



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro Social briefing:
2016 Coup attempt and coup trials**
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Introduction

A coup plot that has allegedly planned and prepared for 16 October 2016, the day of the parliamentary elections, on the government and the parliament of Montenegro has become one of the ‘viral’ topics in the media. The plot was under investigation for several months and in June 2017 Special Prosecutor for organized crime and corruption indicted several people allegedly connected with organizing and masterminding the plot. The plot reappeared on the headlines after the start of the trials in September 2017 and continues to attract public attention (if not serious public scrutiny) until this day. So far, official accounts have been questioned by many critics, and several theories about the plot have been proposed. Some of these have been described as conspiracy theories, some were “mysteriously neglected” by official mouthpieces.

On the late evening of October 16, in the immediate aftermath of the elections, Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, has stated that after the polling stations closed, a group of Montenegrin and Serbian citizens were caught by Special Police in attempt to force their way into the parliament building with clear intentions to attack, or even, assassinate him, thus attempting to create the circumstances that would stir the chaos and facilitate the coup d’état. The day after the elections, October 17, the government said that the Special Police conducted joint action with the National Security Agency and during the election day has also arrested a group of 20 persons suspected to plot the coup. After that, due to ongoing investigation no further explanation has been given until the early November, when Special Prosecutor, Milivoje Katnic revealed that "a powerful organization" comprising about 500 people from Russia, Serbia and Montenegro was behind the coup attempt. In September 2017, the trial of those indicted in connection with the plot began in the High Court in Podgorica. The list of indictees includes former Serbian Police officers, petty criminals, “miscellaneous nationalists”, the leaders of the Montenegrin opposition and two Russian nationals, Eduard Shishmakov (exposed officer of the Russian military

intelligence) and Vladimir Popov, both suspected to be (close to) chief-plotters. While the government and (part of) the mainstream media “built the case” against Russian state-proxy involvement based on these two former security officers, they are still at large and so far have not made any public appearances which only reinvigorates conspiracy theories around the plot. Russian Foreign Ministry denied any involvement, dismissing the accusations as part of the Western smear campaign against “election-meddling” activities supposedly done by the Russian state-proxy actors in France, Sweden, the US, etc. The EU, US and NATO “endorsed” the “official” version that pinpoints Russian state-proxy actors as the chief-plotters.

A detailed account on theories of the coup attempt and piecing the puzzle from the trials is too extensive task to be included in the briefing. Instead, in this report we will try to explore the role Montenegrin media outlets played in coup reporting and the impact it had on the public opinion.

Approved story and conspiracies

According to the official version, by mid-November, after thorough investigation the government received definitive information to reconstruct ‘the foreign-driven coup scenario’. The testimony given by an early dropout claims that the coup has been organized one month before the elections, involved at least ten key people from Montenegro, Serbia and Russia, included preparation for armed insurgency and probably had cell-like chain of command. The information was shared with security services of NATO member countries who helped determining “loose ends” of the scenario, suggesting the most probable connection between the main perpetrators and the Russian “state structures”, i.e. Russian Institute for Strategic Studies and Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. The investigation determined that former members of Serbian Special police forces and other persons with military background were the second tier in a criminal enterprise with no connections to current Serbian agencies. The evidence also suggested the opposition leaders Andrija Mandic and Milan

Knezevic had connections with the plot and have been charged for conspiracy against the constitutional order.

Immediately after the coup scenario broke out, Montenegrin media tried to find the connection between the opposition leaders and the Russian state agencies. Opposition leaders denied all allegations and claimed that the scenario has been fabricated by the government to cover electoral frauds. However, with inconclusive information due to ongoing investigation and media focus shifted on the activities of foreign secret services, (Serbian PM Vucic statement regarding the coup, unscheduled visit of Russian Security Council Director Petrushev to Belgrade, etc.) the coup scenario seemed the most pertinent explanation. During the first 3 months after the coup attempt, state media outlets in Montenegro (RTCG and Pobjeda) were publishing information on “foreign connections” of the opposition leaders, and when the government publicly called to prosecute Mandic-Knezevic & Co. and thus triggering the boycott of the entire opposition, the main media “called their bluff” by refuting their “government-staged coup” accusations as a conspiracy theory or publicity stunt at best.

A few independent media (Vijesti, Monitor etc.) from the beginning has questioned the veracity of the government’s statements about the scope of the coup preparation, especially the level of the foreign involvement in the coup. In the first turn, some op-eds signed by “home” columnists and intellectuals raised doubts on plot preparation and probed the likeliness of the “staged coup scenario”. With announcement of indictments, broadsheet Vijesti engaged in more organized investigative journalism, contacting foreign military consultants and security experts to highlight some inconsistencies in the coup scenario that could be established after a new evidence and testimonies appeared. Yet, apart from instigating a row in the public the newspaper didn’t have much success in forcing the government to reveal any withheld information about the “Kremlin connection”. According to prevailing opinion in the media, there is no evidence to support these claims, thus, some media outlets took for granted “foreign-driven coup scenario”, while some bolstered by the revelation of some factual

inconsistencies lingered around “the government-staged coup scenario”. Needless to say, a variety of social media and tabloids played up various versions of the two basic scenarios.

The possibility of a simple insurgency by local nationalists without (significant) foreign support has been bought up by various news outlets, including Monitor and N1. Speculation has mounted when some testimonies showed unconvincing connection “the most organized secret service in the world” might have with a “very sloppy” coup preparation. Although, no local group has claimed ultimate responsibility, however, some foreign sources argued that the coup preparation could be done only by relatively disorganized and small group “hired for a small cash” by some local actors. In that vein, some sources circulated the story that the coup preparation was actually just protest preparation went wrong; the government planted weapons and refurbished the whole thing to look like a coup (hence, the sloppiness on the both sides). The credibility of these theories, however, has become marginalized following the testimony of Sasa Sindjelic, one of the key participants acting as a protected witness. During October and November 2017, he brought about the names of high-ranking Russian officials involved in the coup attempt.

Trials and their implications on the political situation

Apart from some low-level accomplices that either made a deal with the prosecution or admitted charges in return for a month up to a year sentences, Special Prosecutor indicted 14 people that are standing trial (some in absentia) at High Court in Podgorica from June 2017. Among them, the trials against the two Russian citizens and the two leaders of the opposition parties are preoccupying the public attention. The former due to exuberant “witness cast” not ashamed of spy thrillers (foreign intelligence agents, honorary consuls, code-named persons, etc.), the latter due to the implications it has on the standing row in the parliament and, as of recently, the impact on the presidential elections. In that sense, given the timing of the trial hearings, arrangement of the witness

schedule (just shortly after the opposition announced the single candidate) and the narrative that emphasizes “the conspiracy against the constitutional order” and “the act of terrorism”, it can be argued that the trials are a way to re-create the sentiment that boosted DPS poll ratings following the coup attempt revelations. After all, the coup trials are often depicted as an “opportunity to summon boycotting opposition” by some opinion in the media.

This objection has been continuously raised by the part of the media out of government’s direct control. Montenegro’s judiciary is generally considered lacking independence and highly tainted by political interference. The coup trials are no exception. From the very beginning, the investigation done by Special Prosecutor Katnic was under serious media attack for selective and biased approach and disclosing the information that prove direct meddling of the government. In the same way, High Court Judge Mugosa, who is presiding the coup trials has been accused of impartiality.

Lastly, Milan Knezevic, the leader of Democratic People’s Party in parallel to the coup trial has been convicted for an assault and defamation against the MP in 2015 and sentenced to 5 months. His (parallel) trial and pending imprisonment were also contested among the media, especially because of the timing of the verdict. After he was stripped off the immunity he enjoyed as an MP, last week he “voluntarily” accepted the sentence. The move which some pro-gov media suspects to be a decisive blow to the opposition. The opposition, however, made an argument claiming that he is a political prisoner. As a result, some newspapers have granted a coverage that depicted him as a dissident that successfully defies the regime and is able to sacrifice for the sake of the maintaining unity of the opposition against the knavish tricks of the government. However, this is not the first time the Montenegrin media crosses the fine line between honest journalism and exaggerated pamphleteering sprinkled with conspiracy theories.