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[Hybrid operation “Montenegro”](#)



Moscow’s attempt to influence the outcome of the parliamentary election in Montenegro in order to stall the country’s accession to NATO due to take effect in 2017 has led to accusations that Russia is plotting “a bloody scenario” aimed at destabilizing the Balkans. The Montenegrin election was mired by a “terrorist operation” as national authorities uncovered a plot to forcibly seize governmental premises which may have involved Russian nationals. Security risks have arisen in the region against the backdrop of the crisis in Moscow’s relations with the European Union and the US – key partners and backers of the Balkan states. However, there is currently no threat of large-scale destabilization.

According to [investigators](#), the operation aimed at capturing the buildings of state institutions in Montenegro and arresting its political leaders was to be launched after ballots closed on October 16. Allegedly, several field units comprising 60 persons were to take part in the operation supposedly bankrolled by patrons in Serbia and Russia. Dressed in police uniforms, the conspirators planned to seize the parliament building where the radical Democratic Front were to hold a rally that night. The Democratic Front, the main opposition force in Montenegro, is openly supported by Moscow.

Participants of the special operation were to open fire on protesters (in other words, supporters of the pro-Russian policy) in order to provoke chaos amidst which an attack on the parliament building would be launched by members of the crowd. Allegedly, leaders of the country, including Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, were to be restrained and special task forces were to be hemmed in at his base.

Twenty citizens of Serbia were detained on the eve of the election on suspicion of involvement in the operation in Montenegro. Allegedly, [Bratislav Dikic](#), a former commander of a Serbian special police unit (Gendarmerie), dismissed several years prior on grounds of [suspicion of establishing a criminal group](#), was the chief conspirator. On November 2, Montenegrin journalists reported on the arrest of another alleged organizer of the action – Aleksandar Sindjelic, citizen of Serbia, [wanted](#) by the Ukrainian authorities for participation in the fighting in the Donbass.

It is unlikely that the investigation will yield an unequivocal answer to the question of whether the Kremlin intended to arrange “a bloody Maidan” in Montenegro in order to bring its protégés to power. It goes without saying that Russia itself would not facilitate such an investigation and that it would undoubtedly make attempts, by virtue of its political and diplomatic leverages, to close the “Russian file” and to discredit such allegations. However, it proved impossible to conceal the fact that a “foreign” factor was at play in this case which was clearly indicated both by the authorities of Montenegro and Serbia on whose territory this special operation was planned.

For many experts in the Balkans it remains a contentious issue whether Russia was involved in the attempted overthrow of the Montenegrin government as a state or whether it was “individual citizens” of Russia acting independently of Russian authorities who schemed to provide support to Djukanovic’s opponents through the use of force.

Leaks in the [Serbian media](#) about “the expulsion” of several Russian citizens who could be involved in “the Montenegrin case” from Serbia as well as the refusal of Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vucic to [comment](#)

on the same only serve to bear out suspicions about Moscow's role in the events. Even more so that these leaks emerged at the very time that the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev was paying a visit to Belgrade to hold private talks with all of the key representatives of Serbia's leadership.

Serbian prime minister Vucic [tipped off](#) journalists about "a foreign element" in "the Montenegrin case" a few days ahead of Patrushev's visit. According to him, individuals who had been preparing to carry out "illegal actions" against Montenegro and who had been shadowing Djukanovic among others had been detained on Serbian territory. The sum of 125 thousand euros was seized from them along with uniforms. Vucic went on to stress that the Serbian state had played no part in the plot against Montenegro whatsoever and that it was cooperating with the Montenegrin authorities in connection with their investigation.

Moscow has [denied reports](#) that Russian citizens have been subjected to deportation. Moreover, Russia has neither released an official statement in response to the revelations regarding the attempt to destabilize the situation in Montenegro nor the claims made in the Balkans that Russia was complicit in the plot.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) [merely underlined](#) the need to "investigate an attempted coup d'état in a thorough and transparent manner" and paid special attention to the success of opposition parties in Montenegro who won 39 of 81 parliamentary seats and who have demanded that a referendum be held on joining NATO. Interestingly, when speaking of "an attempted coup d'état", Russia's MFA has resorted to echoing the rhetoric of opposition politicians and not that of the Montenegrin authorities who, in contrast, speak of "a terrorist attack" involving external forces; the ruling United Russia party [relays](#) the interpretation of radical opposition members verbatim, asserting that the coup attempt was "staged" by the authorities themselves.

Moscow chose to ignore the details of the planned seizure of the parliament building [uncovered](#) by the Montenegrin prosecutor Milivoje Katnic. In line with the official representative of the investigative authorities of Montenegro's announcement, pro-Russian citizens of Montenegro (and perhaps citizens of Russian living there) could have been injured or killed by shots fired since the Democratic Front, sharing pro-Russian sentiments, planned to hold a rally after polls closed on October 16.

The lack of attention paid to such "details" by Moscow cannot be attributed to the Russian authorities' ambivalence towards the events in Montenegro. Relations with the latter soured in connection with Podgorica joining in the anti-Russian sanctions imposed in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and their signing of a NATO accession protocol this year. On the contrary, never has Moscow paid greater attention to Montenegrin elections since the country gained independence in 2006.

The most recent election campaign [turned out to be one of the most expensive](#) in the country's history and yet it effectively resulted in a duel between the anti-NATO Democratic Front, mainly comprising Serbian parties, and the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, headed by Djukanovic who supports speedy accessions both to NATO and the European Union.

Djukanovic mentioned, for the first time, attempts to seize power by forceful means with the support of external actors last fall against the backdrop of anti-governmental rallies in Podgorica and statements made by the Russian MFA in favor of "alternative" views expressed by the opposition. The Montenegrin authorities banned deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin and millionaire Konstantin Malofeev from entering the country in a bid to limit opponents' contact with influential Russian figures. The latter is suspected of financing rebel fighters in eastern Ukraine and supporting radical forces in the Balkans.

The general public in Montenegro became aware of Malofeev for the first time in spring of last year when he organized the delivery of the Holy Fire to the Cetinje monastery, [having received the blessing](#) of Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije Radovic who is also known to sympathize with the "radical political camp". The TV channel [Tsargrad](#), owned by Malofeev which adheres to conservative views, has, over recent months, broadcast highly inflammatory anti-Djukanovic and anti-NATO propaganda.

Until recently one would have been forgiven for arriving at the conclusion that Russia had misplaced Djukanovic's file despite his 25 years in power, the fact that he represents the legitimate authorities and that he remains one of the most influential politicians in the Balkans. Moscow has been open about [its interest in](#)

[the consolidation](#) of the opposition forces in Montenegro and its preference for a victory over Djukanovic. The latter has been [accused publicly by Russia's MFA](#) of kowtowing to the West.

The leadership of United Russia has also invited "their friends", [leaders of the Democratic Front](#), to Moscow and signed off on bilateral agreements such as the [declaration](#) on the formation of a "space for sovereign, neutral states of Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina" in the region. United Russia welcomed the decision of the Montenegrin opposition [not to recognize the results of the election](#). United Russia has issued around 20 statements on Montenegro this year which focused on contact with the opposition and military neutrality.

Close cooperation between United Russia and the Democratic Front started as early as four years ago following the latter's success in the 2012 election (although the composition of the party was slightly different at the time). Experts point out that the most recent campaign by the Democratic Front was too expensive judging by the standards of the Montenegrin opposition and that the sources of its financing have become the subject of a [separate investigation](#).

Russian state-owned media have engaged in the [open derision of Djukanovic](#), discrediting the October 16 election in recent weeks and have even resorted to [publishing news stories originating from invented sources](#). Propagandists promised Montenegro ["a Maidan with a Caucasian flair"](#) and [accused Djukanovic of having links](#) with indubitably grim business activities including the smuggling of human organs.

Propagandists also [ridicule](#) the investigation into the attempted seizure of power in Montenegro by reducing everything down to unconfirmed rumors and disregarding both the statements of the Montenegrin prosecutor and the cooperation between the authorities of Montenegro and Serbia on this issue. The latter has officially confirmed that evidence of the plot to carry out the illegal operation against the Montenegrin authorities has been uncovered.

It is not difficult to shift the focus in the Russian information space which remains largely under the Kremlin control. However, Russian influence is increasingly highlighted in the Balkans in the context of nationalism and destabilizing initiatives. Russia's policy in the region, especially post 2014, has been to provide support to anti-western parties and organizations which promote continuity with the nationalist traditions of the 1990s, praise convicted war criminals and refuse to exclude the use of violent methods as underlined by the Democratic Front among others.

Moscow has supposedly gifted [millions of dollars](#) to "friendly parties", the media and anti-NATO organizations as part of a clandestine strategy designed to increase Russian influence in the region.

Following analysis of obscure [methods of exerting influence by Russia](#) which primarily plays into the hands of radical Serbian circles, observers warn of the high probability that in the Balkans, [violent scenarios](#) involving local representatives of security agencies and radical groups will ensue. Although it is not a question of destabilization in the region given the military-and-political configuration which has been prevailing here since the conflicts of the 1990s, any actions aimed at reducing Western influence and stalling integration processes adopted by the regional elites will lead to heightened tensions.

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