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Montenegro Expels Founder of Russian Pro-War Blog Rybar for 'Security Reasons'

October 09, 2026



Mikhail Zvinchuk. **Rutube**

Montenegro expelled Mikhail Zvinchuk, the founder of the influential Russian pro-war Telegram channel Rybar, and three other Russian nationals on Friday after detaining them in an operation targeting suspected Russian influence activities, police and the country's National Security Agency said.

The agencies said the four could no longer remain in Montenegro "for reasons of national and internal security of the state." Their statement identified the Russians only by their initials, but a police source confirmed their identities to Reuters.

Zvinchuk, a former Russian Defense Ministry press officer, was detained in the Adriatic resort town of Risan along with others including his wife, Rybar creative director Valeria Zvinchuk, local media reported.

Security sources told Vijesti that police and the National Security Agency (ANB) carried out the operation to counter "hybrid activities" by Russian information networks.

Prime Minister Milojko Spajić confirmed the arrests earlier Friday, saying Montenegro had faced warnings of attempts to destabilize the country as it pursues European Union membership.

"Montenegro is protecting its interests and no one will endanger our European future," Spajić wrote on X.

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Intelligence agencies had monitored the group for several days after its arrival in Montenegro to film material about the Balkan country's alignment with EU visa policies, the Russian news outlet Readovka reported.

Authorities suspected the material was intended to undermine Montenegro's tourism industry, economy and national interests, according to the report.

Rybar said before the expulsion announcement that its team had entered Montenegro legally and planned to film at a local monastery.

The Russian Embassy in Podgorica said it had demanded clarification on the reasons for the arrests.

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, said that Russia may need to "top up" its prisoner exchange fund with European and U.S. citizens in order to free its own citizens being held in Europe following Zvinchuk's detention.

"Now, it is quite likely that we will have to replenish the exchange fund with European and American idiots in order to get our own people out. There's no other way: when in Rome, do as the Romans do...," said Medvedev.

Rybar has about 1.5 million Telegram subscribers and publishes daily military analysis of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Zvinchuk is subject to Western sanctions. It also operates a broader network of websites and social media channels.

In October 2024, the U.S. State Department offered a reward of up to $10 million for information leading to the identification of 19 individuals involved in managing Rybar-led social media channels, saying they had promoted Russia's political interests in the U.S. ahead of the 2024 presidential elections.

Reuters contributed reporting.

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