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“Small is beautiful”: what does Montenegro need from the EU to become an ecological transition laboratory?

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As part of its editorial project in the run-up to the June 2024 European elections, [European States of Mind – Reinventing the Deal](#), IDDRI is publishing (from November 2023 to March-April 2024) the ideas of European thinkers on the drivers of political debates in Member States, on the project that the European Union should support, and on how the ecological transition fits with social and economic aspects.

Montenegro is keen to join the European Union and seeks to become a laboratory for ecological transition. This blog post, written by Nicolas Petrovitch Njegosh, the Prince of Montenegro, explores what the country expects from the EU, highlighting its natural resources and its commitment to the Green Deal. His message is a call for European cooperation to bring innovative and sustainable projects to fruition, anchoring Montenegro in a European and ecological vision.

Despite the current crises and uncertainties (ecological, economic, political, democratic, and nearby armed conflicts), Montenegro continues to adopt a forward-looking perspective, with accession to the European Union being a key

element of this vision. Among the acceding countries, Montenegro has the potential to become an ecological transition laboratory and to occupy a specific place within Europe, and also among States that are capable, due to their small size, of taking on particularly bold challenges in this area. The EU's Green Deal and the prospect of accession will play a central role in supporting such a project. In this context, what expectations does Montenegro have of the European Commission's next term of office?

Montenegro, an “Ecological State”: historical legacy and future potential

The Republic of Montenegro stretches over 13,500 km² between sea and mountains and has a population of 650,000. On September 20, 1990, Montenegro became the first State to enshrine the “Ecological State” in its Constitution. However, the Yugoslav conflict, the ensuing embargo and the difficulties of an unplanned transition meant that this commitment was neglected. This commitment has taken on a new significance today, given the urgent need to combat global warming: faced with uncontrolled urbanization and tourism development in recent years, the Ecological State has for many become a necessity, representing the only hope of preserving our greatest asset, our exceptional natural resources, and of extricating Montenegro from the rivalries and conflicts that paralyse the country, by providing a project that leads to a desirable and sustainable future.

Montenegro's natural ecosystems, which are particularly rugged and remarkable, have in the past enabled the country to protect itself and maintain its independence; it is these ecosystems that have inspired the Ecological State project. The country also boasts a wealth of natural resources, including mines (bauxite, iron and lignite), a major water supply network, forests covering more than 60% of its territory, and a 250-kilometre coastline with several notable sites, including an enviable commercial port.

The difficult transition from a stagnant bureaucracy, once a model of “socialism with a human face” but which has failed to reinvent itself, to a primitive capitalism leaves too much room for questions of identity, which remain the dominant issues in former Yugoslav republics. But Montenegro's small size and the closeness of its inhabitants mean that, even in the worst moments of the conflict, Montenegro has managed to preserve its community spirit.

In economic terms, socialist Yugoslavia gave priority to industry and developed industrial sites (an aluminium plant, thermal power stations, metallurgy, industrial paper mills, electrical appliance factories). Most of these outdated and polluting facilities have been, or are due to be, shut down, leaving industrial sites derelict and awaiting new projects. Tourism and construction have developed considerably and remain the country's main economic resources and activities. However, left unchecked they can also be the main source of environmental degradation. With the exception of state-run vineyards and tobacco farms, agriculture was marginalized during the socialist period, typically becoming an additional activity for families, despite the very favourable conditions (sun, abundant water, mountain pastures). In the absence of industrial and agricultural pollution, it represents an unexploited potential for organic “Mediterranean” agriculture. Lastly, Montenegro's forest, one of Europe's last remaining primary forests, is poorly exploited and poorly maintained. If properly managed, it could become a source of sustainable development and skilled jobs, particularly in the construction industry.

The Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS in Montenegrin) and its leader, President Djukanovic, held undivided power for around 30 years (1991-2020), keeping Montenegro out of the Yugoslav conflict and leading it to independence in 2006. However, accused of unjust and corrupt management, they lost power in the legislative elections of August 2020. Montenegro then discovered pluralism and the difficulty of governing without a majority. However, the new centrist President elected in April 2023 was able to rally support from a large majority through the country's desire to join the EU and by trying to overcome identity-based divisions. A new government has been elected; it must propose and lead a project for Montenegro and break with the last two years of sterile political

games.

A new political project at the intersection between the EU and the ecological transition

The Ecological State concept, which until now has been driven by NGOs and a small section of the population, is re-emerging within institutions and among the media and communications channels, more often than not in the form of questions rather than answers, such as: what sort of tourism do we want for the future? How can we educate the public about good practices? How should we manage our waste? What about wind turbines, solar farms and mini hydroelectric power stations? The European Union can play a vital role in relation to these questions, helping us to find the right answers together and to implement innovative, sustainable and replicable projects that will benefit our citizens. In this way, adherence to the European pact can take root in Montenegro, beyond the strictly institutional dimension, and more generally in the Balkans, which is still a fragile area on the EU's doorstep. Faced with China's commercial appetite, the choice could be summed up as follows: Green Deal or Silk Roads?

There are encouraging signs in Montenegro's political community and civil society: the new President has mentioned ecology in his speeches and, for the first time, the Presidency has appointed a sustainable development adviser; the new generation of ministers and many elected representatives are more aware of environmental issues; and NGOs are still very active. However, tourism development and the uncontrolled construction of infrastructure are creating emergency situations in a number of areas: traffic and transport, waste and sludge treatment at sewage plants, coastline and marine pollution, land take and deforestation.

Many tangible projects can be proposed to address all of these subjects, as illustrated by some examples of pilot projects led by The Petrovic Njegos Foundation in partnership with institutions, civil society actors and European companies, offering innovative technologies in the following areas: waste treatment and recovery (Genio – Italy)^{[1](#)}, and energy storage and compressed air motors (Anthos air power – France).^{[2](#)}

Pilot projects

These technologies are forming the basis of a number of projects that have been locally proposed and are currently being studied at various locations, mainly in the waste management field. If waste is left untreated, it is often dumped in the open or buried in a natural site, posing serious ecological and health risks.

EKOBRIGADA – being studied by the Montenegrin army

This project aims to equip the army with a fully autonomous mobile waste treatment unit (laser station), enabling it to treat municipal and illegal waste on site.

Partners: Ministry of Defence – Ministry of Ecology – Local authorities

TIVAT – Bay of Kotor

The TIVAT project involves the installation of a water sanitation plant close to the coastal Tivat wastewater treatment plant, which serves the cities of Kotor and Tivat. This plant will also enable the processing of sludge from the wastewater treatment plant. The waste will be transported by sea on air-powered barges (0 CO₂).

Partners: City of Tivat – City of Kotor – Ministry of Ecology

ZELJEZARA NIKSIC – steelworks in the city of Niksic

The steelworks plant in Niksic was closed down when it was taken over by Montenegro's national electricity company

(EPCG). The plan is to build a recycling centre on the site. We are also proposing to include a treatment station for non-recycled waste, providing energy for the plant; and also that the plant should consider manufacturing and maintaining the stations as well as compressed air retrofit kits, thus returning to its industrial and social vocation.

Partners: EPCG – City of Niksic – Ministry of Finance

What can we expect from Europe?

The prospect of accession to the EU is important in the short term, to deploy a support and cooperation framework for accession, and in the longer term, in view of the position that Montenegro will occupy in Europe given its specific assets. In addition to the presence of European projects, which are playing an important role in politically and economically stabilizing the country, the implementation of real and visible projects will help Montenegro to establish its European destiny.

For the citizens of Montenegro, both the EU accession project and the Ecological State project lack visibility in their daily lives. With this in mind, at its own level, the Foundation is investing in areas such as waste treatment, which remains a crucial issue with which Europe should be able to associate itself. In addition, the Franco-Montenegrin cooperation project to create a university hospital centre with the APHP, inspired by the best European expertise in eco-construction and public health, intended by Montenegro to be a model of ecology and the humanization of hospitals, could affect the country's entire population.

Such a project, a government priority that is supported by the EU, would ensure Montenegro is able to find shelter in the port of Europe, after enduring the storms of history. It would not only create a strong regional dynamic for integration, but also a model of what the Green Deal can deliver.

1 These are lightweight, patented pyro-gasification plants (laser or steel ball bombardment at 1,000°C) with high performance (waste: 1m³/h – production: between 600 KWh and 1.5 MWh depending on the type of waste – residual: 7/10% inert ash). The more compact laser model can be transported in containers for on-site treatment.

2 This is a patented retrofit kit that converts standard combustion engines into compressed air engines. The system can also be adapted for all electric engines to replace batteries. It also includes energy storage systems in the form of compressed air.

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