

Saša Mišić\*

Faculty of Political Sciences  
University of Belgrade

## Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality in Trieste in Yugoslav-Italian Relations 1954–1971\*\*

**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality in Trieste (SOCM) in Yugoslav-Italian relations in the period from the signing of the London Memorandum in 1954 to the early 1970s. In that period, the SOCM president Dragoljub Vurdelja, an anti-communist and an opponent of socialist Yugoslavia, had a decisive role. Yugoslavia perceived the SOCM under Vurdelja's leadership as a center of anti-Yugoslav propaganda, so it sought to take control over this church community. To that end, Yugoslavia raised this issue in its relations with Italy and used all available diplomatic means to persuade this country to remove Vurdelja from Trieste. However, the improvement in relations between the SOCM and Yugoslavia began only after Dragoljub Vurdelja died in 1971.

**Keywords:** Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality in Trieste, Italy, Yugoslavia, Dragoljub Vurdelja

The founding of the Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality (SOCM), or *Comunità religiosa serbo-ortodossa*, in Trieste dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1751, the Orthodox population of Trieste, Greeks and Illyrians, received permission from the Austrian Empire to establish an official religious community (known in Serbian as “church municipality”). The union of Greeks and Illyrians – in fact, Serbs – lasted for the next three decades. However, after years of quarreling, the two communities split in 1781. The Illyrians/Serbs formed a separate community/municipality, which passed its statute in 1793. Since then, as Marco Dogo states, a “nation of pious merchants” has been gathered around its Church Municipality, its school and its magnificent church of St. Spyridon, built in the 1860s.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Trieste

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\* [sasa.misic@fpn.bg.ac.rs](mailto:sasa.misic@fpn.bg.ac.rs)

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<sup>1</sup> M. Dogo, “Narod pobožnih trgovaca. Srpsko-ilirska zajednica u Trstu, 1748–1908”, in *Svetlost i senke. Kultura Srba u Trstu*, ed. Marija Mitrović (Belgrade: Clio, 2007), 61–115. On the history of SOCM, see D. Medaković & G. Milosевич, *Letopis Srba u Trstu* (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska revija, Jugoslovenska knjiga, 1987); M. A. Purković, *Istorija srpske pravoslavne*

Serbs were members of the Confraternity and elected from their ranks a board which governed the Church Municipality. Thanks to the generous gifts of its members, the Municipality became prosperous and wealthy over time.

An important change occurred after the First World War when Trieste became part of Italy. The treaty between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes signed in Nettuno in July 1925, the so-called Nettuno Conventions – which came into force in November 1928 – regulated, among other things, the position of the Church Municipality. Although the old statutes remained in effect and “full religious autonomy” was guaranteed, the Nettuno Conventions stipulated that the SOCM, through the Bishopric of Zadar, would fall under the religious, ecclesiastical and hierarchical authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its patriarch (Article 1). It seems that even more important provisions were contained in Article 2, which stipulated that “rights and controls” over the operation of the Municipality, which until then had been exercised by the Italian state, would now be transferred to the new Yugoslav state.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of the Conventions, a new *Pravilna* was adopted in 1929, which partially changed the position of the Church Municipality.<sup>3</sup> One of the provisions stipulated that a representative of the Yugoslav Consulate in Trieste attend the sessions of the Confraternity. This direct interference of Yugoslavia in the work of the Municipality was visible as early as July 1930, when the SOCM session was attended by Vice-Consul Ilija Milikić.<sup>4</sup>

The circumstances created by the Nettuno Conventions made it easier for the new authorities of communist Yugoslavia to put the Municipality under their control during the (in)famous “forty days of Trieste” (Trieste Crisis in the spring of 1945). The Provincial National Liberation Committee for the Slovenian Littoral and Trieste appointed a pre-war teacher at the school, Velimir Đerasimović, as president of the Church Municipality, and he remained in that position until October the same year.<sup>5</sup> Disregarding the old customs, Đerasimović introduced fifty new people into the ranks of the Confraternity, including some non-Serbs, mostly local Orthodox Slovenes who had distinguished

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*crkvene opštine u Trstu* (Trieste 1960); V. Đerasimović, *Srpska crkvena zajednica u Trstu. Važniji događaji oko Sv. Spiridona* (Trieste 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Diplomatski arhiv Ministarstva spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije, Politički arhiv (DA MSP, PA) [Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Political Archive], 1969, folder 67, doc. no. 42672, Agreement on the Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality in Trieste.

<sup>3</sup> M. Sekulić, *Jedna srpska opština prkosi celom svetu* (London 1960), 12.

<sup>4</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1972, f. 53, no. 49372, Report of the Consulate General of Yugoslavia in Trieste on the situation in the SOCM, March 8, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Purković, *Istorija*, 169; F. T., *Srpska pravoslavna opština u Trstu. Istina o događajima u poslednjih 15 godina* (Caracas 1962), 4.

themselves in the Partisan ranks.<sup>6</sup> The school premises were used for the needs of the National Liberation Committee, a tricolor flag with a five-pointed star was flown on the Municipality building, and opponents of the new pro-communist bodies in the Municipality later often stated that official documents ended with the slogan “Death to fascism, freedom to the people”.<sup>7</sup> After Đerasimović, the Municipality was managed by Đorđe Gavela,<sup>8</sup> and the situation remained unchanged for a few more years.

Things started to change in the late 1940s amidst intense pressure coming from the political emigration that had found refuge on the Apennine Peninsula after the war. Thus, the pro-Chetnik emigrant Dragoljub Vurdelja managed to become the president of the Church Municipality in 1951. During the war, Vurdelja was the head of the Smederevo and then the Vračar district, because of which, after the war, he was declared a war criminal by the Yugoslav State Commission for Determining War Crimes.<sup>9</sup> After the war, Vurdelja fled from Yugoslavia and ended up in Trieste under a false name in 1946, where he soon joined the Anglo-American Allied Military Government as an officer in the San Sabba refugee camp.<sup>10</sup> At the end of 1947, he became a brother in the SOCM and initiated the adoption of a new statute in 1950, which would later enable him to control the work of the Municipality more easily.<sup>11</sup> From the time he became the head of the Municipality until his death in 1971, he fully controlled the work of the Municipality by introducing into the ranks of the Confraternity people who were sympathetic to him and they received financial compensation from the Municipality in return for their support to his policy. With the arrival of Vurdelja at the head of the Church Municipality in 1951, a new two-decade-long phase, marked by conflicts and animosity, began in the relations between the Church Municipality and the Yugoslav state.

Given that Trieste was under the control of the Allied Military Government until the fall of 1954, the role of Italy was not visible in this period. In the first post-war years, the Allies provided financial assistance to the Church Municipality in order for it to maintain its immovable property during the destitute post-war period.<sup>12</sup> In addition, in March 1950, the Allies approved changes to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Purković, *Istorija*, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Velimir Đerasimović was a teacher at the school of the SOCM in Trieste until 1953, when he was fired, and the following year he was expelled from the Confraternity (ibid. 171).

<sup>9</sup> Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ) [Archives of Yugoslavia], Fonds 100 – State Commission for Determining the Crimes of the Occupier and Its Helpers, folder no. 8854, Dragoljub Vurdelja.

<sup>10</sup> F. T, *Srpska pravoslavna opština*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1969, f. 66, no. 411774, Annual report of the Consulate in Trieste for 1969.

<sup>12</sup> Đerasimović, *Srpska crkvena zajednica u Trstu*, 35.

the Municipality statutes, while the local Italians seemed to show restraint on this issue.<sup>13</sup> From the very beginning, the Allied Military Government was sympathetic to Vurdelja's administration.

The Yugoslav state and especially the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) did not pay particular attention to the situation in this Municipality until the beginning of the 1950s. Thus, when asked by the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in 1950 to assess the situation in this Municipality, the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church replied that it was under the spiritual care and ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate but completely financially independent and that the Synod had not received any reports and did not provide the Municipality with operational instructions.<sup>14</sup> Although a SOC delegation visited Trieste the following year, no closer contact seems to have been established.<sup>15</sup> The leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church was distrustful of the Church Municipality of Trieste and ignored initiatives coming from that side.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is understandable that some members of the pro-Yugoslav Slovene minority in Trieste, in a conversation with Edvard Kardelj in 1955, criticized the authorities in Belgrade for having neglected the, as they stated, very wealthy municipality and left it in the hands of refugees.<sup>17</sup>

Things began to change in the second half of the 1950s, especially as a result of the deep rift among the Confraternity members within the Church Municipality. Namely, Vurdelja arbitrarily excluding from the municipality old members who opposed his autocracy, and the culmination was the case of the priest Stevan Lastavica. Unlike the previous priests, who were emigrants, Lastavica was sent by the Patriarch from Belgrade to serve as a parish priest in Trieste.<sup>18</sup> However, like many before him, Lastavica did not stay in this place for

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<sup>13</sup> Purković, *Istorija*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> AJ, Fonds 144 – Federal Religious Commission, folder no. 3, item 73, Letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the State Commission for Religious Affairs under the Presidency of the Government of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, March 16, 1950.

<sup>15</sup> In 1951, a delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which included German Đorić, titular bishop and future patriarch, and Dušan Glumac, professor at the Faculty of Theology, visited Trieste – AJ, 144-3-83. Patriarch German later recalled how, during his stay in Trieste, Vurdelja had proposed to him to cooperate by secretly sending intelligence reports from Belgrade and the Synod. However, German refused – AJ, 144-73-171, Note on the conversation between the Secretary of the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs Miloje Dilparić and Patriarch German, April 3, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Thus the then Patriarch Vikentije refused to approve the appointment of Slavko Nićetin as a priest in Trieste – AJ, 144-14-212, Report on the visit to Patriarch Vikentije.

<sup>17</sup> DA MSP, Strictly Confidential Archive, 1955, f. 2, no. 191, Note on Comrade Kardelj's conversation with Dr. Besednjak, Dr. Tončić and Dr. Škrk, March 25, 1955.

<sup>18</sup> F. T., *Srpska pravoslavna opština*, 13.

long because, a few years later, he clashed with Vurdelja. This conflict led to deep divisions within the Serb community gathered around the Church Municipality and reached its climax when a group of fifteen or so former brothers, expelled by Vurdelja, formed a "Initiating Committee" and became active opposition to the Municipality leadership.<sup>19</sup> The events culminated in a trial before the Italian court and the condemnation of this "opposition" group in 1960.

Since Vurdelja emerged victorious from this conflict and Lastavica was forced to leave Trieste, the new patriarch, German, decided to actively intervene, removing Vurdelja from Trieste and putting the SOCM under the control of the Serbian Orthodox Church. That is why he asked the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs to get involved in the case and intervene with the Italian government in order to resolve the "unhealthy" situation in the Municipality caused by political emigrants from Yugoslavia.<sup>20</sup> The interests of the state and the church coincided because Belgrade officials were also against the hostile actions of refugees in the Church Municipality. However, the state limited its intervention to submitting an aide-mémoire and orally transmitting the Patriarch's remarks to the representatives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>21</sup> The ambassador in Rome presented Vurdelja's harmful actions to the Italians, and the solution to the problems in the Church Municipality, and thus transferred the whole case to the diplomatic level. The main argument in the Yugoslav presentation to the Italian state was the anti-Yugoslav actions of the Municipality leader Vurdelja.<sup>22</sup> From that point a constant campaign against the SOCM leader began.

The issue of the Church Municipality in Trieste and its president gained momentum after the split within the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1963, after which the autonomous Serbian Orthodox Diocese in the USA and Canada was created under the leadership of the dismissed bishop Dionisije Milivojević. Vurdelja reacted to this decision by convening an irregular assembly of the Confraternity the same year, which made the decision to side with Dionisije.<sup>23</sup> The Church Municipality of Trieste was the only church community in Western Europe, Latin America, and Australia that openly sided with the breakaway part of the church, and Vurdelja became an increasingly prominent figure. The SOCM

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<sup>19</sup> Đerasimović, *Srpska crkvena zajednica u Trstu*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1960, f. 50, no. 42741, Letter of the Legal Council of the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs (SSFA) titled "Situation in the Church Municipality of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Trieste".

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> DA MSP, PA 1960, f. 47, no. 42184, Note on the conversation between Ambassador to Italy, Mihailo Javorski, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, Giuseppe Pello, on January 22, 1960.

<sup>23</sup> AJ, 144–71–530, Report on the situation in the part of the Orthodox Church abroad. Vurdelja conditioned this decision by respecting the Statute of the SOCM in Trieste.

in Trieste became a refuge for all clerics who fled from Yugoslavia. At one point in early 1964, there were as many as five priests and one deacon who had fled Yugoslavia.<sup>24</sup> Vurdelja also tried to win over other church communities for Dionisije, such as the one in Vienna. Namely, he organized an illegal municipality that fought to overthrow those who supported the Patriarch and the unity of the Serbian Orthodox Church. To that end, according to the pro-Yugoslav administration of the Church Municipality in Vienna, Vurdelja spent large sums of money in order to legally overthrow the existing administration and install a new one.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he showed animosity towards socialist Yugoslavia by hosting former King Peter II Karađorđević in Trieste in October 1962, and then demonstratively bringing him to the Yugoslav-Italian border.<sup>26</sup> In Yugoslavia, they considered all of the above as sufficient proof that the Church Municipality was an espionage hub that worked in the interest of King Peter II and some foreign services, primarily Italy, and one of the centers of hostile propaganda against Yugoslavia.

The described course of events intensified the efforts of the state and the church to replace Vurdelja and get the Italians to expel him from Trieste. At the end of 1963, the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs (SSFA) decided to take all available measures to remove “the Chetnik Vurdelja” and put the Church Municipality under the control of the pro-Yugoslav opposition. This decision was in line with the wider action of the state to decisively deal with the enemy emigration and neutralize it. It should not be forgotten that the Church Municipality of Trieste was very wealthy and that its annual revenue in the 1960s amounted to over 50 million lire (about 500,000 euros). Those funds were used for propaganda against socialist Yugoslavia and activities in favor of Dionisije.<sup>27</sup> To that end, a plan for synchronized action was devised in Belgrade in January 1964, which included intervening with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the Ministry of the Interior, some politicians, and the press, always noting that Vurdelja was a war criminal who had seriously damaged bilateral relations.<sup>28</sup> A special place was given to the Consulate in Trieste, which had the task of

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<sup>24</sup> AJ, 144-72-64, Note on the conversation of the Secretary of the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs with Patriarch German, February 1, 1964.

<sup>25</sup> AJ, 144-74-255, Note on the conversation with the representatives of the church community in Vienna, May 18, 1964.

<sup>26</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 60, no. 48636, Aide-memoire.

<sup>27</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1969, f. 66, no. 411774, Annual report of the Consulate in Trieste for 1969. According to the Consulate, the total income of the SOCM in 1951-1961 amounted to 350 million lire. Total annual expenditures were estimated at a maximum of two-thirds of the revenue.

<sup>28</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1964, f. 76, no. 419923, Telegram II of the SSFA Administration to the Embassy in Rome on January 24, 1964.



regularly monitoring the work of the Church Municipality and Vurdelja, and reporting everything to the SSFA.<sup>29</sup>

Strong pressure on the Italian side was exerted in Belgrade at almost all levels: the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs, the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs (FCRA), the Patriarchate, and the press. In the activities against Vurdelja, the state was more energetic than the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Federal Commission for Religious Affairs demanded that Patriarch German take more decisive measures against Vurdelja and the breakaway priests.<sup>30</sup> At the insistence of the state, but with some hesitation, in April 1964, the Patriarch decided to take Vurdelja and the members of the municipality administration to the ecclesiastical court and suspend him from the position of president and member of the administration.<sup>31</sup> He also informed the outgoing Italian ambassador, Alberto Berio, about this decision during his farewell visit to the Patriarchate. He told the ambassador that Vurdelja had abused church property and his position in order to work against the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He concluded that this was a man who did not have the “canonical or moral qualifications to be the president of the Church Municipality”.<sup>32</sup> The SSFA, for its part, reminded Ambassador Berio that the Church Municipality of Trieste was a hotbed of anti-Yugoslav propaganda led by a notorious war criminal.

Diplomatic missions in Italy were active as well. Based on the instructions from Belgrade, the Embassy in Rome concluded that “everything should be done to remove Vurdelja from Trieste”.<sup>33</sup> To that end, they asked Belgrade for documents on “Vurdelja’s criminal activity during the occupation”.<sup>34</sup> After receiving

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<sup>29</sup> The Consulate in Trieste regularly reported to the SSFA on issues related to SOCM and Vurdelja. They did so within the reporting line p. pov KS-10. Of the 48 reports sent along this line from Trieste during 1966, 16 concerned Vurdelja and SOCM (DA MSP, PA, 1967, f. 57, no. 414877, Report on the work of the Consulate General in Trieste, 31 March 1967). Unfortunately, line reports p. pov KS-10 were not available to us during the research.

<sup>30</sup> AJ, 144-72-55, Note on the conversation between the President of the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs (FCRA), Momo Marković, and the Vice President, Mate Radulović, with Patriarch German on January 11, 1964.

<sup>31</sup> By decision of Patriarch German, apart from Vurdelja, Dušan Relić and Georgije Perini were also suspended. They were accused of “committing the grave canonical wrongdoing of leaving the Serbian Orthodox Church and undermining the church order” by their schismatic act – AJ, 144-82-587.

<sup>32</sup> AJ, 144-73-171, Note on the conversation between the Secretary of the FCRA, Miloje Dilparić, and Patriarch German, April 3, 1964.

<sup>33</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1964, f. 78, no. 412528, Minutes of the meeting of the collegium of the Embassy in Rome held on January 28 and 29, 1964.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the compromising material, they started a wide-ranging activity at all levels.<sup>35</sup> They even took the lead in relation to the actions undertaken by Belgrade.<sup>36</sup>

The Yugoslavs used yet another channel to influence the situation in the Church Municipality – the Vatican. As negotiations on mutual recognition were underway with the papal legate, Agostino Casaroli, the issue of Vurdelja's hostile actions in Trieste both against Yugoslavia and the Serbian Orthodox Church was raised during the discussions.<sup>37</sup> The precise reason for this intervention was the actions of the Catholic clergy in Trieste. The Yugoslavs protested with the Vatican because of the activities of the Bishop of Trieste, Antonio Santin. The Catholic clergy in Trieste, led by Santin, had shown animosity towards socialist Yugoslavia before, mostly because of the way the border issue was resolved. The situation got even worse after Irinej Kovačević visited Trieste and Vurdelja in June 1964 and was elected titular bishop by Dionisije's supporters. On that occasion, Santin held an audience with Irinej, which was a clear sign for Belgrade that the local Catholic Church supported the "rebel" part of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>38</sup> The same complaint about Santin's actions was made by the chief of the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs, Moma Marković, in a conversation with Roberto Ducci, the newly-appointed Italian ambassador to Yugoslavia.<sup>39</sup> Assistant Secretary of State, Dušan Kveder, also had a conversation with the ambassador, protesting against Irinej Kovačević's stay in Trieste and Vurdelja's actions. On that occasion, Kveder conveyed to Ducci the position of the Patriarchate that it was a matter of "supporting and helping the schism in the Orthodox Church".<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1964, f. 74, no. 418445, Operational Letter II of the Administration, May 4, 1964; *ibid.*, no. 421827, Note on the conversation between Sveta Vučić and the Italian Ambassador Roberto Ducci, 18 May 1964 in Skopje.

<sup>36</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 59, no. 45946, Excerpt from the annual report of the Embassy in Rome, February 12, 1965. The case of Grazio Ivanović, the apostolic administrator from Kotor, who visited the Yugoslav Consulate in Trieste on his way to Rome, can be taken as an example of the Consulate's actions in Trieste. Although he intended to visit both SOCM and Vurdelja, he cancelled his visit at the urging of the Consulate. Moreover, he promised to inform the Vatican and Pope Paul VI about the actions of Vurdelja, but also the Bishop of Trieste, Antonio Santin – AJ, 144-75-333, Report of the FCRA to the Executive Council of FR Montenegro, July 14, 1964.

<sup>37</sup> AJ, 144-82-581, Note on the negotiations between Yugoslavia and the Vatican led by Nikola Mandić, Minister-counsellor of the FRY Embassy, and A. Casaroli, Undersecretary at the D. S. Vatican, June 27, 1964 in Rome.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> AJ, 144-76-406, Note on the talks between Momo Marković, Federal Secretary for Health and Social Policy, and Roberto Ducci, Italian Ambassador, September 11, 1964.

<sup>40</sup> AJ, 144-75-308, Note on the conversation between Assistant Secretary of State Dušan Kveder and Italian Ambassador Ducci, on June 10, 1964.



It seems that Yugoslavia made an even more radical move in order to remove Vurdelja from Trieste. In addition to trying to remove him from the position of the head of the Church Municipality, the state also seems to have intended to physically remove him from Trieste. Earlier assassination attempts, which Vurdelja blamed on Belgrade officials, were now replaced by an attempt to kidnap and transfer him to Yugoslav territory. Namely, in mid-October 1964, a five-member group tried to kidnap Vurdelja, but failed. The police in Trieste arrested the perpetrators and, after an investigation, came to the conclusion that Yugoslav officials had been involved in the case. Belgrade officially denied involvement in the event, calling the accusations “provocations” by those working against good bilateral relations and an example that “to some people in Italy, Vurdelja [is] more important than good relations with Yugoslavia, and hence they refuse to remove him from Trieste.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, he warned the Italians not to launch an anti-Yugoslav campaign in the press because that would put additional burden on the relations. The case of the kidnapping of Vurdelja ended up at the court of Trieste, but it did not receive publicity outside this city. The press, apparently at the suggestion of Rome, showed restraint, and the only texts with accusations against Yugoslavia could be read in some right-wing newspapers. Finally, in the kidnappers’ sentences, there was no reference to Yugoslavia’s involvement in the case.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of the events related to the kidnapping of Vurdelja, Yugoslavia continued its ongoing campaign. In order to strengthen its arguments, at the end of 1964, official Belgrade sent Italy an aide-mémoire with compromising material about Vurdelja.<sup>43</sup> This document summarized all the accusations against the leader of the Church Municipality of Trieste presented to the Italians in the previous period. It was stated that he had been “the initiator, organizer, commander and perpetrator of serious war crimes” during the Second World War and that in 1946 he had been declared a war criminal in Yugoslavia.<sup>44</sup> Vurdelja was accused of forming a Chetnik organization during his time in Trieste, whose members carried out “subversive and sabotage actions” against Yugoslavia, as well as of forming a network of spies who worked “in favor of third countries.”<sup>45</sup> He was also accused of propaganda activities such as publishing books and leaflets against Josip Broz Tito and other high officials. His work against the integrity

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<sup>41</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1964, f. 76, no. 441362, Telegram of the Embassy in Rome to the SSFA of October 16, 1964.

<sup>42</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 59, no. 45946, Excerpt from the annual report of the Embassy in Rome, February 12, 1965.

<sup>43</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 60, no. 48636, Aide-memoire.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

of the Serbian Orthodox Church was also underlined, and he was accused of having liberally used the funds of the Trieste Church Municipality to that end. Finally, it was emphasized that his activity was aimed at disrupting neighborly and friendly relations between the two countries and that his presence in Trieste “weighed heavily on” the bilateral relations. Consequently, Italy was strongly asked to remove Vurdelja from Trieste and restore the Municipality to its normal state.<sup>46</sup> This was the most direct act of intervention of the Yugoslav state at the diplomatic level on this issue. Independently of the action in connection with Vurdelja, Yugoslavia also raised the issue of hostile actions of the SOCM with the basic intention to make it possible for all Orthodox believers in Trieste to become members of the Church Municipality and hold “democratic elections” for Confraternity members.<sup>47</sup>

This wide-ranging action pursued throughout 1964 bore some fruit. At the beginning of March 1965, the Italians sent a *promemoria*, in which they fully rejected all allegations and demands made in the aide-mémoire and found that the activities of Vurdelja and the SOCM did not violate the legal framework and that Yugoslavia had interfered in Italy’s internal affairs.<sup>48</sup> However, Belgrade objected again, claiming that Vurdelja had continued his anti-Yugoslav publishing activities and printed the second part of his book *The Beheaded Serbian Church* in Trieste, which attacked the regime in Yugoslavia and some statesmen.<sup>49</sup> Despite publicly denying the possibility of influencing Vurdelja’s activities and hiding behind legal limitations, the Italians tried to at least partially meet the Yugoslav demands. A special reason was the upcoming visit of Aldo Moro. It was the first visit of an Italian prime minister to Yugoslavia, which had been postponed several times. That is why they influenced Vurdelja to resign his position as president of the Church Municipality.<sup>50</sup> They also tried to reinstate as members of the Church Municipality those who had been expelled earlier and represented opposition to Vurdelja.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that they “recognized the political harmfulness of

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 58, no. 41900, Conclusions from the Collegium of the Embassy in Rome, December 29 and 30, 1964.

<sup>48</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 59, no. 49970, Memorandum of the Italian Embassy of March 4, 1965.

<sup>49</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, no. 48636. Vurdelja published the first part of his book *Obezglavljena Srpska crkva* (The Beheaded Serbian Church) in 1964.

<sup>50</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Carte Moro (CM), busta 78, fascicolo 6, Contenzioso italo-jugoslavo.

<sup>51</sup> AJ, 144–83–12, SSFA to the FCRA, January 7, 1965. The Prefecture of Trieste asked the expelled members Blagoje Kovačević, Marko Vučetić and Velimir Đerasimović to apply for readmission to the SOCM Confraternity.

Vurdelja” and were willing to ban him from undertaking any activity, but that the Ministry of the Interior was “resolutely against” this.<sup>52</sup>

Looking at the situation with Vurdelja as a whole, it seems that it was believed in Italy (at least in state security circles) that one of the main goals of Belgrade was to put the Church Municipality and its considerable property in the service of Yugoslav interests.<sup>53</sup> It saw the conflict between Vurdelja’s “independent” faction and the pro-Yugoslav faction that worked for Tito and Yugoslavia as the problem with the Church Municipality. With the defeat of Vurdelja and the victory of the pro-Yugoslav faction, the Church Municipality could have become a “dangerous center of political propaganda and economic expansion of Yugoslavia” in the area of Trieste, “seriously endangering” Italy’s national interests. That is why every request of the Yugoslavs for the removal of Vurdelja had to be ignored, especially because, as it was stated, Vurdelja always kept his actions within the legal framework and political freedoms guaranteed by the Italian constitution.<sup>54</sup> From this perspective, it is understandable that one of Italian diplomatic representatives stated that the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs would advocate a ban on Vurdelja’s activities, but that the Ministry of the Interior would be “resolutely against” it.<sup>55</sup>

However, Vurdelja resigned from the position of SOCM president, which temporarily mollified Belgrade. The Yugoslavs thought that the pressure on Italian state officials had borne fruit, so they waited to see what Vurdelja’s fate would be. At the same time, the expelled members of the Confraternity who made up the “opposition” to him received “advice” from Belgrade to take steps to take over the Church Municipality.<sup>56</sup> However, as Vurdelja quickly moved from the position of SOCM president to the position of secretary, the Yugoslavs concluded that all of that had been a maneuver and that nothing had been done against “that hotbed of provocations.”<sup>57</sup> They were right when it comes to the unhindered activity of the Municipality under Vurdelja’s leadership, as evidenced by the fact that, in August 1965, he ceremoniously received Bishop Dionisije in Trieste. Additionally, in 1966, new statutes of the SOCM were adopted, which

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<sup>52</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 60, no. 419120, Note on Bukumirić’s conversation with advisor Giulio Teruzzi, head of the II Office of the Italian Foreign Ministry, on May 19, 1965.

<sup>53</sup> ACS, CM, n. 77, f. 1, Riservatissima, Vurdelja Dragoljub, Presidente della Comunità serbo-ortodossa di Trieste: richiesta del Governo Jugoslavo per il suo allontanamento da Trieste.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 60, no. 419120, Note on Bukumirić’s conversation with advisor Giulio Teruzzi, head of the II Office of the Italian Foreign Ministry, on May 19, 1965.

<sup>56</sup> AJ, 144–85–191, Letter of the SSFA to the FCRA, dated 8 June 1965.

<sup>57</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1965, f. 60, no. 419120, Note on Bukumirić’s conversation with advisor Giulio Teruzzi, head of the II Office of the Italian Foreign Ministry, on May 19, 1965.

extended the jurisdiction of the Municipality to the whole of Italy, and members of the Confraternity could now become not only Serbs from Trieste, but also those living all across Italy. At the same time, the Municipality formally seceded from the Patriarchate and recognized Dionisije as its primate. Finally, per point of the new statute, the position of the Municipality was to be decided by the responsible Italian authorities.<sup>58</sup> The Yugoslav Consulate in Trieste saw all this as only the first step towards the final goal: to make Trieste the center of Dinosije's part of the Church in Europe and Vurdelja the central figure of this movement.<sup>59</sup>

After a long lull during which the representatives of the opposition within the Church Municipality, aided by Yugoslavia, were the loudest, a new activity followed in early 1968 when Patriarch German decided to definitively replace the suspended Vurdelja administration and appoint a "provisional commission" made up of former Confraternity members. German appointed one of the leaders of the "opposition", Marko Vučetić, as head of the provisional commission.<sup>60</sup> In December 1967, Vurdelja and his closest associates were expelled from the church by decision of the High Ecclesiastical Court.<sup>61</sup> Patriarch German asked the SSFA to provide legal protection to the Serbian Orthodox Church in order for this decision to be implemented. At the same time, the Patriarch and the Synod invoked the 1925 Nettuno Conventions again and demanded that Yugoslavia intervene diplomatically on the basis of them and "prevent the usurpation actions" of the dismissed administration.<sup>62</sup> However, it was a detailed interpretation of the Nettuno Conventions from the mid-1920s that showed the weakness of Yugoslavia's position in relation to the Municipality in Trieste in the entire post-war period. Although, as stated above, this treaty gave Yugoslavia the right to interfere in the affairs of the Church Municipality, it actually lost that right after the war because it ceased to be in force after the signing of the 1947 Peace Treaty. That is why Yugoslavia did not really have a legal basis to invoke it.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the above, the principle of separation of church and state in Yugoslavia needed to be adhered to. The SSFA proposed several models of struggle: to forward the request of the Serbian Orthodox Church through consular channels; to propose to Italy a joint friendly consideration of the case

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<sup>58</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1967, f. 57, no. 414877, Report on the work of the Consulate General in Trieste for 1966.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1971, f. 64, no. 440390, Report of the FCRA of November 11, 1968.

<sup>61</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1971, f. 64, no. 438656, Letter of Patriarch German to the President of the Federal Executive Council, Džemal Bjedić, of September 28, 1971.

<sup>62</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1971, f. 64, no. 440390, Report of the FCRA of November 11, 1968.

<sup>63</sup> This was the legal interpretation of the SSFA Legal Affairs Service – *ibid.*

for achieving the autonomy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Municipality; to bring the case before the Yugoslav-Italian Mixed Committee for Ethnic Groups, which was already in charge of the question of national minorities in the two countries.<sup>64</sup> Old methods of struggle remained available: insisting on the removal of Vurdelja as a war criminal and enemy of Yugoslavia and attempts to conquer the Church Municipality from within by assisting opposition representatives, who would then change the 1966 statute after coming to power in the municipality and work in accordance with the interests of Yugoslavia.<sup>65</sup>

A new threat to Yugoslav interests arose in the spring of 1969, after the Serbian Orthodox Church established its Diocese of Western Europe and Australia based in London and headed by Bishop Lavrentije. At the same time, Dionisije and Vurdelja intended to convene a council in Trieste and also form a European diocese with its seat in this city. Yugoslav diplomacy reacted sharply to the news about the upcoming church council in Trieste. In Belgrade, the Italian Embassy was informed about these developments, with the remark that it was a “purely political anti-Yugoslav emigration activity camouflaged as an ecclesiastical-religious matter” that could have a negative impact on relations between Yugoslavia and Italy.<sup>66</sup> The Italian authorities were asked to prevent the council from taking place, describing it as being directed against the friendship between the two countries. The Yugoslavs again expressed astonishment at the Italians’ support to Vurdelja, “a stateless emigrant, whose activity is in violation of the emigrant status”. When the Italian Embassy remarked that Patriarch German had also intervened and asked them to prevent “Vurdelja’s schismatic activity”, the SSFA distanced itself from German’s position, stating that it was intervening because of anti-Yugoslav activity and not for religious reasons.<sup>67</sup> Obviously, what was at work here was the premise, already heard in the past, that socialist Yugoslavia professed non-interference in religious affairs, limiting itself to those that undermined the state system. The Embassy in Rome also reacted to the possibility of a council being held in Trieste. This diplomatic pressure bore fruit. However, the mentioned gathering did not happen thanks to Italy, which intervened much more decisively this time, since that was the time when bilateral

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<sup>64</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1969, f. 67, no. 42672, Note for the SSFA Collegium on possible measures taken by the Italian government in connection with the anti-Yugoslav activities of Dragoljub Vurdelja in the Serbian Orthodox Municipality in Trieste.

<sup>65</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1971, f. 64, no. 438656, Legal opinion on the position of the Serbian Church Municipality in Trieste.

<sup>66</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1969, f. 68, no. 414083, Note on the conversation of Nikola Mandić, head of the Directorate for Western Europe, with the Minister-counselor of the Italian Embassy Brigante-Colonna, April 22, 1969.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

relations were on the rise after the turbulent fall of 1968.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, thanks to the intervention of the Consulate General in Trieste, representatives of local Italian authorities no longer attended SOCM assemblies, which had been common practice until then.<sup>69</sup>

The 1970s brought a new dynamic, different from that of the previous two decades. The beginning of the new phase was in 1971, when Dragoljub Vurdelja died. Thus ended his two-decade-long sovereign rule over the Serbian Orthodox Church Municipality. Vurdelja was succeeded by his closest associate Dušan Reljić, who proved incapable of continuing the policy set by Vurdelja. However, two more years passed before the pro-Yugoslav faction finally came to lead the Municipality. This did not end the disputes within the Church Municipality, but the pro-Yugoslav faction managed to maintain its dominance.

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<sup>68</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1969, f. 68, no. 414888, Telegram of the Embassy in Rome was sent to the SSFA on April 24, 1969. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that a request for the establishment of the Serbian Orthodox Church for Europe based in Trieste had been submitted in 1965, but that its position on this question had been negative even then.

<sup>69</sup> DA MSP, PA, 1970, f. 80, no. 412517, Information on the conversation between Marijan Tepina, Consul General of Yugoslavia in Trieste, on April 6 and 7, 1970.