

2022

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#### Recommended Citation

Perica, Vjekoslav (2022) "Reconciliation Attempts and the Return to Conflict in the Balkans, 2010-2022 (And Parallels to the Russian War on Ukraine)," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2350>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol42/iss4/4>

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# RECONCILIATION ATTEMPTS AND THE RETURN TO CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS, 2010-2022 (And Parallels to the Russian War on Ukraine)

By Vjekoslav Perica

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I am here to pay respect to the victims and to express words of apology and regret . . . I am here to create the possibility for Croatia and Serbia to turn the page so that our children will not be burdened by the history of the wars of the 1990s . . .

**Boris Tadić, President of Serbia, visiting Croatia in 2010.<sup>1</sup>**

We have gathered in this place of memory and suffering to ensure that the errors from the past will never repeat. . . I am asking forgiveness on behalf of those who bloodstained their hands by committing here or elsewhere in this region, horrible crimes against humanity. . .

**Monsignor Giorgio Lingua, Papal nuncio in Croatia, at the Jasenovac concentration camp memorial site, April 2021.**

By praying today for the victims and for our neighbors, we do not want to use the victims in order to deepen the spiral of conflict, or to wage wars with commemorative policies of remembrance; for if we did that, we would become captives of the self-pitiful discourses and paralyze ourselves; we would thus imprison both the victims and the survivors in a permanent, helpless and hopeless state of mind. The narrative of the victim, if the only possible one, cannot be the mover and the source of inspiration but an eternal torment and a living hell for all of us. . .

**Serbian Patriarch Porphyry, in August 2021 commemorating the end of the 1991-1995 Serb-Croat war.**

## All Victims Matter: A Recapitulation of Reconciliation Efforts in Postwar Balkans

From 2010-2021, nations and faiths of the postwar Western Balkans saw a number of remarkable attempts toward an interfaith and interethnic reconciliation. This author, focusing on elite-level commemorations from 2019-2020, presented the theme in the December 2021 issue of

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<sup>1</sup> “Serbian President Tadić apologizes for Vukovar massacre”, *Deutsche Welle*, 11/04.2010. <https://www.dw.com/en/serbian-president-Tadić-apologizes-for-vukovar-massacre/a-6188935>

OPREE.<sup>2</sup> In short, from January 2019 to August 2021, religious leaders of Catholic Croats and Eastern Orthodox Serbs (also joined by Croatian and Bosnian Muslims, Jews and Evangelical Christians), as well as democratically elected political leaders, took part a series of conciliatory gatherings and commemorations at memorial sites of wartime suffering. My article concludes optimistically:

Overall, the recent progress toward reconciliation of the peoples and faiths in the Balkans is good news. The moderates within ruling nationalists' ranks marginalized the extremists domestically and found support abroad, notably in the European Union, which is interested in fostering greater stability in the troubled southeastern periphery, as well as from the Vatican, both during the pontificate of John Paul II and under Pope Francis. . . The ritual reconciliation and commemorations dedicated to all innocent victims of the conflict, which is now being increasingly perceived as a tragedy rather than triumph, is not without its value and has been working well during the last two years. Therefore, let's give peace a chance. Commemorations that acknowledge and honor all victims and call for forgiveness and reconciliation of faiths and peoples, even though it may be only symbolic, will help normalize and civilize these wounded societies. . .<sup>3</sup>

After the 1991-1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, two papal visits occurred, emphasizing the long history of peaceful interfaith and interethnic life, and launching the “forgive and ask forgiveness” initiative. In 2010, secular forces joined the conciliatory path when liberal-leftists parties replaced right-wing ethnic nationalists in power in Croatia and Serbia. Pope Francis has continued his predecessor's Balkan peace initiative. In 2017, Francis showed good will toward the Serbian Orthodox church by considering its patriarch's objections to the canonization of Croatian Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac (1899-1960), whom the Serbian Church holds accountable for the forcible conversions of Serbs during World War II. Pope Francis froze the process leading to sainthood of this cleric beatified for his resistance to communism, leaving the dispute to a joint Serb-Croat committee of experts. Earlier, Croatian bishops had made a similar move of good will toward the sister-church of Serbia. In 1995, an episcopal letter on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War expresses remorse and compassion and appeals for forgiveness. Croatian bishops specifically write about the suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church at hands of the Croat

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<sup>2</sup> Vjekoslav Perica, "All Victims Matter. Reconciliation of the Balkan Faiths and Peoples: An Assessment of Recent Progress," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 40 : Iss. 10, Article 2., 2020. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/2>. See also Andrea Jung-Grimm, "Opinion: Croatia on path towards reconciliation with Serbian minority," *Deutsche Welle*, 08/07.2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-croatia-on-path-towards-reconciliation-with-serbian-minority/a-54472683>

<sup>3</sup> Perica, "All Victims Matter," pp. 25-26.

ultranationalist “Ustasha” regime in the Second World War. Pope Francis quoted the excerpts in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.

Concurrently, individual church leaders, of their own volition, exchanged apologies and appeared in public together to testify to the desire for reconciliation. The pioneers were Monsignor Mate Uzinić, then the Bishop of Dubrovnik, and Grigorije Durić, then Serb Orthodox Bishop of Herzegovina. In 1996, on behalf of practicing Serb believers from his diocese, Bishop Grigorije expressed regret for the casualties of war, and asked forgiveness for the Serb-Montenegrin army’s bombardment of the historic Croatian coastal city of Dubrovnik in 1991. Bishop Grigorije’s example inspired Milo Đukanović, President of Montenegro, to apologize to Croatia and, in particular, to citizens of Dubrovnik, the medieval city-monument near the Croat-Montenegrin border.

The process gained momentum in 2010, with the involvement of democratically elected political representatives of Serbia and Croatia. Boris Tadić and Ivo Josipović, liberal-leftist politicians who had earlier opposed ethnic nationalism, commemorated together civilian victims at memorial sites of mass suffering. Mr. Tadić apologized for the 1991 massacre of wounded prisoners of war in the city of Vukovar, perpetrated by Serb forces against Croat defenders and civilians. “I am here to pay respect to the victims and to express words of apology and regret . . . I am here to create the possibility for Croatia and Serbia to turn the page so that our children will not be burdened by the history of the 1990s,” President Tadić stated on this occasion.<sup>4</sup> The two presidents also visited the nearby town of Paulin Dvor to honor eighteen Serb civilians killed there by Croat troops.

The reconciliation process thus advanced in Croatia and in Serbia, but not in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereinafter referred to as BH), the neighboring state hit hardest by the 1992-1995 war. The major reason was that Serbia remained unprepared to admit to genocide at Srebrenica despite the Hague Tribunal verdicts. President Tadić wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: “The massacre of thousands of Bosnian Muslims in the town of Srebrenica in July 1995 constituted one of the most tragic chapters of the Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s. In order to show that Serbia mourns for all the victims, I traveled to Srebrenica a year after I was first elected president of Serbia to stand with the survivors and bow to victims on the 10th anniversary of that terrible

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<sup>4</sup> “Serbian President Tadić apologizes for Vukovar massacre”, *Deutsche Welle*, 11/04.2010. <https://www.dw.com/en/serbian-president-Tadić-apologizes-for-vukovar-massacre/a-6188935>

atrocities.”<sup>5</sup> Bosnian Muslims did not accept Tadić’s apology. The *Christian Science Monitor*, among other international observers, cast doubts about Tadić’s and other Serb leaders’ sincerity when they speak about Serbian accountability for war crimes.<sup>6</sup> To this day, neither Serbia nor the Serb republic in BH have adopted the EU resolution that bans genocide-denial concerning Srebrenica. When Montenegro adopted this resolution in 2021, Serb nationalists called it treason.

However, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the land in between Serbia and Croatia, which suffered most casualties and destruction in the war, also showed the desire for reconciliation. A sociological study titled “Preparedness for Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” published in 2010 in Sarajevo, argues that most of the population in BH desires reconciliation among the ethnic groups involved in the 1992-1995 war, even as fifteen postwar years might seem like an insufficient time for healing. Ethnoreligious nationalism, coupled with corruption of the political elites, are, according to this study, the main obstacles to reconciliation. The study concludes: “The most valuable legacies that we can today hand out to our children are truth, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation . . .”<sup>7</sup>

The 2010-2021 drive for reconciliation also involved the forces “from below.” These include peace activists and various associations of civil society emerging after the fall of communism. These efforts work on unification across state boundaries, such as a 2011 regional initiative searching for truth about the wars and their victims. The “Initiative for the Establishment of a Regional Commission for the Establishment of Facts on War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed in the Territory of the Former SFR Yugoslavia from January 1, 1991, to December 31, 2001,” is best known as the RECOM Reconciliation Network (or REKOM; see footnote).<sup>8</sup> It is a Balkan version of “truth and reconciliation” commission, similar to such initiatives in other post-conflict societies worldwide. However, although all post-Yugoslav states initially agreed to cooperate on this project, nationalist regimes and ethnic parties have obstructed the initiative. To make matters worse, ethnic nationalists in all states continue insulting victims by glorifying war criminals as patriots and heroes.

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<sup>5</sup> “An Apology for Srebrenica. For most of our history interethnic and faith-based pluralism was the norm in the Western Balkans.” By Boris Tadić, *The Wall Street Journal*, 04/16. 2010, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303695604575182284149946008>.

<sup>6</sup> “War crimes: Is Serbia's Srebrenica apology genuine?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 03/31. 2010, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0331/War-crimes-Is-Serbia-s-Srebrenica-apology-genuine>.

<sup>7</sup> Srđan Puhalo, Nebojša Petrović, and Neda Perišić, eds. *Spremnost na pomirenje u Bosni i Hercegovini*. [Readiness for reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina] (Sarajevo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> REKOM mreža pomirenja. RECOM Reconciliation Network, <https://www.recom.link/en/category/about-recom/>

Another step forward took place in January 2019, when seventeen Serb and Croat bishops met in Požega, in northern Croatia, and released a public statement with an unprecedented conciliatory rhetoric:

We remember the grave suffering of the Serb and Croatian peoples and other citizens of Croatia during the recent past in wars, conflicts, persecutions, and killings, caused by hatred. We are aware that by accusing each other, manipulating historical truth, interpreting war events for daily political purposes, and continuing with mutual insults and degradations only because of belonging to different faiths and nationalities, we will remain captives of the past and losers in the present. . . We deeply regret and honor every innocent victim of any nationality, religious affiliation or political viewpoint from our recent past . . . Only by seeking mutual forgiveness we can rise above the evil that ashamed, diminished and humiliated us. . . .<sup>9</sup>

A series of joint interfaith gatherings and commemorations that followed echoed the ideas from the seventeen bishops' meeting. These gatherings brought together Catholics, Serb Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. Secular leaders and representatives of civil society associations from all regional states held separate commemorations in the memorial park Jasenovac, under the massive "Flower monument" and a museum dedicated to the victims. Another breakthrough took place in 2020. Croatia's Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, in cooperation with the Serbian National Council (*Srpsko narodno vijeće* SNV) representing the Serb ethnic community in Croatia, sought a dignified commemoration, instead of the previous triumphant victory parade celebrating the end of the 1991-1995 war in Croatia. Both premier Plenković and Croatian president Zoran Milanović, joined by leaders of the Serbian National Council, made statements of regret and compassion for innocent Serb civilian victims, and condemned the perpetrators. In December 2020, joint Serb-Croat commemorations were held at the city of Vukovar, where the war began with its siege and destruction. There, Veran Matić, Serbian human rights activist and President of Serbia's envoy for a Serb-Croat search for wartime missing persons, reenacted Willy Brandt's historic kneeling at Warsaw ghetto.

Early in 2021, Archbishop Giorgio Lingua, Apostolic Nuncio to Croatia, visited Jasenovac. With him were two bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Protestant leaders, and representatives of Jewish and Islamic Communities in Croatia. On this occasion, the nuncio remarkably said: "We have gathered here to make sure that the mistakes and sins committed in

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Perica, *All Victims Matter*, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/2>

history will never repeat . . . I ask forgiveness on behalf of all those who stained their hands with blood of innocent victims here or elsewhere--they committed crimes against humanity."<sup>10</sup> Croatian sociologist of religion Ivan Markešić wrote in a commentary: "The papal nuncio representing Pope Francis thereby condemned Ustasha crimes asked forgiveness on behalf of Croatian Catholics, including clergy and bishops. Will Serbian Orthodox Church finally accept this apology from the highest Catholic authority?"<sup>11</sup> Croatian Jewish authorities thanked the nuncio for his words at Jasenovac, but the Serbian Orthodox Church ignored it, as well as they ignored the Croatian bishops' 1995 letter expressing regret for Serb victims and condemning Ustasha crimes. Apparently, the Serbian Orthodox church is under a decisive influence by Bishop Nikolai Velimirović, canonized in 2003. Velimirović was an anti-ecumenical, specifically anti-Catholic, Serb church leader, who led the 1937 campaign against the concordat between the Vatican and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. After WW2, he accused the entire Catholic Church in Croatia of genocide against Serbs, naming the Vatican as its instigator, and wrote against reconciliation between the Orthodox and Catholics.<sup>12</sup> Neither the Vatican nor Croatian clergy protested or objected his canonization, as had the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding Cardinal Stepinac.

At any rate, from the second half of 2020 to early 2021, the reconciliation initiative reached its peak. Moreover, optimism hit the roof after the election of a new Serbian patriarch. The Patriarch Porphyry (or Porifirije, born in 1961 as Prvoslav Perić, in the northern Serbian Vojvodina province) was a younger, internationally educated and apparently reform-minded cleric. He served five years as Metropolitan Archbishop for Orthodox believers in the Croatian capital Zagreb. There he earned respect from Catholic moderates, ecumenical-minded theologians, and Croat liberal and leftist intellectual circles. Porphyry's election also encouraged the liberal intelligentsia and reform-minded Orthodox believers in Serbia.

The new patriarch introduced a war conciliatory rhetoric into public discourse, a sharp contrast to militant nationalism of his predecessor Patriarch Irinej. Porphyry has said that he thinks of himself as Christian first and an ethnic Serb second, and that he considers Croatia his second

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<sup>10</sup> „Okupili smo se u Jasenovcu da se ne ponove greške iz prošlosti“, *Novosti*, 03/26.2021, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/danas-u-jasenovcu-odrzana-prva-medureligijska-molitva>

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Markešić, “Važnost jasenovačkog molitvenog susreta”, *Autograf.hr*, 07. 04. 2021. <https://www.autograf.hr/vaznost-jasenovackog-molitvenog-susreta/>

<sup>12</sup> Vjekoslav Perica, *Pomirenje i posljednji dani. Balkanske nacije u mitovima i muzejima slave, stida i srama*. [Reconciliation and the last days. Balkan Nations in myths and museums of glory, embarrassment, and shame] (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2021), pp. 91-94.



homeland. Porphyry wrote warm holiday greetings and sent friendly messages to citizens of Zagreb and Croatia. Once, accompanied by Catholic Archbishop of Zagreb, Cardinal Bozanić, Porphyry walked the streets of the Croatian capital city, cheered by Zagreb residents. Porphyry often used references from urban pop culture and rock music of late socialism. Thus, he became popular among the nostalgic generation of former Yugoslavs once united across ethnoreligious divisions. Many liberal opinion makers in Zagreb and Belgrade expressed great expectations for the new leader of the largest church in Western Balkans.<sup>13</sup> A major Balkan rapprochement was also hoped for in Germany. Under the headline “Croatia’s Year of Reconciliation,” *Deutsche Welle* reports in 2021:

Croatia has moved away from right-wing nationalist politics, as evidenced by the convincing election victory of moderately conservative Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and then his gestures of reconciliation in co-operation with the leadership of the Serbian National Council. The relations between Croats and Serbs in Croatia last year were marked by significant gestures of reconciliation. The extent to which this is pure symbolism, and the extent to which it is a permanent and sustainable process will be shown by the new year. . . The atmosphere in the country is better . . .<sup>14</sup>

Yet many people across the region remained skeptical, the foremost of which were Bosnian Muslims, as the new patriarch rarely visited BH or talked about the massive suffering of the 1992-1995 war. Instead, Porphyry would most often talk about World War II, Jasenovac, and the Ustasha genocide. He never mentioned genocide at Srebrenica, and other Serb crimes for which exist relevant verdicts by the Hague Tribunal (ICTY). In general, Porphyry avoided historical controversies. Secular human rights activists therefore remained skeptical of the entire new cleric-led reconciliation. Their practices were described as symbolic, ritual moves that never address the key issues about interethnic conflicts in the recent and earlier wars. A declaration from 2020, “In Defense of History: Historians against Revisionism,” brought together Serb, Croat, Bosnian, and other regional historians, urging a resolute action to halt nationalistic abuses of history and historical revisionism, let alone the glorification of the war criminals sentenced by the international

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<sup>13</sup> Veran Matić, “Novotalasni patrijarh,” [Newlymade patriarch] *Novosti*, 02/19/2021, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/novotalasni-patrijarh/>; “Porfiriyevi kružoci: Malo tko zna da je novi patrijarh SPC-a u Zagrebu redovito okupljao birano društvo” [Porfiriye’s circles: Few know that the new patriarch of the SPC regularly gathered in Zagreb selected society], *Novi list*, 02/21/2021, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/porfiriyevi-kruzoci-malo-tko-zna-da-je-novi-patrijarh-spc-a-u-zagrebu-redovito-okupljao-birano-drustvo/>

<sup>14</sup> “Hrvatska godina pomirenja,” [Croatia’s year of reconciliation] *Deutsche Welle*, 01/03. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/hr/hrvatska-godina-pomirenja/a-56118943>



tribunal and other courts.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, peace activist Vesna Teršelić from Zagreb pointed out in an interview: “Now, like many times before, sporadic conciliatory attempts may be part of an ambivalent and reversible process, leading back to conflict. . .”<sup>16</sup>

### **Vučić’s Serbia Undermines Reconciliation in Croatia**

The new moderate Serbian patriarch has somewhat softened the nationalistic rhetoric in Serbia but did not affect its hardline nationalist president. On the contrary, Aleksandar Vučić would soon use the new patriarch as a tool of Vučić’s pressures on neighboring states. Although Vučić’s predecessor, President Tadić, expressed regret for Serbia’s aggressive war, and Vučić’s envoy Matić genuflected at the Vukovar memorial, the Vučić regime would discontinue these practices, even rejecting the very idea of public apologies. Specifically in terms of Croatia, Vučić did not like the idea of the Serb-Croat rapprochement as manifested in 2020. The close cooperation between the Serbian ethnic minority leaders with Croatian authorities further angered Belgrade. Vučić would pressure Croatian Serbs to frequently come to Belgrade for consultations with Serbia’s government, thereby recognizing Serbia as their matrix state and the regional political headquarters. Consequently, the representatives of Serbs from Croatia, would move away from the Croatian government reconciliation program. Although repeatedly invited by the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, the Croatian Serb leaders abstained from the 2021 commemoration at Knin. Their excuses to the media were awkward and confused. The former Croatian president Ivo Josipović, who, with the Serb president Boris Tadić, pioneered the Serbo-Croat rapprochement in 2010, argued in an interview that the Vučić regime might have pressured Croatian Serbs to quit cooperating with Croatian government regarding the joint commemorations. A German observer argues that “there are also those who think that the representatives of Serbs from Croatia this year should not attend the Knin commemoration, primarily because the Belgrade government does not want to see Croats and Serbs from Croatia working together and becoming closer to each other.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Povjesničari bivše Jugoslavije: Niste samo žrtve niti su dru-gi za sve krivi!” [Historians of Former Yugoslavia: You are not only victims nor are others guilty for everything]. *Večernji list*, 06/17. 2020, <https://www.vecernji.hr/kultura/nakon-one-o-zajednickom-jeziku-povjesnicari-bivse-jugoslavije-donijeli-deklaraciju-o-povijesnom-revizionizmu-1410514>.

<sup>16</sup> “Hrvatska godina pomirenja,” *Deutsche Welle*.

<sup>17</sup> “Proslava Oluje: Je li zapela politika pomirenja i ukljuživosti?” [Celebration of The Storm: Did the politic of reconciliation and inclusivity get stuck?] *Deutsche Welle*, 08/05. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/hr/proslava-oluje-je-li-zapela-politika-pomirenja-i-uklju%C4%8Divosti/a-58763679>

Such assessments soon proved accurate. In August 2021, as Croatia commemorated at Knin the end of the 1991-1995 war, President Vučić staged a “counter-commemoration” in a town near Belgrade populated by Serbs from Croatia who fought in the war and escaped the Croat offensive. The new patriarch Porphyry attended this event. President Vučić and his lieutenants spoke about an alleged continuation of the persecution of Serbs in Croatia from World War II to the 1991-1995 war, as if all Croat government were the same as or only variants of the pro-Nazi Ustasha. Patriarch Porphyry tried to tone down the resentful rhetoric. He spoke about “many good and Serb-loving Croats” he met during his episcopal duty in Croatia. In particular, the following statement, published in Croatia by the liberal Catholic internet portal *Autograf* under the headline, “We do not want to wage wars through commemorative politics of remembrance,” is attributed to Porphyry:

By praying today for the victims, for our neighbors, we do not want to use them in order to deepen the spiral of conflict, or wage wars with commemorative policies of remembrance; much less to become captives of self-pitiful discourses and paralyze ourselves by imprisoning the victims and the survivors in a permanent, helpless, and hopeless state of mind. The narrative of the victim, if the only possible one, cannot be the mover and the source of inspiration. Rather, it is permanent torment and a living hell for all of us. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Apparently, the new Patriarch, at least initially, tried to soften the Vučić regime’s nationalist fervor. Yet, the diehard nationalist Vučić, a wartime aide of the sentenced war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, would ultimately put the new Patriarch in his place to serve the Serbian state, whatever its agenda may be.

Vučić’s plan to undermine the Serb-Croat rapprochement in Croatia had begun much earlier. Vučić’s Serbia had intensified the commemorations of Jasenovac and the Ustasha genocide, adding new museums and memorial sites in Serbia and the Bosnian-Serb republic. Vučić also urged Serbs in Croatia to prioritize the commemorations of the Croatian Serbs’ suffering in World War II and spoke more frequently of the Ustasha genocide. Early in 2021, Vučić’s regime funded and released the feature film called *Dara, a girl from Jasenovac*, graphically depicting Ustasha tortures of Serb prisoners at the Jasenovac concentration camp. Shortly after the release, more than two million people in Serbia saw the film on national TV. “The purpose of this film was

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<sup>18</sup> „Ne želimo voditi ratove komemorativnim politikama sećanja,” [We don’t want to carry on war with commemorative politics of memory] *Autograf.hr*, 08/05.2021, <https://www.autograf.hr/ne-zelimo-voditi-ratove-komemorativnim-politikama-secanja/>

to incite hatred,” the Serb scholar and social critic Aleksandra Đurić Bosnić, said in an interview.<sup>19</sup> The new wave of ethnic hatred in Serbia suited Vučić’s tabloids to intensify anti-Croat reportage. At sporting events, Serb soccer fans shouted hateful anti-Croat, anti-Bosniak, and anti-Albanian slogans. Vučić-controlled media pressured patriarch Porphyry to comment on this film on national TV with President Vučić standing next to him; Porphyry had to say how deeply moved he was by the horrors of Ustasha tortures.<sup>20</sup> Serbia sent the movie to Hollywood as an official candidate for the Best Foreign Film award. The candidacy was Serbia’s counter move to a new Bosnian-made film, *Quo Vadis Aida*, about Serb genocide against Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica. The Bosnian film made the short list, while the Serbian was rejected. Subsequently, at the 34th European Film Awards in Berlin, *Quo Vadis Aida* won the “European Oscar” for best picture, best director, and lead actress. To this day, the Vučić regime has blocked access to *Quo Vadis Aida* from movie theaters of Serbia.

### **The Other Europe: From Communism to Fascism**

After undermining the reconciliation process in Croatia, the Vučić regime moved to destabilize Montenegro and BH through incidents staged by the Serb minority in northern Kosovo, constantly provoking the Albanian government. Vučić also reintroduced what is basically the well-known Great Serbian strategy that caused the Balkan wars of the 1990s, under the new label “Serb World” (*srpski svet*). The phrase is borrowed from Vladimir Putin’s new ideology, inaugurated for the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, known as “Russian world” (“Русский мир”).<sup>21</sup> According to a CNN analysis, “the Russian World is wherever there are Russian speakers . . . wherever there is a Russian church--it does not acknowledge existing political borders . . .”<sup>22</sup>

The “Russian world” ideology has been in the making for at least two decades or longer, to become a national ideology of the new post-communist (and anticommunist) Putin’s Russia. Although still confusing, and attractive to some leftist circles worldwide that support this Russia

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<sup>19</sup> “Aleksandra Đurić Bosnić: ‘Dara iz Jasenovca’ je imala cilj da proizvede mržnju,” [“Dara from Jasenovac” had the goal to produce hatred,] *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 02/27. 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/amp/teme/2021/2/27/bosnic-duric-dara-iz-jasenovca-je-imala-cilj-da-proizvede-mrznju>.

<sup>20</sup> “Patrijarh srpski Porfirije, o filmu Dara iz Jasenovca,” [Serbian patriarch Porphyry about the film Dara from Jasenovac]. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/GeT6oPphvXQ>

<sup>21</sup> “Yes, He Would’: Fiona Hill on Putin and Nukes” , *Politico Magazine*, 02/28. 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/28/world-war-iii-already-there-00012340>

<sup>22</sup> “In Putin’s vision for the world, a medieval narrative resurfaces”, CNN, 03/14. 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/14/europe/patriarch-Kirill-putin-spiritual-battle-intl-cmd/index.html>

as a supposed successor of the earlier Leninist, Stalinist, and Soviet precedents which at least declared themselves as leftist, Putin's Russia is the world champion and principal supporter of rightist authoritarian ideologies and regimes. This blend of the Russian nationalist and imperialist myths, from tsarist to Soviet and post-Soviet times, with the new religious nationalism, has been already categorized as an ultranationalist and conservative ideology of the right, though it incorporates some revised communist-era myths as well. For American historian Timothy Snyder, the case in point is a "Russian fascism," not just because of the revival of the proto-fascist philosopher Ivan Iljin, but that the system sanctioned in Putin's Russia entails many other features of fascism.<sup>23</sup> As such, it has been applied in the new authoritarian anti-western and anti-liberal state, and in the wars in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, the annexation of the Crimea and the current invasion of Ukraine.

Vučić's Serbia imported and rephrased only the label ("the Serb world"), because the ideology and the system were already inaugurated in the mid-1980s, applied throughout Slobodan Milošević's era and the Balkan wars of the 1990s initiated by Milošević. A Serb scholar noted the similarity between "Putin's and Milošević's evil ideas and tragic consequences they caused."<sup>24</sup> Slobodan Milošević was indicted for war crimes by the Hague Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and his allies in BH, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, were sentenced for genocide and crimes against humanity. Their ideology and war aims were developed by a Great Serbian nationalist mass movement in the 1980s, resulting in wars and ethnic cleansing through the 1990s. Milošević himself is described by some analysts as a post-communist fascist.<sup>25</sup> He was not an isolated phenomenon, however. Even before Putin's war in Ukraine that unmasked the new Russian fascism, variants of post-communist fascisms can be observed in Eastern Europe and Russia, including in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a Croatian writer described the ideology of the longest-reigning post-communist "HDZ" party in Croatia as a "two-headed monster" that attempts to blend in a

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Snyder, "God Is a Russian", *The New York Review*, 04/05. 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/04/05/god-is-a-russian/>; and "Ivan Ilyin, Putin's Philosopher of Russian Fascism", *New York Review Daily*, 03/16. 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandra Đurić Bosnić, kulturološkinja: Vučićevo i Putinovo "zlo u deset tačaka," [Putin's and Vučić's "evil in ten points."], *Tacno.net*, 02/28. 2022, <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/aleksandra-duric-bosnic-kulturoloskinja-Vucicevo-i-putinovo-zlo-u-deset-tacka/>.

<sup>25</sup> See R.J.B. Bosworth, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> "Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy", *Freedom House*, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>

populist coexistence “the fascists and the antifascists.”<sup>27</sup> However, only in Russia and Serbia have these post-communist fascisms, consolidated in authoritarian societies, produced major wars of aggression, land grab, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. Many observers drew parallels between ethnic cleansing in present-day Ukraine and in the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Several exhibits are held on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the siege of Sarajevo, showing western reporters’ images of destruction of cities, including new photos and videos of devastated cities of Ukraine. The Belgrade-based Serb writer Tomislav Marković was first in the Balkans, and perhaps in Europe, to write about what he considered Russian genocide in Ukraine, in which the aggressor, as publicly announced in Russian state-controlled media, aims not just at ethnic cleansing but the complete obliteration of Ukrainian distinct, non-Russian, culture and nationality.<sup>28</sup>

Because of the necessary anticommunist component in these post-communist ideologies, new ideologies require the marginalization of WWII communist-led antifascism. Yet, Putin’s Russia kept the Soviet “Great Patriotic War” myth alive. Hence, the Ukrainians are portrayed as “Nazis,” although the Russian invasion and its “denazification” involves Nazi methods and Nazi ways of reasoning. Russian dissidents warn about this contradiction, which can survive only in a North Korea-like state.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Serbia’s new national identity marginalizes the Yugoslav communist leader Tito, but declares as “antifascists” several Serbs who were World War II anticommunist leaders and Nazi collaborators, such as the Chetnik Dragoljub Mihailović, General Milan Nedić, and the native Serb fascist Dimitrije Ljotić, whose organization’s spiritual advisor was the religious nationalist Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Viktor Ivančić, “Dvoglava aždaja,” [Two-headed dragon] *Tacno.net*, 04/16. 2022, <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/dvoglava-azdaja/>

<sup>28</sup> Tomislav Marković, “Putinov plan za genocid nad Ukrajinima,” [Putin’s plan for genocide of Ukrainians] *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 04/23.2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/4/23/putinov-plan-za-genocid-nad-ukrajinima>

<sup>29</sup> “How Russia is turning into North Korea”, *The Telegraph*, 04/01. 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/01/russia-turning-north-korea/>; See also Vladimir Sorokin, “Vladimir Putin sits atop a crumbling pyramid of power”, *The Guardian*, 02/27.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-power>.

<sup>30</sup> Nemanja Drobniak, “Proslava dana pobjede nad fašizmom, ili poraz antifašizma?” [Celebration of victory day over fascism and the defeat of antifascism.] *Novi Plamen*, 05/13. 2021, <https://www.noviplamen.net/glavna/proslava-dana-pobjede-nad-fasizmom-ili-poraz-antifasizma/>; “U Srbiji ništa novo: Fašističke pjesme na proslavi Dana Evrope,” [In Serbia nothing new: Fascist songs at the celebration of Europe Day.] *Sandzak informativni portal*, 05/10.2021, <https://www.sandzak.rs/u-srbiji-nista-novo-fasisticke-pjesme-na-proslavi-dana-evrope/>;

The link between religious nationalism and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans is well-researched and can help in understanding the war in Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Like some leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1990s, the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, has strongly backed Putin's war in Ukraine. Yet, this time, many Orthodox churches and theologians criticize Kirill: "'Russkii mir,' the Russian equivalent of 'blood & soil' ideology at the heart of Putin's war, is explained and rejected by theologians in new statement," *The Religion Dispatches* wrote in March 2022.<sup>32</sup> According to the *Orthodox Times*,

the number of priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia (Gundyaev) has risen above 400, addressing the Council of Heads of Eastern Churches (considering him the supreme authority of world Orthodoxy), suing Kirill as a heretic. They claim that Kirill preaches the doctrine of the "Russian world" (Russian: "Русский мир"), which is the key reason for the war, and he deviates from Orthodox teaching, so it should be condemned as heresy. Kirill is also charged with moral crimes of blessing the war against Ukraine and full support for the aggressive actions of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, Vučić's Serbia still supports Putin, both by not imposing sanctions as required by the EU and possibly helping Russia to break them. Serbian religious scholar Vladimir Veljković writes:

According to Russian Patriarch Kirill, Orthodox civilization consists of all Orthodox believers in the world, and then all nations that have formed their national identity under the influence of Orthodoxy . . . the Russian world is not only ecclesiastical, it is not only cultural, but I would say, even geopolitical," Kirill once said. . . (Similarly in Serbia and the Srpska Republic), "it is just not clear when the military action will start: soon or only after the triumph of the Russian world in Ukraine and after the capitulation of the entire West? By the way, among Serbian bishops, a lot of Kosovo's hope was placed in Vladimir Putin. He was solemnly welcomed in Belgrade, where he installed a mosaic cube in the Church of St. Sava in January 2019 in the presence of the then Patriarch Irinej, Vučić, and the party members as well as masses of Serb believers. . .<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, First Edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Nebojša Popov, Drinka Gojković, eds., *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*. (Budapest: CEU Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> 'Russkii Mir,' The Russian Equivalent Of 'Blood & Soil' Ideology At The Heart Of Putin's War, Is Explained And Rejected By Theologians In New Statement", *Religion Dispatches*, 03/17/2022, <https://religiondispatches.org/russkii-mir-the-russian-equivalent-of-blood-soil-ideology-lies-at-the-heart-of-putins-war-orthodox-theologians-explain-and-oppose-it/>

<sup>33</sup> "400 svećenika Ukrajinske pravoslavne crkve protiv Patrijarha Kirila," [400 priests of Ukrainian Orthodox Church against Patriarch Kirill.] *Globus*, 04/22.2022, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/svijet/400-svecenika-ukrajinske-pravoslavne-crkve-protiv-patrijarha-kirilla-15186852>

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Veljković, "Kainov pohod," [Cain's quest.] *Pescanik*, 02/28.2022, <https://pescanik.net/kainov-pohod/>



Sonja Biserko, president of Serbia's Helsinki committee for human rights, argues that the "Serb world" ideology carries the risk of causing new wars in the Balkans: "Serbia's geopolitical interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the preservation of the Serb republic (RS) and its annexation to Serbia. RS is considered the only Serbian victory of the 1990s and is therefore treated as Serbia's foreign policy priority..."<sup>35</sup> In the similar vein, the Serb scholar and activist Aleksandra Bosnić Đurić writes:

In these ideological templates, Russia is an eternal friend and source of goodness, and the West an eternal enemy from which all evil comes. The Russian and the Serbian worlds are, obviously, ideologically two compatible concepts based on almost identical arguments and consciously produced conspiracy theories. The lack of empathy among the indoctrinated is frightening, as we watch the ruthlessly destroyed Ukrainian cities every day. And that lack of empathy, that blindness and that indifference, unfortunately, is quite similar to the one we remember from the 1990s. In the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik is an active and agile promoter of the program of the Serbian world and its indoctrination. . . .<sup>36</sup>

For non-Serbs in the western Balkans, who were greatly affected by the wars of the 1990s, the Russian invasion of Ukraine bred fear of another, much stronger Serbian aggression, this time backed by Russia. Western observers have also noted a growing Russian influence in the western Balkans, and Putin's calculations with exporting the Ukraine war to another European unstable zone.<sup>37</sup> "The idea of creating a "Greater Serbia" is on the table again," explains Serb anti-nationalist fighter and writer Tomislav Marković in a 2021 article, continuing: "only now it is called a little differently, because the term in question is notorious and inextricably linked to horrific crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide. . . ."<sup>38</sup> In the similar vein, Serb historian Nikola Samardžić explains: "Vučić managed to bind all institutions, services, governmental and non-

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<sup>35</sup> "Sonja Biserko: "Srpski svet i NGO-sektor," [Serbian World and the NGO-sector.] *Prometej.ba*, 02/13. 2022, <http://www.prometej.ba/clanak/drustvo-i-znanost/sonja-biserko-srpski-svet-i-ngo-sektor-5168>

<sup>36</sup> "Aleksandra Bosnić Đurić za Prometej.ba: "Ne verujem previše euforijama, verujem upornim i promišljenim akcijama," [I don't believe much in euphoria, I believe in consistent and thoughtful actions.] *Prometej.ba*, 03/31. 2022, <http://www.prometej.ba/clanak/intervju/aleksandra-bosnic-djuric-za-prometej-ba-ne-verujem-previs-euforijama-verujem-upornim-i-promisljenim-akcijama-5225>.

<sup>37</sup> See Ivana Stradner, "Russia Is Playing With Fire in the Balkans: How Putin's Power Play Threatens Europe," *Foreign affairs*, 12/27. 2021, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-12-27/russia-playing-fire-balkans?utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=www-foreignaffairs-com.cdn.ampproject.org&utm\\_campaign=amp\\_kickers](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-12-27/russia-playing-fire-balkans?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=www-foreignaffairs-com.cdn.ampproject.org&utm_campaign=amp_kickers).

<sup>38</sup> Tomislav Marković, "Srpski svet", kulturna ideja koja je izvršila kulturocid, ["Serbian World," a cultural idea which carried out culturecid.] *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 08/15. 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2021/8/15/srpski-svet-kulturna-ideja-koja-je-izvrsila-kulturocid>



governmental bodies, the Church, the largest part of the NGO sector to the idea and realization of the “Serbian world” (*srpski svet*), which Russia is a stronghold.”<sup>39</sup>

In his speeches, Aleksandar Vučić often uses the paradigmatic fascist rhetoric of national humiliation. The neighboring states and the great powers that backed them, Vučić complains, “want to humiliate Serbia.”<sup>40</sup> He specifically had in mind the loss of Kosovo, aided by the USA, and the Croat military triumph of 1995 known as “Operation Storm,” which, again with American support, defeated a Croatian Serb secessionist movement backed by Serbia. Vučić incites in Serbs a lust for revenge, anticipating, and probably hoping for, new wars and territorial re-conquest in Kosovo, Croatia, and BH, while (at least a half of) Montenegro has been already recaptured.

## 1. Serbian Church Reclaims Montenegro for Serbia

Although Serbia and Montenegro separated peacefully in 2006, Serbian nationalism never recognized the Montenegrin people’s plebiscite, nor viewed Montenegro as a sovereign nation and a nationality distinct from Serbian. The Serbian Orthodox Church preserved the crucial link, and the Church of Montenegro has been administered by the Patriarch of Serbia since 1920. Since 2006, under a pro-western President Milo Đukanović, Montenegro has advanced political independence, crowned by NATO membership and EU candidacy. The Vučić regime, supported by Russia, moved to bring Montenegro back. In 2016, Putin’s Russia, Belgrade, and the pro-Serb Montenegrin parties even staged a coup attempt against President Đukanović.<sup>41</sup> In the first half of 2020, a dispute over church property and new legislation concerning church-state relations led to a massive unrest in Montenegro and the collapse of its government. The Serbian Orthodox initiated the protests and carried them out in form of religious processions (*litije*) through the streets of

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<sup>39</sup> Intervju: Nikola Samardžić, istoričar i politički aktivista: “Beograd je radikalski brlog, urbanistička i duhovna razvalina,” [Belgrade is a radicals’ den, urbanist and spiritual ruin.] *Tacno.net*, 01/21. 2022, <https://www.tacno.net/interview/beograd-je-radikalski-brlog-urbanistička-i-duhovna-razvalina/>

<sup>40</sup> Vučić se žali da Hrvatska želi poniziti Srbiju, stigao mu odgovor da je histeričan, [Vučić complains that Croatia wants to humiliate Serbia, received the reply that he is hysterical.] *Hina*, 05/07. 2021, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/svijet/Vučić-se-zali-da-hrvatska-zeli-poniziti-srbiju-stigao-mu-odgovor-da-je-histerican/>; Vučić: Hteli su da nas ponize, Srbija je čvrsta u odbrani svojih interesa, [Vučić: They wanted to humiliate us: Serbia is strong n defense of its intereststs.] *Kosovo onlajn/RTV Pink/Tanjug*, 10/02.2021, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/Vučić-hteli-su-da-nas-ponize-srbija-je-cvrsta-u-odbrani-svojih-interesa-2-10-2021>.

<sup>41</sup> “Alleged Russian spies sentenced to jail over Montenegro 'coup plot'. Two opposition politicians also convicted over alleged coup attempt in 2016,” *The Guardian*, 05/9. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/09/montenegro-convicts-pro-russia-politicians-of-coup-plot>

Montenegro's towns and cities.<sup>42</sup> Under pressure from the *litije*, Belgrade managed to replace the collapsed government with a new pro-Serb Prime minister picked by the Church and a cabinet staffed by practicing church members loyal to the Serb church. This kind of a "dual administration" lasted until end of 2021, when Đukanović forced new elections. A civil war scenario in the divided nation of 600,000 people has since been frequently mentioned in public discourse.

In September 2021, the Serbian Orthodox Church caused unrest again by appointing as the new bishop-metropolitan of Montenegro the cleric Joanikije, known for his Great Serb assimilationist views. To further exacerbate the crisis, the Serb church leaders, including the new patriarch Porphyry, announced that the new Serb-Montenegrin bishop's installment would, for the first time since 1920, take place at Cetinje, the historic church and state capital of the longtime self-governing Montenegro. When protesters barricaded access roads to Cetinje, the Vučić regime transported the new bishop Joanikije and patriarch Porphyry from Belgrade to Cetinje by a military helicopter. Accompanied by heavily armed members of Vučić's secret service, the unpopular bishop and the patriarch officiated Joanikije's installment. Porphyry's reputation as a man of interethnic reconciliation through tolerant dialogue has since degraded.

## **2. Playing with Fire in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

Russian leader Vladimir Putin and his Balkan allies, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, the leaders of Serbia and Bosnian-Serb Republic, have worked for years to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina, which they view as a western project and potential NATO member. American analyst Ivana Stradner wrote that Russia was playing with fire in the Balkans, threatening another major regional and possibly European war: "This year marks the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, Europe's bloodiest conflict since World War II," Stradner writes, arguing that,

although the Balkan states moved toward democratic governance and integration with NATO and the European Union in the immediate aftermath of the wars, consistent neglect on the part of the West has contributed to a dramatic backsliding in recent years. Now Russian President

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<sup>42</sup> "Thousands in Montenegro march against religion law," EUROPE NEWS, 02/29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-protest-religion/thousands-in-montenegro-march-against-religion-law-idUSKBN20N0LL>

Vladimir Putin is seizing his opportunity and using the former Yugoslav states as the next battlefield to weaken NATO and the European Union. . .<sup>43</sup>

Putin, recognizing on the eve of invasion the independence of the breakaway pro-Russian provinces in eastern Ukraine, “used the language from the 1990s in Yugoslavia, reminiscent of the situation at the outbreak of the 1991 war in Croatia and BH in 1992,” reported *Al Jazeera Balkans*.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, Russia-backed Milorad Dodik, the nationalist leader of the Serb Republic in BH, has frequently called for the secession and annexation of this entity by Serbia. The Serb Republic is a serious blunder of western diplomacy, even as it is still celebrated in liberal Washington as a project that helped end a major war.<sup>45</sup> In reality, Washington conceded to Serb nationalism by legitimizing the product of ethnic cleansing created by Serb leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, who were sentenced by the UN’s International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Former Croatian president Stjepan Mesić (2000-2010), who opposed the nationalist Franjo Tudjman’s Bosnia policy aimed at partitioning of the country in collaboration with Serbia, released in 2021 “Appeal for the Rescue of a United BH.” In this document, Mesić points out:

The behavior of the Serb Republic ( *Republika Srpska*) and its leader, Milorad Dodik, should be seen as the principal trigger of the crisis . . . Dodik (also) has the support of the largest Croatian ethnic nationalist party in BiH, the Croatian Democratic Union of BH. . . The two share “openly separatist aspirations . . . challenging the Bosnia and Herzegovina's existence . . . Milorad Dodik also receives support from the Russian Federation. . . . In addition, the West is responsible for refusing to amend the Dayton Peace Accords that are a big part of the problem. . . . The Dayton regime must be abolished to make possible radical change, which requires a long-term engagement of the European Union and the United Nations. . .<sup>46</sup>

In anticipation of Putin’s Ukraine military intervention, the leading Bosnian Serb nationalist, Milorad Dodik, usually accompanied by Russian ambassador to BH and encouraged by the Vučić regime in Belgrade, often called for secession. Despite The Hague tribunal verdict and the EU High Representative’s threat to prosecute and imprison war crimes and genocide

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<sup>43</sup> “Russia Is Playing with Fire in the Balkans: How Putin’s Power Play Threatens Europe”, By Ivana Stradner, *Foreign affairs*, 12/27. 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-12-27/russia-playing-fire-balkans>.

<sup>44</sup> “Putin koristi jezik iz 90-ih godina na području Jugoslavije,” [Putin uses language of the 90s from the area of Yugoslavia.] *Al Jazeera*, 02/21. 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/videos/2022/2/21/putin-koristi-jezik-koristen-90-tih-godina-na-podrucju-jugoslavije>.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, (New York: Knopf, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> The Office of Stjepan Mesić, President of the Republic of Croatia 2000-2010, February 17, 2022. Media release through Mirjana Pavkovic, the Office’s Secretary. In my free translation V.P.

deniers, Dodik vehemently denies the genocide that Serb forces perpetrated in 1995 against Muslims prisoners of war at Srebrenica. For Dodik's "state," the commanding officer of the mass murderers at Srebrenica, General Ratko Mladić, sentenced in The Hague for war crimes and genocide, is viewed as a hero and the nation's co-founder. Ditto in Serbia. In Belgrade, street clashes erupted in November 2021 between peace and human rights activists and the nationalists who painted a mural glorifying General Mladić.<sup>47</sup>

As observed by German media analysts, the Putin-Vučić-Dodik scenario for Bosnia may lead to another bloody Balkan war and ethnic cleansing.<sup>48</sup> There is no doubt that Bosnian Muslims would fight for their country to keep it united, as a prominent Bosniak writer stated for Radio Free Europe.<sup>49</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church backs the separatist Milorad Dodik and consecrates the ethnically cleansed war territory as a perennial Serbian land. The new Serb patriarch Porphyry, while visiting Sarajevo, offered only pleasant words about what once was a multiethnic city, but said nothing about the Serb siege and bombardment of Sarajevo and its mostly Muslim victims.<sup>50</sup> Belgrade scholar Miloš Janković criticizes Porphyry: "when talking about Jasenovac, the patriarch emphasizes that he is spiritually renewed and empowered there every time. . . However, as soon as Srebrenica is mentioned, things change radically. . . he condemned the Montenegrin signatories of the EU Srebrenica Resolution against genocide-denial . . ."<sup>51</sup>

Western observers of Balkan affairs view today's Serbia as an un-European, pro-Russian and authoritarian country. "Aleksandar Vucic's authoritarian government is aiding Russian and Chinese propaganda and allowing genocide denialists to celebrate war criminals," writes Florian Bieber, the coordinator for the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group at the University of Graz, Austria.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Swedish diplomat Carl Bildt, one of key western mediators during the Balkan

<sup>47</sup> "In Belgrade, a mural of war criminal Ratko Mladić has a city divided", *Euronews*, 11/26. 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/11/26/in-belgrade-a-mural-of-war-criminal-ratko-mladic-has-a-city-divided>

<sup>48</sup> Die Welt: "Je li nakon Ukrajine na redu BiH?" [Is after Ukraine B&H's turn?]. *Deutsche Welle*, 02/24. 2022, <https://www.dw.com/hr/die-welt-je-li-nakon-ukrajine-na-redu-bih/a-60896817>

<sup>49</sup> Omer Karabeg, Most: "Da li bi otcjepljenje Republike Srpske izazvalo rat u BiH?" [Would exit of Republika Srpska cause a war in B&H?] *Radio Free Europe*, 02/6. 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-bih-otcjepljenje-republike-srpske/31687902.html>

<sup>50</sup> "Porfirije: Historija Sarajeva nas uči da smo potrebni jedni drugima," [Porphyry: History of Sarajevo teaches us that we need each other] *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 10/16. 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/10/16/patrijarh-Porphyry-u-sarajevu>

<sup>51</sup> Miloš Janković, "Kako je Porfirije postao drvo," [How Porphyry became wood.] *Pescanik*, 12/31. 2021, <https://pescanik.net/kako-je-porfirije-postao-drvo/print/>

<sup>52</sup> Florian Bieber, "Why Serbia's President Is a Threat to Europe," *Foreign Policy*, 01/22. 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/05/serbia-vucic-mladic-mural-lithium-china-russia-threat-europe/>

wars, stated that Serbia's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine “disqualified Serbia from the process of joining the European Union.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, regarding the pro-Russian course, like Montenegro, Serbia is divided, and even Vučić’s government maneuvers between the EU and Russia. Vučić, urged in an open letter by a group of influential Serb nationalist intellectuals, had publicly opposed the western sanctions against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, Serbia voted for the UN General Assembly’s resolution condemning the Russian invasion. Subsequently, Serbia also voted for the expulsion of Russia from UN’s Human Rights Council. In interfaith relations, Patriarch Porphyry did not back the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, who openly sided with Putin’s war. Instead, Porphyry cooperated with Onofrio, the metropolitan of Kiev, who calls this war a fratricidal war and Ukraine his homeland, while appealing for an immediate cease-fire and peace talks. In his 2022 Easter epistle, Patriarch Porphyry pointed out that every war is a defeat of every human being, so he prays that peace in Ukraine is unconditionally established as soon as possible, and that all refugees are returned to their homes.<sup>54</sup>

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, and the war that followed, evoke the “clash of civilizations” debates during the Bosnian war, 1992-1995. The cultural realignments among foreign powers, and the flow of the foreign volunteers in the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, inspired Samuel P. Huntington for his “clash of civilizations” theory. As Huntington noticed, both Ukraine and Bosnia-Herzegovina share the major civilizational-religious divide along what this American analyst has called “fault lines,” due to the new cultural, rather than ideological, groupings dividing the new post-cold war rival blocks.<sup>55</sup> In his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* journal article, Huntington illustrated the map with the boundary that cuts across Ukraine, dividing it between the western and the eastern pro-Russian sphere, and, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, separated from Serbia by the fateful Drina river.

According to Serb scholar Vladimir Veljković, radical Serbian nationalists view the war in Ukraine as Serbia’s opportunity to restart the wars in the Balkans and recover their losses, although “the Vučić regime continued to maneuver trying to remain Russia’s trusted ally while not

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<sup>53</sup> “Vučić istupio oko Rusije pa nasrnuo na Hrvatsku i zemlje iz regije: 'Hibridni rat se vodi jer se ne raduju uspjesima Srbije,’” [Vučić stepped out in regard to Russia and attacked Croatia and countries in the region: “Hybrid war” is waged as they don’t rejoice to Serbia’s successes.] *Telegram.hr*, 02/27. 2022, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/Vucic-istupio-oko-rusije-pa-nasrnuo-na-hrvatsku-i-zemlje-iz-regije-hibridni-rat-se-vodi-jer-se-ne-raduju-uspjesima-srbije/>

<sup>54</sup> “Patrijarh Porfirije u Uskršnjoj molitvi za mir u Ukrajini,” [Patriarch Porphyry in Easter prayer for peace in Ukraine.] *RFE*, 04/22. 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/porfirije-uskrs-srbija-ukrajina/31816089.html>

<sup>55</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 22-49.

completely alienating the European Union and ruin Serbia's candidacy for membership. . . at least until it is clear who wins in Ukraine. And then, in case of a favorable outcome, armed with the will for expansion, lies, and faith in our own mission. . . maybe we can try something. . ."<sup>56</sup> By contrast, Serbia's main regional rival, Catholic Croatia, sided strongly with Ukraine. Many Croats perceived Croatia as the Ukraine of the Balkans and a possible target for joint Serbia-Russian aggression. "The situation in Ukraine," stated Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković on national TV, "reminds a lot of the situation in Croatia in 1991."<sup>57</sup> Croatia has received, mostly through Catholic charitable organizations, around 15,000 Ukrainian refugees thus far. Catholics in churches and around them hold vigils for the defenders of Ukrainian cities besieged by the Russian invading army. One of first manifestations of the Croat support for Ukraine took place on February 28, when Archbishop of Split officiated mass for peace in Ukraine, with the church choir performing the Ukrainian hymn "Ukraine still lives" (*Šće ne vmerla Ukrajina*).<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the influential Bosnian Franciscan theologian, Ivan Šarčević, said in an interview: "every war is a defeat for both faith and humanity, but now we must stand with the Ukrainian people . . ."<sup>59</sup> The official Catholic Church statement about the war came from the Croatian Bishops Conferences' Commission *Iustitia et pax*. Among other things, the statement points out that, "as the Commission of the Croatian Bishops' Conference that promotes justice and peace, we therefore call on all religious communities in the Republic of Croatia, together with the Catholic Church, to condemn the destruction and killings of war and to open their doors to refugees from Ukraine."<sup>60</sup>

## EPILOGUE

Forgiveness costs. Whatever the theory of atonement, this is at the heart of it that forgiveness costs. . . It is difficult to face up to our complicity because the confession of sins does not come easy. It is also difficult because we do

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<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Veljković "Vreme velikih očekivanja," [The time of great expectations.] 03/12. 2022, *Peščanik*, <https://pescanik.net/vreme-velikih-ocekivanja/print/>

<sup>57</sup> Plenković: 'Situacija u Ukrajini podsjeća na Hrvatsku 1991.', [Situation in Ukraine resembles Croatia in 1991.] 24 sata, 02/02. 2022, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/plenkovic-situacija-u-ukrajini-podsjeća-na-hrvatsku-1991-818004>

<sup>58</sup> "Još je živa Ukrajina, odjekivalo je na misi u splitskoj katedrali," *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 02/28.2022, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/split/jos-je-ziva-ukrajina-odjekivalo-je-na-misi-u-splitskoj-katedrali-poslusajte-izvedbu-maestra-don-ivana-urlica-nadbiskup-pozvao-vjernike-da-na-cistu-srijedu-poste-i-mole-za-mir-1171608>

<sup>59</sup> Fra Ivan Šarčević: Svaki je rat poraz ljudskosti i vjere, ali sada treba stati uz ukrajinski narod," *Tacno.net*, 03/07.2022, <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/fra-ivan-sarcevic-svaki-je-rat-poraz-ljudskosti-i-vjere-ali-sada-treba-stati-uz-ukrajinski-narod/>

<sup>60</sup> "Predstavljena Izjava Komisije HBK „Iustitia et pax“ o ratu u Ukrajini", IKA, 04/21.2022, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/komisija-hbk-iustitia-et-pax-objavila-izjavu-o-ratu-u-ukrajini/>



not want to compound our complicity by claiming sins that are not ours . . . Reconciliation must do justice to what went wrong. It will not merely overlook the wrong. We could not bear to live in a world where wrong is taken lightly, where right and wrong finally make no difference. In such a world, we—what we do and what we are—would make no difference. Spare me a gospel of easy love that makes of my life a thing without consequence.

**Richard John Neuhaus "Father, Forgive Them", 2000.**<sup>61</sup>

Overcoming controversies from the past is not a process that should lead to reconciliation with crimes through forgiveness, but a process of learning how to live with the memory that crimes are part of our history and our group identity and that nothing can reconcile us with those acts. Facing such history realistically and objectively is a step towards developing a critical self-knowledge. By contrast, Churches, by seeking reconciliation and forgiveness for past crimes pursue a greater power in society. They claim and assert the monopoly on morality in a society through adjudication and mediation thereby to strengthen their roles as supreme moral judges.

**Todor Kuljić, *Cultures of Memory: Theoretical Explications of Uses of the Past*, Belgrade, 2006.**<sup>62</sup>

The Serbs will never again apologize to anyone. . .

**Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia, 2021.**<sup>63</sup>

In April 2022, the nationalist Aleksandar Vučić was re-elected president of Serbia. In his victory speech, he delivered a message to the main rival Croatia: “Croats, we want better relations, but in order to attain it, you don’t have to apologize to the Serbs and do not ask from us to apologize to you.”<sup>64</sup> In doing so, the president of Serbia, who had not only undermined the 2010-2021 Serb-Croat reconciliation drive, has also inaugurated the complete reversal of benevolent strategies like the commemorations for all victims, managing the inconvenient historical truths, mutual interstate and interfaith apologies, and seeking and offering forgiveness among former enemies. The erstwhile rapprochement-seeking peoples are again bitter adversaries. The war in Ukraine drove Serbia and Croatia further apart. Serbia, equated only with Byelorussia, is the most loyal ally to Russia in Eastern Europe, as opposed to a strongly pro-western Croatia, compared to, say, Poland.

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<sup>61</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, "Father, Forgive Them", *First Things*, March 2000, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/03/father-forgive-them>

<sup>62</sup> Todor Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja—teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti*, [Culture of memory—theoretical explanations of the use of the past.] (Beograd, Cigoja, 2006), according to "Kritička kultura sećanja", Pešćanik, 30. 06. 2006, <https://pecanik.net/kriticka-kul-tura-secanja/>. In my free translation, VP.

<sup>63</sup> Vučić: Nikada i nikome više se nećemo izvinjavati, Raport.ba, 15.09.2021, <https://raport.ba/Vučić-nikada-i-nikome-vise-se-necemo-izvinjavati/>

<sup>64</sup> “Vučić se u govoru dotaknuo i Hrvatske: 'Želimo bolje odnose. Mi od vas ne tražimo da nam se ispričavate, nemojte ni vi od nas',“ *Vecernji list*, 3/04/2022, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/vucic-nakon-pobjede-na-izborima-nitko-u-srbiji-to-nije-nikada-uspio-ja-sam-jedini-1576081>.



Since the war's beginning, three massive pro-Russia rallies were held in Belgrade alone. In addition, three right-wing pro-Russia parties were for the first time elected to Serbia's parliament. According to a poll at the time of Vučić's re-election, and despite his reassertion of Serbia's ambition to join the EU, only 46% of Serbs eligible to vote would approve EU membership in a referendum, while 65% support Putin's Russia and a stronger Serb-Russia alliance; 63% support China and only 8% of Serbs view the USA in a positive light.<sup>65</sup>

The effects of the new Serbia-Croatia "cold war," coupled with the destructive policies of Vučić's Serbia in BH and Montenegro, could be immediately observed. For example, the improving status of the Serb minority in Croatia has suddenly deteriorated. In contrast to the encouraging decrease of anti-Serb rhetoric, graffiti, and incidents after the reconciliation efforts in the first half of 2021,<sup>66</sup> the Serbian National Council in 2022 reported an upsurge of anti-Serb hate speech in public, and attacks on Serbs, Serb representatives and institutions.<sup>67</sup> Concurrently, interethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the clashes between Serb-Russian and pro-western Montenegrins, are exacerbated.<sup>68</sup> Worsening the new regional crisis even further, Serbia has escalated the ongoing Serbia-Croatia arms race. Reportedly, the Vučić regime imports new military technologies from China, Turkey, and France.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, in such a situation, it is hard to count on the churches as engines of reconciliation as they were during the 2010-2021 reconciliation drive. In a sense, as East and West are at war in Ukraine, so are Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Despite Pope Francis' tactful statements regarding the role of the Orthodox Church in Putin's War, Francis' words have been strong and clear enough. The pope has repeatedly called for peace in Ukraine, urged solidarity with the refugees, and condemned the aggressor's brutality. In his 2022 Easter message, Pope

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<sup>65</sup> "U Srbiji najmanja potpora za članstvo u EU u regiji," [In Serbia the least support for EU in the region.] Novosti, 04/09/2022, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-srbiji-najmanja-potpورا-za-clanstvo-u-eu-u-regiji>

<sup>66</sup> According to a 2021 public opinion survey cited in Perica, *Pomirenje i posljedni dani*, pp. 24-34.

<sup>67</sup> "Udvostručen broj slučajeva napada na Srbe," [Doubling of attacks against Serbs.] Novosti, 04/07/2022, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/udvostrucen-broj-slucaja-napada-na-srbe>

<sup>68</sup> "Britain Sanctions Bosnian Serb Politicians For Pushing 'De Facto Secession' Of Republika Srpska," RFE/RL, 04/11/2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-dodik-cvijanovic-uk-sanctions/31797542.html>; "Montenegro's Pro-Serbian Government Collapses In No-Confidence Vote," RFE/RL, 02/04/2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-government-no-confidence/31687174.html>.

<sup>69</sup> "Serbia receives secret shipment of Chinese missiles, and negotiates acquisition of French fighter jets; Belgrade also seeks Turkish Bayraktar drones," Atalayar, 04/11/2022, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/serbia-receives-secret-shipment-chinese-missiles-and-negotiates-acquisition-french-fighter>;

Francis did not mention Russia by name, yet he clearly spoke about Ukraine as a victim and of Ukrainians as a peaceful people “dragged into a cruel and senseless war.”<sup>70</sup>

Practically, relations between Eastern and Western Christian churches may soon be the worst they have been since the Second Vatican Council. Likewise, relations between the Orthodoxy and Croatian Catholicism have deteriorated to the wartime lows of the 1990s. Croatian bishops’ 2022 Easter epistles and homilies explicitly condemn the Russian aggression on Ukraine and urge the faithful to help the refugees. The Croatian Catholic right, which opposed Pope Francis’ ecumenical course, has been encouraged. Likewise, the anti-western zealots and ecumenical skeptics in the Serbian Orthodox Church attack Patriarch Porphyry’s conciliatory rhetoric toward Catholics and Muslims. Theologian Ivica Šola, the mouthpiece of radical Croatian nationalist Catholicism, perceives the war in Ukraine as a war of religions and clash of civilizations. He employs the term “Christian Orthodox Jihad” against the West incited by “Tsar Putin” and Patriarch of Moscow Kirill.<sup>71</sup> Šola criticizes Pope Francis’ concession to the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the 2017 freeze of the canonization cause for Cardinal Stepinac, although this papal decision made the breakthrough in the reconciliation process possible. “Now, it is clear that this papal decision was a catastrophe,” Šola argues, concluding that Orthodox churches, such as Serbian and Russian, are inherently nationalistic state religions and proven supporters of aggressive wars. He continues, “Such false Christians do not merit that sainthood of the anticommunist martyr Cardinal Stepinac is sacrificed and traded for an ecumenical rapprochement.”<sup>72</sup>

In short, Serbia and Croatia, the two largest states in Western Balkans, which, until recently have enabled the regional reconciliation, are now returning to the hostility of the 1991-1995 war. Croatia views itself as the Ukraine of the Balkans and Serbia as the smaller yet equally dangerous and aggressive Russia of the Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, as well as

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<sup>70</sup> “Pope calls for peace in Ukraine on ‘Easter of war,’ warns of nuclear threat,” The Washington Post, 04/17/2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/17/pope-francis-easter-message-ukraine/>

<sup>71</sup> Ivica Šola: Invaziju treba nazvati pravim imenom - ruski pravoslavni džihad. Car Putin je odlučio zgaziti Ukrajinu”, 03/01. 2022, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/svijet/ivica-sola-invaziju-treba-nazvati-pravim-imenom-ruski-pravoslavni-dzihad-car-putin-je-odlucio-zgaziti-ukrajinu-1171680>

<sup>72</sup> “Ivica Šola: Sada se vidi koliko je stopiranje Stepinca bila katastrofalna odluka,” *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 04/03. 2022, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/svijet/ivica-sola-sada-se-vidi-koliko-je-stopiranje-stepinca-bila-katastrofalna-odluka-1181123>

Kosovo, are often mentioned as the flashpoints for the extension of the war in Ukraine.<sup>73</sup> The best hope for a regional peace is that parallels with Ukraine do not strictly apply. Croatia is not the same as Ukraine, but an EU and NATO member state. Serbia, again, is not the same as Putin's Russia, or quite like Putin's vassal state of Byelorussia. Montenegro and Albania are also NATO member states, while the largest NATO base in southeastern Europe is in Kosovo. Hopefully, the new mandate for President Vučić, and his recent distance from an openly pro-Russian course, will also strengthen his pro-EU path, and the EU will recognize the opportunity for winning Serbia over. If there are any hopeful developments, it may be that Serbia is vacillating between loyalties to Russia and the EU. Since its electoral victory, the Vučić regime is obviously trying to become less dependent on Russia, balancing itself in between the EU and China.

In conclusion, an overview of the Balkan reconciliation endeavor, 2010-2021, indicates a mix of encouraging achievements as well relapses of crisis and conflict. Among the participants, there is also, on both sides, a mix of idealists and enthusiasts and moderates and pragmatic "realists." A 2021 scholarly analysis of the Serb-Croat exchanges of apologies during the period covered in this article summarizes the achievements and obstacles, concluding as follows:

The previous year (2020) led, unexpectedly for many, to the first one's small commemorative gestures on both sides after a long time period. Croatian Premier Plenković's and President Milanović's expressions of regret for the Serb victims in the military operation "Storm," and a symbolic act of kneeling in front of the monument to the victims of Ovčara in Vukovar by Vučić's envoy Matić, send the message that things are possible in this aspect to start from a standstill. However, so long as the two side's national narratives remain embedded in patriotic myths resulting on one-sided views of the conflicts of the 1990s, it cannot be expected that apologies and other symbolic gestures of transitional justice resonate and have greater significance . . .<sup>74</sup>

There remain in Western Balkans enthusiastic believers in a lasting peace and reconciliation. They hope that reconciliation is possible, and that even purely symbolic gestures matter. Serbian Patriarch Porphyry still personally administers the Zagreb diocese to emphasize the importance of Serb-Croat relations. He sent his vicar, Bishop Justin, to administer 2022 Orthodox Easter ceremonies in Zagreb. On this occasion, Bishop Justin expressed the familiar

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<sup>73</sup> "War in Ukraine, the Balkans hold their breath", *Osservatorio balcani e caucaso – Transeuropa*, 03/01. 2022, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/War-in-Ukraine-the-Balkans-hold-their-breath-216258>; See also Stradner, "Russia is playing with Fire in the Balkans."

<sup>74</sup> Milan Krstić, "Serbian and Croatian apologies: causes and effects of apologising and reasons for their limited influence" (*Međusobna izvinjenja Srbije i Hrvatske: uzroci i efekti izvinjenja i razlozi njihovog ograničenog uticaja*), *Tragovi*, 4, no. 2, 2022, p.169.

Porphyry-styled cordial messages to both residents of the host city and to Orthodox believers. He added special appeals for peace in Ukraine and paid a visit to Ukrainian refugees accommodated by the Catholic church near Zagreb. Porphyry also enjoys the support of the Catholic *Autograph.hr* and *Ekumena.org* internet portals and some liberal and leftist intellectual circles in Croatia. The Serb antiwar activist Veran Matić, remembered notably for his Willy Brandt-style kneeling at the city of Vukovar in honor of Croat victims, believes that most people in Serbia, Croatia, and BH feel the need for reconciliation and normalization. “A lot of citizens have a ‘primordial’ (*iskonsku*) need for normalization,” Matić points out in a recent interview, adding that Serbia and Croatia bear responsibility for “creating preconditions for further normalization of mutual relations, reconciliation, strengthening of trust and friendship. In the 1960s, France and Germany did that, and today the two are the backbone of Europe's stability. Likewise, Serbia and Croatia can and must be the reconciled France and Germany of the Balkans. . . .”<sup>75</sup> Matić, with other Serb liberals, also believes in the notion that Patriarch Porphyry could play a positive role.<sup>76</sup>

Secular and leftist associations for dealing with history and memory remain distrustful of major religions as agents of reconciliation, especially in post-Yugoslav states, where they have become religious monopolies allied with ethnic nationalist parties.<sup>77</sup> According to this perspective, the Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, has invested relatively more effort in ecumenical relations, peace, and human rights as compared with the Serbian Orthodox Church. As noted earlier, Patriarch Porphyry can be credited only with a relatively less militant nationalistic rhetoric when compared with earlier patriarchs and the wartime Church supportive of Serbian nationalism. Yet, the major controversies about the past remain the lasting sources of conflict. While the Catholic Church has repeatedly apologized for Croat Ustasha crimes against Serbs in the Second World War, and even suspended canonization proceedings to earn the sister church's trust, the Serbian Orthodox Church never condemned Chetnik massacres of Muslims and Catholics in the same period, never recognized the redeeming role of the Croat antifascist resistance

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<sup>75</sup> Veran Matić: Puno građana ima iskonsku potrebu za normalizacijom, [Many citizens have a priordeal need for normalization.] *Novosti*, 01/15/2022 <https://www.portalnovosti.com/veran-matic-puno-gradjana-ima-iskonsku-potrebu-za-normalizacijom>

<sup>76</sup> Nevena Maksimović, “Godina patrijarha Porfirija: poruke mira i konkretna podrška,” [The year of Patriarch Porphyry: messages of peace and concrete support.] 02/18. 2022, <https://www.autograf.hr/godina-patrijarha-porfirija-poruke-mira-i-konkretna-podrska/>

<sup>77</sup> Todor Kuljić, "Kritička kultura sećanja," [Critical culture of memory.] *Peščanik*, 06/30. 2006, <https://pescanik.net/kriticka-kul-tura-secanja>.

members that fought against the Ustasha regime, and has, since the wars of the 1990s, continued to deny genocide at Srebrenica. Most importantly, secular peace and human rights activists insist on agreement about the key facts about wars and war crimes through mechanisms such as the REKOM Reconciliation Network.<sup>78</sup>

Hopefully there will be soon peace in Ukraine, and another attempt at reconciliation in Western Balkans. Even as mostly symbolic and commemorative practices, these endeavors proved that they improve social trust and reduce interethnic tensions. There still remains the question about the purpose and long-term goals of such reconciliation efforts. In my 2021 book, *Reconciliation and Last Days*, published in Belgrade, Serbia, I argue that postwar reconciliation projects make sense, provided there is a new beginning for wartime enemies, that is, the peoples, faiths, and states in the region. In other words, the purpose of a longer period of peace and stability is socio-economic development and a hopeful future. Yet, if social decay continues, and if societies continue to look to the past and lose human capital, reconciliation becomes pointless--except, perhaps, as a ceremony accompanying a prolonged collective funeral, leading to extinction of these small European ethnic nations that missed all chances and opportunities. The conflict beyond war has lasted far too long. The nationalist myths and new collective identities constructed against “the other” in the immediate neighborhood cannot be changed, no matter how moving commemorative practices and nice words are. To make matters worse, a demographic catastrophe has been unfolding for decades, as young people are leaving *en masse* to seek jobs and permanent settlement in the West. Tito’s unified Yugoslavia was far from a perfect society, yet it was a future-oriented country, with greater economic resources and a positive international reputation. After its collapse, as Tim Judah observed in his 2019 article “Bye, bye, Balkans,” the new states of the region have been dramatically running out of their human capital.<sup>79</sup> That is to say, the peoples and faiths of Western Balkans may never see a new beginning, to make the reconciliation rituals future-oriented incentives rather than a long farewell.

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<sup>78</sup> Vesna Teršelič, „Pomirenje iziskuje priznanje činjenica o svim zločinima, [Reconciliation requires acknowledgment of facts about all crimes.], *Autograf.hr*, 12/27/2021, <https://www.autograf.hr/pomirenje-iziskuje-priznanje-cinjenica-o-svim-zlocinima/>.

<sup>79</sup> Tim Judah, "Bye-Bye, Balkans: A Region in Critical Demographic Decline", *Balkan Insight*, 10/14. 2019.