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EASTERN EUROPE ECHOES: NARRATIVES,
CULTURES, AND MEMORIES FROM COLD
WAR TO DAYTON'S LEGACY (1946–2026)

Edited by

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2. THE TWINNING BETWEEN BARLETTA AND HERCEG NOVI

by Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice*

Abstract: Questo articolo si concentra sul gemellaggio del 1969 tra Barletta e Herceg Novi, inquadrato nelle più ampie relazioni storiche tra Puglia e Montenegro. L'obiettivo principale è esplorare questo gemellaggio come esempio pivotale dei legami Puglia-Montenegro alla fine degli anni '60, enfatizzandone il ruolo nel promuovere la solidarietà adriatica nell'ambito dell'apertura italiana verso la Jugoslavia non allineata di Tito. Radicate nella costruzione a Barletta di un ossario slavo in onore dei partigiani jugoslavi caduti nel Sud Italia, l'iniziativa rifletteva le pratiche pugliesi di memoria antifascista e i sacrifici bellici condivisi con le comunità montenegrine. Accordi preliminari a maggio e settembre 1968 crearono un "ponte adriatico", con visite reciproche dei consigli comunali che posero le basi per una collaborazione più profonda tra il porto pugliese e la cittadina costiera. Questo gemellaggio esemplificava la diplomazia strategica delle città portuali pugliesi con gli hub montenegrini, contrastando le divisioni della Guerra Fredda attraverso legami popolari e anticipando modelli futuri di integrazione transfrontaliera. Posizionando Barletta come testa di ponte della riconciliazione, influenzò reti italo-balcaniche durature, sottolineando l'agenzia degli attori municipali nella distensione della Guerra Fredda.

Parole chiave: Montenegro, Italia, Ossario, Gemellaggio, Barletta, Dopoguerra.

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Abstract: This article focuses on the 1969 twinning between Barletta and Herceg Novi, framed within the broader historical relations between Puglia and Montenegro. The primary aim is to explore this twinning as a pivotal example of Puglia-Montenegro ties during the late 1960s, emphasising its role in fostering Adriatic solidarity amid Italy's outreach to Tito's non-aligned Yugoslavia. Rooted in Barletta's construction of a Slavic ossuary honouring Yugoslav partisans killed in southern Italy, the initiative reflected Puglia's anti-fascist memory practices and shared wartime sacrifices with Montenegrin communities. Prelude agreements in May and September 1968 created an "Adriatic bridge," with reciprocal council visits laying groundwork for deeper collaboration between the Puglian port and the coastal town. This twinning exemplified Puglia's strategic port-city diplomacy with Montenegrin hubs, countering Cold War divisions through grassroots ties and anticipating future cross-border integration models. By positioning Barletta as a reconciliation bridgehead, it influenced enduring Italo-Balkan networks, underscoring municipal actors' agency in the Cold War détente.

Key words: Montenegro, Italy, Ossuary, Twinning, Barletta, Postwar.

Introduction

Montenegro and Italy established diplomatic relations in May 1879, with the opening of the Italian legation in Cetinje (Popovic e Papovic, 2024). The two states maintained cordial ties, fostering close collaboration across various fields, particularly the economic one. In the early 20th century, leading Italian companies in Montenegro aimed to dominate much of the local economy. A symbolic emblem of this friendship was the 1896 marriage between Italian Prince Vittorio Emanuele III and Montenegrin Princess Jelena Petrović-Njegoš. During World War I, the two countries fought as allies within the Entente. When Montenegro was forcibly annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SCS) by the Podgorica

Assembly in 1918, Italy initially refused to recognise it. Instead, it supported the efforts of Montenegrin King Nikola I Petrović-Njegoš and the Government in exile to preserve national independence. Italy continued to treat Montenegro as a sovereign state until the signing of the Rapallo Treaty, which de facto recognised it within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in November 1920. Official relations with the Montenegrin Government in exile were severed in 1922.

From the second half of the 1930s, Fascist Italy planned the dismantling of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the creation of small satellite states, including Montenegro. This scheme materialised in April 1941, when Tripartite Pact forces invaded and dismantled Yugoslavia. Italian occupation lasted from April 17, 1941, to September 8, 1943. The independent State of Montenegro was proclaimed under Italian protectorate, with the establishment of a Civil Commissariat led by High Commissioner Count Serafino Mazzolini, who oversaw a local puppet regime. On July 13, 1941, the Communist Party launched a mass uprising against the occupation. The Civil Commissariat was abolished and replaced by a Military Governorship under General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli. In Montenegro, fierce clashes erupted between Italians and collaborators on one side, and Communist-led partisans on the other; these conflicts led Italy to deploy about 107,000 soldiers there in August 1942, amid a total population of roughly 400,000. In these battles, the Italian occupying forces and their local allies killed and interned numerous Montenegrin patriots and civilians.

1. The relations between Italy and Montenegro

After World War II, Montenegro became one of the republics of socialist Yugoslavia. As foreign policy was the exclusive domain of

the Yugoslav federal government, republican authorities focused on cooperation with neighbouring countries. In the early 1960s, the Montenegrin republican government's top priority was establishing transport links and cultural exchanges with Italy. The Montenegrin ferry "Sveti Stefan" began operating on the Bar – Bari – Bar – Dubrovnik (Ragusa) route on July 24, 1965: this marked Montenegro's first direct maritime connection with a Western country (Milano 2024). The ferry belonged to the Montenegrin company "Prekookeanska plovidba" of Bar, with representation in Bari handled by the "Morfimare" agency. At that time, Italian popular culture was gaining ground in Montenegro. Official Montenegrin media in the early 1960s noted the rising influence of Italian fashion. Beyond fashion, interest in Italian pop music was growing. In early June 1965, the Italian group "Naldi" and singer Ana Lauri performed in Montenegrin coastal towns, followed by a fashion show. In early October 1966, aboard the Santo Stefano ferry, the Miss Adriatic and Miss Coca-Cola contests were held, entertaining about 170 passengers from Bari and surrounding areas with Italian singer Lala Leone. During the voyage from Bar to Dubrovnik, travellers admired the Montenegrin coast, particularly the Bay of Kotor. These events were outcomes of Italy's "Ostpolitik," which in the 1960s made Italy—alongside West Germany—the primary trading partner of communist countries in Europe, alongside expanding cultural cooperation. In 1965, Italy opened a cultural centre in Belgrade and three similar ones in Eastern Europe.

As enduring legacy of sacrifice found poignant commemoration in the Ossuary of the Fallen Slavs in Barletta, Puglia—a stark, modernist monument rising from the sun-bleached southern Italian soil where numerous Montenegrins, alongside other Yugoslav fighters from Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and beyond, met tragic ends during the war's desperate final convulsions amid Allied liberation

campaigns (Klabjan 2024). Barletta emerged as the deliberate and fitting choice for this memorial not by accident, but because its municipal cemetery had already become an impromptu resting place for fallen Yugoslavs as early as 1945, a direct consequence of the region's frontline role in the Italian Campaign: following the dramatic Allied landings at Salerno in September 1943, British and American forces surged northward through Campania and into Puglia, shattering Axis lines and unleashing a torrent of casualties that overwhelmed local infrastructure. Hundreds of wounded partisans, escaped POWs, and emaciated camp survivors—including a significant contingent of Montenegrins airlifted from shattered Balkan fronts like those near Cetinje or repatriated from nearby Italian confinement sites such as Altamura's PG 65 and Bari's transit points—were funneled into Barletta's makeshift medical network, their evacuation prioritized by Allied medics racing against sepsis, gangrene, and the hollow-eyed specter of camp-induced starvation. The soldiers buried in Barletta belonged to the NLAY, the Yugoslav National Liberation Partisan Army, wounded during the liberation struggle and transported by the British to military hospitals in southern Italy, particularly to the field hospital they themselves organized in 1944 in the northwest section of Barletta's cemetery—today the site of the Scuola Musti; an officer oversaw the burials personally, meticulously recording each interment in a dedicated register with the fallen's full personal details (Leuzzi, 2008).

On January 13, 1968, Mika Špiljak, President of the Federal Executive Council of Yugoslavia, visited Barletta to pay homage to the 174 remains of Yugoslav fallen already buried in the local cemetery.

The deeply moving encounter was attended by the highest political and military authorities, including Giulio Pastore, President of the Committee of Ministers for the South; the Yugoslav ambas-

sadors to Rome and Belgrade; Prefect Novello; Police Chief Lacquaviti; Colonel Basso of the General Commissariat for War Fallen Honors; Lt. Col. Cursio, commander of the military garrison; senior law enforcement representatives; and the full municipal junta, chaired by Mayor Michele Morelli.

2. Moro's Ostpolitik and the Morotei, the twinning between Barletta and Herceg Novi

Among the foremost architects of the initial dialogues between Puglia and Montenegro stood Aldo Moro, by far the paramount figure of the Christian Democrats (DC) and Italian politics for the Puglian region during a transformative era. As the Puglia regional autonomy movement gained momentum—culminating in the establishment of the Region of Puglia via the 1970 constitutional reforms—Moro championed an audacious opening toward Yugoslavia's smallest republic, viewing it as a pragmatic extension of his broader Ostpolitik vision: a strategy of détente and economic bridging with Eastern Europe that echoed Brandt's Ostpolitik in Germany, aiming to thaw Cold War divides through trade, cultural exchanges, and mutual development pacts (Monzali, 2016). Montenegro, under the influential leadership of figures like Marko Orlandić. Orlandić, who rose through Titograd's political ranks and advocated infrastructure booms like the Titograd–Bar railway expansions, eyed Puglia's industrial surge (steelworks in Taranto, petrochemicals in Brindisi, Fiat's Adriatic logistics) as a lifeline for Montenegro's coastal tourism revival and export ambitions, from aluminum at Podgorica to fisheries in the Gulf of Kotor. During this era, the inaugural official political contacts were forged between Montenegrin cities and those within the Puglia Region. Montenegro's capital, Titograd (today's Podgorica), pioneered collaboration with

Bari as early as 1966—a modest entente centered on maritime exchanges and cultural overtures that echoed the Sveti Stefan ferry’s inaugural Bari-Bar voyages—only to deepen substantially from 1972 onward through formalized pacts on trade fairs, student mobility programs, and joint Adriatic heritage initiatives, reflecting the broader thaw in Italian-Yugoslav ties under Moro’s conciliatory vision.

The mayor of Barletta, Michele Morelli, was also a devoted “Moroteo”, acting in seamless alignment with his political mentor by forging a robust and fruitful partnership with Montenegro. On April 7, 1969, a delegation from Barletta’s municipal administration—comprising the mayor himself, Deputy Mayor Attorney Francesco Capurso, and Finance Assessor Knight Aldo Bernardini—traveled to Belgrade at the invitation of the Yugoslav government, extended by Federal Executive Council President for Health and Social Policy Nikolo Georgievski via the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On September 23, 1969, what local newspapers hailed as “a bridge across the Adriatic between Barletta and Herceg Novi” came to fruition. In fulfilment of agreements reached by the mayors and city councils of both municipalities since May of that year, the twinning pact between Barletta and the Montenegrin city of Castelnovo (Herceg Novi) was formally signed, aiming to foster more tangible cooperation between the two communities. The initiative was warmly welcomed not only in Italy but also by Montenegro’s leading daily, Pobjeda, which praised it as a symbol of reconciliation and shared Adriatic destiny.

The Yugoslav Fallen Commemorative Ossuary was inaugurated on July 4, 1970, attended by Italy’s highest-ranking officials, a large Yugoslav delegation, and relatives of the deceased fighters. This was followed by the placement of six urns into the crypt and the wreath-laying ceremony: offerings from the city of Barletta, the Italian Minister of Defense, the Italian Government, the Yugoslav Government, Puglia’s partisans, and President Tito. The head of the

Yugoslav delegation, after sealing the crypt, handed its keys to Barletta's mayor, who—reaffirming the pride and warmth with which the city embraced the remains of these brave soldiers—emphasised the deep bonds of friendship uniting the two people.

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