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McCain and Montenegro: The Anatomy of a Conspiracy Theory

By Justin Raimondo
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Just in case you thought the conspiracy theory that Russia secretly controls the US government is exclusively an affliction affecting the Democratic party, Sen. John McCain’s recent performance on the floor of the US Senate should disabuse you of this optimistic notion. Responding to Sen. Rand Paul’s blocking of a vote in favor of the accession of Montenegro to NATO, the failed former GOP presidential candidate let it all hang out:

“I note the senator from Kentucky leaving the floor without justification or any rationale for the action he has just taken. That is really remarkable, that a senator blocking a treaty that is supported by the overwhelming number, perhaps 98 – at least – of his colleagues would come to the floor and object and walk away. The only conclusion you can draw when he walks away is he has no justification for his objection to having a small nation be part of NATO that is under assault from the Russians. So I repeat again, the senator from Kentucky is now working for Vladimir Putin.”

What’s “remarkable” is that this kind of lunacy is tolerated in the US Senate: I recall that Sen. Elizabeth Warren was rebuked – and silenced – by Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell because she read a letter from Coretta Scott King that called into question the motives of Jeff Sessions, then a Senator and a candidate for the office of Attorney General. Surely McCain’s outburst was an even more egregious violation of the rules than Warren’s, and yet McCain was allowed to proceed uninterrupted. Perhaps this is an example of “warmonger’s privilege.”

In a later interview, Sen. Paul sought to explain McCain's behavior as an indication of the Senator from Arizona's advanced age: perhaps, he suggested, McCain is "past his prime," and, by the way, "this is a good argument for term limits." Well, yes, but in the current political atmosphere – where Vladimir Putin has been elevated to the status of a virtually omnipotent force who has the power to change election results and infiltrate the highest reaches of Western governments – it's no crazier than anything else we're hearing out of Washington these days.

Be that as it may, ordinary Americans may have a few questions about this bizarre incident, starting with: What the heck is Montenegro?

A tiny republic in the middle of the Balkans, Montenegro has a population equal to that of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and a military force of around 2,000 soldiers and sailors. Up until the break up of Yugoslavia, it was never a unified independent country (except for a few years early in the twentieth century). Today, it is even less unified, beset as it is with rival factions that routinely battle it out in the streets. Its former President (and, alternately, Prime Minister) Milo Djukanovic, is a former top Communist official who came to power in 1997 in an election marred by allegations of fraud and violent protests, and is known as "Mr. Ten Percent" on account of his reputation for corruption. Although "retired" (this is, I believe, his third "retirement") he is still the real nexus of power in the country.

Formerly a bastion of Serbian nationalism, Montenegro has undergone demographic changes since the end of the Yugoslav era, with a large incursion of Albanians – who have initiated a campaign to create a "Greater Albania" by merging the southern portion of the country with Albania proper. Aside from that, however, there is the question of whether Montenegro will join NATO and the European Union, a project dear to the heart of Djukanovic, and opposed by the former Serbian majority which still remembers how the country was bombed under NATO's rubric during the Kosovo war.

The recent elections, billed as a referendum on NATO membership, yielded ambiguous results for Djukanovic's party: the hope was that Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the successor to the old Communist Party, would win an outright majority, thus enabling the pro-NATO forces to push NATO membership through parliament without having to resort to a referendum. The DPS ended up winning 41 percent of the vote, not enough to form a government, although an alliance with smaller parties – not all of them pro-NATO – gave Djukanovic a parliamentary majority. The opposition parties are now pushing for a popular vote on entering NATO, and recent polls indicate that voters are split almost exactly down the middle on the issue.

That doesn't deter Djukanovic, who, with the help of the Western media, has managed to replicate the anti-Russian hysteria we are seeing infect our own politics. According to Djukanovic, a Russian plot to attack the parliament, kill members of the ruling party, and take over the country was narrowly averted when a number of "plotters" were arrested. The *New York Times* describes these sinister "plotters" as follows:

"Mr. Djukanovic and his officials initially provided no evidence to support their allegation of a foiled coup attempt on Oct. 16, the day of national elections. They said only that 20 Serbs – some

of whom turned out to be elderly and in ill health – had been detained just hours before they were to launch the alleged putsch. Nonetheless, Mr. Djukanovic insisted it ‘is more than obvious’ that unnamed ‘Russian structures’ were working with pro-Moscow politicians to derail the country’s efforts to join NATO.”

After months of searching, the alleged weapons cache that was to be used in the coup attempt has yet to turn up. But, hey, who needs weapons when you’re part of the vast Putinite Conspiracy? Oh, those Russians – stealing elections from Michigan to Montenegro! Is there anything they can’t do? The alleged leader of the “plot” has been granted a plea deal, and is now spinning a tale of intrigue so murky that light cannot penetrate its depths. One version has it that Russian “special forces” “disguised as a Cossack folk band” arrived on the scene to “recruit” those plotting to off Djukanovic. Those are some *very* special forces indeed. Oddly, the alleged “plotters” have all been released, including the supposed ringleader. Meanwhile, leaders of the anti-NATO opposition are being arrested for “ties” to the “plot.”

This what Sen. McCain was talking about when he claimed that Montenegro is “under assault from the Russians.” It’s the Montenegrin version of the same line of baloney he’s been pushing here in the US: that the Russians “stole” the 2016 presidential election, and are “subverting” American democracy.

Sen. Paul was right to block approval of Montenegro’s accession to NATO: that country is the perfect backdrop for an international incident that would drag us into a conflict with Russia. In accusing Paul of “working for Vladimir Putin,” McCain is limning the tactics of Djukanovic, who is busy framing up and arresting his political opponents on similarly phony charges.

The alleged “Russian agent” Mike Flynn, forced to resign as National Security Advisor because of his nonexistent “ties” to Moscow, reportedly recommended that the Trump administration *approve* Montenegro’s bid to join NATO. I guess he didn’t get his directive from Putin in a timely manner. On the other hand, the Montenegrin opposition is petitioning Trump advisor Steve Bannon to urge the President to veto it.

Montenegro’s accession to NATO would plant yet another tripwire that could easily lead directly to a collision with Russia. At the very least it would cause substantial internal turmoil in the country, perhaps ending in an all-out civil war such as happened in Ukraine.

President Trump was right when he said during the campaign that NATO is “obsolete.” It is also dangerous in that it pledges us to go to war in defense of member nations. With Turkey, a NATO member, moving rapidly into Syria, and now face-to-face with Russian and Syrian soldiers, and with British troops now entering Estonia, where a make-believe Russian “threat” is supposedly being thwarted, our membership in NATO could very well drag us into a conflict on two fronts.

How is this putting “America first”?