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Serbia social briefing:
Serbian Orthodox Church Reaction
to the European Parliament 9th March Resolution

Ivona Ladjevac

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
+36 1 5858 690
office@china-cee.eu
china-cee.eu

Serbian Orthodox Church Reaction
to the European Parliament 9th March Resolution

Summary

At its session held on March 9, 2022 the European Parliament has adopted the resolution "Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union". Among many dubious parts, there is a segment of the resolution blaming the Orthodox Church to "promote Russia as a protector of traditional family values and fortify relations between state and church". As expected, such content caused widespread odium in Serbian society and especially within the Serbian Orthodox Church which promptly reacted.

Introduction

The European Parliament Resolution on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes within the European Union[1], including Disinformation, condemned the Russian Federation's attempt to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans in order to support conflicts and divide communities, which could destabilize the entire region. The European Parliament sets out several key factors of concern.

First, the European Parliament expressed concern over the activities of the Orthodox Church in the Republika Srpska to promote the Russian Federation as a "protector of traditional family values, including the promotion of strengthening ties between church and state."

According to the Resolution, the same processes are taking place in Serbia and Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's eastern neighbor has been identified as an aide, along with Hungary, in helping achieve Russian and Chinese geopolitical goals.

Second, disinformation has been explained as a threat to the Western Balkans, and the resolution envisions tools that could counterbalance it. Dialogue with civil society in the region and the private sector was recommended in order to coordinate anti-disinformation activities, with a focus on research, analysis and inclusion of regional experts.

[1] Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (2020/2268(INI)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.pdf, accessed on 27/03/2022.

The European Parliament also called on the European Commission to build the infrastructure needed to produce evidence-based disinformation responses. Responses would be focused on short-term as well as long-term threats of misinformation.

The European External Action Service is called upon to take a proactive stance and focus on building the European Union's credibility in the Western Balkans, rather than focusing on its defense, through the expansion of StratCom[2] monitoring that monitors misinformation threats across EU borders. from the countries of the Western Balkans.

Apart from the Orthodox Church, other religious institutions are also subject to foreign influence, more precisely Turkish and Saudi. The European Parliament concluded that foreign influence could be exercised through influence in religious institutions and the instrumentalization of such institutions as Russian influence in the Orthodox Churches in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the Republika Srpska, Georgia and to some extent in Ukraine. This includes creating divisions among the local population, developing a one-sided understanding of history and promoting the anti-EU agenda.

The influence of the government of the Republic of Turkey is realized through mosques in France and Germany, and the influence of Saudi Arabia through Salafi mosques throughout Europe in which radical Islamism is promoted.

The European Parliament called on the European Commission and all members of the European Union to ensure better coordination in the protection of religious institutions from external influences and to increase the transparency of funding for these institutions. EU members are invited to closely monitor the activities of religious institutions and, with appropriate evidence, to become active by canceling funding or revoking the licenses of related institutions.

Serbian Orthodox Church on Resolution

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) reacted strongly to the European Parliament's Resolution on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, stating that the mention of the SOC “based solely on deep historical prejudices and tendentious

[2] StratCom or Strategic Communications is a body of the European Union, i.e. the European External Action Service, which is focused on “effective communication and promotion” of European Union activities with a focus on Eastern Europe.

stereotypes is not surprising, but certainly deeply disappointing"[3]. As it characteristically commented, this resolution "does not come as a surprise, but it is deeply disappointing for us".

Further, "putting the Serbian Orthodox Church into the role of the cause of "tensions between ethnic groups in the Western Balkans in order to inflame conflicts and divide communities" is completely contrary to the facts and the commitment of the Church in everyday life". Such notions are vicious and intentionally especially, when one knows that SOC prays incessantly for peace, builds peace and encourages its faithful people to heal the early past, promotes trust and builds bridges of cooperation with neighbors, regardless of how they pray and what nation they belong to.

The Serbian Orthodox Church stated that it is "surprising to put in a negative context the issue of protection of traditional family values, which the Serbian Church stands for in the same way as the Russian Orthodox Church and all other local Orthodox churches without exception, but not in the least different, and the Catholic Church, as well as some Reformation churches". This is evidenced, for example, by the joint statement of Pope Francis and Patriarch Cyril, given in Cuba, and through the statements that Pope Francis, like his predecessors, gave together with Patriarch Bartholomew, which both Catholics and Orthodox reaffirm the family as a natural center of human life and society. Similar principles about marriage can be found in Islam, as well as, and of course, in Judaism. For the Serbian church, family is the elementary and universal human value on which not a nation, state or union survives or falls, but human civilization. As such, it definitely is not the matter that can be changed depending on the opinion of any political forum or social group.

Additionally, in its reaction SOC specifically underlined that is "equally difficult to understand why the resolution mentions the relationship between the state and the church as controversial. Anyone who is interested in this issue knows that the Serbian Orthodox Church is committed to mission, for the principle of cooperative separation of church and state".

Reacting to the European Parliament condemnation of Russia's efforts to use ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans "in order to inflame conflicts and divide communities", which could destabilize the entire region, SOC stated that ultimately there neither is nor will be any interference, either from the East or the West. At the center of the SOC's interest, work and engagement are fundamental issues of peace and coexistence.

[3] On the Resolution of the European Parliament, Serbian Orthodox Church, March 14, 2022, http://www.spc.rs/eng/resolution_european_parliament, accessed on: 27/03/2022.

The resolution is first and foremost hostile to the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people. The mere fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church was almost marked as an actor in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine according to that resolution is meaningless and malicious. The Serbian Orthodox Church did not declare itself on the occasion of the war, unless it is for humanitarian reasons, to help everyone who is suffering. The resolution intends to put pressure on the Serbian state in Belgrade, Banja Luka and the entire Serbian people through pressure on the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The European Parliament also express concern "about the spread of foreign state propaganda, primarily from Moscow and Beijing, as well as Ankara", and convincement that the Confucius Institutes, which are based at numerous European universities, serve as a lobbying platform for Chinese economic interests and Chinese intelligence services, as well as for the recruitment of agents and spies. Further, the EP is "concerned about the Orthodox Church's attempts in countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and especially in its entity, the Republika Srpska, to promote Russia as a protector of traditional family values and strengthen state-church relations."

European Commission and member states are called on "to closely monitor activities in religious institutions and, if necessary and if there is evidence, to take measures, inter alia, by denying financial resources or revoking licenses to related institutions."

Conclusion

In its Resolution on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, European Parliament with its assessments on Serbian Orthodox Church, practically have brought

the Republic of Serbia and the entire Serbian people into the position of actors in the events in Ukraine, while deliberately ignoring the fact that Serbia holds neutral position, respects Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, and at the same time does not want to impose any sanctions on Russia. When comes to the Serbian Orthodox Church, main Serbian religion, its attitude was confirmed not only in the statement reacting to the Resolution, but also during the meeting of Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia, Mr. Emanuele Giaufret when discussed the Ukrainian crisis. They agreed that churches, religious communities and their leaders can play a beneficial role, because they are committed to peace, dialogue, tolerance and have the opportunity to contribute to overcoming the great problems facing today's Europe. In this regard, the Patriarch pointed out that the Resolution of the European Parliament does not correspond to reality. Serbian Orthodox Church is committed to and is working for peaceful and fruitful coexistence and cooperation of all peoples, and for it peace is an imperative that has no alternative.