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Metropolitan Amfilohije voting

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THE ELECTIONS IN MONTENEGRO FROM BELGRADE'S PERSPECTIVE

The elections in Montenegro (31 August 2020) brought defeat to the ruling coalition (primarily the Democratic Party of Socialists, although it is individually the party with a majority of votes), while its president will remain in office until 2023. However, most of them consider the election outcome as the last chance for the "survival of the Serbian people in Montenegro and the entire millennial Serbian national and state tradition".[1] For a start, it is expected that Serbia and Montenegro, as the two fraternal states of one nation with common aspirations, normalize their relations.[2] On election night, Bogoljub Šijaković, Profesor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade, told Radio Television Serbia (RTS) that this would be the "time for the creation of a confederation between Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro".[3]

1 Milomir Stepić, "(Dis)kontinuitet", *Pečat*, 11 September 2020.

2 Nikola Vrzić, "Dan posle 30 godina", *Pečat*, 4 September 2020.

3 Zlatoje Martinov, "Crna Gora glasala – Srbija pobedila", *Danas*, 3 September 2020.

The external factor's activity was crucial for the election outcome, which may turn Montenegro into a new neuralgic spot in the Balkans in the future. The election outcome in Montenegro is a new impetus for both the pro-Russian and nationalist opposition in Belgrade. If the new government changes the pro-Western orientation, this will cause tectonic disturbances in the whole region.

The most influential external factor was the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which represents a peculiar kind of precedent in modern parliamentary practice. That is why many analysts hold that the biggest winner of these elections is the Serbian Orthodox Church. The SOC and, in particular, Metropolitan Amfilohije served as the mobilizing factor of the coalition rallied around the Democratic Front.

For months the Serbian Orthodox Church carried on a fierce political agitation through litanies organized in Montenegrin cities under the pretext of protesting against the Law on Freedom of Religion but, in real fact, against sovereign Montenegro.[4] According to the Metropolitan, he carried out a political campaign defending the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian identity. Although the main theme of the Montenegrin opposition's campaign included corruption and the rule of law, the role of the Church shows that the goal was to change regional relations.

The SOC always disputed the borders of the Yugoslav republics and had good relations with the wartime leaderships of the rebel Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia. Given the SOC's clear aspirations to exert influence on political life in the region, it will continue to be a significant political player in Montenegro. The first request is likely to be the withdrawal of the Law that was the reason for organizing litanies and the backbone of the election campaign.

The activities of the official bodies of the Republic of Serbia, carried out primarily within the framework of financial, political, economic, cultural and media support, were intensive. In May, the Government of the Republic of Serbia brought the decision to provide one-off financial aid worth 1.64 million euros to various associations in Montenegro.[5] This aid was previously announced by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who said at the meeting with the Patriarch that this aid was needed "in order to preserve the identity of the people and to further raise awareness about the unity of Serbs wherever they live without endangering anyone".[6]

Official Belgrade allocated about 3.5 million euros to Serbian organizations – the largest amount Serbia has ever set aside as aid – which was also confirmed by President Vučić. This aid was sent to organizations such as the Writers' Association and Matica Srpska, while one portion of the money went for building the so-called Serbian House.[7] The Serbian Government said that the money was earmarked for the associations "involved in the promotion of the economic, cultural and political cooperation of that country with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska"[8].

The winning coalition's election campaign was dominated by the message about a change in the attitude towards Kosovo or, more precisely, the withdrawal of the recognition of its independence which Belgrade viewed as "stabbing their homeland in the back".[9] Military analyst Aleksandar Radić holds that the recognition of Kosovo should not have been placed on the agenda and that Montenegro had at least to be

4 Veseljko Koprivica "Amfilohije ide na izbore", *Novi magazin*, 27 August 2020.

5 https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/18527/.

6 Ibid.

7 .

8 Insajder, 21 May 2020.

9 .

neutral or, in other words, it should not have recognized Kosovo.[10] A different attitude towards European integration and NATO membership was also announced. In essence, this would be the line advocated by Belgrade and Moscow.

The reality of Montenegro is very complex and, as things stand, "it will be harder for the opposition to form the government than win the elections".[11] Bearing in mind that the opposition coalition consists of different parties with different programme commitments, especially with respect to the state-legal status of Montenegro and Euro-Atlantic integration, the subsequent period will be the period of political uncertainty and everything indicates that this government will not last long.

The hitherto agreements reached by the three partners revealed the disunity and disappointment of the pro-Serbian parties, which had very radical demands concerning Montenegro's status. In the meantime, the European Union, United States and NATO, the international actors that set the conditions for a future government, also got involved in advocating that the radicals should not be allowed to enter into the system, especially the security one. It is important for them that Montenegro continues to pursue pro-Western policy and, in that sense, they are aware of the hidden dangers of these elections.

The new ruling coalition can weaken Montenegro's pro-Western orientation if the pro-Serb factor dominates the government. As announced in the election campaign, its focus will be on strengthening Serbian identity in order to make Serbs a majority and thus proclaim Montenegro as the state of the Serbian people. In that sense, a strong government position will enable it to prepare for next year's census. One of its priorities is also the annulment of the law on church property, which was the reason for last December's litanies.

The region has almost unanimously concluded that the election results in Montenegro pose a danger to regional stability. The statement of Zdravko Krivokapić, the leader of the "For the Future of Montenegro" Coalition, that he is worried because none of the regional and world's leaders called him after the parliamentary elections is indicative.[12] It is also possible that the intra-regional relations will worsen. This especially applies to Montenegro's relations with Croatia and Kosovo which have so far been good.

The change of the geopolitical paradigm in Montenegro should also not be neglected, because there exist two concepts of Montenegro – Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asian – which are backed by the West and Russia respectively. The combination of Russia and Belgrade's influences on the Greater Serbian bloc in Montenegro brought about a paradigm shift, that is, the denial of Montenegrin statehood.

BELGRADE'S INFLUENCE

The pro-Serb bloc could not threaten Djukanović with an open Greater Serbia strategy. This time, therefore, they relied on the Serbian Orthodox Church – the concept of Saint-Savaism, which is, in essence, the nationalization of Orthodoxy. In the political sense, Saint-Savaism was conceived by Nikolaj Velimirović in the early 20th century.[13]

10 Smena vlasti u Crnoj Gori: šta se menja, a šta ostaje", *Blic*, 2 September 2020.

11 Ibid.

12 http://rs.n1info.com/Region/a638049/comments/Krivokapic-Brine-me-sto-me-niko-iz-regiona-nije-zvao-Vucica-ni-ne-poznajem.html.

13 He was the founder of a right-wing political ideology, that is, Saint-Savaism-based nationalism. He is considered the spiritual inspirator of Ljotić's organization ZBOR. He was often criticized for his

Thanks to huge media pressure from Belgrade and through the Belgrade-controlled media in Montenegro, the "Saint-Savaian" coalition achieved the election result that brought it to power.

Even before the beginning of the election campaign, the Serbian media presented Montenegro mainly in a negative context, including the thesis about the vulnerability of the Serbian people. Patriarch Irinej went so far as to claim that the "status of Serbs is similar to that at the time of the Independent State of Croatia, a notorious fascist creation."[14]

According to the Progressive Club's Report on the Political Rights of the Serbian People in the Region, Montenegro is, as emphasized by historian Čedomir Antić, the "darkest spot" with respect to ethnic and religious persecution, in particular.[15] He also stated that the Law on Religious Communities disenfranchised the SOC and put it in an unequal position vis-à-vis other religious communities, although 70 per cent of citizens belong to it, while religious and national persecution is underway. He also points out that the Serbian people in Montenegro is subject to frequent pressure and assimilation.[16]

The media reported a number of falsehoods, such as that Djukanović had promised Albanians the post of prime minister, and put special emphasis on rumours that Djukanović would expel Serbs as was done in the Operation Storm, resort to violence and refuse to recognize the election results.

Professor Srdjan Vukadinović, a political analyst, points out that Belgrade also organized specific engineering, since a great number of people living in Serbia voted in Montenegro. As he emphasized, they were paid the costs of travel and accommodation in Montenegro, as well as the PCR test. The cost of this test is high and someone had to pay it to Serbia's Torlak Institute of Public Health.[17]

Such a behavior of Belgrade very much resembles the wave of Serbian clerical nationalism, the anti-bureaucratic revolution of the 1980s and, in particular, the change of government in Montenegro in 1989. The then set of young politicians came to power on that wave. This is a new effort to subjugate Montenegro to Belgrade.

Considering all reactions to the elections in Montenegro, it can be concluded that they were directed not against Djukanović's being in power for so long, but against his policy change, which began in 1997 and ended with the restoration of independence and NATO membership. These reactions are not concealed. They include open rejoicing and planning to expel Djukanović and his inner circle.

The messages sent by Belgrade to the new ruling coalition boil down to the expectations that are succinctly expressed by Kosta Čavoški, a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA). He believes that Montenegro's state orientation should be gradually changed and hopes that in the next census "the number of Serbs in Montenegro will be higher and that the people will be encouraged to declare themselves as Serbs"; thereafter it will be necessary to schedule the elections at which the new majority will be "incomparably larger and more powerful" and then move slowly forward, step by step,

anti-Semitic views. The central place in Velimirović's reflections was the critique of humanism, European civilization, materialistic spirit and the like. He thought of Europe as a great evil to be guarded against, and despised its culture, science and progress.

14 http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/407828/Patrijarh-Irinej-Polozaj-Srba-u-Crnoj-Gori-kao-u-doba-NDH.

15 https://studiob.rs/napredni-klubprava-srba-u-regionu-sve-losija-najgore-u-cg/.

16 Ibid.

17 https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/vukadinovic-buduca-vlada-bice-pod-pritiskom-rusije-i-srbije.

until achieving the desired comeback of Montenegro to the "Serbian world".[18]

The CESID Programme Director, Ivo Čolović, emphasizes that the new Montenegrin authorities must be ready for compromise and deal with the issues of Euro-Atlantic integration and revoking Kosovo's recognition without haste. They will probably be pleased to vote against Kosovo's admission to UNESCO. That is quite enough.**19**

The Montenegrin identity will be in focus, as it is indicated by the reactions of the SASA Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language, which expects a radical change of Podgorica's language policy. The President of the Committee, Dr Sreta Tanasić, holds that it is "necessary to repeal the ridiculous law on language, which was deliberately designed to open up the possibility for the state to use all forms of violence against the Serbian language and its speakers".[20] He also holds that the Cyrillic alphabet should be returned as the official alphabet, and expects that next year's census will show a greater number of Serbia-speaking citizens.[21]

MOSCOW'S REACTIONS

Moscow did not announce itself officially. Due to its 2016 experience, when it was behind the coup intended to prevent Montenegro's membership in NATO, it relied on the Church and the parties leaning towards it. However, Sputnjik participated on a daily basis in creating an atmosphere that favoured the opposition.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeatedly stated that the Russophobic attitudes adopted by Montenegrin politicians, including President Milo Djukanović, amounted to treachery. He is "confident that a vast majority of people in Montenegro do not share those sentiments" and that "temporary [Montenegrin] leaders will fade away." According to him, it is a sad thing when you are betrayed not by a person, but by a nation that stood by you. He does not rule out that Djukanović's U-turn was prompted by his "problems with the law in the West" and being "accused of smuggling and other things in some European countries". Therefore, he "does not exclude the possibility that this was the reason for a U-turn in his policies. Clearly, if politicians are so vulnerable, they can easily be manipulated."[22]

Lavrov expressed his regret over Montenegro which "succumbed to the ultimatum – either Russia or NATO and decided to ignore the economic aspect and to sacrifice its relations with Russia. Let the Montenegrin and NATO leaders have this decision on their conscience. However, it is absolutely incomprehensible how Montenegro's membership will contribute to the increase in NATO's security.[23]

Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation, believes that Montenegro can change after the parliamentary elections and that "we will see a different Montenegro, which has been linked to its neighbouring Serbia and close Russia by common interests and sincere sympathies over the centuries,

18 https://www.standard.co.me/politika/255395/.
19 https://www.pressreader.com/serbia/blic/20200902/282501481024799.
20 "Vratiti ćirilicu i srpski jezik u Crnu Goru", *Večernje novosti*, 14 September 2020.
21 Ibid.
22 https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-region/126506-lavrov-rusofobicni-stavovi-crnogorskog-vodjstva-predstavljaju-izdaju.
23 https://studiob.rs/lavrovu-makedoniji-opasno-podgorica-zrtvovala-odnose-sa-rusijom/.

and for which the Russians have so much affection today despite political differences."[24]

MONTENEGRO IN SERBIA'S STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS

Belgrade has not closed the Serbian issue and is resolving it contrary to the interests of the Serbian people in the neighbouring countries. This is also evidenced by official documents that precisely define the regional policy. Those are, above all else, the Strategy of Preserving and Strengthening the Relations Between the Homeland and the Diaspora and Between the Homeland and the Serbs in the Region (2011) and the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space (2019). In both cases the Serbian Orthodox Church is the main institution for implementation of these strategies, as it is the only legitimate cross-border institution. Therefore, it is not surprising that Belgrade increases its support to Serbian communities in the neighbourhood as well as its pressure on the state authorities regarding the status and rights of the Serbian community. A special role is also played by the Progressive Club, which supports the thesis that the Serbs in all neighbouring countries are endangered in its reports.

In order to understand Serbia's behaviour, it is also necessary to take into account its geostrategic interests, as defined by Serbian elites. These interests are the interests of the state, so that it is irrelevant which option is currently in power. They differ only in method, while the essence remains the same. The current government has completely exposed this strategy and, in a way, opened the eyes of everyone, both the neighbours and the West. A very fluid international context has encouraged the current government to make harsher moves, use a more direct rhetoric and practice more ruthless behavior, both domestically and regionally and internationally.

Montenegro holds a special place in Serbia's geopolitical consideration. It is viewed as an "internal issue" and attributed "immeasurable geopolitical significance". Montenegro has never been accepted as an independent state and has only been treated as a territory, that is, another Serbian land. Montenegrism and the Montenegrin language are disputed, while the Montenegrin identity is viewed as a hybrid one. Thus, the position of the Serbian people is being strengthened, while the Serbian Orthodox Church already has the status of a state within a state. It is in Serbia's interest that Montenegro is led by a "state political leader" who will respect the Serbian geopolitical interests. This is why Milo Djukanović is perceived as the main obstacle to the realization of the Serbian interests. Serbia's ultimate goal is to return Montenegro into the state network, because that is the only way for both "Serbia and Montenegro to gain geostrategic significance".

BELGRADE'S MESSAGES TO THE WINNING COALITION

Belgrade has actively encouraged the division of Montenegrin society, laying emphasis on the unfavourable position of Serbs. This issue is dominant in all official statements. Although Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić avoids making the statements that will directly point to Serbia's interference in the internal affairs of its neighbor, he said on the election day in Montenegro that regardless of the outcome it is important that the "Serbian people rose up and started to protect their identity rights", and that it is also important that the upcoming census (2021) does not show a smaller number of Serbs in that

24 https://www.antenam.net/politika/169850-reakcija-iz-rusije-u-cg-se-moze-promijeniti-strateski-kurs.

country.[25] Therefore, it can be expected that in the coming months all Belgrade's efforts will be focused on a pro-census campaign in order to show that Serbs constitute the majority in the country and to further delegitimize Montenegrin statehood.

In contrast to Vučić, Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin is ready to directly express the Serbian interests in the region. Commenting on the elections in Montenegro, he said that "Milo Đukanović's Government (...) did not understand that they started the process of Serbian unification that cannot be stopped''.[26]

In his interview given to *Pečat* magazine, he says that the "task of my generation is to continue the struggle for the unification of all Serbs into a single state and political community", that the "unification of Serbs is a process and that the election results in Montenegro are the last proof of an unstoppable process".[27]

Many public figures from the academic milieu confined their congratulations to the desire for Montenegro to turn back from the wrong path. Academician Matija Bećković told the united democratic opposition in Montenegro that it has the historical responsibility to prove to be worthy of its election victory and turn back Montenegro from the wrong path where it got stuck up to neck.[28]

The Serbian opposition welcomed the victory of the opposition in Montenegro with great enthusiasm, expecting that a similar scenario would also be possible in Serbia. However, Vuk Jeremić's statement to N1 TV points to the actual expectations from the new government: "Serbia should truly, jointly and fraternally support Montenegro's new government, because this is a matter of the highest state and national priority, and its support should be jointly voiced by the government and the opposition".[29]

Historian Aleksandar Raković was the most explicit as to what Belgrade expects from Montenegro. It is already speculated about the number of Serbs in Montenegro which, according to him, comprise 36 per cent of the population. He hopes that the next census will show not only fewer Montenegrins, but also fewer Bosniaks. He also expressed his expectations that the right to vote would be denied to Bosniaks and Muslims "who do not live in Montenegro", as well as to Albanians in Montenegro. He says that "this will be the job of the new government"! Moreover, he claims that "it is logical to expect that the number of Serbs in Montenegro will increase to over 40 per cent and that they become the most numerous nation in Montenegro". He added that it is realistic to expect that Montenegro will revoke the recognition of Kosovo "in the subsequent period", that is, "in some 5-6-7 years", when Serbs assume complete power in Montenegro.

There were very few voices in Serbia that openly stated what lay behind Belgrade's strategy like that of Vuk Drašković, who warned that "this is a clerical rebellion. The Serbian Orthodox Church leads this pro-Russian opposition which intends to terminate Montenegro's membership in NATO if it wins the elections, annul the decision on Montenegro's sovereignty and independence, and open the gate to the Bay of Kotor to Russia in order to establish its military base there, so that the Russian army can comfortably roam the

25 https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/913302/vucic-rezultatima-izbora-crnoj-gori-predsednik-prokomentarisao-kljucnu-temu-dana.

26 https://www.vulin.rs/lat/aktuelno/ministar-i-predsednik-ps-vulin-crna-gora-se-vratila-sebi-plima-se-promenila3ad3ad41da0f0f5c05c1c9ac6.html.

27 Aleksandar Vulin, "Testament ministra", *Pečat* ,18 September 2020.

28 http://informer.rs/svet/balkan/545554/matija-beckovic-ima-poruku-krivokapica-ekipu-vreme-crnu-goru-vratite-stranputice-koju-bila-grla-zabasala.

29 https://www.danas.rs/politika/jeremic-srbija-da-istinski-solidarno-i-bratski-podrzi-novu-vlast-u-crnoj-gori/.

Balkans and that is the goal".[30] He also pointed out that "Montenegro, that is, normal Montenegro, has never experienced such a civilizational humiliation as it is experiencing now with these litanies".[31]

Dr Darko Trifunović, Professor at the Faculty of Security in Belgrade, turned attention to the fact that in Montenegro "a very dangerous model has been created, which can easily backfire on Serbia. The entire infrastructure built on the territory of Serbia had a great influence on the elections in Montenegro and produced these results. This infrastructure still has not been dismantled and there is a danger that it turns very easily against the Serbian authorities. The Church and Kosovo are particularly sensitive issues. But we should also seek the responsibility of the people in Montenegro that enabled such structures to operate within their territory."[32]

Trifunović warns of the pernicious influence of Russia's policy that destroyed Serbia and brought affliction to it: from Russian exponents and spies to Slobodan Milošević and Mirjana Marković, as well as all villains who dragged Serbia into unnecessary wars on account of the Kremlin and Russia's services, to the biggest plunder of Serbia through the oil industry. Now comes a certain Amfilohije who says that whoever is against Russia should be cursed. Instead of reconciling Serbs and Montenegrins, he brought the apple of discord and, due to personal and economic reasons, put himself in the service of Russia vis-à-vis Montenegro for which he should bear criminal responsibility."[33]

30 https://direktno.rs/politika/299147/vuk-draskovic-crna-gora-izbori.html.

31 Ibid.

32 https://www.antenam.net/politika/171990-trifunovic-amfilohije-radovic-treba-da-ode.

33 Ibid

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the complexity of the situation in Montenegro, it is necessary to take into account the pretensions of both Belgrade and Moscow when it comes to Montenegro's future orientation. The elections have changed the strategic paradigm of the Balkans, which only makes the security context in the region more complex. The Western factor naively claims that it can control the situation on the ground with its support to the URA coalition, which has only four seats in the parliament.

This implies that Serbia should accept the reality in the region. The war consequences and Serbia's territorial and ethnic claims still prevent the normalization of the relations among the post-Yugoslav countries. The wrongly posed identity issues and narrowing of state identities to ethnic and religious ones in all Balkan countries will only deepen their crisis and affect their inter-relations.

Montenegro's transfer of power would be much easier and painless without the external factor's interference. However, as this factor became dominant, the European Union, as the main driver of change in the Balkans, will have to pay more attention to the reasons why the war legacy in the region has not yet been overcome.

Belgrade's strategy will be focused on weakening Montenegro (and other neighbours, especially Bosnia) by relying on Russian assistance. On the other hand, Russia uses Serbia as a means for undermining the stability of the Western Balkans and suppressing Western influence.

Montenegro will face (and is already facing) both the efforts of Brussels (as well as Berlin, Washington and NATO) to establish some kind of guardianship over the state and the efforts of Belgrade and Moscow to make the Montenegrin state senseless and politically marginalize the Montenegrin people.