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The role of Serbian Orthodox Church in preserving national identity during the times of contemporary political challenges

Abstract: Contemporary political events have affected both Serbia and the Serbian nation. In fact, just as in the past, especially during the 20th century, the Serbian nation was in the epicentre of global events and on the target of numerous geopolitical factors. For example, it is enough just to recall the events on the eve of World War 1 or the attack of the NATO alliance on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that occurred because of a desire to seize Kosovo and Metohija. On the other hand, in all these ordeals we have experienced and are still experiencing as a nation, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) presents a unifying element of its own which, alongside many other tasks, also has the task to protect the national identity of Serbian people. For that reason, the SOC is often the target of individuals and organizations that more or less openly strive towards the political as well as religious destabilization of Serbian society, so that the principles of Christianity and morality could be marginalized and substituted with some other, different values.

Keywords: Christianity, Church, conciliarity, national identity

The geopolitical trials the Serbian nation is going through are the consequence of the fact that “the Serbian lands and Serbia were and have remained located in the space of the contact zone of conflicts and opposition of two Christian cultural, spiritual, as well as political tradition” (Despotović, 2019, p. 50). Chronologically speaking, this situation from the times of the early existence of the Serbian state

was further complicated during the Ottoman rule and then, with the passage of time, complications and various challenges were only multiplied in the periods of migration, of religious-political blindness caused by anti-theistic ideas... The Serbian nation as the one that mostly accepted the saving gospel word, the word about the resurrected Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, during its history was most

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often aware of the “background” of the attacks which were, more or less intensely, launched against it for the purpose of its destruction. By accepting crucified Christ, the Serbian nation accepted to take the road of persecution, martyrdom and all kinds of suffering. In fact, within One, Holy, Conciliary and Apostolic Church, the commandments of Christ have been and are constantly being preserved, his instructions to his disciples regarding how and in what way to re-establish the communion with God that our first parents had before the fall. At the same time, through necessary succession, Christ showed the apostles and the apostles showed to the priests of the Church the temptations to be experienced by those who believe in him, those who take the road of the feats with a clearly emphasized eschatological dimension. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15: 18–19). Therefore, the Serbian nation, just as other nations that accepted Orthodox Christianity, were duly encouraged by priests as their spiritual shepherds to stay on the true and only road of salvation. At the same time, the Serbian nation was clearly and unambiguously warned by its true shepherds about the challenges and traps to be encountered. For example, on the Day of Holy Emperor Constantin and Empress Jelena on 8th (i.e., 21st) May 1220/1221^[2]

(Slijepčević, 1991; Velimirović, 2026; Saint Sava, 2024; Bojović, Stošić, 2024), in “Sermon on the true faith” Serbian Saint Sava^[3] said very much regarding the persistence in virtuous Christian life.

First of all, this paternal sermon of the true spiritual shepherd such as Serbian Saint Sava invited and invites all of us not to give up in the feat of going on Christ’s Road. At the same time, “Sermon on the true faith” can also be seen as the beginning of what is called Saint Sava’s Christianity nowadays, particularly concerning the question: What is the content of Saint Sava’s Christianity and what has made it so important to the entire Serbian nation for centuries? In geopolitical terms, Saint Sava’s Christianity is the attitude about the priorities of Serbian national interests or, as stated by Professor Ljubiša Despotović, PhD, Saint Sava’s Christianity is “the main feature of Baptized Serbia... the healing spiritual blessing which has been flowing towards our salvation, even when we did not deserve it” (Despotović, 2019, p. 53). However, when we just mention Saint Sava’s Christianity, what should be taken into consideration is the unity of the church and the people. Namely, we should recall that both in the past and today, many decisions relevant for the future of the Serbian people were made at ecclesiastical and national assemblies. For example, the above-mentioned “Sermon on the true faith” was presented at the ecclesiastical and national assembly in the Monastery of Žiča. Emperor Stefan the

[2] In different historiographic works written about “Sermon on the true faith”, but also in general about details regarding Saint Sava’s life and work, one can often find differences about the exact date of the national assembly in the Monastery of Žiča. That is the reason why both 1220 and 1221 are given here as the years of this famous sermon.

[3] Nowadays, there is extensive literature about his topic in the Serbian language and, owing to modern electronic resources, the text of “Sermon on the true faith” is available on many websites.

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Mosaic icon of the Virgin Hodegetria (12th century): The oldest surviving icon in the Hilandar Treasury, created by masters from Thessaloniki. According to tradition and the Life of Saint Simeon, Stefan Nemanja (Saint Simeon the Myrth-streaming) fell asleep in front of this icon.

On display at the exhibition dedicated to Saint Sava at the SASA Gallery, May 2026

Photo: Serbian Orthodox Church

Fourth Dušan Nemanjić was crowned in Skopje on Estar, 16th April. The First Serbian Uprising began on the Day of the Meeting of the Lord in Orašac in 1804. Miloš Obrenović accepted to be the leader of the Second Serbian Uprising on Palm Sunday, 11th (or 23rd) April 1815, at the council in Takovo. It was the Annunciation Day on 2nd April 1861 when one of many ecclesiastical and national assemblies were held in Sremski Karlovci, which would largely determine the political activities of the Serbs in the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Why is this particular “detail” so important? Because of the fact that gatherings of the Serbian people, i.e., their most important representatives at that historical moment, in the most important church centres, on great Orthodox Christian red-letter days, and that an active role at those gatherings was played by priests as well as by the believing people, i.e., the Church.

The words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed state that the Church is One, Holy, Conciliar and Apostolic. Conciliarity as a characteristic of the Church points to a community. Conciliarity of the Church points to the Eucharist – the liturgical community, but at the same time to the gathering of the people, to their communion both in the temple and around it. It is in this very element that the huge importance of priesthood emerges, in our case – the priesthood of the SOC. This priesthood helped and is helping primarily the functioning of the worship

segment of church life. At the same time, the priesthood helps in what today we define as preserving national identity.^[4] Today, particularly after the period spent in the socialist system, in which religion was marginalized, this segment of the SOC functioning is of great importance. Its importance is multi-layered because for several decades our society has been in a rather challenging environment. In fact, everything that occurred on the political stage after the Cold War, all the challenges we encountered and are still encountering in a more or less open way, point to the process of marginalization and even the process of eradication of national identity.^[5] Furthermore, certain political factors see the SOC exactly as an “organization” that is most responsible for the preservation, as well as for the strengthening of national identity. Even in its name – the Serbian Orthodox Church – it has been recognized that “Serbdom was in the first place, followed by Orthodox Christianity and only at the end, if any room was left, came Christianity (as a faith common with other non-Orthodox churches) (Tomanić, 2001, p. 46). It is unnecessary even to mention that, in the opinion of some political factors, the SOC is the bearer and propagator of „mythology” and „mythomania”, i.e., „dangerous” elements that prevent the rapprochement of Serbian society to „contemporary trends”. The particular fear from the SOC when it comes to its perseverance in preserving national identity can

[4] Today, there is quite extensive literature about the question of national identity in the Serbian language. Of course, attitudes regarding this question vary depending on the authors’ political views. The resulting situation is that there are works minimizing its importance and even claiming that the existence of national identity is not necessary. On the other hand, there are works by the authors who recognize national identity as a necessity and a special bastion in front of the challenges of globalism and neoliberalism.

[5] For the topic of national identity of Serbs seen from different perspectives, see: Bodin, 2024, pp. 1046–1072; Weft of Serbian identity, 2016; Radenović, 2006, pp. 221–237; Radaković, 2010, pp. 43–61...

be recognized primarily in the fact that the SOC showed its strength exactly in the Serbian diaspora in terms of preserving traditional values. “It can be rightfully claimed that, if it had not been for the Church, it would be difficult to imagine the existence of the Serbs as a recognized and acknowledge organic community in the diaspora” (Đorđević, 2012, pp. 24–25). To many, the SOC is still someone that has “strongly contributed to the awakening of ethno-nationalism and the great-state mood of the broadest strata of the people, manipulating their religious and national feelings for political purposes” (Popović Obradović, 22nd February 2009). In the present, as well as in the future, these and such beliefs continuously lead to the beginning of minor or major ideological offensives aimed at creating resentment in the broadest society strata towards “the institution” that enjoys huge trust among the people.^[6] The reason for such attacks is exactly the persistence of the SOC in the preservation of moral values and, thus, of Serbian national identity both in an individual and in society on the whole. National identity is seen by some researchers as “superglue” which, according to them, serves for political purposes (Čolović, 2014, pp. 163–166). Contrary to this opinion and similar ones, national identity in the present, as well as in the future, is – let us use medical terminology – a specific immune system. This *immunitatis* really protects a living organism both from the attacks of foreign/external microorganisms and their toxins, and from its own/internal altered and worn-out cells.

If a healthy immune system is necessary for the man’s body health, then a healthy national identity with all its constituent elements is necessary exactly for the purpose of preserving the proper functioning of the individual, family and entire society. In that respect, Sanja Višnjić has an interesting attitude: “National identity is the key supposition of the functioning of society and the state; a man with an identity is an important subject of society, while society with an identity is a stable foundation of individual, societal and national security” (Višnjić, 2019, p. 259).

From a political perspective, national identity also contains a religious component. In fact, ethno-religious identity when we speak about the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, makes affiliation to one of “Abraham’s religions”, made equal to national affiliation. From the standpoint of Orthodox theology, this is not of crucial relevance when speaking about the Church as a community of believing people. This was most beautifully explained by Apostle Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Epistle to the Galatians 3:28). This conciliarity (community) emphasized by Apostle Paul was written about in the following manner by Saint Justin of Čelije: „According to the Orthodox understanding, conciliarity is not a topographic, geographical concept but an internal, substantial, psychological one. True conciliarity is ideally realized in the Holy Trinity. Whoever truly, who evangelically confesses the Holy Trinity, is truly

[6] Public surveys in Serbia as well as in the countries such as Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina offer the opportunity of gaining an insight into the trust in the institutions expressed in percentages. Although it is wrong to classify the SOC among “institutions”, it can still be seen that citizens, particularly young ones, still show a high percentage of trust in the Church. See: Maksimović, 2019, pp. 85–104; Kljajić (25th May 2024).

conciliar, apostolic conciliar, saintly conciliar.” (Popović, 1986, p. 82). It can be openly said that Christian faith exceeds the frameworks of the origin for the sake of a more significant, in fact essential element for every believing person – the eschatological a dimension of the Church. Man’s longing for the beyond, the longing to satisfy his metaphysical hunger, is actually the individual’s desire to spend his earthly life in such a way that after the separation of the soul from the body of Christ, he does not hear the following: “Truly I tell you, I do not know you” (Matthew 25:12). To put it simply, the longing of every believing man is exactly the realization of the community with God, the community that our first parents, Adam and Eve, had before falling to sin. On the other hand, when speaking about local churches, why do we encounter words such as Serbian, Russian, Romanian, Greek, Cyprian etc.? As a living organism, the Church has spread for centuries, is currently spreading and will spread. Christian faith was and is accepted by individuals from different nations of the world. To overcome the undesired situations of a political, administrative and any other type that actually undermine conciliarity of the Church, as was the example of the long-lasting process of the separation of the Roman patriarchate from the community with Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandrian and Antiochian patriarchates, the creation began of autocephalous churches as local, autonomous and independent in their internal life, and which are at the same time in full dogmatic, canonical and liturgy unity with other

local Orthodox churches.^[7] However, when, particularly during the 20th century, the national question became politicized, the national determinant, such as “Serbian” before “Orthodox Church” became a specific stumbling stone to many in the relations with the nations with a different religion. The Balkan Peninsula became and still is widely known for it not only in terms of inter-church relations, but also in terms of political ones. The attempt to remove the term “Serbian” more or less openly, or to marginalize as well as to physically eradicate it from everyday life resulted in the creation of “state” structures such as the Croatian Orthodox Church, the Yugoslav Orthodox Church or the Constantinople Orthodox Church. In fact, each of these para-synagogues also had and still has its role allotted by certain political elites, but always and for ever with a single specific aim – to destroy the SOC and, through it, to degrade and destroy Serbian national identity.

Although it seems to be a “problem”, the existence of autocephalous Orthodox churches with the name of the nation/the state – the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church etc. – should not actually offend anyone’s national feelings in any respect, having in mind, first of all, that all local churches are within the community. This is, among other things, confirmed by the fact of the mutual mention of every church individually in the service of the Holy Liturgy. In other words, the Church, administratively speaking, consists of the local churches within the so-called Diptych.^[8] The church that is not within

[7] For more details about it, see: Vujović, Mirović, Čelić, 2020.

[8] For more details, see: Tsypin, V. (5th July 2012), *Diptych*.

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President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Patriarch Porfirije at the reception of the Belt of the Most Holy Theotokos at Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, May 20, 2026

Photo: Dimitrije Gol

this community is actually not a constituent part of One, Holy, Conciliary and Apostolic Church. The church that is not within that community, although it seems to have the attributes and manifestations of the Church (worship, places of worship, priesthood...), is actually not the Church but, in the vocabulary of Orthodox ecclesiastical-canonical law, a classic para-synagogue. Such communities, as it

is unfortunately well-known to us, particularly due to the problems they have created in the past few years, are a huge stumbling block and a temptation for the believing people. At the same time, the fact that autocephalous Orthodox churches do not accept the newly-created para-synagogues is a clear and unambiguous indicator that, despite political attempts, the Church as a community simply does

not want to accept under its auspices those pseudo-Orthodox communities that do not have the Holy Spirit in them. To put it simply, the immune system of the Church does not allow any viruses penetrating into its healthy and functional body because they would, sooner or later, harm it in a certain way.

A similar challenge to the believing people is the attack on the SOC because of its position towards national identity. In fact, the above-mentioned attacks outside the daily political events have no meaning whatsoever. Nevertheless, taking into account the situation arising in societies formed after the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, these attacks definitely become a certain kind of discomfort that often leads towards confrontation. Historically speaking, ever since World War 2 the SOC has posed a problem to those who aimed, more or less openly, was to destroy the Serbian people. It is enough to recall the position and suffering of the SOC in the Ushashi Independent State of Croatia, or the position and suffering of the SOC in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia/the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The changes experienced by Serbian society is going through in the past decades, particularly those in terms of de-secularization, which led to the greater presence of the Church in public life and society on the whole, were not welcomed with good intentions by all. To those whose aim is to change the value system and to minimize the influence of Orthodox faith on the system of social values, the SOC definitely poses a

problem. In fact, to them, the SOC is an opponent that should be fought against everywhere and in every place. For example, let us mention the recent events on the occasion of the arrival of one of the greatest Christian holy objects in Serbia – the Belt of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As a matter of fact, the arrival of a large number of believers who visited Saint Sava Cathedral in Belgrade out of fully personal religious feelings, to pray and venerate this holy object, who gathered and made a large community of persons connected by the prayerful reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary, was the occasion for improper attacks on the SOC.^[9] On the other hand, did any of those who criticized more than a million people coming to Belgrade for solely religious reasons (Over 1,100,000 believers venerated the Holy Belt of the Blessed Virgin Mary..., 6th June 2026; Over 1.1 million believers venerated the Holy Belt of the Blessed Virgin Mary..., 6th June 2026) ever think about hurting personal feelings of individuals, both religious and national ones? Past experiences suggest that this was certainly not a coincidence, recklessness, or anything like that. Furthermore, it is also possible to speak about a carefully devised and conducted campaign with a specific aim – to attack the national identity of the Serbian man. The fact that the Ombudsman had to react to this unpleasant phenomenon also speaks volumes about the massive scale of this problem. (Pašalić, 2026). How widespread this phenomenon was is also proved by the fact that the priesthood found itself in an odd situation of having to “justify” the gesture of bringing this great Christian holy

[9] In electronic media today it is really easy to find some of the numerous attacks orchestrated by individuals, as well as some organizations, against the SOC and the government of the Republic of Serbia.

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Belt of the Most Holy Theotokos, Belgrade, May 20, 2026

Photo: Dimitrije Gol

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object to the capital of Serbia and to give certain reasons for the spontaneous gathering/assembly of a huge number of people. Exactly this fact indirectly shows that Serbian society, despite the years-long process of de-secularization, still shows some weaknesses deriving not only from the open antitheism of individuals, but also from insufficient knowledge, i.e., from insufficient familiarity with some basic postulates of the functioning of the Church and its significance to the entire Serbian people. To understand it better, we will deal with only one, in

our opinion, interesting detail that is almost paid no attention whatsoever.

As already mentioned, conciliarity and gathering are an inevitable element of the Church and its life/existence within a society/community. In our Serbian nation, conciliarity or gathering has always been associated with church holidays, people gathering around churches, worship and general communion. In the past, but not that long ago, pocket church calendars published by the SOC so that the believing people could know the name of the saint celebrated in prayers

on that particular day, also contained a list with the red-letter days celebrated as holidays in Serbia by local churches. Unfortunately, because of the influence of the “spirit of time”, i.e., the process of separating the ordinary man from the Holy Church, red-letter gatherings are more and more frequently called “fairs” or “fetes” in our language.^[10] This term has absolutely nothing in common with the tradition of the Serbs gathering around their Orthodox place of worship, let alone the Orthodox Christian practice of communion and conciliarity. On the other hand, the older people remember that the above-mentioned pocket calendars of the SOC used a special term – “panađur”. And, as it would be, as a rule, said by the experts dealing with the Serbian language history, this term used to denote exactly the people gathering around a church on important holidays, which implied both the communion of the believing people in the Holy Liturgy, and the communion that continued after the worship.

The term *πανηγυρικός*, from which the Serbian form “panađur” derives, also denoted the opportunity for the priests and political leaders to send public and general national messages relevant for the future of the community. Starting from early Christianity to recent times, as proved by the practice of the usage of this term among Serbs and its presence in the communication of the SOC priests with the believing people, the central thread of the word denoted by it is the liturgical communion and decision-making about the matters either of general social importance or relevant for the individual and the family. When we compare the meaning of the terms “fair/fete” and “panađur”, we can see that changes occurring only

in reference to the language. In fact, the acceptance of the term “fair/fete” has substantially degraded the meaning of church conciliarity at the parochial level, for example. To a more careful observer of such social movements, it becomes clear that there has been a degradation of the importance of Sokolowski the SOC in this specific event because, whether we want to admit it or not, a “fair/fete” is definitely not the place where priests have the opportunity to do their task of educating and strengthening the gathered believing people in faith. In fact, a “fair/fete” with its manifestations is often shocking to people. On the other hand, a gathering that, in addition to the worship element, also has concrete events through which the people become acquainted with their tradition (performances of folklore troupes, cultural and artistic programs etc.), but also with the current social events that will on a smaller or larger scale leave their trace in the forthcoming period (of great use here are lectures about useful topics delivered by priests and experts in different fields), confirms the fact that the SOC has a very specific role in the process of preserving and strengthening religion and religious feelings, and thus, of national identity as well. Therefore, for starters, it might not be a bad idea to reintroduce the practice of using the term “panađur” in the afore-mentioned pocket calendars published by the SOC. Moreover, it is also necessary that the priesthood of the SOC should, through constant catechetical work with the believing people, deepen the knowledge about the foundations of religion, history, tradition and language, i.e., the elements that make national identity.

[10] Vášár is a word of Hungarian origin and it actually refers to the word *sajam* (an etymologically questionable old Slavic expression) or to a Turkish word *pazar/bazar*, deriving from the Persian word *baha-čār*.

Summing up these truly basic notes about the role of the SOC in the struggle for preserving the national identity of the Serbian people both in the present and in the future, we will emphasize that the symphony existing between secular and ecclesiastical power in the Republic of Serbia definitely has huge importance regarding the question that we have only briefly discussed here. Today in the Republic of Serbia we stand witness to the fact that the expression *Acta non verba* is part of everyday life and, for the sake of emphasis, part of the position of secular power both towards the preservation and strengthening of national identity, and in its position towards the SOC. In fact, the SOC is, let us repeat, an extremely important factor in the preservation of everything that the Serbian nation was, is and will be. “The Serbs have for centuries found exactly in religion the strength to overcome the obstacles they

have encountered on the road of the preservation of their national identity” (Bodrožić, 2014, p. 39). It is exactly due to this fact (and the same refers to the future) that we encounter the attacks of those who are most openly against the influence of the SOC on the people and who are only briefly mentioned in the previous part of the text. Moreover, we also encounter those religious-political factors which, recognizing the importance of the SOC in the Serbian national corpus, most frankly want the Church to continue acting and leading the spiritual flock entrusted to it by God on the road towards salvation while simultaneously resisting the temptations and being of benefit to all of us who want to be and stay what our ancestors used to be – a proud, brave and unwavering confessor of Christ the Savior who will not be ashamed to say that he is a Serb, a Serb with a national identity.

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