

GEOPOLITICAL RISKS AND RECONFIGURATIONS

SERBIA AND THE CHALLENGE TO MONTENEGRO'S STABILITY



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**Geopolitical Risks and Reconfigurations: Serbia and the Challenge to Montenegro's
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Geopolitical Risks and Reconfigurations: Serbia and the Challenge to Montenegro's Stability

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Abstract:

Serbia aims its returnment or the achievement of the Serbian World (Greater Serbia) in Montenegro through the model of Bosnia with federalism, the model of North Macedonia - like the Albanians, the third model is Kosovo - an association of municipalities with a Serbian majority, the fourth model is the possibility of a referendum where partial or complete union with Serbia can be requested from Montenegro and the fifth possibility is the change of favorable geopolitical circumstances leading to full scale invasion.

These conclusions on the paper are based on a historical, geopolitical analysis, Serbian hegemonic appetites, statistical, ethnic engineering, “landlocked territory” as well as economic reasons.

The paper emphasizes how the electoral democracy allowed Serbia and Russia to gradually change the political structure after 2020.

The result predicts that Serbia's geopolitical interests appear as part of a strategy for maintaining its influence in the Balkans and managing regional developments, creating challenges and complex changes for the stability and perspective of Montenegro on the international stage.

Keywords: census, ethnic engineering, landlocked territory, Montenegro, Serbia, Djukanovic, hybrid war.



Introduction:

In the turbulent Western Balkans, where history is followed by incomparable challenges and the ambitions of different parties, a small entity, but with a unique and important location, with access to the Adriatic Sea, puts itself at the center of a great international geopolitical game.

A small territory, but with a long coastline of 293.5 kilometers, and a water space of 2540 square kilometers, is not just a geographical fragment, but an explosion of potential tensions and invisible chances for external influence. Montenegro has historically been part of a dynamic political and strategic landscape, always put in the focus of great powers for various purposes.



For such a territory, with a limited area of 13,812 square kilometers and a troubled history, it has been difficult not to be constantly the object of imperialist ambitions. Serbia, with its historical ambitions and unwillingness to accept the status quo, has shown constant appetites to control this part of the Balkans, which has historically been influenced by various factors, including Russia and Serbia exclusively.

Unfortunately, the history of Montenegro has been uncertain and often associated with the challenges of international politics. After the First World War, this small country faced a “democratic” annexation by the Serbian Kingdom at that time. This event is similar to that of 1989, when Serbia suppressed Kosovo’s autonomy through force against the Kosovo parliament.

After the departure of the king of Montenegro, Nicholas, Serbia managed to create the necessary conditions within few days in December 1918 to draft the rules, hold a referendum and an assembly where the Montenegrins, among other things, joined Serbia, and the assembly that would then be dissolved very quickly after completing its mission. (Pavlović, 2008) (Littlefield, 1922)



Meanwhile, further changes after World War II and the breakup of Yugoslavia would bring about a series of transformations, with Montenegro remaining a part of the second and then third Yugoslavia until 2006.

The special part of the history of Montenegro extends back to 2006, when after a decisive referendum, with the important participation of the Albanian community, independence was declared. This decisive moment marks an important turning point, opening a new chapter in the independent life of Montenegro on the international stage.

In this context, the influence of the Albanian participants in this decisive process cannot be neglected. They, with their national consciousness and commitment to freedom and independence, have increased the weight of the decision in favor of the independence of Montenegro. This shows that, despite the challenges and tensions, Albanian national and cultural factors have a decisive role in the reversal of fortunes in this region with a complicated history.

The research question of the paper is: What are the geopolitical interests of Serbia in relation to Montenegro and how do these elements affect their relations?

The hypothesis of the paper is: “Serbia’s geopolitical interests in Montenegro appear as part of a general strategy to maintain its influence in the Western Balkans and to manage the various developments in the region. These interests include influencing politics within Montenegro, how to deal with ethnic and power distribution issues, and military and economic interests”.

The dependent variable is: “Serbia’s influence on Montenegro”

The research method of this paper is based on the analysis of the actions of Serbia against Montenegro, the geopolitical analysis, election analysis, hybrid war analysis, the analysis of ethnic engineering and the analysis of the “landlocked” country.

Djukanovic and the Road to Independence: Foreign Policy and the Assassination attempt of Djukanovic in Montenegrin History

Montenegro's rapprochement with the West began in the mid-1990s, right after the Dayton agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Dayton Agreement was reached in August 1995, when Milo Djukanovic together with Svetozvar Marovic visited the Pentagon in the USA in



November 1995. (Morrison, 2018) It should be remembered that Djukanovic was close to Milosevic and a friend of Momir Bulatovic, the president of Montenegro at that time, Bulatovic was also a close friend of Milosevic.

Djukanovic, with the evolution of policies after the Cold War, had also started a process of withdrawing from the Yugoslav leadership. His visit together with Marovic during his stay at the Pentagon was the providing of the Port of Bari for logistical operations of international peacekeepers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Morrison, 2018) This moment made Montenegro a factor acting independently from Serbia and as a cooperating constituent on the international scene. Djukanovic also managed to negotiate the limitation of NATO attacks on the territory of Montenegro during the NATO bombing of Serbian military targets in the FRY. (Morrison, 2018)

This connection of Djukanovic with the West made him their man and the guardian of Montenegro's road to independence, NATO and EU integration. However, this journey was not without challenges until the assassination attempt on Djukanovic.

When Montenegro had declared its independence from Serbia, Aleksander Vucic can be seen in a video saying that: “The referendum will be recognized by force.... but we will work to organize another one in the next 10-20 years, where we will be united again in the common state by democratic means”. (Filipovic, 2024) This video reveals that Serbia has never changed its approach of conquering its neighbors, even when it cooperated with the European Union, and that its strategy is completely built on the interests of Russia.

To prove that Vucic did not talk in vain about a strategic return of Russia and its proxy Serbia to Montenegro, we have the demands of Russia a few years later to take possession and access for military purposes to the Adriatic Sea via Montenegro.

In 2013, Montenegro had rejected a request by the Russian Federation to install a military base in its Adriatic port of Bar to provide logistical support to the Russian naval fleet in the Mediterranean. (MediTelegraph, 2013) A similar request to Montenegro was repeated in 2015, where in exchange



for this permission, Montenegro would receive several billion dollars. (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2015)

Ambassador Shaban Murati, at that time, considered that: “Russia, with its request, undertakes a geopolitical and military challenge to NATO, an attempt to change the balance of power in the Adriatic Sea, because all countries, including Montenegro, belong to the Euro-Atlantic strategic orientation and the Atlantic security spectrum”. (Murati, 2014)

This rejection of Russia by Montenegro greatly influenced the hardening of relations between Montenegro, Russia and Serbia. Russia and Serbia, both countries that have had a close historical relationship, were disappointed by Montenegro’s decision not to accept the Russian military base on their territory. This situation raised tensions in the region and created a sensitive political atmosphere, especially since Montenegro was showing a strong pro-Western attitude and on the path of integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. In this context, Montenegro’s decision to reject Russia’s request was interpreted as a clear signal for its future political and military orientation towards the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. This naturally deepens the differences and challenges in regional relations, bringing a new intervention in the security situation in the Western Balkans. This action of Montenegro was also in favor of its other neighbors such as Albania, Kosovo, Croatia, but also for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The challenges for Montenegro would increase even more when the process of this country’s membership in NATO intensified even more. Montenegro’s NATO membership process turned the country into a complicated scene, prompting it to undertake a vigorous effort to cleanse its institutions of various infiltrations and influences, including those of Russia. This process was a sign of Montenegro's determination to respond to the call of the West for membership in NATO. This response of Montenegro, led by Djukanovic, would almost cost him his life.

The security institutions of Montenegro had received a warning from the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA) that they had discovered that an assassination attempt was being prepared during the elections against Milo Djukanovic. From this information, the Montenegrin security authorities managed to disrupt the plot and a group of 20 Serbian and Montenegrin citizens were arrested



there, including the former head of the Serbian gendarmerie Bratislav Dikic and two Russian citizens. (Tomovic, 2018) In early November 2016, the Montenegrin prosecutor for organized crime and corruption who investigated the plot, Milivoje Katnic, concluded that a group of Russian nationalists had planned the assassination of Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic with the aim for an opposition party to come to power. (Gotev, 2016)

The Montenegrin pro-Serbian and pro-Russian opposition considered this assassination as a manipulation by Djukanovic to win another pair of elections. (Tomovic, 2018) Evidence in the court showed the opposite and before the "Supreme Court in Podgorica, the cooperating witness Sasha Singjelic stated that he refused the task given to him by the Russian citizen Eduard Shimakov to kill the Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, during the elections of the year 2016". (The Putsch Trial in Podgorica: The Russians Told Me to Kill Djukanovic, 2018)

When in 2022, the new and short-term Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic signed an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, Djukanovic declared that the Serbian and Russian Churches are in the hands of Putin, who aims to destabilize the Western Balkans from 2016. (Metro, 2022) So, since the time of the assassination attempt of him [Djukanovic].

Russian influence in Montenegro is also confirmed by Macedonian intelligence documents released by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and partners NOVA TV and the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK). According to these documents, Ivan Stoilkovic, a pro-Russian Macedonian MP who was the leader of a small party in a coalition with VMRO and the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia had met politicians and activists from Montenegro who were against the country's NATO membership. (Dojčinović, 2017) According to the same documents, all of these were led by Goran Zivalovic, a BIA operative and official at the Serbian embassy in Skopje.

However, these challenges did not stop Montenegro from following the path of membership towards NATO, where it also achieved this on June 5, 2017, when Donald Trump had become the president of the USA only a few months earlier. He had not opposed Montenegro's membership



in NATO, but had called it a very aggressive country that could lead to the third world war. (The Guardian, 2018)

Until 2020, Montenegro would continue its safe journey towards western structures, but the situation started to change in 2020.

Political Change and Analysis of the Elections: Abazovic's Agreement with the Serbian Church and the Consequences in the Political Scene

The 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro marked a dramatic turn in the course of events, adding to the challenges of maintaining a Western perspective. After three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), a "pro-European" opposition coalition emerged triumphant, marking the end of a long dominance of a single party, the DPS.

The winners, the "For the Future of Montenegro" coalition, led by Zdravko Krivokapic, announced a new political era by securing 36 of the 81 seats in the Montenegrin parliament. This union of political forces from the right and left spectrum included: Democratic Montenegro (DCG), United Montenegro (UCG) and Civic Movement (CG), collecting 41 votes, enough for the creation of the government.

The ruling party, DPS, suffered a heavy defeat winning only 30 seats in the assembly. The new coalition to govern Montenegro elected Zdravko Krivokapic as prime minister, a leader who would remain in power for a period of just 14 months until early February 2022.

For the first time in the history of Montenegro, in August 2021, Dritan Abazovic, a figure of Albanian descent, who was supported by a coalition of pro-European and pro-Serbian forces, was elected prime minister. However, on this path to a new political direction, Abazovic displayed a sharp contrast between his entry into the political scene and his ouster from the office of prime minister. His rise and fall soon turned into a political drama after he signed a basic agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, opening up discussions and strong tensions in the Montenegrin political scene.



The agreement, first confirmed on Abazovic's personal profile on the Telegram social network, a platform mentioned and accused of ties to Russia, "assigned extraterritorial rights to the Serbian Orthodox Church and many other benefits" (Kuka, 2022), causing a wave of opposition and downplaying the possibility of Montenegro's stability. This event marks a critical point in recent developments, bringing new challenges and further reconfigurations in Montenegrin politics.

According to a research study of the daily "Pobjeda" during the government of Abazovic, changes were allowed in the border police, where the professional policemen were overlooked and replaced by incompetent but loyal policemen of the party. These actions, according to "Pobjeda", had basically enabled Montenegro to have a non-functional border with the Republika Srpska, which together with Serbia are the main representatives of Russia in the Western Balkans. (Đuranović & Raičković, 2024)

However, the rationale for overthrowing the Abazovic government was found in the Agreement signed with the Serbian Orthodox Church, as this agreement had a profound impact on the internal political conflict in Montenegro, increasing tensions and unforeseen developments. Djukanovic, a staunch opponent of Abazovic, used his position as president and influence in his DPS party to organize a vote of confidence that ousted Abazovic's government with 50-votes, forcing Montenegro to entering a period of constant political instability.

Dritan Abazovic remained in power with a technical government until the organization of new elections in June 2023. The new elections held in Montenegro were in the spirit of fierce clashes between pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces with pro-Western. These elections again did not create any party that had the majority, but a large coalition of 11 parties emerged from them that would create the government headed by Milojko Spajic. He was appointed amid protests due to his pro-Serbian views. The Albanian MPs are a kind of guarantee that the Spajic government will maintain its pro-Western course and will not withdraw its recognition of Kosovo.

Among other things, the political changes in Montenegro after the last elections show a deterioration of the Montenegrin attitude towards the West and the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian



orientation in many segments of the institutions. To illustrate, Montenegrin Speaker Andrija Mandić participated in a conference of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, when the latter announced victory in the Serbian parliamentary elections. Vučić has officially given up party life, but he continues to control the party he once led. This act, which declared a clear solidarity of Mandić with the political force of Vučić, does nothing other but just strengthen the conviction that Montenegro is heading for a difficult and unstable period on the political scene, bringing great challenges to stability and its perspective.

According to a citizenship certificate issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, published by Alternativa Cerna Gora, Mandić is also a citizen of the Republic of Serbia and is registered in the register of citizens in the area where he resides in Stari Grad in 2009, with personal ordinal number 1229. According to the Montenegrin law on citizenship, he automatically loses Montenegrin citizenship and cannot be the speaker of the assembly of Montenegro. (Gazeta Dita, 2023) However, until now, it hasn't been taken any action against this violation.

That the Montenegrin government and presidency is pro-Serbian and pro-Russian is shown by the fact that when Jakov Milatović took the post of president after Milo Đukanović, Milatović immediately had a meeting with the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, where they agreed to establish good relations political and economic after the clashes that followed between them from the declaration of independence until 2020. (Former Allies Serbia and Montenegro Agree to Repair Strained Relations, 2023) Also, the son of the President of Republika Srpska, Igor Dodik, has admitted that he helped Miloško Spajić, now Prime Minister of Montenegro, to build the party in Montenegro and that Spajić had participated in Republika Srpska Day. (Vijesti, 2024a) On 27.02.2024, in critical moments of global conflicts, Dodik made several visits to many "proxies" of Russia, where he also visited Montenegro. (RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2024) We remind that Milorad Dodik together with his two sons are on the black list of the USA.

The challenges to Montenegro are continuing to grow, gradually changing the approach of this country from the west towards Serbia and Russia, and we also notice this in the census held at the end of 2023.



The Census in Montenegro: Interventions, Manipulations and Accusations of Changing National Identity

In Montenegro, the census or the last population measurements have been held under strong criticism and accusations of foreign interference and irregularities. Due to these problems, this process was postponed several times to be held on December 3, 2023 for 15 consecutive days. (After Several Postponements, the Population Census in Montenegro Begins, 2023)

Accusations of Serbia's interference in this census were widespread with the aim of changing the results of the census. Serbia's goal was for the inhabitants of Montenegro to declare themselves as Serbs in the largest percentage possible.

Before the last census was held, a political campaign began where the slogans “You’re not a Montenegrin if you’re not a Serb” and “If you don’t know who you are, ask your grandfather” were written on billboards. The Serbian Orthodox Church was also involved in this political campaign, namely in mid-October 2023, Patriarch Porfirije (Prvoslav Perić) in Podgorica called



on all Orthodox believers (Montenegros are also Orthodox) to “define their identity as a belief in the Serbian Orthodox Church, as speakers of the Serbian language and as honorable members of the Serbian people... This is a right and responsibility, but also an obligation and duty of all of us...” he also said that: “...it is important to preserve, protect and preserve

what we are, what is called identity - our religious, personal, family, national identity of our ancestors, but also of our descendants”. (Vijesti, 2023b)

After the statements of the Serbian patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the acting head of the DPS, Daniel Zivkovic, emphasized that the purpose of the population census planned for November is "ethnic engineering". (Obradović, 2023)

Djukanovic, regarding Serbia's commitment to the census in Montenegro, had stated that: "The ideologues of Greater Serbia want to destroy Montenegro. The first priority is to prove that



Montenegro is a Serbian state. Montenegrin national identity is under attack because this paves the way for the destruction of Montenegrin independence". (Vijesti, 2023c) These warnings about manipulation of the census were also observed during the process, where many irregularities were identified. Among the irregularities identified, the case of manipulation of lists in Podgorica was recorded. Several people responsible for the census have been arrested there after it was discovered that they had used their tools to manipulate the data, where pencils that could be erased were used and also other filled out hidden registers that were forged. (Salaj, 2023)



Doubts are even more increased by the publication of only some limited statistics from the preliminary results of the census, avoiding information on the national, religious and linguistic affiliation of the

population. According to the director of the Directorate of Statistics of Monstat, Miroslav Pejović, the statistics are still being processed and that it will take several months until they are published. (Pamphlet, 2024)

Analysis about the census in Montenegro suggests that interventions from Serbia have tried to influence the structure of the population, encouraging in various forms a large part of the population to declare themselves as Serbs. This has raised concerns that the results that will be published in full and declared may be subjective and manipulated to reflect a reality similar to Serbia's and Russia's intentions in this region.

While we do not know the results of the last census yet, how many declared as Serbs live in Montenegro, according to the 1948 census only 1.8% Serb lived in Montenegro, in 1953 3.3% lived, in 1961 3% lived, in 1971 7.5% lived Serbs, in 1981, 3.3% of Serbs lived, in 1991, 9.3% of Serbs lived, in 2003, 32% of Serbs lived, and according to the last census in 2011, 28.7% of Serbs lived. (Statistical Office of Montenegro - MONSTAT, n.d.)

Ethnic group	1948/ %	1953/ %	1961/ %	1971/ %	1981/ %	1991/ %	2003/ %	2011/ %
Montenegrins	90.7	86.6	81.4	67.2	68.5	61.9	43.2	45
Serbs	1.8	3.3	3.0	7.5	3.3	9.3	32	28.7
Albanian	5.1	5.6	5.5	6.7	6.5	6.6	5	4.9
Bosnian	0.1	1.5	6.5	13.3	13.4	14.6	11.8	11.9



So, we notice that after the beginning of the destruction of Yugoslavia, the ethnic density in Montenegro in favor of the Serbs has started to change with big steps, reaching high quantity in the two last censuses. An indicator of disproportionate growth compared to the increase of population and other ethnicities is the higher table where it shows a deliberate attempt to change the ethnic balance of a country. In the table built based on the statistics obtained from the statistics agency of Montenegro, we have included only four ethnic groups, where we also notice a change in the Bosniaks who have increased in number while the Albanians have maintained a constant but decreasing number.

The Geopolitics of Maritime Isolation: The Impact of Territorial Loss on Serbia's Identity and Development

In the Serbian mentality, the loss of the territory of Kosovo is not the only concern, it worsens further with the loss of Montenegro. This loss is considered as Serbia's right depriving them of free access to the sea and reducing the strategic influence in the region for Serbia and its ally, Russia.

A landlocked country is a country which is surrounded only by land borders as in the case of present-day Serbia. The return of Serbia to a landlocked territory has brought great strategic obstacles to Russia as well.

The lack of access to the open sea, in addition to the military and political strategic influence, also affects the economy, increasing dependence on neighboring countries both in terms of economic and security aspects.

Landlocked countries in the “developing country” category tend to perform lower on the Human Development Index (HDI) compared to their coastal counterparts. According to the overall performance, of the 44 landlocked countries in the category of developing countries, none of the countries are ranked in the category of "very high human development". Nine of the twelve countries with the lowest HDI scores are landlocked. (Human Development Report 2021/22 | UNDP HDR, n.d.)

Given that Serbia is also in the category of landlocked countries and in the category of developing countries, this increases the possibilities for Serbia to remain behind in terms of economic



development and in other categories compared to its neighbors. This is strengthened even more when we consider the fact that Serbia is deviating towards authoritarianism according to Freedom House. This institution (Freedom House) for 2023 in its findings on Serbia writes that pro-government news sites linked to the ruling party engage in disinformation campaigns, the government uses disruptive tools through social networks with a narrative against critics and adds that Government Agencies are engaged in using of espionage tools and journalists continue to face strategic lawsuits against public participation. (Freedom House, 2023).

As for corruption, in the last 10 years alone, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Serbia has suffered a deterioration for 32 places in corruption, ranking 104th country in the world, compared to 72nd place in 2013. (2023 Corruption Perceptions Index - Explore Serbia's Results, 2024)

Recently, Serbia has also shown that it is not ready to implement international agreements, such as the one reached in Brussels with Kosovo and the annex reached in Ohrid. (Deutsch Welle, 2023) In this case, it openly violates the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the international promise, and seriously insults the EU and the USA as supporters of the dialogue.

However, in terms of security, Serbia being a landlocked country can be a step that holds it back towards an easier cooperation with countries like Russia and China and holds it back from having a threatening independence. This may limit its trade options, access to military resources or diplomatic support compared to coastal countries. Also to this argument is added the reason that Serbia is not showing itself ready for regional cooperation in an equal aspect, especially in the case of Kosovo.

Furthermore, Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence creates complexities when it comes to regional security initiatives. This can limit Kosovo's ability to fully participate in certain programs or information sharing efforts, potentially hindering regional stability. However, it is important to acknowledge alternative perspectives and understand the complex factors at play in Serbia's foreign policy and security considerations. This type of isolation creates the need for Serbia to change its approach to either escalation or stabilization with its neighbors in the near



future. In the best circumstances, it would be stabilization, but in the current circumstances that the world is in, it can send towards escalation.

Serbia considers Montenegro as a deep part of the national identity, and not only as a territory, but also as part of its population, which is connected by Orthodoxy and Slavism. Tomislav Nikolic, after being elected Serbian president in May 2012, in an interview for the Television of Montenegro, said: “I recognize Montenegro as a state, but there is no difference between Serbs and Montenegrins, because there is none”. (B 92, 2012). This shows that Serbia does not accept Montenegro as a separate nation and disputes it as a state, considering it as an integral part of Serbia.

This lost territory represents not only a geographical loss, but a departure from Serbia's deep understanding of itself and its role in the Balkans. It is considered not only as a land area, but also as a union of Orthodox population and Slavic heritage, making it a fundamental element of Serbian national identity.

Serbia’s connection with this territory was added from the time of Nacertanja, but it was Woodrow Wilson who to some extent legitimized Serbian request for access to the sea. Montenegro being a country of strategic importance since the Balkan Wars, as an option to quench Serbian appetites, in point XI of the total of XIV points proposed by American President Woodrow Wilson after the First World War, it was said that Serbia “should be given free and safe access to the sea”. *President Woodrow Wilson’s 14 Points (1918)*, 2022)

The strategy of Russia and Serbia’s approach to the sea has never remained as an outdated version.

Implementation of this policy from Serbia is enabling also with the soft approach that is being made by the West with the aim of seducing and leaving the Russian and Chinese geopolitical structure.

Taulant Elshani from the OCTOPUS Institute writes that: “Western appeasement politics towards Aleksandar Vucic has not only increased Serbia’s support from Russia, but has also led to the provision of the most advanced armaments. It has encouraged Serbia to undertake dangerous military ventures, such as open paramilitary and terrorist aggression against Kosovo. This stance



has also intensified nationalist rhetoric against Bosnia-Herzegovina, further entrenched authoritarianism and eroded democratic principles within Serbia”. (Elshani, 2024)

Ominous Options for Montenegro: From Political to Military Options

Serbia has consolidated its imperialist and colonialist models from the 80s and 90s, starting from the removal of the autonomy of Kosovo in 1989 and the announcement of the Serbian Autonomous Regions (SAO) in Croatia and Bosnia. Therefore, depending on the results of the census in Montenegro, the western reaction and the geopolitical circumstances, we can also see the behavior of Serbia in Montenegro, if the appeasement policy from the west continues towards Serbia, the latter will continue to react in imperialist and terrorists’ ways until the achievement of their goals.

After the results of the census, we should not be surprised if we see the emergence of movements of the type “*Serpski pokry opotors Kosova*” (Serb Resistance Movement in Kosovo) in Montenegro. This type of movement, created in Kosovo with its center in Kosovo Valley (Shollevic, Bulatovic) in 1982 by Dobrica Qosic, in 1986 through a petition addressed to the communist authorities called for the changes they considered necessary to stop the alleged terror Albanians against Serbs in Kosovo. (Tromp-Vrkić, 2021)

In this context, the movements in Montenegro can also take the model of the Republic of Krajina. At the beginning of the 90s, the Serbs in Croatia, with the help of Serbia, in the region of Knin had declared their Republic. The starting point for the creation of the Serbian Autonomous Region of Krajina, with Knin as the administrative center, was the “Declaration of the Sovereignty and Autonomy of the Serbian People in Croatia”, approved by the Assembly of Serbia on July 25, 1990. The declaration announce that the Serbs from the Republic of Croatia had the full right to choose a federal or confederal system, either together with Croatia or independently. In August, the referendum would then be held in 11 municipalities with a Serbian majority where they would vote for independence. (Tromp-Vrkić, 2021a) The same thing happened also in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Therefore, based on the past of Serbia, which has never distanced itself and never apologized for its crimes in the countries of former Yugoslavia, the options that are trapping the state of Montenegro every day are becoming more ominous, the intensity of these options has increased after major political changes with 2020 in Montenegro. But these have become evident especially after the war in Ukraine. The axis that claims to represent the interests of the Slavic-Orthodox people, Moscow-Belgrade is now engaged in hybrid warfare against their neighbors with all possible elements.

Using the “democratic” instruments for ominous purposes to paramilitary and military means are being seen as methods that are on the table if not yet in operation.

After Serbia and Russia have succeeded in installing their vassals in Montenegrin institutions, their use for Russo-Serbian purposes may soon begin.

In Montenegro almost all pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties are in power now, they can choose different paths for realizing the interests of Belgrade and Moscow. At the beginning, they can start the erosion from within by blocking the decision-making process or even demanding more ministerial posts, as a result these two requests can be deliberately rejected and used as justifications for the overthrow of the government.

If the president of Montenegro allows the creation of a technical government or immediately sends the country to elections, this will only be in the interest of the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian forces as they will continue to spread the propaganda that “Serbs in Montenegro are in danger” and “the Montenegrin nationalists will soon return to power”. This can be intensified especially after the publication of the full results of the census organized in December 2023.

The final results of the census may also have other consequences that may trigger a referendum, e.g. as in the municipality of Pljeveljje, Nikšić and Berana. In these municipalities dominates the pro-Russian, pro-Serb and Serbian Orthodox Church sentiment. The population in these municipalities reject everything that is Montenegrin, from laws to symbols. The Serbian Orthodox Church using these parameters in these municipalities can see this issue as a historical opportunity for Serbs to unite and as “God’s will”.



In order to realize these goals, military and para-military methods are also highlighted. Serbia and Russia have continuously used paramilitary methods and this was also seen in the case of the attack in Banjska, Kosovo, in September of the last year (2023). These troops can directly influence the secessionists to successfully realize their goals and also neutralize the reaction of the Montenegrin forces.

All the above actions can also be done without the fear of the intervention of the Army and NATO. As it seems, it is no coincidence that Mandic is at the head of the parliament of Montenegro, just like Dodik, who is the president of Republika Srpska.

Mandic, through his position as speaker of parliament and member of the Security and Defense Council of Montenegro, can block these institutions from protecting the current state of Montenegro. Mandic, through the Security and Defense Council that holds the Command of the Armed Forces, prohibits this force from acting in response to any secession because this Council takes decisions unanimously. While through the position as Speaker of the Parliament, Mandic can also exercise his authority to stop any reaction of the opposition through the Assembly to call NATO based on the latter's treaty, namely in Articles 4 and 5. Such a call can never do the position, but this does not necessarily mean that it stops reaction of NATO in case its nature and security structure are threatened. But the use of the referendum as a "democratic" tool can bring serious questions to NATO's reaction.

The last option remains a total or partial invasion of Serbia against Montenegro under the claim that "Serbs are in danger" creating conditions for a federalization or confederalization of Montenegro, secession as in the case of Crimea in 2014 or total invasion. However, Serbia can also choose not to officially engage in any of these options, but it is enough to finance and organize paramilitary groups that help the secessionists and realize the goals of Russia and Serbia.

These events then help to distract the war, making it even more difficult for the west to deal with hybrid warfare and the many centers of fire created by Russia. Russia promotes the creation of new hotspots in this year as 2024 not only 40% of the countries of the world are in electoral



campaigns and hold elections, but there are also elections in the most important countries such as the USA, the United Kingdom and the European Union.

According to Natalia Ischenko from the Balkan Observer, there are two possible options for Montenegro:

Option 1. “North Macedonia”. Serbs in Montenegro - like Albanians in North Macedonia - will receive greater rights for their language and most importantly - greater and guaranteed representation at all levels and in all power structures.

Option 2. “Bosnia-Herzegovina”. This option provides the federalization of Montenegro, including the change from a unitary to a federal system, as well as the creation of Serbian autonomy. (Правда, 2023)

Thus, the influence of the Serbian organizational and political model can strengthen the movements in Montenegro, bringing about major changes in the country’s political scene and system or perhaps even the fulfillment of Trump’s prophecy.

Conclusions

Geography is a key factor in determining a country's destiny. On the international scene, small but strategically positioned countries like Montenegro are involved in major challenges and are under pressure from their imperialist-minded neighbors.

Serbia, with a great regional hegemonic history, remains determined on its path, not trying to change also why the perspective of the Western Balkans countries towards the West it’s there. Although Montenegro has continued its journey towards Western structures until 2020, it has now been challenged by parties with pro-Russian and pro-Serbian orientations. This, in cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, has announced new spheres of influence, an intervention which was highlighted recently with the attempt to change the ethnic structure in Montenegro by Serbia.



Beyond that, Serbia, in search of territorial expansion and access to the sea, with an imperialist politics, has Montenegro as a key target. Meanwhile, Russian aid is increasing the pressure through hybrid warfare, using different methods to achieve their goals.

These include:

- political assassinations such as the assassination attempt on Djukanovic for changing the approach of Montenegro and banning its membership in NATO.
- political parties, supporting various subjects, mainly of the extreme right wing, by using the fragility of democracy and legalizing their ethnic issue.
- electoral elections by creating as many subjects as possible which then manage to split the votes of the big parties that are not in pro Serbian and Russian interest.
- influence through change propaganda like those before the census that we mentioned in the paper.
- the impact of the change in the declaration of society on ethnic issues, in the specific case the declaration from Montenegrin to Serbian, ethnic engineering.
- the use of television, print and social media to spread propaganda, agitation and disinformation.



Figure 1 Hybrid Warfare Used by Serbia and Russia in the Western Balkans, case study Montenegro

If the hybrid war of Russia and Serbia does not stop, the possible options for Montenegro are five:

Option 1. “North Macedonia”. Serbs in Montenegro - like Albanians in North Macedonia - will get greater rights for their language and most importantly - greater and guaranteed representation at all levels and in all power structures.

Option 2. “Bosnia-Herzegovina”. This option envisages the federalization of Montenegro, including the change from a unitary to a federal system, as well as the creation of Serbian autonomy.



Option 3. “Kosovo” – This option envisages to create an Association for municipality with major of Serbian people with executive powers.

Option 4. “Referendum”. This option tends to return under Serbia in the same form as the state of Montenegro was declared, either as a union or as a complete merger.

Option 5. “Geopolitical Circumstances”. Serbia can wait and slow down all the processes in the Western Balkans until the geopolitical circumstances and balance of forces change, possibly in favor of Russia and China, where as a result it can then freely take Montenegro with or without war.

Hybrid warfare and attempts at influence are fueling tensions in the region, creating an uncertain and challenging atmosphere, especially for Montenegro and the entire Western Balkans. This reality created by Russia and Serbia can only be changed by a strong involvement of the international community, with special emphasis on NATO, the USA and the EU. It is time to stop the "policy of appeasement" towards Serbia and turn the attention towards aggressive actions, such as the violent act in Banjska of Kosovo in September 2023 and the continuous interventions in Bosnia and Montenegro. Only through a common approach and common determination can the international community stop the spread of influence and destabilization of the region.

The example of Putin and Hitler proves how invalid is the “appeasement politics” with Nazi-fascist dictators.

Suggestions for Kosovo:

Kosovo has presented plans for the organization of a census soon (probably from April 1, 2024), an essential step for knowing the population and developing appropriate policies. The Institute for Hybrid Warfare Studies OCTOPUS advises that this process be carried out with a thorough and careful preparation, taking the example of Montenegro and taking into account the interventions of third parties such as Russia and Serbia.



Figure 2 If the hybrid war of Russia and Serbia does not stop, the possible options for Montenegro are five:



In particular, it is important that Kosovo carefully analyzes every aspect of the census process, including recording techniques, data security and the inclusion of all communities. Taking into account the negative experience in Montenegro, appropriate measures should be taken to avoid possible interference by external factors, such as Russia and Serbia.

In the external plan, diplomatic activity should be increased with the decision-making centers, new alliances should be connected, but also the road to NATO membership should be strengthened or advanced.

Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that the organization of the census is an essential process for the recognition of the country's demographic reality and development progress. By committing to a thorough preparation and implementing appropriate security measures, Kosovo will have the opportunity to conduct an accurate and reliable census, preventing fraudulent actions and contributing to the improvement of governance and public policies in the future.

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