

# Foreign policy priorities of Montenegro with special reference to obstacles to accession to the European Union

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University of Zagreb  
Faculty of Political Sciences  
Graduate study of Master of European Studies

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FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF MONTENEGRO WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
OBSTACLES TO ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

GRADUATE THESIS

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GRADUATE THESIS

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September 2023

I declare that I have written my graduate thesis Foreign Policy Priorities of Montenegro with Special Reference to Obstacles to Accession to the European Union that I submitted to my mentor associate professor, Ph.D. Petar Popović for evaluation, independently and that it is entirely in my authorship. I also declare that the paper in question has not been published or used to fulfil teaching obligations at this or any other institution of higher learning, and that I did not obtain ECTS credits based on it.

Furthermore, I declare that I have respected the ethical rules of scientific and academic work, particularly Articles 16-19 of the Code of Ethics of the University of Zagreb.

Boris Vukotić

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of the European Union's (EU) interactions with the Western Balkan countries underwent a sudden shift following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This shift was particularly noticeable in the case of Montenegro and its role in the region, given that Montenegro had made the most progress in its accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro was previously seen from the perspective of a smaller economic system that utilized the euro as its currency. Its potential entry into the EU was regarded as not posing a threat to European stability, whether in financial terms or otherwise. Instead, it was viewed as a strong indication to other entities in the Western Balkans that the EU remained open to expansion. Furthermore, this move was considered one strategy to counteract the extensive involvement of "third parties" in the "soft underbelly of Europe," particularly the infiltration of Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence in the region. These influences were driven by traditional bonds and friendly connections, as influenced by the international factors mentioned earlier. While Russia and Turkey have historically leveraged cultural and religious ties, China's approach has centered on economic connections, investments, and substantial involvement in infrastructure projects, often backed by significant loans. China's objective in these endeavors has been criticized for potentially leading to debt dependence, as illustrated by the example of the highway construction project in Montenegro. The EU has expressed apprehension about the potential social, economic, and financial consequences of Chinese business deals in the region. As noted by a source (glasamerike.net, 2021), there are concerns within the EU that Montenegro could become susceptible to China's "debt diplomacy," where Beijing could seek to convert outstanding loans into political leverage if Montenegro encounters difficulties in repaying the debt.

Although during 2022, it was unofficially said in European circles that Montenegro would quickly join the EU with little effort, this did not happen. On the contrary, Montenegro remained stuck in negotiations, and its European accession path faced a *de facto* blockade.

The Delegation of the European Union in Montenegro, on October 13, 2022, in its Report on Montenegro for 2022, states that political tensions, polarization, and the absence of constructive engagement between political parties have continued. In addition to the above, there is also a failure to build consensus on key issues of national interest, which together led to the fall of two fragmented governments after a vote of no confidence. The proper functioning of Montenegrin institutions was affected by political volatility, instability of the government and tensions within the ruling majority, which affected the delay in the decision-making process and the implementation of reforms. „The main judicial bodies, including the Constitutional Court, work with an incomplete composition due to the inability of the Assembly to elect new members, which disrupts their proper functioning. Since mid-September, the Constitutional Court has not been able to fulfill its role due to the lack of a quorum, which further increased political uncertainty. The conclusion of the Basic Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church affected the political atmosphere and further raised tensions. All in all, the governments and the Parliament have not shown in practice their commitment to the EU-related reform agenda.“ (Delegation of the European Union in Montenegro, 2022)

After only eight months from the above-cited Report, i.e. on June 20, 2023, the Draft Report of the European Parliament for Montenegro was published, where it is said that "the European Parliament regrets that high political tensions, polarization, the failure to build consensus on issues of national interest and the lack of inter-party dialogue have stopped progress in European reforms and pushed Montenegro into a deep political and institutional crisis". It goes on to state that "the European Parliament is seriously concerned about malicious foreign interference, attempts to destabilize the state, hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns by foreign actors in Montenegro. .... The European Parliament notes that religious institutions can be used as a tool for external influence and condemns Serbia's interference in this regard. ... The European Parliament regrets the adoption of controversial amendments to the Law on the President by the Assembly in December last year. We welcome the initiation of the procedure for the evaluation of the constitutionality of the Law on the Constitutional Court". The European Parliament also supported the election of three judges of the Constitutional Court of Montenegro, and assessed that this year's presidential and parliamentary elections were competitive, that candidates and political parties could conduct free campaigns and be equally accessible to voters. (vijesti.me, 2023)

Following the aforementioned points, a logical inquiry emerges, which will also serve as the central research question of this paper. Despite Montenegro's recognized and emphasized

deficiencies, it had been a frontrunner in European integration among all Western Balkan nations until the elections in August 2020. As per pertinent reports from the Brussels administration, it played a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability. With consistent and strong public support for EU integration, Montenegro was the sole country to initiate negotiations on all chapters, even temporarily closing several. Moreover, unofficial statements within the highest diplomatic circles of the EU hinted that Montenegro was resolute in becoming the first new member of the Union, using an accelerated process due to the situation in Ukraine and the threat posed to Europe by Russia's aggressive policies, manifested through a "special military operation" reminiscent of conquests seen during the 18th-century era of Peter the Great.

In light of these circumstances, what are the "insurmountable" obstacles that hindered, or nearly halted, Montenegro's progress towards EU membership? The hypothesis put forth in this paper as an answer to the posed research question is as follows: The involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro served as a tool for advancing the strategic interests of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. To comprehend the cause-and-effect correlation between the research question and the hypothesis, the second chapter of this paper will outline Montenegro's foreign policy priorities since its declaration of independence in 2006. The third chapter will delve into the positioning of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, exploring its economic and financial influence and its stance in relation to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations and values pursued by the state within which the Church operates. The fourth chapter will analyze two crucial sources of evidence that elucidate the methodology employed in exploiting the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro to further the interests of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. This exploitation runs counter to Montenegro's officially stated foreign policy. Finally, the concluding chapter will summarize the findings of the entire study and provide insight into potential actions by key stakeholders, along with prospects for future developments.

## **2. FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF MONTENEGRO**

The foreign policy priorities of Montenegro, defined after the restoration of Montenegrin statehood as a result of 2006 referendum (at which more than 55 percent of Montenegrin citizens decided against the continuation of the two-state commonwealth with the Republic of

Serbia); did not change despite the election defeat of the Democratic Party of Socialist-led openly pro-European and pro-NATO government in August 2020. Therefore, the main foreign policy priorities of the two post-DPS Governments of Montenegro whose actions marked the period 2020-2023, until the extraordinary parliamentary elections held on June 11, 2023, were defined as:

"A) Further strengthening of regional cooperation; B) Continuation of integration into NATO and C) Continuation of integration into the European Union." (Government of Montenegro, General Secretariat of the Government of Montenegro, 2020: A)

Regional cooperation is one of the three key priorities of Montenegrin foreign policy, which is also in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria set and defined by the European Council in June 1993.

"Political criteria imply that, in addition to the stability of institutions, democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and respect and protection of minorities, countries that are candidates for EU membership must also work dedicatedly on good neighborly relations and regional cooperation and as well they must harmonize its foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU." (Government of Montenegro, General Secretariat of the Government of Montenegro, 2020: B)

Montenegro has no open border problems that cause tension, or a potential focal point of misunderstanding in bilateral relations with its neighbors. On the contrary, in almost the entire period after the dissolution of the former state, Montenegro was recognized as a factor of stability in the region. The official demarcation with Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Kosovo was realized, while the administrative-state demarcation with the Republic of Albania was inherited from the time of the existence of the ex-Yugoslavia as legally binding. When it comes to demarcation with the Republic of Croatia, there is an open question of demarcation at the Prevlaka peninsula. In order to solve this problem, the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia signed the Protocol on the Temporary Regime along the Southern Border between the two countries on December 9, 2002. Today, a temporary regime was established in that area, and Montenegro became a party to the Protocol after the declaration of independence in 2006. On several occasions, Croatian and Montenegrin officials advocated for a permanent and comprehensive solution to the problem on a bilateral basis. In this sense, the Government of the Republic of Croatia issued a statement from the meeting of the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs

of the Republic of Croatia, Gordan Grlić Radman, and the Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs, Đorđe Radulović, on May 7, 2021:

"Croatia and Montenegro have different views on the issue of delimitation on Prevlaka, but they are ready to resolve it, and all other issues, bilaterally and in the spirit of good neighborliness..." (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2021) The meeting of Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković with the newly elected President of Montenegro Jakov Milatović in Podgorica on June 27, 2023, took place in the same tone, when the guest from Croatia asserted that "Zagreb and Podgorica should resolve the final issue of the border between Croatia and Montenegro bilaterally". (aljazeera.net, 2023)

The demarcation of the border between the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo) and Montenegro has been established to their mutual satisfaction. However, considering that the Republic of Serbia does not acknowledge the existence of the Republic of Kosovo, unlike Montenegro, questions about the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro can arise. This might become particularly relevant when Montenegro is admitted to the European Union, especially in regards to the delineation of the two states.

Montenegro actively participates in the "Berlin Process," initiated in 2014 in Berlin. This initiative, perhaps the most notable undertaking of the third cabinet of the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, aims to enhance neighborly relations and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe, particularly in the spheres of infrastructure and economic development. It encompasses EU candidate countries from the former Yugoslavia, along with Albania, on one side, and certain EU member states including Great Britain, on the other. The preceding Montenegrin government structures wholeheartedly supported the "Berlin Process" as the optimal framework for implementing regional cooperation policies. Milo Đukanović, the former President of Montenegro, explicitly stated multiple times that there is no alternative to the Berlin Process, notably during his official visit to Berlin in May 2022 while conversing with German President Frank Walter Steinmeier (avaz.ba, 2022).

Nevertheless, in 2019, a regional initiative called "Open Balkans" emerged predominantly advocated and endorsed by the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Albania. The primary proponents of this initiative are Albanian Prime Minister Rama and Serbian President Vučić. This initiative sparked significant polarization not only among political circles but also within the professional community in Montenegro. Many, including prominent NGO activist and Civic Education Center President Daliborka Uljarević, believed that the "Open Balkans"

initiative is essentially a method for resolving longstanding disputes between the Serbian and Albanian peoples at the expense of Montenegrin sovereignty—both politically and economically. They argued that this initiative cannot replace the "Berlin Process." Uljarević also contended that "Open Balkans" lacks a foundation in European Union legislation and is not inclusive in terms of encompassing all regional countries. (n1info.ba, 2022) European Union officials, who view the "Open Balkans" initiative with caution, tend to share this perspective.

Conversely, intellectuals aligned with parties that closely cooperate with Serbian President Vučić, along with more moderately pro-Serbian parties associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and surprisingly, Montenegrin sovereignists themselves—including the President of the 43rd Government of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović—wholeheartedly support the project and its underlying concept due to its resemblance to the European Union's operational system. However, Jovana Marović, a close associate of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Minister in the Ministry of European Affairs of Montenegro, and Vice President of the URA party (from which Prime Minister Abazović hails), resigned from all her positions, including within the party, on November 25, 2022. Her departure was prompted by dissatisfaction with the government's and the Prime Minister's response after her ministry conducted an analysis recommending that Montenegro not decide to participate in the Open Balkans project. Marović had stressed on multiple occasions, even prior to the Ministry of European Affairs' analysis, that the "Open Balkans" initiative could only be meaningful if it included all six Western Balkan countries, not just three (Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania). She advocated that "the Western Balkans should concentrate on the Berlin process and integrate the positive aspects of the Open Balkans into it." (dw.com, 2022) To date, apart from Montenegro, neither the Republic of Kosovo nor Bosnia and Herzegovina have officially joined the project. It's important to note that despite European colleagues' caution, American diplomacy, represented by the special envoy for the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, explicitly and staunchly supports the "Open Balkans" project, even though the envoy himself reiterated several times the aforementioned statement from former Vice President Jovana Marović that the initiative would only be meaningful if all Western Balkan actors participated.

Regarding the second point: The progression of Montenegro's integration into NATO was evident through the participation of the Montenegrin army in NATO missions in Kosovo and

Latvia. In a formal and technical sense, the alignment of Montenegro with the NATO system remained relatively secure despite the change of government in August 2020. At a rhetorical level, both Zdravko Krivokapić and Dritan Abazović as Prime Ministers of the Montenegrin Government, along with the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, carried forward the efforts to adhere to NATO standards and uphold the Alliance's political-security agenda, particularly in light of events following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, NATO allies have begun to exhibit waning trust in Montenegro's security apparatus due to certain personnel within the National Security Agency and the upper echelons of the Ministry of Defense who harbor concealed or overt sympathies for the authoritarian regime in Russia. Noteworthy is the role of the former director of the National Security Agency, Dejan Vukšić, who subsequently became an advisor to the newly elected President of Montenegro, Jakov Milatović. Vukšić's association is linked to a scandal involving the disclosure of classified NATO information. Russian media reported that "Vukšić exposed NATO secrets and the legal residency of the CIA in Montenegro, while Milan Knežević, a leader of the pro-Russian Democratic Front party, assumed leadership of the parliamentary Security Committee and secured a position on the National Security Council of Montenegro." Additionally, there was a purge within the Ministry of Defense of Montenegro and the security services that favored Russian interests in the Balkans (dfc, 2021:56).

As a consequence of the multifaceted security policy pursued by the two successive Montenegrin governments, recent surveys conducted by the NATO alliance indicate a decline in support among Montenegro's citizens for NATO membership, coupled with an increase in those who oppose the country's affiliation with the military organization. Notably, the percentage of those against Montenegro's NATO membership is approximately equal to the number of Montenegrin citizens who identify as members of the Serbian people (pobjeda.me, 2023). It is important to highlight the substantial influence wielded by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in shaping citizens' perceptions of the Western military alliance. The SOC holds an extremely negative stance toward NATO.

Finally, the continued integration of Montenegro into the EU is likely the most vital of the three foreign policy priorities for Montenegrin society. According to all surveys conducted over the past three years, this goal enjoys steadfast and united support from citizens. The most recent significant survey in this series, undertaken in June 2022 by the reputable Defacto Consultancy agency, attended by the head of the EU Delegation in Montenegro, Oana Kristina Popa,

revealed that a striking 83 percent of Montenegrin citizens would back Montenegro's entry into the European Union in the event of a referendum being held. (slobodnaevropa.org, 2022)

Until the parliamentary elections in August 2020, Montenegro had been a frontrunner in EU integration. By June 2020, all negotiation chapters were open, and three had been temporarily closed. European Commission reports consistently underscored Montenegro's dedication and adherence to EU foreign policy, hailing it as a stabilizing and progressive force in the politically precarious context of the Western Balkans.

However, the European Commission's reports also spotlighted persistent issues within Montenegrin society, primarily the lack of integrity among the elites—a critical prerequisite for transitioning from formal democracy to effective democracy. These challenges, alongside endemic corruption, nepotism, clientelism, protectionism, and closed secretive networks, converged with the problems of judicial independence, institutional inefficiency, and obsolescence. These problems resulted in democratic deficiencies, insecurity, and unequal treatment of citizens by state institutions. (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005)

Despite these challenges, Montenegro is recognized as the nation that has made the most progress in EU accession negotiations. Nonetheless, according to the prevailing perspective among Montenegrin politicians and political analysts, the EU's approach toward the Western Balkan countries, Montenegro included, has been consistently sluggish and inconsistent. There's a belief that European officials' statements about EU expansion lack sincerity and that it will be a protracted period before the countries in the region achieve full membership in the European Union.

### **3. POSITIONING OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN MONTENEGRO**

#### **3.1. Positioning of the SOC in Montenegro in terms of concentration of economic and financial power**

Various sources provide substantial data on the longstanding dispute over whether the Orthodox Church in Montenegro is Montenegrin or Serbian. However, it is crucial to acknowledge and credit "the foremost expert on religious and church matters, the highly regarded Croatian publicist, and university professor Inoslav Bešker" for our understanding of this topic. (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021:55) Professor Lalović underscores that Bešker, when discussing the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, known as the Cetinje

Metropolis since the 15th century, highlights that it was officially recognized as autocephalous during the Principality, that is, the Kingdom of Montenegro, and documented in Constantinople's Ecumenical Patriarchate Catalog in 1855. Even well-known Serbian nationalist Nikodin Milaš acknowledges this fact. The Montenegrin autocephalous church (a characteristic of national Orthodox churches that govern themselves) is registered as number 9, and it acquired an adequate number of dioceses due to war-induced expansions, which is necessary for autocephaly. (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021:59) The autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church ceased after Montenegro's annexation first to the Kingdom of Serbia and subsequently, albeit indirectly, to the new state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918. An armed uprising, known in Montenegro as the Christmas Rebellion of 1918, transpired due to the illegality of the Podgorica Assembly, which was convened in contravention of the Constitution and laws of the Kingdom of Montenegro. This uprising was triggered by the Assembly's decisions, notably the ban on the return of the Montenegrin king and his family to the country. The rebels were dissatisfied with the state's stance, as it compromised its long-standing sovereignty for the future of the new entity.

Within the new state, the SOC, specifically the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and Littoral, assumed control of all religious structures, monasteries, and churches in Montenegro. This considerable church property is used by the SOC as an instrument of power. Reflecting on data regarding the tangible wealth of the SOC and Montenegro, Professor Lalović draws a conclusion about its political and other influence: "The SOC doesn't hide its intentions and ambitions, but for three decades, it has embodied the principle of 'cuius ecclesia, eius regio'—whose church, its state. If the church is Serbian, then its country is Serbian too, despite its self-delusion of being Montenegrin." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021:39)

In his book *Darkness - Evangelical Nationalism*, prominent Montenegrin jurist and lawyer Nikola Belada delves into property issues the state faces with the Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Belada highlights that approximately eighty percent of religious structures in Montenegro are listed under the SOC as property owners, despite lacking a valid legal foundation, eligible documents for registration, or any credible legal evidence. This implies that the SOC, like Serbia, illicitly acquired vast property in Montenegro, valued in the hundreds of millions of euros. Belada accentuates that the SOC secured this property through administrative proceedings before Montenegro's Administrative Court. Subsequently, it challenged the legality of these registrations through the same court. Attorney Belada also contests the legality of the entry of the Diocese of Budimljansko-Nikšić into the unified record

of religious organizations in Montenegro, overseen by Montenegro's Ministry of Human and Minority Rights. Belada questions the continuity of this Orthodox diocese, which the SOC claims dates back to 1220. Given that the Eparchy of Budimljansko-Nikšić was established by the decision of the Council of Bishops in Belgrade in 2001 and that Serbia, with international legal expertise, passed the Law on Religious Freedom in 2006, recognizing SOC's continuity since 1836, it is evident that an attempt is being made to distort history since organizational elements of the Orthodox Church (e.g., dioceses) can't precede the mother church in this case, the SOC. (Belada, 2021)

Notably, respected Montenegrin publicist and intellectual Rajko Cerović's findings deserve mention here. In his book *State Hijacking* Cerović explores the SOC's position in Montenegro. Cerović notes that Russian Patriarch Kirill attempted to mask a well-known fact in one of his speeches—Montenegrin Orthodox Church's autocephaly was acknowledged by the Holy Synod of the Russian Church with a diptych in 1850. "Russia did not deny this and even aided the Montenegrin church as a sister. The existence of a fully independent Orthodox Church in the Balkans alongside a sovereign state was advantageous for Russia at a time when the Orthodox Church in Serbia was merely a subservient institution to the Sultan. When the Russian Church sought to exert control over the Montenegrin state and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church by demanding the removal of Montenegrin metropolitan and sovereign Petar I Petrović, they received a robust Montenegrin response and were canonically reminded that the authority of the Russian Holy Synod extended only to the Russian Empire's borders... The Russian Orthodox Church today safeguards the SOC and lets it flout canon law only for its interests, given its historical endorsement of Russian expansionism. It doesn't grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moldavian Orthodox Church, or other Orthodox churches in independent states stemming from the former Soviet empire. It doesn't want to set a precedent even for the SOC, which eagerly anticipates this Russian stance." (Cerović, 2022: 83,84)

Thus, the primary issue in the SOC's positioning in Montenegro, prior to delving into how this stance influences its relationship with the country's Euro-Atlantic integration, is the inability to foster democracy as a consequence of such positioning. Professor Lalović contends that while the SOC itself is not a barrier to Montenegrin demos' political empowerment to the extent it represents the religious rights of Montenegrin Serbs and Serbs in Montenegro, the problem arises because these same religious rights are not extended to Montenegrins. Consequently, from a religious standpoint, Montenegrins feel subjected to foreign ecclesiastical control.

"Democracy cannot thrive where legal equality is absent, and political rights are not universal—no citizens, no democracy. Instead of a legal state preceding a democratic one, the new Montenegrin government opted for the opposite approach, which has proven perilous. A democratic majority is crucial yet insufficient for establishing the rule of law, the separation of powers, judicial independence, and respect for human rights. Tocqueville's caution about the threat of democratic tyranny by the majority in a modern state applies to Montenegro as well." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021: 9)

In analyzing the SOC's positioning in Montenegro, which relies on contentious claims of centuries-old continuity (even predating the state) and challenges the indisputable autocephaly of the Cetinje Metropolis (Montenegro Orthodox Church), Professor Lalović takes a step further: "In Montenegro, it is not a rivalry between two Orthodox churches but a clash between all-Serbian clericalized nationalism represented by the SOC and Montenegrin democratic secular nationalism, vying for Montenegrin ideals' supremacy and the state's survival... Unlike the Serbian nationalism, which is deeply church-centric, belligerent, and Manichean, Montenegrin nationalism predominantly centers on the state, being peaceful and defensive." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021: 53)

The SOC adeptly concentrated economic and financial power in Montenegro for an extended period, albeit in a highly problematic manner. Simultaneously, it imposed its perspectives on a significant portion of the Montenegrin population as the sole religious institution for Orthodox individuals. These perspectives encompass fundamental human values, ethics, morality, honesty, as well as political and other stances within Montenegro and regarding global events concerning other religions, peoples, states, and international organizations. Particularly concerning are the SOC's views on the Islamic faith, NATO alliance policies, liberal democracy values, and ultimately the European Union itself, grounded in liberal democratic values. It is within these viewpoints that the cause for the delay or complete halt in Montenegro's EU integration can be identified.

### **3.2. Positioning of the SOC in Montenegro in relation to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country in which it operates**

The resemblance between the actions of the SOC and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) lies in their unwavering alignment with the supreme authorities of their respective home countries—the ROC with President Putin and the SOC with President Vučić—occupying subservient positions. On multiple occasions, Russian Patriarch Kirill overtly endorsed Putin's

"special military operation" in Ukraine. This viewpoint was reinforced by slobodnaevropa.org's analysis, designating Patriarch Kiril as a prominent supporter of President Vladimir Putin, who endorsed the Russian president's wartime endeavors despite the cautionary counsel of the Roman Catholic Church's head, Pope Francis, against becoming "Putin's altar." Kirill even asserted that every Russian engaged in heroic deeds by harming Ukrainians. "The Church recognizes that someone, motivated by duty and the obligation to uphold their oath, remains faithful to their calling and dies while fulfilling military duties; they unquestionably perform an act equivalent to sacrifice... Kiril perceives the Russian invasion of Ukraine, initiated in February, as a bulwark against the decadent West, emphasizing Russia's historical record of non-aggression." (slobodnaevropa.org, 2022)

The Digital Forensic Center of Montenegro, in collaboration with the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro, in their study *Role of Russia in the Balkans: The Case of Montenegro*, stipulates that following Crimea's annexation, the ROC became a principal instrument for executing Russia's "soft power" policy. "Under Putin's leadership, Russia swiftly shifted from a bastion of communism to a champion of Orthodoxy, the church, and traditional values. The merger of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia in May 2007, with the latter becoming an administrative division of the ROC, bestowed the Moscow Patriarchate significant sway over Orthodox communities worldwide." (dfc, 2021: 12)

The question arises: how did President Putin succeed in enlisting the ROC as an adversary of the West? Multiple factors contribute to this. Primarily, the ROC is intertwined with the Russian intelligence services, rendering it devoid of independence. Contrary to its declarative stance, the ROC does not genuinely embrace the values it proclaims. It opposes religious freedom, firmly and consistently contests Western values and human rights, while simultaneously supporting Russian neo-imperialist strategies. Even before Crimea's annexation, the ROC was never autonomous; it remained a pawn in Putin's hands. (Van Herpen, 2016)

Comparing the attributes of the ROC cited by Van Herpen in his book with the characteristics of the SOC stemming from its affiliation with its parent country, Serbia, reveals striking similarities. It's no secret that even before the events surrounding the contentious enthronement of the new Montenegrin-Littoral metropolitan in Cetinje in September 2021, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije was President Vučić's preferred candidate for the position of the SOC's leader. Patriarch Porfirije's reflections on the separation of church and state exude a noticeable

conservatism, reflecting a reluctance to engage in any form of discord with authorities. The real nature of the relationship was unmistakably unveiled during the contentious enthronement in Cetinje, wherein Porfirije displayed a subservient stance toward Serbia's President: "The approach is such that the church and the state are mutually intertwined, and we should not forget that the first king was one brother while the first archbishop of the autocephalous church was another. It is a code deeply ingrained in the Serbian people," Patriarch Porfirije elucidates. (nova.rs, 2021)

However, diverging from the interaction between the core bodies of the SOC and their home state's authorities and the ROC's association with the Kremlin, the SOC in Montenegro occupies an entirely different position. It has essentially evolved into the predominant religious-political-ideological force within the nation. This shift is particularly evident after the 2020 elections and the subsequent change of the government, marking the conclusion of a nearly three-decade reign. Economically and financially robust, backed by substantial assets (as previously discussed), the SOC in Montenegro feels no compulsion or inclination to collaborate with or defer to the state. Instead, it perceives itself as potent and influential enough to dictate state resolutions, articulating a narrative that has remained tacit but not completely concealed for years—how the church essentially shaped Montenegro's existence. This narrative has propelled further SOC actions in Montenegro, extending beyond forming a new government after the 2020 elections to actively steering the main state policies. In alignment with this, Professor Lalović underscores political analysts' assertions "that the SOC in Montenegro publicly opposed NATO accession, denounced sanctions against Russia, and criticized Montenegrin policies over Kosovo recognition." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021: 68) It is essential to remember that Russia's imposition of sanctions after the unlawful annexation of Crimea and the forceful invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign and globally acknowledged state, in clear violation of *ius cogens* norms of international law, including the UN Charter, is unrelated to subjective views of "historical fraternity" or geopolitical relationships. Instead, it constitutes an inevitable commitment to harmonizing candidate countries' foreign policies with the Brussels administration's current foreign policy—a fundamental prerequisite for EU membership. Additionally, as previously noted, Montenegro's accession to NATO has been one of its three foreign policy priorities for years, unanimously supported by all governments, including the "apostolic" 42nd Montenegrin Government, backed by the SOC.

Publicist Cerović also addresses the extensive influence of the SOC in Montenegro in his book. He argues that the SOC's victory in the Montenegrin elections holds profound significance for

the country's future. The SOC's victory is primarily due to the fact that Montenegrin nationals perceive it as an occupier and reactionary force, without any barriers. Cerović highlights that the most ardent opponents of the NATO alliance in Montenegro are either believers or supporters and admirers of the SOC, which also functions as the most potent Russian espionage network in the country. Considering that the Metropolitan of the SOC in Montenegro openly associates fascism with the NATO alliance and views the EU as detached from Christian values, Cerović casts doubts on whether Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, who enjoys the SOC's backing, can effectively lead Montenegro through the process of European integration. In essence, Cerović's conclusions align closely with Professor Lalović's thoughts: "The Serbian Church does not and will never acknowledge Montenegro's statehood, making it particularly appealing to Montenegrin Serbs... One of the primary goals of the new government following the 2020 elections was to prevent any possibility of the Serbian Orthodox Church actually recognizing Montenegro as a legitimate entity by registering within its borders. Of course, in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, countries that are unquestionably recognized, the Serbian Orthodox Church must be registered since its existence hinges on it." (Cerović, 2022: 46, 114, 134, 143, 144, 172 and 173)

The strategic positioning of the SOC in Montenegro could not escape the notice of Kremlin policymakers. Although Russia was among the earliest countries to acknowledge Montenegro's restored independence in June 2006, it could never accept or forgive Montenegro's NATO membership. This was not driven by some kind of sentimental, emotional, or fraternal ties, but rather by the aim to channel Montenegro's considerable pro-Russian sentiment and affinity toward Russia and its people to further its own pragmatic goals, as historical Russian foreign policy in the Slavic South, characterized by a shared ethnicity and kinship, suggests. Advocating for Montenegrin military neutrality was the initial step. The Russian Federation sought to ensure access to the Adriatic through Montenegro, a controlled outlet for its interests. With Serbia as a more substantial ally in Montenegro's hinterland and along the Adriatic coast, Russia had potential to establish a more substantial presence and access the "soft European underbelly." Fears of Russian influence propelled Montenegro's expedited accession to NATO, even if certain conditions were not fully met. However, this was not unprecedented, considering similar treatment of countries like Bulgaria or Romania.

The Russian Federation's patience waned in relation to Montenegro. Shortly before and following NATO membership (as the membership process was deemed inevitable), the Russian Orthodox Church became a potent instrument to advance and impose its interests. The Digital

Forensic Center characterizes the ROC as one of the vehicles of Russian "soft power," which found fertile ground for operation in Montenegro due to specific circumstances. The Kremlin's policymakers drew inspiration for Serbian ultra-nationalists by crafting the "Russian world" agenda to create their equivalent, the "Serbian world." In Montenegro, this program aimed to not only overturn the government responsible for NATO accession but also systematically redefine the country's internal and external policies, state and national identity, and value system. The intent was to potentially forsake, at least in part, the values of liberal democracy upon which the EU is built, undermining the concepts of equality, rule of law, democracy, and fundamental human rights. Ultimately, this reorientation would shift foreign policy priorities, such as exiting NATO, slowing or halting EU accession negotiations, and retracting Kosovo's recognition, thereby reshaping Montenegro's foreign policy regarding sanctions against the Russian Federation. Achieving these objectives required exacerbating polarization in Montenegrin society, deepening political, national, and religious divisions and tensions, culminating in an institutional crisis that paralyzed the state's normal functioning. Such instability would not only thwart Montenegro's EU aspirations but also rock its NATO membership to its core, necessitating third-party mediation.

Recall the European Parliament's Draft Report for Montenegro, released on June 20, 2023, mentioned in the introduction. The uncanny parallels between the Kremlin's policies and the accomplishments of the ruling majority since August 2020 are significant. The Digital Forensic Center's analysis of Russia's influence in the Balkans delves into the "Serbian world" agenda: "The concept of creating a 'Serbian world' is a pivotal instrument in disseminating Russian influence, aiming to undermine Western values and impede European and Euro-Atlantic integration within the Western Balkans region... The 'Serbian world' construct mirrors the 'Russian world' initiative and is built on identical principles. It entails a narrative of the peril faced by Serbs residing outside Serbia's borders, a narrative that serves to homogenize them, engage in historical revisionism, and deny the national identity of neighboring peoples. This narrative strives to bind them irrevocably to the Serbian national core, with a clear intent to determine vital matters in Belgrade for populations that declare themselves ethnically Serbian, regardless of their location. In essence, it perpetuates the notion of Greater Serbia's old hegemonic ideals... Instances of this dual-world alignment are apparent in Russia's approach to Ukraine and Serbia's relationship to Montenegro." (dfc, 2021: 16) The Russian world negates Ukraine's right to its identity, aligning it with Russian identity. Similarly, the "Serbian world" undermines Montenegrin identity and its historical legacy. The SOC in Montenegro was duly

elected as the enactor of this agenda. After Metropolitan Joanikije assumed leadership of the SOC in Montenegro, forcibly enthroned in Cetinje, the message was clear: there was little to no autonomy for the SOC in Montenegro concerning its Belgrade headquarters. The Digital Forensic Center posits that Moscow and Belgrade's intelligence and policy-making apparatus chose the SOC as the principal vehicle to realize their agendas in Montenegro. While other factors played roles—including political entities, parties, individuals, the Russian diaspora, Montenegrin Serbs, media efforts, and certain cyber activities—none managed to infiltrate systems as complex and resistant to propaganda as Montenegro's small and incomplete system.

"Equating religion and nationality, conflating Serbian identity with Orthodoxy, serves as a potent tool for the ethnically rooted SOC, and concurrently offers a favorable terrain for Russian soft power's forays in the Western Balkans. This is especially true when considering the relationship between the Serbian state and its church, where the state's influence over the SOC supersedes the church's influence over the state. A comparable dynamic exists between Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Recognizing the SOC's potential as a potent instrument for expanding its influence in the Western Balkans region, Russia invested significantly in fostering relations with the religious institution. The outcome of this effort is evident in the substantial support the SOC extends to Serbian organizations advocating stronger ties with Russia, along with Russian entities in Serbia and the wider region." (dfc, 2021: 26)

The Digital Forensic Center, in collaboration with the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro, contends that parallels can be drawn between the "Serbian world" concept and the SOC's actions in Montenegro, akin to Moscow's maneuvers in Ukraine. "Like the notion of the Serbian world and the SOC's modus operandi in Montenegro, the blueprint was borrowed and adapted. Moscow exploited the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), under the umbrella of the ROC in Moscow, to meddle in Ukraine's internal affairs. ROC and UOC-MP dignitaries went beyond endorsing the pro-Russian opposition during the October 2020 elections; they actively participated in the electoral campaign, with a UOC-MP priest advocating separatist ideals in Ukraine featuring on the pro-Russian opposition's candidate list. Similarly, Belgrade harnessed the SOC to advance its interests in Montenegro. The SOC wielded its influence, unifying factions and asserting its dominance in political processes over the past two years." (dfc, 2021: 27)

## **4. THE METHODOLOGY OF INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE CHURCH**

### **4.1. Methodology of instrumentalization of the SOC in Montenegro by the ROC (Kremlin) and the central organs of the SOC (authorities in Belgrade)**

To begin with, it is crucial to highlight that both the Russian state power and the ROC accurately recognized that within the nationalist government in Belgrade and the SOC, subsequent to the initiation of the "Russian world" concept, they could identify a collaborator in propagating traditional spiritual-Orthodox values. At the core of these values is the undermining of universal human rights. This perspective is elaborated on by the Digital Forensic Center in its study: "The distinctiveness of Russian foreign policy becomes particularly evident when observing its actions within international forums such as the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. Here, Russia asserts the confluence of human rights with traditional Orthodox values. This demonstrates a certain ideological continuity with Soviet policy, as the principal objectives of this campaign (democracy, individual freedom, and universal human rights) have remained unaltered. It can be argued that Soviet communism and Russian Orthodoxy share common attributes including Russian nationalism, imperialism, anti-liberalism, deep-seated traditionalism, conservatism, antipathy towards universal human rights, and an entrenched intolerance towards Western democracies. As a reflection of this, the ROC officially criticized universal human rights in 2008 through the document *Foundations of the Teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church on Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights.*" (dfc, 2021: 44) So far, it has been underscored that the SOC in Montenegro harbored anti-Western sentiments even before its consolidation and full integration with the central authorities of the SOC in Belgrade. This sentiment manifested as an inclination to hold NATO and the EU responsible for perceived injustices inflicted on the Serbs during and after the violent dissolution of the former state.

Soon after, the ROC lent unequivocal support to the SOC in Montenegro in the now-famed "litias for the defense of the holy places" events that transpired throughout 2020. These events symbolized opposition to the *Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities*. Notably, the ROC promoted itself with an intriguing assertion that interlinked the "litias" in Montenegro with the purported confrontation between the West and Russia: "All of this unfolds in the heart of Europe, a region that, akin to the United States, has endorsed the principle of separating church and state! Hence, the secular state principle is

conveniently disregarded for specific political objectives, including, of course, the campaign against Russia." (dfc, 2021: 45) Needless to say, most EU countries and even the United States, which was an unexpected stance for the then Montenegrin government, did not assail the Law on Freedom of Religion. At the very least, these nations advocated for the two parties to negotiate and seek compromise on the contentious issues. Consequently, there was no evident adversarial stance towards the Kremlin or Orthodoxy in Western actions, nor did the matter of church-related affairs in Montenegro enter the realm of issues between the West and Russia—publicly, at least.

The primary responsibility for reinforcing the ROC's influence on the SOC, particularly the SOC in Montenegro, was delegated to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, with a particular focus on Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev of Volokolamsk. He boldly asserted that the borders of the ROC extend beyond the frontiers of the Russian Federation, much in the same vein that the borders of the SOC do not terminate in Serbia. This was especially pertinent to safeguarding the position of the Orthodox community in Montenegro. (dfc, 2021: 45) The SOC responded to their counterparts soon after. During the rift between the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which holds the honorific title of "first among equals" in the Orthodox world and acknowledged the autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) from the ROC, the SOC uniquely sided with Russia. The ROC denounced UOC recognition as schismatic and cut off all connections with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. As mentioned, the SOC only found concurrence with the ROC. Consequently, it is not surprising that the ROC held a decidedly adverse stance towards any notion of establishing an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church or the subject of its historical autocephaly, which was never questioned even by the ROC. As this alliance deepened, the heads of the SOC and ROC began addressing political issues, particularly their stance on Kosovo. Politicians became entwined in these discussions. During a visit to Moscow by the Serbian Patriarch in 2020, Foreign Minister Lavrov went to great lengths to employ staunch anti-Western rhetoric, denouncing the propagation of neo-liberal values and emphasizing the hardships endured by the Orthodox community in Montenegro. Naturally, financial matters could not be disregarded. Russian elites and ROC dignitaries reminded their counterparts in the SOC about the substantial financial investment directed by the Russian Federation toward constructing the Cathedral in Belgrade. It is discernible that the relationship between the two churches progressively advanced to a state of firm, indissoluble unity on religious and ideological planes, as their mutual interests became inextricably intertwined. Both the SOC

and the ROC attributed their countries' predicaments to common adversaries—the EU and NATO—blaming their secular value system for promoting malevolence and dismantling the sanctified achievements of Christianity. They maintained that Orthodoxy and the East (a sentiment Patriarch Kirill frequently echoed) were duty-bound to safeguard and uphold Christianity from the iniquities of contemporary civilization emanating from the West.

Following this established understanding and collaboration, it became imperative to realize their envisioned concepts, foremost among which were plans pertaining to Montenegro. As history unfolded, Ukraine assumed the mantle of the next endeavor, materializing in February 2022 through an unarticulated, cataclysmic venture, despite meticulous planning. In Montenegro, the SOC harnessed its extensive propaganda machinery, mobilizing the entire clergy for agitation and furnishing financial support to favored candidates during the August 2020 elections. Through these mechanisms, it propelled its adherents to ascend to power in Montenegro. The Digital Forensic Center expounds upon this development: "...The mandate for forming the government was bestowed upon Zdravko Krivokapić, an explicit exponent of the SOC and the leader of the electoral coalition 'For the Future of Montenegro,' comprised of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian right-wing parties. Under the patronage of the Metropolitanate of the Montenegrin and Littoral Serbian Orthodox Church, the process of selecting and appointing members of the new government unfolded. Krivokapić symbolically referred to them as apostles, implying the programmatic commitments and objectives of his administration. Although the new government was projected as an expert body, expected to operate based on principles of professionalism and meritocracy, it became evident that its priorities and operational pace would align with the interests of the SOC in Montenegro. From the outset, it was apparent that the majority of government members were elected under the direct or indirect influence of the SOC, where connections with church structures and individual priests on various grounds were the guiding criteria." (dfc, 2021: 49) Consequently, by leveraging its sway over the failed 42nd and 43rd Governments of Montenegro, the SOC triggered events that decelerated or entirely halted Montenegro's path toward EU integration. Thus, it achieved the official action agenda of Belgrade and Moscow towards Montenegro. These events constituted two pivotal occurrences that irreparably shattered trust amongst Montenegro's political and public actors, fermenting confusion and intolerance while generating the gravest institutional crisis since Montenegro reclaimed its statehood.

#### **4.2. The first key piece of evidence – the violent enthronement of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro Joanikije in Cetinje with the presence of Serbian Patriarch Porfirije**

Running parallel to the obliteration of even the faintest vestiges of autonomy held by the SOC in Montenegro in relation to the central structures of the SOC in Belgrade, a trend initiated in the preceding period, numerous significant changes transpired. Notably, the Episcopal Council of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro was dissolved, administration of the Cetinje Theological Seminary disbanded, and the legal advisor and lawyer of the Metropolitanate of Montenegrin and Littoral were reassigned under various, unsubstantiated pretexts. Speculation abounded that these actions were motivated by potential past activities aimed at disrupting SOC unity. During this period, the central authorities of the SOC in Belgrade scheduled the enthronement of the newly elected Metropolitan Joanikije at the Cetinje Monastery for September 5, 2021. This event aimed to gather Orthodox believers from Montenegro, Serbia, Republika Srpska, and other countries to witness the ceremonial installment of the new metropolitan. Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Serbian President Vučić were to be present, indicative of the SOC's intent to promote the "Serbian world" and demonstrate the trajectory of an independent and internationally recognized state. This gesture held significance as the identity and sovereignty of Montenegro, albeit undisputed in a formal and legal context, posed challenges for policymakers in the Kremlin and Belgrade. The decision to conduct Joanikije's enthronement in Cetinje generated vehement opposition from Montenegrin sovereignists.

"For a considerable duration, opponents of Metropolitan Joanikije's enthronement in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro advocated against its occurrence within the premises of the Cetinje Monastery. Numerous protest gatherings were organized, and on the day preceding the ceremony, dissenters dismantled police barricades encircling the monastery. Roads leading to the city were blocked, and people from various Montenegrin towns convened to express their disagreement. For these individuals, Joanikije's enthronement at the Cetinje monastery signaled the "occupation" of Montenegro, a shift toward a more clericalized society, and an endeavor to align Montenegro with the so-called "Serbian world." (bbc.com, 2021: A) The subsequent article by BBC journalists succinctly elucidated the contentious nature of the Cetinje Monastery as the chosen venue for the enthronement. Importantly, Montenegrin patriots did not raise objections to conducting the ceremony in another Orthodox church within Montenegro. Worth noting is that the previous government shared a similar sentiment, particularly the then President of Montenegro, whose party lost its long-held supremacy in the

elections after nearly three decades: "The Cetinje Monastery serves as the seat of the Metropolitanate of the Montenegrin-Littoral Serbian Orthodox Church. However, Cetinje also houses the seat of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), which lacks canonical recognition and operates as a registered non-governmental organization. The MOC asserts ownership over numerous churches and monasteries that the SOC considers its own. A prolonged conflict between the SOC and the MOC has persisted. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church supported the Law on Freedom of Religion, which mandated that the state become the proprietor of all religious structures constructed until December 1918 if the religious communities failed to establish ownership. This law incited protests orchestrated by the SOC in Montenegro." (bbc.com, 2021: B)

Both sides remained resolute in their stance, and a peaceful resolution appeared elusive. The SOC was steadfast in its determination to not relocate the enthronement, while supporters in Cetinje and other locales within Montenegro vehemently opposed the idea of their country being maneuvered by political interests in Moscow and Belgrade. Mere days prior to the scheduled event, Prime Minister of the 42nd Government of Montenegro, Krivokapić, received a cautionary message from the then Deputy Prime Minister, responsible for coordinating all security agencies including the police and intelligence, advising that the ceremony should be postponed or relocated to a different site. The rationale behind this counsel was the potential for a clash between citizens, with consequences beyond the control of security forces, even hinting at the possibility of civil unrest. In spite of this advice, Prime Minister Krivokapić, who was assumed to have liaised with high-ranking dignitaries from the Serbian Orthodox Church and Belgrade authorities, disregarded the Deputy Prime Minister's recommendation. Instead, he deployed numerous members of special police units and anti-terrorist squads to Cetinje. On the night between September 4 and September 5, 2021, reports indicate that over two thousand uniformed police officers, specialized units for crowd control, tactical teams armed with long batons, and the complete complement of Montenegrin SAJ (special anti-terrorist units) personnel were stationed in Cetinje.

The peak of tension unfolded during the afternoon hours of September 4, 2021, as opponents of the enthronement broke through police barriers erected around Cetinje, securing control over the strategically significant Belvedere intersection. This blockade effectively halted traffic along the Podgorica-Cetinje-Budva route, obstructing Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and the elected Metropolitan Joanikije's procession to Cetinje. The protestors maintained their occupation of Belvedere until the next morning when Porfirije and Joanikije were flown to the

Cetinje Monastery by a helicopter belonging to the Montenegrin Army. Accompanied by members of SAJ, they entered the monastery and performed the enthronement ceremony alongside the resident clergy. The events of September 5, 2021, in Cetinje left an indelible mark on Montenegrin society. Despite their dissatisfaction with the aerial enthronement operation, the assembled citizens of Cetinje refrained from provoking the police to resort to force, even when faced with the release of substantial amounts of tear gas and rubber bullets. Numerous citizens, both young and old, were hospitalized in Cetinje and Podgorica due to chemical exposure.

Professor Lalović, in his analysis of the "airborne" enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije in the Cetinje Monastery, remarked, "The question arises as to who was behind this act, and who could convince Porfirije to undertake such a high-risk operation. One that not only had the potential to trigger significant conflicts but, above all, appeared both grotesque and tragically comic." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021: 15) The professor continued his assessment, stating, "Regarding Metropolitan Joanikije's enthronement in the Serbian Church in Cetinje, Serbian media waged an aggressive smear campaign that derogated peaceful Montenegrin civil resistance to the enthronement, portraying it as a form of anti-Serbian violent extremism... It is particularly revealing that on the evening of Saturday, September 4, the day before the enthronement, the Radio Television of Serbia and the Tanjug news agency declared that Bishop Joanikije's enthronement in Cetinje would not proceed. This announcement was based on verified information from the Belgrade Patriarchate and the Montenegrin Government... Thus, we might agree with an observer who rhetorically asked whether these developments answer the question that lingered in the days following the enthronement: Who actually orchestrated the decision to transport Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije by helicopter to the field outside the Cetinje Monastery early in the morning?" Should we venture a guess? If neither the upper echelons of the SOC nor the Montenegrin Government nor even divine intervention were responsible, plausible suspicion lands on an individual well-suited to ridicule numerous entities in the disliked Karadag with a single audacious move... Mere minutes after the announcement denying the enthronement, Serbian media promptly recanted and, backed by "reliable sources from Belgrade," declared that the ceremony would indeed proceed... Discerning minds do not need to ponder: the "reliable source from Belgrade" who "whispered" to Serbian media about the impending enthronement likely sat at their desk that evening – within the premises at Andrićev vijećnica 15. Naturally, the President of Serbia, Vučić, emerged as the sole reliable

source who sanctioned the audacious pre-dawn police operation on September 5." (Lalović and Ivezić, 2021: 16, 17)

Comparing Professor Lalović's evaluation with preceding content, which incorporates analyses and evidence by the Digital Forensic Center in collaboration with colleagues from the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro and Dr. Kenter, the Director of the Atlantic Alliance who later spearheaded the Agency for National Security of Montenegro, it becomes apparent that the events of September 5, 2021, in Cetinje were orchestrated not solely by the Serbian Republic President but constituted a coordinated maneuver aiming to dismantle Montenegro's institutional fabric – a *de facto* effort to dismantle the Montenegrin state. This inference is supported by the subsequent fragmentation and irreconcilable divisions within the ruling coalition. This critical juncture marked the primary objective of the actors situated at Andrićev vijenac 15 – the Kremlin. The SOC, as previously iterated, functioned as a tool to implement this strategic annihilation.

"Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić propagated falsehoods once more as he endeavored to displace the Civic Movement URA from Montenegro's Government, replacing it with minority parties merely to secure parliamentary support," as articulated in the collective response of the leaders of the "Albanian Alternative," Nik Đeljošaj, and the "Albanian List Unanimously," Fatmir Đeka. They recounted that following the events of September 5 in Cetinje, they were invited to a meeting at the Montenegro Government, where Minister of Finance and Social Welfare, Miloško Spajić, and Minister of Health, Jelena Borovinić Bojović, extended their welcome. During this meeting, Miloško Spajić proffered an opportunity for them to join the government, discussing ministerial roles and broader political implications. In response to Fatmir Đeka's query about continued collaboration with the URA, Minister Spajić indicated that the URA should be excluded from the ruling majority due to its perceived disloyalty to Prime Minister Krivokapić. (vijesti.me, 2022)

As demonstrated, the events in Cetinje profoundly shook Montenegro's political landscape, leaving a lasting impact yet to be resolved. Consequently, the negotiation process with the EU has virtually stalled or at the very least decelerated to an extent that gives rise to skepticism among well-intentioned analysts, suggesting its near nonexistence.

### **4.3. The second key piece of evidence - the signing of the Basic Agreement between the Government of Montenegro and the SOC**

Soon after the onset of the crisis within Montenegro's 42nd Government, as previously detailed, which stemmed directly from the Cetinje events surrounding the installation of the new metropolitan, and escalated into distrust among coalition partners and an inability to sustain effective governance, Deputy Prime Minister and coordinator of security services, Abazović, initiated a move to establish a minority government. However, this proposition was met with severe condemnation from Prime Minister Krivokapić and key ministers Spajić and Milatović. They were joined by the Democrats led by Parliament President Aleksa Bečić, who organized protests across Montenegro with the intent to portray Abazović's action as a betrayal of the "majority of August 30," the coalition that had displaced the previous government in the elections. Despite this, Vice President Abazović, seemingly self-assured, with backing from the "Quint" (USA, Italy, Germany, UK and France) embassies in Montenegro, and frustrated with Prime Minister Krivokapić's intentions to remove him and the URA movement from government due to disputes over the use of force in Cetinje, initiated discussions with minority parties and the pro-Serbian SNP.

To establish a minority government in the Montenegrin Parliament, it was necessary to seek support from the former ruling party. The Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), under the leadership of then President Đukanović, supported Abazović's proposal. "The DPS is prepared to endorse a minority government as a preferable solution to Montenegro's dire situation," stated the leader of the largest opposition party and President of Montenegro. While acknowledging that a minority government was not the ideal alternative, Đukanović noted the lack of readiness for other solutions, suggesting a one-year tenure and considering early parliamentary elections. A parliamentary session was scheduled for February 4 to hold a vote of no confidence in the government of Zdravko Krivokapić, who had been elected in early December 2020 (slobodnaevropa.org, 2022: A).

The eventual 43rd Government of Montenegro took shape as a minority government, encompassing minority parties, the URA movement, and the pro-Serbian SNP. Support from DPS parliamentary members was secured, even though they did not actively participate in the government. The central focus of this administration was to reinvigorate and expedite negotiations with the European Union, fueled by unofficial speculations that Montenegro could potentially be fast-tracked for EU membership due to developments in Ukraine. This prospect

aimed to signal to other Western Balkan partners, particularly the Republic of Serbia, that the path to EU accession remained viable.

In a session held on April 28 in Cetinje, the minority government led by Prime Minister Abazović was approved, thus ending the three-month technical mandate of Prime Minister Krivokapić's government, which had been voted out of confidence on February 4. The new government's objectives were to unlock Montenegro's European integration process and facilitate key appointments within the judiciary. Prime Minister Abazović emphasized the urgency of meeting the remaining criteria for EU accession, despite Russia's actions in Ukraine causing geopolitical turmoil. Despite these challenges and the emergence of new crises, Montenegro was presented with fresh opportunities, prompting a need for accelerated progress toward EU integration (slobodnaevropa.org, 2022: B).

Regarding the contentious topics negotiated by the parties forming the 43rd Montenegrin Government, and the DPS that supported it indirectly, Prime Minister Abazović allocated limited attention to these matters in his statement. These issues included the signing of the Basic Agreement with the SOC, the population census, and the Open Balkans program. Particularly, he downplayed the significance of the Basic Agreement with the SOC, which was intended to delineate the state's property-related relations with the SOC in Montenegro.

Hence, it is apparent that the primary focus of the new government was to advance European integration, while the remaining agenda took a secondary role. According to most political analysts, the government received backing for its platform not only from active participants but also from external supporters who did not directly engage in the government's operations. However, to the astonishment of Montenegro's public, as well as those outside the nation, particularly Brussels, Prime Minister Abazović chose to prioritize the signing of the Basic Agreement with the SOC over EU integration. The rationale behind this decision sparked speculation, given the awareness and warnings that such a move could exacerbate polarization within Montenegrin society and trigger a crisis within the new government. One interpretation was provided by publicist and intellectual Cerović in his book *Hijacking the State (Otimanje države)*. Cerović argued that the forceful signing of the Basic Agreement with the SOC posed a threat to the civil model of life and the secular state principle, indicating a closeness to Europe that was difficult to comprehend. He suggested that this move might align with Vučić's intentions to destabilize Montenegro's political landscape to the extent of inciting civil unrest,

aiming to impede Montenegro's decisive strides toward EU membership (Cerović, 2022: 223, 227).

The question arises as to why Cerović mentions the term "violent signing of the Basic Agreement" in his work. The answer is straightforward: during the process of drafting and executing such a significant document that deeply divided Montenegro across national, religious, and ideological lines, there was virtually no public discourse, and Prime Minister Abazović effectively suppressed professional opinions. Moreover, the voice of the NGO sector, where Abazović was once favored during his time as an opposition figure, went unheard. Among the plethora of documents sent by non-governmental organizations and Montenegrin institutions to the Montenegrin government, objecting to the text of the Basic Agreement, it is pertinent to highlight the stance of the Action for Human Rights (HRA) and the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts (CANU):

"The Action for Human Rights (HRA) addressed a letter to Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, Minister of Justice Marko Kovač, and Minister of Human and Minority Rights Fatmir Đeka. In the letter, they urged the officials to align the Agreement with the SOC with existing laws and the civil nature of the state... In summary, the HRA believes further harmonization of the contract with existing laws is necessary, particularly regarding the extraterritorial status of religious community facilities. It should be clarified and adjusted in line with the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Position of Religious Communities, reflecting the civil (secular) character of the state as represented by the government. Considering that the current form of the contract could trigger a constitutionality evaluation procedure and unwarranted social and political tensions, we believe further improvements to the text are warranted," stated this non-governmental organization (portalanalitika.me, 2022).

In an analysis of the Basic Agreement text with the SOC, scholars from the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts (CANU) expressed that "Article 7, paragraph 2 of the Basic Agreement, which assures the SOC of the inviolability of property and possession rights over monasteries, temples, buildings, and other real estate and premises in its possession, is unnecessary and legally unacceptable." Reference was made to the General Property Code for the Principality of Montenegro and the Constitution of the Orthodox Consistory within the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts. These documents indicated that entities like the Cetinje Monastery, other monasteries, Orthodox churches, and church institutions are independent legal entities (owners). This implies that they own movable and immovable assets

obtained through gifts, inheritance, bequests, or similar legal means. The regime of property and law was unaltered since the days of the Principality of Montenegro, and this legacy endures today. The evidence lies in the registration of hundreds of monasteries and churches in the cadastre under their names, signifying their status as independent owners (legal entities - owners) (vijesti.me, 2022).

However, as previously stated, during the Government session on July 18, 2022, Prime Minister Abazović dismissed received objections and suggestions, and the Government swiftly approved the Basic Agreement with the SOC. The SOC's preconceived notions of complete formal and legal empowerment, positioning it as a quasi-state entity within Montenegro, were readily accepted. This pertains to the acknowledgment of legal subjectivity and continuity for the SOC in Montenegro since 1219, the contentious transfer of public-legal authority to the SOC in Montenegro (a privilege typically held only by a sovereign state), and the state's obligation to register unregistered immovable properties owned by dioceses of the SOC in Montenegro.

On August 3, 2022, the Basic Agreement between the SOC and Montenegro was signed in Podgorica. The event was attended by members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the SOC and select ministers from the Montenegrin government. The agreement was signed by Patriarch Porfirije and Prime Minister Abazović. Shortly thereafter, the process for a vote of no confidence in the 43rd Government of Montenegro was set in motion, culminating in its dismissal in the Montenegrin Parliament on August 20, 2022, following twelve hours of deliberation. This left the country in a severe institutional crisis once more, lacking a legitimate government, a functional Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the Prosecutor's Council. The nation was polarized and divided to the point of dysfunction. European integration efforts came to a halt, and the sole institution seemingly content with the situation was undeniably the SOC. It is apt to reiterate the words of publicist Cerović: "It is not challenging to deduce what Vučić desires from the inexperienced Dritan in Montenegro, in collaboration with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The aim is to fully destabilize the Montenegrin political arena, pushing it to the brink of civil conflict. The intent is to obstruct Montenegro's definitive strides towards the European Union, despite it having met the prerequisites" (Cerović, 2022: 227). It is fortunate that Cerović's predictions of a civil war did not materialize, although in the volatile Balkans, the option of armed conflict should never be completely dismissed. This fact is well understood by policymakers in the Kremlin. Despite this, Montenegro witnessed two rounds of peaceful elections in 2023: presidential elections on

April 2, where the SOC-favored candidate Milatović emerged victorious, and parliamentary elections on June 11, where the PES (Movement Europe Now) secured the most votes, backed by unwavering support from the SOC. Worth noting is the remarkably low voter turnout in the last parliamentary elections, standing at about 50 percent by Montenegrin standards.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The research has shown that the coordinated efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as tools for the interest-driven strategies of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia have resulted in obstructing Montenegro's path towards EU integration. The consequences of the actions undertaken by these actors have led to the breakdown of Montenegro's institutional framework. This erosion of the state structure has been so profound that by September 2021, Montenegro stood on the precipice of civil conflict. This occurred despite the fact that only a year prior, it had made significant progress in EU accession negotiations compared to other Western Balkan countries.

As previously discussed in this paper, the SOC, working in tandem with the ROC and in accordance with policies devised by Moscow and Belgrade, effectively destabilized the Montenegrin political landscape through two pivotal events in 2021 and 2022. These events involved the contentious enthronement of the SOC's Metropolitan Joanikije in Montenegro's Cetinje, attended by Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, and the contentious signing of the Basic Agreement between Montenegro's Government and the SOC. These incidents utterly shattered the already tenuous trust among Montenegro's political and public figures, sowed confusion and intolerance, exacerbated polarization within society, and deepened divisions based on nationality, religion, and politics. This climate ultimately paralyzed the functioning of institutions, preventing politically opposed entities from making decisions or implementing vital reforms, particularly within the judiciary and executive branches.

The projected policies of the "Russian world" or "Serbian world" program have yielded positive outcomes with regards to Montenegro. These policies were aimed not only at toppling the Montenegrin government due to its NATO membership, but also at systematically reshaping the country's internal and external policies. This encompassed altering its identity,

values, and even the concept of liberal democracy itself, built on principles like equality, the rule of law, democracy, and universal human rights.

A significant development linked to these events is the war in Ukraine. The collective response of Western allies to Russia's forceful invasion of its neighbor was met with unprecedented diplomatic, economic, financial, and trade sanctions. These sanctions also impacted the ROC due to its consistent and explicit support for the Kremlin's military actions in Ukraine. Consequently, the influence and pressure exerted by the ROC on Serbia's government waned. Similarly, the central bodies of the SOC in Belgrade and Montenegro experienced a reduction in their influence.

Furthermore, on March 9, 2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning Russia's attempts to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans with the intention of fueling conflicts and dividing communities. These actions had the potential to destabilize the entire region. The resolution also expressed European representatives' concerns about the Orthodox Church's efforts to position Russia as a guardian of traditional family values. Additionally, it highlighted the Church's endeavors to bolster relationships between the state and the Church in countries like Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly within the Republika Srpska entity (slobodnaevropa.org, 2022).

This signifies that the European Parliament, a key institution within the EU, has finally comprehended the connection between the SOC and the ROC, as well as their joint activities in the Western Balkans. These actions align with Kremlin's ambitions to further its interests in this region. Nonetheless, such understanding is not uniform across other EU institutions, member states, or the Western sphere in its entirety. Significant disagreements persist regarding the activities of religious organizations in the East.

In light of the Western response, particularly that of the EU, a question arises as to whether Russia's grip on Montenegro has loosened. This prompts consideration of whether Putin's proxies in Montenegro, encompassing the SOC, political parties, and organizations closely aligned with the SOC and ROC, will need to modify their strategies. A look at the power distribution within Montenegro's political landscape following the presidential and parliamentary elections in the first half of 2023 reveals that individuals supported by the SOC due to their anti-NATO and anti-liberal views have assumed positions within the government structures. Curiously, these very individuals now prioritize Montenegro's entry into the EU in

their policies. When these individuals held ministerial positions in the 42nd Government of Montenegro (Milatović and Spajić), they reluctantly implemented sanctions on the Russian Federation – a process they initiated. The stance of the EU, now more well-versed in the Montenegrin situation, towards these elected officials, as stated in the European Parliament's Draft Report for Montenegro, remains uncertain.

However, it's imperative to grasp the perspective of the opposing side, aptly encapsulated in a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, dated July 7, 2023: "Destructive forces led by the USA have been working to split Orthodoxy in the world for a long time, and the Orthodox world is today their number one enemy... The schismatic Montenegrin Orthodox Church is essentially a marginal non-governmental organization that is not recognized by any canonical local Orthodox church and that does not have significant citizen support. Her role is artificially inflated by forces that seek to undermine the unity of the Orthodox world" (antenam.net, 2023). This statement from a senior Russian official indicates that despite Russia's substantial challenges, it will not readily abandon its projected policy toward Montenegro. The Kremlin's efforts will persist, focusing on transferring at least a portion of the pressure it currently faces due to instability in its immediate vicinity to the Western Balkans region.

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## SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to present the main foreign policy priorities of Montenegro since the restoration of its independence in 2006, and to explain why accession negotiations with the European Union were interrupted. The fact is that the European integration of Montenegro is its most important foreign policy priority, which has not changed even after the defeat of the three-decade-old government in the 2020 elections. At least declaratively. Also, the work includes the influence of the Russian Federation on the area of the Western Balkans, and the complex activities of the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church aimed at destabilizing the region. The mentioned activities indirectly but as it turned out decisively contributed to the collapse of the Montenegrin state structure, i.e. the failure of the entire state system. The paper describes the methodology of instrumentalization of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro in order to achieve the defined interests of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. Also, the genesis of the ideas of "Russian soft power" and "Russian world" is described, on the basis of which the idea of "Serbian world" was developed as a modified version of Serbia's big-state policies from the 1990s. Ultimately, the paper shows the reaction of the main policy makers for the region and tries to anticipate the further course of events.

**Key words:** foreign policy priorities, integration process, SOC, ROC, soft power, Russian world, Serbian world, non-functioning of institutions