Networks of Leverage

Serbian Influence and Democratic Vulnerability in Montenegro

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Executive Summary

Serbian interference in Montenegro has evolved from ideological affinity and overt political sponsorship into a layered system of domestic leverage. It operates through political proxies, Serbian-state-aligned media, opaque financial flows, organised online networks, clerical structures, and the selective circulation of compromising documents intended to discipline or blackmail political actors. Recent citizenship controversies involving senior officials illustrate how unresolved legal and biographical questions can be transformed into instruments of external pressure. Attempts to redraw the Serbian Orthodox Church's episcopal boundaries similarly suggest that Belgrade seeks not merely to influence the Church, but to discipline its autonomous centres inside Montenegro.

This paper argues that Montenegro's vulnerability lies less in the visibility of Serbian activity than in the institutional grey zones through which foreign direction is converted into apparently domestic action. Its proposed response is therefore preventive, evidence-based and actor-neutral.

First, the government should establish an interagency foreign-interference mechanism with secure procedures for reporting coercion and document-based blackmail. Second, foreign clergy should undergo lawful immigration, security and financial due diligence based on individual risk, not religious identity. Third, anti-money-laundering controls should target beneficial ownership, cross-border transfers and proxy organisations. Fourth, campaign-finance enforcement should capture coordinated third-party spending, professional in-kind assistance, hidden loans and debt forgiveness, while protecting genuine volunteering. Fifth, media ownership, state-linked advertising and sponsored content should be disclosed, with judicially reviewable restrictions on portals demonstrably operated as foreign influence infrastructure. Sixth, Montenegro should protect ecclesiastical autonomy against external administrative coercion.

Finally, Baltic-inspired media-literacy, cyber-investigation and rapid-attribution capacities should strengthen democratic resilience.

The New Phase of Serbian Meddling

Recent developments have made the changing nature of Serbian meddling in Montenegro considerably more visible. In August 2026, documents originating in Serbian administrative and defense institutions were introduced into Montenegrin political space as alleged evidence that Prime Minister Milojko Spajić had entered the reserve composition of the Serbian Armed Forces. The allegation was immediately converted into a demand for his resignation and into a broader claim about his political dependence on Belgrade. Yet the documents themselves did not establish that Spajić voluntarily joined the Serbian military or remained its member. The available chronology indicates that, after publicly acknowledging his Serbian citizenship and requesting release from it in February 2023, he was required to regulate his military-record status before the citizenship procedure could be completed. His release from Serbian citizenship was subsequently documented in June 2023 (RTCG, 2026).

The political significance of the episode therefore extends beyond whether the original accusation was true or false. More importantly, it exposes a mechanism of external influence through which documents generated by the institutions of one state are converted into political—and potentially coercive—capital within another. Such a record does not have to substantiate the allegation attached to it in order to shape political behaviour. It only needs to appear authentic enough to create uncertainty, serious enough to impose reputational costs, and available to a domestic broker capable of timing and amplifying its disclosure. At that point, information becomes leverage, and an administrative document is transformed into an instrument of proxy politics.

The Spajić case consequently belongs to a wider pattern of proxy-enabled coercion. Intermediaries acquire, assemble or circulate dossiers concerning politicians, officials, journalists and their families: administrative records, police or prosecutorial material, business documents, correspondence, photographs, recordings or selectively edited extracts. Some materials may be authentic, while others may be altered or fabricated. Their coercive value lies partly in the target's inability to know what else is held, who supplied it and when it may be released. A proxy may bring forward a document privately, imply that publication can be prevented, connect silence to a vote, appointment or coalition decision, and mobilise friendly portals, television programmes, lawsuits and troll networks if the target resists. The threat does not have to be explicit to produce anticipatory compliance (Kalezić, 2026).

A second development reveals that the same logic of discipline has entered the religious infrastructure of Serbian influence. The emerging disagreement between the Montenegrin-Littoral Metropolitanate and the Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić over the political role of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has formalised a realignment that had been developing for some time. Metropolitan Joanikije and Andrija Mandić now represent a comparatively autonomous centre within the Serbian political and ecclesiastical field in Montenegro, while Metropolitan Metodije has remained more closely aligned with the political and church authorities in Belgrade (Rudović, 2026).

This development does not constitute an ideological conversion and should not be confused with democratic emancipation. It is a renegotiation of brokerage: domestic actors who were previously instrumentalised by the same external centre are now attempting to preserve greater control over the resources, legitimacy and constituencies that they helped to mobilise.

Belgrade's response is increasingly directed towards disciplining this autonomy through institutional engineering inside the Serbian Orthodox Church. The most consequential option is not merely the removal of Joanikije, but the rewriting of eparchial boundaries so that the Montenegrin-Littoral Metropolitanate loses jurisdiction, territory, monasteries and political weight. The possibility of reducing its boundaries or dividing it has been publicly identified as a mechanism for punishing disobedience (Turović, 2026).

The Spajić dossier and the conflict over church jurisdiction appear unrelated, but analytically they belong to the same stage of Serbian influence. Both demonstrate how institutions located in Serbia generate documents, rules and decisions that are subsequently translated into power inside Montenegro. Serbian meddling no longer depends on a single loyal bloc. It functions through a differentiated system of proxies, competitors and brokers that Belgrade bolsters when they comply and destabilises when they acquire excessive autonomy.

From Convergence to Autonomous Brokerage

The argument developed in the *Black Knight* thesis and in *Divergent Pathways of Foreign Influence in Montenegro* starts from a simple proposition: external actors do not influence every political system in the same way. They adapt their instruments to the structure of the domestic regime, the strength of institutions and the availability of internal allies. A black knight may destabilise a government that resists it, bolster an aligned actor whose political survival serves its interests, or combine the two strategies across different institutions (Ambrosio, 2009; Kalezić, 2022).

Serbia applies precisely this mixed strategy in Montenegro. It promotes instability around questions of identity, citizenship and statehood while simultaneously stabilising political, media and religious actors capable of converting Serbian resources into domestic authority. This two-level strategy allows Serbia to weaken the Montenegrin state while strengthening the individual actors through which its influence is exercised.

This framework also explains why proxies should not be treated as passive instruments. Domestic brokers possess their own constituencies, ambitions and organisational resources. They selectively translate external preferences, compete for patronage and may eventually resist the patron's attempt to monopolise their political field. The current Joanikije–Mandić realignment is therefore an example of strategic divergence within the Serbian influence network itself.

Nevertheless, divergence does not abolish the network. Belgrade retains control over media access, institutional documents, financial channels and the central structures of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Its objective is not necessarily to issue every instruction directly, but to determine the costs of autonomy and preserve the capacity to reorder the political field whenever a domestic intermediary becomes insufficiently responsive.

The Grey Zones of Influence

The effectiveness of Serbian meddling is rooted in Montenegro's grey zones: institutional spaces in which foreign direction can be translated into lawful-looking domestic action. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a religious body, but it also possesses mobilisation, property, media and cross-border administrative capacities. A portal may be formally registered in Montenegro while remaining dependent on Serbian ownership, advertising or editorial content. An organised group of volunteers may appear to represent spontaneous participation while supplying campaign services that would normally be commercially remunerated. A Serbian administrative record may be genuine while the political interpretation attached to it is deceptive.

Montenegro's legal framework has not been constructed to identify this conversion. ODIHR found gaps and ambiguities in campaign-finance oversight, including weak control of third-party campaigning, expenditure before candidate registration and in-kind support. Professional services provided free of charge or below market value can remain outside official accounts even though they directly alter the competitiveness of elections (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024).

The European Commission continues to identify weaknesses in party-finance enforcement, media-funding disclosure and the public media registry, while MONEYVAL has pointed to incomplete beneficial-ownership transparency and risk analysis in the non-profit sector, including religious communities (European Commission, 2025; MONEYVAL, 2026). These should not be seen as technical failures. They form the institutional environment in which external linkage becomes domestic leverage.

A credible policy response must distinguish between cultural influence, political interference, coercion and illegality. Serbian identity, religious practice and political opinion are not security threats. Interference begins when a foreign institution or domestic proxy covertly directs, finances or coordinates activity aimed at influencing elections, appointments or foreign policy. Coercion begins when documents, private information, dependency or reputational pressure are used to restrict political choice. Illegality depends on the specific conduct involved, including blackmail, unlawful data acquisition, campaign-finance evasion, money laundering, sanctions violations, fraudulent media registration or coordinated criminal activity.

Democratic self-defence should therefore focus not on Serbian identity, but on exposing and sanctioning hidden direction, opaque financing and coercive conduct.

Closing the Grey Zones: A Policy Response

The first recommendation is to establish a permanent mechanism for identifying and coordinating responses to foreign interference. The government should create a centre-of-government unit connecting the National Security Agency, Police Directorate, Financial Intelligence Unit, Special State Prosecutor's Office, Agency for Prevention of Corruption, State Election Commission, Agency for Audi-visual Media Services, tax and customs authorities, and the ministries responsible for justice, interior and media.

Its task would be to combine information that is currently divided among institutions, maintain a classified operational picture and activate a time-limited election protocol. It should also publish an annual threat assessment explaining methods, vulnerabilities and anonymised case patterns. Estonia and Lithuania demonstrate that public intelligence assessments can strengthen societal recognition of hostile practices without presenting suspicion as evidence. The statutory definition should require foreign direction or material support, concealment or deception, and an intention to influence a democratic process. Intrusive powers should remain subject to parliamentary, judicial and Ombudsperson oversight.

The second recommendation is to adopt a Foreign Coercion and Kompromat Response Protocol. Ministers, senior officials, candidates, party officers and security-cleared personnel should have a confidential duty to report within seventy-two hours whenever a foreign actor or domestic proxy presents suspicious documents, threatens disclosure, offers protection from publication, targets a family member or connects private information with an official decision.

A secure portal and counterintelligence hotline should preserve digital evidence and chain of custody. A specialised forensic cell composed of the National Security Agency, police cyber and document specialists, prosecutors and the data-protection authority should determine whether material is authentic, altered, fabricated or unverifiable. During elections, it should be capable of issuing rapid technical notices without deciding the political merits of an allegation.

Timely reporting should protect the reporting person from retaliation and disciplinary punishment for mere contact or lawful private conduct, but it must not provide immunity for corruption. Lithuania's threat assessments show how apparently minor administrative offences and manufactured encounters with law enforcement can be transformed into pretexts for blackmail. Early reporting reduces the value of secrecy and therefore weakens the coercive mechanism. Montenegro should also criminalise the foreign-directed coercive use of unlawfully acquired personal data and treat an attempt to influence a vote, appointment or government decision as an aggravating circumstance.

The third recommendation is to bring the civil and security consequences of cross-border church governance within Montenegro's legal order. The ministries of interior and justice, the National Security Agency and the Financial Intelligence Unit should establish a verified register of Serbian Orthodox priests, monks and senior administrators exercising formal functions in Montenegro. The register should include citizenship and residence status, appointing authority, institutional affiliation and declared source of remuneration.

Current clergy should undergo a one-time legal-status and security-clearance-standard background review, followed by risk-based screening of foreign appointments and residence renewals. The inquiry must test criminal, intelligence, financial and foreign-direction indicators, not theology, ethnicity or political belief. Every adverse decision must be reasoned and judicially reviewable.

In parallel, the government should adopt a Church Governance and Sovereignty Protocol clarifying that a canonical decision to change an eparchy or remove a bishop does not automatically determine its civil consequences for property, taxation, cultural heritage, residence or public funding. Any attempt by external church authorities to redraw eparchial borders as political punishment should trigger a national-security and legal assessment.

Montenegro should request a Venice Commission opinion on the civil effects of Articles 2, 5 and 6 of the Basic Agreement and establish a procedure under which changes to church legal entities are registered only after their compatibility with Montenegrin law has been verified. This would protect state jurisdiction without allowing the government to decide matters of faith.

The fourth recommendation is to close campaign-finance loopholes before the next parliamentary election. The remaining campaign-finance gaps allow Serbian state-linked and party-linked networks to convert formally private resources into political influence inside Montenegro. The 2025 Law on Financing Political Entities and Election Campaigns already regulates third-party campaigning, recognises non-monetary contributions and protects genuine individual volunteering. The problem is therefore not the absence of regulation, but the distance between formal compliance and the identification of coordinated political activity. The law should be amended so that restrictions on foreign and otherwise prohibited sources of financing apply unequivocally to third-party campaigners. Organisations conducting paid political advocacy should be required to register, designate a legally responsible person and disclose whether their activities were requested, coordinated or materially assisted by a political party, candidate, foreign principal or party-adjacent organisation. When such coordination is established, the expenditure should be attributed to the benefiting political entity and included within its statutory spending limit. This would address the risk, also identified by ODIHR, that prohibited resources may be channelled through formally independent actors while the political beneficiary retains plausible deniability.

Particular attention should be paid to the distinction between authentic volunteering and organised in-kind assistance. The existing legal protection of voluntary, non-specialist individual work should be retained. It safeguards political participation and prevents campaign regulation from becoming an instrument for restricting ordinary civic engagement. However, the exemption should not cover commercially valuable services supplied through organised networks. Work performed by employees, consultants, call-centre teams, digital strategists, media producers or coordinated online activists should be valued at the prevailing market rate whenever it is financed, directed or materially supported by another legal or political actor. The same principle should apply to the free or preferential use of premises, vehicles, databases, printing facilities, hospitality, digital infrastructure and media-production services. The Agency for the Prevention of Corruption should consequently receive explicit authority to adopt binding methodologies for calculating, verifying and reporting the market value of these contributions. Such regulation is particularly relevant to proxy structures in which the real contribution is not a visible financial transfer but the provision of personnel, technology, media access and organisational capacity.

Disclosure obligations should also cover sponsorship agreements, campaign-related loans, outstanding liabilities and debt forgiveness. These arrangements should be reported within five working days, while loans that are not serviced according to their original terms should be treated as donations. Records submitted by third-party campaigners and legal-person donors should be automatically cross-checked against Montenegro's existing Register of Beneficial Owners. The relevant beneficial owners, major donors and sources of campaign-related services should then appear in the public campaign-finance record, subject to proportionate safeguards for personal data. Rather than establishing another lobbying register, Montenegro should strengthen the register already created under the 2024 Law on Lobbying by requiring the identification of foreign principals, ultimate beneficiaries and paid intermediaries involved in electoral or governmental advocacy.

Finally, effective implementation requires reducing the Agency's dependence on information supplied by the entities it supervises. The Agency should have direct, logged and auditable access to the databases necessary to compare campaign reports with tax, customs, company-registration, beneficial-ownership and public-procurement records. Existing deadlines for responding to its requests should be shortened, while the Agency should be empowered to impose proportionate administrative sanctions for delayed reporting, concealment of coordinated activity and inaccurate valuation of in-kind contributions. All such decisions should remain subject to prompt judicial review. These measures should apply equally to every domestic and foreign actor. Their purpose would not be to prohibit legitimate political cooperation with Serbia, but to remove the financial and organisational grey zones through which Serbian proxy networks—and potentially other foreign actors—can intervene in Montenegro's electoral competition without assuming legal responsibility for that intervention.

The fifth recommendation is to treat illicit political finance as an anti-money-laundering priority rather than an electoral misdemeanour. The Financial Intelligence Unit and Special State Prosecutor's Office should maintain a joint analytical file on cross-border transactions connected to parties, media companies, religious bodies, campaign suppliers, NGOs and politically exposed business networks.

Banks should receive risk indicators covering rapid pass-through transfers, structured cash deposits, third-party payment of campaign invoices, foreign advertising purchases, unexplained loans and donations routed through related companies. Media and religious entities receiving substantial foreign transfers should disclose the sending institution, ultimate payer and stated purpose. Beneficial-ownership records should be verified against independent sources, and high-risk discrepancies should trigger enhanced due diligence.

The sixth recommendation is to combine media transparency with a lawful mechanism for disabling covert foreign-influence portals. The public media registry should disclose complete ownership chains, beneficial owners, responsible editors, revenue bands, public advertising, major private advertisers, foreign loans and content-sharing agreements. Public financing should be conditional on complete disclosure.

The Agency for Audi-visual Media Services should apply an escalating enforcement mechanism consisting of correction orders, ownership or foreign-control labels, fines, exclusion from public advertising, suspension of domestic payment and advertising services, targeted removal of unlawful material and, as a final measure, time-limited domain blocking.

Latvia provides a useful institutional model because restrictions are connected to defined legal grounds, published with reasons and open to appeal. In Montenegro, a prosecutor should be required to demonstrate foreign control or financing together with deceptive electoral interference, sanctions evasion, identity fraud, incitement or other criminal conduct before a court may prohibit an outlet.

Pro-Serbian, pro-Russian or anti-government opinion must never constitute a lawful ground for prohibition. Every measure should be specific, proportionate and reviewable.

The seventh recommendation is to regulate Serbian-linked troll factories as part of the electoral environment. Platforms and domestic intermediaries should maintain searchable repositories identifying the sponsor, payer, beneficial owner, expenditure, targeting criteria and reach of political advertisements. Paid advertising purchased by third-country state institutions or undisclosed intermediaries should be prohibited during a defined pre-election period.

The coordination mechanism should possess rapid digital-forensics capacity to preserve evidence of cloned outlets, coordinated accounts, bot amplification, manipulated documents and cross-platform troll operations. It should issue pre-bunking alerts explaining common fabrication and leak strategies before high-risk elections.

Attribution must distinguish Russian-origin material, Serbian amplification infrastructure and the Montenegrin actors who translate it into domestic politics. Portals that repeatedly evade a final court order through mirror domains should be subject to a narrowly drafted anti-circumvention order, while access for researchers and archives remains protected.

Each indicator should be assigned to a named institution and incorporated into Montenegro's dialogue with the European Commission under Chapters 23, 24 and 31. Montenegro should request structured peer assistance from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on public threat reporting, counterintelligence contact channels, financial investigation, election forensics and proportionate portal enforcement.

Annual exercises should simulate a document leak, proxy threat, illicit payment and troll-factory amplification during an election. The lesson to adopt from the Baltic states is not emergency rhetoric, but institutional preparation: early reporting, public explanation, verified ownership and enforcement that remains subject to appeal.

Conclusion

The recent disputes surrounding Spajić and the Serbian Orthodox Church demonstrate that Serbian influence has entered a more differentiated but not less dangerous stage. Belgrade no longer acts only through a unified bloc of loyal actors. It manages a field of proxies whose loyalty must be rewarded, whose autonomy must be contained and whose internal conflicts can be used to reorganise political power.

Documents, church boundaries, media ownership, campaign services and financial transfers are different instruments, but they perform the same political function: they allow external capacity to be converted into domestic advantage while responsibility remains obscured.

Montenegro does not need an exceptional regime directed against a community. It requires ordinary democratic law made capable of recognising this conversion. Security review must test status and conduct, not faith. Financial control must trace beneficial ownership and market value, not nationality. Media regulation must expose concealed control and punish covert operations, not opinion. Electoral rules must capture professional in-kind support without suppressing genuine volunteering.

By closing these grey zones, Montenegro can reduce Serbia's capacity to manage its political development without reproducing the authoritarian practices it seeks to resist.

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