



For Montenegro, On The Brink Of Joining NATO, The Stakes Are High

Gordana Knezevic

February 4, 2017

With the country on the brink of becoming NATO's 29th member, the stakes for Montenegro are high.

Although an accession protocol has already been approved by 23 of the alliance's 28 member states, the process has been delayed in the U.S. Senate. Opponents of NATO expansion see this as a last chance to block the Balkan country's long-expected membership.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has been visiting the region this week. Speaking to journalists in Sarajevo on February 2, Stoltenberg said NATO was aware of reports of increased Russian influence in the Balkans and of Russian intervention in political processes in Montenegro.

"We are following that very closely. We work with partners, including Montenegro, to help them strengthen their intelligence capacities and defense institutions," **Stoltenberg said**, answering a journalist's question.

A day earlier, two Montenegrin opposition politicians rushed to Moscow and were received by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksei Meshkov.

Meshkov reportedly told Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, leaders of Montenegro's Democratic Front, that "dragging Montenegro into NATO may cause a rift in the country's society," **according to the Russian TASS news agency**.

Stoltenberg said he was not concerned that the misgivings about NATO expressed by U.S. President Donald Trump would delay U.S. approval of Montenegro's membership.

"I am confident that the accession protocol will be ratified by the Senate. It has already passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and it has strong bipartisan support," **he said** after meeting the Montenegrin Prime Minister Dusko Markovic.

'Useless Defense Dependent'

Opposing Montenegro's NATO membership, Doug Bandow, senior fellow at The Cato Institute, **claimed that "the Balkans is irrelevant to U.S. security** and only indirectly relevant to the protection of Europe."

If he were still around, it easy to imagine the 19th-century German statesman Otto von Bismarck immediately tweeting his own warning to Bandow about the importance of the Balkans to European peace.

"If there is ever another war in Europe," the Iron Chancellor reportedly said at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, "it will come out of some damned silly thing in the Balkans."

Bandow argues that, if Montenegro becomes a member of NATO, "Americans will have yet another essentially useless defense dependent, this one a corrupt, longtime one-party gangster state. Quite a model for future alliance expansion."

The former prime minister of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, was regularly accused of corruption by members of the opposition, but these accusations were never substantiated.

Djukanovic was the dominant figure on the Montenegrin political stage for a quarter of a century, until stepping down as prime minister after the October 2016 elections.

His Democratic Socialist Party (DPS) narrowly won the elections but was only able to form a parliamentary majority in partnership with deputies from smaller groupings representing Montenegro's various ethnic minorities.

However, the events surrounding Montenegro's October elections were dramatic even in the currently volatile Balkan context.

During the night before the election, only hours before polling booths opened on October 16, Montenegrin police -- with help from neighboring Serbia's security service -- detained 20 people suspected of plotting a violent overthrow of the government.

According to reports based on sources within the Serbian security services, the plan called for the assassination of Prime Minister Djukanovic.

Although he relinquished his prime ministerial role, Djukanovic remained as the leader of the DPS. In an **interview** with the Croatian newspaper Jutarnji List, Djukanovic said that the attempted coup was "the last attempt to divert Montenegro from the course it has been following for the past 20 years -- namely, its desire to join the EU and NATO."

On the subject of the alleged assassination plot, Djukanovic suggested that the real target was something bigger than himself.

"The target was not Milo Djukanovic as such, but the legitimate prime minister who is taking his country into the EU and NATO," he said. "They wanted to send a message to others [in the Balkans] as well. Having in mind that most countries in the region are currently at different stages of Euro-Atlantic integration, the message was that they would not be allowed to make those decisions based on their national interests."

Djukanovic added that the alleged plotters also "wanted to send a message to NATO and the EU -- that there would be no enlargement without approval from Russia."

Djukanovic also said that we "can only speculate" about allegations that Russia was involved in the foiled October plot.

Nonetheless, he added that "Moscow officials had been issuing warnings to Montenegro to stay away from NATO, arguing that it would destabilize the country."

"As our membership talks progressed, the tone of those warnings was becoming harsher," he said. "That was followed by obvious [Russian] support for Montenegrin opposition groups ahead of the parliamentary elections. We are talking about anti-NATO, anti-European, and, in essence, anti-Montenegrin parties run by the same people who had been the foremost opponents of Montenegro's declaration of independence [in 2006]. They continued to receive substantial support from Moscow in their struggle to reverse the country's decision on NATO and EU membership."

Litmus Test?

Although Moscow made an official announcement after the failed coup attempt that Russia had nothing to do with the events in Montenegro, Djukanovic described the Kremlin's statement as "not convincing."

Michael Haltzel, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins' Center for Transatlantic Relations, has **suggested** that the U.S. Senate vote on Montenegro could be seen as a litmus test for the United States' foreign-policy independence.

"The U.S. Senate should ratify Montenegro's membership as soon as possible, and President Trump should formalize it," Haltzel wrote. "For Trump to do otherwise would show the world that during his presidency the Kremlin will exercise unprecedented influence on U.S. foreign policy."

Acknowledging that Podgorica finds itself on the brink of NATO accession at a time of fraught international relations and rising tensions in the Balkans, Djukanovic indicated that Montenegro was still correct to pursue membership in the alliance, saying that the country was now "in the right place at the wrong time."

Should Montenegro eventually join NATO, it will become the third ex-Yugoslav country to enter the alliance, after Croatia and Slovenia.