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# Montenegro, NATO and the divided society

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we are investigating the political and social effects of Montenegro joining NATO. This issue is highly controversial and follows the political divisions in Montenegro, which motivated us to apply social cleavage theory. As method, we applied logistic regression clustered for standard error. We found that besides socio-demographic variables (ethnic division between Montenegrins and Serbs), the main line of the cleavage indicated by support of, or opposition to NATO membership falls along the issues of the independence of Montenegro, its relationship with the EU vs. Russia, as well as the attitude toward political power and party identification.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2017, Montenegro joined NATO and became the thirteenth post-communist member state of the alliance that was founded to contain the spread of communism. Unlike other recent NATO enlargements (Croatia and Albania were the last two countries which joined NATO, in 2009) the process of NATO integration of Montenegro is highly controversial, from both the internal, Montenegrin perspective, and from the perspective of global power relations.

To start with the later, Montenegro membership was heavily challenged by Russia, which perceives this expansion as a potential decrease of Russian influence in the Balkan region, as well as creating division within the population of Montenegro. On the other side, EU and NATO countries perceive Montenegro membership as another expected step toward euro-Atlantic integration of the country and, therefore, as the indicator of stability and progress.

From the internal perspective, NATO membership is one of the most divisive issues in contemporary Montenegrin politics because it splits the society into two, almost-equal halves. Also, from the historical perspective, NATO membership represents one of the symbolic ends of the Yugoslav dissolution process, and one of the final steps (together with potential EU membership) of Montenegro's separation from Serbia and war-time legacies of the Milošević regime.

Montenegro's membership is also interesting because of several unique characteristics that separate this case from other Eastern European countries which already have joined NATO, or plan to join. Some central European countries have significant objections regarding EU policies but support the NATO alliance, for example, Poland or Czech Republic; however, in Montenegro, the situation is reversed: EU integration has had majority support for certain period, while NATO membership has had unstable support, as we show in the data. In this aspect, Montenegro is quite similar to Serbia, with whom it shares the 1999 experience of NATO intervention due to the Kosovo conflict.

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Therefore, NATO membership of Montenegro is highly-contested by a significant part of the population of Montenegro, primarily by the Serbian community, which makes 28% of the total population. The aim of this paper is to explain the roots of this opposition and to evaluate NATO membership as the potential source of internal conflict in the future. In the paper, we apply social cleavage theory because it enables us to link this issue to the main lines of political divisions within Montenegrin society. It also allows us to identify potential long-term developments and the potential of political actors to articulate popular disaffection with NATO membership.

This paper consists of four parts. We will begin the article with the explanation of our theoretical approach in which we elaborate the ways to adapt social cleavage theory for the post-communist societies. Theoretical part of the paper will be followed by the background information on Montenegro, brief overview of the recent political and social history and presentation of the main parties, issues and lines of political competition. In the third part we will present data and variables, and provide a descriptive analysis. In the final part of the paper a detailed statistical analysis will be provided, followed by tests of our hypothesis and the concluding parts and their discussion.

### 1.1. Conceptual framework

Conflict studies in the second half of the twentieth century have been strongly influenced by [Lipset and Rokkan \(1967\)](#) concept of social cleavage. It aimed to explain party systems as the outcome of the main social and political divisions. The explanatory strength of this concept was based on its ability to predict long-lasting and long-term alignments between parties and their constituencies and to explain the structure of political competition. The cleavage concept was strongly criticized in the decades following its introduction, mainly because of the decline of traditional ties between constituencies and political parties, for example, the decline of trade unions and their influence on leftist parties ([Clark and Lipset, 1991](#)), as well as secularization and the decline of established ties between churches and conservative parties ([Dalton, 1996](#)). However, a number of innovative approaches kept the concept on the top of the research agenda, either by emphasizing a new understanding of social structure and its connection to political parties ([Evans, 2010](#)), or by shifting the attention to value-based conflict ([Inglehart, 1990](#); [Kriesi, 2010](#)), and/or to new reinterpretations of the old conflicts ([Oesch, 2008](#)).

Some scholars tried to reformulate the basic concept and make it more flexible and adaptable. In this paper we are also following the methodological approach of [Deegan-Krause \(2007\)](#), who was inspired by [Bartolini and Mair \(1990\)](#). Following this approach, we focus on a three-level understanding of cleavage: socio-demographic (referring to a particular and self-conscious social group), attitudinal (the beliefs and interests of the identified group), and organizational (parties, movements or NGOs that represent the group). However, due to the aforementioned de-alignments in the second half of the twentieth century, Deegan Krause proposes a classification of phenomena that are similar to cleavage but do not fulfill all three criteria, and introduces *differences* (based on only one criteria) and *divisions* (based on the alignment of two levels). Therefore, the *full cleavage* has to include all three components, while there can be three variations of *the divisions*: issue divide (overlapping organizational and attitudinal), census divide (overlapping structural and organizational) and structural (overlapping structural and attitudinal).

In this paper, we are especially interested in so-called *issue divisions* that represent long-lasting divisions between parties based on their different standpoints regarding one of the main political issues. These issue divisions can have significant social rootedness, but it shall not be interpreted as a consequence of it (as in the classic theory), which makes this approach more appropriate for post-communist societies. Namely, post-communist societies are often characterized as societies with low class-differentiation because of the state controlled economy during communist rule. They also are viewed as societies without developed mezzo-levels of political organizing ([Evans and Whitefield, 1993](#)), which prevents interest-based organizing in the first transitional years. This means that political elites have more freedom in articulating the interests and development of group identities, which reverses the initial cleavage theory direction from a bottom-up to a top-down process (at least to a certain extent). Finally, [Elster et al. \(1998\)](#) emphasized one very important distinction from the original theory, arguing that the main cleavages in transitional societies usually spring from identity politics rather than interest-based politics, which has zero-sum logic as the consequence and centrifugal political competition that often leads to polarized party systems ([Pavlović and Antonić, 2007](#)).

### 1.2. Background information

Montenegro is the smallest of the six former Yugoslav republics (626.250 inhabitants), and the last one to gain independence, on May 21, 2006. Although Yugoslavia collapsed during the 1990s after the secession of four republics, Montenegro remained part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which consisted of Serbia and Montenegro. This demonstrates that the idea of a Montenegrin nation, and its relation to Serbian national interest still was not fully developed and clarified ([Bešić, 2005](#)).

There are two main political issues regarding the path of Montenegrin independence: the existence of the independent Montenegrin nation, and the (re)definition of its relationship with Serbia ([Pavićević, 1997](#)). First, the ruling communist party of Montenegro (League of Communists of Montenegro) transformed itself into the Democratic Party of Socialist (DPS), and it remains in power following the model of preemptive reforms ([Kasapović, 1996](#)). During the first transitional years, the DPS and party leaders Momir Bulatović and Milo Đukanović supported politics led by Slobodan Milošević and his Socialist party of Serbia (SPS).

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