

## **Symbolic Resistance and Ecclesiastical Silence: The SOC and the 2024–25 Student Protests**

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### **Abstract**

This Event Analysis explores the paradoxical role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in the wake of the 2024-2025 student-led anti-corruption protests in Serbia. While protestors prominently displayed Orthodox symbols and icons to express moral resistance and national belonging, the SOC remained publicly silent or aligned itself with state power, even engaging in extraterritorial political discourse in Moscow. The analysis argues that the disjuncture between popular religiosity and institutional complicity reveals a process of de-institutionalized religiosity, wherein sacred symbols are reclaimed as civic tools of resistance. The piece explores the themes of civil religion, symbolic capital, and political theology, examining how the SOC's long-standing entanglement with state authority has been challenged by a new form of moral protest rooted in religious semiotics. This analysis draws on theories of civil religion, symbolic capital, and political theology to examine the paradox of public religiosity and institutional silence. It further engages the concept of de-institutionalized religiosity, arguing that sacred symbols can be dislodged from their clerical context and repurposed as civic tools of resistance.

**Keywords:** Serbia; Student protest; Serbian Orthodox Church; Politicization of religion; De-institutionalized religiosity

### **When God is on the Street, but the Church is Silent**

Can we question the morality of religion? Can we question the ethics of religious institutions? Lastly, can we criticize the sacrality and those channeling God's will based on dogmas?

The answers to these questions should be positive in a society with a systematic secular setup. However, what happens in a society where the national Church has been perceived as the most reliable institution and the only intrinsic preserver of a distinct national identity?<sup>1</sup> What happens when the historical position of the national Church results in its politicized role in society, pragmatically influencing daily politics based on religious views?<sup>2</sup> Lastly, what happens when sixteen people get killed by nepotism and corruption of state institutions and officials, does the Church have any other role than to grieve and help its believers find peace in traumatic occurrences?

These questions point to a paradoxical situation that emerged in Serbia after the 1st of November 2024, a canopy at the reconstructed train station in the town of Novi Sad collapsed, killing 14 people and heavily injuring three, of whom two died in the aftermath. A lethargic society has arisen, led by its academic youth, who, after experiencing many similar traumatic events, sought unavoidable justice and the systematic reconstruction of a deeply entrenched autocratic state. Social and civic actions have spread throughout the state, prompting people to consider their political responsibility and deliberative power on multiple levels.

Led by the students, one of the most diverse social groups, the general society felt the urge to react, support, and fight for universal and fundamental values, including the rule of law, human rights, freedom of the press, and democracy. The heterogeneity of the student movement, their catharsis, and charismatic attitudes helped mobilize people from diverse ideological views and cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Expressing their unity at the protests and during actions, participants stood up beneath a universal national symbol, the Serbian flag. Apart from the national flag, other semiotic determinants emerged, indicating subcultural, regional, ethnic, and religious affiliations as identity markers. Those who made it to the forefront of student marches and overall protests are religious symbols of only one denomination: Serbian Orthodoxy. This particular denominator not only indicates religious affiliation with a specific religious institution but also transcends the religious sub-identity, representing the national identity instead.<sup>3</sup>

The two-fold meaning of the Orthodox symbols in Serbia has its roots in the societal perception among the majority that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is a creator, carrier, protector, and keeper of Serbian national identity, dating from the Ottoman occupation of Serbian feudal states where religion played the role of a main denominator of distinction within a multi-ethnic empire. The SOC's revival after the collapse of communist Yugoslavia renewed the perception of its national importance, and the Church once again gained a high social position that secured previously restricted political leverage. This position has been maintained to this day and

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<sup>1</sup> In 2020, 68% of Serbian citizens identified the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Army as the most trustworthy institutions in the country.; Republic Geodetic Authority of the Republic of Serbia. *Najviše poverenje građana u vojsku, crkvu, policiju i RGZ* (accessed: 15 May 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Radić, Radmila. 2000. *Crkva u politici i politika u crkvi*, in *Srpska elita, Helsinške sveske*, edited by Radić, Radmila / Milosavljević, Olivera, and Obrad Savić. Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 39–83.

<sup>3</sup> Brubaker, Rogers. 2012. Religion and nationalism: Four approaches. *Nations and Nationalism* 18(1), 2–20; Radić, Radmila. 2000. *The church and the 'Serbian Question'*, in *The road to war in Serbia: Trauma and catharsis*, edited by Popov, Nebojša, Budapest: Central European University Press, 247–248; Subotić, Jelena. 2019. *The church, the nation, and the state: The Serbian Orthodox Church after Communism*, in *Orthodox Churches and politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, conservatism, and intolerance*, edited by Ramet, Sabrina. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 85–110.

becomes repeatedly visible in times of social and political fracture, as seen in last year's tragedy and the subsequent protests.

What creates a conundrum within current Serbian social and political dynamics is the widespread use of Orthodox symbols by the protests and their traditionalist connectedness to religion and the SOC, contrasted with the SOC's pragmatic silence on the issue and its political complicity in rising tensions and supporting repressive regime measures.<sup>4</sup> The current contrast in the perception of religion raises the question: how does symbolic appropriation influence the public perception of religion versus the institutional role of the SOC in Serbian politics?

The post-communist transition in the 1990s triggered post-secular changes in Serbian society.<sup>5</sup> The SOC slowly but firmly renewed the position it had before WWII. The rise of a reconstructed national state created a gap for the SOC to fill, and due to the interconnectedness of national identity with Orthodoxy, the Church entered political streams, followed by a majority of the population. Even during the democratic changes in 2000, opposition leaders counted on support from the SOC to secure national cohesion against Milošević's regime.<sup>6</sup> However, the Church's support has not been driven by religious ethics as the institution's core but by political ambitions and needs, negotiated each time political actors relied on divine mechanisms for electorate mobilization. The most well-known example of the SOC's politically negotiated terms was its benevolence to the opposition coalition DOS in 2001 in exchange for the introduction of religious education as an elective subject in elementary and high schools.

In 25 years, the power dynamics have not changed, as political leaders show their gratitude to Church leaders and consult them in times of crisis (independence of Kosovo, war in Ukraine, protests) or remain silent on their conservative and discriminatory claims (Pride Parade, cultural events the Church characterizes as blasphemous, or even the legally prescribed usage of gender-sensitive language).

The SOC's alignment with ruling elites and their political agendas shows their use of religion as a tool for creating a thick sacral layer that critics cannot penetrate or even question. Everyone who opposes it gets labeled a national traitor, an opponent of national interests, and of the nation itself. Using their perceived divine ethical superiority to justify specific political ideas and actions, the SOC steps outside the constitutional provisions of a secular state and relies on the general traditionalist perception of religion (less spirituality and practice, more occasional and symbolic actions often stripped of religious doctrine)<sup>7</sup> To build symbolic capital and create a sense

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<sup>4</sup> Blagojević, Mirko, and Nataša Jovanović-Ajzenhamer. 2021. Religiosity in Serbia and other religiously homogeneous European Societies: A comparative Perspective. *Sociologija* 63(2), 314–335; Radulović, Lidiya B., and Mirko Blagojević. 2013. Tradicionalna verska kultura, narodno i oficijelno pravoslavlje. *Kultura* 141, 23–36; Blagojević, Mirko. 2008. Desecularization of contemporary Serbian society. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 28(1), 37–50.

<sup>5</sup> Blagojević. *Desecularization*; Habermas, Jürgen. 2008. Notes on a post-secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25(4), 17–29; Radić, Radmila, and Milan Vukomanović. 2014. *Religion and democracy in Serbia since 1989: The case of the Serbian Orthodox Church*, in *Religion and politics in post-socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, edited by Ramet, Sabrina. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 180–211.

<sup>6</sup> Vukomanović, Milan. 2008. The Serbian Orthodox Church as a political actor in the aftermath of October 5, 2000. *Politics and Religion* 1(2), 237–269.

<sup>7</sup> Radulović and Blagojević, *Tradicionalna verska kultura*; Djordjević, Dragoljub B. 2009. *Religiousness of Serbs at the beginning of the 21st Century: What is it about?*, in *Revitalization of religion: Theoretical and comparative Approaches*, edited by Gavrilović, Danijela. Niš: Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 57–64.

of civil religion upon which they legitimize further political influence.<sup>8</sup>

Knowing the compensatory power-play between the SOC and political elites, it is crucial to ask: What is the price, and where is the transactional limit, when political neglect kills 16 innocent people?

### **Religious Semiotics at the Civil Protest**

The protests in Serbia lasted for seven months, occurring on various occasions and in different capacities. A large number of people joined the protests, expressing their dissatisfaction with Aleksandar Vučić's regime. The mass protests, aside from being colored in red, blue, and white, also carried an image of religiosity. Since the leading causes of the demonstrations were violations of the legal system and misuse of high political positions, students raised four basic demands: to find those accountable for the tragedy, to release arrested protestors after the first demonstrations in Novi Sad, to increase financial support for universities and higher education, and to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister and government members responsible for the train station reconstruction. The demands fluctuated, as the government partially fulfilled some of them. However, in response to the regime's manipulative actions, while opposing social pressure, a new demand emerged urging parliamentary elections, where students face a challenge in formulating a political solution for the country's democratic backsliding and entrenched autocracy.

As a civil protest that unites all citizens regardless of their ethnic and confessional backgrounds and aims to achieve the most basic civil rights, it becomes confusing to see the high number of religious symbols present at these events. One explanation, though speculative, is that protestors, by displaying their national and religious affiliations, send a message to manipulated parts of society that they are patriotic and not a foreign-instructed mass aiming to provoke chaos and revolution, as described by the Serbian President and many of his political subordinates.

The freedom these people have to express their identities remains unquestioned, but concerns arise regarding the meaning these religious symbols hold for the protestors. The intrigue does not stem from their mass appearance at the protests but instead focuses on their visibility at the forefront of student marches throughout Serbia. Accompanied by the flags of the Republic of Serbia and those of specific universities and faculties, religious symbols contribute to the sense of civil religion. The occurrence does not reflect spirituality but instead invokes perceived meanings of righteousness and sacrality that bolster the civic motives of the protests and the demand for socio-political change.

The most visible religious symbols at the protests are banners, flags, and Orthodox icons depicting saints, usually those canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church (e.g., St. Sava, St. Vasilije Ostroški, St. Knez Lazar), as well as Jesus Christ. The specific relevance of St. Sava to a student-led protest is clear: he is canonized as a saint and protector of pupils and students, and is celebrated across educational institutions on the public holiday of January 27. Known for securing church autonomy and educating people throughout his missionary life, St. Sava holds a symbolic place in the Serbian education system, from which the protest movement emerged. However, it is crucial to repeat that students are a heterogeneous group, and Serbia is a multi-

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<sup>8</sup> Bellah, Robert. 1967. *Civil religion in America*. *Daedalus* 96(1), 1–21; Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

ethnic and multi-confessional state, in which St. Sava cannot play a significant unifying role, among the protestors are students of Bosniak, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and other ethnicities whose traditions and confessions have not been tied to this particular saint.

The intentional use of the St. Sava icon within the civil protest context triggers an appropriation process that corresponds to the use of civic symbols, as well as the national flag, effectively placing sacral symbols in civic hands, that is, reclaiming them by non-institutional actors as expressions of identity separate from clerical and state authority. This reinterpretation transforms these symbols into expressions of *symbolic liberation*. Groups of students and their supporters tend to reclaim these emblems not as tools of ideological assertion but as markers of identity, community, and moral grounding, separate from the politicized and administrative misuse by both the state and the Church.

Within the protest platform, national and religious symbols are not displayed as threats or nationalistic provocations by the majority of protesters but rather as affirmations of cultural continuity and national belonging. These symbols get ‘*cleansed*’ of historical burdens and institutional monopolization that have typically served nationalist mobilization during moments of social tension or conflict. While not representing the intentions of all protesters or uniformly resonating across the diverse protester base, this symbolic reappropriation nonetheless reflects a peaceful civic gesture that resists both political instrumentalization and clerical co-optation.

However, except for St. Sava, many other Orthodox icons have been carried by students at the front rows of marches, from their places of residence to protest gatherings, are diverse. From St. Paraskeva of the Balkans and St. Mary to a copy of the fresco of the Myrrhbearer (the White Angel), these icons carry no direct connection to the causes of the protests or the civic rights under threat. Still, their sacral status makes them markers of morality, justice, truth, and purity, everything that stands against the negative values nurtured during 13 years of the Serbian Progressive Party’s rule that ultimately led to the deaths of 16 people.

The image of Jesus Christ, innocent, pure, calm, and the proponent of forgiveness, might seem universally applicable. However, the already internalized and most visible iconography of Christ that typically leads student groups carries a contested meaning. The contentiousness of this *khоругв* lies in its origin and present reappropriation during the violent conflict in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Can the image of the most revered figure in history be contested? Can it be criticized? Does any appropriation of him prevent debate or inquiry into the added meanings that reflect specific historical, political, or conflictual contexts? The sacrality it bears creates a firm, impenetrable membrane, critics or skeptics get labeled as non-believers, unpatriotic, and non-Serbs. These concerns stem from the exposure of a specific flag that depicts the head of Jesus Christ with a halo on a red background. This flag has appeared at nearly every protest since November, symbolizing Christianity and its ethical dogmas.

However, its origins and contemporary appropriation stem from a very different context, one associated with death, displacement, and suffering since March 2022. The same flag first appeared at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, when Grand Prince Dmitry of Moscow clashed with

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<sup>9</sup> Artefact. *Khorugv (Banner)* (accessed: 15 May 2025); Herron, David. 2025. [Why is a Russian battle flag appearing in Bucharest during pro-Georgescu protests?](#). *Medium*, 19 January 2025.

the non-Orthodox Mamai (Mongol) army.<sup>10</sup> The Russian victory gave rise to a new iconographic image of Christ leading the Orthodox army. Orthodox identity gave divine justification to military triumph over those deemed threats to Christianity. When sacrality mixes with nationalist and war-mongering pretensions, it undermines moral responsibility for future actions, even violent ones, as they are interpreted as sanctioned by God himself. This long-standing strategy was revived during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where the same Orthodox Army flag reappeared, used to lead, protect, and absolve actions that paradoxically contradict Christ's teachings.

Given this iconography's symbolic baggage, the question is: why and how did it become embedded in an 'apolitical' civic protest, as students claim? The core values that protesters claim to defend and promote are peace, unity, human decency, and integrity. Therefore, it is highly undesirable to infiltrate the iconography used to justify violence, despite its origins, and use it as a symbol of peace. The contradictory appearance of this symbol is rarely questioned; instead, it is justified by the protesters' right to express multiple identities and the impossibility of organizers to control every banner item. However, this claim collapses when such flags find their way to the front rows or organize marching squads of students.<sup>11</sup>

Even with contested religious symbols present, their meaning to protestors and their usage in civic protest represent the emergence of a new phenomenon. The riddle begins with two contradictory developments: first, the SOC's long-standing silence and early subtle support for the regime, culminating in extraterritorial condemnation of the protestors (e.g., in Russia); second, the grassroots adoption of religious iconography that reinforces national identity and symbolizes a just cause, turning them into anti-establishment symbols detached from the institution and reclaimed by those whose national identity is defined by religious belief.

### Ascetic Silence or Political Calculations?

Since the tragic event in Novi Sad, the SOC has acted publicly only by offering condolences and prayers for those who died and their families. Apart from these statements, and given its politicized role in society, the SOC remained silent for months about the protests and student demands addressed to Serbian institutions. Considering that the tragedy was not caused by unforeseen metaphysical forces but by human neglect, greed, and sloth—deadly sins—the Church's silence raises doubts about its commitment to Christian ethics versus political calculation.

As a historically luminous guide through Serbian suffering, enjoying strong public support (81% of citizens declare themselves Orthodox Christians)<sup>12</sup> Moreover, being tightly linked to Serbian national identity, the SOC has been under scrutiny by those who expected it to defend universal rights and causes. However, its rigid institutional structure has shaped its silence. Only a few exceptions broke through in recent months. One was Archbishop Grigorije Durić, head of the

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, Charles. 2025. *Battle of Kulikovo*. *Encyclopædia Britannica* (accessed: 15 May 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Savanović, Dunja. 2025. *Teolog Miličević o ikonama u studentskim kolonama: "Mladi simbole vraćaju na njihovo mesto"*. *N1 Info*, 15 February 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. *Dissemination database search* (accessed: 15 May 2025); Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2023. *Objavljeni rezultati popisa o maternjem jeziku i veroispovesti u Srbiji*. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 16 June 2025.

Eparchy of Düsseldorf and all of Germany.<sup>13</sup> His explicit support for students demonstrated that the SOC's weakening internal unity allowed him to step outside the Church's official silence.

The second exception followed a controversial statement by Archbishop David of the Eparchy of Kruševac. On the official website of the Eparchy, David stated: "They march through the streets, forging consensuses, even have their ajvanli-pashas who train them to become Serbian Ustašas and new demons."<sup>14</sup> Six Archbishops responded by condemning his remarks, effectively expressing support for the students and protests.<sup>15</sup> Still, the head of the Church and its high-ranking bodies remained silent, exposing a growing lack of control and cohesion that should have prevailed in unity.

This strategic silence came to an end ceremonially with the Patriarch's visit to Moscow on April 22, 2025.<sup>16</sup> The visit was not religious; Patriarch Porfirije met with Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church. There, the politicization of religion became explicit: Porfirije 'complained' about Serbia's political situation and characterized the protests as a "colorful revolution" imposed by Western powers.<sup>17</sup> He further accused these powers of threatening Serbian identity and culture, claiming that the protests aimed to overthrow the state. He concluded his remarks by expressing hope that Serbia would join the "Russian World" (*Русский Мир*).<sup>18</sup>

More revealing, he commented on political matters in Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro, stating that Serbia's positions should follow Russia's strategic views on the same issues. He even passed along greetings from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to Putin.

The silence was thus broken—strategically and only abroad—in a context where anti-Western claims would resonate. The Patriarch's official stance aligned with the regime's manipulative narrative, revealing that the Church broke its silence solely to serve political interests and maintain its influence over a shrinking electorate seduced by dreams of Serbo-Russian brotherhood.

The Church's official (in)action underscores a clash between public theology—meant to spread Christian ethics in times of tension—and political theology, marked by calculated acts cloaked in religious authority, ultimately serving the institution rather than the people.<sup>19</sup> The positionality the Church assumed aligns with Hurd's premise that secularism and religion are

<sup>13</sup> Miladinović, Aleksandar. 2025. "Studenti su ogledalo koje sve razobličava": Vladika Grigorije za BBC. *BBC News na srpskom*, 18 April 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Ironical usage of the Ottoman word Pasha- a high rank in the Ottoman political and military system. The prefix *avajli* (avaj) gives it a derogatory meaning of false-Pasha. Durović, Aneta. 2025. *Šest episkopa uz studente. Patrijaršija ćuti*. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 6 March 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Metropolitan Joanikije of the Montenegrin Coast, Archbishops: Grigorije Eparchy of Düsseldorf, Justin- Eparchy of Žiča, Dimitrije- Eparchy of Zahum-Herzegovina, Maksim- Eparchy of West America, and Irinej- Eparchy of East America.

<sup>16</sup> Martinović, Iva, and Nevena Bogdanović. 2025. *Koga je u Moskvi predstavljao poglavar Srpske pravoslavne crkve?*. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 23 April 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Martinović and Bogdanović, *Koga je u Moskvi*.

<sup>18</sup> Martinović and Bogdanović, *Koga je u Moskvi*; Desnitsky, Andrei. *The 'Russian World': The birth of a mythologeme* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt, Carl. 2005 [1992]. *Political theology*. Translated by Schwab, George. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

not separate spheres, but are reconciled within political arrangements that intentionally manage religious authority in line with state interests.<sup>20</sup>

### Sacral Symbols in Civic Hands

The contrast between the public use of religious symbols and objects and the institutional position on their practice and context has become starkly visible. The monopolistic control over religious matters and symbols has been shaken by a grassroots movement, ironically rooted in seeds planted by the SOC itself. The interconnection between religion and national belonging has now taken a new shape, as people use religious objects and symbols of sacrality to affirm national identity and connect these symbols to the expected goals of the protest, which all have a cathartic and positive value in both heavenly and earthly realms.

Furthermore, the official perception of religion in Serbia distinguishes between faith, practice, and institutional allegiance. The majority of SOC followers do not practice religion daily but maintain a traditionalist view that Orthodoxy is a defining part of national identity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Church retains social and political power to influence and provoke political change, even in a secular state. However, the emerging social rupture triggered by the protests has led to questions about the Church's status, especially given its strategic silence on the matter, support for political actors in power, and the false and demagogic characterization of the protest and its participants.

The most recent reaction of the SOC, prompted by growing public pressure, was the release of the first podcast episode by the Archbishopric of Belgrade and Karlovac, titled *"The Colored Revolution – or Media Attacks on the Church."*<sup>22</sup> In a digital and contemporary format, the SOC hosted Prof. Dr. Vladimir Vuletić, a sociologist from the University of Belgrade, and Archpriest-Stavrofor Prof. Dr. Velibor Džomić, also a professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Kragujevac. Throughout the podcast, the speakers emphasized what they described as a hostile media campaign by opposition-aligned outlets targeting the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and Patriarch Porfirije. They portrayed this antagonism as part of a long-standing pattern of repression dating back to 1945 and socialist Yugoslavia. Simultaneously, they presented the Church as a neutral institution that politicians seek to exploit due to its broad public support.

Paradoxically, while claiming neutrality and avoiding political alignment to preserve spiritual unity, the speakers framed the Patriarch's recent visit to Moscow as a significant diplomatic gesture, arguing it relieved the Serbian state of geopolitical pressure by symbolically assuming the burden of spiritual and political ties with Russia. Another contradiction emerged as speakers pointed out that university blockades are acts that violate the rights of others and cause divisions rather than promote peace. The first episode of the SOC podcast platform reinforced the Church's perception as an apolitical yet unifying force despite its omnipresent role in shaping political narratives that contribute to social polarization.

The paradox lies in the shift in power dynamics: protestors who define and express their identity through religious affiliation have begun to use religious symbols as a moral counter-power to

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<sup>20</sup> Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. 2008. *The politics of secularism in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Blagojević and Jovanović-Ajzenhamer, *Religiosity in Serbia*; Radulović and Blagojević, *Tradicionalna verska kultura*.

<sup>22</sup> YouTube. *Obojena revolucija- ili medijski napad na Crkvu* (accessed: 21 May 2025).



achieve their goals, even when the official Church functions as a status quo enforcer.<sup>23</sup> Losing its influence among parts of its base and due to its long-standing political calculations, the SOC now sees its symbols reclaimed and deployed in the service of social change, even without institutional blessing.

### **Does Religiosity Become De-Institutionalized?**

The contrasting and paradoxical scenes that have played out in Serbian politics since 1 November 2024 have even spilled into the halls of the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarchate. Drowning in its politicized and calculated silence during a moment of harmonious need, Serbia's most trusted institution has lost its carefully constructed legitimacy. While the Church remained silent, Serbian towns and villages witnessed student marches, silent protests, and mass mobilizations filled with religious symbols (some of which were contested), which consequently triggered the phenomenon of de-institutionalized religiosity.

The monopoly over religious symbols in public—and, more crucially, political—space began to dissolve as the institution opted to follow political dogmas instead of religious ones. History repeated itself as the SOC once again served as a sacralizing tool for political elites, just as it had in the 1990s, becoming associated with authoritarianism, repression, manipulation, and other political sins.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, this de-institutionalized religiosity, despite not being based on blind faith, has begun to operate as a new force: a functional cog in the machinery propelling Serbian society toward political and social transformation.<sup>25</sup> Religion has remained in the political arena, but it has shifted sides, now paradoxically acting within a secular framework as a protective and unifying force for those fighting to secure fundamental civil rights within Serbia's institutional structure.

In a long-standing political chess game, the Serbian Orthodox Church has reached the point of facing a 'blockade,' particularly following the controversial visit to Moscow. On May 16, 2025, the Holy Synod, the SOC's highest executive body, convened to address not only internal structural issues but also, unexpectedly, the increasingly unavoidable rise of protests that may soon lead to political transformation.<sup>26</sup> The event, unfortunately, revealed that the Church targeted some of its 'unfaithful' archbishops and avoided recalibrating its political stance following goodwill and Christian justice, the very principles upon which it claims to stand.

### **Notes on author**

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<sup>23</sup> Casanova, José. 1994. *Public religions in the modern world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>24</sup> Tomanić, Milorad. 2001. *Srpska Crkva u ratu i ratovi u njoj*. Belgrade: Medijska knjižara Krug.

<sup>25</sup> Casanova, J. *Public Religions in the Modern World*

<sup>26</sup> Tasić, Jelena. 2025. Sabor SPC u znaku pritisaka, kadrovskih rokada i 'nevidljivih' kamera. *Danas*, 14 May 2025.

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