

CHAUVINISM HIDDEN BEHIND RELIGION: THE CASE OF THE CHURCH IN THE COURTYARD OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PRISHTINA

Dr. Gurakuç Kuçi

Senior Researcher at Institute for Hybrid Warfare Studies “OCTOPUS” and professor
gurakuq.kuqi@octopusinstitute.org

Abstract

This article critically examines the construction of the Serbian Orthodox “Church of Christ the Savior” in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina during the 1990s, framing it as a symbolic and ideological act of occupation rather than a religious endeavor. Positioned within the broader context of Serbian nationalist-chauvinist policy under Slobodan Milosevic, the church’s construction is analyzed as a calculated attempt to assert Serbian dominance over Kosovo’s cultural and educational spaces during a period of institutional apartheid and ethnic repression. The paper argues that this act represents a flagrant violation of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the Geneva Conventions, the Hague Convention on Cultural Property, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Far from serving a local religious community, the church functioned as a hybrid weapon—an instrument of propaganda cloaked in religious symbolism to project control, erase Albanian identity, and reshape historical narratives. The study also deconstructs contemporary efforts to rehabilitate the church's image through propagandistic discourse in Serbian media and pseudo-academic commentary, highlighting how such narratives serve as tools of strategic mobilization and interethnic polarization. Ultimately, the paper argues that the issue should not be framed as a matter of heritage protection within Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, but as a legacy of illegal occupation and symbolic violence. By dissecting the fusion of nationalism, religion, and propaganda, the article reveals how the misuse of faith can become a strategic instrument of domination in hybrid warfare.

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Chauvinism Hidden Behind Religion: The Case of the Church in the Courtyard of the University of Prishtina

At the onset of the former Yugoslavia’s disintegration, the year 1989 marked a dark turning point for Kosovo. Serbia, under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic, unilaterally revoked Kosovo’s constitutional autonomy, dismantled its institutions, and imposed an oppressive system on the Albanian majority. This institutionalized repression was part of a broader Serbian nationalist-chauvinist project, which in the ensuing decade would lead to bloody wars and the genocide in Bosnia (1992–1995), shocking the international conscience.

Within this climate of violence and denial, the Serbian regime began construction of the “Church of Christ the Savior” in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina in 1992. This was not a spiritual or religious initiative of the local community, but a premeditated ideological project, intended to implant Serbian presence and dominance in a space that symbolized knowledge, identity, and the resilience of Albanians in Kosovo. At a time when Albanians were forcibly excluded from education, media, and public institutions, the construction of such a religious object in the heart of the university was a clear symbolic act of ethno-political control.

Had this project been completed and Kosovo ultimately occupied, it would not have stopped at symbolism: it would have included the appropriation of the National Library of Kosovo as a church library, as well as the conversion of university facilities for the church’s needs. This would have secured the Church a strategic position in the heart of Prishtina, turning it into a religious, cultural, and political center for all of Kosovo. This church represented the use of faith as a propagandistic instrument rather than an expression of genuine religious need. It was not constructed to serve the local Orthodox community, but to project Serbian power over public space, to normalize repression, and to impose a new historical narrative. Even the name itself “Church of Christ the Savior” was part of this propaganda: it did not evoke a universal religious value, but rather attempted to portray occupation as “salvation” and oppression as “faith.”

At its core, this church was not a place of worship but a monument of occupation, a calculated effort to strip the University of Prishtina of its Albanian identity and replace it with a symbol of Serbian political power. It was a deliberate act aimed at producing ongoing cultural and historical tension, cloaking domination in the guise of religion, and employing it as a hybrid weapon.

Instrumentalization of Religion for Occupation: The Church’s Construction in Violation of International Law

The construction of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina in the early 1990s, at a time when Kosovo was under an oppressive regime and an institutional apartheid system against Albanians, constitutes a direct violation of numerous principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

According to Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), any destruction or appropriation of public or private property by an occupying power is prohibited, except where such destruction is absolutely necessary for military purposes. Following the abolition of Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989, Serbia acted as a *de facto* occupying power and appropriated the public space of a civilian institution, the University of Prishtina, by constructing a religious building tied to its nationalist-chauvinist ideology. This act not only violated the principle of non-interference with civilian objects but also represented the appropriation of spaces ethnically cleansed of Albanian students and staff under the pretext of military necessity.

Similarly, Article 52 of Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions (1977) prohibits the use of civilian objects for purposes that transform them into political or military targets. The transformation of an educational space into a tool of religious-political propaganda during a time of systematic repression clearly contravenes this provision, turning the University into a platform of ideological imposition.

Furthermore, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), supported by UNESCO conventions, prohibits the misuse and politicization of cultural heritage sites. The construction of a religious-political structure within an educational and cultural center during a period of ethnically organized violence and discrimination violates Article 4 of this Convention, which mandates the protection of cultural property even during wartime.

From a human rights perspective, the construction of the church in a space that had been ethnically cleansed of Albanians also violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966). Article 18 of this covenant guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all citizens. Meanwhile, Article 27 protects the rights of minorities to enjoy their culture and practice their religion. In this case, the Albanian majority was excluded from public institutions, while in their place was installed a symbol of a nationalized religion serving only the occupier.

Within this context, the legal evaluation must also consider two fundamental principles of international humanitarian law: *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. According to *jus ad bellum*, Serbia’s use of force to maintain

control over Kosovo after 1989 had no legitimate basis under international law. Serbia acted without the consent of the local population and without international mandate, rendering its occupation illegal. Accordingly, the construction of the church as a symbol of occupation was not an isolated act, but part of a broader aggressive action that violated the right to self-determination.

From the perspective of *jus in bello*, even if Serbia had held a recognized status as an occupying power, it was still obligated to preserve the civilian character of public institutions and protect cultural property. The construction of a religious-political structure on ethnically cleansed educational grounds constitutes a clear violation of these obligations, turning a civilian zone into an object of propaganda and ethnic tension.

All of these actions, undertaken as part of a broader strategy of institutional apartheid and cultural domination, represent a breach of both the spirit and the letter of international law. The construction of the Church in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina cannot be treated as a neutral or merely religious act, but as an integral part of the machinery of symbolic occupation and structural violence.

During the war in Kosovo in 1998, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) undertook deliberate efforts to protect Serbian religious sites from damage and vandalism, in accordance with international humanitarian law. According to a report by Agence France-Presse (AFP), republished by [Albanian Post](#), KLA fighters stationed guards at several Serbian Orthodox monasteries to protect them during field clashes. This conduct, contrary to narratives that portray the KLA as an exclusionary force, demonstrates a commitment to preserving cultural heritage and religious diversity in Kosovo. Such actions align with the Hague Convention (1954) and the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit targeting religious sites and mandate their protection in times of conflict. While the Serbian regime constructed religious structures as instruments of political domination, the KLA by safeguarding monuments of the other religious community affirmed the defensive and ethical character of its liberation struggle.

Deconstructing the Propaganda Surrounding the Church in the Courtyard of the University of Prishtina

In Kosovo's post-war public discourse, one often encounters attempts to rewrite historical narratives through a refined apparatus of propaganda, operating under the guise of academic analysis or public concern. Articles published on the Kosovo Online platform by individuals with titles such as “professor,” “political analyst,” or “civil society representative” do not represent opinions built upon verifiable facts but ideologically positioned formulations designed to confuse readers and to construct a false dichotomy between “heritage protection” and “religious persecution.”

For example, in an article quoting Professor [Popovic](#) (“the most sacred symbols of the Serbian community are being targeted in Kosovo”), there is a complete lack of concrete references to events, individuals, or specific contexts. Instead of scholarly argumentation, we are presented with emotionally charged generalizations, where any criticism of the Church in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina is equated with an attack on the entire Serbian community. This is a pure example of the technique of spreading collective fear, aimed at preventing rational debate by replacing it with identity panic.

Likewise, statements by analysts such as [Gudzhic](#), who claim that “the goal of the Albanian elites is to erase the Serbian presence in Kosovo”, reflect a simplified and dangerous form of political logic: any criticism of a politically imposed building during wartime is automatically equated with the “cleansing” of a people. This represents a direct manipulation of the word “presence”, presenting the object of conflict as the representative of an entire collective.

Particularly concerning is the involvement of [academic](#) voices in this discourse. Rather than engaging with source-based, contextual, and measurable criteria, these individuals use their titles to seal the narrative as an unquestionable truth. A university professor who engages publicly without citing a single historical, legal, or factual source, and instead relies solely on normative and dramatic statements, violates the very principles of the scientific method: skepticism, objectivity, and argumentative transparency. Such a figure is not educating but contributing to the production of an ideologized readership, erasing the boundary between science and propaganda.

This mode of communication is not neutral: it aids in consolidating a political mythology around the Church as a victim, while concealing its true nature as an instrument of cultural occupation. The fact that these statements avoid engaging with historical data (e.g., the period of the Church’s construction, its symbolic function, the exclusion of Albanians from education, violations of international law) indicates that the goal is not clarification but the creation of a monstrous worldview in which every effort at decolonization is framed as fanaticism against religion.

In this way, propagandistic discourse is not merely inaccurate but actively dangerous: it renders honest conversation impossible and incites tensions by concealing injustice under the veil of “national concern” or “heritage preservation.” Countering this type of rhetoric requires not only confrontation with facts but a denunciation of the method itself, because when science is used to conceal power, it ceases to be science.

From Imaginary Alarm to Political Agenda: The Church as a Symbol of Strategic Mobilization

The discourse constructed around the illegally built Orthodox church in the courtyard of the University of Prishtina, as promoted in certain Serbian media outlets, does not aim to preserve religious heritage, but rather to create a political narrative that frames every legal or institutional debate as an attack on religion. This form of propaganda exploits religious sensitivities to generate interethnic tensions, mobilize Serbian public opinion, and undermine the legitimacy of Kosovo’s institutions in the eyes of the international public.

Particularly problematic is the current attempt to include this issue in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue as a “cultural heritage topic”. This effort is unfounded, as the object in question does not represent protected religious heritage, but a contested construction, built without the consent of the majority during a period of deep institutional repression.

The renewed propaganda efforts, especially during this sensitive political moment and the heightened attention to this church by Kosovo Online, indicate that Serbia is preparing an agenda aimed at mass mobilization, including the potential call for mobilization for war, with the ultimate goal of marching toward Prishtina in “defense” of the church.

No one has called for the demolition of the church, and Kosovo’s position is not one of opposition to the Orthodox faith. However, attempts to treat the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo with special status or to politicize this structure violate the principle of religious equality and aim to transform a legally debatable object into a tool of political bargaining.

These are familiar tactics that Serbia has used in the past: victimization, division, and the diversion of debate from historical truth to emotionally charged narratives. For this reason, it is essential that this issue not be included in the inter-state dialogue and that Serbia’s actions, particularly those employing instruments such as the Orthodox Church for the purposes of inciting conflict and promoting victimhood, remain under close public scrutiny.