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In July 2018, US President Donald Trump gave a contro-
versial interview on *Fox News* in which he called into ques-
tion NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organization's) Article
5, the principle of common defence. The journalist had
asked President Trump why, if Montenegro were attacked,
his (the journalist's) son (an American soldier) should
have to defend it. Answering, Donald Trump described
the Montenegrin people as very aggressive, suggesting
that Montenegro could be the cause of a third world war:
'Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people ...
They are very aggressive people. They may get aggressive,
and congratulations, you are in World War III'.

Only two months prior to this, on 25 May, at the meeting
of NATO heads of state and government in Brussels, the
president of the United States aggressively pushed aside
the prime minister of Montenegro, Duško Marković – a
piece of sensational news covered by media outlets all over
the world. Although many people would struggle to find
Montenegro on a world map, thanks to President Trump,
this small Balkan nation got more attention than it ever had
before.

* * *

In my recent research (Banović 2016), I focus on narra-
tives that connect the historical patriarchal-warrior theme
in Montenegrin masculinity with current social debates
about Montenegro's membership in NATO. I would here
like to problematize Donald Trump's recent statements
regarding Montenegro. Effectively, Trump exaggerated a
historical stereotype of Montenegrins.

My research focuses on young men (aged between 17 and
25). Indeed, I have found out that some of the young men in
that cohort consider readiness for violence and exposure to
danger a mark of masculinity, but these are a small minority.
For most, the capacity to work is the defining feature of
masculine identity. It is through work that men accumulate
the social capital that represents their basic contribution to
their families.

My research on the Montenegrin military also shows that
professional advancement and financial considerations are
important elements of contemporary male identity. These
also feature strongly in the reasons soldiers give for signing
up for international missions: to advance their careers, secure
housing and gain financial benefits (daily pay €100, compared
to the average monthly salary in Montenegro of €511). None
of the soldiers in my research mentioned any other motives.

Today's youth choose a career in the military, not because
they are aggressive or because they seek to wage war, but
to benefit from a secure government job, regular monthly
pay and to improve their prospects of career advancement.
Considering that over 70 per cent of Montenegrin university
students hope to find work in government service, employ-
ment in the military is an attractive prospect. Montenegro
has fewer than 700,000 inhabitants. The Montenegrin army
counts some 1,800 soldiers. Most of the soldiers in active
service see the job as a secure source of income, not a
chance to prove their combat skills.

It is therefore unlikely that soldiers see themselves as
having the potential to spark World War Three. Furthermore,
when thinking about Montenegro's capacity to initiate such
a war, NATO members were initially reluctant to accept
Montenegro's bid to join the organization precisely because
of the insignificance of Montenegro's military to NATO.

Nevertheless, the media had a field day over Montenegrin
soldiers being sent on NATO missions (particularly to

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Afghanistan). Sardonicly emphasizing Montenegro's glorious warrior tradition, observations were made on how the small number of Montenegrin soldiers would help large international missions to finally accomplish their goals, with comments and headlines such as: 'With these 169 Montenegrin soldiers, NATO will finally blow Russia away'; 'Montenegro's government's decision is going to seriously destabilize the Middle East'; 'One platoon and there goes their entire force'; 'The Taliban are now afraid, here comes the Montenegrin raid'.

* * *

Why did Trump resuscitate the narrative of Montenegrins as an aggressive warrior people? Trump seems to have based his comment on Montenegro's political behaviour from several centuries ago, when they developed an extremely warlike ethos and chose to fight the Ottomans rather than submit to them. Although never to the extent that some might claim, the Montenegrins do have a fierce reputation based on at least two aspects of their history.

First, they used to make their living predominantly by shepherding, which involved a warrior-like plunderer economy in the Dinaric Alps region of the Balkan Peninsula. Providing a basic means of existence – whether by protecting one's resources or claiming them through incursions into foreign territory – meant frequent armed conflicts. This produced a masculine patriarchal culture. Second, the constant clashes with the Ottoman Empire secured their warrior legacy once they succeeded in standing their ground.

Around 100 years ago, the German scholar Gerhard Gesemann emphasized the importance of distinguishing between the normative ideal imposed by society as a model of behaviour and actual conduct in daily life. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, Gesemann (1934) encountered many Montenegrin men who no longer fitted the picture of their fathers and grandfathers.

My own research looks at the oversights of previous ethnographers and travel writers who, in describing ideal models, preserved the awareness of men, not as they actually were, but exclusively as the normative ideals of the Montenegrin patriarchal warrior society would have them to be. Consciousness of Montenegrin heroism (predominantly preserved thanks to Montenegro's ruler prince, poet and philosopher, Petar II Petrović Njegoš) had a significant influence on the creation of modern Montenegro and the formation of its identity in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As a ruler, Njegoš suppressed the heroism of the patriarchal warrior society; as a poet and philosopher, however, he preserved it brilliantly in his writing. Thanks to the national poetry to which Njegoš contributed, as well as to Romantic travel writers, ethnographers and historical narratives, awareness of this warrior tradition persisted in popular culture, acquiring potential for use in political projects. How this awareness of Montenegro's aggressive nature as a warrior people made its way to Donald Trump and how exactly he thinks Montenegrin bellicosity could be the cause of a third world war, we can only speculate.

* * *

Trump's egoistic behaviour at the NATO meeting in Brussels was clearly at odds with the conduct of previous US presidents. Opponents of Montenegro's membership in NATO appeared delighted with the incident. For them, this was incontrovertible proof that in NATO not all are equal. When it comes to power games within NATO, however, perhaps more interesting was the behaviour of the Croatian president, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, who was conspicuously trying to stand as close as possible to Donald Trump and (unsuccessfully) draw his attention.

President Trump thus memorialized Montenegro, the youngest member of NATO, with his statements, which provided further oxygen to already raging controversies. Notably, elements of previous debates and arguments sur-

rounding the 2006 independence referendum 'spilled over' into the more recent debate about NATO. At the turn of the 21st century, the meanings of the terms 'Montenegrin' and 'Serbian' were already hotly debated in various spheres of social life. In 19th- and 20th-century sources it is not uncommon to find a description of influential Montenegrins as adherents to Serbdom, thus forging a dual narrative in Montenegro for the reproduction and perpetuation of a fluid identity that can be interpreted both as Montenegrin and Serbian, for which there is plenty of evidence in ethnographic and historical records, as well as in folklore.

Trump's allusions to the issue of Montenegro's NATO membership brought the sensitivities surrounding this fluid sense of Montenegrin identity to the surface again. Such controversies surrounding identity acquire new life (endless, it would seem) in the framework of a larger question: does membership in NATO mean that Montenegro has become part of the West and does this mean a distancing from Russia and Serbia, and also, from Orthodox Christianity? This larger question throws up smaller ones: should Montenegrin soldiers participate in the KFOR (NATO-led Kosovo Force) mission in Kosovo? Should Montenegro have a representative at events marking Croatia's public holiday of 'Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and Day of Croatian Defenders'? Who are Montenegro's allies? How should the issue of the Church be regulated?

Each of these questions necessarily demands a different interpretation of Montenegro's past. My impression is that the question of NATO membership within Montenegro will continue to provoke such questions surrounding identity, in which Serbian identity is either embraced or rejected. Years of multiculturalism as identity politics have only underscored ethnic borders within Montenegro.

Thus, in Montenegro, ethnic Albanians (4.91 per cent of the population) are often happy to be influenced by Albania, ethnic Serbs (28.73 per cent of the population) by Serbia (or Russia), ethnic Bosnians/Muslims (11.96 per cent of the population) by Bosnia and Herzegovina (or Turkey and Arab countries) and ethnic Croats (0.97 per cent of the population) by Croatia. Members of these ethnic groups sometimes approach big political issues with the interests of Tirana (or Pristina), Belgrade (or Moscow), Sarajevo (or Ankara) and Zagreb in mind.

* * *

When I began my research in 2008, nothing indicated that the Russian reaction to Montenegro joining NATO would be as angry and violent as it became, mostly due to altered geopolitical circumstances in the meantime. Only a few years ago, I also could not have foreseen that the UK would leave the European Union (EU) or that the host of the US version of the reality TV programme, *The apprentice*, would become the president of the US.

What then of Trump's outlandish statement that Montenegrin aggression might bring on World War Three? With the US ranking as the second (after Uganda) most warmongering country in the world in 2015 (Withnall 2015), this is of course sheer irony, especially given Trump's own aggressive behaviour and the diminutive size of the Montenegrin army.

And yet, Montenegro (and the Western Balkans in general) is now situated at the intersection of several big geopolitical players: the US, EU, Russia, China, Turkey and some of the rich Arab states. Could it happen that, in the future, Montenegro (or some other Balkan country), wedged between opposing geopolitical interests, might spark off a new large-scale conflict? Maybe. Certainly, with populist politicians like Trump in power, we cannot afford to underestimate such a possibility. However, Montenegro is most unlikely to be the source of aggression itself. Trump must look more closely to home for provoking conflict. ●

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