



Contemporary Southeastern Europe

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

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Event analysis

Gustavo Oliveira Teles de Menezes
Doctoral student, São Paulo State University
gustavo.ot.menezes@unesp.br

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2021, 8(1), 56-66

10.25364/02.8:2021.1.5



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The Montenegro identity and statehood question and the formation of the Krivokapić government

Gustavo Oliveira Teles de Menezes*

Keywords: Montenegro, identity, statehood, Serbia, elections

Introduction

On 4 December 2020, Montenegro's parliament elected a government led by Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, the leader of the For the Future of Montenegro (*Za budućnost Crne Gore*, ZBCG) coalition in the 30 August 2020 parliamentary election.

This was a landmark in contemporary Montenegrin history. For the first time since Montenegro reestablished a multiparty system in 1990, the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS) went into opposition. Despite technically winning the election with 35.06% of the votes, the DPS left power due to the ZBCG's alliance with the Peace is our Nation (*Mir je naša nacija*, MNN) and Black on White (*Crno na bijelo*, CnB) electoral coalitions. The ZBCG-MNN-CnB collectively mustered 50.62% of the votes (32.55%, 12.53% and 5.54% for each coalition respectively),¹ which translated into a narrow parliamentary majority of 41 MPs (out of a total 81 seats in Montenegro's parliament), enabling the election of Krivokapić's government.

Novelties aside, one old issue, namely the Montenegrin identity and statehood question (hereafter the MISQ), was very salient throughout this period. This was mainly due to two factors. First, the election was held in the wake of the massive 2019-2020 demonstrations led by the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, SPC) against the controversial Law on Religious Freedom (LRF). This law, passed in Montenegro's parliament in December 2019, could lead to a nationalisation of part of the SPC's patrimony and thus was widely perceived among pro-Serbian segments of society as an encroachment on Serbian identity. As the DPS-led government framed the protests as a Serbian nationalist threat to the Montenegrin state,² the MISQ once again gained prominence.

* Gustavo Oliveira Teles de Menezes is a doctoral student at the San Tiago Dantas Graduate Programme in International Relations and a researcher at the INCT-INEU, both based in São Paulo, Brazil. He obtained a master's degree at the San Tiago Dantas programme with a dissertation about Russia's perspective on Serbia's neutrality policy. In addition to Balkan politics, he has an interest in Russian foreign policy, focusing on its Middle East dimension. The present article partly builds on a previous Portuguese-language text by the same author: Oliveira, Gustavo. 2020. O novo governo do Montenegro: um desafio à hegemonia ocidental nos Bálcãs? *Terra em Transe*, 11 December 2020 (accessed: 1 March 2021).

¹ Montenegro State Electoral Commission. 2020. Ukupni rezultati izbora po jedinicama lokalne samouprave i po biračkim mjestima, 14 September 2020 (accessed: 2 January 2021).

² Heckert, Fynn-Morten. 2020. Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro. A Challenge to the "Đukanović-System"? *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 7(1), 11-24.

Second, the ZBCG included pro-Serbian groups. The coalition's main element was the Democratic Front (*Demokratski front*, DF), which includes pro-Serbian, Russophile and anti-NATO membership politicians. The ZBCG effectively represented an alliance of sorts between the SPC leadership in Montenegro, which recommended Krivokapić as coalition leader, and the DF.³

These factors posed a challenge to the DPS-led nation-/state-building project in Montenegro, which stressed the individuality of the Montenegrin nation and state in relation to Serbs and Serbia. Opposing pro-Serbian and pro-Russian sentiments, the DPS also presented itself as a fierce promoter of a civic, independent and pro-Western Montenegro.

This article analyses how the MISQ was present in Montenegrin politics during the formation of the Krivokapić government and its aftermath. It argues that the MISQ was an important factor in Montenegrin politics throughout this period and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, not least as a tool for political self-profiling.

The analysis is divided into three sections. The first provides a brief historical overview of the MISQ. The second discusses MISQ-related disputes over the formation and activities of the Krivokapić government as of the time of writing. Finally, the concluding section proceeds to final remarks, discussing the implications of this process for Montenegrin politics and society.

The MISQ: a historical overview

The MISQ essentially revolves around the question of whether Montenegrins are a distinct nation or part of the Serbian one. This question, in turn, leads to others, such as: is Montenegro's historical statehood a statehood of its own or part of a Serbian statehood tradition? Should Montenegro be an independent state or unite with Serbia? What role should Serbian identity assume in Montenegro?

These debates owe much to the "intertwined histories of Serbia and Montenegro".⁴ From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, much of present-day Montenegro was part of Serbian states.⁵ However, as Ottoman expansion in the Balkans from the fourteenth century effectively cut off Montenegro from Serbia, areas of Montenegro developed a particular political identity and history. This differentiation eventually generated two broad views among Montenegro's Christian Orthodox majority, with identity and statehood questions becoming a major political issue from the late nineteenth century. One side, here called pro-Serbian, has historically emphasised the essentially Serbian character of Montenegrins and openness to a Serbia-Montenegro union. The other, pro-Montenegrin, side has supported Montenegro's independence or autonomy and often (though not necessarily) stressed Montenegrins' national uniqueness in

³ Dan. 2020a. [Sad ne valjamo, a dali smo 1,5 miliona](#), 30 October 2020 (accessed: 4 March 2021).

⁴ Morrison, Kenneth. 2009. *Montenegro. A Modern History*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 3.

⁵ Rastoder, Šerbo. 2003. *A short review of the history of Montenegro*, in *Montenegro in Transition. Problems of Identity and Statehood*, edited by Bieber, Florian. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 108-10.

relation to Serbs.⁶

The controversial Podgorica Assembly of November 1918 proclaimed Montenegro's unification with Serbia. Excepting the period of Axis occupation of Yugoslavia during World War II, this union lasted in various forms until 2006. During this period, Montenegro and Serbia were republics in socialist Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (*Savezna republika Jugoslavija*, SRJ) and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (*Državna zajednica Srbija i Crna Gora*, SCG).

In the early 1990s, union with Serbia in the SRJ was embraced by the DPS elite that succeeded the League of Communists of Montenegro (*Savez komunista Crne Gore*, SKCG) in 1991. The Montenegro-Serbia union was also supported by 96% of voters in a March 1992 referendum that was largely boycotted by opposition and minority parties. In 1997, however, the DPS split over relations with Serbia's leader, Slobodan Milošević. While one side, led by Momir Bulatović (then Montenegro's president), supported Milošević, the other, led by then Prime Minister Milo Đukanović, opposed Serbia's and later SRJ's president. Đukanović's wing won the standoff and remained ruling Montenegro, while Bulatović went to the unionist Socialist People's Party (*Socijalistička narodna partija*, SNP). Amid disputes over Montenegro's status in the SRJ/SCG, the DPS split strengthened a pro-independence vs. pro-union sociopolitical divide, with Montenegrin self-identification increasingly associated with support for independence, whereas self-identification as Serb often implied a pro-union attitude.⁷

In this context, the DPS, alongside its main partner from 1998 to 2016, the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (*Socijaldemokratska partija Crne Gore*, SDP), assumed an increasingly pro-independence agenda that gained the support of minority parties. Sizable communities such as the Albanians and the Bosniaks/Muslims often faced a hostile environment during the 1990s, amid strengthened Serbian nationalism. This experience stimulated support for Đukanović within these communities, as the DPS increasingly promoted Montenegro's independence and a civic orientation.⁸

In 2006, following the victory of the independence option in the May referendum, Montenegro, under a DPS-led government, declared its independence. Subsequently, Montenegro's 2007 constitution ruled out any state union that could lead to the country's loss of independence and full international subjecthood. Montenegro was defined as a civic state with guaranteed political and cultural rights for minorities.⁹ According to Montenegro's latest census

⁶ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 1-13; Pavlović, Srdja. 2008. *Balkan Anschluss: the annexation of Montenegro and the creation of the common South Slavic state*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 11-12, 48-59.

⁷ Jenne, Erin K. and Florian Bieber. 2014. Situational Nationalism: Nation-building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox. *Ethnopolitics* 13(5), 447-52; Morrison, Kenneth. 2018. *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*. London: Bloomsbury, 29-53, 69-82.

⁸ Đukanović, Dragan. 2014. „Identitetska pitanja“ i linije unutrašnjih podela u Crnoj Gori. *Međunarodna politika* 66(3-4), 398-99; Morrison, *Nationalism*, 55-68, 121-23.

⁹ Parliament of Montenegro. 2007. *Ustav Crne Gore*, 19 October 2007 (accessed: 19 February 2021).

(2011), 44.98% of the population self-identified as Montenegrin, while 28.73% self-identified as Serb. Bosniaks and Muslims (8.65% and 3.31% respectively) and Albanians (4.91%) comprise the largest non-Montenegrin/non-Serb communities.¹⁰

The immediate pre- and the post-independence years were also marked by other MISQ-related disputes. Issues like state symbols and language, for example, divided those favouring perceived pro-Montenegrin references from those supporting perceived pro-Serbian ones.¹¹

Divisions along these lines have also been observed regarding foreign policy. Montenegro's October 2008 recognition of Kosovo's independence, for example, was strongly opposed by pro-Serbian parties.¹² Montenegro's NATO accession, concluded in 2017, was also highly contentious, owing to factors such as conflicting views about NATO's role in the 1990s Yugoslav wars (especially the alliance's 1999 intervention against Serbia/SRJ over Kosovo). Polls by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (*Centar za demokratiju i ljudska prava*, CEDEM) from 2007 to 2016 showed that opposition to accession was generally higher than support for it. Excluding undecided respondents, 56% of self-declared Montenegrins and almost 80% of Bosniaks and Albanians supported NATO accession, while more than 90% of Serbs opposed it. While the DPS, minority and civic-oriented parties supported NATO membership, with accession often seen as a factor supporting Montenegro's independence, pro-Serbian parties have generally opposed it.¹³ DF and SNP members once vowed that, upon coming to power, they would revoke the parliamentary approval of NATO accession and freeze Montenegro's membership until an accession referendum was held.¹⁴

Relations with Russia became another foreign policy controversy. Russia contributed to the development of Montenegro's statehood during the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, leading to a traditionally widespread Russophile sentiment in Montenegro.¹⁵ As Montenegro-Russia relations deteriorated amid Moscow's opposition to Montenegro's ever-closer NATO accession, pro-Serbian DF leaders developed contacts with Russia's political elite and vowed to remove sanctions against Russia if they came to power.¹⁶ As then Prime Minister Milo Đukanović started accusing the DF of being a Russian (and Serbian) proxy,¹⁷ Russia became a factor in discourses about Montenegro's sovereignty. In an important Russia-related event, pro-Serbian/Russophile DF leaders Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević were controversially sentenced to prison in 2019 after Montenegrin authorities accused both of participating in the

¹⁰ MONSTAT. 2011. Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u Crnoj Gori 2011. godine, 12 July 2011 (accessed: 19 February 2021).

¹¹ Đukanović, „*Identitetska pitanja*“, 401-12.

¹² Morrison, *Nationalism*, 139-41.

¹³ Bešić, Miloš and Dušan Spasojević. 2018. Montenegro, NATO and the divided society. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51(2), 139-50.

¹⁴ IN4S. 2017. Skupština u Murinu izglasala predlog o referendumu o NATO-u, 27 April 2017 (accessed: 8 January 2021).

¹⁵ Rastoder, *A short review*, 114-25.

¹⁶ Dan. 2016. Ako dođemo na vlast, ukinućemo sankcije Rusiji, 2 February 2016 (accessed: 4 March 2021).

¹⁷ Morrison, *Nationalism*, 156-62.

alleged anti-Đukanović, anti-NATO October 2016 coup attempt organised by Russian agents and Serbian nationalists (this first instance sentence, however, was annulled in February 2021, and a new trial is to take place).¹⁸

Finally, the Orthodox Church question has been another notorious MISQ-related controversy. Montenegrin independentists have generally supported the establishment of an autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church, as it existed (according to the 1905 constitution) before the 1920 unification with the SPC. Imbued with this spirit, the pro-Montenegrin Montenegrin Orthodox Church (*Crnogorska pravoslavna crkva*, CPC) has challenged the SPC, although the latter, a stronghold of Serbian identity, remains far more popular. The DPS had a varying relationship with both churches, whereas the SDP and the extinct Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (*Liberalni savez Crne Gore*, LSCG) have traditionally been vocal supporters of the CPC. On the other hand, the SPC has generally been supported by pro-Serbian groups.¹⁹

The MISQ and the Krivokapić government

In one way or another, issues like those outlined above were salient after the 2020 election. For example, the flag of Serbia and the tricolor of the Principality/Kingdom of Montenegro, which has been associated with the pro-Serbian camp, were widely used in celebrations in Podgorica of the then opposition's electoral victory.²⁰ Some days later, a large DPS-supported pro-Montenegrin demonstration claiming to defend the "independent, civic, secular, multicultural and antifascist Montenegro" was held in the capital.²¹

Certainly aware of concerns aroused by the presence of pro-Serbian groups in the new parliamentary majority, the ZBCG-MNN-CnB leadership sought to dismiss MISQ-related revanchism in an attempt to attract broader domestic and Western support. On 8 September 2020, Krivokapić and the MNN and CnB leaders (Aleksa Bečić and Dritan Abazović respectively), signed an agreement on the principles of the new ruling coalition. According to the agreement, there would be no initiative to alter Montenegro's state symbols. Signaling commitment to civic values, participation of minority parties in government was to be enabled. On foreign policy, the agreement ruled out initiatives to withdraw recognition of Kosovo's independence and stressed a commitment to European Union (EU) accession and cooperation with NATO. Finally, the agreement affirmed the will to depoliticise government institutions and fight organised crime and corruption,²² thus promoting an identity-neutral agenda with broad social appeal.

The September agreement was later reinforced by Krivokapić's programme,

¹⁸ Appellate Court of Montenegro. 2021. [SAOPŠTENJE ZA JAVNOST-povodom predmeta "Državni udar"](#), 5 February 2021 (accessed: 1 March 2021).

¹⁹ Đukanović, „*Identitetska pitanja*“, 412-14; Morrison, *Nationalism*, 83-93, 148-50.

²⁰ Nikolić, Biljana. 2020. [Proslava pobjede opozicije: Građani se okupili ispred hrama u Podgorici](#). *Vijesti*, 31 August 2020 (accessed: 2 January 2021).

²¹ Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2020. [Skup u Podgorici: Ne damo Crnu Goru](#), 6 September 2020 (accessed: 4 January 2021).

²² Demokratska Crna Gora. 2020. [ISTORIJSKI SPORAZUM TRI POBJEDNIČKE KOALICIJE](#). *Twitter*, 9 September 2020 (accessed: 5 January 2021).

which stressed issues like democratisation, political reforms, economic recovery and the fight against corruption and organised crime. There were few, if any, elaborate references to MISQ controversies, although the programme did express commitment to review laws deemed to be discriminatory, particularly the LRF.²³

Following its historical failure in 2020, the DPS has attempted to reinforce its image as a fierce defender of Montenegrin statehood and national identity, as well as a civic and pro-Western orientation. President Đukanović has accused Belgrade of interfering in Montenegrin politics and the DF of acting on behalf of “another state” that challenges the Montenegrin state, national and cultural identity.²⁴ Đukanović also denounced the SPC as “an instrument of Greater Serbian nationalism and Russian imperial interests”.²⁵ This trend was well illustrated by the party programme unveiled at DPS’s January 2021 congress. Stating the DPS’s commitment to its self-attributed “state-building mission”, European integration and multi-ethnic harmony, the programme warned of the strengthening of “cleronationalism” and advocated the functioning of an “independent Orthodox Church” in Montenegro.²⁶ In his congress speech, Đukanović spoke of threatening foreign attempts to make Montenegro part of the Serbian and Russian “worlds”.²⁷

There were also MISQ-related disputes within the ZBCG-MNN-CnB bloc itself. Mainly regarding the composition of security- and foreign policy-related organs, they were closely linked to foreign interests. In October 2020, Judy Rising Reinke, the American ambassador in Podgorica, stated that the United States encouraged Krivokapić to ensure that members of the new government were committed to Montenegro’s sovereignty and Euro-Atlantic orientation.²⁸

Abazović seems to have played a leading role in ensuring alignment with such preferences. Abazović’s civic-oriented, pro-NATO United Reform Action (*Ujedinjena reformska akcija*, URA), the CnB’s main component, reportedly had contacts with Western embassies.²⁹ Abazović himself stressed the importance of avoiding individuals in government who could jeopardise Montenegro’s pro-Western orientation, while Krivokapić stated that the government would not be wholeheartedly accepted in some international quarters if DF leaders joined it.³⁰ In turn, Knežević accused Abazović of demanding that Serb DF members receive

²³ Krivokapić, Zdravko. 2020. Predstavljanje programa rada Vlade Crne Gore, 30 November 2020 (accessed: 13 February 2021).

²⁴ MINA. 2021. MINA Intervju Predsjednika Crne Gore Mila Đukanovića. *Youtube*, 22 January 2021 (accessed: 22 January 2021).

²⁵ Milinović, Zdravko. 2020. Đukanović: ‘SPC je instrument velikosrpskoga nacionalizma i ruskih interesa na Balkanu’. *Jutarnji list*, 25 September 2020 (accessed: 10 January 2021).

²⁶ DPS. 2021b. Nova platforma političkog djelovanja. Politički program, 24 January 2021 (accessed: 28 January 2021).

²⁷ DPS. 2021a. Govor predsjednika DPS-a Mila Đukanovića na IX Kongresu. *Youtube*, 24 January 2021 (accessed: 23 February 2021).

²⁸ Marković, Nikola. 2020. Podrška mandataru za prozapadni kadar u bezbjednosti. *Dan*, 30 October 2020 (accessed: 15 January 2021).

²⁹ Sysoev, Gennadii. 2020. Pobeda - eto polbedy. *Kommersant*, 8 October 2020 (accessed: 15 January 2021).

³⁰ Dan. 2020b. Vladi pada reputacija sa liderima DF-a, 30 October 2020 (accessed: 14 January 2021);

RTCG. 2020a. “Neozbiljni ljudi ne mogu da vode bezbjednosne sektore”, 23 September 2020 (accessed: 2 March 2021).

no posts in security- and foreign policy-related organs,³¹ while the DF published an open letter to ambassador Reinke in October insinuating that Krivokapić was under Washington's pressure to exclude the DF from government.³² Similarly, Mandić complained of a perceived anti-DF/anti-Serbian campaign in Montenegro.³³ Together, such declarations pointed to a discourse about the political exclusion of Serbs in Montenegro.

Regarding minorities, Krivokapić, in line with the September agreement, invited Albanian and Bosniak parties/lists for talks about joining the government. However, Krivokapić's attempt failed largely due to these parties'/lists' mistrust over the views of some ZBCG-MNN-CnB members on foreign policy and minorities. Conciliatory messages by Mandić and Knežević seemed to have been to no avail in attracting minority representatives. Declaring that the parliamentary majority included sympathisers of the Greater Serbia ideology and critics of Montenegro's independence and NATO accession, the Albanian Coalition (*Albanska koalicija / Koalicioni Shqiptar*, AK) even declined to enter into talks.³⁴

In November, Krivokapić presented his cabinet. The ZBCG-MNN-CnB intra-bloc dispute was settled largely in a pro-Western direction, with Abazović appointed Deputy Prime Minister.³⁵ Olivera Injac, an international relations scholar with past ties to a famous pro-NATO NGO, was appointed Minister of Defense, while Đorđe Radulović, a career diplomat, became foreign minister. Both had worked in Montenegrin state institutions under DPS-led governments.³⁶ Later, the pro-Serbian camp could at least count with Knežević as head of the parliamentary Committee on Security and Defense and member of the government's National Security Council.³⁷

In December, the ZBCG-MNN-CnB bloc approved Krivokapić's government, while opposition MPs voted against it. One Albanian MP abstained. Those who did not vote for Krivokapić's government, including DPS, SDP and minority representatives, often raised questions such as the (actual or alleged) links of cabinet members to the SPC and its perceived lack of ethnic diversity (although Abazović, for example, is an ethnic Albanian). Supposedly unclear views about minorities' rights in Krivokapić's programme were also mentioned.³⁸ The internal ZBCG-MNN-CnB dispute also left scars: Knežević's Democratic People's

³¹ B92. 2020. [Fokus B92: gost Milan Knežević](#), 29 September 2020 (accessed: 15 January 2021).

³² DF. 2020. [Otvoreno pismo Demokratskog fronta ambasadori SAD. Njenoj Ekselenciji Džudi Rajzing Rainke](#). Facebook, 26 October 2020 (accessed: 14 January 2021).

³³ Mandić, Andrija. 2020. [Tajkunski manifest u Crnoj Gori](#). *Politika*, 1 November 2020 (accessed: 16 January 2021).

³⁴ Janković, Srđan and Aneta Durović. 2020. [Većina stranaka manjinskih naroda odbila Krivokapićev poziv u novu Vladu](#). *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 20 October 2020 (accessed: 16 January 2021).

³⁵ Krivokapić, *Predstavljanje*, 35.

³⁶ CDM. 2020. [Ko je Olivera Injac, kandidatkinja za ministarku odbrane](#), 27 November 2020 (accessed: 20 January 2021); Hajduković, Blažo. 2020. [Radulović: Ponosan što sam dio prve demokratske Vlade](#). *Vijesti*, 5 December 2020 (accessed: 20 January 2021).

³⁷ RTCG. 2020c. [Formirano Vijeće za nacionalnu bezbjednost](#), 25 December 2020 (accessed: 24 February 2021).

³⁸ Matijašević, Biljana and Dušan Cicmil. 2020. [Izglasana Vlada. Krivokapić premijer](#). *Vijesti*, 4 December 2020 (accessed: 28 February 2021); RTCG. 2020b. [Poslanici različito o predloženoj Vladi](#), 3 December 2020 (accessed: 2 March 2021).

Party (*Demokratska narodna partija*, DNP) conditioned its continued support for the new government on issues like the protection of the SPC's interests and the improvement of Montenegro-Serbia and Montenegro-Russia relations.³⁹

Since the beginning of the Krivokapić government, the main MISQ-related controversy was certainly the voting on amendments to the LRF in December and January. These included the removal of articles that the SPC and its supporters feared could lead to a nationalisation of the Church's holy assets.⁴⁰ The amendments were approved by ZBCG-MNN-CnB lawmakers, while opposition MPs, in protest, did not attend the voting sessions. The DPS stated its unwillingness to enable a quorum for "the destruction of civic and European Montenegro".⁴¹ On the day of the first session, opponents of the amendments protested outside the parliament with symbols and rhetoric associated with pro-Montenegrin nationalism.⁴²

Another noteworthy MISQ-related controversy was minorities' integration in public administration, with leading Albanian and Bosniak representatives complaining of a perceived ethnic bias in the government's cadre policies.⁴³ Finally, foreign policy has been marked by assurances from the government to the Western powers. Symbolically, soon after the beginning of the new government Krivokapić visited Brussels, where he met EU and NATO officials. In a meeting with NATO's Secretary General, Krivokapić, while stating his willingness to strengthen Montenegro-Russia relations, stressed that this would be pursued only to the extent that it did not conflict with NATO policies.⁴⁴

Conclusion

This paper discussed the place of the MISQ in Montenegrin politics during the formation of the Krivokapić government and its aftermath. It pointed to the MISQ's important role as a kind of reference guide for political positioning throughout this period.

Krivokapić and the ZBCG-MNN-CnB leadership, apparently in order to garner broader domestic and Western support, declared their acceptance of some elements associated with the DPS-led state-building project. To the same end, the bloc's leadership often drew attention to identity-neutral issues like economic well-being, democratisation and anti-corruption efforts.

In turn, the DPS has attempted to reinforce its image as a fierce defender of

³⁹ Vijesti. 2020. [DNP: Podrška novoj vladi](#), 30 November 2020 (accessed: 24 February 2021).

⁴⁰ Heckert, *Protests*, 11; Official Gazette of Montenegro. 2021. [Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o slobodi vjeroispovijesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica](#), 26 January 2021 (accessed: 27 January 2021).

⁴¹ DPS. 2020. [Poslanički klub DPS: Nećemo činiti kvorum za rušenje građanske i evropske Crne Gore](#), 28 December 2020 (accessed: 27 January 2021).

⁴² Borozan, Nikola and Aleksandar Ljumović. 2020. [Protest ispred Skupštine Crne Gore: Ne damo državu!](#) *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 28 December 2020 (accessed: 1 March 2021).

⁴³ Bošnjačka stranka. 2021. [BS: Vlada sprovodi revanšističku politiku, tjera Bošnjake iz institucija](#), 15 January 2021 (accessed: 27 January 2021); CDM. 2021. [Nimanbegu: Vlada smijenila sve kadrove Albanske liste](#), 11 January 2021 (accessed: 24 February 2021).

⁴⁴ Government of Montenegro. 2020. [Krivokapić: Crna Gora ostaje posvećena članstvu u NATO](#), 15 December 2020 (accessed: 28 January 2021).

Montenegrin state and national individuality, in addition to civic and pro-Western statehood. The party also intensified its attacks on Serbia, the SPC, Russia and pro-Serbian groups in Montenegro. Despite the DPS's rhetoric about multi-ethnic harmony, such efforts will most likely resonate negatively among Montenegro's Serbs, potentially contributing to further social polarisation. Minority parties/lists have also expressed concern about Krivokapić's government on grounds similar to those voiced by the DPS.

While pointing to the importance of the MISQ, this paper does not argue that it is necessarily the most important issue in Montenegrin politics. As shown by protest waves in 2015 and 2019, discontent over authoritarianism, state capture and corruption has been an important source of political mobilisation, which also contributed to the outcome of the 2020 election. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the post-election context provided other possibilities for political positioning. As an example, after years of accusations of authoritarianism and state capture made against the DPS by its opponents, Đukanović has cast the DPS as a pro-democracy party by pointing to the orderly power transition of 2020.⁴⁵

Moreover, Montenegro's independence seems to be largely perceived as a given. A September 2020 CEDEM poll showed that more than 80% of citizens expected that Montenegro would remain independent, while less than 10% believed Montenegro would join Serbia in some state union.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Montenegro reaches its fifteenth year of restored independence still largely polarised by identity divisions. As an illustration, the MISQ affected even a seemingly local affair like the March 2021 municipal election in Nikšić.

Due to this article's limited scope, some relevant themes could not be thoroughly addressed. Differentiations in political views, agendas and networks within the broad pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian camps could not be explored. Further research would also be welcome on topics like the impact of the change of government on cultural/educational policies and minority integration in government/state institutions. Such studies could provide valuable insights about the state of democracy and ethnic relations in Montenegro. Finally, comparative analyses of Montenegro's relations with the EU, NATO and Russia would be particularly relevant.

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⁴⁵ DPS, *Govor*.

⁴⁶ CEDEM. 2020. Očekivanja građana, nakon izbora, o državnom statusu Crne Gore. *Facebook*, 25 September 2020 (accessed: 9 January 2021).

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