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Montenegro: another dispute over the Serbian Orthodox Church

The current government of Montenegro has been facing various internal tensions since its formation. Significant tensions have developed not only between the government and President Milo Đukanović or the largest opposition grouping – the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, but also within the government coalition. The source of the conflict is an agreement to be concluded with the Serbian Orthodox Church. This seemingly “symbolic” conflict, which significantly polarizes society, is at the same time crucial for the stability of the government formed by the coalition with a minimal majority in parliament.

Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church. In Montenegro, there is ongoing discussion on a basic agreement (Temeljni ugovor) with the Serbian Orthodox Church (Srpska pravoslavna crkva, SPC) to regulate their relations, which has not yet been signed. In recent years, there has been a significant deterioration in relations between the former Montenegrin government and the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the dispute over the Law on Religious Freedom has been deeply politicized and has in fact contributed to the removal of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socialist Crne Gore, DPS), from power in the August 2020 elections. It is worth adding that already in 2011, Montenegro concluded such an agreement with the Holy See and, a year later, with the Islamic Community of Montenegro and the Jewish Community.

The Prime Minister of Montenegro, Zdravko Krivokapić, has repeatedly emphasized that he intends to sign the document. It was assumed that this would happen just after Easter, in early May. However, it should be noted that the text of the agreement has not been presented to the public so far. There is also a dispute as to who will sign the document and where it will be signed. Initially, it was claimed that the document would be signed by Patriarch Porfirije and the Prime Minister of Montenegro in Belgrade. According to the attorney Dragan Šoc (a member of the legal team of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (Mitropolija crnogorsko-primorska, MCP – one of the SPC eparchies), the SPC Synod should decide it. In turn, the former Metropolitan of MCP Amfilohije, who has strongly supported Prime Minister Krivokapić, repeated that Montenegrin authorities should sign the agreement with him, and not with the Patriarch, as this would not have a major impact on the validity of the adopted document. In this way, Amfilohije wanted to once again assert his strong position within the SPC. After his death, pressure from Serbia intensified on the Montenegrin SPC, which during the 30 years of service of the former Metropolitan, enjoyed a certain degree of independence.

Unexpected visit of the Prime Minister in Belgrade. On the evening of May 27, 2021, Prime Minister Krivokapić unexpectedly went to Belgrade, where the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church was held, during which a decision was to be made, inter alia, on the election of the new Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral. As the Prime Minister stated, he came to Serbia to express “the will of the people” that the head of the Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić Joanikije will be elected the new Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral. Patriarch SPC Porfirije and Bishop Joanikije expected Z. Krivokapić to sign the prepared agreement then, but this did not happen. After the meeting, Prime Minister Krivokapić reiterated that he would sign the agreement when the date was agreed to by the Patriarch of the SPC, but at the same time suggested that it should take place in Cetinje on October 30, the first anniversary of the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije.

It is worth adding that on May 29, 2021 during the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a new Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral was finally elected. As expected, it was the current bishop Joanikije. He was involved in religious marches in Montenegro after the adoption of the Freedom of Religion Act. Then it was he who managed the MCP after the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije. Joanikije, like Amfilohije,

was an opponent of Montenegro's accession to NATO and a critic of the policy pursued by M. Đukanović. Moreover, he became involved in this year's local elections in Nikšić, where he supported the election list drawn up by the prime minister and the speaker of parliament, and not by the Democratic Front (Demokratski front, DF). In these elections, the DF was strongly supported by Serbia and President Aleksander Vučić. Joanikije repeatedly emphasized that he wanted to continue the activities of Amfilohije, who often harshly criticized the current president of Serbia. It is worth recalling in this context that it was Joanikije who allegedly refused to consent to A. Vučić making a speech during Amfilohije's funeral.

The reaction in Montenegro. The unexpected visit of the Prime Minister of Montenegro to Belgrade was criticized primarily by the DF. Leaders of the DF, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, described Prime Minister Krivokapić's failure to sign an agreement with the SPC as a "scandal" and accused him of a lack of will to adopt the document. Moreover, the DF refused to further support the government because, according to the party, the Prime Minister failed to fulfil his tasks and promises. In response, Z. Krivokapić criticized A. Mandić, accusing him of having the real goal of overthrowing the government, and suggested that Serbia was behind the DF's actions. Both the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro and the President of Montenegro, M. Đukanović, were critical of the Prime Minister's trip to Belgrade, and they have constantly demanded that the text of the agreement be made public, as they fear that it may threaten the interests of the state.

In turn, Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, leader of the United Reform Action (Građanski Pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija, URA), emphasized that he himself advised the prime minister not to rush to sign the agreement, as it was necessary to carefully analyse the content of the document. In turn, Aleksa Bečić, the speaker of parliament and the leader of the Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora, DCG) government coalition, declared that his party would support any project agreed between the government and the SPC.

Conclusions. Relations between the state and the church and the issue of SPC religious buildings in Montenegro have been the cause of significant tensions for a long time, not only between the opposition and the government, and the government and the president, but also within the current government coalition, which is in power after the parliamentary elections in August 2020. Z. Krivokapić, who has no political experience, is strongly supported by the SPC. Moreover, his government includes people closely related to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

However, it seems that there are at least two strong factions within the SPC: one is centred around the Patriarch and Belgrade, and the other in Montenegro, which has been built over the years by the charismatic and controversial Metropolitan Amfilohije. However, it is not known to what extent the new Metropolitan will be able to maintain relative independence from the influence of the SPC from Belgrade.

Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić's failure to sign the agreement during his visit to Belgrade, postponing this moment and opting for it to be signed in Montenegro, not Serbia, can be read as a desire to further strengthen the Montenegrin, autonomous character of the MCP. At the same time, in a sense, the assertive attitude of Prime Minister Krivokapić is aimed at limiting the possibilities of strengthening Serbian influence in the country, and thus the position of the Democratic Front. With the change of government in Montenegro for the first time in three decades, Serbia's interest in Montenegro has increased significantly. This is evidenced not only by numerous statements from Serbian politicians, but also by the content of Serbian media, largely controlled by Serbian authorities.

The possible signing of an agreement in Belgrade, the content of which has not been informed by Montenegrin public opinion, would further strengthen anti-government sentiment in Montenegro, which could again lead to a deterioration in relations between Montenegro and the Serbs. Further, the failure to sign the Belgrade agreement is another pretext for the DF to weaken the position of Prime Minister Krivokapić and to reconstruct the government – a government that does not have a single representative from the Democratic Front. The DF has been asking for this for a long time. The disputes and polemics over the agreement with the SPC prove conclusively that relations between the current members of the government coalition in Montenegro remain de facto complicated. They also show that the stability of this coalition may be threatened.

In the longer term, the strengthening ties between the MCP and the rulers, as well as the growing influence of the Metropolitan on political affairs in the country, may prove problematic. The dispute over the SPC in Montenegro may threaten the political stability of the country. It points to the real influence of the SPC in Montenegro, which can be used for internal, but not solely, political game between the main political actors on the Montenegrin political scene.