CROATIA PM TO PUSH POPE TO CANONISE STEPINAC

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On his first visit to the Vatican, Croatia's new centre-right Prime Minister, Tihomir Oreskovic, is expected to lobby for the canonisation of the controversial Croatian cleric, Alojzije Stepinac.

Oreskovic is expected to urge Pope Francis to continue the process of making Stepinac a saint, after Pope John Paul II declared his beatification in 1998. The Catholic Church has already claimed he performed a miracle, which is a key condition for canonisation.

Stepinac remains a hotly disputed figure in former Yugoslavia, revered by Catholic Croats and widely detested among Serbs.

A staunch Croatian nationalist, as Archbishop of Zagreb during World War II, he blessed the establishment of a fascist puppet state, the Independent State of Croatia, NDH.

He later distanced himself from the NDH regime and its deeds. However, he is accused of not publicly denouncing the NDH's policy of killing Jews, Serbs and Roma and of forcibly converting Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism.

For that reason, the issue of his canonisation remains very controversial in neighbouring Serbia and with the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Drago Pilsel, a columnist, theologian and close observer the process of Stepinac's canonisation, told BIRN that the whole business of Oreskovic's meeting with Pope Francis was mere protocol, a chat for [Oreskovics] domestic political needs.

This is being done to show that Oreskovic cares for all the segments of [state] power... as Oreskovic has taken power, he has a right to a 20-minute audience with the Pope, he said.

Pilsel said Oreskovics move also followed a plea from the current Archbishop of Zagreb, Josip Bozanic, who on multiple occasions has called on Croatias politicians to push for the canonization of Stepinac, accusing the former centre-left government of not defending Stepinac.

Pilsel recalled that recently revealed documents show that the Holy See informed the Croatian Catholic Church two years ago that a joint commission on Stepinac would be formed, including representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Pilsel said that Oreskovic cant say anying essential that will change anything on this front, as the Pope has already decided that Stepinacs canonisation will have to wait for years.

In an article published in January by the Vatican-based newspaper "L'Osservatore Romano", Hyacinthe Destivelle, director of the Istina centre, which promotes ecumenical unity between Catholics and the Orthodox, noted that Stepinac is a sensitive issue for the Pope at a moment when he is seeking to improve relations with the Orthodox Church generally.

In February, the Pope engineered a historic and unprecedented meeting with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch of Moscow, in Cuba.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has meanwhile reiterated its opposition to Stepinac's canonisation, problematizing his role in NDH.

Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic visited Francis in September, when the Pope reportedly assured him that the Catholic Church wont hurry the issue of canonising Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac.

Nikolic reported that he had told Francis that Stepinac played a really bad role during WW2, remaining silent while people were killed only because they werent Catholics.

Many Catholics in Croatia are equally passionate about Stepinac, however, seeing him as a heroic figure who resisted the imposition of Communism and remained with his flock in Croatia after the Communist takeover when he could have fled abroad.

He died under house arrest following several years in prison. His many devotees included the famous Yugoslav sculptor, Ivan Mestrovic. His supporters also note that attacks on him for his wartime role only really started after he publicly opposed the imposition of communist rule in Yugoslavia.

After his trial before a Yugoslav court in 1946, he was jailed for 16 years for collaboration with the Ustase and the Axis occupying forces. He was released to house arrest after five years and died in 1960 of thrombosis.

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http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatian-pm-won-t-change-pope-s-mind-on-controversial-canonisation-04-06-2016#sthash.VUMkUD9P.dpuf

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