

English Text

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The Euro-Atlantic Path must not Change

By Michael Haltzel

Dritan Abazović should know that there are people in the U.S. who care about Montenegro, who care about Albanians, and who want to see the Western Balkans finally join the Euro-Atlantic community. And his decision regarding the next government of Montenegro will play a key role in achieving, or defeating, that goal.

There is a colloquial American expression: “cutting off your nose to spite your face.” I fear that’s what Dritan Abazović would be doing by joining a coalition dominated by radical Serbs. Yes, he would be sticking it to Milo Djukanović, but at what a price!

It was in the fall of 1994 when I first met Djukanović. He was visiting the States and he asked for an appointment with then-Senator Joe Biden. Not surprisingly, Biden had never heard of the obscure 32-year-old Balkan politician, but I urged the Senator to meet him. My argument then was the same as it is today: whatever his faults (and they are not trivial), Djukanović has three core principles that we should support: 1. independence for Montenegro (he only hinted at that in 1994); 2. joining the Euro-Atlantic community; 3. basing his political power on a multi-ethnic coalition of Montenegrins, Serbs, Albanians, Bosniaks/Muslims, and Croats. In the intervening 26 years Djukanović has achieved nearly all of these goals – membership in the European Union being the one still in progress.

The Russian-directed failed coup attempt in 2016 showed how important Montenegro’s accession to NATO was to the Kremlin. The Russians, through their Serb proxies, will continue to try to forestall Montenegro’s EU accession.

But it is Djukanović’s third principle – the multi-ethnic coalition – that is most important to me as an American. It would be naïve to think that Djukanović didn’t calculate the potential gain in forming this kind of coalition; he is a master politician. I think, however, that there was and is a kernel of genuine multi-ethnic understanding there. Former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley, an Olympic and NBA basketball star, once said that it’s impossible for an athlete to be a racist. Although that may be a bit of an exaggeration, the point is well taken. And don’t forget that Djukanović was also a star basketball player.

From a lot of reading and countless conversations I believe that under Djukanović Montenegro's Albanians are better integrated into the life of the country than is any other Albanian minority in the Western Balkans.

Would that change under a coalition led by radical Serbs? Well, it took less than one day for anti-Muslim violence to break out in Pljevlja. Even if the leading Montenegrin Serb politicians didn't directly order the pogrom, their racist views are well known and give license to street thugs. Sound familiar?

Despite what Zdravko Krivokapić and other opposition leaders say, it's simply not credible to think that they care much about the EU. Or worse, they'll declare that they're for Montenegro's accession but only in tandem with Serbia. And you know how long that would take! Just look at how many chapters each country has closed to date.

I've never met Mr. Abazović. His record certainly shows him to be an exceptionally bright individual, someone who is ready to become a leader on the national stage. Moreover, the current electoral line-up puts him in a very strong negotiating position vis-à-vis President Djukanović, if he chooses to use it.

I'm not a Montenegrin, but I am familiar with the horse-trading that precedes the formation of coalition government in a parliamentary system. There are critical times in a nation's history when striking a principled compromise must take precedence over holding on to narrow, party-political interests.

Some day if the COVID-19 pandemic is under control I'd love to meet Mr. Abazović. Until then, he should know that there are people in the U.S. who care about Montenegro, who care about Albanians, and who want to see the Western Balkans finally join the Euro-Atlantic community. And his decision regarding the next government of Montenegro will play a key role in achieving, or defeating, that goal.

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