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Montenegro and NATO membership

An achievement and a risk?

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ANALYSE — CONFLICT EN FRAGIELE STATEN

MONTENEGRO AND NATO MEMBERSHIP: AN ACHIEVEMENT AND A RISK?



29 MAY 2017 - 14:39

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SHARE

Montenegro will join NATO as the 29th member of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance. That is now a fact, following the recent ratifications of the United States, the Netherlands and Spain, and on 28 April that of the Montenegrin parliament.^[1] What do we know about this small country in the Western Balkans, with a population of less than 700,000, that declared its independence in 2006? Nevenka Tromp of the University of Amsterdam analyses Montenegro's history and road towards independence, its internal political developments since and the process of Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration.

On October 16, 2016, the night before the general election in a small European country, special police forces uncovered an alleged terrorist group and arrested 15 of its members, suspected of planning terrorist attacks on state institutions and leading politicians in order to destabilise the state, undermine the authority of the sitting Prime Minister and thus influence the election results. According to the government statement the group was hired by the opposition with the task to impose the victory of a favoured opposition party.

This dramatic news was released midway through the election day when many citizens had not yet casted their vote. The event described resembles a bad gangster movie with a thin plot and not too convincing acting. Yet, this is exactly what happened in Montenegro on 16 October 2016. The Prime Minister in

question is Milo Đukanović.

The alleged terrorists...

But who are the alleged terrorists? Media have identified the leader of the plotters as Bratislav Dikić, a Serb national, with professional history in Serbia's security forces; from 2009 to 2013 he was commander of Serbia's Gendarmerie. According to pro-government media in Montenegro, Dikić has been paid by the opposition parties with a strong pro-Serbia and pro-Russia agenda to prevent Đukanović's re-election as Prime Minister.

Milivoj Katnić, Special State Prosecutor of Montenegro, stated that the group planned to join the anti-government demonstrators before the Assembly Hall in the centre of Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro. The further plan was to enter the building dressed in the Montenegrin Special Police Force's uniforms and fire at the demonstrators. For the people outside the building it would appear the state police was ordered by the government to shoot at its own citizens. Katnić concluded that "[t]his terrorist organisation wanted, by shedding blood of innocent people, to occupy the Assembly, to arrest the Prime Minister, and to take control of the Assembly."

...and who were really behind it?

And who are the political masters behind the attacks? Anti-government opposition media in Montenegro and Serbia created a counter-narrative according to which Dikić was not hired by the pro-Serb opposition but by Đukanović himself, in order to create chaos and uncertainty that would help convince the undecided voters to vote for him. In their view the problem for Montenegro and its democratic future is Đukanović self, his 27 years-long leadership and dictatorial rule, a corrupt government, and political elites engaged in organised crime and corruption.



Đukanović speaking during the signing of the Belgrade Agreement in 2002, promoting Serbian-Montenegrin cooperation.

Source: Government of Montenegro.

The needed clarification of this squabble between the intelligence agencies and the opposing media outlets came from an unlikely source. Some ten days after the election-day drama, Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić confirmed that a group was following Đukanović and that they were in communication with others. However he rejected any connection with Serbia, but did say there was a foreign element involved. He did not mention the ‘foreign’ elements by name, but rumours suggested it could be Russia. Since then, many open references were made of Russia being behind the terrorist attempt; and that the threat to Đukanović is still a real one.^[2]

The importance of the October 2016 election for Montenegro and for stability in this part of Europe should not be understated. The stakes for the political parties that took part in the elections were high as this election struggle went beyond the regular power struggle where the sitting government parties want to retain power and the opposition parties to win it. This election was also a sort of referendum where a vote

for Đukanović equals a vote in favour of the Montenegrin Euro-Atlantic integration.

As a statesman with the longest political tenure in European politics, Đukanović has displayed again and again an exceptional talent for political survival

Victory for the opposition with a pro-Serbia and pro-Russia geopolitical leaning, assembled in the coalition called the 'National Front', would mean the discontinuity of a 10-year long effort by the previous government to fulfil the formal requirements and conditions needed for NATO and EU membership. A government formed by the opposition parties would lead to the change of the ideological make-up of the government and to closer political, military and economic ties with Serbia and Russia.

Yet, not all opposition parties' criticism was driven by geostrategic preferences for alliances. In a more moderate anti-government opposition rhetoric, as articulated by the Key coalition (Ključ), Đukanović's leadership was dismissed as a dictatorship, his government as corrupt and the Montenegrin economic system struggling due to the illegal profits from cigarettes smuggling in which Đukanović has been functioning as some sort of Mafia boss.[3]

Đukanović's Montenegro: A dictatorship or a developing democracy?

To what extent has the disclosure of the alleged terrorist attacks influenced the Montenegrin population to vote in favour or against the sitting Prime Minister and his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) remains difficult to assess. As it is, the DPS came out as the election winner by securing 36 out of 81 seats in the Montenegrin parliament, only 5 seats short of the required minimum of 41 seats for a party to form a government. As winner of the elections, the DPS was mandated to form a coalition government; this task was fulfilled at the end of November (see Box below).

FORMATION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

On 28 November 2016, the new coalition government has been formed, with Duško Marković from the DPS as its Prime Minister. The other coalition parties include the Social Democrats (SD) and, curiously, three parties representing ethnic minorities: the Bosniak party (BS - Bošnjačka stranka), the Croatian Civic Union (HGS – Hrvatski građanski savez) and a coalition of Albanian parties, called 'Albanians Determined' (Albanci odlučno). Đukanović left the government, responding to the criticism of his personality by the opposition parties and thus creating the opportunities for a different political climate. His position as chairman of the DPS indicates he will retain his political influence.

One of the pending political issues is the successful verification of Montenegro's NATO membership.

When asked in a recent interview about his biggest political achievement, Đukanović said the independence of Montenegro was a huge historical leap forward, but that personally he sees the NATO membership as his most important political achievement. Đukanović stated that when deciding to part ways with Serbia, he consulted with the Russian Federation and the United States and got their consent. That was very important. But he recalled that his contacts on both states wondered why to part from Serbia when the future of both is in the EU. Đukanović responded he understood that but wanted Montenegro and its people to be in charge of steering the process.



Montenegrin Prime Minister Marković and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg. Source: NATO

Đukanović's election victory did not come as a surprise. As a statesman with the longest political tenure in European politics, Đukanović has displayed again and again an exceptional talent for political survival, which kept him in power for the past 26 years, with only a short-lived and self-imposed break when he stepped out of politics to pursue a career as a businessman. This career did not last long and Đukanović the politician was back in the complicated maze of local, national and international politics again.

Praised by his supporters and allies for his instinct for political survival and for his ability to adopt to the

changing ideological winds blowing over the post-Cold War European political landscape, he managed to lead Montenegro through ideological, political, economic and geopolitical transformations for almost three decades, stressing the importance of political evolution and continuity of the political leadership.

His opponents and adversaries advocate a regime change as the only way forward. They cast Đukanović as an opportunist interested only in retention of power, and to achieve this he has been shifting – very successfully too – from one ideological affiliation to another. His proponents see his choices of geopolitical allies as political pragmatism of a politician who understands the political realities of his time, his opponents see him as an unreliable and shifty politician with no ideological convictions, driven only by his personal ambition and short-term gains.

Who is Milo Đukanović? In Montenegro, as in many other developing democracies across the world, the authority of a leader remains the most important political institution. Milo Đukanović amplifies it as no other leader in the region. Whatever position he held, that of Prime Minister or that of President, he remained in charge for more than 25 years. Although criticised severely for that by his opponents, his supporters praise the continuity of his leadership that eventually led to Montenegro's independence in 2006 and to its NATO membership in 2017.

*If you are interested to read more about Milo Đukanović,
read this profile, also written by Nevenka Tromp:
[Montegro's game-changing leader](#) [Milo Đukanović](#)*

Continuity and change at the same time

The transition from a communist Montenegro to an authoritarian regime with the elements of political paternalism to a genuine liberal democracy has been taking place for the last 27 years. What makes this transition so unusual is that none of these transformative changes were accompanied by a regime change. In Montenegro the same political elite has been in power throughout and at every stage of this decades long process of political metamorphosis.

Đukanović's leadership represents continuity and change at the same time. The results of his political strategy speak for themselves. It is difficult to imagine some other politician to lead Montenegro to independence and wrestle it free from the firm grip of Serbia's dominance. It seemed that his success has something – or everything – to do with his history of close relationship to Milošević and Serbia.

After all, he had learned the trade as a politician from Milošević personally, observing his thinking and action from a close proximity, so that Đukanović could familiarise himself with the ways Belgrade operated through its politicians and more importantly through its powerful state-security network. This

also made it possible for him to outsmart Belgrade many times and yet to stay in power for 27 years against all odds. Once free from the patronage of Belgrade and celebrating the independence as a historical achievement, the next big question was – where to go from there.

Euro-Atlantic Integration

In less than 10 years after independence – more precisely on December 2, 2015 – the NATO foreign ministers extended a formal invitation to Montenegro for a full membership. The invitation came after nearly a decade long effort by Montenegro’s government to fulfill all the conditions set by NATO. Đukanović could now list the second historical achievement for his country in his political biography. He described the invitation as “yet another important step towards Montenegro’s full membership in the European Union”.

Đukanović’s words echoed the ambition of Montenegro to join the EU ever since EU’s Thessaloniki summit of 2003 in which it was decided the Western Balkan states, i.e. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, should be encouraged to join the EU. The EU leaders that gathered in Thessaloniki warned that organised crime and corruption are the main obstacles for democratic stability, the rule of law, economic development and the development of civil society in the Western Balkan states.[4]

Aspiring EU members

Another concern was the region’s instability. In 2003, the process of the formation of the post-Yugoslav states was still not finished and since the Thessaloniki meeting three new states were established; Montenegro and Serbia (both in 2006); and Kosovo in 2008. With only Croatia acquiring full EU membership as of 2013, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo joined Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania as aspiring EU members.

In Montenegro’s quest for a full NATO membership, Đukanović could count on the support of Croatia and Slovenia

All these countries, except for Serbia, have been seeking NATO membership as well. The destruction, fear and humiliation caused by the NATO bombardments still play an important role in Serbia’s negative attitude towards NATO. Instead, Serbia cultivates the policy of ‘equidistance’, by concentrating on the EU integration while at the same time developing and strengthening its ties with Moscow. This has led to an increasingly vocal opposition to the EU path taken by the Serbian government led by Aleksandar Vučić,

and has been challenged by a growing pro-Russian influence even within Vučić's Serbian Peoples' Party (the SNS).

Towards NATO's membership

In Montenegro, Đukanović's government followed in the footsteps of Slovenia and Croatia, the only two post-Yugoslav states that are members both of NATO and EU. The NATO membership in these countries preceded their EU membership. Immediately after its declaration of independence, Montenegro joined NATO's [Partnership for Peace](#) at the [2006 Riga summit](#) . In November 2007 a transit agreement was signed that allowed NATO troops to move across the territory of Montenegro. In June 2008, Montenegro adopted an [Individual Partnership Action Plan](#) (IPAP) and was invited to join the [Adriatic Charter](#) of NATO aspirants on 25 September 2008.

In Montenegro's quest for a full NATO membership, [Đukanović](#) could count on the support of Croatia and Slovenia. In a letter of 29 May 2014, the Slovenian and Croatian Foreign and Defence Ministers urged NATO's [Secretary General](#) to consider inviting Montenegro to join NATO during the 2014 Summit in Wales. However, NATO's official response was that it would take some more time for Montenegro to work on the list of outstanding conditions and obligations.

Observer status

After the invitation for membership was extended on 2 December 2015, the final accession talks began in February 2016 and as of May 2016, Montenegro was awarded an 'observer' status. The membership will be final once it is ratified by all NATO members and by Montenegro's own assembly.

The elections showed how divided Montenegro is as far as Euro-Atlantic policies are concerned. But, the composition of the new assembly indicates that the ratification will take place. Although the opposition parties with a pro-Serbia and a pro-Russia affiliation lost the elections, they will not give up undermining the government's Euro-Atlantic policies.



Đukanović meets Merkel during the NATO Summit in Warsaw 2016. Source: Government of Montenegro.

On orders to speed up the formation of a coalition government (see box), Đukanović announced ten days after the elections that he would not seek to become Prime Minister again. At the DPS party meeting of 24 October, it was decided that his deputy, Duško Marković, would be in charge of forming a new government, while Đukanović would remain chairman of the party. By this decision, the DPS made clear it would not allow the criticisms of Đukanović personally to distract from the Euro-Atlantic integration process, which has been a core political issue of DPS politics since Montenegro's independence.

Last stage to full membership

All preparatory work for the ratification of the Protocol for the NATO membership by its member states was completed and by the end of January 2017 when a majority of 22 NATO member states had already ratified it.^[5] The US was not among them. Donald Trump who was elected US President in November 2016, was very critical of NATO during his 2016 election campaign. The then presidential candidate Trump had called NATO an 'outdated' organization and demanded the military expenses to be shared more evenly between its member states. With a small army of just 1,950 active army servicemen, Montenegro was not an ideal candidate when it came to sharing the costs. With 2% of its GDP to NATO Montenegro's membership could not be appraised for its contribution on manpower or military expenditure but for its geostrategic importance.

New geo-politics of Europe incited many rumours recently, the one being that President Trump was to make a deal with Russian President Putin according to which the Western Balkan states that are not yet members of NATO and the EU would become areas of influence controlled by the Russian Federation. These rumours seemed baseless after the US Senate voted in favour of Montenegro's NATO membership, followed with the signature of President Trump.

Geopolitical challenges

Đukanović's evolution from a communist *apparatchik* in the shadow of Milošević to one of the most vocal proponents of Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration has been quite successful. The challenge for his political legacy currently comes from Russia as part of Moscow's attempt to expand its sphere of influence to the Western Balkans. Serbia and Montenegro, the two nations with a majority Christian Orthodox population, seem to be top of the list in Russian foreign policy towards the Western Balkans. One of the most important objectives of Moscow was to keep both out of NATO.[6]

When Montenegro announced its NATO membership in 2014, Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin, at a conference in Belgrade, spoke angrily of "a monkey business".[7] His colleague in Podgorica, Jacob Gerasimov, said Russia would have to reconsider its relationship with Montenegro, once it joins NATO. Montenegro's government circles were not impressed. Savo Kentera, a government official serving at Montenegro's Atlantic Council, responded that his country was not a province of Russia and would never be.

Yet, the Russian presence in Montenegro goes beyond tourist visits and is more prominent at the economic level than in any of the other neighbouring countries. From 4,200 registered foreign properties in Montenegro one third is owned by Russians. Russians were also encouraged to buy real estate on the Adriatic coast, which resulted in a small colony of the Russians living in Montenegro.[8] An estimated 10,000 Russians residing in Montenegro have already established their own schools, operating a Russian school programme; one of these schools, the Dukley Academy - Center of Continued Education in Montenegro, is situated in the seaside town of Budva.

Russian residents in Montenegro also have access to Russian-speaking media, a Russian radio station and assemble in a variety of cultural organisations. They are, however, not yet organised in political parties, although the interests of the Russian Federation are represented by parties such as the Democratic Front, a coalition of pro-Serbia and pro-Russian parties, that came out as the second biggest party at the October 2016 elections with 22 seats won.

Montenegro's future in the EU

With NATO membership achieved, the next major political goal of the government will be EU membership. This might take some time. Hence it is important to convince its citizens – especially the sceptics – that the Euro-Atlantic policy was the right choice for them by boosting the economic dynamics, by attracting new investments and by creating new employment opportunities and jobs.

Although NATO membership might be an important milestone for attracting investors and foreign capital, the government – with or without Đukanović at its helm – will need to ensure political stability by a well-measured balance between economic and security considerations. That might include a careful continuation and cultivation of diplomatic and economic ties with Russia and Russian businesses.

Conclusion

In his recent interview to a Croatian daily, Đukanović stated that ten years after Montenegro's independence, Russia's resistance to its NATO membership, as demonstrated in October 2016, shows that the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic influence sphere to the Western Balkans is not and will not be possible without Russia's consent. The future of the Euro-Atlantic integration process will also be influenced by the United States foreign policy priorities under President Trump and so far it seems that the United States will not be as active in the Western Balkans as it used to be.

It all leads to one conclusion: whatever happens next, the European Union will need to take charge of the states that aspire a EU membership and encourage the membership process in a timely and constructive manner. Montenegro appears a good start for an expedient and speedy integration of the Western Balkans states into the European Union.

[1] The pro-government media lauded the ratification and stressed was voted unanimously by all 46 representatives present. However, the opposition parties decided to boycott the vote. They have led protests outside the parliament building, where the opposition criticised the government, demanding a referendum on the NATO membership. The opposition also protested for antagonizing Russia. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted promptly the same day, stating: “We deeply regret the decision of Montenegrin officials and their western patrons not to listen to the voice of reason. Adopting the law on state security issues by voting on the formal majority without asking the population about it is a violation of democratic norms and principles.” Further, the Ministry's public announcement stated: “after this decision, Russia reserves the right to take measures to protect its interests and national security.” On the Montenegrin parliament voting 46-0 for NATO membership, see article of The Guardian, [Montenegro ratifies NATO membership in historic shift to western alliance](#), 2017.

[2] Serwer and Vuković (2016), [This is what it looks like when Russia really wants to mess with your election](#), Foreign Policy.

[3] Patrucic, Brkic and Celic (2009), [Djukanovic's Montenegro: A family business](#), Public Integrity.

[4] Please see the European Commission's [Press Release C/03/163](#) .

[5] RadioFreeEurope and RadioLiberty, [NATO Chief 'confident' US Senate will ratify Montenegro bid](#), 2017.

[6] See for an excellent overview of this topic the following issues of the [Helsinki Bulletins](#) published by Serbian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

[7] CIBAL, [Russian Diplomat's 'Monkey' Jibe Angers Montenegro](#) , 2013.

[8] Tomovic (2016), [Russians dominate foreign ownership of Montenegrin Companies](#), BalkanInsight.

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1 REACTIES

Alyssa Healy

do, 05/24/2018 - 09:38

Montenegro

Montenegro was once quite popular with superstar holidaymakers within the 1960's as an amazing and extra rugged model of coastal vacations in Italy and Spain. It lost recognition via the 80's and ninety's for apparent reasons. <https://www.assignmenthelpdeal.co.uk/write-my-assignment/> Now that Croatia has become so fashionable once more and has had its own property growth (though they had been smart and attempted to be more sensitive to improvement than the Spanish had been within the 60's, 70's and eighty's) humans are looking at Montenegro again. If price tendencies are something like Croatia it will move from very reasonably-priced to Spanish costs in 2-3 years. As a result, I'd bet that the price of dwelling will pass up quite quickly in the ones areas that see maximum improvement and influx of western tourism/ customers... In particular if the low-cost airlines start working to a close-by airport (again, this has already come about for Croatia).

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