



Evropski pokret
Crna Gora

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Montenegro in NATO

Regional and Global Perspectives



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Publisher

Evropski pokret u Crnoj Gori

For publisher

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Design and Printing

Studio MOUSE- Podgorica

Circulation

300

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New Cold War as a global framework

If the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28th 1914 by Gavrilo Principis regarded as the beginning of the World War I, then one could infer, from a statement given by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that on April 14th 2014, Montenegro became the cause of the beginning of the Second Cold War.

On that day, during the visit of Mr. Milo Djukanovic to the U.S, Moscow stated that the Prime Minister's calls for a more expedient acceptance of Montenegro to NATO were followed by "unamicable statements on Russia's account". A more open mutual "labeling" began in 2007 by Russian refusals to be recognized as "a clay pigeon at the American shooting range" and comparisons of the Washington administration to the Third Reich. However, in the aforementioned statement from April 2014, the term "enemy" was used for the first time in the vocabulary of Russian officials.

The confirmation of the return of Cold War rhetoric soon came from the other side as well. The then-incumbent Deputy Secretary-General of NATO and former American ambassador in Russia - Mr. Alexander Vershbow, stated that the Western military alliance is confident that Russia ought to be treated "more like an enemy than a partner".

Recent negative developments in this relationship affirm the position that the Cold War has never actually terminated - it has only transformed from an ideological conflict of two opposed systems to a struggle over the question of power and influence in the areas of energy, economy and security. Such Cold War hybrid existed from

the fall of the Berlin Wall until the end of Boris Yeltsin's term, albeit with a lower intensity, only to strengthen in the years following the arrival of Mr. Vladimir Putin to the helm of Russia.

The launch of the NATO missile defense system was characterized by Moscow as the Cold War being made public again. At the same time, Russia unequivocally announced its stance on NATO's arrival in the vicinity of its borders and traditional spheres of influence, such as Georgia or Ukraine. The short war in Georgia in the summer of 2008 was a confirmation that Putin was ready to deploy military power in order to achieve his foreign policy goals. Those who questioned the purpose of NATO after the fall of the Berlin Wall got their answers from the Russian annexation of Crimea.

In this way, Russia made a series of moves to prevent the monopoly of the American global domination. Such policy is reinstated on a quotidian basis through both Russian activities in the field and the statements of its senior officials, such as Mr. Sergey Lavrov's remark during the visit to Greece in November 2016 that "the U.S. cannot solve global crises by themselves" and that "if that's the way their American partners think" then they will have to undertake a "painful period of understanding that no one can do anything unilaterally".

The American-Russian relationship has been undermined by a barrage of mutual accusations over Ukraine and Syria, to the extent that not only has it reached its lowest levels, but also the officials started mentioning some unpredictable conflict scenarios. In this regard, the German Foreign Minister even remarked that the times are "much more dangerous" than during the Cold War.

Such opinions are being reaffirmed by certain tactical and strategical moves from both ends. After the establishment of the missile defense system, NATO faced Russian threats to the Baltic states, leading to a \$3.4 billion assistance to Poland and the Baltic states, as well as strengthening its ground forces at the Eastern wing by bringing 5 0000 soldiers equipped with modern, high-tech weapons.

Moscow responded by relocating ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad,

a Russian enclave in the Baltic. Civil defense drills were organized on the Russian territory, consisting of 40 million persons. Recently, Mr. Putin issued a Decree suspending an agreement with the U.S. regarding the plutonium disposition, marking an end to one of the final forms of cooperation on disarmament between the two powers.

Verbal and active confrontation have become a standard in the relation between Russia and Euro-Atlantic partners. Everything that can be observed at the “hard” and “soft” fronts, from Europe and Africa to the Middle and Far East, testifies to the account that the situation has taken a dangerous course.

In such a strained and polarized relationship, both parties would like to know who they can count on, following the principle “if you’re not with us, you’re against us”. Today, NATO and the EU on one side and Russia on the other, are gathering allies or at least deterring other countries from intentions of offering support to their rivals.

Western Balkans in the line of fire

In such a constellation of global powers, the Western Balkans, a region which, until recently, had been on the periphery of global interests of the “greats”, immediately gained in strategic importance. The Western Balkans turned to a small, supporting front – “the line of fire” as the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry would put it, on which Russia and NATO have very little to lose, but a lot to gain.

A setting of this kind leaves very few opportunities to the Western Balkans countries to follow authentic, long-term “non-aligned” or self-proclaimed “neutral” politics. The Swiss or Austrian type of neutrality is unsustainable for the countries in the Balkans due to a series of internal reasons, also rendering it impossible in the foreign-policy context due to a lack of an international recognition.

Therefore, the question of individual affiliation of the countries in the region is only partially a product of political visions of their citizens, political elites and distinguished individuals. However, even in such,

relatively limited circumstances, the question of the direction that certain countries will follow is still, ultimately, in the hands of the government and its leaders and their wisdom to govern, including their courage to face the challenges brought by recent and future times.

Still, to decide on a global framework of cooperation is one thing and to implement such a decision in the turbulent Balkans is a wholly different matter. The majority of the countries in the region have voluntarily, in line with their Euro-integration politics and based on rational estimations of their geographical and strategical positions, chosen NATO for the future development of their security policies, even though the process of integration and NATO membership has taken different dynamics in every country in the region.

Serbia is attempting, in a very specific and questionable manner, to maintain the “both EU and Russia” politics and self-proclaimed military neutrality. However, the military cooperation with NATO is more developed than the one with Russia. The Serbian military and its General Staff are being reformed in line with NATO standards. Serbia signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan, within the 2015 Partnership for Peace Framework, which is the highest form of cooperation between NATO and a non-member state, even though the Belgrade interpretations suggest that raising the level of highest political cooperation does not yield any obligations towards Serbia to become an actual member.

The key argument against the membership is still based on the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, which precipitated the creation of independent Kosovo. Russia is using any means necessary to annul the possibility of Serbia joining NATO, despite the fact that it got left out of the mechanism of solving the Kosovo issue, which was relocated from the UN to the EU domain, and the commitment of the Serbian Government to the process of European integrations. A public debate on this topic barely exists.

The key Moscow argument is a hundred-percent energy dependence of Serbia on Russian supplies of gas. The Serbian Gas Industry - NIS was given to the hands of Russia during Boris Tadic’s term at a contro-

versially low price – as a token of gratitude for the political support on Kosovo. This opened the door wide to Russian influence in the important segments of economic, political and social life of Serbia.

In Macedonia, a fully-fledged EU and NATO membership is being blocked by Greece due to a well-known dispute regarding the official name of the country. Meanwhile, Macedonia has become a prime example on how hesitation and insufficient engagement of the European and Euro-Atlantic structures could pave the way for direct interference of other powers in the internal affairs of the Balkans countries.

The ambition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the desires of its Bosniak and Croatian national segment to be more precise, to become a NATO member as soon as possible are thwarted by the resistance of Republika Srpska, which supports the politics of Belgrade officials and fulfills Moscow directives to which the Serbian entity in B&H is one of the strongest forts in the region.

Kosovo is encumbered by the final solutions of its status and negotiations with Serbia under the supervision of the EU, as well as by its political instability, despite the stronger tendencies of Euro-Atlantic partners to define the security structures as fully fledged military powers which, in one way or another, will be in its entirety tied to NATO even before a definitive solution of the question on the status of Kosovo within the UN framework is being reached.

The only country which has successfully overcome all the challenges on its course towards Euro-Atlantic integrations is Montenegro. It wasn't by chance that the Government in Podgorica has begun negotiations on more EU chapters than any candidate country in the region, while NATO members have already started the process of ratifying the admission of Montenegro to NATO (13 ratifications by November 2016). The fact that the country recognized its long-term strategic interests is simultaneously being met with resilient and open pressures and internal interferences from Russia, which was manifested during the October 2015 protests in Podgorica, as well as in the wake, during and in the aftermath of October 2016 elections.

Russian “nyet”

Montenegro, along with other Western Balkans countries, has chosen its Euro-integration course as a natural extension of developing a democratic, free and prosperous country and the rule of law. Most of them, as demonstrated, would like to strengthen this process by Euro-Atlantic integrations as well, recognizing it as guarantees for their own security.

However, since the crisis broke out in Ukraine, the Kremlin adopted the following strategy: if the West wishes to jeopardize our strategic neighborhood posts, then Russia can reply by destabilizing other locations, the Western Balkans being one of them.

This Moscow strategy was made public in 2013 when the influential Russian International Affairs Council presented the following document to the Head of Kremlin: “Russian soft-power strategy in the Balkans”, where, among other propositions, it was stated that “in this region, traditionally connected to Russia, we cannot limit ourselves to investing in companies only. We have to ensure financial means for the infrastructure and persons who recognize Russia as a world power”.

Since the region was placed on the map of Moscow geostrategic interests, Russia is allocating money and relying on Pan-Slavism, the Orthodox Christianity and economic and military links stemming from the times of socialism in order to block the accession of the Western Balkans countries to NATO, without refraining from using open pressures and threats.

Recently, by using sophisticated methods, Russia is trying to slow down, dispute or disrupt the European integrations processes in the countries of the region. The European Union, due to the crisis, is thereby being represented as an “unattractive project” or “the myth from the ‘90s”. A message is being sent to the Western Balkans countries that the EU is losing its appeal, not only economically but security-wise as well. A Russian alternative is being offered more and more prominently – the Eurasian Federation.

The European course of the countries in the region is viewed by Russia as their delusion, therefore “Serbia and Montenegro ought to return to themselves, but not through NATO and the EU, but through Orthodox Christianity”, as Mr. Leonid Reshetnikov, retired Lieutenant-General and the former Director of the influential Russian International Affairs Council, stated during a promotion of his book in Belgrade.

The Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies in Belgrade identified, only in Serbia, close to 120 different parties, political movements, non-government organizations, civic and student organizations and media which are directly employed for the purposes of defending Russian interests. A significant number of such subjects is operating in Montenegro as well, and their influence and visibility have dramatically increased in the last two years.

Montenegrin “enough”!

The case of Montenegro turned into a blatant example of all the manners in which Moscow is trying to destabilize the government that is not to their liking, showing that such politics does not only have a soft-power nature, but that an encompassing realization of other, more aggressive strategic principles of Russian foreign policy in the Western Balkans is under way.

Montenegrin case affirms the truthfulness of the prediction given by Ms. Christine Wormuth, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense, who, at the beginning of 2015, stated that “Russia could go at non-member NATO countries, some of the smaller countries such as Montenegro, and attempt to create instability and use some of the information-based operations and techniques that we’ve seen being deployed in Ukraine”.

For a relatively short time, what commenced by sending undiplomatic threats and messages to Mr. Djukanovic that he’ll be “responsible before God” for his NATO accession efforts, turned into an open

interference proving the adoption of double standards in Russian politics. During the last year's violent protests in Podgorica, Moscow supported the destructive "streets" against the Government, while at the same time defending the pro-Russian Government in Macedonia from "the streets" which were peaceful.

The attacks on Montenegro intensifying is a consequence of the regional and international politics of Mr. Djukanovic, who, in the decade of Montenegro's regaining independence, brought the country in a position in which it holds a specific weight and importance disproportional to its real size.

Therefore, since 2006, Montenegro has become a leader in the processes of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations in particular, serving as a form of a litmus test for political, security and value-based orientation of the whole Western Balkans. The success of Montenegro would be shared by other countries in the region and represent a significant encouragement to the neighboring countries to intensify their efforts towards the EU and NATO membership.

Aware of such disproportionate influence of this small country in the Balkans and its leader, Russia has invested significant resources and efforts in order to remove Mr. Djukanovic from power, partially through parastatal institutions, partially through financial means and influence of certain Russian tycoons and oligarchs who, in the meanwhile, lost their positions in Montenegro.

These Russian efforts are purported by a specific internal political situation in Montenegro, where a significant part of the population still supports nationalistic and mytho-maniacal projects based on the ideas of the Great-Serbian politics, tribal perceptions of Pan-Slavism and Orthodox universalism. The smell of frankincense and gas substituted the red star in the politics of the realization of Russian imperialism.

The carriers of such politics in Montenegro are gathered in an opposition coalition called the Democratic Front (DF), which maintains strong and regular ties to the aforementioned agents of the Russian

elites, as well as the Russian state and parastatal institutions and individuals who are in charge of implementing Russian politics in the Balkans. This resulted in an unequivocal support given to the DF during the organization of 2015 protests and especially in the wake and during the regular parliamentary elections in Montenegro in October 2016. Other opposition parties can be divided into those that avoid direct confrontation with the idea of Montenegrin NATO membership, demanding a referendum on the membership to be organized instead, while simultaneously giving very robust statements against the Euro-Atlantic integrations (such as Demos, Socialist People Party and the Democrats of Montenegro), and into those that cooperate with the followers of the referendum idea (Civic Movement URA) or participate in common opposition politics (such as Social-Democratic Party – SDP).

The parliamentary elections in Montenegro, held on October 16th 2016, showed that DPS is still the strongest parliamentary party with 41% of the votes and 36 out of 81 seats. With their traditional partners: Social-Democrats and minority parties, it is evident that DPS will form a Government with a mandate to finalize Montenegrin accession to NATO. Beside these parties, along with two other opposition parties that support NATO membership, a support of 60% will be ensured towards ratifying an Agreement on Membership in the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization. In that sense, the elections served as a referendum on Euro-Atlantic integrations as well, since the NATO-supporting parties, whether in the Government or the opposition, gained a majority in the Parliament.

However, only one day after the elections ended, the pro-Russian Democratic Front requested an annulment of the election results, due to an alleged influence on the voters via the announcement during the election day regarding the arrest of 20 Serbian citizens accused of plotting a *coup* and terrorist attacks during the election night.

Even though the Police Department and the Special State Prosecutor's Office of Montenegro offered a series of assertions that the aforementioned activities were of international character and very

well organized, the opposition parties, led by the DF, claim that everything was set up by the “Milo Djukanovic regime”, announcing a boycott of the Parliament and potential protests. Truth be told, the opposition parties outside of DF, especially those espousing NATO membership, are leaving some room for a differing opinion, insisting that the investigation is brought to the very end and admitting a possibility that the suspicious activities were, in fact, a *coup* and a terrorist attack in the making.

On the other hand, the governing parties in Montenegro, as well as the Republic of Serbia officials, are insisting on the fact that the action was professionally organized by certain Russian parastatal and nationalistic agents. All the recent pieces of evidence from the official investigation offered by the Montenegrin Prosecutor’s Office representatives, as well as by the media, are also pointing to that direction, while well-informed diplomatic circles in Podgorica claim that the involvement of Russian elements was transparent and unambiguous. According to the investigation process, certain individuals from Russia, through a use of certain financial means, engaged a network of cooperatives in Serbia and Montenegro, with the goal of eliminating the Montenegrin Prime Minister and taking over the Government by the pro-Russian, “patriotic” opposition.

At the same time, the Moscow officials called for the formation of an opposition government, without Milo Djukanovic, thereby indirectly recognizing the election results in Montenegro. However, soon after, the Vice-President of the Russian Duma - Mr. Sergey Zheleznyak, offered a strong support to the opposition intentions of not accepting the election results and organizing further protests. Mr. Zheleznyak addressed the opposition by using open threats, instigating turmoil and calling for a non-institutional takeover of the elected Government. Furthermore, he even expressed hopes that the new President of the U.S. – Mr. Donald Trump, will curtail NATO advancement in the Balkans, particularly in Montenegro.

A somewhat more diplomatic note, albeit with a similar vector direction, was sent by Mr. Vladimir Putin himself, who said that he expects Montenegro to “engage in a balanced politics”. The Prime

Minister Djukanovic responded that, having in mind the respect towards traditional friendships, Montenegro is already engaging in a balanced politics and that it has the right to its own political choice and realization of its own political interests.

Recent deployment of Mr. Mikhail Fradkov, former Prime Minister and experienced Head of the Russian Intelligence Agency, to the position of the Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, suggests that future developments will not be limited only to verbal diplomatic remarks. This time, less rhetorical bravura used by the former Director, Mr. Leonid Reshetnikov, is expected on account of more efficiency in realization personified in Mr. Fradkov.

The elections in Montenegro have therefore garnered a lot more importance than they would in other circumstances. The political will of a country with a population of 620 000 became a global issue related to a disposition of forces attributed to world powers and a regional watershed for the processes of Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration of Montenegro.

According to the events in Montenegro, the Western Balkans perspectives, both in medium and long-terms, ought to be analyzed in the context of the EU and NATO membership. However, this goal will not be reached with a lack of courage of local political elites and their leader, neither with a low level of interest of the Western partners for what is happening in individual countries of the region.

All signs point to the fact that the conflict-laden atmosphere will not abate in the near future, both on the global and regional level. Mr. Putin has already announced new tensions and the bulk of analysis shows that he is planning a future **against**, not **with** the West.

Since it is evident that the pressures and different attempts of destabilization will not subside, it is better to face the new strained relationships and challenges - surrounded by allies. That is why many analysts outside of Montenegro concur that the Government in Podgorica made a wise and brave decision to join the Western military alliance.

Moscow will be reluctant to give up on both Montenegro and the Western Balkans, while Brussels and Washington ought to break with the politics of hesitation and insufficient assistance and protection. It is an imperative that the Western allies increase all forms of efforts for a complete integration of the countries from the region as soon as possible.

Otherwise, a dangerous vacuum is being created, leaving space to Russian, as well as other influences, that do not promote Western democratic values. The EU and NATO members ought to, in the near future, reaffirm their commitment to the Balkans region through concrete and efficient actions.

Before someone else does.

Authors: Bosko Jaksic and Momcilo Radulovic

In Podgorica, October – November 2016

