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MONTENEGRO: BREAKING THE STALEMATE?

SPECIAL REPORT | 20 - 24 FEB 2017
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EU calls for **rapid investigation** into **Montenegro 'coup'**

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Opposition leaders Milan Knežević [L] and Andrija Mandić wait for their immunity to be lifted in front of the Montenegrin parliament. Podgorica, 15 February. [Reuters]

Montenegro, which broke away from a union with Serbia to become independent in 2006, has been engulfed in a coup drama since the 16 October general election when authorities arrested 20 Serbians accused of planning armed attacks against government institutions.

Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, whose party came out ahead in the election but without a parliamentary majority, had presented the vote as a chance for Montenegro's 620,000 citizens to endorse his policy of joining NATO and the EU, instead of pursuing deeper ties with traditional allies in Serbia and Russia.

RISING TENSIONS

Since October, tensions have built up in the small Western Balkan country, and the situation became even more tense after the nation's special prosecutor obtained the lifting of parliamentary immunity from two opposition leaders who are suspected of having participated in a failed coup.

According to The Telegraph, quoting Whitehall sources, the coup to attack Montenegro's parliament and kill pro-Western leader was directed by Russian intelligence officers with support and blessing of Moscow to sabotage the country's plan to join NATO.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed the allegations, while Kremlin spokesman Dmitry

Peskov said it was "irresponsible" to make such accusations.

The plot was foiled only hours before it was due to be carried out, but would have caused heavy bloodshed and plunged the tiny country into turmoil on the eve of becoming Nato's 29th member, the British paper reported.

Riot police were deployed to contain hundreds of protesters who gathered in front of the parliament in Podgorica last week to protest against the motion lifting the two leaders' immunity.

In an attempt to defuse tensions, Montenegro's chief prosecutor ended up overruling the motion, allowing the two men to walk free.

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39 opposition MPs in the country's parliament, including the 18 lawmakers from the Democratic Front (the hardline opposition), are currently boycotting the assembly over allegations of electoral fraud. They are asking for early elections to be held in 2018, together with the presidential election.

The government of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its allies who control a slim majority of 41 MPs of the total of 81 MPs in the Montenegrin parliament believe that the elections were free and fair, and so does the ODIHR, the specialised OSCE body for monitoring elections. DF, however, has produced a 40-page report listing various irregularities.

GEOPOLITICS

The political stalemate is coupled with a geopolitical tug-of-war over the small country's NATO bid.

Montenegro would become the third NATO member in the Balkans, after Croatia and Albania, which both joined in 2009.

The hardline opposition wants a referendum on NATO membership, although there is no constitutional requirement for holding such a poll. The ratification should take place in Parliament. A majority of MPs are in favour of the country's NATO accession, but society remains divided.

An opinion poll conducted in December has only 39.5% of Montenegrins in favour of NATO membership and 39.7% against. Other opinion polls have suggested similar margins.

So far, 24 of the 28 NATO members have ratified the accession of Montenegro to the military alliance. The remaining countries are Canada, the Netherlands, Spain and the USA.

Montenegro is expected to ratify its NATO accession after all 28 current members have completed

the ratification process, possibly in May. Ratification is expected to take place even if part of the opposition continues to boycott parliament. In spite of their participation in the boycott, the moderate opposition is expected to cast their votes in favour of joining NATO.

External factors undoubtedly play a role. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexei Meshkov, was recently quoted as saying that dragging Montenegro into NATO may cause a rift in Montenegrin society. The US has spearheaded Montenegro's EU push, but doubts subsist whether the Trump Administration would like to take on board an ally with less than 2000 military personnel.

An EU diplomat in Podgorica confirmed that Montenegro and geopolitics had become two peas in a pot.

"This little country plays an important role in the current developments in the Western Balkans," the diplomat said. Indeed, Montenegro's future should speak volumes about the prospects of the EU hopefuls in the region.

The ratification of Montenegro's accession to NATO is important for not only for Montenegro but in the wider context and for the regional stability in the Balkans, the diplomat said. He pointed out that the EU appreciated the fact that Montenegro had "aligned 100%" with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including EU sanctions against Russia.

The government of Montenegro has also recognised Kosovo, a move that may appear surprising, given the closeness of Montenegrins with Serbs, with Belgrade having no intention whatsoever to recognise their former province as an independent state. It is assumed that if the hardline opposition would get the upper hand, one of the first things they would do is abandon the sanctions and rescind Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo.

Montenegro is also a champion

in its EU accession talks, outpacing Serbia and Albania, the only two other countries in the Western Balkans in the process. Until now, NATO accession has always preceded EU accession, for all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Regarding the alleged coup, the diplomat said EU member states had been informed of it by the Montenegrin authorities.

"Investigation into this matter should be finished as soon as possible so that the citizens of Montenegro can learn the full truth about this case," he said.

MONEY

Momčilo Radulović, President of the European Movement Montenegro, told Euractiv.com that Russia had proved that "with small amounts of money you can make miracles in the Western Balkans".

"The estimation is that up to €5 million were spent to Montenegro, succeeding to create a strong electoral crisis. Just imagine what they could create with €50 million in Serbia. But Montenegro is more or less stable. Institutions are more or less stable. And the society is more or less stable. That's the good story – we are not that crazy to fight a war for Russian interests," Radulović said.

A Russian diplomat dismissed the allegations. Regarding the coup, he stated that his country sought information from different sources, both from the government and opposition, including the Democratic Front, for a more complete understanding of the political process in Montenegro.

He said that he could not comment on the circumstances of the so-called coup attempt in the absence of any strong evidence that such an attempt took place. Moreover, he explained, the Russian Embassy did not make

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any request to Montenegrin law enforcement authorities about the Russian nationals named in relation to the alleged coup.

Some 20 people – mostly Serb nationals, including two Russian citizens, Eduard Sirokov and Vladimir Popov – have been accused of participating in the 16 October plot.

The Russian diplomat also recalled the words of Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov on 7 November that Russia played no role in the alleged coup attempt. The diplomat expressed regrets that an anti-Russian campaign remains underway in a number of Montenegrin media, although the Special Prosecutor, Milivoje Katnić, had stated that “Montenegrin law enforcement authorities do not have any evidence of Moscow’s official involvement.”

With regard to Montenegro’s plans to join NATO, the diplomat also recalled the requirement for NATO members to spend 2% of GDP on defence, which in his words can create additional difficulties for the country’s budget.

Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić has insisted that those arrested had no connection with the Serbian state, and that there was no evidence of Montenegrin politicians being involved.

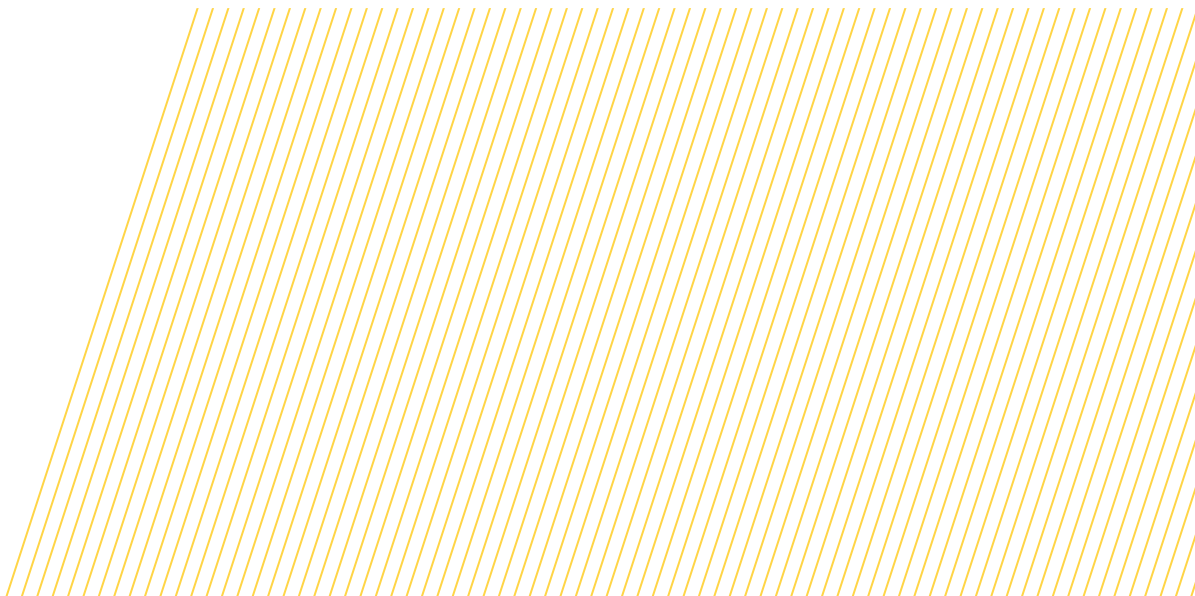
LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Special prosecutor Milivoje Katnić, in charge of the coup investigation, said yesterday (20 February) in a TV program that he had evidence of Russian nationalistic structures being involved, with the support of Russian state authorities.

“Behind these events are nationalist structures from Russia, but now we know that Russian state authorities were involved. The organs of the Russian state must investigate which bodies are involved and open a criminal trial over these acts”, the Special prosecutor said.

Katnić said that the real name of Russian citizen Sirokov (also spelled as Shirokov), accused of participating in the plot, was Eduard Shishmakov, and that he was a deputy of the Russian military attaché in Poland was expelled for espionage, as a persona non grata. His new passport was given to him by the authorities of Russia, Katnić said.

The indictments should be ready by 15 April, Katnić said.



Montenegro's parliament 'will vote for NATO by 59%'



Montenegro will finish the ratification procedure of its NATO accession with a vote in parliament in the coming months. Public opinion is evenly divided for and against NATO membership, but it is unlikely that a referendum will be called over the issue.

Montenegro, a country of 620,000 inhabitants, with an army of under 2000, signed its NATO accession agreement on 19 May 2016, paving the way for the small Western Balkan country to become the trans-Atlantic alliance's 29th member state.

So far, 24 of the 28 NATO members have ratified the accession of Montenegro to the military alliance. The remaining countries are Canada, the Netherlands, Spain and the US.

Montenegro is expected to ratify its NATO accession after all 28

current members have completed the ratification, possibly in May. Ratification is expected to take place even if part of the opposition continues to boycott parliament. In spite of its participation in the boycott, the moderate opposition is expected to cast its votes in favour of NATO.

Montenegro would become the third NATO member in the Balkans, after Croatia and Albania, which both joined in 2009.

NATO membership was a central issue in Montenegro's 16 October general election, with the vote marking the latest episode in a power struggle between Russia and the West over the Balkans.

On the day of the vote, a coup attempt took place, which is still being investigated. The plot was foiled only hours before it was due to be carried out, but would have caused heavy

bloodshed and plunged the tiny country into turmoil.

THE TRUMP CARD

Momčilo Radulović, president of the European Movement Montenegro, told Euractiv.com that despite Trump's concern that the US has little to gain from Montenegro's membership, he would follow the advice of defence specialists who want the country in NATO.

"In theory, he could [deny ratification], but the chances of that, based on the opinion of all the authoritative specialists, is that he wouldn't. I think the foreign policy of the USA is bigger than Trump. He is not the only actor, and in Congress, in the Senate, there is wide majority for

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Montenegro's NATO membership. The latest decision of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Senate was taken unanimously [on 6 December]. So the ratification process will be completed. Of course, we are not at the top of the agenda," Radulović said.

Speaking to Euractiv.com, western diplomats expressed worries that if the US fails to ratify Montenegro's NATO accession, it would signify that "Trump doesn't care" for the Western Balkans, and a signal to Russia that it can have the upper hand among EU hopefuls Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Another fear they shared is that the US could lose interest in Montenegro as part of "bigger deal" with Russia.

Conservatives close to Trump have said that Montenegro's NATO accession makes no sense.

But Radulović took a different view.

"Of all the Mediterranean countries, from Portugal to Turkey, all the coastal countries are in the NATO club, except Montenegro. And I seriously doubt that even Trump, making a deal with Putin on other geopolitical issues, would deprive his own country of greater stability in this part of Europe," he said.

Montenegro's ratification is expected to take place even if part of the opposition continues to boycott parliament over allegations of electoral fraud. In spite of their participation in the boycott, the moderate opposition is expected to cast its vote in favour of NATO.

Asked if the option for a referendum on NATO, as demanded by the opposition, was a realistic option, Radulović answered:

"I don't think so. Opposition URA and SDP will vote for NATO. The result will be 59%."

URA, United Reform Action, has 2 MPs in the 81-member parliament, and SDP, the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro, led by Ranko Krivovapić,

has 4 MPs. Both parties are considered the 'moderate opposition' in contrast with DF.

"DF has been promising military cooperation with Russia, they are not hiding it. But if NATO says 'no' to Montenegro, it will be a final blow. The pro-Djukanović government will fall down and they will come into power," Radulović said.

Asked if early elections, as demanded by the opposition, were a possibility, he replied:

"I do think so. Because when I look at the configuration of the cabinet, it looks to me like a temporary government. And some solutions advocated by the government look like temporary solutions. But you never know, sometimes temporary solutions are the longest-lasting."

Asked if the current stalemate could be called a political crisis, he said he would rather call it "government intermezzo".

CROSSROADS

Queried if he thought his country was at a crossroads, Momčilo Radulović conceded and said the issues will be resolved by the end of the first half of this year. "But even by the end of the year, it will be OK. If the US says yes, it will be solved," he added.

Sonja Drobac, the editor of TV Prva, a national channel, was more careful with her estimation of SPD leader Krivovapić's loyalty to NATO. Asked if Krivovapić would vote for NATO, she answered:

"Yes, I think so, but he made very strong connections with Russia also, during the last 2 years."

Because of these strong connections, Krivovapić and the URA were not returning to parliament, she said.

Asked if she would describe the situation as a political crisis, Drobac answered: "Maybe we are not in a political crisis, but there is a huge potential for that. It depends on

Russia, the USA and EU."

Drobac stated that Montenegro was a "very divided country" and that ten years after the 2006 referendum for independence (which passed by 55.5%), 45% of Montenegrins still didn't accept the country's independence.

"It was complicated before, now it's even more complicated because of NATO-Russia antagonism," she said, adding there were very few chances for a referendum stressing that the pact would pass in parliament.

Russian diplomat Alexandr Botsan-Kharchenko recently said that it was not his country's business to impose its views, but a referendum on NATO in Montenegro would be the best solution, under the circumstances.

"The fact that Montenegro avoids the referendum by itself shows that it is not confident in its results. Opinion polls show roughly a 50-50 split. But if the referendum would show such a result, how can [the government] say that a majority is for NATO? In my view, such a division of public opinion suggests that the decision should not be rushed," the diplomat said, as quoted by RIA Novosti.

The Montenegrin government cites a survey showing that 47.3% of the citizens of Montenegro support the country's membership in NATO, 37.1% oppose and 15.6% are undecided. Some sources claim that the supporters in this survey were inflated by 11%.

The majority of those interviewed by Euractiv quoted polls saying that roughly 39% were in each camp, while more than 20% of Montenegrins were undecided, making it difficult to have a clear picture what people prefer.

Montenegro: Opposition riding the referendum caravan



Marko Milačić in his Podgorica office. [Georgi Gotev]

As Montenegro pushes ahead with its bid to join NATO, the pro-Russian hardline opposition, hoping to block the country's accession, is using "neutrality" as ammunition to fight what it calls a pro-Western "mafia regime".

Marko Milačić, a firebrand young opposition activist, who is a coalition partner of the Democratic Front, the hardline opposition in Montenegro described as pro-Russian and pro-Serbian, told EURACTIV that NATO is turning the country into a Ukraine-like model.

The stakes are high. After a decade of negotiations, Montenegro has almost succeeded in joining the NATO military alliance at the end of 2015. Out of the alliance's 28 members, 24 have already ratified Montenegro's

membership. But the vote is now stalled in the US Senate.

On one side, Donald Trump has put into question the usefulness of NATO and on the other side, Moscow sees the expansion of NATO as a top threat to its security.

Milačić, a journalist by profession, used to work in national television. He was fired when he participated to the first anti-NATO protests in 2010. Over the last 5-6 years he and his organisation "Resistance to hopelessness" organised many marches and protests.

He spoke to EURACTIV as he prepared for a roadshow across Europe to campaign for a referendum to be held on his country's NATO accession.

The roadshow started on Monday (20 February) and is taking Milačić, together with five other activists, across Skopje, Belgrade, Banja Luka

(the capital of Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Zagreb, Ljubljana, Vienna, Prague, Berlin and Brussels, where an event at the European Parliament is planned on 28 February.

Milačić said he had written a letter to US Senators (on 24 January 2017), asking them not to ratify Montenegro's NATO accession protocol, and was harshly criticised by the DPS, former Prime minister Milo Đukanović's party.

THE 'UKRAINISATION' OF MONTENEGRO

On Monday (20 February), Djukanović said that the parliamentary elections showed that after Ukraine and Syria, the turn came

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for Montenegro in the confrontation between Russia and the West, as a country of interest to both sides.

“Those who in 2006 were against the statehood of Montenegro cannot forgive the sin of independence. Their crazy logic is that if not independent, Montenegro would not be able to join the EU and NATO,” said Djukanovic. In his view, opponents of his political party DPS wanted to overthrow the current government and install a pro-Russian puppet regime.

For Milačić, Montenegro is just the finishing piece of the puzzle to complete “the militarization of the Balkans”.

Montenegro is seen as “the last step towards Serbia”, who for the time being insist on staying away from the Atlantic alliance largely due to public anger following the 1999 bombings of Belgrade.

“They [NATO] are making some kind of Ukrainisation of Montenegro, maybe a soft Ukrainisation. We are also being divided, even on ethnic grounds, although we are the same people,” he said.

The tug of war reached a climax during the parliamentary elections on 16 October, when the government announced that it had foiled a plot to assassinate Djukanović.

Since October, tensions have built up in the small Western Balkan country when the nation’s special

prosecutor lifted the parliamentary immunity of two DF leaders who are suspected of having participated in the failed October coup.

Riot police were deployed to contain hundreds of protesters who gathered in front of the parliament in Podgorica last week to protest against the motion lifting the two leaders’ immunity.

In an attempt to defuse tensions, Montenegro’s chief prosecutor ended up overruling the motion, allowing the two men to walk free.

Russia has denied any involvement in the alleged plot, and the opposition in Montenegro has questioned whether any attempt at a coup took place.

“This is not responsible politics. This is a political trial. It’s clear they want to criminalise the anti-NATO politicians. They are for neutrality. Everything is related with NATO,” said Milačić, speaking in English.

Asked to comment on the widespread view that the opposition, including his organisation was paid by Moscow, he said: “In this part of the world, if you are against NATO, it’s normal that they call you a Russian spy, a Putinophile, that you are paid by Putin.”

“I have more connections with the West than with the East. When members of the Bundestag from Die Linke were here, they gave my organisation something like €500. And I wanted to take a picture.

Germans are paying us. Is that OK?” he asked amused, urging the government to prove that he had taken any money from Moscow.

Special Prosecutor Milivoje Katnić, who is in charge of the coup investigation, has investigated cases of suspicious money transfers, but no charges have been made so far.

‘NEUTRALITY’ INSTEAD OF ‘ANTI-NATO’

Asked by EURACTIV whether he would allow Russia to establish a military base in Montenegro, whose deep-water ports would be a perfect stopover for Russia’s naval missions in the Mediterranean, the young opposition leader said:

“I am for neutrality. The smart policy is not to be involved. EU members outside alliances are safe and prosperous. [There are] zero terrorist attacks in neutral countries. Montenegro has no place for a military base. And the Russians need no military base here.”

But the activist insisted that sharing the same border with Russia would be dangerous, but with the US it was dangerous to share the same planet.

According to Milačić, Montenegro’s NATO accession protocol has been on the table five times but never managed to go through ratification and now the

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problem is of a different nature.

“It’s an issue of politics, between Trump and Putin. The US doesn’t care about Montenegro. For Russia, Montenegro is important, because before this was their zone of influence,” he said.

Azra Karastojanović, project manager at the Atlantic Council of Montenegro, said that despite the fact that Trump said NATO was “obsolete”, Montenegro’s was a specific case, because its accession would be a test for the alliance’s open door policy, and because it would prove that third countries don’t determine NATO’s enlargement.

Additionally, Montenegro’s accession to NATO would prove wrong those who believe in a US-Russia rapprochement, she added.

POLITICAL CRISIS?

Asked if there was a danger of civil war in Montenegro, as leaders of DF have been warning in recent days, Milačić pointed at great instability.

“We are in a big political crisis, but not only since the elections. It has been one year. There were protests, I was arrested, we saw tremendous police brutality, it was recorded on mobile phones,” Milačić said of the situation preceding the election.

Under pressure from the opposition, Djukanović put in place a

cabinet of “reconciliation” joined by 5 ministers of the moderate opposition.

The Western diplomatic community in Podgorica doesn’t call the situation following the election a political crisis but admits that it could deteriorate.

“Then the election took place, it was more rigged than before”, said Milačić, repeating the DF accusation of massive electoral fraud. However, OSCE considers the elections as generally free and fair.

“DPS is a mafia type criminal organisation,” Milačić repeated, adding that Western diplomats knew that perfectly well.

Asked what his main criticism of Djukanović is, the activist said: “He is a real criminal. The West knows that better than me. They are totally aware. There is a totally different story what people say in public and what they say in private. It’s huge hypocrisy. They say: He is a criminal, but he serves us well.”

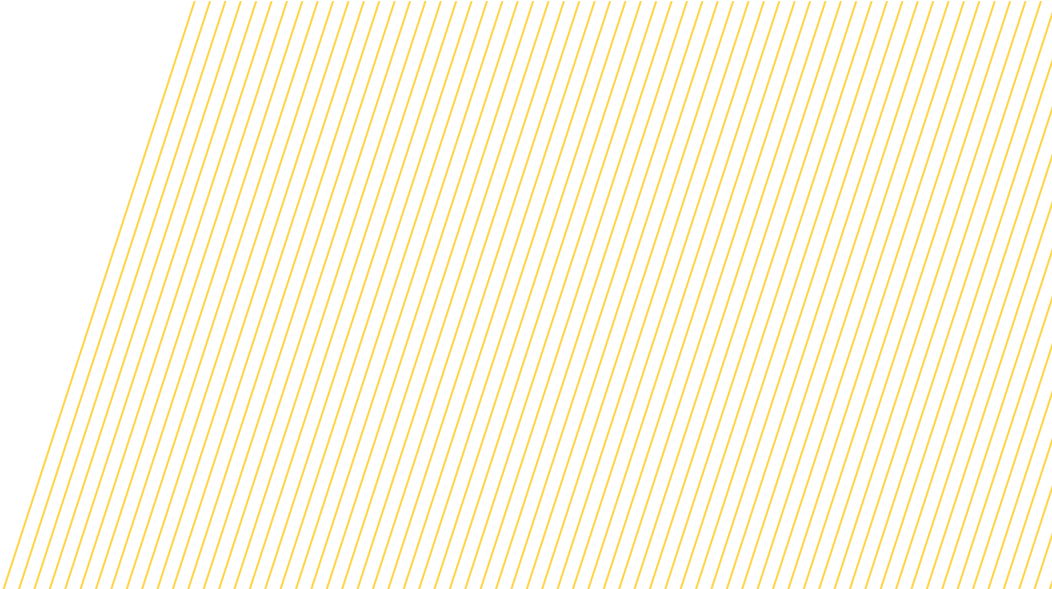
Diplomats told EURACTIV that during the breakdown of Yugoslavia, Montenegro had no financial resources and that Djukanović had instituted smuggling as “a national sport,” initially thanks to the UN embargo on Yugoslavia. But as one of them said, at that time “there was no other choice” for building the small nation’s statehood.

From the early days, Djukanović positioned himself as pro-Western and spearheaded the 2006 independence

referendum as a shortcut to EU accession.

Montenegro is indeed a champion in the accession talks, having opened 26 chapters, compared to Serbia, who opened only six. But more importantly, for joining the EU, Serbia will have to recognise Kosovo, a move Montenegro made in 2008. A diplomat conceded that Montenegro could, in theory, finish its accession talks in one and a half year.

“We have a mafia regime. Everyone who has illusions will realise one day,” Milačić ended.



Montenegro seeks assurance

Trump won't derail its NATO accession



A billboard showing pictures of US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Danilovgrad, Montenegro, November 2016. [Reuters]

Stuck in a geopolitical tug of war over its NATO bid, Montenegro wants the United States to guarantee that it will ratify its accession protocol. American diplomats told EURACTIV that the process will take time but that US policy should not change.

Montenegro, a country of 620,000 inhabitants, with an army of under 2,000, signed its NATO accession agreement on 19 May 2016, paving the way for the small Western Balkan country to become the transatlantic alliance's 29th member.

So far, 24 of the 28 NATO members have ratified the accession of Montenegro. The remaining countries are Canada, the Netherlands, Spain and the US.

Montenegro is expected to ratify its NATO accession after all 28

current members have completed the ratification, possibly in May. Ratification is expected to take place even if part of the opposition continues to boycott parliament.

In spite of its participation in the boycott, the moderate opposition is expected to cast its votes in favour of NATO accession.

But a major hurdle before the vote in Podgorica is US ratification, which was not completed under the Obama administration, despite significant lobbying by Montenegrin diplomats.

Some Republicans believe that Montenegro's NATO membership is "pointless but relatively harmless". Other US conservatives question the consensus in Montenegro over NATO accession as it has been portrayed by certain right-wing media as "a mafia state".

In Republican realist publications

like *The National Interest*, the arguments ironically resemble those in Russia. For example, Russia's lower house of parliament, the Duma, warned last June of "a new Cold War" in the event of Montenegro's NATO accession.

A shadowy pro-Russian and pro-Serbian group called *in4s* set up billboards in Montenegro last November, conveying the message that Trump and his Russian colleague Vladimir Putin had similar ideas to reform the international system, and that tiny Montenegro wouldn't count in a big deal between the two.

American diplomats in Podgorica told EURACTIV that ratification in the US Senate could take time but that the country could count on continued US support.

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A US official said that Trump's presidency wouldn't affect relations between Washington and Podgorica, and that the US policy of promoting democracy in the Balkans would not change.

Regarding the ratification, which at the moment is stuck in the Senate, the diplomat said that "with any new administration things take more time", but in substance, he indicated that Montenegro has nothing to worry about.

A few days later, at the Munich Security Conference, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs John Heffern conveyed a similar message to Prime Minister of Montenegro Duško Marković.

The State Department will continue to work intensively in order for the Senate to ratify the Montenegro-NATO Accession Protocol as soon as possible, Heffern said.

He added that he strongly supported NATO's open door policy and the right for every country to apply for membership "without the interference of third parties", alluding to Russia's opposition to further NATO enlargement.

Asked about widespread allegations that Russian money served to fund political activities in Montenegro, the US diplomat

told EURACTIV that the Western diplomatic community in Podgorica believed that a lot of funding went to the Democratic Front, the hardline opposition, in particular before the election.

A lot of huge election billboards were visible at that time, and a lot of money went to the media, but the US has no proof where the funding came from, the diplomat said.

Asked if there was a political crisis in Montenegro, the US diplomat said that the opposition was trying to paint the situation as a political crisis. The diplomat described it as a "stalemate" rather than a political crisis.

PUSH FOR EARLY ELECTIONS

The opposition, consisting not only of the DF, but also of United Reform Action (URA) and the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (SDP), is pushing for early elections to be held next year, coupled with the regular presidential election. URA has two MPs in the 81-member parliament and SDP, led by Ranko Krivovapić, has four.

Both parties are considered the 'moderate opposition' in contrast with the DF, the main difference being that they are expected to vote for NATO.

Regarding the push for early elections by the opposition, the diplomat said "If the government gives

in, and the opposition loses again, what will they do?"

URA MP Nedjeljko Rudović said on Saturday (18 February) that the opposition should jointly define its conditions for holding early elections and come up with a platform to overcome the crisis.

According to Rudović, the government will try to stay in power at all cost. While the authorities accuse the DF of having tried to stage a coup d'état during the 16 October elections, the opposition claims it was the DPS who staged a fake coup, to be able to persecute the opposition.

"We do not agree to have a role in the theatre of the absurd directed by the DPS. Therefore, there are no negotiations with them until we find out who is responsible for the state of emergency on the election day and until they accept repeating elections that were held 16 October, i.e. to conduct early elections," Rudović said.

Hahn: **All sides** in Montenegro should show restraint



Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Engagement Negotiations [European Commission]

In an exclusive interview against the background of stalemate in Montenegro, Neighbourhood Commissioner Johannes Hahn told EURACTIV.com that he trusts the country's political leaders will find a way to compromise, and that he hoped to meet them soon.

Since the 16 October election, when 20 people were arrested for planning to carry out a coup d'état, tensions have built up in the small Western Balkan country.

Since then, 39 opposition lawmakers in the country's parliament, including the 18 lawmakers of the Democratic Front (DF, the hardline opposition), are boycotting the assembly over allegations of electoral fraud. They are asking for early elections to be held in 2018, together with the presidential election.

The government of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its allies who control a slim majority of 41MPs of the total of 81 lawmakers in the Montenegrin parliament believe that the elections were free and fair, and so does the ODIHR, the specialised OSCE body for monitoring elections. The DF, however, has produced a 40-page report listing various irregularities.

Tensions further grew after the special prosecutor in charge of investigating the coup attempt asked and obtained immunity from prosecution of two Democratic Front MPs, including the leader of the party.

Both Front leaders and the country's Prime Minister, Duško Marković, have stated that there was a risk of "civil war" over the stalemate, exacerbated by divisions over the country's NATO bid. The opposition wants a referendum for the ratification

of the country's NATO accession protocol, while the government plans to pass it through parliament. There is no constitutional requirement for holding a referendum.

Asked on 22 February about the latest developments and fears that the situation could worsen if the opposition MPs were arrested, Commissioner Johannes Hahn said the EU had been very clear since the beginning, and that "all sides" should show restraint.

"We expect the relevant domestic authorities to swiftly and transparently investigate the events on the election day. Regarding the lifting of immunity of Members of Parliament, I cannot comment on ongoing legal procedures. I expect, however, that the principles of the rule

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of law will be fully respected. We are closely following the situation on the ground and I call on all sides to display restraint.”

‘DELICATE SITUATION’

Regarding the political stalemate, he said that the political situation was indeed “delicate at the moment, with the opposition out of the Parliament”.

“Boycott is not a sustainable solution. I expect all political actors, from the governing coalition and the opposition, as well as civil society, to return to a constructive political discourse and to work together constructively. This dialogue is crucial for the country to continue the modernisation process and to move forward on its EU path.”

Asked if he had plans to visit Montenegro and help stabilise the country, Hahn answered:

“I trust that the country’s political leaders will find a way towards compromise and dialogue that would take place in democratically elected institutions, most notably the Parliament. This is what we would expect from a negotiating country and this is what people would expect from their democratically elected leaders.”

He added that the contacts between Montenegro and the EU were close and frequent, including meetings in which he participates personally. Indeed, Hahn visited Montenegro in December and Prime Minister Marković was in Brussels in January.

“I look forward to meeting the country’s political actors, whether in government or opposition, very soon”, Hahn said. He also insisted that when looking at current developments, one should not lose sight of the broader picture, which in his words for Montenegro is “overall positive”.

“With 26 negotiating chapters opened, with legislative and institutional reforms well underway,

Montenegro is undoubtedly a frontrunner as regards EU integration. Based on our contacts with the government, the opposition and the civil society, and judging from the latest opinion polls which show an overwhelming support for the EU, I can say that Montenegro remains firmly committed to its EU path. We equally remain committed to Montenegro’s future in the EU,” the Commissioner said.

Diplomats in Podgorica recently confirmed that Montenegro was so good in the accession negotiations, that it could finish them within the mandate of the present Commission. However, they insisted that if Montenegro wants to be sure that possible referendums on its EU accession are successful, the country should address shortcomings in the fight against organised crime and the freedom of the press. Hahn to made reference to the need of “more concrete progress is needed in the rule of law”.

THE WIDER PICTURE

Asked if geopolitical games could be seen behind the increased trend of stalemates in the Western Balkans, with parliamentary boycotts being frequent in Albania and Macedonia, and the entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina pursuing divisive policies, Hahn gave a very diplomatic answer. He said that for the EU, the Western Balkans were “a real commitment, and not a geopolitical game”.

“Speaking of the wider region, the Western Balkans are not only a key priority for the EU, they are already part of the EU family,” Hahn added. “The EU is the region’s biggest investor and trading partner, helping upgrade educational systems and environmental protection, create better conditions for entrepreneurship and jobs, fight corruption and organised crime – to name just a few

avenues for our assistance. While the EU is not alone in recognising the importance of the region, we are in a unique position to help address its challenges. And as the region integrates with the EU, the benefits of this process are increasingly visible: from the thousands of students across the region broadening their perspectives and enhancing their employability through Erasmus+ to the entrepreneur who can increase his or her sales because they can now trade and travel more easily.”

“In short, for the EU the Western Balkans are a real commitment, with concrete deliverables and results, and not a geopolitical game. Of course, we cannot do the job of national authorities. All these countries must take ownership of the reforms. The pace of progress is in their hands,” the Commissioner said.



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Contact us

Arnaud Sonnet
publicaffairs@euractiv.com
tel. +32 (0)2 226 58 17

Other relevant contact

Georgi Gotev
editor@euractiv.com
tel. +32 (0)2 788 36 76