

TRANSNATIONAL EVANGELICAL NETWORKS IN SERBIA AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the end of communism, the former Yugoslav republics experienced a decade of armed conflict. In the Western Balkans, a complete synthesis between ethnicity and religion has been established. A complex network of church institutions, a large Serbian minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church enabled the Serbian Orthodox Church to act as a center of soft power in the context of geopolitical processes in the region. In recent years, however, transnationalist evangelical Christian communities have emerged as an antithesis to the majority religions in the Western Balkans. This paper examines the capacity of transnational evangelical communities to create interethnic tolerance in Serbia, primarily through the analysis of their humanitarian activities, their inclusiveness in relation to minority and marginalized social groups, and their influence among Serbs in the diaspora.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, or the United States Institute of Peace.

INTRODUCTION

Carl Schmitt's famous claim from his *Political Theology* (2006)—“All significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”¹—is becoming ever more relevant. Despite the formal separation of state and religion, from the American and French revolutions until today, politics and religion have remained connected in many ways. This connection was most often manifested in the attribution of a sacred character to a nation, state, class, race, party, or leader. In addition, political practice was often imbued with myths, rituals, and symbols in ways that closely resembled religious models. This kind of synthesis was more than obvious in political ideas and movements such as national romanticism and Marxism, or in fascist and communist regimes.²

At the end of the twentieth century, the interaction of politics and religion appeared in a more direct form. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist bloc, there was a revival of religion in the post-communist states. Suppressed for decades by communist regimes, religions returned to the scene in Eastern European countries as important factors in the construction of new political and social identities. Another form of religious revivalism manifested itself in the countries of the Near and Middle East. There, the overthrow of secular regimes in some countries did not result in a greater degree of democracy, but in the opening of a wider space for rigid Islamic fundamentalism.

However, the growing power of religion was perhaps most visible in the wars that followed the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic (SFR) of Yugoslavia. Although the wars between Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks were seen as ethnic conflicts, they were also wars between Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims. In the Western Balkans, a complete synthesis has been established between ethnicity and religion. To be a Serb means exclusively to be an Orthodox Christian, to be a Croat is to be a Catholic, and a Bosniak is a synonym for a Muslim.³

Even today, this equalization of ethnic and religious identity represents a potential possibility for the generation of new conflicts in this part of Europe. This is especially pronounced in the Serbian Orthodox Church. Although in Orthodox Christianity ethnophyletism was formally declared heretical and contrary to Christian universalism, the Serbian Orthodox Church continued to influence political stability in the Western Balkans even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A complex network of church institutions, along with the fact that Serbs are a large minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, as well as close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, enabled the Serbian Orthodox Church to act as a powerful and influential center in the creation of geopolitical processes in the region.

In recent years, however, transnationalist evangelical communities have emerged as an antithesis to the majority religions in the Western Balkans. By restoring the original Christian universalism, evangelical communities represent a potential opportunity for building more heterogeneous religious structures in Balkan societies and an alternative to the existing intertwining of ethnic and religious identities. One of the key distinctive elements of evangelical identity is the emphasis on the “supra-ethnic” or “meta-ethnic” identity and openness to various ethnic groups.⁴ Therefore, the main goal of this work is to research the capacity of transnational evangelical communities in Serbia—that is, the form of soft power, primarily through the analysis of their expansion and inclusiveness in relation to minority and marginalized social groups, their humanitarian activities, as well as the degree of their influence among Serbs in the diaspora.

Considering that existing scholarly literature has mostly focused on majority religions, we believe that with this text we contribute to a better understanding of the role of evangelical communities in creating relations of interethnic tolerance in Serbia, as well as in other countries in the region.

TRANSNATIONAL EVANGELICAL NETWORKS IN SERBIA

In recent years, the notion of transnationalism has emerged as a powerful framing concept for understanding a variety of ties, linkages, and alliances that connect widely dispersed communities in a complex network of interactions across national borders.⁵ Transnationalism is closely linked to religious actors as well. As Jeffrey Haynes argues, “increased religious transnational activities are stimulated by globalisation and especially the accompanying communication revolution.”⁶ He further says that the result of these developments is the expansion of “global religious identities,” whereby “people feel themselves part of religious transnational communities in new and important ways...”⁷ In understanding the role of transnational religious networks, one cannot neglect the important role of religion as a form of soft power. As a concept introduced by Joseph Nye (1990),⁸ soft power could be applicable in the context of religious transnational actors which, according to Haynes, must accomplish two goals: “disseminate an attractive cross border message while adapting to local circumstances.”⁹

One of the insightful examples of transnational networks among religious groups is evangelical communities. Their origin and history in the territory of present-day Serbia date back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the first communities of Nazarenes and Baptists emerged in ethnically diverse spaces of Austria-Hungary and later in the region south of the Danube in the Kingdom of Serbia.¹⁰ The emergence of these new religious communities in the first decades of the twentieth century had significant social, cultural, and political impact on the region in the following decades. It affected the spread of religious literacy with various publications in vernacular languages, new concepts of religious practice with an emphasis on personal religiosity, and inner conversion through baptism of adults. Their emergence—Nazarenes, Baptists, Adventists, and Pentecostals—was especially encouraged in the interwar period with the support of different missionary efforts from abroad, including the important role of the British Bible Society. These developed not only in present-day Vojvodina but also in other regions, especially those communities with a high presence of ethnic minorities or in borderlands. Some of the effects of these new developments, in the context of increased religious diversity, influenced revival or renewal movements in Orthodox Christianity as well.¹¹

Therefore, the border regions, places in between in an anthropological sense, presented “hidden religious landscapes” and key places for enhancing contacts between oppressed minority religious groups.

The challenging relationship between religious minorities was especially present during the socialist years, which brought severe persecution of these minority groups due to their pacifism, for example. Persecution was also due to their international and transnational networks and missionary work, especially with Western European countries and the United States. In the Archives of Yugoslavia, there are a number of documents showing how the communist government closely followed these transnational networks. Evangelicals had headquarters across the United States or the West, and there had been strong emigration of persecuted religious minorities from Yugoslavia, some of them previously condemned to long and repeated prison sentences. Community members emigrated, often illegally crossing the border to Italy and Austria in search of religious freedom in the West.¹² Most of the activities were strongly linked to the border areas. These transborder religious practices by diverse religious groups deployed various means to spread their beliefs and practice their religion. Therefore, the border regions, places in between in an anthropological sense, presented “hidden religious landscapes” and key places for enhancing contacts between oppressed minority religious groups.¹³

The main characteristic of all evangelical communities was the ability to reach out and gain followers among very different ethnic groups. Their inclusivity was based on religious identity as a main identity marker and not on ethnicity, which led to diverse ethnic backgrounds of their communities in the Balkans. Many ethnic

minority groups (re)discovered their religious identity in evangelical groups, which has been analyzed in several sociological and anthropological studies, especially in the cases of the Roma minority in the south of Serbia or Romanians in Vojvodina.¹⁴

In Serbia there are seven officially recognized traditional religions, while the majority of the other registered confessional communities are of Protestant origin.¹⁵ According to the Law on Churches and Religious Communities of the Republic of Serbia from 2006, the status of traditional church is recognized for churches with “centuries of historic continuity”: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovakian Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Religious Community, and the Jewish Religious Community.

The law has received much criticism and a high number of objections from scholars, various European commissions and referendums, civil rights protectors, and the religious organizations themselves.¹⁶ One of the biggest challenges smaller religious communities face are very restrictive conditions for registration. These are sometimes hard to fulfill, especially for newly established communities or branches of existing religious groups. Evangelicals or neo-Protestant communities, for example, faced difficulties in registering with the Serbian authorities. The differences between the seven official churches and religious communities and those which are confessional communities are the terms of special state funding, greater access to the media, and religious education. Besides the traditional religious communities with large numbers of believers, a small percent of the population in Serbia belongs to Protestant and neo-Protestant churches and communities (less than 3%). In ethnic terms, the congregations of traditional Protestant churches come mainly from the Hungarian and Slovak minorities. Evangelicals tend to be transnational, having believers from different ethnic backgrounds and holding religious services in many languages.

In the context of emerging religious diversity, the creation of this increasingly heterogeneous religious structure of European societies leads to rethinking and questioning of the existing normative frameworks in many nation-states, especially in those countries where national and religious identities are intertwined.

In societies where some ethnic groups are often identified according to their confessional identity (Serbs and Romanians as Orthodox, Slovaks as Lutherans, Hungarians as Calvinist, Croats as Catholics), religion becomes one of the main ethnic identity markers and plays a central role in drawing ethno-national boundaries.¹⁷ Evangelical or neo-Protestant communities such as Nazarenes, Baptists, Methodist, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists are mostly present in ethnically mixed areas in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina. Conversion to neo-Protestantism has always been greater in multiethnic and multiconfessional areas as well as among ethnic minority groups.¹⁸

Considering the challenges of religious organizations in Yugoslavia, Sabrina Ramet offered a threefold classification of religious organizations.¹⁹ The first classification includes the Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches, which both have the role of historical and leading churches within one nation. The second consists of “ethnic churches” that are most often oriented towards minorities, and Ramet defines them as “national” in their form but without the possibility of having the role of “national leadership” (such as the Lutheran Church among the Germans until the World War II or the Reformed Church among the Hungarians). The third group consists of “non-national churches” that reject the importance of national culture as part of their ideology (Baptists, Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.). Non-national churches,” mentioned by Ramet, represent the basic feature of all neo-Protestant communities in which believers do not look at national affiliation and consider that everyone is the same before God—referring to the New Testament quote where the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28 emphasizes the principle of equality before God: “There is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or master, there is no male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the context of emerging religious diversity, the creation of this increasingly heterogenous religious structure of European societies leads to rethinking and questioning of the existing normative frameworks in many nation-states, especially in those countries where national and religious identities are intertwined. This follows upon significant changes within European societies—not least because of conflicts and migratory waves from various geographic regions and cultures, but also due to the existence of various transnational networks among religious communities.

HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES OF EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA AFTER THE DISINTEGRATION OF YUGOSLAVIA

As part of global religious communities, evangelical religious practices are recognizable in many countries where they have organized church life. This includes the role of humanitarian activities, a key characteristic of evangelical communities. The humanitarian work is provided through their faith-based organizations, which may exist globally or may include initiatives by local evangelical communities. Examples of the start of such faith-based activities in Serbia come from the period after 1990, when the civil war started in the former Yugoslavia and local humanitarian aid organizations were established through the support of their international headquarters. For example, the World Council of Churches initiated the foundation of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization in Serbia (EHO) in 1993. The EHO was founded by representatives of five Protestant churches in Serbia: the Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Ruski Krstur, and the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia.

Among neo-Protestant or evangelical communities there were two organizations that had significant activities: the Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA) and the Bread of Life. ADRA is a global humanitarian organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. According to the data available on its website, ADRA's international network is made up of 130 national offices around the globe, which together make up ADRA International. The Serbian branch of ADRA was founded in 1990. It became famous worldwide because it was the only humanitarian organization able to deliver humanitarian aid during the siege of Sarajevo.²⁰ During that period, between 1992 and 1994, ADRA served as the main communication channel to deliver mail between two countries, between families and friends. ADRA worked intensively in supporting the displaced population in Serbia during the period of 1992 to 1995. In the research paper based on empirical research conducted by Djurić, Milovanovic, and Veković, the data indicates that the foundation of ADRA's office in Serbia originated from the existing international offices of ADRA based in Germany, Austria, and Hungary (European countries with significant number of immigrants from Serbia), which had been sending help (food, clothes, and medicine) to Serbia on a weekly basis. However, humanitarian activities in the region started quite early, after the 1989 Romanian revolution. In late December 1989, ADRA sent two trucks of aid (mostly food and clothes totaling six to eight tons) to Timișoara. As ADRA had received a lot of help from abroad, it was able to send four to five tons of food to Sarajevo in 1991.

The humanitarian aid organization Bread of Life was jointly founded by the Protestant Evangelical Church and the Baptist Church in Belgrade in 1992. Their website offers the following description of their mission:

Based on experience in humanitarian work, and with the acquired knowledge from the past, Bread of Life today implements long-term development programs to strengthen the vulnerable groups in society, while remaining sensitive to the humanitarian needs of the poor, sensitive to the needs of the various health and social institutions, as well, it engages in disaster relief, as it did in the floods of 2014, the arrival of migrants in 2015 and 2016, the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020.²¹

The activities started in the Baptist Church in Belgrade in the early spring of 1992, when the members of this Baptist congregation saw a significant number of people on the streets of Belgrade holding nothing but white bags filled with food. Soon afterwards, they realized these people were refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in need of help. The first step was to print 20 posters addressing the people in need, with a call to come to the church for prayer, help, and support. The Baptist Church decided to open the church to refugees and people in need once a week on Thursdays, and the first meeting was

Although their work brought significant changes to the lives of many people in need in the 1990s, and more recently to refugee populations from the Middle East, it seems the humanitarian work of Bread of Life is quite unknown to the wider population in Serbia. Coming from the side of a religious minority, the effects and long-term relevance of their work remained hidden from the public.

attended by approximately 10 people. As time passed, the number of people coming to the church grew to exceed the building's capacity. As the number of people increased, the leadership reached out to Baptist churches abroad to seek help. One of the members of the Baptist Church in Sweden managed to gather and send nine tons of aid by truck to Belgrade. As the capacity of the Baptist church was limited with regard to receiving, packing, and disseminating this large amount of help, they turned to other religious communities for assistance. This process started in April 1992, and after a meeting with the Protestant Evangelical Church in Belgrade, they agreed to jointly develop and register the Bread of Life organization in September 1992.²²

Bread of Life's activities would not be possible without the existing network of churches and especially the diaspora from Serbia living in many countries in Europe, the United States, and Canada. The significant level of international support for Bread of Life lay in their connections and cooperation with different Protestant churches in Western Europe as various diplomatic representatives in Serbia became aware of the organization. Various other Protestant communities and organizations, including Tearfund; the Church of Sweden; Protestant churches from England, Canada, or Germany; the Red Cross; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; and the International Rescue Committee were included in collaboration and support due to the trust they had in the mission of Bread of Life. They also organized its regional branch in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1994, based in the city of Prijedor.²³ The openness for non-evangelicals allowed them to develop open and efficient networks of volunteers who came from different religious communities and even from refugee populations. The work of volunteers with those in need was crucial. Although their work brought significant changes to the lives of many people in need in the 1990s, and more recently to refugee populations from the Middle East, it seems the humanitarian work of Bread of Life is quite unknown to the wider population in Serbia. Coming from the side of a religious minority, the effects and long-term relevance of their work remained hidden from the public.

THE ROLE OF THE EVANGELICAL DIASPORA

Throughout the twentieth century, members of evangelical communities were prone to emigration, some due to persecution because of their religious identity (such as the case of pacifist Nazarenes) or because they had the support of communities abroad. After the fall of communism, many believers had an important role in financing local congregations in Serbia. Their aid has been predominantly directed towards building new prayer houses, book donations, and organization of evangelization events with educated preachers. Interconnectedness between members of evangelical communities was always high and important. Even during communist times, evangelicals were strictly controlled by the state, especially because of their international and transnational networks and missionary work: "Perceived as the potential allies of foreign intervention due to their connections with communities in other countries, religious minorities were seen as a threat."²⁴ In many European countries, especially those where a number

of Serbian immigrants arrived mostly in the 1960s and 1970s for labor migration (including Austria, Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden), evangelicals founded different so-called “Yugoslav churches.” In the war-torn years, these diaspora communities had a significant role not only in sending humanitarian aid, but also in providing support to local communities across Serbia. These included donations to public hospitals and schools. The Nazarene emigrants in the United States of America have a number of churches which actively contributed to churches in Serbia for decades. These diasporic networks had a critical role in sustaining rather numerically small evangelical churches, especially in rural areas.²⁵

Evangelical diaspora communities supported advancing and developing evangelical youth associations as an important element of their network in Serbia and across the Balkans. According to Pastor Samuilo Petrovski, the Protestant student movements in the countries of the Balkans are part of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), which gathers 150 national Protestant-evangelical movements existing in most countries of the world.²⁶ The Evangelical University Students (EUS) was organized in Serbia in 1991; however, evangelical Christian student work in Yugoslavia started after World War I. This evangelical association

gathers all Christian students, regardless of their religious orientation and is organizing worship concerts with a goal of developing friendships among believers from different Christian churches. It also has an important goal to promote religious tolerance among all believers. Most protestant-evangelical student movements in the Balkans have similar activities, ways of action and visions, and all of them insist that the students should strive for an authentic Christian life.²⁷

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we propose a framework for understanding the role of transnational evangelical communities in overcoming interethnic conflicts in Serbia and other countries of the Western Balkans. The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia brought not only a revival of the influence of traditional religions, but also a strong synthesis of religious and ethnic identities. This explosive connection had a direct impact on the character and dynamics of the wars fought in the Western Balkans region during the 1990s. Moreover, this negative influence continued into the early twenty-first century, producing a geopolitical context in which ethnic-religious narratives and extreme relational processes continue to dominate. At the center of this struggle for supremacy between mutually confronted entities are the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Islamic Community—the so-called “traditional” religions that persistently implement the concept of intertwining of ethnic, national, and religious identity. In the region of the Western Balkans, these powerful religious actors—who insist on defining a “true and desirable identity” and emphasize the preservation of “traditional identities and cultural patterns”²⁸—are undoubtedly generators of continuous crises.

On the other side of this religious spectrum are transnational evangelical communities. The expansion of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity in the world²⁹ also affected the increasingly visible presence of these communities in the countries of the Western Balkans. Actors influencing the increase in the number of believers in neo-Protestant religious communities refer to cultural and ethnic neutrality, the strong missionary activity these communities have in society, and “the willingness of these Christians to use the means of modern technology to spread their teachings.”³⁰ Because of their consistent insistence on Christian universalism, transnational evangelical communities represent an essential antithesis to traditional religions and a possible framework for overcoming interethnic conflicts. Therefore, in this paper, we analyzed the capacity of transnational religious communities in Serbia and their influence on overcoming interethnic conflicts. We conclude that, despite their size, evangelical communities represent potentially important actors in the process of reducing interethnic tensions. This influence can be attributed to their expansiveness and inclusiveness, highly developed humanitarian activities, and increasingly strong presence among Serbs in the diaspora.

Despite some predictions, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century religion remains an important and powerful instrument in the creation of social and political processes. Religions represent an inherent component of human life and are an important factor in the production and reproduction of not only the relationship between individuals and society, but also the relationship between different states (especially in the unstable region of the Western Balkans). That is why it is extremely important to maintain an analytical position that includes active reflection and consideration of the framework, manner, and scope of soft power exhibited by different religions; that is, focusing on the phenomenon of the influence of religions on social and political processes becomes an academic constant in various social and humanistic disciplines.

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The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics. This working paper arises from a partnership between the project and the United States Institute of Peace focused on understanding how the geopolitics of religion shapes peace and conflict dynamics in particular regional and country settings.

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