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# **Winds of Change**

## **A Comprehensive Analysis of 2023 Presidential Elections in Czech Republic and Montenegro**

**Espresso**

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## 1. Introduction

In the first months of 2023, two European countries held presidential elections that, in many ways, could be seen as momentous. First, in January, the Czech Republic put an end to three decades of an almost uninterrupted and progressively more pro-Russian rule of Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman – the country's key political power duo – by electing Petr Pavel, a former NATO chief and a political outsider. Then, in April, Montenegro mounted an extraordinary feat when its people voted Milo Đukanović, perhaps the country's most consequential politician of the last 30 years, out of office and opted instead for Jakov Milatović, a 36-year-old economist and relative political novice. In a sense, both elections had an epoch-ending air to the degree that they indicated a growing desire to move away from personalities intimately associated with the two countries' governance since the end of the Cold War. This is especially true, considering that both candidates won with an unprecedented voter margin, securing 58 and 58,9% of the ballot, respectively. Both elections also took place against the backdrop of increasing social polarization, made only worse in the wake of the War in Ukraine and the related ramp-up of Russian hybrid activities in Europe and compounding economic woes. That such a context produced similar outcomes in two countries usually not mentioned as part of one conversation is a notable occurrence and worth looking into.

That being said, the elections were not identical. Describing both as black-and-white affairs that saw two post-Communist countries move avowedly closer toward the West – although tempting – runs the risk of glossing over important differences between, as well as ignoring major nuances within, each of the countries' election. Rather, to better understand why the two elections appear to bear resemblance, it is necessary to first properly understand each separately. Such is the objective of this policy paper: it explores the two elections deploying a uniform lens to provide context-informed and rich yet also comparable overviews of how the presidential elections in the Czech Republic and Montenegro went down. It does this by considering a variety of issues: from the countries' political systems and situations to the discursive and visual aspects of the elections to the role of Russian disinformation. Ultimately, the paper seeks to provide comprehensive accounts of the two elections but also maximize the possibility of elucidating key differences and similarities between them. While underlining the existence of undeniable contextual variances, the paper shows that the elections did share several important features, beyond what usually meets the eye.

This paper continues in three parts. First, a comprehensive overview of the position of president in the Czech Constitution and political practice is coupled with an in-depth analysis of the presidential elections. Second, the same approach is taken for the case of presidential elections in Montenegro. The third part summarizes both cases and introduces a comparative perspective from which certain conclusive points are drawn.

## 2. Czech Republic

### a. Constitutional and political context of the election

#### *i. De Jure Presidential Powers: the president in the system*

Constitutionally speaking, the system of government in the Czech Republic is parliamentary democracy.[1] In such systems, in contrast to semi-presidential or presidential ones, the locus of political power lies with a popularly elected legislature – a bicameral parliament in the Czech case – and a government that derives from it. The role of the president within such systems tends to be considerably limited, usually restricted to a number of ceremonial, representational and procedural functions. Such is the case with the majority of prerogatives formally granted to the Czech president. To illustrate, the president is tasked with representing the state externally, negotiating and ratifying international agreements, being the supreme commander of the armed forces, appointing and recalling heads of diplomatic missions, calling parliamentary elections, signing enacted laws, convening and dissolving the Chamber of Deputies (the lower chamber of the Parliament), or appointing and recalling the Prime Minister and the Government.[2] Although these powers relate to key political processes in the country, the president's influence over the processes is minimal. In most cases, the president acts symbolically: commanding the armed forces does not entail actual military command but rather bestowing state decorations and promoting generals.[3] In other instances, the president merely enacts or authorizes choices determined by other actors, as is the case with ratifying treaties already negotiated or dissolving the lower chamber and accepting the Government's resignation, both of which are governed by specific procedures – though it will be seen that the last point has proven problematic. To be sure, there are certain prerogatives that grant president more influence. Most notably, the president is the sole actor in choosing and appointing the members of the board of the Czech National Bank. He or she may also unilaterally grant pardons and commute sentences. These are, however, rare exceptions. Other similar powers are usually qualified, typically by the requirement of concurrence with other political actors.[4] The president, for example, appoints the justices of the Constitutional Court but only upon agreement with the Senate (the higher chamber of the Parliament). Likewise, he or she may also veto a bill, but the veto can be overridden by the Chamber of Deputies.

Therefore, formally speaking, the position of the Czech president is typical of a parliamentary-democratic system. A certain anomaly is the method of selection: the Czech president is elected directly by a popular vote, not by lawmakers, as tends to be the case in parliamentary systems. The election system itself is fairly standard: to qualify as a candidate, a person must either collect 50,000 signatures or gain the support of 20 deputies or 10 senators. The candidates then compete in a two-round contest following the rules of runoff voting: either one candidate gains more than 50 % of the vote in the first round, or the two candidates with the most votes face off in the second round that takes place two weeks after the first. Whoever gets more votes in the second round becomes the president. It is worth noting that the direct election has been in place only since 2013 when a change was instituted after a long series of attempts and purportedly in reaction to high popular demand.[5] Although no accompanying changes were made to the president's constitutional powers (save for making the impeachment process more difficult), it has been argued that the direct election alone might skew the political balance of power toward the president and gradually transform the system into a semi-

presidential one.[6] The fact that Miloš Zeman, the first directly elected Czech president, was frequently accused of trespassing his formal prerogatives gives some credence to this notion. However, as the next section details, overstepping formal presidential competencies has a long history in the Czech political system.

## *ii. De Facto Presidential Powers: the president above the system?*

Despite the rather narrow scope of prerogatives granted by the Constitution, Czech presidents have historically used their position to influence, sometimes significantly, the country's politics. A number of factors help explain why this has been the case. For one thing, presidents enjoy an elevated political-cultural status within the Czech society; a sentiment usually traced back to Czechoslovakia's (Czech Republic's predecessor state) first president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who was a consequential political actor despite limited formal powers.[7] As such, the expectation, boosted by the legitimizing effects of the direct election, exists that the president should be active.[8] At the same time, the Czech Constitution is not always specific in defining presidential powers, ensuring there is enough wiggle room for presidents to interpret their prerogatives extensively.[9] Finally, the first three Czech presidents (Václav Havel, Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman) were all strong personalities willing to take advantage of both the legitimacy and definitional latitude to assert their way, especially in times of political crises. What follows is the illustration of some of the most salient areas in which the presidents historically asserted their will.

*Appointing and dismissing.* One typical example concerns the power to appoint, notably government ministers. Although formally the president should merely authorize a candidate chosen by the prime minister, all three presidents sought to have more sway in the selection process. Both Havel and Klaus temporarily held out on appointing ministers (one and four, respectively), citing reasons such as disagreeing with their worldviews or questionable competence.[10] However, both presidents eventually appointed the nominees in question. In contrast, president Zeman went a step further: in two instances, he withheld his approval for so long that the prime minister (Andrej Babiš) withdrew the nominees and replaced them with apparently more acceptable candidates.[11] Similarly, in 2017 Zeman refused to sanction the resignation of PM Bohuslav Sobotka's government, effectively forcing it to stay in power.

*Caretaker governments.* Another major issue relates to forming governments. Despite the fact that the Constitution does not contain any mention of such a prerogative, Presidents Havel and Zeman made use of political crises to appoint a prime minister of their choosing and ask them to form a 'caretaker government'. [12] Although the objective in both cases was to stabilize the political situation and administer the country until the next election, especially in Zeman's case, the move proved divisive. While Havel's (PM Josef Tošovský's) government was made up of parliamentarians and lasted for a limited time, Zeman's (PM Jiří Rusnok's) government comprised ministers independent of major political parties and stayed in office for more than six months despite no confidence from the Parliament and even after an election took place. The move was considered a major presidential power grab, given that in appointing the prime minister, Zeman willfully ignored a parliament-derived candidate.[13]

*Foreign policy.* Finally, especially Presidents Klaus and Zeman sought to assert greater influence also in the field of foreign policy. There is no consensus, even among constitutional lawyers, whether the president has autonomy in foreign policy or must follow the line set by the government.[14] In light of such uncertainty, Klaus, for example, opposed the adoption of the EU Lisbon Treaty, despite the support of a majority in the parliament (and the rest of the EU), and withheld his ratification for almost a year.[15] Zeman, for his part, opted for an even more proactive approach, spearheading openly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese foreign policy at the expense of the generally pro-Western government line.[16] At its most extreme, this entailed praising the Chinese model of 'stabilizing the society', publicly proclaiming Russia's annexation of Crimea a 'fait accompli' or ridiculing the activities of Czech intelligence services countering Russian influence.[17]

### *iii. Political Context of the Election: what was at stake*

The previous section showed that the Czech president can, limited formal powers notwithstanding, act as a consequential political figure. It is no surprise that a presidential election, with a turnout comparable to parliamentary elections, is generally one of the most high-profile political events in the country.[18] That said, with more than 70 % of voters (a 10% increase from the first direct election) casting their vote, the stakes in 2023 appear to have been especially high. Three reasons suggest why this was the case.

*Personal qualities and ambitions.* Despite having won reelection in 2018, available data show that President Zeman was an increasingly unpopular figure towards the end of his second term, with the majority of population agreeing that the president did more harm than good to the country.[19] That being so, finding a more suitable president this time was a key motivation for most voters.[20] However, equally important for the election dynamics was the decision of Andrej Babiš, former prime minister (2017-2021), to enter the race. Babiš, a billionaire who owns 30% of the Czech media, is a highly divisive figure in the Czech politics, facing repeated accusations of corruption and harboring authoritarian tendencies.[21] His decision to run was often interpreted as an attempt to seek immunity that would shield him from possible prison time, as Babiš was at the time fighting a charge of fraudulently obtaining E.U. subsidies (in the end, he was acquitted).[22] More significantly, the election was a key opportunity for Babiš to secure a much-needed political victory after having suffered a series of electoral defeats.

*Eroding social cohesion.* The election took place in the context of growing polarization and diminishing trust in state institutions.[23] Babiš's premiership, coinciding with Zeman's (second) term, was marked by a growing incidence of anti-government protests. One such protest, demanding that Babiš step down, drew more than 200,000 people, the biggest number since the fall of Communism.[24] The Covid-19 pandemic also put a major strain on Czech society, as the heavy-handed approach of Babiš's government not only further chipped away at its popularity but also polarized the society into broadly pro- and anti-restriction/vaccination camps.[25] The situation was not helped by the bankruptcy of a major electricity and gas supplier (with one million customers) and rising overall inflation.[26] Though these factors precipitated Babiš's parliamentary defeat in 2021, the new government of PM Petr Fiala has not fared better. Rising prices and the influx of Ukrainian refugees in the context of the Russian invasion have boosted the increasingly radical anti-government protests, adding to a growing sense of looming unrest in the society.[27]

*Russian revisionism.* The final reason is geopolitical. In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it mattered a great deal what the new president's stances on the issue would be. A year before the invasion, the Czech Republic expelled 63 Russian diplomats after it was discovered that Russian agents had sabotaged a military arms depot in the country in 2014.[28] This was a major turning point after years of Zeman-sanctioned overtures to Russia, earning the Czech Republic a place on Russia's 'official enemy list' and effectively paralyzing relations between the two countries.[29] Moreover, after the invasion on February 24th, Fiala's government took an unequivocally pro-Ukrainian position, pledging material support to the country and championing successive rounds of anti-Russian sanctions.[30] Given the potentially significant influence, a president may exert on the country's foreign policy, it is not surprising that the War in Ukraine eventually became one of the election's key topics, and that the election itself was a major focus of (pro-)Russian disinformation efforts (see below).

## b. Analysis of the election

In this part, this policy brief analyzes major processes surrounding the presidential election. In sections 4 and 5, it discusses mainly the campaigns and strategies of the three most prominent candidates – Andrej Babiš, a billionaire and former prime minister; Petr Pavel, a retired army general and former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee; and Danuše Nerudová, an economist and former university rector – first in terms of discourse and then visually. Each of the sections is divided into two subsections, corresponding to the two-round system used to elect the president. Following that, sections 6 and 7 turn to detailing strands of Russian influence in the election – a major component – focusing on the positions and discourse of presidential candidates and disinformation channels, respectively.

### i. Themes and topics: discourse

*First round.* All three candidates sought to navigate the existing social matrix described in section 3, with their main themes corresponding to the three issue areas identified in the section. As such, there were significant convergences and overlaps in the candidates' focus before the first round, although with different emphases and tones. In the run-up to the first round, the central theme of the three candidates was clear: 'the situation in our country is not good; something must be done about it.' Pavel, for example, stressed that "nowadays, everyone can see that disorder, chaos, and helplessness often reign"[31] or that "everyone senses that there is something wrong: war, high prices, and uncertain tomorrows." [32] Nerudová's message was similar: "we are living through hard times; not everyone is doing well." [33] Of the three, Babiš painted the challenge most starkly, often using such expressive phrases as "omnipresent crisis [that leaves] marks on peoples' souls", "our country is suffering" or that "Czech Republic is falling apart" – never failing to add that Fiala's government, being absolutely helpless, was to blame.[34] Importantly, though this was less the case for Babiš (due to expected voter overlap), Pavel and Nerudová frequently stressed that President Zeman had largely been part of the problem, not the solution.[35]

Despite the shared central theme, the candidates differed in their proposed recipes to improve the dire situation. The differences were usually related to the candidates' past personal experience. Pavel's approach was retrospective, calling for a 'return to order and calm' – to a place where everyone is treated fairly and no one is above the law. To get there, the message went, a war-tested, realistic and

stable leader is needed, one that will get politicians to think about people again. In contrast, Nerudová was more forward-looking, suggesting that while the situation is hard, the country might use the opportunity to emerge stronger: “where will our country be in five years?” [36] Tapping into her university work, Nerudová postured as a young, energetic, and inspiring leader, bringing hope of a better, brighter future.[37] Babiš’s message was more chaotic. Although the campaign tried to portray Babiš as a good-old and caring friend, someone known for “helping people”, Babiš’s rhetoric focused almost exclusively on spreading negativity: pointing out problems, and assigning blame but rarely suggesting solutions.[38] As a result of this mismatch, the dominant theme consisted of an uneasy compromise portraying Babiš as the last stand protecting Czech citizens from the destructive politics of Fiala’s government (Nerudová and Pavel were painted as government candidates).[39]

*Second round.* Out of eight candidates, Pavel and Babiš eventually qualified for the second round, gaining 35,4% and 34,99% of votes, respectively.[40] The result caused panic in Babiš’s team: as most relevant candidates from the first round (Nerudová – 13,92%, Fischer – 6,75%, Hilšer – 2,56 %) pledged their support to Pavel, Babiš was put in a significantly disadvantaged position that did not seem to leave him even a fighting chance of winning.[41] This was evident already at Babiš’s press conference following the first round where he completely shed his friendly persona and launched an all-out attack on his opponent, remarkably likening Pavel to Russian President Putin (the press conference upset even some of Babiš’s former close allies).[42] In the two weeks that followed, Babiš not only doubled down on his previous negative messages (Pavel as a government candidate) but also, crucially, thematized the war in Ukraine as a central subject of the election. The war itself was not a major issue before the first round: although it featured in some candidates’ discourses, there were no significant disagreements over it.[43] However, it became the centerpiece of Babiš’s second-round efforts: having conducted internal polls that showed that what the Czech population feared most was the prospect of war and mindful of the necessity to attract voters of the far-right candidate Jaroslav Bašta (4,7%), Babiš’s team opted for a strategy that portrayed Pavel as a ‘warmonger’.[44] This strategy entailed attempts to associate Pavel with the prospects of the Czech Republic going to war – a staple was proclaiming that Pavel ‘did not believe in peace’ – and simultaneously paint Babiš as a peacemaker and diplomat, one who will never ‘drag Czechia into war’.[45] Paradoxically, this position led Babiš to a major blunder by suggesting that the Czech Republic would not help Poland, a close NATO ally, should Russia attack it.[46]

Although the ‘war question’ was certainly dominant, setting the agenda of TV debates, it did not much affect Pavel’s overall strategy. Rather, Pavel’s second-round campaign put an emphasis on ‘bringing people together’. Under the banner of “one community”, Pavel invited all voters who cherished “courage, honor, dignity [as well as] the truth” instead of “lies, fears, and chaos” to join his side.[47] This inclusive approach, which utilized the help of other candidates and multiple well-known personae, is perhaps best illustrated visually, as demonstrated in the next section.

## *ii. Themes and topics: visuals*

This section shows how the major themes and topics identified in the previous section found their reflection visually, focusing not only on promo materials and billboards but also, more generally, on *how things looked* in the contexts of the different candidates’ strategies.



Picture 1 (Source: Facebook[48])



Picture 2 (Source: Facebook[49])

*First round.* Pavel's message of 'order and calm' was visually clearly communicated. On the one hand, a great portion of videos and images posted by his social media accounts sought to invoke the imagery of the 'good-old days' when 'everything was just fine'. In these visuals, Pavel is usually shown in everyday situations, usually next to his wife (Eva Pavlová). They are often pictured dressed in ordinary clothes, and visibly relaxed and enjoying themselves (Picture 1). Examples include Pavel fixing a roof, cutting down trees, drinking beer with friends, riding a motorbike or, together with his wife, hosting a dinner party, cooking, baking Christmas cookies or ice-skating. Many of the visuals take place in the countryside.

On the other hand, the campaign wished to underline Pavel's prowess as a skilled and responsible leader. Although this entailed a few allusions to Pavel's military career, the premium was put on



showing the candidate in more civil settings, depicting Pavel as a dignified yet down-to-earth figure that commands respect and is both attentive to people's problems and able to provide good advice (Picture 2).

Danuše Nerudová likewise sought to channel her positive and future-oriented campaign visually. Accordingly, this entailed, in great measure, posting visuals evoking positive feelings: both the candidate and other people captured in various photos and videos are often smiling and exuding a sense of optimism. To underline her modern and progressive outlook, Nerudová was often portrayed surrounded by a group of (mostly) young people, and in the company of her youthful and duly supportive family (Picture 3). In fact, the candidate's two sons gradually became key actors in the campaign, appearing in a number of photos or even Nerudová's promotional video – a fact that only served to further emphasize the candidate's concern with making sure that the country's future is a hopeful one (Picture 4). Including such visuals also emphasized Nerudová's qualities as a mother, an approach accompanied by photos and videos showing the candidate next to elderly people or doing 'normal activities' (such as mushroom picking) that aimed at balancing the candidate's forward-looking message with an equal focus on the present (the same strategy applied discursively).



Picture 3 (Source: Facebook[50])



Picture 4 (Source: Facebook[51])

The mismatch in Babiš's campaign tone and rhetoric is well illustrated also visually. From the outset of his campaign, Babiš's team sought to present the candidate in a new light: though previously firebrand and known for aggressive, divisive, and often vulgar language, Babiš was now a person changed in all but one respect – that he 'always helped people'. This is why the campaign, in a pitch to attract a broader array of voters, initially banked on portraying the candidate as a docile, older man (Picture 5). However, perhaps as this strategy did not gain enough traction, the campaign eventually turned to visuals more in sync with the candidate's increasingly incendiary rhetoric. Therefore, only a couple of days before the election and two months after the original design, Babiš was depicted superimposed on the Czech flag, raising a finger, exclaiming, 'Stop the government and its candidates. Our country is suffering!' (Picture 6). As if foreshadowing his radical turn during the second round, the new design was eerily reminiscent of that chosen by the far-right candidate Bašta (Picture 7).



Picture 5 (Source: Facebook)[52]



Picture 6 (Source:Facebook)[53]

*Second round.* As Babiš radicalized his rhetoric, his campaign adapted also visually. For example, using the template from Picture 6 (and again imitating Bašta, Picture 7), one billboard read that Babiš

‘would not drag Czechia into war’ as he was ‘a diplomat, not a soldier’ – a clear attack on Pavel.[54] In a highly criticized pitch,[55] the campaign also put up a solid-black billboard, designed to evoke a sense of gravity, that postulated a (false) dichotomy between Babiš (peace) and Pavel (not peace, war by implication) (Picture 8). Notably, Babiš’s team also used screenshots of fake social media posts capturing members of Fiala’s government purportedly pledging their support to Babiš.[56]



Picture 7 (Source: spd.cz)[57]



Picture 8 (Source: Deník N)[58]

The visuals shared by Pavel’s team during the second round sought to strengthen the messages of ‘community’ and ‘coming together’. As such, the candidate’s social media profiles swelled with pictures showing town squares filled with Pavel’s supporters, Pavel side by side with his former opponents and celebrities or packed concerts organized to support the candidate’s bid (Picture 9). The overarching theme across the visuals was an attempt to convey a sense of unity, belonging, momentum or the power of many, often in a way that was evocative of the Velvet Revolution, a key democratic milestone in the country’s history, complete with time-specific imagery and music.[59] All this was in stark contrast to Babiš, who at the time gave impressions of increasing isolation: in what appeared to be a last-minute bid to attract Christian voters, a number of videos showed Babiš, all by himself, visiting a church and

wandering around.[60] Similarly, although Babiš also held rallies during the time, they were mostly in closed spaces, undermining a sense of inclusivity, and usually accompanied by smaller counterrallies that ensured that following media coverage would include friction and conflict.[61]



Picture 9 (Source: Facebook[62])

### *iii. Russian influence: candidates' positions*

As explained in section 3, Russian influence in the Czech Republic was one of the key contexts of the presidential election. Until his about-face after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, President Zeman had been an influential pro-Russian voice, with his departure putting the future of Russian influence in Czech high politics at stake. That said, in the 2023 election, pro-Russian voices were a minority, with most of the candidates, including Pavel and Nerudová, being avowedly pro-Western. [63] In fact, only two candidates seem to have harbored, or at least professed, views that leaned toward the pro-Russian side of the spectrum. The more prominent of the two was **Jaroslav Bašta**, former Czech ambassador to Russia and candidate of the far-right SPD (Picture 7). Although Bašta initially condemned Russia's invasion and supported efforts to help Ukrainian refugees of war, he frequently peddled Russian narratives, shifted blame for the invasion, and shared pro-Russian disinformation.[64] For example, Bašta likened the ongoing war to a "civil war", blamed 'US expansionism' or President Zelensky for the war's outbreak, argued that the West should "treat Russia [a nuclear superpower] with respect" and, given that 'Ukraine is unlikely to win', opt for peace to prevent a Europe-wide conflict.[65]

To attract additional voters in the second round, **Andrej Babiš** tried to walk a fine line between adopting some far-right and pro-Russian stances and not alienating his moderate voters.[66] Although Babiš tried to frame his views on the conflict in terms of 'putting Czechia first', he nevertheless mirrored a number of somewhat pro-Russian positions, including the views that the Czech Republic should no longer supply Ukraine with weapons and rather focus on 'helping its own citizens' or that the West should 'negotiate with Russia'. [67] Similarly, Babiš likened Fiala's government's growing efforts to stamp out (in great measure pro-Russian) disinformation to 'censorship' and 'new totalitarianism'. [68] This increasingly hardening position, together with Babiš's Poland blunder (see

above), was even noticed in Ukraine, with Ukrainian newspapers openly labeling Babiš a “pro-Russian candidate”.[69] Needless to say, Babiš's far-right turn did not move the candidate any closer to securing a victory; rather, as evident from data[70]documenting voter realignment between the first and the second round, the tactic outright backfired. While Babiš's rhetoric succeeded in mobilizing about 600,000 first-round non-voters, it simultaneously drove away his apparently more moderate voters: about 20% (ca. 430,000) of those who supported Babiš in the first round did not vote the second time around. Similarly, perhaps owing to SPD's lack of endorsement, Babiš also failed to attract the full support of Bašta's voters, with only about 60% casting their vote in his favor.[71]

#### *iv. Russian influence: disinformation during the election*

While openly pro-Russian attitudes and opinions were not much present in the candidates' discourse, the Czech disinformation scene tells a different story. There is a fairly widespread disinformation ‘community’ in the country that actively seeks to foster Russian influence by promulgating pro-Russian narratives and spreading false information.[72]This happens through a number of outlets, including disinformation websites, social media, chain emails, public protests, or the influence of some well-known personalities. Already in high gear after two years of Covid-related activity and, more recently, the war in Ukraine, this community also got involved in the presidential elections.[73] As per reports by Czech disinformation experts, during the first round, the disinformation efforts unfolded along the following lines: supporting ‘pro-Russian’ candidates (Bašta –predominantly, Babiš – partially) and attacking main ‘anti-Russian’ candidates (Pavel –predominantly, Nerudová – briefly).[74] Support for Bašta went across all the different disinformation outlets, with the prevailing message being that Bašta was the ‘only truly patriotic candidate’, the ‘only one who wants peace’, and that, once elected, he would ‘dismiss the government’ – a prerogative the president is generally understood not to have. [75] Bašta also appeared at a number of anti-government protests, many of which were organized by people linked to Russian influence activities in the country, where he frequently brought up such themes as ‘Fiala’s government being the puppet of Washington and Brussels’ or the necessity to ‘end the war in Ukraine to prevent global nuclear catastrophe’.[76] It is noteworthy that the disinformation community would, especially in the run-up to the second round, employ analogical themes and narratives in support of Babiš (as would he himself). However, before the first round, the community was split in its approach to Babiš: whereas some outputs, aimed at less radical recipients, presented Babiš as an *acceptable* candidate, many others vilified him and urged that he withdraw from the election in favor of Bašta (as did SPD leader Tomio Okamura).[77] As a long-time frontrunner in the election, Pavel was a primary and constant target of hostile disinformation efforts.[78] Numerous outlets sought to link Pavel to Fiala's ‘pro-Ukraine and pro-war government’, suggesting that the candidate would do the government's bidding, and, being a former soldier, would not hesitate to send ‘Czech people to fight in Ukraine’ – again, ignoring the fact that the president does not have such a power.[79] In correlation with her surge in polls at the end of 2022, some disinformation outlets also briefly launched attacks against Nerudová, pointing out, among other things, allegations of mismanagement during her time as a rector.[80]

Before the second round, the disinformation dynamic was simpler and clearer: Pavel became the almost sole target of attacks, and Babiš became the preferred candidate.[81] In terms of substance, the attacks against Pavel were largely *more of the same thing*. As detailed in a report by the Czech Elves, a local anti-disinformation organization, disinformation outlets boosted their efforts to paint Pavel as a ‘warmonger eager to declare full war mobilization’ and the ‘government’s puppet’, as well as to spread the view that the candidate was a ‘turncoat’.[82] The latter was a reference to the candidate’s

problematic past – before going on to become a NATO official, Pavel had been meant to join Communist Czechoslovakia’s special forces – which had irked some generally pro-Western voters.[83] These attacks were reinforced by certain public figures.[84] Perhaps most importantly, the sitting President Zeman echoed the main disinformation narratives when he, in a tabloid interview about a week before the second round, argued that Pavel “was the government’s candidate”, associated his ‘order and calm’ slogan with Czechoslovakia’s Communist regime, and problematized his military background by suggesting that ‘civilized countries are not led by soldiers.’[85] Babiš, in contrast, received large support from the disinformation community. As the Czech Elites report further shows, after the first round, a massive pro-Babiš disinformation campaign commenced, making use of numerous outlets and automated mechanisms (bots) that adopted and disseminated Babiš’s rhetoric.[86] Notable among these were the activities of a Facebook group titled ‘Andrej Babiš for president’, which was run by a Russian national.[87] However, as already hinted above, the disinformation community’s support for Babiš was not unequivocal: in common with SPD’s lack of endorsement, the organizers of large anti-government protests at the time did not fully support Babiš either.[88] As many prominent figures behind the protests gained importance during Covid-related protests against then-PM Babiš’s government, they stayed shy of throwing their weight behind their former enemy, suggesting that while he may well be the lesser of two evils, not voting was a viable option at that time.[89]

### c. The result and the aftermath: what came after

With a historic 58% of the vote, Pavel ultimately prevailed in the election, securing an unprecedentedly strong mandate. For comparison, Zeman had previously won with 54,80% (2013) and 51,37% (2018), securing the support of 2,71 and 2,85 million voters, respectively. Given the higher turnout, Pavel gained the confidence of 3,36 million Czech citizens, leaving Babiš trailing by an almost million votes. In his first address after the victory Pavel repeated his campaign discourse, declaring that he would only consider his presidency a success if, at the end of it, the Czech Republic had come closer together, “as one community”, to overcome its current hardships – a notable change from Zeman who, upon his 2018 victory, told his opponents to “shut up”. [90] In subsequent interviews and declarations, Pavel also stressed that he would seek to be an “active president”, albeit within the scope of his formal prerogatives.[91] While some two months after the election it is difficult to evaluate how this outlook is going to translate into practice, some of Pavel’s initial steps hint at possible directions and focus areas.

*Pro-Western and active foreign policy.* Within days after the election, Pavel – at the time still president-elect – made international headlines when he held a phone conversation with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. Though, officially, the call was not made by a sitting head of state (Zeman was still in the office), it still constituted an unprecedented move worldwide: with the exception of the US President Donald Trump, Pavel was the highest-ranking state official to speak with Taiwan’s officials in decades.[92] Expectedly, the move was vehemently condemned by China, leading PM Fiala to publicly assure that the Czech Republic respected the One-China Policy, nevertheless adding that it would decide for itself “whom it calls and with whom it meets”. [93] Then, already in an official capacity, Pavel spoke also with Ukraine’s President Zelensky, reaffirming the Czech Republic’s support and agreeing to visit the country.[94] Relatedly, in a BBC interview, Pavel let it be known that he would support arming Ukraine with F-16 warplanes (at the time an option ruled out by the US) or that he believed Ukraine ‘deserved’ to join NATO.[95] Together, these moves suggest that high-profile pro-Western foreign policy might be one of President Pavel’s key future directions.

*Reaching out and building bridges.* More than two months after the election, the societal situation in the Czech Republic remains combustible. Anti-government protests continue and turn more and more radical: in March, a group of protesters tried to break into the Czech National Museum to remove a Ukrainian flag – a spectacle disturbingly reminiscent of the January 6 US Capitol riot.[96] With a series of unpopular policies, including slowing the growth of pensions, Fiala's government also seems increasingly troubled and unpopular.[97] As in lockstep, Babiš and his party (ANO), the main opposition force in the Chamber of Deputies, grow more intransigent by the day.[98] Amidst all this, Pavel seems to envision for himself the role of a moderator, one who might help calm the situation by reaching out to, and negotiating with, different segments of the polarized society. Two steps he already took are telling. For one thing, Pavel held meetings with the parliamentary opposition regarding the above-mentioned pension reform and did not wholeheartedly support the government despite eventually signing the law.[99] Furthermore, Pavel has also sought to reach out to traditionally marginalized parts of the country, travelling to regions where he received the least support during the election.[100] While impossible to predict if Pavel's actions will eventually help to calm the situation, he might currently be the country's only high official in a position even to attempt it.

### 3. Montenegro

#### a. Constitutional and political context of the election

##### *i. De Jure Presidential Powers: the president in the system*

By the nature of the Constitution, Montenegro is a parliamentary democracy, a civic state with a citizen as the bearer of sovereignty.[101] Despite being the only politician elected by direct popular vote, the president of Montenegro has a largely ceremonial role. President's constitutional duties include representing Montenegro abroad, symbolically commanding the armed forces, receiving foreign diplomats, and many more.[102] However, the role of the president is not as restricted as it could be inferred. There are four areas where he can have an essential influence on the politics of Montenegro.[103] First, he must sign every act the parliament adopts to make it legally effective. The president has the right to return adopted acts to parliament for another round of revisions, while he is obliged to sign it if the parliament subsequently reaffirms its approval for the second time. President also can appeal to the constitutional court for revision of certain laws to check the compatibility with the constitution, which is the practice that can significantly slow down the legislative process. Second, president receives heads of foreign diplomatic missions and appoints and revokes heads of diplomatic missions of Montenegro abroad. Since no law allows bypassing the president, it gives him significant power over the foreign policy of Montenegro. Third, the constitution foresees the possibility of the president dissolving the parliament if it is not fulfilling its constitutional function. Many legal experts say that this norm is prone to different interpretations and that the subjective judgment of the president in a parliamentary system should not be a definitive measure of the law.[104] As will be described further on, the incumbent president used this option to dissolve the parliament in the heat of the presidential election campaign. That move caused polarized reactions from domestic and international communities. Fourth, president nominates three judges of the constitutional court (out of seven) and directly appoints the governor of the Central Bank of Montenegro.

Following the aforementioned points, we can claim that president of Montenegro has powers that go beyond the manifest ceremonial role. To understand the dynamics of presidential involvement in the

political life of Montenegro, it is necessary to keep in mind that the first change of governing political party since 1991 did not come until elections held in August 2020. Before that election cycle, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) held a complete grip over the political power in Montenegro. [105] Accordingly, every president of Montenegro since the independence referendum in 2006 has come from the DPS. That alignment of power was a reassurance that the president would inevitably follow the official government policy, without exception. Just after the parliamentary elections in 2020, Montenegro has been in a condition of cohabitation where President Đukanović (DPS) exercised certain unprecedented constitutional rights.[106]

## *ii. Political Context of the Election: what was at stake*

2023 presidential elections in Montenegro came at a particular socio-political moment. Parliamentary elections of 2020 completely altered the political dynamics by allowing opposition parties to form a new government. A plethora of different political parties with competing ideologies and programs joined the forces to form a government without the long-ruling DPS.[107] Among the parties that formed the government were the Democratic Front (DF), a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political party, considered to be a far-right instrument of malign foreign influence in Montenegro; Democratic Montenegro (DCG), a breakaway party of Socialist People Party (SNP), that was previously part of DPS; United Reform Action (URA), a civic platform that drawn many ecological activists and intellectuals. They were joined by initiatives founded by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SO C), an institution of foreign influence in Montenegro, with a very high trust rate within the society. The elected prime minister has been Zdravko Krivokapić, a non-affiliated candidate strongly backed by the DF, SOC, and the public sphere in Serbia. [108]After a year and a half of indiscriminate revanchism towards the previous regime, dubious handling of economic affairs, and the lack of strategic concept, Krivokapić lost a confidence vote in the parliament.[109] Following the interregnum period, a minority government was formed with Dritan Abazović (URA) as the prime minister, with the parliamentary support of DPS. This was viewed by many as an essential return to power of the old DPS regime.[110] Nevertheless, the support withered away after six months, and his government also lost the confidence vote. This is set to trigger a long-lasting political crisis, and presidential elections will eventually become essential to the turmoil.

The political crisis acknowledged by the international community has been threefold.

*Dysfunctional constitutional court.* According to the constitution, judges of the constitutional court are appointed by a qualified majority of three-fifths in the first round, or two-thirds in the second round of voting in the parliament. Since political parties could not reach a consensus on the candidates, it left Montenegro in an unprecedented legal vacuum.[111] Namely, the paralysis of the constitutional court meant that in the case of constitutional appeals no election results could be finalized and no laws could be adopted. The former happened with the local elections in the capital of Podgorica where the transition of power was prevented because of the five appeals to constitutional court.[112] International organizations have been urging Montenegro to appoint judges to the constitutional court as soon as possible, but it was impossible due to the polarization within the parliament.[113] The dates of presidential elections were determined in the period of paralysis of the constitutional court and it was not possible to determine whether any of the prospective electoral cycles will be finalized. In the heat of the presidential campaign, a couple of weeks before the elections, constitutional court judges were appointed, and its legitimacy was partially restored. However, it gave the court little chance to decide on matters of concern for the upcoming presidential elections.



*Government continues working despite losing confidence vote.* In April 2022, parliament voted in favor of the minority government led by prime minister Dritan Abazović. Previously, the opposition parties (DPS, SDP, LP) have supported the government under the condition that just URA cadre and non-affiliated personalities will become the highest officials. This government has not lasted more than five months due to its inability to handle basic socio-political issues, coupled with troubled legitimacy. [114] Because of the ambiguous character of legal regulations, this government has continued to function despite the loss of the confidence vote under the auspices of 'technical mandate', a notion non-existent in the Montenegrin legal system.[115]

*Disassembling the parliament in the middle of the presidential campaign.* As a consequence of the previous point, the incumbent president of Montenegro Đukanović gave a constitutional deadline of 60 days for the parliamentary parties to come up with a legitimate candidate for prime minister with the written support of the majority of the MPs. As they were unable to do so, Đukanović dissolved the parliament, leaving the country without any functional branch of the government with full legitimacy. [116]

The presidential campaign has been conducted in a polarized atmosphere, with significant abuses of public institutions and biased media reporting.[117] The first round of elections expectedly ended up with the incumbent President Đukanović as the frontrunner. He got 35 percent of the vote, leaving behind Milatović with 29 and Mandić with 19 percent. Therefore, Đukanović and Milatović advanced to the run-off. The two-week period between the election rounds has been marked by the harsh mobilization of voters by both sides. Đukanović aimed his efforts at the large Montenegrin diaspora and pro-European abstainers, while Milatović worked to ensure the support of the unsuccessful candidates.[118] In the end, the latter strategy proved more viable since the unconditional support of Mandić, Bečić, and Danilović provided a decisive advantage in the second round. On the other side, Đukanović failed to come up with a novel political offer, again leaving a vast majority of abstainers out of electoral affairs. In the second round, Mr. Milatović won decisively with 58,9 percent and over 41,1 percent of votes went to Đukanović. The transition of power went smoothly when compared with usual practices in the Western Balkans region. Đukanović publicly declared electoral loss and congratulated the president-elect, while Milatović celebrated surrounded by all the leaders of the parliamentary majority from 2020.[119] The president-elect officially takes office on the May 20, to serve his five-year term.

## **b. Analysis of the election**

### *i. Themes and topics: discourse*

The presidential elections are held in one or two rounds. If in the first round one candidate collects more than 50 percent of votes, then he is declared a winner. Otherwise, the two leading candidates go into the run-off election. Initially, there were eight candidates. This report focuses on Milo Đukanović, the incumbent president and the leader of DPS, Jakov Milatović, vice-president of the Europe Now Movement (ES), and Andrija Mandić, one of the leaders of DF. The procedure for registering candidacy sparked many controversies even before the campaign itself started. Namely, to become a candidate, one needed to submit over 8000 legitimate signatures, which is 1,5 percent of the sum of voters, and essentially around 5 percent of turnouts in the previous elections. This has been considered a very high

bar, discriminating against many potential candidates, therefore demotivating them from participation in the political process.[120] Much bigger turmoil was caused when the State Electoral Commission (SEC) refused to register the candidacy of Miloško Spajić, the leader of ES, on the grounds of him having Serbian citizenship, despite the legal provisions which preclude double citizenship, save for rare exceptions. This decision was seen as arbitrary because SEC significantly exceeded its mandate in investigating the citizenship of Mr. Spajić while refusing to do so in the case of Mr. Mandić and Mr. Danilović, who had publicly declared that they also held Serbian citizenship.[121] The wider public condemned the decision of the SEC, and subsequently, many non-affiliated individuals and groups decided to support another candidate of ES, Mr. Milatović.[122]

*First round.* As expected, the long-running governance of DPS personified by Milo Đukanović resulted in the joint efforts of other candidates to confront him. Orchestrated media reports, farcical televised debates, and a fake epistemic community of political analysts, all had set the agenda of the Đukanović's mischiefs as the central topic. This forced Đukanović into a defensive posture while limiting his ambition of proposing an innovative framework. A range of topics discussed during the campaign went far beyond president's constitutional powers, including foreign policy orientation, fiscal and monetary policy, and many more. However, all leading candidates had a distinct set of messages they wanted to convey to the voters, here presented as particular discourses.

Đukanović had a double-track approach of focusing on the good things from his previous mandates and discrediting other candidates based on their work in government since 2020. Regarding the former, Đukanović emphasized that the DPS and him personally preserved peace in Montenegro during the breakup of Yugoslavia, regained independence in 2006 and joined NATO while bringing the country to the doorstep of the EU.[123] His deliberately idealized vision of reality strived to focus on Montenegro's internal stability and external credibility. His discourse was harshly anti-Russian even though DPS still has a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia. As the president of a NATO ally, Đukanović strongly supported Ukrainian war efforts and joined all the sanctions introduced against Russia.[124] The unconditional pro-EU optimistic attitude has been somewhat shifted due to the obvious enlargement fatigue and the stall in the pre-accession negotiations. Nevertheless, joining the EU remains, according to Đukanović, the main foreign policy goal of Montenegro. He often cites the 'European value system' as the ultimate aim of socio-political transformations. [125] Simultaneously, he led a negative campaign against other candidates, most prominently Milatović and Mandić. Đukanović criticized Milatović for his work as finance minister in the previous government, stigmatizing his 'Europe Now program' as having devastating consequences for the Montenegrin economy.[126] He was also mocked because of his manifest inclusive attitudes contrasted with the background support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This tie has also been recognized by the international community.[127] Đukanović campaigned against Mandić based on his role in an attempted coup in 2016 and his pro-Serbian and pro-Russian attitudes, being stringently opposed to the core tenets of Montenegrin identity.[128]

Andrija Mandić, a leader of the far-right DF, tried to show a novel and milder version of himself. His campaign started with atonement for the brutal words he used in the past. His proclaimed aim was the reconciliation of the internally divided society.[129] Mandić's campaigns have usually been rich in Serbian propaganda and folklore, focused exclusively on the voters of Serbian nationality. This time, his discourse became more inclusive, tolerant, and oriented towards bridging the space between different

'pockets' of voters. Mandić even suggested that Đukanović, as his arch-political opponent, could be a partner if the new vision of reconciled Montenegro comes true<sup>[130]</sup> He refused to engage in negative campaigning, using all the available space to promote his central ideas. Many experts and the general public ultimately considered Mandić's alleged emancipation to be staged just for the sake of achieving greater electoral support.<sup>[131]</sup>

Jakov Milatović, in a somewhat similar fashion to Đukanović, tried to maintain a dual-track approach in the campaign. Great economic results when he was finance minister, significant salary increases, and public debt reduction were just some of the emphasized positive aspects. As an economist, Milatović focused on economic policy, although this area is mostly outside the presidential powers.<sup>[132]</sup> His discourse was pro-European, but also aware of the necessity of regional integration of the Western Balkans, being particularly supportive of the controversial 'Open Balkan' initiative.<sup>[133]</sup> On the other side, Milatović strongly condemned Đukanović for his mistakes in the past, utilizing usual mantras about Montenegro as the privatized state, the last European heaven for mafia and tax evaders.<sup>[134]</sup> He was also critical towards Mandić describing him as the other face of Đukanović's regime. Despite calling for the prospective support of Mandić and Bečić in the second round, he claimed that the presidential elections were marked by the cooperation between DPS and DF. The ultimate aim was supposedly to push Mandić into the second round where he would lose to Đukanović because of the inability to mobilize a sufficiently wide base of voters. Milatović even promoted a discourse that DPS will 'donate' a certain amount of votes to Mandić to help him pass to the run-off.<sup>[135]</sup> These claims have never been confirmed and, as mentioned before, Milatović ended up confronting Đukanović in the second round.

*Second round.* The second round of presidential elections passed in an unusually silent and calm atmosphere. Both candidates decided to go outside to meet potential voters directly rather than engage in classical campaigning. That said, there was just one direct debate between the candidates, and number of rallies was significantly lower when compared to the first round. The debate was generally considered to be of poor quality, rhetorically won by Đukanović, but full of straightforward insults such as 'thief', 'swindler', 'illiterate', and 'war criminal'.<sup>[136]</sup> Again, areas outside of the president's powers dominated the discussion. In the second round, the campaign became extremely negative as mutual accusations turned very serious, threatening to overshadow the significance of the presidential elections.

As many times before, Đukanović attempted to polarize the atmosphere by comparing the upcoming elections to the referendum on independence. He threw in a witty red herring by claiming that voters do not choose who will be the head of state, but if they will have a state at all after the elections.<sup>[137]</sup> Identifying himself with the preservation of Montenegrin statehood, he implied that Milatović is a clerical agent of Serbian and Russian influence whose only aim is to introduce Montenegro to the Open Balkan initiative where it will lose its sovereignty and become part of a new sphere of influence dominated by Serbia.<sup>[138]</sup> Much cited was the alleged comment Milatović made during the anti-SPC protests in Cetinje in 2022: who cares if ten Montenegrins die there? Although it was never confirmed that Milatović said this, it was used to denounce him as an opponent of the Montenegrin people.<sup>[139]</sup> Other than accusing Milatović, Đukanović focused on the large Montenegrin diaspora, particularly in Germany and Switzerland, but also the United States. Attracting them to vote would mean a significant increase in electoral support, with some expert organizations saying that the pool of those votes is as big as 120 thousand, which would be above 20 percent of all the registered voters.<sup>[140]</sup> Diaspora proved to be less influential than expected by bringing just a couple of additional

percent to Đukanović. Another area of voters to tackle was abstainers, a particularly sensitive category in Montenegro because the majority of them are pro-Montenegrin, but completely disenchanting with the electoral process, believing that it is rigged and unfair.[141] Đukanović tried to appeal to the 30 percent of abstainers, but he could not even marginally offer a framework to compel them to vote. Moreover, abstainers are traditionally not inclined towards the incumbent, so his efforts were even less prone to success.

As there were no other 'anti-Đukanović' candidates in the second round, Milatović wanted to present himself not as the vice president of PES and presidential candidate but as the leader of the whole movement to fully remove Đukanović from power.[142] In doing so, he received major support from the other candidates, Mandić, Bečić, and Danilović, who even publicly campaigned together with Milatović to ensure voters mobilization. That support was the key to victory as the winning margin was roughly similar to the number of votes those candidates received in the first round. Milatović did not spare the opponent from rough statements as he claimed that Đukanović was a politician of the past who privatized the state and abused Montenegrin people to preserve his position in power.[143] Aside from attacking the opponent, Milatović adopted the rhetorics of reconciliation, claiming that only through his victory people of all nationalities, confessions, and identities will be able to live together without a corrupted political system that has artificially divided them in the past.[144] By focusing on economic issues and deliberately ideologically neutral attitudes, Milatović presented himself as a candidate of the political center, a catch-all politician whose origins in the far-right circles would not affect the current state of affairs. He managed to convince many intellectuals and political activists of his intentions, which, combined with support from the other candidates, was sufficient to win the elections by an unexpectedly high margin.

## *ii. Themes and topics: visuals*

Presidential campaigns are, by default, personal campaigns. Therefore, choosing a distinct visual identity is of crucial importance. The three leading candidates decided to pursue different strategies. While Đukanović and Milatović put all the focus on themselves, Mandić instead used the space to send messages through all of his appearances.

Đukanović's posters asked a simple question: Milo, who else? He played the card of marginalizing the political weight of his opponents, emphasizing himself as the only valid choice. The red color symbolized Montenegro as it is the most dominant color on the flag, while the black outfit was meant to convey the image of stability and seriousness. The slogan 'European statesman, our president' declared that Đukanović is recognized beyond the Montenegrin borders as the personification of a country that successfully overcame the challenges of the post-communist transition. Limited identification with the voters through the usage of the syntagm 'our president' cannot hide the fact Đukanović has always maintained a clear gap between him and voters.



Picture 1 (Source: Antena M[145])

Đukanović's rallies were organized as spectacles, with flares, professional lighting, organized groups in the audience, live music on the stage, and much more. Numerous speakers would usually focus on local issues, while top DPS officials set the stage for the main speaker. Đukanović's speeches were long and burdensome, sometimes exceeding 45 minutes. He would tackle many topics from Montenegrin history and global political relations to current socio-political entanglements. Every rally began with the Montenegrin anthem and was full of Montenegrin flags, among other symbols of adherence to the state. The majority of rallies occurred before the first round, while before the second round, televised commercials and live shows were more prominent.



Picture 2 (Source: Facebook[146])



Picture 3 (Source: Vijesti[147])

Andrija Mandić indicated an opposite set of values manifesting both in messaging and visual design. His posters featured text in Cyrillic, considered by many to be Serbian, even if it has also been traditionally present in Montenegro. This is in line with the slogan of his campaign: 'For the future, for the tradition, for Montenegro'. His idea was not just to reconcile a society divided deeply on the fundamental questions of identity but to prove that it is possible to connect traditional Montenegro with the one oriented towards the future and prosperity. In the dictionary of far-right DF policy, traditional Montenegro is identified with rapprochement with Serbia and friendship with Russia. However, Mandić's image of a permanent smile and somewhat smart casual outfit signaled his wish to appear closer to the voters when compared to Đukanović.



Picture 4 (Source: Vijesti[148])

Despite the efforts to downplay his pro-Serbian affiliation and present the transformed Mandić, the rallies showed the other side of the coin. Namely, not just 'traditional Montenegrin flags' were present there but also Serbian national flags and flags of the SPC. Aside from the flags, omnipresent were songs about Kosovo and the Serbian character of the Montenegrin state. There was a clear discrepancy between words and deeds. Speakers at the rallies were usually top DF politicians appearing before Mandić, who delivered quite brief speeches. Among the most quoted topics were ending 30 years of Đukanović's reign, improving regional political ties, and allowing Montenegrin society to

overcome its divisions. Mandić was often surrounded by women and youth but speakers and leading figures within the DF were predominantly older men.



Picture 5 (Source: Novosti[149])



Picture 6 (Source: Novosti[150])

Finally, Jakov Milatović attempted to run a campaign inspired by US politics, although much less ambitious. His slogan was simply: 'We will succeed'. The main message of the posters was to stress the difference between him and his two main opponents who have been present in politics for more than three decades. Despite being a relatively new face in political life, he did not need a bombastic campaign to be taken seriously. He drew on his track record as the finance minister and his policy of short-term increases in salaries, deliberately neglecting the negative long-term effects. Economic populism has been paired with the political one, resulting in a value-neutral campaign, marked by the universal blue color and unrealistic messages of optimism.



Picture 7 (Source: Istinomer[151])

Milatović's rallies were vastly different from those of his opponents. No flags, music, or other symbols of affiliation to one national group were present. This was done purposefully to demonstrate that Milatović would be the president of all the citizens regardless of their identity. The rallies did not have many speakers as Milatović was the lone central figure without the heavyweight party infrastructure behind him. He was the only candidate to visit public spaces and directly approach voters without prior arrangements. Milatović's campaign was also specific because he maintained forthright communication with his followers on social networks, being very responsive and polite despite many anonymous users attempting to humiliate him. The period before the second round was marked by the presence of leaders of other political parties at his rallies, sending messages of unity in the political confrontation against the incumbent president.





Picture 8 (Source: Facebook[152])



Picture 9 (Source: Vijesti[153])

### iii. *Russian influence: candidates' positions*

Montenegro has deep and comprehensive historical ties with Russia. For many centuries, it has been considered to be inside the traditional Russian sphere of influence. Even now, many political actors in Montenegro maintain cooperation with Russian partners, often involving financial help and intelligence influence. This was most blatantly seen in 2016, when the plot to violently overthrow the government on the day of the parliamentary elections was revealed.[154] The coup attempt was the result of the cooperation of GRU Russian military intelligence agents, Serbian clerical groups, and individuals from Montenegro involved in politics, predominantly leaders of the Democratic Front.[155]

Andrija Mandić was among those sentenced for the coup attempt. In a paradoxical process, beyond any legal reasoning, although he was found guilty of intent to commit a terrorist act, he was still able to become a member of Parliament and subsequently run for president.[156] It is easy to infer that his attitudes are publicly pro-Russian, boasting about visits to Kremlin and 'friendship' with Vladimir Putin. [157] In the past, there were speculations that Kremlin financed DF political campaigns either directly or through Serbian proxies. During the presidential campaign, Mandić did not expose his pro-Russian attitudes, while it was obvious that his victory would mean an immediate increase of Russian and Serbian influence over Montenegrin politics. Nevertheless, Mandić and Democratic Front together with their media outlets were against the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia, relatively supportive of Russian war efforts, and vocal opponents of the NATO engagement in the conflict. [158] DF is a political party with a steady support of SOC, by far the most widespread religious organization in Montenegro. SPC was labeled by the US administration as an instrument of malign Russian influence.[159] Mandić was the only candidate to openly promote pro-Russian viewpoints.



Picture 10 (Source: Vijesti[160])



Picture 11 (Source: Al Jazeera[161])

Đukanović and his DPS have had a history of close ties with Russian political and business elites. In 2011, DPS signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia, following five years of extensive direct investments of Russian tycoons into businesses in Montenegro, mostly properties. The main political advisor of Đukanović has been considered a 'Russia's man'. [162] However, Đukanović never had pro-Russian rhetoric, claiming that accession to the NATO alliance is the overarching foreign policy priority. Before and during the presidential campaign, Đukanović reiterated his support for Ukraine, joined the efforts of NATO to supply Ukraine with weapons and equipment, and he aligned with all of the sanctions packages against Russia introduced by the EU. [163] On the other hand, it is a matter of fact that Đukanović and DPS never wanted to tackle the issue of direct Russian influence in Montenegro, allowing for huge waves of Russian migrants coming from Serbia, remaining one of the rare safe heavens for Russians in Europe.

Serious analytical circles noticed that Milatović entered politics backed by the SOC. [164] Even though this might suggest elements of Russian influence, Milatović's point of view on all the foreign policy topics was very clear. Namely, he condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine and expressed an unwavering commitment to keeping Montenegro on its geopolitical course, aligned with the EU policies.

#### *iv. Russian influence: disinformation during the election*

Russian disinformation is spread in Montenegro mainly through three channels. First, traditional media outlets such as television, newspapers, and web portals. Second, social media networks and communities of bots and trolls. Third, pseudo-epistemic communities of political analysts.

Traditional media outlets play a very important role in societies with underdeveloped political culture. Individuals are prone to various manipulative techniques because of largely unconditional belief in the media content. Media literacy being on a rudimentary level, even the interested public is left without basic tools to fight disinformation properly. During the presidential campaign, many media outlets openly displayed Russian propaganda (IN4S, Borba, TV Srpska, TV Adria, etc.).<sup>[165]</sup> In addition to that, outlets from Serbia and Serbian parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina played a supplementary role in spreading the propaganda. Those outlets cheered Russian war efforts and promoted the 'denazification of Ukraine' and similar well-known narratives.<sup>[166]</sup> Consensually, these outlets strongly supported Andrija Mandić in the first round, and then gave support to Milatović in the second round, but under the auspices of the fight against Đukanović. Coverage of Đukanović in that part of the media landscape was often extremely negative. He was labeled as 'Dukljanin' (old Montenegrin medieval state, synonym for crypto-nationalism), 'ustaša' (Croatian fascists from WWII), 'traitor of Serbs', and 'mafia don'.<sup>[167]</sup> Any narrative incompatible with 'Sputnik' guidelines was declared anti-Russian and anti-Serbian. The media also spread disinformation about potential riot throughout the election campaign and about Đukanović's plan to declare a state of emergency and arrest leaders of DF or PES, to import Albanian special forces reinforcing his positions of power within the police.<sup>[168]</sup> None of them proved to be true, but they served their purpose by instigating fear and deepening the polarization in society.

Social media networks, particularly Twitter, recently became very popular in Montenegro. Accordingly, political actors started using it for promotion and easier communication. The only presidential candidate to maintain a direct presence on social media was Jakov Milatović. Other candidates used either party profiles or personal profiles run by PR teams.<sup>[169]</sup> DPS and DF both employed an army of bots and trolls to contaminate and jam the communication channels, spreading the influence of disinformation.<sup>[170]</sup> Even traditional media often failed to fact-check information from social media, which led to complete confusion in the public sphere. However, the majority of fake news came through the Russian communications application Telegram and certain extremist groups gathering in the virtual communities within the application.<sup>[171]</sup> There, we could read about the triumphant Russian campaign in Ukraine, support of Putin for DF in the presidential elections but also that Đukanović has escaped from the country in the dawn of the second round of elections, or that mujahedeen and Ukrainian fighters are migrating to Montenegro to prevent power transition. Fortunately, independent fact-checkers quickly discovered and enlisted all the malign sources of information.<sup>[172]</sup>

Finally, political activists disguised as academics, analysts, and civil society members, participated in the proliferation of Russian disinformation. Utilizing all the aforementioned communication channels, they formed a fake epistemic group that, under the mask of professionalism, hid political agitation and for-profit work for the political parties. Many TV shows in Montenegro and Serbia served exclusively as machines to promote primarily Andrija Mandić, then Jakov Milatović.<sup>[173]</sup> In doing so, various experts broke all the possible ethical codes, academic principles, and even legal norms.

### c. The aftermath: what came after

The transition of power after the presidential election went smoothly. On election eve, Đukanović accepted Milatović's victory without any ambition to dispute the result.<sup>[174]</sup> Milatović was celebrating in the company of almost all the leaders of the victorious parliamentary majority from 2020. He said that it was not just his victory but the collective victory of all the involved parties and the whole of Montenegro. Moreover, he announced that his term would be marked by the initiation of the society-wide dialogue to overcome the deepest divisions within the Montenegrin population.<sup>[175]</sup>

Milatović used the international attention he captured to openly repeat his principles in foreign policy: pro-EU, pro-NATO, and pro-regional integration. Milatović immediately sparked controversy among the Serbs because he reiterated unpopular opinions about the Srebrenica genocide, Russian aggression, and many topics where far-right politics would push for alternative, revisionist explanations and denial.<sup>[176]</sup> Aside from the declarative support for the major foreign policy aims, Milatović made certain steps that were considered contrary to what he announced during the campaign. First, although there is no legal obligation for the president to suspend membership in a political party, it is a sign of good political will and a reliable indicator that one wants to be a president for all the citizens. Milatović announced that he would not step down from the position of vice president of PES, declaring his ambition to continue his work in party politics.<sup>[177]</sup> Second, he refused to continue the tradition of holding the inaugural ceremony in the old royal capital of Cetinje, citing security risks. The ceremony will be held for the first time in Podgorica.<sup>[178]</sup> Third, even though he still has not taken office, Milatović rushed to Murino for the commemoration of the victims of the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, offering an excuse to the families in the name of Montenegro.<sup>[179]</sup> All three moves are quite contrary to the character of the presidency proclaimed during the campaign.

The electoral cycle in Montenegro continues at a steady pace. Snap parliamentary elections are to be held on June 11, with DPS and PES again being the frontrunners. In the situation the judiciary's functioning is limited, this will be another polarized and polarizing campaign conducted in the conditions of blurred legitimacy, lack of reforms of electoral legislation, and abuses of public institutions.

## 4. Conclusion

The overall aim of this paper was to demonstrate the similarities of democratic political processes in the environments of differing levels of political culture, media literacy, societal coherence, and geostrategic importance. Many factors shaping presidential campaigns are shared between the Czech Republic and Montenegro, even if there also exist some major differences. Nevertheless, this paper utilized both systemic (macro) and actor-based (micro) perspectives that enabled us to draw seven conclusive points.

First, the political systems of the two countries regarding the role and powers of the president are strikingly similar: *de iure* parliamentary democracy, *de facto* semi-presidential. On paper, the two parliamentary democracies confine the president to a ceremonial role, representing the country

abroad, commanding the armed forces, and signing international treaties. On the other side, president's influence on actual policymaking is allowed through limited power over legislative procedures, the exclusive right to appoint heads of diplomatic missions, choose the governor of the central bank, and appoint judges of the constitutional court, among others. Czech constitution is somewhat more reductive than Montenegrin when it comes to presidential powers since for all the most important decisions president either needs to follow recommendations of legislative authorities or is the last, symbolic instance of decision-making without essential prerogative to change the decision. Montenegrin constitution provides the president with the relatively arbitrary power to dissolve the (unicameral) parliament if the parliamentary majority is not able to propose a 'legitimate bearer of mandate' to form a government. The decision on the legitimacy of a candidate is purely in the hands of the president, which gives him essential power to influence the process. However, just after considering the history of presidents exceeding their mandates, we can claim the semi-presidential nature of the system. The history of charismatic leaders in the Czech Republic from Masaryk to Zeman witnesses significant presidential influence on both domestic (appointment of governments, etc.) and foreign policy.

Second, presidential elections were held in times of political turmoil. International political relations have been severely disrupted by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and aggravated by the Chinese opportunistic approach to the situation. European Union has been searching for a redefinition of its position in the new environment, leaning towards the increase of strategic autonomy. Smaller countries like the Czech Republic have been exposed to malign Russian and Chinese influence that polarized the society resulting in the loss of confidence in state institutions. Babiš's term in office made the country more vulnerable and open to third-party interference. Coupled with global 'black swans' and his misguided economic moves, which continued in times of Fiala's government, it was just a matter of time before harsh anti-government protests took place. When aggression in Ukraine started, Montenegro (and the whole region) was pushed to the margins of European enlargement policy, leaving the country prone to the traditionally strong Russian influence. Political forces backed by the Serbian state and church, among other actors, brought down the longest-ruling party in Europe, consequently causing a progressive disintegration of all the branches of power. Presidential elections have been held in the conditions of dissolved parliament, a government that lost the confidence vote, and a constitutional court without a sufficient number of judges for effective work.

Third, despite the differing levels of political culture, many similar topics and narratives were featured in both presidential campaigns. Among the most prominent was the cult of the leader, whereby candidates' quotidian traits were shown as essential prerequisites for the function of the president. During the campaign in the Czech Republic, the image of Nerudová was built around her being a successful mother and academic Pavel was seen cooking Christmas meals and riding a motorbike. In Montenegro, Đukanović was often seen in the company of his grandson while Mandić was picking potatoes in the field. Campaigns in both countries shared a choice in the binomial distinctions for the prospective president: status quo/change; pro-EU/pro-Russian; support for Ukraine/isolationist; focus on economy/focus on politics. Although simplified, these narratives were present in campaigns in both countries, together with the tendency to extend the role of the president beyond its legal limits, with heated discussions on topics that fall outside the scope of presidential powers.

Fourth, the phenomenon of negative campaigning was present in both cases. Particularly in the second rounds, we could summarize the candidates' approaches: 'vote for me so you prevent the other from becoming president. During the first round, far-right candidates were ostracized. Bašta in the Czech

Republic and Mandić in Montenegro were sanctioned because of their alleged closeness to Russian politics. Accusations in the second round were much more serious. Babiš attacked Pavel as a warmonger citing his military past but also compared him to Vladimir Putin during a press conference. Pavel responded by identifying Babiš with lies, fear, and chaos. In Montenegro, Milatović labeled Đukanović as a mafia boss, owner of the private state, and leader that left the country burn. Đukanović responded by accusing Milatović of being backed by clerical fascists and war criminals, and called him an amateur politician with anti-Montenegrin agenda. Ultimately, candidates in both campaigns counted on the strategies of defamation, discrediting, and proliferation of disinformation.

Fifth, there was a significant presence of Russian influence and disinformation in both countries, although in different modalities. The Russian factor directly influenced Montenegrin elections because one of the leading candidates had been sentenced for the 2016 coup attempt. Aside from that, many media outlets and fake experts were dedicated to spreading Russian propaganda openly to the widest public without being even marginally sanctioned for that behavior. In the Czech Republic, openly pro-Russian attitudes were not prominently present in the discourse of candidates, save for Babiš's attempts to utilize ideological ambiguity to attract far-right voters in the second round. Media outlets with pro-Russian agenda tried to help certain candidates while harshly attacking others, particularly Pavel in the second round. Ultimately, we can say that Russian influence left a much deeper scar on the Montenegrin elections, despite the Czech Republic being a traditional playground for obscure Russian revisionists.

Sixth, voters' reaction was the point where the two cases simultaneously converge and diverge, depending on our perspective. The voters in the Czech Republic and Montenegro voted for change. Czech citizens rejected another unpredictable president with erratic behavior and attitudes. When coupled with Babiš's previous performance as PM, it is easy to infer the reasons for Pavel's victory. Nevertheless, it will be extremely hard for Pavel to come up with a positive platform and build a progressive image without resorting to populist tools. Montenegrins voted for radical change and ousted Đukanović after more than three decades of his reign. Similarly to the Czech case, it was a clear rational vote against rather than for. This means that situation in Montenegro under Milatović is likely to get volatile since we barely got insights into what his core tenets are.

Seventh, the aftermath of the elections showed that both winners opted for the same strategy of reconciliatory narratives and practices. Pavel repeated his efforts to turn the Czech Republic into one community, being particularly inclusive towards the most marginalized groups. He also demonstrated the will to be confronted by people who did not give him support during the elections. On the foreign policy plan, he was in the mid of a controversy after the phone call with the Taiwanese leader, antagonizing almost universal support for the One China policy. Similarly to Pavel, Milatović expressed the wish to open a whole-of-society dialogue to overcome the fundamental divisions among various groups. However, the beginning of his term was marked by the murky choices to visit certain anti-NATO gatherings and remain very active in party politics, despite claiming that he would be the president of all citizens.



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## NOTES

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