



Ne damo svetinje:
The Orthodox Church's
Political Role in Montenegro

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November 2025

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About the Author



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Abstract

Montenegrin politics have been shaped since independence by the instrumentalization of its ethnoreligious cleavages for political purposes. The adoption by the Democratic Party of Socialists, the ruling party until 2020, of a 'Law on Religious Freedom' targeting the Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, the largest Orthodox denomination in the country, triggered mass clergy-led protests, known locally as Litije. The Litije positioned the Church as the country's most important non-Parliamentary political actor, a role it has continued to play following the 2023 Parliamentary elections. This article examines the political influence of the Metropolitanate in Montenegro since 2019 against the backdrop of the ethnoreligious cleavages that characterise the country and its political system. It also proposes a set of policy recommendations for Hungarian decision-makers to engage and establish institutional relations with the Metropolitanate as a supportive measure to its Montenegrin and broader Balkan policy.

Introduction

Montenegro is one of the most complex yet overlooked Balkan polities. Independent since 2006, following a peaceful separation from Serbia amidst a politically tense referendum campaign, Montenegro was mostly spared from the violence of the 1990s Yugoslav Wars. It is, nevertheless, one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse states in the Balkans. As per the 2023 census, the largest ethnic groups in Montenegro's 623,000-strong population are ethnic Montenegrins (41.12% of the total population) and Serbs (32.93% of the total population)¹. Other groups include Bosniaks (9.45%), Albanians (4.97%), Russians (2.06%) and 'ethnic Muslims' (1.63%), a Yugoslav-era ethnocultural classification to which some South Slavic-speaking Muslims adhere to². Montenegro is a predominantly Orthodox Christian country. Census figures show that 71% of the population identify with Eastern Orthodoxy, while around 20% are Muslim and 3.3% follow Roman Catholicism³. Irreligious peoples, accounting for 2% are found across the ethnic divide, and may, in some cases, still identify with the baseline religion of their ethnic group or subgroup as an identitarian marker.

Orthodoxy in Montenegro is, in the vast majority of its churches, synonym with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Montenegrin territory is divided into three Eparchies and the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, which acts as a *de facto primus inter pares* among the country's Orthodox hierarchs. Though under the canonical authority of the Serbian Patriarch, the Montenegrin Church enjoys a significant degree of autonomy, for historical, cultural, and political reasons. The Metropolitanate and the Eparchies own all churches, monasteries, and religious institutions linked to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, as well as all real estate and assets associated thereto. For the sake of cohesiveness and due to the aforementioned role of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral as a *primus inter pares*, the terms 'Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro' and 'Metropolitanate' will be used interchangeably in the present article unless otherwise noted.

The Metropolitanate has historically acted as both a religious institution and as a 'guardian' of Montenegrin Serb ethnocultural heritage, a role it continues to play in the present day. This has led it to come into constant conflict with the Montenegrin government during the State's first decade-and-a-half of existence as an independent polity. From 1992 until 2020, Montenegro was ruled by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), of longtime President and Prime Minister Milo Đukanović, a former Yugoslavist-turned-Montenegrin nationalist. Conflicts between Church and State reached a tipping point in late-2019, when the DPS introduced a new, so-called Law on Religious Freedom, which would have forced the Metropolitanate to yield control of most of its churches and real estate to the State. Đukanović had heretofore supported a dissident, unrecognised church, known as the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which would have benefitted the most from the Law. As a response, mass protests led by priests and Church hierarchs took place across the country. The protests culminated in an unprecedented mobilisation of the opposition to Đukanović and the end of DPS rule in the country after three decades, and the Metropolitanate's consolidation as the leading non-State societal actor in the country.

The present article will analyse the political developments in Montenegro leading up to the Church-led protests in 2019-20, known locally as Litije, after a form of Orthodox procession, and their political aftermath. In the next section, the present-day state of Church-State relations in Montenegro will be assessed, with special attention to the ties between the parties in the ruling coalition and the Metropolitanate. Finally, in the final section, a number of policy recommendations for Hungarian policymakers will be presented, centred around the establishment of institutional relations with the Metropolitanate. It is argued that the establishment of such relations with the Metropolitanate, due to its political and societal influence, contributes to the future-proofing of Hungary's Montenegrin policy, as well as the stated Hungarian policy of establishing relations with Christian communities in Europe and abroad.



St George Monastery, Perast, Bay of Kotor, Montenegro.

(Diego Delso via Wikimedia Commons)

New State, Old Cleavages

Present-day Montenegro was formed as a multiethnic State with a civic, supra-ethnic, multi-confessional, and historically-based identity⁴. The very idea of an “oasis of peace” in a “troubled region” became a part of this new Montenegrin supra-ethnic civic identity, strongly enforced in all levels of government in its first decades of existence as an independent polity⁵. *De jure*, Montenegro has been a multiparty Parliamentary democracy since 2006, with a strong Prime Minister, a mostly ceremonial President, and a strong central government only somewhat countered by local authorities. *De facto*, until 2020, it existed as a semi-autocratic, dominant-party state, governed by a political coalition formed around cronyism, ethnic politics (part of which involved the denial thereof in the public sphere), and constant use of identity issues in politics⁶⁷. This was, in part, facilitated by the political structure that was formed since the end of Socialism in the early 1990s.

The Montenegrin political system, though not as explicitly ethnically-based as the Bosnian one, is the most ethnically-oriented in the Western Balkans after that of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Formed as the legal successor of League of Communists of Yugoslavia in Montenegro, the DPS was originally a strongly Yugoslavist, pro-Milosevic party, with a Montenegrin independentist wing⁸. Following a period of infighting between Yugoslavist and independentist wings in the late-1990s, Đukanović shifted the party towards the latter. Seeking to gather Western support for his cause, and benefitting from Yugoslavia’s international isolation, the DPS also adopted a strongly Euro-Atlantic line. Ideologically, the DPS sought to adapt its own post-socialist legacy to the Western-leaning (and, to an extent, Western-imposed) model of social liberalism – with all the caveats of a traditional society like Montenegro’s. Following an alleged coup attempt by ethnic Serbs in 2016, the veracity of which remains under discussion, the DPS became, more explicitly, both a civic and an *ethnic* Montenegrin party. In Montenegrin terms, this meant *de facto* a party opposed to any institutions, politically or otherwise, linked to Serbia or its national-cultural identity in the country⁹.

The Montenegrin party-political system has previously been described as one based on ethnoreligious ‘cleavages’.¹⁰ Political parties, even those presenting themselves as supra-ethnic, tend to appeal to a specific ethnicity in a more-or-less explicit way, through either rhetoric or policies. Even in the case of those parties that present themselves as ‘supra-ethnic’, their discourse, symbols, and choice of alliance act as markers of appartenence or support. With a few exceptions, these were, directly or otherwise, aimed as much to a certain community as they were to an ideological grouping. In a democratic model, party systems organised around cleavages, whether ethnic-based or otherwise, will often craft a form of consociationalism to ensure governance and a certain degree of internal harmony. This had been the case in post-war Austria¹¹. In Montenegro, however, the conditions for the formation of a consociational model did not materialise. The DPS’ political and numerical dominance until 2020, as well as certain particular internal dynamics to the Serb community, not least the positioning of its main political wing as the leading opposition force in the country, would have rendered it impossible. Conversely, the DPS’ turn towards the development of an ethnic Montenegrin nationalism after 2016 reduced even further the possibility of the establishment of successful consociationalism.

The DPS’ galvanisation of ethnic Montenegrin votes was assisted by the outsized role played by Serb parties in the opposition until 2020. Prior to 2006, the Montenegrin political system was divided into pro-independence and pro-Union parties¹². If the former camp was dominated by the DPS, the latter was populated by a galaxy of ideologically diverse parties, the vast majority of which were closely linked to the Montenegrin Serb community. After independence, the ‘Serb parties’ split along ideological lines. The formerly dominant Socialist People’s Party (SNP) gradually lost support in favour of a right-wing coalition of three parties: New Serb Democracy (NSD), the Democratic People’s Party (DNP), and the Movement for Changes (PzP). This coalition, known as the Democratic Front (DF), was formed in 2012, and remained the largest opposition force throughout the DPS era. Its strong association with Unionism and, after 2016, Serb identity and a perceived opposition to Montenegrin nationhood – an idea promoted by the DPS and allied parties – contributed to the DPS’ consolidation as the main ethnic Montenegrin party.

Besides the DPS and the Democratic Front, several other political parties are active in Montenegro. The DPS usually governed with a number of minor centre-left and liberal parties, such as the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party. Ethnic minorities tend to be represented by at least one dedicated political party, the most prominent of which being the Bosniak Party (BS), the Democratic Union of Albanians (DUA), and the Albanian Alliance (AA). Moreover, a number of de jure supra-ethnic parties have appeared over time, seeking to break the DPS monopoly in power and to reduce the Democratic Front's weight as the main opposition. These parties have tended to adopt a centrist, Euro-Atlantic ideology similar to that of the DPS, with eventual left- or right-wing undertones to appeal to specific electorates. They have, however, remained minor until 2020, with some eventually joining DPS-led coalitions at either national or local levels.



Amfilohije, Metropolitan of Montenegro.

(Liliya Yu via Wikimedia Commons)

Protests and Processions

The DPS government would first lose power after the 2020 Parliamentary elections. Those elections were held against the backdrop of a large-scale protest movement led by the Metropolitanate and, in particular, by the late Metropolitan Amfilohije, against a proposed DPS-initiated 'Law on Religious Freedom'. The proposed text would open a legal pathway for the State to expropriate much of the Metropolitanate's real estate, including historical churches and monasteries whose ownership was disputed with the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.¹³ The Metropolitanate's situation was further complicated by the absence of a Fundamental Agreement delineating, *inter alia*, property rights, as existed between the State and other religious denominations.¹⁴ Both during Parliamentary debates over the Law and following its approval, Dukanović and other leading DPS politicians declared their objective to be the weakening of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro in favour of its unrecognised, autocephalous counterpart.¹⁵

The Church reacted by the organisation across the country of mass protests in the form of public processions known locally as *Litije*. Following the passing of the Law on Religious Freedom, the *Litije* intensified in size and geographic spread, being held across the country and attracting as many as tens of thousands of participants.¹⁶ As elections approached, the movement became markedly more political, with the Church positioning itself clearly in the opposition to the DPS. Concurrently, the Church hierarchy coordinated with the political opposition. Already at the time of the *Litije*, two opposition forces demonstrated public support for Church demands: the right-leaning 'For the Future of Montenegro' coalition of Serb parties and the centrist, Montenegrin-oriented Democrats party, led by future President of Parliament Aleksa Bećić.

The elections, held on the 30th of September, delivered a fractured Parliament, though one in which the DPS and its traditional allies no longer had a simple majority. As such, the three largest opposition coalitions, i.e. the Serb-led 'For the Future of Montenegro' list, the Bećić-led 'Peace is Our Nation', and the progressive 'United Reform Action' (URA) coalition, formed a government with the support of minority parties. The initial Prime Minister was Zdravko Krivokapić, a university professor close to the Metropolitanate who had been chosen to head the Serb-led coalition. Krivokapić's government would prove short-living, marred by infighting and disputes over policy and personnel. His own coalition would withdraw from the government in April 2022, after which he was succeeded by Dritan Abazović, leader of the URA coalition. It would be under Abazović that the Fundamental Agreement between the Church and the State would be signed.¹⁷

The significant loss of support by the DPS and the increase in support for, notably, the opposition alliances led by Krivokapić, were greatly, though not exclusively, motivated by the *Litije*. That three opposition coalitions with major programmatic differences were able to form a government, even if short-living, further attests to the loss of popularity and legitimacy experienced by the DPS by 2020. A thorough understanding of these developments is fundamental for the elaboration of a strategy of engagement and relationship-building with the Metropolitanate. As previously mentioned, following the *Litije*-initiated political shifts, any successful model of diplomatic and political engagement with Montenegro must consider the Metropolitanate's role as a leading societal and political actor.

The *Litije* were successful in cementing the Church as a direct power player in Montenegrin politics and its elevation, in the 2019-20 period, to the main civic opposition actor, beyond ethnic lines. Though it had previously taken political sides in favour of pro-Serb parties such as the Democratic Front, the scale and outcomes of the *Litije* marked an unprecedented escalation in the Metropolitanate's involvement into the daily political life in Podgorica and regional centres. There is now a more "mature", less street-based form of political action by Church authorities, with resort to its grassroots organisations only in key moments such as in electoral campaigns or during political crises. Two events were the catalysts for the strategic and tactical shift by the Metropolitanate in its political strategy.

Firstly, the Metropolitanate underwent an important leadership change shortly after the end of the *Litije* process. Amfilohije passed away in 2021, after which his former right-hand man, then-Bishop Joanikije (Mićović), was elected his successor as Metropolitan Joanikije II of Montenegro and the Littoral. Joanikije was Amfilohije's *de facto* right-hand man and one of the best-known clergymen in Montenegro and Serbia alike, had taken an active role in the *Litije*, having been arrested by Montenegrin police¹⁸. Known for his scholarly and diplomatic demeanour, Joanikije's profile differed from that of his more combative predecessor, whose public image had been largely shaped by the 1990s and the independence campaigns. In politics, Joanikije, though maintaining his predecessor's active stance, has shifted towards a less militantly "pro-Serb" line to a more pragmatic one, engaging with and supporting the efforts of a broader coalition of political parties that share the Church's opposition to the DPS and liberal political agendas.

Secondly, though the political mood in Montenegro remained strongly supportive of systemic change, the political instability of the Krivokapić administration and the weakness of Abazović's political coalition quickly became problematic. Moreover, the DPS, though no longer in government, remained the dominant force in several levels of the State. It was in this context that *Pokret Evropa Sad* (PES), translated as 'Europe Now Movement' came into prominence as the country's leading political force. PES was founded as an overtly non-ethnic party composed mostly of dissatisfied technocrats serving in the two previous non-DPS governments. Its key ideological markers were pro-Europeanism, a strong anti-corruption discourse, and opposition to the DPS. Within one year of its founding, one of its leaders, Jakov Milatović, defeated Đukanović in the 2023 Presidential election. Three days earlier, the party had come first in Parliamentary elections, with its other leader Miloško Spajić, being sworn in as Prime Minister. In forming a government, PES revived the Krivokapić coalition of Serb-conservatives, Montenegrin centrist-nationalists, progressives, and minority parties, with itself at the centre.

Though officially a supra-ethnic party and does not engage in religious disputes, PES enjoys stronger connections with the Metropolitanate – and with the Serb community itself – than most. The proximity to the Metropolitanate of leading figures of PES including, but not restricted to, Milatović and Spajić, is well-established. The party supported the signature of the Framework Agreement with the Church as early as 2022, before it entered Parliament¹⁹. Accordingly, Church-State relations during Spajić's Premiership have mostly been positive and marked by an atmosphere of institutional equidistance. This is partly assisted by the less 'openly' politically activistic position taken by the Metropolitanate since Joanikije's enthronement.

Disputes have, nevertheless, occasionally arisen between Church and State in matters related to national identity. This is mostly due to the 'dual' role often taken on by hierarchs close to the Church, i.e. that of religious-spiritual guidance and that of Serb ethno-cultural 'guardianship'. Church hierarchs and Orthodox organisations have occasionally employed language and occasionally promoted historical figures and ideas associated with Montenegrin Serbs which, for historical or political reasons, are negatively perceived by other communities. One of the most notable examples of this trend is the mainstreaming of the term "Serbian Sparta" (*Srpska Sparta*) to refer to Montenegro – a Serb unionist terminology in origin that draws from the idealised view of the Montenegrin as a mountain warrior, and of Montenegro as a 'special' region within the Serb lands.²⁰ These 'disputes', when arisen, have thus far taken place within the limits of democratic debate, with no direct or significant damage to interinstitutional relations between Church and State.



Lity in Podgorica on February 23, 2020, after the adoption of the law on freedom of religion.

(Vux33 via Wikimedia Commons)

The Church as a Political Stakeholder

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has, since 2020, succeeded in elevating its status from an important societal actor in opposition to State power to a leading partner of the State without compromising social or political capital. The post-*Litije* arrangement of heightened Church-State dialogue, highly promoted by Metropolitan Joanikije II even in cases of disagreements on important matters, further attests to the Church's influence beyond its traditional base in the grassroots and amongst Serb and conservative parties. As such, it can be argued that, if the Metropolitanate had always been the most influential religious organisation in the country, since 2020 it has become the most important non-state actor in Montenegro overall. Nevertheless, this growth in political influence and prestige by the Metropolitanate has, thus far, not been followed by either diplomatic or private interest therein by most non-Orthodox partners of Montenegro. Nor, for that matter, has the Metropolitanate engaged in any large-scale lobbying or public relations campaigns outside of the country or Serbia since the end of the disputes around the Law on Religious Freedom.

Western reluctance in engaging with the Montenegrin Church could be explained in part by the widespread perception of it as an anti-Western institution. There is a strong tendency in European political circles to assume that rhetoric employed during the 1990s—and, in the case of Montenegro, before independence—remain more relevant for present-day policymaking than they really are. Though instances of anti-Western rhetoric were observed in the Metropolitanate's communications in past decades, they are, however, mostly absent from present-day Church discourse. Furthermore, much of the present-day 'antagonism' towards the West—or *stricto sensu*, the EU and the United States—within the Church is targeted at the liberal-progressive ideology promoted by key Western actors within Montenegro. This is particularly true *vis-à-vis* the EU. The few Western-led initiatives that did take place have yielded positive results in the creation of goodwill with the Church. One such initiative came from the United States, a key political and strategic partner of Montenegro but one with which the Church had been heretofore reluctant to engage. Through the American Embassy in Podgorica, several historical monasteries were supported in their renovation

and restoration efforts over the course of the 2000s and 2010s²¹. The project was pursued under the aegis of cultural preservation, a topic held in particularly high regard by the Metropolitanate.

Hungary should, thus, take a leading role in engaging with the Metropolitanate. It should do so both due to Montenegro's strategic importance for Hungarian foreign policy and due to the competitive advantages Budapest enjoys over any other Western player in engaging a stakeholder such as the Metropolitanate. Hungary's connectivity strategy and the centrality of the Western Balkans thereto make Podgorica a strategic ally.²² Political and economic relations have significantly improved since 2020 and, particularly, under Prime Minister Spajić. Hungarian investments in Montenegro have increased, with an economic cooperation agreement announced earlier in the year.²³ During a visit by Prime Minister Spajić to Budapest, both parties pledged to increase trade and investment, with particular attention to Hungarian investment into Montenegrin infrastructure.²⁴ This would complement already-existing Hungarian investments in Montenegrin telecommunications and transport infrastructure, both key areas for Budapest's connectivity strategy. Given Montenegro's relative party-political rotativity, it is important to safeguard bilateral relations beyond the State-level. Engagement with an influential, stable societal actor such as the Metropolitanate is one of the best ways to do so.

The Metropolitanate, as both a religious and a political actor, has, for much of the post-independence period, been the main institution in Montenegro with an active policy of defence of traditional values and the Christian heritage of the country. In engaging with a Christian religious institution, Hungary enjoys at least three competitive advantages over other Western, and particularly non-Orthodox European partners. Firstly, since the 2010s Hungary is one of the few countries where the defence of Christianity and 'Christian culture', at home and abroad, is recognised as State policy.²⁵ Secondly, due to this 'realignment', Hungary has developed a State structure dedicated to outreach with and support for churches outside of its own territory. Its flagship initiative is the Hungary Helps international aid programme, focused on the needs of persecuted and underprivileged Christians. Hungary Helps has, between 2021 and 2023, completed a project in Montenegro, in support of its Albanian Catholic community.²⁶ The agency, working under the Secretary of State for Persecuted Christians and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' own Christian-focused initiatives, have given Budapest significant experience in engagements with Church organisations.

Finally, Hungary is already well-regarded within the Western Balkans as a supporter of the region's integration into the EU, without the liberal-progressive caveats. The integration of Western Balkan States into the EU is seen by Hungary as both a matter of national security, given their pivotal role in the contrast of illegal migratory routes, and, on a political level, of a recentering of the bloc towards the Central and Eastern parts of the continent.^{27²⁸} In both instances, the Hungarian government has developed strong bilateral relations with all States in the region, though paying special attention to neighbouring Serbia. Serbia, which had in the past been marked by tensions surrounding the latter's treatment of its Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, became Hungary's leading political and strategic partner in the Western Balkans. Through Serbian networks, Hungary has also managed to build strong relations with the government of *Republika Srpska*, the Bosnian Serb-led entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁹ Strong connections with the Serbian State, and with *Republika Srpska* authorities, further consolidate Hungary's perception as an 'ally of the Serbs'. This, alongside the perception as one of the only European States committed to the defence of Christianity, even against the EU mainstream, places Hungary in a unique position to establish strong, long-term connections with the Metropolitanate.

A successful Hungarian engagement strategy with the Metropolitanate would not be limited to State-level initiatives. The participation of non-governmental and private actors, in a financial and operational capacity, would add further depth and width to any such actions. At a para-political level, Hungarian Catholic and Reformed church-led organisations have extended their international reach in the past decade-and-a-half, working, in many cases, in close cooperation with the government and/or Hungary Helps. Financial support from private Hungarian companies and other entities with stakes in Montenegro should be sought. Montenegro's strategic importance to Hungary has led to the expansion of Hungarian business interests therein. The most notable such example is 4iG which, as of 2024, is the market leader in mobile telecommunications in Montenegro.³⁰ The US-led projects of cultural restoration of Metropolitanate-held property, as well as Hungary Helps' previous experiences with Orthodox communities in the Balkans, should be explored as examples of best practices. Through the establishment of institutional contacts with the Metropolitanate, a project focus and angle, whether purely cultural-religious, or broader in scope, could be defined. The participation of said private actors contributes not only to their own relations with the Metropolitanate but provides them a positive image as patrons of local culture and heritage.

Hungarian relations with Montenegro have moved on a positive direction since the beginning of the decade. They have been facilitated by political synergy in Budapest and Podgorica, as well as the latter's understanding of its own importance in the former's connectivity and regional strategies. The Hungarian government should, thus, make use of its already-established Christian-based networks to create the logistical, institutional, and financial mechanisms for the construction of a long-term relationship with the Metropolitanate. The establishment of relations with the Metropolitanate would contribute to deepening Hungarian ties in the region, as well as providing it access to a valuable political and societal ally therein.

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