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Spy Scandal Threatens Russian-Serbian Relations

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Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev reviews the police honor guard upon his arrival at the Serbia Palace to meet with Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic in Belgrade, Serbia, Oct. 26, 2016. **Darko Vojinovic / AP**

An alleged spying incidental threatens to cause a scandal in Russian-Serbian relations. The Kommersant newspaper reported on Friday that Serbian media outlets had claimed that two Russian citizens had been deported from Serbia for allegedly preparing "terrorist attacks" in neighboring Montenegro.

The news coincided with an unannounced visit by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. While the officially stated purpose of Patrushev's visit was to discuss drafting a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in security matters, the fact that the proposed memorandum was said to be non-binding has led some Serbian experts to believe the real purpose of the surprise visit was to smooth over Russian-Serbian relations and to prevent a public scandal.

"The visit is without doubt related to what happened neighboring Montenegro, where

authorities claimed to have thwarted terrorist attacks on election day," said Zoran Dragisic, professor at the University of Belgrade.

Serbian military expert Alexander Radic agreed with Dragisic, saying that: "Patrushev arrived in Belgrade to discuss the Montenegro case."

Earlier, Serbian state security officials claimed that they had uncovered a plot to capture certain state institutions in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica on Oct. 16, the day of the parliamentary elections. They also alleged that the plan involved having members of the plotters' group storm Podgorica's assembly building and open fire on crowds so as to provoke a riot. Those arrested in connection with the plot were mostly Serbian citizens, but officials said they had the assistance of a "foreign factor." The detained were found to be in possession of high-quality surveillance equipment and satellite imagery of certain state buildings in the capital.

Milo Djukanovic, Montenegro's long-serving prime minister who announced his resignation on Tuesday, also claimed to be the victim of a Russian-backed coup attempt. Djukanovic said that his government would begin investigating possible Russian involvement in the elections and that there was a "strong connection of a foreign factor."

So far the Serbian government has not denied the local media's claim that two Russian citizens were deported in connection with the attempted coup. After Patrushev's visit, officials only said that Russian and Serbian security officials "have been cooperating successfully."

Sources close to the Serbian government told Kommersant that while the government would prefer to avoid a scandal, it also doesn't want to be suspected of criminal activities in a neighboring state. Commenting as to why Serbia's security forces went public with the information about the attempted coup, Serbian Prime Minister Alexander Vucic said: "Those who suppose Serbia would be involved in any kind of criminal activity are deeply mistaken."

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