



"If you have a vote, Moscow will meddle with it," seems to be the precept fixed into the minds of senior US leaders these days. Any vote is inherently endangered by Russia's meddling techniques, which are so advanced that US intelligence is still either unable or simply too worried to furnish evidence of their existence. But that hasn't stopped the public barrage of allegations.

This time, the vote is in Macedonia over the nation's name problem. A conflict with Greece, one of whose provinces is also named Macedonia, has been behind Greece's blocking the Balkan country's accession to the EU and NATO for a while (Greece is a member of both organizations). The Macedonian government, however, is so desperate to enter the two blocs in search of a better life for its people that it is eager to rename the entire country to do so.

Unsurprisingly, patriotic forces within the country have opposed the idea fiercely. This has brought the country to a political stalemate, which can only be solved by a referendum, scheduled for September 30, as a part of a political agreement with Greece.

Ahead of said referendum, US Defense Secretary James Mattis will visit the country, to "make it clear that the United States supports the Macedonian people," Reuters reported Monday.

As he announced his plan, Mattis expressed his concerns about the horrible threat of — you guessed it — Russian meddling with the referendum, which he referred to as "mischief."

"I am concerned about it... The kind of mischief that Russia has practiced from Estonia to the United States, from Ukraine and now to Macedonia, it always has adapted to the specific situation, and it's always beyond the pale," Mattis said, according to Reuters.

Why would he even bring this up, one might ask?

It is no secret that Moscow opposes the spread of NATO towards its borders; should Macedonia join the military bloc, it would become a "legitimate target" for Russian strikes in the event a full-scale conflict between Russia and NATO were to occur, as Oleg

Shcherbak, Moscow’s ambassador to Skopje, has put it. Therefore, should the referendum fail, it stands to reason that “Russian meddling” would be a convenient narrative to spin to de-legitimize its results.

Earlier in July, Athens exploited the convenient “meddling” narrative when it accused Russia of encouraging demonstrations and bribing unidentified officials to thwart the agreement with Macedonia. Greece expelled two Russian diplomats over the allegations, which Moscow denied, responding in kind.

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Concerned About Russian 'Mischief,' US Defense Secretary to Visit Macedonia



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