

Out of Time - Death of a Patriarch

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In Serbia, radical changes are normal. Not one generation survives without a war. Every radical change disrupts continuity and proclaims a new order.

Some days ago, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, aged 95, died after two years of feeble retirement in a military hospital. He was a small monk whose role in recent Serbian history is alternately portrayed as saintlike or criminal. He rarely took part in worldly politics. His public pronouncements verged on comedy, like the vague aphorisms on the film "Being There," where Peter Sellers, as Mr. Chance the humble gardener, plays a guru by pure misunderstanding.

His long-expected death however paralyzed Serbia for five days, provoking a public coming out of the new Serbian political order.

The democratic pro-European President of Serbia, Boris Tadic, proclaimed a long national mourning, which from three official days turned into five. Schools, industries and businesses were closed by state fiat, and the streets and churches were blocked by masses of people queuing to kiss the hand of the dead patriarch in an open coffin. There were extraordinary scenes of public weeping, praying and religious trances, as masses thronged to kiss a dead man's hand during a flu epidemic. This variety of burial has never happened before in Serbia, where open coffins smack of Russian excess or pagan rituals.

Many years ago, when the communist president Tito died, in 1980, similar mass scenes were seen, organized deftly by the state. The glory of the hero of the Yugoslav Non-Aligned Movement did not long survive his interment. During Tito's regime, the Serbian Orthodox Church was, if not forbidden, then at least publicly disapproved. But decades of official leftist atheism vanished in a mass religious fervor. Many of these new followers of modern Orthodoxy have never seen a church and state work in tandem to control a civil society.

In Italy, ever since 1929 when Mussolini signed his concord with the Catholic Church, the secular Italian state has had problems disentangling laws and civil rights from the framework of a socially conservative religion. In Serbia, this concordat has not yet officially been signed, but there is a similar ruling party attachment to the church and its values. One can predict the end of the multiethnic and secular state and its replacement by a state-church regime based in blood and creed.

Serbia is also trying hard to become part of the European Union, and with considerable success. Soon it will be admitted to the non-visa regime and its demand to formally join the Union may be accepted, notwithstanding the fact that Ratko Mladic, the greatest remaining war criminal of the Balkan breakup, has escaped interment in The Hague. Once inside the European fortress, along with its sister states from the shattered Yugoslavia, Serbia has a good chance to break its cycle of generational land wars.

But even without the guns, raids, and pogroms, Serbia will still be fitfully struggling for a radical new identity. In a world denied tanks, blitzkriegs and artillery there is still the exciting and destabilizing prospect of fundamentalist culture-war. In the Balkanization of Globalization, weak states and even former superpowers are beset with dreamy, fanatical, ecstatic lunges toward the coffin of mainstream orthodoxy, a weird Arctic twilight where Sarah Palin and Rasputin might share a bliny over a map of conquest that neither remotely understands.