



# THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE POLITICS OF POLARISATION IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA

An analysis of cultural wars, anti-scientific narratives, and student protests

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## KEY POINTS

- ◆ The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) plays a decisive role in defining national identity in post-communist Serbia, positioning itself as guardian of “traditional” values against perceived Western liberal influence;
- ◆ Sexual minorities and gender reforms are labelled not merely as moral deviations but as geopolitical tools of Western domination, linking sexuality to national survival narratives;
- ◆ During COVID-19, disputes over communion practices and public health measures became symbolic clashes between scientific rationality and religious authority, reinforcing the binary of “faith vs. globalist science”;
- ◆ The Church’s reaction to student-led anti-corruption protests revealed internal fractures but also a pattern of disciplining clergy and theologians who support civic dissent;
- ◆ The SOC’s rhetoric often mirrors that of the Russian Orthodox Church, particularly when portraying liberal reforms and protests as externally engineered ‘colour revolutions’, thereby anchoring Serbian polarisation within the broader context of Orthodox geopolitics.



## INTRODUCTION

Since the political transformation that followed the fall of Milošević's regime in October 2000, Serbia has been engaged in a prolonged battle over identity, sovereignty, and geopolitical orientation. Within this contested landscape, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has emerged not only as a religious institution, but also as a key player in shaping public discourse. The Church has repeatedly found itself at the heart of divisive national controversies, including debates over LGBT rights, the so-called 'culture wars', responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and reactions to student-led protests against corruption and authoritarian governance, following the tragedy in Novi Sad.

Rather than functioning as a neutral moral authority 'above politics', the SOC operates within a dense web of clientelist state relations and transnational Orthodox geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> Its rhetoric often frames liberal reforms as foreign impositions, secular expertise as ideological aggression and civic mobilisation as externally orchestrated destabilisation.<sup>2</sup> This pattern is indicative not only of domestic political dynamics, but also of the ideological alignment between the SOC and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), particularly in the context of geopolitical polarisation since 2014 and 2022. This policy brief therefore addresses the following key question: does the SOC's consistent alignment with the ROC render it an instrument of Russian influence, or is it an independent national church whose domestic agenda simply coincides with Moscow's? The central argument put forward is that the evidence suggests the latter: not subordination, but convergence. This distinction is substantiated by the three case studies below and developed in full in the concluding section. It is important to establish this both analytically and in terms of policy, because treating the SOC merely as a Russian proxy misrepresents its polarising role and the leverage that stems from its domestic, Serbian roots.

## THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE CULTURAL WARS – LGBT ISSUES AND GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENTS

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has positioned itself as the guardian of historical continuity and national authenticity. It has often labelled liberal reforms and European integration as threats to Serbia's moral sovereignty. Debates over sexuality have become central to this identity struggle. Rather than being considered solely in terms of individual rights and equality before the law, LGBT rights have been presented as a matter of belonging to civilisation.<sup>3</sup> While EU membership was officially being pursued by Serbia, which requires more liberal development in this area, strong political and symbolic connections with Russia were also maintained. In this context, the rights of sexual minorities have been exploited by Russian or pro-Russian initiatives<sup>4</sup> trying to undermine a possible pro-European direction.

Between 2001 and 2012, the SOC's position in this question fluctuated from silence to outright condemnation. The first attempt to hold a Pride parade in Belgrade, in 2001, resulted in violent attacks on the participants. Subsequent attempts in 2004 and 2009 were cancelled due to security concerns. The first successful parade, held under heavy police protection in 2010, was met again with violent unrest.<sup>5</sup> Senior church officials publicly characterised Pride as both morally destructive and incompatible with Serbian tradition. This could be attributed to a parliamentary debate on the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in the previous year, during which seven traditional religious communities, including the SOC, had demanded the removal of provisions protecting individuals on the basis of sexual orientation. At the time, church representatives argued that such legal protections imposed an alien moral framework and endangered religious freedom. This positioned the Church as both a spiritual authority and an active participant in legislative processes affecting minority rights.<sup>6</sup>

A decade later, during EuroPride 2022, the intensification<sup>7</sup> of cultural polarisation was particularly evident. Large religious processions and public demonstrations opposing EuroPride were organised in Belgrade,<sup>8</sup> with participants bearing religious and nationalistic symbols and portraying the event as a threat to family values and national identity. The SOC played an active role in these anti-Pride initiatives.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the SOC organised and led some of the protests, including one on 28 August 2022 which was blessed by the head of the SOC, Patriarch Porfirije. Damijan Knežević from the far-right organisation "Narodna Patrola" also commented on the high level of Russian involvement, claiming that the event had been endorsed by the head of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.<sup>10</sup> This event was also attended by the Russian biker group the "Night Wolves".<sup>11</sup> The SOC's active involvement in the mobilisation, coupled with Russia's involvement in anti-Pride initiatives in 2022, served to reinforce the notion that LGBT rights are a geopolitical rather than a domestic equality issue. Although the authorities initially announced the cancellation of the march, citing security concerns,<sup>12</sup> they ultimately permitted it to proceed.

In general, statements emerging from SOC circles often portray LGBT rights as an externally imposed ideological project.<sup>13</sup> Official commentary links discussions of gender identity in educational materials to 'foreign influence', arguing that they conflict with national traditions. The Church's rhetoric frequently overlaps with narratives emphasising civilisation-level resistance, aligning with Russian interests. The ideology of the 'Russkiy Mir' (Russian World), promoted by the ROC under Patriarch Kirill, presents traditional morality as a defence against liberal Western hegemony.<sup>14</sup> Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this framework has intensified in an attempt to gain support across Europe and the US.<sup>15</sup> The aim is to link moral conservatism to geopolitical sovereignty. The SOC frequently employs similar rhetoric to emphasise spiritual authenticity, demographic survival, and resistance to Western moral relativism from a Serbian perspective.<sup>16</sup>

In previous years, international human rights monitoring bodies have expressed concern about ongoing developments in Serbia regarding supposed 'culture wars', such as those concerning LGBT rights. For instance, Human Rights Watch condemned the attempts to prohibit EuroPride in 2022, by underlining Serbia's responsibility to safeguard freedom of assembly and equality under the law.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the European Parliament has raised concerns about democratic standards and the protection of fundamental rights in Serbia in 2023.<sup>18</sup> In this context, debates about LGBT rights have become a proxy battleground for defining Serbia's geopolitical orientation. Presenting Pride events as externally driven or as a form of destabilisation strengthens a polarised narrative where European integration is linked to moral decline and alignment with traditional Orthodoxy and Russia is linked to cultural preservation. So far, the last Pride, that occurred in 2025, was dedicated to the student-led protest, therefore it became a rare case of an event ending without additional violence.<sup>19</sup>

## PANDEMIC, COMMUNION, AND ANTI-SCIENTIFIC NARRATIVES

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SOC found itself at the centre of a conflict between public health authorities and religious traditionalism. The Serbian media frequently reported on SOC's position as one of the main actors during the crisis. Media reported extensively on the hospitalisation of SOC representatives, critiques of the Church's decisions to defy epidemiologists or the subsequent developments surrounding the funerals of SOC's representatives. In the case of Patriarch Irinej's death, the media were the first to report it,<sup>20</sup> albeit controversially, before the official proclamation by the SOC. The most visible controversy concerned the long-standing liturgical practice of administering Holy Communion with a shared spoon.<sup>21</sup> Ahead of Orthodox Easter on 19 April 2020, medical experts recommended strict social distancing and hygiene protocols. Despite the state-imposed lockdown and other measures, as well as scientific recommendations,<sup>22</sup> Easter liturgies were held in several churches across Serbia in spring 2020. Church representatives rejected claims that the Eucharist could transmit disease.<sup>23</sup> Bishop Irinej of Bačka publicly dismissed critics as 'atheists' and 'servants of globalism', accusing them of worshipping the 'Neopagan goddess Science'.<sup>24</sup> This not only defended liturgical tradition, but also transformed the public health debate into a confrontation between Orthodoxy and secular rationalism, presenting the acceptance of epidemiological guidance as capitulation to Western liberal ideology.<sup>25</sup>

During the height of the pandemic in spring 2020, some internal criticism<sup>26</sup> of the Church emerged, but those who spoke out were subject to disciplinary action. For example, theologian and priest Vukašin Milićević publicly supported taking precautions, pointing out that faith and medical science can go alongside each other.<sup>27</sup> He argued that protecting life and public health was consistent with Christian ethics. As a result, he was suspended from teaching at the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade and subjected to ecclesiastical sanctions. The Church's position was also criticised by Serbian Orthodox Archbishop Grigoriје Đurić, head of the Düsseldorf and All Germany Eparchy.<sup>28</sup> In an article published on *Teologija.net*, the theologian Vladimir Latinović questioned the responses of certain church leaders during the pandemic, arguing that decisions regarding Communion should consider the physical well-being of believers.<sup>29</sup> He urged bishops and clergy to reconsider their assertion that the Eucharist could not transmit infection, suggesting that this issue requires serious theological and practical reflection rather than rhetorical dismissal. Nevertheless, all the proposals made during this period were met with an inappropriate response, despite the SOC's initial partial support for compliance with pandemic measures.<sup>30</sup>

The consequences of this stance soon affected the Church itself. In March 2020, Bishop Milutin of Valjevo died from complications caused by the virus.<sup>31</sup> Then, in October 2020, the virus claimed the life of Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro.<sup>32</sup> His funeral in Podgorica attracted thousands of mourners, many of whom were not wearing masks or observing social distancing. Despite the risk of infection, large crowds could be seen kissing the deceased Metropolitan's body in an open coffin. In November 2020, Patriarch Irinej, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, also died after contracting the virus.<sup>33</sup> He was hospitalised just three days after leading the funeral of Metropolitan Amfilohije.<sup>34</sup> All three deaths were related to the Church's disregard of epidemiological guidelines.

The clergy also began to publicly question the safety of vaccines. They rejected empirical epidemiology in favour of sacramental exceptionalism.<sup>35</sup> Comparable views were not limited to the SOC. In his 2020 Christmas Epistle, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Belgrade, Stanislav Hočevan, expressed the opinion that if people are given vaccines made from manipulated human cells and human foetuses and told they are a cure, then in the long run they are actually being given a new form of the virus.<sup>36</sup> That a comparable suspicion of an undefined external 'something' was voiced from outside the SOC underscores that vaccine scepticism in Serbia crossed confessional lines, rather than being a uniquely Orthodox phenomenon. Later, in 2021, SOC in Montenegro continued to disregard support for vaccination against COVID-19. Joanikije II, the Serbian Church's Metropolitan for Montenegro and the Littoral, claimed that they do not deny anything that medicine prescribes, but are merely careful because politics or other interests want to be involved at every opportunity.<sup>37</sup> They refused to elaborate on this statement when asked by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

The religiously oriented debate about the pandemic in general was not confined to Serbia or its branches in other Balkan countries. The ROC also opposed certain pandemic restrictions.<sup>38</sup> It framed state-imposed measures as an overreach of power. Russian clerical narratives linked lockdown policies to globalist control.<sup>39</sup> This ideological overlap between the ROC and SOC reinforced a broader geopolitical perspective. Within this paradigm, science was depicted as an instrument of Western liberal hegemony, while Orthodoxy embodied spiritual resistance. Public health discourse, which is often aligned with European institutions and WHO guidance, has become associated with Western interests. Within Serbia itself, however, defiance of public-health measures was not confined to the SOC: the majority-Muslim Sandžak region around Novi Pazar became the country's deadliest COVID-19 hotspot in mid-2020, a surge attributed above all to mass gatherings and pre-election rallies rather than to communion disputes. The SOC's conduct thus belonged to a wider pattern of religious and communal resistance to state measures, which cautions against reading it as a uniquely Orthodox or pro-Russian stance.<sup>40</sup>

The deaths of senior church figures in 2020 did not prompt the church to reassess its communion practices. While certain dioceses introduced minor hygiene adjustments, the core ritual remained unchanged. The Church exercised significant moral authority,<sup>41</sup> influencing public perceptions of risk and compliance, as well as the legitimacy of state measures. Public questioning of scientific recommendations by members of the clergy led to greater scepticism of vaccinations and epidemiological guidance. Additionally, the SOC positioned itself as a counterweight to secular technocratic authority by rhetorically opposing 'globalism', defending shared communion and resisting restrictions. The broader ideological binary already visible for example in cultural conflicts described in the previous section was thus reinforced by the pandemic debate. It is telling, however, that the SOC's wariness extended to vaccination as such, irrespective of its provenance: church figures did not endorse the Russian Sputnik V vaccine any more readily than Western ones. This suggests that the driving concern was the defence of clerical authority and the sacrament over the bodies of the faithful, not the advancement of a Russian agenda with anti-western label.

## THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND STUDENT PROTESTS – DISCIPLINE, DISSENT, AND RUSSIAN ALIGNMENT

The most recent and visible polarisation involving SOC has been sparked by nationwide student protests against corruption, institutional decay, and authoritarian governance under President Aleksandar Vučić. The protests were initiated by university students and subsequently expanded into a broader civic mobilisation. The immediate trigger was the collapse of a recently renovated concrete canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024, which killed sixteen people. Widely blamed on corruption and negligent oversight of the station's reconstruction, which was carried out as part of a Serbian–Chinese partnership, the disaster galvanised demands for accountability that grew into the largest protest movement in Serbia in decades.<sup>42</sup> The leadership of the Church openly opposed the protests,<sup>43</sup> while bishops at the lower levels of the hierarchy mostly maintained public silence and abstained of public commentary on the ongoing protests.

However, the Church has not functioned as a monolithic actor.<sup>44</sup> Individual clergy members, usually at the lowest levels of the Church's hierarchy, expressed solidarity with the students.<sup>45</sup> In Kruševac and other cities, for example, priests have publicly blessed protesters and participated in prayer gatherings in support of civic demands.<sup>46</sup> They argued that civic engagement was compatible with Orthodox ethical responsibility. The developments surrounding Metropolitan Justin of Žiča<sup>47</sup> and the subsequent restructuring of the diocese were also seen as politically sensitive decisions made in response to the protests, masked as punishment for alleged numerous canonical and other ecclesiastical offenses in the administration entrusted to him. This divergence between the hierarchy levels revealed internal tensions within the Church regarding its relationship with political authority and signaled the existence of alternative theological interpretations that view protest as a moral response to injustice rather than as foreign-instigated subversion.

The disciplinary case of theologian Blagoje Pantelić sheds light on patterns of internal repression within the SOC.<sup>48</sup> After publicly criticising the Church's stance on social developments and its perceived passivity during civic unrest, Pantelić faced ecclesiastical proceedings and sanctions.<sup>49</sup> His punishment was widely regarded as retaliation, especially given how severe the measures were compared to previous cases.<sup>50</sup> Public statements in support of Pantelić raised concerns about freedom of conscience within the Church and cautioned against equating ecclesiastical obedience with political loyalty. In the end, both Pantelić and later also Vukašin Miličević were expelled from the Church's official ranks after openly criticising the behaviour of bishops and the Church's alignment with the state.<sup>51</sup> Defenders of Miličević contended that the disciplinary actions taken appeared to be driven more by political motivations than religious ones.<sup>52</sup> More generally, it was argued that the SOC was increasingly serving as a stabilising force within the prevailing political structure, which raised concerns about institutional capture and a decline in internal pluralism.<sup>53</sup>

As a protest against the SOC position towards the protests, former Assistant Professor of Old Testament Nenad Božović, left his position at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade in early 2025.<sup>54</sup> His departure was accompanied by the publication of an open letter in which he expressed his support for the students. The ongoing protests and the church's official opposition to them have been met with criticism not only from within its own ranks, but even beyond Serbia's borders. For example, Maxim Vasiljevic, Bishop of the Eparchy of Western America, expressed support for the students on his social media account.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the Church continued to take a stance against protests. Beyond disciplinary proceedings against individual theologians, institutional responses to student mobilisation included the explicit delegitimisation of protest demands. In official Church commentary, the dynamics of protest were described as destabilising and socially destructive rather than as expressions of civic grievance since early January of 2025.<sup>56</sup>

During his visit to Moscow in Bright Week 2025, Patriarch Porfirije in public dialogue with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch of Moscow Kirill characterised the protests using terminology associated with ‘colour revolution’ narratives.<sup>57</sup> This phrase has specific geopolitical connotations and is often used in Russian political discourse to describe Western-backed destabilisation campaigns in post-Soviet and Eastern European countries. By using this vocabulary, the Patriarch presented domestic civic protest as part of a global conflict between liberal democracy and a model of civilisation centred on sovereignty, tradition, and Orthodoxy. In his article for *Public Orthodoxy*, Professor Davor Džalto argues that the Patriarch Porfirije’s stance on the protests has two issues.<sup>58</sup> First is theological, where leader of SOC conflates the New Testament concept of the ‘people of God’ with a contemporary ethnic category, thereby distorting a term that traditionally refers to the Church as a spiritual community rather than to any specific nation. The second problem, according to Džalto, is political. Grounding the Church’s public engagement in the supposed unity of the ‘entire Serbian people’ effectively excludes those who do not fit that identity. Under the guise of neutrality, this approach risks aligning the Church with a compromised political regime instead of preserving its prophetic and universal character.

This framing of ‘colour revolution’ and ‘external western interference’ also mirrors the rhetoric and narratives of ROC representatives and Russian state officials. Particularly in the context of the geopolitical polarisation that followed the invasion of Ukraine through the concept of ‘*Ruskiy Mir*’ (Russian World). By aligning its rhetoric with this Kremlin-pushed discourse, the SOC again put itself at the heart of a wider, Moscow-oriented civilisation bloc. Ultimately, this decision by the church leadership to use student protests to deepen polarisation in a country where they have chosen to side with the regime rather than with the protesters, is likely to be seen as extremely controversial in the future historical recollections about the current era. This stance is all the more striking because the protest movement has itself refused any geopolitical alignment, framing its demands as purely internal questions of accountability and the rule of law and declining to position itself either with the European Union or with Russia.<sup>59</sup> By casting an explicitly non-geopolitical movement in the language of a Western-backed ‘colour revolution’, the SOC was not so much executing an external script as defending its own entanglement with domestic power.

## CONCLUSION: PROXY OR CONVERGENCE? LOCATING THE SOC BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ALIGNMENT

The recurrence of the ROC and Kremlin motifs in all three cases raises an unavoidable question: is the SOC an instrument of Russian influence or an autonomous actor whose worldview coincides with that of Moscow? These two possibilities are analytically distinct. A proxy acts under external direction in the interests of its principal, whereas a convergent actor pursues its own agenda, which may substantially overlap with that of another actor without being controlled by it. Conflating the two by reading shared narratives as proof of command is a common shortcut, but it obscures both how the SOC actually operates and what would be required to counter its influence.

Several features of the SOC’s conduct point to autonomy rather than subordination. Institutionally, the SOC is an autocephalous church, canonically equal to the Moscow Patriarchate rather than answerable to it, and it has repeatedly acted on its own authority in ways Moscow did not dictate. Most visible cases were in leading the mass processions (sr. *litije*) that helped bring down Montenegro’s long-governing party over the 2019 law on religious communities,<sup>60</sup> and in unilaterally resolving the decades-long schism with the Macedonian Orthodox Church in 2022.<sup>61</sup> However, it is fair to note that Đukanović’s government in Montenegro was no longer as acceptable to Moscow, as it had led the country into NATO despite the previous efforts to build mutual relations.

Ideologically, Church's mobilising frames were in the described cases rooted in distinctly Serbian projects: the defence of Kosovo as a sacral national space, anxieties over demographic decline, and the unity of the Serb nation across borders in the Balkan region. Its pandemic conduct, as shown above, tracked the defence of clerical authority and the sacrament and extended to vaccines of any provenance, including the Russian one. And over the protests it sided with the domestic regime, not a foreign patron, geopoliticising a movement that had explicitly refused geopolitical alignment.

None of this makes the alignment trivial. The absence of a command relationship does not diminish the fact that the SOC has adopted, amplified and lent its moral authority to narratives such as 'colour revolution', anti-globalism or civilisational defence, which are also Moscow's usual talking points, and that these narratives work to delegitimise democratisation and to anchor Serbia within a Russia-oriented bloc. The relationship is therefore best described not as one of principal and agent but as ideological convergence and strategic alignment between two autonomous actors whose interests substantially overlap. Far from minimising the SOC's role, this reading is both more accurate and, for policy, more consequential: it locates the source of the SOC's positions in domestic Serbian dynamics that no amount of pressure on Moscow would by itself resolve.

All three cases – cultural issues, the pandemic and the largest protest movement in the last decade, point to the active role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping domestic developments in Serbia. In most cases, the church leadership adheres to narratives presented by the Russian Orthodox Church, suggesting that the SOC acts as a subordinate institution. However, rhetoric alone does not mean that the SOC carries out activities under the direction of the ROC. In all three categories of this policy brief, it is evident that the SOC predominantly acts independently, with its connection to Russian narratives being a natural consequence of this activity, given its identity and proximity. On this reading the apparent paradox dissolves: the SOC can promote narratives indistinguishable from the ROC's, and actively oppose democratisation, without being the ROC's proxy. It does so because those narratives serve its own institutional and national agenda – the convergence is genuine and consequential, but it runs through Belgrade's interests, not Moscow's instructions.

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# THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE POLITICS OF POLARISATION IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA

An analysis of cultural wars, anti-scientific narratives, and student protests

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

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