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## **MONTENEGRO PROTESTERS KEEP UP DEMANDS FOR DJUKANOVIC'S RESIGNATION**

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Protesters marched on Saturday demanding President Milo Djukanovic and government government to resign over widespread corruption and alleged links to organized crime.

Civic activists, academics, students and journalists who say they are not affiliated with any political party, marched through the center Podgorica of the city chanting Milo thief, No more crime, Rebellion and We are the state.

Opposition parties support the protests started in early February but their leaders have distanced themselves of taking prominent role in the organization or addressing the crowd.

An informal group of intellectuals, academics, NGO activists and journalists stand behind the protests dubbed #Odupri se! [Resist!].

Opponents of Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic protested again in the capital on Saturday, accusing the countrys long-time leader of presiding over poverty, a loss of human rights and media freedoms and corruption.

Beside the resignation of President Djukanovic, who has ruled for almost 30 years, the protesters demand the resignation of the Supreme State Prosecutor, Ivica Stankovic, and the Chief Prosecutor for Organised Crime, Milivoje Katnic.

They accuse senior law officials of ignoring evidence and not prosecuting manifest corruption in the ranks of Djukanovics inner circle.

The protesters marched by the Montenegrin broadcaster, RTCG, and demanded more professional and fair reporting.

Saturdays protest was the fifth in a row. It follows the revelation of footage and documents that appear to implicate top officials in obtaining suspicious funds for the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS.

A video clip from 2016 aired in January showed Dusko Knezevic, chairman of the Montenegro-based Atlas Group, appearing to hand the then mayor of Podgorica, Slavoljub Stijepovic, an envelope containing what Knezevic later said was \$100,000, to fund a DPS election campaign.

Knezevic, who is believed now to be in London, has since told the media he had been providing secret cash to the DPS for the past 25 years.

Some saw this as the first concrete confirmation of something that has long been an open secret in Montenegro.

The DPS and Djukanovic have denied wrongdoing, insisting that all donations to the party are recorded in the party's financial records.

The authorities have since gone after Knezevic, until recently close to the ruling elite, who now faces charges of money laundering.

Saturday's protest came amid new a controversy involving a key witness in the trial of the alleged coup plotters.

Sasa Sindjelic, a key witness, has now claimed that the suspects behind the alleged attempt to overthrow the government did not plan a coup and only wanted to rally in support of the opposition.

His statement contradicted his earlier testimony to a Montenegrin court in 2017, when he said a Russian intelligence officer hired him to organise the overthrow of the government and so stop Montenegro from joining NATO.

The trial in Podgorica, which started in May 2017, is entering its final stage and the court is about to hear the closing statements.

A first-instance verdict is expected in the next two months.

But on Friday, in a protest against what they called biased and unprofessional conduct, the defence lawyers for the accused left the court and revoked their credentials, after the court refused to hear any new evidence on Sindjelics statement.

Sindjelic was one of 20 Serbian citizens, including two opposition leaders, accused by Montenegro in connection with the alleged plot.

The prosecution says their goal was to assassinate the then Prime Minister, Djukanovic, and bring the pro-Russian opposition to power on election day on October 16, 2016 and prevent the country from joining NATO.

After foiling the alleged coup in 2016, Montenegro joined NATO in July 2017.

It is now the leading candidate in the region to join the EU. But its government is often accused of not doing enough to tackle organised crime and corruption.

Brussels has demanded more concrete results in the fight against corruption at a high political level as one of the main conditions for it making progress towards membership.

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