

THREATS TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN
MONTENEGRO
INFLUENCE MAPPING



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IMPRESSUM

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INTRODUCTION

Against the background of global political, social, and economic disturbances and the increasingly visible offensive of authoritarian regimes opposed to the Western concept of liberal democracy, which was manifested in its most rigid form by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one can also observe serious ethnic, religious, political and social turmoil in the region of the Western Balkans, which proved to be a very suitable training ground for positioning the Kremlin in the geopolitical competition with the United States of America and the European Union.

Russia has demonstrated its ability to exploit all controversies in this area with a rich history of struggling in turbulent circumstances by maintaining tensions at the regional level and destabilizing situations using various propaganda and intelligence methods. It further complicates the reform plans of the regional countries by encouraging ethnic divisions, strengthening right-wing nationalist structures and politicians, and promoting anti-Western narratives. Dissatisfaction and disappointment with the slow pace of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations also contribute to this. The weakening prospects of EU accession have further slowed down the region's processes, characterized by local leaders' efforts to strengthen their positions and stay in power by combining nationalist and populist rhetoric while declaratively advocating for European integration.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a turning point for global security, the international economy, and global energy infrastructure, and its implications are also noticeable in the Western Balkans region. Right-wing nationalist structures have embraced the pro-Russian propaganda matrix that has been the basis of their actions over a more extended period. It relates to portraying their own nation as a victim of the West while spreading the narratives of clerical-nationalist circles about traditional values inherited by the states belonging to the imaginary pan-Slavic brotherhood. At the forefront are imperial Russia and Serbia as a regional foothold, deeply and fundamentally opposed to the values of Western liberal democracies. The result is intensified political instability in basically all Western Balkan states, with the strengthening of mutual antagonisms with the potential to endanger the already fragile peace and stability in the region.

The key Russian ally in the region is Serbia, which, like Russia, has not accepted alleged territorial losses from the 1990s. It questions the independence and territorial integrity of certain successor states of the former Yugoslavia, using the same Russian revisionist framework. In this sense, an evident analogy can be drawn between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia or Russia and Serbia as their largest states. Both countries assume that Moscow, or Belgrade, has historical rights to spheres of influence in their neighborhood. Serbia is the only European country, along with Belarus, that has not imposed sanctions on Russia, even though it voted for UN General Assembly resolutions in March 2022 condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine and in February 2023 demanding Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine.

Nationalist factions throughout the region, emerging from an ideological synergy of pro-Russian political factors and leaders within the Serbian Orthodox Church, perceive Russia under Vladimir Putin as a protector of the Orthodox people and view the Russian invasion of an Orthodox country like Ukraine as *natural* and within Russia's *historical right*. They also believe that this right belongs to Serbia regarding Kosovo. Putin has cited this precedent to justify the Russian annexation

of Crimea and recognition of the self-proclaimed independence of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

In recent years, Russia has strengthened its military ties with Serbia by selling weapons, aircraft, and air defense systems, while promoting unity among Orthodox brotherly peoples and continuously opposing the independence of Kosovo – which forms the basis for expanding its *soft power* in the region. Such positioning has paved the way for strengthening Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, where significant segments of politics are firmly pro-Russian-oriented. Demonstrating close ties with the Russian leadership is a question of political survival.

Pro-Serbian political entities in Montenegro largely align their actions with Belgrade's policies without questioning sensitive issues, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014. During that period, some of them had frequent communication with Russian officials, so they are expected to accept the spun narrative that Crimea historically belongs to Russia, just as Kosovo belongs to Serbia. In doing so, they overlooked that Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and recognized the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk in 2022.

Referring to the Kosovo precedent, Russia has done the same thing it claims the West did to Serbia by imposing territorial changes through unilateral military force. This narrative is functional even in the current situation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The suffering of the Ukrainian people and the massive destruction of Ukrainian cities and vital infrastructure have not provoked condemnation from pro-Serbian entities in Montenegro, whose ranks mostly relativize Russian aggression. As in most activities of these entities in Montenegro, in this case, there is an evident absence of any desire to align political actions with the national interests of Montenegro and its strategic foreign policy commitments and goals, embodied in NATO membership and the aspiration to join the European Union. Pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro indiscriminately follow the policy of the Serbian government, also following its political maneuvers when it comes to getting closer to the People's Republic of China¹. Recently, China has replaced Russia on the list of key partners of Serbia outside the West, fearing a possible Russian reaction if any agreement on Kosovo that neglects Russia's interests is concluded. This primarily refers to Russia's participation and consent regarding the final agreement between Belgrade and Pristina.

¹ On the occasion of the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Democratic Front congratulated the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China, emphasizing the immeasurable influence of the PRC in achieving political balance in world politics. They emphasized that there should not be dictation from one side, i.e., the aggressive policy of the West, but the creation of a bipolar world, finally bringing the much-needed political balance to the global framework, as a guarantor of lasting peace and dampening Western imperialistic dreams of further fueling war conflicts in numerous sensitive areas of Europe and the world.

POLITICAL CORRIDORS

Numerous problems that burden Montenegrin society have accumulated during the three decades of DPS rule. During that period, although in a completely different external political context, a strong influence of the Russian factor in Montenegro was also enabled. It manifested itself in various forms, from buying real estate to mostly unsuccessful investments in tourism and other industries.ⁱ

During the two countries' growing relationship period, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Democratic Party of Socialists and United Russia to express *the desire to strengthen friendship and expand and deepen comprehensive cooperation between the Russian Federation and Montenegro*.ⁱⁱ

The cooling of relations between Podgorica and Moscow occurred after Montenegro joined the European Union's sanctions against Russia in 2014 (due to the annexation of Crimea) and culminated in the finalization of joining NATO. A direct consequence of these processes was an attempted coup organized by members of Russian intelligence structures in 2016. As a result of such events, Montenegro became fertile ground for various types of Russian influence, which did not lose intensity even after full membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The increased intensity of Russian influence in Montenegro following the invitation to join NATO in 2015 was noticeable through the actions of certain political entities, non-governmental organizations, media, civil activists, and individuals whose political and ideological concept is based on advocating for a change in the country's strategic course and its shift from the Western to the Eastern course. Since then, Moscow's moves have focused on deepening divisions among citizens, expanding its influence in Montenegro, promoting the Kremlin as a protector of Montenegrin citizens who identify themselves as Serbs and support the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) while simultaneously weakening the Montenegrin state and discrediting NATO.

Russian focus on Montenegro was motivated by efforts to prevent further inevitable loss of influence in the Western Balkans. Moscow's imperial ambitions, complemented by the Great Serbian nationalist circles' aspirations, represent an increasingly evident threat to democratic processes in the Western Balkans region. Instead of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, projects that involve redrawing borders are again offered to the region.

The lack of strong and democratic institutions is one of the reasons why Montenegro is particularly vulnerable to harmful influence from Russia and Serbia. During the decades-long rule of the DPS, institutions in Montenegro have been burdened with corruption, party rule, and nepotism. Since 2018, this has also led to stagnation in negotiations for EU membership.

The change of government in the parliamentary elections of 2020 did not bring the expected and substantive changes. On the contrary, already weak institutions were further undermined, and the practice of neglecting state interests continued. Personal, party, and SOC interests were consistently

prioritized in both the 42nd and 43rd Montenegrin governments. Such a socio-political environment in the country has allowed for the expansion and penetration of Russian influence and has gained new momentum since the beginning of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Montenegro has been in a severe socio-political and institutional crisis for some time. There are increasingly frequent signals from relevant European sources about the possibility of blocking the European integration process. Stagnation as an *aggregate state*, in which Montenegrin society has been for months, only benefits Russia and its proxies in the Balkans.

The 42nd Government of Montenegro, formed in 2020, was created from a heterogeneous post-election coalition that brought together almost all right-wing structures advocating for traditionalism and conservatism in their interpretation for a more extended period. This was expressed through their hidden or open advocacy for Montenegro's deviation from the West and turning towards centers in Belgrade and Moscow. The government of Zdravko Krivokapic was formed in the Monastery of Ostrog under the patronage of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which directed the actions of the Prime Minister and his *12 apostles*, as he called them. Although the signed agreement proclaimed a commitment to EU accession, the 42nd Government's actions led to additional delays in negotiating. At the same time, numerous officials appointed in critical positions within Montenegrin institutions openly opposed Montenegro's European perspective. Following the practice of party employment established by the previous government, after the change of power pro-Serbian and pro-Russian proxies gradually took control of the state apparatus and companies that are mostly state-owned.

The Government received a vote of no confidence in the Parliament on February 4, 2022, with the votes of the opposition and the URA Civic Movement, which the political entity justified by the necessity of unblocking negotiations with the EU.

The 43rd Government, given the overall events after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and positive hints from the EU, had a unique chance to contribute to speeding up the process of European integration and ensure an accelerated procedure for Montenegro's entry into the European Union, which was also its declarative priority. However, it turned out that the Government, in which the majority is held by the Socialist People's Party (SNP) and GP URA, did not have the political will to realize that goal. This was also shown by the sudden signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the SOC on August 3, 2022, with constant insistence on the *shady Open Balkan* initiative, which opened up the issue of independent and autonomous action of the minority government and compliance with the national interests of Montenegro. The epilogue of that was the vote of no confidence in Abazović's cabinet on August 19, 2022.

The most direct exponent of Russian-Serbian actions in the political life of Montenegro is the Democratic Front (DF), a coalition that gathers programmatically diverse parties, some of whose constituents act from openly nationalist, pro-Serbian, and pro-Russian positions. The activities of

that political organization are primarily aligned with the official positions of Moscow and Belgrade, and cooperation is achieved through direct contact with various Russian subjects and representatives of the authorities in Serbia.

The leaders of that party do not hide their Russian sentiment, which they particularly expressed in January 2019 during the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Belgrade, when they told him that the majority of Montenegro also sees him as their president, as it was the case during the time of the Principality and Kingdom of Montenegro with Montenegrin people and the Russian tsar.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similar messages were sent by representatives of local self-governments from Montenegro, members of the Democratic Front, during the session of the Committee on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region of the Parliament of Serbia, on December 13, 2022, in Belgrade, where, among other things, they said that *Serbia is the mother country of all Serbs in the region*. A particular focus is placed on the issue of the population census in Montenegro, which is interpreted in the public discourse and from high-level addresses in Serbia as an essential step in implementing the idea of a *Serbian world* and solving the *Serbian issue*. In addition to the announcement of the involvement of official Serbia in the census², they spoke about the goal – to have part of the current Montenegrins declare themselves as Serbs, but also a plan to achieve this even before the census itself.^{iv}

The fact that Serbia is organizationally and financially strengthening its activities in Montenegro due, first of all, to the population census and the upcoming presidential (potentially and parliamentary) elections was indirectly confirmed at that session by an official of the Government of Serbia, the French extreme right-winger Arnaud Gouillon, through the information that the Administration for cooperation with the diaspora and Serbs in the region, will allocate three times more money to Serbian organizations from Montenegro than in 2022 this year– about 4,270,000 euros.

The significance of the census in Montenegro has been emphasized on several occasions by Aleksandar Vučić^v, who has been announcing the reunification of the two countries since 2006.^{vi}

The session of the Committee on the Diaspora, which was chaired by Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski from the right-wing party *Zavetnici*, was attended, in addition to Montenegrin public officials, by Emilo Labudović from the Serbian House (*Srpska kuća*), Momčilo Vuksanović from the Serbian National Council and IN4S portal editor Gojko Raičević.^{vii}

² The president of this parliamentary committee, Milica Đurđević - Stamenkovski, said during the committee: *We will do our best to create an atmosphere in which the citizens of Montenegro will be able to express themselves as they feel*. The involvement of Serbia in the census in Montenegro was also confirmed by the deputy president of this Committee, Milimir Vujadinović (SNS), in a statement: *At the level of authority that we exercise today in the Assembly, we will certainly, as a Committee, be at disposal as part of the support in that work... The State of Serbia will certainly stand behind it*.

The Serbian House in Podgorica is one of the larger projects of the Government of Serbia in Montenegro, in which it invested 3.4 million euros from the state budget. Although founded in March 2017, it was officially opened in February 2019 and registered in the Central Register of Business Entities of Montenegro as a limited liability company. Its director is Emilo Labudović, an active advocate of the Serbian world and a former representative of the Democratic Front in the Parliament of Montenegro. Numerous organizations are located and operate within the Serbian House: Matica srpska, Institute for Serbian Culture, the editorial office of the Serbian South magazine, the Association of Writers of Montenegro, IN4S, Srpske novine, Serbian Radio, the Serbian Literary association, the Serbian Cultural Club Zavjet.^{viii} Its founders are 29 persons registered in the register as owners of 3.44% of shares in that company. Among them are numerous officials and activists of pro-Serbian political parties in Montenegro. In August 2020, the Serbian House was opened in Pljevlja, and in December 2022 in Berane, the construction financed mainly by the Provincial Government of Vojvodina.³

³ The Provincial Government of Vojvodina, through the Secretariat and the Fund of the Government of Serbia, allocated 12 million dinars, i.e. a little over 100 thousand euros, from the current budget reserve for, as announced, aid and support for the project of preserving the identity of the Serbian people in Montenegro, i.e. the opening of the Serbian House in Berane - which will be the headquarters of Serbian organizations in that city. However, according to Pobjeda's knowledge, the entire project with all the equipment will cost something around 200 thousand euros.

**UNITED IN
RELIGION AND
ACTIONS: SOC
AND ROC**

The ideological and value framework for all pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political subjects, organizations, and associations is provided by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) based in Belgrade. At the moment, it represents the only foreign policy instrument of the state of Serbia, given the fact that its religious jurisdiction extends beyond the Serbian state borders and covers the territory from the aspect of the implementation of the *Serbian world* project, particularly areas of interest in Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The SOC achieved significant success in the process of desecularization of society in Montenegro. Since 2020 and the initiation of protest processions due to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the SOC actively participates in making key political decisions, with an undisguised role in personnel combinatorics during the formation of the 42nd Government of Zdravko Krivokapić. Issues of interest to the SOC had a decisive impact on the work of the 43rd Government of Dritan Abazović, despite the signed coalition agreement based on the European agenda.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has become a critical factor that significantly determines the activities of pro-Serbian political parties, organizations, and associations in Montenegro, with increasingly frequent appearances of dignitaries having political connotations. That religious organization affects the change in the character of society from civil to theocratic, along with the destruction of the social system and the rehabilitation of patriarchal, provincial culture, under the auspices and with the active participation of the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a general ideological confusion was created, along with attempts to revise the history of the 20th century and rehabilitate the Chetnik movement from the Second World War, trying to present it as anti-fascist.

Estimating that the SOC could be one of the most effective instruments for spreading its interests in the Western Balkan region and referring to the strong historical ties and brotherhood of the Orthodox peoples, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) pays great attention to the development and strengthening of relations with the SOC, which concerning the state leadership in Belgrade has a similar subordination relationship as the ROC towards the Kremlin. Therefore, the jurisdiction of the SOC in several Western Balkan states (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro) is important from the aspect of spreading Russian geopolitical interests and soft power in the region.

As you know, the Serbian Church is the closest to our Church in terms of culture, spiritual tradition, and devotion to the unity of the Orthodox Slavs. Serbs have never been on the side of Russia's enemies, that is a historical fact, and we appreciate it, dear Bishop. Even now, being in the center of Europe, you are in a difficult situation. That's why I want all of us to preserve our unity, especially the unity of the Serbian and Russian churches, which is based on the unity of our spiritual life, the unity of our saints, and most importantly, the unity of our histories - Patriarch Kirill during the visit of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and Littoral to Moscow, October 18, 2022.

The SOC was continuously involved in anti-NATO, and anti-Western rallies, protests, demonstrations, and campaigns for parliamentary and local elections. It was *vocal* about almost every political or social issue, violating the principle of secularism and constantly promoting the Russian narrative. The events during and after 2020 showed that the influence of the SOC in Montenegro is very strong. For years, public opinion surveys have ranked the Serbian Orthodox Church as an institution at the top regarding citizens' trust.^{ix}

There is a clear parallel in the attitudes of the SOC and ROC towards the Orthodox churches of Montenegro and Ukraine. Both the SOC and the ROC deny the existence of the Montenegrin and Ukrainian identities. Therefore, the Montenegrin and Ukrainian nations and states promote the great state ideas of the *Serbian* and *Russian* world. The highest dignitaries of the SOC are supporters of the thesis that the Serbian people in Montenegro are in a more difficult position than during the Ustasha regime in the NDH - Independent State of Croatia (1941–1945), continuously denying Montenegro its statehood, and independence and particularly the existence of the Montenegrin people, calling it the *Serbian Sparta*.^x Other similar positions of church dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church will be remembered, according to which Montenegrins do not exist but are *communist spawns or bastards who were declared as a nation after the Second World War by Milovan Đilas*.

Unlike the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, loyal to the ROC, which, in May 2022, severed ties with Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine, the SOC remained subordinate and aligned with Putin's agenda in Ukraine. This can be clearly seen through the performances of Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and Littoral. In mid-October 2022, during his stay in Moscow at the International Russian-Serbian Festival of *Serbian Consolation to the Russian Heart*, he stated that he was praying for peace, for overcoming temptations, and for a just solution in, as he said, *these temptations that have afflicted the Russian Orthodox the church, the Russian people and the Russian state*^{xi}. Half a year earlier (on March 13, 2022), he pointed out that the events in Ukraine were the *consequences of godlessness that had taken root*, accusing Protestant Europe from which the *evil of godlessness, atheism, and communism came*. He did not condemn the Russian aggression against a sovereign country where, according to him, *the Orthodox people were fighting with each other*. He also directly negated Montenegro, emphasizing that it is someone's *projection of small Ukraine*. Such a formulation from a critical position in the SOC predicts and legitimizes a possible Ukrainian scenario in Montenegro. On March 27, 2022 (three days after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine), the Serbian Orthodox Church organized a procession in Podgorica on the occasion of the day of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-flowing Nemanjić. The highest representatives of Democratic Montenegro attended the event, members of the pro-Russian motorcycle association *Night Wolves*, as well as members of the *Miholjski zbor*, an association founded by the secretary of the Diocese of Budimlja-Nišići, Mijajlo Backović. Apart from the usual walk, the procession also had a political connotation, with the waving of the flag of Imperial Russia.



Metropolitan Joanikije in front of the flag of Imperial Russia

The SOC openly sided with the Russian Orthodox Church when the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided on October 11, 2019, to recognize the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. That dispute continues to divide the global Orthodox community. Just as the SOC supports the ROC in the case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the Russian Church supports the Serbian Church regarding the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

Although the SOC and the ROC have a clear negative attitude towards communism, their actions are, to a significant extent, identical to its totalitarian program: the unity of the leader, the Party, and the people have been replaced by the unity of the authoritarian leader, the Church, and the people - as a methodology of resistance to the influence of *godless and rotten* Europe.

The synergy between the actions of the ROC and the SOC also carries a risk for European security. The SOC is used as a tool for destabilization and participation in the political life of certain countries, which is part of the tactics that enable the Kremlin to achieve its goals in the Balkans, hiding behind the mask of religion, spirituality, and the protection of Orthodox values. In the context of the negative implications of the SOC's actions on the national interests of Montenegro, it is indicative that the stopped operation of the National Security Agency of Montenegro, in cooperation with partner services, revealed (September 2022) the actions of the SOC priest of Russian nationality, the abbot of the Dajbaba monastery, Danilo Išmatov, contrary to the national interests of Montenegro, who was subsequently banned from entering the country.^{xii}

The European Parliament also indicated the role of the SOC in promoting Russian influence in its Resolution on foreign interference in democratic processes, adopted in March 2022.⁴

⁴ The resolution expresses the concern of the European deputies about the attempts of the Orthodox Church in countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the Republic of Srpska entity, to promote Russia as the protector of traditional family values and strengthen relations between the state and the church, more at - https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.pdf

POLITICS INSPIRED BY RELIGION

The SOC provided logistics to pro-Serbian political parties and coalitions, and the clergy's involvement in political processes and political engineering resulted in the formation of the so-called expert government of Zdravko Krivokapić. Although the 42nd Government was presented to the Montenegrin and international public as an expert government, with the announcement that its work would be guided by professional principles based on the principle of meritocracy, it turned out that its priorities and dynamics of activities were aligned with the interests of the SOC in Montenegro.

The influence of the SOC is also visible through the actions of the 43rd Government of Dritan Abazović, which enabled the adoption of the Fundamental Agreement, a document that, due to the non-transparency of the procedure that preceded its signing, caused numerous controversies and resulted in the fall of Abazović's Government. The contract, which the relevant organizations consider to be contrary to the Constitution of Montenegro^{xiii}, was made without prior expert discussion. According to the *EU Report on the Progress of Montenegro*, it caused increased tensions in society.^{xiv}

The agreement, among other things, recognizes the Serbian Orthodox Church as a legal entity six centuries longer than it has in its home state of Serbia. It is also recognized as extraterritorial concerning Montenegrin state authorities, which prevents access to SOC facilities without the consent of church authorities. The document further obliges the state to register immovable properties in the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (without proof of ownership). It opens the possibility of introducing religious education in public educational institutions.^{xv}

With full responsibility and heightened caution, I accept that the Fundamental Agreement, when we conclude it, will have a legal force greater than local laws - the statement of SOC patriarch Porfirije, given to Belgrade Politika in January 2022.^{xvi}

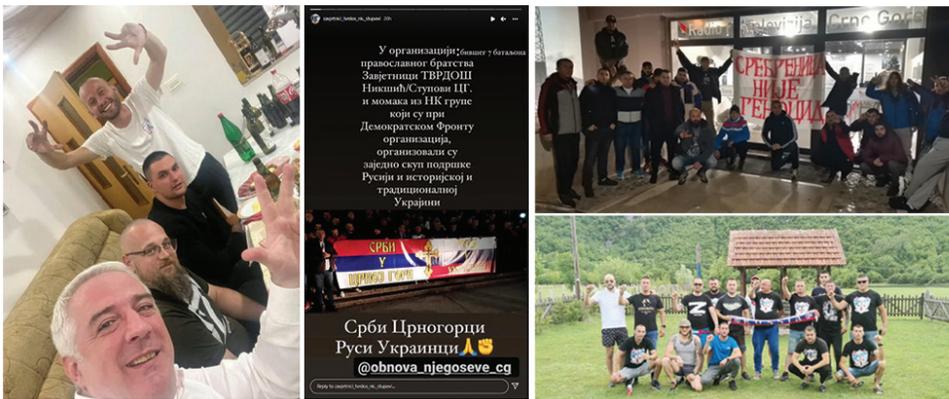
Like the idea of the *Serbian world*, the methodology of the SOC in Montenegro was borrowed and adapted. Moscow used the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which was subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Moscow, to exert influence over internal affairs in Ukraine, including interference in election processes. Like the Kremlin, Belgrade also uses the SOC to realize its interests in Montenegro. As a factor of unity and homogenization, it demonstrates its influence through active participation in political processes from 2020. After the change of government in 2020, government representatives at the state and local level, as well as their staff who manage state-owned companies, donated over one million euros to the Serbian Orthodox Church. The funds are intended for various projects of that religious organization, including money for establishing a religious grammar school, which controversially received a work license.^{xvii} In return, the SOC awarded individuals with decorations.^{xviii}

According to the media, since Aleksandar Vučić came to power in 2012, the Government of Serbia has provided financial assistance to the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and Serbian organizations with a total of around 11.6 million euros.^{xix}

The SOC is an opponent of democracy, liberalism, and universal human rights, which has been continuously demonstrated through the public appearances and rhetoric of dignitaries of that religious organization.⁵

FOR THE PURPOSE OF CLERICALIZATION

The emergence of *grassroots*⁶ conservative groups opened the door to the abuse of religion and the formation, under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Church and with the active participation of certain priests of this religious organization, of new *patriotic and humanitarian* organizations and associations with a strong national and religious identity. Such associations were established according to the matrix of already established similar organizations in Serbia, which have undergone numerous transformations since 2000, moving from bans and prosecutions to the legalization of their activities within political parties with parliamentary status. SOC does not hide its connections with such associations.^{xx} Some of them, only at first glance, seem humanitarian. Still, when their attitudes and activities are examined and contextualized, their agenda is revealed based on right-wing ideology, aggressive spirit and loyalty to Russia.



Left: Member of Parliament Jovan Vučurović with members of the *Nikšićani* group, **In the middle:** Instagram account of the *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić* group, **Top right:** Protest of the *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić* group in front of RTCG due to the decision to broadcast the film *Quo vadis, Aida?*, **Bottom right:** Members of the *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi* provide support to Russia

⁵ The highest ranks of the SOC in Montenegro expressed their opposition to the Montenegro Pride and on October 7, 2022, organized a *prayer for the salvation of the family and Christian marriage*. The SOC called the manifestation of the LGBT population a public preaching of immorality, aimed directly at the destruction of families, homes and the Church of God.

⁶ An initiative that is formed without the participation of large lobbying companies or corporate sponsorship (at least initially), but with the power of engaged citizens, through spontaneous organizing and activism.

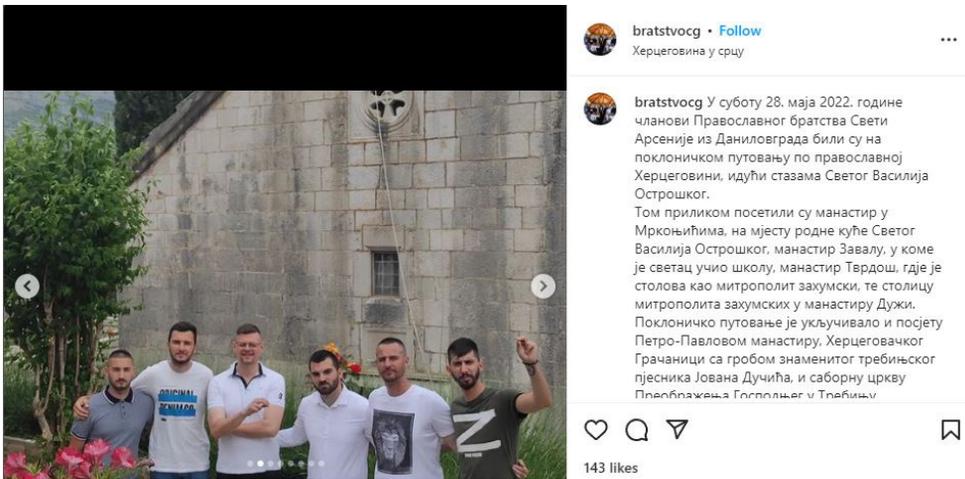
Protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion - the so-called religious processions hatched a strong and well-organized structure of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian right-wing movements, groups, and organizations that base their activities on anti-Western and pro-Russian values, with clear elements of religious and national conservatism. Numerous groups emerged from the procession movement, and some turned to politics. Former Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić emerged from them and a number of ministers from his government. Others, like the Orthodox brotherhoods, describe their mission as patriotic and humanitarian, while they operate with the iconography characteristic of right-wing groups. DFC wrote about this in more detail in the analysis *Who governs our extreme right-wing?*^{xxi}

The *Stupovi Orthodox Brotherhood*, *Miholjski zbor*, *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić*, *Čojstvo*, and the *Society of Russian-Serbian Friendship Sveti Georgije* stand out for their visibility and activity. In technical mandate, the Government of Zdravko Krivokapić helped some of these associations financially.^{xxii} In the ranks of these organizations, several individuals served long prison sentences, having criminal records.^{xxiii} The Police Administration announced that among the members of the NGO *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi*, there are persons of security interest who are also registered as perpetrators of the most severe crimes.^{xxiv}



Andrija Mandić and Jovan Vučurović in the company of members of the *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi*

It is also necessary to mention the *Brotherhood of the Orthodox Youth of Montenegro (Bratstvo pravoslavne omladine Crne Gore)*, which is part of the SOC in Montenegro and operates as part of all its dioceses on the territory of Montenegro, as stated on their Instagram account. Representatives of the Brotherhood are frequent guests in Russia. They attend various events organized by the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the International Russian-Serbian Festival of Serbian Consolation for the Russian Heart, held in Russia in October 2022, where Metropolitan Joanikije also spoke.^{xxv} The Brotherhood also cooperates with Arnaud Guillon^{xxvi}, who is in charge of cooperation with the diaspora and Serbs in the region within the Government of Serbia and who previously worked in the extreme right-wing *Identitarian Bloc* in France, whose activities are prohibited.



Members of the *Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth* with the symbol of Russian aggression against Ukraine

Pro-Russian gatherings were organized in Budva on August 29, 2022, and in Podgorica on September 1, 2022, in the organization of *Miholjski zbor* (governed by the secretary of the Diocese of Budimlje-Nikšić, Mijajlo Backović), the Association of Journalists of Montenegro and the *IN4S* portal. Igor Damjanović, a correspondent of *IN4S* and Serbian tabloids from the battlefield in Ukraine, spoke at them.^{xxvii} On February 16, 2022, Mijajlo Backović and Igor Damjanović met at the Russian Embassy in Podgorica^{xxviii}, and Damjanović traveled to Russia soon after, after which he profiled himself as a prominent media promoter of Russian war propaganda in Montenegro and Serbia.

As DFC previously wrote, in 2016 in Kotor, Mijajlo Backović attended the formation of the so-called Balkan Cossack army.^{xxix} On that occasion, uniformed Russian officers and motorcyclists from the *Night Wolves* paraded through Kotor, along with the members of *Miholjski zbor*, *Zavjetnici Tvrdoš*, and *Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi*. Backović, a holder of the award of the Airborne unit of the Army of the Russian Federation, has been actively participating in political life in Montenegro in recent years. In June 2020, he was recorded coordinating a political protest organized by the Democratic Front in Budva. In August of the same year, just before the parliamentary elections, he cursed all the voters of the then-ruling coalition for adopting the Law on Freedom of Religion.^{xxx} At the beginning of October 2022, a ceremony in Danilovgrad commemorated the Holy First Martyr Tekla Ravnoapostolna. It was attended by the ambassador of the Russian Federation in Montenegro, the chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Montenegro, and some members of the Parliament of Montenegro. At the ceremony, in addition to Mijajlo Backović, there were also persons in the uniforms of the Cossacks' Union, wearing one of the symbols of Russian aggression against Ukraine - the V mark. By the way, Backović was the only one sitting during the Montenegrin national anthem at the Nikšić Liberation Day ceremony on September 18, 2022, which is why misdemeanor proceedings were initiated against him. He committed the same offense in Budva during the Day of the Municipality celebration in 2019.



Mijajlo Backović with members of the Cossack Association in the uniforms

Given that extreme right-wing groups share the positions of the SOC on many issues, further clericalization of Montenegrin society may contribute to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the strengthening of right-wing extremism, especially if it is taken into account that certain parts of the SOC support ultra-right organizations, some of which were formed under the auspices of church dignitaries in Montenegro.

SECULAR ACTIVITIES OF THE SOC

The decades-long activity of the SOC in Montenegro was marked by systematic violations of legal regulations and illegal actions, to which the Montenegrin state authorities, as a rule, and regardless of the structure of the government, did not have an adequate response.

The dispute over the Law on Freedom of Religion initiated a discussion about the attitude towards cultural heritage and how sacred buildings are managed, about re-building, renovations, and devastated heritage in Montenegro.

In 2005, the Commission of the Ministry of Culture for determining the state of the immovable cultural heritage of Montenegro prepared a report entitled *The State of the Cultural Heritage of Montenegro*. The report stated that two-thirds of religious buildings were devastated, i.e., 71% of such installations (representing cultural monuments in Montenegro) were constructed illegally and

unprofessionally. Among them are 80% of facilities managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The harm of works introducing elements neither historically nor culturally characteristic of Montenegro was emphasized. They try to change these areas' historical facts and cultural matrices by creating new material evidence. Most of these facilities were and have been under the permanent protection of the state of Montenegro.^{xxxix}

The most explicit example of the devastation of Montenegrin's cultural and sacred heritage is the monastery complex Ostrog, whose original appearance has been significantly changed. We also have examples of destruction and illegal construction at the Podlastva Monastery in Grblje, the Monastery of St. Luka in Župa Nikšićka, the Dajbabe Monastery, and the Reževići Monastery in the municipality of Budva.

In addition to the problem of the devastation of cultural heritage and the state's inability to sanction violations of the Law on Protection of Cultural Heritage, the activities of the SOC in Montenegro are also linked to a years-long business with real estate and the establishment of companies. On the other hand, the issue of non-payment of taxes has been raised since, in February 2020, its tax debt amounted to several million euros^{xxxix}. Also, due to the alleged procurement of weapons before the parliamentary elections in 2020, the Supreme State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica opened a case.^{xxxix}

**PROPAGANDA
AND THE
REALITY
MODELLING**

In addition to the battlefield on the territory of a sovereign European state, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, another front was opened – a media front long prepared to relativize reality and create a haze between fact and fiction.

Russian propaganda was soon responded to by certain countries, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, and then by the entire European Union, which banned Russian state media such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, which is an unprecedented move. At the same time, social networks made it impossible for Russian media to monetize their content.

The presentation of Russia in Serbian media is one of the most critical elements in Serbia's decade-long wandering regarding its foreign-political positioning, which has strong reflections in the energy and security sectors. The pro-Russian campaign in the Serbian media has been ongoing since 2008. It is based on information about the importance of Russia in the international framework and the need for Russian-Serbian cooperation. Pro-regime tabloids and portals, as one of the key instruments of the current regime in Belgrade since the coming to power of the Serbian Progressive Party in 2012, have been writing about NATO exclusively in a negative context, with relatively neutral reporting on the European Union, but a dominantly anti-Western and mostly pro-Russian narrative. Under the conductor's stick of Aleksandar Vučić, the propaganda machinery improved the disinformation system, which included numerous pro-government tabloids and television stations, several with national frequency. The pro-regime media in Serbia report on Russia and Putin in a positive context. Their content does not include Russian criticism of the Serbian ruling elite, with the clear aim of suggesting the alleged closeness of the two countries and supporting the narrative of strong relations between Serbia and Russia. In this way, public opinion in Serbia is systematically modeled, and the citizens, who mostly have a very negative attitude towards NATO due to the intervention in the FRY in 1999, see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as another in a series of manipulations by NATO, which is trying to thwart Russia in *achieving its historical rights*. It is illustrative that 64% of the citizens of Serbia see the West – USA, NATO, and the EU – as the actors most responsible for the war in Ukraine^{xxxiv}. In comparison, 40% of the citizens of that country would be happy if Serbia abandoned the EU path and formed an alliance with Russia.^{xxxv} The propagandistic opportunism of the pro-regime media in Serbia, which is followed in step, if not with more enthusiasm in the pro-Russian and pro-Putin agitation, by certain media in Montenegro, contributes to the fact that it is difficult to distinguish the extent of real Russian influence on the Serbian and Montenegrin media scene.

However, even a superficial analysis of the reporting and influence of the Belgrade branches of *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* suggests caution when drawing conclusions about the direct influence of Russian state propaganda. The fact that some Serbian and Montenegrin media indiscriminately convey inappropriate and unprofessional content should be considered. The fact that pro-Russian propaganda in the Serbian media space has neither geographical nor language barriers is dangerous, so it is not aimed only at the local but also at the regional audience.

If I were a neighbor of Serbia and observed the obvious admiration for Putin, a man who attacked a neighbor twice (Ukraine), another neighbor once (Georgia), and never left the occupied territory of a former neighbor (Moldova) - I would wonder if that could make it think about imitating Putin's moves, and not just expressing admiration for him..." - Michael Kirby, long-time US diplomat and former ambassador to Serbia.

Although there are no registered official Russian media in Montenegro, pro-Kremlin propaganda is present, given that most pro-regime Serbian media outlets place their content in the public space of Montenegro.⁷

Only on April 20, 2022, Montenegro agreed with the European Union's foreign policy regarding sanctions against Russia by banning the broadcasting of *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*. Nevertheless, despite the decision of the Council of the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), the mentioned portals can be accessed unhindered from Montenegro. The Government's decision applies to any means of broadcasting, such as cable, satellite, IP-TV, Internet service providers, platforms or applications for video sharing on the Internet. AEM came into the spotlight in October 2022 due to the decision of its Council to grant *TV Adria* the status of a national broadcaster, despite the fact that Bratislav Stojković owns it. At the request of the National Security Agency, he was banned from entering Montenegro for trying to influence the election process in Montenegro.^{xxxvi}

In addition to *Sputnik Srbija*, the *Russia Today Balkan* portal, with content in Serbian and headquartered in Belgrade, will be available to the public in the region from November 15, 2022. Although a candidate for EU membership, Serbia did not decide on sanctions against Russia. Instead, it allowed the Russian state propaganda media to operate from its territory and spread in the region. Despite the reactions and criticisms of European officials, *RT Balkan* started its program with the slogan *Kosovo is Serbia*, announcing that it will provide an *alternative perspective on regional and world events*, with a plan to launch a television program by 2024. The former Minister of Internal Affairs and the current director of the Security Information Agency (BIA) Aleksandar Vulin^{xxxvii} said that official Belgrade would not ban any Russian media, which, due to the high readership of those media and tabloids in Montenegro, opens the door to anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation in the Montenegrin information space. The increased polarization in Montenegrin society and the interference of politics in the media and vice versa represent fertile ground for numerous disinformation campaigns and media manipulations.⁸

⁷ According to the data of the specialized website Similarweb, the Serbian tabloids *Kurir* and *Blic* were the third and fourth most read media portals in Montenegro in December 2022

⁸ In the first five months of the war in Ukraine, the media and social networks in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro published more than 1,500 inaccurate and manipulative claims about the war. <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Izvestavanje-u-regionu-Najmanje-1-500-dezinformacija-za-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-1071>

After a short break after the end of processions and the passing of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the Russian media are turning to Montenegro again, this time focusing on the presidential elections. The Russian news agency TACC published, on December 20, 2022, Oleg Bondarenko's statement that the Russian factor will influence the elections abroad in 2023, where, among other things, the presidential elections in Montenegro are mentioned^{xxxviii}, after which the Belgrade tabloids followed up on the mentioned topic.^{xxxix} The fact that such a direct announcement of the interference of the Russian factor in the upcoming elections passed under the radar of the media, as well as the authorities and the opposition in Montenegro, is worrying.

The most significant role in promoting pro-Russian and pro-Serbian narratives in Montenegro is played by the unregistered portal *IN4S*. According to the editor-in-chief Gojko Raičević, that portal, apart from Belgrade, has its editorial offices in Novi Sad, Nikšić, Pljevlja, Sjeverna Mitrovica, and Donbass. The owner and editor-in-chief of the portal is Gojko Raičević, the head of the NGO No to War - No to NATO (*Ne u rat – Ne u NATO*), which led a campaign against Montenegro's entry into NATO. According to the data from the register of non-governmental organizations, *IN4S* was founded in 2009. Raičević is also one of the founders of the Serbian House (*Srpska kuća*) in Podgorica^{xl}. The rector of the University of Montenegro, Vladimir Božović, is among the founders of *IN4S*, and the public remembers him for his performance at the pro-Russian gathering in Belgrade in 2015. Then he explained the importance of the synergy of Russian-Serbian action in Montenegro and proposed steps for action.^{xli}

The *IN4S* portal serves as an extension of Russian state media and interests in the region. Through *that portal*, Russia presents itself as an alternative to the West, to which *traditional* Montenegro should turn. In addition to spreading disinformation and fake news, *IN4S* incites hate speech and misogyny with its texts.^{xlii} One of the examples of the spread of hate speech can be seen in the headlines of the reports on the protests organized by the *Ima nas* movement: *From the assembly of Udbas, fascists, and smugglers: You will have your house exterminated: what are you going to leave to your descendants.*^{xliii}

On December 13, 2022, Gojko Raičević, along with the presidents of certain Montenegrin municipalities from the DF, attended the Committee for the Diaspora and Serbs session in the Region in the National Assembly of Serbia. On that occasion, the position and perspective of Serbs in Montenegro were discussed, which indicates the comprehensive approach of Serbian institutions to the *Serbian issue* in Montenegro.^{xliiv} The population census in Montenegro was also the topic of the meeting, to which Raičević said that a campaign for the presumed census was launched through the *IN4S* portal with the slogan *It's not Montenegrin if it's not Serbian (Nije crnogorski ako nije srpski).*^{xliv}

The portal *Borba* operates according to a similar matrix, responsible for promoting narratives about the threat and discrimination of Serbs in Montenegro and the glorification of the Serbian and Russian presidents, who, according to the portal, should be emulated by Montenegrin officials in conducting internal and foreign policy. Portal *Borba* gives full support to

pro-Serbian parties on the political scene of Montenegro, and the focus is on support for the Democratic Front. Their most frequent interlocutors and columnists advocate the *Serbian world* concept^{xlvi} and the restoration of Njegoš's chapel.^{xlvii} The *Open Balkan* initiative presents itself as a concept for the region's future and a model for the final reconciliation of the Western Balkans.^{xlviii}

The fact that there is a strong pro-Russian sentiment among journalists and media in Montenegro is also indicated by the activities of the Association of Journalists of Montenegro. On January 20, 2023, that organization posthumously awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award to Darya Dugina, the daughter of the Russian ultra-nationalist ideologue and Putin's advisor Alexander Dugin. The Association also awarded annual awards for 2022 to Igor Damjanović, *IN4S* correspondent, Ljubica Gojković Vukićević, TV *Piva* journalist, and Bratislav Stoilković, owner of TV *Adria*. The award for the best portal went to *Sputnik Serbia*, financed directly by the Kremlin and operates in Serbia. The awards were given to journalists and media outlets who unreservedly and openly promote and justify Russian aggression against Ukraine and deny the Montenegrin state and nation. Such an act of professional organization did not meet an adequate reaction and public condemnation, which is even more worrying and leaves room for the promotion of undemocratic and anti-Western values and non-compliance with the journalistic code.



Awards ceremony at the Serbian House

Acknowledgments also came from the Russian side, so the Union of Journalists of Russia presented an award to the Association of Journalists of Montenegro for its contribution to international cooperation. President of the Russian Union of Journalists, Vladimir Solovyov, awarded the prize for courage and professionalism to Igor Damjanović, who, as stated, has been reporting from the area of *special military operations* since February 2022. The award ceremony^{xlix} took place in the Serbian House in Podgorica. The guests of honor were the Russian ambassador to Montenegro, Vladislav Maslenikov, and the director of the Russian House in Belgrade, Evgeny

Baranov.⁹ The Russian House in Belgrade is a Russian center for science and culture. It is a representative office of the Russian federal agency Rosotrudnichestvo in Serbia, which deals with implementing state policy on international cooperation and promoting an *objective understanding of contemporary Russia in the world*. After the award ceremony, representatives of the Association of Journalists of Montenegro and the Russian Union of Journalists agreed to sign a cooperation agreement.¹



Russian awards for Igor Damjanović and the Association of Journalists of Montenegro
Igor Damjanović and Evgeny Baranov

SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A BATTLEFIELD

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, social networks have been abused and are a powerful tool for spreading political and military propaganda in real-time. Since geographical borders do not play a significant role in the online world, disinformation of Russian origin reaches users of social networks in Montenegro, as evidenced by the examples that the Digital Forensic Center has continuously pointed out.ⁱⁱ

According to Data reportal from 2022, the Internet in Montenegro is used by 83% of citizens, while Facebook is used by 54.8% of the population over 13 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ Montenegrin politicians and clerics from the Serbian Orthodox Church also have accounts on Facebook and other social networks. They use them to promote ideological and political positionsⁱⁱⁱⁱ and/or deal with political dissenters.

Numerous groups that spread disinformation, fake news, hate speech, and narratives about the events in Ukraine justify Russian aggression against a

⁹ Evgeny Baranov, director of the Russian House who attended the awards ceremony in Podgorica, was a war reporter from the former Yugoslavia, and in 2001 he received the Order of Courage. Analyzing his Facebook profile, Baranov can be seen in the company of the Night Wolves motorcycle group, the director of the Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region in the Government of Serbia, Arnaud Gouillon, the former honorary consul of the Russian Federation in Montenegro, Boro Đukić, members of the Immortal Regiment of Serbia (Besmrtni puk Srbije) and Serbian mercenary and sniper in Donbass, Dejan Berić

sovereign state and glorify Russian President Vladimir Putin. Therefore, due to the limited reach on the popular social networks Facebook and Instagram, they looked for an alternative platform – Telegram. Through the channels on that platform, the same narratives as in the media, about the supremacy of Russia and the weaknesses of the Ukrainian army, about the involvement of the West in the war, and the alleged genocide of the Ukrainian soldiers against the civilian population are published. Thus, the pro-Russian portal *IN4S* informed its readers that news concerning the *Ukrainian crisis* would be broadcast exclusively on the Telegram group because their Facebook pages were, as they say, *targeted by Facebook administrators*.^{iv} The popular Instagram page *Bunt Crna Gora*, which has generated over 23 thousand followers on that social network, has decided to transfer its activities to the Telegram channel called *Bunt je stanje duha*, which has 69.9 thousand followers. The channel often broadcasts news from the *IN4S* portal, calls for violence, and spreads disinformation and pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives. There is a whole network of Telegram channels in Serbian and Russian that transmit mutual propaganda content and whose members are predominantly from Montenegro and Serbia.

Igor Damjanović and Nikola Jović (correspondent of the Russian state media *Russia Today*) are active on the Telegram channels, which allegedly report on the war in Ukraine. They are followed by over six thousand users on those Telegram channels, contributing to virality and the possibility of manipulating information, spreading Russian propaganda, and deceiving the public. Both are active in Montenegro and promote pro-Russian narratives through events and media appearances.

Nikola Jović, who the High Court of Serbia convicted for participating in the war in Donbass in 2014, when he fought on the Russian side as a nineteen-year-old volunteer, often stays in Montenegro. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Jović stayed in Podgorica, Danilovgrad, and Nikšić, where he promoted his book *Witness of the Russian Spring (Svedok ruskog proleća)*. The Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Society *Sveti Georgije* organized the promotions in Nikšić and *Ruski bar* in Podgorica. In addition to the opportunity to promote his book, Nikola Jović also received media space in Montenegro on *Srpska TV*, where he spoke about the novel, war, Putin, and mobilization in Russia.^{lv} Although he is a frequent guest in Montenegro, he denies the existence of Montenegro as an independent state, emphasizing that this kind of Montenegro is not historical but *Montenegrin anti-Serbia* and that the only fair solution is its abolition and the unification of all Serbs into one Serbian state.^{lvi} In 2022, Jović was banned from entering Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the explanation that he represented a threat to the security of that country.^{lvii} After his return from Russia in December 2022, Jović was at the barricades in the north of Kosovo. As a correspondent for *Russia Today*, he reported on the situation in Kosovo, describing it as a *provocation* by the Albanians and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti. After the Digital Forensic Center in its analysis, *Who governs our extreme right-wing?*^{lviii} referred to Nikola Jović's activities in Montenegro, he threatened DFC on his Facebook account.^{lix}

On Instagram, the nationalist pages *revolt_cg*, *crna_gora_srpska_sparta*,

obnova_njegoševe_cg, *oportacg*, *rodoobljube_*, which previously called for protests and processions in Montenegro, and now support Russia and the *fraternal Orthodox Russian people*, glorifying Russian President Vladimir Putin are active. In the posts of the mentioned accounts and pages, the same matrix can be observed, according to which it is emphasized that Kosovo is part of Serbia, that the Serbian people in Kosovo are suffering from terror, the leader of the Chetnik movement from World War II, Draža Mihajlović, is glorified and the unconstitutional Republic of Srpska Day is celebrated.

**POLITICS
UNDER THE
MASKS**

The intelligence system of the Russian Federation, inherited mainly from the previous state formation and burdened with complex organizational reforms, managed to consolidate and grow into a powerful apparatus. That system, along with the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian media, and organizations, has become one of the main pillars of contemporary Russian foreign policy.

Over the years, Russia has not shied away from using intelligence agencies as an essential tool of foreign policy and hybrid action, affirming subversive activities to achieve geopolitical goals. Therefore, the intelligence services of the Russian Federation undoubtedly have an important role in the attempt to restore the global influence of the Russian state. A large number of political appointments of former members of the intelligence and security system evidences this.

The most precise articulation of modern Russian strategy is considered to be an article from 2013 entitled *The value of science is in the foresight* authored by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces. The article presents a new theory of modern warfare, which includes using hackers, manipulating the media, creating fake news, information leakage, and conventional and asymmetric military means.^{lx}

The text states the following: The very rules of war have changed. The role of non-military means in achieving political and strategic goals has increased and, in many cases, exceeded the power of the armed forces. (...) All this was supplemented by military means of a hidden character.

In March 2016, Gerasimov stated that every government ministry, not only the Ministry of Defence, must be able to support hybrid warfare and that *falsifying events and restricting the activities of the mass media can be compared to the results of large-scale use of troops and forces*.^{lxi}

The application of Gerasimov's doctrine can best be analyzed on the examples of European countries, some of which are members of NATO. In just a few months of 2021, four GRU actions were exposed on European soil and in NATO member countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Germany. Previous examples include military support for separatist republics in eastern Ukraine, attempted coups and cyber operations in Montenegro, and campaigns in the US during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. Involvement in the French election in 2017, the poisoning of Russian-British double agent Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018, the attempted hacking of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the Hague, also in 2018, as well as multiple attempts at direct election interference processes in other countries, clearly indicate the scope of Russian foreign policy implemented through the secret services.

Annual reports from the State Department, the EU, and NGOs across Europe show a wide range of techniques Russia uses for political influence through its levers of hard power (including the SVR and the GRU). They present details of

the implementation of such activities, which are believed to have as their goal a change in European politics and decision-making, and thus a weakening of NATO and the EU.

DISCLOSURE AND CONCEALMENT

Security situations from the end of August 2022 once again shed light on hybrid Russian activities in Montenegro, this time through a well-organized intelligence network, with the aim of collecting confidential data from a NATO member and its destabilization through the planned collapse of state institutions.

The new personnel decisions from May 2022 in the security sector, primarily in the National Security Agency, restored the trust of Western partners and paved the way for joint actions in suppressing malign foreign influence in Montenegro. The epilogue of action, carried out on September 29, 2022, by partner agencies and Montenegrin competent authorities, was the denial of residence for six Russian diplomats and the ban on entry to Montenegro for 28 foreign citizens. They, as stated, worked for the interests of foreign services and were *carriers of malign influence*.^{lxii} Among those suspected of working for the Russian intelligence service is a former employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, allegedly a member of a spy network formed by an intelligence officer of the Russian Military Intelligence Service GRU, Igor Zaitsev, who has been in Montenegro on several occasions.^{lxiii}

Until the publication of this document, the competent Montenegrin authorities did not publish the names of the unwelcome Russians and the other 28 persons, so it is unknown whose citizens they are and whether they are still in the territory of Montenegro or have left it. However, several of them have been confirmed to be on that list. Among them are the former ambassador of Serbia in Montenegro, Vladimir Božović, who was declared *persona non grata* by the official Podgorica in November 2020, the abbot of the monastery in Dajbaba, Danilo Išmatov, as well as the owner of *Adria TV*, Bratislav Stoilković.^{lxiv} A few days after the mentioned activities, the Government of Montenegro, without a clear and precisely articulated explanation, according to an urgent procedure (in a telephone session), dismissed the head of the National Security Agency, thus calling into question its commitment to the fight against Russian malign activity.

In the context of Russian malign activity in Montenegro, the case of the former Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro, Strahinja Bulajić, from February 2022 is indicative. His connections, meetings, and contacts with Russian intelligence agents were questioned amid discussions about convening a session of the Parliament where a vote was to be taken on the election of the 43rd Government, which is a confirmation that the intelligence services of the Russian Federation, even after the events of 2016, did not give up from Montenegro.^{lxv}

According to publicly available information, Bulajić frequently communicated with the former deputy ambassador of the Russian Federation in Podgorica - an officer of the Russian SVR intelligence service - Vladimir Gurko, during his two mandates in Montenegro.^{lxvi}

ATTEMPTED COUP

The coup attempt in October 2016 is treated as the most extreme example of Russian interference and attempts to destabilize Montenegro to stop Montenegro's entry into NATO while installing a new government that would be led by pro-Russian structures in the country.

According to the indictment of the Special State Prosecutor's Office, two Russian citizens, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, eight Serbian citizens, and the leaders of the pro-Russian Democratic Front, Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić, prepared a violent change of government on the day of the 2016 election, for which they were sentenced to prison terms in the first-instance proceedings. The Court of Appeal sent the case back for retrial based on the same - unchanged indictment.

The investigation also showed that the mentioned Russian citizens possessed legal passports while staying in Belgrade but under fake names. It was the same batch of passports used by Russian spies in the Skripal poisoning attempt. Like their colleagues from the GRU, Anatoliy Chepiga, and Alexander Mishkin, who are suspected in the Skripal case, Moiseyev and Shishmakov are in Russian databases with two parallel identities.

In June 2014, Shishmakov was expelled from Poland (declared *persona non grata*) after being exposed in a spy operation recruiting an influential Polish general and several Polish businessmen.^{lxvii}

On the other hand, research by the British research network *Bellingcat* and the Russian magazine *Insider* indicates that Moiseyev was involved in inciting unrest and protests in Moldova, whose government was about to sign the EU Accession Agreement in May 2014.

After the parliamentary elections in Montenegro and the announcement of the coup attempt, the Prime Minister of Serbia at the time, Aleksandar Vučić, pointed out that the security authorities of the Republic of Serbia had found irrefutable evidence that various illegal activities were being prepared on the territory of Serbia. Some of them were, and some should have been, realized on the territory of Montenegro. Among them is the monitoring of the then Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović.^{lxviii} At the conference on October 24, 2016, Vučić emphasized that *difficult things were being prepared for Montenegro*, disclosing information obtained by the Serbian services. According to that information, Đukanović was intensively monitored using state-of-the-art equipment that only the most powerful countries in the world and their secret services possess, and that cannot be simply acquired on the black market.^{lxix}

In addition to the information disclosed by Aleksandar Vučić, there is also a number of other pieces of evidence of the connection between the activities of Shishmakov, Popov, and national actors, such as the transfer of money from Shishmakov to Sindelić (a cooperating witness in the *coup d'état affair*) on September 25, 2016, which was also confirmed by the internal the investigation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), but also the official data of the bank through which the transaction was carried out.^{lxx}

November, *The Guardian* quoted a source close to the Serbian government that Patrushev apologized to the Serbian authorities for what he described as an *unapproved operation*^{lxxi}. Russia later publicly denied those claims and called them a *provocation*.

The fact that during that period, the Democratic Front was financed by Russia was confirmed by a source of the US administration at a briefing on September 13, 2022, referring to their intelligence findings.^{lxxii}

Security Council Secretary Patrushev has a significant role in creating Russian policy towards the Balkans. Until 2015, Moscow lacked a central figure with authority that would significantly contribute to realizing Russian goals in the Balkans^{lxxiii}. Patrushev, the former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), a close ally of Putin, and a man known for his aggressive and harsh views, was the ideal person to take on the role. As a result, in late 2015 or 2016 (depending on the source), Putin made him the Kremlin's key man in charge of the Balkans. Patrushev is credited with participating in the coup d'état in Montenegro.^{lxxiv} In addition, he strongly advocated for the construction of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš, which is considered a cover for conducting military intelligence operations in Serbia and the region^{lxxv}. What particularly fueled the claims that it is a center from which Russian intelligence services operate is the fact that official Moscow has repeatedly asked Serbia to grant special status to Russian personnel employed at the Center through an agreement on the residence, privileges, and immunity of personnel. The first intelligence officer of Russia, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergej Naryshkin, in an interview for *RTS*, said that granting diplomatic status to the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš is not a request, but an appeal for Serbia but that this has not been done so far due to pressure from certain Western countries.

CHRONOLOGY OF ATTACKS IN CYBERSPACE

Russian activities in cyberspace represent an integral part of hybrid warfare, derived from the Russian understanding of soft power and relations between states, more precisely, the zero-sum game of great powers for influence in the world. Like other aspects of Russian soft power, the Kremlin perceives cyberspace geopolitically.

The frequent use of the term hybrid warfare can be traced to the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014¹⁰, to describe Russia's mode of action in this conflict, which includes a range of military and non-military activities, special operations of the Russian military, cyber warfare, information warfare, financial and socio-economic pressure, political struggle, etc.¹¹ One of the elements particularly highlighted is the action in the cyber sphere aimed at disinformation, as well as nano-strategic, i.e., the infrastructure of particular importance for the functioning of the Ukrainian state. Hybrid warfare involves using all (or several) options for waging war available and does not rely solely on conventional means. Cyberattacks carried out directly or indirectly by state actors are today mainly used within the framework of a broader concept of hybrid warfare to achieve a specific effect (insecurity, panic, intimidation, deterrence, incitement to instability and mistrust of institutions, etc.) without the use of conventional forces. The inevitable digitalization of society opens the door to malicious actors.¹²

The Russian concept of information warfare and the role of cyberspace in it are exposed in strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy (2015 and 2021), Foreign Policy Concept (2016), Information Security Doctrine (2016), Military Doctrine (2014), as well as works and publications by Russian military strategists and generals.

Interference in the 2016 US presidential election is the most documented case showing the Russian modus operandi. This interference involved cyberattacks on US election infrastructure, the collection and deliberate disclosure of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's and the Democratic National

¹⁰ Hybrid warfare as a term first appeared in **William Nemeth's** masterwork *Future war and Chechnya: a case for hybrid warfare*, 2002. He analyzed the wars in Chechnya, Russian Federation, during the 1990s and presented the thesis that future wars will be mostly hybrid like the war in Chechnya, with the Chechen way of fighting and guerrilla warfare being his model. At that time the term was not sufficiently accepted and was not the subject of further consideration

¹¹ The work of Russian General **Valery Gerasimov**, Chief of the General Staff of the Army of the Russian Federation, which he published in 2013 (the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine) was especially used for this purpose. In his work, *The Value of Science Is in the Foresight*, he discussed the conduct of total warfare, as today's war, in which the very rules of warfare have changed, so that the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. He stated that the approach to war today is guerilla and widespread on a wide front, from hackers on computer networks, media, intelligence services, special military forces, etc.

¹² Some authors define different ways in which a cyber-attack can be characterized as war, that is, when international law can be applied. The best-known example is the Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare, written by an international Group of Experts at the invitation of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, following the infamous cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007.

Committee's data, including Hillary Clinton's emails, along with an extensive information campaign conducted by the Russian troll factory - the Internet Research Agency and Russia's affiliated media.

The entities involved in Russian cyber activities include state actors, with a significant role played by intelligence communities and non-state proxies. Besides GRU units 74455 and 54777, the most interesting from the point of view of Montenegro is Unit 26165, which is behind the activities of the group APT28 (Advanced Persistent Threat 28). APT28, also known as Fancy Bear, is identified as a GRU unit by US Special Prosecutor Robert Muller and EU officials. APT28 uses sophisticated tools around the world, targeting Kremlin opponents. Although security companies such as ESET and FireEye have been identifying the activities of this group since 2004, these attacks have become more intense since 2014.

One of the first countries to experience both military and cyber operations and attacks is Georgia, which lost almost a fifth of its territory in the 2008 war. APT28 was also found to be responsible for the attacks on the German Bundestag in 2015^{lxxvi}, the French TV station TV5 Monde^{lxxvii}, the attempted attacks on the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)^{lxxviii}, the 2018 Pyongyang Winter Olympics^{lxxix} and Romania 2017^{lxxx}, as well as numerous operations in Montenegro since 2016.

ABOUT CYBER-ATTACKS

The term cyber-attack is used colloquially when talking about operations that involve different types of hostile or malign activities, such as destroying websites, network intrusion, theft of private information, or disrupting the provision of internet services. Therefore, cyber operations described as cyber-attacks are not necessarily armed attacks or an act of war. There is a certain amount of vagueness and ambiguity in the international legal classification, so cyber-attacks are often not classified as using force or an international crime.

An attacker can be an anonymous individual, a hacker group, an organization, or even a sovereign state. In addition to losing or stealing important data, targeted organizations face significant financial losses and reduced user trust.

The most challenging aspect of attribution in cyberspace is to link or attribute a specific action to a named person, group, or state with enough certainty and evidence to hold them accountable if they do not take responsibility themselves. It is a complex process in which a cyber incident's technical, legal, and political aspects are analyzed to come to a complete response. Technical attribution refers to digital forensic examination and investigation to identify who is behind a cyber-attack or operation (analysis of code styles, IP addresses, resource language, etc.). Legal attribution assesses whether there has been a breach of international law. Finally, political attribution is based on cumulative or circumstantial evidence. It involves a political decision to publicly or privately publish those assessments and bind them to a particular state or private actor.

In addition to the physical effect on infrastructure, cyberattacks have a significant psychological dimension, creating confusion and uncertainty.

MONTENEGRO PUT TO THE TEST: THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

On the day of the parliamentary elections, October 16, 2016, Montenegro faced frequent DDoS attacks, which targeted websites of state institutions, pages of pro-NATO and pro-EU political parties, civil society websites, and election observers. This, among other things, resulted in the takedown of the websites of portals CdM, Antena M, and the Democratic Party of Socialists. Also, the website of the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), which monitored the elections, became inaccessible.

A distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack targets websites and servers to disrupt network services. During a DDoS attack, a series of bots or botnets overwhelm a website or service with HTTP requests and traffic, resulting in poor website functionality or being completely offline. As a result, service may be delayed or otherwise interrupted for a long time. It is also possible for hackers to infiltrate the database during an attack and access all kinds of sensitive information. DDoS attacks can exploit security vulnerabilities and target any endpoint accessible publicly via the Internet. DDoS attacks are among the most common cyber threats and can compromise a company, network security, sales, and reputation.

In addition to the DDoS attack, citizens were swamped with numerous anti-government messages from unknown numbers via Viber, WhatsApp, and Facebook platforms that day. The Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services banned using these applications and similar communication services. That order was sent to all telecommunications operators in Montenegro during the day. Operators were obliged to implement this measure in accordance with the Law on Electronic Communications, which provides that communication for direct marketing purposes is permitted only with the prior consent of the user. The continued blocking of these platforms has drawn public condemnation from numerous domestic and international organizations, including Reporters Without Borders. Four days after the elections, on October 20, 2016, another phishing attack was launched against the Parliament of Montenegro.

More intensive DDoS attacks occurred in January, February, and June 2017, threatening the web services of the Government and state institutions, as well as some pro-government media. The Montenegrin Ministry of Defence also reported that the targeting of the phishing attack was via emails apparently coming from the EU and NATO with attachments, allowing hackers to install the malware Gamefish on the Ministry of Defence computers, a method used by APT28. Gamefish is a Trojan that offers a hacker easy access to a target computer, including exfiltration of data, access to logs, and other surveillance capabilities.

The Government announced at the time that the scale and variety of the attacks and the fact that they were performed at a professional level indicated a synchronized action. Three cybersecurity companies – FireEye, Trend Micro, and ESET – concluded that the attacks came from APT28. US intelligence data further indicates that the group is affiliated with the Russian military intelligence service GRU and is funded by the Kremlin. After a series of attacks in early 2017, Montenegro requested help from NATO and the UK, which contributed to the success of repelling two attacks later that year.

An analysis of cyber threats to Montenegro by the Ministry of Public Administration, presented in the Cyber Security Strategy of Montenegro 2018-2021, showed that the number of hacker attacks increased in 2017. That data coincides with the final phase of Montenegro's accession to NATO, which does not imply that they all came from Russia. In the first nine months of 2017, there were 385 reported incidents, out of which 335 involved malware and attacks on websites and government institutions. For comparison's sake, only 22 were registered in 2013.

The National Computer Incident Response Team (CIRT) told DFC that the 2015-2020 period registered increased attacks compared to the 2011-2014 period. However, they are becoming more sophisticated and challenging to track down. CIRT worked on investigating the attacks that occurred in 2016 and 2017. However, they could not definitively determine the responsibility of any hacker group.

Due to previous events, members of the US Cyber Command arrived in Podgorica at the invitation of the Government of Montenegro in early October 2019. The goal was to investigate signs of Russian penetration into Montenegrin government networks and create insight into rival cyber threats in the face of the then-upcoming US and Montenegrin elections in 2020.

2022 UNDER THE VEIL OF SECRETS

Montenegro again faced strong cyber-attacks on August 22, 2022. The target was the complete information technology infrastructure of the Government of Montenegro, which prevented access to the official websites of the institutions, as well as emails. The planned attack, i.e., a combination of DDoS, botnet, and ransomware attacks, was aimed at obtaining financial benefits based on the conditioning of the data owner, i.e., the state.

The perpetrators confirmed this via their website, stating they owned sensitive information, including financial documentation, correspondence, account details, balance sheets, and tax documents.^{lxxxix}

In addition to the physical impact on infrastructure, cyber-attacks have a significant psychological dimension. In this case, due to the surprise and unpreparedness of the Montenegrin administration, the attackers could cause significantly more considerable damage in the cyber domain. However, it is very likely that the key goal was to sow confusion and uncertainty, that is, to discredit Montenegro as a NATO member. The probability is confirmed by the fact that, according to

Montenegrin officials, the hacker group used a combination of viruses that had not been used anywhere in the world until then. They asked for less money to purchase encrypted data than was needed to create those viruses.^{lxxxii}

NATO and EU partners were alerted to the attack and sent their teams to Montenegro to help repair the damage.¹³

According to the government, the main threat was the data of 150 compromised or infected computers in ten government institutions. Citizens' data was not compromised, while some government data was lost.^{lxxxiii}

In late August 2022, several official addresses said that there were indications of where the sophisticated attack came from. The National Security Agency announced that Russian services^{lxxxiv} were behind the attack, with the assessment that it was a hybrid war. The Ministry of Defense said that the state resources that someone has at their disposal are behind the attack and that there are data indicating that coordinated Russian services are behind it. The Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Mircea Geoană^{lxxxv} and the Minister of Defense of Slovakia, Jaroslav Nad'ľ^{lxxxvi}, confirmed that these were cyber-attacks by Russian groups. As in all previous cases, Moscow rejected its participation in the attacks, with the assessment that such claims were part of a continuous policy of worsening relations with Moscow to satisfy the USA's interests.^{lxxxvii}

Given the accelerated degradation of bilateral relations between Podgorica and Moscow, which resulted in the expulsion of 12 Russian diplomats from Montenegro in 2022 and the declaration of Montenegro as an enemy state by the Kremlin, the possibility of political motivation and the nature of the attack cannot be ruled out.

Although it was unequivocally established that Montenegro had been the target of powerful cyber operations for days long and carefully planned from the outside, this did not prevent attempts to relativize it from the inside.^{lxxxviii} Certain actors on the Montenegrin political scene tried to trivialize the seriousness of cyber-attacks, commenting that they are harmless and come from the inside.^{lxxxix} The thesis that the attacks come from actors and/or criminal structures from within aim at influencing public opinion, which contributes to the further polarization of society and raises tensions in an already sensitive socio-political situation. In Montenegro, the practice of political opportunism has been *naturalized*, which implies the transfer of responsibility for all negative phenomena, events, and activities to the opposite political gender, regardless of the consequences it may cause.

¹³ The expert team from the USA provided expert support in overcoming the newly created situation and in planning and creating mechanisms for more adequate cyber defense/protection in case of a new cyber-attack with a high level of sophistication. Support was provided for the re-establishment of certain information systems by experts from the Republic of France, that is, the National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSSI). With partners from Great Britain exchanged experiences regarding current cyber-attacks and joint improvement projects were planned information security in Montenegro.

THE STATE'S RESPONSE

Cyber-attacks from August 2022 indicated that the Montenegrin administration was not prepared to adequately protect state systems from such possibilities, mainly because cyberspace is a permanent battleground of modern warfare and an area for increasingly sophisticated forms of criminal activity. It is essential to have developed awareness at the highest management level on the importance of sustainably allocating the necessary resources to strengthen the operational, human and technical resources of the cybersecurity authorities to provide an effective and functional cybersecurity mechanism to detect and defend against cyber threats and attacks.

Montenegro undertook a series of activities to establish key information systems necessary for the smooth functioning of the state administration and the services provided to citizens to repair the damages and follow the defined *Priority Action Plan on IT Infrastructure Recovery*.^{xc}

In addition to the undertaken and implemented short-term activities, according to the Ministry of Public Administration, specific mid-term and long-term measures are also being worked on to strengthen the state's capacity in an increasingly complex digital environment.^{xci}

However, six months after the incident, the Government and the competent state authorities are very non-transparent and reserved in sharing information regarding the applied methods, technology, method of intrusion, and the damage caused. There are no indications of when the public could be informed about that important issue's details.

Let us recall, in the Cyber Security Strategy from 2022 to 2026, it is stated that Montenegro does not have adequate mechanisms for detecting cyber threats, as well as mechanisms for a sufficiently rapid response, i.e., recovery from cyber-attacks. In addition, the lack of cybersecurity experts is recognized as a global problem, while in Montenegro, this problem is even more evident due to limited human resources, and the absence of a specific budget allocated for implementing the Strategy is cited as a particular weakness.

The Strategy states that research indicates that 95% of cyber security incidents result from human error and that only 1% of employed public servants have undergone cyber security training. The action plan of the strategy predicts that by 2026 that number will be increased to 15% of civil servants.

CONCLUSION

Russia's efforts and strategic goals in the Western Balkan region can be seen through its hybrid activities to obstruct the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan states while encouraging anti-Western sentiment and undermining the interests of the West throughout the Balkans, making the problems more acute and harming the reforms that are a prerequisite for further integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic economic, political, and security structures. Russia will undoubtedly continue its activities to create the impression of its greater influence in the Western Balkans region than it objectively has, with attempts to present itself as an alternative to the West, occasionally acting as a disruptive factor, to show that it is capable of challenging instability in this region as well.

To this end, Moscow supports the Serbian Orthodox Church and anti-Western media, right-wing populist parties, and far-right groups. Despite a relatively good legal framework, the state's poor response to various forms of extremism is evident. Hate speech and hate crimes are not met with effective, proportionate, and deterrent sanctions. The existence of extreme factions within the Government and the parliamentary clubs in the Parliament of Montenegro prevents effective action through the institutions.¹⁴ Montenegro needs an adequate legislative resolution to ban fascist and nationalist organizations and the use of their symbols, along with the deletion from the register of all organizations whose program principles and goals are in conflict with democratic principles and guaranteed human and minority rights, as well as the refusal to register such new organizations.

Russian public diplomacy and pro-Russian media proxies emphasize significant historical, cultural, and religious ties - which are often exaggerated or manipulatively interpreted, in order to open up space for Russian influence operations aimed at slowing or preventing the membership of the Western Balkan states in the EU and stopping further NATO expansion in the region.

Russian efforts to undermine political and public support for EU membership in the countries of the region have had some success, primarily in Serbia, where less than half of the population now supports joining the EU. The fact that there is still no consensus among EU members regarding the integration of the Western Balkan region certainly contributes to this, which leaves room for the actions of Russia and China to act and increase their influence in the region.

The foreign policy performance of official Belgrade, as a key Russian proxy in the region, towards neighboring countries, primarily towards Montenegro, is impossible to observe outside the context of the pro-Russian narrative imposed in Serbia.

In the political-security synergy of these two states, a construct of the so-called *Serbian world* was also created, which relies heavily on the Russian concept and *Russian world* foundation, which, after the Montenegrin parliamentary elections

¹⁴ The double refusal of Montenegrin MPs to discuss the Draft Law on the Prohibition of Fascist and Nationalist Organizations shows that inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions are politically profitable. Namely, the proposal of the opposition Liberal Party from December of the previous year was supported by only 29 MPs out of a total of 81 s. For the first time, an almost identical text was rejected in May of the same year.

in 2020 and the arrival of its own transparent representatives of Russian interests to power, was promoted from numerous political and religious addresses in Montenegro, the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Republic of Srpska and Serbia. Although presented as a project to protect the interests of the Serbian people in the region, this anachronistic modification of the idea of Greater Serbia in a very short period of time stirred up Montenegrin society and triggered a series of negative courses that are already having an impact on the dynamics of Montenegro's European integration, with increasingly serious security implications. Also, polarization in society affects the survival of ethno-nationalist and anti-Western sentiment in Montenegro, where it is possible to politically mobilize a significant part of the electorate willing to support the realization of various pan-Slovenian or regional nationalist projects.

If Serbia remains a key ally of Moscow in the region as a base for the expansion of Russian subversive influence, that will almost certainly result in further complicating regional circumstances and slowing Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia's reliance on the great-state ambitions of the nationalist elites in Serbia and its support for their activities within the *Serbian world* project, the implementation of which is being announced from the highest political addresses in Serbia, can undoubtedly lead to the destabilization of regional circumstances with significant potential to complicate the security situation.

Information warfare, adapted to the geopolitical circumstances of the 21st century, ranks high in Russia's arsenal of tools for achieving political and other goals in the world. From Russia's perspective, the information war is ongoing. The tools used to conduct it include all possible means at their disposal – from disinformation campaigns and the abuse of their networks and media to cyber-attacks on institutions of different countries. In this sense, the security events from late August 2022 again shed light on hybrid Russian activity in Montenegro, this time through a well-organized intelligence network.

The current global crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of Montenegro's NATO membership. Still, it has also exposed its internal weaknesses reflecting political, national, and social fragmentation and the continuing inflow of malign foreign influence.

For now, Montenegro's NATO membership guarantees its survival on its western path. The direction in which the development of Montenegrin society will move further will also depend to a significant extent on the attitude of Western partners and allies towards Montenegro because it is evident that the current problems it faces after the first transition of power in thirty years are mainly strongly encouraged by those actors who are in permanent conflict with Western values and who use every opportunity to undermine or at least slow down the European path of the Western Balkan states.

Russian and Serbian influence through the media and social networks in Montenegro is not negligible, especially after the 2020 elections and the change of government, since pro-Russian and pro-Serbian structures participate in the current government, which gives additional freedom to domestic proxies to act. The political crisis, social divisions, and unresolved issues from the past provide fertile ground for spreading disinformation and propaganda, thereby

pursuing the geopolitical interests of various actors. The upcoming elections and population census are followed by the danger of aggressive interference by third parties, primarily Serbia and Russia, as indicated by explicit media and analysts' announcements working under the patronage of these two states.

It is certain that, depending on the development of the situation in Ukraine, Russia will try to conduct dispersion of the crisis and resolve a range of security issues that should be addressed by NATO and EU structures. The situation in the Western Balkan region is characterized by a complex historical heritage and numerous issues that continuously contribute to the region's instability and facilitate the destructive actions of the Kremlin. The fact is that Montenegro, due to the action of various internal and external factors contrary to the expectations of Western partners and allies, has come into the spotlight as a potentially critical point in the region. It is to be expected that Moscow will try to find additional instruments to influence Montenegrin political factions. This certainly implies an attempt to gain political subjects and actors on the Montenegrin political scene while continuing to cooperate with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro as an irreplaceable promoter and propagator of anti-Western and anti-liberal sentiment, opposed to Montenegro's strategic affiliation and Euro-Atlantic goals.

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