

The Captive Candidate: Montenegro Between the EU and Serbia's Influence

*(An analysis of the political, security, economic,
and cultural mechanisms of Serbia's influence
on Montenegro's European perspective,
with geostrategic implications)*

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INTRODUCTION

The intensification of the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries, especially Montenegro, is increasingly revealing the complex layers of political, security, and identity challenges that have long been suppressed by the technical issues of enlargement progress.¹ Facing hybrid threats on its territory, the European Union is beginning to speak more clearly and directly about malign and foreign influences in candidate countries. In this context, Montenegro no longer figures merely as a technical and self-proclaimed “front-runner” in the integration process but is increasingly coming under the scrutiny of European officials precisely because of its internal vulnerability to external political and intelligence pressures.

Members of the European Parliament who closely monitor the enlargement process—such as Tomislav Sokol and Tonino Picula²—have openly expressed concern regarding Serbia's alarming interference in Montenegro's internal affairs. Belgrade uses a range of mechanisms, from political satellites and institutional ties to soft power and religious-cultural channels. These developments raise questions about Montenegro's ability to independently and steadily continue its European path, particularly in areas concerning the rule of law, security, and resilience against external influences.

1 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_1576

2 <https://www.cdm.me/english/picula-no-one-can-be-satisfied-with-report-podgorica-can-regain-necessary-rhythm/>

That is why it is essential to supplement the enlargement paradigm thematically—European processes can no longer be addressed solely through the lens of chapters and reform roadmaps. The security dimension, resilience to hybrid threats, and protection of the state's identity integrity must become integral components of the European agenda. In this context, the question arises: Is Montenegro, which the EU has long perceived as the most advanced candidate, becoming a new risk point for the European order?

1. KEY POINTS

The regime in Belgrade, led by Aleksandar Vučić, is developing a long-term strategy for political, cultural, and security penetration into Montenegro, with the ultimate goal of complete control over its internal processes and the gradual delegitimization of the state independence achieved in 2006. This objective is no longer concealed—it is legitimized by official rhetoric, the regime's propaganda machinery, but also institutional actions. The Government of Montenegro is increasingly aligning its policies with Belgrade, while a faction under the direct control of Belgrade, represented by the President of the Parliament of Montenegro, Andrija Mandić, is simultaneously working to alter Montenegro's ethnic and constitutional character.³ Two primary political objectives of pro-Serbian forces in Montenegro are:

- Liberalization of the policy for acquiring Montenegrin citizenship, which would pave the way for more intensive Serbia's interference and drastically change the ethnic composition of the population.⁴
- Amendment of the Constitution of Montenegro which would make the Serbian language the official language in Montenegro and introduce the concept of constituent peoples instead of the civic model, leading to further disintegration of the state.⁵

Serbia and its agents of influence in Montenegro achieve their goals through five levels of influence.

3 <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-influence-in-montenegro-could-create-a-threat-for-natos-information-security/>

4 <https://www.telegraf.com/en/the-change-in-the-citizenship-law-seriously-endangers-the-independence-of-montenegro%C2%2C-analysts-estimate/>

5 <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/vucic-u-crnoj-gori-sve-moze-samo-srpski-ne-moze-da-bude-sluzbeni-jezik>

2. FIVE LEVELS OF INFLUENCE

2.1. Intelligence level

Serbian intelligence structures operate actively in Montenegro through:

- Recruitment of personnel within security, police, and judiciary sectors;
- Infiltration of media structures and local branches of religious and cultural organizations;⁶
- Construction of parallel information channels and destabilization of pro-Montenegrin elements.

Montenegro, with weak counterintelligence capacities and an excess of compromised actors in key institutions, represents fertile ground for these operations. The absence of a platform to guard against foreign influences and a clearly defined strategy for defending the national interest makes Montenegro a suitable environment for the development of malign operations. Without a strong pro-independence and pro-Montenegrin element within the Government, the protection of Montenegro currently appears impossible.⁷

6 <https://dfc.me/wp-content/uploads/Studija-cg.pdf>

7 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/5116>

2.2. Political level

The Vučić's regime utilizes political satellites in Montenegro such as:

- The coalition *For the Future of Montenegro* (formerly the *Democratic Front*);
- Factions within the government close to the Serbian Orthodox Church and Belgrade, present in parties like the *Democrats*, *SNP (Socialist People's Party of Montenegro)*, *Europe Now Movement*, *URA (United Reform Action)*, as well as other smaller pro-Serbian parties and political movements;
- So-called “national reconciliation oriented” structures that relativize the Montenegrin identity in the name of “stability”;
- Parts of minority parties, especially those that maintain close business-interest ties with Belgrade.

The aforementioned elements act as operational tools of Belgrade, enabling institutional penetration through personnel appointments, legislative initiatives, and control of local authorities. The best example of this synergistic activity is the effort to remove pro-Montenegrin parties from power at all levels.⁸

⁸ <https://www.cdm.me/svijet/region/vucic-bili-smo-nezainteresovani-dok-nam-je-pred-ocima-crna-gora-otisla/>

2.3. Cultural-identity level

The key instruments of identity-related activities aimed at altering the national structure in Montenegro and reducing the number of those identifying as Montenegrin are achieved through:

- Systematic suppression of Montenegrin cultural production;
- Abolition or marginalization of state cultural institutions and organizations that promote Montenegrin and civic identity;
- Support for projects that affirm the “Serbian cultural space”, such as bookstores, publishing houses, fairs, and events organized by Serbian associations or the Serbian Church;
- Media demonization of all social actors associated with the idea of an emancipated, independent Montenegro. Such cultural diffusion operates through a soft power policy that normalizes the narrative that Montenegro is a “historically Serbian territory” and a fabricated creation born of the “autocratic will of Milo Đukanović”.⁹

9 <https://www.cdm.me/english/network-of-vucics-and-pro-russian-media-in-mne/>

2.4. Economic level

Serbian capital, often of non-transparent origin, enters Montenegro through:

- The acquisition of key media outlets and online portals;
- Investments in real estate and hospitality along the Montenegrin coast;
- The establishment of “nationally oriented” NGOs and media outlets that function as an economic and media fifth column;
- The grey economy serving Serbian interests: business operations linked to the Serbian Orthodox Church and businessmen close to Serbia and the Montenegrin government.

Through these channels, Belgrade not only expands its economic influence but also finances political and propaganda activities. Furthermore, individuals close to Serbian political interests are being appointed to key positions that oversee Montenegro’s state resources.

2.5. Criminal level

The Belgrade regime uses criminal structures:

- As a means of control over certain municipalities, most evident during local and parliamentary elections;
- To spread fear and destabilize sovereigntist actors;
- For money laundering and creating parallel economic power, which further finances identity politics.

Certain clans act as an extended arm of Belgrade's para-intelligence interests, while their logistics are protected by political patronage from both centers. This represents a continuation of the policy of Slobodan Milošević, in which the state and organized crime were closely linked through an unreformed intelligence service.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/izbori-niksic-crna-gora-sav-jet-evrope-primjer/33357574.html>

3. IDEOLOGICAL BACKBONE: ORTHODOXY AS THE FOUNDATION FOR HYBRID OPERATIONS

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is the primary instrument of cultural and identity transformation of Montenegro. It operates according to the patterns and agenda of hybrid action with the ultimate goal of the long-term establishment of the Serbian factor in Montenegro, within which religious doctrine serves as a platform for:

- The normalization of the political pan-Serbian narrative;
- The delegitimization of Montenegrin history, language, culture, and statehood;
- Spiritual colonization through mass performative forms, aggressive and mythologized iconography, and the introduction of the Church into public institutions.

Theoretically, the Serbian Orthodox Church uses mechanisms of cultural warfare, where hegemony is not established by force but through the acceptance of the discourse of Montenegro's "natural belonging" to the Serbian territory. In this way, the Montenegrin nation becomes the primary target of assimilation, as evidenced by census results in Montenegro from 1991 to 2023, which show that over 32 years, the percentage of Montenegrins decreased from 61.86% to the current 41.12%.

The closeness of language, religion, and shared life within Yugoslavia make the Montenegrin nation—significantly smaller and lacking national infrastructure—vulnerable and prone to assimilation. The failure to restore the autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, along with the frivolity and incompetence of its current leaders to implement the Ukrainian church scenario, long-term prevents any limitation of the Serbian Orthodox Church's omnipotence in Montenegro's spiritual sphere.¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/montenegro-signs-long-disputed-contract-with-serbian-orthodox-church-2022-08-03/>

4. WHY IS THE MONTENEGRIN NATION UNDER ATTACK?

The Montenegrin nation represents the last obstacle to the “Serbian world” project in Montenegro and one of the main ones in the region—alongside the Bosniak nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Albanian nation in Kosovo. Its existence threatens:

- The ideological coherence of the Greater Serbia project;
- The hegemony of the Serbian Orthodox Church as the exclusive spiritual authority;
- Serbia’s political dominance;
- The anti-European ideology in the Balkans.

This is why the attack on the Montenegrin nation is multi-layered: through the education system, institutional structures, the intelligence apparatus, public discourse, and the internationalization of the Montenegrin issue. Reducing the number of Montenegrins to 30% of the country’s total population would effectively complete domination of Serbia and the Serbian factor in Montenegro.¹² Put simply—without the Montenegrin people as the majority, the existence of the Montenegrin state becomes meaningless. With control over Montenegrin territory, Serbia would have a clearer path to expanding instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo. It would become the main hegemon in the Balkans—a region already struggling with questionable democratic capacities—burdened with the legacy of the war during the breakup of Yugoslavia, which it has yet to officially confront.

¹² <https://www.cdm.me/english/history-of-census-in-mne-story-of-endangered-serbs-belgrades-propaganda/>

5. GEOSTRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF SERBIAN INTERFERENCE IN MONTENEGRO

The multilayered influence of Serbia in Montenegro, in the current geostrategic context, is of vital importance for Russia's policy in the Balkans. Through the Serbian political, intelligence, cultural, and economic apparatus, Moscow gains an indirect but effective lever for destabilizing the Western Balkans, with Montenegro playing a key role as a NATO member and EU candidate. Russia benefits from the weakening of sovereigntist forces in Montenegro, as this renders Western integration efforts in the region meaningless, undermines NATO's credibility, and expands the zone of political uncertainty within Europe. Relying on the religious infrastructure of the Serbian Orthodox Church, hybrid political actors, intelligence penetration, and criminal networks, Russia, through Serbia, is building a parallel authority in Montenegro, thereby slowing reforms, polarizing society, and compromising institutional integrity.

It is important to keep in mind that the operative ideology of the "Serbian World", whose core objective is the cultural, political, and identity unification of Serbian territories under Belgrade, fully reflects the model of the "Russian World"—a doctrine the Kremlin uses to justify its interventionist policies in the post-Soviet region. The symbolic and political significance of this alignment was confirmed by the visit of Serbian Patriarch Porfirije to Moscow, where open agreement was expressed between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the "spiritual unity of Slavic peoples". In this context,

Montenegro is not viewed as a separate state, but rather as a space for the restoration of a broader pro-Russian, Orthodox identity order, backed by authoritarian regimes.¹³ Therefore, Montenegro should not be seen solely through the lens of its internal political problems, but as an active security challenge for European institutions — especially at a time when the EU enlargement process is gaining new momentum. Ignoring these tendencies enables the continuation of Russian and Serbian hybrid operations and undermines the very idea of European sovereignty and stability in Southeastern Europe.¹⁴

¹³ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-porfirije-moskva-cr-na-gora-putin/33395854.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/analiza-dfc-a-ruski-specijalci-u-politickim-igrama-na-balkanu>

CONCLUSION

Montenegro is no longer on a technical path toward the European Union, but at a geopolitical crossroads between European integration and the Serbian-Russian sphere of influence. Although the process of its EU accession is formally tied to meeting benchmarks and chapters, in reality it has been brought into a state of political dependence on the interests of the regime in Belgrade. In the current power structure of the Western Balkans, the fate and dynamics of Montenegro's European perspective, unfortunately, will not be determined by institutions in Podgorica and Brussels, regardless of the "open doors", but by the political center in Serbia, embodied in Aleksandar Vučić and his sophisticated expansionist apparatus.

If the Belgrade regime assesses that Montenegro's membership in the EU contributes to its own regional agenda, the process of Montenegro's accession will not be stopped. In that case, Belgrade will view Montenegro as a satellite entity, firmly tied (after accession) to the Orbán-Fico axis. Such a development would mean a profound transformation of the Montenegrin state—from a Mediterranean, multiethnic democracy to an ideologically disciplined entity with the identity character of a "little Serbia" on the Adriatic. This process will be led from within by actors like Andrija Mandić, whose pro-European rhetoric conceals loyalty to a political direction that sees Europe as a tool for national revision rather than as a framework of values.

In the opposite scenario—if Serbia decides that a European Montenegro does not suit its interests—Montenegro will remain outside the Union, but even then under a

clear condition: that pro-Serbian structures hold power, guaranteeing long-term political control of Belgrade over Montenegrin institutions. Most importantly, if the instability in Serbia, triggered by student protests against Aleksandar Vučić's regime, does not subside in the near future and if Vučić's position as the undisputed ruler of Serbia is threatened, there is a significant risk of "exporting" unrest to Montenegro in order for Vučić to remain in power.

In either case, it is crucial to recognize that Montenegro, in the process of European integration, no longer acts as a political subject with its own will, but is becoming a tool in the geopolitical confrontation between the idea of a sovereign Europe and a growing authoritarian network. The greatest risk in this process is not just whether Montenegro will become a member of the EU, but what kind of Montenegro it will become—whether an emancipated, stable, reformed state, or a fragment of the "Serbian and Russian world".

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Montenegro must be treated as a security challenge for the EU due to the activities of external actors, particularly Russia and Serbia, through hybrid operations.
- A national strategy for countering hybrid threats needs to be developed and institutionally adopted, with the support and expertise of the European Union.
- The education system must be reformed to protect civic education, limit the influence of religious institutions, and prevent nationalist indoctrination promoted by representatives of the ruling coalition.
- The EU must significantly increase its support for independent media, NGOs, and research organizations engaged in exposing and analyzing hybrid operations.
- It is essential to develop regional mechanisms for information exchange and timely warning about malign influence by third parties.
- EU institutions should insist on the depoliticization of the security sector and the strengthening of resilience of institutions against ethno-nationalist and political pressures.
- Serbia must be criticized at the highest levels of the EU for its interference in Montenegro.

