

Montenegro on the Way to NATO

POLICY PAPER

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Introduction

Montenegro – a small Western Balkan nation of around 600.000 citizens – became in 2015 a symbol that the NATO's open door policy is still alive and the enlargement possible. The country with Armed Forces smaller than 2.000 men and women in uniforms got on December 2, 2015 invitation to join the Alliance – as the first country since the last NATO enlargement in 2009. This gives hope to other candidate countries. However, Montenegro's way to NATO has been far from easy and is still not over, despite the final goal is close at arm's length.

*This policy paper maps the development of Montenegro's NATO accession especially from the point of view of the public support. The policy paper is issued within the project "**Visegrad for the South-East Europe: Towards Successful Integration**"¹ implemented by the **GLOBSEC** (formerly the **Slovak Atlantic Commission**) from September 2015 – March 2017 in Montenegro and Serbia. The project has been supported by the **International Visegrad Fund**².*

Montenegro's way to NATO

Montenegro (further also just MNE) gained independence on June 3, 2006 after the referendum for independence that took place on May 21, 2006. Its beginning of the Euro-Atlantic integration was quite speedy, then the pace slowed down and MNE is still awaiting to finalize this process already little bit over 10 years now.

Already in November 2006 NATO invites Montenegro to join the Partnership for Peace (PfP) at the Riga Summit and in December 2006 Montenegro joins the PfP. In July 2008 Montenegro agrees on the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, which focuses on the full range of political, military, financial and security issues related to its aspirations to membership. In December 2009 was Montenegro invited to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP), less than a year later MNE submitted its first Annual National Programme (ANP) under the MAP. On December 2, 2015 at the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels Montenegro was invited to start accession talks to join the Alliance, the accession talks were conducted in February 2016 with the NATO International Staff at NATO Headquarters. After that on May 19, 2016 NATO foreign ministers sign the Accession Protocol and the

¹ - <http://www.ata-sac.org/projects/visegrad-south-east-europe-towards-successful-integration>

² - <http://visegradfund.org/home/>

process of ratifications of accession protocols started in NATO member countries.³ As of March 22, 2017 altogether 26 NATO member countries ratified the MNE's accession documents with the U.S. and Spain remaining to do so in near future.

The Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC; after May 2016 renamed to GLOBSEC) has been active in MNE since the country started the implementation of the MAP in 2009. SAC/GLOBSEC activities focused on raising public awareness about the Euro-Atlantic integration through public discussions in regions of Montenegro – so-called Speaking Tours. Goal of these public discussions was to provide relevant and easy to understand information about NATO through sharing of the Slovak or Visegrad countries' experience with the Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time speakers and experts, were addressing myths and disinformation about NATO and provided facts and figures based on experience of their countries. Working with the public has been crucial in regards to the NATO integration process of Montenegro. The public opinion on whether country should join the Alliance or not has been and still is divided – more or less around the ethnic lines. While majority of Montenegrins as well as Albanians and Bosnians support country's accession to the NATO, Serbian population that comprises approximately one third of the population is strongly opposing such step.

There are few reasons for that, but one thing that needs to be taken into consideration is, that MNE is the only NATO candidate country that was ever bombed by the Alliance – in 1999 during the NATO intervention against that time Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo conflict. The air-raids claimed in Montenegro mostly military losses, but there were also some civilian victims too. This is the reason why there is quite vocal minority, that objects accession of Montenegro to NATO. Number of victims in general was much lower in Montenegro than in Serbia, but the Serbian population feels solidarity with Serbia and therefore object the NATO integration. Another strong opponent of Montenegro's NATO integration is the Serbian Orthodox Church, that has powerful position in Montenegro – enjoying high level of trust and possesses power also in form of Church property, lands, churches and monasteries. Furthermore, it belongs under the patriarch in Belgrade, who in turn belongs under the patriarch in Moscow. Third reason those against Montenegro's accession to NATO is simply nostalgia after the former Yugoslavia, when Montenegro was part of one state with Serbia and other – now independent countries – and used to be a regional power.

Last but definitively not least is the Russian influence in Montenegro and in the region. Russian citizens invested substantively in Montenegro after it gained independence in 2006, mostly into tourism and tourism connected services but also in industry. After 2012 however, there has been a slight decrease in direct foreign investments originating from Russia. This was due to introduction of some more European legislation as Montenegro works hard to join the EU as well. Stricter anti-money laundering regulations, higher accounting and auditing standards led to decrease of some types of Russian investments. However, Russia is exercising its influence in Montenegro also directly – through own security services that are active in Montenegro (as well as in Serbia); through so-called influencing agents in MNE (and in the region) such as pro-Russian and conspiracy-theories media, pro-Russian political parties, NGOs, cultural organizations and already mentioned the Orthodox Church. The influence of Russian "special services" in Montenegrin security services was one of the last serious "technical" obstacles, that MNE had to overcome before securing for itself the invitation to the Alliance. Number of Montenegrin security services officers were fired from their positions during this "curative process" of Montenegrin security sector.

³ - http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49736.htm

Anti-NATO Protests in 2015 – 16

During 2015 – 16 the internal political situation in Montenegro deteriorated due to activities of some newly established opposition groupings, that had two main goals – to depose long-term (then) Prime Minister of Montenegro Milo Djukanović and the Government led by his political party DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists). The second goal was to block country's accession to NATO. Both goals were of equal importance for the so called Democratic Front (DF) – grouping of Serbian, anti-NATO and pro-Russian politicians, that led the protests in capitol Podgorica as well as in some other cities. Their goal was to unleash and lead public anti-NATO and anti-Government campaign in streets with the aim if not to block the NATO accession at all, then at least seriously hamper the process. Their goal was to present the movement as the general public movement, that would show to the Western Allies, that Montenegro does not want to join NATO. They skilfully played with loyal media and were using propaganda and information operations' tactics.

The protests were launched on September 27, 2015 in Podgorica as well as in couple of cities in regions. Protests were led by the pro-Serbian Democratic Front and quite quickly developed from peaceful protests into blockade of Montenegrin state institutions by setting up a tent camp in front of the Office of the Government and the Assembly of Montenegro (Skupština) effectively blocking one of the main streets of the capitol. The authorities gave permission to use the public venue for one week, that passed relatively quietly with full blockade on the boulevard in front of the Parliament building and the Office of the Government. Subsequently the City of Podgorica extended the permission to use the public area until October 10, 2015, that was just days prior the planned visit of the whole NATO North Atlantic Council (NAC) to Montenegro (October 14 – 15, 2015). The protests and blockade of state institutions went on. The NAC meeting took place successfully along with the official visit of the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in MNE, while the tent camp remained in place – as the symbol of "plurality of opinions on future geopolitical direction of Montenegro".

Declared goal of protests was deposing of PM Milo Djukanović and his Government. Appointment of a technical temporary cabinet and organization of snap elections, that were supposed to be "the first time ever free, fair and transparent in Montenegro's modern history" as presented by the opposition leaders. The opposition blamed PM Djukanović that he holds on to the power and that he is in power – in different incarnations – for already 26 years, basically from the fall of the communism, even long before the independence of Montenegro was reinstated in 2006. They were blaming him that through corruption, nepotism and control of key security and economical pressure points of the young country, he developed in the country a "state of capture", that could not be changed without major political and election reform. The opposition also accused the government coalition under DPS of manipulating the public opinion and election corruption, just to stay in power.

Montenegro clearly has some problems with the rule of law and with corruption, on the other hand the composition of protesters and whole timing – just days prior the NATO NAC trip to MNE and just weeks before the NATO's supposed decision to invite MNE to join the Alliance, is worth attention. At certain points there were counter-protests by supporters of the Government, were openly speaking, that the opposition led protests are clearly about/against NATO and are financed by Russians. That could be of course just speculation, but fact was, that there were far more Serbian and Russian flags than Montenegrin in the tent camp. Even flags of the Serbian Orthodox Church or controversial flags of so-called „Novorossiya“ could be found there.

On October 17, 2015 (after the NAC visit) early in the morning the police started to clear up the boulevard from the tent camp as at that time it was already „illegal gathering on the public property“. At that time there were only couple of dozens of protesters camping and leaders of the DF were quickly summoned to the scene to help protesters with their authority. Police found out that most of the tents placed on the boulevard were actually empty and planted there just for the effect. Despite the police showed restrain, there were scuffles with opposition activists that led to number of wounded in the process and number of others arrested. Police used the tear gas to disperse the crowd.

In protest to this police action the opposition convened big rally in Podgorica on following day evening. Couple of thousands opposition supporters gathered and protested calmly. Police estimated the number of protesters at 5.000 people, but did not intervened. The opposition DF leader Andrija

Mandić gave ultimatum to the Government to step down by the following Saturday (October 24, 2015) otherwise they threatened to organize another rally – even bigger and in number of cities around the country. The Montenegrin government did not step down and therefore the opposition organized on October 24, 2015 another mass rally in the downtown Podgorica. The rally ended up with provocations by opposition activists against the police protecting the state buildings. Police used the tear gas and dispersed the crowd. After this point the opposition movement lost a little bit of its energy and momentum. It was because at rallies of October 18 and 24 also representatives of Montenegrin and pro-Western opposition took place out of solidarity. The police clean up of the opposition tent camp of October 17, 2015 therefore united for a very short period of time representatives of anti-NATO and pro-Serbian (pro-Russian) as well as Montenegrin, pro-Western opposition, that was up until that point very fragmented and it had been almost impossible to find programmatic and thematic common grounds. At the same time the rallies just confirmed the polarisation within the Montenegrin society and that there is a significant minority that requires extensive political change.

Despite the protests, Montenegro received the invitation to start accession talks at the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting on December 2, 2017 in Brussels. The Allies at the same time urged Montenegro to continue with reforms and to work on the rule of law related issues. The accession talks were conducted in February 2016 with the NATO International Staff at the NATO Headquarters. After successful conclusion of the talks, the NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs signed the Accession Protocols and started the process of ratification of these accession protocols by all NATO member countries (28) and Montenegro. Until March 22, 2017 already 26 member countries ratified the protocols with 2 remaining (the US. and Spain) and then finally the Assembly of Montenegro has to take a vote on the protocols as well.

Parliamentary Elections and the “Coups attempt”

On October 16, 2016 the parliamentary elections took place in Montenegro with political tensions growing high. The elections were perceived as the last opportunity also for the anti-NATO opposition to engage the hand-break on the process – in case they would win the elections and gain majority in the Parliament as the Assembly of Montenegro has to approve the protocols at the end of the ratification process too. Already the pre-election campaign was very heated and the coalition split leaving Montenegro under the leadership of de-facto minority government just months before the polls.

On the election day there has been an unexpected twist of development, suddenly the security services arrested couple of suspects and announced in media, that they foiled a coup d'etat in progress, that was supposedly orchestrated and financed from abroad. The group consisted of Serbian nationalists as well as Montenegrin nationals. Soon it was revealed, that they had ties to the Russian extremist groups and probably even security services – GRU. Though Russia tries hard to maintain plausible deniability towards group of armed men in Montenegro, claiming they might have been vigilante-type freelancers. The aim of the plotters was supposedly to storm the Parliament on the election night and to kill the – then – Prime Minister Djukanović. This way they wanted to achieve the pro-Russian and anti-NATO government to be installed. Despite strange timing and dodgy plan to conduct the coup, there was a subsequent wave of arrests both in Montenegro as well as in Serbia taking place in days after the elections. Some of the plotters were identified as having served on the side of pro-Russian insurgents in the Eastern Ukraine. The coup overshadowed the election.

As Milan Nič from the GLOBSEC Policy Institute points out - many observers were initially sceptical about the official claims from Podgorica that local security service narrowly prevented a coup. Then Montenegro presented evidence, which was partly gathered thanks to cooperation with Serbian authorities. Pro-Russian opposition parties still bitterly contest the claim. Nevertheless, presented evidence confirms the long-term trend.⁴

⁴ - For more see: **Milan Nič, “EU disturbed by new Balkan instability and geopolitics: hidden contradictions”** in <https://globsecpolicyinstitute.blogspot.am/2017/03/eu-disturbed-by-new-balkan-instability.html>

Djukanović's party DPS has won the election at the end and after weeks of coalition forming, they managed to put together a support for Government, that confirmed the Euro-Atlantic heading of the country. One of the compromises of the Government forming however was, that Djukanović will not be the Prime Minister, therefore he was replaced at the helm of the new cabinet by trusted ally from the DPS - Duško Marković.

The newly appointed Government pledged to continue with the NATO integration of Montenegro and the ratification process continues with other countries confirming the Montenegro's accession protocols.

Public support and Montenegro's NATO Accession

One of the key elements of Montenegro's NATO accession process has been the public support, that oscillated between the support for and against joining the Alliance. Approximately 1/3rd of the population was claiming to be against the NATO accession, roughly matching the proportion of citizens of Montenegro with Serbian ethnicity. Another 40 – 45% of population, according to the various opinion polls, were for joining the Alliance and the rest of the population were undecided.

The GLOBSEC and previously the Slovak Atlantic Commission conducted number of public campaigns in regions of Montenegro aimed at raising public awareness about NATO, providing citizens with factual information based on Slovak and Visegrad countries' experience with the accession to the Alliance. These information campaigns called "Speaking Tours" were town-hall level public discussions organized in each bigger town or city of Montenegro, attended by local opinion-shapers and were speakers from Slovakia, Visegrad countries and Montenegrin state institutions as well as NGOs and media.

The most frequently asked questions during public discussions included: economic benefits of Montenegro stemming from the potential NATO membership; how will the NATO membership influence common life of citizens; will be Montenegro more secure, how the defence budget will be influenced – how much money will have to Montenegro give for the defence afterwards; will there be any impact of the membership on tourism - one of the most important sectors of the country's economy.

The most common arguments of those opposing the NATO membership were:

1. NATO is a military alliance and the Montenegro should be military neutral country (such as Serbia). Nobody from Montenegro's neighbours is threatening the country anyway. This narrative of "neutrality" was mostly present among Serbian population of the Montenegro.
2. NATO membership is useless for Montenegro from the defence and security perspective – it is quite enough to cooperate with the Alliance in the frame of the Partnership for Peace. On the other hand they usually support Montenegro's integration to the EU.
3. Montenegro is not yet ready to join the NATO – it is needed to wait a little more to be really ready, now it is not a good time to join the Alliance. MNE has problems with the rule of law, good governance, there are anti-Government protests, international crisis – we need to wait. This so-called "delaying tactics" is quite common, it's real aim is to gain more time for mobilisations of those opposing MNE's Euro-Atlantic integration.
4. A referendum about the accession of Montenegro to NATO should take place and only in case of positive results of successful referendum (over 50% voters come to the polls) MNE can join the NATO. This is another version of delaying tactics as the referendum is not required by the Montenegrin constitution to be called upon when joining the Alliance.
5. NATO's membership will alienate Russia and our good relations with Russia will suffer. Montenegro will loose Russian investments, trade as well as tourists plus Russia will point its nuclear weapons of the tiny Montenegro in case accepted to the NATO.⁵

⁵ - for more information please see: <http://www.natomontenegro.me/naslovna>

The panacea of opponents of the Montenegro's NATO membership is the referendum – they call for the citizens to vote and respond the question, whether they wish the country joins the Alliance or not. This is a delaying tactics to buy some more time in order to mobilize those opposing the membership. In theory, the Montenegrin Government is not against the referendum, but it definitively prefers decision taken by the Parliament of Montenegro and it bases its argument on the basis of representative democracy and parliamentary legitimacy. Furthermore, when a country joins the NATO it does not give up part of its sovereignty, there is no transfer of competencies from the national government onto the supranational body – the Alliance. The current Government claims, that it got the mandate to decide about the foreign policy heading of the country in the last elections – gained the democratic majority, majority of votes and hence also the legitimacy to decide about the strategic direction of the country. Apart from that, the NATO membership is being supported by some of the smaller opposition parties too, they mostly represent ethnic minorities living in Montenegro and with the exception of the Serbian minority, they support the NATO membership. Furthermore, the decision to join the Alliance is not just a decision of the (relatively) newly formed Government – it is a consistent policy from the regaining independence of the country in 2006.

About GLOBSEC

GLOBSEC is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation that builds on the successful work done by the Slovak Atlantic Commission (est.1993). Its main goal is to shape the global debate through conducting research activities and connecting key experts on foreign and security policy.

To this goal contributes the annual *GLOBSEC Bratislava Global Security Forum*, one of the top conferences on global security in the world. GLOBSEC also organises the annual *TATRA SUMMIT*, a conference that provides the ground for fruitful expert and political discussions on the future of Europe. In addition, *GLOBSEC World* aims to organise spin-off conferences on the most pressing issues in order to support debates tailored for specific regions of the world.

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