

Editorial Team: Beata Surmacz (Director of ICE), Tomasz Stępniewski (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Jakub Olchowski, Konrad Pawłowski, Agata Tatarenko

No. 417 (114/2021) | 06.07.2021

ISSN 2657-6996

© IEŚ

Agata Domachowska

Serbia and Montenegro: deteriorating relations between states

With the formation of the new government in Montenegro, it was assumed that Belgrade-Podgorica relations could improve significantly. However, both the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), which had been ruling for almost thirty years, and the unquestioned leader and president of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, warned about the dangerous “approach” of Montenegro to Serbia. The first seven months of Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić’s government showed that Serbian-Montenegrin relations not only did not improve, but were actually gradually deteriorating.

The formation of a new government in Montenegro in December 2020 by opposition groups was enthusiastically received by authorities in Belgrade, especially because before its appointment, relations soured after the outgoing authorities in Podgorica declared Serbia’s ambassador, Vladimir Božović, as persona non grata, accusing him of interfering in the country’s internal affairs. Initially, Serbia decided to expel the Montenegrin ambassador from its territory, but quickly changed its mind in hopes of a similar attitude by the new government in Podgorica. However, this did not happen.

Despite frequent emphasis by Serbian authorities on the exceptional closeness that exists between the two countries, the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, has not in fact paid a single official visit to Montenegro since he took power in 2012 (first as deputy prime minister, then as prime minister and president). He first appeared in Podgorica in November 2020 at the funeral ceremony of Metropolitan Amfilohije, and he has not returned.

Since taking office, the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Z. Krivokapić, has constantly emphasized that his goal is to improve relations with Serbia, and he therefore publicly invited the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić to visit Montenegro. She finally arrived in Podgorica on February 17, 2021, in order to personally transfer the first contingent of 2,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine to Montenegro (three days earlier, Serbia also transferred vaccines to North Macedonia – 4,680 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech). Prime Minister Krivokapić greeted her personally at the airport. A. Brnabić emphasized that in this way she intended to start a new chapter in bilateral relations.

Resolution on Srebrenica. In subsequent months, tensions between the authorities in Montenegro and Serbia only grew. However, the Montenegrin parliament’s vote on the resolution on Srebrenica (17 June) proposed by the Bosniak Party (Bošnjačka stranka) was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

The adopted resolution stated, inter alia, that genocide had taken place in Bosnia and Herzegovina; that it would be forbidden to deny or diminish the genocide in Srebrenica; and that a July 11 commemoration day would be held for the victims of the 1995 genocide. It also condemned all war crimes committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and any attempts to blame a nation for genocide, as it laid responsibility on individuals for the genocide. Moreover, it emphasized that Montenegro as a NATO member is committed to supporting European and Euro-Atlantic values. 55 members voted for the resolution, 19 were against, and 7 abstained. During the vote on the adoption of the resolution by the Montenegrin parliament, there was a split in the government coalition. The largest party forming the government, the Democratic Front (Demokratski front, DF), voted against, while the Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora, DCG) and United Reform Action (Ujedinjena Reformska Akcija, URA) voted in favour. DF demanded, inter alia, removal of the word “genocide” from the text of the resolution in order to replace it with the word “crime.” It is also worth adding that after the vote, Prime Minister Krivokapić stated that adoption of the resolution was unnecessary and expressed concern that it deepened divisions in society.

The Montenegrin parliament also dismissed Vladimir Leposavić as the minister of justice following his statement in March, in which he expressed doubts on the genocide in Srebrenica, and questioned the validity of the judgment of the International Court of Justice. Following this controversial statement, the Minister’s resignation was demanded by the Prime Minister of Montenegro. In this case, there was also a split in the ranks of the government coalition – 43 MPs voted to dismiss the minister (members of the DPS and other opposition parties and members of the URA), 10 abstained (DCG members), and 27 members of the Democratic Front voted against. Right after the vote, DF leaders described the resolution as a document that would strengthen the anti-Serb atmosphere in the country, announced a boycott of the parliament, and demanded a change of prime minister. In their opinion, Prime Minister Krivokapić is pursuing the same policy as former authorities, and his voting jointly with the DPS on the dismissal of the minister is deceiving voters. According to Andrija Mandić (DF), in order to end the crisis it is necessary to develop a new coalition agreement or to call early parliamentary elections. Moreover, Milan Knežević (DF) suggested that the text of the resolution was not written in Montenegro and that its content was influenced by NATO embassies.

Serbia's reaction. The Serbian minister of defence, Aleksandar Vulin, reacted harshly to the decision of the Montenegrin parliament, stating that those who voted for the resolution should be banned from entering Serbia. In turn, the chairman of the Serbian parliament, Ivica Dačić, decided that the resolution directly affected Serbian interests and asked Metropolitan Joanikije for a reaction, pointing out that it was the former metropolitan who had a key influence on the shape of the current government coalition in Montenegro. Moreover, in response to the authorities in Podgorica who accused him of trying to meddle in Montenegro's internal affairs, Dačić stated that it was quite the opposite – that Montenegro was in fact interfering in Serbia's internal affairs. The Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selaković spoke in a similar vein, assessing the resolution as hurting the Serbs and the actions of the Montenegrin authorities as dishonest. He argued that, contrary to numerous assurances about the will to build friendly relations with Serbia, the adoption of the resolution proves the opposite.

The fact that the Montenegrin resolution is affecting the interests and dignity of the Serbian people was also emphasized by President A. Vučić. At the same time, he stressed that in relations with Montenegro he would focus on economic issues. He also assured citizens that he would continue to provide support to Serbs living in Montenegro. It is worth noting that in Serbian tabloids, largely controlled by Serbian authorities, Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić was directly called a “traitor,” and the adoption of the resolution was described as an act of “stabbing in the Serbian back again” (the same metaphor was used to describe the Montenegrin authorities' decision to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008).

In response, representatives of the ruling coalition in Montenegro (except DF) accused Serbian authorities of making further attempts to pressure the new Montenegrin government and destabilizing the country. The leader of the DCG and the speaker of parliament, Aleksa Bečić, emphasized that he was “a friend of Serbia, but a servant of Montenegro.” Further, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Đorđe Radulović, calmly repeated that the resolution was not directed against any state or nation, and certainly not against Serbs. On the other hand, Prime Minister Krivokapić noted that in the history of Montenegro there had never been so many attacks by Serbia directed at the Montenegrin authorities in such a short period of time. At the same time, he emphasized that Montenegro is the homeland of the Serbs living in its territory, and Belgrade is not.

Conclusions. Despite pre-election expectations, the change of government in Montenegro did not lead to an improvement in relations with Serbia. Since Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić took office, more polemics and disputes have arisen in relations between the two countries. However, the authorities in Podgorica are trying to resist the political pressure from Belgrade. In Montenegro, the conviction is growing that Serbia, despite assurances of fraternal relations, does not treat Montenegro as an independent state and equal partner.

The Democratic Front remains the strongest group of people through which Serbia is trying to influence the situation in Montenegro, as evidenced by the constant tensions within the current government coalition. The DF also consistently demands the reconstruction of the Montenegrin government in such a way as to gain real influence on the decisions taken by this government. It should be expected that the composition of the government and the functioning of the government coalition will change in the near future. Currently, it actually seems necessary if all ruling parties want to maintain the majority in parliament. Most likely, it is the DF who could lose the most by holding early elections. President Đukanović seems to benefit most from the tense situation in the country, as he uses it to consolidate his party, and thus actually prepares the DPS for the next elections.

The results of public opinion polls carried out in June 2021 by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (Centar za demokratiju i ljudska prava, CEDEM) indicate that the DPS still enjoys the greatest public support (31%), followed by the DF (18.7%), the Democratic Montenegro (18.4%), and URA (6.4%). Compared to the results of the last parliamentary elections in August 2020, the DCG enjoys more support, and the Democratic Front much less. Moreover, the leader of DCG, A. Bečić, is the most highly rated politician in Montenegro, followed by President M. Đukanović, Deputy Prime Minister D. Abazović, and Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić.