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Dunja Arandjelovic  
arandjelovicd96@gmail.com

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THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AS A TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL  
ACTOR:  
A CASE STUDY OF REGIME CHANGE IN MONTENEGRO

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science in Social Science  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice

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by  
Dunja Arandjelovic  
December 2022

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Laura R. Olson Chair  
Dr. Jeffrey Peake  
Dr. Vaiva Kalesnikaite  
Dr. Brayan Miller

## ABSTRACT

Although many scholars have considered how religious institutions can affect democratic change, little attention has been given to the contemporary transnational potential of a church with a distinctively national identity. This study will explore the capacity of national churches to act transnationally by analyzing the Serbian Orthodox Church's (SOC) recent political intervention in Montenegro, during which the church mobilized almost half of the Montenegrin population during the COVID pandemic in a movement that led to the defeat of Montenegro's president in parliamentary elections for the first time in 30 years.

My project is based on in-depth elite interviews with ten SOC leaders in the Balkans and the Diaspora. The purpose of the study is to understand the transnational potential of the SOC, its motivation for action and cooperation, and its political aspirations in the Balkans in the context of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Nina.

Without her endless love and support, I would not be who I am today.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been realized without the help, understanding, advice and support of many people. First of all, I would like to thank my mentor dr. Laura Olson for accepting to work with me and selflessly sharing all the advice, both academic and much more important, life ones. I am grateful to her for having a lot of patience while working with me, for listening to me again and again, analyzing my ideas, correcting me when I was wrong. She was a strict mentor during my thesis work but always a friend and great support. My acquaintance with her is certainly one of the best things that Clemson has brought me and I am very much looking forward to our future work.

Also, I would like to express my gratitude to the members of my committee, dr. Jeffrey Peake and dr. Vaiva Kalesnikaite for always being there for all advice, suggestions and help.

However, I owe the greatest gratitude to someone without whom I would not be where I am now, to my professor dr. Marko Vekovic from the University of Belgrade. His tremendous support and belief in me led me to Clemson University. I am grateful to him for believing in me even when I didn't, for helping me to overcome all my fears and insecurities. He taught me that all worthwhile things are also difficult and that the path to academic success is not easy, but with work and dedication everything is possible. Not only that this thesis would not have been completed without his help, but also, I would not be the person, student and researcher that I am today. I hope that I will not disappoint him and that I will achieve all the academic goals that we set together at the beginning of this journey.

Finally, I would like to thank those without whom nothing would be possible - my family. Your love and support were my greatest motivation and strength. It's hard to find words to describe how much it meant and helped me.

Also, thank you to my friends, first of all for understanding my absence and my dedication above all to academic work in the past two years. Despite all that, you stayed where you were all these years, next to me. No success would be complete without opportunity to share it with you. I am grateful to have you all in my life.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Today no one should  
remain aloof from what is happening in world Orthodoxy”*

His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill

"A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism," Karl Marx said in his Manifesto of the Communist Party (Marx and Engels, 1848), not knowing that this specter would forever mark the understanding of society and politics in Eastern Europe and that it would become both an obstacle and a justification for understanding (or not) both by ordinary people and the scholarly community. Generations of Eastern Europeans grew up with an ideology that claimed that “the religion is opium of the people” (Marx, 1977, p. 175), yet the bare-bones structure of society was, and still is, religion, specifically Orthodox Christianity.

In numbers, Orthodoxy is the smallest of the three branches of Christianity, and is mostly concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe, where 76% of the worldwide Orthodox population lives (Pew Research Center, 2017). Followers of Eastern Orthodoxy in these countries are religiously distinctive for several reasons. They tend to claim that religiosity is not a very important factor in their lives; belief in God varies from country to country but never reaches especially high levels; Orthodox Christians do not go to church often (or even at all); they do not pray nor read the Bible (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, they keep pictures of saints in the house (icons), celebrate all important Orthodox holidays without exception, they hold strictly conservative views on the role of women in society and the position and status of minority communities and the LGBTQ population (Pew Research Center, 2017). They mostly claim that church and state should

be separate, but strongly assert that citizenship and nationhood are contingent on being Eastern Orthodox (Pew Research Center, 2017).

For centuries, Orthodox Christians in Eastern Europe have showed a willingness to organize and stand up to protect the church whenever the state has threatened it. Today, they seem to support the church's support of aggression, even against another Orthodox country. During the COVID pandemic, they were ready to be fired from their jobs for refusing vaccination, guided by the Orthodox Church's views. Such models of behavior, as well as the role of religion in the state and society, are complex and substantially different from those we see in Catholicism and Protestantism.

Nothing justifies the continuing scholarly misunderstanding of religious dynamics in a part of the world where 200 million people live and which in the last few years has attracted attention for its political struggles. However, the lack of understanding is somehow understandable: it is a consequence of the denial of the religious factor in political science (Gill, 2001; Jevtic, 2007; Philpott, 2009; Kettle, 2012; Fox, 2012), which in the West is justified by modernization and secularization, and in Eastern Europe by the continuing specter of communism and the Iron Curtain.

In the West, the lack of attention to religion was often explained by relying on Peter Berger's thesis on secularization, who believed, like many sociologists in the 1960s, that the process of modernization would lead to the decline of religion both in society and in the minds of individuals (Berger, 1990; Bruce, 2002; Norris and Inglehart, 2003; Casanova, 2007) However, even though Berger (2001) admitted the mistake he made in light of the fact that religiosity has not declined with modernization, political scientists did not suddenly begin to emphasize the religious factor in politics. Steven Kettle's analysis of leading political science journals in the

period 2000-2010 revealed that only 184 articles out of a possible 7,245 (2.54%) had something to do with religion (Kettle, 2012).

Looking for the reasons for the lack of attention to religion in political science, Kenneth Wald and Clyde Wilcox (2006) concluded that the marginalized position of religion in the field of political science is based on the intellectual origins of the discipline, the social background of practitioners, the complexity of religious measurement, and the event-driven agenda of political science. Also, they add that even though religion's influence on politics has become evident in real-world events since the 1980s, this area remains poorly researched primarily because of *the intellectual isolation of research on the topic*.

In the West, at least a few scholars saw and wrote about this gap in the literature, but in Eastern, Orthodox Europe religion's impact on politics remains almost completely neglected, mainly because of the continuing belief that communism eradicated religion and religiosity and left an atheist legacy in that part of the world. What Wald and Wilcox noted about the intellectual isolation of research on the topic is also a significant barrier for Eastern European scholars. It is arguably an even bigger problem there than in the West. However, if you look at the current politics of predominantly Orthodox countries, the influence and presence of the religious factor is more than evident. This part of the world remains insufficiently researched, especially concerning the ways religion affects national and regional politics.

Specific historical and cultural factors have shaped the position of the churches in Eastern European countries and, subsequently, their relationship with the state. Eastern Europeans' attitudes towards the church (and religion in general) differ from the attitudes that have existed in other Christian traditions. For example, the concept of "belonging without believing and behaving"

(Flanagan and Davie, 1995) is characteristic of most (though not all)<sup>1</sup> of countries in Eastern, Orthodox Europe. No two majority-Orthodox countries are the same, nor are the relationships between their national churches and the state. These particularities make it challenging to study the connection between politics and Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe and have probably demotivated many who noticed this connection to try to deal with it.

The neglect of the religious factor in politics in political and social science has been especially grave in the former Yugoslav countries. This lack of attention is startling considering that the breakup of Yugoslavia itself, according to some authors, had an important religious dimension (Huntington, 1996; Ramet, 2007), but also because the Balkans are a place in the world where religion, religious leaders, and religious communities are all extremely significant political actors (Vekovic and Djogatovic, 2019).

This thesis aims to research, understand, and explain the transnational political potential of one of the most powerful social and political institutions in one former Yugoslav country: Serbia. The Serbian Orthodox Churches (SOC) is not only a key political player in Serbia, but also in the Balkan region. I aim to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and politics not only in the Balkans, but beyond.

Although the SOC emphasizes its primarily spiritual character and denies its political role and ideals, many of its activities indicate that it plays a potentially important role in both domestic and foreign policy in Serbia. The Church influences Serbia's relations with other countries and is shaping its path towards the European Union. It is also contributing to both ethno-religious relations and tensions in the Balkans, where Eastern Orthodoxy is the dominant religion.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Greece is a significant outlier.

This thesis examines the transnational political potential of the SOC through its engagement in Montenegro during 2019 and 2020. In reaction to the Montenegrin government's Law on Freedom of Religion, which provided for the confiscation of all its property acquired before 1918, the SOC managed to mobilize almost half of the Montenegrin population (around 300,000 people) into peaceful protests – *litije* – for eight consecutive months during the COVID pandemic. The *litije* led firstly to the fall of President Milo Djukanovic's rule in Montenegro after 30 years and then to the amendment of the Law and the complete protection of SOC's right to its property.

With this intervention, the Church showed that it has the potential to act politically when it comes to the protection of its interests, but also that this potential is most likely transnational - that is, that the SOC in Montenegro had the help of other dioceses of the SOC both in other countries in the Balkans and in the Serbian Orthodox diaspora. Also, it seems that the SOC's activity in Montenegro was guided by some higher goals that have certain elements of nationalism, which in this thesis I aim to explore, understand and define.

For research purposes, I use a qualitative research design that will include historical analysis, media content analysis, and in-depth interviews based on purposive sampling of experts. My primary substantive contribution will be to make the case that regime change could not have been realized without the involvement of the broader SOC in support of its dioceses in Montenegro, but also to consider whether the SOC is guided by specific political goals in its actions and if so, how can they be defined and understood.

Structurally, this thesis, in addition to the introduction, consists of five chapters followed by a conclusion and an appendix.

*Chapter One* presents the theoretical framework of the thesis, introducing the research problem followed by a review of the literature in order to explain the importance of this area of study and the theoretical support from which the project departs. The chapter explains the nature, historical importance, and institutional position of the SOC and introduces the concepts of institutional preconditions, motivation, and resources as important elements for the church's political engagement and analyzes them in the context of Montenegro. At the end of the chapter, three guiding hypotheses that the thesis aims to test are presented.

*Chapter Two* describes the events in Montenegro in which the SOC was involved. The chapter also briefly explains the nature of the relationship between church and state in Serbia and follows the development of events from the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in December 2019, through the mobilization of people into *litije*, then the events during the election campaign, the elections themselves, the defeat of Djukanovic's party and the victory of the pro-SOC option, and finally the amendment of the Law in accordance with the wishes and needs of the SOC and its adoption in January 2021. These details are important to cover in the context of understanding the research problem and motivating the guiding hypotheses.

*Chapter Three* presents and defends the research design. I explain why media content analysis and expert interviews are the best approach to researching this problem. I also describe the details of my interview process.

*Chapter Four* presents the results expressed through six topic codes related to three concepts -transnational cooperation, *litije* and political aspirations of SOC in the Balkans.

*Chapter Five* is a discussion about the results with the aim of understanding, analyzing and explaining the findings.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis is a case study of the concept of *transnational action*, defined as a “phenomenon that is not limited to a single country and spreads across borders” (Fox, 2018). I contend that religious actors have the potential to act transnationally because religions focus on eternal truth that does not change when one crosses from one country to the next (Fox, 2018). I also argue that religious actors act transnationally with the aim of achieving certain social, political, and/or economic goals.

I focus on the transnational potential of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), one of the most powerful socio-political institutions in Serbia and the entire Balkan region. Specifically, I analyze the Serbian Orthodox Church’s recent social and political activity in Montenegro. The Church’s transnational actions led it beyond its traditionally national character, thus calling into question one of the main arguments found in the scientific literature on Eastern Orthodoxy, which is that its autocephalous churches lack the potential to influence or initiate political change across geographic borders.

Scholars (Berger, 1999; Huntington 1996; Prodromou, 2004; Stepan, 2000; Vukmanovic, 2008) seem to assume that Orthodox Churches do not benefit from some of the same historical and cultural characteristics that have allowed the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant traditions to shape civil society and politics. One of the main arguments (Stepan, 2000) has been that the Orthodox Churches’ national character limits their political relevance; that is, they have lacked transnational potential.

In his work on religion and democratization, Stepan (2000) is skeptical about the potential of Eastern Orthodoxy to create and influence an open civil society. He characterizes

Orthodoxy as a *strong obstacle* to democratization, lacking the potential to mobilize people for social and political change due to the nature and historical context in which the Orthodox Churches exist. He states that “With respect to resistance to the state, Eastern Orthodox Christianity is often organizationally and ideologically in a relatively weak position because the church is a national (as opposed to a transnational) organization” (Stepan, 2000, p. 53).

For a better understanding of Stepan’s contention (and why I disagree with it), it is necessary to explain that the national character of the Eastern Orthodox Churches is related to their historical origin, i.e., the fact that with the independence of the state goes the autocephaly (independence) of each national church (Vekovic and Jevtic 2019). In the Orthodox world, the acquisition of statehood is directly linked to religious autonomy, which is why there are not only *national* Orthodox churches, but also why each Orthodox church is characterized by a special, intimate relationship with the state. Jevtic (2007) explains that "with the development of the state, the church also develops, and these two institutions go hand in hand, that is, the church gives the legitimacy to the state" (Jevtic, 2007, p. 100). This close, mutually reinforcing relationship between church and state is referred to as *symphonia*.

The symphonic relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the state is rooted in two specific historical experiences. The first was the period of Ottoman occupation that lasted for five hundred years, during which the Church was the most important actor that maintained the Serbian national idea and spiritual unity. The second was the period of church life under the communist regime, which is known in the history of the SOC as the "darkest period" (Bigovic, 2022) but which also greatly strengthened the Church’s position after the fall of communism during a period of awakening national pride (Jevtic, 2007). Since the fall of



communism, the SOC arguably has been the most powerful socio-political actors in Serbia, continuing and strengthening its symphonic relationship with the state.

However, in November 2019, the Serbian Orthodox Church arose against the state—but not the Serbian state. It acted instead in neighboring Montenegro, after that country passed a Law on Freedom of Religion (hereinafter “the Law”). First, the SOC independently condemned the Montenegrin state for passing the Law, which they labeled “ungodly.” Then, after the Church’s pressures did not yield results, it called on the people of Montenegro for help, which resulted in mass protests (*litije*) that gathered 300,000 people during the COVID pandemic. These protests led to the fall of Milo Djukanovic's government after 30 years, as well as a change in the Law in favor of the SOC.

Although much of the existing literature depicts Orthodoxy as both an obstacle to change and disinclined toward political engagement, some scholars take a more nuanced approach. Philpott (2007) and Prodromou (2004) both consider political *ambivalence* among religious actors, and Stepan (2000) considers religion’s *multivocality*, i.e., its potential to act politically in more than one direction (e.g., both authoritarian/conservative and democratic/liberal).

Both concepts apply well to the SOC’s recent action in Montenegro. Thus, I make three assumptions. First, for its action in Montenegro to succeed, the Church had to have *institutional prerequisites* (given that we are talking about *national* churches). Second, the Church had a particular *motivation* for action. Third, the SOC was able to provide *resources* to sustain action and mobilization in Montenegro.

Institutional prerequisites are essential because, as Nepstad (2021) contends, “for any religious elites to organize and support protests, it is necessary for them to be autonomous from the state” (p. 2). Achieving such autonomy is difficult in the context of Orthodox Churches

because of their traditionally national character and longstanding connections with their national governments. Nevertheless, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro did not have close relations with the government of Montenegrin President Djukanovic, nor did it depend on him in any way, which enabled the SOC to mobilize Orthodox Christians in Montenegro against his rule. In short, the SOC's political potential in Montenegro was enhanced because its center of power lay outside the borders of Montenegrin territory.

Philpott's (2000) conceptualizations of *differentiation*, *political theology*, and the ambivalence of religion help us understand the SOC's institutional prerequisites, its relationship to the state, and its potential to act politically. Philpott defines differentiation as the degree of autonomy that exists between religious actors and the state in terms of basic/core rights.

Differentiation may be high or low (if low, it is labeled integrationism) and may be achieved through consensus or conflict. The specific configuration of differentiation leads the church to a certain type and degree of political engagement. Philpott defines *political theology* as a set of ideas that religious actors have about political power and justice. In other words, do church teachings have the potential to support political engagement, liberal ideas and democracy?

Figure 1 presents the potential configurations of church and state in relation to degree and type of differentiation and political theology. As we see in the upper right corner, the SOC in Serbia fits into the category of consensual differentiation, which is normatively the most stable category because it is characterized by the absence of conflict. In practical terms, consensual differentiation means that church and state are autonomous from each other in terms of their basic rights and responsibilities, that this arrangement was reached by consensual agreement, and that both parties are satisfied with an outcome.

On the other hand, the relationship between church and state in Montenegro is in the category of conflict differentiation (the upper left corner of Figure 1). This means that church and state are autonomous from each other; that is, the church has *gained* significant autonomy, but because of conflict. Neither the church nor the state is satisfied with the other party or with the relationship between the two. Thus, in Montenegro the SOC has the potential for political engagement because it (a) is autonomous from the state; (b) has a conflictual relationship with the state; and (c) has a political theology that supports the political engagement of the church (Prodromou, 2004)

When the institutional prerequisites are sufficient, religious actors need a clear *motivation* to act (Fox, 2018). Whether and when religious institutions decide to mobilize depends on many factors that are difficult to predict. What seems most important for mobilization is the presence of an advantageous *opportunity structure* (Tarrow, 1999), which may be perceived through a classic cost-benefit analysis; that is, the motivation for action lies in rational thinking and may be understood through rational choice theory.

Social scientists have tended to assume that we should not conceive of religious actors as “rational” (in the context of rational actor theory) because they tend not to act independently to achieve their goals (e.g., Euben 1995). Instead, they are a tool that politicians use to achieve their goals, even though political and religious goals can coincide, especially when the connection between religion and politics is very narrow (Fox, 2018). However, Fox (2018) argues that religious actors and institutions *are* rational actors with their own interests that they strive to realize. Such interests often are not strictly political, but most of them can be influenced by the political process. In this vein, the SOC may be seen as a rational actor with concrete interests and motivations that it strives to satisfy.

Meanwhile, the broader literature on political mobilization and collective action includes the claim that fear is a powerful driver of both processes (Almeida, 2019). For religious actors, fear might arise from the possibility that their interests will be threatened. Religious actors' most important interests are institutional survival (Gill, 2007) and propagation of the religion (Fox, 2018). The primary motivation for the SOC's activities in Montenegro was to ensure institutional survival, which was directly threatened by the Law on Freedom of Religion. For the SOC, the Law was "bad news," a concept from the literature on mobilization and collective action that comprises all the information, data, decisions, laws that cause people or actors to feel threatened and therefore fearful (Almeida, 2019).

The Law provided for the confiscation of all SOC property that the Church had acquired before 1918 and for which it did not have proof of ownership. Because the SOC has so many churches, monasteries, schools, and land in Montenegro, transferring that property to state ownership would mean that the Church would have to exist on state territory rather than its own territory. Simply put, the Church would have been forced to put itself in a subordinate position in relation to the state, which would greatly weaken and even jeopardize its survival in Montenegro. The fact that the SOC would be left without control of its schools, monasteries, and churches would have meant that it would no longer have had places to gather its members, and over time it presumably would have begun to lose them. Since we know that without members, the Church cannot exist, it is clear that the SOC's institutional survival was profoundly threatened by the Law.

On the other hand, the SOC knew that there was a chance that the state would transfer the property to the canonically unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), a longstanding

project of President Djukanovic that was rejected by the Mother Church, global Eastern Orthodox community and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

The SOC's motivation for its action in Montenegro may also be understood through *power devaluation theory*, which claims that when a dominant group (in this case, an institution) in society begins to lose power, it further radicalizes its goals and actions in order to ensure institutional survival (Gill, 1998)). For this reason, according to Fetzer and Soper (2004), religious actors act as secular NGOs in the public sphere, and religious leaders often perceive a necessity to lobby the government to achieve their own religious and/or organizational ideals and interests. These interests concern religion as a rational actor rather than one guided exclusively by religious beliefs (see Gill and Pfaff, 2010). Of course, religious actors can also advocate for moral ideals or the propagation of religion, which are guided primarily by religious beliefs. However, for the SOC in Montenegro, religious interests were secondary. The SOC's core interest was primarily organizational (institutional survival), and its goal was to preserve its property rights.

Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) teaches that any social movement must have the capacity to generate resources and use them wisely to sustain successful collective action. These resources include organization and organizational knowledge, social and human capital, influence, and connection with other affiliated social groups, etc. (Jenkins, 1983). How might the SOC in Montenegro have managed to maintain even a minimum of resources, and then to mobilize them? It is fair to say that Montenegrins exemplify "belonging without believing and bonding," as rates of worship attendance are low. According to Gill and Pfaff (2010), it is especially difficult for such institutions to mobilize. It is safe to assume that the SOC in Montenegro could not provide essential resources on its own, nor could it obtain them

from the state. That said, Montenegro only gained independence in 2006, and it shares a large portion of its history, traditions, and myths with Serbia. What had to happen for the SOC in Montenegro to obtain these necessary resources? To answer this question, I propose the **first guiding hypothesis**:

*The Serbian Orthodox Church, although it is a distinctly national church, has great potential to act transnationally.*

In short, it was essential for the greater SOC to provide necessary resources for its action in Montenegro. Ordinarily, national Orthodox churches would be denied the possibility of acting transnationally, so would have a difficult time bringing about any change outside their own country. Transnationalism is especially challenging in the context of the Serbian Church because SOC dioceses in the Balkans and those in the diaspora have a long history of tense relations and conflict with each other (Vekovic, 2020). Nevertheless, the success of the SOC's initiatives in Montenegro seems to indicate that transnationalism is possible despite these obstacles.

If the SOC is capable of transnational action, a **second guiding hypothesis** is necessary:

*Transnational cooperation between the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia and Montenegro played an essential role in building resource capacity (material and organizational) for the successful mobilization and ultimate regime change in Montenegro.*

It is difficult at best to stand up against a 30-year-old regime with a history of permitting high levels of crime and brutality towards dissenters (Freedom House, 2022). However, the SOC in Montenegro did have some preexisting resources as a diocese operating in a country of 607,000 citizens, roughly 72% of whom belong to the SOC (U.S. Department of State 2021). Religious institutions like the SOC are high-profile organizations which often have political connections and physical resources for mobilization, including a place to meet, organizational

and financial resources, experienced leadership, and rank-and-file members (Fox, 2018). Also, despite its national character, the SOC is one Orthodox, conciliar, and apostolic Church. Thus, its dioceses naturally seek support (at a minimum, moral support) from one another, especially the larger, most powerful ones which are located in Serbia (known as central jurisdiction).

Therefore, I ask not only whether transnational action took place, but (assuming it did) whether it provided material and organizational resources for the SOC's action in Montenegro or offered nothing beyond moral support. Because the SOC is a national church, perhaps transnational cooperation across dioceses could benefit some national idea/vision. This possibility could add an extra dimension to our understanding of the political character of the SOC, which gives rise to a **third guiding hypothesis**:

*Transnational cooperation between the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans and those in the diaspora was guided/motivated by the idea of (Serbian) Orthodox nationalism.*

The origin of the Serbian Orthodox Church is directly tied to the origin and development of the Serbian state. With independence comes *autocephaly*, which means that church and state develop hand-in-hand. Accordingly, the SOC created and maintained a *national identity*; as Mylonas (2003) argues, Orthodoxy served to sacralize Serbian national identity. Djordjevic (2009) notes that Serbian Orthodoxy is a highly traditionalistic faith with religious rituals – such as baptism, church weddings and funerals, and feast day celebrations of patron saints (*slava*) – that have instrumental value for Serbs because they cement feelings of national belonging and ties to tradition. Similarly, Blagojevic and Radulovic (2013) argue that Orthodox Christians often look to confirm their national, personal, and family identities by practicing distinctively *Orthodox* rituals (as opposed to prayer, reading the Bible, and other broadly Christian practices).

Moreover, Serbia's historical experience, particularly 500 years under Ottoman rule, made the church an institution that maintained national identity when there was no state. In the years since liberation from the Ottomans, the SOC has enjoyed a privileged position in Serbian society. The Church played an essential role in maintaining a distinctive Serbian identity during the Yugoslavian years. Since the fall of communism, the SOC has had the platform to highlight, modify, and strengthen Serbian national identity, which boils down to one matter: to be a Serb means to be an Orthodox Christian.

In this sense, organized religion is playing the role of showing *who is who*. As Merdjanova (2003) states, religion (Orthodoxy) serves as a "catalyst for delimitation, alienation, and animosity towards the 'Others,' and at the same time it can be one of the main factors that contribute to the 'creation and preservation of identity'" (p. 10). Brubaker (2011) also helps establish the connection between nationalism and religion embodied by the Serbian Orthodox Church. He contends that religion and nationalism are *analogous*, that is, that religion allows for group identification and the construction of meaningful, bounded social groups; it also plays a significant role in the development of political claims (Brubaker, 2011).

Recent history has highlighted the SOC's role as a unifier of the Serbian people. The fall of communism led the Church to prioritize building unity among Serbs wherever they lived in the Balkans. The SOC used religion to demarcate "who was who" in the multiethnic and multi-confessional environment that was first Yugoslavia, and then Serbia, but also in the various other environments (republics) where Serbs lived after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The Serbian Orthodox Church teaches that Serbs grew out of Orthodox Christianity, so the national idea and national identity are inseparable from the Church. As a result, the SOC is seen as the spiritual mother of the Serbian people wherever they may live. The Church's foremost goal is to maintain



the Serbian *Orthodox* national identity. In short, it has instrumentalized religion by sacralizing myths, traditions, and history, thus making the church and national identity inseparable (Gajic, 2020). Its dream would be to unite the Serbian Orthodox population within the borders of a single Serbian state. It is so-called idea of the Serbian World.

However, in reaction to the Law in Montenegro, the SOC stepped away from its “Big Serbia” discourse. The bishops and other church representatives in Montenegro began avoiding national connotations when they spoke about the Church and its role. Instead, they claimed that the SOC is a church *of believers of all nationalities* who accept the SOC as the only true and faithful church.<sup>2</sup> This makes sense if we follow Slater (2009), who states that for religiously inspired protests to be successful, they must take place in a religiously homogeneous environment, which was the case in Montenegro. Roughly 72% of the population of Montenegro are Orthodox Christians (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021), though they are divided along ethnic lines into two categories: Serbs from Montenegro and Montenegrins. The SOC in Montenegro had to adjust its discourse to build support among Orthodox Christians regardless of ethnic origin, as those who identify as Montenegrin should hardly be expected to embrace being Serbian as an alternative identity.

If the Church acted transnationally by facilitating cooperation across dioceses to provide resources for the SOC in Montenegro, why did it do so? Has the SOC changed its discourse and recast itself as a church of all nationalities (which seems unlikely), or did it spread and secure the idea of Serbian Orthodox nationalism through this cooperation?

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<sup>2</sup> The SOC uses this phrase to emphasize the difference between itself and the canonically unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church, to which only a small number of people in Montenegro belong.

I will answer these questions by testing the three guiding hypotheses specified above using elite interviews with some of the most important leaders of the SOC as well as analysis of media content concerning the SOC's action in Montenegro.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S INTERVENTION IN MONTENEGRO: FROM  
THE LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION THROUGH *LITIJE* TO THE FALL OF THE  
DJUKANOVIC REGIME

Direct relations between the state of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church began with the creation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in 1945. In addition to four other states, the FRY included two states – Serbia and Montenegro – where the SOC remained active as the only canonical church. At that moment, the majority of the population did not see the SOC as a problem or obstacle given that it had been operating in that territory for centuries and had an important role to play in preserving cultural, historical, and national heritage and identity for Serbs and Montenegrins alike. This was the period of the so-called Serbian-Montenegrin unionism or unity (Morrison, 2008). It seems to have suited most everyone in the territory of Montenegro, as shown by the results of the first independence referendum in 1992, where 96.76% of the citizens voted to remain within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) together with Serbia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Montenegro, 1992)

However, Milo Djukanovic, a former member of the Union of Communists of Montenegro and (importantly) an atheist, became a member of the newly formed Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in the FRY; from the mid-1990s he was a strong advocate for Montenegrin nationalism and an independent Montenegro (Imeri, 2016; Vukovic-Calasan and Zecevic, 2015; ). Djukanovic knew that with the independence of the country would come an autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church in Montenegro. He also knew how important the Church was to the people in Montenegro during the 1990s, as national feelings awoke after a long period of life under communist rule. Accordingly, he began to propagate the idea of an independent Montenegrin diocese of the Orthodox Church (MOC), which was founded in 1993

(Vekovic and Jevtic, 2019). The MOC, however, has never been officially recognized by the worldwide Orthodox community, its nominal leader, Patriarch Bartholomew, or the Mother Church because “there is no autocephaly without the declaration of the will of the mother church”<sup>3</sup> (Vekovic, 2019).

Montenegro gained its independence in 2006 after a referendum, and Djukanovic (who had already been the most politically powerful individual in Montenegro) became its first president. To this day, he remains at the head of the DPS, a party that states in its platform that its ideology is Montenegrin nationalism and an independent, national, *secular* and European Montenegro that will have an *independent Orthodox church* (Program of Democratic Party of Socialists, 2021).

The Serbian Orthodox Church did not rise up against Djukanovic's government when it started to propagate the MOC, nor when it separated from Serbia, nor when it joined NATO, nor when it recognized the independence of Kosovo. Because all these policy decisions were unacceptable to Serbia, they were also unacceptable to the SOC, as in its essence the SOC is a *national*, i.e., Serbian, church and is therefore the guardian of the culture and identity of *Serbia*. The SOC has claimed that it does not want to interfere in political issues. However, it has also been willing to say it does not agree with decisions like the ones made in Montenegro, and that it hopes the policies will eventually change.

Relations between Djukanovic's government and the SOC, although they were strained in the years after independence, were nevertheless distinguished by a baseline level of tolerance. However, in 2015, the government of Montenegro passed a draft of the Law on Freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> According to the canonical law of Orthodox Christianity, in order for a church to acquire autocephaly, it must first request it from the "Mother Church," which in this case would be the Serbian Orthodox Church. The SOC has never, nor will it ever accept this in the context of the MOC.

Religion (Law on Freedom of Religion, 2019), which subsequently went through four years' worth of parliamentary debates, amendments, and failed votes. It was finally voted on on the night of December 28th 2019, and became effective on January 8, 2020 (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2020).

This Law had a lot of disputed points,<sup>4</sup> but two stood out as the most problematic to the SOC. The first concerned the registration of religious communities (Articles 18-34) and the other was about proving ownership of property (Article 62).

Registration of religious communities was not mandatory under the Law, but it was a condition if the religious community wanted to acquire legal status and accordingly own property or even have a bank account. In addition, the registration would treat the SOC as a newly formed religious group and not as one that existed long before the Law itself, which was unacceptable to the Church that had existed in present-day Montenegro for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Proof of ownership implied that religious communities would be obliged to provide proof of ownership of property acquired before December 1, 1918, or else the property would be confiscated and transferred to state ownership under the guise of "state cultural heritage." This provision of the Law was problematic for the SOC because the Church believed that the state would hand all the property over to Djukanovic's canonically unrecognized MOC (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021). The SOC's fears were enhanced by the fact that it was (and is) actively arguing about which diocese controls 750 Orthodox localities in Montenegro (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> You can read more about all the disputed points of this Law in the report of the Venice Commission. See more at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)010-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)010-e)

<sup>5</sup> The Law also did not specify exactly what was meant by "proof of ownership," and left room for the authorities and the judiciary to define this at their own discretion.

The SOC, with the support of the opposition party Democratic Front (DF), took to the streets of Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, on the same night when the Law was adopted, with the aim of expressing their displeasure with this decision.

From that night, until the middle of March 2020, peaceful protest gatherings known as *litije* were held every day. Enhancing the message that these protests were religiously inspired and SOC-endorsed, they were always followed by a worship service. The *litije* took place first in Montenegro's largest cities, which were opposition party strongholds. Then they spread to places where the majority of ethnic Serbs live, and day by day they came to include almost all towns in Montenegro. Also, *litije* soon began to be held in almost all cities of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (in the portion of that country known as Republika Srpska),<sup>6</sup> Croatia, and Kosovo<sup>7</sup> (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2020).

In the early stages of the *litije*, dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church outside Montenegro quickly expressed their solidarity with efforts to protect Orthodox holy places there, as church property represents history, culture, tradition, identity, and nation. With the aim of *litije* remaining dignified, peaceful, and above all apolitical, SOC clergy made great efforts to influence the participants not to avoid violence, hate speech and bigotry, and political rhetoric .

To keep things organized and controlled, a decision was made to hold *litije* every Thursday and Sunday in the evening hours, synchronized, in all cities in Montenegro. *Litije* in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Croatia, and Kosovo followed the same format.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities: (1) the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and (2) Republika Srpska and the District of Brčko, which has a special status. In the context of the activities of the SOC, the Republika Srpska is important since it is an entity in which ethnic Serbs, Serbian Orthodox Christians live and a place where the SOC has an appropriate role and mission. See more at [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA\\_951121\\_DaytonAgreement.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA_951121_DaytonAgreement.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> In Serbian municipalities within Kosovo.

During this period, representatives of Montenegro's government and the SOC met several times in order to try to reach a solution. Each of these meetings was unsuccessful, however, and tensions between the two sides grew. At that point external actors began to get involved in the situation. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, participated by commenting on the dispute. Meanwhile, the guest of honor at one of the *litije* at the end of February was the Metropolitan Onuphriy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which operates under the auspices of the Moscow Patriarchate), a leader who is very close to Russia and the Russian Patriarch Kirill and whose speech at the *litija* caused a lot of controversy both in the Balkans and in other countries.<sup>8</sup>

The SOC was mobilizing people quickly and effectively for the *litije*, especially by putting a lot of effort into shaping the rhetoric necessary to justify the protests. Then the first case of the coronavirus was recorded in Montenegro at the beginning of March, and the country went into lockdown. All events and public gatherings were banned. The SOC influenced its supporters to suspend gatherings to comply with government restrictions, but also to safeguard people's health (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

For the next two months, the SOC and the Montenegrin state argued through the media. The SOC also used internet technologies to launch so-called "virtual *litije*" on Facebook, during which people could ask questions of Metropolitan Amfilohije and other SOC clergy. This type of activity was a complete novelty for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had never before used online platforms for its activities. However, given the importance of maintaining awareness and motivation among the people about the struggle to maintain church property, the SOC had to adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic by going online. Fortunately for the SOC, people easily adapted to online activism.

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<sup>8</sup> See more at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-protest-president-idUSKCN20M2SS>

On the feast of Saint Basil of Ostrog (May 12), the clergy gathered in the church in Niksic municipality with the aim of holding a service on the great holiday. In accordance with COVID restrictions, citizens were not invited to gather in the church. They decided to come anyway. On that occasion, Metropolitan Amfilohije decided to lead a *litija* from the church to the city center with the gathered people, regardless of the strict COVID restrictions that were active. Due to the violation of the restrictions, nine priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, including the bishop of Budimlja-Niksica Joanikije II (the current metropolitan there) were arrested and ordered to be detained for 72 hours (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2020). The people protested day and night in front of the police station where the clergy were detained, but also in other towns in Montenegro, until they were released.

This action was the biggest mistake Milo Djukanovic's regime could have made at that moment. The last time priests had been arrested and imprisoned in this region had been during the worst phase of communism, the so-called phase of terrorism (Radulovic, 2006). The authorities' action against the priests greatly increased the anger of the people – and their desire to change the regime – as they increasingly came to see the SOC as a victim of the DPS and Djukanovic.

After this event, the dispute between the regime and the SOC grew ever more intense. The Djukanovic regime began to claim that the SOC was an instrument being used by Serbia to spread its national ideas and politics, to destroy the sovereignty of Montenegro, and ultimately to turn Montenegro over to Russia (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

Elections were scheduled for August 30, 2020, and the Montenegrin government had to hold a campaign that would be in accordance with the COVID restrictions. The government decreed that gatherings of more than 200 people, i.e., the *litije*, would violate the restrictions.



Many participants and priests were sanctioned as a result. However, arguing that even the state did not respect its own restrictions, the SOC decided to hold *litije* regardless of the COVID regulations to show that neither they nor the people were giving up on the campaign to change the Law (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2020). As a result, Metropolitan Amfilohije was soon targeted by the regime and taken into custody (Danas, 2020). The people took this action even harder than they had taken the earlier arrest of the clergy, because the Metropolitan was known as *djedo* (the grandfather of the people in Montenegro) and was extremely well respected not only in Montenegro but across the Orthodox Christian world. After he was released, Metropolitan Amfilohije, who claimed for months that the SOC had no intention of engaging in politics, said that he was going to vote for the first time in his life and called on all people to do the same by voting against the Montenegrin government for passing an ungodly law (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

In this spirit, before the elections themselves, almost the entire campaign was divided along the Djukanovic-SOC line. There were two clear-cut blocs: one that advocated for the Law and opposed the SOC's property rights (only the DPS was on this side in Montenegro's multiparty system) and another that was against the Law and for the SOC's property rights. The closer the elections got, the more Montenegro's government strengthened its COVID restrictions and banned gatherings. Even so, it did not succeed in preventing the SOC from keeping the people in a protest mood. The SOC again showed its ability to adapt to changing circumstances by organizing so-called *auto-litije* – because social distancing can be respected when people remain in their cars. In the days before the election, *auto-litije* were held across Montenegro, but also in Serbia and Republika Srpska (Studio B, 2020). Convoys of vehicles traveled from many

cities to the border with Montenegro (which they did not cross due to potential risks), all with the blessing of local SOC clergy (N1, 2020).

After many conflicts and accusations in the days leading up to the elections and culminating on election day itself, DPS lost the parliamentary elections on August 30, 2020, for the first time in 30 years. Opposition parties with close ties to the SOC – For Montenegro's Future, Peace Is Our Nation, and Black on White – won.

On election night, the leader of the coalition For Montenegro's Future, Zdravko Krivokapic, met with Metropolitan Amfilohije in the Church of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica as a sign of joint victory in the fight for the rights of the SOC, which became one of the most controversial moments of the entire episode for all those who opposed this alliance. They claimed that the meeting directly confirmed the close connection between religion (the SOC) and politics (the coalition of opposition parties) and accused the alliance of seeking a theocratic future for Montenegro (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

After the opposition had won a majority in the election, it could amend the Law in accordance with the wishes and needs of the SOC. Amendments to the Law were adopted in December, but Djukanovic sent them back for further changes.<sup>9</sup> However, the coalition majority decided not to change anything and insisted that the Law be voted on again in its entirety (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021). In the end, Djukanovic signed it, guaranteeing the SOC all its rights, and the Church's struggle, which lasted over a year, came to a successful end.

Metropolitan Amfilohije, leader of the *litije* and a symbol of the SOC's struggle for its rights, died from the effects of the coronavirus before the adoption of the amended Law.

However, the SOC was, in the opinion of many, the biggest winner of the parliamentary

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<sup>9</sup> Although he lost the parliamentary elections, Djukanovic is still the president, so he had to sign the Law in order for it to come into force.

elections in Montenegro in 2020. It displayed institutional potential and successful activism that had never been seen before (Sljivic, 2021).

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN

To test the guiding hypotheses presented in Chapter 1, I will use a qualitative research design consisting of in-depth interviews based on purposive sampling of experts.

My primary substantive contribution will be to make the case that regime change could not have been realized without the involvement of the broader SOC in support of its dioceses in Montenegro, as well as to understand whether this type of activity was driven by a higher goal of the Church: the advancement of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism.

I have chosen qualitative methods, and particularly in-depth elite interviews, because they are the best way of gaining in-depth information and understanding from individuals who have unique and important knowledge about the problem being researched (Biber, 2016). Because no other studies have yet been conducted about the SOC's role in the recent regime change in Montenegro, it is essential to learn what happened from the people who made it happen. In this case, those people are Serbian Orthodox elites.

I will supplement the information I gather from my interviews with relevant analysis of the SOC's history of political influence. This research design will enable the most precise and accurate understanding of the research problem.

Given that my topic is the SOC's transnational potential, I use a special type of purposive sampling: expert sampling (Biber, 2016).

This strategy allows me to select interview subjects from a group of respondents made up of experts in the field I am researching. In this case, the pool of experts for sampling consists of

representatives of SOC dioceses both in the Balkans and across the world, as I assume that the entire SOC in all its locations had some influence on its activities in Montenegro.

This was visible through social media where people posted pictures and videos from the cities in the Balkans and in the diaspora where they gathered together as sign of support for the SOC and they were supported by local clergy who led these gatherings.

According to Goldstein (2002), elite interviews with high-ranking individuals strive to gather information from a sample of officials to make generalizable claims about all such officials. So, if I understand the positions and motivations of the highest-ranking people in the church who shape its policy, it will be possible to reach conclusions about the position and motivation of the SOC as a whole.

The SOC has 39 dioceses, or geographic territories, each of which has an individual leader.<sup>10</sup> My sampling frame is made up of 10 bishops of specific dioceses in the Balkans and the Serbian diaspora. I have chosen these dioceses and metropolitanates because they have the greatest political significance and are the most politically active.

The sampling frame should be a representative sample of the target population, and even with elite interviews, it can be a problem to find the right interlocutors (Goldstein, 2002).

However, in the context of SOC, choosing the appropriate people to interview was straightforward. I know that the real interlocutors are those who are in the highest positions and those who are the most politically active either in general or during the events in Montenegro.

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<sup>10</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church is decentralized. Its main administrative unit is the geographic diocese, each of which is headed by a bishop who may have one of four titles: bishop, metropolitan, archbishop, or patriarch. Bishops head dioceses; metropolitans head metropolitanates. There is no significant difference between a diocese and a metropolitanate, except that a diocese is elevated to the rank of metropolitan if it is significant in historical, cultural or political terms as decided by the SOC Parliament. Archbishops head archbishoprics, of which there is one in the SOC: the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric, a local and autonomous church under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of the SOC is the head of the Metropolitanate of Belgrade and Karlovac, which is the most important of the SOC's dioceses.

Talking about political topics can be a sensitive matter for ordinary members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. For this reason, I was confident I would get the most honest answers from individuals in the highest positions in the SOC, i.e., the leaders of specific dioceses. Lower-ranking clergy would have concerns about being responsible to their superior bishops for the answers they would give, so would probably be more constrained in what they would say.<sup>11</sup> Only the top Church leaders are in a position to tell me directly what the Church does to shape society and politics beyond Serbia.

My interview is made up of ten open-ended questions that focus on three concepts: transnational action (relationships and cooperation between dioceses); the success of *litije* in Montenegro; the political goals and ideas of the SOC in the Balkans.

I decided exclusively on open-ended questions because, according to Sberbach and Rockman (2002), these types of questions are the best option for elite interviews if the topic being discussed examines controversial and/or complex subject matter. Also, according to them, “open-ended questions help maximize response validity because they provide a greater opportunity for respondents to organize their answers within their own frameworks, even though it makes coding and analysis more challenging. Elites especially—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think” (Sberbach and Rockman, 2002, p. 674). Open-ended questions also allow the discussion to be longer and to yield more information and details from the interviewees.

In elite interviews, for the discussion to be efficient and effective, it is necessary for the researcher to have an extremely high level of knowledge about the topic being discussed,

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<sup>11</sup> Also, they would have to get a blessing from the superior bishop even before the interview itself.

because it is very possible that the interviewee will challenge the researcher during the discussion, and it is important to have ready feedback. Accordingly, my preparation for these interviews was very detailed and based on reading the historiography of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Church announcements, getting to know the character and work of each interviewee, and learning about the media interviews and announcements each interviewee has given in recent years. In this way, trust is built between researchers and interviewees, which is key in this type of interview but very difficult to achieve; it is necessary to build it before, during and after the interview (Harvey, 2011).

For the purposes of this research, the first contact with each of my interviewees was made by the director of my MA in Political Science of Religion program at the University of Belgrade, Associate Professor Marko Vekovic,<sup>12</sup> who through this program has had the opportunity to meet the leaders and/or their assistants personally. Professor Vekovic informed the respondents about my research and secured their consent for me to contact them with more information about the project and to personally invite them to participate.

In addition to the planned sampling frame, I asked each respondent if they knew anyone else who could provide useful information concerning my research problem, and whether they can connect me with that potential respondent. Goldstein (2002) recommends this so-called snowball sampling as a good tactic for obtaining even more information and details.

The data were collected via Zoom interviews conducted in Serbian which lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Interviews are better in person for purposes of building trust, overcoming cultural differences, and gaining a better understanding of the context (Harvey,

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<sup>12</sup> Marko Vekovic is Associate Professor and director of MA in Political Science of Religion program at University in Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science. Contact Email: marko.vekovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

2011). However, because I am Serbian, there is no cultural distance, and a minimum degree of trust is already present before the interview itself.

Although there is a lot of controversy about whether interviews should be recorded or not (Harvey, 2011), I made audio recordings of the interviews with the interviewees' permission so I would have all the details they provided during their interview. Only I have access to the interview recordings and transcripts.

With elite interviews, the biggest difficulty is actually getting the interview itself to happen, that is, "getting in the door" is the most important part of such interviews (Goldstein, 2002). Since SOC leaders are high-ranking people who are generally very busy, they choose whether to grant interviews and when. Also, these leaders typically would prefer to give an interview to the national press to promote themselves, rather than for any kind of scientific work, even if it could be published in the best scientific journal in the world (Sberbach and Rockman, 2002).

An additional challenge that presents itself when interviewing SOC leaders is that discussing the political activities of the church is always problematic and controversial for them, so I was prepared for my invitations to be turned down. Fortunately, everyone I asked to interview agreed. According to Goldstein (2002), if someone declines an invitation to be interviewed, it is essential to think about what that person might have said differently compared to those we did manage to interview. Therefore, the potential similarity among the answers of the interviewed elites is much more important than the number of respondents who did not answer.

The information I collected from the participants concerns the potential for transnational political activity by the Serbian Orthodox Church through issues of inter-diocesan relations, political goals and missions of the Church, and SOC activities in the Balkans. I will place special



emphasis on (1) the Church's role in recent regime change in Montenegro, and (2) issues related to the current political situation in Eastern Europe, the traditional home of Orthodox Christianity.

Please see the complete interview guide in the Appendix.

## CHAPTER FOUR RESULTS

In this part of the thesis, I present the results of my interviews through six topic codes related to three concepts/problems: (a) transnational action (codes 1-2); (b) success of *litije* in Montenegro (codes 3-4); and (c) political aspirations of the SOC in the Balkans and understanding of such aspirations in Eastern Europe (codes 5 -6). Visual presentation of codes and concepts can be found at the end of this thesis (Figure 2).

### **Transnational Action**

The possibility of transnational action and cooperation between dioceses of the SOC was the main problem from which I started my research. In the context of transnational cooperation, two things were investigated:

- (a) How is cooperation between dioceses currently evaluated?
- (b) Which goal is important enough for the SOC to decide to cooperate, that is, in which situation does the SOC react and in which does it not?

The second question is especially important because the SOC showed in Montenegro that it can cooperate and thus overcome the limitations placed upon it as a national church, which the SOC had never done before. For that reason, I emphasize questions concerning when SOC dioceses decide to cooperate. The answers received from different respondents to these questions show all the complexity of this problem and will be analyzed in detail in Chapter 5.

My two codes for transnational action are *Complexity of Cooperation* and *Divided Actor*.

#### **1. Complexity of Cooperation**

- "The church is Orthodox.... When essential things are in question, we live with the fullness of Orthodoxy, we act as one church."
- "Except for the case of Montenegro, I cannot say that good cooperation or potential for transnational work of the SOC is something we normally do,"

## **2. Divided Actor**

- "There are things where the Church should intervene and where it should not. The Church cannot declare itself about everything."
- "The Church must be ready to go to the Cross for the sake of truth ... it must be ready to suffer [always]."

### ***Litije in Montenegro***

The cooperation and transnational action of the Serbian Orthodox Church attracted attention because of its actions in Montenegro, since before that it did not show such potential, much less behavior. For this reason, my second group of questions and associated topic codes are related to the *litije* in Montenegro, but also to the assistance other dioceses provided. Through this group of questions, I sought to find out:

- (a) How and why is it possible that *litije* in Montenegro happened at all?
- (b) What was the role of other dioceses in the Balkans and in the diaspora and why did they act as they did?

The two topic codes related to SOC *litije* in Montenegro are ***Miracle in Montenegro*** and ***The Church Is our Nation.***

## **3. Miracle in Montenegro**

- "Litije were a miracle. The SOC in Montenegro reconciled the people and united the country. The SOC prevented a civil war."

#### **4. The Church Is our Nation**

- "People everywhere recognized the problem.... They recognized that something essential was happening for the fate of the church. That is why people expressed their support. Nobody forced them to do anything."

### **Political Aspirations of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans**

National churches that have a symphonic relationship with the state typically cannot separate themselves from certain policies that the state leads. However, in Montenegro, something quite the opposite has been shown. For this reason, the last group of my questions is related to:

- (a) The potential political goals of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans, the specific relationship between the state and the church, and SOC perception of (Serbian) Orthodox nationalism.
- (b) How SOC leaders understand the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the war in Ukraine.

My two topic codes related to this group of questions are *Between national and nationalist* and *Montenegro is projected to be a "small Ukraine"*

#### **5. Between national and nationalist**

- "The Church is, in principle, a national Church. However, if it becomes nationalistic it stops being a Church. The problem with the SOC is that it is always somewhere in between."

## 6. Montenegro is projected to be a "small Ukraine"

- "It is an inconvenient topic.... But ... I will quote Pope Francis ... he said that NATO barks at Russia's borders."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The respondent did not want to answer directly, but he shared with me what Pope Francis said and indicated that he agreed with him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### **Transnational Cooperation**

##### *Complexity of Cooperation*

The first topic code, "complexity of cooperation." reveals a lot about the potential of the transnational action of the Church, but also about the current relationships among SOC dioceses.

The first problem can be seen from the two quotes presented in Chapter 4. The Church leaders are not united in their attitudes as to whether cooperation is good or not, and it is very difficult to get an impression of the potential of transnational action from this.

However, during the interviews, those leaders who said that cooperation is good and that the SOC functions as a unique organism claiming that "SOC is one functional organism with all its dioceses; cooperation is also functional" gave the impression with their answers that cooperation is not as desirable as they may have claimed at the beginning. One of the interviewees who began by claiming that the cooperation was great later in the conversation said that "we [SOC] need to cooperate more often and have closer relations." Another respondent who also thought that the cooperation was good, later said that "we should look at SOC as a grandmother who has many grandchildren; the grandchildren come to the grandmother occasionally to take pictures, but it would not be good for either the grandmother or the grandchildren if they were all to stay together for a long time."

This grandmother-grandchildren analogy seems to be the best description of cooperation between dioceses. It is a somewhat formal relationship that boils down to the fact that local SOC churches come together for metaphorical pictures - that is, for a performance that is sent to the

public about their relationship. More than that, as the respondent claims, overly close bonds are not good for anyone, which largely explains the nature of inter-dioceses relations and is what we can see in practice.

If grandmother and grandchildren cannot sit together for a long time – that is, dioceses cannot cooperate continuously – then we should wonder about the stability of relationships in the family. If grandmother and grandchildren meet only to take pictures, then the question arises - what kind of family is this?

However, the leaders avoid openly talking about the stability of the larger family, i.e., the SOC. Most everyone said at the beginning of the interview that inter-diocesan cooperation is desirable and that the various branches of the church do function as one. This is what they also say to the media, and in principle this is what would be the essence of the Orthodox Church's actions. However, principle and practice are two different things.

### *Divided Actor*

The events in Montenegro changed and challenged *both* principle and practice in the SOC. Given that the SOC does not usually show the capacity to act transnationally, and that the Montenegro situation changed that, the second group of my questions related to this concept is about *when* (in which situations) the Church decides whether to cooperate and act transnationally.

With this topic code, we observe that Church leaders are divided on the issue of when the church should act and when not. Some bishops (and they are in the majority) believe that the SOC should not interfere in everything or even declare its views about everything. One of the

interviewees who was of this opinion claimed that "the SOC should not always react; only in certain situations"

However, other bishops think that the role of the Church is to die for freedom and to always react when its people suffer and/or its personal interests are threatened. They claimed that "the Church must always be free and independent, which means ready to react in every situation in which it needs to protect freedom. Not only its freedom, but also the freedom of people"

And while my initial assumption was that the main motive of the Church for cooperation and transnational action in Montenegro was personal interest – institutional survival – it turns out that in fact, motivations are far more complex than I anticipated and involve much more than the straightforward institutional interests of the Church.

The SOC needed several things for its action in Montenegro – and the transnational cooperation of the dioceses – to succeed. According to my interviews, the SOC needed the institutional element (for institutional survival), the spiritual element (the struggle to save the people from a new civil war), and the leader, Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic, who was described as "Moses who led his people out of slavery" thanks to his "congregational character and an independent personality." These three elements are inseparable and without each, the SOC would not have been ready to act transnationally and change the regime in Montenegro.

Institutional survival was the first factor that motivated transnational action. According to the interviewees, Montenegro is ideologically closest to North Korea. It is a country that until recently was run by a man, Milo Djukanovic, who presents himself as a communist and claims that he does not believe in God or the Church. In an attempt to shore up his power, Djukanovic



introduced the idea that Montenegro needed its own autonomous Orthodox Church even though Montenegrins had already had their own Church for centuries.

The respondents believed that the easiest way for Djukanovic to create a new church was to abolish the old one: the SOC. How might he have done so? Since the Law on Freedom of Religion would have placed SOC property under state control along with its personnel and finances, interviewees perceived that the SOC would have become just another department in the Montenegrin state apparatus. It was clear that if Djukanovic implemented this policy, the institutional survival of the church would have been impossible.

However, there was also a higher, spiritual dimension that initiated transnational cooperation. Djukanovic aspired to radically and militantly change the national identity in Montenegro, to divide a unified nation where all people saw themselves as relatives, to allow Montenegro to slide into civil war in order to achieve his ideal – a nationalist, ethnically Montenegrin Montenegro in which there is no place for ethnic Serbs. One interviewee explained this by claiming that "we were aware that Djukanovic was trying to artificially and militantly change people's identity. That would mean the beginning of a civil war."

The interviewees believed that the duty of the Church under such circumstances is evangelical: to save the people from this kind of evil, and to reconcile the Orthodox relatives and bring them together once again in the Church that has always been theirs in common: the SOC. All dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church recognized the importance of this problem and the necessity of a joint response.

One additional factor was key to the success of the SOC's transnational cooperation, and that was the leader of the SOC in Montenegro, Amfilohije. As the interviewees said, "he had two important characteristics: a *congregational character* and an *independent personality*."

Amfilohije's congregational character stemmed from his missionary work, which was practically designed to develop good relations with other dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church, but also with Orthodox Churches everywhere. He had especially good relations with the dioceses that bordered his diocese and with the diocese in Kosovo. He also had excellent relations with the SOC in the diaspora and with the Albanian Orthodox Church and its Archbishop Anastasije.

Across the Orthodox world, he enjoyed exceptional respect. He brought the Patriarchs of Jerusalem, Russia, and Constantinople, who do not agree on various matters, together in Montenegro. At that time, he became a symbol of unity and cohesiveness in the Orthodox Church both in Montenegro and beyond.

On the other hand, as the interviewees said, Amfilohije had an independent personality. This independent personality was formed through his education, which he acquired in both the East and the West. He spoke five languages, which made him open toward everyone but also independent of any authority and politics outside of his sphere of interest. Precisely for this reason, Amfilohije managed to exclude external political factors from having influence on the *litije* in Montenegro. This accomplishment made Metropolitan Amfilohije a shepherd who enabled the SOC to overcome its limitations and unite in the protection of the Orthodox people and the centuries-old Church in Montenegro.

### ***Litije in Montenegro***

#### *Miracle in Montenegro*

This portion of my analysis concerns the matter of resources that the SOC required to facilitate its success in Montenegro. The first group of questions related to the SOC's capability

of independently providing resources in Montenegro, especially the most important resource of all: the people who will participate.

The topic code for this group of questions is "Miracle in Montenegro," which reflects the fact that that my interview respondents thought the only way to explain what happened in Montenegro is to label it a miracle. One of the interviewees explained it by saying “*Litije* were a miracle. It is unlikely that something like that will ever happen again in the future.”

In Montenegro, *litije* were a miracle because the mobilization of the people for such an engagement during the pandemic was very difficult, and not just because a life-threatening virus was in the air. In addition, the people were already quite divided along ethnic and religious lines, and Djukanovic deepened these divisions daily with his rhetoric.

However, through the interviews, I learned that the Church managed to unite the people because they were cognizant of the dangers posed by the Djukanovic regime and aware of how unfair the Law was to the SOC. In short, the people who participated in the *litije* came to see the SOC as a victim of the Montenegrin regime. Also, even though the people were artificially divided by Djukanovic, in the end what was decisive was the fact that all these people had the same identity. They had been culturally connected for centuries, so they were all brothers, friends, relatives, and they had always been held together by the Church.

According to what I learned from the interviewees (primarily from those in Montenegro), three groups of people participated in the *litije*. The first group consisted of Orthodox Christians (regardless of ethnic differences). This group included people who truly believe and go to church on a weekly basis, and those who do not participate regularly (or at all) but are bound to the SOC by traditional cultural reasons.

In the second group of *litije* participants were members of religious minorities: mainly Catholics and Muslims who considered this Law, and Djukanovic's policy in general, a form of religious discrimination. Although interreligious relations remain tense in some contexts in the Balkans, threats to religious freedom can bring people of different faiths together in a hurry. My interviewees explained this by saying that "members of religious minorities participated in *litije* because they knew that what was happening to us [SOC] was very unfair, and tomorrow the same thing could happen to them. They were aware of the kind of man [Djukanovic] we were dealing with."

The third group of *litije* participants was made up of people who do not belong to the SOC or in many cases any religion at all. These individuals saw Djukanovic's Law as a violation of basic rights and freedom as well as a repudiation of democracy and the concept of the secular state, because the Law would have allowed the state to directly encroach on the life of religious communities (Figure 3).

Also, some Montenegrins joined the *litije* solely based on dissatisfaction with the regime of Milo Djukanovic, whose 30-year rule was marked by a very high rate of crime, corruption, and patronage. In addition, the COVID pandemic revealed the shortcomings of the health system in Montenegro, which did not have even the most basic medical equipment to fight the virus. Meanwhile, the people were aware that the president and other politicians in his party had plenty of money to use for their own needs.

The existing literature shows that where church attendance is low, the chances for mobilization are small. As the *litije* in Montenegro have shown, though, this is not a necessary rule. Therefore, I sought to find out from the interviewees how it is possible that Montenegro was an exception to the rule.

One of the interviewees said that “it is quite problematic to use frequency of worship attendance as a predictor of mobilization because in the Balkans, the wall between believers and non-believers is quite thin.” The interviewee claimed that these categories are quite fluid and that those who were non-believers yesterday can be believers today. The relative unimportance of religious participation is reinforced by the fact that the Church, which is the custodian of all Serbian (and Montenegrin) history and tradition, was widely perceived as a victim of the regime both by people who go to church and those who do not.

### *The Power of Orthodoxy*

Although it may have been unlikely, the SOC in Montenegro managed to secure the most basic resource to make its efforts succeed: people. This is how the *litije* were born. However, to keep them going, widespread and eager support was necessary. By simply following these events in the newspapers and social networks, it was difficult to determine how the Church’s help and support developed.

The interviews revealed that the transnational cooperation provided essential resources without which it is questionable whether the epilogue of the *litije* would have been the way it was. The first resource provided by transnational cooperation was leadership. Orthodox bishops from all dioceses went to Montenegro and gave speeches to the gathered population. Through the interviews, I found out that these bishops received an invitation from Metropolitan Amfilohije to Montenegro and provide support. Without Amfilohije’s leadership, ordinary Montenegrins would not have realized how deeply opposed the SOC was to Djukanovic’s announced policy. The interviewees admitted that they were skeptical at first when the *litije* first began, but that they could not refuse a man who was as universally respected as Amfilohije.

According to the interviewee, the scene that greeted them in Podgorica is something he will remember forever: a huge number of people in the middle of the winter who did not have the slightest fear but instead faith, hope, and a desire for change. Everyone stood united and thus overcame all the divisions that Djukanovic's regime had been trying to impose on them. At that point, the bishops realized that what was happening in Montenegro was completely different from anything the SOC had faced or done before. It was clear to them that the activism was a miracle, but they also realized that to maintain morale and motivation, additional help was needed.

Thus, through transnational cooperation, another important resource was secured - bishops in their dioceses began to organize *local litije*. In their conversations with me, the bishops said that their initial invitations to the people to gather were very modest. They avoided including any specially designed rhetoric, instead issuing a simple invitation to come together and pray for the people and the Church in Montenegro. Much to their surprise, a huge number of people responded. People came every Thursday and Sunday regardless of the weather conditions and regardless of how far they had to travel to the place where the *local litije* were held.

This resource – gentle mobilization of Serbian Orthodox believers outside of Montenegro – played a fundamentally important role in maintaining motivation, morale, and faith among the people who protested in Montenegro. Montenegrins and Serbs from Montenegro saw direct evidence that their Serbian Orthodox relatives outside the country stood along with them in their efforts.

In Milo Djukanovic, the people and the Church in Montenegro faced a very serious enemy. However, they had a great advantage over Djukanovic because he chose neither the method nor the means in this fight. The Church had the upper hand thanks to the cooperation of

all dioceses across the Balkans and the diaspora. Gatherings of local Orthodox believers in each diocese at the same time as *litije* were being held in Montenegro sent the message that "everyone is there for each other in this fight and that there is no giving up."

According to one of the respondents, "this highly symbolic display of solidarity was the most important resource of all because it showed the most beautiful dimension of Orthodoxy: the power of spiritual unity that need not have a physical dimension to achieve results." The indispensable nature of this transnational action indicates that the most important resource SOC leaders provided was to demonstrate that all Serbian Orthodox believers were one family, one movement, spiritual and not physical, which resisted all challenges for eight months and resulted in the end of Milo Djukanovic's regime.

Presumably this inter-diocesan cooperation also helped with the provision of another resource, money, to keep the *litije* going for eight months. However, my interviews revealed that money was *not* an essential resource for the maintenance of the *litije*. According to the interviewees, the Montenegrin and Littoral Metropolitanate needed only 50 euros to maintain each *litija*, a sum the SOC could easily afford. Also, as the interviewees said, the main idea of the *litije* was that they should "send an image of modesty, peace, nonviolence, and unity." It was therefore important to deflect any attempt to connect their maintenance with any material support received from different sources. A top goal was to keep the *litije* completely apolitical, which was very challenging because, according to the interviewees, "everyone tried to have their influence on *litije*; not only Serbia and Russia, but also the West."

Thus, the *litije* succeeded without money as a key resource, without violence and conflict, and without politicization. And with that, the *litije* were a *differentia specifica* when it comes to social protests.

## **The Political Aspirations of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans**

### *Between National and Nationalist*

My interviews also dealt with bishops' perceptions of the SOC as a political actor and examined the extent to which the activities of the Church in the Balkans might be characterized as the spread of Orthodox (Serbian) nationalism. I included this dimension in my interviews because critics (especially Milo Djukanovic) attacked the SOC many times during the *litije* for spreading Serbian national ideas and for being an organization that works on behalf of the Serbian government and its goals (N1, 2020). Djukanovic's main argument for such claims was a reference to the wars of the 1990s in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, when the SOC truly did espouse a rhetoric that was aimed at spreading a version of Serbian nationalism.

However, news accounts of the Church's action in Montenegro indicate that the Church has been avoiding this kind of rhetoric; that is, the SOC has fundamentally changed the tone and content of its discourse since in the aftermath of the wars. (Antena M, 2019)

I was eager to ask the interviewees whether they thought the SOC in the Balkans nevertheless had one or more political goals in mind and whether it is guided by the idea of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism.

What the interviewees almost uniformly told me is that because the SOC is a national church – a Serbian church, it cannot be separated from the idea of Serbian nationalism. However, this idea does not necessarily have to be a negative one; it can include the goals of cultural, historical, and linguistic preservation as well as a benignly traditional dimension. Nevertheless, in the complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious context of the Balkans, the possibility that such a version of nationalism could exist without any pushback seems quite debatable.



To determine whether the SOC might be attempting to spread some version of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism in the Balkans, I asked my interviewees to explain what, in their opinion, is the correct role of the SOC in the Balkans, especially in territories characterized by the most complex socio-political situations, i.e., Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro.

The interviewees' responses concerning the Church's possible nationalist agenda in the Balkans fall into two categories. Some said the SOC's main goal is to unite the Serbian people and keep them together, while others said it is to preserve identity. These answers seem simple at first glance, but in the still-fraught context of the Balkans, both goals on the part of the church could create a lot of problems. In fact, the idea that the SOC aims to unite the Serbian people and preserve the Serbian identity in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious environments of the Balkans sounds quite controversial. And an additional context must be considered here: the deep and complex connections between religious communities and politics in the Balkans. For this reason, I aimed to find out *how* the interviewees think such goals might be achieved, especially in contested areas such as Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro.

One of the interviewees said that "being a good citizen and a good SOC member can go hand-in-hand even in environments where there is a complex social and political situation."

The goal of the Church, he said, is to bind citizens to a collective, Orthodox identity and not to the state of Serbia, and therefore he claimed that he does not see how such a goal of the Church could be problematic. Other respondents reflected the view that the SOC can exist anywhere without threatening or destroying the state. In order to support this argument, the respondents gave example from Montenegro and said that "SOC in Montenegro was not against the state, it was against the anti-constitutional, anti-democratic and anti-secular Law. The Church even strengthened the statehood of Montenegro in this way."

However, some of the bishops acknowledged the complexity of church-state relations in the Balkans. One leader contended that relations can remain calm as long as a "[certain] state does not stand up against the Church and try to destroy it, [but if] that state is against the state of Serbia ... the Church will not be ready to tolerate it."

Although it seems reasonable that the SOC will not tolerate it if a state threatens its rights and position, its concerns about whether another country is "against Serbia" in principle would seem to exceed both its spiritual mission and its goals of keeping the population together and preserving its identity. It seems that making judgments about which states are for or against Serbia is the point where the SOC's evangelical mission ends and its political one begins. However, what circumstances might lead the SOC to cross the line between a purely spiritual mission and a political one? The answer depends on political contexts, the nature of the church-state relationship in Serbia, and political relations between states in the Balkans and the roles religion plays in those relations.

The problem of political relations between the countries in the Balkans goes beyond the subject of my research, but what is important to know in this context is that relations since the breakup of Yugoslavia have remained quite tense and complicated, and that religion – Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Islam – are used instrumentally in shaping these relations.

I asked my interviewees about their perceptions of the relationship between the Serbian state and the SOC beyond its formally symphonic relationship (as discussed in Chapter 1), specifically how that relationship affects the formation of Orthodox nationalism and any political pretensions of the SOC in the Balkans. Their reactions to these questions indicate that the relationship between the SOC and Serbia is extremely close, and that this closeness represents a concerning problem.

According to the respondents, the Church and the state should never be in such a tight embrace as they are now, because it is dangerous, but the reality today is that church and state are inextricably linked in today's Serbia. As one interviewee said, "The Church must be absolutely free in surrendering to the state, which means that it must be ready to suffer." If the relationship is not like this, the church becomes a tool, a slave of the regime. Interviewees were concerned that an impervious relationship between church and state can be disastrous because it risks turning the SOC's spiritual mission into a political one. The interviewees used the recent action in Montenegro as an illustration of how to avoid risk and potential disaster, as the *litije* were peaceful, dignified, and above all apolitical. The bishops were clear that the *litije* ultimately succeeded mainly for this reason. The implication is that forceful, unpopular political interventions by the SOC would *not* succeed. In fact, the bishops identified the extremely close relationship between the state and the SOC as one of the biggest threats to the success of the *litije*. They told me there had been attempts from Belgrade and the Synod of the SOC (the executive authority of the Church) to exert influence and to introduce "the Serbian factor" (which is certainly not only national but also nationalist).

The first such attempt was embodied by pressure that was placed on Metropolitan Amfilohije to have the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, come to speak at *litije*, on Christmas Day, January 7, 2020. When the Metropolitan refused, Serbian media close to President Vucic started an unprecedented smear campaign aimed at a man who until then had been seen as a living saint and a great unifier of peoples. However, as soon as he tried in even the slightest way to criticize the authorities in Serbia, the media turned him from a hero to a villain.

There were also various attempts to intervene in, and perhaps undermine, the *litije* in other ways. One plan was to involve ultra-nationalist groups from Serbia in the *litije* and to

present their participation as the position of the Church. Other efforts aimed to use the *litije* to propagate Serbian and Russian interests by bringing in Russian flags and singing nationalist songs. However, none of those plans succeeded because Metropolitan Amfilohije did not allow it, which put him in an unenviable position when it comes to the relationship with Serbia and the SOC headquarters in Belgrade.

Also, even the participants were aware that any kind of nationalist provocation must be prevented. According to what one of the interviewees said, "people [*litije* participants] did their best to prevent anyone who would try to behave in a way that introduced any nationalistic ideas and politicized this event. They knew that *litije* have much higher dimension and that they will not allow political influence to endanger them"

The interviewees believed that any introduction of a national idea would completely make the *litije* meaningless, but also confirm what President Djukanovic kept saying: that the movement was the action of a national church aiming to spread nationalist, Serbian ideas and abolish the independence of Montenegro. Amfilohije knew that any appearance of such covert aims could crush the *litije* – and cede the SOC's property to the Montenegrin state. However, it is important to emphasize that what happened in Montenegro happened against the odds. Realistically speaking, the relationship between the SOC and the Serbian state is so close that most any form of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism – even when it is positive or benign – has little chance of *not* being perceived as a more toxic nationalism. In this context, one of the interviewees said that "The Church always adapts to the model of the state and the regime in which it functions. The church is like water, you can pour it into various vessels." The fact that the protests were in Montenegro, not Serbia itself, created an important boundary. Moreover, Amfilohije himself – an exceptional person who was independent-minded and critical of the

authorities in Serbia – was able to control the narrative around the movement, insuring that people did not wrongly view the *litije* as actions driven by the Serbian state. One of my interviewees said that based on how the Montenegro action turned out, "It does not follow that SOC has any political ambitions ... even if [the religious and the political] cannot be separated today."

The biggest obstacle to greater autonomy of the SOC from the state is the Synod of the SOC, that is, the highest church executive in which, as a rule, the members are close to the state authorities. One of them, due to his exceptional closeness to the ruling regime, is sometimes referred to as the "president in a mantle." His statement, which undercuts any presumption of consensus and cooperation in the SOC, was "decisions of the Synod are not discussed."<sup>14</sup> However, in practice, the decisions of the Synod always correspond to the preferences of the regime. For instance, after a meeting between Serbian President Vucic and the SOC Synod during which they talked about the situation in Kosovo, they announced to the public that they would act *together* to protect vital, *national and state* interests. In short, in most cases the SOC is a little spiritual and a lot political, more nationalist than a national Church, due to its symphonia with the state. As such, the SOC's action in Montenegro was the exception to the rule.

*Montenegro Is "Projected to Be a Small Ukraine"*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Details about this person and his political involvement were presented in the documentary show *Junaci doba zlog* (Heroes of the Evil Age). See more at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUz6Cq6pFqg>

<sup>15</sup> The current SOC Metropolitan Joanikije compared the events in Ukraine and Montenegro and emphasized that in fact the goal in both countries was the same, claiming that "what is happening in Ukraine is the result of impiety that has taken root" and that Montenegro should have the same fate [but *litije* prevented it] See more at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/joanikije-ukrajina-crna-gora/31751141.html>

During the *litije* in Montenegro, many observers in Eastern Europe worried that Montenegro was about to become a “small Ukraine.” This contention suggested that the West planned to do the same thing in Montenegro as they had done in Ukraine, i.e., to divide the people into Russians and Ukrainians, to found a completely new (and political) church, and thus to diminish or eliminate Russian influence while spreading its own. Milo Djukanovic was given such a task in Montenegro. The SOC, aware of all the consequences that the spread of Western influence had on Ukraine, wished to prevent such a scenario. This is the common sense understanding of these relations and events for people living in Eastern Europe, and through conversations with the interviewees, it was clear that they also share this view.

The pervasiveness of this concern is reflected by the fact that all of my interviewees saw the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine as a clash of civilizations between East and West, that is, Russia and the United States. They see the U.S. and the West in general as trying to impose Western values and influence on Eastern Europe, and this concerns them greatly. Although all respondents were against war and unnecessary human suffering, they all reflected an understanding of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill’s supportive position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Thinking a bit about how Serbian Orthodox leaders have been reacting to the war in Ukraine offers an additional window for understanding Orthodox nationalism and church-state relations in Eastern Europe and their potential consequences. The Russian Orthodox Church is the only Orthodox churches in the world besides the SOC that has such an impervious relationship with the state. In Russia today as in Serbia, church and state are tightly bound together. (Vekovic, 2020) The two churches also share a similar way of understanding Orthodox nationalism and their political role. (Ivanov, 2017)

The ROC and SOC have the same models of behavior because they have the same relations with the state. This relationship is characterized by a lack of freedom for the church, being placed in a position of servitude to the state, and reduction to a simple instrument for the use of politicians. In Russia, the ROC is used in the context of the realization of the broader “Russian World.”(Baluk and Doroshko, 2021) Similar rhetoric was introduced in Serbia a few years ago suggesting that the SOC should help foster a broader “Serbian World.”<sup>16</sup>Such a world would involve unifying all Serbs in the Balkans within the borders of one state. Given that the SOC is a state instrument, it is typically expected that the state can use the church to achieve its goals (up to and including the creation of a unified Serbian state), in a similar way that Russia uses the ROC to justify the war in Ukraine.

These two examples actually show us that if the relationship between the state and the church is too close, there is no chance that the church is only national, but it almost always becomes nationalistic.

Also, if we look back at what my respondents said, it is clear that the relationship between the state and the SOC in Serbia is so close that it is dangerous, and the same applies to the ROC and the Russian state.

For this reason, events in Eastern Europe in the future will largely be determined and dictated by state-church relations in which the ROC and its closest ally SOC will certainly play an extremely important role.

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<sup>16</sup> See more at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpski-svet-srbija-balkan-/31521168.html>





## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are important for understanding the nature and potential of the Serbian Orthodox Church as one of the key political and social actors in the Balkans. The aim of the research was to investigate whether a traditionally national church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, has the potential to act transnationally and thus achieve certain goals that cross outside of its own borders. Can the Church overcome inter-diocesan disagreements and differences and cooperate as effectively as when the SOC decides to act within national borders? What goal might be important enough for the Church to take the exceptional step of acting in coordination across diocesan lines?

My results add to our understanding of the political role the SOC often plays, as well as the concept of Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism. In this way, I make a contribution to the understanding of the overall politics of Serbia, but also the complete socio-political situation in the Balkans from the point of view of religion and politics, without which it is impossible to fully understand the functioning of the Balkans and the whole of Eastern, Orthodox Europe.

My research has shown that the SOC *does* have the potential to act transnationally, but when the Church will decide to cooperate and act in a coordinated way across national lines is a highly complex question to which there is no singular answer. Institutional survival alone is not reason enough to give rise to transnational cooperation. What seems crucial for the engagement of the broader SOC is that its action be differentiated, that is, separate and independent, from the state. The SOC's relationship with the Serbian state is so close that any actions it takes are likely to be perceived as having the tacit approval of the government in Belgrade. Therefore, it is a delicate matter indeed for the Church to act *on its own* without being seen as an instrument of the

state. The action in Montenegro illustrates how and why the SOC can act to promote policy change, even transnationally, when it draws a boundary between its motivations and those of the Serbian government.

In the context of Montenegro, the SOC's decision to act transnationally was key to the success of *litije*. The support that came from dioceses across the Balkans and the diaspora in the form of local *litije* and prayers gave motivation and strength to the people in Montenegro not to give up and to remain united for eight months.

Perhaps the most important findings in this research concern the political aspirations of the SOC. In its activities in the Balkans, the SOC is guided by Serbian (Orthodox) nationalism, which, in the opinion of the interviewees, is not necessarily something bad and dangerous at its core. However, the symphonic relationship between the church and the Serbian state turns the SOC more and more into a nationalist church – whether it wants to be one or not – that serves as a tool of the regime, making it completely unfree and distracted from its spiritual mission. This situation is problematic and creates uncertain expectations when it comes to the future of the socio-political situation in the Balkans, in which the SOC is one of the most important regional actors.

However, the success of the *litije* in Montenegro and the SOC's efforts to support them are a clear exception to the rule and a prime example of the well-utilized potential that the SOC has within itself. This episode was the first time in history that an Orthodox Church directly influenced the change of an autocratic regime. Also, this happened in Montenegro, a country where communism is deeply rooted and where the people have not had a say in changing their ruler for 1,000 years. Seemingly out of nowhere, the Church appeared, overcame many practical hurdles, and showed that it can initiate and help the process of democratization.

So, this is exactly what Philpott (2007) was talking about: the political ambivalence of religion. According to Philpott, every religion has the potential to produce positive political change, even Orthodoxy, which has been denied this possibility in literature for a long time. However, the *litije* in Montenegro completely changed this understanding and showed that Orthodoxy is also politically ambivalent.

However, the key circumstance in the Balkans concerns the the separation of church and state, that is, differentiation. The lack of church-state separation is and will continue to be the biggest challenge for the SOC in the future because its current relationship with the state is so tight as to be dangerous.

Nevertheless, the example of *litije* in Montenegro shows that the Church has the potential to act ambivalently (Philpott, 2007), and some of the bishops I spoke with for the purposes of this research agree that the SOC can, should, and must separate itself from the state, even at the cost of suffering because it is its own. spiritual, evangelical role. This challenge should be considered in all future research about the role of the SOC in the Balkans.

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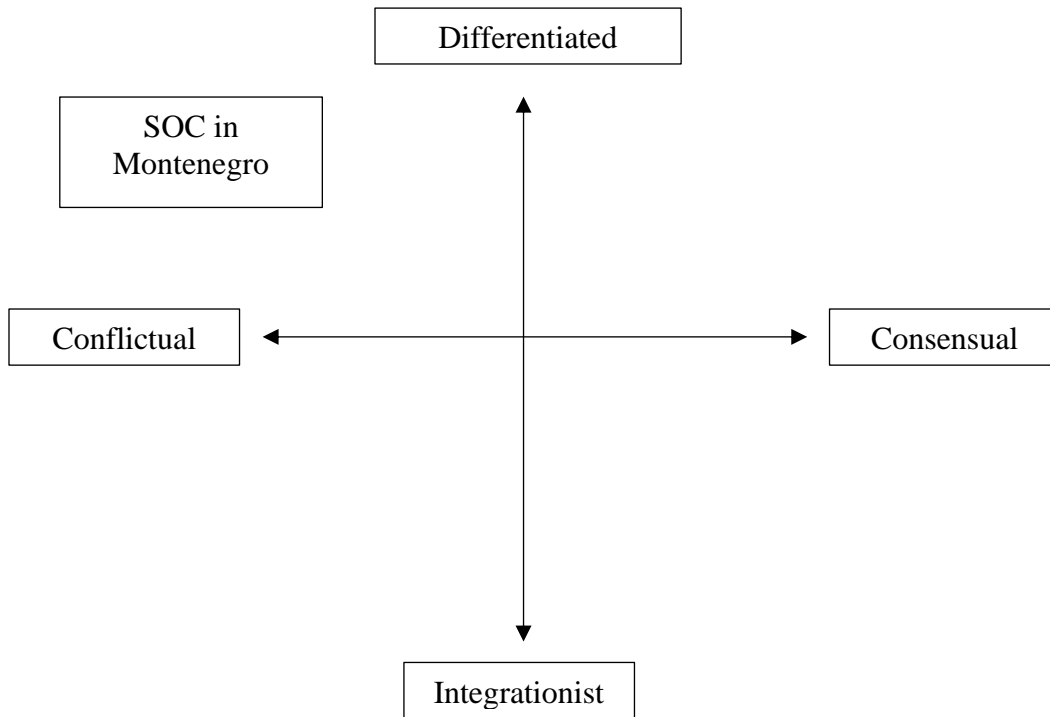
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Configuration of differentiation between Church and State in Montenegro





<b>GH:2</b>	<i>Litije</i> in Montenegro	Miracle in Montenegro  Power of Orthodoxy	"Litije were a miracle. The SOC in Montenegro reconciled the people and united the country. SOC prevented a civil war"  "People everywhere recognized the problem... They recognized that something essential was happening for the fate of the church. That is why people expressed their support. Nobody forced them to do anything"
<b>GH:3</b>	The political aspirations of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans and the understanding of such aspirations in Eastern Europe	Between national and nationalist  Montenegro is projected to be "small Ukraine"	"Church is, in principle, a national Church. However, if it becomes nationalistic it stops to be a Church. The problem with the SOC is that it is always somewhere in between"  "It is an inconvenient topic ... But ... I will quote the Pope Francis...he said that NATO barks at Russia's borders"

Figure 3: Table presentation of people who participated in *litije*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
Orthodox Christians People who believe/behave and people who belong	Radical change of identity  Endangering the SOC as a guardian of tradition, history, and culture
Religious minorities Catholics and Muslims	Law on Freedom of Religion is kind of discrimination
Other citizens Not religious affiliated in any way	Violation of secularism, democracy and the liberal state

## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

The inter-diocesan relations of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Balkans and in the Diaspora have gone through various phases.

**Q1:** How would you describe the inter-diocesan relations of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the moment?

**Probe:** (Ask only in Diaspora): Is it easier for your diocese to cooperate with the dioceses in the West compared to the dioceses in the Balkans?

- **If yes:** Why do you think it is harder to achieve cooperation with dioceses in the Balkans?
- **If not:** What do you think was the main obstacle to achieving more cooperative relations with the Diaspora in the past and how has it been overcome?

**Probe:** (Ask only in the Balkans): Is it easier for your diocese to cooperate with the dioceses in the Balkans compared to the dioceses in the Diaspora?

- **If yes:** Why do you think it is harder to achieve cooperation with dioceses in the West?
- **If not:** What do you think was the main obstacle to achieving more cooperative relations with the Diaspora in the past and how has it been overcome?

**Q2:** Can you think of a goal that would be important enough to motivate the Church to overcome inter-diocesan disagreements and cooperate?

**Probe:** Why would this goal be important for the SOC?

**Probe:** Can you think of any other goal that would prompt inter-diocesan cooperation besides maintaining peace and stability between Church dioceses?

We say that the Serbian Orthodox Church functions like any political community - it has its own executive (Synod), legislative (Church Parliament-Council) and judicial power (Church Court).

**Q3:** In your opinion, what is the primary *political goal* of the Serbian Orthodox Church?

**Probe:** What role does inter-diocesan cooperation play in achieving this goal?

Today, Serbia is facing great challenges (if we think about the situation in Montenegro, Republika Srpska, Kosovo)



**Q4:** In your opinion, what is the appropriate role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in these regions?

**Probe:** Do you think inter-diocesan cooperation helps solve problems in these regions, or is it the obligation of only the dioceses located in these regions?

It is said that the biggest winner of the elections in Montenegro in 2020 was the Serbian Orthodox Church, i.e., the Church managed to do what the people themselves could not do for 30 years: change the government.

**Q5:** In your opinion, what was the Church's primary goal when it decided to take part in the events in Montenegro?

**Probe:** Did these goals have anything to do with the goals and interests of Serbia and/or the Serbian government?

Although we know that the Serbian Orthodox Church is decentralized (divided into dioceses), it is still *one (unique), apostolic, conciliar, holy* Church. Being conciliar (all issues and problems are resolved by the Parliament-Council) and unique, it is probably necessary for the SOC to cooperate, especially when the issue at hand is as important as was the situation in Montenegro.

**Q6:** Do you think that the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral could have decided and acted on its own in Montenegro, or did it need the support and consent of other SOC dioceses?

In addition to the *litije* in Montenegro, peaceful protests in support of the SOC in Montenegro were organized in various cities in Serbia – but also in Croatia, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, and other countries.

**Q7:** What role did your diocese play in the events in Montenegro?

**Probe:** How and why did your diocese decide to play that role?

**Probe:** What was your main motivation for doing what you did, beyond opposition to “the ungodly Law” (as the Law on Freedom of Religion was called)?

We are also witnesses to the fact that there were people from Republika Srpska, Serbia, and other Balkan countries who went to Montenegro to join the liturgies in their epicenter.

**Q8a:** (Ask only in the Balkans) Did your diocese advise people to go to Montenegro, or support them in these decisions? Were there people who asked you for blessings and advice about going to Montenegro?

**Probe:** If so, what advice did you give and why?

**Q8b:** (Ask only in Diaspora): Because of the coronavirus, people from your diocese were prevented from traveling and providing support in Montenegro. If that situation had been different, would you have blessed people who wanted to go to Montenegro to support SOC and/or participate in protests there?

**Probe:** Why or why not?

We are aware of the recent events in Ukraine and Russia, countries that we consider as brotherly Orthodox countries.

**Q9:** What do you think is the main reason for Patriarch Kirill's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

**Probe:** Could such a decision by Patriarch Kirill jeopardize the good relations between ROC and SOC?

The Metropolitan of the UOC-MP visited Montenegro two years ago to provide support to the Serbian Orthodox Church in the fight against the Law on Freedom of Religion. Religious leaders and others in Russia also strongly criticized the Law. Now have a situation in Ukraine in which the Serbian Orthodox Church is providing support to the UOC-MP.

**Q10:** What is the role of cooperation between the SOC and the UOC-MP (or the ROC in general)?

**Probe:** What is the main goal these churches have in mind in addition to striving for peace in Eastern Europe?