



## Russia and Montenegro: How and Why a Centuries Old Relationship Ruptured

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**Abstract:** In 2016 Montenegro and America shared a common problem – Russian meddling in the democratic process of both countries. According to an official assessment from American intelligence agencies, Russia was involved in an obstruction of the American presidential elections. During the 2016 October election night in Montenegro, Russian citizens together with individuals from Serbia and Montenegro, planned to kill former Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and overthrow his pro-Western government. Russian nationalists, members of the Russia’s military intelligence service GRU, were involved in the planned action with the goal of stopping Montenegrin accession to NATO. Officially Moscow denied its involvement in both cases. The aim of this article will be to offer answers to the dilemma – how did it happen that Montenegro, after a clear commitment to become the next member of NATO, has found itself in the center of the Russian sphere of influence? Moreover, this article is written with an intention to clarify how modern techniques of Russian hybrid warfare became visible in the case of Montenegrin accession to NATO.

**Keywords:** Montenegro, USA, 2016 elections, Russia, democratic process, NATO, hybrid warfare.

### Introduction

By the end of 2016 Montenegro (MNE) and America were experiencing similar problems. Among numerous accusations by politicians that the Presidential elections in the USA and the Parliamentary elections in Montenegro were irregular, there was one more thing that was common for Montenegro and USA last year

– Russian meddling in the democratic process of both countries. According to an official assessment from American intelligence agencies, Russia was involved in the obstruction of the American presidential elections. Also, during the 16 October—election night in Montenegro—a group of Russian citizens together with individuals from Serbia and Montenegro, reportedly planned to kill the former Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and overthrow his pro-Western government. According to the official statement about this by the Montenegrin Special Prosecutor Milivoje Katnic, given at a press conference on 6 November 2016, Russian nationalists were involved in this planned action with the goal of stopping Montenegrin accession to NATO.<sup>1</sup> On 18 November, Katnic released the names of two Russians who are accused of organizing the attack – Eduard Shirokov, currently on the Interpol’s red notice, and Vladimir Popov.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, Shirokov was a deputy military attaché in the Russian embassy in Poland, but was expelled as *persona non grata* due to espionage activities for Russia. Apparently, both Shirokov and Popov are members of GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service.<sup>3</sup>

With high-tech assistance from British and American intelligence services to view encrypted calls and emails between plotters, there was credible evidence from both countries that the allegations of an attempted terrorist attack were genuine, and it resulted in the arrest of 20 suspects in this case. Montenegrin society remains divided on the veracity of this case, with many believing that these allegations were manufactured by the ruling party on Election Day.<sup>4</sup> There are strong divisions in the country between Montenegrins and Serbs (who support stronger ties with Russia) that date from the period of separation from Serbia in 2006. This has created a society in which the Serbian portion of the nation want to annex Montenegro to Serbia, oppose NATO integration and support the formation of a militarily neutral country under the protection of Russia.

## Historical Relations between Two Countries

A look at the history of the Balkans helps to explain the strong Russian influence in the area. Russia has held a centuries-long ambition to become “the third

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<sup>1</sup> “Montenegro Says Russian ‘Nationalists Were Behind Plot to Kill Djukanovic,” *Radio Free Europe*, November 6, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russian-nationalists-plot-assassination-djukanovic/28100046.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Veseljko Koprivica, “Istraga o pokušaju ‘državnog udara’ u Crnoj Gori [An Investigation into the Attempt of a ‘State Strike’ in Montenegro],” *Aljazeera Balkans*, November 20, 2016, accessed January 24, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/istraga-opokusaju-drzavnog-udara-u-crnoj-gori>.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Farmer, “Montenegro ‘to Indict Russian Spy Behind Coup Plot’,” *The Telegraph*, February 26, 2017, accessed January 24, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/26/montenegro-indict-russian-spy-behind-coup-plot/>.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Recknagel, “Montenegrin Opposition Calls Charges of Plot to Kill Djukanovic ‘Fabricated’,” *Radio Free Europe*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-denies-role-plot-to-kill-pm/28101516.html>.

Rome”<sup>5</sup> – an idea hatched in the 15<sup>th</sup> century after the fall of Constantinople under the Ottomans. This ambition of Russia can be clearly seen in the letters of Monk Filofej to the Russian emperor Peter the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which he says: “All the kingdoms of the Christian Orthodox faith are poured into your kingdom, and you are the only Christian Emperor under the heavens.”<sup>6</sup> In his book *Political Thought* Dostoevsky explains the necessity for Russia to be a world leader: “In order to exist for a long time, every great nation must believe that the salvation of the world lays in them, only them, that their only goal is to rule other nations, in order to unite them and lead them to a greater cause.”<sup>7</sup> In a political statement by Peter the Great, written in 18<sup>th</sup> century, one can find his grand plan for Russia to win world domination through the conquest of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> This document also states that Russia must extend her boundaries over the Balkan states and Constantinople, across the Dardanelles and so forth. Peter the Great writes: “Approach as near as possible to Constantinople and India. Whoever governs there will be the true sovereign of the world. Consequently, excite continual wars, not only in Turkey, but in Persia. Establish dockyards on the Black Sea. Penetrate to the Persian Gulf...”

Here are some additional points of the statement:

1. To keep the Russian nation in constant warfare, in order to always have good soldiers;
2. Interfere in the affairs of all Europe, particularly Germany, which deserves your main attention;
3. Divide Poland by raising up continual disorders and jealousies;
4. Take all you can from Sweden; isolate her from Denmark, and vice versa. Be careful to rouse their jealousy;
5. Do all in your power to approach closely Constantinople and India. Hasten the fall of Persia. Open a route towards the Persian Gulf. Re-establish, as much as possible, the ancient commerce of the Levant, and then approach India.

Every serious analysis of Russian foreign policy recognizes the Balkans as an important area where Imperial and later Soviet Russia had strong ambitions and constant geostrategic interest. Thanks to the cultural, religious and political relations, the Balkans was an area where the Orthodox religion created a special tie, together with the historic fight against the Ottomans.

During the long history of their relations, Montenegro and Russia have had a love-hate relationship. A significant number of those who are not familiar with

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<sup>5</sup> R. Radonjic, *U predjelima duha* (Podgorica, 2015), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Vladik S. Nersesyanc, *Istorija politicheskikh i travovyyih ucheniy [History of Political and Legal Teachings]* (Moscow: Norma, 1994), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Feodor M. Dostojevski, *Political Thought* (Belgrade, 1934), 243.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitry V. Lehovich, “The Testament of Peter the Great,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 7, no. 2 (April 1948): 111-124.

Montenegrin history, of which, unfortunately, there are many, believe that Russia and Montenegro had a centuries long partnership of brotherhood, friendship and mutual respect. Russian diplomacy towards Montenegro, before and after gaining independence at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, was more of a diktat, a continuous attempt to keep a small country such as Montenegro under control. There were periods during which Montenegro saw Russia as a patroness figure, to whom they owed loyalty. But the long-term patronage that Russia managed to achieve in MNE by sending money to the Montenegrin rulers was, in fact, a way to keep this small country on a leash, and a short one at that, in order to ensure that this small, but militarily competent, nation could join their wars when it suited Russian interest. Each time Montenegrin rulers tried to turn to other countries in order to establish or strengthen an alliance, Russia reacted aggressively by cutting financial help significantly. As many historians claim, Russia was even behind the murder of the Montenegrin ruler Prince Danilo in 1860. According to a historical theory, that was never proven, the motive was the Montenegrin desire to create closer ties to France during Danilo's governance, which was perceived by Russia as a betrayal.

Perhaps the most vivid expression of how Russia viewed a small country such as Montenegro is detailed in the document "Montenegro from 1860-1900" that was published in the magazine of the Russian Academy of Science "Slavyanovedenie" by the historian Dr. Varvara Borisovna Hlebnikova. In this paper the Russian ambassador in Montenegro, Konstantin Arkadijevic Gubastov is quoted as saying: "Montenegro cannot have any kind of citizen mission that other communities might have; no independent form of state can exist within that territory. As a country, Montenegro is too small, too poor and deprived of the ability to have peaceful civil existence."<sup>9</sup>

The idea of Russia as a superpower has continued during the long history of its many leaders. It is worth mentioning Stalin and his definition of internationalism that states: "The touchstone and infallible criteria of internationalism is the attitude towards the Soviet Union – the socialist motherland to all working people, bastion of peace and security of the nation. Internationalist is the one who is without question, without hesitation, without any conditions willing to protect the SSR because the SSR is the base of the world revolutionary movement."<sup>10</sup> The modern history of international relations shows how this Russian special vision of the world continuously evolved and grew. Another example is President Dmitry Medvedev's call for a new European security architecture, the most ac-

<sup>9</sup> Varvara Borisovna Hlebnikova, *Rossia i Chernogorija v kontse XIX-nachale XX vv. [Russia and Montenegro in the Context of the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Centuries]* (Vladivostok: Izd-vo Dal'nevostochnogo universiteta, 1992), 40-51, <https://www.antenam.net/index.php/istorija/item/13205-strogo-povjerljivo-ruski-car-pocetkom-1914-odlucio-drzavu-crnu-goru-unistiti-pripojiti-je-srbiji-1>.

<sup>10</sup> *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Enciclopedia [The Grand Soviet Encyclopedia]*, Second edition, vol. 18 (Moscow, 1953), 300.

tive initiative undertaken by Russian diplomacy in recent years.<sup>11</sup> The Medvedev project was launched in 2009 with an attempt to introduce Russia's own vision of European and Euro-Atlantic security. The Kremlin seeks to exploit divisions within the Western alliance, between the US and Europe, and amongst the Europeans themselves. In a very real sense, it reflects Russia's desire to play, and have the leading role as a 'responsible stakeholder' in regional and global affairs.

## **Russian Economic Penetration after Montenegrin Independence in 2006**

After gaining its independence, based on a peaceful referendum in 2006, Montenegro set a priority for Euro-Atlantic integration as a constitutional cornerstone. Once a stable economy had been established, membership of NATO became one of Montenegro's primary goals. That was the moment when the Montenegrin economy went through a period of so-called investment boom, and was one of the leading countries in terms of Direct Foreign Investments per capita. The investment wave lasted until 2008, when the global economic crisis exposed the severe structural problems of the Montenegrin economy. By 2007, some thirty thousand Russians had bought land and real property, and invested nearly 2 billion dollars in Montenegro. In a briefing paper requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, the author Matija Rojec explained how out of all the Central Eastern and South Eastern European countries, Russian Foreign Direct Investments in 2006 were the highest in Montenegro, while the importance of Russian investors in other CEE and SEE countries was more or less negligible.<sup>12</sup> These direct investments in the economy were seen as creating a solid Russian basis in the Balkans, while many characterized it as an expected result of the attractiveness of the Montenegrin market, combined with the closeness and traditional friendship between two countries. Some projects have been implemented while others were suspended due to the economic crisis or illegal building. Russian "Lukoil" also participated in the privatization of the Montenegrin company "Montenegro Bonus," a petrol stations network, with a plan to open an additional 15 gas stations.

However, it is important to mention one case of privatization that had serious consequences for Russia-Montenegro relations. In 2005, a majority package of shares for the KAP aluminum factory and bauxite mine was sold to the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska. The deal was endorsed by the Kremlin which sent two Russian officials (the Speaker of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov, and the then-Emer-

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<sup>11</sup> Bobo Lo, "Medvedev and the new European security architecture," *Open Democracy*, August 3, 2009, accessed January 24, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/medvedev-and-the-new-european-security-architecture>.

<sup>12</sup> Matija Rojec, Mojmir Mrak, Tamás Szemlér, and Tamás Novák, "The Russian Economic Penetration in Montenegro," *Briefing Paper* (Brussels: Directorate General External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, December 2007).

gency Situations Minister, Sergei Shoigu) to visit the factory.<sup>13</sup> After the collapse in global aluminum prices in 2009, the government was forced to buy back nearly 30 percent of the shares. Nevertheless, the Central European Aluminum Company (CEAC) still controlled the management of the company and had led KAP into debt. In addition to buying back half of Deripaska's KAP stake following the price collapse in 2009, the Government also provided guarantees for a 132 million Euro loan that Deripaska took from Hungary's OTP bank and Russia's state-controlled VTB bank.<sup>14</sup> The whole case ended up at an arbitration tribunal of the Vienna-based UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) with Deripaska filing a suit for 93 million euros against Montenegro in front of the arbitration court.<sup>15</sup> Deripaska's law suit was eventually rejected by the court but the company, which once employed 5,000 workers, ended up in bankruptcy in 2013, with 180 million Euros of debt.<sup>16</sup>

The ultimate goal of the Russian economic presence in Montenegro was to establish a firm base for future political action. As a group of authors recently claimed in the publication *The Kremlin Playbook*, Russia has cultivated an opaque web of economic and political patronage across the region in order to advance its interests by influencing policy making.<sup>17</sup>

### Russia's Close Ties with the Serbian Church in Montenegro

Establishing Montenegro as a zone of their economic interest and power was not the only way in which Russia tried to gain influence. During the last eight years, numerous associations of Russian-Montenegrin friendship have been established. In particular, the powerful Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has

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<sup>13</sup> Esad Krcic, "Montenegrin Aluminum Plant's Woes Cast Geopolitical Shadow," *Radio Free Europe*, July 15, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-aluminum-plant/25046657.html>.

<sup>14</sup> John Helmer, "Oleg Deripaska's Newest Disappearing Trick – En+ Share Price Dives After Prospectus Draws No Commercial Demand; VTB Required to Finance Chinese Share Buyer," November 12, 2017, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://johnhelmer.net/oleg-deripaskas-newest-disappearing-trick-en-share-price-dives-after-prospectus-draws-no-commercial-demand-vtb-required-to-finance-chinese-share-buyer/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sebastian Duda, "Arbitration in Vienna dismissed the claim of the company Mr. Deripaska to Montenegro," *Russia News Today*, January 16, 2017, accessed January 28, 2018, <https://chelorg.com/2017/01/16/arbitration-in-vienna-dismissed-the-claim-of-the-company-mr-deripaska-to-montenegro>.

<sup>16</sup> Dusica Tomovic, "Russian Billionaire Sues Montenegro Over Lost Investment," *Balkan Insight*, December 7, 2016, accessed January 28, 2018, [www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russian-tycoon-deripaska-sues-montenegro-over-investment-loses-12-07-2016](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russian-tycoon-deripaska-sues-montenegro-over-investment-loses-12-07-2016).

<sup>17</sup> Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, DC / Lanham, MD: Center for Strategic and International Studies / Rowman & Littlefield, October 2016), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

intensified cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church resulting in three Russian Orthodox churches being built in Montenegro. At the same time, an anti-NATO movement was also established<sup>18</sup> which exploited the divisions in Montenegrin society between national Montenegrins, that voted in favor of the NATO referendum, and those who consider themselves to be Serbs. Using the Serbian Church, its leading man in Montenegro, Bishop Amfilohije Radovic established close ties with Russian representatives in Montenegro and in Serbia to obstruct Montenegro's path to membership in NATO. Radovic was an honored guest at numerous events dedicated to the concept of military neutrality in Montenegro and in favor of organizing a referendum against joining NATO. He even gave a blessing in May 2016, when one of the leaders of the opposition Democratic Front, Milan Knezevic, signed a declaration about cooperation with Putin's Unified Russian Party. According to the declaration, the Democratic Front will work together with Russia to create an alliance of neutral sovereign states of South-east Europe and will support the suspension of the sanctions on Russia.<sup>19</sup>

The Serbian Church even gave an Order of the Holy Emperor Constantine to the director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Research, Leonid Reshetnikov, for the "nurturing and spreading of Orthodoxy."<sup>20</sup> Reshetnikov was one of the loudest critics of Montenegrin membership of NATO. During Reshetnikov's book promotion in 2014, Bishop Radovic cursed all of those "who are not loyal to Russia" with a short message declaring that "living flesh will come of their skin" if they do not obey this.<sup>21</sup>

## **Russian Reactions to the Last Phase of Montenegrin Membership in NATO**

Perhaps the most significant defeat for Russia was the decision to pursue membership in NATO, that Montenegro made when it gained independence. One of the first reactions to Montenegro's aspiration to join NATO was in November 2013 when, during a lecture to students in Belgrade, the Russian ambassador to

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<sup>18</sup> Draško Đuranović, "Kad Moskva pozove [When Moscow Calls]," *Portal Analitika*, April 16, 2014, accessed January 28, 2018, <http://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/142605/kad-moskva-pozove>.

<sup>19</sup> Miloš Rudović, "DNP saraduje sa Putinovom partijom: Deklaracija potpisana uz blagoslov Amfilohija [DNP Cooperates with Putin's Party: Declaration Signed with the Blessing of Amfilohije]," *Portal Vijesti*, May 7, 2016, accessed January 28, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/dnp-saraduje-sa-putinovom-partijom-deklaracija-potpisana-uz-blagoslov-amfilohija-886998>.

<sup>20</sup> "‘Braća po SPC ordenju’: Vujanović, Rešetnjikov, Velja Ilić ... [‘Brothers by SPC Ordination’: Vujanović, Reshetnikov, Velja Ilić ...]," *Portal Analitika*, June 4, 2014, accessed January 28, 2018, <http://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/148996/arhiv>.

<sup>21</sup> "Amfilohije osudio politiku Crne Gore prema Rusiji [Amfilohije Condemned Montenegro's Policy Towards Russia]," *Blic*, April 29, 2014, accessed January 28, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/amfilohije-osudio-politiku-crne-gore-prema-rusiji/j2n5hnm>.



Serbia, Alexander Chepurin, described the Montenegrin ambition to become a member of the Alliance as “monkey business.”<sup>22</sup> Following Montenegro’s decision in 2014, Russia continued to increase political pressure. The tone of their diplomacy became openly aggressive after Montenegro joined the EU in imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation as a response to Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimea. In response, the Russian ambassador made a statement in which he stated that “the Montenegrin choice will have an appropriate place in the common history of the two countries” and that “Montenegro, regardless of what is the policy of the European Union, should avoid offending Russia.”<sup>23</sup> That was just the beginning of Russia’s harsh reactions to many of the decisions taken by the Montenegrin government which, Russia claimed, were directed against it.

The displays of anger and the offensive statements were a sign that Moscow was not planning to give up so easily in their efforts to influence Montenegro. Several days after Prime Minister Đukanović met with the US Vice President Biden in Washington in April 2014, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted with this statement: “In his speech Milo Djukanovic allowed himself hostile statements against Russia, which in combination with joining EU sanctions create great disappointment.”<sup>24</sup> Reacting to the Russian statement, a Montenegrin opposition delegation offered an apology to Moscow during their official visit to Russia, as well as an explanation that “the irresponsible statements of Djukanovic don’t represent the majority will among Montenegrin citizens.”<sup>25</sup>

In September 2014, the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, warned Montenegro that “The expansion of NATO to the former Yugoslav republics is an irresponsible policy and we in Moscow see it as a provocation.”<sup>26</sup> The Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted immediately with a statement that the country has a clear foreign policy commitment, which is in line with national interests and which has been repeatedly stated in communications with Russian

<sup>22</sup> “Čepurin: CG u NATO-majmunska posla [Chepurin: Montenegro in NATO – Monkey Buisness],” *RTCG*, November 28, 2013, accessed January 29, 2018, [www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/33180/cepurin-cg-u-nato-majmunska-posla-.html](http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/33180/cepurin-cg-u-nato-majmunska-posla-.html).

<sup>23</sup> “Nesterenko: Sankcije Crne Gore biće dio zajedničke istorije [Nesterenko: The Sanctions by Montenegro Will Be Part of the Common History],” *Radio Televizija Republike Srpske*, May 13, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=112063>.

<sup>24</sup> Nebojša Redžić, “Podgorica odgovara na kritiku Moskve [Podgorica responds to the Critique by Moscow],” *Voice of America*, April 15, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, [http://www.glasamerike.net/a/podgorica\\_moskva/1893750.html](http://www.glasamerike.net/a/podgorica_moskva/1893750.html).

<sup>25</sup> “Rukovodstvo SNP-a putuje u Moskvu da se ogradi od Đukanovića, Danilović tvrdi da se premijer preigrao [The Leadership of SNP Travels to Moscow to Demonstrate it Differs from Djukanovic, Danilovic Claims that the Prime Minister Has Overplayed It],” *Portal Analitika*, April 15, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://portalanalitika.me/clanak/142538/rukovodstvo-snp-a-putuje-u-moskvu-da-se-ogradi-od-jukanovica-danilovic-tvrdi-da-se-premijer-preigrao>.

<sup>26</sup> “NATO’s Planned Balkan Expansion a ‘Provocation’: Russia’s Lavrov,” *Reuters*, September 29, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-idUSKCN0HO11W20140929>.



officials and other countries. During 2014, harsh, rude and inappropriate statements by Russian officials were part of the everyday political life in Montenegro. From Sergei Lavrov, who stated in December 2016 for the Russian news agency Sputnik, that Montenegro “betrayed Russia,”<sup>27</sup> to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Rogozin, who said that, “Montenegro will regret its decision to join NATO.”<sup>28</sup> These and other statements from such a significant world player towards a small Balkan country created a kind of political hysteria which was yet another example of how Russia conducts its high-pressure international relations.

Some of those statements came from the Director of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, Leonid Reshetnikov, who had been a KGB agent in Serbia, and who was fired by Putin less than a month after the failed attempts on the life of Djukanovic in Montenegro. In 2016, on a political talk-show, while he was commenting an attempted terrorist attack on a Russian television station, Reshetnikov said that he believes that there could be bloodbath in Montenegro.<sup>29</sup> He also invited Russian tourists to boycott Montenegro during the summer season and “not to leave money to Djukanovic.” The same TV show hosted an opposition leader from Montenegro, Milan Knezevic. During the live appearance, just before Knezevic began to explain the decision of the opposition parties to boycott the Parliament in the upcoming period, the host of the show asked him, “How are you dealing with the difficult situation, our brothers? Are you being tortured? Our hearts suffer because of what you are going through.” The main title on the screen was, “War in Montenegro.” Knezevic used the opportunity to call for help from the Russian state to save them from Djukanovic and NATO. It is worth mentioning that this TV station is owned by the Russian tycoon Constantine Malofeyev, who is also a great admirer and friend of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Malofeyev, who was blessed by Bishop Amfilohije Radovic, is on the list of Russian citizens who have had their assets frozen by the European Union and is banned from travelling to EU countries. Malofeyev was also one of the main financiers of anti-Western and anti-NATO movements in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Are We Supposed to Betray Ourselves in Order to Avoid Betraying Russia?” *Portal CDM*, December 15, 2016, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.cdm.me/english/trebali-da-izdamo-sebe-da-ne-bi-izdali-rusiju-2/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Statement by Montenegro’s Foreign Ministry Regarding DPM of Russia Dmitry Rogozin’s Claims,” Government of Montenegro, January 13, 2016, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.gov.me/en/News/156731/Statement.html>.

<sup>29</sup> “Rešetnjikov: U Crnoj Gori može biti krvoprolića [Reshetnikov: There May Be a Bloodbath in Montenegro],” *Portal Analitika*, November 27, 2016, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://portalanalitika.me/clanak/251798/resetnjikov-u-crnoj-gori-moze-biti-krvoprolica>.

<sup>30</sup> Joachim Bartz, Arndt Ginzel, and Christian Rohde, “Frisches Geld aus Moskau: Wie Russland antiwestliche Bewegungen in Europa finanziert [Fresh Money from Moscow: How Russia Funded Anti-Western Movements in Europe],” *ZDF*, May 23, 2017, ac-

The main opposition party in Montenegro, the Democratic Front, and their Russian partners, have collaborated for many years. During the opposition protests against Djukanovic and NATO in October 2015, opposition leaders were publicly accused of receiving millions of dollars from Russia to organize the protests and later, in 2016, for their parliamentary election campaign.<sup>31</sup> Two of the opposition leaders, Milan Knezevic and Andrija Mandic, travelled to Moscow in February 2016 to get instructions from their Russian financiers and mentors, such as the senior official of the Unified Russian Party, Sergey Zeleznyak, and the Vice President of the Russian parliament, Pyotr Tolstoy. It is reported that they held a number of discussions about topics including organizing a referendum about NATO, the suspension of the sanctions against Russia and the withdrawal of the decision to recognize Kosovo.<sup>32</sup> Knezevic even signed the so-called *Lovcen Declaration* on mutual cooperation between the Party of Unified Russia and the Democratic Front of Montenegro, in which they clearly specified the necessity of improving relations between Montenegro and Russia, creating an alliance of military-neutral states, and holding a referendum on the membership in NATO.<sup>33</sup> It came as no surprise when Russia expressed a great deal of interest during the 2015 opposition protests in Montenegro, organized by the two opposition leaders. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave an official statement during the protests in which they pointed out that they had “a significant concern because of the excessive use of force over protesters in Podgorica.”<sup>34</sup>

Only a month after signing the *Lovcen Declaration*, on the same day that the process of ratification of the Protocol on Montenegrin accession to NATO was taking place, three opposition parties from Montenegro – the New Serbian Democracy, the People’s Party, and the Socialist People’s Party, signed the Unified Russia Declaration. The main aim of this Declaration was to establish a military

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cessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.zdf.de/politik/frontal-21/frisches-geld-aus-moskau-100.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksandar Vasovic, “Montenegro PM Accuses Russia of Financing anti-NATO Campaign,” *Reuters*, October 13, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, [www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election-idUSKCN12D2QV](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election-idUSKCN12D2QV).

<sup>32</sup> “Mandić: Iscenirani, skandalozni državni udar u organizaciji Đukanovića produbio krizu u CG [Mandić: Staged, Scandalous State Coup Organized by Djukanovic Deepens the Crisis in Montenegro],” *Portal Vijesti*, December 2, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/mandic-iscenirani-skandalozni-drzavni-udar-u-organizaciji-djukanovica-produbio-krizu-u-cg-914484>.

<sup>33</sup> “Uz blagoslov Mitropolita Amfilohija potpisana Lovčenska deklaracija [The Lovcen Declaration was Signed with the Blessing of Bishop Amfilohije],” *Demokratska narodna partija*, May 6, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.dnpcg.me/uz-blagoslov-mitropolita-amfilohija-potpisana-lovcenska-deklaracija/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Moscow Perplexed by Russia’s Accusation of Provoking Protests in Montenegro,” *Interfax, Russia beyond the Headlines*, October 27, 2015, accessed January 30, 2018, [https://www.rbth.com/news/2015/10/27/moscow-perplexed-by-rusias-accusation-of-provoking-protests-in-montenegro\\_534477](https://www.rbth.com/news/2015/10/27/moscow-perplexed-by-rusias-accusation-of-provoking-protests-in-montenegro_534477).

alliance in the Balkans.<sup>35</sup> Opposition leaders have continued their efforts to stop Montenegro in its progress towards NATO membership even when membership in the Alliance has become a certainty. After the parliaments of Iceland and Slovenia ratified the Protocol on Montenegro's accession on June 8, 2016, members of the Democratic Front sent a public request to the parliaments of NATO countries not to approve Montenegro's accession to the Alliance because, as they warned, "Montenegrin membership will cause an escalation of the political crisis in the country."<sup>36</sup>

The numerous Russian attempts to interfere in Montenegrin internal affairs reached their climax on October 16, 2016 – election night in Montenegro. Two Russian citizens, members of the GRU service, together with a group of Serbian and Montenegrin citizens tried to kill Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and violently take over the Montenegrin Assembly. At a subsequent press conference on November 6, 2016, the special prosecutor Milivoje Katnic said that this criminal organization had been formed on the territories of Montenegro, Russia and Serbia with an aim of committing acts of terrorism.<sup>37</sup> According to Katnić, this group, which was led by two Russian citizens, Vladimir Popov and Eduard Shishmakov, aimed to stop Montenegrin accession to NATO.<sup>38</sup> Shishmakov had been Russia's deputy military attaché in Poland until he was expelled for spying for Russia. Despite the fact that its citizens were being prosecuted in Montenegro, Russia denied the allegations of involvement in the events in Montenegro on October 16, 2016. Russia also officially refused to offer any kind of assistance in this case, and would not extradite Popov or Shishmakov, together with one of their accomplices, Ananije Nikic, who was given asylum in Russia.<sup>39</sup> Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, rejected accusations that Moscow was behind this unsuccessful coup attempt, saying that there was "no evidence," while a spokes-

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<sup>35</sup> Esad Krcić, "Demokratski principi i ruski sentimenti [Democratic Principles and Russian Sentiments]," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, June 29, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/demkratski-principi-i-ruski-sentimenti/27828601.html>

<sup>36</sup> Srđan Janković, "Pristupanje Crne Gore NATO savezu napreduje, opozicija oštro protiv [Montenegro's Accession to the NATO Alliance is Progressing, the Opposition is Strongly Against]," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, June 9, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pristupanje-cg-nato-napreduje-opozicija-protiv/27788500.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Rada Brajović and Savo Njunjić, "Katnić: Politička struktura iz CG uključena u pokušaj rušenja vlasti [Katnić: A Political Organization in Montenegro is Involved in the Attempt to Destroy Government]," *Portal Vijesti*, November 6, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/katnic-politicka-struktura-iz-cg-ukljucena-u-pokusaj-rusenja-vlasti-910641>.

<sup>38</sup> John R. Schindler, "Putin's Balkan Terror Plot Exposed," *Observer*, February 27, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://observer.com/2017/02/vladimir-putin-kremlin-montenegro-nato-eduard-shirokov>.

<sup>39</sup> "Russia Says It Won't Extradite Suspect in Montenegro Alleged Coup Attempt, *Radio Free Europe*," November 1, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-extradite-montenegro-coup-suspect/28829550.html>.

man for the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov, reacted by calling the media reports “irresponsible,” saying that they were not supported by “concrete facts.”<sup>40</sup> The Montenegrin Special Prosecutor’s Office indicted 25 people in this case, among them were the leaders of the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, who lost their parliamentary immunity because of their involvement in this case. Their trial is still going on.

This case of an attempted state coup in Montenegro is an example of Russian hybrid warfare techniques in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the fact that the international community has accused Russia of an attempted terrorist attack in Montenegro, Moscow has continued to interfere in the internal affairs of the country. Opposition leaders Mandic and Knezevic travelled to Moscow in February 2017, where they met with Sergey Zeleznyak, who supported their plans to organize a referendum on Montenegro’s accession to NATO.<sup>41</sup> But, all attempts to stop Montenegro on its way to joining NATO have failed and the country became the 29<sup>th</sup> member on June 5, 2017. However, Russian resentment at losing a strategically important coastal area has not ended. Immediately after Montenegro joined NATO, Sergei Lavrov said that “Montenegro’s accession to NATO was a purely geopolitical project imposed on that country in exchange for Russo-phobia.”<sup>42</sup> The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that, as a result of NATO membership, the official policy of Podgorica is “hostile” and that Russia will take “reciprocal measures” because of Montenegrin accession to NATO.<sup>43</sup> Those reciprocal measures were introduced soon afterwards and included:

1. Blocking the import of Montenegrin wine “Plantaže” by the Russian Federal Service for the oversight of consumer protection, allegedly because they found pesticides in the wine;<sup>44</sup>
2. Declaring the Montenegrin politician Miodrag Vukovic a *persona non grata* after detaining him for over ten hours at Moscow’s Domodedovo

<sup>40</sup> “Montenegro Accuses Russia of Masterminding Coup Attempt,” *Fox News*, February 20, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/02/20/montenegro-accuses-russia-masterminding-coup-attempt.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “Železnjak i crnogorska opozicija podržali referendum o NATO [Zeleznyak and the Montenegrin Opposition Backed a Referendum on NATO],” *Blic*, February 2, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/zeleznjak-i-crnogorska-opozicija-podrzali-referendum-o-nato/pe0dlsn>.

<sup>42</sup> Predrag Tomović, “Moskva prijeti najmlađoj NATO članici [Moscow Threatens the Youngest NATO Member],” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, June 6, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, [www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-prijeti-crnoj-gori/28531462.html](http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-prijeti-crnoj-gori/28531462.html).

<sup>43</sup> “Moskva: Imamo pravo da odgovorimo na neprijateljsku politiku Podgorice [Moscow: We Have the Right to Respond to the Hostile Policies of Podgorica],” *Portal Vijesti*, June 5, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/moskva-imamo-pravo-da-odgovorimo-na-neprijateljsku-politiku-podgorice-941037>.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Crosby and Lela Scepanovic, “Kremlin’s Diplomatic Sour Grapes Leave Bad Taste for Montenegrin Winemaker,” *Radio Free Europe*, June 4, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-plantaze-winery-russia-ban-nato/28527931.html>.

airport and putting him on a black list of Montenegrin citizens who are blocked from entering Russia because of the Montenegrin participation in imposing sanctions on Russia in 2014;<sup>45</sup>

3. Increasing Russian propaganda and fake media by reporting that there is a “civil war going on in Montenegro” because of its membership of NATO, and advising Russian citizens to avoid travelling there.<sup>46</sup>

The latest case of Russian meddling in Montenegro was during the 2018 presidential elections in Montenegro when it was discovered that the honorary consul of the Russian Federation in Podgorica, Boro Djukic, was one of the founders and a principal financier of the Prava Crna Gora party,<sup>47</sup> whose president was one of the opposition candidates in the April presidential elections. Djukic was expelled as part of the Montenegrin response, with their NATO allies, to the poisoning of the ex-spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia on British soil by Russia.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Today’s Russia, controlled in an authoritarian manner by Putin, has no desire to adjust to the changes in the world. In fact, a non-democratic society such as the Russian seems to have no capacity for change. It is no secret that in the modern world some state actors are trying to influence others. It is, however, surprising, that Russia uses its many capabilities to make an impact on small countries such as Montenegro. From economic penetration at the precise moment when a newly independent country such as Montenegro needed investments; to building close ties with the Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin opposition; to the latest phase expressed by harsh diplomacy, propaganda and the spreading of false news, all with the intention of preventing the expansion of NATO. While commenting on Russian meddling in the US and Montenegrin 2016 elections, the late US Congressman John McCain claimed in his article “Russia threat is dead serious. Montenegro coup and murder plot proves it,” that this plot, organized

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<sup>45</sup> “Montenegro’s Accession to NATO is ‘One of the Biggest Betrayals in History’,” *Sputnik News*, June 6, 2017, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201706061054357050-montenegro-nato-membership-consequences>.

<sup>46</sup> Gordana Knezevic, “Moscow Bad-Mouths Montenegro, But Russians Still Flocking to Its Beaches,” *Radio Free Europe*, April 15, 2017, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russian-tourists-accusation-crime/28450918.html>.

<sup>47</sup> “Đukić potpisao osnivanje Prave Crne Gore [Djukic Signed the Founding of True Montenegro],” *Pobjeda*, March 30, 2018, p. 3, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.pobjeda.net/protected/listalica/2018-03-30/files/assets/common/downloads/publication.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Predrag Tomović, “Crna Gora protjeruje ruskog diplomatu [Montenegro Expels a Russian Diplomat],” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, March 28, 2018, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-protjeruje-ruskog-diplomatu/29130249.html>.

by Russia, should be a warning to every American that Russia's interference in US 2016 election should not be treated as an isolated incident. McCain says, "We have to stop looking at this through the warped lens of politics and see this attack on our democracy for what it is: just one phase of Putin's long-term campaign to weaken the United States, to destabilize Europe, to break the NATO alliance, to undermine confidence in Western values, and to erode any and all resistance to his dangerous view of the world."<sup>49</sup>

It is expected that Russia will continue its attempts to reinforce its influence on the Balkans through economic measures. The Russian giant will probably turn to Montenegro's neighbor Serbia in the future, and will invest whatever it takes to keep them on a militarily neutral track. Their influence will remain strong in Serbia because of the powerful influence of the Orthodox Church on politicians and the decision-making processes in that country. As long as Serbia remains trapped both in the Kosovo myth and under the strong guidance of a Church that cultivates a centuries' long brotherhood with 'Mother Russia,' it will continue to support views that are at odds with Western values. Those Balkan countries that have leaders who are still encumbered with the burdens of the last war, who still feed their nations with false post-war facts and who are winning elections based on nationalism and separation will not make any progress in the future as long as they stay on this path. Furthermore, they will continue to be a target for regimes such as the Russian one.

What Russia is seeking is a combination of political instability, socio-economic crisis and nationalism. Only those countries with strong leadership, focused on the Euro-Atlantic vision, and who are pursuing reforms within their society will not be attractive partners to Russia. One thing is pretty clear, the Russian influence in Montenegro will be limited in the future, because the Montenegrin opposition is weak. Moscow needs strong opposition leaders in Montenegro in order to achieve its aim, and that is to overthrow the pro-Western government and bring the pro-Russian opposition to power. Fortunately, the power of the opposition in Montenegro is, and will remain, negligible for quite a time. As Mark Galeotti claims in his publication "Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe," in countries where institutional safeguards are weak, Moscow will target the state, not in the expectation of being able to capture it, but to seek to influence it on specific issues—such as sanctions—and to work on nudging it into a more favorable position.<sup>50</sup> Montenegro still struggles with the weakness of its institutions, and strong support for Russia within some sections

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<sup>49</sup> John McCain, "McCain Flashback: Russia Threat is Dead Serious. Montenegro Coup and Murder Plot Proves It," *USA Today*, June 29, 2017, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/06/29/russian-hacks-john-mccain-column/436354001/>.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," *Policy Brief* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, August 2017), [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228\\_-\\_CONTROLLING\\_CHAOS1.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228_-_CONTROLLING_CHAOS1.pdf), accessed January 31, 2018.

of society which has been exploited by Kremlin in the last ten years. Nevertheless, Montenegro is the first country that has openly opposed the new Russian hybrid warfare by bringing to trial those who organized the attempted coup in 2016.

## **About the Author**

**Ivana Gardasevic** is a Marshall Center Alumni who recently obtained her Master's degree, presenting a thesis on geostrategic confrontation of Russian and US interest in the context of Montenegrin accession to NATO. She worked as a journalist from 2009-2012, covering political issues in Montenegro and hosted two political radio shows about EU and NATO accession. From 2012-2015 she worked as an assistant for Public Relations to the Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro. Since November 2015 she is an advisor in Security and Defense Committee within the Parliament of Montenegro.

Ms. Gardasevic successfully attended the Program on Applied Security Studies (6 September to 16 November 2017), the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS-July to August 2016), and the European Security Seminar – South (May 2016). She participated in GCMC's Global Counter Terrorism Alumni Community of Interest Workshop in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on the "Role of Women in Counter Terrorism" (January 2017) and gave a presentation in April 2017 to the Seminar on Regional Security on "The Role of Women in Conflict."