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Montenegro (MNE), a country on the southeastern shore of the Adriatic Sea, regained its independence in 2006, after almost a century of being part of either Yugoslavia or a joint state with Serbia. In 2017, it became a member of NATO. Montenegro started its negotiations for EU membership in 2012, and its population of approximately 622,000 has always strongly supported EU membership, with support levels on the order of 70% – 80%. For thirty years, the main political processes in Montenegro were led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its charismatic leader, sometimes from the position of president, sometimes from that of prime minister, who left a lasting mark on the overall political dynamics of the country. That enabled Montenegro to:

1. Avoid fighting a war on its territory during the 1990s, unlike Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo;
2. Achieve independence through a referendum rather than war;
3. Join NATO;
4. Embark on the path to EU membership and become the first of the Western Balkans to begin negotiations.

However, in the 2020 elections, the government changed, and for the past five years the country has been run by a coalition of pro-Serbian, Russia-financed, hardcore Serbian nationalists alongside a variety of smaller civic and ethnic minority political parties. Since 2023, the ruling coalition has consisted of two Serbian nationalist, anti-NATO, and anti-EU political parties, as well as the Prime Minister's party, called Europe Now! Despite its name, Europe Now! has been flip-flopping between pro-EU and anti-EU policies and decisions, and generally seems to be increasingly controlled by the leader of the main Serbian nationalist party and Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament Andrija Mandić, as well as by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. So, broadly speaking, the governing coalition is made up of Europe Now! (Prime Minister Milojko Spajić) and Europe Never! (Speaker Andrija Mandić).

Under these circumstances, the EU Commission and some member states now seem to be more inclined than ever before to push Montenegro towards EU membership, not because of its geopolitical and geostrategic importance, but, on the contrary, for its perceived unobtrusiveness. While Montenegro is small in both size and population, its geopolitical position makes it infinitely more important than its size would merit. The political changes since 2020 have brought to power a political elite that is partly ambiguous and partly outright opposed to the country's EU membership. Its rhetoric has been modified, but its policies and political decisions remain anti-EU. It has potentially opened two possible roads to EU membership for Montenegro: one based on meeting the Copenhagen Criteria, plus all the negotiation requirements; the other modeled on Viktor Orbán's approach—"Bring in more

Orbán". The latter is based on the idea of destabilizing the EU by bringing in more authoritarian leaders, close to Russian president Putin, who would form a coalition and, through their veto power, gradually weaken and possibly even destroy the EU from within. Some current Montenegrin leaders are very close to this approach. However, joining via the "Orbán model" would be completely useless, if not even counterproductive, for the citizens of Montenegro who support EU membership.

We will summarize here the reasons for Montenegro's EU membership, the main threats on its road to Europe, and suggest possible solutions.

RELEVANCE

■ **Geopolitical position** – Although small, Montenegro is located on the Adriatic coast, with the Bay of Kotor—the southernmost fjord in Europe. It lies very close to the Strait of Otranto, which controls the entrance to the Adriatic Sea. It is the latest addition to NATO, and the only country on both sides of the Adriatic whose leadership is openly skeptical about their country's NATO membership. Because of its strategic position, there has been continued pressure from Russia on Montenegro to leave NATO. If that were to happen, the security structure of the entire Adriatic basin would be disrupted. That would have detrimental consequences for the security of Southern Europe and potentially for Europe as a whole.

■ **Key country for disrupting/implementing the “Srpski svet” project** – “Srpski svet” (“Serbian World”) is a concept promoted by the Serbian president Vučić and the political elite supporting him. It is modeled on the Russian idea of “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian World”) and advances the same ideas that were part of Greater Serbia, the political vision of Slobodan Milošević that led to the four wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Although there are ethnic Serb minorities living in other countries of the Western Balkans, without Montenegro and its access to the Adriatic Sea, it is impossible to implement the destabilizing strategy of “Srpski svet”. Thus, Montenegro and its independence remain the key barrier to a replay of the expansionist policy that led to four wars thirty years ago.

■ **Potentially important instrument for Russia's destabilization of the EU**

– Russia has neither economic nor territorial interests in the Western Balkans. President Putin's and Russia's main interests in the region are geopolitics and disruption. With its only Mediterranean base in Latakia (Syria) under threat, Russia is in need of an alternative. Montenegro would be an ideal candidate. While Russia does not share borders with any of the WB countries and therefore has no territorial aspirations, it uses its influence in the region to promote anti-EU propaganda, political parties and politicians, finance paramilitary formations, and create social conflict and sharp divisions within societies. It promotes extreme nationalist movements and ideologies and uses the Orthodox Church to turn public opinion against the EU and NATO. Anchoring Montenegro within the EU institutional framework would greatly reduce both Russia's and Serbia's capacity to continuously produce instability and lawlessness in this region surrounded by EU territory on all sides.

■ **Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's integrity and Kosovo's independence**

– The Speaker Andrija Mandić led a part of the ruling coalition (cynically named "For The Future of Montenegro") that has repeatedly called for Montenegro to de-recognize Kosovo. They have also been enthusiastic supporters of BiH separatist leader Milorad Dodik, another Putin client, who is continuously destabilizing Bosnia and Herzegovina and the entire region. A sovereign Montenegro, on the path toward the EU membership, is a confirmation that there will be no border changes in the WB.

■ **EU success story** – If Montenegro manages to join the EU—not through the “Orbán approach”, but by meeting the Copenhagen criteria—it would be a clear signal to other WB societies that it is achievable and that it does have a political transformative power. That would be particularly important for Serbian society, where Serbian and Russian propaganda has managed to reduce public support for EU membership from over 60% in 2014 when they started the negotiations, to about 30% today. In all other WB societies, with maybe the exception of Albania, the public has become increasingly skeptical about their EU future, to some extent also because of EU’s inconsistent approach to the enlargement in the region. A real success of Montenegro would have a strong transformative influence on public opinion in all WB societies.

THREATS

■ **Strong Serbian pressure by the Vučić government** – There has been a continuous effort by Serbia's president Vučić to dominate the political scene and the government of Montenegro and to control its political decision-making. This would eventually lead either to the re-establishment a formal union between Serbia and Montenegro, or to turning Montenegro into a vassal state of Serbia. Such a development would give Serbia—a land-locked country—access to the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean. It would also serve as a “consolation prize” for losing Kosovo, which, despite all the political noise in Serbia, is extremely unlikely to lose its independence. A large proportion of Montenegro's population identifies as Serbs (approximately 32%), while Kosovo is by now over 90% Albanian and adamant about preserving its independence from Serbia. The additional danger is that some EU members and other Western allies might see the situation the same way, not understanding the broader geopolitical importance of an independent Montenegro.

■ **SPC – Srpska pravoslavna crkva / Serbian Orthodox Church**

– The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is an important, aggressive, and effective instrument of the Serbian government. Its clerics play an active and highly visible role in national and local elections in Montenegro. It was the main organizer of the mass demonstrations that brought down the government in 2020; the new coalition government that took over was formed in one of its monasteries (Ostrog Monastery); one of the short lived, subsequent governments signed over practically all church property in Montenegro to the Serbian Orthodox Church, finally and completely delegitimizing the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. It is a strong promoter of the “Srpski svet”/“Serbian World” ideology. It is anti-NATO, anti-EU, and closely connected to the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill, as well as directly to the Russian president Putin. It is very active in advocating against and gradually eroding Montenegro’s independence.

■ **Russian influence**

– Russia sees Montenegro as an easy target and useful instrument in destabilizing the EU and penetrating NATO decision-making. Close to 10% of population of MNE identifies as Russian or Russian-speaking, and Russian nationals own about 40% of the country’s real estate. For years, the Russian government has been financing some of the extreme reactionary political parties in MNE, including the Democratic Front, the party of a key member of the current government coalition Andrija Mandić. In 2016, the Russian secret service, with the help of Mandić and Milan Knežević, organized an unsuccessful coup and attempted assassination of Montenegro’s president at the time. Both Mandić and Knežević were arrested and found guilty, but were later released by the new government, which they eventually joined. However, with the war in Ukraine, Russia —though still present—seems to have relinquished its leadership role in controlling Montenegro to Serbia.

■ **Media** – Almost the entire media scene in Montenegro is controlled and/or owned by Serbian and Russian media companies. There are a few online publications and smaller TV stations that are independent, but their voices are mostly drowned in the sea of propaganda from the controlled media. A good example is IN4S and Borba, online news outlets in MNE, reporting on an attack on student protesters by a group of thugs at Novi Pazar University. Under the headline “Crazed Novi Pazar Jihadists”, Borba claimed that the protesting students had attacked the police, who were defending themselves. While it was later established that the thugs attacking the students were civilians, had no insignia, and entered the space where the students were gathered in order to attack them, the “jihadist” characterization was added for good measure. Namely, Novi Pazar is a town with the majority Muslim/Bosniak population, so inciting ethnic and religious hatred was seen as an additional bonus. Although a comparably minor incident, it is a paradigmatic example of using “fake news” and lies to spread social discord and dominate Montenegrin media space.

■ **Government opposed to the existence of the state**

– Some political parties currently participating in the ruling coalition have a history of opposing the independence of Montenegro and its sovereignty. The former Democratic Front and other members of the “For the Future of Montenegro” segment of the ruling coalition see MNE as part of the “Serbian World” and, ultimately, a Greater Serbia, and are working on that project from within Montenegrin government institutions. Although they have changed their rhetoric to declare their support for MNE joining the EU, every decision they made or introduced has taken the country further away from EU standards and its EU allies. The same pattern of mouthing EU slogans, while making and supporting anti-EU decisions is followed by the Democratic Montenegro (the Democrats), another influential member of the governing coalition.

■ **Europe Now! & Europe Never!**

– The current ruling coalition is made up of Europe Now! movement/political party and “Europe Never!”—a group of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties that want to keep the country out of the EU and possibly take it out of NATO. Although the latter have less political support (under 15%), they are better organized, better financed, have a longer political tradition, are backed by Serbia and Russia, and are more determined than the former—so they are winning in the power struggle.

■ **Leaking NATO documents**

– It has been reported that, under new government, MNE has been leaking sensitive NATO documents to the Russian intelligence services. This led to the temporary exclusion of MNE from the circulation of some NATO documents.

■ **Dual citizenship** – The government is debating the introduction of dual citizenship, which poses a serious threat to the current political makeup of Montenegro. In the 2023 census, 41.1% of citizens of MNE registered as Montenegrins and 32.9% as Serbs. The rest were other minority groups. These numbers have changed dramatically over time, under political pressure and propaganda. For example, in the 1991 census, there were 61.9% Montenegrins and 9.3% Serbs. Legalizing dual citizenship would allow tens of thousands of Serbian citizens with some ties to Montenegro to also become Montenegrin citizens and become eligible to vote in Montenegrin elections. In a country of 620,000 inhabitants, this could result in a decisive political shift, effectively allowing those who do not live in Montenegro to outvote those who actually do.

■ **Government inefficiency** – In order to satisfy numerous members of a ruling coalition with often contradictory objectives, the Prime Minister is now leading a government composed of over 30 ministers, some of whom he reportedly does not even know personally. The level of government ineffectiveness has grown exponentially, with few decisions being reached and even fewer implemented.

■ **Lack of expertise** – Although it is a political process, the EU accession also requires a lot of expertise, qualified civil servants and outside experts in a variety of fields. Since the majority of EU oriented parties are in opposition and there is intense animosity between the government and the opposition, there is an acute lack of necessary knowledge within the administration for a successful implementation of the *Acquis Communautaire*.

SOLUTIONS

■ **Tailor-made approach by the EU** – For all the reasons and potential dangers mentioned above, it is very important for both regional and European security that Montenegro successfully joins the EU. In order for that to happen, the EU should take a mentored or sherpa approach to MNE. A smaller or medium-sized EU member state, with neither real nor perceived political or territorial aspirations, like Ireland or Denmark, should assume a mentoring role in the EU accession process of MNE. A similar approach was used during the accession of the 3 Baltic countries, when Denmark, Sweden, and Finland worked closely with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. They helped and monitored their progress, but also kept the EU institutions informed of all the reforms and political climate. In that way they became a European project even before actually joining.

■ **Involving the UK** – The UK has already appointed Ambassador Karen Pierce as the Special Envoy for the Western Balkans. Considering the UK's authority and potential influence in Montenegro, it would be beneficial if Ms Pierce's office were, at least temporarily, joined by a senior British political figure dedicated specifically to MNE.

■ **Copenhagen Criteria** – Considering Viktor Orbán's detrimental influence in Serbia, BiH, and the entire region, it is essential that Montenegro meets the Copenhagen Criteria for joining the EU. Accepting Montenegro based on Orbán's approach would only mean including another disruptor into the EU. It would also be a major disappointment for all those in MNE supporting its EU path.

■ **Coalition of the Willing** – Although Montenegro is a member of NATO, it would be very useful to include it in the emerging Coalition of the Willing, led by the UK, France, and Germany. It is an alliance emphasizing Europe's responsibility for its own security in the future, and an independent, stable, and sovereign MNE is definitely a matter of European security. It would also strengthen MNE's engagement with European security institutions.

■ **EU Defense Commissioner** – The EU Commissioner for Defense and Space, a new and important position within the EU Commission, should appoint a special assistant for Montenegro to work closely with and help prepare MNE defense sector for EU membership. This is a very important and currently sensitive aspect of the necessary reforms.

■ **Political coalition for EU** – For the time being, Montenegro's accession to the EU should be its main objective and is in the interest of both regional and European security. Therefore, a coalition should be forged comprising all political parties and civil society organizations advocating and promoting this path. Putting aside their other differences, political parties such as DPS, European Alliance (SD, SDP, LP), parts of URA, parts of PES (Europe Now!), and some minority parties should form a coalition that would not only easily win elections, but would also be capable of delivering on the EU accession. Most voters would support such a coalition, and the very influential Quint (ambassadors of the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and the US) should facilitate its formation.

■ **Turkey** – Finally, a new and potentially helpful external influence is emerging in Montenegro. With the increasing probability of MNE joining the EU in the foreseeable future, there has been growing interest of Turkish business people and entrepreneurs in establishing businesses in MNE. They clearly see it as a launching pad for future access to the EU market. Some sources quote the number of 80,000 Turkish business people currently working or investing in MNE. While this number might be an exaggeration, there has definitely been a surge of Turkish presence in MNE. Although their interest is economic rather than political, it is based on the assumption of MNE joining the EU. Therefore, they are potentially an economically powerful ally on Montenegro's road to EU membership.

MONTENEGRO'S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION IS NEITHER SIMPLE NOR STRAIGHTFORWARD; HOWEVER, IT IS ACHIEVABLE, IT IS USEFUL AND IT IS WORTH A TRY. IF SUCCESSFUL, IT WOULD HAVE A MUCH BROADER IMPACT BEYOND MNE ITSELF. IT WOULD POSITIVELY INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION IN ALL 6 WB STATES, IT WOULD COUNTER SOME VERY DISRUPTIVE AND DANGEROUS POLICIES, AND IT WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO THE STABILITY OF THE REGION AND SECURITY OF EUROPE. LET'S DO IT!

SIGNATORIES:

Vesna Pusić, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia 2011–2016

Iveta Radičová, Prime Minister of Slovakia 2010–2012.
Minister of Defense of Slovakia 2011–2012

Tomáš Petříček, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2018–2021

Roman Jakič, Minister of Defense of Slovenia 2012–2014. Member of European Parliament 2000–2004

Tinatin Khidasheli, Minister of Defense of Georgia 2015–2016

Fatmir Mediu, Minister of Defense of Albania 2005–2008

