

## MONTENEGRO AT A CROSSROADS

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The Republic of Montenegro, member of the Union for the Mediterranean and candidate for EU membership, is soon to become a member of NATO. One of the coastal countries of the Adriatic Sea, with a population of just over 620,000 in a surface area of 13,812 km<sup>2</sup>, a GDP of 4 billion USD and annual growth of 10% a decade ago (and still above EU average), Montenegro is an interesting candidate for NATO and EU membership. Its candidacy for NATO created a storm in its relations with Russia and neighbouring Serbia.

There is no doubt that inclusion of this country in the frameworks of NATO and the EU would ensure its stability and that of other NATO countries in the Adriatic region (Albania, Croatia, Italy and Slovenia) but would also improve the chances for stability in regional trouble spots like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. The most intriguing aspect, however, is that Montenegro's accession to NATO may serve as a litmus test for relations between Donald J. Trump and Vladimir Putin.

### **Historical Background: The “Greens” and the “Whites”**

The Montenegrin nation was created in a long struggle between Slavic Montenegrin clans and the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to 19th centuries. Inaccessible in their mountains and highlands, Montenegrins showed a dichotomy in their international relations: between an Eastern (Orthodox) religious and cultural background and the need for a West-oriented alliance, first with Venice and then with the Habsburg Empire, to counter the threat to the nation's existence from the East. On the other hand, the emergence of the Russian Empire in the European scene during the Napoleonic Wars resulted in an alliance between two Slavic and Orthodox countries, Montenegro and Russia. Considerable subventions were granted by the Russian tsar, and supplies of arms and ammunition were sent to Montenegro. This resulted in Russia being held in high esteem in Montenegro and led to sometimes bizarre

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Montenegrin political moves, such as the declaration of war on the Empire of Japan in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, which was fought exclusively in the Far East (Japan recognised the independent Republic of Montenegro in 2006 and declared that the state of war between them was over (“Montenegro, Japan to declare truce”, 2006).

The unification of Montenegro and Serbia in 1918 is still one of the most interesting and important issues of contemporary Montenegrin history (Pavlović, 2008), and is relevant even today. Podgorica's Assembly was called by Regent Alexander of Serbia (not by King Nicholas I of Montenegro) and resulted in the occupation and annexation of Montenegro by Serbia,<sup>1</sup> thus making Montenegro the only victorious Entente country occupied by another Entente power. From that moment on, despite the existence of various political parties in the last two centuries, the main political division in Montenegro from 1918 to the present remains between the “Whites” and the “Greens” (or “Bjelaši” and “Zelenaši” in Montenegrin).

The “Greens” encompass all political powers in Montenegro seeking the self-determination and independence of Montenegro, which may look for alliances in the West and the East. The “Whites” encompass all political powers in Montenegro that deny the existence of a separate Montenegrin nation, considering Montenegrins just as another Serbian tribe and Montenegro as a south-western coastal province of Serbia. For “Whites”, the alliances with Russia and Serbia are the only reasonable ones. Any “Green” government of Montenegro did not therefore face only opposition to its government but is always faced with opposition to the very existence of Montenegro as an independent state and Montenegrins as a separate nation. Consequently, the “Whites” have not accepted the results of any elections since Montenegro’s independence, including those of 2016.

Nevertheless, the independence of Montenegro was brought about through a referendum held on 21 May 2006. The referendum ended in a short-lived federation of Serbia and Montenegro, established after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992. Moreover, the referendum actually showed the real political strength of the “Greens” and the “Whites” in an independent Montenegro of that time. A total of 419,240 votes were cast, representing 86.5% of the total electorate; 230,661 votes or 55.5% were for independence, i.e. the “Green” vision of Montenegro. Montenegro’s voters thus narrowly surpassed the 55% threshold needed to validate the referendum under the rules established by the European Union. The “Whites” received the rest, i.e. 44.5%

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<sup>1</sup> Besides, in 1920 the Serbian Regent Alexander abolished the Montenegrin Autocephalous Orthodox Church, while the property of this Church was transferred to the Serbian Orthodox Church and has not been reclaimed since. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church was re-established in 1993.

of the votes. It should be noted, however, that Montenegro's ethnic minorities, Croats, Muslims and Albanians, sided with the "Greens" in this referendum. Independent Montenegro, separated from turmoil in post-Milošević Serbia, began to build a new national image based on a Euro-Mediterranean identity, in opposition to a Balkan identity, considered as something too reminiscent of Serbia and Yugoslavia.

### **Montenegro and Russia: Cooling of Relations and "White" Riots**

Centuries-old "Slavic, Orthodox Christian fraternal relations" between Montenegro and Russia have cooled since 5 March 2014, when the government of Montenegro condemned "blatant violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ukraine and the aggression of Russian armed forces" ("Vlada ima isti stav kao EU osuda ruske agresije i krsenja suvereniteta", 2014). Moreover, in March 2014 Montenegro joined Western sanctions imposed on Russia over the crisis in the Ukraine. In response, Russia sanctioned Montenegrin exports in August 2014. The Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Lukšić, stated that "Montenegro is neither happy, nor insisted on introducing sanctions on Russia, but in its process of accession to the EU Montenegro wanted to be with its partners" ("Lukšić: Nismo srećni zbog uvođenja sankcija Rusiji", 2016). He also recalled that in 1992 Russia remorselessly joined the West in introducing much harsher sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro.

Another reason for the cooling of Russian-Montenegrin relations is, of course, Montenegro's decision to accede to NATO, which opposes Russian visions for the Balkans. On 29 November 2013, Aleksandar Čepurin, Russian Ambassador to Serbia, compared Montenegro's leaders to "a bunch of monkeys" ("Ruski veleposlanik o Crnoj Gori", 2013) due to their wish to join NATO. Since then, a great deal of analysis and many statements have appeared in Russian, Serbian and parts of the Montenegrin media describing Montenegro's accession to NATO as nonsense. Fierce political debate in Montenegro goes along well-known lines, where "Greens" support accession to NATO, while "Whites" support the pro-Russian stances of Montenegro's preferable "military neutrality", corresponding to similar political stances in Serbia.

How far "White" resistance to Montenegro's accession to NATO may go has been shown during 2015 and 2016. "White" forces, i.e. the Democratic People's Party (DNP), New Serbian Democracy (NOVA), Movement for Changes (PzP) and other pro-Serbian/pro-Russian parties, formed the Democratic Front (DF) block in summer 2012 and in 2015 decided to undermine the "Green" government by permanent protests and widespread riots, emulating events in Maidan Square in Kiev, Ukraine. DF thus created a tent camp on Trg Slobode Square in front of Montenegro's Parliament – Skupština in Podgorica on 27 September 2015, and began with continuous protest, using a makeshift stage to demand the resignation of PM Milo Đukanović and the sitting Montenegrin government, as well as new elections in order

to get an anti-NATO government. On 17 October police stopped and dispersed the gathering in front of the Skupština and “protest walks”. On 18 October 2015 Russia promptly expressed its regret for police brutality (Grekov, 2015), while the European Commission and USA called for calm and a detailed investigation of this event (“Crna Gora 'odbrusila' Rusiji”, 2015).

The DF then called for the largest anti-government and anti-NATO protest (Kalajdžić, 2015; “Nemiri u Podgorici,” 2015) on 24 October 2015. Montenegrin Minister of Interior Affairs, Raško Konjević, in his statement to the media clearly recognised the existence of various pro-Serbian/pro-Russian extremist groups, not only from Montenegro but also from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina willing to attack Montenegrin police forces. In his statement on 21 October 2015, Montenegro’s PM Milo Đukanović openly accused Russia of instigating and supporting protests against his government (“Đukanović optužio Rusiju da potiče prosvjede”, 2015). Nearly 15,000 “White” protesters gathered on Trg Slobode Square on the evening of 24 October 2015 with Serbian flags and wearing the costumes and insignia of various Serbian extremist groups from WWII and today. The protest soon turned violent, with protesters hurling stones, bottles and torches for several hours toward a cordon of several hundred policemen of the Montenegrin Special Anti-terrorist Unit (SAJ), which were protecting the gates of the Parliament building. When “White” protesters began with an all-out assault on the police, various police units finally responded, resulting in street fights with widespread use of tear gas. Over 40 policemen and protesters were injured during several hours of night clashes. The outcome was total dispersal of the “White” protest, as the government demonstrated its readiness to maintain order and not give in to pro-Russian/anti-NATO protests.

On 20 November 2015, the Russian Parliament (Duma) adopted a statement that was sent to MPs in the Montenegro Parliament, the parliaments of NATO member states and to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. In its statement, the Duma recalls that “the attempt by Montenegro to accede to NATO is a serious blow to the traditional friendly relationship between Montenegro and Russia,” that “involving states in blocs against the will of the people is an instrument from the Cold War,” and that “the will of Montenegrin Prime Minister, Milo Đukanović, and his regime to join NATO is in opposition to the will of most Montenegrins” (“Rusija: Duma usvaja izjavu o protivljenju ulaska Crne Gore u NATO”, 2015). These statements from the Duma surprised Montenegro’s government. Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Lukšić, sarcastically commented that his government is surprised with Russian concerns about Montenegro’s accession to NATO in the context of that organisation spreading to the East, since Montenegro is in Southern and not Eastern Europe.

Dmitrij Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, and one of the closest associates of Vladimir Putin, stepped up the Russian threats in his interview to web portal Sputnik

News on 12 January 2016, where he promised that “Montenegro would regret its decision to join NATO” (Milinčić, 2016; “Rogozin: Crna Gora će zažaliti zbog odluke da pristupi u NATO”, 2016). Rogozin also stated that he “does not believe that this is the people’s will, since there were no polls on public opinion,” and that “decision making is in the hands of a very small number of people.” Contrary to Rogozin’s statements, at the moment 47.3% of citizens support and 37.1% oppose Montenegro’s membership of NATO, while 15.6% are undecided, according to a survey of the agency for public opinion research “Damar” (“47.3 % of citizens in favor of NATO membership”, 2016). In reaction to such Russian insults, and following a similar move by the European Council, on 11 February 2016, Montenegro’s government sanctioned Rogozin’s visit to Montenegro’s “White” opposition (“Rogozin: Crna Gora će zažaliti zbog odluke da pristupi u NATO”, 2016; “Dmitrij Rogozin ne može u Crnu Goru”, 2016).

#### **“Alliance of Neutral Balkan States”**

On 30 January 2016, Dmitrij Rogozin invited leaders of the Montenegrin Democratic People’s Party (DNP) and of the “White” Democratic Front (DF), Milan Knežević and Predrag Bulatović, to visit him in Moscow, which they did from 3 to 5 February 2016, with an alleged agenda to establish close cooperation between DF with Rogozin’s Rodina Party and other Russian parties (“Rogozin zvao Kneževića i Bulatovića u Moskvu”, 2016). Rogozin, obviously on behalf of the Russian government, maintains good relations with opposition extremists in both Montenegro and Serbia – such as his visit to Belgrade on 13 January 2016 to meet notorious Serbian war criminal Vojislav Šešelj (Jelovac, 2016), indicted by the ICTY war crimes tribunal in the Hague.

Intriguing idea appeared beforehand, at “anti-NATO” rally organised by DNP in Danilovgrad on 22 January 2016 (“DNP: U petak anti-NATO tribina u Danilovgradu”, 2016) in Montenegro: military neutrality of Montenegro, guaranteed by both Russia and NATO. This formed the basis upon which the highly ranked member of Putin’s United Russia Party Sergei Zheleznyak in December of the same year proposed the formation of an “Alliance of neutral Balkan states”, which would encompass Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (“Formirati savez neutralnih država na Balkanu”, 2016; “Jedinstvena Rusija za savez neutralnih zemalja na Balkanu”, 2016; “Rusija hoće savez neutralnih na Balkanu”, 2016). The “military neutrality” of each state, as well as the “neutrality” of this whole “alliance” would be guaranteed by both Russia and NATO. The idea of an “alliance of neutral Balkan states” gained support among right-wing parties in Serbia. However, due to coherence between both the DNP’s ideas and the Russian vision of the Balkans, it is reasonable to consider the actual Russian origin of these concepts. If brought about, the “alliance of neutral Balkan states” would lead to the creation of a Russian-sponsored “neutral” Slavic-Orthodox enclave in the heart of the Balkans.

### **Accession of Montenegro to NATO: Smooth Start and Russian Protests**

After the invitation to Montenegro at the Riga Summit, in December 2006, Montenegro joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) (NATO, 2016; “Razvoj odnosa Crne Gore i NATO”, 2016). In 2007, Montenegro donated weapons and ammunition to the Afghan National Army, supporting NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. Moreover, in February 2010 Montenegro decided to contribute to the ISAF forces in Afghanistan. In the NATO Wales Summit Declaration (NATO, 2016b), issued on 5 September 2014 by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, point 95 specifies the somewhat unique procedure on Montenegro's accession to NATO. Finally, at the meeting held in Brussels on 2 December 2015 NATO foreign ministers unilaterally invited Montenegro to start accession talks to join it, while encouraging further progress on reforms, especially in the area of rule of law. That caused excitement in Montenegro's government and among the “Greens” all over the country, as well as rage and despair among the DF and other “White” forces (“Proruska opozicija u Crnoj Gori kipti od bijesa”, 2016) in Montenegro.

In its statement on 16 December 2015, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked Montenegro to hold a referendum on accession to NATO (“Moskva: Poziv Crnoj Gori u NATO prijatnja po bezbjednost Rusije”, 2015; “Rusija traži referendum u Crnoj Gori”, 2015). Moscow pointed to the “confrontational nature” of NATO's call to Montenegro, which “leads to fragmentation of the European security area and the creation of new demarcation zones in this continent” and continues NATO's policy of “frightening Russia.” The Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration promptly responded to such Russian requests, stating that the procedure is an internal matter of Montenegro (“Crna Gora 'odbrusila' Rusiji”, 2015).

Montenegro began its negotiations with NATO on 15 February 2016. Montenegro's Parliamentary Institute Research Centre issued a detailed study on the timetable and procedures for the ratification of protocols of accession to NATO (“NATO: Timetable and Procedures for the Ratification of Protocols on Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty”, 2016). On 19 May 2016, NATO foreign ministers signed the Accession Protocol for Montenegro, marking a historic step in Montenegro's path to the Alliance. Speaking at a joint press conference with Montenegrin Prime Minister Đukanovic, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underlined that today's decision is “a clear sign that NATO's door remains open for partners that share and promote our values.” This step marked the start of the ratification process, which is ongoing with ratifications from the USA and Spain remaining, on 20 March 2017 (“Tok ratifikacije Pristupnog protokola Crne Gore NATO-u”, 2017), while Montenegro already participates in all NATO meetings as an observer.

According to the IISS Military Balance 2014, Montenegro's defence budget in 2013 and 2014 was around €40 million. Of 2,020 active military personnel, 1,500 were in the Army, 350 in the Navy and 230 in the Air Force. The Navy had five patrol and coastal surface combatants, five landing crafts and three vessels for logistics and support. The Air Force had one jet training plane and seven light helicopters. Paramilitary personnel consisted of Montenegrin Ministry of Interior forces – 6,000 policemen and the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SAJ) – with 4,100 members.

Moreover, in June 2006, the European Council confirmed the European perspective of the country by recognising its independence. In that same year in September, a political dialogue at the level of ministers had been established between the government of Montenegro and the EU institutions. On the 22 January 2007, the EU Council approved a decision on the adoption of the new European partnership with Montenegro ("Relations between Montenegro and the EU", 2017). In December 2011, the Council launched the accession process with the accession negotiations with Montenegro starting on 29 June 2012. Over 15 negotiation chapters have been opened since (European Commission, 2017).

### **Elections and Armed Groups Incursions**

For Montenegrin "Greens" and "Whites" the stakes could not be higher, and both sides aimed for victory in the parliamentary elections held on 16 October 2016. The key issue on elections was NATO, and all other topics proved to be irrelevant. PM Milo Đukanović portrayed elections "as a choice between peace, prosperity, deeper European integration and NATO membership under his leadership, and being reduced to a 'Russian colony' under opposition parties" (Vasović, 2016). Russia's anti-NATO campaign in Montenegro during the elections in October 2016 became bold, brazen and unscrupulous. Coordinated cyber-attacks against government websites and massive trolling of fake news on social media sought to discredit the vote. The campaigning of the "Whites" was unusually professional and more expensive than what the usually meagre opposition funds used to allow.

Moreover, a sophisticated plot was also uncovered in which 20 hired mercenaries were to take over the parliament building, shoot anti-government protestors, and assassinate the prime minister to create chaos and undermine Montenegrin democracy ("Poslijeizborna drama u Crnoj Gori", 2016). Montenegrin police arrested 14 Serbian citizens on 15 October (one day before elections), who allegedly infiltrated Montenegro from Serbia, under the leadership of retired General Bratislav Dikić, President of the Pro-Russian Patriotic Front of Serbia and former Commander of the Serbian Gendarmerie ("DNP: U petak anti-NATO tribina u Danilovgradu", 2016). Another six suspects were arrested in other parts of Montenegro. Dikić was relieved of his duties in Serbia in 2013, after a chain of crimes committed, including racket

and drug smuggling, and is well-known for his pro-Russian stances. Dikić organised anti-NATO protests in Serbia and allegedly participated in anti-NATO protests in Montenegro in 2015. The Montenegrin State Attorney accused Dikić of being the leader of a terrorist group that prepared attacks on institutions, the murder of civilians and the assassination of PM Đukanović. The Montenegrin daily *Dnevne novine* alleged that the transcript of the phone talks of Dikić with his partners in Montenegro and abroad that appeared on 19 October “prove coordination between Dikić and his group with political factors in Montenegro, as well as with para-intelligence structures from Russia” (“Crnogorski mediji objavili transkript navodnog razgovora Dikića i 'Sinđe'”, 2016; “Dnevne novine' objavile transkript razgovora Dikića”, 2016). Serbian media immediately described this affair as fake news masterminded in DPS (Jevtić & Jovičević, 2016), while Serbian PM Aleksandar Vučić denied Serbia’s involvement in this affair and stated that accusations against Dikić are weak and without proof (“Vučić Crnogorcima: Dajte dokaze za Dikića!”, 2016). Still, over the next few months, further information surfaced on the involvement of Russian intelligence operatives in the alleged plot, allegedly turning the pre-election coup situation in Montenegro into a topic of discussion at the highest levels of NATO leadership (Farmer, 2017).

Be that as it may, the October 2016 elections ended with a relative majority of the “Greens” – the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of PM Milo Đukanović won 36 of 81 seats in the Parliament (OSCE, 2016). Various opposition parties won 39 seats: Democratic Front (DF), 18 seats; Great Coalition “Key”, nine seats; Democratic Montenegro (DCG), eight seats; Social-Democratic Party (SDP), four seats; and the Social-Democrats (SD), two seats. Ethnic minority parties won four seats: Bosnian Party (BS), two; Croatian Civil Initiative, one; and Albanian Decisive (AO), one (Vasović, 2016, “Montenegro election: Djukanovic declares ruling party victory,” 2016; “Montenegro elections end inconclusively,” 2016).

The DPS immediately offered a coalition to representatives of ethnic minorities, which accepted the offer, stating that they “do not want to enter into coalition with parties that do not recognise the state and its achievements” (“Poslijeizborna drama u Crnoj Gori”, 2016). Ethnic minority support for PM Đukanović is understandable. The Muslim, a.k.a. Bosnian, minority, as well as the Albanian and Croatian minority, know well that the stability of a “Green” Montenegro government is important for their own existence. Undermining the “Green” government inevitably leads to strengthening of the “White” faction, which in practical terms is the nemesis of all local ethnic minorities. To everyone’s surprise, after election victory, on 26 October amid “White” accusations on a staged coup and political instability, the long-time DPS leader Milo Đukanović offered his resignation and denied the possibility of his re-election as PM, proposing instead his deputy Duško Marković as new PM of Montenegro (“Povlaci se Milo Dukanovic?”, 2016; “Neocekivana ostavka”, 2016). Mr. Marković is the Deputy

Chairperson of the DPS, who served as one of the deputy prime ministers and formerly as head of the now pro-Western national intelligence service. By his resignation, Milo Đukanović has ceased to be a focal point and unification factor for “White” opposition groups in Montenegro.

The “White” opposition parties did not recognise the outcome of such “rigged elections” (“Crnogorska oporba ne priznaje rezultate izbora”, 2016), stating in their joint statement on 17 October that the arrests of Dikić’s group were themselves a staged coup, aimed to boost support for the ruling DPS and PM Đukanović, while also demanding an immediate and thorough investigation into the alleged attempted terrorist attack. The same mood prevails in the Serbian media (“Sramna namestajka u Crnoj Gori”, 2016). Keeping their word, all the “White” opposition parties also boycotted the parliamentary session that gave support to the new Montenegro government on 29 December 2016.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Although this foreign policy shift from the East to the West could not cut various cultural, social and economic ties between Montenegro and Russia and/or Serbia, it eliminates or at least reduces a possibility of significant Serbian or Russian influence on the domestic and foreign policy of Montenegro. The accession of Montenegro to NATO undermines plans for the creation of an “alliance of neutral Balkan states” comprising Slavic and Orthodox Balkan nations under Russian “protection”. It also conveys a strong message to pro-Russian forces in those very nations (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Macedonia) that the enlargement processes of NATO and the EU have not stopped.

Moreover, Montenegro’s accession to NATO results in two other significant strategic changes. One is the complete command of the Adriatic Sea by the West, since after Montenegro’s accession to NATO the Adriatic Sea becomes “a NATO gulf” and there would be no more “neutral” ports that could be used as a shelter/base for problematic non-NATO ships. The other significant consequence is the further strengthening of the joint airspace control over the Balkans, since the more thorough inclusion of Montenegro into the NATO network (NATINADS, as well as the regional BRAAD Project) will lead to better surveillance of airspace over the Balkans.

As all the processes that we observed are fragile and ongoing, it is crucially important that the international community stays involved in Montenegro’s path toward the EU and NATO. These organisations represent important points of stability, transferring their beneficial influence onto Montenegro’s volatile political scene. A radical change of the current political course or some form of international isolation from the West would likely result in deeper internal political changes in the country. At the same time,

this would probably not bring about a weakening or removal of foreign support for local “White” forces, only resulting in radical weakening or dissolution of pro-Western political forces, long-term instability and a degradation of the Montenegrin administrative system. The result of such developments would easily be a situation along the lines visible today in Macedonia. Consequently, the continual and intensive cooperation with the EU and NATO is crucial for a democratic and stable Montenegro.

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