



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Montenegro External Relations briefing:  
Recent development in Montenegro's foreign policy**  
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## **Introduction**

Despite geographical size, the political elite in Montenegro has regarded Montenegrin FP capacity in a small-power narrative.<sup>1</sup> Within regional power relations Montenegro had resources and leverage to be in position to influence power relations and (re)create regional political layout. In this sense, until 2012 when Montenegro started with accession negotiations with the EU, DPS foreign policy manifested in accommodation of European and Russian influence while maintaining sovereigntist tendencies against normative engagements from the former and subversive influence from the latter (and its regional proxy Serbia). Even after the start of “cold-warlesque” tensions between the EU and Russia, DPS led government has continued to uphold “small-power” FP goals that defied the size of Montenegro and successfully “adapt-adopted” asymmetric constellation between regional and global powers in the Western Balkans. This means that Montenegro’s government adapted to the position where a big power (the EU) is more concerned to pressure its neighbours (Serbia, the RS) to steer off Russian influence and basically adopted these steering strategies to, on the one hand, demonstrate the commitment to Brussels and, on the other, to show that pro-Serb(ian) influence is as dangerous as the Russian influence.

This small-power narrative for the last few years generated certain impression that Montenegro, despite of its strategic goals (the EU and NATO accession), could be an unpredictable ‘swing state’ in yielding support for hedging Russian subversive activities in the Europe’s “soft underbelly”. However, unveiling of the coup plot and Russian increased hostility towards Montenegro’s resoluteness in pursuing NATO integration moved Montenegro decisively closer to the West and significantly deteriorated its relations with Russia. This report will, therefore, give account about the main developments in Montenegro’s foreign policy following the NATO accession.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hill, Christopher, 2008.

## **Post-accession situation**

In previous report we provided a brief overlook on a small “hiccup” Montenegro’s NATO accession encountered during the transitional phase in the US administration.<sup>2</sup> After the US Senate quickly approved the vote on the Montenegro’s accession in April, a month later Montenegro had an open invitation and was officially admitted into the organization on the NATO summit in Brussels. Despite rather “colloquial encounter” PM Markovic had with Trump on the Summit, snapped with taunting remarks by the regional media,<sup>3</sup> NATO accession gave a strong impetus to Montenegrin government to boost its international and regional standing. First, the frequency of foreign high-level visits to Podgorica increased. Many European ministerial-level officials paid the visit to Montenegro to “commend the efforts done towards the EU integrations and reaffirm their support for the [Montenegro’s] full EU membership”. Second, the EU accession negotiations also registered windfalls from the NATO accession. Until May-June 2017, Montenegro opened chapters 1 (Free movement of goods) and 22 (Regional policy) and closed important chapter on External relations (Chapter. 30). Third, regional security alliances were enhanced. In February, together with Albania and Croatia (both NATO members) Montenegro launched “Adriatic trilateral”, aiming at closer cooperation in energy sector. The benefits of finding itself in this regional “entourage” – especially for winning the US support - were immediate as both Albania and Croatia were considered as close regional partners supportive of American “LNG initiative”. In August, Montenegro was given the honour to host NATO sponsored (and during the last 10 years mostly hibernating) Adriatic Charter Summit, with the US Vice President Pence as the highest guest. During the Summit, the US Vice President, several State Department officials send “a strong message” to domestic audience and international community that the US

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<sup>2</sup> MNE-political developments, Feb 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018

<sup>3</sup> Trump “might have elbowed” Markovic while rushing to assume a better standing on official group photo ceremony, This ‘incident’ was variously interpreted by local media, where some criticized “Trump’s grotesque comportment” while some drew out “symbolic gesture that showed to Montenegro its place within a new community”.

and the EU has unison stance regarding the Russian destabilizing incursions in Montenegro and reaffirmed the support for Montenegro's pro-West course.

While the NATO accession increased FP activities with the West, simultaneously it caused temporarily communication blackout between Podgorica and Moscow. It was obvious that political relations have been seriously deteriorated with the first allegations on the coup attempt, however after the accession the economic and trade relations also came under a "veil of uncertainty". Political frictions were sustained through the Russian "sub-state actors" (United Russia party) and "state-proxy media" (Sputnik), occasionally involving Russian MFA press releases criticizing Montenegro's "foreign tutored FP 'switch' that had no popular support". The tensions escalated with a minor diplomatic scandal in June when Montenegrin MP was denied transfer on Moscow's airport,<sup>4</sup> signaling the possibility of more gruesome retaliation that might come afterwards.

At some point, the overall bilateral relations were rumoured to reach 'point of no return' and that Montenegro should not count any more on Russian investors, tourists and businessmen; however, no negative domino effect -so far - followed in comprehensive bilateral relations. In spite of the fact that opposition assumed vocal support from Russia, the government has not yet run out of resources to accommodate Russian economic interests. Many of the moderate figures within Montenegrin political elite became increasingly in favour of 'balancing back' Russian support either through maintaining low-profile in NATO activities or active engagement in maintaining stable economic and people-to-people relations. Moreover, PM Markovic himself emphasized in public interviews that the NATO accession does not change Montenegro's stance regarding the bilateral relations with Russia and expressed the hope that the "recent accession should not be a burden in bilateral relations". Particular diplomatic "gymnastics" was done by FM Darmanovic who was professing

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<sup>4</sup> Due to "newly updated immigration regulations" DPS MP Vlahovic was denied transfer to Minsk bound flight and had to return to Podgorica.

strong commitment for NATO while catering European partners and had “understanding for Russian concerns regarding the NATO expansion” while answering questions from Russian state media.

### **Rethinking regional integrations**

Montenegro’s ‘swing back’ to the West had an immediate effect on its relations with the regional actors. As mentioned, the direct consequence of the accession was enhancing security cooperation with neighbouring NATO members Croatia and Albania. Moreover, the relations with Slovenia and Hungary improved over time which many ascribed to the successful track in the EU negotiations and enhanced security cooperation. The relations with Macedonia had positive impact for Montenegro’s regional standing and gave the chance to re-create its small-power narrative by offering the help and expertise in pursuing the NATO integration. Montenegro-Kosovo border demarcation agreement -the main bilateral issue between the two countries - has been waiting the ratification by Kosovar Parliament for entire year, however as its was stalled due to internal disagreements it didn’t reflect much on the bilateral relations. As a staunch supporter of Euro-Atlantic integrations, Kosovo’s (Albanian majority) have looked positively on Montenegro’s FP ‘switch’.

On the other hand, DPS led government found itself more estranged from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. The assertive role of the former towards pro-Serb opposition in Montenegro had cooling effects between Belgrade and Podgorica. In December, Montenegro’s government has openly vocalized the concerns on the initiative made by Serbian President Vucic and supported by the RS President Dodik to draft the “Declaration on Serbs in the region”, however – as reported previously – Podgorica so far successfully “adapt-adopted” to pro-Serb subversive activities and its effects domestically should have a limited reach.

Among regional countries with rather unstable EU integration trajectory, Montenegro figured as a role model in completing the reforms and following the

instructions of the Enlargement Commissioner. Montenegro has also responded to the EU initiatives that seek to integrate the WB region, such as the “Berlin process”. Yet, Montenegrin diplomats have several times on semi-official occasions raised concern that the “Berlin process” is a mere substitute for the postponed promise on the EU accession. It is, therefore, bandwagoning with the initiative - attended the Trieste Summit in July and signed the MoU between 3 EU and 6 WB countries - but is the least committed to become more economically or politically integrated with the other WB countries. The new government is facing difficult task to trade in its excellent track of record in accession negotiation process for a more earlier accession date or the perspective of individual accession. Anything less than that would most likely put Montenegro on the same track with Serbia and thus will cause enormous repercussions to its Euro-Atlantic project domestically and even doom DPS results on the next elections. Therefore, the disappointment that occurred in August, when EU Commission submitted report announcing a year 2025 as the earliest possible date for the next ‘joint enlargement’ was twofold. The government and DPS mouthpieces showed open dissatisfaction with the date and the joint enlargement.

Even though it might cause a ‘fatal blow’ to DPS rule, it is still early to predict the trajectory Montenegro’s FP will assume to bargain down earlier and/or the individual accession. So far, as the country particularly interested to transcend the frameworks based on the cooperative engagements within the ‘immediate region’, Montenegro should have relatively high propensity to be an active supporter of multi-lateral engagements with the EU countries and within the EU and NATO sponsored supra-regional frameworks. This idea is especially rooted in the Montenegrin small-power narrative and might go hand in hand with Montenegro’s conceptual disengagement with the WB region and crafting experimental approaches to reconnect with the Mediterranean and Central European regions.