

THE DEVIL'S CELEBRATION IN THE NAME OF GOD

The ethnicization of Orthodox religion: Serbia's nationalist strategy for destabilizing Kosovo

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Abstract

Serbia has ethnicized religion, transforming it into a nationalist tool to destabilize Kosovo. Religious holidays, such as Orthodox Christmas, are exploited to promote political and nationalist agendas, fueling interethnic tensions. Instead of focusing on spiritual values, these events have become platforms for chauvinistic rhetoric and the glorification of Serbian historical narratives, often supported by Russia. Through the Serbian List, Belgrade employs political provocations and deliberate manipulations to challenge Kosovo's sovereignty and maintain a climate of ongoing tension. This instrumentalization of religion and religious symbolism is part of a broader strategy aimed not only at exacerbating interethnic relations but also at undermining Kosovo's efforts toward stability and democratic coexistence.

Keywords: Orthodox religion, ethnization, nationalism, Serpska List, destabilization

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THE ETHNICIZATION OF ORTHODOX RELIGION: SERBIA’S NATIONALIST STRATEGY FOR DESTABILIZING KOSOVO

The politicization of religion and the ethnicization of religious practices have been powerful tools in Serbia’s nationalist strategy, particularly in its relations with Kosovo. Religious events such as Orthodox Christmas and the Orthodox New Year have consistently been exploited as platforms to promote nationalism by the Serbian groups in Kosovo. These celebrations, blending tradition with religious belief, often present a distorted image, invoking the “face of the Devil” in the name of God. Through nationalist rhetoric and by fostering chauvinistic sentiments against Albanians, they “idolize” the promotion of hatred, interethnic tensions, and the undermining of peaceful coexistence in the region.

Serbia’s strategy of intertwining religion with politics is strongly supported by its ally, Russia, granting it an international dimension. This phenomenon of religious ethnicization is not confined to Kosovo but is part of a broader strategy to extend Serbian influence in the Western Balkans and to challenge Kosovo’s sovereignty through sophisticated hybrid means, including propaganda, false historical narratives, and political manipulation.

A key element of this strategy is the Serbian List, a political entity functioning as a direct instrument of Belgrade. Through its political practices and its control over the Serbian community in Kosovo, the Serbian List has acted as a bridge between Serbia’s nationalist policies and concrete actions aimed at undermining Kosovo’s stability and sovereignty. This includes orchestrating deliberate provocations, leveraging religious symbolism, and fostering a climate of continuous tension through propagandist narratives and nationalist rhetoric.

This analysis examines the ways in which Serbia has utilized “religious celebrations,” historical symbolism, and political mechanisms such as the Serbian List to instrumentalize religious faith and advance its hegemonic objectives. The focus of the analysis lies in highlighting how these strategies are employed to fuel interethnic tensions and obstruct Kosovo’s stability as a democratic, multiethnic society.

The Church against God: The serbian-russian symmetry in the instrumentalization of religion

The celebrations of Orthodox Christmas in Kosovo by the Serbian groups have been accompanied by a deep process of ethnicization and politicization, transforming them into platforms for promoting political agendas.

Rather than focusing on the spiritual dimension and the figure of Christ, attention was once again directed toward Kosovo through nationalist rhetoric, following a pattern consistent with past practices. Thus, Serbian churches, instead of serving as religious institutions spreading the word of God, have been instrumentalized in service of an ethnocentric policy, undermining their spiritual essence and peaceful role.



Photo: 1 The display of Serbian and Russian flag in Babin Most, Obiliq

Serbian provocations during Orthodox Christmas celebrations in Kosovo began in locations bearing deep historical wounds and painful symbolism for the Albanian people. One such example is Babin Most in Obiliq, a region infamous for war crimes during 1998-1999, including sexual violence against Albanian women, such as the tragic case of Vafije Krasniqi and many other victims. In this place, as seen in the above photograph, religious celebrations were transformed into a platform for displaying Serbian and Russian national symbols, reinforcing political narratives and strategic ties between the two countries.

The display of Russian and Serbian flags in an environment meant to represent a festive spiritual atmosphere clearly reveals the political dimension of these celebrations. This act reflects the close relations between Serbia and Russia, illustrated by the Russian center in Nis, Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia for the war in Ukraine, and the enduring strength of their political and strategic ties.

These so-called “religious” celebrations also served as a platform to demonstrate support for Russia and to adopt its propaganda tactics against Kosovo. This phenomenon remains as relevant as it was at the onset of the war in Ukraine, as evidenced by the use of the “Z” symbol—a hallmark of Russian aggression—and calls for military actions against Kosovo.



Photo: 2 Celebrations with the "Z" symbol and calls for war in Zhitkoc, Gjilan.

A clear example of this phenomenon was seen in [Zhitkoc](#), Zvecan, where the use of the “Z” symbol and its accompanying messages demonstrated the application of the Russian model as part of Serbian nationalist rhetoric and actions. The display of the “Z” symbol in this context is not merely a provocation but a clear signal of strategic alignment and an effort to heighten regional tensions through symbolism borrowed from global conflicts.

Continuing their provocative policies and the use of “religious” celebrations as a tool to promote ethnic and political agendas, a gathering was organized in [Shillove](#), Gjilan, where nationalist messages reached another level. A group of Serbs unveiled a banner reading: “Once again, the fire of the Nemanjic dynasty saves, builds, and creates Kosovo! Shillove.” This message, laden with the symbolism of glorifying the Nemanjic dynasty, serves to renew medieval narratives emphasizing Serbian claims over Kosovo, leveraging national mythology as a tool for mobilization and interethnic division.

These actions are a deliberate attempt to revive historical ideology in support of a modern nationalist and



Photo: 3 In Shillove, Gjilan, Serbs called for anti-Kosovo slogans and the restoration of Nemanja's empire.

political agenda. This approach parallels Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric of reviving Russia’s past greatness, justifying aggressive actions through the glorification of historical periods of power and domination. The

use of such messages at gatherings adorned with Serbian symbols and flags continues the effort to weaponize mythology as a propaganda tool to destabilize and incite interethnic tensions in Kosovo.

The interaction between these messages and the broader context of “religious” celebrations demonstrates a clearly synchronized strategy in which religious, historical, and political elements are intertwined to reinforce ties between Serbia and Russia, undermining efforts for peace and coexistence in the region.

As part of the orchestrated scenarios by Serbian groups in Kosovo, a [banner](#) with the inscription “We are coming for Christmas”, displayed in northern municipalities in November of last year before the terrorist attack on critical infrastructure in Iber Lepenc, served as a provocative warning and a symbol of political mobilization under the guise of religious celebration. This message, in the context of ongoing nationalist rhetoric against Kosovo, was not merely symbolic but a direct call for escalating conflicts and creating fear among local communities.



Photo: 4 The banner "We are coming for Christmas" in the northern municipalities of Kosovo.



Photo: 5 The celebrations of Serbs with the Chetnik flag in Popovci.

Provocations with Chetnik flags continued unabated in Leposavic. In the village of Popovc in this municipality, a group of Serbs was photographed celebrating with the Chetnik flag and other nationalist symbols (even involving children), providing a clear example of the instrumentalization of religious and ethnic symbolism for political agendas. These actions are not merely local provocations but part of a broader strategy that exploits celebrations and historical symbolism to incite nationalism and interethnic tensions.

In response to these developments, Kosovo Police, in coordination with KFOR, heightened [vigilance](#) to ensure stability and prevent these provocations from escalating into more severe incidents. The operational plan implemented

aimed to address a situation classified as high-risk, considering the nature of the rhetoric and the atmosphere created by actors seeking to destabilize Kosovo.

Simultaneously, efforts to obscure the true intentions behind these actions were supported by propaganda platforms such as [Russia Today](#). Through manipulated narratives, this international media outlet distorted the situation, attempting to portray the celebrations as peaceful and spiritual events. Through this propaganda strategy, it aimed to misinform the global audience and justify destabilizing acts, while on the ground, the actions had a clearly provocative and well-planned character.

From national-religion to proxy politics

In the ongoing exploitation of Orthodox Christmas celebrations to bolster nationalist chauvinism among Serbs, the [Serbian List](#) responded by declaring itself as “the shield protecting the interests of Serbs and Serbia in Kosovo”. Furthermore, it accused the Central Election Commission (CEC) of “denying” its right to monitor the elections scheduled for February 9. This rhetoric is rooted in a long history of manipulations and dubious electoral practices that have characterized the Serbian List’s activities.

In the past, elections have been marred by numerous [reports](#) of manipulation and vote-rigging by this entity, including direct threats against Serbian voters. One of the most egregious cases occurred in 2021, when the Serbian List attempted to [manipulate the electoral](#) system by distributing votes to non-Serbian parties aligned with its agenda, aiming to secure more pro-Serbia representatives in Kosovo’s Assembly. Additionally, the climate of fear has been exacerbated by extreme acts of violence against dissenters within the Serbian community, such as the murder of politician Oliver Ivanovic, an outspoken critic of the Serbian List.

The activities of the Serbian List have severely impacted the democratic process within the Serbian community in Kosovo, transforming this political entity into an organization that employs autocratic practices resembling militantly organized structures. However, the waning influence of the Serbian List has sparked panic in Serbia, as its declining power and diminishing threats against the Serbian community in Kosovo gradually weaken its grip. This development could result in the loss of at least some of the guaranteed seats for Serbs in Kosovo’s Assembly, where the Serbian List currently holds a strong position with 10 deputies.

The risk lies in the possibility of an aggressive response from Serbia and the Serbian List to reclaim their lost influence, potentially including new hybrid or terrorist attacks against Kosovo. These tactics might also

involve more severe provocations, such as fabricating incidents to blame Albanians. Cases like the PANDA* massacre in Peja or the Djordje Martinovic* incident in Gjilan remain clear examples of such dangerous and manipulative strategies that undermine peace and regional stability.

One of the Serbian List’s key strategies is to provoke Albanians into creating incidents that can be used as justification for their propaganda. However, these attempts have so far been unsuccessful, making it evident that narratives based on direct provocations are not working. In the absence of results in this regard, the Serbian List and Vucic’s regime may escalate to another level: fabricating and manipulating incidents themselves to project a false reality where Albanians are portrayed as aggressors.

This approach is essential to maintaining the autocratic vertical structure of Vucic’s regime and the Serbian List. They act as guardians of a provincial mindset, where conflict and hostility are deliberately used to divert the Serbian people’s attention from the lack of economic and social development and from a state of “mental occupation” that prevents Serbian society from advancing toward functional democracy. Any effort to give the Serbian people the space to escape this deadlock would pose a direct threat to Vucic’s power and his close political circle, which would then frame such efforts as threats to Serbia itself.

Thus, their strategy is based on creating a perpetual state of tension and conflict, using propaganda, information manipulation, and deliberate provocations as the primary tools to ensure their grip on power. For Vucic and the Serbian List, fostering ongoing hostilities and interethnic conflicts not only serves to maintain their position in Serbia but also undermines Kosovo’s sovereignty and stability both domestically and on the international stage.

*[PANDA](#) crime happened on December 14, 1998, in Peja, six Serbian youths were killed in an attack on a cafe. Initially, the incident was attributed to Albanians and used as propaganda by the Serbian regime to justify its military actions in Kosovo. However, in 2013, Aleksandar Vucic publicly admitted that the attack had been carried out by Serbian security services themselves.

* On May 1, 1985, [Djordje Martinovic](#), a Serbian farmer from Gjilan, Kosovo, reported an alleged attack by masked Albanians, claiming he had been sexually assaulted with a bottle. Subsequent investigations revealed that the injury was self-inflicted during an act of masturbation, according to an official report by the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade. Later, Martinovic admitted to fabricating the event and acknowledged that the injury was the result of a self-inflicted act, confessing to lying about the attack.

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