

# SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND STUDENT PROTEST IN 1996/97

## A CASE STUDY OF TEMPORARY ALTERING OF RITUALS

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**Abstract:** St. Sava has been celebrated as a national symbol and a patron saint of schools and education since the first half of the nineteenth century. A set of rituals, customs and performances has developed in connection with this celebration.

Local elections in Serbia in 199 sparked a political crisis that lasted through the winter of 1996/97, even with violence on the streets of Serbian cities. There were several acting groups: the regime, the opposition, and the students. The Serbian Orthodox Church, as a respected national institution, tried to influence these events in various ways. The most obvious intervention occurred on St. Sava's day, 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1997, when Church authorities even altered regular rituals and customs. A dangerous standoff of protesting students and police was resolved by a procession.

This was a rare situation where the Church directly used its rituals in political engagement, an action that was largely welcomed by the public. It was one of the most attended Church services in recent history. The actions of the patriarch himself were understood as a personal stand and symbolic declaration by people that would not have come otherwise.

**Keywords:** Orthodox Church, student protest, ritual, procession

### Introduction

St. Sava, a medieval Serbian saint is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in Serbian history and patron saint of schools, schoolchildren, and education in general<sup>1</sup>. There is an established way of celebrating St. Sava's day among Serbs, with many of these customs dating from the early nineteenth-century Austrian empire. A post-election crisis in Serbia in 1996 forced Orthodox Church not only to give public statements or to try to mediate solutions "behind the scene", but to take an active role in the events. The focus of this article is the difference between regular Church rituals and the altered version that was performed at the time.

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1 For his biography and his cult through history, see WENDEL 1935.

## Methods Applied in this Paper

The difference between usual celebration of St. Sava's day and this particular case will be established by comparing regular practices on St. Sava day (given with a history of their development) with those in 1997. Previously published sociological, psychological, and anthropological researches of the protest and publicised documentation will be used, along with the personal experience of the author, who was an anthropology student and a participant observer in these events.

## Saint Sava and Celebration of his Day

St. Sava, a thirteenth-century saint, has been Serbian national symbol at least since the sixteenth century. National awakening in the nineteenth century gave his cult new meanings. In the Enlightenment-era atmosphere of belief in power of reason and education, one role St. Sava had was to be a patron saint of schools. The first recorded idea to celebrate St. Sava in this way originated in Zemun in 1812 and spread among Serbs in what was then the Austrian Empire. The hymn (an anthem) of St. Sava was first sung<sup>2</sup> in Szeged. In the principality of Serbia, celebrating St. Sava has been arranged by law since 1840. We can notice that St. Sava has obtained an ambiguous role, being a Christian saint and a national symbol in a modern sense. In the course of time, certain customs evolved around the celebration of St. Sava in churches and schools.

There are three modes of celebrating St. Sava: as a patron of a church, as a patron of a family, and as a patron of schools. Rituals and customs related to first mode are practically common for all Orthodox Churches. Second set of rituals, called "slava", is related to the first and is exclusively Serbian, and the third set was derived from first two. A short description of these rituals is necessary in order to point out what was different in this particular case.

Liturgical day in the Orthodox Church starts with evening service on the previous civil calendar day. For example, celebrating of St. Sava starts on the evening of 26<sup>th</sup> of January with a vigil and continues with a Liturgy in the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> of January. If the local church is dedicated to the saint of the day, then there is a procession *after* the liturgy *around* the church, but *inside* church courtyard, accompanied by the ritual of consecrating specially prepared bread and cooked wheat, and then by a meal for everybody present, usually in the courtyard itself or on the church premises. If it is a day of the patron saint of the town, usually there is a procession through the streets – again circular, starting and ending in front of the church.

Celebration of a family patron saint is a complex of customs which is accepted to be Serbian *differentia specifica* in relation to other Slavic and/or Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup> For his biography and his cult through history, see WENDEL 1935.

nations, and it has been studied extensively by many authors and researchers.<sup>3</sup> It is not necessarily directly connected with a liturgy and taking communion, because it is not a practice to serve liturgy every day, but ritual of consecrating of bread and wheat in the family house – and a meal with guests – is an obligation, connecting these customs with those of celebrating of a church patron saint.

Celebration rituals and customs related to St. Sava as the patron of school should be primarily compared to the celebration of a family patron saint, because official celebrating of St. Sava was derived from and partly modeled after to these customs. It is even called “school slava”. The school principal was assigned the role of the head of household (father of the family) just by the priest. Before WWII, celebration after liturgy continued in schools, with a priest and a service of consecrating bread and wheat, and then a pupils’ performance, with commendations for successful learning, etc. After WWII and the banishing of religion from schools and public life, the celebrating of St. Sava retreated completely to churches. After the liturgy there was a children’s performance, usually in the church itself; children recited songs about St. Sava and they received small presents from the parish. This custom was so deeply rooted that it survived throughout the communist era in some places. During the mid-1990s (the time for this research), public celebrating of St. Sava was not yet reestablished, so participating in rituals was still in churches and completely according to one’s free will.

### **Student Protests of 1996/97**

Demonstrations started after the local elections of 17<sup>th</sup> November 1996, which both the authorities and the opposition claimed to have won in major urban areas. The authorities tried to annul the results of elections in important towns, and the opposition started protests which soon turned violent, resulting in injured demonstrators and policemen and with material damage. Students initiated their own separate protests on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, demanding that the truth about the elections should be established. Student protests consisted of long walks through Belgrade suburbs to get attention of citizens, as well as various performances aimed to ridicule the attitudes, actions, and claims of the authorities. Some walks were as much as 30 kilometers long.<sup>4</sup>

Students of social sciences and humanities seized the opportunity to conduct research among protesters at the time, resulting in a substantial amount of collected material and published works, all of which studied the protest and the protesters from various angles.

One research project that was conducted at the time aimed to establish the correlation between the religious and national identity of the participants.<sup>5</sup>

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3 And probably written, KORAĆ 1992. 180.

4 MAXWELL 1891; GEORGIEVITCH 1917. 48 - 49.

5 MIHAJLOVIĆ – PANIĆ – POPOVIĆKI 2003. 107.

This research showed that about 14% of the participants could be called “convinced Orthodox believers”; 44% were “folk Orthodox” with modified understanding of Orthodox Christianity; 22% were atheists, and 19% accepted alternative forms of religiosity.<sup>6</sup> In spite of that, leaders of students made a constant effort to maintain a clear public image of a nationally “appropriate” orientation of the protest,<sup>7</sup> because students were stigmatized as “national traitors” in the state media. Because of this protests started with the Hymn of St. Sava, as a connection with national and cultural background, and no flags were allowed except Serbian ones. The ritual pattern of protest that repeated every day was noticeable: Meeting in front of the Philosophy faculty, hymns, speeches and reading letters of support, protest walks with performances, coming back to the Philosophy faculty, setting time for the next day, and going home. This pattern was interpreted by many students as a way to save energy – not being all the time in the streets – because a long term of protests was expected. On the other hand, the route for the walk for the day was acknowledged only after addresses and speeches, and this created a public atmosphere of expectation and drama.

After Christmas, police began to stop these student walks by a placing cordon to interrupt them for some time and then let them go on, perhaps hoping to provoke an incident that would justify more drastic measures. Thus police stopped the student walk in the evening on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January in the center of Belgrade, in Kolarceva Street. The next day it became obvious that authorities had no intention to let students pass through, and situation got into a dangerous standoff. This “Cordon against cordon” action – as it was called – had great symbolic value and emotional power, both for the participants and the public. Belgrade center was not entirely blocked, as surrounding streets were opened for pedestrians (prepared to take risks). The streets in relative proximity were even open for traffic, but a fight of nerves was on: who would step back? Police officers took regular shifts (every few hours) in the cordon, while students in Kolarceva Street were replaced “on duty” according to their Faculty. In the street there was a carnival atmosphere of non-stop music and dancing, combined with various performances, intended to underline difference between the youth of the country and the establishment. Citizens brought food and drink as a sign of support for the students. Meanwhile, strong police and security forces – even dressed as civilians – blocked other protests and confronted them with opposition, sometimes brutally. A frantic activity to find a solution for this situation was going on behind the scene of protests.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), as an important national institution with high reputation in public<sup>8</sup> and a growing public role,<sup>9</sup> tried to influence this crisis in various ways. The clergy was not unanimous in its opinion of the overall political situation in Western Balkans, and thus the church had its own

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6 NEDELJKOVIĆ 2001.

7 NEDELJKOVIĆ 2001. 93 - 94.

8 RIBIĆ 1997. 7.

9 BLAGOJEVIĆ 2012b. 65.

internal struggles about the best way to react. Theological interpretations of church "behaviour" and an analysis of decision-making were given at the time,<sup>10</sup> showing how Christian ideals were realized in practice. Both the authorities and the opposition had their supporters and opponents among the high clergy. Eventually the student protests were perceived by most as a sound alternative to the ongoing political struggle for power. An attitude towards peaceful solution and overcoming the crisis of Patriarch Pavle, whose moral authority was undividedly recognized inside and outside the church, prevailed. While the Faculty of theology of SOC was not a member of University at the time, students of theology joined the protests from the beginning. There are hints that some students of theology established and maintained contact between church authorities and leaders of student protest.

The Orthodox church has an extensive practice for the seasons of Lent, aimed as a support to the spiritual development of believers. There is a six-week long Lent before Christmas, which is on January the 7<sup>th</sup> (Julian calendar). The next Lent is seven weeks long, before Easter. An Orthodox bishop also has the authority to declare an exceptional Lent on special occasions, such as droughts, diseases, disasters, etc. When the students were stopped on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January (which is a big Orthodox feast of Theophany – the Baptism of Christ – and is not a Lent day), the level of unrest and violence in Serbian towns was so high that Patriarch Pavle declared an additional Lent from the day of St. John (20<sup>th</sup> of January) to the day of St. Sava (27<sup>th</sup> of January) in hopes it would lead people to repentance. This is an illustration how grave the situation seemed to him, because Christmas Lent ended just two weeks before and Easter Lent was only seven weeks ahead (Easter was on April 27<sup>th</sup>, and Lent had begun on March the 9<sup>th</sup>). However, the public was not well informed of Patriarch Pavle's decision, so it was relatively poorly obeyed. Trying to mediate a solution between authorities on one side and students on the other, Patriarch Pavle gave a statement that he would lead a procession from the Patriarchate all through the center of Belgrade – through blocked Kolarceva Street – to the church of St. Sava, on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. Patriarch Pavle was 83 at the time, and he led a mid-winter, cold-weather, early-morning procession for 3.5 kilometers on foot himself. The procession lasted for hour and a half, followed by a Liturgy in the church. It was prepared and performed as if it was a procession for a patron saint of a city. Even according to the reports of media and NGOs not inclined towards the church, Patriarch Pavle was followed by more than 100,000 citizens<sup>11</sup> in atmosphere of dignity.

The "Cordon against cordon" blockade lasted for more than a week, 178 hours exactly. This procession produced a substantial relaxation of tensions. Police did not retreat in front of students, and students did not give up. Authorities tried to present this as a win-win situation, but general sentiment was that establishment is not invincible. Protests of students and opposition continued for many more days, with lot more violence, but the protesters now felt that they could win,

10 BLAGOJEVIĆ 2012a. 23.

11 SMILJANIĆ 1997.

which eventually happened. Other church feasts during the time of the protests were celebrated in a regular manner.

### **Conclusion: What Made this Procession Different?**

First, there are some technical differences. This procession was *before* the liturgy and it passed *through* the city. Processions are usually circular – but this one was linear. The symbolic value of church processions, with their consecration of time and space, is underscored by predictable repetitiveness. This procession happened just once. Regular processions only have symbolic value and therefore have no objectively visible result. This one had an immediate positive and visible result. Taking all of these factors into account, this was a completely unusual practice.

Secondly, while participants of regular processions are mainly active believers, in this case it was not so. According to the 2011 census, more than 85% of the Serbian population declares itself as Orthodox. Research shows<sup>12</sup> that less than 10% can explain to some extent what do they believe in. In the mid-1990s the situation was even worse.<sup>13</sup> Opposition protests and manifestations those days (1996/97) could amass up to 300,000 people. The most widely attended events were religious or of religious origin: Christmas, 7<sup>th</sup> of January, and Serbian New Year, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> of January drew as many as 500,000 people to the streets. Estimations for the St. Sava procession were from 100,000 to 300,000 people. It is obvious, according to census data and research findings, that maybe up to 20,000 people who were present knew what was going on in terms of a procession and a liturgy. For the majority of those who joined the procession, it was a political demonstration. It aligned many people, even those who were not religious, with the Church, because they saw the Church as a peace proponent and a catalyzer of a solution at the time. The action of SOC in this situation was interpreted as aligning with the demands of the students,<sup>14</sup> which were accepted as appropriate by the public.

The St. Sava procession in 1997 was a unique way to solve a political crisis. This was a rare situation in which the Church directly used its rituals in a political engagement, which was largely welcomed by the public. It became one of the most widely attended Church services in recent history. What led people who would not have come otherwise to be there? Walking with Patriarch Pavle himself meant standing up and showing support for those who were there, regardless of their own personal religious beliefs.

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12 BLAGOJEVIĆ 2012b.

13 BLAGOJEVIĆ 2012a. 17.

14 RIBIĆ 2005. 132.

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