

# THE NOT-SO-SOFT POWER OF FAITH: RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This report examines the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegrin society, with a main focus on the last two years when the SOC directly participated in the political changes in the country. This report suggests that the SOC served as a foreign influence instrument for Serbian and Russian interests in Montenegro, especially during the country's recent turbulent political processes. The SOC maintains a position of authority in Montenegrin society, which is made possible due to the strong influence the Serbian church exercises over the decision-making processes in the country.*

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, or the United States Institute of Peace.*

# INTRODUCTION

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The political crisis within the European Union (EU), the U.S. strategic focus on the Pacific, and Russia's aggressive diplomacy were part of the environment that enabled third-party foreign malign influence campaigns to succeed in the Balkans in the last decade. Montenegro has often been at the center of the attention of global politics in the last decade, as its political situation was one of the frequent topics brought up during the geopolitical standoffs between Russia and the West.

This working paper suggests that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was one of the main instruments of Russian and Serbian influence operations in Montenegro in the last ten years. Montenegro is a country with diverse religious demographics. The majority of the Montenegrin population are adherents of the Eastern Orthodox faith. The SOC is a dominant religious institution in Montenegro,<sup>1</sup> and it is also among the most trusted institutions in the country.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the Montenegrin parliament passed a controversial law on freedom of religion,<sup>3</sup> which sparked a series of protests organized by the SOC. The SOC protest campaign overlapped with the 2020 parliamentary elections. These protests had a strong impact on the Montenegrin social fabric and directly affected the country's politics.

## BACKGROUND: THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN MONTENEGRO

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Orthodox Christianity undoubtedly became dominant in Montenegro during the expansion of the Serbian medieval state led by the Nemanjić dynasty. Until the Nemanjić family's conversion to Orthodoxy in 1217, this part of the Slavic south, and especially the ruling elite of Duklja, were predominantly Roman Catholic.<sup>4</sup> After the Ottoman conquests of the Balkans, Montenegrins remained the last people in the peninsula with autonomous church and state rule, embodied in the role of the Montenegrin metropolitans (a high-ranking title in Eastern Orthodox churches).

Despite established relations with other Orthodox churches, especially the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Montenegrin metropolitans lead an independent path, as they exercised a substantial level of autonomy in their rule in Montenegro. After a brief union with the Catholic church in the seventeenth century, the Russian Empire started growing its influence over Montenegrin metropolitans by providing them with resources and funding. With Russian support and occasional alliances with the Venetian authorities, Montenegrin metropolitans became de facto rulers of the Montenegrin lands.

Following the end of the seventeenth century, the metropolitan role was almost exclusively reserved for the members of the Petrović-Njegoš family. The continuity of their rule was secured through a practice similar to the Catholic church's historical *cardinalis nepos* (cardinal-nephew). Under this institution, the future metropolitan was chosen among the nephews of the current metropolitan. This practice was discontinued after Prince Danilo Petrović Njegoš came to power in 1852. Upon his appointment, the spiritual and secular rule in Montenegro were separated for the first time since the fifteenth century.

Prince Danilo launched a campaign for the international recognition of Montenegro's independence from the Ottoman Empire. The armed struggle for independence continued during the reign of Prince Nikola Petrović-Njegoš and culminated in the Montenegrin–Ottoman War from 1876 to 1878, after which Montenegrin independence was recognized at the Berlin Congress on July 13, 1878. Montenegrin Prince (and then King after 1910) Nikola modernized the state administration and strengthened the central government during his reign from 1860 to 1918. In 1905, Prince Nikola approved the Constitution of the Principality of Montenegro by which Montenegro became a constitutional monarchy. The constitution contains self-state features similar to that of the Russian Empire at the time and was also inspired by the Constitution of Serbia from 1869. Orthodox Christianity was recognized as a state religion in the

constitution, and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) was declared the official state church, whose autocephaly is highlighted in this document.<sup>5</sup>

After the outbreak of World War I, Montenegro sided with Serbia and its allies. Despite being on the victorious side, Montenegro lost its independence after the war ended. In 1918, the Great National Assembly of the Serbian People in Montenegro (Podgorica Assembly) was organized with the sole purpose of passing the decision on the dethronement of the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty and the unification of Montenegro with Serbia, as well as the subsequent incorporation into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after 1929).

In January 1919, a few months after the Podgorica Assembly, an armed uprising was organized against the unconditional unification with Serbia. In 1921, the MOC's autocephaly was abolished and the SOC was formed through the unification of the previously independent Orthodox church jurisdictions of Belgrade, Cetinje, and Sremski Karlovci.

The MOC is a small religious community that aspires to claim continuity with the abolished autocephalous church. The MOC was founded in 1993 under the leadership of Metropolitan Antonius (Abramović), who had previously served in the Orthodox Church in America.

The SOC remains the dominant religious organization that serves the most populous Orthodox Christian religious community in Montenegro, as it claims ownership over almost all the Orthodox churches and monasteries in the country.

After the restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006, the ruling party tried to influence the recognition of the autocephaly of the MOC. Some circles within the SOC in Montenegro, led by Metropolitan Amfilohije, accepted the need for greater autonomy of the Orthodox church in Montenegro. Subsequently, the Episcopal Council of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro was formed, and Metropolitan Amfilohije secured the title of archbishop. These steps toward greater autonomy were abolished after political changes in the country and the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

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## THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

On March 9, 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on “foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation,” in which it emphasized the SOC's role in promoting “Russia as a protector of traditional family values” and its attempt to “fortify relations between church and state” in Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>7</sup>

During a 2015 pseudo-scientific event organized by a now-defunct Strategic Culture Fund, a pro-Russian Serbian organization, professor Vladimir Božović presented his article “Analysis of the Vectors of the Soft Power in Montenegro: Overview and Perspectives.” Professor Božović, a Montenegrin mathematician, founded the pro-Russian news website *IN4S* and was the president of Matica Srpska in Montenegro. In the document, structured as a policy paper, Božović identifies a space for cooperation between Serbia and Russia, as he sees a “complete congruence” between the Serbian and pro-Russian “social consciousness” in Montenegro.<sup>8</sup>

“The potential of Serbian culture is enormous,” states Božović, suggesting that the Russian influence could and should use the Serbian influence as a vessel, because, as Božović notes regrettably, Russian cultural

and soft influence has been reduced to the influence of classical Russian literature. He sees the potential in new marketing and communication concepts and mentions the *IN4S* portal as a good example of these practices.<sup>9</sup>

Professor Božović regrets that Russia does not see the potential in the SOC and suggests that in the days to come, special attention should be paid to the “seizing of church property by the Đukanović regime.”<sup>10</sup>

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Considering political developments since 2015, it appears this document served as a perfect road map to guide institutions of Serbian nationalism in Montenegro to achieve regime change in 2020.

After the 2020 changes took place, Božović was elected as rector (chairman) of the University of Montenegro (UOM) in a heavily politicized election process in 2021. The UOM is the biggest and only state-owned higher education institution. It exercises a monopoly in most of the scientific fields taught in the country.

The political parties close to the SOC in Montenegro have also been cooperating with political parties from Russia, such as United Russia and Rodina (Homeland), which was founded by the former Russian deputy prime minister Dimitriy Rogozin. *Voice of America* reported Democratic Front, which has the closest ties with the Russian authorities, to be the beneficiary of substantial financial donations from Russia. The report published by *Voice of America* cites sources in the U.S. administration when accusing the Democratic Front of benefitting from offshore companies connected to Russian industrialist Oleg Deripaska.<sup>11</sup>

During Montenegro’s NATO accession campaign in 2015, the late Metropolitan Amfilohije of the SOC publicly cursed those who dared to “betray Russia.” Amfilohije appeared in public with the retired Russian intelligence officer Leonid Reshetnikov, with whom he sent joint threats and curses to those who are “not loyal and faithful to Russia.”<sup>12</sup>

The leader of the ROC in Ukraine, Metropolitan Onufriy, was a guest of the SOC in Montenegro during one of the protests in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Before his visit, Metropolitan Amfilohije implied that the destiny of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who lost elections in 2019, awaited the Montenegrin authorities.<sup>14</sup>

Numerous other organizations are promoting so-called Russian values in Montenegro, from the Immortal Regiment (an organization that promotes the legacy of the Soviet victory in World War II), to the Night Wolves Bike Club, to the Balkan Cossack Armies. These organizations were promoted and sponsored mostly by the Russian honorary consul in Montenegro, Boro Đukić. Đukić’s activities, and his ties with the SOC and ROC, were recently exposed in an international journalistic investigation conducted by ProPublica and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) called “Shadow Diplomats.”<sup>15</sup>

## THE SOC PROTEST MOVEMENT IN MONTENEGRO

Since the 1990s, the Montenegrin government and the SOC have had a complicated relationship, from periods of partnership and peaceful coexistence to periods of open confrontation. The SOC is headquartered in Belgrade, Serbia, and it is often perceived by the Montenegrin public as an instrument of external influence in Montenegro.

Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović is increasingly using the alternative name for the SOC, “The Church of Serbia,”<sup>16</sup> to highlight the role of the SOC as an external factor in Montenegrin society and politics.

In December 2019, the Montenegrin ruling majority decided to pass a controversial law, Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities.<sup>17</sup> The law sought to correct the historical injustice of religious and political unification in 1918 and 1921 by returning the Orthodox churches and monasteries to state ownership, as was the case before the events of 1918. As a part of the communication strategy for this process, the ruling political parties extensively emphasized the need for the restoration of the Montenegrin church autocephaly.

The passing of the law on the freedom of religion was met with a strong reaction from the SOC and its adherents. On the evening of the law’s passage, a physical confrontation between members of the parliament took place, and roadblocks were placed in Golubovci and Berane.<sup>18</sup>

The SOC organized a powerful protest campaign calling for revocation of the law. Starting in January 2020, the protest public gatherings were held twice a week. Mass rallies, organized by the SOC, were organized with the help and support of opposing political parties and the media, as well as logistical support from Serbia and Russia.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from Serbia and Russia, this campaign gained ground even in the United States and the United Kingdom. The narrative of the “protection of religious freedom” and “persecution of Christians” resonated with conservative and Christian democratic circles in the West. Tim Farron and Steve Baker, members of the British parliament, wrote an opinion piece for *Newsweek* in July 2020, claiming that “the Christians and their clergy are being threatened, beaten and incarcerated for seeking to defend their faith and their right to worship in the manner of their choosing.”<sup>20</sup> After that, the legal counsel of the SOC in Montenegro, Vladimir Leposavić, wrote an op-ed for the UK-based evangelical Christian magazine *Premier Christianity*: “The Government of Montenegro is Persecuting Christians.”<sup>21</sup> Leposavić was appointed minister of justice of Montenegro in December 2020 after the forces loyal to the SOC won the elections. He was dismissed the next year because of his public relativization of the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>22</sup>

## WHO IS A MONTENEGRIN? THE DIVISIVENESS OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN MONTENEGRO

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Identity divisions foster an ideal environment for enabling potentially malicious and harmful external influence in Montenegro. In his 2019 article “Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited,” Joseph Nye questions whether authoritarian regimes are capable of soft power or if they are using the concept to disguise the sharp power they are exercising. In Montenegro, the influence campaigns (which have become more frequent in the last decade)—aimed at strengthening social divisions, creating gaps between different social groups in the country, and blocking dialogue and cooperation by making democratic processes meaningless and deepening distrust in democratic institutions—cannot be regarded as soft power tools.

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In their work, Jelena Džankić<sup>23</sup> and Florian Biber<sup>24</sup> correlate the attitude towards Montenegrin independence with the expression of identity of ethnic Montenegrins. For reference, they drew data from the vote on the 1992 and 2006 referendums, as well as the demographics of the population censuses in 1991 and 2003. They each conclude that those who declare themselves as Serbs often opt for a unification or federative state with Serbia, while Montenegrins are predominantly supporters of state independence.

*This fluidity of Montenegrin identity has been exploited by numerous influence campaigns and projects aimed at strengthening the Serbian identity in Montenegro, which the state of Serbia implements in accordance with its strategic documents.*

In 1991, Montenegro had 61.9% Montenegrins and 9.34% Serbs. In the 2003 census, 32% of the population declared themselves as Serbs and 43.2% as Montenegrins. This number continues to change, with a declining number of people who identify as Montenegrins in Montenegro and abroad.<sup>25</sup> This fluidity of Montenegrin identity has been exploited by numerous influence campaigns and projects aimed at strengthening the Serbian identity in Montenegro, which the state of Serbia implements in accordance with its strategic documents.<sup>26</sup>

In Professor Vladimir Božović's article<sup>27</sup> on the soft power in Montenegro, he touches on the subject of Montenegrin identity, draws parallels between Ukrainians and Montenegrins, and calls the distinct Ukrainian and Montenegrin identities "new identities" that were engineered through "new languages and newly-named languages." He indicates that the same technology has been used in both countries to separate and estrange Montenegro and Ukraine from their pro-Russian Orthodox Christian "spiritual essence." Božović sees the United States and NATO as forces behind these "deserbinization and derussification" efforts.<sup>28</sup>

This is an omnipresent narrative that is being used by the SOC in Montenegro. The highest-ranking clergy of the SOC in Montenegro were speaking about the Montenegrin separate identity as a product of communist engineering. The late Metropolitan Amfilohije of the SOC went as far as calling Montenegrins, by nationality, "bastards."<sup>29</sup>

During the SOC protests of 2020, an alternative flag was proposed for Montenegro: an adapted royal tricolor of Montenegro. The SOC also promotes the use of Cyrillic script in public with the help of friendly and loyal authorities. In December 2022, the group of newly elected Montenegrin mayors and city council chairmen from Nikšić, Tivat, Berane, Danilovgrad, and Herceg Novi visited the Serbian parliament, where they spoke about the introduction of tricolor flags and Cyrillic script in their administrations.<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF THE SOC IN POST-2020 MONTENEGRIN POLITICS

A growing trend of stronger religious identification has been recorded in recent polls in Montenegro. The results on religiosity from the European Social Survey conducted in Montenegro in 2018<sup>31</sup> can be compared with the data collected by the DeFacto Consultancy in 2020,<sup>32</sup> showing a 30% increase in self-reported religiosity. Additionally, the Montenegrin National Election Study (2016) shows a significant percentage of people who "don't know" who was "right" in World War II (answer choices were partisans, chetniks, greens, no one, or don't know).<sup>33</sup> These surveys suggest that this trend coincides with a trend towards the relativization of history and the role of the Serbian nationalist Nazi-collaborating forces in World War II, as well as with the growing number of people who identify themselves as Serbs.

This is reflected in the emergence of numerous organizations gathered around what they call "Orthodox Christian values." These organizations arranged gatherings and protests in support of the Russian invasion

of Ukraine<sup>34</sup> and took part in the clashes with the people who were celebrating Montenegrin Statehood Day in the town of Nikšić in 2022.<sup>35</sup>

After the successful elections campaign that coincided with the SOC protest movement, the first regime change occurred in Montenegro since the introduction of parliamentary democracy. Following the parliamentary elections of 2020, the SOC was rewarded for its role in the campaigns. This was done through the appointment of the people loyal to the SOC to the highest offices in the newly elected government. Zdravko Krivokapić, the leader of the new majority, became the prime minister. Krivokapić was also the founder of the *Ne damo Crnu Goru* (“We won’t give up Montenegro”) protest movement against the law on the freedom of religion. The chief legal counsel of the SOC in Montenegro, Vladimir Lepasavić, became the minister of justice. Another SOC legal counsel, Dejan Vukšić, became the head of the Agency for National Security of Montenegro (ANB). Finally, the head of *Matica Srpska* and member of the *Ne damo Crnu Goru* movement, Vladimir Božović, became the rector of the University of Montenegro. Additional people close to the SOC became ministers of education, culture, defense, and agriculture.

The new parliamentary majority prioritized amending the law on freedom of religion and revoking the articles that were the cause of the church protests. The influence of the SOC on political decision-making in Montenegro proved to be harmful and politically destabilizing. The pressure coming from the SOC led to the vote of no confidence for both the 42nd and 43rd Governments of Montenegro, which were formed after the 2020 changes.

In the first case, the insistence of the SOC on the enthronement of the new metropolitan Joanikije in the formal royal capital of Cetinje provoked a reaction from citizens, who protested and called for the enthronement to take place elsewhere. The reason was Metropolitan Joanikije’s divisive statements on Montenegrins and Montenegrin national identity.<sup>36</sup> Despite the warnings of the security sector, Prime Minister Krivokapić decided to provide logistical support for the enthronement. After violent protests and the excessive use of force by the police in response,<sup>37</sup> the conflict between the prime minister and deputy prime minister led to tensions within the ruling coalition. These tensions ultimately resulted in the collapse of the 42nd Government of Montenegro.<sup>38</sup>

After the 43rd Government was formed in April 2022, newly elected Prime Minister Dritan Abazović decided to appease the SOC by signing an agreement between the government of Montenegro and the SOC. The text of the agreement and the signing process faced sharp criticism from the political parties supporting the new government, as well as from the non-governmental sector.<sup>39</sup> The crisis caused by the agreement with the SOC resulted again in the collapse of the government and the institutional and systemic blockade that Montenegro experiences to this day.

If these processes continue to persist in Montenegro, there may be numerous risks that could affect the country’s long-term stability and security. A possible consolidation of the rule of the conservative pro-Serbian forces could result in interethnic tensions, democratic backsliding, and the growing influence of Serbia—and subsequently Russia—on the decision-makers in Montenegro. In that scenario, an unstable and insecure Montenegro will become a weak link in regional security and cooperation and in the collective security of NATO.

# GLOSSARY

ANB - Agency for National Security of Montenegro  
EU - European Union  
ICIJ - International Consortium of Investigative Journalists  
MOC - Montenegrin Orthodox Church  
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
ROC - Russian Orthodox Church  
SOC - Serbian Orthodox Church  
UOM - University of Montenegro  
U.S. - United States of America

## Endnotes

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