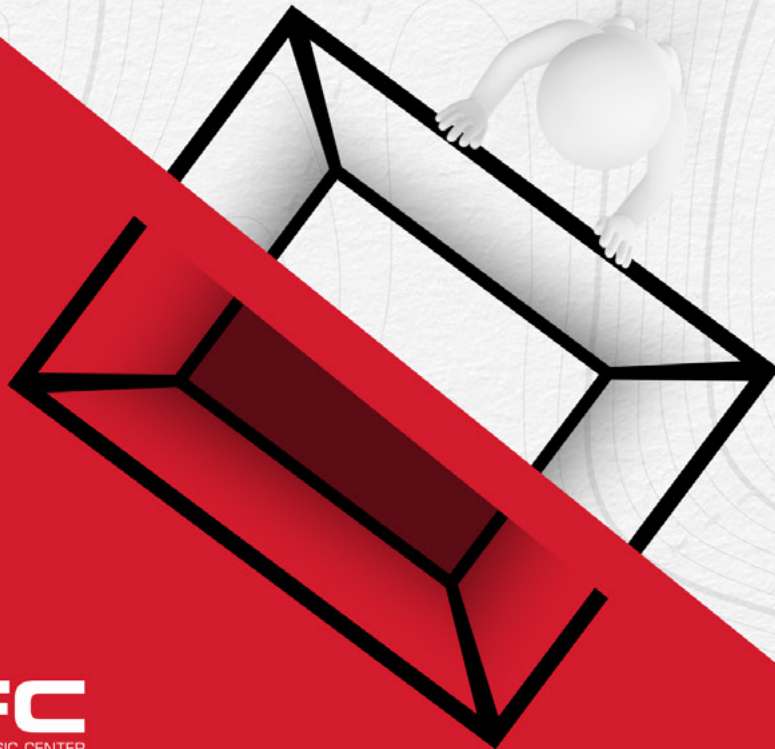


DFC STUDY

Unbreakable Bonds or Geopolitical Strategy

INFLUENCE OF SERBIA IN MONTENEGRO





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March 2024

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Introduction

The foreign policy of Serbia is predominantly determined by the non-acceptance of the territorial framework of the Serbian state and continuous advocacy for the unification of the Serbian people into one state. Ideas about the expansion of territorial boundaries for the purpose of national unification emerged even before Serbia gained independence at the Berlin Congress in 1878. Their authorship is attributed to a Serbian from Austria, Count Đorđe Branović, who in the 17th century sought support from the Austrian Emperor Leopold I to spark an uprising of the Serbian people against Turkish rule. He proposed the formation of the *Kingdom of Illyria*, which would encompass all Serbs into one state.

Načertanije by Ilija Garašanin from 1844 is the first program that envisions the creation of a South Slavic state led by Serbia. Historical aspirations based on the concept of unifying the Serbian national corpus into a unique state framework were, in a certain sense, realized in 1918 with the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. By the decision of the so-called *Podgorica Assembly* (also known as the Great People's Assembly of the Serbian People in Montenegro), the Montenegrin people lost their identity and international political subjectivity of the state through the unconditional annexation to Serbia.

Socialist Yugoslavia, formed after World War II, was conceived as a state of equal member republics, within which Montenegro managed to regain its name and national identity. On the eve of its dissolution in 1986, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) released a document titled *Memorandum*, which represented a modified version of earlier greater-Serbia national programs. The theses from the mentioned document, which argued that the borders of Serbia were not adequate for the demographic structure of the Serbian people and their endangerment from anti-Serbian forces beyond Serbia's borders, served as fuel for the escalation of the nationalist movement. Regardless of its ideological background, ranging from the far left to the radical right, with certain fluctuations, it has retained its vitality and destructive potential up to the present day.

This significantly influenced the definition of Serbia's foreign policy position following the restoration of Montenegro's independence in 2006, and the declaration of Kosovo's

independence in 2008 opened numerous dilemmas regarding the interpretation of national interests, as well as the ways and means by which they can be realized.

Pragmatic political interests have resulted in Serbia aligning itself closer with Russia to leverage its position in the United Nations Security Council (UN) and the veto power possibility over Kosovo's request for membership in the UN and other international organizations. Belgrade continues to perceive Kosovo as part of its territory and puts in diplomatic efforts to prevent its international recognition. In addition to Russia's opposition to Kosovo's independence, energy cooperation as well as animosity towards the West contributed to the strengthening of ties between the two countries.

In the shadow of the complex and longstanding Kosovo issue, Serbia's regional positioning is conceived, leaving dilemmas of whether its initiatives on expanding regional cooperation are motivated by economic reasons in line with meeting demands of the European Union for *strengthening good neighborly relations*, or if they are part of *the concern for the Serbian people living beyond Serbia's borders*.

Serbia has not adopted a foreign policy strategy, and its ambivalent foreign policy is based on the so-called four pillars, which include the EU, Russia, China, and the USA.

The concept of the three pillars of foreign policy and military neutrality of Serbia, created by the former Prime Minister of Serbia, Vojislav Koštunica, and complemented with the fourth pillar (China) by the former President of Serbia, Boris Tadić, was further strengthened with the Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) rise to power, created upon the dissolution of Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party.

The fact that global relations have dramatically changed in the meantime has not influenced a change in Serbia's foreign policy course. Official Belgrade continues to insist that Serbia is a neutral country on the European path, proud of its traditional friendship with Russia and steel friendship with China.

On the other hand, the European Union and the United States base their relations with Serbia on foreign policy priorities, among which the most significant are: suppressing and limiting the influence of Russia and China, normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and protecting the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The relative failure achieved in that regard can be explained by various reasons, but it certainly indicates the need for a change in the political dynamics of the EU and the USA towards the regime in Belgrade. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has usurped all sources of power in Serbia and has exerted significant influence and control over Serbian political structures in Northern Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska (entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as in Montenegro. He has secured such a position thanks to numerous factors, among which the inertia and indecisiveness of the EU, as well as the insufficient focus of the USA on the Western Balkan region, play a significant role.

In the eyes of the West, Vučić is an unavoidable factor on key issues in the Western Balkans, despite official Belgrade's refusal to join the European Union's sanctions against Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, and the influence of China is constantly increasing.

Serbia is the only candidate country that has not aligned its foreign and security policy with the European Union. The misaligned objectives with Brussels led to a decline in support among Serbian citizens for EU membership, which has been contributed to by a long-standing continuous anti-Western campaign by Serbian tabloids close to the regime, which strongly influenced the shaping of public opinion.

The media under his control have created an image of the West as an enemy with whose

pressures Serbia is permanently confronted, especially when it comes to sanctions against Russia and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. This freed up space for the operation of Russian media in Serbia. *Russia today* opened an office for the Western Balkans in Belgrade in 2022, and *Sputnik Srbija* continued broadcasting without interruption.

Paradoxically, Serbia is mostly oriented towards Western economies, and significant foreign direct investments in Serbia come from the European Union.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Serbia aligned itself with some European positions in international organizations, including the United Nations General Assembly. However, it did not adhere to restrictive measures against the Russian Federation; on the contrary, it maintained a high level of relations with it. This raises questions about Serbia's strategic direction.

The assessment that Serbia made an important step by joining the United Nations Resolution condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, and that it should not be further *pushed* towards Russia and China, contributes to the impression of right-wing and nationalist structures in Serbia and the Western Balkan region about the weakness of the West. This complicates a constructive approach to the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and the abandonment of policies supporting secessionist tendencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The majority of Serbian citizens, shaping their opinions through media under the absolute control of Vučić's regime that disseminates pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and anti-Western narratives, oppose the imposition of sanctions on Russia.

Serbia's European perspective cannot be legitimized in an atmosphere characterized by the absence of consensus on strategic goals and with public attitudes shaped based on long-standing anti-Western propaganda. The official Belgrade's stance towards Russia can hardly be changed without the risk of losing electoral support, along with the calculated possibility of losing Russia's support regarding Kosovo, as well as its potential turning to other proxy actors on Serbia's political scene.

Greater state ambitions based on the denial of the territorial framework of the Serbian state, which are inherent in the actions of the Serbian ruling structures in a historical context, are wrapped in a new form of the so-called *Serbian world* and are ideologically and methodologically aligned with Russian imperial ambitions. Resorting to hybrid methods of operation aims at the denial of history, culture, tradition, and national identity in the *immediate neighborhood* towards which both Russian and Serbian regimes have aspirations. In a geopolitical context, a drastic form of such manifestation was seen in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, while in the Western Balkan region, it strongly reflects on the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the internal situation in Montenegro.

A stronger reaction from Western partners and allies due to the display of overt hegemonic aspirations of the regime in Belgrade towards Montenegro and harsh interference in its internal affairs has been lacking which was certainly contributed to by the absence of an institutional and stronger public opinion reaction in Montenegro. The permanent propaganda campaign carried out in cooperation with numerous Serbian nationalist structures from Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska (entity of BiH), as well as public statements by Serbian officials and officials affiliated with Serbia, leave little room for speculations about their real intentions, which are directed towards the gradual reshaping of Montenegro's constitutional framework. According to their projections, it should be organized as a state of peoples instead of a civic state, as a stage on the path of completing the project of creating the *Serbian world*^{1,2}. It is implied that the decision-making center on significant issues of all Serbians of the region would be in Belgrade.

The Overton Window

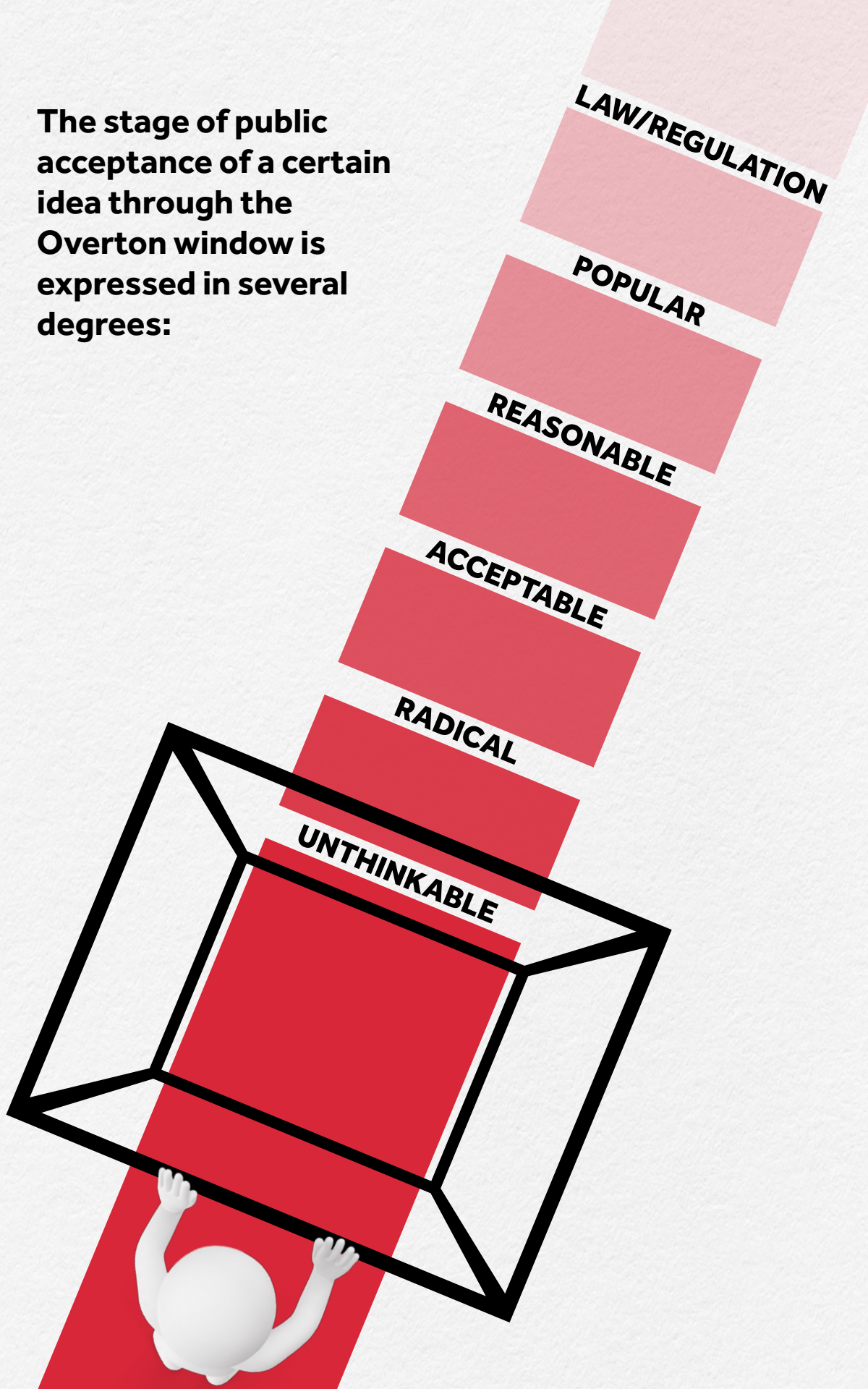
Since the change of government in Montenegro in 2020, Montenegrin society has never faced a faster expansion of the so-called Overton Window effect, that is, the legitimization of once unimaginable ideas.

The Overton Window is a simple and effective technique that allows for *the indoctrination of any idea into the consciousness, even of a highly moral society*. It is a term used to describe the range of ideas, primarily socio-political ones, that the public considers acceptable for discussion. This refined technique ensured gradual influence, with the entire process remaining almost imperceptible to society. The Overton Window was coined in the mid-1990s by Joseph P. Overton, who was a senior vice president at the *think tank Mackinac Center for Public Policy*.

Serbian proxies in Montenegro consistently expand the Overton windows, turning ideas promoted by the *Serbian world* from taboos to acceptable, reasonable, and popular. The idea of all Serbs living in one state is not a new one. However, after the end of the war in the former SFRY, and in Montenegro especially after the restoration of independence, it was unthinkable. However, today, the creation of the *Serbian world* is a realistic policy imposed by Serbian proxies, striving to make it popular and acceptable to Montenegrin citizens who identify themselves nationally as Serbs. The identical process occurs concerning the state symbols of Montenegro, state holidays, antifascist heritage, and the wars in the territory of the former SFRY in the 1990s. State symbols and holidays are not respected and are contested, collaborationist movements from World War II are portrayed as antifascist, while war criminals from the 1990s are presented as heroes.

The Overton Window is a simple and effective technique that allows for the indoctrination of any idea into the consciousness, even of a highly moral society.

The stage of public acceptance of a certain idea through the Overton window is expressed in several degrees:



Network of Serbia's Influence

Strategy and Directions of Operation

Shortly after the referendum on Montenegro's independence, the Government of Vojislav Koštunica, on October 8, 2006, adopted the first strategic document that dealt with the Serbian diaspora and Serbs in the region. *The Declaration on the Proclamation of Relations Between the Homeland and the Diaspora as a Matter of the Highest State and National Interest* contains three articles³, the first article is particularly indicative as it deals with *two involuntarily and spatially separated parts of the Serbian people*. The Declaration also treats the issue of Serbs outside Serbia as one of the most important state and national interests¹. Although the Government of Vojislav Koštunica declaratively advocated for European integration, the year 2008 represents a turning point in regional relations and the profiling of Serbia's foreign policy priorities. In February 2008, the Republic of Kosovo declared independence. From that moment, Serbia has used the issue of Kosovo's international recognition to instrumentalize the issue of Serbs in the region, as well as to deepen ties with Russia and China because of the veto power these countries hold in the United Nations Security Council regarding this issue. Also, in December 2008, the Government of Boris Tadić sold the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) to the Russian state company Gazprom Neft, thereby binding strategic energy sources to the Russian Federation. The sale of NIS was not conducted according to the rules of a market economy, making it clear that this act represents the political binding of Serbia to official Moscow and opens the door for a stronger Russian presence in the Western Balkan region.⁴

The new approach to the issue of Serbs in the region is evident in the *Law on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region*⁵, passed by the Serbian National Assembly on October 28, 2009. The law outlines clear guidelines for preserving culture, language, and script, as well as maintaining connections with Serbs in the region and the diaspora, and methods for project funding. However, from the perspective of long-term operational engagement toward Montenegro, a document of the *Ministry of Faith and Diaspora of Serbia*, which was adopted in 2011 - *The Strategy on Preservation and Strengthening of Relations Between the Home Country and the Diaspora and the Home Country of Serbs in the Region*⁶ - stands out. The section on Montenegro, states the need to grant Serbian citizenship to all members of the Serbian people from Montenegro who wish to obtain it. It also emphasizes the commitment to the restoration of the sacred heritage of the Serbian people and support for the development of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Additionally, the document focuses on providing financial support for the construction of seminaries and high schools under the auspices of the SOC.

The new strategy of operation, direct and indirect interference in the internal and social affairs in Montenegro, was established during the rule of Boris Tadić, and implemented at the operational level through his advisors Mlađan Đorđević and Milorad Miki Rakić. Unlike the policy of Slobodan Milošević, which directly confronted the West in 1999 and attempted to destabilize Montenegro through the misuse of certain military resources, the new tactic of the Belgrade authorities was the criminalization of the state of Mon-

tenegro through the creation of media narratives. Such efforts by official Belgrade were taking place concurrently with Montenegro's aspirations for EU membership. In 2010, the European Commission provided a positive opinion on initiating accession negotiations with Montenegro to join the European Union, and the European Council granted it candidate status.⁷

Mladen Đorđević, an advisor to Boris Tadić, played a significant role in shaping Serbian hegemonic ambitions towards Montenegro. During the period from 2010 to 2012, he coordinated numerous activities with the pro-Serbian opposition in Montenegro, especially during the period before the population census in Montenegro in 2011. He later found himself at the helm of the organization *Srpski kod*, which promotes Russian-Serbian interests in the region. The fact that Russian and Serbian nationalist structures are active in channeling destructive activities towards Montenegro suggests that Russia's imperial ambitions and Serbia's regional power demonstrations are part of the same agenda. Activities towards Montenegro have been synergistically planned and organized in accordance with the strategic documents of the Serbian government, with the aim of *protecting the endangered Serbian population in the region*. The narrative about the *endangered Serbian national essence* is identical to the narrative created after Slobodan Milošević came to power in 1991 when the entire media and intelligence apparatus was mobilized to create Greater Serbia.⁸

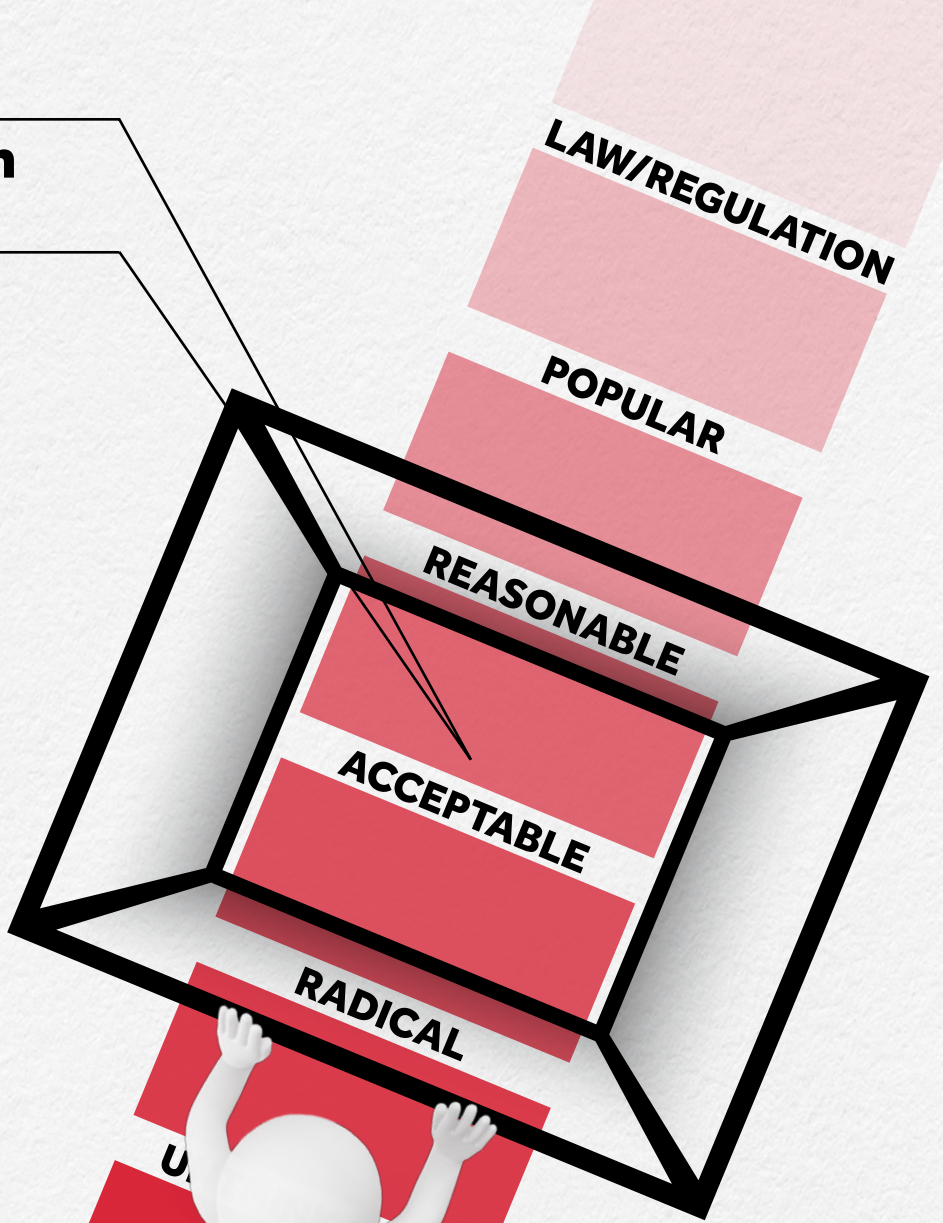
In addition to the concern for Serbs in the region, a significant form of pressure from the authorities in Belgrade has been the creation of media affairs that deliberately linked the Montenegrin state to organized crime. The authorities in Serbia tried to portray Montenegrin statehood and sovereignty as a product of communist rule after World War II, and the restoration of Montenegrin independence as a result of the actions of criminal structures.⁹

The National Security Strategy of Serbia, adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on December 27, 2019, emphasizes *the preservation of the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live*. The then Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin, during the presentation of the Strategy in Parliament, stated that *the Republic of Serbia closely monitors changes in the environment and adjusts its defence and security policy accordingly*.

The Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region

The Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, operating within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, allocates funds annually to numerous organizations and associations working on the promotion and connection between the home country and Serbs in the region. According to the *Law on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region*, the term *Serbs in the region* refers to members of the Serbian people living in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Albania, and Hungary and it was coined as an expression of the home country's aspiration to improve the position and rights of members of the Serbian people living beyond the borders of the Republic of Serbia and to contribute to the preservation of the Serbian language and culture. Cooperation with Serbs in the region is conducted through two programmatic activities: Preservation and strengthening of National and Cultural Identity, and Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region¹⁰. Here, similarities can be observed with Russia's state policy toward compatriots, as defined by the *Federal Law on the State Policy of the Russian Federation Towards Compatriots Abroad* and implemented through *Rosstrudnichestvo*, an executive body of the Russian Federation for compatriots' issues.

Serbian world



Serbian proxies in Montenegro continuously expand the Overton window, thus ideas promoted by the Serbian world have shifted from taboo to acceptable.

The Director of the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region is Arno Gujon, who evolved from political involvement in the far-right *Bloc Identitaire* in France to political engagement in the Government of Serbia. Gujon presented himself as a humanitarian who assists Serbs in Kosovo. In 2020, he announced that the religious processions in Montenegro serve as an example not only for the religious people and not only for Serbs but for the entire world. Gujon himself confirmed that the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region significantly financially supports organizations in Montenegro. In December 2022, during a sitting of the Committee on the Diaspora in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, he announced that Serbian organizations in Montenegro would receive three times more funding in 2023 than in 2022. According to the data from the website of the Administration for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, in 2022, Serbian-affiliated organizations in Montenegro were allocated 3,830,000 RSD, while in 2023, 9,630,000 RSD were allocated for projects contributing, through their quality, to the preservation and strengthening of connections between the home country and Serbs from Montenegro.

The money is allocated to organizations and projects that allegedly promote information, culture, tradition, and education, but in reality, an attempt is thereby made to impose on the public the idea that Serbian identity, the Serbian language, culture, and tradition are dominant in Montenegro. Simultaneously, the sovereignty of Montenegro, the uniqueness of Montenegrin identity, language, tradition, and culture is denied, and the secular and civic character of the state is undermined, impacting Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic path. Organizations close to the Serbian Orthodox Church and pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political structures in Montenegro receive funding from the Government of Serbia. This money is allocated for financing numerous forums, public appearances, and activities on social media, and media, with the aim of supporting extreme nationalist and right-wing political options.

In 2023, the unregistered pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portal *IN4S* received 400.000 RSD from the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region for a project titled *Anti-Serbdom in Montenegro*. The *Serbian National Council of Montenegro*, founded and headed by Momčilo Vuksanović, received 300.000 dinars for publishing a project titled *Towards the Population Census in Montenegro* in June 2023. In 2024, at a forum titled *The Position of the Serbian People in the Countries of the Region*, held during the *Saint Sava celebration days* in Čačak, Momčilo Vuksanović stated that they expect the census results to show a significant increase in the number of citizens in Montenegro identifying as Serbs and speaking the Serbian language.

During the same period, *The Serbian National Council of Montenegro* (founded by the initiative of the *Serbian National Council*) of which Momčilo Vuksanović is also the founder and president, received 300.000 RSD for the project *Academic Forums*. The *Academic Forums* in the Serbian House (Srpska kuća) in Podgorica and Pljevlja covered topics such as *Either Njegoš or Tito*, *The Perspectives of the Serbian People in Montenegro*, *The Montenegrin Identity Enigma*, and *Montenegro and the Recognition of the False State Kosovo*. Promoters of Serbian national thought, including Marko Carević, Novica Đurić, Budimir Dubak, Milo Lompar, Dejan Mitrović, Dragoslav Bokan, Srđa Trifković, and others, participated in these forums.

The Serbian Historical Cultural Society Nikola Vasojević from Montenegro was included in June 2023 on the list compiled by the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region based on the decision to co-finance projects contributing to the preservation and strengthening of connections between the home country and Serbs in the region through their quality. The Society received 200.000 dinars from the Government of Serbia for the project *Publishing, Printing, and Promoting the Voice of Holmija*. The president and founder of that society is Goran Kiković, a history professor, member of the Main Board of the New Serbian Democracy, and a former president of the Municipal Assembly of Berane. He advocated for the erection of a monument to the war criminal from

World War II and Chetnik commander Pavle Đurišić. Kiković is also the founder of the *Serbian Cultural Center Župan Prvoslav*, which advocated for naming the streets of Berane after the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić and Chetnik commanders Pavle Đurišić and Momčilo Đuić. The spokesperson of the European Commission, Ana Pisonero Hernandez, reacted to these proposals, stating that *the EU expects political leaders, including those at a local level, to respect the victims of past conflicts and sincerely affirm democracy, justice, and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Glorifying war criminals, revisionism, and the denial of documented facts about wartime events, including war crimes, are contrary to the most basic European values*, stated Pisonero. *Voice of Holmija*, for whose printing and publishing were allocated funds from Serbia, is a magazine for literature, history, and culture. According to Goran Kiković, editor-in-chief, *it serves as a barrier to forgeries and the Doclean-Montenegrin distortion of historical truth*. The magazine promotes the idea of restoring the chapel on Lovćen, built by the Serbian King Aleksandar Karađorđević in 1925, and the narrative that Montenegro is a Serbian state.

New Actors

After the political changes in Serbia in 2012, it seemed that Montenegro would not be a focal point of the foreign policy priorities of the new government led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP). The government in Montenegro led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) looked favorably upon the change in Serbia and the rise to power of former radicals Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić. The first years of the Serbian Progressive Party's rule in Serbia were marked by numerous statements from both Serbian and Montenegrin officials about the improvement of relations between the two countries, often described as the best in the last twenty years. In parallel with a different regional political dynamic, the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia opened the door to Russian media influence in Serbia. The media landscape in Serbia has become a key stronghold for intelligence and propaganda activities, with portals such as *Srbin Info*, *Nova Srpska Politička Misao*, *Srbija Danas*, *Vesti – Gazeta*, *Vostok*, and *News-Front*. The main bastion for Russian malign activities became the Russian state media *Sputnik*, which opened its office in Serbia in 2015.¹¹

Montenegro's firm commitment to joining NATO and receiving an invitation for membership in 2015 disclosed the foreign policy priorities of the Serbian government. Tomislav Nikolić, from the position of the President of Serbia, stated that *by choosing to be part of the EU and NATO, Montenegro consciously nullifies its independence and agrees to be someone's puppet*.¹² After Montenegro voted for Kosovo's membership in UNESCO on October 21, 2015, narratives in Serbia's public policy regarding how the Montenegrin government treats Serbs in Montenegro have been revitalized. The old narrative from the time of Milošević's rule about the endangered Serbian people in certain countries in the region has become part of the official policy of the SPP and Aleksandar Vučić. Antagonism towards Montenegro reflects Serbia's strategic approach that places EU integration on the same level as cooperation with Russia, the United States, and China. In this way, to some extent, the significance of EU integration has been relativized, and space has been created for the influence of third parties in the Western Balkan region.

Russia's involvement in the terrorism attempt on the day of the parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2016 marked a turning point in the relations between Serbia and Montenegro. Details about the coup attempt were confirmed by the then-Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. However, after the arrival of the Russian Secretary of the National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, in Belgrade on October 26, 2016, the paradigm of relations between Serbia and Montenegro changed. Institutional cooperation between the two states on this issue ceased, and the authorities in Belgrade revitalized narrative constructs that contributed to the disruption of mutual relations. The narra-

tive of the alleged difficult position of Serbs in Montenegro has been continuously used for Belgrade's direct interference in the internal affairs of Montenegro.

The *Democratic Front* (DF) requested a meeting with Aleksandar Vučić on November 1, 2016, claiming that the *Serbian people in Montenegro were subjected to persecution, media and political demonization*.¹³ The leaders of the *Democratic Front* presented the judicial proceedings concerning the attempt at terrorism as a threat to all citizens who identify as Serbs in Montenegro. They elevated the position of the President of Serbia to the level of protector of all Serbs in the region.

The strengthening of the ties between Russian state structures and Serbian institutions after the attempted coup in Montenegro reflected the intensity of Serbian influence in Montenegro. Montenegro's entry into NATO in 2017 did not change Serbia's stance on Montenegro's independence and sovereignty.

The reliance of the *Democratic Front* on Belgrade and Moscow is evident even after Montenegro's entry into NATO. The leaders of the *Democratic Front* met with the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, in Belgrade in January 2019. On that occasion, Vladimir Putin referred to the leaders of the *Democratic Front* as heroes.¹⁴

We have to endure and do what we heard from the President of Russia, who conveyed such a message to me and Milan when we met him in Belgrade – just endure, all of this is rotten, it will collapse very soon.

Andrija Mandić
2019

The first meeting between Aleksandar Vučić and the leaders of the Democratic Front Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, Blažo Popović representing the Matica Srpska, Momčilo Vuksanović on behalf of the Serbian National Council, and Budimir Aleksić, representing the Institute for Serbian Culture, held on December 5, 2016



Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić with Vladimir Putin in Belgrade in 2019

Due to the Srebrenica genocide, the Serbian people will never forget and cannot forget, regardless of the verdicts and decisions of the Tribunal, the Serbian army led by Radovan Karadžić and General Mladić.

Andrija Mandić

on November 22, 2017, regarding the verdict for Ratko Mladić¹⁷

Besides strong anti-NATO narratives in public statements and extrajudicial actions, DF's activities are characterized by robust rhetoric that delegitimizes international judicial decisions. The verbal reconciliation policy propagated by pro-Serbian proxy actors in the past decade was accompanied by an attitude of negation towards the events in the 1990s in Yugoslavia. The verdicts of the Hague Tribunal for war crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina are considered by DF leaders as a continuity of the West's anti-Serbian policy. The verdicts of the Hague Tribunal against Ratko Mladić¹⁵ and Radovan Karadžić¹⁶ for the genocide in Srebrenica are portrayed by DF leaders as a reckoning of the West with the Serbian people, and themselves as victims of that reckoning.

The Synergy of Proxy Actors

The strategy of instrumentalizing Serbians in the region took shape in 2018 when Serbian officials and their political proxies became active in raising ethnic tensions in Montenegro. The rigidity of Serbian policy towards Montenegro reflected on all elements of Montenegrin sovereignty.

Just like Russia in its relation with Ukraine, Serbia employs all elements of *informational confrontation* to achieve hegemonic goals towards Montenegro. Imposing regional authority and projecting long-term strategic goals remains a constant in its policy. For the first time since the aggression on Ukraine, Aleksandar Vučić publicly spoke about the future of Serbia on the occasion of the 182 anniversary of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts on November 20, 2023. Strategic patience, that is buying time, indicates that Serbia does not tie its future to the EU but to imperial Russia and China, and that it hopes for a better geopolitical moment for the realization of regional projections.¹⁸ Serbia's aspiration for multipolarity and the desire to diversify the international political order reflects the latent anti-Western tendencies of Aleksandar Vučić's regime, with the expectation of weakening Western influence and strengthening Russia and China on the global stage, which would provide presumptions for the realization of strategic goals related to Serbia's regional agenda.¹⁹

The platform for the actions of the pro-Serbian structures in Montenegro is based on the foreign policy projections of Vučić's regime. Pro-Russian narratives about an imperial

Did Vučić or anyone of the officials destroy the FRY and let Montenegro go? People from Serbia who allowed the loss of the campaign in a country with 30% Serbs and 60% Serbian-speaking citizens ahead of the referendum on Montenegrin independence in 2006, can be called nothing other than irresponsible.

Aleksandar Vučić

July 22, 2018

West eager for conflict are in complete correlation with Belgrade's attitudes. Criticism of the dominance of Western values and positions on Kosovo, and a sincere desire for a bipolar world order are universal motives of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian structures in Montenegro. DF's congratulation on the occasion of the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China sums up the anti-Western aspirations of pro-Serbian right-wing structures. Similar to the government in Serbia they envision the survival of their political idea in multipolarity.²⁰

A significant point of influence is the creation of divisions based on a denial position towards Montenegrin history. The commemoration of *A Hundred Years of Liberation of Boka and the Unification* on November 7, 2018, contains all the elements of hybrid actions and marks the continuation of a destructive policy towards Montenegro. The event was organized by the Serbian proxy association *Serbian People of Boka Bay (Sprski narod Boke)*, and the main message from the gathering was - *Long live our age-old protector Russia, long live our Montenegro and Boka, our Serbia, long live freedom, and long live the Serbian people in Boka and the universe, amen.*²¹

One can sense the scent of freedom in the world. I'm not saying it has arrived, but one can feel it. I see how freedom movements are spreading around the world.

Aleksandar Vučić
at the UN on September 21, 2023

The immeasurable influence of the People's Republic of China (PCR) on achieving political balance in world policy, where there should be no instructions from either side, i.e. aggressive policy of the West, but by creating a bipolar world, there could finally be much-needed political equilibrium on the global stage, acting as a guarantor of lasting peace and dampening Western imperialistic dreams of further igniting war conflicts at numerous critical points in Europe and around the world..

DF's congratulation on the occasion of the Congress of the Communist Party of China

The narrative created before the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is identical to the narrative about Serbian Boka that was disseminated during the events in Budva. The authorities in Budva, consisting of representatives of pro-Serbian parties, non-governmental organizations, and individuals from Serbian institutions, glorified the disappearance of the state through the narrative of the liberation of Boka Kotorska Bay. Intentionally placing Boka outside the context of Montenegro's territory serves to create an impression that Boka is not part of Montenegro, but historically belongs to an imaginary *Serbian seaside*. Messages from this gathering *Keep your head up, Serbian people of Montenegro, all occupiers have passed, and these will pass too* have the same meaning as the messages of pro-Russian separatists from Crimea claiming that Crimea was occupied by the Nazi regime in Kyiv.



Billboard in Budva in 2018 glorifies the disappearance of Montenegro through the narrative of the liberation of Boka

Billboard in Crimea from 2014 where the annexation of Crimea is portrayed as salvation from the occupying government in Kyiv



Elements of Hybrid Warfare

The membership of Montenegro in NATO did not constitute an obstacle to Serbian state policy to build an interest zone in Montenegro through political and other mediators. After the adoption of the *Law on Freedom of Religion on December 27, 2019*, which sparked a wave of religious processions, proxies in Montenegro were activated in synergy with the political leadership from Serbia.

Aleksandar Vulin, Milos Vučević, and Nikola Selaković, and members of the SPP at positions in the Serbian government, performing since 2019, actively work on establishing conditions for the establishment of the so-called *Serbian world*. Relying on strategic documents, Nikola Selaković, from 2019 to 2024, has articulated an ethno-nationalist strategy towards Montenegro through statements and public actions. Statements from 2019 claiming that *Montenegro is a classical Serbian state*, as well as those from 2023 suggesting that *the identity of Serbs in Montenegro is denied*, indicate that Selaković, regardless of his position in the Serbian government, creates narrative constructs towards Montenegro with the same intensity.

The interest of Serbian security system leaders in the internal political dynamics of Montenegro is symptomatic. Aleksandar Vulin, from his position as the Minister of Defence



Andrija Mandić kissing the sword gifted to him by the Serbian Minister of Defence, Aleksandar Vulin on January 12, 2020



Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević bringing the Yule log into the building of the Presidency of Serbia on January 6, 2019

of Serbia in 2020, during the time of the religious processions, pointed out that Montenegro *was becoming a source of instability in the region*. Meanwhile, the current Minister of Defence, Vučević, in August 2023, claimed that recognizing Kosovo would backfire on Montenegro, similar to what happened to Ukraine.²²

Serbia vigorously acts through its proxies in the region, disseminating fake destabilizing narratives towards Montenegro. These narratives undermine institutions, polarize and radicalize Montenegrin society, and directly oppose the country's Euro-Atlantic path, thus relativizing its sovereignty. The narrative about the NATO aggression towards the FRY is used as a starting point for propaganda activities towards Montenegro. Multi-channel Serbian propaganda, by activating the narrative about NATO bombing, on one hand, fuels anti-Western sentiment in Montenegro, and on the other hand, it encourages the activities of proxy actors. The case of awarding a commemorative medal to Andrija Mandić for his contribution to the defence of the Republic of Serbia in 1999 best illustrates the practice of exploiting events from recent history for psychological and propaganda purposes.²³

The activities of Serbian proxy actors in Montenegro are closely linked to the political priorities of the regime in Belgrade; therefore, their activities in the public sphere are aligned with the actions of the Serbian government and the President of Serbia. The carefully designed events contextualize the appropriate political moment and symbolically reflect the official stance of Serbia towards all Serbians in the region, neglecting the principle of non-interference in the sovereignty of neighboring states. On the other hand, proxy actors follow the views and priorities of Belgrade on all issues that are burdensome for the region and the state of Serbia, aligning their actions with the views of Aleksandar Vučić, whom they accept as *the president of all Serbs in the region*.²⁴

The Special Forces of the Serbian World

After the change of government in Montenegro in the parliamentary elections on August 30, 2020, Serbia directed its efforts towards the information space, promoting pro-Serbian parties and their involvement in Montenegro's political life from positions of power. The local election processes, especially in Nikšić, served as a demonstration of the Serbian regime's methods in articulating its interests in Montenegro. The comprehensive system of soft power, supported by the media and intelligence apparatus, influenced public opinion in Montenegro ahead of the local elections in Nikšić on March 14, 2021. The TV show on *TV Happy* titled *The Battle for Nikšić*, along with disinformation and fake news from Serbian media, is just a part of the axis of para-political activities in the new circumstances following the change of government in August.²⁵

Members of the SPP, Vladimir Mandić, Dan Šijan, and Aleksandar Jokić, were detained by Montenegrin authorities for attempting election engineering in Montenegro, specifically suspicions of vote-buying and interference in the electoral process²⁶. The presence of renowned figures from public life in Serbia, with membership in the SPP, during significant socio-political events is just part of Serbia's hybrid activities in Montenegro. In October 2022, the Government of Montenegro banned Mandić and Šijan from entering Montenegro for reasons of national security. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ranko Kri-vokapić, stated during the Security Committee meeting on October 28, 2022, that these individuals had financed political processes in Montenegro.²⁷

Their role in undermining democratic processes is noticeable in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mandić was detained in Banja Luka three days before the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022 on suspicion of illegal activities in the electoral process.

The company owned by Šijan provided voters from Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely from the Republic of Srpska entity, who were brought to Serbia on the day of the elections on March 17, 2023. Meanwhile, in the building owned by Mandić, 154 voters were reported for the elections in Belgrade²⁸. Disrupting the integrity of the electoral process and putting pressure on voters indicate that the regime in Serbia employs sophisticated methods of hybrid warfare to achieve its political goals.

There are clear attempts at electoral engineering by Vučić's regime in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Apart from the abuse of media, social networks, and disinformation, the involvement of individuals with special tasks, such as Mandić and Šijan, in electoral processes illustrates the regime's tendency in Serbia to achieve its desired electoral and political projections in the region at any cost.

A glaring example of interference in the electoral process in Montenegro is the case of Milojko Spajić's candidacy in the 2023 presidential elections. At the moment when he announced his candidacy for the President of Montenegro, the State Election Commission (DIK) sent an inquiry to the state authorities of Serbia on February 10, 2023, and received a response from the competent Serbian authority four days later, stating that Spajić holds Serbian citizenship and is registered with a residence in Belgrade. On the same occasion, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia determined that the other candidate for the presidency, Andrija Mandić, does not have a residence in Serbia, withholding information about whether he is a Serbian citizen, even though Mandić confirmed in 2011 that he holds Serbian citizenship²⁹.

I want to call upon all citizens of Montenegro who hold Serbian citizenship, as I do, not to submit their citizenship to the Montenegrin authorities under any circumstances. I encourage every citizen of Montenegro to take Serbian citizenship and not to be afraid, and there is no need to inform the authorities in Montenegro about these relations.

Andrija Mandić
2011

It is evident that the issue of dual citizenship is used as a tool to influence electoral processes and that the question of Serbian citizens who have the right to vote in Montenegro is instrumentalized at convenient political moments. The continuous discrediting of the Montenegrin Citizenship Law by Serbian state organs, officials, and proxies in Montenegro aims to change voting rights to achieve election results aligned with the official Serbian policy.

The political reality after the elections in Nikšić largely reflects how the dependence of one political group on a third party is created. The donation of two million euros to the Municipality of Nikšić is an expression of support for mayor Marko Kovačević and illustrates the relationship of Serbia towards Montenegro after the political changes in

August 2020. The current socio-political image of Nikšić best reflects Belgrade's undisguised aspiration to actively participate in changing the cultural and identity image of Montenegro. The activities of the municipal authorities in Nikšić, such as Russian-Serbian cultural evenings, the unveiling of the monument to Alexander Nevsky together with militant Orthodox brotherhoods and the *Night Wolves (Noćni vukovi)*, as well as the relativistic attitude towards the anti-fascist history of Montenegro and Nikšić, are direct results of dependence on the policy of official Serbia.³⁰

The specificity of local self-governments in which the DF, or the coalition *For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG)*, forms the government is reflected in synchronized activities that strengthen Serbian influence in Montenegro. The municipality of Pljevlja is the most prominent example. In Pljevlja, the coalition government has decided to change Municipality Day. Despite the fact that Pljevlja is a multinational and multireligious community, the ruling coalition decided in September 2023 that, instead of November 20 (when partisan units liberated the city from occupation in 1944), the Municipality Day would be celebrated on the Orthodox religious holiday of Saint Paraskeva of the Balkans (Sveta Petka)³¹. The latest example is the celebration of the Statehood Day of the Republic of Serbia by the municipality of Pljevlja on February 14, 2024.³² The municipalities of Zeta and Andrijevisa, where ZBCG also predominately forms the government, announced the adoption of declarations on withdrawing recognition of Kosovo. In the same period, the ZBCG coalition, together with proxy associations, organized gatherings in Nikšić and Podgorica in support of Serbs in Kosovo.³³

After the change of government in Montenegro, Serbia carefully created an image of Montenegro's economic and social dependence on Serbia through its proxies. In addition to blatant examples of influencing the local government in Nikšić and asymmetric actions through *declarations to annul recognition of Kosovo* in local parliaments, the visit of six municipalities' representatives from Montenegro to the Serbian Assembly on January 11, 2023, and the submission of reports on their work to the Committee on the Diaspora of the Serbian Assembly are paradigms of the current relation between the two countries. Reporting on the implementation of Montenegro's budget, apart from symbolizing dependence on Serbia, is significant from the perspective of disrespecting Montenegro's sovereignty and accepting Serbia as the home country.³⁴

Informing the MPs of the Serbian Assembly that the *Cyrillic script and the tricolor flag have been reintroduced* into the offices of the mayors of six Montenegrin municipalities – Nikšić, Berane, Mojkovac, Tivat, Danilovgrad, and Herceg Novi – projects the main priorities of pro-Serbian parties after coming to power at the state level in 2023. The coalition ZBCG found a basis for further shaping the public-political and media narratives about *the reintroduction of the Cyrillic script and the tricolor flag* in the population census, i.e., in the projection and prejudgment of its results.



Vladimir Božović, Gojko Raičević,
Vladimir Dobrosavljević, Đorđe
Vukadinović, and Aleksandar Raković

Influence Vectors

Recognized exponents of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian ethnonationalist politics in Montenegro operate from positions of all-Serbian unitarism. Serbian propagandistic methods and narratives aimed at criminalizing Montenegrin independence and statehood have taken the form of strategic communication since 2006.

The coordinated engagement of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces in the past decade is closely linked to the period of Montenegro's accession to NATO. The architecture of operation and the ideological worldview of cultural, religious, and political actors have been established under the strong influence of the current rector of the University of Montenegro, Vladimir Božović. As the president of the executive board of the Matica Srpska Society of Serbian Members in Montenegro, the founder of the movement for neutrality *No to War – No to NATO*, one of the founders of the Serbian House in Podgorica, and the propaganda portal *IN4S*, he has significantly contributed to the homogenization of forces that, in parallel to the activities for the change of government, led the anti-NATO campaign. The activities of Matica Srpska in Montenegro, the pro-Russian propaganda portal *IN4S*, and political proxy actors in Montenegro unfolded in three directions: 1. The denial of the Montenegrin identity, 2. Anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda, 3. Strengthening the influence of the SOC on socio-political environment. – Graphic

Božović's role in understanding the current points of entry of Serbian soft power, as well as the mechanisms used in that direction, is essential. His analysis *Russian soft power vectors*, which he presented in 2015 in Belgrade at the conference titled *The Struggle of Russia and Serbia Yesterday and Today, World War II, Yugoslavia 1991-1999, Ukraine 2014-15*, has become a guide for Russian-Serbian malign activities in Montenegro. The main thesis in the analysis is that for the development of Russian-Serbian soft power vectors, it is necessary to rely on the SOC in Montenegro, and that the development of Serbian culture is entirely compatible with the process of strengthening Russian cultural and political influence. On that occasion, Božović stated that *Montenegro is a country of Serbian, Orthodox, pro-Russian, and pan-Slavic spiritual essence*, pointing out the similarities between the Montenegrin and Ukrainian cases. This thesis will be reiterated and developed later by political entities, right-wing organizations, and leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the mentioned conference, Božović emphasized the role of the SOC as *the most significant and vital pro-Russian social organism in Montenegro*, which proved to be true in the subsequent period.³⁵ In the coming years, the SOC actively engaged in political processes in Montenegro, supporting pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political entities, organizing religious processions – religious-political gatherings, endorsing Putin's policy towards Ukraine, and through expressing positions and organizing numerous events, conducted a revision and denial of Montenegro's history.

Today in Montenegro, the statistical and substantive volume of Serbian and pro-Russian social consciousness completely overlaps. This fact should be emphasized and marked as crucial in the case of a potential strategy for the development of Russian soft power vectors towards Montenegro.

Vladimir Božović
June 2015

religious processions – religious-political gatherings, endorsing Putin's policy towards Ukraine, and through expressing positions and organizing numerous events, conducted a revision and denial of Montenegro's history.

In 2015, at a round table on the topic *Montenegro and NATO* organized by the Peace Movement *No To War – No to NATO* and the *Eurasian Security Forum*, Božović declared, at what he referred to as an emotional moment, that Andrija Mandić, Milan Knežević, Slaven Radunović, and Igor Damjanović were the true heroes who *fought with their lives against the criminal alliance that is knocking on our doors today, brought about by people who promoted treason as a leading life and moral matrix*. Additionally, Božović emphasized that *Russia must assume one of the key legitimate roles of operation in this area to protect*

its own interests and the interests of the community to which we all belong.³⁶ Božović's Russia-inclined attitude and anti-Western narratives are evident in his statement that *films, music, and tentacles of the American consumerist lifestyle have gradually but very intensively led to the loss of the traditional pro-Russian sentiment in a significant part of the population. The artificial and senseless divisions and categories, such as pro-American and pro-Russian, are set on two antipodes: the Serbian and the new-Montenegrin national sentiment*, claims Božović.³⁷

Božović played a significant role in a strong anti-NATO campaign, reflected in numerous events, authored texts, and meetings with Russian actors aimed at preventing Montenegro from joining the North Atlantic alliance. He emphasized that *NATO bombings, in addition to their purely humanitarian function, had become a key tool in new geopolitical delineations*.³⁸ With his activities, he positioned himself as the architect of a strategy linking Russian and Serbian interests in Montenegro with the goal of changing its pro-Western course. The tactic of consolidating pro-Serbian and pro-Russian proxies under the auspices of the SOC was evident during the protests of the *Democratic Front* in 2015, in which the late Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the SOC, Amfilohije, participated. Božović also facilitated easier inflow of Russian-Serbian hybrid activities in Montenegro from 2013 to 2017, through Matica srpska and Movement for Neutrality – *No to War, No to NATO*. One of the main actors in promoting and channeling Russian-Serbian hybrid activities is Leonid Reshetnikov, the director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI). He coordinated anti-Western organizations in Montenegro

Do you know of a country and a people where, descendants settle scores with their ancestors through aggressive media, using forgeries in the educational system and repressive political means?

Vladimir Božović

June 2015



Vladimir Božović and Leonid Reshetnikov in the premises of Matica Srpska in Podgorica

Ceremonial academy in 2019 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade in World War II



and claimed that there could be bloodshed in Montenegro due to its accession to NATO.³⁹

Following the terrorism attempt ahead of the parliamentary elections in October 2016, Vladimir Božović stated that *the coup was an obvious but sudden, clumsy staging aimed at saving the regime of Milo Đukanović*. He emphasized that the then Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, *unfortunately, is persistent in trying to cover up these facts*.⁴⁰

Božović actively participated in the religious processions and was also engaged during the parliamentary elections in August 2020. At that time, according to his own words, *he did everything to establish the coalition For the Future of Montenegro in the elections and became a member of the expert team led by Zdravko Krivokapić, the leader of that coalition. After the elections and the victory of the opposition, Božović emphasized the need to unify the political potential of the religious processions, calling it a complex political chess operation and stating that the main architects of the bureaucratic new identity are bewildered and defeated*.⁴¹

The change of government in Montenegro in 2020 strengthened the operational activities of Serbian proxies at all levels. Retrograde ideas of Serbian nationalism have been implemented through the education system, with the SOC having a dominant influence on social processes. The narratives about the artificially created Montenegrin language, the endangerment of traditional spirituality, and the alleged undermining of the historical Serbian character of Montenegro have been translated into principles for political action. The volume of Serbian *soft power* has targeted the emancipatory segments of Montenegrin society that Serbian ethnonationalists perceive as obstacles to the spread of Russian-Serbian influence. In parallel with the additional degradation of fragile institutions, the strategy of expanding Serbian-Russian cultural associations and actors aims to strengthen nationalist and right-wing ideas that further divide Montenegrin society.

The educational system after 2020 has become a battleground for confrontation with the foundations of Montenegrin statehood. Pro-Serbian and Pro-Russian proxy actors have been installed in the top positions in that sector, and Vladimir Božović was appointed as the rector of the University of Montenegro.

Do you know of a country where, in the last twenty years, engineers of a new identity have devised a new language and changed the name of the new language, only to distance themselves from the essence of the historical being and heritage of its people?

Vladimir Božović

June 2015

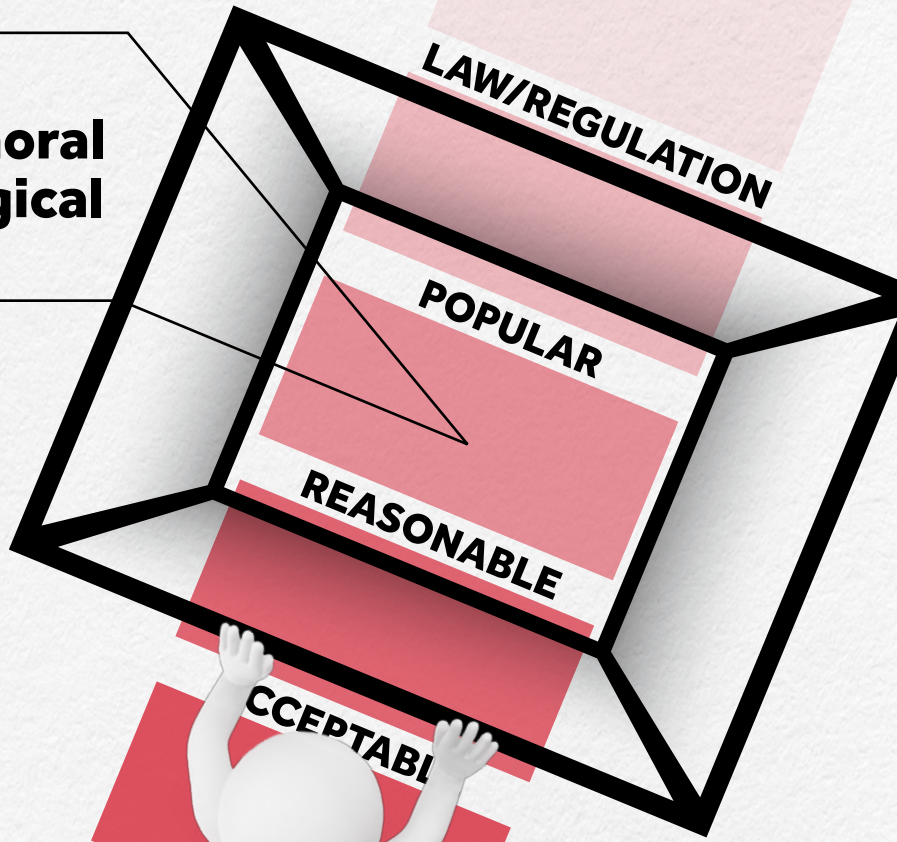
Team B has the crucial task of preserving the fundamental legacy of Milo Đukanović's rule after the change in government. According to them, above all, Montenegro must continue its state life as an American NATO protectorate. Taking this into account, the mechanisms of repression and apartheid towards the Serbian people, the Serbian language community, and the Serbian Orthodox Church must remain untouched, as a solid guarantee that Russia cannot (once again) anchor itself here.

Vladimir Božović

June 2015

Even though the Montenegrin state authorities nominally promote a pro-European agenda, at the local level, pro-Serbian actors consistently delegitimize Montenegrin pro-European path through the falsification of historical facts⁴², disrespect for state symbols⁴³, and the use of local parliaments for unconstitutional and illegal activities.⁴⁴ Taking into account the activities of actors since the change of government in 2020, especially since the formation of the 44th Government of Montenegro, two parallel processes are unfolding on the political scene. One involves aligning rhetoric and actions with the publicly proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic strategic goals of the state, while within the second, at the local level, mechanisms are being strengthened that gradually bring Montenegro closer to Serbian and Russian value systems. The dominant narrative advocating for the protection of traditional values, promoted by the SOC aligns with the narrative projected by the Russian Orthodox Church in close neighborhood.

SOC as the supreme moral and ideological arbiter



The Serbian Orthodox Church continuously intervenes in socio-political issues in Montenegro. The enormous influence that this organization has on Montenegrin society contributes to the gradual acceptance and popularity of unthinkable and radical ideas promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Additionally, the ruling structures in Montenegro over the past 30 years have also contributed to this process.

Religion, Politics, and Identity

Revitalization of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)

The general crisis that the SFRY faced in the 1980s strengthened Serbian nationalism in the country and marked the return of the SOC to the public stage. Its return is linked to the political crisis manifested by events in Kosovo in the early 1980s when 21 priests of the SOC issued an *Appeal for the protection of the Serbian population and its holy places in Kosovo and Metohija* to the highest state authorities of Serbia and Yugoslavia, the Assembly, and the Synod.⁴⁵ The Appeal emphasized the necessity of protecting the *spiritual and biological essence* of the Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija which, according to their claims, was equally threatened in the SFRY as it had been under Ottoman rule.

The strong and multifaceted connection between the SOC and the Serbian state was revitalized with the rise of Slobodan Milošević to power. What connected the Church and the new regime in Serbia, despite its communist legacy, was the alignment of their ultimate goals – the unification of all Serbs into one state. The SOC was an authentic bearer of ethnonationalist expansionist ideology, which Milošević embraced and utilized for mobilization and military campaigns. The relation between Milošević's regime and the Church varied. However, with his departure and the arrival of the new government, which openly based its legitimacy on anti-communism, there began an accelerated effort to institutionalize the new role of the SOC in all segments of society and the state, particularly those with a key role in shaping national identity and the overall cultural model.

Today, the SOC plays a prominent role in the social and political life of Serbian society. The Church represents a key instrument of the Serbian state for directly intervening in the internal affairs of neighboring countries.

Values of the SOC

The values promoted by the Church are characterized by collectivism, anti-Western sentiment, xenophobia, as well as evident intolerance towards minority social (LGBTQ+) and ethnic groups. The SOC promotes a patriarchal social order and opposes the con-

cept of gender equality. The activities of the clergy of the SOC in the fight against gender-sensitive language are the latest confirmation of this thesis.⁴⁶

Ethnophyletism is a key ideological concept in the program and activities of the SOC in the Western Balkans. Representing one ethnic community, and supposedly driven by humanitarian and patriotic feelings, the Church presents itself as the *protector* of Serbs in the region.

The SOC openly opposes anything coming from the Western cultural and civilizational sphere. The guiding principle, as defined by the newspaper *Pravoslavlje* (the publication of the Serbian Patriarchate), is *Serbs into Europe – Yes, Europe into Serbs – God forbid*.⁴⁷ The SOC does not embrace individualism and pluralism but instead adopts the principle of collectivism. In that context, it aligns the belonging to the Serbian nation with Orthodoxy. Patriarch Pavle, in his book *Neka pitanja naše vere* (*Some Questions of Our Faith*), says: "I am a Serb and a Serb unbaptized cannot exist".⁴⁸ The stance of the SOC is that belonging to a nation is conditioned by belonging to the Church. In essence, the SOC systematically rejects the very foundations of modern democratic society and the state. According to the interpretation of the SOC, liberal democracy and multiculturalism, or globalization, are considered the greatest threats to identity, history, culture, and tradition. At the same time, Russia is promoted as a brotherly country and protector of the Orthodox people.

Anti-SFRY rhetoric is also an important component of the ideology of the SOC. SFR Yugoslavia is interpreted as *a historical mistake and a period of suffering for the Church*.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE SOC INCLUDES:

- Ethnic homogenization and relativization of state and ethnic borders
- The promotion of traditional, yet fundamentally authoritarian values
- Opposition to the concept of liberal democracy and multiculturalism
- Hostility towards minority social and ethnic groups
- Patriarchal social system
- Historical revisionism and denial
- Anti-Western/Pro-Russian stance
- Anti-Yugoslav sentiment (Anti-SFRY)

Simultaneously, collaborationist movements with ideological roots from the period of World War II are rehabilitated and promoted, serving as a counterbalance to the anti-fascist People's Liberation Movement. Additionally, there is a frequent glorification of war criminals from the conflict of the 1990s.

The Organization of the SOC in Montenegro and its Relation with Authorities

The identification of religion and nationality, or the equating of Serbdom with Orthodoxy, is a powerful instrument in the actions of the ethnophyletically grounded Serbian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, this is also a very convenient circumstance for advancing the interests of the Serbian regime in the region, especially considering the fact that the relation between the church and the state in Serbia is structured in a way that the state has a stronger influence on the SOC than the other way around. Serbian Orthodox Church represents a key foreign policy instrument of the state of Serbia, given the fact that its jurisdiction extends beyond the Serbian state borders. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is organized through the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and

the Littoral, Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić, as well as parts of the Mileševa and Zahumlje-Herzegovina Dioceses. The division of the Montenegrin territory into dioceses, even with headquarters outside Montenegro's borders, is in line with the greater state aspirations that the SOC did not hide, especially during the 1990s.

The Serbian people have been politically fragmented and divided by unnatural borders that cut through its living organism for half a century. These borders were planned by the Communist International corpus, implemented by the neo-fascist and Ustasha occupation, and solidified and prolonged – against the will of the Serbian people – by Tito's communist dictatorship through its notably anti-Serbian AVNOJ (AC-NLY – Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia). Because of this, neither the Serbian Orthodox Church nor the Serbian people have ever recognized the artificial and illegitimate AVNOJ internal borders established without historical or ethnic foundations, by the arbitrary actions of the communist guerrilla during the conditions of occupations and civil war.⁴⁹

The extraordinary session of the Bishops Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church on January 16 and 17, 1992

In the Gazette of the SOC from June 1996, there is an announcement stating that *despite the dissolution of the Versailles Yugoslavia, i.e. the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to extend to all Orthodox individuals within that territory.*⁵⁰ This clearly indicates that high-ranking officials of the SOC, even after the conclusion of the war, decided that if the establishment of the Serbian state authority was not feasible, they would strive to preserve the presence and influence of the SOC throughout the entire territory of the Former Socialist Federal Republic. Thirty years after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to operate in an identical manner, representing a central pillar of the new greater-state project known as the *Serbian world*.

The relation between the SOC and the Montenegrin authorities over the

past three decades has been subject to change. During the 1990s, there was an observable closeness between the authorities, led at that time by the *unified Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)* and the SOC. Their synergy was primarily reflected through the support and promotion of greater Serbian nationalism, which gained significant momentum in Montenegro in the early 1990s. The division within the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its alignment with the bloc for the restoration of Montenegro's independence partially strained the relationship between the Montenegrin authorities and the SOC.



Milo Đukanović and Metropolitan Amfilohije

The SOC was explicit in its opposition to the restoration of Montenegrin independence. Its position was that the dissolution of the union could provoke far-reaching detrimental consequences and jeopardize the people and their freedom both in Serbia and Montenegro in the future.⁵¹ On May 17, 2006, four days before the referendum, the then Serbian Patriarch Pavle, together with Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, received a visit from Predrag Bulatović, the then-president of the SPP (Socialist People's Party) and the leader of the bloc advocating for a joint state. On that occasion, the patriarch emphasized that *unity and togetherness are the foundation of every healthy human and societal life, highlighting unity in freedom and justice.*

The restoration of Montenegrin independence did not completely disrupt the relationship between the SOC and the authorities in Montenegro. Following the referendum, this relation took on various forms of tacit cooperation, often accompanied by a passive stance of state institutions towards the decades-long activities of the SOC in Montenegro, marked by systematic violations of legal regulations, unlawful appropriation of property, and the devastation of Montenegrin cultural and sacred heritage. The most vivid examples include the illegal construction of several religious facilities, initiated by placing a metal church on Mount Rumija, which was transported there by a helicopter of the former joint state in 2005, as well as the absence of reaction (or collaboration) from state institutions regarding the registration of Montenegrin churches and monasteries as the property of the SOC.

The unlawfully erected church on Mount Rumija



The Commission of the Ministry of Culture for Determining the State of Cultural Heritage of Montenegro compiled a report in 2015 titled *State of the Cultural Heritage of Montenegro*. The report concluded that two-thirds of religious facilities were devastated, with 71% of such structures (representing cultural monuments in Montenegro) undergoing illegal and unprofessional alterations. Among them, 80% of facilities were under the management of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The detrimental nature of the alterations that are neither historically nor culturally characteristic of Montenegro was emphasized. In this way, by creating new material evidence, efforts were

The signing of the
Fundamental Agreement



made to alter historical facts and the cultural matrix in these areas. The majority of these structures were and still are under the constant protection of the state of Montenegro.⁵² This trend continues to this day. New instances of the devastation of Montenegrin religious structures can be observed on a daily basis.

In early 2020, the Serbian Orthodox Church organized mass protests in all cities of Montenegro, prompted by the adoption of the *Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Legal Status of Religious Communities* in the Montenegrin Parliament. The religious nature of the protest was combined with political elements from the very beginning. In addition to a large number of citizens expressing their dissatisfaction with the adoption of the Law, as well as the challenging social conditions and widespread corruption affecting all societal structures, opposition political parties, which recognized the political potential of the religious processions, also participated in the protests. Due to the evident alignment of the interests between the clergy of the SOC and pro-Serbian political parties, the religious processions transformed into a continuous campaign for parliamentary elections, with the ultimate goal of changing the government in Montenegro.

After the change of government on August 30, 2020, the SOC became the most influential political structure in the country. It demonstrated its dominance in the process of forming the 42nd government of Montenegro under Zdravko Krivokapić, which was formed in the Ostrog Monastery and wherein the SOC played a significant role in employing personnel.⁵³ Although presented to the Montenegrin and international public as an expert government, with assurances of being guided by professional principles based on meritocracy, it turned out that its priorities and activity dynamics were aligned with the interests of the SOC in Montenegro.

The war in Ukraine has created an opportunity to accelerate Montenegro's European path and achieve one of its key strategic goals – membership in the European Union. However, the 43rd Government prioritized the signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The lack of transparency in the procedure preceding its signing has caused numerous controversies and resulted in the fall of of Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic's government.

The agreement, deemed by relevant organizations dealing with legal and cultural-historical issues as contrary to the Constitution of Montenegro, was drafted without prior expert debate⁵⁴, and according to the EU Progress Report on Montenegro, it triggered an increase in tensions within society.⁵⁵ The agreement, among other things, grants legal subjectivity to the Serbian Orthodox Church for a period six centuries longer than it holds



Metropolitan Amfilohije and leaders of the DF at the anti-NATO protest

in its home country, Serbia. It also recognizes extraterritoriality concerning Montenegrin state authorities, preventing their access to the objects of the SOC without the consent of the church authorities. This document obliges the state to register immovable properties to the dioceses of the SOC in Montenegro (without proof of ownership) and opens the possibility of introducing religious education into public educational institutions.⁵⁶

The next goal that the SOC in Montenegro is focusing on is the introduction of religious education into public educational institutions. This would further strengthen its influence in Montenegrin society and contribute to its additional clericalization. The government of Dritan Abazović in a technical mandate allocated 900 thousand euros to the SOC for two private religious schools. On that occasion, it is important to note that the entire procedure for licensing and financing these schools was violated.⁵⁷

Activities of the SOC in Montenegro

***May the living flesh fall off anyone
who is not loyal to a single-
language, single-blooded Russia.
Let him/her be cursed three times
and three thousand times by me.***⁶²

**Metropolitan Amfilohije
at the anti-NATO rally
in Podgorica on October 4, 2015**

The significant presence of the SOC in the socio-political life of Montenegro began with the enthronement of Amfilohije Radović as the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral in December 1990. With his appointment at the helm of the SOC in Montenegro, the process of desecularization of the Montenegrin state begins. It is clear that this process has yielded significant results more than thirty years later. Today, the SOC is present in all aspects of public life in Montenegro and has been among the institutions in which the citizens of Mon-

tenegro have placed the highest trust for several years. In addition to taking over Montenegrin cultural and religious sites and constructing new ones, the arrival of Amfilohije in Montenegro also intensified the media presence of the SOC. Amfilohije established the Publishing and Information Institution *Svetigora* in Cetinje, under which operates *Radio Svetigora*, as well as *Svetigora-press*, an informational agency reporting on everything happening in the Metropolitanate. The infrastructure of the SOC in Montenegro has been gradually developed from the 1990s to the present day. Moreover, the number of priests and monks has increased day by day. According to the tendentious words of Archpriest-Stavrophor Velibor Džomić *church councillors, religious officials, and church servants, together with priests, monks, and nuns, outnumber the members of the military of Montenegro.*⁵⁸

The SOC is an opponent of democracy, liberalism, and universal human rights, a stance consistently demonstrated through the public statements and rhetoric of its high-ranking officials. The activities of the SOC in Montenegro are essentially subordinated to the preservation of the ideas of Greater Serbian projects. The SOC continuously denies the existence of Montenegrin identity, culture, church, or any form of uniqueness. Serbia utilizes the SOC in a similar manner to how Russia employs the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Digital Forensic Center, in previous studies *Shadows of Ukraine Over Montenegro and Threats to Democratic Processes in Montenegro: Mapping the Influence* pointed out similarities between Serbia's actions towards Montenegro and Russia's actions toward Ukraine, specifically highlighting the roles of the SOC and the ROC. There is a clear parallel in the attitudes of the SOC and ROC towards the Orthodox Churches of Montenegro and Ukraine. The SOC and ROC deny the existence of Montenegrin and Ukrainian identities, and consequently, the existence of Montenegrin and Ukrainian nations and states. Instead, they promote the expansionist ideas of the Serbian and Russian worlds.

The positions of the SOC have directly influenced the polarization and radicalization of Montenegrin society. The highest representatives of the SOC, with Metropolitan Amfilohije prominently among them, have often propagated hate speech towards the citizens of Montenegro. Amfilohije referred to Montenegrins as *communist spawns or bastards, oxen, and Docleans*. During the celebration of the Orthodox New Year in Podgorica in 2002, he delivered words perceived as an attack on Montenegrins and those advocating for the independence of the Montenegrin state: *May God grant that there be as few as possible of those who bow to the pagan tzar, cursed Doclean and may every Montenegrin nail the pagan Doclean tzar to the Vezir Bridge with a hammer.*⁵⁹

Paradoxically, twenty years after those words, official Belgrade, the SOC, and all Serbian media claim St. Jovan Vladimir of Doclea as the first Serbian saint.⁶⁰ This is just one of many examples of historical denial and revisionism propagated by the SOC.

Simultaneously, while the representatives of the SOC insult the citizens of Montenegro who identify as Montenegrin, thereby violating basic human rights, they propagate a narrative of the alleged endangerment of Serbs in Montenegro. The identical narrative has been abused for the past 30 years, aiming at the direct interference of Serbia in the internal affairs of neighboring countries. High-ranking officials of the SOC have advocated the claim that the Serbian people in Montenegro are in a more difficult position than during the Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia (ISC) from 1941 to 1945.⁶¹ Discrimination and inequality still persist in Montenegrin society. However, it has never been based on national grounds; instead, it predominately manifests based on the party or more precisely, the party-centric principle, which remains the primary key for the majorization or discrimination in Montenegro even at the present moment.

In addition to opposing the restoration of Montenegro's independence, the SOC has also directly opposed its Euro-Atlantic path. The SOC has consistently been involved in anti-NATO and anti-Western rallies, protests, and demonstrations. It has participated

The image of Zdravko Krivokapić removed from the fresco in the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ

in campaigns for parliamentary and local elections and has been vocal on nearly every political or social issue, thereby violating the principle of secularism and consistently promoting the Russian narrative.

The activities of the SOC have been indicative since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Metropolitan Joanikije of the SOC has accused the West of being responsible for the war in Ukraine. He stated that the events in Ukraine are consequences of godlessness that had taken root, blaming Protestant Europe for the evil of godlessness, atheism, and communism.⁶³ In October 2022, Joanikije served a liturgy in Moscow alongside the Russian Patriarch Kirill.⁶⁴ In 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution expressing concern about attempts by the Orthodox Church in countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the entity of the Republic of Srpska, to promote Russia as a protector of traditional family values and strengthen the relation between the state and the church.⁶⁵ Russian propaganda and disinformation, partly disseminated by the SOC, have a significant impact on the views of Montenegrin citizens. This was confirmed by a public opinion survey conducted in January 2024, which shows that 42.7% of citizens believe that Russia is fighting against Nazism in Ukraine, while 29.7% say that it is a lie. In addition, 27.6% say that they do not know whether it is true or false. Only half of the citizens believe that Russia annexed the territories of Ukraine, a quarter (24.8%) think that is not the case, while the remaining quarter (25.2%) says they do not know.⁶⁶



Parish priest Boris Radović of the SOC consecrated the square and hospitality venues in Budva

The SOC allegedly advocates for the protection of traditional family values. In that context, it creates the narrative that the West poses a threat to those values. The rights of sexual minorities are especially targeted by the SOC. Regarding the LGBTQ+ population, Metropolitan Amfilohije used metaphors involving fruit that does not bear fruit: *A fruit tree is planted to bear fruit. And the fruit tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*⁶⁷ The SOC opposed the organization of Pride events in Montenegrin cities. The former Patriarch of the SOC Irinej, in 2011, referred to Pride as a *parade of shame* and labelled LGBTQ+ activists as a group of *deviants*.⁶⁸ The first Pride event in Montenegro took place in Budva in 2013, accompanied by a strong police presence. The march was marked by numerous incidents and attacks on the participants of the procession. Additionally, after the march, the Budva parish priest of the SOC, Boris Radović, consecrated the square and hospitality venues. Along with condemnations, describing it as a *parade of shame and sickness* and praying to God to drive away all diseases and attacks from Budva and Montenegro, Father Radović stated that homosexuals are enemies of the entire cosmos.⁶⁹

The Legacy of Amfilohije

Metropolitan Amfilohije was one of the most influential figures not only in the SOC but in the entire Orthodox world. His actions sometimes differed from the positions of the headquarters of the SOC in Belgrade, and a vivid example of this is the conflict of the current President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.⁷² Amfilohije was a fierce critic of Vučić, especially regarding his policy towards Kosovo. However, the underlying cause of this conflict was the struggle for influence within the church and on the political scene in Montenegro. Authorities in Belgrade successfully controlled the SOC in Serbia. However, its branch in Montenegro, led by Amfilohije, demonstrated a certain degree of autonomy. This is evident in the titles that Amfilohije attributed to himself: Archbishop of Cetinje, Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral, Exarch of the Holy Throne of Peć.⁷³ The only recognized title for Amfilohije in the SOC was exclusively Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral.

The situation changed significantly after Amfilohije's death. The Central authority in Belgrade completely erased Amfilohije's legacy. In May 2021, the SOC abolished the Episcopal Council in Montenegro, which was a collective name for the dioceses of the SOC in Montenegro – the Orthodox Church in Montenegro. They also removed the liturgical and honorary title of the Archbishop of Cetinje, replacing it with the title of Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral. It is indicative that the SOC abolished the Episcopal Council in Montenegro, while not doing so in Croatia.⁷⁴ Amfilohije's closest associates have also been degraded.⁷⁵ An illustrative example is the former Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, who was a political protege of Amfilohije. Krivokapić has been consistently targeted by political, media, and religious circles controlled by Belgrade, especially visible after his refusal to sign the Fundamental Agreement, whose text grossly undermined the interests of Montenegro. A characteristic example of the SOC distancing itself from Krivokapić is the removal of his image from the fresco in the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica. The attitude towards Amfilohije's legacy, both political and religious, clearly indicates that the secular and religious authorities in Belgrade do not want to allow any form of autonomy to Serbian organizations in Montenegro. The signing of the Fundamental agreement was the final point of that process.

The attitude of the SOC towards the LGBTQ+ population did not change in the following 10 years. The day before Pride in 2022, the SOC in Montenegro organized a prayer for the sanctity of marriage and the preservation of the family, denouncing Pride as debauchery and immorality.⁷⁰ Although research indicates high support for Montenegro’s accession to the European Union with over 75%, the latest public opinion survey showed that every second citizen (53.8%) believes that the EU and Western countries actively promote changes in traditional values and impose deviant behavior. Similarly, a shattering figure is that 66.2% of citizens believe that homosexuality is a threat to the traditional concept of family. These results indicate the direct influence of the SOC on society in Montenegro.⁷¹

Historical Revisionism and Negationism

In the last few years, Montenegro has been facing the challenge of preserving anti-fascist values due to the rise of the extreme right in the wider Western Balkan region. This trend has been further fueled by the participation of right-wing structures in the governments of both Serbia and Montenegro. In addition, the political dynamics are significantly influenced by the growing influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church. On one hand, the SOC minimizes the significance of the People’s Liberation Movement, while on the other it actively works towards the rehabilitation of the collaborationist movements from World War II.

This trend of influence from Serbia manifests through historical revisionism and denial, primarily based on fabrications, directly impacting the strengthening of far-right and anti-democratic forces that oppose the civic structures of Montenegro.⁷⁶



Chetnik flag at gatherings in front of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ

The Ambassador of the Russian Federation at the memorial service for Draža Mihailović

The SOC often marginalizes the partisan movement and national heroes from World War II, placing them in a negative context. At the same time, it organizes memorial services in honor of the Chetnik commander Draža Mihailović, redefining historical facts by positioning the Chetnik movement as part of the anti-fascist movement. In August 2022, Bishop Metodije Ostojić of Budimlja-Nikšić praised Draža Mihajlović and Pavle Đurišić, Chetnik leaders of the World War II responsible for war crimes and mass murders of civilians. During the memorial service in Gornje Zaostro, preceding the traditional Chetnik gathering, Bishop Metodije referred to Mihailović and other Chetnik leaders as *commandants who fought for the right cause*. At the memorial service held at the Cathedral Church in Nikšić in 2023, the mayor Kovačević, the president of the local parliament Nemanja Vuković, and the Russian ambassador to Montenegro Vladislav Maslenikov were present.⁷⁷

Members of the Night Wolves at the commemoration of the anniversary of the crime in Doli



Crimes in Doli and Velika

The most comprehensive approach to historical negationism is evident when it comes to the attitude towards Montenegro's anti-fascist heritage. With constant attempts to equate the partisan and Chetnik movements, manipulation of victims of the occupier's terror occurs by emphasizing religious conflicts, attacking the fundamental binding issue of anti-fascist unity. Such an approach is evident in the commemoration of the crimes in Doli and Velika.

In June 1943, the 7th SS Division Prinz Eugen killed over 520 civilians from the Piva region. The crime was committed as part of the Fifth Enemy Offensive, better known as the Battle of Sutjeska, during which the entire Piva region was the battleground of fierce battles between partisan units and the German forces.

In memory of the killed civilians, a memorial complex called Dola was erected in the municipality of Plužine in 1977. The complex was disrupted in 2006 when the SOC erected a chapel and a wooden bell tower at that location. Also, one example of historical negationism towards the antifascist heritage is the dedicatory inscription placed in 2006 when the chapel was built: The suffering in the year of our Lord 1943, in the month of June, on the seventh day, enemies of the cross and Serbdom killed 520 innocent victims at this holy place. This attempts to create a narrative that the events were exclusively reprisals against the population based on religious and national grounds. This is a historical falsehood and a glaring example of revisionism present in the public space, which not only goes unpunished but is promoted by the authorities.⁸⁰ Today, the anniversary of that crime is commemorated in the presence of the clergy of the SOC, political structures supporting collaborationist movements from World War II, as well as far-right groups such as the Night Wolves.

One of the prominent representatives of the SOC in Montenegro, priest Gojko Perović, in an authored text, portrays the Chetnik leader and his followers as anti-fascist fighters for freedom, citing the verdict of the Higher Court in Belgrade from 2015.⁷⁸

At gatherings organized by the SOC in front of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica, a prominent black Chetnik flag with the inscription *With faith in God, for the king and homeland* was displayed. The SOC provides ideological guidance to pro-Serbian organizations, including political parties, cultural associations, and media.

A public opinion poll has indicated that only a third of the citizens of Montenegro (32.3%) feel closer to the partisan movement. For less than a fifth of the respondents (18%), that is the Chetnik movement, while almost half of those surveyed cannot determine their stance on this issue (49.7%).⁷⁹

The Far-Right

The strong influence of Serbia, particularly the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church on socio-political events in Montenegro is reflected in the strengthening of far-right ideologies with a Serbian orientation. The far-right in Montenegro operates on identical principles as in Serbia. The political space of the right wing in Montenegro is covered by numerous pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties draped in the cloak of traditional Orthodox values, historical heritage, and old alliances, which have been dominant in influencing political processes since 2020. In addition to them, there is a growing number of organizations ostensibly engaged in humanitarian activism, which essentially represent far-right organizations in Montenegro. The far-right in Montenegro is well organized, with evident synergy among certain political parties, media, and far-right organizations from both Montenegro and Serbia.

The role assigned to the Serbian Orthodox Church in the identity profiling of the Orthodox population in Montenegro is dominant and decisive. In fact, the SOC is the creator of the ideological framework for the activities of right-wing parties and organizations, as well as the media that promote and support them. The SOC has taken on social responsibility and, based on ethnophyletistic dogma and historical confabulations about an eight-century continuity in the territory of Montenegro, attempts to provide a new, or alternative – distinctly anti-Western and pro-Russian ideological and value framework.

Far-right pro-Serbian organizations have been attempting to establish a prominent role in the socio-political life of Montenegro over an extended period. Their activities have been particularly noticeable during significant events – religious processions, parliamentary and local elections, the enthronement of the Metropolitan, as well as numerous protests.

Prominent Far-Right Organizations and Their Activities

A significant number of far-right organizations in Montenegro and the region hide behind humanitarian work, seeking to *soften* their image in order to gain social acceptance. Some of them may appear humanitarian at first glance, but when their positions and activities are examined, and when contextualized, their agenda based on far-right ideology and militaristic spirit is revealed.



Orthodox Brotherhood
Stupovi in front of the
Cathedral in Podgorica,
in formation

Protest of Serbian right-
wing activists in front of
RTCG



Prominently, in terms of visibility and actions, the Orthodox Brotherhood *Stupovi*, *Miholjski zbor*, *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić*, and *Brotherhood and Society of Russian-Serbian Friendship Saint George* stand out. Within the ranks of these organizations, there are individuals with a history of serving lengthy prison sentences and criminal records. The Police Administration has stated that among the members of the NGO *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi*, there are individuals of security interest who are also registered as perpetrators of the most serious criminal offences.⁸¹

Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić were registered in October 2021 as a non-governmental organization involved in *cultural, educational, humanitarian, and spiritual activities aimed at protecting and enhancing the historical heritage of our people.*

Stupovi and *Zavjetnici*, in addition to participating in religious processions, were also involved in protests in front of the *Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG)* due to the broadcasting the film *Quo Vadis, Aida* on the first channel of *RTCG* on December 29, 2021, which addresses the genocide in Srebrenica. Around twenty representatives of the NGO *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić* and the NGO *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi* protested in front of the entrance of the Public broadcaster building, holding a banner that read *Srebrenica is not a genocide*. Slavko Perošević, promoted by media in Serbia as a hero of the religious processions, stated on behalf of the gathered that the crime in Srebrenica should not be treated as a genocide in any way. He suggested that it could be considered on some levels whether a certain crime occurred in Srebrenica. Although the State Prosecutors Office investigated whether anyone present, or all of them, committed the criminal offence of inciting religious, racial, and national hatred, the inquiry determined that no criminal offences within their jurisdiction were committed. The same participants, led by Perošević, caused an incident in Nikšić during the celebration of the Statehood Day on July 13, 2022. Due to the apparent and deliberate police oversight, the group, accompanied by nationalist songs and flags of Serbia, Russia, and the tricolor with the white Montenegrin emblem, incited riots at Šako Petrović Square. The police had to intervene to quell conflicts with participants displaying Montenegrin national symbols.

After the Russian aggression on Ukraine, several gatherings in support of the Russian Federation were organized in Montenegro, featuring Serbian, Russian, and Chetnik flags. Messages conveyed that Russia is a just participant in the war in Ukraine and that the West is the main culprit for the conflict. Members of the local branch of the *Night Wolves*, the *Ravna Gora Movement*, as well as members of Orthodox brotherhoods, were also present at the gatherings. By chanting in support of Russia and Putin, and singing songs about Serbian Kosovo, members of right-wing Serbian-Russian national organizations expressed their support for Russia in the war against Ukraine.

Montenegrin institutions did not react to the activities of these right-wing nationalist organizations, despite their continuous promotion of religious and national intolerance.

The political activity of the *Miholjski zbor*, founded by the secretary of Budimija-Nikšić Eparchy, was first noticed before the parliamentary elections in 2020. This organization has publicly stated multiple times that it actively participated in the downfall of the regime led by Milo Đukanović. After the vote of no confidence in the government of Montenegro in February 2022, its members participated in organizing protests and road blockades in Montenegro. Together with members of the Orthodox brotherhoods *Stupovi* and *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš*, they have clearly stated demands to political entities that the new government should be formed by the parliamentary majority parties constituted after the 2020 elections and minority parties. They openly threatened the peace in Montenegro by announcing that the formation of the minority government led by Dritan Abazović would cause unprecedented chaos in the country. Zdravko Nišavić, the president of the *Miholjski zbor*, was a member of the organizational committee of the people's protests and a speaker at the gatherings. Events on the Montenegrin political scene, as well as regional developments, often trigger the activation and actions of far-right organizations and individuals. The events in Kosovo in May 2020³ and October of the same year confirmed this.

After the incident in Zvečan (In May 2023), a series of protests in support of the Serbian



Images from the protests supporting Serbs in Kosovo

people in Kosovo took place in Montenegro and Serbia, which mostly had an anti-NATO and anti-EU character. Traditionally, in Montenegro, such gatherings take place with the blessing of the Serbian Orthodox Church and active participation of priests, pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political parties, and media.

In June of the same year, a rally in support of Serbians in Kosovo was organized by the Miholjski zbor. The protest had an international character as it simultaneously took place in Tivat, Belgrade and the Italian city of Verona. In addition to supporting Serbians in Kosovo, the protests had a clear anti-NATO and anti-EU connotation.⁸² The protest in Verona was organized by Serbians from Italy and the organization Verona per la libertà (Verona for Freedom). At the end of the protest, the NATO flag was torn apart and set on fire.

The armed attack by Serbian extremists in northern Kosovo in October 2023 further activated right-wing organizations in Montenegro. A video of Zdravko Nišavić surfaced on social media in which he calls for the mobilization of the population and veterans to go to Kosovo if necessary. At the same time, this is a continuation of the campaign that has been conducted in recent months under the slogan When the army returns to Kosovo. Graffiti with the same slogan has appeared in several cities in Montenegro, Serbia, as well as Russia. Montenegro, in the context of regional security, has once again proven to be fertile ground for hybrid operations. By hybrid actions and instrumentalization of the Church, a climate is created for the consolidation of radically right-wing organizations, which often operate within fan groups or church brotherhoods.

Russian Right-Wing Organizations

In Montenegro, branches of Russian right-wing organizations are also active. The Montenegrin branch of the *Night Wolves* was established on September 1, 2014, with its headquarters in Podgorica. The founders are listed as Vukoman Bulatović (authorized person), Dragan Maraš, and Željko Obradović. According to the information on their website, the goals of the association include fostering and preserving the Orthodox faith, humanitarian work, maintaining multi-ethnic harmony, and promoting healthy lifestyles. They rely on Orthodox values and the tradition of their ancestors, living according to the testament of Saint Peter of Cetinje, and consider any place where Orthodox Slavs live as their homeland.

In the spectrum of activities visible on their official website, there is evidence of their presence at anti-NATO gatherings, attending the birthday celebration of the president of the Russian branch of the *Night Wolves*, as well as visits to monasteries, churches, Russian schools, and kindergartens.

On May 9, 2015, organized by the NGO *Monterussia*, the *Night Wolves* led a procession of Montenegrin motorcyclists as part of the Victory Day celebrations. In the statement at that time, *NGO Monterussia* announced that, under the patronage of the Russian Embassy and Rosstrudnichestvo, they would organize a series of events in Bar, Budva, and Herceg Novi.

The *Night Wolves* had their first significant public promotion in Montenegro on September 12, 2016, in Kotor, at a gathering of Cossacks from Russia, Serbia, and the Cossack Center of Montenegro, established to strengthen ties with Russia. Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church also attended the ceremony.

Indeed, the proximity to the SOC is a characteristic feature of the *Night Wolves*. In October 2018, they were in the company of the Serbian Patriarch Irinej during his visit to Montenegro. Together with Orthodox brotherhoods close to the Serbian Orthodox

Church, the *Night Wolves* participated in religious processions organized by the SOC during the year 2020. Their presence was noted at the Cetinje Monastery on September 5, 2021, during the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije.

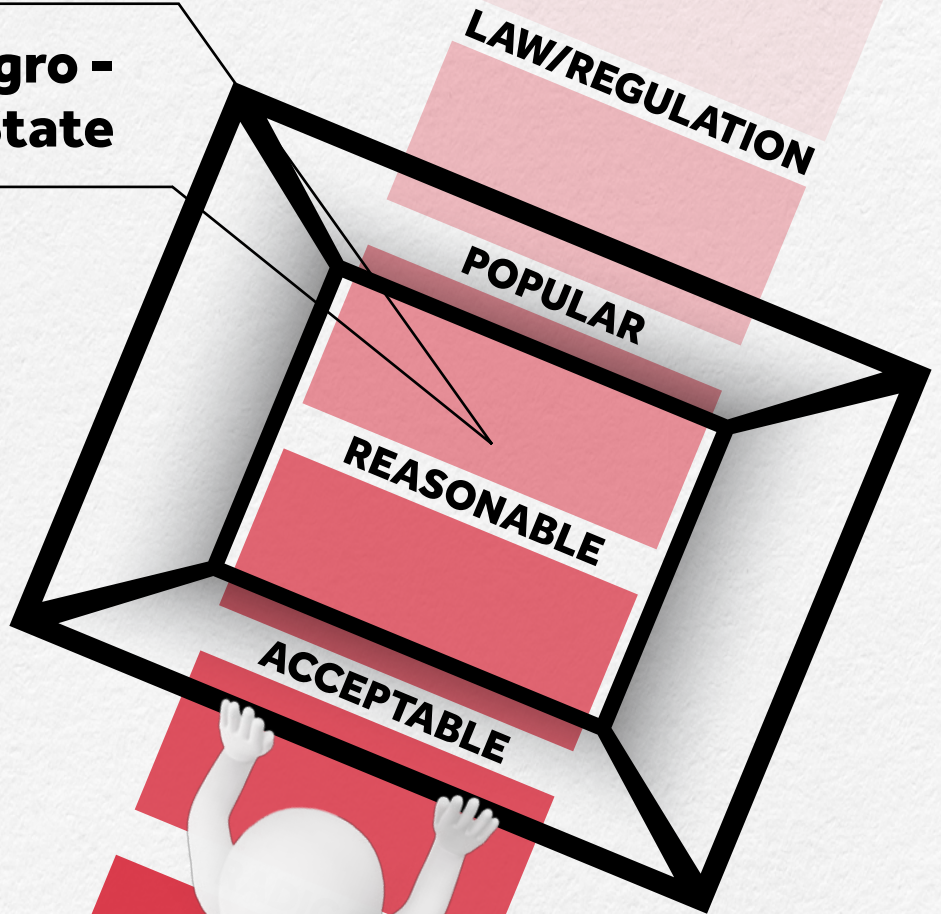
The *Night Wolves* were particularly active after Russia attacked Ukraine. Among other things, they attended a rally in support of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on March 2, 2022, in front of the Parliament of Montenegro. That rally was promoted on Facebook by Aleksander Zaldostanov, the leader of the *Night Wolves* from Moscow.

The Balkan Cossack Army was founded on September 11, 2016, in Kotor. Uniformed Cossacks and bikers from Russian pro-Russian parts of Ukraine, Serbia, and Montenegro gathered in front of the Church of St. Nicholas in Kotor, where the liturgy was conducted by then-Kotor parish priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Momčilo Krivokapić. After the sermon, anti-Western messages, masked with Orthodox Christianity and Pan-Slavism were conveyed. Among those present were: General Viktor Vladimirovich Zaplatin, the Supreme Ataman of the Balkan Cossack Army, who had worked in Serbia for over 16 years as a representative of the Russian Federation, Cossack Colonel Slobodan Pejović, the Ataman of Montenegro, and Zaplatins deputy, Cossack Colonel Vojislav Vidaković, the Chief Ataman for Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska, as well as Mijajlo Backović.

At the beginning of October 2022, a ceremony was held in Danilovgrad to mark the celebration day of Saint Thecla, the Equal-to-the-Apostles. It was led by Bishop Metodije Ostojić of Budimija-Nikšić, and in attendance were the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Montenegro, the Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Montenegro, as well as some members of the Montenegrin Parliament. At the ceremony, alongside Mijajlo Backović, there were also individuals in uniforms of the Cossack Union, featuring one of Putin's aggressor symbols, the letter V.

The Night Wolves and Cossack Army, following the example of their counterparts in Russia, have been directly linked to the Serbian Orthodox Church since their establishment. The ideological framework of the SOC precisely connects the Night Wolves with radical Orthodox brotherhoods in Montenegro.

Montenegro - Serbian State



The activity of pro-Serbian media, in synergy with political entities, activists, and analysts, is reflected in strong campaigns during significant socio-political events in Montenegro

Influence Campaigns

In contemporary societies and the digital age, the media plays a crucial role in spreading manipulations, with authoritarian regimes and foreign actors often using these methods to exacerbate divisions within society. The media is not just a tool for gathering and disseminating information, but also producers, controllers and owners of information that they shape according to their interests and preferences. Foreign actors often use media as a platform for propaganda by disseminating narratives, disinformation, and fake news to influence public opinion, manipulate information, and undermine trust in state institutions. Foreign influences through the media can also manifest themselves in attempts to influence electoral processes, which can seriously undermine their integrity. Malign influences exerted through the media represent a form of *soft power*. Contemporary media have significant capabilities in shaping public opinion and social awareness. By controlling information and the way it is presented to the public, foreign actors influence the shaping of emotions, opinions, and behaviors of people in all spheres of society through the media. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Western Balkan region, where pro-Serbian and pro-Russian narratives are often used to support specific political structures or goals. Different media and online platforms are used for hybrid campaigns targeting pro-Western and pro-democratic actors.

The media scene in Montenegro is characterized by the presence of various media outlets whose content and editorial policies are shaped by the political and ideological preferences of their owners, who are predominantly foreign actors. Although media pluralism is desirable in developed democratic countries, the type of pluralism prevalent in Montenegrin media contributes to the further polarization of Montenegrin society. In Montenegro, foreign malign influence through the media poses a serious challenge to sovereignty, social stability, and democratic processes in the country. Media manipulation and the influence of foreign actors in the media sphere can significantly impact the integrity of the Montenegrin media environment, creating confusion among the general public and undermining their trust in journalism.

Serbia has a considerable influence on the media landscape in Montenegro through ownership of media outlets. The interest of Serbian companies buying Montenegrin media is not of a financial nature; rather, it is aimed at exerting certain influence. Foreign entities, predominately Serbian, by acquiring domestic media in Montenegro, enable the control of information distribution and influence editorial policies. Media in Montenegro are also under significant influence from political structures and actors who use the media to shape public opinion according to their will, which constitutes manipulation. Research from the Digital Forensic Center in 2023 showed that every third respondent (33.9%) believes that political parties control the work of the media. Nearly half of the citizens, 44.6%, expressed the opinion that the media work in the interest of political structures.⁸³

The actions of the media in synergy with political entities, activists, and analysts are reflected in strong campaigns during important socio-political events in Montenegro. By channeling a disinformation narrative that portrays Montenegro as *ambassadoristan* and consistently disseminating sweeping and unsubstantiated judgments about the exclusion of Serbians from socio-political currents, as well as actively and decisively partici-

pating in the process of forming the government in Montenegro, Serbia seeks to exert influence with the primary interest of shaping a government in line with official Belgrade. Official Belgrade perceives the representatives of the Serbian people in Montenegro exclusively through the political parties of the former *Democratic Front*, as reflected in the intensive campaigns of pro-Serbian portals *Borba* and *IN4S*.

A serious problem arises from foreign political influence being exerted precisely through ownership of the media. The goal and interest of both domestic and foreign political actors are to use the media to convey to the public only what suits them and brings them political points. In Montenegro, there is evident pressure on the media, along with connections between certain media outlets and political entities or foreign malign actors. In Montenegro, for years, Russia and Serbia have predominately exerted *soft power* through the media. As early as 2014, during a period of relatively good relations between the authorities in Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia exerted significant influence on Montenegro's media scene with the arrival of the Serbian tabloid *Informer*, which violated the Code of Journalists of Montenegro with its reporting. The Montenegrin branch of *Informer* was shut down in 2017, but the Serbian branch (print and online) continued to disseminate narratives and manipulate information about Montenegro. The media monitoring conducted by the DFC also attests to this. The extent to which *Informer* and other Serbian media report on Montenegro is evident from the fact that during the four years of monitoring the most read Serbian media in Montenegro conducted by DFC, they published 41,178 articles about Montenegro, which were often of questionable quality.

In addition to media from Serbia, the *soft power* of Serbia and Russia is reflected through aggressive propaganda disseminated by media that are not originally Serbian or Russian but align with their agendas. Such media outlets in Montenegro disseminate disinformation and fake news, as well as narratives as subtler forms of manipulation, which are more dangerous because they are not easily recognizable. Disinformation and narratives of domestic origin are often instrumentalized by local political elites to strengthen their positions and eliminate political opponents. One of the key tools used for media control involves legal maneuvers, especially through lawsuits known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP). These lawsuits, often baseless, are employed to intimidate media, journalists, and academic structures that investigate sensitive topics or report uncomfortable truths. In addition to legal threats, democratic structures are often exposed to pressure and attacks due to their work. This creates a climate of fear and self-censorship, resulting in a diminished ability of the media to fulfil its crucial role in society.

IN4S

The portal *IN4S* plays a crucial role in promoting pro-Russian and pro-Serbian narratives in Montenegro. In addition to its presence in Podgorica, it has editorial offices in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nikšić, North Mitrovica, and the Ukrainian Donbas. The *IN4S* portal is not registered, which means that it is not subject to the legal regulations of Montenegro. The Impressum lists Felix Savon, a Cuban boxer, as the main and responsible editor. The actual founder and main editor-in-chief of the *IN4S* portal is Gojko Raičević. Raičević has also been at the helm of the NGO *No to War- No to NATO* and advocated for the organization of a mandatory referendum on Montenegro's entry into NATO⁸⁴. Simultaneously, he has been active as a Russian propagandist. The portal is recognized for spreading disinformation, promoting national and religious intolerance, hate speech, and narratives that deny the Montenegrin national and cultural identity, targeting the non-governmental sector and civic activists, and violating the Media law and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. In numerous articles on that portal, war criminals are affirmed, Vladimir Putin's policies are promoted, and Russia's aggression on Ukraine is supported. Addi-

tionally, there is the denial of the genocide in Srebrenica. The *IN4S* portal reports affirmatively on the policies of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. In 2021, President Vučić sent a government plane to transport Gojko Raičević for treatment at the COVID hospital in Batajnica.⁸⁵

In the report by the U.S. State Department outlining the pillars of the Russian disinformation campaign, the *IN4S* portal is identified as part of the propaganda ecosystem of the Russian disinformation campaign.⁸⁶ The DFC has previously reported⁸⁷ that *IN4S* was founded in 2009 and that among its founders, alongside Gojko Raičević, was Vladimir Božović, the current rector of the University of Montenegro.

Vladimir Božović and Gojko Raičević were together in Moscow in 2017, where they attended the Plenary Session of the First Convocation of the Assembly of the Peoples of Eurasia and the VII Convocation of the Assembly of the Peoples of Russia. The same event was attended by Vojin Grubač, a columnist for the *IN4S* portal, Marko Kovavčević, the mayor of Nikšić, and Mlađan Đorđević, a former advisor to the President of Serbia Boris Tadić and the secretary of the Council for Serbians in the Region and the Diaspora.

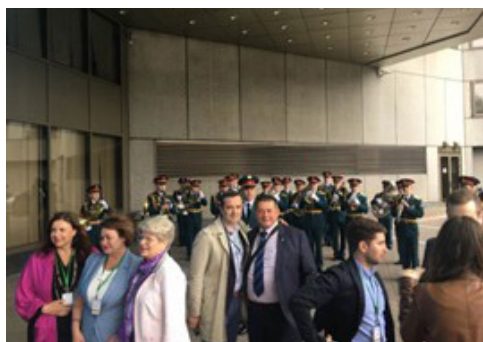
In May 2023, certain Moldovan media outlets published articles containing specific information about alleged connections between Gojko Raičević and Russian intelligence structures, disseminating commissioned texts through the *IN4S* portal. Those media outlets published a photograph from 2016 allegedly showing Raičević in the company of Russian agents, including Ana Bogačeva, a member of the Internet Research Agency, sought by the FBI for unlawful interference in the U.S. elections.⁸⁸ Moldovan media cite Igor Damjanović, a correspondent for *IN4S* and various Russian publications, Vladimir Božović, the rector of the University of Montenegro and Dražen Živković, the founder and editor of the *Borba* portal, as collaborators with Gojko Raičević.⁸⁹



Gojko Raičević

Although soft power, in its definition, encompasses other important components, I believe that culture is a central element of this concept. In order to keep Montenegro within the Serbian identity field, and thus in the zone of Russian influence, we need to strengthen cultural and media institutions in the region.

Vladimir Božović 2015



Vladimir Božović and Gojko Raičević in Russia in 2017

The *IN4S* portal intensified its Russian propaganda mission at the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022. During this time, fake news and narratives were disseminated, praising Russian power and justifying the decision to carry out a pre-planned invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine. Through various platforms, *IN4S* disseminated information that was precisely and consistently harmonized with the official Moscow positions. The key individual responsible for disseminating Russian propaganda in Montenegro through the *IN4S* portal, which originates directly from Russian institutions and media, is Igor Damjanović. He, along with the Serbian Orthodox Church priest Mijajlo Backović, was at a meeting in the Russian Embassy in Podgorica on February 16, 2023, after which he traveled to Russia. In addition to reporting for *IN4S*, Damjanović also provided coverage of events from the front for Serbian media outlets, including *Alo* and *Happy TV*. After his Facebook profile was suspended for a certain period, preventing



Gojko Raičević
and Ana Bogačeva

him from posting controversial content, he opened a Telegram channel called *War Live*, which garnered over 20 thousand users.⁹⁰ Igor Damjanović was present with the Russian military in the field and was awarded the *Medal of Patriot of Russia* by Colonel Sedoy, the commander of the battalion *Jevgeny Rodionov*, for his efforts in *providing objective reporting on the situation at the front*.⁹¹ Igor Damjanović wrote articles for Russian portals *Katehon* and *Geopolitica.ru* during 2015 and 2016. These portals were identified in the U.S. State Department report as part of the so-called propaganda ecosystem of the Russian disinformation campaign. In addition, Damjanović is the founder of the *Immortal Regiment Movement* in Montenegro, formed in the image of the international civil-patriotic movement to preserve personal memories of generations from World War II, which was established in February 2014 in Russia. The activities of *IN4S* and Igor Damjanović serve as a

telegraph. ACTUAL POLITIC OPINII SOCIAL ECONOMIC EXTERNE LIFESTYL

EXTERNE

Federația Rusă atacă de pe frontul hibrid din Muntenegru

TELEGRAPH
6 MAI 2023



Pictures from the Moldovan media



Igor Damjanović receives a medal from Colonel Sedoy



Igor Damjanović in the company of Russian soldiers at the front in Ukraine

clear example of Russian malign influence and propaganda that directly impact and undermine Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic path.

The pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portal *IN4S* often disseminates insults and provocations directed towards national minorities or their political representatives. In this manner, the portal participates in a campaign aimed at polarization and the long-term erosion of the social fabric and civic concept of Montenegro. The insults directed at Albanians and Croats in Montenegro from that portal do not seem to elicit reactions from Montenegrin institutions. On the other hand, the support for the *IN4S* portal and its editor, Gojko Raičević, comes from Goran Danilović, the leader of *United Montenegro*, and the director of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Milivoje Brković, a councilor in the Assembly of the Capital City, Serbian Orthodox Church Priest Mijajlo Backović, *True Montenegro* and its leader Marko Milačić, as well as the *Bunt* page, recognized for spreading disinformation, anti-Western narratives, hate speech and calls for violence. Indeed, these are the channels through which *soft power* is disseminated, which may not necessarily escalate into concrete violence but significantly influence the increase in tensions within society.

In addition to direct support for the portal expressed in individual cases, legitimacy was also provided by certain Montenegrin officials by appearing on its platforms. Among them were Dritan Abazović, Zdravko Krivokapić, and Milojko Spajić. *IN4S* has been as-



The appearances of Dritan Abazović, Zdravko Krivokapić, and Milojko Spajić on *IN4S* platforms



sisted and encouraged in its activities by public state-owned companies such as *Elektroprivreda Crne Gore (EPCG)* and *Crnogorski elektrodistributivni centar (CEDIS)*. These entities had signed contracts with the portal for advertising during 2021 and 2022. In this

Borba

The founder of *Borba* is Dražen Živković, who now also serves as the editor-in-chief of *Prva TV*. The *Borba* portal disseminates narratives claiming that the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro are discriminated against and endangered. Additionally, it advocates for Montenegro to strengthen its ties with Serbia and Russia rather than with Western partners. The *Borba* portal consistently provides daily support for pro-Serbian political entities in Montenegro. It focuses on the former *Democratic Front*, specifically the *For the Future of Montenegro* coalition and its leaders, while also praising the character and actions of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the policies he pursues.

Dražen Živković, along with Gojko Raičević, was detained by the Montenegrin police in 2020 on suspicion of disseminating false information about an explosion at Villa Gorica, thereby committing the criminal offense of causing panic and disorder.⁹³ At that time, officials from the *Democratic Front* expressed support for them in front of the Prosecutor's Office.

Borba provides significant media space to various actors from Serbia and Montenegro who promote the idea that Montenegro should become part of the Serbian world and unite into a single state with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. They often deny the Montenegrin national and state identity and the independence of the state of Montenegro. The columnists of the *Borba* portal are supporters of Russian President Vladimir Putin and advocates of his special military operation in Ukraine. They are opponents of NATO and Western democratic values, deniers of the Srebrenica genocide, opponents of the existence of Kosovo as an independent state, and promoters of convicted war criminals. The *Borba* portal consistently uses bias as a mechanism of manipulation when reporting on Serbia, its president Aleksandar Vučić, and the Serbian Progressive Party. The reporting by *Borba* and the coordinated activities of a network of accounts in the comments on articles in the run-up to the elections in Serbia held on December 17, 2023, serve as an example of how this pro-Serbian portal from Montenegro is used to promote the political agenda of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Journalists of *Borba* report on Serbia as if it were their own country. They often attempt to belittle the state of Montenegro. An obvious example of this is an article published after the handball match between Montenegro and Serbia in January 2024.

On multiple occasions, the DFC pointed out the disinformation and narratives disseminated by that portal.⁹⁴ During 2019, there was a significant number of articles aiming to discredit Montenegrin institutions, especially the National Security Agency (NSA), as noted by the DFC. It involved disinformation subsumed



Headline of the *Borba* portal

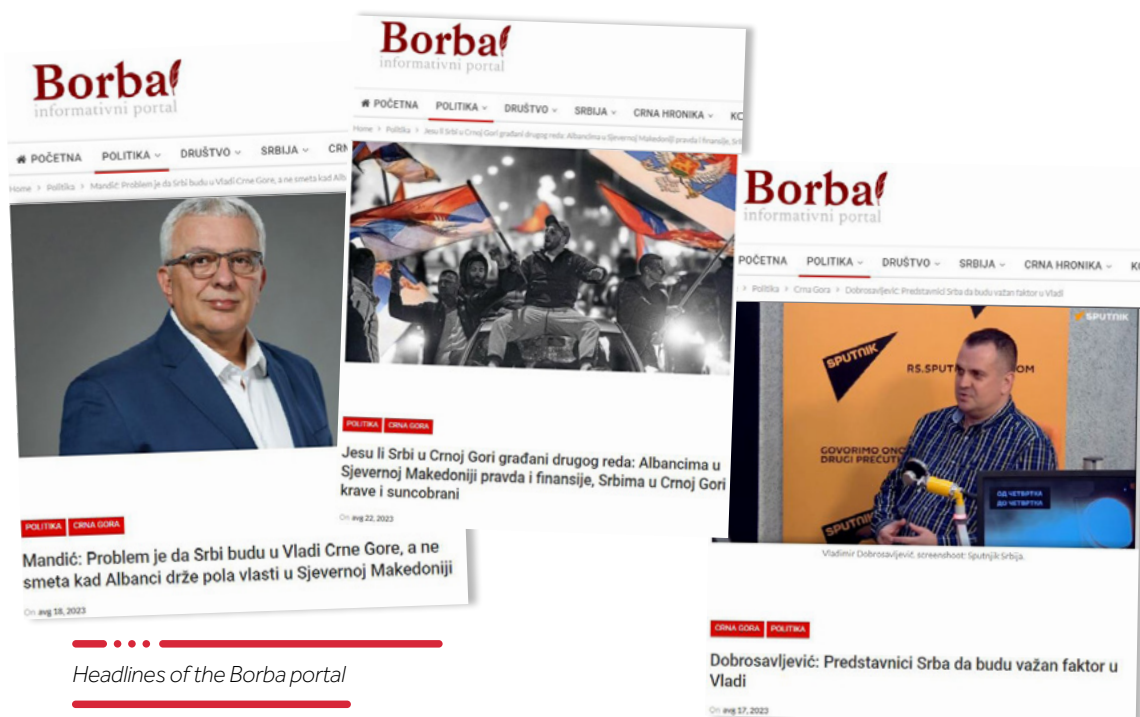
into several narratives advocating for instability within the institution itself and activities against the state and society of Montenegro.⁹⁵ During the elections, the *Borba* portal was active, as evident during the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023.

In addition to its own content, the portal also transmitted certain texts with unverified information about alleged election fraud and forged documents from Serbian portals.⁹⁶ *Borba*, through well-known narratives and media constructs about the alleged ban on Serbians entering the government, attempted to influence and destabilize the processes of forming the government in Montenegro. It was emphasized that representatives of Serbians should be an important factor in the government, comparing it to the position of Albanians in North Macedonia. It was suggested that the only true representatives of the interests of the Serbian people in Montenegro are embodied in political entities that are part of the *For the Future of Montenegro* coalition. This is even though the coalition won 14.76% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in June 2023, and their candidate for the presidency in March 2023 received 19.32% of the votes in the elections.

During significant social and political events, as well as in regular circumstances, it is observed that *Borba* takes content from Russian propaganda portals such as *RT Balkan* and *Sputnik Serbia*. These are media whose broadcasting is banned by the European Union as part of measures against Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine, measures with which Montenegro has aligned itself.

Radio Television Srpska

Radio Television *Srpska* is a relatively new media outlet on the Montenegrin media scene, with its main editor-in-chief being a Serbian citizen, Vladimir Dobrosavljević. He is a political analyst, former advisor to Andrija Mandić, and one of the ideologues of the Serbian world. Radosav Jokić serves as the director of *RTV Srpska* and is also at the helm of the



Headlines of the Borba portal

NGO *Society for Equality and Tolerance*, established in March 2004. This organization is a provider of audio-visual media services, namely the broadcaster of *Srpska RTV*, and Jokić is the authorized person of the broadcaster. Among the founders of the Society are former members of the Parliament of Montenegro and *Democratic Front* officials Marina Jočić, Ksenija Kljajević (sister of the leader of the New Serb Democracy, Andrija Mandić), and the president of the Serbian National Council, Momčilo Vuksanović. The Society for Equality and Tolerance received financial assistance in 2021 and 2022 from the Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbians in the Region of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia for a TV Series titled *Serbian People in Montenegro* and *Manifestations of the Culture of the Serbian people in Montenegro*.

The *Srpska RTV* portal provides media space for columns of individuals who deny Montenegrin sovereignty and the Montenegrin nation, including Emil Labudović, Čedomir Antić, and Bećir Vuković. Their texts are regularly transmitted by the *IN4S* and *Borba* portals as well. *Srpska RTV* also has its YouTube channel where, among other content, shows like *Stories from Belgrade (Beogradske Priče)* and *In the Center with Srpska* are published. The show *Stories from Belgrade* is edited and hosted by the main editor-in-chief, Vladimir Dobrosaljević, in the form of interviews. His first interviewees were Andrija Mandić⁹⁷, Vladimir Pavićević⁹⁸, Želidrag Nikčević⁹⁹, and Bojan Panaotović¹⁰⁰. All of them are frequent speakers in Serbian media, as well as pro-Serbian media in Montenegro. Following the same narrative, they consistently speak about Montenegro as a Serbian state. The second show, *In the Center with Srpska*, is hosted by Perica Đaković, a former war reporter for RTM from the Dubrovnik battlefield. The Facebook page of *Srpska RTV* was opened in January 2016 under the name *Come on, Vote*. It later changed its name to *Voice of Serbia* in September 2016, and in February 2023, it became *Srpska RTV*, sharing content from the portal.¹⁰¹

The DFC analyzed the presidential elections in 2023, examining the campaign of Serbian portals and highlighting the disinformation and narratives they disseminated. Media monitoring revealed that during that time, marginal Serbian portals with limited popularity were particularly active, which usually sporadically focused on Montenegro. One from that group was the portal *Vaseljenska TV*, with Vesna Veizović serving as the main editor-in-chief. She is listed in the database of the Ukrainian site *Mirotvorec* as part of the Center for Research of Crimes Against the National Security of Ukraine, where she is labelled as an anti-Ukrainian propagandist. Veizović was in Montenegro shortly before the first round of the presidential elections, specifically at the premises of *Srpska RTV* in Podgorica.¹⁰² According to her Facebook post, it could be inferred that she was preparing segments for *Srpska RTV*, which she emphasized as the *only television with a Serbian narrative in Montenegro*.

Prva TV

In spreading Russian and Serbian propaganda in Montenegro, a significant role is played by *Prva TV*, owned by Srđan Milovanović, a businessman from Serbia whose brother is a high-ranking official of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) in Niš. In February 2021, Dražen Živković, the founder and owner of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portal *Borba*, was appointed editor-in-chief of *Prva TV*.

On *Prva TV*, a significant media space has been opened for political entities that predominantly advocate pro-Serbian narratives, especially for the former *Democratic Front*. This was demonstrated by the monitoring of the presidential election campaigns in 2023 on television, conducted by the Media Center. Their analysis showed that *Prva TV*, along with *Adria TV*, favored the presidential candidate Andrija Mandić. This was reflected in the biased coverage of his pre-election activities and the promotion of affirmative views

about him and the political group that nominated him.¹⁰³ During the pre-election campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2023, the dominant narratives on *TV Prva* were the belittling of opponents and denigration/accusations against the West. The discreditation of political opponents was most often directed at the Democratic Party of Socialists, former President Milo Đukanović, or the former regime that was in power until August 2020. The representatives of the coalition *For the Future of Montenegro*, and actors close to them, used television to disseminate negative narratives about Western partners: The United States, the European Union, and NATO. They sought to convey messages that Western embassies in Montenegro dictate the country's internal and foreign policies, organize elections, give orders and instructions to certain political entities and institutions in Montenegro, that foreign power centers form governments¹⁰⁴, that Brussels supported the criminal and corrupt regime of the *Democratic Party of Socialists*¹⁰⁵, that Brussels is not a partner but someone who gives orders, and that the EU, together with the USA, is accustomed to using its ambassadors for anything that does not represent the will of the people.¹⁰⁶ By spreading these narratives, the speakers often disseminated misleading content, using common mechanisms such as unverifiable information and manipulation of facts.

After the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in the reporting and appearances of journalists and guests on *TV Prva*, there was an observed tendency to downplay Russia's act of aggression and promote propagandistic narratives. They also avoid using the term *war* or *Russian invasion* but instead use phrases like *military operation by the Russian army* or *military intervention*.¹⁰⁷ The editor of the foreign-policy department of Radio Montenegro, Slaviša Đorđević, characterized the conflict in Ukraine as a *proxy intermediary war between two great empires, Russia and the USA, which spills over the European space*, during his appearance on the show *Morning* on *TV Prva*. Ljubomir Radinović, the President of the Council for International Relations of the Russian political party Rodina, is a frequent guest on *TV Prva*, discussing the war in Ukraine.¹⁰⁸ The Rodina party and the Democratic People's Party (DPP) of Milan Knežević signed a Memorandum of Cooperation in February 2016, stating that they share the same ideological principles of the so-called people's democracy. During the court proceedings for the attempt at terrorism in 2017, a delegation from Rodina traveled to Podgorica and expressed their support for the leaders of the DF, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, who were among the accused.¹⁰⁹ Mandić and Knežević visited Rodina the following year and met with its leaders. The founder of the Rodina party is the controversial Dimitry Rogozin, former Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Government and former head of the state space agency Roscosmos. According to a Facebook post, Radinović was with Rogozin when he was injured in the Ukrainian strike on Donetsk, a stronghold of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.¹¹⁰



Ljubomir Radinović
and Dimitry Rogozin



Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević with the
representatives of the political party Rodina

Aloonline.me

The portal aloonline.me is part of the *Alo Media System d.o.o.* group based in Belgrade, which owns the Serbian tabloid *Alo*, closely associated with the authorities in Serbia. The general director of that media is Dragan Lazić, who is also the president of the Chess Federation of Serbia. The editor-in-chief of the *Aloonline.me* portal is Vladimir Vuković, a former external consultant of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports in the Government of Montenegro during the mandate of Vesna Bratić. Vladimir Vuković insulted the *Radio Television of Montenegro* journalist Nebojša Šofranac at the Podgorica Airport in April 2021 during the reception of the junior world boxing vice-champion. The Ministry terminated the consultancy contract with Vuković due to his persistent disregard for warnings about his behavior on social media. He celebrated the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić on his Facebook profile. He is a frequent guest on Serbian television channels *Happy* and *Kurir*, where he comments on and analyzes socio-political developments in Montenegro.

In 2017, when Montenegro joined NATO, several new pro-Russian portals were registered, including the news portal *Princip*, led by Vladimir Vuković. He stated at that time that the portal operated thanks to his pure enthusiasm and the enthusiasm of his friends. According to the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIJM), Vuković wrote about the discrimination of the Serbian community in Montenegro, NAATO, and relations between Montenegro and Russia. On one occasion, he stated *If I ever received money from Russia, I would tell everyone, and it would be an honor, but I haven't.*¹¹¹

Vladimir Vuković, through his Facebook profile, called for protests during the formation of the 44th Government, stating that the people would not peacefully express their protest through prayer. In his post, he also announced that he would carry a rod and attack anyone who stood in his way. Such bizarre statements raise concerns that the socio-political crisis could have implications for potentially endangering civil peace and stability in Montenegro. After Facebook removed the mentioned post because it did not comply with Facebook community standards, Vuković once again confirmed that he stands behind everything he wrote. He made several posts calling on the Serbian Orthodox Church and Metropolitan Joanikije to express their stance on socio-political events.

Through the *Aloonline.me* portal, pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives are actively promoted, and Andrija Mandić is presented as a statesman and leader of the parliamentary majority who properly represents Montenegro¹¹² and advocates for reconciliation and the European path for Montenegro.

Srpska 24

The portal *Srpska 24* was founded on December 19, 2019, with the idea of *exposing communist heritage in all areas of social life in Montenegro and offering an alternative project to*



*Vladimir Vuković with
Metropolitan of Montenegro
and the Littoral Joanikije and
Bishop of Budimlja-Nikšić
Metodije Ostojčić*



Ivan Milošević (first from the right) in the company of Mileta Pavičević (third from the left)

its followers, which includes the Serbian national idea and monarchy as a natural practice for Serbians. The portal advocates for the return of the soldiers of the Yugoslav Army to their homeland and for General Draža Mihailović to be included in Serbian textbooks and the families of their descendants. It aligns with the clear spiritual orientation that the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral has preserved for centuries in Montenegro. During the establishment of the portal, it was stated that it would be open to all opposition parties and like-minded people, organizations, and movements who understand that the main social problem in Montenegro is the three-decades-long rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists.¹¹³

The owner and editor-in-chief of the portal is Ivan Milošević, a journalist and the general secretary of the Association of Journalists of Montenegro. Milošević is an advocate of the Chetnik movement and the figure and deeds of Chetnik commander Draža Mihailović, along with Vojvoda Mile Pavičević, the president of the *United Ravna Gora Movement of Montenegro*. Mile Pavičević, in 2007, alongside Andrija Mandić, the current president of the Parliament of Montenegro, was awarded the title of Chetnik Vojvoda.¹¹⁴

Adria TV and the Portal

In September 2021, *Adria* television and portal started operating under the slogan *Connecting the Incompatible*. That television, as well as radio *Jadran* from Herceg Novi, is part of the *Adria Jadran* media group. At the opening ceremony, the then president of the Board of Directors of the media group and owner of *Adria Management Services (Adrija MS)*, Bratislav Stojilković, stated that the company had been operating successfully for many years in all Western Balkan countries. He announced that the media business is becoming their priority in the coming period, that *Montenegrin society is deeply divided on various grounds, and that the media scene is polluted with content contributing to such a state*.¹¹⁵



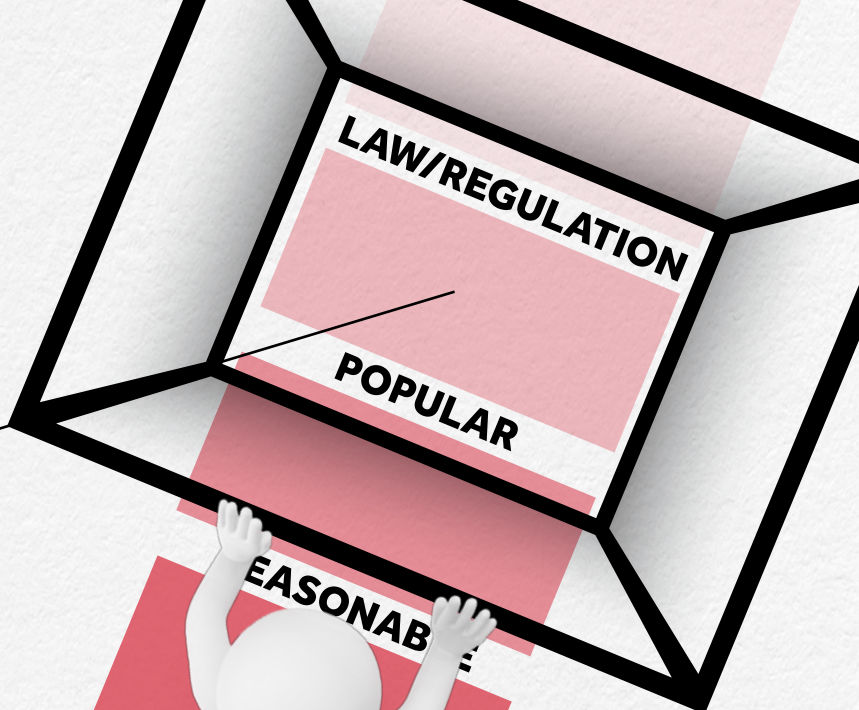
The General Director of RTM, Boris Raonić, and Bratislav Stojilković during the signing of the agreement

Within this media group, the festival *Our Sea, Our Scales* was organized in Herceg Novi under the patronage of *Telekom Serbia*. The *Adria Jadran* media group signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Radio Television Montenegro for the realization of this cultural and artistic event.¹¹⁶ The General Director of *Radio Television Montenegro*, Boris Raonić, submitted a request to the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) to include the mentioned festival in events of national importance. The Council of the AEM gave such consent in June 2022, but the decision was revoked in July of the same year.

In October 2022, Bratislav Stoilković, who is said to be a close associate of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the leader of the former *Democratic Front*, was banned from entering Montenegro at the request of the NSA, with the explanation that he is a carrier of malign influence for the interest of foreign services. On that occasion, *Adria* stated that the doors for Stoilković are open around the world, as is evident by his stay in New York during the session of the United Nations Security Council.¹¹⁷ Despite the entry ban for the owner, *Adria TV* also obtained the status of a national broadcaster in October 2022.¹¹⁸ In January 2023, Bratislav Stoilković received the annual award from the Association of Journalists of Montenegro.¹¹⁹ In addition to him, the Association awarded prizes to Russian propagandist Igor Damjanović, the propaganda platform Sputnik, and posthumously to Daria Dugin, the daughter of Putin's ideologue Aleksandr Dugin. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda appointed Serbian businessman Stoilković as the trade representative of the country for all countries in Southeast Europe. Speaking about relations with Serbia, Museveni reiterated that Uganda firmly stands by Serbia regarding its positions on the status of the southern province of Kosovo and Metohija.¹²⁰ *Adrija* portal is currently running a campaign through its articles advocating for the withdrawal of recognition of Kosovo by the Montenegrin government.¹²¹ At the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the DFC analyzed media coverage and the dissemination of narratives in Montenegro, pointing out that *Adria TV* propagates the defence of Donbas through a special military operation.¹²² Amidst the presidential election campaign in March 2023, *Adria* was one of the few portals that published an alleged public opinion poll attributed to the unexisting Center for Independent Researchers (CIR) from Belgrade.¹²³

In April 2023, Bratislav Stoilković stepped out of the ownership structure of *Adria Management Services* and *Adria TV*, wishing *good luck to the new investors and colleagues in the new and better times ahead, and to the newly elected president, Oxford graduate Jakov Milatović, and the people of Montenegro, fair winds.*¹²⁴

Introducing religious education into public educational institutions



The Serbian Orthodox Church interferes in Montenegro's education system through passionate advocacy for the introduction of religious education into schools. The foundational Agreement stipulates that Orthodox religious teaching in public schools can be regulated in accordance with the legal order of the state.

Shaping the Identity

Advocates of the *Serbian world* increasingly exert influence on education and culture in Montenegro, advocating for a platform of traditionalism and conservatism, and advocating for Montenegro's departure from the West and Western values. As an alternative, Serbia and Russia are offered as countries that should lead Montenegro in the *right direction*. These spheres are crucial for spreading Serbian nationalism but also for denying and eliminating a separate Montenegrin identity, language, and culture.

It is noticeable that after the change of government in 2020, pro-Serbian political structures are placing special focus on the education sector. The targeted degradation of the education sector began during the term of the 42nd Government, primarily through the illegal dismissal of 160 directors of public educational institutions. Instead of the depoliticization of the sector, representatives with rigid clero-nationalistic and antidemocratic views have been appointed continuously through three governments. They publicly spread hate speech towards members of minority nations, the LGBTQ+ population, as well as the political opposition.^{125, 126, 127} What sets them apart is their intolerance towards the Montenegrin identity and its denial. The hostile attitude is most vividly reflected in the treatment of the Montenegrin authorities towards the Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature (FMLL) in Cetinje, which has consistently faced political and economic pressure over the last three years. In March 2021, the Faculty faced a discontinuation of funding, leading to a lack of resources for professors and students. Additionally, the Ministry of Education refused to increase salaries exclusively for the academic staff of the FMLL. Furthermore, the Commission for the reaccreditation of the FMLL was composed of individuals known for denying the existence of the Montenegrin language, and not being experts in the field of linguistics at all.¹²⁸

In addition to its significant influence on political and social developments, the Serbian Orthodox Church is present in the field of education, establishing Orthodox schools funded by the state budget, organizing various educational and cultural events, and advocating for the inclusion of religious education in school programs. Despite the fact that the entire procedure for licensing and funding two private religious schools of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro was violated, they received 900,000 euros by the decree of the Government during its technical mandate, led by Dritan Abazović. There are still many unknowns about the schools of the SOC, such as the number of teachers and students, as well as whether they have religious subjects or not. The *Saint Sava* school started the 2023/2024 school year with one formed class of the first grade with 11 students, which is not in accordance with Article 7 of the *Regulation on Norms and Standards for Acquiring Funds from Public Revenues*. This regulation stipulates that *a department of the graduation course, i.e., the international baccalaureate in an institution, from paragraph 1 of this article, can be formed with a minimum of 20 students*. The General Law on Education and Upbringing, article 139, states: *A private institution that delivers publicly recognized educational programs can be financed from the budget of Montenegro in accordance with this law*. Paragraph 1 of Article 139 of the General Law on Education and Upbringing prescribes that *a religious school can be financed if it delivers an educa-*

tional program from the first to the final grade of schooling, which the religious school *Sveti Sava* does not fulfil.¹²⁹ The budget proposal for the year 2024 includes support for religious educational institutions amounting to 1,700,000 euros. This leads us to the conclusion that religious schools, treated equally as private schools according to Montenegrin laws, are financed from public funds.

In addition to the religious school *Sveti Sava*, the Institute for Serbian Culture Nikšić is also controversial. It obtained the license to operate during the government of Zdravko Krivokapić and has received funds from the budget reserve twice, both times amounting to 50,000 euros each.¹³⁰ To obtain the license, the founders submitted a lease agreement with the Serbian House in Podgorica, with their address, in the decision of the Tax Administration in the Central Register of Business Entities, being listed as Boulevard 13. July 21/3, Nikšić. From this information, it can be inferred that the Institute rented space in the Serbian House in Podgorica but is registered and operates in Nikšić.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is intervening in the education system of Montenegro through passionate advocacy to introduce religious education into schools. Metropolitan Joanikije, at a gathering commemorating 160 years of higher education in Montenegro and the first theological school in 1863-2023, criticized the chaotic transition to the Bologna system and reiterated the demand for the introduction of religious education into the school system so that children could be educated in *the right, truly meaningful way*.¹³¹ The realization of this goal began with a subtle influence on school boards by individuals close to the church. People whose main recommendation is participation in religious processions or some other form of *defence of holy places* and closeness to the church have been appointed as directors and their assistants.

Cultural and artistic events are often abused to promote nationalist and greater state ideologies. An illustrative example is the promotion of books by Slavko Perošević, a member of far-right groups in Montenegro, in the crypt of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica on December 3, 2023. The event, aimed at promoting Serbian nationalist and far-right ideologies, gathered the entire spectrum of the right wing of Montenegro, from political entities whose parties are represented in the Parliament of Montenegro to members of extremist organizations.

On July 10, 2023, the third edition of the *Summer School of Serbian Language for Beginners and Diaspora Members* was held in Nikšić and Budva, organized by *Matica Srpska – Society of Members in Montenegro*, with the support of the municipality of Nikšić and the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region of the Republic of Serbia. By the decision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, *Matica Srpska* in Montenegro received 800,000 dinars for that project.¹³² A representative of the Embassy of Serbia in Montenegro, Jelisaveta Čelanović, was also present at the opening of the school.

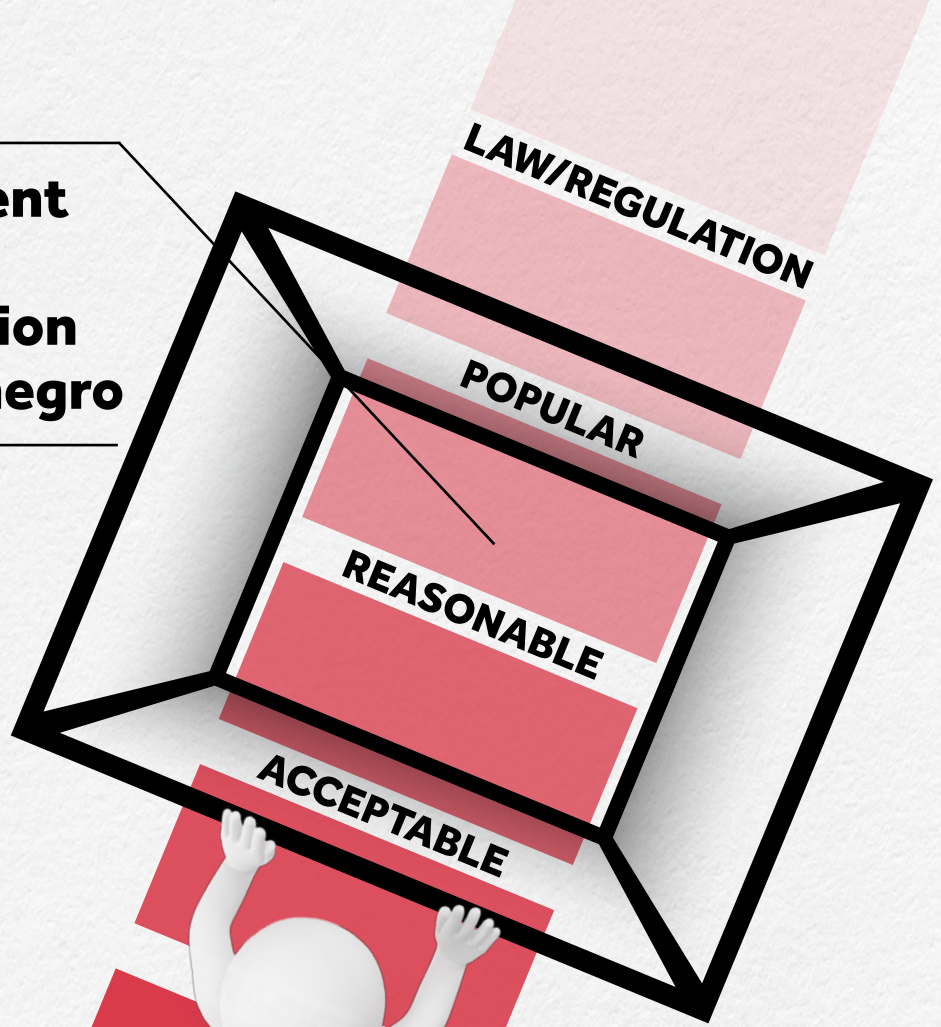
*So, the Serbian language in Montenegro, and that's why we reach it in Montenegro, so that our students also know that in Montenegro, no language other than Serbian has ever been spoken, except in the last decade and a half when violence was done to the name of the Serbian language – Jatica Stojanović, President of the Matica Srpska Society Members in Montenegro, in her speech at the opening of the Summer School.*¹³³

State institutions from Serbia, in collaboration with pro-Serbian organizations in Montenegro, aim to portray Serbia as the motherland of all Serbians in the region. In this context, special attention is given to children. Under the patronage of the Serbian National Council of Montenegro, led by Momčilo Vuksanović, and in collaboration with the Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbians in the Region of the Republic of Serbia, a youth camp named *Svetlost (Light)* was organized. As part of this camp, 50 children from Montenegro visited Belgrade, where they toured various state institutions, the Church of Saint Sava, and other landmarks. The children were received by President Aleksandar Vučić, Patriarch Prfirije, Speaker of the Assembly Vladimir Orlić, and the Director of the Office for the Diaspora Arno Gujon.



Political leaders at the book promotion of Slavko Perošević

Amendment of the Constitution of Montenegro



The intense census campaign conducted by local and regional propaganda actors is aligned with the efforts of the Serbian regime and pro-Serbian actors in Montenegro, aiming to demand a change in the Constitution following the projected increase in the number of Serbs.

Case Study: Census

The penultimate population census in Montenegro was held in 2011, although the practise is for the census to be conducted every ten years. The census scheduled for 2021 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the postponement of the census initiation, following the demands of opposition parties and organizations representing national minorities, the census was conducted from December 3rd to December 28th, 2023. Although it is supposed to provide the executive branch with data for defining and shaping public policies, the census in Montenegro is predominantly a political issue with a focus on national and religious questions. Therefore, the population census has undoubtedly drew significant attention, both in Montenegro and in the region. A fairly intense census campaign from the very beginning was accompanied by political struggles, social polarization, tensions, disinformation, fake news, and narratives. During the preparations for the census, in addition to the evident propaganda campaigns by certain media outlets from Serbia and Montenegro, significant roles were played by political entities, high-ranking church officials, organizations with a national focus, and numerous activists from various spheres of life in Montenegro and Serbia. Pro-Serbian and pro-Russian entities in Montenegro, as well as actors in the region, urged citizens to identify themselves as Serbs, aiming to restore the *traditional Serbian identity to Montenegro*. The strong census campaign conducted by domestic and regional propaganda actors was aligned with the efforts of the Serbian regime and pro-Serbian entities in Montenegro. The goal was to, after the projected increase in the number of Serbs, advocate for a change in the constitution, acknowledging the new demographic facts.

The manipulation of information, dissemination of narratives, and propaganda activities during significant socio-political events in Montenegro primarily originate from Serbia and from entities closely affiliated with Serbia in Montenegro. The same applies to the population census in Montenegro, which the Serbian regime attempted to instrumentalize to strengthen its position as the protector of all Serbs and emphasize Belgrade's role as a leader with dominant influence on the dynamics of political, economic, and social processes in the region.

Political Structures

Pro-Serbian political parties in Montenegro insisted on conducting the census, anticipating that, following the change in government, the number of Montenegrin citizens identifying as Serbs would increase. According to their interpretation, this shift would mark a *return of Montenegro to a Serbian identity*. Political entities and parties aim to shape the demographic character of the state in accordance with their political projections. They openly stated their intention to initiate constitutional changes in Montenegro after the census, aiming for a gradual shift from a civic to a national character of the state. Therefore, the census results have the potential to become a significant tool in the political struggle, leading to additional polarization within Montenegrin society.

President of the Montenegrin Parliament, Andrija Mandić, announced in an interview with the Serbian media outlet *Večernje Novosti*, ahead of the census, that he would initiate a dialogue in the Assembly following the census. His goal is for the Serbian language to obtain official status, and as a representative of the Serbian people, he will advocate for the *will of the majority of people to be incorporated into the supreme legal document of our state*.¹³⁴ To materialize Mandić's proposal, it needs to receive two-thirds support in the Parliament, followed by the approval of three-fifths of all voters in a mandatory referendum.

The Coalition *For the Future of Montenegro* introduced a narrative during the pre-census campaign, emphasizing that the population census would provide clear indicators of the property of all citizens of Montenegro. They particularly highlighted the possibility of obtaining data on the number of apartments owned by former officials.¹³⁵ Similar claims were made by the Socialist People's Party (SPP), stating that parties from the former regime aim to prevent the scrutiny of those whose wealth significantly exceeds their income by postponing the census.¹³⁶ Such claims from pro-Serbian political entities were denied by the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT).¹³⁷ However, despite their denial, pro-Russian and pro-Serbian media affiliated with those political structures continued to disseminate narratives and manipulations of similar nature. The branch of the Russian media outlet *Russia Today* in Serbia published an article titled *RT Balkan Investigates: Why is the census in Montenegro dangerous and irregular for the DPS and Milo?* The answers to this question were provided by Milutin Mićović, a writer and the brother of Metropolitan Joanikije, and Jovan Markuš, the former mayor of Cetinje.¹³⁸ Both individuals have been previously known for denying Montenegrin national and cultural identity, spreading disinformation, promoting misogyny, and engaging in hate speech.

The influence of Serbia on the self-identification of Montenegro's population during the census represents a direct interference in the internal affairs of Montenegro. The statements by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, regarding his interest in the census results, the number of Serbs in Montenegro, and their rights, are merely an articulation of the prevalent opinion within the Serbian regime and the majority of the opposition political establishment about Montenegro as another Serbian state, ethnically well-defined. In March 2021, Vučić openly expressed his interest in the census results in Montenegro, reintroducing the narrative that Serbs in Montenegro, despite being outnumbering Albanians in North Macedonia, do not have the same rights that Albanians enjoy in North Macedonia.¹³⁹

The President of Serbia touched upon the population census in Montenegro in October 2023 during the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the Serbian Progressive Party in Šabac, stating that there is an attempt to prohibit Serbs from identifying as Serbs.

With such messages, Vučić suggests that Serbia will continue to actively contribute to the attempts to change the demographic structure in Montenegro. It is important to note that from the statements of President Aleksandar Vučić, a narrative about the perceived endangerment of Serbs in Montenegro and advocacy for the reconfiguration of Montenegro along ethno-national lines, including the redefinition of the status of Serbs in Montenegro similar to the status of Albanians in North Macedonia, has been reiterated many times. The first step in achieving the goal of Serbia and its proxy actors in Montenegro should be realized through the census.

There are proportionally more Serbs in Montenegro than Albanians in North Macedonia, yet they have no rights. Since 2006, they have had no representative in power. There were more Albanians and Bosniaks, while Serbs, with a significant percentage, had no rights.

**Aleksandar Vučić,
March 18, 2021**

The recognition of Serbia and its president Aleksandar Vučić's interference in the population census process in Montenegro by European partners is evident in the statement of Alan Milon, a French member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. During the winter session in Strasbourg, he stated that the census had a significant political dimension, and the process was closely monitored by Serbia. This was highlighted by the statement of the president of Serbia, who declared that the census was of *vital interest* to Serbia.¹⁴¹

The political leadership of Serbia, during the pre-census campaign, propagated narratives about the first free census in Montenegro, characterizing it as highly politicized to the extreme,¹⁴² urging citizens to declare themselves as their ancestors did and proudly state the language they write and speak.¹⁴³ The use of such terminology and messages represents a direct politicization of the process of collecting statistical data and interference in the internal affairs of the state of Montenegro.

There were also suggestions, coming from Serbia, to enact a law stating that anyone who identifies as a Serb in the census in Montenegro would receive a range of rights and benefits in Serbia. This would include the right to all levels of education, healthcare, voluntary military service, and more.¹⁴⁴ Certain suggestions directing citizens to identify as Serbs do not formally come from the Serbian government, but they have its support. An example of such an initiative is the proposal by the Union of Montenegrin students in Serbia that for free studying in Serbia, a simple statement on the form is no longer sufficient. Instead, they proposed requiring the submission of a copy of the census questionnaire in which the applicant identified as a member of the Serbian national corpus. This initiative was presented at a meeting of students with the Minister of Defence and the president of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), Miloš Vučević, and the Minister of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, Nikola Selaković.¹⁴⁵ Although the capacity in which he attended the meeting is not known, Gojko Raičević, the founder and editor of the unregistered propaganda portal *IN4S*, was also present at the meeting. All the mentioned messages and activities indicate a synergy among actors from the spheres of politics, media, culture, and the church with the aim of influencing the public in Montenegro.

In addition to the Serbian government, the far-right in Serbia has also become involved in the campaign for the census in Montenegro. This is evident from statements made by Miša Vacić, the leader of the Serbian right, and Goran Davidović Firer, the former leader of the neo-nazi organization *Nacionalni stroj*, whose activities were banned in Serbia in 2011. They called upon citizens to identify themselves as members of the Serbian people and followers of the SOC who speak the Serbian language on the social network X. The interest of Serbian right-wing groups in the census in Montenegro is not surprising. In December 2022, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski from the Serbian right-wing party *Zavjetnici* promised assistance from Serbia in conducting the Census during a session of the Committee for the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region in the Serbian Parliament. The meeting was attended by mayors of certain municipalities in Montenegro, even though the census was only in the planning stages at the time.

When the time comes for the census, not the regular but the delayed one – oh, let's not conduct the census because there will be more Serbs. What exactly do you want, what do all of you from the outside want? To prohibit Serbs from identifying as Serbs, to erase the names and surnames of Serbs, and to prevent Serbs from stating that they are Serbs. You won't see that day. We will protect Serbia, but we will also protect our people.

Aleksandar Vučić
October 21, 2023¹⁴⁰



Students from Montenegro at a meeting with Miloš Vučević, Nikola Selaković, and Gojko Raičević

The Chairman of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, also got involved in the pre-census campaign by expressing a position on the formation of a unified Serbian state that would include Montenegro.

The Media

Regional and domestic media, known for their campaigns of disinformation and propaganda in all significant socio-political processes in Montenegro in recent years, played a significant role in the aggressive census campaign.

During the intense census campaign, Serbian propagandists appropriated historical figures. An example of this is the campaign by the unregistered pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portal *IN4S* titled *Proud of our Serbdom*. The campaign manifested itself through the installment of billboards in several cities¹⁴⁷ and articles on the portal, suggesting to the citizens of Montenegro to identify themselves as Serbs and followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church who speak the Serbian language in the census.¹⁴⁸ During the campaign, prominent figures from Croatian history, such as Ruđer Bošković and Valtazar Bogišić, were portrayed as Serbs. Due to the unacceptable attribution of the historical heritage of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian people to Serbian culture, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia sent a diplomatic protest note to the Montenegrin authorities. However, there was no reaction from the Montenegrin side. With such a political campaign of a media aligned with pro-Serbian political structures that insisted on conducting the census, the entire process became politicized and the focus shifted from

On October 28, 2023, three days before the initial scheduled date for the census, Milorad Dodik stated that Montenegro should be returned to its Serbian national essence because it undoubtedly belongs there. He also claimed that the West is preventing the census in Montenegro because they fear a significant expansion of Serbs on that census, and it's normal for them to return to their roots. Dodik emphasized that we should already state in this century, they want a unified state consisting of Serbia with Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska, and, if there is a democratic decision, Montenegro as well.¹⁹⁰

collecting statistical data crucial for making strategic decisions for Montenegro's further development.

This created an atmosphere that instilled a sense of pressure and a certain kind of fear among citizens, ignoring their genuine sense of belonging to the community. In addition, the lack of transparency in funding such campaigns raises suspicions of possible external influences or pressures on citizens' self-identification.

IN4S initiated a campaign in 2021 with the slogan *It's not Montenegrin if it's not Serbian*. This was confirmed by the founder and editor of the portal, Gojko Raičević, during a thematic sitting of the Committee for the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in December 2022. The session, chaired by Milica Đurđević Stamenopvski from the Serbian right-wing party *Zavjetnici*¹⁴⁹, was formally dedicated to the position and perspective of Serbs in Montenegro. The campaign was based on a false narrative of the endangerment of the Serbian identity and language in Montenegro, along with simultaneous propaganda targeting other national and religious communities.

Similar to *IN4S*, the pro-Serbian portal *Borba* operates according to a similar pattern, tasked with promoting narratives about the perceived endangerment and discrimination of Serbs in Montenegro. The founder and editor of that portal, Dražen Živković, claims that the DPS pressured citizens to declare their national identity in a way that allegedly suited the political party. He also stated that threats of job loss were made if individuals did not comply. Živković believes that the census will reveal the extent of each individual's wealth, especially among officials.¹⁵⁰ In its campaign and series on the census, the *Borba* portal gathered participants who, through their statements or authored texts, attempted to emphasize the Serbian national identity and language in Montenegro. They promote the idea of the Serbian world while simultaneously denying the existence of the Montenegrin identity, language, and state symbols. Just two days after the conclusion of the census, on December 30, 2023, the *Borba* portal published alleged results based on a sample of 80% of the counted material. According to this data, the results indicate that Serbs show the highest growth compared to 2011 and that the majority of the population speaks the Serbian language.¹⁵¹ The *Borba* portal's reporting was picked up by other portals such as *Srbija danas*¹⁵², *Alo, Informer*¹⁵³, *Republika*¹⁵⁴, *Infoplus*¹⁵⁵, and *Odbrana.info*¹⁵⁶. This indicates coordination between the *Borba* portal and tabloids from Serbia that are under government control. It is questionable how the propaganda portal *Borba* obtained alleged preliminary census results, considering that the first preliminary results from the SOM, which pertained to the number of population, households, and dwellings, were announced on January 25, 2024.

Billboard Proud of Our Serbdom

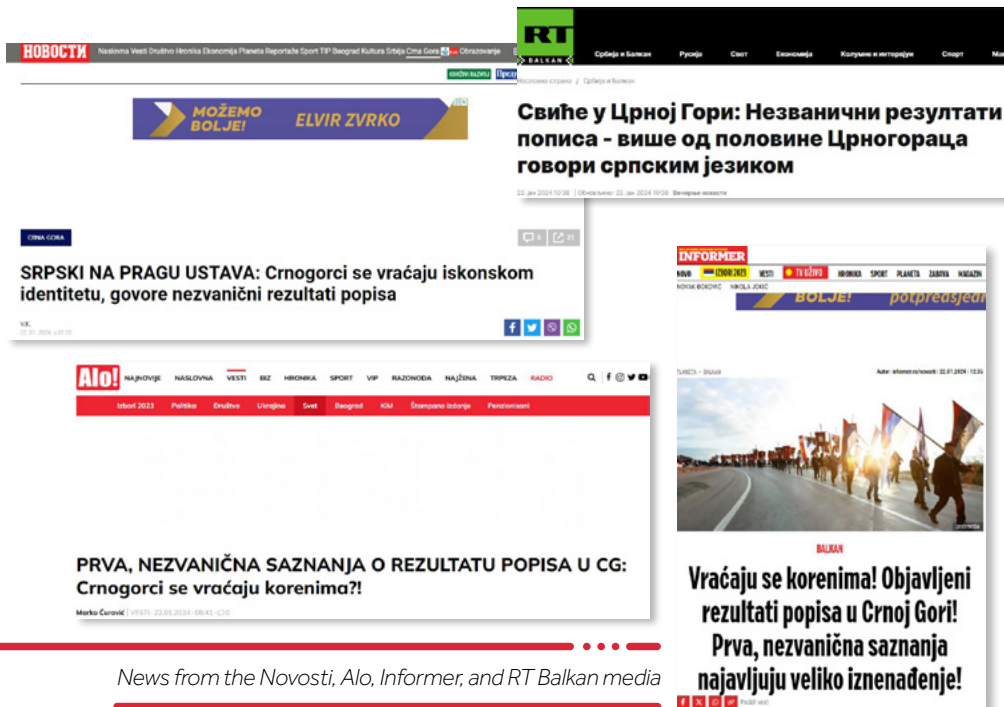


Gojko Raičević in the company of Igor Damjanović and Dejan Mirović

The DFC has previously, through its studies and analyses, pointed out the negative impact of Serbian media during important socio-political processes in Montenegro. The census has once again confirmed that the reporting of Serbian media on Montenegro is packed with sensationalism and narratives aimed at a broader audience. This raises concerns about the potential manipulation of public opinion in Montenegro. The dominant narratives suggested concerns about the census due to an expected increase in the number of Serbs and that there were proposals to postpone the census because of this.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, it was emphasized that this census would allow citizens of Montenegro to freely express themselves and return to their roots¹⁵⁸. There were also *widespread disinformation campaigns* suggesting chaos and irregularities in Montenegro, alleging that census enumerators refused to record Serbs¹⁵⁹ or recorded their nationality as Montenegrin on their own accord.¹⁶⁰

The portals *Sputnik Serbia* and *RT Balkan*, branches of Russian state propaganda media based in Belgrade, were highly active before, during, and after the population census in Montenegro, manipulating information and promoting anti-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian narratives. These media outlets have, on several occasions, attempted to stir tensions in Montenegrin society by publishing sensationalist articles about alleged deceptions in which *Serbs were allegedly being reclassified as Montenegrins*¹⁶¹, the supposed involvement of Washington and London in the census¹⁶², and the fear of the *truth* about the number of Serbs.¹⁶³ *RT Balkan* went a step further by publishing, while the census was ongoing in Montenegro, the results of a survey on nationality, religion, and language conducted for their purposes by *Nova srpska politička misao*, led by Đorđe Vukadinović.¹⁶⁴ With the alleged results of the research, *RT Balkan* and the research coordinator Vukadinović reiterated familiar narratives, suggesting that everything indicates that *Montenegro is slowly remembering its origins, alluding to its alleged Serbian origins and that people during the previous census were not allowed to declare their identity, but now they are allowed to do so*. This is a clear example of how Serbian and Russian actors, in synergy, attempt to influence the citizens of Montenegro.

After MONSTAT announced that preliminary results of the census, broken down by set-



News from the Novosti, Alo, Informer, and RT Balkan media

tlements, units of local self-government, and for the territory of Montenegro, regarding the number of inhabitants, households, dwellings would be published on January 25, 2023¹⁶⁵, Serbian tabloids started a campaign with information about alleged preliminary results of the census and declaring the outcome. *Novosti*, *Alo*, *Informer*, and *RT Balkan* published articles with sensationalistic headlines containing unverified information about the number of Serbs and speakers of the Serbian language. They further propagated narratives suggesting that Montenegrins *are returning to their original identity and roots*. They also claimed that *previous censuses were marked by tensions, pressures, and anti-Serbian hysteria*. The goal of these narratives is to generate emotional tension among citizens, leading to additional divisions and tensions in society. The relevant institutions in Montenegro did not respond to the dissemination of these unverified and particularly sensitive data.

Serbian Orthodox Church

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was active and participated in the campaign for the population census, similar to its involvement during election cycles and government formation processes in Montenegro. Although the priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Gojko Perović, stated on *A Plus* television that it *never occurred to anyone from the clergy to agitate, visit homes, or discuss the census during religious services*¹⁶⁶, the activities and statements of church officials were, in fact, quite the opposite and were part of a nationalist campaign. Priests of this religious organization, in their media appearances and during religious ceremonies, attempted to guide citizens on how to declare their in the census.

The Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Porfirije, directly participated in the census campaign. In his address to the gathered faithful in front of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica on October 14, 2023, he urged citizens to decisively express their identity as *members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, speakers of the Serbian language, and proud members of the Serbian people*. He preached that citizens need to preserve their Serbian identity *because we live in a time of the destruction of traditional identities*. The religious act was abused, and such a message from the Patriarch



Milan Knežević, Andrija Mandić, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, Boško Obradović, and Patriarch Porfirije (from left to right) at the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica, ahead of the population census

suggests that the Serbian Orthodox Church aims for a change in the national structure in Montenegro in favor of Serbs. It's a continuation of the activities of the head of the SOC, who has been denying the Montenegrin nation for years. The event in Podgorica, where the patriarch directly addressed how citizens should declare themselves in the census, was attended by members of the Serbian far-right parties *Zavjetnici* and *Dveri*, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski and Boško Obradović, who openly promote greater state ambitions towards Montenegro. After the census in Montenegro began, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski posted on Facebook that the census would show that the Serbdom is in-destructible.¹⁶⁷

In addition to the Patriarch of the SOC, Bishop Metodije Ostojić of Budimlja-Nikšić joined the pre-census campaign, explaining that the head of the SOC, Porfirije, is merely encouraging people to identify as Serbs, adding that he supports this but that it doesn't stop there because *it is not the end. Let's become what our ancestors, who identified as Serbs, were*, said Bishop Metodije, emphasizing that *if we don't become true Serbs in a spiritual sense, not just a name on a paper, we won't endure under that name here.*¹⁶⁸ In Pljevlja, in October 2023, during an event marking 530 years since the beginning of printing the *Octoechoes of the First Tone*, Ostojić stated that those who speak Serbian and write in Cyrillic are a small herd that, *through their physical and spiritual ancestors, have maintained the pledge and vow.*¹⁶⁹

The clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church sought to engage in the census campaign through media appearances and public forums, advising citizens on how to declare their ethnicity. On October 30, 2023, Archpriest Jovan Plamenac delivered a lecture on the topic *Serbdom of Montenegrins* at the premises of the Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Society *Sveti Georgije* in Nikšić. During that event, Plamenac pointed out the alleged roots of the denial of their past by citizens who explicitly consider themselves Montenegrins. Velimir Lule Kasalica, the head of the Society, posted on Facebook that the lecture was a small contribution to the upcoming census in Montenegro. Plamenac, in one of the numerous columns for the propaganda portal *Borba*, wrote *that communist ideologists and designers of the Montenegrin nation needed to establish the Montenegrin language and literature as stakes on the landslide of the serbianization of Montenegro*. He further states that the Montenegrin language was inserted into the Constitution of Montenegro in 2007 (after the 2006 referendum) which, according to him, was conducted in the spirit of the functioning of the DPS with a serious theft, the results of which were legalized by the Euro-Atlantic community.¹⁷⁰

Mijajlo Backović, secretary of the Budimlja-Nikšić Eparchy, one of the founders of the organization *Miholjski Zbor*, and a former member of the 63rd Parachute Brigade of the Yugoslav Army, also had a role in the pre-census campaign. In an authored text published on the unregistered portal *IN4S*, he stated that the census should be an *expression of the freedom of the religious processions, or the expression of freedom that, although unclear, still exists after August 30, 2020*. He emphasized that *we should be what we are and be*



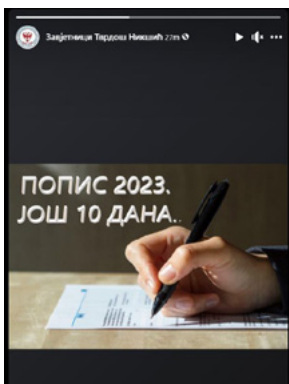
Jovan Plamenac and Velimir Kasalica in the premises of the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Sveti Georgije

named after our ancestors¹⁷¹, emphasizing that he is a Serb who speaks, thinks, and prays to God in the Serbian language.¹⁷²

In addition to Backović, the campaign also involved Professor of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Saint Basil of Ostrog at the University of East Sarajevo, Archpriest-Stavrophor Darko Đogo, and Priest Nenad Ilić, the head of the Church of St. Nicholas in Amsterdam. They expressed their views in the interviews for the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portal *Borba* as part of the series on the census. Đogo quoted the late Kotor Archpriest-Stavrophor Momčilo Krivokapić who said that 100 years ago, every resident of Boka Kotorska Bay knew they were not Montenegrins, and every Montenegrin knew they were Serbs. He promoted the well-known narrative in political and church circles about the alleged threat to the Serbian identity in Montenegro.¹⁷³ Nenad Ilić stated that the former ruler in Montenegro wanted as many people with shallow roots as possible because it was easier to control such individuals. He emphasized that it is up to the Serbs to dignify the moral legacy of their ancestors and convincingly connect the past with the future.¹⁷⁴

In the lead-up to the census, certain media outlets, pages, and social media profiles recalled the statement made by Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral in January 2023. During an appearance on the *Press plus* show on *Adria TV*, he stated that after so many years of being a Metropolitan, it is inappropriate to ask whether he is a Serb and whether he follows the Orthodox faith. So, it's clear who I am and what I am.¹⁷⁵ Pro-Serbian and pro-Russian portals *IN4S* and *Borba*, during the campaign in which they sought to influence how citizens would declare themselves, also invoked the late Metropolitan Amflohije, reminding of his statements regarding previous censuses in Montenegro.

In addition to the clergy, pre-census campaigns also involved Orthodox brotherhoods close to the Orthodox Church – *Miholjski zbor* and *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić*. *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić* posted false information on their Facebook profile claiming that in the cen-



The census campaign of Serbian far-right groups in Montenegro



suses of 1909 and 1921, 95% and 91.3% of Montenegrin citizens, respectively, declared themselves as Serbs.¹⁷⁶ During the census in Montenegro in 1909 and 1921, there was no declaration of national affiliation. The collected data only included information about citizenship and religion.

After the announcements in October 2023 that the population census would be postponed due to the failure to meet all necessary conditions for its conduct, *Miholjski zbor* addressed the public and Prime Minister Milojko Spajić in a statement. They advised him *not to play with their patience, as he was not aware of the effort and struggle invested in the survival of the Serbian people in the territory of Montenegro.*¹⁷⁷

Actors and Organizations – the Serbian World

In addition to officials, church dignitaries, and media working in the service of the Serbian world and increasing the number of Serbs in Montenegro, in the run-up to the population census and during its process, there have been increasingly present actors in the media and public space who envision Montenegro as another Serbian state.

The most prominent advocate for Montenegro's entry into a federal state or alliance with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, Aleksandar Raković, a Serbian Historian, advocates for a change in the Montenegrin Constitution with the aim of making the language official.¹⁷⁸ Such a stance is part of a campaign based on the alleged endangerment of the Serbian language in Montenegro.

Raković's stance is that the Constitution can be changed by forming a constituent assembly and a certain type of referendum that will result in a new constitution. He told the *IN4S* portal that citizens of Montenegro should declare themselves as Serbs by nationality, speak the Serbian language, and follow the Orthodox faith. He also suggested preserving copies of the census forms, as they might potentially be used to claim rights in the Republic of Serbia.¹⁷⁹ He emphasized that these three questions are crucial for liberating Montenegro from mental constraints that have lasted for decades. He justified the interest and attention that Serbia and the Republic of Srpska have directed towards this process.¹⁸⁰

Lawyer and member of the legal council of *IN4S*, Predrag Savić, states that the political project of the DPS and Milo Đukanović was based on the formation of the *Montenegrin* nation, predicting that the majority will declare on the census as speakers of the Serbian language.¹⁸¹

The narrative that people will finally express themselves freely without the pressures and fears imposed by the DPS and that this is a result of the religious processions, freedom, and the August elections is also advocated by the director Dragoslav Bokan. He is a former leader of the paramilitary formation *White Eagles*, which was active during the war events in the 1990s in former Yugoslavia.¹⁸² Bokan previously referred to Montenegro as a *modern Montenegro*, based on hatred towards the Serbian identity in an interview for the pro-Serbian portal *Borba*. He called for the creation of a common Serbian narrative that should serve as a national orientation for all Serbs in the region and beyond.¹⁸³

The official language in Montenegro is the Montenegrin language. Both Cyrillic and Latin scripts are equal. In official use are Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian, and Croatian languages.

Article 13 of the Constitution of Montenegro

Čedomir Antić, a Serbian historian and another advocate of the Greater Serbian project, also had a plan for the census. He expressed the opinion in an authored text for the portal *Borba* that previous censuses in Montenegro were largely falsified, stating that *it is better for everyone that the Docleans don't play Shqiptars because Serbdom won't be scorned once the populist government of the ENM's (Europe Now Movement) falls. Serbs won't disappear; only our policy of rounding off the national identity of the Serbian nation, which is one and indivisible, will be completed with a little necessary time.* Antić believes that after one or two census cycles, they will achieve either constitutional equality or true cantonisation of the state.¹⁸⁴

The mentioned actors consistently promote the narrative of the endangerment of Serbs outside Serbia and use it to homogenize and bind them to the national corpus, with a clear goal of deciding on all vital issues concerning Serbs, wherever they live, in Belgrade.

In addition to individuals, pro-Serbian organizations played a significant role in spreading nationalist propaganda and promoting *traditional values* through increased activities leading up to the census. By organizing numerous events and manifestations with themes such as history, culture, education, tradition, and identity, they work towards revising history and denying the Montenegrin identity. The organizers of cultural and artistic events aimed at promoting the Serbian identity were the Serbian National Council led by Momčilo Vuksanović and the Serbian House in Podgorica and Berane. One such event was the *Days of the Serbian Assembly*, which marked the 105th anniversary of the Podgorica Assembly of 1918, symbolizing the disappearance of Montenegro as a state.

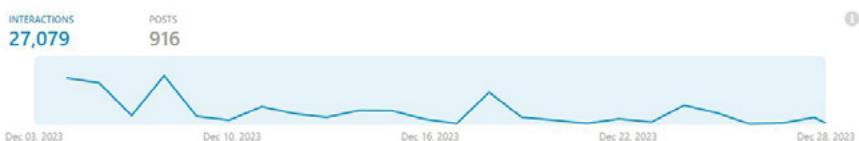
Social Media

Increased activities were observed in the online sphere in the run-up to and during the census. The census once again demonstrated that social media, alongside portals, is a significant channel for spreading disinformation, fake news, and narratives. Numerous Facebook pages, groups, and profiles, through their activities on social media, tried to influence or encourage declarations related to national and religious identity. The social media campaign further divides an already polarized Montenegrin society and negatively contributes to social cohesion.

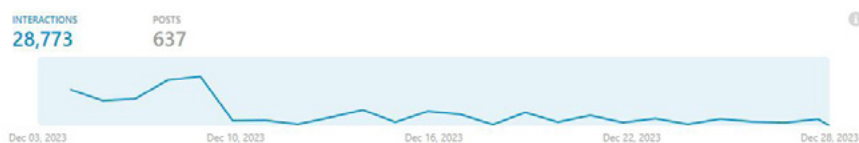
In the run-up to the population census, the Digital Forensic Center monitored and analyzed activities on social media, with a focus on identifying disinformation campaigns, narratives, and coordinated inauthentic behavior aimed at influencing public opinion. It was observed that there is a network of Facebook pages and profiles that frequently share content on the census topic in a coordinated manner. That content was entirely dedicated to encouraging citizens to identify themselves as Serbs who speak the Serbian language and are followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The intensive campaign included slogans such as *Let's be what our ancestors were, If you don't know, ask grandpa, If you don't speak Serbian, we can't talk, We don't understand each other, Clear and loud because we know who we are – Serbs.*

The analysis showed that during the census period from December 3 to December 28, 2023, there were 916 posts on Facebook pages from Montenegro, generating 27,079 interactions. On Facebook pages from Serbia during the same period, there were 637 posts with 28,773 interactions.

A specific campaign on social media ahead of the population census was led by the non-governmental organization *We Know Who We Are*, formed in 2020, bringing together young Serbs from Montenegro and focusing on promoting Serbian culture and protecting Serbian interests.



The number of posts and interactions on Facebook pages from Montenegro during the period from December 3 to December 28, 2023



The number of posts and interactions on Facebook pages from Serbia during the period from December 3 to December 28, 2023

This NGO, through its Facebook page, relativizes historical facts and denies the Montenegrin nation and language. The NGO *We Know Who We Are* states that they are not politically oriented, but according to the system of values they adhere to, they represent a conservative civic option of a moderate right-center. One of the founders of the NGO is Stefan Sinanović, a professor of Serbian literature and former spokesperson in the department of the former minister Vesna Bratić. For him, the Podgorica Assembly of 1918 is legal, and the Montenegrin language in textbooks for children is discrimination. Sinanović, after forming the NGO, announced the *return of Vidovdan ethics in Montenegro* and a campaign for the census and the preservation of the Serbian language for the Serbian portal *Novi Standard*, emphasizing that *Montenegrin Serbs endured blatant theft in the 2006 referendum, the adoption of a discriminatory Constitution, recognition of the so-called Kosovo, and entry into the NATO pact.*¹⁸⁵ *We Know Who We Are* advocates for the return of the chapel to the top of Lovćen, as they consider it a Serbian national holy place.¹⁸⁶



One of the slogans of the census campaign

Through a set of posts on its Facebook page, the NGO *We Know Who We Are* explained and provided instructions to citizens in preparation for the population census. In those posts, it was emphasized that the Serbian people in *Montenegro have been discriminated against in various ways for years. To strengthen the rights and position of the Serbian people, it is necessary for them to freely and without fear speak about themselves, their language, and their identity during the census.* Regarding the endangerment of Serbs and their declaration on the census in Montenegro, Sinanović spoke before the Committee for the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in December 2022. On that occasion, he stated that there is a need to work on reaffirming *suppressed topics* (Serbian language, persecution of political dissenters, attacks on the SOC) through more intensive media representation and on affirming *exemplary figures from Serbian national history in Montenegro.*¹⁸⁷ His ideas were put into practice in synergy with the organization *We Know Who We Are* and pro-Russian portals *IN4S* and *Borba* in preparation for the census held in December 2023.¹⁸⁸

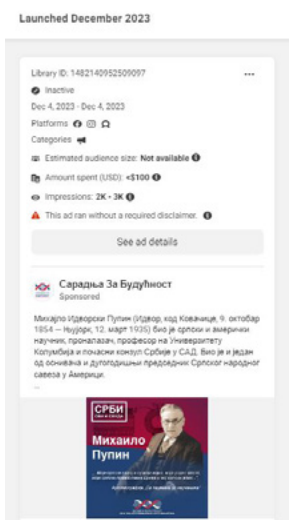
The association *Cooperation for the Future – Montenegro – Serbia – the Republic of Srpska*, founded in 2019 and active during the religious processions in 2020, also joined the propaganda campaign during the population census in Montenegro. After the religious processions concluded, the association was inactive, but it was reactivated during the campaign for the population census. The director of the association, whose tendentious name suggests the idea of the *Serbian world*, is Vladislav Bojović, a member of the Democratic People's Party who serves as a parliamentarian in the Parliament of Montenegro. Among other responsibilities, he is a member of the Committee monitoring the implementation of the Agreement on Conditions for Conducting the Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings, as well as overseeing the implementation of the census process.

The association *Cooperation for the Future Montenegro – Serbia – the Republic of Srpska* conducted its campaign during the population census in social media, employing established methods such as historical revisionism and information manipulation. Through sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram, historical figures from Montenegro, such as Petar I and Petar II Petrović Njegoš, Marko Miljanov, King Nikola, and others, are presented as Serbs. The association attempts to promote Serbian identity among the general public while simultaneously denying the existence of the Montenegrin identity. The same pattern has been observed in the campaign as with the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian portal *IN4S*. Such a synergistic campaign by associations, individuals, and media during the population census had clear objectives: to further polarize society, homogenize the Serbian national corpus, and change the national structure of Montenegro. The Facebook page of the association was opened on December 4, 2023, one day after the population census began. Even though it didn't have a significant number of followers and had no posts, the Facebook page of the association named *Cooperation for the Future* attempted to reach a wider audience through sponsored posts. The Facebook page followed the *For the Future of Montenegro* page, and the association's logo represents a modified depiction of a DNA molecule.

Vladislav Bojović, through the activities of the association in 2019 and 2020, propagated a narrative about the alleged endangerment, discrimination, and persecution of the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The association reported this to the European Commission and the United Nations. In letters signed by Vladislav



Census campaign of the association *Cooperation for the Future - Montenegro - Serbia – the Republic of Srpska* on social networks



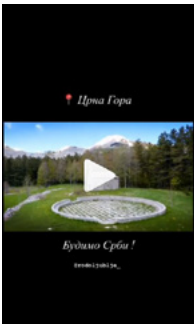


Vladislav Bojović and Gojko Raičević
at the Russian-Balkan summit of
People's Democracy

Bojović as the director of the association, sent in 2020, it is stated that the atmosphere has been brought to the *brink of civil conflicts*. In addition to the letters, during 2020, the association placed billboards throughout Montenegro with the Message *We won't give up the holy sites*, aiming to send a strong message of *unity for the Serbian Orthodox Church and its historical existence in Montenegro*. In 2020, Bojović also expressed gratitude to Serbia for supporting Serbian associations and organizations in Montenegro. He endorsed the initiative of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić for the formation of a small Schengen zone in the Balkans. It is important to note Bojović's earlier activities and his presence at the first Russian-Balkan Summit of People's Democracy at Voronezh State University in Russia in 2019, organized by the Russian-Balkan Center for People's Diplomacy. People's diplomacy represents the Russian version of public diplomacy, differing from the Western model. On that occasion, Bojović stated that Russia's presence in the Balkans is a *sign of preserving traditional values, Orthodox spirituality, and the cultural identity of Slavic peoples, with support for maintaining the sovereignty of Balkan countries*. He also pointed out the success of Serbia's foreign policy, as well as the prestige and significance of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Bojović emphasized that *the forced entry of the country into NATO did not succeed in alienating the majority of citizens from cultural and spiritual unity with Serbia and Russia*. At that event, Gojko Raičević, the editor of the *IN4S* portal. On that occasion, he emphasized that the space with the highest concentration of Russophiles is now occupied by NATO.



The census campaign
on social media



Nationalistic pages on the social media platform Instagram were active as well: *bunt_cg*, *crna_gora_srpska_sparta*, *kosmet_otadzbina*, *rodoljublje_*, *miznamokosmo2023*, *obnova_njegoseve_cg*, *otporcg* (mentioned in the DFC study *Shadows of Ukraine Over Montenegro*), where calls for citizens to declare themselves as Serbs were published. False information about the number of Serbs in the 1909 census was disseminated, and predictions about the census results were made. Those pages had previously called for religious processions, protests against the minority government in Montenegro, praised the Russian aggression against Ukraine, glorified Vladimir Putin, celebrated the declaration of independence of Donetsk and Lugansk, and congratulated the unconstitutional day of the Republic of Srpska.

Conclusion

Russia's efforts and strategic objectives in the Western Balkans can be observed through its hybrid activities aimed at obstructing the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkan states. These efforts involve fostering anti-Western sentiments and undermining Western interests through the Balkans, making existing issues more acute and causing harm to the reforms necessary for further integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic economic, political, and security structures. As a base for its activities in the region, Russia utilizes Serbia, focusing on areas predominantly populated by Orthodox Christian communities, with a particular emphasis on segments of the Orthodox population whose frustrations with political, social, economic and other issues are articulated through animosity towards Western civilization's values.

The slowed progress on the European path has widely opened the doors for malign Russian influence in the Western Balkans. It particularly manifests itself strongly in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska (BiH), and also in Montenegro. The continuous anti-Western and pro-Russian campaign after the Serbian Progressive Party came to power has resulted in a significant narrowing of the maneuvering space for Vučić's regime, which finds itself in a discrepancy between proclaimed European ambitions and the open anti-Western sentiment it has consciously and calculatedly promoted in the Serbian public. The consciously promoted and romanticized narrative about the unbreakable historical, cultural, and spiritual ties between Serbia and Russia, along with the brotherhood of the Orthodox Serbian and Russian peoples, deeply penetrates the Serbian political, social, and information space, from where it propagates its unhindered influence in targeted states across the region. Thanks to its position regarding Kosovo, Russia has secured respect and acceptance in Serbian society, where there is widespread belief that Russia is the greatest friend and the most significant ally of Serbia. This contributes to the continuous decline in support for accession to the European Union, which is lowest in Serbia compared to other Western Balkan countries in the region.

Moscow's neo-imperial ambitions, seeking to compensate for perceived losses after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and regain control in its immediate neighborhood, find their counterpart in the Western Balkans, where the Serbian regime attempts to revive and implement old ideas of unifying the Serbian national corpus. Currently, these ideas are articulated with the vague concept of creating the so-called Serbian world, which would encompass the territories of three sovereign and internationally recognized states: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

Periodic tensions and the escalation of ethnic violence in northern Kosovo, coupled with the continuous shadow of Milorad Dodik's separatist agenda in Bosnia and Herzegovina, point to the far-reaching destabilizing potential of unresolved conflicts from the past in the Western Balkan region. Those are the two crucial points of political contention that fuel instability in the region and hinder its European and Euro-Atlantic integrations.

Unsolved disputed and security risks in the Western Balkans serve as an entry point for destructive actors seeking to project their influence in the region. Security concerns and identity dilemmas created by revisionist narratives are at the center of the political discourse of authoritarian regimes in Moscow and Belgrade.

Western efforts to pull Serbia out of Russia's orbit and guide it toward the realization of its declared European strategic goals have not contributed to the democratization of Serbian society. On the contrary, the Vučić regime has solidified its positions, using Serbia's central role in the region to manipulate regional stability, escalating and de-escalating crises according to its needs. The populist president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, has perfected the ability to create crises and tensions to portray himself as an undisputed leader and protector of the state and nation, simultaneously delegitimizing the opposition as unpatriotic or even traitorous, while minimizing numerous issues arising from his unlimited authoritarian rule. Control over pro-Serbian political entities in the region, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Republic of Srpska), Kosovo, and Montenegro, provides him with a broad range of opportunities to pursue an agenda articulated through projects such as the *Open Balkan* initiative and the idea of the so-called Serbian world.

Identity dilemmas within the Orthodox majority in Montenegro have evolved into deep ethnic divisions, becoming a source of struggle for control over the country's geopolitical orientation. Consensus on strategic orientations and goals of state policy is a significant step toward overcoming internal divisions in Montenegro and a prerequisite for further progress on the European path. Considering that these divisions have been significantly fueled from outside and are part of revisionist narratives within Moscow's imperial ambitions and the hegemonic aspirations of the Belgrade regime, there remains a dilemma regarding the ultimate reach of the current government in Montenegro, where pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political structures play a significant role.

Unilateral interpretations of past events, fabrications, and the promotion of convicted war criminals are widely accepted by key political actors in Serbia and some prominent representatives in the current government in Montenegro. Denial of responsibility and the lack of sincere cooperation in facing the consequences of the wars that followed the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia continue to contribute to regional misunderstandings, leaving room for the actions of the extreme right and obscure pseudo-scientific interpretations of the causes and outcomes of the conflicts in the region in the 1990s.

The main direction of actions involves the comprehensive influence of the SOC in socio-political conditions, and the clericalization of society through sophisticated methods of influencing public opinion via Orthodox brotherhoods, media, cultural associations with Serbian affiliations, and political actors in the executive branch.

With a parliament and government aligned with the Serbian agenda, other state bodies and institutions founded by the Republic of Serbia gained the ability to deny the Montenegrin national identity. A significant part of this is implemented under the guise of *religious freedom* to deceive Western observers and promoters of democracy. Using *soft power*, the Serbian Orthodox Church spreads its views, primarily based on fabrications and denial of Montenegrin history.

The SOC increasingly positions itself as the supreme moral and ideological arbiter – from the education of the youngest population and the youth to the cultural and civilizational orientation of society as a whole. The religious order penetrates the Montenegrin education system, where church dignitaries indoctrinate children from an early age to

renounce their Montenegrin heritage. The promoted values in this context are characterized by nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and xenophobia.

The census campaign in Montenegro demonstrated the breadth and synergy in the actions of the regime in Belgrade and its numerous proxies in Montenegro. The actions of political, religious, media, cultural, and educational organizations during the census campaign were based on undermining the concept of civic society, denying the Montenegrin identity, and relativizing European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Montenegro.

Insufficiently developed and inert institutions in the past decade have not provided an adequate response to foreign interference in Montenegro. The aggressive actions of the Serbian regime and nationalist structures from Serbia and Montenegro have not encountered an adequate response from Montenegrin institutions and state authorities, which opportunistically adapted their positions to political interests. The relativization or denial of foreign malign influence, especially from Serbia, has characterized the appearances of almost all state officials and political leaders in power since 2020, and the weakened security sector has not posed a serious barrier to malign Russian and Serbian influence. In the current moment, perhaps more than ever before, it is evident that only a clear state strategy in the fight against foreign malign influence, with a decisive and proactive role of institutional systems, is the sole guarantee that continuous attacks on civic identity and sovereignty will not define the contemporary image of Montenegro, that is, it will not become a battleground for the hybrid activities of authoritarian regimes in their struggle to establish a new multipolar world order.

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