

REPORT ON THE STATE OF  
RADICALIZATION IN MONTENEGRO

**A DEFENSELESS SOCIETY:**  
**The normalization of**  
**extremism and weaknesses**  
**in the institutional response**

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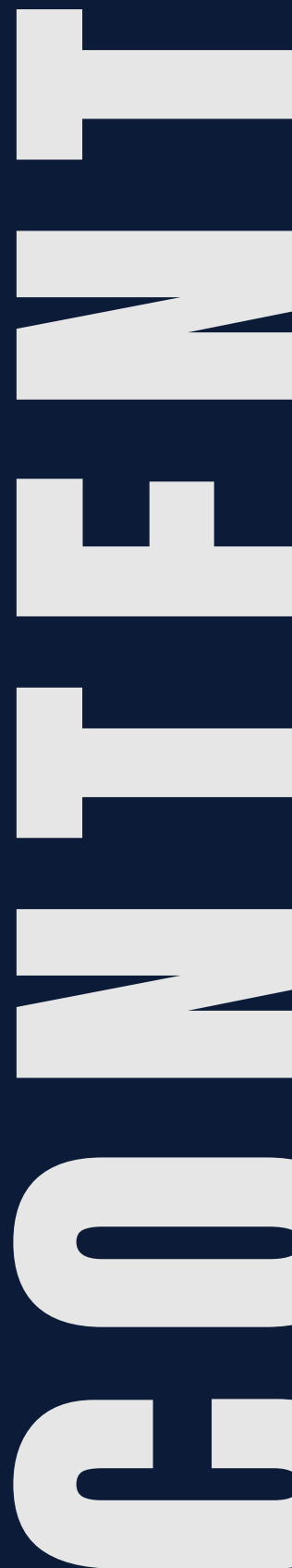
# **A DEFENSELESS SOCIETY: The normalization of extremism and weaknesses in the institutional response**

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# INTRODUCTION

Montenegrin society today exists in an environment of deep polarization and normalized intolerance, where hate speech, ethnonationalism and disinformation are no longer exceptions but rather a pattern of political competition and public communication. While institutions remain passive, weak or preoccupied with their own survival, radical rhetoric is shifting from the margins to the center of political discourse and is becoming a legitimate tool in the struggle for power.

In such a context, political actors and institutions fail to offer a consistent and principled response – on the contrary, they often flirt with extremist narratives or strategically tolerate hate speech for political gain, while manipulations of history and identity undermine the fundamental principles of coexistence and democratic order.

The problem of radicalization and extremism in Montenegro is not recognized as a strategic priority. The state still lacks both a strategic and institutional framework for combating radicalization; instead of systemic measures and long-term policies, the issue is addressed through improvisation and sporadic, short-term reactions. In such a vacuum, extremist narratives not only persist but grow stronger, feeding on the silence of institutions and the fear of political elites to clearly denounce hate speech and identity-based incitement.

This report shows that the roots of radicalization in Montenegro lie within the political system itself, in the instrumentalization of historical traumas, the weaknesses of the education system, and a neglected public sphere flooded with disinformation. Without a serious and consistent state response, the fight against radicalization remains at the level of declarative statements, while extremism continues to erode social relations and threaten the country's security and stability.

Radicalization is not a technical issue to be resolved through bureaucratic protocols – it is a political and societal challenge that requires a courageous and principled response from all who believe in democracy and an open society.

This report presents an analysis of the factors conducive to radicalization and violent extremism in Montenegro, maps institutional weaknesses, and documents examples that illustrate how extremist narratives are spreading and becoming normalized. We are open to comments, suggestions, and joint reflection on potential solutions.

CDT Team



# Capacities of policies and institutions

Montenegro's institutional response to the challenges of radicalization and violent extremism in recent years has been characterized by a continued formal approach, with a serious lack of substantive and consistent policy implementation. In February 2020, the Government of Montenegro adopted the Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Radicalization and Violent Extremism 2020–2024, along with the Action Plan for 2020. However, the fact that no new action plan was adopted in the following four years testifies to the complete neglect of this area and clearly indicates that the implementation of the Strategy, in essence, never truly began.

Although a working group was formed in the summer of 2024 to draft a new Strategy for the 2025–2030 period, it has yet to deliver any results. Moreover, the Action Plan for Chapter 24 stipulates that the adoption of the new strategy is planned only for the fourth quarter of 2025, meaning that the entire year will pass without a valid strategic framework.

The only document currently in force – the Joint Action Plan for Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans – still lacks appropriate institutional weight in Montenegro. While certain activities have been recognized in a declarative sense, their concrete application in practice remains limited. This gap between undertaken political commitments and operational implementation indicates the need for stronger dedication and a more coordinated approach in the fight against radicalization and terrorism.

The issue of institutional continuity is further burdened by frequent personnel changes. Since 2020, no fewer than four different individuals have served as the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism, while the National Operational Team (NOT) – the body tasked with ensuring interdepartmental coordination – has been practically non-functional for most of this period due to ongoing political changes and institutional instability. The consequences are evident on the ground – previously initiated cooperation activities with local governments and establishing the Support and Protection Team as an important preventive measure have since been discontinued or abandoned.

Despite the existence of formal documents and international obligations, the state has failed to establish sustainable mechanisms for the prevention of violent extremism. Due to the lack of strategic documents, weak capacities, and low political prioritization, the fight against radicalization in Montenegro remains sporadic and without clear direction, rather than a systemic response to a complex societal problem.



# Limitations of the previous strategy and guidelines for the future strategic framework

The Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Radicalization and Violent Extremism for the Period 2020–2024 represented an attempt to institutionalize a response to the complex challenges posed by these phenomena. However, its fundamental weakness lay not only in the lack of implementation but also in the conceptual and functional limitations of the document itself.

Firstly, the strategy relied heavily on the security apparatus – its focus was predominantly on repressive institutions: the police, prosecution, judiciary, and the prison system. Although the preventive dimension was formally recognized, it remained secondary, without a clear mechanism for effective implementation. The strategy mostly dealt with returnees from foreign battlefields and the deradicalization of convicted individuals, while increasingly present forms of domestic radicalization were neglected – those that arise within communities and often manifest through hate speech, identity-based extremism, and the normalization of violent rhetoric in the political and public spheres.

The second key shortcoming was the absence of a truly multisectoral approach. Although the document formally listed numerous actors from various sectors – education, social protection, health care, local governments, and civil society – their role in practice remained marginal, often reduced to project-based initiatives dependent solely on donor funding. Many activities were “borrowed” from other strategic documents, without specific and tailored solutions.

Thirdly, the institutional capacities for implementing the strategy were not sustainable. The National Operational Team (NOT), as the main coordination body, was non-functional for most of the time due to political instability and frequent changes of coordinators. As a result, key interdepartmental coordination and strategic direction were lacking.

In drafting the new strategy, there is an opportunity to establish a conceptually more mature and functionally more effective framework. A good model in this regard is the Dutch National Extremism Strategy (2024–2029), which is based on three interconnected components: promoting a resilient and open society, protecting the democratic order, and suppressing manifestations of extremism. Such a structure clearly differentiates between universal preventive measures, protection against violations of the rule of law, and measures directly aimed at suppressing violent and non-violent extremist phenomena.

This model clearly recognizes that the fight against extremism must not be reduced solely to the fight against violence – it must also tackle the normalization of extremist ideas, the spread of hatred, dehumanization, delegitimization of institutions, and the degradation of public space. A particular emphasis is placed on digital resilience – developing society’s capacity to recognize, understand, and respond to extremist and manipulative narratives in the online space – something that is still not systematically developed in the domestic context.

The new strategy should therefore priorities prevention, rather than merely reacting to already-developed forms of extremism. It is crucial that it builds social resilience through the education system, public media, local communities, and mechanisms for youth engagement, in order to reduce sources of radicalization in the long term. Instead of continuing to rely predominantly on civil society projects, institutions must take an active role – not as formal signatories of strategic documents, but as genuine agents of change. This also entails securing sustainable funding from the state budget for key measures to end the long-standing dependence on donor resources. Furthermore, the new strategy must have a clearly defined normative basis and performance indicators so that its implementation can be systematically monitored and evaluated, and the results objectively measured.

Given the current social context in Montenegro – pronounced divisions, widespread hate speech, and declining trust in institutions – the new strategy must offer more than just an administrative framework. It must be a document that identifies the challenges and proposes concrete, sustainable, and contextually sensitive responses to them.

## IV

# Citizens' attitudes: Perceptions, fears and expectations

The results of a public opinion survey conducted for CDT by the Damar Institute in November 2024 provide a layered, yet troubling picture of the social climate in Montenegro regarding ethnic relations, institutional trust, and the potential for radicalization.

Hate speech is perceived as a widespread problem in Montenegro, and most ethnic communities feel victimized by it. The highest level of perceived exposure is among citizens of Serbian ethnicity, 35% of whom believe their community is frequently targeted by hate speech. Similar sentiments are shared by 23.9% of Bosniaks, 23.2% of Muslims, 16.7% of Albanians, and 15.6% of Montenegrins.

The main channels identified for spreading such content are social media (37%) and online news portals (32%). However, citizens do not see institutions as providing an effective response to this issue – nearly half of respondents (48.3%) consider the work of the police to be ineffective, while over 60% express doubts about the effectiveness of the prosecution service. Only 12% of citizens believe that the existing penalties for hate speech are sufficiently strict, further reinforcing the perception of impunity and institutional passivity.

The way citizens perceive the actions of key institutions – police, prosecution, and courts – further highlights the problem of a lack of trust. As many as 15.8% of respondents believe that these institutions directly contribute to provoking or tolerating religious and ethnic hatred, while 36.8% believe they do so partially. Only 23.5% of citizens believe that the institutions do not contribute to these phenomena, while nearly a quarter (23.9%) have no formed opinion. This distribution of responses points to a serious deficit of trust and a sense of insecurity that arises when institutions do not act as reliable defenders of equality and social cohesion.

Ethnic divisions are perceived as deepening – 42.7% of citizens believe they have worsened over the past four years. Among Montenegrins, Bosniaks, and Albanians, this percentage exceeds 50%, while almost 70% of respondents who identify as Serbs believe that divisions have not deepened. This gap in perception further confirms how different social groups experience reality from parallel perspectives, making it difficult to create a shared narrative and common policies.

Citizens of Montenegro clearly identify domestic political actors as the main sources of ethnic divisions. According to the survey, 42.9% of respondents believe that political parties contribute most to deepening ethnic tensions, followed by 17.5% who point to the media, and 16.1% to the Government. A significantly smaller number of respondents assign responsibility to religious communities (8.4%) and the education system (4.4%). These findings confirm that citizens view the problem of ethnic polarization primarily as a result of internal political processes, rather than external influence. Instead of contributing to social integration, political dynamics often rely on identity-based divisions, further undermining social cohesion and creating space for radicalization. Particularly concerning are the figures reflecting deeply rooted identity-based insularity: 34.4% of citizens believe that loyalty to their ethnic group is more important than loyalty to the state, while



43.2% feel more comfortable in the company of members of their own ethnic group, and 41.7% among those of the same religion. This level of intergroup distance reveals serious weaknesses in building a shared, inclusive social space.

The perception of vulnerability also varies among groups: 50% of surveyed Albanians report feeling threatened because of their ethnic identity, 45% of Muslims because of their religion, and 67% of Croats because of their political affiliation. Women more often than men report feeling threatened due to their gender (14% compared to 5%), pointing to the presence of gender-based discrimination as a component of broader social insecurity.

Citizens clearly articulate which measures could help reduce ethnic tensions. The top-ranked measures are penalties for hate speech and violence (26.6%), followed by intercommunity dialogue (17.8%), promotion of multiculturalism in the media (15%), and education reform (13.9%). It is important to note that only 9.9% of respondents believe that a stronger engagement of non-governmental organizations would be an effective response. These findings do not deny the importance of civil society, whose role in this process is highly valuable, but they do clearly show that without functional and committed institutions, there can be no sustainable solutions. Preventing radicalization cannot be outsourced – it is not a task that can be left to others, but must be an integral part of state action through education, the judiciary, the security sector, and public policy.

The public opinion survey conducted by the Damar Institute for CDT in May 2025 confirms deep political polarization and widespread social dissatisfaction in Montenegro.

The data show that nearly half of respondents (45.4%) believe that the general social situation in the country is unsatisfactory, while only 22.2% express satisfaction. More than half (53.7%) consider Montenegro to be a “deeply divided country,” while 20.9% disagree. Particularly worrying is the fact that one in five citizens believes that Montenegro is facing potential dissolution, although more than half (52%) reject such a view.

More than one-third of citizens (36.3%) agree with statements of a strongly polarizing nature, indicating entrenched divisions and susceptibility to narratives that promote conflict and exclusivity.

The survey also shows that 45.7% of respondents believe the current socio-political situation must be opposed “by all means,” which implies an openness to a broad spectrum of potentially undemocratic methods of action.

Public resilience to disinformation remains exceptionally low – only 13.9% of respondents could identify false information in the test. An experimental part of the survey, in which political statements were deliberately misattributed to actors from opposing sides, showed that citizens primarily assess messages based on the political or ethno-national identity of the speaker, rather than the content of the message. This points to a deep polarization that affects even basic reasoning about the accuracy of information and creates space for manipulation in the public sphere.

Although these findings do not necessarily indicate the presence of political extremism, they confirm a state of public vulnerability to populist rhetoric and polarizing narratives – conditions that may be instrumentalized to spread extremist ideas in times of crisis.

If local triggers of radicalization – hate speech, feelings of exclusion, identity-related frustrations – are ignored, we risk losing the battle where it matters most: within our own communities. And perhaps most dangerously – the normalization of divisions, silence around hate speech, and the lack of empathy among citizens create the illusion of peace in a society that is, in reality, simmering beneath the surface.

# V Key factors of radicalization in Montenegro

Radicalization in Montenegro does not occur in a vacuum – it is the product of a complex web of political, social, and institutional circumstances that have shaped public discourse and identity relations for years. Although the number of actual violent incidents is limited, the environment in which radical ideas are legitimized and spread – especially through ethno-nationalist narratives, hate speech, and disinformation – is a cause for alarm for society as a whole. Radicalization no longer takes place solely on the margins but is increasingly being normalized through institutions, political speeches, and dominant media narratives.

## 1. ETHNONATIONAL AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

One of the strongest drivers of radicalization in Montenegro is the deepening ethnonational and political polarization, which not only shapes the political landscape but also affects everyday social life. The dominant social division between Montenegrin and Serbian identities is further deepened through the frequent instrumentalization of historical disputes by political and religious actors, who use them to mobilize support and exclude opposing narratives. In this context, the political scene has been reshaped into a binary system of “patriots” and “traitors,” where compromise becomes suspect, and consensus is perceived as weakness.

Such an environment fosters radicalization by encouraging “us vs. them” thinking, generating social atomization, and obstructing rational political dialogue. Extremist messages are increasingly normalized through institutions, religious ceremonies, and the media, blurring the line between legitimate ideological differences and outright incitement. The glorification of war criminals, denial of crimes, and relativization of historical traumas contribute to the normalization of extremism and open the door to violent rhetoric and actions.

This synthesis of political extremism and ethnonationalist agendas makes the Montenegrin case particularly risky: it is not a matter of fringe ideology, but of narratives coming from the center of political life. In such an atmosphere, any attempt to build a shared identity based on democratic and civic values faces resistance and suspicion – further narrowing the space for the prevention of violent extremism.

## 2. HATE SPEECH AND INSTITUTIONAL PASSIVITY

In Montenegro, hate speech has become not only a frequent occurrence but also a socially acceptable pattern of behavior in the public sphere. It spreads through political speeches, media content, social networks, and religious activities – often without any consequences for the perpetrators. Particularly alarming is the fact that such speech is being normalized through institutions: it is produced or tacitly tolerated by elected officials, public office holders, and government functionaries.

In recent years, the first institutional steps towards addressing the problem have been observed. In 2025, the Prosecution Service adopted a general binding instruction for handling hate speech cases, based on international standards. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Justice announced the introduction of a new criminal offence – aggravated hate speech – to strengthen the legal framework and end the history of impunity.

However, implementation still lags: despite regulations, hate speech and radical rhetoric are often classified as misdemeanors rather than criminal acts. Prosecutors and courts frequently fail to recognize or ignore the broader social context from which hate speech emerges, thereby missing the opportunity to send a clear message that such behavior is unacceptable. Even when judgments were handed down, they were often acquittals or involved symbolic penalties that failed to have a deterrent effect.

Such institutional passivity does not merely entail the absence of sanctions – it creates an environment of impunity that encourages the further production of hatred. In a society where even the most extreme examples of hate speech – including calls to violence, dehumanization of entire communities, and open threats – are ignored or downplayed, it is difficult to speak of a serious fight against radicalization. On the contrary, the system thus signals that tolerance of hate can be rewarding, especially when it comes from politically powerful or ideologically “acceptable” sources.

## 3. DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In Montenegro, disinformation not only distorts understanding of important social and political issues but also directly contributes to the process of radicalization – spreading fear, distrust, and divisions that extremist ideologies exploit for recruitment and influence. Narratives that fuel fear, mistrust, and intolerance are disseminated through a network of portals, social media, and politically instrumentalized media outlets. These messages are often sensationalist, lacking factual verification, and deliberately crafted to divide society along ethnic, ideological, or religious lines.

Public opinion research shows that a significant percentage of citizens believe in conspiracy theories – including views that global elites orchestrated the pandemic, fabricated climate change, seek to “reduce the population,” or that Western centers of power control the media and politics in Montenegro. These narratives are often accompanied by the demonization of certain

groups (e.g., LGBT people, political opponents, the West, or specific ethnic communities), thereby creating space for the development of extremist views and justifying violence as a form of “defense against threat.”

Disinformation intensifies particularly during periods of political and social tension, when the public becomes more susceptible to manipulation that plays on identity-based fears and divisions. During such times, the digital space becomes saturated with fabricated narratives that target specific groups, distort historical facts, or delegitimize institutions. These manipulations not only affect the emotions and perceptions of citizens but, in the long term, create social polarization and increase communities’ vulnerability to extremist ideas.

In the absence of a systemic strategy for media and information literacy, institutional responses to disinformation, and media accountability, such content has a long-lasting destabilizing effect and poses a serious challenge to the prevention of radicalization.

## 4. SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AND THE SENSE OF EXCLUSION

Economic insecurity and the feeling of social marginalization among young people are significant vulnerability factors in the process of radicalization. The most recent data from the Employment Agency of Montenegro (2022) indicate that the unemployment rate among youth aged 15–24 reached 40.3%, while the unemployment rate among those aged 15–29 was 32.5%. Eurostat estimates that in 2023, as many as 26.8% of young people in Montenegro were living at risk of poverty. These figures are further supported by research indicating that young people widely feel that their interests are neglected, that their voices carry no political weight, and that political institutions – including parties, the Government, and the Parliament – are among the least trusted.

These figures reflect not only economic hardship but also deep exclusion of young people from social and developmental processes. Among young people in Montenegro, there is a pronounced sense of frustration and hopelessness, which is further exacerbated by barriers to employment, where personal connections and party affiliation play a decisive role in getting a job. Such an environment, marked by weak rule of law and limited opportunities for advancement, often gives rise to a sense of injustice and personal powerlessness. At the same time, many young people feel that their needs and opinions are not adequately represented in decision-making processes, which further erodes trust in institutions.

In the absence of institutional mechanisms to provide support, perspective, and participation, many young people seek meaning in alternative frameworks – often through ideological, religious, or identity-based groups that act in radical or exclusionary ways. This weakens their resilience to extremist messages, which offer a clear purpose and a sense of belonging – often at the expense of democracy, openness, and overall social progress.

# VI

## Case studies: Disinformation, narrative manipulation, and the normalization of extremism

During the observed period, Montenegro predominantly faced social and ideological forms of extremism, while actual acts of violence were sporadic. Nevertheless, the ongoing atmosphere of political and ethnic polarization, the normalization of hate speech, and the manipulation of sensitive topics – from war crimes to international relations – point to a growing potential for radicalization. The following examples illustrate how narratives are used to incite division and undermine social cohesion.

### 1. THE CETINJE TRAGEDY: EXPLOITING PAIN FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES

One of the most shocking events in Montenegro – the mass killing in January 2025 in Cetinje – was not spared from manipulation, hate speech, and exploitation for political and ideological purposes. Instead of evoking immediate solidarity and compassion, the tragedy was swiftly used to spread hatred and dehumanizing narratives targeting all residents of Cetinje. In online comments and on news portals, the citizens of Cetinje were labelled as “godless,” “degenerates,” “Serb-haters” – with even references to “collective schizophrenia” used to justify violent attitudes<sup>1</sup>. These characterizations constituted not just verbal attacks, but psychological labelling of an entire community, a classic example of collective humiliation.

This form of symbolic violence – where victims are turned into threats and shock is used as a pretext for retaliation – was further amplified by the circulation of misleading claims about the alleged motives of the attacker. According to these narratives, the killer acted out of ethnic and political motives, with unfounded and unverified insinuations about his supposed calls for violence against a particular group quickly going viral. Although media outlets and fact-checking platforms like Raskrinkavanje quickly debunked these false claims<sup>23</sup>, they had already reinforced ethnic stereotypes and incited fear.

<sup>1</sup> Aneta Durović, “U borbu protiv govora mržnje nakon tragedije na Cetinju uključilo se Tužilaštvo”

(The Prosecutor’s Office joins the fight against hate speech after the Cetinje tragedy), Radio Slobodna Evropa, January 15, 2025

<sup>2</sup> Darvin Murić, “Alo lažno tvrdio da je ubica sa Cetinja pred masakr „pozivao na ubistvo Srba””

(Alo falsely claimed that the Cetinje killer “called for the murder of Serbs” before the massacre), Raskrinkavanje.me, January 13, 2025

<sup>3</sup> Darvin Murić, “Izveštavanje medija o Cetinju: Guranje nacionalističko-političkih agenda preko stradalih građana”

(Media reporting on Cetinje: Pushing nationalist-political agendas over the victims), Raskrinkavanje.me, January 18, 2025

A particular problem in this case was the absence of a consistent institutional and political condemnation. Official reactions were selective, often politically tinted, and lacked a genuine call for de-escalation. Instead of a united condemnation of hate speech, we witnessed a pattern in which violent rhetoric was denounced only when it came “from the other side,” while similar narratives from within one’s own ranks were ignored or even encouraged. The Police Directorate and the State Prosecutor’s Office further contributed to this setting through their passivity and delayed, vague statements about “undertaking measures and actions,” without providing concrete results or outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, hate speech spread freely through digital spaces – without sanctions, without moderation, and without institutional resistance. When citizens and the media are faster and more accurate in identifying hate speech than the authorities tasked with sanctioning it, the issue is no longer one of oversight – it becomes a symptom of a deeper systemic failure that erodes trust in institutions and normalizes intolerance as an integral part of political and social life.

This case clearly illustrates how tragedies – when treated as opportunities for political manipulation and deepening ethnic divisions – can lead to social traumatization and radicalization. When a community is labelled as collectively mentally ill, the line between individual acts of violence and collective identity is blurred, significantly increasing the risk that symbolic hatred will turn into real harm. This shows that Montenegro does not merely need a response to isolated incidents but requires systemic, institutionally led responsibility for combating hate speech.

## 2. EXPLOITING CRIME FOR ETHNIC MOBILIZATION: THE BALIJAGIC CASE

Following the revelation in October 2024 of a double homicide committed by Alija Balijagic near Bijelo Polje, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic used an appearance on the television program Cirilica to frame the event within a dangerous narrative of religious extremism. Without any evidence, he claimed that Balijagic was an “extreme, radical Islamist,” and that intelligence from Montenegro confirmed this. Vucic went further, suggesting that the crime could be seen as “revenge for Sahovici” – the 1924 massacre of Bosniaks. In doing so, a brutal murder was instrumentalized to evoke historical trauma and stir up ethnic and religious tensions.

Following this statement, the Centre for Democratic Transition (CDT) called on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to seek clarification from the official Belgrade and initiated an emergency session of the National Operational Team for Countering Violent Extremism (NOT)<sup>5</sup>. At that session, representatives of the Police Directorate and the National Security Agency clearly stated that there was no evidence indicating Balijagic’s connection to religious extremism. The official statement from the institutions confirmed that there were no security indicators pointing to such a motive<sup>6</sup>.

Despite this, the false claims had tangible consequences on the ground. In November 2024, residents from northern Montenegro organized a protest at Slijepac Most. They not only demanded accountability for the delayed police response but publicly framed their protest as a stand against Islamic fundamentalism<sup>7</sup>. This outcome demonstrates how unfounded but high-profile statements can trigger identity-based tensions that evolve into localized hostility.

<sup>4</sup> Govor mržnje nakon tragedije na Cetinju se ne smije ignorisati (Hate speech after the Cetinje tragedy must not be ignored), Centar za demokratsku tranziciju, January 14, 2025

<sup>5</sup> MVP da zatraži odgovore povodom izjava predsjednika Srbije, NOT da održi sjednicu (MFA should request answers regarding the statements of the Serbian president, NOT to hold a session), Centar za demokratsku tranziciju, November 7, 2025

<sup>6</sup> B.H., “UP i ANB: Nemamo podatke da je Balijagić sklon radikalnom vjerskom ekstremizmu” (PD and NSA: We have no data indicating that Balijagić is prone to radical religious extremism), Vijesti, November 5, 2024

<sup>7</sup> Senja Mahinić, “Kako je Vučić iskoristio dvostruko ubistvo Alije Balijagića da ponovo destabilizuje Crnu Goru” (How Vučić used the double murder committed by Alija Balijagić to once again destabilise Montenegro), Portal Analitika, November 19, 2024



Linking current crimes with historical tensions between communities not only deepens polarization but also paves the way for the normalization of identity-based mobilization and potential retaliation. In such a context, precise and prompt reactions from domestic institutions – although rare – become a crucial tool for countering disinformation and preventing escalation.

### 3. REVISIONISM AS A TOOL OF IDENTITY MOBILIZATION: THE CASE OF THE REHABILITATION OF THE CHETNIK MOVEMENT

In recent years, Montenegro has been facing frequent attempts at historical revisionism originating from institutional and religious authority positions. These narratives, often disseminated through liturgical messages, church sermons, and political statements, relativize or openly deny crimes committed during World War II and portray collaborationist movements as liberation forces. This phenomenon becomes particularly problematic when there is no adequate institutional response and the social environment begins to penalize those who dare to oppose it.

In May 2025, Metropolitan Joanikije Micovic of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), during a religious ceremony held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, publicly referred to Pavle Djurisić – commander of Chetnik formations responsible for mass crimes against civilians – as “a great hero of an indomitable character.”<sup>8</sup> This statement was not incidental – it was a public endorsement of a criminal movement and an individual whose collaboration and role in ethnic violence are historically documented<sup>9</sup>. Despite this, the Basic State Prosecutor’s Office dismissed the criminal complaint filed by NGOs calling for an investigation into these statements, without providing any explanation for its decision<sup>11</sup>.

A similar discourse was recorded a month later, in June 2025, when another SOC metropolitan, Metodije Ostojic, stated during a religious ceremony in Montenegro that “Mihailovic and Djurisić were the first guerrillas against the fascists” and that the “truths about them have been buried by lies.”<sup>12</sup> Such a claim is not only historically inaccurate but also extremely dangerous, as it seeks to alter the core values upon which modern Montenegro rests – including anti-fascism as a foundational element of its identity. Following these statements, a case was opened by the Basic State Prosecutor’s Office in Bijelo Polje<sup>13</sup>, but by the time this report was concluded, there was no information on any concrete developments.

Public reactions – particularly from civil society organizations and the media – were strong, but institutional responses were virtually non-existent. What is symptomatic is the silence of most public officials and institutions. The few weak condemnations that were recorded were not authentic reactions but statements made under persistent media pressure. An atmosphere was created in which any criticism of the Church is perceived as an attack on “national interests,” and those who dare to speak out against such historical revisionism face public discrediting and a lynch-mob climate – with real threats and stigmatization<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> B.H., “Joanikije: Pavle Đurišić bio veliki junak nepobjedivog karaktera” (Joanikije: Pavle Đurišić was a great hero of an V character), *Vijesti*, May 4, 2025

<sup>9</sup> Dragan Koprivica and Darvin Murić, “Je li Pavle Đurišić “junak nepobjedivog karaktera”?”

(Is Pavle Djurisić a “hero of an indomitable character?”), *Raskrinkavanje.me*, May 13, 2025

<sup>10</sup> Dragan Koprivica and Darvin Murić, “Je li Pavle Đurišić “junak nepobjedivog karaktera”? (II)”

(Is Pavle Đurišić a “hero of an indomitable character”? (II)), *Raskrinkavanje.me*, May 19, 2025

<sup>11</sup> “VDT odbilo prijava protiv Joanikija za izazivanje rasne, nacionalne i vjerske mržnje”

(Supreme State Prosecutor rejected the complaint against Joanikije for inciting racial, national and religious hatred), *Dan Portal*, June 18, 2025

<sup>12</sup> Arhijerejska liturgija i parastos u manastiru Podmalinsko (Hierarchical liturgy and memorial service at the Podmalinsko Monastery),

Eparhija budimljansko-nikšićka, June 8, 2025

<sup>13</sup> Balša Rudović, “Bjelopoljsko Više državno tužilaštvo formiralo predmet povodom Metodijevog veličanja četnika”

(Higher State Prosecutor’s Office in Bijelo Polje opened a case regarding Metodije’s glorification of the Chetniks), *Vijesti*, June 12, 2025

<sup>14</sup> Darvin Murić, “Smije li se reći da crkva nije u pravu i zašto ne?” (Is it allowed to say the church is wrong – and why not?), *Raskrinkavanje.me*, June 16, 2025

## 4. HATE SPEECH UNDER INSTITUTIONAL IMMUNITY: THE CASE OF MARKO KOVACEVIC

Political tolerance of hate speech and its normalization through institutions represent a serious challenge to democratic and legal culture in Montenegro. One of the most striking examples occurred in June of last year on Grahovac, when the Mayor of Niksic, Marko Kovacevic, declared: "If someone does not want us to be brothers, if someone wants to resemble the Turks more, then, by God, in the future we will treat them as we did the Turks."<sup>15</sup> This statement directly incited ethnic intolerance, using historical symbolism to deliver an implicit threat to citizens of Montenegro who do not accept such national and ideological identification.

This was not the first time Kovacevic used hate speech in public<sup>16</sup>, yet institutions tolerated his outbursts, establishing a practice in which nationalist and threatening political rhetoric is treated as acceptable political discourse. He had previously denied the genocide in Srebrenica, a case in which the Basic Court in Niksic issued an acquittal<sup>17</sup>.

Due to the statement made at Grahovac, in September 2024, the Higher State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica requested the lifting of Kovacevic's parliamentary immunity<sup>18</sup>. However, the Administrative Committee of the Parliament of Montenegro never processed the request. In the meantime, Kovacevic was re-elected as Mayor of Niksic and resigned from his MP position in July due to incompatibility of functions<sup>19</sup>. In this way, the institution of parliamentary immunity was reduced to an unjustified privilege serving day-to-day political needs, and the Parliament became a shield for hate speech<sup>20</sup>.

The case of Marko Kovacevic clearly demonstrates how political figures can use nationalist and inflammatory rhetoric without consequences, relying on systemic lack of oversight, active protection, and the persistent silence of institutions. Such a practice not only undermines the rule of law and renders legal norms meaningless, but also directly contributes to the normalization of extremist narratives in public discourse.

<sup>15</sup> "VIDEO: Kovačević u skandaloznom govoru mržnje prijetio Crnogorcima: Ako nismo braća, završićete kao Turci"

(VIDEO: Kovacevic, in a scandalous hate speech, threatened Montenegrins: If we're not brothers, you'll end up like the Turks), CDM, June 16, 2024

<sup>16</sup> Predrag Nikolić, "SLUČAJ MARKA KOVAČEVIĆA: Kontinuitet govora mržnje"

(THE CASE OF MARKO KOVACEVIC: A continuity of hate speech), Monitor Online, June 21, 2024

<sup>17</sup> B.R., "Tvrdi da Marko Kovačević negiranjem genocida u Srebrenici nije mogao da izazove nacionalnu i vjersku mržnju"

(Claims that by denying the Srebrenica genocide, Marko Kovacevic could not have incited national and religious hatred), Pobjeda, February 24, 2023

<sup>18</sup> Nikola Dragaš, "Više tužilaštvo traži ukidanje imuniteta Kovačeviću zbog postupka u vezi govora na Grahovu"

(High Prosecutor's Office requests lifting of Kovacevic's immunity due to speech in Grahovo), Vijesti, September 26, 2024

<sup>19</sup> Ostavka na mjesto poslanika u Skupštini Crne Gore – Marko Kovačević

(Resignation from the position of MP in the Parliament of Montenegro – Marko Kovacevic), July 3, 2025

<sup>20</sup> Govor mržnje pod imunitetom: Parlament ignoriše tužilaštvo

(Hate speech under immunity: Parliament ignores the prosecution), Centar za demokratsku tranziciju, January 29, 2025



## 5. RESOLUTIONS AS WEAPONS IN THE NARRATIVE WAR: FROM SREBRENICA TO JASENOVAC

The adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution on the Srebrenica genocide in May 2024 became a trigger for an intense campaign of disinformation and political manipulation in Montenegro. Although the Government of Montenegro voted in favor of the resolution, it refused to co-sponsor it, which already indicated an attempt to balance between European obligations and pressure from domestic political actors, particularly those from the former Democratic Front. Instead of seizing the moment to clearly condemn genocide and reaffirm the values of transitional justice, the authorities created space for relativization and reinterpretation of crimes – culminating in the adoption of a resolution on the Jasenovac concentration camp by the Parliament of Montenegro on 28 June 2024. Amendments later added Mauthausen and Dachau to the resolution's title<sup>21</sup>.

This resolution, passed under direct pressure from pro-Serbian political parties, was an obvious attempt to question the international condemnation of the Srebrenica genocide through a "victim balance" strategy, which relativizes crimes and dilutes historical accountability. No one in Montenegro denies the genocide at Jasenovac, whereas many still deny or minimize the genocide in Srebrenica. In that context, the adoption of the resolution on Jasenovac was not an expression of reverence for victims, but an attempt to diminish the gravity and significance of the UN Srebrenica resolution – placing the narrative of collective Serbian stigmatization once again at the center of political instrumentalization.

The adoption of the Jasenovac resolution provoked a strong reaction from Croatia – DF leaders Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, along with Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Bčić, were declared *persona non grata* and banned from entering Croatia. The serious diplomatic consequences of this internal political calculation are felt throughout Montenegro's EU accession process, and relations with Croatia – despite diplomatic efforts – had not been restored to their previous level even a year later.

At the same time, domestic and regional actors exploited the disinformation space to disseminate narratives about an "anti-Serb resolution," "collective guilt," and even that "the genocide never happened"<sup>22</sup> – despite clear verdicts from international courts. During this period, online portals and social media were flooded with disinformation. As analyses from the Raskrinkavanje portal show, claims that the resolution declared Serbs a genocidal people<sup>23</sup>, that Montenegro's top officials labelled Serbs as genocidal<sup>24</sup>, or that the genocide verdict was rendered without evidence<sup>25</sup> – were all fabricated or distorted narratives that further fueled tensions. Instead of facilitating a reckoning with the past, the institutionally tolerated campaign deepened interethnic distrust and radicalized public discourse.

<sup>21</sup> Amandmani na rezoluciju, 00-71/24-3/5 (Amendments to the resolution, 00-71/24-3/5), June 28, 2024

<sup>22</sup> Darvin Murić, "Srebrenica: Negiranje i dezinformisanje, odozgo ka dolje" (Srebrenica: Denial and disinformation, top-down), Raskrinkavanje.me, April 26, 2024

<sup>23</sup> Jelena Jovanović, "Rezolucija o Srebrenici neće i ne može Srbe označiti kao genocidan narod" (Resolution on Srebrenica will not and cannot label Serbs as a genocidal people), Raskrinkavanje.me, April 23, 2024

<sup>24</sup> Darvin Murić, "Ofanziva „Borbe“ na Spajića i Milatovića uz ponavljanje manipulacija o „antisrpskoj rezoluciji“ (Offensive by "Borba" on Spajic and Milatovic through repeated manipulations about the "anti-Serb resolution"), Raskrinkavanje.me, May 13, 2024

<sup>25</sup> Jelena Jovanović, "Presuda o genocidu u Srebrenici nije donešena bez dokaza" (The genocide verdict on Srebrenica was not made without evidence), Raskrinkavanje.me, April, 25, 2024

# VII

## Conclusion

Radicalization in Montenegro does not occur on the margins – it stems from deep structural weaknesses in society: the political instrumentalization of identity, the normalization of hate speech, and the persistent presence of disinformation. These phenomena are integrated into public discourse, supported by the silence or calculations of political elites, while the institutional response remains reactive, fragmented, or symbolic.

Despite individual efforts, Montenegro still lacks both a strategic framework and a systemic vision for combating radicalization. In the absence of clear policy and coordinated action, institutions respond ad hoc, often only after escalation occurs. Instead, there is a need to shift the focus from a purely security-based approach to a broader understanding of prevention – through education, local communities, the defense of democracy and the rule of law, strengthening trust in institutions, and systematic support for young people. Prevention is not merely about early detection of risks, but about building social resilience – through critical thinking, a sense of belonging, and space for constructive disagreement.

Although economic challenges and social exclusion are important contextual factors, in Montenegro, it is primarily ethnonationalist narratives, inciting politics, and the unchecked spread of hatred that serve as the main channels through which extremist ideas are disseminated and legitimized. Without decisive and principled institutional action, without clear political condemnation of all forms of extremism, and without serious investment in education and digital literacy, the space for radicalization will expand and societal polarization will deepen.

Building an effective response to radicalization must be long-term and coordinated – based on understanding social causes, community engagement, and cross-sectoral cooperation. This also requires redefining the role of the security sector, which must work in concert with educational, social, cultural, and media actors – not in isolation. Without this shift, every effort will remain superficial and inadequate to respond to the threats that originate from within, and are fueled by silence, inaction, and the tolerance of extremist narratives as a legitimate form of political struggle.



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