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### Review of Radeljić and Topić's "Religion in the Post-Yugoslav Context"

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Branislav Radeljić and Martina Topić (eds). *Religion in the Post-Yugoslav Context*. Lanham-Boulder-New York-London: Lexington Books, 2015. 254 pp. Hardbound, ISBN: 9781498522472.**

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More than sixteen years since the last conflicts in the former Yugoslavia ended, ethnicity continues to be perceived as identical to religious affiliation (Bosniaks and Kosovars are Muslims, Croats and Slovenes are Catholics, and Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins are Eastern Orthodox believers). As Professor Mojzes rightly states: “Religion, indeed, was both the main difference among the warring groups as well as the most important cohesive element of each ethnic group” (7). Religion was used for illicit public support for recent wars and conflicts, and regional WWII history is being rewritten in order for modern nationalists to feel victorious. This feeling of victory for modern nationalists is evidenced in that the Ustashas and Chetniks are coming back to us alive, whether in pop music concerts or courthouses, winning audiences or legal cases, enforcing the artificial divide that was a root of most evil and genocidal attempts during WWII.

*Religion in the Post-Yugoslav Context* could be considered a compendium of various reports on the situation of religion in seven countries that sprung into existence after the fall of Yugoslavia since 1991: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo. It addresses the majority religious communities: the Roman Catholic Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Faith Community, and describes the interplay with the values of the local state, society and the EU. Fourteen authors have contributed to this book, including Paul Mojzes, Ivan Cvitković, Sergej Flere, Raymond Detrez, and Angela Ilić.

The degree to which ethno-religion (and its organizational structure—a nation-based church, faith community, etc.) participated in the establishment of new nation-countries (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and also Bosnia and Herzegovina) is the degree to which Yugoslav wars were religious wars. Of all the new countries, only Slovenia did not have such a path—mainly because its national identity was formed around language and culture and not so much around the church. For this, the modern Slovenian republic should be also grateful to the

Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (and later Kingdom of Yugoslavia), as only in that country did the language received its rightful place and became a foundational form of ethno-identification. Kosovo, on the other side, is recently undergoing a “fundamentalist” crisis. In May 2016 a *New York Times* report speaks of more than 300 Kosovars who left the country and went to support the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Kosovo officials blame the so-called “political Islam.”

An article published by one of the editors, Martina Topić, provides an updated review of the rise of a narrative in Croatia, recently connected with a Holocaust denial among some of the Roman Catholic clergy serving in that country. It is notable that a loud minority led by the Catholic Church continues to express anti-Semitism and Serbophobia, also intimidating Croats who think differently. This is done by spreading accusations of being pro Yugo-nostalgic and using public encouragement of hatred. Topić found that the policy of undermining or denying the Holocaust had been the policy of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia since 1991, while an increase of radicalization occurred in 2010. Since the last elections in Croatia (in early 2016), the situation is not improving in this regard.

Considering the countries of former Yugoslavia, although there are more and more citizens who we may call “secular with a religious excuse,” religious magi to this day invoke centuries-old historical disputes and do not cease to fire nationalist fears of the possible “new war” as a continuation of the bloody 1990s. Citizens of the new Balkan countries somehow seem to be unable to differentiate between religious and national identity. Relying heavily on that fact, the majority religions did virtually nothing to deconstruct such a model. Their inter-religious talks end almost every time on an invocation of “blessings and good wishes” in which a minority church seems very agile in its cooperation with the majority church (like Serbian Orthodox in Croatia, or the Roman Catholics in Serbia). The last twenty years of meetings and photo-ops have not changed much if any of the suffering of their laymen. On the other hand, no major discussion in these societies has been going on without significant input from the churches and faith communities. Official visits to heads of religious communities are highly publicized, and the religious media openly promotes or demotes certain political forces.

From that perspective, it appears that religion continues to be a forceful political and social reality, and the blocks of ethnically and religiously different peoples remain steady in their trenches, waiting for another historical opportunity to flare another “no-war” and to pay back for

the mutual atrocities since the beginning of the world. Reconciliation, for the most part, remains a valuable topic for various fund-raising activities and conferences, while the ethnic and religious divide and hatred toward the “other” remain significant factors in each new country. It is because of these elements that the volume presented here provides a valuable and critical evaluation of the involvement of religion in the post-Yugoslav countries in the Western Balkans.