

FROM KOSOVO TO MACEDONIA:
SPOTLIGHTING RECENT ATTACKS ON
FORMER YUGOSLAVIA'S RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

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Keywords: Religious heritage; Kosovo; FYRO Macedonia; desecration.

Abstract: The present note refers to the negative effects of the Kosovo conflicts on the religious heritage of FYRO Macedonia, such as the recent desecration of Matejče Monastery by Albanian paramilitary forces. It is argued that the situation in FYRO Macedonia should be closely observed while the experience accumulated during previous wars between countries once belonging to former Yugoslavia be used to prevent future interethnic conflicts and further destruction. It is also suggested to shift the attention from political and historical narratives concerning the interethnic conflicts, to the biography of buildings and objects themselves.

Rezumat: Nota de față se referă la consecințele negative ale conflictului din Kosovo asupra patrimoniului religios din F.R.I. Macedonia, cum ar fi recenta profanare a Mănăstirii Matejče de către membrii unei facțiuni armate albaneze. Se argumentează că situația din F.R.I. Macedonia ar trebui urmărită cu maximă atenție, iar experiențele acumulate în urma războaielor anterioare din țările ce au compus fosta Iugoslavie folosite pentru a preîntâmpina un nou conflict interetnic și noi distrugerii. Se susține totodată mutarea accentului de la narațiunile istorico-politice privind conflictele interetnice, spre biografia clădirilor și a obiectelor propriu-zise.

The dramatic long-lived conflicts ravaging former Yugoslavia after the 1990s are among the major events that received most media coverage in Europe's recent history in general and in that of the Balkans, in particular. Whether Serbian, Croatian or Muslim Bosnian, the forces involved have all tried to neutralize their enemy, physically and militarily, as well as obliterate every indication of the latter's cultural, ethnic and religious identity. This explains the havoc caused to their material heritage, previously common to the entire nation.¹

Religious buildings were among the most affected elements of the national heritage because, as Branka Šulc justly points while referring to the destruction of Croatia's cultural heritage, "Churches are fundamental cultural markers in the landscape. Their destruction erases the sign of communities based on religious custom and other traditions".²

The war from the Kosovo region (1998-1999), one of the most recent episodes in the dismantling of the Former Yugoslavian State, was by no means an exception, having been marked by mutual devastation of religious

heritage.³ To use my own experience, I could mention that, together with others and accompanied by a military escort, I had the opportunity to visit Kosovo in the very year 2004, shortly after several Christian-Orthodox churches, including mediaeval historical monuments (e.g. Church of the Mother of God Ljeviška), had been ravaged to different degrees and/or desecrated by the Albanian military forces, in retaliation for the Serbs' havoc during the war. Due to the resulting instability, the monks and nuns from the local monasteries (Dečani, Gračanica, Pečka Patrijaršija) encouraged us to take as many photographs as possible, as a form of visual documentation of monuments that could have perished at any moment. When I returned to Kosovo in 2011 (to document a PhD thesis on the Palaeologan Renaissance in 14th century painting), the atmosphere seemed to have significantly improved: calmness reigned and there was no need for a military escort anymore. While visiting the Church of the Mother of God Ljeviška again, I met a team of Italian restorers, working intensively to recondition the painted surface of the interior frescoes. At the same time, I could freely travel to previously inaccessible regions; among other things, I had the chance to visit several mediaeval monuments from the city of Prizren (a hotbed of burning conflict until then), such as Tsar Dušan's Oratory, whose exterior walls had been damaged by grenade explosions. I then visited the Monastery of the Holy Archangels, not far away from Prizren, also originally built by Tsar Dušan, and noticed that new cells and a small oratory were being built, to replace those that had been destroyed.

Yet, notwithstanding positive changes, such as the restoration of Muslim and Christian damaged monuments, or the projects emphasizing the role of the cultural heritage in promoting democracy, dialogue and reconciliation,⁴ still the negative effects of the Kosovo conflicts on former Yugoslavia's religious heritage cannot be denied. The large number of Albanian war refugees from Kosovo (about 500,000), who settled in the neighbouring country, FYRO Macedonia, triggered significant demographic changes as Albanians came to be a majority in the (borderline) north-western region. Given these conditions, tensions similar to those in Kosovo occurred in the north-west of Macedonia which included aggressive behaviour towards the Macedonian Christian-Orthodox heritage. A case in point, utterly overlooked by the media, is Matejče Monastery (Fig. 1),⁵ a mediaeval historical monument, where first layers of some of the frescoes have been desecrated with graffiti by Albanian paramilitary forces based in Macedonia's mountains. One of the included photos (Fig. 2) illustrates how a symbol of the UÇK Organization has been applied over the painted layer of the fresco inside the church, which

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¹ E.g. Chapman 1994.

² Šulc 2001, p. 157.

³ E.g. Hoxha 2012.

⁴ E.g. Wolferstan 2007.

⁵ E.g. Dimitrova 2002.



Fig. 1. Church of Matejče Monastery from FYRO Macedonia (<http://www.monumentaserbica.com/mushushu/images/66.jpg>).

is a hint that the desecration was not a random deed, but one with political overtones. Another image offers clear evidence that we are dealing with an act of desecration, as the painted face of a Saint has been disfigured in a mocking way (Fig. 3).

The case of Matejče Monastery amounts to an alarm signal. Politically speaking, the war in Kosovo has come to an end; the entire area is no longer in the media spotlight, which means such actions might further go unnoticed. Destruction could become more extensive, more radical and/or could entail similar attitudes towards the Muslim religious heritage, including the historical one, of Ottoman origin. Therefore, the situation in FYRO Macedonia should be closely observed while the experience accumulated during previous wars between countries once belonging to former Yugoslavia be used to prevent future interethnic conflicts and further destruction.

As an overall conclusion regarding the cultural heritage of former Yugoslavia (including the religious one), I suggest shifting the attention from political and historical narratives concerning the interethnic conflicts, to the biography of buildings (whether historical monuments or not) and objects themselves, to their materials, scars, restoration and changes, as well as to the documentation of the forms of presence of those precise monuments that no longer exist. In other words, going beyond the politicians' and historians' discourses and even beyond the testimonials of those affected by these tragic events, to try to find out what specific memories these monuments and the places where once there were monuments actually contain, what their story is. And it may happen that, after such encounters, we understand the conflicts in former Yugoslavia in a totally different light.



Figs. 2, 3. Graffiti desecration in the Church of Matejče Monastery: symbol of UÇK Organization (<http://www.kosovo.net/matejce2.jpg>); mocking face of the painted Saint (<http://www.kosovo.net/desecr.jpg>).

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Acknowledgements: I wish to thank both Radu-Alexandru Dragoman and Ștefan Bălici for their help.