

Serbia's government breaking its ties with the church

The cooperation agreement signed between Serbia and Kosovo in Brussels last month was a big step towards reconciliation and finally creating peace in the area. The Serbian Orthodox Church was strongly against the agreement, but the government went ahead and did it anyway. Since the fall of communism the church has steadily been getting more power, but now the government is taking a stand.

During the communist period of Yugoslavia few would say that they were religious and the different religious institutions had a small part in the society. But after the fall of communism suddenly everyone turned to faith.

“No one would claim to be religious during the communist period, but after the fall of communism polls were done in all of former Yugoslavia and 90% said that they were either Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim. Religion here was declarative, statistic or political religiosity, a way to confirm ones identity” says Darko Tanaskovic, professor of philology, politics and religion and representative from the European Center for Peace and Development. According to him the fall of communism meant that there was an ideological hole to fill where the church quickly moved in.

“Both the church and the state after the fall of communism used their position and the vulnerability of people to increase their influence and control over people” he says.

Zivica Tucic, a religious analyst and public debater claims that since the war religion has had a big part in the society, both in the influence of people's attitudes but also in relation to the state.

“The state wants to be on good terms with the church in order to stay popular with the public. Since the church does have an affect on the public opinion and there have been several compromises and discussions between the church and state regarding legislations”, he says.

Earlier this year however this relationship was altered when the Government on April 19th signed an agreement in Brussels to normalize relations with Kosovo and setting up diplomatic ties.

“The conflict between Kosovo and Serbia is the last remainder of the problems on the Balkans, and the last obstacle for Serbian EU membership” says Natasa Kandic, a Serbian human rights activist and founder of the NGO Humanitarian Law Center which had a main role in documentation the war crimes in Kosovo.

“We have a church that has always supported the extreme nationalist side and it's not surprising that they were against the Brussels agreement. But this time he

government told the church that politics in this country should be left to those chosen by the people, that we are a secularized country and that the church has no place in politics” she says.

The power and influence of the church

The Serbian Orthodox Church has during several periods through history been suppressed in Serbia, the latest being the communist period before the civil war of the 90's. As a reaction to this, enforced by the newfound patriotism and nationalism, the government tried to make up for the past by giving the church new rights and privileges

“The Serbian Orthodox Church was protected by the law in a way that other religions were not. New churches were built, they were given financial support and in 2001 religious studies were implemented in schools”, says Radmila Radic, historian at the institute for new history in Serbia.

Still Serbia is officially a secularized country and critics mean that the Church has more rights than it should have. According to Snezana Tabacki, an activist in the feminist and anti-military organization women in black, argues that because Serbian Orthodox is the traditional religion in Serbia, they get protection that other religions don't.

“The religious studies that were implemented in 2001 mean that children in state schools learn how to be Serbian Orthodox. They learn the prayers, the holidays, the religious rites and this is not something that should be happening in a secularized society”, she says. Snezana Tabacki also claims that the Church missuses the power it has and tries to influence politics.

“They don't just give their opinions, they also try to influence the parliament and use their power to change legislation. One example is the law against discrimination that was implemented in 2009. The night before the legislation would be addressed they called president Tadic and made him take the question off the agenda. After the church had made some amendments it was taken up again and passed”, she says.

Radomir Rakic, Protodeacon¹ in the Serbian Orthodox church who has been in the Serbian Partriarch for 40 years, however disagrees that the church has any influence in politics

“We don't want to be in politics, that is not our goal. We need to be a spiritual leader for our community. But at the same time we are part of this society, and we are allowed to have an opinion just like any other citizen.” he says.

¹ Name for a married deacon in the Serbian Orthodox church.

Historian Radmila Radic agrees and claims that the church does not have as much power as the public seems to believe.

“The church has as influence as the state lets it have. The last decade it has had more power but as the Brussels agreement shows the government can whenever they want put an end to it” she says.

Religion as an identity

Miroljub Jevtic is a professor of the Politicalology of Religion at the faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade and he claims that the basis of the issues on the Balkans, whether it being the civil war or Kosovo’s independence, is religion.

“The only difference between Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro is religion, without religion they are an identical ethnic and political group. Religion on the Balkans is interconnected with culture; it does not necessarily mean faith. Our national identity is completely based on religion”, he says.

According to him religion increased after the civil war not because people started to believe in god, but because they had lost the identity that came with being a communist state. Now nationality became their identity and the only thing that separated the different nations within former Yugoslavia was religion.

Religious analyst Zivica Tucic agrees and claims that Serbia is in fact a very secularized country even though most people call themselves religious.

“In Serbia religion is less about faith and more about nationalism. If you ask a Serb if they are Serbian Orthodox they will understand the question as “are you a Serb”. And the same thing goes for people from the other states of former Yugoslavia”, he says

Nenad and Ivana Stevanovic are a married couple that have experienced the change after communism. They both go to church for the big holidays and practice their religion, but they don’t call themselves religious.

“My grandparents were religious during the communist period and we celebrated the holidays even then, but there are a lot of people who started practicing their religion to the extreme after the war, says Ivana Stevanovic.

“People have become much more aware of their nationality after the war and I think that’s why religion increased so much. But I think it’s too much, people who never celebrated slave² 20 years ago started celebrating it fanatically now”, says Nenad Stevanovic.

² Celebration of a family’s guardian saint

People loosing trust in the Church

From the communist period until the last couple of years the Serbian Orthodox Church had a lot of trust amongst people, but lately that trust has gone down. An investigation done by Ipsos Strategic Marketing in Serbia shows that for the first time since 2000 the church is not the institution most trusted, but has lost its first place to the army.

“The one who is doing the most to ruin religion in Serbia is the church. When people see how arrogant and materialistic it is they loose belief in it.” Says Zivica Tusic, religious analyst.

“After the fall of communism they could have showed people what real fait was but they didn’t. The church doesn’t mind why people go there, they accept it and stay quiet because they make money on it” he says.

The Serbian Orthodox church has over the last couple of years been making headlines on newspapers with one scandal after the other, which could have contributed to the decline in trust. From corruption and money to sex-scandals and recently a pedophilia-scandal with one of the bishops.

Protodeacon Radomir Rakic however claims that the media exaggerates and intentionally tries to give the church a bad reputation.

“Media is trying to find things to write about the church but they don’t see the good things that the church does. They will write that a bishop drives an expensive car but nothing about the work he does in starting 20 new churches. These journalists are just digging, trying to see if my cloak is clean or not and it’s not their place to do“ he says.

Historian Radmila Radic argues that the scandals do affect people’s opinions of the church but that there are more factors influencing it.

“Scandals happen in the church and every time they do they affect the trust, but usually it comes back again after a while. I also believe there’s an element of manipulation here. The government knew about the videos of a bishop kissing a boy a year before it came out to the press, I think sometimes the government let’s something out because they want to weaken the church’s position at that time”, she says.

However she believes that the church is putting sticks in its own wheels by not dealing with the scandals.

“The biggest problem is that they don’t react fast enough, I think that does more damage than the actual scandal. After a while they did make the bishop leave the church but it took a long time, and I think that hurt them, she says.

The future for religiosity in Serbia

The scandals and the weakened position of the church could be the reason why the state took the opportunity to take a stand against the church without fearing that it would affect public opinion.

“I think the church needs to change its strategy and become more humble and focus on ethics instead of politics. I really like what happened in Zagreb a week ago: all the churches and religious communities went together and published a plan against poverty, violence and corruption. Here the church has never gone out and taken a stand against anything like that”, says Zivica Tucic. He argues that the church is being to arrogant for its own good and that it needs to start working with moral and creating a better society rather than trying to get more power as an institution.

Darko Tanaskovic from the European Center for Peace and Development believes that there is also an economic factor to the churches success.

“Part of why the church has been able to reach the power it has is because of the economic and social situation in the country. I am certain that if we increased the welfare in the country the public would stop depending on the church to solve all problems and religion would become a private matter”, he says.

However even though the power of the church might not decreasing, most experts agree that religiosity is a different matter. According to Radmila Radic faith is something that is not easily changed.

“Religiosity will definitely not decrease, I think it will stay on the level it is now. There are lot more young people who go to church, women are starting to use head-scarfs, there are more and more applicants to the theological universities. I think the number of “real believers” will stay on the same level and the other will probably fluctuate depending on how things with the church develops”, she says.

Miroljub Jevtic agrees and even believes that there are signs that faith and spirituality is becoming more important and that religion is increasing.

“If you look at the world as a whole religiosity is actually increasing. I think that it is a trend that is apparent in Serbia as well”, he says.

Fact boxes

Religion in Serbia

Population

Serbs: 82.86%

Hungarians: 3.91%

Bosniaks: 1.82%

Roma: 1.44%

The main religion is Serbian Orthodox. The state is separated from the church.

<http://www.arhiva.serbia.gov.rs/cms/view.php?id=1015>

Serbian Orthodox Church

- Every family has a patron saint that they celebrate on a certain day.
- The church uses the Julian Calender where Christmas day falls on January 7 (same as Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Jerusalem and the old Greek calendar)
- Fast every Wednesday and Friday by eating no meat, milk or egg.
- 46 days of Lenten fast before Easter

Development of Religion

- Under the Ottoman Empire until 1389 (Muslim influence)
- Under the Austro-Hungarian rule (catholic influence) until Franz Ferdinand is shot in Sarajevo 1914, starting WWI.
- 1918-1943 Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes under King Alexander I.
- 1943-1992 Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, founded during WWII under Josip Broz Tito
- 1991-1999 Yugoslav war

How much do our surroundings affect our beliefs?

One grew up in communist Yugoslavia, the other in capitalist Serbia. Geographically located at the same place, but two completely different countries. In a society where religion has moved from almost non-existing to dominating the society, two people raised in the two different societies describe their relationship with religion.

From one of the small streets branching out from the shopping street Knez Mihajlova a very tall, dark haired 20-year old boy steps out of his house. He has spent the sunny spring day inside studying for his final exams in electrical engineering.

“I started going to church when I was really young but I became conscious of what religion was around 9 years old”, says Dimitar Popovic. He was born and raised in Belgrade, Serbia and grew up in a religious home. His parents were two of the few people who were religious during the communist period.

“My grandparents weren’t religious, but my parents were so I guess I inherited that from them. I go to church every week, I fast two times a week and just try to be a good man” he says.

In another part of the city Violeta Nedeljkovic is finishing her day at the magazine Blic woman. She is a 45 year-old journalist who grew up during the communist rule in former Yugoslavia when religion was basically non-existing in the society.

“The church was unnoticeable when I was young. We knew Bajram existed, the Muslims knew that we had some kind of Christmas but that was it”, she says.

“Me and my friends never even talked about religion. For us it was interesting to go to the midnight mass because it was fun to see but we definitely didn’t connect it to religion”, says Violeta Nedeljkovic.

Relationship to religion

After the fall of communism the church gained more power and being religious became a part of the Serbian identity. People who had been communist during the previous rule started going to church and when polls were done over 90 % proclaimed themselves religious. In Dimitar Popovic’s family however religion was always present. Still it wasn’t easy to be a practicing Christian when he was younger.

“When I was little I was sort of hiding it from everyone. It was embarrassing to say I can’t stay up late on Saturday because I have to go to church on Sunday or I can’t eat that because I’m fasting. So I would just say I’m not hungry or I’m really tired and need to go to bed”, he says.

But when Dimitar Popovic got older his friends started to become aware of religion as well.

“I actually changed my friend. He knew that I was religious and one day he started asking me about it and then in the end he decided to get baptized, and asked me to be his godfather”, he says.

On the walk down street Knez Mihailova Dimitar Popovic talks about his conviction. He is still a normal young guy who studies, plays basketball in the afternoon and hangs out with his friends. The only difference is that he takes his religion seriously.

“Of course there are some things that are hard! For example when I want to go to bed but I have to read my prayers first. Or it’s new years and I want to eat and drink, but am not allowed to eat meat. Or drinking alcohol, having sex before marriage all of those things” says Dimitar Popovic.

“Most people don’t follow the rules as strict as I do and I think that’s wrong, you shouldn’t say you are a Christian if you don’t follow through and practice it the way it should be done. Then you’re not a man of your word but a hypocrite, he says. Still Dimitar Popovic admits that he has doubted his religion.

“I know that what I believe is right and that’s a great security. Of course I have doubted my religion, especially when discussing with friends who have different opinions. But I always find my way back to it. I’m lucky because people in Serbia respect religion even if they’re not religious. I have both religious and atheist friends but it’s not a problem, we just try not to discuss it” he says.

Whereas Dimitar Popovic is a convinced Orthodox, Violeta Nedeljkovic has a completely different view on religion.

“My parents were not religious, they didn’t go to church and I wasn’t brought up in a religious way so I didn’t have that outlook on life”, she says.

When the communist period ended however, Violeta Nedeljkovic was confronted with her identity and nationality just like every other citizen in former Yugoslavia, and with that she had to relate to her religion.

“I went to university in Sarajevo and I probably would have stayed there if the war had not started. I loved the variation we had in former Yugoslavia, my best friend was Muslim and I socialized with people from all nationalities. When the war started my religion was given, pushed upon me, that’s how I see it. I didn’t choose to be a Serbian Orthodox, I just happened to be Serbian”, she says.

Violeta Nedelkovic pauses and takes a sip of her bitter lemon while she runs her fingers through her perfectly straight hair. She is animated and passionate when

talking about her university days, but slows down when returning to the topic of religion.

“Today I have a strange relationship with religion. I don’t follow the rules in the church but I’m religious in the way that I have some deeper respect for the unknown and supernatural and I believe in being a good person. And I do go to church sometimes to light a candle for my parents and grandparents who have passed and to pray for my family and friends”, says Violeta Nedelkovic.

Religion in the society

According to Zivica Tucic, a religious analyst with a focus on the former Yugoslav religions, the identity of the people on the Balkans is so closely connected to religion that people cannot differ from religiosity and culture. He claims that most people don’t know what they believe in.

“People will go on fasts, wear crosses and celebrate the Hollidays, but ask them one thing about the Bible and they won’t be able to answer”, he says.

“I think most young people will tell you that they are religious but they never go to church and they don’t respect the rules of the religion”, says Dimitar Popovic. He believes that the rules are there for a reason and that you need to respect them in order to be a good Christian.

“There is definitely a lot of hypocrisy here today. I know people who follow all the rules, do the fast etc. but at the same are not good people. Morally they do bad things but still they are the ones that are the best “practicing Christians” and that is wrong”, says Violeta Nedeljkovic.

It’s not only religiosity that has increased after the war. Crime has increased a lot over the last 20 years and Serbia is on of the most corrupted countries in Europe with a corruption perceptions index of 39/100 (0 being highly corrupt and 100 very clean).

“It’s interesting how religiosity has increased so much but still the morale of the society has completely dropped. You will see criminals wearing a cross and going to church, it’s like people don’t understand what religion is about”, says Violeta Nedeljkovic.

Zivica Tucic argues that the church has the ability to show teach people about real faith but that it is too focused on gaining power in the society.

“The church doesn’t care why people are there as long as they get enough money. They need to become less arrogant and actually focus on making the society a better place” he says.

Violeta Nedeljkovic agrees and claims that the church in Serbia has always looked to increase its own power.

“It was not until the nationalist forces came than the church got bigger room than they ever had before. And then, instead of calming the people and trying to create peace the leaders of faith did the opposite. They had a hand in starting the war because it was in their interest”, she says.

The church might have had a lot of power until now but due to several scandals happening around the bishops people are starting to lose trust. Dimitar Popovic's faith however is not compromised by what the church does.

“Earlier the church as an institution was really respected but today there are a lot more scandals. A lot of the highest priests drive nice cars and have expensive homes while they should live modestly. But I try not to judge them, it's not my place, I try to focus on my church and my priest who is doing a good job” he says.

While Dimitar Popovic doesn't differentiate between faith and the church Violeta Nedeljkovic on the other hand sees her religiosity as a spiritual and private matter and she does not sympathizes with everything that the church says.

“The church is an institution and it doesn't have anything to do with faith. Religion to me is about believing in something bigger than myself, not about the rules that the church sets up, she says.
