

Research Article

## **Orthodoxy in Diplomacy: An Overview of the Serbian Orthodox Church's Religious Diplomacy and Role in International Relations**

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### **Abstract:**

Following the revitalization and politicization of religion that happened in Serbia during the late 20th and early 21st century, the Serbian Orthodox Church became an important non-state actor in the country. This article explores its involvement in Serbia's relations with other countries, with a particular focus on the Church's and the country's religious diplomacy efforts. It provides an overview of the Church's multifaceted roles, including advising Serbian and foreign diplomats, engaging in track II diplomacy, as well as other small-scale initiatives.

**Keywords:** religious diplomacy, Serbian Orthodox Church, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, SPC.

### **Introduction**

When it comes to international relations, it is widely known that non-state actors, or NSOs, can often play an important role. Indeed, NSOs such

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as non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, national or multinational corporations, lobby groups, or religious organizations can hold tremendous sway over national policies and international relations alike. For instance, such actors have been playing an important role in everything from international security<sup>1</sup> to international law<sup>2</sup> for quite some time. However, when it comes to religious organizations, their influence can extend well beyond these realms, and they can occupy a prominent role in everything from international relations generally, to foreign policy and diplomatic relations between individual countries.

Exploring what role religion can and does play in diplomacy, Allen Keiswetter, a retired senior Foreign Service Officer and scholar, and John Bryson Chane, the eighth Bishop of Washington DC, noted several ways for it to help in strengthening diplomatic relations: clerics advising diplomats, clerics engaging in track II diplomacy, faith-based organizations offering humanitarian or other assistance to countries, and clerics promoting interfaith dialogue and starting initiatives that promote shared concepts, e.g. among the Abrahamic/Ibrahmic faiths, in addition to other indirect actions, such as clerics and faith leaders promoting peace and understanding that will inevitably help in strengthening diplomatic relations.<sup>3</sup> Keiswetter and Chane rightfully postulated that the extent of influence that religion can have goes well beyond typical track II diplomacy, first introduced by W. D. Davidson and J. V. Montville back in the 1980s to distinguish between the work of diplomats (track I diplomacy) and activities of non-state actors that play a significant role in fostering ties between countries, or track II diplomacy;<sup>4</sup> a conceptualization of diplomatic relations that developed into what is today known as multi-track diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the role of religion in international relations extends well beyond track II diplomacy as its influence isn't tied to religious organizations maintaining ties with other organizations or countries.

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Johnston, *Faith-based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Lawrence Chikering, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security* (Stanford, US: Hoover Institution Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Markus Wagner, "Non-State Actors," in *The Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, ed. Rüdiger Wolfrum, 741-749 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Allen Keiswetter and

John Chane, *Diplomacy and Religion: Seeking Common Interests and Engagement in a Dynamically Changing and Turbulent World* (Washington DC, US: The Brookings Institution, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See W. D. Davidson, and J. V. Montville, "Foreign Policy According to Freud.," *Foreign Policy* 45 (1981): 145-157.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Diamond, and John McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Guide and Analysis* (Grinnell, US: Iowa Peace Institute, 1991).

Today, even states, as primary actors in diplomacy, understand that religion can help them achieve their foreign policy goals, which is why many turn to religious diplomacy or faith-based diplomacy.

Put simply, religious diplomacy represents the use of religious factors by a state in foreign policy directly or indirectly. And, such mechanisms of state cooperation with religious organizations in the pursuit of national interests can be seen in the diplomatic practice of many states. For instance, as of writing this article, on the official website of the *Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, "religious diplomacy" is listed as one of the 9 foreign policy agendas that the Greek government is pursuing,<sup>6</sup> but the Greek Orthodox Church and the religious diplomacy of the *Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs* definitely aren't rare cases of religion being used by a state; when providing an overview of commonly used "tools" in cultural diplomacy, John Lenczowski listed "religious diplomacy" as one of them, noting how it is actively utilized even by secular states that one doesn't often associate with it, such as the United States.<sup>7</sup> After all, given how much attention has been placed on such aspects of diplomatic relations in the 21st century following the publication of Joseph Nye's seminal work on soft power, it is not surprising that numerous states saw the benefits of investing in religious diplomacy. Even Nye himself hinted at the "power" of religion in international relations while formulating the now widely-known concept of "soft power;" his example is that of the Holy See itself and the fact that, with it having diplomatic relations with over 180 countries and almost 90 countries having embassies to the Holy See today, it has a disproportionate amount of sway in international relations, especially given Joseph Stalin's famous remark "how many divisions does the Pope have?"<sup>8</sup> which perfectly illustrates Nye's point about the impact that soft power can have even without economic and military might which are associated with hard power and our own point in this article about religion having the potential to serve an important role in international relations given the right circumstances.

Given all of this, it is not surprising that religion plays into the foreign policy of many countries regardless of their state or dominant

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<sup>6</sup> Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d., <https://www.mfa.gr/en/church-diplomacy> (accessed 17 January, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> John Lenczowski, "Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Integrated Strategy," in *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*, ed. J. Michael Waller, 74-99 (Washington DC, US: The Institute Of World Politics Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, US: PublicAffairs, 2004).

religion, whether they are economic and military superpowers, regional powers, or even states without a lot of influence, both through the work of religious organizations and through active use of it by the state. And, as the title implies, this article will explore one example of that: the religious diplomacy and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia's diplomatic relations. This is due to the Church's prominent role in Serbia's relations with other countries. This case study can offer useful insights into the role of religious diplomacy as a tool in the foreign policies of rather modest countries that are neither economic nor regional powers, both in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world.

### **Religious Diplomacy, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the Serbian Orthodox Church**

Before moving on to the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia's relations, it is important to highlight that "religious diplomacy" isn't tied to Christianity or the "West." It is widely understood that Israel masterfully utilizes religious diplomacy<sup>9</sup> and that Judaism played a very important role in Israel's foreign policy for quite some time despite skepticism about its true extent,<sup>10</sup> though there are scholars who point out that "Jewish diplomacy" existed well before the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state<sup>11</sup> and that "Jewish foreign policy" exists beyond Israel.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Islam has also served as a powerful tool utilized in international relations, with different countries using it in different ways, including the

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<sup>9</sup> See Claudia Baumgart-Ochse, "Israel's Religious Soft Power: Within and Beyond Judaism," in *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy*, ed. Peter Mandaville, 211-231 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> See Efraim Inbar, "Jews, Jewishness and Israel's Foreign Policy," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 2(1990): 165-183 and Dov Waxman "Between Isolation and Integration: The Jewish Dimension in Israeli Foreign Policy," *Israel Studies Forum* 19 (2003): 34-56.

<sup>11</sup> See Jonathan Dekel-Chen, "Philanthropy, Diplomacy, and Jewish Internationalism," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism Volume VIII: The Modern World, 1815-2000*, eds. Mitchell B. Hart and Tony Michels, 505-528 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and Shmuel Sandler, *The Jewish Origins of Israeli Foreign Policy: A Study in Tradition and Survival* (London, UK: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> See Dov Waxman and Scott B. Lasensky, "Jewish Foreign Policy: Israel, World Jewry, and the Defence of 'Jewish Interests'," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12(2013): 232-252.

UAE,<sup>13</sup> Morocco,<sup>14</sup> Türkiye,<sup>15</sup> and many others. The case of Türkiye is especially interesting because the country utilizes it to foster ties with countries where Muslims don't make up the majority, like Serbia, which even has a fairly tense relationship with Islam and its heritage due to resisting Islam and Ottomans being a cornerstone of Serbian national identity.<sup>16</sup> And yet, Türkiye nevertheless successfully utilizes its religious heritage in Serbia to remind the people of their close ties with Türkiye and to win praise by helping Serbia preserve its cultural heritage, which it couldn't otherwise do, such as by investing two million USD into the restoration of the Sultan Valida Mosque, the only imperial mosque in Serbia.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, some thinkers argue that Islamic religious diplomacy can even be utilized to help solve serious issues, such as pan-Islamic organizations helping stabilize the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> But, of course, religious diplomacy isn't tied to Abrahamic religions either. For instance, despite attacking and persecuting organized religions during the 20th century, China has a long history of religious diplomacy and still utilizes Confucianism and Buddhism to gain soft power.<sup>19</sup> However, when it comes to diplomacy, religious diplomacy, and Orthodox Christianity, the situation is a bit more complicated.

Elizabeth H. Prodromou, for one, analyzed the role of Orthodox Christianity in diplomacy and geopolitics. She noted that its organization

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<sup>13</sup> See Hamdullah Baycar and Mehmet Rakipoğlu, "The United Arab Emirates' Religious Soft Power through Ulema and Organizations," *Religions* 13(2022): 646.

<sup>14</sup> See Sawsene Nejjar, *Morocco's Political Use of Islam and Its Religious Diplomacy* (Barcelona, Spain: EuroMeSCo, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> See Mehmet Ozkan, "Turkey's Religious Diplomacy," *The Arab World Geographer* 17(2014): 223–237 and Ayhan Kaya and Amina Drhimeur, "Diaspora politics and religious diplomacy in Turkey and Morocco," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 23(2023): 317–337.

<sup>16</sup> Miloš Todorović, "The Problems of Studying Ottoman Heritage in Serbia," *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* 4(2021): 213–237.

<sup>17</sup> Miloš Todorović, "Gaining Soft Power through Hard Heritage: Turkey's Restoration Projects in Serbia," *Balkan Studies Congress Proceedings* 1(2021): 383–396. However, when considering the effectiveness of such religious diplomacy, it is important to note that while these attempts to foster ties led to positive outcomes in Serbia and other countries, restoration projects of Ottoman heritage and Islamic religious heritage have led to Türkiye being heavily criticized in both the countries where it funds such restoration projects, like Serbia, and abroad, most notably on the grounds of the country having a "neo-Ottoman agenda" (see Miloš Todorović, "TİKA's Heritage Restoration Projects: Examples of Foreign Aid or Proof of Neo-Ottomanism?," *Insight Turkey* 23(2021): 141–156).

<sup>18</sup> Muddassar Ahmed, *How Religious Diplomacy and Pan-Islamic Organizations Can Help Stabilize Afghanistan* (Washington DC, US: German Marshall Fund., 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Juyan Zhang, "China's Faith Diplomacy," in *Religion and Public Diplomacy*, ed. P. Seib, 75–97 (New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

as a communion of 15 distinct churches (four ancient patriarchates, five national patriarchates, and the remaining six autocephalous churches), and its functioning according to the primacy of honor for the Ecumenical Patriarch, as opposed to a centralized top-down model like the Catholic Church or a decentralized model like the Protestant Church, makes relations between different Orthodox churches important. They have to work together despite expected tensions and disagreements inherent in such a model. Given that Orthodox Christianity is divided into distinct churches, with some being tied to individual countries/nationalities and being an important focal point of national identity, it is little wonder why these churches serve as important non-state actors to this day. Russia offers us perhaps the best illustration of this, not the least because of the important role that the Patriarch of Moscow plays in global Orthodox Christianity, but also because of the "Church-state partnership aimed at mutually reinforcing geopolitical hegemonies—hegemonies of territory and material interests, as well as hegemonies of identity, norms, and religio-culture," as Prodromou put it.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, ever since Kirill became the Patriarch of Moscow in 2009, the ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government have become so profound that, in just a matter of years, the Russian Orthodox Church gained tremendous sway over Russia's domestic and foreign policy,<sup>21</sup> which is the case even today, and it is understandable why said ties are important to both and why the Church and the Government tend to cooperate when it comes to foreign policy. As Alicja Curanović noted in her assessment of the religious diplomacy of Russia, "There is one more factor which reinforces state-Church contacts in the foreign policy and gives them solid grounds—common views on international relations. Both the Russian state and the ROC, consider the so-called 'near abroad' (which almost perfectly corresponds to the ROC's canonical territory) a sphere of Russia's existential interests. Therefore, they perceive the activity of non-Russian actors (regardless of whether those are states or religious organizations) in this part of the world as a direct challenge. What is more, the Moscow Patriarchate shares the Kremlin's criticism of the 'unipolar' world; the *Pax Americana* is viewed by both as a threat to global peace and stabilization. The ROC is particularly cautious about exaggerated liberalization of social relations, erosion of the

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Prodromou, *Diplomacy, Geopolitics, and Global Orthodox Christianity in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington DC, US: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs at Georgetown University, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Robert C. Blitt, "Whither Secular Bear: The Russian Orthodox Church's Strengthening Influence on Russia's Domestic and Foreign Policy," *Fides Et Libertas: The Journal of the International Religious Liberty Association* 10 (2011): 89-125.

institution of family, moral relativism, which are all associated with 'Westernisation' and seen in terms of civilisational pressure performed by the US",<sup>22</sup> going on to explore different ways in which Russia utilizes religious diplomacy. But while the ties between the state and its Orthodox church aren't as pronounced when it comes to foreign policy as they are in Russia, and while religious diplomacy isn't as important as it is for Greece which lists it as one of its main foreign policy issues/agendas, the Serbian Orthodox Church still represents a fairly important non-state actor when it comes to Serbia's relations with other countries. Why this is the case is somewhat evident.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, or *Српска православна црква / Srpska pravoslavna crkva* (SPC for short), is one of the autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Christian churches. It gained its autocephalous status in 1219, under the leadership of Saint Sava, which perfectly illustrates the Church's long diplomatic history. Sava was born as Rastko Nemanjić and was the youngest son of Serbian Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja (1166–1196) and the brother of Stefan the First-Crowned who ruled over Serbia as Grand Prince (1196–1217) and King (1217–1228). Given that he was the brother of the King and the First Archbishop of the Serbian Church, it isn't so surprising that Sava played a diplomatic role as well, both formal and informal. For instance, there were other pilgrims from Serbia, but when Sava went on his two pilgrimages to the Near East, he also acted as an informal emissary, being welcomed by the Patriarch of Alexandria and exchanging gifts with him.<sup>23</sup> However, we also know of instances where he acted as a Formal Emissary of his brother, like when he served as an envoy to the court of King Andrew II of Hungary and the Bulgarian *sebastokrator* Strez.<sup>24</sup>

Simply put, ever since the earliest days of the Serbian Orthodox Church, we find it involved in activities that would be perceived as "religious diplomacy" today. In fact, according to Serbian historians, following the Ottoman conquest of Serbia in the 15th century, the Serbian Orthodox Church started playing a prominent role because, ever since the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć was restored in 1557 thanks to the mediation of pasha Mehmed Sokolović (who also helped secure his cousin Makarije

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<sup>22</sup> Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation* (Paris, France: Russia/NIS Center 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Miloš Todorović, *Serbia And Egypt: Serbian-Egyptian Intercultural Relations* (Belgrade, Serbia: Alia Mundi, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Đura Hardi, "O diplomatskoj misiji Svetog Save kod ugarskog kralja Andrije II," *Crkvene studije* 16(2019): 235–248.

Sokolović as the new patriarch), the Church was the only institution able to act as an advocate and representative of the Serbian people and Serbia, which didn't even exist as a state at the time,<sup>25</sup> though that view isn't supported by Ottoman historical sources; while there is no disputing the fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church helped foster a sense of belonging and served a vital role in protecting the Serbian national identity, as far as the Ottoman state was concerned, the Orthodox churches, Serbian included, played a predominantly fiscal role and did not act as formal intermediaries between their believers and state authorities.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the Church still played a rather important role by helping establish relations with other Orthodox countries, such as Russia,<sup>27</sup> with which it helped establish deep cultural and religious ties that extend well beyond international relations and last up to the present.<sup>28</sup> However, it goes without saying that following the establishment of the Serbian state, the Serbian Orthodox Church no longer served as the representative of the Serbian people in any capacity. In time, its role was diminished further still, especially in the second part of the 20th century given that Yugoslavia was a socialist state. Even so, just like in other former socialist countries, the late 20th and early 21st century saw the revitalization and politicization of religion in Serbia, with the Serbian Orthodox Church once again becoming a prominent non-state actor that has the power to shape the public discourse and government policy.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, there is no doubt that the

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<sup>25</sup> Dejan Tanić, *Diplomatija Srpske pravoslavne crkve u XVI i XVII veku* (Jagodina, Serbia: Istorijski arhiv Jagodina, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> See Hasan Çolak and Elif Bayraktar-Tellan, *The Orthodox Church as an Ottoman Institution: A Study of Early Modern Patriarchal Berats* (Istanbul, Türkiye: The Isis Press, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Dejan Tanić, *Rusko carstvo i Srpska pravoslavna crkva (1557-1766)* (Niš, Serbia: Društvo srpsko-ruskog prijateljstva Naisus, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> See Branko Radovanović, "Aspekti međusobnih hrišćanskih i kulturoloških uticaja Srba i Rusa u periodu od 10. do 16. veka," *Crkvene studije* 12 (2015): 109–121 and Dejan Tanić, "Ključni momenti srpsko-ruskih kulturoloških i duhovno-ideoloških prožimanja: od Svetog Save do vladike Nikolaja," in *Igumanija Ana (Adžić) - oličenje posvećenosti: zbornik radova povodom 120 godina od rođenja i 70 godina od primanja monaškog čina*, eds. Ilijana Čutura and Oliver Đorđević, 59–80 (Jagodina, Serbia: Fakultet pedagoških nauka Univerziteta u Kragujevcu & Istorijski arhiv Srednje Pomoravlje, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> See Milan Vukomanović, "The Serbian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in the Aftermath of October 5, 2000," *Politics and Religion* 1(2008): 237–269, Bojan Aleksov, "The New Role of the Orthodox Church in Serbia," *Südosteuropa. Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3(2008): 353–375, Radmila Radić and Milan Vukomanović, "Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church," in *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, 180–211 (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Srđan Barišić, "The Role of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches in Shaping Governmental Policies," in *The Warp of Serbian Identity*, ed. Sonja Biserko, 105–126 (Belgrade, Serbia: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2016), and Jelena Subotić, "The



Serbian Orthodox Church represents one of the most vocal and influential non-state actors in Serbia today given its history, relationship with national identity, and historical ties with the state,<sup>30</sup> as well as the fact that it acts as the voice for the largest religious community in the country by far given that 81.1% of the population identified as “Orthodox Christian” during the 2022 census.<sup>31</sup> And, while most of its influence is tied to domestic policy, the Church still represents a powerful actor when it comes to Serbia’s foreign policy and relations with other countries as well.

### **The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in International Relations Today**

When it comes to understanding the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in relations that Serbia has with other countries and in the relations that they have with Serbia, one has to bear in mind that religious diplomacy is a complex endeavor generally, which is why the topic must be approached systematically, and Keiswetter and Chane provided us with a useful framework to go on. As we have already mentioned, they highlighted several possible channels of religious diplomacy: clerics advising diplomats, clerics engaging in track II diplomacy, faith-based organizations offering humanitarian or other assistance to countries, and clerics promoting interfaith dialogue, among other indirect things, such as clerics and faith leaders promoting peace and understanding that would inevitably help in strengthening diplomatic relations.<sup>32</sup> The reason why we will go off of their work is the fact that it provides a convenient calcification for our overview as the Serbian Orthodox Church is involved in just about every activity they listed, and a couple of others as we shall see.

#### ***Priests Advising Foreign Diplomats***

One of the most frequent ways that the Serbian Orthodox Church gets involved in diplomatic relations of different countries with Serbia is by advising foreign officials. Of course, there is nothing new or unusual in

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Church, the Nation, and the State: The Serbian Orthodox Church After Communism,” in *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservatism, and Intolerance*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, 85–110 (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> See Zorica Kuburić, “Serbian Orthodox Church in the Context of State’s History,” *Religija i tolerancija: Časopis Centra za empirijska istraživanja religije* 12(2014): 387–402.

<sup>31</sup> The Census Office, n.d. <https://popis2022.stat.gov.rs/en-us/5-vestisaopstenja/news-events/20230616-st/?a=0&s=0> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> John Chane and Allen Keiswetter, *Diplomacy and Religion: Seeking Common Interests and Engagement in a Dynamically Changing and Turbulent World* (Washington DC, US: The Brookings Institution, 2013).

such work; priests, especially church dignitaries, providing advice on different issues and voicing the concerns of members of their church, particularly concerning religious matters, is rather common practice. Given the fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church voices the concerns of the majority of believers in the country and that it is an important local and regional non-state actor, it is not surprising that many diplomats present in Belgrade and officials visiting the country seek out its advice and work towards maintaining good relations with the Church. In fact, this is such common practice that it would be impossible to even list all of the meetings between church dignitaries and priests with foreign officials, let alone explore them. Take, for instance, the case of the current head of the Church.

Following the death of the 90-year-old Patriarch Irinej, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church for 10 years between 2010 and 2020, the Bishops' Council elected the Metropolitan Bishop of Zagreb Porfirije as his successor on 18 February 2021. This means that Porfirije has been acting as the Head of the Church for some two and a half years now, and yet, if we were to look at the publicly available archive of the announcements made by the Serbian Orthodox Church at the time of writing this article, we would see that he met with numerous diplomats from Serbia and other countries, as well as foreign officials during this time, talking to them about different issues. Take, for instance, his official meetings with dignitaries during 2021 alone.

- In March: the **Ambassador of Russia to Serbia** on March 11, the **Apostolic Nuncio to Serbia** and the **Ambassador of the United States to Serbia** on March 12, the **Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Serbia** on March 23, the **Head of EU's delegation to Serbia** and the **Ambassador of Greece to Serbia** on March 24, and the **Apostolic Nuncio to Croatia** on March 29.

- In April: the **Ambassador of Cyprus to Serbia** on April 1, the **Ambassador of Serbia to the Vatican**, the **Ambassador of Austria to Serbia**, and the **Ambassador of Armenia to Serbia** on April 2, the **Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece** and the **Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus** on April 5, the **Ambassador of Belgium to Serbia** on April 9, the **Ambassador of Serbia to Bulgaria**, the **Ambassador of Israel to Serbia**, and the **Ambassador of Italy to Serbia** on April 12, the **Head of the Council of Europe's Mission to Serbia** on April 13, the **Ambassador of Slovenia to Serbia**, the **Ambassador of Ukraine to Serbia**, and the **Ambassador of Romania to Serbia** on April 14, the **Ambassador of Belarus to Serbia** on April 15, the **Head of OSCE's Mission to Serbia** on April 19, the **Consul of**

**Bulgaria in Edirne** April 20, and the **Ambassador of Serbia to Montenegro** on April 28.

- In June: the **Ambassador of Russia to Croatia** on June 7, the **OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities** on June 16, and the **Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia** on June 18.

- In July: the newly elected **Ambassadors of Serbia to Syria, Morocco, and Congo** on July 1, the **Ambassador of Egypt to Serbia**, and the **Ambassadors of Canada and Australia to Serbia** on July 13, the **Chargé d'Affaires of Georgia to Greece with a Mission in Belgrade** on July 20, and the **Ambassador of Bulgaria to Serbia** on July 21.

- In August: the **Ambassador of Serbia to Albania** and the **Ambassador of Poland to Serbia** on August 13, the **UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia** and the director of the **World Health Organization's Office in Serbia** jointly and the **Ambassador of Germany to Serbia** on August 17, and the **Apostolic Nuncio to Serbia** on August 20.

- In September: the **UNHCR's Representative in Serbia** as well as the **Ambassador of Iran to Serbia** on September 3, the **Ambassador of Panama to Serbia** on September 6, the **Ambassador of Georgia to Serbia**, the **Ambassador of Japan to Serbia**, and the **Ambassador of Greece to Serbia** all on September 7.

- In November: the **Chargé d'Affaires of Syria in Belgrade** on November 9, and the **Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States** on November 23.

- In December: the **Ambassador of the Netherlands to Serbia** on December 13, and the **Ambassador of the European Union to Serbia** on December 22 [list compiled and titles highlighted by the author].<sup>33</sup>

Naturally, these were just the official visits by officials to His Holiness during his first year as the Patriarch. It goes without saying that numerous other meetings occurred with other Church officials and at different diplomatic events hosted by Serbia in Belgrade, both with the Patriarch and different Church dignitaries. And, while it is tempting to

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<sup>33</sup> Arhiva Srpske pravoslavne crkve, n.d., <http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/arhiva.html> (accessed January 17, 2023).

dismiss these visits as mere courtesy visits given that we are talking about the first year of Porfirije's tenure as the Patriarch, the fact of the matter is that he kept meeting with officials,<sup>34</sup> continues to do so, and has met with numerous dignitaries, including the Chancellor of Austria Karl Nehammer, Greece's Minister for Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias, and others.

### *Track II Diplomacy and Supporting the State*

Much like its Russian counterpart, the Serbian Orthodox Church also maintains strong ties with the state and helps aid its foreign policy objectives as they often overlap with the Church's interests; this partnership with the state has been going on ever since the fall of Slobodan Milošević, but especially following the Serbian Progressive Party coming to power in 2012.<sup>35</sup> And, one of the most important issues where the Church and the Government align is their stance toward the independence of Kosovo. After all, the Church officially opposes any kind of acceptance of Kosovo's independence so much so that the Holy Bishops' Council, the Church's supreme body, put out a statement back in 2018 arguing that the issue of Kosovo and Metohija is a matter of the highest priority for Serbia, encompassing religious, national, and state concerns, in addition to urging state authorities to ensure Kosovo remains part of Serbia and to refuse to agree to any territorial exchange.<sup>36</sup> Of course, there are numerous other instances of such statements and pleas being made by the Church and its officials, but they are little more than superfluous displays of the Church's official stance because the Serbian government already shares them, at least for the time being.

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<sup>34</sup> In just the first half of 2022, Patriarch Porfirije also met with the newly elected ambassadors of Serbia to Belarus, Belgium, Australia, and Egypt (February 3), the ambassador of Ukraine to Serbia (February 8), the ambassador of France to Serbia (February 18), the apostolic nuncio to Slovenia (February 21), the head of EU's delegation to Serbia (March 15), the chancellor of Austria (March 17), the ambassador of Belgium to Serbia (March 18), the ambassador of Sweden to Serbia (April 4), the ambassador of Kazakhstan to Serbia and the ambassador of Cyprus to Serbia (April 15), the ambassador of the United States to Serbia (May 7), the ambassador of Australia to Serbia (May 27), the ambassador of Egypt to Serbia (June 15), the ambassador of Slovakia to Serbia (June 16), the ambassador of Spain to Serbia and the ambassador of Germany to Serbia (June 17).

<sup>35</sup> See Viktor Stamenković, "Političke poruke Srpske pravoslavne crkve u vreme poglavarstva Patrijarha srpskog gospodina Pavla i Patrijarha srpskog gospodina Irineja," *Politički život: časopis za analizu politike* 22(2022): 25–35.

<sup>36</sup> Maja Zivanovic, "Don't Abandon Kosovo, Serbian Church Urges Govt," *Balkan Insight*, May 11, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/11/serbian-orthodox-church-against-kosovo-independence-05-11-2018/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

Both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Government of Serbia oppose and refuse to acknowledge the independence of Kosovo. And, given that both are interested in making sure that Kosovo and Metohija remain a part of the Republic of Serbia, it is little wonder that the Church is eager to support the Government's efforts towards that goal and that the Government is all too keen on using religion as a foreign policy tool if and when it is suitable. The most illustrative and effective examples of this occurred in 2015, following Kosovo's bid to become a member of UNESCO.

Kosovo becoming a member of UNESCO would have helped it gain legitimacy and further its cause by putting additional pressure on other countries to recognize it as an independent state, which is why the Government of Serbia was forced to intervene and launch an international campaign to make sure that this doesn't happen. The campaign had two aspects: one involved lobbying states, and the other involved launching a public diplomacy campaign aimed at changing the perception of their people so that they align with Belgrade's viewpoint on the issue. In both cases, the Government relied heavily on Serbia's religion and religious heritage in Kosovo. That is, when approaching officials and diplomats of other countries, Serbian officials argued that the two main reasons why Kosovo couldn't be accepted as a member of UNESCO were that: 1) it is not a formally recognized country and so cannot be accepted as a member because that is a requirement for membership according to the UNESCO's Constitution and 2) that Kosovo becoming a member would put Serbia's medieval religious heritage in danger, relying on this so much so that all Serbian embassies put out a statement on *Why Kosovo is ineligible for membership in UNESCO*, arguing in it that "four Serbian orthodox monasteries are inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in danger although the armed conflict in Kosovo is over for many years now. In danger from whom?". The Serbian government actively utilized the fact that the Medieval Monuments in Kosovo were inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites only to be inscribed on the list of World Heritage in Danger just two years later. This fact was often highlighted in speeches made by Serbian officials, including President Tomislav Nikolić, who even gathered all the accredited ambassadors in Belgrade at the Palace of Serbia a month before the vote was scheduled to take place to deliver a speech on the issue. He went so far as to name individual instances of it being destroyed, such as the 2004 unrest in Kosovo, which resulted in the destruction and damage of 35 Orthodox churches, including that of Our Lady of Ljeviš, which represents a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And, to reiterate his point, Nikolić even showed the gathered representatives a video documentary on the destruction of Serbian Orthodox religious

heritage in Kosovo produced by the state-owned broadcaster *Radio Television of Serbia*. This wouldn't be the only time the President used that video as his team shared it publicly on the President's official YouTube channel not long after as a part of the online campaign #NoKosovoUnesco, which was initiated by the humanitarian organization *28 June* and the director and producer Boris Malagurski; needless to say, the campaign was endorsed and supported by the Government of Serbia, and the Serbian Orthodox Church, from the onset. In fact, the documentary was translated into different languages and was aired in different countries, including by large networks such as *Russia Today*, and the Government estimated that by the end of the campaign, the documentary and other material and posts produced for the campaign reached over 25 million people worldwide through traditional and social media.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, it goes without saying that the support of media houses such as *Russia Today* was the result of the campaign being endorsed by the state. However, the mentioned hashtag campaign #NoKosovoUnesco was initiated by *28 Jun* and Malagurski to draw attention to their joint petition that would be sent to the then Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, and to the issue of Serbian religious heritage in Kosovo, which is evident even when looking at the posts made by them (Figure 1 & 2). Naturally, the Serbian Orthodox Church was very much eager to support the initiative itself, but also the online campaign with it issuing statements on the issue and dignitaries posting about the destruction of religious heritage on their social media accounts, like Sava Janjić, the Hegumen of the Visoki Dečani Monastery, also referred to as "Cybermonk" due to his early adoption of the internet back in the 1990s (Figure 3).

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<sup>37</sup> Miloš Todorović, "Upotreba nasleđa u spoljnoj politici Republike Srbije: kratak pregled dosadašnje prakse i saveti za dalji razvoj," *Napredak: časopis za političku teoriju i praksu* 3(2022): 75-94.



Figure 1 – An early post made by *28 June* on *Facebook* asking people to sign the petition and depicting a Serbian monk on top of a tank next to his monastery.



Figure 2 – An early post made by Malagurski on *Facebook* with the depiction of a man destroying a cross on top of the UNESCO logo—a famous image of the destruction of a Serbian church in Kosovo that took place in March 2004.





Figure 3 – Sava Janjić sharing a post with the *NoKosovoUnesco* hashtag.

In the end, Serbia's attempts were successful and Kosovo didn't become a member of UNESCO, though it was a very close call given that the bid fell short by only three votes.<sup>38</sup> And, naturally, the Serbian Orthodox Church's involvement in the issue of Kosovo's independence extends well beyond campaigning. Far from being a passive actor, the Church is one of the most influential voices, and its rights and properties in Kosovo represent some of the key issues in discussions between Belgrade and Pristina, so much so that the Church has to be referenced in international agreements like the *Washington Agreement* (formally known as the *Kosovo and Serbia Economic Normalization Agreements*) signed by the then Prime Minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti and the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić on September 4, 2020, in the presence of President Doland Trump.<sup>39</sup> However, not everyone in the Church is satisfied with its role and some

<sup>38</sup> John Irish, "Kosovo fails in bid to gain UNESCO membership," *Reuters*, November 9, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-unesco-idUSKCN0SY1CW20151109/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>39</sup> See Velibor Džomić, "Vašingtonski sporazum i crkveno pitanje," *Crkvene studije* 18(2021): 381-392.

dignitaries argue that it should be an active participant and have more say in the discussions themselves given that it is an important topic in these discussions,<sup>40</sup> though the Church has an understanding and partnership with the state much like the Russian Orthodox Church has with Russia; this understanding runs so deep that the Church refused to address representatives of Serbian associations in Kosovo who asked to be received by the patriarch to express their concerns that President Vučić will sign the Franco-German proposal for Kosovo that they argued would “jeopardize the survival of Serbian people, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the state of Serbia” because President Vučić was in Brussels negotiating with Pristina authorities at the time.<sup>41</sup>

Rather small actions and inactions like these help illustrate the mutual understanding between the Church and the Government because they show its true extent: even otherwise “small actions,” like (not) hearing out activists that support your cause, are thought over. Of course, the support that the Church gives to the state isn’t that surprising given their lucrative partnership. After all, many analysts and journalists argue that the Government of Serbia has actively been “buying the loyalty of the Serbian Orthodox Church” for quite some time through donations, including to help in the restoration of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade;<sup>42</sup> it is not even known how much money the Government of Serbia has donated to the Serbian Orthodox Church over the years. Some estimates place the figure around 90 million euros between 2002 and the beginning of 2017 alone. This figure does not include the approximately 43 million euros donated solely for the restoration of the Church of Saint Sava between 2017 and 2020. Furthermore, subsequent donations were made; in 2023, the Government donated another 4.5 million euros, with 2 million earmarked for the restoration of the same church.<sup>43</sup> And, in return, the

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<sup>40</sup> See Velibor Džomić, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva i tzv. spoljašnji dijalog o Kosovu i Metohiji od 2011. do 2018. godine,” *Crkvene studije* 16(2019): 407–420.

<sup>41</sup> J. Tasić, “Diplomatija, Fest i Veliki post: Patrijarh Porfirije nije primio predstavnike Srba sa KiM povodom sastanka u Briselu,” *Danas*, February 27, 2023. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/diplomatija-fest-i-veliki-post-patrijarh-porfirije-nije-primio-predstavnike-srba-sa-kim-povodom-sastanka-u-briselu/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Ljudmila Cvetković, “Kupuje li država lojalnost Srpske pravoslavne crkve?,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, March 28, 2019. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-spc-kupovina-lojalnost/29845816.html> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Nataša Latković, “Još keša za „blagoslov“ Vučićevoj politici: Vlada Srbije poklonila SPC novih 4,5 miliona evra,” *Nova.rs*, September 18, 2023. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/jos-kesa-za-blagoslov-vucicevoj-politici-vlada-srbije-poklonila-spc-novih-45-miliona-evra/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

Church helps the Government by appeasing the religious and conservative base in Serbia thanks to its traditional role in Serbian society, ties to Serbian national identity, and influence that cannot be understated given that several research projects conducted by different organizations over the years, most notably the *National Youth Council of Serbia*, showed that even the youngest population trusts the Serbian Orthodox Church more than the government.<sup>44</sup> Precisely because of that, it is important for the Government to have the support of the Church when it comes to domestic and foreign policy because it represents one of the most important non-state actors in the country and abroad. After all, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in neighboring countries cannot and should not be understated. For instance, when the Government of Montenegro proposed and adopted the "Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities" that the Church found unfavorable in December 2019, it initiated 8-month-long protests which ended up rallying its believers and the people of Montenegro who ousted President Milo Đukanović and his party that has been leading the country for more than 30 years during the elections that took place on 30 August 2020; elections that Zdravko Krivokapić and the *For the Future of Montenegro* party won and, in turn for the Church's support, amended the law according to its liking.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the presence and influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro are so strong that the Government of Montenegro had to sign the "Fundamental Agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and

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<sup>44</sup> See Nebojša Grabež, "Mladi veruju Crkvi i Vojski," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, June 4, 2021. [https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/tema\\_sedmice\\_mladi\\_drustvene\\_vrednosti\\_srbija/24215086.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/tema_sedmice_mladi_drustvene_vrednosti_srbija/24215086.html) (accessed January 17, 2023), Branka Mihajlović, "Istraživanje: Mladi u Srbiji najviše veruju vojski," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 8, 2018. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mladi-neoliberalizam-poverenje-konzervativizam/29589827.html> (accessed January 17, 2023), V. A. "Kome mladi u Srbiji najviše veruju: Na skali od 1 do 5 samo jedna javna ličnost dobila ocenu preko 2,5," *Danas*, August 12, 2022. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/kome-mladi-u-srbiji-najvise-veruju-na-skali-od-1-do-5-samo-jedna-javna-licnost-dobila-ocenu-preko-25/> (accessed January 17, 2023), C. Spasojević "Veruju patrijarhu, većina bi u vojsku: Istraživanje KOMS o stavovima mladih." *Novosti*, August 12, 2021. <https://www.novosti.rs/c/drustvo/vesti/1026567/veruju-patrijarhu-vecina-vojsku-istrazivanje-koms-stavovima-mladih> (accessed January 17, 2023), and N1, "Istraživanje: Skoro 50 odsto mladih planira da napusti Srbiju, jača nepoverenje," *N1*, August 11, 2023. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/istrazivanje-mladi-nemaju-poverenje-u-institucije-veruju-u-crkvu-i-vojsku/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Asja Hafner, "Ključni događaji u godinu dana Zakona o slobodi vjeroispovijesti u Crnoj Gori," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, December 28, 2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/godinu-dana-zakona-o-slobodi-vjeroispovijesti-u-crnoj-gori/31022713.html> (accessed January 17, 2023).

Montenegro” in August 2022 despite it serving as a catalyst for a vote of no-confidence.<sup>46</sup>

### *Providing Assistance*

Like most other religious organizations, the Serbian Orthodox Church is involved in charitable work and providing humanitarian assistance to those in need. However, as Serbia is not an otherwise wealthy country, most of the charitable work of the Church revolves around helping people in need either in Serbia or Serbs in neighboring countries. Of course, there are instances of it donating money to people in need abroad and mobilizing people in Serbia to provide assistance in humanitarian disasters, notably collecting and passing along aid to people in Syria and Türkiye following the devastating earthquakes that took place on 6 February 2023<sup>47</sup> and to people of Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion of the country.<sup>48</sup> Yet, such instances are few and far between given that the Church’s primary goal when it comes to charitable work is to help the Serbian people. Because of that, this aspect of religious diplomacy doesn’t warrant as much attention as the others, which is why we will only mention that the Church gets involved in it from time to time, though not to the extent that other similar religious organizations do it.

### *Promoting Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue*

Needless to say, a somewhat significant component of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s work is maintaining ties with other religious organizations. Naturally, this extends beyond just working with other Orthodox churches, with which it has to maintain ties and work together given the way that Eastern Orthodox Christianity is organized; simply put, because the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is recognized as having *Primus Inter Pares* status—that is, since he is merely honored and represents the first among equals—it is important for the Orthodox

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<sup>46</sup> Stevo Vasiljevic, “Montenegro govt church deal triggers initiative for no-confidence motion,” *Reuters*, August 3, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/montenegro-signs-long-disputed-contract-with-serbian-orthodox-church-2022-08-03/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> N1, “Serbian Orthodox Church calls for donations to Syria and Turkey,” *N1*, February 11, 2023. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-orthodox-church-calls-for-donations-to-syria-and-turkey/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Anna Bogun, “Patriarch Porfirije: Serbian Church to help UOC and Metropolitan Onuphry,” *UOJ*, February 28, 2022. <https://spzh.news/en/news/86729-patriarkh-porfirij-serbskaja-cerkovy-pomozhet-upc-i-mitropolitu-onufriju> (accessed January 17, 2023).

churches to maintain relations, if not close ties with each other, and to participate in joint initiatives, such as the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that took place in June 2016.<sup>49</sup> Of course, because of that structure, the Serbian Orthodox Church is a key non-state actor in diplomatic and cultural relations with other Orthodox countries, particularly Russia as we already discussed. However, this doesn't mean that the Church maintains ties only with other Orthodox churches. Far from it, it has been building and maintaining ties with other churches from around the world for decades, with its Patriarch German (1958–1990) even being elected to the central committee of the *World Council of Churches*, a worldwide Christian inter-church organization founded in 1948 to work for the cause of ecumenism, during its fourth assembly in 1968.<sup>50</sup> More recently, Serbia also hosted the 2018 Assembly of the *Conference of European Churches*, of which the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a member since 1965.<sup>51</sup>

When it comes to promoting interfaith dialogue in Serbia, the Church maintains ties with other religious organizations in the country and follows the developments with other religions in the world, informing its believers about them; the official newspaper of the Patriarchate, *Orthodoxy*, even has a segment "The Christian World."<sup>52</sup> For instance, the patriarch sends his good wishes and congratulations on important holidays for different religions, such as Eid al-Fitr, and meets with his counterparts, such as the Chief Rabbi of Serbia.<sup>53</sup> However, it could be argued that the primary actors in facilitating interfaith dialogue in the country are individual priests and other members of the Church from around the country who engage in it based on their own initiatives, such as by organizing and/or participating in numerous public lectures, seminars, and similar events.

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<sup>49</sup> It should be noted here that the *Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* also showed a lot of tensions within Eastern Orthodoxy. Namely, four autocephalous Orthodox churches were absent and others were split internally over their stances towards the Council (see Karin Hofmeisterová, "Ecclesiastical nationalism and primacy in world Orthodoxy: the case of the Serbian Church at the pan-Orthodox Council in Crete," *Religion State and Society* 47(2019): 341–357 about the Serbian Orthodox Church's stance towards it).

<sup>50</sup> Dušan Jerotijević, "Srpska pravoslavna crkva u međunarodnim odnosima sa posebnim osvrtom na odnose sa Ruskom pravoslavnom crkvom," *Crkvene studije* 17(2020): 221–240.

<sup>51</sup> Beta, "Conference of European Churches Assembly in Serbia," *N1*, May 31, 2018, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a392643-cec-opens-assembly-in-novi-sad/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>52</sup> Pravoslavlje, n.d. <https://pravoslavlje.spc.rs/hriscanski-svet/> (accessed January 17, 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Srpska pravoslavna crkva (SPC), September 20, 2021. [http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/patrijarh\\_srpski\\_primio\\_glavnog\\_rabina\\_jevrejske\\_zajednice\\_srbije.html](http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/patrijarh_srpski_primio_glavnog_rabina_jevrejske_zajednice_srbije.html) (accessed January 17, 2023).

### *Representing Serbia*

While the Serbian Orthodox Church no longer represents Serbia, Serbs, or their interests as it did during the 16th and 17th centuries, the fact of the matter is that it still very much represents the country, though in a somewhat different capacity. The reason for this is the fact that the Church is so closely tied to Serbian national identity and culture that it is impossible to envision one without the other, and so the Church represents one of the key non-state actors in promoting Serbian culture abroad, both on its own, “as an intermediary,” and as a partner of the state. Namely, there are several instances of it working with the state, like it co-financing along with the Republic of Serbia the opening of the *Serbian Cultural and Informative Centre “Lukijan Mušicki”* in Karlovci, Croatia (the center is even named after the famous Serbian Orthodox Bishop in Karlovci), or it acting as an intermediary connecting the government with its diaspora because of the Church’s close ties with the Serbian community abroad. Of course, the Church also helps organize events, promotions, and exhibitions that help present Serbian culture, but even when it isn’t involved directly, the religious heritage of Serbia, of which it is the custodian, is still a prominent actor in these promotions; for her doctoral dissertation, Vjera Mujović-Prajs researched the cultural diplomacy of Serbia and its role in changing the image of the country abroad following the 1990s, and she listed dozens of exhibitions of religious heritage, including photos of frescoes, monasteries, and other cultural artifacts. Additionally, she noted concerts of religious music that had a positive impact on promoting Serbia and altering its image. However, what further illustrates the Serbian Orthodox Church’s importance in representing Serbian culture and its role in Serbia’s diplomatic relations is the fact that Mujović-Prajs interviewed several of Serbia’s senior diplomats who acknowledged the points mentioned here. Ambassador Ljiljana Nikšić singled out Serbia’s Orthodox monasteries as a significant cultural resource for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and identified the Serbian Orthodox Church as a potential donor and partner in promoting Serbian culture abroad. Ambassador Ognjen Pribević highlighted the Church as a notable partner due to its ability to connect the state with Serbs living and working abroad.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Vjera Mujović-Prajs, “Kulturna diplomatija kao činilac promene imidža Republike Srbije” (PhD diss., Singidunum University, 2019).

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

As we have already mentioned, following the religious reawakening after the fall of the socialist regime, the Serbian Orthodox Church gained a prominent role in Serbian society and became an important non-state actor and partner for the state. Indeed, despite Serbia being a secular state and not having a state religion, the Church to this day remains an important actor in Serbia's relations with other countries, which is why it is important to understand its role in international relations. And, as this article pointed out, there are several ways in which it is involved because it is: 1) both a passive and active actor in Serbia's foreign policy efforts, 2) a supporting actor in Serbia's diplomatic relations with other countries, be it through advising Serbia's diplomats and foreign diplomats in Serbia or by supporting Serbia's efforts abroad, 3) a religious diplomacy actor in its own right that represents Serbian culture and, by extension, Serbia abroad, 4) a custodian of Serbia's religious and cultural heritage that the state and/or other institutions utilize as a resource to promote Serbia and Serbian culture abroad, and 5) an organizer of various activities that, though not as prominent for international relations, still shape the way in which people in the country see and interact with others. So, while it might not even be the most important non-state actor in the country, the Serbian Orthodox Church still represents an important actor in Serbia's foreign policy and relations with other countries, which is why more attention should be paid to it, to its role in Serbia's relations with other countries, and to the Church's own religious diplomacy efforts.

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