



MONTENEGRO

NATO Country Assessment —TIER TWO—

ACCELERATION TO 2% • MILITARY MODERNIZATION • WEAK PUBLIC SUPPORT



JULY 2026



TIER 2

Average Ally



AT A GLANCE

Toplines

- **Sharing the Burden on Defense:** Defense spending rose nearly 50% in GDP share over three years, reaching 2.03% in 2025, this is a genuine acceleration from a country that had drifted below the floor.
- **Enhancing Capability for NATO 3.0:** Equipment share transformation from 7.5% to 34.3% since 2014, with personnel costs falling from 78% to 44%, reflects a real structural rebalancing. Montenegro is spending its limited budget in roughly the right proportions even if the absolute sums are tiny.
- **Early Gains Undermined by Weak Domestic Support:** Public support for collective defense is soft at 49% agreeing Montenegro should defend another ally if attacked, Ukraine support sits in the lower third of the alliance, and NATO enthusiasm has softened since accession.



FORCE STRUCTURE AT A GLANCE

LAND COMBAT



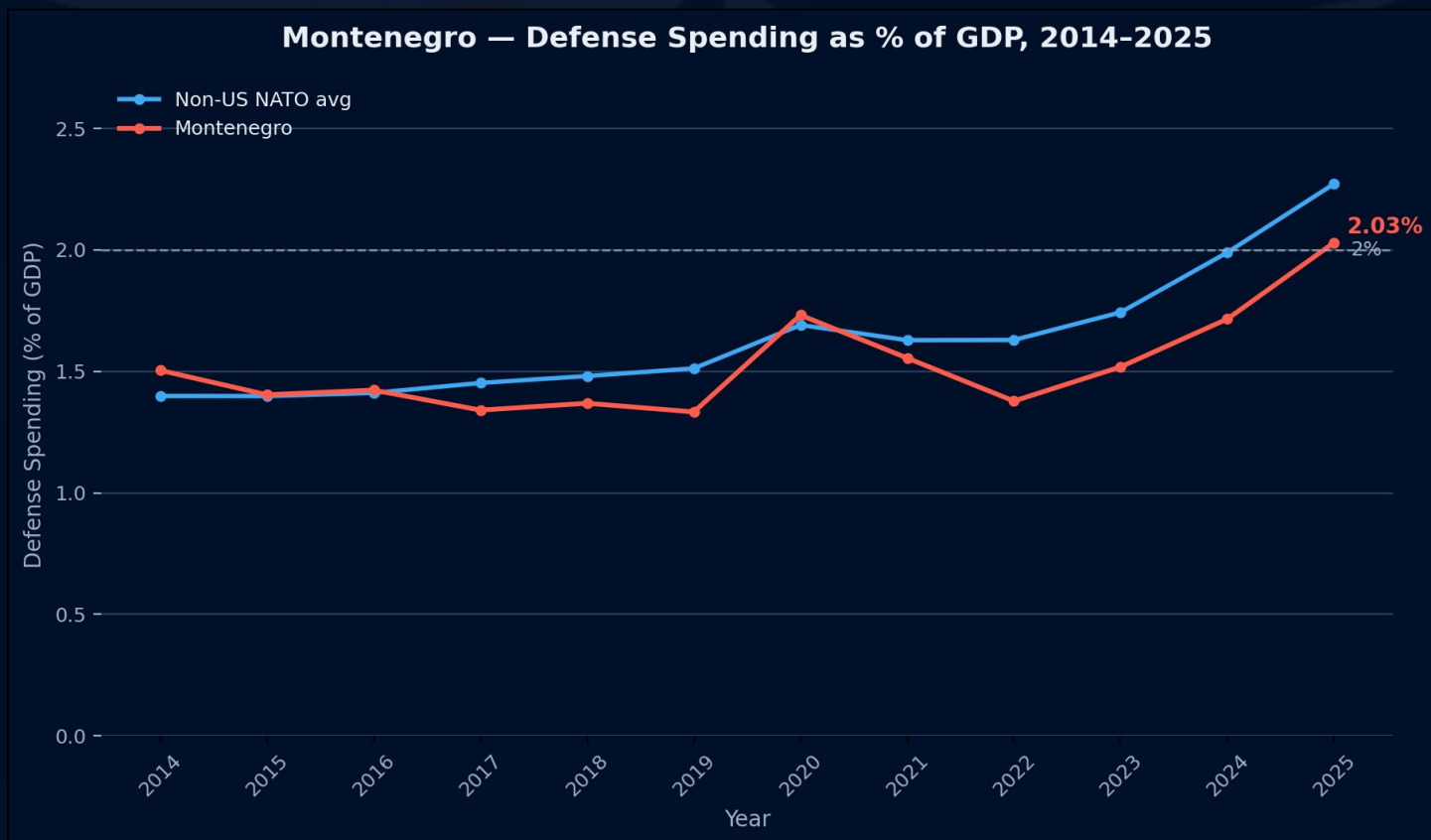
This radar chart compares a country's force structure to the Non-US NATO median (data from IISS's 2026 Military Balance) across six capability areas: Land Combat (tanks, IFVs), Active Personnel (total active-duty troops), Naval Combat (submarines, destroyers/frigates/corvettes), Air & Missile Defense (long/medium-range SAM systems), Air Combat (4th-gen+ combat aircraft), and Fires (artillery, rocket launchers). Scores are weighted, with modern platforms counted fully and legacy platforms counted at reduced weight.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Defense Spending Level

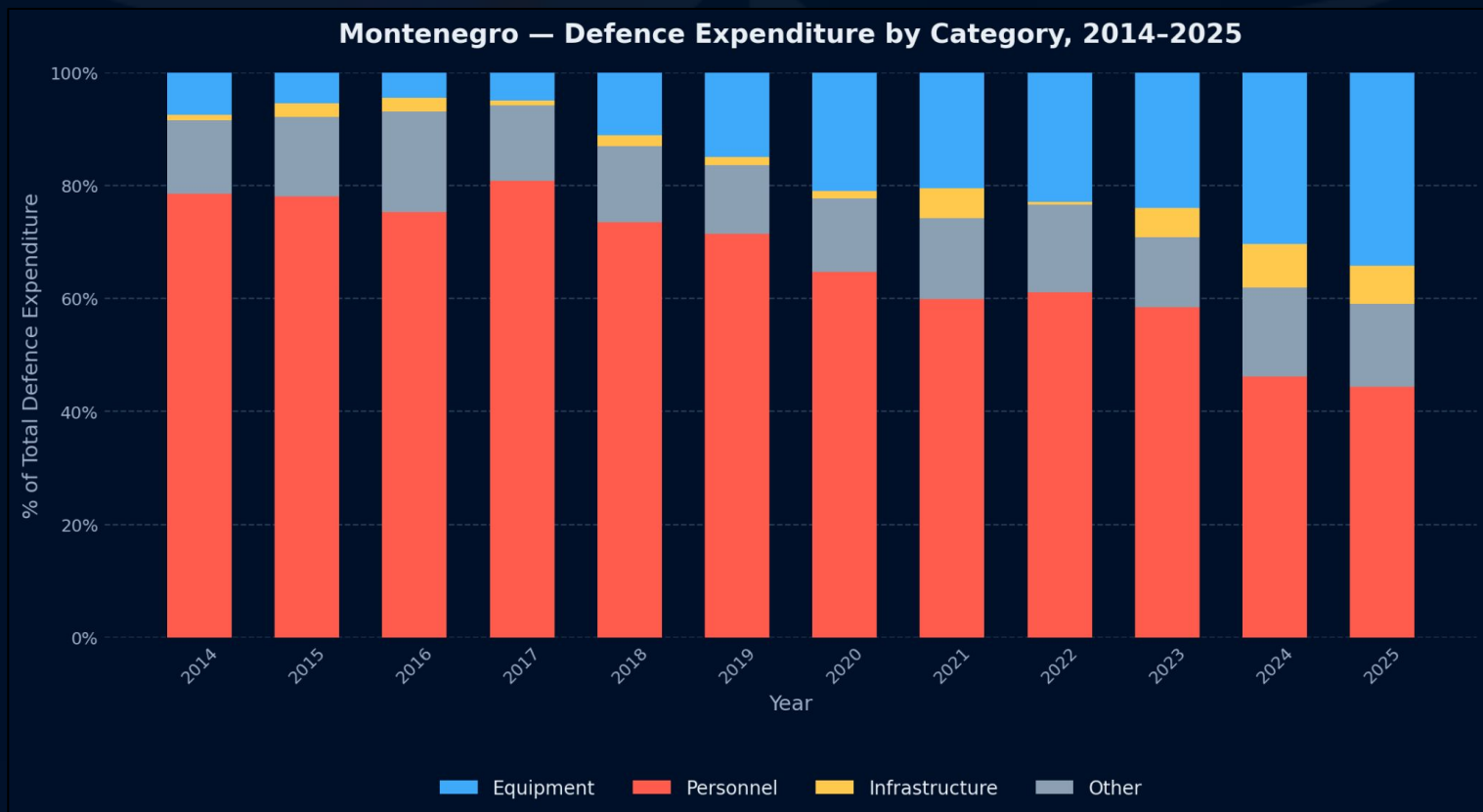
Montenegro reached 2.03% of GDP in 2025—meeting the NATO floor for the first time in years, up from 1.37% in 2022, a nearly 50% increase in GDP share over three years. The [data shows](#) Montenegro tracking close to the non-US NATO average through 2018-2020, dipping below after 2021, and recovering sharply by 2025. Montenegro accepted the Hague 3.5% core plus 1.5% framework at the June 2025 summit. The trajectory is positive; the structural ceiling is real—at 2% of GDP, Montenegro’s entire defense budget is less than the cost of many single NATO weapons programs, and a population of 620,000 imposes binding limits on force depth regardless of spending share.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Equipment Share

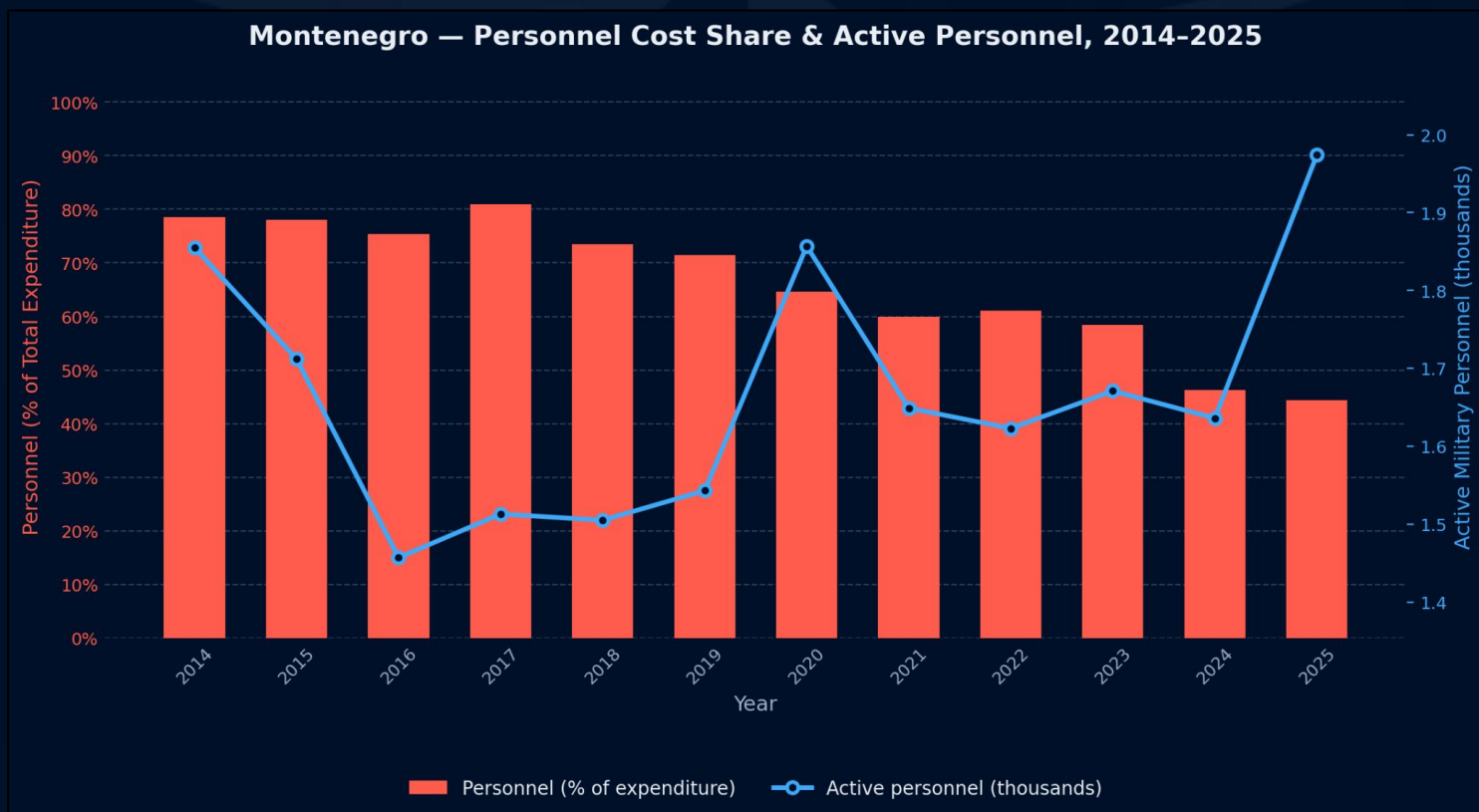
Montenegro's equipment share has risen from roughly 7.5% in 2014 to approximately 34.3% in 2025—well above NATO's 20% benchmark—as personnel costs fell from 78.5% to 44.4% over the same period. The chart shows a clear inflection from 2021 onward as equipment investment began dominating the growing budget. The ratio is favorable; the absolute numbers are not. At 34% of a ~\$174M defense budget, Montenegro's entire annual equipment spend is smaller than a single mid-tier NATO procurement contract. Montenegro is caught in the small country trap: equipment-share improvements cannot substitute for the fiscal scale needed to address core capability absences.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Manpower & Recruitment

Montenegro's [personnel picture](#) shows a force that has been both shrinking and now recovering. Active military personnel dropped sharply from roughly 1,850 in 2014 to approximately 1,450 by 2016-2018 before recovering to approximately 2,000 by 2025. Personnel costs have fallen from roughly 78% in 2014 to approximately 44% in 2025, a rebalancing toward equipment. Montenegro is rebuilding force depth while simultaneously freeing budget space for equipment. The constraint remains absolute scale: at roughly 2,000 active personnel, Montenegro fields a force smaller than a single NATO battalion, and the professionalization challenge is sustaining recruitment for a military career in a country of 620,000 where the entire armed forces could fit in a mid-sized sports stadium.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Capability Modernization

Montenegro's [modernization challenge](#) is replacing a nearly entirely Soviet-era inventory on a budget of approximately \$174M. Progress is slow but directionally correct. Ground forces consist of a single motorized infantry battalion equipped with aging BOV APCs, D-30 towed artillery, Soviet anti-tank missiles, and 32 JLTVs as the modern addition. Aviation is the most pressing gap: the G-4 Super Galeb jets and Utva-75 trainers are non-operational, leaving the air force with 16 Gazelle and 3 Bell 412 helicopters as its entire operational inventory—no independent fixed-wing combat capacity whatsoever, with Italian and Greek NATO fighters covering Montenegrin airspace. No submarines, no major naval combatants, no air defense beyond infantry-level systems. Montenegro's [realistic modernization scope](#) is infantry equipment, protected mobility, communications, and drones—but even on that narrowed agenda, progress is incremental given the budget constraint.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Force Posture

Montenegro's force posture is defined by small but [consistent contributions](#) to NATO forward deployments: 40 troops in Bulgaria's eFP, 11 in Latvia's eFP, 2 in Kosovo, and 1 in NATO Mission Iraq. Joining the Canada-led Latvia battlegroup in 2018, shortly after NATO accession, was politically significant. Montenegro has demonstrated immediate alliance commitment from a newly-joined member. Montenegro hosts no significant US or allied military installations and has no nuclear hosting role. NATO air policing over Montenegro is entirely provided by Italian and Greek aircraft. The force posture value is primarily political—demonstrating that even the alliance's smallest member participates in forward deterrence—rather than militarily material.



MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Industrial Base

Montenegro has minimal defense industrial capability. [TARA Aerospace](#) produces small arms, ammunition, and is developing drones—the only meaningful domestic defense production. For everything else, Montenegro is entirely import-dependent. The [Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Center](#), inaugurated December 2024, adds a regional cyber-training role that generates alliance value beyond Montenegro’s force size. On raw materials, Montenegro holds bauxite and aluminum deposits—the [Podgorica Aluminum Plant](#) was historically significant—with potential relevance to NATO’s critical minerals supply chain given aluminum’s role in aerospace and defense manufacturing, though current production capacity is limited. Montenegro’s most strategically relevant industrial asset is geographic: the Port of Bar on the Adriatic provides NATO logistics access to the Western Balkans.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Declared Posture

Montenegro's declared posture tracks NATO on Russia at the government level. [Spajić and President Milatović](#) back EU sanctions, support Ukraine through EUMAM and NSATU participation, and Spajić explicitly rejected BRI financing for future infrastructure. The tension is coalition composition: Parliament Speaker Andrija Mandić leads the pro-Russian For the Future of Montenegro bloc and was among defendants in the 2016 alleged Russia-linked coup plot (acquitted at retrial in 2024). NATO alignment is real at the executive level but structurally fragile given dependence on actors with contrary instincts.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Ukraine Support

Kiel Institute does not track Montenegro's Ukraine aid in its standard dataset, making precise GDP-share comparison unavailable. Based on publicly reported assistance, Montenegro has transferred €10 million worth of Soviet-era stocks, small arms, ammunition, and humanitarian support across multiple packages—modest in absolute terms relative to a ~\$174M defense budget but consistent with its capacity. The more significant story is institutional support: Parliament approved EUMAM participation in June 2025 after a nine-month delay driven by pro-Russian coalition pressure, and NSATU participation in November 2025 by a vote of 44–5. Both votes cleared despite Parliament Speaker Mandić's pro-Russian record. Montenegro aligned with every EU Russia sanctions package from the 6th through the 20th despite non-EU status.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Russian Decoupling

Montenegro's Russian energy decoupling is clean—minimal pre-2022 dependence, relying primarily on domestic hydroelectric power and Adriatic regional interconnections, no Rosatom footprint, no pipeline gas dependence. The Russia exposure is not energy but **financial and social**: Russian capital, real estate, tourism, and residence along the Adriatic coast create persistent sanctions enforcement challenges. Golden **passport pathways** created Russian penetration risks that EU accession pressure has forced tightening on but not eliminated. Montenegro aligned with every EU Russia sanctions package through the 20th despite non-EU status—genuine and among the strongest in the Western Balkans—but enforcement quality against individual Russian property and residence exposure is the real test that Montenegro has only partially passed.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Public Support & Political Resilience

Montenegro recorded 67% for staying in NATO and 71% feeling more safe from NATO cooperation in 2024, solid majorities that nonetheless reflect the country's deep internal divisions between pro-Western and Russia-friendly political camps. Forty-nine percent agreed Montenegro should defend another ally if attacked, below the alliance median, and Ukraine support stood at around 59% combined, in the lower third of the survey. The Europe Now (PES) government of Milojko Spajić is formally pro-NATO and has been the most accelerated Western integration government in Montenegrin history, but the Democratic Front and associated Serbia-aligned parties represent a substantial bloc that is openly pro-Russian and views the 2017 NATO accession as having been imposed over significant domestic opposition. Public Ukraine support is among the lower third of the alliance, consistent with complex historical and cultural ties to both Serbia and Russia that persist in the electorate. NATO support has softened somewhat in Montenegro since accession, consistent with a pattern seen in other newer members where public enthusiasm does not fully consolidate once membership is achieved.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Hedging Behavior

Montenegro's hedging behavior record is positive at the government level with two lingering concerns. On China, the [Bar-Boljare highway](#)—contracted with China Road and Bridge Corporation under a roughly \$944M China Exim Bank loan—is one of Europe's most cited BRI debt-exposure cases. Spajić has committed to [ally-based financing](#) going forward and no major Chinese-controlled critical infrastructure exists beyond the highway, but the debt burden created real leverage that took years to manage. On Russia, the risk is coalition politics rather than government policy: Mandić's pro-Russian history and the For the Future of Montenegro bloc represent persistent internal pressure that delayed EUMAM and NSATU approvals without ultimately blocking them. Arms procurement is non-adversary, Montenegro did not obstruct Finnish or Swedish accession, and it contributes to NATO forward deployments in Latvia and Bulgaria. The profile is improving but structurally complicated.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Operational Cooperation

Montenegro contributed forces to [Afghanistan under ISAF](#) and [Iraq coalition operations](#). On recent US operations, Montenegro has been supportive without obstruction—no hindrance to Operation Epic Fury, aligned on Iran sanctions. Montenegro does not participate in Operation Aspides or Operation Prosperity Guardian and had no public Epic Fury strike support role. The core [operational contributions](#) are distributed across alliance frameworks: 40 troops in Bulgaria’s eFP, 11 in Latvia’s eFP, continuous KFOR Kosovo presence, and EU NAVFOR Atalanta participation. Parliament [approved EUMAM](#) Ukraine participation in June 2025 and [NSATU in November](#) 2025—both cleared despite pro-Russian coalition pressure, placing Montenegro inside both EU and NATO Ukraine-support architectures. The Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre at Podgorica adds a regional cyber-training role. For NATO’s smallest member, the breadth of participation across multiple alliance frameworks is the defining operational story.

