



# Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro Social briefing:  
Social developments in Montenegro**  
**Ivica Bakota**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

## **Introduction**

It is not a novelty that democracy and media freedom in Montenegro- just as in the whole WB region – has been backsliding over the last ten years. It suffices to snap the reports from Freedom House or the Economist Intelligence Unit to see the overall democratization trend that has been stagnant over the years, decisively taking downturn in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Neglected Enlargement policy, 2008 economic crisis and the “Russian threat” are common signifiers for downsized EU’s normative policy in the region which not only kept afloat some of the region’s “autocrats” but also provided fertile ground for the rise of so called “stabilocracy”. As a term largely popularized after BiEPAG report in March 2017, “stabilocracy” signified relatively weak democracies with authoritarian, yet pro-European leaders who during the European “yawn” have all but succeeded in consolidating their clientelist networks, media image and nominal support for pro-European FP course.

However, the EU’s assertive normativity regained regional footholds with Macedonian parliamentary crisis in the early 2017. Beyond the nationalist rhetoric of the day, it is the dialectic of integration “carrot” and isolation “stick” that ultimately ushered the peaceful government transfer and proved that the EU is still the main auditor of the WB’s liberalization and democratization processes. Moreover, “Macedonian scenario” incited the wave of uncertainty across the region, autocratic leaders feared the EU might extend the hand to a few scattered oppositional parties and NGOs and reinvent the “non-regime” opposition. As a matter of fact, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and, to a certain extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina have all seen a rise of the voices critical to the regime, yet, paradoxically, the country with the most entrenched autocratic government seemed to be left out. Montenegro is the only country where the EU has lost a contact with the “real” opposition.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2016 Democracy Index report, Montenegro had a fall from 58th place in 2006 to 85th place in 2016; Freedom of the Press, 2017 report, similarly reports a fall from the 58th place to 106th place. Details, see: Freedom in the World, 2017 report, Freedom House; 2016 Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit

After a sobering visit to the Western Balkans in early March 2017, Frederica Mogherini might have learned “tense internal challenges [in the Western Balkans]”, but after the meeting with PM Markovic in Podgorica she only voiced concerns for the ongoing boycott and remained patiently presumptuous to cast off the whole opposition as “non-compliant to the democratic standards and procedures”. In these circumstances, enjoying unprecedented level of support from the West, the Montenegro’s government was given all means to exacerbate political and social cleavages to the point of ideological Manicheanism and master the technique of “delegitimization” or co-optation of political voices within the society.

### **Ideological Manicheanism**

Over the years a cross-party consensus has emerged that Montenegro’s strategic goal is to join the EU. On the other hand, the DPS led FP project, i.e. NATO integration has met a strong resentment not only from the political opposition, but also from some moderate political forces. NATO accession policy was, as PM Djukanovic argued, indispensable path Montenegro should take to preserve internal stability and regional security. Yet, pro-Serb political forces have seen the NATO accession as an irreversible declension from Serbian non-aligned security policy and *propter hoc* Serbia itself. Therefore, they have formed anti-NATO opinion advocating the proximity with Serbian FP and balancing attitude between the East and the West. While the former idea propelled ethnic divisions, the latter idea had a support within the broad public.

The start of the EU accession negotiations and, moreover, the restitution of the Cold war between the EU and Russia, moved Montenegrin FP policy more towards the EU, while resolute stance towards the NATO integration brought into light stark political and social divisions and furtherly uniformed the dominant Euro-Atlantic course. On the other hand, the estrangement in political relations with Russia entrusted some political parties on the side of Montenegrin weak opposition to ‘bounce back’ and set a broad range of revisionist policies

that seek rapprochement with Russia and/ or assume Serbian “playing two pianos” policy. However, during the course, it became less clear what is a viable alternative to Montenegrin Euro-Atlantic integration, and much of the promises of the opposition parties were framed in abstract and inconclusive ways that have no tenable platform in the short and medium term.

After 2 year-long deliberations on NATO accession, Montenegro’s politics became a black-and-white game that soon spread in the media and created either pro-NATO or anti-NATO opinions, where a cluster of moderate, Eurosceptic, non-aligned, pacifist opinions have been increasingly alienated from the public space. As a result of this polarization, the NATO accession has been depicted almost as a EU referendum vote and the polling agencies have registered ever stronger correlation between the EU and NATO approval rates. Therefore, it came as no surprise when the government made a controversial decision to reject the referendum on the accession following continuously unfavourable results from polls and there were barely a few “independent” NGO organizations that criticized government’s unison approach to NATO and the EU.

In this sense, clear-cut dualism between Euro-Atlantic integrations and anti-NATO Euroscepticism are two opposite trends that make no concessions among their proponents in political arena and can only amount to a clash between the dominant and the alternative ideological narratives. The narratives can also extend to a broad set of values and beliefs that involve the clash of dominant ideology of neoliberalism and Western-style democracy with more traditionalist and conservative Orthodox Brotherhood theory or populist promises on national consensus regarding the goals in Montenegro’s FP.

A particular catalyst to social polarization is Serbian Orthodox Church and its Montenegrin Archbishop Amfilohije Radovic. As the highest religious authority for the Montenegro’s Serbs also revered by Montenegrins, Archbishop Amfilohije tuned his public discourse against the Montenegrin statehood and distinct national identity, advocating “Pan-Serb” nationalism and Orthodox clericalism. His controversial statements on “Montenegrin’s identity” from July

2017, open sympathies for Russia and radical criticism against the government made him one of the most prominent ideologues of the “alt-right” opposition.

Another source of such dualist thinking on Montenegro’s FP is the zero-sum discourse employed by the West (US and the EU) in treating Montenegro’s accession to NATO and “successful track of record in the EU negotiations”<sup>2</sup> as a particular “victory” of progressive and reform-minded political forces against the manipulative and subversive behaviour of the Russian state-proxy actors. Besides generating stabilocracy, the lack of the European support decimated the strength of the “real” opposition and blurred a thin line between regressive and radical opposition and their civic counterparts.

### **“Delegitimization” or co-optation**

As the op-ed appeared in Montenegro’s daily “Vijesti” in December explains,<sup>3</sup> media “delegitimization” is a brutally effective technique against the media outlets and political organizations mastered by Djukanovic and its regime “long before Trump”. It mainly consists of avoiding direct accusations on criminal or corruption activities by employing *ad hominem* counterattacks, questioning sources behind the allegations and intimidation of journalists and activists “not on the DPS’ payroll”. Without sufficient checks and balances by judiciary and civil society, these threats and intimidations are often realized “under unclear circumstances” and without due investigations.

In November 2017, Djukanovic escalated dormant feud with editorial board of “Vijesti” calling them “mafia-backed and power-voracious” group. During the year, several journalists that have reported intimidations by high-level DPS officials were refuted and denied further contact with the government. Independent reports about irregularities and frauds on several local elections in March and November 2017 were being discarded as oppositional “setups”. Moreover, even the last parliamentary elections in October 2016 are tainted with

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Report for Montenegro, 2017

<sup>3</sup> S. Scekić, Pelcer s Baklana, Vijesti, 9.12..2017

serious accusations on electoral frauds, yet in the official propaganda they are “regularly” discarded as an unsubstantiated hoax.

On the other hand, co-optation is a strategy that has been employed with significant success in academia and civil society and with mixed effects in the media. For one, it includes the organizations and political actors that stress importance of the European integrations, building institutional capacity, responsible governance, public accountability, etc. while essentially, reproducing existing political and social cleavages. However, in many instances, co-opted institutions developed a discourse critical to the government, denouncing legalist issues and procedures, but rarely questioned the (government`s) legitimacy itself. In that sense, DPS- affiliated pundits defended rejection of the NATO referendum by explaining why the parliament is more competent to bring up this decision, while circumscribing the question of the legitimacy of popular vote. In the last year, this particular pattern of behavior occurred during the “coup attempt trials” where co-opted media have developed discourse underlying the responsibility or complicity of the key opposition figures, strictly maintaining the “endorsed version” of the coup; embellishing the importance of the key foreign visits (Mogherini in March, Pence in August, regional summit in October, etc.); denouncing opposition`s contacts with Russian or Serbian political representatives, etc.

The mouthpiece of DPS, “Pobjeda” has regularly published “undigested versions” of DPS press releases and several cases of auto-censorship on Montenegro`s national TV station came to the public attention. There are also some criticisms that government`s “inclusive approach” to civil society participation in the EU negotiations has the likes of co-opting strategies given the fact that the role of civil society in creating and monitoring government`s strategy in the negotiations remains side-lined and there is surprising absence of any reports which – again – instead of pointing out systemic and legalist obstacles in the fight against illiberal or corrupt practices, criticize the legitimacy of the actor itself.