



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro social briefing:
Attacks on civil society organizations - a feature of dictatorships
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Attacks on civil society organizations - a feature of dictatorships

Summary

The real non-governmental sector is currently the target of criticism from the Montenegrin Prime Minister (PM). A man who will not participate in the next government tries to maintain his position by focusing on the fight against healthy critical thought. Additionally, the way he does it is extremely problematic and indicates that he wants to subjugate Montenegrin society to his vanity, ego and immature ambitions. The criminalization of all those who think differently is an act that is dangerous and that is characteristic of dictatorial regimes in which they are stigmatized. The public's response to this kind of behavior nevertheless indicates that a healthy fabric of society exists and will survive, despite the single-mindedness that has grown on the basis of a false sense of power.

Introduction

Recently, the Montenegrin PM in his technical mandate, who is counting his last days in that position, in his author's text in the so-called independent media, marked the representatives of the civil sector as a part of "criminal octopus".¹ In the problematic text, it is stated that the "criminal octopus is not only made up of people with a criminal background, they have now more or less become known to the public. The problem and confusion is caused by those active actors of the public scene who work in many institutions, organizations or individually, presenting themselves as "independent", people from business or often as civil sector..."² This text caused numerous reactions, but first of all, the question arises, why is the civil sector the PM's target?

¹ The prime minister's author's text was published under the title "Octopus Cave: two lines about the equipment found in the Bemax building". (available at <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/666454/spilja-hobotnice-dvije-rtice-o-opremi-pronadjenoj-u-zgradi-bemaxa>)

² Ibid.

Why is the civil sector under fire from the PM?

Civil society organizations (CSOs), i.e. non-governmental organizations, citizens' associations and independent institutions, play a key role in the development of society and the encouragement of critical thinking, primarily through the strengthening of democratic processes and the involvement of citizens in decision-making on important social issues. However, in addition, the important role of these organizations is reflected precisely in the control of the government, so that the government is responsible to its citizens. The ability of CSOs to oppose bad governance, corruption and abuses of power helps to preserve the integrity of every society, including the Montenegrin one.

Nevertheless, the recognition of such a role of the civil sector did not prevent the PM from lashing out at that sector. In his attack, the PM specifically thought of those who are critical of him, and above all, he was thinking of the director of the Center for Civic Education, who during the previous months criticized his work and revealed his character. The text was transmitted by the media that represent pro-Serbian interests in Montenegro and are close to the Church of Serbia. That religious institution was also a frequent target of criticism of the mentioned representative of the civil sector. The fact that the Montenegrin PM signed a harmful contract with the Church of Serbia in which valuable Montenegrin state property was handed over to that church, brought him the favour of the abovementioned media. For example, the PM has never expressed a single condemnation of that religious institution, which is more concerned with national and political than religious issues and which recently organized a memorial service in Montenegro for a Serbian war criminal from the World War II who collaborated with the fascists.³ The Prime Minister remained silent on such degenerative and backward changes in Montenegrin society, but that is why he was very aggressive in falsely accusing the civil sector of participation in crime.

It seems clear why. Criticism of the civilian sector in Montenegro damaged his plans to rule based on theatrical performances, which he wanted to ascribe to himself the epithet of a fearless righteous person and a fighter against crime. Nevertheless, numerous scandals that

³ The SPC in Nikšić held a memorial service for a war criminal and glorified Russia, the liturgy was attended by Kovačević and Vuković (<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/665976/spc-u-niksicu-drzala-parastos-ratnom-zlocincu-i-velicala-rusiju-liturgiji-prisustvovali-kovacevic-i-vukovic>)

surfaced in the public indicate that he could be part of the corrupt elite that was involved in cigar smuggling⁴ and that is connected to criminal clans.⁵

Labeling everyone who opposes the opinion of a presumptuous leader as an enemy of the state and collaborators of organized criminal clans is a dangerous road to dictatorship. In addition, the setback of Montenegro on the way to the EU during the government of the current PM is a reflection of his policy, the goal of which is obviously not to join the EU. Viewed from that perspective, the goal of the PM's article is precisely to target those who revealed this dependence of the prime minister on the interests of another state and his anti-European policy. Therefore, it is clear why, through the aforementioned text, one of the most influential representatives of civil society is being tried to be criminalized. Undermining the credibility of such person would be only the first step in meaningfully diminishing the importance of the entire critical part of the civil sector dedicated to the European aspirations of Montenegro.

The road to totalitarianism?

George Orwell stated in his famous work that the totalitarian state basically has the ambition that every individual thinks the way the government wants, and that its main purpose is the destruction of freedom of thought.⁶ This is exactly what is slowly being tried to be implemented in Montenegrin society by a PM who was voted no confidence for betraying state interests only a few months after the formation of the government.

There is clearly a desire of the current PM, supported by the promoters of the nationalist idea of a "Serbian world", to crush all resistance, especially the free-thinking of representatives of civil society, to achieve complete government control over all forms of social consciousness and to prohibit the existence of pluralism of thought in the country.

On the scene is the systematic suppression of independent organizations. The motives for such attacks by a man who has no authority, but wants to achieve it by force, are in an attempt to eliminate any form of opposition. By reducing the freedom of expression, controlling information and limiting the rights and freedoms of citizens, as well as limiting the activities of

4 Abazović knew about cigarette smuggling, crime is behind the minority government (<https://gradski.me/abazovic-je-znao-za-sverc-cigareta-iza-manjinske-vlade-stoji-kriminal/>)

5 SKY correspondence: Members of the criminal clan get Abazovic the encrypted phone he was looking for? (<https://www.standard.co.me/politika/sky-prepiska-clanovi-kriminalnog-klana-nabavljaju-abazovicu-kriptovani-telefon-koji-je-trazio/>)

⁶ Orwell, G. (2021). Nineteen Eighty-Four. Penguin Classics.

NGOs, which work for the benefit of citizens, the aim is to weaken civil society and reduce the mechanisms for supervision of the government.

On the road to dictatorship and totalitarianism, the government wants power over all aspects of citizens' lives, including over the media, education, and civil society organizations. For this reason, the support and protection of independent NGOs, as well as the promotion of democratic values, civil freedoms and political pluralism in Montenegro, are important in order to prevent such a path. Citizens and society as a whole have a responsibility to preserve democratic values and ensure that the institutions of society are kept open, transparent and accountable. In that process, as well as in the EU accession process, civil society organizations play an important role in promoting democratic values, human rights and social progress, so their influence is of great importance. Hence, this provides a clearer picture of why the PM lashed out at the civil sector.

The response of the Montenegrin society

In order for the political system in Montenegro not to turn into a dictatorial one that stifles free thought and civil initiative, a clear response to such attempts is needed. And that response came from numerous addresses.⁷ In resisting the path to dictatorship, it seems that the entire citizen-oriented society was in solidarity. Support and solidarity with the attacked representative of the civil sector came from other numerous civil society organizations, independent intellectuals, international organizations and associations and numerous other free-thinking people.⁸

However, what is very worrying is that among the last to react were those who declaratively promote democracy and freedom of thought – some Western embassies. Even the independent media clearly called them out for not reacting.⁹ Their role in the processes that brought the current PM to power will remain questionable. Therefore, the impression remains that the embassies had to condemn the PM's authorial text much earlier in which he attacks civil

⁷ Condemnation of Abazović's attack on Daliborka Uljarević (<https://gradski.me/osude-napada-abazovica-na-daliborku-uljarevic/>)

⁸ The Montenegrin Prime Minister's orchestrated campaign against CGO and Daliborka Uljarević is causing regional concern (<https://rs.boell.org/sr/2023/07/26/orchestrated-campaign-montenegrin-pm-against-cce-and-daliborka-uljarevic-sparks-regional>)

⁹ Dritan threatens, they remain silent (<https://www.antenam.net/politika/293657-dritan-prijeti-one-cute>)

society, given that such outbursts were harshly criticized by them until the change of the previous government. The ambassadors of Great Britain, the United States and the European Union have been called in particular. Those independent media correctly stated that they spoke only sporadically about all the uncivilized and undemocratic outbursts of the PM, using general formulations that relativized his behaviour, or they completely kept silent about his attempts to intimidate the unwarranted.¹⁰

In addition to the PM's constant pressure on the state institutions such as Prosecutor's Office, he started public name-calling of people from the judicial system, intellectuals, civil activists, journalists, that is, all those who have a different opinion than him. The latest in a series of his attacks and false accusations is the director of the Center for Civic Education. Through these attacks, he wants to cover up his anti-state policy, and possibly his involvement in crime. What is certain is that the PM's indisputable aspiration is towards ideological indoctrination in order to suppress individuality and critical thinking. However, the Montenegrin society opposes this aspiration for now.

¹⁰ Ibid.