

SERBIAN ORTHODOX CULTURAL HERITAGE IN KOSOVO

(A Brief Status Report)

Kosovo is secular, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. The majority of the population is ethnic Albanian, and the constitution guarantees that non-Albanian communities enjoy equality with the majority population and play an important (in some cases, decisive) role in running the state. The ethnic groups who have lived in the land through the centuries have contributed to the varied and extremely rich cultural heritage of today's Kosovo, a heritage that covers a vast length of time, dating back to prehistoric times and extending, through antiquity, Illyrian and Roman times, the Middle Ages, including the Byzantine and the Serbian period, followed by the Ottoman Empire, to modern times and our age.

Pride of place among the Kosovo cultural heritage monuments belongs undoubtedly to the cultural heritage of the Serbian Orthodox Church, so far the only heritage in Kosovo represented on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The four monuments included on that list, all of them dating to the Middle Ages, are: the Visoki Decani monastery in Decan/Decane, the Pec Patriarchate in Peja/Pec, the Gracanica monastery in the homonymous municipality near Prishtina, and the Bogorodica Ljeviska church in Prizren.

The turbulent history of the region has inevitably left its scars on the monuments of cultural heritage in Kosovo. The war of 1998-1999, which eventually led to the declaration of independence of Kosovo some ten years later, has unfortunately been no exception in this respect. More than 200 mosques and tekkes and dozens of churches were destroyed or damaged during the war.

What is particularly unfortunate in the case of Kosovo is that destruction of cultural monuments did not end with the war. And almost five years after the end of the war, in March 2004, a tragic outburst of violence directed at the Serbian community caused, in addition to loss of life, significant destruction of property, including some outstanding architectural monuments of cultural heritage belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Kosovo Albanian leaders have joined in the universal condemnation of the violence and the destruction wrought by the mobs in 2004.

In the aftermath of the March 2004 riots the then Kosovo authorities and the international community drew up a plan for the reconstruction of 34 damaged Serbian heritage monuments. A five-member Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC) was set up under the chairmanship of the Council of Europe, with mixed Serbian and Albanian Kosovar membership, including in particular the Serbian Orthodox Church, owner of the monuments concerned. The whole process was funded primarily from the budget of the Government of Kosovo. When the mandate of the RIC came to an end, in 2011, some 70% of the planned reconstruction had been completed, and the amount spent up until then by the Kosovo Government far exceeded the total amount originally budgeted for the whole reconstruction project. Since then, resumption of the reconstruction process has not been possible. However, the Government has repeatedly made clear that it remains fully committed to the completion of the works, from its own budget and in co-operation with the owner of the monuments concerned, i.e., the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The negotiations on Kosovo's final status, which took place in Vienna in 2006 under the leadership of UN Envoy Martti Ahtisaari pursuant to a UN Security Council resolution, attributed primary importance to the protection of the Serbian religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo. And the "Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement", which resulted from those negotiations, devotes a central chapter (Annex V) to the issue. The reasons for this special treatment of the Serbian cultural heritage are, first, the realization of its vulnerability, in light of the March 2004 riots, and also the recognition of its extraordinary esthetic and historical value, which has elevated some of its monuments to the status of world cultural heritage. Although Serbia rejected the Proposal, Kosovo accepted it in its totality and at its declaration of independence, on 17 February 2008, solemnly pledged to the world its commitment to its full implementation. The provisions of the Proposal became the foundation of the constitution of Kosovo and a chief source of its legislation currently in force.

Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan, as the Proposal is also known, spells out the rights, privileges and immunities of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, as well as its duties and responsibilities. The bulk of those provisions have now been transposed into the Kosovo legal framework.

Furthermore, a five-member body, known as Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC), has been set up to ensure full implementation of all Kosovo legislation pertaining to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. The Church itself is a member

of the IMC, together with the Minister of the Environment and Spatial Planning, the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport, the European Union Special Representative, and the Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo.

In conclusion, the legal framework of Kosovo constitutes an unequivocal and firm commitment of the Kosovo authorities to respect and fully protect the Serbian heritage in its territory. It is a commitment that the Government is called upon to reaffirm each time difficulties and challenges arise.

Serbian Orthodox religious and cultural heritage is, and will continue to be, an indispensable part of Kosovo reality; it must continue to thrive and to be recognized for what it is. And Kosovo's membership in UNESCO must be seen, and used, as an opportunity to enhance its protection as it would add one more level of international guarantees, oversight and expertise to that effect.

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