

**Secularism in Serbia: Civil Society's Perceptions of the Growing Influence of The Serbian
Orthodox Church and its Effects on Peace and Democracy**

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Abstract

Serbia, like many other post-socialist countries, experienced a religious resurgence following the wars in the 90s that resulted in a significant increase in church and state relationships during the early 2000s. This research project examines civil society actors' perceptions of the increasing influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its potential threats to the country's peace efforts and developing democracy. Using semi-structured interviews with activists involved directly or indirectly with anti-fundamentalist movements, this research identifies the ways in which they perceive the SOC's power undermines democratic norms and curtails peace efforts. Further, it looks for a plausible alternative and explores how a secular state would contribute to Serbia's post-conflict transformation.

Introduction

Article 11 of Serbia's Constitution declares, "The Republic of Serbia is a secular state" in which "Churches and religious communities shall be separated from the state" (Constitution of The Republic of Serbia, 2006). However, the interference of the church in state matters, both explicit and implicit, is observable and welcomed by almost all politicians and state institutions. For example, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has representatives in several political bodies, including the Republic broadcasting agency, where they supervise TV programs and act as moral advisers, ensuring that they follow the spirit of Orthodox Christianity. Representatives from the SOC also sit on several University Councils and the National Education Council. Further, they are the advisors to many politicians who visit the Serbian Patriarch whenever they face difficulties in political practice. These televised visits are integral to political marketing and campaigning (Stojković, 2012). This research focuses on the potential role of secularism in Serbia's post-conflict transformation with a specific focus on the ideas and work of Belgrade's civil society. It aims to answer these questions in the voice of the activists involved: what are their perceived threats to peace and democracy posed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, what alternatives do they suggest, and how would a strictly secular state contribute to Serbia's post-conflict transformation?

My interest in this topic was sparked by this quote from Daša Duhacek's essay regarding political responsibility in Serbia based on the ideas of Villa and Arendt, "Only by, with, and through the secularization of political space can the issues of responsibility be raised with theoretical seriousness and practical political effectiveness." (Duhacek pg. 20, 2008). Duhacek claims society must have the capacity to deal with evil in entirely secular terms, distanced from sin and guilt, for citizenry must take the burden for what was done in their name, or the policy of

evil will be implemented over again. Political reckoning with the past, claiming and acknowledging the war crimes committed for the benefit of the Serbian state and citizens, is a prerequisite for the longevity and maintenance of peace. My logic here is that if political responsibility is a necessary part of the state reconciliation process as Duhacek claims it is. The secularization of the political space is indeed needed to raise the question of responsibility, then it is essential to research the current relationship between the church and state in Serbia and the proposed alternative. The available literature reveals that Serbia is secular only in the weakest sense, and there is a mass effort from civil society groups to embrace a more robust definition of secularism, most prominently, the Coalition for a Secular State. Their goals are to warn the public that losing the state's secular character entails serious consequences for peace and democracy. It was from these goals that I formulated my research questions.

For this research, a secular state is defined not as one that suppresses religion but as one that defines and structures itself independently, thereby granting citizens freedom of belief. Freedom of belief naturally includes the freedom not to believe. Thus, the issue of secularism should be treated as a normative political principle that aims to protect the citizens' freedom of belief and as a different matter than the quantitative increase or decrease of religiosity in society. Disagreements regarding secularism in Serbia stem from two prevailing understandings that contest each other; one has stricter and one looser practicality. Civil Society groups promote a stricter definition of secularism that they claim is more aligned with the ways of the west and the EU. Meanwhile, they are met with mass opposition by groups and individuals with a looser definition of secularism who think that the strict understanding of secularism advanced by NGOs prohibits and terminates religious freedom for Orthodox Serbs by infringing on their right to express their religion freely. Serbia's civil society claims to be the defender of human rights.

During this research, I gained an in-depth understanding of which and whose rights they defend and attempted to articulate their vision of a strictly secular Serbia.

This paper starts with a brief literature review regarding the academic and historical context of discussions on secularism in Serbia, where I explain the post-socialist resurgence of religion and the current laws that aim to reinstate and regulate religion. Then, I discuss a perceived linkage between the Orthodox religion and Serbian national identity and how it affects the body politic. Third, I provide a background on anti-fundamentalist civil society work and the Coalition for a Secular State to explore what alternatives they are offering. Next, I recount a recent civil society initiative to abolish religious education from public schools and the opposition they faced. Having explained the context in which I conducted my interviews, I describe my methodology and positionality. Last, I present my findings from the interviews and conclude this research. I structure the research findings by the most prevalent themes I found when conducting my interviews. First, I elaborate on the perceptions of civil society and how they believe the SOC threatens peace and democracy. I identify six common concerns, including infringements on LGBTQ rights, religious education curriculums in public schools, SOC exceptionalism from laws, monopolization of media, and curtailing potential EU integration. Then, I explain their lack of a collective vision for the future and how an alternative, secular future contributes to Serbia's post-conflict transformation.

Context and Literature Review

Academic and Historical Contexts of the Research

The fall of the socialist regime and the dissolution of Yugoslavia catalyzed a process of religious resurgence. In 1982, 24% of the Serbian population self-identified as religious. In 1993, that number had increased to 71%. In 1999, it rose again to 97% (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011).

The civil war (1992-1995) resulted in social, political, and economic catastrophe for the former Yugoslav people. Due to the state's limited capacity at the time, religiously based humanitarian organizations dealt with this issue significantly. The Serbian Orthodox Church offered itself as the "traditional bastion of national security and the center of national life," as evidenced by its centuries-long role as the single institution that "never in history betrayed the Serbian people" (Đurić-Milovanović & Veković, 2020).

Previously, the 1990 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia regulated religious life. However, church-state relations in Serbia entered a new phase after the democratic revolution and the fall of Milošević's regime in 2000. When Vojislav Kostunica became president of Serbia, Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia became closely tied to the church and frequently used religion and religious ceremonies to both legitimize their own power and to encourage citizens to view themselves as a united Orthodox Serbia. Thus, religious education was introduced in schools in 2001 through the law on the 'Regulation on Organization and Implementation of Religious Education and Teaching Alternative Courses in Elementary and Secondary Schools,' and in 2006, the 'Act on Churches and Religious Communities' an even more significant change to church-state relations (Đurić-Milovanović & Veković, 2020).

The Act on Churches and Religious Communities distinguishes between four categories of churches. The first group comprises the traditional churches and religious communities granted status by various laws passed in the Kingdom of Serbia. The argument for the law is that traditional religious communities deserve a special legal status due to their historical importance and previous legal status. According to Vukomanovic, this distinction between categories of churches led to the "etatization" of the Serbian Church and other negative consequences for non-traditional religious communities (Vukomanovic, 2008). Etatization describes a drift away

from democratic politics and the adoption of state politics, which are always authoritarian. To acquire any legal personality, the new churches and religious communities must be registered in accordance with the Act on Churches and Religious Communities. Non-registered religious communities do not enjoy the rights and benefits the state extends to registered ones, such as subsidies of the pension, social and health insurance contributions to the priests and clerics, and exemption from taxes. Article 4 of this law entitles workers who are Serbian Orthodox, Catholic, or members of other Christian religious communities and members of the Islamic and Jewish Communities to take a day off for their religious holidays. Ercolessi claims this unjustifiably distinguishes between workers on the grounds of their religion and discriminates against all workers not belonging to the enumerated religious communities (Vukomanovic, 2019).

NGOs and circles in civil society started to challenge the alleged 'unconstrained revival of religion' and its broad inclusion in the public sphere, often with an accusation of "clericalization of the society," (Avramovic, 2001). Their main argument is anchored on the Constitution providing for the secular state, and they claim that the principle of secularization is endangered. This leaves a lot to be understood without any additional explanation. The very notion of secularism is not easily comprehended and is not well-researched in the Serbian doctrine (Avramovic, 2001). Secularism is a very complicated, controversial, and complex term that inevitably sparks various visions of how it should manifest itself in society. Hence, my decision to research further the goals and vision of the actors within civil society.

Religion, Nationalism, & Politics

Civil society groups in Serbia claim there is a new trend of "clericalization," or the shift from secular to religious approaches to issues in the public sphere, as the church is taking on an increasingly powerful role in public decision-making. They say clericalization threatens

reconciliation efforts, for the SOC presents itself as the savior and keeper of Serbian identity, using nationalist rhetoric of a divinely ordained "Greater Serbia," constructed from myths of a Serbian society in the pre-Ottoman Western Balkans. At the core of this discourse lies the unbreakable unities of the nation, state, and church, a construction that potentially excludes those who are not Orthodox from claiming a Serbian identity (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011). Civil society actors insist that these ideas are weaponized by both religious communities and political parties who unite with each other in an attempt to monopolize political power. This is especially effective in Serbia, where 6,079,396 citizens (84.6 percent of the total population) self-declare as Serbian Orthodox (Ercolessi, 2019). Politicians can easily feel the ideological influence of the church, and they use it to gain as much political power as possible. In practice, they follow the religious course and keep close to church authority. Political authorities know the most effective way to guarantee a long reign is a symbiosis with religious authorities resulting in the unity of God's and worldly rules.

Civil society activists warn us that the unity of church and state poses certain threats to developing a democratic state, for an identity movement that achieves power, or even on the way to power, is bound to be exclusionary and undemocratic (Gülalp, 2022). According to Gülalp, It is, by definition, intolerant of diversity and individual freedoms. They claim that among the possible types of identity politics, religious identity is the most distant to democracy because the religious creed is considered sacred.

The SOC, as a rule, views tradition as static and unchangeable rather than something which can be amended, built upon, and reinterpreted in the spirit of the times. Thus, the SOC is against hermeneutic pluralism out of fear that this leads to relativism regarding worldviews and values. Instead, the Serbian Orthodox Church promotes monoculturalism and employs a

Manichean 'us vs. them' rhetoric that encourages division and derails reconciliation efforts (Vukomanović, 2008 pg. 153).

SOC discourse also portrays the Serbs as persecuted people under constant threat of extinction. These ideas promote self-victimization and obstruct efforts to take mass responsibility for the war crimes committed in the 90s. In 1997, Patriarch Pavle blessed this message speaking against the Genocide of the Serbian People and describing the threat of annihilation that the Serbs have faced: "Throughout their history, [the Serbs] have faced the fiercest forms of genocides and exoduses that have jeopardized their existence, yet they have always been self-defenders of their own existence, spirituality, culture, and democratic convictions," (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011). This statement, however, came only two years after the Srebrenica Genocide in Bosnia, where Serbian forces killed over 8,000 Muslim men and boys. This nationalist dialogue, increase in church-state relations, and secularism as a prerequisite to political responsibility make secularist efforts pertinent to the field of peace and conflict studies.

Belgrade Civil Society & Opposition

Various civil society groups believe the SOC has effectively established a monopoly on the Serbian people's morals, national interests, values, and identity. Furthermore, this monopoly is the primary reason for the increasing destruction of the achievements of civil society and elementary civilizational criteria. Civil society, by definition, is based on respect for the different interests of its citizens and the concept of tolerance. Based on this, activists identify secularity as a condition for the survival of such a concept of society. Civil society activists state to have formed the Coalition for a Secular State (CSS) for the sake of their own survival. The CSS is made up of the following Belgrade civil society organizations: Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Belgrade Center for Human Rights, Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, Queeria

Center for the Promotion of a Culture of Non-Violence and Diversity, Republika Journal, Social Democratic Union, Urban In, Center for Peace and Democracy Development, Center for the Advancement of Legal Studies, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, and Women in Black-Serbia (Stojković, 2012). Each of these groups has served a pivotal role in the fight for human rights in Serbia. By forming the coalition, Women in Black and other organizations could combine their experiences, resources, and networks. and knowledge bases. The Manifesto on Secularism, drawn up on the founding of the coalition, states the coalition's aims as: a secular state: complete division of church and state, no interference of any church in state affairs, a secular education system: schools with no religious indoctrination and no interference of church or religious institutions, with an education based on the principles of science and rationalism, freedom of religion: re-affirming the right of each individual to belong to a religious community, to change it or abandon it, as well as not to believe and not belong to any religious community, the equal treatment of believers and non-believers: there should be no discrimination whatsoever, nor any privileges based on public expressions of religious beliefs or lack thereof, and a society where religious expression is an exclusively private matter of each individual woman and man, especially as far as state officials are concerned (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011).

As a coalition, they agree to warn the public that losing the state's secular character entails serious consequences for peace, democracy, and human and women's rights. They promise to bring attention to the constant abuse of religion, tradition, and cultural heritage for political purposes and to support absolute freedom of belief and secularism as a critical legacy of modernity. Women in Black have been especially committed to recognizing and combating growing trends of fundamentalism and do so by educating women on the basic concepts behind fundamentalism, writing back to challenge what is said in other published works, protesting the

idea that there is a single recognized authority over published histories, and researching and documenting the voices of a diverse population of Serbian women. In 2008, it launched Reproductive Rights and the Revival of Traditionalism, a research project focused on younger generations of women (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011). The survey results showed a gap between the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church on sexual and reproductive rights and the views of younger women in Serbia. The results also challenged the idea that the church has significantly affected society's ideas and beliefs. While official census data states that 95% of the Serbian population is religious, only three-fifths of the women surveyed by Women in Black professed their faith. Some said this was due to the pressure to conform and the fear of standing out (Zajović & Mahuron, 2011).

The most recent civil society initiative aimed to fight 'clericalism' is the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights' petition: *Apel za Sekularnu Državu i Ukidanje Veronauke u Školama* (appeal for a secular state and the abolition of religious education in schools). The petition claims that the politicization of religion and the SOC as an organization is imposing patterns of identity homogenization. It additionally states that the introduction of religious education in state schools, the political activities of the church and church officials, enormous influence on state politics, large monetary donations that the state unjustifiably and non-transparently gives to religious organizations, exemption from a whole series of taxes, court processes are examples of gross violations of the secular character of the state of Serbia. These violations, they insist, allowed the SOC to establish a monopoly on the Serbian people's morals, national interests, values, and identity. The petition goes on to say the SOC is characterized by numerous outbursts, such as awarding decorations to dictators, war criminals, and business people with dubious biographies, concealing pedophilia in its ranks, and as enormous

enrichment. The petition further claims that it is unacceptable that such an organization determines the contents of school programs and textbooks in Serbia today, for it negates science, spreads conspiracy theories, and educates entire generations in the spirit of the most conservative obscurantism, incapable of existing in the modern world. 225 civil society activists signed the petition in agreement with the following message, "We demand that the Government of Serbia pass a decree on the abolition of religious education in public schools. As they are extremely intolerant, grossly anti-democratic, and extremely exclusive, the SOC cannot and must not educate our children. A better society begins with the strict separation of church and religion from science and the state" (Apel za Sekularnu, 2022).

As I previously mentioned, there are two prominent ideas pertaining to how secularism should be practiced that influence conversations about religious education in public schools. Civil society's vision of a strict separation of church and state is met with significant pushback by a majority group of Serbian citizens with a looser perception of a functional, secular state. They argue that religious education is an optional and not a compulsory subject, and all children and their parents in Serbia have the right to choose between religious education and civic education. They additionally say that abolition of religious curriculum would prohibit and terminate religious freedom for parents and children who want to attend religious classes, which primarily affects non-Orthodox, members of religious minorities (Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, and Jews) in Serbia who should be allowed to enjoy their rights, which include state-sponsored education about their religion and in their language. Third, even if every accusation is true about the SOC, there is no reason to abolish religious education altogether but instead, initiate reforms to improve the curriculum and/or release it from the influence of the SOC if necessary. In conversation about EU membership and western understandings of a

secular state, many European countries and their societies were neither, nor are they today, strictly secular in the way the Appeal's authors advocated. Religious education is taught in schools in most of the EU member states. It is even a compulsory subject legally regulated in the Constitution of the following countries: Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Luxembourg, Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal (Withdrawing from Religious Education at School, 2022). Therefore, the complete and strict separation of church and state and strict secularism are not preconditions for entering or belonging to the European Union. In fact, as the examples show, societies can be very developed and civilized, tolerant and democratic, even if they maintain some kind of connection between state and church institutions or financially support and legally positively discriminate against a particular traditionally dominant church and religious denomination in their society. The opposition believes that the 2/3 of children in Serbia who attend religious teaching should not be deprived of their right to do so.

Methods

When attempting to understand how exactly civil society perceives the position of the SOC, the activists on the ground offer the most insight into their mission. By gaining the perspective of activists within the member NGOs of the Coalition, I gathered their thoughts and learned more about their perceptions of secularism in Serbia, their current initiatives, and how they imagine the future. These civil society activists made the perfect interviewees since they have an unmatched knowledge of the impacts of fundamentalism and a unique vision of the future of Serbian society.

I interviewed four individuals from four different organizations, including the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights Serbia (HCHRS), The Center for the Advancement of Legal Studies (CUPS), The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YiHR), and the Association of

Anti-Fascists of Vojvodina. The HCHRS is currently the most active regarding issues of secularism and thus provided the most pertinence to this research. However, all of the interviewees are engaged either directly or indirectly with anti-fundamentalist activism. I refer to the interviewees as participant one, participant two, etc., but they remain anonymous in their personal names and association with their organization. I repeatedly reached out to 17 contacts working with secularist issues and interviewed all who responded. All interviews were conducted in English and did not require a translator. The interviews were semi-structured in format, with more questions added depending on context. The questions concerned their perceived threats to peace and democracy posed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, their suggested alternative, and how they thought a strictly secular state could contribute to Serbia's post-conflict transformation.

It is equally important to acknowledge my position as a researcher. This way, I can be aware of my bias when conducting and writing this ISP, and the reader can know where to be skeptical. First, I am an American. Not being a Serbian citizen positions me as an outsider, someone who is unaffected, to the conclusion of this research. While I think this can offer constructive objectivity, it also means that I am prone to project the western ideas of religion and democracy that I grew up learning. Part of my study abroad experience has been deconstructing my orientalist understanding of southeast Europe and learning to avoid what Vesna Goldsworthy calls the "rhetoric of Balkanization" that reduces the region into an essentialized area of endless fighting between unchanging, hateful ethnic groups (Goldsworthy, 2002). I know that the ethnic hatred argument is lazily engaged by western academics, and I do not seek to perpetuate this narrative. Instead, I hope to offer insight and a possible framework within which we can discuss reconciliation. In addition, I do not speak fluent Serbian. Being a non-speaker of the national

language prevented me from being treated the same as a local researcher and could have affected the information I received from the interviews.

Considering my research focuses on religion, it is necessary to acknowledge my religious identity. Though I grew up going to a Christian church and am familiar with Christian teachings, I no longer devoutly practice and therefore identify as non-religious. My experiences with religion can bias me toward secular society as a better alternative, hence my decision to focus on the voices of actors in Belgrade's civil society. I would not feel comfortable voicing the side of fundamentalists; therefore, I want to emphasize this research is not an attempt to voice the nation's perceptions of secularism. With this said, I attempt to retain a critical stance as an objective researcher and avoid writing as a sympathizer.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, civil society representatives expressed personal views, but the coding process illuminated several points of convergence. Thus, I organized the discussion in this section by identifying the most prominent common topics, discussing each in detail, and analyzing the views of the interviewees. These recurrent themes being: the dehumanization of the LGBTQ community, religious education in schools, SOC exceptionalism, SOC monopolization, and EU vs. Russia Conversations. In this section, I elaborate on how the interviewees perceive that these issues harm the existence of peace and the development of democracy in Serbia.

Perceived Threats to Peace and Democracy

Dehumanizing the LGBTQ

"The LGBTQ community is basically the eternal enemy." - Participant 3 speaking of the SOC.

The Orthodox Church believes homosexual behavior is a sin. They are granted their freedom to believe this and to express their religious beliefs by the Serbian Constitution; however, Serbia's civil society believes the increasing sociopolitical power of the church threatens the safety of Serbia's LGBTQ community. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in areas like employment, trade, and education is prohibited in Serbia, yet the church actively dehumanizes homosexual citizens and accuses their presence of "desecrating the city of Belgrade, the holy Serbian city." (Bishop of the Serbian Church, 2022) While everyone is granted their freedom of belief and right to free speech, hate speech is not protected. Hate speech harms democratic processes by undermining the political status of some citizens and stratifying citizenship based on identity. Further, the intolerance to the LGBTQ community promoted by the church escalates quickly into oppression, verbal threats, and actualized violence. Serbian NGOs record dozens of incidents of anti-LGBT violence yearly (Bogdanovic, 2022). Nikanor Bogunovic, the Bishop of Banat, said in August of this year, "If I had a gun, I would use it, I would use this power if I had it, but I don't have it," speaking of Belgrade's hosting of EuroPride (Bishop of the Serbian Church, 2022).

On the topic of EuroPride, President Aleksander Vučić agreed to host the 2022 parade years ago and promised to ensure it was secure. Days before it was scheduled, the SOC, under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, asked that it be forbidden. According to participant 1, it was originally forbidden, but because of immense pressure from the west, the EU, and the United States, "Finally, Vučić had to give in on the very day of the EuroParade, but it was not nearly as it was imagined to be because he only allowed 500 people." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). They added, "this whole event was of the symbolic value

of what is going on in Serbia itself at the political level." speaking of Serbia's attempt to balance the political influence of the church and international actors.

This is not the only instance where we can observe the church using its influence to discourage homosexuality. "They put a pressure to change the texts.. school textbooks about LGBTQ and what it is." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). Previously, the textbooks explained homosexuality in a very moderate, medical way, but now, the books are written by "people who have nothing to do with biology, medicine, or anything of that kind. These are nationalists who are against these values." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). This particular initiative received backlash from professionals and medical experts, but in the end, "they've won." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). One of the biology textbooks in question explains the difference between sex and gender and describes sexual orientation and gender identity. Gender "can be independent of the sex assigned to [a person] at birth," the book says, adding, "An individual alone can determine [their] gender identity." Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Porfirije declared publicly that this book "imposes an unacceptable LGBT ideology," and Orthodox Christians "cannot accept the imposition of new social norms that were not propagated by God." (Bogdanovic, 2022). Civil society actors concur that the forced modification of textbooks is part of an accelerating trend of clericalization and an attempt by the SOC to censor and dehumanize entire segments of the population. Initiatives like these threaten efforts for maintainable peace by nourishing intolerance and destroying democratic institutions by limiting and manipulating the knowledge available to the public.

Religious Education in Schools

"The abolition of religious education would be a great step towards a better society." -
Participant 4

All interviewees agreed that no program without a scientific basis should be allowed in public schools. However, there is no consensus on how exactly that claim should manifest itself. They all identified problems with the current religious education provided by the state, but the question still remains if it requires reform or abolition. "It was planned as some kind of special subject about the history of religion, but it's not that. It's basically an ideological school about actualism and also about nationalism." (personal communication, December 2, 2022). This participant is echoed by Svenka Savić's research on the contents of religious education textbooks in Serbia where she concludes, "inter-religious and gender perspectives in selected textbooks are for the most part missing; furthermore, they rather mirror a patriarchal educational model of the community where students live, and not a religious message about spirituality, which is the main goal of a religious education." (Savić, 2018). Actualism is the idea that there is just one possible, predetermined future. It refuses alternative possibilities and restricts critical thinking about the past, present, and future. Participant 1 claimed that anyone can see the effects of conservative religious education by looking at generational differences. "Younger generations are becoming much more conservative. Their grandmothers are more liberal than they are." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). They continued, "They [The SOC] have greatly damaged the secular context and I think many people, older generations, are aware of that. Young people do not have this awareness, they are not brought up like this because this is what is lacking in their education." Expressed similarly in every interview, the participants are concerned that the younger generation is being deprived of a plurality of views.

Participant 3 said the current religious education curriculum is "producing nationalism and hatred to the others," but it is essential to "educate and give people free space to discuss these issues." implying that all-inclusive, comprehensive religious education could be a

beneficial alternative that encourages a plurality of thought and tolerance (personal communication, December 2, 2022). They say this alternative education, centered on political, economic, and social human rights, would help the younger generations become "more resilient to very hard ideologies." (personal communication, December 2, 2022). This solution would also attract less opposition from people claiming to protect their right to religious education. As long as the curriculum guarantees all participants in the school are "equally treated, with respect to all groups – national, religious, sexual and other minorities," religious education has the potential to facilitate meaningful conversations in which young people will benefit from an exchange of ideas and exposure to different ideologies, ushering in a new generation of tolerance and understanding, and facilitating "effective and also positive peace." (personal communication, December 2, 2022).

Serbian Orthodox Exceptionalism

"That's the society in which we are now living, impunity!!" - Participant 2

Another common concern expressed in the interviews was the immunity and exceptionalism offered to the Serbian Orthodox Church. "There was only one group of people excluded from the law of anti-discrimination. It was the members of the Orthodox church, and that was the compromise between the Coalition with the Democratic party. They made a compromise that members of the Orthodox Church cannot be prosecuted for their statements." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). This became especially pertinent when allegations arose about pedophilia within the SOC. Participant 3 said of the situation, "a lot of the families of these, especially young boys, that was assaulted and sexually raped actually tried to get any kind of compensation through the Serbian court system, but they didn't get it. So some of them are now at European Court for Human Rights, and some of them, as I know 11 cases, are

before some London basic court because they believe in some other court system not in Serbia, especially because of the kind of synergy between the church and the Serbian State." (personal communication, December 2, 2022). According to participant 2, a law professor and activist for the center for the advancement of legal studies, "It is not certain whether priests are or are not immune for some types of a criminal investigation." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). The laws are vague and leave room for interpretation. "You never know when it is an offense or is not an offense." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). Additionally, they added that the Serbian Constitution provides the possibility to expel immunity for members of parliament, but "for priests, there is no possibility that immunity could be reduced." (personal communication, December 1, 2022).

Participant 2 also talked about the Act on Churches and Religious Communities, saying that by stratifying the types of religious communities, it produced inequalities between them in favor of the SOC. "You have to fulfill more preconditions than when we are talking about traditional churches, traditional legal communities, and religious communities." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). Beyond this, every place, including public places, can become a place for a religious ceremony if the church decides it. "For instance, you have a practice of religious service on the street, in the marketplace, and so on. It sometimes happens when protests and manifestations have been organized that priests come in the same place and started church service." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). Participant 3 recalled that people tried to rally against this with claims that it infringed on their right to organize and freedom of thought, but the church was protected by law, and nothing resulted from their efforts.

Monopolization of Media and Thought

"It is becoming a one-party system with stronger leaders, and one very strong leader arbitrating every situation at all levels." - Participant 1

The monopolization of media, especially digital media, is also of major concern for Serbian civil society actors. "How do you get through to a society when there are no public debates? There are no TV shows, interviews of different stances, and reflections of certain problems." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). Participant 1 talked about the media's response to Helsinki Committee for Human Rights petition to abolish religious education in public schools. They said there was only brief coverage of the initiative by a few talk shows, but the only publicized opinions were "very much in favor of the SOC. There was no debate in society after this was released. The region, generally, was not able to catch the essence of the appeal." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). They refer to contemporary Serbian society as "more or less populism with strong elements of this extremist ideology which monopolize feelings." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). They continued,

"We [the people of Serbia] have here manipulation of the feelings of a population, which is very confusing considering the crisis you are living in for some decades now, and there is no one to explain it or to help them understand the challenges of this new world, I would say, or the new challenges of the new era." (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

They repeatedly reiterate how concerning it is to them that they feel like they are living in a crisis where no one can do anything about it because no one knows any other options. "You don't have media, so there is no balancing mechanism that allows the other side to come up with its own answers, its own concepts, and so on." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). When I asked about civil society's role in educating citizens on plausible alternatives and letting them know that populism is not the only option, participant 1 replied, "It's so difficult to penetrate into this closed, monopolized world of information. You can go from door to door, but

this needs a whole army of people to go from one door to another one, and it will not happen like that. And now, they will always be able to come up with some kind of promises they will never fulfill." (personal communication, November 22, 2022). The opinion of the interviewees is that the media is fully captured by the influence of the SOC and restricts freedom of expression. If this is true, monopolized media presents major threats to democracy by facilitating repression, political control, and the continuance of existing inequalities, injustices, and exploitation.

East vs. West

"I am afraid that the Russian pressure at this point is much stronger, and I don't know how we will get out of this." - Participant 1

Serbia exists at the center of great-power competition between the East and West and has for centuries. Russia plays a leading role by continually supporting its Slavic and Orthodox allies. All interviewees expressed similar concerns about the implications of the growing influence of the SOC on Serbia's potential EU integration. Additionally, all participants agree that the country is currently aligned more with Russia than the west and the EU because of the patriarchs' great influence. Participant 2 said, "The top man of the Orthodox Church said very clearly, very openly that we have nothing in common with the west and with the West European way of life, and that we had to preserve our way of life and tradition. So, it is completely clear that they are against the European Union." (personal communication, December 1, 2022). Participant 3 added, "They [The SOC] are following basically the very dangerous role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is basically also a proxy of the regime of Vladimir Putin" (personal communication, December 2, 2022).

Participant 1 additionally showed concern for the potential effects the relationship between the SOC and the Russian Orthodox Church could have on the current peace in the

Balkan region. They talked about the frozen conflicts between Serbia and neighboring states like Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro and how Russia's influence on the SOC encourages revisionism of established borders and has the possibility to reignite conflict that was never properly reconciled.

"In the 90s, all these states were recognized, and now they [The SOC] are undermining all of these neighboring states. So, it is very important to stop this revisionism on borders which Russia is also now trying to say that they have the right - you know, they always invent all their arguments justifying their initiatives and military operations. So this is the new reality in the world: Russia, as a strong country with nuclear potential, is really putting pressure on the world."(personal communication, November 22, 2022).

The SOC's relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church is worrying because their revisionist views and refusal to accurately recount history curtails reconciliation efforts, resurfaces historical points of contention, and threatens new violence.

In this section, I presented my findings by identifying and analyzing six recurrent topics: the dehumanization of the LGBTQ community, religious education in schools, SOC exceptionalism, SOC monopolization, and EU vs. Russia Conversations. The findings showed that the SOC uses its increasing power to encourage the stratification of citizenship, control and limit the knowledge available to the public, and push the government towards Russia and away from EU integration. In the next section, I will discuss how the research participants thought about the future and suggest that they come together to create a collective vision that is currently lacking.

The Future

My findings reflect an issue true to the Serbian anti-fundamentalist movement as a whole. There is no consensus on the ideal future or collective vision. Participant 1 feels that secularism of the political space is necessary but had no plan nor hope for the near future. They were weary of the upcoming change in generations, saying that their generation, who grew up in Yugoslavia,

had different values that made civil society possible. "My generation, those who started with the anti-war movement and then started with activities in civil society, we believed it would change, but now, over the last ten years, these hopes are vanishing. Also, my generation is vanishing." (personal communication, November 22, 2022) Participant 1 also talked about how conservative the youth is because they do not have the tools or knowledge to challenge current political trends. They claim this makes change nearly impossible. "As of today, you have this totalitarian system secured...the whole system destroyed, education system and all. You know, the younger generation that was born after the 90s and 2000s, they have no knowledge of it. They are totally brought about different values." Perceiving the end of their generation and with little hope for future generations, participant 1 finished by adding, "Who is going to change it? I don't know. It doesn't happen just because you remove one person like Vučić.. what about his party, which is now occupying all levels of power? The change won't be so easy to do." (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

Participant 2 agreed that change will not be easy. They recounted a past initiative that was stopped prematurely, presumably because of the exceptional position of the SOC.

"We filled an initiative to examine the constitutionality of the law [The Act on Churches and Religious Communities]. But only one out of 15 judges in that court voted to proceed. All others were against it. And well, I cannot prove, it is very difficult to prove, but I think that it was a result of very strong influence, either from the church or with some political influence because our politicians, the president of the state, Alexander Vučić, is very, very well connected with the top of the Serbian Orthodox church." They continued, "They decided not to proceed upon our initiative, but that does not mean they found that we are not right." (personal communication, December 1, 2022)

Participant 4 spoke to the importance of secularism not only in the country but globally as well. When asked about the future, they said:

"Secularism is necessary for the modern world itself, not only for the region of former Yugoslavia. Consequently, it would be of great contribution to maintaining peace in the region. We have been witnesses to the horrible behavior of religious leaders since 1990.

Something needs to change given the different nations, religions and cultures that exist here, with the supremacy of the 'constitutional patriotism' concept" (personal communication, December 2, 2022).

The concept of constitutional patriotism designates the idea that political attachment ought to center on the norms, the values, and, more indirectly, the procedures of a liberal democratic constitution. Thus, political allegiance is not owed to national culture, and constitutional patriotism promises a form of solidarity distinct from nationalism (personal communication, December 2, 2022).

The concept of constitutional patriotism is frequently proffered as a solution to the difficult issue of political allegiance within increasingly multicultural societies. According to this principle, decoupling a political culture characterized by shared universalist principles might be possible and offers the potential result of promoting political inclusiveness. In Serbia, this would manifest into a realization of the strictest version of secularist interpretation and a society in which people are willing to prioritize democratic norms over personal religious beliefs. However, this solution not only hinges on an unknown: whether or not loyalty to democratic values is strong enough to unify a state; it also necessitates a dramatic ideological shift in the Serbian body politic. I agree with participant 1 that this is improbable, but I believe participant 3 made a great point when they said, "The Serbian Orthodox Church can be and because of their influence need to be a part of the reconciliation." (personal communication, December 2, 2022)

Participant 3 promoted a future in which the political needs of young people are articulated and realized in the spirit of creating a free and democratic society. They claim that the reform process entails political representatives assembling to discuss the harms of nationalistic ideologies and the importance of including a plurality of views in collaboration with representatives from the SOC. They elaborated, "We need to have enough willingness and also

sources to join on the same side to build these principles, which is very hard, especially with the trends so that the Church and State are actually trying to demolish all of the institutions of the democratic state and then you also lacking with any kind of secular principle. But, as I said, if you have the rule of law, then you need to have also respect for a secular state." (personal communication, December 2, 2022).

As we have previously talked about the SOC's influence in Serbia's political decisions to side with either the EU and the United States or Russia, I would like to additionally talk about how integration into the EU could balance out the power of the SOC. The potential of admission into the EU is the driving factor for implementing democratic changes now, and thus, it seems to be the most effective argument for encouraging democratization. The War in Ukraine is forcing Serbian politicians to reconsider the quality of their relations with Russia. While Vučić has tried to balance EU and Russian interests, it will soon be necessary to make a decision, and siding with Russia and the SOC will doom EU membership for Serbia. Though participants 1 and 2 showed little hope that the current administration will side with democracy, it could be very likely. Though Vučić has refused to implement sanctions against Russia, this could be because Russia covers 89% of Serbia's domestic gas needs, and supporting sanctions is nearly impossible, for it would lead to an energetical crisis in Serbia (Bošková & Iliev, 2022). Since February 24, 2022, Vučić's rhetoric has changed from aggressive and nationalistic to portraying himself as a peace guarantor in the Western Balkans. After the latest events in Ukraine, Vučić and Serbian leadership will necessarily re-think whether Russia provides such robust and beneficial opportunities as the European Union membership. Since Russia has now cut relations with almost all western countries, Serbia's leadership might find Russia a less reliable partner (Bošková & Iliev, 2022). An inclination towards the EU will bring about necessary democratic

reforms with the capability to return Serbia's institutions to the people free of the SOC's influence.

In this case, rid of the SOC's monopolization of media and thought, a process of self-reflection will be possible within Serbia, and citizens will be able to face the truth about the deeds committed in their name. This is how secularization of the political space can assist Serbia's post-conflict transformation. By limiting the influence of the SOC and opening the thought landscape to a plurality of views, nationalism will no longer be an uncontested ideology. By deregulating the flow of knowledge and allowing public conversations about the past, a collective political responsibility becomes possible, and with that political responsibility will come acknowledgment and acceptance. Reaching this point not only shows the true transformation of thought but is also crucial for maintaining peace. The burden of responsibility must be reckoned with, or "the policy of evil will be implemented again and again." (Duhacek pg. 22, 2008).

Conclusion

Relying on semi-structured interviews, this research articulated the potential threats to peace and democracy posed by the Serbian Orthodox Church from the perceptions of actors in Serbia's civil society and academia, attempted to reveal a shared vision for the future and explored ways that commitment to a strictly secular state could contribute to Serbia's post-conflict transformation. While only one side of this political argument was represented in the interviews, the findings undoubtedly show that the influence of the Orthodox church is reaching dangerous levels. By disregarding democratic norms and monopolizing information and emotions, the SOC presents a concerning threat to the survival of civil society, inhibits efforts to take collective political responsibility for the Yugoslav Wars, and encourages populism.

However, there is yet to be a clear alternative at this time. The SOC controls the political space, judicial space, public education, and media. Beyond this, they have almost unlimited resources to pursue whatever initiatives best suit their interest. "Several successive governments improved the SOC's position, and this organization became the richest financial institution in Serbian society!" (personal communication, December 2, 2022). The new generation exists without the knowledge or the tools to sculpt a better future. You can sense their frustration, for they do not know how to escape mass conservatism. Brain drain is prevalent, and young, educated people are leaving the country in great numbers. Soon, Serbia will need to import professional people to complete the country's necessary reforms. (personal communication, November 22, 2022) However, without the church on their side, any substantial change fueled by civil society seems nearly impossible. However, there is hope that because the Serbian government has a strategic interest in maintaining its current ties to the European Union and the United States, this could influence necessary constraints on church and state relationships.

Actualizing secularization of the political space is necessary to give rise to a plurality of views and replace nationalism with tolerance. Only in a space where knowledge is unrestricted, and tolerance is the dominant ideology can Serbian citizens acknowledge the past and take collective political responsibility, which is an integral part of the post-conflict transformation. Moving forward, Serbian NGOs and civil society activists should learn from the example of the Coalition for a Secular State and come together to share their experiences, resources, networks, and knowledge bases toward a collective vision. By collectivizing, they would have a much broader scope of possibilities and could further their individual impact.

Constraints on time and resources limit this research. As I previously mentioned, this study includes only the opinions of four civil society and academic actors situated on the left side

of the political spectrum. More voices are needed to create a more holistic view of the secularist debate. I recommend a further study including moderate and politically right-oriented persons to add a critical element to my findings. Additionally, understanding the opposite view is needed to make an educated decision for further action.

I also recommend a comparative analysis of religion's political influence in Serbia and EU member countries that includes religious curriculum in schools and a comparison of textbook content. This study would answer the question if Serbia's religious education program needs reform or abolition and show whether or not a democracy can thrive within a relationship with the church. It would additionally answer essential questions about how EU integration could affect the future of democracy in Serbia by highlighting the differences and similarities of religious influence.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your involvement with the Coalition for a Secular Society?
 - a. What made you want to get involved?
2. What initiatives are you currently working on?
 - a. How would you assess the impact of your work both current and potential?
 - b. What is your necessity to society?
3. How do you perceive the current role of religion in society?
 - a. What should the role of religion be in society?
4. How would you describe the current impact of the Serbian Orthodox Church?
 - a. In private and in public life?
5. Can you explain the current relationship between the church and national politics?
6. Can you tell me about the current initiatives which aim to institutionalize religion?
 - a. How would they change the society in Serbia?
 - b. Would they affect levels of democracy and peace in Serbia?
 - i. If so, how?
7. What are your reactions to these initiatives?
 - a. How does your coalition react?
8. What is your Coalition's alternative to these right-wing initiatives?

Adjusted Question for Participant 4

1. I noticed you signed the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights' appeal for a secular state and the abolition of religious education in schools. What made you want to sign this petition?

- a. Why is the abolition of religious education in public schools important?

Appendix B: Participants Chart

Participant	Sex	Organization	Field of Work	Interview Date
Participant 1	Female	Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (HCHRS)	Civil Society	November 22, 2022
Participant 2	Female	Center for the Advancement of Legal Studies (CUPS)	Civil Society	December 1, 2022
Participant 3	Male	Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YiHR)	Civil Society	December 2, 2022
Participant 4	Male	Vojvodina Political Science Association and the Association of Anti-Fascists of Vojvodina.	Academia	December 2, 2022

