

DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX
EUROPE: COMPARING GREECE, SERBIA AND RUSSIA,
BY MARKO VEKOVIĆ, LONDON & NEW YORK,
ROUTLEDGE, 2020.

For a long time, Orthodoxy was considered a „strong obstacle” to democratization, it was believed to be a tradition that was extremely anti-democratic and anti-modern, and that it did not have a significant part in any of the waves of democratization in the way that Western Christianity did. The author of this book, starting from the fact that today we have 12 predominantly Orthodox countries and that most of them are stable democratic regimes, or on their way to becoming one, concludes that it is almost certain that the Orthodox Churches in these countries played some role in the process democratization. For his case study, he takes three Orthodox countries, Greece, Serbia and Russia, in which the Orthodox churches played completely different roles in the process of democratization, that is, the first was a free rider, the second was a leading actor and the third showed resistance to democratization. Vekovic points out that it is precisely this different engagement that speaks in favor of the idea of political ambivalence and multi-vocality of religion, and that it is therefore, wrong to characterize Orthodoxy as univocal and anti-democratic. The main argument that the author states as the reason for the different political engagement of churches belonging to the same tradition (so they have the same political theology) is a specific institutional arrangement (the relationship between the Church and the State) that crucially affects the political engagement of the church. In addition to the State-Church relationship, the historical and political context within democratization starts, the type of regime which preceded democracy, and the question who initiated democratization had an important influence on the political engagement of the Orthodox churches as well. As these factors were *differentia specifica* for post-communist, Orthodox countries, the author suggests that the wave of democratization in Orthodox countries should be called *The Orthodox Christian Cluster of Democratization*.

In the technical sense, this book consists of an acknowledgment, appendices bibliography, index, notes and the book's body is made up of an introduction, five chapters and concluding remarks.

In the introduction of his book, the author points out that it is possible to notice that in the process of democratization in dominantly Orthodox countries, the Orthodox churches could have played one of 4 roles: Leading actor, Supportive actor, Free -rider and Reactionary resister of democratization (p.27). Vekovic takes three countries as a case study: Greece (Free rider), Serbia (Leading actor) and Russia (Reactionary resister) and asks the research question *Why did different Orthodox Christian Churches, although sharing the same ideas about politics (political theology), act significantly differently in the democratization processes in Greece, Russia and Serbia?*

Vekovic opens the discussion with the case study of Greece and the role of the Greek Orthodox Church (GOC) in the process of democratization. As he states, the GOC was never just a religious actor, but its role goes much beyond that, it penetrates into the social and political life of this country. This very important institution has been the subject of numerous researches, however one period has always been overlooked, that is the period of the military junta (1964–1974), known as dark period in Greek history (p. 41) in which the GOC played very important role. During this period of Greek history, the GOC and the State had a very close relationship, which was determined by the fact that the Church was actually under State control – the state controlled it from the inside (the State directly named and changed archbishops and bishops), it exercised control through finances, as one of the the most powerful means of control, then through the establishment of Church Courts for all clergy who did not agree with regime politics. That is, it can be said that the institutional arrangement in Greece during the military junta was such that the GOC did not have any autonomy, it was, as the author emphasized, *Junta's Church* (p. 43). There were also certain common interests in building such a close relationship between the Church and the State, and they were determined by the wider political context, that is, the fear of communism that was spreading throughout Orthodox Europe at that time which was a great fear for both, the junta and the GOC. However, what makes GOC an interesting case, and why it can be identified as a “free rider” of the democratization process, is that Church supported the military junta but did not oppose its overthrow. Also, when the junta fell and the democratization process began, GOC accepted it in a very good way and began to look for its place in it. Therefore, it is a great example of the political ambivalence of religion, but also an example of how its pro-democratic or pro-authoritarian tendencies are largely determined by its relationship with the State.

The author continues the analysis with the case of Serbia and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in the process of democratization after the fall of communism in 1990, trying to examine the claims of some

authors (Toft, Philpott, and Shah) that the SOC was a leading actor in the process of democratization (p. 63). Vekovic points out that the role of the SOC can be divided into two phases, one from 1990 to 2000 and the other that began with the democratic changes in October 2000. The first phase is characterized above all by SOC's return to the public sphere and the beginning of rebuilding the relationship between the State and the Church that were traditionally very good, damaged only during communism. Also, this stage is characterized by a very positive attitude of the SOC towards democratic changes (such as support for fair and free elections and a multi-party system). As the winner of the first elections was Slobodan Milosevic and his party, practically heirs of communist infrastructure, the Church found itself in a rather difficult position to impose its basic demands – the introduction of religious education in schools and the return of confiscated Church property. As Milosevic refused these demands on several occasions, the SOC distanced itself from the regime and managed to achieve a significant degree of differentiation (autonomy), which, according to the author, enabled it to take a stand against the state and state policy during the 90s and thus support the democratization process. Thus, the SOC was one of the most vocal critics of the regime when it came to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the attitude towards the Serbian population on the other side of the Drina river, and it openly began to criticize the regime through the announcements of the Synod. Dissatisfaction with the regime was also shown through the support that the SOC and late Patriarch Pavle gave to the student protests in 1996. The final split between the Church and the State occurred with the Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, for which SOC largely blamed the regime. The second stage for SOC began after the October 5, 2000 when the Church supported liberalization and the construction of a new democratic order and began to build ever closer relations with the state, from which it received everything that the regime of Slobodan Milosevic did not enable – introduction of religious education in schools, significant progress in returning expropriated property and the introduction of religion into the army (p. 84). This was a very important step for the relationship between the SOC and the State, that is, for the increasingly high level of integrationism. This is especially important since 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party came to power with numerous pro-authoritarian ideas, which has the SOC as its very important ally. The author points out that SOC was a leading actor in the democratization process, as some authors before him correctly noted, and that was largely determined by SOC's autonomy in relation to the State in the 90s. Vekovic ends his analysis with probably the most challenging case, Russia and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the process of democratization, which the author believes showed a resist-

ance to democratization and he explains it by the specific institutional engagement, that is, the relationship between the State and the Church, as in the previous two cases. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism, an ideological vacuum was created that was filled by Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church, which, according to the author, found an important place in the emerging system because identity and culture were the two basic pillars of the new Russia, and the ROC was seen as a great ally in construction of it (p. 115). Thus, a new history began to be written in the relations between the Church and the State in Russia, which in the period from 1990–2000 was characterized by significant autonomy of the Church from the State. The role of the ROC in the process of democratization in post-communist Russia is a great example of the ambivalence of religion. In fact, at the beginning, the ROC showed a very positive attitude towards liberalization and even democratization, which can be seen through its role in the crises that broke out in 1993 and 1995, in which ROC sided with the regime. However, a major turning point occurred in 1997 when the ROC decided to insist on the adoption of the Law, which largely propagated what cannot be labeled as democratic. This turn, that is, the willingness to show authoritarian tendencies, further deepened with the arrival of Vladimir Putin in power in 2000, when begins a new era in the construction of extremely close relations between the Church and the State, i.e. increasing integrationism, which was not oriented towards democratization but towards the construction of a new Russia as a superpower that would be a „controlled democracy.” In building a new, strong Russia, the ROC was an instrument of soft power and this role suited the Church, which supported Putin and received numerous privileges in return. And if the author believes that this was a win-win situation for both parties, he still emphasizes that it is necessary to understand that the Church was not the stronger side here, rather it can be label as *asymmetric symphonia* – the State adheres to the opinion of the Church in what is going on in favor of State, if there is a difference of opinion between the Church and the State, the State follows its own opinion. The additional strengthening of integrationism between the Church and the State continues especially since Putin’s second election for president in 2012, which moved Russia even more towards authoritarianism in which the ROC continued to be the most important ally of the regime. Therefore, the ROC, which today is most often associated with authoritarian models of behavior, actually has an ambivalent character, but as in the first two cases, it is conditioned by the relationship with the State.

All three case studies show that Orthodoxy is not necessarily an obstacle to democratization, rather it is characterized by political ambivalence or multi-vocality. The three different paths that Orthodox churches

chose in three different countries were largely determined by State-Church relations. In Greece, the Church had no autonomy in relation to the State and supported what suited the regime at the given moment, that is, it was a free rider. In Serbia, the Church was the biggest leader of democratic changes in the 90s, mostly because it was autonomous from the State, however, the October 5, 2000 led to greater integrationism, and since 2012 this Church has shown significant support for pro-authoritarian tendencies. Russia, certainly the most challenging case, showed a certain potential to support democratic changes in the years when it was autonomous in relation to the State. With increasing integrationism in the „controlled democracy” of Vladimir Putin, this Church has increasingly begun to show its anti-democratic tendencies.

This book represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the relationship between Orthodoxy and democratization, which for decades were considered completely incompatible, and the literature dealing with this area was almost non-existent. As Eastern Orthodox Europe nowadays becomes the center of many important political events in which Orthodoxy plays a significant role, Vekovic’s book is a great basis for understanding the political nature of Orthodox churches, but also a basis for understanding the way of researching the political behavior of these religious institutions. Nevertheless, Vekovic’s book should not be taken as the last word on Orthodox Christianity and its political potential, nor would I think he intended it as such, yet it should be a great motivation for further research into the dynamic relations between Orthodoxy and politics.

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