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The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Montenegro

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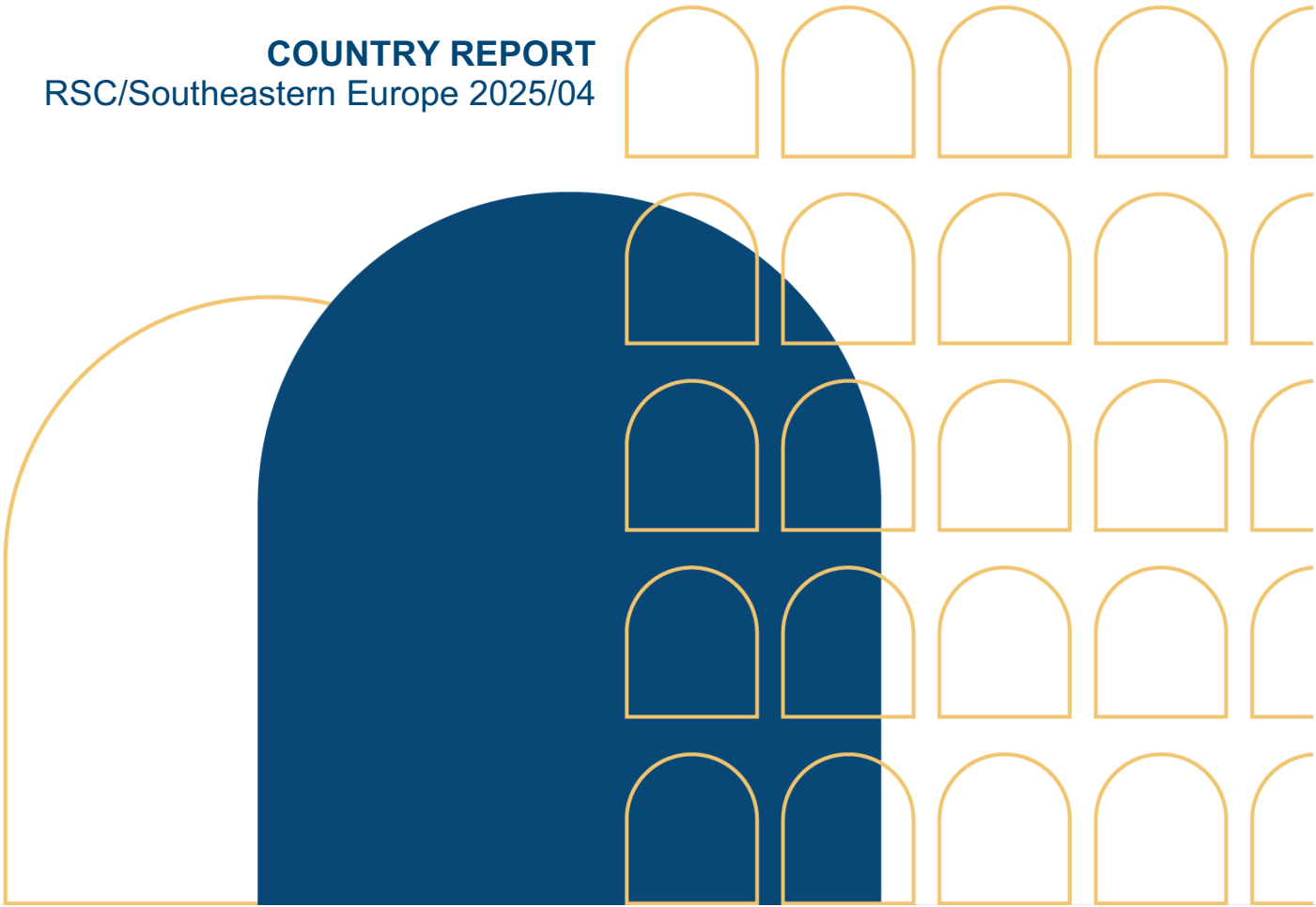

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The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Montenegro

Jiří Němec[1]

1. Introduction

Montenegro's democracy has seen significant challenges, including fallacies in implementing the rule of law, highly politicised judiciary, cases of corruption and criminal activity involving high-level officials, or overall political instability and limited media freedom, as pointed out by the European Union's (EU) 2023 report on Montenegro (DG NEAR 2023). While the country officially remains on a path toward EU integration, its democratic standards have deteriorated, with issues such as state capture, weakened judicial independence, or media independence under threat (Kmezić 2020; Džankić and Keil 2017). Despite Freedom House reports describing Montenegro as a leader in the EU integration processes in the 2020-2024 period, it was still considered as only partly free, primarily because of the widespread patronage system and corruption. Polarisation, often along ethno-religious lines or concerning economic cleavages, has also strained political processes and served as rifts exploitable by illiberal foreign actors, including the Russian Federation (RF) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Analyst Vuk Vuksanović (2023) highlights that Russia is seen as a traditional, historically bound actor in the Balkans, whereas China is mainly perceived as a newcomer to the region. While Russian influence is often multiplied and catalysed by the behaviour of the Serbian elites in pursuit of their regional ambitions, only Russia and China are in the focus of this report as the two external global powers whose influence on Montenegro's democratic trajectory is the most notable. It does not mean other actors, malign or not, such as the EU, the NATO, Serbia, or Turkey, and the Gulf states, do not strive to exert influence over Montenegro.

The key objective of this report is to offer an understanding of how the two malign actors under scrutiny here influence democratization efforts. Scholars have extensively critiqued the inefficacy of democracy promotion mechanisms in the wider Balkan region, pointing to the EU's inability to foster substantial democratic reforms (e.g. Đorđević, Turcsányi and Vučkovič 2021). However, they have often failed to explore the link between geopolitical security dynamics, foreign malign influence, and democratic decline. The narrow focus on institutional shortcomings neglects how external influences, such as global geopolitical shifts, intentional foreign interference and influence operations, or competition for regional dominance, directly undermine democratic transition and consolidation. This gap overlooks how international actors exploit internal socio-political cleavages, economic dependencies and democratic vulnerabilities to advance their strategic interests, which, consequently, also complicates the EU's role in assisting long-term democratic stability.

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Russia is the dominant actor in this regard as it has a long-standing and deeply rooted influence in Montenegro. It plays a significant role in Montenegrin democratic decline, often working in synergy with the "brotherly" Serbia to push its own geopolitical interests. Russia exerts influence through a deliberate combination of political, economic, and cultural means, also known in Russian military-strategic jargon as the *kombinatsiya* (see e.g. Giles, Sherr and Seaboyer 2018), employing a mix of propaganda, disinformation, and support for pro-Russian proxy actors to destabilise Montenegro's political environment. Historically, Russia has sought to maintain its sphere of influence in the Balkans, and Montenegro's NATO accession in 2017 was seen as a blow to Moscow's regional aspirations.

While much attention is given to Russian influence, China has quietly expanded its footprint in the Balkans, including Montenegro, particularly through economic means, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[2], or the China-CEE[3] mechanism. The most prominent example is furnished by large-scale infrastructure investments. Growing financial dependence on the PRC has weakened the country's leverage in negotiations with the EU and has provided China with soft power influence. Although China does not oppose Montenegro's EU integration, its involvement complicates this path as it creates exploitable economic vulnerabilities and introduces an alternative governance model focused on economic development rather than democratic standards. Presenting itself as a non-interfering partner, China indirectly undermines the EU's efforts to promote the rule of law and democratic accountability, contributing to democratic backsliding (Pizzolo 2024; Garlick n.d.). The narrative of China as a non-interfering actor does not necessarily align with the executed practice of the country's strategic, cultural, and global objectives.

This report examines the external geopolitical influences on Montenegro, focusing solely on Russia and China. It discusses their distinct strategies, such as Russia's use of cultural, political, and religious ties, China's economic leverage buildup through infrastructure projects, and their impact on Montenegro's democratic institutions and the EU integration process. The report highlights how these two actors exploit vulnerabilities to undermine democratic governance, while inviting comparison with broader trends in the Western Balkans.

2. Geopoliticising the State of Democracy

Montenegro's democracy and institutions have faced increasing pressure, and its EU integration process has stalled despite initial progress. Recent developments point to a series factors contributing to democratic backsliding, including state capture, clientelism, patronage, weak rule of law, and pervasive corruption (Kmezić 2020; Džankić and Keil 2017). Internal political instability, regional ethno-national tensions, or malign external geopolitical influences

[2] The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's global infrastructure and investment strategy, aiming to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation between Asia, Europe, and Africa. In the Western Balkans, the BRI focuses on infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications projects, reflecting China's ambitions to strengthen its influence in the region and create trade corridors linking Europe to Chinese markets. In Montenegro, the BRI's centrepiece is the Bar-Boljare highway project. BRI projects in the Western Balkans also include energy investments, often characterised by state-backed Chinese loans and reliance on Chinese engineering, creating opportunities for influence while exacerbating financial risks for host countries and exemplifying the region's challenges, such as increased debt dependency and environmental concerns (Mardell n.d.).

[3] The so-called Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEE, or China-CEEC, also 14+1; formerly 17+1 from 2019 to 2021 and 16+1 from 2012 to 2022) has been a key tool in promoting Chinese engagement with the Western Balkans, launched in 2012 to foster business and investment relations in the frame of the BRI (Pizzolo 2024).

have exacerbated these issues. Scholarly attention to Montenegro's democratic decline has expanded (see e.g. Đuković 2024, Sotiropoulos 2023, Stankov 2023, or Komar 2020), but critical areas remain underexplored, including the role of external actors in shaping this trajectory.

Montenegro officially remains a candidate for EU membership and, as of October 2024, has opened all the 35 negotiation chapters, with three chapters (25. *Science and research*, 26. *Education and culture*, and 30. *External relations*) provisionally closed (DG NEAR 2023, 2024). The EU's criticism largely focused on Montenegro's lack of substantive reforms in the rule of law and governance sectors. The failure to surpass EU benchmarks, particularly in fighting corruption and establishing judicial independence (DG NEAR 2023), has since 2016-2017 led to growing scepticism about whether Montenegro is genuinely committed to the European path (Nenezić and Kecojević 2019). Such a period ended in June 2024 as Montenegro was granted a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report in the wider rule of law area (Chapters 23 and 24), confirming Montenegrin pro-EU progress and political direction (EEAS 2024). Furthermore, Montenegrin citizens seem to be increasingly pro-European as the support for membership rose from 54 per cent to 78 per cent in the last four years, and the EU is seen as a foreign policy priority by more than 70 per cent of Montenegrin citizens (CEDEM 2024).

Scholarship on Montenegro's democratic backsliding has primarily concentrated on several vital frameworks, each providing valuable insights into the country's struggles. However, it sometimes overlooks the interplay between global geopolitics and internal democratic erosion. Bieber (2018) has described Montenegro as a "stabilitocracy," where international actors, particularly the EU, prioritise political stability over democratic reforms. The ruling elites are tolerated or even supported by the EU because they maintain regional stability, even if they subvert democratic norms. The EU's leniency towards these elites has thus contributed to the stagnation of Montenegro's democratic development, which is undoubtedly a significant geopolitical influence. Stojanović (2020) has further described the country as a 'hybrid regime' due to the decline in democratic standards, especially concerning good governance, judicial independence, elections, corruption, and media freedom. Analysts have noted that the rise in populism is part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans. Contributions from local think tanks like the MANS national report (2021) emphasise state capture as a core issue in Montenegro's democratic decline. A study by Tena Prelec (2020) illustrates how political elites in Montenegro manipulate institutions for personal and political gain, stalling democratic reforms and perpetuating a culture of impunity. Europeanization, as the process by which EU norms and democratic values are transmitted to candidate countries, has been incomplete and uneven in Montenegro, especially concerning the limitations of EU conditionality in pushing for genuine reforms in the face of entrenched political elites and external interferences, mainly from Russa and China (Vučković 2021) as these actors seek to counterbalance Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Conley and Melino 2019; Pizzolo 2024).

There is a growing body of work on external actors in the Balkans, especially Russian influence through economic ties, disinformation campaigns, political financing, or support for anti-NATO and anti-EU movements in Montenegro (see e.g.: Loshaj 2024; Stefanov and Vladimirov 2020; Bechev 2019; or Bajrović, Garčević and Kreamer 2018). Additionally, Serbian political and cultural influence, mainly through the Serbian Orthodox Church, strongly aligned with the Russian Orthodox Church being a proxy tool of the Kremlin (Conley and Melino 2019), has been well documented. China's influence, however, has received less attention in the academic literature, even though its role in Montenegro's economic affairs is becoming increasingly significant as Chinese loans and infrastructure projects created financial dependency and *debt trap*, thus weakened Montenegro's institutional resilience, leaving it vulnerable to external influence. Pizzolo (2024), Stankov (2023) or MANS (2018), have raised

concerns about how such economic dependencies complicate EU accession efforts through increasing the public debt, undermining fiscal stability and limiting the government's capacity to prioritize the EU-required reforms, such as strengthening transparency and reducing corruption.

3. Identifying the Geopolitical Actors

Russia and China exert different types and degrees of influence on Montenegro, each leveraging their global or regional geopolitical aspirations and strategic interests to shape the country's political, economic, and, to a lesser extent, security landscape. At the global level, these actors pursue long-term strategic goals aligned with and based on their international influence, global standing, and strategic cultures. Regionally, they seek to maintain or expand their presence in the Balkans as it represents a contested geopolitical space where they can exploit economic, cultural, and political vulnerabilities to expand their influence and challenge Western integration efforts. At the same time, locally in Montenegro, their influence is a mix of economic investment, political manoeuvring, supporting or opposing important socio-political actors, and cultural and religious engagement. The nature of their interference often exploits Montenegro's geopolitical vulnerability as a small state[4] balancing between Euro-Atlantic integration and Eastern pressure (Bianchini 2020).

Montenegro's relations with Russia have significantly shifted over time, reflecting broader geopolitical tensions. During the early 2000s, Russia was a critical political and economic partner for the country, especially in energy, industry, tourism, and real estate (Injac and Goranović 2023). Russian businesses and oligarchs invested heavily in Montenegro's real estate, particularly in coastal areas like Sveti Stefan. Politically, the Kremlin viewed Montenegro as part of its historical sphere of influence in the Balkans, with shared Slavic and Orthodox Christian ties shaping diplomatic relations.

Montenegro's independence from the state union with Serbia in 2006 and, more importantly, its accession to NATO in 2017 marked a turning point, drastically souring bilateral relations. Russia vehemently opposed Montenegro's NATO membership, viewing it as a strategic loss in the Balkans, and allegedly backed a coup attempt in 2016 to prevent this alignment (Bechev 2019). Economic ties also deteriorated since Montenegro fully aligned with EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and with sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the open war against Ukraine in 2022. However, Russia is still strategically important player in Montenegro and its influence further lingers through political (former Democratic Front or New Serb Democracy and Democratic People's Party), media (such as *IN4S*, *Borba*, *Prva TV*, *Adria TV* or *Aloonline.me* portal; see Digitalni Forenzički Centar 2024) and social media channels (mainly Telegram[5]), promoting anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives.

[4] A small state is defined by its limited material resources, population size, and economic capacity. Key features include dependency on external alliances, susceptibility to global shocks, and specialization in niche diplomacy or economics. Small states often rely on trade and aid, leaving them vulnerable to external shocks and global market volatility. Narrowly focused economies, such as on tourism as in case of Montenegro, heighten this interdependence. With limited military budgets, small states are vulnerable to external coercion and influence, and heavily depend on alliances or multilateral organizations like NATO for assistance and protection (Baldacchino and Wivel 2020).

[5] As of autumn 2024, at least 50 Telegram accounts were identified active in Montenegro, promoting anti-Western narratives. There was strong evidence of these accounts being affiliated to the Russian Federation, despite intentionally bearing Ukrainian names (for the purpose to be blamed). Narratives spread on these Telegram accounts were further disseminated on Twitter/X and supported by

Russia's promulgated global goal is to counter NATO and EU expansion, particularly in the former post-communist countries (Bechev 2021). Montenegro's NATO membership represents a strategic defeat, but Russia continues to undermine the Western alliance through *kombinatsiya of* disinformation, cyber-attacks, and political meddling. In Montenegro, Russia's strategy focuses on destabilising pro-Western forces and supporting pro-Serbian political factions that advocate for closer ties with Moscow. Disinformation campaigns and support for political parties or alliances like the former Democratic Front[6] alliance highlight Moscow's tactical approach to preserving influence despite Montenegro's pro-EU and NATO stance (Bechev 2019). Russian rhetoric emphasises defending Orthodox Christianity and Slavic unity, often using anti-Western, anti-liberal, and socially conservative discourse to capitalise on Montenegrin societal polarisation. The Kremlin uses soft power through the Serbian Orthodox Church, heavily influenced by the Moscow Patriarchate, and media outlets to exploit ethnic tensions and fuel nationalist and revisionist sentiments. A prime example was fuelling the Montenegrin-Serbian dispute with disinformation and influence operations following the adoption of the so-called Law on Freedom of Religion in Montenegro in late 2019 (EUvsDisinfo 2020; Němec 2020).

China's relationship with Montenegro is primarily economic, characterised by Beijing's use of infrastructure investment as part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative and its general strategy of pursuing *political warfare* to recreate the world order to Chinese will (Gershaneck 2020). While political and military ties between China and Montenegro are minimal, economic relations have deepened significantly in recent years. China's investments are primarily focused on infrastructure and energy, with Chinese companies involved in major projects such as the Bar-Boljare and Adriatic-Ionian highways construction, Kolasin-Kos railway rehabilitation, renewal of several ship fleets or upgrade of Pljevlja lignite-fed power plant (BIRN n.d.). Beijing's strategy emphasises economic cooperation without the conditionality of democratic reforms, contrasting with the EU's governance and transparency demands, indirectly pushing burdened states into the hands of Chinese authoritarianism. Another negative externality may potentially materialise in environmental degradation in operation areas of PRC-run entities, as is the case, in the region, in neighbouring Serbia concerning, among others, the Kostolac power plant, the Bor copper mine, or the Zrenjanin tyre-processing factory.

Globally, China's strategy in Montenegro fits within its broader goal of longitudinal gradual small-step expansion of influence, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-CEE mechanism, and other economic incentives. Montenegro's strategic location on the Adriatic makes it an attractive investment destination for Beijing, especially as part of its effort to create

automated bot accounts. These information were acquired during interview with an exiled member of Russian opposition held under Chatham House Rule.

[6] The Democratic Front was a political coalition founded in 2012, composed of several parties, primarily pro-Serbian and pro-Russian in orientation. The coalition included groups such as the New Serb Democracy (NSD), the Democratic People's Party (DNP), and the Movement for Changes (PzP), among others. Its ideological focus combined Serbian nationalism, Russophilia, and opposition to NATO membership, advocating for the withdrawal of Montenegro from NATO and the repeal of its recognition of Kosovo's independence. The DF was pivotal in opposing the long-dominant Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of Milo Đukanović. In 2020, it played a significant role in unseating the DPS after nearly three decades of rule, contributing to the formation of a new government coalition. However, internal divisions and dissatisfaction with governance reforms eventually led to the dissolution of the DF in 2023. The DF's positions were often controversial, particularly its alignment with Serbian and Russian interests. Its activities, such as protests against the Montenegrin government's actions regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church and its criticism of EU sanctions against Russia, have highlighted its ideological leanings (EWB 2023).

a trade and infrastructure network that links Asia to Europe (Kovačević 2022; Wang 2016). Regionally, the PRC seeks to build relationships with the Balkans dominantly through investment and trade. The focus is on economic interdependency, offering large infrastructure loans that bind countries to China economically, in line with the often misunderstood Chinese strategic culture and *political warfare* strategy. Chinese impact has been evident in Montenegro's significant debt to China, which has raised concerns over the state's economic sovereignty (Prelec 2020; Dordević, Turcsanyi and Vučković 2021). Nevertheless, the Chinese "hotspot" in the Western Balkans remains in neighbouring Serbia (Stojkovski et al. 2021). Locally, China's tactical influence is also primarily economic. The financial dependence created by Chinese loans gives Beijing soft power leverage. It subtly provides an alternative model to Western governance as it does not employ Western economic, human rights, environmental and other conditionalities. However, the PRC has so far avoided formal entanglement in Montenegro's domestic political issues. Chinese rhetoric focuses on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, positioning Beijing as a neutral, development-focused partner (Rolland 2017).

In sum, Russia and China each pursue distinct, yet sometimes overlapping and mutually reinforcing, strategies in Montenegro. Russia leverages historical, cultural, and political ties to undermine Montenegro's Western orientation and strives to conserve what has remained of its former economic presence. On its own or via Serbian proxies, RF focuses on ethnic and religious aspects to spread pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox revisionist narratives. China, by contrast, operates mainly through economic means, using infrastructure investments to deepen financial dependencies that can be further exploited in case of need in line with the PRC's long-term strategic thought.

4. Systematising the Channels of Influence

Russia's influence in Montenegro operates through a combination of formal and informal channels. While formal ties between the two countries have weakened since Montenegro's alignment with the EU following both 2014 and 2022 invasions to Ukraine and its NATO accession in 2017, informal channels remain potent. These include personal networks, political party affiliations, and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on its Serbian counterpart present in Montenegro, which all have been leveraged in line with the *kombinatsiya* approach to maintain a foothold in Montenegro despite its formal pro-Western orientation and somewhat strained diplomatic relations.

For instance, in 2016, foreign direct investments from RF to Montenegro represented around 30 per cent of Montenegro's GDP and 13 per cent of all inward FDI, making Russia the country's single largest investor that year. However, formal economic ties have waned in recent years due to Montenegro's alignment with EU sanctions, legal constraints imposed on Russian oligarchs, or the NATO accession. Different channels of influence have, however, emerged and developed instead. In 2017, following the NATO accession, RF launched a substantial media offensive to portray Montenegro as a dangerous, criminal country to divert Russian tourism as one of the punishments. Nevertheless, in 2019, Russian citizens still constituted the most significant part of Montenegro's tourism, which made a 20 per cent share of the country's GDP (Conley and Melino 2019). Furthermore, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian nationals represented the largest group of asylum seekers in Montenegro (DG NEAR 2023). Out of total 623 633 inhabitants, 2,06 per cent now declare themselves as Russians and 2,36 per cent speak Russian as their mother tongue (MONSTAT 2024).

Informally, Russia continues to influence Montenegro through its ties with political parties and media and via its conservative religious influence. The Democratic Front, a former Montenegrin political coalition that swayed from catch-all liberal conservativism to right-wing populism and Serbian nationalism, is a notable example of a political actor with solid pro-Russian sentiments. The DF has been accused of accepting financial and political support from Moscow in return for promoting anti-NATO and anti-EU agendas, seeking to shift public opinion to support Russia's geopolitical goals (Bechev 2019). Although the alliance ceased to exist in May 2023, some of its successor parties – New Serb Democracy, led by Andrija Mandić, and the Democratic People's Party, led by Milan Knežević – remain relatively potent, pursuing revisionist, pro-Serb, anti-West, socially and religiously conservative, and right-wing populist ideologies. Russia also uses its state-funded media outlets, such as Sputnik and Russia Today, to disseminate disinformation and polarising content, aiming to undermine Western institutions and foment public distrust in Montenegro's pro-EU trajectory. Nevertheless, the Montenegro-NATO relationship and the former's integration into intelligence-sharing and security protocols of the latter, has entirely foreclosed military cooperation with Russia since 2017.

The line between formal and informal influence can be blurred. For instance, formal economic investments in tourism and real estate may still provide Russia with relatively informal leverage. On the contrary, the 2016 coup attempt, allegedly supported by Russian agents of the 29155 GRU unit[7], illustrates how political influence through proxy actors may directly interfere with democratic processes. Russian influence in Montenegro, though contested, is resilient and exerted primarily through soft power mechanisms. While formal economic ties have weakened, they remain exploitable, and the presence of pro-Russian (social) media and the entanglement of Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches ensures a persistent socio-cultural and ideological connection with substantial parts of the population. In 2024, the portion of citizens self-identifying as of Serb ethnicity increased to 33 per cent, and the identification of Orthodox believers amounted to 71 per cent of the population (Višnjić 2024). Furthermore, the Kremlin also weaponizes the historical role of the Russian Empire as the defender and protector of its Slavic brethren in Montenegro while equating the then enemy, the Ottoman Empire, for the now enemy, the West (Conley and Melino 2019); the idea of Slavic world under Russian patronage is thus kept alive.

Russia's ability to operationalise its influence in Montenegro is evident in its support for anti-Western political forces and its dissemination of disinformation and information operations. The alleged coup attempt in 2016 shows how far Russian actors are possibly willing to go to prevent Montenegro's NATO accession. However, while Russia's soft power can influence public opinion, its ability to effect regime change or directly shift Montenegro's foreign policy is limited due to the country's official Euro-Atlantic commitments. As the citizens strongly support

[7] The Democratic Front was a political coalition founded in 2012, composed of several parties, primarily pro-Serbian and pro-Russian in orientation. The coalition included groups such as the New Serb Democracy (NSD), the Democratic People's Party (DNP), and the Movement for Changes (PzP), among others. Its ideological focus combined Serbian nationalism, Russophilia, and opposition to NATO membership, advocating for the withdrawal of Montenegro from NATO and the repeal of its recognition of Kosovo's independence. The DF was pivotal in opposing the long-dominant Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of Milo Đukanović. In 2020, it played a significant role in unseating the DPS after nearly three decades of rule, contributing to the formation of a new government coalition. However, internal divisions and dissatisfaction with governance reforms eventually led to the dissolution of the DF in 2023. The DF's positions were often controversial, particularly its alignment with Serbian and Russian interests. Its activities, such as protests against the Montenegrin government's actions regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church and its criticism of EU sanctions against Russia, have highlighted its ideological leanings (EWB 2023).

the pro-EU (to a lesser extent pro-NATO) foreign policy orientation (CEDEM 2024), Russian influence is currently more likely to stir social unrest or political instability than to influence directly government decisions at this stage. However, as Western secret services publicly warn against increasing Russian aggressivity on European soil since the 2022 invasion to Ukraine (Jones, Rathbone and Milne 2024, Burns and Moore 2024), this dimension may be taken advantage of in the future to destabilise the wider Western Balkans.

Although informal channels are beginning to emerge as China seeks to expand its soft power in the region, its influence in Montenegro is primarily economic, operating through formal channels such as investment in infrastructure projects.

The most significant mechanism of Chinese influence is the Bar-Boljare highway, financed by approximately $943 million (Stankov 2023) initial loan from the Export-Import Bank of China. This project has been highly controversial due to concerns over debt sustainability, as Montenegro now owes nearly 20 per cent of its GDP to China (Stankov 2023, Stojkovski et al. 2021). Furthermore, after initiation, the country's debt-to-GDP ratio skyrocketed to 105 per cent of GDP in 2020, compared to 79 per cent in 2019 (Injac and Goranović 2023). This massive investment has led to significant debt dependency, making Montenegro vulnerable to Chinese economic influence, and the PRC is also pursuing several more projects in areas of infrastructure and energy. Politically, China maintains a low profile, preferring to operate through formal economic agreements rather than overt political meddling. Militarily, there is little cooperation between the two countries. Informally, China's influence is less pronounced but is growing through study and research exchange programs or Confucius Institutes across the whole Balkans, which aim at building soft power by promoting pro-PRC language and socio-cultural worldviews in Montenegro (Kovačević 2022). These initiatives are part of China's holistic strategic culture and *political warfare* to enhance its regional image and foster goodwill among local populations. Nevertheless, the true face of Sino-Montenegrin relations often relies on the "pro-Westness" of the latter's government (Bogojević 2022).

China's influence in Montenegro is exerted primarily through economic channels, with the country's debt dependency being the most significant lever. While infrastructure investment, such as through the BRI, is a formal mechanism, the resulting financial dependency creates informal political pressure. Although seemingly cultural, China's soft power initiatives also aim to shape public opinion to accept Chinese values and align political elites and society with Chinese interests, subtly influencing policy decisions. Although the PRC's direct interference in internal politics is limited compared to Russian methods, its financial clout could shape Montenegro's long-term economic and foreign policies. If Montenegro defaults on its debt, China may use this as an opportunity to exert tremendous political pressure, aligning the country more closely with Beijing's global strategy.

5. The Outcomes of Externalities in Transitional Contexts

Russia's adverse effect on Montenegro's democratic institutions and processes has manifested primarily through the promotion of political polarisation, support for pro-Russian political parties, and disinformation campaigns. One of the most striking cases of Russian interference was the alleged coup attempt in 2016, where Russian actors were accused of plotting to overthrow Montenegro's government and prevent its accession to NATO (Galeotti 2018). This event exemplifies Russia's use of covert operations and support for anti-Western forces to undermine democratic institutions, a trend increasingly seen across Europe in the last years. Russia employs information operations through its media channels, such as Sputnik and Russia Today, or affiliated social media networks, such as Telegram, which promote

narratives that question the legitimacy of Western institutions and Montenegro's alignment with the EU and NATO. This media influence deepens societal divisions, as pro-Russian sentiments are often tied to Orthodox Christian and pan-Slavic identities (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023), creating a cultural counterweight to Montenegro's Western orientation. While 24 per cent of Montenegrins believe that solely Vladimir Putin and Russia are responsible for the 2022 full-scale invasion, and 33 per cent perceive the conflict as Russian aggression; 26 per cent would say "everyone is to blame", or 20 per cent would not have an opinion in the former aspect. Furthermore, 29 per cent believe the conflict to be Russian defence against NATO and 38 per cent does not have an opinion (CEDEM 2024). These numbers are critical if we understand that disinformation and information operations' goal is not primarily to persuade but rather to create informational congestion, distrust in objective truth, and overall disinterest and apathy (Hameleers 2023).

The political consequences of Russian interference are evident in Montenegro's increasingly polarised political landscape. By supporting political parties such as the former Democratic Front or successor New Serb Democracy and Democratic People's Party, Russia has directly influenced Montenegro's internal divisions over issues such as NATO membership and EU integration. These political entities had consistently opposed Montenegro's Western alignment, promoting closer ties with Russia and Serbia, which has weakened pro-democracy and pro-EU forces within Montenegro's political system, hampering efforts to consolidate democratic reforms (Bechev 2019).

Economically, Russian influence has declined, especially following Montenegro's alignment with EU's CSFP and sanctions imposed after both the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. However, Russian nationals continue to invest in Montenegro and hold a sizeable share of the country's foreign direct investments inflows, mainly as they constituted the vast majority (together with Chinese) of applicants for the controversial "golden passports" awarded by Montenegro during its 2019-2022 investor citizenship scheme (Rudović 2023, DG NEAR 2023). Between February 2022 and July 2023, 5,846 companies were opened by Russian citizens in Montenegro, out of which 64 per cent, however, had no more than one employee and 22 per cent have no registered employees other than the founder. In 2022 solely, Russian nationals shared 54 per cent of the total number of foreign-owned companies in Montenegro (Vlada Crne Gore n. d.). Experts say the data suggests Russians are opening firms not to do business, but to secure residence (Ivanović 2023). This can indirectly influence local decision-making, particularly as certain political elites may benefit from Russian capital flows, and it poses some risk for money laundering, tax evasion, terrorist financing, corruption, or infiltration by organised crime.

Russia's influence on Montenegro's democratic institutions is likely to continue through disinformation campaigns, support for pro-Russian social and political groups, and conservative religious influence via the close ties of Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches. As Montenegro faces further pressure to align more closely with EU standards and undergo reforms, Russia will likely intensify its efforts to disrupt these processes. Future interference could also take the form of cyber-attacks or covert operations aimed at destabilising the Montenegrin government, similar to what has already been observed in Montenegro or recently in wider Europe. Apart from the aforementioned coup attempt, Russia-affiliated cyber espionage group conducted a number of serious cyber-attacks on Montenegro already in 2017 (Tomović and Živanović 2018), in context of NATO accession, and Russian secret services were behind a cyber-attack on Montenegrin government servers in 2022 (Kajošević 2022).

China's influence in Montenegro is primarily economic, with the Bar-Boljare highway project being the most prominent example of how Chinese investments can undermine democratic processes and institutions. Montenegro's loan from China's Export-Import Bank for this

infrastructure project has created a significant debt burden, giving China economic leverage over the country's political decisions (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019) while stressing Montenegro to seek economic support in covering the loan elsewhere (the EU, transnational private sector). This debt dependency has raised concerns about Montenegro's ability to maintain its sovereignty and pursue democratic reforms free from external pressures. While China's influence is largely confined to economic realm, the political implications of its economic presence cannot be ignored since such an interdependence poses an exploitable vulnerability and moves Montenegro to subordinate position to China (Vučković 2024). Especially as Chinese companies often operate within projects concerning critical infrastructure, yet according to Chinese, not local, laws (ibid.), and with little transparency; thus, bypassing local democratic oversight and weakening institutional checks and balances (Pizzolo 2024).

Politically, like other countries heavily indebted to China, Montenegro may find itself constrained in its ability to criticise Beijing's policies or align fully with Western positions on cybersecurity, human rights, or foreign investment transparency. This softening of democratic values is a subtle but significant consequence of China's economic leverage. Economically, Montenegro's debt to China represents a long-term vulnerability. Should Montenegro default on its loan payments, China could seek to extract political or economic concessions, further undermining the country's ability to operate independently within the EU framework. Such a *debt trap diplomacy* could weaken Montenegro's democratic institutions (Adarov, Grübler and Holzner 2018) by shifting decision-making power away from elected officials and towards technocratic, business, or external entities influenced by Chinese interests.

In the future, China's influence in Montenegro could grow with its economic footprint, in particular if accompanied by foreign policy reorientation of some future cabinet. The Bar-Boljare highway project, while economically burdensome, may serve as a precedent for future Chinese investments in Montenegro's infrastructure and energy sectors, as well as discouragement should economic, societal, or environmental impact exceed society's tolerance. A gradual erosion of democratic oversight will likely accompany this expansion of Chinese economic influence, as Chinese companies often operate with minimal transparency and accountability, and manage not to be tied by local laws, as seen in neighbouring Serbia. In the long term, debt dependency risks pushing the country to align more closely with Chinese geopolitical interests, compromising its commitments to democratic governance and EU integration.

6. Key Highlights

This report elaborates on two prominent external geopolitical actors present in Montenegro, their strategies, mechanisms of influence, and the impact of these activities on the country’s democratic institutions. The primary malign actors concerned are the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, both of which exert significant but distinct influences on Montenegro. This does not imply that other actors such as the EU, the NATO, Serbia, Turkey, or others, are not present in Montenegro with their own particular interests, malign or beneficial.

The Russian Federation and China are the primary non-democratic actors influencing Montenegro’s political landscape. Russia has a long-established influence in the region and is often perceived as a protector of Slavic and Orthodox Christian interests. It seeks to maintain its influence dominantly through cultural and political ties, often exploiting historical connections and leveraging Serbia as a proxy. At the same time, China is a more recent entrant, primarily exerting influence through economic channels. China’s involvement is more subtle, meant to be gradual and longitudinal but is equally impactful, focusing on economic

interdependence, particularly through infrastructure projects such as the Bar-Boljare highway. Both actors operate with overlapping goals of counterbalancing Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly its alignment with the EU and NATO.

The strategies employed by Russia and China vary across global, regional, and local levels. Globally, Russia's objective is to prevent the further expansion of NATO and the EU, viewing Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017 as a significant strategic loss. Moscow's tactics include *kombinatsiya* of political financing, disinformation campaigns, and leveraging ethno-religious ties to promote anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives. Also, in case the Russian Federation was truly behind the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro, it would eventually underline its willingness to use covert operations to thwart Western alignment. On the other hand, China operates primarily through economic means, using infrastructure investments under the BRI and China-CEE platforms to increase financial dependence. The $943 million loan for the Bar-Boljare highway has placed Montenegro in a vulnerable economic position, making it susceptible to Chinese influence. While China avoids overt political interference, its economic presence indirectly undermines EU influence by offering a development model without democratic conditionality. China's soft power efforts, including Confucius Institutes and academia-related human capital exchanges, are slowly emerging as additional channels for influence, aiming to build cultural and academic ties.

The influence of these external actors has had observable negative impacts on Montenegro's democratic institutions and values. Russia's interference has exacerbated political polarisation, weakened pro-EU factions, and contributed to disinformation that sows distrust in Western institutions. Russia's attempts to destabilise Montenegro's political system thrives through (social) media campaigns and the financial backing of pro-Russian political entities. China's economic influence has contributed to democratic backsliding by weakening Montenegro's institutional resilience. The financial dependency created by Chinese loans has eroded Montenegro's ability to engage in independent decision-making, particularly concerning its EU accession process. The lack of transparency in Chinese investments further undermines democratic governance, as critical infrastructure projects are often executed without proper democratic oversight.

The report highlights that the influence of external actors in Montenegro is comparable to similar trends observed in other Western Balkan countries. Russia's use of ethno-religious narratives to undermine democratic institutions is mirrored in Serbia and Bosnia's the Republic of Srpska, where Moscow has a more entrenched presence. Similarly, China's economic strategy in Montenegro reflects its broader approach across the region, where infrastructure investments bind countries into debt dependency. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort by Montenegro and its Western allies to mitigate the negative impact of foreign influence on democratic governance and EU integration efforts.

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