

Washington DC, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2017

## U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee

### Hearing on the ‘Attempted coup in Montenegro and Malign Russian Influence in the Region’

#### Testimony by H.E. Mr. Nebojsa Kaludjerovic, Ambassador of Montenegro to the United States

Mr. Chairman - Senator McCain, Ranking member Reed, distinguished members of the Committee,

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to address you today on behalf of my Government and I extend especially our appreciation for the Committee’s hearing on this important topic. Your interest and dedication to the issue of security in Europe, the Western Balkans and Montenegro in this case, amid the ongoing challenges we are all facing, is a considerable contribution **in itself** to the valued support of the U.S. to our region towards its future as a **full** part of the Euro Atlantic community.

We are talking today about one serious, **destabilizing** scenario orchestrated from the outside that fortunately never materialized in Montenegro on the eve of the Parliamentary Elections that took place in October last year. The plot in question, which virtually amounted to coup d’ etat, now subject of a trial in front of courts in Montenegro, consisted of planned terrorist attacks to overthrow a **legitimately elected** Government and to illegally detain or even assassinate its Prime Minister. In the worst case scenario, if the plans had succeeded there would have been chaos, serious violence and extremely dangerous instability with intention to undermine the constitutional order and institutions of Montenegro. That would also have been a **derailment** of the progress of Montenegro and the entire region towards **NATO** and **EU integration**, which was a presumed motive for carrying out the entire plot.

At this moment, the public trial is ongoing, following **months** of investigation. The Special Chief Prosecutor, in charge of the case, has publicly stated that the evidence in this case is (I quote) ‘**undisputable**’ and ‘**iron clad**’.

Indictments that include two Russian nationals (evidence points to that, that they were members of GRU-Military Intelligence Services) as well as two leading politicians and MPs from the

opposition party Democratic Front, for conspiracy to form a criminal organization and attempt at terrorist attacks, as well as the acts against the Constitutional order and public safety. Nine people so far have admitted their guilt via the plea – bargain mechanism. Their confessions were included in the indictment. The witnesses identified one of the Russian nationals, former Deputy Military Attaché of Russian Federation in Poland **who was declared persona non grata in that country for acts of espionage**, as the organizer of the plot.

The involvement of Russian nationals is **undisputed** and Montenegrin authorities are waiting for the feedback from the Russian authorities, which acknowledged the requests, regarding the questions on the involvement of these nationals and their role in the events. (So far, Russian authorities have informed us that one of the other suspects, who is not a Russian national but is currently at large in Russia, is currently being subjected to pre – extradition background checks following a request for extradition by the Ministry of Justice of Montenegro. This suspect is also banned from traveling outside the territory of Russia).

Had the plot in October succeeded, the instability would have been created not **only** within Montenegro's boundaries but would, for sure, have had a spillover effect, in a region that is still not on a **fully irreversible** path to stability. Gratefully, **the opposite happened**. First of all, Montenegrin citizens, once again **like at every election** since restoring the statehood in 2006, have elected pro-NATO and pro-European Government.

Montenegro joined NATO on June 5<sup>th</sup>, and **another** spillover effect happened, but a **positive** one. The example of another Western Balkans, or SEE country, joining the Euro Atlantic institutions is immeasurable. It will create a **long-term** positive effect, offer motivation and encouragement to other aspirants from the Region for EU and NATO membership, that the perspective of membership in these organizations is **alive**, based on merits, standards and values. **No better example** could have been given to our region.

Aside from the outcome of this particular matter, Russia's view on NATO enlargement and the accession of its 29<sup>th</sup> member is not a secret, **nor** is their support to the opposition parties and actors in Montenegro that are against NATO membership. Leading to the elections in October, there was a well-organized and financed public campaign to that effect. But these influences Montenegro experienced **before, during and after** elections is not an isolated fact but a pattern based on notions that the facts on the ground could be changed. Membership of Montenegro to NATO is often perceived by some high level Russian officials as a temporary setback, through the false narrative that NATO does not have support in Montenegro etc. Therefore, we expect a continuation of pressure both aimed at Montenegro and at the Region, especially those countries that have not yet become members of NATO and/or EU. .

I wish to point out that Montenegro has been able to succeed in achieving its goals in becoming a member of NATO and a **frontrunner in EU accession** by **working hard** over the past decade with friends and partners **like the United States**. That is an alliance based on **values**, and that is

why it succeeds. The reforms, helped bilaterally by the United States, part of achieving NATO and EU standards, made our society better and firmly on a right path.

After all, it was thanks to **those** reforms aimed at strengthening the capacities and independence of institutions to uphold the rule of law that helped those very institutions to tackle such a challenge we are talking about today that would put to test much more established democracies than ours.

And where we did not have capacities ourselves, considering that the attempts were multifaceted, involving propaganda and cyber-attacks, we were able to ask our partners in NATO or bilaterally like US for assistance. As an Ally, we will work together within the Alliance on the capacities to address new challenges like these.

We had and **do have** a right to determine our alliances and our future, which we have always been clear about, as our decisions are based on our strategic visions and goals **not** against anybody or anything. Montenegro does not pose any sort of threat to Russia and wants to be engaged in conversation, in dialogue, and not in confrontation.

Montenegro in NATO can only mean peace and stability, and expansion of the area of welfare, of regional cooperation, and good, neighborly relations.

Distinguished members of the Committee,

What should be done? The U.S. role in Europe is **extremely** valuable and necessary. The commitment to the vision of Europe whole, free and at peace is **as relevant today** as it was before. The United States and its European partners, should continue to reaffirm at every opportunity the value of Trans-Atlantic bond, NATO and Article 5 commitment, as President Trump reinforced that valuable message in Poland few days ago. As to the Western Balkans, it is crucial to keep countering trends that seems to encourage the countries or actors in the region to find **alternatives** to the Euro Atlantic integration and **full** embracement of values and standards that they bring.

We are thankful and grateful for the US support to our NATO membership as well as the increasing focus on the Western Balkans issues. The support by the U.S. Congress, and the Senate has been a **particular** champion, is **very** welcome and needed, as well as from the U.S. administration.

The upcoming visit to Montenegro by Vice President Pence is a **strong** message that the United States is focused on Europe, and an opportunity to show continuous support to the stability and security of the Western Balkans region, by supporting a clear perspective of membership both in NATO and EU as the **best** way to achieve those goals.

On our side, Montenegro will continue to spread the area of stability in the Region and beyond and fulfill its responsibilities as a new Ally. We are ready to do our part.

Thank you.