THE ISSUE

- Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans is proving to have a political impact in Montenegro through the exploitation of the Orthodox faith, Pan-Slavic identity, and economics.

- The coup attempt in October 2016 was influence in action as it sought to foment political chaos and prevent Montenegro from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

INTRODUCTION

Russian malign influence seeks to exploit every weakness and societal division within in a respective country. An adviser to Russian president Vladimir Putin, Vladislav Surkov, recently stated that “Foreign politicians talk about Russia’s interference in elections and referendums around the world. In fact, the matter is even more serious: Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it.” It must be understood that everything from religion, history, facts, information, racial and ethnic tensions, illicit financing, and institutional and economic weakness, can be weaponized.

The mobilization of the Orthodox Church (in Montenegro through the Serbian Orthodox Church) is one such weapon in the Kremlin’s effort to resuscitate pan-Slavism and unite the Slavic world under Russian patronage. Doing so supports the Kremlin’s narrative that only Russian president Vladimir Putin is the true “defender of the faith,” and all that is culturally traditional and conservative. In effect, the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches “interfere in [one’s] brain and alter an individual’s conscience” because the church touches many aspects of daily life, from the blessing of cars and homes to encouraging followers to fight against the decadence and liberalism of the West. The intermingling of financial support and the creation of outlets for the church’s charitable works can often be traced back to Russian ultra-nationalist oligarchs with close political and financial ties to the Kremlin. One particularly active figure in this space is Konstantin Malofeev who created the Charitable Foundation of St. Basil the Great, which is in part charged with spreading the Russian Orthodox faith. Mr. Malofeev’s spiritual adviser, Orthodox priest Bishop Tikhon, is also President Putin’s spiritual adviser. It is reported that Mr. Malofeev and Mr. Surkov also closely coordinate their activities.

The Kremlin is also weaponizing history as it attempts to revitalize the historical role of the Russian Empire as the true defender and “protector” of its Slavic brethren in Montenegro from its clashes with the Ottoman Empire. Today, Russia defends its Slavic brethren from the West and makes powerful appeals to a common Slavic identity and Orthodox culture to wield greater influence in Montenegro.
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Kremlin exploits religious and cultural leverage through the Orthodox Church. A large majority of Montenegrins are Christian Orthodox, and the country’s religious authorities (the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral) are still ecumenically attached to the Serbian Orthodox Church. There is, however, a Montenegrin Orthodox Church that has declared autocephaly (similar to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church), but it has not been recognized by Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Serbian patriarch has also served as a conduit for Russian influence in Montenegro. For example, on one of his recent visits to the country, he was escorted by the infamous pro-Putin bikers’ club, the Night Wolves.

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The Kremlin has tapped the Orthodox Church to influence Montenegro’s foreign policy decisions on two occasions: Montenegro’s 2006 push for independence and its 2016 accession to NATO.

As World War I drew to a close, Montenegro became part of a union of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia. As Yugoslavia collapsed and dissolved into ethnic warfare, eventually an EU-mediated accord established the new state of Serbia and Montenegro in 2002. Calls for greater independence in Montenegro followed, and Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic advocated for independence and eventual membership into the European Union. In 2006, following a referendum in which a 55 percent validity threshold was marginally met, Montenegro declared independence. Tensions flared in the run-up to the referendum as a majority of Montenegrin Serbs were strong advocates for a joint state with Serbia. During the campaign, the Serbian Orthodox Church served as an amplifier of and supporter of a unified state, playing on the fears that independence would have economic and political consequences for Montenegrins living in Serbia. Despite its passage, many still do not accept the results of the referendum, fueling the narrative of a divided state susceptible to Russian influence that pits one side of the population against another. The Kremlin is critical of any effort in the region that fragments a unified Slavic and Orthodox entity which is why it is against an independent Kosovo.

A more recent example of Russia’s use of the Orthodox Church occurred in 2016 as Montenegro’s membership to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was advancing. In an attempt to foment domestic opposition, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church publicly voiced concern over the prospects of NATO accession. Shortly thereafter, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro released its own statement echoing Russian demands for greater scrutiny over the decision. The statement explained, “It is our duty in the name of the Church [italics added] that gave birth to Montenegro . . . to say that it is necessary that such a historic decision, like the decision on independence, is made by all citizens in a free referendum, and not simply by pressure from the ruling clique.” Opposition by the church followed aggressive statements from the Kremlin, which characterized Montenegrin membership in NATO as “an openly confrontational step,” “reckless expansion,” and “a prelude to the new Cold War.”

The Orthodox church has also sought to foment societal divisions by weaponizing history. During a visit to Montenegro in October 2018, Serbian Patriarch Irinej evoked the memory of a unified Serbia-Montenegro state, explaining that “we are one nation, although we are divided.” He also appealed to injustices done to the Serb minority in Montenegro, comparing the treatment of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbs in Montenegro to how Serbs were treated during Ottoman occupation and “in the independent State of Croatia”—implying severe persecution at the hands of a pro-Nazi government that tolerated the killings of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and anti-fascist Croats.

Such statements foment internal divisions and erode confidence in leaders and democratic institutions. As many countries in the region are very new and fragile democracies, complications related to independence and democratic transition—issues of representation, protection of minorities, and government accountability—are politically destabilizing, making these countries unappealing for further Euro-Atlantic integration while reinforcing the internal messaging that Western democracy is simply incompatible with Slavic identity and the orthodox faith. Moreover, identity and religion overlap, and powerfully amplify malign Russian influence and the Kremlin’s interests.

SUCCESSFULLY SHAPING PAN-SLAVIC ATTITUDES

The Western Balkans is a historic cornerstone of Russian influence with a Russian desire to unify Slavic communities across Europe. Prior to World War I, Slavic
populations across Eurasia were estimated at 150,000,000: 100,000,000 in Russia, 25,000,000 in Austria-Hungary, with the remaining 25,000,000 residing in the Balkans. The idea of “Pan-Slavism” suggests that borders are irrelevant to the transcendent need to unite ethnic peoples. President Putin frequently champions this need, particularly when it came to reuniting the ethnic Russian communities in neighboring countries. A recent example is a 2014 construct of a “new Russia” or Novorossiya, which was the Kremlin’s policy to reunite the Russian people beyond its borders. Some of the early dynamics of this policy could be found in Russia’s compatriot policies of the mid-1990s. By renewing the historical role of the Russian empire in defending the Slavic world, Russia can reclaim its role as a great power guardian of the region.

In Montenegro, ethnic Serbs represent close to 30 percent of the population, and many identify with and by their Slavic heritage, some even seeking to establish a Greater Serbia and enhance relations with Moscow. A poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in October 2017 found that 42 percent of Montenegrins held a very favorable opinion of Vladimir Putin and 42 percent viewed him as a defender of traditional European values. Furthermore, recent polling by the National Democratic Institute highlighted that within Montenegro, Russia is viewed most favorably among foreign states and international institutions. China places second followed by the European Union and the United States. Montenegrins also view Russia as militarly superior to NATO.

Skepticism if not outright hostility about closer relations with the West and NATO are key components of the Kremlin’s narrative. As the Balkans reflects on the 20th anniversary of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo and the subsequent 78-day bombing campaign against Serb forces, many ethnic Serbs view NATO as an aggressor who acted without international approval. A public opinion poll conducted in May 2017, a month before Montenegro officially joined the alliance, suggested that 47 percent of Montenegrins were against NATO membership, while 45 percent believe that membership was a positive development. Despite joining the alliance, the debate over NATO and its value continues to be a polarizing issue within Montenegrin society. Opponents are quick to point out that Montenegro is the only country to have joined the alliance after it was the target of NATO military operations.

Actively exploiting societal divisions and appealing to ethnic identity and historical memory has been successful in “changing their consciences,” but it did not ultimately prevent Montenegro from joining NATO as its 29th member despite the Kremlin’s alleged attempts to incite violence and foster a coup. The level of public support for Russia provides many avenues of influence to advance its foreign policy goals.

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN ACTION: THE 2016 COUP ATTEMPT

Appeals to cultural, historical, and religious affinities translated into action in October 2016 as a failed coup attempt aimed to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO created a political crisis.

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The day before parliamentary elections on October 16, 2016, Podgorica police arrested a former Serbian gendarmerie commander and 19 other individuals based on the suspicion (and inside information they had received) that they were planning to overthrow the government and murder the prime minister. Serbian nationals were involved, as well as, according to Montenegrin officials, FSB and GRU operatives. The operatives were to disguise themselves as Montenegrin police officers who would create a disruption at parliament, shoot demonstrators and eventually make their way to the prime minister, all while blaming the government for killing innocents. A few days later, Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vucic confirmed law enforcement had arrested individuals in connection to the attempted coup, providing support to the theory that third country individuals were involved. Notably, the Serbian Orthodox Church reportedly hosted a meeting of the instigators of the failed coup in a monastery in 2016 before the elections. The verdict of the trial of the alleged coup instigators is due to be given on May 9, 2019.

Russia’s focus on Montenegro was understandable: it sought to prevent further loss of its influence in the Western Balkans as well as to stave off the loss of the last section of Adriatic coastline not held by NATO. Montenegro had already declined Russia’s request in 2013 to use its deep-water ports of Bar and Kotor for the temporary moorage of warships (giving the fleet easy access to the Eastern Mediterranean). The Russian government, through the voice of then-deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin, stated that Montenegro would come to regret its decision to join the alliance.
WEAPONIZING RUSSIA’S ECONOMIC PRESENCE IN MONTENEGRO

In addition to cultural issues, Russian influence in Montenegro can be channeled through the economic sphere. Foreign direct investments (FDI) from Russia to Montenegro represented around 30 percent of Montenegro’s GDP in 2016, and 13 percent of all inward FDI (Russia was the country’s single largest investor in that year). Though Russia’s corporate footprint has decreased since independence, investments are concentrated in some sectors, particularly services and metallurgy. Tourism and real estate have become an economic boon for Montenegro: real estate has provided close to €25 million in sales taxes since 2006 (an estimated 70,000 properties in the country belong to Russian owners) while tourism now represents 20 percent of Montenegro’s GDP, and Russians account for the largest group of tourists visiting Montenegro today. This is an important leverage point for the Kremlin, and it has used it in recent years; in 2017, it launched a media offensive that portrayed Montenegro as a dangerous country with rising crime rates, prompting tourism from Russia to plummet. Russia’s presence in the metallurgy sector was for years exemplified in Oleg Deripaska’s ownership of the Podgorica Aluminum Plant (KAP), which the Russian businessman acquired in 2005. The plant was the largest company in the country (over 2,000 employees and accounting for 15 percent of GDP in 2005), and the acquisition agreement required Deripaska’s company to repay existing debt in return for preferential electricity prices. The 2008 economic crisis hurt the aluminum business, and KAP was unable to fulfill its agreement with the state, leading to bankruptcy and the state taking over the plant. The state did not recover all arrears, and most employees lost their jobs over the plant’s financial hardships. Deripaska has since tried to sue Montenegro, demanding compensation that would crush the state’s finances, but to no avail—although he is now pursuing the case in Cyprus.

CONCLUSION

Despite the heightened public focus on Montenegro following the 2016 alleged coup plot, the risk of Russian malign influence in Montenegro has not receded following their NATO membership and efforts to join the European Union. If anything, it may be intensifying. Russia will continue to exploit political tensions following the conclusion of the attempted coup trial, and there is evidence that Russia is amplifying the legitimate political protests in Montenegro against the prime minister and alleged government corruption in the so-called “Envelope Affair.” It bears repeating—everything, from religion, history, information, racial and ethnic tensions, illicit financing, and institutional and economic weakness, can be weaponized by Russia to alter the country’s policy orientation. Evidence of this is present in Montenegro. Cultural tools and influence networks from both within (a sympathetic ethnic Serbian population) and outside Montenegro (intelligence and criminal networks in the region) have been deployed, and Montenegro is proving to be one of Russia’s laboratories for malign influence.

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ENDNOTES


7. Bajrovic et al., “Hanging by a Thread.”


10. Bajrovic et al., “Hanging by a Thread.”


