

Helsinki bulletin



HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
address: Kralja Milana 10,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

NO.123 // FEBRUARY 2016

RUSSIA AND NATO: A TEST OF STRENGTH OVER MONTENEGRO



WWW.SLOBODNAEVROPA.ORG

Protests in Podgorica, October 2015.

Russia's reaction to Montenegro's decision to join NATO was more than negative. It has strengthened its position in Montenegro ever since the latter was invited to the membership of NATO so as to put across a message to the West, but to Serbia as well should it opt for such a course of action.

The official Podgorica and Premier Milo Đukanović see NATO's invitation as Montenegro's huge achievement and recognition of its reforms. Đukanović calls it a large step for

regional, European and even global security, the one that will also speed up Montenegro's accession to EU.¹ He specifically argues that Montenegro's membership of NATO is the most efficient and rational way of ensuring a significant inflow of investment - a major stimulus for Montenegro's economy. For him, NATO's invitation stands for a historical event, almost as

¹ http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2015/12/18/milo-Đukanovic-smetaju-mi-kritike-ruskih-politicara_552655

important as the outcome of the 2006 referendum on independence: Montenegro has been invited to the exclusive club of countries symbolizing the best values of today's civilization.²

The fact that Montenegro's opposition has been instrumentalized and serious turmoil over the NATO's invitation caused should not be underestimated: the developments threaten to destabilize not only Montenegro but also the entire region. Having asked a vote of confidence from the parliament Premier Đukanović managed to put the ball in the opposition's court. He suggested a reshuffle of the government and accepted all the requests of the Positive Montenegro: and all this in the function of the upcoming election campaign.

Russia's support to Montenegrin opposition found an echo in Serbia's pro-Russian circles, which are not to be neglected. In Serbia, the West-Russia dichotomy is neither artificial nor just in the service of geopolitical interests. Historian Milivoj Bešlin says it is has to do with different concepts of the rule of law, social plurality, institutions, individualism, human rights, media freedoms and critical thought. It has to do with the ambition to transport to Serbia a certain type of autocracy and the state's supremacy over the society and an individual. On the other hand, he says, Russia itself has been interested in the Balkans for the past two centuries – the region where, without taking any risk, it could prove itself as a truly big and not just a regional power. Therefore, not a single politician in Serbia, the incumbent Premier included, could ignore this context. And this context now determines his rational foreign policy moves.³

2 <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/344548/Brisel-Crna-Gora-pozvana-u-NATO>

3 http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/politika/precutkuje_se_da_srbija_ima_veci_izvoz_na_kosovo_nego_u_rusiju.56.html?news_id=312750#sthash.4RNI925q.dpuf

Russia's reaction to Montenegro's membership of NATO should be viewed in the context of its overall policy, mostly in the security sector. Russia takes that the global security system should be redefined: for it, NATO makes sense no more and new solutions should be searched for. Since the disintegration of the Warsaw bloc, Russia has been trying to impose OSCE as a new security forum. Sergey Karaganov, the dean of the Faculty of Global Economy and International Policy, says it is more than obvious that the system of Europe's security has failed. Based on the West's domination, he argues, this system was unacceptable to the great majority of Russia's elites. Karganov himself used to be in the membership of OSCE's "group of sages" tasked with suggesting "a joint project" for renewal of European security. This group hardly attained anything at all. He says that OSCE has been prevented from growing into an efficient mechanism for the post-cold-war security system. However, once the war broke out in Ukraine, he adds, OSCE was most successful in coordinating the peace mission and as such could continue acting as a forum of dialogue and a crisis center.⁴

Moscow's strong reaction to NATO's invitation to Montenegro show that it has renewed its imperial and revanchist ambitions. Everything indicates that it will not give up Montenegro as its interest sphere just like that. Over the past two decades it has developed a large net of influence on many Montenegrin institutions; last year's request for stationing Russian warships in the Bar Harbor was a part of Russia's strong campaign for positioning itself in the Mediterranean.

President of the Defense Committee of the Russian Senate Victor Ozerov confirmed the above by saying, "Montenegro is becoming now a potential threat to Russia's security." Montenegro's

4 http://ruskarec.ru/opinion/2016/01/14/ne-treba-se-radovati-pre-vremena_559499

membership of NATO, he added, “will disable many programs Russia has been implementing there, including the technical-military cooperation.” Moscow takes that NATO initiative is gradually undermining whatever remained of Russia’s influence in the Balkans: it expands further US axis to the East, the axis that is already allocating its troops and resources in Baltic republics, Poland, Bulgaria and Rumania.⁵

When two years ago Montenegro announced its plan for the membership of NATO, Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin was so much angered that he told a conference in Belgrade that “like everywhere else there are also monkeys in politics.” He called Montenegro’s plan “a monkey business.”⁶ And his counterpart in Podgorica at the time, Jacob Gerasimov, warned openly that Russia would be forced to reconsider its relationship with Montenegro once the latter joined NATO.⁷

Unlike the official Podgorica’s restrained response to statements as such, Savo Kentera of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro said that Russia should realize that Montenegro was not its province and would never be, since Montenegro had already charted its course – it would join NATO membership. “Russia could do absolutely nothing about it or influence on it, and ‘Russian boot’ will not step in Montenegro,” he said.⁸

Expert in geopolitics Blagoje Grahovac characterized Russia’s warning at the time as a most aggressive geopolitical story Russia has been telling especially to Balkan countries.⁹

5 <http://www.nspm.rs/srbija-i-nato/crna-gora-u-nato-poslednji-antiruski-potez.html>

6 <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/reakcija-na-ispad-cepurina-rvcrna-gora-pripada-eu-i-nato/25183370.html>

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Montenegro’s option for Euro-Atlantic integration is faced with serious challenges. Once again (after the referendum on independence) Montenegro is at the crossroad of its democratic development. Opponents to its membership of NATO are louder and louder, more and more aggressive and growingly manipulative.

MONTENEGRIN OPPOSITION INSTRUMENTALIZED

A part of Montenegrin opposition – but the civil sector and the media as well – has been trying for long to disqualify Đukanović’s rule but with almost no avail. Some opposition parties are extremely pro-Russian (Serbian parties) and close to the pro-Russian bloc in Serbia (DSS, Dveri, Serbian Orthodox Church, Academia and newspapers such as Politika, Vecernje novosti, Geopolitika, Pecat and many others). NATO’s invitation to Montenegro unified the opposition in the interest of Russia. The Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ and Metropolitan Amfilohije are the fiercest opponents of NATO on the one hand, and fervent advocates for Russia on the other. “What is NATO that bombarded us, then snatched our Kosovo and Metohija, and today wages a civil war in Ukraine thus continuing what Hitler started?” says Amfilohije.¹⁰

Russia strengthened its support to the Montenegrin opposition to undermine Montenegro’s membership of NATO. Oppositionists are going often to Moscow where they are being received by highest Russian officials. Premier Đukanović says that the opposition makes no bones about its ties with Moscow; as for Moscow, it never denied it. It supports the protests the opposition has been staging with an eye to the country’s destabilization and ouster of its incumbent regime. Without Moscow’s support

10 <http://www.newsweek.rs/region/67331-amfilohije-oppozivu-crne-gore-u-nato-kao-da-su-prihvatili-hitlera-1941-godine.html>

the opposition would hardly been so loud and persistent in its demands for so long.¹¹

The opposition intensified its protests after NATO's invitation. In an interview with the *Russian Word* magazine Premier Đukanović said, "The Montenegrin opposition is being supported by some Russian state-run media, certain politicians, MPs and some domestic institutions that openly boast about their ties with Kremlin. They are openly supporting the protests meant to destabilize legal institutions and oust the democratically elected government by revolutionary means. For many reasons Russia is the last country Montenegro would expect something like this from."¹²

Oppositionists are protesting clearly against Montenegro's membership of NATO and calling for a referendum on the issue. Voices calling for a Balkan alliance based on neutrality are growing louder and louder. President of the Democratic People's Party Milan Knežević says, "The plan of anti-NATO activities our party adopted promotes an alliance between Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia that would be founded on neutrality. This alliance would ask UN SC to guarantee its neutrality and that would be the best answer to all the challenges and possible conflicts in the Balkans."¹³

Tchetnik Duke Andrija Mandić, the actual leader of the pro-Russian opposition and his New Serbian Democracy party /NSD/ argues against Montenegro's membership of NATO saying, "That alliance launched a criminal aggression against FRY and its policy directly aims against our millennial patroness, Russia, snatches the territory of the sisterly Serbia, and continually

threatens world peace." A decision on the membership of NATO, he stresses, can only be made at a "fair and just referendum," whereas "the Montenegrin puppet government leads us towards a morbid and unsustainable situation of being in alliance with Turkey and Albania, and in direct confrontation with Russia and Serbia. Such a situation, apart from associating high treason, borders on political lunacy as wants citizens of Montenegro to accept Turkey and Albania as allies, and be in confrontation with Russia and Serbia."¹⁴

Reminding of historical ties with Russia, Mandić points out that Đukanović, like every other Montenegrin, should be grateful to Russia for keeping Montenegro alive for three hundred years by supporting it military and politically. "It was thanks to Russia that Montenegro was internationally recognized at the Berlin Congress in 1878; everyone was grateful to Russia at the time," he says.¹⁵

The Democratic Front – the opposition alliance – invited Russian Vice-President Dmitri Rogozin to visit Montenegro. However, Rogozin is on the list of Russian citizens denied entry to Montenegro according to the government's decision to respect EU's sanctions against Russia. In many of his earlier statements Rogozin was threatening Montenegro for opting for the membership of NATO.¹⁶

11 http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2015/12/18/milo-Đukanovic-smetaju-mi-kritike-ruskih-politicara_552655

12 Ibid.

13 <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/dnp-za-savez-balkanskih-drzava-zasnovan-na-vojnoj-neutralnosti-871384>

14 <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/ulazak-u-nato-gasi-snove-o-velikoj-srbiji>

15 http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2015/12/23/u-crnoj-gori-ce-pobediti-zlo-ako-rusija-nista-ne-preduzme_554283

16 <http://rs.n1info.com/a133753/Svet/Region/Rogozin-ne-moze-u-Crnu-Goru.html>

MOSCOW'S REACTIONS

Moscow responded strongly to Đukanović's statements about Russia and Montenegro following EU policy for sanctions against it. It was notably disappointed with Đukanović's visit to US and his meeting with Vice-President Joseph Biden; it called it politically "hostile" and "contrary to the traditional friendship between the peoples of our two countries."

President of the Russian Duma Sergey Naryshkin told the delegation of the Democratic Front that Moscow was "deeply disappointed with Montenegro for having imposed sanctions against Russia" and could hardly understand Montenegrin officials the more so since their country had been bombarded by "their future allies."¹⁷

Russia even announced that it would put an end to all projects with Montenegro. The most dangerous message it has put across to Montenegro was the one about "Montenegro being a legitimate target of Russian nuclear weapons once it joins NATO."¹⁸

First Vice-President of the Russian Duma Leonid Kalashnikov said that much could be said about "Montenegrin sovereignty" as it was more than clear that the "so-called Euro-Atlantic integrations" were conducted by US. "Americans are exerting pressure on all countries – on their European and NATO partners and especially on those with well-balanced stands about NATO enlargement. This has been escalating problems and rising tensions between Russia and European countries in all discussions about the anyway tough issues in the

17 <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/348353/Predsednik-Dume-sa-liderima-crnogorske-opozicije>

18 <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/ulazak-u-nato-gasi-snove-o-velikoj-srbiji>

Balkans."¹⁹ Security-related solutions to Montenegro, he said, should take into consideration the stands of all interested parties, Russia included. "This is the only approach that guarantees Montenegro's sovereignty, prosperity and standing in the Balkans."²⁰

Most serious of all in warning Montenegro was Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who said that its joining NATO was "an artificial decision" that would not ensure security to the Alliance. According to him, the membership of NATO was nothing Montenegrins were after, especially when denied the right to have their say at a referendum. He also accused NATO of manipulating small countries and creating "ungrounded atmosphere of fear of Russia."²¹

Moscow's *Komersant* newspaper calls the reaction of many Russian politicians and "patriotic" experts to NATO's invitation to Montenegro "absurd and irresponsible," arguing that no other countries on its way to NATO had ever been faced with Russia's discriminatory actions.²²

RUSSIA'S MESSAGES TO SERBIA

Relations between Russia and Serbia have intensified in all spheres over the past two or three years. Nikita Bondarov of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies says, "Serbia is certainly in Russia's sphere of interest" as testified by ever closer relations between the two countries. He also speaks of some problems in the military cooperation between Serbia and

19 <http://www.kurir.rs/planeta/rusi-odgovorili-na-bilbord-u-podgorici-poruka-ruskom-ambasadoru-necivilizovana-i-nepismena-clanak-1879773>

20 Ibid.

21 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/lavrov-crnogorci-nisu-zaboravili-nato-bombe/s1cm1vv>

22 <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/344548/Brisel-Crna-Gora-pozvana-u-NATO>

Russia caused by Serbia's developed cooperation with NATO. "Serbia's neutrality is far from being something favorable, it is simply unsustainable," he says. "Political neutrality – or, to put it precisely, deliberate refraining from the struggle against Islamic terrorism and extremism – will reduce Serbia to a Belgrade pashalik: a neutral Belgrade pashalik."²³

During his recent visit to Belgrade Vice-Premier Dmitri Rogozin said Serbia should act with caution while adjusting its foreign policy to EU "as if everything could turn into Cologne No. 2."²⁴ Referring to massive demonstrations migrants have staged in Germany, he says that one should be on one's guard as "newcomers will be seeing themselves as bosses, while women will be afraid of going out."²⁵

Commenting on the news about Croatia's plan to buy American rockets, Petar Iskenderov of the Russian Academy of Sciences says, "Giving up neutrality and joining NATO immediately turns Serbia into a toy of foreign interests."²⁶ He warns Premier Vučić that his electorate will be posing him questions about national security on the eve of the elections since rockets in Croatia are a provocation to Serbia forcing its leadership to respond adequately.²⁷

The Russian *Komeserant* has already informed its readership about Serbia wanting to buy Russian arms. Vice-Premier Rogozin said that Russia would consider carefully Serbia's request.²⁸

23 http://lat.ruskarec.ru/blogovi/hocemo_rusle/2016/01/17/neutralnost-na-balkanu-ni-studena-ni-vruca_559971

24 Migrants attacking women in Cologne during Christmas holidays.

25 http://ruskarec.ru/news/2016/01/14/iskenderov-hrvatska-kupuje-americke-rakete-ko-provocira-srbiju_559435

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

President of the Duma Committee of International Relations Aleksey Konstantinovich takes that Russia's global influence is growing and announces serious changes in Europe's policy. For him, Serbia looks like some exception in Europe for being the only country that denied to impose sanctions on Russia – and that will be its advantage once sanctions are lifted. Unsuccessful isolation of Russia, he says, opens the avenues to closer relations with Serbia. He even takes that pipeline projects are not dead and buried – they will be revived once Brussels changes its attitude toward Russia.²⁹

Russia manipulates Serbia's position and its sitting on two chairs. On the one hand it praises it for reframing from sanctions against Russia and, on the other, warns it that it could not possibly trade in two free trade zone – Russian and EU's.³⁰

SERBIA STILL AMBIVALENT

The official Belgrade has not taken a clear stand on Russia and its activities in the Balkans, the more so the President's and the Premier's views are rather different – declaratively at least. Russia has been supporting President Nikolić's anti-European stands and sees him as a partner in the obstruction of Serbia's movement towards EU. After initial accession chapters were opened the President has been belittling openly the government's pro-European course. His appeal to SPC (Serbian Orthodox Church) to have its say about the Chapter 35 / Kosovo/ and "interfere in governmental affairs" is directed against EU.³¹

29 <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/342494/Srbija-je-za-Putina-prioritetna-drzava>

30 Ibid.

31 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-treba-odmah-da-se-suocimo-sa-poglavljem-35-o-kosovu/h05sbr2>

Premier Vučić keeps saying that Serbia has opted for European integration and at the same time remained in good relations with Russia. Everything boils down to the ambivalent stand, “both Russia and EU,” which varies depending on international developments. During his last visit to Russia Premier Vučić was emphasizing that Russia was one of Serbia’s three biggest trade partners, and that both sides were furthering their cooperation in construction industry, agriculture and, of course, arms industry. Reminding of the fact that Serbia was among the few in Europe refusing to impose sanctions against Russia, he said that it was important to pursue such policy along with the policy of neutrality.³²

Nikita Bondarov stresses that relations between Russia and Serbia have intensified over the past two-three years. “Not with a single post-socialist country of Central and Southeast Europe has Russia been developing relations so intensively like with Serbia,” he says. Thanks to economic sanctions imposed against Serbia in 1990s large facilities for infrastructural investment in energy supplies, oil, gas and chemical industry, metallurgy, mining and transport remained available, he says, explaining that once Russia recovered from “democratization shock” and market reforms – in mid-2000s – Russian businessmen had areas for investment in Serbia.³³

Serbs see Putin as the only European politician who would not accept a mono-polar world and American hegemony, and who fights Islamic terrorism actively and with success, says Bondarov.³⁴

32 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-u-moskvi-vazno-da-srbija-i-rusija-imaju-ciste-odnose/4rcxfts>

33 http://lat.ruskarec.ru/blogovi/hocemo_rusle/2016/01/17/neutralnost-na-balkanu-ni-studena-ni-vruca_559971

34 Ibid.

Serbia’s pro-Russian media keep pointing out that Russia has not bombarded Serbia, imposed sanctions against it or recognized Kosovo. They speak of the Serbian government’s servility to Western powers. One cannot tell yet whether at this point Serbia’s Russophilia prefers “the mother Russia” over Putin or the other way round, or, perhaps, is more inspired by the hatred for Western democrats. However, the latter is certainly perceived as some line of national dignity not to be crossed.

President of the Serbian People’s Party /SNP/ Nenad Popović takes that two decades after Yugoslavia’s tragic disintegration the idea about a non-bloc alliance in the Balkans is sensible anew, and that at this point some conditions for a project are already there 1) Serbia’s neutrality affixed at the level of the parliament; 2) Bosnia-Herzegovina outside NATO thanks to RS veto; 3) Macedonia outside NATO on account of Greece’s opposition; and 4) increasing support to the project of a permanently neutral Montenegro.³⁵

Popović compliments Russia’s political and diplomatic performance in the Balkans: “Russia supports Macedonia’s territorial integrity, Montenegro’s independence, Bosnia-Herzegovina’s sovereignty but also the integrity of both entities, and does not recognize unitarily proclaimed independence of the fake state of Kosovo.”³⁶ In his view, Russia should assist a non-bloc constitution of the Balkans, establishment of new institutions and empowerment of the existing ones for cooperation with the Russian Federation, “what EU and NATO have already been doing most aggressively.”³⁷

The pro-Russian bloc also believes that with Russia’s assistance Serbia would improve its

35 http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2016/01/27/balkanski-savez-neutralnih-drzava-u-21-veku_562933

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

geo-political standing, bad and humiliating at present. With its present borders, they argue, Serbia is one of 44 countries all over the world that have no access to the sea, and such land-locked states are seen as geo-politically handicapped.

Milomir Stanić of the Institute of Political Studies says that ensuring Serbia access to the sea remains a crucial geo-political and geo-economic task. Alleged realists and ideologists would only logically call it Utopia, he argues, but they should be reminded of the fact that

the Balkans is synonymous to geo-political changeability.³⁸

For centuries the West has been trying to reduce Serbia's power to "a harmless level." One of the methods it uses is blocking Serbia's maritime participation and orientation. Montenegro's, a historically Serbian land's, separation from Serbia following a dubious referendum, openly supported by the West, testifies of the importance the West attaches to preventing Serbia's access to the sea, he says.³⁹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An all-inclusive security, political and economic framework, to be established as soon as possible, preconditions stabilization of the Balkans. It is crucial to place the entire region under one umbrella so as to prevent it from being split between several spheres of interest big powers would be competing over.

By supporting a referendum in RS and denying Montenegro the right for the membership of NATO, Russia is realizing its goals for destabilization of the Balkans.

Negotiations with Montenegro, therefore, should be over as soon as possible so as to avoid the country's destabilization. Russia and certain circles in Serbia and Montenegro had been working hard on, hand in hand.

Membership of NATO is most important to post-conflict societies as it prevents tensions and conflicts. In this context, membership of EU is crucial.

Montenegro's membership of NATO rounds off the Balkan region. Integration into EU of all countries of the region should be sped up to put an end to regressive trends of turning up to Russia. Incapable, irresponsible, corrupt and authoritarian leaders are already asking Russia to support them – and Russia only gladly obliges them.

For Russia, Serbia is a major point. This was evident in its undiplomatic reaction to Montenegro's membership of NATO. All its reactions and threats were addressed to Serbia to a large extent. Bearing in mind Serbia's still uncertain orientation toward Euro-Atlantic integration, the latter should be sped up institutionally.

Ukrainian and migrant crises laid bare the fragility of the Western policy for the Balkans. This also calls for the region's closer ties with Euro-Atlantic institutions, and implies the West's stronger economic involvement in it.

Given that the region is incapable of meeting all the criteria for EU accession in the short run, it is necessary to make such arrangements that would tie it to EU and, at the same time, enable EU to continually monitor reforms in Balkan countries.

38 Geopolitika, February 2016.

39 Ibid.