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# IN THE LINE OF FIRE: NATO TAKES AIM AT BALKAN GRASSLANDS

Pablo Dominguez

Plans to transform Europe's second-largest mountain pasture in Montenegro into a military training ground threaten local communities with a loss of livelihood and risk upsetting the area's delicate natural balance.

In a remote region of the Balkans, shepherds and local communities with the help of national and international activists, are mounting stiff resistance to preserve their traditional lands and ways of life.

For them, voting in the recent governmental elections was not just an exercise in democracy – it was an existential demand.

This is because the Sinjajevina-Durmitor mountain range, the second-largest mountain pasture in Europe and the greatest in the Balkans, is under threat by [military ambitions](#) that have little regard for the environment and its inhabitants.

## Ancient practices and world heritage



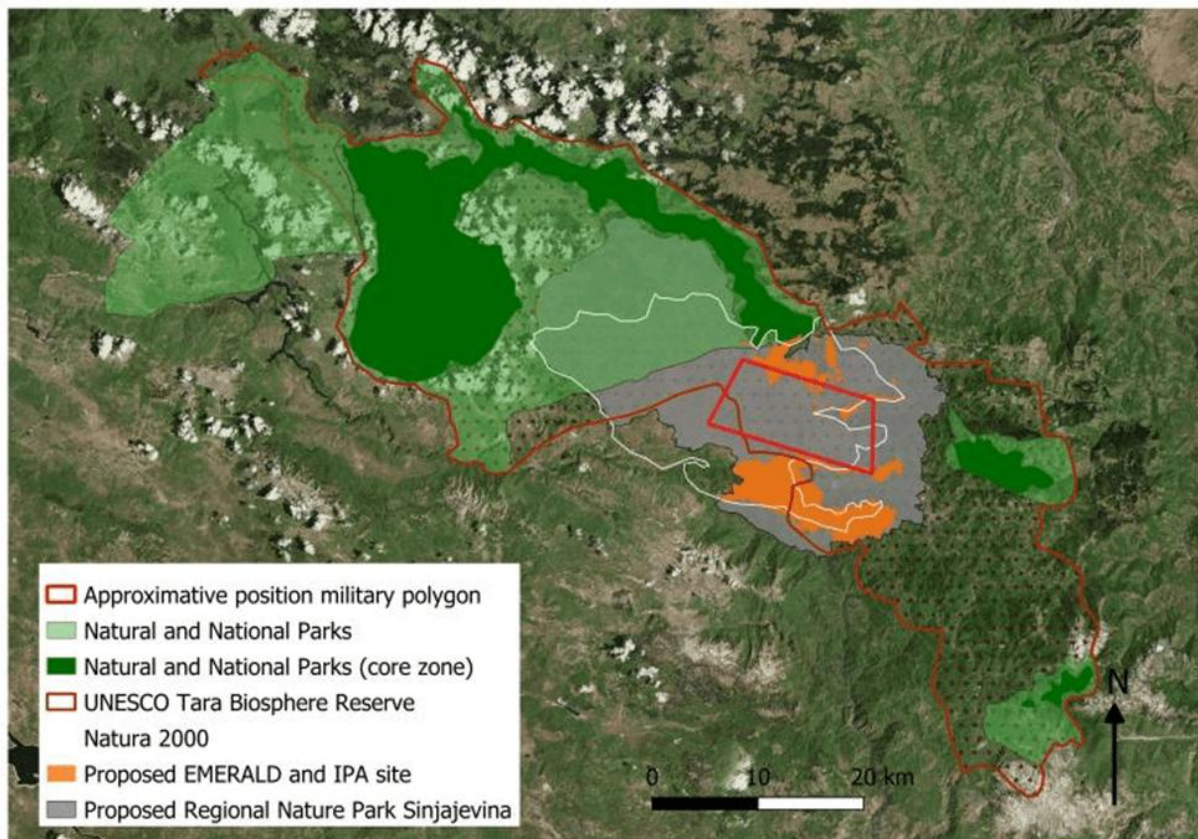
Photo: Wake Up Films

A planned [military training ground](#) would cover 7,500 hectares in the UNESCO Tara River Basin Biosphere Reserve where [one of the oldest national parks in the Balkans, the Durmitor National Park](#), is located.

Around 22,000 people around Sinjajevina continue a millennia-long legacy of sustainable management of the land there, mainly through pastoralism. Beekeeping and medicinal plant collection are common in the Sinjajevina pastures, which are used and managed communally by eight different Montenegrin tribes through assemblies of rights' holders, traditionally known as *zbor*.

The ancient practice of moving grazing animals up and down the mountains forms the backbone of the social relations weaved across different communities in Montenegro.

The area is also culturally significant as evidenced by the numerous churches, monasteries, and memorials that dot the landscape. For example, carved tombstones within the Sinjajevina-Durmitor highlands which date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and are recognised as a UNESCO [World Heritage Site](#).



**The military installation has carved out a huge chunk of land from the proposed regional park for the protection of nature and culture in Sinjajevina.**

**Image: Pablo Domínguez.**

## Popular resistance

In 2017, Montenegro joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in an effort to align itself with Western powers.

Two years later, the [first](#) international NATO military training in the area took place. As helicopters flew by and soldiers fired their guns and threw smoke bombs and explosives, local

shepherds watched in astonishment as their pristine mountain range turned into a simulated warzone.

More recently, in mid-October, hundreds of NATO soldiers arrived to take over the area and shepherds, local community members and entire families, as well as environmental activists and rights groups gathered in large numbers to protest.

They camped at the feet of Margita mountain, within the Sinjajevina site earmarked for the military, and blocked soldiers' access to their pastures, serving as "human shields".

Farmers also protested outside Montenegro's parliament days earlier, when Olivér Várhelyi, the EU Commissioner in charge of enlargement, visited the country. At the same time, activists launched a [petition](#) to stop the military activities.

## Occupation by stealth



Photo: Ministry of Defence of Montenegro

The pastoralist communities were never consulted about the military use of their land and most only became aware of this decision through local radio coverage.

Protestors say that Montenegro's constitution was violated by the lack of consultation with local communities since customary rights for use of these pastoral lands are guaranteed by royal decrees introduced more than 100 years ago. Activists also claim that the militarisation of Sinjajevina is a [violation](#) of the [UN Aarhus Convention](#), to which Montenegro is a signatory party.

Escalating military activities, such as the discharging of explosives, the firing of bullets and the testing of rockets, are bound to cause irreparable damage to flora, fauna, water streams and the overall ecology of the region.

Additionally, severe damage will be inflicted on the age-old symbiosis between pastoralism and the local ecosystem whose plants and animals have evolved to directly depend on it.

The region is also suffering from great uncertainty. So far, the government has not made public any environmental impact assessments nor calculated the environmental, health or socioeconomic effects of giving this land over to the military.

Forceful eviction is something that locals fear as well, as they have no way of knowing if their land will fall within the limits of the training ground.

## Governance

Three weeks ago, Montenegro's defence ministry postponed the military training exercises in Sinjajevina after environmental activists and local community members occupied the training ground near the town of Kolasin in October.

Defence Minister Predrag Boskovic stressed that he did not want any conflict with local communities and argued that he wanted "to convince" them that the exercises were for the [benefit of all](#). Despite portraying himself as open to dialogue, Boskovic continues to argue that the protests are anti-western rather than environmentally focused.

Two weeks after the demonstrations, a Montenegrin man was jailed for 15 days for allegedly insulting the defence minister on [Facebook](#).

The new government coalition, which will take office on 2 December 2020, has expressed support for protestors even though a clear solution has not yet been offered. Nevertheless, this new coalition continues to give full support to Montenegro's membership of NATO.

Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of NATO, issued a [statement](#) claiming that: "Nature must be protected and armed forces must carry out military exercise." However, he gave no indication of how these two conflicting aims could be reconciled.

As winter approaches, tensions continue to rise. Locals mention that military personnel have started visiting residents and asking them to leave their lands. Surveillance of the area is also continuing to increase as helicopters fly overhead, intimidating residents.

## Save Sinjajevina



Photo: Wake Up Films

A campaign has now come together under the name [Save Sinjajevina](#). It demands the creation of a protected area in Sinjajevina which would be co-designed and co-governed with local

communities. The campaign is also calling on the EU to suspend membership talks with Montenegro until the country stops militarising this “[territory of life](#)”.

Environmental activists and local farmers continue to camp on the mountain and as the winter approaches, protesters too are growing weary and have called for solidarity from the international community.

For the many activists involved in the protection of Sinjajevina, the unique biodiversity and cultural importance of the mountain range is not Montenegro’s heritage alone. To them, this natural wealth belongs to all Europeans and to future generations.

#### **About the author**

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