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NGO Report on the People's Republic of Montenegro for the 143rd Session of the Human Rights Committee / Rapport des ONG sur la République populaire du Monténégro pour la 143ème session du Comité des droits de l'homme

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Introduction

1. The Centre for Voters Initiative & Action presents this report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee ahead of the 143rd Session for the review of Montenegro. The Centre is a non-governmental organisation based in the Americas with an international focus. The Centre acknowledges there can be no secure tomorrow without ensuring civil societies have knowledge to vote, participate, and engage with the democratic processes.
2. The Centre works with multiple international mechanisms to convey dialogue, conduct research, and bring awareness to the thematic issues of electoral engagement around the world. We closely follow and participate in the United Nations human rights mechanisms in Geneva and abroad, including the Human Rights Committee, to promote civil society participation in the public affairs process.
3. The Centre submits this ahead of the second periodic review of Montenegro under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. Recognising the complex nature of the recent challenge Montenegro faces, the Centre hopes to provide valuable information to the Committee regarding the State's compliance with issues exacerbating in compliance under Article 25. Indeed, this report is focused on the

scope of Article 25, and we encourage Committee members to understand the nature of civic education as a tool to combat this contemporary turmoil; hopefully, the Committee will find this report valuable.

4. The Centre has submitted this petition to the Committee to focus on two specific violations: (1) the systemic barriers to civic education and (2) the influence of external states, particularly Russia, on the elections in Montenegro. Both these violations contribute to the undermining of Montenegro civil society's rights under Article 25.

Absence of Civic Education in Schools

5. Civic education is defined as “learning for effective participation in democratic and development processes at both local and national levels,” according to the United Nations Development Programme.¹ This is an area in which Montenegro excelled prior to 2017, when the education system was modified as part of a government reform implemented by the then Minister Damir Šehović.²
6. Prior to 2017, civic education was a required course for all students in primary and secondary schools, meaning students from the ages of six to eighteen were subject to the educational programme.³ The curriculum included a variety of topics, from ways to engage civically, to logic and ethics, teaching students political and religious tolerance.⁴ Post government reform, the curriculum was designated as an optional elective course, causing a spike in political violence, attributed to the lack of ideological tolerance, along with an alarming decrease in voter participation.^{5 6}
7. Over 17% of students have been victims of peer violence.⁷ Furthermore, 7 out of 10 female identifying politicians have experienced instances of harassment, and 9 out of 10 experiencing gender based discrimination.⁸ This issue has widespread

¹ Kindly refer to the "Civic Education Practical Guidance Note" by the *United Nations Development Programme Bureau for Development Policy*, April 2004, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/07/undpciviceducationpracticalguidancenote2004.pdf>.

² "Children's Right to Human Rights Education in Montenegro: The Subject of Civic Education Should Once Again be Made Compulsory", *Human Rights Action Montenegro*, 28 February 2024, <https://www.hraction.org/2024/02/28/childrens-right-to-human-rights-education-in-montenegro-the-subject-of-civic-education-should-once-again-be-made-compulsory/?lang=en>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Strategy for Civic Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in Montenegro", *Bureau for Educational Services* in cooperation with the *Centre for Civic Education*, December 2007, https://archive.erisee.org/downloads/library_montenegro/Strategy%20for%20civic%20education.pdf.

⁵ Kindly refer to <https://en.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/696104/gorjanc-prelevic-neophodno-je-da-se-u-skole-vrati-gradjansko-obrazovanje-kao-obavezan-predmet>.

⁶ Kindly refer to <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/245/>.

⁷ Vojin Golubovic, "The increase of violence in Montenegrin society - a reflection of social changes", *China-CEE Institute*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (ME), April 2023, https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023s04_Montenegro.pdf.

⁸ "Violence against women in Montenegrin politics", *Westminster Foundation for Democracy*, February 2024, <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/violence-against-women-montenegrin-politics/>.

consequences — studies show that 94% of Montenegrins are concerned by the rising levels of hostility.⁹ The fear of one's well being can be considered a catalyst for the steady decline in voter participation.

8. When the curriculum was mandatory for all students, voter turnout was very high, with 86.49% of the population participating in the referendum, and 71% in the assembly election.¹⁰ The effects of the curriculum's removal were immediately felt. In the 2023 presidential election, only 63% of the population voted, as opposed to prior elections with a turnout of 70%.¹¹ Furthermore in the 2023 assembly election, only 56% of the electorate cast a ballot, the lowest in the country's history.¹²
9. Following the alarming drop in voter turnout, a coalition government was formed to address civic education and a lack of government trust.¹³ The government also proposed an open list electoral system, increasing transparency and the importance of the individual vote.¹⁴ Additionally, the State Election Commission (SEC), with the support of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), has conducted civic education campaigns to educate voters about the electoral process. Thanks to these efforts, in 2023, only 21% of adults felt uninformed about how to vote, as opposed to the 41% in 2021.¹⁵

Given the diminishing nature of civic participation in Montenegro, the Centre urges the Committee to ask Montenegro what actions are being taken to advance civic education measures across Montenegro.

In particular, the Committee should note the removal of previous civic education initiatives and press the delegation for the reasons why these measures were removed, and advocate for their re-instatement.

Russian Influence on Montenegro's Elections

10. Although voter turnout in Montenegro is very high in comparison to other countries, there are fears of Russian interference. Russia has utilised disinformation campaigns, pro-Serbian political groups and churches to sway public opinion of Montenegro's attempts at western integration.¹⁶

⁹ Refer to footnote 7.

¹⁰ Information derived from <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/245/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Montenegro Country Report" from *BTI Index*: <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MNE/>.

¹⁴ "President of Montenegro proposes change to open list electoral system", *Vijesti*, 13 December 2024, <https://constitutionnet.org/news/president-montenegro-proposes-change-open-list-electoral-system/>.

¹⁵ "OSCE-supported public opinion research shows a slight increase in confidence in elections in Montenegro", *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Mission to Montenegro*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-montenegro/566428/>.

¹⁶ Refer to "Russian sources of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina": <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/russian-sources-of-influence-in-serbia-montenegro-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

11. Russia's main course of action to influence Montenegro's political landscape has been through direct contribution and support of political parties. According to Milo Đukanović, former president of Montenegro, the EU's negligence of the western Balkan region's needs, mostly attributed to many countries only recently gaining independence, has resulted in Russia's continued presence.¹⁷ Furthermore, due to Montenegro's ethnic/religious tensions, socioeconomic disparities, corruption, and geography, it is the perfect place for Russia to test its power in influencing foreign nations on a smaller scale.¹⁸
12. The best example of Russian supported groups in Montenegro is the For the Future of Montenegro party (ZBCG), which won 14.7% of the popular vote in the 2023 parliamentary election.¹⁹ The ZBCG's leader, Andrija Mandić, was convicted for his role in the 2016 Russian backed coup, which began in hopes to block Montenegro's membership of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to establish a Russian serving government.²⁰ The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was accused of funding (200,000 Euros) and orchestrating the effort.²¹
13. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has been a clear ally of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The SOC has publicly opposed the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from Russia, Montenegro's membership of NATO, and has spread anti-western and pro-Serbian succession rhetoric.²² Montenegrin news sources have found the SOC to have close ties to extremist right organisations, thus their involvement in the government.²³
14. The SOC encourages pro-Serbian ideals, therefore pro-Russian narratives throughout Montenegro. For example, the SOC has strongly opposed the Montenegrin census, to portray the population as more Serbian. Similarly, the SOC believes the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is largely Serbian, which has been linked to efforts by

¹⁷ Predrag Milic, "Montenegro's president: EU's neglect gave Russia a platform", *Associated Press*, 28 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/montenegro-president-election-russia-eu-433a12475ad190f75edf6c17223935ff/>.

¹⁸ We strongly recommend reading the report which provided us this information – Vanja Čalović Marković, "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case", *National Endowment for Democracy*, August 2024, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/NED_FORUM-Authoritarianism-Influence-Report_final.pdf.

¹⁹ "Montenegro's Europe Now Movement Wins Snap Vote, According To Preliminary Results", *RadioFreeEurope*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-parliament-election-results/32455083.html>.

²⁰ Supported with the opinion article by Julia Dickson and Emily Harding: "Russia Aims at Montenegro", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 13 February 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-aims-montenegro/>.

²¹ Refer to https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Montenegrin_coup_attempt_allegations.

²² Kindly refer to footnote 16.

²³ "Jovanović: Biće još mapiranih grupa, od onih koji šire ruski uticaj do "usamljenih vukova"", 17 November 2022, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/630960/jovanovic-bice-jos-mapiranih-grupa-od-onih-koji-sire-ruski-uticaj-do-usamljenih-vukova/>.

Serbia and Russia to expand their influence in Montenegro.²⁴ With the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, it is crucial to ensure the Balkan region maintains independence, while assimilating with the NATO countries, ensuring Russia's efforts at expanding its territories does not spread.

15. Russia's use of media to spread disinformation most notably began to discourage Montenegro's independence from Serbia. False narratives were spread to convince the Montenegrin people that economic hardship and regional instability would be caused by their own independence.²⁵ Currently, the most notable media platforms used by Russia to spread propaganda are IN4S and Borba.

16. These platforms spread ideas denying Montenegrin independence and identity, advocating for stronger ties to Russia while praising President Vladimir Putin's actions including the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian War.²⁶ The United States Department of State has identified these media sources as part of the Russian Propaganda Ecosystem.²⁷ Furthermore, it is suspected these media outlets source their information from Russian State-Controlled sources such as Russia Today and Sputnik, bypassing existing structures to limit Russian influence.²⁸

Considering the complex history and ongoing influence of Russia in Montenegro, as well as its neighbouring countries, it is crucial the government of Montenegro takes deliberate actions to safeguard its sovereignty. Indeed, Russia's influence is most damaging by influencing the political system, undermining the true rights of Article 25 under the Covenant for Montenegro civil society.

The Committee should press the Montenegro delegation of measures it is taking to combat Russian influence in the electoral process, including measures taken to safeguard the political system against foreign influence and combat misinformation.

In particular, the Committee should note Russia's undoubtable aim to expand their sphere of influence, and should note in its recommendations that Montenegro must be ever-vigilant if it seeks to safeguard its sovereignty.

²⁴ "Russia's Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro", *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro/>.

²⁵ "Montenegro and Russia – Relation that suffers from the "history excess"", 2 November 2018, <https://dfc.me/montenegro-and-russia/>.

²⁶ "The activities of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian platforms in Montenegro", *Support4Partnership*, 7 May 2024, <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/the-activities-of-pro-serbian-and-pro-russian-platforms-in-montenegro/>.

²⁷ "GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda", *United States Department of State Global Engagement Centre*, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

²⁸ Kindly refer to footnote 26.

Conclusion

17. Montenegro's vast mountain range and Adriatic coastline indeed make the State seem like a beautiful haven on Earth, and it is undoubtedly a centre for civil societies across Europe to gather. Yet, it's equally important to recognise the dark political situation which juxtaposes its vast beauty; indeed, the Committee must remain vigilant of the active factors undermining the rights of civil society to properly express their political participation rights under Article 25 of the Covenant.
18. In particular, the measures taken to undermine civic education in Montenegro are alarming, for how can a civil society participate if they are not actively provided knowledge about the process? Furthermore, the Russian influence on their political system sets forth an alarming trend of external states seeking to influence Montenegro for their own gain, invertedly undermining the rights of Montenegro civil society to participate in their own sovereign electoral processes. Indeed, these are concerns which should not turn to alarms, which is why the Centre urges active recognition of these potential threats to Article 25 of Montenegro. We hope the Committee finds this information valuable and useful when exploring the human rights situation in Montenegro.
19. This submission may be published on the OHCHR website or any other places necessary. For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact primary contributor Mr. Dinu ANTONESCU and secondary contributor Mr. Samad QURASHI at dantonescu@cvia.ch and squraishi@cvia.ch, respectively.