

Protesters Hold Back Military Takeover of Balkans' Largest Mountain Pasture

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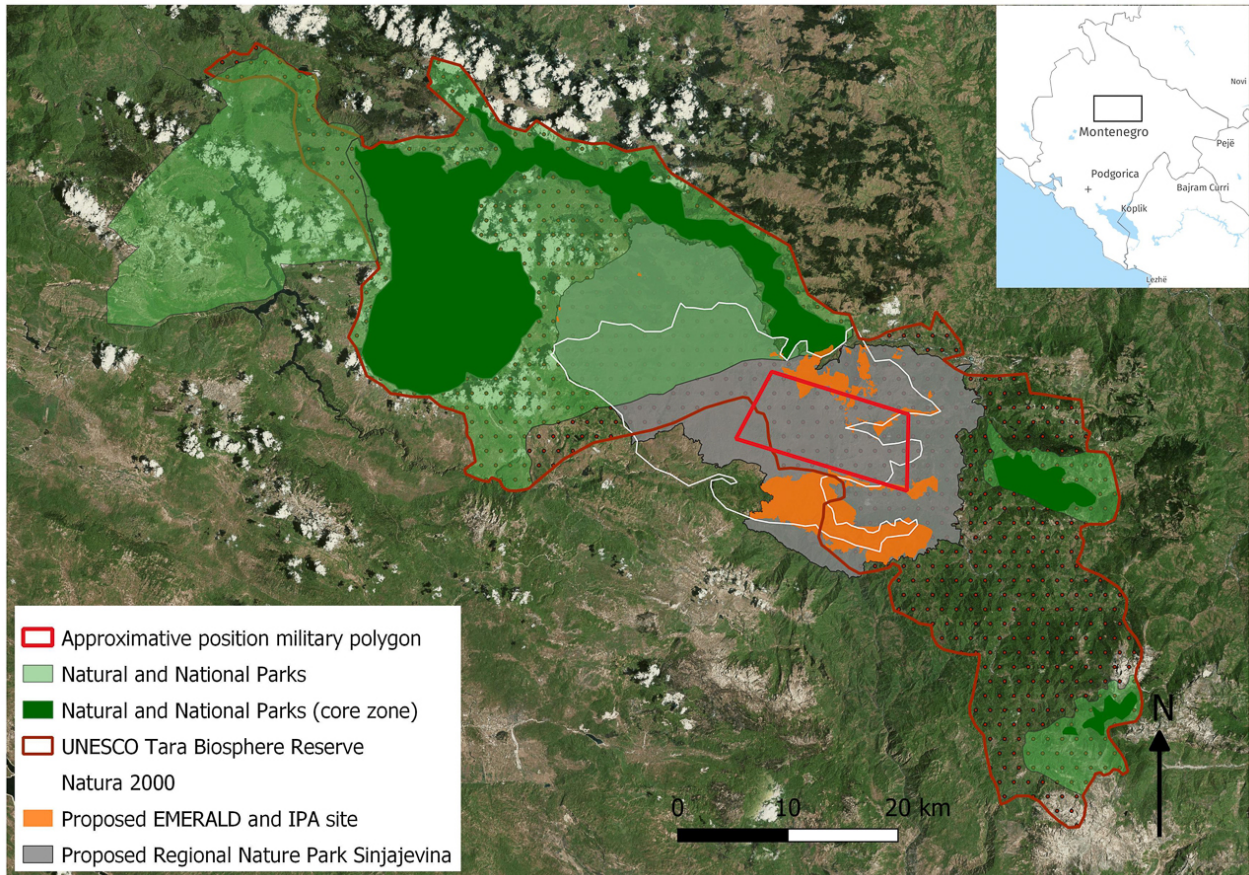
Montenegro's military — and maybe NATO — want the Sinjajevina Highlands for maneuvers; traditional herding communities want these biodiverse alpine pasturelands conserved.

Mileva “Gara” Jovanović’s family has been taking cattle up to graze in Montenegro’s Sinjajevina Highlands for more than 140 summers. The mountain pastures of the Sinjajevina-Durmitor Massif are the largest on Europe’s Balkan Peninsula, and they’ve provided her family not only with milk, cheese, and meat, but with an enduring livelihood and the means to send five of her six children to university.

“It gives us life,” said Gara, an elected spokesperson for the eight self-described tribes who share the summer pasture.

But, Gara says, this alpine pasture — “the Mountain,” she calls it — is under serious threat, and with it the tribes’ way of life. Two years ago, Montenegro’s military moved ahead with plans to develop a training ground where soldiers would carry out maneuvers and artillery practice in these grasslands.

No stranger to the daunting challenges of life as an alpine herder, Gara said that when she first heard of the military’s plans, it brought her to tears. “It’s going to destroy the Mountain because it’s impossible to have both the military polygon there and cattle,” she told Mongabay.



A map showing the approximate location of the proposed military polygon in the Sinjajevina pasturelands. Image courtesy of Pablo Domínguez (inset courtesy of Google Earth Engine).

Anthropologists who have studied the region say that pastoralists have been bringing their herds to the Sinjajevina grasslands for around 3,000 years. Now, Gara fears that the military’s use of the land will utterly disrupt the current natural balance that 250 local families have carefully cultivated.

The tribes are all part of the same ethnic group, and they meet periodically to discuss the management of the pasturelands. Thanks to their nurturing efforts, verdant grasses carpet the Mountain each spring that feed not only their cattle, sheep and horses. The long-sustained partnership between natural and human communities also engenders a unique and richly specied landscape, while snowmelt flowing down from Sinjajevina supplies Montenegro with water and supports its human population.

“Maintaining a diversity of uses and practices up there is helping conserve some very valuable stuff,” Pablo Domínguez, an environmental anthropologist at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) at the University of Toulouse, told Mongabay.



Milan Sekulović, who leads the Save Sinjajevina Association, with a horse on Sinjajevina Mountain.
Image courtesy of Milan Sekulović.

The battle over Sinjajevina's future — whether it remains a rare example of nature coexisting alongside humanity, or becomes a proving ground for kitted-out troops and heavy artillery — has embroiled not just Gara, the eight tribes, and the government of a small Balkans nation; it may also figure significantly into the global geopolitics of NATO and the European Union.

To many, including Gara, the two paths are incompatible. That stance led to a 51-day protest in late 2020. Around 150 farmers and activists camped on the Mountain in the fall, blocking the military's deployment with little more than their presence and sheer determination.

For now, at least, they've succeeded, coinciding with a seismic, generational political shift in Montenegro. Today, the challenge that preservation proponents like Gara and Domínguez face is to parlay this ephemeral triumph into permanent protections for Sinjajevina and its people.

A highland and homeland of surprising diversity

The Sinjajevina grasslands cover a rocky, rolling plain in northern Montenegro of more than 450 square kilometers (147 square miles), according to the government, amid the craggy dolomitic peaks and limestone karsts of the Dinaric Alps.

Average elevations of 1,600 meters (5,250 feet) mean that impassable snows blanket the high pastures for five or six months each year. During that time, herders vacate their *katuns* — small, seasonal alpine outposts — until the warmth of late spring returns.

These grasslands border [Durmitor National Park](#) and the [Tara River Basin Biosphere Reserve](#), both UNESCO World Heritage Sites where the rivers that drain these heights converge, plunging into Europe’s deepest river gorge.

At first glance, Sinjajevina appears boundless and quiet — even barren. In the military’s view, “It is empty,” said Petar Glomazić, a documentary filmmaker. Since 2019, Glomazić has co-led a coalition of international and local human rights groups, environmental NGOs and the European Union’s Green Party in a push to stop Montenegro’s military from commandeering the heart of Sinjajevina.



A katun on Sinjajevina Mountain. Image courtesy of the Save Sinjajevina Association.

Those initial impressions of the region’s emptiness can be deceiving. Sinjajevina’s pastures are capable of fattening 10,000 cattle and 70,000 sheep each summer, according to estimates by agricultural scientists. But through the ages, these “semi-natural” grasslands — a designation given because the ecosystem’s persistence depends in part on human activities — have remained an oasis of ecological stability.

“That way of life, that very sustainable way of life, has been there for centuries,” Glomazić said.

Beyond Sinjajevina, in the lands below, the people and the environment alike have been hammered by centuries of human-induced tumult in a politically turbulent region. The Balkans sit at the nexus of trade routes connecting Europe and Asia and along the borders between now-defunct empires and religious divisions. That location has led to repeated

conflicts amid shuffled power structures over many centuries.

Gara's tribe, the Bjelopavlići, trace their legal claim to Sinjajevina back to the 1880s. After a war with the Ottoman Empire, King Nikola I gave the Bjelopavlići the legal right to graze their herds there in recognition of their efforts and sacrifice in holding off the Turks.

Gara and her six children descend from that line of pastoralists who have shepherded their flocks to the Mountain, first by foot, a journey that took three to four days, and now with trucks. They've endured two world wars, the formation and disintegration of nation-states, the rising and falling tide of Communism, and a vicious ethnic conflict that brutalized the Balkan Peninsula in the 1990s.

For their part, Gara's children remain committed to preserving the way of life that their mother and others have kept alive, said her daughter, Persida Jovanović.



A cow on the pastures of Sinjajevina. Image courtesy of the Save Sinjajevina Association.

The eight tribes feel certain that stripping human influence from the grasslands would trigger an immediate change in the landscape, Gara said — one that could bankrupt the ecosystem and profoundly disrupt the balance that exists there today.

“Our ancestors, and us today, have unwritten laws how to keep the Mountain clean, especially the spring water,” Gara said. This code governs how early in the season people can bring their livestock to the high pastures, the number of animals allowed, where they can drink to keep waters free of pollution, and other considerations to encourage the renewed production of grasses year after year.

These handed-down strategies have in turn helped preserve wild animal and plant life.

“It is really a beautiful example of symbiosis of humans and nature. That nature would be different without the humans,” Glomazić said, “and vice versa.”

Vanishing global grasslands

Maintaining this time-honored balance requires a delicate dance between traditional pastoral livelihoods and nature — a dance that’s dying out around the world, especially on grasslands as [humanity converts them](#) for industrial agribusiness and other modern uses.

In 2020, a team of researchers in Japan, led by Taiki Inoue of the University of Tsukuba in Nagano, looked at plant communities in the Sugadaira Highland grasslands. Japan’s Sugadaira, like Sinjajevina, has hosted herders for thousands of years. More recently, pastoralists have abandoned parts of these Asian grasslands, as they find it harder to make a living herding in today’s world.

The researchers compared the number of plant species living in the grasslands with those living in the forests that sprung up in the herders’ absence and in new grasslands created after loggers cleared some of those forests. They found that the old grasslands — at least 160, and in some cases thousands, of years old — had the widest plant variety by far. Younger grasslands, stemming from deforestation over the past 52 to 70 years, had fewer plant species, but still more than the forest itself.

The authors note that, globally, grasslands are diminishing. About 13% of Japan’s land area was covered by grassland in the early 20th century, a figure that dropped to 1% by the early 2000s. Likewise, in recent decades, Brazil [lost half](#) of its vast Cerrado savanna biome, the largest grasslands now left on Earth. Given these precipitous declines, the authors [suggest](#) that conservation efforts should target the oldest “hotspot grasslands” where biodiversity is greatest — places like Sinjajevina.



Collecting herbs on Sinjajevina Mountain. Image courtesy of Milan Sekulović.

Part of what makes the hotspots “hot” stems from their susceptibility to takeover by powerful institutions such as modern governments or corporations, which in turn derives from how grasslands are typically managed by traditional communities, Domínguez said.

Grasslands are often communally shared, rather than being privately owned by a single individual, family or other legally deeded entity. Domínguez noted that it doesn’t make much sense to divide up a grass-covered landscape among herders for individual exploitation. In expansive range systems like Sinjajevina, livestock need vast spaces so they do not overexploit the grasses available on a single plot. Sometimes, these commonly managed pastoral areas are even pejoratively referred to as “badlands.” He said this misnomer is due to the incorrect assumption that land is only good when it can be exploited intensively. In fact, he added, such so-called badlands often sustain many times more natural and cultural values than does intensive farming.

In contrast with conventional modern agriculture, the herders of Sinjajevina share the sprawling pastures, across which they move their animals from place to place, adhering to a strict code of self-imposed regulations to avoid overtaxing any one location. As a result, the pastures can offer people sustainable livelihoods almost indefinitely. Gara’s family is living proof that this approach to caring for the commons works, Domínguez said.

But the small population — 250 families in the case of Sinjajevina — leaves these herders in a position where they can “hardly oppose a central state or NATO in their land grabbing,” he said.

Humans and nature in concert

Though Sinjajevina has thrived in balance for centuries, it turns out that the “beautiful” symbiosis” found there — so rare, and becoming more so in the world’s grasslands, rainforests, and other landscapes — isn’t well understood by scientists.

Ecologist Vladimir Pešić said that the dearth of data on Sinjajevina makes it “very difficult to talk [about] from a scientific point of view” what would happen if the military turns part of it into a training ground.

“We can only speculate,” said Pešić, a professor at the University of Montenegro. But, he added, “For sure there will be an impact on the Tara River canyon ecosystem.”

Milan Sekulović, the secretary-general for the Montenegrin NGO Save Sinjajevina Association, still walks with his family’s herds to the Mountain every spring. He noted that the military incursion risks ruining “one big ecological resource because we still don’t know what we exactly have.”



A lake on Sinjajevina Mountain. Image courtesy of the Save Sinjajevina Association.

In fact, the government’s Agency for Nature and Environmental Protection of Montenegro

(EPA) probed the ecology of Sinjajevina before the military had — publicly, at least — shown interest in the Mountain. That [research](#), released in 2018, was an initial step toward protecting the Sinjajevina Highlands as a regional nature park.

The study revealed a striking amalgam of plant and animal species, many found in few other places. Researchers recorded 1,300 plant species, 56 of which live only on the Balkan Peninsula. The massif boasts dozens of bird and mammal species, as well as a handful of protected amphibian and reptile species, including the karst viper (*Vipera ursinii macrops*), a small, venomous snake that thrives in mountain grasslands but whose numbers have dwindled along with its favored habitat.

The EPA study led to the promise of funding from the European Union to establish a park that would protect both the ecosystem and the herders' way of life.

Other government documents attest to Sinjajevina's ecological value. A 2015 [report](#) from the Montenegrin Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism notes that Sinjajevina is a bulwark for threatened mammals, of both the wild and domesticated sort, including the Piva sheep that local shepherds developed.

What's more, scientists say Sinjajevina feeds Montenegro's other regions. Every spring, alpine rivers swell with melting snow, gushing down from limestone peaks and providing a vital source of clean freshwater for Montenegro's population. Pešić, the lead editor of a book called [The Rivers of Montenegro](#), explained that the snowfall on the Mountain was a "very important" water source for the Balkan nation.



Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić (left) and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg speak to the press on Dec. 15, 2020, at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Image courtesy of NATO.

Zdravko Krivokapić, the country's new prime minister, recently acknowledged this reliance,

noting the urgent need to better understand how altering Sinjajevina will impact not just the immediate environment and the people who live there, but also the broader population of Montenegro.

“We have to be very careful about everything that we are doing,” Krivokapić told NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at a joint press conference on Dec. 15, 2020. “We have to find the best solution in order to meet the needs of NATO requirements and our [national] plans, and to preserve the essential value, which is, first and foremost, our environment.”

Gara was more forthright in her assessment. “If they do the military exercises in Sinjajevina, they’re going to pollute our rivers and mountains,” she said. “The waters that come from Sinjajevina — I think they go to half of the country. If those waters are polluted, everything else is polluted.”

Winds of (geo)political change

Considering these concerns, why, then, would Montenegro have chosen to move ahead with military plans that could endanger the country’s environment and water supply?

Several sources speculated to Mongabay that the push for a Sinjajevina training ground wasn’t driven by Montenegro’s army alone, which at full muster comprises fewer than 2,400 active soldiers. Instead, it is possible that Montenegro’s position on Europe’s southeastern flank is seen as strategic by NATO, and perhaps the European Union, of which Montenegro is not yet a member. But those military goals could also put Montenegro at odds with the EU’s stringent requirements for protecting nature.

Through a spokesperson, NATO declined to comment, except to direct Mongabay to the press conference held by the organization’s secretary-general and Montenegrin Prime Minister Krivokapić on Dec. 15.

European Commission spokesperson Ana Pisonero, on behalf of the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, acknowledged to Mongabay that the military training area overlaps with a UNESCO World Heritage Site — the Tara River Biosphere Reserve — and that Sinjajevina is a candidate for inclusion in the European Community’s Natura 2000 network.



Milan Sekulović and another protester at the Margita camp, where activists blocked a military exercise for 51 days in late 2020. Image courtesy of Milan Sekulović.

The [Natura 2000](#) program includes threatened species habitat and breeding areas, often in places where humans also use the landscape. These spots don't have the strict protections of national parks and preserves, but EU bylaws require member nations to manage them sustainably.

Pisonero noted that a 2020 EU [report](#) required Montenegro to prioritize "urgent measures to preserve and improve the ecological value of protected areas and potential Natura 2000 sites."

She said the report called for any military operations in Sinjajevina to "be planned and monitored in line with the UNESCO principles of socio-cultural and ecological sustainability." Pisonero also pointed out that the remaining unfulfilled requirements related to the environment and climate change for Montenegro's admission to the EU were "among the most demanding."

"To progress on the EU-accession path, the country must deepen and speed up reforms,"

Pisonero said. “The faster Montenegro aligns with EU legislation, [and] conducts and implements necessary reforms, the faster it will be in a position to join.”

Military incursions begin

In the summer of 2019, the movement to protect Sinjajevina called for the cancelation of the March 2019 decree creating the military training ground. The activist coalition argued that, in addition to the risks to the environment, the government hadn’t carried out the necessary consultations and assessments to comply with the international principle of free, prior and informed consent.

“No negotiations with anybody,” Domínguez said. “They just declared it.”

To draw attention to the military’s plans, close to 10,000 people signed a series of petitions organized by Save Sinjajevina and groups from abroad, including Land Rights Now, the Indigenous Peoples’ and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) Consortium, the International Land Coalition, and the Common Lands Network. And nearly 100 local and international NGOs from as far away as the Philippines, Indonesia and Burundi signed a statement supporting the measures.

Gara, along with Save Sinjajevina’s Sekulović, said that the tribes weren’t even told the size or the location of the troop training ground.

The Montenegrin Ministry of Defense did not respond to telephone and emailed requests for comment. However, available estimates put the proposed area at between 100 and 250 km² (39 and 97 mi²). Wider ecological impacts could also occur as military missions travel to and from alpine areas.

In September, Thomas Waitz, a member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the EU Green party, visited Sinjajevina and voiced his support via [tweet](#) for keeping the military out.

“Military exercises here will have devastating consequences for farmers, animals, and the natural environment,” Waitz later told Mongabay in an email. “We need to protect this vital ecosystem and say no to military destruction.”

Still, in late September 2019, an international contingent of around 300 soldiers armed with explosives moved into Sinjajevina for military exercises.

“Now we are in the situation when you must fight for your home against your own army,” Sekulović said in an interview. “It’s a strange situation, but it’s real.”

Proponents of militarizing Sinjajevina have called the protesters traitors, saying they’re standing in the way of national defense in a volatile region. And the conservation movement’s leaders worried that their movement’s resistance wouldn’t be sufficient to end the military’s plans.

New government, new resistance

Then, in August 2020, the results of Montenegro’s elections buoyed the hopes of Sinjajevina’s defenders.

In all but a few of the past 30 years, Milo Djukanovic has led Montenegro as either president or prime minister. But Djukanovic's grip on power in the Balkans appears to be on the wane: In last August's election, the loss of seats by Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists meant that a new government coalition would soon rule Montenegro. That has opened the door for a ruling coalition that's ostensibly more attuned to environmental issues and specifically Sinjajevina.

One of the members of that new coalition, the United Reform Action (URA) party, recently became a member of the EU Green Party. URA leader Dritan Abazović, who in December 2020 became Montenegro's deputy prime minister, signaled his support of conservation prior to the formation of the new government in a [tweet](#), writing in October, "There will be no military exercises on #Sinjajevina!" He called the preservation of the Mountain's pastures a "significant victory" for the people and the environment of the little Balkan nation.

But that claim quickly collided with reality, as hundreds of soldiers, including not just Montenegrins but also international troops, reportedly planned to camp and carry out shelling exercises in the Margita area of Sinjajevina.

The Save Sinjajevina Association responded with dogged resistance. Beginning Oct. 16, some 150 protesters camped in the Margita area, where they believed the exercise would take place. They stayed for nearly two months, withstanding plummeting temperatures and winter storms and standing in the way of a military takeover at the heart of Sinjajevina.

Throughout November 2020, the soldiers remained close to Margita, to the frustration of Domínguez and other supporters of the Save Sinjajevina movement.

In Podgorica, the capital, talks among the newly elected members of the coalition failed to produce a working government, first missing one deadline in November, and then another. That led to concerns about whether URA leader Abazović, even with the support of the EU Greens, would in fact have the final say on the military training ground.

Relief on the Mountain

Finally, on Dec. 5, the coalition came together and formed a new government. The same day, incoming Minister of Defense Olivera Injac announced that the protesters should "go home freely."

"I will be very happy to visit our natural pearl together with my colleagues and talk to the locals as soon as the opportunity arises," Injac said, according to the Montenegrin newspaper [Vijesti](#) — an announcement that was "welcomed" by the European Commission, spokesperson Ana Pisonero said.

That same day, the protesters decamped, based on a promise from Injac that the military's presence on the Mountain would be reevaluated. Still, the activists remain steadfast in calling for the permanent cancelation of the decree that created the training ground. They also want to see a park designated in Sinjajevina and created with the involvement of local communities and protection of traditional livelihoods in a region buffeted by political vagaries.

However, they worry whether the initial support their movement has marshaled will last, particularly in the context of global politics involving NATO, the EU and Montenegro's place

in Europe. Montenegro, after all, is a country in flux: The new governing coalition represents the first meaningful change in the country's leadership in three decades, and it remains a young nation that only arose in its current form out of the former Yugoslavia less than two decades ago.

"It is surely too early to say if this decision is going to be stable and definitive," Domínguez said in an email to Save Sinjajevina supporters, "and we will have to look very carefully at the developments."

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Featured image: Activists on Sinjajevina celebrated a victory on Dec. 5 when the newly formed government promised to reevaluate the military's use of the pasturelands. Image courtesy of Milan Sekulović.

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