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**Unraveling Tensions: A Study of Montenegro's Interethnic Dynamics and Sociopolitical
Shifts in the Wake of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom**

A Thesis Presented

by

Teodora Brnović

to

the Department of Sociology

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of

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Hartford, CT

Advised by Dr. Alyson K. Spurgas

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To Milorad, my father and my biggest inspiration.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, Montenegro has lived through a turbulent period on both social and political fronts, marked most significantly by the 2020 election, when the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) lost power for the first time after almost thirty years of rule. The 2020 elections happened in the wake of eight months of protests related to the “Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities” (in further text, “Law on Religious Freedom” or “2019 law”) that the DPS passed in 2019, which had significant influence on the sociopolitical landscape and inter-ethnic conflicts in Montenegro.

When the DPS adopted the 2019 law, thousands of Montenegrin citizens took to the streets to express dissatisfaction with the law and its controversial implications regarding property rights of Orthodox Churches in Montenegro, reaching a scale of uprising that had not been seen in Montenegro since its independence from Serbia in 2006 (Milosevich, 2020). The 2019 Law was contested primarily by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) because it foresaw 1) a transfer of ownership of religious objects from the SOC to the state of Montenegro and 2) the legitimization of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), which to this day remains canonically unrecognized (Arandjelovic, 2022; Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022; Milosevich, 2020). The Law on Religious Freedom was fiercely opposed by the SOC clergy, pro-Serb parties in Montenegro, and the Serbian leadership in Belgrade (Morrison & Garčević, 2023). The SOC-led *liturgies* (originally “*litije*,” in further text “*protests*”) that ensued were initially targeted against the 2019 law, but quickly evolved into expressions of an overall dissatisfaction with the DPS and their thirty-year rule in Montenegro.

The disputed part of the 2019 law was that it intended to take away all religious objects that belonged to the Montenegrin state prior to the year 1918, when the then Kingdom of Montenegro was annexed into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). The adopted law had direct implications for the SOC, signifying that it would lose all religious objects that existed prior to the loss of independence in 1918 and were considered a public good or cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Montenegro (Arandjelovic, 2022; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). In other words, all property that the SOC controlled since 1918 would become property of the state of Montenegro and would likely become part of the MOC, which ceased to exist in 1922 but was restored in 1993 and now operates as a nongovernmental organization (Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022; Milosevich, 2020; Report on International Religious Freedom, 2021). Considering that the SOC is one of the largest landowners and real estate investors in Montenegro (Morrison & Garčević, 2023), it comes as no surprise that the DPS would attempt to diminish the SOC’s political influence in Montenegro by targeting their property rights. The SOC, therefore, rightfully recognized this law as a discriminatory act and an attempt of the DPS to decrease the SOC’s financial independence and social influence within Montenegro (Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022; Sinanovic, 2020).

Liturgies. As a response to the 2019 law, the SOC clergy led protests that were intended to show disagreement with the law and the DPS, which was seen as a seeking to disadvantage the

position of Serbs in Montenegro. Therefore, these protests, named *liturgies* to indicate their religious character, had a distinct political nature in addition to the spiritual one. Over the course of eight months between 2019 and 2020, these protests were attended by tens of thousands of people who opposed the 2019 law, which included not only ethnic Serbs but also folks of other ethnicities who sought to express dissatisfaction with the thirty-year rule of the DPS (Arandjelovic, 2022). Citizens of Montenegro and several neighboring countries, including Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Croatia took part in the liturgies (Arandjelovic, 2022; Morrison & Garčević, 2023).

The SOC's clergy headed the protests, which for the most part consisted of long and peaceful walks followed by prayers across many cities in Montenegro (Arandjelovic, 2022; Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022). Due to their strong ties with the Serb identity, the SOC invited Orthodox Christians to defend their holy places and preserve the national Serbian identity that is seen as inextricably tied to these religious objects (Gajić, 2020). Accordingly, the slogan that the protesters adopted was "Ne damo svetinje" (We won't give up holy places), which was accompanied by folk Serbian songs and chants with right-wing nationalistic thematic (Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Zenović, 2021). The pro-Serb opposition parties also saw these protests as an opportunity to demonstrate their support for the Serb people in Montenegro and advance the interests of the SOC and Serbia and gain electoral advantage (Arandjelovic, 2022; Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022).

While attitudes toward the protests were heterogeneous, they significantly decreased the DPS's pool of supporters, leading his party to lose the 2020 elections for the first time since 1991 (Arandjelovic, 2022; Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Sinanovic, 2020). The newly formed government was made up of three coalitions – For the Future of Montenegro (Za budućnost Crne Gore), Peace is our Nation (Mir je naša nacija), and Black on White (Crno na bijelo). With a history of interfering in political affairs in the Western Balkan region and being openly against the DPS's pro-Western politics, the SOC's opposition to the 2019 law made the church an important actor in the 2020 parliamentary elections (Koprivica et al., 2021). In 2020, Zdravko Krivokapić, who was appointed as the leader of the pro-Serb coalition For the Future of Montenegro at the request of the SOC, then became Montenegro's first Prime Minister (Koprivica et al., 2021). On election night, Krivokapić met with Amfilohije Radović, who was the Metropolitan Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral since 1990 until his death in 2020. The two met in the Church of Christ's Resurrection in Montenegro's capital city, Podgorica, to celebrate the election results and the implicit victory of the SOC, who fought for the 2019 law to be amended. This and other meetings that occurred among the SOC clergy and newly elect Montenegrin government officials, called a lot of attention because it put into question the SOC's ties with politics and further complicated the question of secularism in Montenegro, with many accusing the newly founded government of attempting to theocratize Montenegrin politics (Arandjelovic, 2022; Gajić, 2020; Report on International Religious Freedom, 2022; Sinanovic, 2020).

In this climate of political antagonism to the Montenegrin government, two ethnic groups became opposed – ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs. Throughout 2019 and 2020, people involved on the two sides of these inter-ethnic tensions often took extreme political stances, and the Orthodox Christians in Montenegro were further divided along ethnic and political lines (Koprivica et al., 2021). Recent research has revealed increasing tendencies towards the radicalization of ethnic and religious identities in Montenegro. Almost half of the Montenegrin population thinks of their own religion as superior to others, and a significant percentage believes that the use of weapons would be justified if it came to defending one's own religion (Koprivica et al., 2021). This data indicates that there is reason to conclude that politics built around ethnic and religious identities or affiliations is concerning and may escalate to further, potentially violent, conflicts in the future.

Despite the importance and implications of the above discussed events, few studies have been conducted on the 2019-2020 period and its effect on Montenegrin citizens. The events that unfolded in this time frame have left an impact on the state of tensions among ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. Moreover, the scale of these events and the involvement of external political and religious leaders has led to sociopolitical changes relevant not just for Montenegro but also for neighboring countries.

This research explores the effect that the 2019-2020 period had on inter-ethnic tensions in Montenegro, as well as the way Montenegrin citizens' interpersonal relationships and political views were affected by these events. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How do ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs make sense of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and the ensuing protests? and 2) How have the sociopolitical changes in the 2019-2020 period affected their interpersonal relationships and political views?

Through a mixed methods analysis, this study will contribute to the existing literature on ethnic conflicts in the Balkans by adding a necessary social psychology approach for a deeper understanding of ethnoreligious and ethnopolitical identification. After an overview of the relevant literature and methodology, the most important findings and conclusions of this study are discussed.

Literature Review

For a better understanding of the events that unfolded following the passing of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom, it is important to comprehend the context within which these events occurred. Previous research helps us understand how nationalistic politics that emerged in the Western Balkan countries during and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s have affected inter-ethnic conflicts within Montenegro. Existing studies provide insight into the role of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and their clergy in the region, highlighting their significance as relevant social and political actors in post-Yugoslav countries. An overview of relevant literature is presented below.

A) Montenegrin Statehood and Identity

During the civil war in the 1990s that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, ethnonationalism emerged as the biggest challenge for peace and stability in the Western Balkans (Flere, 1991; Job, 1993; Hammel et al., 2010; Ramet, 2007). While most countries in the region sought independence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Montenegro remained in a union with Serbia until 2006.

A critical actor that emerged in the years leading up to the separation was Milo Đukanović, a leader of the DPS who was at the forefront of the fight for Montenegrin independence from Serbia. During its rule from 1997 to 2020, the DPS established close ties with the West, leading Montenegro to become an EU candidate in 2010 and a NATO member in 2017, and thus distancing itself politically from its neighbor and historical ally, Serbia. As part of nation building strategies, Đukanović and the DPS stressed the importance of establishing a complete ethnic, linguistic, and cultural separation from Serbia and Serbdom in their political programs.

Ethnic Identity. The question of whether Montenegrins and Serbs are one ethnolinguistic group or if they are distinct is one that has been at the center of public debate in Montenegro. With different points of view on critical historical events, many Montenegrin citizens are divided on the question of whether Montenegrins are simply ethnic Serbs living on the territory called Montenegro or if they have a unique ethnic belonging that is separate from Serbdom (Erdem, 2017). Scholars have widely disagreed on this topic, reaching no consensus, and thus furthering the divides that have existed for decades between those who believe that Montenegrins are ethnic Serbs and those who argue that Montenegrins are their own ethnic category. Some academics have claimed that Montenegrin ethnoreligious identity has historically existed independently from Serbdom (Mrduljaš, 2023), while others have argued that Montenegrins and Serbs were not always seen as mutually exclusive categories (Džankić, 2014; Erdem, 2017). Many scholars have also highlighted how political and religious elites have manufactured a clear divide on this issue, with the pro-Montenegrin elites claiming that Montenegrins and Serbs are two distinct ethnic identities, and the pro-Serbian elites maintaining that the two groups belong to one and the same

ethnicity (Džankić, 2014; Erdem, 2017; Koprivica et al., 2021; Malešević & Uzelac, 2007; Subotic, 2020).

This question has for decades pervaded Montenegrin political discourse and has been a divisive factor among the general population, contributing to social antagonism and political polarization along ethnic lines, most clearly seen among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs. Research on this topic has contributed to a better understanding of the influences that political elites, as well as broader geopolitical tensions between the East and the West, have had on the general population in Montenegro (Džankić, 2014; Dževerdanović Pejović, 2022; Garčević & Morrison, 2023; Milosevich, 2020; Mrduljaš, 2023; Sinanovic, 2020). Scholars point out that the Serb ethnic identity within Montenegro came to be associated with the preservation of ties with Serbia and an alignment with Russia, while Montenegrin ethnic/national identity came to be associated with an independent Montenegrin state and a leaning towards European integration and Western values (Džankić, 2014; Erdem, 2017). In other words, the Montenegrin ethnic identity came to be associated with supporting the DPS and their domestic and foreign politics. It comes as no surprise then, that the 2019 law, which targeted the SOC, received backlash primarily from ethnic Serbs, who were at the forefront of the 2019-20 protests that eventually led to the DPS losing the 2020 elections after almost thirty years of rule.

Linguistic Identity. Another important identity marker in Montenegro is linguistic identity, which has also been a controversial topic that has contributed to further divisions among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs (Erdem, 2017; Morrison, 2009; Džankić, 2014). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, where the official language was Serbo-Croatian, the newly independent countries sought to establish and institutionalize their own languages as part of a nation building process (Kordić, 2010; Lakić, 2021). In this process, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin were institutionalized as different languages, despite being variants of the same language. Led by the DPS, Montenegro also went through a process of establishing Montenegrin as the national language, which caused divided reactions among the population and sparked further tensions among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs.

B) The Orthodox Churches in the Political Arena

According to the latest census in 2011, Orthodox Christians make up 72% of the population in Montenegro, which is for the most part constituted by people who identify as ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins (MONSTAT, 2011). Just like ethnicity and language, the Orthodox Christian identity is another marker that has contributed to a deeper divide between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. Many scholars claim that the root of this issue can be traced back to the year 1918, when Serbia annexed Montenegro to create the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). With this annexation, many markers of Montenegrin national identity were incorporated into their Serbian counterparts,

including the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), whose status of autocephaly¹ is often disputed by political and religious leaders. While many scholars agree that the MOC was autocephalous from 1905 until 1920, the SOC clergy has often disputed these claims (Milosevich, 2020; Morrison, 2017; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). Disagreement on historical events is not uncommon in the Western Balkans, and scholars have written extensively about historical revisionism and its role in the instrumentalization of ethnoreligious conflicts for political purposes in the Balkans (Koprivica et al., 2021; Pavasović Trošt, 2018; Prekic, 2019; Sinanovic, 2020; Stojanovic, 2007).

The DPS. Before the DPS started propagating separatist politics in 1997, the SOC and the DPS were on great terms (Koprivica et al., 2021). However, during the years of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the DPS led by Đukanović reinstituted the MOC as another step toward affirming the uniqueness of the Montenegrin identity and establishing independence from Serbia (Džankić, 2014; Erdem, 2017). This decision had differing effects among Orthodox Christians in Montenegro, alienating ethnic Serbs even further from the DPS, while gaining widespread support from ethnic Montenegrins who did not want to be affiliated with a church that contained the word “Serbian” in it (Džankić, 2014; Erdem, 2017). The reinstatement of the MOC thus deepened the divide among ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins and reinforced a system in which ethnicity is a relevant predictor of political orientation in Montenegro (Erdem, 2017; Gajić, 2020). The conflict between the SOC and the MOC over autocephaly and their respective influence in Montenegro has been described as a proxy struggle due to the position of these respective churches within the political arena of Montenegro (Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Morrison, 2017). In other words, the quarrel between the two Orthodox Churches can be seen as a manifestation of the pre-existing political struggles over identity and nationhood among these two ethnic groups, which have been inextricably tied to nationalist tendencies on both sides (Erdem, 2017; Morrison, 2017).

The Serbian Orthodox Church. Previous research reveals that the SOC has for decades been exerting its power for political purposes in the Western Balkans, particularly during the civil war period in Yugoslavia (Morrison & Garčević, 2023). The SOC and its officials have been associated with promoting Serb nationalism and the ideology of Greater Serbia² or the “Serbian World,”³ having a potent influence on the Orthodox Christian population who often consider the SOC an institution that is beyond reproach (Gajić, 2020; Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Sinanovic, 2020). While the SOC has been able to use religion to differentiate between nationalities in other post-Yugoslavian countries and thus exercise political influence, it has not

¹ Autocephaly is a term used to describe church autonomy.

² The concept of “Greater Serbia” dates back to Ilija Garašanin’s pamphlet *Načertanije* (1844), who propagated the idea that all Serbs should live in one state and had influence on furthering Serbian expansionist and nationalist tendencies (Sinanovic, 2020)

³ In 2020, responding to the events related to the 2019 Law and the SOC’s position in Montenegro and North Macedonia, the Serbian Minister of Defense Aleksander Vulin suggested that the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic create a “Serbian World,” referring to the unification of all ethnic Serbs under a single state. (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2020)

been able to instrumentalize religion in Montenegro in the same way, since the majority of both ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs identify as Orthodox Christians (Gajić, 2020).

In Montenegro, the SOC has enjoyed a privileged position by being able to avoid certain legal duties, such as paying taxes to the state, or by building religious objects illegally within the country (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). While some see the SOC as a guardian of the Orthodox Christian faith and the protector of Serb identity in Montenegro, others see it as a “foreign body” that threatens the survival of Montenegrin identity and independence (Arandjelovic, 2022; Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Sinanovic, 2020).

The SOC’s ability to leverage political influence to advance nationalist agendas has been best exemplified by the case of Amfilohije Radovic, one of the most influential clergymen of the SOC. Amfilohije served as the Metropolitan Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral from 1990 until his death in 2020 and was the leader of the protests against the 2019 Law (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison, 2017). Upon his appointment in 1990, Amfilohije consolidated the influence of the SOC in Montenegro by increasing the number of monasteries, clergy, and the faithful (Morrison & Garčević, 2023; Morrison, 2017).

During the 1990s, when civil war was wreaking havoc across Yugoslavia, Amfilohije employed ethnonationalist rhetoric to show public support for Serbs, often spreading threatening messages towards non-Serbs and non-Orthodox communities (Gajić, 2020; Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison, 2017; Sinanovic, 2020). He saw the Montenegrin identity as inseparable from Serbdom, and the state of Montenegro as an invention of separatists who wanted to divide the Serbs of the Balkans (Morrison, 2017), often referring to Montenegro as the “second Serb state” (Gajić, 2020; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). Conversely, Amfilohije regarded those advocating for the reinstatement of the MOC as “Godless,” “heretics,” and driven by political goals and anti-Serb sentiments (Morrison, 2017). During the war period, Amfilohije also demonstrated his support for the Serbian authoritarian president, Slobodan Milosevic, and for several Serb nationalist war criminals and their paramilitary groups (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison, 2017).

In the context of post-independence Montenegro, Amfilohije and the SOC did not steer away from politics either, publicly voicing their opposition to the country’s accession to NATO and the decision to recognize Kosovo’s independence, thus demonstrating pro-Serb and ethnonationalist tendencies (Koprivica et al., 2021). In other words, since the Yugoslavian civil war and the reinstatement of the MOC in the 90s, the Orthodox Churches have served as political actors by proxy and have contributed towards deepening the divides among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs (Koprivica et al., 2021; Morrison, 2017).

External Influences. Previous literature has found that Russia has been using its influence over Orthodox Churches in the Western Balkans to exercise “soft power” and advance the agendas of the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Koprivica et al., 2021; Milosevich, 2020; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). Both the SOC and the ROC have interfered in political affairs and the foreign policies of their respective countries, including showing support for Serbia’s influence in Montenegro or Russia’s position on Ukraine. Furthermore, both the

ROC and the SOC have continuously positioned themselves and Eastern Orthodox Christian values against the “rotten West,” the EU, and NATO (Milosevich, 2020; Morrison & Garčević, 2023). In the wake of the 2019 law in Montenegro, the ROC openly called for Orthodox Christians everywhere to show support to the canonically recognized SOC in Montenegro and has actively worked to diminish the legitimacy of the MOC (Milosevich, 2020).

When the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) gained autocephalous recognition, the MOC was also motivated to achieve similar status (Subotić, 2019). In this light, comparisons can be made between Montenegro and Ukraine due to their similar paths towards independence and autonomy as Orthodox Churches. In other words, a parallel is made between the SOC, which denies the existence of a unique Montenegrin identity and state, and the ROC, which denies the independence of the Ukrainian identity and state (Milosevich, 2020). As a member of NATO, an EU candidate, and a country that has recognized Kosovo, Montenegro has clear points of tension with both Russia and Serbia (Milosevich, 2020). This point is exemplified by the fact that the new elected pro-Serb leader, Krivokapic, delayed fully imposing sanctions on Russia in 2022 when the country invaded Ukraine, despite Montenegro’s official alignment with NATO and the EU (Morrison & Garčević, 2023).

C) The 2019-2020 Period

While the 2019-2020 protests and subsequent regime change in Montenegro have been extensively covered by the media, not a lot of research has been conducted on people’s lived experiences of these events. Zenović (2021) analyzed the intertextual linkages between these protests and famous folk songs and pop culture references, highlighting the creativity behind people's protesting strategies. Arandjelovic (2022) conducted a study with clergy of the SOC, seeking to understand the motivation and organizing efforts that went into the 2019 protests, providing insight into the SOC's perspective on the matter. Dževerdanović Pejović (2022) analyzed public statements from Đukanović and Metropolitan Amfilohije, concluding that both individuals appeal to emotions rather than reason in their speeches, thus further blurring the lines between religious and secular rhetoric.

While previous literature has been crucial for understanding the power dynamics that exist between the MOC, the SOC, the Montenegrin state, Serbia, and other relevant geopolitical actors, little research has been conducted on the effects that these events have had on Montenegrin citizens. This research will build on existing literature by investigating how the 2019 law, the subsequent protests, and the regime change affected the divides among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs. My research is a novel addition to previous studies by being the first project to focus on the general population rather than the elites, and by conducting interviews with individuals from both ethnic groups.

Theoretical Framework

The topic of ethnic identities and inter-ethnic conflicts has been studied by many scholars and disciplines in various parts of the world. Many theoretical approaches have been developed to understand the way cultural identities manifest in various social environments. The theories that are usually discussed in ethnic studies include primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. After an overview of the main theories of ethnicity, this section will discuss the theoretical framework that will be used for analyzing the findings of this study.

Primordialism is a theory that presents identity as fixed and deeply rooted in human nature, suggesting that humans naturally tend to distance themselves from and engage in conflict with members of other groups. Theorists of primordialism reference human instinct and kinship attachments to argue that humans care about preserving the “purity” of their group and are therefore often willing to engage in conflict in order to protect their identity (Filić, 2022). The primordialist approach is faulty in many ways due to its reductive representation of human identity and behavior. Primordialists see identity as deeply rooted in individuals and fixed, thus disregarding the role of the social and political environments in changing and shaping identities. Moreover, the primordialist approach argues that humans are naturally likely to assume antagonistic attitudes toward those who are not part of their cultural group, implying that cultural identity is always politically relevant and can lead to conflict by default, which is not necessarily true.

Most modern theories of ethnic identity and ethnic conflict agree that identities are flexible and can be shaped by the social or political environment which they are in. One such theory is instrumentalism, which frames ethnic identity as susceptible to change and responsive to influences from elite actors. Instrumentalists argue that elites can appeal to ethnic identities and make them politically relevant by providing incentives to individuals and the opportunity to choose the ethnic identity that would benefit them. In other words, instrumentalists believe that ethnic conflicts arise only when ethnic identities are mobilized by elites for gaining sociopolitical advantage at the expense of other groups (Che, 2016). In presenting ethnic identities as both rationally chosen and vulnerable to the manipulation of elites, instrumentalist theorists offer a rather restrictive image of ethnic identities and conflict. Therefore, an important shortcoming of instrumentalism is the overemphasizing the role of human agency on directing identity and conflict, while disregarding the social and political factors that may contribute to this process.

Another theory often used by ethnic studies scholars is constructivism. For both instrumentalists and constructivists, identity is malleable and can be shaped by events and institutions, which indicates that both theories are in disagreement with primordialists. While constructivist theorists agree with instrumentalists in that ethnic identity is flexible, they disagree on the exact ways that identities can be altered. Unlike instrumentalist theorists, constructivists argue that changes in ethnic identities are not a result of personal choice but rather of a shifting social context. For constructivist theorists, the social environment determines the way

individuals relate to their identities and the extent to which these identities are politically relevant, i.e., likely to lead to a large-scale conflict (Chandra, 2012).

In analyzing cultural identity and cultural conflict, Crawford & Lipschutz (1998) center institutions of the state and the role they play in rendering certain identities more salient or politically relevant than others. According to Crawford & Lipschutz, institutions always set the terms of the social contract between the state and society due to their role as the constrainers and incentivizers of behavior. Crawford & Lipschutz disagree with primordialists and argue that social identities and norms do not lead to conflict by default but are rather contingent upon institutional procedures. In other words, institutions have the power to make identities politically relevant by structuring the social contract in a way that allocates resources based on ethnicity and favors one group over others. Conversely, institutions can also play a significant role in limiting the extent to which identities become politically relevant.

Crawford & Lipschutz argue that areas where ethnic identities have historically been politicized will experience higher levels of ethnic-based violence. Crawford & Lipschutz's approach is particularly useful for understanding why certain identities emerge as politically significant in some areas more than others, even if the two areas have similar demographic and/or economic characteristics. Similarly to instrumentalists, Crawford & Lipschutz highlight how political elites – which they refer to as “ethnic entrepreneurs” – can mobilize individuals based on ethnic identity and thus make identity politically relevant. While Crawford & Lipschutz's approach is important because it sheds light on structural factors that shape ethnic identities and ethnic conflicts, it is also an inadequate theoretical approach for this research. In focusing on the role of state institutions, Crawford & Lipschutz do not take into account those institutions that are not established or controlled by the state, such as the church. Furthermore, Crawford & Lipschutz's theory overemphasizes the role of elites and their material interest while neglecting the impact that non-elites have on ethnic identification and ethnic conflict.

While some theories like primordialism overemphasize the innate and fixed nature of ethnic identity, others overemphasize its malleability and adaptability to social and political change. In so doing, none of the above discussed theories are adequate for this study, the findings of which suggest that ethnic identity is both deeply rooted in individuals and susceptible to change due to sociopolitical factors. Furthermore, none of the above theories address the social psychology of ethnic conflicts, which is necessary to understand the implications of this research. I now turn to an overview of the theoretical framework that will be utilized to make sense of the findings presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

In “Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict,” Sambanis and Shayo (2013) present a nuanced view of ethnic identification and inter-ethnic conflicts. The theoretical framework developed by these authors is valuable for understanding the events that occurred in the 2019-2020 period and the effects these have had on the sociopolitical landscape of Montenegro. The authors draw from previous theories of cultural identity, including elements of primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism, to conclude that ethnic identities are both deeply rooted and

malleable at the same time. Moreover, they draw from social psychology to explain the processes of ethnic identification and how this can manifest in inter-ethnic conflict, which is invaluable for considering the implications of this study.

Just like instrumentalists, Sambanis and Shayo argue that strategic and material benefits play an important role in the intensity and salience of cultural identification. In their model, the relative social status of a group is a significant predictor of the extent to which individuals identify with that ethnic group. In line with constructivism, Sambanis and Shayo argue that identity is constructed and malleable, but they also recognize that identity can create long-lasting social and emotional attachments and significantly impact individual behavior. In other words, they see ethnic identity as both socially constructed and resistant to change, a perspective that is particularly useful when it comes to understanding Montenegrin and Serb ethnic identities during and after the 2019-2020 period.

Sambanis and Shayo highlight that ethnic identification is not innate or automatic and that the environment can have a strong impact on individuals' social preferences. Their model of social identification seeks to capture the extent to which individuals identify with their ethnic group. For their model, social preferences are an important factor in an identification spectrum. By social preferences, Sambanis and Shayo refer to the fact that individuals can adapt to their ethnic identity based on the following two considerations: 1) the extent to which the individual cares about the status of their group, and 2) the perceived level of similarity between the individual and other members of that group. In this model, a high status of the ethnic group and a stronger perceived similarity to the group members are factors that are directly correlated with an intense identification with the ethnic group.

In addition to focusing on perceived in-group similarities and differences, Sambanis and Shayo highlight that the way individuals relate to national identity also matters. They see the nation as the aggregate of all ethnic groups within a given territory, which may not be equally accessible to all ethnic groups and thus may potentially aggravate inter-ethnic tensions. They theorize that individuals will identify more intensely with their ethnic group the bigger the perceived distance between their group and the nation. Furthermore, by acknowledging that a given ethnic group can be made up of individuals who identify more with the group and those who identify more with the nation, Sambanis and Shayo offer a nuanced view of ethnic identification that will be invaluable for analyzing this study's findings.

Sambanis and Shayo present ethnic groups as heterogeneous by identifying two types of group members – core and non-core – with the former being those who see themselves as closest to their group and therefore furthest from the nation, and the latter being those who see themselves as closer to the nation and therefore further from their ethnic group. If not well integrated, core members are more likely than noncore members to identify with their ethnic group and tend to use more resources to confront the other ethnic group, making them appear as radicals or extremists. I will return to the distinction between core and non-core members and unpack its relevance to this research in the Discussion section of this paper.

Just like Crawford & Lipschutz, Sambanis and Shayo emphasize the role that institutions can play in aggravating or mitigating ethnic conflicts. They highlight how institutions can limit resources that could be taken by force to benefit one group over another, and thus contribute to lessening the intensity of ethnic identification. Considering that institutions have control over the distribution of resources and therefore the extent of identification with the nation, Sambanis and Shayo highlight how institutions are crucial for determining the intensity and outcome of inter-ethnic conflicts. These considerations are particularly useful when it comes to understanding the respective perspectives of ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins on the 2019-2020 period and subsequent sociopolitical changes.

In addition to emphasizing elite actors' influences on ethnic identity and its sociopolitical relevance, Sambanis and Shayo's approach also allows for a consideration of non-elite individual impact and agency. While acknowledging that elites can play a significant role in inciting fear and mobilizing individuals for their own selfish interests, Sambanis and Shayo note that individuals should not be seen merely as members of the manipulated masses, as some instrumentalist theorists present them to be. Indeed, the authors see non-elite individuals as relevant actors in the process of ethnic identification and inter-ethnic conflict, who are motivated not just by selfish interests but also by care for their ethnic group. These considerations will be of great value for understanding how ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs make sense of the 2019-2020 period and how that has impacted their interpersonal relationships and political views.

Therefore, with an approach that presents ethnic identification as nuanced and responsive to the changing social and political landscape in which it is set, Sambanis and Shayo allow for an analysis of complex and heterogeneous ethnic identities and inter-ethnic cleavages such as the ones analyzed in this study. After an overview of the methodology utilized in this research, I present the most significant findings and discuss their implications.

Methodology

This research analyzes the effects of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and the subsequent protests and government change on the interpersonal relationships and political views of Montenegrin citizens. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs make sense of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and the ensuing protests?
2. How have the sociopolitical changes in the 2019-2020 period affected their interpersonal relationships and political views?

To answer the above questions, this study employed a mixed methods analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, whereas the quantitative data was collected via a Qualtrics survey distributed online. This research project was approved by the Trinity College IRB, and all relevant documents including consent forms, interview protocols, survey questions, and their respective translations can be found in the Appendix section of this paper. A more detailed review of the methodology is outlined below.

Interview Data Collection

A total of 24 interviews were conducted during the month of January 2024 in Montenegro, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into word documents and uploaded to Atlas.ti for analysis.

The sampling frame for the interviews was adults (18+) who lived in Montenegro during the 2019-2020 period and identified as either ethnic Montenegrin or ethnic Serb. Participants were asked about the way that the 2019 law and subsequent sociopolitical changes affected their interpersonal relationships and political views. Given that conversations around this topic can be sensitive and often require trust, this research used an informal convenience sample that involved directly contacting individuals from the informal social networks of the researcher. Individuals were asked to participate because of their close connection to the researcher, which created a trusting environment where participants felt that they could engage in an in-depth conversation on ethnic conflicts in Montenegro. Because this topic of exploration is relatively new, a semi-structured approach was followed, allowing the researcher to pose sub-questions and explore any topics that emerged during the interview. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also chosen to complement the quantitative data analysis, particularly because the latter lacks depth and personal nuances.

The sample pool consisted of 24 individuals, out of which 17 identified as ethnically Montenegrin, and seven individuals identified as ethnically Serb. Out of the 24 interviewees, 13 identified as female, and 11 identified as male. Nine out of 24 interviewees were between the ages of 18 and 30, three were between the ages of 31 and 40, three were between the ages of 41 and 50, five were between the ages of 51 and 60, and four were 60+ years old. Seven interviewees were college educated, five were on their way towards receiving a college degree,

and 12 had no college education. All interviewees that reported being religious identified as Orthodox Christian (n=18); the remaining interviewees identified as atheist (n=6).

Interview Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti for qualitative data analysis. The analysis involved reading through the transcribed interviews and employing the method of open coding, generating a total of 30 codes. Particular attention was paid to the way that the interviewees talked about their ethnic and religious identities, as well as how these related to their interpersonal relationships and attitudes on relevant social and political issues. Detailed interview results are discussed in the Findings section of this paper.

Survey Data Collection

The sampling frame for the survey was adults who lived in Montenegro during the 2019-2020 period. The survey was created in Qualtrics survey software and was distributed via social media, primarily through Instagram and Viber. The survey took 6.6 minutes on average to complete and was conducted during the months of February and March 2024. Complete survey responses were collected from 193 individuals, whose demographic characteristics are discussed in more detail in the Findings section.

Survey Measurements

The survey for this study was divided into four parts:

- I. The first part involved demographic questions, including the respondent's age, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, occupation, and education.
- II. In the second part, survey respondents were asked about their knowledge on information relevant to the topic, namely the 2019 law and the history of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), respectively. Individuals were also asked if they participated in the 2019-2020 protests, and if they supported either one of the sides.
- III. The third section of the survey assessed the extent to which the 2019-2020 period affected the individuals' personal life and interpersonal relationships. In this section, individuals were asked if and how much their ethnic and religious identities matter in their interpersonal relationships, particularly when it comes to their relationships with family, friends, romantic partners, colleagues, and neighbors.
- IV. The fourth and final section of the survey/interview included questions on the participants' political views and whether these were affected by the 2019-2020 period. This section included questions about participants' views on different actors in the local and global political arenas, posing questions related to their ethnic and religious identities and how those pertain to their political views and orientation.

The measurements outlined in parts 1-4 of the survey and their respective dependent variables are discussed below. The survey questionnaire is included in the Appendix.

1. *Knowledge of the 2019 Law and Orthodox Churches*

To understand the respondents' level of familiarity with the issue that is the focus of this study, respondents were asked to indicate their level of familiarity with the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom, as well as the history of the Serbian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches, respectively. For this measurement, a Likert scale from 1-5 was used, with 1 indicating the lowest level of familiarity and 5 indicating the highest. These three responses were then combined as an average into the three following variables: *Familiarity with the 2019 Law*, *Familiarity with the History of the SOC*, and *Familiarity with the History of the MOC*.

2. *Opinions on the MOC and the SOC*

To assess the respondents' opinion on the two Orthodox institutions in question, this survey included a multiple answer question where individuals could select the statements that they agree with, with value 0 indicating disagreement and 1 indicating agreement. The statements included affirmations about supporting the SOC and the MOC. Supporting the SOC was categorized as a pro-SOC sentiment, whereas the pro-MOC sentiment was identified in those responses where support for the MOC was indicated. For the sake of simplicity, the two categories were merged into a single variable, with the values of the latter one being reversed in order to have the same direction as the former. In other words, the values indicated for the statements about the MOC were flipped (turning value 0 to 1 and value 1 to 0). From this measurement, a dependent variable called *Support for the SOC* was created, indicating the sum of respondents' support for the SOC, as well as their opposition to the MOC.

3. *Importance of Identity in Interpersonal Relationships*

To assess the extent to which ethnic and religious identities matter in their interpersonal relationships, survey respondents were asked if and how much they prefer being surrounded by people of the same religious and ethnic background as their own. The respondents were asked to identify whether the 2019-2020 period affected their relationships with friends, family members, neighbors, or colleagues, respectively.

From this measurement, two dependent variables were created. The first variable, labeled *Significance of Identity in Interpersonal Relationships*, refers to the extent to which respondents reported caring about being surrounded by people who have the same ethnic and religious identities as them. This variable was measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 indicating not caring about surrounding oneself with people of the same ethnic and religious identity and 5 indicating the opposite. The second dependent variable generated from this section was labeled *Impact on Interpersonal Relationships* and it refers to the perceived impact that the 2019-2020 period had on the respondents' relationships with their friends, family members, colleagues, and neighbors. This variable was also measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 indicating the lowest impact on interpersonal relationships and 5 indicating the highest impact.

4. *Views on Local Politics in the 2019-2020 period*

For assessing the respondents' views on local politics, the survey included a multiple answer question, where respondents could indicate if they supported the ruling party of the time (the DPS) or the political opposition in the 2019-2020 protests and the 2020 election, on a 1-5 Likert scale. After reversing the values of the responses in support for the opposition parties, all responses to this question were grouped together into a new dependent variable called *Support for the DPS*.

5. *Measuring Geopolitical Views*

To draw conclusions on the individuals' geopolitical views, the survey included questions that would indicate whether the respondents were in favor of or opposed to a pro-Western orientation regarding Montenegro's foreign policy. Specifically, individuals were asked about their views on Montenegro's membership in NATO, its accession to the EU, its decision to impose sanctions on Russia in 2022, and its decision to recognize Kosovo's independence. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements on a Likert scale from 1-5, with 1 indicating the lowest level of agreement and 5 indicating the highest level of agreement. A new dependent variable called *Support for Pro-Western Policies* was then created.

Survey Data Analysis

To answer the research questions of this study and determine whether there are significant correlations between the respondents' demographic characteristics and the dependent variables measured, three tests were used – t-test, ANOVA, and Pearson's R. The choice of statistical test was based on the level of measurement of the variables being analyzed. The relationship between the dependent variables outlined above and the independent variables – age, gender, education level, religion, and ethnicity – was then analyzed. All dependent variables analyzed in this study are listed below:

1. *Familiarity with the 2019 Law*
2. *Familiarity with the History of the SOC*
3. *Familiarity with the History of the MOC*
4. *Support for the SOC*
5. *Support for the DPS*
6. *Significance of Identity in Interpersonal Relationships*
7. *Impact on Interpersonal Relationships*
8. *Support for Pro-Western Policies*

For measuring the relationship between *Age* and the dependent variables listed above, a Pearson's R test was employed. For measuring the relationship between the dependent variables and *Gender*, which for the purposes of this study is represented as a binary variable, a t-test was performed. A t-test was also used to determine correlations between the dependent variables and *Education*, which was also represented as a binary variable in this research (see Table 1). To determine the correlations between the above indicated continuous dependent variables and the categorical independent variable *Religion*, an ANOVA test was performed. An ANOVA test was

also performed when determining the relationship between the above-mentioned dependent variables and *Ethnicity*.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this study is that the sample size is small given the sample size of the population that it claims to analyze, i.e., the Montenegrin population. Therefore, to draw conclusions that could be considered generalizable, a study with a larger sample would need to be done.

Another limitation of this research project is the ways that certain variables are measured. For instance, the variable indicating support for pro-Western policies is one that may be more heterogeneous and nuanced than represented. In other words, a person could indicate that they disagree with the decision for Montenegro to join NATO but also indicate that they agree with the decision to recognize Kosovo's independence. While these two stances can coexist in a person's view, they are considered contradictory for the purposes of this variable. This example demonstrates that reducing complex variables such as geopolitical views to a binary category (pro-Western and anti-Western) may be an oversimplification and lack nuance.

An element of my research that could be seen as a shortcoming is the temporal distance between the events analyzed and the present research. This research focuses on events that occurred in the past and asks participants to recall how they felt before, during, and after 2019, and to report any changes that they noticed as a cause of these events. In other words, documenting people's present-day testimonies to assess impact of past events over time is not the most reliable method of measurement.

Survey Findings

For the purpose of this research, the data findings will be narrated by paying special attention to ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs, and particularly those who identify as Orthodox Christians. The reason for this is twofold: 1) this study seeks to understand how the tensions between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs were affected by the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and the subsequent sociopolitical changes, and 2) this study's sample mostly consists of individuals who identify as Orthodox Christians and does not contain a large enough sample of people of other religious groups (see Table 1 below). Moreover, while the data findings indicate that age, gender, and education may in some cases be significant predictors of the dependent variables analyzed, the most relevant independent variables that will be considered for this analysis are ethnic and religious identification. We begin by observing the characteristics of the survey sample.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	Frequency (Percentage)
<i>Age (Mean/SD)</i>	33.5 (13.2)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	70 (36.5)
Female	121 (63.0)
<i>Education</i>	
No college degree	56 (29.5)
College degree	134 (70.5)
<i>Religion</i>	
Orthodox	132 (68.8)
Muslim	8 (4.2)
Catholic	2 (1.0)
Atheist	27 (14.1)
Agnostic	18 (9.4)
Not sure	5 (2.6)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Montenegrin	135 (70.3)
Serb	44 (22.9)
other	13 (6.8)
<i>Language</i>	
Montenegrin	104 (53.9)
Serbian	75 (38.9)
Serbo-Croatian	5 (2.6)
Bosnian	2 (1.0)
Montenegro-Serbian	2 (2.0)
CSBH (MSBC)	3 (1.6)
No response	2 (1.0)
<i>Municipality</i>	
Capital (Podgorica)	148 (76.7)
Central cities	12 (6.2)
Northern cities	12 (6.2)
Southern cities	12 (6.2)
Other	9 (4.7)
N	193

Table 1 shows the composition of the survey data sample, with respect to seven independent variables – age, gender, education, religion, ethnicity, language, and municipality. The only continuous variable in this table, age, is represented with a mean and a standard deviation, while all other variables are discrete and presented with their frequencies and percentages. The values in the table above are presented in the order in which they appeared on the original survey.

The total number of survey respondents was 193, but not all respondents provided all demographic information. Respondents had an average age of 33.5. Out of the total number of

respondents, 121 identified as female (63.0%), while 70 identified as male (36.5%). The sample included 134 individuals that have a college degree (70.5%) and 56 individuals that do not have a college degree (29.5%). When it comes to the religious distribution, 68.8% of the total sample identified as Orthodox Christians (N=135), 14.1% of the sample identified as Atheist (N=27), 9.4% of the sample identified as Agnostic (N=18), 4.2% of the sample identified as Muslim (N=8), 2.6% of the sample reported being unsure of their religious identification (N=5), and 1.0% of the sample identified as Catholic (N=2). The sample involved 135 individuals who identified as ethnic Montenegrins (70.3%), 44 individuals that identified as ethnic Serbs (22.9%), and 13 individuals that identified as other ethnicity (6.8%). When it came to language identification, 104 individuals reported Montenegrin being their mother tongue (53.9%), 75 respondents reported Serbian as their mother tongue (38.9%) and 14 individuals (7.2%) reported their mother tongue being some other version of the language – Serbo-Croatian, Bosnian, Montenegro-Serbian, Montenegrin-Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian (MSBC) – or gave no response. 148 individuals (76.7%) reported that they lived in the capital city, Podgorica, 12 (6.2%) reported living in the central region (other than Podgorica), 12 (6.2%) reported living in the northern region, 12 (6.2%) reported living in the southern region, and 9 respondents (4.7%) reported living abroad during the 2019-2020 period.

Table 2: Respondents' Opinions

Scale	N	Mean (SD)	Min-Max
Support for prior government (DPS)	193	0.2	0-1
Support for the SOC	193	0.4	0-1
Support for Pro-Western policies	174	3.4 (1.3)	1-5
Significance of identity in relationships	177	2.0 (1.1)	1-5
Impact on interpersonal relationships	185	1.9 (1.2)	1-5

Table 2 shows survey findings pertinent to the respondents' political views and interpersonal relationships. The first three rows of Table 2 show the respondents' level of support for the prior Montenegrin government led by the DPS, their support for the Serbian Orthodox Church, and

their support for Pro-Western policies. The remaining rows of Table 2 show the extent to which respondents view their ethnic and religious affiliation as important for their interpersonal relationships, as well as whether they noted an impact of the sociopolitical changes from the 2019-2020 period on their interpersonal relationships. The levels of support for the prior government and for the SOC are indicated with point decimal averages on a scale of 0-1, with 0 indicating no support and 1 indicating full support. For all other dependent variables indicated on Table 2, the Likert scale (1-5) was used, with 1 indicating the lowest level of reported support/impact, and 5 indicating the highest.

The respondents reported an overall low support for the prior government (the DPS) during the 2019-2020 period, with an average of 0.2 on the 0-1 scale. A slightly higher level of support was noted for the SOC, with an average of 0.4 on the 0-1 scale. When it came to measuring the respondents' support for Pro-Western policies, there was an average of 3.4 (out of 5) recorded. With respect to the level of importance of ethnic and religious identities in interpersonal relationships, respondents scored an average of 2.0 (out of 5). The last row on Table 2 indicates the extent to which the respondents' interpersonal relationships were affected by the 2019-2020 events and sociopolitical changes in Montenegro. On a scale of 1-5, the mean reported change in interpersonal relationships was 1.9, meaning that the average respondent reported no or very few changes in their interpersonal relationships due to the 2019-2020 events.

Table 3: Respondents' Linguistic and Religious Identity, by Ethnic Sub-Group

	Montenegrin (N=135)	Serb (N=44)	Other (N=13)	Total (N=192)
<i>Respondent Indicated Mother Tongue (%)</i>				
Montenegrin	74.1	0.0	30.8	54.2
Serbian	19.3	100.0	38.5	39.1
Serbo-Croatian	3.0	0.0	7.7	2.6
Bosnian	0.0	0.0	15.4	1.0
Montenegro-Serbian	1.5	0.0	0.0	1.0
MSBC	2.2	0.0	0.0	1.6
No response	0.0	0.0	7.7	0.5
<i>Religious Identification (%)</i>				
Orthodox	63.7	90.9	46.2	68.8
Muslim	1.5	0.0	46.2	4.2
Catholic	1.5	0.0	0.0	1.0
Agnostic	11.9	4.6	0.0	9.4
Atheist	17.8	4.6	7.7	14.1
Not sure	3.7	0.0	0.0	2.6
<i>Importance of Ethnicity and Religion in Interpersonal Relationships</i>				
Mean (SD)**	1.8 (1.0)	2.4 (1.2)	2.3 (1.2)	2.0 (1.1)

**Mean differences were statistically significant at $p < .01$ (ANOVA test, $df=2,174$, $F=4.88$)

Table 3 shows the relationship between ethnicity and two other important markers of identity – namely mother tongue and religion. The table also provides insight into what role ethnic identification plays in the respondents' interpersonal relationships.

Most ethnic Montenegrins (74.1%) reported their mother tongue to be Montenegrin, while the second most reported mother tongue in this ethnic group was Serbian (19.3%). Ethnic Montenegrins also used other denominations to describe their native language, including Serbo-Croatian (3.0%), Montenegro-Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian (above indicated as MSBC; 2.2%), and Montenegro-Serbian (1.5%). On the other hand, every respondent who identified as an ethnic Serb (100.0%) indicated Serbian as their native language.

Respondents identifying as ethnic Montenegrins largely identified as Orthodox Christians (63.7%), but also reported belonging to other religious identities, including Atheist (17.8%), Agnostic (11.9%), Muslim (1.5%), Catholic (1.5%), and some were not sure about their religious identification (3.7%). Religion among ethnic Serbs was much less heterogeneous, with 90.9% of Serbs identifying as Orthodox Christians, and 4.6% identifying as Atheist and Agnostic each. It is also worth noting that the level of importance of ethnic and religious identities in interpersonal relationships among respondents is higher on average among ethnic Serbs (2.4) than it is among ethnic Montenegrins (1.8).

The data in Table 3 suggest that identifying as an ethnic Serb almost automatically entails calling your mother tongue “Serbian” and identifying as an Orthodox Christian, which suggests that this identity is an ethnoreligious one. Moreover, the data regarding identity in interpersonal relationships indicate that ethnic Serbs on average care more about surrounding themselves with people from the same ethnic and religious identity as their own. The presented findings are statistically significant, which further suggests that ethnic Serbs are a relatively homogenous group.

Table 4: Familiarity With the 2019 Law and History of Churches, by Respondent Demographics

	Familiarity with the 2019 law	Familiarity with the history of the SOC	Familiarity with the history of the MOC
<i>Age</i>	-0.18*	0.07	-0.05
<i>Gender</i>		**	*
Male	4.1 (1.1)	4.1 (1.1)	3.9 (1.4)
Female	3.8 (1.2)	3.6 (1.4)	3.4 (1.5)
<i>Education</i>			
No college degree	4.1 (1.2)	4.0 (1.3)	3.5 (1.6)
College degree	3.9 (1.2)	3.7 (1.3)	3.6 (1.5)
<i>Religion</i>			
Orthodox	4.0 (1.2)	4.0 (1.2)	3.8 (1.4)
Muslim	4.3 (0.9)	3.8 (0.8)	3.3 (1.4)
Catholic	2.5 (2.1)	5.0 (0.0)	5.0 (0.0)
Atheist	3.8 (1.2)	3.3 (1.6)	3.3 (1.6)
Agnostic	3.9 (1.1)	3.3 (1.5)	3.1 (1.6)
Not sure	4.0 (0.0)	3.3 (1.2)	1.7 (0.6)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	*	***	
Montenegrin	3.8 (1.1)	3.6 (1.4)	3.5 (1.5)
Serb	4.4 (1.1)	4.4 (0.9)	3.8 (1.5)
other	3.7 (1.1)	3.9 (0.7)	3.8 (1.3)

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 4 shows whether and to what extent the respondents reported that they are familiar with the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom, the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the history of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The Likert scale (1-5) was used as a measurement for all three dependent variables, with 1 indicating “I completely disagree” and 5 indicating “I completely agree.”

While religion did not prove to be significantly correlated with the dependent variables here measured, it is still important to consider these findings and put them into context of ethnic identification. Those who identify as Orthodox Christians reported a high level of familiarity with the 2019 law (4.0). I note that there is a statistically significant correlation between ethnicity and the level of familiarity with the 2019 law ($F=3.50$, $p<0.05$), with ethnic Serbs having the highest score (4.4) and ethnic Montenegrins having the second highest score (3.8). Knowing that all ethnic Serbs in the sample identify as Orthodox Christians (see Table 3), this may help explain why Orthodox Christians scored so highly (4.0) as a religious group when it comes to their familiarity with the 2019 law. Gender and education were not significant predictors of the respondents’ familiarity with the 2019 law.

When it comes to the level of familiarity with the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church, male respondents scored higher (4.1) than their female counterparts (3.6). There is a substantial correlation between the religious identification of the respondents and their level of familiarity with the history of the SOC, with Orthodox Christians scoring high (4.0) on the 1-5

Likert scale. Ethnicity was shown to be significantly correlated with familiarity with the history of the SOC ($F=7.17$, $p<0.001$), with ethnic Serbs reporting the highest level of familiarity with the SOC (4.4), and ethnic Montenegrins reporting the lowest (3.6).

With respect to the respondents' level of familiarity with the history of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, gender was the only independent variables that was significantly correlated to the measured dependent variable, with male respondents showing a higher level of familiarity (3.9) than female respondents (3.4). Even though Catholics appeared to score the highest (5.0) when it comes to their level of familiarity with the history of the SOC and the MOC, their small percentage in this sample size (see Table 1) allows us to disregard the findings and focus on the second highest-scoring religious group, i.e., Orthodox Christians (3.8). Even though ethnicity did not prove to be a significant predictor of the correlation to the measured dependent variables, it is still important to note that ethnic Serbs scored higher (3.8) than ethnic Montenegrins (3.5) when it comes to their level of knowledge of the history of the MOC.

Table 5: Ethnic and Religious Identities in Interpersonal Relationships, by Respondent Demographic

	Importance of ethnoreligious identity in interpersonal relationships	Impact of 2019-2020 period on interpersonal relationships
<i>Age</i>	0.07	-0.04
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	2.1 (1.3)	2.0 (1.2)
Female	1.9 (1.0)	1.9 (1.2)
<i>Education</i>	***	**
No college degree	2.4 (1.2)	2.3 (1.4)
College degree	1.8 (1.0)	1.8 (1.0)
<i>Religion</i>		
Orthodox	2.1 (1.7)	1.8 (1.1)
Muslim	2.3 (1.2)	1.8 (0.8)
Catholic	1.9 (1.2)	2.8 (2.5)
Atheist	1.8 (1.0)	1.9 (1.2)
Agnostic	1.4 (0.5)	2.2 (1.4)
Not sure	1.5 (0.5)	2.4 (1.4)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	**	
Montenegrin	1.8 (1.0)	2.0 (1.2)
Serb	2.4 (1.2)	1.9 (1.2)
other	2.3 (1.2)	1.7 (0.9)

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

Table 5 shows the extent to which ethnic and religious identities matter in the respondents' interpersonal relationships, as well as the degree to which their interpersonal relationships were affected by the 2019-2020 protests and the subsequent political changes.

For both dependent variables here measured, education emerged as a significant predictor – $t(174) = 3.562, p < 0.001$, and $t(181) = 2.872, p < 0.01$, respectively. Respondents without a college degree were more likely to be attached to their ethnoreligious identities when it came to their interpersonal relationships (2.4) than college educated respondents (1.8). Non-college educated individuals also reported a higher impact of the 2019-2020 period on their relationships (2.3) than did the college educated respondents (1.8). Ethnicity was also shown to be a significant predictor of the importance of ethnoreligious identities in interpersonal relationships ($F = 4.88, p < 0.01$), with Serbs reporting to care the most about surrounding themselves with people of the same identity (2.4), and Montenegrins reporting to care the least (1.8).

Respondents for the most part did not report that the 2019-2020 period had a significant impact on their interpersonal relationships, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity. Age and gender were not significant predictors of the dependent variables indicated in these tables.

Table 6: Political Views and Orientations, by Respondent Demographics

	Pro-DPS	Pro-SOC	Pro-Western Policies
<i>Age</i>	-0.20*	0.10	-0.09
<i>Gender</i>	*	*	
Male	0.2 (0.4)	0.4 (0.5)	3.3 (1.4)
Female	0.1 (0.3)	0.3 (0.5)	3.5 (1.2)
<i>Education</i>		**	
No college degree	0.2 (0.4)	0.5 (0.5)	3.1 (1.4)
College degree	0.2 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)	3.5 (1.2)
<i>Religion</i>	*	***	***
Orthodox	0.1 (0.3)	0.5 (0.5)	3.1 (1.2)
Muslim	0.4 (0.5)	0.0 (0.0)	4.9 (0.1)
Catholic	0.5 (0.7)	0.0 (0.0)	3.4 (2.3)
Atheist	0.3 (0.5)	0.1 (0.3)	3.9 (1.2)
Agnostic	0.3 (0.5)	0.1 (0.3)	4.2 (0.8)
Not sure	0.0 (0.0)	0.2 (0.4)	2.6 (1.5)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	**	***	***
Montenegrin	0.2 (0.4)	0.2 (0.4)	3.8 (1.1)
Serb	0.2 (0.4)	1.0 (0.2)	2.1 (0.9)
other	0.0 (0.0)	0.3 (0.5)	4.0 (1.2)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 6 show respondents' support for the prior government (the DPS), the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Pro-Western policies. The first two dependent variables were measured as binary variables, with 0 indicating no support and 1 indicating full support. Respondents were asked to

select statements that apply to their views; in this set up, the statement could either apply or not apply to the respondent, which is why these variables were measured as dichotomous. The third variable was measured with a Likert scale from 1-5, with 1 indicating the least support and 5 indicating the highest level of support. The reason this variable was measured on a scale is because pro-Western policies were assessed by indicating agreement with several statements instead of just one (see Methodology section for more details).

We begin by examining the respondents' indicated level of support for the prior government. We observe that out of all religious groups, Orthodox Christians showed the least support (0.1) for the former government during the 2019-2020 period. With ethnicity taken into consideration, both ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins reported an equal level of support for the former government (0.2). Both religion ($F=3.93$, $p<0.05$) and ethnicity ($F=5.5$, $p<0.01$) were significant predictors of support for the DPS.

Observing the data regarding respondents' support for the SOC, religion and ethnicity both emerge as significant predictors of this variable. Orthodox Christians reported the highest level of support for the SOC (0.5). Taking ethnicity into consideration, we observe that Montenegrins showed the lowest level of support for the SOC (0.2), while ethnic Serbs showed the highest level of support for the SOC (1.0). Looking simply at religious affiliation, it may be concluded that Orthodox Christians as a group tend to support the SOC on average, but using the data on ethnicity, it is clear that this is not true for all Orthodox Christians, given that the group is not ethnically homogenous. Specifically, ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins, who account for the majority of the Orthodox population in the sample (see Table 1), reported widely differing levels of support for the SOC. Both religion ($F=7.02$, $p<0.001$) and ethnicity ($F=89.63$, $p<0.001$) showed correlations that were statistically significant.

Looking at the last dependent variable, we note that there is a significant correlation ($F=7.32$, $p<0.001$) between religious affiliations and the respondents' indicated level of support for Pro-Western policies. Orthodox Christians, out of which 33.3% are ethnic Serbs (see Table 1), reported a fairly low level of support for Pro-Western policies (3.1). Conversely, religious categories that showed a higher level of support for Pro-Western policies were those where ethnic Montenegrins were more represented (see Table 3), namely Agnostics (4.2) and Atheists (3.9). As indicated in the above table, ethnicity is a significant predictor of support for Pro-Western policies ($F=38.77$, $p<0.001$), with ethnic Serbs demonstrating the lowest level of support for these policies (2.1), and ethnic Montenegrins showing a high level of support (3.8). Just as in the example above, looking at religious affiliation alone would not be enough to make sense of the data on respondents' level of support for Pro-Western policies; rather, we must consider ethnic identification, as well.

Interview Findings

Understanding the 2019-2020 Period

In order to comprehend the way that the 2019-2020 period affected Montenegrin citizens, it was important to first understand how these events appear from their perspective. For this reason, interviewees were asked to narrate what they know about the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and about the respective histories of the Montenegrin and Serbian Orthodox Churches. The results indicate that there is a significant difference between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs in terms of the versions of history – both recent and distant – that they are familiar with.

All interviewees agreed on certain facts regarding the Law, e.g., that the DPS adopted it and that it had significant implications for the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Apart from these facts, there is not a consensus among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs about what happened or how the 2019-2020 events played out. When I asked Danica (45, Serb) to tell me about the way she understands the implications of the 2019 law, she says:

The state of Montenegro wanted to appropriate the Orthodox holy places, so to speak, to break them off, to separate them, to take them under control. However, that is a question of the church, a question of the Orthodox faith, a Christian question, and people jumped [to protest] for those reasons. So, it was literally a fight against the authorities and for the preservation of the unity of the Orthodox Church. Because the Orthodox Church is not only the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, but it is also the Orthodox Church in Macedonia, Serbia, and the Republic of Srpska.

In this quote, Danica implies that the DPS – “the State of Montenegro” – intended to forcefully take religious objects away from the SOC. Danica sees the 2019 law as an attempt of the DPS to take control over what is not theirs, i.e., to steal property. However, in Danica’s mind, the question of church property is one that should be addressed by the church and not by any state. Moreover, she sees the SOC as a religious institution that has the right to exist in various countries in the Western Balkans, unifying Orthodox Christians without interference of governments. Indeed, she hints at the fact that the 2019 law contradicts Montenegro’s claims of being a secular state given that it represents the DPS’s direct interference in spiritual matters.

Unlike Danica who sees the interference of the DPS as an illegitimate attempt to control the SOC, Jovana (28, Montenegrin) expresses that she sees the SOC as the real maker of illegitimate claims:

Does Russia have an Orthodox Church? It does. Can Vucic go to Russia and tell Putin this is under the Serbian Orthodox Church now? It would be very difficult for him to do that.

Unlike Danica who sees the SOC as the true representative of the Orthodox People of the Western Balkans, Jovana sees the SOC as an actor that holds illegitimate power on Montenegrin soil. While Danica expresses the sentiment that the DPS worked against the will of the Orthodox people who were trying to remain in unity (under the SOC), Jovana implies that the SOC is the actor that has been working against the interest of Montenegrins, and more importantly, against

the sovereignty of Montenegro. Jovana implies that Montenegro did not willingly accept the SOC, but rather that it succumbed to the SOC's influence, and accordingly the influence of the state of Serbia. She also implies that Serbia's government (President Vucic) is the true decision-maker behind the SOC that exercises direct influence in Montenegro through this religious institution.

That the 2019 law was a breach in Montenegro's history of secularism is an idea that was voiced by several interviewees who identify as ethnic Montenegrins, albeit differently than how Danica talks about it in the quote above. Talking about these events in relation to the 2020 election, Mina (61, Montenegrin) states:

In Montenegro, the church has taken over civil power. So, literally, the church engages in politics, which is against the law. The church should not serve for people to engage in politics, but for people to practice their religious customs, to fulfill their spiritual needs. For example, at some point all Montenegrin [governmental] paperwork was found in some church and political decisions were made there.

In this quote, Mina is referencing an event following the 2020 elections when several Montenegrin elected officials met up with the SOC clergy for unspecified reasons, including the newly elected Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic, who was recommended for that position by the SOC. Hence, Mina emphasizes how the issue of secularism is one that stems from the SOC and its clergy, who directly interfered in the political life of Montenegro. Danica, on the other hand, recognized secularism as a problem that originated from the former government, the DPS, with its attempt to extract religious objects from the SOC. Therefore, even though individuals from both ethnic groups see characteristics of non-secularism as problematic, they identify different culprits for this problem.

Opinions on why the 2019 law caused so much controversy and started the eight-month-long protests also varied among the two ethnic groups that I interviewed. When asked about why he thinks the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom was controversial, Mihajlo (36, Serb) remarks:

The law was disputed because there is a dispute that was created artificially in the 90s between Montenegrins and Serbs, about who belongs to which church and whose property that is. That is the basic problem. ... Since 2006, when the state was created, they [the DPS] artificially created the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, they tried to persuade the renounced people and the sovereigntists, especially from Cetinje, to join that church. That project apparently failed, judging by today's events.

In this quote, Mihajlo makes several interesting points. The first one is that he sees the 2019 law not as an independent event but as a mere continuation of the process that started in the 1990s, i.e., the process of Montenegrin separation from Serbia. For Mihajlo, this separation *artificially* created the divide between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins that persists today, in order to advance personal interests of political elites. The idea that Montenegrins and Serbs were artificially divided is a sentiment that was expressed by several interviewees, particularly those

that identify as Serbs. When talking about her views on the motivations and goals of the people that protested the 2019 law, Sonja, 71, shares a similar sentiment:

I assume that they [protesters] wanted some harmony, some unity, to be together like Montenegrins and Serbs used to be together. Because it was once thought that Serbia and Montenegro could never live without each other. They were always said to be sisters. ... The DPS divided brothers and sisters, it divided the people among themselves.

In the above quote, Sonja expresses that she sees Serbs and Montenegrins as one and the same, a singular ethnic group that was divided because of personal interests of political elites. It is interesting to highlight that Sonja was the only person who I interviewed that hesitated to give a response when asked to indicate her ethnicity. Sonja was uncertain of what I meant by ethnic identification and confused, she proceeded to explain that she identifies as both a Serb and a Montenegrin. In other words, Sonja did not care about which term she used because she did not attach a particular meaning to either of the terms, because in her mind these are identical.

While ethnic Serbs reference the year 1990 or 2006 as the starting point of the issue that was to erupt into the inter-ethnic quarrel around the 2019 law, ethnic Montenegrins go further back in history to find the root of the problem. When asked about how she feels about the division between the Montenegrin and the Serbian Orthodox Church, Smilja (73, Montenegrin) remarks:

The Montenegrin Orthodox Church always existed here. That division [between the MOC and the SOC] was created by force in 1918 – the MOC was abolished and joined to the SOC and some other churches of that time. And that happened by decree of King Alexander⁴ when Yugoslavia was created in 1918 and Montenegro was erased from the register of independent states, then the church was also erased. And so, the state and the church were extinguished. Since then, we have the division between the Serbian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches, but until then there was no Serbian church in Montenegro.

Even though both Smilja and Mihajlo emphasize that the division between the MOC and the SOC is an artificial one, what they mean by it is very different. For Mihajlo, the divides started in the 90s when the DPS began its campaign to separate Montenegro from Serbia, which is a division that was institutionalized in 2006 when Montenegro gained independence. For Smilja, the divides started back in 1918, when Serbia annexed Montenegro into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Ironically, the years that Mihajlo sees as the start of the problem (1990s and 2006), Smilja sees as the logical solution to a problem that had started a century before the adoption of the 2019 law. This sentiment was also expressed by Danka (63, Montenegrin) who, after emphasizing that the MOC is older than the SOC, states:

⁴ Alexander I Karađorđević was the king of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1921–29) and of Yugoslavia (1929–34).

The Serbian Orthodox Church only got its tomos⁵ in 1924, while the Montenegrin one already had it [before the SOC]. In 1918 and 1919, the Serbs tried to destroy everything that was Montenegrin. The Serbian army entered the liberated country and then King Karađorđević ordered them to slaughter, to kill, to rape, to burn, to do all kinds of things.

Danka points out that the root of the problem lies in the fact that the MOC used to be its own independent church, but that after 1918, it was absorbed into the SOC, just like the Montenegrin state was absorbed into the Serbian state. In Danka's account of history, there is little differentiation between the Serbian state and the SOC – they appear to be one and the same actor. Indeed, in our conversation, Danka went back and forth between talking about Serbia and the SOC, appearing to note no difference between the two. Therefore, for Danka, the SOC is a legacy of the aggression that the Serbian state committed when it annexed Montenegro, and the 2019 law was an attempt at fixing these mistakes that were made in 1918. In the above quote, Danka also alludes to the fact that along with its independence, Montenegro also lost the MOC, which is why it is crucial to reclaim it now that Montenegro is not in union with Serbia anymore. That the MOC is an important piece of nation-building is also expressed by Una (22, Montenegrin):

As a Montenegrin, I understand that part of the identity should generally be represented by the church, and from that point of view I, who am an atheist, think that in order for the identity of the state to be complete, there should also be a church. Personally, it doesn't mean a lot to me because I'm an atheist, but as part of a national identity, I understand that it [the MOC] should exist.

In this quote, Una highlights that even though she identifies as atheist, she cares about Montenegro having its own independent church in order for its national identity to be complete. It is interesting to point out here that the previously cited Montenegrins, Smilja and Danka, also identify as atheists. In fact, Smilja shared with me an event from December 2023, when a census researcher came to her house and asked her questions for the census survey. When the researcher asked her what her religious identity was, she told him to write that she is an atheist, but that she supports the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. It is important to note here that all the atheists in the interview sample identified as Montenegrins, whereas all interviewees who are ethnic Serbs identified as Orthodox Christians. The lack of religious heterogeneity among ethnic Serbs is in line with the survey findings (see Table 3).

Perceptions of the SOC

When it comes to the perception of the SOC, a theme that came up often in the interviews with ethnic Montenegrins was the idea of the SOC being a foreign institution, an intruder that exercises its power on the soil of Montenegro without respect for the country or consent of its

⁵ A tomos is a document that codifies a decision by a Holy Synod, or council of Orthodox bishops.

citizens. When asked about what the 2022 Framework Agreement⁶ meant to him, Žarko (57, Montenegrin) said:

A complete capitulation. You gave them [the SOC] everything. If they own the land of my village, they can forbid us to have burials there. Not now, but in fifteen or twenty years, they will say this is the Serbian Orthodox Church. It's our church, what are you going to do here, you can't bury yourself here. What did they get with this Framework Agreement? They got ownership of everything, all churches, monasteries, everything, it's all theirs.

From the way that Žarko describes the outcomes of the Framework Agreement, we can conclude that he sees the SOC as an outsider that has the power to threaten Montenegrin citizens' everyday lives. By saying "It's all theirs," Žarko engages in the "Us vs. Them" rhetoric, directly juxtaposing himself against the SOC. He represents the SOC as antagonists of not only himself but also his family, and his entire village. Because he identifies as an atheist, Žarko does not have a religious attachment to the objects owned by the SOC, but he nevertheless feels strongly about the fact that they are now the unrepachable owners of this property. With this, he implies that the SOC unjustly occupies the spaces that he thinks should belong to everyone, such as his village or the burial site of his family. Here, Žarko suggests that for him, the question of the SOC owning religious objects in Montenegro is a lot more existential and intimate than it is religious. To deny someone a place of burial is tyrannical, as it takes away that individual's agency and erases their roots and sense of belonging, and this is exactly what the SOC is seen as doing – erasing history and changing it so that it fits their Serb nationalist ideology.

Another interviewee, Anđela (22, Montenegrin), expressed similar views when asked why she thinks the 2022 Framework Agreement was created:

I think the Framework Agreement was made just so that the church could do its work outside the control of the state and that it continues with some of its affairs, because they [the SOC] are obviously bothered by the influence of the state. And my question that arises then is why? If they are the way they should be, why would the influence of the state bother them? And it is not even the influence of the state, it's just that you are simply in that country, the state must exist there.

In this quote, Anđela expresses her distrust of the SOC and their insistence on wanting to self-govern, independently from the state. The question that she poses implies that, in her mind, the SOC has something to hide which is why they do not let the state get involved with their functioning.

Other participants who identified as ethnic Montenegrins expressed their distrust not only for the SOC but its allies as well, as shown in the quote below from Vladimir (57, Montenegrin):

I think that the Serbian Orthodox Church has become very involved in political life, even though in Montenegro the church should be separate from the state. So, there is an obvious

⁶ The 2022 Framework Agreement was a treaty between the SOC and the Montenegrin state which ensured that the measurements suggested by the 2019 law would not be completed, i.e., that the SOC's property would remain intact and would not come under the ownership of the state of Montenegro.

influence of Serbia on political events in Montenegro, and through that Russia too. Whereas the Montenegrin Orthodox Church did not get involved in political life, nor did it receive any significant support until the former government, the DPS. ... Even the fact that the first government [after 2020] was formed in the Ostrog monastery is a clear indicator of who truly governs politics.

What Vladimir expresses in the above quote is not only that he distrusts the SOC and its allies, Serbia and Russia, but also that there is an imbalance in power dynamics between the MOC and the SOC. He highlights that the MOC did not receive significant support except from the former government, while the SOC enjoyed support from various actors that are very influential in the region and in the Orthodox world more broadly.

This distrust for the SOC's affairs was a common theme in interviews with other ethnic Montenegrins, as well, as exemplified in the following quote from Mina (61, Montenegrin):

Well, the problem is not the Serbs, the problem is the Chetniks,⁷ if there are any. And if there are any, they are there [in the SOC]. So, if there is a large number of people who want to separate a part of this country in any sense, this is not good. In my opinion, they [Chetniks] are fascists. But Serbs are Serbs, and they are fine as long they are not Chetniks or any other nationalists.

Mina's remarks tell us that she sees the SOC as a haven for Serb nationalists, which implies a big cause for concern for the Montenegrin identity and state. In this quote, Mina also highlights the underlying risk of granting too much power to the SOC, i.e., to Serb nationalists, because they may use it to harm the country. Just like Masa in the above quote, here Mina highlights that the SOC and its nationalism threaten Montenegrin statehood, identity, and sovereignty.

In addition to associating the SOC with Serb nationalism, many ethnic Montenegrins in the interviews implied other immoral characteristics of the SOC and its adherents. When talking about the position of the SOC clergy in Montenegro, Žarko (57, Montenegrin) highlights:

We see how much the Serbian Orthodox Church interferes in today's government and what it gets. The church gets money, it doesn't pay taxes, they never pay anything. ... The first time I saw someone wearing all Versace was with a priest in his mantle, an Orthodox mantle, all shiny, as he was getting into the latest Mercedes. So, it's obvious that this has nothing to do with faith but that the church was used for some other things.

In the above quote, Žarko states with disdain that the SOC clergy enjoys material privileges that are not usually associated with the life of church clergy. He implies that the origins of their wealth stem from not having to pay for taxes to the Montenegrin state, which allows them to accumulate capital and spend it for personal purposes. It is interesting to compare these remarks made by Žarko to those made by Danica when she expressed the idea that the former Montenegrin government forcefully took (stole) property that rightfully belonged to the SOC.

⁷ Chetniks were Serbian guerrilla fighters formed during WWII, primarily engaging in civil conflict against Yugoslav communist fighters. In the 1990s during the breakup of Yugoslavia, the term resurged among Serb nationalists and was applied to various right-wing paramilitary groups supporting the ethnic Serb cause.

Unlike Danica, Žarko believes that the real thieves in the picture are the SOC clergy who have not been paying their dues to the Montenegrin state and people, and who have been profiting off of other people's work.

Attributing immoral characteristics to the SOC and its clergy was expressed by Danka (63, Montenegrin) in the following way:

How can people who were war criminals, people who don't have any moral code be in charge of the country? Those people [priests] do not deserve the title they have. A war criminal [Amfilohije] was proclaimed a saint, how is that possible? I can't stand them, I get an allergy when I see a priest, any priest. ... During Yugoslavia, there was peace. Because everything [ethnic conflict] was kept under control. As soon as everyone started pulling to their side, when Yugoslavia broke up, then the priests rose and brought great evil to us.

In this quote, Danka refers to SOC-backed politicians and influential figures as "war criminals," thus entirely diminishing their moral ground. She angrily expresses her disdain for Amfilohije, the Metropolitan of the SOC in Montenegro and the leader of the 2019-2020 protests, who she also refers to as a war criminal. It is important to notice that Danka expresses dissatisfaction with not just the SOC, but also any religious figure and their interference in the political life of Montenegro. Considering that Danka is someone who grew up during Yugoslavia's communism and identifies as an atheist, this positionality makes sense.

While Danka and Žarko have decisively strong negative opinions on the SOC clergy and in particular Amfilohije, Danica (45, Serb) expresses opposite sentiments:

Metropolitan Amfilohije had a great influence on [getting people back to the church] because he built churches, he invested himself both spiritually and financially, in every sense, to bring people together. And he literally brought people back to faith. It didn't happen immediately after that [2019-2020], but it was a process that lasted his whole life that somehow escalated then [during the liturgies].

Unlike the ethnic Montenegrins in the interview sample who see Amfilohije as a supporter of war criminals and Serb nationalism, Danica sees him as a bringer of cohesion and unity among people in Montenegro. She praises the investments he has made in building temples and expanding the Orthodox faith in Montenegro, thus bringing the population back to their religious roots. Talking about bringing people *back* to faith implies that they were previously lost, that they had wandered off. The idea that Danica alludes to in this quote is that communism during Yugoslavia steered many people away from religion and that this mistake has been addressed the most by Amfilohije and his work as a Metropolitan of the SOC in Montenegro. Therefore, the return of religion after communism, which Danka characterizes as "evil," is seen as a positive and a necessary thing for Danica.

Mocking the MOC

When it comes to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, the general sentiment expressed from the ethnic Serbs in the sample is that the MOC is not a legitimate religious institution and therefore does not even deserve to be discussed much. When asked about what she thinks about the split between the Montenegrin and Serbian Orthodox Churches, Krtistina (20, Serb) remarked with a giggle:

Well, I think that this division never officially happened. Because the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is not a recognized church at all, it is run as an NGO. And honestly, I don't know much about that branch of the Orthodox Church. So, it didn't mean anything to me, as if it never even happened.

This quote assumes a mocking tone in which we see that Kristina does not see the MOC as a legitimate church or even as an institution that could be compared to the SOC. She uses the fact that the MOC is canonically unrecognized as proof that there is no split between the two churches, but that rather there is the illusion of the MOC. Therefore, for Kristina, the only real and legitimate church in the picture is the SOC. She admits that she mostly gets information about the MOC from social media, and in particular from Instagram memes, which often present the MOC as a dysfunctional NGO with an internal quarrel among its clergy. A similar sentiment is expressed by Sonja (71):

I find it [division of the churches] a bit silly because everyone always knew which church existed in Montenegro, so the fact that they invented this Montenegrin Church is incomprehensible to me. I don't understand it at all. I've been around for a long time, and I've never heard of that MOC until now. ... When I heard about that Montenegrin Church, I was shocked because as far as I know, it never existed. I am old enough, older than Milo Đukanović and quite a few of them, to probably have heard that that church once existed, but I have not heard of it.

For Sonja, the MOC is seen as an invention of Đukanović and the DPS. She uses her age and life experience as proof of the fact that the MOC never existed and is therefore an illegitimate church. To emphasize the MOC's flimsy base and moral ground, another interviewee, Dimitrije (46, Serb) states:

Milo wanted all churches in Montenegro to belong to that Montenegrin Church. I'm not a supporter of that because it can't be done. First of all, I didn't learn the Montenegrin language, and I've never been to a Montenegrin Church. I can't, it's illogical for me to accept that [the 2019 law] in any sense. I am not against Montenegrins or that religion, but I am not a supporter. Now lesbians and gays are getting married in Montenegrin churches, I can't be a supporter of that. That's rock bottom for me. It is literally a disgrace for Montenegro.

Similarly to Sonja, Dimitrije references his personal life experience to prove that the MOC does not have a legitimate claim for being an autonomous church. Dimitrije highlights the fact that he never learned Montenegrin or ever visited a MOC church to further express the idea that the

MOC is not a real religious institution. What is interesting in this quote is the fact that Dimitrije calls into question not only the legitimacy of the Montenegrin Church, but also the Montenegrin language. By doing so, he indicates that he sees the Montenegrin language and the MOC as two aspects of the same project, i.e., a continuation of Montenegrin nation-building and separation from Serbia. He does not see this project as legitimate because he does not recognize the Montenegrin Church or language as independent, but rather as connected to the Serb identity. Another significant element of Dimitrije's quote above is the fact that he positions the MOC as antagonistic to his values and Orthodox Christian values, more broadly. For Dimitrije, the fact that the MOC includes the LGBTQ+ community is proof that this church is illegitimate and harbors anti-Orthodox values.

The Neutrals and the In-Betweens

The quote below by Blažo (25, Montenegrin) shows that even though he identifies as a Montenegrin ethnically, he criticizes the MOC and its current leadership. He emphasizes the need for the name MOC to be kept, as it is a key component of the process of rebuilding Montenegrin national identity, which was destabilized in 1918.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Montenegro became independent as a state, and we got our country back, but there were a lot of problems because the church remained part of Serbia. Now, the problem is that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is led by awful people today. I respect people who belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church more than I respect those who belong to the current Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

With the above quote, Blažo highlights that the process that started in 2006 was never fully completed because the MOC was never instituted as the official and canonically recognized church of Montenegro. Despite the need for the institutionalization of the MOC, Blažo also expresses his dissatisfaction with the current MOC leadership, emphasizing that he has more respect for the SOC clergy. With this statement, Blažo stands out from the typical binary form of categorization, and we note that there is nuance in his approach to both the SOC and the MOC, regardless of his ethnic identity. A similar sentiment was expressed by Željka (58, Montenegrin):

I just care about the fact that there is a church where I can pray. I don't care about the Serbian or Montenegrin church, I just want a place where I can be calm and peaceful, and that I consider mine. Not Serbian, not Montenegrin, but mine, you know, mine and of all the people who come there – that it's our church.

In this quote, Željka emphasizes that her identity as an Orthodox Christian is more relevant to her than her ethnic identity when it comes to practicing her faith. Throughout the interview, she repeatedly states that she does not fully understand what the difference between the Montenegrin and the Serbian Church is, and that it makes no difference in terms of how or where she prays. Indeed, as shown in the quote above, what matters more for Željka is knowing that she is welcome in the religious place, regardless of who the owner is.

Several other ethnic Montenegrins expressed similar sentiments that could be described as neutrality, indifference, or even dissatisfaction with both churches. Moreover, a common thought that came up in the interviews with ethnic Montenegrins is the idea that the Church should not bear either the name Serbian nor Montenegrin but should rather be called “Orthodox Church” or “Orthodox Church in Montenegro.”

The conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that the individuals who expressed these considerations were willing to compromise, putting their ethnic identities aside and understanding the perspectives of the other ethnic group. However, this conclusion could not be drawn from the interviews conducted with ethnic Serbs. Instead, ethnic Serbs in the sample unanimously (though not with the same intensity) defended the right of the SOC to keep “Serbian” in the name, and for the MOC to remain unrecognized as a church.

While the sample of ethnic Serbs was relatively small (see Table 1), the findings from the interviews suggest that ethnic Serbs tend to provide more homogenous views on the Orthodox Churches in Montenegro than do ethnic Montenegrins. These findings are in line with the survey data shown in Table 3, where we see that Serbian identity is one that tends to involve the same characteristics, namely the Serbian ethnic, linguistic, religious (Orthodox) identity. Moreover, the survey findings shown in Table 6 suggest that there is a correlation between the Serb Orthodox identity and an anti-Western, pro-Russian orientation in political thought, pertaining to both local and global political views. Therefore, taking into consideration both the interview and survey findings, we can understand why no interviewee that identifies as an ethnic Serb offered a nuanced take on the situation of the Orthodox churches in Montenegro, but rather firmly stayed on the side of the SOC.

Views on the 2019-2020 Protests

Opinions on the protests, or “liturgies,” that followed the passing of the 2019 law varied largely among the two ethnic groups. One of the points of convergence among Serbs and Montenegrins that emerged in the interviews was the question of protesters’ motivations and intended aims. Out of 17 ethnic Montenegrins interviewed, one person participated in the protests, and out of seven ethnic Serbs interviewed, six participated in the protests. The findings presented below demonstrate that the participants’ opinions on the 2019-2020 protests largely differ based on the respondent’s ethnic identity. According to Danica (45, Serb):

[The liturgies] wanted to preserve the Orthodox faith in Montenegro, which was literally threatened with extermination, and the church was threatened to be transformed into the Montenegrin one. I don’t even understand how you can call it Montenegrin when it’s one and the same. It’s like capturing a church and saying “Now this is Montenegrin;” like yeah it is Montenegrin, we are Montenegrins, so what?

In this quote, Danica asserts that the liturgies started because the SOC was under attack from the DPS, and its Orthodox followers jumped to save it from being “exterminated” and “transformed”

into a Montenegrin one. An interesting element of Danica's quote is the fact that she does not see a difference between the Montenegrin and Serbian Churches, implying that she also does not see a difference between the two ethnic identities. With the last sentence of the above quote, Danica shows that her identification as a Montenegrin (in a national rather than an ethnic sense) does not take away from her ethnic identity as a Serb but complements it. For Danica, Serbs and Montenegrins are one ethnic group, with Montenegrins simply signifying the population that lives on the territory called Montenegro. Therefore, any attempt at separating these two identities, whether on ethnic or religious lines, is nonsensical for Danica.

When asked the same question about the perceived motivation of individuals that protested during the 2019-2020 period, Smilja (73, Montenegrin) states:

The liturgies had a clear program, it's obvious. That there is no state of Montenegro – that is the century-old dream of Serbia. That there is no state of Montenegro, no language, no culture... that everything is Serbian, everything.

Smilja's perception of the protests and their aims was influenced by her fear of Montenegro losing its independence and sovereignty, and along with it all identity markers that render Montenegrins separate from Serbs. Smilja's remarks are interesting especially when juxtaposed against Danica's previous quote. Both Danica and Smilja felt like their identities were threatened during the 2019-2020 period, but while Danica saw the threat as stemming from the DPS and their separatist tendencies, Smilja saw the SOC and their anti-Montenegrin rhetoric as the real threat. Similar to Smilja's and Danica's perception of the protests, Dimitrije's (46, Serb) reason for protesting was an existential one, given that his ethnoreligious identity was threatened:

Well, because people literally said that if they allow this [the 2019 law], soon he [Đukanović] will be able to force them to convert to Catholicism or Islam or to become Albanians, he will be able to do whatever he wants with them. If we don't stand up for ourselves, then we're nothing, we don't have a nation nor a religion, we don't know who we are.

Unlike ethnic Serbs in my sample, Anđela (22, Montenegrin) did not participate in the 2019-2020 protests. When prompted the question why she chose not to participate, Anđela remarks:

I thought that the liturgies were unnecessary, and that politics could be expressed in another way and not through the church. And I couldn't wait for them to stop because they were bothering me, I couldn't go out because of them... And I think that the liturgies were harmful in the sense that they divided the people, and a lot of money was spent there [in organizing them]. ... I think that it was also harmful for the state because it was politically motivated... They weren't liturgies, they were elections. They were literally a referendum.

For Anđela, the stakes were a lot lower than for Danica or Dimitrije. While Dimitrije sees the protests as existential and as if he had no choice but to participate in them, Anđela describes the protests as superfluous and unnecessary. She also emphasizes what she perceives to be their negative effects, such as their high management cost and their distinct political character. For Anđela, the protests were not really liturgies because they had nothing to do with religion but

were purely politically motivated. It is interesting to note that Anđela sees the 2019-2020 protests as a reincarnation of the 2006 referendum, which asked the population of Montenegro if they wanted to remain in Union with Serbia or separate from it.

The idea that the 2019-2020 protests were purely politically motivated is one that was shared by almost all interviewed ethnic Montenegrins. Furthermore, this idea was always described in a negative light, indicating that ethnic Montenegrins on average did not favor the implicit political character of the liturgies. Many even highlighted the idea that Serbs were manipulated into thinking that they were defending church property, when in fact they were representing a political cause. Smilja (73, Montenegrin) expresses a similar sentiment in the quote below:

First of all, those “liturgies” were not what they declared themselves to be. “We won’t give up holy places” – whose holy places? And who was taking them away? Whose are they really? ... The goal was first of all to erase Montenegro again and for the Serbian Orthodox Church to take over all the Orthodox places of worship that exist in Montenegro, and that’s what they did. That [Serb] nationalist spirit never died from Garašanin to the present day, and the church is an exponent of that.

In this quote, Smilja expresses not only that the protests were essentially political in nature, and therefore falsely represented themselves as “liturgies,” but also that their premise was completely wrong. She hints at the fact that the religious objects that ethnic Serbs were “defending” are not theirs to start with, implying that Serbs do not know history well enough to react to the 2019 law. Smilja believes that these “holy places” rightfully belong to the people of Montenegro, and not to Serbia or Serbs. This theme was found in other interviews, as several ethnic Montenegrins also expressed the sentiment that the churches on Montenegrin soil were built by the people of Montenegro and therefore deserved to be in the hands of the public, i.e., the hands of the state.

What is also interesting in Smilja’s above quote is that, just like Mina mentioned in an earlier quote, the SOC and the protests they led are directly related to Serb nationalism. Smilja mentions Ilija Garašanin, a Serbian statesman and administrator to whom the idea of the “Greater Serbia” is usually attributed, and how his spirit lived on through the 2019-2020 protests. She hints at the fact that the very existence of a separate ethnic, linguistic, and possibly religious Montenegrin identity contradicts with the logic of Serb nationalism and impedes the creation of the “Greater Serbia.” Therefore, it is clear why she sees the SOC and the 2019-2020 protests as inherently devoted to promoting Serb nationalism and thus diminishing any and all aspects of Montenegrin identity.

While some ethnic Serbs in the sample expressed that their motivations were of a purely religious nature, others affirmed that their motivations were complex, as exemplified in the example of Milena (35, Serb):

I went [to liturgies] on Sundays because we were all free then, we all breathed in one spirit and there weren’t any riots or any problems or fights, everything was peaceful. I was motivated [to join] because I wanted our church and what we believe in to be preserved. ...

And of course, it was all very closely related to politics. I hoped that that man [Đukanović] would go away, because thirty years is really a lot. Like, let's give someone else, some younger people, a chance.

In this quote, Milena asserts that while her initial motivation for joining the protests was of a religious character, she also protested for political reasons. In this quote, Milena shows that she sees these two types of motivation as inextricably tied to one another, given that protesting the 2019 law was seen as synonymous with protesting the 30-years-long rule of Đukanović, i.e., the DPS. In addition to talking in a positive light about her political motivations, Milena also points out the fact that the protests were peaceful and made people come together in unity and breathe as one body. A similar sentiment is expressed by Kristina (20, Serb) below:

That [the liturgies] was really a beautiful movement on an energetic level. I mean, you could feel like you were part of some kind of community, that these were peaceful movements filled with love.

In this quote, Kristina emphasizes that the liturgies were largely peaceful and had an important role in community-building, which is a sentiment that all ethnic Serbs and very few ethnic Montenegrins in the interviews expressed. When talking about the effects that the protests had on her life, Kristina adds:

I can't say that it affected my daily life, but I think that it affected a general feeling that is common among people. I feel like things were different after the regime [DPS] fell. And that was, in my opinion, the direct result of those liturgies.

Kristina sees the results of the 2019-2020 protests culminating in the change of the government in 2020. For Kristina, the protests were the most significant cause for the fall of the DPS after almost thirty years of rule, and she perceives this change as having an overall cathartic effect on the population of Montenegro. Many ethnic Montenegrins disagreed with Kristina, as shown by the quote below from Žarko (57, Montenegrin):

Instead of living like the Czech Republic and Slovakia – and we used to be ahead of them – we regressed because of Serbian nationalism, because of religion. It's happening again now, and for the next twenty to thirty years we will be suffering the consequences of what those liturgies brought to Montenegro.

For Žarko, the liturgies did not result in the positive outcome that Kristina described above. On the contrary, Žarko believes that the progress of Montenegrin society was sabotaged by these protests and the changes that occurred as their result. He expresses that the protests brought the nation thirty years back, implying that the current situation is a direct invocation of the 1990s, when a Yugoslavian civil war was in the making. Žarko points to the '90s as a period where Montenegro allowed Serb nationalism to creep in, and he sees the 2019-2020 period as the aftermath of what started occurring in the '90s. Therefore, he identifies the ideology of Serb nationalism, which the SOC advocates for, as the main culprit for all inter-ethnic conflicts that people in Montenegro face today.

Perceived Outcomes Post-2019

The interview data shows that perceived outcomes of 2019-2020 protests and subsequent political changes were interpreted very differently by the two ethnic groups. The findings demonstrate that while ethnic Montenegrins are on average less satisfied with the aftermath of the 2019-2020 period, ethnic Serbs noted a satisfaction with the outcome of these events. Ethnic Montenegrins also reported on average a bigger impact on their interpersonal relationships, usually when it comes to the relationships with their ethnic Serb counterparts. Ethnic Serbs, on the other hand, did not note the same effect on their interpersonal relationship, but many expressed that for them identity is an important factor when it comes to forming and maintaining inter-ethnic relationships. When it comes to political views, a substantial difference was noted among the two ethnic groups hereby analyzed, with ethnic Montenegrins demonstrating more support for the DPS and pro-Western politics, and ethnic Serbs demonstrating greater support for Russia and anti-Western politics. The perceived outcomes of the 2019-2020 period are discussed in more detail below.

Identity in Interpersonal Relationships

To understand how the respondents' inter-ethnic relationships were affected by the 2019-2020 period, we must comprehend the nuance in ethnic differences between Serbs and Montenegrins. In both ethnic groups that were interviewed, but more commonly among ethnic Serbs, a theme that emerged was the idea that the other ethnic group is not aware of their own ethnic status. This sentiment is expressed by the two following quotes:

I think [the church] should be called "Montenegrin Orthodox Church," because it used to be called that and [the church clergy] need to return to their roots. Many priests are not familiar with the fact that their ancestors were Montenegrins; they think that they are all Serbs. And that's very wrong in my opinion. (Blažo, 25, Montenegrin)

I may be wrong, but I think that there will be 10% fewer Montenegrins [on the 2023 census results, compared to the 2011 census]. Because they realized that it's embarrassing to be called Montenegrin now. The MOC belittled Montenegrins, literally turned them into nothing. (Dimitrije, 46, Serb)

In the two quotes above, we see that both Blažo and Dimitrije think of members of the other ethnic group as delusional about their own ethnic identity. Blažo emphasizes that much of the SOC clergy identifies as Serb out of ignorance, neglecting their Montenegrin heritage. Conversely, Dimitrije argues that many Montenegrins were not aware of their true Serb origin, but that the 2019-2020 events and alleged delusion with the MOC helped them return to their Serb identities. Several ethnic Serbs in the interviews expressed that the Serb and Montenegrin identities are one and the same, as seen in the following quote by Vasilije (45, Serb):

I always say that my first name is Montenegrin and my last name is Serb. And that every Montenegrin is really a Serb. I can call myself a Serb from Montenegro and I can call

myself a Montenegrin of Serb origin – it's the same for me. But they are inseparable for me; I cannot be only a Montenegrin or only a Serb. And I think that people who call themselves only Montenegrin are very selfish.

For Vasilije, the two ethnic identities are as inseparable as an individual's first and last name. He sees people who call themselves ethnic Montenegrins as selfish because they disregard what he deems to be the other, root part of their identity, i.e., Serbdom. What we can infer from the quotes above is that participants from both groups demonstrate skepticism with respect to the other group's ethnic identification.

This skepticism and accusations of the alleged misunderstanding of one's ethnic identity emerged as an important piece of inter-ethnic relationships. Specifically, several ethnic Montenegrins talked about experiencing pressure by ethnic Serbs to admit that Montenegrins are Serbs too, as shown in the following quote from Una (22, Montenegrin):

There were people who would stop me on the street to talk to me about Serbs and Montenegrins. There were some people who knew how I identify, and they would come to me to tell me about their identities, to enlighten me on what I need to do, how I need to think, they would give me "a history lesson" in the middle of the street. I had to run away from people around Zabjelo [a neighborhood in Podgorica], I'll never forget that.

The above sentiment was one that many ethnic Montenegrins expressed in the interviews. Serbs were described as attempting to convince Montenegrins that they too are Serbs but just do not realize it yet. What Una refers to in the above quote is that Serbs utilized their knowledge of history to prove that all Montenegrins are in fact Serbs, convincing her that her identity as a Montenegrin is illegitimate. This created an impact on Una, who adds that she felt compelled to revisit her high school history books so that she can always have counterarguments ready to defend her ethnic identity from any ethnic Serbs that may "attack" her on the street. Predrag (22, Montenegrin) had a similar experience with ethnic Serbs:

All the people in Montenegro who identify as Serbs then got a huge wind in their backs to express their opinions. Even so much so that you were ridiculed if you declared yourself a Montenegrin or anything else. During that period, you literally weren't allowed to identify as Muslim or Albanian because the environment would be so hostile towards you. ... It was literally an eruption of Serbdom in Montenegro. Those liturgies were really an eruption of Serbdom here.

According to Predrag, the SOC and the 2019-2020 period gave ethnic Serbs the confidence to believe and stress the fact that people around them are ethnic Serbs but do not know it yet. Predrag also expresses that he felt like a target of mockery and degradation from ethnic Serbs in Montenegro. Furthermore, he perceives ethnic Serbs to be problematic not just for Montenegrins but also for other ethnic and religious identities. Similarly to other ethnic Montenegrins, Predrag also alludes to the fact that the root of the issue is Serb nationalism, i.e., that the problem is not between Montenegrins and Serbs but between Serbs and everyone else. The fact that Predrag

identifies the 2019-2020 period as an eruption of Serbdom in Montenegro reveals that he sees Serb nationalism as a problem that had existed for decades in the Western Balkans but to different intensities. In other words, Serb nationalism is an omnipresent problem that was contained but happened to be suddenly released and expressed thanks to the 2019 protests.

At a different point in our conversation, Predrag shares a story of his first day at work, where the employees happen to be mostly ethnic Serbs. The first thing his new colleagues asked him was what his ethnic identity was, which Predrag recounts to emphasize that ethnic identity became more relevant in interpersonal relationships for many Serbs, and that, in his words, it became a “pre-requisite for hanging out.” In thinking about overall changes in social life that he noted, Predrag adds:

And even during celebrations, you now need to be careful about what you sing. Now when you organize a wedding, you have to tell the audience which songs they cannot sing. Literally, you have to tell them “Don’t sing that.”

In this quote, Predrag points out that ethnic identities, and particularly those of ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins, suddenly became more important in social gatherings after 2020. He notes this change when it comes to weddings, where the marrying couple is expected to highlight if they want Serb or Montenegrin songs to be played by the live band. In this ethnically charged environment, Predrag emphasizes how it is almost mandatory to tell the guests which songs are forbidden from being requested or played.

That the 2019-2020 period generated a change in inter-ethnic relationships in Montenegro is a theme that emerged multiple times in the interviews with ethnic Montenegrins, as shown in the quote from Smilja (73, Montenegrin) below:

I feel powerless to change anything. They [Serbs] take your name, your country, everything. They disrupted family relations, neighborhood relations, they disrupted everything. I never asked anyone if they go to church, if they were baptized, I'm not baptized and I'm not interested in that. But suddenly, it now matters whether you are a Serb or a Montenegrin, and if you go to church. I thought that was obvious – I was born here, all my ancestors were born here, we live here, I'm Montenegrin; what else could I be?

In the quote above, Smilja emphasizes that the 2019-2020 period influenced her relationships with family members and neighbors, pointing out that her ethnic identity was not as important for her relationships prior to the liturgies. She expresses that she did not think of her ethnicity as controversial or disputable, yet the 2019-2020 period made her Montenegrin identity salient and a subject of debate in her everyday life. Other interviewees reported their familial relationships being affected, as seen in the following quote by Milivoje (54, Montenegrin):

Some close relatives showed, by changing their attitude towards me, by distancing themselves, that they knew that I voted against [the DPS], and they would tell me things like “I would never sell my country like that.” And on the other side, I had [Serb] relatives tell me “Oh now you will join the [pro-Serb opposition] party, now you will support one

of *us*” and all that kind of stupid stuff. ... And I don’t want to be with one or the other, I honestly hate both sides, I would just like to live peacefully.

Milivoje indicates that his family includes people from both sides that felt strongly about their identities and political views, to the extent that it had the potential of jeopardizing the relationship with Milivoje. He explains that his relatives who identify as ethnic Montenegrins accused him of “selling” his country by not voting for the DPS, implying that any other option is one that seeks to destroy the Montenegrin state and identity. On the other hand, he expresses that those who identify as ethnic Serbs questioned whether he voted for the opposition just because he sensed that the DPS would lose and therefore chose to switch to the “winning team.” Despite these accusations on both sides, Milivoje explains that he voted for the opposition because of personal convictions and not attachments to his ethnicity or the DPS. Seeking to maintain neutrality in this charged ethnopolitical context, Milivoje was caught between two fires, receiving backlash from both sides. However, he was not the only person in the interviews to share that his close personal relationships were affected by the 2019-2020 liturgies and the subsequent election. Sonja (71) shares a story with similar implications:

And now look at what is happening, our politics have destroyed people. Brothers fought with each other, slaughtered each other. Is that normal? For a brother to go against his brother? I know from my own experience, from what my sister wrote to me [on Facebook]. She posted something against Jakov Milatovic,⁸ that he should go to Serbia and be a nationalist there. And because I wrote “Jakov is the best,” she wrote all kinds of nasty things [in my DMs]. And that’s my sister.

In the above quote, Sonja recalls a conflict that she had with her sister, where their ethnic identities and politics were confronted. Although Sonja does not feel strongly about identifying as either Serb or Montenegrin, she leans more toward the Serb identity and over the years she has felt more represented by pro-Serb parties. Her sister, on the other hand, harbored a Montenegrin identity and has supported pro-Montenegrin parties. In the situation described in the quote above, Sonja’s sister gets mad at her because Sonja shows that she is favorable of Jakov Milatovic, the current President of Montenegro. This situation could be seen as a mere lack of political alignment between the two sisters but is ultimately a consequential difference that is rooted in ethnic identification, as well.

The reason Sonja’s sister dislikes Milatovic, as shown in the quote, is because she sees him as a promoter of Serb nationalism, which puts Sonja’s sister in the same line of thought that ethnic Montenegrins in these interviews have expressed. Sonja’s disagreement with her sister’s politics is, therefore, one that goes beyond politics and enters the realm of ethnic and inter-ethnic tensions. In Sonja’s example, we see how inter-ethnic tensions can sometimes exist within intimate and familial relationships. Moreover, both Milivoje and Sonja express the interconnectedness of ethnic identities and political views, which is a theme that will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

⁸ Jakov Milatović is the current President of Montenegro who replaced Milo Đukanović in office in 2023.

When talking about how her day-to-day life changed, Anđela (22, Montenegrin) recounts that the topic of ethnicity and dispute around churches was prevalent in almost all aspects of her life during and after the 2019-2020 period:

[There was talk of liturgies] at my grandma's, with older people, with friends, in schools, everywhere. ... I was literally condemned to hear about it everywhere. In the store, on the street, everywhere. I think I mostly heard it from older people, in whom it awakened great anger and a literal call to war. They talked as if this was a matter of life or death in Montenegro, and that it was time to defend ourselves, that it was time to respond.

In this quote, we note that Anđela sees both ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins as guilty of promoting fear and panic around the ethnicity question. Rather than singling out one ethnic group as the real and only perpetrator of inter-ethnic conflict, Anđela points out that she sees age as an important factor in the picture. She identifies older people as the main reason why ethnic differences became so salient after the 2019-2020 period, thus highlighting an important element of generational difference. Mina (61, Montenegrin) expresses that she also noted a change in her surroundings after the 2019-2020 period:

I know for sure that there were very difficult situations in family relations and in neighborly relations. Violence between children of different religions increased. The Serbian Orthodox Church grew stronger and even teachers took children to the liturgies and to various religious ceremonies. And in that context, some children who are not Orthodox or even Christian felt bad. This led to violence between children and some religious and national outbursts by young people, teenagers who expressed their religious beliefs in an aggressive manner.

As a teacher, Mina is familiar with how the 2019-2020 period affected youth and their school environments. She expresses her concern for the way the SOC has been able to penetrate and exercise influence in Montenegrin schools. Unlike Anđela who sees both sides as contributing to the increasing tensions, Mina highlights the role of ethnic Serbs in perpetrating and maintaining these tensions. She implies that the reason for her concerns is not necessarily the Church as an institution, but rather its supporters, or in this case teachers. Mina claims that teachers in non-religious schools who supported the SOC used their position to bring children to the liturgies, thus openly showing their preferences for one faith, one church, and one ethnic identity – the Serbian one.

Other participants also voiced the concern that the SOC and Serbs in Montenegro have repeatedly attempted to homogenize the ethnoreligious landscape of Montenegro by being hostile toward some groups and favoring others. Reflecting on the role of the liturgies in Montenegro, a country that prides itself as a multicultural society, Danko (63, Montenegrin) says:

All religions were accepted in Montenegro up until one point. All of a sudden, the liturgies started, and it got to the point where everyone hates everyone. The bottom line is that those liturgies separated families, brothers and sisters, and that everything went to hell.

For instance, I am a Montenegrin. But for that Muslim person who was born and whose ancestors were born here, is Montenegro less important to him than to me? I don't think so. ... I heard a woman in the store say, "We should banish these Turkish and Albanian bastards," which is a disgrace.

In this quote, Danka emphasizes that she noted changes in the way ethnic Serbs in her neighborhood spoke differently about people of different ethnicities. She highlights that the 2019-2020 protests separated family members and that society overall was divided along ethnic and religious lines. Reflecting on the changes she noticed in the inter-ethnic relationships around her, Danka recounts a moment when she was in a supermarket and overheard a woman who identifies as ethnically Serb spread hate toward Muslims in Montenegro, calling them "Turkish and Albanian bastards." Danka recognizes that the liturgies contributed not only toward divides between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs, but also between Orthodox Serbs and all non-Orthodox communities in Montenegro. In other words, she sees not just the liturgies as the cause of these ethnoreligious tensions, but specifically ethnic Serbs as to blame.

While most participants who identified as ethnic Montenegrins expressed that they noticed changes in their relationships after the liturgies, Mihajlo (36, Serb) reported no changes. When asked what he thinks of the tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins during and after the 2019-2020 period, he remarks:

These conflicts do not exist among ordinary people. There are no tensions or any kind of problems. The only problems that exist are those produced by politicians because of their own interests, so there is essentially no problem among ordinary citizens.

In this quote, Mihajlo suggests that inter-ethnic conflicts are a mere invention of politicians that used as a tool to pursue personal or political interests. He emphasizes that an average person does not care about this artificially made quarrel between Serbs and Montenegrins, nor have their relationships been affected by the sociopolitical context of the 2019-2020 period. While Mihajlo claims that his identity as a Serb and an Orthodox Christian does not interfere with his interpersonal relationships, Vasilije (45, Serb) expresses a different sentiment:

I have a particular relationship with three ethnic groups... I don't hate, but I also don't like Croats, Albanians, and Muslims. We can have a normal relationship, say hello to each other, but nothing beyond that. ... And I'm really thinking of the Bosniaks.⁹ For instance, I feel sorry for the Palestinians over there, this situation in Gaza, and they are Muslims. I feel sorry for them, I am on their side. So, it's really only those three ethnic groups that we [Serbs] have had bad experiences with historically, going back hundreds of years ago.

In the above quote, Vasilije expresses that he dislikes Croats, Albanians, and Bosniaks. He references his support for Gaza in the current conflict as proof that he does not have negative sentiments against all Muslims, just those in the Western Balkans region. Vasilije considers historical ethnic-based conflicts in the Balkans as an important piece of

⁹ The term "Bosniak" identifies ethnic Muslims who live in Bosnia & Herzegovina. This term is different from "Bosnian," which denotes all citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina regardless of their religious identity.

his interpersonal relationships, which is something that Danica (45, Serb) talks about as well:

I have colleagues at work who are great and it's like "Oh, it doesn't matter who we are, the important thing is that we are good people!" In my head, that sounds great, that is until I know that you are Albanian and I am Serb. I can't forget the massacres, I can't forget Jasenovac, I can't forget the Korićka jama, I can't forget millions of things where people lashed out on Serbs. Probably they [Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians] can't forget some historical events either.

Just like Mihajlo, Danica points out that her attitude toward other ethnic or religious groups did not change and was not affected by the liturgies or any related subsequent event. Nevertheless, contrary to Mihajlo, Danica finds it difficult to ignore her Serb identity when interacting with people from other groups. She points out that knowing someone's identity is an instant call back to crucial historical events, particularly those where Serbs suffered at the hands of others, whether they be Croats, Bosniaks, or Albanians. Danica specifically references two events – in Jasenovac and Korićka Jama – where Serbs were massacred during World War II by Ustasha¹⁰ groups.

It is important to highlight here that Danica personally went through the Yugoslavian civil war when she lived in a small town in Bosnia in the 1990s and vividly recalls this traumatic period of her life. Danica found out about her ethnic identity and family history only after the war started and has not been able to forget about it ever since. She recalls a story of when she was a young student and wanted to participate in a competition testing knowledge about Yugoslavian partisans in WWII. She remembers being surprised at the fact that her father subtly discouraged her from learning that history, but she later found out that her family had a different version of WWII history. Namely, Danica's grandfather was a Chetnik during the war and his family was attacked and tortured numerous times while he was away fighting. Recounting this story of her grandfather and the respect he enjoyed in his local town, Danica concludes that Chetniks could not have been all that bad. In other words, she sees her identity as an important factor in her interpersonal relationships and the level of trust she feels toward those who do not belong to her ethnoreligious group.

However, Danica was not the only person to recall the war in the 1990s and the fear of an escalated ethnic conflict, as demonstrated by the quotes below:

I think that if any conflicts erupt, they could potentially expand beyond the borders of Montenegro, and it could be a larger-scale Balkan conflict. And that's what I'm always afraid of. (Kristina, 20, Serb)

My biggest concern is that people start seeing the *other* as less of a human than themselves just because they have different identities and different opinions. (Danilo, 22, Montenegrin)

¹⁰ Ustasha is a term that refers to a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist group that was active between 1929 and 1945, and that collaborated with the Nazis during WWII.

An important observation to note from the quotes above is that the participants who expressed fears of a potential conflict escalation were all young individuals in their early 20s. In other words, ethnicity was not found to be a significant factor when determining one's fears of the future regarding ethnic conflicts in Montenegro, whereas age was.

Doing Ethnopolitics

In exploring the participants' views on local and regional politics, the Church was mentioned by many ethnic Montenegrins as a relevant political actor, as seen in the quotes below:

I think that we have returned to the 19th century where the church has more say than the state, that's for certain. ... I think that it's outrageous for the state and for the church because the church can't interfere in the constitution. (Anđela, 22, Montenegrin)

[The liturgies] had nothing to do with faith, it was all just a political program. And what did [the SOC] get in the end? They got to keep the property, to set up the government, to do whatever they want. They now lead politics in Montenegro. So, we are now like Iran and Jamahiriya, but an Orthodox version. The church dictates what happens in politics. (Žarko, 57, Montenegrin)

Both Anđela and Žarko emphasize that they see the SOC as interfering in politics and thus compromising the secularism of Montenegro. They both see the 2019-2020 period as a moment when the SOC grew too powerful, and Montenegro shifted to a non-secular political system. Vasilije (45, Serb) sees the SOC's interference in a different light:

The church did not intervene in the formation of the government in 2020, they literally just told the leaders of the coalition For the Future of Montenegro that Zdravko Krivokapić must be the prime minister. ... It was as if he fell from Heaven. And I think that was the only time when the church intervened, and never again after that.

Whereas Anđela and Žarko see the SOC as an actor that has an immense and ongoing political power in Montenegro, Vasilije downplays the SOC's interference in Montenegrin politics in 2020, presenting it as a one-time thing and an exception to the rule. Many ethnic Montenegrins, however, saw the SOC's interference as a continuation of the process that started in the '90s, when the SOC emerged as a key contributor to promoting Serb nationalism in regional politics.

An observation that can be made here is that there is a correlation between one's ethnic identity and their political orientation, which supports this study's quantitative findings (see Table 6). While most interviewees reported that they wanted the DPS to lose elections after almost thirty years of rule, many ethnic Montenegrins expressed that the alternative political parties were even worse than the DPS. The following quotes shed light on this theme:

I knew that [after the 2020 elections] nothing would be better, that things would be even worse. And don't get me wrong, they [the DPS] weren't good either, let's face it, but these new ones are a thousand times worse. ... In my opinion, they are traitors of Montenegro. (Danka, 63, Montenegrin)

I used to only support one party [the DPS]. And I don't even know why, I think it's because everyone around me supported it. And I would always say: I am aware that they [the DPS] are stealing our money, but these [the pro-Serb opposition] are stealing our money *and* our identity. ... Now, when the next elections happen, I don't know if I would vote because I have no idea [who to vote for]. (Anđela, 22, Montenegrin)

In both quotes above, we see that among ethnic Montenegrins there is a common view of the DPS as the defenders of the Montenegrin state and identity. As Anđela and Danka highlight above, the DPS is always juxtaposed against the pro-Serb opposition parties who do not have the same interest in maintaining an independent and sovereign Montenegro. The corrupt and anti-democratic character of the DPS is then often disregarded because the alternative means losing the Montenegrin state and identity.

What Anđela's above quote also highlights is that the connection between the DPS and ethnic Montenegrins has been so ingrained over the thirty years of their rule that it is difficult for former DPS supporters to now find their place in the political landscape of Montenegro. The fact that ethnic Montenegrins feel like they need to choose between having a corrupt government and losing their national identity is a stark indication of ethnopolitics in Montenegro. The association of the DPS with anyone who identifies as Montenegrin is addressed by Predrag (22, Montenegrin) in the following quote:

I now work in a place where people mostly identify as Serbs, and I had a phone case that had the Montenegrin coat of arms on it and when my colleagues saw it, they immediately started messing with me like "Oh look he's Montenegrin." And you cannot explain to people that you are just a Montenegrin who loves Montenegro, because they immediately think that you love Milo Đukanović and that you are a member of the DPS.

In the above quote, Predrag laments the fact that ethnic Montenegrins have been put in a box and labeled as DPS supporters when in fact they have much more complex feelings towards the DPS's politics. Predrag complains about how his patriotism was mistakenly seen as his support for Đukanović and the DPS that ruled over Montenegro since the 1990s.

Just like in the quantitative analysis, the strong tie between political orientation and ethnic identity emerged as a prominent theme in the interviews. Participants were asked if the ethnic and religious identities of politicians matter when deciding to support or vote for them. While many ethnic Montenegrins expressed that the politicians' ethnoreligious identities would do not necessarily matter, several ethnic Serbs had more nuanced opinions. Sonja (71) responded in the following way:

I can hang out with them [Albanians], they can be my friends, but not my president, not really. Don't think that I hate any religions, nor minorities, nor Albanians, nor Muslims, nor Bosniaks. I don't hate them, but I just wouldn't like them to be in power or to run my country. I would prefer it to be one of *our* people.

Even though Sonja did not feel particularly strongly about her own ethnic identity (she identified as both Serb and Montenegrin), identity seems important to her with respect to other ethnic

groups, particularly in terms of political leadership. Regardless of their politics, an ethnic Albanian politician is never a better choice for running the country than an ethnic Montenegrin or an ethnic Serb. Danica (45, Serb) has a similar opinion:

Ethnic Albanians will always be tied to Albania. And we, as Serbs, as Montenegrins, will always be tied to our motherland, which is probably Serbia. He [the ethnic Albanian] may have been living [in Montenegro] for a long time, but I am sure that he would give everything for Albania. Even though he is a Montenegrin, even though his family has been here for decades. There is some kind of code written within us, whether through upbringing or wars or wounds that have been inflicted onto us because of our ethnicity; that code is deeply embedded in us.

Here, Danica explains why someone who identifies ethnically as Albanian (or any other ethnicity that is not Serb or Montenegrin) could never have Montenegro's best interest in mind. Just like Sonja, Danica does not differentiate between Serbs and Montenegrins and sees them both as tied to Serbia and the interests of the Serb people. She holds that an ethnic Albanian will always be tied to what she calls "his motherland," i.e., Albania, which means that their ethnic identity will always prevail when confronted with their national identity. Just like for Sonja, Danica also sees the question of political support as inseparable from the identity question. However, it is important to note that many participants, both Serb and Montenegrin, expressed that they do not necessarily focus on the politician's ethnoreligious identity when deciding whether to support them.

The connection between ethnoreligious identity and political orientation proved to be relevant not only in considerations around local and regional politics, but also on international matters. When asked what he thinks is the best path for Montenegro to take in today's geopolitical landscape, Blažo (25, Montenegrin) said:

In my opinion, Montenegro needs to improve its relationship with Russia. Because we were the first to have great relations with the Russians, even before Serbia. And today Russia says that Montenegro is among fifty enemy countries – that's a great shame for our people. I think that what is happening now in Ukraine is a big misfortune, but we're not even considering the [Russian] side. We just do what our interest dictates, we hope that the US will help us, we joined NATO, we're doing all these things. None of that will help us, especially not the European Union.

In the above quote, Blažo highlights his wish for Montenegro to re-establish the close relations with Russia that it had historically. He expresses that he did not necessarily support the decision to impose sanctions on Russia in 2022 when it invaded Ukraine, and that Montenegro should have had a more nuanced response. Blažo sees the ties between Montenegro and Russia as based on historical ties and the general cultural similarity. In our conversation, Blažo highlighted how Montenegro's connection to the Russians is a "natural" one, given the similarities in language, culture, and religion between the two countries that are deeply rooted. In other words, the fact that the majority of Russians and Montenegrins are Orthodox Christians is for Blažo an

important reason for political allyship. Dimitrije (46, Serb) expresses a similar sentiment with respect to Russia:

I don't like America, and they are the ones who literally rule over us now. Had Montenegro gone with Russia, I think it would have been much better. Instead, we imposed these sanctions to Russia now, so we can't even go to Russia. I worked in Russia for 2 years, it's the most beautiful country out there.

Just like Blažo, Dimitrije feels strongly about the need to be closer to Russia than the US. He implies that he also disagreed with the decision to impose sanctions on Russia in 2022. Feeling strongly against the West also came up in interviews with other ethnic Serbs, as seen in Vasilije's (45, Serb) quote below:

I think that the West could have stopped the war in Bosnia. Instead, they let them kill each other for 5 years, 100,000 people were killed. But when it is not in their interests to resolve a conflict, they disregard it. ... Then they sided with the Croats and Muslims [in the 1990s], so [NATO] bombed the Serbs because [the West] was against the Serbs.

The above quote shows that Vasilije feels strongly against NATO, the US, and the West as a whole. He sees the West as filled with war profiteers who do not care about anything else but advancing their own interests. In this quote, Vasilije implies that the West has conducted its politics in the Western Balkans region with an anti-Serb sentiment, which is why Vasilije feels so strongly opposed to them.

While Vasilije's remarks offer important insight into the correlation between ethnoreligious identity and political orientation, a factor that was particularly indicative of his political views was the visual aspect of this interview. During our conversation, Vasilije was wearing a t-shirt that had "I love Serbia" written on it. The interview was conducted in Vasilije's home, the walls of which were decorated with objects that represent Serb cultural heritage. There were two flags hung on the interior walls – the Serbian and the Russian flag. This environment perfectly complemented Vasilije's social and political views that he expressed throughout the interview, and it served as a potent example of the way ethnopolitics can manifest and how deeply embedded they can be in people's everyday lives.

Whereas most ethnic Serbs expressed their disdain for the West and a pro-Russia sentiment, most ethnic Montenegrins – with the exception of Blažo – had opposite views, as seen in the quote below by Vladimir (57, Montenegrin):

The only solution for Montenegro is [obtaining] membership in the European Union because we are too small to be a significant factor anywhere. And it is also the only organization to which we logically belong, even though it has its shortcomings, but nobody is perfect. But definitely that is where our geopolitical place is.

In the above quote, Vladimir emphasizes that the future of Montenegro is unavoidably tied to the EU and Western politics. Just as Blažo believes that Montenegro should "naturally" align with Russia due to cultural similarities, so does Vladimir believe that Montenegro "logically" belongs

to the EU, given its geographical position. In other words, both pro-Western and anti-Western sentiments in the participants are attributed in a manner that is symmetrically logical. A similar political outlook is seen in Žarko (57, Montenegrin):

The East made everyone go crazy, especially the intelligence services of Russia and Serbia. And now we have these newspapers that seem to be making fun of a coup d'état even though the whole world admitted that there was a coup in Montenegro [in 2016] and that Russia's intelligence did it. They want to pretend as if it didn't happen. And they weakened [Montenegrin] intelligence services, and everything is just... a complete capitulation.

In Žarko's quote above, he highlights the way Russia, in collaboration with Serbia, has been able to interfere with Montenegrin politics and actively destabilize its governmental security structures. He references a coup that was allegedly planned in 2016 by Russian intelligence agents and a few pro-Serb opposition party leaders, most likely to prevent Montenegro's accession to NATO. In highlighting how this event has been ridiculed in newspapers after the fall of the DPS in 2020, Žarko implies his disapproval of Russia and an inclination toward pro-Western politics. The clear correlation between pro-Western policies and the Montenegrin identity, as well as the correlation between anti-Western sentiments and the Serb Orthodox identity, complement the survey findings of this study (see Table 6).

While many interviewees had strong opinions on matters of local, regional, and international politics, another theme that emerged from several conversations was an unfavorable view on political engagement and politics as a whole. A common view expressed by many participants is noted in the quote below by Željka (58, Montenegrin):

I think that politics is the greatest enemy of our people. They [politicians] are the ones who brought us to poverty because they stole everything [from us]. It's all because of the politicians.

When asked about whether the 2019-2020 period affected her level of engagement with politics and interest in political matters, Anđela (22, Montenegrin) responds:

Yes, it helped me realize that I don't want to deal with politics. I don't see politics as a healthy way of communication between the state and the population anymore ... I realized that I have never seen healthy politics that it is really done for the benefit of the state; it has always been for the benefit of individuals here.

Anđela's remarks about how the 2019-2020 period made her want to be less engaged with politics are indicative of a tendency among some respondents to be apolitical. Because of the way that identities were able to permeate political life and, in turn, the way that politics were able to influence social life, Anđela feels alienated from civic engagement. Danica (45, Serb) feels the same way:

I'm completely apolitical, I don't really care what they [politicians] do at all. I just want to live well. ... I think 80% of Americans do not know who the president of their country is, nor do they care. Because if I live well, I don't care at all who rules. But if I feel poorly, then I care a lot. So, we haven't been living well so far.

The quote above shows that Danica sees one's level of engagement with politics or knowledge about political life as directly related to their standard of living. She suggests that people in more developed countries, like the US, are not as knowledgeable about their country's politics because they lead a good life. Conversely, she sees Montenegrin society as being politically engaged precisely because the standard of living is low.

Jovana (28, Montenegrin) shares a similar perspective:

In Luxembourg, they don't know who their mayor is. They have no idea. They have a salary of 4,000 euros, and they are not interested [in politics]. And here [in Montenegro], it is the other way around: we know all about politicians, but we don't know what we are going to eat, where we can go to the theater, how we are going to spend the day, month, weekend. We are in big debt and we don't even realize, but we sure know who the president is and what his salary is.

Just like Danica, Jovana also believes that people in richer nations are not as engaged in their country's politics as people in Montenegro are. Jovana, who never voted, highlights that worrying about politics occupies such a big portion of Montenegrin citizens' time that they do not have any time to spare for deciding about how to develop their personal life, whether that is through culture, arts, or leisure activities. In other words, Jovana sees preoccupation with politics as a distraction from what really matters, and not as a way of engaging with important social issues. The implications of the findings outlined above are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Ethnic-Based Accounts of History

Observing the survey and interview findings of this study, it is clear that the tensions between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs have roots in their strong respective attachments to these identities as well as relevant historical events that make these identities salient to this day. To understand why the question of ethnicity emerged as socially and politically relevant during the 2019-2020 period in Montenegro, I turn to the theoretical framework developed by Sambanis and Shayo (2013) in their article “Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict.” These theorists point out that social identities can create long-lasting impacts on individual behavior and social conflict, while also emphasizing that identities are constructed and may be altered by the social environment in which they are set. Their theory is also useful for assessing the vulnerability of the Montenegrin ethnic landscape and the possibility of an escalated inter-ethnic conflict similar to the one in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

When assessing the nature of the post-2019 tensions between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs, it is important to consider how these two groups view the relevant events analyzed in this study – namely, the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom, the subsequent protests (i.e., liturgies), and the 2020 election that overthrew the DPS. It is further important to consider individuals’ knowledge of historical events and the narratives surrounding them, especially in areas like the Western Balkans where history and cultural identity have been used to promote conflict and justify violence. In analyzing individuals’ knowledge of the 2019-2020 period, ethnic identification emerges as a significant predictor of the extent to which individuals are familiar with these events and the way they view them.

Several ethnic Montenegrins in this study described the events of 1918, i.e., the Serbian annexation of Montenegro to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as the root cause of the modern-day tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins. Conversely, many ethnic Serbs in the interviews identified the 1990s, i.e., the beginning of the process of separating Montenegro from Serbia, as the period when these tensions began. In other words, while ethnic Montenegrins presented Serb aggression on Montenegro and their expansionist politics as the root of inter-ethnic divisions, ethnic Serbs identified the DPS and their separatist politics as the real culprit. Consequently, the views of the 2019 law and subsequent protests were also seen very differently by these two ethnic groups.

Ethnic Montenegrins saw the 2019 law and the reinstitution of the MOC as an attempt to undo the mistakes made in 1918 when the Montenegrin state and church lost independence. On the other hand, ethnic Serbs saw the 2019 law as a blasphemous political project of the DPS aimed at debilitating the position of the Serb identity in Montenegro. The interviews reveal that ethnic Serbs saw the 2019 law as an attack on the sovereignty of the SOC and a simultaneous attack on Serbdom as a whole. All ethnic Serbs in the interview sample supported the liturgies and the SOC, given that these were seen as the defenders of their ethnoreligious identity. Ethnic

Montenegrins, on the other hand, expressed their disapproval of the SOC and its interference in Montenegrin political life. Therefore, unlike Serbs, most ethnic Montenegrins did not support the 2019-2020 liturgies, framing them as a threat to the Montenegrin identity and the country's autonomy.

When it comes to opinions on the 2019-2020 liturgies, ethnic Serbs maintained that the protesters were peaceful, harmonious, unified, and religiously motivated. For Serbs, the liturgies were a call to defend their places of worship and were a necessary process for preserving their ethnoreligious identity. Ethnic Montenegrins, on the other hand, mostly described the protesters as Serb nationalists, a manipulated mass, and politically motivated intruders that threaten Montenegrin independence. In other words, when it came to understanding the way that individuals view the events that occurred in 2019-2020, widely different accounts were reported by the two ethnic groups.

The findings discussed above point to three conclusions. First, the evidence suggests that individuals are not in agreement about what happened in 1918 and the 1990s, nor about what the separation of Montenegro from Serbia in 2006 signified. Moreover, it is evident that the respondents have differing opinions on the impact that these significant historical periods have had on the relationships between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs. Second, ethnicity influences how individuals recount what happened in the 2019-2020 period and how these events have affected Montenegrin society. Third, the fact that there are clear patterns of different ethnic groups having different accounts of key historical events points to the idea that history is being written and rewritten as we speak. If different ethnic groups cannot agree on key historical events, whether distant or recent, there is a risk of historical revisionism. Disagreement on key historical events may have serious ramifications for any future manifestations of the inter-ethnic tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins, especially if these conflicts escalate and if the salience of ethnic identities – and polarization between them – continues to increase.

The theoretical model presented by Sambanis and Shayo (2013) helps us understand how elites – or ethnic entrepreneurs, to use Crawford & Lipschutz's (1998) term – can mobilize co-ethnics in times when ethnic identities are made salient. Given that ethnic identity is related to the way individuals view historical events indicates that history can be used by ethnic entrepreneurs as a way to incite or justify inter-ethnic conflict. The value in agreeing on what happened in the past, whether it is recent or more distant, lies in the fact that individuals are less likely to engage in heated debate or conflict. Therefore, knowing that historical revisionism may lead to conflict and that the historical events discussed above are so closely tied to ethnic identity, there is a clear risk of an escalation of the current conflict between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins.

The Sociopolitical Salience of Ethnic Identity

As indicated above, Sambanis and Shayo (2013) highlight the role of elites and institutions that seek to accentuate inter-ethnic differences and thus aggravate tensions between ethnic groups in order to advance personal interests. In relation to the events analyzed in this study, it is clear that while the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom initially started as a dispute between the SOC and the state of Montenegro led by the DPS, it evolved into a broader, low-scale conflict between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. This may lead us to conclude that these inter-ethnic tensions were a result of the interferences and manipulation tactics of elite actors and institutions and their ability to mobilize co-ethnics to advance their own interests. However, the findings of this research suggest that ethnic divisions were not perpetrated and emphasized solely by elites, but also by non-elite individuals who identify intensely with their ethnic group.

The survey findings show that Serbs are a group that is for the most part ethnically, religiously, and linguistically homogeneous, which points to the conclusion that Serbs in Montenegro are an ethnoreligious identity. The interviews complement the idea that Serbs are a relatively homogeneous group with strong opinions on their ethnoreligious identity and its antagonistic relationship to other ethnic and religious groups. Conversely, a higher degree of heterogeneity was noted among ethnic Montenegrins, as well as more diversity in political stances and attitudes toward other ethnic and religious groups. These findings indicate that while Serbs tend to identify strongly with their ethnoreligious group and show little variation within it, ethnic Montenegrins are not as intensely tied to their ethnic identity.

As Sambanis and Shayo (2013) point out, the degree to which individuals relate to their ethnic identity is an important factor for understanding inter-ethnic conflicts. The theorists suggest that the bigger the perceived distance between an ethnic group and the nation,¹¹ the more intensely individuals will identify with their ethnic group. This consideration is important when it comes to explaining why ethnic Serbs tend to care more about their ethnoreligious identity compared to ethnic Montenegrins. Since Montenegrins are the biggest ethnic group in the country, it is difficult to disentangle their ethnic and national identity. For Serbs, who are the second largest ethnic group in Montenegro, the distinction between national and ethnic identity is clearer. Further from these demographic considerations, it is also important to highlight the role of politics in solidifying the distinction between ethnic and national identities in Montenegro.

The year 2020 marked the end of a thirty-year one-party rule by the DPS. The DPS and its most prominent leader, Milo Đukanović, had been in power for three decades until 2020, during which they sought to separate Montenegro from Serbia on the national and cultural level. This process involved not only gaining de facto independence, but also reinstating the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, institutionalizing the Montenegrin language as the official state language, and recognizing Kosovo's independence, among other things. This process, which started in the 1990s, culminated in 2006, and continued until the DPS lost the election in 2020,

¹¹ As a reminder, Sambanis and Shayo (2013) define the nation as the aggregate of all groups within a given territory.

has alienated the Serb population in Montenegro over time. The fact that ethnic Serbs strongly oppose the DPS, the MOC, and the separation of the Montenegrin identity from Serbdom are all proof of this ethno-political alienation. Therefore, the three-decade political project of the DPS resulted in a clear-cut distinction between the ethnic Serb identity and the national Montenegrin identity, which has pushed Serbs to identify more intensely with their ethnic group rather than the nation of Montenegro.

Sambanis and Shayo (2013) point to the importance of state institutions when it comes to solidifying ethnic differences and making them politically relevant. In addition to distancing Montenegro from Serbia on the state, cultural, and political level, the DPS also deliberately used ethnically charged political strategies to garner electoral support. Because their separatist politics resulted in alienating Serbs from the nation, the DPS mostly gained support from ethnic Montenegrins and other ethnic minorities in the country during their thirty-year rule. Given that ethnicity has been directly correlated with electoral support and political orientation since the 1990s, this served to deepen the divisions between Serbs and Montenegrins along ethnic and political lines. With ethnicities being made increasingly politically relevant, the stage was set in Montenegro for the 2020 regime change to have a significant impact on the ethnic identification among Montenegrins and Serbs and to intensify the inter-ethnic tensions between these groups. It is no surprise then, that the 2019-2020 period was both ethnically and politically charged, as ethnicity and political orientation were difficult to disentangle.

In addition to asserting that identification with one's ethnic group rather than the nation may increase inter-ethnic conflict, Sambanis and Shayo (2013) also highlight that ethnicity might become more salient during periods when political events are likely to affect the relative status of ethnic groups. In talking about the 2019-2020 period, many ethnic Montenegrins in the interviews highlight that they felt like their ethnonational identity was threatened by the SOC, the liturgies, and the interferences of external actors in Montenegrin politics. For ethnic Montenegrins, this period marked a decline in the sovereignty of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the state, which had a significant impact on the perceived status of this ethnic group. Conversely, it could be argued that ethnic Serbs were given a more privileged position after 2019 with respect to the one they had before. When Predrag (22, Montenegrin) said that Serbs "got a huge wind in their backs" thanks to the SOC-led liturgies and that there was an "eruption of Serbdom" in Montenegro after 2019, he was referring to the perceived status increase of this ethnic group. The changes in the respective statuses of these two ethnic groups resulted in intensified inter-ethnic tensions.

The survey responses from both ethnic groups indicate that few changes were noted in the interpersonal relationships of individuals post-2019. However, the interviews, which allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the participants' experience of the 2019-2020 period, suggest that individuals' interpersonal relationships were indeed affected by the events analyzed in this study. To understand the impact on interpersonal relationships, we must consider the issue that is at the

heart of the tensions among Serbs and Montenegrins, i.e., the debate around the distinction between these two identities.

It is important to highlight that the difference between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs in Montenegro is not apparent by any parameters, whether that be by physical features, linguistic characteristic, or religious affiliation. Therefore, to accentuate this distinction, individuals from both groups often decide to symbolically showcase their ethnic identities through clothing, like the example of Vasilije (45, Serb) who wore his “I love Serbia” t-shirt during our interview. The fact that the difference between these two identities is invisible to the eye has presented a challenge when it comes to claiming either of the two identities or concluding with certainty how individuals should identify.

The Construction and Malleability of Ethnicity

In addition to the above-discussed disagreement on key historical events, ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs are often in disagreement of one another’s identities. Many Serbs in the interviews expressed that they believe that Montenegrin identity is inseparable from the Serb identity, i.e., that all Montenegrins are ethnic Serbs. Montenegrins strongly disagreed with this premise, and some also remarked that many individuals who identify as ethnic Serbs are actually Montenegrin but are not aware of it. This disagreement on how the other group should identify has had a significant impact on the interpersonal relationships of individuals from these groups. Many ethnic Montenegrins, for instance, expressed how they felt pressured by Serbs to “admit” that Montenegrins are Serbs, too, particularly during and after the 2019-2020 period.

Sambanis and Shayo (2013) maintain that ethnic identities are socially constructed and at the same time resistant to change. The fact that members of both ethnic groups in the interview sample expressed skepticism regarding the identity of the other ethnic group points to the fact that ethnicity is malleable and not a fixed category. The question that arises from this analysis is not which of the two groups is correct in their judgment but why this judgment matters in the first place. In other words, instead of trying to infer whether individuals mistakenly call themselves Montenegrins or Serbs, we ought to wonder why these distinctions are deemed relevant and why they carry so much sociopolitical significance.

Many Montenegrins in the interview sample felt the need to defend themselves from what they deemed to be attacks on their identity by ethnic Serbs. For instance, because ethnic Serbs would stop Una (22, Montenegrin) on the street and try to convince her that she is a Serb by giving her a “history lesson,” she felt compelled to revisit her high school history textbooks and find counterarguments that would defend her identity. In other words, the 2019-2020 period made Una more engaged in understanding and committed to her ethnic identity than she was before. It is interesting to look at Una’s case using the theoretical framework provided by Sambanis and Shayo (2013). These theorists make a distinction between core and non-core members of an ethnic group, with the former being those individuals who feel particularly close

to their ethnic group and very distant from the nation, and the latter being those individuals who feel relatively closer to the nation and less so to their ethnic group. Looking at these definitions, we may say that Una was a non-core member of her ethnic group before the 2019-2020 period, but then evolved to act more as a core member of her group.

In making sense of an intensification of ethnic identification among non-core members, i.e., moderates, Sambanis and Shayo (2013) argue that violence plays a key role. They claim that an increase in violence may increase the level and intensity of ethnic identification among those who have previously behaved as noncore members of the group. While the events analyzed in this study are not characterized by overt physical violence, we can argue that they were perceived as violent by some ethnic Montenegrins. The frequent “attacks” on the street that Una experienced during and after the 2019-2020 period can be considered an act of violence not only against her persona but against her ethnic and national identity, which is why they elicited a strong defensive response in her. From this example, we can conclude that the 2019-2020 period made ethnic identity salient and led people to identify more intensely with their own ethnic group, thus setting the stage for a potential future escalation of inter-ethnic tensions in Montenegro.

While the findings of this research point to the conclusion that ethnic Serbs in Montenegro identify more with their ethnic group than the nation, this may not be characteristic of only Serbs in Montenegro, but perhaps Serbs more broadly. Several Serbs reported intolerance towards other ethnic groups, referencing history as justification for their hostility toward these groups. The interview where this is most clearly demonstrated is with Danica (45, Serb), who reflects on the war in Bosnia that she lived through before moving to Montenegro. Danica expresses that the war forced her to learn about her ethnic identity and led her to develop animosity toward certain ethnic groups, namely Albanians, Croats, and Bosniaks. She highlights that her attitudes toward these groups are a logical result of historical antagonisms between Serbs and people of these other ethnicities. Considering that Danica was born in Bosnia indicates that it may not be just Serbs in Montenegro who identify intensely with their ethnoreligious identity, but rather Serbs as a group altogether.

In this story, Danica also remembers her grandfather, who was a Chetnik, i.e., a Serb nationalist guerrilla during World War II, with great admiration and respect. She highlights that even though many people talk badly of Chetniks today and condemn their actions, she believes that they could not have been all that bad if her grandfather was one of them. Danica's story is an example of how historical revisionism, even when it stems from familial stories instead of formal education, can have deep effects on the way individuals relate to their own identity and to other ethnic groups. Moreover, Danica's story is a warning on how strong emotional attachment to ethnic identity may lead individuals to endorse right-wing nationalist perspectives and antagonize certain social groups based on ethnic identification.

Even though ethnic identities are deeply rooted in people's familial and personal realities, Sambanis and Shayo (2013) argue that individuals have the ability to choose their identity based

on social preferences. An indicator that ethnic identification may vary is the fact that sometimes even siblings identify as different ethnicities. For instance, Sonja (71), who identifies as an ethnic Serb also shared a story of the fight that she had with her sister, who identifies as Montenegrin, over their political views. While the findings of this research do not explain why some family members identify as Serbs and other as Montenegrins, the frequent confusion of the two is a testament to their similarities and the malleability of ethnicity. To understand how the tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins are both ethnic and political in nature, I now turn to a discussion of ethnopolitics in Montenegro.

Ethnopolitics

When it comes to local politics, ethnic Serbs in Montenegro unanimously had negative opinions on the DPS, which was revealed by both the quantitative and qualitative data. While many ethnic Montenegrins were critical of the DPS, several also expressed that they would rather support the corrupt DPS than the alternative, i.e., pro-Serb opposition parties. Anđela (22, Montenegrin) sees the DPS as thieves of the Montenegrin people's money, but she sees the pro-Serb opposition parties as thieves of both Montenegrin money *and* identity. Anđela's remarks exemplify the aforementioned point about how ethnic identification and political orientation have been strongly correlated with one another ever since the 1990s. The fact that the Montenegrin identity has been associated with the DPS for the last thirty years is something that Predrag (22, Montenegrin) laments. Predrag expresses how his Serb friends and acquaintances are unable to differentiate between the Montenegrin identity and the DPS, which immediately renders him a DPS supporter in their eyes. Predrag's case is a testament to the strong correlation between ethnicities and political views in Montenegro and how these can manifest in a person's social life.

When interviewees were asked if they considered the ethnic identity of a politician as relevant in deciding whether to support or vote for them, many said no. However, a pattern was noted among Serb respondents who expressed that even though they do not differentiate between ethnic Serb and ethnic Montenegrin politicians, they do consider ethnicity as an important factor when other groups are involved. Danica's interview exemplifies this thought, as she notes that she would not trust an Albanian politician to lead Montenegro because of how she sees ethnic identity intertwined with political orientation and interests. Specifically, Danica assumes that regardless of how many generations this politician has lived in Montenegro and whether they identify nationally as Montenegrin, they will always be ethnically Albanian and harbor strong ties with what she refers to as their "motherland," i.e., Albania. Therefore, ethnic identification is not just correlated with political orientation but in some cases, it is also a pre-requisite for supporting or voting for a politician.

A correlation was also noted between ethnic identity and views on geopolitical matters. Both the survey and interview findings suggest that ethnic Montenegrins for the most part support pro-Western policies, such as NATO accession, EU membership, and the recognition of

Kosovo. The survey and interview findings also reveal that ethnic Serbs oppose these pro-Western policies and demonstrate pro-Russian sentiments. In some instances, ethnicity did not perfectly correlate with these views on geopolitics, as there were interviewees that identified as Montenegrin but were decisively anti-Western and/or pro-Russian. In these cases, an intense Orthodox identity was noted.

The above findings indicate that ethnicity is a politically relevant identity marker in Montenegro. The implication of ethnopolitics, especially in a place like the Western Balkans where identities have historically been used for political purposes, is that ethnic and ideological conflicts can be conflated. As Sambanis and Shayo (2013) point out, when cultural identities become politically relevant, the risk of a violent conflict increases. In other words, the politicization and polarization of ethnic identities makes an inter-ethnic conflict more likely, especially when individuals organize around both ethnic and political identities. Therefore, the strong correlation between ethnic identity and political views heralds the potential development of a larger scale conflict between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins in post-2019 Montenegro.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the effects of the 2019-2020 period on the interpersonal relationships and political views of ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How do ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs make sense of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and the ensuing protests? and 2) How have the sociopolitical changes in the 2019-2020 period affected their interpersonal relationships and political views? Through a mixed methods analysis of 193 survey responses and 24 interviews, this research reached conclusions that are significant for understanding the inter-ethnic dynamics in post-2019 Montenegro.

This study revealed that ethnicity is directly correlated with the perspective on history that individuals hold. The findings indicate that individuals of different ethnicities have widely differing accounts of key historical events, both recent and distant. The fact that individuals cannot agree on historical events that are key for understanding the present context of inter-ethnic tensions in Montenegro is an indication that history is continuously being written and rewritten. When paired with ethnic conflict, this historical revisionism has the potential to create significant ruptures in the harmony among ethnic groups. As Sambanis and Shayo (2013) highlight, when ethnic identity is made socially and politically relevant, ethnic entrepreneurs are likely to mobilize co-ethnics around issues that polarize groups along ethnic lines. The fact that knowledge of history is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity and political views in Montenegro is an indication that historical revisionism has the potential to lead to a more intense conflict among ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins.

While ethnic entrepreneurs, who are usually political or religious elites, play a key role in inciting ethnic conflict, this study sheds light on the role that non-elite actors play in perpetuating and aggravating inter-ethnic tensions. The study's findings indicate that both ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs felt that their identities were threatened in the 2019-2020 period, albeit in different ways, and that this contributed to heightening the extent to which individuals identify with their own ethnic group. The theoretical framework developed by Sambanis and Shayo helps us understand how intensified identification with one's ethnic group increases the risk of inter-ethnic conflict. The fact that many individuals began identifying more strongly with their ethnicity after 2019 points to the fact that the 2019-2020 period has set the stage for a possible escalation of the existing ethnic tensions in Montenegro.

The fact that the 2019-2020 period made ethnic identities more salient has led to a point where identities were increasingly questioned and disputed. In addition to not being able to agree on key historical events, this research showed that ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins are also in disagreement on the distinctness of their ethnic identities. This was particularly evident in the fact that ethnic Serbs repeatedly disputed the legitimacy of the Montenegrin identity and claimed that Montenegrins are essentially Serbs. Consequently, many ethnic Montenegrins felt compelled to defend their ethnic identity while also feeling increasingly more antagonistic toward ethnic Serbs.

The findings of this study reveal that the 2019-2020 period has increased the salience of ethnic identity in individuals' interpersonal relationships. The interviews revealed negative changes in people's relationships with acquaintances, neighbors, friends, colleagues, and family members. The data indicates that these negative changes stem from the fact that the 2019-2020 period marked a series of significant sociopolitical shifts that made ethnicity relevant in diverse contexts. The increased status of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro paired with the ousting of the DPS – which is associated with Montenegrin independence and identity – in 2020 led to the polarization of the two ethnic groups analyzed. In other words, the shifts that occurred in the political arena in the 2019-2020 period, with the pro-Montenegrin faction being replaced by a pro-Serb faction, have had a significant impact on tensions among ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs in Montenegro more broadly.

The findings of this study also indicate that there is a strong correlation between political views and ethnic identity. Whereas ethnic Serbs tend to support pro-Serb political actors, including the SOC, ethnic Montenegrins tend to oppose them and show more support for pro-Montenegrin actors such as the DPS. Furthermore, while ethnic Serbs have demonstrated anti-Western sentiments and being more aligned with Russia, ethnic Montenegrins have for the most part expressed support for pro-Western policies. These findings are in line with previous research, which has pointed to similar connections between ethnic identity and political views in the Western Balkans. However, the novel addition of these findings in this regard is that they demonstrate how the 2019-2020 period has made political views and their connection to ethnicity even more evident and salient among the population in Montenegro, which also reveals them as significant risk factors for a potential escalation of this inter-ethnic conflict.

In analyzing the inter-ethnic dynamics among ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins in the wake of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom, this study indicates that ethnic identities have become increasingly both socially and politically relevant in Montenegro. Furthermore, with the guidance of the theoretical framework developed by Sambanis and Shayo, this study has highlighted how the emergence of ethnic identity as salient can have serious implications for the peace and stability of post-2019 Montenegro.

Limitations

This study collected survey and interview data within a limited time frame – approximately a two-month period – which made it difficult to conduct a thorough data overview and analysis. Another important shortcoming of this research is its sample size, which is relatively small with respect to the population that it seeks to analyze. Future research should attempt to expand the sample size and undertake a more systematic data collection method that would allow the researchers to yield more generalizable results. Moreover, future studies should expand their research frame to consider other ethnic and religious groups, while also accounting for more

demographic characteristics, including diversity in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Another element of this research that is a limitation is the temporal distance between the events analyzed and the actual time of research. Participants were asked to assess the effect of the 2019-2020 period on their interpersonal relationships and political views more than four years after these events occurred. It is difficult to draw conclusions about events that happened in the past by relying on individuals' memories and personal accounts because this form of measurement is not reliable.

For a more thorough analysis of the inter-ethnic relationship between Serbs and Montenegrins, a deeper historical overview and sample is necessary. Given that the tensions between these two ethnic groups were not introduced but were rather exacerbated by the 2019 law, future research should consider how these inter-ethnic tensions have evolved over time while keeping up to date with the latest manifestations of this conflict.

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Appendix

Survey Informed Consent and Questions

Survey informed consent:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the research on “The Salience of Ethnic and Religious Identities in Montenegro in the period between 2019 and 2024.” The purpose of this research is to understand the effects of the 2019 “Law on Religious Freedoms” and subsequent sociopolitical changes on Montenegrin citizens. You will be asked questions about your understanding of the 2019-2020 tensions, your interpersonal relationships, and political views, as well as how that relates to your ethnic and religious identities.

The benefits of this study are that it will contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of the 2019-2020 contestations and subsequent sociopolitical tensions in Montenegro on its people. The study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life. You may complete this survey only once, upon which you may choose to enter a raffle to win a 50 EUR gift card.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop or withdraw your participation at any time, without penalty. If you choose to participate in this survey, your responses will be anonymous, and your personal identifiable information will not be collected. Responses will be stripped of any information that may lead to an individual respondent and will be deleted upon the conclusion of this research.

By taking this survey, you confirm that you are overage (18 years or older) and that you consent to your responses being used for research purposes only.

If you have any questions about this study or want more information, please contact:

Teodora Brnovic, Trinity College, at teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator at irb@trincoll.edu

Survey questions:

1. Please indicate your age in years.
 1. _____
2. What is your gender identity?
 1. Male
 2. Female
 3. Transgender Male/Trans Man
 4. Transgender Female/Trans Woman

5. Non-binary
 6. Genderqueer
 7. Gender non-conforming
 8. Other (please specify): _____
3. What is your ethnicity?
1. Montenegrin
 2. Serb
 3. Croat
 4. Bosniak
 5. Albanian
 6. Romani
 7. Macedonian
 8. Other, please specify: _____
4. Please indicate your mother tongue (please list all languages that apply):
1. _____
5. What is your religious identity?
1. Orthodox Christian
 2. Muslim
 3. Roman Catholic
 4. Protestant
 5. Jew
 6. Agnostic
 7. Atheist
 8. None
 9. Other (please specify): _____
6. What is your occupation? _____
7. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (If currently enrolled, select highest degree received)
1. No schooling completed
 2. Elementary school

3. Some high school, no diploma
 4. High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent
 5. Some college credit, no degree
 6. Trade/technical/vocational training
 7. Bachelor's degree
 8. Master's degree
 9. Doctorate degree
8. In the period between 2019 and today, what municipality did you live in? Please list all that apply:
1. _____

The following questions will ask about your views of the sociopolitical situation in Montenegro between 2019 and today. Please be honest when responding, and feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

9. How much do you agree with the following statements? (1 – Completely disagree, 2 – Somewhat disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree, 4 – Agree, 5 – Completely agree, 6 – Unsure)
1. I know what the Law on Religious Freedom (2019) outlined;
 2. I believe that the Law on Religious Freedom (2019) was just;
 3. I supported the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 2019-2020 protests;
 4. I supported the political opposition (anti DPS) during the 2019 and 2020 protests;
 5. I had a neutral stance during the 2019-2020 protests;
 6. I was not neutral during the 2019-2020 protests but I disagreed with both sides of the conflict

The following questions will ask about your interpersonal relationships. Please be honest when responding, and feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

10. How much do you agree with the following statements? (1 – Completely disagree, 2 – Somewhat disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree, 4 – Agree, 5 – Completely agree, 6 – Unsure)
1. The 2019-2020 protests impacted my friendships
 2. The 2019-2020 protests impacted my family relationships
 3. The 2019-2020 protests impacted my workplace relationships
 4. My ethnic identity is very important to me

5. My religious identity is very important to me
6. It is important to me that my partner/significant other is of the same ethnic identity as me
7. It is important to me that my partner/significant other is of the same religious identity as me

The following questions will ask about your political views. Please be honest when responding, and feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

11. How much do you agree with the following statements? (1 – Completely disagree, 2 – Somewhat disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree, 4 – Agree, 5 – Completely agree, 6 – Unsure)

1. The 2019-2020 protests made me get more involved in local politics
2. The 2019-2020 protests made me get more involved in international politics
3. I supported DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists) during 2019-2020 protests
4. I supported DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists) after the 2019-2020 protests
5. I supported the expert government elected in 2020 (coalition of the following parties: For the Future of Montenegro, Peace is Our Nation and In Black and White)
6. I supported PES (Movement Europe Now) in the 2023 elections
7. I trust the current Montenegrin government
8. I believe Montenegro should join the European Union
9. I support the decision for Montenegro to be a member of NATO
10. I support the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state

12. Would you like to be contacted for a follow up interview? If you select yes, you will be asked to provide an email address and will be contacted shortly.

1. Yes, this is my email address: _____
2. No

13. Would you like to be entered for a 50 EUR gift card raffle?

1. Yes, this is my email address: _____
2. No

Thank you for taking this survey! If you have any questions, please contact Teodora Brnovic at teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu.

Translation of Survey Informed Consent and Questions

Informisani pristanak u anketi:

Hvala vam na voljnosti da učestvujete u istraživanju „Značaj etničkih i vjerskih identiteta u Crnoj Gori u periodu od 2019. do 2024. godine“. Svrha ovog istraživanja je da se sagledaju efekti „Zakona o slobodi vjeroispovijesti“ iz 2019. godine i naknadnih društveno-političkih promjena na građane Crne Gore. Učesnicima će biti postavljena pitanja o njihovom razumijevanju tenzija 2019-2020., njihovim međuljudskim odnosima i političkim stavovima, kao i o tome kako se to odnosi na njihov etnički i vjerski identitet.

Prednosti ove studije su u tome što će doprinijeti širem razumijevanju uticaja događaja iz 2019-2020. i naknadnih društveno-političkih tenzija u Crnoj Gori na građane. Studija uključuje samo minimalan rizik, što znači da vjerovatnoća štete ili neprijatnosti nije veća nego što se obično susrijeće u svakodnevnom životu. Ovu anketu možete popuniti samo jednom, nakon čega ćete automatski biti uključeni u nagradnu igru da biste osvojili poklon karticu od 50 eura.

Učešće u ovoj studiji je potpuno dobrovoljno, i vi ste slobodni da prekinete ili povučete svoje učešće u bilo kom trenutku, bez kazne. Ako odlučite da učestvujete u ovoj anketi, vaši odgovori će biti anonimni, a vaši lični podaci neće biti prikupljeni. Odgovori će biti lišeni svih informacija koje bi mogle dovesti do pojedinačnog ispitanika i biće obrisani po završetku ovog istraživanja.

Popunjavanjem ove ankete potvrđujete da ste punoljetni (18 godina ili više) i da pristajete da se vaši odgovori koriste isključivo u istraživačke svrhe.

Ako imate bilo kakvih pitanja o ovoj studiji ili želite više informacija, kontaktirajte:

Teodora Brnović, Trinity College, na teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu

Ili kontaktirajte Trinity College IRB administratora na irb@trincoll.edu

Pitanja ankete:

1. Koliko imate godina?

a. _____

2. Koji je vaš rodni identitet?

a. Muško

c. Žensko

d. Transrodni muškarac/Trans muškarac

e. Transrodna žena/Trans žena

f. Nebinarna osoba

g. Genderqueer

h. Drugo (navesti): _____

3. Koje ste nacionalnosti?

a. Crnogorske

b. Srpske

c. Hrvatske

d. Bošnjačke

e. Albanske

f. Romske

g. Makedonske

h. Drugo (navesti): _____

4. Koji je vaš maternji jezik:

a. _____

5. Koje je vaše vjersko opredjeljenje?

a. Pravoslavlje

b. Islam

c. Katoličanstvo

d. Protestantizam

e. Judeizam

f. Agnosticizam

g. Ateizam

h. Nijedan

i. Drugo (navesti): _____

6. Koje je vaše zanimanje?

a.

7. Koji je najviši stepen obrazovanja koji ste završili? (Ako ste trenutno upisani, izaberite najvišu diplomu dobijenu)

a. Nedovršeno osnovno školovanje

b. Osnovna škola

c. Dio srednje škole, bez diplome

d. Završena srednja škola, diploma ili ekvivalent

- e. Dio fakulteta, bez diplome
- f. Trgovinska/tehnička/stručna obuka
- g. Diploma više škole (fakultet, univerzitet)
- h. Magistrirat
- i. Doktorska diploma

8. U kojoj ste opštini živjeli u periodu od 2019. do danas?

a. _____

9. Sljedeća pitanja će biti o vašim viđenjima društveno-političke situacije u Crnoj Gori od 2019. do danas. Budite iskreni kada odgovarate i slobodno preskočite ona pitanja na koja ne želite da odgovorite.

10. Koliko se slažete sa sledećim tvrdnjama? (1 – U potpunosti se ne slažem, 2 – Donekle se ne slažem, 3 – Niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 – Slažem se, 5 – Potpuno se slažem, 6 – Nisam siguran/na)

- a. Znam šta je podrazumijevao Zakon o slobodi veroispovesti (2019);
- b. Smatram da je Zakon o slobodi veroispovesti (2019) bio pravedan;
- c. Podržavao/la sam stav Srpske pravoslavne crkve na protestima 2019-2020.;
- d. Podržavao/la sam političku opoziciju koja se pridružila protestima 2019. i 2020. godine;
- e. Iao/la sam neutralan stav tokom protesta 2019-2020.;
- f. Nisam bio/la neutralan/na tokom protesta 2019-2020, ali nisam ni podržavao/la ni jednu ni drugu stranu sukoba

11. Sljedeća pitanja će biti o vašim međuljudskim odnosima. Budite iskreni kada odgovarate i slobodno preskočite sva pitanja zbog kojih se osećate neprijatno.

12. Koliko se slažete sa sljedećim tvrdnjama? (1 – U potpunosti se ne slažem, 2 – Donekle se ne slažem, 3 – Niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 – Slažem se, 5 – Potpuno se slažem, 6 – Nisam siguran/na)

- a. Protesti 2019-2020. su uticali na moja prijateljstva
- b. Protesti 2019-2020. su uticali na moje porodične odnose
- c. Protesti 2019-2020. su uticali na moje odnose na radnom mjestu
- d. Moj etnički, tj. nacionalni identitet mi je veoma važan
- e. Moj vjerski identitet mi je veoma važan
- f. Važno mi je da moj partner ima isti etnički identitet kao ja

g. Važno mi je da je moj partner istog vjerskog identiteta kao ja

13. Naredna pitanja su o vašim političkim stavovima. Budite iskreni kada odgovarate i slobodno preskočite sva pitanja zbog kojih se osećate neprijatno.

14. Koliko se slažete sa sljedećim tvrdnjama? (1 – U potpunosti se ne slažem, 2 – Donekle se ne slažem, 3 – Niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 – Slažem se, 5 – Potpuno se slažem, 6 – Nisam siguran/na)

- a. Protesti 2019-2020. su me natjerali da se više bavim lokalnom politikom
- b. Protesti 2019-2020. su me natjerali da se više bavim međunarodnom politikom
- c. Podržavao/la sam DPS (Demokratsku partiju socijalista) tokom protesta 2019-2020.
- d. Podržavao/la sam DPS (Demokratsku partiju socijalista) nakon protesta 2019-2020.
- e. Podržavao/la sam stručnu vladu izabranu 2020. godine (koalicija partija: Za budućnost Crne Gore, mir je naš narod i Crno na bijelo)
- f. Podržao/la sam PES (Pokret Evropa Sad) na izborima 2023. godine
- g. Imam povjerenje u aktuelnu crnogorsku vlast
- h. Smatram da Crna Gora treba da se pridruži Evropskoj uniji
- i. Podržavam odluku da Crna Gora bude članica NATO-a
- j. Podržavam priznanje Kosova kao nezavisne države

13. Da li biste željeli da vas kontaktiram radi naknadnog intervjua? Ako izaberete da, biće vam zatraženo da unesete svoj email, preko kojeg žete ubrzo biti kontaktirani.

- a. Da, ovo je moja email adresa: _____
- b. Ne

14. Da li želite da budete uključeni u nagradnu igru da biste osvojili poklon karticu od 50 eura?

- a. Da, ovo je moja email adresa: _____
- b. Ne

Hvala vam što ste ispunili ovu anketu! Ako imate bilo kakvih pitanja, kontaktirajte Teodoru Brnović na teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu.

Interview Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in a study on:

“The Salience of Ethnic and Religious Identity in Montenegro in the Period Between 2019 and 2024”

The purpose of this research is to understand the effects of the 2019 “Law on Religious Freedoms” and subsequent sociopolitical changes on people in Montenegro. Individuals will be asked to participate in a 45–75-minute interview, answering questions about their interpersonal relationships and political views, as well as how that relates to their ethnic and religious identities. The benefits of this study are that it will contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of the 2019 controversy and subsequent sociopolitical tensions in Montenegro on its people. The study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop at any time without penalty. Interview responses are confidential, and all information that may lead to an individual respondent will be removed and destroyed upon the completion of this research. Interview transcripts will be stored in password-protected accounts and signed consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet that only the Principal Investigator will have access to.

Please note that you must be 18 or older to participate in this study. If you consent to participate and be interviewed, please check the following:

- ☐ I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty.
- ☐ I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential, and will be used only for research purposes.

Recording the interview helps me to accurately transcribe your ideas and thoughts. Do you consent to being recorded?

- ☐ Yes, I consent to being recorded.
- ☐ No, I do not consent to being recorded.

If you have any questions about this study or want more information, you are free to contact:

Teodora Brnovic, Trinity College, teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Print your name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.

Translation of Interview Consent Form

Informisani pristanak na učestvovanje u istraživanju:

“Značaj etničkog identiteta u Crnoj Gori u periodu između 2019. i 2024. godine”

Svrha ovog istraživanja je da se sagledaju efekti „Zakona o slobodi vjeroispovijesti“ iz 2019. godine i naknadnih društveno-političkih promjena na građane Crne Gore. Učesnicima će biti postavljena pitanja o njihovom razumijevanju tenzija 2019-2020., njihovim međuljudskim odnosima i političkim stavovima, kao i o tome kako se to odnosi na njihov etnički i vjerski identitet. Prednosti ove studije su u tome što će doprinijeti širem razumijevanju uticaja događaja iz 2019-2020. i naknadnih društveno-političkih tenzija u Crnoj Gori na građane. Studija uključuje samo minimalan rizik, što znači da vjerovatnoća štete ili neprijatnosti nije veća nego što se obično susrijeće u svakodnevnom životu.

Učešće u ovoj studiji je potpuno dobrovoljno i slobodno možete da prekinete u bilo kom trenutku bez kazne. Odgovori na intervju su poverljivi, a sve informacije koje mogu dovesti do pojedinačnog ispitanika biće uklonjene i uništene po završetku ovog istraživanja. Transkripti intervjua biće uskladišteni na računima zaštićenim lozinkom, a potpisani obrasci za saglasnost biće uskladišteni u zaključanom ormariću kojem će imati pristup samo glavni istraživač.

Imajte u vidu da morate imati 18 ili više godina da učestvujete u ovom istraživanju. Ako pristajete da budete intervjuisani, molim Vas popunite sljedeća polja:

☐ Razumijem da je moje učešće u ovom projektu u cjelosti dobrovoljno i slobodan/na sam da prekinem ili povučem svoje učešće u bilo kojem trenutku i bez ikakvih posljedica.

☐ Razumijem da su moji odgovori u ovoj studiji u cjelosti povjerljivi i da će biti korišćeni isključivo za svrhe istraživanja.

Snimanje ovog intervjua mi pomaže da vjerodostojno zapišem tvoje ideje i misli. Da li pristaješ da naš razgovor bude snimljen?

☐ Da, pristajem da ovaj razgovor bude snimljen.

☐ Ne, ne pristajem da ovaj razgovor bude snimljen.

Ako imate bilo kakva pitanja o ovom istraživanju ili želite dodatne informacije, kontaktirajte:

Teodoru Brnović, Trinity College, teodora.brnovic@trincoll.edu

Ili kontaktirajte administratora IRB (Institutional Review Board) na Trinity College-u putem mejla: irb@trincoll.edu

Ime (štampano): _____

Potpis: _____ Datum: _____

Svi potpisani formulari ostaju povjerljivi. Učesnici mogu zadržati prazan formular ako to žele.

Interview Guide

Interview script: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today, your contribution to this research is very appreciated. I would like to begin by asking a few demographic questions before getting into the main part of the interview. As a reminder, you may skip questions freely or stop participating at any point if you wish.

1. Would you please state your age?
2. Would you please state your gender identity?
3. How would you describe your ethnicity?
4. What is[are] your mother tongue[s]?
5. What is your religious identity, if any?
6. What is your occupation?
7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
8. What municipality do you live in?

Interview script: Thank you. I would now like to move on to the main interview questions. The first few questions will ask about your understanding of the social and political situation in Montenegro during the 2019-2020 period.

9. Are you familiar with the 2019 “Law on Religious Freedom”? In your own words, what was the law about?
 1. Why was this law introduced?
 2. Who were the actors involved in the decision making?
10. What does the church split mean to you?
11. Did you participate in the protests (litije) sparked by the 2019 law?
 1. What motivated you to join (or stay out of) these protests?
 2. How involved were you in the protests [if at all]?
 3. What were you protesting against? What were you hoping to gain? OR: What do you think the protesters were hoping to gain?
12. Are you familiar with the 2022 foundational agreement between the state and the church? How do you understand this agreement?
 1. Why was the agreement made? What kind of effect did it have overall?
 2. Looking back, do you believe that the protesters’ demands were met?

Interview script: The next few questions will ask about how the 2019-2020 social and political situation in Montenegro affected your personal life.

13. Have the 2019-2020 protests and subsequent political changes been impactful on your day-to-day life? Do you think they impacted the lives of your family and friends?
14. Have these events affected your relationship with religion?
15. Have these events (2019 to today) affected your opinion on Montenegrins and Serbs? How about other ethnic minorities in Montenegro?
16. Do you find it important to surround yourself with people of your ethnicity and why?
17. When choosing a partner, how important is their ethnic or religious identity?

Interview script: The last few questions that I have for you are related to your political views and involvement in politics between 2019 and today.

18. Have the 2019-2020 events affected your level of participation in politics?
19. Have the events that we have been talking about affected your political views?
 1. Have they been important for the way you understand local and global politics?
20. Do you consider politicians' ethnic or religious identity important when choosing whom to vote for or who to support?
21. Do you believe that the newly elected government represents your interests and the interests of most people in Montenegro?
22. Lastly, what are your biggest worries when it comes to ethnic and religious tensions in Montenegro? What do you think is at stake for you personally?
23. Do you have any questions for me? Do you think I skipped anything?

Interview script: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate your contribution to this research.

Translation of Interview Guide

Scenario intervjua: Hvala vam što ste pristali da budete intervjuisani danas, Vaš doprinos ovom istraživanju je veoma cijenjen. Željela bih da započnem postavljanjem nekoliko demografskih pitanja prije nego što pređem na glavni dio intervjua. Podsjećam Vas da možete slobodno preskočiti pitanja ili prestati da učestvujete u bilo kom trenutku ako to želite.

1. Koliko imate godina?
2. Koji je vaš rodni identitet?
3. Kako se izjašnjavate po etničkoj, tj. nacionalnoj osnovi?
4. Koji je Vaš maternji jezik?
5. Koja je Vaša religija, ako je imate?
6. Koje je Vaše zanimanje?
7. Koji je najviši stepen obrazovanja koji ste završili?
8. U kojoj opštini živite?

Scenario intervjua: Hvala. Sada bih željela da pređem na glavni dio intervjua. Prvih nekoliko pitanja će biti o vašem razumijevanju društvene i političke situacije u Crnoj Gori tokom perioda 2019-2020.

9. Da li ste upoznati sa „Zakonom o slobodi vjeroispovesti“ iz 2019. godine? U vašim riječima, o čemu je bio zakon?
 1. Zašto je uveden ovaj zakon?
 2. Ko su bili akteri uključeni u donošenje odluka oko ovog zakona?
10. Šta je za Vas značila podjela crkve na Crnogorsku i Srpsku pravoslavnu crkvu?
11. Da li ste učestvovali u protestima (litijama) izazvanim zakonom iz 2019. godine?
 1. Šta vas je motivisalo da se pridružite (ili da se ne uključite) u ove proteste?
 2. Koliko ste bili uključeni u proteste [ako ste uopšte bili]?
 3. Protiv čega ste se bunili? Šta ste se nadali da će protesti postići? ILI: Šta mislite šta su se demonstranti željeli da postignu?
12. Da li ste upoznati sa temeljnim ugovorom između države i crkve iz 2022. godine? Kako razumijete ovaj sporazum?
 1. Zašto je sklopljen sporazum? Kakav je efekat imao uopšte?
 2. Gledajući unazad, da li verujete da su zahtjevi demonstirani ispunjeni?

Scenario intervjua: Narednih nekoliko pitanja će biti o tome kako je društveno-politička situacija u Crnoj Gori 2019-2020. uticala na vaš lični život.

13. Da li su protesti 2019-2020 i kasnije političke promene uticale na vaš svakodnevni život?
Mislite li da su uticali na živote vaše porodice i prijatelja?
14. Da li su ovi događaji uticali na vaš odnos prema religiji?
15. Da li su ovi događaji (od 2019. do danas) uticali na vaše mišljenje o Crnogorcima i Srbima? A o ostalim etničkim manjinama u Crnoj Gori?
16. Da li vam je važno da se okružite ljudima svoje nacionalnosti i zašto?
17. Pri izboru partnera, koliko Vam je važan njihov etnički ili vjerski identitet?

Scenario intervjua: Posljednjih nekoliko pitanja koja imam za vas odnose se na vaše političke stavove i angažman u politici od 2019. do danas.

18. Da li su događaji između 2019. i 2020. uticali na nivo vašeg učešća u politici?
19. Da li su događaji o kojima smo govorili uticali na vaše političke stavove?
 1. Da li su oni bili važni za način na koji razumijete lokalnu i globalnu politiku?
20. Da li smatrate da je etnički ili vjerski identitet političara važan kada birate za koga ćete glasati ili koga ćete podržati?
21. Da li vjerujete da novoizabrana vlast u Crnoj Gori zastupa vaše interese i interese građanske većine?
22. Na kraju, koje su vaše najveće brige kada su u pitanju etničke i vjerske tenzije u Crnoj Gori?
23. Da li imate neka pitanja za mene? Da li mislite da sam nešto preskočila?

Scenario intervjua: Hvala vam puno što ste odvojili vrijeme da razgovarate sa mnom danas. Zaista cijenim vaš doprinos ovom istraživanju.