




NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AS A FACTOR THREATENING SECURITY

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Abstract

The paper examines new religious movements and their potential for endangering various security aspects, focusing on the situation in the Republic of Serbia. The first part of the paper contains an overview of the interaction of new religious movements and the sphere of security in contemporary global circumstances. In the second part, the characteristics of many serious criminal offenses are studied, using individual examples from domestic practice, related to the activities of new religious movements or to the perpetrators' alternative religious beliefs. The third part of the paper contains an assessment of the security-threatening potential of new religious movements on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. In conclusion, certain new religious movements can indisputably represent threats to certain spheres of security, but such threats rarely affect the vital interests of the state and society.

Key words: new religious movements, religious extremism, religion motivated crime, security threats, national security.

НОВИ РЕЛИГИЈСКИ ПОКРЕТИ КАО ФАКТОР УГРОЖАВАЊА БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ

Апстракт

Предмет рада јесте анализа нових религијских покрета из угла њиховог потенцијала за угрожавање различитих аспеката безбедности, са посебним нагласком на приликама у Републици Србији. У првом делу, проучена је интеракција нових религијских покрета и сфере безбедности у контексту савремених глобалних прилика. У оквиру другог дела, анализом појединачних примера из домаће праксе истражене су одлике већег броја тешких кривичних дела која су довођена

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у везу са деловањем нових верских покрета или са алтернативним верским уверењима учинилаца. Унутар трећег дела извршена је оцена безбедносно угрожавајућег потенцијала нових религијских покрета на територији Републике Србије. Међу осталим закључцима, указано је да поједини нови религијски покрети неспорно могу представљати чиниоце угрожавања одређених сфера безбедности, али да такво угрожавање веома ретко погађа виталне интересе државе и укупног друштва.

Кључне речи: нови религијски покрети, верски екстремизам, верски мотивисани криминалитет, угрожавање безбедности, национална безбедност.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND GLOBAL SECURITY

New religious movements and alternative religious teachings generally provoke different responses in the public. As a rule, most responses are negative or sceptical, sometimes bordering on religious discrimination and incitement of religious hatred and intolerance.¹ The motivation for the negative perception of alternative spiritual movements partially lies in the real (or possible) threats that certain religious practices present. Some of the most notorious and lethal incidents were carried out by members of certain destructive religious organisations, receiving massive global media coverage, such as the criminal and terrorist activities of Aum Shinrikyo members², the suicides and murders of members of the People's Temple³ and the Order of the Solar Temple⁴, the mass suicide of followers of the Heaven's Gate⁵, and the attempted mass suicide of members of the White Brotherhood sect⁶, the mass murder of the members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God⁷, the armed conflict with the police and mass death of members of the Branch Davidians⁸, and the murders and ritual tortures carried out by members of the New Divine Light⁹. These incidents, which indisputably endangered lives and vital social values, are relatively rare in comparison to much more common forms of negative phenomena arising from new religious teachings. These range from various socially deviant actions, to misdemeanours, and crimes that

¹ One such example is the so-called "anti-cultism". For more on anti-cult movement and activism, see Introvigne 2024; Kaplan 1993; Shupe and Bromley 1985. For more on anti-cult movement, religious sects and cults in domestic sociology scholarship, see Božović 2003; Đorđević 1998, 1999, 2003;

² For more information, see Danzig et al. 2012; Gerteis 2008; Lifton 2000, 2004; Nehorayoff et al. 2016; Parachini 2005; Reader 2002;

³ See Chidester 2004; Hall 1987; Layton 1998; Reiterman and Jacobs 1982;

⁴ See Introvigne 1995; Introvigne and Mayer 2002; Mayer and Siegler 1999;

⁵ See Davis 2000; Lewis 2003; Robinson 1997; Wessinger 2000;

⁶ See Dvorkin 2002;

⁷ See Robinson 2000;

⁸ See Gallagher 2014; Hall 2002; Wright 1995;

⁹ See AP 2021; Picheta and Guy 2020;

rarely endanger the most valuable social goods (life, health, physical integrity, the general safety of people and property, etc.).¹⁰ While such isolated incidents can undeniably be characterised as high-intensity security threats, the nature of the security threat posed by the less extremist part of the new religious movements remains a matter of considerable debate.¹¹

In recent years, both international and nation legislations have dealt with the legal sanctioning of the harmful effects of new religious movements. Internationally, the most important actions were undertaken by the Council of Europe (Matković 2018a)¹². As to national legislations, only a few countries opted for so-called anti-cult and anti-sect legislation (USA¹³, France¹⁴, Luxembourg¹⁵), while some countries opted for other methods, establishing various bodies to monitor new religious movements and other preventive actions (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, etc.) (Doe 2011; Matković 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2021b).

After the Cold War ended, there was a sort of vacuum regarding security challenges, and security services began to turn their focus on new religious movements, more specifically the so-called destructive sects and cults (Mayer 1999). The causes lie primarily in objective circumstances, i.e., increasingly violent actions and incidents caused by members of certain alternative religious groups, such as Aum Shinrikyo, Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate, and others. On the other hand, the current socio-political constellation, created after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the bipolar world, may have contributed to security

¹⁰ On more frequent socially deviant and illegal activities of new religious movements, see Lanning 1989; Olson-Raymer 1990;

¹¹ On the scholarly debate on the relationship between new religious movements and violence, see Bromley and Melton 2002; Introvigne 2002, 2018; Lewis 2011; Moore 2020; Robbins 1997; Robbins and Hall 2007; Skrumedi 2017; Wessinger 2006. On the relationship between new religious movements and crime, see Lanning 1989; Olson-Raymer 1990; Perlmutter 2003; Robbins 1979. On the relationship between new religious movements and terrorism, see Dawson 2009; Mayer 2001; Ogbonnaya 2013; Perlmutter 2003; Simeunović 2009;

¹² See some of the most important CoE recommendations: CoE, Recommendation 1178 (1992); CoE, Recommendation 1412 (1999); CoE, Doc. 9612 (2002); CoE, Doc. 12595 (2011); CoE, Doc. 13441 (2014);

¹³ See: California Penal Code, An act to add Section 667.83 to the Penal Code, relating to sentencing, 1994; Criminal Code of Illinois (720 ILCS 5/), 2012; Idaho Statutes, Title 18: Crimes and Punishments, Chapter 15: Children and vulnerable Adults, Section: 18-1506A (added 1990, ch. 210, sec. 1, p. 467; am. 2006, ch. 178, sec. 4, p. 546.);

¹⁴ Code pénal (France), Version consolidée au 07.08.2014; Loi no 2001-504 du 12 juin 2001 tendant à renforcer la prévention et la répression des mouvements sectaires portant atteinte aux droits de l'homme et aux libertés fondamentales;

¹⁵ Code pénal en vigueur dans le grand-duché de Luxembourg (législation: jusqu'au 3 octobre 2015), Ministère de la justice, Luxembourg; Loi du 21. février 2013. portant incrimination de l'abus de faiblesse; Loi du 21. février 2013. relative à la lutte contre les abus sexuels et l'exploitation sexuelle des enfants et portant modification de plusieurs dispositions du Code penal;

services focusing their attention on new religious movements, as one of the potential major challenges to national, regional and global security.

The level of security endangerment is usually classified as security challenges, risks and threats (Orlić 2004; Simić 2002)¹⁶, where the harmful effects of new religious movements are typically seen as security threats. However, in some cases, this negative religious influence can also be seen as a security risk, especially if the subject of endangerment is defined more broadly and equated to the legal concepts of a protected object or the object of a criminal offense (e.g., life, physical and psychological integrity, general safety, property, etc.). Finally, in a much broader context, the socially undesirable activities of new religious movements can be seen as a security challenge, and as a potential threat to vital social interests, such as challenges related to the crisis of spirituality of modern man, the transformation of contemporary forms of religiosity, the relationship between individual and institutionalised faith, etc. According to the general characteristics of security challenges, such challenges can be defined in two ways: as a potential negative influence on society, as well as an incentive for increased effort and a positive solution to the problem (Daničić 2018).¹⁷

Mayer (1999) recognises two types of threats from destructive religious movements: (1) infiltration into government and other power structures; and (2) striving towards the violent achievement of a goal or mission that a religious group has set. However, while there have been some examples of the second type mentioned by Mayer (violent achievement of a goal) in practice, it remains uncertain whether the cases of infiltration of destructive religious organisations into government structures have actually been recorded, as well as whether such infiltration has resulted in a threat to national or international security¹⁸. The criminal offenses perpetrated by destructive religious movements can range from various forms of economic exploitation to the abuse of subordinate relationships or other forms of manipulation, or from various crimes against life, physical and sexual integrity, to extremist, terrorist and other criminal acts that threaten the wider community. One of the more notorious subcategories of crimes associated with new religious movements are the so-called occult crimes,

¹⁶ Beside these categories (security challenges, risks and threats), international theories sometimes include *vulnerabilities* as a category. See Brauch 2005. On critical examination of these categories, see Ilić 2013;

¹⁷ On classifying new religious movements as security challenges, risks, and threats, see Cresswell and Wilson 2012; Hubback 1997; Mayer 1999; Ogbonnaya 2013;

¹⁸ The (unsuccessful) attempt by members of Aum Shinrikyo to gain political power in Japan could serve as an example. However, at the time Aum Shinrikyo was going through a transformation from a religious community to a socio-political organization, finally becoming a bona fide political party. Therefore, it is highly debatable whether the Aum Shinrikyo activities can be classified as those of an extremist religious cult and religious terrorism, or whether the extremist acts of its members are the result of secular, i.e., socio-political worldviews. For further information, see Matković 2018b;

especially those related to various satanic or pseudo-satanic beliefs of the perpetrators¹⁹. Many different divisions and classifications of these occult crimes can be found in the available literature. Lanning (1989) lists the following crimes and other socially deviant behaviours: vandalism, desecration of churches and cemeteries, theft in churches and cemeteries, teenage gangs, animal mutilation, teenage suicide, child abuse, kidnapping, murder, and human sacrifice. Following Lanning, Olson-Raymer (1990) offers a somewhat modified typology and proposes two basic categories: criminal offenses and deviant acts whose existence is indisputable, and criminal offenses and socially deviant acts whose existence is questionable. The first category includes disturbance of private property, vandalism, theft, writing graffiti, arson, animal sacrifice and blackmail, while the second category includes suicide, kidnapping, murder and offering of human sacrifices, and ritual abuse (Olson-Raymer 1990). As an attempt to form an integral typology that would overcome the shortcomings of earlier classifications, the following classification has been proposed: (1) criminal offenses with occult or ritual characteristics and criminal offenses with pseudo-occult elements; (2) criminal offenses associated with traditional folk occultism and criminal offenses with features of modern occultism; and (3) classification according to the type of protected object (Matković 2016a, 2021b). From the criminal law perspective, one of the possible classifications of criminal offenses related to alternative religiosity is according to the type of protective object. The offenses can be classified into a number of categories of protective objects, such as crimes against life and body, against human and citizen freedoms and rights, against honour and reputation, against sexual freedom, against property, against public health, against the environment, against the general safety of people and property, against public traffic safety, against constitutional order and security, against public order and peace, against humanity and other goods protected by international law, etc. (Matković 2016a, 2021b).

When determining the actual scope of the security-threatening potential of new religious movements, it is important to consider the phenomenon of moral panic and its mechanisms. Introduced as a scientific term by S. Cohen (2011), moral panic is succinctly defined as a strong feeling of fear and threat in society due to a problem that is perceived as a threat to the established social order (Jones and Jones, 1999). Throughout history, several examples of moral panic can be found, e.g., medieval and early modern persecutions of witches and sorcerers, fear of the rise of communism in the USA ("Red Scare"), concerns about the expansion of youth delinquency and the emergence of youth subcultures after World War II, fear of the spread of HIV, fear of non-traditional religious teachings and movements, etc. (cf. Cohen 2011; Garland 2008; Goode and Ben Yehuda

¹⁹ For more on this classification, see Matković 2016d, 2017;

1994; Thompson 2003). The last one is an example of religious moral panic and the so-called anti-cult propaganda (Matković 2016, 2021b). The anti-cult moral panic usually involves a series of extremely dubious or outright false claims about serious crimes allegedly committed by members of certain cults, such as mass ritual murders, mass abductions of children for ritual abuse and sacrifice, serial incitement to ritual suicides, organised paedophile-occult circles, multi-generational destructive cults that have existed undetected for decades (or even much longer) and commit heinous criminal acts, the involvement of the world's political and economic elite in destructive occult groups and their management of the world according to such occult doctrines, and similar well-known allegations (cf. Bromley 1991; Nathan and Snedeker 2001; Robbins 2002; Richardson and Introvigne 2001). If these allegations were true, new religious movements could undoubtedly be considered as one of the major security threats on both the national and international level. However, no valid evidence has been found for the above allegations, while many have been scientifically refuted with arguments (cf. Fontaine 1998; Goldstein and Farmer 1995; Nathan and Snedeker 2001; Roleff 2002; Victor 1993). Therefore, the influence of religious moral panic represents a significant aggravating circumstance that hinders the proper understanding of objective security challenges, risks, and threats associated with alternative spiritual practices. When dealing with security threats caused by the actions of certain non-traditional religious movements, it is important to critically assess and make a clear distinction between real dangers, on the one hand, and threats that have been insufficiently verified or are completely unfounded, on the other.

CASES FROM SERBIAN CRIMINAL AND COURT PRACTICE

In the following section of the paper, we will examine several incidents that involved the alleged alternative religious motives of the perpetrators in the period starting after the dissolution of SFRY and ending in the present day. In line with the focus of this research on the most serious forms of endangering security, the analysis includes only examples of the most serious crimes against life and limb, as well as examples of committed suicides preceded by criminal acts against life and limb. Other criminal offenses and other socially deviant acts of lesser degree were not taken into consideration²⁰.

In the early 1990s, a mass murder followed by suicide took place in a barracks of the Yugoslav Army. The perpetrator was a young man who was there for military training. With an automatic rifle, he killed seven people – six soldiers and one ensign – and then took his own life. During

²⁰ For analysis of different types of criminal offences and deviant acts associated with alternative religious movements, see Matković 2016a, 2021b;

the investigation conducted by the military police, it was established that the killer had tattoos of an inverted cross and the date of the crime. It was also stated that various occult objects (pendants, magazines, posters, etc.) were found in his room in the family house. Consequently, it was concluded that the perpetrator belonged to an obscure satanic sect Bad Faith, an alleged branch of the (equally disputed) Black Rose sect (Đurđević-Stojković 2002; Luković 1998, 2000). However, looking at the circumstances more closely, we can conclude that there is no solid evidence that the perpetrator actually belonged to a formal religious organisation, and therefore that this organisation could not have influenced him to commit the crime. On the other hand, evidence has shown that the perpetrator really was interested in the occult, while it remains unclear whether (and to what degree) it was about his true religious beliefs, or whether it was just a superficial adolescent interest in what was socially stigmatised. This possibility is also supported by evidence that the killer had 'dark and morbid' interests, listened to music with occult aesthetics, and belonged to a youth musical subculture. Likewise, the question of the primary motives that led him to commit this crime, as well as the question of the possible connection of such motives with psychopathological factors, remains largely open. For instance, the psychological evaluation describes the perpetrator as a very aggressive and conflicted person: about a month before the crime was committed, the report of the Security Service of the Yugoslav Army stated that there was a danger that he could do 'something unwanted.' Besides, on the very evening he committed the crime, he was kept in the detention unit of the barracks, from which he managed to get out by force and then commit the mass murder and suicide (Stojanović 2016; Švarn 1996)²¹.

Just a few days after this crime, a very similar incident – a murder followed by suicide – happened in another barracks. A soldier in training killed a corporal and wounded one soldier, taking his own life afterwards (Đurđević-Stojković 2002). In all likelihood, primarily due to the very recent incident that took place in the other barracks, this crime was also attributed to the activities of the alleged Black Rose religious sect. However, the available data does not support such a hypothesis, since there was no evidence that the perpetrator had any occult interests at all. On the other hand, it seems that other, much more logical potential motives for the crimes and suicides, such as the copycat phenomenon, have been largely neglected. This theory is supported by a very short interval between the two incidents, the same modus operandi, same location (barracks), as well as the same personal circumstances of both perpetrators. Both perpetrators were in military training, of a similar age, and belonged to the same national minority. Therefore, it is highly likely that both experienced the same

²¹ For a detailed criminological and legal analysis of some incidents, see Matković 2016a, 2021b;

types of pressures and inconveniences related to the current civil war conflicts in SFRY, the rise of inter-ethnic tensions, the increase of anti-war sentiment among the youth, etc. (Matković 2016; Švarn 1996). Besides, it is important to note that these incidents were not the only domestic examples of murders and suicides in the barracks, since several similar tragic events were recorded from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, but they did not involve the alleged influence of religious sects (cf. Sikavica 1997).

In the mid-1990s, two murders of elderly women by their closest relatives were linked to religious and occult motives. In the first case, the old woman was killed by her granddaughter, daughter and son-in-law, at the urging of the granddaughter who declared the old woman to be 'Satan.' Performing various (pseudo)ritual acts, they brutally and protractedly abused the victim, hitting and injuring her with hands, feet, and various objects, only to finally burn her alive on a pyre, beating her throughout. Contrary to these ritualistic elements of the execution, the results of the neuropsychiatric examination showed that all three perpetrators suffered from mental disorders, the granddaughter and son-in-law from schizophrenia, and the daughter from acute psychosis²². The second murder was carried out with the complicity of two minors: the old woman's granddaughter and her friend. This crime attracted a lot of public attention, among other things, because one of the defendants invoked occult influences during the court proceedings. As part of her defence strategy, she claimed that she was bewitched by a wise woman and the other defendant. At the same time, the same defendant stated that she believed she was under the influence of a mind control program designed by a religious sect. However, the court rejected such allegations as false, taking the position that the motives for committing the crime were related to the conflict between the victim and the defendant²³.

The mass murder in eastern Serbia in the mid-2010s is one of the most extreme examples of the alleged influence of folk magic on crime. A man armed with a hunting rifle, moving towards the centre of the village, shot at all the villagers he encountered, killing nine and wounding two people. The results of the neuropsychiatric examination showed that he was suffering from a severe mental illness²⁴. This disproves the sensationalist hypothesis about the alleged influence of Wallachian magic spells that the killer believed were cast on him.

At the same time, another brutal crime caused dismay in the public, both because of the very nature of the crime and because of speculations about the killer's alleged 'sectarian' motives. A man in his mid-twenties killed his friend and his preschool-age cousin. The murder was carried out

²² Case file K. 67/94, Čačak District Court;

²³ Case file K. 250/97, Belgrade District Court; case file Kž. I 1247/98, Supreme Court of Serbia;

²⁴ Case file K. 57/07, Negotin District Court;

with cold weapons in a cruel manner, and the bodies of the victims were dismembered by the murderer (likely to cover up the traces of the crime)²⁵. The circumstances of the murder, together with speculations about the perpetrator's private interests in the occult, led to the media speculating that the crime was the work of a religious sect (cf. Anonymous1 2007; Jelovac and Adžić 2007; Slatinac 2007a, 2007b; Preradović 2007). However, during the investigation and trial, it was not proven that the perpetrator belonged to a religious group, while the results of the expert examination showed that he was a mentally ill person with a diagnosis of schizophrenia²⁶.

Two somewhat related incidents that took place ten years apart can serve as a warning against establishing an unfounded link between the perpetrators' personal interests in the occult with the criminal acts they committed due to mental illness. The first incident occurred in the mid- 2010s. A man in his early thirties, armed with a knife, attacked several members of his family, injuring his father and grandfather, who later died because of their injuries. Having then come into possession of a gun, he fired several shots into the air in response to the police's persuasion to surrender, and a little later took his own life with a shot under the chin. Based on the statements of the killer's family members, it was established that he actually had an interest in the occult, and that, in all probability, he was a member or at least a sympathiser of a famous esoteric organisation, *Ordo Templi Orientis* (Galović and Albunović 2007; Lopušina 2009). On the other hand, it was not established that these interests had anything to do with the attack on his family members. What was established, however, was that he suffered from a mental illness and already had a history of aggressive behaviour (Adžić 2007; Anonymous2 2007; Lopušina 2009; Telesković 2007). About a decade later, another man in his thirties killed his cousin during an argument, by stabbing him with a kitchen knife²⁷. And this time, the perpetrator's personal interests in the occult (although much more superficial and indirect than in the previous case) gave rise to the sensationalist hypothesis of a 'Satanist killer' or a 'sectarian murder' (Anonymous3 2014; Anonymous4 2014; Anonymous5 2014). However, as in most related cases, the investigation showed that the perpetrator was suffering from a mental illness. At the same time, this shows that perpetrators, as a rule, have a history of aggressive behaviour, but also a history of convictions for violent criminal offenses²⁸.

A more recent incident is the crime in which a younger man killed an old woman from the same town, coming to her house and inflicting fatal injuries on her with a knife. The reason for connecting this crime with occult motives was found in statements of questionable reliability made by

²⁵ Case file K. 201/07 Sremska Mitrovica District Court;

²⁶ Case file K. 201/07 Sremska Mitrovica District Court;

²⁷ Case file 5K. 21/16, Zrenjanin High Court;

²⁸ Case file K 24109/10 Novi Sad Basic Court. Case file 5K. 21/16, Zrenjanin High Court.

certain media, according to which an occult symbol – the pentagram – was engraved on the surface of the knife, while several similar ‘sectarian tattoos’ were allegedly found on the perpetrator’s body (Anonymous⁶ 2023; E. I. 2023). Due to the respect for the presumption of innocence, we cannot examine this case more closely; however, we must caution against giving such blanket assessments about the perpetrator’s motives. This is, as a rule, motivated by media sensationalism, whereas all other (and far more realistic) motives, such as self-interest, profit, possible conflict between the perpetrator and the victim, or the perpetrator’s mental state, are ignored in most media reports.

Another incident that recently shook the Serbian public was a family tragedy: a young couple killed their two children by poisoning and then took their own lives by jumping off a building (021.rs 2024; Bogosav 2024; Zelenović 2024). This shocking event became even more disturbing after speculations emerged about the possible ritual nature of the murder and suicide due to the family’s affiliation with a religious sect. The main reason for such allegations was the fact that the couple was interested in mythology (primarily the presence of Egyptian symbolism in their household), while, as an additional reason, there are unspecified claims that the family lived in seclusion and isolation (Anonymous⁷ 2024; Gracun 2024; Petrović and Čarnić 2024; Zelenović 2024). On the other hand, there was no evidence that the couple was involved with a religious cult, and their interest in some form of spiritual teaching remained in the realm of vague speculations.

RATING THE SECURITY THREATENING POTENTIAL OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN SERBIA

Based on the analysis of cases from practice, it can be concluded that the experience so far has shown that the phenomenon of new religious movements and alternative spirituality in the Republic of Serbia also represents a security threat of a certain degree, but that there are significant differences of opinion regarding the degree of such a threat. As for a more precise determination of the intensity of the threat mentioned, a few incidents (first, several registered cases of mass murders) are profiled as highly threatening and, consequently, highly destructive sources of threat. However, the other incidents represent a security threat corresponding to the general threat posed to society by committing more serious forms of crimes against life and limb. The possibility of the influence of alternative spiritual movements on the suicidal ideation among their followers, no matter how controversial and problematic such influence may be, can also be characterised as a threat to life as one of the vital values of every society.

On the other hand, it is very difficult to establish a reliable connection between the incidents in question and the religious motives of the perpetrators for two reasons: (1) it is difficult to prove that the perpetrators

even held the religious beliefs attributed to them; and (2), it is difficult to establish whether such religious beliefs were related to their motives for committing the crime. In addition, it is particularly difficult to establish the possible connection of the perpetrator with a specific religious organisation, especially since the so-called destructive religious cults, as a rule, are groups that are not officially registered and therefore operate secretly. Besides, with the advent of the Internet and social networks, the concept of a classic religious community has largely been replaced by the concept of like-minded people connected online, rather than in a physical, local group (Beckford 2004; Cowan 2012; Dawson and Hennebry 1999; Kaplan et al. 2006; Năstură 2012). Finally, many of the alleged destructive religious sects are the product of the imagination of the media and the public, i.e., the result of the spread of unfounded allegations which are a part of religious moral panic (Matković 2021a). All of the above corresponds with the previously observed characteristics of occult crimes on a global level, since all these characteristics are noticeable as patterns with an international/global tendency to manifest (Matković 2016a, 2021b).

Evidently, among the practitioners of alternative spirituality there are individuals who are prepared to threaten the security of the community because of their religious beliefs. Besides, new religious groups whose actions may represent a significant security threat may emerge, although the likelihood of this happening in Serbia is remote. In most cases, practicing alternative spirituality, individually or in a group, has not been shown to be a security threat (cf. Mayer 1999). Even when such a threat exists, it is usually a minor one. On the other hand, most stereotypes present in the media and public discourse are unfounded accusations and allegations not supported by valid arguments and evidence.

The analysis of examples from practice has shown that even the most serious crimes associated (justly or unjustly) with alternative religious beliefs are limited to narrow localised frameworks (one individual, a small group, local communities, etc.), and are not relevant for national security issues. One of the long-standing theories in the national security sphere was about alleged attempts of certain destructive cults to infiltrate Serbia's military, with the aim of destabilising the military and political structures (cf. Đurđević-Stojković 2002; Prokopljević 2018; Sikavica 1997; Švarn 1996). The murders and suicides in the Yugoslav Army were taken as proof of this theory. However, this has never been supported by reliable evidence. Similarly, frequent speculations in sensationalist media about the alleged infiltration of religious sects into government structures have never been proven. Therefore, the activity of new religious movements, according to currently available data, does not appear to be a major factor in endangering national security.

Concerning the current security challenges associated with religious issues, it should be noted that religious fundamentalism presents a consid-

erably more serious threat, the most well-documented example being Islamic fundamentalism and its close links to terrorist activities (Despotović and Ivančević 2018; Grbić and Lečić 2021; Simeunović 2009; Simeunović and Dolnik 2013). However, for the sake of respecting the constitutionally guaranteed religious rights and freedoms, it is important not to base the security treatment of religion-motivated crimes on the type of religion. Any illegal act related to the religious beliefs of the perpetrator deserves equal legal and security treatment, regardless of the type of religious doctrine in question. Moreover, religious extremism of any kind should be treated as another form of ideological extremism. In other words, the fact that a certain form of extremism is religion-based may affect the community's reaction to it, but not the legal qualification.

Moral panic has significantly affected the public perception of the threats posed to society by new religious movements in Serbia. At the same time, the local version of the anti-cult moral panic has specific features related to the social, political and cultural climate in Serbia and former Yugoslavia, compared to the Western countries where this type of moral panic originated (Matković 2021a). Interestingly, the local anti-cult propaganda is more enduring than in the West. This calls into question one of Cohen's basic postulates, that moral panic leads to a sudden increase in concern within a community, after which it either decreases or social changes occur (Cohen 2011).

In conclusion, the security threats associated with new religious movements and alternative forms of spirituality are of limited effect. Therefore, experts should assume a particularly careful and measured approach when designing security strategies in general and acting in each specific case.

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3. Case file Kž. I 1247/98 Supreme Court of Serbia.
4. Case file K. 57/07 Negotin District Court.
5. Case file K. 201/07 Sremska Mitrovica District Court.
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НОВИ РЕЛИГИЈСКИ ПОКРЕТИ КАО ФАКТОР УГРОЖАВАЊА БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ

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Резиме

Предмет рада јесте анализа нових религијских покрета из угла њиховог потенцијала за угрожавање различитих аспеката безбедности, са посебним нагласком на приликама у Републици Србији. У првом делу, проучена је интеракција нових религијских покрета и сфере безбедности у контексту савремених глобалних прилика. У оквиру другог дела, анализом појединачних примера из домаће праксе истражене су одлике већег броја тешких кривичних дела која су довођена у везу са деловањем нових верских покрета или са алтернативним верским уверењима учинилаца. Унутар трећег дела извршена је оцена безбедносно угрожавајућег потенцијала нових религијских покрета на територији Републике Србије. Међу осталим закључцима, указано је да поједини нови религијски покрети неспорно могу представљати чиниоце угрожавања одређених сфера безбедности, али да такво угрожавање веома ретко погађа виталне интересе државе и укупног друштва. Такође је указано на значајно разилажење између реалних обележја безбедносно угрожавајућег деловања алтернативних верских пракси са једне стране, и неутемељених обележја таквих пракси која представљају резултат утицаја моралне панике са друге стране. Због свега овога сугерисан је нарочито опрезан и одмерен приступ како приликом заузимања генералних ставова и осмишљавања безбедносних стратегија усмерених ка штетном деловању нових верских покрета, тако и приликом поступања у сваком конкретном случају у оперативном раду.