

Kostunica Embraces Church

Author: [Milanka Saponja-Hadzic](#)

Serbian liberals are concerned over the growing influence of the Orthodox Church

Yugoslavia's new government is embracing the Orthodox religion with such zest that Serbian liberals fear the onset of a Church-dominated state.

President Vojislav Kostunica is backing a Church programme of religious education in schools, the army, the police and in prisons. Also on the agenda is restitution of Church property confiscated during the Tito era.

Prime minister Zoran Zizic told the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch, Pavle, in mid-November that the government would pass new legislation aimed at ensuring relations between Church and State were "intertwined".

Judging from President Kostunica dealings with senior clergy, it seems he considers the welfare of the Serbian Orthodox Church, SPC, the most important issue following Milosevic's departure.

In diplomatic circles, this has earned Kostunica and his men the nickname 'Amish' (as in the strict US Mennonite sect).

But from the clergy, Kostunica has received nothing but fulsome tributes. Episcopo Vasilije of Srem has said, "We believe we will forge close relations with the president. We will talk about the problems of the Serbian people."

The idea of fusing Church and State has enraged liberal Serbs. Philosopher Nenad Dakovic warned at the beginning of December that Serbia, which has 36 different religions, is seeing the rise of an undemocratic clerical-nationalism.

Since taking office, Kostunica, accompanied by a coterie of ministers, sees Pavle on a daily basis, while the Patriarch has been taken on numerous state and private visits. It has become a matter of prestige to be seen in the company of a priest.

Kostunica's visit at the beginning of December to the Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Hilandar on Mt Athos in Greece attracted huge publicity. His 40-strong entourage included 18 ministers along with other politicians, public figures and journalists. Although described as a private trip, it was paid for by the Serbian government. For several days, the Belgrade media was full of it.

Not all reaction was favourable. Mirko Djordjevic, an expert on religious affairs, said the visit "smelled of fundamentalism". He described it as anachronistic and preposterous, warning that the occasion would not be good for either Church or State.

The government has shrugged aside such criticism. The federal religious affairs minister, Bogoljub Sijakovic, advised his colleagues to follow his example and request Patriarch Pavle to bless their decisions.

Immediately after the change of government in October, it was clear that the SPC, which played a significant role in the overthrow of Milosevic, would play an enhanced role in public affairs.

The new authorities lost no time in expressing gratitude. Prime Minister Zoran Zizic said in November the government had donated around 300,000 German marks to the Saint Sava Church in Belgrade. He said 600 churches and other religious buildings were in the process of being built. This is at a time when the average salary in Serbia is around 80 Deutsch marks a month.

Despite this support for the clergy, research shows that Serbians are not especially religious. Novi Sad sociologist Lazar Zolt found that only 36 per cent of people in central Serbia are religious.

Regardless of their religious inclinations, the majority of citizens have welcomed the increase in clerical influence just as they welcomed Milosevic decisions when he was in power.

Neither the government nor the Church is ready to talk about the SPC role in recent wars or its support for Milosevic while these wars were being fought. Radmila Radic, a scientist at the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, argues that the SPC turned its back on Milosevic not because of his mistakes but because he failed to achieve the dream of a Greater Serbia. "Now the Church is trying to accomplish through Kostunica what it could not do with Milosevic," she said.

Olga Popovic-Obradovic, a professor of law at Belgrade University, thinks the main question in Serbia today is whether the civil or clerical state is going to emerge.

In November, the SPC Council, the highest Church body, announced that a commission for developing a national curriculum for religious studies in the primary and secondary schools was already in place. Plans for religious studies in the army, police and prisons are also under way, though the Church acknowledges that lack of sufficient staff will delay implementation.

After his recent meeting with Pavle, the Yugoslav army chief-of-staff, General Nebojsa Pavkovic, whom Kostunica kept on after the fall of Milosevic, said he welcomed the introduction of priests into the army as a way of granting soldiers full religious rights and freedoms.

Skeptics in Belgrade recall that the same general had little thought for religious rights and freedoms while he was "liberating" fellow-citizens of former Yugoslavia from their homes and lives during the recent wars.

Those opposed to entanglement of religion and politics regard the new government's policy as retrograde.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights warned the government in November that Federal Yugoslavia and Serbia are secular states under their constitutions and that legislation distinguished clearly between Church and State.

This means that religious studies cannot legally be implemented in public institutions.

Government critics believe religion should be private affair. Some such as

Sociology professor Zaga Golubovic believe its introduction into the classroom would merely substitute a

new ideology for the old communist and nationalist creeds.

SPC representatives have refused an invitation by the Helsinki Committee to join in a public debate on the issue with representatives of other religions. Instead, the SPC has bombarded newspapers and television with its convictions.

Public opinion, after wavering for a while, now seems firmly behind the Church. Even without an official decision, some religious studies are already being implemented, as in the case of a nursery in Uzice.

The public is being gently prepared for the Church programme. In an effort not to appear too dogmatic, the authorities have said religious studies would be optional and possibly conducted in agreement with other faiths.

However, children will have the last word. They might decide religion classes are too boring and skip them. And authorities may find they need more than Divine help to fill the people's empty stomachs.

Milanka Saponja-Hadzic is an IWPR contributor

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