

## INTER-ETHNIC VERSUS INTER-STATE RELATIONS IN MONTENEGRO

Agon DEMJAHA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Political Studies, Faculty of Law, University of Tetova, Republic of North Macedonia*

*\*Corresponding author e-mail: agon.demjaha@unite.edu.mk*

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### Abstract

Montenegro was the smallest republic of former Yugoslavia, both in terms of the size of its territory, as well as its population. Unlike other states that were created after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, Montenegro's path towards independence after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia has undergone through three major phases such as– from Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), through State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, to independent Montenegro. Montenegrins and Serbs have for centuries shared the same language and religious beliefs as well as certain common features of their respective traditional cultures. Accordingly, throughout history the two nations have in general had long periods of coexistence, sometimes even of identification with each other. Since independence of Montenegro in 2006, inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs in Montenegro have been rather tense, and its society has been divided among many issues. Crucial role of other minorities on positive of independence referendum has also deteriorated inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and these minorities. The main aim of the paper is to analyse the current state of inter-ethnic relations between the two main ethnicities in Montenegro, and to offer an analysis of the causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations. The paper claims that similarly to most of the countries in the Western Balkans, inter-ethnic and interstate relations are basically the components of the same equation. The paper concludes that in Montenegro, such causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations is more valid with regard to relations between Montenegro and Serbia, than between Montenegro and other “mother states” such as Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Accordingly, the overall inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs in Montenegro heavily depend on inter-state relations between Montenegro and Serbia and vice versa.

*Keywords:* Inter-ethnic relations, Inter-state relations, Conflict, Montenegrins, Serbs.

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### 1. Introduction

Montenegro was the smallest republic of former Yugoslavia, both in terms of the size of its territory, as well as its population. Montenegro's path towards independence after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia has undergone three major phases – from Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) (1992 – 2003), through State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003-2006), to independent Montenegro (after 2006). As it will be elaborated, these different stages of statehood have also reflected on the status of minorities and overall inter-ethnic relations in the country. It should be mentioned, that Montenegro has managed to escape large-scale ethnic and armed conflicts after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, different factors such as migration, settlement of refugees and certain shifts in ethnic identification, have altered the ethnic and demographic structure of Montenegro during the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the consequent wars in 1990s (Šístek and Dimitrovová, 2003, p. 159). Since independence in 2006, inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro have been rather tense, and its society has been divided among many issues. In addition to tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs, crucial role played by other minorities for positive outcome of the independence referendum has

further deteriorated inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and these minorities. Nevertheless, after overcoming initial problems, Montenegro has managed to stabilize both politically and economically. In 2017, it has become the 29<sup>th</sup> country to join the NATO Alliance, while since 2012 it has started its accession negotiations for becoming a member state of the European Union (EU). Nevertheless, occasionally there were tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs, as a consequence between the states of Montenegro and Serbia as well.

The methodology of the paper is based on a qualitative approach through desk research of different official documents, academic papers, policy reports and news articles in the field of inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro. Through such methodology of observational research, key findings over the researched question have been exerted. While, the observational method makes difficult to generalize the findings, it still offers an in-depth and context based study that enables the paper to make a genuine contribution in the field.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the state of inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro in general, and those between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs in particular. Although the paper will primarily focus on inter-ethnic relations after independence of Montenegro, certain attention will be given to earlier periods due to their impact on current state of affairs. The structure of the paper consists of five chapters, including introduction and conclusion. After the introductory chapter, in the second chapter the paper will provide a short overview of the history of inter-ethnic relations in the country. The next chapter will explore the current state of affairs of inter-ethnic relations between the Montenegrins as the major ethnic group and relevant minorities in the country. In the fourth chapter, special attention will be given to the causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations, namely to the fact that in the countries of the Western Balkans, inter-ethnic and interstate relations are basically the components of the same equation. As it will be shown, relations between Montenegrins and Serbs are the most problematic once, and thus they have a direct impact on inter-state relations between Montenegro and Serbia, and vice versa. The paper ends with a concluding chapter that provides a summary of the main findings of our analysis.

## **2. History of Inter-ethnic Relations in Montenegro**

Throughout history, Montenegrins have in general had long periods of coexistence, sometimes even identification with Serbs. Two nations have shared the same language and religious beliefs as well as certain common features of their respective traditional cultures (Hastings, 1997, p. 142). Accordingly, many scholars have argued that Montenegrins are basically part of the Serbian nation that took refuge in that region after defeats in different wars (Watson, 1966, p. 31). However, there are others who maintain that Montenegrins are a separate nation with a different political history and longstanding existence of an apparent horizontal self-identification (Tomašević, 1955, p. 126). What is certainly true is that for centuries there were no inter-ethnic tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs. First tensions began in 1996 due to signs of political discord between parts of Montenegrin leadership and the Serbian leadership. Since then, subsequent governments in Montenegro have distanced themselves from Milosevic's nationalistic agenda and policies of genocide. Tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs culminated around the period when Montenegro pressed for its independence and separation from Serbia.

The "pro-independence" block was led by Milo Djukanovic, the Prime Minister and former President of Montenegro as well as the leader of the Democratic Union of Socialists (DPS). On the other hand, Predrag Bulatovic the head of the Popular Socialist Party (SNP) was the leader

of the “pro-Serbia unionist” block. The referendum campaign was highly polarized, with most ethnic Montenegrins supporting independence, while most of the Serb population favored the continuation of the union with Serbia. When on 21 May 2006 the independence referendum was passed by 55.5% of voters, narrowly passing the 55% threshold, the tensions between the two communities reached their peak (The Guardian, 2006). Following confirmation of independence, the Serb parties adopted a defiant attitude, refusing to officially acknowledge the outcome of the referendum and boycotting parliamentary sessions (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2007). Moreover, there were warnings that future conflicts over the constitution, state symbols, the position of the church as well as the relationship between the government and the opposition could lead to new clashes (Morrison, 2011, p. 2).

### **3. Current State of Affairs**

During the joint asymmetric state with Serbia, the status of different ethnic groups living in both Serbia and Montenegro was viewed in the framework of much larger entity. As a result, Serbs and Montenegrins had a status of constituent people, though numerically Montenegrins were a huge minority. By the same token, the percentage of other ethnicities living in Montenegro was basically symbolic. According to the last census held in 2011, in addition to Montenegrins (45%), three largest ethnic groups in the country were Serbs (28.7%), Bosnians (8.6%) and Albanians (4.9%). Other Ethnic minorities include Muslims (3.3%), Romani (1%) and Croats (0.9%), while 7.2% have not declared their ethnic background (Population by Age and Ethnicity, 2011). It should be noted that Montenegro is the only country in the Balkan region in which the majority is relative, since less than 50% of the population is ethnic Montenegrin. Having in mind historical past and their high percentage, there are even debates whether Serbs should be considered a minority in the country. Starting with Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918, then Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, and after its disintegration, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Montenegrins and Serbs have been members of the same state for over 85 years. Consequently, self-identification as a Serb or a Montenegrin in Montenegro has for years been a matter of personal choice based on political, cultural and other grounds. Such an ‘ethnic’ division has actually existed even inside many families in the country (Pavlović, 2003, p. 94). Nevertheless, today Serbs are officially considered a minority in Montenegro and are basically scattered throughout the territory of the country. According to the 2011 census, Serbs are absolute majority in only three municipalities, are relative majority in another three, and constitute less than 20% of population in only four out of total 21 municipalities in the country (Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2011a).

Indeed, since independence the Montenegrin society has been divided among many issues. In addition to tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs, crucial role of other minorities on positive outcome of the independence referendum has further deteriorated inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and these minorities. Nevertheless, being dispersed throughout the country, Serbian political representatives did not pursue any claims for territorial autonomy. Instead, their primary objective was “the protection of the constitutionality and full affirmation of the identity and freedom of the Serb people” (Party Program, 2006, p. 3). Such agenda consisted of several key demands: (1) Serbs should be defined constitutionally as a distinct and equal nation (not as a national minority); (2) Serbs should be represented on a proportional basis in state and local governing bodies; (3) They should have the right to display Serb national symbols; and (4) There should be a constitutional confirmation of Serbian as an official language and the Cyrillic alphabet as an official script (Morrison, 2011, p. 6). However, in order to conciliate internal political divisions Montenegro’s constitution denoted a “civic

state”, whereby sovereignty was vested in the “citizens having Montenegrin nationality”. Additionally, such a definition was also a barrier against the claims of Serbs in Montenegro to be recognized as a constituent people that would in turn lead to multipartite power-sharing (Džankić, 2012, p. 44).

As far as use of official languages of minorities is concerned, current legislation is more restrictive than former national legislature and standards of other countries in the region and further. The Montenegrin Constitution stipulates that the official language in the country is Montenegrin with equal usage of Cyrillic and Latin alphabet, while members of national minorities have the right to official use of language solely at the local level, in local governance units in which minority constitutes majority of population (Minorities in Montenegro Legislation and Practice, 2007, p. 19). Despite minor differences between Montenegrin and Serbian languages, the Serbian population has opposed the idea of a linguistic separation in the country which included the creation of a new Montenegrin Cyrillic alphabet which is basically the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet with the addition of two new letters. Additional tensions between the two communities have been in regard to the separation of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church from the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Final blow in terms of inter-ethnic tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs has come with the official recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the Montenegro government. While Serbia promptly expelled Podgorica's ambassador, the pro-Serb opposition parties in Montenegro organized countrywide demonstrations against the government's decision on Kosovo (Montenegro formally recognizes Kosovo's independence, 2010). Nevertheless, despite evident tensions before and immediately after independence, overall relations between Montenegrins and Serbs have since gradually been more or less normalized.

Other minorities, on the other hand, in addition to being much smaller numerically can also to some degree be defined territorially since they are generally concentrated on the periphery of the republic - Albanians along the border with Albania; most Bosniaks-Muslims along the northern frontier with Serbia in the Montenegrin part of the Sandžak region; and Croats in the Boka Kotorska close to the border with Croatia. It should be mentioned that the period between 1992 and 1997 was characterized by violations of fundamental human rights and particularly of the minority rights. During this period, political parties representing minorities were marginalized with regard to the political affairs, and they were excluded from any decision-making (Sindik, 2008, p. 182). Montenegro’s process of separation from Serbia since 1997 has resulted in an improvement in majority-minority since Montenegrin leadership sought to build a domestic coalition for greater autonomy and eventually independence, which necessitated the inclusion of minorities (Bieber, 2002, p. 3). Consequently, Article 2 of Montenegro’s 2006 Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms defines a minority as “a group of nationals of Montenegro, fewer in numbers than the prevailing population, who have common ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics, different from the remaining population, who are historically connected to Montenegro and who are motivated by the desire to preserve national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity” (Law on Minority Rights and Freedoms, 2006). Clearly this law aimed at showing the international community that Montenegro is a positive example of interethnic relations in the Balkans and at attracting the votes of non-Christian Orthodox minorities (Dzankic, 2012, p. 343). Nevertheless, after independence these minorities have often felt betrayed by the pro-independence coalition.

Although not so large numerically, due to geographic proximity with Albania and Kosovo the Albanian minority deserves special attention in terms of inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro. It should be mentioned that the position of the Albanian minority and the degree of co-operation and integration with the majority society has been far greater than in the case

of Albanian minorities in Kosovo before 1999, or in Macedonia and southern Serbia. Montenegrin Albanians have not attempted to organise referendums on territorial autonomy or independence, they have not boycotted republican elections and there have been no attempts at armed rebellion or signs of terrorist activities. Albanians in Montenegro have been concerned by the dramatic developments concerning Kosovo Albanians and, to a certain degree, the Albanian minority in Macedonia. Therefore, subsequent to the change in political orientation of the Montenegrin ruling elite in 1997-98, the government has likewise, demonstrated an increased degree of co-operation and dialogue (Šístek and Dimitrovová, 2003, p. 172). Among others, the 1998 Election Law the Albanian minority was guaranteed five MPs out of 78 from an electoral unit in an area where Albanians are majority (Sindik, 2008, p. 181).

Nevertheless, like other minorities in the country, after independence Albanians' expectations were not met and they found themselves disillusioned about their future. Their grievances stem from significant shortcomings in terms of translating high level constitutional commitments regarding minority rights into concrete laws and policies. In addition, Albanians complain for slow implementation and biased application of existing laws. Their demands are mainly related to enhanced decentralization process, wider use of the Albanian language including university education in their own language, school curricula in primary and secondary classes and economic underdevelopment (Boga and Wolff, 2011, p.7). According to the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe, the quality of translation of some textbooks from Montenegrin into Albanian language is very poor, while the lack of textbooks for some subjects is hampering knowledge acquisition altogether. In addition, the Committee points out that the history of Albanians is hardly taught and some textbooks do not reflect Albanian culture adequately (Second Opinion on Montenegro, 2014, p. 29). Although most of the demands of the Albanian representatives can realistically be fulfilled by the Montenegrin government, so far its measures have felt short of Albanians' expectations in the country. The lack of jobs and future prosperity has continued to encourage emigration of Albanians abroad, mainly to the US, thus further reducing the Albanian population in Montenegro.

#### **4. Causality Between Inter-ethnic and Inter-state Relations**

In the Western Balkans, inter-ethnic and interstate relations are basically the components of the same equation. This means that the majority-minority inter-ethnic relations are often influenced by inter-state relations between the "mother state" of a certain minority and the country in question, and vice versa. For instance, the inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo directly depend on inter-state relations between Kosovo and Serbia (Demjaha, 2017. pp. 182-183). Similarly, ethnic relations, between Bosnians and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) are not affected only by history and political and social factors within the country, but are also shaped by inter-state relations between BIH and Serbia as independent states (Demjaha, 2020, pp. 11-28). In principle, this can apply to all other relations between ethnic groups in the region. Consequently, improvements or deteriorations of inter-state relations between certain two countries have a direct impact on inter-ethnic relations in a specific country. In this regard, Montenegro is not an exception, though to certain extent it represents a unique case, since each ethnic minority group in Montenegro has its "mother state." Undoubtedly, the relations among these states, and among the ethnic groups within them, shape the ethnic relations within Montenegro itself. In addition, as already mentioned, Montenegro is also the only country in the Balkan region in which the majority is relative since less than 50 percent of the population is ethnic Montenegrin. (Bešić, 2019, p. 813).

In line with this, the inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins, Serbs and other minorities in the country are often influenced by inter-state relations between Montenegro and “mother states” of minorities living in the country. Consequently, improvements or deteriorations of relations between Montenegro and these states are an important factor that has a direct impact on inter-ethnic relations between different ethnicities in the country. At the same time, the opposite is also true; improvements or deteriorations of inter-ethnic relations between different ethnicities living in Montenegro directly influence the bilateral relations between Montenegro and “mother states”. It should be noted though that in the case of Montenegro, such causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations, is more valid with regard to relations between Montenegro and Serbia, than between Montenegro and other “mother states” such as Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Below we will analyze several reasons why Serbia rather than Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina is much more relevant for the causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations in Montenegro.

Firstly, with 28.7 percent, Serbs are by far the largest minority in Montenegro, and therefore their demands are higher than those of smaller minorities. In principle, the larger one minority is in a certain country, the more intensive are its efforts to preserve and protect its identity and rights. As already mentioned Serb population in Montenegro was against country’s independence and favored the continuation of the union with Serbia. Thus, the successful independence referendum in 2006 dramatically increased the tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs in the country (The Guardian, 2006). After confirmation of independence, the Serb parties refused to officially acknowledge the outcome of the referendum and even boycotted parliamentary sessions (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2007). Since then, there were fears of potential clashes between Montenegrins and Serbs over the constitution of the country and its state symbols, as well as about the position of the church (Morrison, 2011, p. 2).

Secondly, other minorities are much smaller than Serbs, and have basically had more tensions with Serbian minority than with the Montenegrin one. Even before independence, representatives of the pro-Yugoslav and pro-Serb political parties in Montenegro have often attacked and threatened other minorities. In the context of independence referendum, they openly declared that referendum won with the votes of minorities cannot be considered legitimate” (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2001). When these minorities played a crucial role on positive of independence referendum, inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and these minorities deteriorated greatly. Bosnians who are the third largest ethnic group in Montenegro, have supported independence of the country, while their main political party the “Bosnian Party” was a part of the government coalition during 2010-2020 led by Djukanovic’s Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). Although their expectations after independence were not fully met, Albanians in Montenegro have predominantly also had good relations with Montenegrins. Except occasional tensions with Montenegrins, Albanians have been collaborative and their political parties have also regularly participated in previous government coalitions led by DPS.

Finally, Serbs living in the country still identify themselves more with Serbia than with Montenegro and have often opposed country’s NATO membership. Among the three main opposition blocs that won the parliamentary elections held in August 2020, the largest one, “For the Future of Montenegro”, is led by Democratic Front that mostly includes pro-Serbian right-wing parties. Some of its leaders are “well known and disliked for their paranoia, crude nationalism and un-reflexive Russophile”, and for wanting much closer ties with Belgrade and Moscow (Šćepanović, 2020). As a result, fears have risen about increased ethnic tensions, while incidents in several Montenegrin towns in which Bosniaks were verbally and physically

assaulted have already been reported (Balkan Insight, 2020). Although an agreement signed early after the elections by representatives of all three coalitions stipulates that Montenegro's international commitments such as NATO membership and recognition of Kosovo will not be reversed (Šćepanović, 2020), it remains to be seen what the new amalgam government coalition will bring.

Causality of inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs and interstate relations between Montenegro and Serbia has been visible in several occasions. First elements of such causality were noticeable during the independence referendum process. The entire process was highly polarized and was characterized with heated rhetoric and increased tensions between the pro-independence and pro-Union camps. Instead of encouraging Montenegro's pro-Union parties to talk constructively with the government about the independence referendum, some forces in Belgrade encouraged these parties not only to boycott a referendum, but also to even organize street demonstrations and protests in order to prevent it (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 15). When the Montenegrin government informed Belgrade about the idea of independence, then the Prime minister of Serbia, Vojislav Kostunica, responded rather bluntly and labeled it as a rude violation of the Belgrade Agreement (B92, 2005). In June 2005, Kostunica even handed over to Commissioner Rehn a list of 264,000 Montenegrin citizens in Serbia, who, according to him should have the right to vote in an independence referendum, thus further raising tensions between the two republics (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 13). There were even signs that some elements were discussing the creation inside Montenegro of a secessionist Serbian Autonomous Region, similar to Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Serb Republic Krajina in Croatia (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. i). Clearly, through such actions of Serbia towards Montenegro, the former has directly contributed to increased tensions and further deterioration of inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs in the country.

The most visible case that inter-ethnic and inter-state relations are basically the components of the same equation is the official recognition of Kosovo's independence by the Montenegro government. In this case, the direct influence of inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs on inter-state relations between Montenegro and Serbia, and vice versa, is more than obvious. Montenegro's decision sparked outrage in Belgrade, and Serbia immediately expelled Montenegro's ambassador (France 24, 2008). Then the Serbian president, Boris Tadic labeled the move by Montenegro as irrational and counterproductive, which has jeopardized sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia. He stated that "the decisions of the governments of Montenegro and Macedonia to recognize the illegally proclaimed independence of Kosovo are very wrong, opposite to international law and do not contribute to regional stability and good neighborly relations." Such reactions from officials in Serbia led to protests in Podgorica organized by pro-Serb political parties that gathered more than 20,000 people. Riots were also supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović who even addressed the protesters (MTS Mondo, 2008). In addition to waving Serbian flags and chanting, "Kosovo is Serbia", the protesters insulted the Prime-minister Djukanovic and other government members by calling them "ustashas" and "shiptars". Violence that occurred at the end of the riot when small groups of protesters attacked police, resulted in 28 arrested and 34 injured people (RTS, 2008).

The last case in which the causality between inter-state and inter-ethnic relations has been witnessed was the adoption of the "the Law on the Freedom of Religion and Beliefs and Legal Status of Religious Communities" by the Montenegrin government in December 2019. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) heavily criticized the law, which stipulates that religious

property lacking clear ownership that had been built from public or communal funds before 1918 will become state property (Law on the Freedom of Religion, 2019). The government said that the Venice Commission has supported the law, and repeatedly stated that it did not intend to confiscate SOC property. However, SOC insisted that by outlawing operation of religious communities that have their seat outside of Montenegro, the law intends to cripple it and to nationalize its properties that were built from public or communal funds before 1918 (Šćepanović, 2020). Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro called the law as “discriminatory and unconstitutional,” accused the Montenegrin authorities of “inciting divisions and hatred”, while Bishop Amfilohije even said a civil war could ensue (Maksimović, 2020). Consequently, hundreds of thousands of SOC believers throughout the country protested almost daily, mainly peacefully, against the respective law. In some cases, there were incidents of violence against the police as well as online incitements to violence. The following months have been characterized with ongoing tensions between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government. Tensions have grown further when the police detained several Serbian Orthodox priests who held a religious procession attended by a few thousands of people despite the ban on public gatherings. Their detention sparked again protests mainly by hard-line believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church in several towns in Montenegro and Serbia. In Montenegro, there were violent clashes of protesters with police during which dozens were arrested (Vasiljevic, 2020).

These increased inter-ethnic tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs have ultimately polarised inter-state relations between Montenegro and Serbia. President Djukanovic accused the Serbian Orthodox Church of waging a campaign for a Greater Serbia and warned that if the dominant Serbian Orthodox church does not transform itself into a church of all Orthodox believers living in Montenegro, an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) will be formed. Furthermore, he said that he “will not allow contemporary Montenegro to live under the dictatorship of a religious organization that represents a relic of the past” (United States Department of State, 2020). On the other hand, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic stated that his country would protect Serbs in Montenegro who are threatened by the possible formation of an independent Orthodox church. In addition, at a joint news conference with Vucic, Serbian Patriarch Irinej heavily criticised Djukanovic and his government, and compared them to the World War II pro-Nazi puppet state in neighboring Croatia. Moreover, the Patriarch said that by forming the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, Djukanovic aims at doing what the Usthas did - to chase out Serbs from Montenegro and to destroy the SOC (Associated Press, 2020). As a result, relations between the two countries have fallen at the lowest level ever, as confirmed by President Djukanovic in his speech in March 2021. On this occasion he said that the Serbian “genie who is the spirit of hatred towards Montenegro and everything Montenegrin is now out of the bottle.” According to him, this can be seen “through the ruthless campaign being carried out by Serbia in connection with the local elections in Niksic, Montenegro’s second largest city” (Balkan News, 2021). Only few days later, Djukanovic accused Serbia for its new expansion towards the neighbors, “with an obvious intention to create some colonial order in the mythical Serbian lands wherever the Serbs live (N1 Info, 2021).

#### **4. Conclusion**

As with other countries of the Western-Balkans, inter-ethnic relations in Montenegro represent an important factor for the overall stability in the region. Throughout history, Montenegrins and Serbs have shared the same language and religious beliefs, and have in general had long periods of coexistence, sometimes even of identification with each other. However, since independence of Montenegro in 2006, inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs have been rather tense, with the two nations being divided among

many issues. The crucial role of other minorities on the positive outcome of the independence referendum has also worsened inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and these minorities. The paper has shown that in Montenegro inter-ethnic and interstate relations are basically the components of the same equation, meaning that the majority-minority inter-ethnic relations are often influenced by inter-state relations between the “mother state” of a certain minority and the country in question, and vice versa. In the case of Montenegro, it was concluded that causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations, is more valid with regard to relations between Montenegro and Serbia, than between Montenegro and other “mother states” such as Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such conclusion is backed by the fact that Serbs are by far the largest minority in Montenegro, they still identify themselves more with Serbia than with Montenegro, and often oppose country’s membership to NATO. On the other hand, the paper has put forward a considerable number of examples and arguments that demonstrate the causality of inter-ethnic and interstate relations in Montenegro. The independence referendum in 2006, recognition of Kosovo’s independence in 2008, and the recent Law on the Freedom of Religion are among the most confirming cases. The ongoing tensions between Montenegrins and Serbs related to the Law on the Freedom of Religion have also worsened the relations between Montenegro and Serbia to the lowest level ever. The paper concludes that only an improvement of overall relations between Montenegro and Serbia could ultimately contribute to the relaxation of inter-ethnic relations between Montenegrins and Serbs in Montenegro, and vice versa.

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