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## Book Review: Democratization in Christian Orthodox Europe: Comparing Greece, Serbia and Russia

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**Marko Veković, *Democratization in Christian Orthodox Europe: Comparing Greece, Serbia and Russia* (New York & London, Routledge, 2020; 176 p. ISBN 9780367420833.**

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Since in many post-communist countries democratization processes seem to stagnate or even to have rolled back, some have advanced the idea that Orthodoxy may have a decisive impact on these developments. In most of the post-communist countries, Orthodoxy is supposed to be the religion of the majority, yet the real content of these statistical data, the meaning respondents give to their answer and, most important, what Orthodoxy means in terms of political and social ideas, often remains beyond the research frame. Accordingly, drawing direct correlations between religious belonging and political paradigms is a highly contentious endeavor. Most studies concerned with the role of the Orthodox Church in these political processes nevertheless show a tendency to oversimplify the relation as anti-democratic or incompatible.

Marko Veković's book "Democratization in Christian Orthodox Europe" is a much needed and timely contribution that sheds light on the diverse responses Orthodox churches give to the democratization process in general and in their local context in particular. Veković suggests a comparative approach, which is effective in order to achieve a better understanding of contextual and essential patterns of Orthodox attitudes towards democracy and the accompanying political and social processes. Comparing Greece, Serbia, and Russia is in several ways a well-turned sample, as the countries are on different stages of democratization, the Orthodox churches have a different social and political standing – and they show different levels of theological awareness. The focus of the author is indeed on the first and partly on the second aspects, as he measures and compares the outcomes of democratization processes and restricts the analysis to the perspective of political sciences and institutional behavior. Nevertheless, he is aware of internal church affairs and therefore able to relate institutional strategies and divergent currents within the churches.

Relying on different approaches for measuring democratization, Veković develops a theoretical framework for categorizing the different levels of democratization in his sample. Following on this framework, he describes the role of the Orthodox Church in post-war Greece, post-communist Serbia, and Russia. For each case, he offers a comprehensive yet interest-driven overview about the development of the relationship between state and church, as well

as the role of the civil society. While specialists of each country and church may find it necessary to put more attention to specific events and correlations, the value of these country studies lies in their straightforward focus on the aim to reveal the continuous lines of the attitude of the official church. By maintaining this focus, Veković succeeds in presenting a concise history of the role of each church during the democratization processes of its country. The author suggests four main aspects in order to structure the analysis: church-state relations, the political and historical context, the type of regime preceding democratization, and the initiator of democratization. Without a doubt, this sample of aspects could be extended in various directions, including theological aspects, and the author is aware of these boundaries. However, these four framing questions are sufficient to grasp the major developments on an institutional level.

The final chapters compare the three case studies and provide some lessons for the further study of the role and impact of Orthodoxy in political processes in general, and in the post-communist context, in particular. Veković's main result is the acknowledgment of the importance of Orthodoxy in this post-communist context, which contributes to a separate Orthodox Christian group of democratizing countries beyond the well-analyzed three waves of democratization, and therefore deserves a broader scientific engagement. He underlines the ambivalent and dynamic attitude of the Orthodox churches in the according local democratization processes, which should prevent researchers and observers from oversimplifying the role and position of the churches.

Veković' study is indeed a very valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse about the interrelation of Orthodoxy and post-communist socio-political processes. He fills a gap between the broad literature on democratic development in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe on the one hand and studies on the political role of Orthodoxy in different countries on the other hand, thus pointing to the lack of comparative and in-depth research of the role of Orthodoxy in sociopolitical transition. Ironically, to some degree Veković traps himself in this lack of studies, for example when he repeatedly bases his research question on the proposition that all Orthodox churches share "the same ideas (political theology) about politics and society." In fact, the discussion about Orthodox political theologies as a concept as well as in content is just in its infancy, and publications like "Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity" by Stoeckl, Gabriel and Papanikolaou (Bloomsbury 2018) show the variety of approaches and ideas in this discourse. While Veković self-critically limits himself to questions of political studies several times, it is confusing to realize, that his main question is based on a

theological paradigm, which he does not elaborate further and which appears to be highly questionable.

One exemplary detail in this context: Veković rightly refers to the “Basis of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church” from 2000 as a foundation for political ideas in Russian Orthodoxy. The author finds several – and rather ambivalent–positions on political activities and development, yet he misses the outspoken skepticism about the very idea of democracy in this document. This skepticism is expressed while describing the decay from the time of Judges to the monarchy and finally to democracy as most far from God’s intention; and it is expressed when the document judges freedom of conscience as an indication of “the disruption of the system of spiritual values, loss of striving for salvation.” Comparing these positions with those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Orthodox Church of America, or the Romanian Orthodox Church quickly reveals the very different approaches of Orthodox Churches in relation to democracy and its patterns. These observations could have pointed to the question, whether a church can be expected to support democratization beyond contextual entanglements and even accidental events, if it has such a skeptical position on the very idea of democracy. A similar question could be put on the understanding of civil society, which at least for the Russian Orthodox Church is just not existent as a sovereign actor in its theological approach to post-Soviet Russia. This understanding significantly affects the view as to how the ROC could and should relate to civil society in Russia.

Yet, this problematic lack of insight into the theological concepts of democracy and politics within the three analyzed churches does not diminish the value of putting–again and forcefully –the attention of social sciences to the importance of religion in political processes. Veković presents a unique comparative study with impressive knowledge of the three cases. With his convincing theoretical frame, he challenges established concepts of democratization paradigms and adds a significant piece to the puzzle of post-communist transition. Within theology and religious studies, his study may trigger opposition and further studies on Orthodox political theologies, which would be the most sustainable success of such an important contribution.