



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro external relations briefing:
Challenges of the security policy in new conditions
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Challenges of the security policy in new conditions

Summary

Security policy of Montenegro is harmonized with EU and NATO policy, considering Montenegro's membership in NATO and the direction of foreign policy towards EU membership. During October, various events were organized that focused on security policy and in which Montenegro participated. Organized events represent important opportunities and platforms for initiating discussion and jointly solving challenges and open questions, which are especially visible in the period of new facts and events in international relations. Likewise, the To Be Secure (2BS) Forum, which was organized in Montenegro, is an event that brought together a large number of officials from several countries, international organizations and experts in the field of security policy, who exchanged opinions on important issues in the field of security policy and emphasizing Euro-Atlantic values. and principles. Similarly, in the past period, the Warsaw Security Forum was organized, which also represents an excellent platform for discussion and a joint approach to solving problems. For a NATO member state, it is of great importance for Montenegro to participate in this and similar events.

Introduction

The new geopolitical situation imposed the need for a new approach to security policy. The war in Ukraine influenced attitudes about security policy, but also influenced the perception of EU integration. As a country that aspires to join the EU and is a member of NATO, Montenegro has harmonized its foreign and security policy with EU policy. First of all, in relation to the war in Ukraine, it took a position condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Russia, thus joining the countries that stood by Ukraine. Additionally, during the previous period, it pursued a policy that is in line with NATO policy. Montenegro participated in the last NATO Summit, which was held in Lithuania, where the commitment to the fulfillment of NATO's goals was also expressed. In addition to the discussion of new challenges in the field of security policy, one of the topics was security in the countries of the Western Balkans. In this connection, such determination of the member countries is of great importance for the security policy of Montenegro. Montenegro has planned a defense allocation of 2% of GDP, which is predicted by the new guidelines, which shows the

country's commitment to respecting the goals of the NATO Alliance. According to the NATO research, pre-Vilnius Summit opinion polls from 2023, one third of respondents from Montenegro said that Montenegro should spend more on defense, while 41% said that the country should allocate less than the current defense spending.¹

What are the security challenges?

Taking into account that Montenegro is a candidate country for membership in the EU and also Montenegro is a member of NATO, this also implies conducting a policy towards Russia. It is additionally important for Montenegro, given the influence of Russia in the region. Namely, Russia's influence in the countries of the Western Balkans, and therefore in Montenegro, is present through various aspects. Relations with Russia have always existed to a greater or lesser extent. Diplomatic ties between Montenegro and Russia have always been strong. Additionally, tourists from Russia are a significant percentage of the number of tourists to Montenegro, while FDI was also significant during the last period, which, among other things, invested in real estate. Leading the policy of Euro-Atlantic integration, Montenegro made a departure from Russian policy, however, certain influences still exist. Namely, Montenegro showed its orientation in the implementation of foreign policy in the new geopolitical conditions when it condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The introduction of sanctions additionally shows an effort to remove the Russian influence that exists in the Western Balkans, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. In fact, the presence of Russian influence has been evident over the years. And it is precisely this influence that represents a potential danger for stability and peace in the region, so one of the focuses of Montenegro's security policy is the reduction and elimination of risks arising from it. Montenegro introduced sanctions against Russia nine years ago, due to the annexation of Crimea, thus showing the direction of its foreign policy. This led to an additional tightening of relations between the two countries. NATO membership would reduce Russian influence in Montenegro, which is why Russia was against such a decision. Therefore, some Russian citizens were also involved in the coup that was organized during the parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2016. Nevertheless, Montenegro became a member of NATO. With the change of government three years ago, the Russian influence is again present on a larger scale,

¹ NATO (2023) NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, available on:

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/2300707-pre-summit-research-2023.pdf

since the government was held by politicians and parties that are close to Russian politics. Therefore, the greater presence of Russia can represent a potential factor of instability in the region. NATO adopted the New Strategic Concept in 2022, and one of the important issues is maintaining stability in the Western Balkans taking into account the risks that exist in the case of security due to the presence of Russia in this region. The discussion on the Western Balkans is an encouraging fact, indicating NATO's orientation towards the countries of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro. This is of great importance for establishing stability in the region. The orientation of NATO towards Montenegro and other countries in the Western Balkan region shows the interest of the NATO Alliance in strengthening relations and cooperation with this group of countries². Research among the citizens of Montenegro conducted by the Center for Civil Education and Damar shows that 37.1% of citizens believe that Russian influence is dangerous for the region, while a slightly smaller percentage (35.6%) of respondents gave the opposite answer.³

In addition, interference in the internal affairs of Montenegro is also present on the part of Serbia, which was often discussed during the previous period among political parties and other organizations and individuals. In the last report of the European Parliament, it is stated that "Remains seriously concerned by malign foreign interference, destabilisation efforts, hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns by foreign actors in Montenegro; notes that religious institutions can be used as a tool for external influence and condemns Serbian interference in this regard"⁴. The public opinion also perceives that Serbia is interfering in the internal affairs of Montenegro. A public opinion poll on the relations between Montenegro and Serbia, conducted by the Center for Civil Education and Damar in October 2023, shows that 52.9% of respondents believe that there is interference by Serbia in the internal political affairs of Montenegro, and 32% of respondents believe that the interference of the authorities in Serbia is the main problem in the relations between the two countries⁵.

² Mirkovic Milika (2023) Relations with Serbia and other issues, July External Relations briefing, China-CEE Institute, available on: <https://china-cee.eu/2023/08/14/montenegro-external-relations-briefing-relations-with-serbia-and-other-issues/>

³ Centre for Civil Education (2023) Plenum o crnogorsko-srpskim odnosima, available on: <https://media.cgo-cce.org/2023/10/CGO-ADD-Damar-CH-Plenum-CG-SRB.pdf>

⁴ European Parliament (2023) Draft Report on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro, available on: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-749915_EN.pdf

⁵ Centre for Civil Education (2023) Plenum o crnogorsko-srpskim odnosima, available on: <https://media.cgo-cce.org/2023/10/CGO-ADD-Damar-CH-Plenum-CG-SRB.pdf>

2BS Forum 2023 was organized in Montenegro

In October, the 2BS Forum was organized in Montenegro, where the focus of the discussion was the role of NATO for security and stability in Montenegro. The forum was organized by the Atlant Association of Montenegro.

The 2BS Forum has been organized since 2011 with a focus on security issues in Southeast Europe and the promotion of Euro-Atlantic values. As in previous years, this year's event brought together Montenegrin and foreign officials, representatives of international organizations, academies, security experts, representatives of the NGO sector, as well as ambassadors and representatives of countries. The forum was attended by the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues Mr. Miroslav Lajčák, Slovak member of the European Parliament Mr. Vladimír Bilčík, American Ambassador to Montenegro Mrs. Judi Rising Reinke, the Special Representative for the Western Balkans at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Adrian Davidoiu.

Considering the various challenges faced by the countries in the new conditions, the discussion and search for a joint solution in order to establish greater safety and security is of great importance. Forums can contribute to the creation of new ideas, the establishment of stronger cooperation and the intensification of discussion and dialogue between countries in order to overcome the challenges we face in the field of security. It seems that the role of this forum has never been more important, given that Montenegro is stagnating on the EU path. At the Forum, the positions and perspectives of the Western Balkans were presented, as well as the security policy, taking into account the war in Ukraine, was discussed. Through the discussion, the importance of NATO for the security and stability of the region was pointed out.

The president of the Board of Directors of the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro, which organized the 2BS Forum, emphasized that the strengthening of the transatlantic alliance represents one of the strongest reactions to the Ukrainian crisis. Referring to security in the Western Balkan region, she emphasized that Russian aggression against Ukraine has additionally encouraged numerous anti-democratic subjects in the Balkans, whose actions are directed against undermining peace and stability⁶.

Security issues caused by the war in Ukraine were one of the topics of discussion at the Forum. The US ambassador pointed out that Russia's attack on Ukraine represents an attack on

⁶ To Be Secure Forum (2023) The 2BS Fourm began, available on: <https://2bs.me/the-2bs-forum-began/>

democratic values, stressing her strong support for Ukraine. It was pointed out that Russian influence is present in the countries of the Western Balkans, therefore also in Montenegro, which additionally represents a challenge in security policy. This can pose a danger to the stability and security of the region. Therefore, it is of great importance to promote Euro-Atlantic values and continue the reform process of joining the EU, as well as leading and following NATO policy. The American ambassador pointed out the need for the formation of a government in Montenegro that will be decisive in implementing reforms aimed at joining the EU and emphasized the necessity of the commitment of "a leader of stability and security that is built on strong democratic institutions". In order to achieve the goal, i.e. membership of the EU, it was emphasized that "there is an urgent need for a Government that puts institutions above personal ambitions and party politics". Any deviation from this path or the opposite policy would cause harm. In that case, the role of strong democratic institutions, including free elections, independent judiciary, non-politicized state administration and others, is emphasized⁷.

The EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues Miroslav Lajčak emphasized that the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo and the incident that happened recently represents a challenge not only for Serbia and Kosovo, but also for the entire region, indicating that „makes the region look bad, and it's detrimental to the enlargement process, which worries the entire region“⁸. Taking into account all the challenges in the region, the enlargement process does not happen by itself, but requires the commitment of all the countries in the region, that is, the readiness to jointly resolve conflicts and open issues. On that occasion, the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue emphasized that "the EU is more ready for the Western Balkans than the Balkans for it"⁹. This clearly indicates the need for additional efforts to fulfill the criteria for EU membership. Therefore, the need for the establishment of a pro-European Government of Montenegro, which will advocate the values of the EU and NATO, was emphasized.

To this end, it is of great importance that the new Government leads the EU integration policy, as well as follows the NATO policy in order to ensure security in the country. During the previous three years, the process of joining the EU slowed down, so in the coming period,

⁷ Embassy of United States in Montenegro (2023) Govor američke ambasadorke Džudi Rajzing Rajnke na 13. forumu To Be Secure, available on: <https://me.usembassy.gov/me/govor-americke-ambasadorke-dzudi-rajzing-rajnke-na-13-forumu-to-be-secure/>

⁸ To Be Secure Forum (2023) The EU is more prepared for the Balkans than the Balkans are prepared for the EU <https://2bs.me/the-eu-is-more-prepared-for-the-balkans-than-the-balkans-are-prepared-for-the-eu/>

⁹ Ibid.

the new government should work more dedicatedly and devotedly on the implementation of the reform process. In this way, the influence of third countries existing in the Western Balkan region would be reduced and eliminated, which could potentially represent a disruptive factor for the stability of the entire region.

Warsaw Security Forum: an opportunity to discuss security challenges

The Warsaw Security Forum is an event organized at the beginning of October, which focuses on security policy. This Forum was established in 2014 with the aim of promoting cooperation in the field of security for Central and Eastern Europe. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation initiated organisation of the Forum nine years ago, in cooperation with NATO and the National Security Bureau to the President of the Republic of Poland.¹⁰ That was the goal of this year's forum, which gathered a large number of officials from different countries, representatives of international organizations, civil society, academia and think tanks. Specifically, the emphasis of this year's discussion relates to all aspects of security, which include foreign policy, defense, energy and democratic resilience.

Taking into account the importance of this Forum, the Prime Minister of Montenegro participated in the event in a technical mandate. For Montenegro, this Forum is of great importance because it represents an opportunity to exchange views and proposals on different security issues. By participating in this event, Montenegro shows its commitment to conducting a security policy that is in line with the EU and NATO and shows Montenegro's commitment to promoting Euro-Atlantic values and commitment to implementing Euro-Atlantic processes in order to contribute to strengthening security and find answers and solutions to security challenges, which have increased during recent years. Joint resolution of issues and open discussion is one of the best solutions and strategies, given that no country can alone face the challenges brought by new times and new trends. This is especially important for Montenegro. By participating in this meeting, the Prime Minister of Montenegro expressed Montenegro's position and commitment to EU integration and the complete alignment of Montenegro's foreign policy with EU foreign policy. The entry of Montenegro into the EU community represents the main strategic goal of the foreign policy of Montenegro. The attitude towards

¹⁰ Warsaw Security Forum, Who We Are, available on: <https://warsawsecurityforum.org/about/>

Russia's aggression against Ukraine was also emphasized, indicating that Ukraine's struggle is a struggle to defend the democratic values of all democratic nations.¹¹

Security policy and NATO membership - what are the perceptions of Montenegrin citizens?

Public opinion surveys show that support for NATO has grown over recent years and that confidence in NATO has increased. The new geopolitical situation and the war in Ukraine influenced citizens' perception of security policy, but also attitudes about NATO, EU integration and others.

According to the latest survey by the Center for Civic Education and Damar, 55% of citizens believe that Montenegro should remain a NATO member, while 36.4% are against NATO membership.¹² Compared to the results of the research from the previous year, conducted by these two organizations, support for NATO increased by 5.2 percentage points (in 2022, 49.8% of citizens supported membership in NATO). However, the percentage of those who are against NATO remained almost the same (36.8%)¹³. This growth in support can be explained by the war in Ukraine, which influenced the view that membership in NATO can contribute to stability in the country. The same survey from 2022 shows that more than a third of citizens (34.3%) believe that Montenegro should follow the official NATO and EU policy towards Russia, while more than half (51.5%) said that the war in Ukraine proved that it is good that Montenegro is a member of the NATO Alliance¹⁴.

According to the pre-Vilnius Summit opinion polls from 2023, 87% of citizens of Montenegro believe that Montenegro will be safer due to cooperation between North America and European NATO nations, which is the highest percentage among all NATO members. Also, 81% of respondents consider the Alliance to be very important (36%) or somewhat important

¹¹ Government of Montenegro (2023) Abazovic na Varsavskom bezbjednosnom forumu: Iskoristiti geopoliticki momentum za snaznije djelovanje NATO i EU, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/abazovic-na-varsavskom-bezbjednosnom-forumu-iskoristiti-sadasnji-geopoliticki-momentum-za-snaznije-djelovanje-nato-i-eu>

¹² Centre for Civil Education (2023) Plenum o crnogorsko-srpskim odnosima, available on: <https://media.cgo-cce.org/2023/10/CGO-ADD-Damar-CH-Plenum-CG-SRB.pdf>

¹³ Portal Analitika (2022) CGO: Support for Montenegro's membership in NATO is growing because of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, available on: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/cgo-podrska-clanstvu-crne-gore-u-nato-u-jaca-zbog-agresije-rusije-na-ukrajinu>

¹⁴ CGO (2022) MNE Pulse, available on: <https://cgo-cce.org/en/infographics/mne-pulse/>

(45%) for the future national security. In total, 64% of respondents from Montenegro would vote for Montenegro to remain a NATO member, while 23% would vote against it.¹⁵ Compared to 2022, there is a growing trend of NATO support (in 2022, a total of 51% of respondents would vote for Montenegro to remain a NATO member)¹⁶.

When it comes to support for Ukraine, NATO pre-Vilnius Summit opinion polls from 2023 show that 13% of citizens from Montenegro strongly support and 29% tend to support Ukraine, in terms of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (in comparison to Alliance members, it is lower for 21 and 3 percentage points, respectively). On the other hand, 27% of respondents stated that they strongly oppose, while 30% tend to oppose.

Taking into account all the challenges in new conditions and relations, membership in NATO represents an important fact that favors stability and peace in Montenegro and in the region. Therefore, strengthening the role of NATO is a necessity and an important factor of stability. In this regard, Montenegro pursues a policy that is in line with NATO and the EU. Russia's influence in the Western Balkan region has existed since before, so any activity aimed at threatening peace and stability represented a danger to Montenegro and the entire region. However, security does not depend only on external factors and relations on the international scene, but also on internal factors and stability in the country. Therefore, the orientation of the new Government of Montenegro towards a more dedicated implementation of the reform process in order to join the EU as soon as possible, as well as the conduct of a security policy that is in line with NATO policy, is of great importance.

Organizing and participating in events dedicated to security policy is important for Montenegro. For twelve years, the 2BS Forum has been an excellent platform for the exchange of opinions on security policy in the region. Similarly, the Warsaw Security Forum presents an opportunity to look at security issues from a different perspective.

¹⁵ NATO (2023) NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, available on: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/2300707-pre-summit-research-2023.pdf

¹⁶ NATO (2022) NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, available on: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220622-pre-summit-research-2022.pdf