

In the first of a series of posts by investigative journalists and civil society activists working on exposing corruption in the Balkans, Milka Tadić Mijović (President, Centre for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro) discusses impunity in Montenegro and the complicity of the West.

Last spring, a woman in Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, was shot in the leg in front of her apartment. Had the bullet hit the artery an inch further, she could have died. That woman, Olivera Lakic, an investigative journalist who has revealed links between top officials and cigarette smugglers, is still on sick leave. Montenegro is globally known for cigarette and heavy drugs smuggling.

Around Christmas a few years ago, a strong explosion erupted at midnight. The bomb exploded outside the office of the Editor-in-Chief of the daily Vijesti, the most influential newspaper in the country. Just a minute earlier, the editor had left the office. Had he stayed, he might have not been alive anymore. Nobody was held responsible for that crime either. Previously, the CEO of Vijesti was brutally beaten, and the Editor-in-Chief was physically attacked by the Podgorica's mayor and his son. A bomb exploded in the yard of the reporter of the same daily. Six Vijesti's vehicles were set on fire.

None of this has been fully illuminated; justice has not been satisfied.

It is not yet known who was behind the murder of Dusko Jovanovic, Editor-in-Chief of the daily Dan. Jovanovic was killed after publishing a series of articles on cigarette smuggling, in which one of the main actors was the current Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, who was even indicted at one point in Italy.

The campaign against the professional media has often been led by the President himself, who depicts them as the media mafia. Due to all this, Montenegro has fallen more than 50 places on the Reporters Without Borders Media Freedom Index in the last decade and it is now in 104th place, among the lowest-ranked countries in Europe.

Montenegro, the smallest country in the Balkans, has never experienced a change of government in free elections. After the Second World War, the communists came to power. They still rule: in 1989, when Montenegro was one of the six constituent federal states of Yugoslavia, Djukanovic and a group of local followers of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic staged an intra-party coup that was part of the mosaic of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the four devastating regional wars that ensued. In 1990, the new Montenegrin leaders renamed the League of Communists into the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), but continued with the same authoritarian rule. Over the 30 years since then, Djukanovic has been either a

prime minister or president, with two brief breaks when he maintained full control as DPS Chairman.

Since 1991, around 140,000 people have left the country of just 630,000 inhabitants to seek better opportunities. According to UNDP, about 30 percent of the country's citizens are at or below the poverty line.

The authorities have nurtured within the ruling establishment a special form of corruption and clientelism by providing attractive financial perks for loyalty. Among others, apartments and grants are awarded to the senior staff, while those at the top have privileged access to state sponsored deals that bring millions. Most of the benefits, not surprisingly, are enjoyed by Djukanovic's family. The British Independent has listed Djukanovic among the 20 richest politicians in the world, although he came to power as a relatively poor man.

Before each election, corruption extends to the poorest voter whom the DPS activists offer food packages or financial aid from both state-controlled and grey zone funds. In the totally controlled system, the affairs "Envelope" and "Recordings" that revealed how citizens have been bribed to vote for the ruling party did not receive an epilogue before the courts and no one has been held accountable to date.

Hardly any of this is unknown to the West. The State Department notes in its Integrated Strategy for Relations with the State that endemic corruption and organized crime are the main obstacles to Montenegro's integration into the European Union (daily Dan 12 October 2019). In its country reports, the EU refers to Montenegro as a captured state. In 2012, the Foreign Affairs magazine classified Montenegro in an article as a "mafia state", along with Venezuela, Bulgaria, Guinea-Bissau and Viktor Yanukovich's Ukraine.

Yet, despite all this, the West supports Djukanovic, which frustrates the country's democratic forces. In this paradox, Montenegrin citizens are prisoners of two international political doctrines - Kissinger's 'Our Bad Guys' and the other on 'Stabilitocracy'. Maybe because if one looks from the outside at the Balkans, where the Serbian-Kosovo agreement is still far away, where there is a latent danger of the breakup of Bosnia and Herzegovina and where a heated conflict between North Macedonia and Greece has only recently been resolved, a country like Montenegro that is not producing regional problems appears as a bright spot.

Djukanovic is skillfully playing for now. On several occasions, when his career was on the precipice, he received support from the US and Europe. He was forgiven for his war-time complicity with Slobodan Milosevic after making a U-turn and becoming an opponent of the Serbian president, who was his political father. In 2017, when Montenegro was accepted into NATO, following a process in which loud warnings about the imminent Russian danger

overwhelmed all other news, it was forgotten in the West that it was Djukanovic who brought Russian oligarchs to Montenegro and sold them the key industrial assets and a large part of the coast. Now, in business with China, which finances a 40km motorway section that will cost over \$1 billion, he risks exposing the country to debt slavery to Beijing, to which the state owes one-third of its huge external debt. At the same time, as if this had nothing to do with him, Djukanovic stated that the West should note that the influence of Brussels and Washington is weakening in the region where other players are entering - alluding to his Chinese partners and, until recently, the "brothers" from Russia. Although the opposition in Montenegro is fragmented and divided, most of it is pro-West and wants to join the European Union. The exception is a conglomerate of Eurosceptics and ultra-right pro-Russian and pro-Serbian populists who count on 15% of the popular vote and are at odds with the rest of the opposition. Not surprisingly, Djukanovic and his propaganda machinery have successfully fuelled and exploited these divisions. Besides, Djukanovic's powerful apparatus in small Montenegro knows directly even by name and 'communicates' in the ways described earlier with practically every one of its 40% of voters. This is how the DPS manages to retain control of the Parliament with additional support from some small clientelist parties.

After seven years of negotiations with the EU, progress has been poor particularly in Chapters 23 and 24 covering the rule of law and human rights. Consequently, the previously projected year 2025 as the date of country's EU accession does not seem realistic. Simply, the rule of law and human rights do not go hand in hand with Djukanovic and his oppressive regime.

It is obvious, given how the state is captured, that Montenegrin citizens do not have the power and the tools to implement democratic changes on their own. Without support from the EU, it will be extremely hard for them to change the government in free elections for the first time in the country's history. Whether the West will cease its support for the most enduring Balkan leader could make a difference.

Source: cin-cg.me