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# Montenegro's Contentious Politics: How Clerical Protests brought Down the Government

**Abstract:** Parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2020 marked an end of Milo Đukanović's ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS. The defeat was an outcome of clerical protests led and organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church, SOC. This paper explores the contentious politics used by SOC to bring down the DPS-led government over the controversial Law on Freedom of Religions. SOC used its well-rooted repertoires of contention in nonviolent religious processions and channeled the discontent that was present among the people in Montenegro to its advantage. Montenegro's democratic deficits and systemic corruption helped mobilize the people against Đukanović and DPS. First part contextualizes the evolution of relations between SOC and the government in the past thirty years, to determine the internal dynamics that would define religious revolt in 2020. Second part looks specifically at religious processions traditionally used by SOC as a type of modular collective action for achieving its political aims. Finally, we discuss how the strategy of non-violent protests of 2020, changed discourse and general monopolization of anti-government sentiments led to a successful outcome at the elections. SOC not only accomplished its goal of terminating the Law, but continues to behave as a *state above the state*.

**Keywords:** contentious politics, Montenegro, Serbian Orthodox Church, religious procession, non-violence

## Introduction

On 30 August 2020, the parliamentary election in Montenegro ended the thirty-year rule of Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). The political change in this small Western Balkans country of some 620.000 inhabitants has been welcomed by the international community as a sign of democratic progress. Though Montenegro did join NATO in 2019 and made considerable progress towards the EU accession, the regime's longevity has been under scrutiny for its authoritarian tendencies. The widespread discontent exponentially grew over the past decade, yet defeating DPS had little to do with the organizational skills or political appeal of the opposition parties. Instead, it was the pressure from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), the dominant religious institution in the country whose population is 72% Eastern Orthodox Christian. The controversial Law on Freedom of Religions was sparking contention (Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022); which SOC viewed as the government's legal justification to confiscate its property and assets. Thus, when the Law was passed in late December 2019, SOC immediately organized cross-country religious processions in protest. Over the next eight months, until the August election, peaceful prayer walks turned into a massive anti-government revolt. Considering the election's outcome, it could be argued that these clerical protests were indeed a non-violent revolution (see Sommer, 2000).

There are two common explanations for the outcome of the elections. DPS is the successor of the League of Communists of Montenegro, which transformed during the bloody collapse of Socialist Yugoslavia in 1991. The continuity of the same group in power is usually seen as the main reason for stalling the process of Montenegro's post-communist transition into functional democratic society (Komar, Novak, 2020). As one opposition politician commented on election night, "Berlin Wall finally came down" in Montenegro (Nedeljnik.rs, 2020). Another explanation suggests that, after the election, Montenegro became "the latest domino to fall towards Russia" (Stradner, Jovanović, 2020; also see Popović, Todorović, 2021). Ever since Montenegro gained independence from the two-state commonwealth with Serbia in 2006 and began the process of joining EU and NATO, pro-Serbian forces pledged to overthrow the government.<sup>1</sup> In the 2016 parliamentary election, the opposition Democratic Front unsuccessfully attempted a coup in collusion with nationals from Serbia and Russia (Todorović, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnic composition of Montenegro is 45% of Montenegrins, 29% of Serbs, 12% Muslim Bosnians, 5% Albanians and 1% Croats. Keeping an ethnic balance has been fundamentally important for country's stability and integrity, but since the election the equilibrium was imperiled by the same Great-Serbian nationalism that led to the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Popular discontent with the democratic deficit and the anti-Western ideology of Serb nationalism should not be confused. Yet, both tendencies conflated in the clerical protests organized by SOC, which is precisely why Montenegro's crisis of 2020 carries a specific revolutionary element worth examining. To illustrate the political complexity, this article will use the theoretical approaches of contentious politics and social movements.

The first part of the article will contextualize the decades-long uneasy balance between the head of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral,<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović, and Đukanović's DPS government. It was only when this balance collapsed with the passing of the Law on Freedom of Religions that a revolutionary situation emerged. The second part will examine religious procession as what Tilly calls the "repertoire of contention". By definition, the repertoire is "claim-making routines that apply to the same claimant-object pairs" (Tilly, 2008, p. 14). In this case, it is far more complex than pairs church-state. The third part will specifically focus on the clerical protests in 2020, their non-violent character and how it emerged as a popular massive anti-government protest. In theory, this phenomenon can be explained as "modular collective action" – a routine repertoire of contention that is "used for a variety of purposes and by different combinations of social actors" (Tarrow, 2011, p. 38). The way SOC monopolized anti-government sentiments is the key to understanding the outcome of the election. The concluding remarks will discuss the long-term effects of SOC's activities, which can not be reduced to an immediate outcome (the fall of the DPS government) but should be considered in the context of the ongoing political instability and institutional paralysis in Montenegro.

This article intends to use the terminology and theoretical approaches of contentious politics as a means to showcase how Montenegro's crisis presents an atypical and scientifically interesting series of events that culminated in the change of government after months of religious protests. The leading claim-making actor that instigated these events was SOC in its quest to destabilize and consequently influence the political sphere of Montenegro. Since contentious politics distinguish these forms of contention from the institutional forms of contention, such as elections, Montenegro's case of apparently regular elections in 2020 is worth reconsidering in terms of 'revolutionary situation'.

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<sup>2</sup> The Metropolitanate of Montenegro is at the same time the largest eparchy of SOC in Montenegro and the Metropolitanate of SOC which also includes the Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić whose existence was renewed in 2001. The Metropolitanate of Montenegro is the main branch of SOC in Montenegro.

## Contextualizing Montenegro's crisis

### The theoretical background

Over the past two decades, and especially after the Arab Spring, the study of contentious politics has grown in popularity. Coined by Charles Tilly (1978; 1993; 2006), the concept is used as an analytical tool to explain various social phenomena of contention, from strikes and peaceful protests to revolutions and civil wars (see Dacrema, Benati, 2020). Tilly's repudiation of structural ontology and top-down explanations is of major significance. The novelty was the focus on the internal dynamics of local contentions and their upward effects on national and potentially international levels.

Danijela Dolenc (2016), for example, shows in the case of democratization of Eastern Europe, how the role of the elites was exaggerated. Contentious politics such as revolutions, demonstrations, and strikes is often poorly researched, and the importance of non-elite participation is often dismissed. This is why in the case of Montenegro's crisis, the perspectives on either post-communist democratization or East-West geopolitics, while plausible indeed, are limiting. The clerical protests of 2020 had their own dynamic and mechanisms that need addressing. Thus, even though the SOC encouraged people to participate in the clerical protest, the emphasis on the bottom-up approach when researching the Montenegrin crisis should not be understated.

Was the change of Montenegro's government the result of a revolution? At the very basic theoretical level, a revolution needs to have a process or preparation for the main event; i.e. taking over the state. Tilly calls this process a "revolutionary situation" (1993, p. 10). It is a structural condition of multiplying sovereignty, presuming the contention of two or more blocs with mutually incompatible claims to control the state. Thus, the criteria for determining whether the contention evolved into a revolutionary situation has to consider the following causes (a) the claim being made by the contender to take over the control of the state; (b) the significant segment of the population supporting the claim of the contender; and (c) the inability or unwillingness of the ruling party to suppress the contender (Tilly, 1993; also Young, Leszczynski, 2021).

Finally, Tilly's theory postulates that for a contention to be a revolution, the causes defining a revolutionary situation must also have their revolutionary outcome, i.e., the successful transfer of power. In the case of Montenegro's crisis, these conditions have all been met (as following sections will show); however, as Tilly suggests, this tautological understanding of the revolution is merely an analytical framework. Different cultural, economic, and political conditions across space and time result in a different type of revolution. There may be similarities due to geographical, political, and cultural approximation in specific regions (e.g., Eastern Europe in 1989), but each is always case-specific.

Incredibly unique in this case is the fact that protests were clerical (implying that protests were orchestrated by the church hierarchy instead of being spontaneous among the religious people of Montenegro). Religion is indeed conceptually significant, considering its revival in the study of contentious politics (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994; 2001; Wald, Silverman, Fridy, 2005). Recent empirical research has shown that it is not religiosity as such that mobilizes collective action but rather religious organizations of a secular type (Omelicheva, Ahmed, 2017). SOC has historically been considered a political tool of Serbian nationalism, with its presence not only in Serbia but in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro. The overlap of politics and religion defines the activities of SOC and its capability to mobilize collective action. How it managed to conflate its claim – to forestall the Law on Freedom of Religions – with the broader national anti-government sentiment is the critical factor that can be explained by closely examining the SOC's standard mode of mobilization; religious procession.

At closer examination, if indeed considered a revolution, clerical protests in Montenegro do pose a particular analytical challenge. Traditionally, revolutions are commonly associated with coups, guerrilla warfare, and urban insurrections (Calvert, 2010, pp. 24–29). Montenegro's crisis falls into a specific category of non-violent (or peaceful) revolution (Nepastad, 2011; also see East, Potin, 1997). Non-violent methods presume massive peaceful protests in the run-up to the elections, which either see authoritarian leaders resign or be overthrown. Thus, clerical protests organized by SOC do correspond (descriptively at least) to the “colour revolutions” in the post-communist European space (Finkel, Brundy, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Concerning the longevity of Đukanović's regime<sup>4</sup> and its communist past, the conclusion could quickly be drawn that Montenegro was affected by the delayed “third wave of democratization” (Huntington, 1993).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Colour revolutions” is a term used to describe revolutions in the early 2000s, among which are the Bulldozer Revolution in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2000, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and others. They were aimed at overthrowing authoritarian leadership. (Kennedy, 2014, pp. 273–274).

<sup>4</sup> Montenegro was classified as a hybrid regime with sporadic incursions in the categories of flawed or semi-consolidated democracies due to Đukanović's long-lasting stay in power. Categorizing Montenegro as a hybrid regime brings some issues that are analyzed by Sartori and Pranzl (2018) in relation to “Freedom Calling” protests that were organized by pro-Serb opposition parties in 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The third wave of democratization is usually described as beginning in 1974 when the Portuguese military ousted the dictatorial regime and began the transition to democracy. The third wave lasted until 1989, when communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe collapsed and is generally described as the most extensive wave, with more than 60 countries (Shin, 1994, pp. 150–151).

Some commentators in Western media saw the church's resistance to government as a spark of a massive democratic upheaval, which led to the formation of a new government, patriotic and professional; "on par with western European governments" (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Also, the Western media misinterpreted church's resistance and its ability to mask its activities as transgressive contention. Theories of contentious politics generally differentiate between contained and transgressive contention; the former being waged by constituted and self-defined actors and the latter by spontaneous action of previously unorganized and apolitical groups (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001).

One of the suitable examples of transgressive contention over a prolonged period can be seen in Guatemala from the 1960s through the 1970s and the cessation of contentious actions in the early 1980s. The contentious actions of Guatemalan people in the 1960s and early 1970s, represented by mine workers' unions, different indigenous people groups, and resistance groups that fought for democratic reforms, can be viewed as a combined transgressive contention since they were not orchestrated but spontaneous events. Guatemala in that period was also a great example of changing political opportunities, which generated new contentions when political opportunities were appropriate and reduced contentious actions when political opportunities were not favourable (Brockett, 2005). The authors of this article want to emphasize the difference between events that occurred in Montenegro under the significant influence of SOC and the events like protests in Guatemala, which were a collection of different protests united under the collective disagreements with the Guatemalan political elite.

Since the 2020 election, however, these optimistic views and projections, underpinned by the democratization thesis, have proved to be illusory. So far, two governments suffered a non-confidence vote, and presently the caretaker cabinet awaits the 2023 election. European Commission's *2022 Report on Montenegro* states that institutional paralysis is caused by "political volatility, government instability and tensions within the ruling majorities, stalling decision-making processes and reform implementation" (Ec.europa, 2022). To explain why the revolutionary outcome was a failure, the causes of the revolutionary situation in 2020 have to be observed from a different viewpoint. The fallacy of understanding Montenegro's clerical protests in terms of post-communist non-violent revolutions stems from reducing the complexity of Montenegro's contentious politics to a single binary division: popular democratic opposition vs. authoritarian government. This perspective overlooks the key variable of organized religion, which was at the heart of the revolt. In that respect, the underlying logic of Montenegro's revolutionary situation has more in common with Arab Spring than "colour revolutions". As Marc Plattner (2011) notes, the failed democratization of the Middle East and North Africa can not be explained without considering the Islamic factor. Thus, the question is not why Montenegro's non-violent

revolution failed in prompting democratization but whether democratization was the objective of the movement at all.

## Chronological review of events leading to the clerical protests

Overlooking its “disruptive” potential stems from the general concurrence with the traditional Marxist view that religious organizations are not radical and are always in support of the given status quo (McVeigh, Sikkink, 2001). In principle, conservative inclinations towards the status quo are intrinsic to organized religions, and SOC is no exception. But to understand how SOC became the moving force behind a non-violent revolution – what its motives, goals, and methods were – a wider context is needed. As Dragutin Lalović and Danilo Ivezić (2021) show, since the mid-1990s, an informal “duumvirate” was formed, between Đukanović and the head of SOC’s Metropolitan of Montenegro Amfilohije Radović. The “deal” guaranteed SOC a supreme authority over religious issues in Montenegro, provided it did not blatantly interfere in the “political sphere” ruled by Đukanović and DPS. SOC’s tacit support became apparent during the presidential elections in 1997 when Đukanović began distancing himself from Slobodan Milošević’s dictatorship and his disastrous wars that brought rump Yugoslavia under international sanctions. Metropolitan Amfilohije’s strategy was not to support Đukanović directly but not to support Milošević’s candidate Momir Bulatović (Lalović, Ivezić, 2021, pp. 96–97). Đukanović won the elections and, since then, gradually began moving Montenegro in the direction of national self-determination and statehood reconstitution.

In 2006, during the campaign for the referendum on Montenegro’s independence from the two-state commonwealth with Serbia, Amfilohije displayed the same tacit approval by refusing to openly support Đukanović’s opponents. Đukanović won, and Montenegro became an independent state (Lalović, Ivezić, 2021, p. 98). Indeed, the underlying gap between Đukanović’s Montenegrin patriotism and Amfilohije’s ideology of Serbian ultra-nationalism could only be bridged by their shared objective: gaining autonomy from Belgrade. However, since Montenegro proclaimed independence, the dynamics in the “duumvirate” began to shift. Đukanović was now the dominant figure in the state, and his policies only amplified tensions with Amfilohije and SOC – the project of revitalization of Montenegrin national heritage, culture, and language; the recognition of Kosovo (which seceded from Serbia in 2008) and the decision to move Montenegro away from the Russian and Serbian influence towards EU and NATO. However, it would be the draft of the Law on Freedom of Religions, announced in 2015, that irreversibly infringed the long-standing status quo.

After Montenegro gained independence in 2006, the SOC allowed the name *Orthodox Church in Montenegro* as the name of Metropolitanate of Montenegro and it allowed an honorary title of Archbishop of Cetinje Amfilohije. That meant that Montenegrin parts of SOC and its head Amfilohije gained a limited autonomy from the SOC in Serbia. That became a problem since the Government could not recognize that name with the explanation that SOC was not the only orthodox church in Montenegro and because it was not its official name.

The notion that the Law was an excuse for a corrupt government to misappropriate the Church's real estate and assets is overly simplified Serbo-Russian propaganda (Tass, 2020). In fact, the Law was part of the EU accession process and was thus approved by the Venice Commission<sup>6</sup> in 2019. The main point of contention was article 62 of the Law, which states that unless a religious community can prove otherwise, the religious property built, bought with state funds, or that was the property of the state until 1 December 1918, will be proclaimed the property of the state. In addition, places of worship built by citizens of Montenegro on its territory until 1 December 1918, whose ownership can not be proven, become the property of the state as its cultural heritage (Službeni list Crne Gore 74/2019). The date used in the Law – 1 December 1918 – is vital in this case since it signifies the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS, officially renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929). A few days prior to the creation of Kingdom SCS, the Kingdom of Serbia merged with the Kingdom of Montenegro. The merger is still a source of contention between Montenegrin and Serbian nationalists. For the latter, the merger was in accordance with the popular will and legally confirmed by the so-called “Podgorica Assembly”;<sup>7</sup> for the former, it was Serbia's illegal occupation and annexation of Montenegro (Heka, 2021).

Before the creation of the Kingdom SCS, places of worship in Montenegro were considered the property of the Kingdom of Montenegro (Telegram, 2019). Thus, when in 1920 Regent Aleksandar Karađorđević unified all Orthodox Churches in the Kingdom into a single entity – the Serbian Orthodox Church – Montenegrin Orthodox Church was effectively abolished. Hence the appropriation of all of its properties by SOC (Kathimerini, 2021). Lalović and Ivezić (2021)

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<sup>6</sup> The Venice Commission is an institution of the Council of Europe with 58 member states, out of which 47 are members of Council of Europe. It is tasked with issuing opinions on constitutional and legal questions in order to help individual countries safeguard democratic institutions and human rights (Hoffmann-Riem, 2014, pp. 579–580).

<sup>7</sup> Even though some consider the “Podgorica Assembly” as legal and legitimate, available documents show that it did not follow guidelines defined in Montenegrin Constitution at the time; delegates were handpicked based on supporting the unification with the Kingdom of Serbia, and bribes were used in the process of selecting delegates. It led to the abolishment of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the incorporation of Montenegro into Serbia, which, in fact, led to the gradual incorporation of everything Montenegrin into Serbian national heritage (Pavlović, 1999, pp. 157–159).



show that Montenegrin Orthodox Church was registered in *The Catalogue of the Ecumenical Patriarchate* in 1855 as one of the fifteen autocephalous Orthodox Churches. The record thus proves that Montenegrin Orthodox Church was an independent entity at the time of its incorporation into SOC by Karadžević's decree. Although SOC considers itself an 800-year-old church and has insisted that the government should recognize its continuity, it simply could not have proven the legal ownership of its properties.<sup>8</sup> But the procedural issue of regulating religious communities soon became the political question par excellence. At the eighth party Congress of DPS in 2019, the party manifesto emphasized that the priority, only second to the EU integration process, is to restore the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. For SOC, this was a clear sign of not only the potential confiscation of the property but its institutional eradication and substitution with the existing Montenegrin Orthodox Church (formed in 1993 and registered as a religious NGO in 2001).

Thus, when the Law was passed in late December 2019, Amfilohije organized religious processions in protest, which immediately grew into a non-violent revolution against the regime. Clearly, the passing of the Law meant that the status quo ceased to exist and that the church and state entered a revolutionary situation. In such structural conditions, conservative inclinations and behavior is hardly sustainable. This is why Henry Kissinger (1957, p. 193) claims that in revolutionary situations conservative position often becomes dominated by the reactionary force. The reaction is ideologically rooted in conservatism, but its methods are revolutionary. But what chiefly distinguishes a reactionary from a conservative position is that the latter strives to either uphold or restore the status quo. Reaction, on the other hand, strives to restore the mythical past. Thus, for Amfilohije and SOC, the objective of the clerical protests has never been the restoration of the status quo, let alone democratization. Rather, it was an opportunity to move the scale in its favor – to take control over the state and shape it in its image.

This ambition did not arise with the structural opportunity made available by the passing of the Law. It has been immanent throughout the history of the “duumvirate”, and is revealed in SOC's persistent refusal to register as a religious community. Registration would presume SOC's recognition of the state's sovereignty and its laws. For Lalović and Ivezić (2021, p. 95), the Đukanović-Amfilohije “duumvirate” enabled SOC to perceive itself as not even being a state within a state, but as a state above a state. Amfilohije stated that there is no need for SOC to register in Montenegro, but, on the contrary, it is Montenegro that should register in SOC if it wants to become an actual sovereign state (Portal Analitika, 2015). The myth of an 800-year-old church that transcends everything

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<sup>8</sup> The irrationality behind the myth becomes even greater since laws in the Republic of Serbia recognize the continuity of SOC in Serbia since 1836 (Službeni glasnik RS: 036/2006).

temporal, i.e., states and governments, feeds into the narrative and the perception that it is actually Montenegro that is the property of SOC. The success of clerical protests eventually far surpassed the initial aims of SOC. Examining the nature and character of SOC's repertoire of contention, i.e., a religious procession, can shed light on the outcome of the process, i.e. the fall of DPS-led government in August 2020.

## Contentious performance – religious procession

Clerical protests held in Montenegro between December 2019 and August 2020 are known as *lity* or *litiyá*; an Orthodox Christian festive religious procession that is rooted in the Byzantine liturgical tradition. *Lity* denotes a collective prayer walk, accompanied by chanting of religious songs, and also *moleban*; a worship to God or a saint, performed either before or after the ceremonial service. *Lity* often takes place outside the church and is usually performed at night during important feast days.

*Lity* and *moleban* are part of SOC's standard and deeply embedded repertoire of contention. Indeed, repertoires evolve over time, reflecting the changes in structures of political opportunity, i.e., adapting the "known scripts" of actions to given circumstances (Tilly, 1997; Tarrow, 2010). Thus, due to the limiting conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the processions held in Montenegro have undergone ritualistic innovations, which are without precedent in the entire Orthodox tradition (Todorović, 2020, p. 50). To avoid losing political momentum, around June and July 2020 Metropolitan Amfilohije called for organizing ship-*lity* and car-*lity*. Ship-*lity* and ship-*moleban* were held in boats by the coastal cities of Budva and Kotor (Rtrs, 2020). The largest car-*lity* "drove" prayer from the Monastery of Ostrog to the city of Nikšić, with a few hundred cars participating (Direktno, 2020). But these innovations have not changed the substantial logic of SOC's repertoire, traditionally established in Serbian nationalism, by use of inflammatory discourse, and a strong propensity for violence.

The notable early episode of clerical protests organized by SOC was in 1937 when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Vatican signed a Concordat to regulate the position of the Catholic Church. This was a legal issue protracted since 1922, thereby finalizing the last legal status of one of the state-recognized religions (Novaković, 2009, pp. 524–526). Perceiving it as detrimental to Orthodox dominant and privileged position, SOC fomented the country-wide revolt. Religious processions were held in Serbia proper, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The contentious performance of SOC displayed a couple of its intrinsic characteristics.

First, its common use of exaggerated and usually false claims to mobilize collective action. On the so-called “bloody procession” on July 19 in Belgrade, a public prayer was held for terminally ill Patriarch of SOC. But the motive of the gathering was protest and when one bishop was only minorly injured, the reaction led to a violent clash between protesters and gendarmerie (Djokić, 2011, pp. 65–67). Second is the modular character of the protests – a prayer walk in an open space, where anyone can join in, attracts massive support regardless of the basic claim of the organizers. Thus, during the “Concordat crisis”, SOC’s underlying motive – to prevent the regulation of the status of Catholic Church – became diffused within the flexible structure. While indeed moved by the ideology of Serbian nationalism, the protests were, as Dejan Djokić notes, primarily motivated by the general “dissatisfaction with the government” (2011, p. 67). The government eventually yielded to pressure and withdrew the document from parliamentary procedure.

Another major episode was on the eve of the bloody disintegration of the Socialist Federate Republic of Yugoslavia. By the late 1980s, SOC actively propagated the claim that ethnic Serbs living outside Serbia proper (namely in Kosovo and Croatia) were being threatened with genocide (Markovich, 2014, p. 117). Only by uniting in Greater Serbia could the national question forever be resolved. The “church-national programme” published in 1989 states that Yugoslavia “in its present form” is not in accordance with “God’s absolute justice”, which means that it must be abolished and in the process, “three million people” should be resettled (Jovanović, 2014). On the occasion of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (when Serbia was defeated by Ottoman Turks), SOC organized arguably the single largest religious performance – the cross-country transfer of bones of Tzar Lazar, who, according to the legend, heroically fell in the battle. From Belgrade to Gračanica in Kosovo, the transfer lasted from July 1988 to September 1989. Lazar’s relic was passed around monasteries across Yugoslavia in a highly politicized manner and in the places claimed to be Serbian lands (Biserko, 2007, pp. 13–16; Silber, Little, 1997, pp. 70–73). Most notably, a procession held in the small Croatian village Dalmatinsko Kosovo in July 1989 amplified inter-ethnic tensions in a prelude to war. Although Croatian communist officials were reluctant to react, the media critically reported on nationalistic symbolism, such as flags and songs, as well as a warmongering discourse that called for the defence of Serbs from supposed cultural and ethnic “assimilation” (Popović, 2021).

SOC’s processions as a method to mobilize ethnic Serbs for the upcoming war were welcomed by Milošević, then head of the Serbian League of Communists. For Milošević, the nationalist ideology of expansionism was a political incentive to consolidate his autocracy and avoid “the third wave of democratization” that transformed Eastern European states into democracies. But the Orthodox-communist alliance was short-lived and by 1990 collapsed over the issues such

as refusal to return to SOC its properties nationalized after 1945 (Tomanić, 2001, pp. 24–28). When first massive protests against Milošević's regime came in 1996 and 1997, SOC nominally supported the resisters. But due to the genuinely democratic and liberal character of the opposition, SOC did not stand out nor take any major initiative. There was, however, one notable lity organized in January 1997, which was led by Patriarch Pavle himself, who publicly blessed the student protesters. Yet, the insignificance of SOC's engagement in the overall national resistance to Milošević's directorship is generally attributed to the fact that the church and regime had an informal understanding and held principle relations open (Miladinović, 2019).

There is a seeming contradiction running through these episodes. On the one hand, SOC is an organization with a well-defined identity and nationalistic objectives underlying its historically contingent claims. On the other, it tends to pose as the exponent of people's will, which in certain instances surfaces at the helm of the culminating national dissatisfaction. While the character of SOC is indeed constitutive, its real power stems from monopolizing the transgressive contention and presenting the events it orchestrated as spontaneous events generated by the people's will. In the late 1980s, SOC managed to catalyze its genocidal "national-church" programme through the so-called "happening of the people" that brought Milošević to power. During Montenegro's 2020 political crisis, a well-ordained plan to overthrow the government found refuge in massive popular dissatisfaction with the state's democratic deficit and systemic corruption. Hence the labeling of clerical protest in Montenegro as an "Orthodox miracle" (a phrase often used by pro-Serb opposition and the Serbian media) (Vukadinović, 2020).

On the backdrop of the "miraculous" spontaneity in gathering resistance to DPS-led government, SOC's practical preparations to take over the state reflected its more genuine sense for violence. In August 2022, a major scandal broke out when Interpol informed Montenegro's justice department on intercepted text messaging via SKY ECC platform between two members of the local gang. Their communication reveals SOC's purchase and contraband of around a hundred AK-47 rifles from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The weaponry was intended for an armed insurrection in the case the pro-Serbian opposition loses the parliamentary elections in August (M-portal, 2022). The concern was that such a violent measure would be necessary, provided the clerical protests turned out to be ineffective.

Actually, they were extremely successful, but there are deep structural reasons for its success which go beyond mere dissatisfaction with the government. The protests reflect the wider crisis of secularism and modernity in societies disenchanted by the false promises of Globalization to bring eternal well-being (Flassbeck, Steinhardt, 2020). However, the anti-establishment sentiments in post-communist societies can not simply be reduced to a democratic deficit

and widening socio-economic gap between disenfranchised people and the *no-menklatura-turned-liberal* elites. It is caused by the neo-liberal ethic of an atomized individual, who is responsible for oneself and whose misfortunes are neither the concern nor the responsibility of society (Dugan, 2003; Brown, 2006). Hence both the material and spiritual anxiety of an individual in the neoliberal era. Since gaining independence, Montenegro was integrated into the prevailing Western neoliberal system and would thus be no exception in the emerging systemic crisis.

And it is precisely in this failure of the post-socialist transition that Slobodan Vukičević (2021) sees the massive appeal of the lity. It offered the frustrated powerless masses an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with state-party bureaucratic control; and, individually, to redefine their spiritual meaning as autonomous human beings. But how did a specific legal matter of irregular land-registered religious objects become the source of the massive anti-government revolt? Structural reasons only offer a general framework for understanding. It is the modular character of the clerical protest and the strategies used – non-violence and change of discourse – that helped SOC monopolize popular discontent with the government.

## Non-violent revolution and its outcome

When Montenegro's government announced the draft of the Law on Freedom of Religions in 2015, the pro-Serbian opposition initiated a series of mostly unsuccessful protests known as the "Freedom Calling" (Sartori, Pranzl, 2018). The standard mobilizing tactic included the same inflammatory rhetoric of the late 1980s, emphasizing the "survival" of the Serb population and laminating about the civil war. From its Belgrade headquarters, SOC actively contributed to the contentious atmosphere. In 2018, Patriarch Irinej said that "today in Montenegro, the Orthodox church is worse off than it was at the time of Ottoman Turks" and that "the Serbs are worse off than they were in the Independent State of Croatia"<sup>9</sup> (Slobodna Evropa, 2018). When the Law on Freedom of Religion was passed on 27 December 2019, Andrija Mandić, the leader of the pro-Serbian Democratic Front, called his supporters to take up arms and burn down the parliament. Because Mandić and his closest associates were involved in the failed coup during the 2016 elections, Đukanović and DPS discarded SOC in a usual manner. SOC and pro-Serb opposition were called the "fifth column", which in collusion with the Serbian nationalists and Vučić government, plan to undermine Montenegro's statehood.

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<sup>9</sup> Independent State of Croatia was a Nazi puppet state during World War II, which committed large scale atrocities against Serb population.

However, a significant shift occurred. According to Mandić's own testimony, he was dissuaded to taking any concrete steps by Metropolitan Amfilohije himself (Vričko, 2020). As Heckert (2020) states, it was SOC taking over the initiative and announcing religious processions to put pressure on the government. Clerical protests were to be held every Thursday and Sunday until the Law would be withdrawn. Pragmatically repudiating the warmongering language and distancing from the extremist politicians, religious processions were sought out as a method of non-violent resistance. Officially, lity was a method of defending the religious rights of Montenegrin citizens. It was indeed a decisive deflection and a radical break with the past routine practices. SOC could have taken its objections to the Constitutional court. Instead, it chose the non-institutional venue by "peaceful means" and "godly rhetoric", which, according to Aleksandar Radoman, represented a "sophisticated mode of a coup" (Portal Analitika, 2020). While the intentions were neither peaceful nor godly, the non-violent strategy had to have success because it forced Đukanović and the DPS-led government into an asymmetric conflict. An asymmetric conflict, in this case, happened between the legally and legitimately elected government and the religious institution, SOC. In asymmetric conflicts, the sides on opposite sides have fundamental and significant differences in their resources and capabilities (Stepanova, 2008). In the case of Montenegro, the SOC can be viewed as being in a subordinate position to the state, regardless of its vast power and wealth. That meant that the SOC was forced to use strategy in its favor to try and balance the playing field. It managed to do that with the clerical process as routine repertoires of contention.

Gene Sharp (1973, pp. 110–113; also see Dudouet, 2008) notes that the repression against non-violent action always exhausts the legitimacy of those who hold the monopoly on violence. Provided the resisters are kept disciplined, repression of any kind against non-violent action is, by default, self-defeating. Thus, in principle, the government has two options. On the one hand, it can provoke a desired violent reaction from the resisters by excessively using force. On the other, it can self-restrain from using force altogether and pragmatically reapproach the resisters. The reaction of the DPS-led government was a mixture in that the force was used but never exceeded its legal boundaries. For example, on May 12, eight Orthodox priests were arrested (including the current Metropolitan Joanikije) for organizing a lity in Nikšić in a direct violation of the strict anti-COVID-19 measures. The arrests enraged the resisters, and despite large gatherings being prohibited, a few thousand people led by Metropolitan Amfilohije went on the protest prayer walk. A riot broke out in which several protesters were detained, and one reporter was injured. Accusations that government's reaction was overly repressive further deteriorated the legitimacy of the regime.

But the key strategy in radicalizing the asymmetry of the state repression and non-violent resistance was to break the conventional dichotomies, which

have for decades defined Montenegro's contentious politics; pro-European vs. pro-Russian, Montenegrin vs. Serbian, independent state vs. Serbia's annexation, and secular state vs. theocracy. Three days after the Nikšić incident, the priests were released from detention, and bishop Joanikije gave a telling statement – no grudge held against the policemen who had to do their job, but who are nevertheless “part of our people” (Šćepanović, Tomović, 2020). Although from SOC's standpoint, “our people” unequivocally presumes Serbian people, it was never explicitly emphasized. Also, when Amfilohije warns that the government is provoking a civil war, the curious phrase he uses is *bratoubilački rat* which is akin to the notion of civil war, but in direct translation means fratricidal war. In other words, it does not imply inter-ethnic but intra-ethnic conflict. The purpose of such concealed discursive meaning was to present lity all-inclusive. The ideological divisions came down to a single binary construct – the division between the corrupt government and *the people*.

By transcending usual controversies under the guise of protecting people's religious freedoms, SOC and pro-Serbian parties claimed that they have included “others” in religious procession; Montenegrins, Muslims, atheists, etc. Peaceful rhetoric and inclusiveness of the lity showed results. In February, local journalists from Nikšić reported on the procession, asking about the motives of the participants. By and large, they stated that the purpose of the gathering was to overthrow the government; some stated that they were motivated to defend their religious rights; and none had any knowledge of what the Law on Freedom of Religions prescribes (CDM, 2020). Đukanović and DPS from the start insisted that SOC's defence of religious freedoms was a mask of pro-Serbian nationalist agenda, but Amfilohije turned the charge against them. The charge was now perceived as government's propaganda to hide its own corruption. In the first week since the passing of the Law, the processions in the capital city of Podgorica, DPS stronghold, grew from few thousand to more than ten or even twenty thousand participants; in Nikšić by January 4 to over twenty thousand; smaller towns such as Berane had record high participation in processions, with over five thousand participants (Vijesti, 2020). In the first three months of 2020, processions continued in Montenegro, Serbia, the entity of Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and even in some cities in Europe and in the US<sup>10</sup> (Kovačević, 2020). At that point in time, Heckert (2020) correctly predicted that the clerical protests would pose a critical threat to Đukanović controlled government, since it

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<sup>10</sup> An especially interesting event occurred in Merrillville, Indiana where hundreds of people marched in support of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The local Serbian American population marched from the Church of Saint Sava to the Church of Saint Elijah. Among those who participated in the lity were also the third and fourth-generation Serbian Americans who do not speak the Serbian language anymore, but they also wanted to express their Serbian identity by supporting the values of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (Nwitimes.com).

was the government promoting claims that the withdrawal of the Law directly implied the “fundamental questions of state and nationhood“. In addition, mainstream media portrayed clerical protests as anti-systemic, anarchic and fundamentally opposed to European values. It was suggested that Montenegro could resemble Tehran in 1979 in the event of SOC’s success.

Eventually, the results of the parliamentary elections of 30 August would show that DPS lost 15.000 votes or 6% of its supporters. Yet, the pro-Serbian Democratic Front – although it did win 78.000 votes more than in the 2016 elections – did not achieve the envisaged success. For Professor Miloš Bešić, this is the main indicator that the Law on Freedom of Religions was the only true cause of DPS’s loss. While the rise in support for pro-Serbian parties was notable, it was not decisive. On the other hand, the polls showed an unprecedented public trust in SOC, and Amfilohije led as the most popular public figure in the country (Šćepanović, 2020). How many sympathizers of DPS joined clerical protests remains unknown.

By late spring, the immense pressure forced the government to consider making concessions. Prime Minister Duško Marković offered to suspend the Law and renew negotiations with SOC in the presence of and mediated by the legal experts. Under the proposed new agreement, the ownership of religious objects would be determined by the courts, but even where the court rules that the state of Montenegro is the owner of the property, SOC could nevertheless continue using the religious object. Also, the new arrangement would explicitly rule out the possibility of any other religious organization using the objects in question, except SOC (N1info, 2020). The latter point attests to the government’s *de facto* recognition of the defeat because it thwarted any prospect of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church ever reclaiming its properties lost in 1918. However, SOC would be required to register as a religious institution in Montenegro. By then, SOC had become the moving force of massive popular resistance and had no intention of giving up its hybrid status. The offer was refused, and the processions continued in an effort to fully mobilize for the upcoming parliamentary elections. However, the electoral success on 30 August was relative. The ruling DPS and its small coalition partners lost the majority by a margin of one parliamentary seat.

The three opposition coalitions that won the election included the pro-European coalition led by the Movement Ura and two pro-Serbian ones led by the Democrats party and Democratic Front. On the one hand, these coalitions were relative winners, and neither had the necessary majority to form the government. Further complicating the matter was the fact that these coalitions, apart from their categorical anti-DPS stance, had ideologically and politically very little in common. But did forming a government really require further engagement by SOC? Peaceful processions fulfilled their purpose and it was certain that the Law on Freedom of Religions would be annulled. SOC was, however, in



a unique position to dictate the terms of complementing the process of the transfer of power. And because it did engage in the process of completing the outcome shows that its goals far surpassed the original claim.

In late September, Amfilohije summoned the leaders of three coalitions in the Monastery of Ostrog, where he apparently acted as a mediator in the post-electoral negotiations. In fact, Amfilohije was setting up the government in consultation with the Serbian secret service (Đuranović, Zečević, 2020). After three months of exhausting negotiations, on 4 December, SOC formed a government exclusively comprised of experts (the only politician Dritan Abazović, the head of Ura, was given the intelligence service department). Leaders of the Democratic Front, the strongest opposition party, did not participate in government. Instead, an independent candidate, Zdravko Krivokapić, Amfilohije's personal choice, would be the candidate for prime minister. In the act of empty formality, Đukanović, still holding the office of the president, granted a mandate to Krivokapić. His first decision as a prime minister was to annul the Law on Freedom of Religions.

While the formation of the so-called "monastery government" could indeed be characterized as a revolutionary outcome – in that SOC effectively took over the state – the new status quo was not established. Actually, the atmosphere of looming civil war would only intensify. Immediately after the election, the intimidation and provocations of the Muslim population by the supporters of SOC occurred regularly, with desecration of Muslim religious objects and chanting of slogans that glorify the genocide in Srebrenica (Aljović, 2020). After the government was formed, SOC began building its paramilitary organization, known as Orthodox Brotherhood Pillars, *Stupovi*. Officially a humanitarian organization whose purpose is defending Serbdom and Orthodoxy, it became widely known in December 2020 when some of its members were arrested for violating COVID-19 restrictions. These groups are mostly comprised of veterans from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Amfilohije died from COVID-19 infection in October 2020, and the new Prime Minister Krivokapić announced that the enthronement of the new Metropolitan would occur on 4 September 2021, in Cetinje Monastery. News of the enthronement sparked counter-protests of Montenegrin nationalists and opponents of SOC.

While Montenegrin protesters guarded the barricades, Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije landed in Cetinje in a military (NATO) helicopter. They arrived under the protection of Special Forces and bulletproof vests to protect them from the alleged snipers (there has never been any evidence presented about the existence of snipers). After arriving at the monastery, the enthronement ceremony took place, with Patriarch Porfirije calling for peace and joy in Montenegro, while the protesters in Cetinje were being brutally suppressed by special police forces.

In 2021, after the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije, the SOC wanted to sign the Fundamental Agreement with the Government of Montenegro. However, this time the Government was under the heavy influence of the SOC and the name *Orthodox Church in Montenegro* and Amfilohije's honorary title became a problem because they were the symbol of autonomy, limited autonomy, but nevertheless autonomy. The SOC's demands were presented by the historian Aleksandar Raković who stated that the eparchies of SOC in Montenegro could only be a part of *Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro* and the honorary title was only valid for Metropolitan Amfilohije. In addition to that, the Fundamental agreement should be signed by the Patriarch Porfirije (who is the head of SOC) and the Government. By doing so, the SOC in Montenegro can be viewed as a foreign church, because the head of a SOC is situated in Belgrade. By taking the autonomy from the Metropolitan of Montenegro, the SOC would have even more control over religious and political spheres of influence (Lalović, 2021).

## Conclusion

While the change of government after Montenegro's 2020 elections was initially hailed by the international community as a positive sign of the democratization process, clerical protests organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church were, in fact, critical for the electoral result. This indicates a deeper and more complex socio-political dimension of Montenegro's crisis, which during the election crisis, carried a particular revolutionary component that is worth examining from the perspective of contentious politics. The political dynamics prior to the election are unique two-dimensional phenomena: the popular non-violent uprising against the government that was over thirty years in power and SOC's standard and deeply embedded repertoire of contention that inspired the revolt and monopolized the popular dissatisfaction. A well-executed strategy to change the government found sanctuary in the vast public dissatisfaction, which, as this article showed, has to be viewed as a combination of local political and ethnic contention with deeper historical roots and a broader crisis of secularism and liberalism. In that respect, Montenegro's crisis should be seen as the part of the general international trend of populist-nationalist and religious reactions to the failures of globalization.

As this article showed, the 'informal' deal between president Đukanović and the SOC since the 1990s is crucial in explaining the ongoing contentious politics in Montenegro.<sup>11</sup> The culmination of contention, turning into a revolutionary situation, came only with the passing of the Law on Freedom of Religions,

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<sup>11</sup> For a thorough analysis of the revival of SOC in Montenegro in the 1990s, also see Saggau, 2019.

which from the perspective of SOC, was exclusively aimed at confiscating religious property in favor of the state, which threatened to undermine the long-lasting status quo between government and the Church. Đukanović's decision to sever all the ties with the SOC after more than 30 years in power is arguably one of the rare but greatest strategic mistakes in his long career. However, SOC's capacity to mobilize people for its cause proved to be enormously higher than the DPS-led government expected. SOC's strategy in this asymmetric conflict consisted of routine repertoires of contention, i.e., religious processions, and it owes its success entirely to strategically using public dissatisfaction and channeling it through its repertoires of contention.

Nevertheless, with the single most crucial twist, SOC dispensed with its embedded and historically proven record of promoting or fomenting violence. The structural opportunity reflecting the contemporary crisis of liberalism, and the widespread dissatisfaction with elites and their corruption, presented itself. The non-violent strategy and changed rhetoric emphasizing the defense of religious freedoms made SOC's clerical revolution a success.

Nonetheless, as soon as the processions were put in motion, the claim was not merely to forestall the Law and return to the status quo but to take over the state via the so-called 'monastery government' and create conditions that are in accordance with the SOC's official claim that the 800-years old Church is above fourteen-year-old state. The continuity of the revolutionary situation can be explained only by the long-term aims of SOC, i.e., pursuing the outcome of systematic "Serbization" of Montenegro via negating its nationhood, history, language, and cultural heritage. Ever since the election, two governments have faced a vote of no confidence, and the caretaker cabinet is currently awaiting the 2023 election, with the further deepening divisions in Montenegro continuing to grow.

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