

THE US SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE: RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Russia and Montenegro

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June 28, 2017, Washington DC*

Dear Mr. Chairman Burr, Dear Vice Chairman Warner, Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Intelligence. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today on continuous Russia's interference in Montenegro's home affairs over the past few years.

Introduction

For years, the Balkans has slipped out of the attention of the EU and the US. Not being fully integrated into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures, it has become an ideal target for Russia that found its way to influence regional Governments and sway them to more favorable position for Moscow. Russian politicians, MPs, representatives of various Russian "institutes" and groups are frequently visiting the Region. Semi-official Russian cultural and religious organizations have been flourishing in the recent past. They are established to provide necessary political and financial support to Regional political parties, leaders, intellectuals, media outlets with a solid Russian connection.

In the Western Balkans¹, Russia has a plenty of soft power means at its disposal. Cultural closeness, historic ties, identical religious roots make Russia and the Russian people close to ordinary citizens in the Balkans, which Russia smartly utilizes to expand its political and economic influence.

Montenegro has a particularly interesting position in Moscow's eyes. Its geographical location makes this country far more relevant in given European security and political context than one may conclude judging its size.

Why is it so important?

¹ The institutions of the EU have defined the "Western Balkans" as the south-east European area that includes countries that are not members of the EU: Croatia (now an EU member), Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania

In September 2013, the Russian Federation made what then-Russian ambassador in Montenegro, Andrey Nesterenko, described as “a request” to “discuss the terms of allowing Russian warships temporary moorage at the ports in Montenegro for refueling, maintenance and other necessities.” Moscow’s request was prompted by the war in Syria and the uncertain future of the Russian naval facility in the Syrian port city of Tartus. Montenegro rejected the request in December of that year. The importance of such facilities in the Mediterranean was demonstrated in October 2016 when the Russian carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, and its battle group were denied refueling in European ports on their way to support the Russian military effort in Syria.

That’s why Moscow looks at Montenegro’s decision to join NATO with displeasure. If Montenegro joins NATO, it would give the alliance control of every northern port in the Mediterranean.

The naval base case has brought Moscow to conclusion that only a change of the current Government in Montenegro may enable Russia to make gains in the small Balkans state and secure its strategic interests in this part of the Adriatic Sea. Being in the middle of the demanding process of the democratic transition marked by challenges such as corruption or weak state institutions and getting split over the issue of NATO membership, Montenegro provided an opportunity for a Moscow’s stronger involvement and murky political games.

The coup plot is just a tip of the iceberg, the culmination of more than 18-months long synchronized actions, which includes an aggressive media campaign coupled with the open political and financial support to pro-Russian political parties in Montenegro with an obvious aim – to reverse a pro-western course of the state and prevent it from joining NATO.

Russian Media Campaign in Montenegro

In the Region, Russia has established numerous Moscow based media offices in order to bolster its influence in both Montenegro and the rest of the Balkans. As it appeared to be virtually impossible in Montenegro because the Government of Montenegro can withdraw its licenses at any moment, media outlets are based in neighboring Serbia and from there they have an almost unimpeded access to Montenegro. They all broadcast or print their information in the Serbian language. The Region witnessed an outburst of Russian media in the Serbian language: Sputnik, South Front, Novaya Russia. There are more than 100 Moscow-backed organizations and media outlets active in Serbia in this moment. Sputnik is, by far, the most protuberant media outlet profoundly engaged in the ongoing media war and the anti-Western campaign in the Region.

Portraying Montenegro, Russian media have developed a twofold approach with a set of messages for international public and another for Montenegrin citizens. The campaign had been particularly intensive a few months before Montenegro got an invitation to join NATO on December 2, 2015, and several weeks before and during the Parliamentary elections held in October 16, 2016.

For the international public, Montenegro is depicting as a highly corrupted, politically unstable and problems-burdened state lagging behind all its neighbors, particularly Serbia. The Montenegrin leadership is portrayed as one that doesn't respect international norms and has been involved in numerous criminal activities and, hence, it is to be held responsible and prosecuted. The NATO decision to invite Montenegro to join the Alliance is depicted as an example of "double standards" and a move motivated exclusively by Western interests to challenge Moscow and show disrespect for its international position.

In messages for Montenegro's public, the Montenegrin Government is described as treacherous, corrupted and bribed, a pawn in hands of the US and NATO, not being worthy of support.

Russian media have been exceptionally supportive to extreme right Serb nationalist political groups in Montenegro. Russian arguments are presented to the Montenegrin public through social networks or through web portals of political actors, groups/NGOs that oppose NATO membership of Montenegro. On their side, Russia is depicted as an invincible, stronger than ever power, the guardian of the Orthodox Christianity and an undisputed friend of all the Orthodox peoples. Contrary, NATO is portrayed as a US-led war-bringing organization that wants to control the world and Russia is the only state standing in its way.

In order to penetrate Montenegrin society Russia also utilizes the Orthodox Church for its goals. The Church plays an important social and political role among the orthodox population. It is used to promote "the values of Eastern Christianity" and present them as something which fundamentally contradicts the Western world, i.e. both the EU and NATO. Priests from the Church have been actively engaged in an anti-Western propaganda invented to comfort Russian sentiments. Their statements and accusations are broadly broadcasted by local and Russian media.

An Open Support for anti-NATO and Pro-Russia Protests

Moscow didn't hide that it would like to see the Montenegrin Government replaced by those who could turn the country toward Russia. Democratic front,

an anti-NATO political coalition dominated by Serbian nationalist parties² known for their pro-Russian affiliation, almost dying on the margin of the Montenegrin political spectrum, was resurrected by the Russian hand to become the biggest opposition formation in the Montenegrin Parliament winning 21 percent of votes at the last Parliamentary elections held in October 2016 or 18 seats out of 81 seats in the Montenegrin Parliament. Their ideas are promoted by pro-Russia's web portals: inf4s (<http://www.in4s.net>), the portal of the NGO NO to War, NO to NATO (<http://www.neunato.net/>) and the web site of the Montenegrin Movement for Neutrality (<http://mnmne.org/>). In some cases, Montenegrin NGO leaders and political activists are on payroll lists of Russian institutions in Serbia. One of the leaders of the anti-NATO campaign in Montenegro, Marko Milacic, was long a correspondent of Sputnik in Montenegro.

A few months before the NATO Ministerial in December 2015, when had become apparent that Montenegro would get NATO invitation, hardcore opponents of NATO, summoned around Democratic Front and backed by Serbian Orthodox Church, with an overt support of Moscow decided to stage "democratic protests" against the Government with an aim to spark the outburst of popular unrests all over the country, "liberate the Parliament" and overturn the Montenegrin leadership. At the beginning of the street protests, organizers were chanting slogans against the corrupted Government and alleged electoral frauds. How protests continued, from slogans, political speeches, anti-NATO and pro-Russian rhetoric of protest leaders, it had become obvious that those behind a "people's awakening" had the only one agenda in their mind: how to prevent Montenegro from becoming the next member of NATO and how to bring Montenegro back to the Russian hug.

Russia's involvement in Montenegro is unique compared to the Maiden protests in Ukraine for two reasons: 1) The Russian government was openly supporting the protestors who wanted to overthrow a democratically elected Government which was not the case in Ukraine. In its reaction from October 17, 2015, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs deplored the events in Montenegro emphasizing "it is impossible to overlook the fact that, contrary to the assurances that Western states are giving Montenegrin leaders, the involvement of this country in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration does not lead to its consolidation and prosperity. On the contrary, we are witnessing the political and ideological polarization of society and the escalation of socioeconomic problems. One gets the impression that plans for the expedite promotion of Montenegro into NATO simultaneously contemplate the suppression of

² Democratic Front is composed of the New Serbian Democracy (NOVA), Movement for Changes (PzP), Democratic People's Party (DNP), Workers' Party (RP), Democratic Party of Unity (DSJ), Yugoslav Communist Party of Montenegro (JKP), Democratic Serb Party (DSS), Resistance to Hopelessness (OB), Party of United Pensioners and the Disabled (PUPI) and Serb Radical Party (SRS).

alternative approaches.” 2) Russia politically endorsed Democratic Front and actors affiliated to it.

Russian Federation and Democratic Front

Leaders of Democratic Front are frequent visitors to Moscow. Almost every month leaders of the Front pay visits to either Russian state institutions or Russian institutes for foreign relations. Their last visits took place just few weeks ago. Delegations of Democratic Front are regularly met by high-ranking Russian officials who are recognized for their connections with the war in Ukraine, including Vice President Dmitry Rogozin, Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Duma Sergey Naryshkin and Sergei Zheleznyak, former Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Leonid Resetnikov and so on. During those visits, in accordance with public statements, leaders of Democratic Front discussed a new course of action after having been defeated at the Parliamentary elections in Montenegro.

During one of those visits, the idea of neutral Montenegro, the “Balkans Switzerland” was born. This notion was coined by Sergei Zheleznyak, a prominent member of Putin’s party and former deputy Speaker of the Russian Parliament. Zheleznyak is on the US black list of Russians who supported the Crimean annexation and the one who co-authored a law which would force internationally funded non-profit organizations to register as “foreign agents”. He advised Montenegrin political cronies to promote the neutrality as a counter-argument against the membership to NATO. Russian interlocutors promised an unwavering support to Democratic Front so as to facilitate their triumph in the upcoming Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro. Leaders of Democratic Front, from their side, gave a firm word that they would reverse Montenegro’s support of the EU sanctions against Russia. They underlined the commitment to revoke the Montenegrin Euro-Atlantic integration.

Russia’s officials about Montenegro’s membership in NATO

Russian officials and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have made several indicative statements about Montenegro since it has been invited to join NATO. A couple of them are particularly symptomatic and suggestive and can be perceived, at least, as stirring for what will be happening during the electoral campaign in Montenegro, including the coup attempt. While Russia has been consistent with making threatening gestures over Montenegro’s NATO integration, they have also never specified what they were/are planning to do.

When NATO allies, on December 2, 2015, invited Montenegro to join the Alliance, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that Russia has repeatedly warned that "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." As he explained the action would be aimed "to provide for [Russia's] security interests and support parity" between Moscow and the Alliance.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes the decision "to launch NATO accession talks with Montenegro as an openly confrontationalist move which is fraught with additional destabilizing consequences for the system of Euro-Atlantic security" and concludes that "this new round of the alliance's expansion directly affects the interests of the Russian Federation and forces us to respond accordingly."

In a response to the signing of the Protocol of Accession of Montenegro to NATO, on May 19, 2016, the Russian Ministry accused NATO for "attempts to change the military and political landscape in Europe, in particular, in the context of its outspoken policy of deterrence towards Russia" and made it clear that this, "will inevitably affect Russia's interests and force it to respond proportionately," According to the statement, "dragging Montenegro into NATO won't be left without Russia's reaction". This is followed by similar accusations of other Russian officials including minister of foreign affairs Sergej Lavrov and his deputy Aleksej Miskov.

It goes without saying that above mentioned arguments were reverberated by leaders of Democratic Front during the election campaign.

Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro and A Coup Plot

Democratic Front was running an intensive, aggressive and very costly political campaign in Montenegro throughout 2016. Its broad mobilizing action was backed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, numerous NGOs both in Montenegro and Serbia, intellectuals renowned for their pro-Russian opinions and some political parties from the region with the similar ideology. This network served and still serves as an extended and agile component of Democratic Front. In spite of an exceptionally expensive campaign, Front leaders have never provided a comprehensive information on financial sources for their campaign.

The primary goal of Democratic Front and their supporters in Russia was to get the Montenegrin opposition united around the Democratic Front's platform for action and prevent the strongest party in Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialist, from gaining majority in the Parliament that would enable the formation of a new pro-NATO Government.

The Coup Plot

On October 16, 2016, Montenegro held its parliamentary elections. The plotters disguised in police uniforms were preparing to storm the Montenegrin Parliament and provoke a turmoil by shooting at citizens waiting for the election results. Following the incident, they would declare that the party of their choice (Democratic Front) had won the elections. In the final stage of the action, the plotters intended to unlawfully detain or assassinate the Prime Minister of Montenegro. Acting on a tip from an informant, Montenegrin police were able to abort the violence and arrest most of the plot suspects, including the former commander of the Serbian Gendarmerie, Bratislav Dikic. The Prosecutors Office has interrogated more than 20 suspects, 14 of them were taken into custody, while others were released.

Montenegrin state authorities (the Supreme State Prosecutor and the Special Prosecutor for Organized Crime and Corruption) publicly presented some pieces of evidence to prove their claim and justify their action against the plot suspects. This included intercepted phone conversations between Bratislav Dikic and Aleksandar Sindjelic, a supposed founder of the pro-Russian organization in Serbia "The Serbian Wolves". According to Krym.Realii, Sindjelic has fought in the Eastern Ukraine on the side of the Russian-backed forces.

Sindjelic and Dikic accepted to cooperate with the Prosecutor Office. They provided information about key links between suspected terrorists, nationalist Russian structures and, possibly, some political subjects in Montenegro. They confirmed that the action was carefully prepared both in Serbia and Montenegro. Dikic and the core group of plotters arrived in Montenegro a few days before the general elections with the aim to organize two groups of plotters and make things ready for their action during the election day. Sindjelic confessed his 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." According to the police sources, Sindjelic received €200,000 from the Russians and distributed the money to members of the criminal group. Dikic, for example, received €15,000.

Following statements of Montenegrin authorities, the Serbia's Prime Minister, in his press announcement, revealed the information of Serbia's Intelligence agency that there had been a preparation of "illegal activities" in Serbia to be carried out on Montenegrin territory. He confirmed that the Serbian police identified and arrested several persons who closely monitored and stalked Prime Minister of Montenegro, M. Djukanovic, and informed another group, including "foreign elements", about that. He added that there were numerous proofs for

his claims, including photographs, videos, intercepted phone conversations, uniforms, confiscated money (€120,000 in cash) as well as legal confessions of some suspects involved in the plot. Russian daily Kommersant wrote that these groups used encrypted telephones, two of which were discovered in Serbia and in Montenegro, and the third one, "located in Russia", was out of reach.

Nemanja Ristic, the person from Serbia suspected of being one of the key plotters is still at large. He has been revealed by Serbian media as photographed standing near Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. The mentioned photo had been made on December 12 2016, during Lavrov's visit to Belgrade while meeting with Serbian far-right grouping members. Among them, there was Nemanja Ristic. The Serbian police keeps him under police surveillance, but they didn't yet deport him to Montenegro despite the Interpol red notice issued by the request of Montenegrin jurisdictions.



In the 135 pages indictment filed recently, the Montenegro's chief prosecutor charges 14 people, including two Montenegrin opposition politicians and two Russian agents, Vladimir Popov and Eduard Shirokov, members of the Russian Military Intelligence Service – GRU, who are identified as the ringleaders of the operation. The GRU is the same organization sanctioned by the US for hacking the Democratic National Committee offices. Shirokov, alias Shishmakov, was posted as the assistant military attaché at the Russian Embassy in Poland until 2014 when Poland declared him persona non-grata for espionage. Shirokov, got a new identity and false Russian documents in August last year, two months before the elections in Montenegro. Popov and Shirokov were then dispatched to Montenegro's next door neighbor Serbia from where they coordinated coup preparations. They were expelled from Serbia to Russia several weeks after the coup. The whereabouts of Shirokov and Popov are unknown while Russian state authorities have never replied to Montenegro's requests to provide information about the suspects.

The Coup: The Balkans Cossacks Army

It should be noted that all conspirators arrested in actions of the Montenegro's and Serbia's police enjoy the reputation of being supporters of pro-Russian nationalist extremist groups and Russian separatists in the Eastern Ukraine. One of those Russian extremist organizations has a special place in this case as many of the plotters have been either closely connected to it or they have been members of it. It is the so-called Balkans Cossacks Army, an offspring of the Russian Cossacks Army, a semi-military nationalistic, pan-Slav association linked to the Russian army and secret services. As the investigation indicates, the Balkans Cossacks Army is likely used to reach out people willing to take part in the plot, motivate and organize them and prepare them for the execution of the plan.

The Balkans Cossack Army was formed in Kotor, Montenegro on September 11, 2016 (the date, September 11, was chosen on purpose) with the support of Night Wolves, the Russian biker organization close to Vladimir Putin. The Night Wolves are banned from entering the United States, Poland, Germany, and Canada.³ The Cossacks are known for their efforts to "unite the orthodox world and advance the Russian world". Cossack "general" Viktor Vladimirovich Zaplatin has been unanimously elected supreme ataman (commander) of the Balkan Cossack Army. Zaplatin has been living in Serbia for 16 years and enjoys reputation of one who has good connections with Russian officials. He fought in Bosnia in 1992-93, as well as in conflicts in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in the Azerbaijani region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and in the Moldovan region of Transnistria. Zaplatin is described in the pro-Russian press in Serbia as "the official representative of the Union of Volunteers, which is directly associated with Vladimir Putin." Priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church were present at the event to bless the formation of the Balkans Cossack Army.

The key coup plotters from Serbia are closely tied with the Balkans Cossack Army whereas Sindjelic publicly admitted his connection with the Night Wolves. Representatives of the Balkans Cossack Army visited Moscow from October 11 through October 16.

The building of paramilitary and extremist forces to be used abroad as proxies is an age-old tactic. The Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* in an article published at the beginning of November 2016 highlighted how Cossacks and Serbian volunteers, who fought in the Eastern Ukraine, are used by Russian secret services to carry out sensitive operations in the Balkans.

³ <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/j19729.aspx>

The Coup: Russian official reactions

Moscow officially denied any involvement in the Montenegrin October's events. After the Montenegrin Government was formed, Russian Foreign Ministry issued statement urging Montenegro to chart a "balanced course in foreign policy", which is yet another diplomatic warning that Russia will defend its "sphere of interest" in the Balkans. The Montenegrin government and especially former Prime Minister Djukanovic were harshly criticized by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov. In December 2016, he stated that EU is pressuring Serbia to act like "Montenegro, who broke all its promises and betrayed Russia".

The same day, on June 5, when Montenegro formally joined NATO, the Russian Foreign Ministry commented that in response to Montenegro's "anti-Russian hysteria" and "hostile policy," Russia "reserves the right to take reciprocal measures." This was yet another public warning from Russia's side though they didn't explicitly mention what kind of counter-measures Moscow is considering to take against Montenegro.

In spite of the Russian firm denial of any connection with the plot, a few Russian moves may denote the Moscow's involvement in the case:

1. Sergei Petrushev, the former head of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and the current Head of Russian Security Council arrived in Serbia a few days after the coup. His visit coincided with reported expulsions of several Russian citizens from Serbia, which seemingly included Popov and Shirokov. The deportation seemed to have happened after the Petrushev intervention.

2. On November 4, 2016 President of Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin released retired general Leonid Reshetnikov from his duties as Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), effective January 4, 2017, and appointed Mikhail Fradkov, the former Prime Minister of Russia and the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service from 6 October 2007 to 5 October 2016, as a new Director. This decision not only illustrates the profile of the "Institute", but also came soon after Petrushev's visit to Belgrade.

Reshetnikov is known for his extreme anti-NATO and anti-American position. He is seen to be heavily engaged in the region and attempts to reverse Montenegrin NATO integration. Being close to nationalist, pan-Slavic Russian groups and organizations linked to separatists in Ukraine and involved in the war in this country, he welcomed the establishment of the Balkans Cossack Army as "another uniting factor of Orthodox Slovenian nations in the Balkans". The dismissal of Reshetnikov is likely a result of Petrushev's talks in Belgrade and consultations with President Putin.

Cyber attacks

During election campaign and voting day, several Montenegrin on-line media were subjected to cyber-attacks, which resulted in temporary disruptions of their services. The online news portals CaffeDelMontenegro (one of the most popular online portals in Montenegro) and "Antena M", which are recognized for their support to NATO membership of Montenegro, were attacked several times. Moreover, web pages of the Government of Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialists and Center for Democratic Transition (one of NGOs observing the elections, known for its support to NATO) were also attacked. It has been estimated by Montenegrin authorities that these cyber-attacks were the strongest ever encountered by Montenegro's information system. The cyber-attacks have not been stopped ever since, official sites, and networks, as well as online media, have been methodically subjected to cyber-attacks up until the present day.

Conclusion:

Montenegro appeared to be a failed case for Russia, one of only a few cases that Moscow has lately lost in its ongoing zero-sum style competition with the West. Despite its efforts and money, Moscow has made no measurable progress in getting Montenegro on its side, and it has seemingly lost a possibility of having a strategically significant outlet on the Adriatic Sea.

1. NATO open door policy must remain as vibrant as before:

Russia should not have a veto right on NATO expansion, but it proved to have the capacity to threaten, influence and subvert the process as it was the case with Georgia. It's why Montenegro matters more than it looks at the first sight. The Montenegrin case confirms, once again, what Russia is capable of doing to make its interests come through. The Balkans is one of several European playgrounds between Moscow on one side and the US and the EU on the other. Russia's long-term strategy is to drag its rivals' involvement down to a level that would make countries of the region subjects to Moscow's interference. This part of Europe has long been low on the list of American priorities and any further American retreat may have lasting adverse implications for this region particularly and the European security in general, which may eventually be detrimental to America's enduring interests in Europe.

2. To restraint Russia's influence a continuous pro-active approach is needed from the US and the EU side in countries wishing to join NATO and the EU. Democratic transition in aspiring countries should be reinforced: the rule of law, fight against corruption and strengthening of institutions are the precondition for stability and an effective protection from Russia's influence

The Russian Federation will continue to exploit loopholes that exist in most of the Balkans states: democratic incapacity, corruption, ethnic tensions, countries' economic and/or military needs, and growing feelings of disenfranchisement of those countries "on the path" to EU and NATO membership. The goal of Russia is not so much to gain partners from which it can benefit economically or militarily (in the sense of physical support). Rather, Russia's intends to keep NATO and the EU out of the Balkans to the fullest extent possible, whether by filling gaps (e.g. economic requirements) or exploiting existing ethnic and political tensions and widening existing gaps, or through actively fomenting crises that would challenge western organizations and draw upon their resources.

Russia is exploiting democratic deficiency of those states in an effort to gain greater geopolitical influence. The Kremlin seeks to weaken democratic transitions, to erode state institutions and the rule of law concept. To achieve its goals, Moscow looks for shadowy economic deals, encourage corruption and obstruction of justice. It supports political parties and individuals in Europe and the US who challenge the core postulates of liberal democracy and separation of powers.

3. Need for more intensive cooperation between NATO members and aspiring countries and reliable NATO partners on cyber defense policy

Increased cooperation between NATO members and aspiring countries on cyber defense policy would be extremely useful. With the adoption of the Talin 2.0 manual by NATO earlier this year, it is imperative that Member States integrate recommendations from the manual in an expedited manner in order to minimize the continued infringement on national sovereignty from online attacks. The United States should be active in partnering with its allies both inside and outside of the alliance. Specifically, by advocating and assisting members to have strong cyber defense policies on a national level, in addition to striving to find stronger paths of communication regarding cyber threats inside of the alliance