



SHADOWS OF UKRAINE OVER MONTENEGRO

DFC STUDY

PODGORICA, MARCH 2022

CONTENTS

4	SHADOWS OF UKRAINE OVER MONTENEGRO
5	Revolution of Dignity and Annexation of Crimea
8	NEGATION – THE ORIGINALLY BORROWED CONCEPT
8	Russia’s rhetoric towards Ukraine
10	The rhetoric of Serbia towards Montenegro
14	An alternative understanding of Nazism
16	Other common confabulations
17	Ukraine-Kosovo analogy
19	POSITIONING OF ENTITIES IN MONTENEGRO
20	Sitting on two chairs
22	Russian destabilization of Montenegro
25	MONTENEGRIN MEDIA IN THE SERVICE OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA
28	No. 1 topic on social media as well
30	Calls for protests in support of Russia
33	Men’s State (Мужское государство) in Montenegro
35	Implications for the region
37	CONCLUSIONS
41	RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPRESSUM

PUBLISHER: Atlantic Council of Montenegro / **EDITOR IN CHIEF:** Dr Savo Kentera
AUTHORS: Milan Jovanovic and DFC team / **DESIGN AND LAYOUT:** Branka Gardašević



This project was funded, in part, through a U.S. Department of State grant. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Government.

SHADOWS OF UKRAINE OVER MONTENEGRO

The principles of international political relations on which the modern European security architecture is built have once again proved null and void in the face of Russia's neo-imperialist intentions. Diplomacy has not fulfilled its basic tasks, and the peace policy and culture that are the basis of the universal institutional organization today are facing the initial challenges of overcoming the rivalry characteristic of the Cold War bloc era. In addition, it seems that questioning the justification of NATO's existence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, in the current global political and security circumstances, is at a minimum level of relevance.

Russia's excessive sensitivity based on the belief that the broader framework of Euro-Atlantic integration will jeopardize its national security

interests is a reflection of Russia's perception of the existence of an ideological (not foreign policy) threat and the danger that Western cultural values will integrate into Russian society and threaten the existing system of government. More than three decades after American political analyst Francis Fukuyama presented his idea of *the end of history*, according to which the ideological development of the human

THE ABSENCE OF PHYSICAL BARRIERS ON THE WESTERN BORDERS WITH EUROPE FACILITATED THE POLICY OF EXPANSION OF THE RUSSIAN *LEBENSRAUM*

community reached its peak with the establishment of liberal democracy, his thesis on Russian nationalism as a barrier to global democracy expansion has matured.

Moreover, thirty years later, the entrenched nationalism of the Russian elites entered a permanent state of neo-imperialist aspirations on a global scale and again became a threat to the universal values of liberalism. The absence of physical barriers on the western borders with Europe facilitated the policy of expansion of the Russian *lebensraum*, the German geopolitical concept of *living space* from the beginning of the last century, which supports the interest in establishing colonies, which was taken over and carried out by Adolf Hitler as the foreign policy of the Third Reich.

However, unlike the Cold War period, the clash of two different conceptions – democracy and authoritarianism, equality and oligarchy,

individualism and totalitarianism, ideological systems and the values that support them – is now taking place on European soil, in a geopolitical vacuum between East and West.

Russia's military offensive against Ukraine is an unprecedented crime against peace since 1939 and the latest attempt to return the country to Moscow's political orbit after Ukraine renounced Russia's imperial heritage and sided with the West. It is a continuation of the complex processes that Ukraine went through during the color revolutions of 2004 (*Orange Revolution*) and 2014 (*Euromaidan*), which escalated with Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and the war in the separatist eastern parts of the country (Donetsk and Lugansk), supported by official Moscow.

The thesis that Russians and Ukrainians are one people who are part of Russian civilization, then the narrative of the endangerment of Russians in Ukraine (according to the 2001 census, 15-17% of ethnic Russians live in Ukraine, and about 20% of the total population speaks Russian as their mother tongue), and the fact that the West violated the promise from the 1990s that NATO would not expand its membership to Eastern Europe, served as a justification and immediate reason for the long-conceived and carefully prepared Machiavellian strategy of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022.

REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY AND ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

The beginning of the crisis in Ukraine was marked by protests in December 2013 against the autocratic government of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich on the Maidan in Kyiv, which is considered a symbol of Ukrainian independence and revolutionary resistance.

Earlier in November 2013, at a meeting of the European Union's Initiative with the Eastern Partnership countries in Vilnius, Yanukovich under Russian pressure [refused](#) to sign the Comprehensive Association Agreement (which would prevent Ukraine's accession to Putin's Eurasian Union) and instead of introducing European standards and values, the then government in Kyiv began to propagate a customs union with Russia, which at the same time meant greater tutelage of Moscow. The Russian government celebrated the move as a victory.

Yanukovich began his presidency in 2010. That the pro-Russian president sells Ukraine's interests to Moscow, offering it everything Ukraine can give, was shown by one of his first steps from the government's position – signing an agreement with then Russian President Dmitry

Medvedev, which allowed Russia to extend the lease of the port in Sevastopol for the Black Sea Fleet until 2042, in [exchange](#) for a discount on the price of Russian gas. Russia then announced that it would expand its presence in the Black Sea. This, as interpreted in Ukraine and Russia, made it impossible to consider the issue of Ukraine's membership in NATO for at least another three decades.

IN JANUARY 2014, YANUKOVYCH RETROACTIVELY CRIMINALIZED PROTESTS AND LEGALIZED HIS OWN USE OF FORCE WITH LAWS THAT PROTESTERS CALLED *DICTATORSHIP LAWS*

Spontaneous gatherings of students and other disgruntled citizens of Ukraine protesting against the government's policy in Kyiv grew into civil protests called *Euromaidan*, and then into a mass pro-Western movement demanding democratic reforms and the removal of corrupt state leadership. The brutal repression of the authorities and the excessive violence carried out against the peaceful demonstrators by the special police unit [Berkut](#), mobilized general social discontent and daily gatherings of hundreds of thousands of people on the Independence Square in Kyiv.

In January 2014, Yanukovich retroactively criminalized protests and legalized his own use of force with laws that protesters called *dictatorship laws*. The laws were passed outside the usual parliamentary [procedure](#) and imposed strict restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, extremism was banned (although the term was not legally defined), and all foreign-funded NGOs were ordered, following Russian practice, to register as foreign agents. On the other hand, Russian leaders applied to the events on the Maidan tactics of [homosexualization](#) of protest, as was the case two years earlier during the protests in Moscow.

Peaceful protests were violently suppressed in February 2014 by police aggression and brutality towards protesters, but the scope of the so-called *revolutions of dignity* was far-reaching – the pro-Russian establishment was removed and pro-Western Petro Poroshenko was elected the new President of Ukraine. A few months after the beginning of *Euromaidan*, Yanukovich fled to Russia, which still interprets the protests on the Maidan as a right-wing coup supported by the West.

The collapse of the system and the internal destabilization of the state served opportunistic separatist movements to, with Russian support,

start a war in eastern Ukraine and declare the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk and support Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula in March 2014. Fearing a democratic Ukraine, Moscow responded to its right to decide its own future by occupying the military and annexing the Black Sea peninsula to its territory after a referendum on Crimea's secession that the United Nations declared invalid.

The Russian government claimed that neo-Nazi forces had taken power in Kyiv and could not deny support to Crimean residents in their right to self-determination, disputing claims of their own role in annexing sovereign Ukrainian territory. Despite clear evidence of Russian troops' activities in Crimea, the Kremlin has launched a campaign to deny involvement, talking about self-defense units formed by the local population due to alleged threats from Ukrainian ultranationalists.

Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory violates basic principles of international law, the Charter of the United Nations, as well as bilateral agreements between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. One of them is the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia (along with the United Kingdom and the United States) guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity, and by which Ukraine agreed to the largest nuclear disarmament in history, handing over 1,300 intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 created the so-called *Crimean effect*, or *Crimean bonus*, as the record-breaking popularity enjoyed by the Russian state leadership among the population in the first years after *reunification*, was the generally accepted narrative for the occupation of Crimea.

NEGATION – THE ORIGINALLY BORROWED CONCEPT

RUSSIA'S RHETORIC TOWARDS UKRAINE

Like the dissident philosopher Ivan Ilyin, who advocated fascism in Russia and admired Hitler during the 20th century, Putin has long shown a desire to restore Russia's Orthodox Christian empire, the foundation of Russian civilization, by building a Russian world that includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and ethnic-Russian regions of Kazakhstan. The collapse of the Soviet Union has long been an obsession of Vladimir Putin and *the greatest catastrophe of the 21st century*, and the current *special military operation*, in addition to great state aspirations, was fueled by recent disunity and inability to reach consensus on vital interests between NATO allies and EU members.

That is the essence of the war that is being waged in Ukraine these days. It is not just a matter of banning Ukraine to join the organizations and alliances it wants, including NATO – which is the right of every sovereign country. Russia also strongly opposes Ukraine's membership in the European Union, although Putin in the early 2000s had a diametrically different opinion on the dynamics of the development of relations among Russia, its *near abroad*, and the West. Today, he sees the loss of territory in the war of civilizations – the West, on the one hand, and the *Russian world*, on the other. Therefore, with subordinate Ukraine, led by the new Yanukovich, Russia would become an empire again and corridors would be opened for further action. Otherwise, a prosperous and democratic Ukraine would be a problem for Putin's autocratic regime because Russia's people in the immediate neighborhood could face a more acceptable reality than the one they live in.

In 2007, Russia institutionalized this initiative through the *Russkiy Mir* (world) Foundation, which is much more than caring for cultural heritage and is an integral part of public and open state policy, with a combination of soft and hard power. Putin himself justified the annexation of Crimea by evoking that concept and calling for the aspiration to restore a unique broad Russian civilization protected from external (Western) forces.

Back in 2013, Putin [said](#) in Kyiv that Ukraine was facing a civilization-al choice: *We understand the current reality that there are Ukrainian and Belarusian people, as well as other peoples... but, of course, at the core lie the common spiritual values that make us one people.*

According to [him](#), Ukraine is an inseparable part of Russia, has no tradition of statehood, and has become only a tool of American and NATO expansionism, which poses a threat to Russia's security. Putin has spent the last 20 years believing that Ukraine has no historical or any other predisposition to be a sovereign state, or that, at best, it should be a satellite state. The Maidan revolution ended all hopes that Kyiv would remain pro-Russian, and Putin saw the hand of the United States and Hillary Clinton in overthrowing Yanukovich. He also began to believe his own propagandists, Surkov, Dugin, and Kisel, that Ukraine was ruled by a Nazi-Bandera junta. The perfect excuse for the *denazification* of Ukraine and a *special military operation*.

On Ilyin's concept of *endangerment* of his own people and the genocide that is being carried out against it, Putin, with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church (RPC) and Patriarch Kirill, who [justifies](#) the war with a gay parade and violation of traditional values by Ukraine, rationalized the invasion to the Russian people, its costs and consequences, highlighting Russia's ability to sacrifice itself and face Western decadent values and threats.

Viewed from the perspective of Montenegro, it seems that the rhetoric of Putin and his ideologists was accepted by certain Serbian officials, their exponents in Montenegro, media and agitators of the *Serbian world* in an aggressive approach to Montenegro, the fact that Digital Forensic Center (DFC) has first warned about since 2018, especially during 2020 and 2021, when we noticed a strong Russian trace and influence on the elections and socio-political conditions in the country. The operationalization of the *Serbian world* is an originally borrowed concept of Putin's *Eurasian Union*.

VIEWED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MONTENEGRO, IT SEEMS THAT THE RHETORIC OF PUTIN AND HIS IDEOLOGISTS WAS ACCEPTED BY CERTAIN SERBIAN OFFICIALS, THEIR EXPONENTS IN MONTENEGRO, MEDIA AND AGITATORS OF THE SERBIAN WORLD IN AN AGGRESSIVE APPROACH TO MONTENEGRO

THE RHETORIC OF SERBIA TOWARDS MONTENEGRO

The activities of disruptive factors acting towards Montenegro are largely coordinated from Moscow, mainly through Serbia as a platform for the implementation of Russian interests and goals in the Western Balkans. A well-designed quasi-nationalist narrative about the need for Montenegro's return to traditional values within the wider Orthodox, pan-Slavic community is being placed. The project was taken over and based on the Russian concept of soft power, and within it, there is no place for Montenegrin identity, culture, and history, and after the change of government in Montenegro, under the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has significantly determined political dynamics of the ruling majority, its civic concept, secularism and anti-fascist values on which the modern

AT THE CURRENT STAGE, WITHOUT THE GOVERNMENT AND FUNCTIONAL INSTITUTIONS, MONTENEGRO IS OPEN TO DIRECT RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL FLOWS

Montenegrin state is based will also be brought into question. The change of government in 2020 paved the way for malign Russian influence. At the head of the Parliament, the Ministry of Defense and the National Security Agency (ANB) are figures whose activities are in significant discrepancy with the proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic principles and values. At the current stage, without the Government and functional institutions, Montenegro is

open to direct Russian influence and influence on political flows through its proxies that cover important positions.

Just as the *Russian world* is partly based on the idea of endangerment of Russians in the territories of the *near abroad*, the *Serbian world* implies a narrative about the endangerment of Serbs in territories outside Serbia (Serbs in the diaspora), in the function of their homogenization, historical revisionism, the negation of national identity of certain peoples in the near neighborhood and attempts to tie them completely to the Serbian National Corps. The ambition to decide in Belgrade on all vital issues concerning parts of the population whose members declare themselves as Serbs, wherever they live, is also clearly expressed.

Following the example of the Russian Law on Compatriots (Федеральный закон о государственной политике Российской Федерации в отношении соотечественников за рубежом), the Strategy of National State Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025 (Стратегия государственной национальной политики Российской Федерации на период до 2025

года) and other laws and bylaws, Serbia has also legally established a policy towards Serbs in the region through key documents, such as Declaration on the Proclamation on the relations of the Homeland and Diaspora as Relations of Greatest State and National Interest (2006), Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (2009), Strategy on Preserving and Strengthening Relations between the Home Country and the Diaspora and Home Country and Serbs in the Region (2011), National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2019), Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2020 to 2029.

Bottom line, it is a question of the continuity of the old hegemonic idea of a Greater Serbia, which was one of the main causes of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the bloody ethnic conflicts that took place on its territory in the 1990s. Also, both countries have similarly supported the spread of these ideologies through laws and bylaws, and declarations.

The role of the main political promoter of the [concept](#) of the *Serbian world* was given to the Serbian Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin, who used every opportunity to comment on the events in Montenegro and sharply criticize the actions of the former and current Montenegrin government, stating that the creation of the *Serbian world* is only a matter of time and that a lot has already been done to implement it. Even the minister without a portfolio in Brnabić's government, a transparent exponent of Russian interests, Nenad Popovic, did not refrain from negative comments about Montenegro.

In addition to officials and media working for the *Serbian world*, many activists deny Montenegrin identity and the fundamental values of Montenegrin anti-fascism. The most vocal advocates and interpreters of the idea of creating the *Serbian world* are Dragoslav Bokan, director and former leader of the paramilitary formation *White Eagles* (Beli orlovi), as well as historians Aleksandar Rakovic and Cedomir Antic. They are also the most prominent advocates of the unification of Montenegro, Serbia, and the Republic of Srpska into one federal state. For them, Montenegrins are a *people with a mental fallacy*, created on the [fascist model](#), Montenegro is a *fragmented Serbian country* that needs to be returned to [factory settings](#). In those circles, Montenegro is called [modern Montenegro](#) based on hatred towards Serbhood, which will one day return to its roots. Almost identical rhetoric is directed from Moscow towards Kyiv. While Montenegrins are *Djilas' bastards* and a product of communism, Moscow sees Ukraine as Lenin's creation.

Such explicit publicly announced positions are supported by a very serious political, media and propaganda infrastructure that operates in

parallel in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and Montenegro. Political parties of right-wing provenance, organizations, and associations, numerous groups on social networks, following the Russian model, promote conservative, extreme right-wing, anti-globalist ideas in a hypocritical, ideologically superficial, and conflicting way, not flinching from spreading lies, insults, and intimidation of opponents. All attempts to oppose such attitudes are subject to insults in the media and on social networks, with threats and new insults against Montenegro and Montenegrins, all with a passive attitude of state institutions or their campaign activities.

Ukraine and Montenegro are understood as anti-Russian and anti-Serbian creations, with the conclusion that both countries are based and created on hatred, and that they are continuously attacking Moscow, that is Belgrade.

Officials, ideologists, and media that opportunistically favor the Russian and pro-Russian mood see multiethnic, multi-confessional, civil, and anti-fascist Ukraine and Montenegro as threats to their great-power projects – *Ruskiy mir* and the *Serbian world*. Creating a fictitious and artificial enemy justifies aggression and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the guise of protecting their people. In Montenegro, this pattern has been used for a long time.

In Russia, the narrative *Genocide against the Russian people in Ukraine will not be allowed* was constructed on the abuse of the clearly defined term *genocide*, and such confabulation additionally legitimizes aggression. In that action of *protection* during the five days of the war, more civilians were killed than Russians and Ukrainians lost their lives in Donbas in 2021 – a total of 18. During 2020, that number was 26, according to United Nations reports.

We should not forget the activities of the ROC or SOC, which follow a similar model in Russia, i.e. in Serbia and Montenegro. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (RPC-MP) in Ukraine have a similar appearance in the relevant information space of Montenegro and Ukraine. SOC operations are aimed at undermining pro-NATO and pro-Western initiatives, similar to those of the RPC-MP in Ukraine. Both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the RPC-MP deny the existence of the Montenegrin and Ukrainian identities, respectively, and seek to undermine the sovereignty of Montenegro and Ukraine. The Serbian Orthodox Church, with the help of the ROC, is trying to undermine the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC), which it denies even the right to exist, just as the ROC tried to undermine the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine through the RPC-MP.

The subordination and harmonization of the Serbian Orthodox Church with Putin's agenda have been evident in the [statement](#) of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Joanikije from March 13, when he pointed out in his *speech* that *the events in Ukraine were the result of ingrained atheism*, accusing Protestant Europe, from where the evil of atheism and communism came. On that occasion, he did not condemn in a single sentence the Russian aggression on the sovereign country in which, according to him, *the Orthodox people quarreled with each other*, and he directly denied Montenegro, emphasizing that it is someone's projection – *Montenegro is projected to be a small Ukraine*. This formulation overlooks and legitimizes the *Ukrainian scenario* in Montenegro from the key position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.

Unlike the Serbian Orthodox Church, which unconditionally approves Putin's efforts to wipe out Ukraine, Metropolitan Onufrije, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, has twice condemned Putin and [called](#) on him to stop the *fratricidal war*.

Like Joanikije, Metropolitan Amfilohije was one of those who dominantly influenced the national, religious, and political division in Montenegro, and his statement that Montenegrins do not exist and are *communist descendants* or *bastards* will be remembered – a phrase suggesting that Montenegrins were proclaimed a nation only after the Second World War by Milovan Djilas. Apart from the negation of Montenegrins, the late Metropolitan saw Ukraine as an integral part of Russia, with the [words](#): ... *Metropolitan Dimitrije sends him to today's Ukraine, then Russia, and today's Russia, God willing*.

Although they regularly express their attitude towards communism, the ROC and the SOC do not give up on its totalitarian program: the unity of the leader, the Party, and the people are changing with the unity of the authoritarian leader, the Church, and the people – as resistance to the influence of *godless and rotten* Europe, where democracy, liberalism, and free thought came from.

The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in promoting Russian influence was also indicated by the European Parliament in its [Resolution](#) on Foreign Interference in Democratic Processes, adopted on March 9.

**LIKE JOANIKIJE,
METROPOLITAN AMFILOHIJE
WAS ONE OF THOSE WHO
DOMINANTLY INFLUENCED
THE NATIONAL, RELIGIOUS,
AND POLITICAL DIVISION IN
MONTENEGRO**

AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF NAZISM

In recent years, in the rhetoric of the Russian and Serbian political and ideological establishment, it has become common to use the words fascism and Nazism when talking about Ukraine and Montenegro.

This can be understood if we take into account that the terms mentioned in that dictionary do not mean at all what they officially mean in academic circles and the definitions adopted by the relevant conventions. On the contrary, they often have diametrically opposite meanings.

German Nazism arose out of fear that the *Other* (lower nations according to the followers of this ideology) would become similar to them and destroy the *Aryans* from within. That is the key diagnosis of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Nazism in modern Russian-Serbian discourse is different: it does not emphasize the fear of the other, it emphasizes identity. It is believed that Ukrainians and Montenegrins (as well as Belarusians) are the same as Russians and Serbs, so any deviation from that paradigm should be punished and called by its *real name*. In that discourse, there is a fear that they will not become *Others* – that is Ukrainians and Montenegrins, that is, not to step out of the category of compatriots, laid down by the projects of the *Russian* and *Serbian world*, and step towards the Anglo-Saxon world, seeking democracy and emphasizing their uniqueness.

That is the core of Russian-Serbian propaganda about alleged Ukrainian and Montenegrin Nazism. They call everything that is simply Ukrainian or Montenegrin Nazi: language, culture, identity.

It is important to mention another reason for labeling Ukraine as a Nazi state – the neo-Nazi battalion Azov, which profiled itself as such by the crimes during 2014 and the Russian occupation of Crimea. Today, members of Azov are training civilians and participating in the country's defense against aggression. Still, is that enough for Ukraine to be a Nazi state?

Statistics say that one Jew, whose family realized the true meaning of the Holocaust, is at the position of President of Ukraine, with 73% of the votes won in the 2019 elections. During the parliamentary elections of the same year, the right-wing *Svoboda* party won 2.13% of the vote and is far below the threshold.

Also, after the overthrow of Yanukovich and the formation of the government in 2014, neither *Svoboda* nor the *Right Sector*, as right-wing parties, passed the threshold, so the government was formed without the participation of the right-wing. In May 2014, in the presidential election in which Poroshenko won, two ultra-right candidates took less than 1% of the vote.

If we compare these figures with democracies like Germany or France, where the AfD and the National Front have much more success, can we use this logic to treat these two countries as fascist?

Is Ukrainian fascism really a problem? Putin's intellectual guru is Ivan Ilyin, whom he often quotes, and whose works are reprinted and offered for reading to the Russian public and army. After being expelled from the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, Ilyin advocated a Russian version of fascism: a state as an organic community led by an omnipotent ruler, where freedom is interpreted as knowing your place. For Ilyin (and Putin), the purpose of the election is to express collective support for the leader, not to elect him. Putin's longtime ideologist and operative, Vladislav Surkov, also takes the position that elections have a decorative character in Russia,

PUTIN'S LONGTIME IDEOLOGIST AND OPERATIVE, VLADISLAV SURKOV, ALSO TAKES THE POSITION THAT ELECTIONS HAVE A DECORATIVE CHARACTER IN RUSSIA

[claiming](#) that Russia is *a new type of country in which interest in discussions of what democracy should be and whether it should exist at all has been completely lost.*

When Putin talks about the denazification of Ukraine, one should also keep in mind his support for numerous conservative and Nazi movements across Europe, which he has supplied with money since 2014 and provided a strong *media back* together with Vladislav Surkov.

Alexander Dugin, a proponent of fascism, once an obscure academic and marginalized philosopher, and today Putin's court philosopher and author of Russia's neo-imperialist policy, faithfully follows Ilyin's steps, speaking of an independent Ukraine as a threat to Russian civilization and calling for Ukraine's annexation as a key prerequisite for achieving Euro-Asian imperialistic project.

Every so-called truth is a matter of belief. So we believe in what we do and we believe in what we say. And that is the only way to determine the truth. We have our own special Russian truth that you have to accept – Dugin said. The Russian truth is a suitable myth to justify Putin's imperialist vision. Dragoslav Bokan, an ideologist of the *Serbian world*, has an almost identical understanding. In a recent interview for the *Borba* portal, he called for the creation of a *common Serbian narrative* that should represent a national landmark for all Serbs in the region and beyond. The mythical past is incorporated into this understanding as the basis for the current action, and Montenegro is spoken of as the part of the West that

attacks Moscow and Belgrade, which is characterized as *unnatural obscenity*. In both cases, history is a spiritual resource, a source of images and references that should change the present.

Like in Russia, where conservatives, right-wingers, and advocates of fascist ideology have been rehabilitated on state television since 2012, a similar trend is observed in Serbia, where various TV channels, such as *TV Happy*, give space to the aforementioned deniers of Montenegro. Another parallel line that permeates the negative discourse is the understanding of democracy as a Western creation in order to weaken Russia and Serbia. The enmity of the West was not a question of what the Western actor was doing, but of how the West was portrayed. Thus, multiethnic, multi-confessional, civil, and anti-fascist Montenegro is understood as a euphemism for anti-Serbian Montenegro.

OTHER COMMON CONFABULATIONS

Just as the position of official Serbia is that Serbia has never attacked anyone, so the Russians have their own *Russian truth*, which Russian officials, media, activists, and paramilitary groups tirelessly repeat, and it comes from Ivan Ilyin. Ilyin claimed that Russia lives by self-defense, that is, that *every action is only a justified Russian response to the constant external threat of the decadent West*. Every conquest and expansion of the territory was out of the need for self-defense. The adoption of such a paradigm and strategy of *denying the obvious* was evident first through the Kremlin's claims that Russia was in no way involved in the seizure of Crimea, even though Russian soldiers paraded on the peninsula, and then in Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's [statement](#) that Russia *did not attack Ukraine*. Also, Russia *did not take part* in the war in Donbas, in the east of Ukraine. That version is still valid. The people spontaneously rose, and weapons were *taken from the enemy, Russian uniforms were bought in stores*. Two months before the February invasion of Ukraine, we listened to Putin, Lavrov, and their subordinate spokesmen that Russia has no intention of attacking and that the accumulation of troops along the border with Ukraine is its internal affair, regular exercise, and maneuvers - quite similar messages could be heard in 2014 as well. On the other hand, US President Biden and other Western officials have been the subject of ridicule, even in certain pro-Russian media in Montenegro, due to the constant pointing out of the danger of an attack. When it was already certain what was happening, the next level of propaganda was that the Ukrainians shell themselves, which is a narrative taken from our region - Bosniaks attacked themselves in the Markale market.

Also, there are several inconsistencies in Russian-Serbian propaganda towards Ukraine, i.e. Montenegrin – Ukrainian and Montenegrin society is full of nationalists, but the Ukrainian and Montenegrin nations do not exist; there is linguistic assimilation of Serbs and Russians in Montenegro and Ukraine, but the Montenegrin and Ukrainian languages do not exist. At the same time, there are aspirations from Moscow and Belgrade for both countries to be part of the wider Russian and Serbian communities, respectively. In the paradigm of the *Serbian world* and *Russian world*, Montenegrins and Ukrainians are becoming hostages of the foreign policy of other countries. Their uniqueness and individuality are lost and not recognized, but they stand out as phenomena that allegedly threaten Serbs and Russians. At the same time, the alleged threat is used as a justification for Serbia-Russia interference in Montenegro's and Ukraine's internal affairs and attempts to derail their foreign policy course.

IN THE PARADIGM OF THE SERBIAN WORLD AND RUSSIAN WORLD, MONTENEGRINS AND UKRAINIANS ARE BECOMING HOSTAGES OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF OTHER COUNTRIES

UKRAINE-KOSOVO ANALOGY

In his address on February 21, in which he announced the recognition of Lugansk (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), Putin spoke about protecting the local population from genocide, stopping the out-of-control nationalist government, affirming human rights, and mentioning the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia and supporting Kosovo as a contact point and justification for Russia's future moves.

In his view, NATO appears to have devised genocide in Kosovo to legitimize its intervention; now it is doing the same – if the West can redraw the borders for Kosovo, then Russia can redraw the borders of Ukraine and recognize the DNR and LNR in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's understanding of NATO's war against FR Yugoslavia is quite different from that of many Western countries, which see it as a humanitarian intervention to prevent genocide, despite the lack of UN Security Council approval. However, it should be emphasized that NATO started military action only after several months of negotiations with the then

Yugoslav leadership and President Slobodan Milosevic, which failed in Rambouillet.

Yugoslavia was a constant reference point in the speeches of Putin and Lavrov, especially during the *Euromaidan revolution* 2013-2014, which overthrew Ukrainian leader Viktor Yanukovich, a corrupt and nepotistic Russian ally. Putin was convinced that *Euromaidan* was organized by *mindless agents of global sexual decadence whose actions endangered the innocent Russian national organism*, and not the citizens of Ukraine, so the state media continuously broadcast footage of the bombing of Belgrade and other cities. By claiming that all those who oppose politics are in fact foreign agents, Putin has located all responsibility for Russia's

THE KREMLIN ALSO CLEARLY WANTS TO REMOVE ZELENSKY'S GOVERNMENT IN KYIV, JUST AS, IN HIS OPINION, THE WEST, NOT THE PEOPLE, OVERTHREW MILOSEVIC

problems outside his country's borders. The Kremlin's incessant claims about the genocide in Donbas and the creation of a refugee crisis seem like obvious efforts to refer to Western actions in Kosovo. This mapping can also be seen in the Kremlin's military tactics, with strikes on infrastructural and military targets across Ukraine, just as it was the case during the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia. The Kremlin also clearly wants to remove Zelensky's government in Kyiv, just as, in his opinion, the West, not the people, overthrew Milosevic. In achieving that goal, Russia has already surpassed NATO actions in intensity and crimes.

POSITIONING OF ENTITIES IN MONTENEGRO

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further exposed pro-Russian structures in Montenegro. After Russia recognized separatist areas in eastern Ukraine, and after the beginning of Russian aggression, political entities in Montenegro also came forward. A significant number of Montenegrin politicians have sided with the pro-European and pro-Western sides, sharing condemnation of Russia's aggression with Western partners. However, there are a large number of political entities, analysts, and activists who have not done so.

A few hours after both Putin's decisions, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic was the first to speak out in support of Ukraine, condemning acts on Donetsk and Lugansk recognition as independent entities. The President of Montenegro also pointed out that Montenegro reiterates its unequivocal support for the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders. Djukanovic also strongly condemned Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Montenegro also said that Russia's decisions represent a violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the Minsk Agreement, and international law. The MFA strongly condemned Russian aggression.

The Montenegrin Ministry of Defense condemned the reckless Russian aggression. However, their reactions were much rarer and milder compared to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

All opposition parties, as well as, the civic movement URA from the former ruling coalition have also publicly condemned the Russian invasion. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) has proposed a resolution on Russia's attack on Ukraine, which will be discussed in the Parliament. The draft resolution was signed by 44 deputies.

Ukraine was also supported by Deputy Prime Minister and President of the URA Dritan Abazovic. Abazovic assessed that the decisions of the Russian Federation, concerning Ukraine, to recognize the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk regions, violate security and international law. He expressed regret that Russia chose the war in the 21st century. However, it should be noted that only a day later, Abazovic attended a gathering where

almost all well-known Russian exponents in Montenegro who strongly supported Russian aggression were present.

SITTING ON TWO CHAIRS

Since coming to the position of the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Zdravko Krivokapic has presented himself as a pro-Western politician, but also as someone who wants to cultivate friendly relations with everyone, including Russia. Krivokapic, ministers in his government, but also some constituents of the parliamentary majority, have been trying to sit on two chairs from the beginning. In their public appearances, they all declared themselves pro-European politicians and sincere partners of the West who strongly support Montenegro's entry into the European Union. In practice, however, they have largely strengthened Putin's influence in the Balkans and Montenegro.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, Krivokapic and his most loyal supporters from the parliamentary majority, the Democrats, have re-

mained consistent in their continuity of not having a clear position to side with Western partners and condemn Russia's aggression.

Neither Krivokapic nor the leader of the Democrats, Aleksa Becic, spoke out after Putin recognized the separatist republics in Donbas. After Russia launched aggression against Ukraine, Krivokapic and the Democrats posted on Twitter. They did not exactly condemn the Russian invasion. Without mentioning the aggression, Krivokapic

WITHOUT MENTIONING THE AGGRESSION, KRIVOKAPIC AND BECIC'S DEMOCRATS CALLED FOR PEACE AND DIALOGUE, WITH THEIR CHARACTERISTIC REMARK TO STAND TOGETHER WITH THE MONTENEGRIN ALLIES

and Becic's Democrats called for peace and dialogue, with their characteristic remark to stand together with the Montenegrin allies.

Although the Government announced that it would harmonize the policy with the EU towards Russia, the session of the Government, held on March 17, at which the decision on sanctions against Russia was made, was interrupted when the item on the agenda was discussed. Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic demanded that the Government does not make this decision but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as a way to absolve itself of responsibility, after which there was a discussion and the session was adjourned.

This behavior of Zdravko Krivokapic and the Democrats is not surprising if we take into account their closeness to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which is directly responsible for the spread of Russian influence in the country.

This was clearly shown only three days after the beginning of the Russian invasion. The Serbian Orthodox Church organized a procession in Podgorica on February 27 on the occasion of the day of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-bearer Nemanjic, and the highest representatives of Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora) attended the procession. Members of the pro-Russian motorcycle association *Night Wolves* also took part in the procession, as well as members of the *Miholjski zbor*, an association established by the SOC priest Mijajlo Backovic. Apart from the usual religious procession, the procession also had a political connotation. While the flag of tsarist Russia was flying in his background, the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church Joanikije said that the Metropolitan of Kyiv and

APART FROM THE USUAL RELIGIOUS PROCESSION, THE PROCESSION ALSO HAD A POLITICAL CONNOTATION

All Ukraine Onufrije was in a great crossfire and that he hoped to preserve the canonical unity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It should be pointed out that Onufrije is not a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The Socialist People's Party (SNP) has been at the center of attention since the no-confidence vote in the Government of Zdravko Krivokapic. The party decided to support the idea of forming a minority government led by Dritan Abazovic. The entry of the SNP as a pro-Serbian party into the government, which consists of the URA and minority parties, also aims to reduce tensions and divisions in society. However, the SNP's priorities for joining the government, which the Prime Minister says should be pro-European and pro-Western and aimed at unblocking the EU negotiation process, largely coincide with the pro-Russian Democratic Front (DF) program priorities, but also the dismissed government of Zdravko Krivokapic. The priorities of the SNP are the signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the census, and Montenegro's accession to the *Open Balkan Initiative*. None of these priorities are crucial for Montenegro's progress on its European path. In addition to these SNP priorities, their non-condemnation of Russian aggression largely limits the constructive role in the Euro-Atlantic efforts of Prime Minister-designate Abazovic. Even on the tenth day of the war, SNP leader Vladimir Jokovic could not give a *specific answer as to whether Russia was invading.*"

RUSSIAN DESTABILIZATION OF MONTENEGRO

The most direct political exponent of Russian-Serbian activity in Montenegrin political life is the Democratic Front, a coalition that brings together programmatically diverse parties (New Serbian Democracy, Democratic People's Party, and Movement for Change), whose constituents are openly nationalist, pro-Serbian, and pro-Russian. The activities of this political organization are fully harmonized with the official positions of Moscow and Belgrade, and the cooperation is realized in direct contact with various Russian subjects and representatives of the authorities in Serbia.

The Democratic Front did not go public too much about the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The statements of that political alliance and its leaders mostly followed the narrative of the hypocrisy of Western countries and pro-Western parties in Montenegro for calling for respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while they do not respect Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the fact that the DF continues to strongly implement Russian policy in Montenegro is best shown by its current activities. The DF has already organized warning blockades of the country's main roads due to the announcement of the minority government formation. Also, the DF blocks the work of institutions, more precisely the Parliament, along with constant threats of unrest.

Apart from Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, already well known for their ties with Moscow, it is very important to emphasize the role of Strahinja Bulajic, vice president of the New Serbian Democracy, who was elected Vice President of the Montenegrin Parliament after the 2020 parliamentary elections, and who after the dismissal of Aleksa Becic came to the position of Acting President of the Parliament of Montenegro. That position is crucial for the formation of a minority government. Bulajic announced that he would not schedule a session of the Parliament at which a new president of the highest legislative institution in the country would be elected, and subsequently the minority government of Dritan Abazovic as well. With this procedure, Bulajic directly blocks the work of institutions and prolongs the institutional crisis that has been going on for a long time.

Strahinja Bulajic has long been known for his anti-Western and pro-Russian views. In his frequent interviews with (pro)Serbian and Russian media, he demonstrates the rigidity of personal attitudes and the commitment of the political structure he represents. Bulajic did not soften anti-Western and predominantly pro-Russian rhetoric even after being elected to the leadership of the highest legislative body, despite Montenegro's proclaimed strategic commitments, which were confirmed

by the Agreement signed by the leaders of the three winning coalitions immediately after the parliamentary elections.

Bulajic’s views have always been very precisely and consistently harmonized with the views of Moscow and Belgrade. In this regard, he stated that both nations – Montenegrin and Ukrainian were formed under the patronage of the communist authorities in the twentieth century as a product of ideological experiments, claiming that the first Serbian states and the Serbian church emerged in present-day Montenegro, and, in the case of Ukraine, first Russian state and Russian church.

In September 2014, Bulajic was a participant in an international gathering in Moscow dedicated to traditional family values, sponsored by Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeyev, close to Russian

President Putin. Malofeyev was banned from entering Montenegro in 2015 after he was on the list of Russian citizens under European Union sanctions due to the annexation of Crimea. During the past years, Bulajic had frequent communication with Russian representatives, as well as exponents of Russian politics in Montenegro.

As for the current situation, on February 20, 2022, in Danilovgrad, Bulajic met with the Russian intelligence officers of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Viktor Antipin, and Alexander Perishov. On March 4, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro declared Antipin a *persona non grata*. A statement from the Foreign Ministry said that the reason for the expulsion was the *assessment of the relevant security bodies in Montenegro about the activities of the Russian diplomat, which conflict with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*. Bulajic’s actions after taking over the position of the first man of the Parliament directly coincide with Russia’s goals in Montenegro. Russia is trying to destabilize Montenegro and the region, through various types of institutional and extra-institutional blockades. Also through the reduction of any kind of democratization of the country, and disinformation campaigns aimed at introducing divisions and inciting conflicts in society.

The Democratic Front also organized a warning protest on February 24. The leaders of that party and their supporters blocked all key roads in the country as a warning for the possible formation of a minority government. Leaders of the Democratic Front are increasingly threatening/

**BULAJIC’S VIEWS
HAVE ALWAYS BEEN
VERY PRECISELY
AND CONSISTENTLY
HARMONIZED WITH THE
VIEWS OF MOSCOW AND
BELGRADE**

warning about possible unrest and conflict in Montenegro. Therefore, it is indicative to mention that one of the leaders of the DF, Milan Knezevic, speaking about the situation between Ukraine and Russia in the show *Nacisto* on *TV Vijesti*, said that he was concerned that this crisis would reflect on the threat to civil peace and stability in Montenegro, not to mention the economic parameters. That is exactly one of Russia's goals. At this moment, the Kremlin needs to destabilize and prevent the formation of any government in Montenegro, which would bring the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic community. To Russia, possible riots and conflicts in Montenegro, but also in the region, would serve to divert attention from the events in Ukraine.

It should be noted that Russia is currently expanding its influence in Montenegro through organizations and exponents who are not members of political parties. Within that network, there are a large number of non-governmental organizations, associations, and fraternities that are close to the Serbian Orthodox Church. There are also media, which directly place disinformation and propaganda from the Russian media controlled by the Kremlin. Mijajlo Backovic and activist and journalist Igor Damjanovic had a meeting on February 16 at the Russian Embassy in Podgorica. Backovic is considered a person who is a key link between the Orthodox fraternities and the Serbian Orthodox Church. After that, Igor Damjanovic traveled to Russia and is a key man who promotes propaganda in Montenegro, which comes directly from Russian institutions and the media. When it comes to pro-Russian organizations, the *Night Wolves*, the *TvrDOS* and *Stupovi* brotherhoods stand out. These organizations, close to the Serbian Orthodox Church, are the backbone of the protests in support of Russia that have been organized in the cities of Montenegro since the beginning of the Russian invasion. It should be noted that the *Night Wolves* were one of the levers that Putin used during the annexation of Crimea. The cooperation between that ultra-right group and the President of Russia was noticed in Crimea even after 2014. It is obvious that they have now taken on a similar role in Montenegro. The Montenegrin branch of the *Night Wolves* was founded on September 1, 2014, with its headquarters in Podgorica, and the DFC wrote about that organization in a study on Russian influence in Montenegro. Protests in support of Russia are being organized not only in Montenegro but also in Serbia.

MONTENEGRIN MEDIA IN THE SERVICE OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine, the activities of the Kremlin-controlled media and their loyal followers in Montenegro intensified. The daily placement of narratives, propaganda, and disinformation campaigns aims to distort the image of reality and deceive the public. Numerous narratives and series of suspicious information, videos, and photographs that appeared in the Russian state media were also transmitted by certain Montenegrin and regional media.

The Russian propaganda was soon influenced by certain countries individually, and then by the entire European Union, which introduced a ban on Russian state media such as *RT* and *Sputnik*, which is an unprecedented move against the Kremlin's media machinery. The social networks Facebook, Twitter, as well as YouTube platform also joined the sanctions of the European Union.

Unlike the European Union and social networks, which are strongly committed to stopping the spread of Russian propaganda or at least mitigating its effects, it is experiencing its heyday in Montenegro. Although there is no registered editorial office of any of the leading Russian media in Montenegro, that does not diminish the importance and efficiency of Russian propaganda in this area. Information is precisely and consistently harmonized with the views of official Moscow through certain portals and TV stations. In Montenegro, the Russian propaganda mission is primarily performed by the portals *IN4S* and *Borba*, recognized by the spread of narratives and disinformation. In the current situation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, *IN4S* and *Borba* publish articles of questionable content every day, which glorify Russian power and justify war actions.

INFORMATION IS PRECISELY AND CONSISTENTLY HARMONIZED WITH THE VIEWS OF OFFICIAL MOSCOW THROUGH CERTAIN PORTALS AND TV STATIONS

The content that is placed in these media is full of sensationalism, fake news, and disinformation and is in direct correlation with the narratives that are placed in Moscow. The Digital Forensic Center has [analyzed](#) the deceptive narratives that most often come from *Sputnik* or *RT*, and which these portals have widely disseminated. The main and basic postulate of these media reports is that the word aggression or war is not mentioned.

ALL ACTIVITIES OF THE RUSSIAN AND PRO-RUSSIAN MEDIA REMAINED UNSANCTIONED AND BEYOND THE NECESSARY ATTENTION OF THE COMPETENT INSTITUTIONS IN MONTENEGRO

Pro-Russian media prefer the terms *special military operation* or *crisis* in Ukraine, just as the Russian state leadership and Russian state media call it. Content that glorifies Russia and Vladimir Putin, and puts Ukraine and the West in a negative context, further accusing the West of pushing Ukraine into conflict can be found in these media. It insists on Russia's military supremacy to demoralize the Ukrainians, emphasizing their losses or weaknesses, but also points out that the Ukrainians and the government in Kyiv are committing genocide against the population in Donbas. Columnists who write for *IN4S* and *Borba* emphasize the denial of Ukrainian identity and the portrayal of Ukraine as a communist creation, which is similar to emphasizing that Montenegrin identity was invented, invented by communists and that Montenegro is an artificial creation.

However, all activities of the Russian and pro-Russian media remained unsanctioned and beyond the necessary attention of the competent institutions in Montenegro. Although the Minister of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media Tamara Srzentic said that she strongly supports the decision of the European Union to suspend the distribution of Russian media *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* and announced that she would propose to the Government the adoption of Conclusions on Montenegro's EU accession and recommendations to the Electronic Media Agency (AEM) and the Agency for Electronic Media and Postal Services (EKIP) to make a decision in accordance with their competencies following the position of the Government and the Council of the EU, this did not happen. Namely, the Government of Montenegro did not make a decision to suspend the distribution of Russian media, because the Government session was interrupted due to disagreements between members of the Government regarding

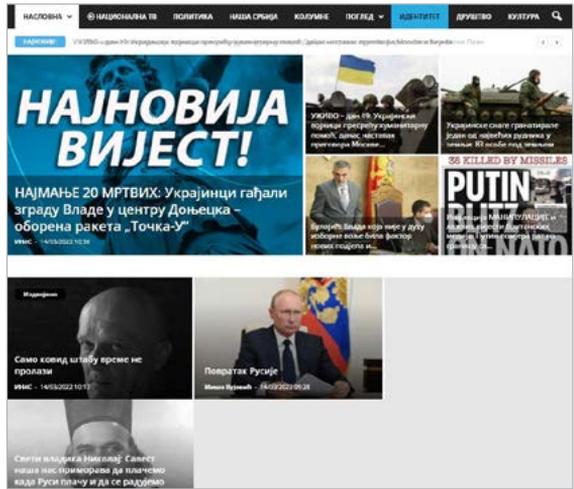
sanctions against Russia. The obvious irresponsible behavior and indifferent attitude of the members of the Government in the technical mandate to manipulate information and the inability of captured institutions and agencies to actively contribute to the continued spread of Russian propaganda and the degradation of Montenegro as a future EU member.

Montenegro has never had a problem with the official channels of Russian state propaganda, such as the EU-sanctioned media, but their informal and unofficial wings – in the foreground *IN4S*, which according to SimilarWeb is the third most-read portal in Montenegro. That media, from the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, inflames hatred, supports war actions, relativizes and justifies aggression and attack on a sovereign state, and targets dissidents. It also provokes and encourages hatred based on ethnicity, which is prohibited in Montenegro by the Constitution and the Criminal Code, as well as the Law on Public Order and Peace, [congratulating](#) the birthday of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladic.

Although the Impressum of *IN4S* states that the editor-in-chief is Felix Savon, the editor of the portal is Gojko Raicevic, who presents himself in public as editor. Raicevic is also an authorized person in the non-governmental organization of the same name, which was founded in 2009, and according to data from the NGO register, apart from him the current rector of the University of Montenegro and president of the Executive Board of Matica Srpska Vladimir Bozovic is among the founders.

Bozovic is considered a key man in Russian and Serbian operations designed to turn Montenegro into a part of the *Serbian world*, and his speech from a conference in Belgrade in 2015 came to the public's attention after he became rector of the University. In that speech, Bozovic said that *cultural conquest was more thorough* and that *the most vital pro-Russian social organism in Montenegro was the Serbian Orthodox Church*, after which he instructed Moscow on how to effectively exert its influence in Montenegro.

The media in Montenegro, which are under the influence of Russia, place news that is tailored to Russian interests, and in that way the public receives unreliable information. Such media reports and propaganda



Screenshot of the title on the *IN4S* portal

activities are aimed at justifying Vladimir Putin’s moves, while on the other hand humiliating Ukraine and its Western partners. The inadequate response of the competent Montenegrin institutions to the actions of these media raises concerns about the possibility of manipulating the Montenegrin public and discrediting Montenegro as a NATO member and a serious candidate for EU membership. That is why the Government of Montenegro and competent institutions must harmonize policy with the European Union, react immediately, suspend Russian media, but also media in Montenegro that are an echo of Russian state media and thus stop distributing content that spreads Kremlin manipulation and supports the aggressor.

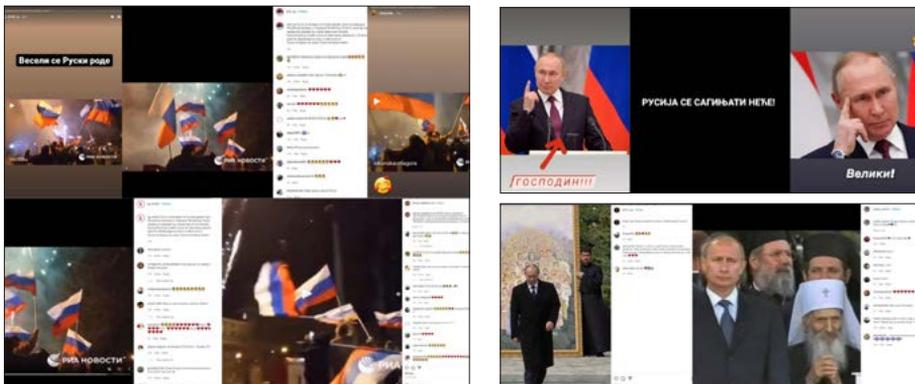
NO. 1 TOPIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS WELL

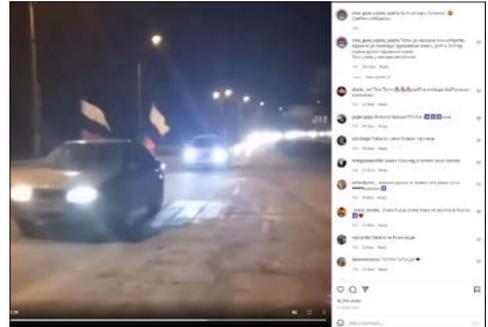
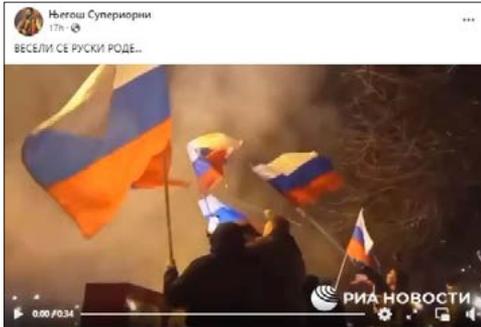
Tensions and conflicts between Ukraine and Russia, the recognition of the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk by Putin, and the Russian aggression of Ukraine are events that have drawn great attention on social networks.

These events have undoubtedly divided the users of social networks – those who welcome Putin’s move and those who strongly condemn Russia’s policy towards Ukraine. The focus of the analysis is on the activities on social networks of those who take the side of Russia, glorify its moves, and congratulate the independence of the self-proclaimed republics, territories in eastern Ukraine that are under the control of pro-Russian separatists.

Particularly active on Instagram were nationalist pages calling for protests organized by Democratic Montenegro and the processions in Montenegro, opposing the minority government formation. On the Instagram

Screenshot of the Instagram page posts (on the left)
Screenshot of the glorification of Russia and Putin (on the right)





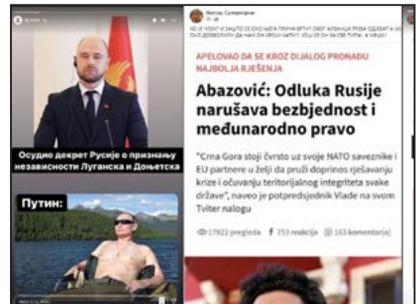
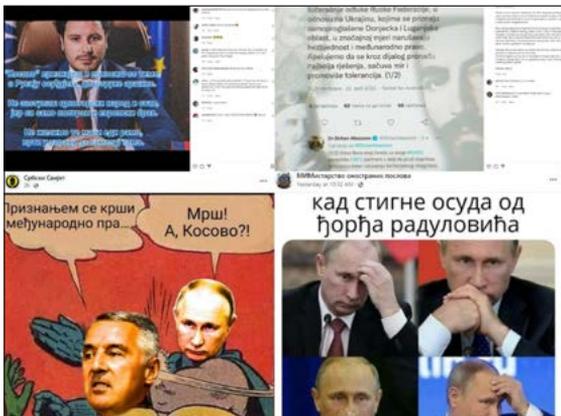
Screenshots of announcements comparing DNR and LNR celebrations with Montenegro

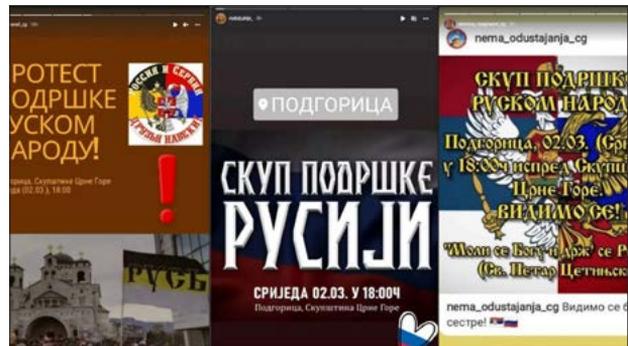
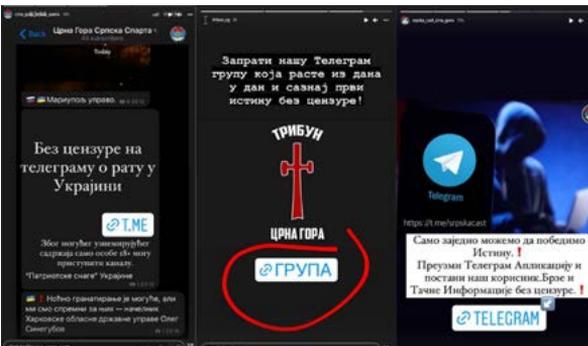
pages *cg_revolt*, *crna_gora_srpska_sparta*, *etnarh_cg*, *obnova_njegoseve_cg*, *otporcg*, *rodoljublje_*, *srbi_cg*, *udar_cg*, footages of the celebrations from Donetsk and Lugansk made by the Russian media *RIA Novosti* were shared.

After Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Djordje Radulovic spoke out and condemned Russia's moves and supported Ukraine, they fell victim to condemnation, insults, and ridicule from nationalist accounts and meme pages on Facebook and Instagram. The hate speech addressed to Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic included insults on a national basis, which additionally encourages the already existing intolerance.

The activities of these pages and accounts were especially intensified after Russia started the invasion of Ukraine. A group of Instagram pages was noticed, which act in a coordinated manner, sharing

Screenshots of posts on Instagram and Facebook concerning Djukanovic, Abazovic, and Radulovic





Screenshot of the invitation to follow Telegram groups (on the left)
Instagram pages' invitations to a protest in support of Russia (on the right)

the same content to provide support to Russia and the brotherly Orthodox Russian people. These pages post information on Instagram every day about the events in Ukraine and the progress of the Russian army. However, due to the increasing marking and removal of propaganda, fake and disturbing content by Instagram, these pages are switching to Telegram. Instagram pages *tribun_cg*, *crna_gora_srpska_sparta*, *srpska_cast_crna_gora*, *srbj_cg*, and *obnova_njegoseve_cg* invite their followers to join their Telegram groups where they can follow the contents of the war in Ukraine without censorship. Some of these Telegram groups have over three thousand members, which further increases the concern about the possibility of manipulating information and spreading Russian propaganda.

CALLS FOR PROTESTS IN SUPPORT OF RUSSIA

After Russia attacked Ukraine, protests in support of Ukraine were held in Montenegro, as well as protests in support of Russia and Vladimir Putin. The mentioned Instagram pages regularly published invitations for protests in support of Russia and the brotherly Russian people, which were organized in Niksic, Bar, and Podgorica. At gatherings that were not large in number, slogans of Russia and its president Vladimir Putin were shouted along with songs of Serbian Kosovo. Members of the national Serbian-Russian organizations Seventh Battalion, Zavjetnici TvrDOS, Stupovi, and a group that calls itself free citizens have given their support to Russia in the war against Ukraine. Those gathered at these protests wore Russian and Serbian tricolors, flags of the Russian Empire, and Chetnik flags with the skulls, but also banners with the inscriptions *Pray to God*, *Stick to Russia*, and *Serbs in Montenegro*, *Russians in Ukraine*. In addition to unequivocal

support for Russia, the United States and other Western countries were marked at the protests as a global evil, which sowed the seeds of discord among Orthodox nations and pushed Ukraine into a fratricidal war. The gathered people told Vladimir Putin that he must not allow fascists and Nazis to do what they intended, but also expressed hope that Putin, as the guardian of Orthodoxy, would return Kosovo to them. It is noticeable, therefore, that the narratives about Ukraine as a Nazi creation and Serbian Kosovo, as well as the narrative that the West is to blame for the outbreak of war promoted by the Russian and pro-Russian media, have moved to the streets of Montenegrin cities.

The Montenegrin branch of the *Night Wolves* motorcycle group also expressed support for Russia at a protest in Podgorica. The leader of the Russian motorcycle club *Night Wolves*, Alexander Zaldostanov ‘The Surgeon’, [shared](#) a video from the protest in support of Russia from Podgorica on his Facebook profile, which shows members of the Montenegrin *Night Wolves* saying: *Brothers, we are with you*. One of the founders of the Montenegrin branch, Vukoman Bulatovic, announced on his Facebook profile that there is no joy in Russia’s progress in Ukraine because every Orthodox in the world is saddened by the war between two fraternal peoples, but there is joy in the strength of the Russian army, which is capable of stopping the imposition of the Western vision of democracy and freedom. In his announcement, Bulatovic places the now well-known narrative that NATO member states wholeheartedly pushed Ukraine into a bloody conflict and suffering. Although the *Night Wolves* claim that their goals are to nurture and preserve the Orthodox faith, humanitarian work, preserve multiethnic harmony and promote healthy lifestyles, their activities indicate that they are part of a network of Russian influence and propaganda used by Russian authorities to achieve Russian foreign policy goals. Their

Night wolves on a protest in Podgorica in support of Russia (on the left)

Velimir Kasalica and Velisa Kadic (left) from a protest in support of Russia in Podgorica (on the right)



message is to *Pray to God and stick to Russia*. At one of the protests held in Podgorica, support for Russia together with the *Night Wolves* was provided by Vladimir Vukovic, a former external consultant of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, headed by Vesna Bratic. The ministry terminated the consulting contract with Vukovic due to persistent ignoring of warnings concerning his behavior on social networks. Vukovic celebrated convicted war criminal Ratko Mladic on his Facebook profile.

Apart from the *Night Wolves*, Velimir Kasalica, head of the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship St. George from Niksic, which DFC has already written about in the study *Russia's Role in the Balkans: The Case of*

VUKOVIC CELEBRATED CONVICTED WAR CRIMINAL RATKO MLADIC ON HIS FACEBOOK PROFILE

Montenegro as of an NGO through which Russia is implementing its influence in Montenegro. Kasalica was at the protest in support of Russia together with the journalist and correspondent of the Serbian portal *Vecernje Novosti*, Velisa Kadic. The analysis of the Facebook account shows that Kasalica could be seen in the company of the mayor of Niksic, Marko Kovacevic, the editor of the pro-Russian *IN4S* portal Gojko Raicevic, the rector of the University of Mon-

tenegro Vladimir Bozovic, and the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

In addition to the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship St. George, the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Peter I, whose main goal is to preserve and improve the centuries-old fraternal relations of the Montenegrin and Russian people. The association announced that all its boards at the municipal and local level in Montenegro give full support to the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine in order to ensure the security of the borders of its state and the people of the Russian Federation. The association strongly advocated for Montenegro not to become a NATO member, while the president of the Association, Gojko Tomasevic, is a member of the Cossack Center for the Balkans with the rank of captain and holder of important Cossack decorations. Tomasevic was awarded the Victory over Fascism Day medal by the Russian Embassy in Montenegro for his work in the Peter I Society. DFC wrote about the activities of association through which Russian influence is exercised in the study *The Role of Russia in the Balkans: The Case of Montenegro*.

When we talk about the Russian aggression on Ukraine and protests in support of Russia in Montenegro, it is important to mention the name Benjamin Striga, whose activities and influence in Montenegro we wrote about in the study on Russian influence. Striga strongly represented the interests of political parties and organizations that fought against Montenegro's

entry into NATO and profiled himself as a great supporter and admirer of the protests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and the late Metropolitan Amfilohije. Although Striga suddenly left Montenegro immediately after the parliamentary elections in October 2016 and attempted terrorism, he continued to propagate through his Facebook profile. This can be seen even now during the Russian aggression on Ukraine. On February 25, the day after the blockades organized by the Democratic Front, Striga [announced](#) on his Facebook profile that people in Montenegro had taken the flags of Russia and the Donetsk People’s Republic *en masse* and organized action against betrayal – against the formation of a pro-NATO government, adding that 11,000 people came out, which is a lot for such a small country. Only a day later, he [wrote](#) that Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic was spitting at protest gatherings in support of Russia and the Donetsk People’s Republic, and spoke of alleged discrimination against Russians (*modest, ordinary people who bring children to sea*) in Montenegro. On March 4, he [announced](#) that Serbia had taken to the streets, followed by Montenegro to express its support for Russia, saying that American-European Nazism would not pass. It is very indicative that Striga is dealing with Montenegro in the days when Russia is invading Ukraine, trying to point out the events in Montenegro through his propaganda publications and falsely present the attitude of the people in Montenegro in relation to Russia.

IT IS VERY INDICATIVE THAT STRIGA IS DEALING WITH MONTENEGRO IN THE DAYS WHEN RUSSIA IS INVADING UKRAINE, TRYING TO POINT OUT THE EVENTS IN MONTENEGRO THROUGH HIS PROPAGANDA PUBLICATIONS AND FALSELY PRESENT THE ATTITUDE OF THE PEOPLE IN MONTENEGRO IN RELATION TO RUSSIA

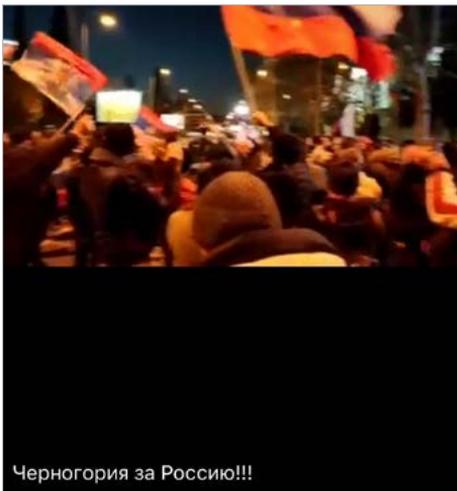
MEN’S STATE (МУЖСКОЕ ГОСУДАРСТВО) IN MONTENEGRO

Despite certain Montenegrin media, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and organizations close to them, Russian President Vladimir Putin can still count on the support of some other groups. One of the loudest – and most bizarre – that has stood up to defend the Russian president and his *military operation* in the neighboring country these days is the *Men’s State*.

It is an online group of racists, homophobes, and misogynists that has been so toxic and destructive in the past that even Moscow officially

banned it in October last year. Russian courts have declared the *Men's State* an extremist organization and banned it from operating, but its leader fled Russia to Podgorica, where the group continued to spread hatred, which has taken the form of celebrating Russia's invasion and spreading disinformation about Ukraine's war.

The *Men's state* started to exist as a closed group on the social network VKontakte. It was founded in 2016 by bodybuilder Vladislav Pozdnyakov, and potential members of the group had to meet strict membership criteria. In the Russian media, they are [connected](#) with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).



In addition to the *Men's State*, which has 62,000 subscribers, the group coordinates its activities through five other channels on the Telegram. The group's leader, Pozdnyakov, has about 83,000 followers on his private channel.

Pozdnyakov has been in Podgorica since February this year, and from his Telegram channel, which has 83,000 members, he reports on the events on a front day by day. However, he often referred to local activities in Montenegro, commenting on protests in support of Russia, which he attended. He also conveys messages of support from local Montenegrin actors to Russia.

It is indicative that the leader of this now pro-Putin extremist organization moved to Montenegro, at a time of socio-political crisis when Russian influence through institutions and beyond is more visible than ever, and members of the pro-Russian DF announce blockades and concerns that this crisis will possibly reflect and jeopardize civil peace and stability in Montenegro.

Screenshots published by Vladislav Pozdnyakov's Telegram Group

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

The aggravation of relations between Russia and the West in the context of the war in Ukraine could, in addition to the former republics of the USSR, and today's members of NATO and the European Union, reflect on the Western Balkans region, which is a traditional neuralgic point of European security. An important segment of the strategy for the return of spheres of influence lost after the Cold War is the pro-Russian forces in the former Yugoslav republics, whose role is often neglected by the international community. Therefore, the best way to understand the role that Russia has in its near abroad and the Western Balkans, but also to project its power in general, is the thesis that Russia sees its neighbors either as enemies or as vassals – vassals being controlled and enemies being politically and militarily intimidated. A possible *gateway* to the region could therefore be Serbia, which, like Russia, did not accept the territorial losses

BY REFUSING TO UPHOLD DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND VALUES, OFFICIAL SERBIAN POLITICS RETURNED TO THE STARTING POINTS OF MILOSEVIC'S POLICIES FROM THE EARLY 1990S AND SIDED WITH RUSSIA'S MURDEROUS AND AGGRESSIVE POLICIES

of the 1990s and which, according to the same pattern, calls into question the independence of Yugoslavia's successor states, taking over Russia's role in Ukraine since 2014.

In that sense, it is possible to draw a very clear analogy between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (USSR in small), i.e. Russia and Serbia as their largest states, where it is assumed that Moscow and Belgrade claim historical right to spheres of influence in their neighborhood.

In the light of the war in Ukraine, Serbia found itself in a delicate position, trying to maneuver between Russian interests and the West. Although it condemned the threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity and supported the adoption of a UN resolution condemning Russian aggression, Serbia is the only European country that, along with Belarus, has not imposed sanctions on Russia. By refusing to uphold democratic principles and values, official Serbian politics returned to the starting points of Milosevic's policies from the early 1990s and sided with Russia's murderous and aggressive policies. The invasion of Ukraine introduced new circumstances, so the

recognizable Serbian position of sitting on two chairs lost its significance, which, if that country does not turn to the West and accelerate European integration, could result not only in a stalemate in its negotiation process with the European Union but also in a kind of deeper political isolation.

The Kremlin, directly and indirectly, through its proxies in the Balkans, undermines the chances of the countries of the region for NATO membership, while it has an ambiguous attitude towards the European Union, promoting the alliance with Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West. Russia, through its key exhibits in the Western Balkans region and proxies for destabilizing other countries, could cause instability with deeper security implications, in order to divert the attention of the West (NATO) to this part of the European continent. In that sense, we should not ignore analysts' assessments that after the attack on Ukraine, Russia can be expected to start creating chaos in the Western Balkans, since the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine can be followed by radicalization in the Western Balkans, primarily bearing in mind Dodik's behavior, which almost led to the point of disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and potentially opened a new front.

CONCLUSIONS

Ukraine's sovereign right to choose foreign policy direction and abandon the narrative of historical and spiritual unity with Russia collided with Putin's concept of a *state-civilization*, defined as a counterweight (liberal, individualistic, materialistic, *rotten*) to the West as the dominant other reality. The result: the denazification of Ukraine and *the protection of the Russian population from the genocide* allegedly carried out over them by the (current) Ukrainian regime.

Russia's aggression on Ukraine caused a dramatic change in the West's approach to Russia and paved the way for the creation of new world order. The *special military operation* (as it is called in the Kremlin) not only did not get the outlines of a blitzkrieg, as planned, but it united the Euro-Atlantic community. NATO has received a new *raison d'être* and an incentive for further expansion.

Russia has been implementing its hybrid strategy in the Western Balkans for years, especially in those countries where Serbia, as a key Russian partner, has strong political and religious influence – Bosnia and Herzegovina where it supports secessionist policies, and Montenegro where Russia through domestic exponents, and Serbian intelligence, paramilitary, parapolitical and church structures is trying to cause instability by creating and exploiting internal crises, stagnation and disfunction of institutions.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and the period of instability, as well as the obvious malign foreign influence on the events in Montenegro, which is affected by ambivalent attitudes and positioning of certain political actors whose activities are in significant discrepancy with proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic principles, there are fears that Russia could launch a new crisis hotspot right here in order to divert attention from its own activities and gain room for maneuver.

At the current stage, Montenegro, without the Government and functional institutions, is open to direct Russian influence and influence on political course through its proxies that cover important positions.

In addition to Montenegrin and neighborhood officials working for the *Serbian world*, many activists deny Montenegrin identity and the fundamental values of Montenegrin anti-fascism. For them, Montenegrins *are a people with a mental fallacy* evolved on the fascist model, Montenegro is a *fragmented Serbian country* that needs to return to *factory settings*. In those circles, Montenegro is called *modern Montenegro* based on hatred of Serbs, which will one day return to its roots. Almost identical rhetoric

Moscow expresses towards Kyiv. While Montenegrins are *Djilas' bastards* and a product of communism, Moscow sees Ukraine as Lenin's creation. Ukraine and Montenegro are understood as anti-Russian, i.e. anti-Serbian creations, with the conclusion that both countries are based and created on hatred, continuously attacking Moscow, i.e. Belgrade.

Officials, ideologists, and media that opportunistically favor the Russian and pro-Russian sentiment see multiethnic, multi-confessional, civil, and anti-fascist Ukraine and Montenegro as threats to their great-power projects – the *Russian world*, i.e. the *Serbian world*. Creating a fictitious and artificial enemy justifies aggression and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the guise of protecting their people. In Montenegro, this pattern has been used for a long time.

WHILE MONTENEGRINS ARE DJILAS' BASTARDS AND A PRODUCT OF COMMUNISM, MOSCOW SEES UKRAINE AS LENIN'S CREATION

It is also very indicative that the leader of the *Men's State*, an extreme right-wing pro-Putin organization, has moved to Montenegro, which is associated with the FSB in the Russian media, at a time of socio-political crisis, when Russian influence through institutions and beyond them is more evident than ever, and members of the pro-Russian DF are announcing blockades and concerns that *this crisis will have reflections on the threat to possible civil peace and stability in Montenegro*.

Unlike the European Union and social networks, which are strongly committed to stopping the spread of Russian propaganda or at least mitigating its effects, it is experiencing its heyday in Montenegro. In Montenegro, the Russian propaganda mission is primarily performed by the portals *IN4S* and *Borba*, recognized by the spread of narratives and disinformation, precisely and consistently harmonized with the views of official Moscow. In the current situation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, *IN4S* and *Borba* publish propaganda articles on daily basis, which glorify Russian power and justify war actions.

The official channels of Russian state propaganda, such as *RT* or *Sputnik*, have never been the problem in Montenegro, but their informal and unofficial wings – such as *IN4S*, which is the third most-read media portal in Montenegro. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, the media has been inciting hatred, supporting war actions, and

functioning as a platform for spreading the Kremlin's war propaganda. Their reporting and propaganda activities are aimed at justifying Vladimir Putin's moves, while on the other hand humiliating Ukraine and its Western partners. The inadequate response of the competent Montenegrin institutions to the actions of this and similar media raises concerns about the possibility of manipulating the Montenegrin public and discrediting Montenegro as a NATO member and a serious candidate for EU membership.

Although the Minister of Public Administration, Digital Society, and Media said that *spreading disinformation and propaganda which tries to justify the attack on Ukraine, should not be allowed* in Montenegro, Montenegrin institutions have not taken adequate measures to realize that. That is why the Government of Montenegro and competent institutions must harmonize policy with the European Union, react immediately, suspend Russian media, but also media in Montenegro that are echoes of Russian state media, primarily *IN4S*, and thus stop distributing content used for spreading manipulations of the Kremlin and stop supporting the aggressor.

We should not lose sight of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has been playing an important role in formulating Montenegro's internal affairs since 2020 and acts in coordination with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, supporting the destruction of Ukraine. The recent words of Metropolitan Joanikije have completely exposed the pro-Russian and anti-state character of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. This was also shown in the case of the recognition of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church when it sided with Moscow, against the Ecumenical Patriarch.

However, the crisis had several positive implications for Montenegro. It exposed the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church as an agent of the Russian world and Serbian world, which was finally recognized by a relevant address such as the European Parliament as a destabilizing factor in the Balkans, operating in symphony with the Russian Orthodox Church and never questioning Putin's neo-imperialist policy.

Apart from the Serbian Orthodox Church, other Putin agitators have come to the fore, who will certainly experience their regression in the context of the dynamics of Western involvement in the region. Russia's aggression will certainly unite all Western powers, both in Montenegro

THE RECENT WORDS OF METROPOLITAN JOANIKIJE HAVE COMPLETELY EXPOSED THE PRO-RUSSIAN AND ANTI-STATE CHARACTER OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN MONTENEGRO

and in the region, and accelerate and ameliorate Euro-Atlantic integration. The current crisis and NATO membership require a clear pro-Montenegrin and pro-European government that will not tolerate the activities of Russian and Serbian agents, as has been the case since December 2020, and will ensure Montenegro's long-term stability as a precondition for future EU membership.

The current global crisis after Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of Montenegro's NATO membership but has shed additional light on internal weaknesses that reflect political, national, and social fragmentation and the continued influx of foreign malign influence. There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine has deepened the polarization in Montenegrin society, and the fact that forces committed to Vladimir Putin's policies are in power (albeit in a technical mandate) further complicates the current political and security issues.

RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION WILL CERTAINLY UNITE ALL WESTERN POWERS, BOTH IN MONTENEGRO AND IN THE REGION, AND ACCELERATE AND AMELIORATE EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

Given the possible negative implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also all the implications of the extensive campaign against Montenegro from Russia and its key partner in the region of Serbia over the past few years, the possibility of further complicating political, security, economic and social opportunity in Montenegro cannot be ignored.

In order to prevent malign influence and negative scenarios that have recently been hinted at by key Russian proxies in Montenegro, an urgent reaction of all democratic structures of society is needed, which base their political activism on European and Euro-Atlantic values and which certainly make up the majority. This would include several urgent moves by the majority in parliament formed after a no-confidence vote in Zdravko Krivokapic's government, which would help stabilize the situation and create the preconditions for an institutional solution to Montenegro's problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Finding ways to unblock key Montenegrin institutions, which, in complex political, security, and economic matters were captured by pro-Russian and pro-Serbian representatives of the current parliamentary majority, is of priority importance when it comes to further dynamics of political and security processes in Montenegro.

2

The formation of the government ready to face the problems of the Montenegrin society in the situation of complicating the security situation on the global level against the background of the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Politicization and issues of secondary importance for vital national interests, such as the signing of the so-called Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, consideration of joining the *Open Balkans Initiative* which is increasingly neglected, census etc., must be pushed to the background so that priority could be given to strengthening efforts to intensify activities that will contribute to Montenegro's decisive step towards EU membership.

3

Urgent harmonization of the policy with the European Union related to the ban on the work of Russian media that spread pro-Russian propaganda, as well as the suspension of media in Montenegro that are an echo of Russian state media, and thus stop the distribution of content that spreads Kremlin's manipulation and supports Russian aggression against Ukraine. In Montenegro, the Russian propaganda mission is primarily implemented by the portals *IN4S* and *Borba*, recognized for the spread of narratives and disinformation that are precisely and consistently harmonized with the views of official Moscow.

4

Emphasize NATO's commitment and provide unequivocal guarantees to allies that Montenegro is a credible and reliable member, which will find institutional ways to overcome internal political and social tensions resulting from political, national, and social fragmentation and the continued influence of external malignancy. This implies a serious and comprehensive reorganization of the intelligence and security sector and the defense sector, which must be established on the principles of protection of strategic national interests of Montenegro, as well as the interests of international organizations to which Montenegro belongs or aspires, primarily NATO and EU. The current crisis emphasizes the importance of having credible intelligence and security structures that will not tolerate the activities of foreign agents and that will contribute to the long-term stability of Montenegro and be a credible partner to international partners and NATO allies.

