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THE ORTHODOX CHURCH, MONTENEGRO, AND THE 'SERBIAN WORLD'

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Introduction

In European history, the church has played an important role in the creation of nations, their identities, and their states. While the political importance of these churches, particularly in the Protestant or Lutheran part of the continent, has noticeably decreased over time,¹ in the Orthodox countries the church remains a significant factor, inextricably linked to both politics and state power. In Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva* - SPC) remains a potent force in public and political life. Yet, politics is transient and the church, among Serbs in the Western Balkans is a constant, a stable entity, an institution that represents historical continuity, national identity and destiny. The church casts itself as the authentic articulator of the soul of the Serbs and as such is regarded by many in Serbia, and among Serbs throughout the Western Balkans, as an institution that is beyond reapproach.² Consequently, the SPC is more influential and powerful than any individual political figure or any state institution in Serbia and in neighboring states where Serbs reside.

Though their influence is often exercised with relative discretion, it is exercised nevertheless. The SPC, after all, is not merely an instrument of soft power, it is an important node in a network that spans politics, media, social media and academia within the broader and euphemistically-named *Srpski svet* (Serbian World) project. The 'Serbian World' was first mentioned in public in September 2020 by the then Serbian Minister of Defense (and, since December 2022, the Director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency), Aleksander Vulin, who stated 'Aleksander Vučić should create the Serbian World. Belgrade must gather all Serbs in and around it, and the president of Serbia is the president of all Serbs.'³ In essence, proponents of the Serbian World aim to 'unite Serb lands' in the Western Balkans.⁴ In terms of that stated objective, the SPC plays a crucial role, in that it has and continues to

¹ Dalia Fahmi, *In Western Europe, most people back church-state separation even while many willingly pay church tax*, Pew Research Center, May 28, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/28/in-western-europe-most-people-back-church-state-separation-even-while-many-willingly-pay-church-tax/>. See also Michael Radu, 'The Burden of Eastern Orthodoxy', *Orbis*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Spring 1998,

² For a more detailed account of the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia, see Radmila Radić & Milan Vukomanović, 'Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church', in Sabrina Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe*, Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2014, pp. 180-211.

³ Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Sprski Svet: concept koji region čini nervoznim', <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpski-svet-srbija-balkan-/31521168.html>. The concept of the Serbian corresponds closely with that of the *Ruski mir* (Russian World). See Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Putin odobrio 'ruski svijet', doktrinu za opravdavanje inostranih intervencija', 5 September 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin-doktrina-ruski-svijet/32019790.html>.

⁴ *Ibid.* Critics of the Serbian World claim that the 'Open Balkans' initiative, one primarily driven by Serbia, is merely one part of the broader Serbian World project. Thus, there is significant resistance to the Open Balkans initiative among many

be utilized as an effective tool to interfere in the domestic affairs of neighboring states. The church, after all, enjoys a privileged status in Serbia and sometimes operates in a ‘grey zone’, outside the legal system of neighboring countries. Montenegro, (North) Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), particularly the former, are key to that project, but without Montenegro, the aims of the Serbian World can never be realized, and it is here that the SPC and other proponents of the project have been most active in attempting to shape the political and social landscape. Hence, it is Montenegro⁵ – where the SPC emerged in 2019 as the de facto political opposition - is the primary focus of our analysis.

Defenders of the Faith

Among Orthodox Christians in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina, the SPC is the most trusted institution. Indeed, recent surveys confirm that among Orthodox populations there is a strong association between religion and national identity and that more people in Orthodox-majority countries than Catholic-majority countries support strong church-state ties.⁶ This symbiosis or symphony of authorities (known as *Byzantine symphony*) means the state supports the church, while the church affirms the government’s policies.⁷ It is, moreover, often politically opportune for political elites to ‘play the church card’ to influence voting patterns and to bolster their legitimacy. The Russian Orthodox Church (*Rússkaya pravoslávnaia tsérkov* – RPC), for example, often lavishes praise on the regime of Vladimir Putin and publicly supports the aims of the so-called ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine, while the Patriarch of the SPC often publicly endorses the policies of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

The church, moreover, does not shy away from controversy, endorsing the views of extreme right-wing politicians such as Vojislav Šešelj, who was decorated by the SPC (for the second time) in September 2022⁸, or ultranationalist movements such as *Naši* (Ours), 1389, People’s Patrol, the

in Montenegro and in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo. Both the President of Montenegro Milo Đukanović, and the Professor of the Faculty of Economics in Podgorica, Gordana Đurović, have raised political and economic reservations, respectively, about the Open Balkans. Indeed, critics have questioned why the initiative is necessary when the ‘Berlin Process’, a project supported by the European Union and of which all six countries of the Western Balkans are members, already exists.

The Montenegrin Ministry of European Affairs published on 25 November an internal analysis reiterating the reservations about the ‘Open Balkans’ initiative. The publication of the document and its prompt removal from the official website of the Government coincided with the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs, Jovana Marović. See Mathieu Neelen: *Montenegro’s new criticism of the Open Balkan initiative divides rather than unites*, European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, November 30, 2022, <https://www.europeanforum.net/headlines/montenegro-s-new-criticism-of-the-open-balkan-initiative-divides-rather-than-unites>. For the original document in Montenegrin language: Gradska TV Podgorica: *Analiza MEP-a: OB bez strategije i garancije za ravnopravan položaj država članica*, November 25, 2022, <https://gradski.me/gradski-portal-objavljuje-dokument-analiza-o-prednostima-i-manama-ucesca-u-regionalnoj-inicijativi-open-balkan-koji-je-izradilo-ministarstvo-evropskih-poslova-mep/>;

⁵ The SPC in Montenegro comprises of the following eparchies (provinces): The Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral; the Eparchy of Budimlja-Nikšić; the Eparchy of Milešava; the Eparchy of Zahumlje, Hezegovina and the Littoral.

⁶ Michael Lipka & Neha Sahgal, *9 key findings about religion and politics in Central and Eastern Europe*, Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/10/9-key-findings-about-religion-and-politics-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁷ Davor Džalto, *The Symphonia Doctrine: Introduction. Anarchy and the Kingdom of God: From Eschatology to Orthodox Political Theology and Back*, New York, USA: Fordham University Press, 2021, pp. 27-34.

⁷ Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Amfilohije Radović: Mitropolit molitvi i kletvi*, October 30, 2020, Radio Free Europe (Serbian Service), <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mitropolit-amfilohije-in-memoriam/30919884.html>.

⁸ *Vijesti* (Podgorica), ‘SPC odlikovala Šešelja’, <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/621119/spc-odlikovala-seselja>.

'Russian Liberation Movement', and parties such as *Srpska stranka zavetnici* (Serbian Party Oathkeepers) and *Srpski pokret dveri* (Serbian Movement Dveri), popularly known as Dveri (Doorway), an organization that perceives itself as part of the growing Orthodox Christian right in Serbia, and one that has endeavored to forge close links with the SPC.⁹ Similarly, influential clerics within the church do not flinch from providing rhetorical support to organizations such as *Otačastveni pokret Obraz*, classified by the Serbian police as clerico-fascist, since it builds on the conceptual traditions of the Serbian fascist movement *Zbor* from the 1930s and 1940s. *Obraz* aligns closely to the ideology of 'Saint Sava nationalism' (underpinning which is the idea that there should be a close symbiosis between church and state) and support for the clerical-nationalism of SPC Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1920-56).¹⁰ In Montenegro specifically, the SPC are alleged to have links with groups such as *Tvrdoš, Stupovi, Miholjski bor* (and organization led by an SPC priest and 'Red Beret' Mijajlo Backović)¹¹ and the Montenegrin chapter of *Noćni vukovi* (Night Wolves), which was formed in September 2014.¹²

The church consistently casts itself as a defender of conservative family values, strongly opposing the organization of pride parades in Belgrade and Podgorica by supporting nationalist, far-right activists and movements. By way of illustration, in a sermon in September 2022, the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije condemned the planned EuroPride in Belgrade for threatening those traditional family (Serb) values¹³ and supported the organization of street protests against the event. Likewise, the SPC in Montenegro called for a mass religious rally for 'the preservation of family' ahead of the 10th Pride parade in Podgorica.¹⁴

The church, of course, possesses an equally important status among the ethnic Serb populations in neighboring countries, and in particular Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro. In Bosnia & Herzegovina, the SPC has used its influence to mobilize Bosnian Serbs to support political elites that have explicitly nationalist aims and this has manifested itself in numerous ways, be it tacit support of Milorad Dodik's secessionist rhetoric or the role it played in Republika Srpska's 'statehood day' events on 9 January 2022 (also a Serbian Orthodox holiday, St. Stephen's Day). These developments demonstrated the very real political power of the church in those contexts and, moreover, their explicitly political role in them.

Montenegro has, according to some analysts, been subject to a process of 'clericalization' – a process that began in 2019 during the protests against the 'Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal

⁹ Balkanist, *Serbian Orthodox Far-Right Increases Visibility- and Adaptability – with Protests*, July 16, 2019, Balkanist, <https://balkanist.net/serbia-orthodox-far-right-increases-its-visibility-and-adaptability-with-protests/>.

¹⁰ Jovo Bakić, *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia*, p.3, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, February 2013, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09659.pdf>.

¹¹ Backović has publicly stated that he wishes Montenegro to become 'Serbianized' and has called on those who declared themselves 'Montenegrins' in the 2011 census to declare themselves 'Serbs' in the net Montenegrin population census. It is alleged that he is also the key organiser of a number of 'Orthodox youth fraternities.' See Pobjeda, 'Pop "crvena beretka" Mijajlo Backović bi da posrbljava Crnu Goru u cilju projekat "Srpski svet"', Podgorica, 24 September 2021, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/pop-crvena-beretka-mijajlo-backovic-bi-da-posrbljava-crnu-goru-u-cilju-projekta-srpski-svet>.

¹² On 27 February 2022, three days after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the SPC organized a procession in Podgorica which was attended by numerous members of those groups. See Digital Forensic Center, 'Shadows of Ukraine Over Montenegro', Podgorica, March 2022, p. 21.

¹³ Reuters, *Thousands march in Belgrade against planned Gay Pride parade*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-march-belgrade-against-planned-gay-pride-parade-2022-09-11/>.

¹⁴ Balkan Insight, *Orthodox Christians to Rally Against LGBT Pride March in Montenegro*, Balkan Insight, October 4, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/04/orthodox-christians-to-rally-against-lgbt-pride-march-in-montenegro/>.

Status of Religious Communities' (Law on Religious Freedoms), the *litije* (liturgies) that were a key part of the pre-election landscape prior to the August 2020 elections that led to the end of three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), through to the controversial enthronement of a new Metropolitan in Cetinje in September 2021 and the signing of the 'fundamental agreement' in August 2022 between the Montenegrin government, led by Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović, and the SPC.¹⁵ Consequently, the church now enjoys what amounts to a *sui generis* status within the legal system of Montenegro in which they are not subject to standard legal processes or mechanisms as well as being one of the largest landowners and investors in Montenegro (investments in property, for example, generate income through rents for housing, business, tourism and hospitality). In addition, the church has also continued to undermine the identity of Montenegrins, who the church has generally regarded as Serbs, and Montenegro as the 'Serbian Sparta' and a 'second Serb state'.¹⁶

Beyond the parameters of domestic or regional politics, the SPC have also been at the forefront of supporting, and even coordinating the activities of, Serbian organizations that promote stronger links with Russia, Russian organizations in Serbia or visiting the region (such as that of the 'Balkan Cossack Army' who were hosted at a liturgy in the Church of St. Nicholas in Kotor in 2016)¹⁷ and the wider Western Balkans, and of pushing narratives about the centuries-long *bratstvo* (brotherhood) between Serbs/Montenegrins and Russians - that *Srbija je Rusija na Balkanu* - 'Serbia is Russia in the Balkans'. The extent of concern that the SPC were a channel for Russian influence was underlined by the European Parliament's Resolution of 9 March 2022, in which they expressed dismay at the role of the SPC in promoting Russian interests (emphasizing their activities in Serbia, Montenegro and the entity of Republika Srpska).¹⁸ And, of course, the symbiosis between the SPC and Russia (and the RPC) has tangible political outcomes. Russia, of course, supports Serbia's stance on Kosovo and Republika Srpska, within the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), while Moscow provides support for pro-Russian elements in Montenegro, such as the Democratic Front (*Demokratski front* - DF)¹⁹, the de facto leaders of which, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, have visited the Russian capital and met with key individuals close to Putin on a number of occasions and were both found indicted for alleged involvement in the attempted Russian-backed coup d'état in October 2016 (through these charges were later overturned).²⁰ Serbia, meanwhile, has resisted alignment with the EU on issues such as the sanctions regime.

¹⁵ See Kenneth Morrison, 'Church Pact Heralds Fall of the Montenegrin Government', Transitions, Prague, 24 August 2022, <https://tol.org/client/article/church-pact-heralds-fall-of-montenegrin-government.html>.

¹⁶ The narrative of Montenegrins as Serbs is supported by a number of academics and public intellectuals in both Serbia and Montenegro. Foremost among them are Gojko Raičević, the editor-in-chief of the IN4S portal (who launched the *National TV* channel, the centrepiece of which was a programme entitled *Srpski svet*), the Serbian historian Aleksander Raković, the author of the book *Crnogoski separatizam* (Montenegrin Separatism) and the one-time editor of the 'Serb Land of Montenegro' website, and the historian Čedomir Antić. The latter two often appear on the controversial *Happy TV* in Serbia discussing Montenegrin political developments and issues of identity.

¹⁷ See Al Jazeera Balkans, 'Kožačka vojska u Kotoru: Poruke zamaskirane pravoslavljem', 17 September 2016, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2016/9/17/kozacka-vojska-u-kotoru-poruke-zamaskirane-pravoslavljem>.

¹⁸ See European Parliament, 'Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union', 9 March 2022, P9_TA(2022)0064, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.pdf.

¹⁹ The DF is essentially a coalition comprising three parties: New Serb Democracy (*Nova Srpska demokratije* - NSD), Movement for Changes (*Pokret za promenu* - PzP) and the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratska narodna partija* - DNP). Its collective leadership comprises Andrija Mandić (NSD), Nebojša Medojević (PzP) and Milan Knežević (DNP).

²⁰ Balkan Insight, 'Montenegrin Opposition Leaders Visit Moscow to Reaffirm Ties', 17 October 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/17/montenegrin-opposition-leaders-tighting-relations-with-moscow-10-17-2018/>.

For more on the attempted coup in October 2016 (and on Russia's influence in the Western Balkans more generally), see Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. See also Vesko Garčević, 'Southeast Europe in Focus, External Actors Series: Russia; Russia's Soft and Sharp Power in Southeast

Additionally, the SPC, like the RPC, continuously promotes the values of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, presenting them as something that stands in fundamental contrast to those of the Western world (the ‘rotten West’) and the war in Ukraine as an epic battle of civilizations, values and morality, pitting Eastern Orthodoxy against the corrupt, rotten, secular West and their political and military institutions such as the EU and NATO. Indeed, with regard to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, statements from SPC clerics often generate controversy. Inflammatory statements, such as that given by the new Metropolitan of the SPC in Montenegro, Joanikije, who claimed that that Montenegro was at risk of becoming a ‘little Ukraine’ have served only to heighten tensions and give further credence to those who argue that Montenegro is becoming drawn into a proxy struggle in this wider context.²¹

The SPC in Montenegro

Behind the febrile debates in Montenegro surrounding the Law on Religious Freedoms, disputes over the recently signed ‘fundamental agreement’ and the SPC’s broader role in Montenegro lies not merely the issue of identity politics. The ongoing feud between those parties and groups that constitute the ‘sovereign bloc’ and the ‘pro-Serbian bloc’ confirm that church and faith are not only intertwined with politics and power, but that the rhetoric of faith, nation and freedom often obscures political interests and a struggle for dominance.

Although relations between the Montenegrin government and the SPC had been burdened by arguments over issues of identity, there were times when the church and the state enjoyed a relatively harmonious coexistence. Yet, their interaction has gradually deteriorated, spiraling into open confrontation with the proposed introduction of the Law on Religious Freedoms, first mooted in 2015 but initiated in 2019. Yet, the role of personalities cannot be excluded from the narrative, and any credible analysis of the conflict between the Montenegrin government and the SPC has to address the critical role played by Amfilohije Radović, the ‘Metropolitan of Montenegrin and Littoral, Archbishop of Cetinje, Exarch of the throne of Peć’ (Metropolitan), who was the architect of the SPC’s policy in Montenegro until his death in October 2020. Though highly regarded within the church and by its faithful, he was cast by many Montenegrins as the ‘Metropolitan of prayers and curses’.²² Often, however, cooperation between church and the state solely relied on personal relations between Amfilohije and the Montenegrin leadership, particularly the current Montenegrin President, Milo Djukanović.

In the years preceding the breakup of the Yugoslav state, and particularly during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the SPC revived their role as ‘emancipators’ and ‘defenders’, avidly

Europe – Russian Hybrid Influence Operation in Montenegro’, No 1, 2019, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, pp 71-83; and Reuf Bajrović, Vesko Garčević & Richard Kraemer, ‘Hanging by a Thread: Russia’s Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>.

²¹ Slobodna Evropa, ‘Crna Gora projektovana da bude ‘mala Ukrajina’, kaže Joanikije’, 13 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/joanikije-ukrajina-crna-gora/31751141.html>.

²² Srdjan Janković, ‘Amfilohije Radović: Mitropolit molitvi i kletvi’, October 30, 2020, Radio Free Europe (Serbian Service), <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mitropolit-amfilohije-in-memoriam/30919884.html>; In October 2020, Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG) produced a film entitled ‘Svejdok Božije ljubavi’ (Witness of God’s Love) which documented Amfilohije’s numerous chauvinistic statements about Montenegrins, Muslims and the West (including his statement that NATO akin to a ‘Fourth Reich’). See RTCG, ‘Svejdok Božije ljubavi’, (Directors: Tanja Šuković & Snežanja Rakonjac), 10 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PF77nrrS3M>.

promoting the 'Serb national revival'. The enthronement of Amfilohije - which was attended by, among others Radovan Karadžić, the then leader of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and the then Montenegrin President, Momir Bulatović - who became the Metropolitan of Montenegro, (based in Cetinje) in December 1990 was an important part of this process. He was regarded not only as one of the most educated theologians in the SPC and among its most influential. During his thirty-year reign as Metropolitan, he was a sharp critic of the 'Montenegrin project' rejecting the notion of the Montenegrins as a separate nation, though not necessarily Montenegro as a state - provided, of course, that Montenegro remained essentially a 'second Serb state' in which the SPC remained prominent.²³ As one whose 'duty is worship, but politics his love', Amfilohije was often criticized for becoming a *de facto* opposition leader. He, on the other hand, believed that 'nothing that is human is alien to the Church', arguing against what he described as the 'marginalization of the Church in everyday life', including politics. Amfilohije had strongly opposed the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (*Crnogorska pravoslavna crkva* - CPC) since its restoration in 1993, calling the MPC's clergy 'impostors' whose role was to 'convert Montenegrins into Catholics'.²⁴

Amfilohije was a staunch opponent to any government policy that he regarded as distorting or betraying the legacy of Saint Sava and the spiritual and political unity of the Serbs (and he was unambiguous in his argument that Montenegrins were, in essence, Serbs). He offered support to the Yugoslav/Serb armed forces in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina and blessed the reserve forces of then Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Montenegrin irregulars before the attack on Dubrovnik in October 1991. With his acquiescence, the Cetinje Monastery, the seat of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro, hosted, on two separate occasions, the Serbian warlord Željko Ražnatović 'Arkan' and his *Tigers* - the first time on the St Peter's Day (July 12, 1991) when the Cetinje monastery opened its door for the armed *Tigers*, transforming the monastery into a 'military barracks' and again on Orthodox Christmas Eve in January 1992.²⁵

Throughout the 1990s, relations between the church and the Montenegrin government fluctuated. During the political turbulence marked by the split within the DPS and confrontation between then Prime Minister Milo Djukanović and the President Momir Bulatović, Amfilohije stood by Djukanović, and when he became president in January 1998, Djukanović chose his words carefully when discussing Amfilohije. The first signs of disagreements emerged, however, in the early 2000s when the DPS decided to embark upon a new project – independence. The SPC and Amfilohije himself offered unwavering support to political parties advocating a union with Serbia. Their campaign often went beyond regular, politically accepted, standards when it comes to how to treat the opponent. At that time, pro-Serbian political subjects and the SPC coined the term *Dukljani* to demean citizens who identified as Montenegrins. At the celebration of the Orthodox New Year in Podgorica in 2002, Amfilohije compared Montenegrins to 'infidels who revere the pagan emperor, the doomed *Dukljanin*';

²³ For Amfilohije's views on some of the key elements of Montenegrin history, see Mitropolit Amfilohije et al., *Dubovno i političko biće Crne Gore*, Nikšić: ETNOS, 2002. (This edited volume also contains a number of articles by, among other the Montenegrin Serb writer and poet, Matija Bećković.)

²⁴ For more on the conflict between the SPC and the CPC see Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 83-94.

²⁵ Šerbo Rastoder, 'Religion and Politics – The Montenegrin Perspective', in D. Vujadinović et al. (eds.), *Between Authoritarianism and Democracy: Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Vol. II, Civil Society and Political Culture*, Belgrade: CEDET, 2005, p. 117. For detailed analyses of the history of the CPC, see Sreten Zekovic (ed.), *Elementa Montenegrina brestomatija (Crnogorska pravoslavna crkva)*, Zagreb: 1991; Danilo Radojević, *Iz povijesti hrišćanskih crkava u Crnoj Gori*, CDNK: Cetinje, 2000; Branko Nikac, *Crnogorska pravoslavna crkva: članci – rasprave – studije*, Cetinje: 2000; Veseljko Koprivica, *Amfilohijeva sabrana nedjela*, Podgorica: Monitor, 1999; Adžić, *Kratka istorija Crnogorske pravoslavne crkve (od sredine XV vijeka do 1920. godine)*.

On subsequent occasions, he labelled those who defined themselves Montenegrins as ‘communist bastards’ and ‘the devil’s children’.²⁶

However, following Montenegro’s independence referendum in May 2006 and the subsequent declaration of independence thereafter, the church exhibited restraint. Instead, they reluctantly accepted the referendum result, echoed arguments about alleged irregularities, but stopped short of inciting protests among those who voted against independence. The recognition of Kosovo in 2008 generated a much stronger reaction from the church, however, and in the months preceding Montenegro’s recognition, Amfilohije had warned the government that if they recognized Kosovo they would be cursed forever as traitors. Following that recognition, he described it as the ‘greatest shame and betrayal in Montenegrin history’, though again the SPC stopped short of encouraging protests against the government. It nevertheless never accepted Kosovo’s recognition and still regards the decision to recognize it as illegitimate, as ‘nobody has the right to betray the right, dignity and history of Serbian people’. Similarly, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije called the decision of the Montenegrin parliament to condemn the July 1995 genocide in Srebrenica a ‘betrayal of the grace of God with the aim of polarizing us, declaring some as good, others as evil’.²⁷

However, Montenegro’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations further worsened relations between a succession of DPS-led governments and the SPC. The church consistently conveyed negative narratives about NATO (and the West more generally), and priests led by Amfilohije actively engaged in an anti-NATO propaganda campaign. Amfilohije himself occasionally appeared at the protests in Podgorica in 2015 and 2016, whereupon waxed lyrical about the importance of the historical bonds between Montenegro and Russia and dangers of joining the alliance. Yet, once again, the church remained relatively muted when Montenegro joined the military alliance in 2017.

Notwithstanding numerous disputes with the SPC, the Montenegrin authorities largely avoided discussion on the most vexed of questions: the SPC’s role in the country, the status of the CPC and the issue of property rights. The government purposely adopted a neutral stance towards the CPC, trying not to provoke an unnecessary conflict at times when it had to deal with other, more important, issues. The issue of the property rights was mentioned in public occasionally, but rarely by state officials. Yet, it was this issue that was to bring the SPC to a more prominent role and politically active position.

The Law on Religious Freedoms and its Discontents

The decision of the Montenegrin Parliament in December 2019 to approve the Law on Religious Freedoms, despite street protests and a last-minute attempt by the pro-Serb opposition delegates to prevent the vote going ahead, was controversial and considered by the church to be a thinly-veiled attempt by the ruling DPS to further consolidate their power. The law received a positive opinion by European legal experts from the Venice Commission, though it was sternly challenged by the SPC’s clergy, pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro, the Serbian leadership and by official Belgrade.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 15. See also Veseljko Koprivica, *Amfilohijeva sabrana nedjela*, Podgorica: Vijesti, 1999; and Milorad Tomanić, *Srpska crkva u ratu*, Belgrade: Medijska knjižara krug, 2001.

²⁷ Novi Standard, ‘Patrijarh Porfirije and Mitropolit Joanikije reagovali zbog Rezolucije o Srebrenici’, June 21, 2021, <https://standard.rs/2021/06/21/patrijarh-porfirije-i-mitropolit-joanikije-reagovali-zbog-rezolucije-o-srebrenici/>.

²⁸ Council of Europe, The Venice Commission, *Montenegro Opinion on the Draft Law on Freedom of Religion or Beliefs and Legal Status of Religious Communities*, Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 119th Plenary Session, June 21-22, 2019,

Conversely, Bojan Milosavljević a Professor at the Law School at Belgrade University, interpreted the opinion of the Venice Commission as ‘a moratorium on the transfer of the property rights to the state’.²⁹

The disputed part of the law was that which addressed the religious communities’ property right. It stipulated that the state, not the SPC, has the property right over religious objects that represent the cultural heritage of Montenegro built over the centuries. It also envisaged that all religious objects that were a ‘public good’ (the property of the Kingdom of Montenegro before the loss of its independence in November 1918) would be recognized as state property. The new law, however, stated that religious communities could only retain ownership of their property if they could provide evidence of ownership³⁰. And there was a legal pretext, of sorts. The Montenegrin Government used the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg against the Diocese of ‘Budimljansko-Nikšićka’ in Montenegro as a legal argument in its favour. Namely, in 2004, the Diocese, as well as other SPC organizational units in Montenegro, filed a lawsuit with the court in Strasbourg regarding the return of church property. In this proceeding, Serbia had the status of a ‘friend of the court’, supporting the SPC. Eight years later, the court ruled that ‘Diocese Budimljansko-Nikšićka could not legitimately expect restitution of property expropriated in Montenegro after the Second World War’.³¹

The question of the religious property is, of course, inseparable from the status of the Montenegrin church. Restored in 1993 – but rejected by the SPC as a ‘political project’ initiated by the pro-independence Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (*Liberalni savez Crne Gore* – LSCG) and led by Antonije Abramović (and later by Miraš Dedeić), both of whom the SPC claimed were ‘defrocked priests’) – the CPC claims to be a successor of the autocephalous Montenegrin church, which ceased to exist in 1922 by the decree of King Aleksander Karadjordjević. The CPC claims that SPC has occupied its property illegally since and that church property built before 1918 should be returned to the Montenegrin state. While many in the SPC refute that the pre-1922 Montenegrin Church was ever autocephalous, Afmilohije had nevertheless acknowledged, on several occasions, that Montenegro had an autocephalous church, one ‘that had created an independent Montenegro’.³²

Nevertheless, the SPC was deeply hostile to the Law on Religious Freedoms and sought to cast it as a struggle against those who wished to threaten both SPC interests (and assets) in Montenegro and an attack on Serb identity. The church claimed that it had not been consulted during the drafting process and accused the government of trying to control it. The coordinator of the Legal Council of the Metropolitanate in Cetinje, Velibor Džomić, also dismissed statements that the Venice Commission had given a positive opinion on the bill as ‘incorrect’.³³ Before the proposed 2019 law, Montenegro

[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)010-e#:~:text=In%20any%20case%2C%20the%20Venice,territories%20of%20the%20country%20concerned.](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)010-e#:~:text=In%20any%20case%2C%20the%20Venice,territories%20of%20the%20country%20concerned.)

²⁹ Novi Standard, ‘B. Milosavljević: Odluka Venecijanske Komisije nepovljna za Podgoricu’, 25 June 2019, <https://standard.rs/2019/06/25/b-milosavljevic-odluka-venecijanske-komisije-nepovoljna-za-podgoricu/>.

³⁰ Radio Slobodna Evropa, ‘Novi zakon o crkvama cilja crkvenu imovinu u Crnoj Gori’, Radio Free Europe (Serbian Service) May 17, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-zakon-imovina/29947615.html>.

³¹ The European Court of Human Rights, Press Release, *Diocese Budimljansko-Nikšićka could not legitimately expect restitution of property expropriated in Montenegro after World War II*, October 19, 2012, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?library=ECHR&id=003-4125009-4857539&filename=003-4125009-4857539.pdf>;

³² Glas Amerike, ‘Amfilohije: Mitropolija “u svoje vrijeme slovila za autokefalnu”’, Voice of America, February 28, 2020, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/crna-gora-crkva-amfilohije/5308348.html>.

³³ Radio Slobodna Evropa, ‘Venecijanska Komisija: Moguće promjene promjene vlasništva nad crkvama u Crnoj Gori’, Radio Free Europe (Serbian Service), June 24, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30017812.html>.

had not regulated the property rights of religious communities in the country, which left significant space for ambiguity and legal challenge. The last such law was adopted in 1977, according to the government, but some experts claim it was abolished in 1979.³⁴ Thus, the SPC accused the government of plotting ‘a land grab’ and had vowed to defend its assets. In the following weeks and months, tens of thousands of Montenegrin citizens took to streets to protest against the law and call the Montenegrin authorities to ‘hear the voice of the people’ and to bring ‘their lost souls back to the church’³⁵ The SPC also succeeded in forging a narrative that Orthodox Christians were being persecuted by the Montenegrin government, a somewhat misleading narrative that was even picked-up by two British MP’s, who co-authored a rather bizarre and ill-informed article entitled ‘NATO, Britain, Must Stand With Montenegro’s Christians’ for the US magazine *Newsweek*, parroting the claims of the SPC.³⁶

While the SPC labelled the protests (*litije*) religious in character, it had a distinctly political dynamic. The church essentially coordinated the protests and clergymen led the processions, acting as de facto political agitators organising and leading the protestors. The *litije* were characterised by the dominance of religious and national symbolism, recognisable slogans – such as *Ne damo svetinje* (We won’t give up our saints) – accompanied by songs such as *Veseli se Srpske rode* (Rejoice, Serbian People), sung by the Danica Crnogorčević, whose repertoire is comprised of new versions of old Serbian folk songs (her musical career has been funded by the SPC), and *Sviće zora* (Dawn is Breaking) by the Serbian ‘hip-hop collective’ *Beogradski sindikat*, known for their affiliation with the right-wing political groups in Serbia.³⁷ These, and other, songs became the accompanying soundtrack to the *litije* and the related gatherings that frequently took place in the immediate vicinity of the *Hram Hristovog vaskrsenja* (Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ) in Podgorica.

The protests were changing the political landscape and strengthening opposition (pro-Serbian) political parties in Montenegro, but the events there resonated far beyond its borders. Indeed, in Bosnia & Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) rallies in support of the *litije* in Montenegro took place in Trebinje, Pale, Bijeljina, Banja Luka (where the Serb member of the Tripartite Presidency of Bosnia & Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, participated) and Gacko, where some of those participating in local rallies attempted to enter Montenegro but were turned back by Montenegrin border guards on the basis that they were a threat to the country’s national security.³⁸

The *litije* also revealed a deep, years-old discontent felt by many citizens, with their lives, the uncertainty of their futures, the leaders who represented them, as well as state institutions. With over 50,000 people participating in the protests, it was the biggest test for the ruling DPS had faced since

³⁴ Balkan Insight ‘Serbian Bishop Accuses Montenegro of Eying Church’s Property’, *Balkans Insight*, June 7, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/07/serbian-bishop-accuses-montenegro-of-eying-churchs-property/>.

³⁵ Balkan Insight, ‘The Church Has Become the real Opposition in Montenegro’, *Balkans Insight*, February 27, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/27/the-church-has-become-the-real-opposition-in-montenegro/>.

³⁶ See Tim Farron & Steve Baker, ‘NATO, Britain, Must Stand With Montenegro’s Christians’ *Newsweek*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/nato-britain-must-stand-montenegros-christians-opinion-1514484>.

³⁷ See Danica Crnogorčević, ‘Veseli se Srpske rode’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50t-8B0v9CI> and Beogradski sindikat, ‘Sviće zora’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXpOvSv37Kk>. Beogradski sindikat is best known for songs like ‘Kosovo je Srbija’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7-I8y43Hus> or the song *BS Armija* (*BS Army*) that glorifies Syrian President Assad, the Russians from Donetsk and the Houthis’ rebels in Yemen. In the same song, they identify with Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of Austro-Hungarian crown prince Franz Ferdinand in 1914, and the movement he belonged to – *Mlada Bosna* (*The Young Bosnia*), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SC5UffC2qY>.

³⁸ See Radio Slobodna Evropa, ‘I u Trebinju održan protest podrške crnogorskim Srbima’, 29 December 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30350192.html>.

Montenegro regained its independence in 2006. Three decades of DPS rule and of Milo Djukanović, who rotated between the roles of president and prime minister with a couple of short sabbaticals, was considered by many citizens as the main obstacle for the further development of Montenegro. Protestors argued that the state had been ‘captured’ by the DPS and its corrupted leadership and it was they who were responsible.³⁹ However, most opposition leaders had also been in Montenegrin politics for decades, and while many citizens saw the series of DPS-led governments as corrupt and inefficient, they also saw no political alternative capable of articulating their frustration and translating it into tangible change.

The SPC, after all, had the moral authority and power that was derived from that. As the most trusted institution in the country, they, or rather Amfilohije, adopted the role of leader of the opposition, mobilizing Orthodox believers against the government. For him, this was not just demonstration of the church’s influence among Montenegrin citizens; he was pursuing another political battle at the same time. The mass religious procession improved his odds to win the equally convoluted struggle for influence within the SPC. He had many opponents, including highly influential Serbian clerics and Serbian leader Aleksandar Vučić. Amfilohije appeared to have been defiant not only to the Serbian President, but he also showed disobedience to the Serbian Patriarch with regard to how the protests should be orchestrated. While the Synod and the Serbian Government channelled their support towards the Democratic Front (*Demokratski front* - DF) as the leaders of the protests, Amfilohije tried to push himself and the SPC in Montenegro into, and remaining in, the leading role.⁴⁰ In his view, the church leadership was the most likely to be able to create the conditions for an opposition victory in the August 2020 parliamentary elections, and in this he proved correct – though it was ostensibly Zdravko Krivokapić and the ‘For the Future of Montenegro’ (*Za budućnost Crne Gore* – ZBCG) coalition that remained the political leaders of the protests.

New Government, Old Tensions

Relations between the SPC and the state entered a new phase with the government led by Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić (who, it is rumoured, was selected by Amfilohije himself). After the victory of the opposition was confirmed, Krivokapić visited Amfilohije immediately to inform him. Subsequent negotiations on the composition of the government took place in Ostrog monastery near Nikšić, with the active participation of a number of high-ranking SPC clerics.⁴¹ But the victory of the ZBCG was greeted with fear and anxiety by many of Montenegro’s ethnic minorities, not least because of attacks on Bosniaks in the town of Pljevlja in the immediate wake of the elections and on the building housing the local Islamic Community, during which a note was left which warned ‘Pljevlja will be Srebrenica’.⁴²

³⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the rule of the DPS covering the period between 1990 to 2018, see Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

⁴⁰ Beta, ‘Serbian Patriarch Irinej: Support to Leaders of Democratic Front in Defending the Serbian Orthodox Church’, December 26, 2019, <https://betabriefing.com/archive/news/9364-serbian-patriarch-irinej-support-to-leaders-of-democratic-front-in-defending-the-serbian-orthodox-church>; For an analysis of the relationship between the DF and the SPC in Montenegro after the 2020 elections see Pobjeda (Podgorica), ‘DF: Porfirije dao blagoslov Mandiću i Kneževiću da novoj Vladi brane interese SPC’, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/df-porfirije-dao-blagoslov-mandicu-i-knezevicu-da-novoj-vladi-brane-interese-spc>.

⁴¹ Nedeljnik, ‘Dritan na Ostrogu predložio Krivokapić za mandatara DF odbio’: *Kako teku pregovori za forimiranje vlade u CG*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/dritan-na-ostrogu-predlozio-krivokapica-za-mandatara-df-odbio-kako-teku-pregovori-za-forimiranje-vlade-u-cg/>.

⁴² See Al Jazeera, ‘Bosniaks in Montenegro live in ‘fear, anxiety’ following election’, 5 September 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/5/bosniaks-in-montenegro-live-in-fear-anxiety-following-election>. Pljevlja’s

Following the events in Pljevlja, the new parliamentary majority initiated the amendments to the Law on Religious Freedoms, which took into account all the SPC's objections. The changes were endorsed on December 29, 2020, a year after the adoption of the first version of the Law. At the same time, PM Zdravko Krivokapić confirmed that a 'fundamental agreement' would be signed between Montenegro and the SPC, as soon as it was agreed by the two sides. For him, the opportune moment for that to happen was soon after the enthronement of a new Montenegrin Metropolitan.⁴³ However, the apparent symbiosis between the SPC and state authorities didn't heal the wounds in a society deeply divided over both identity issues and the role of the SPC in Montenegro. While many Serbs in the country saw the SPC as a guardian of their faith and identity, many Montenegrins perceived the SPC as a 'foreign body', an intruder and usurper of their land and religious objects (*ecclesiastical property*); an organisation that actively worked to negate their national identity, distinct from that of Serbs, and potentially their statehood. These disagreements, already acute, worsened following the sudden death from Covid-19 of Metropolitan Amfilohije, in October 2020.

The events that accompanied the enthronement of a new Metropolitan, Joanikije (Jovan Mićović), in September 2021 again underlined the sensitivities. When Amfilohije had been enthroned, Montenegro was still one of six republics within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), but it had been independent since 2006. Nevertheless, the Metropolitan was chosen by the Synod in Belgrade, the capital of another state. The fact that the enthronement of Joanikije took place in Cetinje, a town which is the historical capital of Montenegro and a symbol of its statehood and identity, angered many Montenegrins who saw it as an example of the weaponization of the church by Serbia.

A stand-off between protesters and the SPC leaders supported by the Montenegrin Government culminated on 5 September 2021 when the enthronement was due to take place. Police fired teargas at thousands of demonstrators who blocked the roads leading to Cetinje and a smaller number who had gathered in the town to protest against the inauguration. However, the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Bishop Joanikije, the new Metropolitan, arrived to Cetinje by (Montenegrin government) military helicopter⁴⁴ surrounded by a robust police escort.⁴⁵ For those standing at the barricades at Belveder near Cetinje, or supporting the protest in Montenegro from their homes, the staging of the inauguration in Cetinje was more evidence of the power the SPC, supported by Belgrade, now possessed. They argued that attempts by the church to negate Montenegrin identity or define it through the lens of Montenegrins as Serbian-Orthodox was unacceptable for country with a multi-ethnic fabric and multi-confessional character.⁴⁶ Conversely, those who supported the inauguration dismissed the protesters as merely a group organized by former police officers and elements of

Bosniak (Muslim) community had reason to be fearful, having experienced a violent purge led by Milika-Čeka Dačević in 1992. See Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, pp. 60-63.

⁴³ Vijesti, Krivokapić, 'Najbolje bi bilo da se temeljni ugovor potpiše kad bude izabran mitropolit', April 30, 2021, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/534935/krivokapic-najbolje-bi-bilo-da-se-potpise-kad-bude-izabran-mitropolit>;

⁴⁴ Portal Luča, 'Injac: Na Cetinju nije korišćen NATO helikopter, već Vojske Crne Gore, koji su građani platili', September 27, 2021 <https://portalluca.me/drustvo/vijesti-drustvo/injac-na-cetinju-nije-korisecen-nato-helikopter-vec-vojske-crne-gore-koji-su-gradjani-platili/>).

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, 'Protests as Montenegro's new Orthodox head inaugurated', September 5, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/5/protests-as-montenegros-new-orthodox-head-inaugurated>.

⁴⁶ Gradski portal/Portal Analitika, 'Adžić: Belveder 1936 and Belveder 2021 veže simboličko i idejno značenje', May 6, 2022, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/adzic-belveder-1936-i-belveder-2021-veze-simbolicno-i-idejno-znacenje>; See also Nebojša Redžić, 'Obrana Crnogorskog Identiteta: Za jačanje nacionalne svijesti više učinio Belveder nego sva intelektualna i naučna misao', October 6, 2021, <https://www.aktuelno.me/crna-gora/odbrana-crnogorskog-identiteta-za-jacanje-nacionalne-svijesti-vise-ucinio-belveder-nego-sva-intelektualna-i-naucna-misao/>.

intelligence community close to Milo Djukanović. It was he, they argued, that had instrumentalized the protests for their political goals, and was thus to blame for the unrest that unfolded prior to and during the inauguration.⁴⁷

The ‘Fundamental Agreement’

In April 2022, almost three months since the collapse of the previous (Zdravko Krivokapić) government, Montenegro’s parliament endorsed a new minority government, which was also dependent on the support of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the party that had been in government for three decades. Abazović, as the country’s new prime minister, stated his government was time-limited and that parliamentary elections would take place in the spring of 2023. He outlined his immediate priorities as reinvigorating the EU accession process, tackling corruption and organised crime, and promoting sustainable economic development, with a view to putting Montenegro back on a clear trajectory towards eventual EU membership. Abazović also committed to resolving upon the issue of relations between the state and the SPC which, he claimed, would forge a path beyond the divisions that have wracked Montenegro in recent years. However well intentioned, he took a huge political risk by doing so. Agreements had already been signed between the Montenegrin government and religious organisations representing Catholic, Islamic and Jewish communities, and the SPC has long argued that it was, given the absence of a similar agreement, being discriminated against. However, the issue of an agreement with the SPC has proved highly politically sensitive, largely due to fact that many Montenegrins regard the SPC as an instrument of Serb nationalism and proponents of the ‘Serbian World’. The agreement, they argued, would give the SPC inordinate power in Montenegro.

Abazović’s decision to prioritise this over other critical issues left many observers dumbfounded. Montenegro faced many challenges: deep political divisions, a fractured economy – further damaged by another disappointing tourist season – and rising inflation. Predictably, therefore, the political flux caused by the signing of the agreement led to the collapse of the government and yet more political instability (though Abazović currently remains at ‘Prime Minister in technical mandate’). Given the sensitivities, it was questionable whether the time was right to deal with an issue as contentious as the fundamental agreement. Some within the government, and the DPS, whose support the government depended upon, cautioned that signing it without due consultation would initiate a vote of no confidence in parliament. Nevertheless, on 8 July Montenegro’s government voted in favour of supporting the signing of the fundamental agreement with the SPC, though five government ministers were against and three others were conspicuous by their absence. Following the vote, the DPS announced that Abazović’s government could no longer rely on that support and called upon other parties to support a vote of no confidence.

The tensions generated were not, however, limited to the confines of parliament. On 13 July, a holiday that marks both the recognition of Montenegro’s statehood at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and the first peoples uprising against Axis occupation in Europe in 1941, incidents in Montenegro’s second-largest city Nikšić demonstrated the febrile atmosphere in which debates over the signing were taking place. Police intervened to separate two groups, one comprising (Serb) Orthodox youth organizations including ‘Tvrdoš’ and ‘Stupovi’, who walked through the city chanting slogans in support of Serbia

⁴⁷ Vreme, ‘Suzavac, tamjan i odmeravanje snaga’, Vreme, September 9, 2021, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/suzavac-tamjan-i-odmeravanje-snaga/>.

and Russia, and a gathering of pro-Montenegrin ‘sovereignists’.⁴⁸ The Mayor of Nikšić, Marko Kovačević (a member of the DF), stated that the incidents had been caused by ‘outsiders’, though his critics accused him of instrumentalizing the incidents by instructing police to allow the members of the Orthodox youth groups to enter the centre of Nikšić, where celebrations marking Montenegro’s statehood were taking place.⁴⁹

In the wake of those events, Abazović and Montenegro’s veteran president, Milo Djukanović, agreed form a ‘commission of experts’ that would be tasked with reviewing the constitutionality of the agreement. During a meeting on 19 July, they tentatively agreed on a panel comprising six members, though one in particular, nominated by Abazović, raised eyebrows. Velibor Marković, a somewhat controversial lawyer and member of the SPC’s legal team had a reputation for giving chauvinistic and homophobic statements through his social media accounts. As a consequence, two members of the proposed commission immediately resigned, citing their unwillingness to work with him.⁵⁰ Critics accused Abazović of attempting to derail the whole process of scrutiny by proposing Marković, knowing that others would likely refuse to work with him, the work of the body would never commence and there would, as a result, be no significant review of the constitutional validity of the agreement.

The work of the commission never began and the agreement was eventually signed on 3 August 2022, much to the chagrin of those who had argued that no agreement should have been signed without much broader consultation. And it was the manner in which this was conducted, essentially in secret with no public announcement in advance, that caused further offence. Indeed, Montenegro’s Foreign Minister, Ranko Krivokapić, who had opposed the signing, stated that it had been ‘Authorised in Belgrade and brought to Montenegro’ and that the government could not change even one letter in it, while others opposed to the agreement expressed similar outrage.⁵¹ This was, to some extent, confirmed by Zdravko Krivokapić, who wanted to sign the fundamental agreement in 2021 and travelled to Belgrade in vain to do so. He confirmed in an interview for the daily *Vijesti* that the new version of the document was not the one that had been originally drafted by the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and Metropolitan Amfilohije and that ‘some elements in the Church and some politicians, including Andrija Mandić’ were against that version of the document and the idea that the Montenegrin Metropolitan should co-sign the agreement along with other representatives of the SPC and the Montenegrin Government.⁵²

There is little doubt, therefore, that by signing the agreement – which Milo Djukanović called ‘the worst betrayal of national interests since 1918’ - Abazović had taken a significant political gamble. The

⁴⁸ See *Vijesti*, ‘Nikšić: Sukob policije i grupe građana, privedene dvije osobe’, 13 July 2022, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/613175/niksic-sukob-policije-i-grupe-gradjana-bacen-suzavac>.

⁴⁹ *Vijesti*, ‘Kovačević o incidentu: Ovo nijesu izazvali Nikšićani već pojedini gosti koje niko nije dirao’, 13 July 2022, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/613189/kovacevic-o-incidentu-ovo-nijesu-izazvali-niksicani-vec-pojedini-gosti-koje-niko-nije-dirao>.

⁵⁰ Pobjeda, ‘Gorjanc-Prelević i Spaić neće za sto sa homofobom i mizoginom, Marković ih potom izvrijedjao’, 23 July 2022, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/gorjanc-prelevic-i-spaic-neze-za-sto-sa-homofobom-i-mizoginom-markovic-ih-potom-izvrijedjao>.

⁵¹ Radio Slobodna Evropa, ‘Crna Gora i Srpska pravoslavna crkva potpisali Temeljni ugovor’, 3 August 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/3191769.html>.

⁵² *Vijesti*, ‘Krivokapić: SPC smo poslali Amfilohijevu verziju temeljnog ugovora’, 1 January 2023, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/637264/krivokapic-spc-smo-poslali-amfilohijevu-verziju-temeljnog-ugovora>.

no confidence motion brought forward by the DPS and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), both claiming that the signing of the agreement was anti-constitutional, led to a heated parliamentary session. Facing criticism not only for the signing of the agreement, but for his government's record more broadly, Abazović stated that he did not regret signing the agreement and claiming that some of those behind the no confidence motion, and the media supporting them, were funded by organised criminal groups that he had been committed to combatting. Regardless, however, 50 of the 81 delegates voted for the motion of no confidence, heralding the end of the short-lived Abazović government.

The situation escalated further when the Montenegrin *M Portal* and *Pobjeda* published an analysis of the Sky ECC⁵³ application correspondence, which had been tapped by EUROPOL, between members of the Škaljari clan, one of the largest criminal groups in Montenegro and one that has been involved in a lengthy and violent dispute with the Kavač clan, both of which originated in Kotor. The reports alleged that there existed connections between the SPC and criminal clans and that there had been plans to procure weapons before the August 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro. According to the communication of Srdjan Vukić and Dragan Tomić (codes MIBD41 and 4702B7)⁵⁴, two members of the Škaljari clan, armed attacks could not be excluded in case of an undesirable outcome of the August 2020 parliamentary elections, and if peaceful protests (*litije*) did not result in an opposition victory. The plan they discussed over the SKY ECC application included attacks on police, security centers and offices of the DPS. Indeed, *Pobjeda* published extracts of a conversation between Risto Mijanović and Nikola Dedović, the Škaljari clan members, in which they discussed the purchase of 100 Kalashnikovs requested by the SPC for the city of Nikšić where pro-Serbian parties together with the SPC organized political rallies ahead of the parliamentary elections in August 2020. Mijanović wrote to Dedović stating: 'My brothers are asking me to buy 100 Kalash [Kalashnikovs]. The church pays. They wrote to me. Yes, bro. They ask me for everything they have to buy right away. Mitra's brother is the abbot'.⁵⁵ Consequently, the Prosecutor's Office opened the case. The investigation is still under way, but the Prosecutor has yet to confirm or deny the authenticity of the conversations.⁵⁶

The last few months has seen yet more uncertainty in Montenegro. Though many had predicted that municipal elections, held on October 23, 2022, might create the momentum which would end the existing political deadlock in the country, the situation has become more complex. The campaigns were held in a febrile atmosphere of distrust and mutual accusations, with identity issues completely dominating public discourse. The DPS saw its chance to regain its influence if it remained in power in Podgorica and a few other places. But, the parties that make up the current 'government in the technical mandate' and the DPS both experienced a significant loss, and though the DPS had created a grand coalition in advance of the elections in Podgorica, it was defeated for the first time in 24

⁵³ Kaymera, 'What Happened to Sky ECC', 28 June 2021, <https://blog.kaymera.com/industry-news-and-articles/what-happened-to-sky-ecc>; see also ComputerWeekly.com, 'Police crack world's largest cryptophone network as criminals swap EncroChat for Sky ECC', 10 March, 2021, <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252497565/Police-crack-worlds-largest-cryptophone-network-as-criminals-swap-EncroChat-for-Sky-NCC>.

⁵⁴ MPortal, 'Vukić: Ako ovaj ishod ne bude kako treba noćas da se popali to sve dolje', 8 September 2022, <https://mportal.me/drustvo/hronika/vukic---ako-ovaj-ishod-ne-bude-kako-treba-nocas-da-se-popali-to-sve-dolje>.

⁵⁵ Pobjeda, 'Škaljarac: Traže mi 100 kalaša, Crkva finansira nabuka za NK', 23 August 2022, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/skaljarac-traze-mi-100-kalasa-crkva-finansira-nabavku-za-nk>.

⁵⁶ CDM, 'Tužilaštvo formiralo predmet: Provjeriće navode o nabavci oružja za SPC uoči izbora 2020 godine', 23 August 2020, <https://www.cdm.me/hronika/vise-drzavno-tuzilastvo-u-podgorici-formiralo-predmet-povodom-objava-u-medijima-o-nabavci-oruzja/>.

years.⁵⁷ The local elections confirmed the further decline of the party as they lost five percent of the electorate compared with parliamentary elections in 2020.⁵⁸ It was the newly-formed political movement *Evropa Sad* (Europe Now), led by Jakov Milatović and Miloško Spajić, former ministers in the government of Zdravko Krivokapić, emerged as the de-facto victors and, broadly, the parties which ousted the DPS in the 2020 parliamentary elections won in most of the municipalities in Montenegro.

Quo Vadis?

The SPC looks set to further capitalize in a political environment that has become increasingly favorable for them. As the most trusted institution among Serbs living in the Western Balkans and with its grassroots community outreach, the SPC is an extended arm of the Serbian state, an instrument through which Russian influence can be channeled and a powerful tool for the realization of the Serbian World project. In Montenegro, the church continues to benefit from the largesse of the current government. In October 2022, just two months after the signing of the fundamental agreement and despite objections that the application did not meet legal requirements and, more broadly, in a context within which the economic crisis has impacted significantly on the country's citizens, the SPC received 900,000 euros from the state budget for the construction of a private Orthodox Gymnasium to be constructed in Podgorica.⁵⁹

The conservative orthodoxy and extreme nationalism, often publicly empowered by the SPC, continue to make inroads in all aspects of the social, cultural, and political life in the country. For example, the highest literary prize in Montenegro, 'Miroslav's Gospel', was awarded to little-known writer Milutin Mićović, brother of Metropolitan Joanikije, for a work in which he portrays Montenegrins 'who stripped away their Serbian spiritual content' as 'worthless people' (*nule od ljudi*). In the same book, he postulates that 'Serbian Muslims, Serbian Croats, and Serbian Albanians are apostasies of their origin, the apostasy of the truth...falling into mortal oblivion and betrayal'⁶⁰.

Montenegro is often a bellwether for the region and what has taken place there since 2019 should be understood as a series of developments that may have wider implications. The coming months are, therefore, crucial. The parties constituting the parliamentary majority had planned to form a government by 20 January 2023 and nominated Miodrag Lekić, the leader of the Demos party and a former head of Montenegrin diplomacy and ambassador during Slobodan Milošević's time, as a new prime minister. Their decision was based on controversial changes of the 'Law on the President', which took the Constitutional authority of the President to decide who to assign a mandate for the composition of a new government. The amendments to the Law of the President have received a

⁵⁷ Glas Amerike, 'Vujović o lokalnim izborima: Evropa sad – najveći dobitnik, fijasko partia koje čine vladu', 24 October, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/crna-gora-lokalni-izbori-zlatko-vujovic-evropa-sad-pobednik-fijasko-partija-koje-cine-vladu/6803351.html>.

⁵⁸ Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Lokalni Izbori u Crnoj Gori: Djukanovićeva partija I dalje u padu', 23 October 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-lokalni-izbori/32097155.html>.

⁵⁹ Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Pare crnogorskih građana za škole SPC', 3 October 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novac-crna-gora-skole-srpska-pravoslavna-crkva/32063364.html>. The process of facilitating the opening of the Orthodox schools was initiated by Vesna Bratić, the former Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, in April 2021.

⁶⁰ Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Državna nagrada za djelo koje negira Crnogorce i nacionalne manjine', 4 January, 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/knjizevna-nagrada-crna-gora/31639295.html>.

negative assessment from the Venice Commission⁶¹ and have been widely criticized by the EU and the US.⁶² And while a decision on early parliamentary elections has not yet been made, Metropolitan Joanikije called in his Christmas message on Montenegrin citizens to participate in the upcoming elections and freely vote according to their conscience. Many in Montenegro perceive this message as a Church's blessing for the early elections and the de-facto beginning of the electoral campaign⁶³.

While it is unrealistic to suggest that any new government will publicly relinquish Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic agenda, the strong influence of the SPC (primarily, though not exclusively, channeled through the DF) the country will be a somewhat dubious NATO member and will continue to make slow progress towards EU membership. Simultaneously, Montenegro may become more aligned with Serbia's regional policies, including the Open Balkans and the opaque Serbian World project. Therefore, the recent participation of the Montenegrin ministers in the occasion of the 'statehood day' of Republika Srpska should not come as a surprise.⁶⁴ Just a day before the Academy, Bosnian Serb President Milorad Dodik decided to award Russian President Vladimir Putin with the highest medal of honor for his 'patriotic concern and love for Republika Srpska'⁶⁵.

In the meantime, the war in Ukraine will continue to cast a dark shadow, and while Montenegro's position on the conflict may not change dramatically or suddenly, a new government may seek 'procedural opportunities' to slow down the application of unwanted or unpopular EU decisions against Russia. They may repeat the pattern of Krivokapić's government which, for 'procedural reasons', postponed for several weeks the full implementation of sanctions against Russia. PM Krivokapić's hesitation caused the suspension of the Governments meetings and a public quarrel with the Minister of Foreign Affairs⁶⁶. Due to the obstruction by a DF member, the Montenegrin Defense and Security Council couldn't make a decision on whether to support NATO's emergency response force.⁶⁷ It's likely, therefore, that should the DF be part of any new government, they would continue to hinder any further punitive decisions against Moscow by the EU. In addition, the DF has requested on several occasions that the Montenegrin government revoke recognition of Kosovo and were

⁶¹ Venice Commission, 'Montenegro - Law on amendments to the Law on the President of Montenegro', CDL-REF (2022)068-e, Opinion No. 1111 / 2022, 6 December 2022, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF\(2022\)068-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF(2022)068-e);

⁶² Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Propao pokušaj formiranja nove vlade Crne Gore', 4 January, 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/lekcija-vlada-crne-gore-sastanak/32207675.html>

⁶³ Kolektiv.me, 'Vujović o poruci Joanikija: Božićna poslanica kao završna predizborna poruka', 5 January 2023, [https://kolektiv.me/213364/vujovic-o-poruci-joanikija-bozicna-poslanica-kao-završna-predizborna-poruka](https://kolektiv.me/213364/vujovic-o-poruci-joanikija-bozicna-poslanica-kao-zavrсна-predizborna-poruka).

⁶⁴ Minister of Justice Marko Kovač and Minister of Finance Aleksandar Damjanović both representatives of the Serbian People's Party in the Government. Their attendance was condemned by the Mothers' of Srebrenica, who stated that it was regrettable that Kovač and Damjanović were 'among those who glorify genocide'. See <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/638165/majke-srebrenice-uputile-protest-vladi-crne-gore>.

CdM, 'Kovač i Damjanović na akademiji povodom neustavnog Dana Republike Srpske', 8 January, 2023, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/damjanovic-i-kovac-na-svecanoj-akademiji-povodom-dana-rs/>.

⁶⁵ Reuters, 'Bosnian Serb leader awards Russian President Putin in absentia', January 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-leader-awards-russian-president-putin-medal-absentia-2023-01-08/>.

⁶⁶ Aktuelno.me: Prekinuta sjednica Vlade, Krivokapić neće da glasa za sankcije Rusiji, 17 March, 2022, <https://www.aktuelno.me/politika/prekinuta-sjednica-vlade-krivokapic-needa-glasa-za-sankcije-rusiji/>.

⁶⁷ RTV Crna Gora, Bulajić blokirao odluke suprotne interesima većine građana, 3 March, 2022, <https://rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/353998/bulajic-blokirao-odluke-suprotne-interesima-vecine-gradjana.html>.

openly hostile to Montenegro becoming a NATO member.⁶⁸ As part of a future government, they would likely do so again, with the goal of either withdrawing the recognition, downgrading diplomatic relations until the end of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue or supporting a withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo's state institutions.

As we have seen, the SPC have since 2019 consolidated their position in Montenegro - by way of their resistance to the Law on Religious Freedoms, the organization of the *litije* (during which they became the de facto opposition) and the signing of the 'fundamental agreement' - and through their political proxies have increased their power and influence and set the country on an uncertain trajectory that may have significant implications not only for Montenegro's multi-ethnic and multi-religious balance and internal stability, but for that of the Western Balkans more broadly. As we have argued, control of Montenegro is critical for its success and the evidence suggests that much has been accomplished in reaching this objective. As the Montenegrin political scientist, Radovan Radonjić stated in a recent interview for *Pobjeda*, the country has 'fallen to the lowest rung [of the ladder] because we are a society now governed by the church'.⁶⁹ Politically volatile after three decades of DPS rule, the country is wracked by numerous problems: weak state institutions, corruption and partocracy are contributing to creating an environment that can be manipulated to serve Belgrade's regional ambitions, and the ambitions of the proponents of the Serbian World project, in Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina.

⁶⁸ Novosti, 'Ne menja odluku o Kosovu: Krivokapić nastavlja Djukanovićevu politiku o KiM i Rusiji', 26 December 2020, <https://www.novosti.rs/crna-gora/vesti/948706/menja-odluku-kosovu-krivokapic-nastavlja-djukanovicevu-politiku-kim-rusiji>.

⁶⁹ Pobjeda, 'Radonjić: Pali smo na najnižu stepenicu jer smo društvo kojim upravlja crkva', 31 October 2022, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/stavljanje-tacke-na-smisao-i-cilj-antibirokratske-revolucije>.