

KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE ON BULGARIA, NORTH MACEDONIA, AND MONTENEGRO IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

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The Kremlin is well positioned to influence the sociopolitical situation in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro. In this area, Moscow relies on pre-established economic, political, social, (dis)informational and cultural ties. With the outbreak of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow could hope to use these networks to destabilize the entire Balkan region and undermine the unity of the international coalition to support Kyiv. How prepared were Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Montenegro to face such pressure?

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops in February 2022 forced most European countries to reconsider their relations with Moscow. Many capitals on the continent started to realize that the Kremlin's actions are a direct threat to their countries, not just to neighbors of Russia. This fact, along with moral reasons, motivated most European governments to provide political, military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Simultaneously, it requires that European states identify and neutralize Russia's overt and covert leverage over them. This especially applies to those countries that maintain strong economic and political ties with the Kremlin and have active and influential groups of lobbyists for Russian interests.

In this regard, the states of the Balkan Peninsula deserve particular attention. The Kremlin has a strategic interest in controlling the region. First, over the past century, Moscow has repeatedly expressed its intention to be the "protector of interests" of the peoples of this part of Europe "before external influences." Such protectionist rhetoric has served the Kremlin as a formal justification for treating the Balkan Peninsula as a "sphere of Russian influence." In an effort to establish and preserve this influence, Moscow built a network of contacts with local national elites. Second, control over the region is important to Russia because of economic and geographic factors. Pipelines that carry Russian gas to Central Europe are located in some countries of the region. Besides, the Kremlin views individual governments and political forces in the Balkan states as allies for political confrontation with NATO. Thus,

Moscow sees its control over the processes in this part of Europe as a [reaffirmation](#) of its imagined global power status.

In the context of Russian influence and attitudes toward Kremlin policies, Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro are in a middle ground compared to other countries in the region. As members of NATO and EU / candidates for EU membership, the three states demonstrate that the Western vector is key for them in foreign policy. Also, these countries have [consistently supported](#) Ukraine in condemning Russian aggression at the UN. In addition, Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro have contributed and keep contributing to the international community's collective sanctions and material assistance to Kyiv against the invasion from the east. This is why they have been on the [list](#) of unfriendly states of the Russian government since March.

However, all three countries have a substantial social base for maintaining warm contacts with Moscow and spreading Kremlin narratives. Back in early 2022, according to the International Republican Institute, the Kremlin's dictator Vladimir Putin was [one](#) of the most popular foreign politicians in North Macedonia and enjoyed the greatest sympathy in Montenegro. At the same time, Russia was in second place among the biggest threats that citizens of the two countries identified for their states. The United States was then more often named as the main threat, although supporters of this view in both North Macedonia and Montenegro were not much more numerous than those suspicious of the Kremlin. Among the respondents, 13% and 19%, respectively, supported the statement that their government's policy should be pro-Russian. Advocates of such a course in both countries are fewer than sympathizers of the "equal approach" and supporters of pro-Western orientation, but they constitute a significant proportion of society. Meanwhile, the authors of the Globsec Trends 2022 [study](#) called Bulgaria "the least pro-Western country in the region [of Central Europe]". This statement is based on public opinion surveys: 38% of respondents supported their country's withdrawal from NATO, while 30% called Moscow a strategic partner. These are the highest figures for such questions among all the Central European countries examined. At the same time, membership in the North Atlantic Alliance was approved by 50% of Bulgarian respondents, while 33% saw Russia as a threat to Bulgaria.

Such figures, despite the foreign policy orientation of Podgorica, Skopje and Sofia, allow the Kremlin to assume that it can influence domestic political processes in the three countries. On the one hand, Moscow does so with hidden instruments of soft power. For example, Russian institutions [finance](#) right-wing Serbian radical movements represented in Montenegro. Kremlin propaganda [is aimed](#) at European and Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia and Montenegro, while trying to fuel the dispute between Sofia and Skopje. These actions have overlapped with economic expansion: in particular, legal entities from Russia have [taken over](#) or invested in gas, oil refineries and nuclear facilities in Bulgaria in recent decades, and Russian citizens have become the largest group of non-residents buying [Bulgarian](#) and [Montenegrin](#) real estate. In recent years, however, the Kremlin has also intervened directly in these countries, threatening their security. For example, Russian agents were likely [involved](#) in explosions at ammunition depots in Bulgaria in 2014–2015, and may also be involved in similar incidents in [2020–2022](#). In addition, Montenegrin security services and authorities [suspect](#) Moscow of participating in an attempted coup d'état in the country in 2016.

Thus, conditions in all three countries under discussion were relatively favorable for the spread of Russian influence. It also showed up during a critical period for European security after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In what follows, we will more closely examine the case of each country in the context of these events.

BULGARIA

Russia is not Bulgaria's main trading partner. But Bulgarian consumers depend on certain categories of goods from Russian suppliers. In terms of total trade turnover, Moscow was in [fifth](#) place among all of Sofia's foreign economic partners in 2020. However, the economic relations between the two countries are imbalanced. In 2020, Russia's share of Bulgaria's exports was 1.5%, while its share of imports was 6.1%. The main [sales](#) items from Bulgaria to Russia in 2020 were chemical products (35.82% of respective exports), machinery for industry (29.14%) and food and tobacco products (10.61%). Russian companies most often [supplied](#) the Bulgarian market with hydrocarbons (59.4% of all Bulgarian imports from Russia), metals (5.86%), equipment for industry (7.75%) and agricultural products (6.84%).

In 2020, of all energy products [imported](#) by Bulgaria, 68.6% were oil and derived products, 23.2% were gas, and 3.9% were solid fossil fuels. The overall energy [dependence](#) of the country (the ratio of all available energy to imported energy) reached 37.9%. Then 75.2% of natural gas [came into](#) the country from Russia. It should be noted, however, that Bulgaria's annual demand for this type of fuel is comparatively low and amounts to about [3 billion](#) cubic meters. It is mainly used by the industrial enterprises. In the spring of this year the former Bulgarian Vice Prime Minister Asen Vasilev announced that Sofia would not buy the blue fuel from Gazprom starting from 2023. Bulgaria soon refused to pay the Russian monopoly for gas in rubles, and Russia stopped supplying it to the country.

Later, Sofia signed an [agreement](#) with the United States to buy liquefied gas. This agreement was made possible by the [construction](#) of an interconnector between the gas transmission networks of Bulgaria and Greece. However, this supply channel has not worked yet because the Bulgarian government [has not received](#) all the documents on the project completion. Meanwhile, the state company Bulgargaz, reacting to the trends on the European market, [asked](#) the authorities to raise gas prices by at least 60%. In response to this, Eleonora Mitrofanova, the Russian Ambassador in Sofia, [stated](#) that Bulgaria could get cheap fuel if only it paid to Gazprom in rubles.

The Bulgarian government also has strong ties to Moscow for sales of oil and related products. In 2020, Russian suppliers [accounted for](#) 8% of Bulgaria's fuel imports from abroad. In this case, however, the vulnerability is not due to quantitative indicators, but to the specifics of the infrastructure. The country's main refinery is Lukoil Neftochim Burgas, owned by Russian company Lukoil. The refinery has a [total refining capacity](#) of about 7 million tons of oil per year. This is almost the entire amount of oil and related products that Bulgaria imported in 2020. At the same time, about 4.2 million tons of oil passes through the enterprise annually. This is the reason why the European Commission and the EU Council made an [exception](#) for

Bulgaria (and some other states), introducing an oil embargo against Russia: the country must give up Russian fuel not by the beginning of 2023, but by the end of 2025. The state has to redirect an entire branch of production to another source of oil.

Sofia is also [connected](#) to Moscow in the nuclear power sector. The country has a total of two reactors at the Kozloduy plant. During 2012–2019, they were modernized by the Russian corporation Rosatom. Bulgaria also bought nuclear fuel from its subsidiary company TVEL. In 2022, representatives of official Sofia declared their intention to change the energy supplier. In addition, Atomstroyexport, a subsidiary of Rosatom, participated in a tender to supply equipment for Bulgaria's projected Belene nuclear power plant. In 2021, the Bulgarian government [decided](#) that American equipment would be used at the site. Thus, Moscow risks losing contracts with Sofia in this area in a few years. However, this would require Bulgaria's often-changing leadership to support the trend.

Crisis has been the reality of Bulgarian political life for the last two years. In 2021 the country held one regular and two extraordinary votes for parliamentary composition. The last of these elections established a relatively stable government under the leadership of Kiril Petkov of the centrist liberal party We Continue the Change. It was under his leadership that Bulgaria met the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But the parliamentary coalition, established in late 2021, maintained unity for little more than six months. In June 2022, Slavi Trifonov, leader of the populist There Is Such a People party, announced that his force was leaving the majority against the backdrop of the Bulgarian government's willingness to reach an agreement with the authorities in North Macedonia on an understanding of identity and history.

In August, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev dissolved the National Assembly. Early elections are due to be held in October. They will be the fourth in the last two years. By then, the country is run by an interim government appointed by Rumen Radev. Duties of the Prime Minister is performed by former Minister of Labor Galab Donev.

It is important to note that the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which in the past was a promoter of relations between Sofia and Moscow, was also in the parliamentary majority of the previous convocation. For instance, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev, who belonged to this political force, were active apologists for friendship and joint projects with the Kremlin in the early 2000s.

Shortly after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Bulgarian National Assembly adopted a [declaration](#) condemning the Kremlin's actions. It was also supported by the BSP. At the same time, this political force opposed EU sanctions against Moscow. In addition, the leader of the party and former Vice Prime Minister Korneliya Ninova has repeatedly objected to the sending of Bulgarian arms to Kyiv. This idea was also [opposed](#) by Rumen Radev, formerly affiliated with the BSP. Instead, he [guaranteed](#) to provide Ukraine with humanitarian aid. Later, Korneliya Ninova stated at least [twice](#) that Russia was a friendly country for Bulgaria, because Bulgarian citizens thought so.

Despite these circumstances, in the spring of 2022 a parliamentary coalition led by We Continue the Change [decided](#) on technical and military aid to Ukraine. Back then, the parliamentary majority insisted that this would not involve sending weapons to Kyiv. Yet, in the summer the opposition parties GERB (a conservative pro-European force) and Revival (an extreme right anti-European one) started accusing the Bulgarian government in effect at that time that Sofia was in fact sending military equipment to Kyiv, but doing it via other countries. Then GERB deputy Hristo Gadzhev [inquired](#) Korneliya Ninova about arms exports from Bulgaria between March and June 2022. The official responded that during that time Sofia had granted permits for arms sales totaling €1.02 billion. For all of 2019, that figure reached €857.1 million.

It should be added that in previous months, the government of Kiril Petkov reacted rigidly to aggressive statements and attempts by Russian officials to influence processes in Bulgaria. The former prime minister forced Eleonora Mitrofanova to apologize after she called the authorities in Sofia “NATO henchmen” and compared the Russian war in Ukraine to the liberation of Bulgarian territory from Ottoman rule in the 19th century. Additionally, the government under his leadership has declared a total of 83 employees of the Russian embassy personae non grata since February 2022: [two](#) in March, [eleven](#) in April, and [seventy](#) in June. According to the Bulgarian power structures and authorities, in all cases the members of the mission violated the requirements of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Finally, in July 2022, Lena Borislavova, a representative of the Kiril Petkov government, [reported](#) that the Bulgarian security services had exposed a network of experts, journalists, and politicians who were promoting Russian propaganda narratives for a fee of €2,000 a month.

Concerning actors loyal to the Kremlin in Bulgarian politics, the Revival party should be considered in detail. In the 2021–2022 parliament, this force had the fewest seats. The party was founded in 2014 by Kostadin Kostadinov, a former member of the IMRO nationalist movement. The [manifesto](#) of this political force proclaims, among other things, that Bulgaria is ruled by Brussels and Washington, which treat it as a colony. Revival’s political [program](#) for the last election declared the need to develop equal relations with the countries of the West, as well as Russia, the Arab world and the countries of East Asia. Along with that, the document stressed that Moscow a priori could not be an enemy of Sofia. Besides, the program stated that Revival’s priorities were taking care of Bulgarian minorities abroad and integration with North Macedonia.

Some of the party’s founding principles echo the narratives propagated by the Kremlin. However, this is not the only thing that makes this political force loyal to Moscow. Since February 2022, Revival members have stated that the Bulgarian government [is dragging](#) the country to war between fraternal nations and that Sofia should [become](#) a peacemaker between Russia and Ukraine. In the spring, party activists organized several actions where they brought Russian flags: during [celebrations](#) on Mount Shipka and during a protest against sending weapons to Ukraine (which was not authorized by the Bulgarian government). In addition, over the past months Kostadin Kostadinov [stated](#) that the U.S. interferes in the internal affairs of other countries, but this does not cause such resistance to the world community as similar

actions of Russia. The party leader also [called](#) the Euromaidan in Ukraine “an event produced by the Americans.”

In the last election, Revival gained 4.8% of the vote. Since then, the party's average [rating](#) has risen to 10-11%. This phenomenon can be explained by the fatigue of the voters from the systemic political forces in the face of a permanent parliamentary crisis. Meanwhile, the energy and economic crisis unfolding in Bulgaria and Europe as a whole begins to take its toll. Given the position on Russian aggression against Ukraine that Revival members have adhered to in previous months, it is to be expected that after the early elections this party will insist on the resumption of economic and political contacts with Moscow. It is not ruled out that amid challenging social situation other Bulgarian political forces, in particular the BSP, will also call for business as usual with Russia.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Russia is not ranked as the major foreign economic partner of North Macedonia. Thus, in 2020 the Russian direction accounted for only 1.06% of the country's [exports](#), and 1.31% of [imports](#) came by the return route. The main goods that Macedonian companies sold to Russia were gardening and vegetable products (38.7% of all exports from there), pharmaceuticals (25.5%), equipment for industry and components of household appliances (14.1%) and clothing (10.8%). The main items of Russian imports to North Macedonia were fuel (52.6% of imports from Russia), metallurgical products (31.4%) and chemical products (primarily fertilizers, 6.6%).

Taking a detailed look at energy imports, one can say that Skopje is not generally dependent on Moscow in this component. However, there are critical items in the structure of supplies, which are of concern to the Macedonian authorities. In 2020, 62.6% of all energy products bought abroad [came from](#) oil and derivatives, 15.5% from natural gas, 14.2% from electricity, 4.5% from solid fossil fuels and 3.2% from biofuels. Along with this, only 2.3% of [oil](#) and 4% of [coal](#) imports of the country came from Russia. At the same time, all of the gas that North Macedonia purchased abroad [was sold](#) by Russian suppliers. In recent years, this type of fuel has become increasingly important in the structure of the country's energy consumption. With gas, North Macedonia has reduced the share of coal in the energy balance, due to plans to decarbonize the economy. While in 2015 solid fossil fuels [accounted](#) for 38.3% of all energy consumed by the country and gas for 4.4%, in 2020 these figures were already 24.2% and 14.1% respectively. This summer, the distributors of the fuel in North Macedonia [informed](#) that the country will be left without gas if Russia stops supplying it to Europe. The state has an interconnector that links it to the Bulgarian gas transportation network, but it has been operating at half capacity over the past few years. Its full capacity until 2030, however, is reserved by Gazprom. Thus, North Macedonia will need a new way to get gas if the Russian monopoly stops supplying fuel to the country.

In the political field, the main events of recent months and even of recent years in North Macedonia are related to the country's integration into NATO and the EU. On its way to these organizations, the country has had to make compromises, at times painful for the society or parts of it. In 2018, after lengthy negotiations, a Macedonian-Greek [agreement](#) of

understanding was signed and the country's name was changed from "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" to "North Macedonia." Athens opposed the previous name, because it also referred to part of the Greek region. The agreement between the two countries unblocked Skopje's path to NATO, and the country joined the Alliance in 2020.

Meanwhile, historical and nominal contradictions came to the fore in Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. Negotiations with Sofia were part of Skopje's movement towards NATO and the EU and addressed issues of Macedonian national identity and statehood. They particularly hampered the integration of North Macedonia into both organizations, despite the fact that the country had expressed its intention to join them in the first decade of the 2000s. Different generations of Bulgarian elites have insisted since the early 1990s that the Macedonian nation and the Macedonian language do not exist, and that the two countries are bound by a common past. Because Sofia, as a member of NATO and the EU, had the ability to block Skopje's integration, North Macedonia had to enter into a dialogue with Bulgaria to reach a consensus. In 2017, the two countries concluded a [treaty](#) of friendship, good neighborliness and cooperation. A joint commission on historical and educational issues was established. However, negotiations soon came under threat of disruption, because Skopje did not agree with Sofia's demand to recognize that the Macedonian language and identity had historical Bulgarian roots. During active contact with Bulgaria, North Macedonia managed to join NATO, but failed to move forward on the EU accession negotiations.

In 2020, despite the preliminary agreement of the European Commission and the support of most EU states, the European Council did not allow accession talks to begin between Brussels and Skopje. The Bulgarian and French leaders opposed it, insisting that the disputes between the candidates and the members of the United Europe must be settled. This led to early parliamentary elections in North Macedonia and proved that there was a certain crisis of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans (because Skopje [had been waiting](#) for candidate status since 2005 and received approval from the European Commission in 2009). Progress was made in 2022, when French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a draft Bulgarian-Macedonian agreement. The document proposed, among other things, that North Macedonia recognize the Bulgarian minority in the country, but did not oblige Sofia to recognize the Macedonian language. The sides were also to open negotiations on other contentious issues. The agreement was supported by the Macedonian parliament. The path to the EU [was unblocked](#).

A detailed examination of this situation is necessary to outline the most favorable space for the Kremlin's destabilization operations in North Macedonia. For example, by 2020, the main [target](#) of Russian propaganda in the country was the NATO movement. Disinformation and threats on this topic were spread through both traditional media and official diplomatic channels. In 2018, for example, the then-Russian ambassador to North Macedonia, Oleg Shcherbakov, said that joining the Alliance would have a direct impact on Skopje, as it could turn it into a target for Russian attacks, should Moscow feel threatened. Then Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev [suspected](#) the Kremlin of trying to influence the outcome of the referendum on the country's accession to NATO. After 2020, Russian propaganda in North Macedonia began to [parasitize](#) on the topic of EU accession, calling the country a victim of

plots by neighboring states and accusing the pro-Western government of neglecting national interests in its relations with Bulgaria.

It is worth noting that such narratives about North Macedonia are instrumentalized by certain political forces in the country. First of all, in this context we should mention the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE, which has been using [anti-Western](#) and sometimes [pro-Russian](#) slogans in recent years and [establishing](#) ties with Russian diplomatic and cultural institutions. This summer, the political force was among the organizers of a [protest](#) in Skopje against “unacceptable conditions for joining the EU.” According to VMRO-DPMNE leader Christian Mickovski, there is now a Bulgarianization of the Macedonian state, and the movement to a United Europe cannot come at such a price. Another organizer of this action was The Left party, which merges right-wing and left-wing ideology. Immediately after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, two representatives of this political force in the Macedonian parliament [justified](#) the Kremlin’s actions by the need to “denacify and remove threats from extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi movements [in Ukraine],” and called their foreign minister a “Russophobe.” They also met with the Russian ambassador to North Macedonia, Sergey Bazdnikin. Such steps were condemned by representatives of most parliamentary forces, in particular, the ruling Social Democratic Party. The Left party’s frequent allies from VMRO-DPMNE ignored these actions.

In contrast, from February 24, 2022, the official Skopje witnessed its support for Ukraine in its fight against the Russian invaders. The Parliament of North Macedonia [condemned](#) the actions of the Kremlin, and the country’s government [closed](#) Macedonian skies to air carriers from Russia immediately after the full-scale invasion was launched. Russian Federation Council member Vladimir Dzhubarov responded by [threatening](#) that Moscow would stop supplying gas to Skopje (as well as to Sofia and Podgorica). Even VMRO-DPMNE spoke out against the Kremlin’s actions, but it did so after the position of the European People’s Party, a conservative group in the European Parliament to which the Bulgarian party belongs, was made public. In the following months, North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski [accused](#) Moscow at least twice of trying to interfere in the country’s internal political affairs, in particular through [spreading](#) disinformation and possible involvement in the organization of anti-European protests.

In the summer, North Macedonia, along with Bulgaria and Montenegro, did not step back from closing its skies to Russian airlines when a plane carrying Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was on its way to Serbia. Moscow [labeled](#) these actions as a “NATO demarche,” arguing that the decision on restrictions was not made in the Balkan countries. Later, official Skopje decided to hand over to Ukraine T-72 tanks that were in the possession of the Macedonian army. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [condemned](#) this move, promising consequences for North Macedonia.

Lastly, in recent years Skopje and Moscow have not signed any bilateral agreements. The most recent agreement on the development of partnership dates back to 2013. Accordingly, at the intergovernmental level, relations between the two states were stagnant even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops. During 2018–2022, North Macedonia expelled 14 Russian diplomats [in response](#) to the poisoning of former double agent Sergei Skripal, seeing them as a threat to its national security and [accusing](#) them of [violating](#) the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961.

MONTENEGRO

Russia is an important, but not the main economic partner of Montenegro. In 2020, 3.46% of Montenegro's [exports](#) were sent to Russian consumers. Out of it, 88.3% were pharmaceutical products, 6.9%—construction materials, 3.4%—optical devices. At the same time Russia accounted for only 0.62% of the total [imports](#) of Montenegro. Of all Russian goods and services imported to Montenegro, 46,1% were metallurgy products, 15,6%—crop products (especially tobacco and spirits), 11,9%—coal and gasoline, 9,4%—equipment for industry, 4,2%—wood.

It should be mentioned that Montenegro [does not use](#) natural gas, so it does not need to produce or import it. In the total structure of consumption of the country in 2020, 42.9% came from oil and derivative products, 34.9% from electricity, 21.3% from renewable and biofuels. At the same time, the [level](#) of energy dependence of the country was 27.4%, which is one of the best indicators in Europe. The main components of Montenegro's energy imports were [electricity](#) (60.7% of all relevant imports) and [oil](#) and related products (38.8%). The Russian share is present only in the second type of purchases. However, the volume of oil and derivatives coming from Russia to Montenegro in 2020 was extremely low: it amounted to only 0.9% of all relevant imports. Thus, we can say that the Montenegrin state is not dependent on Russia in energy sector.

However, Montenegro is vulnerable to political influence from Russia. It is made possible by loyal to Moscow groups among the national elites. For example, until [April](#) 2022 the prime minister of Montenegro was Zdravko Krivokapić, who in particular advocated rapprochement with the Kremlin and hindered the European integration of the country. He was replaced by the government of Dritan Abazović, which stands for stepping up negotiations with Brussels on Montenegro's accession to the EU. The access of pro-Russian politicians to power in the state in previous years, in particular, led to the introduction of exceptional conditions for Russian investors. Most notably, Russian citizens could take advantage of the Golden Visa [program](#), which allows those who invested a minimum of €450 thousand in the Montenegrin economy to get a permit to reside in the country. This made the Russian state [the largest](#) foreign investor in Montenegro. However, the government of Dritan Abazović in May 2022 [assured](#) EU partners that the practice of granting Golden Visas to citizens of Russia will be discontinued.

Overall, the change of government in Montenegro in the first quarter of 2022 conditioned the way in which the country responded and still responds to Russian aggression against Ukraine. For example, with the Dritan Abazović government in charge, the Montenegrin parliament [criticized](#) Russia for a full-scale invasion. The informal external commitments of official Podgorica to Western partners also played an important role, which was demonstrated in a solidarity stance with other EU and NATO members in support of Ukraine. The commitments prompted the country to [close](#) its airspace to Russian airlines in March, as well as to [support](#) personal sanctions against individuals and entities from Russia. The Montenegrin state [undertook](#) these steps despite their possible negative impact on the national economy. In general, Dritan Abazović and his team consistently [state](#) that Montenegro will continue to condemn the aggressive actions of the Kremlin. Also, the Montenegrin prime minister uses

the example of Russia's war against Ukraine as an argument that Western organizations—the EU and NATO—should work as swiftly as possible to integrate European states that show interest in joining them.

However, Dritan Abazović's team's tenure at the head of the Montenegrin government should not be regarded as evidence of a final weakening of Russian influence on the country or guaranteed destabilization. From the very beginning of his term in office, the current Prime Minister of the country has been in conflict with President Milo Đukanović. In particular, the head of state criticized Dritan Abazović for his intention to sign an agreement of understanding with the Serbian Orthodox Church. This initiative led to [protests](#) in Montenegro and served as the formal reason for a vote of no confidence in the current government in Parliament. Because of this decision Dritan Abazović tried to find a new basis for relations with Serbia after the conflict between the two states in 2020, caused by restrictions on entry through quarantine and ended with the mutual [expulsion](#) of ambassadors. The agreement with Belgrade was a way to facilitate negotiations with Brussels on Montenegro's EU accession. The Montenegrin parliament in late August [expressed](#) no confidence in the government of Dritan Abazović. For now, he is acting prime minister. Montenegro is preparing for possible early parliamentary elections. The vote may lead the country out of the political crisis, but it could bring pro-Russian forces back to power amid potential economic problems. Currently, one of the active participants in negotiations for a new coalition in the Montenegrin Parliament is the Democratic Front party. Recently, Voice of America published [testimony](#) from an unnamed source in the U.S. Presidential Administration which cited intelligence that this political force has received funding from Russia in recent years.

The Kremlin is seeking to exploit the instability of Montenegro's socio-political life to undermine the Western course of the state. For example, in 2020, Milo Đukanović [blamed](#) Serbia and Russia for using the Serbian Orthodox Church to stop his country's European integration. This year, following Podgorica's accession to Western sanctions against Moscow, Montenegrin Minister of Public Administration Marash Dukaj claimed that Russia [carried out](#) a cyberattack on Montenegrin state servers. The country is also a target of information impact by Kremlin actors. Specifically, the Russian embassy in Podgorica, even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, [threatened](#) Montenegro with a repeat of the "Ukrainian scenario," accusing the U.S. of influencing this Balkan state. Later, member of the Federation Council of Russia Konstantin Kozachev called the closure of airspace by Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bulgaria a sign of the [loss](#) of sovereignty of these states in favor of NATO. Sergey Rogozin, head of Roskosmos, responded to this measure of the three countries by threatening them with nuclear weapons.

Official Podgorica also retaliated to aggressive actions and statements of Russian officials by expelling diplomats. For example, in 2018, Montenegrin authorities [declared](#) a member of the Russian Embassy persona non grata in reaction to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Montenegro [has expelled](#) six [Kremlin diplomats](#), considering their activities a threat to the security of the state.

CONCLUSIONS

At the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine or shortly thereafter, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Montenegro were led by political forces that clearly identified the Kremlin's actions not only as an act of aggression against the Ukrainian state, but also as a security threat to all of Europe. This has determined the nature of these countries' support for Kyiv in recent months. In addition, in all three states under consideration, governments and security agencies have recently been working to varying degrees to identify the destructive influence that Russian diplomats, economic and cultural ties to Moscow, and domestic pro-Russian actors have on national security. It is also essential that both Bulgaria and North Macedonia and Montenegro have welcomed Russia's war against Ukraine as NATO members. This gives all three countries guarantees of protection from direct aggressive actions of the Kremlin against them.

Nevertheless, despite these circumstances, Russia retains a significant arsenal of instruments of indirect influence on the socio-political situation in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Potential of their application grows against the backdrop of economic and energy crisis in Europe, as well as the political uncertainty in Sofia and Podgorica.

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