



A YEAR IN RETROSPECT: WHAT DOES THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE MEAN FOR MONTENEGRO?

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A few weeks after the infamous anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I had the opportunity to look back on how the war events in Ukraine reflected on the political situation in Montenegro. I would situate the answer to this question in the context of democratic consolidation or backsliding, and it seems that the democratic processes in Montenegro advanced dominantly, following the EU conditionality policy, while they regressed and stumbled in place, aided by foreign malignant influences, primarily Russian. In the face of the Russian invasion, the EU seemed to be losing the race, and the region, not only Montenegro, was sinking into the dark ideas of the 1990s. Let's face it, Milorad Dodik's recent moves, pushing the narrative of Republika Srpska independence as well as the «law on foreign agents,» continue to testify in favor of that claim and paint a grim political picture of the region with little reason for optimism.

But it exists. In addition to all the attempts at political suicide by passing unconstitutional laws on local self-government and the President, as well as months-long media fights about the appointment of constitutional court judges (without exaggeration, one could call it a reality show «Constitutional Court»), the door of the EU was open for Montenegro. Several political moves by the EU in the past year have demonstrated a renewed commitment to the integration process. The summit of the Berlin Process in December 2022 was a step in the right direction, and the German-French plan for Serbia and Kosovo relations, at least in a symbolic sense, demonstrates the desire to stabilize political conditions in the region. A recent example in Montenegro is the energy aid package launched in March, in the amount of 30 million euros, intended for vulnerable categories to ease the economic consequences of the Russian invasion. During the presentation of the program, the EU Ambassador to Montenegro, Oana Kristina Popa, emphasized that «we want the citizens of Montenegro to feel the benefits of the EU in their daily lives as soon as possible.» A possible motivation behind such programs is the EU's desire to limit the space for the Ukrainian scenario in the Balkans, but the «jury is still out» on their effectiveness.

At the moment, it seems that Russia's poor strategic position in the war in Ukraine significantly limits the amount of attention they are willing to devote to the Western Balkans region. The previous two election processes in Montenegro speak in favor of this - despite their importance for the redistribution of political power in the country, it seems that the influence of the foreign factor was significantly smaller than before. Unlike the Battle for Nikšić, when the media machines from Serbia harnessed all their capacities for the political campaign of the pro-Serbian/Russian parties, we did not witness the battles for Podgorica or the President of Montenegro. Nevertheless, it would be naive to conclude that, due to the lack of visible influence

on current political processes, Russian policy in the Balkans is limited, because the damage has already been done. At the beginning of March, a gathering of support for Russia was organized in front of the Parliament of Montenegro with indicative banners, especially the one that said – «Serbs in Montenegro, Russians in Ukraine.» Political processes have slowed down significantly, and EU integration has stopped; the democratic functionality of institutions has been called into question like never before (the dissolved Parliament is still in session, and the Prime Minister persistently calls on the newly elected President to violate the Constitution as soon as he takes office), and it is almost unnecessary to talk about the turn and transformation of values as well as the cultural aspects of society. The strength and spread of Russian influence can simply be demonstrated by the fact that on the occasion of Journalists' Day, January 23 this year, the Association of Journalists of Montenegro decided that it was the right moment to award the propaganda Russian newspaper Sputnik Srbija as the best regional portal in 2022, grant the Memorial for 150 years of journalism in Montenegro (1871-2021) to the Union of Journalists of Russia, as well as posthumously award Daria Dugina (one of the most active media supporters and patrons of Russian aggression against Ukraine).

The space for malignant Russian influence is, it seems, a consequence of the cyclical nature of Montenegrin social and political processes. Fundamental questions about the direction of the development of Montenegrin society are being discussed repeatedly in Montenegro. While the political conflict in Montenegro has a pronounced ethnic dimension, it is also grounded in value differences. First of all – do we strive for Western civilization's achievements and democracy or Eastern despotism and religious fundamentalism? I don't know, ask the Assembly of the Municipality of Zeta about the initiative to annul the decision of the recognition of Kosovo's independence on the territory of that municipality.

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