

KREMLIN WATCH REPORT

VULNERABILITIES TO RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN MONTENEGRO



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KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM

Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Center for Security Policy which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a population of a little more than 650,000 citizens, Montenegro is NATO's newest and smallest member. It joined the Alliance controversially and without a majority of public support in June 2017 ("The World Factbook: Montenegro"). Though Montenegro is small, its admission into NATO is viewed as a big win for the Alliance. The NATO win, however, is not in terms of what Montenegro can provide militarily – it has an army of a mere 2,000 soldiers - but in terms of the message it sends to Russia and other Western Balkan nations.

However, despite NATO membership, Russian influence in the country remains significant and has shown no signs of going away. This influence is seen in nearly all

levels of Montenegrin society, but most prominently in the economic, political, civil society, media, and religious realms. Russia relies heavily on disinformation and uses its proxy agents to promote its agenda directly and indirectly in the country. The high level of corruption in Montenegro and its weak institutions provides the fuel that allows Russian influence to take hold and infiltrate all levels of society without any recourse. This poses a major threat not only to Montenegro, but to the broader Western Balkan region and to both NATO and the EU. It also damages Montenegro's chances of EU accession in 2025, which the majority of the population supports, and feels is necessary for Montenegro's economic prosperity.



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INTRODUCTION

According to current Montenegrin Prime Minister Dusko Markovic, “the Balkans for centuries has been the scene of a struggle between the West and the East. Like other states in the region, Montenegro has strong links with the East, but in 2006...made a key decision ... to adopt Western standards and values” (Sekularac 2017). From that point on, Montenegro’s political and economic course shifted drastically towards the West. This, however, is not always reflected in the views and sympathies of the people.¹

According to a public opinion poll conducted in 2017, 51% of the population of Montenegro is against NATO membership, and only 43% of the population support it (Center for Insights in Survey Research (IRI) 2017). As a point of reference, according to a 2018 survey by Pew Research Centre, 61% of people across all other NATO member countries view NATO favorably, including a majority of people in every NATO country with the exception of Spain, Greece, and Turkey (Fagan 2018).

The sentiment in Montenegro with regard to security partners is complicated by the populous’ feelings about Russia. Roughly 55% of the Montenegrin population, according to the IRI survey, believe that “Russia should be considered a partner in European security and brought into European security structures...keeping Russia out makes us less secure” (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2017). This is despite the fact that Russia has actively sought to disrupt the security situation in the country numerous times. Sixty-eight percent of the population view Vladimir Putin favorably (Ibid: 50). According to the mayor of Budva, Montenegro, Dragan Krapovic, “A vast majority (of people) support (sic) Russia, you cannot exclude emotions... Russia supported Montenegro’s independence referendum, and many [Russians] invested money after that. Now they feel cheated (as a result of Montenegro’s joining NATO)” (Sekularac 2017).

¹ Generally, a majority of the population is supportive of EU membership. It is NATO membership that is the issue.

Russian and Serbian Sympathies

Montenegrins, who regained independence from Serbia in 2006 are often sympathetic to Russia's closest Balkan friend, Serbia (CEAS 2017). The two countries share close physical, cultural, ideological, and demographic ties. Memories of the April 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Serbia and Montenegro are still fresh in the minds of most. Thus, a large minority of Montenegrin citizens, many who are Serbian themselves, often tend to favor or be sympathetic towards Serbia and Russia. This is not surprising when one looks at the demographics of Montenegro as well as its complicated history. Based on the most recent census completed in Montenegro (published in 2011) forty-five percent of the population consider themselves Montenegrin. Twenty-nine percent of the population consider themselves Serbian and seventeen percent consider themselves Muslim, Bosniak, or Albanian. The remaining nine percent of the population consists of Croats, Macedonians, Romani, and people from other groups who chose not to identify themselves. However, it must be noted that citizenship, ethnicity, and identity in Montenegro, as in all Western Balkan countries, can be a bit muddled and how one chooses to identify can potentially change given a number of factors. Therefore, identity for some is not as clear cut as in some other regions of the world.

There are many trends in the sentiment of the populous that are troubling signals for Montenegrin society. First of all, 54% of Montenegrins believe that Montenegro is headed in the wrong direction compared with 37% who believe it is headed in the right direction (10% answered "don't know"). Equally troubling, 61% of the population does not believe that today's young people have a good future in Montenegro (Ibid).² In a report by the National Defence Academy of Latvia's Center for Security and Strategic Research, it was determined that a "significant vulnerability in security can develop if war is

implemented by non-military means as a consequence of society's dissatisfaction with the state's social and economic development."³ It appears based on the surveys that a major source of frustration in Montenegro is a result of these two elements – poor social and economic development. Russia plays on these frustrations and will likely continue to do so unless the Montenegrin government makes drastic moves to alleviate them.

Russia and Montenegro – Friends?

The relationship between Russia and Montenegro has over three hundred years of history behind it. Though the history is full of conflict, mistrust, and apprehension, it also includes periods of partnership and cooperation. The Russian narrative often tends to highlight only the partnership and neglects to mention any of the not so favorable periods of history. The relationship is said to have begun in 1711 with Peter the Great's call for Montenegrins to rise up with him to throw the Ottoman's out of the Balkans once and for all in exchange for Russian protection. Though his campaign against the Ottomans was clearly not successful, this was the start of diplomatic relations between Russia and Montenegro. Montenegrins are said to have been among the first South Slavs recruited by Russia (Poláčková and Van Duin 2016). Russia would again come to the region's rescue throughout the 1800 and 1900s.

However, the relationship between Montenegro and Russia was and is not always harmonious, both historically and in the contemporary age, despite Russia's continuous attempts to highlight Russian-Montenegrin historical and pan-Slavic ties. In the last few years alone, Russia has increasingly shown its willingness to assert itself aggressively in the country. It is thought that Russia has had a hand in stroking societal tensions and providing support for the government's

² Between October 6&12, 2017, the Center for Insights in Survey Research conducted 1,218 face-to-face interviews with residents of Montenegro who were eighteen and older in order to get the most complete picture of how Montenegrins felt about key societal issues (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2017). The demographics of those who filled out the survey were almost identical to the ethnic composition of Montenegro. The survey was composed of responses from Montenegrins (49% of respondents), Serbs (28% of respondents), Albanians (5% of respondents), Muslims (11% of respondents), and individuals that fall into a category of other (7% of respondents) (Ibid: 61). The surveys were conducted in all regions and federal states of Montenegro and in both urban and rural areas. This was the most complete public opinion survey conducted in Montenegro in the last twenty years. It has a margin of error of plus/minus three percent with a ninety-five percent confidence level (Ibid).

³ This report by the National Defence Academy of Latvia's Center for Security and Strategic Research, titled *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia: Potential National Security Threats*, is a fascinating research piece which analyzes the varying factors present in Latvia and their relative probability for destabilizing the society.

opposition parties. The most publicized examples of this are the 2016 attempted coup d'état and the 2017 cyber attacks thought to be sponsored by the Russian state.

2016 Attempted Coup d'état

The attempted coup, which was both scheduled for and thwarted on October 16, 2016 - the day of parliamentary elections in Montenegro – was the culmination of nearly a year of protests in Montenegro. The protests were organized by Montenegro's opposition groups and began in Podgorica in October 2015. The protests were, at least on the surface, in opposition to corruption and Montenegro's proposed entry into NATO. They were led by the New Serb Democracy Party's leader Andrija Mandić. It is believed that Russia had a significant hand in supporting the protests, both financially and through support on social media and in the media. Đukanović tied the protests to "nationalist circles in Serbia and Russia meddling in the country's internal affairs" (Bechev 2017). The protests grew in strength and intensity, ultimately resulting in a large Pogorica riot on October 24, 2015 and then the October 2016 attempted coup d'état.

The goal of the attempted coup was to disrupt the Parliamentary elections, overthrow Đukanović's pro-Western government (the Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS) and assassinate then prime minister, current president, Milo Đukanović, and to install a pro-Russian government led by the Democratic Front (DF) that would change Montenegro's pro-Western progression (Balkan Insight 2018). It has been proven through investigations by Montenegrin authorities and outside experts that Russia coordinated the planned attack along with Serb nationalists.

The plan for the coup was for twenty conspirators, dressed in stolen police uniforms, to stand outside the parliament and remain there as the election result – which was to be a DF victory - was declared. Hundreds of DF supporters who were waiting outside of the parliament would then storm the building, and the "police" were to fire upon them. DF would then call for additional protests to deride "DPS" attempts to use violence to keep the DF victory from being realized (Tomovic 2017). Đukanović, who was then prime minister, was to be assassinated in the process and confusion.

However, the plan was foiled when the Montenegrin and Serbian conspirators were arrested the night before the election. It has been reported that Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency alerted Montenegrin security services that 50 Russian Special Forces soldiers entered Montenegro's Zlatibor region from Serbia on October 15. When they lost contact with head conspirators in Podgorica (as a result of their arrests), the Russian Special Forces troops fled the country (Ibid). Montenegrin Chief Special Prosecutor Milivoje Katnić has additionally stated that roughly 500 people planned to enter Montenegro and cause violent protests on Podgorica on election day (Podgorica. 2016). According to Montenegrin officials, Serbian nationals planned the coup at the direction of Russian GRU and FSB operatives. The complete plan involved Russian agents, Serbian extremists, and leaders of Montenegro's Democratic Front (Bajrović et al. 2018: 9).

General Bratislav Dikić, former head of Serbia's gendarmerie was arrested on suspicion of orchestrating the coup. Russian military officer Eduard Shishmakov was also implicated. Aleksandar Sindjelic, a self-identified Serb nationalist, head of the Night Wolves in Montenegro, and key suspect turned witness in the trial, testified that Shishmakov was one of the main financiers of the plot (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017a). Shishmakov is a known Russian GRU agent who was declared persona non grata and thrown out of Poland in 2014 for alleged involvement in espionage while a deputy military attaché in the Russian embassy in Warsaw (Zaba and Tomovic 2017). It is alleged that he was a main organizer and the financier along with Vladimir Moiseev, whose alias was Vladimir Popov, another Russian GRU agent (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017b). Sindjelic is said to have worked as the liaison between Shishmakov and Moiseev, and was in charge of recruiting hundreds of local volunteers to participate in the coup (Bajrović et al. 2018). In 2017, the High Court in Podgorica formally charged both Andrija Mandić and Milan Knezević from DF with "preparing a conspiracy against the constitutional order and the security of Montenegro" and an "attempted terrorist act" for their roles in the attempted 2016 coup (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017a).

Russia has repeatedly denied the allegations that it was a key organizer in the coup. The attempted coup "marks the first time Russia has attempted to use violence

outside of the former Soviet Union to achieve its political aims” (Bajrović et al. 2018a: 1). This demonstrates just how important Montenegro is to Russia, and how far Russia is willing to go to change Montenegro’s pro-Western course.

2017 Cyber Attacks

The Russian hacking group Fancy Bear, which is thought to consist of Russian GRU agents, attempted to hack into the Montenegrin state’s IT system and steal classified information in January 2017. The number and intensity of attempted cyber attacks in Montenegro has increased exponentially in the last few years, with 400 attempted attacks reported in 2017 (Tomovic & Zivanovic 2018). It appears that as Montenegro was preparing to join NATO, the attacks began to increase. The main goals appear to be to cause disruption and to steal classified NATO information.

In June of 2014, an unnamed NATO source estimated that there were between twenty-five and fifty employees at the Montenegrin National Security Agency (ANB) who were suspected Russian double-agents (Bechev 2017). The threat of information being leaked knowingly or unknowingly from Montenegrin security services (or NATO through Montenegrin breaches) to Russia is thought to be relatively high as a result. This poses a large potential risk not only to Montenegro, but also to NATO.

Russia’s Influence in the Montenegrin Political System

While Montenegro has democratic undertones, its state institutions remain weak, fractured, and ineffective. According to the 2018 Freedom House report on Nations in Transit, Montenegro is classified as a semi-democracy with a score of 3.93 on a scale of democracy (1 being the lowest score, 7 being the highest) (FreedomHouse.org. 2018). In Montenegro, the issues start at the top, which create large vulnerabilities and illiberal undertones that permeate into nearly all parts of political life. The people also have little faith in their political system. According to a 2015 poll, only 25% of Montenegrins trust in political parties and a majority think their country is headed in the wrong direction

(Dragojlovic 2019). The lack of trust in political parties is generally thought to also be a function of the high levels of corruption that exist in the country, along with years of empty promises.

Current President Milo Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) have been in power in Montenegro since 1991. He has served as either the president or prime minister of Montenegro for over twenty years with a few very short breaks in between.⁴ Đukanović’s crafty political maneuvering has enabled him and his party to consolidate and remain in power, gaining a substantial amount of economic and political wealth in the process. DPS, and therefore both Đukanović and Montenegro, are largely associated with crime, corruption, and nepotism. As a result, he is an easy target for Russia to attack, despite the fact that the Russian government and investors have clearly benefited from his being in power.

Public opinion polls show that Montenegrins lack faith in their corrupt government, but feel powerless to do anything about it (Dragojlovic 2019). These sentiments coupled with the complex mix of ethnicities and historical perspectives in the country create a situation that is ripe for Russian influence to take hold as Russia tends to prey on societal frustrations. Due to the ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the Montenegrin political system, nearly every layer of the political system is primed for Russian influence and interference to deal it a major blow.

Russian Support of Opposition Parties

While still significantly lagging in the polls, Montenegrin opposition parties have been gaining traction in recent years, largely as a result of Russian support. The most vocal opposition party (really an alliance) is the Democratic Front. The Democratic Front (DF) is “a multi-party alliance of Russophile, Serb nationalist, and anti-Western political parties” (Bajrović et al. 2018a). Though still considered weak in comparison to DPS, the Democratic Front has gotten stronger in the last few years, partially as a result of increased Russian support. As a result of the 2018 election, it now controls 18 of Montenegro’s 81 parliamentary seats. For comparison, DPS has a total of 35 seats. A number of different groups

⁴ Đukanović was Prime Minister from 1991-1998, then president from 1998-2002, Prime Minister again from 2003-2006, took 2 years “off” from 2006-2008, and then was again prime minister from 2008-2010, and again from 2012-2016. He was most recently was elected president again and assumed office on May 20, 2018.

operate under the DF banner. Most importantly, the New Serb Democracy party led by Andrija Mandić with 8 seats in Parliament, the Democratic People's Party led by Milan Knezević with 4 seats in Parliament, and the Movement for Changes Party led by Nebojsa Medojević with 5 seats in Parliament (Ibid). The Worker's Party, lead by Janko Vučinić also has 1 seat in Parliament. The Yugoslav Community Party and Democratic Serb Party also fall under the DF banner, but do not currently hold any seats in Parliament. Mladen Bojanić was DF's most recent presidential candidate in the 2018 presidential elections and received roughly 33% of the vote.

Many of DF's leaders have taken trips to Russia, have collaborated with the Kremlin, and have been supported by it to varying degrees. In June of 2016, Mandić (head of the New Serb Democracy Party) along with leaders from the Democratic People's Party, the Montenegrin pro-Serbian Socialist People's Party, and some other pro-Russian parties in the Balkans signed a military cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia for the "creation of a militarily neutral territory in the Balkans...[as part of a] reduction of international tensions to form a territory of neutral sovereign states, which would include Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina" (BIRN 2016). The leaders traveled to Russia for the meeting, which occurred between two significant periods of time in Montenegro's recent history– the 2015 protests and 2016 attempted coup. After the meeting, in April 2016, Russian leaders traveled to Montenegro where they met with pro-Russian parties, religious leaders, NGOs, the media, and Russian citizens living in the country (Tomovic 2016). After this Russian visit, societal tensions in Montenegro increased.

Russia's Economic Influence in Montenegro

"For Russia, today, as in the past, every trade is a direct mean of politics." - 1956, Yugoslav (Montenegrin) Ambassador to Moscow, Veljko Micunovic, in a 1956 letter to Yugoslav President Tito (Kovacevic 2018).

When Montenegro became independent in 2006, Russian investors flocked to the country. Russia remains the single largest investor in the country. Russia's cumulative foreign direct investments (FDI) in the country amount to roughly \$1.3 billion of the total roughly \$17 billion in cumulative FDI in the country (CSD 2018).

Tourism accounts for roughly twenty percent of Montenegro's GDP. According to a study from the Center for the Study of Democracy, tourism is both the strategic driver of economic growth in Montenegro and the most vulnerable sector to Russian influence (Ibid). Russian tourists account for approximately 25% of this with over 300,000 tourists per year bringing in 200 million euros in tourist income annually out of a total 800 million euro total tourist income (Ibid). In terms of the actual number of tourists, Russian tourists make up roughly 1/3 of all overnight visitors to Montenegro. Further, Russian nationals own approximately 40% of all Adriatic Sea coast properties (Eckel 2017), and it is estimated, 70,000 properties in total (CSD 2018).

Russian foreign direct investment in Montenegro is roughly thirty percent of Montenegro's overall GDP (Foreign Direct Investment). Of all foreign companies operating in Montenegro, one third – or 1,722 companies -are owned by Russian nationals (CSD 2018). These numbers are likely smaller than the true amount given that many of the investments are from Russian nationals, but through companies registered in Montenegro or another country (Daniels).

With that said, Russia is only responsible for 5.5% of Montenegro's total revenue, down from roughly 30% in 2006 (CSD 2018). In 2006, the level of Russia's revenue impact in Montenegro was quite high due to the Podgorica Aluminum Plant (KAP) owned by the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who is a very close friend of Vladimir Putin. The plant is now owned by a Montenegrin company after the Montenegrin government began bankruptcy proceedings in 2014. At the time the bankruptcy proceedings began, KAP was 360 million euros in debt (Ibid).

Corruption

Montenegro's business regulations are complex and not applied on a consistent basis to everyone. Therefore, corruption is one of the main determinants of who gets contracts and business opportunities in the country. Unlike the typical Western partner, Russia is perfectly comfortable operating in a corruption-heavy environment. Corruption is illegal in the Montenegrin Criminal Code, but really only on paper.⁵ In reality, corruption influences just about every business and political transaction in Montenegro.

Given the level of Russian investments in Montenegro and proven corruption cases involving Russian nationals, it is a natural conclusion that Russia both influences and benefits through Montenegro's culture of corruption. A large portion of Montenegro's coastal properties are owned by Russian businessmen and it is reported that many private loans were provided by the Montenegrin state to companies with Russian ties. An OCCRP report states that since 2006, Montenegro's government has provided €300 million in state guarantees for loans taken out by private companies with no interest required, of which €184 million was never repaid (Daniels). Roughly 70% of the unpaid loans were to Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska and his KAP aluminum plant (Ibid). Deripaska is also an investor in Montenegro's famed Porto Montenegro – a yacht marina project aimed becoming the new Monaco for the world's wealthiest billionaires (Dobson 2018).

Russia's Influence Through the Orthodox Church

At present, it is hard to imagine a single influence or influencer in Montenegro that carries more weight than the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁶ A March 2018 Montenegrin public opinion poll demonstrated that 62.3 percent of Montenegrins have a high or mostly high confidence in the Serbian Orthodox Church. This was the highest-ranking institution in the poll. The church in Montenegro is not just a religious institution, but also a political, economic, and social one. It often meddles in affairs that are outside of what is typically thought to involve a religious institution. The connection between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church is thought by many to be one of the biggest vulnerabilities that exist in the country. The church functions as a corrupting and polarizing influence in Montenegro.

Serbian nationalists and pro-Russian groups can and do use the church to influence and usher payments to extremist groups and political parties without any recourse. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin support the Serbian Orthodox Church both economically and politically. The church is involved in anti-NATO, anti-Western rallies, protests, and demonstrations and has something to say about any and all political or social issues, constantly promoting the Russian line. The Church was heavily involved in pushing for a rejection of NATO membership. Many Montenegrins look up to the church and look to it for guidance. Though some recognize its bias and use as a Russian agent, many do not and view the church as both the law, and above the law believing that if the church says something, it must be true. Russia is well aware of

⁵ The Criminal Code as pertains to corruption is very rarely followed unless it is advantageous to DPS (GAN Business Anti-Corruption Portal 2015). Furthermore, in certain sectors, corruption and gifts are expected (Ibid). Thus, bribery is the norm and way of doing business. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Montenegro ranks number 64 out of 180 countries measured. The World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators gives Montenegro of 55.02 rating (on a 0-100 scale) with regard to its control of corruption (Shukla 2014).

⁶ There are two competing Orthodox factions within Montenegro. The most influential is the Montenegrin Metropolitanate, which is part of the Serbian Orthodox Church and is very strongly influenced by Russia. The patriarchal seat of the Montenegrin Metropolitanate has always been in Serbia, therefore, its legal status is in Serbia, not Montenegro. Thus, the church is not subject to any laws in Montenegro, only in Serbia. The Montenegrin Metropolitanate is most often referred to as the Serbian Orthodox Church even in Montenegro. It will thus be referred to as the Serbian Orthodox Church in the rest of this thesis. The second church, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, is a much weaker institution, which struggles to be recognized both within and outside of Montenegro. Government authorities have recently been calling for official recognition for the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which currently operates as an NGO. This rift poses a large vulnerability that will likely expand in the coming months in similar fashion to the current battle over the schism in Ukraine's competing Orthodox churches.

this and uses the church anytime it needs to get a message or perspective across to the masses.

Russia's Uses of the Civil Society to Push its Agenda

There are three main ways that Russia has tried to influence civil society in Montenegro: by establishing and using NGOs (non-governmental organizations), by influencing expert communities, and by attempting to create their own version of a civil society.⁷

Non-Governmental Organizations

There are numerous examples of pro-Russian NGOs operating in Montenegro and Serbia. NGOs have been in place since the early 2000s, potentially earlier, and are not always active. They lie dormant during periods when they are not "necessary" to push the pro-Russian agenda. The pro-Russian NGOs that operate in Montenegro are very often based in Serbia. Due to being under the same republic until 2006, NGOs were often established in Belgrade but operated in both countries. After independence, the situation has largely remained the same given that many of these NGOs were established prior to independence. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult (and perhaps arbitrary) to separate them and determine NGOs with sole Montenegrin operations.

The three most significant Serbia-based NGOs that are proven to be pro-Russian and have Montenegrin operations are: Srbska čast (Serb Honor), Noćni vukovi (Night Wolves), and the Balkan Cossack Army (BKV). Srbska čast is a Niš based NGO which serves young males who are ethnically Serbian in Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. Their membership exceeds 40,000 and their stated goal is "youth activism and mobilization for human rights and the environment" (Bajrovic et al. 2018). However, their actual undertakings include military training, anti-NATO and anti-Western protests and violence, and ultra-nationalism. Srbska čast has proven links and associations to the Russian-Serbian "Humanitarian Center" based in Niš, Serbia. The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center claims to have been founded in order to provide humanitarian emergency responses in Serbia and other Balkan countries in the case crises or situations that requires humanitarian

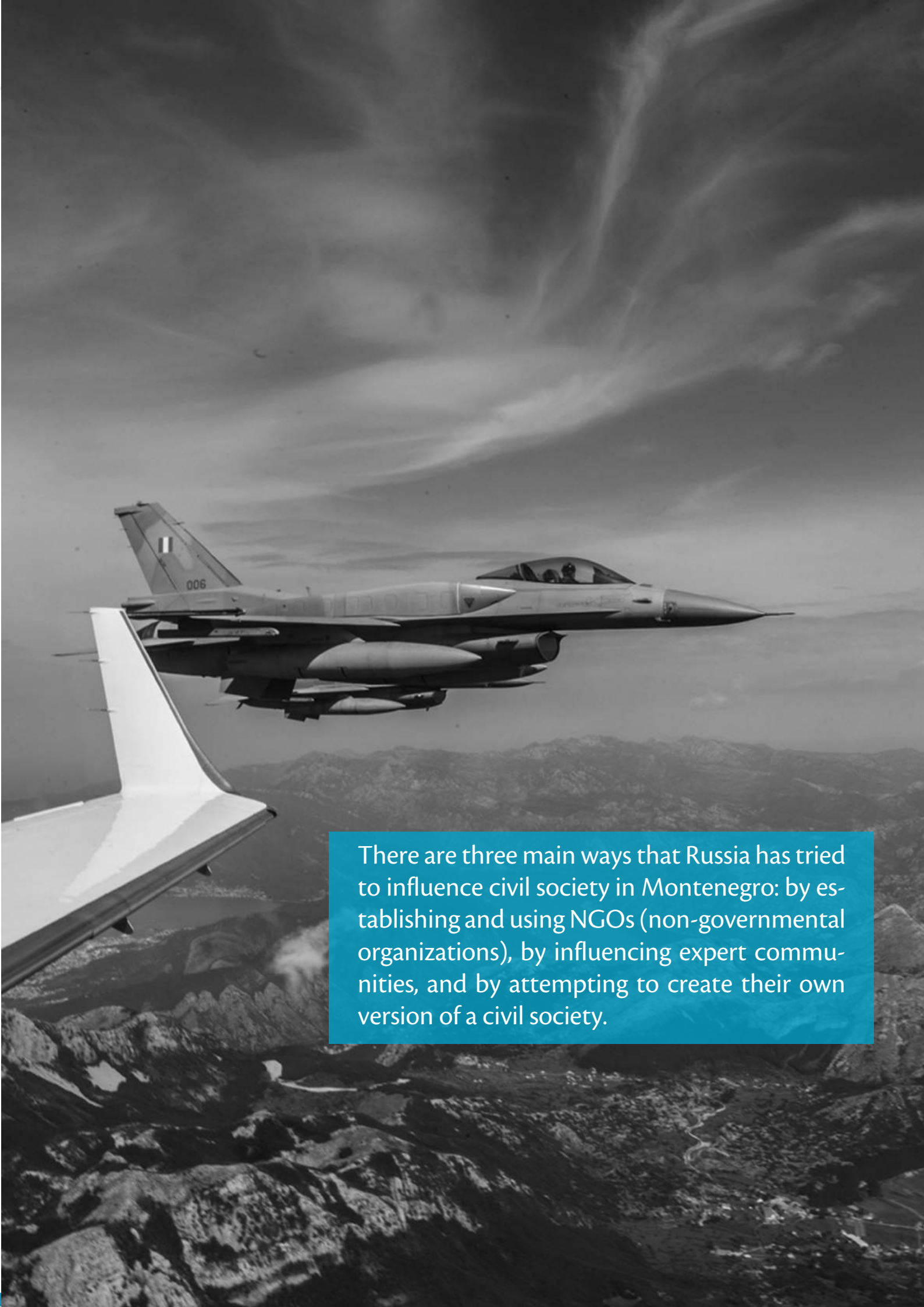
assistance (Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center 2018). However, it is widely publicized that the Humanitarian Centre is not really a humanitarian center at all and is really a base for covert Russian operations.⁸

The Night Wolves are a Russian motorcycle club is become widely known for being a proxy for the Russian state and close friends with Vladimir Putin. They are funded by the Kremlin and tied to the Russian Orthodox Church (Rudic and Tomovic 2018). Their main mission is to strengthen the bonds of Eastern Orthodox communities and Russia and bring countries together under Russia. The Night Wolves have a chapter in Montenegro as well as one in Serbia and in Republika Srpska. It is unknown exactly how many members the Montenegrin branch has, but it is known that they are from many towns around the country. Their motto is "pray to God and stick with Russia " (Ibid). The Montenegrin Night Wolves have been involved in a number of high-profile rallies and tours in Montenegro that included Night Wolves from other countries. Most notable are the Oct 2014 Russian Balkan pilgrimage, May 2016 pilgrimage to Ostroj monastery, June 2016 "Slavic World Tour 2016," March 2018 Russian Balkans Tour of Serbia and Bosnia, and the Oct 2018 escort of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, across Montenegro. Several members of the Night Wolves were implicated in the 2016 attempted coup.

The Balkan Cossacks Army (BKV), a self-described Russian paramilitary organization is based in Podgorica. The group was created in September 2016 and its founding ceremony took place in Kotor. Serbian Orthodox priest Momchilo Krivokapić was in charge of the ceremony and promoted the message that "the Orthodox world is one world" (Ibid). It is unknown how many members the BKV has at the moment, or how active they currently are. According to interviews undertaken for this research, many of the groups who were very active prior to NATO accession have now quieted down, but this does not mean that they are no longer in Montenegro, merely that they are laying dormant. Many members of the BKV are also members of the Night Wolves and other pro-Russian groups.

⁷ Russia has extensively established GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) both in Russia and internationally that spread the Russian agenda.

⁸ For more on this, see Chivis 2017.



There are three main ways that Russia has tried to influence civil society in Montenegro: by establishing and using NGOs (non-governmental organizations), by influencing expert communities, and by attempting to create their own version of a civil society.

In the same way that there are many NGOs based in Serbia that also operate in Montenegro, there are a few based in Montenegro that operate in Serbia as well. Some of the most influential Serb nationalist, anti-Western, pro-Russian political groups based in Montenegro are the Movement for Neutrality of Montenegro and No to War, No to NATO (Bajrovic et al. 2018: 6). Given that the pro-Russian agenda is typically also ultra-Serbian nationalist, the overall pro-Serbian agenda is the same for both Serbian and Montenegrin NGOs. They desire a reunification with Serbia and closer ties to Russia. They also attempt to discredit pro-Western NGOs that exist in a society by attacking their policies and painting them in a bad light.

In August, Serbian police closed a paramilitary youth camp that was sponsored by Russia and the Russian Embassy in Belgrade. The camp was organized by Zeljko Vukelic, a Serbian war veteran who also runs the Association of Participants in Armed Conflicts on Former Yugoslav Territory (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018a). Youth from Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina were at the camp being trained by Serbian and Russian instructors in combat skills. A Russian military attaché visited the facility according to one of the camp's organizers. The co-organizer of the "military patriotic" camp was the Russian ultranationalist group ENOT and according to organizers, the camp was based upon 'patriotic education' camps in Russia (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018a).

Expert Community

Russia attempts to influence expert communities covertly and in plain sight in order to change public opinion from a position of authority on a given subject. According to Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2016, "greater participation of Russia's academics and experts in the dialogue with foreign specialists on global politics and international security is one of the areas of public diplomacy development (Persson 2014)." These experts are quite often attached to think tanks that promote Russian foreign policy. However, often their affiliation with Russia is concealed. These so-called experts

attempt to get invited to conferences and give presentations that often covertly are pushing the Western agenda. Often many pro-Western organizations are blind-sided or unaware of the ulterior motives of these experts when they invite them to participate in conferences.

Alternative Civil Society

According to expert interviews conducted for this thesis, in 2013 Russia began to create an alternative civil society of sorts in Montenegro. They tried to gain legitimacy by appealing to actual Montenegrin experts to speak at their events (unbeknownst to the experts until they arrived at the event), which were not broadcast as being supported by Russia. They also began creating and supporting existing "patriotic" NGOs that existed in the country and were anti-establishment. They organized a union of pro-Russian journalists that were registered in Germany. And they conducted extensive smear campaigns on any and all other NGOs that were not pro-Russian. This alternative civil society has largely disappeared since Montenegro joined NATO, but the individuals and groups that were part of it are still living in the country and could re-engage at any point in time.

Russian Influence of the Media

According to Dusica Tomović, writing on behalf of Balkan Insight, "if Russia really is investing heavily in an army of bots, hackers and fake news sites to affect the outcome of elections everywhere from the US to Germany, it doesn't need to waste any money doing the same in Montenegro, where Moscow's agenda is well-represented by local media" (Tomović 2017b).

Montenegro's media landscape is known to be far from independent and largely captured by state and other very biased interests. According to Reporters Without Borders 2018 World Press Freedom Index, Montenegro ranks number 103 on a scale of 1-180, with 1 being the most free (Norway) and 180 being the least free (North Korea) (Reporters Without Borders 2018). Montenegro has the second lowest ranking of all the Western Balkan countries.⁹ Only Macedonia has less media freedom, with a ranking of 109. Journalists in Montenegro

⁹ According to the index, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the most media freedom with a score of 62, followed by Albania at 75, Serbia at 76, Kosovo at 78, and then Montenegro at 103. For reference, Ukraine and Georgia, which are widely publicized for its Russian influence in the media are ranked 101 (Ukraine) and 61 (Georgia) respectively. See Reporters Without Borders 2018 World Press Freedom Index for more information: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

constantly live in fear, particularly investigative reporters. They are often harassed and chastised by the government, those involved in organized crime, and even fellow citizens. Journalists are most often attacked when they report on corruption or potential crimes involving Đukanović's inner circle. The attacks are not just verbal either. Anyone who is critical of the government can find himself or herself in a very bad position. In April of 2018, a car bomb went off outside of investigative journalist Sead Sadiković's house. After the attack, which he survived but did not think would be investigated, he said "whenever someone speaks out in Montenegro, bombs go off or noses are broken" (Walker 2018).

In addition to its frequent attacks on the media, the government has never truly investigated any scandals or corruption cases brought to it by the media. It is believed that one of the main reasons for this is that government authorities are extremely fearful that the media could expose connections between organized crime and Montenegrin officials. It is thought that both are closely connected with the Kremlin given that a large amount of Russian money is rumored to be laundered through Montenegro. Therefore, Russia has a double-incentive to interfere in and influence the Montenegrin media to prevent exposure of its crimes by investigative journalists, and to promote its pro-Russian anti-Western agenda. The media climate in Montenegro coupled with and the government's continued castigation of it makes the media (both traditional and social media) very easy for Russia to influence.

Websites and social media pages with pro-Russian agendas have been launching with increased ferocity since Montenegro joined NATO. These sources are often quoted on mainstream media in Montenegro, typically without any reference to the original source of the information, creating a ripple effect of pro-Russian disinformation throughout the country. Five major new websites have been launched since 2017 to help spread pro-Russian disinformation in Montenegro. None of the websites appear to be owned by Russian individuals or organizations (Tomovic 2017b). Instead, local journalists who are representatives of pro-Russian organizations or supporters of the Montenegrin opposition run these sites (Ibid). The websites push a strong pro-Russian and pro-Serbian agenda. This is consistent with the typical manner in which Russia most often and most effectively

influences the media – by using local agents to push their message as opposed to owning the websites that it influences outwardly. It is much easier to conceal one's identity and influence from behind the scenes than openly in the limelight.

When Montenegro joined NATO, Russia issued the following statement: "In connection with the parliamentary decision of April 28 on the entry of Montenegro into NATO, we should state with deep regret that the current leadership of the country and its Western backers did not heed the voice of reason and conscience. The adoption of fundamental acts affecting the fundamental issues of state security by voting of individual deputies on the basis of a coarse formal majority without taking into account the opinion of the people of the country is a demonstrative act of violating all democratic norms and principles" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017). A message similar to this then appeared on a plethora of Montenegrin news and social media sites. The vociferous sharing of disinformation in social media is a major cause for concern in a country where the majority of the population does not even believe that Russian disinformation exists.

Russia's Use of Energy for Influence

Unlike most other countries in the Balkans, the Russian influence in Montenegro's energy sector are much less significant. This is largely due to the fact that Montenegro does not currently import (or use) any natural gas (Bechev 2017: 217). Russia uses energy as a major instrument of influence against energy dependent states, particularly in natural gas. It is less effective to attempt to manipulate crude oil and refined products as they are traded on global markets in an efficient process with many other suppliers available (Collins 2017).

Russia's Lukoil has sought to shore up influence by investing in petroleum products and gas stations, beginning in 2006. However, the company only currently owns eleven gas stations in Montenegro and 12% of the local retail motor fuel market (Lukoil 2018).

Given the fact that the Montenegrin government owns the majority of all energy resources in Montenegro, the issue with regard to energy is less about reliance on Russian energy use of energy as a tool of influence in the country, and more about the vulnerabilities due to corruption and the potential political vulnerabilities

would that exist and if a pro-Russian government came to power.

Case Example of Energy, Economics, Corruption, and Government Collusion in Montenegro - Kombinat Aluminijuma Podgorica (KAP)

For decades, KAP was the largest employer in Montenegro, and was owned by the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska. His Cypriot offshore company Central European Aluminum (formerly called Salomon Enterprises), had purchased the plant, along with a bauxite mine Niksic, in 2006 right before independence in the privatization boom in Montenegro. He also attempted to purchase the thermal power plant (TPP) and coal mine in Pljevlja in 2007 in order to control the entire supply chain for his plant, but was stopped by the Montenegrin parliament (CSD 2018). The privatization agreement contained a guarantee that KAP would receive electricity at favorable rates from EPCG until 2010 (CSD 2018). In 2007, Deripaska also attempted to purchase the Thermal Power Plant (TPP) and coal mine in Pljevlja (CSD 2018). Luckily, this was blocked by the Montenegrin Parliament. Had Deripaska been allowed to purchase them, the results could have been catastrophic for the country, and would have given Russia a high degree of leverage over the Montenegrin government (CSD 2018). Nevertheless, despite the fact that KAP was receiving substantial subsidies for electricity, it stopped paying its electric bills. Once the agreement expired in 2010, Deripaska attempted to obtain additional subsidies from the Montenegrin government and concessions to keep the plant running. The 2008 global recession hit KAP very hard and caused major economic losses for the plant. In 2010, the Montenegrin government agreed to provide the plant with 135 million euros in exchange for 29.36% of KAP and 31.45% of the bauxite mine (CSD 2018). The Montenegrin state also agreed to forgive the debts KAP owed to the government for roughly 15 million euros in unpaid income taxes on employee salaries from 2006 and 2007, and provide an additional 2 million euros for employee severance due to necessary layoffs to keep the company going (Ibid). Despite all the concessions, KAP still refused to pay its electricity bills and Deripaska used the KAP plant's size to try to influence and manipulate the Montenegrin government into providing him with free electricity based on the fact that the plant provided Montenegrins with essential jobs. This tactic was

effective for many years, however, by the end of 2012 and with increasing pressure from the EU, the government had had enough.

In February 2013, EPCG stopped supplying electricity to KAP. This was a major problem as KAP provided a substantial number of jobs to Montenegrins. As a result, CGES (the electricity transmission company) began taking electricity from the European grid covertly and illegally between March and May 2013 (Prelec 2014). The European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) caught EPCG and warned EPCG to stop stealing the electricity or Montenegro would be cut off of the European network. This became a scandal when it was discovered that Montenegro's government knew that EPCG was stealing the electricity for KAP, but did nothing to stop or report it. It was sent to the state prosecutor's office, however, nothing has come of the charges. EPCG nonetheless, paid ENTSO-E back for the stolen electricity in the amount of 3 million euros. However, KAP itself was never held responsible for its role in all of this.

Montenegro's Illusion or Disillusion with EU Accession

Montenegro is a relatively new member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) - having joined in 2017. It is eagerly eying European Union (EU) accession by 2025. However, it is full of vulnerabilities in nearly all layers of society and in all of its institutions. The domestic vulnerabilities can be easily compromised by Russia, which could not only derail the EU accession process for Montenegro but would likely have a spillover effect to other countries in the region.

Montenegrin politicians have sold EU accession to citizens as the country's main goal and path towards economic stability and reward. According to a December 2018 poll conducted by CEDEM, 63% of participants think that Montenegro should join the EU (CEDEM 2018). However, EU accession is looking more and more like a pipe dream according to many experts. The EU has stated its desire to focus efforts on the Balkans, but due to the growing multitude of internal EU problems, meaningful actions have not measured up to what has been promised to Montenegro and other Western Balkan countries. This creates a massive vulnerability that Russia and other external players could potentially exploit. Montenegro's EU accession

failure, a general weakening of the EU concept of enlargement, and failure within international institutions are some of the biggest risks for the country. EU accession failure would very likely lead to frustration amongst the people, a loss of hope in the economic situation improving, and hence external players like Russia may be looked to as a last could start to gain more power and be looked to as Montenegro's only hope. Given that these opposition forces are largely pro-Russian, this would likely be bad news for the West. Therefore, a lot is riding on Montenegro's ability to join the EU.

However, the West's haste to counter Russia's increased influence could lead to the façade of government reforms to satisfy Western institutions like the EU, but "reforms" that are really only reforms on paper. This fear

exists in all the Balkan countries, but particularly in Montenegro where we have already seen many "changes" to satisfy EU requirements, such as anti-corruption legislation, but the legislation is entirely ignored. According to James Sawyer of the Eurasia Group, "the good governance reforms that are supposed in theory to be part of the NATO accession process have largely been cosmetic, while many other important reforms remain to be done" (Sekularac 2017). There are indications that EU accession may be the same as with NATO accession. The promotion of new laws to satisfy the EU, but with no real change can also lead to disgruntled citizens. Russia is likely banking on the fact that the more disenfranchised citizens become with the EU process, the greater the opportunity becomes for Russia to step in and "save" the people from the faulty Western course.

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