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### **Reassessing the Holy See's Policy toward the Serbian Orthodox Population in the Western Balkans before the Second World War\***

**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to reassess the position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Serbian Orthodox population in the period leading up to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. Due to the broad chronological and geographical scope of the topic, the analysis is focused on micro case studies, including the question of religious "communion" the role of Catholic clergy in the Croatian national movement, the Concordat between Yugoslavia and the Vatican, and Catholic Action. By examining these focal points, the study seeks to explore the cultural, political, and ideological dynamics of the Catholic Church's relationship with the Serbian Orthodox population. Furthermore, the research highlights certain continuities in this relationship, culminating in the persecution, oppression, and genocide of the Serbian people during the existence of the Independent State of Croatia.

**KEYWORDS:** Roman Catholic Church, Serbian Orthodox, church communion, Croatia, Slavonia, catholic clergy, Concordat, Catholic action

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The aim of this study is to reevaluate the position of the Holy See regarding the Serbian Orthodox population in the period leading up to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. Given the complexity of the subject matter and the intricate nature of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox community, it is not feasible to provide an exhaustive account. This is particularly true when considering the broad chronological and geographical scope that the analysis encompasses. In light of this, a series of micro case studies has been selected to illustrate the multifaceted character of interreligious relations and the long-term processes at play. As a foundational point of analysis, only a brief overview is provided for the period prior to the nineteenth century, focusing on key developments such as the establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (1622) and its influence in the Balkans, particularly concerning the Orthodox population. Geographically, the study focuses on the territories that later became part of the Independent State of Croatia, understood here as part of the wider Western Balkan context.

The European Reformation, as a religious and political challenge to the papacy, profoundly reshaped the Christian world, marking the rise of Protestantism and a definitive schism within Western Christianity. In response, the Roman Catholic Church launched the Counter-Reformation, reaffirming doctrine and reforming internal practices. This movement, which transformed Europe's religious and political landscape, was embodied in the Council of Trent (1545–1563).<sup>1</sup> Faced with European Reformation the Council of Trent sought to determine doctrinal basis of faith and to set tone for reorganization within Roman Catholic Church. The fight for the “lost souls” was not limited only to Protestant believers, but also to Christian Orthodox population in the Balkans.

The shifting political, cultural, and religious climate deeply affected the Slavic population. As Protestantism gained ground in Central Europe, the Roman Catholic Church intensified efforts to reaffirm its presence in the Balkans, particularly in Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia. Nearly sixty years after

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<sup>1</sup> An overview of the Council of Trent: Robert Bireley, SJ, „Redefining Catholicism: Trent and beyond, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 6 Reform and Expansion 1550–1660*, ed. Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)”, 145–161.

the Council of Trent, the founding of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 marked a pivotal moment in global Catholic missions and the peak of the Counter-Reformation.<sup>2</sup> From its inception, the Congregation focused heavily on the Balkans and the Orthodox population, often resulting in tensions.<sup>3</sup>

One of the key consequences of the Counter-Reformation and the establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was the question of “communion” with the Roman Church among the Serbian Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. Although the history of such initiatives predates the Reformation, the core issue was papal primacy: entering into “communion” implied recognition of the Roman pope as the head of the Christian hierarchy, while retaining Orthodox liturgical practices. In the Habsburg lands, the spread of “communion” was often supported by the Viennese court and the bishops of Zagreb, but it faced strong resistance from the Serbian Orthodox population, who actively defended their religious rights.<sup>4</sup>

The Ottoman conquests in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries prompted large-scale migrations, particularly of the Serbian population, into Habsburg-controlled lands. In return for military service, Serbs were settled in regions such as Croatia, Slavonia, and Inner Austria, where they were granted land, religious freedom, and tax privileges.<sup>5</sup> These settlements contributed to the formation and expansion of the Military Frontier, a defensive zone under direct Habsburg military control, bypassing local nobility and often clashing with the Catholic clergy's interests.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Guilday, „The Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide (1622–1922)”, *The Catholic Historical Review* 6, no. 4 (1921), 479.

<sup>3</sup> Beginning phases of the Congregation work in the Balkans are described and deeply analyzed in: Jovan Radonić, *Rimska kurija i Južnoslavenske zemlje od XVI do XIX veka* (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka, 1950), 28–41. Also, important works on subject: Marko Jačov, *Le missioni cattoliche nei Balcani tra le due grandi guerre: Candia (1645–1669) Vienna e Morea (1683–1699)* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1998); Marko Jačov, *Spisi kongregacije za propagandu vere u Rimu o Srbima: 1622–1644*, t. 1 (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>5</sup> Vojin S. Dabić, „Wanderungen der Serben nach Kroatien und Slawonien vom Anfang des XVI bis Ende des XVII Jahrhunderts”, *Istorijski časopis* 38 (1991), 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 37; Ivo Banac, *Hrvati i crkva. Kratka povijest*

Religious freedom was a key privilege for Serbian Orthodox settlers, yet tensions soon arose, particularly with the Catholic hierarchy in Zagreb. The Roman Catholic Church's efforts to bring the Serbian Orthodox population into "communion" with Rome led to persistent pressure on Orthodox clergy, especially in sensitive areas like Žumberak, a place that presents an interesting case study. There, the Orthodox community faced continuous efforts to impose "communion" culminating in the 1678 acceptance of Rome by the bishop of Marča, which triggered resistance from the Serbian Orthodox population.<sup>7</sup>

The mass migration of Serbs of 1690 further strengthened the Serbian Orthodox presence. In response, Emperor Leopold I issued six imperial diplomas (1690–1695), confirming religious rights, clerical autonomy, and the use of the Julian calendar.<sup>8</sup> These reaffirmations were necessary in the face of ongoing attempts by Catholic and "communion" clergy to convert the Orthodox.

Despite imperial guarantees, efforts to impose "communion" continued throughout the 18th century. Figures such as Patriarch Arsenije III opposed these moves, especially in Srem and Slavonia. In Žumberak, Habsburg officials restricted Orthodox clergy, and the Catholic hierarchy intensified pressure. By 1754, the Marča Monastery, once a center of Serbian Orthodoxy, was transferred to "communion" clergy following a decree by the Croatian Sabor.

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*hrvatskog katoličanstva u modernosti* (Zagreb: Profil knjiga, 2013), 19. More on Military Frontier: Vojin S. Dabić, *Vojna krajina. Karlovački generalat (1530–1746)* (Beograd: Ekscelzior, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Johann Heinrich Schwicker, *Zur Geschichte der kirchlichen Union in der croatischen Militärgränze: eine geschichtliche Studie nach den Acten des Archives der ehemaligen königlich ungarischen Hofkanzlei* (Wien: in Commission bei Karl Gerold's Sohn, 1874); Serbian translation: Johan Hajnrih Šviker, *Istorija unijačenja Srba u Vojnoj krajini* (Novi Sad: Arhiv Vojvodine, Beograd: Muzej srpske pravoslavne crkve, Kragujevac: Kalenić, 1995). Radoslav M. Grujić, *Pravoslavna Srpska crkva* (Kragujevac: Kalenić, 1989) 97–98.

<sup>8</sup> More on the privileges and wider historical context: Isidora Točanac Radović, „The Great Migration of Serbs and the Question of the Serbian Ethnic and Religious Community in the Habsburg Monarchy”, in *Migrations in the Slavic Cultural Space, From the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, eds. Zofia A. Brzozowska, Piotr Kernel, Izabela Lis-Wielgosz (Lodz: Lodz University Press, 2022), 15–27; An extensive overview of the Serbian migration: Dušan J. Popović, *Velika seoba Srba 1690. Srbi seljaci i plemići* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruka, 1954); Published diplomas and other important documents can be found in: Jovan Radonić, Mita Kostić, *Srpske privilegije od 1690 do 1792* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1954), 19–45.

Habsburg religious policy during the reigns of Maria Theresa and Joseph II brought further changes. While centralization and restrictions on certain Catholic orders strained relations with the Holy See, attempts to extend "communion" to the Serbian Orthodox population persisted well into the late 18th century.

The French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars brought about a fundamental transformation of Europe, dismantling the old political and social order. In its place, a new era emerged, one that promised the extension of equal rights and the abolition of entrenched privileges. Motivated by the ideals of the Enlightenment, the revolutionaries sought not only to curtail the power of the nobility but also to diminish the influence and special status of the Roman Catholic Church, which had been a cornerstone of pre-revolutionary society. However, the Revolution also gave rise to a period of violence and warfare, and as a result, the core principles of the French Revolution were significantly altered and shaped by the tumultuous events that followed.<sup>9</sup>

Holy See had to navigate this new reality and to fight for rights and privileges that had been curtailed during the Revolution. However, this complex reality did not change stance towards the Serbian Orthodox population and constant attempts to bring them in the "union". After the defeat of Napoleon, the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Habsburgs was largely defined by a reaffirmation of traditional Catholic values. The Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), which redrew the map of Europe after Napoleon's defeat, marked the return of much of the pre-revolutionary order, including the restoration of the papal states.<sup>10</sup> After surviving decades of persecution papacy, in the eyes of the believers, became defender of the faith.<sup>11</sup>

Fundamental transformation of Europe after the Napoleonic wars and the revolutionary ideas deeply influenced one important movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Liberal Catholicism as a response to the intellectual, social, and political changes of the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> Some of the

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<sup>9</sup> Marvin Perry, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 155–159.

<sup>10</sup> More on Roman Catholic Christianity during Napoleonic Wars: Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 261–272.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>12</sup> More on ideas: Franjo Emanuel Hoško, „Liberalni katolicizam kao sastojnica ideologije ilirizma”, *Croatica Christiana periodica* 28 (vol. 15) (1991), 44–45.

Catholic intellectuals thought that the Holy See had some trouble adapting to the political and intellectual upheaval brought on by the French revolution and Enlightenment. The new movement in the Roman Catholic Church emerged as an attempt to reconcile new ideas and the traditional stance.

During the period commonly referred to as the Croatian Revival<sup>13</sup>, liberal Catholicism emerged as a significant intellectual and political force. This movement, characterized by its progressive ideas, facilitated a synthesis between the universal mission of the Roman Catholic Church and the concept of popular sovereignty. The reconciliation of these seemingly divergent principles had a profound impact, particularly in regions with religious pluralism, such as the Habsburg territories. One could assert that the core of this evolving “philosophy” is encapsulated in Cesare Balbo’s 1844 essay *The Hopes of Italy*. In this work, the Italian politician and writer advocates for the Habsburg monarchy to relinquish its holding of German and Italian territories and to focus instead on expanding its territory in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>14</sup> Liberal Catholicism had a deep influence on the Roman Catholic clergy in Croatia and Slavonia. The introduction of these novel ideas and theological perspectives encouraged the clergy to reconsider the integration of the Slavic population, including those who were not adherents of Catholicism. This intellectual and doctrinal shift facilitated the clergy’s participation in the Illyrian movement.<sup>15</sup> The convergence of these new religious ideas with emerging nationalist currents created a space for the intellectuals and Catholic clergy to engage actively in the social and political integration of the Slavic peoples.<sup>16</sup>

The Illyrian movement emerged during the Croatian revival period and was profoundly shaped by the ideals of liberal Catholicism, with significant participation from the clergy. Its primary objective was to foster unity

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<sup>13</sup> More on that period: Nikša Stančić, „Hrvatski narodni preporod”, in *Hrvatski narodni preporod 1790–1848. Hrvatska u vrijeme Ilirskog pokreta*, ur. Nikša Stančić (Zagreb: Povijesni muzej Hrvatske, Muzej za umjetnost i obrt, Muzej grada Zagreba, 1985), 1–30.

<sup>14</sup> The importance of the essay *The Hopes of Italy* and its connection with the liberal Catholicism is thoroughly analyzed in: Milorad Ekmečić, „Uloga katoličke političke ideologije u Istočnom pitanju”, u Milorad Ekmečić, *Dijalog prošlosti i sadašnjosti* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 2002), 213–214.

<sup>15</sup> Hoško, „Liberalni katolicizam kao sastojnica ideologije ilirizma”, 52–54.

<sup>16</sup> Milorad Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918 I* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1989), 359.

among the Slavic populations of the region. However, despite its initial aspirations, the movement inadvertently deepened the rift between the Serbs and Croats. Driven by the conviction that a common standard language and orthography could mitigate the effects of territorial fragmentation, a group based in Zagreb, under the leadership of Ljudevit Gaj, championed the cause of linguistic unity among the Slavic peoples.<sup>17</sup> The concept of the Illyrian literary language is complex and difficult to fully comprehend. In its nascent stages, there were even proposals for a broader unity with Bulgaria.<sup>18</sup> However, the reality proved to be far more complicated. National integration within the Slavic sphere faced significant challenges. The Serbs had long before the rise of Illyrian movement established both a distinct cultural and political identity, marked, among many other, by “symbols” such as the liberated Serbian state and the the Karlovac Metropolitanate.

The adoption of the Illyrian designation was, in part, an attempt to transcend these divisions.<sup>19</sup> However, the movement had little impact on the Slovenes and Serbs thereby rendering the Illyrian movement primarily a Croatian national initiative.<sup>20</sup>

The Illyrian phase of the Croatian national revival played a pivotal role in redefining key issues related to Croatian national integration. Advocates of the movement were resolutely committed to promoting a common language as a means of transcending different cultural traditions. It is no-

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<sup>17</sup> Goldstein, *Croatia. A History*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Pavle Ivić, *The Serbian People and Their Language* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2024), 158.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, *Croatia. A History*, 61. The Croatian character of this movement becomes apparent with the adoption of the Shtokavian dialect of Serbo-Croatian, which was primarily spoken by Serbs. Ljudevit Gaj's decision to switch the publication *Danica* to Shtokavian was a strategic effort to promote Illyrian ideals. During this period, a growing sense of national unity was emerging, and the territorial scope associated with the Illyrian identity extended beyond the boundaries of what was traditionally considered Croatia. The later prohibition of the Illyrian name, followed by the embrace of the Croatian identity, contributed to significant challenges in defining ethnic and national affiliation. With the support of eager parishioners of Roman Catholic Church Croatian name was extended all the way to some Catholic enclaves in Kosovo and Metohija. It was obvious that the language was not a primary measure of national affiliation and sentiment. More on that: Ivić, *The Serbian People and Their Language*, 159. In the end, this led to conflicts between Serbian and Croatian national movement, and also to Croatization of certain geographical areas as the Illyrian movement considered Istria, Dalmatia, Slavonia, Bosnia

teworthy that the movement's members remained loyal to the Habsburg dynasty, emphasizing their intent to pursue their objectives within the framework of the Monarchy.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the movement had covertly sought support within Bosnia and Herzegovina, resulting in a rift with the Habsburg authorities. This foray into foreign policy led to the official proscription of the Illyrian name in January 1843.<sup>22</sup>

During the revolutionary years of 1848 and 1849<sup>23</sup> the Croats, along with Serbs and various other groups within the Habsburg monarchy, demonstrated significant enthusiasm for the broader wave of revolutionary change sweeping across Europe. The Croatian Sabor was convened, marking a historic moment as it convened for the first time under a newly reformed electoral law. Among the key demands articulated in Zagreb were the unification of Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia, as well as the pursuit of financial autonomy from Hungary. These aspirations, however, were framed within the context of maintaining allegiance to the Habsburg monarchy. While the Croatian leadership's loyalty to the dynasty shaped its approach to reform, it also placed Croatian nationalist ambitions on a collision course with Hungarian national aspirations. Throughout the turbulent period of 1848–1849, the idea of Austro-Slavism predominated among Croatian political circles, reflecting an ideological commitment to the unity of the Slavic peoples within the Habsburg framework.<sup>24</sup> In the aftermath of the revolution, however, the majority of the institutions and reforms proposed by the Croats were swiftly suppressed, and many of the newly established Croatian state structures were dismantled by imperial authorities.

Following the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 and 1849, both the Habsburg Monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church were profoundly destabilized. Under the newly ascended Emperor Franz Joseph I and the leadership of Alexander Bach, the monarchy initiated a series of political and

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<sup>21</sup> Goldstein, *Hrvatska povijest*, 195.

<sup>22</sup> Radovan Subić, *Austro-Ugarska i Hrvati u Bosni i Hercegovini (1903–1914)* (PhD dissertation, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of History), 49; Stančić, „Hrvatski narodni preporod”, 25–26.

<sup>23</sup> More on so-called *Springtime of the Peoples*: Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 155–217.

<sup>24</sup> Goldstein, *Croatia. A History*, 70.



administrative reforms aimed at consolidating imperial authority. This period marked the onset of a policy characterized by absolutist centralism, wherein Bach implemented an increasingly authoritarian and centralized regime. His efforts sought to re-establish imperial control, curtail regional autonomy, and suppress nationalist movements, thus reinforcing the central authority of the Habsburg state while curbing the influence of local aristocracies and revolutionary forces.<sup>25</sup> During this period, Catholicism was once again regarded as a central unifying force within the Habsburg Monarchy. The policy of centralization was perceived as a means of restoring stability to society in the aftermath of the 1848–49 revolutions. In this context, the Austrian Concordat of 1855 was negotiated with the Holy See. This agreement effectively reinstated the Church's control over key aspects of religious and social life, including clerical appointments, marriage laws, and education, reversing the Josephinist reforms that had previously reduced the Holy See's influence in these areas. The Concordat thus represented a significant reaffirmation of the Church's privileged status within the empire and a consolidation of the Habsburg monarchy's alliance with the Catholic Church in the face of broader European political challenges.<sup>26</sup> Ideas, stances and learnings of Roman Catholic Church were at the core of these reforms and can be observed and described as a reaction to the teachings and learning of liberal Catholicism.<sup>27</sup>

The Concordat of 1855 and the subsequent neo-absolutist era ushered in significant transformations within the Catholic hierarchy of Croatia and Slavonia. Notably, in 1852, the Diocese of Zagreb was elevated to the status of an archdiocese. This restructuring, along with the strengthened position of the Roman Catholic Church, allowed the clergy to exert considerable influence within the Croatian national movement. Among the most prominent clerical figures during this period were Josip Juraj Strossmayer and Fra-

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<sup>25</sup> Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 225.

<sup>26</sup> Juraj Mirko Mataušić, „Susret crkve sa civilnim društvom u XIX. stoljeću”, in *Hrvatski katolički pokret. Zbornik radova s Međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa održanog u Zagrebu i Krku od 29. do 31. ožujka 2001*, ur. Zlatko Matijević (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 2002), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Milorad Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja. Istorija Srba u Novom veku 1492–1992* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike 2007), 249; Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918 I*, 641.

njo Rački.<sup>28</sup> Rački<sup>29</sup>, a priest and historian, and Strossmayer, the Bishop of Đakovo and later of Đakovo and Syrmia, played pivotal roles in shaping the ecclesiastical and national landscape. Furthermore, Strossmayer's jurisdiction extended over the Catholics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, solidifying his influence in the broader region. He also served as Apostolic Administrator of Serbia from 1851 to 1897. The main focus of his administration was his effort to promote rapprochement between the Serbian Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities, particularly through the introduction of the Slavonic liturgy within the Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup> Both Rački and Strossmayer can be regarded as continuations of the Illyrian movement, though the term "Illyrian" itself was increasingly abandoned during their time. The political stance of these two clergymen can be characterized as dual in nature. On one hand, they were firmly committed to advancing the Croatian national movement; on the other, they advocated for the broader idea of South Slav unity.

The concept of South Slav unity, as articulated and understood by Strossmayer, was, in his view, attainable only through the reunion of the Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church. In essence, this vision entailed the acceptance of the "union" by the Serbian Orthodox population. Strossmayer, in his capacity as Bishop of Đakovo, even advocated for certain reforms within the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup> Serbian elites were rather skeptical about reforms and final intentions of these ideas. Many have understood that these propositions were articulated through the influence of liberal Catholicism and experience of germanization in Croatia and Slavonia that happened during the neo-absolutist period.<sup>32</sup> However, through his correspondence with the Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna, Seraphino Vanutelli, Strossmayer addressed, among various other topics, the potential

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<sup>28</sup> Correspondence between Strossmayer and Rački were published in four volumes and it represents an important source for their ideas, relationship, but also intellectual climate of the period between 1860 and 1894. See more: *Korespondencija Rački-Strossmayer* I-IV, ur. Ferdo Šišić (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1928–1931).

<sup>29</sup> More on Franjo Rački: Viktor Novak, *Franjo Rački (1828–1894)* (Beograd: Nolit, 1958).

<sup>30</sup> Robin Okey, „Austro-Hungarian Diplomacy and the Campaign for a Slavonic Liturgy in the Catholic Church, 1881–1914”, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 70.2 (1992), 258–283.

<sup>31</sup> Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> Jure Krišto, *Hrvatski katolički pokret (1903. – 1945.)* (Zagreb: Glas koncila, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2004), 19.

union of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and emphasized the significance of such an event. This correspondence underscores Strossmayer's commitment to the idea of religious "reconciliation" and its perceived importance for broader ecclesiastical and national objectives.<sup>33</sup> Rački and Strossmayer complemented each other in their efforts. Rački, in his capacity as a historian, provided scholarly support to the ideological framework that was of significant importance to Strossmayer. Their collaboration, blending intellectual and ecclesiastical pursuits, was crucial in advancing their broader goals.<sup>34</sup>

Concurrently with Strossmayer, two other significant figures were shaping their own ideas and positions: Ante Starčević and Eugen Kvaternik. Both condemned the Illyrian movement and rejected the concept of South Slav unity. Unlike earlier generations of Croatian and Slavonian politicians, who were willing to negotiate and work within the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Starčević and Kvaternik openly criticized Vienna. Their opposition marked a clear departure from the more conciliatory approach of previous political leaders, emphasizing a more aggressive stance toward Croatian autonomy and independence.<sup>35</sup> The two founded the Party of State Rights, although in its early stages it lacked the classic structure of a formal political party. Initially, both Starčević and Kvaternik advocated for broader autonomy and self-rule for Croatia. The primary distinction between them lay in their approaches to achieving these objectives.<sup>36</sup> The core of their beliefs was the concept of state rights, which they defined as belonging to the Croat "political people", a term encompassing both the medieval nobility and the broader general public. Drawing on Starčević's idea that the existence of a state could give rise to its corresponding nation, both Starčević and Kvaternik argued that no other peoples existed within Croatia – other nations could

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<sup>33</sup> „Strossmayer Vannutelliju, Đakovo, 15. 3. 1881”, u *Korespondencija Josip Juraj Strossmayer – Serafin Vannutelli. Correspondentia Josephi Georgii Strossmayer cum Seraphino Vannutelli 1881 – 1887*, ur. Josip Balabanić, Josip Kolanović (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Dom i svijet 1999), 80–87.

<sup>34</sup> Mirjana Gross, *Počeci moderne Hrvatske : neoapsolutizam u civilnoj Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji 1850 – 1860* (Zagreb: Globus 1985), 350–534.

<sup>35</sup> Goldstein, *Croatia. A History*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Mirjana Gross, *Izvorno pravaštvo: ideologija, agitacija, pokret* (Zagreb: Librokon, 2000), 10–12.

only emerge through their claim to distinct political territories.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note here that the Catholic clergy had an important part within all Croatian national movements.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile the important changes were happening in the Habsburg Monarchy. After the defeat against Prussia in 1866, Franz Joseph had to make some radical concessions. In the spring of 1867, a settlement was made with Hungarian activists. The deal, in essence, restore almost all of the laws declared during the revolution of 1848. Hungary gained independence regarding domestic issues, and emperor consented to be coronated in Church of Matthias Corvinus in Buda. In December of 1867 new constitutional laws were introduced that replaced the Austrian Empire of 1804 with Austria-Hungary.<sup>39</sup> This divided the Monarchy left Croatia and Slavonia in the Hungarian “half” of the country. Starčević’s followers were adamantly against the Croatian-Hungarian deal (Nagodba).<sup>40</sup> Croatian Sabor had control over internal affairs, but Hungarian prime minister recommended the appointment of the Croatian viceroy (ban).<sup>41</sup> One of the very important changes was dissolution of the Military Frontier and integration of those lands to Croatia and Slavonia. Appointment of Count Károly Khuen-Héderváry in 1883 as a ban of Croatia and Slavonia was considered, among Croatian nationalist, as an oppressive regime that had stifled Croatian national struggle.<sup>42</sup>

It is important to note that this is the age of *Kulturkampf* in the German speaking lands. German government and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to reduce power of the Roman Catholic Church by introducing a series of laws that were aimed at reducing Church’s authority.<sup>43</sup> In response to the

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<sup>37</sup> Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 85–88; Detailed explanation of Party of State Rights and state right ideology: Mirjana Gross, *Povijest pravaške ideologije* (Zagreb: Institut za hrvatsku povijest, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Krišto, *Hrvatski katolički pokret (1903. – 1945.)*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 259–262.

<sup>40</sup> Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 264.

<sup>42</sup> Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald J. Ross, „Enforcing the Kulturkampf in the Bismarckian State and the Limits of Coercion in Imperial Germany”, *The Journal of Modern History* 56/3 (1984), 456–482. For extensive overview of the conflict between Catholics and nation states: *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Christopher Clark, Wolfram Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).

limitations imposed upon it, the Roman Catholic Church formally defined the doctrine of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). This dogma asserts that the pope, when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of doctrine, is preserved from the possibility of error, thereby safeguarding the Church's teachings from doctrinal fallibility. The conflict with the Roman Catholic Church gave rise to several Catholic movements that had a profound impact on the Balkans, significantly influencing relations between the Serbian Orthodox and Catholic populations. The conflicts between nation-states and the Roman Catholic Church had a relatively limited impact on Vienna. However, through a combination of Catholic resistance, the compromises made by the clergy, and the actions of Bishop Franz Joseph Rudiger, a new Catholic movement emerged within the Dual Monarchy.<sup>44</sup>

The Great Eastern Crises<sup>45</sup> ended in 1878 with Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sanjak of Novi Pazar. Serbia, Montenegro and Romania gained their independence. Occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was an important milestone in relations of Roman Catholic Church towards the Serbian Orthodox population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Franciscan order had a long-standing tradition, yet the arrival of Dual Monarchy troops necessitated significant changes.<sup>46</sup> The privileged status of the Franciscan order had been meticulously protected by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.<sup>47</sup> Bishop Strossmayer of Đakovo sought to exert greater influence over the region and persistently and resolutely advocated for a redefinition of the Franciscan order's role in the newly occupied province of Austria-Hungary. Throughout their presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Franciscan order established a *de facto* parallel Catholic hi-

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<sup>44</sup> Ivan Markešić, „Katolički pokreti – Europski kontekst”, in: *Hrvatski katolički pokret*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that there are indications suggesting that the initial uprisings originated among the Catholic inhabitants of lower Herzegovina, who appealed to the Dual Monarchy for assistance in their suffering and struggle. More on that: Milorad Ekmečić, „Uloga don Ivana Musića u Hercegovačkom ustanku 1875–1878. godine”, in Milorad Ekmečić, *Radovi iz istorije Bosne i Hercegovine 19. veka* (Beograd: BIGZ 1995), 73–177.

<sup>46</sup> Extensively on interconfessional relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Petar Vrankić, *Religion und Politik in Bosnien und der Herzegowina: (1878–1918)* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> Berislav Gavranović, *Uspostava redovite katoličke hijerarhije u Bosni i Hercegovini 1881. godine (Prilog političkoj historiji Austro-Ugarske monarhije na Balkanu)* (Beograd: Seminar za opću historiju novoga vijeka Filozofskog fakulteta, 1935), 71–90.

erarchy, steadfastly resisting any efforts to alter their position. In contrast, both the Holy See and Vienna were resolute in their determination to establish a regular Catholic hierarchy<sup>48</sup> in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>49</sup>

All these struggles were resolved in the summer of 1881 with the appointment of a new Archbishop of Vrhbosna, Josip Stadler.<sup>50</sup> Austrian emperor had the privilege to appoint archbishop and bishops in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>51</sup> Stadler devoted his efforts to combating the Franciscan order for control over the Catholic population, while also waging a covert struggle against Austrian officials concerning the potential conversion of the Muslim population.<sup>52</sup> Austrian authorities contributed to the confusion by issuing secret directives instructing officials not to engage in conversions. However, sporadic reports of conversions from Islam to Christianity surfaced, fostering an atmosphere in which it was believed that a broader plan for the Muslim population involved religious conversion.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Serbian Orthodox population was afraid of the forceful conversion to the "union".<sup>54</sup> In this matter Stadler was following the path of Strossmayer.<sup>55</sup>

Stadler was resolutely opposed to the involvement of civil authorities in matters of religious conversion. In an attempt to reach a resolution, the process of conversion to Catholicism was formalized through a convention in 1895. Despite this, tensions persisted, with an ongoing struggle between the

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<sup>48</sup> From the beginning of the occupation, the joint Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Finance entered into negotiations with the Holy See regarding a convention that would establish a regular Roman Catholic hierarchy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These discussions culminated in the signing of the convention in June 1881, which formally enabled the creation of a regular Catholic ecclesiastical structure in the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>49</sup> Srećko M. Džaja, *Bosna i Hercegovina u austrougarskom razdoblju (1878–1918). Intelligencija između tradicije i ideologije* (Mostar – Zagreb: Ziral 2002), 46–51.

<sup>50</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 44.

<sup>51</sup> Tomislav Kraljačić, *Kalajev režim u Bosni i Hercegovini 1882–1903* (Beograd: Catena Mundi 2017), 317–318.

<sup>52</sup> Catholic clergy had analyzed the potential for religious conversions and we learn about ideas from Strossmayer's letters. For example, he describes what is necessary for Bosnia to "come back to religion of ancestors, catholic religion": „Strossmayer Vannutelliju, Đakovo 15. 3. 1881", u *Korespondencija Josip Juraj Strossmayer – Serafin Vannutelli*, 80–90.

<sup>53</sup> Subić, *Austro-Ugarska i Hrvati u Bosni i Hercegovini (1903–1914)*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Tomo Vukšić, *Međusobni odnosi katolika i pravoslavaca u Bosni i Hercegovini (1878.–1903.). Povijesno teološki prikaz* (Mostar: Teološki institut, 1994), 128.

<sup>55</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 45.

authorities, who sought to preserve social order, and the zealous Catholic clergy, determined to expand their influence. The most significant impetus for Stadler's cause, as well as for the broader Catholic movement, came in 1900 following the First Croatian Catholic Congress in Zagreb.<sup>56</sup> In the wake of the 1895<sup>57</sup> reforms in Hungary, a new political ideology began to emerge: political Catholicism. This movement sought to play a central role in shaping both the national and integrative aspects of Catholic states.<sup>58</sup>

This congress was a great spur in the Stadler's activities. He sought to build the Croatian nationhood firmly on the Catholic basis.<sup>59</sup> He adamantly insisted on conversion of the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which caused them to seek support from Serbian Orthodox population. Constant tries to involve Muslim population in Croatian nation can be seen also through literature and motifs that were popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>60</sup> Franciscan order, still in conflict with Stadler, refute the connection between the Catholicism and Croatian national sentiment.<sup>61</sup> The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 marks the beginning of cooperation between the Muslim and the Catholics of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Political cooperation lasted until the beginning of the Great War.

On the eve of the First World War, the Serbian state and the Holy See reached an agreement regarding a Concordat. This agreement was the culmination of a protracted series of negotiations that began in 1880, when Bishop Strossmayer visited Belgrade and advocated for the necessity of such an accord. In Strossmayer's view, the Concordat represented a means to reduce the influence of Austria-Hungary in Serbia. While Vienna opposed this initiative, the Roman Catholic supported Strossmayer's position.

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<sup>56</sup> More on congress: Mario Strecha, „*Mi smo Hrvati Katolici*”. *Prvi hrvatski katolički kongres 1900*. (Zagreb: Zavod za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2008), 94–112.

<sup>57</sup> In the same year emperor Franz Joseph visited Zagreb. During his visit a few attacks on Serbian institutions happened. Dušan T. Bataković, „Balkanski Pijemont – Srbija i jugoslovensko pitanje”, in *Istorija jedne utopije – 100 godina od stvaranja Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Catena Mundi, 2018), 30.

<sup>58</sup> Mario Strecha, „Prvi hrvatski katolički kongres – korak naprijed u afirmaciji političkog katolicizma u banskoj Hrvatskoj”, in *Hrvatski katolički pokret*, 176–177.

<sup>59</sup> Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 364–365.

<sup>61</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 46.

However, it became apparent that the timing was premature for the realization of such an agreement.<sup>62</sup>

Since 1903, significant shifts occurred in the geopolitical landscape of the Balkan. While the Dual Monarchy remained steadfast in safeguarding its position in the Balkans, the dynastic change in Serbia facilitated a growing influence of Russia. In response, the Dual Monarchy sought to align more closely with the Holy See in order to preserve its regional dominance. At the same time, the monarchy endeavored to prevent direct negotiations between Belgrade and the Holy See, asserting that it was the prerogative of the Habsburgs to protect Catholic interests in the Balkans.<sup>63</sup> Contrary to the wishes of Austria-Hungary, negotiations between the Holy See and Serbia were resumed following the Balkan Wars. The principal representative of the Roman Catholic Church was Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, while the Serbian delegation was led by Lujo Bakotić.<sup>64</sup> The discussions began in the summer of 1912 and proved lengthy, as Austria-Hungary sought to maintain its influence over the Catholic population in the region. Both the Holy See, through Pacelli, and the Serbian government insisted on several revisions throughout the process. The final round of talks took place in June 1914, and the Concordat was signed on June 24. The Serbian Parliament ratified the agreement in August 1914.<sup>65</sup>

The First world war made clear to everyone that large geopolitical changes are coming. The Catholic church under the new pope Benedict XV tried to insist on neutrality among the states in war.<sup>66</sup> However, Holy See supported the Austria-Hungary and its attack on Serbia, disregarding disagreement concerning Concordat and the role of protector of Roman Catholic population in the Balkans.<sup>67</sup> During the war the Croatian population was

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<sup>62</sup> Radoslav M. Grujić, *Političko-verska aktivnost Vatikana na Balkanu kroz vekove* (Beograd: Catena Mundi, 2020), 67–68.

<sup>63</sup> Dragoljub R. Živojinović, „Prilog proučavanju konkordata Kraljevine Srbije i Svete Stolicе 1914”, in Dragoljub R. Živojinović, *Vatikan u balkanskom vrtlogu: studije i rasprave* (Beograd: Albatros plus, 2012), 17–19.

<sup>64</sup> Extensive analysis on relations between Serbia and the Holy See: Milosav Z. Đoković, *Le relazioni politico-ecclesiastiche tra la Santa Sede e la Serbia dal 1878 al 1918* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press 2023).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>66</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> Radmila Radić, „Jugoslavija i Vatikan 1918–1992. godine”, *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia* 24/4 (2014), 692.



drawn into war with, among other means, Catholic propaganda that had insisted on justifiable war against the Serbs. The Pope sought to mediate through diplomatic channels, but some saw this attitude of neutrality as latent support towards the Dual Monarchy.<sup>68</sup> The creation of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes deeply upset the Holy See, that saw the defeat of the Austria-Hungary, as its own.<sup>69</sup> Official recognition of the new state came almost a year after promulgation of the new state, and the diplomatic relations began in the 1920.<sup>70</sup>

The Holy See's relations with Yugoslavia between 1918 and 1939 were marked by religious and political complexity, shaped by interfaith tensions, nationalist movements, and the Church's desire to safeguard Catholic interests amidst a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.<sup>71</sup> Due to a complex and often strained relations between the Holy See and the Yugoslav state, we will focus our interest on the question of Concordat and the Catholic action. All of the previous agreements with Holy See on the Yugoslav area ceded to exist.<sup>72</sup> Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was not granted rights over Catholic population on the territories that were once Austria-Hungary and that became part of the Yugoslav state.<sup>73</sup>

The Catholic clergy harbored a profound mistrust toward the newly established Kingdom of Yugoslavia, urging the swift negotiation of a new Concordat with the Holy See. The intricate political climate surrounding the promulgation of the Vidovdan Constitution compelled the Yugoslav leadership to consider an agreement with the Holy See, recognizing the need to mitigate tensions with the Catholic population. In their view, such a diplomatic

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<sup>68</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> Ljubodrag Dimić, Nikola Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup (1934–1941)* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 2017), 70.

<sup>70</sup> The complexity of the relations is described in: Živojinović, „Sveta Stolica i stvaranje jugoslovenske države 1914–1918. godine. Politički život Jugoslavije 1914–1945”, in *Vatikan u balkanskom vrtlogu*, 63–116.

<sup>71</sup> Relations of the Vatican towards the creation of the Yugoslav state and the position of the Holy See during the Great War: Dragoljub R. Živojinović, *Vatikan, Srbija i stvaranje jugoslovenske države: 1914–1920* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 1995).

<sup>72</sup> Viktor Novak, *Magnum Crimen: pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Hrvatske, 1948), 165.

<sup>73</sup> Radmila Radić, „Pregovori o konkordatu između Kraljevine SHS i Svete Stolice 1925. godine”, *Anali PFBU* 69/1 (2021), 70.

accord was essential to alleviating the religious and political frictions that threatened to destabilize the unity of the state.<sup>74</sup>

In the latter half of 1920s, preparations commenced for negotiating an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, a development that attracted considerable attention not only from the clergy but also from the broader public.<sup>75</sup> Representatives met in 1925, but long negotiations did not lead to an understanding, despite efforts made by the state.<sup>76</sup> Holy See did not want to antagonize Italy by reaching an understanding, Serbian Orthodox Church was against an agreement and catholic clergy had many complaints about the proposed text and was adamantly against agrarian reform.<sup>77</sup> But the most important obstacle was control of the education, and the representatives of the government were ready to make some concessions in 1925, but the Holy See insisted on deep changes that were unacceptable to the state.<sup>78</sup>

The legal status of churches in Yugoslavia was partially governed by domestic laws; however, the situation of the Roman Catholic Church presented a unique challenge, as its leadership resided outside the country. Long after the geopolitical upheavals following the Great War, the issue of diocesan boundaries remained unresolved. The territorial divisions that had once been part of a unified empire now created a complex problem, as dioceses that were formerly within the same national borders were now separated by newly established state frontiers.<sup>79</sup>

After the First World War Roman Catholic Church had to formulate a response to a new age and new reality. In the fight against secularization the Church reach for the rechristianization of society. The answer was found in a new movement within the Church called Catholic Action. The movement was promoted by the Holy See, particularly under the leadership of Pope Pius XI, and played a crucial role in the Church's response to the

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<sup>74</sup> Ljubodrag Dimić, Nikola Žutić, *Rimokatolički klerikalizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918 – 1941* (Beograd: Vojna štamparija, 1992), 229.

<sup>75</sup> Radić, „Pregovori o konkordatu između Kraljevine SHS i Svete Stolicе 1925. godine”, 76–85.

<sup>76</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Rimokatolički klerikalizam*, 230.

<sup>77</sup> Radić, „Pregovori o konkordatu između Kraljevine SHS i Svete Stolicе 1925. godine”, 94.

<sup>78</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup*, 90.

<sup>79</sup> On the question of dioceses: Nikola Žutić, „Rimokatoličke dijeceze u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji – crkveno međudržavno razgraničenje i obrazovanje novih dijeceza”, *Istorija 20. veka* 1–2 (1992), 73–82.

socio-political changes and challenges of the interwar period, including secularism and communism. By emphasizing the active involvement of laypeople in both religious and social matters, focus of the movement was on strengthening Catholic influence in the public sphere.<sup>80</sup> The movement was very active among the Catholic population of Yugoslavia. Catholic Action in Yugoslavia was heavily influenced by the growing Croatian nationalism, which was particularly strong in the 1920s and 1930s. In Croatia, Catholic Action was closely associated with the rise of the *Ustaša* movement, a Croatian fascist and nationalist organization that sought to create an independent Croatian state.

Two significant organizations emerged in Yugoslavia, inspired by Catholic Action and the revitalization of the Croatian Catholic movement: the *Hrvatski orlovski savez* (Croat Eagle Union, 1923–1929) and the *Križarska organizacija* (Crusaders Organization, 1930–1945). Both organizations professed to remain outside the realm of daily politics; however, their consistent opposition to liberalism and communism led to persistent accusations of clericalism. The Eagles, initially founded as a gymnastic society, were deeply influenced by Catholic Action principles and its emphasis on lay participation. They believed that physical exercise could serve as a vehicle for spreading the Catholic message. Despite their claims of neutrality, it was clear that the Eagles functioned as educational and formative organizations, offering an alternative to the secular curriculum of public schools.<sup>81</sup> In 1929, following the proclamation of the personal regime by King Alexander, the Eagles were banned, further clarifying their role as a Catholic educational movement intertwined with nationalist and religious objectives. After the ban of the Eagles a new organization emerged – the Crusaders. Despite the ban on organizations that had religious and ethnic structure archbishop of Zagreb Antun Bauer allowed this organization.<sup>82</sup> Crusaders were radical, with specific relation towards the “homeland”. Only the “homeland” was not Yugoslavia but greater version of Croatia. By the late 1930s the Crusaders can be best described

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<sup>80</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup*, 93.

<sup>81</sup> Sandra Prlenda, „Young, Religious, and Radical: The Croat Catholic Youth Organizations, 1922–1945”, in *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, eds. John R. Lampe, Mark Mazower (Budapest – New York: Central University Press 2004), 85–90.

<sup>82</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Rimokatolički klerikalizam*, 249.

by their catchwords “God, Church, Homeland”. The proclamation of Independent State of Croatia was met with celebrations.<sup>83</sup>

Following the political crises caused by the attempted assassination and later death of Stjepan Radić the king Alexander abolished the constitution, dissolved the parliament and started the period of personal regime. During this period the king and the government tried to regulate relations with religious organizations with series of laws.<sup>84</sup> As it was mentioned above certain organizations were banned. To mitigate the destruction of the Eagles movement, the king tried to create Falcons, that were supposed to be a Yugoslav organization. However, Catholic Church stood strongly against it.<sup>85</sup> In the 1933 the confrontation with Catholic clergy was at peak and the king realized that the agreement with Vatican is necessary.

In the autumn of 1932, the Yugoslav minister of foreign affairs created a commission that was supposed to create a proposition of an agreement to the Holy See. Proposition was finished in the August of 1934. King Alexander was killed in an assassination in October of 1934. He was killed by a member of IMRO with a great help from Ustaše lead by Ante Pavelić. After the murder of a king the Holy See and Yugoslavia reached an agreement in July of 1935.

The text of the Concordat remained undisclosed to the public until it was presented to the Yugoslav Parliament for ratification in November 1936, at which point it immediately provoked significant controversy and political conflict.<sup>86</sup> The Concordat was controversial for a variety of reasons, primarily because it granted the Catholic Church considerable privileges in a state that was already divided along religious and national lines. The Catholic Church was granted the right to publicly and freely pursue its mission within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Using the term mission sparked controversy because it could imply proselytism. One of the most controversial provisions was the potential for the Catholic Church to exert greater control over education in Yugoslavia. The Concordat granted the Catholic Church significant influence over Catholic

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<sup>83</sup> Prlenda, „Young, Religious, and Radical: The Croat Catholic Youth Organizations, 1922–1945”, 93–95.

<sup>84</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>86</sup> See more: Milorad Sredojević, *Konkordat u Skupštini Kraljevine Jugoslavije* (Beograd: SKZ).

schools and religious education, which was perceived as an attempt by the Vatican to bypass state control and establish an independent educational system.<sup>87</sup>

The prevailing sentiment among the population was that the government had capitulated to the Roman Catholic Church. The Serbian Orthodox Church, in particular, contended that the agreement between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia effectively granted the Catholic Church a privileged position. Serbian Patriarch Varnava communicated his concerns to the Prime Minister, warning that the Concordat could prove detrimental to the state. According to the critics the Roman Catholic church was introduced into schools and homes and the road to clericalism was paved.<sup>88</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church initiated activities to pressure withdrawal from the agreement in which it warned Orthodox members of the Parliament of Yugoslavia to vote against the concordat.

Alojzije Stepinac was appointed Archbishop of Zagreb in December 1937, a time when Serbo-Croatian relations had reached a particularly low point.<sup>89</sup> The Concordat crisis was at its peak, and Stepinac did not conceal his hostility towards the Serbian Orthodox Church. He openly criticized the attitude of the Orthodox Church.<sup>90</sup> Although the Concordat was approved by the Parliament, its ratification in the Senate was repeatedly delayed and that caused a significant rift in the deteriorating relations between Serbs and Croats. In his diaries Stepinac is even more explicit, "attesting" to immorality of Serbian priests and patriarch.<sup>91</sup> The divide caused by the Concordat and the circumstances surrounding it were evident even among the Croats, as some strongly opposed its ratification, understanding that it would signify recognition of Yugoslavia, something they firmly resisted.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup*, 291–292. More detailed: Dimić, Žutić, *Rimokatolički klerikalizam*, 239–249.

<sup>88</sup> Rastko Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej. Zbor, hrišćanstvo i verske zajednice* (Beograd: Catena Mundi, 2021), 207; Dimić, Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup*, 299.

<sup>89</sup> Banac, *Hrvati i crkva*, 81.

<sup>90</sup> Dimić, Žutić, *Alojzije Stepinac – država, crkva, nadbiskup*, 303.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>92</sup> More on topic: Massimiliano Valente, *Diplomazia pontificia e regno dei Serbi, Croati e Sloveni (1918–1929)* (Split: Filozofski fakultet u Splitu, 2012); Igor Salmić, *Al di là di ogni pregiudizio: Le trattative per il concordato tra la Santa Sede e il regno dei Serbi Croati e Sloveni/Jugoslavia e la mancata ratifica (1922–1938)* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2015).

In February 1938, Prime Minister Stojadinović stated that the Concordat would not be returned to Parliament for reconsideration and emphasized that future regulation of relations with the Holy See would take into account the principle of religious equality for all faiths within Yugoslavia. The cancellation of the Concordat elicited protests from the Vatican. The evident response of Catholic Church in Yugoslavia came through statement of the Bishop conference that pointed out the unfair treatment of Catholic population and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Yugoslav government.<sup>93</sup>

The unsuccessful conclusion of the concordat between the Holy See and the Yugoslav government also provoked unrest within the Croatian Peasant Party (CPP), the leading political force in Croatia at the time. Its leader, Vlatko Maček, maintained that an independent Croatian state would be able to secure a significantly more favorable agreement with the Vatican than the Belgrade. This stance was supported by segments of the Catholic clergy. However, the Holy See viewed the growing involvement of the Croatian clergy in political affairs highly worrying particularly when framed as a defense of national interests.<sup>94</sup>

The Catholic clergy increasingly fostered and publicly promoted a narrative portraying the Church as a victim of repression and discrimination within Yugoslavia, allegedly endangered by the proselytizing efforts of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which were seen as attempts to denationalize the Croatian people. Over time, this dominant discourse was repeatedly reproduced and adapted to new contexts, thereby playing a role in ideologically preparing segments of the Croatian population to accept the propaganda of the Ustasha regime and its implementation of a genocidal policy against the Serbian population.<sup>95</sup> The Ustasha regime represented the culmination of Croa-

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>94</sup> Vojislav Pavlović, „Questionable Solicitude Pius XII and the Catholic Church in Croatia during the Second World War”, in: *Pope Pius XII and the Challenge of Totalitarianism in Yugoslavia, 1941–1958*, ed. Vojislav Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies SASA, 2025), 39.

<sup>95</sup> More on the subject: Vasilije. Dj. Krestić, *Dosije o genezi genocida nad Srbima u NDH* (Novi Sad: Prometej 2009); Veljko Đurić Mišina, *Zločin je počeo ranije. Prilozi za istoriju stradajnja Srba u banovinama Primorskoj i Savskoj 1934–1939* (Beograd: V. Đ. Mišina, 2004).

tian ultranationalist ideology that had developed throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Following the assassination of Stjepan Radić, the Catholic clergy increasingly assumed a leading role in the national struggle, particularly by portraying the Roman Catholic Church as a victim of Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>96</sup>

Across the longue durée from the Counter-Reformation to the early twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church played a central and evolving role in the religious and political transformation of the Balkans. What began as a response to Protestantism through the Council of Trent and the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith expanded into a sustained campaign to bring Orthodox Christians of the Balkans into communion with Rome. These trends intensified after the Napoleonic Wars, when the restoration of the papacy and the reaffirmation of traditional Church privileges through the Austrian Concordat of 1855 marked a return to clerical influence. Yet this revival occurred within a changing intellectual climate. The rise of liberal Catholicism attempted to reconcile modern political and social ideas with Church doctrine, and it significantly influenced the Croatian national revival.

By the end of the century, political Catholicism had become an assertive force, culminating in events such as the First Croatian Catholic Congress in 1900. Josip Stadler emerged as the leading voice of a more exclusive Catholic nationalism that sought to define Croatian identity in religious terms, while also attempting to convert both Muslims and Serbian Orthodox Christians in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These efforts revealed the growing entanglement of national ideologies, religious identity, and imperial strategy. At the same time, the Vatican's diplomatic efforts, most notably its long negotiation of a Concordat with Serbia, reflected an attempt to assert influence in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

The First World War marked the collapse of the old order. The dissolution of Austria-Hungary severed the institutional link between the Vatican and its traditional political ally in the region. The formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes represented a new reality that the Holy See was slow to accept.

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<sup>96</sup> Aleksandar Stojanović, „The Independent State of Croatia and the Role of the Catholic Church in the Genocide”, in: *Pope Pius XII and the Challenge of Totalitarianism in Yugoslavia, 1941–1958*, 83.

Following the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes faced the challenge of redefining its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. The absence of legal continuity with previous concordats created a vacuum that led to prolonged diplomatic negotiations, stalled repeatedly by internal divisions and geopolitical sensitivities. Concordat crisis exposed the fragility of religious coexistence. While Catholic leaders pushed for institutional guarantees, particularly in education and Church governance, Serbian Orthodox leaders feared a privileging of Catholicism that would undermine both religious parity and national unity. The Vatican's insistence on broad rights for the Church clashed with the Yugoslav government's need to maintain domestic balance, resulting in a protracted conflict that ultimately culminated in the Concordat's failure. The controversy not only deepened mistrust between Serbs and Croats and was used by the Roman Catholic Church to reinforce the perception among many Catholics that their Church was systematically marginalized within the Yugoslav state. This narrative contributed to the ideological preparation of parts of the Croatian population for the radical solutions later proposed by the Ustasha regime.

Simultaneously, the rise of Catholic Action and affiliated lay organizations such as the Orlovi and Križari reflected the Church's broader strategy to reclaim social influence through the mobilization of the faithful. These movements, although ostensibly non-political, became vehicles for nationalist and ideological agendas, increasingly aligning with the goals of Croatian nationalism. By the late 1930s, the breakdown of efforts to achieve a lasting agreement with the Vatican, coupled with the politicization of Catholic identity, illustrated the deepening national and confessional divisions within Yugoslavia. The unresolved religious questions and the failure of concordat diplomacy were not merely institutional setbacks; they were symptomatic of a broader crisis of legitimacy and cohesion in the Yugoslav state. As Catholic leadership increasingly tethered its vision of justice and identity to Croatian nationalism, the stage was set for the catastrophic ruptures that would follow during the Second World War.



## SUMMARY

This article reexamines the Holy See's evolving approach to the Serbian Orthodox population in the Balkans from the Counter-Reformation through the interwar period, highlighting how religious policy became increasingly entangled with emerging national ideologies. Initially focused on bringing Orthodox Christians into communion with Rome, the Roman Catholic Church's efforts intensified in the 19th century. Following the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, the Holy See faced a transformed political and religious landscape characterized by the absence of existing concordat agreements and heightened tensions over interconfessional balance and church-state relations. The failed Concordat negotiations with Yugoslavia not only exposed deep confessional rifts but also reinforced Catholic perceptions of marginalization, fueling nationalist sentiments. The mobilization of Catholic lay organizations further politicized religious identity, aligning Church interests with Croatian nationalist goals. By the late 1930s, the unresolved tensions between the Holy See and the Yugoslav state manifested through stalled diplomacy, failed integration, and rising mistrust, contributed to the ideological conditions that enabled the later radicalization under the Ustasha regime.

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## Резиме

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### ПРЕИСПИТИВАЊЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ СВЕТЕ СТОЛИЦЕ ПРЕМА СРПСКОМ ПРАВОСЛАВНОМ СТАНОВНИШТВУ НА ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ ПРЕ ДРУГОГ СВЕТСКОГ РАТА

АПСТРАКТ: Овај рад има за циљ да преиспита став Римокатоличке цркве према српском православном становништву у периоду који је претходио успостављању Независне Државе Хрватске. Због широког хронолошког и географског оквира теме, анализа је усмерена на студије случаја, укључујући питање унијаћења, улогу католичког свештенства у хрватском националном покрету, Конкордат између Југославије и Ватикана, као и Католичку акцију. Испитивањем ових кључних тачака, рад настоји да сагледа културну, политичку и идеолошку динамику односа Католичке цркве према српском православном становништву. Такође, истраживање указује на одређене континуитете у овом односу, који кулминирају прогонима, угњетавањем и геноцидом над српским народом током постојања Независне Државе Хрватске.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: Римокатоличка црква, Српска православна црква, унијаћење, Хрватска, Славонија, католичко свештенство, Конкордат, Католичка акција

Овај чланак изнова разматра однос Свете столице према српском православном становништву на Балкану од периода контрареформације до међуратног раздобља, истичући начин на који се верска политика преплитала са настајућим националним идеологијама. Напори Римокатоличке цркве да православне хришћане доведе под сопствено окриље интензивирали су се током 19. века. Након распада Аустроугарске и стварања Краљевине Срба, Хрвата и Словенаца, Света столица се суочила са измењеним политичким и верским окружењем, које је карактерисало одсуство постојећих конкордатских споразума, као и појачане међуверске тензије и нарушени однос цркве и државе. Неуспешни пре-

говори о Конкордату са Југославијом нису само разоткрили дубоке конфесионалне поделе, већ су и учврстили католичку перцепцију сопствене маргинализације, подстичући националистичка осећања. Мобилизација католичких лаичких организација додатно је политизовала верски идентитет, усклађујући интересе Цркве са хрватским националним циљевима. До касних тридесетих година 20. века, нерешене тензије између Свете столице и југословенске државе, испољене кроз застоје у преговорима, неуспелу интеграцију и растуће неповерење, допринеле су стварању идеолошких предуслова који су омогућили каснију радикализацију под усташким режимом.