

On the Brink of Sanity

**REPORT ON THE STATE  
OF RADICALIZATION**

**AND VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM**

**IN MONTENEGRO**



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



CENTAR ZA  
DEMOKRATSKU  
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# INTRODUCTION

In a functioning democracy, violence is not an acceptable way of seeking political or social change. Today's liberal constitutions protect the right of citizens to defend even those views that are extreme, but they also limit the freedom of speech that promotes hatred and violence.

In Montenegro, hatred and violence have moved from margins to the center of public and media space in the last few years, as influential organizations - political groups and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) - come up as the main stimulators of social radicalization.

Political developments and relations between the state and the SPC serve as triggers for manifesting radical views and violence. However, it is clear that sharp reactions of the general public are, for the most part, not a spontaneous response to these developments, but rather a result of the coordinated and organized increasing and decreasing of tensions, designed so as to cater for current political interests of different parts of the political spectrum.

This can easily be observed with the formation of minority government, which did not have the support of the extreme voices, and so a political agreement was reached to avoid destabilization. On the other hand, developments around the fundamental agreement show that this topic is deliberately used to build up tensions and stop reform processes.

There can be no talk of an effective fight against violent extremism in a situation where powerful political organizations use radicalization to attain their goals. Factors that have a long-lasting effect on polarization and radicalization, such as hate speech or disinformation, need to be countered with a united reaction of both institutions and civil society, but this becomes impossible when polarization and radicalization are being promoted by political power-holders.

Prevention of violent extremism in Montenegro is left to institutions that lack relevant authority and political support; as for re-

pression, institutions that have the capacity to detect, investigate and suppress VE are often facing politically motivated obstacles in their work.

In the past year, the system for combating violent extremism was stagnating, while extremism, on the other hand, was thriving. This disinterest of decision makers in resolving these issues is already taking a major toll on stability and social cohesion in Montenegro. If this practice was to go on, it could finally shatter the image of Montenegro as a civil and multicultural state, and instead lead to country being labelled as an oasis for right-wing and ethno-nationalist extremism.



## **WHAT IS THE STATE DOING, AND WHAT IS IT NOT DOING?**

National Interdepartmental Operational Team for Countering Violent Extremism, Terrorism, Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing (NOT) has been working in full political and legal capacity for no more than a few months.

The coordinator and members of NOT were appointed in June 2021, more than half a year after the election of the 42nd Government of Montenegro. Since the election of the new, 43rd Government in late April 2022, NOT has been in a technical mandate and essentially non-functional because many of its members were reassigned to new posts or are no longer working in state administration. However, the activity of NOT was winding down even back in September 2021, amid events surrounding the enthronement of the SPC Metropolitan in Cetinje that prompted government crisis, only to come to a complete halt in late 2021, when political talks of a new minority government were initiated.

Due to the delay in setting up NOT, the 2021 Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Radicalization and Violent Extremism was not drawn up, and measures provided for in the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism in the Western Balkans and the Strategy were implemented instead.

In this short timeframe, several important activities were carried out towards establishing regional cooperation, through visits to regional institutions and organizations in charge of combating terrorism and violent extremism. Cooperation was maintained with international partners and the civil sector through trainings and information exchange.

The annual conference of the National Platform for Countering Violent Extremism was held in cooperation with the CDT. Also, CDT provided support in drafting the 2022 Action Plan, which was not adopted due to government crisis.

Nevertheless, there was an evident lack of political support for the work of NOT. No progress has been made towards institutionalization and better integration of this authority in state administration system. No funds were allocated for its operation, which is why NOT is still relying heavily on support from donors and non-governmental sector. No progress has been made with the idea to set up a special department within the Police Directorate for monitoring extremism and terrorism.

Poor relations within the government and mistrust between and within state authorities have reflected on the functioning of a cross-governmental body such as NOT. The current composition of NOT held only a couple of sessions, and there was no substantial information exchange among its members. State bodies with operational remit in the area of violent extremism and terrorism did not share information about the growing radicalization and organized extremist groups with all members of NOT, which is why they had to rely on media coverage to stay informed about extremism, which they are supposed to be combating.

On the other hand, violent extremism was not standing still. In the past year, right-wing ethno-nationalist structures in Montenegro started getting a semblance of organized structures, and it no longer takes special skills and access to operational and classified information to be able to recognize this.

The daily monitoring and analysis of the publicly available sources show that a complex structure has been created on the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian right-wing spectrum, made up of individu-

als, groups and organizations that operate online and onsite, with a strong backing from politicians and church. They are not always formally interlinked, but they nurture similar ideologies and hatred towards the common enemy. This radicalism does not only build its strength from the ideological and motivational elements, but also from its ties to the criminal subculture that is capable of turning extreme intentions into extreme acts. Alongside individual displays of the pro-Montenegrin right-wing views, there are also indications of organised structures cropping up, predominantly as a response to pro-Russian and pro-Serbian organizations.

Motivation indicators for violent extremist activity<sup>1</sup> are highly visible on social media. The coordinated and overlapping networks of interlinked authentic, fake and bot profiles, often under the veil of activism or humor, produce, promote and consume high volume of content, narratives, videos, messages filled with hate speech, xenophobia, discrimination and misogyny<sup>2</sup>. There are also the ever-present revisionist narratives of World War II, as well as those celebrating war crimes and criminals from the 1990s.

Radicalized individuals take things to the next level by posting photos of themselves posing with symbols of violent extremism and weapons, and then build up to making direct threats to individuals or expressing their desire to carry out violence against their ideological targets. In practical terms, this means proclaiming no-go zones, places to be avoided by their ideological opponents, setting up roadblocks and stating in which cities their opponents are not welcome.

A particularly alarming indicator of radicalization of the wider community that comes into contact with extreme policies or groups is that violence becomes accepted as a necessary means for achieving ideological goals, and non-violent methods get dis-

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<sup>1</sup> US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators 2021 Edition [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/Mobilization\\_Indicators\\_Booklet\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/Mobilization_Indicators_Booklet_2021.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Goran Delic, Milica Kovacevic, Radoje Cerovic, Disinformation network in Montenegro: Do we see the elephant in the room?, Center for Democratic Transition, May 2022, <https://www.cdtmn.org/analyze/mreza-dezinformacija-u-crnoj-gori-vidimo-li-slona-u-prostoriji/>



carded as ineffective. This is where we reach a whole new level of relativization, where increasingly large parts of society are utterly unable to recognize extremism on their side of the political spectrum.

It is worth noting that politicians often slap the extremist label on those who are not in fact extremists, thus directly stirring up confusion and obfuscating the very notion, making it difficult to distinguish between extremists and those that do not fall under this category.

## **TRIGGERS OR SUPPRESSORS: WHO IS ACTUALLY FUELING EXTREMISM?**

Authors well versed in the topic of radicalization agree in that it entails a process of change, personal and political transformation. It is a long-term process, and one does not become a radical overnight, although there are “catalysts” that can accelerate the process. Authors of the pyramid model of radicalization provide the following explanation: “political radicalization of individuals, groups, and mass publics occurs in a trajectory of action and reaction in which state action often plays a significant role. Radicalization emerges in a relationship of intergroup competition and conflict in which both sides are radicalized.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past year (as well as in the previous years), political and social life in Montenegro became an embodiment of such intergroup competition. Political and social developments, be it local, regional or international, serve as catalysts or triggers that set in motion this kind of group dynamic, whereas instigators and agitators - politicians and church - act on a domestic front, but also through foreign influences.

Regulation of mutual relations between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church is one of the tried-and-tested catalysts for

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<sup>3</sup> Diego Muro, What does Radicalisation Look Like? Four Visualisations of Socialisation into Violent Extremism, CIDOB, 2016, [https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie\\_de\\_publicacion/notes\\_internacionals\\_cidob/n1\\_163/what\\_does\\_radicalisation\\_look\\_like\\_four\\_visualisations\\_of\\_socialisation\\_into\\_violent\\_extremism](https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionals_cidob/n1_163/what_does_radicalisation_look_like_four_visualisations_of_socialisation_into_violent_extremism)

radicalization in the society. It is precisely because of its conflict potential and impossibility to reach a compromise that this issue was put on the back burner for years. Since the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in 2019, it has served as an inexhaustible source of tension, carrying the potential to make large crowds take to the streets and generate violence. With the backing of political forces in Montenegro and the political, financial and media support from the region, the SPC successfully managed to mobilize tens of thousands of citizens in 2020 protests and thus let the genie out of the bottle. It was not possible to channel the energy accumulated in the newly-formed mass processions movement, nor to calm down the radicalized individuals and groups by simply instructing them to do so. Parts of the movement transformed into conservative political projects, but the more radical part continued to exist through organized right-wing groups.<sup>4</sup> These events triggered the radicalization and grouping on the other side of the political spectrum as well, with radicalized individuals increasingly voicing their intention to abandon institutional action and non-violent forms of protest.

The social conflict reached its peak in early September 2021 in Cetinje, during the enthronement of Joanikije Micovic, Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The official documents and reports are not available to the public even to this day, but, at the time, numerous sources were quoting very grim security assessments performed prior to this gathering.<sup>5</sup> Police was warning of "extremists on both sides"<sup>6</sup>, while numerous media reported about the presence of suspicious persons and groups<sup>7</sup>. Despite all of this, and despite the fact that the Ministry of Interior and the police were against it, the event took place, verging on a severe conflict and with police intervention, which was rightly criticized

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<sup>4</sup> Center for Democratic Transition, series "On the Brink of Sanity", "Church yet again assuming the role of a party" (part 1, 2 and 3) 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIfNXFgAbDE&list=PLIgfoeQv2VjSorTVD-C8bNZUnkv4SkClpW&index=2&t=8s&ab\\_channel=CDTCrnaGora](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIfNXFgAbDE&list=PLIgfoeQv2VjSorTVD-C8bNZUnkv4SkClpW&index=2&t=8s&ab_channel=CDTCrnaGora)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3gbDogWjkQ&ab\\_channel=CDTCrnaGora](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3gbDogWjkQ&ab_channel=CDTCrnaGora)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siMaNiiW0Zo&list=PLIgfoeQv2VjSorTVD-C8bNZUnkv4SkClpW&index=29&ab\\_channel=CDTCrnaGora](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siMaNiiW0Zo&list=PLIgfoeQv2VjSorTVD-C8bNZUnkv4SkClpW&index=29&ab_channel=CDTCrnaGora)

<sup>5</sup> Lela Scepovic, "Enthronement to take place in Cetinje despite risks and tensions", Radio Free Europe, 03.09.2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-cetinje-joanikije-/31442525.html>

<sup>6</sup> MINA, "Sekulovic: There are extremes on both sides", 01.09.2021, <https://mina.news/vijesti-iz-crne-gore/sekulovic-postoje-ekstremi-sa-obje-strane/>

<sup>7</sup> Kacusa Krsmanovic, "Serb extremists deployed in the Cetinje monastery, groups are also ready and waiting in Podgorica", Pobjeda, 04.09.2021, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/srpski-ekstremisti-rasporedu-u-cetinjskom-manastiru-grupe-spreme-cekaju-i-u-podgorici>



by many on account of excessive use of coercive means. Fortunately, there were no casualties or other serious consequences.

It seemed that this topic was at least temporarily sidelined from the agenda. The new government was established following promises made of European integration and plans to confront issues that affect the majority of Montenegrin citizens, and thus garnering their undivided support. However, the issue of signing of the fundamental agreement with the SPC was re-introduced in late June 2022. Yet again, this was done without a dialogue, as the government put forward a hard-and-fast document, without giving the possibility to make so much as a change to a comma placement. The very manner in which this issue was introduced is raising suspicion that this was a deliberate attempt to set political radicalization in motion.

European Parliament resolution warns that foreign interference can also be pursued through influence in and the instrumentalization of religious institutes, such as Russian influence in Orthodox churches in the region, including by sowing division among local populations, developing a biased writing of history and promoting an anti-EU agenda.<sup>8</sup>

However, historical revisionism does not exclusively belong to the SPC. At a time of growing ethno-nationalist radicalization, revisionism is a tool that all parties resort to. Wartime collaborators of occupiers, Joanikije Lipovac, Krsto Popovic, Osman Rastoder and others, are now hailed as heroes and martyrs in the unfounded interpretations by nationalists.

Political party frictions often inspire radicalization; however, political actors are also often able to control and stop the tensions they had instigated. Once the 42nd Government of Montenegro was given a vote of no-confidence in early February 2022 and the formation of a minority government was announced, those less

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<sup>8</sup> European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.html)

informed might have expected that the propaganda machine would come swooping down on the new PM-designate and government constituents and that Montenegro would be facing new roadblocks and violent protests. However, it all took place in solemn silence. The Serbian pro-government tabloids fell silent, the SPC in Montenegro issued a "purged" statement, memers and bots were oddly quiet, even the Serbian interior minister had nothing to say. The Democratic Front was not urging their activists to take to the streets and start arming for fight, and so the protests staged by the Democrats failed to amass the necessary number of participants, but also went along without radical outbursts.

State holiday celebrations are a trigger for radical behavior as well. This year, the Statehood Day celebration on July 13 in Niksic ended with tear gas. A group of people toting right-wing insignia and singing right-wing songs provoked riots in the town square where celebration was taking place. Although tensions were being fueled for days prior to the event and the incident was clearly imminent, the police only intervened on-site, instead of taking preventive measures.

Developments on the international scene are often a catalyst for radicalization, but they also confirm the presence of foreign influences through well-known domestic channels. When Russia's aggression against Ukraine began in late February 2022, an entire disinformation ecosystem switched from its usual right-wing tirades onto the Russian propaganda frequency within only a few hours. European sanctions against Russian propaganda outlets and stricter content moderation policies introduced by the biggest social media prompted a mass migration of disinformers towards Telegram. This network has long been a favorite meeting point for Balkan radical groups, as it makes room for numerous activities that are not just plain radical rhetoric, but feature elements of criminality. Such copious amount of manipulation and disinformation is specifically intended for radicalizing individuals and groups. Montenegrin citizens also took part<sup>9</sup> in the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, having joined Russian paramilitary forces, and one person was convicted<sup>10</sup>. It is not known whether there are any Montenegrin citizens joining the current conflict, either on the Russian or Ukrainian side. In mid-June 2022, Russian channels published the alleged data of the Russian Ministry of Defense, stating that

there were two Montenegrin citizens fighting on Ukraine's side, one of whom was killed. Foreign ministries in the region<sup>11</sup> denied the claims pertaining to their respective countries, but no official reaction came from Montenegrin institutions.



## WHAT IS TO BE DONE NEXT?

Homegrown radicalization and domestic violent extremism are problems that many countries are facing, but many of them also have a better grip on these phenomena and are tackling them more successfully.

In Montenegro, radicalization and extremism are for the most part not the product of marginal violent ideologies, but come as a result of mainstream political action. An efficient and sustainable suppression of the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism would mean depriving major political actors of the tools they use to manage and pursue their interests.

Therefore, the first necessary step is to de-escalate political tensions and achieve political stability. In a situation of constant political instability, radicalization becomes the methodology that certain political actors operate by, and violent extremism becomes a threat once they get their hold of it. In such circumstances, the fight against radicalization and extremism is no more than a process simulated for the sake of meeting the requirements of Chapter 24.

Authorities in charge of combating extremism require political support, which means that the fight against violent extremism needs to be clearly indicated as an important state policy. The

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<sup>9</sup> Darvin Muric, "Nine foreign fighters return from ISIL, eight Montenegrin fighters in Ukraine", Vijesti, 04.12.2007, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/53440/iz-isil-a-se-vratilo-devetoro-u-ukrajini-osam-bo-raca-iz-crne-gore>

<sup>10</sup> Milos Rudovic, Jelena Jovanovic, "Started off as a driver, moved on to become a sniper: Barovic's pictures from the battlefield are a sufficient proof for his conviction" <https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/49872/bio-vozac-pa-snajperista-baroviceve-slike-sa-ratista-dokaz-za-robiju>

<sup>11</sup> Radio Free Europe, "Croatian Foreign Ministry claims to have no information on death of any Croat in Ukraine", 19.06.2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31904853.html>  
Shkelqim Hysenaj, "Disinformation about 'mercenaries' from Kosovo is being spread from Russia", Radio Free Europe, 21.07.2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-kosovo-propaganda/31953538.html>

Parliament of Montenegro, as the most important political forum, needs to be more heavily engaged, and it can demonstrate its commitment to this issue both through legislative and oversight activities.

All institutions of the system must contribute to countering long-term generators of violent extremism, through a systemic and coordinated approach and in partnership with civil society. It is high time for activities that will protect citizens from hatred, xenophobia, and misogyny that they are exposed to on the Internet, in the media, and on the street. Competent authorities must systematically monitor and analyze propaganda and disinformation activities aimed at radicalizing citizens and polarizing the society, and direct the government to develop relevant policies, with due consideration of the democratic principle of freedom of speech.

It is also necessary to introduce mechanisms for monitoring and preventing negative foreign influences on Montenegrin society. One of the mechanisms we proposed is to create a special committee in the Parliament of Montenegro that would deal with foreign interference in democratic processes, modeled after the INGE Committee of the European Parliament. The government needs to promptly establish a comprehensive mechanism for screening investments as a way to protect national interests and national security. The reports of the European Parliament underscore the need to protect religious institutions from foreign interference through the monitoring of their activities and increased transparency of their funding.

It is necessary to strengthen the institutional position of NOT in the coming period and improve its cooperation and connections with both the government and the Police Directorate. As per practice that is common in the entire region and beyond, a special service / department needs to be set up within the Police Directorate, whose task would be to prevent and detect acts related to terrorism and extremism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Milica Kovacevic, Tijana Velimirovic, "New tasks for the new NOT: Proposals for improving interdepartmental coordination in preventing and combating violent extremism", Center for Democratic Transition, July 2020 [https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CDT\\_novi-zadaci-za-novi-not-1.pdf](https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CDT_novi-zadaci-za-novi-not-1.pdf)