

**The Position of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the
Serbian State Regarding the Montenegrin Law on
Religious Freedom**

A szerb ortodox egyház és a szerb állam álláspontja
a montenegrói vallásszabadságról szóló törvénnyel
kapcsolatban

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Abstract: This study analyzes the role of religion in Orthodox countries, where religion plays an important role when it comes to national identity, focusing on Serbia and Montenegro. Apart from analyzing this specific connection, the paper addresses the politicization of religion by both the state and religious institutions during the turbulent events in Montenegro between 2019 and 2020. Critical discourse analysis and the Discourse-Historical Approach is used to analyze the potential but significant shift in the ethno-religious and nationalist discourse of Serbian Orthodox Church officials. These methodological tools are used to observe the phenomenon of politicization of religion and frame the discourse of the two actors of this process, the Serbian state and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The paper concludes that the Serbian state has to “defend” the influential position of the Serbian Church due to their historical connection. By protecting the Church, the state is showing its dedication to the preservation of the Serbian national identity.

Keywords: Serbia, Montenegro, Serbian Orthodox Church, ethno-religious nationalism, critical discourse analysis, politicization of religion.

Összefoglalás: *A tanulmánya a vallás szerepét vizsgálja olyan ortodox országokban, ahol a vallás fontos szerepet játszik a nemzeti identitásban, így Szerbiában és Montenegróban. Ennek a speciális kapcsolatnak a vizsgálatán túl az írás azzal foglalkozik, hogy az állam és a vallásos intézmények miként politicizálták a vallást a 2019-2020-as viharos események során Montenegróban. A kritikai diskurzusanalízis és a diszkurzív-történeti megközelítés módszertanával mutatja ki a potenciális, de jelentős elmozdulást a Szerb Ortodox Egyház képviselőinek etno-vallási és nemzeti diskurzusában. Ezek a módszertani eszközök segítenek megfigyelni a vallás politicizálásának folyamatát, és keretbe helyezni a két szereplőnke, a szerb államnak és a Szerb Ortodox Egyháznak a diskurzusát. A tanulmány következtetése szerint a szerb államnak meg kell védenie a szerb egyház történeti kapcsolatból fakadó erős pozícióit. Az egyház megvédésével az állam megmutatja elkötelezettségét a szerb nemzeti identitás megőrzésében.*

Kulcsszavak: Szerbia, Montenegró, Szerb Ortodox Egyház, etno-vallásos nacionalizmus, kritikai diskurzusanalízis vallás politicizálása

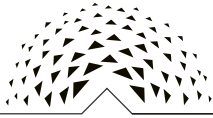
INTRODUCTION

The Montenegrin state adopted a new and long-awaited Law on Religious Freedom on 27 December, 2019 (Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovijesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica, 2019). By creating a clear distinction between church and state this law has a secularizing character and aims, according to its proponents, to open and regulate the religious market in the secular state of Montenegro. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) claims that by imposing these measures, the Montenegrin government is jeopardizing the dominant position held by the SOC in the country. As a result, the adoption of the Law and its potential implementation has provoked strong reactions from the SOC, members of the public affiliated with this denomination, as well as the Serbian state. Moreover, religious protests have taken place both in Montenegro and in other parts of the Western Balkan region where Serbs live. These protests have mostly been organized by the SOC and have created a dispute that has enabled the Serbian state to intervene with the aim of “defending” this institution, which is intrinsically important for Serbian national identity.

This paper presents and analyzes the reactions of the SOC and the Serbian state regarding the newly adopted Law and demonstrates the interconnectedness of the church and the state, which has provoked the Serbian state to intervene in the internal social, religious, and political matters of its neighboring state.

Critical Discourse analysis is used to examine the issue and locate the topics and argumentation strategies that frame the discourse of these actors and show the similarities and differences between them. In order to have a representative sample, the analysis focuses on statements given by high state and church officials. As representatives of the people in both the religious and the secular spheres, these high officials have given statements that resonate with the broader public and influence the creation of particular public opinions, also giving rise to certain political and social actions. Furthermore, the analysis includes those statements from the beginning of 2019 that refer to the discussion about the adoption of the Law, but also those statements given after the adoption, or more precisely from the December 2019 until the end of the first half of 2020, since at that time due to the COVID-19 crisis the focus and interest in the issue of the Serbian and Montenegrin societies in the issue have decreased. The analysis thus includes the period of religious protests in Montenegro, when the discourse on the topic was rich in its semantics and symbolism. This time frame offers significant and authentic discourse examples on the politicization of religion.

During 2020, drastic political and social changes have taken place within Montenegro and Montenegrin society. The SOC did not miss the chance to interfere in the Montenegrin elections in 2020 and shape public opinion, certainly influencing the outcome of the elections. Furthermore, the newly elected government has reshaped and softened its relationship with the SOC.



Nevertheless, changes in the relations between the SOC and the Montenegrin government have undoubtedly led to changes in their discourses as well. The significance of the newly shaped discourse is important, but due to the limitations of this paper, the time frame of the analysis was limited to the end of the first half of the 2020.

The analysis uses Critical Discourse analysis and the Discourse Historical Approach, locating patterns of discourse and comparing them. A comparison of the discourses of the state and church officials shows different ways of instrumentalizing and politicizing religion. During the analysis, particular argumentation strategies are identified. First, nomination creates a sense of an established social group, while predication creates a discursive qualification of social actors (Wodak, 2015). Analysing the statements, I will also focus on usage of topoi. The topoi are argumentation shames that serve for strengthening the argument and for increasing its persuasiveness. The special focus will be on locating the usage of different topoi as, topos of history and topos threat (ibid.). The topos of threat is important because it is often used in statements by both Serbian state officials and the officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as they frequently emphasize the threat the new Montenegrin Law poses for Serbian national identity (ibid: 11). Moreover, the topos of threat has been present in the discourse of Church officials since the beginning of the 1990s, when the ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia emerged, and it still persists today, as it helps the unification and mobilization of people sharing a Serbian national identity or its specific components (for example, the religion or tradition connected to it). The topos of history is also important, since in the discourse of the SOC and state officials current events are constantly linked to historical ones (ibid.). Beside connecting the present with the past, this argumentation scheme promotes the implementation of past solutions that had preferable outcomes. This feature is highly relevant for the case of the SOC in Montenegro, as the Church wants to preserve its historically highly politicized and influential position in the country.

THE IDENTITY-BUILDING ROLE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ITS PLACE POLITICS

The Serbian Orthodox Church is the largest religious community in Montenegro, with the highest number of followers. Beside its traditional role as a religious institution, its active participation in the political sphere also needs to be taken into consideration. Through various political actions and statements, Church officials influence the attitudes of their followers, who are also part of the electorate. Since Montenegro gained independence, SOC officials have made highly politicized statements against Montenegro

joining NATO and against any attempt of Montenegro liberalizing its society by giving more rights to the LGBT community or promoting gender equality, which ultimately influences the electorate to vote for more conservative political options (N1, 2016; Savic, 2020).

Additionally, the interconnectedness of the Serbian state and the SOC plays a crucial role in legitimizing the protective actions of the Serbian state towards the Church. Decentralization and the absence of a central authority as the main characteristics of the Orthodox Churches during medieval times enabled the creation of national churches with distinctive features. This made the churches closer and more interdependent to medieval states and their rulers. Moreover, the churches gave divine legitimacy to the rulers, who secured financial and other forms of support for these religious institutions (Banac, 2015: 75; Radić, 2000: 247–248). The connection between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the medieval Serbian state is still one of the primary legitimizing resources that the Church uses to preserve its position in the public sphere. The Serbian national identity is strongly tied to ethno-symbolism, myths, and historical events from the medieval period.

Throughout the period of nation-building, these three components were sacralised and hijacked by the SOC, which also played a crucial role in the aforementioned process. Apart from participating in the nation-building process, the SOC also created and shaped many of the national symbols and myths by incorporating the religious and sacral narrative into them. Therefore, the separation of the state and the Church, due to their strong ties to these three components, is unlikely to happen even during secular times. Moreover, as the only Serbian institution that had partial autonomy under the Ottoman rule, the SOC has been presented as the institution responsible for preserving the Serbian national identity throughout the centuries. Therefore, the role of being the keeper and saviour of the Serbs and their cultural and national uniqueness has helped the SOC to consistently remain close to the Serbian state and gain legitimacy for political actions that shaped not only religious but secular matters as well (ibid: 252–257; Vukomanović, 2008: 237–269).

The broader literature on the topic emphasizes that due to the interconnection between the Church and Serbian national identity, the Serbian Orthodox Church argues that it is responsible for protecting all Serbs, regardless of where they live. For example, analysing the politicization of religion in the case of the SOC, Ognjenović and Jozelić conceptualize these extraterritorial interests of the Church as “territoriality” (Ognjenović & Jozelić, 2014). The authors use this term to refer to the phenomenon of the destruction of the cultural heritage of others to replace it with objects that mark a particular territory as one’s own. The authors also support the argument that after the dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, it became difficult for the Serbian Orthodox Church to exert its influence by instrumentalizing religion on neighbouring countries where Serbs live (ibid).



Because of the interconnectedness of the SOC and the Serbian state, the SOC's actions are sometimes perceived as if they were provoked by the Serbian state itself. In addition, the immense wealth of the SOC, its infrastructure, and its high number of followers deepen the influence that the SOC holds over the inhabitants of Montenegro. This influence was most recently exerted during the last Montenegrin elections, when, on the wings of religious protests and support from the church, a block of oppositional parties achieved great results at the elections and formed the current Montenegrin government.

REACTIONS OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH REGARDING THE MONTENEGRIN LAW ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

When it comes to the content of the Law itself, its most controversial provision is Paragraph 62, which affects the property rights of religious communities in Montenegro (Paragraph 62, *Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovijesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica*). This provision has been one of the most problematized, emphasized, and addressed issues of recent times, and therefore the discourse around it has the most chances to determine the social value of the law itself, and to cause particular social and political actions.

The provision regulating property rights gives the right to the Montenegrin state to become the owner of the property of a religious community, if said property had been built or obtained before December 1918, and the community cannot legally prove ownership. As the largest religious community in Montenegro, the SOC is most affected by this provision, as it has many monasteries, churches, and other properties in Montenegro that were confiscated from the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in 1920, during the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Some of these monasteries and churches are of great financial importance for the SOC in Montenegro (Janković, 2013). This provision was the most debated part of the Law, causing massive religious protests, and because of it the whole Law has been characterized as discriminatory towards Serbs and the SOC. The Government and those members of parliament who voted for the Law have been characterized as communists by Church officials (Janković, 2020).

The late Metropolitan Amfilohije, who was the former head of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral was one of the most influential SOC officials and occupied the position for almost thirty years. When addressing the Law, Metropolitan Amfilohije mostly uses non-sacral, politicized discourse, which usually describes the Montenegrin state with negative attributes:

The modern and contemporary state has a role and obligation to guarantee peace, rule of law, and to protect the property of all, and guarantee justice among people and that all citizens in that state have a feeling of prosperity and security. Here, something different is happening, the state that should guarantee peace with its acts is causing conflicts. It seems that out of this need to keep citizens in constant tension, the law on freedom of religion arose (Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 2019c).

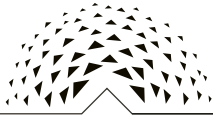
In this statement the Montenegrin state is juxtaposed with the ideal state, with all its required features. However, according to Amfilohije, Montenegro is not close to this idea, since the state is “causing conflicts”. Moreover, the basic role and purpose of the state and its institutions is questioned in the statement. Saying that the actions of the state “keep citizens in constant tension” invokes the meaning that the state would rather maintain its power by doing so than serve its citizens by protecting their basic rights. Apart from these negative attributions ascribed to the Montenegrin state through the predication strategy, we can also locate the topos of threat. The combination of the words ‘conflicts’ and ‘constant tension’ point to the fact that a threat is coming from the Montenegrin state, against which certain actions have to be taken.

The secular and highly politicized discourse usually puts Montenegro in comparison with progressive states from Western Europe. However, this comparison usually serves to delegitimize the Montenegrin state and its actions:

Such a dangerous, ill-intentioned, and maliciously prepared law does not deserve to be discussed and debated in the Parliament of Montenegro until it gets consent from all traditional churches and religious communities in Montenegro, in accordance with the opinion of the Venice Commission and the highest international standards. The Orthodox Church persistently keeps the door open for professional, transparent, and comprehensive dialogue based on the positive experience of modern, secular states in Europe and the world, preserving the principle of equality, and everything we ask for ourselves, we ask for others (ibid).

The clear intent of delegitimizing the Montenegrin state and the Law on Religious Freedom can be seen at the beginning of the statement. The argumentation is set in a way that characterizing the Law as ‘dangerous, ill-intentioned, and malicious’ can be perceived as threatening. However, the SOC is described positively, as an institution open to potential dialogue, as it ‘persistently keeps the door open’ for transparent and comprehensive talks on solving the issue. Once again, the predication strategy is used, as both the Montenegrin state and the SOC are discursively qualified with evaluative attributions that propagate a certain perception to the public.

Complying with Amfilohije’s political approach to the topic, Gojko Petrović, former rector of the Theological School in Cetinje played an influential role in the events related to the Law in Montenegro, as well as in Serbia. Petrović gave many interviews and attended some of the TV debates in Serbia and Montenegro, but more importantly, he often addressed protestors all over Montenegro. His



discourse does not differ from the official discourse of the SOC, since the Church has historically been a homogenous institution when it comes to its ideological and political affiliations. Therefore, patterns of secularizing the discourse are present in the statements given by Petrović:

It [the Law] violates Paragraph 14 of the Constitution [Montenegro] and publicly announces in Parliament and outside Parliament that he [president Milo Đukanović] and his party will found and re-establish the Church. I do not go into detail at all about what kind of church it is according to his idea, who would make that church, what kind of believers they are, according to which canons - but I ask you: does the constitution of this country allow the president of a civil, multi-confessional state to announce that he will found or renew a church? That is the atmosphere in which we are talking about this Law (Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 2019b).

Paragraph 14 of the Montenegrin Constitution refers to religious freedom and the secularity of the state, as religious communities are separated from the state, and religious communities are equal and free in the performance of religious rites and religious affairs. (*Constitution of the Republic of Montenegro*, n.d.) Petrović's statement emphasizes that the Montenegrin Constitution has been 'violated'. This emphasis is supported through the Montenegrin president's intention to 'found and re-establish' the Church (referring to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church). The claim targets the most common argument for imposing the Law, based on a concept of secularity, which should divide the state from church. Using this argument, Petrović wants to create a paradox from Djukanović's actions by showing that he is not making the state more secular, only shaking up the current religious market by decreasing the power of the SOC and tying the MOC to the state by securing it a more prominent and privileged position. The hypothetical question that follows ('Does the constitution of this country allow the president of a civil, multi-confessional state to announce that he will found or renew a church?'), combined with the previous claim of violating the Constitution contributes to the general atmosphere of insecurity and threat that SOC officials are creating through their discourse. Therefore, the same pattern can be recognized again: first delegitimization through a negative evaluation of the Montenegrin state, followed by the topos of threat.

Beyond the two above-mentioned SOC officials, a highly active opponent of the Law and the Montenegrin regime is the Bishop of Budva and Nikšić, who is the newly elected head of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, Joanikije. His popularity among the followers of the SOC had already been high and only increased after he was arrested on 13 June, 2020 on suspicion of violating state-imposed preventive measures during the coronavirus crisis by organizing a public protest in the town of Nikšić. (Serbia, n.d.-a) Joanikije's influence and current events in Montenegro, presented as repressive towards the SOC, prompted many protests during May 2020. Joanikije's discourse regarding the Law is, in a similar vein to previous ones, characterized by politicized and legal language:

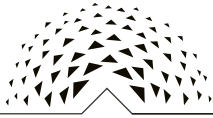
Our people from the bottom of their soul felt when this monstrous legal act was passed, which is also not in compliance with the Constitution of Montenegro and the internationally set standards that regulate freedom of religion. It is not in compliance with the law and justice, which our lawyers have proven numerous times. (...) Adopting this monstrous Law is a humiliation of Montenegro and its entire order, it is especially sinister that it introduces divisions among brothers and introduces inequality between religions in Montenegro. (...) This law, as we have noticed, is unilaterally directed towards the Serbian Orthodox Church. It is a matter of a discriminatory act and evil will. However, the Church is accustomed to suffering from injustice and persecution (Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 2020b).

The Law in this statement is presented as unlawful, since it is emphasized that the law 'is not in compliance' with not only domestic law but also with 'internationally set standards'. Furthermore, the negative perception of this legal act continues with highly negative adjectives ('monstrous' and 'sinister'). This particular framing is mentioned twice in the statement, using repetition to emphasize its negative character, increasing the likelihood of it being internalized by the public. Furthermore, a sense of SOC being a victim in the ongoing crisis is created by stating that the Law is 'discriminatory' and 'unilaterally directed towards the Serbian Orthodox Church'. The strength of the victimization argument increases as the statement ends with Joanikije stating that 'the Church is accustomed to suffering from injustice and persecution'. Being 'accustomed' to suffering refers to the already established perception of the Church as a victim through its eight-century history and all the conflicts Serbia had been involved in.

The last example comes from the most prominent person among the SOC officials, the Late Serbian Patriarch Irinej, who died in November 2020. The former head of the Serbian Church problematizes the Law and Montenegrin state policies on religious matters by including the use of the predication strategy and the topos of threat. However, this particular statement brings up the historical argument based on the connection between the SOC and Montenegrin statehood:

What Djukanović did is not only illegal, but it is against all reason, he attacks the greatest shrines of Serbia and Montenegro. (...) The Serbian Church gave birth to and raised Montenegro - without the Serbian Church, Montenegro would not even exist today. (...) The only solution is to withdraw that law about the so-called religious freedom, there is no talk on religious freedom in which there is a desire to confiscate the shrines and monastery property and to give it to the current, so-called, Metropolitan Miras Dedeić (RTRS, 2020).

In terms of the legitimization of the Montenegrin state and the Law, it is not difficult to notice that the Law is mentioned in a negative connotation, as being 'illegal'. Moreover, the action is described through a war metaphor, as the President of Montenegro, who has enacted and supported the Law, 'attacks' the greatest shrines of the SOC. This particular formulation resembles the frequent usage of the topos of threat, which in this case indicates that the Serbs and the SOC are attacked, which urges people to react. In addition to this argument



the topos of threat has been reinforced by the usage of the verb 'confiscated' when referring to the actions of the Montenegrin state, as it will give the shrines and monastery property of the SOC to the opponent, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Moreover, Irinej questions the name of the Law saying that it cannot propagate religious freedom as it attacks the SOC and confiscates its property in Montenegro. Finally, the late Serbian Patriarch makes a strong claim tying the SOC to the Montenegro state by claiming that the SOC 'gave birth to and raised Montenegro' and that 'without the Serbian Church, Montenegro would not exist'. Claiming this, Irinej uses the topos of history, proposing that there should be a continuity of the well-established and deeply rooted ties between the SOC and the Montenegrin state. Lastly, by saying that "The Serbian Church gave birth to and raised Montenegro", Patriarch strengthens the relationship between the SOC and the Montenegrin state comparing it to the emotional relationship of mother and child, which is not easy to break.

REACTIONS OF THE SERBIAN STATE REGARDING THE MONTENEGRIN LAW ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Although Serbia is secular by its constitution, its officials were deeply concerned and frustrated by the Montenegrin Law on Religious Freedom. These negative feelings and strong reactions emerged because the Serbian state sees its role as a protector of the Serbian people and their national identity, which is inseparable from Orthodoxy, and therefore the SOC. This connection was reestablished during the 1990s, after the collapse of communism, when the nationalistic political elite saw the potential that religion and tradition have for mobilizing during elections and later during regional conflicts. (Radić & Vukomanović, 2014). Therefore, to prove their dedication to preserving the national identity, the state and its officials had to protect the SOC. The analysis below looks at the reactions of state officials who occupy high positions in the political hierarchy, have a significant public presence, and have the support of, and hold sway over, ethnic Serbs in Montenegro and Serbia.

One of the first reactions came from the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić, who interpreted the Law as discriminatory towards the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church. (Dačić: N1 RS, 2020.) However, a more controversial statement than claiming that the Law is discriminatory towards Serbs is a statement that emphasized the importance of defending the SOC in Montenegro and therefore, the Serbian people:

Those who earned everything they have in Serbia have the obligation not to be quiet regarding this question, and those who support the Montenegrin regime regarding this question are fighting against the Serbian people - I think that it is a huge question whether they should still have Serbian citizenship. (ibid.)

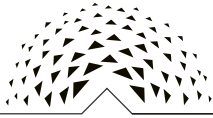
First, we can see that there is a clear attempt of polarizing and distinguishing two social groups through the nomination strategy. Polarization is established between those who 'support the Montenegrin regime' and those who do not. The predication strategy can also be located within the statement since certain qualifications are discursively attached to these two polarised social groups. The supporters of the Montenegrin regime are described negatively, as those 'fighting against the Serbian people'. This formulation is an example of how the topos of threat is used in the discourse of Serbian state officials, as the verb 'fight' is used to describe the actions of the Montenegrin state and its supporters. Moreover, referring to the Montenegrins living in Serbia as 'those who earned everything they have in Serbia', there is an emphasis on the 'privileged' position they have in Serbia compared to the position of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro. Therefore, by having enjoyed privileged treatment in Serbia, according to the former Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, these people are 'obliged not to be quiet'.

Addressing the Law, former Serbian Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin accused the Montenegrin state of denying the basic rights of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro. (Vulin, 2020a.) The way this argument is constructed shows an already established and effective usage of the topos of threat in the discourse of Serbian state officials when addressing this issue. One of many examples is the statement of the Serbian Minister of Defense: "I do criticize the regime that tries to wrest from the Serbian Orthodox Church its temples, its monasteries, its shrines, and from ethnic Serbs in Montenegro their right to decide on their churches and shrines." (Vulin, 2020b.) The threat in this statement is emphasized through the characterization of the actions of the Montenegrin state, when it 'wrests' the property of the SOC away from them. Moreover, the size of the loss of the SOC is emphasized, since there is a gradual depiction of all 'temples', 'monasteries', and 'shrines'.

Vulin gave another statement in the same manner, going even further in emphasizing the rising threat to the Serbian people and the Serbian national identity in Montenegro:

Neither is the Serbian state a theocracy, nor is Montenegro a role model of European values. If it was, then the Serbian Orthodox Church and its followers would not have to defend their shrines from the state from which they come. (...) It is not hard for me to understand that someone decides not to be a Serb anymore, but it is hard for me to comprehend why he/she has to become an anti-Serb.

The predication argumentation strategy in this statement is used to characterize these two societies. The Montenegrin state, as the opponent side, is negatively described as not being a 'role model of European values'. Therefore, by attaching this attribute to the Montenegrin state, the basis for its further delegitimization is set. For that reason, the topos of threat is used in the argumentation, as Serbs have to 'defend' themselves from the Montenegrin state. However, the last part of the statement points to Montenegrin identity politics and the ongoing creation of a unique national identity, for which the national church would be required as one of its



integral parts. This phenomenon is also connected to the SOC, since by 'stopping being a Serb', a detachment from the SOC is implied. Finally, the phrase 'anti-Serb', used to describe supporters of the Montenegro regime and its current actions, contributes to the threatening atmosphere that is created in Serbian state officials' discourse. The negative 'anti' prefix, combined with the topos of threat, implies towards whom these threatening actions are made.

Finally, and most importantly, the reactions that came from the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić show the constantly imposed topos of threat in the discourse of state officials, although the uniqueness of Vučić's statements is in that the victimization of the Serbian people is more frequent than in the statements of other state officials:

For us, an especially important fact is that politics interferes with the internal organization of the church, and, I would say, with spiritual things because as we do not do it here in Serbia, I think it is not common for Montenegro to do that either. (...) We cannot understand that politicians are establishing new churches and that they do not stop there but think that it is necessary to wrest the property of the church, which, in the worst scenario, has centuries-old factual ownership, and not to mention proof based on different documents that the property belongs to it. Therefore, this is very difficult for the Serbian people. (RTS Sajt - Zvanični kanal, 2020).

Even though he gave this statement together with the Serbian Patriarch, having discussed with him how the Serbian state can help the resolution of this problem, the President of Serbia emphasizes the secularism argument regarding the separation of state and church. He contrasts Serbian and Montenegrin politics towards religious communities by saying that righteous Serbia is surprised that in Montenegro 'politics interferes with the internal organization of the church', but also 'with spiritual things'. This argument is strengthened by being combined with the topos of threat for the Serbian people, since Church property has been 'wrested' from it by the Montenegrin state. Lastly, a sense of being a victim is created by characterizing it as 'very difficult for the Serbian people'.

The defensive and victimizing discourse of the Serbian President usually concentrates on the fact that the Montenegrin regime sympathizes with the MOC and promotes the idea of having their national Orthodox Church:

Someone is trying to create a new church in Montenegro, with only one purpose, to call it Orthodox Church in Montenegro, as they saw that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church cannot get any popularity nor attract anyone, (...) and ostensibly unite everyone, but in fact to make Serbian people disappear in the next ten years. This would happen because you would not hear the word "Serbian" anywhere, nor would there be any discussion on the Serbian people, as there is now. (ibid.)

The crucial part of the statement can be found at the end, which leaves an impression of the nation being in danger due to the acts of the Montenegrin state. The predication strategy is used to delegitimize the MOC as the opponent

of the SOC on the Montenegrin religious market. The MOC in this statement is described as a tool of Montenegrin national awakening and, more importantly, as a danger to Serbs in Montenegro. However, the capacity of the MOC is questioned in this statement, since it 'cannot get any popularity nor attract anyone'. After the delegitimization of the MOC and the Montenegrin state, the topos of threat is brought in, and there is a drastic increase in the way the threat is described. This strong depiction of a threat implies a sense of being a victim, as Vučić claims that 'in the next ten years Serbs will disappear' in Montenegro. This dramatic argument can fuel an already complicated situation in Montenegro, which in the previous two months had been marked by police intervention and physical conflicts between the protestors and Montenegrin police. (Vojvodine, 2019.)

To show the seriousness of the situation, Serbian President Vučić emphasizes the potential repetition of the same issue and threat not just in Montenegro but in all the neighboring countries, parts of which are components of the Serbian nation:

This only has to do with Serbian people, this only has to do with the fact that some people from the region who think that the Serbian Church, and the Serbian people, need to be limited to Central Serbia and maybe Vojvodina and that the rest should be some other Orthodox people that do not have any connection with Serbs. This is just the beginning, after this, you will have an attempt to create the Orthodox Church in Kosovo, after that, you will have the beginning of the Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an Orthodox Church in Croatia. (ibid.)

The topos of threat plays a great role in this statement, since, according to Vučić, there is a regional intention that Serbs should be 'limited' to a certain territory and not exist in other regions where they live today. However, it is stated that Serbs would then be transformed into 'some other Orthodox people that do not have any connection with Serbs'. More importantly, it is added that all the neighboring countries where Serbs live will establish their Orthodox Churches and alienate Serbs living there from their spiritual and national basis, the Serbian Orthodox Church. By emphasizing the potential repetition of the scenario, Vučić's argumentation again creates a dramatic and speculative sense of increasing threat not just for the Serbs in the region but also for the Serbs living in Serbia, since they would be limited to Central Serbia.

CONCLUSION

The SOC is not just a religious community but a national Orthodox church and a political actor in Montenegro. Losing the privileged status it currently has would be a great loss both for the Church itself and for the Serbian state. However, the reaction of these two actors to the events differs because there is a discrepancy between the goals of the two institutions. The SOC has the primary



goal of stopping the implementation of the Law, but political demands have also been raised during the protests, displayed in the constant delegitimization of the Montenegrin regime in the analyzed statements. Apart from the strategy of predication, the SOC discourse regarding the Law is characterized by the frequent use of the topos of threat, which is usually combined with the victimization of the Serbian people. This argumentation scheme serves to unify Serbs, as there is an urgency to react to the actions of the Montenegrin state. Finally, apart from the sacralized discourse present during religious rituals, the official discourse of the SOC, as it has been shown in the analysis, relies upon and uses highly politicized and legal terms and language, which helps it obtain and maintain a highly politicized position in the Montenegrin public space.

Contrary to the SOC position, Serbian state officials emphasize the urgency to protect the Serbian people and its Church in the region, which are facing discrimination and oppression. By being protective of the SOC, the Serbian officials show a deep dedication to the preservation of a Serbian national identity that is closely tied to the SOC. The main characteristic of their discourse is an emphasis on the Serbian people in the region and the potential threats for them not just in Montenegro but also in other post-Yugoslav countries where Serbs live. Other features of the Serbian state officials' discourse include othering, combined with the topos of threat, and an increased sense of victimization. Similarly to the SOC discourse, the predication strategy is frequently used, which also serves the purpose of delegitimizing the Montenegrin state and the Law. Lastly, being delegitimized by both actors in these events, the Montenegrin state and its actions are easily presented as a threat against which action is required.