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# **WHO GOVERNS OUR EXTREME RIGHT-WING?**

PODGORICA, OCTOBER 2022



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## IMPRESUM

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НАЦИОНАЛНА БИБЛИОТЕКА ЦРНЕ ГОРЕ, ЦЕТИЊЕ

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# I INTRODUCTION

Dilemmas about the activities of the extreme right-wing in Montenegro have come to the fore lately, in parallel with the profound political, social, identity, and cultural crisis which marked the last two years after the 2020 parliamentary elections. Although sporadic and insufficiently scientifically based, considerations on this topic offered different thoughts and conclusions. They range from the premise that Montenegro *has been living its state life for years between two ethno-political extremes that embody Serbian and Montenegrin nationalism*<sup>1</sup>, to a lament that can be heard more and more often in the public space due to the absence of political articulation that would have a right-wing Montenegrin character.

While there is a significant number of examples regarding the thesis about Serbian nationalism in Montenegro in the thirty-year practice of Montenegrin democracy, according to which it is evident that right-wing parties as a rule have the Serbian omen and are mainly devoted to the interests of Serbia (and Russia) and to contesting the right to the existence of the state of Montenegro and the national identity of Montenegrins, since the introduction of the multi-party system, no attempts of political organization of the Montenegrin right-wing have been registered – as a political expression of the desire to protect the Montenegrin national and state identity and its articulations on the political and cultural level. Sporadic, mostly reactive right-wing activities or politicization of identity issues from the pragmatic needs of some nominally left-wing parties and parties of the Montenegrin political center could hardly be a confirmation for the thesis that Montenegrin nationalism *represents a ticking timebomb in the foundations of the state of Montenegro, i.e., that asymptomatic nationalism produces all the political consequences like other nationalisms, although it does not have all their visible features*<sup>2</sup>.

These theses ignore the fact that Serbian nationalism, whose violent forms of manifestation in Montenegro we can trace from 1988 to nowadays, with constant attempts to relativize and rehabilitate criminals and crimes committed *in the name of the people or to protect it from historical enemies*, but also morbid attempts to deny Montenegrin national identity and the right to exist as a sovereign and independent state of Montenegro.

The political space of the right-wing in Montenegro is covered by numerous pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties cloaked in the mantle of protection of *endangered national interests and traditional values*, which from 2020 have had a dominant influence on political processes, with significant

successes in dismantling the concept of the secular and civil state of Montenegro and the relativization of the values achieved through membership in NATO and the slowing down of the European integration process.

The emergence of the extreme right-wing and right-wing ideology in Montenegro is a direct reflection of the disintegration of the SFRY and the changes that followed the dismantling of the joint socialist state and has been connected with the process of radicalization of the environment in Serbia from the beginning. The idea of creating a *greater Serbia* and the wars that were waged in that name in the nineties of the last century has been, in the meantime, modified by the rehabilitated, currently ruling Serbian parties that were the bearers of the war policy and have its ideological expression

through advocacy for the creation of a *Serbian world*, which represents a reinterpretation of the concept of the *Russian world* (*Russkiy Mir*).

Basically, the ideology of the right-wing implies: the ethnic homogenization of the Serbian people in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (the entity of the Republic of Srpska), Kosovo, and Montenegro – through the concept of *protecting the interests of Serbs in the dispersion*, that is, the relativization of state and ethnic borders; anti-communism and denial of anti-fascism, promotion of *traditional*, essentially authoritarian values; uncritical glorification of Orthodoxy in the interpretation of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox churches; opposition to the concept of liberal democracy and multiculturalism represented by the *decadent West*; as well as intolerance towards minority social (LGBT) and ethnic groups.

The ideological and value framework for all pro-Serbian political subjects, organizations, and associations is provided by the Serbian Orthodox Church with its headquarters in Belgrade, which at the moment represents the only foreign policy instrument of Serbia, considering the fact that its religious jurisdiction extends beyond the Serbian state borders and covers the territory, from the aspect of the implementation of the *Serbian world* project, of particularly interesting areas in Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Under the auspices and with the active participation of the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a general ideological confusion was created, with attempts to revise the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the promotion of the Chetnik movement as a *right-wing anti-fascist movement*, which, after its success in Serbia, is trying to be rehabilitated in Montenegro.

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**IDEOLOGICAL AND VALUE  
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ORTHODOX CHURCH WITH  
HEADQUARTERS IN BELGRADE**

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The SOC achieved significant success in the process of desecularization of society in Montenegro, which since 2019 and the protest processions due to the enactment of the Law on Freedom of Religion, actively participates in making key political decisions, with an undisguised role in personnel combinatorics during the formation of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Government of Zdravko Krivokapić. Issues of interest to the SOC had a crucial impact on the work of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Government of Dritan Abazović, which, despite the signed coalition agreement based on the European agenda, set as its priority the signing of the controversial Fundamental Agreement with the SOC,

which was the main reason for the vote of no confidence in the Parliament of Montenegro.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has become a key factor that, to a significant extent, determines the activities of pro-Serbian political parties and organizations, and associations in Montenegro, affecting the change in the character of society from civil into theocratic, with the destruction of the social system and rehabilitation of patriarchal, provincial culture.

Ideological and political divisions, institutional vulnerability, and economic problems are a suitable ground for spreading their narratives, which aim to deepen national and religious divisions and incite inter-ethnic tensions, and mistrust towards EU and NATO, as well as Montenegrin institutions – contributing to the general decline of confidence in their strength and vitality, and are based on promoting Serbian hegemonic and Russian imperial ambitions.

The increased intensity of Russian *soft power* in Montenegro came to the fore, especially after the NATO membership invitation in 2015, and was noticeable through the actions of certain political subjects, non-government organizations, media, civil activists, and individuals whose political and ideological concept is based on advocating the change of the strategic course of the country and its displacement from the western to the eastern track. Even then, the Serbian Orthodox Church is asserted as a key proxy of Russian activities, which, with the appearance of *grass-roots* conservative groups, opened the door to the abuse of religion and the formation, under the auspices of the SOC and with the active participation of certain priests of this religious organization, of new *patriotic* and *humanitarian* organizations and associations with strong national -Serbian and religious identity.

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**THE INCREASED INTENSITY OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN MONTENEGRO WAS PARTICULARLY EVIDENT AFTER THE INVITATION FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP IN 2015 AND WAS MANIFESTED THROUGH THE ACTIONS OF CERTAIN POLITICAL SUBJECTS, NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS, MEDIA, CIVIL ACTIVISTS AND INDIVIDUALS**

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Such associations were established according to the pattern of already established similar organizations in Serbia, which have undergone numerous transformations since 2000, from bans and prosecutions to the legalization of their activities within political parties with parliamentary status. SOC does not even hide its connections with such associations.<sup>3</sup>

A significant number of those organizations in Montenegro and the region are hiding behind humanitarian work, trying to *soften* their image, through social networks, for them to be socially accepted – like the *Sveti Georgije* organization from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is partly financed by the Russian embassy, and which was active during the religious processions in Montenegro<sup>4</sup>. At first glance, some of them seem humanitarian, but when you look at their attitudes and activities being contextualized, their underlying agenda based on right-wing ideology, militaristic spirit, and loyalty to Russia are revealed.

## ORGANIZATIONS' ACTIVITIES

Thus, in 2014, a section of the Russian motorcycle club Night Wolves was founded in Montenegro, whose members participated in the campaign during the annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, as well as in the fighting in the Donbas area. In 2016, the Balkan Cossack Army was formed in Kotor, which the DFC has already written about.<sup>5</sup> Often an integral part of the narratives of these groups is the celebration of war criminals, the revision of history, and the promotion of Serbian-Russian politics in Montenegro. Night Wolves, an organization whose declarative action relies on Orthodox values and ancestral traditions, is working by the bequest of St. Peter of Cetinje *Pray to God and hold on to Russia*, which was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a completely different historical context. The connection of the Night Wolves with the Serbian Orthodox Church speaks of the fact that members of this organization were accompanied by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Irinej, and other church dignitaries during their visit to Montenegro in October 2018. On that occasion, they were detained by the Cetinje police. The members of this group stayed at the gate of the Cetinje Monastery in anticipation of the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije Mićović on September 5, 2021.

There is no doubt that this pro-Russian association of allegedly patriotically motivated bikers, gathered around Orthodoxy, is part of a network



Night Wolves in Cetinje Monastery (left)

Chetnik flag in front of the Church in Podgorica (right)

of Russian influence and propaganda. Its appearance and increased involvement are connected to Russian pressure on the countries of the region. The Night Wolves are a par excellence tool for achieving the goals of Russian foreign policy, including the Balkans, and the coincidence of their establishment in Montenegro and the increased Russian presence in the Balkans are not accidental.<sup>6</sup>

In 2016, the Ministry of Interior banned the Serbian nationalist organization Ravnogorski pokret. However, the ban had little effect since this organization is still on the register of active NGO associations, and its activities have not been suspended, which was evident after the elections in August 2020. So, in Podgorica, in front of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ, on August 31, 2020, there was a black Chetnik flag stating *With faith in God for the King and the fatherland*. Similar manifestations were registered in other Montenegrin cities, so the *Sandžak* portal published a video showing the supporters of the future Government celebrating the victory in Bijelo Polje and singing *From Glava Zete to the city of Spuz*, with iconography showing photos of Radovan Karadžić, Ratko Mladić, Slobodan Milošević.<sup>7</sup>

And the militarized Orthodox youth, the *Sorok Sorokov* organization promoted in Montenegro by former honorary consul of Russia Boro Đukić, works similarly. This aggressive organization, which is some kind of the informal security service of Orthodox churches in Russia, was accused of attacks on the opposition and human rights activists, and most often those who fight for the rights of members of the LGBT population. Followers of the Orthodox Christian order have conservative views on gender, sexuality, reproduction, and the roles of men and women. Their goal is to protect the Russian Orthodox Church and keep the nation safe and sound. What is important to note is that the *Sorok Sorokov* movement, in addition to



Sorok Sorokov protest of support to SOC (left)



Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi in front of the Church in Podgorica, standing in formation (right)

the aforementioned support for Serbia, organized protests across Moscow as a sign of support for the Serbian Orthodox Church during the protest processions in Montenegro at the end of 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion – the so-called religious processions brought to the surface a strong and well-organized structure of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian right-wing movements, groups, and organizations based on anti-Western and pro-Russian values, with visible elements of religious and national conservatism. Numerous groups emerged from the *processions'* movement, some of which turned to political activity and from which Montenegrin Prime Minister Krivokapić and some of his government ministers emerged. Others, like Orthodox brotherhoods, describe their mission as patriotic and humanitarian while they work with iconography characteristic of right-wing groups.

Visibility and activities of the *Pravoslavno bratstvo Stupovi*, *Miholjski zbor*, *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić*, *Čojstvo*, and the *Društvo rusko-srpskog prijateljstva Sveti Georgije* especially stand out. In the ranks of these organizations, some individuals served long-term prison sentences and have criminal records, such as Stojan Sekulović from Bar, who was in the group that was detained in December 2020, and Milan Rončević, who was arrested both in Montenegro and abroad, where he served a prison sentence, and recently several members were arrested on suspicion of selling drugs.<sup>9</sup> The Police Administration announced that among the NGO *Pravoslavno bratstvo Stupovi* members are persons of security interest, who are also registered as perpetrators of the most severe crimes.<sup>10</sup>

During the shooting of the film *Quo vadis, Aida*, on December 29, 2021, on the *RTCG* channel, which deals with the genocide in Srebrenica, about twenty representatives of the NGO *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić* and the NGO *Pravoslavno bratstvo Stupovi* protested in front of the entrance to the



Denying genocide on the protest of Stupovi in front of Radio Television Montenegro (RTCG) (left)



Slavko Perošević in Cossacks uniform (upper photo on right)

Perošević wearing T-shirt with Z symbol (one of the symbols of Russian aggression against Ukraine) during the incident in Nikšić (photo on right below)



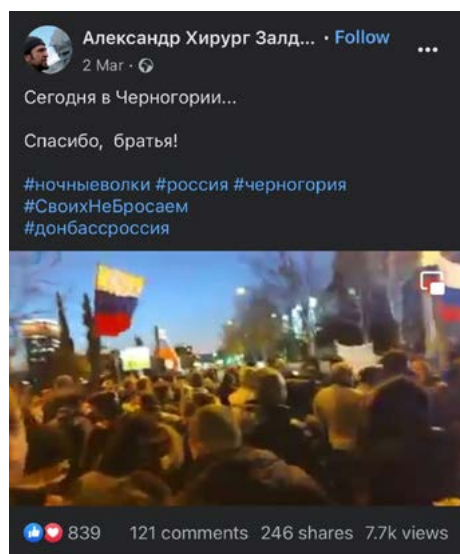
building of Public service, with a banner that read *Srebrenica is not genocide*.

On behalf of those gathered, Slavko Perošević, whom the media in Serbia promoted as a *procession's hero*, told the media that *the crime that happened in Srebrenica cannot be treated as genocide* and that *it can be discussed at some levels whether a certain crime occurred in Srebrenica*.

Although the Higher State Prosecutor's Office investigated whether any of them, or all those present, committed the criminal offense of inciting religious, racial, and national hatred, the investigation showed that no criminal offense was committed under their jurisdiction.

On July 13, 2022, Perošević led a group of people of right-wing characteristics who, supported by the police's intentional negligence, provoked riots on Šako Petrović Square in Nikšić, where a celebration was organized on the occasion of the Statehood Day, after which the police had to intervene due to a conflict with people wearing Montenegrin national symbols. The people he led headed towards the Square singing a song: *The Turks are wailing, the bula's are crying, oh lele lele, here is Vule, and Commander Janko is waving his saber, strike, brothers, serbhood is ours*, chanting: *Serbia, Russia, and Kosovo*. In May 2022, Perošević received the award of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade of Serbia *for his selfless help and support in nurturing tradition, organizing the memorials, as well as remembering the hero of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade, Goran Ostojić*.

After the Russian aggression against Ukraine, several protests in support of the Russian Federation were organized in Montenegro with Serbian,



Zaldostanov promotes Night Wolves and pro-Russian protest in Montenegro (left)



The announcement of Igor Damjanović's panel (right)

Russian, and Chetnik flags, along with banners: *Freedom or death* with a skull and message that *Russia is righteous in the war it has been waging in Ukraine*, and that the West is the main culprit of that war. Local members of the Night Wolves also attended the protests, the Ravnogorski movement, formerly the Seventh battalion, but also members of Orthodox brotherhoods. While shouting Russia, Putin, and singing about *Serbian Kosovo*, several members of right-wing national Serbian-Russian organizations supported Russia in the war against Ukraine. The banners read *Serbs in Montenegro*, *Russians in Ukraine*, and *Pray to God, stick to Russia*. The support protest organized on March 2 was promoted on Aleksandar Zaldostanov's Facebook account (the leader of the Night Wolves from Moscow).<sup>11</sup>

In the organization of the *Miholjski zbor* (under the auspices of the Secretary of the Diocese of Budimlja-Nikšić Mijajlo Backović), the *Association of Journalists of Montenegro* and *IN4S*, on August 29 in Budva and on September 1, in Podgorica, pro-Russian protests were held. The speaker at those protests was Igor Damjanović, a correspondent of *IN4S* and Serbian tabloids from the battlefield in Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. It should be noted that Mijajlo Backović and Igor Damjanović had a meeting at the Embassy of Russia on February 16, in Podgorica<sup>13</sup>, and that Damjanović went shortly thereafter to Russia and is a crucial media promoter of Russian war propaganda in Montenegro.

In the period before the 2020 parliamentary elections, the political activity of the *Miholjski zbor* was noticeable. This organization has

repeatedly stated publicly that it *actively participated in the overthrow of Milo Đukanović's regime*. After the vote of no confidence in the Government of Montenegro in February 2022, members of this organization participated in the organization of protests and road blockades in Montenegro, together with members of the *Pravoslavno bratstvo Stupovi* and *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš*, with clear requests for political subjects to form a new Government from a parliamentary majority and minority parties. They openly threatened

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**THE ACTUAL REASONS AND CRITERIA ACCORDING TO WHICH KRIVOKAPIĆ DECIDED TO DONATE FUNDS FROM THE BUDGET RESERVE TO THE EXPONENTS OF THE SERBIAN WORLD IN MONTENEGRO ARE NOT KNOWN**

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peace in Montenegro by announcing that the formation of a minority government would cause *unprecedented chaos in Montenegro*.<sup>14</sup>

The Government of Zdravko Krivokapić, in the technical mandate, with a discretionary decision, paid on February 9, 2021, 1,000 EUR precisely to *Miholjski zbor*, and 2,700 EUR to the Diocese of Budimlja-Nikšić from the budget reserve. The real reasons and criteria for Krivokapić's decision to donate funds from budget reserves to the exponents

of the Serbian world in Montenegro are unknown. During 2021, *Miholjski zbor* was also financially supported by some majority state-owned companies. The municipality of Budva also financially supported certain activities of this organization.<sup>15</sup>

As DFC previously wrote, Mijajlo Backović, in 2016 in Kotor attended the establishment of the so-called Balkan Cossack Army.<sup>16</sup> On that occasion, uniformed Russian officers and motorcyclists from Night wolves paraded through Kotor, together with the *Miholjski zbor*, *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš*, and *Pravoslavno bratstvo Stupovi*. Backović has been actively participating in political life in recent years in Montenegro. In June 2020, he was recorded coordinating a political protest organized by the Democratic Front in Budva. It was in August of the same year, just before the parliamentary elections, when he cursed all the voters of the then-ruling coalition due to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion.<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of October 2022, a ceremony was held in Danilovgrad on the occasion of the commemoration of the Holy First Martyr and Apostle Thecla, which was led by the Bishop of Budimlja-Nikšić, Metodije Ostojić, and was attended by the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Montenegro, the chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia to Montenegro, as well as some members of the Parliament of Montenegro. At the ceremony, along with Mijajlo Backović were also persons in the uniforms of the *Cossacks' Union*, wearing one of Putin's aggressor symbols V.



Mijajlo Backović and persons wearing Cossacks uniforms in Danilovgrad (left)

Backovic is sitting during the singing of the Montenegrin national anthem at the celebration of Liberation Day of Budva (right)

Mijajlo Backović is one of the few in the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral of the SOC, who, after the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije, got promoted in the service because he advanced from the post of the parish priest of Grbalj to the important and influential position of Secretary of the Diocese of Budimlja-Nikšić.

In addition, he is the holder of the award VDV OS RF – Airborne Army of the Russian Federation (Воздушнодесантные войска Российской Федерации), which he received from Major General Aleksandr Saluyanov, former commander and veteran of the VDV, who was on October 2, 2016, at the Miholjska prevlaka. In return, Backović, introducing himself as the president of the executive committee of the Association of Veterans of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade, presented the award to Major General Saluyanov<sup>18</sup>. On September 13, 2016, Backović attended the founding of the Balkan Cossack Army in Kotor.

The controversial actions of the former member of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade and *Red Beret* were continued by disrespecting the national symbols of Montenegro (he was the only one who sat during the singing of the Montenegrin national anthem in Nikšić, on the occasion of September 18, Liberation Day, for which a misdemeanor procedure was initiated, as well as in Budva during the celebration of the Municipality Day 2019).

The activity of the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Sveti Georgije is also indicative, which, in addition to cooperating<sup>19</sup> with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro, serves as a platform for promoting<sup>20</sup> the books of Nikola Jović, convicted before the High Court in Belgrade for participating in the war in Donbas, when he was nineteen years old volunteer fighting on the Russian side. Jović was recently banned

from entering Bosnia and Herzegovina because he represents a threat to the security of that country.<sup>21</sup> Dominantly as a reaction to the aggressive attitude and denying of Greater Serbia nationalism towards the Montenegrin national identity, and due to the weakening of civil society structures, on the Montenegrin side as well as individual ones, we can also see some signs of right-wing progress and inappropriate slogans and songs, such as provocative nationalist songs sang by supporters of the Croatian extreme right-wing during several pro-Montenegro protests organized by the Patriot-Komitsky alliance.



Members of *Sveti Georgije* with the members of the Russian Federation Embassy and book promotion

# RESPONSE(IBILITY) OF THE STATE

The problem of religious and national extremism in Montenegro has become extremely visible. It has been spreading since the 2020 Government change, although these phenomena also occurred during the previous rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists. Extremism of this kind is more present through the growing political polarisation, acceptance, and manifestation of right-wing ideas in the political sphere as well parties and in other organizations and groups such as certain Orthodox brotherhoods and associations, increasingly frequent interference of religious communities in political life, and the expansion of violence in public discourse and space.

Some of the highest officials of the previous and current ruling majority openly support war criminals and have extremely controversial attitudes towards the past and moves that were essentially collaborationist, with a tendency to ideologically rewrite history by equalizing partisan and Chetnik movement.

At that time, the Deputy Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović, attended a nationalist gathering of right-wing organizations (*Zavjetnici Tvrdoš*, *Sveti Pantelejmon*, *Miholjski zbor*) on February 26, 2022, and a celebration of St. Patron's Day of the Orthodox society *Đurđevi Stupovi* together with the officials of the Democratic Front, which provoked numerous reactions in the country and abroad. Nationalist Islamophobic songs were sung, Russia and Serbia were glorified, and Abazović himself was insulted by those present.<sup>22</sup>



Dritan Abazović at the celebration of St. Patron's Day of Orthodox Brotherhood *Đurđevi stupovi*

All this contributes to extremism, intolerance and even fascism becoming acceptable to a certain extent and present in the public, as shown by the public opinion survey from 2021, according to which one-fifth of the citizens of Montenegro think that the Chetnik movement is anti-fascist, while a significant percentage, around 27%, has no attitude on that issue.<sup>23</sup>

A communication network comprised of meme pages and other right-wing accounts was formed in the pre-election campaign for the 2020 elections. These networks promote the importance of religion, Serbian national symbols, the church, irredentism, and animosity towards other ethnic groups. Online radicalization of discourse has led to attacks on national and religious grounds and extremist messages throughout Montenegro.

In September 2020, the premises of the Islamic communities in Pljevlja were stoned, messages of hatred on a national basis were recorded in Berane, the incidents marked the local elections in Nikšić on March 14, 2021, as well as the enthronement of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Joanikije, in Cetinje. At the humanitarian football tournament in Mojkovac, on December 12, participated teams called General Ratko, Šubare (Russian hat, fur hat), and Prizren, while Serbian flags with the ocila emblem, and a tricolor flag with a map of Kosovo were displayed on the stands.<sup>24</sup> A nine-year-old boy from Podgorica was physically attacked by three pupils from the same class because he told them that he *supports Ukraine*.<sup>25</sup>

On several occasions, promoters of the Chetnik movement were appointed to positions in state and educational institutions.

A significant factor in religious radicalization is the activity of religious communities that are directed against the concept of secularism, which,

inter alia, is supported by the recent chronology of the requests of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards the Government for the introduction of religious education in schools, but also the decision of 43<sup>rd</sup> Government in technical mandate to allocate EUR 900,000 for financing two private secondary religious schools.<sup>26</sup> In the Fundamental Agreement signed in a non-transparent manner between the state of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, Article 16 states that *Orthodox religious teaching in public schools will be regulated by a special agreement between the contracting parties*, which leaves space for further destabilization in one, constitutionally guaranteed, secular state.

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**THE STATE'S WEAK REACTION TO VARIOUS FORMS OF EXTREMISM IS OBVIOUS, DESPITE A RELATIVELY GOOD LAW FRAMEWORK**

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*hing in public schools will be regulated by a special agreement between the contracting parties*, which leaves space for further destabilization in one, constitutionally guaranteed, secular state.

The weak reaction of the state to various forms of extremism despite a relatively good legal framework is evident. one does not react to the hate speech and criminal acts committed out of hatred by imposing effective, proportionate, and dissuasive sanctions. The Center for Democratic Transition analysis indicated that official statistics, especially those coming from the judiciary, can lead to the wrong conclusion that acts motivated by hatred are rare because incidents happen but are not being prosecuted.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that there is no comprehensive political will, and the existence of extremist groups both within the Government and within parliamentary clubs disables undertaking effective actions. The double refusal of the Montenegrin MPs to discuss the Law proposal on the Prohibition of Fascist and Nationalist organizations shows that inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions are politically profitable. Namely, the Proposal of the opposition Liberal Party from December last year was supported by only 29 MPs out of 81 MPs. The first time, an almost identical text was rejected in May of the same year.

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Bad relations within the Government and mistrust between and within government authorities were also transferred to the functioning of the National Interdepartmental Operational Team for Suppression of Violent Extremism, Terrorism, Money Laundering, and Terrorist Financing (NOT). The NOT held only a couple of sessions in this composition, and essential information sharing among the members often did not happen. State authorities that cover operationally violent extremism and terrorism did not share information about growing radicalization and organized extremist groups with all NOT members, so the members of NOT found information on extremism they were supposed to fight against, in the media.<sup>28</sup>

# CONCLUSIONS

Montenegro's progress toward European integration was halted after the 2020 parliamentary elections, although significant progress was not made even in the previous period. The announcements of speeding up the European path, that the leaders of the new parliamentary majority, composed mainly of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties, repeated as a mantra did not produce results and were not realized despite the promises. Moves of the new executive power only confirmed fears that the rise of ethnonationalism and the deeply fragmented political scene in Montenegro could harm progress towards EU accession.

The ethnic polarization that followed within the Orthodox majority has been continuously and strongly encouraged by the action of external factors, and the radicalization of right-wing groups in Montenegro can be observed through regional and broader geopolitical dynamics.

Evident and strong Russian influence could have been registered over the years, which preceded Montenegro's membership in NATO. The traditionally good relations between Montenegro and Russia deteriorated in proportion to the progress of Montenegro towards full membership in the Alliance, and after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the joining of the Montenegrin Government to the sanctions introduced by the EU to Russia, as well as the latest developments after the illegal and unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, they took an unstoppable negative path, so that today they are at the lowest point in the history of Montenegrin-Russian relations. Serbia's activities have also increased; it uses numerous instruments to achieve a dominant influence on the political and social environment in Montenegro.

The certainty of Montenegro's membership in NATO in 2015 also led to the growth of right-wing extremism with a Serbian omen, as well as to the founding of the first organizations whose members share strong Orthodox feelings, and perform with a similar narrative, glorify war criminals and advocate for the revision of history, which in their interpretation is based on confabulations, i.e. historical falsifications.

Since Russian malign activity is manifested through a synergy of actions at several levels: through the institutions of the targeted state, the intelligence sector, but intensively through directing the actions of various non-government organizations, associations, Orthodox brotherhoods, as well as the media, a strong confederation of Orthodox associations and organizations was formed in Montenegro, for which some indications actively cooperate with other Serbian-Russian exponents in Montenegro.

A significant role in the process of the evident desecularization of Montenegrin society was also played by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which, after starting protest processions due to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and undisguised political engineering during the formation of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Government of Zdravko Krivokapić in 2020, has been actively participating in making key socio-political decisions, with undisguised tendencies to expand its mandate. Questions of interest for SOC crucially influenced the work and fall of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Government of Dritan Abazović.

Special attention should be paid to the role of unregulated social networks in the radicalization of the public space in Montenegro, with a large number of active related groups and pages that promote extreme right-wing ideas and attitudes, with consequences beyond virtual reality, in real life, as warned by some studies according to which numerous citizens condone violence as a response to injustice or as a measure to protect their religion.

## I RECOMMENDATIONS

**1** It is necessary to ensure the secularity of the state, that is, to prevent the interference of the church in political decision-making. This is especially important if one has in mind the fact that certain religious organizations, in the first place, the Serbian Orthodox Church, often interfere in the political decision-making in Montenegro. Given that extreme right-wing groups share the views of the Serbian Orthodox Church on many issues, the further clericalization of Montenegrin society can contribute to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the strengthening of right-wing extremism, primarily if one bears in mind that certain parts of the SOC support ultra-right organizations, some of which were formed under the auspices of church circles in Montenegro;

**2** It is necessary to act preventively on the plan of opposing the spread of right-wing extremist ideas, with the undertaking of certain concrete measures by the state through better implementation and improvement of strategies and the legislative framework;

**3** Preventing historical revisionism and promoting anti-fascism as fundamental values of modern society – in school textbooks, the media, and public discourse;

**4** Providing support to civil society organizations that promote democratic values, human and minority rights, social pluralism, etc. – the cooperation of state institutions is needed with these organizations;

**5** Emphasis on human rights in the system of formal and informal education and systematic promotion of social pluralism and equality of all social groups;

**6** It is necessary to pass an adequate legal solution on the prohibition of fascist and nationalist organizations and the use of their symbols, with deletion from the register of all organizations whose program principles and goals are contrary to democratic principles and guaranteed human and minority rights, as well as refusal to register new such organizations;

**7** The non-violent activities of extreme right-wing extremists must be subject to constant monitoring by competent state institutions and authorities, and the intelligence and security services must recognize the international networking and activities of extreme right-wing organizations and individuals who are prone to violence through the exchange of information and preventive work and adequate training of their personnel. In this regard, it is particularly important to constantly point out the online risks of extreme right-wing activities, as well as the development of online preventive measures to combat toxic and borderline activities of right-wing extremist performances and more effective suppression of fake news and conspiracy theories with direct messages and answers adapted to members of the younger and older population in Montenegro, while improving independent investigative journalism through training of journalists on the activities of radical extreme right-wingers.

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