



FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN MONTENEGRO 2016–2023

PART I

PODGORICA MAY 2024.

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IMPRINT:

Publisher: Center for Democratic Transition www.cdtmn.org

Author: CDT team

For the publisher: Dragan Koprivica

Graphic design: LUMI studio

Podgorica 2024.



The publication was created as part of the project “Electoral Reform in Focus: It’s Time!”, which the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) is implementing in cooperation with the Association for Responsible and Sustainable Development (UZOR) and the Association of Disabled Youth (UMHCG), with the support of the European Union, through the EU Delegation in Montenegro. Its content is the sole responsibility of the Center for Democratic Transition and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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Editor's note

Electoral and other laws regulating parts of this process in Montenegro almost do not contain mechanisms for preventing foreign and other illegal interference, which should enable this, the most important democratic institution, to be implemented in line with international standards.

The Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) recorded and publicly reacted to these phenomena through projects of civic monitoring of elections. Now, at the beginning of the long-awaited reform of the electoral legislation, we want to contribute to the understanding of this problem and its better resolution with this publication.

We will address this issue in two publications that will be available to interested parties during the electoral reform. In the first publication, we deal with the most illustrative examples and mechanisms of undermining democratic processes from abroad, while in the second, we will give an overview of some of the mechanisms that can be used to intervene in order to minimize this phenomenon as much as possible.

In the previous eight years, which is the period we cover in this analysis, we have been able to witness a wide range of illicit influences on electoral processes. Montenegro's citizens were able to witness political influences, campaigns in which more money was apparently spent than was reported, and whose origin goes back to foreign companies or circles close to political elites from the surrounding region, media campaigns from abroad aimed at influencing election processes, and the spread of disinformation and the clear and completely visible interference of religious communities.

Solving this complex problem will not be easy, because the influences we are discussing exist in different segments of the electoral process. An additional challenge in this area is our need to find that, often thin and elusive line, on the one hand, defending democratic processes and preventing foreign influences, and on the other hand, safeguarding the inviolable rights to freedom of expression and political organization, and the free operation of the media.

The key directions in which, in our opinion, electoral reform should move were published in July 2023 in the document titled "35 recommendations for electoral reform"¹. Through this project, and series of publications we are preparing, our aim is to make our proposals concrete, delve into even deeper analyses, and bolster the success of the forthcoming reform by grounding it in a comprehensive understanding of all the key international standards for a transparent and fair electoral process.

This publication was produced as part of the project "Electoral Reform in Focus: It's Time!", which the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) is implementing in cooperation with the Association for Responsible and Sustainable Development (UZOR) and the Association of Youth with Disabilities (UMHCG), with the support of the European Union, through the EU Delegation in Montenegro. Its content is the sole responsibility of CDT and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

We remain open to public dialogue related to the content of our publication, as well as to all well-intended criticism and suggestions.

CDT team

¹Dragan Koprivica, Milena Gvozdenovic, Milica Kovacevic, *35 Recommendations for Electoral Reform*, Center for Democratic Transition, 2023



2023 Elections:
Representatives
of political parties
in the SEC serving
foreign influences

In Montenegro, 2023 was a year dedicated to election processes. Two rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections, followed by the lengthy formation of the new government, dominated the domestic public scene and sparked great interest in the entire region for the outcomes of these processes. This, naturally, brought opportunities for more or less serious influences or attempted influences from the surrounding countries.

The most significant and dangerous example is the role of the institutions of the Republic of Serbia, that is, the Republic Election Commission of Serbia (REC) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of that country, whose activities influenced the decision of who was eligible to participate in the presidential elections.

Specifically, the representatives of some political parties from the parliamentary majority and the opposition, acting in their capacity as members of the State Election Commission of Montenegro² (SEC), with the help of institutions from Serbia, abused this institution. Through a previously unknown and illegal procedure, they asked the state authorities of Serbia to answer whether Milojko Spajic has a residence and voting rights in that country. After an affirmative answer, the SEC rejected his candidacy for the president of the state, thus allowing direct interference in the elections by the authorities of another state. It is important to note that the state authorities of Serbia had been very closed until then when it comes to various treatments of their citizens, even when it comes to extraditions of convicted criminals. However, they promptly responded in this case and provided the SEC with what it needed to disqualify a candidate who was a nuisance in the election race.

Interestingly, apart from Spajic's candidacy, Serbian REC and Montenegrin SEC did not have the need to establish "cooperation" in the case of other presidential candidates and/or several hundred candidates for MPs who took part in the parliamentary elections.

This SEC action was also noted by the European Commission.³ Its 2023 Report on Montenegro clearly stated that the SEC made a legally questionable decision led by politically appointed members and that the candidacy was rejected based on contradictory information about citizenship and place of residence and a procedure that is not envisaged by law.

²M.K. "DIK provjerava da li Mandić i Spajić imaju prebivalište i biračko pravo u Srbiji" (*SEC checks whether Mandić and Spajic have residence and voting rights in Serbia*), *Vijesti*, March 2, 2023

³European Commission, Montenegro Report 2023

More crucial is establishing a dangerous precedent, allowing political elites and state institutions in Serbia and Montenegro to eliminate candidates from the electoral process whenever they desire.

His case, along with many others, confirms what everyone knows in practice: Serbia has a leading and crucial role among other countries that interfere in democratic processes in Montenegro in various ways and constantly carries out various types of cross-border interventions, offering various explanations to the public, essentially reduced to “protecting Serbs.” In the last few years, this country⁴ has provided millions of euros of support to Serbian organizations and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro, which directly and openly supported certain options in the elections. During this election cycle, SOC Metropolitan Joanikije Micovic openly expressed that Djukanovic should leave, while Bishop Metodije Ostojic⁵ strongly endorsed Andrija Mandic as a presidential candidate and the For the Future of Montenegro coalition (FFM).

For the Montenegro election year of 2023, the Serbian budget earmarked three times the amount of funds for the region compared to the previous year. Once the Call of the Government of Serbia for the allocation of funds was announced⁶, numerous parapolitical organizations from Montenegro that directly support some of the political options, as well as the media that have been spreading disinformation and propaganda for years, have applied.

It was also announced⁷ that Mandic received two donations of 20,000 euros each from the non-governmental organizations “Society for Equality and Tolerance” and “Society for the Promotion of Political, Cultural and Economic Cooperation of Montenegro, the Republic of Serbia and the Republika Srpska” although NGOs are not allowed to donate money to political entities.

These two organizations are not mentioned in the list of grant beneficiaries of the Government of Serbia’s Diaspora Administration in 2023. The Society for Equality and Tolerance is connected to the organizations that are beneficiaries of these grants⁸ and serves as the founder of the media outlets⁹ operating within the Serbian House in Podgorica¹⁰, a project backed by the Government of Serbia.

⁴2023 Presidential Election in Montenegro, Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2023

⁵Episkopi SPC-a stali uz Andriju Mandića: Vladike Metodije i Atanasije, kao i vikar patrijarha Porfirija podržali predsjedničkog kandidata DF-a! (*The SOC bishops stand by Andrija Mandic: Bishops Metodije and Atanasije, as well as the Vicar of Patriarch Porfirije, support the DF presidential candidate!*), *Borba*, March 17, 2023

⁶<https://www.dijaspora.gov.rs/konkursi2023.php>

⁷MANS: Sumnjive donacije obilježile i ovaj izborni ciklus (*MANS: Suspicious donations marked this election cycle as well!*), *Pobjeda*, May 9, 2023

⁸https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbima_preko_pola_miliona_ostalima_330_hiljada/2248246.html

⁹<https://aemcg.org/emiter/srpska-tv/>

¹⁰<https://srpskakucacg.me/o-nama/>

On the other hand, there was also the influence of other countries and their leaders, especially on the national minorities in Montenegro. Thus, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, encouraged Albanians¹¹ to vote for the candidate Djukanovic. BiH Presidency member Zeljko Komsic also gave open support to Djukanovic¹², and Bosniak representative in the Presidency Denis Becirovic followed suit¹³. During 2021, Croatian President Zoran Milanovic also provided unequivocal support to Milo Djukanovic¹⁴.

The disinformation campaign aimed at influencing the outcome of the election reached its peak during the presidential election.

In addition to the usual bias and open support for one side, tabloids from Serbia¹⁵ practically gave free marketing to presidential candidate Andrija Mandic, who was declared the winner of the election even before the first round. The remaining candidates could gain “space” in these media only when negative reports were made about them, often in the form of disinformation and/or hate speech.

The results of the monitoring of media reporting on the presidential elections in Serbia, conducted by the organization BIRODI, show that in the first round, Andrija Mandic was represented most positively (60.7%) against Milo Djukanovic, who was represented the most negatively (80.5%), while Jakov Milatovic was presented in a relatively balanced manner. Unlike the first round, in the second round Milo Djukanovic was presented neutrally (88.2%), and Jakov Milatovic was presented positively two-thirds of the time (62.8%).

The report further states that in some media, pro-government and pro-right analysts were presented as objective analysts, who in many cases did not have expertise in the field of elections, and some of them were actively involved in presidential candidates' campaigns. In this way, the idea was created that what the analysts say is objective, and in essence it was about promotion (in the example of Andrija Mandic), criticism to the level of labeling (in the example of Milo Djukanovic) and marginalization of potential competitor Andrija Mandic (in the example of Jakov Milatovic).

¹¹D.C., “Kurti: Ako izgubi Đukanović, mogla bi da nestane crnogorska nacija” (*Kurti: If Djukanovic loses, the Montenegrin nation could disappear*), *Vijesti*, March 31, 2023

¹²“Željko Komsić podržao Đukanovića” (*Zeljko Komsic supports Djukanovic*), *DAN online*, March 30, 2023

¹³“Bećirović podržao Đukanovića i poručio: Naše države su ugrožene od istog velikodržavlja” (*Becirovic supports Djukanovic and says: Our countries are threatened by the same idea of greater nationalism*), *Oslobođenje*, March 30, 2023

¹⁴“Milanović: Podrška modernoj, građanskoj, otvorenoj Crnoj Gori” (*Milanovic: Support for a modern, civil, open Montenegro*), *Al Jazeera*, September 16, 2021

¹⁵2023 Presidential Election in Montenegro, Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2023

The qualitative analysis findings show no significant changes during the parliamentary elections when comparing the reporting of the analyzed media service providers. Analysts' performances on certain television channels expressed a negative attitude towards Milo Djukanovic, and some of them negatively portrayed the "Europe Now" movement.¹⁶

In line with the previously established practice, one of the most commonly used methods of manipulation, during 2023, was the publication of opinion polls allegedly conducted by the non-existent research agency from Belgrade, CSI¹⁷, which supposedly surveyed even 323,658 citizens of Montenegro. This "research" was published by Kurir, Vecernje novosti, Alo, and Srbija Danas shortly before the elections.

A similar scenario occurred during the campaign for parliamentary elections. Once again, Serbian tabloids showed clear bias by favoring the FFM coalition and only providing negative coverage for other lists and candidates. They were especially activated after the case of Do Kwon, a Korean citizen who was arrested in Montenegro on suspicion of falsifying public documents, and who is accused by other countries of causing more than 40 billion dollars in losses caused by the collapse of the company that founded the cryptocurrency Terra. Do Kwon then sent a letter to the then Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic and certain ministers, after which the Prime Minister, using the Government and later the National Security Council, which, as part of pre-election folklore, discussed this topic, tried to link the fugitive "crypto king" with the leader of the movement Europe Now, Milojko Spajic. Tabloids from Serbia evidently favored the narrative that accused Spajic and mostly ignored his and his party's views on this issue.

Bias was also shown by certain media from Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia, which openly supported Djukanovic and the DPS in relation to the other candidates, justifying it by defending against the Greater Serbia influence.

The European Commission also noticed the influence on the elections through disinformation to the public. In its Report¹⁸ on the manipulation of information and interference from abroad, the EC stated that there was foreign interference during last year's parliamentary elections.

¹⁶https://www.mans.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CG_2.pdf

¹⁷Darvin Murić, "CSI, ali ne iz Majamija: Ko su istraživači koji se javljaju samo pred izbore?" (*CSI, but not the Miami one: Who are the pollsters who appear only before elections?*), *Raskrinkavanje*, March 10, 2023

¹⁸The 2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Threats, January 23, 2024

The close ties of the Bosniak Party (BS) with the party of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey is proof that the influence on Montenegro does not only come directly from the region. Thus, Minister of Labor and Social Welfare Admir Adrovic, State Secretary in the Ministry of Defense Asmir Pepic, who are officials of the Bosniak Party (BS), as well as their party colleague Enes Husovic, participated in a rally in support of Erdogan's party¹⁹.

One of the cases we deemed necessary to mention in our study, which drew attention from both the Montenegrin and the international public, was the caretaker government's support to Saudi Arabia for organizing the EXPO 2030. Several NGOs then sent a protest to Abazovic demanding support for Italy, problematizing, among other things, the Prime Minister's justification that support was given to Saudi Arabia because the country "participates in the construction of an educational facility." Non-governmental organizations then condemned such "promotion of general corruption," reminding the public of massive human rights violations in this country. This government decision was announced to the public after the completion of the electoral processes in 2023.

In the context of foreign influence on elections in Montenegro, the announcement of the United States of America (USA), namely the US Treasury Department's Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), when they added Miodrag Daka Davidovic and Branislav Micunovic to the list of sanctioned companies and individuals²⁰ from the Western Balkans due to corruption and malicious activities in favor of Russia, is particularly interesting. The decision of the US authorities states that Davidovic "has laundered money for decades for crime syndicates, strengthening his influence and carving out his criminal enterprise of cigarette, oil, and arms smuggling in Montenegro. His corrupt activities enabled Russia's efforts to compromise the independence of the country's democratic institutions and judiciary, including its efforts to influence electoral outcomes."

What also strikes as characteristic is that Davidovic's alcoholic beverage factory, "Neksan", passed into Russian hands. This factory, which was opened at a time when Russia, like the owners of this band, was under sanctions due to aggression against Ukraine now produces "Beluga" vodka²¹. The opening of the factory was attended by then-Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic.

¹⁹Biljana Matijašević, "Funkcioneri Bošnjačke stranke u kampanji Erdogana" (*Bosniak Party officials in Erdogan's campaign*), *Vijesti*, May 12, 2023

²⁰Ambasadorka SAD: Stavljanje kontroverznih biznismena na crnu listu je pomoć Crnoj Gori (*US Ambassador: Putting controversial businessmen on the blacklist is a help to Montenegro*), *RSE*, November 11, 2023

²¹Abazović na otvaranju ruske fabrike u Nikšiću: 'Nisu svi pod sankcijama' (*Abazovic at the opening of the Russian factory in Niksic: 'Not everyone is under sanctions'*) *RSE*, April 12, 2023

Davidovic was implicated in alleged election manipulation by “Vijesti”²² which published a transcript from the SKY application in which a fugitive police officer Ljubo Milovic, explained how Davidovic used to buy out ID cards, that is, votes, for the DPS in Niksic.

It is worth noting that ahead of local elections (2022) and presidential and parliamentary elections (2023), a major cyber-attack occurred in August 2022, which paralyzed a significant part of the state system, and its consequences are still felt today. According to government data, 17 IT systems in 10 institutions were affected. Initially, the National Security Agency (ANB) blamed Russian agencies for the attack, but later Minister Marash Dukaj said that a cybercriminal group called *Cuba ransomware* was responsible²³. In March 2023, the National Security Council announced that due to the specificity and complexity of the cyber-attack, it was not determined who was behind it²⁴.

Montenegro has a CIRT (Computer Incident Response Team), but this unit is far from equipped or trained to address IT challenges and ongoing hacking attempts. After these attacks, in May 2023, the first regional cybersecurity training center was opened in Podgorica.

During the past year, Montenegro has faced numerous false bomb threats allegedly planted in key state institutions, some of which arrived even on election day. Such occurrences unequivocally confirm the porousness of the electoral process, which can be easily undermined in this way. Apart from individual arrests of minors²⁵, Montenegrin institutions have never fully shed light on who sent these reports and why, as some of them were sent from abroad.

²²Jelena Jovanović, “Lične kupovali, glasače snimali – policajci i kavčani u izornoj trci u Nkšiću 2021” (*Purchasing IDs, filming voters – policemen and Kavac clan members in the electoral race in Niksic 2021*), *Vijesti*, December 7, 2023

²³Crna Gora: Iza cyber napada stoji grupa Cuba Ransomware (*Montenegro: The Cuba Ransomware group behind the cyber-attack*), *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2022

²⁴<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/646737/vijece-nije-utvrdjeno-ko-stoji-iza-sajber-napada>

²⁵Uprava policije: Dijete slalo lažne dojave o bombama, prijave protiv roditelja zbog zanemarivanja (*Police Directorate: Child sent false reports about bombs, reports against parents for neglect*), *CDM*, December 24, 2023



2021 Local elections: “Battle for Niksic”

In 2021, a new phenomenon was observed – that local elections in a neighboring country are followed and politically commented on more than local elections in one's own country.

The local elections in Niksic, a city that is neither the largest nor the richest in Montenegro, received incredible attention and importance in Serbian tabloids and tabloid television stations close to the local authorities. This election process was labeled as the “Battle for Niksic”²⁶. Numerous television stations and online portals from Serbia had a special section in their program, that is, on their websites, called “Battle for Niksic”.

In Niksic, the presence of persons close to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Aleksandar Vucic was recorded, and suspicions were raised of illegal financing of parties with money from Serbia. In some cases, there was also work for the competent state authorities.

The media reported²⁷ that former handball players working for SNS, Vlada Mandic and Dane Sijan, SNS MPs Predrag Rajic and Aleksandar Jokic were visiting Niksic. The Niksic police detained Jokic, Mandic and Sijan, as well as Nemanja Bogdanovic from Sarajevo, and the then member of the Parliament of Montenegro Milo Bozovic, Slobodan Lalovic from Foca, Dejan Puhali from Trebinje, Blagdan Madzic from Foca, and Miroslav Vujovic on suspicion of bringing into the country money to buy votes. Mandic and Sijan were then banned from entering Montenegro. Half a year after the election, the city of Belgrade paid Niksic a donation²⁸ of two million euros.

The President of the Municipality of Niksic, Marko Kovacevic, announced on December 26 that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, and the Mayor of Belgrade, Zoran Radojicic, “fulfilled their promise” and paid two million euros to the account of the Municipality of Niksic.

During the pre-election campaign in Niksic, there were several conflicts²⁹ between supporters of the two blocs who exchanged political arguments with fists, as well as openly extremist moments such as the writing of the message “Srebrenica” on the Niksic mosque.

²⁶Igor Žarković, “BITKA ZA NIKŠIĆ Izbori u rodnom gradu predsednika poslednja SLAMKA SPASA ZA MILA, počinje prvo odmeravanje snaga na uzavreloj političkoj sceni Crne Gore” (*BATTLE FOR NIKSIC: Elections in the President's hometown, the last straw for Milo, marks the first showdown on Montenegro's boiling political stage*), *Blic*, February 21, 2021

²⁷Nenad Zečević, “Policija privela Vladimira Mandića, Mila Božovića i još sedam lica zbog sumnje da unose novac” (*The police detained Vladimir Mandic, Milo Bozovic and seven others on suspicion of bringing in money*), *Pobjeda*, February 13, 2021

²⁸Grad Beograd donirao Nikšiću dva miliona evra (*The city of Belgrade donates two million euros to Niksic*), *Danas online*, December 26, 2021

²⁹Radomir Kračković, “Izbori u Nikšiću, opet na „život i smrt”” (*Elections in Niksic, once again matter of “life and death”*), *Deutsche Welle*, March 13, 2021

Through the media and analyzes of the Digital Forensic Center (DFC), reports were shared³⁰ that the SOC was an active participant in the elections in Niksic and that their priests “called on the citizens to change the government in Niksic, thereby confirming the freedom won with blood and lives.”

In the course of the “Battle for Niksic”, CDT’s Raskrinkavanje debunking platform recorded new levels of disinformation to the public characterized by the rapid and coordinated spread of falsehoods on a group of online portals and good connectivity and dissemination of false content from nationalist pages on social networks.

One of the most striking examples of the spread of fear and panic from the neighborhood is the one when the tabloids “informed” us that Milo Djukanovic was going to turn off the electricity supply³¹ at the polling stations and then the whole city, that he was “gathering 300 guys”³² to create mayhem in Niksic and nullify the will of the voters”. There were also claims that Dusko Markovic³³ decided to leave DPS right then and found a new party.

During the campaign for the local elections in Budva, the media also reported that an SNS delegation came from Serbia to assist the DF. After that, it was announced that Petar Babovic, a member of the Main Board of SNS, came to Budva, in the company of four of his associates, Miroslav Djokic, Dusan Mihajlovic, Olivera Djordjevic and Jelena Denic, all of whom are employed in the administration of the city of Nis and serve as local officials of SNS.

³⁰“SPC aktivan učesnik i izbora u Nikšiću” (*SPC active participant in the elections in Niksic*), RTCG online, March 11, 2021

³¹Darvin Murić, “Sklopka ostala uključena: Đukanović nije ugasio struju u Nikšiću” (*The switch remained on: Djukanovic did not turn off the electricity in Niksic*), Raskrinkavanje, March 17, 2021

³²Darvin Murić, “„Nepostojećih 300“ nije poništilo izbornu volju u Nikšiću” (*The “Non-existent 300” did not nullify the electoral will in Nikšić*), Raskrinkavanje, March 16, 2021

³³Darvin Murić, “Dezinformacije tokom izbornog dana: Duško Marković ne napušta DPS” (*Disinformation during election day: Dusko Markovic is not leaving DPS*), Raskrinkavanje, March 14, 2021



2020
Parliamentary
elections: Divine
will

The 2020 Parliamentary elections were held in an ever more tense atmosphere, after the adoption of the Law on Religious Freedoms, which triggered protests organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Even before said elections, the Government of Serbia sent³⁴ direct financial aid to associations close to and openly supporting certain political subjects. In addition to that, the SOC openly participated in the pre-election campaign, undisguisedly giving political support to the forces advocating for the repeal of the Law on Religious Freedoms. Just before the elections,³⁵ the patriarch of the SOC, Irinej Gavrilovic, accused Djukanovic of expelling his people and said that he could not be negotiated with.

Commenting on the election results, Vucic said³⁶ that, regardless of the election results, it is important that “the Serbian people stood up and started to protect their identity rights”. He added that “Serbia, as a country, without hiding and in line with European practice, helped Serbian organizations – the Association of Writers and Matica srpska, with the largest sum of money that Serbia has allocated in history” and reminded that the Serbian House was built at the cost of 3.5 million euros. He also added that Serbia wants to preserve the Serbian people, language, and culture and that some progress has been made and is visible. On the other hand, support for the DPS came from the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, who, just two days before the elections, wished Djukanovic’s party “to win for all of us”³⁷.

During that very campaign, and especially during election day, the Belgrade tabloids, such as Vecernje novosti, Glas javnosti, Kurir, with the help of numerous nationalist pages on social networks, also spread disinformation about alleged hooligans from Croatia³⁸ who intend create chaos in Montenegro during the election night, that the citizens will be run over by a fire truck³⁹, that the police are preparing to beat the citizens etc.

The regional media also published false news⁴⁰ about the changes in official anti-covid measures related to entry into Montenegro, accusing the ruling coalition of doing this in order to achieve the best possible election result.

³⁴Biljana Papovic, Dragan Koprivica, Milena Gvozdenovic, Milica Kovacevic, *2020 Parliamentary elections*, Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2020

³⁵Jelena Čalija, “Ne može se dobiti rat proterivanjem i uništavanjem sopstvenog naroda” (*You cannot win a war by expelling and destroying your own people*), *Politika*, August 14, 2020

³⁶Vučić o izborima u Crnoj Gori: Veliki rezultat Demokratskog fronta (*Vucic on the elections in Montenegro: Great result of the Democratic Front*), *RSE*, August 30, 2020

³⁷VIDEO: Rama podržao DPS: Pobjedite za sve nas! (*VIDEO: Rama supports DPS: Win for all of us!*), *Pobjeda online*, August 26, 2020

³⁸Tijana Velimirović, “Laži o hrvatskim huliganima i neredima u Crnoj Gori” (*Lies about Croatian hooligans and riots in Montenegro*), *Raskrinkavanje*, September 9, 2020

³⁹Tijana Velimirović, “Lažna vijest o podgoričkim vatrogascima” (*Fake news about Podgorica firefighters*), *Raskrinkavanje*, March 3, 2023

⁴⁰Milica Kovačević, “Režim ulaska u Crnu Goru nije promijenjen” (*The regime of entry into Montenegro has not changed*), *Raskrinkavanje*, August 28, 2020



2016 Parliamentary elections: An attack on democracy

The 2016 elections remain the most talked-about elections in Montenegro and beyond. A few hours before the closing of polling stations, information was published that twenty⁴¹ Serbian citizens were arrested on the order of the Special State Prosecutor's Office (SSPO) because they allegedly wanted to occupy the Parliament of Montenegro and capture or liquidate the then Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic.

"A well-founded suspicion of the crimes of the establishment of a criminal organization and attempted terrorism stems from the collected data and evidence, statements of suspects and confiscated items, and especially secret surveillance measures," said Supreme State Prosecutor Ivica Stankovic. After the names of the twenty citizens of Serbia, the names of the leaders of the then Democratic Front (DF), Andrije Mandic and Milan Knezevic, also emerged. Allegedly, everything took place in cooperation with agents of the Russian agency GRU, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov. Montenegro also requested the extradition of American citizen Joseph Assad, whom the prosecution suspected of being part of the network that organized the coup d'état attempt.

Interestingly, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, made a statement immediately after the event that serious things were brewing in Montenegro. As reported by the media on October 24, 2016⁴², Vucic said that the national security authorities of Serbia had obtained irrefutable and material evidence that various illegal activities were being prepared on Serbia's territory in order to be exercised on the territory of Montenegro. He also added that there was no involvement of politicians from Serbia or Montenegro.

After numerous controversies and illogicalities, the judicial process began. It lasted for about three years and was broadcast live on several television stations in Montenegro.

Mandic and Knezevic were sentenced to five years in prison by the first-instance decision. The Court of Appeals overturned the verdict, by which, in addition to the DF leader, Shishmakov and Popov were sentenced to 15 and 12 years in prison, respectively.

⁴¹"Pet godina od izbora 2016. i slučaja "državni udar"" (*Five years since the 2016 election and the "coup d'état" case*), RTCG online, October 16, 2021

⁴²Ljudmila Cvetković, Vučić: U Srbiji pripremane nelegalne aktivnosti za Crnu Goru, (*Vucic: Illegal activities were being prepared in Serbia for Montenegro*), RSE, October 24, 2016

In addition to this, eight Serbian citizens and Mandić's driver and DF activist Mihailo Cadjenovic were sentenced. As stated, the verdict was annulled due to significant violations of the criminal procedure. The retrial is currently underway before the High Court in Podgorica.

During the trial, today's President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, met with the accused Andrija Mandić and said⁴³ that the Security Information Agency (BIA) of Serbia does not have evidence or information that any Montenegrin citizen participated in any criminal activities related to the last year's events.

In the meantime, one of the accused, who was later convicted in the case of alleged attempted terrorism, Branka Milic, replaced her detention in prison with a stay at the Serbian Embassy⁴⁴ in Podgorica. Vucic hosted Mandić⁴⁵ at a military parade in Nis just one day after the High Court's verdict.

Regardless of whether what was stated in the SSPO's indictment is true, this process had a great impact on Montenegro by dividing the citizens into those who believed and those who did not believe that the attempted terrorism really happened.

Another important moment was that the process and the judgment directed a significant part of the then-opposition parties to a partial or complete boycott of the Parliament of Montenegro, which was motivated by their belief that the announcement of the arrest on election day was a simulation designed to reduce the turnout of opposition voters and crucially influenced the DPS to win the parliamentary elections in 2016. It is interesting to note that some of these parties did not attend the confirmation of Montenegro's membership in NATO in 2017 due to the boycott, and some of them organized protests in front of the Parliament of Montenegro during the decision on this issue.

The third important moment was that Western countries, led by the USA, openly said that Russia tried to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO with a coup d'état.

⁴³DF: Vučić kaže da BIA nema dokaza da su državljani CG učestvovali u dešavanjima 16. oktobra (DF: Vucic says that the BIA has no evidence that the citizens of Montenegro participated in the events of October 16), *Vijesti online*, February 23, 2017

⁴⁴Aneta Durović, Branka Milić i dalje u Ambasadi Srbije u Podgorici (*Branka Milic still in the Embassy of Serbia in Podgorica*), RSE, February 11, 2021

⁴⁵Dodik i Vučić susreli se sa Mandićem, osuđenim za državni udar (*Dodik and Vucic meet with Mandić, convicted of a coup d'état*), RSE, May 10, 2019

The US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Matthew Palmer,⁴⁶ accused Russia of being behind the coup d'état attempt in Montenegro. Official America and Great Britain welcomed⁴⁷ the High Court's verdict. The British Foreign Minister at the time, Jeremy Hunt, announced that this verdict shows "another example of Russia's outrageous attempts to undermine European democracy", while the US Embassy said that this verdict is of historical significance for the rule of law in Montenegro.

One of the main prosecutors in this case, Sasa Cadjenovic⁴⁸, was arrested in the meantime on the charge of being a member of the organized criminal group "Kavac clan" and that as a prosecutor he had the task of not undertaking criminal prosecution, not initiating criminal proceedings against the organizers and members of the criminal organization, and that he made it impossible to discover perpetrators of the most serious criminal offenses.

During the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Network for the Affirmation of the Non-Governmental Sector (MANS) noted⁴⁹ a new practice – that political subjects buy space in the Montenegrin media through intermediaries from abroad. During that campaign, as investigated by MANS, the two largest opposition groups, the DF and the Key coalition, leased space on television, newspapers and the "Vijesti" online portal through the "New Focus Communications", a company registered in Belgrade. The Belgrade company would lease media space only to sell it to DF and the Key coalition. They issued an invoice to DF for the amount of 217 thousand euros, and to Key coalition for 157 thousand euros. However, those invoices only list totals, and do not contain information on the price of individual items. Therefore, it is impossible to determine at what price the company "New Focus Communications" bought space in the media, at what price it sold it to political subjects, and whether this company from Serbia covertly donated money to the campaign.

⁴⁶Palmer: Rusija stoji iza pokušaja državnog udara u Crnoj Gori, (*Palmer: Russia is behind the coup attempt in Montenegro*), *Vijesti online*, June 15, 2019

⁴⁷Crna Gora: SAD i Velika Britanija pozdravile presudu za državni udar (*Montenegro: USA and Great Britain welcome the coup d'état verdict*), *NI*, September 5, 2019

⁴⁸Specijalni tužilac iz Crne Gore osumnjičen da je pripadnik "Kavačkog klana" (*Special prosecutor from Montenegro suspected of being a member of the "Kavac clan"*), *RSE*, December 9, 2022

⁴⁹Vanja Čalović Marković, Ines Mrdović, Danilo Kalezić, *Sprovođenje Zakona o finansiranju političkih subjekata i izbornih kampanja (2016 - 2018.) (Implementation of the Law on Financing Political Entities and Election Campaigns (2016-2018))*, MANS, Podgorica, 2018



**Foreign
influences during
the formation of
the Government
in Montenegro:**

It is not over even
when the votes
are counted

Attempts at foreign influence did not end with the announcement of the election results. The highest public officials and religious leaders made “comments” on the possible composition of the Government of Montenegro and suggestions on who should be included in it. However, the highlight was the organization of the meeting of the winners of the 2020 election and the formation of the Government in the Ostrog⁵⁰ monastery by SOC Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic.

At that time, Zdravko Krivokapic was elected as prime minister, who soon became a target of tabloids close to the Belgrade authorities. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic spoke harsh words against him. The attacks followed a well-established matrix: anyone who believed that the then DF should not be part of the executive power was called a traitor who “builds a government without Serbs⁵¹”, and the Serbs were portrayed as undesirable⁵².

Later, Krivokapic was particularly attacked by tabloids and politicians after he proposed the dismissal of the Minister of Justice Vladimir Leposavic, who denied the genocide in Srebrenica, when the Parliament of Montenegro adopted the Resolution on the Genocide in Srebrenica⁵³, as well as for refusing to sign the Fundamental Agreement with the SOC in Belgrade. At that time, officials from Belgrade, such as Aleksandar Vulin⁵⁴, accused him of hating Serbs, and the tabloids targeted his family as well⁵⁵. During that period, as announced by the Government at the time⁵⁶, the son of the Prime Minister of Montenegro was stopped by Serbian police while they were pointing guns at him.

⁵⁰Krivokapic potvrdio pisanje “Vijesti”: Iznenadio sam se kad sam predložen, noć prije je bio drugačiji stav, (*Krivokapic confirms the writing of “Vijesti”: I was surprised when my name was proposed, the night before there was a different attitude*), *Vijesti online*, September 26, 2020

⁵¹LICEMER! Zdravko Krivokapic se provodio uz “Tamo daleko”: Pevaju srpske pesme, a prave vladu bez Srba! (A HYPOCRITE! Zdravko Krivokapic enjoys “Tamo daleko”: They sing Serbian songs, but they make a government without Serbs!), *Republika*, September 26, 2020

⁵²BRUKA U CRNOJ GORI! Posle Mila GORI OD MILA!? Srbi pobedili na izborima, a sad su zabranjeni u Vladi! (DISGRACE IN MONTENEGRO! Milo succeeded by even worse ones!? Serbs won the elections, and now they are banned from the Government!), *Informer*, September 24, 2020

⁵³DVESTA POSTO CRNOGORAC, TRISTA POSTO G*VNO!” Vjerica Radeta ogolila izdajnika Zdravka Krivokapića!, (*TWO HUNDRED PERCENT MONTENEGRIN, THREE HUNDRED PERCENT PIECE OF S*HIT!” Vjerica Radeta exposes the traitor Zdravko Krivokapic!*), *Alo.rs*, June 17, 2021

⁵⁴Vulin: Krivokapic još jednom pokazao da mu nije stalo do Srba (Vulin: Krivokapic once again shows that he does not care about Serbs), *CDM*, May 4, 2021

⁵⁵KAKAV PREVARANT, MAŠALA Krivi proglasio Srbe za genocidaše, a njegov sin za koji dan brani doktorat u Kragujevcu! (*WHAT A FRAUD, WAY TO GO! Krivokapic declared Serbs to be those who commit genocide, while his son defends his doctorate in Kragujevac in a few days!*), *Alo.rs*, July 13, 2021

⁵⁶Razmena optužbi Beograda i Podgorice zbog pretresa pratnje Krivokapićevog sina (Exchange of accusations between Belgrade and Podgorica following the search of Krivokapic’s son’s escort), *RSE*, September 11, 2021

Even SOC Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic⁵⁷ was accused of not allowing Serbs to enter the Government.

The path from hero⁵⁸ to villain in the Serbian tabloids was also traversed by Dritan Abazovic who, in 2022, decided to support the fall of the Government of Zdravko Krivokapic and form a new government with the minority support of the opposition DPS. Headlines about Abazovic, who “completed the betrayal”⁵⁹ and became “the disgrace and shame of Montenegro”⁶⁰ appeared, and the government formed by Abazovic⁶¹ was called “a perfidious game against the Serbs”.

The recently formed Government, led by Milojko Spajic, received special attention, preceded by numerous messages from both the region and the West.

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, commented on several occasions⁶², and even when it was not known who would be part of the executive power, that “Serbs in Montenegro cannot join the government” and as the alleged reason for this he pointed out that “they are not convincing enough in vowing to fight against the hated Belgrade and even more hated Moscow”. He also declared that “one has to say the worst about Serbia in order to enter the Government”.

Similar claims were made by the head of diplomacy of Serbia, Ivica Dacic⁶³, commenting that it would be “bad news if the new government of Montenegro is without Serbs, who make up about 30 percent in that country, and that the negative attitude towards Serbs will continue”.

⁵⁷Srpski tabloidi ogorčeni potezima Amfilohija i Abazovića (*Serbian tabloids outraged by the moves of Amfilohije and Abazovic*), CDM, September 23, 2020

⁵⁸Milo ga je nazvao bitangom i albanskim četnikom, a on je pokupio svu slavu. Dritan drži sudbinu Crne Gore u svojim rukama, sada ima poruku za čitav narod (*Milo called him a scoundrel and an Albanian Chetnik, but he took all the glory. Dritan holds the fate of Montenegro in his hands, now he has a message for the entire nation*), Alo, January 9, 2020

⁵⁹DRITAN ABAZOVIĆ PREMIJER Ovo je nova Vlada Crne Gore – Izdaja naroda je konačno dovršena! (*DRITAN ABAZOVIĆ PRIME MINISTER This is the new Government of Montenegro – The betrayal of the people is finally complete!*), Hello online, February 8, 2022

⁶⁰VRAČA SE MILOV DPS! Bruka i sramota Crne Gore, na čelu vlade Dritan Abazović! (*MILO'S DPS IS BACK! Embarrassment of Montenegro, Dritan Abazovic at the helm of the government!*), Informer, June 4, 2022

⁶¹VELIKA PREVARA U CRNOJ GORI Perfidna igra protiv Srba, glavni akteri Zdravko Krivokapić, Milo Đukanović i Dritan Abazović (*BIG SWINDLE IN MONTENEGRO Perfidious game against Serbs, with main actors being Zdravko Krivokapic, Milo Djukanovic and Dritan Abazovic*), Alo.rs, April 30, 2022

⁶²Vučić: Završeno formiranje Vlade Crne Gore, Bošnjaci imaju šest ministarstava, a Srbi “šipak”, (*Vucic: The formation of the Government of Montenegro has been completed, Bosniaks got six ministries, while Serbs got nothing*), CDM, July 14, 2023

⁶³Dačić: Loša vijest ako nova vlada Crne Gore bude bez Srba (*Dacic: It is bad news if the new government of Montenegro is formed without Serbs*), RTCG online, July 16, 2023

The prime minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabic joined these claims⁶⁴.

The tabloids also joined in the action, again reporting that “Serbs cannot be in power”, blaming Mandator Spajic⁶⁵ and the USA⁶⁶.

US Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar⁶⁷, repeatedly sent the message that only those who condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine are acceptable partners to the USA. In the end, when the government was formed, he said⁶⁸ that the USA was disappointed with the participation of a party that did not reflect Western principles.

The German ambassador in Podgorica, Peter Felten, also sent messages⁶⁹ that it was in the best interest of Montenegro that the new government be made up of only those political forces that actively and credibly promote Montenegro’s pro-European and Euro-Atlantic orientation, while European MP Vladimir Bilcik⁷⁰ said “that he could not imagine a pro-European government in which there would be forces that questioned the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Montenegro”.

Propaganda close to anti-Western values tried to portray⁷¹ these interventions by diplomats as “unscrupulous interference in the formation of government.” While on the one hand, it is clear that no one with good intentions wants foreigners to interfere in the internal affairs of the state, on the other hand it is even clearer that the attempt to equalize the influences that hinder and help Montenegro achieve its state priorities is a very dangerous phenomenon.

⁶⁴Brnabić: Ne znam zašto Srbi ne mogu učestvuju u vlasti u Crnoj Gori, oni su značajan dio te zemlje (*Brnabic: I don't know why Serbs cannot participate in the government in Montenegro, they are a significant part of that country*), CDM, August 28, 2023

⁶⁵NOVA BRUKA CRNE GORE! Bez Srba u novoj Vladi? (*NEW EMBARRASSMENT FOR MONTENEGRO! No Serbs in the new government?*), Alo online, July 13, 2023

⁶⁶Spajić u problemu! Bez Srba nema većinu za novu vladu – čeka direktivu SAD (*Spajic is in trouble! Without the Serbs, there is no majority for the new government! Spajic is waiting for the directive from the USA*), Informer, September 17, 2023

⁶⁷Aneta Durović, Ko se i na koji način miješa u formiranje Vlade u Crnoj Gori (*Who interferes in the formation of the Government in Montenegro and in what way*), RSE, August 23, 2023

⁶⁸Eskobar o crnogorskoj vladi: Želimo saradnju, razočarani smo zbog stranke koja ne odražava zapadne principe, (*Escobar on the Montenegrin government: We want cooperation, we are disappointed by a party that does not reflect Western principles*), Vijesti online, November 4, 2023

⁶⁹Ambasador Felten: Nova Vlada treba da bude sastavljena samo od proevropskih i euroatlantskih snaga (*Ambassador Felten: The new government should be composed only of pro-European and Euro-Atlantic forces*), Analitika, August 16, 2023

⁷⁰BILČIK: Ne mogu da zamislim vladu sa onima koji su dovodili u pitanje evroatlantsku orijentaciju Crne Gore, pa čak i pokušavali da je potkopaju (*BILČIK: I cannot imagine a government with those who questioned the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Montenegro and even tried to undermine it*), Standard, August 13, 2023

⁷¹Njemački ambasador se beskrupulozno umiješao u formiranje vlasti i potvrdio pisanje BORBE: Traži da vlada da bude sastavljena samo od partija koje aktivno i kredibilno promovišu NATO agendu!, (*The German ambassador has unscrupulously interfered in the formation of government and confirmed BORBA's reporting: He demands that the government be composed only of parties actively and credibly promoting the NATO agenda!*) Borba, August 16, 2023

Namely, through numerous agreements, decisions and public policies, our country determined its foreign policy priorities – credible membership in NATO and membership in the EU. Until these goals are changed through appropriate democratic procedures, those who help achieve them are allies, and those who undermine them represent malign foreign influence.

Influences also came from other regional countries, in the form of media reports⁷² targeting the president and the Government, and newspaper columns⁷³ signed by authors who openly supported one of the options in the elections.

⁷²Velika, insajderska reportaža Tvrтка Jakovine iz Crne Gore: Kako su proruski četnici preuzeli državu (*Big, insider report from Montenegro by Tvrтко Jakovina: How the pro-Russian Chetniks took over the country*), Antena M, November 9, 2023

⁷³Jutarnji: Četnički vojvoda ulazi u vlast – 'Postajemo južna Republika Srpska, mala Srbija na moru' (*Jutarnji: Chetnik duke comes to power – 'We are becoming the southern Republika Srpska, little Serbia on the sea'*), Standard, October 15, 2023



Key directions for implementing future electoral legislation reform regarding illicit foreign interference

Foreign interference in electoral and democratic processes is described as a set of various and changing practices, a mixture of disinformation, political financing, strategic advertising, purchase of critical infrastructure, cyber-attacks, pressure on researchers, the establishment of new NGOs, use of troll networks to fuel destructive discourse where it should be solution-oriented.

In the last few election cycles, as we could see in this document, a large number of the mentioned instruments and tactics were used. While during the parliamentary elections of 2016 there were signs of interference coming from Russia, in the elections of 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 there were many public signs of interference from Serbia and other countries in the region.

The European Parliament has a Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE). However, our proposal to establish a similar committee in the Parliament of Montenegro has not yet been put on the parliament's agenda. The mandate of the INGE committee of the European Parliament is to assess the level of foreign threats in various spheres, and after analyzing the issues, to identify solutions and propose tools to counter attempts to sabotage democratic processes. As we mentioned earlier, we gave the key directions in which the announced electoral reform should move in the document titled "35 Recommendations for Electoral Reform"⁷⁴ we published in July 2023.

For the purposes of the first part of our document, we would like to highlight several key issues that require immediate attention in the electoral reform process. These issues will be thoroughly discussed in the second part of our upcoming publication, which will be released in a few months.

First and foremost, there is an urgent need to address foreign interference in our electoral processes, which poses a threat to the integrity and sovereignty of our democratic institutions. To address this challenge, we advocate for expanding the mandate of the Electoral Reform Committee, enabling them to actively address the issue of illicit foreign influence.

⁷⁴Dragan Koprivica, Milena Gvozdenovic, Milica Kovacevic, 35 Recommendations for Electoral Reform, Center for Democratic Transition, 2023

Additionally, we underscore the importance of depoliticizing and professionalizing the electoral administration, aiming to curb the political abuses that have marked previous electoral cycles, including the risks of foreign political influence.

It is of utmost importance to ensure fair and transparent elections, which implies strengthening the regulatory framework to prevent covert and illegal financing of political entities. Regulating the financing of political entities by third parties and establishing a system of checks and penalties to deter any potential abuses is of particular concern.

Furthermore, the fight against disinformation campaigns, particularly those orchestrated from abroad, is crucial to safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process. This calls for regulatory measures to enhance transparency and accountability in media reporting and political advertising during election campaigns. It is essential to expand the powers of the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), particularly in effectively regulating the electoral process and countering harmful foreign media influences.



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