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Research Article

Vladimir Vučković
Lecturer, Masaryk University
vuckovic@mail.muni.cz

Miloš Petrović
Visiting Lecturer, University of Belgrad
milos.petrovic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

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Colliding Western Balkan Neighbors: Serbia and Montenegro in Post-Yugoslav Context –Identity and Interest Representation

Vladimir Vučković and Miloš Petrović*

Abstract: This research seeks to examine the development of relations between Serbia and Montenegro after 2006, in the context of insufficient acceptance of a distinct Montenegrin identity by the Serbian state, elite, and public. The authors argue that, unlike elsewhere in the post-Yugoslav space, where inter-republic cooperation had decreased during the country's breakup, Serbo-Montenegrin relations have mostly deteriorated “only” since Montenegrin independence. The authors attribute such developments to local identity politics, arguing that Montenegrin and pro-Serbian political actors manipulate identarian symbols both to strengthen their own positions and differentiate said positions from their political rivals. Identarian aspects (like state symbols, language and religion) are used not solely to underline one's ethnic affiliation, but also for ideological distancing from opponents. These populist activities have caused a deep polarization in Montenegrin society for at least two reasons. Firstly, the use of aforementioned state symbols further strengthened the political divisions even at the inter-state level, resulting in the homogenization of the national and electorate corps. Secondly, ethnic affiliation has been influenced by geopolitical elements, namely, Russophile tendencies in the Serbian political actors and pro-Western tendencies among Montenegrin actors. The authors apply the ‘situational nationalism’ approach to show that the outcomes of the still-ongoing nation-building process in Montenegro correlate with both domestic policies (institutional top-down approach) and external factors (cross-border effects, including the geopolitics).

Keywords: Serbia, Montenegro, nation-building, statehood and national identity, populism

* Vladimir Vučković is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations and European Studies at the Masaryk University, Czechia with a research interest focusing on the European Union, populism in Europe, and Western Balkan political and socio-economic developments. He has held a visiting fellowship at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz (2021/22) and Department of Political Science at the University of Stockholm (2017/18).

Miloš Petrović is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade, Serbia and a Visiting Lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, where he previously obtained his PhD in domain of International and European Studies. He holds an LL.M. degree from Europa-Institut, University of Saarland, Saarbrücken, Germany. His research interests include the Europeanization processes in SEE and the post-Soviet space (spanning both the EU enlargement and neighborhood policies), as well as contemporary political historical developments and democratization processes in CEE.

Introduction

Following the results of the 2006 Montenegrin referendum, current political relations between Serbia and Montenegro can be best described as poor and underdeveloped. The existence of common historical, cultural, political, and religious peculiarities between the two states has not resulted in improved state relations during the post-referendum period. Common characteristics include: adherence to the Orthodox Christianity (including the Serbian Church), close linguistic relatedness (different versions of a common stock), the struggle against Ottoman Empire and achievement of independence at the Congress of Berlin (1878), shared history throughout most of the 20th century etc.¹ Despite the mentioned commonalities, the increasingly antagonistic relations have manifested on numerous occasions, ranging from statements from Serbian officials about absence of Montenegrin identity, decisions of Government of Montenegro to recognize Kosovo's*² secession in 2008, and the joining of NATO in 2017. The question of function of Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and preservation of its property in Montenegro following the adoption of the Law on Religious Freedom in 2019 is also a contentious point along with the issue of dual citizenship, and the official participation of a Montenegrin state delegation in the annual Croatian 'Operation Storm' celebration, etc.³

The matrix of deteriorating relations in the former Yugoslav space mostly originates with the violent breakup of the joint state during the 1990s. However, Serbo-Montenegrin relations did not follow such a pattern. Namely, this research is centered around the fact that the worsening of Belgrade-Podgorica cooperation chiefly ensued following their otherwise relatively peaceful breakup,⁴ rather than during or before the separation. These unfavorable phenomena have been taking place since the reestablishment of Montenegrin statehood, in parallel with its increased nationalist ideology marked by progressive distancing from Serbia in various domains.

This research seeks to examine development of relations between Serbia and Montenegro in the post-referendum period by focusing on statehood and identity issues. The paper aims to investigate broken relations between two 'fraternal countries' during the post-referendum period by analyzing the problems of

¹ Noutcheva, Gergana and Michel Huysseune. 2004. Serbia and Montenegro. *JEMIE - Journal on ethnopolitics and minority issues in Europe* 2004(1), 1-29; Dymarski, Miroslav. 2017. Political situation of ethnic minority groups in independent Montenegro. *Studia Środkowoeuropejskie i Bałkanistyczne* XXVI, 205-19; Petrović, Rajko. 2022. Politički odnosi između Srbije i Crne Gore od 2006. do 2021. godine. *Nacionalni interes* XVII 41(1), 211-28.

² Designation Kosovo* is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Further in text, both "Kosovo*" and informal term *Kosovo* will be used.

³ Hafner, Asja. 2020. *Odnosi Srbije i Crne Gore od 2006 do 2020* (accessed: 1 May 2022).

⁴ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. 2006. *Doc. 10980 – Report: Consequences of the referendum in Montenegro - Political Affairs Committee by Lord Russell-Johnston* (accessed: 10 September 2022); Darmanović, Srđan. 2003. Serbia and Montenegro and their New Union. *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2003*, 130-31.

acceptance of Montenegrin identity by Serbian institutions, (mostly governed by the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS)), elite, and public. In addition, the paper seeks to analyse how the state responds to such subversive tendencies to preserve the achievements of Montenegrin statehood, primarily through the dominant ruling party of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro's (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS) usage of various populist mechanisms. Based on the factors outlined above, the main research question has been defined as follows: to what extent do Montenegrin and Serbian domestic political elites manipulate issues of national identity in order to retain power?

The research argues that the political actors in Belgrade and Podgorica have been using populist mechanisms to retain power and advance their positions with their respective electorates. The strength of populist instruments largely resided in the polarization strategy, which itself relied on highlighting and also overstating the distinctions and divisions between the two sides in identarian, historical, social-cultural, political, and other domains. The authors consider that such activities have increased inter-ethnic antagonisms and caused extreme politicization of most aspects of co-existence and cooperation, which resulted in growing neglect of mutual cooperation at all levels. That also includes the current state of relations between the two independent countries, they are far below their actual potential and are still affected by the polarization mechanisms.

This article is structured in the following way. In addition to the introduction, the first section contains theoretical-methodological analysis pertaining to the evolution of, and current state surrounding the two conflicting identities in Montenegro. The second part is dedicated to identifying and explicating the chief disagreements between Serbia and Montenegro since the dissolution of their state union. The third section largely focuses on the course of the nation-building process in Montenegro and the identarian disagreements in that regard, before proceeding to concluding remarks in the fourth and final segment of this paper.

Theoretical and methodological framework: Alternative vs titular identity in Montenegro

The issues of statehood, nationhood, and national identity have continued to play a significant role in the political life of Montenegro, whereas different interpretations of these categories between Montenegrins and Serbs consequently affect the internal political dynamics and processes within the society, as well as the development of the political situation.⁵ National identity disputes between Serbs and Montenegrins reflect a long history of ethnic divisions. Interestingly, the history of nation-building in Montenegro does not align with the institutionalist theory of nationalism, which states that the establishment of national institutions predominately strengthens

⁵ Morrison, Kenneth. 2018. *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.

and increases collective national identity.⁶ Clearly, this was not the case in Montenegro, where national identity sentiments gradually decreased from 91% in 1948 to 45% in 2011, based on the data from the latest census, despite the fact that the state had its own flag, coat of arms, parliament, national institutions, government, academy of science and art, and so on. Yet, the process of national identification was significantly slowed not just because national institutions and elites were not persistent in enforcing national identity. But also, because conflicts, actions, and events from wider region can be more forceful the effectiveness of campaign of national identification.⁷

Table 1: Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 1948-2011

	Montenegrin	Serbian	Bosniak (Muslim)	Albanian	Croatian
1948	90.67%	1.78%	0.1%	5.15%	1.8%
1953	86.61%	3.3%	-	5.58%	2.33%
1961	81.37%	2.99%	6.5%	5.47%	2.26%
1971	67.15%	7.46%	13.26%	6.74%	1.74%
1981	68.54%	3.32%	13.36%	6.46%	1.81%
1991	61.86%	9.34%	14.57%	6.57%	1.02%
2003	43.16%	31.99%	7.77%	5.03%	0.42%
2011	44.98%	28.73%	8.65%	4.91%	1.01%

Source: Monstat (<https://www.monstat.org/cg/>)

This research uses Jenne and Bieber's approach of 'situational nationalism' as its main theoretical stronghold, this approach supposes that national identity may change due to various geopolitical circumstances within a fluid identity framework.⁸ In such a case the national project mostly depends on national struggles within and outside national borders. In many cases, the political elites compete for dominance by positioning themselves as protectors of national interests – triggering a circle of 'ethnic outbidding' which radicalized the entire society. Political elites increase mutual ethnical divisions by making promises that benefits one group at the expense of others.⁹ Thus, nation-building projects are more likely to be oriented toward state-periphery conflicts where the issues of national identity are unclear, and therefore are more affected by the dynamics of situational nationalism, as was the case in Montenegro. According to this theory, nationalizing elites rightly realize that they are competing in a kind of 'marketplace of ideas' and to achieve the goal, the titular identity (originating from Montenegro) must be more receptive to the people than the alternative identity (coming from Serbia).¹⁰ In a sort of political marketplace, domestic political elites use identarian arguments on an everyday basis to convince voters regarding the benefits of their politics.

⁶ Malešević, Siniša and Gordana Uzelac. 2007. A nation-state without the nation? The trajectories of nation-state formation in Montenegro. *Nations and Nationalism* 13(4), 695–716.

⁷ Jenne, K. Erin and Florian Bieber. 2014. Situational Nationalism: Nation-building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox. *Ethnopolitics* 13(5), 431–60.

⁸ Jenne and Bieber, *Situational Nationalism*, 431–36.

⁹ Saideman, M. Stephen / Dougherty, Beth K. and Erin K. Jenne. 2005. Dilemmas of Divorce: How Secessionist Identities Cut Both Ways. *Security Studies* 14(4), 618.

¹⁰ Snyder, Jack and Karren Ballentine. 1996. Nationalism and Marketplace of Ideas. *International Security* 21(2), 5-40.

The “consumers” in the marketplace, consequently, decide whom to support based on the logic of appropriateness, by being persuaded of the legitimacy of the elites’ arguments and the credibility of promises being fulfilled.¹¹ Media manipulation, together with social, political, and cultural elites, often plays a key role in strengthening nationalism and promoting identity politics that generate ideas for mass dissemination. In fact, impact of the media is used as a main advertiser for certain support of the political elites. As an outcome, the elites use this advertiser to convince the people about the correctness of their attitudes: that certain national or identity policies will be beneficial with little cost or no cost itself, and the alternative policies will lead to disastrous results.¹²

Leaders will try to change the titular identity (or even raise the value of another identity) when they realize that the mobilizing value of their existing identity is overpowered by an alternative. At all times, therefore, these leaders are forced to use the identity they believe is best (1) that unites the inhabitants of the claimed territory around mandates for self-determination; (2) mobilize popular resistance against the alternative identity; and (3) maximize their leverage against the center while minimizing international resistance. For the above reasons, the starting point for such a secessionist movement is likely to be its territorial identity. They may serve as a suitable mobilization mechanism for the nation and identarian movements because they united domestic support for a claim of restoration of statehood and identity issues.¹³

However, the leadership may face significant obstacles in (titular) identity selection, vis-à-vis the ethnic and religious profile of the people that reside in the claimed territory. Therefore, elites must carefully select myths, symbols, beliefs, cultural traditions, and values that will have popular support in the society.¹⁴ Also, the political elites may try to strengthen the titular identity through nationalism itself. This being said, nationalism is not created spontaneously. It is the product of a clear political discourse and rhetoric imposed by the elite, which aims to mobilize members of the group to share the same values, opinions, and attitudes on certain political issues.¹⁵ Such goals require the help of the media, but also parties, intellectuals, and religious groups. Today, a key indicator of nationalism is the level of inclusion and exclusion, based on which we can distinguish between endemic and virulent. The intensity of nationalism can be measured through several indicators ranging from latent or structural factors, citizenship issues, and socioeconomic and

¹¹ Vučković, Vladimir. 2021. *Europeanizing Montenegro: The European Union, The Rule of Law, and Regional Cooperation*. Lanham and London: Lexington Books.

¹² Kaufman, J. Stuard. 2001. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹³ Saideman / Dougherty and Jenne, *Dilemmas*, 616-17; Snyder, Jack. 2000. *From Voting to Violence. Democratization and Nationalist Violence*. New York & London: Norton and Company.

¹⁴ Saideman / Dougherty and Jenne, *Dilemmas*, 613; Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1999. Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia. *International Security* 24(3), 139-78.

¹⁵ Brubaker, Roger. 2004. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

religious marginalization to more radical factors such as media discourse and support for national parties, etc.¹⁶

It is very important to mention that any nationalism, even a situational one, is closely related to authoritarianism and populist tendencies. Although nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism are distinct phenomena, they are interconnected. Following the Serbia-Montenegro case, these systems can be defined as semi-authoritarian regimes. They are ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits.¹⁷ In absence of consolidated democracy, nationalism (coupled with authoritarianism) becomes an important source of legitimacy against external and internal ethnic groups and opposition parties.¹⁸ Also, nationalism may be interlinked with populism as these two concepts contain the characteristics of many-sided ideologies. Populism considers society to be ultimately divided between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupted elites’, where politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.¹⁹ Hence, it not only promotes a universal “good vs evil” distinction, but populism also contains the features of adversarial politics – where the political actors are perceived as rivals with little need for compromise (morality of conflict), and of majoritarianism – disregarding minority interests, separation of power and check-balance constraints. If the people are being defined in national terms, then nationalism and populist trends can find a common ground in the form of ‘national populism’ – where the political elite prioritizes the culture and interest of the nation and promises to give voice to people who feel that they have been neglected in a certain historical period when national self-awareness is being questioned.²⁰

On the other hand, the alternative identity may substantially challenge the titular identity, especially during major political events or transitions when they focus on identity struggles that enjoy greater popular resonance. This was primarily the case with the controversial Montenegrin Law on Religious Freedom adopted in December 2019 which largely attracted the attention of Serbia (but also other regional countries). It supported not only the SOC’s claims on protection of church properties and organization of clerical protests (i.e., street liturgies) in Montenegro but also in the wider region to protect their religious rights. Although the law was inherently

¹⁶ Bieber, Florian. 2018. Is Nationalism on the Rise? Assessing Global Trends. *Ethnopolitics* 17(5), 521.

¹⁷ Ottaway, Marina. 2003. *Democracy Challenged. The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹⁸ Bieber, *Is Nationalism on the Rise?*, 522.

¹⁹ Mudde, Cas. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4), 541-63; Taggart, Paul. 2000. *Populism*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press; Stanley, Ben. 2008. The Thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13(1), 95-110.

²⁰ Eatwell, Roger and Matthew Goodwin. 2018. *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Penguin UK; Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation*. California: Stanford University Press.; Wodak, Ruth / Khosravini, Majid and Brigitte Mral (eds.). 2013. *Right-wing populism in Europe: politics and discourse*. London: Bloomsbury.

very controversial, the narrative around its significance and impact on Serbian identity issues and the SOC's religious freedom is more a consequence of populist (political) discourse rather than legal outputs. Having this claimed, situational nationalism implies that neither national institutions nor nationalizing elites are enough for consolidating titular national identity as events in the narrow identity landscape, such as the case of the adopted Montenegrin language or controversial Law on Religious Freedom, favor mobilizing the public around alternative national cleavages. What all this suggests is that political elites may have far less control over the consolidation of the national identity than we can imagine.²¹

In line with a proclaimed theoretical framework, this methodology section is oriented toward gaining a deeper understanding of identity construction and reconstruction in Montenegro. The issue of building Montenegrin national identity is a very complex issue, and it can be understood through the relationship between ethnicity, nationhood, and statehood by considering territory, language, and religion. This being said, an important puzzle in understanding the construction of the Montenegrin identity lies in elites' disagreement over the historical statehood of Montenegro (and its centuries-old existence) and its entry into the Kingdom of Serbia. As one of the oldest states in the Balkans (where the elements of statehood existed since the tenth century and the period of the Vojislavljević dynasty), Montenegro continued to build its distinctiveness as an independent state, just like Serbia, by gaining its international legal subjectivity at the Berlin Congress in 1878. Following the decision of the Podgorica Assembly on 28 November 1918, Montenegro was annexed to Serbia (while the Petrović dynasty was dethroned), shortly ahead of the establishment Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes ('Yugoslavia' since 1929). The loss of Montenegrin statehood changed the nature, context, and perception of identity, consequently changing the frames that determined the concept of national belonging. The formation of "Banovina Zeta" (1929) separated the Montenegrin national identity from its historical territory, through the doubling of its pre-war size. Thus, the feeling of national belonging was identified only with the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian ethnic groups, which was also an argument for contesting the national identity in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia during the period of first Yugoslavia.²² As a result, Serbs and Montenegrins were seen in the same national category divided only by territory and political history.²³

As a subject of war and occupation twice in the first half of the 20th century, Montenegrin's status not only in the socialist Yugoslavia (SFRY) but also in the succeeding state unions strengthened national antagonism and ethical tensions between Montenegrin Serbs (advocate a federal model and closer cooperation with Serbia) and Montenegrins (claim to be a separate nation and are oriented toward

²¹ Pavlovic, Srdja. 2008. *Balkan Anschluss. The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press; Morrison, Kenneth. 2009. *Montenegro: A Modern History*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris; Morrison, *Nationalism*.

²² Banac, Ivo. 1988. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

²³ Hastings, Adrian. 1997. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

independence).²⁴ “The existence of historical disagreements²⁵ remained throughout the existence of multinational Yugoslavia”.²⁶ The proclamation of the Yugoslav Kingdom in 1929 failed to resolve the conflict between its nationalities, including between Serbs and Montenegrins. There were many who believed that the annexation of Montenegro was an occupation and that the issue of the existence of the national identity of Montenegrins was contested although these two nations shared a common historical and cultural heritage.²⁷ However, reconciliation processes between the two entities was only possible if the new federal state was conceived predominantly on Serbian ideological ground. The reason for the creation of the former federations were based on cultural and religious affiliations, however, it should be kept in mind that Orthodoxy was not able to continuously resist all the divisions that existed between Serbs and Montenegrins. In a religious sense, Montenegrin Orthodoxy resisted and still resists being incorporated into the SOC.²⁸

In order to test the theory of ‘situational nationalism,’ and therefore gain new scientific insight based on the main research question, this work has identified seven key internal factors representing at the same time a research focus. In particular, the article has pointed out main Serbian levers of powers continually questioning Montenegrin nationhood and identity: 1) SOC; 2) right-wing populist political coalition party – Democratic Front of Montenegro (DF); 3) academics; 4) pro-SNS media and tabloids. On the other hand, the paper also defines main tools of influence based on which the pro-DPS government defended achievements of Montenegrin statehood in 2006: 1) adoption of normative acts that legally regulate respect of national symbols and status of SOC and its church properties in Montenegro; 2) the question of ‘autocephaly’ and restoration of unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC); 3) “alleged” repression against Serbian national minority by sanctioning its employment in state and public institutions.

The main objectives of the research are chiefly empirical. These research objects are vested in description, analysis, and explanation of national identity issues and controversial interests’ representation in both Serbia and Montenegro. The article will employ a mixture of various qualitative methods of data collection ranging from: a) qualitative content analysis describing past and present Serbian-Montenegrin relations; b) empirical analysis aiming to examine laws, programs, and statutes of political parties using official reports of local and parliamentary elections of the State Election Commission as primary sources, and volumes, articles, press clippings of relevant media, and statements of political officials as a secondary sources. As for the spatial framework of the research, this study shall focus solely on Serbia and Montenegro, countries which had been developing together for almost

²⁴ Wachtel, Andrew. 2008. *The Balkans in World History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁵ Annexation of Montenegro and the dethronement of King Nikola I, division between the Greens (Zelenaši) and the Whites (Bjelaši), and frequent comity rebellions etc.

²⁶ Emmert, Thomas and Charles Ingraio (eds.). 2006. *Conflict in Southeastern Europe at the End of the Twentieth Century: A "Scholars' Initiative" Assesses Some of the Controversies*. London: Routledge.

²⁷ Žanić, Ivo. 2007. *Flag on the Mountain: a Political Anthropology of War in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1990-1995*. London and Berkeley: Saqi Books.

²⁸ Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*, 142.

nine decades throughout various incarnations of South-Slavic state projects (namely Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (SCG), etc.). In terms of the timeframe of research, the paper shall examine the period from 2006 till the present moment.

Table 2: Theoretical Framework: Alternative vs Titular Identity in Montenegro

Alternative identity	
Promoter	Serbia – SNS-led government
Levers of powers/ actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SOC - nationalist political parties - academics in Serbia and Montenegro - pro-government media
Titular identity	
Advocator	Montenegro – DPS-led government
Tools of influence/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adoption of normative acts (respects of national reaction symbols, role of SOC) - restoration of uncanonically MOC - repression of Serbian national minority by sanctioning employment - academics in Montenegro and pro-government media

Source: Authors' own elaborations

Serbia-Montenegro relations since 2006: Kosovo and other disagreements

Contemporary political, social, and other relations between Serbia and Montenegro have been shaped by both their resemblances and distinctions and burdened by numerous inherited and more recent challenges. Major distancing of Montenegrin authorities from Belgrade became apparent by 1999, when its autonomous decision-making was demonstrated in a two-fold manner: politically – by objecting to support the federal (Yugoslav) army during the Kosovo conflict and NATO bombardment; and economically – by introducing the German mark, aiming to obtain monetary independence. Paradoxically, rather than easing, the unfavorable dynamics intensified following the democratic changes in Serbia (2000), when Montenegro's government, led by DPS, no longer represented the chief pro-Western actor in the country. Serbia remained in the foreign-political focus as its reintegration into the international community was burdened by accumulated economic, social and political problems. The chief political challenges which complicated Serbia's international position (including the EU entry prospects) were: (1) the unresolved Kosovo*situation; (2) the unregulated ties with Podgorica, and (3) the ICTY cooperation.²⁹ Much to Montenegro's dislike, its own integrative ambitions were entangled with all these issues. As it turned out, Serbo-Montenegrin relations would continue to be dictated by the Kosovo aspect even *after* Podgorica regained sovereignty.

²⁹ Petrović, Miloš. 2019. EU integration process of Serbia: a vicious circle of high politics? *The Review of International Affairs* LXX(1175), 24-25.

During the early 2000s, the international community was reluctant to consider Montenegrin demands for independence. The distaste for sovereignty likely had much to do with a greater priority: to stabilize and encourage democratic transformation in Serbia - the region's largest nation. Likewise, some consider that the international community actively discouraged Montenegro's secessionist path due to fears regarding Kosovo's own independence quest.³⁰ Instead, the EU managed to broker the Belgrade Agreement, devolving most of the competencies to the constituencies - Serbia and Montenegro - and introducing a 3-year moratorium on the latter's independence poll in accordance with Article 60.³¹ This period was used for the purpose of devolution of powers and referendum preparations, but also to set in motion the UN-led negotiations between Belgrade and Priština regarding the political status of Kosovo. Consequently, the political positions of Montenegro and Kosovo have been *de facto* linked, despite the fact that only the latter has constituted a part of Serbia (as per its Constitution). Although the Montenegrin independence referendum ultimately succeeded in 2006, the entanglement between Priština, Podgorica and Belgrade, and the diverging views thereof, would continue to affect political cooperation between the two fraternal nations. Most of Serbia's political spectrum favored the continuation of the Union. Also, the pro-unionist part of Montenegrin society argued that strong linguistic, religious, and frequently also family bonds with Serbia should not be severed.³²

While the Montenegrin Metropolitanate (MM) largely abstained from the campaign and didn't campaign against independence,³³ the role of Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije was perceived by some as "pivotal" in securing de-escalation following the proclamation of independence.³⁴ Several years later, during a parliamentary speech, Prime Minister Đukanović even mentioned an assassination plot against Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije ahead of the referendum by the "opponents of independence", aimed at discrediting and destabilizing Montenegro.³⁵ Grouped around pro-Serb parties like SNP (Socialist People's Party), the unionist bloc suffered a defeat, which also marked the beginning of their respective evolution into modern conservative movements. In effect, Serbia became sovereign as result of Montenegro's independence poll. The government in Belgrade recognized Podgorica almost a month after the referendum, demonstrating its joyless stance toward such outcome.

³⁰ Sabalic, Ines. *Analysis: Kosovo independence ruled out* (accessed: 15 April 2022).

³¹ ICG. *Još uvek kupujući vreme: Crna Gora, Srbija i Evropska unija* (accessed: 1 May 2022).

³² Recknagel, Charles. 2006. *Montenegro: Independence Referendum Turns Into Cliffhanger* (accessed: 10 September 2022).

³³ Štavljanin, Dragan. *Može li Amfilohije biti prvi crnogorski patrijarh?* (accessed: 20 May 2022); Rudorič, Nedeljko. 2006. *Mitropolit za sva vremena* (accessed: 15 September 2022).

³⁴ IFIMES. 2020. *Montenegro 2020: Will the Montenegrin Orthodox Church become a Greek Catholic Church?* (accessed: 9. September 2022).

³⁵ RTS. 2015. Đukanović: *Uoči referenduma bio planiran atentat na Amfilohija* (accessed: 12 September 2022).

The 2007 Montenegrin Constitution defined the civic character of the system and promoted Montenegrin as the official language, while the status of the Serbian language was limited to “official use” (Article 13). The Serbian community (32% of the population) considered such act to be discriminatory, since 62% of the population of Montenegro opted for Serbian as their native tongue.³⁶ Meanwhile, the institutional promotion of a Montenegrin identity had yielded very limited results. By the 2011 census, the share of Montenegrins increased from 43% to 45%, while the Serbian community recorded a drop to about 29%; likewise, the Montenegrin language has been embraced by 37% of the population, while its Serbian counterpart recorded a sharp drop to 43%.³⁷ According to Jenne and Bieber, the identity shifts between Serbs and Montenegrins are not uncommon, and they might correlate with geography; those in areas geographically closer to Serbia have been identifying as Serbian in the course of the past several population censuses, while those further to the south kept identifying as Montenegrins.³⁸ Those shifts have been occurring in parallel with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Serbo-Montenegrin state. Considering the deep political crises in the meantime ranging from the NATO bombing, the secession of Kosovo*, to the dissolution of the Serbo-Montenegrin union, the greater role of the SOC, aspects like politics, religion and geopolitics seem to have reflected quite significantly on the expression of national identity in Montenegro. Many, if not majority of those interested in preserving or deepening relations with Serbia and symbolic institutions like the SOC identified as Serbian during the past several decades. However, such identification arguably also implied certain support for Serbia’s international political relations, such as nurturing ties with Russia in the context of Moscow’s support over the Kosovo* claim. Issues like Kosovo*, the functioning of the SOC, relations with Russia, and NATO accession have been influencing politics and society in both Serbia and Montenegro, even after the retrieval of independence, and have turned into divisive topics. Nevertheless, the 2011 census was the first after three decades to record the relative drop in the size of Serbian community and the modest increase of Montenegrin ethnos. Numerous organizations of Montenegrin Serbs considered the results rigged and the government policy assimilatory.³⁹

Montenegrin nation-building has been largely shaped by underlining the “otherness” in comparison to the Serbian identity, perhaps similarly to Todorova’s notes on the Balkans representing “the other” (an antipode) in relation to Europe.⁴⁰ In accordance with such a reductionist construct, in Montenegro, conservative aspects have been attributed primarily to the “other” (hereby meaning Serbs), whereas the pro-Western, enlightened and reformist aspects were associated with Montenegrins.⁴¹ For instance, the Latin script rose in prominence as the primary

³⁶ Monstat. 2011. *Stanovništvo prema nacionalnoj ili etničkoj pripadnosti u Republici Crnoj Gori, po opštinama* (accessed: 1 June 2022).

³⁷ Monstat. 2011. *Census 2011 Data*. (accessed: 1 June 2022).

³⁸ Jenne and Bieber, *Situational Nationalism*.

³⁹ Tomović, Predrag. 2011. *Srbi pozivaju na bojkot popisa i Crnogoraca* (accessed: 10 April 2022).

⁴⁰ Todorova, Maria, 1999. *Imaginarni Balkan*. Beograd: XX vek.

⁴¹ Džankić, Jelena. 2014. Reconstructing the Meaning of Being ‘Montenegrin.’ *Slavic Review* 73(2), 356–71.

script in official correspondence. Political representatives of Montenegrin Serbs claimed a disproportionately low representation in the public service domain, arguing that “Serbs constituted only 7,3% of all public personnel” in the state and local governments, while one MP contended that the Serbs have been removed from positions in most important national public bodies.⁴² Internationally, authorities fostered the reputation of a reliable pro-EU and trans-Atlantic partner, which has continuously been peacefully inclined and invested in regional stability. According to Džankić and Keil, the DPS “capitalized” on the identity rift in Montenegro internally, while externally pursuing a foreign policy which strongly distinguished the country from Serbia.⁴³ This intensified differentiation has also led to the growing ideological bifurcation between politically liberal Montenegrins and conservative Serbs. And largely factitious social division gradually also reflected on culture, politics, and religion. Consequently, relations between the two governments, and the two peoples, complicated further.

In February 2008, the Priština authorities - for the second time in two decades - declared secession from Serbia, following the 2007 UN Special envoy report which recommended the start of “supervised independence”, triggering mixed international reactions.⁴⁴ Serbian authorities reacted by issuing an annulment decision, reaffirming that it contradicted the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 which defined Kosovo as part of Serbia (and other acts).⁴⁵ The government (headed by a moderate conservative Vojislav Koštunica, in coalition with the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS)) dissolved within weeks, due to diverging views regarding the compatibility of EU path with the Kosovo claim. The EU responded by enabling Serbia to sign the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) and the Interim Trade Agreement just weeks before the elections, which aided the victory of the pro-European DS.⁴⁶ In Serbia, the signing of EU agreements was of two-fold importance: (1) it increased the political weight of the DS, while also (2) contributing to the collapse of the extreme-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS). While SRS opposed the signing, the newly-formed progressive wing – the nucleus of the SNS – supported the approximation toward the EU, which gradually led to its evolution into the strongest political group. Its moderately-conservative ideology and populist tactics would pose a significant challenge to the political survival of DS in the years to come.

The Montenegrin recognition of Kosovo’s secession in 2008 represented a key turn in relations with Serbia and the SOC/MM, while also contributing to the feeling of estrangement among Montenegrin Serbs’. That act complicated relations with Serbia and Republika Srpska (a veto-power territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina), while

⁴² Dymarski, *Political situation*, 209.

⁴³ Džankić, Jelena and Soeren Keil. 2017. State-Sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19(4), 403–18.

⁴⁴ UNSC. 2007. *Report of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo's future status* (accessed: 10 April 2022).

⁴⁵ Government of the Republic of Serbia. 2008. *Decision on the annulment of the illegitimate acts of the provisional institutions of self-government in Kosovo and Metohija on their declaration of unilateral independence* (accessed: 1 June 2022).

⁴⁶ Petrović, *EU integration*, 35.

also causing frustrations among the region's Serbs. The Montenegrin government justified the recognition through alignment with the parliamentary resolution on European integration (despite insufficient public support). As a result, the Montenegrin ambassador was temporarily expelled from Belgrade, large demonstrations ensued in many places across the country, and the-then Metropolitan of Montenegro (Amfilohije) accused the authorities for treason for supporting the separation of the spiritual seat of the Serbian Patriarchate (in Kosovo), from Serbia.⁴⁷

Over the next years, the antagonisms between Montenegrin authorities and pro-Serbian stakeholders (Montenegrin Serb associations, Belgrade authorities, SOC etc.) would constitute a major driving force behind the Montenegrin-nation-building activities, but also for broader bilateral relations. However, despite the divergences, both countries continued to advance on their EU paths; Montenegro was the first to assume candidate status in 2010, with Serbia following suit in early 2012, following the completion of major ICTY requirements. Still, despite this common strategic goal and the good-neighborly requirement, high level Serbo-Montenegrin political cooperation remained limited. This was paradoxical, as the governing parties in both countries - DPS and DS, have pursued a pro-Western course, which also included greater regional cooperation. Montenegrin leaders frequently accused Serbia of meddling in its internal affairs via “pro-Serbian” actors, whereas Belgrade politicians denied this, considering the position of Montenegrin Serbs and their status discriminatory.⁴⁸ Such a narrative continued even following changes of government in Serbia. In Montenegro, the opposition to the pro-Serbian identity has largely represented a political form of the nation-building process. Contrastingly, in Serbia, interference in Montenegrin affairs regarding the status of Serbs served, *inter alia*, to increase the patriotic reputation of the otherwise-moderate DS. However, in 2012, the DS lost the parliamentary and presidential elections to the SNS. Unofficially, such a result can also be attributed to the lack of the Belgrade government's cooperation in EU-led negotiations over Kosovo, causing the retraction of international support for the DS.⁴⁹

Since 2012 onwards, successive Serbian governments have been formed around the SNS in coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Meanwhile, the old misunderstandings with Montenegro remained. Some symbolic gestures were made; PM Milo Đukanović, after six years, officially visited Belgrade in 2013, but Serbia's most influential political leader – Aleksandar Vučić – hasn't visited Podgorica in his official capacity until this day.⁵⁰ As for the trans-Atlantic course, unlike Montenegro, Serbia has always been unwilling to take part it due to bitter experience of the NATO bombing campaign. This aspect is very important considering that the anti-NATO sentiment, combined with objection toward Kosovo's secession, have contributed to a growing Russian presence in Serbia, while at the same time

⁴⁷ Janković, Srđan. 2020. *Amfilohije Radović: Mitropolit molitve i kletve* (accessed: 1 March 2022).

⁴⁸ RTS. 2010. *Đukanović je nesiguran* (accessed: 23 March 2022).

⁴⁹ BBC. 2011. *Germany's Angela Merkel ties Serbian EU hopes to Kosovo* (accessed: 23 March 2022).

⁵⁰ RTS. 2013. *Milo Đukanović u Beogradu* (accessed: 23 March 2022).

Montenegro's ties with Moscow have been greatly reduced. In addition, the Ukrainian crisis prompted the EU to impose sanctions on Russia. Considering that the alignment in common foreign political domain (CFSP) forms an EU-negotiating criterion, Podgorica also sanctioned Russia. While both Montenegro and Serbia have managed to initiate their EU membership negotiations during the past decade, Serbian authorities haven't introduced sanctions on Russia. Such a course caused a decreased alignment with the CFSP decisions, which reflected on the fact that - unlike Podgorica - Belgrade has still not opened the foreign policy negotiating chapters. Aleksandar Vučić (president since 2017) implied that the European integration process would greatly accelerate if Serbia introduced sanctions on Russia.⁵¹

In 2019, the Montenegrin parliament introduced, and opened debate on the law on Freedom of Religion, aiming to regulate that very broad and comprehensive field. One controversial aspect of the law envisaged the possibility of turning SOC property into the state property of Montenegro.⁵² Those opposed to the law argued that it intended to weaken the SOC by enabling the transfer of its properties to the canonically unrecognized MOC.⁵³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew also denounced the law, calling it "unjust" toward the SOC as the "sole canonical church in Montenegro".⁵⁴ Mass protests ensued, which apart from the religious, also possessed a social-political component. The SOC *de facto* evolved into a "kingmaker of the new government", co-chairing the opposition meetings and offering advice.⁵⁵ The SOC influence has always been enormous; as the Venice Commission mentioned in its report, 70% of the Orthodox population considered it the leading Eastern-Christian authority in Montenegro.⁵⁶ Considering that, it is unsurprising that the DPS attempts to undermine its status and property ended with colossal failure. The devotion to the SOC represents a cohesive factor for Serbs and Montenegrins, by supporting a more conservative political option, the voters of the two largest ethnic groups not only punished the DPS for meddling in religious affairs, but also signaled that its polarizing activities were no longer welcome. Be it as it may, both Serbian and Montenegrin leaders have frequently played the nationalism trump card, especially ahead of the elections.⁵⁷ Montenegrin leader Đukanović and his DPS instrumentalized the religious aspect to antagonize the pro-Serbian spectrum and present themselves as protectors of Montenegrin sovereignty. On the other hand, SOC and Serbian officials supported the prayer-marches (street liturgies), *inter alia* fearing that the Church might be marginalized. The church protests, coupled with

⁵¹ Vijesti. 2017. *Vučić: Kada bi Srbija uvela sankcije Rusiji i kada bi priznala Kosovo, bila bi šampion* (accessed: 01 March 2022).

⁵² Puppink, Grégor. 2020. *ECLJ Overview on the Law against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro* (accessed: 8 September 2022).

⁵³ Kesvelioğlu, Abdullah. 2020. *How Montenegro's religious property law is a regional power struggle* (accessed: 8 September 2022).

⁵⁴ Beta. 2019. *Vaseljenski patrijarh: Jedina kanonska crkva u Crnoj Gori je mitropolija SPC* (accessed: 1 April 2022).

⁵⁵ Sinanović, Ermin. 2020. *The Serbian Orthodox Church and the 2020 Montenegro Elections* (accessed: 01 April 2022).

⁵⁶ Venice Commission. 2019. *Opinion No. 953 / 2019* (accessed: 1 June 2022).

⁵⁷ Rošćić, Dijana. 2020. *„Nacionalizam je adut Vučića i Đukanovića“* (accessed: 16 March 2022).

wide-spread political dissatisfaction of various actors, ultimately contributed to the inauguration of the first non-DPS-led-government in 30 years in 2020.

A heterogeneous cabinet headed by PM Zdravko Krivokapić was formed around the conservative catch-all coalition “For the Future of Montenegro”, which advocated a multi-vector policy, greater inclusion and interests of the “pro-Serbian” population, the SOC, but also pro-Europeanism, with support of the moderate-populist “Peace is Our Nation” and progressive, multiethnic-civic “United Reform Action” (URA).⁵⁸ The new parliamentary majority amended the controversial aspects of the religious law and assumed a reconciliatory tone toward Serbia and the SOC. However, the response from Belgrade has been constrained, which may also have to do with the fact that the (new) Montenegrin government hasn’t revoked recognition of Kosovo. Although religious tensions have somewhat eased, Podgorica’s Kosovo policy continues to represent a major stumbling block from Serbia’s perspective. In addition, the Krivokapić cabinet hasn’t overturned the decision of the previous government to banish the Serbian ambassador Božović, while Belgrade insists on his reappointment. In 2020, H.E. Božović spoke affirmatively about the 1918 Podgorica Assembly, therefore contradicting the 2018 parliamentary resolution, which perceived that act hostile toward Montenegro.⁵⁹ The public perception of mutual ties was also affected; according to a 2020 poll, more Serbs considered Bosnia-Herzegovina and Hungary “friendlier” than Montenegro.⁶⁰

The first official visit of PM Krivokapić in 2021 was shadowed by lacking diplomatic protocol, which some media characterized as disrespectful toward Podgorica.⁶¹ Likewise, the Basic Treaty, regulating the position of the MM was finally signed in August 2022, after the both sides overcame long running reluctance. It’s signing caused a no-confidence vote in Montenegrin Parliament.⁶² The *diarchy* in Montenegro between the president (Milo Đukanović from DPS) and the government (formed by the anti-DPS coalition, with occasional support of the pro-Serbian parties) portrayed essentially an ambiguous situation, marked, on one hand, by increased political pluralism (which is positive in democratic-performance-terms), while on the other hand making the situation unstable (therefore adding to the democracy-stability paradox). Also, this unsteadiness revealed that the previously marginalized and discriminated “pro-Serbian spectrum”, ranging from the SOC, to the Montenegrin Serbs’ parties and groups, to officials from Belgrade, all possess a certain potential which might shape further political developments in Montenegro.

⁵⁸ Tomović, Predrag and Srđan Janković. 2020. *Crnogorska Vlada: Jedan potpredsjednik i 12 ministara* (accessed: 5 June 2022).

⁵⁹ RTCG. 2020. *“Podgorička skupština izraz volje za ujedinenjem”* (accessed: 5 June 2022).

⁶⁰ Aljazeera. 2020. *Anketa: Manje građana Srbije smatra Hrvatsku kao neprijatelja* (accessed: 25 March 2022).

⁶¹ Janković, Srđan. 2021. *Prva posjeta Krivokapića Beogradu u sjenci protokolarnih propusta* (accessed: 13 March 2022).

⁶² European Western Balkans. 2022. *Montenegro signs the agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church* (accessed: 15 September 2022).

The nation-building question and identity disputes between Serbia and Montenegro

The national identity issue to a large extent plays an important role in relations between Montenegrins and Serbs. The results of Montenegro's independence referendum from 2006 revealed the complexity of inter-ethnic relations where questions of Montenegrin statehood and self-identification continue to play a dominant role in internal political life. A clear division between referendum winners and losers, those pro-Western or pro-Russia affiliated, has created a clear political division on the internal level. Consequently, Montenegro has entered into a very uncertain modern political phase, predominantly determined by political antagonism and inter-ethnic divisions, where Serbs, as the largest ethnic community, have not recognized the legitimacy of the referendum results from 2006.⁶³

Several policies adopted by the DPS-led government in the post-referendum era aiming to strengthen Montenegrin national identity (the use of new state symbols, the adoption of the Montenegrin language, and the deviation of domestic political elite from SOC etc.) have further strengthened the political divisions between Serbs and Montenegrins even at the inter-state level.⁶⁴ Mutual accusations between Montenegrin and Serbian state officials over the nation-building issues have shown the problematic nature of current political relations. Historical revisionism, the one-sided interpretation of various political decisions, and open interference of one in the internal affairs of one country on the other are among the tools used to strengthen one or the other side's political influence on society. As a result, spreading national-ethnic intolerance is being felt not only among political elites, but also among the citizens themselves.⁶⁵

In light of current political tensions, Serbian political leadership has supported the empowerment of an alternative identity in Montenegro mostly through various socio-political factors, namely the SOC in Montenegro, right-wing political party coalition DF, Serbo-Montenegrin academics, and pro-regime media and tabloids. Also, the Serbian government directly supported opening of the "Serbian House" (2019) in Podgorica in order to preserve Serbian national identity, tradition, and cultural uniqueness.⁶⁶ Various cultural and artistic societies, associations, and media are located within the Serbian House, such as Matica srpska, the Institute of Serbian Culture, the Serbian National Council, the Association of Writers of the Serbian People, Serbian Television and Radio, newspapers, portals, Serbian Cultural Center, etc.⁶⁷ To implement projects and support its work, Serbia provided a one-time grant of 1.64 million EUR to Serbian associations in Montenegro.⁶⁸

⁶³ Morrison, *Montenegro*.

⁶⁴ Džankić, *Reconstructing the Meaning*.

⁶⁵ Komar, Olivera and Slaven Živković. 2016. Montenegro: A democracy without alternations. *East European Politics and Societies* 30(4), 785–804.

⁶⁶ Vijesti. 2019. *Selaković otvara Srpsku kuću u* Podgorici (accessed: 10 September 2022).

⁶⁷ Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2017. *Male tajne crnogorske 'Srpske kuće'* (accessed: 10 September 2022).

⁶⁸ RTS. 2020. *Srbija šalje 1,64 miliona evra pomoći udruženjima u Crnoj Gori* (accessed: 10 September 2022).

Based on the nature of their actions, these actors may be perceived as dominant in terms of influence on Montenegrin socio-political developments. The inseparability of politics and culture (religion) remains a fundamental element of national self-identification where the Serbianness and Orthodoxy are equated.⁶⁹ The very same nation-religion proximity has been transferred to Montenegrin Serbs as being (mis)used by political elites to maintain their grip. In recent years, this ideological endeavor took its form through the concept of the ‘Serbian world’ (srpski svet) which primarily refers to giving legitimacy to expanding Serbia’s political influence outside of its borders. The concept ‘Serbian world’ refers to narrative of endangerment of Serbs outside Serbia for the purpose of their homogenization, as well as historical revisionism, denial of the existence of the national identity of certain nations in the region while expressing the belief that the national interests of Serbs, wherever they live, should be decided exclusively in Belgrade.⁷⁰

Although Aleksandar Vučić did not officially use a term ‘Serbian world,’ he often emphasized, in his public appearances, importance of maintaining the unity of the Serb nation that no one can destroy even though they live in different countries.⁷¹ The imposition of inter-ethnic polarization combined with its inability to accept the results of Montenegrin referendum coincides with the start of a stronger campaign of Vučić’s interference in Montenegro’s internal affairs. Accusing the former Serbian regime of allowing Montenegro to freely leave the state union with Serbia, he labelled the government in Serbia led by DS and its leader, President Boris Tadić, as irresponsible because they allowed themselves to lose the referendum campaign in the country where 30% of the populations declared themselves as Serbs while 60% of citizens speak the Serbian language.⁷² In fact, Vučić’s statement can be taken as the beginning of the dominant negative campaign against Montenegro being used up to the present.

He used various populist mechanisms through the imposition of ethno-national divisions and development of religious tensions that served to create a climate where disputing the existence of the Montenegrin national identity and its legitimate claim for the restoration of its statehood could be expressed and amplified. By using this populist rhetoric, Vučić succeeded to strengthen its power even outside of Serbia by further homogenizing the Serbian nation. In this regard, the Serbian foreign minister Nikola Selaković, quite known for his controversial statements about the Montenegrin national being, claimed that Montenegro is a classic Serbian state that has been proud of its Serbian identity since its existence.⁷³ In the same vein, the Serbian minister of interior Aleksandar Vulin, also known as one of the main supporter of this concept, pointed out that Vučić should create the ‘Serbian world’ as

⁶⁹ Veković, Marko and Jevtić Miroljub. 2019. Render unto Caesar: Explaining Political Dimension of the Autocephaly Demands in Ukraine and Montenegro. *Journal of Church and State* 61(4), 591-609.

⁷⁰ Digitalni forenzički centar (DFC). 2021. *Srpski svet – originalni pozajmljen concept*. Podgorica: DFC, 3-4.

⁷¹ N1. 2019. *Miting "Budućnost Srbije" u Beogradu završen govorom Vučića i specijalnom pesmom* (accessed: 19 April 2022).

⁷² Digitalni forenzički centar, *Srpski svet*, 6.

⁷³ Digitalni forenzički centar, *Srpski svet*, 6.

he is legitimate president of all Serbs, and therefore, it is natural that Serbs want to be united and because of that natural desire they have no reason to justify themselves.⁷⁴

The kind of informal identity politics of the ‘Serbian world’ has its main protagonists in the activities of the SOC and DF in Montenegro as these actors wield strong power to influence internal political developments and changes in society. The aspiration to establish a fluid Montenegrin identity in the modern age mainly coincides with the creation of an environment of various socio-political crises and instabilities ranging from mass anti-NATO protests in 2015 to the boycott of parliamentary elections in 2016 organized by the pro-Serbian DF bloc.⁷⁵ It can be inferred that such DF activities are also aimed at challenging the current Montenegrin identity struggle by questioning peoples’ values, beliefs, and behavior during important political events that gain greater local and regional social reach.

Regardless of the moderate public support that the DF received for slowing down the process of nation-building, Montenegro entered this last most turbulent phase at the end of 2019. Due to unpredictable internal political circumstances, this period was characterized by the adoption of Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro and consequently organization of mass protests by the SOC and its supporters and believers.⁷⁶ As the law was viewed as discriminatory and directly created against the SOC, the Church itself immediately, with the assistance of DF, the clergy, the monks, and the believing people, organized massive public protests – so-called street church liturgies, in order to influence the government to withdraw disputed law.⁷⁷ The SOC’s position has become pivotal in the internal socio-political sphere of Montenegro after 2020 elections as the Church succeeded not only to amend the controversial law but to elect a new government who are loyal to the church and its ethno-philentelistic ideology. Moreover, the SOC interference in the last elections not only led to demise of the DPS-led government after more than three decades, but it has also strengthened national self-identification in Montenegro based on the aforementioned equation of Serbianness with Orthodoxy.

In line with this view, the greatest SOC dignitaries are proponents of the assertion that Montenegrins and Serbs are one people, that Montenegrin national identity does not exist, and therefore, that the term Montenegrin is a fictional one that has no foundation in ethnicity, but in the geographical designation of a people that are qualified as Serbs. Therefore, the statement of the late Metropolitan Amfilohije is

⁷⁴ Danas. 2020. *Vulin: Vučić treba da stvara Srpski svet, on je predsednik svih Srba* (accessed: 26 March 2022).

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Nationalism*, 151-69.

⁷⁶ The controversial law stipulated that all religious buildings that represent cultural heritage and were the property of the state of Montenegro before the loss of its independence on 1 December 1918 will be registered as state property. And if any religious community has evidence that it has become the owner of any property in past or present time, the state will recognize and respect it. For more details: Vlada Crne Gore. 2021. *Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovijesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica Crne Gore* (accessed 4 April 2022).

⁷⁷ Reuters. 2020. *Thousands in Montenegro march against religious law* (accessed: 1 June 2022).

not surprising as he claimed that Montenegrins are nothing more than “communist bastards.”⁷⁸ However, the imposition of ethical divisions and religious polarization by the SOC continued to be salient in public discourse even before the adoption of the controversial law. In such a manner, the late SOC Patriarch Irinej claimed that the position of Serbs in Montenegro nowadays is the same as in time of the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945), and the position of the Serbian Church in Montenegro is worse than during the Ottoman occupation.⁷⁹ Surprisingly, the late patriarch did not apologize for such a statement because he directly contributed to raising ethnic-political tensions in society, and therefore creating antagonism between so-called ‘disenfranchised Serbs’ and ‘privileged Montenegrins’. In fact, the SOC continued with anti-Montenegrin rhetoric calling into question the state’s anti-fascist heritage, and its modern civic and multiethnic character. Seen from the church perspective, restoration of Montenegrin sovereignty after World War II was identified with creation of ‘Avnoj-fildžan’ state, the existence of the Montenegrin language and the MOC is denied, whereas Muslims were viewed as people of false faith.⁸⁰ As a result of such activities, we have witnessed an emergence of fluid identity settings. Precisely because the issue of national self-awareness has been challenged by the highest spiritual and religious authorities in Montenegro, it has greatly influenced the decline of ethnically-oriented Montenegrins over the years.

The pro-Serbian right-wing nationalist coalition block DF is another in a series of advocates for strengthening the alternative national identity in Montenegro in modern times. As is the case of a typical right-wing populist party, the coalition block DF, since its foundation in 2012, has proclaimed zero tolerance toward establishing any kind of relations or cooperation with DPS that had been ruling Montenegro for more than 30 years. Also, introducing a nationalist and conservative approach in its public appearances, the DF has dominantly highlighted traditional values such as ‘God’, ‘church’, ‘heroism’, ‘nation-Serbs’, ‘tradition’, ‘Orthodox customs’ as a central element of its party program.⁸¹ Due to its nationalist and conservative ideological stances, the DF has based its activities on the continuous political polarization of Montenegrin society. The block relies primarily on the rhetoric of political and ethnic divisions between Serbs and Montenegrins, continuously emphasizing the unenviable and disenfranchised position of the Serb minority during the DPS-led government. The polarization rose sharply as the DF never abandoned its new discourse by making a clear distinction between ‘pure and authentic people’ and ‘corrupted and rich elite.’ As previously stated, to polarize their opponents, the DF has implemented a multi-fold strategy approach by consciously advocating 1) total refusing a post-election coalition with DPS party; 2) improving the endangered status of the Serbian ethnic community; 3) protector of the SOC; and 4) over promising instead of promoting policies for economic recovery and decline of high unemployment.

⁷⁸Janković, *Amfilohije Radović*.

⁷⁹Tomović, Predrag. 2018. *Irinej se nije izvinio Crnoj Gori* (accessed: 15 March 2022).

⁸⁰ 2014. *Oštre osude govora mržnje Amfilohija Radovića* (accessed: 10 March 2022); Vijesti. 2015. *Amfilohije: Ne može SPC da prihvati granice “avnojske fildžan-države* (accessed: 3 May 2022).

⁸¹ Nova srpska demokratija (NSD). 2021. *Program* (accessed: 12 May 2022); Demokratska narodna partija Crne Gore (DNP). 2021. *Program* (accessed: 12 May 2022).

From now on, the DF will begin to rely significantly on strengthening political antagonism by imposing narratives about a state ‘anti-Serb policy’ introduced by the DPS-led government and the ‘decades of satanization of the Serb population and policy of assimilation’ conducted by Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović, etc. Clearly, polarization is essentially seen as a cheaper strategy and electorally far more rewarding than any other option available to them, relying on historical revisionism as an instrument for deepening ethnic divisions between Serbs and Montenegrins. For instance, political tensions that were rising on the commemoration of the Podgorica Assembly from 1918 (i.e., an event in which Montenegro lost its statehood and internationally recognized status by being annexed to Serbia) were controversial and above all highly problematic between Serbs and Montenegrins. While on one hand, the DF party elite saw this event as a claim for the unification of the Serbs into one state, on the other hand, the DPS-led government considered this occasion as an occupation of Montenegro.⁸²

Consequently, declining self-identity trends among Montenegrins is noticeable not only after the last 2020 parliamentary elections, but also after the first local elections held in 2021. Following the demise of the DPS’s autocratic leadership, the threat to the survival of the national project escalated in 2021 when political polarization further complicated inter-ethnic relations in the country. In that context, the Serbian media and tabloids loyal to President Vučić presented local elections in Nikšić and Herceg Novi (but also last Montenegrin parliamentary elections) as part of an internal issue of Serbia. By relying on propaganda, fake news, and open support and favoring certain political subjects in Montenegro, the pro-Vučić media machinery set in motion a negative campaign against Montenegro in order to influence internal political changes and processes in the society. The main narratives highlighted by these media outlets were aimed at presenting a) Montenegro as a captive and criminal state; b) Serbs as an endangered nation; c) political crisis in Montenegro; d) adoption of the Srebrenica Resolution as directed against Serbia and the Serbian people; e) former DPS regime as a persecutor who wants to take over ‘Serbian shrines’; f) local elections in Nikšić and Herceg Novi as crucial for the survival of the Serbian national corps in Montenegro.⁸³

Arguably, the creation of such a tense political situation by Vučić’s media contributed to the growth of national tensions in society consequently reflecting on the poor electoral results of the sovereigntist parties at the local level in Nikšić and Herceg Novi. Comparing the two election cycles from 2017 and 2021, the DPS, as a pro-sovereign Montenegrin party, had witnessed a visible decline in electorate shares in both cities, losing many councillor and mayoral seats in both municipalities. On the other hand, it is evident that the DF significantly improved its electoral results becoming the major political force in both municipalities.⁸⁴

⁸² Janković Srđan. 2018. *Podgorička skupština za nove političke igre* (accessed: 15 May 2022).

⁸³ Digitalni forenzički centar, *Srpski svet*, 9.

⁸⁴ Državna izborna komisija Crne Gore (DIK). 2022. *Izbori* (accessed: 19 May 2022).

The DF claims that Serbs and Montenegrins are one nation, and therefore that Montenegrin national self-identification, language, and church do not exist, has consequently influenced the existence of political indignation by the DPS-led government to strengthen Montenegrin national corpus even in the same case quite artificially. During the three decades of DPS rule, the party continuously imposed political divisions and ethnic-religious polarizations between Serbs on one side, and Montenegrins and ethnic national minorities (namely Bosniaks, Albanians, and Croats) on the other, consequently strengthening the sense of the alternative identity among the Serb minority as a reflection of political revolt.

Several identity policies adopted by the DPS-led government during the post-independence period for the purpose of further consolidation of Montenegrin self-awareness, such as the adoption of new state symbols, existence of the Montenegrin language, support of the autocephaly of MOC, have essentially convinced Serbs not to accept Montenegro as their motherland.⁸⁵ From a historical perspective, during the Ottoman era, Montenegro used several types of flags. However, from the period of rule of the Petrović dynasty, through SFRY to FRY, the tricoloured flag (red, blue, and white) was in general usage. By actualizing the issue of national self-awareness in Montenegro, this flag was replaced by the new Montenegrin national flag – a red flag with golden frames and with a coat of arms in the middle; a flag that substantially differs in colors and symbols from the one from the Petrović dynasty from the from the 1700s until the 1918. This new red flag was unacceptable to the Serbian community which perceived it as inconsistent with the cultural and historical traditions of Montenegrins. Similarly, nationhood day was switched from commemorating the 13 July 1941 (the beginning of the people’s uprising against the Fascist occupation) to celebrating the memory of international recognition of Montenegro by the Berlin Congress in 1878.

And perhaps, far more controversial remains the change of the Montenegrin national anthem as the song “Onamo, namo” written by King Nikola I Petrović contains stanzas that mention Serbian territories, history and tradition. This national anthem was replaced with the current “Oj svijetla majska zoro.” The current national anthem remains highly problematic for the Serbian community because it offends their national feelings, as the song was rearranged by the Montenegrin controversial nationalist leader, Sekula Drljević who collaborated with the Ustaše of the Independent State of Croatia and proclaimed the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Montenegro during WWII - an Axis-aligned puppet state supported by Italian authorities. Noticeably, by introducing the new Montenegrin state symbols into public service, political elites tried to strengthen Montenegrin self-awareness with the centuries-old existence of national distinctiveness and continuity of statehood, which was abolished after 1918, which had broken the relationship with the past.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Džankić, Jelena. 2014. Citizenship between the ‘Image of the Nation’ and the ‘Image of Politics: The Case of Montenegro.’ *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14(1), 43–64; Morrison, *Montenegro*.

⁸⁶ Morrison, *Nationalism*.

Along with the issues with the state symbols, policies adopted concerning the Montenegrin census and language were perceived among the minority Serbs as assimilative policies that have predominately developed a sense of political revanchism. In such circumstances, an opinion is created among minority Serbs that they should leave government institutions, distance themselves from national Montenegrins, and even cut off personal contacts as this is the only way to preserve the Serbian national identity.⁸⁷

Besides, the intra-Orthodox dispute between the SOC and the MOC over the issue of recognition of the MOC's autocephaly rose to the level of political struggle where the question of Montenegrin nationhood and statehood is being considered as a fuzzy business. It has been used as an important political tool in empowering the Montenegrin national identity, integrity, and political cohesion consequently as the MOC's autocephaly demand has some strong historical roots. Following the decree of King Alexander I in 1920 to abolish the MOC and Montenegrin state (due to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), a cornerstone of the SOC-MOC political conflict exists over the issue of autocephaly, as it remains the important question of preserving Montenegrin national identity.⁸⁸ What is even more intriguing, both types of Orthodoxy, which are mainly shaped by national borders, have also acquired a national-oriented connotation. Thus, it is conceived as an important element of the nation, culture, and tradition, and is therefore profoundly politicized.⁸⁹

Finally, other events and occasions have been observed as a clearly discriminatory and anti-Serb, namely the recognition of Kosovo in 2008, the official participation of the Montenegrin delegation in the anniversary celebration 'Operation Storm' in Croatia in 2018 etc. Such political circumstances greatly influenced the Serbian minority to further homogenize in national-ethnic terms, but also to politically radicalize by demonstrating massive mobilization as the main instrument of protest to exercise their political and religious rights.⁹⁰

Conclusion

It might be reasonable to conclude that both the governments of Serbia and Montenegro still use extensive populist policy mechanisms based on ethnic antagonism and growing upheaval between Serbian and Montenegrin societies. Even more, inter-state political divisions and national polarizations play a significant role in the SNS and DPS strategy aiming to strengthen a dominant position in the society and therefore affecting internal socio-political developments and processes in these societies.⁹¹ Consequently, both sets of domestic political elites cause damage to inter-ethnic and other perspectives of cooperation by (ab)using

⁸⁷ Tomović, *Srbi pozivaju na bojkot*.

⁸⁸ Veković and Jevtić, *Render unto Caesar*.

⁸⁹ Ramet, Sabrina. 1999. *Balkan Babel*. Boulder: Westview Press; Vučković, *Europeanizing Montenegro*; Morrison, *Nationalism*.

⁹⁰ Džankić, Jelena. *Reconstructing the Meaning*.

⁹¹ Džankić and Keil, *State-Sponsored Populism*.

identarian aspects. They do so to present themselves as their respective national guardians, which increases their patriotic potential and chances to retain power.

By using various populist instruments, Serbian and Montenegrin political elites have greatly relied on the imposition of polarization being the cheapest and electorally most rewarding strategy, more so than any other option available to them. They lean heavily on ethnic national divisions, identity disputes, and historical revisionism as main instruments for deepening existing divisions between Serbs and Montenegrins. Polarization rose sharply as both sets of elites have never abandoned their populist discourse by making very clear distinctions among those who are politically eligible or unsuitable for one or the other regime. The introduction of the multi-fold strategy of division continues to be used today by both sides by refusing to reduce the level of ethnic antagonism, or to soften nationalist inflammatory rhetoric, and to cease to present themselves as guardians of the national beings.

Also, this article argued that Montenegrin political elites will not be successful in consolidating national identity even in the future, mostly because national-self-identification was mitigated due to high exposure and responsiveness to external (Serbian) influences that have mobilized the public around this alternative identity. Moreover, it can be expected that the further consolidation of the Montenegrin national identity (attractively seen through the acquisition of autocephaly by the canonically unrecognized MOC) has faced and will face much greater resistance, especially from the wider regional environment. Yet, the DPS-led policies of strengthening Montenegrin identity failed not just because national institutions and elites were not persistent in enforcing a national identity. But also because of the absence of strategic communication with the public on why it was important to legally regulate relations between the state and the SOC and also because of previously adopted artificial identity policies (such as the adoption of the Montenegrin language) that did not resonate well among the population. This is the case with Montenegrin national identity as national sentiments gradually decreased from 91% in 1948 to 44% in 2011, while according to data from the last census in Serbia, nationally determined Montenegrins were practically halved from 1.4% in 1991 to 0.54% in 2011.⁹²

There are numerous practical instances of multi-layered identity politics in Montenegro, which encompasses not only the domestic aspect but also the international/geopolitical one. However, we will only single out a few. Several identity politics enforced by the DPS-led government in the post-referendum period aimed to consolidate national self-awareness, namely the use of new state symbols, the adoption of the Montenegrin language, and the status of the SOC in Montenegro. Following the Law on Religious Freedom this has led to political polarization, consequently creating conditions for deep instability and inter-ethnic tensions in society on a long-term basis. Inflammatory political speeches include the recent qualification of the SOC by President Đukanović as a non-religious, criminalized,

⁹² Jenne and Bieber, *Situational Nationalism*.

para-military structure, and a Kremlin implementation agency,⁹³ while Marko Kovačević (the mayor of Nikšić from the New Serb Democracy) compared the adoption of the previous Law on Religious Freedom to the genocidal policies of the Independent State of Croatia.⁹⁴

Finally, it would be justified to claim that as long as the imposition of polarization continues to be widely used by both sides, it seems unlikely to expect that the process of reconciliation between the Serbian and Montenegrin peoples' will be able to move forward.

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⁹³ Beta. 2022. Đukanović: SPC kriminalizovana i paravojna struktura (accessed: 16 September 2022).

⁹⁴ Milić, Predrag. Đukanović: Sve što je oteto Crnoj Gori biće ponovo njeno, ma koliko se neko protivio (accessed: 16 September 2022).

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