

MONTENEGRO, SERBIAN IDENTITY AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The work shows the resistance and stabilization of the Serbian identity in Montenegro, in the context of international relations: from Trump's coming to power in the United States of America (2017) through the Orthodox Christian Litiyá movement in Montenegro (2020) and the census in Montenegro (2023). In this regard, it can be seen that key foreign factors did not pose visible obstacles to this process in previous years.

Keywords. Montenegro, Serbs, Serbia, identity, West, Russia.

Introduction

From 1997 to 2019, the regime of Milo Djukanović attacked and destroyed elements of Serbian statehood in Montenegro one by one, and in that process broke up the joint state of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006. At the same time, Djukanović attacked the Serbian national identity of Montenegrins, as the only historical identity of Montenegro's statehood. Djukanović, until Trump came to power in the United States of America, had the support of the West for his anti-Serbian intentions. Since 2017, he has faced the first American blockades (Raković, 2019). Some other Western structures also got involved in exposing Djukanović's destructive activities.

Unfortunately, the Russian Federation also supported the secession of Montenegro from the joint state with Serbia. This was the naive policy of Russia, which believed that the time for the common state of Serbia and Montenegro had run out and that Russia would have an independent Montenegro as an ally. However, it turned out that this Russian policy was completely wrong because the Djukanović regime turned against the interests of Russia in the following years (Raković, 2019, pp. 272–275). Therefore, in 2020, Russia did not provide any support to Djukanović during the process of overthrowing his regime.

The Serbian people of Montenegro resisted these attacks through political parties, and when the Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted in December 2019, the Serbian Orthodox Church finally resisted the

Djukanović regime. The Litiyá movement was started. On that wave of all-Serbian gathering in Montenegro – in which Serbs from the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska were included with their support – in the parliamentary elections on 30 August 2020 the segregationist regime of Milo Đukanović and the Democratic Party of Socialists was overthrown.

This time there were international circumstances that went hand in hand. The peaceful Serbian revolution in Montenegro might not have been successful if it were not for the affection of some foreign structures towards the Litiyá movement or the intolerance of some other foreign structures towards the smuggling economy of the Đukanović regime.

Law on Freedom of Religion (2019) and the Litiyá movement in Montenegro (2020)

Since 1997, the Democratic Party of Socialists has been preparing for a showdown with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. After the secession of Montenegro (2006), Djukanović and his elite built a structure that would create a framework for the expulsion of the Serbian Orthodox Church from Montenegro and the confiscation of its property through institutional and administrative means, under the abduction law (Raković, 2015, pp. 72–109). They believed that that moment had come in 2019.

After Serbian political leaders of the Democratic Front Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević received a blessing from Serbian Patriarch Irinej on 25 December 2019 to “fight in every place and at every opportunity and not give up the defense” of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (*Sputnik Serbia*, 25 December 2019), on 26 December 2019 the Democratic Front attempted to prevent by physical resistance the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities in the Parliament of Montenegro. However, since all the MPs of the Democratic Front were taken out of the Parliament of Montenegro and arrested, the regime parties of Montenegrin separatists and national minorities adopted this law on 27 December 2019. (*Radio-television of Serbia*, 27 December 2019).

Andrija Mandić has been proposing for some time that peaceful protests should be organized, similar to the “Immortal Regiment” (*Besmrtni puk*) in Russia, but instead of images of ancestors, participants would carry Orthodox icons: “We should not carry photos of our ancestors, but we should carry icons of our saints, to pray to God and for all those who believe in God and who belong to the Orthodox Church to take to the streets. Our

Serbian Orthodox Church is primarily responsible for the organization of going out on the streets, and we certainly want that law to be changed in the parliament, with the aim of returning it to the parliament and removing the shortcomings so that everything proposed by the Church can be incorporated into it" (*Vijesti.me*, 28 December 2019).

On the evening of 26 December 2019, Bishops Joanikije of Budimlja and Nikšić and Metodije of Diocletia went out into the street with Orthodox Christian believers, to put pressure through prayer gatherings on the regime to withdraw this robber law. On the streets of Montenegro, there were blockades and clashes between the faithful citizens and the Montenegrin police (*Vijesti.me*, 26 December 2019; *Sputnik Serbia*, 27 December 2019; *CdM.me*, 29 December 2019). In order to prevent major incidents, the Metropolitan of the Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije became the head of the protest, and at the turn of 2019 and 2020, the gatherings grew into countless processions that gathered up to 200,000 people. These were the largest movements of the people in the history of Montenegro.

At the same time, the rebellion of the youth against the Montenegrin regime broke out, especially with the waving of the flags of the Kingdom of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church and the painting of murals throughout Montenegro in the colors of the Serbian tricolor red-blue-white flag of the Kingdom of Montenegro (*IN4S*, 22 January 2020). The Litiya movement and youth rebellion painted these events as a Serbian revolution in Montenegro. As never before in recent history, all-Serbian solidarity took place in all cities of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, where citizens in support of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbs in Montenegro also organized processions and painted murals in the colors of the Serbian red-blue-white flag.

Litiya processions were held during the winter for the last time on 12 March 2020 and then they were temporarily stopped by the decision of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro due to the corona virus outbreak. Since there was no political progress regarding the changes to the robber law, the Litiya movement continued on 14 June 2020 (*Vijesti.me*, 13 June 2020; *Sputnik Serbia*, 14 June 2020) until the parliamentary elections on 30 August 2020.

The arrival of Donald Trump in power and Montenegro

On 28 June 2016, US President Barack Obama submitted a proposal to the Senate to ratify the Protocol on Montenegro's accession to NATO. He did that on Serbian holiday St Vitus Day, exactly ten years since Montenegro

was accepted into the United Nations (on St Vitus Day 2006). However, that Obama proposal did not reach the agenda until the presidential election in the United States of America, which was held on 8 November 2016. The election was won by Donald Trump, who took the position that “NATO is obsolete” (*Independent*, 7 April 2016).

Breitbart, a portal owned by Trump’s chief strategist Stephen Bannon, published an article on 7 December 2016, titled “Montenegro’s Push to Join NATO May Set Up Trump-GOP Congress Showdown”. The text states that all the democrat senators are in favor of Montenegro joining NATO, and that on that issue “disagreements remain” among the republican senators. Therefore, writes the author of the text, Neil W. McCabe, there may be an “awkward situation” between the Trump administration and a section of Republican senators who support Montenegro’s admission to NATO (*Breitbart.com*, 7 December 2016).

Senator Rand Paul, with the support of Senator Mike Lee, blocked the ratification of the Protocol on the accession of Montenegro to the NATO alliance from December 2016 to March 2017 (*Shaheen.senate.gov*, 10 December 2016; *Washington Post*, 16. March 2017). Notorious supporters of Montenegro’s accession to NATO – such as Michael Haltzel – expressed fear that Trump could veto a positive decision by the Senate (*Huffington Post*, 30 January 2017).

But the “deep state” opened a series of scandals about the connections of members of Trump’s cabinet and environment with Russian structures. Trump’s national security adviser, General Michael Flynn, had to resign in mid-February 2017 (*Guardian*, 14 February 2017), and the head of Trump’s presidential campaign, Paul Manafort, was exposed to a media lynching because of his ties to the Russians (*Politico.com*, 8 March 2017). Among other things, and for this reason, on 7 March 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wrote to the Senate to adopt the Protocol on Montenegro’s Accession to the NATO (*Reuters*, 21 March 2017). On 28 March 2017, American senators voted by a convincing majority of 97:2 to ratify the Protocol on Montenegro’s Accession to NATO (*Reuters*, 27 March 2017). On 11 April 2017, Trump signed the ratification of that protocol (*WhiteHouse.gov*, 11 April 2017).

Despite this, Trump could not “swallow” the fact that he was forced to ratify Montenegro’s entry into NATO. In this regard, at the NATO Summit in Brussels on 25 May 2017, Trump rudely pushed Montenegrin Prime Minister Duško Marković away. Trump’s associate Omarosa Manigault Newman writes that Trump told her he pushed Marković away because “he’s just a whiny punk bitch”. (Manigault Newman, 2018, p. 211).

In an interview with *Fox television* on 18 July 2018, Trump even questioned whether the United States of America would defend Montenegro militarily, despite its NATO obligation. He thought that because of Montenegro – about which he spoke only with irony – one should not risk the third world war.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the American ambassador to Montenegro did not support the intention of the Djukanović regime to adopt the segregationist law on freedom of religion. Namely, on 5 November 2019 the American ambassador Judy Rising Reinke visited the Metropolitan Amfilohije and at the meeting “it was concluded that such important social issues as the right to freedom of religion or belief must be conducted in the broadest public, permanent and institutional dialogue with full mutual respect, cooperation and tolerance of the state and all subjects of religious freedom” (*Pobjeda.me*, 5 November 2019).

British Ambassador Alison Kemp was on the same path. On 18 June 2020 she provided support to the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The statement of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral stated: “The ambassador reiterated the position that the United Kingdom is committed to the rule of law and full respect for human rights, which include the right to freedom of religion or belief, expression and assembly. Ambassador Kemp supported the expressed willingness of the Metropolitan and the clergy of our Church to resolve all open issues in the spirit of dialogue, peace, tolerance and mutual respect. Ambassador Kemp particularly emphasized the importance of avoiding violence and the use of force in this and all other situations” (*Vijesti.me*, 18 June 2020).

As far as Russia is concerned, it left the alliance with Milo Djukanović a long time ago, because the Montenegrin president deceived them by promising that Montenegro would not join NATO. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that he was friend with Milo Djukanović until Djukanović became a weapon of Russophobia (*Pečat*, 13 October 2023).

Here is a personal experience. Since I was a part of the inner circle – up to a dozen people – who planned and designed the way to the overthrow of Djukanović’s regime in the parliamentary elections. During 2020, I met twice in Belgrade with British structures, once with American structures and several times with Brussels structures. For them, the most important thing was that Montenegro does not withdraw from NATO and remains on the “European path”. When they received assurances that only the overthrow of Djukanović’s regime was in order, and not the revision of international

agreements, it was a guarantee that the West in Montenegro would not be an obstacle to defense of the Serbian Orthodox Church and even not be an obstacle to the restoration of the Serbian identity of Montenegro.

Cutting Montenegrin criminal channels across the oceans and seas

David Phillips from Columbia University writes in a book about the interventionism of the United States of America in Kosovo and Metohija, that American officials willingly overlooked Djukanović's connections with the mafia because they saw him as an effective counterweight to Milošević (Phillips, 2012, p. 80). The foreword for that book was written by American diplomat Nicholas Burns, who was actively involved in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav disintegration.

The former American ambassador to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, William Montgomery, confirms that the Americans turned a blind eye to cigarette smuggling and human trafficking in Montenegro only to overthrow Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević through Djukanović. On the other hand, says Montgomery, after Vojislav Koštunica's victory over Milošević on the Yugoslav federal elections (2000), the British insisted that "Montenegro under Djukanović is corrupt, and any alternative is preferable." Montgomery writes that such and similar objections from the "international community" were "hypocrisy" because everyone knew that "the transfer of cigarettes through Montenegro was one of the ways in which the Montenegrin government financed itself" in order to oppose Milošević (Montgomery, 2010, pp. 122, 124, 130).

Italian Finance Minister Ottaviano Del Turco gave an interview to Rome's *Il Tempo* on 1 February 2001 in which he made harsh accusations against Djukanović for cigarette smuggling. Del Turco pointed to connections between people close to Djukanović and the Neapolitan Camorra mafia. In addition, Del Turco said that with the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, bigger problems appeared: human trafficking, arms trafficking and drug trafficking to Italy (*Glas Crnogoraca*, 25 March 2001).

On 30 June 2003 the news broke in Italy that the prosecutor's office in Naples requested Djukanović's arrest. According to the prosecution's report, Djukanović was at the head of a criminal organization that was involved in cigarette smuggling to Montenegro and other countries freed from the monopoly regime. According to the report, the Montenegrin leader and his associates collaborated with the Italian mafia. However, judge Anna Di

Mauro said that she refuses to consider this case because Djukanović is protected by diplomatic immunity (*NIN*, 10 July 2003).

Therefore, the anti-state as a parallel economic creation in Montenegro essentially influenced the secession from the joint state with Serbia. In this regard, in an interview with Podgorica's *A1* television, Montenegrin banker Duško Knežević said that he could not talk about the malfeasances that were carried out in the referendum process in 2006 because it would "threaten the statehood of Montenegro" (*A1TV*, 25 January 2019).

Consortium of research centers dealing with the study of organized crime and corruption (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) awarded Milo Djukanović in 2015 with *Organized Crime and Corruption 'Person of the Year'* award. Therefore, it should not be surprising that since Trump came to power, actions to cut Montenegrin drug smuggling channels across the oceans and seas, from the United States of America to Australia, have intensified worldwide. In this regard, from 2017 to the end of 2023, in the actions of the DEA and other services and the police, 41.7 tons of cocaine were seized worldwide, smuggled in eleven shipments by Montenegrin citizens (*Politika*, 30 September 2023).

Namely, in September 2018, near the Azores, the Portuguese police seized 840 kilograms of cocaine on the ship "Florida", and two Montenegrin citizens were arrested on that occasion. In 2019, the Portuguese police seized six tons of cocaine on the ship "Yemaya", also near the Azores, and arrested a Montenegrin citizen. In addition, in 2019, the Portuguese police seized another 800 kilograms of cocaine on the ship "Seascape" that was sailing to Porto, and this shipment was also related to the drug smuggling of the Montenegrin underground (*Politika*, 30 September 2023).

Furthermore, in February 2019, 1.4 tons of cocaine were seized on the ship "MSC Carlotta" in New York, and then in March 2019, 540 kilograms of cocaine were seized on the ship "MSC Desiree" in Philadelphia, both of which were charged to the Montenegrin underground. The biggest action took place in June 2019, when about 20 tons of cocaine were seized on the ship "MSC Gayane" and five Montenegrin citizens were arrested (*Politika*, 30 September 2023).

Then, in February 2020, more than five tons of cocaine were seized on the ship "Aressa" off the coast of Venezuela, and the police arrested 11 Montenegrin citizens. Then in May 2020, the German police in the port of Hamburg seized half a ton of cocaine on the ship "Budva" sailing under the state flag of Montenegro (*Politika*, 30 September 2023).

All this, before the parliamentary elections on August 30, 2020, cast a great stain on the Djukanović regime, and also showed the intention of the Western services to deal with Montenegrin crime, which in previous years was linked to the powers of the regime in Montenegro.

The corona virus pandemic and circumstances in Montenegro

Despite Trump's negative attitude towards NATO, and even Montenegro's entry into NATO, the structures of the deep state continued their anti-Serbian policy. American General Curtis Scaparrotti, the commander of NATO in Europe, said at a hearing in the Armed Forces Committee of the US Senate on 8 March 2018 that the reason for concern is not only the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, but also the Serbian population in the Balkans (*US Senate*, 8 March 2018).

In this regard, the minister of a friendly country told me immediately before the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic, that he had information from the ambassador of a NATO country, that there would be no military intervention by the Euro-Atlantic alliance against the Serbs, that is, the Orthodox Christian believers in Montenegro, as were the NATO aggressions against the Republic Serbian Krajina and Republika Srpska (1994–1995) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia and Montenegro (1999). The situation in Montenegro was considered an internal dispute.

However, the ambassador of that NATO country told him that there is a possibility that Italy will intervene at the invitation of Montenegro, as was done in 1997 in "Operation Alba" in Albania. Namely, in 1997, the Italian army intervened in Albania to restore order, suppress rebellion, stop civil unrest, and prevent mass looting after the banking collapse. Although that operation was "successfully completed", the riots were used to loot military barracks and police stations, and the smuggling of these weapons could lead to radical Albanian structures in Kosovo and Metohija (Greco, 1997, pp. 4–5).

If such an intervention had occurred in Montenegro, it would have been obviously on the basis of the bilateral agreement between official Montenegro and Italy. At the same time, it stands out that the Alpine Brigade "Julia" of the special forces of the Italian army, from 20 to 27 January 2020, on the eastern border towards the former Yugoslavia, held a military exercise for fighting in mountainous and urban conditions, which is very reminiscent of a possible conflict in Montenegro (*Esercito.difesa.it*, 27 January 2020). The entry of the Italian army under the guise of a "peacekeeping operation" would be nothing more than the occupation of Montenegro.

After the severe suffering of Italy in the corona virus pandemic, it was no longer possible, even if there was such an intention or thinking.

However, this is not the only indicator of why the corona virus pandemic contributed to the fall of the Djukanovic regime.

Namely, in February 2020, the “Factor plus” agency from Belgrade conducted an internal survey, according to which Serbian parties and parties voted for by the Serbian people could already have an absolute majority of voters in Montenegro: New Serbian Democracy (20.1%), Democratic Montenegro (18.3%), Socialist People’s Party (4.7%), True Montenegro (4.4%), Democratic People’s Party (4.2%) (*Faktor plus*, February 2020). However, the voters of Djukanović’s party did not live only in Montenegro, but came to vote from Western countries where they worked as guest workers (*gastarbeiter*). When it comes to small differences in votes, it could always turn the result in Djukanović’s favor. Of course, with all the other electoral malpractices that could be carried out by his structures. However, the corona virus pandemic thwarted some of the intentions of the Djukanović regime.

In accordance with the general epidemiological trends in the world, on 15 March 2020 Montenegro closed the borders for the entry of foreign citizens, in order to stop the spread of the corona virus (*Slobodna Evropa*, 17 March 2020). In order to prevent the collapse of the tourist season, the Government of Montenegro decided on 30 June 2020 to open the borders for citizens of the European Union (*Gov.me*, 30 June 2020). In anticipation of the parliamentary elections, on 15 August 2020, Montenegro opened its borders for citizens of the Republic of Serbia, the countries of the region and the United States of America (*Slobodna Evropa*, 14 August 2020). However, Montenegrin citizens who work as guest workers, for example, in Switzerland and Luxembourg, could not easily come to vote on 30 August 2020, because upon their return to the countries of Western Europe, they would be subject to quarantine, which could significantly complicate their lives and economy.

Nothing, therefore, benefited Djukanović’s regime. He was faced with a large Orthodox Christian movement of the Serbian people in Montenegro (and around it), he lost the support of the United States of America and the United Kingdom, due to epidemiological measures in Europe and limited movement he lost the external resource of voters. In the same time, arrests of Montenegrin drug smugglers were made on all meridians.

The absence of diaspora voters was crucial at the moment when the new parliamentary majority had only one more MP than Djukanović’s party and

its satellites – 41 MPs against 40 MPs. The bearer of this victory was the Serbian people of Montenegro.

Parliamentary elections (2020) and post-election events

On 31 January 2020, the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, held a meeting with Metropolitan Amfilohije and Bishop Joanikije in Belgrade. At that meeting, Vučić told the Serbian bishops from Montenegro that they would have all possible support from Serbia in the defense of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In this regard, the Republic of Serbia has engaged diplomatically to represent the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro at international forums. The media network in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska has been fully made available to protection of Serbian holy places in Montenegro.

At the same time, there was no objection in the Republic of Serbia that Zdravko Krivokapić, a university professor of mechanical engineering who was recommended by the Montenegrin priest Gojko Perović, became the head of the Serbian coalition “Za budućnost Crne Gore” (“For the Future of Montenegro”). But when the Democratic Party of Socialists was defeated in the parliamentary elections on 30 August 2020, Krivokapić showed a completely different face.

The leaders of the electoral lists of the new parliamentary majority Zdravko Krivokapić (“For the future of Montenegro”), Aleksa Bečić (“Peace is our nation”) and Dritan Abazović (“Black on white”) signed a coalition agreement on 9 September 2020 according to which the new majority committed that, after the formation of the government, it would continue to recognize the independence of the so-called of Kosovo, strengthens the position of Montenegro in NATO, and that the historical Serbian symbols of Montenegro will not be returned to use (*Slobodna Evropa*, 9 September 2020).

At the same time, Krivokapić, as a prime minister-designate, did not want the Democratic Front politicians who were the backbone of the “For the Future of Montenegro” coalition to enter the new government. When a high-ranking Serbian official called me to discuss what is happening in Montenegro after the elections, I told him that we were deceived, that we in Serbia should take the burden off the backs of Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević in the expectations of our public that they would be on ministerial positions and thus make their situation easier because Krivokapić, obviously with foreigners, excluded from power the members of the coalition he led in the elections.

It is obvious that Krivokapić's foreign mentors, possibly from Germany, believed that the new American President Joe Biden, who defeated Trump in the presidential elections on 3 November 2020, will return the old anti-Serbian policy towards Montenegro. However, it turned out that even Biden was not interested in supporting the defeated Djukanović structures.

On 24 September 2020, when Vučić again hosted Metropolitan Amfilohije and Bishop Joanikije in Belgrade, Amfilohije told him that "now he understands him much better" because Zdravko Krivokapić – behind whom the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral stood – signed a new recognition of the so-called Kosovo, which the Republic of Serbia has never done, nor would it do. At that meeting, Metropolitan Amfilohije and President Vučić improved their relations even more. The fruits of that improvement could not be seen because the corona virus killed Metropolitan Amfilohije on 30 October 2020. Only twenty days later, on 20 November 2020 the corona virus killed Serbian Partarch Irinej.

The so-called expert government of Zdravko Krivokapić was formed on 4 December 2020, and most of the ministers were of Serbian ethnicity. On 29 December 2020, the Parliament of Montenegro adopted amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religion, which removed the articles of the law that were a threat to the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Radio-television of Serbia*, 29 December 2020). Since the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanović refused to sign these changes, the Parliament of Montenegro again adopted the same changes on 20 January 2021, which according to the Constitution of Montenegro, Djukanović was no longer allowed not to sign (*Politika.rs*, 20 January 2021). This was an important, but not the final step in the protection of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.

Basic Agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegro (2022)

On 18 February 2021 the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church elected Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana as the Serbian Patriarch. At the next session of the Holy Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Zdravko Krivokapić was invited to sign the Basic Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church on 27 May 2021. Krivokapić arrived in Belgrade, but refused to sign the Basic Agreement (*Radio-television of Serbia*, 27 May 2021). On 29 May 2021, the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church elected Bishop Joanikije as the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral.

Furthermore, at that May session of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2021, a decision was made to abolish the episcopal councils in those former Yugoslav republics where they were established, and the most important thing was that the Episcopal Council in Montenegro was abolished (*Serbian Orthodox Church*, 29 May 2021). Thus, the honorary title of the Archbishop of Cetinje and the informal name “Orthodox Church in Montenegro” for dioceses in Montenegro were excluded from use. Therefore, dioceses in Montenegro could bear only the name – Serbian Orthodox Church. On 5 September 2021 Patriarch Porfirije enthroned Metropolitan Joanikije in the Cetinje monastery.

Before the fall of Krivokapić’s government, Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović visited Patriarch Porfirije in Belgrade on 26 January 2022 and gave him his word that he would sign the Basic Agreement because, Abazović emphasized, the Serbian Orthodox Church must have the same rights as other traditional churches and religious communities in Montenegro. Abazović’s government was formed on 28 April 2022.

Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović signed on 3 August 2022 in Podgorica the Basic Agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Government of Montenegro. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro was thereby granted historical continuity and legal legitimacy in the length of 800 years on the soil of Montenegro. At the foundation of the Serbian statehood of Montenegro is the identity of the Patriarchate of Peć. That was the final step in the protection of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.

Despite the fact that the church autonomist Zdravko Krivokapić refused to sign the Basic Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the general climate in Montenegro became significantly better for the Serbian people during his and Abazović’s government. Representatives of Serbian political parties were given positions “by depth”, they became directors of companies and institutions, and they employed Serbs who were not allowed to be employed during the time of the Democratic Party of Socialists. Therefore, the Serbian people began to win their freedom.

Western factors did not stop this process, not even the Biden administration. The US Deputy Secretary of State and Special Envoy of the President of the United States of America for the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, said on 15 October 2021 that he could not see that being pro-Serbian and pro-Russian in Montenegro is the same thing, and that the Serbian issue is different issue (*Glas Amerike*, 15 October 2021). The Americans obviously wanted to show that there are pro-NATO Serbs in Montenegro, who would

be different from the anti-NATO Serbs in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. This is a departure from Scaparotti's view that the entire Serbian population in the Balkans is hostile.

Presidential and parliamentary elections and census (2023)

Two of Krivokapić's "expert ministers", Milojko Spajić and Jakov Milatović, founded the populist movement "Europe Now" in June 2022. They acted from dualistic Montenegrin-Serbian positions, which – when it comes to identity issues – put Montenegro above and Serbdom below. In that sense, "Europe now" is quite similar to Democratic Montenegro. The "For the Future of Montenegro" coalition, led by Mandić and Knežević, had a completely different view, which always considered Serbdom equal to Montenegro.

In the second round of presidential elections on 2 April 2023, Jakov Milatović defeated Milo Djukanović and became the President of Montenegro. In the parliamentary elections in Montenegro, which were held on 11 June 2023, the "Europe Now" movement won (25.53%). They were followed by the Democratic Party of Socialists (23.22%), the coalition "For the Future of Montenegro" (14.74%), Democratic Montenegro (12.48%), the Bosniak Party (7.09%), the Socialist People's Party (3.13%). A new parliamentary majority was formed, which on 31 October 2023 elected Milojko Spajić as Prime Minister and Andrija Mandić as President of the Parliament of Montenegro.

Andrija Mandić placed a Serbian tricolor flag – the same dimensions as the red and yellow state flag of Montenegro – in his presidential cabinet. Before him, Serbian tricolors were placed in cabinets and on municipal buildings by the mayors of municipalities throughout Montenegro where the Serbian people form the local government (*Vijesti.me*, 16 January 2024). Mandić did not congratulate the so-called statehood day of Kosovo. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, headed by Filip Ivanović, the spiritual child of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral and staff member of "Europe Now", congratulated on 17 February 2024 the so-called Kosovo: "We congratulate you on the Independence Day of the Republic of Kosovo. We look forward to the further improvement of our good neighborly relations" (*Vijesti.me*, 18 February 2024).

And this is an example that shows the visible role of pro-NATO Serbian structures in Montenegro, who act and will act against the interests of the

Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the united and indivisible Serbdom.

After a two-year delay, the census in Montenegro began on 3 December 2023 and ended on 28 December 2023. However, the census results on identity issues were not officially published until April 2024. There is reliable knowledge that 36–37% of Montenegro population declared they are of Serbian ethnicity, and 40–41% said they are of so-called Montenegrin ethnicity, while about 52% of population speak Serbian and about 33% speak so-called Montenegrin language.

It is noticeable, therefore, that Serbian identity through language has an absolute majority in Montenegro. Based on this, it can be seen that among the Orthodox Christians in Montenegro, and expressed as a percentage in relation to the entire population of Montenegro, a unique and indivisible Serbian identity is cherished by more than a third of citizens (over 36%), while a third of citizens have an exclusive so-called Montenegrin identity (about 33%), and the dual Montenegrin-Serbian identity has about 15% of the population. In accordance with the growth trends of Serbian identity, it can be expected that in the next census in 2031, the majority of dualists will break in favor of a single Serbian identity. Thus, the Serbian ethnic identity could reach an absolute majority in the total population of Montenegro.

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