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The «Situational Nationalism»: A New Age of Nation and State Building in Montenegro?

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Abstract. For a long time, the political development of Montenegro has been determined by the peculiarities of historical development and the legacy of the former Yugoslavia. The divisions between groups of citizens identifying themselves as Serbs or Montenegrins, as well as contradictions between the state and the church, have determined the configuration of political forces. The fear of national minorities of Serbian national policy and the skillful maneuvering of M. Djukanovic contributed to their support for his regime. However, the problems of economic development, Djukanovic's miscalculations regarding the Orthodox Church, as well as the lack of serious progress on the way to the EU, led to an increase in opposition sentiment and the defeat of Djukanovic in 2023 presidential elections, and the DPS in the parliamentary ones. Representatives of the younger generation of politicians came to power in Montenegro, relying to a lesser extent on traditional ethno-confessional divisions for Montenegro and aimed at solving economic problems and accelerating the process of the country's accession to the EU. The article concludes that the end of a long period of dominance of one political force does not mean the end of the process of democratization. The unresolved issues of national and state building, the influence of external centers, the lack of effective institutions for the achievement of compromise and the protection of the interests of minorities make political life unstable and complicate the adoption of effective political decisions. Despite the victory of a new generation of politicians in the last national elections, the country's traditional divisions still determine the choice of many voters and may again become relevant under the influence of market circumstances.

Keywords: Montenegro, state- and nation-building, political regime, political cleavages, presidential elections, parliamentary elections

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«Ситуационный национализм» по-черногорски: новый этап национально-государственного строительства?

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Аннотация. Длительное время политическое развитие Черногории определялось особенностями исторического развития и наследием бывшей Югославии. Размежевания между группами граждан, идентифицирующих себя как сербы или черногорцы, а также между государством и церковью во многом определяли расстановку политических сил. Страх национальных меньшинств перед национальной политикой Сербии и его умелое использование бывшим президентом М. Джукановичем давало его режиму необходимую поддержку. Однако проблемы экономического характера, а также просчеты Джукановича в отношении православной церкви вкупе с отсутствием серьезного продвижения на пути в ЕС обусловили возрастание оппозиционных настроений и поражение бессменного лидера государства на президентских выборах 2023 г., а его Демократической партии социалистов — на парламентских. К власти в Черногории пришли представители молодого поколения политиков, в меньшей степени опирающихся на традиционные для Черногории этноконфессиональные размежевания и нацеленных на решение экономических проблем и ускорение процесса вступления страны в ЕС. Делается вывод, что окончание длительного периода доминирования одной политической силы не означает завершения процесса демократизации. Нерешенность вопросов национального и государственного строительства, влияние внешних центров, отсутствие эффективных институтов формирования компромиссных решений и защиты интересов меньшинств делают политическую жизнь нестабильной и осложняют принятие эффективных политических решений. Несмотря на победу на последних национальных выборах политиков нового поколения, традиционные для страны размежевания во многом продолжают определять выбор избирателя и могут вновь стать актуальными под воздействием конъюнктурных обстоятельств.

Ключевые слова: Черногория, национально-государственное строительство, политический режим, ситуационный национализм, политические размежевания, президентские выборы, парламентские выборы

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Introduction

Montenegro is a country with a smaller territory and population than the Kaliningrad region in Russia. Despite its size, the state is actively developing. Montenegro is distinguished by a very diverse and rich political life, characterized by a number of deep divisions inherited from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. These divisions are associated with a “varied” ethnic composition (interestingly, Montenegro is the only European country where the titular ethnic group, Montenegrins, accounts for less than half the population [Meleshkina, Pomiguyev 2021]), religious, linguistic, and cultural differences. Then, it is worth mentioning the geographical location of the country, which has strategically important access to the warm Mediterranean Sea, which attracts the attention of not only tourists but also various economic, political, and military alliances (Montenegro is a candidate for accession to the EU and a full member of NATO). All noted features become the cause of significant political conflicts within the country.

Since 2019, the Montenegrin political landscape has changed rapidly: parliamentary elections were held twice, including early ones; the government was replaced twice after a motion of no confidence was passed; and in 2023, the almost 30-year reign of M. Djukanovic (at different times the President and Prime Minister of the country) and his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) ended. An analysis of the political life of Montenegro after the collapse of Yugoslavia allows researchers to better understand the main trends in the development of new states formed after the collapse of large complex polities. This is relevant not only for the republics that currently exist on the territory of the former Yugoslavia but also for other regions, including the post-Soviet space.

The article analyzes the main factors determining the national and state development of Montenegro at the present stage, shows the role of these factors in the political processes in the country, including the latest national elections, and identifies the main internal divisions and their manifestations in politics, as well as prospects for further political development, including in the context of the influence of external actors and projects on the state.

Borders, center and periphery as factors in the formation of the state and nation

The presented study uses two approaches: the center-periphery theory of Rokkan and his followers, as well as the concept of “situational nationalism” as interpreted by Jenne and Bieber [2014].

Representatives of the Rokkan approach consider relations between centers and peripheries as an important factor in state building and national consolidation [Rokkan 1999; 1987]. For instance, Bartolini [2005] proposes to consider the formation of any territorial polity in terms of consolidation of the center and borders, determination of membership criteria, as well as political structuring. This universal functional logic allows us to describe the emergence and development of the state and nation as a process involving territorial consolidation, the formation of an institutional structure, and sociocultural mechanisms for unifying the community.

Internal institution building and nation consolidation are largely related to the strategy of border construction and the possibilities of their “exit” from the control of the center, which is created because of the application of this strategy and is partly determined by the international order. It is not so much a matter of territorial boundaries as of economic and sociocultural borders formed by the norms and rules of “membership” in the political community. The weakening of borders entails their expansion, opening, and reducing control over them. Strengthening borders entails their closure and/or reduction and is also characterized by increased control of the center over borders with subsequent consolidation [Popescu 2012]. In addition, an important factor in the integration of polity is not only the strengthening of external borders but also the weakening of internal ones [Schimmelfennig 2021].

Control over borders and the reduction of opportunities for actors to “exit” generate a process of increasing political production [Bartolini 2005]. The higher the control over borders, the more opportunities hierarchical structures must stabilize and legitimize their dominant positions, and vice versa. In this regard, the presence of centers external to any polity can complicate the process of consolidating borders and forming a nation or state, creating the basis for the existence of competing national projects and thus limiting the ability of elites to use mechanisms of national consolidation.

Despite the efforts of the elite to build a nation around certain principles, citizens choose their identity in the context of an ever-changing field of political identities at the international and domestic levels. Thus, it is quite difficult to promote a single “national narrative” from the authorities since there are several alternatives in a kind of “market of ideas”, among which certain groups of society choose.

Conflicts of identity hinder the success of any nation-building project, as described in the concept of “situational nationalism” proposed by Jenne and Bieber [2014]. Its authors rightly believe that national identity can change due to different geopolitical circumstances within the moving structure of identities. In other words, the national project depends largely on the struggle within and beyond national borders. Often, in competing for domination, political elites

position themselves as defenders of national interests, making promises that benefit one group at the expense of others, thereby increasing mutual ethnic differences and radicalizing society as a whole. Such national-building projects are likely to create conflicts on the periphery (variably understood) of the state, where issues of national identity are more blurred and therefore more vulnerable to “situational nationalism”.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of these approaches for understanding the political development of countries that arose during the collapse of large polities. They often retain the potential openness and inconsistency of borders of various kinds (territorial, political, cultural, religious, economic, etc.), accompanied by dispersion of central control and lack of consent of the population on “establishing” issues¹ [Meleshkina 2012; 2013]. This condition may manifest itself, among other things, in the presence of a significant proportion of national minorities, similar in terms of ethnic origin to the main population of the center of the former state, and/or in their compact residence. Disagreement on “establishing” issues may intensify in connection with acts of violence or other dramatic events that accompany the collapse of a large polity.

Circumstances associated with the disintegration of large polities, the specifics of the new independent republics, and the unresolved issues of the formation of nations or states often actualize contradictions between interpretations of the national community based on civil, state, and other, including ethnic, criteria, or, as Brubaker [2012] defines, between “state-framed” and “counter-state” interpretations. In the republics of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the “counter-state” version has become widespread.

As far as Montenegro is concerned, the tragic events that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia in a few other republics have been avoided. However, the historical traditions, the specifics of the SFRU’s national policy, and the events of the 1990s have marked the formation of the Montenegrin nation and the subsequent political developments.

Contextual features of Montenegrin nation-building

Like most modern states in the Western Balkans, Montenegro has a complex history.² Three factors are of particular importance here: the presence of relatively little experience of independent statehood; the entry of a number of territories into the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires; being part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from 1918 to 1941 (Kingdom of Yugoslavia since 1929); the SFRY since 1945; the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1992 to 2003;

¹ On the nature of the state and the criteria for membership in the nation, the basic rules of the game.

² A brief overview of the history of Montenegrin statehood is contained in (Meleshkina, Pomiguyev, 2021).

and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro from 2003 to 2006 [Meleshkina, Pomiguyev 2021].

In the first half of the 1990s, Montenegrin authorities supported the policies of S. Milosevic, but then the official attitude of Montenegro's authorities toward the Serbian regime's policy changed drastically; the course was taken for greater autonomy and public distancing from Serbia, as well as the construction of its own Montenegro nation.

The complex historical fate of Montenegro, the integration of its territories into various state formations, as well as the conflicts in the neighboring territories of the former Yugoslavia after its collapse, have determined the multi-ethnic composition of the population and the presence of different cultural and religious traditions. The existence of Montenegro as part of Yugoslavia did not contribute to the consolidation of a unified ethno-political identity among the population of the republic.³ This was largely due to the attempt of the communists within the SFRY to create a single Yugoslav people, united by a common ideological, rather than ethnic, framework.⁴

In addition, the internal administrative borders of socialist Yugoslavia did not take into account the traditional historical and ethnocultural specifics of the region. The formation of the federation led to the artificial fragmentation and isolation of previously united national communities (for example, a third of the Serbs found themselves outside the Republic of Serbia), as well as the crystallization of new communities, for example, Muslim Slavs (Slavs who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule, or Bosniaks) and Yugoslavs (mostly children from mixed marriages during the existence of the SFRY) [Allworth 1994].

Thus, the policy carried out in the SFRY was a factor that complicated the task of consolidating the borders of state and national construction in the republics after the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, which contributed to the formation of a complex ethnic composition of the population in the former SFRY republics, including Montenegro [Vučković, Petrović 2022].

At the moment, there are at least two main problems that have to be solved at the political level: building the Montenegrin nation in the context of a multi-ethnic composition (moreover, relations with Serbs and representatives of other (small) ethnic groups are to be built differently), as well as religious diversity (primarily due to the “counter-state” influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church for representatives of the “old” elite).

³ It is worth noting that in the mid-20th century, according to the population census, more than 90 % of the republic's residents called themselves Montenegrins, which more reflected their connection to their place of residence rather than to an ethnic group within the SFRY. See more details (Jenne, Bieber, 2014)

⁴ A particular example of the result of such a policy is the change in the surnames of Catholic Albanians in Montenegro, who added the Slavic suffix — *ić* to their surnames (Pavlović, 2003).

According to the latest census, slightly less than half the country calls themselves Montenegrins, while less than a third identify themselves as Serbs.⁵ The growth of the share of the former was facilitated by the “nationalization” measures taken during the reign of M. Djukanovic, including in terms of changes in Montenegrin legislation regarding language, citizenship, etc., as well as the official political rhetoric of this period.⁶ Most of the Montenegro’s population is Orthodox, but divisions between Montenegrins and Serbs partly overlap with divisions between supporters and opponents of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church.

Ethnic minorities living in the country, including Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians (most of whom are also Muslims), have long supported Djukanovic’s regime, considering it a kind of guarantee of inter-ethnic peace. At the same time, the situation has changed in recent years, primarily due to economic problems.⁷

These differences still affect the political development of the republic, including the course and results of the presidential and parliamentary elections.

An important internal political division that largely determined the outcome of the last cycle of national elections is the division between supporters and opponents of the political regime of M. Djukanovic and his DPS party, which existed for almost thirty years.⁸ The existence of this regime was supported, on the one hand, by the instruments of “stabilitocracy” [Pavlović 2016] and “privatization of the state”, deep penetration of political power and representatives of the ruling party into the private economic sphere, clientelism, party protectionism (Kaufman, 2000), and, on the other, nationalist rhetoric. Since the 2006 referendum, Montenegrin political life has been marked by a rise in nationalist rhetoric, disagreements over the interpretation of historical plots, conflicts over relations with Serbia, the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and state symbols (Morrison, 2018). At the same time, the ruling elite successfully used the image

⁵ Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u Crnoj Gori 2011. godine Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011 Stanovništvo Crne Gore prema polu, tipu naselja, nacionalnoj, odnosno etničkoj pripadnosti, vjeroispovijesti i maternjem jeziku po opštinama u Crnoj Gori. *Podgorica*. 2011. Retrieved January 5, 2023, from [http://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje \(1\).pdf](http://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje (1).pdf) Since the last population census in 2011, the situation has changed slightly: according to the results of a sociological survey by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights, conducted in December 2022, if the population census were carried out now, 48.3 % of the population would identify themselves as Montenegrins, Serbs — 32.7 %, Bosniaks — 8.3 %, Albanians — 4.5 %, Muslims — 3.9 %. *DPS bi glasalo 27.7 odsto građana, Evropu sad 15.2*. Retrieved from <https://mina.news/glavna/dps-bi-glasalo-277-odsto-gradana-evropu-sad-152/>

⁶ See [Meleshkina, Pomiguyev 2021].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In fact, M. Djukanovic ruled Montenegro since 1991, but in 2019, due to a scandal with a law restricting the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church, he, while remaining president in a parliamentary republic, lost majority control in parliament and became a kind of “lame duck.” For more information about the scandal and consequences, see: [Meleshkina, Pomiguyev 2021].

of “enemies” to strengthen their power: Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Russia in connection with the attempted coup in 2016 [Begović 2021].

For a long period, the opposition to this regime consisted mainly of political players claiming to reflect the interests of the Serbian population. However, in recent years, the situation has changed, and various political forces have found themselves in the ranks of the opposition to the regime, including those that were able to successfully use the “Serbian card” to push M. Djukanovic from power.

“External contour” of nation-state building in Montenegro

Contemporary political processes in Montenegro and prospects for national and state construction are not only influenced by ethnic or religious divisions within the country, linked to the country’s historical traditions, its existence as part of Yugoslavia, and the current influence of Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church, and not only by the attitude towards the Djukanovic regime. International players, both traditional for the region (for example, the center of the former Yugoslavia, Serbia, as well as Russia), and relatively new players, have a significant influence on the republic’s domestic political process.

Political life in the country is significantly influenced by dissatisfaction with the policies pursued by the authorities, as well as the emergence of a new generation of political figures who “open their eyes” to the corrupt nature of the past government of M. Djukanovic and the DPS.⁹

Since 2010, Montenegro has been a candidate for membership in the European Union,¹⁰ and in 2017, it became a member of NATO. International structures (European Commission, OSCE, Vienna Commission, etc.), including those ensuring the process of European integration, are becoming important actors in the internal political struggle. An appeal to these institutions is used within the country as a means of legitimizing domestic political decisions (Komar, 2019) and as a tool for political struggle with one’s opponents. In this regard, the case of the Minister of Justice, Human Rights, and Minorities, Vladimir Lepasavić, who worked in the 42nd Cabinet of Ministers under the leadership of Z. Krivokapić, called the “government of experts” due to the non-partisan status of almost all of its members, is indicative. V. Lepasavić, when asked by parliamentarians whether he, as a minister, was ready to recognize the fact of “genocide in Srebrenica” during the 1992–1995 war, replied that he would recognize it only when it was

⁹ Montenegro government toppled by no-confidence vote. *Balkan Insight*. 19.08.2022. Retrieved July 31, 2023, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/19/montenegro-government-toppled-by-no-confidence-vote/>

¹⁰ At the moment, all 33 chapters of the negotiation process are open, only three are closed (one more than in Serbia). See Factograph. *Montenegro*. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/factograph_montenegro.pdf

clearly proven.¹¹ As a result, the parliament decided to remove the minister from his post on the initiative of the head of the cabinet and also to approve a resolution strongly condemning the “genocide in Srebrenica” established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.¹² In turn, V. Leposavić stated that those politicians who once participated in these events are now asking him to confess to war crimes.¹³

This case indicates that the country’s desire to join the European Union obliges the Montenegrin authorities not only to look at the position of Western partners [Vukicevic 2017] in order to fulfill all packages of requirements of the EU and other European institutions imposed on candidate countries,¹⁴ but also to adhere to a unified European interpretation of historical events that took place in Europe in general and in the Balkans in particular [Pomiguyev, Salakhedinov 2021]. At the same time, the symbolic and historical field of Montenegrin politics can be considered a space of symbolic struggle with political opponents, including through attempts to redefine the borders and criteria of national identity.

The political forces of Montenegro are generally unanimous regarding the issue of the course towards European integration [Morrison 2018].¹⁵ The disagreements and splits on the issue of the country’s accession to NATO, which determined the contradictions between the main political forces and the specifics of the discourse of the election campaign in 2016,¹⁶ are largely a thing of the past.¹⁷ At the same time, there are some disagreements regarding the mechanisms of European integration and participation in other integration projects, including regional unions. The so-called “Open Balkans” (or “mini-Schengen”) project deserves special attention, the idea of which appeared back in the 1990s but was

¹¹ The Parliament of Montenegro approved the resignation of the Minister of Justice for statements about Srebrenica. *Tass*. 06/17/2021. Retrieved July 1, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11683005>

¹² *Rezolucija o genocidu u Srebrenici*. Retrieved July 1, 2023, from <https://zakoni.skupstina.me/zakoni/web/dokumenta/zakoni-i-drugi-akti/98/2450-14936-00-71-20-22-17.pdf>

¹³ *Saopštenije za javnost ministra pravde, ljudskih I manjinskih prava dr Vladimira Leposavića*. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://www.gov.me/clanak/saopstenije-za-javnost-ministra-pravde-ljudskih-i-manjinskih-prava-dr-vladimira-leposavica-2>

¹⁴ Montenegro 2020 Report. Commission Staff Working Document. *European Commission*. 06.10.2020. SWD (2020) 353 final, 131 p.

¹⁵ This also corresponds to the sentiments of the majority of citizens, 75 % of whom in December 2022 supported Montenegro’s membership in the EU, while only 13 % were against. *DPS bi glasalo 27.7 odsto građana, Evropu sad 15.2*. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from <https://mina.news/glavna/dps-bi-glasalo-277-odsto-gradana-evropu-sad-152/>

¹⁶ See for more details (Meleshkina, Pomiguyev, 2021).

¹⁷ At the same time, this issue remains divisive among voters. In particular, according to a survey by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights conducted in December 2022, 44 % of citizens are positive about the country’s membership in NATO, while 40 % assess this fact negatively. *DPS bi glasalo 27.7 odsto građana, Evropu sad 15.2*. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from <https://mina.news/glavna/dps-bi-glasalo-277-odsto-gradana-evropu-sad-152/>

not developed then due to the wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In 2017, the Albanian authorities again expressed the idea of the political and economic rapprochement of the three countries (Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia) at a regional summit in Trieste.¹⁸ On July 29, 2021, the presidents of the three countries signed agreements on the movement of goods, access to the labor market, and cooperation in the field of protection against natural disasters, and in 2022, on the exchange of food products, energy, and cinematography, as well as cooperation in emergency situations. At the same time, it was decided to open border crossings for citizens and goods of the three countries without restrictions as of January 1, 2023.¹⁹

In 2022, at the meeting of the countries that created the “Open Balkans”, the Prime Minister of Montenegro, D. Abazović, and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Z. Tegeltija, were present. They expressed a “personal position” on the benefits of the integration initiative,²⁰ but at the state level, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still skeptical about the prospects of a “mini-Schengen”. Thus, according to Z. Krivokapic, the country’s priority should remain membership in the EU, and according to the position of M. Djukanovic, such an integration project will lead to strengthening Russia’s position in the region and slowing down its accession to the EU.²¹ In fact, the new integration initiative is becoming one of the possible alternatives for the development of the states of the Western Balkans, which is interpreted by M. Djukanovic and his DPS party as a “counter-state” idea for the national-state development of Montenegro.

As noted above, another problem of the “external contour” is the relationship of the state authorities of Montenegro with Serbia, or rather, primarily with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is an important actor not only in Serbian [see, for example, Subotic 2019] but also Montenegrin politics [see, for example, Bakrač 2022]. The 2020 parliamentary elections were generally characterized by an atmosphere of highly polarized society on issues of church and national identity.²² They took place in the wake of protests by supporters of the SOC against the new law on freedom of religion, which deprived this church of a large share of property in Montenegro. Together with

¹⁸ Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans. *EURACTIV*. Retrieved July 1, 2023, from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/three-countries-agree-mini-schengen-in-the-balkans/>

¹⁹ Balkan leaders agree to open borders between nations in 2023. *AP-News*. Retrieved July 5, 2023, from <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-global-trade-7027282f6a93c2c12015d47717dc9d78>

²⁰ *Montenegro’s New PM Supports ‘Open Balkan’ Initiative*. Retrieved July 5, 2023, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/11/montenegros-new-pm-supports-open-balkan-initiative/>

²¹ Kosovo, Montenegro Presidents Warn of Open Balkan as Threat to the Region. *Exitnew*. 19.05.2022. Retrieved July 5, 2023, from <https://exit.al/en/kosovo-montenegro-presidents-warn-of-open-balkan-as-threat-to-the-region/>

²² Montenegro — Parliamentary Elections, 30 August 2020. *OSCE*. 30.08.2020. Retrieved July 9, 2023, from https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/7/462016_2.pdf

unresolved economic and political problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, these reasons aided in changing the political landscape of the country [Meleshkina, Pomiguyev, 2021; Banchev 2021].²³

According to the voting results on August 30, 2020, the majority of votes were cast for the DPS party of M. Djukanovic. However, it received six fewer mandates than in the previous convocation, which did not allow it to participate in the formation of the cabinet of ministers with its traditional coalition allies, the Social Democrats of Montenegro, the Bosniak Party, and the Albanian List.²⁴ At the same time, representatives of three opposition alliances, which opposed not only the policies of M. Djukanovic but also the adopted law on freedom of religion,²⁵ jointly managed to gain 41 seats in parliament: “For the Future of Montenegro”, “The World is Our Nation”, and “United Reformist Action” (URA). As a result, it was these political forces that received the right to form the government, and their leaders took key government positions in parliament and formed the so-called “expert government”.

The new Cabinet of Ministers of Montenegro, approved on December 4, 2020, was positioned as a “non-political government” or “government of experts”, all of whose members are non-partisan (except for Deputy Prime Minister D. Abazović from the United Reformist Action (URA)). The government itself was transitional in nature, and its goals were to fight corruption and prepare for new, fair elections.²⁶ This position of the new government in the person of Prime Minister Z. Krivokapic could have a positive impact on the process of smoothing out ethnic, political, and religious differences existing in the country, but expectations were not met.

The absence of effective institutional solutions to accommodate social discrepancies and dialogue aimed at achieving consensus among the opposing political forces in the country [Bieber 2010] has made this task more and more difficult, as evidenced by the political developments that took place between the elections.

²³ “Whoever is not faithful to his half-blooded Russia, may God make the flesh fall off him alive”. *Kommersant*. 01.11.2020. Retrieved from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4557365> (date of visit:12.09.2020); For more information on the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 2020 elections, see [Šljivić 2021]; D. Montenegro’s Canonical Orthodox Church and Transition to Democracy in the Aftermath of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*. 2021. No. 1. P. 47–61

²⁴ Saopštenje nakon 149. sjednice Komisije. *Državna izborna komisija Crne Gora*. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <https://dik.co.me/saopstenje-nakon-149-sjednice-komisije/>

²⁵ For more details, see (Šljivić, 2021).

²⁶ With the exception of D. Abazovic, who can be considered a political figure providing communication with the Albanian population in the absence of representatives of ethnic minorities in the coalition: Montenegro Elects First Government Without Djukanovic Party. *Balkaninsight*. 04.12.2020. Retrieved November 7, 2023, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/04/montenegro-elects-first-government-without-djukanovic-party/>

The Krivokapic government eventually succeeded in removing the articles of the law on religion that had sparked protests, raised the minimum wage, and implemented several measures to combat the shadow economy. At the same time, the government's activities gave rise to dissatisfaction and resistance from various political forces on all sides, including the leaders of the Democratic Front, who accused Krivokapic of the fact that instead of the expected improvement in relations between Montenegro and Serbia, the government achieved the opposite; moreover, they introduced sanctions against Russia.²⁷ As a result, the government has failed to deliver on many of its promises, including the legally required census in 2021 and electoral reform. The Krivokapic government was dismissed on February 4, 2022, after a motion of no confidence in parliament on the initiative of the United Reformist Action (URA) led by Deputy Prime Minister D. Abazovic, who was subsequently nominated by President M. Djukanovic to head the “minority cabinet”, with the support of the traffic police.

The conflict over the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which reduced support for the DPS in 2020, largely determined not only the specifics of political discussions and events in the inter-election period but also the peculiarity of the political situation in which the 2023 presidential elections took place. One of the election promises of the opposition in the 2020 parliamentary elections was not only a change in the law on religion but also the conclusion of an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which would guarantee the inviolability of its property, including that seized from the Montenegrin Church in 1918. The Krivokapic government carried out the work to draft such an agreement but did not sign it. The work of the cabinet took place in an atmosphere of smoldering and periodically flaring up conflict. The coalition partners disagreed on several issues, including the influence of the Serbian authorities and its church on the internal affairs of Montenegro.²⁸

The differences described, on the one hand, reflected the mood in society, and on the other, were used by the political elites in the political struggle. In particular, one of the indicative events were mass protests in the old capital of Montenegro, Cetinje, against the enthronement of the new Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Ioannikis, and the visit of the Cetinje Monastery by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Porfiry, in September 2021.

The agreement with the SOC was nevertheless signed, but already by the head of the new government, D. Abazović, in August 2022. This step actually

²⁷ Montenegro: Krivokapic's betrayal is sanctioned by the West — interview. *eadaily*. Retrieved November 7, 2023, from <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2021/08/06/chernogoriya-predatelstvo-krivokapicha-sankcionirovano-zapadom-intervyu>

²⁸ Montenegro's conservative pro-Serbian governing coalition collapses. *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/montenegros-conservative-pro-serbian-governing-coalition-collapses>

meant a rejection of the course towards autocephaly of the Montenegrin Church, which led to a weakening of tensions in relations with the SOC and Belgrade but became the cause of a constitutional crisis. Two weeks after the agreement was signed, D. Abazović was dismissed by the votes of the majority of Skupština deputies on the initiative of the DPS. Commenting on the resignation, DPS Secretary General I. Vujović accused Abazović of colluding with Serbian President A. Vučić, who, by signing the agreement, allegedly wanted to carry out “the first phase of the operation to destabilize Montenegro in order to turn it off the European path”.²⁹

An interesting fact is that the need for European integration does not cause serious disagreements among the Montenegrin political elite; only the approaches to achieving the goal differ. Some believe that building close ties with neighboring countries and developing new integration projects will bring the country closer to the EU, while others, on the contrary, are skeptical about such ideas, believing that this will lead to the country’s dependence on Serbia and even Russia.

Thus, the “external contour” of the nation-state building of Montenegro is characterized by the presence of influential foreign policy centers, the impact of which is contradictory. On the one hand, the influence of Serbia and the SOC blurs the boundaries of the Montenegrin nation and fuels the divisions existing in society. On the other hand, the prospect of joining the European Union and the agreement of the majority of political forces with it is a kind of framework uniting the political community, potentially capable of smoothing out the divisions existing in society. However, at present this is not yet observed as a stable trend: until the last parliamentary elections, the general orientation towards joining the EU was combined with the struggle of two main interpretations of nation-state building on the way to the European Union (“state-framed”, conventionally “anti-Serbian”, and “alternative”, which is conditionally “pro-Serbian”). In a sense, it can be said that from 2020 onwards, these attitudes are changing political roles, as evidenced by the results of the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.

“Inner contour” of nation-state building: reformatting the modern political system

As noted above, the specifics of political life were determined not only by the divisions between Montenegrins and Serbs, supporters and opponents of the Serbian Orthodox Church, entry into NATO, etc., but also by the presence of ethnic minorities, which played an important role in supporting the Djukanovic

²⁹ Vujović: Neizglasavanje članova Sudskog savjeta završni čin antievropske politike Abazovića. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/617814/vujovic-neizglasavanje-clanova-sudskog-savjeta-završni-cin-antievropske-politike-abazovica>

regime, in which sometimes veto players make decisions at the national level. However, the last two election cycles have demonstrated not only a change in their role in the new political configuration but also a decrease in influence on decisions made in general.

After the 2016 elections, the authorities attempted to change the rules for the representation of national minorities through electoral reform. Its development began in 2018 but did not find support from the opposition amid consideration of the law on religious freedom,³⁰ which led to the closure of the EU-backed electoral reform council. As a result, the changes never took place due to the lack of support from the qualified majority required for amendments to the electoral legislation.³¹

Neither the cabinet of Z. Krivokapic nor, even more so, the “minority coalition” with the government of D. Abazovic were able to carry out electoral reform. The only changes that occurred during this time were limited to the actual abolition of the “residence qualification” of voters, eliminated by the Charter Court.³²

It is worth noting that, at the moment, there is some protection for ethnic minorities in the electoral process. Thus, parties representing Bosniaks and Albanians have the right to representatives in parliament if their list receives at least 0.7 % (with an electoral threshold of 3 %), and for the Croat minority, a mandate is possible if the list receives 0.35 % of the votes [Meleshkina, Pomiguev 2021].

Thus, the dynamic political struggle in Montenegro unfolds within the existing legal framework. The main trends of the new stage of nation-state building, which can be counted from 2019 (the conflict with the SOC), were a significant rejuvenation of the political composition and the “politicization of experts”. And if everything is clear with the first one—a new generation of 30- to 40-year-old politicians³³ is entering the scene—then the second point needs clarification.

Thus, the “non-political” government of Z. Krivokapic, where there was only one party member of the cabinet (D. Abazovic, URA), turned out to be the birthplace of new politicians: ministers of finance and social security M. Spajic, economy J. Milatovic, and defense O. Inzhak founded the “Europe Now!” movement, eventually occupying the posts of speaker of parliament, president of Montenegro,

³⁰ Demokrate napustile odbor: Povuci iz procedure zakon koji izaziva medjunacionalnu mrznju. *VoP*. 10.12.2019. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://volimpodgoricu.me/2019/12/10/demokrate-napustile-odbor-povuci-iz-procedure-zakon-koji-izaziva-medjunacionalnu-mrznju/>

³¹ Koprivica D., Kovačević M. Izborna reforma — potreba društva ili sredstvo za partijsku trgovinu?. *Podgorica, mart*. 2021. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Izborna-reforma_ONLINE.pdf

³² Koprivica D., Kovačević M. Izborna reforma — potreba društva ili sredstvo za partijsku trgovinu?. *Podgorica, mart*. 2021. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Izborna-reforma_ONLINE.pdf

³³ IPU Parline. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from https://data.ipu.org/node/114/data-on-youth?chamber_id=13577

and mayor of the capital, respectively. After his resignation, V. Liposavic created his own party “Justice for All!”, which did not enter parliament, gaining 2.77 % of the votes.

The political crisis that arose after the motion of no confidence in the cabinet of Z. Krivokapic, and even more so after the resignation of the government of D. Abazovic, led to the fact that none of the parties was able to form a government, and in the fall of 2022, the DPS, among other things, lost the majority of local elections, which symbolized the beginning of the end of its dominance.

Another political trend that clearly manifested itself in the last presidential and parliamentary elections was the intensification of contradictions between supporters and opponents of the existing political regime and the actualization of the corresponding demarcation, which became possible largely due to the arrival of a new generation in politics.

The presidential elections held in March–April 2023 put an end to the long tenure of DPS leader M. Djukanovic as head of the republic. A number of factors contributed to this. Thus, the specifics of M. Djukanovic’s policy and the population’s fatigue from unresolved economic issues and high corruption³⁴ played an important role. Indirect evidence of the “criminal” nature of M. Djukanovic’s power was the fact that the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) chose him as the 2015 Person of the Year, according to the Organized Crime and Corruption magazine.³⁵ During Djukanovic’s time in power, there have been repeated allegations that the country has become a haven for smugglers and illegal financial transactions. Money laundering was facilitated by Montenegro’s decision to introduce the euro as its national currency, despite the fact that the country has not yet joined the

³⁴ According to a sociological survey by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), conducted in August 2020, unemployment (39 %), economic development (28 %), youth emigration (27 %), corruption and crime (20 %), the fight against the Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic (18 %) were named among the main development problems in Montenegro. *NDI Montenegro Public Opinion Poll*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-montenegro-public-opinion-poll-2020> According to a sociological survey by the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, in June 2022, 51.6 % believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction and only 20.4 % in the right direction. *Političko javno mnjenje Crne Gore*. Jun 2022. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from https://www.cedem.me/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Prezentacija-jun-2022_FINAL-06072022.pdf In 2022, according to the World Bank, the country ranked 73rd in terms of GDP per capita. *GDP per capita, PPP*. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD> In March 2022, the share of unemployed in the country was 23.75 % of the active population. *Evidencija nezaposlenih lica*. Prvi kvartal 2022.godine. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.zzzcg.me/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Evidencije-nezaposlenih-lica-Izvje%C5%A1ta-o-radu-za-prvi-kvartal-2022.-godine.pdf>

³⁵ Milo Djukanovic. 2015 person of the year in organized crime and corruption. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <http://www.occrp.org/en/poy/2015>

EU.³⁶ Another scandal erupted around Prva Banka, controlled by Djukanovic's brother, where the European Parliament called for an investigation into suspicions of money laundering.³⁷ In this context, D. Abazovic's words that the motion of no confidence in his government was a direct consequence of the politician's struggle with smugglers seemed quite logical.³⁸

M. Djukanovic was one of the main candidates in the presidential elections. He listed integration into the European Union among other promises in his election campaign. Another one concerned the danger for Montenegro allegedly coming from Russia, as well as from the ranks of "Serbian nationalists" who have ambitions to develop the "Serbian world" by analogy with the "Russian world" and create an anti-NATO "Greater Serbia". From this point of view, he assessed the upcoming elections: "In the coming days, a decision must be made not only regarding the European path of Montenegro, the development of a multi-ethnic civil society, and sustainable economic growth. This is a decision regarding the future of the Balkans as well as stability in Europe".³⁹ During the election campaign, Djukanovic behaved like a statesman, while at the same time creating the impression that the country would plunge into chaos if he were defeated.

In addition to Djukanovic, several candidates participated in the first round. One of his rivals in the presidential elections was A. Mandic, the leader of the coalition of pro-Serbian and pro-Yugoslav opposition, the Democratic Front (In the parliamentary elections of 2023, the coalition "For the Future of Montenegro"). This political force advocates a closer union with Serbia, being an opponent of NATO membership, and taking pro-Russian positions. The party is supported by about a fifth of the population.⁴⁰ A representative of the "eternal opposition" in Montenegrin politics, Mandic was known as a supporter of the creation of a joint state with Serbia as well as a Serbian

³⁶ Interestingly, the use of the euro as a national currency in a non-EU country is contrary to the Maastricht criteria for European integration. See: EU warns Montenegro over Euro. *B92*. 2007. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2007&mm=10&dd=10&nav_id=44442

³⁷ Montenegro Urged to Probe PM's Family Bank. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/22/montenegro-urged-to-probe-pm-s-family-bank-01-21-2016/> The President of Montenegro is suspected of machinations of the Cosa Nostra mafia clan. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://newdaynews.ru/balkans/742180.html>

³⁸ Montenegro Government Toppled by No-Confidence Vote. *BalkanInsight*. 2022, August 19. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/19/montenegro-government-toppled-by-no-confidence-vote/>

³⁹ Đukanović M. Presidential Elections in Montenegro Amid Hybrid Russian Threats. *Opinion*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.newsweek.com/presidential-elections-montenegro-amid-hybrid-russian-threats-opinion-1790986>

⁴⁰ According to the results of the parliamentary elections, the pro-Serbian coalition gained almost 15% of the votes, and A. Mandić — 19% in the first round of elections. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/KONACNI-REZULTATI-2023.pdf>; <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/konacni-rezultati-2023.pdf>

nationalist and opponent of Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration. During the election campaign, Mandić tried to appeal to centrist voters, not speaking out against Montenegro's membership in NATO and supporting European integration. Opposing the Djukanović regime, Mandić argued that the presidential elections "are a battle for reconciliation, a battle for everyone who does not want Montenegro to be a captive of the mafia".⁴¹

As for M. Djukanović's other rival, J. Milatović, his appearance and especially his success were unexpected for the Montenegrin political process. J. Milatović is a relatively new and "young" political figure. Having received a good economic education at Western universities, he worked in the banking sector and also actively collaborated with various international organizations in the scientific, economic, and diplomatic spheres. As Minister of Economy and Economic Development, he became one of the authors of the economic development program of Montenegro "Europe Now", which formed the ideological basis of the program of the political movement bearing the same name, primarily of the economic plan: issues of investment in the real sector of the economy, completion of the construction of the Bar-Belgrade, etc.

While advocating the country's membership in the EU, Milatović did not deny the importance of economic cooperation with Serbia as well as with other countries in the region. Milatović diplomatically ignored issues of attitude towards anti-Russian sanctions and the special military operation in Ukraine in his speeches, although he is a supporter of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Milatović's election campaign was marked by excesses, indicating the intense political struggle and the use of the existing separations in the country by political forces. In the former capital of Montenegro, Cetinje, Milatović was attacked by a group of people while he was going to the electoral assembly.⁴² This was followed by the publication of fake news and negative information against Milatović and his team by organizations and activists supporting the current President Djukanović. Participants in the action in Cetinje described the incident as a "peaceful protest of citizens".⁴³

The winners of the first round of elections were Djukanović and Milatović. In the second round, a number of candidates (Mandić, Beca from Democratic Montenegro, and Danilović from United Montenegro) supported the latter. Even before the first round, Prime Minister D. Abazović's United Action Reform (URA) party, which did

⁴¹ *Andrija Mandić predsjednički kandidat*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/641567/andrija-mandic-predsjednicki-kandidat>

⁴² *Milatović napadnut na Cetinju*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/predsjednickiizbori/405708/milatovic-napadnut-na-cetinju.html>; *VIDEO Milatović jedva uspio da uđe na konvenciju, demonstranti nasrtali i psovali*. Retrieved from https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/647096/video-milatovic-jedva-uspjio-da-udje-na-konvenciju-demonstranti-nasrtali-i-psovali?utm_source=vijesti&utm_medium=article_related&utm_campaign=article_intext_related

⁴³ *Učesnici protesta na Cetinju: Milatović se želi predstaviti žrtvom, naš skup bio je nenasilan*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/ucesnici-protesta-na-cetinju-milatovic-se-zeli-predstaviti-zrtvom-nas-skup-bio-je-nenasilan>

not field a candidate in these elections, announced that it would enter into an alliance with the Democrats and subsequently expressed its support for Milatovic. M. Lekic's party, which had been trying to form a new government to replace Abazovic's cabinet since September 2022, also announced support for Milatovic. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Social Democrats supported the then-incumbent president.

Both presidential candidates declared their commitment to the country's entry into the European Union during the election campaign and promised to work to restore economic prospects. The tone of the campaign in the media and social networks became more aggressive in the second round, when competitors began using staged videos and "black" PR. Both candidates resorted to negative campaigning: Milatovic presented his candidacy as the embodiment of a young future compared to the past president, whom he accused of using power in the interests of his circle, condoning corruption and crime. Milatovic declared that the Djukanovic era was over, campaigning on the need for change and promising a better future.⁴⁴

Djukanovic accused his opponent of "brutal populism" and argued that Milatovic was a proxy for Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church and plunged the country into crippling debt while serving as economy minister.⁴⁵ He described the second round of presidential elections as a choice between an independent Montenegro and a country controlled by Serbia and Russia.

As a result, J. Milatovic received 58.88 % of the votes, and M. Djukanovic received 41.12 %.

The results of the first and second rounds served as an impetus for reforming the party-political system. After several unsuccessful attempts to form the Government of Montenegro, the then-current President M. Djukanovic, three days before the presidential elections on March 16, 2023, dissolved the parliament and scheduled new elections for June 11, 2023. On March 17, 41 Members of Parliament (MPS) filed a constitutional complaint against the presidential decree, arguing that it did not indicate any legal grounds for the dissolution of parliament, but the necessary majority of judges was subsequently not found in the Constitutional Court to make such a decision.⁴⁶

On March 24, the president publicly stated that deputies who ignore his decree to dissolve parliament would be prosecuted. In the period leading up to the elections, a number of police and government officials were arrested as part of ongoing efforts to combat organized crime. As a result, on March 30,

⁴⁴ *Milatović: Građani 2. aprila odlučuju hoće li okrenuti ledja prošlosti*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from https://translated.turbopages.org/proxy_u/en-ru.ru.082ef73f-64982b46-ec2568e9-74722d776562/https/www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/650177/milatovic-gradjani-2-aprila-odlucuju-hoce-li-okrenuti-ledja-proslosti

⁴⁵ *Djukanović: Milatović nastupa s platforme Velike Srbije*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/649703/djukanovic-milatovic-nastupa-s-platforme-velike-srbije>

⁴⁶ Montenegroin deputies protested the dissolution of parliament in the Constitutional Court. *TASS*. 03/17/2023. Retrieved November 7, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17298173>

the Director of Police was dismissed by the government at the proposal of the Minister of Internal Affairs.

On the eve of the parliamentary elections, some changes took place in the structure of parties and alliances. In particular, after Djukanovic's defeat in the presidential elections, he was replaced as chairman of the DPS by the relatively young D. Zivkovic. The coalition "For the Future of Montenegro" (which includes the Democratic Front with one of the leaders in the person of the presidential election candidate A. Mandic), led by Z. Krivokapic in the previous elections, was headed by M. Knezevic. On May 17, 2023, a new coalition, "Dritan and Alexa—Count Boldly", was created with the participation of former Prime Minister D. Abazovic.

It is significant that the past parliamentary elections were characterized by a change in the main political agenda. The main issues of the election campaign were economic development and welfare, while ethnic and religious issues were not widely discussed. As a result, there were the following outcomes: a significant defeat of M. Djukanovic's party and the formation of a new configuration of political forces led by a new presidential force.

In the last elections, the centrist movement "Europe Now" (25.55 %) came first, to which the new President of the country, J. Milatovic, belongs. The bloc led by the former president's Democratic Socialist Party (Together) took second place (23.26 %). Third came the party "For the Future of Montenegro" (14.76 %); then the union of the United Reformist Action and Democratic Montenegro ("Count Boldly") followed fourth with 12.5 %. The Bosnian Party, the bloc of the Socialist People's Party and the Democratic Union, the Albanian Forum, the Albanian Alliance, and the Croatian Civic Initiative also entered parliament.

The election results cemented the defeat of M. Djukanovic and his party, led to a change in the political agenda, and symbolized the entry of a new generation of politicians with little to no experience. In just a few months, this generation gained an active voter base.⁴⁷ This indicates that the Montenegrin population is tired of old politicians and problems, as well as the strive of many citizens to get out of the vicious circle of ethnic and religious differences in order to finally deal with "non-political" issues of socio-economic development, the fight against corruption, etc.

The political changes that occurred in 2023 are again "reversing" the direction of the official political course in the field of nation-state building. In order to enter the large European family, the new authorities are abandoning the "pro-Serbian-anti-Serbian" dichotomy as the main idea of building the Montenegrin nation in favor of globalist ideas of friendship with everyone, recognition of the position of all parties

⁴⁷ Milo: says goodbye, but doesn't leave. *Balkanist*. 06/12/2023. Retrieved December 7, 2023, from <https://balkanist.ru/milo-proshhaetsya-no-ne-uhodit/>

to conflicts in the Western Balkans, and alleviating societal stress by drawing attention to socio-economic problems.

The political events of the last three years in Montenegro showed that while the current power elite, led by M. Djukanovic, was looking for enemies outside, the younger generation of politicians found an enemy in M. Djukanovic himself. In other words, due to the actions of politicians of the new generation, divisions regarding attitudes towards the political regime (a kind of inter-generational gap) acted as a unifying incentive for opposition political forces, which contributed to a change of regime and the coming to power of new political forces.

However, the events of recent years have shown that the relevance of disagreements on an ethnic and religious basis remains, and in the future, this may significantly affect the political process. Some analysts see the recent elections as a “critical fork in the road” that could determine Montenegro’s future trajectory, either in terms of accelerating EU membership or weakening ties with the EU and NATO.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The analysis showed that for a long time, the political development of Montenegro was determined by the historical features of its formation and the legacy of the former Yugoslavia. In particular, the center of the former Yugoslavia, Serbia, played a significant role, which still retains influence on the internal political processes of Montenegro and determines the national and religious identification of a significant part of its population.

Divisions between groups of citizens identifying themselves as Serbs or Montenegrins, as well as between the state and the church, determined the balance of political forces for a long time. The fear of national minorities (primarily Albanians and Bosniaks) of the national policy of Serbia and the skillful maneuvering of M. Djukanovic, who played the national card, for a long time ensured support for his regime and the dominance of the DPS in the political arena. However, problems of economic development, corruption, and control of financial flows, as well as Djukanovic’s miscalculations in relation to the Orthodox Church, coupled with the lack of serious progress towards European integration, led to a weakening of support for the regime by national minorities, an increase in opposition sentiments, and ultimately the defeat of Djukanovic in the presidential elections and the DPS in the parliamentary ones. Representatives of a younger generation of politicians came to power in Montenegro, relying less on the traditional ethno-confessional divisions in Montenegro and more

⁴⁸ Vujović Z. Nenezić A. Montenegro in Crises: Navigating Political Turmoil and the Path to European Integration. *Suedosteuroopa-Mitteilungen*. 2023, Iss. 2, P. 25–44.

on solving economic problems and accelerating the process of the country's accession to the EU.

However, the end of a long period of dominance by one political force does not mean the end of the democratization process. It is worth recognizing that economic processes in the country largely remain under the control of the Djukanovic clan, and the DPS, although it has lost its dominant position, is still quite popular and strong. In turn, there is significant fragmentation and instability in the opposition camp, even taking into account the emergence of a new presidential force that is forming a coalition as a winner.

The unresolved issues of national and state building, the influence of external centers (Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the EU, Russia, Balkan unions, etc.), the lack of effective institutions for the formation of compromise solutions, and the protection of the interests of minorities make political life unstable and complicate the adoption of effective political decisions.

As the latest national elections show, the idea of joining the EU is not attractive enough to overcome all the differences between political forces, and the country's traditional divisions will still remind of themselves, especially when the "honeymoon" of the new authorities with the multinational and multi-religious population of Montenegro has passed.

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