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Orthodoxy Goes Pop: Rock Music and Cultural Hegemony in Serbia¹

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„Modern politics here has always had a soundtrack.”²

This paper is not an aesthetic or musicological treatise. What is going to be discussed is the role that rock music played in the struggle(s) for cultural hegemony. Two periods will be considered: one during the late socialism in the former Yugoslavia (early eighties of the twentieth century), and the other starting in the early post-socialist Serbia and continuing to this day (year two thousand onwards).

More precisely, narratives and discourses contained in and surrounding the album *Одбрана и последњи дани* (*The Defense and the Last Days*) by the group VIS³ Idoli (Idols) from 1982, and the compilation *Песме изнад истока и запада* (*Songs above East and West*) from 2001, will be identified and subjected to interpretation. There were several instances where pop-rock bands in eastern parts of the former Yugoslavia used religious, i.e. Eastern Christian motives in their music.⁴ However, due to the space limitations of this paper, only the two cases mentioned will be analysed, as the comparison of the stark contrasts between them promises the most significant insight into the workings of ideology.

The record by Idoli is referred to as „the first album in Eastern Europe that deals with Orthodoxy in any way”⁵. This engagement with Eastern Christianity was imbued with controversies related to the performers’ intentions and the ambivalent meanings of some of

¹ This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-66/2024-03). The author wishes to thank Mislava Emmerich Jerić for the help with translating parts of the text into English.

² N. Itano, *Turbo-folk music is the sound of Serbia feeling sorry for itself*, „Christian Science Monitor” 2008.

³ VIS is an abbreviation of: *Vokalno instrumentalni sastav* (*Vocal and instrumental band*).

⁴ Let the following Macedonian groups be mentioned here: Mizar (1981–1991), Telo-Nauka Sovršena (1982–1987), Padot na Vizantija (1985), Aporea (Apokrifna realnost) (1988), and Anastasia (1990–2009). In Serbia, Gothic-rock band Trivalia released the album „Pravoslavija” in 1989, and a pop-rock group Galija issued a 7" single „Pravoslavlje” in 1991, with the title song also appearing on compilation „Ni rat ni mir – Odlomci iz trilogije 1987-1991”.

the musical and lyrical elements on the record. This makes this album particularly suitable for all types of projections and the inscribing of different connotations.

Песме изнад истока и запада comprise thirteen songs by well-known and established musicians based on the poems of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956), who was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2003. The compilation was edited by the then hieromonk and bishop of Pakrac and Slavonia since 2014, Jovan (Ćulibrk). It was officially released on Easter, April 15, 2001, by state-owned and operated label PGP-RTS, in cooperation with Radio Svetigora, the radio of the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereafter: SOC), founded by and based in the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral. This record has been compared to the one by Idoli, as it also thematises Orthodox Christianity.

This text will attempt to show that rock⁶ played diverse roles in two different historical periods – while in late socialism, it was (mostly)⁷ subversive in relation to the officially presented reality of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), in post-socialism it legitimises the hegemonic culture of religious nationalism in contemporary Serbia.⁸

Cultural Hegemony

The concept of *hegemony* is usually defined as a cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life by imposing its cultural ideal, i.e. worldview:

„It is the power to establish the «common sense» or «doxa» of a society, the fund of self-evident descriptions of social reality that normally go without saying. This includes the power to establish authoritative definitions of social situations and social needs, the power to define the universe of legitimate disagreement, and the power to shape the political agenda.”⁹

Hegemony (*egemonia culturale*) is a term that Antonio Gramsci used for the „discursive face of power”. It is obtained through struggles for meaning and power „performed by individuals who elaborate and bring cultural essentials to the fore”, and through conflicts „in which beliefs, symbolism, and practices are open to antagonistic interpretations”.¹⁰ Predominance or hegemonic rule is obtained by consent rather than force, and it usually entails implicit or uncritical intellectual or emotional acceptance of the sociopolitical order.¹¹

⁵ I. Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali*, Beograd 2013, p. 252; D. Vesić, *Bunt dece socijalizma*, Beograd 2020, p. 274.

⁶ In this paper, we will not deal with the legitimising effects of popular (*забавна*), (neo-)folk (*народна; новокомпонована*) or disco music in the former Yugoslavia. For a comprehensive account of “music for the masses” in SFRY, see: D. Š. Beard & Lj. Rasmussen, *Made in Yugoslavia. Studies in Popular Music*, New York 2020.

⁷ Although the very fact that it came from the capitalist West made rock „suspicious”, and thus at least potentially subversive, there was a special kind of local mainstream hybrid: a mixture of folk and pop motifs with hard-rock features, which some critics derogatorily labelled „shepherd’s rock”. Its most widely accepted and consumed incarnation was the band Bijelo dugme (White Button) from Sarajevo. The New Wave in Yugoslavia can be seen as a reaction to and a departure from the mainstream, „Yugoslavised” folk rock of Bijelo Dugme.

⁸ It could be said that the music here functions as a „conductor” or „transmitter” of dominant ideology.

⁹ N. Fraser, *The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics*, „Theory, Culture & Society” 1992, no 9, p. 53.

¹⁰ R. Forlenza, *Antonio Gramsci on Religion*, „Journal of Classical Sociology” 2021, no. 21, p. 39.

¹¹ See: A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York 1971, pp. 323; 326.

The question about „which culture is the best”¹² transcends the boundaries of the cultural field, and the struggle to achieve hegemony epitomizes an important form of social struggles. In various theoretical conceptions of symbolic conflicts, such clashes are labelled as „culture wars”¹³, „classification struggles”¹⁴ or „drawing of symbolic boundaries”¹⁵.

„Hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power”¹⁶. In Yugoslavia, the cultural ideals of „brotherhood and unity” of its peoples/ethnic groups and socialist secularism were wholeheartedly promoted. Political and administrative structures „watched over” the cultural production, and sanctioned any „deviations from the right path” of socialist development. However, political control was much less strict than the one existing in the countries „behind the iron curtain”, and gradually even grew „softer” over time. Yugoslavia was „something in between” the capitalist West and socialist East, a „«user friendly» communism”.¹⁷

„Rock music came to the attention of the authorities very soon, and [...] Tito and Kardelj personally discussed this genre in order to decide what posture to adopt toward it. In contrast to the other communist elites of Eastern Europe, Tito and Kardelj opted for a policy of toleration.”¹⁸

The façade of control was created and socialist hegemony was upheld through mass media, the school education system, party rituals and ceremonies at the centre of which was the personality cult of Marshal Tito.

The change in the social and political climate that occurred shortly before and after Josip Broz Tito’s death in 1980 greatly influenced life in Yugoslavia, which was indirectly reflected in the flourishing of the punk and new wave scenes.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia in the nineties and the fall of Slobodan Milošević’s authoritarian rule in 2000, different cultural ideals were established and promoted as the dominant ones, and institutional power shifted, with SOC gaining high political ground.

The Church took the starring role in the nation-(re)building project: widespread social acceptability of Orthodox symbols, imagery and religious rituals among the general public, besides being emblems of nominal confessionality, implicitly flagged ethnic identity and collective belonging of the Serbian people.¹⁹ The SOC enjoys certain concessions and budgetary benefits which ensure its unhindered activity in the field of finances, (religious) education, regulation of and participation in the media sphere, as well as a privileged position in the restitution of the property confiscated after the Second World War.

The data on the SOC being flooded with government donations indisputably testify to the „increased rapprochement between the state and the church” after 2000.²⁰ A particularly visible indicator of the status that the SOC has in Serbian society is a ubiquitous „construction boom with more churches, monasteries, parish halls, bishops’ palaces and houses for priests, built in the last two decades than in the SOC’s entire history”.²¹

Even a sketchy depiction of the two social realities, such as the one just provided, indicates considerably dissimilar cultural contexts in which the two records dealing with

¹² „Culture” denoting a way of life, which comprises: customs, morals, tastes, various beliefs, etc.

¹³ J. D. Hunter, *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America. Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics*, New York 1991.

¹⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Classification Struggles*, transl. P. Collier, Cambridge 2018.

¹⁵ M. Lamont, V. Molnár, *The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences*, „Annual Review of Sociology” 2002, no 28, p. 167–195.

¹⁶ R. Connell, *Masculinities*, New York 2005, p. 77.

¹⁷ M. Ristivojević, *Beograd na „novom talasu”*, Beograd 2014, p. 124.

¹⁸ S. P. Ramet, *Shake, Rattle, and Self-Management*, London 1994, p. 111.

¹⁹ T. Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition*, London 2021, p. 321.

²⁰ M. Jovanović, *Simbolički sukobi oko pričešća u Srbiji za vreme pandemije*, Niš 2022, p. 52–53.

²¹ B. Aleksov & N. Lackenby, *Orthodoxy in Serbia*, „International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church” 2022, no 22, p. 217. See also: AFANS, *The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia*, Novi Sad 2007.

religion appeared. Therefore, unsurprisingly, musics with seemingly similar references and features serve divergent causes and produce rather different social effects.

The Last Days of Socialism

„*The Defense and the Last Days* is a kind of Orthodox punk oratorio that came out before the public two years after Tito's death, in an anxious state which cultivated its pain for the dictator.”²²

„We started it all, but we never went further with it, because I never liked the idea of creating orthodox rock and roll [...] It wasn't my idea to bring the Church into my music, and I really wasn't ready for that [...] At that time, I wanted to know why the church seemed so undesirable to young people? Not because I was religious, it is just that I simply wanted to know why I was there and what to do with the whole story!”²³

Idoli were one of the „great three” bands²⁴ of the „Belgrade alternative scene”²⁵, and an indispensable group in every anthology of Yugoslav rock.²⁶ They were recognizable for their camp image and ironic approach brilliantly wrapped up in catchy pop tunes. For example, the track „Retko te viđam sa devojčkama” („I rarely see you with girls”) from their debut single thematized homosexuality. They continued to take on awkward topics, such as Germanophobia, the overemphasizing of Russian communist leitmotifs and the debunking of American dream, on the *Paket aranžman* (1981), a „seminal New Wave compilation”²⁷ of the early eighties Serbian Punk/New Wave. The self-titled mini-LP went further on with camping of the sixties mainstream music and used the Macedonian language in a slightly obscene manner (on the track „Malena”/„Little one”), which could have been interpreted as going against the policy of brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav peoples.

Their first full-length album – *Одбрана и последњи дани* – was an LP that challenged the cliché-ridden and worn-out ideological mainstays of the Yugoslav socialist state. It did that by employing several features.

The cover. The initial idea was to have White Angel – a detail of the fresco the Myrrhbearers at Christ's tomb from the Mileševa monastery – as the record cover art, but the

²² Nebojša Pajkić, [in:] A. M. Grbić, *Idoli i poslednji dan*, Beograd 2018, p. 109.

²³ Vlada Divljan, [in:] I. Bečković, *Ekskluzivno: Neobjavljeni delovi poslednjeg intervjuja Vlade Divljana za makedonske medije*, 2015.

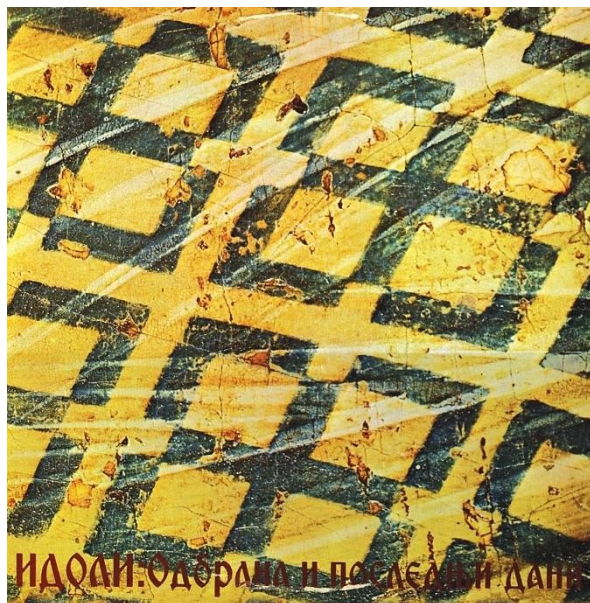
²⁴ Šarlo akrobata and Električni orgazam being the other two, whereas the Idoli were „the most receptive to the public”, „the most communicative with a wider circle of listeners”, and at one moment „the most popular band in the country”, M. Ajduk, *Reprezentacija jugoslovenskog novog talasa u štampi od 1979. do 1985. godine*, Beograd 2021, p. 49; 69.

²⁵ There is fairly extensive literature on the Yugoslav New Wave music. A selection of publications available to us: M. Ajduk, *Reprezentacija jugoslovenskog novog talasa u štampi od 1979. do 1985. godine*, Beograd 2021; M. Ajduk, *Kulturne predstave o novom talasu u Jugoslaviji 40 godina kasnije*, „Etnoantropološki problemi” 2023; D. Albahari (ed.), *Drugom stranom*, Beograd 1983; J. Božilović, *New wave in Yugoslavia*, „Facta Universitatis – series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History” 2013; B. Ćurko & I. Gregurić (eds.) *Novi val i filozofija*, Zagreb 2012; V. Đurić, *Vodič kroz novi talas u SFRJ*, Beograd 2018; S. Jevtić, *Novi talas kao poslednji jugoslovenski muzičko-kulturni i društveni pokret*, „Politikon” 2022; Z. Jovanović, „My life is new wave”, „Popular Music History” 2016; N. Kyaw, *Računajte na nas*, Novi Sad 2009; I. Mirković, *Sretno Dijete*, Zagreb 2004; I. Prica, „Novi val” kao anticipacija krize, „Etnološka tribina” 1990; Lj. Reinkowski, *Die letzte Welle der Brüderlichkeit?*, Göttingen 2014; M. Ristivojević, *Beograd na „novom talasu”*, Beograd 2014; S. Varda, *Zvuk slobode*, Niš 2023; D. Vesić, *Bunt dece socijalizma*, Beograd 2020.

²⁶ See: I. Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali*, Beograd 2013; P. Janjatović, *Ex-Yu Rock enciklopedija*, Beograd 2007; D. Mišina, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, London 2013; S. P. Ramet, *Shake, Rattle, and Self-Management*, London 1994.

²⁷ M. Ajduk, *Reprezentacija jugoslovenskog novog talasa u štampi od 1979. do 1985. godine*, Beograd 2021, p. 49.

officials at the Jugoton label disagreed, considering it too provocative. The designer then took a photo of a cloth detail from a Saint Nicholas icon from the National Museum in Belgrade, which became the cover art. A detail from the golden background of the icon was made into a back cover. The name of the band and the title of the album were printed in Cyrillic font, and in 1982 „the party committees were not too happy that the Cyrillic alphabet appeared on an artefact of the youth subculture, which according to some tradition was – Latin”²⁸. Amusingly enough, as one of the frontmen and a guitarist of Idoli, Vlada Divljan, affirms that „at that time it was much more difficult to release a Cyrillic record in Serbia than in Croatia”²⁹. Jugoton label was based in Zagreb, Croatia; Croats use only the Latin alphabet, and Serbs use both, with nationalists insisting on the primacy or the exclusivity of the Cyrillic alphabet.



Il. 1. Goranka Matić (photography and design), Cover art of „Idoli – Odbrana i poslednji dani”, 1982, Zagreb, ©Jugoton/Croatia Records

Song titles and lyrics. Due to the problematic title, a song that was initially titled „Isus je naš maj” („Jesus is our May”) became „Odbrana” („The Defence”), with the line „Isus je naš maj” remaining a part of the song, sung at the beginning and throughout. What was „ticklish” was the placing of Jesus as a preference to or even a substitute for „May” – that might be an allusion to *International Workers’ Day* (May 1st), one of the most important dates in the socialist, and generally left-wing calendar. However, more importantly, the reference is the

one to May 25th, Tito’s official birthday and *Dan mladosti* (*Youth Day*), a national holiday with a symbolic race *Štafeta mladosti* (*The Relay of Youth*).

Another song title was altered, from „Маршал је мој бог” („Marshal is my god”) to „Последњи дани” („The Last Days”). The closing verses were also changed, from:

„Маршал је мог бог
 Маршал је мој бог
 Маршал зна откуда
 Маршал зна ко сам ја
 Дођите, дођите, чекам вас ја нов”
 („Marshal is my god
 Marshal is my god
 Marshal knows where from
 Marshal knows who I am
 Come, come, the new me is awaiting you”),
 into:
 „Проћи ћу сигурно
 Чисто и поносно
 Чека ме мој бог
 Чекаће знам то”
 („I will pass for sure

²⁸ M. Jergović, *Pitanje za cijeli život: što bi to bilo pubes luks?*, [no place] 2022.

²⁹ A. M. Grbić, *Idoli i poslednji dan*, Beograd 2018, p. 120.

Clean and proud
My god awaits
He will wait, that I know”³⁰

The stanza „Чека ме мој бог, чекаће знам то”, is entirely consistent with the aforementioned mode of provocation: substitution of a socialist symbol (Marshal) with a religious one (God).

The name of the track „Играле се делије” („The delis³¹ were playing”) remained as a tongue-in-cheek hint at Serbian nationalism.³² Idoli used the lyrics and melody of the eponymous song, which is believed to be a traditional. Actually, the song lyrics were written by a Serbian poet Milorad Petrović, a participant in the Balkan wars (1912–1913), inspired by the Siege of Adrianople. The music was composed by Božidar Joksimović in 1919.

Some of the verses from other songs also contain religious, i.e. Christian allusions. For instance: „Небеска војска” („Celestial army”) in „Једина (Узурликзурли)” („The only one [WithTheHowlOfZurlas])”, „Нек га ова чаша мимоиђе” („Let this cup pass from him”)³³ in „Сенке су другачије” („Shadows are different”), and „Мириси, тамјан и метвица; Жалости, блаженства, наде” („Scents, incense and mint; Sorrows, blessings, hopes”) and the chorus „Небеса певају о слави” („The heavens sing of glory”) in „Немо” („Silently/Mute”).

Two lines from „Кенозоик” („The Cenozoic”) are especially attention-grabbing:
„Светосавска блага рука каже пут,
Августовско плаво сунце, pubes lux”
(„Sava’s³⁴ saintly gentle hand leads the way,
August’s blue sun, pubes lux”)

The collocation of a saintly hand and pubic light (indicating sexuality) seems very „punk” or irreverent on several levels: firstly, the bringing up of a religious motive (a clear challenge thrown in the face of socialist secularism/atheism), and then placing it close to the flesh, a part of flesh with sexual connotations to boost (derisive of religious puritanism, i.e. Christian denigration of sexuality).

The centrepiece of the album, a track titled „Моја си” („You are mine”) holds a somewhat analogous juxtaposition: a referral to the predicament of a transsexual person, or simply a person struggling with their gender identity, placed side by side with parts of short Orthodox Christian hymns (troparions) sung in Church Slavonic at the end of the song:

„Моја си, моја си и себе гледа док се облачи
Он би волео бити та девојка
Он би волео да га воле другови
Да проба себе да се измени”
(„You’re mine, you’re mine and looks at oneself as one dresses
He would love to be that girl
He would like to be loved by his friends

³⁰ M. Tokić, *Novi val, režim i Grad*, Zagreb 2012, pp. 46–47. Tokić quotes the lyrics incorrectly, as he writes: „Čekat će” twice, first time instead of „Čeka me” and second instead „Čekaće”.

³¹ Delis were irregular light cavalry in the Ottoman empire. In Serbian „delija” denotes a hero or a strong man (in original Turkish „deli” means mad, wild or daring).

³² In an interview from 2003, Vlada Divljan refers to this song as „Hoćeš li sa mnom na ples?” („Do you want to go dancing with me?”), and comments on the nationalism: „I must say that at that time the so-called Serbian nationalism had a different connotation, it represented a kind of civil society’s resistance to the official ideology”, Lj. Stavrić, *Ne veruj u idole*, 2003.

³³ Misquotation of *Matthew* 26:39.

³⁴ Saint Sava (1169/1174–1236), a Serbian prince who later became a monk, and eventually the first Archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Church. He is known as the first Serbian Enlightener, with an elaborated folk cult celebrating his alleged wisdom and fairness. Today, he is celebrated as the Patron saint of the Serbian schools/education on January 27th, in a vein very similar to state celebrations of the socialist period.

To try to change himself”)

„Од њега се сви опраштају
И њега дуго, дуго гледају”
(„Everyone bids farewell to him
Their eyes fixed on him for a long, long time”)³⁵

„Христос воскрес из мртвих,
Смртију смрт поправ и сушчим во гробјех живот даровав!
Обшчеје воскресеније, преже твојеја страсти увјерјаја
Из мртвих воздвигал јеси Лазарја
Христе Боже, тјемже и ми јако отроци побједи знаменија носјашче
Тебје побједитељу смрти вопијем
Спаси, утјешитељу благи
Појушчија ти: алилуја”
(„Christ rose from the dead,
destroyed death with death, and gave life to all who were in the graves!
The resurrection of all, confirming before His suffering,
You raised Lazarus from the dead,
Therefore we too, like children bearing the sign of victory,
To You, the Conqueror of death we cry
Save us, gentle Comforter, us who sing to You: Hallelujah”)

Promotion. Before the start of the concerts set to promote *Одбрана и последњи дани*, in Zagreb (club Kulušić) and Belgrade (Dom omladine) a man and a woman, respectively, censed the stage while dressed in black, akin to the priests in Eastern Christian rites. Orthodox choir music could be heard from the PA system. One of the headings in the papers read: „Rock with the smell of incense”.

The record did not fare well commercially, but rock critics embraced and praised it immensely. It received accolades, being pronounced the best album and cover art design of the year 1982. In 1985, *Džuboks* magazine, based on the votes of the critics, proclaimed *Одбрана и последњи дани* the best Yugoslav rock album of the twentieth century. It was one of the few Yugoslav albums reviewed by the British *New Musical Express*, where it was favourably assessed. French magazine *Actuel* ranked Idoli the fourth in the list of ten best young European acts, with the first three positions taken by Yello, Depeche Mode and Falco. In 2022, Croatia records re-released the record as a deluxe edition to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the original release. It was remastered from the original tapes, pressed on heavy-weight (180g) vinyl with a gatefold sleeve containing a 24 page colour booklet with lyrics, photos, and articles, thus sealing its cult status.

The Clero-hegemonic Symbiosis of East and West

„Pop culture arose as a rebellion because the Western world had changed. However, the rebels there, starting out as seemingly genuine ideologues, became profiteers in a short period of time. The participants in this project of ours are authentic rebels, not businessmen like Madonna or U2.”³⁶

³⁵ Departure/transition from the worldly to the spiritual? Leaving this world and entering a monastery?

³⁶ J. Culibrk, *Pravoslavni rokenrol*, „NIN“ 2000, no. 2564.

„After the fall of the communist regime, it is certain that there is no better foundation on which to build a new Serbian culture than Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović.”³⁷

As social order changes, so do the accounts of historical events and figures. Not infrequently, individuals marginalized in one period, become elevated to preeminent paragons of virtue, wisdom, and/or aesthetic ideal. The former socialist societies are not an exception to such developments.³⁸

Hitherto taken-for-granted historical facts of the tempestuous twentieth century in the countries of the former Yugoslavia were swept away by a massive wave of reassessments. This historical revisionism consisted not only of the reinterpretations and questioning of past particulars, but also of the politically driven distortion of their meanings „motivated by clear or covert intentions to justify narrow national or political objectives”.³⁹

The fall of socialism, amongst other consequences, resulted in anomie – previously propagated values and accompanying norms lost their sacrosanctity. Old, pre-socialist ideals gained predominance. The answer to the ubiquitous confusion, insecurity and frustration became „the return to the golden age” – understood as the opposite of socialism, but also any other modernism. „Tradition” and „identity” became the new buzzwords, which practically meant an emphatic anti-Westernism and an anti-enlightenment worldview. The SOC saw and took advantage of its chance at moral and spiritual leadership in society.

„In spite of fear of westernization and western culture being pinpointed as the key element of all church’s endeavour to form new Serbian identity, Serbian Orthodox Church activated new currents that recognized the need to work on improving the image of the Church. Creating new strategy groups, the Church started to adjust itself to those target groups (urban population in the first place, youth and younger generations) whose identity had been formed under the strong influence of contemporary popular culture, which comes, of course, from the west.”⁴⁰

Thus, the present-day head of the SOC, Porfirije, was deemed „Rock and roll patriarch” at the start of his service, since he professed his love for the music of Bob Dylan, Jethro Tull and the Serbian rock band the Partibrejkers. He also quoted the lyrics of Džoni Štulić, the frontman of the new wave group Azra, while he congratulated the progressive forces on their victory in the local elections in Zagreb.⁴¹

It should be noted that within the church there is also a current that perceives rock as a sinful practice. In 1996, Bishop Ilarion (Rastko Lupulović), a former actor and a member of the band Kanda, Kodža i Nebojša, felt „oversatiated and tired of rock and everything related to it”, its „superficiality”, and believed that rock „wears people out”.⁴² More vocal than Ilarion was the monk Arsenije, the author of the book *God and Rock’n’roll*⁴³, who recently (November 2023) urged orthodox believers to gather and protest, to prevent the black/doom metal band Батюшка’s concert in Belgrade, labelling them „Satanists from Poland who mock Russian Orthodoxy”.⁴⁴ Back in 2003, a conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), allegedly defending the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, had issues with „explicitly satanic iconography” that the avant-garde/experimental band the Residents supposedly used

³⁷ V. Oreščanin, *V/A – Pesme iznad Istoka i Zapada*, 2001.

³⁸ See: O. Luthar (ed.), *Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits*, Budapest-New York 2017.

³⁹ T. Kuljić, *Prevladavanje prošlosti*, Beograd 2002, p. 441.

⁴⁰ Zoran Petakov, [in:] AFANS, *The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia*, Novi Sad 2007, p. 79.

⁴¹ B. Rabrenović, *Rokenrol patrijarh*, 2021.

⁴² A. Ivanović, *Srpski glumac je stekao slavu pa postao monah*, 2020.

⁴³ A. Jovanović, *Bog i rokenrol*, Ibarski Kolašin 2006.

⁴⁴ T. Marković, *Kako je iguman Arsenije sačuvao Beograd od satanista*, 2023.

on the 2002 album *Demons Dance Alone*. Ironically enough, hieromonk Jovan (Ćulibrk) came to the rescue and stood up for the Residents.⁴⁵

Following up on the initial idea by the Metropolitan Amfilohije, hieromonk Jovan (Ćulibrk)⁴⁶ assembled musicians⁴⁷ to perform religiously inspired poems by Nikolaj Velimirović⁴⁸ in contemporary rock, but also experimental and hybrid manner (combining motives from the traditional folk and Orthodox spiritual music with modern elements). The fruit of that collaboration is the compilation *Песме изнад истока и запада*.

„Just as Studenica⁴⁹ took the language of the West of the time and transformed it into a note of Orthodoxy, Bishop Nikolaj himself took the hits of the time and transformed them into folk songs. A similar thing happened with our project, representing a long process of grafting Orthodoxy and pop music. The basis are the verses of Bishop Nikolaj, which, like Njegoš's⁵⁰, entered the vernacular without people even realising it.”⁵¹

The album had had significant media support even before it was released. It was presented at a series of launch events in Banja Luka (at the Faculty of philosophy, February 2000), Kraljevo, and Belgrade (Dom kulture Studentski grad, June 2001). The project had a richly furnished website devoted to it (now archived).

Within this Orthodox *Reconquista*, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović appeared as the perfect figure who could be utilised for the „Church cause”. Although a great advocate of liberal ideas and ecumenism in his youth, Velimirović turned to anti-Europeanism and conservatism in the interwar period and became a pronounced propagator of the ideology of *Svetosavlje*.⁵² He was often criticised for his anti-Semitism⁵³ and profound anti-Westernism. Adding to controversies, Velimirović was awarded a medal by Adolf Hitler for his contribution to the renovation of the German military cemetery from the First World War in Bitola, Macedonia.⁵⁴

Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk) spoke about „the marriage of East and West”, and observed a specific cultural paradigm shift:

⁴⁵ N. Grujičić, *Nečastivi u DSS-u*, 2003.

⁴⁶ Neven Ćulibrk was a rock critic writing for the *Ritam* magazine until 1991 when he joined the monastery, and became monk Jovan. He burned all of his photos from the previous, i.e. secular period, as stated in the interview conducted by M. Turudić (*Ličnost godine – Episkop lipljanski Jovan (Ćulibrk). Simboli venčanja Istoka i Zapada*, „Vreme“ 2013, no. 1149).

⁴⁷ For a full list of more than thirty participants, music authorship, lyrics, press clipping, and a biography glorifying Nikolaj Velimirović see the project web page, now archived:

https://web.archive.org/web/20110722174606/http://www.mitropolija.co.me/ustrojstvo/radio/vladika/projekat/index_1.html. Even though the participation of Srđan Šaper and Nebojša Krstić, members of Idoli, had been announced, they did not take part in the project.

⁴⁸ From his collections „Ohridski prolog” („The Ohrid Prologue”) and „Molitve na jezeru” („Prayers on the Lake”).

⁴⁹ The largest Serbian monastery, dating from the twelfth century. It is often referred to as the Serbian monastery first in terms of dignity.

⁵⁰ Petar II Petrović – Njegoš (1813–1851), Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, highly respected philosopher and poet.

⁵¹ J. Ćulibrk, *Pravoslavni rokenrol*, „NIN“ 2000, no. 2564.

⁵² Translated into English as: *Saint Sava's Cult*, *Saint Savahood* or *Saintsaviness*. It is most often considered as an ideology of Serbian nationalism closely connected to the right-wing political movements, c.f. M. Falina, *Svetosavlje: a case study in the nationalization of religion*, „Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte” 2007. For recent theological assessments see: N. Vukić, *Saintsavaism(s) and Nationalism*, „Exchange” 2021, no. 50, and: V. Cvetković, *Svetosavlje, Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism*, Beograd 2022.

⁵³ Jovan (Ćulibrk) has faced criticism by some authors for not addressing antisemitism within the Church and the work of Nikolaj Velimirović, see: K. Hofmeisterová, *The Serbian Orthodox Church's Involvement in Carrying the Memory of the Holocaust*, „Comparative Southeast European Studies”, 2019, vol. 67, no. 4.

⁵⁴ For more on Nikolaj Velimirović: J. Byford, *From „Traitor” to „Saint”*, „Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism” 2004, no. 22.

„Songs above East and West: with them came the overcoming of a view of the world in which pop culture is an ad hoc counterculture. In that, they caused polemics and reactions, and ultimately marked a new approach to pop culture in our country. A huge number of people who made *Songs above East and West* are people from the church and I see no difference between Cane⁵⁵ and me.”⁵⁶

The peculiar symbiosis of rock and „tradition” is nicely illustrated on the cover of the Partibrejkers’⁵⁷ CD *Gramzivost i pohlepa* (*Avarice and Greed*):



Il. 2. Talent Factory (design, idea, photography), Leo fon Punkerstein (tattoo, calligraphy), CD cover and inner sleeve art of „Partibrejkers – *Gramzivost i pohlepa*”, 2002, Beograd, ©Hi-Fi Centar

Notice the tattoos of Jimi Hendrix on the right, and Karađorđe⁵⁸ on the left shoulder. The name of the band and the title of the album are in Latin alphabet, and the Lord’s prayer tattoo in calligraphic medieval-like Cyrillic script.⁵⁹

Song titles and lyrics on *Песме изнад истока и запада* follow the common pattern of Christian Rock, and comprise an Orthodox mixture of folk songs with religious motifs and church hymns.⁶⁰ Tracks contain praises of the Lord, his omnipresence and mercy („Kora ћy да хвалим?” [„Who will I praise?”], „Све је твоје, Боже” [„Everything is yours, God”]). God’s heavenly armies receive their due admiration („Владај, Боже” [„Rule, God”]). One of the songs is a prayer for salvation and strength to resist the evil temptations and dark thoughts

⁵⁵ Zoran Kostić Cane, singer of the punk/garage rock band Partibrejkers. During the New Wave era, Cane was the singer of the band Radnička kontrola, which appeared on the *Paket aranžman* follow-up compilation *Artistička radna akcija* (1981).

⁵⁶ M. Turudić, *Ličnost godine – Episkop lipljanski Jovan (Ćulibrk)*, „Vreme” 2013, no. 1149.

⁵⁷ Apart from taking part in *Песме изнад истока и запада*, Partibrejkers were one of the initiators of the benefit rock concert „Podignimo Stupove” („Let us Raise the Stupovi”) for the restoration of the Đurđevi stupovi monastery in Ras. Cane, the singer of Partibrejkers, is a vocal Orthodox Christian, who has appeared together with the Patriarch on special occasions. In 2022 he recorded a song with the high-school band Veronauksi (The Catechisms). The song was made with the blessing of the Patriarch to support the work of the church soup kitchen which feeds homeless and people in need.

⁵⁸ „Black George”, Đorđe Petrović (1762–1817), leader of the First Serbian Uprising (1804) against the Ottoman Empire.

⁵⁹ The cover art of *Песме изнад истока и запада* features a photograph of a church from Skadarsko jezero, which was taken by Goranka Matić, who designed the cover of *Одбрана и последњи дани*.

⁶⁰ This was perhaps the first instance of an unambiguous production of faith-based music in the Orthodox world, L. Molokotos-Liederman, *Sacred Words in a Secular Beat: The Free Monks Phenomenon at the Intersection of Religion, Youth and Popular Culture*, Farnham 2010, p. 224.

(„Услиши нас, Боже наш” [„Hear us, our God”]). Jesus is lauded as the kind and loving son of God („Молитва благом Христу” [„A prayer to the gentle Christ”], „Знаш ли ко те љуби силно?” [„Do you know who loves you immensely?”]).

Additionally, there are panegyrics for the first Serbian Saint („Дарови светог Јована Владимира” [„Gifts of Saint John Vladimir”]), Saint Thecla⁶¹ („Света Текла”), and Saint Sava („Песма светом Сави” [„A Song to Saint Sava”]). The eternal East („Исток са висине” [„East from above”]), the enduring Church („Гора висока” [„A high mountain”]), and desolate homes („За угашена огњишта” [„For the extinguished hearths”]) receive an honourable mention.

The musicians involved in the project publicly expressed⁶² and emphatically confessed their „life attitude”, „determination” and allegiance to the Orthodox Christian spiritual narrative, conveniently in line with the new dominant ideology of ethnoreligious identification. All of them „responded joyfully” to Father Jovan Ćulibrk’s invitation to take part, especially since it was based on the verses of Bishop Nikolaj „who played an important role in the spiritual development for all of them.” Their devotion and wish to celebrate the Saint was mixed with the resentment towards atheist socialist Yugoslav state and its „decades-long resistance to the essential features of the personality and community”.

With enthusiasm and zeal typical of religious converts, Goran Marić Maks, the singer of Bjesovi (Demons/The Possessed/The Devils), testified like a penitent sinner who experienced the greatest mercy from God and love for the call he has been given, and that is to make music as a way to redemption. Drago Senić from Qrve (read: Kurve; Whores) underwent a metamorphosis by means of playing music and harmonizing with church life. He stated that his own musings coincided with ideas behind the project, which present the „right” and „natural way” to place the music of his band within a correct context. The singer of Darkwood Dub, Dejan Vučetić Vuča, also an icon painter, expressed his „deepest conviction that every true artist is in his essence a seeker of God, including a rock and roll musician.” Like Senić, he previously also had ideas of using poems of Nikolaj Velimirović, „who strongly influenced his work in music, not only with his poetry, but also with his prose books.”

In a way confirming our thesis that *Songs above East and West* are a reflection and motivator of a new social reality characterized by ecclesiasticism, Jovan (Ćulibrk) commented that this record

„is only a sign of a great beginning [...] an expression of a deep cry for meaning, not silent, but a very clear and loud one. A cry for a sense of a deep penitential escape and deep ecclesiastication of a generation and, finally, an expression of its joy.”⁶³

Several participants of the project indicated continuity with the 1982 *Idoli* record, which Jovan (Ćulibrk) considers „perhaps the first and indispensable step to where we arrived at today”:

„I once asked Srđan Šaper if the cover of *Одбрана...* looked like *Sgt. Pepper*, who would be on it. He replied: «Well, I don't know many people, but there would certainly be three people on it who had a decisive influence on us at that time – the hieromonks of that time, Amfilohije, Atanasije and Irinej». I think that's the best answer to what it's all about.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ An early Christian saint, „protomartyr among women, equal-to-apostles in sanctity”. Part of her relics is kept in the old Serbian Orthodox Church in Baščaršija in Sarajevo.

⁶² See interviews in the press clipping on the archived project's site (link in footnote 47), especially an article from the weekly „Vreme” (no. 526, February 1, 2001): *Galerija glasova*, by Nebojša Grujičić.

⁶³ From the press clipping available at the archived web site of the *Songs above East and West* project.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

Zoran Stefanović, the creator of the campaign and visual identity of the *Songs*... finds it „not much different from the confessions on the album *Одбрана и последњи дани* or *Paket aranžman*”, although „with ideological gloves off and [...] with a much greater direct spiritual and political influence.”⁶⁵ Drago Senić, the chief music composer of the project, stresses the „more direct”⁶⁶ touching on religious topics on *Songs* than on *Одбрана*.

Conclusion

„Art can offer a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding.”⁶⁷

Twenty-something years after the release of *Songs above East and West*, the presence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in public life in Serbia is even more evident. Many of the important decisions at the state level can hardly be made without the blessing or silent approval of the SOC. This hegemony, in which the religious institution plays an important role, in its form resembles the one from the socialist Yugoslavia, naturally, with a different content. The Church has made an entry into the popular rock culture, one of the few domains in which it had not yet achieved its dominance. Nowadays, there is no longer a need for the censorship of party apparatchiks in maintaining the symbolic order, as „true” Serbs, who do not miss the opportunity to display and stress their Orthodox faith, control and sanction any outbursts of criticism aimed at the dominant set of (religious) beliefs and practices. Frustrations of the majority of „transitional losers” are articulated by the dominant ideology of clero-nationalism.⁶⁸

Within this context, it is somewhat more plausible to speak of a discontinuity between the rock of *Одбрана и последњи дани* and *Песме изнад истока и запада*. The playful and campy tactic of Idoli⁶⁹ is replaced with the religious pathos and seriousness of the Orthodox rockers, whose album marks the end of „politics, banter, transience, sexuality, evil, «affirmation of metaphysical chills» and «more or less comical disappointment»” as „the popular culture’s ultimate content and backdrop”.⁷⁰

The Idoli were fascinated by the vibrancy of Orthodoxy and used it to poke fun at the system and music as „a springboard for delving into the «pathological» within the Yugoslav conscience collective”⁷¹:

„in the early eighties, immediately after Tito’s death, the «rediscovery» of religion among the Serbs did not have the brutal, simple-minded and caricatural

⁶⁵ D. Strahinić, *20 godina albuma „Pesme iznad Istoka i Zapada“*, „Pravoslavlje” 2021, no. 1298.

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ B Holmes, *Artistic autonomy and the communication society*, „Third Text” 2004, no. 18, p. 549.

⁶⁸ A group of left-wing and liberal intellectuals issued „A letter of warning to the Serbian cultural public” published in the daily *Danas* on October 28 2002, in which they cautioned against the coupling of different national institutions, including the Church, comprising a power structure that thrives on resentment and directs towards a new like-mindedness that differs from the communist one only in terms of content, and lacks no malignancy. According to the concerned public figures, this new unanimity is marked by the totalitarian and undemocratic ideology of the Serbian fascist collaborators and „the triumph of the «philosophy of parochialism» («filozofija palanke») of Nikolaj Velimirović”, see: M. Đorđević et al., *Pismo upozorenja srpskoj kulturnoj javnosti*, 2002.

⁶⁹ Whose members jokingly talk about drawing graffiti on St. Mark’s Church in Belgrade, see: D. Albahari (ed.), *Drugom stranom*, Beograd 1983, p. 28.

⁷⁰ N. Grujičić, *Galerija glasova*, „Vreme” 2001, no. 526.

⁷¹ D. Mišina, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, London 2013, p. 145.

form that it would acquire at the end of that decade and, especially in the nineties. Vigils in front of the Congregational church attracted decent people and were not deprived of a certain elegance, and the priests did not yet turn into symbols of new nationalism, chauvinism and every kind of backwardness. Hence, only seemingly paradoxically, Idoli's dealing with Orthodoxy was civil defiance in the face of dying Titoism. Nevertheless, religion and its rites [...] represented, shall we say, a single in a series of references or, if you will, provocations."⁷²

Songs above East and West pay homage to a newly installed (religious) hero of the masses, and the new elites alike. Musical practices here play a part in constituting and maintaining of a given symbolic order. Idoli's „deconstruction of «Orthodoxism»”⁷³ differs from the reconstruction undertaken by the musicians at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Although not proclaiming „brotherhood and unity” as the dogma of Yugoslav socialism, Idoli and other New Wavers „practically lived it”.⁷⁴ Cosmopolitanism and modernism were some of the main features of the artistic practices in the early eighties. They were replaced with local orientation and apotheosis of „tradition”, i.e. the imagining of it, in the postsocialist period.

Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk) reminds us that „counterculture often arises where the official culture is rigid”.⁷⁵ Could this mean that the time has come for some new Idoli to play and mock the new taken-for-granted creeds, although ominously different from the socialist ones?

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⁷² I. Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali*, Beograd 2013, p. 252.

⁷³ D. Mišina, op. cit., p. 146.

⁷⁴ S. Jevtić, *Novi talas kao poslednji jugoslovenski muzičko-kulturni i društveni pokret*, „Politikon” 2022, no. 32, p. 62.

⁷⁵ M. Turudić, *Ličnost godine – Episkop lipljanski Jovan (Ćulibrk)*, „Vreme” 2013, no. 1149.

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SUMMARY

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Orthodoxy Goes Pop: Rock Music and Cultural Hegemony in Serbia

The paper deals with the symbolic struggles over cultural hegemony in contemporary Serbia. Two rock albums, *Одбрана и последњи дани* by Idoli (1982), and a compilation *Песме изнад истока и запада* (2001) have been chosen as case studies. The narratives and discourses contained, as well as those induced by the records, are identified and analysed. Both albums engage with Orthodox Christian motifs and themes. The different socio-political contexts in which they appeared shaped the meanings, together with cultural and political effects they helped produce.

Keywords

Hegemony, Symbolic struggles, Rock, New wave, Serbian Orthodox Church