

GENESIS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO: WHY THE WEST SHOULD BE CONCERNED?



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GENESIS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO: WHY THE WEST SHOULD BE CONCERNED?	5
Back to reality: The pro-EU Prime Minister with pro-Russian elements inside the Government	6
The chance for PM Spajić to do the right thing despite the unveiled Russian threats	8
Why is Montenegro important to Russia?	9
When did the Russian factor activate in Montenegro?	10
When did the pro-Russian forces come to power in Montenegro? ..	11
Russian and Serbian agents control a NATO member's security sector and resources	13
War in Ukraine: The US and the EU pressures to fix the situation in Montenegro	14
Is Montenegro living a Ukrainian scenario and is Serbia imitating Russia and Iran?	15
CONCLUSION	18

GENESIS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO: WHY THE WEST SHOULD BE CONCERNED?

Does anyone remember former US President Donald Trump's statement regarding Montenegro from July 2018, made as he spoke for FOX television on the occasion of Montenegro's accession to NATO: "Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people... They're very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you're in World War III".¹ There were numerous reports about the statement the leading news agencies across the globe. At that time, it merely seemed as yet another media blunder made by Donald Trump. However, viewed from a distance and in the context of current events in Europe, Ukraine and the Balkans, the statement is significant in many ways. Trump's "policy of yielding" to Russian influence and Putin's regime, supported by his visions of restructuring the collective security system and amending Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (collective defense), rightly led Fox's prime-time host at the time Carlson Tucker to ask the American president the following question – "Why should my son go to Montenegro to defend it from attack?"² Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017 was an important step for the organization as it meant that the last piece of the European part of the Mediterranean outside the North Atlantic security system became part of the NATO zone. Of course, this could not but annoy the Russians, who have seen the Montenegrin Adriatic coast as their sphere of interest since the 19th century. As a result, since 2017, Russian pressure and influence in Montenegro has been abruptly intensifying in the form of hybrid and malignant activity, financing of pro-Russian political parties and strengthening of the Russian "soft power", which led Montenegro to great social instability, potentially dangerous for global security.³

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/19/very-aggressive-trump-suggests-montenegro-could-cause-world-war-three>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/19/very-aggressive-trump-suggests-montenegro-could-cause-world-war-three>

3 <https://dfc.me/dfc-studija-uloga-rusije-na-balkanu-slucaj-crne-gore/>

Back to reality: The pro-EU Prime Minister with pro-Russian elements inside the Government

A few months before Trump's defeat in the US, which he and his supporters are yet to accept, on the last day of August 2020, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its leader Milo Đukanović lost power in Montenegro after three decades, although he remained in office as the President of Montenegro until May 2023.

The long-term and almost absolute three-decade rule of Đukanović was primarily marked by his courageous move of 1997, when he opposed Slobodan Milošević's criminal policy that led to the Balkan wars in the 90s, turning Montenegro towards the West, while simultaneously managing to skillfully balance different interests to avoid any direct conflicts that could have resulted in bloodshed in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Montenegro. Throughout that period, Đukanović's rule included extraordinary and strategically wise statehood and foreign policy decisions. However, the period was also marked by a number of critical mistakes internally – including those in the form of uncurbed corruption, crime, nepotism and cronyism, which altogether created a conducive ground for the pro-Serbian nationalist forces to use the opportunity to come to power. Financially and logistically supported from abroad and inside, with strong and overt leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has never come to terms with the "loss" of Montenegro as they perceive its regained independence from Serbia, these forces carried out a clerical revolution known as "litiyás", held under the populist slogans such as "We won't give our holy places."⁴

Nevertheless, the celebrations and chanting about the "refreshed and most democratic Montenegro ever", supported even by many Western allies, soon turned into an unpleasantly surprising nightmare. Not for the true pro-Western advocates in the country, though – they kept pointing out that everything that was left from the European and Euro-Atlantic course were empty phrases that the new majority knew Brussels and Washington bureaucrats wanted to hear, while on the ground, their real work to further clericalize and infuse the country with Serbian and Russian influence carried on with all available means.

Those who, only ten years ago, explained to the public "that NATO is not in the interest of Montenegro" (specifically, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Filip Ivanović⁵) have now adopted European rhetoric. Instead of being used for the reform processes, the money from the European funds, i.e., EU taxpayers is being used for clericalization of Montenegrin society and its subjugation, as a sovereign

4 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-54535662>

5 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/249567/nato-nije-nas-interes>

state and a NATO member, to the only country in the region that has territorial claims against its neighbors – Serbia, and through it, Russia as well. During the yet incomplete term of Joe Biden in the White House, Montenegro has already had three governments – from the autumn “refresh” of 2020 to the autumn of 2023. All of the governments are, however, including the same majority from August 2020, despite numerous mutual frictions, fragmentations and splits.

As for the Finance Minister of the so-called “first apostolic government” of 2020 and current Prime Minister, Milojko Spajić, a combination of various circumstances has given him an opportunity to tear Montenegro away from the claws of those that brought him to power and to lead it where it belongs – in the European and Western family of nations. Internally, these circumstances included the disastrous results of his two predecessors, the fact that of all the other political actors from the once unique coalition he is the least (publicly) favored in official Belgrade (therefore, in Moscow too), and the call of irresistible populism embodied in the salary increase, referred to under the code name Europe Now 1 (Europe Now 2 has also been promised), as well as, from the global perspective, increasingly unstable world in which the Balkans are always a suitable ground for various influences (especially malignant ones).⁶

Although the EU doors have remained wide open for Montenegro and although EU and US officials, as well as all the country’s neighbors (except Serbia), are very loud in encouraging Montenegro to cross the finish line, Spajić’s task, as absurdly as it may be, is a daunting one. Namely, on top of the fact that the previous two governments, including the first one in which he participated, completely stopped the EU integration process, persistently turned the compass towards the Kremlin and Belgrade, and enabled a NATO country to become an open polygon for malignant Russian influence, he possibly may have to overcome some opponents of the idea even in his own cabinet.

6 <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/mmf-program-evropa-sad-2-rizik-za-drzavu-pdv-bi-mogao-ici-na-30-odsto-ako-se-ukinu-doprinosi>

The chance for PM Spajić to do the right thing despite the unveiled Russian threats

The main problem here can be defined as a question – how to cross the EU accession finish line and avoid the obstacles set even by actors from the inner circle, who in the last three and a half years worked diligently to ensure that Montenegro does not join the EU, as this would, in their view, on top of NATO accession in 2017, be another important step in moving away from malignant and retrograde influences with authoritarian tendencies from Russia and Serbia.

Meanwhile, as this new opportunity for Montenegro to pass through the European doors has re-appeared once again, more reachable than before, Vladislav Maslenikov, the Russian ambassador in Podgorica, explicitly threatened the country by saying – in an extensive interview for the Russian media outlet “Izvestia” of February 2024 – that Montenegro’s accession to the EU would mean confrontation with Russia.⁷

When it comes to the Western Balkans, Russia has only so far considered the expansion of NATO as a threat. In the case of Montenegro, however, another comparison is applicable – the one with Ukraine, from the period of the first invasion in 2013/2014, which was followed by the annexation of Crimea and the war operations in the East of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. The reason for the first Russian aggression against Ukraine was the strategic decision of the country to join the EU accession process (the head of Ukraine at that time was the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, who fled on the eve of the annexation of Crimea to Russia, where he still lives in exile).

There are, of course, a couple of important differences, with the key one Montenegro being a NATO member, regardless of the fact that none of its current leaders supported that membership when it was decided upon in 2017. Also, Russia is not bordering Montenegro, but its main proxy in the Balkans – Serbia, is, and its leaders, every now and then, openly express Serbia’s territorial pretensions towards Montenegro. Through influence from Serbia, the powerful SOC, and the local players who are now in positions of power, Russia has more than enough room for maneuver, malicious activities and attempts to thwart PM Spajić from taking advantage of the historical opportunity that was given to him, of finally doing the right thing for Montenegro and for the region as a whole.

7 https://montenegro.mid.ru/sr_RS_latn/web/me/-/intervju-ambasadora-vladislava-maslenikova-za-ruski-list-izvestija-14-02-2024

Why is Montenegro important to Russia?

Montenegro is a small Balkan country on the coast of the Adriatic Sea with about 630,000 inhabitants. It regained its independence from Serbia in a democratic referendum in 2006. Since then, it has profiled itself in international politics as a country that strives to Euro-Atlantic integration. The country's greatest foreign policy achievement is its accession to NATO in 2017. Decades-long dependence on Serbia made the Serbian factor in the country alive and active. Pro-Serbian parties, organizations, and above all – very strong and powerful Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) have not lost their power once Montenegro regained its independence in 2006, but worked for years on their infrastructure and strengthening their presence in the already multi-ethnic Montenegrin society, where in addition to 45% of national Montenegrins and about 20% of the Bosniak, Albanian, Croat and Roma minorities, there are almost 30% national Serbs. It was precisely the strong influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, along with dramatic social changes in the 1990s during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, that contributed to a significant change in the national structure of the country during that turbulent decade, although there were no major demographic changes. Namely, in the period between the censuses conducted in 1991 and 2003, the number of ethnic Montenegrins dropped from 61% to around 45%, while the number of ethnic Serbs increased from 9% to over 30%. The fact that a significant number of Montenegrin citizens changed their national self-expression during a decade is a consequence of the aggressive campaign of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which abuses the fact that both Serbs and Montenegrins are dominantly Orthodox, implementing a kind of assimilation of national Montenegrins by soft power.⁸ The national preferences of the Orthodox part of the Montenegrin population are not based on ethnic origin, but are predominantly ideological in nature, so the pro-Western Orthodox population predominantly nationally identifies with the ethnonym Montenegrins, while those who opt for Serbian national self-expression are dominantly associated with anti-Western and pro-Russian political sentiment. Therefore, national divisions in Montenegro do not depict clear borders between national groups, but often pass through families themselves. Strong pro-Russian emotions among a part of Montenegrin citizens with a pro-Serbian orientation and large Russian investments in Montenegro in the period of 2006-2010 made Russia look at Montenegro with particular attention. As soon as it became clear that Montenegro would join NATO, the Russians activated all possible tools to destabilize the country. Serbia and the regime of Aleksandar Vučić also found an interest in this endeavor, in an attempt to become a key regional player in the Western Balkans through the poli-

8 <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SPC-WEB.pdf>

cy of undermining the independence of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Although sometimes it is not necessarily a matter of coordinated actions, Russian and Serbian interference in Montenegro and the region are motivated by the same goals.

When did the Russian factor activate in Montenegro?

In 2013, there was a request for Montenegro to permit the entry, anchoring and repair of Russian ships in the Port of Bar and Port of Bijela on the Adriatic coast. Montenegro refused this request, and the punishment came soon, as access to the Adriatic (and Mediterranean) Sea through Montenegro remains a long-standing obsession of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian nationalist forces. In 2015, Montenegro's pro-Western foreign policy received a lot of criticism from the Kremlin. At the same time, anti-NATO protests by pro-Russian political parties began, led by the Democratic Front (renamed in 2023 as the "For the Future of Montenegro"), which represents the interests of Serbs in Montenegro, as well as by Serbian and Russian cultural organizations and activists, with the important support of the powerful Serbian Orthodox Church.⁹ The protests lasted for two weeks without final success, and ended with an aggressive action by the Montenegrin police, which caused a deep political crisis.¹⁰ Following these events, and ahead of general elections in Montenegro, Russia changed its tactics in 2016 – from mass protests to a complex coup d'état operation.¹¹ In contact with politicians from the Democratic Front, the Russian GRU (the military intelligence service) planned to violently enter the Montenegrin Parliament, take control of the institutions and prevent Montenegro from joining NATO.¹² Thanks to a coordinated action of the Montenegrin and Western security services, such a scenario was prevented. The entire coup d'état operation had a judicial epilogue that was broadcast for months on national television, whereby the public was made aware of the evidence against the suspected politicians from the Democratic Front. It has been proven in the first instance that they planned a coup d'état and a violent change in the constitutional order directly with the Russian GRU and agents recruited in Serbia. The leaders of the Democratic Front, MPs Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, were sentenced to five years in prison each, and their associates to seven years in prison. However, the state did not find the strength to arrest them, so the politicians from the

9 <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/10/15/montenegro-hosts-nato-amid-protests-10-15-2015/>

10 <https://rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/106941/napad-demonstranata-na-policiju.html>

11 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-attempted-coup-in-montenegro-in-2016>

12 <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-gru-agents-found-guilty-attempted-montenegro-coup/>

Democratic Front continued to engage in politics. The first-instance verdict was quashed by the Court of Appeal, and the process was returned to the beginning. The High Court in Podgorica is conducting a repeated trial, with a new prosecutor and judge – the prosecutors from the first trial are being held in custody for alleged ties with organized crime. At the same time, Andrija Mandić is the Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro and Milan Knežević is a member of the ruling majority.¹³

These events from 2016 were closely monitored by then Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, who initially offered to send the data collected by the Serbian Security Information Agency (BIA) regarding the case to Montenegrin counterparts, since a group of Serbian citizens was directly involved in the Russian plot. Yet, a twist followed after a high-ranking official of the Russian intelligence service Nikolai Patrushev flew into Belgrade and held a meeting with Serbian leaders.¹⁴ After that meeting, Aleksandar Vučić refused to cooperate with Montenegrin institutions and prevented the sharing of data. This can be considered a turning point in the relations between Montenegro and Serbia, because after Patrushev's visit to Belgrade, the rhetoric of the Serbian state officials towards Montenegro changed completely, which eventually led, only a few years later, to the expulsion of the Serbian ambassador from Montenegro, as well as to an attack on the Montenegrin Embassy in Belgrade.

When did the pro-Russian forces come to power in Montenegro?

Before 2020, the then ruling government, composed of DPS and its coalition partners (social-democrats and the parties of minorities), believed that NATO membership would resolve all security issues and that Montenegro would be completely protected from Russian interference. In reality, this could not be further away from the truth. After it failed to prevent Montenegro's accession to NATO, Russia realized that it could turn the tables for its benefit – with a view to conquer the Montenegrin security sector it started to increasingly rely on the pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro, helping them rise to power. It was back in 2015, at the Strategic Forum organized in Belgrade by the Russian Organization in Serbia "Strategic Culture Fund" that one of the main pro-Russian activists in Montenegro (close to DF), university professor Vladimir Božović (who will become the Rector of the only state-owned University in Montenegro after August 2020) proposed that the Russian strategy in Monte-

¹³ <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-gru-agents-found-guilty-attempted-montenegro-coup/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/25/montenegro-investigating-russia-alleged-election-coup-plot>

negro is changed.¹⁵ Božović suggested that Russia should rely more on the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), given that Montenegro's population included 80% Orthodox Christians and that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was destroyed back in 1918, which meant that the Serbian church was the only canonically recognized Orthodox institution. Rector Božović is also one of the founders of the organization of Matica srpska in Montenegro and the media outlet IN4S, a controversial news portal infamous for spreading hate speech, targeting non-Serb population, labeling independent intellectuals and civic activists and openly promoting Russian interests, as was demonstrated during the occupation of Donbas and Crimea and after Putin's aggression in Ukraine, when its reporters and columnists spread misinformation on events in Ukraine, glorifying Putin and his criminal endeavor. Meanwhile, the IN4S news portal has been identified by the US State Department as an integral part of the Russian disinformation and propaganda ecosystem.¹⁶ Eventually, the SOC did prove to be the holder of the process of taking over Montenegrin institutions by the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties. In 2019, the Serbian church in Montenegro started protests against Montenegrin government due to its efforts to pass a Law on Freedom of Religion, which would finally give legal status to all church organizations in Montenegro.¹⁷ Through cunning action and aggressive propaganda, the Serbian church managed to depict the state's effort to regulate the church status in accordance with the law as a struggle of the socially deprived for human rights and change in long-standing power – thus, with the intensive assistance from Serbia and the media, they managed to mobilize the voters and change the pro-Western government in Montenegro in 2020, in midst of the coronavirus pandemic. It was an overt and blatant meddling of a religious institution in national politics. Yet, as the western world was busy with coronavirus and the lock-down effects, Russia and Serbia conducted a “quiet” revolution in Montenegro through Serbian Orthodox Church and pro-Serbian political parties, generously financing the political actors that won the parliamentary elections. It is important to note that the legitimacy for the takeover of power by the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties in 2020 was provided by the so-called green civic movement URA led by Dritan Abazović, which was self-presented as progressive and pro-Western party. Since then, the country's collapse has started and Montenegro has become the focus of a malignant impact on the Western Balkans.

¹⁵ <https://www.cdm.me/english/who-is-chancellor-vladimir-bozovic-the-vector-of-russian-soft-power-in-Montenegro/>

¹⁶ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

¹⁷ <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-serbian-orthodox-church-and-the-2020-montenegro-elections>

Russian and Serbian agents control a NATO member's security sector and resources

The removal of DPS from power after long-standing rule has caused a huge shock in the country. The power was now held by political parties that were against Montenegro's independence and which, in the parliamentary campaign, emphasized the importance of relations with Russia, supporting the idea of revoking the recognition of Kosovo's independence and taking more active approach in the direction of getting Montenegro closer to Serbia and strengthening pro-Serbian and pro-Russian sentiment. The main levers in the new government were in the hands of the Democratic Front, the same party whose leaders were convicted of an attempted coup d'état just a few years ago. The new government formed in December 2020 was a true international and security scandal. In order to get a clear idea of what happened in Montenegro with that government, it is sufficient to reflect on three high-level state functions – PM Zdravko Krivokapić, who stated that his political role model was former Iranian PM Muhammad Ahmadinejad; Dejan Vukšić, a lawyer of criminal clans and Russian businesssean and an official of the Democratic Front, who became the Director of the National Security Agency (ANB); and Vladimir Leposavić, a Minister of Justice who refused to acknowledge the verdicts of the Hague Tribunal related to war crimes and genocide in Srebrenica. The Russian-Serbian strategy for taking over key resources and institutions in the country started to be implemented.¹⁸ The new government in Montenegro led to a sudden influx of Serbian investments in Montenegro. In a few months, all important media outlets in the country were purchased by Serbian businessmen. Due to political pressures, the public broadcaster and local TV stations owned by local governments have changed their editorial policy in favor of the Serbian narratives. The Serbian Orthodox Church became an extremely powerful factor and the main center for appointment of politicians in the authorities – moreover – the Government of Montenegro formed in December 2020 was officially agreed upon in an Orthodox monastery in the presence of Serbian church clergy. The church came to play the role of “moral” authority and social power, while implementing serious strategic operations to the benefit of Serbian and Russian policies in Montenegro, as was observed in the European Commission's report after the Russian aggression in Ukraine in which it characterized Serbian Orthodox Church as one of the tools of Russian influence.¹⁹

The most important state resources – the thermal power plant and the coal mine in Pljevlja, the Port of Bar on the Adriatic Sea and the country's electricity company

18 <https://www.nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/focus/id/1351>

19 <https://www.antenam.net/stav/300823-the-church-problem>

and distribution network (EPCG/CEDIS) – are now managed by verified pro-Russian personnel. Since their sale to companies from Serbia and Russia would be too obvious and could cause resistance, the government decided to buy back shares in these important companies under the guise of “protecting national interests”, only to appoint pro-Russian and pro-Serbian personnel in the management boards and to executive positions and thus put them under the control of Russian-Serbian interests. Those directors and management boards have immediately started to finance and sponsor the SOC activities with millions of Euros. In short – we effectively have taxpayers’ money in a NATO member state used for pro-Russian interests. Air transportation in Montenegro was solved differently – the national airline “Montenegro Airlines” was immediately liquidated by the new government, only for Serbian national company “Air Serbia” to benefit the most from its termination, as it was allowed to take over the main routes of the Montenegrin company.

War in Ukraine: The US and the EU pressures to fix the situation in Montenegro

After Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Western democracies began to take more seriously the depth of Russian channels in Montenegro. National and religious divisions in the country, which would certainly cause it to resemble Lebanon in the event of an outbreak of internal conflict, forced the USA and the EU to take a more active approach. The idea led to the aforementioned attempt to form a pro-western minority government with Dritan Abazović as a PM, without new parliamentary elections and with strong EU promises that Montenegro would soon be the first next member of the EU. In return, Montenegro was requested to implement technical changes in the judiciary, with the instructions to reform the security sector. High-level representatives of the EU began to visit Montenegro, giving encouraging statements about Montenegro’s accession to the EU, while Savo Kentera, a professional close to the US, was appointed as the Director of the NSA. Although part of the Montenegrin public was suspicious of Abazović’s true intentions, as he was the one who had enabled the clerical 2020 government to be formed and the security sector to be penetrated by Russian and Serbian agents, the new government was formed in 2022. Yet, it did not take long for Abazović to show his true intentions. As a PM, he promptly replaced Kentera, who had managed to reveal a network of over 50 Russian spies in Montenegro and a huge operation of cigarette smuggling in the port of Bar in which Abazović’s close friend and political associate was involved.²⁰ Furthermore, despite receiving a no-confidence vote for

20 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/5116>

his government in the Parliament, Abazović moved on to remove from office both the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Raško Konjević and Ranko Krivokapić, politicians who were a guarantee that Montenegro would not turn away from the Euro-Atlantic agenda. Just as he was supposed to implement the required judicial reforms that would bring Montenegro back on the European track, Abazović decided to meet the interests of SOC and the Serbian president instead and signed the so-called “Fundamental Agreement” with SOC, *de facto* transferring the ownership rights over a total of 52 km² of Montenegro’s territory to the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchy of Belgrade.²¹ Thus, all the Christian Orthodox sacral heritage of Montenegro became the property of the Belgrade Patriarchate and was alienated from its parent state. As a result, Abazović’s government received a no confidence vote in the Parliament, which effectively shattered the country’s EU accession dreams. Yet, he continued to rule the country under a technical mandate, destroying it further. Since the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the beginning of the Abazović’s mandate, as many as 4,000 Russian companies were established in Montenegro. In April 2023, the production of Russian vodka “Beluga”, banned from the EU market, started in Montenegro.²² As a result, the EU has frozen negotiations and began publishing negative annual reports with the warnings of Russian and Serbian interference in internal affairs of Montenegro.

Is Montenegro living a Ukrainian scenario and is Serbia imitating Russia and Iran?

Parallels between Ukraine and Montenegro – both in a historical perspective and in a modern context – are more than obvious. Just as Vladimir Putin promoted the doctrine of the “Russian World” as an official ideology before the aggression, the current regime in Serbia, imitating his actions, promoted the concept of the “Serbian World”.²³ The foundations of Belgrade’s expansionist policy in Montenegro were defined by the original text of the Serbia’s Government Strategy of 2011, on Serbia’s action with regard to Serbs living in the region: one of the goals set in that document is a request for changes of the Constitution of Montenegro, in order for Serbs to become a constitutive people. After a prompt reaction of Montenegro, this request was withdrawn from the Strategy, but the document itself has turned out to be a long-term plan for destabilization of countries neighboring Serbia that have a greater or lesser percentage of Serbs in their population. Strong financial

21 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/29/serbian-church-agreement-shakes-montenegro-coalition/>

22 <https://euobserver.com/world/156915>

23 <https://dfc.me/en/narrative-on-the-serbian-world-negates-the-montenegrin-identity/>

support from Serbia aimed at strengthening the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church and numerous organizations and the media outlets in Montenegro in the past decade reveals that it is a carefully designed and implemented project. The closest Vučić's associates – such as a newly appointed Vice PM of Serbia who was also a former Director of the National Security Agency, Aleksandar Vulin, a person under US sanctions, openly talk about the ambition to change the borders in the Balkans, referring to the concept of the “Serbian World” since 2020. Meanwhile, Metropolitan of the SOC in Montenegro Joanikije Mićović publicly referred to Montenegro a “small Ukraine”, saying that the country would have to return to the alleged “roots”, i.e., the integral Serbian state.²⁴ The highest dignitaries of the SOC in Montenegro openly glorify Russia and Putin in their public addresses, promoting anti-western stereotypes aggressively. In addition, the argument about Ukraine as the Russian “historical territory”, originally used by Putin, is constantly repeated in Montenegro by the clergy of the SOC. Recently, SOC Patriarch Porfirije Perić called upon the citizens of Montenegro to declare that they speak Serbian language in the population census in Montenegro, which is in direct conflict with the constitutional definition of Montenegro as a state of citizens, and its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural being. There is no doubt that such messages are intended to portray Montenegro as a dysfunctional country, subordinated to Serbia in political, economic and cultural terms, after which its constitutional remodeling would ensue for the Serbs to become a constitutive people. This way, the country would soon be transformed from a civil state into an ethno-federal system. Introducing the concept of constituent people(s) would lay foundations for creating a ‘Republika Srpska’ in Montenegro, which has already been proven an effective permanent destabilizer not only of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but of the entire region. It would be a Serbian equivalent of South Ossetia or Transnistria – Russian footholds in Georgia and Moldova. This would permanently pave the way for full Serbian control of Montenegro's political orientation.

Meanwhile, the Serbian Orthodox Church remains the most powerful tool of Russia and Serbia for assimilation in the Balkans, since it can exert a strong influence among the population due to language similarity and the fact that Orthodox Christians live in several countries. Just as Russia for years undermined Ukraine through the Russian Orthodox Church, Serbia continues to utilize SOC to undermine three sovereign countries in the Balkans: Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. After several armed conflicts in Kosovo recently, international investigations have proven that the firearms used for terrorist actions were stored

²⁴ <https://thegeopost.com/en/news/dangerous-parallels-between-montenegro-and-ukraine/>

in the premises of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Also, information appeared that firearms are being kept in the premises of the same religious organization in Montenegro. A corresponding situation could be found in the Islamic world in the case of Iran, which, through the instrumentalization of Shia Islam, keeps undermining countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, forming the so-called “Shia crescent” of influence. In the case of Serbia, theoretically, its policy of undermining the independence of the region through the instrumentalization of Orthodox Christianity could be called the “Serbian-Orthodox arch” in the Balkans.

Even though the current situation in Montenegro – where pro-Russian and pro-Serbian actors have taken over some of the key structures of power in the country – resembles the one in Ukraine in the era of pro-Russian president Yanukovich, there is an important difference – Montenegro is a NATO member. That fact could, on the one hand, give ground for an assumption that, with the strongest possible influence from the West, Montenegro could be liberated from Russian and Serbian influence. Yet, on the other hand, this could also be a misleading point.

It is clear that Montenegro will not be attacked from the outside for the time being, and it seems that this fact has largely diminished the West’s interest in the malignant processes that have been taking place in the country for the past three years under direct Serbian, and only seemingly less direct Russian influence. But, it is precisely because of such a naïve and neglectful approach that anti-Western forces have taken control over some key Montenegrin structures, now seeking to completely undermine the country’s system and, consequently, NATO collective security system.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Russian influence in Montenegro is active and strong. This influence is exerted through political parties in the ruling majority, through the Serbian Orthodox Church, management in state-owned companies, and at the level of local self-governments, where representatives of the parliamentary majority hold sway. The fusion to achieve Russian influence is carried out through Serbian influence, and these two factors are complementary. All the important aspects of pro-Serbian policy in Montenegro serve the interests of Russian influence. Russians are trying to whip up anti-Western hysteria in Montenegro, which is a well-known and recognizable Russian approach in democratic countries. The fact alone that Russia has invested so much political and financial capital and high-level interference in Montenegro should be enough to trigger serious interest from the EU and US in the whole situation.

At the same time, the current government, led by Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, denies the existence of significant Russian influence. During his address to the European Parliament in April 2024, Spajić downplayed Russian influence, emphasizing that it was at its historical minimum. The biggest challenge for Spajić is the “stabilizer” of his cumbersome ruling majority – the coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” (formerly Democratic Front). Leaders of this coalition, Andrija Mandić, the Speaker of the Parliament, and Milan Knežević, the Member of the Parliament, both staunchly and openly pro-Russian and pro-Serbian actors, constantly pressure the government, conditioning their support with increasingly vocal demands for more seats in the government and institutional positions. PM Spajić and his party Europe Now are struggling to navigate through such a complex situation, so at times it seems that Andrija Mandić is actually running the government. This was most evident during the coordination of Montenegro’s official stance on the United Nations Resolution on the Genocide in Srebrenica, as both Mandić and Knežević exerted enormous pressure in order for Montenegro to abstain from voting, demanding that the official policy aligns more closely with Belgrade. The same is true regarding the issue of Kosovo’s membership in the Council of Europe, where Spajić’s party remained abstinent, although the Minister of European Affairs, close to the PM, promised Priština authorities that Montenegro would vote in favor of Kosovo’s admission.

In the context of the international situation and Russia’s increasingly aggressive incursion into Europe, the situation in Montenegro does not look promising. With a government that neither addresses nor considers the dangers of Russian influence, with representatives of the parliamentary majority that were directly financed by Russia in 2017, and with very pronounced ethnic and religious divisions,

Montenegrin society appears to be an ideal target for provoking internal conflicts. Therefore, it is essential to intensify the West's action in Montenegro, primarily in terms of economic, media, education and security aspects – or in all those spheres where Russian influence has instruments through which it asserts its presence. On the other hand, it is very important for Montenegro that due to both global and regional processes, the EU apparently decided to turn a blind eye to the numerous Montenegrin deficits, including the porosity to the Russian and Serbian malign influence. Hopefully, after getting the IBAR (Interim Benchmark Assessment Report) in June, the final step will be taken and Montenegro's membership in the European family of peoples and values would be approved to the benefit of all Montenegrin citizens. Nonetheless, it would be equally dangerous for all, Montenegro, the EU and the NATO, if, instead of a country with a true European value system, Montenegro would become or remain "a Russian mole" in the Western fabric.

WestBalkanNet: Regional Forum for Democracy, Reconciliation, and Strategic Analyses (WBN) is a think tank and non-profit non-governmental organization based in Montenegro. It is dedicated to promoting and devising actions and strategies that would aid in the spread of democracy, reconciliation, and a culture of dialogue in the Western Balkan countries during their accession process to the European Union. WBN's mission is to create a network of experts, political actors, institutions, activists, and non-governmental organizations with a common agenda of promoting EU practices, values, and achievements. The vision of WBN are open, reconciled, and democratic societies immune to malign, subversive, and hybrid influences from non-democratic regimes that undermine the integration processes of the Western Balkan region into the EU.



GENESIS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO: WHY THE WEST SHOULD BE CONCERNED?