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The Serbian Orthodox Church`s interpretations of the past and its involvement in

memory politics in the post-Milošević period

In the 1980s, the world has experienced an unexpected revitalization and assumption of public

roles by those religious traditions, which both theories of modernity and secularization had

believed were becoming ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world. Also, in the

context of socio-political transformation(s) of state-socialist systems of Eastern and

Southeastern Europe, religious institutions began to emerge from the limited zone of pastoral

service and slowly penetrate the public sphere. Depending on particular religious traditions,

historical trajectories and contemporary socio-political conditions, they however, adopted

various agendas and actions to re-define their functional positions in the transforming political

realm. In the thesis, I focus generally on the case of Serbia which, in contrast to other

(post)socialist countries, came through profound structural changes only a decade later,

following the fall of Slobodan Milošević`s regime, and in particularly on public mnemonic

activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC).

Accordingly, I aim to explore (1) how the SOC interprets the past through production,

support or contestation of particular historical narratives, and (2) how the SOC represents the

past as an active mnemonic agent in the public sphere(s). In this respect, I lean on a wide

array of primary sources that encompass official statements of the SOC, media outlets (both

Orthodox and secular), interviews with ecclesiastical and other mnemonic agents conducted

from 2019 to 2021, personal visits of sites of memory in the region, and finally on observation

of mnemonic practices such as commemorations, public discussions etc.

Through a qualitative analysis of sources informing about the SOC`s involvement in

memory politics in the transforming socio-political realities of post-Milošević Serbia and

other territories within the SOC’s definition of canonical borders (i.e., post-Yugoslav space), I

identify public strategies of this hegemonic religious institution in its pursuit to continuously

legitimize its relevance and positions of power. Accordingly, the thesis tracks these alterations

in an increasingly multivocal setting, with a special emphasis on the SOC’s reactions to the

emerging authoritarian features of the political experience. The vibrant decades after the fall

of Slobodan Milošević`s regime, which are still scholarly under-researched with respect to

religious categories, represent an ideal context for such an analysis. First, as a turning point, it

brought a significant incentive for a re-negotiation of conceptual and functional elements of

memorialization policies. Second, the public arena within which domestic and transnational

agents of memory politics pursue their ideas and agendas, shifted in quality and form also in

the given period. In a broader sense therefore, the research provides a conceptual basis

indispensable for understanding the process-relational dynamics between the high-profiled

phenomena of religion and memory in the public sphere(s) of the present.´