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CONTENTS:

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SADRŽAJ:

Original scientific article

HOW RUSSIA PROMOTES PRO-RUSSIAN AND ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA IN THE BALKANS NARRATIVES OF SPUTNIK SRBIJA ON MONTENEGRO

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this paper is to understand the worldview of Russia's narratives on Montenegro by analyzing articles in *Sputnik Srbija*, a Russia's state-run propaganda media. *Sputnik Srbija* regards Montenegro as an Orthodox and Serbian state, opposes the "separation" of Montenegro from Serbia, and deems Russia as a friendly state. Although these are typical Serbian nationalist worldviews, Sputnik Srbija is characterized by its emphasis on solidarity with Russia and use of a logic similar to the one that Russia in its invasion of Ukraine.

KEY WORDS: *Montenegro; Russia's narrative; Sputnik; Propaganda; Information warfare.*

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1   NAKAZAWA Takuya (1989) got B.A. in History from Waseda University (Tokyo) and M.A. in European Studies from the University of Tokyo. He is a historian who studies Montenegrin national question and Japanese-Yugoslav relationship, and he also researches contemporary politics of former Yugoslav States. He lectures history as an assistant professor at National Institute of Technology, Kagawa College (Takuma Campus) in Japan from April 2022.

SAŽETAK:

Kroz pregled sadržaja ruske novinske agencije/televizije *Sputnjik,* koji je dio državnog, propagandnog sistema Rusije, analizira se narativ medijskih sadržaja o Crnoj Gori. Srpsko izdanje *Sputnjika* Crnu Goru gleda kao pravoslavnu i srpsku državu, protivi se „*odvajanju*" Crne Gore od Srbije, a Rusiju smatra prijateljskom državom. Iako su ovo tipični srpski nacionalistički pogledi na svijet, *Sputnjik* Srbija karakteriše naglasak na solidarnosti sa Rusijom i upotreba logike slične onoj koju je Rusija koristila u svojoj invaziji na Ukrajinu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Crna Gora; Ruski narativ; Sputnjik; Propaganda; Informacioni rat.*

I. Introduction[2]

In January 2018, European Commissioner[3] Julian King told the European Parliament in Strasbourg:

> *There seems, frankly, little doubt, that the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign is an orchestrated strategy – delivering the same disinformation stories in as many languages as possible, through as many channels as possible, as often as possible (The Independent, 17. 1. 2018).*

The dissemination of disinformation by Russia in cyberspace has been a problem in recent years.[4] For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine, it was pointed out that the Russian state-run media played a part in intelligence gathering to disturb public opinion in other countries (Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019, 93–97).[5] Disinformation has also played a role in inciting anti-elite sentiment in Europe and trumpeting conspiracy theories.

Research on fake news and conspiracy theories circulated by Russia has rapidly progressed since the latter half of the 2010s due to the above-mentioned circumstances. These studies point out that the Russian media are spreading hostility and conspiracy theories against the elite in Europe (Audinet & Limonier 2017; Wagnsson 2022; Watanabe 2018; Yablokov 2015). Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro (2016, 125) says that "[m]any fake news sites, such as *Sputnik*, describe their content as 'alternative'. In reality this usually means 'pro-Russian,' 'conspiracy theoretical' and 'anti-Western.'" Discourse analysis has been carried out on Russian narratives distributed in several languages (Chernetskyi 2017; Deverell *et al.* 2021;

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2   This paper is first presented at 2020 Symposium of the Graduate Program on Global Society "Boundaries, Crossings, and Creative Spaces in the Contemporary World," held at the University of Tokyo in 23rd February 2020, i.e. before the pandemic of COVID-19 and the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It's widely known that Sputnik spreads a lot of fake news about the pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian War, but it was hard to bring that analysis into this paper. This paper will therefore only discuss propaganda before the pandemic and the war.

3   In this article, personal titles shall be as of the time of the occurrence of the event.

4   The influence has spread across a variety of media, including YouTube and social media. In this article, we have only covered the discourse of news sites, but the propaganda of these media should also be studied.

5   ⁾ On the development of Russian strategy of information warfare, see Hirose (2021, 143–164); Hofstetter (2022, ch.2); Koizumi (2016, 171–184); Thomas (2014).

Doncheva 2020; Elswah & Howard 2020; Hoyle *et al.* 2021; Kragh & Åsberg 2017; Nantoi *et al.* 2018; Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019; Ştefan 2020).

In this paper, will be discussed about *Sputnik Srbija*,[6] Serbian version of the Russian propaganda media *Sputnik*. *Sputnik Srbija* was founded in Belgrade in 2015 and broadcasts news via radio and web sites.[7] Its official application was downloaded more than hundred thousand times (Stefanov & Vladimirov 2018, 21–22). *Sputnik Srbija was the tenth most followed account* on twitter and "Good!" on Facebook out of 33 languages of *Sputnik* in 2016 (EUISS 2016, 7–8). It has 25,427 followers on twitter and 153,690 "Good!" and 216,459 followers on Facebook.[8] *Sputnik Srbija* (and *RT*) is favored mainly among ethnic Serbs in Montenegro (Svetoka & Doncheva 2021, 12). According to Atlantic Council of Montenegro (2020, 10), out of 11,425 articles they reviewed, 704 mentioned Montenegro, and 554 of them directly featured Montenegro. That is about 1/3 of articles on Kosovo, but more than total number of articles on the North Macedonia.

The above mentioned discourse analysis of Russian media including *Sputnik* is conducted in various languages, and *Sputnik Srbija* is one of these cases.[9] Euro-Atlantic Research Center in Belgrade reports that *Sputnik* continues to publish anti-NATO and Serbian nationalist articles (CEAS 2016, 58). Sophie Eisentraut and Stephanie de Leon (2018, 3) points out that "*Sputnik Srbija* promotes conspiratorial thinking by framing the EU and the U.S. as imperialist powers seeking to destroy Serbian identity and autonomy" circulated repeatedly about subjects such as the threat of Greater Albania, the air raids by the NATO in 1999, injustice at the ICTY, and praise to Russia.[10] *Sputnik Srbija* has also written many articles about Montenegro. Atlantic Council of Montenegro (2020) analyzed narratives of *Sputnik Srbija* by country quantitatively. Vesko Garčević (2019, 8–11), former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, also refers articles on Montenegro's NATO membership in *Sputnik Srbija*, but did not comment on other articles. In this study, is given

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6   It also has another spelling Sputnjik (Спутњик), a Serbian spelling of the Russian word Sputnik (Спутник). For simplicity, Sputnik is the only spelling used in this article.

7   On contemporary situation of media in Serbia, see Jovanović (2018a); Reid (2021); Stojarová (2020).

8   Researched at JST 20:00 1st June 2021. Official account of twitter is @rs_sputnik and of Facebook is @rs.sputniknews.

9   In a series of studies on Serbian media, Srđan Mladenov Jovanović (2018c, 5–6) also refers to Sputnik Srbija.

10   However, any sources are not mentioned in the report by Eisentraut & de Leon (2018), and it is not clear how they led to such a conclusion.

detailed analysis of some articles on Montenegro in *Sputnik Srbija*, and unraveled what sort of worldview Russian propaganda is based on.

This paper does not fact-check whether Russia's claims are correct or false. Instead, it focuses on the narrative of articles circulated in Russia's propaganda media and use the method of discourse analysis to reveal the rhetoric *Sputnik Srbija* uses to disturb and destabilize the society of Montenegro.

By analyzing Russia's anti-Montenegro propaganda in Serbian, this paper aims to add new cases to the study of Russia's propaganda and to provide new perspectives in studying Russia's Balkan policies. Montenegro is not only the second latest NATO member as of 2021, but also has considerable weight which cannot be ignored when considering Russian policy toward Europe. Russia considers that its influence should extend not only to the former Soviet bloc but also to the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and therefore considers the eastward expansion of NATO as a threat to its sphere of influence. Montenegro is therefore of considerable importance in considering the policies of Europe by Russia (Koizumi 2016, 74–76; 2019, 70–72). As a result, Russia strongly opposed to Montenegro joining NATO (Biserko 2016; Samorukov 2017). And there is no Montenegrin version of *Sputnik* and *Sputnik Srbija* is also responsible for information transmission to Montenegro. Therefore, it can be said that the anti-Montenegrin propaganda in *Sputnik Srbija* appeared in the media most likely to have an impact on the spot among the propaganda Russia is developing in this country.

2. Background

Before analyzing articles on *Sputnik Srbija*, we would like to briefly explain about the political situation of Montenegro and controversial issues on the Montenegrin national question.

The majority of Montenegro is Orthodox Christian like the Serbs, and speaks the language so called Serbo-Croatian in socialist period (therefore Montenegrin people can read *Sputnik Srbija* without trouble). Montenegrins have historically been considered part of the Serbian nation because of their ethnic proximity, however, during the socialist period, Montenegrins were recognized as a different nation (*nacija*) from Serbs. And after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992, there was a confrontation in Montenegro between the fraction that considered themselves

as Serb and supported the union with Serbia, and the fraction that considered themselves as Montenegrin and advocated independence of Montenegro (Bešić 2019; Kubo 2004; Morrison 2018; Zahova 2013).

Finally, Montenegro gained its independence from Serbia and Montenegro on 3rd June 2006 through a referendum held in May. The Government of Montenegro, after its independence, has increasingly recognized Montenegrin uniqueness and adopted pro-Western policy. For example, the official language was changed from Serbian to Montenegrin language (Jovanović 2018b; Melnytska 2016; Nakazawa 2015). Also, Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC), established in 1993 in opposition to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), has been operating with the official approval from the government (Morrison 2018, 83–93). Furthermore, Montenegro joined NATO in 2017, and the membership divides the society between pro-Western supporters and pro-Russian opponents (Banović 2016; Bešić & Spasojević 2018). These processes were led by the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), which has been in power from 1990 to 2010, and its leader, Milo Đukanović.[11] In opposition to this, political parties that advocate "Serbian identity" have kept seats in the Montenegrin parliament (Sadakata 2017, 115).

3. Narratives

3.1. Struggles in Classroom

This section examines how *Sputnik Srbija* describes the historical perception and the language issue in Montenegrin school education. The Government of Montenegro made "Montenegrin language" its official language through a constitutional amendment made in 2007, when there are introduced 2 new characters, *ś* and *ź*,[12] into its orthography. However, there is a divide in Montenegrin society over whether or not to recognize "Montenegrin language," as about 40 percent of the population consider their mother tongue as "Serbian language." People speak the same language, but what to call it has become a point of political contention (Nakazawa 2015; 2020).

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11   ) He won the presidential election in 2018 and became the president until today. He has served as the prime minister from 1991 to 1998, the president from 1998 to 2002, the prime minister from 2003 to 2006 and again from 2009 to 2016 (Morrison 2018), and the president again from 2018, i.e., he has been in power for 30 years.

12   ) These characters, adopted in the new orthography of 2009, were not used in Serbo-Croatian, i.e. Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian languages. The use of these characters means that Montenegrin is completely disconnected from Serbian (Jovanović 2018b, 75–77).

A post on Facebook by Marko Milačić (*Facebook*, 10. 12. 2016),[13] a contributor of *Sputnik Srbija*, was introduced in an article titled "New Montenegrin Alphabet Book: Parents in Shock" in December 2016 (*Sputnik Srbija*, 10. 12. 2016). This article includes pictures of new characters, ś and ź, and textbooks. It also quotes parents' objections such as "I've had enough of the terror of Hercegovinian-Nikšić grammar,"[14] which seems to have been sent to Milačić. The parents cited in the article argued that these characters do not exist in the literary language of Montenegro, and that the literary language of Montenegro is in common with that of Serbia.

Not only creation of original language but also perception of history has been considered to be a problem. Quoting an article in the Serbian newspaper *Blic* (23. 12. 2016), *Sputnik Srbija* (23. 12. 2016) said that a seventh grader, Rade Račić, who attends a school in Podgorica, answered his teacher in a history class and the teacher suddenly became upset.

"Račić, tell me something about the rise of Montenegro."

"Montenegro was the first Serb state......"

Then the teacher interrupted him and shouted:

"Wait, wait, wait, where is that in the textbook?"

Rade then answered to his teacher: "It is not written anywhere, sir, this is taught at home, this is what everyone knows." [......]

Based on the historical view that early Montenegro was part of Serbia, and therefore Montenegro was part of the Serbs, this article is structured to deride and laugh at the claims of Montenegrin nationalism. As with the article on the "Montenegrin language" mentioned above, *Sputnik Srbija* can be said to emphasize the unity between Montenegrins and Serbs, wary of education based on Montenegrin nationalism being conducted in schools.

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13   ) Two years later from this post, he formed a small party True Montenegro (Prava Crna Gora) and ran for presidential election. He finally lost the election but made repeated nationalistic statements during his campaign (Večernje novosti, 4. 4. 2018; Vijesti, 29. 1. 2018).

14   ) This probably refers to the fact that Vojislav P. Nikčević, who wrote The Orthography of Montenegrin Language in 1993, was working at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nikšić (Nakazawa 2015, 129). On similar discourse by bishop Amfilohije of SPC, see Melnytska (2016, 64).

3.2. Against NATO

In this section, are analyzed articles related to NATO and the West in order to find out how *Sputnik Srbija* depicts Montenegro which approaches the West and what rhetoric Russia uses to spread propaganda in Orthodox states in the Balkans.[15]

As of 2015, *Sputnik Srbija* (15. 12. 2015) had interviews with former president Momir Bulatović and an article entitled "Djukanović leads Montenegro into a new conflict," and argued against Montenegro's accession to NATO. In another interview with *Sputnik Srbija* (15. 10. 2015), Bulatović argues that NATO is a criminal organization and "from the standpoint of Montenegro's tradition of freedom and struggle, NATO is not in any way a sworn friend of ours, but a military alliance which already has blood debt to Montenegro."

Furthermore, *Sputnik Srbija* (16. 12. 2015) reported that in a statement by the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs it is insisted that the voice of all the people must be heard in a referendum when Montenegro joins NATO. The argument that a referendum is necessary was repeated even in 2017, with comments by intellectuals stating that "even those in favor of NATO are in favor of a referendum" (*Sputnik Srbija*, 5. 7. 2017).

In response to Montenegro's participation in the sanctions against Russia after the "annexation" of Crimea, Marko Milačić wrote an article entitled "Russia, Sorry." According to Milačić, relations between Montenegro and Russia have a long history, and Montenegro has received a great deal of support from Russia, including support for its independence under the Berlin Treaty and the acquisition of the sea. Nevertheless, the sanctions were imposed by "anti-Russian hysteria (*antiruska histerija*)" (*Sputnik Srbija* 2. 10. 2017).

Sputnik Srbija (25. 10. 2017) also told about the conference between Milačić and Sergei V. Zheleznyak, a Russian MP, and cited their criticism over the Government of Montenegro. Zheleznyak criticizes the current Montenegrin Government for joining NATO "against the will of its citizens" and for depreciating the sovereign state Montenegro as a satellite state of NATO. This logic reflects a unique understanding on "sovereignty" under Putin's Russia that regards accession to a military alliance as a loss of "sovereignty."[16]

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15   On Russia's anti-NATO propaganda in other Western Balkan states, see Bećirević & Turčalo (2020); Doncheva (2020).

16   According to Koizumi Yû (2018, 36–39; 2019, 58–61), even Germany isn't a "sovereign state" because

Another article is about Turkish investment in Montenegro. In this article, Nebojša Medojević, the leader of Movement for Change (Pokret za promjene), accused Djukanović for corrupt governance and for trying to sell Montenegro to foreign companies. According to him, the funding of Turkish companies, which has become active in recent years, is led by "Turkish businessmen, Gülenists" who have connections with the U.S. special forces. And he warns that the "Albanian mafia" is also trying to buy real estates in the coastal area of Montenegro. He points out that the mafia are not "our Albanians from Montenegro" but from Albania and Kosovo (*Sputnik Srbija*, 5. 5. 2018). At the core of his argument is a conspiracy theory that the United States and its "agents," "Gülenists," and "Albanian mafia," are using corrupt government to exploit Montenegro. *Sputnik Srbija* thus seeks to arouse anti-Western sentiment by exploiting the anger against pro-Western corrupt Government of Montenegro. When the West supports a corrupt and illiberal government because it is pro-Western (stabilitocracy),[17] it consequently supports such Russian anti-Western propaganda.

We can conclude that *Sputnik Srbija* uses the same rhetoric as that of the Russian Government. It calls for a referendum to support a true "will of citizens," condemns "Russophobia" (*Sputnik Srbija*, 21. 7. 2018) and "anti-Russian hysteria," cites the Russian understanding of "sovereignty" and stresses the historical friendship between Montenegro and Russia.

3.3. Serbian Culture in "Crisis"

In this section is discussed the role of *Sputnik Srbija* as a catalyst for the "crisis" of Serbian culture in Montenegro.

DPS tried to designate Njegoš's birthday as a public holiday in 2013 and 2017, but withdrew it due to opposition from the coalition party, the Bosniak Party, because Njegoš's representative work, *The Mountain Wreath*, is a tale of heroism whose main theme is the persecution of the Slavic people who converted to Islam in Montenegro in the 18th century. Bosniaks, *i.e.* Muslims who speak Bosnian

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of NATO in this understanding. On Russia's concept of sovereignty, see also Okada (2017).

17   On the concept of "stabilitocracy," see Bieber (2020, 98–105), and on the illiberal governance by DPS, see Komar (2020). Rufin Zamfir (2020) pointed out that the corruption of Montenegro (and other Western Balkan states) makes the country vulnerable to Russia's propaganda. On the vulnerability of Western Balkans, see also Dolan (2022).

language, have criticized Njegoš as "a genocidal poet" (Baskar 2019; Saggau 2018). The article of *Sputnik Srbija* (14. 11. 2017) on this issue criticized the Government's attitude by using the phrase "Montenegrin regime (montengrinski režim)." While euphemistically criticizing the DPS regime as westernized,[18] the article invokes Njegoš to criticize the Government for approving Kosovo's independence and distancing itself from Russia. It argues that joining NATO is against Njego's ideals.

The other articles also claim that the Serbian culture represented by Njegoš is threatened by Muslims. An article by Milačić entitled "Njegoš' Open Letter to Montenegrins" takes the form of a letter written by Njego. In it, he stated that "I couldn't laugh at all when I heard that I was 'genocidal' against the Turks," and pointed out that "Turks" would not be regarded as genocidal and argued that it was the Turks and Albanians who launched the attacks (*Sputnik Srbija*, 30. 12. 2016). Milačić's article positions Islam as a threat to the "Orthodox Montenegro," and *Sputnik Srbija* positioned Njegoš as an Orthodox poet and used his authority as canon to agitate Islamophobia. Of course, this must be understood in relation to the DPS government's positioning of Njegoš as a secular poet. For *Sputnik Srbija*, to see Njegoš as a secular poet is to support the DPS-led separation of Montenegro from Serbia, and to make Montenegro less Orthodox. *Sputnik Srbija* opposes the secular image of Njegoš because *Sputnik Srbija* thinks it will split the Serbs.[19]

Sputnik Srbija also claims that Serbs are being persecuted in Montenegro. In an article dealing with the inhabitants of Berane, a municipality of northern Montenegro, the Montenegrin Serbs were claimed to be more severe than in Kosovo. In the same article, one resident of Berane argues that the DPS government wants to change identity of Serbs in Montenegro from Serbs to Montenegrins, and that situation of Serbs in Montenegro is worse than the situation in Kosovo. According to him, "Serbs are the only nation (*narod*) in Montenegro that has no rights, and that have been expelled from the Constitution, so the Serbian people have no reason to vote for a regime" (*Sputnik Srbija* 16. 2. 2018). Another article states compares monasteries in Kosovo and Njegoš in Montenegro, and it was argued that

18   Montenegro is called "Crna Gora" in Serbo-Croatian and its adjective form "crnogorski" is usually used to mean "Montenegrin." In this case, an adjective derived from the Western name "montenegrinski" is used to imply that the object is "Westernism."

19   Another article in Sputnik Srbija (3. 7. 2018) argues that Serbs in Bosnia should not be called "Bosnian Serb." The article supports Milorad Dodik, an influential politician of Republika Srpska, who claims that there is only one Serbian, no Bosnian Serbs, Croatian Serbs, or Kosovan Serbs, and argues that using the term "Bosnian Serbs" is intended to prevent the integration of Serbs.

the "Serbian culture" was at risk in both Kosovo and Montenegro (*Sputnik Srbija* 21. 10. 2018). *Sputnik Srbija* highlighted the "persecution" of Serbs in Montenegro, in contrast to Kosovo, where the Serbian population has declined sharply following the conflict.[20] Thus, the argument asserting that the "fellow countryman" is at risk was made in the process of Russia's intervention in Crimea and Donbass (Koizumi 2019, 150–164; Pupcenoks & Seltzer 2021, 767–771), and the *Sputnik Srbija* can be said to reproduce the pattern seen in the propaganda in Montenegro as well.

The propaganda of *Sputnik Srbija* identifies Montenegro, first and foremost, as an Orthodox country and presents Muslims and the West as threat to it. This is not only the typical logic of Serbian nationalism, but also the logic of Russian intervention in which "compatriot" is at stake.

4. Discussion

Our research thus far indicates that Russia's propaganda against Montenegro is a concentrated attack on vulnerable democracy in Montenegro. The vulnerability of democracy in Montenegro is partly due to the intensifying ethno-nationalistic disputes over political issues on national identity, such as language and historical perception (Milačić 2017). We conclude that discourses of *Sputnik Srbija* aimed at strengthening ethno-nationalistic cleavages and preventing the consolidation of democracy in Montenegro.

Also, there is important attack on the Euro-Atlantic integration policy in Montenegro. Russia had consistently opposed Montenegro's joining to NATO because it would mean that the disappearance of possibility for Russia to secure a good port in the northern Mediterranean. Would. And by repeatedly stressing that the Euro-Atlantic integration policy does not have public support, *Sputnik Srbija* not only opposes Montenegro's joining to NATO, but also encourages citizens to question the legitimacy of the pro-Western government. Challenges to the legitimacy of the Government, of course, deepen divisions among citizens.

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20   In Kosovo, not only did the Serbs persecute the Albanians, but there was also persecution of the Serbs by the Albanians. Japanese journalist Kimura Yukihiko (2005) reported the persecution of Serbs after the Kosovo conflict. According to Hidaka Midori (2017), it is true that Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo have been neglected by the authorities and placed in a critical situation. But it also needs to bear in mind the fact that the discourse around "crisis of monasteries in Kosovo" is overemphasized and mythologized in media of Serbia (Jovanović 2018c, 8–9).

Therefore, it can be concluded that *Sputnik Srbija*'s sensational reporting on identity issues is intended to destroy the civic common space on the web[21] and to make Montenegro's political society vulnerable. However, this paper does not empirically analyze how it is perceived by citizens in Montenegro, as it only analyzes discourse. We look forward to empirical studies of the impact of discourses of *Sputnik Srbija*.

5. Conclusion

The study in this paper has revealed the logic of propaganda circulated by Russia about Montenegro. In Russia's narrative, Montenegro is identified as a Serbian and Orthodox country, and the pro-Western policies of the DPS government were portrayed as a threat to the "Orthodox Montenegro" without the true will of the citizens. And Russia is represented as a country that supports the will of the citizens of Montenegro. *Sputnik Srbija* is opposing to pro-Western Montenegrin nationalism and is also inciting pro-Russian populism and Serbian nationalism.

It is important to understand what lies behind these conspiracy theories. Đukanović-led DPS government, despite its corruption, had gained support from the EU and NATO simply because of its support for European integration, which cannot be ignored in discussing Russian propaganda. In other words, the natural anger against corruption was being used for Russian propaganda in the form of anti-NATO. This is not a problem that can be solved if the West simply supports pro-Western regimes. Rather, it would widen internal divisions in Montenegro and benefit Russian propaganda.

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21   On the conceptual background of information warfare for civic society, see Hofstetter (2022, ch.2).

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