

Russia's role in the Balkans:

# THE CASE OF MONTENEGRO





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# ABOUT THE STUDY

This study aims to expose the Kremlin's malign influence on Montenegro to Montenegrins and the broader public, exercised through the *soft power* implementation between Crimea annexation and July 2021.

The goals, the methods, the collaborators, and the effects of the Russian *soft power* in Montenegro have been analyzed, including the ways in which they have been projected to the wider region. The concrete examples show how the Russian presence is jeopardizing not only the strategic course of Montenegro but also the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.

After it received NATO membership invitation and after the 2020 government change, Montenegro has become, due to a set of circumstances, a fertile ground for diverse Kremlin influences, and it seems that this issue is not adequately referred to or enough addressed within the society.

The study was written with the aim to present conclusions and recommendations to the experts in Montenegro and abroad, who tackle Russia, in one way or another, and to help expose Russian influence in Montenegro.

The paper is penned and encompasses the aforementioned period and a detailed analysis of key notions such as the Russian *soft power*, which differs a lot from the original U.S. *soft power* concept introduced by Joseph Nye; the activities of the fundamental pillars of the Russian presence, such as Serbia; the Russian and the Serbian Orthodox Church; the media; the far-right pro-Russian political parties, politicians, and organizations; and the Russian intelligence services.

Conclusions and recommendations were derived from the analyses and may be found at the end of the study.

# INTRODUCTION

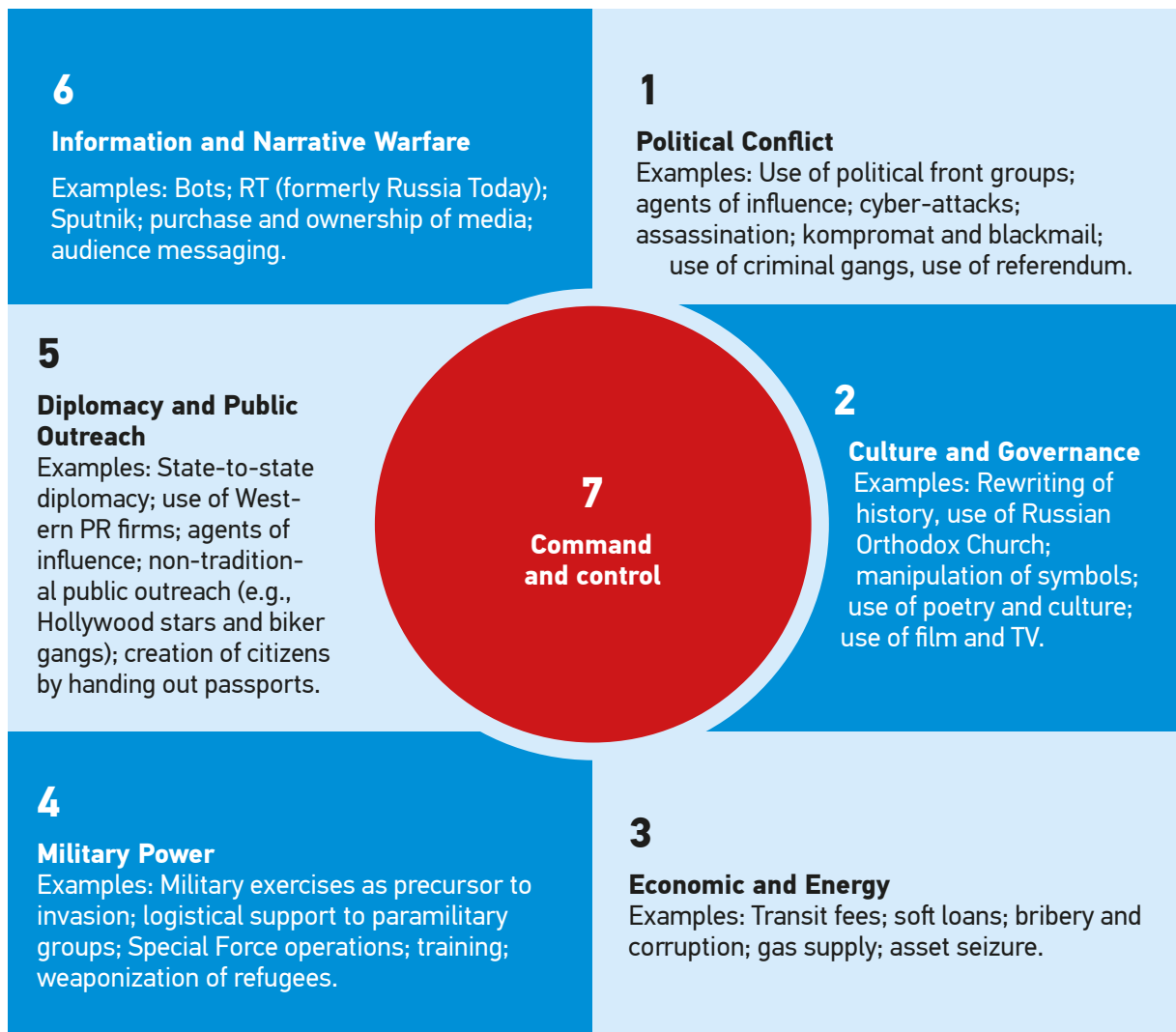
## ABOUT THE *SOFT POWER* CONCEPT

After having been introduced by **Joseph Nye**, U.S. political scientist, professor, and architect of the theory of neoliberalism, in his book titled *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* published in 1990, the *soft power* concept has become a catchword in the international relations. The concept had not been significantly used in the international political discourse until 2004 when Nye's book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* was published.<sup>1</sup>

According to Nye, *soft power* rests on the ability to get the outcomes you want through attraction and not through coercion or payments. It derives from the attractiveness of culture, political

ideals, and politics of a country or non-state actors. Even though the *soft power* concept is considered a characteristic of Western societies, the Soviet Union also had its *soft power* sources, promoting the ideology of communism, which had been attractive and appealing for a short time even to certain circles in the West after the end of the Second World War.

Compared to the *hard power* of a country, which implies achieving goals through weapons and economic measures, *soft power*, as means to achieve a goal, may be used by other actors in international relations, such as non-governmental organizations and international institutions.





## SOFT POWER DISCUSSED IN RUSSIA

*Soft power* became the subject of discussion at the highest political level in Russia for the first time in 2007, when, at a meeting of the Russian Public Chamber Council members with **Vladimir Putin**, **Vyacheslav Nikonov**, Russian political scientist, Chairman of the Board of the Russkiy Mir Foundation (фонд *Русский мир*), President of the State Duma Committee on Education and Science, and a grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, said that Russia needs a national project to create its own soft power instruments.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the soft power concept in Russia has made a long journey from a decentralized liberal model, very close to Nye's original concept, to a hybrid integral part of the foreign policy and hard power.

Several facts point to the reason why the debate around soft power began fairly late in Russia. First, the concept such as soft power is completely contrary to the Russian tradition and way of thinking. In the Russian Empire, as well as in the Soviet Union, power was simply defined as a strong or hard force. The foreign policy of both regimes was characterized by the accent on military power, while the authorities were frequently using violence and police repression. In order to understand the new concept of soft power in its original sense, a complete

turnaround of these traditional ways of thinking was necessary to be made.

The second reason was the fact that Russians saw soft power as a classic U.S.-originated concept. The real interest in the new concept was not shown before the *color revolutions* in the post-Soviet territory – Georgia's *Rose Revolution* in 2003 and Ukraine's *Orange Revolution* in 2004 – the people's movements that brought the corrupt and non-democratic regimes down. At that moment, the Kremlin realized that soft power could eventually be used as a very effective weapon.<sup>3</sup>

Reshaping of the Western soft power concept can be found earlier on in the document titled *The Main Guidelines of the Policy of the Russian Federation in the field of International Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation* (Основные направления политики Российской Федерации в сфере международного культурно-гуманитарного сотрудничества)<sup>4</sup> published in 2010 as an amendment to the 2008 *Foreign Policy Concept* and the 2013 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации)<sup>5</sup>. The latter indicates the usage of soft power as a complement to traditional diplomacy, i.e. as a *comprehensive toolkit*

### How Do Russian Organizations Engage in Subversion?

	State	Attributed and Unattributed Proxies	Foreign Partners of Russia	Major Challenges
Military	Military GRU-Septsnaz; VVD	Private military companies (Wagner Group)	Separatist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relatively highly capable light force</li> <li>to distinguish from armed civilians at the beginning; law enforcement response might be insufficient, while military response bears political cost and may contribute to Russian propaganda</li> </ul>
Political	Possibly executed by intelligence agencies (GRU, FSB, SVR)	State-linked patriotic groups (e.g., <i>Night wolves</i> biker gang)	Ataka in Bulgaria, Front National in France, AfD in Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political influence in target countries</li> <li>Attribution to Russian government</li> <li>Grounded in preexisting political divisions</li> </ul>
Economic	State-owned enterprises (e.g., Gazprom, Rosneft)	Private, state-linked companies (e.g., Lukoil)	Trade partners with Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extensive European trade links with Russia</li> <li>Difficulty distinguishing legitimate activity</li> </ul>
Information	RT, Rossiya Segodnya, Sputnik, security services	Internet Research Agency (and other troll farms)	Users who amplify Russian media or unknowingly participate – "useful idiots"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deceptive or false content</li> <li>Difficult to regulate</li> <li>Attribution</li> <li>Global reach</li> </ul>
Cyber	GRU, FSB, SRV	Co-opted independent hackers: APT28, APT29	Patriotic hacking groups: CyberBerkut	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly capable</li> <li>Attribution</li> <li>Global reach</li> </ul>

for achieving foreign policy objectives building on a civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy that is becoming an unavoidable supplement of contemporary international relations. At the same time, the document mentions even the usage of soft power to exert pressure, interfere in internal affairs of sovereign states, and manipulate public opinion under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad.

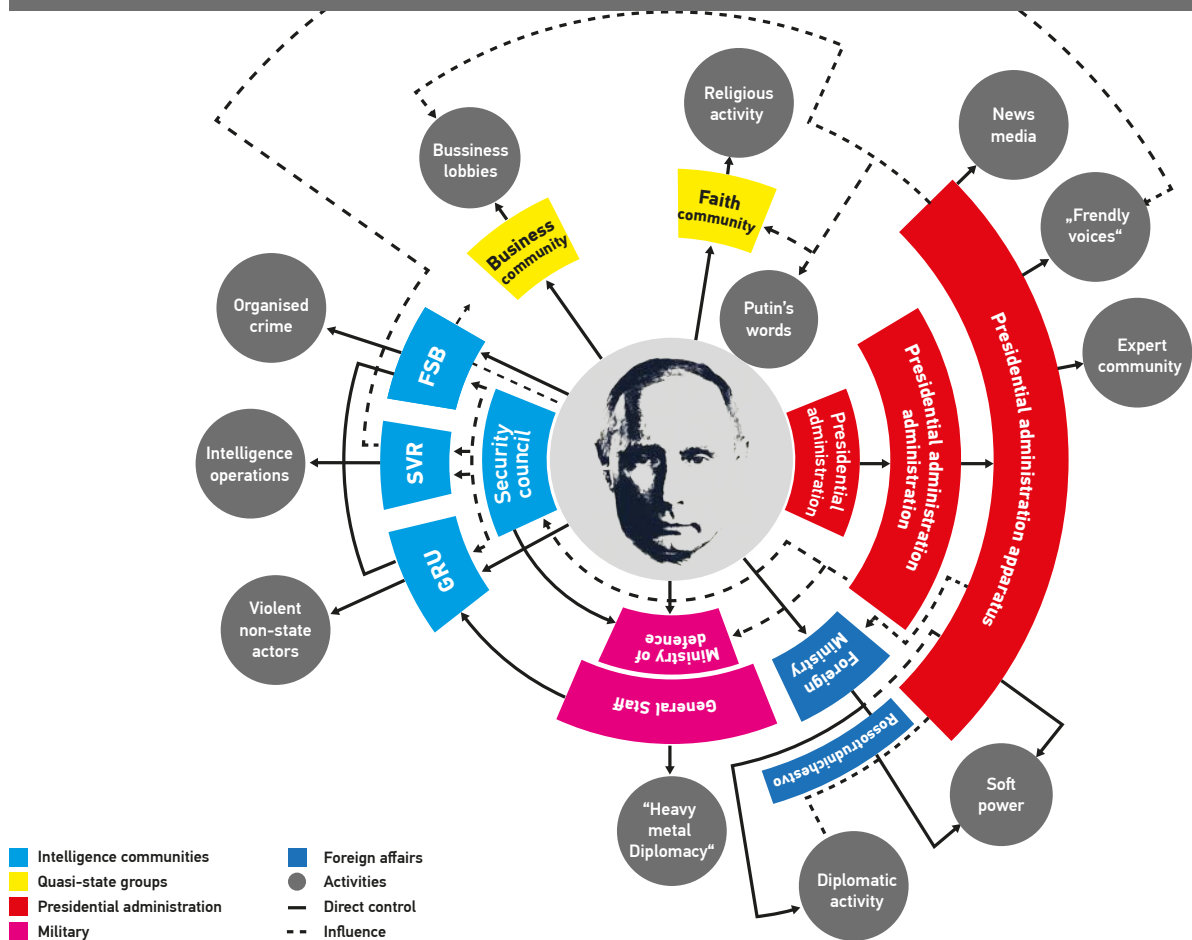
That way, *soft power* deriving from civil society, political ideals, or culture, has come down to an instrument that a country uses to influence foreign governments and manipulate public opinion abroad. Given that the Kremlin incorporated *soft power* as an integral part of the overall *hard power*, the meaning of *soft power* in Russia has been completely reversed; therefore, illegal activities, such as bribery and espionage abroad, were presented as useful *soft power* instruments.

## RUSSIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SOFT POWER

Broad understanding of the notion may be clearly seen in the way in which Vladimir Putin describes *soft power* in a manifesto drafted for his third

presidential term, published in *Moskovskie Novosti* (Московские новости)<sup>6</sup> in February 2012: *The notion of soft power is being used increasingly often.*

### How Putin coordinates Russia's active measures:



*This implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence. Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist, and nationalistic attitudes, manipulate the public, and conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries. There must be a clear division between freedom of speech and normal political activity, on the one hand, and illegal instruments of soft power, on the other... However, the activities of pseudo-NGOs and other agencies that try to destabilize other countries with outside support are unacceptable.*

After Putin had been re-elected President in 2012, the Russian Duma adopted in July of the same year the Law identifying non-governmental organizations financed from abroad as *foreign agents*.<sup>7</sup> The Law stipulates strict restrictions for all the NGOs

that, according to the government's assessment, participate in political activity. According to the Law, any publication issued by those groups must be published with a warning indicating that its author is a *foreign agent*, while the organizations are obliged to deliver detailed quarterly business performance reports. The Law had three goals: to discredit the NGO sector; to hinder the work, the activities, and the business; and to delegitimize their activities in the eyes of the public.

Putin did not stop there. On October 23, 2012, the Duma adopted amendments to Articles 275 and 276 of the Criminal Code, stipulating a much broader definition of *treason*. *Treason* is no longer limited to illegal handing over of classified data to foreign governments; now it includes *providing assistance in the form of information, means, and consultations to the Western and international organizations*. The Western and international organizations include the Western NGOs as well.<sup>8</sup>

## RUSSIA AND THE MEDIA

During 2005, Russia started integrating actively in the international media market. That year, the Russian international TV channel *Russia Today – RT* was launched, which is available today in more than 100 countries around the globe. In 2014, *Sputnik* informative agency was launched as a part of the Russian media group *Rossiia Segodnya (Россия сегодня)*, which is today publishing articles in more than 30 different languages.

After the *color revolutions* and the Crimea annexation, both *RT* and *Sputnik* started using more aggressive rhetoric. Besides the escalation of anti-U.S. and anti-Western narratives, the media focused on Europe and the United States, trying to pay as much attention as possible to the issues that have been dividing Western societies, with the aim of polarizing the population. Using provocative headlines and controversial interpretations of events both in Russia and the world, both media have been resorting to disinformation and fake news. The process of strengthening domestic Russian media was occurring concurrently with the process of purchasing of the Western media, such as the British *The Independent* bought by the former KGB agent **Alexander Lebedev** and the French *France-Soir* bought by Putin's banker **Sergey Pugachev** and his son

**Alexander**. Nevertheless, such ventures did not have much success.

In addition, increasingly frequent activities of pro-Kremlin bloggers, trolls, and bots have been flooding social media, media, and Western discussion forums with pro-Putin comments. The strength and the potential of such campaigns came to light during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Coordinated efforts of the media, bloggers, trolls (**Prigozhin's** troll factory in Saint Petersburg), and bots were aimed at politically targeting the afore identified public, which, because of its political, social, or historical characteristics, was responsive to the Russian strategic narratives, such as the ones claiming that the West is a threat to traditional values, that NATO is aggressive, criminal organization, etc.

Simultaneously, the biggest PR agencies were hired – *Ketchum*, *Washington Group* with the seat in the United States, and *GPlus Europe* with its seat in Belgium. Besides, they were actively working with foreign lobbyists: **Henry Kissinger**, **James Baker**, **Thomas Graham**, **Gerhard Schroeder**, and **Bernard Walker**.

## SPIES AS A PART OF *SOFT POWER*

Intelligence services and agents are not usually perceived as an integral part of the *soft power* weaponry, and they do not surely fit in Nye's definition. However, intelligence services deserve a place in this analysis since they fit very well in Putin's definition of the concept.

Since the Crimea annexation, the narrative about the Russian intelligence services directed towards abroad – the GRU and the SVR – has become a current affair. Over the years, Russia has not hesitated to use the agencies as an important foreign policy tool, which have thus approved subversive activities

as an integral part of the Russian foreign policy and hybrid activity.

Just in 2021, there were four exposed activities – Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, and the latest one – the Czech Republic. For years now, Russia has been taking actions against the United States, its partners, and allies via services and organizations under its control – the examples include military support to the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine, attempted coup in Montenegro, meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2017 French elections, **Skripal** poisoning in the United Kingdom, and many more.

## RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

After Crimea, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has begun actively contributing to the implementation of the Russian *soft power* projects, i.e. it has become the Kremlin's tool. During Putin's rule, Russia has transformed from the bastion of communism to the defender of Orthodoxy, the Church, and traditional values. The unification of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (*Русская Православная Церковь Заграницей*) in May 2007<sup>9</sup>, with the latter becoming an administrative unit of the ROC, gave the Moscow Patriarchate an enormous influence in the Orthodox communities in different countries.

As **Marcel H. van Herpen** stated in his book titled *Putin's Propaganda Machine*, there are five reasons why Moscow has smoothly turned the ROC into an instrument to confront the West: **first**, the fact is that the ROC is not independent but tightly connected to the Kremlin and intelligence services; **second**, the ROC does not act as a universal carrier of moral standards as it presents itself; **third**, the ROC opposes to the freedom of religion; **fourth**, the ROC opposes to the Western democracy and universal human rights; and **fifth**, the ROC wholeheartedly supports Putin's neo-imperialist politics.<sup>10</sup>

## RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Russian activities in obstructing all efforts of the Western Balkan countries to integrate into NATO and the EU have been intensified after the intervention in Ukraine and the 2014 Crimea annexation. The Kremlin responded to the sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States by infiltrating the region and sowing discord whenever possible, using the Western Balkans' fertile ground, characterized by ethnic divisions, weak and insufficiently developed institutions, and controversial media scene.

The Balkans cherishes with Russia significant historic, cultural, and religious ties – this is actively propagated and sometimes even exaggerated by the

efforts of the Russian public diplomacy and the narratives of the Russian and pro-Russian subsidiaries and proxies in the Balkans.

From the Moscow perspective, the presence in the region is a sort of response to the West, which is very active and helps in the democratization of Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and other countries of the Russian *close abroad*. The failure of both the United States and the EU to clearly articulate a coherent and consistent approach to the Western Balkan region gave enough scope for the Russian interference. By directly or indirectly using its proxies in the Balkans, the Kremlin is undermining the regional

countries' chances for NATO membership, adopting an equivocal attitude towards the EU, while promoting itself as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West.

Russia continuously incites tensions among different communities, works on the strengthening of nationalist and right-wing movements, and creates an imbalance in the local media ecosystem and journalism. In North Macedonia, Russia was particularly active in the *#Bojkot* campaign during the referendum on the change of name. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is undermining the possibility of political and institutional cooperation between the two entities in the country. After the unsuccessful *coup d'état* in Montenegro, the negative media campaign was intensified, using Serbia and its tabloids as a *water heater* to carry out such activities. In the turbulent region of the Western Balkans, Russia does not even have to bother to create problems – it made an assessment that sometimes it only needs to exploit the dissatisfaction with the West that exists among a certain part of the population.

A set of tools from the Russian *soft power* box is large and includes economic instruments – particularly regarding the energy sector, strong media presence, disinformation, the Church, intelligence network, far-right organizations, the influence exercised through friendly politicians, political parties, and non-governmental sector, while playing on the card of rooted narrative about the common history and traditionally good, fraternal relations with the Orthodox countries.

However, it seems that the biggest success of Moscow lies in exploiting dissatisfaction that is present in the region due to the exhausting and uncertain European integration process and the EU's relation towards the aspirant countries. Simultaneously, it is cherishing ties with far-right and conservative political parties (such as the Democratic Front (Demokratski front – DF) in Montenegro) and trying to find common ground with ultranationalist groups.

Local proxies base their politics on alleged cherishing of tradition and historic ties with Russia and Serbia, insisting on *the unconditional Russian political support to the regional countries in hard times*, which is one of the best-installed false narratives among the wider population. The boundary between thoughts and facts is erased; the distrust in once credible sources of information is created; the room for creating simplified and yet effective anti-Western propaganda is allowed. The narratives are used in different variations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and are

spread depending on the occasion. They include the ones claiming that NATO is an aggressor, the EU is institutionally and politically weak, the United States wants to create Greater Albania, Montenegro does not benefit from NATO membership, etc. while portraying Russia as a historically reliable partner. Such rhetoric is spread through traditional media, social media; it is even used by local political, cultural, and other actors, and serves to present the West as a reason for the regional setback in democratic processes, the economics' falling behind, and ethnic divisions.

Even though nearly all of the Western Balkan countries have been targeted by pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in the past years, these activities have not been practically recognized at the local level as security or issues of interest, mostly because some governments and politicians have been directly in charge of their spreading.

The situation on the ground is not encouraging and it seems that the region is particularly susceptible to fake news and disinformation. This is corroborated by the *Media Literacy Index 2021 of the Open Society Institute*<sup>11</sup>, which has been ranking Albania, B&H, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia for years now at the bottom of the list of 35 countries – as the European countries least ready to identify and combat fake news, which is mostly a consequence of the situation in media and education.

Russia has used Serbia as a carefully prepared platform for its activities, whose ambivalent foreign policy positioning – as an EU aspirant country that is extensively following the foreign policy priorities of the Kremlin – represents a warning to the possibility that such a significant country might establish, for the overall regional perspective, a long-term partnership with Russia and become an anti-Western enclave in the heart of Europe, particularly regarding the strengthening of Euroscepticism and anti-immigration trends within the EU that could additionally and for a longer period postpone the complete Euro-Atlantic and European integration of the Western Balkan countries.

Besides the media, the Kremlin is using the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as an instrument of influence in the countries with a significant share of Orthodox people in the overall population. Moscow is launching a narrative on fraternal and common Orthodox heritage in order to strengthen its ties with political leaders, churches, and independent groups in B&H, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

# **INFLUENCE**

**THROUGH POLITICAL PARTIES,  
PROMINENT INDIVIDUALS,  
NGOS, CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS**



**T**he events in Montenegro after the change of government in the parliamentary elections in 2020 and the constant attempts to destabilize it are a clear sign that Russia has not given up on its aspirations in the Western Balkan region. The hysteria that spread propagandistically throughout the very carefully designed space under the working title of the *Serbian world* after the adoption of the *Resolution on the Genocide in Srebrenica* on June 17, 2021, in the Parliament of Montenegro, made obvious the role of certain actors on the Montenegrin political scene and shed additional light on Russian-Serbian operations on the Belgrade-Podgorica-Banja Luka route. Russia's imperial ambitions together with the great-power aspirations of Serbian nationalist circles represent an increasingly evident threat to democratic processes in the Western Balkan region, which is once again being offered projects that imply redrawing borders doomed to failure instead of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations.

Increased intensity of Russian influence in Montenegro particularly came to the fore after the invitation to join NATO in 2015 and was noticeable through the activities of certain political entities, NGOs, media, civic activists, and individuals, whose political and ideological concept is based on a change of strategic course of the country and its derail from the Western to the Eastern track. Since then, all of Moscow's moves have been aimed to increase divisions among citizens and expand influence in Montenegro, as well as to promote the Kremlin as the protector of the Orthodox Church and of citizens who identify themselves as Serbs, while weakening the Montenegrin state and discrediting NATO.

Russia's focus on Montenegro was motivated in terms of efforts to prevent the inevitable further loss of influence in the Western Balkans. Montenegro has already rejected Russia's request in 2013 to use the ports of Bar and Kotor for logistic support for its ships (which would allow the Russian fleet easy access to the Mediterranean). After it became certain that Montenegro would become the 29<sup>th</sup> member of the Alliance, the then Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, **Dmitry Rogozin**, pointed out that Montenegro would regret it.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2015, Russian influence in Montenegro can be viewed through several different spheres – culture, politics, religion, media, and implies propaganda, historical revisionism, spreading of narratives about the unity and harmony of Slavic peoples, and other ideas whose authorship can be attributed to the Kremlin. The Kremlin's activities are successful predominantly in environments where there are visible

internal, political, social, economic, and other issues, and where a certain part of the population takes the values of Western civilization with a grain of salt.

The combination of disinformation campaigns, media narratives, cyber-attacks, the continued use of the ROC and SOC as tools of the Kremlin's *soft power*, and support for ultra-right-wing pro-Russian conservative parties is a hallmark of Russia's negative influence in Montenegro. The Kremlin's presence became even more evident after a failed coup attempt during Montenegro's parliamentary elections in October 2016, as well as Montenegro's accession to NATO the following year.

The Church has been continuously involved in anti-NATO, anti-Western rallies, protests, and demonstrations, parliamentary and local elections, and has been vocal on almost every political or social issue, violating the principle of secularism and constantly promoting the Russian narrative. The influence of the Church in Montenegro is very strong, which was shown in the events during 2020. Public opinion polls rank the Serbian Orthodox Church among the top institutions in terms of citizens' trust.<sup>13</sup> Russia is aware of this and uses the Church whenever it needs to convey a message or narrative to the masses.

As the analysis shows, there is a clear parallel in the attitudes of the SOC and the ROC towards the Orthodox Churches of Montenegro and Ukraine. Both the SOC and the ROC deny the existence of the Montenegrin or Ukrainian identity, and thus the Montenegrin or Ukrainian nation and state. The role of these narratives is to justify Serbian nationalism and the process of Russian hegemony in its *close abroad*.

The activities of these entities are significantly coordinated from Moscow, mainly through Serbia as a platform for the implementation of Russian interests and goals in the Western Balkans. The very carefully designed narrative, which is partly based on the historical heritage of Montenegro, but also complete confabulations, implies a quasi-nationalist construct on the need to *return Montenegro to traditional values within the wider Orthodox, pan-Slavic community*. The project is based on the Russian concept of *soft power*, within which there is no place for Montenegrin national identity, culture, and history. After the change of government in Montenegro under the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, that significantly determines the political dynamics of the ruling majority, its civic concept, secularism, and anti-fascist values on which the modern Montenegrin state is based are also in question.

## RUSSIAN WORLD AND SERBIAN WORLD

Serbia, as a predominantly Orthodox country in which the notions of nationality and religion are equated so that Serbhood (the state of being a Serb) and Orthodoxy are equated, is an ideal testing ground for articulating Russian interests. The specific position and complex relations with Montenegro, but with other countries in the region, favor the action of Russian *soft power* in the Western Balkans.

The idea of creating a *Serbian world* is one of the key tools for spreading Russian influence, and its goal is to undermine Western values, as well as the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkan region. In March 2021, the Digital Forensic Center published a detailed analysis of what this Greater Serbia ambition represents and how it is being implemented.<sup>14</sup>

The construct of *the Serbian world* is a copy of the initiative of the Russian world (*Russkiy Mir*), which was institutionalized through the foundation of the same name. The idea of *the Serbian world* is based on the same principles on which the Russian world is built. *The Serbian world* implies a narrative about the endangerment of Serbs in territories outside Serbia in the function of their homogenization, historical revisionism, denial of the national identity of certain peoples in the immediate neighborhood, and an attempt to fully bind them to the Serbian national corps, with a clear ambition to decide in Belgrade on all vital issues concerning parts of the population identifying themselves Serbs, wherever they live. In essence, it is about the continuity of the old hegemonic idea of a Greater Serbia, which was one of the main causes of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the bloody ethnic conflicts that took place on its territory in the 1990s.

A concrete example of the coincidence of the *two worlds* is the attitude of Russia towards Ukraine on one side, and Serbia towards Montenegro on the other. The Russian world denies the right to the existence of the Ukrainian identity and identifies it with the Russian one, and that is the same manner in which the idea of *the Serbian world* acts towards the Montenegrin identity and the historical heritage of Montenegro. Also, both countries have similarly supported the spread of these ideologies through laws and bylaws, and declarations.

After a failed coup attempt in 2016, which aimed to thwart Montenegro's accession into NATO, Russia changed its approach and left Serbia to destabilize

the 29<sup>th</sup> NATO member in cooperation with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian entities in Montenegro.

The change of government in Montenegro in the 2020 parliamentary elections and the dominant participation of pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political entities in the newly formed parliamentary majority is a key step towards Montenegro's complete immersion in the Serbian world. Following the example of Russia's *soft power*, Serbia is openly interfering in the internal affairs of Montenegro, with propaganda, launching disinformation and fake news in order to support its favorites on the Montenegrin political scene. Several DFC surveys have shown the extent to which they have gone and how the Belgrade media have reported when it comes to developments in Montenegro.

The electoral success of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces in the parliamentary elections in August 2020 was achieved with the material, media, and infrastructural assistance of Belgrade and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Montenegrin elections, first parliamentary (August 2020), then local elections in Niksic (March 2021), took on the character of an internal issue of the Republic of Serbia, which was manifested by open interference of Serbian political structures in Montenegrin electoral processes, with activists of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, headed by President **Aleksandar Vucic**, who provided significant field support to pro-Serbian political parties in Montenegro.

**Milorad Vucelic**, director of *Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS)* during Slobodan Milosevic's rule, clearly defined the goal of the architects of the *Serbian world*, which is *the final defeat of Djukanovic's project, that is the most important among necessary preconditions for Montenegro's return to where it has always belonged, into its Serbian world* (*Pecat*, issue No. 657, March 19, 2021).

The next target of Serbia is the census in Montenegro, which has been planned for 2021. The importance of the census in Montenegro was emphasized on several occasions by President Vucic, who hinted that Serbia would continue to do everything in its power to influence the results of the census, while the DF is blackmailing the survival of the Government by holding it this year. From numerous statements and publicly announced positions of Serbian politicians, intellectuals, prominent individuals in various fields of life, it can be concluded that this kind of engineering



should have as a favorable result accomplishment of the dominant influence of the Serbian national corps in Montenegro. Media outlets such as *Sputnik* published logistical details of the *recyrillicization* blitzkrieg of Montenegro and its *artificial identity*, which is, in fact, a continuation of the long-standing denial of Montenegrin uniqueness and identity by the Serbian and Russian media. A possible change in the demographic structure in Montenegro, according to their understanding of things, would break down the last obstacle to Montenegro's integration into the *Serbian world*.

Aleksandar Vucic, who has been trying to present himself as a guarantor of peace and stability in the Balkans since his coming to power, insists in his statements on the unity of the Serbian national corps on a regional principle. Other high-ranking Serbian state officials and representatives of the movements and the parties do not hesitate to promote the idea of the *Serbian world* at every possible opportunity. However, the role of the main promoter of the concept of the *Serbian world* was given to the Minister of Interior **Aleksandar Vulin**, who used every opportunity to comment on the events in Montenegro and sharply criticize the actions of the former and current Montenegrin government, stating that creation of the *Serbian world* is only a matter of time and that implementation of it has already begun.

## EXTENDED ARM OF RUSSIA IN MONTENEGRO

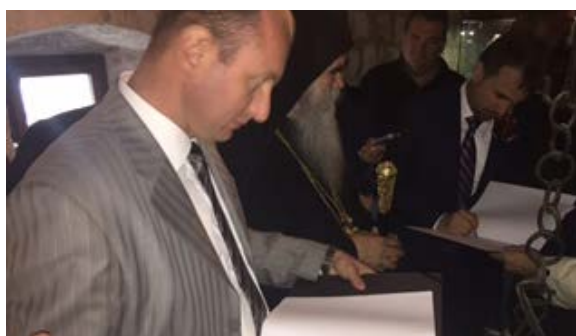
The most direct exponent of foreign Russian-Serbian activity in the political life of Montenegro is the Democratic Front, a coalition that brings together programmatically diverse parties (New Serbian Democracy (Nova srpska demokratija – NSD), Democratic People's Party (Demokratska narodna partija – DNP) and Movement for Changes (Pokret za promjene – PzP)), whose certain constituents act from openly nationalistic, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian positions. The activities of this political organization are fully harmonized with the official positions of Moscow and Belgrade, and the cooperation is implemented in direct contact with various Russian subjects and representatives of the authorities in Serbia.

The first indications that something significant had changed in the proverbially uninventive and fruitless political performances of the Democratic Front were noticeable with the approach of Montenegro's full membership in NATO. The activities of the DF were better designed, and the emphasis was placed

on non-institutional forms of action, with more and more conspicuous verbal and physical aggression of the leaders and supporters of this coalition during the street protests. It was also evident that the financing of their activities is not a problem at all, and the almost daily street performances of the DF culminated in the formation of the so-called tent settlement in front of the Parliament of Montenegro in October 2015. This unusually well-designed action was strongly supported by certain political circles from Moscow, although the official Kremlin denied any participation or support to the protests.<sup>15</sup>

Russian officials, especially former Duma Vice President and United Russia official **Sergei Zheleznyak** who stood out, advocated a referendum on Montenegro's accession into NATO and threatened with economic sanctions, which soon became the mantra of all opponents of Montenegro's entry into NATO.<sup>16</sup>

Moscow's increasingly direct campaign, mediated by the Democratic Front, was continued in early May 2016, when the *Lovcen Declaration* on mutual cooperation between the All-Russian United Russia Party and the Democratic People's Party of Montenegro was signed in Njegos' house-museum in Cetinje, with the blessing of Metropolitan **Amfilohije** of Montenegro and the Littoral. The *Lovcen Declaration* was signed for the common good of the two states and fraternal peoples by the President of the DNP, **Milan Knezevic**, and the representative of the All-Russian party United Russia **Viktor Kolbanovski**.<sup>17</sup>



**Milan Knezevic and Viktor Kolbanovski – signing of the *Lovcen Declaration* in 2016**

Putin's United Russia signed a *Declaration of Cooperation* with 10 parties from five Balkan countries during the party's 15<sup>th</sup> congress in late June 2016, the same day it was announced that then US President **Barack Obama** had sent a letter to the US Senate to start the ratification process of the *Protocol on Montenegro's accession to NATO*. These are mostly radical parties with a nationalist background

from Serbia, Republic of Srpska, and Montenegro, such as the Serbian Progressive Party, Aleksandar Vucic; Serbian People's Party, Nenad Popovic; Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, Milorad Dodik; New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party, and from the then coalition *KEY* – Socialist People's Party.

The emphasis in all declarations is placed on the *joint fight against international terrorism*, support for the *joint preservation of spiritual, social values, Christian shrines – monuments of the spiritual and cultural-historical heritage of world civilization*, as well as renunciation of the politics of the *anti-Russian sanctions* imposed by the West after Moscow annexed Crimea.

What is especially interesting in these declarations, and it concerns parties from countries that are not EU members, is the commitment to anti-NATO actions and the formation of a kind of a bloc of military-neutral states.<sup>18</sup>

In July 2016, Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, said that Moscow regretted the refusal of the Montenegrin authorities to call a referendum on Montenegro's accession to NATO, warning that Russia would respond to the accumulation of NATO weapons.<sup>19</sup>

## MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS

The attempted coup on the day of the parliamentary elections in October 2016, behind which, according to the indictment of the Special Prosecutor's Office, were some members of the Russian military intelligence service GRU, pointed to the depth and seriousness of relations between Moscow and political parties in Montenegro. Initially, DF leaders Milan Knezevic and **Andrija Mandic** were sentenced to five years in prison in 2019 for participating in a Russia-sponsored coup attempt in 2016. After the Court of Appeals revoked the first instance verdict in this case on February 5, 2021, and returned the case to the Court Council for retrial in other composition, the first hearing in the retrial was scheduled for May 31, 2021, but due to a lawyer's strike, it was postponed to October 18, 2021.

The first instance verdict for the coup attempt stated that Mandic and Knezevic traveled to Moscow on several occasions during 2016, which was not the case in 2014 and 2015.

Less than two months after the coup attempt on the night of the parliamentary elections, the two DF leaders traveled to Moscow. On that occasion, they met with the Deputy Speaker of the Duma, **Peter**

**Tolstoy**, who denied the participation or connection of Russia with any illegal activities in Montenegro, and stressed that Russia has never betrayed and will never betray its allies.<sup>20</sup> Tolstoy reminded that politicians from the DF received strong support from the then Duma leadership at the beginning of the year, led by **Sergey Naryshkin**<sup>21</sup>, and added that the new convocation and the new Duma leadership would have the same attitude towards the DF and that they considered Mandic and Knezevic sincere friends. During their stay in Moscow, Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic also met with Vladimir Putin's adviser, **Sergey Glazev**, whom they introduced to the current political events in Montenegro. As it was announced at the time, Glazev *assured DF leaders that Russia would do everything to shed light on the so-called coup in Montenegro*, paying special respect to DF leaders *who make great sacrifices for the love for their country, defending traditional values according to which Montenegro used to be famous for*.

In May 2017, Mandic and Knezevic paid an unexpected visit to Moscow, which followed shortly after a statement by Putin's close ally and senior United Russia official Sergei Zheleznyak that the Montenegrin opposition should have a single presidential candidate in the upcoming presidential election scheduled for April 2018.<sup>22</sup>

In September 2017, the same Mandic-Knezevic tandem received an invitation from Sergei Zheleznyak to be guests of the party's leadership in the second half of September. The topics of discussion were: development of inter-party relations with political forces in the Balkans; analysis of the political situation in Montenegro, the Balkans, and Europe; as well as directions for future cooperation. However, this visit never happened because the High Court in Podgorica confiscated the passports of DF leaders ahead of the trial for the alleged coup attempt.<sup>23</sup>



The DF leaders at the meeting with Zheleznyak in Moscow

In January 2019, the President of the New Serbian Democracy Andrija Mandic, the leader of the Democratic People's Party Milan Knezevic, and the

President of the True Montenegro (Prava Crna Gora) **Marko Milacic** attended a luncheon in Belgrade organized by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on the occasion of President Vladimir Putin's visit, who was told that the majority of Montenegro perceives him as their President, as they perceived the Russian Tsar as their own during the Principality and Kingdom of Montenegro.



**Montenegrin opposition representatives with Vladimir Putin in Belgrade in 2019**

The President of the Committee for International Cooperation of the Russian Duma **Leonid Slutsky** invited DF leaders Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic to visit Moscow in June 2021, with the aim of discussing current issues at the level of mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries. During the visit, Mandic and Knezevic held a series of meetings with representatives of the Duma, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and leading people of the Russian air traffic, tourism, and economy. Also, the leaders of the DF met with the leaders of the Russian state-owned United Shipbuilding Corporation. Russian businessmen pointed out the possibility of investments in the field of shipbuilding, and a visit of the management of the United Shipbuilding Corporation to Montenegro is planned in order to consider the partnership. Although it was said that the goal of this was to improve the cooperation between the two countries, the timing opens space for many questions. On their way back, they received a blessing in Belgrade from the Serbian Patriarch **Porfirije** to *protect and defend the interests of our holy Serbian Orthodox Church and the believing people of Montenegro in the new Government.*<sup>24</sup>

## RENOWNED INDIVIDUALS

The Vice President of the New Serbian Democracy, **Strahinja Bulajic**, who was elected Vice President of the Parliament of Montenegro after the 2020 parliamentary elections, in his frequent interviews for

(pro)Serbian and Russian media demonstrates the rigidity of personal attitudes and the commitment of political structure he represents. Bulajic did not mitigate the anti-Western and predominantly pro-Russian rhetoric, not even after having been elected one of the leaders of the highest legislative body, despite the proclaimed strategic commitments of Montenegro that were confirmed by the Agreement signed by the leaders of the three winning coalitions immediately after the parliamentary elections. The Agreement primarily refers to the principles the new government will rest upon, which imply cooperation with NATO, the continuation of the EU integration process, incontrovertible Kosovo recognition, and which exclude the change of the Montenegrin national symbols.

Bulajic's views are always very precisely and consistently harmonized with the views of Moscow and Belgrade. In this regard, he stated that both nations – Montenegrin and Ukrainian – were formed under the patronage of the communist authorities in the twentieth century as a product of ideological experiments, claiming that the first Serbian states and the Serbian church emerged in the area of today's Montenegro, and the region of Ukraine first Russian state and Russian church.<sup>25</sup>

In September 2014, Bulajic was a participant in an international gathering in Moscow dedicated to traditional family values, sponsored by Russian billionaire **Konstantin Malofeyev**, close to Russian President Putin. Malofeyev was banned from entering Montenegro in 2015 after he was on the list of Russian citizens under the European Union sanctions due to the annexation of Crimea.

During the past years, Bulajic had frequent communication with Russian representatives as well as exponents of Russian politics in Montenegro. At the end of 2015, he participated online in an international round table dedicated to Montenegro's future membership in NATO titled *Montenegro: Prospects for Resolving the Crisis. Political dialogue*. On the Russian side, the round table was attended by Deputy Chairman of the Duma Sergei Zheleznyak; member of the State Duma Committee for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots **Vasily Likhachev**; member of the State Duma Defense Committee **Vyacheslav Tetekin**; political scientist, historian, publicist **Elena Ponomareva**; Director of the *Balkan Center for International Cooperation* **Viktor Kolbanovski**; and representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition to Bulajic, representatives of the then opposition parties



participated on behalf of Montenegro: Andrija Mandić, Milan Knežević, **Mladen Bojanic**, **Srdjan Milic**, **Goran Danilovic**, and **Aleksa Becić**.<sup>26</sup>

Earlier that year, a round table was held in Moscow on NATO enlargement to the Western Balkans and future implications for regional security. The event was attended by, among others, Marko Milacić as the leader of the *Movement for Neutrality of Montenegro* (*Pokret za neutralnost*); Strahinja Bulajić in front of the New Serbian Democracy; coordinator of international cooperation of the movement *No to War – No to NATO!* (*Ne u rat – Ne u NATO!*) **Igor Damjanović**; Deputy of the *Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots* in Montenegro **Veniamin Striga**; Deputy State Duma of the Russian Federation **Alexander Prokopyev**; President of the Russian public organization *Savez Srba* (*Alliance of Serbs*) **Bozidar Mitrović**; **Nikita Bondarev** on behalf of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Research*; Viktor Kolbanovski, as a representative of the *Balkan Center for International Cooperation*.<sup>27</sup>

**Jovan Vucurović**, a member of the Democratic Front and a member of the New Serbian Democracy, who was appointed chairperson of the parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms after the parliamentary elections, stands out for his nationalist views, strong pro-Russian and anti-NATO positions. As a spokesman of the New Serbian Democracy, Vucurović always commented on the actions of the former governments led by the DPS towards the Russian Federation. He assessed the proposal of the decision on the introduction of restrictive measures concerning actions that undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine in 2015, as a *hostile act towards Russia, which seeks to further deteriorate relations with that country*. For him, it was a *continuation of the subservient and puppet policy of the Montenegrin government in relation to NATO*.

Vucurović was a strong opponent of Montenegro's accession to NATO, explaining that *the decision to join this offensive military alliance is in direct conflict with our civilization affiliation, and can very quickly cause us such harmful consequences that could jeopardize our survival in the territory of today's Montenegro*.

On the sidelines of the International Conference *Belgrade Dialogue: For the Constructive Relations with Russia and Recognition of the Will of the People of Crimea*, MP Vucurović, then a member of the Montenegrin Parliamentary Committee on International Relations, spoke with senior Russian officials

led by **Natalia Poklonska**, Deputy Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation; **Georgi Muradov**, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Crimea and Permanent Representative of the President of Russia in Crimea, along with Senator **Sergey Pavlovich Tsekov**, member of the Federation Council for International Affairs. The statement of the DF then emphasized that Russia supports the policy of the DF, which is focused on the values of traditional Montenegro and the preservation of fraternal and friendly relations among Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia, as well as between the Serbian and Russian people.

Even after coming to power, Vucurović continued with identical rhetoric, which is primarily recognized by the spread of narratives about traditional values and fraternal relations between Montenegro and Russia. Judging by his controversial performances both in the Parliament and in the media, Vucurović purposefully wants to radicalize the situation in Montenegro and further deepen the divisions in Montenegrin society.

The President of the True Montenegro and MP of the Montenegrin Parliament Marko Milacić is the best example of a political convert who went from a national Montenegrin and a proponent of Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic path to an ethnic Serb and an MP who promotes Serbhood and Orthodoxy and advocates the closest possible cooperation with Russia. Milacić is a long-term project of Moscow, and with his entry into the Montenegrin Parliament, only its first phase was completed.

He has shown ambition since the episode on the national RTCG TV channel during 2009 when he readily accepted the offer to host the foreign policy show *Globus* (*The Globe*) as a novice journalist. The recently deceased Serbian ambassador to Moscow, **Miroslav Lazanski**, a journalist and military analyst at the time, an advocate of hard Serbian politics and close relations between Serbia and Russia, was a guest on the show several times.

During 2011, Milacić participated in social protests organized by unions and the NGO MANS. At that time, he was eagerly seeking social justice, and in his speech in front of RTCG, he referred to his partisan ancestors. The next step in Milacić's journalistic career was the weekly *Monitor*, for which he wrote with varying degrees of success.

In the same year when he left RTCG, Milacić realized that he was not ready to accept Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic path. Together with Miroslav Lazanski

and the editor of the *IN4S* portal, **Gojko Raicevic**, he often spoke at tribunes and conferences, always advocating anti-NATO views. The Milacic-Raicevic duo has become inseparable, and the latter's portal has since regularly and emphatically followed Milacic's statements and activities.

The path from NATO advocate to the Alliance's bitter opponent led through the *Movement for Neutrality*, which Milacic founded in 2014. It was then that the coincidence of his views with the officially proclaimed Russian policy became evident. Russia then took the position that the best solution for Montenegro is military neutrality, as well as that it is necessary to organize a referendum in which the citizens of Montenegro would vote on joining NATO. Milacic's *Movement for Neutrality* also advocated identical views.

Milacic's transformation is not surprising if one knows about his closeness to the exponents of Russian politics in the Balkans and connections with right-wing politicians and activists such as **Boris Malagurski**, **Ivan Pernar**, **Drasko Stanivukovic**, **Fedja Dimovic**, **Bosko Obradovic**, as well as media outlets, such as *Sputnik*, *IN4S*, etc.

The invitation for NATO membership sent to Montenegro in December 2015 was a turning point for further tightening of Russia's positions. At the same time, Milacic abruptly abandoned the narrative of neutrality and turned to harsh anti-NATO rhetoric. This paved the way for him to the Russian and Belgrade media and opened the space for numerous visits and high-level meetings. Unlike previous years, when he promoted his views in a relatively civilized way at panels and conferences of civil society organizations in Montenegro, since 2016, all events organized by Milacic and the ones where he took part were characterized by exclusivity and radical methods of expressing views.

Milacic openly promoted the Kremlin's views through the activities of the *Otpor beznadju* movement (*Resistance to Hopelessness*). The movement represents an extended arm of the *Movement for Neutrality* and advocates *sovereignty over domestic usurpers and the ruling gang, foreign usurpers embodied in military alliances such as NATO, and the neoliberal economic concept that erodes states and societies*.

Trying to turn Russia's support into influence in Montenegro and strengthen his activities, Milacic tried to get closer to the Democratic Front, with which he shared many ideological views, and he spoke on their behalf several times in the then pre-election debates.

Milacic did not limit his activities to Montenegro. At the end of 2016, he participated in the tenth *EU-Russia* forum, in the European Parliament in Brussels. In his speech, direct Russian influence was noticeable through the use of narratives that the Kremlin had begun to spread, in order to influence the situation in Montenegro, the Balkans, but also in the European Union. Milacic's key message was that the EU and the Balkans should build close relations with Russia and that both the USA and NATO are to be blamed for the deterioration of those relations. He also attended a number of anti-NATO activities in Brussels, Minsk, Sweden, Bosnia, and Herzegovina and became a visible exponent of Russian action and influence.

In the following 2017 year, Milacic worked on strengthening ties with Moscow, Belgrade, and other satellites of Russian activity. In order to deter Montenegro from NATO, he organized a *Referendumski caravan* (*Referendum Caravan*) going through nine European countries, spreading anti-NATO views under the guise of a civic initiative.

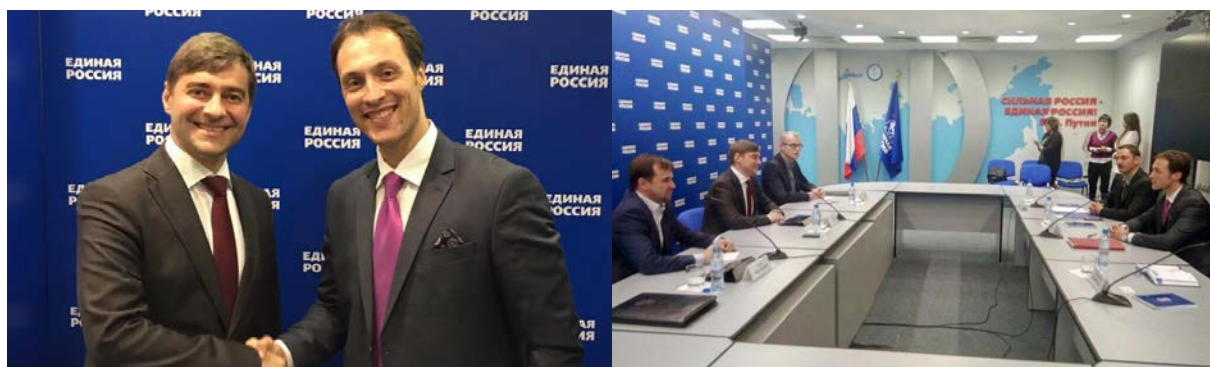
A new visit to the EP soon followed, where he spoke along with **Konstantin Zatulin**, **Vladimir Lukin**, and Russia's ambassador to the EU, **Vladimir Chizhov**, about Europe's unfair attitude and sanctions against Russia.

Since then, he has appeared regularly in Russian and Serbia-based pro-Russian media, such as *Russia 1*, *RT*, *Sputnik*, *Srpska TV*, *Balkan INFO*, *O2*, *ATV*, *RTS*, *B92*. This campaign aimed to point out Milacic as a relevant political entity in Montenegro and the region, further raise his rating and popularity, and prepare the ground for his future party.

Milacic got a significant media space on *Sputnik*, thanks not only to his views but also to his kinship with the editor-in-chief **Ljubinka Milincic**. He was a guest in various shows on *Sputnik*, and most often in shows hosted by Lazanski.

Relations with Moscow were made official during his first (public) stay in Moscow on October 23, 2017. On that occasion, he visited United Russia and met with Sergei Zheleznyak. A meeting with the youth of that party followed. Milacic's visit was observed by the then Honorary Consul of Russia in Montenegro **Boro Djukic**, who according to several sources is most responsible for organizing his trips and meetings in Moscow, where the main thesis was that a small group of people in power occupied everything in Montenegro, being a hostage to NATO.<sup>28</sup>

At that time, the public in Montenegro, through a statement published on the central part of the



**Milacic at the meeting with Zheleznyak (left)**  
**Milacic with the United Russia representatives (right)**

United Russia website, was informed that Zheleznyak had presented Russia's concern over the situation in Montenegro and the Balkans as a whole and suggested *that only a united opposition could oppose the Montenegrin regime's criminal activities*.

It is clear that this statement was not only a direct announcement of Marko Milacic's party launch but is also indicative of the source of funding for all of Milacic's previous activities, visits, movements, and initiatives. Marko Milacic and his party were profiled as an additional political factor, directly responsible to Moscow, not to Belgrade, in order to overthrow the then government and install pro-Russian entities at key positions in Montenegro.

In Moscow, Milacic also presented his intention to run for president of Montenegro. The fact that the honorary Russian consul in Montenegro Boro Djukic supported him as a presidential candidate, as well as his unrevealed participation in the founding of Milacic's party The True Montenegro unequivocally showed that Moscow intervened in the then-presidential race and provided logistical support to Milacic.



**Marko Milacic and Vladimir Putin**

In the presidential election, Milacic won only 2.81% of the votes. However, bearing in mind that he was recognized by the majority of the Montenegrin public as a frivolous sensationalist, that number of votes is not negligible and showed that he would not be an episodic phenomenon on the Montenegrin political scene.

Milacic took a surprisingly high third place on the opposition's election list formed ahead of August 30 with the DF as its main constituent, which could not belong to him either in respect of his personal influence or the influence of the party. Shortly after the formation of the new parliamentary majority in the Parliament of Montenegro, Milacic left the parliamentary club of the Democratic Front and decided to continue acting as an (in)dependent MP.

In the context of Milacic's activities, **Vladislav Dajkovic** who accompanied him on frequent trips to Russia should also be mentioned. Dajkovic is the former Secretary of the True Montenegro who was dismissed by Milacic under unexplained circumstances in October 2019, with a brief explanation that it happened due to *the insurmountable loss of professional and personal trust*. Today, Dajkovic is a regular guest of the media under the control of the current Serbian government, i.e. President Vucic. Frequent guest appearances in the media in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, which also promoted him as a *prominent young politician and future mayor of Podgorica*, contributed to his media presence, especially after the change of government in Montenegro.



## NEW GOVERNMENT IN MONTENEGRO

The heterogeneous post-election ruling coalition in Montenegro brings together all right-wing structures that have long performed from the platform of traditionalism and conservatism in their own interpretation, which in real political life has its expression through their covert or overt advocacy for Montenegro's diversion from the West and turning to the centers in Belgrade and Moscow.

What contributes to that is the fact that the principles and priorities proclaimed in the Agreement signed immediately after the elections by the leaders of the three coalitions that constitute the current government are not sincerely accepted by all political subjects of the parliamentary majority that supports the current Government.

Among them, the Democratic Front stands out for its undisguised pro-Serbian and pro-Russian views, whose leaders Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević do not veil the fact that they are coordinating their policy with Belgrade and the *President of all Serbs*, Aleksandar Vučić. As self-proclaimed *the only true representatives and protectors of the Serbian people in Montenegro*, Mandić and Knežević regularly travel to Belgrade for consultations, and it is not uncommon for the President of Serbia to send a plane of the Government of the Republic of Serbia for them. Their political activities can be sublimated within the narrative of the alleged endangerment of Serbhood and Serbs in Montenegro, the need for a stronger connection between Montenegro and Serbia, as well as the renewal of a strong partnership with Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Although they express open dissatisfaction with the composition and work of the Government of **Zdravko Krivokapić**, the representatives of the Democratic Front managed to install their numerous staff in the state administration. This is also their key interest in this phase of the implementation of the *Serbian World* project. The parliamentary majority and the Government also tried to make electoral engineering through changes decisions on residency and actual address and modeling of electoral roll on the basis of which they could provide an advantage in future electoral processes, which was unsuccessful due to determined opposing of both the current opposition and the significant number of Montenegrin citizens that express their views at a peaceful protest.

In the context of increasingly noticeable activities on the formation of the Serbian world, the activities of the new Minister are characteristic, who have



Vesna Bratic at a reception in the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Podgorica

united four departments in her portfolio: education, science, culture, and sports. Minister **Vesna Bratic**, the successor of Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić as the President of the NGO *We won't give up Montenegro* (*Ne damo Crnu Goru*), defended the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Her attitudes and efforts shed some stronger light on the ideological profiling of the so-called Krivokapić's expert Government, whose ministers he himself chose based on their expertise, calling them apostles at the beginning of their terms.

It can be stated that Minister Bratic, who originated from Bosnia and Herzegovina (she received Montenegrin citizenship a few years ago), has the same deniable pattern of the Montenegrin nation as officials and activists from Serbia. As a professor of English language and literature at the University of Montenegro, she has used the names *Novocrnogorci* (*New Montenegrins*), *Montenegrini* (*Montenegrins*), *Dukljani* (*Docleans*), and *Milogorci* (*Milo's Montenegrins*) for Montenegrins, similar to her spiritual father, the late Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral.<sup>30</sup> Such attitudes correlate with her earlier performances in which she declared herself a Serbian nationalist and a Chetnik woman. The denial of the national identity of Montenegrins in this way by the Minister who heads the departments dealing with education and culture can strongly affect the system of value of young people, given the mass dismissal of current primary and secondary school principals in Montenegro and the appointments of acting directors among whom some are defenders of war criminals and promoters of the Chetnik movement.

Having in mind the *modus operandi*, as well as the success in installing its exponents at important positions in the country, additional attempts can be expected to infiltrate Russian and Serbian exponents into all government structures, with the ultimate goal of integration into the *Serbian world* and changes in Montenegro's foreign policy. One of the most obvious examples of this intention is the appointment of the former correspondent of *Sputnik* from Montenegro, **Nebojsa Popovic**, as the president of the Management Board of the Public Company for National Parks of Montenegro.

## POLITICAL PATRONAGE

All three constituents of the new government (coalitions *For the Future of Montenegro* (*Za buducnost Crne Gore*), *Peace is Our Nation* (*Mir je nasa nacija*), and *Black and White* (*Crno na bijelo*)) in Montenegro were explicit that the previous practice of party employment and nepotism carried out by the previous government should never be repeated in Montenegro. They agreed that they should use the knowledge and skills of experts, regardless of their party affiliation, who will not be able to use their functions and jobs for personal enrichment and embezzlement at the expense of the state and its citizens. This thesis was confirmed in a now recognizable style by the then Prime Minister-Designate, current Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic, by saying that *Christians do not take revenge*. However, so, far, the practice and the results of the new Government work have shown something completely different.

Numerous examples of political patronage testify that the dismantling of the party-nepotistic employment system, as agreed between the Prime Minister-Designate and the heads of the parliamentary clubs of the ruling majority parties, did not happen.

Even the position of the European Commission that depoliticized and professional public institutions are of the utmost importance for efficient public administration, which enjoys the trust of citizens, did not stagger the new government to appoint staff following party and family lines. After mass layoffs and the dismissals of often expert staff, the parties of the ruling majority appointed their staff at positions of importance.

Shortly after the parliamentary elections held in August 2020, a table appeared on social networks and in the media, which was made by the three ruling coalitions with the aim of efficient distribution of leading positions in state-owned companies, agencies, institutions, and other public institutions. In addition to the fact that having the *party key* was a priority during the appointment, individuals without the necessary work experience, references, and formal education were appointed to certain positions.

In July 2021, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic, in fact, confirmed that only political patronage was conducted, stating that the ruling parties received all such functions as they wished in the first place.<sup>31</sup> According to data from the same month, the Democratic Front, i.e. Andrija Mandic's New Serbian Democracy and Milan Knezevic's Democratic People's Party, won 264 positions in public companies, the Socialist People's Party 88, and the Movement for Changes 85 functions. Therefore, the coalition *For the Future of Montenegro* received a total of two-thirds of the functions, while one-third, i.e. 145 functions, were divided between the coalitions *Peace is Our Nation* and *Black and White*.<sup>32</sup> The very parties that insisted on the removal of the Prime Minister had the biggest benefits, and they can be seen in delegating 437 functions in public companies in which the majority package of shares is held by the state.

## ACTIVISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to officials working in the service of the *Serbian world*, numerous activists and organizations publish on a daily basis narrative about the project of uniting all Serbs in the region, while denying the Montenegrin identity and fundamental values of Montenegrin anti-fascism.

The project of the pro-Russian portal *IN4S* is responsible for the *boom* of the phrase *Serbian world*. In the middle of 2020, the editorial board of this media launched a project called *Nacionalna TV*, with the

central show *Serbian world* (*Srpski sv(ij)et*), which is broadcast from Belgrade. The goal of this project is to promote the idea of the *Serbian world*.

Since then, the phrase *Serbian world* has been in daily political use, and this construct has been forced by tabloids in Serbia and Montenegro, Serbian officials and pro-Serbian politicians in Montenegro, and related activists, journalists, and historians, forming a nationalist narrative of the need to revive Serbia as a *protector of all Serbs in the diaspora*.



The main experts and interlocutors on the creation of the *Serbian world* are **Dragoslav Bokan**, director and former leader of the *Beli orlovi* (White Eagles) paramilitary formation, also responsible for the name of the project launched by IN4S, historians **Aleksandar Rakovic** and **Cedomir Antic** who are the most prominent advocates of unification of Montenegro, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska into one federal state.

The statements of Antic and Rakovic are often full of insults against Montenegro and Montenegrins. For them, Montenegro is a fascist country, and Montenegrins are a *people with a mental fallacy*. It is noticeable that lately these two historians, as well as politicians in Serbia, have been focusing on the census in Montenegro. The culmination of their ideas is the national engineering plan, according to which in the next census in Montenegro the number of Serbs should be increased (which according to the last census amounted to 28.73%), while the number of Montenegrins should be reduced to only 25% (from the current 44.98%), thus creating conditions for Montenegro to become a part of the *Serbian world* as easily as possible. In that manner, Montenegro would become a Serbian state and a strategic triangle Belgrade-Podgorica-Banja Luka could be formed.

Such explicit publicly announced positions are supported by a very serious political, media, propaganda infrastructure that operates simultaneously in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and Montenegro. Political parties of right-wing provenance, organizations, and associations, numerous groups on social networks, acting on the Russian model, promote conservative, extreme right-wing, anti-globalist ideas in a hypocritical, ideologically superficial, and conflicting way, not hesitating to spread lies, insults, and to intimidate opponents. All attempts to oppose such attitudes are exposed to insults in the media and on social networks, with threats and new insults against Montenegro and Montenegrins, with a passive attitude of state institutions or their occasional activities.

In the context of the creation of the *Serbian world*, it is important to mention two organizations: *Srbi na okup* (Serbs Reunited) and *Srbska akcija* (Serbian action). The first was founded as an all-Serbian, patriotic organization that cherishes Saint Sava's ideology and which cites as one of the biggest problems the Serbian people cope with *decades of insidious disintegration and fragmentation of the Serbian national and state space that has lasted to this day*, and in that process, more *anti-Serbian little states and autonomies* were created. This statement alludes to Montenegro, which is included in the circle of *Serbian countries* on the website of this organization.

That this organization stands for the creation of the *Serbian world* is confirmed by an item of the program

– *the aspiration for the liberation and unification of Serbian countries: such as Montenegro, Western Slavonia, Serbian Dalmatia, i.e. Knin Krajina, Southern Serbia, Old Serbia, Bosnian Krajina.*

One of the important items of the program is to rely on Russia, as the only supporter of resisting globalization and preservation of Saint Sava's identity, as well as abandoning all programs that would lead to the integration of the Serbian Army into NATO structures.

Another organization, *Srbska akcija*, is an ultranationalist movement, active in Serbia since 2010, largely based on<sup>33</sup> the positions of **Dimitrije Ljotic**, an associate of the German occupiers during World War II, as well as Bishop **Nikolaj Velimirovic** and General **Milan Nedic**. One of the main goals of the movement is to *persevere in the fight for the survival of the Serbian people and the renewal of the Orthodox faith among today's Serbs*. It is one of the numerous organizations that promote the concept of the *Serbian world* in its program. *In terms of territory, the Serbian state should be united and include as much of the Serbian patriotic regions as possible, which is nowadays mostly occupied. Apart from today's Serbia (including, of course, Kosovo and Metohija), the Serbian homeland includes Montenegro, Krajina (with Slavonia and Dalmatia), Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Southern Serbia (Macedonia).*<sup>34</sup> Along with the creation of the *Serbian world*, the organization also advocates the strongest possible relations with Russia and Belarus (more precisely, for Serbia's accession to the alliance of Russia and Belarus). In addition, the organization is known for spreading hatred towards migrants and the Roma people.

Some members of the *Srbska akcija*, including Stefan Simic and Stefan Hadzi Antonovic, fought in Ukraine on the side of pro-Russian forces, as evidenced by the Ukrainian website *Myrotvorets* (Миротворець) – a platform with a purpose to reveal information about enemies who endangered Ukraine's national security.<sup>35</sup>

The *Srbska akcija* also supported processions and also interfered in identity issues in Montenegro. In February 2020, the activists of this organization brought up a banner in front of the monument to Peter II Petrovic Njegos, in Belgrade, and in that way supported the brothers and sisters in *Serbian Sparta* (the name that the Greater Serbia project supporters use to refer to Montenegro) in the fight against the *anti-Serbian and thieving government*.<sup>36</sup>

A protest statement on the issue of Montenegro's accession into NATO expressed numerous insults against a large part of Montenegrin citizens, who were called *Ustashoid, neo-communist Milo's spawns*.<sup>37</sup>

## SERBIAN HOUSE

One of the larger projects in which the Government of Serbia has invested 3.4 million euros from the state budget is the construction of the *Serbian House* (*Srpska kuca*) in Podgorica. Although it was founded in March 2017, the *Serbian House* was officially opened in February 2019 and was registered in the Central Register of Business Entities of Montenegro as a Limited Liability Company. Its director is Emilo Labudovic, an active advocate of the *Serbian world* and a former member of the Democratic Front in the Parliament of Montenegro. Numerous organizations of Serbian science and culture are located and operate within the *Serbian House*, such as *Matica srpska*, *Institut za srpsku kulturu* (Institute for Serbian Culture), the editorial board of *Srpski jug* (Serbian South), *Udruzenje knjizevnika Crne Gore* (Association of Authors of Montenegro), *IN4S*, *Srpska televizija* (Serbian TV), *Srpske novine* (Serbian Newspaper), *Srpski radio* (Serbian Radio), *Srpska knjizevna zadruza* (Serbian Literature Society), *Srpski kulturni klub "Zavjet"* (Serbian Culture Club "Zavjet"). The founders of the center are 29 people who are registered in the register as owners of 3.44 percent of shares each in that company and among whom are numerous officials and activists of pro-Serbian political parties in Montenegro, ardent advocates of the idea of the *Serbian world*, and deniers of Montenegrin national identity: Rector of the University of Montenegro **Vladimir Bozovic**, Vice President of the Parliament of Montenegro Strahinja Bulajic, Member of Parliament from the Democratic Front **Slaven Radunovic**, former MPs also from the DF **Budimir Aleksic** and **Natasa Jevric**, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Elektroprivreda Crne Gore (EPCG) **Milutin Djukanovic**, President of Tivat Municipality **Zeljko Komnenovic**, editor-in-chief of the *IN4S* portal Gojko Raičević and others.

In addition to the *Serbian House* in Podgorica, the *Cultural Information Center St. Sava*, also known as the *Serbian House*, was opened in Pljevlja at the end of August 2020 under the patronage of the *Serb National Council of Montenegro* and its president **Momcilo Vuksanovic**. Financial support was also provided by the Government of Serbia.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to these budget allocations, the Government of Serbia decided on May 21, 2020, when it was published in the Official Gazette, to donate a one-time aid of 1.64 million euros to Serb societies and associations in Montenegro for project implementation and support in their work. It is indicative that this assistance was granted several months before the parliamentary elections in Montenegro. However, it is unknown which Serbian societies and associations in Montenegro received that financial aid.



**Aleksandar Vucic visits the Serbian House in Podgorica**

Also, the media wrote that since the arrival of Aleksandar Vucic to power, the Government of Serbia has financially supported the eparchies of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and Serbian organizations with a total amount of about 11.6 million euros, which was confirmed by Milan Knezevic in the Parliament in September 2020, not stating the exact amount, but noting it was a *multimillion one*.<sup>39</sup>

## SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE GOVERNMENT OF MONTENEGRO

Identifying religion with the nation, that is, equalizing Serbhood and Orthodoxy, is a powerful instrument for the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church founded on ethno-phyletism, but also a very favorable circumstance for the activities of the Russian *soft power* in the Western Balkan region. Especially if we keep in mind the fact that the relation between the church and the state in Serbia is regulated in such a way that the state has a stronger influence on the Serbian Orthodox Church than *vice versa*. The relationship between Russia and the Russian Orthodox

Church (ROC) is similar.

Properly assessing that the Serbian Orthodox Church could be one of the most effective instruments for spreading its interests in the Western Balkan region, Russia paid special attention to relations with that religious organization, which resulted in, among other things, great support given by the Serbian Orthodox Church to Serbian organizations advocating the strengthening of ties with Russia, as well as with the Russian organizations in Serbia and the region. Having all this in mind, we cannot talk about the

*Serbian world* without mentioning the main pillar of the project – the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is established in Montenegro through the Metropolitan of Montenegro and Littoral, the Eparchy of Budimlja and Niksic, as well as parts of the Eparchies of Milesevo and Zahumlje-Herzegovina.

The highest dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church were supporters of the thesis that the Serbian people in Montenegro were in a more difficult position than during the Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in the period from 1941 to 1945, continuously denying Montenegro, its statehood, independence, and individual existence of the Montenegrin people.

At the same time, the Serbian Orthodox Church was a mentor and logistic support of pro-Serbian political parties and coalitions, and the degree of its involvement in political processes in Montenegro is notable by the fact that the current Prime Minister of Montenegro Zdravko Krivokapic (who as President of the NGO *We won't give up Montenegro* led the electoral list of the Democratic Front) was elected at the insistence of the Church, while the talks between the political leaders of the winning coalition on the government constitution after the August 2020 elections were held in the Ostrog Monastery, with the active participation of church dignitaries.

The influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the Government of Montenegro is obvious in the current situation with the Fundamental Agreement, the

content of which will remain unknown to the public and most members of the Government until its signing, as announced by Joanikije, the new Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral. Upon taking office, the new Government and the parliamentary majority reacted promptly and practically its first act was the amendment to the Law on Freedom of Religion in a direction that corresponded to the interests and requirements of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Just like the idea of the *Serbian world*, the modus operandi of the SOC's activities in Montenegro has been borrowed and adjusted. Moscow used the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, to interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine.

ROC and UOC-MP dignitaries did not limit themselves to public support for the pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine in the October 2020 elections, but also directly participated in the election campaign, with one UOC-MP priest, an advocate of separatist ideas in Ukraine, being on the electoral roll of the pro-Russian opposition.

On the same principle as the Kremlin, Belgrade uses the Serbian Orthodox Church to pursue its interests in Montenegro, which, as a factor of influence, gathering, and homogenization has demonstrated its power through active participation in political processes over the last two years.

## THE RUSSIAN INFLUENCE THROUGH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The decision of Montenegro to back the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union on March 19, 2014, due to military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, as well as Montenegro's invitation for full NATO membership in December 2015, are key events that spurred a strong campaign of Russia, which has shown how it can effectively combine different means and methods when targeting areas that the Kremlin perceives as its own zone of interest.

One method is to use *soft power* instruments through non-governmental organizations and centers following the Russian narrative, which operate under the guise of activities to promote tourism, nurture tradition and preserve spiritual identity, respect the indigenous and ancient culture of compatriots living abroad and develop friendship between Russian and Montenegrin people.

Non-governmental organizations that mainly deal with culture, although they are predominantly registered in the name of domestic, Montenegrin citizens, can hardly be classified in the category of Russian compatriot organizations, at least in accordance with what the Russian Law on Compatriots stipulates. However, it is clear that regardless of the legal status that these organizations have in Montenegro, the methods of action and the description of activities indicate that they represent a platform for the Russian influence in the social, cultural, and religious spheres.

### COMPATRIOTS IN MONTENEGRO

The Russian diaspora is the second-largest diaspora in the world. It is estimated that after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, about 20 million Russian

citizens remained to live on the territory of the former Soviet republics, while from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1990s, 10 million Russians left the area in six waves of emigration. Today, about 30 million Russians live abroad, and they are organized through various associations that represent an important instrument of Russian *soft power*.

According to the 2011 census conducted by MONSTAT, 946 Russians live on the territory of Montenegro, which is a share of 0.15% of the total population. According to the same census, it is stated that 1,026 citizens, or 0.17%, of those whose mother tongue is Russian, live in Montenegro. On the other hand, unofficial and insufficiently reliable estimates speculate with a much larger number of Russian citizens residing in Montenegro on a non-resident basis.

According to the data of the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) from 2019, about 4,500 Russian citizens have been registered in Montenegro. According to the latest data, the Ministry of the Interior approved 3,873 temporary and 671 permanent residence permits for Russian passport holders.<sup>40</sup>

**The Federal Law on State Policy of the Russian Federation in respect of Compatriots Abroad (1999)**<sup>41</sup> covers four categories of persons:

- citizens of the Russian Federation who are resident on a permanent basis outside the Russian Federation;
- individuals who were citizens of the USSR and live in states that were formerly part of the USSR, who have become citizens of those states or become stateless persons;
- expatriates (emigrants) from the Russian Empire, the Russian Republic, the RSFSR, the USSR, and the Russian Federation, who had the corresponding civic identity (citizenship) and have become citizens of a foreign state, or have become stateless persons;
- the descendants of the individuals belonging to the above-mentioned groups, with the exception of descendants of individuals from the titular nations of the foreign state.

According to the Law, the state policy of the Russian Federation in relation to compatriots is an integral part of Russia's domestic and foreign policy and is therefore implemented through a systematic approach and according to the guidelines of the President of the Russian Federation. It is based on the principles of partnership and cooperation, the need to ensure respect for basic human rights and freedoms, as well as the interactions of states in this field.

The goals of the state policy of the Russian Federation

in relation to compatriots, according to this Law, are to provide state support to compatriots, including the provision of the legal protection of their interests and provision of conditions under which compatriots could live in foreign countries as equal citizens, or to provide their return to the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation assists compatriots in implementing and ensuring respect for human and civil rights and freedoms, including the right to preserve and develop the cultural heritage and language that are an integral part of the identity of compatriots in order to develop their spiritual and intellectual potential; the right to access education at all levels and in their mother tongue; establishing and freely maintaining ties between compatriots and the Russian Federation with means of moral encouragement; creation of national-cultural autonomy, public associations, and religious organizations of compatriots, media and participation in their activities; participation in the work of non-governmental organizations at the national and international level; participation in the development of mutually beneficial relations between the countries of residence and the Russian Federation; the right to freely choose one's place of residence and the right to return to the Russian Federation.

The rather broadly defined legal framework provides the basis for the action of government authorities of the Russian Federation in the implementation of the policy of compatriots. The powers of state authorities in the field of relations with compatriots, among others, relate to the establishment of councils (commissions) in the countries of residence, which are subordinate to the state authorities of the Russian Federation in order to coordinate work with a view to implementing state policy towards compatriots, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations and public associations of compatriots.

In accordance with the powers established by the Federal Law, the financing of activities in the field of relations with compatriots is done at the expense of the federal budget and the budget of the RF subjects. Also, the Law envisaged the possibility of establishing public funds and other public associations to support compatriots and their associations, as well as the charitable activities of individuals and legal entities in the field of relations with compatriots.

With the latest amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation from 2020, care and support for compatriots abroad have been introduced in the part related to nurturing the Russian identity.



## COORDINATION COUNCIL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF RUSSIAN COMPATRIOTS OF MONTENEGRO (KSORS)

The Coordination Council of the Organization of Russian Compatriots of Montenegro (KSORS) was established in March 2015 and then included eight independent and non-governmental organizations operating in Montenegro: NGO *Nas dom – Montenegro Tivat* (Our Home – Montenegro Tivat), NGO *Rusko-crnogorsko drustvo “Ognjiste”* (Russian-Montenegrin Association “Hearth”), magazine *Ruski vjesnik Crna Gora* (Russian Courier Montenegro), *Ruski radio* (Russian Radio)<sup>42</sup>; NGO *Monterusija* (Monte-Russia), *Ruski Balkan* (Russian Balkans), *Slavenska vremena: zajednicka istorija naroda* (Slavic Times: Common History of the People), *Hodocasce Crna Gora* (Pilgrimage Montenegro)<sup>43</sup>.

The founders of this organization are Russian citizens: **Alexei Galitsky**, a member of the Russian motorcycle club *Night wolves* and the Council of the Russian moto-tourism Federation. Together with biker **Alexander Shmakov**, he organizes pilgrimages from Russia to Montenegro, helps local Orthodox churches, and participates in working with young people; **Sergej Sichev**, founder of the NGO *Ognjiste*, who works on the integration of compatriots into the local society and the development of Russian-Montenegrin ties; Veniamin Striga, a journalist and a blogger who studies Slavic culture and researches the historical ties between the Montenegrin and Russian people in his works; **Alina Banovic**, who together with **Gulya Smagulova** runs the magazine *Ruski vjesnik*; **Marina Hutorova**, who together with **Natalia Mikheyeva** organize the festival of Russian-Montenegrin cuisine *Monterusija*; **Sergei Babenkov** and **Oksana Frenkel**, chair the Council and organizations *Nas dom – Montenegro* and *Moj dom Crna Gora*. Apart from them, **Jelena Janjic** is also involved in the work of the organization, who is in charge of the Russian-Montenegrin sports club and is an authorized person of the *Povjerenje Kotor* (Trust Kotor) foundation, whose founders are also **Vitaly Kazakov** and biker Aleksandar Shmakov.

KSORS relies on the assistance of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro and the organization *Rossotrudnichestvo* as the executive body of the Russian Federation for the issue of compatriots, under whose auspices numerous social, political, and cultural events are organized in Montenegro. The activities of that organization are aimed at promoting an objective view of the role of modern Russia outside its borders, as well as its material and spiritual potential. The Russian Embassy, among other things, organizes consultative meetings of the heads

of all organizations of KSORS with the ambassador and the representative of *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

The Council in Montenegro operates within the umbrella of the *World Coordination Council of Russian compatriots living abroad* which brings together similar organizations from over 90 countries. These are structures that include various public associations in the countries of residence of compatriots, Russian-language media, and Russian educational institutions in order to unite them organizationally and spiritually and conduct joint actions to protect the rights and interests of their members, preserve and promote Russian culture and strengthen ties with the historical homeland.<sup>44</sup>

The World Coordination Council meets at its annual congresses – the *World Congress of Russian Compatriots*, which, in addition to activists of public associations of compatriots, also includes the highest state officials of the Russian Federation, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church – as irreplaceable partners in working with compatriots, Russian foundations and NGOs. Montenegro was represented at the forum in Moscow in 2015 by two delegates: KSORS Deputy Chairman Alexei Galitsky and KSORS member and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Ruski vjesnik Crna Gora*, Gulya Smagulova.<sup>45</sup>

The first issue of the magazine *Ruski vjesnik Crna Gora* was published in 2010<sup>46</sup> as the only officially registered newspaper in the Russian language in Montenegro. Since 2015, it had been a part of KSORS and since then it has been published as a magazine with an increased number of pages, with a circulation of 2,000 to 5,500 copies, which promotes the Russian language, culture, and history. It thematically deals with Montenegro, local celebrities, historical events, brings stories about Russian compatriots and interesting projects. It covers all topics relevant to the Russian diaspora and also contains information and advice for Russian tourists as well as announcements of cultural events. The *Our Guest* column promotes the work of Montenegrin and Russian politicians and artists, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Russian *Night wolves*. The last issue is the one from September 2019, while the last publication on the website is from July 2020.

The editorial board of the magazine also consists of Russian citizens. It also supports educational institutions operating in the territory of Montenegro in which Russian language and literature are studied, non-governmental organizations, (pro)Russian organizations, and historical societies that oppose the rewriting of history.<sup>47</sup>

Alexei Galitsky's Facebook profile is indicative when it comes to his role in promoting official Russian policy. The fact that he is familiar with the political situation in Montenegro is shown by his announcements

of support for the anti-NATO campaign<sup>48</sup>, the activities of the then opposition Democratic Front<sup>49</sup>, as well as the reaction to the alleged Russophobia of the authorities in Montenegro.<sup>50</sup>

The deputy chairman of KSORS and co-founder of the organization *Nas dom – Crna Gora*, Veniamin Striga, based on his Facebook account, profiles himself as a supporter of anti-NATO current and a critic of the former government and President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic, whom he accuses of criminal activities<sup>51</sup>, as well as a great supporter and admirer of the SOC's processions in Montenegro and the late Metropolitan Amfilohije.

Analyzing the attempt at terrorism on the day of the 2016 parliamentary elections, Striga wonders in one of the author's texts for the Russian portal *Balkanist* who invented Russian spies, stating that one of the leaders of the then opposition, Andrija Mandić, precisely determined that such activities never happened.<sup>52</sup>

In all public appearances in the Russian media, Striga fiercely represented the interests of political parties and organizations that fought against Montenegro's accession into NATO. He used well-known arguments that the state apparatus oppresses Russians and Russian business in Montenegro that a civil war would follow if Montenegro joined NATO, and so on.

He was also a frequent guest of the FSB portal *News Front* hosted by journalist Oksana Sazonova, who, after Crimea, stayed in Serbia and Montenegro. Sazonova was also a guest on *Srpska TV* with **Ljubica Gojkovic Vukicevic**, a former spokeswoman for the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports headed by Vesna Bratic.<sup>53</sup>

Striga could be seen in the company of **Alexander Dugin**, Putin's ideologue and frequent author writing for the *Katehon* website, which is owned by Konstantin Malofeyev. He was a frequent guest of the portals on Tsargrad TV, also owned by Malofeyev, as an expert on events in Montenegro.

In addition, Striga is a member of three national associations of journalists – Russian, Montenegrin, and Serbian.<sup>54</sup>



**Veniamin Striga and Alexander Dugin**

According to media reports, Striga has been in Montenegro since 2005, when he fled Russia due to a criminal scandal.<sup>55</sup> It is also stated that he was expelled from Russia and that upon his arrival in Montenegro he became active as a Russian patriot. However, due to numerous scandals, he was expelled from the local organization of the Russian diaspora, members of which signed a petition against him and Alexei Galitsky and asked Russian authorities to prosecute the two partners on the grounds of defamation.

Striga suddenly changed his country of residence, leaving Montenegro immediately after the parliamentary elections in October 2016, that is after the news about the attempted terrorism was published.<sup>56</sup> However, that did not stop him from continuing his propaganda against Montenegro's membership in NATO.

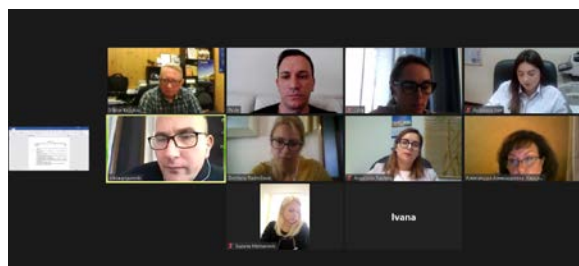
## RUSSIAN SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTER IN HERCEG NOVI

The municipality of Herceg Novi can be proud of its excellent cooperation with Russian organizations, especially when it comes to promoting the tourist offer of Herceg Novi, including culture, education, and economy.

In December 2020, at an online meeting of representatives of educational institutions of Moscow and St. Petersburg with colleagues from Herceg Novi and representatives of TO and the Municipality, it was agreed to establish *Ruski naucno-obrazovni centar*



**Oksana Sazonova – appearing in a TV show on *Srpska TV* hosted by Ljubica Gojkovic Vukicevic**



**Representatives of the Russian educational institutions at an online meeting with the representatives of the Herceg Novi municipality**

u Herceg Novom (*Russian Scientific and Educational center in Herceg Novi*), but the exact opening date was not specified.

According to TO Herceg Novi, the goals of establishing the *Russian Science Center* are to expand cooperation in the field of education and science between countries and peoples, the convergence of countries' education systems based on the concept of internationalization in education, development of direct contacts between interested Russian and Montenegrin educational and scientific organizations. This also includes support and promotion of the infrastructure to study the Russian language in Montenegro, exchange of experiences and information in the field of higher education, integration of universities and scientific organizations, and their cooperation with organizations operating in the real sector of the economy. The goal is to organize congress and exhibition events of international level in the field of higher education, attend exhibitions, fairs, festivals, seminars in the field of science and education organized by the institutions of Russia and Montenegro, organize masterclass courses and thematic workshops, and lectures by professors in tourism, marketing, and medicine, culture, information technology, economics, etc.

The agreement on the establishment of the *Russian Center* was preceded by the visit (the first official to the Municipality of Herceg Novi) of the Russian Ambassador to Montenegro in February 2020, when he discussed with the representatives of the Municipality the directions of future cooperation in the economic and cultural field. Ambassador **Vladislav Maslennikov** thanked the President of the Municipality **Stevan Katic** for the efforts made to make Herceg Novi the center of Russian culture in Montenegro. The official statement says that the Embassy of the Russian Federation will continue to provide support and assistance in connecting the two peoples and Russian cities with Herceg Novi.

Also, on June 22, 2021, the President of *Rusko-srpska fondacija za kulturu i nasljedje* (the *Russian-Serbian Foundation for Culture and Heritage*) **Natalia Shatalina** visited the President of the Municipal Assembly of Herceg Novi **Ivan Otovic**, and, on that occasion, they discussed the establishment of cooperation in the field of culture, education, and economy. Furthermore, the *Russian-Serbian Foundation* and its President played an active role in the procurement of the *Sputnik V* vaccine in cooperation with the Montenegrin Ministry of Health.<sup>57</sup>

The cooperation activities have been ongoing for years. In April 2018, as part of the *Days of Russian Spirituality and Culture* event in Herceg Novi, an exhibition of photographs dedicated to the key stages of making mosaics on the dome of the Church of St.

Sava in Belgrade was opened. The installation was made by the *Center for Science and Culture of Russia* and the *Russian House*. The exhibition was opened by the director of the Tver College of Culture **Dr. Alexei Evganievich Baranov**, who gave a lecture on the topic: *Come to Montenegro to Get to Know Russia Better* – the experience of the International Youth Project. It was part of the story about the cooperation between the students of the Tver College of Culture, i.e. Russian Ministry of Culture and the Eparchy of Budimlja and Niksic. On behalf of the host, the archpriest-staurophore **Radomir Nikcevic** greeted and thanked Baranov for his support and participation. In December the same year, an agreement was signed in St. Petersburg on cooperation between the Tourist Organization of Herceg Novi and that Russian city.<sup>58</sup>

The monument to Count Sava Vladislavic was unveiled in Herceg Novi on January 27, 2014, by the then Russian Ambassador to Montenegro **Andrei Nesterenko**, and the event was attended, among others, by Metropolitan Amfilohije, who wished that there would be *such knights as Count Vladislavic among Serbs, Herzegovinians, Slavs, and the great mother of Slavic – Russia in the future*. During the monument unveiling, Zeljko Komnenovic, the current President of the Municipality of Tivat and then in the capacity of the President of Matica Boke for Tivat, addressed the audience, noting that Count Vladislavic was *the Ragusan father of Russian diplomacy, the son of Serbian freedom, and an important European figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*.

The monument to Sava Vladislavic has been erected thanks to the NGO *Matica Boke*, the financial support of the *Russian Association Slavic Union* and the *Andrew the First-Called Fund*. The event was also attended by the Vice President of the Foundation of Saint Andrew the First-Called **Zelina Medoeva**, who emphasized the role of Count Vladislavic in expanding Russia's borders towards the East.<sup>59</sup>

On the same day, *Ruski kulturni cenatr – grof Sava Vladislavic* (the *Russian Cultural Center – Count Sava Vladislavic*) was opened and consecrated, and one of its founders, **Dusko Radovic**, said that *the first goal of the Center was to bring grandiose Russian culture closer, and the second was to, through the Center, integrate the Russian brothers living in Herceg Novi into Montenegrin society*. Apart from him, the event was also attended by the former ambassador of Russia to Montenegro Andrei Nesterenko and the Metropolitan of the MCP Amfilohije. **Milos Konjevic**<sup>60</sup>, now the Vice President of the Executive Board of the Novska lista party that received significant support (19%) in the municipal elections in Herceg Novi on May 9, 2021, is also mentioned as one of the founders of the association.



## NGO TSAR NIKOLAI BIJELO POLJE

In April 2011, the monograph *Russian Migration in Montenegro during the October Revolution*<sup>61</sup> was published, which was a new project of the NGO Car Nikolaj from Bijelo Polje (*Tsar Nikolai*), and which was realized with the cooperation and support of the Russian Embassy in Podgorica. The monograph was prepared by the President of that NGO **Zoran Loktionov**, one of the descendants of the Russian migrants who came to Montenegro after the October Revolution in 1917.

In addition, Loktionov was the only one to receive the prestigious medal for his contribution to improving relations between the peoples of Russia and Montenegro in 2015, which was awarded to him personally by Russian President Vladimir Putin and presented to him by then-Ambassador Nesterenko at the premises of the Russian Embassy in Podgorica.<sup>62</sup> Besides, Loktionov spoke about the rapprochement of Montenegro and Russia at the international conference *Balkan Dialogue 2015*, held in Novi Sad. On that occasion, he said that he believes Montenegro can be brought closer to Russia by building a memorial to the Russian Cossacks who defended the borders of Montenegro.<sup>63</sup> **Mladjan Djordjevic** from the organization *Srpski kod* (*Serbian Code*) also attended the event. Loktionov attended a panel entitled *The Balkans in the Geopolitical System of the Coordinates of the Eurasian Continent: Mutual Trust and Dialogue as a Condition for Overcoming the Global Crisis*, moderated by **Vitaly Solonetsky** and Nikita Bondarev. The panel was also attended by **Djordje Vukadinovic**, who spoke about Russia's role in the current Balkan geopolitical context, as well as numerous other Russian and pro-Russian activists and presidents of organizations.<sup>64</sup> More about the work of *Srpski kod* and the mentioned actors can be read in other parts of the study.

## SOCIETY OF MONTENEGRIN- RUSSIAN FRIENDSHIP PETER I IN PODGORICA

The main goal of this NGO is to *preserve and improve, through centuries-long fraternal relations between the Montenegrin and Russian people*. The society, which brings together members from various political parties, religious and national denominations, opposes any integration, or as they say, *brainwashing and blackmailing by the authorities linked to the crime*.

The Society advocated for Montenegro not to become a member of the NATO alliance and supported its positions with media appearances in which

they stated that they do not understand Montenegro's path to integration because it is a path of humiliation, a path of flattery, and a path where Montenegro and its people become NATO servants. The Society states that the former state leadership renounced its brothers from Russia, Serbia, and the Republic of Srpska, and positioned themselves as the subordinate to the NATO alliance. In 2015, *Drustvo crnogorsko-ruskog prijateljstva Petar I* (*the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Peter I*) from Podgorica, which formed boards in several municipalities in Montenegro and has more than 5,000 members, said it would not allow themselves *to be the shame of our ancestors, brothers, and comrades – victims of the bombing of the villain NATO alliance*.<sup>65</sup>

The Society also initiated the construction of a monument to the last Russian Tsar Nikolai Romanov.<sup>66</sup> The president of *Drustvo crnogorsko-ruskog prijateljstva Petar I* **Gojko Tomasevic** is a member of the *Cossack Center* for the Balkans with the rank of captain and holder of important Cossack decorations, so it is not surprising that members of the *Balkan Cossack Army* attend the events organized by this Society. Tomasevic was awarded the Victory over Fascism Day medal by the Russian Embassy in Montenegro for his work in the *Peter I Society*.

According to Tomasevic, the most important activity of the Society is an organization of a forum on the topic of *Anti-globalism*. For several years, members of the Society laid a wreath at the monument of Russian volunteers in Visegrad at the invitation of the Alliance of Fighters of the Republic of Srpska, who, as Tomasevic says, laid down their lives defending Orthodoxy from *Muslim jihadists and the evil NATO pact*. Also, together with members of the Russian Embassy, they laid wreaths at the monument to Russian volunteers in Gusinje and the monument to the victims of NATO aggression in Murino. The Society planned to establish a Russian House in Podgorica with an office and a club for socializing, but also to form a civic movement that would be aimed at restoring fraternal ties with Russia and the Serbian people in the Balkans, especially in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska.<sup>67</sup>

In 2014, members of the *Balkan Cossack Army* attended the evening of Montenegrin-Russian friendship organized by this society in the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica. The moderator of the evening was Archpriest **Predrag Scepanovic**, and the program was attended by General and Deputy Ataman of the *Cossack Army of the Russian Federation* **Gennady Jakovlevich Temnikov**, Colonel Ataman of the Saint Sava Cossack Station of Serbia **Vojislav Vidakovic**, representatives of the Russian school from Budva *Katyusha*, prof. Dr. **Novo Vujosevic**, representatives of the folklore society *Djurdjevdansko*



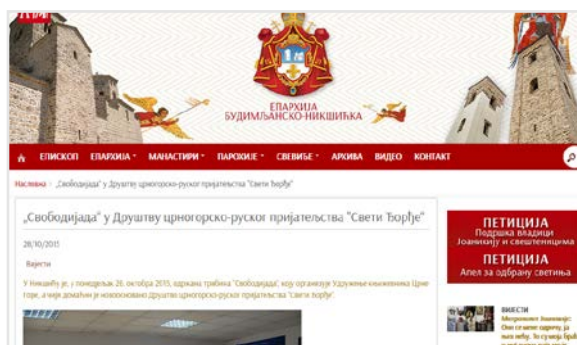
kolo, actor **Gojko Burzanovic**, a minstrel, and Colonel Deputy Ataman for Montenegro **Zeljko Curovic**.

On that occasion, the *Society of Peter I* handed over a letter of gratitude to **Dimitri Rogozin**, General Director of *Roscosmos*, which was taken over on his behalf by General Temnikov, who was also handed a letter of gratitude. Apart from them, letters of gratitude were given to then Russian Ambassador to Montenegro Andrei Alekseyevich Nesterenko, Colonel, and Ataman of the *Cossack Center St. Peter of Cetinje Slobodan Pejovic*; Major and Deputy Ataman of the *Cossack Center St. Peter of Cetinje Vukoman Bulatovic* (founder of the Montenegrin branch of the *Night wolves*); Lieutenant of the *Cossack Center St. Peter of Cetinje* Captain **Dragan Maras**; Assistant Ataman of the *Cossack Center St. Peter of Cetinje Marija Pejovic; representative of the *Cossack Center of the Republic of Srpska Milos Lazovic* and President of the *Fatherland Russia Association Dragoslav Bokan*. On that occasion, the speakers praised Russia and its President Putin, emphasizing that their path is a spiritual path, the path of the community of Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and the Russian Federation.<sup>68</sup>*

The reunion in honor of the Montenegrin-Russian friendship was held in May 2017 also in the crypt of the Cathedral in Podgorica. The ceremony was attended by a delegation of the Municipality of Berane, which included the then Mayor **Dragoslav Scekkic** and President of the Assembly **Goran Kikovic**, who recently voted for the proposal that one street in Berane be named after the war criminal from the Second World War, Pavle Djuricic<sup>69</sup>. On that occasion, they were awarded the medals of St. Peter of Cetinje, for the promotion and preservation of the age-old fraternal love of our peoples. Kikovic spoke about the fraternal relations between Russia and Montenegro and Russian aid through the centuries. The ceremony was also attended by representatives of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro, Deputy Ambassador **Sergei Bublikov** and Second Secretary of the Embassy **Eduard Serik** and former Member of the Parliament of Montenegro, and the current Director of the Revenue Administration **Aleksandar Damjanovic**.<sup>70</sup>

## SOCIETY OF MONTENEGRIN-RUSSIAN FRIENDSHIP SAINT GEORGE

*Društvo crnogorsko-ruskog prijateljstva Sveti Georgije* (the *Society of Montenegrin-Russian friendship Saint George*), founded in 2015 in Niksic, over time has become one of the leading promoters of religious, cultural, and historical ties between the two



News on an event organized by the *Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship* on the website of the Eparchy of Budimlja and Niksic

Orthodox and Slavic peoples. The driving force behind its work is the bequest of St. Peter of Cetinje, who called on Montenegrins and Brdjani *not to give up their love for a homogeneous and monotheistic Russia, cursing those who would think or act differently*.

The Society organizes a large number of forums, exhibitions, promotions, concerts (over 100 such events in 18 months), together with professors of Russian language and literature from the Faculty of Philology of the University of Montenegro, within which the *Russian Center* operates. It also cooperates with Matica Srpska – Society of Members in Montenegro, the Eparchy of Budimlja and Niksic, and the Church Municipality of Niksic, which is the largest financial donor to the *Society*. In an interview with Serbian *Novosti* in 2017, the Head of the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship St. George **Velimir Kasalica** said that it was necessary to establish closer cooperation with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro and Russian state institutions whose participation in the Society's implementation of the mission is limited to verbal support.<sup>71</sup>

Within the society, there is a forum *Svobodijada* (*Libertiad*) organized by the *Association of Authors of Montenegro* (UKCG), and edited and led by the poet **Milica Bakrac**, professor of Serbian language and literature and Vice President of UKCG. The forum gathers a large number of participants, including representatives of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (Joanikije, **Jovan Plamenac**, **Gojko Perovic**) and Russian academics. The program of the first forum (October 2015) was dedicated to Russia.<sup>72</sup>

## OTHER NGOS

In the records of active NGOs in Montenegro from the Government's open data portal<sup>73</sup>, there are several other NGOs with a Russian prefix, such as:

*Srpsko-rusko prijateljstvo – slovensko bratstvo*, Niksic (Serbian-Russian friendship – Slavic fraternity), *Rusko-srpsko-crnogorsko bratstvo – Bijeli andjeo*, Niksic (Russian-Serbian-Montenegrin fraternity – White Angel), *Klub crnogorsko-rusko-srpskog prijateljstva*, Niksic (the Club of Montenegrin-Russian-Serbian Friendship), *Drustvo crnogorsko-srpsko-rusko-bjeloruskog prijateljstva*, Zabljak (Association of Montenegrin-Serbian-Russian-Belarusian Friendship), *Drustvo srpsko-ruskog prijateljstva za Herceg Novi i Boku*

*Kotorsku*, Herceg Novi (Association of Serbian-Russian Friendship for Herceg Novi and Boka Kotorska), *Fond ruska nagrada*, Budva (Russian Award Fund), *Drustvo crnogorsko-ruskog prijateljstva Aleksandar Nevski*, Podgorica (the Society of Montenegrin-Russian Friendship Alexander Nevski), and *Bratsvo Ruski car*, Pljevlja (the Fraternity Russian Tsar), which according to official data operate in the field of culture. However, it is not possible to find more information on specific activities based on available sources.

## SCHOOLS AND KINDERGARTENS

After having bought numerous real estates and started their businesses in Montenegro, especially on the Montenegrin coast, the Russians who found their new home in Montenegro decided to establish educational institutions. The Russian community in Montenegro needed to open kindergartens and schools so that their children could attend classes in their mother tongue, but also in order to bring their educational system and Russian culture closer to the local population in the best possible way. With the help of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Education of Montenegro, they managed to open several kindergartens and schools.

There are two Russian schools in Budva: *Dukley Academy* and *Sorok dva* (Сорок два), which function in accordance with the educational model and official programs of the Russian Federation.

*Dukley Academy – Center of Continued Education*, which was founded in 2016, provides its students with learning in their mother tongue and obtaining a state Russian diploma but also works on integrating the Russian community into the life of Montenegrin society. *Dukley Academy* follows the Russian state school program for primary and secondary school students, and the obtained diplomas enable the continuation of education in Russia or somewhere else abroad.<sup>74</sup> Within the *Dukley Academy*, there is also the *Kuca Mala* (Куча Мала) development center, which is a multidisciplinary preschool institution.<sup>75</sup> The school was founded upon the initiative of **Nadezda Lapteva**, who is also the school principal. She did not want her children to go to the local school, and the reason for that was the difference in the curriculum. The director of the school *Sorok dva*<sup>76</sup>, which is located in Sveti Stefan, **Dmitri Tuterin**, stated that parents from Russia prefer the Russian educational system.<sup>77</sup>

Although its ownership structure lacks Russians, the *Vini Pu* kindergarten in Budva, licensed by the

Ministry of Education of Montenegro<sup>78</sup>, has the Russian language classes within its curriculum, and they are held by **Larisa Moskaleva** from Donetsk<sup>79</sup>.

*Adriatic College* (Адриатик колледж) is an international school that was founded in 2014 in Budva, and the program provides students with access to all educational institutions in Montenegro, Russia, and Europe. After graduating from this school, students receive a certificate like other students in Montenegro, and if desired, they can also receive a diploma of basic general education in the Russian Federation.<sup>80</sup> As part of the *Adriatic College*, the *Adriatic Land* (Адриатик Ланд) kindergarten was opened, where education is implemented according to the Russian basic general education program for preschool education. The director of the school is **Slavko Dasic**, and the founders are **Milan Komljenovic**, **Yuri Evgenievich Bichkov**, **Tatyana Homutova Vladimirovna**, and *AlternativaMont LLC*.<sup>81</sup> According to the Central Register of Business Entities, *AlternativaMont LLC* is a company that deals with consulting related to business and other management, and the executive director and the founder is **Irina Babina**.

It is evident that Russian educational institutions are mostly located in Budva due to the number of Russian citizens residing in that city. However, a part of the Russian community in Bar requested in 2012 the opening of schools in the Russian language, such as those in Budva, about which there were informal dialogues with the elementary school *Anto Djedovic* in Susanj.<sup>82</sup> Although the opening of the school in the Russian language never happened, there is a school in Bar, named *Young Scout* (Юный натуралист), which organizes excursions that help to teach children to master certain skills and get familiar with flora and fauna of Montenegro.<sup>83</sup> Apart from those, there is a vocal choir studio *Zima* (the Winter), which was founded in 2015.

# STATE FOUNDATIONS, AGENCIES, AND INSTITUTES

## ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO

In addition to gaining official status in Russia's foreign policy strategy, *soft power* was gradually institutionalized in 2008, when the *Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation – Rossotrudnichestvo* (Федеральное агентство по делам Содружества Независимых Государств, соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом, и по международному гуманитарному сотрудничеству – Россотрудничество) was established by presidential Decree 1315, in response to the United States Agency for International Development – USAID.

*Rossotrudnichestvo* has created a network of its representative offices abroad (following the example of the *British Council* and the German *Goethe Institute*). Today, *Rossotrudnichestvo* has 97 representative offices in 80 countries, including 72 Russian centers for science and culture in 62 countries, 24 representatives of the Agency working in Russian embassies in 21 countries, including Montenegro. In June 2012, the then newly appointed director **Konstantin Kosachev** revealed in a speech to the Federation Council his plans for the future of the Agency – the spread of Russian culture and science was not the ultimate goal. It was important to provide Russia with *stronger geopolitical influence*.<sup>84</sup> This stronger geopolitical influence is especially evident in the former Soviet territory, where the Kremlin has introduced new integration projects, mainly in the form of a mega-project called *the Eurasian Union*. One of the key goals of this Agency is not only to build the image of Russia abroad through *soft power* but also to provide the necessary assistance to compatriots living outside the borders of Russia and their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual centers.

The activities of the *Rossotrudnichestvo* representative office in Podgorica, headed by the First Secretary of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro **Alexander Sergeyevich Belchenko**, have been carried out since 2013 in close cooperation with the Embassy of the Russian Federation.

Priority tasks are the preservation of the Russian-speaking region, promotion of Russian education, support of compatriots, strengthening of bilateral ties

in the cultural and humanitarian sphere, assistance in establishing contacts in the field of science and sports, information support to Russia's foreign and domestic policy. To that end, numerous workshops, cultural events, and free Russian language courses have been organized.<sup>85</sup>

## RUSSKIY MIR FOUNDATION

One year prior to the founding of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* was established by a presidential decree on June 21, 2007. The Foundation has the task to promote the Russian language and culture, unite compatriots living abroad, and provide grants for a network of non-governmental organizations working in the same fields abroad. Compatriots imply both ethnic Russians (people who speak Russian) and all Orthodox believers wherever they may live. Like *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the *Russkiy Mir* opens its representative offices abroad, mainly at universities and schools, following the example of the Chinese *Confucius Institute*. It is funded from the federal budget, donations, and its own revenues.<sup>86</sup>

The Foundation is a joint project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science, supported by public and private funds. The Foundation is headed by **Vyacheslav Nikonov**, Chair of History and Political Sciences at the Moscow International University, while the board of commissioners includes the Minister of Education of the Russian Federation **Sergei Kravtsov**, the Minister of Foreign Affairs **Sergei Lavrov**, the Minister of Culture **Olga Lyubimova**, the Minister of Education and Science **Valery Falkov**, and the Deputy Chief of Staff of the President of Russia **Dmitry Kozak**.

The idea of the *Russian world*, actively promoted by Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, has significantly transformed from a purely cultural to a geopolitical phenomenon, losing the potential of a neutral concept that could unite all Russophiles around the world, regardless of their nationality.

Putin himself justified the annexation of Crimea by referring to the concept of the *Russian world*. He spoke about Russians living in a divided nation and emphasized the aspiration of the *Russian world*, historical Russia, to restore unity. He also emphasized the existence of a *broad Russian civilization*, which must be protected from external forces



(especially from the West), which it defines as a sphere of Russian interests.

Russia has actively begun to promote its role as a conservative force and a stronghold of traditional values since 2013. Speaking at the opening of the Valdai International Debate Club (Международный дискуссионный клуб Валдай) conference in September 2013, Putin said that Western countries had renounced their roots, including Christian values, and pursued policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, faith in God with a belief in Satan.<sup>87</sup> This narrative has been accepted by pro-Russian actors in Montenegro and is often used to deal with political dissidents.

The new amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, adopted by a people's referendum in July 2020, strengthened the form of state ideology organized around three key pillars: religion, patriotism, and nationalism. This trinity seems to be reminiscent of the official doctrine of the Russian Empire during the reign of Nikolai I (1825–1855): Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality.<sup>88</sup>

The project is based on the premise that the *Russian world* consists not only of Russians or compatriots in countries *close* and *far abroad* but also of foreign citizens who speak or learn Russian and who are interested in the future of the Russian Federation. The *Russian world* is, therefore, a global project through which Russia acquires a new form of identity and opens the possibility for interaction with the rest of the world.

Today, there are 84 centers and 119 so-called *cabinets* of the *Russian world* around the world, including one center in Montenegro at the Faculty of Philology in Niksic, which stopped working in the period from 2016 to 2018, to continue working in December 2018. It is chaired by **Vesna Vukicevic**, Ph.D., professor at the Study Program for Russian Language

and Literature, who replaced prof. Dr. **Dragan Koprivica**<sup>89</sup>, the former spokesman for the Democratic People's Party of Milan Knezevic and an external expert within the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports.<sup>90</sup>

The *Russkiy Mir* Foundation has representative offices in 52 countries, including the Western Balkans – Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, where they operate within state university units.

After a two-year break, the Russian Center in Montenegro continued to conduct programs in the field of affirmation of the Russian language, culture, and history, show Russian films, and organize Russian language courses for interested citizens of Niksic and students of the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy.

The Faculty of Philology regularly participates in the activities of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, so in November 2019, the Dean of that Faculty, at the invitation of the organizers, participated in the XIII Assembly of the Foundation, held in Yaroslavl. The Department of Russian Language has long cooperated with similar institutions in Russia, and frequent guests of the Faculty are representatives of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Montenegro.

It is especially important to point out that the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation is included in the *Resolution of the European Parliament of 23 November 2016 on the EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties*. The section titled *Recognizing and Exposing Russian Disinformation and Propaganda Warfare* states, among other things, that the Russian government employs a wide range of tools and instruments as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values and question Western democratic values. It is stated that this is intended to gain the



**Dragan Koprivica**, premises of the *Russian Center* at the Faculty of Philology in Niksic



The representatives of the *Russian Center* in Niksic with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Montenegro **Vladislav Maslenikov**

support of the domestic public and create a perception of the countries in the EU's eastern neighborhood as failed states.<sup>91</sup>

## RUSSIAN INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH (RISI)

The opening of the RISI office in Belgrade is obviously the result of Russia's aspirations to increase its influence in the Western Balkans. The *Russian Institute for Strategic Research* (RISI), established by a presidential decree in 2009, is one of the Kremlin's most important information and analytical agencies in charge of designing and creating Russian policy strategies. An experienced intelligence officer with three decades of experience, Lieutenant-General **Leonid Petrovich Reshetnikov** was appointed Director of RISI by President Putin's decree from 2009. In a statement to the media on the occasion of the agency opening, Reshetnikov said that its analytical products will contribute to the work of all key Russian services, from the presidential administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, agencies responsible for Russia's security, to corporations such as *Gazprom* and *Olimpstroy*.

In return for the support it received from the Moscow Patriarchate, the Serbian Orthodox Church, in addition to publicly promoting the idea of strengthening traditional ties with Russia, institutionally cooperates and supports Russian organizations in Serbia and the region.



Veniamin Striga (in the middle) and Leonid Reshetnikov (right)

The first on a list of such organizations is the *Russian Institute for Strategic Research*, whose representative office in Belgrade was opened at the end of October 2013. At the opening ceremony, the speakers were the following: on behalf of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Vicar of the Serbian Patriarch, Bishop **Jovan** of Liplje who blessed the beginning of the office work; then the President of the *Center for Russian Studies* and Professor of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade **Miroslav Jovanovic**; the founder of the humanitarian organization *Nasa Srbija* (*Our Serbia*) Mladjan Djordjevic; RISI research associate from Moscow **Nikita Bondarev**; and Director of the RISI representative office in Belgrade **Alexei Timofeyev**, who also hosted the ceremony.

Bondarev informed the participants about RISI's plans and pointed out that Russia does not intend to use *soft power* against Serbia, but that it is a project of strengthening and deepening of cooperation on common spiritual and historical grounds and matching interests.

In the same year (on October 11) in Moscow, as a result of Reshetnikov's visit to the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro earlier that year (in June), a Cooperation Agreement was signed between the NGO *Nasa Srbija* (*Our Serbia*) and RISI. The Agreement signed by Mladjan Djordjevic and Leonid Reshetnikov on behalf of the two organizations envisages cooperation in implementing research projects, organizing scientific forums, conferences, and round tables, publishing publications, and intensifying cooperation between prospective Serbian and Russian young scientists in the field of international relations, economy and culture.

Reshetnikov was remembered for legitimizing the Serbian great-power idea, which, according to him, could be compared to the Russian experience: *Although we would all like stability, those [borders] are temporary because they are artificially imposed from the outside to the detriment of the Serbian people. It is divided, similar to the Russian one. There are 25 million Russians living outside of Russia, and there is a conflict in Ukraine about that since the borders there are artificial too. Such can exist for some time because you cannot artificially divide one nation. The German people were divided, and whatever we thought about it, in the end, they managed to unite. Likewise, the Serbian people, or any person to whom you tie their hands, strives to be untied and liberated. It is not a process that ends in a year or ten, but it will inevitably end.*<sup>92</sup>

In 2015, on the occasion of *Vidovdan* – Saint Patron's Day of the Army of the Republic of Srpska and the Third Infantry (RS) Regiment of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik awarded

Reshetnikov the Order of Njegos of the 1<sup>st</sup> class for recognized work and merits, as well as a personal contribution to the development of scientific and cultural cooperation between Russian Federation and the Republic of Srpska, whose significance has a wider scale in the affirmation of the Republic of Srpska.

At that time, for their contribution to creation, affirmation, development, and cooperation with the Republic of Srpska, the following were awarded: Russian President's assistant **Igor Shchogolev** (Order of the Flag of the Republic of Srpska with a golden wreath for the work and extraordinary merits in the post-war development of the Republic of Srpska and for personal contribution to the development of political, cultural and spiritual ties between the RF and the RS), businessman and founder of the St. Vasily the Great Foundation **Konstantin Malofeyev** (Order of Njegos of the 1<sup>st</sup> class for special contribution to the development of economy and humanitarian cooperation between the RF and the RS and for results and achievements of wider significance and scale in affirmation of the RS), President of the International Union of Heirs of Victory **Valery Kalyakin** (Order of Njegos of the 1<sup>st</sup> class for recognized work and merits and personal contribution to enhancing cooperation between Veterans of the RF and Veterans of the RS), **Denis Davidov** (Order of Njegos of the 3<sup>rd</sup> class for special contribution to the development of cooperation in the field of informatics between the RF and the RS).



**Milorad Dodik and Leonid Reshetnikov**

Reshetnikov was linked in the media to the coup attempt in Montenegro in October 2016, so his removal from the position of RISI Director in January 2017 was interpreted in that context, which he denied on several occasions.<sup>93</sup>

*Tsargrad* TV, owned by Malofeyev, often had Reshetnikov as the main guest, who used the opportunity to attack the then government in Podgorica. Speaking in the show *Russian Response – War in Montenegro*,

Leonid Reshetnikov stated that bloodshed could occur in Montenegro.

The media also wrote about his earlier meeting with the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije, enclosing a photo that was allegedly taken in November 2014.



**Leonid Reshetnikov and Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije in Belgrade in 2014**

In 2017, *Reuters* in its article titled *A Putin-related research center has drawn up a plan to influence the 2016 US elections – documents* offered insight into strategy and methods of Russian actions aimed at redirecting the elections in favor of Donald Trump and undermining trust in the U.S. electoral system.<sup>94</sup>

The Institute is currently managed by **Mikhail Fradkov**, who replaced Leonid Reshetnikov in the position of Director by the decree of the Russian President from January 4, 2017. Fradkov's official biography states that he performed a number of important state functions, including the duties of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation (2004-2007) and the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (2007-2016).

## GORCHAKOV PUBLIC DIPLOMACY SUPPORT FUND

The *Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund* was established by a decree of Russian President **Dmitry Medvedev** on February 2, 2010, as a unique mechanism of a partnership between the state and civil society in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, which created conditions for intensifying international activities of the Russian NGOs.

The general goals of the *Fund* are the development of the sphere of public diplomacy and the contribution to the formation of a favorable foreign policy image of Russia abroad. To that end, it organizes scientific and educational programs, thematic conferences, round tables and forums, expert discussions, and tribunes.



According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who is also the Chairman of *the Fund's* Board of Trustees (Executive Board), during its work, *the Fund* has achieved notable success in supporting public diplomacy and has made a significant contribution to expanding international contacts of domestic nonprofit organizations.<sup>95</sup> The Board includes a large number of prominent individuals, including Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation **Yuri Ushakov**, MP of the ruling United Russia party and Head of *Rosstrudnichestvo* **Yevgeny Primakov**, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation **Igor Ivanov**, President of the Executive Board of the *St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation* and the *Center of National Glory of Russia* **Vladimir Yakunin**.

Within *the Fund*, there are several programs aimed at certain geopolitical spatial units (*Caucasian Dialogue*, *Central Asian School*), among which it is important to single out the *Balkan Dialogue* launched in 2013, whose main purpose is to establish a dialogue between experts and representatives of the scientific community of the Balkan Peninsula. The most important topics of the event are the geopolitical situation, trade and economic activities of the Balkan countries, the role of the media in shaping public opinion and political culture, contemporary security challenges in the region.

Two Serbian organizations, *Srpski kod* (*Serbian Code*) and *Dostojanstvo* (*Dignity*), with the financial support of *the Gorchakov Fund* and the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, organized other smaller gatherings of a regional character, mainly in Serbia, attended by Gojko Raicevic, editor of the *IN4S* portal, president of the parliamentary party True Montenegro Marko Milacic, Serbian journalist **Tomislav Lovrekovic**, political analyst **Bosko Vukicevic**, and **Srdjan Milic** in front of the Socialist People's Party (Socijalisticka narodna partija – SNP).

In recent years, *the Gorchakov Fund* has established cooperation with the highest and oldest educational institutions in Montenegro. In 2019, **Leonid Vladimirovich Drachevski**, Executive Director of *the Fund* and an experienced Russian diplomat (whose political biography can be traced back to Vladimir Putin's political rise), visited Podgorica to present a letter of thanks to the Historical Institute of the University of Montenegro for its contribution to the development of Montenegrin-Russian relations and discussed the directions of future cooperation.<sup>96</sup> The reaction of the director of the Historical Institute of the University of Montenegro soon followed in order to clarify the cooperation with the *Gorchakov Fund*, revealing that the Institute cooperated with the mentioned institution on two scientific projects.<sup>97</sup>

## PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS

### THE BALKAN COSSACK ARMY

*The Balkan Cossack Army* was established on September 11, 2016, in Kotor. Cossacks in uniforms and bikers who arrived from Russia, pro-Russian parts of Ukraine, Serbia, and Montenegro gathered in front of the Church of St. Nicholas in Kotor where they attended the liturgy held by the then Serbian Orthodox Church's priest in Kotor **Momcilo Krivokapic**. After the liturgy, the anti-West messages were sent, wrapped in Orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism.

Some of the attendants included: **general Viktor Vladimirovich Zaplatin**, the supreme ataman (or the supreme military commander) of *the Balkan Cossack Army*, who worked in Serbia for over 16 years as a representative of the Russian Federation; Cossack Colonel (ataman for Montenegro) Slobodan Pejovic, his Deputy; Cossack Colonel (ataman for Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska) Vojislav

Vidakovic; priest **Mijajlo Backovic**, a former member of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade of the Yugoslav Army, largely involved in all SOC's activities and operations in Montenegro; **Sergei Stepin** from *the Union of Donbas Volunteers*; **Vojo Gusic**, vice-President of the *Veterans Organization of the Republic of Srpska*; and **Miroslav Topalovic**, who was presented as a former soldier from the Republic of Srpska.<sup>98</sup>

In 2016, ataman Slobodan Pejovic called NATO a cage and condemned the official Montenegrin politics that aimed at joining the Alliance. Hierarchically speaking, *the Cossack Center of Montenegro* is a branch of the "Svetosavska" Ambassador Cossack Station in Serbia, which unites the Cossacks in Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska. The President of the Governing Board of *Matica Boke* and the current mayor of Tivat Zeljko Komnenovic said that *the Balkan Cossack Army has to do with the Orthodox Unity and the promotion of historic ties between the Bay of Kotor and Russia*.<sup>99</sup> He said that the

*fears that the Cossack Army could threaten the security of Montenegro are unfounded and that Cossacks will not certainly attack Montenegro.*

*The Balkan Cossack Army is subordinate to the Registered Cossacks of the Russian Federation, which under the control of the Russian Orthodox Church played a great role in negotiations during the 2014 Crimea annexation.<sup>100</sup> Before they arrived in Kotor, bikers announced that their visit to the Orthodox shrines in Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia aimed at uniting the Orthodox people at the time when an invisible director attempts to destroy the Orthodox brotherhood, referring to the West and NATO.*

During their investigation regarding the attempted coup on Election Day in 2016, the Montenegrin judiciary launched an investigation on the potential involvement of *the Balkan Cossack Army* in the attempted terrorist attack. On that occasion, the ataman for Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska Vojislav Vidakovic determinedly denied any connections with the suspects of planning a terrorist attack in Montenegro.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, the ataman of *the Cossack Center of Montenegro* Slobodan Pejovic said that Cossacks participated neither in any illegal activities nor in any attempted coup and that they were neither summoned nor called out by relevant authorities regarding the coup.<sup>102</sup>

**Dragoslav Scekcic**, the former President of the Municipality of Berane and the current Director at Health Insurance Fund of Montenegro, cherishes good relations with Cossacks, as evidenced by him welcoming them in 2016 when he highlighted traditionally good relations with Russia.<sup>103</sup> On that occasion, Viktor Zaplatin, General of *the Registered Cossacks of Russia* and a veteran of the wars in the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic and Abkhazia, called the representatives of the Municipality of Berane to visit Russia.

*The Balkan Cossack Army* signed in 2018 *Chapter on Fraternization with the Veterans' Organization of the Republic of Srpska*<sup>104</sup>, and in 2020, **Zeljko Curovic**, one of the founders of *the Balkan Cossack Army* and President of *the Alliance of Serbs from Montenegro*, announced the establishment of a branch for the Republic of Srpska. It is important to emphasize that even though an official branch in B&H did not exist at that time, the Cossacks led by **Nikolai Djakonov** (the Crimea participant from the pro-Russian forces) stayed in Banja Luka ahead of the 2014 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, according to the analysts' assessments, provided support to Milorad Dodik's candidacy for the President of the Republic of Srpska.<sup>105</sup>

According to BIRN's research<sup>106</sup>, even though it was founded in Montenegro, *the Balkan Cossack Army*

is registered in Serbia. BIRN stated that the Serbian Business Registers Agency wrote that the association, represented by Vojislav Vidakovic, has a name of *the Union of Cossacks of the Balkans* with its headquarters in Belgrade and that it was founded in order to *affirm the Cossacks' culture and tradition through the revival and presentation of Cossacks' ethnoscapes*.

*The Cossacks* in the Balkans gathers individuals that participated in the Ukrainian battlefield or were related to the associations of fighters of the pro-Russian paramilitary formations in Ukraine. Apart from *Night wolves*, the gathering in Kotor was attended by several individuals from B&H. One of them was **Gavrilo Stevic**, who has been trailed before the B&H Court for participating on the foreign battlefield in Ukraine. Another B&H citizen who was identified by BIRN B&H was **Slavenko Kuzmanovic**, who testified at the trial and said that he traveled to the gathering in Kotor with Stevic and two more people at least and that they discussed the experiences from the Ukrainian battlefield during the trip.<sup>107</sup>

The current number of *the Balkan Cossack Army* members is unknown, as is the number of those who have an active membership.

## NIGHT WOLVES

The Montenegrin chapter of *Night wolves* was founded on September 1, 2014, with its headquarters in Podgorica. Founders are Vukoman Bulatovic (authorized person), **Dragan Maras**, and **Zeljko Obradovic**. In the organization of the NGO *Monterusija*, the *Night wolves* headed the parade of Montenegrin motorbikers on May 9, 2015, within the celebration of *Victory Day*.<sup>108</sup> The then press release of the NGO *MonteRusija* read that the NGO, under the auspices



**Alexei Galitsky (second from the left) and the *Night wolves***



of the Russian Embassy and *Rossotrudnichestvo*, would organize a set of manifestations in Bar, Budva, and Herceg Novi in the next three days.

According to the data from their website, the goals of the Association include *cherishing and preserving Orthodox religion, humanitarian work, preserving multi-ethnic harmony, as well as promoting a*



Alexander Zaldostanov – the Surgeon (left) and Alexei Galitsky



Alexander Zaldostanov – the Surgeon and SOC Patriarch Irinej

*healthy lifestyle*. Their path rests upon Orthodox values and the tradition of ancestors; they live adhering to the bequest of Saint Peter of Cetinje, while their land and home are wherever the Orthodox Slavs live. Their message is to *Pray to God and stick to Russia*.

That the relationship between *the Night wolves* and the Serbian Orthodox Church exists can be proven by the fact that the members of the organization were part of the escort of the SOC Patriarch **Irinej** and other Church dignitaries during their visit to Montenegro in October 2018. On that occasion, the police from Cetinje apprehended them and detained them.

Even though *the Night wolves* claim that nothing else but motorcycles, patriotism, and Orthodoxy brought them together, their activities point out that they and *the Balkan Cossack Army* belong to the same network of Russian influence and propaganda, which has been developed by the Russian government all over the world and used as a means of achieving the Russian foreign policy goals. Although Bulatovic does not deny his frequent visits to Russia, he claims that they have never met Russian President Vladimir Putin or any other Russian official.<sup>109</sup> Bulatovic also claims that the President of *Night wolves of Serbia Sasa Savic* stuck up for them from the very beginning, opened many doors for them, and was a sort of a connection between them and Russia.<sup>110</sup>

Some of *the Night wolves'* activities included celebrating *Victory Day*, visiting Russian school and kindergarten in Zagoric in Podgorica<sup>111</sup>, celebrating the Saint Patron's Day of the Army of the Republic of Srpska, visiting Berane and the north of Montenegro with Cossack atamans and Cossacks, attending the dinner in celebration of the Montenegrin and Russian friendship organized by *the Society for Montenegrin and Russian Friendship Peter I* and *the Cossack Center Saint Peter of Cetinje*, and many sermons of Bishop Joanikije.

It is interesting to mention the Orthodox motorcycle pilgrimage *Russian road* that has been organized in the countries at the Adriatic coast by the Russian *Night wolves* and *Russian motor-tourism Federation*. The motorcycle pilgrimage road is 3,000 kilometers long and goes through Montenegro, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia. It aims to study the historical heritage of the Russian Empire and Orthodoxy<sup>112</sup>. The representatives from the RF Embassy, ROC, Orthodox churches, monasteries, and parishes in the Balkans and at the Adriatic coast participate in the planning of the trip together with the compatriots' organizations.

Undoubtedly, the pro-Russian association of allegedly patriotically motivated bikers gathered around Orthodoxy is part of the Russian influence and propaganda network, and that their presence and increased engagement is related to the Russian

pressure on the regional countries. *The Night wolves* are means *par excellence* for achieving Russian foreign policy goals, including in the Balkans; therefore, the coincidence of their establishment in Montenegro and the increased activities with certain Russian foreign policy activities in the Balkans is not accidental.<sup>113</sup>

## VETERANS OF THE 63<sup>RD</sup> PARACHUTE BRIGADE IN MONTENEGRO

Mijajlo Backovic, one of the founders of the association of the *Veterans of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade of the Yugoslav Army* and priest of the SOC, was an organizer of processions against the Law on Freedom of Religion that the police pressed charges against. Backovic is a former member of the Yugoslav Army, a participant of the 1997–1999 war, and a veteran of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade.

In March 2018, Mijajlo Backovic gave an exclusive interview for *Russia Beyond* where he talked about the period when he was in the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade of the Yugoslav Army and about the current Russian-Montenegrin relations. On that occasion, he said that the associations of the Veterans of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade from Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska actively cooperate

with fraternal associations from Russia, that the frequent visits of the delegations both of active soldiers and veterans from Russia prove. In the interview, he emphasized that he himself has a Russian godfather and many friends from Russia, who know that the people from Montenegro did not impose sanctions on Russia but the government in Podgorica, alienated from its people. The data that Backovic, as he said, stayed in Moscow in 2014 and presented President Putin with a document showing his ownership over a piece of land in Grbalj, proves that he is inclined to Russia and the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin.<sup>114</sup>

Besides, he received a decoration of the Russian Airborne Forces of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (VDV AF RF) by Major-General **Alexander Saluyanov**, former commander and veteran of the VDV who visited Mihaljska prevlaka on October 2, 2016. In return, presenting himself as the President of the Executive Board of the Association of Veterans of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade, Backovic decorated Major-General Saluyanov<sup>115</sup>. On September 13, 2016, Backovic attended the founding of the *Balkan Cossack Army* in Kotor.

In June 2020, there was a video of him coordinating a political protest in the organization of the Democratic Front in Budva.<sup>116</sup> In August the same year, ahead of the parliamentary elections, he directly cursed all the voters of the then ruling coalition because of the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion.<sup>117</sup>



■ Mijajlo Backovic in a military uniform

# **RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**



In the historical context, Russian foreign policy shows a strong religious component. In this regard, the marginalization of the social-integrative role of the church during the communist-socialist rule in Russia can be seen as a departure from the centuries-old close relations between the state and the church, although even in that time frame the church was subordinate to the state, given its instrumentalized role in foreign policy and cooperation with the KGB. With Putin's coming to power, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has become one of the key instruments of *soft power* from the Kremlin's arsenal, becoming the *spiritual* face of Russian foreign policy. Specifically, Orthodox expansionism has become an important part of the Russian foreign policy within which three important goals can be identified:

- the return of Orthodox parishes abroad under the auspices of the Moscow Patriarchate;
- the return of the former church property of Imperial Russia abroad;
- gathering of a wider group of supporters of the *Russian world* abroad, who are expected to become loyal defenders of the Kremlin's policy.<sup>118</sup>

The synergistic action of the state and the ROC in promoting traditional (spiritual) values is an integral part of a coordinated *offensive* aimed at undermining universal human rights. Such a character of Russia's foreign policy is especially noticeable if its activities are monitored within international forums – the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, where it insists on equating human rights with the values of traditional Orthodoxy.<sup>119</sup> In this manner, a certain ideological continuity with Soviet politics is maintained, since the main targets of the attack (democracy, individual freedom, and universal human rights) remained unchanged.

Moreover, it can be assessed that Soviet communism and Russian Orthodoxy share Russian

nationalism and imperialism, anti-liberalism, deeply rooted traditionalism and conservatism, aversion to universal human rights, and deep intolerance towards Western democracies.<sup>120</sup> Thus, in 2008, the ROC formalized its critique of universal human rights in the document *The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* (Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви о достоинстве, свободе и правах человека).<sup>121</sup> One of the mechanisms of Moscow's religious diplomacy is the working group for the *exchange of assessments on various situations in certain regions of the world where there are Orthodox believers*, which was founded in 2011 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>122</sup>

The ROC has become an influential institution, especially in post-Soviet countries such as Belarus, Georgia, and Kazakhstan. The role that the church played during the *Euromaidan* revolution in Ukraine best illustrates its dependence on official Moscow. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) – a subordinate branch of the ROC in Ukraine, actively supported the Russian annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. The UOC-MP has worked to create parallel security structures in Ukraine, such as the Cossacks<sup>123</sup>. The ROC used the church to interfere in the Ukrainian local elections in October 2020 – the UOC-MP clergy openly campaigned for the pro-Russian opposition, and the UOC-MP priest, who advocated separatism in Ukraine, ran in the local elections in Uzhhorod as one of the holders of the list of the pro-Russian party Opposition Platform – for life (Опозиційна платформа — За життя).<sup>124</sup> The ROC also exerts a significant influence on the views of believers, and promotes, at least indirectly, sympathy for Putin's neo-imperialist ideology.

It is noticeable that the top of the ROC used *the Orthodox crisis* in Montenegro as a suitable moment for the anti-Western campaign, and, through



The ROC priests consecrating the Russian armament

the media, placed the issue of freedom of religion in Montenegro in the context of events in Ukraine. Thus, in one of the announcements of the ROC, it is stated: *All this is happening in the heart of Europe, which has proclaimed, as well as the United States, the principle of separation of church and state! Thus, the principle of a secular state is easily violated for certain political goals, including, of course, the fight against Russia.*<sup>125</sup>

One of the more recent examples of the (mis)use of the Orthodox Church is its mediating role in Russian anti-NATO propaganda. After aggressive statements from the Kremlin that characterized Montenegro's NATO membership as *open opposition, reckless expansion, and introduction to a new Cold War*, and after the ROC publicly expressed concern

over Montenegro's accession to NATO, a statement from the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro soon followed in form of a Russian demand – citizens should decide on joining the Alliance on a referendum. However, the risk of harmful Russian influence on Montenegro has not decreased even after joining NATO, but it has certainly strengthened.<sup>126</sup> The influence of the ROC on the SOC also carries a risk to European security. The Serbian Orthodox Church is used as a means to destabilize and participate in the political life of certain countries, which is part of the tactics that enable the Kremlin to carry out its goals in the Balkans, hiding behind the mask of religion, spirituality, and protection of Orthodox values.

## DEPARTMENT FOR EXTERNAL CHURCH RELATIONS OF THE MOSCOW PATRIARCHATE

The main role in the development of external contacts of the ROC aimed at preserving and strengthening Orthodox unity is entrusted to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, whose president is Metropolitan **Hilarion** of Volokolamsk (Alfeyev). The influence of that synodal department and especially the Head of Diplomacy (the second man) of the Russian Church in the region was quite intensified after the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in the Parliament of Montenegro at the end of 2019, which was immediately condemned by the ROC.

In several statements given for the Russian and Serbian media, Metropolitan Hilarion supported believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the *noble and holy fight* they are waging against the *discriminatory* Law on Freedom of Religion, and then he personally engaged through participation in an on-line procession.<sup>127</sup> On that occasion, he expressed admiration for the processions, which, according to him, he watched on central Russian television, and assessed that these were not attacks on the Serbian Church in Montenegro but attacks on canonical Orthodoxy, because it was an attempt to nationalize church property and transfer it to *non-canonical Montenegrin church*. Speaking about the borders of the church jurisdiction and spiritual centers, Hilarion emphasized that the canonical structure of the

church and its administrative organization never coincided with the administrative borders of states: *the Russian Orthodox Church is not only the Church of Russia. It is the Church of Ukraine, the Church of Belarus, and the Church of Moldova. It is also the Church of the Baltic Republics. It is also the Church of Central Asia countries. (...) Likewise, the Serbian Orthodox Church does not exist only in Serbia but also in other countries.*

On another occasion, during his visit to Serbia, when he met with the Serbian church and state leadership, Hilarion sent a warning to Montenegrin **President Milo Djukanovic** using an undiplomatic vocabulary,



Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion and the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije



saying that if he did not revise his position on forming his own schismatic church, he would end up as former Ukrainian President **Petro Poroshenko**.<sup>128</sup>

Metropolitan Hilarion often expressed his political views regarding the situation in Montenegro, especially prior to the 2020 election process. In addition to political instructions to the then Montenegrin government regarding the regulation of internal relations, Hilarion stated in one of his public appearances that the Montenegrin ambassador in Moscow tried to convince him personally of the validity of the Law

on Freedom of Religion. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro then denied the allegations of the Russian Metropolitan.<sup>129</sup>

His attitudes and standards in the context of events in Montenegro and Belarus, which in a sense can be viewed analogously, are also interesting. While the Moscow Patriarchate actively supported the protest processions that served as a ground for mobilizing the electorate of the then opposition parties in Montenegro, Belarus, on the other hand, was notified that the clergy should not interfere in the politics.<sup>130</sup>

## SOC AS A MEDIUM OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO

Apart from the public appearances of Metropolitan Hilarion, the statements of the highest body of the ROC – the Holy Synod and Patriarch **Kirill** of Moscow and All Russia, whose public appearances consist of political tones, testify to how closely the processes in Montenegro are monitored in Moscow. In mid-2020, he made a statement calling upon the Montenegrin authorities to abolish *the discriminatory Law that brought division and schism in Montenegrin society and to stop the persecution against the canonical Orthodox Church in Montenegro, and drop the attempts to create an "autocephalous church" with local schismatics*. Making an analogy with the situation in Ukraine, Kirill said to the Montenegrin authorities that the *bitter fruits of the state's attack against people's shrines guarded by the Church and the establishment of a local church are visible in that country*.<sup>131</sup>

The Serbian Orthodox Church was the first and only one to take the side of one of the confronted parties – the side of the Russian Orthodox Church, in a dispute dividing the global Orthodox community since October 11 when the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to recognize the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church.<sup>132</sup> Just as the SOC supports the ROC in the case of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Russian Church supports the Serbian one regarding the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Even though in the previous century, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, according to the 1905 Constitution of Montenegro, was autocephalous, nowadays, it has no support to regain it, primarily due to the strong influence and mutual actions of the SOC and the ROC. As early as 1992, Metropolitan

Amfilohije wrote to the Russian Patriarch asking him to exclude the Montenegrin Orthodox Church from the list of the autocephalous churches.

In a very similar manner, both the SOC and the state leadership responded to the events in Montenegro, while promoting church dogmas in public discourse and blurring the border of secularism in Serbia.<sup>133</sup>

In the middle of last year, addressing the public, Serbian Patriarch **Irinej** compared the Montenegrin government to the Ottoman and even the Ustasha, while Serbian President **Aleksandar Vucic** condemned the Montenegrin government's interference in the internal church organization in Montenegro, thus personally interfering in Montenegro's internal affairs.

However, this was not the first time that the Serbian Patriarch spoke inappropriately about the position of the church and the believers in Montenegro. During his official visit in July 2018, he compared the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbs in Montenegro with their position in the Ottoman Empire and during the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).<sup>134</sup> A similar *modus operandi* can be recognized in the performances of Patriarch Kirill, such as the one in Ukraine in 2009, when one of the main goals of his visit was to suppress the desire of the local church to gain independence.<sup>135</sup> During Patriarch Irinej's second official visit in October the same year, when he was welcomed at the airport by the Montenegrin chapter of the pro-Putin motorcycle club *Night wolves*, Irinej pointed out that Montenegro is a *classic Serbian country and Serbian Sparta*.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to implementing a similar policy towards Montenegro, joint activities and intensive cooperation between the ROC and the SOC, i.e. Russia and Serbia are important in the field of spiritual education and the implementation of joint humanitarian projects, as well as announcements of a joint strategy of churches regarding the problem of *Christianophobia* and saving the Serbian people and their shrines. In that context, it is worth looking at the statements from several meetings between Patriarchs Kirill and Irinej, when both sides sent political messages and emphasized the importance of religious, cultural, and very close historical ties between the two peoples and the two churches.

During his visit to Moscow in 2013, Patriarch Irinej, together with his Russian counterpart, criticized the political leadership of the Republic of Serbia for its policy towards Kosovo, with words that were not in accordance with church practice and political vocabulary, saying that it was under the influence of the West.<sup>137</sup>

Returning hospitality, in November 2014, a month after Putin's visit to Belgrade, SOC Patriarch Irinej met with Russian Patriarch Kirill and bishops, including Metropolitan Hilarion. During the three-day visit, Kirill talked with the church and political leadership of the Republic of Serbia about the development of the ROC's aid program for Serbian shrines in Kosovo, consecrated the monument to Russian Tsar Nikolai II Romanov, and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Belgrade.<sup>138</sup> Previously, in 2011, this institution awarded an honorary doctorate to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Also, in June 2020, during a joint address with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Patriarch Irinej asked for state and church help from Russia in order for Serbia to preserve Kosovo. At that time, Lavrov

criticized the promotion of neoliberal values with anti-Western rhetoric and expressed support to the Serbian Orthodox Church *going through hard times in Montenegro*, emphasizing that Russia, *as the guardian of traditional values*, would always fight for the interests of the Orthodox church.<sup>139</sup> At the same meeting, it was reported about the works on the Cathedral in Belgrade, financed by Russia.

In the spirit of cooperation and mutual support, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia **Nikola Selakovic** visited Patriarch Kirill in Moscow in April 2021, shortly after the new patriarch was anointed in Belgrade. Selakovic then assured the Russian Patriarch that the newly elected Serbian Patriarch Porfirije would not deviate from the path that the two churches had built during the time of Patriarch Irinej.

At the beginning of 2020, representatives of the ROC in Ukraine – Metropolitan of the UOC-MP **Onufriy** and his vicar, Bishop of Barishev **Viktor Kocaba**, also joined the political-ideological game of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. First, in January 2020, during a visit to Montenegro, Kocaba, accompanied by Metropolitan Amfilohije, served a prayer service in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Budva, after which they led a procession in that city with the clergy. Then, in February, the Russian Metropolitan of Ukraine Onufriy stayed in Podgorica, and also led the processions. The arrival of the ROC representatives in Montenegro with a view to providing support to the SOC in *the fight for the defense of shrines*, as well as the messages they sent at the time, clearly indicate the existence of certain historical and cultural spheres of interest in Russia-Ukraine and Serbia-Montenegro relations.

On the occasion of the visit of the Russian Metropolitan of Ukraine Onufriy to Montenegro during the sharp public dispute caused by the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the Embassy of Ukraine in Montenegro conveyed the previously issued statement of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in which it was stated that Metropolitan Onufriy was not authorized to express the views of the majority of Orthodox believers in Ukraine, as well as that it was inappropriate for a representative of the ROC to comment on the internal issues of Montenegro on behalf of the Ukrainian people. The statement also said that the only bishop of the autocephalous OCU was Metropolitan **Epiphany**, who had no intention to visit Montenegro.<sup>140</sup> Besides, the ROC in Ukraine has been functioning as a church organization loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate since 2019 when the OCU gained autocephaly.



**Sergei Lavrov and SOC Patriarch Irinej**

## OLIGARCH KONSTANTIN MALOFEYEV AS AN IMPORTANT ACTOR OF THE ROC

Part of the behind-the-scenes network of Russian actors in the Western Balkans is Konstantin Malofeyev, an Orthodox tycoon who closely coordinates his activities with the bearers of Russia's strategy for the Balkans. Malofeyev is the founder of the *Foundation St. Basil the Great*, the largest Orthodox humanitarian organization in Russia, with a reported budget of over 40 million dollars. This Foundation maintains long-term cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, thus contributing to the promotion of the Russian culture and language. In 2012, Serbian Patriarch Irinej hosted the cadets of the *Foundation St. Basil the Great*, who showed interest in the further development of relations between the two institutions, with the message *to remain persistent in their studies, faith, and love for the homeland*.<sup>141</sup>

Malofeyev is the founder and the owner of the *Marshall Capital Partners* investment company, which invests a lot in the telecommunication sector, media, and technology. Besides the *Fond*, Malofeyev is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the *Tsargrad TV* and a member of the Board of Trustees of the non-profit partnership *Safe Internet League*.

A report<sup>142</sup> published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington in mid-2019 in the context of using the Serbian Orthodox Church as a channel for Russian influence in Montenegro, states that he is an ultra-right oligarch, founder of a charity, politically and financially linked to the Kremlin, who works closely with Russian President Adviser **Vladislav Surkov**. From the position of interpreting the methods of Russian malign influence, which, the report explains, tries to exploit every weakness and social division within the country, the following statement by Surkov is also cited: *Foreign politicians talk about Russia's interference in elections and referendums around the world. In fact, the matter is even more serious: Russia is interfering in your brain, we are changing your conscience and there is nothing you can do about it*.<sup>143</sup>

Businessman Malofeyev was connected to the alleged negotiations on the purchase of *TV channel Novi* from Herceg Novi with the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, that owns that media, and that would significantly contribute to the strengthening of conservative forces and political-propaganda affirmation of Russia's ties with Montenegro and countries in the region, primarily Serbia.<sup>144</sup>

Besides having close ties and cooperation with the Democratic Front leaders, the Russian oligarch was also in contact with Metropolitan Amfilohije. The

Metropolitan blessed Malofeyev in 2015 for financing and organizing the bringing of the *Holy Fire* to Montenegro through his *St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation*.<sup>145</sup>

It is significant to note that Malofeyev has been put on the list of people declared *persona non grata* by the Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs because of his activities concerning either threatening to or undermining territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine. Malofeyev has also been put on the list of the Russian citizens who were imposed sanctions by the European Union in the form of freezing of the assets and ban on travel in the EU countries – the 2014 decision supported by the Government of Montenegro as well.<sup>146</sup>

## METROPOLITAN AMFILOHIJE AS AN IMPORTANT ACTOR IN THE PROMOTION OF ROC INTERESTS

The engagement of the Russian Orthodox media network during the protests caused by the religious law in Montenegro is also significant. Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radovic) was presented as a *hero* and a *legend* who opposed the Montenegrin government. Until then, his pro-Russian and anti-Western views were republished by some conservative websites, one of which (*Pravoslavie*) is run by Metropolitan **Tikhon** (Shevkunov), known as a person close to Vladimir Putin. The other – *Tsargrad* (also known for its campaign against President Djukanovic and passionate advocacy of Orthodox states alliances) is under the control of businessman Konstantin Malofeyev, who is considered to have financed a pro-Russian uprising in eastern Ukraine, which is why he is on the list of Russian citizens to whom the EU has imposed sanctions and travel bans.<sup>147</sup>

When it comes to other Russian connections of Amfilohije Radovic, it should be pointed out that, among the leading persons in Moscow, he was considered one of the most energetic Russophiles in the Balkans. Advocating close ties with Russia and promoting its



**I SOC Patriarch Irinej and Leonid Reshetnikov**



positive image in the world, then its historical role in World War II (which is an important thesis of Putin's propaganda), meetings with the pro-Putin organization *Night wolves* recommended Amfilohije as a holder of high Russian awards. In 2001, in the Kremlin, he was awarded the Order of Lomonosov, the highest recognition of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Two years later, he received an honorary doctorate from the Moscow Theological Academy, and in 2014 from the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg.<sup>148</sup>

In mid-2016, Amfilohije spoke at the promotion of the second edition of the book *To Return to Russia* by Leonid Reshetnikov, then director of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Research*. Apart from Amfilohije, the following individuals spoke at the gathering: Metropolitan **Dimitri** (Kapalin) of Tobolsk and Tyumen, Deputy Speaker of the State Duma for the Commonwealth of Independent States **Oleg Leb-edevev**, Scientific Adviser of the *Institute for European Studies* in Belgrade **Misa Djurkovic**, and Editor-in-Chief of *Nove Srpske politicke misli* (*New Serbian Political Thought*) **Djordje Vukadinovic**. The extremely well-attended and media-covered promotion was held in the premises of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce in Belgrade, and just before its beginning, Reshetnikov received the Order of Holy Emperor Constantine from Patriarch Irinej for special merits for the strengthening of Serbian-Russian ties.



Leonid Reshetnikov and Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije on the book launch in Belgrade in 2014



Metropolitan Dimitri (Kapalin) of Tobolsk and Tyumen, Leonid Reshetnikov, and Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije on the launch of the book titled *To Return to Russia* in Belgrade in 2016

Metropolitan Amfilohije was one of the speakers at the first promotion of the book, also in Belgrade in 2014, when, in the conditions of international sanctions against Russia due to the annexation of Crimea, he criticized the Montenegrin government and cursed with the words: *May he who is not loyal to the same-language, same-blood Russia, have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice, and 3,000 times by me. This is what St. Peter of Cetinje left to his Montenegrins, and it would be good if the current prime minister of Montenegro read these words at a time when he, for the first time in history, introduced sanctions against Russia. (...) Djukanovic made such a decision only on behalf of the government, but not in the name of Montenegro and Montenegrins. If it was not true, it would be sad and funny. We could expect anything in Montenegro, but we could not have expected this.*<sup>149</sup>

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOC ON THE CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF MONTENEGRO

There is no doubt that the power of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is great, which was demonstrated in the parliamentary and local elections in 2020 and 2021<sup>150</sup>, when it was obvious that the support of the Church and active participation of its priests, and the entire church infrastructure, in the election process significantly determined its outcome.

After the election victory of the three ideologically diverse coalitions with different party programs that were united around a common goal – the end of the 30-year rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) on August 30, 2020, the direct exponent of the Serbian Orthodox Church **Zdravko Krivokapic** won the term to form the government and became the holder of the electoral list of the coalition of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian right parties – *For the future of Montenegro*. Under the auspices of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the process of selection and election of members of the new government, whom Krivokapic symbolically called *apostles*, was implemented, thus suggesting the program commitments and goals of his government.

Although the new government was presented to the Montenegrin and international public as an expert one, with the announcement that its work would be guided by professional principles based on the principle of meritocracy, it was clear that its priorities and dynamics of activities would be harmonized with the SOC interests in Montenegro.

In fact, from the very beginning, it was clear that the majority of members of the Government were elected under the direct or indirect influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the principle for the election was connection or closeness with church structures and individual priests on various grounds. Over time, it has become apparent that it was not just a matter of respecting the church as an institution and the religion it preaches and practices, but also about a much deeper connection between some of the Krivokapic's apostles<sup>151</sup>, manifested through kinship or family ties, suggesting that nepotism, not a meritocracy, decided on certain appointments in the new Government of Montenegro.

Almost all ministers in the Government are directly connected with the Serbian Orthodox Church and its branches in Montenegro. **Vladimir Leposavic**, former Minister of Justice and Human and Minority Rights, was the legal representative of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, while **Ratko Mitrovic**, one of the builders of the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica, was appointed Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning, and Urbanism. The Head of the Pulmonology Department of the Clinical Center of Montenegro **Jelena Borovinic Bojovic** was appointed Minister of Health. She treated the late Metropolitan Amfilohije and she attended his funeral without respecting epidemiological measures. **Vesna Bratic**, Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports, a close associate of Zdravko Krivokapic and an advocate of the *Serbian world*, is one of the key soldiers of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Also, other ministers in the Government, have particularly emphasized their commitment to the Serbian Orthodox Church with their actions and publicly expressed views.

The Government of Zdravko Krivokapic is composed in a form that enables the Serbian Orthodox Church to follow and fulfill its agenda in full capacity. Despite the publicly declared principles and priorities, almost all steps of this government enabled the Serbian Orthodox Church to expand its influence in Montenegro, open the door wide to the *Serbian world* and thus call into question the multiethnic, civic and secular character of Montenegro.

With his work and views on the genocide in Srebrenica, former Minister of Justice and Human and Minority Rights in the Government of Montenegro Vladimir Leposavic drew great attention of the domestic and foreign public. Under the pressure of the local and foreign public, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic was forced to initiate the procedure of dismissal of Minister Leposavic, which shook the already rather loose relations within the Government and the parliamentary majority.

Whatsoever, Leposavic is not completely unknown to the Montenegrin public. In 2012, he was politically



**Connections between the SOC and the members of the Montenegrin Government**

engaged as a speaker at the rallies of the pro-Serbian nationalist Party of Serbian Unity (Srpska Slo-ga), founded by **Dobriko Dedeic**.<sup>152</sup> During 2014, at the rallies of the Socialist People's Party led by Srdjan Milic, he stood out with his anti-NATO views.<sup>153</sup> From 2018, he was a legal advisor to the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral and the Eparchy of Budimlja and Niksic, and actively fought for the *defense of Orthodox shrines* and amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religion. He represented the Serbian Orthodox Church at the United Nations in Geneva, as well as at the OSCE and the Council of Europe's forums. He was also a member of the SOC expert team in negotiations with Dusko Markovic's previous government on the Law on Freedom of Religion.

It is the strong connection with the Serbian Orthodox Church that is a key reference for which Leposavic became the Minister in the Government of Zdravko Krivokapic. In his short term, he managed to perform two important tasks. First, to amend the Law on Freedom of Religion in favor of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Second, to participate in the drafting of the Fundamental Agreement that the Government of Montenegro should sign with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Since the signing has been announced, Montenegrin leaders, under the pressure of the public and the media to reveal more details about the whole process, have given nothing but contradictory statements accompanied by often scant information. The only thing the public currently knows is that the Agreement should be signed in October this year, but its content is unknown.

Vladimir Leposavic has positioned himself very strongly in pro-Serbian right-wing circles as a sincere and uncompromising advocate of an ideology that, through the concept of the alleged endangerment of the Serbian people, promotes the



great-state ambitions of Belgrade supported by the SOC, which ignore the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of the Western Balkan countries, and sees Montenegrin identity and Montenegrin nation as a product of communism.

The proposal, and then the appointment of Vesna Bratic as the Minister of united departments of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports in the Government of Zdravko Krivokapic, justifiably encouraged skepticism at the very beginning and met with antagonism in the Montenegrin public. Until then, a socially anonymous professor at several faculty units of the University of Montenegro, gripped attention with speeches that were assessed as unacceptable, having in mind the importance and scope of the departments that she is in charge of.

Vesna Bratic appeared in the Montenegrin media in July last year, when a group of university professors (77 of them) gathered around the idea of *defending Serbian shrines*, announced the beginning of the work of the new NGO *We won't give up Montenegro (Ne damo Crnu Goru)*. The proclamation, then presented to the public, points out that this NGO will fight against *all forms of discrimination, especially against not respecting the right to freedom of religion, freedom of public speech, freedom of assembly, and expression of civil discontent*.<sup>154</sup> Since the beginning of its public activities, the organization that grew out of the procession movement has imposed itself as a political actor with a clearly profiled political orientation. Thus, the appeal that the organization sent to the leaders of the opposition parties in Montenegro on July 10, points out the importance of the broadest opposition gathering and consensus as a model for running in the parliamentary elections.<sup>155</sup>

The NGO *We won't give up Montenegro* (in which Vesna Bratic inherited the director's position from Zdravko Krivokapic) organized a disproportionately large number of round tables in the short time since its establishment, attended by representatives of the academic and professional community, as well as the SOC clergy in Montenegro, which raises the question of the source of funding for this organization. It is symptomatic that the Government of the Republic of Serbia in May 2020 (immediately before introducing this NGO to the public) allocated a one-time financial aid of 1.64 million euros to various associations in Montenegro while leaving the public without the precise information on which associations.<sup>156</sup>

Unlike other members of the current government, the controversial public appearances of Vesna Bratic provoked criticism and condemnation of a part of civil society even before she took over the ministerial office, i.e. at the time of her candidacy for that position. When Prime Minister-designate Zdravko Krivokapic presented a proposal for the constitution

of his government, seven NGOs working in the fields of labor and gender equality, in an open letter, demanded that Krivokapic withdraw Bratic's candidacy because of her earlier statement that *women in Montenegro are often in the position that they chose themselves*, thus expressing, as they believe, ignorance and unawareness of the position of women in modern society.<sup>157</sup> In addition, her entire attitude was perceived as a glorification of patriarchy and a kind of condemnation of feminism.

The petition, signed by 150 cultural and scientific workers at the end of November last year on the occasion of the formation of the new Montenegrin government, with the support of Montenegrin associations abroad, states that *the election of Vesna Bratic as Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports was motivated by her clerical nationalist views, rather than professional and managerial qualifications*. It is also stated that using Ministry she was appointed to, through her scandalous statements incompatible with the civil, secular, anti-fascist, and multicultural state character, she is trying to destroy the foundations of Montenegrin statehood, and disenfranchise and assimilate the Montenegrin people.<sup>158</sup>

In fact, Vesna Bratic, appearing on the Serbian media in Montenegro and speaking affirmatively about her own Serbian nationalism as love for her own people (who, according to her, has been experiencing artificial discourse in the anti-Serbian campaign for a long time) commented in a recognizable manner on the *fear* of the upcoming census in Montenegro deriving a dichotomy between ethnic Montenegrins (*who are also Serbs*) and those who emerged as a product of ethnic engineering (*Novocrnogorci, Montenegrini, Dukljani, Milogorci*). At that time, she assessed that a pro-fascist policy has been pursued towards Serbs in Montenegro, which is a *secular and civil state, but also a Serbian state*, and that the discourse of *Serbs and citizens* is being perpetuated in the regime newspapers in a neo-Goebbels manner.<sup>159</sup>

There are many other, inappropriate and socially unacceptable statements based on fundamentalist views on *rebuilding the votive chapel* in Lovcen<sup>160</sup> (the peculiar thing is that the *little chapel* in Lovcen is part of the visual identity of the NGO *Ne damo Crnu Goru*), a *Chetnik woman*, and a statement that believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church *became orphans* after the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije, who was her spiritual guru. Acting on the matrix of the *Serbian world*, Vesna Bratic has the role of enabling the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the spread of this ideology through educational and scientific institutions.

Another obvious example of nepotism and employment of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the

Government of Montenegro is the appointment of Jelena Borovinic Bojovic to the position of Minister of Health. Not only is the minister's husband **Dragan Bojovic** a high-ranking official of the Democratic Front, more precisely the vice president of the Democratic People's Party of Milan Knezevic, but her brother-in-law is the Bishop of Buenos Aires and South-Central America **Kirilo (Milan Bojovic)**. The third brother of the Bojovic family, lawyer **Radovan Bojovic**, currently serves as a secretary in the Ministry of Ecology, Spatial Planning, and Urbanism.

The Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism, Ratko Mitrovic, who was also the director of the construction of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica, also has family ties in the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral. His brother, Archpriest-Staurophore **Dragan Mitrovic**, performs the function of the elder of the Cathedral in Podgorica. Dragan Mitrovic has come into the public spotlight several times. For the first time in July 2020, when, after a prayer service in the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica, he was arrested for violating epidemiological measures. For the second time, at the end of October of the same year, when the media published a video from the Department of Pulmonology at the Clinical Center of Montenegro (headed by Borovinic Bojovic) in which Mitrovic with other clergy, doctors, and medical staff bid a final farewell to Metropolitan Amfilohije, although then, according to media claims, he was treated in KCCG for coronavirus. For the third and last time, Mitrovic came into the public spotlight after appearing on TV *Vijesti* on May 17<sup>161</sup>, after which the NGO *Network for Affirmation of the Non-Governmental Sector* (MANS) filed a criminal complaint with the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Kotor against the Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism and his son – **Matija Mitrovic**, on suspicion that they committed the criminal offense of building an object without a report and documentation for construction.<sup>162</sup>

When the new Government of Montenegro was formed on December 4, MSc **Aleksandar Stijovic**, from the Institute of Forestry, was appointed head of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management. In the first months of his term, Minister Stijovic distinguished himself by appearances in which he accused his predecessors **Milutin Simovic** and **Petar Ivanovic** of alleged criminal activities and illegal spending of money.

While Minister Stijovic tried his best to discredit the former government and especially the former ministers of agriculture in his media appearances, he himself became the target of criticism coming from MANS. In fact, in February, he visited the *Carevic* farm in Krimovica, which is owned by **Marko Carevic**, the president of the Municipality of Budva and an

official of the Democratic Front, which caused a reaction by **Dejan Milovac** from MANS. Milovac assessed that by visiting the *Carevic* farm, the Minister of Agriculture reaffirmed the lawlessness and seizure of state property as a recipe for illegal personal enrichment at the expense of the citizens of Montenegro. However, public support for Carevic and his illegal project in Krimovica is not the only wrong step of the new Minister of Agriculture.<sup>163</sup>

Also, despite Prime Minister Krivokapic's words that none of the ministers in his government will be part of parties or political movements, he actively participated in the election campaign in Niksic. Stijovic, together with the Prime Minister's advisor for economic issues **Gordana Radovic**, who is the leader of the *We won't give up Niksic* (*Ne damo Niksic*) movement, and who ran on the coalition list *Peace is our nation* (*Mir je nasa nacija*), presented development projects from the area of agriculture in the local community of Grahovo in the midst of the election campaign. The Minister's visit did not meet the positive response of the Grahovo residents.<sup>164</sup>

The support provided to Carevic, Prime Minister's adviser Radovic and Leposavic indicates that Minister Stijovic shares the same values with them. Just like them, Stijovic is very close to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, as it can be seen from his visit to the humanitarian organization *Cojstvo* in his hometown of Berane, very close to the SOC.



Members of the humanitarian organization *Cojstvo* visiting Monastery Djurdjevi Stupovi

# THE MEDIA

**A**fter Putin had won a third presidential term, the Russian General Staff and intelligence services introduced disinformation and propaganda (2012/13) as a part of the security strategy and hybrid warfare, which should support the military strategy. Believing they were under attack of the West, Russian leaders responded by cyber-attacks and disinformation in order to counter Western *soft power* and compensate for the conventional strategy weaknesses.<sup>165</sup> Russia's media-spread propaganda strongly affects our region, particularly the traditional environments where history is sometimes understood naïvely and incorrectly, and usually calculatedly, often by pointing out the traditional, fraternal relations with Russia. A high level of political polarization in the Western Balkan region and political interference in the media represent a fertile ground for malign disinformation campaigns.

Russian main ally in this region is Serbia, and it serves as a Russian politics' tool; therefore, apart from being present in the domestic and pro-Russian media, Kremlin's propaganda is visible in the

Serbia-based media as well. Russia's narratives on the regional countries, with the focus on Montenegro, are not spread by *Sputnik Serbia* only, but also by other online and print media in Serbia. That way, Moscow uses Belgrade to exert its influence on Montenegro.

Serbia-based media, including pro-Russian and pro-Serbian Montenegro-based media modeled on them, glorify Russia in their articles, simultaneously negating all Western values and frequently incorrectly covering the events in the United States and the European Union. Serbia-based media with the biggest circulation participate in the building of Russian President Putin's image while presenting Russia as a friend and a country-protector and distorting the reality.

Media in Serbia and Montenegro influenced by Russia publish articles that are shaped by Russian and Serbian interests, while the public in both countries, including all over the region, is getting less and less reliable information.

## THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

Even though the Russian influence in Montenegro has been present for a longer period through the influx of Russian money, the interest of the Russian media and their propagandistic activity becomes visible, particularly during significant social and political events. Montenegro's NATO invitation in 2015 was a sign for Russia to intensify its activities. The goal of Russian and pro-Russian media was to promote the official Kremlin's agenda, which included opposing Montenegro's NATO membership, criticizing the ruling government, and supporting the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political parties.

Initially, Russian media were covering the 2015 protests organized by the opposition Democratic Front party, which requested the dismissal of Milo Djukanovic's government; the possibility of Montenegro's NATO membership was within their sphere of interest as well. Hence, on October 26, 2015, a round table discussion was held in the premises of *RIA Novosti* in Moscow under the title: *NATO goes after the Balkans: Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia*, which was organized by RISI and the *Balkan Center for International Cooperation*. The message from the round table discussion read that Montenegro's

accession to NATO must not be allowed. The participants were Nikita Bondarev, head of *RISI's Group for Balkan countries*, Viktor Kolbanovski, director of the *Balkan Center*, Igor Damjanovic, coordinator for the international cooperation of the *No to War – No to NATO* movement, and Veniamin Striga, Deputy Chairman of the *Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Montenegro*.<sup>166</sup> In November same year, another round table discussion was held at the press center of the state-owned *Parliamentary Gazette* in Moscow under the title: *Montenegro. Prospects for Resolving the Crisis. Political Dialogue*. On that occasion, Deputy Speaker of the State Duma Sergei Zheleznyak said that Montenegro must hold a referendum on potential membership to NATO and that Russia should be actively involved in the process, while Milan Knezevic and Andrija Mandic, who joined the discussion online, openly sought Russia's support in their opposing to country's NATO accession.<sup>167</sup>

A more intensive media reporting continued throughout 2016, during and after the October elections and attempted coup, the aim of which was to prevent Montenegro's NATO accession and enable the pro-Russian Democratic Front to come to power.



During the 2016 parliamentary elections, Russia has activated its media propaganda machinery, whose main narrative read that Milo Djukanovic's regime would soon collapse and that, therefore, the anti-NATO battle had not been lost yet.<sup>168</sup> *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, a Moscow-based daily newspaper, portrayed Montenegrin elections as controversial while Djukanovic was called *an Asian type of dictator who cannot be accepted in Europe*. Moreover, they were frequently insinuating that Podgorica was about to face the Ukrainian scenario.<sup>169</sup>

During Montenegro's NATO integration process, apart from a ban on import of the Montenegrin state-owned *Plantaze* Company's products and pro-Russian opposition parties' boycott of 2017 voting on NATO membership ratification in the Parliament, Russia's moves included diplomatic responses and media attacks against the Government. However,

that was not the end. In May 2017, Russian state-owned media outlet *Rossiya 1* published a short documentary claiming that Montenegro *is a dangerous country for Russian tourists, that there is a high risk of infection by contagious disease, that there are dirty beaches, minefields, and political instability, and threat the Russian citizens are being arrested for unknown reasons*<sup>170</sup> – a *modus operandi* that Serbia-based tabloids integrated into their own propaganda weapon against Montenegro.

Despite Russian efforts to prevent Montenegro's NATO accession by employing media and disinformation as the *soft power* tools, Montenegro became the Alliance's member in 2017. Likewise, a strong negative campaign of the Russian media during 2017 directed against Montenegrin tourism was not successful either; during 2017, 2018, and 2019 Montenegro recorded an increase in the number of overnights from Russia compared to 2016.<sup>171</sup>

## LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA SPACE

Adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, which caused discontent of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the then opposition and initiated processions, was a significant topic in the Russian information space at the end of 2019 and during 2020. In an artificially created wave of media disinformation, manipulation, narratives, and distorted reality, already seen patterns were noticed both in the behavior of certain political actors and centers of power and their media logistics, tasked with creating a suitable atmosphere and influencing the public opinion.

Many headlines are supporting the thesis that the Russian media were leading a serious campaign against Montenegro after the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion. Some of the headlines read: *A record number of Serbian Church defenders took to the streets of Montenegro*<sup>172</sup>, *Police in Montenegro refused to protect the believers in the procession*<sup>173</sup>, *"Finish off the remnants of the unity of the South Slavs": How the church schism intensifies in Montenegro*<sup>174</sup>, *Unrests in Montenegro: A controversial Law on church adopted*<sup>175</sup>, *A scandalous Law on church enters into force in Montenegro*<sup>176</sup>, etc. Besides these sensational and frequently dramatic headlines, the atmosphere surrounding the Law served to launch anti-Western propaganda and a new negative campaign against President

Milo Djukanovic. The media reported that Djukanovic was uncooperative<sup>177</sup> and that there was only one way out for him – to resign<sup>178</sup>.

An article published by the Russian News Agency TASS, reporting that there were suspicions about the United States having imposed the controversial Law to Montenegro<sup>179</sup>, proves the extent to which the Russia-based media manipulated the situation. In this context, it is important to emphasize the media coverage of the Russian *Tsargrad TV*, which, in its many articles, wrote that the United States had been *eradicating* the canonical status of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro with the assistance of the mafia.<sup>180</sup> *Tsargrad TV* also reported that Montenegrins were an inseparable part of the Serbs and that the anti-Serbian *Montenegrin project* had been set up to destroy the Serbian identity of the Montenegrins.<sup>181</sup>

The European External Action Service concluded in the analysis titled *Disinformation is heightening tension between Serbia and Montenegro* that disinformation regarding the Law on Freedom of Religion led to the heightening of tensions and revealed that Serbia-based media (some of them even state-owned), Russia-owned media in Serbia (*Sputnik*), and some Montenegro-based news portals were among the other sources of false reporting.<sup>182</sup>

## ELECTIONS AND CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IN MONTENEGRO

The *Regnum* news portal projected in July 2020 that *a totalitarian Medieval government in Montenegro has never been so close to its crash* and that despite all Milo Djukanovic's schemes, the opposition would have every chance to get people's support and win the elections, if it was cooperative.<sup>183</sup>

Soon after the August 2020 parliamentary elections ended, while it was still unknown who would form the government in Montenegro, the Kremlin-based media reported that the pro-Western Democratic Party of Socialists was on brink of defeat and that the attitude surrounding the Law on Freedom of Religion, the processions, and the support to the Serbian Orthodox Church contributed to the success of the opposition – the same narrative was pushed by Serbia-based media. State-owned news agency *RIA Novosti* paid attention to the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, emphasizing that the opposition owed its success to the Church that mobilized the voters through processions. *RIA Novosti* stated that the protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion attracted greater attention of the citizens than the 2015/16 opposition protests and the 2017 protests against Montenegro's NATO accession.<sup>184</sup> During the first reactions, the possibilities of relations between Russia and Montenegro being improved, and Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic path being questioned, have been emphasized. Day after the elections, the *Parliamentary Gazette*<sup>185</sup> republished an opinion of political scientist **Sergey Markov**, who said for the 360 TV that the opposition suited Russia better than the current government, which had been trying significantly to deteriorate relations with Russia.<sup>186</sup> A similar attitude took Konstantin Kosachev, a former Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs, who expressed on Facebook a hope that Montenegro would change its strategic course and abandon its anti-Russian orientation.<sup>187</sup> That message of his was republished by numerous Russian media, including the state-owned *TASS* agency.<sup>188</sup> Ahead of these elections, Moscow-based daily newspaper *Kommersant* published an article stating that Montenegro's NATO membership and its European path largely depended on the election results. *Many observers call the elections a new referendum on further country's development*, *Kommersant* wrote.<sup>189</sup> Using such media reports

and narratives, the Russian media tend to separate Montenegro from Europe and simultaneously tied it up with Russia.

The Russian media also attentively covered the affair surrounding the disclosure of confidential information, whose key player was the Head of the National Security Agency (ANB) **Dejan Vuksic**. In their reports, they were emphasizing that Vuksic *exposed* confidential NATO information<sup>190</sup> and legal CIA *rezidentura* (Russian lingo for the base of operations for resident spies) in Montenegro<sup>191</sup>. An article stating that Vuksic removed experienced executives from the Agency, that one of the DF leaders Milan Knezevic was appointed Chairperson of the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee and member of the National Security Council, and that there were changes in the Ministry of Defense, was published by the Russian news portal *Vzglyad* under the tendentious headline: *Pro-Russian forces purged the Montenegrin special services*<sup>192</sup>. Regarding thereto, the U.S. *Jamestown Foundation* estimated that the Russian media *added fuel to the fire* in an otherwise volatile atmosphere by openly bragging about Moscow's success in Montenegro.<sup>193</sup>

During Democratic Front leaders Milan Knezevic and Andrija Mandic's visit to Moscow in June 2021, Knezevic appeared on the *Govorit Moskva* (Говорит Москва) radio show hosted by **Oleg Bondarenko**, where he stated that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church did not exist and that he would never recognize a *fake country of Kosovo*. He stated that the opposition party of Milo Djukanovic, together with Aleksa Becic and **Dritan Abazovic**, accused Serbia, Serbs, and the Serbian Orthodox Church of genocide by passing the Resolution on Srebrenica, which is the reason why a serious crisis took place.<sup>194</sup>

## KATEHON

The *Katehon* news portal owned by Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev contributed to the glorification of the Slavic brotherhood. The news portal was created in order to increase the Kremlin's influence abroad; it is managed from Moscow and in 2005, it offered even translation of chosen articles for a target group – Serbs in Montenegro and Serbia. According to the 2017 data, the Governing Board of the news portal included former director of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Studies* Leonid Reshetnikov and Russian ideologist of the new world order **Aleksandar Dugin**.<sup>195</sup>

In the U.S. Department of State's report titled *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda*

*Ecosystem*, *Katehon* and its founder Malofeyev are stated to have meddled in the election process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, been involved in the purchase of media in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia, and the attempted coup in Montenegro.<sup>196</sup> Even *Bellingcat* found *circumstantial evidence* that Malofeyev was involved in the failed Montenegro coup during the 2016 parliamentary elections.<sup>197</sup> It is also known that Malofeyev owns *Tsargrad TV* that broadcast interviews with the Democratic Front politicians, including with one of its leaders Andrija Mandić, during 2016 and 2017 in Moscow. Moreover, Leonid Reshetnikov frequently appeared on *Tsargrad TV*, who used the media to attack governments in Belgrade and Podgorica.

## A MONTENEGRIN FAVORITE OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

Marko Milacic, President of the True Montenegro party, enjoyed the attention of the Russian and the pro-Kremlin media during 2016 and 2017. Milacic's frequent appearance in the Russian media at that time coincides with the beginnings of his political conversion, moreover, with his relation towards NATO. He made a long way from national Montenegrin and pro-EU advocate to ethnic Serb and an MP who advocates in the Parliament for the Serbhood, Orthodoxy, and the closest possible cooperation with Russia. During 2016, as the leader of the *Movement for Neutrality* and the Head of the *Resistance to Hopelessness* organization, Milacic appeared on the Russian *RTVi* and *CTVBY* where he talked about how *NATO creates instability in the world*. On May 21, 2016, he appeared on the Russian *Life TV* on the occasion of Montenegro's Independence Day that, as he said, could not be celebrated since the country had been run by a criminal elite that had been pushing Montenegro towards NATO. In 2017, *News front* published Milacic's statement during the *Referendum Caravan*. That same year, Milacic was making journalists from the Russian state TVs feel frightened from the Montenegrin crime, which diverts tourists from Montenegro. In the same video, **Drazen Zivkovic**, editor-in-chief of the *Borba* news

portal and *Prva TV*, and Igor Damjanovic, a correspondent for the *Balkanist* news portal and president of the NGO *Immortal Regiment*, also made some comments. Milacic and Damjanovic were told to be *the residents of Budva*, which is another false and disputable claim of the Russian media in that situation. The same year, Russian agency *Sputnik* published around 30 articles regarding Milacic's activities. A Facebook analysis of Milacic's account showed that during 2017, he was appearing on and giving statements for the Russian TVs such as *Россия 1*, *Russia Today*, and information agency *EADaily*. After having been founded in 2018, the True Montenegro party stated that the Russian industry-leading information agencies (*ITAR-TASS*, *RIA Novosti*, *Tsargrad TV*, and the editorial board of the *Foundation for Strategic Culture*) reported on the foundation of the party.<sup>198</sup> During 2015, 2016, and 2017, Milacic was a correspondent for *Sputnik Serbia*, and he was writing about the domestic politicians and foreign diplomats' campaign for NATO membership, bad consequences of NATO membership, anti-government protests organized by the Democratic Front.

# RUSSIAN AND PRO-RUSSIAN MEDIA IN SERBIA

## SPUTNIK

Russian state-owned media group *Rossiya Segodnya* launched in November 2014 its news portal and radio – *Sputnik*. Since then, the brand has expanded and, nowadays, it offers news in more than 30 world languages. Just as *Russia Today*, *Sputnik* constantly promotes anti-Western narratives.

*Sputnik* opened its office in Belgrade in 2015, representing a pillar of the pro-Kremlin activity and influence in the region, and as such, it largely focuses on Montenegro. By providing content both in Cyrillic and Latin script and given the similarity among languages, *Sputnik Serbia* reaches large public across the Western Balkans.

*Sputnik Serbia*'s editor-in-chief Ljubinka Milincic is a publicist, journalist, and translator, who lived and worked in Russia for many years, first as a cultural attaché and then as a correspondent for the Serbian *RTS*, *NIN*, and *Tanjug*. Given the family relationship, Milincic gave the True Montenegro party leader Marko Milacic a media space on *Sputnik*, which he used many times to air his opinion against the then government in Montenegro and NATO. Besides Milincic, an important role in spreading of the Russian propaganda via this media was occupied by **Miroslav Lazanski**, the Ambassador of Serbia to Russia, who used his TV show – *In Lazanski's Crosshairs* – to glorify Russia, President Putin, Russian weapons and degrade the West and Western values. He also gave Milacic media space in his own show.

In cooperation with the *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, the *Digital Forensic Center* analyzed *Sputnik Serbia*'s narratives in 2018 in order to understand the messages of the media outlet that targeted the Western Balkan countries, the European Union, and NATO. When it comes to Montenegro, the articles focused on ethnic divisions, historic revisionism, anti-Serbian discrimination, Montenegro's NATO membership, and the country's EU path.<sup>199</sup>

## PRO-GOVERNMENT TABLOIDS

Tabloids close to the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and the ruling class are also recognized as pro-Russian media. The media that single out in this context are *Novosti*, *Informer*, *Kurir*, *Srbija danas*,

*Alo*, *Blic*, and *Telegraf*, which have been declared as absolute record-holders in breaching journalism ethics and the *Press Council of Serbia*'s standards and labeled by Twitter as media which editorial policy has been directly influenced by the Government of Serbia. Even though the government in Serbia declaratively advocates a pro-European path, one can get a completely different impression judging by the content of the mentioned tabloids, since it is abundant in negative reporting on the EU and NATO and a positive one on Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, who is presented as a protector of Serbia and Serbian interests.<sup>200</sup> Given the stated, it is important to emphasize a great readership of the stated newspapers and news portals in both Serbia and Montenegro. Actually, based on *Similar web* statistics, *Kurir* ranks the second most read news portal in Serbia, while *Alo* ranks fifth.

The intensity of reporting on Montenegro amplified since the country joined NATO, and it reached its peak with the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, and later on, with the processions of a religious and political character. A whole range of Serbia-based media became a creator and a filter for channeling several threatening narratives in our media space. Instead of contributing to calming the delicate situation in the Montenegrin society, the media made it even more volatile with their reporting. Political conflict between state institutions in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the coronavirus pandemic, and the elections were key events followed by a large number of narratives in the Serbia-based media, which frequently found their way to the Russian colleagues.

The media firestorm is particularly visible during the summer tourist season. Due to the importance of tourism regarding the national income, and the great interest of Serbian citizens in having a vacation in our country, tourism is a highly ranked topic about which media in Serbia spread disinformation. A large number of articles of the Serbian media outlets portray Montenegro as an expensive and insufficiently safe destination with dirty beaches and aggressive people. They publish articles such as *Tourists have been largely canceling vacation in Montenegro*<sup>201</sup> and *It came out from the shallow water and headed towards people; a snake captured on the Buljarica beach packed with people*<sup>202</sup>. This



is the pattern Russia used in 2017 to build a negative campaign and present Montenegro as an unsafe destination, thus hoping to prevent Montenegro's NATO membership.

Such reporting led to the development of serious prejudices about Montenegro, its citizens, and institution among a large number of Serbian citizens, and Montenegrin ones as well, given the fact that a great readership of those news portals exists in our country too. It is obvious from the aforementioned that Serbia-based media, particularly since 2017, pay great attention to Montenegro by reporting in an extremely sensational and fervent way, frequently taking information out of the context and breaching a journalism code of ethics and a moral code.

## VOSTOK

Unlike most of the pro-Russian and Russian news portals, it is noticeable that the *Vostok* news portal does not swim in sensational headlines. However, this does not undermine the fact that it is particularly active in spreading the pro-Russian and anti-NATO sentiment to the extent that Facebook suspended the news portal's page because of publishing articles on the anniversary of NATO intervention on FR Yugoslavia. This even provoked **Maria Zakharova**, spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, to react with words that it was about political censorship conducted by the West.<sup>203</sup> Then, **Vanja Savicevic**, editor-in-chief of the news portal, said that *Vostok* would not change its editorial policy and that it would continue to publish content on NATO aggression.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, Savicevic was in Luhansk and Donetsk, and he is banned from entering Ukraine, which even proves the already mentioned website *Myrotvorets*.<sup>205</sup> Among other things, he is known for having interviewed **Dejan Beric**, a Serbian volunteer combatant in the War in Donetsk, whose biography is also controversial.<sup>206</sup>

**Sasa Savicevic**, Savicevic's brother, is a former pilot in the Army of Republika Srpska and a veteran of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade from Nis, and a representative of *Russia Today* (RT) for the Balkans and Africa. In the 90s, he established a Russian-Serbian brotherhood called *Bridge: Moscow, Belgrade, and Banja Luka*, and he also served as an advisor to the Duma Deputies in the Security Committee. In an interview, he talked about Russia's bad information position in the Balkans since the news about Russia were coming from the Western media to Serbia, which is one of the reasons why the *Vostok* news portal was created.<sup>207</sup>

It is noticeable that the column *Region* on this news portal has been flooded with articles on Montenegro,

while articles on other regional countries are present to a far lesser extent. The statements of the Democratic Front leaders are in the focus of the reporting, including the events in the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral.

## VIDOVĐAN

*Vidovdan* is another pro-Kremlin news portal, close to the Serbian Orthodox Church and particularly to certain circles (Bishop of Bachka Irinej (Bulovic)). Among other things, it is known for launching a media firestorm on certain people from the SOC in Montenegro, for example on the former rector of the Cetinje Seminary **Gojko Perovic**, or Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic and president of the Parliament Aleksa Becic. The news portal has been regularly publishing statements of the Democratic Front leaders, which to a degree confirms the existence of close ties between the news portal and the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic. Concerning the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between Montenegro and the SOC and the reorganization in the MCP, the news portal is known for spreading exclusive information without naming its source. The *Vidovdan* news portal spread the narrative that Gojko Perovic, a former rector of the Cetinje Seminary, is a leader of the separatist, autonomous, and ultra-Montenegrin fraction within the MCP, and that, therefore, Metropolitan Joanikije has been delivered a task to remove him.<sup>208</sup> Even the pro-Montenegrin media in Montenegro republished the news referring to *Vidovdan*.<sup>209</sup> The editor-in-chief of the news portal is a religious analyst **Zeljko Injac**.

The news portal's correspondents are also significant for this analysis. Besides writing for *Vidovdan*, **Branko Radun** (simultaneously one of the main analysts of the *Nove srpske političke misli – New Serbian Political Thought*) and **Dragomir Andjelkovic** are also members of the *Center for the Development of International Cooperation*, an organization known for its anti-NATO conferences and the glorification of Russia. Apart from this, they cooperated with<sup>210</sup> *Russia's Strategic Culture Foundation*, a think-tank organization. Radun<sup>211</sup> and Andjelkovic<sup>212</sup> regularly comment on and analyze the political situation in Montenegro.

## FAKTI

*Fakti*'s editor-in-chief **Djuro Bilbija** was working as the *Vecernje novosti* correspondent from Moscow for 13 years and was also one of the editors-in-chief of the *Glas javnosti* daily newspaper.<sup>213</sup> Today, *Glas*

*javnosti* does not publish print versions but only online one and is known for spreading the Russian narrative, fake news, and disinformation. During the 2020 parliamentary election campaign in Montenegro, the news portal was recognized as a leader in publishing fake news – the DFC already wrote about it.<sup>214</sup>

In 2011, Bilbija launched the *Fakti* news portal, which cherishes aggressive pro-Russian sentiment. That fact is mainly visible in the columns and sub-columns such as *Россия (Russia)*, *Orthodox Point*, *Svetosavlje (Saint Sava's ideology)*, *Globotpor (Globresistence)*, *Evroskeptici (Euroskeptics)*, *Šiptari (Shqiptars)*, *Njegoševi Srbi (Njegos's Serbs)*, *Mladic, Karadzic, Seselj*, and alike.

Some of the columnists of the news portal include historian Cedimir Antic, one of the biggest advocates of the *Serbian world* concept; journalist **Milijana Baletic**, several times accused of warmongering journalism in the 90s, who is also frequently writing for the *Vidovdan* news portal; conspiracy theorist **Milan Vidojevic**; and historian and political scientist **Srdja Trifkovic** whose sphere of interest often includes political situation in Montenegro.

Bilbija is an advocator of the idea that Serbia should make the same alliance with Russia as the United States with Israel, and he criticizes the dominantly pro-Western course that the Government of Serbia has chosen, only declaratively though.<sup>215</sup>

## BALKANIST

In the context of the Russian propaganda, the *Balkanist* news portal should be mentioned as well. It was created in 2018, while the version in the Serbian language started to operate in December 2019. *Balkanist* became a club that gathers Russian politicians, political scientists, historians, experts, and journalists whose lives have been in a way related to the Balkan region. A political analyst and an advocator of Russian politics Igor Damjanovic writes analyses on the events in Montenegro for this news portal, who claimed in his articles, among other things, that journalists in Montenegro had been arrested upon a request of the Americans<sup>216</sup> and that Montenegro was about to face *bloodshed*<sup>217</sup>. Together with the *Balkanist*'s founder and Editor-in-chief Oleg Bondarenko, Damjanovic appeared in April 2021 on the *Srpski svet (Serbian world)* TV show produced by *IN4S*. On that occasion, Bondarenko said that both Montenegrin and Serbian people were friends of Russians, but when it came to the events in the previous ten years, it could not be said that the Montenegrin government was fond of Russia and that

it behaved in a friendly manner, adding that even though the government had changed, the situation remained the same. *When the government in Montenegro starts to behave in a partner-like and friendly manner, we can create a new wave of cooperation*, Bondarenko said.<sup>218</sup> It is obvious that Igor Damjanovic shares his opinion on possible future cooperation. It is important to note that Nikita Bondarev, head of the group for the Balkan countries of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI)*, also writes for the news portal. In 2016, he advocated for the new referendum on the state and legal status of Montenegro that would question the decision from 2006.<sup>219</sup>

## NEWS FRONT

In the context of the spreading of Russian narratives and disinformation, a significant role is played by the *News Front* news portal, which has been operating in Serbian since 2015. This news portal was launched in Crimea to provide support to the Russian attempt regarding the Crimea annexation. It has been recognized as one of the most apparent Russian websites for disinformation spreading, which even proves the data that its manipulative techniques led to the removal of their accounts on social media at the beginning of 2020, including the accounts of its Serbian editorial office on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>220</sup> Even though the owner of the media **Konstantin Knirik** claims that the media has been financed from the donations of his family and friends<sup>221</sup>, one of the former employees said for the German *Zeit* that the Russian intelligence services allocated funds accounting for a great deal of the media's budget<sup>222</sup>. During the coronavirus pandemic, *EUvsDisinfo* analyzed *News Front* and revealed numerous examples of disinformation and narratives, including the one related to Montenegro – *NATO does not care about Montenegro amid COVID-19 pandemic*<sup>223</sup>. *News Front* is also one of many Russian websites and institutions that collaborate with *One World*, a think-tank organization that covered the 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro.<sup>224</sup>

Oksana Sazonova, a *News Front* journalist for Serbia, wrote in October 2016, ahead of the parliamentary elections in Montenegro, that Milo Djukanovic is a politician who promotes NATO and makes his people feel frightened from Russia<sup>225</sup>. A year after, Sazonova interviewed Belgrade-based lawyer **Goran Petronijevic**, who talked about Montenegro's accession to NATO, highlighting that NATO cannot make any good for Montenegro, and about the attempted coup for which he said was staged.<sup>226</sup>

## NOVA SRPSKA POLITICKA MISAO

*Nova srpska politicka misao* (New Serbian Political Thought – NSPM) is a specialized political magazine, established in the 90s, which today has its online version. Besides political analyses, public opinion surveys, whose credibility is frequently questioned, are one of its main scopes of work. This organization often conducts research related to Montenegro. The most prominent one is from 2015, when the NSPM's president, analyst Djordjije Vukadinovic, distanced himself from the public opinion survey on social and political trends in the regional countries by stating that he was not the author, that he did not know who was behind the research, and that he was only asked to present it.<sup>227</sup> Vukadinovic's distancing was perceived by certain media as a Democratic Front's propaganda, i.e. as faking for the benefit of that political organization. Even though there is no evidence for such claims, the fact is that the connections between Vukadinovic and some Democratic Front members exist. Actually, Vukadinovic is a member of the Board for Defense of the Democratic Front leaders Andrija Mandic,

Milan Knezevic, and others accused of the attempted coup.<sup>228</sup> Besides him, members of the Board are (among others) historians Cedomir Antic and **Aleksandar Rakovic**, both known for their extreme advocating for the *Serbian world* concept and negating of the Montenegrin nation. Therefore, Vukadinovic many times spread the well-known narrative about Serbs being endangered by the then government. The NSPM also conducted research ahead of the parliamentary elections in Montenegro in August last year, and according to some reports, it was performed upon the request of the controversial businessman **Dusko Knezevic**.<sup>229</sup>

In 2016, Vukadinovic was on the DSS-Dveri's list as a non-party candidate for an MP and he was regularly participating at the conferences organized by the right-wing and pro-Russian Dveri political party.<sup>230</sup> At one of the conferences in Cacak titled *Geopolitical position of Serbia between the EU and Russia in the light of the Ukrainian crisis*, he emphasized that the days when one had a dilemma about Serbia's joining the EU since *between the EU and Russia, we choose Russia*, have long gone.<sup>231</sup>

## PRO-RUSSIAN MEDIA IN MONTENEGRO

Even though none of the leading Russian media is registered in Montenegro, this does not diminish the significance and the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in the region. When it comes to Montenegro, Russian propaganda is spread through domestic media founded by local journalists, representatives of the pro-Russian organizations, or supporters of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political parties in Montenegro.

The content that is spread in those media *swims in* sensationalism, disinformation, and fake news and is directly related to the narratives launched from Moscow and Belgrade. Those media in Montenegro mostly produce content that glorifies Russia and Vladimir Putin, puts the West, and particularly NATO, in a negative context, and emphasizes the ties between the Montenegrin and Russian peoples. Likewise, these media particularly highlight that Serbs in Montenegro are endangered – the narrative that the *Serbian world* idea rests upon. Most of those media are characterized by the support that they have been providing to the current government in Montenegro and a negative tone towards the former government. Moreover, a synchronization between those media and the media from Serbia found

of President Aleksandar Vucic and the Serbian Progressive Party is clearly visible.

Pro-Russian news portals massively started to be created in the period when it became clear that Montenegro would become the next NATO member. During 2017, when Montenegro joined the North Atlantic Alliance, five new pro-Russian news portals were registered – *Ujedinjenje* (Union), *Nova rijec* (The New Word), *Princip* (The Principle), and *Sedmica* (Seven). The common characteristic of those media was the promotion of the Kremlin's official politics, which included opposing to Montenegro's NATO and the European Union membership, criticizing the then ruling government, and supporting the political parties from the opposition. Out of those five media, only *Sedmica* and *Ujedinjenje* are still active, although in a slightly different form – *Ujedinjenje* changed its name to *Srpsko ujednjenje*. The owners and founders of those media clearly declared that they have not been financed by Russia.

According to the 2017 data, the *Sedmica* news portal was launched by journalist **Donko Rakocovic**, who said that, culturally, they have been more inclined to Russia and, generally, to the East, but politically, that they have been equally criticizing Moscow and



the EU and the United States. The *Ujedinjenje* news portal promoted nationalist stances of its founders **Robert Zizic** and Dobrilo Dedeic. Zizic is a former member of the Montenegrin branch of Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party and a high-ranking officer of the *Balkan Cossack Army*, a branch of the Russian traditional military movement. He also founded the ultra-nationalist movement Serbian Committee *Zavjetnici* in Montenegro.<sup>232</sup> He believes that Russia is a sole and true, natural ally of Montenegro. Ahead of the local elections in Niksic, Zizic was presented in the media as a person who can vote both in Serbia and Montenegro, which he denied and said that since 2012, he had not voted in Serbia but that he remained loyal to the ideology of Serbian nationalism.<sup>233</sup> Dobrilo Dedeic, who still assumes the position of *Srpsko ujedinjenje*'s editor-in-chief, is a former member of the Serbian People's Party in Montenegro. One of the reasons why Dedeic launched the news portal is because he was dissatisfied with the work of the Russian Embassy in Montenegro, which, in his opinion, did not promote Russian interests, anti-NATO, and pro-Serbian stances well enough.

The *Princip* news portal was headed by **Vladimir Vukovic** in 2017, the then Montenegrin journalist and a co-author of several online pro-Russian publications in Belgrade, who told that owing to his and his friends' pure enthusiasm, this news portal was functioning. According to the *Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro* (CIN-CG), Vukovic wrote about discrimination of the Serbian community in Montenegro, NATO, and relations between Russia and Montenegro, and stated the following: *if I had ever received money from Russia, I would have told that to everyone and it would have been an honor, but I have not.*<sup>234</sup> It is important to emphasize that Vukovic served until recently as an advisor to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport headed by Minister Vesna Bratic and that he appeared in the media after having insulted *RTCG* journalist **Nebojsa Sofranac**.<sup>235</sup>

In the Montenegrin online community, a significant role in promoting pro-Russian and pro-Serbian values and stances belongs to the *IN4S* news portal, whose founder and editor-in-chief is **Gojko Raicevic**, also the Head of the NGO *No to War – No to NATO*. Within his NGO, Raicevic advocated for an obligatory referendum on Montenegro's NATO accession<sup>236</sup> on one hand and glorified the Russian Federation on the other<sup>237</sup>. He also attended and was a speaker at many anti-NATO rallies. A rally held in March 2019 at Miholjska Prevlaka, which was organized by NGOs *Miholjski zbor* (the Assembly of Miholje), *Bratstvo pravoslavne omladine Crne Gore*

(the Brotherhood of the Orthodox Youth of Montenegro), the *Immortal Regiment of Montenegro*, and the *Veterans of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade* is also significant in this context. Among others, some of the attendants were the then State Duma Deputy Speaker **Sergei Baburin** and the representative of the Russian Embassy **Sergey Federenko**.<sup>238</sup> Besides, Raicevic is one of the founders of the *Serbian House* in Podgorica<sup>239</sup>, for which construction Serbia allocated 3.5 million euros.<sup>240</sup> Raicevic and Drazen Zivkovic, editor-in-chief of the *Borba* news portal and *TV Prva*, were summoned to give a statement in the police in January 2020 because they were suspected of having committed an offense of creating panic and unrest by publishing fake news about an explosion in Villa Gorica on their news portals.<sup>241</sup>

According to the data of the NGOs Register, the *IN4S* was founded in 2009, and besides Gojko Raicevic, one of the founders is Vladimir Bozovic, the current rector of the University of Montenegro. Bozovic's affection towards Russia became visible in his statement that *socialism and the U.S. films and music were to be blamed for Montenegrins' not being mainly pro-Russian Serbs*. He also shares Raicevic's opinion on NATO, emphasizing that *NATO bombing, besides its sole "humanitarian" function, is a key tool for new geopolitical demarcations*. Bozovic and Raicevic visited Moscow, which even proofs a photo in front of the Administrative Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation.



Vladimir Bozovic and Gojko Raicevic in front of the Administrative Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation in Moscow

The *IN4S* news portal daily publishes narratives negating the existence of Montenegro and the Montenegrin identity, and Western values, while at the same time promoting Serbia and Russia as the most significant partners. *The Agency for Electronic Media in Montenegro* labeled *IN4S* as one of the news portals that are leading a campaign dangerous for the country and started proceedings against this



news portal for its hate speech.<sup>242</sup> In June 2020, the *IN4S* opened its editorial office in Belgrade and the *National TV*, whose goal is the promotion of Serbian traditional and cultural values.<sup>243</sup> Both the news portal and the TV have been recognized as the media that actively lead disinformation campaigns, spread fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech. Even the U. S. Department of State's report, which presents the pillars of Russia's disinformation, recognizes the *IN4S* as a part of the so-called propaganda ecosystem of Russia's disinformation campaign.<sup>244</sup>

Although the intensity of his activities is not the same as Gojko Raicevic's via *IN4S*, Drazen Zivkovic uses his news portal *Borba* to promote and advocate for better relations between Russia and Montenegro, write about discriminated and endangered Serbs in Montenegro, and provide support to the pro-Serbian political parties on the Montenegrin political scene. That support is primarily directed towards the DF.

Besides these online issues, there is a printed media that promotes Russian values and stances – *Ruska rijec (the Russian Word)*, which has been issued since 2016 as the *Dan* daily newspaper's monthly supplement. *Ruska rijec* is portrayed as a *necessary counterbalance to the Montenegrin media that serve the Montenegrin regime* (author's comment: the then government in Montenegro) *and its ideological and cultural order*. Former *Dan*'s editor-in-chief **Nikola Markovic** said that the Russian part had initiated a partner project and that it provided content, while the Montenegrin media had been tasked with printing and distribution. The content related to culture, society, economy, and alike has been prepared by the Russian media project *Russia Beyond*.<sup>245</sup> It is obvious that the goal is to familiarize the Montenegrin public with Russian tradition and values. Besides, since 2012, they have had an issue published within the Serbia-based tabloids *Politika (Politics)* and *Geopolitika (Geopolitics)*.

When it comes to TVs, it is important to mention *Srpska RTV (Serbian RTV)*, which throughout 2017 broadcast *Sputnik*'s informative shows in Serbian in three different timeframes. The TV director **Momci-lo Vuksanovic** said then that *the content of those TV shows was of global character, but that it happens sometimes that there is some information from Montenegro as well, i.e., that is what they have been broadcasting and nothing is Montenegro-specialized*. He also added that there was not any financial arrangement between *Sputnik* and them regarding that, since they signed the agreement on broadcasting *Sputnik*'s informative shows upon their own initiative.<sup>246</sup> Even though Vuksanovic's statement could

be understood that it was not a big deal that *Srpska RTV* in Montenegro had been broadcasting *Sputnik Serbia*'s TV shows, it is necessary to emphasize that it is one of the ways that Russian propaganda operates and that is aimed at influencing the public.

*Srpska RTV* broadcasts a 24-hour program via all three cable operators in Montenegro. In a promo video released by *Srpska RTV*, it is stated that they have 900 hours of informative program and as many hours of *the most significant current affairs related to the Serbian people*. Besides the regular program, *Srpska RTV* produced hundreds of hours of a program dedicated to the *magnificent processions*. It is stated that the Serbian National Council deserves all the credit, equally emphasizing the support of President Aleksandar Vucic to the Council.

After the change of the government in Montenegro, a change in ownership occurred in some of the media. *Adria Management Services LLC*, the company that was founded in 2012 by **Bratislav Stoilkovic**, became a 100% owner of the *Jadran* radio from Herceg Novi or got 70% of the shares in *A1 TV*. What has become obvious after the *A1 TV* and *Jadran*'s change in ownership is that those media became affiliated to the Democratic Front. The founder of the *Adria Management Services* Company Bratislav Stoilkovic was present in the media during the campaign for local elections in Niksic. In mid-February, the Niksic police stopped the car of DF's MP **Milo Bozovic**, who was accompanied by the SNS member **Vladimir Mandic** and Bratislav Stoilkovic. During their stay in Niksic, the SNS activists participated in the election campaign.

It is worth noting that after the parliamentary elections, the change in the management and editorship of *Prva TV* also occurred; now, it shows support towards the new parliamentary majority. *Prva TV*'s editor-in-chief for Montenegro is now Drazen Zivkovic, also editor-in-chief of the *Borba* news portal.

# **RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES**

**S**tructural reshaping of the international order upon the end of the Cold War caused a redefinition of the Russian Federation's political position in the new constellation of power and, in a long-term perspective, initiated a revision of the state approach to the Russian foreign policy concept. Feeling of historic humiliation with the events from the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, feeling of endangerment caused by the NATO enlargement on the East<sup>247</sup>, together with the exclusion from the post-Cold War European security architecture, incited Russian authorities to opt for the open confrontation with the (pro)Western countries, rather than the *peaceful coexistence*.

Such an approach to the foreign policy requested defining the new hybrid operation strategy (war) where the borders between *the levels* of war became blurred. However, its actors remained the same – Russian intelligence services. The intelligence system of the Russian Federation, mostly inherited from the former state system and burdened by the complex organizational reforms, managed to consolidate and grew into the strong system, which, together with the Russian Orthodox Church, media and organizations would become one of the major pillars of the modern Russian foreign policy.

For years, Russia did not hesitate to use intelligence agencies as an important foreign policy and hybrid operation tool, while affirming the subversive actions as a means to reach its geopolitical goals. Therefore, the intelligence services of the Russian Federation undoubtedly have an important role to renew Russian global influence and strengthen the Russian state. The political appointments of the former members of the intelligence-security system confirm these claims.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subject of Russian intelligence services whose operations are directed abroad, became global. In this context, two institutions stand out – Foreign Intelligence Service and Military Intelligence Service.

**Foreign Intelligence Service or SVR** (*Служба внешней разведки - СВР*) was founded in 1991 by President Yeltsin's decree, as one of the Soviet KGB's successors. The legal foundation of the SVR is the Constitution of the Russian Federation, federal and other acts that regulate the work of the federal services. The goals of the intelligence operations of this and other services are stipulated by *the Federal Law on Foreign Intelligence* (*Федеральный закон "О внешней разведке"*)<sup>248</sup> from 1995. According to the Law, the SVR collects and processes the intelligence information on the Russian Federation's vital interests being threatened (by the states, organizations, and individuals). The main domains of the service are: political, economic, military-strategic, scientific-technological, and ecological<sup>249</sup>, while the

greatest part of the resources is used for foreign policy intelligence work. The Service also represents the evaluative and political force that contributes to the creation of the Russian foreign policy. Its headquarters is in Moscow while its residencies are located in the Russian diplomatic-consular and commerce offices all around the world.

**Military Intelligence Service or GRU** (*Главное разведывательное управление – ГРУ, or Главное управление – ГУ*) was founded in 1921 and represents a strong professional military intelligence organization that performs within the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Its legal foundation is also composed of the Constitution, Law on Foreign Intelligence, and other legal and strategic documents of the Russian Federation. The GRU is responsible for the collection of intelligence data referring to the foreign military potentials and military plans of the foreign countries directed towards the Russian Federation. Collecting intelligence data is performed by using electronic systems, observing and investigating the activities of the armed forces of the countries from the immediate environment, observation satellite systems, and applying human intelligence.<sup>250</sup> Generally, the activities and tasks of this service may be classified into two elementary groups: counter-terrorist activities and espionage. Central and Eastern Europe are the main areas of GRU operations.

**The Federal Security Service or FSB** (*Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации - ФСБ*), formerly (1994-1995) Federal Counterintelligence Service is a Russian service for the interior security and counterintelligence affairs, founded in 1994 as one of the KGB successors from the Soviet era. It is responsible for the counterintelligence services, anti-terrorism, and supervision of the Army. The FSB is located in the former KGB headquarters on the Lubyanka Square in Moscow. In 1998, **Boris Yeltsin** appointed Vladimir Putin for an FSB director, a former KGB veteran who later succeeded Yeltsin as Federal President. Yeltsin also ordered FSB to extend its operations against trade unions in Siberia and fight the right dissidents. As a president, Putin increased the authority of the FSB by including countering the foreign intelligence operations, fighting against organized crime, and suppressing the Chechen separatists in their scope of work. The FSB is the largest security service in Europe and is exceptionally successful in counter-intelligence activities. Even though particular limitations over the FSB activities within the country have been imposed (such as reduced spying on religious institutions and charitable organizations), the FSB as well as other Russian intelligence services is subject to a smaller control of legislation or judiciary.

## OPERATIONS OF THE SERVICES AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL

The doctrine of the contemporary Russian activity is attributed to **Valery Gerasimov**, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, who published the article titled *The value of science in prediction* in February 2013. The article is considered the most useful articulation of the contemporary Russian strategy. It offers a new theory of modern warfare, representing a combination of the Soviet psychological tactics and strategic military thinking on total war, reminding more of the hostile countries' hacking, rather than an open, frontal attack (usage of hackers, media instrumentalization, fake news creation, information leak, presence of the businessmen, together with the conventional and asymmetric military tools). The following is written in the article: *The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. (...) All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character.*<sup>251</sup>

In March 2016, Gerasimov stated that each government ministry, not just the Ministry of Defence, needs to be capable to support hybrid warfare, and that *"falsification of events [and] restriction of activity of mass media... can be comparable to the results of large-scale use of troops and forces."*<sup>252</sup>

The application of Gerasimov's doctrine can best be analyzed on the example of the European countries, with some of them being NATO member countries. In just a couple of months in 2021, it was more than obvious that Moscow did not sit idly. In that period, four GRU actions on the territory of Europe and NATO members (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Italy, and

Germany) were revealed. Russia has been performing actions against the USA and its partners and allies for years, through the services and organizations controlled by the Kremlin. The examples include military support to the separatist republics in the East of Ukraine, a coup attempt and cyber operations in Montenegro as well as the campaigns of influencing in the USA during the presidential election in 2016 and 2020. Electoral interference in France 2017, poisoning of a Russian-British double agent Sergei Skripal in Great Britain in 2018, the hacking attempt of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in Hague also in 2018, and many attempts of direct interference into electoral processes in other countries clearly indicate the reach of Russian foreign policy implemented through the secret services.

Response to such actions usually came down to the expulsion of Russian diplomats and imposing of economic sanctions, which additionally became meaningless with lack of continuity and cohesion between the Western countries and allies.

Annual reports of the State Department, the EU, and NGOs all around Europe indicate the wide spectrum of techniques that Russia is using to exert its political influence through its power leverages (including SVR and GRU), and offer particular details on the implementation of these activities that are believed to aim at changing European politics and decision making, and therefore – weakening of NATO and the EU.

For numerous mentioned reasons, the Western Balkans represents a fertile ground for the implementation of the Russian strategy, since it is very important due to its geographic position.

## SERVICES IN THE FIELD

For a long time, Russian intelligence services in the region have been engaged in the local propaganda offensives in the media, online and on social media, but also in the field, in order to strengthen the Russian prestige and influence but also to undermine the credibility of the state institutions. The operations performed in this forever-turbulent area have been conceived in order to attract Eurosceptic, anti-American, and ultraconservative social subjects

and individuals, to whom Russia is presented as a defender of traditional values and Orthodoxy.

Moscow openly threatened to Montenegro and NATO alliance on several occasions<sup>253</sup>. In December 2015, the Kremlin spokesman **Dmitry Peskov** threatened that Russia would know how to fight back if Montenegro joins NATO, and the Russian Parliament threatened to freeze all projects with Montenegro. Ignoring these Russian warnings, the then Prime



Minister of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic signed in May 2016 the NATO accession protocol, permanently depriving Russia of the only potential ally with maritime access to the Mediterranean. In June 2016, spokeswoman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova stated that the then-Montenegrin government would be completely accountable for the anti-Russian stance that it allegedly took.<sup>254</sup>

The goal of the coup attempt was primarily to stop Montenegro's accession to NATO but also to install the new government in Montenegro, the one that would be led by the pro-Russian Democratic Front. In May 2019, the High Court in Podgorica sentenced two Russian citizens **Eduard Shishmakov** and **Vladimir Popov** to 15 and 12 years in prison. The Democratic Front leaders **Andrija Mandic** and **Milan Knezevic** were sentenced to five years in prison respectively, while the former Serbian police general **Bratislav Dikic** was sentenced to eight years in prison. **Predrag Bogicevic** and **Nemanja Ristic**, members of the extreme right-wing organizations from Serbia, who were unavailable to the Montenegrin judiciary, were sentenced to 7 years of prison respectively. The driver of the Democratic Front **Mihajlo Cadjenovic** was sentenced to one year and six months in prison, **Branka Milic**, the citizen of Serbia who escaped to the Serbian Embassy in Podgorica before the very end of the trial was sentenced to three years in prison, Serbian citizen **Milan Dusic** was sentenced to one year and a half, **Drgan Maksic** to one year and nine months, **Srboljub Djordjevic** to one year and a half and **Kristina Hristic** got suspended sentence<sup>255</sup>.



Passports of a Russian intelligence officer suspected of participating in the attempted coup in 2016

In February 2021, the Appellate Court of Montenegro abolished the first-instance verdict since, during the procedure, the violation of the criminal procedure provisions was made.<sup>256</sup> Retrial for attempted terrorism on the parliamentary Election Day in 2016 in Montenegro, which was supposed to start on May

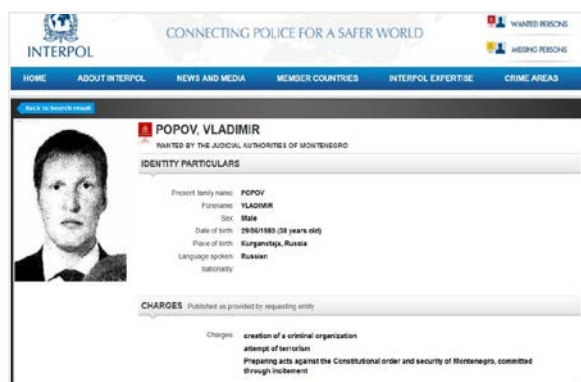
31, was postponed for October 19 due to the strike of Montenegrin lawyers.

Eduard Shishmakov was traveling to Serbia with a Russian passport under the name of Eduard Shirokov. Under this name, Montenegro issued a red notice through Interpol on February 19, 2017. Montenegrin Special State Prosecutor **Milivoje Katnic** said that Shirokov's real name was Shishmakov, which was revealed thanks to the tip from the Polish partner services<sup>257</sup>. Since 2013, Shishmakov was a naval attaché in the Russian Embassy in Warsaw. As the most prominent investigative media *Bellingcat* reveals, Shishmakov took part in the high-level security meeting with the Polish Security Council on January 24, 2014<sup>258</sup>. On the Russian part, the meeting was attended by Deputy Secretary of the Security Council **Evgeny Lukyanov** (Deputy of Nikolai Patrushev), as well as the Head of Center for Defense of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kremlin*, **Grigory Tishchenko**. In November 2014, Polish media reported that the Russian diplomat was declared persona non grata and expelled. In March 2017, Polish authorities confirmed to *Sky News* that the diplomat was Eduard Shishmakov<sup>259</sup>. His residential address is in Sankt Peterburg, and according to *Bellingcat*, the address belongs to a corporate residential complex owned by GRU.



GRU residential complex where Shishmakov officially resides

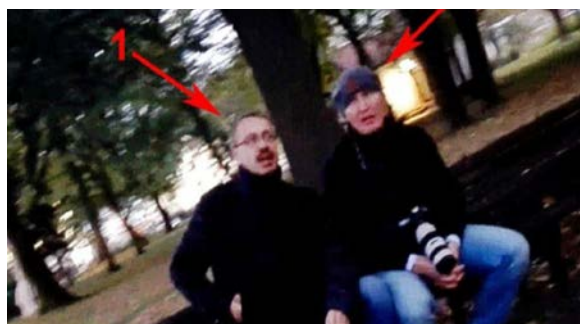
Vladimir Popov is another GRU agent who was sentenced to 12 years in prison upon the first instance verdict. *Bellingcat* and *Insider* managed to reveal the true identity of Popov – **Vladimir Nikolaevich Moiseyev**. Moiseyev, a lieutenant colonel or colonel (*Bellingcat* could not claim for sure) in the Russian intelligence service, was born on June 29, 1980, the same day as the made-up Popov.<sup>260</sup> *Bellingcat* states that in 2009, Moiseyev was given a new identity under the name of Vladimir Popov. Just like his colleagues from the GRU Chepiga and Mishkin, who are suspected of poisoning a Russian-British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Great Britain with



### Russian intelligence officer on the Interpol red notice

a nerve agent, Moiseev has two parallel identities in the Russian databases—Vladimir Moiseyev and Vladimir Popov. Also, in March 2015, Moiseyev was given an apartment in the same residential building where Mishkin obtained it a couple of months ago. Just like in the case of Mishkin, the apartment is registered in the name of Moiseyev's wife and children while the GRU agent's name was not stated in the document on the property. Popov was employed as a *photo correspondent* and *journalist* who worked for the magazine and used this identity to travel around Europe between 2012 and 2016. Claiming to be a *Morskoye Strakhovanie* journalist, Popov traveled to Serbia in October 2016. A couple of days before the parliamentary election in Montenegro, Popov, and Shishmakov met in Belgrade, which is visible in the surveillance camera footage.<sup>261</sup>

Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev traveled to Belgrade on October 26, 2016, for the previously scheduled visit. At the beginning of November, *the Guardian* quoted a source close to the Serbian government who said that Patrushev had apologized to the Serbian authorities for, as he described, *rogue operation*<sup>262</sup>. Russia later publicly denied these claims and characterized them as a *provocation*.



Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Moiseyev in Belgrade

Patrushev has a significant role in the creation of Russian politics towards the Balkans. In the period until 2015, Moscow lacked a central authority figure that would significantly contribute to the implementation of the Russian goals in the Balkans<sup>263</sup>. Patrushev, former Director of the Russian Federal Security Service, a close associate to Putin, known for his aggressive and strong stances, was a perfect person to assume that role. As a result, Putin appointed him the key person of the Kremlin for the Balkans at the end of 2015 or 2016 (depending on the source). Patrushev is accused of taking part in the organization of the coup d'état in Montenegro.<sup>264</sup> Besides, he was ardently advocating for the construction of the *Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre* in Nis, considered a cover-up for military-intelligence operations in Serbia and the region<sup>265</sup>. What particularly instigated claims that it is a Center that Russian intelligence services operate from, is the fact that the official Moscow, on several occasions, sought from Serbia to delegate special status to the Russian staff employed in the Center, through the Agreement on terms and conditions of the residence, privileges, and immunity of the staff. The first Russian intelligence officer, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin, said in an interview given to *RTS* that delegating diplomatic status to the *Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center* in Nis was not a request but an appeal to Serbia and that it had not been done so far due to the pressure of particular Western countries.

## CYBERSPACE

Russian activities in cyberspace represent an integral part of the comprehensive framework of hybrid warfare, derived from the Russian understanding of *soft power* and relations among countries, more precisely, *the zero-sum game* of the great powers for the influence in the world. Just like other aspects of the Russian *soft power*, the Kremlin perceives cyberspace in a geopolitical sense.

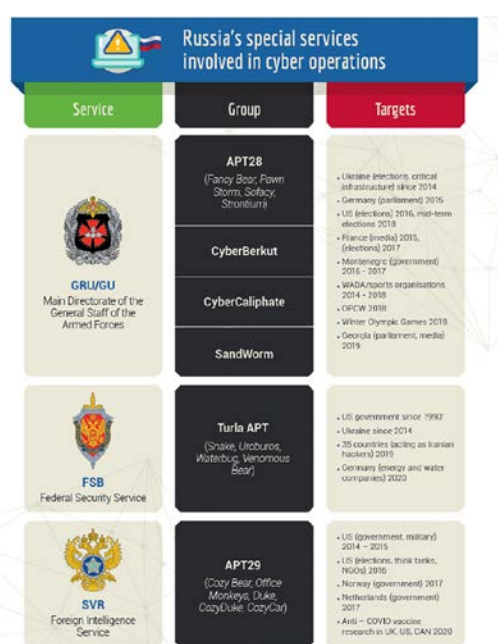
The Russian concept of information warfare and role of the cyberspace in it is exposed in the strategic policy documents such as the *National Security Strategy* (2015 and 2021)<sup>266</sup>, *Foreign Policy Concept* (2016)<sup>267</sup>, *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation* (2016)<sup>268</sup>, *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2014)<sup>269</sup>, as well as the works and publications of the Russian military strategists.

Interference in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 is the most documented case demonstrating the Russian *modus operandi*. This interference included the attacks on the U.S. election infrastructure, collecting, and intentional data leaking of the *Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee* and *Democratic National Committee*, including the emails of **Hilary Clinton**, together with the extensive information campaign conducted by the Russian troll factory – Internet Research Agency (*Агентство интернет-исследований*) – and related Russian media.

The actors participating in the Russian cyber activities include both state actors, with a significant role of the intelligence community, and non-state proxies. Aside from the GRU 74455 and 54777 Units, from Montenegro's perspective, the 26165 Unit is the most relevant, which is behind the activities of the APT28 group (*Advanced Persistent Threat 28*) also known as *Fancy Bear*. Both the investigation of the U.S. Special Counsel **Robert Mueller** on the possible coordination between Russia and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump<sup>270</sup> and the EU officials<sup>271</sup> identified APT28 as a GRU 26165 Unit. APT28 uses sophisticated tools around the world, targeting Kremlin opponents. Even though the 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.<sup>272</sup>

So far, the Russian activities in Ukraine have been the most complex and the clearest example of the Russian means and methods. Since *Euromaidan* in 2013 and the Crimea annexation the year after, Ukraine has been the testing ground for many Russian cyber capabilities. Ukraine has also fallen victim to distracting cyber-attacks on its electric energy infrastructure, which caused a power outage for

a great part of the population in 2015 and 2016. Another attack on Ukrainian infrastructure occurred in June 2017 when the Ukrainian financial system was broken into; the data from the computers of banks, energy companies, high officials, and airports were deleted.<sup>273</sup>



### The role of the Russian intelligence services in cyber operations

Georgia is one of the first examples where the military and cyber operations and attacks were simultaneously used when it lost almost 1/5 of its territory in the 2008 war. The newer example is a massive cyber-attack on Georgia in October 2019, which illustrates the sophistication of Russia's approach. The attack damaged servers in offices of the Georgian President, judicial system, municipalities, government, and non-government organizations, blocked sites, and disrupted TV stations' broadcasting. In the Western Balkans, Russian cyber operations were used as an integral part of greater campaigns to obstruct the NATO enlargement process.

It was revealed that the APT28 was also responsible for attacks on German Bundestag in 2015<sup>274</sup>, French television *TV5 Monde*<sup>275</sup>, attempted attack on the *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* (OPCW)<sup>276</sup>, Winter Olympic Games in Pyongyang in 2018,<sup>277</sup> and Romania in 2017,<sup>278</sup> as well as for numerous operations in Montenegro since 2016.



# RUSSIAN CYBER-OPERATIONS IN MONTENEGRO

Along with Northern Macedonia<sup>279</sup>, Montenegro is the most significant target of cyber-attacks and espionage with Russian signature. These activities became particularly prominent during 2016 and 2017.

In the period of NATO accession finalization, which coincided with the parliamentary election in October 2016, Russia became significantly active and intensified its presence through disinformation campaigns of the Russian media, embargo on *Plantaze* wine and other products, coup attempt, and the GRU cyber-attacks, i.e., their APT28 group.

On the parliamentary Election Day in October 2016, Montenegro faced frequent DDoS<sup>280</sup> attacks that targeted the sites of public institutions, pro-NATO and pro-EU parties' web pages, pages of civil society, and election observers. Due to these efforts, the sites of news portals *CdM*, *Antena M*, and the Democratic Party of Socialists, inter alia, were taken down. The site of the *Center for Democratic Transition (CDT)*, which monitored the election, could have not been accessed as well.<sup>281</sup>

Besides DDoS attacks, the citizens were spammed by numerous anti-Government messages on the same day. They were coming from unknown numbers via Viber, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services of Montenegro ordered a ban on these applications and similar communication services, which has been addressed to all telecommunication operators in Montenegro during that day. The operators were obliged to implement the measure in accordance with the Law on Electronic Communications, which stipulates that communication for the purpose of direct marketing is not allowed unless the user previously agreed to it. The act of blocking these platforms for several hours was condemned by the public, numerous local and international organizations, including the *Reporters Without Borders*.<sup>282</sup>

Facebook stated that this company was familiar with the disruption that affected the access to it in Montenegro, which occurred in October 2016 during the election. Four days after the election, on October 20, 2016, another phishing attack on the Parliament of Montenegro occurred; the group *Fancy Bear* probably was behind it again.<sup>283</sup>

More intensive DDoS attacks (than those on the elections) occurred in January, February, and June 2017, disrupting the web services of the Government and state institutions, as well as some pro-Government media. Montenegrin Ministry of Defence also

reported that they were the target of phishing attacks through e-mails that seemed to have been sent from the EU and NATO with attachments and provide hackers with an opportunity to install the malware *Gamefish* to the computers of the Ministry of Defence, which is a method that the APT28 uses<sup>284</sup>. *Gamefish* is a *Trojan* that offers to a hacker good access to the targeted computer, including the exfiltration of data<sup>285</sup>, access to the logs<sup>286</sup>, and other surveillance options.

The Government stated back then that the scope and diversity of attacks, but also the fact that they were performed at the professional level, pointed out synchronized action<sup>287</sup>. Three cyber security companies – *FireEye*, *Trend Micro*, and *ESET* concluded that the attacks came from APT28.<sup>288</sup> The U.S. intelligence data additionally indicate that the group had connections with the Russian military intelligence service GRU and was financed by the Kremlin<sup>289</sup>. After many attacks at the beginning of 2017, Montenegro sought help from NATO and the U.K., which helped to successfully stop two attacks at the end of the same year.

Analysis of the cyber threats to Montenegro published by the Ministry of Public Administration and presented in the *Cyber Security Strategy of Montenegro 2018 – 2021*<sup>290</sup>, pointed out that the number of cyber-attacks rose in 2017, or, that it coincided with the final phase of Montenegro's accession to NATO, which certainly does not imply that all of them were from Russia. During the first nine months of 2017, there were 385 reported incidents out of which 335 concerned malware and attacks on sites and state institutions. In comparison, there were only 22 attacks in 2013.

Since the attacks have become more frequent, Montenegro tightened defense measures and formed 31 local teams, in charge of cooperating with the members of the national *Computer Incident Response Team (CIRT)*, concerning the protection from computer security incidents online.<sup>291</sup>

CIRT said for the DFC that the number of attacks rose in comparison to 2017 but they are becoming more and more sophisticated, therefore, it is very difficult to trace perpetrators. CIRT worked on the investigation of DDoS attacks that occurred in 2016 and 2017, however, it could not determine for sure the accountability of any hacker group (contrary to the mentioned cyber security companies), during, and shortly after the attacks, since they were very complex, unlike the regular DDoS attacks.



Year	Attacks on websites and information systems	Internet frauds	Abuse of social media accounts	Inappropriate online content	Malware	Other (harassments, blackmails, identity theft etc.)	Total
2011.	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
2012.	3	2	-	1	-	-	6
2013.	5	3	10	-	1	3	22
2014.	5	6	20	5	-	6	42
2015.	6	17	37	19	17	36	132
2016.	18	20	36	14	50	25	163
2017.	91	18	34	9	368	12	532
2018.	13	68	50	6	363	37	537
2019.	19	70	79	11	387	38	604
2020.	25	84	90	15	383	44	641
01.01–15.06. 2021.	12	38	48	7	167	23	295

Cyber-attack statistics in the period between 2011 and June 2021

Due to the previous events, at the beginning of October 2019, members of the U.S. Cyber Command arrived in Podgorica at the invitation of the Government of Montenegro in order to investigate the signs of Russian penetrating the networks of the Montenegrin government, but also to have an insight into the adversary cyber threats before the then-upcoming 2020 U.S. and Montenegrin election.

## GRU ONLINE OPERATIONS IN MONTENEGRO

Online operations are focused on the creation of fake media websites, bot accounts, and distribution of propaganda content harmonized with the official state narrative and goals, and they represent a *par excellence* example of the Russian modus operandi.

Among the data that Facebook submitted to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) in 2019, there are clear and precise indicators and proofs of the ways that GRU and their APT28 used between 2014 and 2019 in order to create think tanks, alternative media, and avatar accounts on various social media in many countries, including Montenegro. This demonstrated that Russia had had an active role in the 2016 Montenegrin election and its attempted sabotage.

*Modus operandi* was simple – anti-NATO and anti-Western content from the GRU-created alternative media was supposed to be spread as much as possible, using fake Facebook, Twitter, and even Medium accounts, using adequate hashtags related to the Montenegrin elections and NATO accession, such as #NeUNato, #STOPMILO, etc.

### CRNA GORA NEWS AGENCY

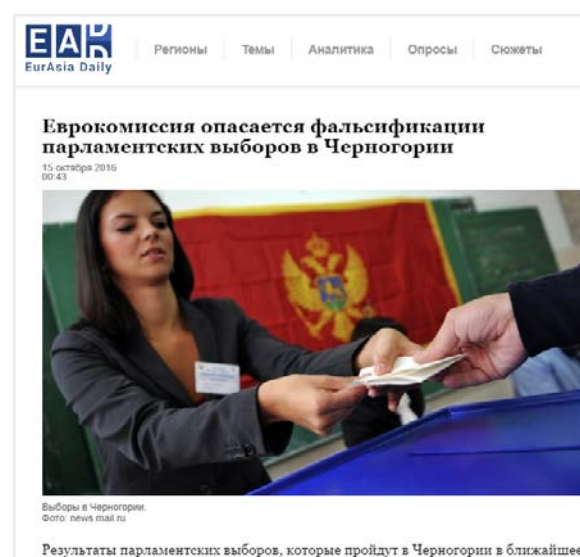
Out of 33 Facebook pages (all of them were deleted in 2018 in accordance with the Facebook inauthentic behavior policy) that were delivered to the U.S. Board, one of the fake media *Crna Gora News Agency* particularly stands out. CGNA's Facebook page contained 1,530 posts. The page shared the content in Montenegrin (around 90% of the posts) and English (around 10%) with three related sites – *cgna.info* (does not exist), *crnagoranevs.vordpress.com* (does not exist), and *cgna.me* (in the moment of writing – porn site). The articles usually aimed at discrediting President Milo Djukanovic and NATO, and represented another step forward in the Russian aggressive media campaign.

Russian and pro-Russian Bulgarian media frequently republished the articles from CGNA, such as fake news on the European Commission's fears that the



Home page of *Crna Gora News Agency (CGNA)*

*electoral fraud* would occur in Montenegro in 2016, which was another attempt of discrediting.



Russian media using CGNA as a source

Besides mentioned topics, this fake Russian medium and Facebook page shared stories about Syria and supported Assad in its reporting (which coincides with the Russian official attitudes), followed by the anti-Hillary articles and numerous conspiracy theories.<sup>292</sup>

The archived version of the CGNA website reads that *Crna Gora News Agency is the first syndicated multimedia news service and strives to be the source of reliable and credible news on government, politics, economy, markets, business, sports, and lifestyle*.<sup>293</sup> The unclear and linguistically disputable structure of the sentences implies that the persons editing the content of the portal were not native speakers.

## AVATAR ACCOUNTS

Besides pages, fake accounts of non-existing persons were created in order to make additional content and distribute the existing one on social media. All fake accounts had particular similarities – they all claimed to be either independent and free journalists or students of postgraduate studies and published articles in the right-wing blogs/media that do not exist today such as *Inside Syria Media Center* (ISMC), *The Informer*, and *Crna Gora News Agency*. Likewise, many of them only published on one topic and had only one photo taken from the Russian VKontakte social media.

One of the important accounts in the context of Montenegro is **Milko Pejovic**, which was one of the few that shared the CGNA content, and one of five that followed the CGNA *Medium* page. On his *Medium* page, it is stated that he allegedly studied at the Faculty of Political Science in Podgorica. He published the articles about Montenegro on the pro-Russian site *Globalresearch*.

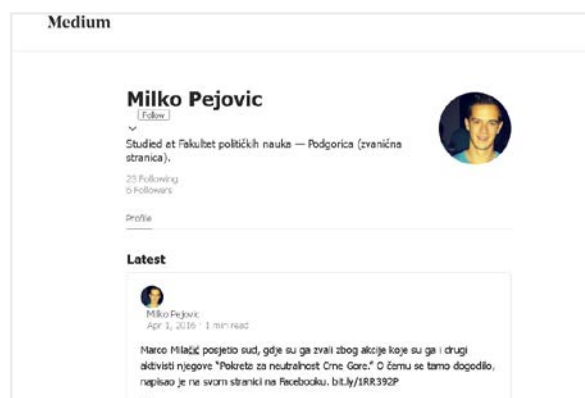
**Jelena Rakocevic** is also one of the few who published the CGNA posts and wrote articles for the alternative media that do not exist today, while she used the stolen photo of a real person from the VK network. In September and October 2016, she was very active on the site *Forum-CG* with the Russian

domain (<http://www.forum-cg.ru/>) where she only shared the CGNA content with hashtags #STOPMILO, #NEURAT, and #STOPNATO, and afterward, she completely stopped posting.



Photo of Jelena Rakocevic taken from VK

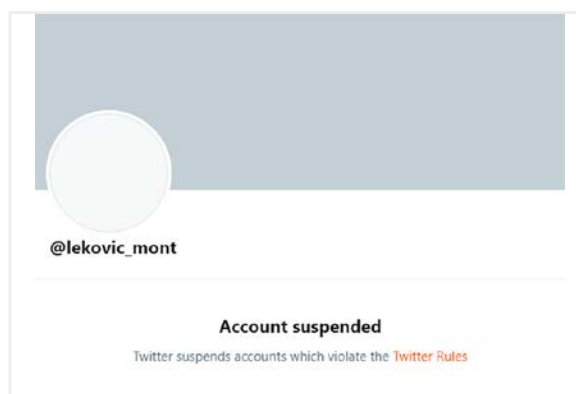
Also, there were Twitter accounts promoting the CGNA and anti-NATO content, created in 2016, and two of them, @lekovic\_mont and @MilkoPejovic, stood out.



Medium account of Milko Pejovic



Milko Pejovic's account being removed from Medium



Twitter account @lekovic\_mont being suspended



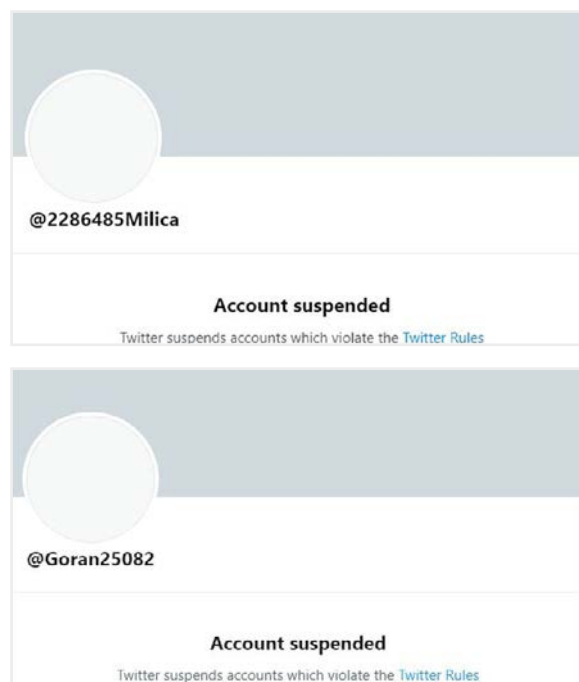
Twitter account of Milko Pejovic being suspended

Milko Pejovic shared links for *votemontenegro.eu* platform created by Marko Milacic's *Movement for Neutrality* where the citizens were able to vote online, using their Facebook profiles. In this case, it is indicative that the *News Front*, an FSB medium, shared posts and information on the referendum, presenting Marko Milacic as a *courageous and brave guy whom the voters trust*.<sup>294</sup>



#### Sharing of the *votemontenegro.eu* platform

The other account frequently posted #NEUNATO, #ANTINATO, and #STOPMILO posts. After Facebook had recognized inauthentic behavior on their accounts on the platform, the accounts were deleted, and Twitter soon did the same.



#### Some of the suspended accounts from the fake account network

*Crna Gora News Agency* and a joined network of fake accounts offer another view on the way that Russia updates and uses its influence mechanisms in the digital era. These data reveal the GRU's attempts to insert Russian narratives in the Montenegrin media environment, even though their reach was very limited..

## ESTABLISHED RUSSIAN MEDIA AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE SERVICES

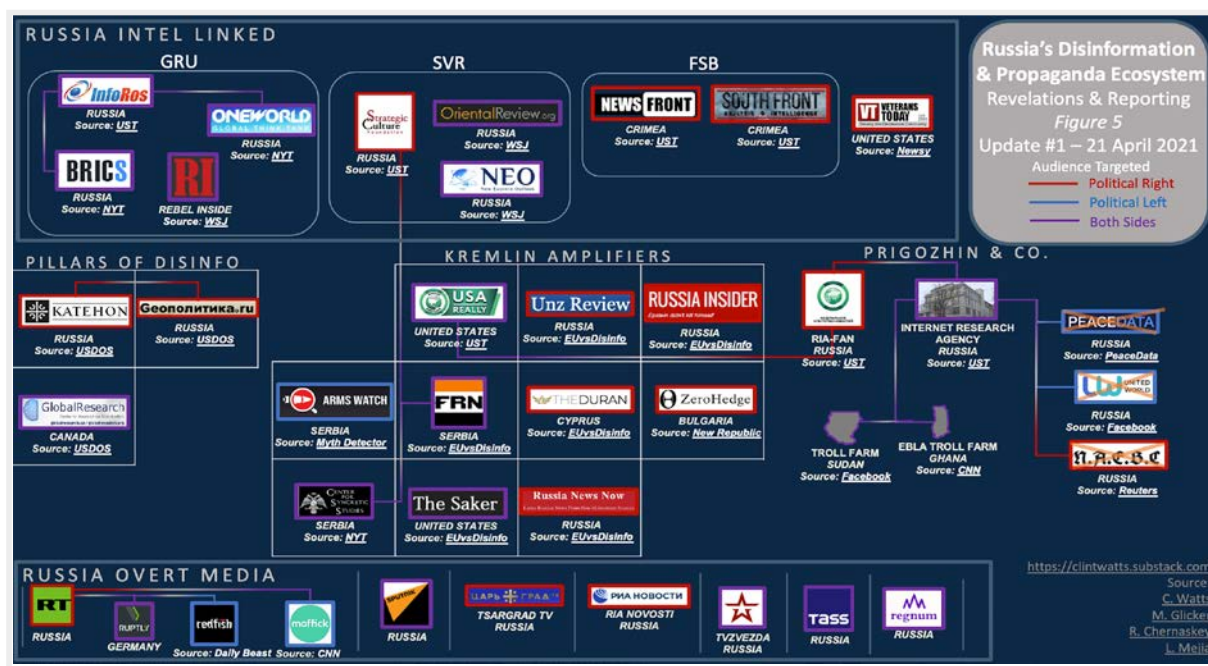
One of the channels used for spreading the Russian influence is the media that operate together with the services. Russian security services actively operate through the media, and they are no strangers to the creation of media outlets in order to spread the Russian narratives. The FSB, the GRU, and the SVR all manage the media network that made it to Montenegro as well.

### LIFENEWS AND FSB

*LifeNews* is a pro-Kremlin media organization launched in 2009, which has strong connections with the Federal Security Service. It is used for all

purposes, such as the mudslinging of Kremlin opponents and planting disinformation.<sup>295</sup> This media is headed by **Aram Gabrelyanov**, described by *Lenta.ru* as a man who abruptly succeeded from the provincial tabloid editor to one of the most influential Russian media moguls. Throughout 2011, Gabrelyanov was also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of *Izvestia*<sup>296</sup>. He publicly calls the Russian President the *father of the nation*, and Putin recognized his contribution to Russian propaganda in Ukraine in May 2014 and awarded him the *Order of Honor for objectivity and professionalism in covering events in the Republic of Crimea*.





## Russian disinformation and propaganda ecosystem

### RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE DISINFORMATION OUTLETS

#### InfoRos

InfoRos is covertly run by GRU 72nd Main Intelligence Information Center Officers. The GRU used InfoRos to exploit the worldwide health crisis to sow confusion and discord regarding the novel coronavirus.

#### Strategic Culture Foundation

The Strategic Culture Foundation is directed by Russia's SVR. It typically posts biased content while giving the misleading impression that is independent and unaffiliated with the SVR Directorate MS (Active Measures).

#### South Front

SouthFront is operated by the Russian FSB. It attempts to appeal military enthusiasts, veterans, and conspiracy theorists, all while going to great lengths to hide its connections to Russia.

#### NewsFront

NewsFront is controlled by the Russian FSB. It is based in Crimea and partially focused on supporting Russia-backed forces in Ukraine. Its manipulative tactics led to a near total dismantling of its presence on social media in early 2020.

In the context of Montenegro, this medium is interesting since the leader of the True Montenegro Marko Milacic appeared on *LifeNews* television on May 21, 2016, on the occasion of celebrating the Independence Day of Montenegro, who strongly criticized the then Montenegrin government<sup>297</sup>. Equally, *LifeNews* published articles on the Democratic Front campaign against Montenegrin accession to NATO<sup>298</sup> and their reaction to the coup attempt and addresses to Sergei Lavrov.<sup>299</sup>

## KATEHON AND GEOPOLITICA

*Katehon*, a think tank organization and news portal with headquarters in Moscow, is in charge of spreading anti-Western disinformation and propaganda, and it is led by individuals associated with the Russian intelligence services. Board of Directors comprises **Sergey Glazyev**, former economic advisor to President Vladimir Putin; **Andrey Klimov**, Deputy Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign

Affairs; Leonid Reshetnikov, retired Lieutenant-General of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service; and **Alexander Makarov**, retired Lieutenant-General of the Russian Federal Security Service.<sup>300</sup>

During 2015, *Katehon* published numerous articles and tried to conduct a campaign against Montenegro's NATO accession. The analysis showed a link between pro-Russian news portal *IN4S* and *Katehon*. The *IN4S* republished many articles from *Katehon*, usually targeting NATO, which was characterized as a *private club of war criminals*<sup>301</sup>, and during 2016, the *IN4S* republished *Katehon*'s weekly geopolitical forecasts twice.<sup>302</sup>

Also, in October 2016, *Katehon* republished the interview with general **Leonid Ivashov**, which Igor Damjanovic carried out in Moscow for the *IN4S* news portal.<sup>303</sup> *Katehon* thanked Damjanovic and the *IN4S* news portal for the provided material. The interview was republished by the news portal *Geopolitica.ru*, also recognized as a platform for spreading disinformation, propaganda, and ideas of an ultranationalist Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin.<sup>304</sup>

However, the interview with Ivashov was not the only Damjanovic's contribution to *Katehon* and *Geopolitica.ru*. These news portals also contain his articles stating that the media in Montenegro were mudslinging Russia<sup>305</sup>, that Montenegrins would not allow accession to the anti-Russian Alliance<sup>306</sup>, and that the party of Milo Djukanovic was rigging the elections<sup>307</sup>. *Katehon*, *IN4S*, and *Geopolitica.ru* were labeled in the U.S. Department of State's Report as a part of a so-called *propaganda ecosystem* of the Russian disinformation campaign.

## SOUTHFRONT

In the context of Russian media that are close to the security sector and launch disinformation, it is important to mention the news portal *Southfront*, focused on military and security issues. *Southfront* is a site for spreading disinformation, registered in Russia, undertaking the FSB's tasks. *Southfront* tries to influence the military enthusiasts, veterans, and conspiracy theorists while it also tries to hide its links to the Russian intelligence service.<sup>308</sup> Even though they try to hide their Russian roots in all possible ways, the news portal is registered in Moscow and their PayPal address has a Russian domain. Also, the owner or founder of this media is not known in public, but officer **Viktor Stoilov**, a Bulgarian marketing expert that manages a marketing company in Sofia, is mentioned as a part of its managing committee.

However, besides *Southfront*, the name of Stoilov can also be found on *Katehon* and *Geopolitica.ru*, the news portals that he also writes his analyses for. It is also indicative that the pro-Russian news portal *IN4S* was also listed as a part of the *Southfront* media network, which was removed from the *Southfront* website in the period between October 31 and November 6, 2018.<sup>309</sup> However, what was not removed from the website were the articles republished from *IN4S*.

## INFOROS

Along with the abovementioned news portals, the connection was found between the *IN4S* and the news portal *InfoRos*, which is allegedly initiated by the GRU's Main Intelligence Information Center (GRITs), also known as the 54777 Unit. GRITs is a Unit within the Russian Information Operations Troops, identified as Russia's military force for conducting cyber espionage, influencing, and carrying out offensive cyber operations.<sup>310</sup>

In 2018, the *Washington Post* labeled *InfoRos* and the *Institute of the Russian Diaspora* as the most significant organizations acting within the 54777 Unit, which was described as the center of the Russian military's psychological-warfare capability<sup>311</sup>. *InfoRos* used the network of websites, including declaratively independent web locations for spreading false narratives on conspiracies and disinformation promoted by the GRU officials.

In July 2020, the U.S. officials identified *InfoRos* as a platform that, along with managing the websites *InfoRos.ru*, *Infobrics.org*, and *OneWorld.press*, spreads disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. **Denis Valeryevich Tyurin** and **Aleksandr Genadyevich Starunskiy** were identified as high-level members of *InfoRos*, who used to work for the GRU. And, according to the U.S. officials' statements, they still maintain close ties with the GRU Unit where they worked as specialized military-psychological intelligence officers.<sup>312</sup>

In its report from June 2020, the *EU DisinfoLab*<sup>313</sup> analyzed connections between *InfoRos*, *One World*, and *Observateur Continental* on one side and the Russian intelligence service – GRU on the other side. The report says that the *InfoRos* is evolving in a *shady grey zone*, where regular information activities are mixed with more controversial actions that could be quite possibly linked to the Russian state's information operations.

The EU DisinfoLab presented the secret connections between InfoRos and web page *Observateur Continental* that spreads disinformation and pro-Russian narratives in France, but also with *One World*<sup>314</sup>, which reported on the 2020 parliamentary election in Montenegro<sup>315</sup>. InfoRos is the news portal that republished a piece of news from *the IN4S*, referring to the number of people that attended the processions during 2020<sup>316</sup>, and back in 2015, they published an article by Igor Damjanovic titled *Fear of uncontrolled people's uprising – Montenegro's accession to NATO puts an end to economic development*.<sup>317</sup>

## STRATEGIC CULTURE FOUNDATION

*Strategic Culture Foundation* is a medium and a think tank registered in Russia in 2005 and according to the State Department's Report, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, it is under the authority of the Russian *Foreign Intelligence Service* and maintains close ties with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The basic tactic of this medium is to publish the statements of the Western intellectuals and conspiracy theorists, thus trying to hide its Russian origin, but also to reach the Western target audience<sup>318</sup>. The General Director of the *Strategic Culture Foundation* is **Vladimir Makimenko**, who used to be the Director of the *Russian Unity*<sup>319</sup> Foundation, whose goal was to promote a *positive image of Russia and Russian culture abroad*, especially among the so-called Russian compatriots<sup>320</sup>. President of the Foundation is **Yuri Prokofiev** who was the Moscow Communist Party chief from 1989 to 1991 and a member of the Soviet Politburo but also one of the founders of the *Russian Organization for Assistance to Special Services and Law Enforcement Authorities* (ROSSPO). ROSSPO closely cooperates with the Russian security services in order to offer support to the Russian policies, facilitate the cooperation between state institutions and the civil sector, and provide social protection of the employees in intelligence services and law enforcement bodies<sup>321</sup>. English version of the media focuses on world politics and security issues but it says nowhere that the news portal is registered and managed from Russia. It is evident that they are attempting to hide Russian origin and connection with the security services, but the Russian narratives on topics of Russian interest give them away. Here are a couple of examples *The Skripal Case is a NATO False Flag Operation*, *The European*

*Union was created by Nazis, Russians have Excellent Weapons*, and similar.<sup>322</sup>

It is indicative that this media in Russian reports on significant social and political events in Montenegro, such as NATO accession, processions, and elections. Based on the successful recipe, the following narratives are frequently pushed: *after NATO accession, Montenegro is facing its end*<sup>323</sup>, *the Law on Freedom of Religion or Beliefs from 2020 was an anti-church law*<sup>324</sup>, *the Church in Montenegro is being persecuted*<sup>325</sup>, *atheist Milo Djukanovic is creating his own church on the basis of Ukrainian scenario*<sup>326</sup>, *Montenegro is trying to get rid of the criminal regime*<sup>327</sup>, *mafia as a guarantor of the Euro-Atlantic integration*<sup>328</sup>. In 2019, this news portal republished the news that *True Montenegro leader Marko Milacic set the NATO flag on fire as a protest against colonial politics of the Alliance*<sup>329</sup>. *Strategic Culture Foundation* had its subsidiary in Serbia but seven years after the website had been created, it stopped working in December 2017<sup>330</sup>. The news portal *IN4S* extensively republished the articles of the *Strategic Culture Foundation* glorifying Russia and emphasizing the significance of Russia-Serbia relations while presenting NATO as an instability factor in the Balkans<sup>331</sup>, that plans to put the whole Balkans in *its pocket* and then attack Russia<sup>332</sup>. In 2015, the *Strategic Culture Foundation* carried out an interview with the then Bishop of Budimlja and Niksic Joanikije, and the topic was the situation in Montenegro.<sup>333</sup> A former associate at the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and then editor of the news portal *Princip* Vladimir Vukovic, previously mentioned in the analysis, was one of the speakers at the conference *Balance of the Western Import of Democracy to the Territory of SFRY from 1990 until Today*, organized by the *Strategic Culture Fund* in 2016. On that occasion, he emphasized that Montenegro was the best example of a country on the ex-Yugoslavia territory that was made upon the pattern of the Western democracy, that the citizens of Montenegro living in the totalitarian democracy were still waiting for the promised fruits of independence, while the tradition was being ruthlessly trampled upon, and historical relations with Russia were being deleted.<sup>334</sup>

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOM- MENDATIONS



**T**he increased Russian efforts to turn the Western loss of focus into its advantage and capitalize on unresolved issues and the political instability in the region have manifested through the constant attempts to reshape the political reality in certain countries, from sowing disinformation through local pro-Russian media in order to encourage discontent or change the political narrative, to the radical operations such as was the Russian interference in the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016.

Even though the majority of Russian efforts concerning the region have failed, its power to obstruct the Western efforts should never be underestimated, primarily of the EU that joined NATO on the Russian legitimate targets' list after the Crimea annexation and the sanctions imposed against Russia.

Given that the Russian priority motive is to ensure competitiveness with respect to the West, which is based on its concept of foreign policy from 2013, Russia's presence in the Western Balkans can mostly be observed through its *soft power*. Using the narrative on the fraternity among the Orthodox nations, Moscow has intensified foreign policy activities in the form of the frequent visits and meetings of Russian officials with its loyalists in the Western Balkans and the presence of politicians from the Balkans in Russia.

Even though ambivalent opinions and pragmatic positioning of certain regional political actors, whose activities significantly differ from proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic tendencies, suit Kremlin activities, the impression remains that Russian perception of the Western Balkans as its own (at least secondary) sphere of interest is not accompanied by a created long-term strategy that would imply a sophisticated approach to the development of relations with the Western Balkan countries. Objectively speaking, Russia cannot offer an alternative to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, or a model for achieving the long-term stability and prosperity of the Western-Balkan countries. On the contrary, Moscow tries to obstruct the entire West's efforts in the Western Balkans by using different *soft power* mechanisms, from providing assistance to the Serbian Orthodox Church and anti-Western media to creating fraternal relations with right-wing populist political parties, thus undermining the EU and NATO values. With its activities, Russia tends to show that Montenegro, as a NATO member, can become a source of instability in the region, thus additionally discrediting the North Atlantic Alliance.

After the NATO membership invitation in 2015, all Moscow's moves coordinated with local political, media, and other pro-Russian actors came down to the strengthening of divisions among citizens and spreading of influence in Montenegro, as well as to promoting of Kremlin as a protector of Serbs and Orthodoxy while simultaneously weakening the pillars of the Montenegrin state and identity, using propaganda, historic revisionism, and disinformation, and discrediting NATO.

Alienation of the EU and the United States from the Western Balkans in the last years, which occurred due to a range of internal issues, pave the way and space for activities on its destabilization, stalling the democratization process and undermining of European values, which corresponded to the global rise of the right-wing forces.

Serbia, as its key partner, has allowed Russia to preserve its presence in the region and spread its influence. The political and security synergy of these two countries created the so-called *Serbian world* construct drawing heavily from the concept of the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, which has been introduced from numerous high political and church positions in Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska, and Serbia after the 2020 Montenegrin parliamentary elections and the advocates of the Russian interests' coming to power. Even though presented as the project aimed at protecting Serbs in the region, this modification of the anachronistic idea of *Greater Serbia* has quickly shaken the Montenegrin society and triggered a series of negative events that have already affected the dynamic of the Montenegrin path towards EU integration with the increasingly serious security implications.

The operations of the ROC as a *protector* of the Orthodox religion in the Western Balkans are a continuity of such politics. Referring to the strong historical relations and fraternity of Orthodox peoples, the ROC dedicates a lot of attention to developing and strengthening relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose relations with the state authorities in Belgrade remind of the submission that ROC has in relation to the Kremlin. Therefore, the SOC jurisdiction in a few Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, and Serbia) is important from the aspect of spreading the Russian geopolitical interests in the region.

Political engineering of the clergymen of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro resulted in forming the so-called technocratic government of Zdravko Krivokapic. This political experiment, difficult to find

in the practice of modern social and political systems, has been exceptionally criticized from the very beginning, primarily due to the fact that many Ministers, appointed unexpectedly, demonstrated ineptitude, as well as the Prime Minister himself.

The influence of the Kremlin via the Orthodox Church and the support to the political parties close to the Church aimed at implementing Russia's interests in this area surpasses *soft power* and may have devastating consequences, which is visible in the role of the ROC in supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine.

In the arsenal of Russian tools for implementing political and other goals in the world, information warfare has been high on the scale, adapted to the geopolitical circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the Russian perspective, information warfare is permanent and tools used for it include all the possible means at disposal – from disinformation campaigns, social media, and media misuse to the cyberattacks on the different states' institutions. In the official Russian doctrines and conceptual publications, there were no significant changes and contradictions in relation to the information confrontation since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency. Instead, the operation has been built upon and upgraded to the previous ones, inheriting the best practices, concepts, and methods from the Soviet era. Considering the fact that Russian abilities and methods to become part of the information confrontation are constantly developing and that the consciousness of citizens and political elites in Montenegro concerning Russian cyber activities in Montenegro is on the very low level of recognizing, there is room for undisturbed Russian operations, which has been evident during the last couple of years. The lack of a clearly defined action plan and response, as a consequence of the inadequate perception of this issue by the power structures in Montenegro since 2016, clearly indicates the need for effective action.

If Serbia remains the key ally of Moscow in the region, as a basis for spreading Russian subversive influence, it will almost certainly result in additional complicating of the atmosphere in the region and slowing down of the Euro-Atlantic integration. Russian reliance on the great-power ambition of the nationalist elites in Serbia and the support to its activities within the project *Serbian world*, whose implementation has been announced from the highest political addresses in Serbia, can certainly lead to destabilization of the regional circumstances with the significant potential to complicate security situation.

Russia perceived Montenegro as another Balkan stronghold due to close ties, particularly strong economic relations established through numerous investments. It is one of the reasons why the official Moscow has not accepted Montenegrin NATO membership even today. Participation of Russian intelligence officers in the coup on the parliamentary Election Day in 2016 shows the extent to which Montenegro's not joining the Alliance was important for Russia.

In order to keep its independence and resist malign Russian influence, Montenegro needs to strengthen its institutions and regain the trust of the citizens degraded due to the bad practice and corruption of the previous government. In the current constellation of power, Russian influence is limited and it seems that it could not determine the pro-Western political path of Montenegro that is in a very complex phase of democratic development and is sensitive to different external influences. Maybe more than ever before, Montenegro needs the understanding, support, and help of its Western friends, partners, and allies in order to overcome serious challenges from different sides and deep, historical divisions incited due to many different motives.

Otherwise, in the near future, Moscow could generate the greatest success in the Western Balkans right in Montenegro, a NATO member and the most serious EU candidate, where the pro-Russian staff has been appointed to the very important positions in the period after the parliamentary election in 2020 through political patronage, who are actively working on creating new and inciting the existing internal divisions among different ethnic, national, and religious groups, bringing into question all the values that the Montenegrin civic, multinational, and multi-confessional society is founded on.

Considering all the above, it is necessary for the Western partners and allies to pay more attention to Montenegro. New energy and awareness are necessary for Russia's current success in destabilizing the internal situation in Montenegro and installing a great number of loyalists in its institutions and state bodies soon to become an episode, that is, the vulnerable phase of the democratic development of the Montenegrin society of cultural diversity.

The direction the Montenegrin society will take largely depends on the future attitude of the Western partners and allies concerning Montenegro. This becomes especially evident if considering the fact that the issues Montenegro is facing now after the first change of government in 30 years are mostly

encouraged by the stakeholders who are in permanent conflict with the Western values and are using every opportunity to undermine or at least slow down the Western Balkan countries on their European path.

Even though Montenegro's EU partners and NATO allies have a proactive approach to dilemmas the society is facing, it seems that their stronger presence, above all of the United States, along with good diplomatic practice in similar situations, could contribute to surpassing seemingly irreconcilable differences on the Montenegrin political scene and exploiting the democratic potential of the parties nurturing the civic concept and supporting European and Euro-Atlantic integration. A broad coalition of those parties would create the conditions for the functioning of the stable parliamentary majority and taking a decisive step forward towards the EU membership, with the necessary guarantees for the continuation of the fight against organized crime and corruption and the fulfillment of the criteria from Chapters 23 and 24.

Therefore, the Russian and Serbian malign influences that are considerably affecting the current events in Montenegro through their exponents would be eliminated.

In addition, this would send a strong message to all forces in the region committed to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which has been seriously shaken and brought into question with the most recent developments in Montenegro, and left an inevitable impression that the country, a NATO member and once the leader in the EU integration, has been left to a certain extent to the mercy of the imperialistic aspirations of Serbia and Russia.

Otherwise, Russia and Serbia could finally capitalize on their success achieved on the platform of the protests organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the partial success of the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian conservative forces at the elections on August 30, 2020, could even become the first phase in their long-term positioning and installing of their entire infrastructure in Montenegro.

As it was expected, after the formation of the incoherent parliamentary majority with an inconsistent program, Montenegro experienced a very turbulent period in the last year marked by the aggravation of the security situation in the circumstances of artificially *keeping alive* the Government of Zdravko Krivokapic, who enjoys the support of the right-wing anti-Western structures in the Montenegrin Parliament, which are interpreting any kind

of hesitancy or passivity of the Western partners as a sign of weakness or lack of interest for the situation in Montenegro.

The aggression from the *Serbian world's* exponents led to an inevitable homogenization of the citizens perceiving Montenegro as their only country and their grouping out of an institutional framework to defend themselves against the perceived threat. Therefore, the conditions have been created for mass and continuing protests that could, under certain circumstances, turn into riots with tremendous consequences. In any case, Montenegro would become destabilized and its democratic progress on the path towards EU integration would be halted for an indefinite period.

Montenegro needs more efficient cooperation at all levels of the society to develop its skills in identifying different forms of political manipulation of the society. The development of critical thinking and media literacy represent the precondition for the future development of a democratic political culture that should ease the social and political tensions that may cause incidents. Special attention should be paid to journalists at the state and local level, in order to strengthen their professional skills for identifying and fighting adverse digital phenomena. The Government of Montenegro plays a key role in this process, and, therefore, it must take action to preserve stability, protect democratic principles, and pursue national interests. In addition, the Government must stand up against all malign foreign influences on the electoral processes in Montenegro in a timely and decisive manner. In this context, a more efficient and visible education on cybersecurity is of key importance. The relevant institutions should systematically perform the risk analyses on the information environment, identify susceptible populations and infrastructure, and inform the public on the potential risks.

There is no doubt that the situation, as in a system of *the communicating vessels*, could become more complex in the Western Balkan region. Considering the destructive potential still present in this region and the fact that the Russian strategy entails encouraging instability in the areas of their interest, it can be assumed that the potential crisis would not stop at the Montenegrin borders and that it would unfold in an unpredictable dynamic. The experiences from the nineties of the last century serve as a warning that, without timely and efficient action to prevent the megalomaniac nationalistic, potentially *explosive* projects, the situation could easily spiral out of control.

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