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Politics, Religion and Remembering the Past: The Case of Croatian Serbs in the 1990s¹

Carolyn Leutloff

1. Introduction

In former Yugoslavia the socialist regime held the dominant position in public life for decades. The role of the church was more or less restricted to the private sphere and was mostly opposed to the socialist authoritative political discourse. From the late 1980s on and culminating in the break up of the Yugoslav state, the public role of the church has been profoundly re-evaluated. The church supported the upcoming national politics by justifying and stirring up national differences and sometimes even national hatred. Following the increasingly influential national political discourses, religion occupied an important place in the collective identity of the people – primarily on a national-ideological level, but to some extent also on the level of every day practices.

In this paper, I would like to draw attention to this shifting relation between politics and religion by analysing narratives and every day practices which deal with religion and its connection to politics. I will focus on narratives I collected and religious practices I observed among Croatian Serbs in their exile in Belgrade, during my anthropological fieldwork among Serb refugees in 1996 and 1997. These Serbs had lived in the so called “Krajina” from 1991-1995. The “Krajina” was occupied by Serbian forces and was located in the Republic of Croatia, which had been proclaimed in 1990. The refugees fled the region in the direction of Serbia because of the Croatian military (re-)conquest of the “Krajina” in the summer of 1995.

During my fieldwork in Belgrade, the shifting relation between politics and religion was not at the centre of my research. Rather I wanted to explore the impact of war, flight, and the confrontation with the ethno-national “homeland”, Serbia, on the self-ascription of collective and especially national identity among these Serbian refugees from Croatia.³ However, parts of the open interviews I conducted and observations I made during fieldwork, also highlighted the role of religion in (presenting) the past and structuring and interpreting the present. In fact, the relation of refugees to religion and politics turned out to be very important in

¹ Carolyn Leutloff, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, contact: leutloff@eth.mpg.de. This paper was presented in a shorter version at the EASA -conference in Krakow, 26.-28.7.00, in the panel: “Politics, Religion and Remembering the Past” chaired by Haldis Haukanes, Deema Kaneff and Frances Pine. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted in 1996 and 1997 for my M.A. thesis at Freie Universität Berlin.

³ The conditions and processes of “switching” identity are very well elaborated in Elwert 1995.

understanding the shifting we-group identities of these refugees, because Serbian national identity is very much bound up with the Orthodox confession.⁴ In this paper I want to present my findings by dealing with the following questions: how is the relation between the political regime and religion in socialist times remembered and how is this relation defined now? How is (the memory of) religion used to criticize the former socialist political regime and to oppose the regime of Milošević in Serbia? In what way are (traditional) religious practices used as mechanisms of opposition to current political and social processes?

As this article is mainly based on empirical material I collected in 1996 and 1997, it focuses on narratives and observations which were deeply influenced by the two main violent transformations; firstly, the violent break-up of the socialist Yugoslav state starting in 1991, which caused widespread nationalization, “ethno-national” war⁵ and forceful occupation of those regions in Croatia, in which Serbs were perceived to be the “majority of the population” and secondly, the forced migration of Croatian Serbs after the Croat military re-conquest of the region in 1995. Those violent transformations turned many Croatian Serbs into refugees and changed their lives severely. Memories of the relationship between the political regime and religious practice in socialist times and narratives about present day religious ideology and practice were therefore often coloured by these events. They were used to interpret the present-day conflicts of the Serbian refugees in Serbia, where refugees saw themselves betrayed by their own “state”, in the form of the political regime of Milošević. Religious ideology, religious practices and memories of these were used as means of, and space for, opposition to the regime.

In stressing the constructed character of remembrance, I refer to Halbwachs who states that remembrance is in most cases a reconstruction of the past with the help of events from the present. Those events are often caused by the political system and ideology. Numerous social scientists showed that in the case of former Yugoslavia, as in other totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, political ideology was very successful in (re-)constructing a past to suit their own needs.⁶ In former Yugoslavia, the socialist reading of the past was superseded by the national reading of the past, which was just as authoritarian as the former and served the interests of warring- parties. However, Halbwachs also states that the reading of the present is not only

⁴ National identity may be based on cultural values, which traditionally for Serbs were tightly bound up with membership of the Serbian-Orthodox confession. Or it may be founded more on a subjective-political understanding of the nation, which implies a rule of law and a common understanding of norms and values among citizens. The national identity of a people might shift between these two diverging definitions, sometimes relying more on the one, sometimes more on the other. For the definition of culturally based nationalism and politically based nationalism and its connection to former Yugoslavia see Sundhaussen (1994).

⁵ For a definition of ethno-nationalism see Sundhaussen (1994)

⁶ See Denich (1994), Hayden (1994), Sundhaussen (1994), Grandits (1998)

influenced by the historiography of the official ideology, but by the individual and remembered experiences of the people. The individual experienced past might even be more important for analysing the present than the official historiography (1984:55). Those individual memories might gain the status of a collective memory, a “hidden history” which might be contrasted with the authoritative discourse of the political regime.⁷ However, as Connerton (1989) stresses, special institutions or at least mechanisms are needed to generate such collective remembrance. Next to the politically constructed character of memory, I want to draw attention to the impact of individual experiences and practices in (re-)defining the relation of politics to religion.

Taking these considerations into account, I would like to present three arguments in this paper:

1. In personal memories of Serbian refugees from Croatia, religion was differently practised by Croats and Serbs in socialist times. The weakness of Serb Orthodox religion under socialism was often seen as a sign for the stronger suppression of the Serb nation by the socialist regime in comparison with the Croat nation. However, it was also seen as a sign of fragmentation of the Serb nation-group.
2. In refugees’ narratives, religious affiliation was also used to criticise Milošević and his regime, who was seen as the successor to the socialist regime. He was depicted as a non-believer who threatened the solidarity of the Serbian nation. In consequence of this argument, religion was seen as an expression of national solidarity of the people in Serbia and for some also as a way to believe in a (mythical) regaining of the so- perceived Serbian national territory.
3. Religious practices were to some extent a way of maintaining relations before flight. For Serb refugees from Krajina it was a mode of exchange and means for creating solidarity between Krajina-refugees in general and between the former neighbour and village-communities themselves. In this way, they created opposition against the political mainstream in Yugoslavia.

2. Background

The Krajina-area in Croatia, the home region of the refugees I spoke to, was traditionally inhabited by Croats and Serbs to a relatively equal share. While language and many social

⁷ The four scientists mentioned in the previous footnote explain the success of the authoritative national ideology emerging in the late 1980s by referring to individual memories of war crimes in WW2, which have not been recognized by the former dominant political ideology (ibid.), but which existed as an unofficial past and which could be presented as collective memory by the new dominant national ideology in the late 80s.

habits were for centuries similar, the two groups differed in religious practices. Catholicism and Orthodoxy became the markers of national identities for Croats and Serbs respectively in the process of nationalisation from the (late) 19th century onwards. Although, during World War II, the Krajina eventually became a stronghold of the Communist partisan movement, the influence of national antagonistic and paramilitary groups, such as Serbian Cetniks and Croatian Ustaša, played a major role in later we-group formation. Cetniks and Ustaša propounded an ideology of a pure ethnic Serb or ethnic Croat state respectively. Especially in the Krajina region, which during World War II was part of the Croatian fascist “Ustaša-state”, many Serbian inhabitants became victims of ethnically motivated village raids or were killed in the biggest concentration camp, Jasenovac. Whole villages and many churches were destroyed. In 1945, at end of the war, partisans, in the majority Serbs, took “revenge” and massacred 10.000s of “Ustaše” and followers of the Ustaša-state following their detention at the Slovene-Austrian border near the city of Bleiburg.

Socialism and its ideology of “brotherhood and unity” diminished the we-group-boundaries between the two national groups. While church services were abandoned by party members, interethnic marriages became more common. However, the numerous crimes committed during World War II were presented in an ideological way, which made it impossible for the two sides to come to terms with the past. On a private level, stories about those crimes still circulated and were passed on from generation to generation. In the late 80s, during the strong economic recession, the stories about crimes were popularised and very soon acquired national connotations. This again stirred up interethnic fear between Croats and Serbs. In this ideology aimed at escalating conflict, religion was again used as a marker of Croatian and Serbian nationhood and acquired increasing importance. When Croatia announced its independence in 1991, Serb extremist politicians announced the “Serbian Republic of Krajina” in the southern part of Croatia. The territory was defended by military force and the civilian Croats living there were violently expelled. Contrasting with the former political regime, the new nationalist regime started renovating Orthodox churches and introduced religious lessons in schools. The political leadership itself went to church-services, celebrated the Slava-festival and was on good terms with the clergy. The flag of the “state”, its coat of arms and its anthem showed Serbian-Orthodox symbols (Radic 1998:198). A unification of the Krajina-Serb-territory with the other so-perceived “Serbian” territories of Bosnia Herzegovina and Yugoslavia to form a common “Serbian state” was aspired to by the larger part of the population. However, this plan was not realised. In 1995, the Serbian population

was driven out of the region by the Croatian army. They mostly sought refuge in Serbia (and partly in Bosnia).

In exile in Serbia, Krajina-Serbs started to be deeply disappointed with the Serbian state: they felt betrayed by the political leadership of Milošević, which did not support them during the Croatian military offensive. Furthermore many Krajina-Serb refugees lived under economically very difficult circumstances and were often discriminated against by civilians in Serbia.⁸ However, in Serbia they could rely on the Serbian Orthodox church, which itself was in opposition to the regime of Milošević. In this way, they could retain their national point of view, but criticize the political leadership.

3. “Suppression of religion” under socialism, and symbolic revival of religion as national marker

In their narratives many Serbs said that they did not (or not often) visit church-services in socialist times. Many older informants said that they would have liked to visit church-services, but that they feared the consequences. Older people who still went to church during socialism said that they went only in secret or at least, that they did not stress religious worship in public. Younger informants confessed that they were not brought up in a religious way, but in the socialist tradition, and therefore did not care for church visits.

In their reminiscences informants pointed out the different religious practices of Serbs and Croats in Krajina. According to collected narratives, Croats regularly went to church services while Serbs did not go.

Thus one 25 year-old woman remembered:

“I never went to church, although my parents (atleast my mother) often went . (...) Under the Croats, it was permissible to go to church, while under the Serbs, it was not well looked upon. Only Tito was important. The Orthodox church was neglected after WW II. My teacher told me not to go to church. That it is not good. I went to church for the first time when I was about ten years old. There was a big festival in the church. When I went to school the next day, the teacher was yelling at me. (...)”

An other male informant of about 40 years remembered:

“My house was regularly visited by a priest, and I read many books about Serbian monasteries. (...) We (the Krajina-Serbs) never had enough priests. During communism we were not allowed to say that we were going to church. We were told that God is dead. In this region, people lived for 50 years in fear. (...) The Serbian people of this region did not visit the church. They feared the special police (milicija) or something like that. Since WW II we had only two or three churches in the whole region. This was different in Slovenia and Croatia [he means the other parts of Croatia which were predominately populated by

⁸ Some of them returned to Croatia as soon as was possible, but here they are discriminated against by Croatian (political) institutions and individuals.

Catholic Croats]. Many people visited the church there. I was in Zagreb and have seen that people went to church. (...) My father always said that I should take Orthodox church lessons. But I said, I would not go. Today I think of my home-region and I think, that it would not have been a bad idea. I could have been an Orthodox priest now... ”

In the quoted narratives, suppression of Orthodox religious practices by the socialist regime was perceived to be much stronger than the suppression of Catholic religious practices. Catholics seemed to have been allowed to visit the church. In this way, Serbs present themselves as the real victims of socialism by equating the suppression of church visits with the suppression of their national identity. At the same time, it becomes obvious that the national demarcation in times of socialism was presented as the relation of the people to their church, even if only a minority of people visited church services themselves. This nationalized reading of personal church experiences in the socialist past can most likely be seen as a product of the nationalization processes of the 1990s.

However, to some extent both informants also stressed that the anti-religious notion of the Serbian people in socialist times was not only caused by an outside force but very much supported by Serbs, too. In the memories of these two informants, they seemed to have been “better” communists than their Croatian neighbours and restricted the church visits within their own Serbian community. The second informant even said that he did not want to take church lessons, although his father suggested he participate. He confessed that during socialist times, he was not interested in going.

This narrated memory of Serbian citizens deliberately abandoning the church can be supported by the fact that Serbs in Krajina provided a relatively higher percentage of employees in police-services and state administration than their Croatian compatriots. They were therefore much more integrated into the state-structures of the socialist regime and often closer to the socialist ideology, which did not appreciate the role of the church. The dual opposition between repressed “people” and the suppressing socialist state authorities, which was often presented in nationalist discourses, seemed much more difficult for the Serbian we-group to sustain than for the Croat we-group. In the quoted narratives informants interpreted this as a reason for fragmentation within the Serbian national we-group.

Focussing on the second narrative, the notion of religious practices during socialism can be discussed on another level, too. This informant is quite ambivalent in his statement about the neglect of religious practices. At the beginning of the quote he points out that his “house was regularly visited by the priest” and that he “read many books about Serbian monasteries”. How can that be understood? It shows that some kind of religious practices were common even during socialism. Among them were those which took place at home, in the more private

domain of the family. The informant refers to the Orthodox House-Slava in his narrative. This is not celebrated in the church, but in the house itself and next to Easter and Christmas it is the most important Serb festival in the religious calendar. The House-Slava is celebrated in the house on the day of the saint of the male head of household. Although many informants said that the Slava lost its religious meaning in socialist times (and was therefore maybe more acceptable than other religious rituals)⁹, most of them said that their house was visited by a priest during the Slava-celebration on the Slava-day, which is the traditional custom. Before the war, the festivities were often attended by up to 30 guests – mostly relatives, neighbours and friends, who were not having Slava on the same day (very often they were also of different ethnic and religious origin).¹⁰ Informants told me that they even got a holiday from work on days of private House-Slavas, and on the next day it was common to take some of the food not consumed during the festival to work and offer it to the colleagues.

Today, most of the informants say that they regret not being educated in a religious way. But the majority of informants indicated that even today “religion” does not form an important part of their everyday life. For instance they said that they still do not visit church services (regularly). But interestingly, the notion of being Orthodox seemed not to be bound to religious practice. A survey of the UNHCR/Institute for Social Policy in Belgrade showed that the majority of refugees called themselves Orthodox without regardless of their church attendance.¹¹ Serbian Orthodoxy was most of all a symbol for belonging to the Serb nation, which again was imagined as being inherited from the forefathers – and not achieved through religious practice. One of my informants explained that membership in the church was given by birth and could (and should) not be freely chosen by individuals. Another informant pointed out that no Serb could exist who was not Orthodox – regardless if he had ever visited the church in his life.

⁹ Karl Kaser states that the Slava is originally not a Christian festival, but dates back to times before Christianity and was adapted to Christian rites during Christianisation. This festival is celebrated not only by Serbian Orthodoxy, but was to some extent also found among Catholic families in Bosnia and Albania. He stresses the patriarchal character of the Slava, which re-institutionalises the male descent line of the family. The role of the Orthodox church in the festival is marginal. For a very detailed description of the origin and the social meaning of the House-Slava see Kaser (1993).

¹⁰ People with same surnames also share the same Slava day. Therefore, at least male relatives mostly celebrate Slava on the same day. Sometimes, some related single family households celebrate the Slava together, especially when they have the possibility to meet in the common family house, e.g. the house of their parents and ancestors.

¹¹ In a questionnaire of the UNHCR/Institute of Social Policy (1993:71, 73), 79% of people answered that they are orthodox, but at the same time 62% of people answered that they never visit the church and 41% of people answered that they do not celebrate religious festivals.

However, despite such a national focus on the Serbian Orthodox confession, more and more Krajina-Serbs also actively confessed their membership to the Orthodox church in rituals of passage- in the course of their lives. Many Serbs told me that from the early nineties (and thus in exile) they started to baptize their children, and even went to be baptised themselves as adults, as the great majority of them had not been baptised under the socialist system. A similar situation applied to marriages: after 50 years of not marrying in church, people reintroduced the practice, often even bringing along a Yugoslav flag for the commemorative photo. These ceremonial practices show the growing meaning of religion, which serves above all as a national marker of Serb identity.¹² In this way, Krajina-Serbs used religion to differentiate themselves from Croats on a national basis, but also to distinguish themselves from socialism, which was seen as fragmenting the national union of Serbs.

4. Orthodox church criticizing Milošević and unifying the nation

In narratives of exiled Krajina-Serbs, religion was not only used to criticise the socialist regime of former times, but also to criticise the government of Milošević, which was seen as “the last communist power in South Eastern Europe”. Thus one informant said:

“Every nation has its own spiritual unity, which keeps the nation together. Our nation is represented by the church. However, it is our problem that we are not together with our church. We have never been religious enough. The Croatian church was always more united and stronger. We could not unify the Serbian nation. We did not have a church. (...) The church should say: respect your leadership. And the political leadership should show respect for the church. But Milošević is a communist... How can you let Milošević visit a church? This is the biggest problem and our illness...”

The informant thinks that the Orthodox church would have the power to unify the Serbian people as soon as people believe in the Orthodox church and listen to it.¹³ In this context, people are asked to be religious, and to some extent this should imply obeying the religious authorities of the Serbian Orthodox church. He criticizes the neglect of and distancing from the Orthodox church in times of Tito, which he determines as the reason for the disintegration of the Serbian nation.¹⁴ Furthermore, the informant openly criticises the political leadership of

¹² Religious affiliation as national marker is also found among Poles (being Roman Catholics) and their Ukrainian minority (being Greek Catholics) in today’s Poland. Competition for religious rights and fear of religious dominance in today’s Poland is the most obvious conflict between these groups. However, this includes – next to assimilation and out-migration - a struggle for territory and property rights (see Hann 1998).

¹³ Here, he may be guided by the fact that the orthodox church was in history an important factor for national integration (Radic 1998:183).

¹⁴ He also believes that the Croatian nation is in principle unified behind the Catholic church, and that because of the stronger belief of the Croatian people, the project of unifying the Croatian nation and the solidarity between the people is greater.

Milošević in Serbia, which represents a communist point of view and does not respect the church. He identifies this as the reason for the failure of the national union of Serbs.

Here we should again remind ourselves of the context of this criticism: while Krajina-Serbs strived to unite their occupied territory in Croatia with Serbia and other Serb-held territories in the war from 1991-95, the regime of Milošević did not try to protect the territory of the “Serbian Republic of Krajina” when Croatia started a military operation against it in 1995. After the military loss of the region, Milošević did not promise to regain the territory. Instead of this, he treated Krajina-Serbs in Serbia as second class citizens (or not even as citizens, because most of them could not yet get Yugoslav citizenship) and never gave any explanation for not protecting the Krajina from re-conquest by Croatian forces. Many Krajina-Serbs were therefore very disappointed with Milošević. While they saw him as a guarantor for the unification of “Serbian soil” until the loss of their territory, they now felt abandoned by their leader. After being followers of his national program for five years, they tried to build an opposition against his authoritative discourse.

One way to express this disappointment was to criticise Milošević's religious conduct and turn to the discourse of the Orthodox church. The latter seemed to be qualified, because the Orthodox church carried on a powerful rhetoric which on the one hand criticized the politics of Milošević and on the other hand strived for national unity of all Serbs. In this discourse, the Orthodox church supported Milošević's dominant aim during the war of creating a unified Serbian state, but was not satisfied with the realization of this aim. The church followed the principle that state and church should pay respect to one another and should advise their followers to do the same (Radic 1998:199).¹⁵ However, similar to the informant's narrative quoted above, Patriarch Pavle called Milošević and his leadership communist successors of the old Yugoslav leadership, threatening the unity of the Serbs and responsible for the tragic fate of the Serbs in war. Following this political attitude of the Orthodox church, Krajina-Serbs could refer to the Orthodox church to express their political (or at least emotional) wish to regain Serb-held territory in Croatia and to opt for a nation-based solidarity between native Serbs and Krajina-Serb refugees in Serbia.

¹⁵ The Serbian church was never an independent political factor in the turn of the history. It followed the principle of coordinated Diarchy. That means the coordination and cooperation of state and church in all vital questions and the recognition of their autonomy. But if the state was hostile towards the church and the people, the church was to step aside and not cooperate with the state. (Radic 1998:183).

5. Revitalizing Slava celebrations as meeting point for Krajina-village and kinship communities in exile

Religious practices in the form of Slava-celebrations, which I mentioned in an earlier section, could serve as a podium for such an opposition of Croatian Serbs to the political regime of Milošević. Furthermore they could be seen as a mechanism for generating specific traditions, which were already held in (pre-)socialist times and often gave power to institutions like the family, neighbourhood- and village-communities.

I already mentioned the House-Slava, which Krajina-Serbs celebrated in socialist times. Krajina-Serb refugees kept on celebrating the House-Slava in exile, although with less friends, relatives and neighbours coming. Former friends, godfathers, relatives and neighbours were now dispersed and travelling was expensive, while ties to the new environment were often not well enough developed to invite these people. Still, as Rheubottom (1976) stressed, this Slava festival had a special community building character. By inviting strangers as guests as well as relatives, neighbours and friends, it revitalized the relations to the familiar and incorporated the new and unknown into the realm of the family. In this way, the House-Slava on the one hand supported the development of bonds to the new environment, on the other hand it supported the preservation of ties to the home region and its former communities.

I would like to refer now to another form of Orthodox Slava-festivals, which is in my point of view even more important in understanding the relation of politics and religion: the Orthodox Village-Slava. According to narratives, the village community traditionally gathered together in the village church for a communal worshipping on the special day of the village saint; later the festivities were continued on the church square accompanied by dancing and eating and drinking together. During socialism, this festival lost most of its religious character, similar to what I already described for the House-Slava. Not all (or better, only some, mostly elderly) people visited the church-service, but most of the village community came to participate in the festivities which continued throughout the whole day. Neighbouring Croats and people from surrounding villages came to participate in these celebrations too. In socialist times both festivals, the House-Slava and the Village-Slava, lent great stability to the community of kin or the village respectively, while the notion of the nation remained more in the background.

In exile, these Village-Slavas were still celebrated. They were one of the rare, if not the only occasion on which often widely dispersed family- and village-members met each other. On these occasions, conversations about the connection of politics and religion, as discussed

before, were very likely to take place. Furthermore, people shared experiences and information with each other: e.g. about their former life in Krajina, about the betrayal by the Serbian state, about the flight, their actual difficult position in Serbia, and about the possibilities of returning to their homes in Croatia. Thus one informant described such a Village-Slava in exile in the following words:

“This year, a few months ago, I went to visit a church in Zemun (a small town near Belgrade). This church has the same name like the one in our village (in Croatia). It is named after the saint of our village (Holy Trinity) - We met each other on the day of this saint, we call this festival Slava. We wanted to gather together to see and to speak with each other. When I was in this church in Zemun, together with the people from my village, we spoke about the war-situation in Croatia and about the situation after the flight from our homes. What our village might look like now... The conversation went on and on, and I recognized the anger in the faces of the people.

They tried to open themselves and to say, what they really thought. They said that they hate all politicians. The Serbians, the Croatians, the UN, UNPROFOR (...). The people tried to open themselves, but they always looked around. Maybe there were spies among us...”

This narrative describes a Village-Slava in exile which was attended by the Serbian members of a pre-war-community in Croatia. The Village-Slava itself, the contents of conversations during the festivities and the behaviour of the guests were therefore adapted to the new political and social situation, which Krajina-Serbs had to face.

The meaning of these religious festivals for Krajina-Serb group formation can only be understood when we consider how very rare the possibilities were for Krajina Serbs to gather – either in social, or in political situations. In the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Krajina-Serb refugees did not have the right to vote, they did not have a political representative whom they trusted and were strongly discouraged by various forms of repression from giving political statements in public. Therefore, these religious festivals became another kind of opposition to state-controlled publicity. They created a space for expressing their disappointment and discussing the future. As Krajina-Serbs lost trust in political institutions and did not have their own political representatives,¹⁶ the church functioned as the only institution which gave the Serbs some structure and which had the power to unite them. In this way, the church had a we-group establishing function among Krajina-Serb refugees. Here, refugees referred to “religious” or better communal practices to which they used to adhere during socialism.

¹⁶ There is one official representative, Borislav Mikelic, but he was seen as a collaborator of Milošević, representing only his own interests and not representing the Krajina-Serb population.

6. Prospect

Presently, I am conducting field-research in a small village in the former war area in Croatia, in which the percentage of Serb returnees to Croatia is relatively high (about 40% - the average is 12%). At the beginning of June, I could participate in such a Village-Slava, at which even the Serbian Bishop from Šibenik, a bigger town on the Croatian coast attended.

According to people's narratives, before the war the Village-Slava was the biggest Orthodox festival in the village. In summer of 2000, about 150 people – old and young, female and male - visited the church, although about half of them did not enter the church during the entire church-service, but stood in front of the church and chatted with each other, like they used to do under socialism. People from neighbouring villages came to participate, too, as did relatives who still lived in exile in Serbia and in some cases were even coming for the first time to visit their home-village. Most of them (but especially the men) participated in the celebration in front of the church on the next day. They prepared young lambs, drank wine and beer, played *ballote* and cards, and were sang and talked. On that occasion, most of the local Croats, who lived in the neighbourhood and who also returned from exile (in which they lived from 1991-95 when they were expelled by Serbian (para-)military groups) came to visit and participate in the festivities, as had been the habit before the war. It seems that they did not connect the Village-Slava with the national ambition of the Serb-Orthodox-church.¹⁷ They seemed to view it much more as a community-festival, as it had been before the war.

These Village-Slavas also took place in other neighbouring villages during the summer, and here again, local Croats joined the festivities. In this way, the church may also have the function of contributing to re-enabling the living-together of Serbs and Croats in Croatia by providing an occasion to meet each other in a peaceful and joyful atmosphere. However, during the observed Village-Slava in my place of fieldwork, none of the Bosnian Croats, who had recently settled in the village after the war and who compose about 40% of today's population in the region, came to celebrate together. For them, there is no memory of Village-Slavas in pre-war times, and they see it as a purely Orthodox festival. Still, as I heard from other villages, some Bosnian Croats sold drinks etc. at Village-Slavas in other neighbouring

¹⁷ However, during a visit to Croatia in 1999, which included the visit of the Croatian president Dr. Franjo Tudjman, Patriarch Pavle, the highest representative of the Orthodox church, gave Croatian Serbs the advice to return to their homes in Croatia and to obey Croatian laws. In this way, the church might also contribute to the return process of Serbs in Croatia and reconciliation process of Croats and Serbs in Croatia.

villages, and this might be seen as a sign for a slow but peaceful integration of the different we-groups now present in the former war-area in Croatia.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to point out that in memories of Croatian Serbs, the relation between religion and the political regime under socialism is presented as one of competing institutions, in which the state was seen as suppressing Orthodoxy and fragmenting the union of the Serbian nation. At the same time, the Serbian nation was seen as fragmented by non-believing members of the Serbian community. This point of view is shaped by and used as a mode of interpretation for the present-day problems which Croatian Serbs have to face in exile (and in Croatia, as well). In the present situation of political disappointment and distrust and following nationalisation during war, the Orthodox church gained a strong meaning for Krajina-Serbs in opposing the politics of Milošević and striving for national solidarity. This was very much influenced by the dominant present-day discourse of the Orthodox church, which distanced itself from the politics of Milošević and attempted to achieve national unity of Serbs.

While Orthodox religion was not intensively practised in socialist times, present-day participation in religious ceremonies served in particular as a sign for Serb national affiliation. However, religious practices in the form of Slava-festivals, which were also celebrated during socialism, have been again performed in exile. These Slava-festivals could acquire meaning as community-building ceremonies, which are used by Croatian Serbs for building solidarity between themselves as well as for building up an opposition against the political regime of Milošević. To some extent these Slava festivals could even promote the resettlement of Serbs in Croatia and revitalize the former (interethnic) village-life in the war-torn villages in Croatia. In this way they may support Croatian Serbs in distancing themselves from Serb nationalism.

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