



MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF RELIGIOUS CONTENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SHAPING OF PUBLIC OPINION ON RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Summary: Amid escalating tensions following Montenegro’s Law on Religious Freedom in December 2019, this study examines the media’s role in presenting religious content and its potential influence on shaping religious identity in the Western Balkans. Specifically, we analyze how a sample of 45 articles from June 2019 to December 2020 – spanning American, international, Montenegrin, and Serbian sources – presented the law’s impact. Our research question centers on understanding the media’s influence in raising public awareness and potentially constructing distorted perceptions of religious identity, often amplified by biased reporting. This study highlights the need for responsible journalism, media literacy, and unbiased reporting, advocating for a balanced approach among media, religious institutions, and citizens in the digital age.

Keywords: *Religious identity; Traditional media; Online/ digital platforms; Foreign/ Montenegrin/ Serbian press; Law on Religious Freedom*

INTRODUCTION

In the early twenty-first century, the boundaries between the ‘sacred’ realm of religious media and the ‘profane’ sphere of secular media have increasingly blurred, resulting in a unified media culture that significantly influences religious identity. This convergence is particularly evident in the Western Balkans, as seen during the debates surrounding Montenegro’s Law on the Freedom of Religion and Beliefs and Legal Status of Religious Communities, enacted on December 27-28, 2019. The law’s implications, especially around the ownership of religious properties, sparked controversy, particularly with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which viewed it as a threat to its property rights and influence.

Despite government claims that the law aimed to resolve longstanding questions of state and religious identity, particularly linked to Montenegro’s 1918 loss of independence, the SOC’s supporters responded with widespread protests. According to the 2019 *Report on International Religious Freedom in Montenegro* by the U.S. State Department¹, isolated incidents of violence and online calls for violence emerged alongside the protests, and tensions occasionally necessitated police intervention to separate SOC and Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) gatherings to prevent clashes.

As Article 62 (U.S. Department of State, 2019)² of the law mandates that religious entities demonstrate property ownership predating 1918, the SOC now faces requirements to validate its claims over numerous medieval sites, which would otherwise be designated as state-owned. This study thus aims to analyze media portrayals of these events, with a focus on how Montenegrin, Serbian, and selected foreign outlets, including *The Washington Post* and *Al Jazeera*, framed the debate on religious freedom and identity in Montenegro.

To provide a clearer outline of our research approach, we analyze a sample of 45 articles published from June 2019 to December 2020. This sample includes American (*The Washington Post*), international (*Al Jazeera*), Montenegrin (*Pobjeda*, *Dnevne novine*), and Serbian (*Informer*, *Danas*) publications, selected based on their relevance, influence, and reach. In selecting foreign media outlets for this

1 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/montenegro/>

2 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2019\)014-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2019)014-e)

study, *Al Jazeera* and *The Washington Post* were chosen based on their global reach, influence, and frequent coverage of Balkan-related socio-political issues. *Al Jazeera*, an international English-language news channel based in Doha, Western Asia, with its extensive coverage in the Middle East and regions including the Balkans, provides a perspective that reflects non-Western narratives and emphasizes regional politics within a broader geopolitical context. *The Washington Post*, as a leading American media outlet, offers a Western-centric viewpoint and frequently addresses international human rights, law, and socio-political issues that resonate globally. Together, these two sources provide a balanced view by offering distinct geopolitical perspectives, enriching the analysis of how media representation of religious identity is influenced by global narratives. Our central research question explores how media portrayals contribute to public awareness and perceptions of religious identity within the Western Balkans. Furthermore, we examine whether media coverage, including instances of fake news and biased reporting, may have skewed public understanding of religious identity.

Theoretical framework: religious identity

In a broader sense, religion can be seen as a way of life woven with the sacred, while identity represents the core of self and subjectivity. Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist who analyzed religion as a social phenomenon, proposed that religious identities are grounded in the totemic principle. He argued that religion, as a vital element of identity, emerges through the convergence of morality, belief, and practice within institutional structures, fostering collective consciousness and solidarity (Durkheim, 1964[1915]: 47). Durkheim highlighted the fluidity of religious identities, which cross and transcend fixed boundaries and often involve personal rituals that carry a strong performative aspect. Yet, the rituals surrounding them are complex, collective acts that remain largely localized and can, at times, lead to conflict. From a believer's perspective, religious identity represents a division between the human and sacred, individual and divine. As Werbner (2010: 233) notes, it emphasizes "the experience of transcendence and divinity" for both individuals and communities. The way believers bridge the sacred-profane divide within their tradition reflects their closeness to sacred objects, shaping religious personhood uniquely across world religions. Religions, as social constructs,

have historically seen identities marked in encounters, blurred in conversion, or shared in festivals and shrines (Werbner, 2010: 233). Such hybridization often triggers counter-movements, where “syncretic tendencies come to be highly politicized, and religious boundaries sharply demarcated” (Werbner, 2010: 232). Religious identity, shaped by its power dynamics, frequently responds to external challenges—whether from neighboring groups, colonial forces, or secular influences (Asad, 2003). Modernity, nationalism, nation-states, electoral politics, and women’s liberation have profoundly influenced public religious identities, spanning from democratic humanism to, in extreme cases, genocidal racism.

Werbner (2010: 235) argues that religious identity centers on boundaries, relatedness, otherness, and inclusiveness. It emerges when religious groups face sectarian divisions, interact with neighbors, or resist domination by groups aiming to reshape society based on moral principles, often leading to politicized identities and clear boundary lines. As Peter L. Berger (1967) suggests, religion provides meaning and identity during social change and conflict. Religious identity finds its embodiment in ritual performances and religious festivals and becomes ‘more pronounced during periods of struggle,’ as exemplified by Metropolitan Joanikije in his post-enthronement interview in Cetinje. During such celebrations of identity, sacred and profane moments intertwine, blurring the once-clear boundary between the two. As the French historian Fustel de Coulanges argued, in times of war, city-states “carry their gods with them,” leading to an inundation of public discourse with inflammatory rhetoric adopted by all involved parties.

Media and religious identity

In the digital age, various media forms, from traditional news outlets to social networks and online platforms, play key roles in shaping and affirming religious communities worldwide. These channels have transformed religious dynamics, giving rise to ‘Cyber-religion’ – a concept introduced in the mid-20th century (Banić Grubišič, 2012; Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Karaflogka, 2002; O’Leary, 1996). Cyber-religion encompasses virtual religious practices, including virtual Eucharist, online church services, and even confessions via email. This influence of media now reaches into deeply personal aspects of individuals’ lives. While fostering interfaith communication and global dialogue, media can also create

internal conflicts within religious groups, at times isolating believers (Cvitković 2014, 508). Media platforms introduce new religious perspectives that often diverge from traditional views, appealing especially to digitally connected generations. Consequently, today's digital citizens must approach diverse sources—from TV and radio to the Internet—with both caution and critical discernment.”

Understanding how media shapes public opinion on religious identity requires distinguishing between traditional and online/digital platforms. Jakubowicz (2011: 16) identifies three “new notions of media”: digital, convergent media encompassing all existing forms (1); media created by new actors like social, civic, and user-generated platforms (2); and media-like activities by non-traditional actors (3). Social networks, as a core component of online platforms, bridge media content and users, facilitating engagement, discussion, and content sharing among diverse audiences. Traditional media now increasingly utilize these platforms for news promotion, as noted by Harkin, Anderson, Morgan, and Smith (2013: 25), who highlight the critical role user-generated content plays, particularly under governmental restrictions or in social conflicts.

A critical distinction between traditional media and online platforms lies in editorial control and content quality. Traditional media generally uphold editorial standards, involving fact-checking and a commitment to objectivity, though biases can still emerge based on specific editorial policies and audience. Online platforms, however, range from digital versions of traditional media to independent websites and social networks, the latter typically operating without editorial oversight. Social networks, in particular, function as interactive content-sharing spaces that prioritize immediacy over moderation. This leads to unfiltered dissemination of opinions, especially on rapidly evolving topics like religious issues, fostering global connectivity while posing challenges in regulatory oversight. Understanding these distinctions between traditional media, structured online outlets, and social networks is essential to grasping how each shapes public perceptions of religious identity in the digital age.

The credibility of information regarding religious content transmitted through media is further complicated by factors such as the relevance and accuracy of sources, as well as the nuanced nature of religion. Unlike politics, which often involves taking sides, religion deals with concepts of the afterlife, transcendence,

and inspiration. As Hoover (2012: 29) argues, journalists tend to cover religion based on certain ‘shared assumptions,’ particularly when these assumptions are challenged. For instance, they might report on religious hypocrisy, the intersection of religion and politics, or religious conflicts and violence. The convergence of religion and media extends beyond examining media’s portrayal of religion or religious individuals’ use of media. New developments in digital media, including the Internet, social media, and the globalization of content, have introduced a vast array of religious and quasi-religious ideas, movements, and symbols into the media landscape. This intersection presents challenges: (1) religions risk losing their symbols as media and celebrity culture reinterpret them; (2) the visibility and adaptability of religions in the public sphere become uncertain; (3) traditional religious authority is increasingly relativized, potentially weakening religious structures; (4) traditional religions now coexist in a marketplace of spirituality that often disregards form, doctrine, tradition, and history” (Hoover, 2012: 32); (5) ‘cyber-religion’ – a fusion of media and religion or “religion without religion” (Banić Grubišić, 2012: 110) – has spurred new religious movements and ‘postmodern cyber-culture.’ While some journalism promotes religious understanding, it often exacerbates biases and misconceptions.

Christianity and media in Serbia and Croatia

The wide-reaching influence of mass media and the importance of public relations in disseminating religious content have been acknowledged by the Church and religious communities throughout the Western Balkans region. The Catholic Church officially embraced the Internet on January 25, 1996, with various motives driving its presence in the virtual environment. The internet provides opportunities for evangelicalism, re-evangelicalism, and new evangelicalism (Jurković, 2019: 14). Communication through new forms of media introduces changes, and web logistics are seen as challenging yet offering fresh perspectives and different faith experiences (Valković, 2011). In Croatia, media outlets are rich in religious content, spanning various formats such as Laudato TV, portals Book.hr and Bitno.net, the weekly newspaper *Glas Koncila*, and Radio Marija (Jurković, 2019: 21). The SOC also plays a significant role in the media, with ownership of several leading magazines and journals focusing on religious matters, church life,

and culture. These include ‘Glasnik SPC,’ ‘Pravoslavni Misionar,’ ‘Pravoslavlje,’ ‘Teološki pogledi,’ ‘Svetosavsko zvonice,’ ‘Kalendar-Crkva,’ and ‘Poslanica Njegove Svetosti Patrijarha srpskog G. Pavla.’ (Radujković, 2006: 120). Additionally, numerous journals are issued by parishes, eparchies, and Christian associations within the church, such as ‘Svetigora,’ ‘Glas Crkve,’ ‘Dabar,’ ‘Žički blagovesnik,’ ‘Vidoslov,’ ‘Put, istina i život’ (Radujković, 2006: 121). The SOC also mentions its official website (www.spc.org.rs) to share religious content and the latest news regarding church affairs.

While the Church sees value in cooperating with secular media to share its message, it must proceed carefully. A survey of 859 participants in Croatia indicates that Facebook is highly valued for sharing religious content, especially among those aged 20-49, with over 80% following religious pages for spiritual growth, daily guidance, and learning about their faith (Jurković, 2019: 51-52). Church officials engaging with mass media must consider how information is processed and be mindful of the media’s stance on faith and morality. Cooperation can become contentious when coverage of church life is distorted, misrepresented, or taken out of context, impacting the political and social dimensions of related protests.

Mass media often employ specific jargon and inflammatory rhetoric when covering events of public interest, aiming to evoke emotional reactions and engage their audience. Stories are typically presented with attention-grabbing headlines and often favor one perspective, aligning with either pro-Government or anti-Government media outlets. Serbia’s media freedom, according to the Press Freedom Index report compiled by Reporters Without Borders, has shown a declining trend between 2016 and 2018 (Nikolić, 2018: 265). In 2016, Serbia was ranked 59th out of 180 countries, dropping to 66th in 2017, 76th in 2018, and 90th in 2019 (Škobo, 2019: 7). According to the data from 2021, Serbia was ranked 93rd (Reporters Without Borders)³ and Montenegro 104th (Reporters Without Borders).⁴ The most recent data reveals significant variations, especially in the case of Montenegro. In 2022, Montenegro was ranked 63rd, but in 2023, it climbed to the 39th position (Reporters Without Borders).⁵ On the other hand, Serbia, which was ranked 79th in 2022, slipped to the 91st position in 2023.

3 <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

4 <https://rsf.org/en/montenegro>

5 <https://rsf.org/en/country/montenegro>

Prominent British and American newspapers like *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Guardian* have depicted Serbia as having a “repressive media environment” and “pro-Vučić” tabloids (i.e. the *Informer*) (Škobo, 2019: 7). This portrayal is based on statements from Serbian journalists and those who have experienced unfair treatment or found it challenging to practice unbiased journalism. Opposition members have also raised concerns about pro-government media in Serbia (Nikolić, 2018: 265). The Serbian online magazine *Dnevni Žurnal*⁶ has compiled a list of television channels and newspapers, categorizing them based on their perceived alignment with government propaganda activities. According to their classification, *Informer* is regarded as a clear example of a pro-government newspaper, while *Danas* is considered an anti-government newspaper. This classification is in line with Škobo’s study examining the image of Serbia in Western media (Škobo, 2019: 7). In Montenegro, *Pobjeda* and *Dnevne Novine* have been ‘the greatest supporters of the government’s agenda’ since 2015 (Brkić, 2015: 6).

Corpus presentation: quantitative and qualitative analysis

Throughout the time span between June 2019 and December 2020, a total of 1,572 articles dealing with the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro had been published, 3 of which were published by *Al Jazeera*, 5 by *The Washington Post*, 259 by *Pobjeda*, 342 by *Dnevne novine*, 576 by *Danas*, and 387 by *Informer* (see Table 1). The analysis is limited to 45 articles, 3 articles published by *Al Jazeera*, 5 by *The Washington Post*, 7 by *Pobjeda*, 9 by *Dnevne novine*, 10 by *Danas* and 11 by *Informer*. The selection criteria depended on several factors: (1) the relevance to the research topic, (2) the desire to maintain a manageable sample size for analysis, selecting a subset of articles that provide a representative sample of the broader body of literature on the Law on Religious Freedom while still allowing for in-depth analysis, (3) availability of relevant articles, with preference given to the most informative or comprehensive articles in addressing the research questions,

⁶ This categorization reflects the magazine’s assessment of media outlets in Serbia in terms of their stance toward the government. It is important to note that this assessment is specific to media outlets’ positions in relation to the government and is not directly related to assessing media freedom in Serbia.

and (4) ensuring a balanced and diverse representation of perspectives and sources.

Table 1: *The number of texts regarding the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro published between June 2019 and December 2020 via online media platforms.*

Online media	Number of articles on the Law on Religious Freedom published between June 2019 and December 2020 per specific media	Number of articles analyzed per specific media	Total number of articles covering the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro
<i>Al Jazeera</i>	3	3	1,572
<i>The Washington Post</i>	5	5	
<i>Pobjeda</i>	259	7	
<i>Dnevne novine</i>	342	9	
<i>Danas</i>	576	10	
<i>Informer</i>	387	11	

Coverage by Al Jazeera and The Washington Post

Al Jazeera highlighted that nationwide protests were organized by supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro, who claimed that the law would lead to the “strip[ping of] the church of its property, including medieval monasteries and churches,” and they described the law as “discriminatory and unconstitutional” (“Montenegro adopts law on religion”, 2019). The report also presented the views of Montenegro’s pro-Western president, who accused the SOC of promoting pro-Serb policies and attempting to undermine the country’s statehood, especially since Montenegro’s separation from the larger Serbia in 2006. Additionally, it was noted that Montenegro’s population remained divided over whether the country should maintain close ties with Serbia, with approximately 30 percent of Montenegro’s population identifying as Serbs and predominantly opposing the separation from Serbia. Another *Al Jazeera*’s report discusses the aftermath of Montenegro’s recent parliamentary election, where the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists lost power after three decades, highlighting the concerns about potential shifts in Montenegro’s pro-Western

stance and stability due to ethno-nationalist sentiments, particularly against Muslim minorities (“How the use of ethnonationalism backfired”, 2020). It traces Montenegro’s political trajectory under President Milo Đukanović, highlighting corruption scandals and recent tensions over a disputed law on religious freedoms. Despite pledges to uphold international agreements, there were fears of increased division and instability under the new coalition. The report suggests that Đukanović’s continued involvement in government could ensure Montenegro’s Euro-Atlantic integration, although uncertainties remain about the country’s future direction. Another report (“Opposition challenges Montenegro’s ruling party”, 2020) highlights the significance of the election outcome and the uncertainty surrounding Montenegro’s political future, with Đukanović, criticized for corruption and authoritarianism, facing the risk of being removed from power, and the opposition’s ability to effectively collaborate, considering their diversity.

The selected articles published by *The Washington Post* highlighted President Đukanović’s role in advancing Montenegro’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and addressed concerns about potential shifts in the country’s geopolitical orientation. In the article titled “Thousands rally in Montenegro,” Milić (2020) highlighted the law as a part of a policy shift away from NATO towards traditional allies Serbia and Russia. Đukanović, recognized as a key figure in Montenegro’s pro-Western policy, was portrayed as a crucial Western ally advancing Balkan integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Milić (2020a) also highlights Montenegro’s delicate balance between its pro-Western stance, reflected in NATO membership and EU aspirations, and historical ties to Serbia and Russia (“Montenegro opposition claims election victory”). The author pointed out that the tensions escalated amid protests against the religious rights law, with fears of unrest echoing past incidents. Đukanović is portrayed as a key figure in European politics and Montenegro’s integration efforts, with the main opposition aligning with church-led protests, seeking closer ties with Belgrade and Moscow, while the government denies religious property confiscation claims.

Milić (2020b) also discussed post-election political developments in Montenegro, where a coalition of three opposition parties ousted the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists after three decades in power (“Montenegro lawmakers return”). Despite concerns about potential shifts in Montenegro’s pro-Western stance, the new government pledged to maintain NATO ties and accelerate EU accession

reforms. The coalition also committed to addressing issues like a disputed law on religious freedoms amid challenges posed by COVID-19 and a struggling tourism season. In Milić's (2020c) article, he reported on the coalition agreement signing, reaffirming Montenegro's commitment to international obligations, including NATO ties and EU accession reforms ("Government agreed"). The coalition leaders emphasized their pro-European stance, amidst rising tensions post-election, with opposition supporters celebrating victory amidst chants against Đukanović, while his supporters staged a large rally. Despite challenges, Đukanović's pro-Western orientation remains a defining feature of Montenegro's political landscape.

Another article ("Montenegro's ruling party supporters", 2020), stresses tension between Montenegro's ruling party and the opposition, especially those with pro-Serb and pro-Russian leanings. Despite the ruling party winning the most votes, the opposition coalition secured a parliamentary majority, raising concerns about a potential shift away from the West towards Serbia and Russia. Đukanović's role in steering Montenegro towards Western alliances, including NATO membership, is emphasized. While fears of a change in foreign policy under an opposition-led government exist, opposition leaders have pledged to uphold international agreements and continue EU accession reforms.

Montenegrin portals: Pobjeda, Dnevne novine

Pobjeda, one of the leading Montenegrin portals, prominently featured the law on religious freedom adopted seven months before the Montenegrin election, amidst the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and various issues within the leading party. The law was cited as one of the three primary reasons behind most of the population's decision not to support Đukanović. In one of *Pobjeda* articles, Zečević (2020) reported that a significant portion of the people who previously supported the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), at least 10%, shifted their support to a 'clerical coalition of DF' led by Metropolitan Amfilohije, Montenegro's Senior Orthodox Cleric ("Tri razloga pada rejtinga DPS-a"). This coalition openly advocated for the return of neo-fascist ideologies in Montenegro and was critical of the law. *Pobjeda* covered an interview with Đukanović broadcast on the popular Sarajevo television channel, Face TV, on 18 September 2020 ("Đukanović: Crnu Goru ćemo ako bude trebalo braniti i u šumi"). In the interview, Đukanović

downplayed the significance of the regime in Montenegro and asserted that Montenegro would be defended if needed. He also expressed skepticism about Amfilohije's ability to build temples in Cetinje. Đukanović stressed that the new regime's actions were influenced by Serbian nationalism and Russian interests in Europe and the region. He criticized Serbian media for their partiality and negative portrayal of Montenegro since its independence in 2006, claiming that Montenegro was viewed as "a natural part of Serbian society, natural part of Greater Serbia, [...] some sort of food that should feed hungry nationalist mouths."

Pobjeda reported that the SOC's involvement in Montenegro's elections, coupled with logistical and media support for the Serbian coalition "For the Future of Montenegro," significantly impacted the voting outcome ("SPC i opozicija jače od države"). Additionally, Prime Minister Duško Marković clarified that the Law on Religious Freedom did not involve seizing property from the SOC, emphasizing its alignment with international standards and dispelling concerns about clergy removal ("Zakon o vjeroispovjesti nikad nije bio tema", 2019)."

Đuričić (2020) highlighted Montenegrin Minister of Defense Predrag Bosković's perspective on the law on religious freedom, considering it a catalyst for addressing issues within Montenegro ("Zakon o vjeroispovjesti okidač"). The protests were interpreted as driven not solely by the law but also by political motives aimed at destabilizing the government, both domestically and internationally.

In another article ("Đurašković: novim zakonom o vjeroispovjesti se SPC", 2020), Nikola Đurašković from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) argues that amendments to the law on religious freedom aim to strengthen the SOC's privileged position and validate its ownership of Montenegro's cultural and religious assets. He criticizes the transfer of these assets to another state instead of keeping them within Montenegro. Moreover, Đurašković suggests that the new regime relies heavily on the SOC, given the lack of public discussion on the law's amendments and the absence of consultation with MOC representatives, indicating a discriminatory stance towards other religious communities in Montenegro.

Zečević (2020a) reported information from media platforms affiliated with Milorad Dodik, the Democratic Front, and the SOC ("Litijama žele srpski svijet"). These platforms suggested that the religious protests organized by the SOC in Montenegro aimed to establish a "Serbian world," mirroring the Russian

model, with a strategic focus on Podgorica, Banjaluka, and Belgrade, shifting Montenegro's alignment away from the EU and NATO towards Russia and Central Asia. The article provided insights into the political agenda behind these protests, featuring key figures such as Episcopate Joanikije, Milomir Stepić from the Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade, Gojko Raičević from the IN4S portal, Predrag Ceranić from the Faculty of Security in Banja Luka, and Dejan Mirović, a university professor. Additionally, it highlighted a text titled "Is there a Russian world – do these religious protests point to the forming of the Serbian world," published by pro-Dodik portal "All about Srpska" and the IN4S portal, which supported the Democratic Front and SOC in Montenegro. The article underscored the broader political aspirations of these platforms, indicating that their objectives extended beyond the religious freedom law to challenge the country's leadership.

The headlines of articles published by *Dnevne Novine* concerning this issue consistently fostered a hostile atmosphere and invoked negative emotions among the public. An examination of issues published in June 2019 further reinforces these observations. For instance, the front page of an issue published on June 22, 2019, summarized the opinion of Dragan Radulović, the president of Matica Crnogorska, with the headline: "SOC is the last political relic from 1918" ("SPC je poslednji politički relik"). Another front-page article featured an interview with Slobodan Sadžakov, a university professor, with the headline "SOC unscrupulous in clash with Montenegro" ("SPC ne bira sredstva"). Similar headlines in June 2019 issues followed this pattern: "Amfilohije's ambition is to 'have dominance over' Montenegro" (as concluded by Dušan Janjić, a Serbian political analyst) ("Amfilohijeva ambicija"), "IF SOC were to decide, there would be no Montenegro nor Montenegrins" (as stated by Dragutin Papović, a historian) ("Da se SPC pitala"), or "Property taken in 1918 should be given back to Montenegro" (as concluded by Nenad Čanak) ("Čanak: Crnoj Gori vratiti imovinu").

The front pages of the issues published in 2020 continued in a similar vein, featuring headlines such as "Amfilohije's Speech as in a Pre-election meeting," "There are numerous proofs of SOC being a political actor and DF's partner," "They don't accept MOC because of Ideology," "Serbia contemptuously interferes in Montenegro's interior affairs," and "Protest Walks after Government's Offer – malicious move." These articles underscored the church's support for the government, contingent on its rejection of the law on religious freedom. The

framing portrayed this support as a patriotic stance to safeguard Montenegro from Serbia's ambitions. The article discussing Metropolitan Amfilohije's speech emphasized that the church would back the government if it rejected what it deemed 'insanity' (referring to the law on religious freedom). According to Metropolitan Amfilohije, failure to do so would be considered "an act of crime against Montenegro," akin to Kosovo's recognition ("Amfilohijev govor").

Additionally, *Dnevne novine* frequently published interviews with Đukanović, where he positioned himself as a patriot protecting Montenegro from Serbia's territorial ambitions. This perspective is evident from the following headlines: "SPC is wrong to think that protest walks can jeopardize the basic values of Montenegrin society" (a front-page interview with Đukanović in June 2020) ("SPC se vara ako misli"), "Idea of Greater Serbia in Montenegro would be wishful thinking" (an interview with Đukanović in October 2020) ("Velikosrpska ideja u Crnoj Gori"), or "The Country is not giving what belongs to it to anyone, be that someone wearing a suit or priest's uniform" ("Država ne da svoje nikome"). These interviews conveyed Đukanović's stance on issues related to the Serbian Orthodox Church and its influence in Montenegro.

Serbian portals: *Danas* and *Informer*

In January 2020, *Danas* published an article shedding light on the differing perspectives of Ranko Krivokapić, the President of the SDP in Montenegro and former President of the Montenegrin Parliament, and Grigorije Đurić, a Serbian Orthodox bishop and head of the Eparchy of Düsseldorf and all of Germany ("DW: Crna Gora"). Krivokapić argued that the SOC's denial of Montenegrin identity and attempts to assert ownership over properties were politically motivated. He emphasized for churches to be legally registered, as mandated by the Montenegrin Constitution of 1905. In contrast, Đurić contended that proving ownership of centuries-old temples and churches was impractical, pointing out their historical origins with the Nemanjić dynasty. He alleged that Đukanović purposely incited the religious crisis to fuel tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins, positioning himself as a peacemaker and the only viable political option. Churches should be registered as legal entities, just like all other religious communities.

In December 2019, *Danas* featured an article covering the adoption of the contentious law, which coincided with the publication of the Appeal against Belgrade's Threats to Peace in Montenegro and the Region ("Apel osude"). Over 120 public figures from across the former Yugoslavia signed the Appeal, condemning Serbia for allegedly endangering peace and seeking to destabilize Montenegro.

In January 2020, *Danas* conducted an interview with Đukanović, where he asserted that the exploitation of religious sentiments aimed to destabilize Montenegro ("Đukanović: zloupotreba vere"). He urged citizens to refrain from engaging in what he termed a 'mad movement' and refuted claims that the law aimed to valorize tourist sites. He characterized the act of transferring property from the SOC to the MOC, registered in 1993 in Montenegro, as manipulative and attributed it to SOC representatives and parties allied with SOC.

Danas also covered the launch of a signature collection drive by students from the University of Belgrade on January 28th to support a resolution addressing perceived threats to Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro ("Studenti BU počinju prikupljanje potpisa"). The resolution urges the Serbian government to take legal and diplomatic actions to protect these rights.

In February 2020, *Danas* published an article titled "Megalomania Present in all Ex-Yu Nations," which focused on the personal attitudes of individuals who wanted their identities to remain hidden (Omčikus, 2020). The article emphasized that one of the key postulates of a democratic state is the separation of church and state, highlighting that religious communities have no right to appropriate cultural inheritance and property belonging to other communities, particularly traditional ones. It argued that laws should be freed from any suggestion that states have the authority to decide on property ownership matters. The article contended that megalomania is an omnipresent feature within individuals or groups of people and accused various parties in the Ex-Yu region of using accusations of Greater Serbia pretensions to deflect their own megalomania. Regarding the Law on Religious Freedoms, the article deemed it logical as long as it safeguarded freedom of religion without infringing on individual liberties, ensured autonomy, and established a centralized register of churches and religious communities. Property issues were suggested to be addressed through separate legislation, covering all natural and legal entities. Notably, church property classified as cultural assets would

be protected under distinct legislation, with competent authorities responsible for property maintenance. In a March 2020 article, Montenegro's Prime Minister Duško Marković emphasized the country's secular, civic, and multiethnic nature, rejecting notions of it becoming a religious or nationalistic state ("Marković patrijarhu Irineju"). He cautioned against undermining Montenegrin values and potential, especially amid concerns about resurgent divisive politics reminiscent of the 1990s. Marković pledged to address issues peacefully and democratically to ensure stability. Conversely, the SOC Patriarch Irinej expressed concerns about potential conflicts, urging respect for the defense of holy sites. This exchange highlights tensions between the Montenegrin government and the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding religious and national identity.

In another article ("Litijske zore i naše pare"), the intense political and propaganda battle over Montenegro's future is examined, focusing on whether it will align with Serbia, the SOC, and Russia, or maintain sovereignty and pursue integration with Western institutions (Radić, 2020). The pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc, led by the SOC's Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MML), is portrayed as challenging Montenegro's pro-Western stance. The article also highlights tensions between the MML and the Montenegrin government, illustrated by a tax dispute, with the MML disputing claims of owed taxes. Furthermore, criticism is directed at Serbian President Vučić's offer to pay off the MML's alleged debt to Montenegro using Serbian taxpayers' money, suggesting a pattern of unchecked populist leadership.

The February 17 article reported on Đukanović's efforts to contextualize the Law on Freedom of Religion within a broader regional framework, framing it as part of a political struggle between proponents of a European future and advocates for the status quo ("Đukanović: problem Zakona o slobodi veroispovesti"). He highlighted Montenegro's dedication to evolving as a civic, multiethnic state aligned with European and Euro-Atlantic values, contrasting it with proposals to revert to a Serbian-dominated, medieval model. Đukanović emphasized the need for a cautious approach to address historical consciousness and advocated for a gradual emancipation process. He also underscored Montenegro's commitment to resolving issues in accordance with European practices as it progresses towards EU integration.

Danas also covered Patriarch Irinej's criticism of Montenegro's Defense Minister, Predrag Bošković, accusing him of using the Law on Freedom of Religion to instigate a crusade against Montenegro ("Irinej: žele da istrebe Srbe"). He urged people to persevere in defending sacred sites, highlighting that such rhetoric ultimately seeks to eradicate Serbs from Montenegro. Irinej expressed resolve to continue the struggle, encouraging participation in processions and expressing hope for a favorable ruling from the Constitutional Court.

Another article reflects deep concerns about Metropolitan Amfilohije's leadership in protests against the Law ("Istorija Amfilohijevog 'ratovanja'"). Despite being a senior figure in the SOC known for nationalist and divisive rhetoric, Amfilohije's involvement in politics has drawn criticism. Aleksandar Olenik points to Amfilohije's past support for nationalist politicians like Milošević and Koštunica, suggesting a consistent pattern of political involvement. Resistance against nationalist influences, led by organizations like the Civil Democratic Forum and individuals learned from past conflicts, aims to prevent history from repeating itself at the expense of both Serbian and Montenegrin citizens. Conversely, Aleksandra Jerkov stresses the need to address underlying issues perpetuating conflict in the region, including unresolved historical grievances and political manipulation. Both commentators emphasize the importance of acknowledging past mistakes and preventing further destabilization in the Balkans.

The Serbian pro-regime online portal *Informer* extensively covered events surrounding the controversial law. Its articles unequivocally demonstrated the portal's unwavering support for the SOC in Montenegro. The headlines, often accompanied by photos and videos, fell into several categories: (1) articles that called for and/or reported on massive protest walks against the controversial law in Montenegro and Serbia ("Together in Prayer against Lawlessness and Defense of Sanctuary!" (Zajedno u molitvi), "People Rose To Defend Serbian Sanctuary in Montenegro" ("Narod ustao"), "Serbians in Montenegro Will either Defend their Church or Disappear" ("Srpski narod u Crnoj Gori"); (2) articles featuring Serbian political figures and prominent figures expressing their disagreement with the law ("Vucic With No Second Thoughts: There is One Canonical Orthodox Church in Montenegro, but there are also some non-government organizations" ("Vučić bez dileme"); "Vulin: I am ashamed of the fact that Europe remains silent regarding the fact that Serbian people need to fight for their own sanctuary," ("Vulin: Stidim

se”); (3) articles designed to evoke strong emotions in readers (“They want to take away SOC’s property! MOC: This will be the saddest Christmas for believers,” (“Hoće da otmu imovinu”), “You will get chills: little Milos sent the strongest message from the protest walks in Montenegro: I’m guilty of using the three fingers when I cross myself, I’m guilty of using the Cyrillic script,...” (“Naježićete se!”), “Milo, you cannot take this away! Little Avram (7) showed how he spent his winter holiday and fascinated the Serbs! Teacher delighted!” (“Milo, ovo nam ne možeš oteti”); and (4) articles with inflammatory rhetoric targeting Milo Đukanović (“Wicked Milo spat on his own people and sanctuary! Milačić: Đukanović signed the shameful law on St. Vasilije’s Birthday” (“Izopačeni Milo”), “Milo, the thief! Pljevlja on its feet regarding Milonegrin’s shameful Law,” (“Milo, lopove!”), “Disgrace! Milonegrins do not fear God!” (“Bruka!”). These headlines and articles collectively portrayed *Informer’s* resolute support for SOC in Montenegro.

Discussion

Foreign media outlets, particularly those from the United States and Doha, displayed a modest level of coverage regarding the controversial law on religious freedom in Montenegro, as evidenced by the limited number of articles on this topic. *Al Jazeera* provided a balanced perspective by presenting the viewpoints of both stakeholders in the debate, while *The Washington Post* framed the events within a broader geopolitical context, noting Montenegro’s possible shift away from NATO and towards traditional Slavic allies, such as Serbia and Russia. This framing emphasizes the law’s significance from an American perspective.

On the domestic front, the media landscape in both Serbia and Montenegro exhibited clear divisions along pro-regime and anti-regime lines. These outlets used attention-grabbing audio-visual materials and colloquial language to reach wider audiences, with headlines and front pages designed to shock or surprise readers, thus contributing to the polarization of public opinion. Articles from Montenegrin portals *Pobjeda* and *Dnevne novine* shared characteristics with those found in the Serbian *Informer*, featuring similar categorizations. The Serbian anti-regime portal *Danas* provided a platform for a broader understanding of the issue by presenting diverse perspectives from various sides involved, although it fell short of the ideal objectivity and freedom of expression expected of independent

media. This stark division in the media landscape in both countries has deepened the divide among the population, exacerbating tensions over contradictory perceptions of religious identity in the Western Balkans.

Pobjeda's coverage highlighted the law's influence on political dynamics, particularly its role in shaping electoral outcomes and fueling tensions between different political factions. The articles examined the reactions of key political figures offering contrasting views on the law's objectives and impacts. Moreover, the coverage shed light on the involvement of the SOC in the political arena, suggesting its significant influence on electoral processes and public sentiment. Additionally, the articles explored the geopolitical dimensions of the dispute, linking it to broader regional dynamics and interests, particularly those of Serbia and Russia. *Dnevne Novine* consistently presented a critical perspective on the law on religious freedom and its implications for Montenegro's political landscape. The headlines evoked negative emotions and fostered a hostile atmosphere, reflecting the magazine's stance on the issue. Through interviews with key figures and analyses of political developments, *Dnevne Novine* portrayed the SOC as a political actor seeking dominance over Montenegro, emphasizing the church's support for the government's rejection of the law as a patriotic stance to safeguard Montenegro's sovereignty against Serbia's perceived ambitions. Articles in *Dnevne Novine* frequently featured interviews with Đukanović, highlighting his perspective on the church's influence and his role in protecting Montenegro's interests. The articles published in *Danas* examine various perspectives, including those of political figures, religious leaders, and commentators, offering insights into the ongoing tensions between the Montenegrin government and the SOC. The reporting reflected a commitment to presenting diverse viewpoints and analyzing the complex dynamics at play, ultimately contributing to a nuanced understanding of the situation. Additionally, *Danas* covers related developments, such as the involvement of public figures and organizations across the former Yugoslavia and the broader regional context of Montenegro's geopolitical orientation. The Serbian pro-regime online portal *Informer* extensively covered events surrounding the controversial law, demonstrating unwavering support for the SOC in Montenegro. The headlines fell into several categories: articles reporting on massive protest walks against the law, featuring Serbian political figures expressing disagreement with the law, evoking strong emotions in readers,

and targeting Đukanović with inflammatory rhetoric. Collectively, these articles portrayed *Informer's* resolute support for the SOC in Montenegro. While this study provides valuable insights into media representation of religious identity in the Western Balkans, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size of articles analyzed, combined with the broad time span covered, may raise questions regarding the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, the selection process did not systematically account for the distribution of articles across different months within the selected timeframe, potentially resulting in an uneven representation of certain periods. Despite these limitations, the paper nuanced perspective on media dynamics in the Western Balkans, particularly in relation to perceptions of religious identity amidst significant political shifts. By analyzing diverse media sources, it sheds light on how media representation influences discourse surrounding Montenegro's controversial Law on Religious Freedom. This comprehensive approach, which spans various platforms and regions, reveals the language and framing techniques that shape public opinion. The findings underscore the importance of media literacy and responsible journalism in promoting informed discourse, thereby enhancing our understanding of media's role in shaping socio-political dynamics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In examining the media's portrayal of religious content and its impact on public perception of religious identity in the Western Balkans, the intricate connections between media, religion, politics, and identity become unmistakably complex. The controversy surrounding Montenegro's law on religious freedom provided a stage for media outlets in Serbia, Montenegro, and abroad to project diverse narratives, highlighting media's substantial role in shaping public consciousness.

Foreign media, while often more restrained in tone, contextualized these events within a broader geopolitical framework. By contrast, domestic media in Serbia and Montenegro exhibited pronounced polarization, with outlets aligning strongly along political lines and using provocative headlines to reinforce existing biases. The polarized portrayal underscores the significant influence media wields over religious identity in the digital age, amplifying divisions and intensifying tensions in an already sensitive regional landscape.

To mitigate the media's influence in deepening regional divides, prioritizing media literacy, responsible journalism, and balanced reporting is essential to foster constructive dialogue among religious institutions, the state, and the public. The Western Balkans exemplifies the broader challenges and opportunities posed by media representation of religious content in the 21st century. Amid rapid information dissemination and digital interconnectedness, media representations of religious content hold the power to either bridge divides or exacerbate conflicts. This paper calls for religious and governmental institutions to adapt their approaches to religious identity within this evolving digital landscape, where identity – religious or otherwise – should be regarded as dynamic, fluid, and free from restrictive historical, social, and cultural frameworks. Sensitivity to the complex interplay between religious, political, and national identities in the region, along with a focus on the needs of digital citizens, are critical steps toward fostering a deeper insight into religious identity and easing ongoing tensions.

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MEDIJSKO PREDSTAVLJANJE RELIGIJSKOG SADRŽAJA I NJEGOV UTICAJ NA JAVNO MNJENJE PO PITANJU VERSKOG IDENTITETA NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU

Sažetak: Imajući u vidu period rastućih tenzija u vezi sa kontroverznim Zakonom o slobodi veroispovesti u Crnoj Gori usvojenim u decembru 2019. godine, ovaj rad ima za cilj da istraži prave razloge zbog kojih su hiljade ljudi širom Crne Gore i Srbije izašli na ulice, kao i da utvrdi kako lokalni, nacionalni i međunarodni mediji svojim načinom predstavljanja religijskog sadržaja utiču na oblikovanje verskog identiteta na tom delu Zapadnog Balkana. Analizirano je 45 novinskih članaka u periodu od juna 2019. godine do decembra 2020. godine, a izvori uključuju američku štampu (*The Washington Post*) i sadržaj na engleskom jeziku koji plasira *Al Džazira*, kao arapska medijska kuća sa sedištem u Dohi, a koja je 2011. godine pokrenula program na Balkanu, te crnogorska štampa (*Pobjeda*, *Dnevne novine*) i srpska štampa (*Informer*, *Danas*). Jedno od ključnih istraživačkih pitanja ovog rada tiče se načina na koji mediji doprinose kako podizanju svesti javnosti o temi koja je od presudnog značaja za očuvanje verskog identiteta na ovom prostoru, tako i stvaranju lažne slike o verskom identitetu u javnosti putem plasiranja lažnih vesti i/ili kroz površno izveštavanje o složenim pitanjima koja iziskuju interdisciplinarni pristup. Takođe, u radu se istražuju mehanizmi putem kojih mediji doprinose povećanju javne svesti o ovom pitanju, što je od ključnog značaja za očuvanje verskog identiteta. Podjednako je važno uzeti u obzir i ulogu medija u oblikovanju javnog mnjenja po pitanju verskog identiteta koji, kako zbog širenja lažnih vesti, tako i zbog neadekvatnog i nepotpunog izveštavanja o složenim pitanjima koja zahtevaju multidisciplinarni pristup, neretko biva u velikoj meri pogrešno percipiran u javnosti. Analiza odabranih članaka religijske sadržine i njihovog načina predstavljanja od strane medija ukazuje na potrebu za odgovornim novinarstvom, medijskom pismenošću i nepristrasnim izveštavanjem u medijskom pejzažu sklonom čestoj promeni. Poziva se na konstruktivni dijalog između verskih institucija, države i digitalnih građana kako bi se sa promišljenošću koračalo kroz digitalno doba.

Ključne reči: *verski identitet, tradicionalni mediji, onlajn/digitalne platforme, strana/crnogorska/srpska štampa, Zakon o slobodi veroispovesti*