

Montenegro: Russia accused of attempting to organise a coup d'état

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The special prosecutor of Montenegro, who is supervising an inquiry into an attempted coup d'état on the day of the parliamentary elections in October 2016, has accused "organs of the Russian state" of trying to overthrow the Montenegrin government. According to the prosecutor, the coup was prepared at the Kremlin's order by Russian nationalist groups, and one of the coup's organisers was an officer of the Russian special services, Eduard Shishmakov, a former deputy to the Russian military attaché in Warsaw, who was expelled from Poland in 2014 on charges of espionage. Back in November, Montenegrin investigators identified another Russian citizen, Vladimir Popov, as a co-organiser of the coup.

The Montenegrin prosecutor's statement was made on 19 February, the day after the publication in the British *Daily Telegraph* of an article which, citing anonymous sources in British and American intelligence, accused Russia of attempting to organise a coup in Montenegro. According to the Montenegrin public prosecutor's office, the coup organised by the Russians was to have been carried out by a group of citizens of Serbia, of whom 20 people were detained by Montenegrin police and special services on the night of 15 October, just before the parliamentary elections. According to the Montenegrin public prosecutor's office, the Serbs detained planned to bring about riots on the streets of Podgorica and seize power in the country, in cooperation with the pro-Russian part of the Montenegrin opposition. This would have meant a pro-Russian turn in the foreign policy of Montenegro, halting the country's planned accession to NATO and withdrawing its recognition of Kosovo's independence. The prosecution also claims that the plotters intended to abduct and kill the then Prime Minister of Montenegro, Milo Djukanović, the leader of the Democratic Socialists' Party (DPS), which has been ruling Montenegro for 26 years. The detained participants in the coup were charged with terrorist activities, and nearly all of them have admitted the charges.

News of the would-be attackers' arrest appeared in the Montenegrin media on the day of the election. From the beginning, the ruling Democratic Socialists' Party of Milo Djukanović spread reports of links between the detainees and the opposition in Montenegro, and suggested that Russia was behind the attempted coup. The accusations formulated by activists of Djukanović's party struck directly at the main opposition force, the anti-Djukanović Democratic Front coalition, which is dominated by pro-Russian activists. According to the public prosecutor's office, the plotters cooperated with the leaders of two parties within the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić (of New Serbian Democracy) and Milan

Knežević (of the Democratic People's Party). In mid-February, Parliament stripped them of their immunity, although so far they have not been arrested, and have been released from custody pending further investigations. Both politicians as well as the Democratic Front deny any relationship with the group of arrested Serbs, and have accused the Djukanović camp of organising what they see as a fake coup in order to retain power. The Democratic Front and other opposition parties are demanding a re-run of the elections, as well as the organisation of a referendum on Montenegro's entry to NATO.

The arrest of Serbian citizens (including several people from the north of Kosovo) has meant that the events in Montenegro have also had repercussions in Serbia itself. Initially, the action by the Montenegrin security services was criticised by the Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. However, at a special press conference on 24 October, he announced that "foreign special services, from both the east and the west" had been operating on Serbian territory. Vučić confirmed that part of the action against the government of Montenegro had been launched from Serbian territory (eavesdropping and tracking Djukanović). Subsequent to the disclosure of this information, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, paid an unannounced two-day visit to Belgrade. During his visit the opposition-linked liberal newspaper *Danas*, citing sources in Serbian government circles, reported that after the events in Montenegro the Serbian special services "isolated" and then expelled from Serbia ten Russian citizens suspected of espionage. Serbia has also undertaken limited cooperation with the public prosecutor's office in Montenegro: it handed one of the alleged leaders of the group, Aleksandar Sinđelić, over to Podgorica, and arrested three of the six Serbs wanted under a Montenegrin arrest warrant in connection with the attempted coup. In the case of two of them, however, Serbian courts then refused to extradite them to Montenegro.

Since the beginning the Russian government has denied any connection to the events in Montenegro, criticising both the statements by the public prosecutor's office and the government of Montenegro, as well as the reports in the Western media about the coup. Despite this, during a visit to Belgrade in December 2016, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov met members of the Serbian nationalist and pro-Russian organisation *Zavetnici* (as he had done in 2014 and 2015), from the ranks of which (according to the Montenegrin public prosecutor's office) the participants in the October coup were recruited. Among those meeting Lavrov was Nemanja Ristić, who is the subject of an arrest warrant in Montenegro. Russian media in the Balkans clearly favour the Montenegrin opposition, and have accused Djukanović of using the 'pseudo-coup' to attack the opposition. At the same time, they accuse the government of violating the principles of democracy by refusing a referendum on accession to NATO. A poll in December 2016 reported that entry into NATO was opposed by 39.7% of Montenegrins (39.5% were in favour of joining, and 20.8% had no opinion).

Although the arrests came on the eve of the October parliamentary elections, the EU, OSCE and NATO all acknowledged the elections as valid. At the same time, they called on Montenegro to conduct an investigation and a possible trial on the coup in a transparent manner. In the English-speaking media, the belief predominates that Russia was involved in the attempted coup d'état: for example, the aforementioned report in the British *Daily Telegraph*; and Sky News TV has published scans of passports which, in its editorial opinion, belonged to Shishmakov; one of them was issued in the name of Shirokov.

Commentary

- The version of events as presented by the Montenegrin public prosecutor has been largely well-documented, although some elements of the story still raise questions. The scale of the destabilising activities in Montenegro in October 2016 could have been exaggerated by Podgorica, but Moscow's participation in organising them is highly likely. The involvement of Russian special services in attempts to provoke a riot and take over the parliament on the day of the election with the aid of Serbian nationalist circles and pro-Russian forces (such as the *Zavetnici*) should be considered as plausible. However, the investigators have not provided any evidence that there was an attempt to actually take over power in Montenegro, or especially to kidnap and kill Djukanović.
- The Russian government's intention was probably to discredit Montenegro in the eyes of its Western allies, and to block the process of its accession to NATO. It is expected that Moscow will continue to use its potential for destabilisation in the Balkans, including its strong and well-established influence in Serbian nationalist circles, and the growing importance of Russian media on the Balkan media scene. Russia sees the region as an area of rivalry and strategic struggle for influence with the United States and the European Union countries. Russia's actions are principally intended to stop the countries in the region from moving closer to Western structures (NATO and the EU) by raising instability in the area.
- Russian involvement in the events in Montenegro is likely for the following reasons, among others: the way in which these activities fit Moscow's interests and way of operating; the sudden visit by the secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, to Belgrade; and the information given by Western media on the basis of intelligence leaks. The close contacts between part of the Montenegrin opposition and the Russian authorities are also noteworthy. In June 2016, the New Serbian Democracy (NOVA) and the Democratic People's (DNP) parties, which are members of the Democratic Front, signed an agreement with Putin's United Russia on political cooperation and promoting the Russian agenda in the Balkans (the DNP also has an agreement with the *Rodina* party). Their leaders have been proclaiming anti-NATO and anti-Western slogans for several years now, and have sought Moscow's support in efforts to block Montenegro's accession to NATO; to this end, they met the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, among others, in Moscow in February.
- The investigation into the coup strengthens the position of the Montenegrin government, which is composed of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of former Prime Minister Milo Djukanović. The government is using the investigation to compromise the opposition, which was close to taking power in the country after the October elections. The opposition parties actually received more votes than the Djukanović camp, but the DPS remained in power with the support of the national minorities (Albanian, Bosnian and Croatian). Djukanović's tried and trusted method for weakening the already fragmented opposition is to emphasise their divisions on foreign policy questions. For years this has allowed the DPS to marginalise the questions of economic problems, corruption and the takeover of the state by a group of people close to Djukanović in the public debate.

However, this strategy by the Montenegrin government, based on sowing discord within the opposition, has not been fully effective. Despite their differences, the opposition parties have consistently boycotted the work of parliament and are calling for a re-run of the elections, while defending the Democratic Front, which in their view has been subject to persecution.

- The documented involvement of Serbian nationalists in the events in Montenegro, acting on the initiative of the Russian special services, has placed the Serbian government in an embarrassing situation. The prime minister Aleksandar Vučić has been forced to admit that his country has been penetrated by foreign intelligence, and that Serbia was used as the base to destabilise the situation in a neighbouring country. The government of Serbia maintains good relations with that of Montenegro, and an attempted coup d'état in Podgorica was not in Belgrade's interests, especially as Serbia is trying to present itself abroad as a contributor to stability in the region. Indications are that Vučić's cabinet did not know about the Russian plans, and was not prepared for their disclosure. In this context, Patrushev's visit to Belgrade can be considered as an attempt to mitigate the impact of the disturbance in Serbian-Russian relations. Irrespective of the disruption to bilateral relations caused by the events in Montenegro, Russia remains a strategic ally for Serbia in the context of blocking international recognition of Kosovo's independence and modernising Serbia's armed forces.