

Testimony before the
Senate Armed Services Committee

The Attempted Coup in Montenegro and Russian Malign Influence in Europe

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Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee:

In June 2014, NATO foreign ministers met in Brussels to consider Montenegro's accession to NATO. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was working hard toward a consensus that Montenegro would be invited to begin accession talks to become NATO's next ally.

Just three months prior, the Russian Federation had annexed Crimea. Many, including me, argued at the time that a NATO decision to invite Montenegro into the Alliance was not only merited on its own terms, but would also contribute to a decisive response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Others urged a delay, emphasizing de-escalation of the crisis unfolding in Ukraine.

In the end, ambivalence among key allies and opposition by the United States led the Alliance to punt, forcing an exasperated Secretary General to announce that NATO would reconsider the issue by the end of 2015, 18 months later, removing this decision from the agenda of NATO leaders who would meet in Wales that September.

As NATO ministers failed to reach consensus on Montenegro that tumultuous summer, Moscow saw an opening. NATO had blinked. With the successful seizure of Crimea and the emergence of what the Kremlin believed would become Novorossiia, Russia was on offense. The West was stunned. True to form, Moscow's success emboldened the Kremlin. The thinking in Moscow was that its seizure of Ukrainian territory would surely block Ukraine's move toward NATO and the European Union (EU). But might the Kremlin also be able to stop the integration process in Southeast Europe? The lack of a NATO decision on Montenegro signaled ambivalence, leaving a vacuum which Moscow was intent to fill.

It was during this time that Aleksandar Sindjelic, leader of the paramilitary "Serbian Wolves," began sending Serbian fighters to Ukraine to support Russia's seizure of Crimea and insurgency in the Donbass. While in Ukraine, Sindjelic worked with Russian nationalists who introduced him to Eduard Shirokov (he is also known as Eduard Shishmakov) and Vladimir Popov. Open source reporting has verified both as Russian military intelligence, or GRU, agents.¹ Their encounter set in train the attempted coup in Montenegro.

¹ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>

Thanks to what we at the Atlantic Council call #DigitalSherlocks, or our digital forensic open source researchers, we know that Shirokov formerly served as deputy military attaché at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw, where he was accused of espionage, declared persona non grata, and expelled in June 2014. His registered address in Russia is a GRU-owned residence. He was issued a false passport in August 2016, two months before traveling to the Balkans. Popov, who had been spotted in Moldova with Gagauzian separatists in 2014, joined Shirokov in hosting Sindjelic in Moscow in September 2015, where they proposed the plot to derail Montenegro's NATO bid. Sindjelic received money from these Russian contacts to purchase weapons and supplies used in the operation, and to recruit participants.

These events set in motion the extraordinarily brazen attempted coup in Montenegro last October. Open source reporting provides a compelling case that the GRU and its associates were directly involved in orchestrating this attempted coup in an effort to install a government friendly to Moscow and derail Montenegro's NATO accession. If the coup would have succeeded, it would have dealt an immeasurable blow to the Alliance and its credibility. It also would have brought to a halt the process of NATO enlargement.

This incident is part of Russia's strategy to, in effect, make the world safe for autocracy and kleptocracy. As Russia itself has become more of an authoritarian kleptocracy, it has sought to reverse the post-Cold War order that has been so successful in advancing freedom, prosperity, and security in Europe. To achieve its objectives, Russia need only disrupt this process. Moscow however escalates its objectives with success, meaning that Russia has seen an opportunity to undermine both NATO and the EU from within through its malign influence operations.

To date, the West has been flat footed. During the Obama administration, the United States and the EU enacted tough sanctions. But sanctions should be part of a strategy, not the entire strategy. The Trump administration has yet to articulate the nature of the Russian challenge, much less a strategy to counter it. Nonetheless, key elements of a response are in place or within reach.

I would argue that the best defense is offense. Building on the president's recent address in Warsaw, we should focus on rallying the free world to defend itself and the values that underpin our freedom. To tackle malign Russian influence, I advocate a five-part strategy: promoting prosperity, bolstering our deterrent capabilities, pursuing a concerted diplomatic engagement strategy, exposing Russian actions, and anchoring our actions in our ideals – that is, offering our vision of what it is we are seeking to achieve rather than simply countering Russian moves.

Russia is able to advance its malign influence where there is a nexus of corruption, organized crime, and underdevelopment. To tackle this, the head of an allied intelligence service recently told me that the best answer is to promote economic growth. Prosperity is the antidote as it increases the resilience of nations, particularly in Europe's East and Southeast.

This is why President Trump's endorsement of the Three Seas Initiative in Warsaw is important. This initiative brings together the 12 EU members between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas with the aim of advancing cross-border energy, transportation, and telecommunications infrastructure to better integrate their economies, unlock growth potential, and ensure Russia cannot hold their economies hostage. In effect, this Initiative is about completing Europe within these currently segmented markets. At the same time, this effort should aim to connect these EU members to non-EU members in Southeast Europe and Europe's East, helping to integrate structurally these economies into Europe.

An American prosperity agenda should advance US investment and financing in the region, putting our economic relationship on par with our security relationship in many of these nations. Furthermore, a US policy of advancing one of our soft power strengths, entrepreneurship, would also help provide job growth outside the control of political patronage networks which are subject to Russian manipulation.

Second, we need to project our military strength as a stabilizing force, especially in Europe's East and Southeast. I applaud the request, and urge Congressional approval, of the increase in funding for the European Deterrence Initiative from \$3.4 billion to nearly \$4.8 billion. In addition, to counter malign Russian influence in Southeast Europe, the United States should transform its presence within KFOR into a permanent US military presence at Camp Bondsteel, aimed at projecting security throughout the region. Congress should also approve the sale of the Patriot system to Romania, reinforcing the deterrent effect of the recent agreement to sell Patriots to Poland. Furthermore, Congress should return to the idea of providing substantial defensive lethal weaponry and combat training for Ukraine and Georgia.

Third, the United States has an opportunity to build on President Trump's visit to Warsaw with a sustained diplomatic offensive in the region. Our engagement in the region is too episodic and not at a sufficient political level. Vice President Pence will soon visit Tallinn, Podgorica, and Tbilisi – providing an excellent opportunity to offer concrete follow up on the Three Seas prosperity agenda and announcing steps to bolster our security commitments. The President should agree to meet with Three Seas leaders at their summit in Bucharest next year, and end the isolation of the Hungarian government which has only made its leaders more susceptible to Russian pressure. We must work to ensure Montenegro's NATO membership is a success and sharpen the message that reforms at home can lead to membership in NATO and the EU. We should pursue an historic rapprochement with Serbia that ends Belgrade's dangerous hedging. In this regard, I applaud the Vice President's hosting of Serbian President Vučić on Monday. The United States should also resume its leadership in resolving the name dispute between Greece and Macedonia, paving the way for the latter's membership in NATO as it consolidates domestic reforms. To start, we should welcome Greek Prime Minister Tsipras to Washington and work to ensure Athens is a joint partner in the region rather than an obstacle. Robust US engagement deprives Russia's strategy of the void it seeks to fill.

Fourth, in our open democratic societies, often the most effective means to counter Russian malign influence is to expose it. We do not need to counter disinformation with propaganda of our own. However, we need our own citizens to expose Russian actions and disinformation. As our electorates become educated on Russian influence operations, they become inoculated to its impact. To this end, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab with its partner Bellingcat last week hosted in Warsaw the first Open Source ("OS 360") summit to train journalists and activists on using unclassified techniques to expose and combat Russian influence. We need to empower this type of work across our Alliance as it makes our democracies more resilient and our electorates less susceptible to manipulation.

Most importantly, we need to keep our values as our guiding star and restore a credible vision of a Europe whole and free. The lack of a North Star has opened a tempting new front for the Kremlin's efforts to rewrite the rules of the post-Cold War era. The United States should join with the EU to re-establish a clear, common vision for the continent. Our message should be that as a result of reforms at home, all European states can ultimately be part of a secure and prosperous transatlantic community. Advancing a Europe whole and free should be a central plank of a broader effort to rally the West, as President Trump suggested in his Warsaw Speech. I prefer the term "free world" to connote our

community is not one of geography, but one of ideals – democratic institutions, human rights, rule of law, free media, and a vibrant civil society.

As part of this strategy, the United States must remain a force for integration, not fragmentation, in Europe. Russia's strategy is to undermine the EU. The administration cannot be ambivalent about this. We should never become an enabler of the Kremlin strategy to divide and weaken the EU.

Excluding the invasions of Ukraine and Georgia, the coup in Montenegro may be among the most brazen of Russia's influence operations. Its significance is that the Russians almost got away with it. But it is by no means unique. In October 2014, Russian Cossacks entered Banja Luka poised to intervene if Milorad Dodik had lost his election. Arms caches have been found in Hungary with ties to GRU agents. Russian fingerprints are on a spectacular kidnapping in Estonia, instability and violence in Macedonia, efforts to stoke separatism in Moldova and delegitimize Kosovo as a state, and financing of extreme political parties across the continent.

The Kremlin has drawn its own lessons from the muted response of the free world. We must end the cycle of impunity, continuing to raise the costs of not only Russia's actions in Ukraine, but also its interference in our own societies, even as we work to eliminate opportunities for its malign influence throughout Europe.

The painful lesson of the 20th century is that American ambivalence only increases the likelihood of conflict in Europe and a direct challenge to our national interests. Through sustained leadership and engagement, anchored in our own values and vision, we can counter the malign influence of Putin's Russia.

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