

KOSOVO*, SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, AND POPULISM

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The situation in Kosovo^{336*} is not new, nor it is without its complications. These complications need to be understood before delving deeper into this specific topic. In addition to that, the term ‘populism’ needs to be addressed before moving further, to avoid the same understanding as that of the ‘Polish horse’,³³⁷ as the term ‘populism’ is used for various purposes, and often in complete contradiction.

Therefore, we need to find a definition for populism, as well become acquainted with a very brief history of relations in post-war Kosovo*, so that one might understand better the matter at hand.

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³³⁶ * As described by Security Council Resolution 1244 and ICJ opinion

³³⁷ In 1746 Polish dictionary, definition for a horse is “Everyone knows what a horse is”.

Populism with Regard to Kosovo* and the Serbian Orthodox Church

As is already stated in various publications, ‘populism’ has become a catch-all term in recent years³³⁸. Although it can have various meanings, depending on the actors in question, one could always be certain that, within populism, there exist at least two groups with conflicting interests, whether those interests are real or misrepresented for certain purposes. We could say that a populist agenda always creates a divide between *us* and *them* in order to use that divide for its own purposes.

The *us* in populist terminology refers to those who are usually morally superior and made to suffer by *them*, whether *them* are the ones in power or protected by norms that are not in the interests of *us*. The *us* are therefore suffering to please *them*. However, *they* are never satisfied and always want more from *us*: more of *our* jobs, *our* rights, *our* money, etc.

With that in mind, a conclusion that need not be stipulated is that the *us* need to do something to protect *us* from *them* before it is too late and *they* get *their* way. Once that effect is etched in the minds of people, a representative of *us* needs only keep the flames of the conflict alive, and steer that conflict in a certain direction.

Regarding some other definitions of populism, we feel that it does not matter who has the power and who does not. For populists to succeed, they do not need to be in any kind of opposition. They only need to create a permanent threat to the interests of *us*, coming from *them*.

Finally, the divide created between *us* and *them* in almost all cases serves a particular purpose.

³³⁸ Canovan, Margaret, *Populism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, 3.

For this article, the relation that is important is the relation between the Kosovo* Albanian stakeholders and institutions, and the Serbian Orthodox Church.³³⁹ With that in mind, we can define populism as an act or verbal expression of an individual or of a group, with an intention to create and sustain a divide against targeted individual or a group, with a desire to achieve certain goals, at the expense of a targeted individual or a group.

Kosovo – a Brief History

After the war in 1999, the Serbian population in Kosovo, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church, faced a massive wave of violence. Over 210,000 Serbs were forced out of their homes,³⁴⁰ 35 churches and other religious objects of the highest cultural value were demolished,³⁴¹ while almost double that number in the second and third category were destroyed, and in that wave of violence and terror all kinds of atrocities happened. In Devič Monastery, nuns were held captive for days by a local warlord and his company, where they were raped and molested repeatedly until help finally arrived.³⁴² Two of the Serbian Orthodox

³³⁹ The term “Serbian Orthodox Church” refers more specifically to the Diocese of Raška and Prizren, which has canonical jurisdiction in Kosovo*, as well as in a part of territory outside of Kosovo*. But, to avoid any confusion, the term that we will be using here will be *Serbian Orthodox Church* or simply *The Church*.

³⁴⁰ Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia (2018), “Situation and needs of internally displaced persons”, https://www.unhcr.org/see/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2018/12/Situation_and_Needs_of_IDPs_2018_ENG.pdf, 12 (accessed in 15 July 2022).

³⁴¹ Media Srbija (2005) “The fate of cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija”, https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medeng/documents/fate_of_cult_heritage.pdf, 19 (accessed in 15 July 2022).

³⁴² Glas Javnosti archive in Serbian (1999), “OVK” pljačka i siluje, <http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/1999/06/18/najnovije-vesti-0617.html> (accessed in 15 July 2022).

Church monks were kidnapped and had their heads ritually sawn off after being tortured.³⁴³ There was the presence of the international community with a UN mandate, according to Security Council Resolution 1244³⁴⁴, with a military presence KFOR.³⁴⁵ but they did little in those post-war days to protect the minority population.

After the initial chaos, crimes - although not on the same previous scale - did not stop, and were both brutal and numerous at times.^{346 347} The goal of the stakeholders behind those crimes was to drive out the remaining Serbian population through intimidation. Serbian Orthodox Church clergy and staff could not move freely without an international military escort, except in a small number of Serb settlements.

Supervised by the international community, Kosovo* had gotten its government with a UN high representative having final and unlimited executive power, superseding all other institutions, including judicial and legislative institutions. In the elections, parties mostly nominated their candidates parties around former warlords who held actual control over certain areas in Kosovo*.

Tensions had been building for several years, and on 17 March 2004, there was yet another wave of organised violence against the Serbian population and Serbian Orthodox Church. The official narrative, proven

³⁴³ “New Martyrs of our times, Fr Chariton Lukić”, <http://www.kosovo.net/hariton.html> (accessed in 15 July 2022).

³⁴⁴ United Nations (1999), “Resolution 1244”, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/united-nations-resolution-1244> (accessed in 15 July 2022).

³⁴⁵ Kosovo Force, an international military presence in Kosovo*, according to UN SC Resolution 1244.

³⁴⁶ KoSSev (2021), “Staro Gracko: There will not be justice for the victims and the kidnapped until the perpetrators are found”, <https://kossev.info/staro-gracko-there-will-not-be-justice-for-the-victims-and-the-kidnapped-until-the-perpetrators-are-found/> (accessed in 15 July 2022)

³⁴⁷ Voice of America in Serbian (2020), “Kosovo: 17 godina od ubistva srpske dece u Goraždevcu”, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/kosovo-17-godina-od-ubistva-dece-u-gora%C5%BEdevcu/5542325.html> (accessed in 15 July 2022)

to be false, was that two Albanian children had been chased into the local river by Serbs with their dogs and drowned.³⁴⁸ During those three days of massive, organised violence, 23 people lost their lives, 954 people were injured, about 4000 Serbs were driven from their homes, and 36 religious objects were burned or destroyed.³⁴⁹ Unlike previous instances, the international community finally put up a response to this situation, especially the US KFOR contingent and, after three days, violence was finally contained.³⁵⁰ However, none of the organisers of that violence have been brought to justice to this day.

In 2008, peace talks began in Vienna with representatives of Serbia and representatives from Kosovo*. The outcome was the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo*, which remains a point of conflict between governments in Belgrade and Priština. The independence of Kosovo* is limited, even in circles of those who recognised it. There was still a strong international presence, embodied in the office of International Civilian Representative (ICO), and the International Steering Group (ISG). Their task was, in effect, to help transition Kosovo* into a democratic civil society.

The Church also participated in those discussions and gained certain rights for itself. The Church was exempt from taxes or custom duties, it had the rights to build or reconstruct its objects without permission from the authorities, it was protected from any unauthorised or unallowed entrance in its premises by officials, from central or other levels, and special protective zones were established around the most important churches or monasteries. Within special protective zones, nothing could be built without the permission of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and

³⁴⁸ Humanitarian Law Center (2021), “The March violence in Kosovo, a reminder of the facts”, http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=37934&lang=de#_ftn1 (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁴⁹ Humanitarian Law Center, *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ In Serbia and within Kosovo* Serb population, this event is referred to as ‘the March pogrom’.

certain activities, such as highways or large-scale projects were banned completely. Finally, a special body was established, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (the IMC), to watch over the implementation, and to solve all disputes between the Serbian Orthodox Church and any branches of government.³⁵¹

These mechanisms of protection for the Serbian Orthodox Church were established due to the hostility shown previously by the Albanian authorities towards the Church, with an emphasis on the March 2004 pogrom. Also, a large part of the Ahtisaari Plan (official name: the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement)³⁵² dealt with matters of land restitution. Being the largest individual landowner in Kosovo before communist expropriation in 1945, the Church was also interested in this part of the Ahtisaari Plan. However, this part was never implemented, nor were there even any formal attempts to implement it, as everyone knew who would get most of its land returned.

In 2012, the set of laws was established and Kosovo's* constitution was changed to end the supervised independence. This was done in coordination with the international community. The Ahtisaari Plan had been abolished, together with the ICO and ISG. In laws governing the transition,³⁵³ certain of the rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church were confirmed but them all. The Church had lost any rights relating to undisturbed reconstruction and rebuilding, some of the rights relating to freedom of movement, and rights relating to the presentation of cultural

³⁵¹ Law No. 03/L-039 on special protective zones, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2529> (accessed on 15 July 2022).

³⁵² 2007, "The Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement", <http://pbosnia.kentlaw.edu/Comprehensive%20Proposal%20for%20the%20Kosovo%20Settlement.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁵³ Law no. 04/L-115 on Ammending and Supplementing the Laws Related to the Ending of International Supervision of Independence of Kosovo, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2840> (accessed 15 July 2022).

heritage;³⁵⁴ the guarantees for documents did not get any sub-legal acts and are often ignored, etc. The laws that relate to Church rights did get a special status in the Constitution, and there is a set of laws that cannot be changed without the explicit approval of a Serbian parliamentary group in Kosovo's* parliament.

Almost immediately after the transfer process was complete, problems for the Serbian Orthodox Church began. In 2015, the Government of Kosovo* (GoK) tried to pass a law on cultural heritage which would effectively take all the cultural heritage from the Church. GoK also tried to institute 'cultural inspectors' into the churches and monasteries, even with the special provision banning the entrance of official organs. Through intentional sabotage, the IMC was rendered impotent, and had become little more than a debate club, solving no problems save those that happen to be in the interest of GoK or persons connected to them. The identity of the Serbian Orthodox Church was denigrated everywhere and a new pseudo history movement got far larger media support, with attempts to present the Serbian Orthodox Church, an institution with eight centuries of continuous presence in Kosovo*, as an intruder, and an institution whose sole purpose is to serve the whims of politicians from Serbia.

Finally, in the February 2021 elections, the movement called Self-Determination took absolute power. It is a political movement advocating for 'Natural Albania',³⁵⁵ while fiercely against the rights of communities, and a movement that is a strong proponent of pseudo historical rhetoric, etc. Immediately after taking power, and needing legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, the Prime

³⁵⁴ This is a large problem, as the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo is facing cultural appropriation.

³⁵⁵ This is, in fact, the recycled idea of the 'Greater Albania', a state that encompassed parts of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Greece, that existed in WWII as an ally of the Axis powers.

Minister, Mr Albin Kurti, wrote to the Church, wishing to meet, but never once mentioned it by its full name - Serbian Orthodox Church - but rather 'Orthodox Church in Kosovo'.³⁵⁶ Certain ministers in the Assembly said that upholding the Law on Special Protected Zones would be treasonous, that Serbian Orthodox Church cultural monuments are again being proclaimed as Albanian heritage,³⁵⁷ and the Church was again marked as first and foremost a servant of the Milošević regime, and later of every other Serbian regime. In a brief time, the number of ethnically or religiously motivated incidents rose considerably. All of this has had the effect of further distancing the Church from the GoK, and representatives from the Church will not meet with Kosovo* officials until certain long standing issues are finally resolved, as they do not want to participate in showing an image of Kosovo* as an entity that is committed to preserving or promoting the religious and human rights of Serbs or the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Taking into account what has been said about populism, Kosovo's* economy is in extremely bad condition. Unemployment is high, especially among the young population.³⁵⁸ The rate of childbirth, for which Albanians have been known throughout the 1980s and 1990s, has greatly declined,³⁵⁹ and the numbers of people that are leaving are

³⁵⁶ KoSSev (2021), "'Congratulations' of Albin Kurti", <https://kossev.info/congratulations-of-albin-kurti/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁵⁷ Capussela, Andrea Lorenzo (2020), "Are 'Serb' churches Serb? Critique of an unwise choice", <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/28/are-serb-churches-serb-critique-of-an-unwise-choice/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁵⁸ Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2021), "Unemployment Rate in Kosovo decreased to 25.80 percent in the first quarter of 2021 from 27 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020", <https://tradingeconomics.com/kosovo/unemployment-rate> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁵⁹ The World Bank (2020), "Fertility rate, total (births per women) – Kosovo", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=XK> (accessed 15 July 2022).

staggering for such a small society.³⁶⁰ The corruption rate is very high³⁶¹ and, as a society, Kosovo* is surviving in large part from money transfers from emigrants. Therefore, there are a huge number of problems, even without the traditional hostility towards the Serbian Orthodox Church, or the question of the status of Kosovo*.

Populism in Kosovo* and Its Consequences

After this brief introduction to the history and current situation of Kosovo*, one could be safely conclude that there was, and still is, huge hostility towards the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. Part of that hostility lies in the history of Kosovo* Albanians and Serbs. Nevertheless, as we shall see from the examples below, the Church is purposely falsely portrayed as a problematic institution, and that it wants rights that conflict with the rights of the majority of the population.

Whenever the Serbian Orthodox Church stands firm in upholding its legal rights, laws guaranteeing those rights are marked as oppressive towards Kosovo Albanians and against the interests of Kosovo*. When it calls upon the verdict of a Constitutional Court of Kosovo*, the verdict, as well as the Constitutional Court, are marked as working against the interest of people of Kosovo*. When the Serbian Orthodox Church held a liturgy in its temple after twenty years, it was accused of being a ‘political’ liturgy, and the temple itself was proclaimed to be a ‘Milosevich’ church. The Serbian Orthodox Church is often portrayed as ‘using its power’ to work against the ‘interests of Kosovo’s* people’.

³⁶⁰ Balkan Insight (2019), “Leaving Kosovo: Legal Migration Upsurge Causes Depopulation Fears”, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/25/leaving-kosovo-legal-migration-upsurge-causes-depopulation-fears/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁶¹ Transparency International (2021), “Kosovo is the 87 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International”, <https://tradingeconomics.com/kosovo/corruption-rank> (accessed 15 July 2022).

If we call upon our definition of populism, we clearly have an *us* (the interests of people of Kosovo* or of Kosovo* itself) and a *them* (the Serbian Orthodox Church, purposefully damaging the interests of Kosovo* and its people). In that situation, only a small spark is needed to cause damage. As we shall see, that spark is ever looming and, if something does not change, that spark shall be ignited, as it has been so many times before.

Monastery, Rule of Law and the Interests of *the People*

The Visoki Dečani monastery is a fourteenth century monastery, one of the most beautiful in this part of the world, unique in its mix of Serbian Orthodox and Romanesque styles. It exists for almost seven centuries and has continuously had services in all that time; its icons and the building itself are preserved and in excellent shape. It is a considered a UNESCO world heritage site.

During the post-war period, the monastery was bombed by mortar shells on two occasions. The monastery was also a target of ISIS graffiti back in 2014³⁶² and, although the monks housed and protected a large number of local Albanians from harm during the war,³⁶³ monks have often had the most horrible accusations thrown at them.³⁶⁴ The

³⁶² Diocese of Raška – Prizren (2014), “Terrorist graffiti appeared overnight in the vicinity of Dečani Monastery”, <https://eparhija-prizren.com/en/news/terrorist-graffiti-appeared-overnight-vicecity-decani-monastery/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁶³ Booth, Rod (2000), “Dateline ACT Monastery became a sanctuary - 80 Orthodox churches and shrines in Kosovo have been attacked and demolished”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/dateline-act-monastery-became-sanctuary-80-orthodox-churches-and-shrines-kosovo-have> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁶⁴ KoSSev (2021), “CDHRF from the „burning“ of Albanians in Trepca in 1999, through to 17 March, to Fr. Sava as a “possible war criminal”, <https://kossev.info/cdhrf-from-the-burning-of-albanians-in-trepca-in-1999-through-to-march-17th-to-fr-sava-as-a-possible-war-criminal/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

monastery tried to open to the local community, and the international community even established an outreach program with a local school where students would visit the monastery, spend some time with monks and have their questions answered, but the local authorities cancelled it without explanation after a while.

Shortly after the war, an unknown individual changed the cadastral records of around 24 hectares of monastic land around the monastery, and registered them to a previously bankrupt, socially-owned enterprise (SOE). After that decision was annulled by the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Kosovo (SRSG) in 2000, the monastery was sued and a lengthy court proceeding followed. However, the land in the local cadastral office was still registered to the non-existing SOEs. In 2016, after sixteen years of litigation, the monastery got the final verdict from the Constitutional Court of Kosovo*, stating that the land belongs to the monastery and that this decision is final, self-executable and binding for all persons and institutions in Kosovo*.³⁶⁵

This caused outrage. The monastery was labelled as an entity working ‘against the interests of citizens of Dečani municipality’, and local informal stakeholders organised a series of demonstrations not only against the monastery but also against the Constitutional Court (CC), putting posters with images of the CC judges everywhere,³⁶⁶ and going so far as to threaten the judges of the CC. To ease the situation, representatives of the international community went to the local assembly, offering projects to develop local economic activities, but the reply they received was that the land in question “is our land, and we need it to develop our municipality”.

³⁶⁵ Constitutional Court (2016), “Case no. KI132/15”, https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/vendimet/KI132_15_ANG.pdf (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁶⁶ Nikci, Skodran (2016), “Kosovo Albanians Protest Against Court Ruling on Decani”, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/05/26/protest-against-court-s-ruling-on-land-case-in-decani-05-26-2016/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

After the international attempts failed, the monastery submitted a request to the local municipality to register its land. It received its answer from the mayor on 26 May 2017. Included in the answer, among other things, was that the Assembly of Dečani had voted for a ruling not to enforce the CC decision. After that, the Church went to the Kosovo Cadastral Agency, which has supreme authority in these matters within Kosovo's* system. It never received an answer. Unofficially, the Cadastral Agency is waiting for an 'approval' from local stakeholders. With that in mind, we renewed our request in 2020, only to have the same occur again. The request remains open and unanswered at the Kosovo Cadastral Agency.

On 27 May 2019, the municipality of Dečani again had an extraordinary session, only to issue a declaration that it stands against the implementation of the CC verdict, as the CC did not account for the 'interests of the local population'. Also: "We believe that no one in this State, either local or international institutions, nor the monastery, invest in creating situations 'where we will be faced with civic disobedience of whatever nature'".

Along with the local institutions, there is a local pseudo historical society, which has, as one of its main goals, to spread pseudo historical narratives and threaten the monastery.³⁶⁷ No one has been held accountable for all those threats.

The CC verdict, despite the law and requests made by the Church, and all the efforts of the highest authorities of the international community, is still to be implemented five years after it has been ruled.

³⁶⁷ Koha, Izvor (2019), "Albanian historians: 'Abbot of Visoki Decani to apologize for genocide of the Serbian state and people. The monastery is Albanian'", <https://kossev.info/albanian-historians-abbot-of-visoki-decani-to-apologize-for-genocide-of-the-serbian-state-and-people-the-monastery-is-albanian/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

In the meantime, local stakeholders are fuelling hatred against the monastery, without any consequences.

Temple, Liturgy and Graffiti

Temple of Christ the Saviour in Priština (the Temple) began being built in 1993. At the time, there were more than 40,000 Serbs living in Priština, and they demanded a cathedral temple, as there was only one small church in the entire city. The municipality donated some of the unused University land and the Church began the construction with all the necessary paperwork in hand. At the start of the war, the temple itself had been consecrated and the rough exterior finished but not the interior. After the war, the municipality of Priština attempted, as in Dečani, to change the cadastral records but the decision was annulled by the SRSG. The University filed a lawsuit requesting the Church demolish its temple and give the land back to the University but was rejected in 2017, and it filed another in 2019, which is pending.

The primary motive is clear, there cannot be big temple representing the Serbian Orthodox Church in the centre of Priština. However, there is also a more lucrative motive: The land around the temple, large in surface, is in the centre of a city, and potentially very valuable to investors.

During the post-war years, the temple was intentionally desecrated, its surroundings used as a garbage dump, and there were mountain climbers climbing to the top of the temple, stating that they had “conquered the Church” and it went without saying that the Church staff and clergy were forbidden to enter it. The temple was proclaimed to be ‘a Milosevich church’, ‘a symbol of Serbian oppression’, etc., and there were many suggestions about what to do with the temple. Suggestions went from simply taking the land from the Church and demolishing the temple, to the more creative – to take the temple from the Church and

turn it into a museum of ‘Genocide against Kosovan Albanians’.³⁶⁸ After the Church went public with all the proper documentation, the temple started being perceived as ‘a symbol of discrimination against Albanians which cannot be allowed to be finished’.

After the Church cleaned the temple and its surroundings in 2017, an action which caused trouble with the Kosovo police,³⁶⁹ the keys from the temple remained in the possession of the Church. On 10 June 2021, the Diocesan Bishop held a liturgy in the temple for the first time since the war. Neither during the liturgy or after it were there any incidents or provocations, nobody from Kosovo’s* public life was mentioned, and there were no interactions with anyone outside the Church regarding the liturgy. After the Church had posted news about it on its website, there was a hate campaign all over Kosovo’s* media, calling the liturgy an “incident”, a “provocation”, etc.³⁷⁰ In the evening of 10 June, graffiti appeared on the doors of our temple, stating, in English “Jesus hates Serbs”.³⁷¹ The following day, 11 June, a student group affiliated with a local political party held protests where they again shouted anti-Church slogans and, in the presence of Kosovo police, wrote graffiti on the

³⁶⁸ Koha Ditore (2021), “Bezeraj: Church on UP campus to be turned into a museum of Genocide”, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/277784/bezeraj-kisha-ne-kampusin-e-up-se-te-shnderrohet-ne-muze-te-gjenocidit/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁶⁹ After this action, the Secretary of the Diocese was brought to a police station, where he was held for several hours and received *a serious warning* to stay out of the Temple. He did not receive any official document that would forbid any such activities, however, because the Church is the owner of the temple and surrounding land, and that document would be subject to legal remedies.

³⁷⁰ KoSSev (2021), “Reactions from Pristina to the liturgy in the Church of Christ the Savior: Provocations will not be tolerated, protest to be held today”, <https://kossev.info/reactions-from-pristina-to-the-liturgy-in-the-church-of-christ-the-savior-provocations-will-not-be-tolerated-protest-to-be-held-today/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁷¹ KoSSev (2021), *Ibid.*

temple doors that stated, in Albanian, “The symbol of chauvinism is becoming a holy site, with the blessing of Albin Kurti.”³⁷² The Church did not report this incident to Kosovo police, as their members were present during the second desecration, securing the protestors while in the act of desecrating the Temple.

Serbian Pilgrims Poisoning the Water

This incident happened in the town of Dečani, near the Dečani monastery (previously mentioned with the land issue case). There was a health emergency, with around 1200 citizens falling sick, the cause of which remained as the investigation was still underway. With previous experiences, Serbian Orthodox Church had sent warnings to the international representatives (US, OSCE, EU representatives) that this might be a prelude to blame the situation on Serbs and create a reason for another wave of violence, just like in 2004 pogrom. On 13-14 July, there was an article in *Bota Sot*, an Albanian newspaper, that two Serbs were in the proximity of the waterworks, with Novi Sad registration plates (city in northern Serbia) asking around for directions to Dečani monastery, and that they were suspected of poisoning the water supply.³⁷³

As this had the potential of inflaming the situation, and was clearly premeditated, the Church immediately addressed the matter to the international organisations. Just before the news escalated beyond the possibility of damage control, the US Embassy issued a tweet about the

³⁷² KoSSev (2021), “Protest against yesterday’s liturgy in the Church of Christ the Savior”, <https://kossev.info/protest-against-yesterdays-liturgy-in-the-church-of-christ-the-savior-symbol-of-chauvinism-is-becoming-a-holy-site-with-the-blessing-of-albin-kurti/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

³⁷³ Bota Press (2021), “Uninsured wells and ‘two suspicious Serbs who visited Decani before poisoning’”, <https://botapress.info/pusetat-e-pasiguruara-dhe-dy-serbet-e-dyshimte-qe-vizituan-decanin-para-helmimit/> (accessed 15 July 2022).

importance of not spreading such rumours. There was also other work on alleviating the situation. The media stories on the ‘Serb pilgrims poisoning the water’ had ceased, and a few days later, official sources confirmed that the source of the water poisoning was E coli bacteria. The prosecutor in the area, however, remained adamant that he would investigate the story about “suspicious Serbs” around the water supply.

Kosovo* Police and Justice System

To conclude, one of the key pillars for this treatment of the Serbian Orthodox Church is the Kosovo* justice system. Almost no perpetrator ever gets caught. Even if a perpetrator gets caught, they can count on a charge that does not include inter-ethnic or inter-religious hatred, even when those things are obvious. Offenses are most often given light charges, or charges for ‘damage against property’. And sentences are either lacking because the case goes into prescription or because there is pressure from the international community, or, more frequently, they are suspended sentences.

If one were to read police or court statistics, one would think that Kosovo* is a society with a history of ethnic or religious hatred that is free of violence, which is far from the truth. When speaking about populism as defined above, we must be aware that this is a subtle policy, not only designed to hide the true state of affairs, but also to justify the current state of affairs. If one would call out Kosovo* as a society hostile to the Serbian Orthodox Church, or a society with constant and rising inter-ethnic and inter-religious incidents, officials could show police statistics that prove hate crimes are almost non-existent, and the person speaking about the true state of affairs could be labelled as an ‘enemy of Kosovo*, a Serbian mercenary, an enemy of Albanian people’, or similar names used in populist rhetoric when confronted with reality.

Populism and Its Consequences

As seen from these few examples, populist rhetoric could lead to serious consequences over the period of time. In a span of one month only, the Serbian Orthodox Church has had its temple doors sprayed with chauvinistic slurs in the presence of police, and people associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church have been accused of poisoning the water in the media. It would be hard, and it would take too much space, to illustrate how guaranteed rights and freedoms of the Serbian Orthodox Church have degraded over the years because the same institutions that are responsible for punishing such behaviours have ignored them.

And although populist rhetoric aimed at the Church is not the only factor in the treatment of Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo*, it is the one that binds everything together. Through populist rhetoric, people are rallied, their enemy is pointed at over and over again, so they do not forget and, through populist rhetoric, every act of vandalism or human and religious rights deprivation or diminishment is justified as a defence.

In this atmosphere, three solutions for the future are possible. The first would be that Albanian media and politicians stop using inflammable rhetoric and start respecting the rights and freedoms, as well as property, of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The second would be to make a new arrangement, together with the international community, with far better and stronger guarantees for the Church, as the system which depends on Kosovo* institutions has had a decade to prove itself, and it keeps generating problems almost daily. The third solution would be to leave the things just as they are, and in couple of decades, to have the Serbian Orthodox Church leave Kosovo*, or have the objects of the Serbian Orthodox Church taken away in favour of a religious institution that would best serve the needs of Kosovo's* Albanian elite.

As the first solution is unrealistic, and the third solution would be tragic, it is the job of all stakeholders, with the international community at the helm, to find a viable and permanent solution that would replace an unsuccessful, decade-long experiment with something more viable and permanent that would not depend on the whims of Albanian politicians.