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Institute of Balkan Studies & Center of Thracology
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

CONTEMPORARY BALKANS

THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Collective monograph

Edited by prof. Alexandre Kostov

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CONTEMPORARY BALKANS: THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY
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MONTENEGRO: BETWEEN EURO-ATLANTIC STABILITY AND INTERNAL DIVISION

Bisser Banchev

Montenegro is a small state with a big historical heritage. During the second decade of the 21st century it proved to be the point of intersection of major geopolitical clashes. Hence contemporary processes in the country evoke lasting interest.¹

In the late 20th and early 21st century, Montenegro made a radical attempt to part with its Yugoslav past.² In 2006, the country attained its independence after a referendum conducted under EU supervision. It is sometimes pointed out that Montenegro is a sovereign state without its own currency and that it is a maritime state without its own navy. Several patrol boats and training ships disprove the second statement. Unlike it, the first statement is true and it is much more important, because Montenegro renounced the currency of Yugoslavia and formed indirect links with the financial system of the EU already back in 1999.

The restoring of statehood that had been lost in 1918 is an important element of the official rhetoric. In practice, more than a decade after the referendum on independence the Montenegrin society has not yet succeeded in finding the balance between the Yugoslav heritage and the pre-Yugoslav tradition. The latter includes the particularly close relations with Russia before World War I. Special attention was devoted to the topic immediately

1 MORRISON, K. *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); BIEBER, F. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); BECHEV, D. *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding?* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 2018); PAVLOVIĆ, S. "Montenegro's 'stabilitocracy': the West's support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change", *LSEE Blog*, December 23, 2016.

2 БАНЧЕВ, Б. „Черна гора – малката държава с големи амбиции“. – В: КОСТОВ АЛ. (съст) *Балканите през второто десетилетие на ХХI век* (София, Парадигма, 2015), 363–387.

after 2006, and Moscow recognised the new independence of Montenegro before Washington.³ Russian investors in industry, as well as Russian tourists, became a major factor for the country's economy. Subsequently the realisation would come that the contacts were on unsound foundations.

Montenegro's big ambition during the second decade of the 21st century is connected with the country's EU accession. The paradox is that in 2012 Montenegro started accession negotiations with the same parties and even with the same persons who started the transition to a democratic society in the early 1990s. Throughout the entire period the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) was the leading force in public life. It is direct successor of the local republican subdivision of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and it gave the country's Prime Minister for the entire period from 1990 until 2020, as it did in 1945–1990 as well. Montenegro is a unique case in this respect. After 1991, Milo Djukanović (b. 1962) constantly alternated the position of Prime Minister with that of President, with the exception of two short spells when both posts were held by close associates of his, while he himself remained the unchanged leader of the ruling party.

Observers are justified to refer to "intimate blending" between the ruling party and the state. Monopoly over power creates opportunities for abuse of public resources during elections, for discrediting opponents and for consolidating the patronage positions of the leading political party figures. Nearly one-third of the labour force is in the public sector, which makes the unemployment topic very sensitive, because in times of crisis work is given only through party channels, expecting in return controlled vote during the elections.⁴ The confrontation is particularly acute during local elections, which are often perceived as more important than national elections in the miniature state.

Montenegro is the first candidate that started EU accession negotiations following a new model. Chapters 23 and 24 – on the judiciary, human rights and combating corruption – were opened first. These chapters are to remain open until the accession negotiations are completed, so that progress in these areas can be permanently monitored by Brussels. There has been no other period in the history of Montenegro with such direct obligation for the country to abide by certain rules, combined with external control.

3 RAKOVIĆ, A. "Montenegro from secession to NATO: Reflection on the disorientation of the Russian foreign policy (2006–2017)," – *National Interest*, vol. 28.1, (2017), p. 73.

4 ČAĐENOVIĆ, I. "Sudbina državnih preduzeća nakon izbora: Otključati kasice prasice DPS-a," – *Monitor*, 15.09.2020.

All existing controversies become apparent. Protests on social grounds alternate with protests on anti-corruption grounds, and with protests on ethnic and religious grounds. The latter manifest a peculiar Montenegrin specificity that does not concern Muslim or Catholic believers, and the ethnic Albanians or Croatians. The conflicts develop predominantly within the Christian Orthodox majority. There is an ongoing process of state-sponsored consolidation of a new Montenegrin nation, distinguished from the Serbian nation whose part it was considered to be until then. The idea of a new state identity triggers a conflict between those who identify themselves as Serbs and as Montenegrins. The Cyrillic script is banned, new letters are introduced in the alphabet, mandatory choice between Serbian and Montenegrin citizenship is imposed. Maximum difficulties are created for the work of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the country's territory. Tensions are superimposed and exacerbated over the dividing lines between the poor North and the rich South of the small republic.

Lack of cohesion and unity is characteristic of the opposition as well, which is composed of two major components provisionally defined as political and civilian. In turn, the political opposition consists of two groups. The first one represents the so-called "Serbian bloc" and expresses the interests of the population with Serbian or double identity. The second group consists of relatively young activists and economists with liberal and environmentalist views, usually with prior involvement in the NGO sector. An additional internal dividing line passes through the so-called "pro-Serbian" parties: some of them are considered to be successors of the communist Yugoslav tradition, others are associated with the Great Serbia idea and its Chetnik implementations during World War II. The pro-liberal parties originate from the civilian sector that never stops eliciting new leaders in an attempt to surmount or at least to circumvent the traditional links based on family, native land and political party. They are generated by the civilian component of the opposition: non-governmental organisations that develop a strong anti-corruption rhetoric and are an important element in public life. The division is reflected even in the trade union movement.⁵

Chronic financial deficits are a systemic problem. The budget often balances on the verge of national bankruptcy that cannot be compensated by the Russian investors in real estate. It becomes particularly difficult when emergency expenditures become necessary, e.g., 155 million € to save the

5 "Jedni čekaju da Vlada ispuni obećanje drugi pozivaju na proteste," – *PVportal*, 01.05.2012.

national airline from bankruptcy.⁶ It becomes often necessary for the municipal authorities to seek bridge financing from the government. In a miniature country like Montenegro it is difficult to draw the dividing lines between local issues and problems affecting the entire state. The municipalities are the only entities for administrative functioning, apart from the state. Municipal (self-)government carries a relatively big weight and local elections are being perceived as more important than the national elections. Proposals to create new municipalities became an important element in the negotiations aimed at forming coalitions, especially with the minority parties.

Influential media in the USA and in Europe include Montenegro among the so-called “mafia states.” The rulers seek examples that would convince the general public that they are well accepted by their Western partners. The NATO topic is particularly beneficial in this respect. A large-scale campaign for membership in the Alliance was conducted. A symbolic military contingent was sent to Afghanistan. Montenegro was among the first states to recognise Kosovo. From the start of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the authorities in Podgorica denounced Russia and joined the EU sanctions. Montenegro tried to fit in the strategic scenarios of NATO, but encountered certain problems with the individual assessment of the country’s readiness. Podgorica did not receive an invitation for the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 because the needed profound reforms in the security and intelligence sector had not been implemented. This led to the dismissal of dozens of security personnel on claims of being connected with Russia, and to the resignation of the Director of the National Security Agency.

The burden of the Yugoslav heritage weighs on the country’s foreign policy as well. The issue of the dual citizenship of many Montenegrins remains open with Serbia, but Montenegro prohibits it as part of the process of endorsing a new national identity. There are disputes on the boundary delimitation with Croatia and with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and even with Kosovo.

The leading tendency in the development of the domestic policy of Montenegro during the second decade of the 21st century can be defined as creeping destabilisation. Problematic linking of stability with one person and his circle is observed. Djukanović appears to be practically the only guarantor of stability. He became an emblematic example of the term “stabilocracy” that is gaining prominence in the Western Balkans – the rule of a leader who

6 ŠĆEPANOVIĆ , L. "Vladini milioni za Montenegro Airlines," – *RFE/RL*, 12.12.2019.

vacillates between democratic and autocratic tendencies, but secures foreign policy stability. His loyalty is a leading motive in the attitudes of the Western governments and the EU, instead of encouraging the country's democratic development. The assessment of the society in Montenegro tends to be the opposite and can be presented metaphorically as "Milo in Wonderland" where impossible things happen: deceased individuals and persons who are in fact absent vote during elections.⁷

The political vitality of Djukanović rests on his skill to distance himself from former close associates that he no longer needs. President Filip Vujanović is an example of that practice in the party, who was gradually pushed to the background after the end of his last term in office, and the second in command in the party, Svetozar Marović, was sentenced on corruption charges, although he was no longer a factor in Montenegrin policy. Similarly, during the 1990s Djukanović distanced himself from the former President of Montenegro, Momir Bulatović, and from the former President of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević. In 2016, the leader of the smaller coalition partner and Speaker of Parliament, Ranko Krivokapić, was the next person who proved to be redundant and lost his position. For a long time Djukanović exploited successfully the existing divisions in society. He provoked different conflicts, trying to be their only arbitrator. Hence he is often defined as "pyromaniac and fire-fighter rolled in one."⁸

The municipalities in which the DPS is not in power are subjected to permanent pressure by the central government. The methods vary: from sending different inspectors to harass the local officials to provoking political crises and replacing mayors elected from the opposition.⁹ Some of the influential leaders of the parliamentary opposition were arrested and tried in court. This did not ease the existing tension. The different wings of the pro-Serbian and pro-European opposition saw the imperative need to seek various possible forms of cooperation among them. Periodic boycotts of Parliament became one of the evidences of political instability in 2013–2020. The length of that period was a source of concern among the European partners. Ultimately, amendments to the legislation were adopted, which improved the quality of the election process. However, that does not

7 DEDOVIĆ, D. "Čudo već viđeno," – *Deutsche Welle*, 17.10.2016.

8 MURIĆ, D. "Mnogi iz EU neće željeti za isti sto sa Đukanovićem i Vučićem," – *Vijesti*, 14.04.2019.

9 Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020: Montenegro – <https://freedomhouse.org/country/montenegro/nations-transit/2020> (18.07.2021).

change the fact that the boycotts make the normal functioning of Parliament extremely difficult.¹⁰

The paradox is that the conflicts in all that anxiety do not affect the minorities: Albanian, Bosnian and Croatian. Their representatives in Parliament are usually included in the ruling majority and it is precisely the MPs from the minority parties who secure the control exercised by Djukanović on the executive power during the 2016–2020 parliamentary cycle. The price was to form a new municipality Tuzi with predominant Albanian population. The promise was fulfilled in September 2018 and the number of municipalities increased from 23 to 24.¹¹

Throughout that period, politics became the dominant theme in public debate, but it betrayed conscious economic interests behind it. The aspirations for control over the economy by one party, by one family and by one individual are obvious. DPS, the party of Djukanović, is part of the European Left. A coalition was formed around it involving other former members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, notably the Social Democratic Party (SDP). They were joined by the leaders of the minorities that received proportional access to ministerial posts and other power and financial resources.

It was difficult for the opposition to attain unity. It participated in the 2013 presidential elections with a common candidate and lost with a very small difference in the number of votes to the government candidate Filip Vujanović. The unification disintegrated quickly afterwards, resulting in reformatting of the internal political landscape in 2015–2016.¹² Three of the influential opposition parties were abandoned by their leading activists. The same occurred with the smaller partner in the ruling coalition as well. In the general case, the separatists left after losing an internal leadership battle in their party. All four conflicts ended with the emergence of new political formations. The ideological differentiation with the old partners is strongly blurred and the difference tends to be connected with the concrete person. Such split is unseen in the country's new history. Only parliamentary parties are affected. With a total of 81 MPs, a shift in the loyalty of even one of them may cause deep turbulence in the country's governance. It is even stranger

10 *Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans* (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019), p. 80.

11 "Samostalna Opština Tuzi nakon dvije decenije obećanja," – *RFE/RL*, 03.09.2018.

12 Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2016: Montenegro* – <https://freedomhouse.org/country/montenegro/nations-transit/2016> (18.07.2021).

that the political scene was so deeply perturbed in a year when there are no elections. Only hypotheses can be launched on the deep reasons for the big displacements in 2015: personal, ideological or under external pressure. The latter was connected with the imminent accession to NATO. The mechanisms of Montenegro's policy are sometimes paradoxical. This was very well illustrated by the Minister of Interior Ivan Brajović, who left the smaller coalition partner SDP after failing to become its leader. He created the formation "Social Democrats of Montenegro" that preserved its position in power. Ivan Brajović was born in the same year as Milo Djukanović, and both had worked together in the leadership of the youth organisation of the League of Communists of Montenegro during the last years of Yugoslavia.

The Speaker of Parliament Ranko Krivokapić proved to be in a losing position. He broke up with Djukanović, but waited for the invitation for NATO membership to be received before initiating a vote of no confidence for the Prime Minister. It is curious to note that the withdrawn SDP votes were "compensated for" by the representatives of Positive Montenegro, who belonged to the opposition until that moment and were strongly critical of Djukanović. They acted on the recommendations of MEPs from the Group of the Greens in the European Parliament, who feared destabilisation of the state that could hamper the NATO membership of Montenegro.¹³ Positive Montenegro disintegrated a year later and its former leader left to become Ambassador to China, but that merely added colour to the picture of political life in Montenegro.

The observation carried out by the European Commission and NATO proved to be decisive for a "parliamentary dialogue" aimed at overcoming the political crisis in the spring of 2016. It ended with an agreement to create conditions for free and fair elections. A part of the opposition agreed to participate in an "interim government" that would organise the regular parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2016. The government was transitional, but not caretaker or expert government, because it continued to be headed by Djukanović. Another part of the opposition rejected the dialogue. Parliamentary sessions were interrupted due to insults and chaos in the plenary hall. The high level of the debate can be seen in shouts by the opposition that Djukanović is a "thief" – to which he replied by calling them "cretins."¹⁴ In order to avoid any doubt on the motives of those who accepted or rejected the agreement, the interim government was endorsed by

13 *Parliamentary Boycotts*, p. 75.

14 "Haos u skupštini CG: 'Milo lopove', 'Bravo kreteni'". – *Tanjug*, 13.05.2016.

Parliament on 19 May.¹⁵ At the same time, the foreign ministers of the NATO states signed a Protocol on the accession of Montenegro to the Alliance, assuming that the requirement for political dialogue had been met. Another important external requirement – examples of the fight against corruption – was complied with in September when the former second in command of the ruling party and former President of the state union between Serbia and Montenegro was finally given a prison sentence on corruption charges. The case was heard by the institution of the Special Prosecutor that was created as a result of the EU accession negotiations.

In the long run, it appears that the parties remaining outside the interim government were recognised by voters as authentic opposition at the elections. The issue is the extent to which their campaign was correctly focused. The leading accent in it falls on anti-Western rhetoric instead of on themes of power abuse and corruption, which are more popular among the divided society of Montenegro. There is no doubt that in addition to the demands for fair elections, the boycotts and protests were directed against Montenegro's accession to NATO. Djukanović took advantage of that, appearing in the posture of the principal guarantor of the country's Euro-Atlantic future.

On 15 October 2016, a day before the bitterly opposed elections, the authorities announced that they had thwarted an attempted coup d'état aimed at changing the election results and at physically removing Milo Djukanović. Russia was cited as instigator to prevent Montenegro's imminent accession to NATO. The elections proceeded in an atmosphere of arrests and blocking of the communications applications like WhatsApp and Viber, allegedly with the motive of counteracting the coup. Nevertheless, the party of Djukanović and its smaller coalition partners failed to win half of the seats in Parliament. The new government was formed with the decisive support of the minority parties. Djukanović introduced some reassurance by refusing to be candidate for the position of Prime Minister and ceding it to his close associate Duško Marković who worked for and subsequently headed the security services. His election suggests the existence of higher levels of threat for the country or at least for its rulers. Milo Djukanović remained Chairman of the Democratic Party of Socialists. New faces were included in the government. However, the overall impression of the "renovation" was spoiled by the appointing of a new finance minister who had been in charge of a private bank owned by the brother of Djukanović.

15 "Montenegro got the new government, Krivokapic replaced," – CDM, 19.05.2016.

The specialised Prosecutor's Office was expected to create a certain feeling of justice and fairness in society by starting to check vigorously the corruption signals. This did not happen due to the prolonged investigation of the attempted coup. Opposition leaders accused several times that the attempted coup d'état had been "stage managed" by the authorities with the aim of winning the elections,¹⁶ its other aim being to deflect the attention of the judiciary from the country's real problems.

In the spring of 2018 Milo Djukanović was candidate in the regular presidential elections. Most of the opposition parties rallied around Mladen Bojanić – a well known economist and civil activist, who was among the MPs who gave their "no confidence" vote to the government in 2016. The opposition candidate, considered to be incorruptible and honest, received one-third of the votes. The campaign will also be remembered with the participation of the first woman in the history of Montenegro as candidate for head of state: university professor Draginja Vuksanović from SDP.¹⁷

Opposition politicians did not enjoy good working conditions. Law suits had been filed against them for alleged participation in the attempted coup and for money laundering, but they refused to testify before the specialised prosecution. On 30 November 2018, one MP was arrested and another one barricaded himself in the parliament building. The arrest warrants were issued without stripping them of their parliamentary immunity first, which demonstrates clearly the compliance with the democratic procedures. The man who was arrested and taken into custody started a hunger strike and was even hospitalised. Still, the democratic rules were taken into consideration by the Constitutional Court, which stopped the arrest warrant of the MPs. In May 2019, two opposition leaders were sentenced to five years imprisonment for alleged complicity with the attempted coup in 2016, but that decision was perceived on a mass scale as yet another step in the political confrontation. Street protests became a daily occurrence. Between November 2017 and October 2017, the entire opposition boycotted Parliament. Many women jointed the anti-government demonstrations, being deprived by the law that

16 "DF spinuje javnost: Radunović ponovio Katnićevu priču," – *CdM*, 05.09.2017; *Svjedočio Slaven Radunović: Režim režirao "državni udar", Katnić ne zna kako da se izvuče*, 29.03.2018.

17 JANKOVIĆ, S. "Finiš predsjedničke kampanje: Izdajnici, kumovi i srećna djeca," – *RFE/RL*, 13.04.2018; KAOŠEVIĆ, S. "Dogovor postignut: Mladen Bojanić kandidat većeg dijela opozicije," – *Vijesti*, 09.03.2018; S.D. "Vuksanović zadovoljna svojim rezultatom," – *CdM*, 15.04.2018.

reduces the state aid for “mothers of three and more children.”¹⁸ Passions flared again in January 2019. A businessman investigated for financial crimes escaped abroad and disseminated a video from there on how he donated 97,000 € in an envelope to the party of Milo Đukanović before the 2016 parliamentary elections. The affair became famous by the name “Envelope” and the country was seized by a new wave of protests organised by the 97,000 – *Resist!* civil initiative. The protests are believed to have been most numerous since the moment of declaration of independence. The entire opposition left parliament again. In March the organisers of the protest drafted a document entitled *Agreement on the Future* that was signed by all opposition parties. The Agreement set the conditions for the formation of a provisional government consisting of equal number of representatives of the ruling majority, the opposition parties and non-party members, which would organise free and fair elections, preserving at the same time the foreign policy pursued. Private party interests again undermined the opposition unity. As early as in April, SDP supported the rulers in their attempt to remove the opposition Mayor of the Kotor municipality.¹⁹

The protests acquired very different proportions in December 2019, when the country’s division acquired the form of a conflict between the government and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (SOC). The striving to reduce its influence and to replace it by a local Montenegrin Orthodox Church dates back to the moment of the declaration of independence, but the confrontation escalated sharply with the adoption of the new legislation on the freedom of religious denominations and on the legal status of the religious communities.²⁰ Different observers detect in this law battles for identity and battles for influence in society, but an opinion in favour of an unceremonious attempt at expropriating attractive Church property is gaining ground. All Church property acquired prior to 1918, for which the respective religious denomination did not possess ownership documents, was nationalised under the law. The Serbian Orthodox Church, which claimed to have owned the disputed property for hundreds of years, was worst affected. The adoption of the law led to unrest in Parliament, 17 opposition MPs were detained and taken out of the building. Mass protests

18 ĐURIĆ, N. "Majke protestom brane nadoknade," – *Politika*, 17.02.2017.

19 "Podgorica: Najmasovniji antivladin protest '97 hiljada – Odupri se!“, – *RFE/RL*, 02.03.2019; "Potpisani 'Sporazum za budućnost'“, – *Radio Tivat*, 30.03.2019.

20 "Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovijesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica", – *Službeni list Crne Gore*, br. 74/30.12.2019.

all over the country started and continued in 2020 as well. The rulers failed to control the discontent, ascribing it to Serbian and Russian influence. The protests generated considerable moral capital that was superimposed over earlier accusations of corruption and abuse of power. In a sense, the COVID-19 epidemic was accepted almost as “God’s punishment.” In July Montenegro legitimised same sex marriages and became the first European country outside the EU to recognise the marriage of gay couples. That decision did not increase the government’s popularity among the members of the relatively patriarchal society.

The country thus entered the campaign for the parliamentary elections on 30 August 2020. The debates were dominated by Church issues and COVID-19. For a long time the government declared the country as being free from the infection, but precisely during the election campaign it banned big rallies to prevent the spreading of the disease. Public protests against the government’s religious policy were also prohibited and priests were arrested on fake charges of violating the anti-epidemic measures.²¹ The opposition formed three blocs that reflected the political tradition of the Serbian pre-war idea, of the Yugoslav communist heritage and the modern civilian liberal idea. Zdravko Krivokapić, Professor of Mechanical Engineering from the coalition *For the Future of Montenegro*, was the leading candidate. Being member of no party with active participation in the religious protests, Professor Krivokapić was one in a series of examples of the ways in which the opposition permanently and deliberately confronted Djukanović with individuals who have the authority of honest persons of integrity, irrespective of their political convictions. Even the Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije from the Serbian Orthodox Church appealed to the electorate to vote against the rulers, claiming that he was not engaging in political propaganda, but was caring “as a good shepherd for the souls of the believers.” President Milo Djukanović resorted to his traditional rhetoric that the opposition coalition was anti-Montenegrin, being composed in Belgrade.

The Metropolitan Bishop gave a personal example by voting for the first time in his life. The elections were held with a record high voter turnout. The party of Milo Djukanović came out first, but the outcome proved to be insufficient. The three opposition blocs won precisely the 41 seats they needed (out of a total of 81). The minority parties won their traditional seats. It is interesting to note the division in the Albanian community that

21 KEŠMER, M. "Vjerski život u vrijeme korona virusa na Zapadnom Balkanu," – *RFE/RL*, 16.03.2020.

participated with three parties, in spite of the appeal by the National Council of the Albanians in Montenegro for all minority political entities to run united. Two of the ballot lists won one seat each. Another Albanian from Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, is leader of the liberal opposition coalition *Black on White* that held the decisive votes for the formation of the next government. It acquired its legitimacy also from the conclusion of the EU representatives that the elections were free and competitive, and that they complied with the democratic standards.

Some observers claimed that the Serbian Orthodox Church was the big winner in those elections.²² Appeals were heard to reconsider the decision on the recognising of Kosovo and to organise a referendum on the accession to NATO. The leaders of the opposition secured Western support for themselves by declaring that Montenegro would not change its foreign policy course, including on the issue of NATO membership. The promise of responsible fulfilment of the country's international commitments was included in an agreement on the formation of a new government, which was signed on 9 September 2020.²³

It is interesting to note the existence of a section on "foreign policy priorities" on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, which is still blank.²⁴ Insofar as the country is conducting very actively its EU accession negotiations, it may be assumed that this is the official priority. In practice, Podgorica relies heavily on its contacts with the USA, with a growing role of the UK in recent years. Relations with Italy are traditionally important among the EU states.

The distancing from Russia was the biggest change during the second decade of the 21st century, resulting in sharp deterioration of the relations in 2016–2017. Such a development appears as an "anti-natural" anomaly against the background of the deep historical links between the two countries. There is evidence that Moscow was not only among the first to recognise the referendum in 2006, but it also is said to have financed the circles around Milo Djukanović. Around 2010, Russian businessmen owned a considerable part of the economy of Montenegro, acquired with approval by the local

22 MITROVIĆ, M. "Pobednik izbora u Crnoj Gori – Srpska pravoslavna crkva," *Danas* 01.09.2020.

23 MATIJAŠEVIĆ, B. "Istorijski sporazum "trojke": Nema izmjene zastave i himne, nema revanšizma, što brže u EU" – *Vijesti*, 09.09.2020.

24 Ministarstvo vanjskih poslova. *Spoljno-politički prioriteti Crne Gore.* – <https://www.mvp.gov.me/ministarstvo/spoljno-politicki-prioriteti> (18.07.2021).

authorities. The situation changed drastically after 2012, when Podgorica declared its interest in joining NATO. In 2013, the oligarch Oleg Deripaska lost control over the aluminium plant in Podgorica, which is of structure-forming importance for the country's economy, and Montenegro joined the sanctions against Russia on account of Crimea in 2014. Montenegro finally received an invitation to join NATO and immediately turned into yet another geopolitical point of confrontation between Moscow and the West. Russian media covered extensively the anti-government protests, and parliamentarians organised a series of visits to Montenegro to support the local opposition parties. On 6 May 2016, high-ranking representatives of Putin's United Russia Party signed a declaration on cooperation with opposition parties in the Adriatic republic. The ceremony for the signing of that declaration took place in the old capital Cetinje, where it received the blessing of Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije. The document contains the intention to build a bloc of neutral countries in Southeastern Europe and to initiate a referendum in Montenegro on the issue of NATO membership.²⁵ The support was insufficient for the opposition and it failed to prevent the signing of the accession protocol to the North Atlantic Alliance two weeks later.

The accession to NATO served as a catalyst of an attempted coup d'état on the day of the elections. Three versions of the reasons for it are discussed. The first one implies direct involvement of the Russian state. This version raises the issue that a civilian conflict in the small state does not bring a big advantage to the Russian foreign policy. NATO membership is of major importance to Montenegro, but its real impact on Moscow is insignificant. It is noteworthy that Moscow did not cancel the visa-free regime, as it did against Turkey during the crisis in the relations with Ankara in 2015–2016. There was no dramatic drop in the number of tourists, or relocation of Russian investors in the real estate sector in Montenegro. There is a second theory that the coup was not organised on Kremlin orders, but by freelancers around the Russian businessman and conservative nationalist Konstantin Malofeev. That was not the first time when Malofeev was accused of inciting conflicts in Eastern Europe. The third hypothesis launched is that the conspiracy was masterminded by Oleg Deripaska, who wished to "settle his score" with Djukanović. The second version is considered most plausible. Apart from the testimony of several protected witnesses, the hypothesis of

²⁵ "Uz blagoslov Mitropolita Amfilohija potpisana Lovćenska deklaracija [The Lovcen Declaration was signed with the blessing of Bishop Amfilohije]," – *Demokratska narodna partija*, May 6, 2016.

Russian participation is also argued with the surprise visit to Belgrade by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and former Director of the Federal Security Service. On the other hand, Russian researchers recall that similar revelations had been made during other important elections as well – in 1997 and 2006 – and ironically qualify Montenegro as the “country of pre-election coups d'état.”²⁶

On 6 June 2017, Montenegro became the 29th NATO Member State, which is sometimes defined as “the most dramatic change in the region.” The entire Adriatic Sea became internal sea for NATO. The closeness to the USA acquired an anecdotal nuance when the US President pushed the Prime Minister of Montenegro Duško Marković aside to get to the official rostrum at a NATO Summit. In the subsequent year, Donald Trump again attracted attention to the Balkan country with his statement that Montenegro is not worth protecting, because it is “a tiny country with very strong people... They’re very strong people, they’re very aggressive people. They may get aggressive and, congratulations, you’re in World War Three.”²⁷ There are fears that a Russian attack in Montenegro could lead to disintegration of NATO. Solidarity needs additional consolidation. In 2018, the Minister of Defence of Montenegro declared that no military bases of NATO would be established on the country’s territory, but the next year the government allocated a plot of land on which such a base is to be built. At the same time, the Supreme Court in Podgorica sentenced *in absentia* two Russians to 15 and 12 years in prison, accordingly, suspected of working for the military intelligence of their country and for their involvement in the attempted coup in 2016. At the start of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, Montenegro first appealed for help through NATO channels, but did not receive help at first, which fuelled new sharp criticism from the pro-Russian part of the opposition.²⁸

The political elite of Montenegro hopes that NATO membership will facilitate the country’s accession to the European Union. The country is

26 BECHEV, D. "The 2016 Coup Attempt", 10–12; BOYADJIEVA, N. Russian Security Strategy in the Balkans." – In: KANET, R. E. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (Routledge, 2019), p. 373; CAMОРУКОВ, М. „Россия и переворот в Черногории: что показал суд над заговорщиками“. – *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 13.05.2019.

27 DELAUNEY, G. "Stupid statements' – Trump WW3 jibe stuns Montenegro," – *BBC*, 18.07.2018.

28 "Odbili ste pomoć iz bratske Srbije, a gde vam je sada VAŠ NATO?! Pismo Marka Milačića državnom vrhu Crne Gore," – *Novosti*, 03.04.2020.

ahead of the other candidates in the negotiations process, having opened the last chapter in the accession negotiations on 23 June 2020. The Strategy on the Western Balkans from early 2018 gives hopes to Podgorica that it can join the EU by 2025. These expectations were qualified as conditional by the then President of the European Commission Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, who specified that 2025 was an indicative date – a prospect that would motivate the countries to pursue the reforms. The annual reports of the European Commission on the progress of the candidate countries often indicate that Montenegro has achieved a lot “on paper, but not in practice.” One of the disputed topics is connected with the programme for granting citizenship in exchange for investments in the country’s economy. It became known that in the summer of 2020 the first owner of Montenegro passport for “economic citizenship” was Russian. Against this background, the President’s insistence on faster EU accession with the appeal “Don’t give us to Russia!” sounds a bit ambiguous.²⁹

The migration issue is an important topic in the relations with Brussels. Owing to its specific geography, Montenegro remained away from the main route of the migrants during the 2015–2016 crisis. During subsequent years, the closing of the “Western Balkans route” of the migrants intensified the pressure on alternative itineraries that included Montenegro as well, where the option of building a fence along the border with Albania was discussed. An agreement for border cooperation was signed with the EU in early 2019. It allowed the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) to participate in joint operations and to deploy its teams along the borders of Montenegro.

The laying of an underwater cable between Montenegro and Italy is the biggest joint economic project that includes the country in the European electricity system and plays the role of an “energy bridges” between the European Union and the Western Balkans under the Adriatic Sea. The cable was officially launched on 15 November 2019 in the presence of both presidents. Podgorica is also interested in being included in the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which is part of the Southern Gas Corridor intended for the transport of natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Relations with China develop at the point of intersection between politics and economy. Chinese investments and loans are accepted with open arms, but they lead to a growing debt dependence on Beijing. The motorway from the sea to the Serbian border is the biggest infrastructural project in the

29 "Đukanović poručuje EU: Ne predajte nas Rusiji," – *Antenam*, 05.04.2019.

country. That motorway is built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation, and the foreign debt of Montenegro reached up to 80 per cent of its GDP.

Relations between Podgorica and the Albanian neighbours develop very well. Already in 2015, Montenegro signed an agreement for demarcation of the border with Kosovo. A shared railway station is functioning on the border with Albania since 2017.³⁰ Busts of the Albanian national hero Skanderbeg were placed in Montenegrin towns with a population of ethnic Albanians. Hence it is not surprising that the Prime Minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj appealed to the Albanians in Montenegro to vote for Milo Djukanović at the presidential elections, and in 2020 the Albanian President Edi Rama fervently campaigned in favour of Djukanović at the parliamentary elections with the words: "Milo, thank you for being there!"

The biggest difficulties exist in the development of the relations with Serbia. Belgrade does not accept the development of the Montenegrin nation as negation of the Serbian nation. The Serbian government systematically finances different cultural and educational organisations and events on the territory of Montenegro,³¹ hence these organisations are strongly critical of the authorities in Podgorica. Relations deteriorated drastically after the adoption of the legislation on the religious denominations and the mass protests organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The conflict flared on the territory of the pandemic as well. At the end of March 2020, the authorities in Montenegro accused Serbia of having confiscated respirators travelling to Montenegro across Serbia. The Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dačić commented in his characteristic style that relations with Montenegro were for the first time on the verge of a "fratricidal war." The President of Montenegro accused Serbia that "it had not meddled so much since the time of Milošević."³²

The stabilising and destabilising processes are undoubtedly personified by Milo Djukanović. In 2015, he was proclaimed "Person of the Year" in the world in the sphere of organised crime and corruption by the international network of journalists investigating organised crime and corruption.³³

30 "Ministarstavo saobraćaja i pomorstva," *Otvorena zajednička željeznička stanica Crne Gore i Albanije – Tuzi*, 20.11.2017.

31 ZEĆEVIĆ, P. "Za profesionalno srbovanje sedam miliona eura, a crkvi 4,6 miliona." – *Dnevne novine*, br.2803, 30.09.2020, 2–3.

32 "Milo Đukanović: Još od vremena Slobodana Miloševića Srbija se nije ovoliko mešala u Crnoj Gori!" – *VestiNet*, 12.07.2020.

33 "Person of the Year 2015: Milo Djukanovic, 2015 Man of the year in organized

His brother Aleksandar (“Aco”) and his sister Ana Kolarević possess a considerable family wealth. The President’s name is associated with massive smuggling of cigarettes to Italy. Specialised publications have repeatedly proclaimed him to be one of the richest politicians in Europe. In one of the cases photographs have been published of Djukanović with watches estimated at 1.5 million €, but the Anti-Corruption Agency refused to investigate the reasons for the absence of the watches from his declaration of assets.³⁴ At the same time, Milo Djukanović is the political guarantor for the ties between Montenegro and the West. All that made rule of law very problematic in the small country. In 2019, it was revealed that many high-ranking judges had received houses or loans and highly preferential rates from the state, which made them dependent on the government. The Supreme Judicial Council with expired term in office reappointed several presidents of first instance courts of justice, who occupied these positions for the third or fourth time, without having that right. In 2019 for the first time since the start of the EU accession negotiations not one single chapter has been opened or provisionally closed, which is interpreted as a sanction for the absence of reforms in the judiciary system. Signals are coming from Brussels that the implementation of the codes of ethics and the disciplinary liability of the judges and public prosecutors remains limited. The European Commission keeps reminding that the institutions in Montenegro are not sufficiently active against corruption.³⁵ The problem is directly reflected on the security of the people in the region. The two competing mafia clans from Kotor who have been at war for more than four years are the most salient example in this respect. The conflict cost more than 40 lives, some of which on the territory of neighbouring states. Threats and attempted terrorist acts against investigative journalists are reported periodically.

During the second decade of the 21st century the traditional division of society along political and ethnic lines continued to deepen, acquiring an economic dimension as well. The problems should be sought in depth in the endorsing of a new national identity and in the imposition of a new foreign policy orientation. The dominant political figure of Milo Djukanović finds it increasingly difficult to balance between the diverse internal and external interests. The country’s accession to NATO failed to become a stabilising

crime and corruption" - <https://www.occrp.org/en/poy/2015/> (18.07.2021).

34 Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2020: Montenegro* – <https://freedomhouse.org/country/montenegro/nations-transit/2020> (18.07.2021).

35 "European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document: *Montenegro 2019 Report*, SWD(2019) 217 final", Brussels, 29.05.2019.

factor, at least in a short-term perspective. There is a growing feeling in society that the time in power of the last generation of politicians from the time of former Yugoslavia is running out. The political model of quasi-one-party rule with a dominant formation supported by the minority parties, which lasted for three decades, is exhausted.

Abstract: For more than a decade after the referendum, the traditional division of the Montenegrin society along political and ethnic lines continued to intensify, acquiring an economic dimension as well. The problems are connected with the consolidation of a new national identity and with the imposition of a new foreign policy orientation. The dominant political figure of Milo Đukanović found it increasingly difficult to balance between the diverse internal and external interests. Linking the idea of the country's stability with one individual and with the circle of his close associates was becoming more and more problematic in the course of time. The accession of Montenegro to NATO failed to turn into a stabilising factor, at least from a short-term perspective. The distancing from Russia seemed like an "unnatural" anomaly against the background of the deep historical ties between the two countries. A day before the bitterly disputed elections in 2016, the authorities announced that a coup attempt had been thwarted, citing Russia as instigator. Relations with China develop at the point of intersection between politics and economy. Chinese investments and loans are welcomed with open arms, but they lead to growing indebtedness to Beijing.

The periodic boycott of parliament became one of the manifestations of the political instability between 2013 and 2020. The confrontation escalated sharply after the adoption of the new law on the freedom of religious denominations and the legal status of the religious communities. That law transforms the conflict of identities into a blunt attempt at expropriating attractive real estate belonging to the Church. There is a growing feeling in society that the time of the last generation of politicians from the former Yugoslavia is running out. The political model of quasi single-party rule with a dominant formation supported by the minority parties, which lasted for three decades, is exhausted.

Keywords: Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, EU-Western Balkans relations, EU enlargement, geopolitics in the Balkans

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