



*RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS*

# HANGING BY A THREAD: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro

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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE





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June 2018



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# HANGING BY A THREAD:

## Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro

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## Executive Summary

In December 2015, Montenegro opted to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and in doing so categorically rebuffed two years of Russian efforts to secure a port there for the replenishment and repair of Russian military vessels. Russia then embarked on a new strategy: stoking political and ethnic divisions to destabilize Montenegro and preclude further Western integration. In the Kremlin's best-case scenario, a pro-Russia government would come to power and reverse Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic course. To this end, Russia coordinated with local opposition and Serb ethno-nationalists in an unsuccessful attempt to topple the democratically elected government of Montenegro in October 2016.

Despite the coup's failure, the future of Montenegro's progress toward Western integration remains uncertain. The institutional actors behind the failed coup attempt remain largely in place and steadfastly opposed to NATO membership. Should they come to power, they likely would withdraw Montenegro from the Alliance, retract its recognition of Kosovo, and potentially reunite with Serbia. Thus, to prevent the reversal of Montenegro's Western trajectory, the U.S. and its NATO allies immediately must work to deepen their engagement with the country. Without undertaking measures to strengthen military cooperation, facilitate democratic reforms, accelerate the European Union accession process, and renew financial support for programs in the rule of law, the West is unprepared to counter Russia's destabilizing efforts.

## Russia in the Balkans

Russia vocally has opposed the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions into the Balkans, which it perceives as part of its sphere of influence.<sup>1</sup> When the Kremlin feels that its influence is eroding in this region vis-à-vis the West, it becomes a destabilizing force. This is a concern of Moscow's throughout the Western Balkans, and in particular, in Montenegro.

The Kremlin knows that instability brings underperformance in governance and the economy. It also believes—as demonstrated by the wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014)—that a conflict-averse Europe and U.S. will not integrate states where political instability is chronic. For example, NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a "NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance."<sup>2</sup> Within this context, fulfilling minimum NATO membership requirements includes full civilian control of military, compatibility of NATO forces, democratic governance, and progress towards a market economy.<sup>3</sup> These requirements cannot be met in a state of chronic political dysfunction where intolerance and acrimony is pervasive and institutional corruption is common. To this end, Russia has adopted a strategy of stoking political and ethnic divisions and rewarding crony capitalism in target states, aiming to impede further Euro-Atlantic integration.

In Montenegro, the placement of a pro-Russian, anti-Western government in Podgorica is essential to Moscow's strategy to thwart greater Western

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1 Reacting to Montenegro's invitation to join NATO, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman stated, "Russia has repeatedly warned that the continuing expansion of NATO . . . cannot fail to lead to actions in response . . . from Russia." See "Montenegro invited to join NATO," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 2, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-invite/27401948.html>. See, also, warnings made by Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Sergei Zelenyak in Belgrade, December 26, 2015; and Gordana Knezevic, "Montenegro's NATO-Russian Chess Match," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 2, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-russia-chess-match/28210094.html>.

2 Membership Action Plan (MAP), North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics\\_37356.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_37356.htm) (accessed May 22, 2018).

3 "Minimum requirements for NATO membership," US State Department, [https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/fs\\_members.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/fs_members.html).

engagement in its perceived sphere of influence. A crucial Russian entry point lies in its exploitation of ultranationalistic sentiments couched in Pan-Slavism. Appealing to a broadly Slavic heritage, common Christian Orthodox faith, and Russia's historically patriarchal role in the region stemming from the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kremlin works to forge common cause with ethnic Serbs. Extreme Serb nationalism, coupled with its vision of Greater Serbia (the unification of all ethnic Serbs into one state), creates fertile grounds for recruitment to Russian-backed political and paramilitary activities. Montenegro has its share of groups promoting ethno-nationalist ideologies to which a portion of its Serbian population is sympathetic, if not outright supportive.<sup>4</sup>

The primary Serb ethno-nationalist political force is the Democratic Front (DF), a coalition made up of several Serb nationalist parties known for their pro-Russian affiliation comprising: the Democratic People's Party, New Serb Democracy, Democratic Serb Party, and the Yugoslav Communist Party of Montenegro. Russian media is supportive of the DF and other right-leaning, Serb nationalist political groups in Montenegro, including non-governmental organizations such as the Movement for Neutrality of Montenegro and No to War, No to NATO, noteworthy for their anti-Western rhetoric and pro-Russian stances. Given Russia's means of political leverage and the geopolitical stakes, Montenegro's continued Western trajectory remains at risk.

## Montenegro in a Geopolitical Context

Montenegro is a parliamentary republic located on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea. By the World Bank's classification, the country of 642,500 is upper middle-income.<sup>5</sup> After the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Montenegro joined its neighbor Serbia to establish the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. This state union existed until 2006 when the majority of Montenegrin citizens voted for independence in a nationwide referendum.

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4 For more background on the role of formal and informal ultranationalist Serb groups, see, "Bosnia on the Russian Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent It," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 16, 2018, pp. 8-10, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/03/bosnia-russian-chopping-block-potential-violence-steps-prevent/>.

5 Country data, World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/montenegro> (accessed April 14, 2018).





Port of Kotor, Montenegro. (Source: Shutterstock)

Under the leadership of Milo Djukanovic,<sup>6</sup> Montenegro consistently has sought deeper relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). However, a considerable minority (approximately 35-40%)<sup>7</sup> of the population remains skeptical of this path.<sup>8</sup> These segments question Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic partnerships for a variety of reasons, including the historical permeation of Pan-Slavism with attendant Pan-Orthodox leanings<sup>9</sup> and resentment of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign

6 Milo Djukanovic, re-elected as the country's president on April 15, 2016, has served either in that office or as prime minister in several governments from 1991 to the present.

7 See, "Growth in support: 47.3 percent of citizens to join NATO" [Rast podrške: za ulazak u NATO 47.3 odsto gradana], Crna Gora, February 1, 2016, <http://crna.gora.me/vijesti/politika/rast-podrške-za-ulazak-u-nato-473-odsto-gradana/>.

8 Levels of skepticism of NATO membership in Montenegro are not uniquely high in comparison to other NATO states; e.g. 30 percent in Germany and over 40 percent in France. See, "Support for NATO is widespread among member nations," Pew Research Center, July 6, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/06/support-for-nato-is-widespread-among-member-nations/>.

9 The Pan-Slavic political movement grew out of the 1848 Spring of Nations, around which time the Slavic peoples of the Hapsburg Empire convened a congress in Prague. Its aim was to secure more democratic representation for its ethnically Slavic subjects. By the 1860s, many of its ideas had become popular in Russia; however, Russian thinkers reshaping it under the premise that the West was culturally bankrupt and spiritually bereft, the latter implying a "redemptive" role for the Orthodox Church. See, also, "Pan-Slavism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pan-Slavism> (accessed May 22, 2016).

against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The stakes surrounding Montenegro's geopolitical orientation are high. Geographically, its location on the Adriatic Sea grants deep-water access to the Mediterranean from the ports of Bar and Kotor. Politically, its growing alliance with the Euro-Atlantic Community thwarts local ambitions for a "Greater Serbia"<sup>10</sup> and limits Russia's efforts to expand its influence in the Balkans.

Russia's interest in Montenegro heightened several years ago. As the reliability of its naval base in Tartus, Syria became less certain, Russia began seeking alternatives. In September 2013, the Russian government requested a meeting with the Montenegrin Ministry of Defense to discuss the temporary moorage of Russian warships at the ports of Bar and Kotor. By Moscow's proposal, Russian ships would dock under a privileged status that would allow for the extensive use of territorial waters. In sum, it was a request to install a Russian naval base in Montenegro. Podgorica rebuked the request, instead referring Moscow to the UN Convention on Law of Sea, whereby Russian ships in need of assistance for refueling or maintenance would be granted as such accordingly.

The value to Moscow of an Eastern Mediterranean

10 "Vojislav Seselj: I wanted a 'Greater Serbia,'" *Balkan Insight*, June 10, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/seselj-s-goal-was-greater-serbia>.



*Evidence (equipment allegedly prepared for the coup) presented by the Montenegrin prosecutor.  
(Source: PR Centar)*

military port should not be underestimated. For example, the Russian Naval Facility in Syria's Tartus is that navy's only repair-and-replenishment port in the Mediterranean. According to Russia and Middle East expert Anna Borshchevskaya, "A port allows a country to project power and support military operations. Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean helps protect against a possible blockade seeking to punish or topple the Bashar al-Assad government in Damascus."<sup>11</sup> The Russian navy further has an operational role in the conflict, as demonstrated by the deployment of Russia's sole aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and its Northern Fleet strike group in October 2016. Although playing a secondary role in airstrikes, 40 Russian naval aircraft conducted a sizeable number of sorties in Syrian—over 400 in a two-month period, hitting a reported 1,252 targets, according to Russian news.<sup>12</sup>

Lacking a reliable port in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia's strategic capability in the region is limited. For example, the *Kuznetsov* group was denied port by European NATO member states in its voyage from its home port of Severomorsk. Absent a bilateral agreement with a coastal state, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea does not obligate states to provide facilities for refueling, repair, or moorage. Reliable port access in the

Eastern Mediterranean remedies that strategic limitation. Unable to approach NATO member states, Russia's remaining options for basing were less stable North African states and Cyprus, with the talks with the latter and Egypt failing to bear fruit. These factors help to explain Russia's 2013-14 drive to secure a deal with Montenegro's government for the usage of ports in Bar and Kotor.

Given the strategic significance and consequent effort Russia placed on naval presence in Montenegro, the Kremlin's response to NATO's membership invitation was predictably caustic and threatening.<sup>13</sup> President Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, stressed that Russia has repeatedly warned, "The continuing expansion of NATO and the military infrastructure of NATO to the east cannot fail to lead to actions in response from the East - that is, from Russia."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs saw NATO's invitation as openly confrontational, concluding that "this new round of the alliance's expansion directly affects the interests of the Russian

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Anna Borshchevskaya, Ira Weiner Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 8, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier's experience in Syria included in-training programs," Tass Russian News Agency, October 30, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/973134>.

<sup>13</sup> Montenegro's candidacy for NATO membership commenced with its participation in MAP in 2009; the formal invitation for full membership was extended in December 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "Montenegro invited to join NATO," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 2, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-invite/27401948.html>.



Federation and forces us to respond accordingly.”<sup>15</sup> On Montenegro’s signing of the Protocol of Accession to NATO in May 2016, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said plainly that, “This latest NATO move undertaken . . . will definitely affect Russia’s interests and force us to react.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the subsequent events of 2016 demonstrated Russia’s commitment to its word.<sup>17</sup>

### The Attempted Coup d’Etat of 2016

On the eve of Montenegro’s 2016 parliamentary elections, police in Podgorica detained former Serbian gendarmerie commander Bratislav Dikic and 19 other individuals on charges of forming a criminal organization with the intent to overthrow the government. Fourteen indictees are currently being tried in Podgorica by Special Prosecutor for Organized Crime Milivoje Katnic. With the support of testimonies, confessions, and physical evidence, the following is alleged.

In the months leading up to the parliamentary elections of October 16, 2016, Russian agents, Serbian extremists, and leaders of the Montenegrin opposition alliance (Democratic Front) prepared to oust the government violently on election night. They planned to instigate political violence with the hope of triggering nationwide protests and toppling the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) government led by Milo Djukanovic. According to officials, Serbian nationals initiated the enterprise in early 2016 under the direction of Russian GRU<sup>18</sup> and FSB operatives.<sup>19</sup>

The planned takeover was relatively straightforward. Under the command of Dikic, a group of 20 individuals dressed in stolen Montenegrin police uniforms were to occupy

15 “Comment by the Information and Press Department on Invitation for Montenegro to Start Talks joining NATO,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, December 2, 2015, [http://www.mid.ru/en\\_GB/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1963259](http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1963259).

16 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, May 19, 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset\\_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/2287934](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/2287934).

17 The pro-Russia political coalition Democratic Front began mobilizing Kremlin-backed, anti-NATO protests in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica in September 2015.

18 Russian: *Glavnoye razvedyvatel’noye upravleniye*; Russia’s military intelligence agency.

19 Russian: *Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*; Federal Security Service.



*Alleged coup plotter Nemanja Ristic with Andrej Kindjakov, Russian military attache to Serbia. (Source: fokuspress.com)*

parliament on the night of the election. Meanwhile, the Democratic Front would declare victory and call on hundreds of mobilized supporters to storm the building. In response, the group of disguised police would fire on opposition protestors. The DF would then call for nationwide protests, alleging that the violence was an attempt to prevent the “victorious” opposition from seizing the reins of government. The plotters also planned to assassinate Djukanovic. In this manner, opposition leadership envisioned a state of emergency as the springboard to state control.<sup>20</sup>

Montenegrin authorities, however, successfully prevented the coup attempt. On October 12, four days before the elections, former police officer Mirko Velimirovic confessed to his involvement as a gunrunner, giving the Montenegrin authorities their initial lead.<sup>21</sup> Investigations ensued, leading to the discovery of encrypted phones among ten individuals, including leaders of the Democratic Front. Arrests commenced, and officials confiscated rifles, spiked road barriers, handcuffs, batons, and other equipment exclusive to the state’s special police.

20 This plan adheres to the fundamental techniques of a coup d’etat, i.e., “The planners of the coup must use the power of the state against its political masters. This is done by a process of infiltration and subversion in which a small but critical part of the security forces are totally subverted, while much of the rest is temporarily neutralized.” Edward Luttwak, *Coup d’Etat – A Practical Handbook* (New York: Knopf, 1968), preface vii.

21 Simon Shuster, “Q&A: Dusko Markovic, the Prime Minister Stuck between Putin and Trump in the Balkans,” *Time*, February 16, 2017, <http://time.com/4673038/dusko-markovic-montenegro-russia-nato/>.

As detentions were underway, Montenegrin security services reportedly received communications from Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency (BIA)<sup>22</sup> that 50 Russian GRU special forces troops had entered Montenegro's mountainous Zlatibor region from Serbia on the night of October 15. Their aim was first to neutralize a nearby Montenegrin special forces camp and then to travel to Podgorica to assist Dikic's group in the planned post-election clashes. Linked through their encrypted phones to indicted Montenegrin plotter Milan Knezevic, the specialists terminated their operation in response to his radio silence. Without further word from BIA, Montenegrin authorities believe that the GRU unit fled Montenegro through neighboring borders.<sup>23</sup>

Two Russian agents distinct from the group in Zlatibor escaped into Serbia. These GRU operatives, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, had been coordinating coup-related efforts within Montenegro in the months leading up to the election. As word of the plot's discovery spread, Shishmakov and Popov successfully made their way to Belgrade to be extricated back to Russia by Security Council Secretary and former FSB chief Nikolai Patrushev. BIA communications with Montenegrin counterparts discontinued thereafter.

The day following the foiled attempt, Montenegrin police found discarded weapons including knives, sling-shots, and various blunted instruments across the country. Apparently, the protestors mobilized for violence concluded that their leaders' designs had gone to naught.

## The Accused

Responsibility for the attempted coup will be determined in a Montenegrin court. The identities of those accused and their interrelations are well documented. Taken together, there is a compelling case for a trans-border operation involving agents with professional ties to state entities, namely, the Russian and Serbian governments.

### *Forces of Montenegrin Opposition*

There exists in Montenegro an integrated political opposition comprising of pro-Russia political

<sup>22</sup> Serbian: *Besbednosno-Informativna Agencija*; Serbia's intelligence agency.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Montenegrin security and judiciary officials.

parties, ultranationalist groups affiliated with Russian counterparts, and the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>24</sup>

Montenegro's Democratic Front is a multi-party alliance of Russophile, Serb nationalist, and anti-Western political parties. Controlling 18 of Montenegro's 81 parliamentary seats, the DF is Montenegro's largest opposition bloc.<sup>25</sup> As a coalition, its leadership is officially collective. However, the parties commanding the most seats naturally wield the greatest influence. The core of DF leadership comprises Andrija Mandic of the New Serb Democracy party, Milan Knezevic of the Democratic People's Party, and Nebojsa Medojevic of Movement for Changes Party. Mandic and Knezevic are both indicted in the coup attempt case. Their primary role was to coordinate Montenegrin plotters' activities and to assist in the distribution of funds. Medojevic, on the other hand, recently has been charged with laundering Russian money to finance the 2016 DF campaign.<sup>26</sup>

As in neighboring Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska (RS), Montenegro boasts its own pan-Serb, pro-Russian extremist groups. The paramilitary Balkan Cossacks Army (BKV) is one.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of the BKV, which is an affiliate of Russia's Night Wolves biker group, is unclear, aside from public statements endorsing pan-Orthodoxy for Slavic peoples.<sup>28</sup> Formed shortly before the election in Kotor on September 11, 2016, the BKV is led by self-styled Cossack General Viktor V. Zaplatin. A Russian citizen with resident status in Serbia, Zaplatin is a longstanding veteran of conflicts in the post-Soviet space with links to *Rosstrudnichestvo's*

<sup>24</sup> Clouded in some dispute, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro officially was united with other dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church following King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic's declaration in 1920. Despite the dissolution of the FRY almost 100 years later, Montenegro has yet to effectively assert its religious independence via the establishment of a separate Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

<sup>25</sup> Djukanovic's ruling DPS holds 35 seats in the current parliament, distinct from seats of other smaller, pro-Western democratic parties.

<sup>26</sup> Dusica Tomovic, "Montenegrin Opposition Leader Tried for Money-Laundering," *Balkan Insight*, April 18, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/montenegrin-opposition-leader-tried-for-money-laundering-04-17-2018>.

<sup>27</sup> Serbian – *Balkanska Kozacka Vojska*.

<sup>28</sup> Jasna Vukicevic and Robert Coalson, "Russia's Friends Form New 'Cossack Army' in Balkans," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 18, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-russias-friends-form-new-cossack-army/28061110.html>.



Former Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Director Leonid Reshetnikov with Serbian Orthodox Church Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije Radovic. (Source: riskmanagementlab.com)

Russian Cultural Center in Belgrade.<sup>29</sup> In addition to Zaplatin, key Serbian coup plotters Bratislav Dikic and Aleksandar Sindjelic are BKV members.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC)<sup>30</sup> is a significant socio-political force in Montenegro, where nearly three-quarters of Montenegrins identify as Orthodox. With its patriarchal seat in Serbia, the SPC in Montenegro is an entirely extra-legal organization, successfully countering any discussion or efforts to change its legal status following Montenegro's independence in 2006.<sup>31</sup> From its uniquely advantageous position, the SPC effectively administers political endorsement, logistical assistance, and financial support to Montenegro's extremists. For example, while the SPC was not directly implicated in the plot's attempted execution, it did host an overnight

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Zaplatin is a Russian army veteran of numerous armed conflicts including Bosnia in 1992-93, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia/Azerbaijan, and Transnistria in Moldova. He is described in the pro-Russian press in Serbia as the official representative of the Union of Volunteers, a Russian association "to unite the countries volunteers in general projects." Zaplatin is further associated with Russian strategist in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Aleksandr Borodai.

<sup>30</sup> Serbian: *Srpska pravoslava crkva*.

<sup>31</sup> In Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church is an independent organization registered and with legal status in Serbia. This is a consequence of a 1977 law governing religious group and organizations in Montenegro that provides for official recognition through registration, *however* exempting those existing in Montenegro prior to 1977. Unwilling to subject itself to the laws of Montenegro for political reasons, the Serbian Orthodox Church has effectively resisted previous efforts to legalize its presence and activities in Montenegro.

meeting of the coup's leadership at Montenegro's famed Ostrog monastery just before the elections. This event suggests the culpability of Amfilohije Radovic, the Serbian Church's Metropolitan Bishop of Montenegro and the Littoral.

#### *Ethno-nationalist Serbian Actors*

Acting independently of their government,<sup>32</sup> the Serbian citizens on trial for the attempted coup are deeply integrated in the extremist, pro-Russian ecosystem that permeates Serb majority lands in the Western Balkans. With Serbia as the fulcrum, pan-Serbists must engage with regional counterparts to fulfill their ambitions for a Greater Serbia.

Of the Serbians indicted, Aleksandr Sindjelic sits at the top of the scheme. Sindjelic is the co-founder of the Serbian chapter of Russia's Night Wolves—Serbian Wolves—and a combat veteran of Ukraine's Donbass.<sup>33</sup> He is accused of serving as the key liaison with the GRU operatives, Shishmakov and Popov. Locally, Sindjelic was tasked with recruiting approximately 300-500 volunteers and distributing hundreds of thousands

<sup>32</sup> Statement of Dusko Markovic, Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, October 17, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> "I am a Serb nationalist, they told me that the authorities in Montenegro should be taken down," *Telegraf*, October 26, 2017, <http://www.telegraf.rs/english/2906860-i-am-a-serb-nationalist-they-told-me-that-the-authorities-in-montenegro-should-be-taken-down-sindjelic-spoke-at-the-trial-of-the-terrorist-attempt-on-the-election-day>.



of euros for coup-related efforts. The nature of Sindjelic's relationship with the GRU officers is evidenced by a conversation intercepted on Mirko Velimirovic's phone, confiscated on his voluntary surrender. In it, Shishmakov and Sindjelic discuss Djukanovic's planned assassination.<sup>34</sup>

Working with Sindjelic was Bratislav Dikic, a former Serbian gendarmerie commander. A BKV member, Dikic was to lead the plotters disguised as Montenegrin special police in storming the parliament and later firing on the DF's assembled protestors. He received 15,000 euros from Sindjelic for his efforts.<sup>35</sup>

Following their arrests in October 2016, Sindjelic and Dikic agreed to cooperate with the prosecutor's office in Podgorica.<sup>36</sup> They admitted their respective roles in the attempted coup and provided information about key links between local conspirators, Russian agents, and political actors in Montenegro. Each confirmed that the undertaking was fully premeditated and planned in both Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>37</sup>

Currently at large in Serbia is indicted plotter Nemanja Ristic. A Serbian citizen and BKV member, the Serbian government refuses to extradite Ristic, opting instead to keep him under surveillance despite an outstanding Interpol warrant.<sup>38</sup> The High Court in Belgrade ordered he undergo psychiatric treatment in 2015 following threats of violence made to members of the media and former U.S.

34 Interview with special prosecutor for criminal organizations, prosecutor's office, Montenegrin ministry of justice, Podgorica, March 2018. See, also, Ben Farmer, "Russia plotted to overthrow Montenegro government by assassinating Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic last year, according to senior Whitehall sources," *The Telegraph*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/18/russias-deadly-plot-overthrow-montenegro-government-assassinating/>; and Tomovic, *ibid*.

35 Dusica Tomovic, "Montenegro opposition slams coup plotter's 'witness' status in court," *Balkan Insight*, November 25, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en).

36 Sindjelic confessed having a key role in "recruiting other members of the organization, transferring money between the organizers and members of the group, providing weapons, phones, buying police equipment, uniforms, shields, batons, body armours, tear gas, gas masks and other equipment that would be used by the group members during the attack on the Parliament." MEMRI Special Dispatch, November 24, 2016, [https://www.memri.org/reports/russias-orbit-part-ii-attempted-coup-montenegro#\\_edn5](https://www.memri.org/reports/russias-orbit-part-ii-attempted-coup-montenegro#_edn5).

37 Farmer, *ibid*.

38 <https://www.interpol.int/notice/search/wanted/2016-78727> (accessed April 20, 2018).

Ambassador Michael Kirby.<sup>39</sup> Ristic is reported to have "working relations" with the Russian military attaché in Belgrade<sup>40</sup> and was photographed with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during his 2016 visit to the city.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Russia Hand*

Russian involvement in the scheme's formulation and execution began from its inception. GRU agents Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov currently are being tried *in absentia* in Podgorica for their alleged leading roles in the coup attempt.<sup>42</sup> After fleeing from Podgorica to Belgrade, the agents were flown to Russia one day prior to the unscheduled arrival of Russian Security Council Director Patrushev.<sup>43</sup> Their current whereabouts are unknown.

Shishmakov led the GRU efforts, and his chosen interlocutors were Sindjelic and Dikic.<sup>44</sup> Montenegrin authorities claim that in September 2016 Shishmakov and Popov met with Sindjelic in Moscow to finalize the plot and provide 200,000 euros for attendant costs.

Evidence of Shishmakov's involvement is significant. He is recorded in discussion on the encrypted network with plotters Velimirovic and Knezevic, in addition to Sindjelic. In August

39 "Suspect in Alleged Montenegrin Coup Plot Pictured with Lavrov in Belgrade," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-coup-plot-suspect-instagram-lavrov-ristic/28176472.html>.

40 "Nemanja Ristic blizak sa vojnim ataseom u Beogradu" [Nemanja Ristic close to the Russian military attaché in Belgrade], *Fokus*, January 8, 2017, <http://fokuspress.com/u-fokusu/3444-kiev-reporter-nemanja-ristic-blizak-sa-ruskim-vojnim-ataseom-u-beogradu>.

41 *Ibid*. RFE, fn 29.

42 *Ibid*. The former's work in Central Europe precedes him, having been expelled from his post as Deputy Military Attaché at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw on charges of espionage in 2014.

43 Julian Borger and Shaun Walker, "Serbians deport Russians suspected of plotting Montenegro coup," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/11/serbia-deports-russians-suspected-of-plotting-montenegro-coup>. See, also, "Serbia released Shishmakov at Patrushev's urging," *Café de Montenegro*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.cdm.me/english/serbia-released-shishmakov-patrushevs-urging/>. In addition, according to two ranking Montenegrin officials, this plane's passengers included some remnants of the GRU specialist group that fled from Zlatibor (interviews, Podgorica, March 2018).

44 The State of Montenegro alleges that during the inception phase, both GRU and FSB were pursuing parallel tracks towards an attempted coup; eventually, the GRU's was judged to have the greater chance for success.



President Milo Djukanovic meets with Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, June 2018.  
(Source: Euinside.eu)

2017, photos of Sindjelic and Shishmakov meeting in a Belgrade park were made public.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Patrushev's presence for the extraction of Shishmakov and Popov not only indicates the depth of their involvement in the attempted coup, but it also suggests—at the very least—official Russian endorsement of the project. The Kremlin denied any involvement in the coup attempt.<sup>46</sup>

### The Aftermath

Democratic civil society in Montenegro finds itself in a difficult place. Despite their Euro-Atlantic orientation and ethnically pluralistic platform, Djukanovic and his DPS have dominated the country's political space for decades, leaving little space for the emergence of democratic alternatives. Indeed, after decades of alternating between the post of president and prime minister, Djukanovic would be well advised to gracefully exit from Montenegrin politics at his term's end in 2023; whether he will do so remains an open question. Meanwhile, DF opposition bloc's ultranationalist platform is a non-starter for democrats desirous of more liberal alternatives.

Opposite Djukanovic is a Russophile, ethno-nationalist opposition currently agitating under

the DF banner, despite the party's recent electoral defeats. In Montenegro, ethno-nationalist and anti-Western sentiments remain strong and were such a party or leader to come to power in 2020, Montenegro could retract its recognition of Kosovo, withdraw from NATO, and possibly even reunify with the Republic of Serbia; in sum, to realize ambitions reflecting Pan-Serb and Pan-Slavic ideologies held and promoted by them and their regional counterparts. Stuck with a political system that provides little space for new democratic actors to participate, the country's politics risk increasing polarization.

Here, the West has an important role to play. Its ongoing political, military, and economic engagement with Montenegro helps to keep this Mediterranean nation on its Western trajectory. The current EU strategy for enlargement in the Western Balkans envisions Montenegro's potential ascension by 2025.<sup>47</sup> The EU membership perspective will require sustained efforts and reforms, requiring political will in both Brussels and Podgorica. Renewed financial and technical assistance to the country's civil society is needed. Montenegro has shown progress in fulfilling its EU accession requirements, as confirmed during a June 2018 meeting between EU President Donald Tusk

<sup>45</sup> Ben Farmer, "Surveillance photos show Russian intelligence officers plotting Montenegro coup," *The Telegraph*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/28/surveillance-photos-show-russian-intelligence-officers-plotting/>.

<sup>46</sup> "Kremlin denies involvement in alleged plot against Montenegro's PM," *Reuters*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-montenegro-election-idUSKBN132170?il=0>.


<sup>47</sup> "Strategy for the Western Balkans," European Commission, February 6, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en). See, also, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans_en.pdf).

and Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic.<sup>48</sup> For the benefit of its citizens and, indirectly, the region, it remains on track to EU membership.

With respect to Montenegro's newly membership in the Alliance, NATO should strengthen its political and military cooperation with Montenegro by increasing the regularity and breadth of joint military trainings and exercises, boosting the NATO naval presence in Montenegrin ports on a permanent or rotational basis, bolstering Golubovci Airbase and Helicopter Center by transforming it into a regional NATO helicopter pilot training facility. Encouraging steps have recently been taken by the U.S. Congress, by passing the U.S. National Defence Authorization Act, which acknowledges the threat of Russian influence in the Western Balkans and the consequent need for military-to-military cooperation there.<sup>49</sup>

Montenegro's deeper Western integration should not be taken for granted. Moscow continues to see Southeast Europe as within its sphere of interest, whether as the self-appointed protector of Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule through the Cold War and into its relations with various Serbian and other regional governments post-1989. Indeed, Russia's willingness to deploy clandestine operations in Montenegro underlines the severity of the threat, demonstrating the lengths Moscow will go in secure its regional interests.

As it seeks new tools to influence Montenegrin politics, Russia will try to cultivate new, less compromised political actors among several recently formed, pro-Russian political parties. It will also continue to cooperate with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro to fan anti-Western and anti-government sentiment. The DF, together with extremist pro-Russian groups and the Serbian Orthodox Church, will continue to support Russian interests in Montenegro. If a pro-Russian government came to power in Podgorica, it could not only reverse Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic

course, but it would further jeopardize NATO and EU interests in the Balkans and Mediterranean. The October 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro shows the consequences of insufficient support for the pro-Western governments in the Western Balkans. 

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48 Press statement, "Remarks by President Donald Tusk after meeting with President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic," Council of Europe, June 5, 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/06/05/remarks-by-president-donald-tusk-after-his-meeting-with-president-of-montenegro-milo-dukanovic/pdf>.

49 "NDAA: Countering Malign Foreign Influence Campaigns," House Armed Services Committee, May 22, 2018, <https://armed-services.house.gov/news/defense-drumbeat/ndaa-countering-malign-foreign-influence-campaigns>.





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