THE CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE SITUATION IN MONTENEGRO

Martin Henzelmann

University of Greifswald, Germany
E-mail: martin.henzelmann@uni-greifswald.de

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0812-6508

Előd Dudás

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: dudas.elod@btk.elte.hu

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5958-8708

ABSTRACT: This study provides a brief overview of the current linguistic situation in Montenegro. We show that, in this southeastern European country, language varieties are spoken that share the core features of the principal languages of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of which fall within the Shtokavian dialect continuum. At the same time, Montenegro exhibits several distinctive features that set its linguistic profile apart. One of the most striking characteristics is the variability in language naming conventions among the population. Although the official designation is Montenegrin, the same Shtokavian varieties are also referred to—depending on regional, political, or personal factors—as Serbian, Croatian, or Bosnian. This multiplicity of labels, applied to what are often linguistically identical or near-identical varieties, distinguishes Montenegro's linguistic reality from that of its neighbors, where language descriptors tend to align more predictably with ethnic and national identities. We take up this question and illuminate it in light of the most recent data from the 2023 census, while contextualizing the demographic interrelations among linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities. Furthermore, we discuss the specific conditions encountered by the official language upon its implementation in the public sphere. In this context, we address the role of the Latin and Cyrillic scripts, which, although granted equal legal status, are distributed unevenly in practice. In sum, we conclude that all these peculiarities have given rise to the highest degree of ethno-linguistic plurality within the territory of former Yugoslavia, which context fundamentally distinguishes Montenegrin from all other standard languages within the Shtokavian continuum.

KEYWORDS: Montenegro, Shtokavian, linguistic typology, standard language, variety linguistics, language and identity, language in the public sphere

Background

Montenegro is a small country in southeastern Europe dominated by the rugged terrain of the Dinaric Alps. It faces the Adriatic Sea to the southwest and shares land borders with Albania and Kosovo to the southeast, Serbia to the

northeast, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the northwest, and it lies adjacent to a narrow Croatian coastal corridor that culminates in a short 25-kilometer border with Montenegro. According to the 2023 census, a total population of 623,633 people resides in Montenegro,[1] making it the least populous country in southeastern Europe. For much of the 20th century, it was part of the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, in which it formed strong ties to the union's central state of Serbia. After the Yugoslav Federation dissolved in the early 1990s and the constituent republics each went their separate ways, Montenegro initially chose to remain in union with Serbia, until, in 2006, a referendum on independence favored a declaration of sovereign statehood.[2]

State independence raised essential questions in the post-Yugoslav context: which language should be officially adopted, how it should be named, how to codify its written form, and which minority languages should receive official recognition. Given the complex typology of the country's linguistic landscape, these matters were far from straightforward. We begin the discussion by addressing the challenges of linguistic classification in Montenegro, followed by an analysis of the social parameters that influence the role of language in contemporary Montenegrin society.

Typological Context

The linguistic situation in Montenegro is very complex, for several reasons. Legally, the official language of Montenegro today is Montenegrin. At the same time, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Albanian are also in official use,[3] while both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets are permitted. But what does all this tell us about language practice today? To answer this question, we must briefly examine the linguistic situation that led to the development of a modern written language in the Shtokavian-speaking area, which today functions as a polycentric medium of communication that has given rise to several standard languages, each bearing a different name and displaying its own unique features, some of which are particularly pronounced in Montenegro.

Typologically, the Montenegrin standard language belongs to the Shtokavian continuum and is characterized by Ijekavian pronunciation and spelling. Both aspects—the Shtokavian context and the Ijekavian variant—merit closer examination. Shtokavian comprises a continuum of dialectal varieties most

---

[1] All data concerning demographics, language use and ethnic affiliation in this paper are drawn from the officially published results of the most recent census, available on the website of the Statistical Office of Montenegro (Uprava za statistiku, commonly "MONSTAT"). On the Office's homepage, there is a section listing all censuses since 2003 (https://www.monstat.org/cg/page.php?id=56), which provide a comprehensive overview of the country's ethnic and linguistic composition in recent history.

[2] We limit ourselves here to historical aspects relevant to language development. For a more detailed account of the (ancient and recent) history of Montenegro, cf. Roberts, 2024.

[3] For this reason, we use the simplified term "official language" in cases where it is not explicitly clear which standard language is being referred to.

widespread in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Its classification hinges on the form taken in these varieties by the interrogative and relative pronoun *što*, meaning 'what'. The Shtokavian area can itself be subdivided based on the reflex of the historical vowel known as *Yat*, as found in the prototypical word *mlěko 'milk'. Depending on the outcome, the subdialects are termed Ekavian (with *Yat* reflected as *e*, yielding *mleko*), Ijekavian (with *mlijeko*), or Ikavian (with *mliko*; Thomas, 2013, p. 240 gives further examples). Over the 19th century, Shtokavian underwent standardization and was subject to multiple reforms. Two unification efforts are especially significant in this context: first, the 1850 Vienna Literary Agreement (*Bečki književni dogovor*), which aimed to create a shared literary language primarily for Serbs and Croats. To establish a common ground for codification, it was decided to adopt Ijekavian as the basis (Neweklowsky, 2002, p. 448). Although this decision proved relevant in connection with societal developments, resistance grew increasingly vocal. It was not until the mid-20th century that Yugoslav President Josip Tito mandated new regulations on language use. Under the Novi Sad Agreement (*Novosadski dogovor*) of 1954, it was decreed that the language used across the entire Shtokavian area was essentially one and the same, on which premise a new unified, mandatory orthography was developed and finally rolled out in 1960. Both the Latin and Cyrillic scripts were deemed equally permissible for writing the standard language, although regional preferences persisted in practice (Thomas, 2013, p. 238). The terms *Serbo-Croatian* or *Croato-Serbian* have since been widely used for this language area, especially outside Yugoslavia.

Following these unification efforts, the disintegration of Yugoslavia led to social upheavals that profoundly affected how the language situation was perceived and managed in the newly independent states. The umbrella terms *Serbo-Croatian* or *Croato-Serbian* were abandoned in favor of adjectival designations tied to national or ethnic identity—such as *Croatian* in Croatia, *Serbian* in Serbia, and so on—even though the actual linguistic situation largely remained unchanged. Heated debates also ensued over the naming and status of the respective language varieties.[4] Croatian linguist Snježana Kordić repeatedly

---

[4] Within Slavic studies, as practiced in Western countries, certain misconceptions have arisen regarding the post-Yugoslav language situation. For instance, the dissolution of the state was erroneously associated with a supposed disintegration of the language—an assumption held without any clear notion of its implications or supporting explanation. The language did not disintegrate; rather, it became systematically bound to ethnic categories and was relabeled accordingly (Vujović, 2024; Vujović, 2025), while a public debate ensued that rested less on linguistically substantiated arguments than on personal affinities and attitudes. Expert scholars, however, have rigorously distinguished between solid typological analysis and emotionally and politically motivated pseudo-linguistic conceptions. Among them, Bernhard Gröschel—one of Germany's foremost authorities on the linguistic situation of former Yugoslavia—comprehensively examined this issue in his seminal 2009 study, which meticulously unpacks the entanglements of language and politics.

criticized this trend as an intrusive form of "language nationalism" that disregarded typological reality (Kordić, 2010). And it did not stop at replacing *Serbo-Croatian* with *Croatian* or *Serbian*; *Bosnian* and *Montenegrin* also came to the fore as new ethnolinguistic identifiers. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Montenegro, emancipation from the primacy of Serbian or Croatian involved creating new national standards of codification. In Montenegro, efforts were driven especially by Vojislav Nikčević, who played a central role in advancing the modern standardization of Montenegrin. He also introduced the graphemes *ś* and *ź* and authored general orthographic rules, thereby helping to develop a codified norm for use in the education system and the public sphere.

Thus, standardization of the Montenegrin language was made possible by the creation of an independent state. In 2010, an official grammar of the Montenegrin language was published, establishing the new grammatical norm. Its most distinctive features include *(i)je* as the reflex of historical *Yat* (evident in words like *cvijet, mlijeko, svijet, ljepota, vjera*), the preservation of four pitch accents, and the formal recognition of the palatalized dental sounds resulting from Ijekavian jotation as phonemes: /s+j/ > /ś/, /z+j/ > /ź/, /t+j/ > /ć/, /d+j/ > /đ/ (cf. *śenica*, *śever*, *śutra*; *iźesti*, *iźelica*, *koźi*, *źenica*; *ćerati*, *lećeti*, *poćerina*, *vrćeti*; *đe*, *neđelja*, *śeđeti*, *viđeti*). So, while largely aligning with the norms of the Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian standard languages, Montenegrin nevertheless exhibits graphemic features absent from other Shtokavian-based standards.

Lexical codification also remains incomplete, as the development of a monolingual normative dictionary by the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts (*Crnogorska akademija nauka i umjetnosti*, or CANU) was halted following public criticism. A most pressing challenge for the Montenegrin standard language today is the completion and publication of such a dictionary. Equally important, however, is the task of strengthening the status and prestige of the standard language within the broader speech community—a need highlighted by recent census data (cf. below; for more details, see also Dudás, 2021; Dudás, 2023a, pp. 145–159).

Here, it must be emphasized that the Montenegrin standard language belongs to the same dialect continuum as the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian standard languages, and that all are mutually intelligible, as is typical for polycentric languages. The notion of polycentricity was introduced to language study rather casually by German scholar Heinz Kloss in the 1970s and later developed by Michael Clyne to denote languages with multiple centers of normativity and at least one codified standard (Clyne, 2004, p. 296). According to Clyne, such language areas can simultaneously serve as both unifying and dividing forces. Although mutual communication is possible throughout, speakers in different regions may attribute different social meanings, attitudes or identities to the same linguistic form (Clyne, 2004, p. 296; Heller, 2005, p. 1582; Vujović 2024, p. 158, pp. 164–165). Thus, typological affiliation to the same linguistic basis does not preclude significant social variation, whose manifestations must be

described individually and, above all, accounted for in order to fully understand linguistic reality.

In the case of Montenegro, one must proceed on the knowledge that the Ijekavian variant of Shtokavian dominates throughout the country. Although this speech variety is also widespread in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, those countries also exhibit other regional varieties, a situation extensively documented in classical dialectology. This is not true for Montenegro, where the other speech varieties are atypical, such that the nationwide dominance of Ijekavian is a distinguishing feature of Montenegro within the wider Shtokavian-speaking area (Čirgić, 2017, p. 89). In addition, numerous subordinate dialects are spoken in the country, some of which retain archaic or unique elements that are scarce or altogether absent in other Shtokavian dialect areas (for more details, see Čirgić, 2017; Henzelmann, 2017, pp. 38–39, Čirgić, 2020; Dudás, 2023a; Vujović, 2024). Consequently, a distinction must be made between typological classification within the polycentric language area and nationally specific regional characteristics. These elements continue to shape the linguistic situation in Montenegro today.

Language and Demography in Montenegro

Thus far, we have established that the principal languages of Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina share a common Shtokavian basis and each constitutes part of a polycentric area, while being subject to individually codified language standards. In this section, we now turn to how Montenegro's linguistic reality is perceived and evaluated by its own inhabitants, while linking questions of identity to the country-specific context. We also consider recent statistics that have yielded striking results underlining Montenegro's unique position within the broader polycentric continuum of Shtokavian-based languages.

Language and identity can—but need not—be considered independently of systemic linguistic, historical, or otherwise academically verifiable contexts. However, unlike scholarly analysis, assessments rooted in personal identity are often influenced by emotional or biased perspectives, which helps explain why seemingly unambiguous facts can nevertheless yield divergent perspectives. That the Slavicist Robert Greenberg devoted an entire monograph to the problem of language identity in the post-Yugoslav region (cf. Greenberg, 2004) underscores the multitude of framework conditions that must be taken into account in this language area—even when the focus is limited to questions of language and identity. Serbian linguist Ranko Bugarski, therefore, differentiates between languages with a simple identity and those with a complex one. The former is exemplified by Hungarian, whose speakers consistently refer to their language by the same name regardless of whether they live inside or outside Hungary. In contrast, languages with a complex identity are those that constitute a systemic unit from a typological perspective, but whose speakers hold divergent views on linguistic reality or how the language should be referred to. Montenegro's

language situation falls within this type, as it must be considered against a complex background of multiple linguistic identities (Bugarski, 2010, p. 28) coexistent within the overarching pluricentric structure. The same applies to all languages formerly grouped under the label *Serbo-Croatian*, as well as to other linguistic complexes such as Romanian, which is also referred to as Moldavian depending on linguistic attitudes or the political context (Bugarski, 2010, pp. 24–25). These competing designations, however, do not reflect any division within the latter's internal linguistic structure, which remains interchangeable regardless of the name.

For Montenegro, at least three main factors must be considered in relation to the current language situation, each of which has fluctuated over time. The first is the ethnic affiliation declared by the country's inhabitants. This parameter is not constant and indicates a fluid identity in certain regions of the state, yet it also reveals local centers that have preserved distinct characteristics to this day. The second factor concerns how individuals refer to their own language. This, too, is not uniform, with varying preferences observable across different time periods and geographical regions. The third factor is religious affiliation, itself a nexus within a broader constellation of social determinants. Orthodox Christianity and, in some regions, Islam have traditionally been the dominant faiths in Montenegro. This context is crucial for understanding the current language situation, as religious sensitivities significantly influence demographic patterns in national censuses. In what follows, we will address each of these three factors—ethnic identity, language naming, and religion—in turn, with attention to how they vary within Montenegro[5] and the influence they exert on the dynamics underlying the language issue.

Let us begin with ethnicity, while noting that a Montenegrin ethnic identity has consistently appeared as the leading category in the country's surveys and statistics since 1991. Nevertheless, fluctuations have occurred: Even before 1991, the largest single group of inhabitants claimed Montenegrin ethnicity, but, over time, the number declined as other affiliations, such as Serbian and Muslim, were increasingly declared. The extent of ongoing shifts in ethnic self-identification was dramatically revealed after the turn of the millennium, when only 43% of citizens identified as ethnic Montenegrins in the 2003 census, while over 30% claimed Serbian ethnicity. In the following 2011 census, the proportion of Montenegrins rose again to over 45%, while the number of self-identifying Serbs in the country dropped below 30%. The most recent census from 2023 shows that 41% identified as Montenegrins and 33% as Serbs. These results indicate a significant departure from previous data on ethnic identity leading into

---

[5] These demographic factors are significant because their interrelationship in Montenegro differs markedly from other countries in former Yugoslavia. In Croatia, for example, these three factors largely coincide: The majority of the population identifies ethnically as Croatian, calls their language Croatian and is Catholic by faith. In Montenegro, the situation is much more complex and by no means clear-cut, therefore warranting closer examination.

the 2003 census, whereas the fluctuations in the 20 subsequent years have been comparatively minor. It can thus be assumed that, after the Montenegrin option, Serbian ethnic affiliation remains the second most frequently declared identity in Montenegro today.

Regarding the second factor, language naming conventions throughout southeastern Europe typically exhibit a direct correspondence between the name of an ethnic group and the name of its language—for example, Croatian in Croatia, Albanian in Albania, and so on. In Montenegro, this pattern is evident only in certain regions, but not nationwide. There is no consistent correlation between ethnic and linguistic identification across the population, and this is a distinctive feature of Montenegro's linguistic reality. The latest surveys show that 43% of people in Montenegro identify Serbian as their mother tongue, while 34.5% identify Montenegrin. Mixed designations such as *Montenegrin-Serbian*, *Croato-Serbian*, or *Yugoslavian* are much rarer, each accounting for fewer than one percent. Nevertheless, there is clearly some correlation between the name of the language and the ethnicity claimed by parts of the population. In certain regions, such as in and around the town of Cetinje, the term *Montenegrin* is very stable, both for ethnic affiliation and the name of the language. Overall, Montenegro stands out in the region as the only country where the most frequently claimed first language does not correspond in name to the country (Henzelmann, 2016, p. 362; Henzelmann, 2024, pp. 242–243). In other words, Montenegro is the only state in all of southeastern Europe where the official language Montenegrin, which is defined by law and linked to the country's name, is not identified by the majority of the population as their mother tongue, as shown in the most recent surveys; instead, Montenegrin ranks second, after Serbian. However, by appearing in the census, both languages (among others) have their existence legitimized in a sociolinguistic sense, thus also securing their academic recognition in all social and professional domains (Dudás, 2023a; Dudás, 2023b; Vujović, 2024; Vujović, 2025).[6]

Moving on to the third factor—religion—we can observe that, in Montenegro, 71% of the population identify as Orthodox Christians, 20% as Muslims, and 3% as Catholics, with the remainder affiliating with other denominations. Compared to the previous categories, these figures suggest that religious affiliation is an important but not a reliable predictor of language preferences or ethnic identity. The south and east of the country are notably influenced by Islam; however, even there, we see no consistent pattern of language designation. In predominantly Muslim and Albanian communities, Bosnian,

---

[6] Fundamentally, this situation stems from the language policies of former Yugoslavia, as Dalibor Brozović (1992, p. 361) elucidates: "The Montenegrin (sub)variant has the actual status of an official standard idiom, although the official language has been constitutionally defined only as Serbo-Croatian with the Ijekavian pronunciation. In practice, however, it has been noted that the use of the Montenegrin linguistic peculiarities is in proportion to the strength of the individual's Montenegrin national identity." Brozović (2006) further develops these reflections in the context of normativity.

Montenegrin, and Albanian are the most frequently reported languages, while Serbian is reported much less frequently, and Croatian even more rarely. This marks a clear contrast to countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, or Croatia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, language designation is strongly correlated with ethnic and religious affiliation. A corresponding claim cannot be made for Montenegro, as affiliations vary from one census to the next and depend on regional customs. The strongest correlation that can be observed exists between Montenegrin identity and Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, a considerable number of people identify as Montenegrins in an ethnic sense and as Muslims by faith. All of this, in turn, has a considerable impact on language naming practices, as changing political circumstances can lead speakers to refer to the same language differently over time, even if the language itself has undergone little measurable change.[7] This dynamic was exemplified in the unification efforts of former Yugoslavia, which imposed a Serbo-Croatian linguistic identity, but also in Montenegro's post-independence recognition of multiple languages in official use, even though they differ only slightly in measurable characteristics of speech and writing. In short, patterns of language use in Montenegro do not predict religious affiliation, nor do they straightforwardly inform linguistic identity. Certain tendencies do exist, however—one of the most telling being the choice of script, which allows more direct conclusions to be drawn about linguistic alignment. For this reason, we now turn to an evaluation of language use in public spaces.

Language in the Public Sphere
The presence of languages in public spaces has been the subject of extensive research over the past three decades, resulting in a substantial body of work on linguistic landscapes. Some studies primarily focused on large cities and were particularly oriented toward quantitative approaches, aiming to measure frequency structures in order to draw conclusions about the visibility and use of different languages in the public sphere (cf. Stojanović, 2011; Giesel, 2023; Henzelmann, Hacı, 2025; Lisek, 2025). Numerous studies have explored this topic in southeastern Europe[8]— especially in Serbia, which may have to do with the

---

[7] Other examples of a shift in linguistic affinities can also be cited in the South Slavic area, which are not based on typological contexts but can be attributed to external influences such as border shifts or other political conditions. For example, in the case of the dialects spoken by the Pomaks on both sides of the Bulgarian-Greek border, there is no mistaking their association with the Bulgarian language area (Henzelmann/Mitrinov, 2020, p. 281). At the same time, it is not uncommon to recognize a diversity in linguistic identity among individuals within this community, which is not necessarily oriented towards the findings that remain prevalent among scholars of Slavic.

[8] In principle, this applies to the entire southeastern European region. The linguistic landscape has been comprehensively mapped as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, which process evaluates the interaction between majorities and minorities and their languages in a country, as well as global trends and national legislation against the background of

parallel use of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets that can be observed and comprehensively evaluated practically everywhere in the country (Ivković, 2015a; Ivković, 2015b). Important work has also been done for Croatia, but with a different focus, given that the country's national language is written exclusively in the Latin script. Instead, attention has been paid to the presence of global languages such as English, as well as to such interesting trends as the reintegration of Glagolitic script into the public sphere. Studies on Montenegro's own linguistic landscape have, for example, investigated the spread of Albanian in language contact with Montenegrin and Serbian (cf. Giesel, 2023) or critically commented on the current challenges of language management in the public sphere (cf. Vujović, 2024).

In Montenegro, both the Latin and—less frequently—the Cyrillic alphabet are used to write the country's official languages, with Albanian, in Latin-based orthography, also appearing regionally. The public sphere is primarily shaped by the presence of these languages, though others are occasionally also visible. These additional languages hold no official status and are mainly used in the tourism sector. Museums, restaurants, hotels, or popular destinations, for example, often provide information in foreign languages, alongside the official ones, to assist international visitors.

Beyond the officially recognized languages, which predominantly appear in public spaces, especially English—as the language of international communication—and, to a lesser extent, Russian are widely used in Montenegro. English appears almost universally in areas frequented by international guests, such as at airports, in the hotel industry, or at tourist sites. English is also used to provide orientation for those who do not speak the official language in regional contexts (exemplified in Figure 2). However, the tourism and real estate sector also drives the use of Russian in addition to English, as many people who go on vacation to or buy property in Montenegro are Russian-speaking.

To illustrate the significance of language in Montenegro's public sphere, we briefly offer two examples. Figure 1 shows a signpost pointing toward the old town center of the coastal community of Herceg Novi, rendered exclusively in the official language using the Latin script.[9] Although the sign's monolingualism limits its usefulness as an element of tourist infrastructure, the pictogram of a

---

visible language use. The question of minority languages has been discussed in very different ways and is currently being synthesized with conceptual questions of semiotics (Ivković, 2015b; Giesel, 2023, p. 110ff.; Henzelmann, Hacı, 2025, pp. 115–126). This approach often embeds the assumption that places and their visual perception have a considerable influence on the interpretation of linguistic occurrences and are reflected in the current circumstances of public language use.

[9] Both images derive from the authors' private archive and were taken in 2023 in Herceg Novi. This town, situated in the northwestern coastal region near the Croatian border, has a high proportion of residents who self-identify as Serbs. Consequently, Cyrillic signage is more frequent there than, for example, in the southern coastal region, which has an Albanian majority.

castle on the left does help convey meaning, and the use of the Latin alphabet at least makes the text legible for most foreign visitors. Pictograms also appear on the signs in Figure 2, which are bilingual, combining the official language in its Cyrillic form with accompanying English translations, allowing them to be read and understood by international visitors as well.[10]

Figure 1:

A monolingual signpost in Montenegro's official language in Latin script.

Figure 2:

A signpost in Montenegro's official language in Cyrillic script (above) and in English translation (below).

In the past, the Cyrillic script was extremely relevant in Montenegro, as numerous historical documents and important texts were written in this script. Many monuments throughout the country, on which the Cyrillic alphabet is used, still bear witness to this heritage. It is therefore interesting to analyze the country's current distribution of the Latin and Cyrillic scripts. While both writing systems are officially granted equal status—as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2—a progressive transition to the Latin script has been underway for a long time all across the country, with the notable exception of areas tied to the Orthodox Church. Although Cyrillic retains official status, it does not enjoy the same level of societal support as does the Latin script. This discrepancy is quite evident in the public sphere, for which Jelica Stojanović provides some empirical findings (Stojanović, 2011, p. 89): According to her, Cyrillic has almost completely

---

[10] For this reason, the Armenian semiotician Tigran Simyan argues that public space is "read" and thus interpreted, enabling an interaction between linguistic and other signs that incorporates cultural-semiotic references (Simyan, 2022). In the Montenegrin context, the presence of Cyrillic inscriptions may indicate a substantial Serbian population or the local designation of the principal language as Serbian, as is frequently observable in Herceg Novi. However, given the uneven distribution of signage nationwide, the occurrence of Cyrillic and Latin scripts should be interpreted with due caution.

disappeared from public spaces in Montenegro. Depending on the location, up to 98% of all inscriptions are in the Latin script, although minimal local variation exists. Anyone traveling to Montenegro today will quickly share this impression, but it should also be mentioned that church institutions and texts produced within the Christian Orthodox tradition remain exceptions. In places like the coastal region of Herceg Novi or Žabljak in the mountainous hinterland, Cyrillic inscriptions are still more prevalent, and many older buildings also feature prominent Cyrillic lettering. All in all, these observations reveal a disconnect between the legal provisions guaranteeing parity among scripts and their practical implementation. On the one hand, the predominance of the Latin script may be interpreted as a form of visual demarcation and linguistic emancipation from the Serbian linguistic context. On the other hand, local differences and preferences persist, and the authorities do adapt the use of both writing systems accordingly (cf. Figure 2). Based on our observational experience, we consider it unrealistic to expect parity in the use of the writing systems, as the coexistence of two parallel options inevitably leads to one being preferred over the other. In the digitalized world, we observe a clear dominance of the Latin script, especially across the Shtokavian language area. Unlike Serbia, Montenegro does not accord preferential legal status to either of the two writing systems, and, unlike Croatia, official orthographic norms are not restricted to a single system. As a result, Cyrillic remains visibly present alongside Latin, whether in scholarly publications, in historical inscriptions, or within the Christian Orthodox domain.

Albanian as a Minority Language

In addition to the standard languages Montenegrin, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, Albanian serves as the language of the Albanian minority in Montenegro. This non-Slavic language is particularly prevalent in the south around Ulcinj, where roughly 74% of the population identifies it as their primary language, as well as in the municipality of Tuzi, south of the capital Podgorica, where over 60% are native speakers. It is also common in the southeast around Gusinje, where it is spoken by 34% of the population. The Albanian minority numbers over 30,000 people, accounting for approximately 5% of the country's total population. In the most recent census, more than 32,000 respondents declared Albanian as their native language, so the number of Albanian speakers actually exceeds the number of recorded ethnic Albanians in the country. Albanian is therefore Montenegro's most important language beyond the Shtokavian continuum.[11]

---

[11] Albanian is taught in schools and included in public signage. Montenegro is among the states that have signed and ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, drawn up by the Council of Europe and in force since 1998. This framework grants protected minority languages, including Albanian, special rights and enshrines an obligation to provide institutional support in national law.

Conclusions

In our discussion of the current linguistic situation in Montenegro, we began by outlining the specifics of the Shtokavian continuum and noting that the language varieties spoken in Montenegro clearly share this typological basis with Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, while at the same time exhibiting unique features that are now also codified in the Montenegrin standard language. These features include the consistent use of Ijekavian pronunciation and spelling (where other countries in the Shtokavian language area have at least two and, regionally, even three such variants) and certain archaic elements found especially in local dialects. Another peculiarity of the country's linguistic situation is that its sociolinguistic profile does not follow the same pattern observable in other successor states of former Yugoslavia: there is no direct correlation between language designation, ethnic self-identification, and religious affiliation. Thus, the distinctiveness of Montenegro's linguistic context extends to both intralingual features and sociolinguistic dynamics. For this reason, we argue that Montenegro exhibits the highest degree of plurality in matters of linguistic identity within the entire Shtokavian continuum. Whereas a personal name in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina may predictably signal ethnic and religious affiliation, this is not the case in Montenegro. The same holds true for the use of Cyrillic versus Latin script: although certain preferences were reflected in the 2023 census, script usage does not allow for reliable inferences about linguistic practice or identity. Montenegro's population, accordingly, exhibits more varied combinations of ethno-linguistic markers than those of its neighbors, while it remains unpredictable which combination of language name, ethnic origin, and religious affiliation will be claimed by any given inhabitant. Further research is yet needed to disentangle the connections between these parameters and thus provide deeper insight into Montenegro's complex linguistic reality.

REFERENCES:

Brozović, D. (1992). Serbo-Croatian as a Pluricentric Language. In M. Clyne (ed.), *Pluricentric Languages: Differing Norms in Different Nations* (pp. 347–380). Contributions to the Sociology of Language, 62. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Brozović, D. (2006). *Neka bitna pitanja hrvatskoga jezičnog standarda*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.

Bugarski, R. (2010). *Jezik i identitet*. Beograd: XX vek.

Čirgić, A. (2017). *Dijalektologija crnogorskoga jezika*. Biblioteka Montenegrina, 19. Cetinje: FCJK.

Čirgić, A. (2020). *Dijalektolozi i crnogorski jezik*. Cetinje: Fakultet za crnogorski jezik i književnost.

Clyne, M. (2004). Pluricentric Language/Plurizentrische Sprache. In H. E. Wiegand (ed.), *Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft. Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science. Manuels de linguistique et des sciences de communication* (pp. 296–300). Vol. 3.1, 2nd ed. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Dudás, E. (2021). Južnoslovenski standardni jezici u istorijskom i savremenom kontekstu. *Lingua Montenegrina*, 27 (2021), 1, pp. 3 – 19.

Dudás, E. (2023a). *Od povijesti jezika do jezične politike*. Budapest: ELTE BTK Szláv Filológiai Tanszék. https://real.mtak.hu/183134/1/DudasElod_Odpovijestijezikadojezicnepolitike.pdf

Dudás, E. (2023b). Iz črnogorskega imenoslovja. *Jezikoslovni Zapiski*, 29 (2023), 2, pp. 363 – 367. https://doi.org/10.3986/JZ.29.2.16

Giesel, C. (2023). Personennamen als Indikatoren slawisch-albanischer Symbiosen und Assimilationen am Beispiel von Grabinschriften in der albanisch-katholischen Mikroregion Südmontenegros. In W. Dahmen & P. Himstedt-Vaid & G. Schubert (eds.), *Nomen est omen. Die Bedeutung von Namen in südosteuropäischen Kulturen* (pp. 87–116). Forschungen zu Südosteuropa. Sprache – Kultur – Literatur, 21. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Greenberg, R. D. (2004). *Language and identity in the Balkans: Serbo-Croatian and its disintegration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gröschel, B. (2009). *Das Serbokroatische zwischen Linguistik und Politik. Mit einer Bibliographie zum postjugoslavischen Sprachenstreit*. Studies in Slavic Linguistics, 34. München: Lincom.

Heller, M. (2005). Language and Identity. In U. Ammon et al. (eds.), *An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society. Volume 2* (pp. 1582–1586). Berlin & New York: De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110171488.2.8.1582

Henzelmann, M. (2016). Der Ausbau des Bunjewatzischen zu einer südslavischen Mikroliteratursprache. *Zeitschrift für Slawistik*, 61 (2016), 2, pp. 353 – 368. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/slaw-2016-0018/html

Henzelmann, M. (2017). Wie südslavische Mikroliteratursprachen (nicht) entstehen: Sprachplanerische Grundsätze, Rahmenbedingungen und Schwierigkeiten (skizziert am Beispiel des Bunjewatzischen und des Pomakischen). *Balkanistic Forum*, XXVI (2017), 3, pp. 34 – 49. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=572032

Henzelmann, M. (2024). Language in post-Yugoslav Montenegro: An unstable complex of contested values. *Zeitschrift für Slawistik. Journal of Slavic Studies*, 69 (2024), 2, pp. 229 – 255. https://doi.org/10.1515/slaw-2024-0013

Henzelmann, M. & Mitrinov, G. (2020). Lexikalische Einflüsse auf die Mundarten von Chloi (Komotini/Griechenland) und Gorni Juruci (Krumovgrad/Bulgarien): Kontrastive Beobachtungen zu Isotopien im Bereich der Gesundheitsterminologie. *Linguistique Balkanique*, 59 (2020), 2, pp. 280 – 299. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=915641

Henzelmann, M. & Hacı, S. (2025). The Infrastructure of the Turkish Language in Bulgaria: Visualization, Semiotization, and Contemporary Challenges. *Praxema. Journal of Visual Semiotics*, 44 (2025), 2, pp. 105 – 132. DOI: 10.23951/2312-7899-2025-2-105-132

Ivković, D. (2015a). Jezički krajolik Srbije (prvi deo): Percepcija prisustva ćirilice i latinice u javnoj sferi. *Antropologija*, 15 (2015), 2, pp. 87 – 110.

Ivković, D. (2015b). Jezički krajolik Srbije (drugi deo): žanrovska digrafija i semiotizacija pisama. *Antropologija*, 15 (2015), 3, pp. 69 – 99.

Kordić, S. (2010). *Jezik i nacionalizam*. Zagreb: Durieux.

Lisek, G. (2025). Russian in Artistic and Regulatory Discourses? The Appearance and Thematic Composition of Multilingual Signs in Linguistic Landscape of the Czech Town of Karlovy Vary. *Croatica et Slavica Iadertina,* 21 (2025), 1, pp. 343 – 365. https://doi.org/10.15291/csi.4811

Neweklowsky, G. (2002). Serbisch. In M. Okuka (ed.), *Wieser Enzyklopädie des europäischen Ostens* (pp. 443–460). Vol. 10. Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag.

Roberts, E. (2024). *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro*. London: Hurst Publishers.

Simyan, T. (2022). Feodosia as a city and a visual text (Aivazovsky Project). *Slovo.ru: Baltic Accent*, 13 (2022), 4, pp. 59 – 70. DOI: 10.5922/2225-5346-2022-4-4

Stojanović, J. (2011). *Putevima srpskog jezika i ćirilice*. Posebna izdanja, 1. Nikšić: Matica srpska.

Thomas, P.-L. (2013). Pour une grammaire commune du BCMS (bosniaque – croate – monténégrin – serbe). *Revue des études slaves*, 84 (2013), 1/2, pp. 235 – 251.

Uprava za statistiku (MONSTAT). https://www.monstat.org/ (Main page with various sections, including one on censuses. The most recent census is from 2023 and can be accessed at the following address: https://www.monstat.org/uploads/files/popis%202021/saopstenja/SAOPSTENJE_Popis%20stanovnistva%202023%20II_cg.pdf)

Vujović, N. (2024). Zakonski osnov i filološka argumentacija u prilog zaštiti crnogorskih govora. *Jezikoslovni Zapiski*, 30 (2024), 1, pp. 153 – 168. https://doi.org/10.3986/JZ.30.1.07

Vujović, N. (2025). Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der Sprachkultur in Montenegro und ihrer gegenwärtigen Bedeutung. *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie*, 60 (2024), 2, pp. 247 – 260.