

**OCTOBER 2021**

# **MONTENEGRO AND SERBIA: A CLASH BEYOND RELIGION**



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**WRITTEN BY:  
KRISTINA RAZHEVA**

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The passive dispute between Serbia and Montenegro took shape on 5 September 2021 with a physical clash between protesters and riot police in Cetinje, the former royal capital of Montenegro. The conflict was provoked by the inauguration of Bishop Joanikje II as the new Head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Protesters put up barricades and were allegedly throwing rocks and fireworks at police officers in an attempt to prevent the inauguration, compelling riot police to respond with tear gas and to dismantle the barricades. The conflict resulted in many arrests and left at least 60 people injured (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

This clash can be explained as a riot of Montenegrins against Serbia caused by the unique position of the church in the political relationship between the two states. Since the proclamation of Montenegro's independence from Serbia in 2006, many have expressed support for independence from the Church. And although the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was founded in 1993, it has not been recognised by the rest of the Orthodox world, virtually binding Christianity in the State to the Serbian Orthodox Church (Orthodox Christianity, 2019). From this, it follows naturally that the ceremonial inauguration of a new leader in the very same town where the unrecognised Montenegrin Church was founded and is situated, was seen by the nation as a provocation from the Serbian State. Moreover, many hold the opinion that Serbia is using the Church as a means to exert influence on the politics of Montenegro (Deutsche Welle, 2021). This argument may be far-fetched since religious institutions do not possess any legitimate powers in a parliamentary republic like Montenegro. Nonetheless, it is undisputable that the Church has the power to influence society, considering the high levels of Orthodox religiousness in the country (more than 72% of the nation defines itself as Eastern Orthodox) (Monstat, 2011). The confrontation of 5 September was escalated even further by the fact that Bishop Joanikje II and other clerical staff arrived in Cetinje with a helicopter and were heavily protected by riot police – an action which undoubtedly pointed at State involvement in not only the transportation, but the inauguration processes.

The incident at hand serves as a reminder of a deeply rooted conflict between Serbia and other former Yugoslav republics, including Montenegro. Even though, at first glance, the rationale behind the clash seems religious in nature, it stretches far beyond religion and concerns not only the dispute over the independence of the Montenegrin Church, but also the perpetual debate over the existence of Montenegro as an independent state. Montenegro is considered independent from Serbia internationally, as it fulfils the relevant international law requirements for state independence and is also a member of NATO and an EU candidate. Although Serbia was among the first to formally recognise Montenegro, the two countries still encounter many points of conflict, such as the name of the Montenegrin language and Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo\* (Kajosevic & Stojanovic, 2021). This pressure is also apparent within Montenegro itself – statistics demonstrate that almost one-third of the country's population defines itself as Serbian and thus supports the pro-Serbian inertia in the relationship between the two states (Monstat, 2011). This number in itself suffices to assume that Montenegro is torn by ethnic tensions, the acceleration of which may have grave consequences for the country's political situation and the stability of the region as a whole.

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It is also essential to consider the fact that Montenegro has been a point of conflict since the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, which has led to greater sensitivity of society towards any threats for a military clash. An eventual escalation is dreaded by many on the Balkan Peninsula, in particular by those who lived through the destructive Balkan Wars of the 1990s. For this reason, a number of ex-officials from neighbouring countries, including former Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia, have issued an appeal to the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission and the Secretary-General of NATO, urging them to initiate a peaceful de-escalation of the conflict (Halili, 2021). This letter suggests that the inauguration of a new leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is not as much a religious act as it demonstrates Serbia's de facto non-acceptance of Montenegro's independence. Even though the authors of the letter do not explicitly side with any of the parties of the clash, they affirm that the existence of Montenegro as an independent state is crucial for the security and stability in the West Balkans. Finally, the officials expressed their fear that the escalation of a conflict such as the present one may inflict anti-NATO and anti-EU influences on the Montenegrin government, which would prove detrimental for the state and the region as a whole. The EU and NATO are called upon to launch a political dialogue with all parties involved in the dispute to facilitate its peaceful resolution.

It has to be borne in mind that the Balkan Peninsula is a very sensitive region with inhabitants who are often prejudiced towards one another due to historical and religious discrepancies. The relationship between Montenegro and Serbia is very complex as not only do the States share a large portion of their history, but their inhabitants are also ethnically intertwined. Both states still remember the bloodshed during the Balkan Wars, but are willing to defend their national interests even through physical confrontations. The inauguration of Bishop Joanikije II as the Head of Serbian Church in Montenegro and the riots that followed may be a part of the aggressive agenda of Serbia. Still, it may also only be a sudden outburst of the patriotic feelings caused by the many years spent under the rule of Yugoslavia. Even so, political talk and abstinence from physical interference are the only reasonable means for the de-escalation of this tension.

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