

# RETURN OF SERBIAN CHANT TO BYZANTINE TRADITION

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The article examines the specific phenomenon of the return of Serbian Orthodox Church music to Byzantine chant in the turbulent period of the early 1990s. The framework for the study is an analysis of a unique movement among younger generations of Serbian believers for the revival of ecclesiastical heritage in church art, particularly music. This paper highlights: (1) the reasons behind a deep spiritual crisis that preceded affirmation of Byzantine chant, (2) (in)correct perceptions of Eastern Christian tradition and heritage among Serbs actively engaged in the liturgical life of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1990s, and (3) some pros and cons of the unique musical tradition of the Eastern Church and the national variants of church singing, such as the Serbian church chant. The article concludes that even in today's circumstances, the Orthodox Serbs who ground their national identity in Eastern Christian/Byzantine religious heritage regardless of the existing borders of the Serbian state – have a reason to consider themselves a part of Byzantine and Mediterranean Europe.

*Key words:* church chant, Byzantium, Serbian Orthodox Church, national and spiritual identity, sacred tradition



## INTRODUCTION

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In complex social and political circumstances following the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, it appeared logical that Serbian people felt a sort of imperative to turn to the past and research their history. As it could be expected, the leading figures of the nation entangled in war conflicts used this for different platforms and with various methods and agendas. Revitalisation of tradition(s) also became evident in several domains. The categories of opposites that could not be avoided at such a time – eternal vs transient, national out of conviction vs national out of interest – also led to a more intensive search for spiritual identity. In combination with the need to find its place again and/or (re)define the collective spiritual identity of the Serbian nation in that period, a particularly notable trend emerged in a form of more intensive religious identification of the younger generation of Serbs with Orthodox Christianity. Despite growing up in the Yugoslav reality, most young people were fully aware of the inevitability of the collapse of previously valid Yugoslav ideals, many of which were artificially imposed and hardly or not at all achievable. Standpoints relying on historically attested values of the Serbian church, as well as on newly discovered answers to existential and ontological dilemmas, drew the attention of many young people in Serbia to Orthodoxy. Those who dedicated the focus of their being to liturgical life strove to reach the deepest values of ecclesiastical tradition, which resulted in the specific revival of church art—painting, architecture and also music. This article focuses primarily on the revival of the ancient Byzantine chant in the liturgical life of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the early 1990s. It presents the reasons for a deep spiritual crisis that preceded the affirmation of the traditional Byzantine chant. Moreover, it reveals the (in)correct perceptions of Eastern Christian tradition and ecclesiastical heritage among Serbs actively engaged in the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1990s. It also presents some pros and cons of the unique musical tradition of the Eastern Church and the national variants of church singing, such as the Serbian church chant.



## THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

The “case” of the Serbian return to its “national”, that is Orthodoxy as a striking and highly provocative religion, was directly related to the research of one’s heritage, but also included facing the falsehoods and half-truths associated with it in the previous decades. Existing sociological and anthropological research testifies to different aspects of manifestations of this “new” religiousness and declared religious affiliation among Serbian population at the end of the previous century, but also to contrasting forms of religious nominalism, pastoral needs and expectations, more expressed through equating religious and national sentiments, a (lack of) social engagement of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as its political instrumentalisation, and so on. A theological discourse – although essential to most issues pertaining to sociological observation – was either missing or highly disputable, if not outright false. The situation was similar with research related to the new-old phenomena in the spheres of church architecture at the turn of the millennium: fresco and icon painting, religion-inspired fine arts, as well as church and art music whose creators turned to the characteristic Eastern Christian melodic tradition, or were inspired by motifs from the national history. Regardless of whether avoiding the theological approach and not using its findings in the scientific sphere may be justified in one-sided and single-discipline research of phenomena related to the Serbian church, it is undeniable that, even with all the evident changes in the social reality, theology has remained inferior in the Serbian academic scene, having been suppressed in Serbia and Yugoslavia since World War II due to the rise of communist ideology and later under socialism. As in previous decades, a prevalent view is that exploring/researching Serbian medieval history – which is inextricably linked to the history of the Orthodox Church – as well as the Church’s mission, its status in contemporary society, politics and culture, church art in general, both in the past and present, does not require scholars to be acquainted even with the basic postulates of Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, invoking Orthodox dogmatic and ethical principles and exposing



mystagogical familiarity is disqualified as the influence of “private and personal affiliation, which should not interfere with the scientific principles” (Pavićević 2009: 1414).

Taking liturgical and dogmatic aspects into consideration proves to be necessary particularly when interpreting the reception of artistic forms and practices in liturgical music that expressed a strong link to “Byzantinism” at the turbulent turn of the millennium.<sup>1</sup> This multi-layered paradigm, upon which Serbian culture was shaped in the distant past, gained relevance again in the observed period, although one could say its influence on modern Serbian culture never completely disappeared. It is important to note that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked in turn by distancing from the Byzantine legacy and return to Byzantine models. In the period between WWII and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the revitalisation of the “Golden Age” was mostly suppressed and marginalised on Serbian territory. The motto “down with the past”, as a tool of Communist ideology, had an impact on the entire Yugoslav entire culture policy. Any turn to the past, especially to the Middle Ages and medieval mysticism, was strictly condemned in public discourse

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1 Despite the well-known and justifiable reasons that link Byzantium and anything Byzantine to a historically common strategy of *damnatio memoriae* (erasure of memory; Petrović 2013) and a whole range of other negative connotations, this paper will use this as an imposed and inevitable convention that has been accepted by scholars. Moreover, we are deeply convinced that the renaming of the Eastern Roman Empire as Byzantium enabled the introduction of the “second” history which attributes to Eastern Roman rulers a geopolitically and culturally inferior influence, which represented, in the course of its millennium-long lifetime and in the least negative interpretation, a “gloomy epilogue to the glorious Roman past”. From Hieronymus Wolf, who used the term Byzantium in the title of his 16<sup>th</sup>-century collection of documents *Corpus Historiae Byzantinae*, and French King Luis XIV, under whose patronage scholars analysed and elaborated Wolf’s collection in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century into a 34-volume history of Byzantium in Latin and Greek, and all the way to later Western interpreters of Roman history such as Edward Gibbon, the tendency is to equate Byzantinism with obscurantism, conservatism and barbarianism (Geanakoplos 2003: 333–350).



(Đilas 1948: 34–35). Historically based patriotism, which glorified the past, was considered backward and churchly, while national liberation based patriotism, aimed at the national struggle and independence, was the only right and respectable cult. Research into the positions of the church and its hierarchs in Serbian history presented publicly in writing or orally during the communist and socialist period has not yet been conducted. However, it is clear that only since the 1980s have individual bishops been speaking more openly of the Byzantine roots of Serbian religious identity.

## ANALYSIS

An evident turn towards Byzantium and the Middle Ages in Serbia can be noticed in different artistic domains directly before 1989. The year marked an important anniversary that mobilised the entire Serbian public scene, from the political to the church and the cultural, and stirred long suppressed national emotions. This was the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo between the Serbian-led Christian army and the invading Ottomans. On this occasion, the earthly remains of Great Martyr Lazar, Prince of Serbia, who led the Serbian army in the battle, were returned from Vrdnik Monastery in northern Serbia to the Ravanica Monastery, which he himself had built as his resting place. The main celebration was organised at Gazimestan, the site of the battle. This important national event along with the continuation of the construction of St. Sava Memorial Temple in Belgrade which took place in 1984 set off a wave of interest in medieval Serbian and Byzantine legacy, and has become a direct and indirect inspiration for the creative work of numerous Serbian artists (Vesić and Peno 2020).

In the early 1990s, a group of mostly newly baptised young believers (neophytes) in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, strove for a special, liturgically and theologically articulated perception of the Byzantine model, on which the medieval Serbian national culture was shaped. The protagonists of this movement, wishing for a return to the original roots of church art, came from different walks of life but were mainly artists and well-educated



young people, mostly born in Belgrade (J. Jovanović 2011: 189). They came together on their own initiative, without official institutional support from the Serbian church, which was based on a shared need to build their own spiritual identity on the original teachings of the Orthodox Church. The rebirth of interest in religious truths followed, as a natural consequence, of the deep spiritual crisis that had been present in the Serbian society for a long time. Losing the stability of previous values also brought about a quest for what was labelled in church practice as tradition. An encounter with patristic literature and experiences taken from the liturgical practices of other local churches, particularly those in the Balkans, allowed the younger generation of Serbian theologians and believers to name more freely the factors of distortion and deviation from the Orthodox sacred tradition.

The return to the thought of Holy Fathers, which freed Orthodox theology from the rigid academic theological system<sup>2</sup>, also initiated an exploration of/into forgotten liturgical traditions, both in terms of liturgy as well as in overall – conditionally speaking – liturgical externalities: hymnography, visual art and singing. Immediately before and especially during the extremely tense social conditions, the abovementioned community of young believers launched the restoration of traditional techniques of painting frescoes and icons (Mitrović 2014: 87–103), as well as church chanting. In respect to chanting, their role models were Athonite monks,<sup>3</sup> whose tradition

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2 Florovsky characterised the influences of Western scholasticism on the Orthodox theological system, which were present since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as the “Babylonian captivity” of the Orthodox Church. Already then did the foundations on which the Church stood diverged: theology—the law of faith (*lex credendi*) and liturgy—the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) (Cf. Florovsky 1997: 107, 64; Γιανναρά 1992: 96).

3 Apart from a series of different audio materials available, the first monographic study on Vikentije, monk, scribe and chanter from the Hilandar Monastery, was published in 2003, with facsimiles of his calligraphic neumatic manuscripts (*cf.* Peno 2003).



emerged from the late Byzantine musical legacy, and was systematised into a stable theoretical and neumatic notation system in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This reform referred mainly to the simplification of neumes, which were then used to re-transcribe traditional melodies, but it also included the standardisation of an eight-mode (*octoechos*) scale system and rhythm. In all other local Orthodox churches in the Balkans, except the Serbian church, this type of chant was used in the church services. Ethnophyletistic temptations, which marked the history of local churches in the Balkans during and after the Ottoman rule and brought an aversion for the Hellenic element, and especially a generally low Serbian interest in cultivating the art of chanting were the two main reasons why Serbian chanters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not adopt the reformed neumatic notation. However, the monophonic chant they used at the time, and which started being transcribed in the European staff notation in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, also stemmed from the unique late Byzantine chant. Except for a different language, it had no unique characteristic features that would be originally Serbian. Despite numerous testimonies of various problems in chanting practice, the stereotype of an original and exceptionally beautiful Serbian national tradition of church music spread, without much grounding in reality, and has remained in effect to this day. From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first educated Serbian musicians started harmonising traditional monophonic tunes on the European basis, creating a repertory of multipart church music, which over time gained equal status in Serbian liturgy to the traditional chants (Peno 2016: 87–150).

It is evident that the singing in the churches of the Serbian capital – and even more so in smaller communities – did not meet the aesthetic criteria nor the spiritual needs of the worshippers who took the initiative to start a revival of Byzantine/medieval Serbian art, religious fine arts and chanting. Deeply aware of the fact that affiliation with the Orthodox Church entailed an identity that is not limited by any biological, social, cultural or other conditions, they tied their interests in the field of music to the Balkan and more broadly speaking the Eastern musical tradition. It was there that they recognised the



continuity of common elements from the time of Byzantium during the Ottoman period and up to the present (Todorova 2006: 310; 339; 342). The unique melodic feel of this music led worshippers to the exploration of both religious and secular melodies. On these grounds, they had no doubt as to whether it was appropriate for Serbian liturgical needs to adapt Greek or Bulgarian sources, which they used in chanting at first. The “Byzantines” – as they often referred to themselves and as they were pejoratively named by those opposing any change in the established music practice – used the same method as the rest of the Orthodox nations or communities of Orthodox denomination in other nations of the world, where renaissance of Byzantium in church chanting can be observed in recent times. In other words, just as Russians, who have a long independent chant tradition, have no issue with adapting melodies from contemporary Greek neumatic chant collections to Church Slavonic, the same has been done by minority Orthodox communities in Western Europe, including Finland, France, Germany, and so on (Olkinuora 2011: 133–146).

By analogy of the established use both in colloquial speech and scholarly discourse throughout the modern Orthodox world, the Serbian “reformers” also used the term Byzantine for the chant, the inclusion of which they strove for in Serbian liturgy. In respect of historical and artistic legacy, the attribute “Byzantine” has two meanings: first, relating to the Byzantine Empire, and second, the characteristics that distinguish the religious creative heritage of Byzantium – since it was not Byzantium that created the Orthodoxy, but rather vice-versa since the Orthodox religion had been its cornerstone for ages (Meyendorff 1982: 9). This concept, although questionable from scientific perspective in many aspects, bears legitimacy in the liturgical context. The practice of church chanting does not become petrified, nor is it static. It is primarily cultivated through oral tradition, and is marked by extraordinary dynamism, characteristic of the unchangeable yet always new course of church services. Therefore, the term “Byzantine” can be used as a synonym for “church” chant, or the singing that may find its place in the church in accordance with the criteria of liturgical dogma (Στάθης 1972:





389–438). With ecclesiastical connotations, neume chanting also became known among Serbian chanters of the 1990s as “traditional”, with the term referring to the sacred tradition, both ancient and more recent, but it was also an eschatological ideal, serving in the liturgy in the present as a reflection of the world to come.

Although its limited reach meant it could never be a threat to the established liturgical music of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the resonance of the Byzantine revival was met with a great backlash from certain clerics and laymen.<sup>4</sup> The decisive reasons against the new-old type of chanting were and remain emotional aesthetic preferences and ethnophyletism. To justify the exclusive use of the official “Serbian” liturgical music – although in practice it had been in serious crisis for two centuries if not more (Peno 2012: 167–181) – non-scientific interpretations of historical data were used, along with value judgements derived from them. Moreover, personal musical taste and habits, but above all national sentiments, prevailed in statements against the so-called Greek chant, which was presented as an opponent to Serbian liturgical tradition. To make the paradox even greater, comparative analyses of melodies from Greek neumatic collections from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with analogous Serbian melodies in five-line staves have shown a high level of similarity, with the differences between them mainly originating from the very nature of the two notation systems – the possibility of indicating different sizes of the so-called natural intervals in neumes, while they cannot be articulated as clearly in staff notation, which is based on tempered tuning (Peno 2008: 101–125). Furthermore, it is worth noting that Russian influence – particularly present in choral liturgical literature performed in

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4 A notable number of Byzantines chose monastic life, so they transferred their chanting experience to others in the monasteries where they lived. Byzantine chant is actively cultivated in a few monasteries in Serbia and Montenegro, where a great majority of Orthodox churchgoers belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (only a fraction of them have declared their affiliation with the noncanonical and unrecognised Montenegrin Orthodox Church).



churches that have their own choirs – was in no way seen as problematic, unlike the post-Byzantine and pan-Balkan ones.

In an effort to minimise the continuity of the Eastern chanting tradition – from Byzantine to post-Byzantine and modern Greek, but also Bulgarian, Romanian and the singing practices of Arab Orthodox Christians and other nations – the supporters of the national Serbian musical tradition linked each and every melody written down in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformed neumatic notation exclusively to the present-day Greek church. In this way, they proved persistent in their aversion to their Hellenic Orthodox brothers that Serbs had felt for centuries preceding the formation of their own nation state. Namely, the complicated and problematic relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and its exponents under the Ottoman rule, the Phanariot bishops, was long used as justification for opposing Orthodox Greeks. Although the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople was non-canonically forced on other Orthodox nations, including the Bulgarians, in the same way, the negative experience had become deeply ingrained in the Serbian ecclesiastic memory. In the case of music it became the justification for the demonstration of individuality within the universal body of the Orthodox Church (Šmeman 2007: 482).

Referring to long outdated scholarly theses, the opponents to the revival of Byzantine chant most commonly emphasized oriental musical influence that allegedly changed the ethos of post-Byzantine chanting and severed the link it had with the original Byzantine musical style. This was an interpretation disseminated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by pioneers of Byzantine musicology in the West (Peno 2011b; 2015). Even though the modern musicology has solved many of the problems regarding methodological approaches and overcome the false interpretations of the oriental character of post-Byzantine tradition, Serbian opponents to Byzantine chant until recently continued to reiterate irrelevant information about the supposedly oriental characteristics of Eastern Christian chant (chromatic elements, melisma, nasal singing, etc.) in close scholarly circles and in different social fora. The ideological attitude also comes to light in the tendentious disregard of more recent



scientific findings that do not fit the preselected concept on the one hand, and on the other, one-sidedly highlights the research that played the preservation of Serbian national identity at the heart of singing ahead of scientific truths. Moreover, questioning the deeply rooted opinions is seen as dangerous, unpopular, and is often even anathemised.

The said emotional and nationalistic pathos, and the psychological criteria of personal preference, were accompanied by referring to the “national”, that is Serbian, hallmarks when assessing the appropriateness of one and inappropriateness of the other type of musical expression in the services of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>5</sup> Attributing the role of creator of a particular kind of church singing to the nation was part of the national ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which entire Serbian art had to serve (Peno and Vesić 2016: 135–136). The romantic national zeal of that age was accompanied by a tendency to equate national and religious expression, “so that Orthodoxy became a national rather than theological category” (M. Jovanović 1987: 148). The expression of the national soul and religious feelings of the Serbian nation were declared by contemporary missionaries of nationalism as criteria under which “Byzantine” music had no place under the arches of Serbian churches. Here, it is important to stress that they absolutely ignored the scientifically proven fact that the “national”, Serbian church chanting only lost its original Byzantine character in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a process by which – in accordance with Europeanised aesthetic criteria – it was “purified” of all oriental (i.e. Byzantine) melodic ornaments that were “superfluous” and “distasteful”, or even “repugnant”. These are the precise adjectives used by the most renowned Serbian composer and church chant transcriber of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, when describing his process of writing

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5 Some archpriests of the Serbian church even banned the use of “Greek” chanting in liturgy in their dioceses. However, unlike Byzantine chant, Byzantine legacy in icons and frescoes is well established in the Serbian church, and is not met with any resistance or shock.



down the melodies without the ornaments and effects he could hear from chanters of his era (Stojanović Mokranjac 1908: 10–11). Thus, we can see that the Eastern musical element/feel had to be forcefully removed from the traditional chanting in the Serbian Church so that a new tradition could be formed in accordance with the European musical taste under the label of “Serbian national tradition”, which would grant it the official legitimacy of originality and antiquity. This is how idealisation of the past led to the scholarly affirmation of a stylised history of Serbian church music, where romantic stereotypes of the tradition’s originality were cemented as axiomatic (Peno 2016: 16–17; 161–164).

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## CONCLUSIONS

Like history, culture in general, including Serbian church art, fell victim to different discontinuities (Palavestra 1982: 10–11), ideologies and canons, forced or self-imposed devaluation, insufficient preservation, marginalisation and inappropriate channelling of the specificities of its own identity (Jovanović, 2011: 33). Both the distant and recent Serbian past have been subject to divergences from valuations and interpretations, as well as to the creation of “new memory” and a self-imposed strategy of erasure from memory (*damnatio memoriae*). The described attitude of the defenders of Serbian national monophonic chant, who, at the same time, opposed the Byzantine chant, reflects an uprooting from the Orthodox background. And it is precisely this background that ensures an objective perception of the past, free from all aspects of social and cultural conditionality, along with giving content and meaning to the Orthodox heritage as a sacred tradition (Šmeman 1997: 13). The complex role of sacred tradition in the history of Christianity, including the Orthodox Church, is already evident from numerous texts by Church Fathers. One of its definitions could be that sacred tradition is the continuity of the unique ethos of the Church that is based on the foundations of the Orthodox faith. The unique sacred tradition of the Church represents the main hermeneutical principle and method with which anything in church life,



and also church art, is to be approached. Orthodoxy has a long history, and history is a channel of transferring sacred tradition, the continuity and identity of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” (Florovsky 1993: 59). Nevertheless, tradition is not limited to the past, nor is the past its content. The eschatological perspective, the view in light of the “age to come”, articulates the difference between what has proved in the past (in tradition) to be successful and in harmony with the Christian ideal, and what has proved to be a failure (in the original sense of the Greek word *αμαρτία*, i.e. “sin”) or deviation from the Christian ideal.

Numerous and diverse are the reasons that affected the spiritual aspect of modern Serbian history and its divergence from the Christian tradition. “The spiritual thread is systematically (voluntarily) uprooted, and it is short-sightedly or insultingly directed” (Popović 1988: 21). Bearing in mind that already at the time of the birth of the Serbian nation state in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reviving elements from the past and sacred tradition were viewed among Serbs as a “sign of empty traditionalism and backward provincialism” (Cvijić 1991: 391),<sup>6</sup> it is not surprising that today part of the Serbian nation is intensively searching for its place on the European map, not remembering its spiritual foundations, or even fearing them.<sup>7</sup> The other part of Serbs whose Orthodox identity ensures enthusiasm for artistic research of the past even in the times of crisis, and who judge their lives and the life of their nation through the lens of sacred tradition, protect the positive memory of Byzantium and

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6 Renowned scholar Jovan Cvijić wrote in 1907 how some of his influential Serbian contemporaries were mocking Serbian patriotism, considering it a lower-order emotion.

7 It is very illustrative to take a look at the results of a psychological study of the attitudes of Serbian students to Byzantium and Byzantine culture conducted in the 1990s. It established that most students had a negative attitude towards Byzantium, even if they could not explain the reasons for their views. Moreover, none of the respondents confirmed the link between the Serbian and Byzantine cultures (Panić 1993: 255–265)



the reality of the world to come to which it aspired. Such Serbs have no problem belonging to “Byzantine Europe”.<sup>8</sup> Through this Byzantine link, they also belong to the Mediterranean, regardless of the newest geographical borders.<sup>9</sup> In the rich civilizational legacy of the Byzantine commonwealth nations, as well as in their own national heritage, they will discover their benefits time and again.

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- 8 According to certain analysts of political and social relations in Eastern Europe, Byzantium continues to have some sort of political entity to this day. In this sense, there is talk of the “situation in Byzantine Europe” and “Byzantine countries of Eastern Europe” (Bakić-Hajden 2003: 80; Monti 2004: 45).
- 9 The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (shortened as FR Yugoslavia or simply Yugoslavia), comprising the Republic of Serbia (together with its two autonomous provinces Kosovo and Metohija, and Vojvodina) and the Republic of Montenegro, was formed in 1992, after the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It started in 1991 with the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, followed by Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which led to the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1995). In 2003, the country was transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, until the parliament of Montenegro declared independence on 3 June 2006. The Republic of Serbia automatically became a separate state without direct access to the Adriatic Sea. This formally removed it from the list of Mediterranean countries (for questions on Mediterranean, see Bojinović Fenko 2015).



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