

WORDS AS WEAPONS RUSSIAN DIGITAL FOOTPRINT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Andelka ROGAČ and Srđan DARMANOVIĆ

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The publication in front of the readers was prepared as part of a NATO Public Diplomacy Division-supported project called *“Disinformation - Fact CheckMate!”*. Disinformation resilience can be understood as the adaptability of countries, societies, and individuals to resist political, economic, and social calculated pressures and lies spread in a variety of media formats, including television, radio, printed, online, and social media, with a view to influence political and economic choices, including the targeting of disadvantaged groups. That is why the main goal of this project is the strengthening of resilience of Montenegrin society to the spreading of fake news, as well as the increase in knowledge, awareness and understanding among the citizens of the manners to suppress disinformation, propaganda, hybrid threats and other hostile information activities. The project also aims to create information of lasting value in novel and unconventional methods that may be broadly circulated inside and outside NATO and civil society networks. The case in point here is disinformation activity of various state and non-state Russian and pro-Russian actors in the Western Balkans, as extraordinarily frequent activity of this type is developed in recent years as part of the so-called *hybrid warfare* strategy.

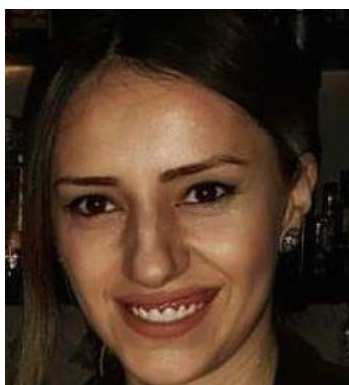
The analytical report, and/or *academic policy paper* *“Russian digital footprints in the Western Balkans”* was created on the basis of the research undertaken by *Anđelka Rogač*, who is also the author of the largest portion of this text. *Prof. Srđan Darmanović PhD* wrote the Prologue, certain sections of the report and edited its final version.

CEDEM believes that this project will encourage new research on similar topics, with the goal of strengthening democratic societies' capacities to respond to challenges posed by unparalleled possibilities of abusing digital technologies in online space.

Center for Democracy and Human Rights



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PROLOGUE

I heard the following story for the first time from Ambassador of Costa Rica to America, *Roman Macaya Hayes*¹, during my tenure in Washington. There was some symbolism in the fact that he told me it at a reception at the Russian embassy on the occasion of Russia's national day. „Ambassador, you come from a country that was once part of Yugoslavia,” he said at one point. „You know, it's fascinating to me that our two small countries, thousands of kilometers apart, are actually linked by quite interesting historical threads.” I asked as to what he meant. Then he told me this thrilling story. Later, I found it on Internet portals, in some local newspapers, in one scientific journal², and in one book³. Although not entirely novel, I believe it is worth to be repeated here.

Teodoro Castro, a successful Costa Rican businessman living and working in Rome, approached his country's government in the early 1950s with a proposal to appoint him as Costa Rica's ambassador to Italy. The proposal was persuasive. Costa Rica did not have many embassies around the world or in Europe, and Castro, with his extensive connections in Italy, both in business circles and among Catholic Church dignitaries up to the Pope himself, could be a good solution. He couldn't be motivated by money and a comfortable lifestyle because he had already had both through his business. That is why, despite the fact that Castro was not a diplomat, the response of a small Central American country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was - why not? It was a win-win situation for both parties. Following this agreement, Teodoro Castro was appointed Chargé d'Affaires of the Costa Rican Embassy in Rome, and in 1952, he presented the credentials of the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Costa Rica to Italian President *Luigi Einaudi*.

Castro also persuaded Costa Rican foreign policy decision makers to appoint him Ambassador to Yugoslavia (FNRJ) on a non-resident basis, allowing him to occasionally visit Belgrade. The concept was rationally explained. Yugoslavia was a country that did something previously unthinkable in the communist world: it opposed Stalin and went into fierce confrontation with the Soviet Union and its satellites in order to preserve its independence and the right to its own „path to socialism.” Yugoslavia required Western economic assistance in the context of the intra-communist

¹ Dr Roman Macaya Hayes, Costa Rican scientist in the field of biochemistry, entrepreneur, diplomat and public servant, was his country's ambassador to the United States from 2014 to 2018.

² It is the journal *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 44/2017, where professor from the University of Memphis, *Andrei Znamenski*, published an article mentioning this story.

³ Luka Mičeta, *Odjek prošlosti*, Laguna, Belgrade 2019.

conflict, so there may have been room for some Costa Rican companies and businessmen. Furthermore, the Costa Rican government paid almost nothing for the non-resident representation in Belgrade, and it provided a kind of presence in a politically very interesting country. Thus, Teodoro Castro, who had made excellent connections in the Roman diplomatic corps during 1951 and 1952, presented his credentials to Marshal *Josip Broz Tito* on April 25, 1953, formally becoming Costa Rica's ambassador to Yugoslavia. Since then, Castro has visited Belgrade several times during his diplomatic mission in Rome to meet with Yugoslav President.

After two years of vigorous diplomatic and business work, as well as an interesting life in Rome, something almost unthinkable in diplomacy occurred with Teodoro Castro. Costa Rica's ambassador simply vanished from the face of the Earth, without a trace. When confronted with the fact that its ambassador had vanished, the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs was taken aback and had no idea what was going on. They set out in search of Castro with the help of the country's intelligence service, but to no avail. The diplomatic corps in Rome also spread word of the disappearance of a colleague who, as a very active, communicative, and friendly member of the diplomatic community from a small Latin American country, had many friendships or affections among the ambassadors. After some time, it became widely assumed among the diplomats based in Rome that Castro while developing his business activities probably had made enemies of some of the *Uomini d'onore* and had fallen victim to the Mafia.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in his home country, another assumption was developed after several months of fruitless search - that Castro was a non-resident ambassador to Yugoslavia, that „you never know with communists,” that he may have been eliminated for some reason, and that the chances of him being found were thus equal to zero. As a result, the case was closed, and no one had heard anything about Teodoro Castro in decades.

Teodoro Castro's name was revealed unexpectedly and as a complete surprise only in the late 1990s, full 40 years after his mysterious disappearance from Rome. This was due to the now-famous „Mitrokhin Archive.” The archive is named after *Vasili Mitrokhin*, a former KGB archivist who secretly copied by hand all important information from his work during his 30 years of service in counter-intelligence (First KGB Directorate), resulting in an impressive private collection of information about one of world's most powerful secret services. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, Mitrokhin decided to defect to the West, to Great Britain, in 1992, and bring all of his archives with him, which filled six full trucks. The fact of his defection was not disclosed to public until 1999.

After he had started living in Great Britain, Mitrokhin started cooperating with the official historian of British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), *Christopher Andrew*. Mitrokhin and Andrew published several books



based on Mitrokhin Archive: *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (1999); *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (1999); *KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officer's Handbook* (2002); *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (2005); *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World* (2005).

Teodoro Castro, Costa Rica's Ambassador in Rome and Belgrade, also appears in Mitrokhin's archive, but under his real name - Josif Grigulevich. Who was Teodoro Castro, alias Josif Grigulevich? *Iosif Romualdovich Grigulevich* (1913-1988), Costa Rica's ambassador to Italy (and Yugoslavia) during the first half of the 1950s, was in fact an NKVD secret operative from 1937 to 1954. He was one of Stalin's hitmen, in charge of organizing assassinations of those whom the „leader of the world proletariat“ would label as enemies and traitors.

Grigulevich, for example, was a member of the so-called Sikeiros Group, which was responsible for the first, unsuccessful attempt to assassinate *Leon Trotsky* in May 1940, when Stalinist agents, led by Mexican poet *David Siqueiros*, stormed Trotsky's house in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City, and fired a hail of bullets from automatic rifles. Trotsky's grandson was injured, but the former Red Army commander and his wife *Natalya Sedova* were unharmed. To this day, it is unclear whether this was a genuine assassination attempt that failed due to the clumsiness of the perpetrators, or whether Kremlin planners sent Sikeiros' group only to deceive the trail and pave the way for the „silent“ assassin already in place, *Ramon Mercader*. In any case, Mercader finished the work in August 1940. The fact that many grandees of the art world at the time believed in Stalinism is evidenced by the fact that, following the failed assassination attempt in Mexico City, the famous Chilean poet and diplomat *Pablo Neruda* assisted Grigulevich and two of his accomplices⁴ in escaping from Mexican police.

Prior to his trip to Mexico, the NKVD had dispatched Grigulevich to Spain to supervise the activities of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) during the Spanish Civil War. Famous British writer *George Orwell* was also a member of POUM. Because POUM was a Trotskyist party, Grigulevich organized „mobile squads“ to eliminate prominent Trotskyists, and in 1937 he oversaw the arrest, horrific torture, and murder of POUM leader *Andreu Nin Perez*, a former Catalan politician (justice minister) and essayist. After Spain, Grigulevich was sent to Argentina during World War II to coordinate the organization of anti-Nazi operations and sabotage in that country, which, while neutral under General *Juan Peron*, was a place where Nazis felt like home. When he returned to Moscow, he faced several difficult years because, in typical Stalinist fashion, he found himself under suspicion and investigated by same brutal structure he had himself served. However, he was able to

⁴ One of them was *Laura Araujo Aguilar*, Grigulevich's future wife and also a Soviet secret agent, and the other was the Mexican painter *Antonio Pujol Jimenez*.

demonstrate his loyalty and was soon assigned to an important mission to Italy, which took him through Costa Rica and its diplomatic service.

The Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no reason to doubt the identity of this former Sorbonne student, because he had already lived in Argentina with his father in his early childhood, spoke perfect Spanish and at least a few other foreign languages, and his physical appearance was unmistakably Latin American. Prior to his formal appointment as ambassador, he served as an adviser to the Costa Rican delegation at the 1951 UN General Assembly. There he delivered a speech that was so unabashedly anti-Soviet, it was applauded by pro-Western delegates. On the other hand, the Soviet foreign minister, former state prosecutor, and “butcher” of the Great Purge fame, *Andrey Vyshinsky*, referred to Castro as the „guard dog of imperialism“. Vyshinsky, despite being a member of the innermost circle of Soviet leadership, had no idea Teodoro Castro was a Soviet citizen and an NKVD operative on the most secret mission.

His mission in Rome and Belgrade was *to assassinate Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito*. The Kremlin would not tolerate „apostasy“ within the international communist movement. According to Mitrokhin Archive, Grigulevich devised several plans for Tito’s assassination. One included using deadly plague germ developed by the NKVD in the 1940s, with the assassin being vaccinated ahead of time and thus immune to its effects. Others included the detonation of an explosive device at a diplomatic reception in Belgrade and a “classic” firearm murder during Tito’s visit to London. Grigulevich apparently began to develop his plan during his visits to Belgrade, but after Stalin’s death and efforts to normalize relations with Yugoslavia, Khrushchev ordered an immediate cessation of all further activities in this direction, the suspension of Grigulevich’s mission, and his return to Moscow.

Thus, Teodoro B. Castro vanished from the Italian diplomatic corps, Costa Rican diplomacy, and the face of the planet. Josif Grigulevich, the real man, returned to Moscow. However, the old Stalinist cadres of NKVD, now renamed the KGB, were no longer popular with the new Soviet leadership and were gradually released from service.

That is when Josif Grigulevich’s new life and career began. He led a life of a successful scientist and historian, a peaceful, law-abiding citizen – polar opposite of his adventures as an intelligence operative, involved in many “wet jobs”. As a scientist, he specialized in Latin American history and the Catholic Church. He published 58 books over a 30-year period, including a biography of *Che Guevara (Ernesto Che Guevara)*, and was elected a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1979.

However, he could not shed some habits from previous life. For unknown reasons, he did not publish a portion of his works, including Che Guevara’s biography, under his own name, but rather under the pen name „Iosif R. Lavrecki.“ Despite their admiration for his work, colleagues in the



scientific community always had two strange things to say about him. Until his forties, it was impossible to find even the most basic biographical information about Josif Grigulevich. He also refused to be photographed and did not travel outside of the Soviet Union. Without the Internet, Teodoro Castro could only be discovered through written biographical traces, physical encounters on travels, or photographs.

Prof. Dr. Srđan Darmanović



INTRODUCTION

The analysis aims to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the political context, nature, and tactics of Russia's disinformation and propaganda strategy in the Western Balkans online sphere, as well as to make recommendations to NATO allies, civil society organizations, and the academic community for a coherent response to Russian malign influence.

Departure from the Soviet system, and democratic transition which was supposed to be a continuation of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, converted under Boris Yeltsin's presidency during the 1990s, into an unstable and occasionally chaotic system with diminishing odds of democratic outcome. Following Putin's ascension to power, the transition to democracy was replaced by nostalgia for the Soviet Union⁵ and the re-establishment of Russia as a great power - „strong Russia“. Putin revitalized and strengthened authoritarian regime, while also establishing means within the system for achieving the avowed strategic goal known as *hybrid warfare*. This orientation of Russian strategy and policy is associated with the name of Russia's Chief of General Staff, General *Valery Gerasimov*. *Gerasimov* delivered a speech at a Russian military conference in 2013 in which he allegedly outlined a strategy of integrated psychological, political, subversive, and military activities targeted at destabilizing Western countries. The speech was subsequently published in a relatively unknown Russian military magazine - *Military-Industrial Courier*, and that is how the *Gerasimov doctrine* was created. The *Gerasimov doctrine* is actually an attempt to construct an operational concept for Russian confrontation with the West, as a supplement to another, authentic doctrine that has directed Russian politics for more than two decades: *the Primakov doctrine*.

Former Russian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in *Yeltsin's* administration, *Yevgeny Primakov*, articulated specific postulates and principles of Russian entrance on the world arena following the Cold War, the collapse of communism in Europe, and the demise of the Soviet Union. Those principles rest on the fundamental premise that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is *unacceptable for Russia*, which

⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin called the disintegration of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" and a "genuine tragedy" for the Russian people in his yearly address to the nation in April 2005. NBC News, April 25, 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/wbna7632057>.

should therefore aspire for a *multipolar world* governed by a concert of great powers as a counterbalance to the unilateral power of the United States. The following are the elements of this strategy: a) Russia should insist on its supremacy in the post-Soviet space and lead some sort of integration in that region; b) Russia should oppose NATO enlargement; c) Nuclear weapons are the foundation of the country's national security and the ultimate guarantor of its strategic independence, though they are not instruments for risky ventures, but simply ensure that other powers do not engage in such ventures against Russia itself; d) More sophisticated and combined means are required for the achievement of national objectives in the geopolitical game, so-called *hybrid approach*; e) Military power is the necessary trigger of hybrid warfare, but it is most often risky, expensive, and impractical; f) Hybrid means can be an important risk management instrument, with military power always standing in the background.

The Primakov multipolarity doctrine has not been applied hastily. Russian combined use of the hybrid warfare and the military power against Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, as well as in Syria in 2015 was calibrated so as to avoid the unnecessary risks⁶.

It will turn out that some of the most important operational methods of the Primakov doctrine are the use of deception, concealment, and disinformation, both in strategic matters and decisions as well as in tactical implementation. As stated by one of the authors: "One of the stickiest challenges for Western governments has been how to deal with, or even understand, a Russian leadership that lies insistently and incessantly, even when it doesn't need to."⁷

Although information manipulation was widely used during the Soviet era, present-day Russian authorities, other Russian political actors, the Russian academic community, and the Russian media use disinformation tactics as one of the primary tools in their efforts to expand Russian influence and weaken the North Atlantic alliance and the Western value system.⁸ This approach often results in the international community lacking a unified stance toward Russia's authoritarian rule and hegemony as the core of Russian foreign and neighborhood policy. Researchers have long debated the "dictator's dilemma" in the information arena - whether to allow free flow of information, so opening the door to gradual democratization, or

6 See more about this in: Eugene Rumer, **The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action**, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 5, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>.

7 Christopher Bort, **Why The Kremlin Lies: Understanding Its Loose Relationship With the Truth**, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 6, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/06/why-kremlin-lies-understanding-its-loose-relationship-with-truth-pub-86132>.

8 Joseph Robbins, **Countering Russian Disinformation**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/countering-russian-disinformation>.

to prohibit it, thereby preventing the “opening of the regime.”⁹. Nowadays, however, there is a “democrat’s dilemma” - whether to regulate the flow of information, thereby calling into question key democratic postulates, or to allow the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, which undermines democratic society¹⁰.

Russian disinformation strategy involves blending facts and reliable information with false narratives in order to deceive the public meant for such disinformation.¹¹ State-owned media *Russia Today*, and the *Sputnik* news agency are recognized as not just the primary means of disseminating Russian propaganda, but also as an integral part of Russia’s foreign policy apparatus¹². Russia is attempting to confine the Internet space within its borders by developing its own restricted version of the Internet known as *RuNet*¹³. On the other hand, in international arena Russia uses online space to foment perpetual strife¹⁴. The US Department of State Global Engagement Center (GEC) labelled Moscow’s ramifications in the online sphere a „disinformation and propaganda ecosystem“, by this implying „the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives“¹⁵. It is centered around five major pillars: official governmental communications, global state-funded message distribution, nurturing and fostering „proxy“ sources, utilizing social networks as weapons, and cyber-enabled disinformation actions¹⁶. GEC deems Moscow directly accountable for the creation of these techniques, whereas Russian use of information as a supplement to traditional arsenals of armament and hybrid warfare¹⁷ are almost a commonplace in serious analyses of contemporary security

9 See more about this in: Phillip N. Howard, Sheetal D. Agarwal, and Muzammil M. Hussain, **The Dictators’ Digital Dilemma: When do States Disconnect Their Digital Networks?** *Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings*, October, 2011, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10_dictators_digital_network.pdf.

10 Henry Farrell, and Bruce Schneier, **Democracy’s Dilemma**, *Boston Review*, May 15, 2019, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/forum-henry-farrell-bruce-schneier-democracys-dilemma/>.

11 Crull, Nicholas J., Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Alistar Shawcross. **Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against It An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present**, *LSE. LSE Institute for Global Affairs*, October 2017, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Final-Report.pdf>.

12 **GEC Special Report Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem**, U.S. Department of State *Global Engagement Center*, January 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf.

13 Justin Sherman, **Reassessing RuNet: Russian Internet isolation and implications for Russian cyber behavior**, *Atlantic Council*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/reassessing-runet-russian-internet-isolation-and-implications-for-russian-cyber-behavior/>.

14 Todd C. Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, **Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe**, *Rand Corporation*, 2018,

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf.

15 **GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation Propaganda System**, U.S. Department of State *Global Engagement Center*, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

16 *Ibid*.

17 Arsalan Bilal, **Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and ‘Trust’ as the Antidote**, *NATO Review*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

threats¹⁸. The use of this method has the following advantages: a) it allows the placement of different variations of the same false narratives, thus making them receptive to different target publics; b) it exempts Kremlin officials from being accused of placing narratives because there are no clear links with them; and c) connectivity of media platforms, social networks, and communications in the material space increases the resonance and scope of the placed false narratives¹⁹.

The following can be identified as distinct Russian disinformation campaign tactics: a) support for radical right-wing political parties and organizations throughout Western Europe (France, Italy, UK...); b) spreading fake news on controversial domestic or regional topics in order to deepen divisions in NATO societies, but also in countries in the Alliance's immediate neighborhood (by inciting tensions in Eastern Ukraine, deepening the Catalan crisis, obstructing the resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, and bringing up the issue of the Russian minority in Estonia²⁰); c) employing religion, tradition, and historical revisionism as weapons (*weaponization*) in countries with a sizable Orthodox population (Baltic countries, Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina, North Macedonia etc.)²¹; d) disseminating fake news implying Russia's political, economic, military, and moral supremacy over the „hypocritical“ and „unjust“ West²²; e) the distribution of false news implying discord among NATO members and a lack of legitimacy of the Organization in terms of military presence in crisis areas in Europe (such as reports that NATO will withdraw troops from Lithuania)²³, or that Canadian troops „imported Corona virus“ in Latvia²⁴, or that Polish military authorities criticize the conduct of U.S. military forces²⁵); f) *kompromat*, a method of discrediting and blackmailing political and business elites, movements, and organizations, that dates back to the Soviet era and has been revitalized with the rise of social networks.²⁶

18 William H. Webster, Arnaud de Borchgrave, Pat Gallagher, Frank J. Cilluffo, Stephanie M. Lanz, **Information Warfare/Information Assurance**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/transnational-threats-project-past-task-force-4>.

19 **GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System**, *U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center*, August 2020, <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

20 **Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations**, *United States Senate*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/html/CPRT-115SPRT28110.htm>.

21 Tetyana Zhurman, **Religion as a Hybrid War Weapon to Achieve Russia's Geopolitical Goals**, *The Jamestown Foundation Global Research and Analysis*, July 30, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/religion-as-a-hybrid-war-weapon-to-achieve-russias-geopolitical-goals/>.

22 Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, **Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe**, *CEPA's Information Warfare Project in Partnership with the Legatum Institute*, August 2016, https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2773.

23 **NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation: a Focus on COVID-19**, *NATO*, July, 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>.

24 Murray Brewster, **Canadian-led NATO battlegroup in Latvia targeted by pandemic Disinformation campaign**, *CBS News*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/nato-latvia-battle-group-pandemic-covid-coronavirus-disinformation-russia-1.5581248>.

25 Malgorzata Zawadzka, **Today's Potemkin Village: Kremlin Disinformation and Propaganda in Poland**, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, May 15, 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/todays-potemkin-village-kremlin-disinformation-propaganda-poland/>.

26 Sarah Oates, **How Russian 'kompromat' destroys political opponents, no facts required**, *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/13/how-russian-kompromat-destroys-political-opponents-no-facts-required/>.

The Western Balkans is a region with a complex history, relatively recent experience of ethnic conflicts, and important geopolitical location. All countries are striving for admission to the EU, which has not expanded since 2013. Montenegro, Albania, and Northern Macedonia are NATO members, although a large portion of political elites in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain opposed to either Euro-Atlantic integration or acknowledgment of NATO membership as a reality. Aside from the Western Balkans being a geopolitically fertile field for the dissemination of Russian propaganda and the use of disinformation tools, the regimes in the Western Balkans have all *inherited disinformation spreading strategies from the 1990s wars*²⁷. In Serbia, in particular, narratives from the 1990s are still very much alive or are being resurrected, both internally and in Serbia's actions towards its neighbors. Disinformation distribution routes haven't changed much since the period when the media was utilized for ultra-nationalist purposes, 30 years ago²⁸. Furthermore, they have regained force and intensity with the penetration of digital technology and the growth of social networks.

This paper builds on numerous studies of the goals of Russian propaganda in the Western Balkans' online sphere. Its intention is to help to a better understanding of the threat Russian propaganda poses to the region's Euro-Atlantic orientation, as well as the civil society and democratization trajectories of the Western Balkans countries.

The studies mainly identify two primary goals of Russian disinformation campaigns: a) undermining public perception of the US and the EU; and b) impeding or delaying Western Balkans countries' accession into Euro-Atlantic frameworks²⁹. Even the third one may be added here: preserving Russia's domestic political order and preventing the international community from banding together to apply pressure on Russia for violations of human rights and civil liberties under authoritarian rule. Russia seeks to undermine NATO and the EU by upholding *the status quo* and delaying resolution of the outstanding open issues in the region. As it will be explained, Russian authorities collaborate with the authorities and radical right wingers in Serbia and Republika Srpska, impeding the effective conclusion of the Serbia-Kosovo talks and interfering with the process of making Bosnia and Herzegovina a functional state. Russian propaganda seeks to persuade the citizens of

27 Renaud de La Brosse, *Politička propaganda i projekt "Svi Srbi u jednoj državi": posledice instrumentalizacije medija za ultranacionalističke svrhe*, Tužilaštvo Međunarodnog krivičnog suda za bivšu Jugoslaviju, Januar 2003, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_milosevic/prosexp/bcs/rep-srb-b.htm.

28 *Ibidem*.

29 Sophie Eisentraut, Stephanie de Leon, **Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia's Information War**, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, March 6, 2018, <https://www.kas.de/en/analysen-und-argumente/detail/-/content/propaganda-and-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans-how-the-eu-can-counter-russia-s-information-war>.

Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia that by joining NATO, their countries have become Western puppets. Serbia is portrayed as a successful economic story in the region, owing to its lack of Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Russian hybrid activities are heightened in the run-up to events or elections that are critical to the Western Balkans nations' future Euro-Atlantic prospects. Among those in the past few years are a referendum on the issue of name in North Macedonia in 2018, parliamentary elections in Kosovo in 2019, and elections in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro in 2020. North Macedonia was targeted by Russian subversive actions in the run-up to the referendum on the issue of name. Russia collaborated with nationalist groups affiliated with the country's current most powerful opposition party, the conservative VMRO-DPMNE, and engaged in extensive intelligence-media activities in order to reduce turnout for the referendum, and thus help prevent the resolution of the country's decades-long dispute with Greece. In Kosovo, regardless of who is in power, Russian propaganda has remained focused on weakening trust along the Kosovo Government – Kosovo Serbs divide, with some attempts at disseminating disinformation online. When Serbian political elites recognize their own interest in the events in the region, neighboring countries feel the brunt of joint Russian-Serbian propaganda efforts. This is the case with the resurrection of the propaganda *All Serbs in one state* personified in a new *Serb world* concept.³⁰ Montenegro was particularly hard affected by such combined propaganda following the enactment of the Montenegrin *Law on freedom of religion and legal status of religious communities* in 2019, on the eve of the Parliamentary election in 2020, but also the local election in Nikšić in 2021.

Aside from propaganda through official Russian channels, particular attention will be paid to *proxy* voices in the Western Balkans, which also bear part of the responsibility for spreading disinformation and propaganda that goes to the Kremlin's advantage.

30 Jasmin Agić, **Vulinov 'srpski svet': Pola Bosne i cijela Crna Gora**, *Balkans Aljazeera*, May 5, 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2021/5/5/vulinov-srpski-svet-pola-bosne-i-cijela-crna-gora>.



1.1. The rise of Russian disinformation and propaganda machinery

Present-day Russian propaganda campaigns bear much resemblance to those the Soviet Union, such as *Operation Infection* or *Operation Neptune* or the propagation of the slogan *Regan means war*³¹. However, the world in which they are released is not the same³². There is no longer an Iron Curtain separating the „two worlds,“ and the bipolar perception of reality in which the Western block is strategically one of the conflict's parties has been abandoned. This enables Russian disinformation to be seductive even to Western societies. The previously successfully implemented techniques of resistance to manipulation do not genuinely correspond to the contemporary „unreality style,“ which *Peter Pomerantsev* refers to as „futureless now“³³.

Throughout the Cold War, Western strategic communication, in addition to spreading information on Western Block policies, managed to advocate *values* contained in the U.S. President *Franklin D. Roosevelt's* 1941 speech on “four freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear³⁴. It is precisely for this reason that, with the fall of the Berlin wall the Western political block emerged victorious not only militarily, strategically and politically, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of *values*. The unified ideals of democracy, political freedoms, human rights protection, and prosperity appeared to have trumped the Soviet narrative that civil and political rights were a *bourgeois hoax*³⁵.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lagged considerably behind the United States in the fields of information technology and computer science, and it was losing *the propaganda war*. The Kremlin viewed the growth of the IT industry with mistrust at the end of the 1990s, only to quickly integrate it into the realm of disinformation and propaganda activities. Following the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, Putin labeled the leading Russian IT company *Yandex* as vulnerable to external manipulation, and designated the entire Internet as an American *Central Intelligence Agency* project. The company's shares have

31 David Robert Grimes, **Russian fake news is not new: Soviet Aids propaganda cost countless lives**, *The Guardian*, Jun 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/jun/14/russian-fake-news-is-not-new-soviet-aids-propaganda-cost-countless-lives>.

32 Linda Qiu, **Fingerprints of Russian Disinformation: From AIDS to Fake News**, *The New York Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/us/politics/russian-disinformation-aids-fake-news.html>.

33 Peter Pomerantsev, **To Unreality – and Beyond**, *Journal of Design and Science*, MIT Media Lab, October 23, 2019, <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ic90utal/release/4>.

34 **FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech**, FDR Library and Museum, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>.

35 Nicholas J. Cull, Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Alistair Shawcross, **Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it: An Analytical History, with Lessons for the Present, Final Report**, *LSE Consulting*, October 2017, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Final-Report.pdf>.

dropped to less than 5% of their initial value, and the company has quickly turned to Russian authorities, to the point where opposition leader *Alexei Navalny* accused *Yandex* in 2017 of manipulating news browsing algorithms so that mentions of protests against Putin are excluded³⁶.

Russia first began developing its propaganda capabilities in its immediate neighborhood and former Soviet republics that have a sizable ethnic Russian minority and Russian speaking population. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Estonia, as the then most recent NATO member with a considerable Russian minority, was a target of Russian cyber-attacks on banks, government websites and media outlets. The modes of operation were ramped up during the 2008 invasion on Georgia³⁷. Russia was encouraged by the digital revolution and began disseminating false narratives on the Internet in order to rationalize its conduct. The motive for this was the fear that far more powerful western media propaganda may harm Putin. *Russia Today*, the state-owned television network, was eventually reshaped and became a key part of Russian foreign policy operations.³⁸.

The protests in Russia in 2011 were, however, the tipping point in Russian malign activity in the Internet arena and the impetus for waging a true „information war“ against the West. Participants in the rallies, which Putin blamed on the West, were mostly mobilized using social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Vkontakte*³⁹. Shortly after, during his visit to *Russia Today*, Putin declared the intention of “breaking the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global information streams”⁴⁰.

The Syrian civil war provided a fresh opportunity for Russia to refine its tactics and to, for instance, include discrediting human rights organizations on *Twitter*, as with the *White Helmets*⁴¹. The amount of disinformation fueled by the Kremlin has practically created the impression that the truth about events, such as the use of chemical weapons by Russian partners in Syria, can never be established, inspiring cynicism and despair, and thus allowing the Kremlin

36 *Yandex, Russia's biggest technology company, celebrates 20 years*, *The Economist*, September 30, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/business/2017/09/30/yandex-russias-biggest-technology-company-celebrates-20-years>

37 Donals L. Buresh, *Russian Cyber-attacks on Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine, Including Tactics, Techniques, Procedures, and Effects*, *Journal of Advanced Forensic Sciences*, 2021, <https://openaccesspub.org/jafs/article/1686>.

38 Nicholas J. Cull, Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Alistair Shawcross, *Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it: An Analytical History, with Lessons for the Present, Final Report*, *LSE Consulting*, October 2017, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Final-Report.pdf>.

39 Tom Balmforth, *Russian Protesters Mobilize Via Social Networks, as Key Opposition Leaders Jailed*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 7, 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/russian_protesters_mobilize_online_as_leaders_jailed/24414881.html.

40 *In case you weren't clear on Russia Today relationship to Moscow, Putin clears it up*, *Washington Post*, June 13, 2013 *in-case-you-weren't-clear-on-russia-todays-relationship-to-moscow-putin-clears-it-up*.

41 Olivia Solon, *How Syria's White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine*, *The Guardian*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories>.

to pursue its aims unhindered⁴². During the Ukrainian *Pride Revolution* in 2013, images from Syria, Chechnya and Bosnia were used as evidence of killings committed by alleged *Ukrainian fascists*⁴³ (tactics of using images created on other occasions will become common for Montenegrin fake news during the protests ahead of and following the adoption of the *Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities*)⁴⁴.

The scale of the Internet smear campaign grew significantly with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Russian President informed the public with great ease that there were no Russian military in Crimea, implying that, in Pomerantsev's words, the „facts had lost their power“ and were of no relevance⁴⁵. As compared to the Cold War spreading of *dezinformatsiya*, such behavior marked a turning point in the activity of the Russian media propaganda machinery and in the nature of disinformation. Politicians, who did not always tell the truth anyway, began expressing ultimate indifference as to whether they told the truth or not⁴⁶. When American President *Ronald Reagan* confronted Soviet leader *Mikhail Gorbachev* with the truth that *KGB* was behind *Operation Infektion*, a false narrative claiming the US had invented AIDS as a biological weapon against Africa, *Gorbachev* acted offended. Not long after, in 1987 *Gorbachev* ordered for the operation to be halted, and it was only in 1992 that *Yevgeny Primakov*, the then-director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, admitted to it⁴⁷.

Simultaneously, *Russia Today* was widely circulating incorrect information regarding Ukraine's behavior. A fake air controller was quoted as having certified that Ukrainian fighter planes were engaged in the shooting down of *Malaysia Airlines Flight 17*, which killed 298 people⁴⁸. This information went viral on social networks, making it the first case of state-orchestrated disinformation dissemination through the media, which had previously been reserved for *terrorist organizations*.

42 Crull, Nicholas J., Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Alistar Shawcross. **Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against It An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present**. LSE. LSE Institute for Global Affairs, October 2017, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Final-Report.pdf>.

43 Josh Raab, In Ukraine, A Battle of Words and Images, Time, July 8, 2014, <https://time.com/3810444/ukraine-fake-images-claim/>.

44 **Litije i manipulativna igra brojka**, CDM, March 3, 2020, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/litije-i-manipulativna-igra-brojkama/>.

45 Peter Pomerantsev, **To Unreality – and Beyond**, *Journal of Design and Science*, MIT Media Lab, October 23, 2019, <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ic90utal/release/4>.

46 *Ibidem*.

47 David Robert Grimes, **Russian fake news is not new: Soviet Aids propaganda cost countless lives**, *The Guardian*, Jun 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/jun/14/russian-fake-news-is-not-new-soviet-aids-propaganda-cost-countless-lives>.

48 **MH17 News**, RT, <https://www.rt.com/tags/mh17-news/>.

Nowadays, propaganda aimed at *compatriots* includes formulation and placement of narratives on the West's geopolitical *fall* and the ethically dubious *abandonment* of post-Soviet states rather than the promised economic progress. Another storyline is that the ideals advocated by the West are diametrically opposed to family and Orthodoxy values. The West is accused of intentionally “creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties”⁴⁹. To this end, Russian military experts coined the term *colored revolution*, which encompasses the *Rose revolution* in Georgia in 2012, the *Orange revolution* in Ukraine in 2004, and the *Tulip revolution* in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The term was transferred to the online sphere in order to scare the audiences of former Soviet republics into believing that violent protests result in „bloody civil conflicts.”⁵⁰.

To counteract colored revolutions, Russia has established a plethora of so-called *troll factories*, which are companies that execute disinformation propaganda activities on the Internet under the guise of PR agency, research centers, and so on⁵¹. For example, the *CyberBerkut* and *Russiya Vesna* groups were *troll factories* entrusted with spreading information on social networks, frequently utilizing automated accounts⁵².

Individuals who begin examining or emphasizing Russian strategies of covering the online realm with bots are seldom exposed to abuse and threats by *trolls*, i.e. people who provoke conflicts on social networks by introducing controversial issues or insulting the interlocutors. For example, Russian *troll factories* launched a social media attack against Finnish journalist *Jessikka Aro*, stating that she worked as a prostitute for „American special services”. *Aro* was receiving a great deal of e-mails with rape or murder threats. The journalist came to the attention of the international public in 2019 when the State Department was set to present her the *International Women of Courage* award, but the procedure was halted due to her writings criticizing American President Donald Trump⁵³.

Other countries began using similar tactics. *Troll factories* on social media were a crucial element in *Rodrigo Duterte's* victory in the 2016 Philippine

49 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the “Color Revolution”: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West (Full Report)*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-“color-revolution”>.

50 Andrei Soldatov, and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries*, Public Affairs, New York, 2015.

51 Vidjeti više na: **Media – {Dis}information – Security**, NATO, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/5/pdf/2005-deepportal2-troll-factories.pdf.

52 Jacob T. Rob, and Jacob N. Shapiro, **A brief History of Online Influence Operations**, *Lawfare*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/brief-history-online-influence-operations>.

53 Journalist Jessikka Aro: **“Harassment of journalists is a societal problem”**, *DW*, October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/journalist-jessikka-aro-harassment-of-journalists-is-a-societal-problem/a-55219349>.

presidential election. The Philippine government continued allocating tens of thousands of dollars to hire *bots* (individuals running false accounts) who launched attacks against opposition members on Philippine social media⁵⁴. A troll factory came down on Philippine-American journalist Maria Ressa, who won the Nobel prize last year for her work to preserve freedom of expression as a prerequisite for democracy and long-lasting peace.

The growth of populism and right wing in Europe as a result of the migration crisis has produced even more fertile ground for Russian propaganda to penetrate. Russian influence ranges from financial assistance for radical and extremist parties on both the Left and the Right on the political spectrum all over Western Europe, to a ubiquitous presence on social media. *Marine Le Pen*, the leader of France's extreme right-wing *Front National*, and her father, *Jean-Marie Le Pen*, the founder and long-standing party leader, revealed at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 that the *Front* was funded by Russia, confirming that Russia provides even financial support for the parties that serve its interests. The broker in this transaction was *Aymeric Chauprade*, *Marine Le Pen's* foreign-policy advisor, who claimed in an interview with Russian media outlets that the *Front National* would dismantle European Union if elected. *Chauprade* was one of the *Front National's* „observers“ during the Crimea referendum on March 16, 2014, which resulted in Russia officially annexing the peninsula. *Chauprade* and *Le Pen* welcomed the election results with the purported 90 percent turnout, including an incredible 123 percent in Sevastopol, according to official figures!⁵⁵ Russia was also a meeting point for European far-right groups and organizations. On March 22, 2015, around 150 representatives of Russian nationalist and European neo-fascist parties gathered in Sankt Petersburg at the invitation of *Rodina* (Всероссийская политическая партия “Родина”), a political party close to the Kremlin, with the primary goal of supporting Russian politics in relation to Ukraine and condemning EU sanctions against Russia⁵⁶.

It is also worth noting that several European left-wing personalities have spoken out in support of Russian Ukraine-related narrative and operations. *Seumas Milne*, one of the *British Guardian's* editors, was undoubtedly one of the intriguing personalities of this type. Because of the pieces he wrote about Ukraine, Putin honored him in 2014 by appointing him to chair the *Valday* summit on Russian foreign policy. Despite this, *Milne* will be named Head of Communication Service to former Labour leader *Jeremy Corbin* in October 2015!⁵⁷

54 Gaby Baizas, *Investigating troll farms: What to look out for*, *Rappler*, July 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/investigating-troll-farms-what-to-look-out-for/>.

55 More about this in: Timothy Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, Tim Duggan Books, New York 2018, pp. 98-100, 133-134.

56 Europe far-right parties meet in St Petersburg, Russia, *BBC News*, 22 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32009360>.

57 More reading about this in: Timothy Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, Tim Duggan Books, New York 2018, pp. 200-201.

Russian hybrid activity was notably visible in the run-up to the 2016 American presidential election. According to *Central Intelligence Agency*, *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, and *US National Security Agency* reports, Russia conducted massive Internet operations to influence the outcome of the election in favor of President Trump⁵⁸. The narrative spread by Russia's bot network included global and domestic conspiracy theories ranging from *George Soros* owning voting machines in America and *Hilary Clinton* having major health issues to establishing fake narratives on American foreign and domestic policies. *Russian Internet Research Agency*, a company founded by Russian oligarch *Yevgeny Prigozhin*, created dozens of Facebook groups that exaggerated social divisions in the United States, in particular inciting racial, religious, and class animosity⁵⁹. The pages were employing Facebook advertising algorithms to reach a portion of the population that is most receptive to the narrative being disseminated. That is how Russia launched *Blacktivist* as an extreme version of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, which posted videos of police brutality against black people. *Being Patriotic*, a Facebook page, instilled anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. On Facebook, all such pages generated approximately 20 million interactions⁶⁰.

Russia's *Internet Research Agency* created hundreds of fake accounts in order to tweet about *Brexit* and support the UK's exit from the EU⁶¹. In Germany, for example, Russia twisted a 13-year-old Russian girl's statement about being raped by migrants. Despite the fact that all this turned out to be false, Russian official television, as well as Russian Foreign Minister *Lavrov*, continued to blame Germany⁶².

Nowadays, various Russian hacker organizations, such as *Cozy Bear* and *Fancy Bear* are active in the online sphere and are considered to be tied to Russian state intelligence agencies⁶³. One example of the broadness of their activities is the case in 2020, when the American *National Security Agency* accused *Cozy Bear* of attempting to steal information on COVID-19 treatment methods and vaccines. This happened after a series of years-long attacks beginning with the 2016 election campaign in the United States. Following this event, the same group attempted an intrusion into the e-mail systems of American federal agencies.⁶⁴

58 Intelligence Community Assessment, **Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections**, 6 January 2017, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/committee-findings-2017-intelligence-community-assessment>.

59 Tom McCarthy, **How Russia used social media to divide Americans**, *The Guardian*, October 2017.

60 *Ibidem*.

61 Robert Booth, Matthew Weaver, Alex Hern, Stacey Smith, and Shaun Walker, **Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows**, *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>.

62 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html>

63 Sam Shead, **Russia's Fancy Bear and Cozy Bear hacking groups are under the spotlight**, *CNBC*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/17/fancy-bear-cozy-bear-russia.html>

64 *Ibid*.

As a battleground of geopolitical disputes and sharply polarized politics, The Western Balkans is a tempting target for both foreign and domestic actors seeking to alter, weaken, or delegitimize the outcomes of democratic processes and the Western model of liberal democracy. Outstanding issues with an ethnic label, linked to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also to the right of people to self-determination, and the region's high proportion of Orthodox population make it easy to link this region with the territories that Russia claims in its immediate neighborhood. As a result, this region represents a significant challenge – and an opportunity – for the West to identify the roots of Russian propaganda, key problems in individual countries, and develop and implement strategies for empowering democracy, building stability, and steering the region toward a pro-western, Euro-Atlantic course.



RUSSIAN ACTIVITIES IN WESTERN BALKANS



2.1. Political background of Russian involvement in Western Balkans in recent history

Contrary to popular belief that Russia is historically attached to Serbian people, the contemporary history of Russian activities in the Western Balkans reveals that Russia was interested in the region as a means for accomplishing global imperialist and/or ideological ambitions. Throughout history, this coincided with aggressive Greater-Serbian hegemonism, such as that assumed by *Nikola Pašić*, the main supporter of Russian politics in the Western Balkans at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, who put in practice the key ideas from *Ilija Garašanin's* nationalist program *Načertanije*. Russian and Great-Serbian nationalism in the Western Balkans find common ground always when favorable international circumstances arise: when the West neglects historical, ingrained potential of the actors in the region for generating new divisions and conflicts, and when Russia recognizes that the geopolitical position of the Western Balkans constitutes a fruitful ground for wider global confrontation with the Western powers⁶⁵.

29

Yugoslavia was a part of the *sanitary corridor* for preventing the spread of the Russian revolution, so diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia did not exist between the two world wars, until 1940⁶⁶. Following *World War II*, the two countries engaged in a bitter ideological and political confrontation from 1948 to 1955. After normalization of relations, the USSR was interested in the events in the SFRY only when it assessed that communism in Yugoslavia was under threat from nationalist movements or when it believed that it was necessary to prevent any growth of influence of the so-called Yugoslav *socialism with a human face* within the international communist movement. During *Perestroika* and after the fall of the Soviet Union, the weakened Russia, burdened with the necessity for its own economic

⁶⁵ The Sources of Serbian Conduct: Analysis of Serbia's relations with the region and guidelines for the response of Montenegro and Western allies, June 2021, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65711430/the-sources-of-serbian-conduct>.

⁶⁶ Norman E. Saul, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Foreign Policy*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014.



consolidation, did not take a more active interest in the Western Balkans⁶⁷. Furthermore, *Gorbachev's* dismissal of *the Brezhnev Doctrine of communist countries' limited sovereignty* sent a signal to East European countries that the Soviet Union would not intervene in their domestic affairs.⁶⁸. Whereas civil society leaders in Poland and Czechoslovakia, such as *Lech Walesa* and *Vaclav Havel*, enabled the start of democratization on more solid ground by advocating political pluralism, in the Western Balkans, nationalist elites prevailed in Serbia, seeking to legitimize and rationalize their preparations for Yugoslavia's war through historical revisionism. Serbian nationalist elites were precisely the actors who introduced Russia, especially Russian nationalist circles, into political discourse and daily life in the Western Balkans.

Parallel nationalists' dissatisfaction with *Gorbachev's* reform government in Russia and *Ante Marković's* reform government in Yugoslavia⁶⁹, as well as centrifugal tendencies in both countries, allowed for close collaboration between the Russian *red-brown* coalition of anti-communist ultranationalists and hard-core communists on one side and Serbian ultra-nationalists on the other. Serbian intellectual and clerical circles, building on the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, reintroduced the topic of *Orthodox brotherhood* of Serbs and Russians, legitimizing the booming Greater-Serbian nationalism in the former Yugoslavia and assigning a political-military role to the Serbian Orthodox Church. It is hardly surprising, then, that in such a climate, in August 1991, Serbian „communist generals“ supported a coup attempt against Gorbachev, who was supportive of reform-oriented Yugoslavia and Ante Marković's government⁷⁰.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Russian government publicly supported the imposition of sanctions against Yugoslavia, as well as the establishment of the *International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia* in 1992⁷¹. Near the end of the Yugoslav war, *Yeltsin*, under

67 Leonard J. Cohen, *Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power*, JSTOR Sage Publications, 1994, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40202977>.

68 *Twenty-Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History, Lecture 24: The failure of Balkan Communism and the cause of the Revolutions of 1989, November 1996*, <https://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect24.htm> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538931>

69 *Michail Gorbachev* took up the office of the Secretary General of the Soviet Union Communist Party in 1985. His project *Perestroika* aimed at giving socialism a *human face* modelled after Yugoslav example of socialist self-management and decentralization. In 1988, Gorbachev thawed relationships between Russia and Yugoslavia and established cooperation with Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Marković and his *Union of Reform Forces*. Read more in: Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's influence in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017.

70 *The Sources of Serbian Conduct: Analysis of Serbia's relations with the region and guidelines for the response of Montenegro and Western allies*, June 2021, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65711430/the-sources-of-serbian-conduct>.

71 Paul Lewis, *U.N. votes 13-0 for embargo on trade with Yugoslavia; air travel and oil curbed*, *The New York Times*, May 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/31/world/un-votes-13-0-for-embargo-on-trade-with-yugoslavia-air-travel-and-oil-curbed.html>.

pressure from nationalist opposition and in an attempt to keep power, took a closer stance toward Serbian authorities.

Russian interest in the region, which was publicly aroused in 1996, had little to do with sympathy with Balkans' peoples and far more to do with *Yevgeny Primakov* announcing the previously described multipolarity doctrine, under which Russia, China, and India would jointly compete with the West⁷². As a continuation, in 1999 Putin began returning Russia to its traditional course of authoritarianism in the internal sphere and anti-Western imperialism in foreign policy.

As of that time, Russian authorities began to establish tighter contacts with *Slobodan Milošević*. Russian engagement was obvious as late as 1999, when Russia redeployed its soldiers from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Kosovo, and through Russia's participation in the Kosovo peace mission after 1999, which it left in 2003. Russia also demonstrated military weakness for more meaningful responses at that time⁷³. Following the fall of *Milošević*, Russia had little to offer Serbian authorities, particularly pro-western Prime Minister *Zoran Dindić*. Close connections with Serbia were forged in 2008, when Russia used its veto power in the United Nations to provide back-up to Serbian authorities in rejecting the plan of Finnish diplomat and special UN envoy *Marti Ahtisaari* as a settlement for the status of Kosovo and Metohija⁷⁴. Russian authorities, Russian right-wingers and intelligence circles found partners both among official authorities and right-wing and nationalist politicians in Serbia and Republika Srpska. In Serbia, Russia found an unwavering partner in the nationalist Serbian Radical Party since Russia opposed the liberalization of Serbia under the leadership of *Zoran Dindić*. After *Šešelj's* extradition to The Hague Tribunal and the dissolution of the Serbian Radical Party, then-President of the Republika Srpska *Milorad Dodik* became the most loyal partner.

Russian flirting between accusations of recourse to the West on the part of the official Serbian leadership and support for its continued anti-western path, combined with Russia's support for both Serbian authorities and opposition circles, *allowed Russia to nearly become the owner of Serbia's public discourse and its domestic political scene*. Both Russian and Serbian hegemonic policies in the Western Balkans were directed by this relationship.

72 More about this topic in: Eugene Rumer, **The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action**, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 5, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>.

73 Since Russian leadership had influence over Milošević, it assisted international community in obtaining his consent for the withdrawal of Serbian police and Yugoslav Army from Kosovo after 78 days of NATO bombing, as well as in making Milošević step down from the office after refusing to admit election defeat on 5th October 2000.

74 Filip Vojvodic-Medic, **How to Downsize Russia in the Balkans**, *German Marshall Fund*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/how-downsize-russia-balkans>.

Following the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of US and EU sanctions on Russia, propaganda and disinformation as the new backbones of the Russian global response, became directed to the Western Balkans as well. Kremlin perceives NATO expansion as a key threat to its national security. While Russia considers the Western Balkans to be internationally geopolitically peripheral, it realizes that WB is a region where much can be accomplished in terms of NATO destabilization with minimal effort and funding. Russia recognizes that it lacks the resources for military dominance in the region, and that its economic model is unappealing to WB states. For that reason, Moscow employs hybrid tactics. As it is common, it runs disinformation campaigns and spreads propaganda in the Western Balkans in order to fulfill the goals of its global foreign policy and safeguard Russian autocracy and imperialism in its near neighborhood.

In addition, Russia establishes its presence in vital energy infrastructure⁷⁵ and encourages cultural and religious relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the same time, it exacerbates long-standing ethnic tensions. It devotes special attention to Russian and local media outlets that are eager to propagate Russian propaganda content, as well as social media platforms where it broadcasts narratives claiming that the United States, NATO, and the European Union are hegemonic, immoral imperialist powers. As an alternative to European integration, Serbia is offered membership in the Euro-Asian Community⁷⁶.

2.2. Factors conducive to Russian subversive activities in Western Balkans

Many factors support Russia's assessment that propaganda and disinformation in the Western Balkans can be effective in undermining the West, decreasing the impact of Euro-Atlantic institutions, and eroding liberal democratic norms.

Events such as Brexit, the rise of Turkish and Russian influence, the economic growth of China and the Gulf countries, and the Trump

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ Jelena Jevtić, **The Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Western Balkans**, The Security Distillery, April 28, 2021, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkansrussia-playing-fire-balkans>

administration's geopolitical return to dividing the *spheres of influence* have resulted in a less visible global consensus on liberal democracy as the best model of governance and the ultimate outcome of democratic transitions. Even inside the United States and the European Union, liberal democracy has faced challenges, and essentially nondemocratic populist forms have begun to fill public discourse as an alternative *non-liberal* type of democracy⁷⁷.

The relatively recent experience of war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia has resulted in religious and ethno-national divides becoming an inherent element of political discourse and convenient to manipulate with. Serbia is the main target and headquarters of Russia's disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is undoubtedly the most vulnerable to Russian influence, as Russia benefits from ethnic divisions among Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks and de facto supports the leadership of Republika Srpska's secessionist intentions⁷⁸. Prior to North Macedonia joining NATO, Russia actively promoted the nationalist narrative in order to obstruct the resolution of the name dispute and to maintain the country in a multi-decade frozen conflict with Greece. The main focus of Russia's disinformation effort in Kosovo are Kosovo Serbs, who primarily consume the content of Serbian portals⁷⁹.

As a result of global developments, Western actors dealing with radicalization in the Western Balkans have mostly focused on violent jihadism inspired by the Islamic state. At the same time, radical right-wing nationalism was blossoming in the Western Balkans, eventually becoming a „new normality“ in society⁸⁰. *Thanks to the joint efforts of Russian and Serbian political elites, and with almost no opposition from the international community, the recycled narratives from the 1990s became an intrinsic part of the dominant political discourse throughout the Western Balkans region.*

Russian and Serbian political elites utilize *Orthodox religion as a weapon* to incite inter-ethnic enmity and destabilize countries with largely Orthodox populations, replicating the model of Serbian nationalist leaders from the 1990s. In Montenegro, for example, *the Serbian Orthodox Church*,

77 Based on this 1997 essay, the influential analyst Fareed Zakaria wrote an essay for the Washington Post with distinct title - "America's democracy has become illiberal".

Fareed Zakaria, **The Rise of Illiberal Democracy**, Foreign Affairs, November/December 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>

Fareed Zakaria, **America's democracy has become illiberal**, The Washington Post, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-becoming-a-land-of-less-liberty/2016/12/29/2a91744c-ce09-11e6-a747-d03044780a02_story.html?utm_term=.a63159978fa7

78 Jelena Jevtić, **The Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Western Balkans**, The Security Distillery, April 28, 2021, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkansrussia-playing-fire-balkans>.

79 Ibid.

80 Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), **Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge**, Balkan Politics and Society, April 2019.

with the support of *the Russian Orthodox Church* and Russian authorities, undermines Montenegrin national identity without hesitation, fosters intolerance towards minorities, and frequently assumes the role of participant and key factor in internal political turmoil⁸¹. The inquiry of the Serbian Orthodox Church's financial transactions frequently leads to Russian ultra-nationalist oligarchs, such as *Konstantin Malofeev*, who formed a charity foundation of *Saint Basil the Great*, which is partly entrusted with propagating Russian Orthodox faith⁸².

The Western Balkans countries' incomplete transition efforts and democratization shortcomings also make them attractive targets for Russia's disinformation campaign. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of Europe's communist systems, democracy was consolidated in a relatively small number of post-communist countries. With the exception of Slovenia and, to a lesser extent, Croatia, no country at the former Yugoslavia's territory qualifies as a liberal democracy. On a case-to-case basis and depending on different aspects of democratic transformations, some can be classified as *partitocracies*, while others can be classified as *stabilocracies*⁸³, and the third as *hybrid regimes*. According to a European Parliament's study⁸⁴, Western Balkan countries are characterized by weak rule of law, fragile civil societies, and geopolitical tensions. Citizens are disappointed with the lack of crucial reforms that would bring the countries closer to EU membership. Russia exploits the region's poor results in the fight against corruption and the establishment of the rule of law, underlining that the West and its *proxies* in the Balkans are corrupt. Simultaneously, that does not prevent Russia from investing in the empowerment of parties and actors with combined nationalist and clerical agendas.

Western Europe is repeating the same error it made in the 1990s in the Western Balkans, focusing on its own difficulties and putting aside a need for

81 Heather Conley, Matthew Melino, **Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

82 Conley and Melino state that the spiritual advisor to Malofeev, the Orthodox priest Bishop Tihon, is also a spiritual advisor to the President Putin, and refer to the reports that Malofeev and the coordinator of the Russian propaganda Surkov also coordinate closely their activities. More reading in Heather Conley, Matthew Melino, **Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

83 Jasmin Mujanović in his book *Hunger and Fury*, but also Damir Marušić in the report "Balkans Forward" under the auspices of the Atlantic Council, warn that in the era of the absence of American dedication to liberal democracy and readiness to making compromises for the sake of solidifying alliances and achieving security interests, the countries of the Western Balkans lose the impetus for proper democratization of their societies and become "stabilocracies" headed by "strongmen", instead of democracies. More reading in: Jasmin Mujanović, **Hunger and Fury, The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans**, *Hurst Publishers*, 2018. i **Balkans Forward: A New US Strategy for the Region**, Atlantic Council, November 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/balkans-forward-content-series/balkans-forward-2/>.

84 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

more engagement in the region. The EU focuses on supporting reforms relating to the eradication of corruption, the improvement of the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary, although the process of European integration has stalled since 2013, when Croatia became a member. At the same time, it fails to recognize political and historical complexity of the region, in which major international actors exploit deeply established divides to advance their own geopolitical interests. This has far-reaching implications for the region's stability and its greater democratization. Some analysts warn that the countries of the Western Balkans are experiencing democratic regression, owing to „chronic neglect by the West.“ This, in turn, opens the door for the Kremlin to use the region as the next battleground for the weakening of NATO and the European Union, where Russia would be the sole reconciler and guarantor of security in a destabilized region, as part of its ambition to reposition itself as a global power⁸⁵.

The Russian threat to Euro-Atlantic security and the Western value system via Western Balkans is frequently overlooked. In July 2021, *Dimitri Trenin*, the director of the *Carnegie Moscow Centre* stated that he saw no implications of the new *Russian Strategy of National Security* for the Western Balkans, that „the Balkans are mostly on the backburner of Russia's foreign and security policy,“ and that „Moscow opposes NATO's enlargement in principle“ as its confronter in the past years⁸⁶.

It is indeed reasonable to assume that the Western Balkan countries are outside of Moscow's direct geopolitical interest, and that the region is primarily one of multiple „theatres“ for Russia's battles with the West. Consequently, unlike the Baltic states or Poland, the countries in this region often fail to regard Russia as a threat. As a result, until recently, they lacked the infrastructure to counter Russian disinformation, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and research laboratories to educate citizens about Russian threats in both real and virtual space.

⁸⁵ Read, for instance: Ivana Stradner, **Russia Is Playing With Fire in the Balkans**, *Foreign Affairs*, December 27, 2021, [russia-playing-fire-balkans](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/russia-playing-fire-balkans).

⁸⁶ **EWB Interview Trenin: Balkans are not a prime battlefield in the Russia-West confrontation**, *EWB*, July 31, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/31/ewb-interview-trenin-balkans-are-not-a-prime-battlefield-in-the-russia-west-confrontation/>.

2.3. Why does Russia opt for subversive activity in the Western Balkans and which channels does it use?

Russia does not need to invest heavily in propaganda in the Western Balkans. This is largely because it can rely on the involvement of *proxy* elites in the region.

External actors in the Western Balkans are not the main players in the domain of disinformation, instead “the bulk of disinformation in the Western Balkans is produced and disseminated by domestic actors for domestic purposes”, while external actors have a part in manipulating the actions of domestic players, including social and religious groups, media, political parties and business interests⁸⁷. Like everywhere else, it is difficult to distinguish between content sponsored by the Russian government or spread by the Russian intelligence community’s network, and content rooted in local narratives or created by local individuals who want to achieve local political goals, sometimes indirectly going the way of Russian propaganda goals.

Russian foreign policy objectives and Serbian nationalism empower one another. In the setting of the West’s reduced interest in the WB region, Serbian political elites, intelligence, the nationalist intellectual community, and the *Serbian Orthodox Church* recognize their chance to achieve hegemonic goals in the region, personified in the most recent incarnation of the *Greater Serbia* project named *Serbian World*⁸⁸. This goal cannot be achieved without the thriving of Great Serbian nationalism in the neighboring countries, which is why pro-Russian narrative is viewed as desirable. In the WB, pro-government media and an army of pro-government bots, as well as right-wing social media accounts, readily launch such narratives.

Local political players, independent from external actors, produce and fuel false narratives in WB nations, even in countries deemed to be the least vulnerable to Russian influence. Local players are often the ones who copy Russian disinformation techniques and propagate fake news in order to achieve their own interests, regardless of Russian propaganda. As a result, politicians accuse their adversaries of being „disinformation vectors.“ In Albania, for example, the fear of Russian propaganda and disinformation is sometimes used to curtail media freedoms, target political opponents and

87 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

88 **The Sources of Serbian Conduct: Analysis of Serbia’s relations with the region and guidelines for the response of Montenegro and Western allies**, June 2021, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65711430/the-sources-of-serbian-conduct>.

independent journalists, and consolidate power.⁸⁹

Russia's subversive activities have also been imitated by Hungary's most recent foreign policy activities, as well as by conservative right-wing elites, such as those who support former American President *Donald Trump*. Hungarian Prime Minister *Viktor Orban* backs Bosnian Serb leader *Milorad Dodik*, spreading a „anti-Muslim“ narrative in the media by raising the question „how to integrate a country with two million Muslims“ and fostering the deepening of inter-ethnic divisions and destabilization of the WB countries⁹⁰. Hungary's Foreign Minister declared that Hungary will „veto any request for the imposition of EU sanctions on *Milorad Dodik*“⁹¹. Hungary and Serbia found common language in the alleged *fight for the preservation of Christian values* as a pretext for non-democratic practices⁹². Such support aids Serbia frame the “Serbian World” and political actions of the Serbian Orthodox Church into a narrative of the fight for religious freedoms, despite the fact that in reality such narrative means annihilating national identity of other pre-dominantly Orthodox nations and deepening of inter-religious divisions in the neighboring countries⁹³.

Finally, the complex media ecosystems of the Western Balkans are conducive to Russian subversive actions. This is due to a number of reasons. There is significant media polarization, a concentration of power in media outlet management, a lack of regulations when it comes to online platforms, the emergence of a large number of online media running in parallel with the disappearance of local newspapers, and the explosive popularity of social networks among all age groups, particularly among the young⁹⁴.

89 Sasa Dragojlo, ‘**Fear Reigns’ in Serbian Town, Undercutting Official COVID-19 Narrative**, *BIRN*, July 6, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/06/fear-reigns-in-serbian-town-undercutting-official-covidnarrative>.

90 See more in: Jasmin Mujanović, **Hungary's Orban: Investing in the Destruction of Bosnia**, *BIRN*, January 5, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/05/hungarys-orban-investing-in-the-destruction-of-bosnia/>.

91 Zeljko Trkanjec, **Hungarian foreign minister: We will veto EU sanctions against Dodik**, *Euractiv*, December 20, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/hungarian-foreign-minister-we-will-veto-eu-sanctions-against-dodik/.

92 Read more in: **Vujo Ilić, Serbia's Vucic takes an Illiberal Turn**, *BIRN*, October 11, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/11/serbias-vucic-takes-an-illiberal-turn/>.

93 Read more in: Mira Milosevich, **Russia's Weaponization of Tradition: The case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro**, *CSIS*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro>.

94 CESID's public opinion poll in Serbia showed that 75% of the population is informed about events most often or often through social networks, and this percentage among young people under the age of 23 is as high as 88%. The population over the age of 54 relies on traditional media and as many as 62% single out television as the most used medium. A survey conducted by the Media Center of the Faculty of Political Sciences showed that every fifth consumer of news in Serbia completely abandons traditional media, social networks are one of the sources of news for 76% of the population, and a key source of news for one third. See more in **Gradani i mediji: konzumacija, navike i medijska pismenost**, *Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID)*, September 2020. <http://www.cesid.rs/istrazivanja/gradani-mediji-konzumacija-navike-medijska-pismenost/>.

The RESIS public opinion poll in Northern Macedonia for 2020 showed that 76% of respondents used television as a means of information, but an identical percentage the citizens received information about events online. Only 20% listened to the radio, and only 17% read the print media. Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 receive

2.4. Methods of launching Russian disinformation campaigns in Western Balkans online sphere

Serbia is the center of spreading Russian propaganda in the Western Balkans. The fact that Serbian language is understood or spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina, parts of Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia makes it easy for Russian propaganda to reach all six WB countries via social networks and domestic media outlets that broadcast Russian and Serbian media content. Pro-Russian disinformation narrative is promoted through several channels: a) media under the political control of the WB elites; b) media outlets that are politically or ideologically close to Russia, regardless of whether they are supported by state actors; and c) media outlets which spread false narratives for economic gain⁹⁵.

Russia seeks for media dominance through *Sputnik*, a Russian official media outlet with regional headquarters in Belgrade since 2015. The *Sputnik* news agency has been identified as the source of the majority of political disinformation in the region. Other media are free to broadcast news from Sputnik, which they do, either because it is compatible with the propaganda activities of the political elites under whose control they quite often act, or because of the need to survive on the media scene due to a lack of funding and research journalism. *Russia Today* additionally launched a webpage in 2015, and a mobile app in Serbian was produced in 2018⁹⁶.

As will be demonstrated later through individual headline examples, Russian media outlets engage in historical revisionism of Russian-Serbian ties, emphasizing common Slavic origin and Orthodox religious identity, while also placing a Serbian nationalist narrative that denies other national and ethnic identities and sees Serbia within the „natural“ boundaries of the Greater Serbia via a new doctrine dubbed „Serbian World.“

information exclusively via the Internet, which is also used every day by the population between the ages of 16 and 49. In Kosovo, an IPSOS survey shows that as many as 82% of the population use television as an information platform on a daily basis, while less than 10% use “traditional” media such as radio and print media. Television is followed by social networks, which are used as the most common source of information by as many as 65% of the population over the age of 18, followed by newspaper web portals through which 45% of the population is informed. Portals are especially popular among the ethnic Serbian population (mostly portals based in the Republic of Serbia). Among young people aged 18 to 29, social networks are the dominant source of information - as many as 88% use them, and then they are most often informed through web portals - as many as 53%. See more in **The ImpAct of New Media on the Formation of Public Opinion and on the Work of Traditional Media**, RESIS, 2020, <https://resis.mk/en/research/publications>.

95 Darko Brkan, Aleksandra Grdinić, Milovan Papić, Marko Pankovski, Veronika Vichova, Joey Gurney, Iliyana Georgieva, Adam Lelonek, Marta Kowalska, Patrik Szicherle, and Kristina Urbanova, **Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia**, European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/assessment.pdf>

96 Read more in: Miriam Matthews, Alyssa Demus, Elina Treyger, Marek N. Posard, Hilary Reinnger, Christopher Paul, Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe, RAND Corporation, 2021, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1145376.pdf>.

In Serbia and Republika Srpska, in addition to Russian media, state-controlled local media play an important role in promoting pro-Russian and anti-western narratives, and they are joined by a number of actors on social media. The portals linked to official Russian circles and Russian intelligence agencies deal extensively with the Western Balkans in their analyses, while the mainstream media under the control of President Vučić's inner circle, as well as minor Serbian media, provide them with convenient space for the placement of false narratives. According to international institutions' reports, Serbian tabloids such as *Informer*, *Kurir*, *Srpski telegraf*, and *Alo* are under direct control of the ruling elites, and the fact that the content is understood by the majority of neighboring countries' populations broadens the scope of Russian-Serbian propaganda.⁹⁷ There is no investigative journalism in them; instead, tabloids exist to serve the demands of the campaign against political opponents, thanks to lucrative financial deals and support from government or local self-government projects. The entire society is perpetually in the midst of a pre-election campaign. Russian disinformation is also promoted via nationalist webportals such as *Crvene beretke*, *Nacionalist*, and others, as well as smaller media sources that amplify the available content on larger portals in order to survive. In North Macedonia, social networks are flooded with fake accounts, which started to appear in the run-up to the referendum on the name change, in particular.

Russian officials and Russian intelligence circles act in concert in disinformation dissemination. According to the *Global Engagement Centre* report, the *Katehon* portal, founded by the aforementioned Russian oligarch Malofeev, is involved in activities related to the annexation of Crimea, support for Russian troops in Donbas, election interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and taking over media outlets in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia. According to the Report, a *Katehon* Board member, *Leonid Reshetnikov*, was involved in the planning of the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016.⁹⁸

The intelligence agencies' tactics for launching the Russian narrative in the Western Balkans also include creating accounts on social media for non-existent think tanks, NGOs, or news outlets. Initially, fictional organizations and media outlets issue news about conflicts and political events throughout the world, which is subsequently disseminated by *Potemkin figures*, i.e. fake personal accounts created by Russian intelligence services⁹⁹. This was the case ahead of Montenegro's NATO admission.

97 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

98 **GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System**, U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

99 Renee Diresta and Shelby Grossman, **Potemkin Pages and Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019**, Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center, 2020, <https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf>.

According to a *Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center* research, some of the web pages that post universal narratives are intended for the general public in a large number of countries around the world, while others are established for the purpose of launching false narratives in a specific country. For example, the *Russian military intelligence service - GRU* - produced the *Victory for Peace* web page in March 2015 as part of the *InfoRos* project¹⁰⁰. The motivation for creating this website was to prepare for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, or the Allied troops' victory in World War II. The *Victory for Peace* page acquired a huge number of advertisements with the goal of highlighting Russia's role in World War II and spreading some of the regular narratives developed by the Russian Federation in order to show the West's actions as morally dubious and to rationalize the annexation of Crimea. There is a narrative that the West „forgot“ who liberated them, that „Crimea and Sevastopol have returned to their historic fatherland“, that the Western forces' failure to open the Western Front resulted in the USSR bearing an additional burden of defense against Nazism, and that the Red Army occupied Eastern Europe for humanitarian reasons. One of the advertisements, purchased for 3,000 rubles, was aimed at Serbia, among other countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, UK, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Norway, Poland, Romania).

The non-existent *Montenegrin news agency* (CGNA) was established in the run-up to the crucial election ahead of Montenegrin NATO membership¹⁰¹. The goal of this website, according to its description was “to become one of the reliable and credible source of news about government, politics, economy, market, business, sport and lifestyle”. The page disseminated the content with anti-NATO and anti-EU propaganda, but also the one against then-Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović, and tried to call into question the integrity of the 2016 autumn election. Taken together, the logical assumption is that this „news agency“ was part of a larger intelligence operation run by the *Kremlin*, with the goal of preventing the pro-western option from winning the 2016 Parliamentary election, and thus attempting to block Montenegro's accession to NATO the following year. In addition, a *Twitter* account @crnagoranews was formed, similar to the *cgna.info*, *crnagoranews.wordpress.com*, and *cgna.me* web pages, which have all been deactivated or are being used for other purposes. Among *Potemkin's* figures sharing information on CGNA, Jelena Rakočević and Milko Pejović stand out.

100 InfoRos is a Russian agency registered with the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, which publishes the content in Russian and English. Although the page was active for only one month, the website under the same name was created on 7th April 2015 and together with the Twitter profile continued posting information. More reading in: Renee Diresta and Shelby Grossman, **Potemkin Pages and Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019**, *Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center*, 2020, <https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf>.

101 *Ibidem*.

On the eve of Montenegro's NATO admission, both profiles were actively disseminating misinformation in the country.

There are also local *proxy* actors for Russian propaganda on social media. Most often these websites are founded by radical right-wing organizations with established links with Russian elites and Russian right-wing actors (as in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro), but also nationalist parties and organizations that see Russian propaganda as an opportunity to strengthen their positions.

2.5. Pre-dominant narratives of Russian propaganda activities in Western Balkans

The Atlantic Council of Montenegro points out in its analysis published by the NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communications, that the following narratives are produced by the Kremlin via Sputnik Serbia in order to achieve Russian regional goals: a) the Western Balkans region is a site of East-West conflict; b) it is unstable and prone to conflict; c) the EU is a hegemonic organization; d) WB countries are weak, incapable, and corrupt, and that human rights in them are jeopardized; e) the EU and NATO are weak and disunited; f) NATO is aggressive and provocative; g) Montenegro invests efforts focused at revising history; h) NATO brings no benefits to its members¹⁰².

Russian media portrays Western Europe and the United States as losers in the geopolitical battle against Russia and China. Furthermore, in the international squabbles and frictions in the Western Balkans, these media plainly stand with Serbia and pro-Serbian actors in neighboring countries, particularly Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russian propaganda narrative presents Russia as a protector of Slavic people, its army is proclaimed superior, and Russian President Putin is assigned almost „super-human“ characteristics. Since the Western Balkans is not an appealing destination for refugees and migrants, the right-wing narrative is less focused on spreading anti-migration feelings, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where fear of Muslim infiltration from the Middle East is fostered among Bosnian Serbs¹⁰³.

¹⁰² **Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija**, Atlantic Council of Montenegro/ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, April 30, 2020, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-narratives-toward-the-western-balkans-analysis-of-sputnik-srbija/56>

¹⁰³ Tihomira Doncheva, **Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media**, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/tracking_russias_narratives_western_balkan_media_30-04_v4.pdf.

The placement of the following dual narratives tries to undermine perceptions of the European Union: a) that the EU is discriminatory, imperialist, and hegemonic; and b) that the EU is weak, plagued with challenges such as migration, and fails to fulfill commitments made to the Western Balkans. The first set of narratives is meant for supporters of European integration, while the second is aimed at Eurosceptics, with the intention of instilling a sense of general dissatisfaction with EU goals and policy¹⁰⁴.

The EU-related narrative is adjusted to the specificities of individual countries¹⁰⁵. In Serbia and Montenegro, which are candidate countries, the pre-dominant narrative is that, owing to internal tensions, the EU will be unable to meet the target of admitting the two countries by 2025. Russia is particularly interested in placing this narrative in Montenegro, especially after the unsuccessful attempt to prevent Montenegrin NATO accession and bearing in mind that Montenegro has gone the furthest in EU membership negotiations, with the level of EU accession support normally exceeding 70%, sometimes even up to 80%¹⁰⁶. In Serbia, among Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and among Serbs in Kosovo, there is widespread disinformation that the European Union supports the Serbs' opponents, particularly Muslims, Albanians, NGOs, neighboring countries, and often members of Serb political elites in these countries. Disinformation about the worsening of relations between the EU and the US, the formation of the EU Army that will allegedly oust NATO, the conflict over sanctions against Russia and Iran, the Nordstream II, and other issues are particularly prevalent in pro-western countries in the Western Balkans.

All outstanding issues in Western Balkans are of interest for Russian propaganda activities. Russia is seeking to promote narratives about Western backing for Kosovo Albanians and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while simultaneously keeping alive the idea of „exchange of lands“ between Serbia and Kosovo, the secession of Republika Srpska, and the establishment of the „Greater Albania.“ While the latter is presented as a dangerous project with negative implications, the narrative on the „Serbian World“ or the rebirth of the idea of the „Greater Serbia“ is connoted in a positive fashion and is not viewed as a threat to Western Balkan stability, but rather as historically inevitable and vital for averting further plans for the “extermination” of Serbian population.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ **Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija**, *Atlantic Council of Montenegro/ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, April 30, 2020, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-narratives-toward-the-western-balkans-analysis-of-sputnik-srbija/56>.

¹⁰⁶ **EU is losing PR battle and the soft power in the Western Balkans**, *European Western Balkans*, December 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/07/eu-is-losing-the-pr-battle-and-the-soft-power-in-the-western-balkans/>.

2.6. Global Russian media and their coverage of Western Balkans

The State Department Global Engagement Centre (GEC) Report shows that Russian global web portals have exceptional role in spreading disinformation in online sphere¹⁰⁷. Western Balkans is not exempt from that general rule.

The outstanding issues in Western Balkans are in the focus of attention of the online magazine *Strategic Culture Foundation*, registered in Russia. According to the findings of the *GEC*, the magazine is managed by the Russian *Foreign Intelligence Service*, and cooperates closely with Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁰⁸. This portal is known for presenting conspiracy theorists from the West as serious analysts, and it also published the Serbian webpage *Fond strateške kulture* for the seven years.

Sputnik Serbia shared only one story related to the portal, mentioning the conference organized under the aegis of the *Strategic Culture Fund*, which was titled „Is Serbia in line with Western democracy?“¹⁰⁹ whilst domestic, state portals and tabloids close to Vučić spearheaded in dissemination of content. By the end of 2013, for instance, *In4S* published all 100 original articles of the *Fund*, and has a special section for its authors¹¹⁰. The portal of the daily *Blic* was transmitting parts of announcements, citing the authors of the *Strategic Culture Fund* as legitimate researchers, research assistants, and experts. The portal of the daily *Politika* was transmitting the content to a lesser extent, though it did share the interview with the editor-in-chief of the portal *Strategic Culture Fund* in Serbian, *Anja Filimonova* and her “defence” by the associate of the *Fund* Zoran Čvorović on the occasion of the article “Comrade Filimonova” written by *Boško Jakšić* questioning the sense of the Euro-Asian integration of Serbia¹¹¹.

On the occasion of the Strategic Culture Fund’s Serbian page closure after seven years of operation, the Editorial Board issued a statement on

107 **GEC Special Report: Pillar’s of Russia’s Disinformation Propaganda System**, *U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center*, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

108 **GEC Special Report: Pillar’s of Russia’s Disinformation Propaganda System**, *U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center*, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

109 **Da li je Srbija po meri zapadne demokratije**, *Sputnik Srbija*, April 17, 2016. https://rs.sputniknews.com/organization_Fond_strateshke_kulture/.

110 In4S portal, articles of the authors of the Strategic Culture Fund: <https://www.in4s.net/author/fond-strateske-kulture/>.

111 In one of the interviews for *Politika*, Filimonova explains that Russia did “betray” Serbia by not reacting in 1999, but Russia then and Russia ten years after are not the same, and presents the model of Euro-Asian intergration of Serbia. She also states that by “discovering Serbia, Russia returns to itself, regains its fullness. Since Serbia is a part of the Russian World. And for us now, on the level of civilization, the most important thing is the renewal of the Russian World” <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/309046/Srbija-je-strateski-saveznik-Rusije>

December 1st, 2017, stating, among other things, „Although we are extremely sad about that fact, we assure you that we were not afraid and that we did nothing to contribute to the extinguishing of this unique light in the media darkness that reigns over Serbia, which showed, on the one hand, all spiritual reality of the Serbian-Russian brotherhood, and on the other, that the best among Serbs and Russians are true promoters of Truth, Justice and Law”¹¹².

The events in Western Balkans are occasionally in the focus of attention of *Global Research*, the website registered in Canada, which occasionally transmits the news from Russian web portals such as *Russia Today*, combined with the analyses of Russian views by Western commentators, which makes it, according to the assessment of *The Economist* the hub for conspiracy theories and false stories¹¹³. The portal was established in 2001 by *Michael Chossudovsky*, professor of Ottawa University, author of numerous articles on the dissolution and conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and a witness at the trial to *Slobodan Milošević* for war crimes, including genocide and crimes against humanity¹¹⁴.

According to *GEC* research, this portal frequently serves to recruit authors for other portals linked to the Russian intelligence community, such as *South Front*, *Strategic Culture Foundation*, *Geopolitica.ru*, *Sputnik*, but also Chinese media for false narratives placement, such as *The 4th Media*. The founder, *Chossudovsky*, for instance, first served as a member and then as Chair of *The 4th Media* International Advisory Board. As international community began to step up its efforts to combat Russian disinformation operations, the aforementioned websites even attempted to conceal mutual ties¹¹⁵.

One of the website's tactics is to popularize and include local fake narratives in larger conspiracy theories aimed at endangering Western democracies. It frequently collaborates with Russian alt-right American *Twitter* users. For instance, a pro-government website in Syria released an article implying that a chemical attack in Syria in 2017 did not occur but was fabricated by *Hillary Clinton* in order to trigger a missile assault. The material was then distributed via the Russian website *Global Research*, only to be promoted in the United States by the website *Infowars*, which is linked to Russian *troll networks*. The website alters one of the favorite topics of Russian and other ultra-right-wing propagandists, that the above operation

112 Fond Strateške kulture u Srbiji prestao sa radom, KM Novine, December 1, 2017, <https://www.kmnovine.com/2017/12/fond-strateske-kulture.html>

113 How a pair of self-publicists wound up as apologists for Assad, *The Economist*, April 15, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2017/04/15/how-a-pair-of-self-publicists-wound-up-as-apologists-for-assad>.

114 GEC Special Report: Pillar's of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System, U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

115 Ibidem.

allegedly orchestrated by the former American State Secretary was „funded by Soros“. On the basis of the same plot, *Mike Cernovich*, a well-known American conspiracy theorist, coined the viral hashtag *#SyriaHoax*.¹¹⁶

Contrary to the *Strategic Culture Fund*, one can notice a much smaller number of *Global Research* articles on Western Balkans in recent years. The latter is less willing to put its own narrative regarding Western Balkans, but rather to utilize the articles on Western Balkans to portray the imperialism and unscrupulousness of the West and to promote the correctness of the Russian worldview. American author *Carla Stea*, a correspondent of the Global Research from the UN headquarters in New York, usually publishes the articles on “ethnic killing of Russians and minorities in Baltic states”, sympathy for North Korea which “was at war with American power for 70 years”, “frightening social consequences of American sanctions imposed on North Korea”. However, in April 2021, she also published a research titled “United Nations Security Council: World Peace and Security Ignored (1950-2021)” in which, beside the examples of the alleged unscrupulousness of West, there are statements of Russian permanent representative and his deputy in New York in which they warn of “demonization of Serbs” and “silence over the sins of others”¹¹⁷.

With Montenegro’s approaching to NATO membership, *Global Research* began publishing the analyses of „American political commentators“, such as correspondents of the *Oriental Review* portal under the auspices of the *Sputnik agency*. For example, American author *Andrew Korybko* writes: „The United States brings a new Cold War directly to Russia’s doorstep.“ *Intermarium and Central Balkans*,” and elaborates the concept of forming a „Central Balkans“ focused on Serbia. Serbia would be strategically linked to North Macedonia and Republika Srpska, and with Russia’s help, it would become a formidable geopolitical force in Europe¹¹⁸.

The Geopolitica.ru runs a page in Serbian, where it publishes analyses on global politics. A special section is dedicated to the ideology of *neo-Eurasianism* spread by *Aleksandar Dugin* entitled *Duginove smjernice [Dugin’s guidelines]*¹¹⁹ where one can read the articles like: “Globalization is abolished - and, how to proceed?”, “What lies in store for the World of

116 Jack O. Nassetta and Ethan P. Fecht, *All the World is Staged: An Analysis of Social Media Influence Operations against US Counterproliferation*, CNS, 2018, <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/op37-all-the-world-is-staged.pdf>.

Liam Stack, *Who is Mike Cernovich? A guide*, The New York Times, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/us/politics/mike-cernovich-bio-who.html>.

How a pair of self-publicists wound up as apologists for Assad, *The Economist*, April 15, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2017/04/15/how-a-pair-of-self-publicists-wound-up-as-apologists-for-assad>.

117 Articles by Carla Stea on Global Research: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/author/carla-stea>.

118 Articles by Andrew Korybko on Global Research: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/author/andrew-korybko>.

119 Articles within the section *Duginove smjernice* on *Geopolitica.ru*: <https://www.geopolitica.ru/sr/directives>.

idiots?”. The articles glorify *Ratko Mladić*, convicted for war crimes in former Yugoslavia, including the genocide in Srebrenica. Also, the analyses of Serbian pro-Russian analysts are posted, like the one written by *Živadin Jovanović* entitled “Great Britain and the United States still stick to the principles: “Don’t trust Serbia”. There are also conspiracy theories on the events in Kosovo from 1999, and special attention is paid to the politics of the West in relation to Serbia. Serbian tabloids like the *Kurir*, *Informer* etc. often transmit the content from the *Geopolitica.ru*.

News Front portal, which is a Russian web portal created in November 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, is also worth mentioning. As noticed by *EUvsDisinfo*, the web portal is funded by the Russian security service, and the content is posted in Russian, German, English, Serbian, Spanish, Bulgarian, French and Hungarian¹²⁰. The fact that there is no identical news in different languages, but only those relevant to the population in a certain linguistic area, confirms that this web portal is an important element of the well-designed disinformation operation. English version readers are informed about the „USA breakdown“ and the „deep state,“ German readers about the „migrant background,“ and Russian readers, as expected, about Eastern Ukraine. In this way Russian strategic priorities are successfully linked with the fight against the phenomena disliked by a considerable number of readers, like feminism and migration in Germany, right-wing extremism, American imperialism in Great Britain etc.

It is interesting that there is none of all these web portals has any news or analysis about the *Open Balkan* or *Mini Schengen*, a topic that captivates the whole world community when it comes to the Western Balkans.

¹²⁰ No news on the News Front, How a Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Outlet Tailors Content to Different European Audiences, *EUvsDISINFO*, April 29, 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/no-news-on-the-news-front/>.

CASE STUDIES



3.1. SERBIA

Understanding the growth of nationalist sentiment in Serbia and elsewhere in the region requires a look at the historical context. The *Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* of 1986 opened ideological path for the region's nationalist discourse to triumph over the necessity for democratic and political transformation. In the late 1980s, military and political elites built and reactivated historical myths in order to mobilize the population and resources for the impending war and "defense of the Serbs". *Slobodan Milosevic* took control of the media and used it as a "weapon of war" to achieve the political aim of "All Serbs in One State" and the strategic goal of forcible territory conquest¹²¹ The media space was flooded by the intellectuals and politicians who declared that "the Serbian people must reclaim their self-love and self-confidence and defend themselves," those who deployed mythology and historically reinforced prejudices and ostracism towards anyone who would name 90s events nationalism. Independent journalists were regularly labeled "so-called" and accused of working as foreign agents¹²².

The central point of the revised history is that during WWII, the *Chetniks* protected Serbia against "Croatian fascists and Ustashas" and Bosniak "traitors"¹²³. Several other important historical events and personalities fueled nationalist narratives in Serbia public discourse: the violence in Kosovo in 1997 and 1998, NATO intervention in 1999, the spillover of the conflict to North Macedonia, *Slobodan Milošević's* rule, the assassination of Prime Minister *Dinđić*. Dealing with the past has never occurred in Serbia, and the attempt to lustrate and comprehend the socialist past has devolved into a review of the history of the "*Chetnik* national movement".¹²⁴ The efforts to "rehabilitate

¹²¹ Renaud de La Brosse, **Political Propaganda and the Project "All Serbs in One State": The Consequences of the Instrumentalization of Media for Ultranationalist Purposes**, Prosecutor's Office of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, January 2003, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_milosevic/prosexp/bcs/rep-srb-b.htm.

¹²² Ibidem.

¹²³ Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), **Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge**, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

¹²⁴ Jelena Djureinovic, **Serbia's Ruling Party is Rewriting World War II History**, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, May 17, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/17/serbias-ruling-party-is-rewriting-world-war-ii-history/>.

the Chetniks” or the “Ravna Gora movement,” as well as to modify history by calling both partisans and Chetniks anti-fascists gained in strength in the early 2000s. Despite the *Alliance of Anti-Fascists of Serbia*’s attempts to clarify that “Chetniks” was a conventional collaborationist movement and military force, the *Chetnik* general *Dragoljub Draža Mihailović* was rehabilitated. This unlocked the Pandora’s Box, because identification with the *Chetnik* nationalist movement was also related to the activities of the Serbian army throughout the 1990s wars. The narrative of Serb victimization was revived, nationalism became the new normal, and “nationalism” and “anti-fascism” became equated.¹²⁵

While Russia was not particularly interested in the Western Balkans during the Yeltsin era, in the mid-1990s intelligence and academic envoys became increasingly present in Serbia, serving a dual purpose: 1) supporting Serbian right-wing forces and connecting Russian and Serbian right-wing forces; and 2) placing official Moscow messages and creating closer ties between the two official addresses, including political attacks on Serbian leaders when they did not serve Russia’s interest¹²⁶. Russian propaganda, as well as the rise of populism and right-wing forces in Western Europe and America, created a fertile field for nationalist discourse in Serbia and the Western Balkans¹²⁷. Serbian political elites had their own interest, as by exploiting the cases of Crimea and the creation of “republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk, Serbia might further legitimize the “correctness” of its role in the 1990s wars and thus avoid confronting the past.

In the mid-1990s, several interpreters of Russian ideological views, such as *Yelena Guskova*, head of the *Center for Balkan Crisis at the Institute of Slavic Studies* of the *Russian Academy of Sciences*, and *Alexander Dugin*, Russian philosopher and politician and propagandist of Eurasian geopolitics, became active on the Serbian political scene¹²⁸. *Eurasianism*, seen in Russian philosophy as an idea and geopolitical guide to action with roots in the 1930s, has not remained solely the Russian intellectual and political far-right idea. During 2012 and 2013, the official Russia began to favor the idea of a Eurasian Union as an alternative to the EU. The papers of the main Russian *Eurasianists*,

¹²⁵ Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, Balkan Politics and Society, April 2019.

¹²⁶ Ibidem.

¹²⁷ More in: Izabela Kisic (ed.), *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia (Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji)*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, March 2020, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/desni%20ekstremizam.pdf>.

¹²⁸ Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, Balkan Politics and Society, April 2019.

and in fact fascist thinkers such as *Dugin*¹²⁹ and Alexander Prokhanov¹³⁰, prefer referring to the “Eurasian Empire”. From that perspective, the occupation and annexation of Crimea, followed by the outbreak of separatist wars in eastern Ukraine, were entirely legitimate and one of the necessary, though minor links in the chain of Eurasian geopolitics implementation. The entire “Eurasian school” is based on the perspective of *Ivan Ilyin*, a Russian fascist thinker from the interwar period. *Ilyin*, initially an advocate of the rule of law and a principled opponent of the *Bolshevik* revolution, turned to fascism after emigrating¹³¹ and repeatedly pointed out that Mussolini and Hitler were his leadership role models. Like other fascist thinkers, he saw the ideal of the (Russian) state as an order led by a leader-savior who comprehended the country’s goal and direction and who should be followed. If there are political parties in society, their duty is not to establish political pluralism, but to assist the leader to fulfill his mission and to lead the country. Elections serve the same purpose of garnering collective support for the leader-savior and, in contrast to Western democracies, should be held in public with signed ballots rather than in secret. *Ilyin’s* papers began to be published in Russia after the communist regime collapsed, but his work saw a true resurgence once Putin came to power. Putin arranged for the transportation of *Ilyin’s* remains from Switzerland and reburial in Moscow in 2005. In his annual addresses to the country, Putin began to quote *Ilyin* and evoke his authority. This paved the path for *Ilyin’s* work to become more widely known. Putin’s “propaganda magician,” *Vladislav Surkov*, adjusted *Ilyin’s* articles for mass media interpretations, and *Dmitriy Medvedev* advised Russian youngsters to become acquainted with *Ilyin’s* ideas and work.¹³²

129 Alexander Dugin, a Russian philosopher and political strategist, was the organizer of several ultra-right wing political parties. Together with the much better known “bomber” of Sarajevo in our region, Eduard Limonov, he founded the *National Bolshevik Party*, then the *National Bolshevik Front*, and, finally, the *Eurasian Party*. Dugin never hid his organicist philosophy of society, corporatist understanding of the state and fascist ideology, on the contrary. In an interview given to the Polish newspaper *Frona* (1999), he explained: “In Russian Orthodox Christianity, an individual is part of the church, part of the collective organism, just as the foot is. So how can an individual be responsible for himself? Can the foot be responsible for itself? Hence the idea of the state, the total state. That is why the Russians, being Orthodox, can be true fascists, unlike the Italian artificial fascists...”. Only a few years earlier, in the article *Fascism - Borderless and Red*, he had announced the arrival of “real, true, radically revolutionary consistent fascist fascism” in Russia. Despite the often controversial and tense relations between the “Eurasianists” and the Kremlin, the fact that their influence remained not only on the margins of Russian politics, but also reached the top, is evidenced by the fact that Dugin was an adviser to two Russian Duma presidents, Gennadiy Seleznyov, and Sergei Naryshkin, and Naryshkin is now the director of Russia’s intelligence service, the FSB.

130 Alexander Prokhanov, a Russian writer, editor of the extreme right-wing, ultranationalist newspaper *Zavtra (Завтра)*, supported Gennadiy Zyuganov’s Communist Party of Russia for a long time, and yet turned to the nationalist party of Rodin in the mid-2000s. In 2012, Prokhanov founded the Eurasian think-tank *Izborsk Club*. Like other Eurasianists, he supported Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and called Alexander Borodai, prime minister of the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic, a “true white Russian nationalist.”

131 After leaving Russia in 1922, Ilyin lived and worked in Berlin until 1938, when he moved to Switzerland, where he died in 1954.

132 See more about Ilyin and his influence in Russia in: Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, *Tim Duggan Books*, New York 2018. i: Timothy Snyder, *Ivan Ilyin, Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism*, *The New York Review*, New York, March 16, 2018.

Anti-Western ideologies and their protagonists became increasingly present on the Serbian political scene. *Yelena Guskova*, author of the book “Yugoslav Crisis,” which *Milošević* used in his defense in The Hague, was a regular visitor and member of the *Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU)* since 2007. In all of her speeches, she encouraged anti-Western sentiments in Serbia and actively interfered in internal affairs, for example, by opposing *Zoran Dindić*, glorifying the *Serbian Radical Party*. She was also accusing the US and the EU of funding the “Resistance” movement as a model for further colored revolutions around the world, as well as of financing Montenegrin independence. *Guskova* also criticized *Vučić*, in a balanced way, for he “pays attention only to what the West tells him”, and cooperated with radical right-wing groups. At the same time, she was reiterating the support of the official Russian authorities to President *Vučić* and his policy towards Kosovo.

Alexander Dugin, known as the founder of the *National Bolshevik Party* which was supposed to unite the “radical right wing” and the “radical left wing” in an effort to remove the then-Russian President *Boris Yeltsin* from power, became active on the Serbian political and media scene in 2007.¹³³ In 2008, he launched the idea of Eurasian geopolitical reality at the University of Belgrade, according to which Putin would position Russia as a global player, and Serbia’s elites would have a clear choice - either join the “Eurasian Empire” or be remembered as traitors to the Serbian state. *Dugin* is intensively present in the media in Serbia, such as *Politika*, *Informer*, *Patriot*, *Pravda*, *Vaseljenska*, *SRBski FBReporter*, *Srbinfo*.

The *radical right wing* in Serbia has been an additional conduit for spreading Russian propaganda influence since the 1990s. It can be classified into two categories. One, such as the Serbian Radical Party, developed amid Yugoslavia’s disintegration. It was active during the Yugoslav conflicts, with connections to or participation in war crimes. The second type evolved in the last 20 years, and it was connected to the worldwide crisis of liberal democracy and Russia’s geostrategic ambitions, or the threat that Russia perceived in NATO and the EU strengthening. The radical right-wingers of the second wave are also more modern and resemble skinhead right-wingers in the United Kingdom¹³⁴.

Since 2002, and especially after 2010, when a closer connection between Russia and Serbia was established, a number of radical right-wing parties and organizations, such as *Naši (Ours)*, *Zavetnici (Patrons)*, *Dveri (Gates)*, *Srpski narodni pokret 1389 (Serbian People’s Movement 1389)*, *Obraz*

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Marta Vasic, *Genesis and Trends of the Extreme Right Wing in Today’s Serbia (Geneza i trendovi ekstremne desnice u današnjoj Srbiji)*, Talas, October 27, 2020, <https://talas.rs/2020/10/27/geneza-i-trendovi-ekstremne-desnice-u-danasnjoj-srbiji/>.

(Face), *Nacionalni stroj* (National Alignment), *Krv i cast* (Blood and Honor), *Srpska akcija* (Serbian Action), popped up on the Serbian political scene. Both Russian and Serbian “*Naši*” (Ours) are inspired by the idea of Eurasian connectivity. The second wave did not drive out the previous radical right, rather they fed off each other. The invasion of Crimea and Russia’s renewed interest in the Western Balkans coincided with the rebirth of the Serbian Radical Party and its election to Parliament in 2016 with as many as 22 seats out of a total of 250.

The main feature of the narratives promoted by these organizations is the ease with which different historical periods and characters can be merged to depict the Serbian people’s perpetual struggle for freedom and existence, amid constant threats of extinction. All of these organizations promote similar narratives, claiming that Croats were “fascists” and “Ustashas,” and that *Operation Storm* was genocide against the Serbian people, that no war crimes occurred in Srebrenica, but rather the defense of the state against *Islamic fundamentalism*, and that Muslims committed genocide against the Serbian nation while praising *Chetnik nationalism*.¹³⁵ *Zavetnici* (The Patrons) wear Russian military ornaments as a symbol, and use traditional *Chetnik* greetings (thumb, forefinger and middle finger joined), glorifying “Russian heroes” who “gave their lives for the defense of the Serbian state and nation.”¹³⁶ They regularly celebrate “Vidovdan” (the day of the Battle of Kosovo), carrying a photo of *Gavrilo Princip*. The spectrum of “enemies” who “threaten the Serbian people” is wide - fascists (Croats) and Muslims, Ustashas (the term often including Montenegrins whose national identity is denied), pro-Western NGOs, Western organizations, the international community, especially the EU, ICTY, RECOM, Radio Free Europe, Soros, gay lobby, but also Serbian authorities and “non-patriotic Serbs”.

The Serbian state’s and its elites’ support for Serbian extreme right-wing groups is a major element in their radicalization and greater presence in the media and on social media. Right-wing organizations in Serbia function as a sort of controlled opposition to President *Vučić*. Following Crimea’s annexation, dozens of mercenary soldiers and warriors joined pro-Russian forces throughout Ukraine. President *Vučić* occasionally attends gatherings organized by the radical right-wing groups, such as the *National Avant-Garde Association* conference, which was held on October 5, 2018, with the goal of analyzing the events of the October 5, 2000 revolution from a security standpoint. The conference took a truly harsh stance against all those involved in the fall of *Slobodan Milosevic*’s regime. In the speeches, it was commonly noted that journalists, NGO representatives, opposition

¹³⁵ More in: Izabela Kisic (ed.), *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia* (*Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*), Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, March 2020 <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/desni%20ekstremizam.pdf>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

members, and members of the media were subversive groups “abused” by outside entities¹³⁷.

Two important national institutions, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, continue to play almost unchanged role as in the 90s. These institutions actively support the normalization of nationalist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Albanian rhetoric, as well as Vucic’s hunt for internal and external enemies and Serbian hegemony over other Western Balkan countries embodied in propaganda of the “Serbian world.” While the activities of hooligan soccer groups such as *Grobar (Undertaker)* and *Delije (Heroes)* were linked to street violence without an ideological foundation, it appears that the extremism of their actions, as well as the power of mobilization among young people, easily found common ground with radical right-wing ideologically colored groups, with synergistic action in real and online space. While Russian-Serbian academics and Church officials shape the nationalist sentiment in Serbia in ideological sense, hooligan fan groups allied to the Serbian authorities are developing youth networks that can be mobilized when needed to achieve nationalist goals both inside and outside Serbia. The slogan “Kosovo is Serbia” appeared on the home page of *Delije’s* website, and *Partizan* supporters proclaimed their intention to go to the “frontline to protect Serbianhood and the Saint Sava faith.”¹³⁸ Fans have tattooed war and religious motifs, thus a Saint Sava temple and a hand grenade can be found “next to each other.” In short, among today’s hooligans there is also reminiscent of supporters who volunteered to join paramilitary formations like the *Serbian Volunteer Guard* led by *Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan*.

The radical right-wing organizations are supported by a *whole plead of actors on the Russian political scene*. They particularly collaborate closely with the radical right-wing Russian organizations. For example, late *Ilya Goryachev*, a representative of the radical right-wing Russian parliamentary party National Alliance, was inspired by a meeting with *Obraz (Face)* leader *Mladen Obradovic* to establish a Russian representation of Serbian *Obraz* and successfully have *Seselj* declared an honorary citizen of Moscow. The Russian offshoot was active when the Serbian *Obraz* was temporarily banned in 2012. The fact that *Goryachev* was sentenced to life imprisonment in Russia in 2013 for five murders on ideological grounds, including anti-fascist activists, journalists and others due to their “non-Russian” appearance¹³⁹,

¹³⁷ Saša Ilić, *Naprednjačke igre bezbjednosti*, *Peščanik*, October 9, 2018 <https://pescanik.net/naprednjacke-igre-bezbednosti/>.

¹³⁸ Ivan Čolović, *Navijači – huligani i novi fašizam*, *Peščanik*, September 11, 2012, <https://pescanik.net/navijaci-huligani-i-novi-fasizam/>.

¹³⁹ Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

speaks volumes about the radical nature of his actions. Shortly afterwards, Goryachev committed suicide in custody in Moscow.

Serbian radical right-wing organizations are also in close contact with Russian officials. First, Serbian *Obraz* established contact with *United Russia's* delegate, Russian Duma vice-president *Maksim Mishchenko*, who was in Serbia to commemorate ten years of NATO bombing¹⁴⁰. For example, after visiting Moscow in 2013 and learning that there were roughly 3,000 church-military societies in Russia that brought together teenagers and older youth, *Naši* decided to form similar organizations in Serbia. They also joined the *Russian Federal Agency for Youth Affairs*. *Zavetnici* developed close ties with Russia, routinely visiting the Russian Duma and meeting with the leaders of the United Russia.

Both Vučić and the radical right wing in Serbia find a source and legitimacy for their nationalist narratives in the falsified or revised history of the Serbian people. The pre-dominant myth that pervades such a history is that Serbs are perpetual victims of neighbors backed by imperial powers, and that they face constant threats. As a guest on *Prva TV*, Serbia's President commented on the condemnation of the *Jasenovac camp* in a newly produced movie as follows: "No one made such a comment on the movie about Srebrenica, where a horrific atrocity occurred. Victimization was not considered wrong at the time, but when Serbs produce a movie about being victims, victimization is horrifying, because Serbs will become homogeneous again, and as soon as Serbs become a little stronger, they should be hit in the head and lowered. Many people in the region and around the world believe this."¹⁴¹

Speaking about the situation in Montenegro before the 2020 elections, Vučić said that "Serbs in Montenegro are deprived of almost everything except the air"¹⁴², and that after the change of government he said „it is clear to everyone that the policy of Greater Montenegrin nationalism of Milo Djukanovic and his anti-Serbian hysteria which has been spread for months, cannot bring serious results."¹⁴³ Serbian elites perceive and frame Serbia's regional hegemony as "anti-fascist", while fascism is reserved for "others" against whom Serbs must protect themselves (Croats, Muslims, Albanians, Montenegrins). In Serbian pro-government tabloids, Montenegrins (*Crnogorci* in Montenegrin) are called *Milogorci*; "Djilas's bastards", the Croats are called "Ustashas", etc.

140 **NATO – Yes and No** (NATO – Da ili Ne), *Helsinki Bulletin*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, April 2009, <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/HB-Br24.pdf>.

141 "As soon as Serbs get stronger, they should be hit in the head and lowered", President Vucic on the significance of the movie "Dara from Jasenovac", *Danas*, February 27, 2021, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/cim-srbi-ocajaju-need-to-hit-them-in-the-head-and-lower-the-president-vucic-o-znacaju-filma-dara-iz-2021-02-27>.

142 Tomislav Markovic, **Aleksandar Vucic, fighter against Greater Montenegrin nationalism**, *Balkans Aljazeera*, February 14, 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2021/2/14/aleksandar-vucic-borac-protiv-velikocrnogorskog-nacionalizma>

143 **I am big enough not to allow humiliation**, *Politika*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/472453/Dovoljno-sam-veliki-da-ne-dozvolim-ponizavanje>.

While Russia cooperates and supports Serbian authorities, it is wary of any among them who take a pro-European stance. This is essentially the rationale for Russia's greater reliance on the media and radical right-wing organizations over whom it may have direct control or whose actions benefit Russia directly. Although Vučić is frequently described as a washed-up radical because the media under his control place narratives that increasingly resemble *Seselj's, Mladic's, or Karadzic's* rhetoric from the 1990s, radical right-wing groups accuse him of selling Serbia, while *Milorad Dodik* is seen as a true protector of Serbian interests.¹⁴⁴

With the exception of Serbian liberals, who are now almost on the periphery of social life in Serbia, there are almost no indications of dominant political elites attempting to steer Serbia towards the West. Even when such attempts do arise, they are necessarily accompanied by additional historical revisionism. Insufficient understanding or neglecting of the overly complicated history of the Western Balkans, can lead Western elites, both European and American, into a dangerous zone of searching for partners among Serbian nationalists, underestimating the cost of such cooperation. To dislodge Serbia from Russian-Chinese influence, Western addresses sometimes highlight Vučić as a suitable partner, even portraying him as a factor of stability. *Freedom House* describes Serbia as a "transitional or hybrid regime" and especially criticizes Vučić for stifling media freedoms and civil society.¹⁴⁵ Most Serbian media are under the control of Vučić and his ruling Serbian People's Party. Vučić's tabloids are known for spreading intensive and explosive propaganda and disinformation through cheap printed publications that are also available online. The *Journalists Without Borders* report ranks Serbia 93rd in terms of media freedoms in 2021 and writes that "Serbia is a country with weak institutions that is prey to fake news spread by government-backed sensational media, a country where journalists are subjected to almost daily attacks that increasingly come from the ruling elite and pro-government media"¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁴ Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

¹⁴⁵ *Nations in Transit 2021: Serbia*, *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2021>.

¹⁴⁶ *Serbia RSF – Reporters sans frontières*, <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

3.1.1. Russian Propaganda in Serbia through the Media

As is the case with the Serbian economy, in which Russian capital participates to a far lesser extent compared to the capital from the European Union, Russia is not significantly present as a financier of the Serbian media. Apart from certain indications that Russia could influence the editorial policy of the most influential daily newspaper *Politika* due to unclear (secret) ownership structure, there were indications that Russian companies could use their connection with pro-Russian businessman Bogoljub Karic, owner of *NOVA TV*, to buy media in Serbia, while in 2016 and 2017, news published that the Russian businessman on the EU and US sanctions list, *Konstantin Malofeev*, wanted to have a stake in Serbian TV stations.¹⁴⁷

Russia's most intensive presence in the Serbian media space is through the *Sputnik* news agency, which opened the *Sputnik Serbia* regional office in Belgrade in 2015, as the successor to the *Voice of Russia* web portal.¹⁴⁸ The web portal *Sputnik Serbia*, together with the accompanying mobile application in Serbian, is immensely influential, and its content can still be distributed for free by various Serbian tabloids and smaller portals on the condition that they cite or refer to the source. *Radio Sputnik* includes several broadcasts that cover all important spheres of activity, such as politics, culture, energy, and the economy. Its content is transmitted by the private Belgrade radio station *Radio Novosti*, and then rebroadcasted by over 30 regional and local radio stations in Serbia. As a result, Russian media content is now available in practically every part of Serbia.

Among the narratives propagated by *Sputnik* is that the EU and NATO stand out as weak, fragmented, hegemonic and aggressive.¹⁴⁹ Headlines that instigate discord, misleading narratives, and sensationalized disinformation are typical on this news agency's portals.¹⁵⁰

In addition to *Sputnik*, there are other web portals in Serbia, also backed by *Russiya Segodnya*, a media group owned by the Russian government. *Russia Beyond*, whose content is available in Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian, in

¹⁴⁷ Stefan Meister (ed.), *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*, SSOAR, 2018.

https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf.

¹⁴⁸ Megan Duffy, Samuel Green, *Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans*, the Edward R. Murrow Center for a Digital World, Fall 2020, <https://sites.tufts.edu/murrowcenter/files/2020/11/Organised-Chaos.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Jelena Jevtic, *The Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Western Balkans*, Security Distillery, 2021. <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkans>.

¹⁵⁰ Megan Duffy, Samuel Green, *Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans*, the Edward R. Murrow Center for a Digital World, Fall 2020, <https://sites.tufts.edu/murrowcenter/files/2020/11/Organised-Chaos.pdf>.

addition to eleven other languages, glorifies Russia's military strength, culture, economy, science, art and lifestyle. There is also the newspaper *Argumenti i fakti* (*Arguments and facts*), as well as the monthly issue called *Ruska reč* (*Russian Word*) distributed along with the magazine *Nedeljnik* (*Weekly*). Russian content is also available online through web portals that earn from publishing news from other sources, such as *naslovi.net*.¹⁵¹

The study of the influence of the Russian Federation in the media in Serbia points out as a special challenge the fact that the majority of web portals that place pro-Russian content, such as *Novi Standard* (*New Standard*), *Srbinfo*, *Vostok*, *Gazeta*, *Istina* (*Truth*), *Kremlin*, *Vaseljenska TV*, have been created in Serbia, not in Russia. These media are not even registered in the official *Media Register of Serbia*, contrary to law requirements.¹⁵²

At the annual world conference of the Russian diaspora in October 2021, the editor-in-chief of *Russia Today* stated that Serbia had been "asking to broadcast in Serbian for ten years, but that a decision by the Russian authorities is needed." At the same time, *YouTube* blocked *Russia Today* in German, which had over 600,000 subscribers, due to spreading false information and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination. The editor-in-chief interpreted this move as a "media war" against Russia, insinuating that the decision could have followed under pressure from the German authorities.¹⁵³ *Russia Today* is banned in a number of countries, including the Baltic states Lithuania and Latvia.

Big words in Russian media propaganda are losing their original meaning. The promotion of democracy as the traditional centerpiece of the American foreign policy agenda is presented as an unscrupulous struggle to achieve geopolitical goals to the detriment of Russia. In Serbia, the reality is being simplified by drawing parallels between Crimea and Kosovo. The Kosovo authorities' stance toward Kosovo Serbs is presented as "fascist," much as the Ukrainian regime in eastern Ukraine. According to this narrative, NATO forces bombed the Serbian people in Serbia and Kosovo in the same way that the revolution in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 was reportedly engineered by the US. For instance, *Sputnik Serbia* publishes articles such as: "Lukashenko: West - they used to be and still are Nazis", "The Big Brother is watching you: West is turning into a society of total control", "New totalitarianism of the West: Why have Speedy Gonzalez, Dambo and Peter Pan been cancelled",

¹⁵¹ Stefan Meister (ed.), *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*, SSOAR, 2018.

https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Russia's RT Says German YouTube Channel Blocked Right After Launch, *RFE/RL*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/rt-german-youtube-deleted/31612364.html>.

“Opposition MP in Rada: Ukraine - the cradle of fascism”, “Ukrainian Nazism fights in Donbas”, April 2021, “German MP at the Victory Parade: Had there been no Kursk and Stalingrad, there would have been no freedom”, “Has Europe forgotten who freed it from fascism”, “Fighter of the First Proletarian Brigade: The role of the Red Army was decisive for the victory over fascism”.¹⁵⁴

At the same time, Muslims and Albanians are presented as a threat to Serbia, with sensationalist headlines about the countries of the region. The propaganda is very similar to Milošević's propaganda in the 1990s, which sought to keep the Serb population in constant fear of imaginary enemies and thus generate readiness to respond to threats from the neighborhood. Some of the headlines are¹⁵⁵: “It will not stop: Pristina's beating to intimidate Serbs” December 2021; “We are scared! Serbs from Strpci testify about incursion of Pristina 'commandos' who also expect – backup support”; “Threatening message from Pristina: Possible war in the Balkans - Serbia, Russia and China are in danger”; “Finger in the eye of Serbia: Croatia ready for sensitive military cooperation with Kosovo”; “Red Line Defense: Are Albanians on the verge of escalating crisis in Kosovo”; “Operation Valac: Will Pristina cross the Serbian ‘Red Line’ on November 6”; “The Albanians forge a new plan: They go into action with Bosniaks and Croats against Serbia – in New York”; “French analyst: Albanian Muslims colonized Serbian, Orthodox Kosovo”; “Appeal of Serbs from Kosovo: Don't let us be beaten”; “Shame on Albania - violence in response to helplessness”; “A move out of desperation: Montenegrins, Bosniaks and Albanians strike together against Serbia in the middle of the USA”; “Kurti strikes against Belgrade: ‘Attacks in Zubin Potok and Zvečan instigated from Serbia’”; “350 long-barreled ROSU special forces invaded northern Kosovo, including snipers”; “Dangerous provocation: demonstration exercise for the conquest of northern Kosovo in the very act”; “Protest in North Macedonia: Albanian nationalism is gaining momentum and burning stronger.”

The West is presented as favoring all of Serbia's neighbors, while at the same time the neighboring NATO member countries are facing a narrative about the lack of benefits from membership in the Alliance. Some of the news articles read¹⁵⁶: “Brits and Americans do not change their opinion about Serbs: There is no appeasement in the Balkans”; “Kosovo serves Americans as an experiment for dangerous projects”; “British ‘vilayet’: A project to create a great Albanian state, while having a finger in the pie of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, October 2021; “Will the Americans have ‘Rammstein’ in Kosovo as well”; “NATO and Bondsteel are not enough for them: Will the Pentagon grant Pristina's wish for another military base”, October

¹⁵⁴ All texts whose titles are cited are available at <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

2021; "Message from Germany: Since they will not join NATO, Serbs must be portrayed as villains"; "Pristina's sinister intent hidden behind rattling American weapons"; "Misconception that costs: North Macedonia will pay for NATO membership in installments", November 2021; "How the West 'rewards' the most obedient leader in the Balkans: he gave everything, but got nothing"; "How the West arms Albanians for 'defense' against Serbs".

While Montenegrin and North Macedonian leaders are presented as pawns of the West, Vučić is portrayed as a powerful leader¹⁵⁷: "Vučić on Serbia's measures: I rejected *Quintet's* proposal - I'm fed up with tricks"; "Vučić on Pristina's moves: Our measures will not be painless".

Pro-Russian media exaggerate Serbian-Russian ties, particularly Russia's role as the "liberator" of the Serbian people from the Ottoman Empire and the joint fight against fascism and Nazism in World War II. Furthermore, Russia is hyperbolized as the world's largest nuclear and energy power. According to the news stories, Russia provides military and energy assistance to Serbia, which, as a result, reportedly becomes the main economic, military, and energy power in the Western Balkans. For example, after a telephone conversation between the Serbian and Russian presidents in December 2021, *Sputnik Serbia* published headlines such as "Telephone conversation between Putin and Vucic: Russian missiles best in the world strengthened the Serbian army"; "We save eight million euros a day by agreement with Putin"; The meeting of two leaders in Sochi, in November 2021, was depicted as a "historic agreement on the price of gas". *Sputnik* also dedicates a huge number of headlines to Russia's supplying Serbia with supposedly superior military equipment: "Big boom: Serbia is becoming the most powerful military power in the Balkans - Russia is also launching it"; "The largest procurement of weapons since the time of the Yugoslav People's Army begins: What weapons the Serbian Army will receive"; "Preparations for the parade in Nis, 4,000 men and new equipment".

There are also headlines suggesting Russia's military superiority and Europe's energy dependence on Russia¹⁵⁸: "Even Poles recognize Russia's military power"; "Gazprom is working full steam ahead: Record gas supplies during extremely low temperatures"; "Russian gas dominates Europe: Gazprom delivers huge amounts of fuel and increases production"; "Germans admit: Russia is at the center of global energy and is resistant to sanctions"; "Russia responds to France: Without our energy the Western economy will stagnate"; "Recognition from Germany: No peace in Europe without Russia"; "Putin: Russian Navy gets Zircons next year, high-level military security"; "Russian pilots get new weapons"; "Russia's Winged Infantry - lightning fast

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

and efficient"; "Russian soldier of the future will be protected by combat equipment that will surpass all types of protection"; "One of the most efficient electronic warfare systems will be installed in the south of Russia".

Attempting to discredit the EU and European institutions, Russian media often quote right-wing European Union leaders from Putin's orbit (*Jansa, Orban, Kaczynski*) in a positive light: "Germany is trying to turn the EU into the Fourth Reich: Sharp accusation from Poland". However, the article only conveys the words of the leader of the Polish ruling party, *Jaroslav Kaczynski*, alluding to the "First Reich" of the *Holy Roman Empire*, in which Germany would have the upper hand. In December 2021, amid tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the open adherence of Hungarian Prime Minister *Viktor Orban* to Republika Srpska's leader *Milorad Dodik*, *Sputnik Serbia* announced that "Hungary's firm veto reveals Western disunity towards Dodik and Srpska - Schmidt raises stakes", and conveys "the message from Hungary" that "the EU has deceived the Western Balkans again". Also striking is the headline from October 2021 "Soros puppets, Slovenia is not a colony: Jansa's war on Twitter with EU representatives", or from July 2021: "Jansa defends Orban: 'The West of the EU applies double standards'; or from October 2021: "Punishment for Poland - disciplining sovereign forces within the EU".¹⁵⁹

Statements by European officials on the Western Balkans are generally presented as threatening Serbia and Republika Srpska. *Sputnik* has published a story headline "Scandalous threat of an American official in Montenegro to 'pro-Serbian forces': Possible sanctions", in October 2021; or "When Washington commands, and Brussels orders - the states have no say"; "British send 'heavyweights' to the Balkans - are new pressures on Serbs to follow?"; or "New threat to Srpska: the possibility of an EU reaction cannot be ruled out", which describes the words of the head of the EU delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a response to growing tensions in the country in late 2021. In an effort to analyze the EU's attitude towards BiH, *Sputnik* creates the title "Dangerous maneuver of the EU or the end of crazy politics".

Political systems of EU member states are presented as unstable: "The New German Government is threatened by a split over Russia: What is behind Scholz and Burbock's disagreements", "Chaos in Dunning Street: Britain is shaken by scandals, and "Boris Johnson's key associates are leaving him".

Consequently, the headlines suggest that the West does not have a unified strategy for the Western Balkans region: "Hungary's firm veto reveals West's disunity towards Dodik and Srpska - Schmidt raises stakes", passes "a message from Hungary" that "EU cheated the Western Balkans again."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

It is interesting that in November 2021, after a meeting of three member states, Sputnik Serbia published an analysis in which the „Open Balkan“ initiative was presented in a positive light, with some of the subheadings reading „facilitated business“, „enabling a single information system“, „companies without obligations“, „better positioning of the region“. Headlines dedicated to the „Open Balkans“ are also positively or neutrally connoted: „Rama: ‚Open Balkans‘, because we can no longer wait for the EU“; „Vucic in Tirana: No one can stop the ‚Open Balkans‘“; „At the protest in Tirana against the ‚Open Balkans‘, Serbia’s flag set on fire“; „Let them be ashamed: Rama reacted sharply to protests, starting part of the summit tonight in Elbasan“; „Escobar: Open Balkans will be complete with all six economies“; „Brnabic invited Pristina to the Open Balkans“; „The event dedicated to ‚Open Balkans‘ in Nis closed“; „Three countries to work as one: Meeting of representatives of governments of Open Balkan countries“; „Rama criticizes Pristina for their position on ‚Open Balkans‘“; „Vucic: ‚Open Balkan‘ will work, just because no one but us has come up with it.“¹⁶¹

3.1.2. Serbian Political Elites and Pro-Government Domestic Media in Serbia helping Russian Propaganda

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The main feature of the media scene in Serbia is the concentration of media ownership in the hands of individuals close to the ruling coalition, which in turn leads to the lack of compliance with ethical standards in journalism. Although Serbia initiated the privatization of state media by adopting a package of media laws in 2014, the non-transparency of the privatization process has led to the closure of a huge number of media outlets and directed private media towards politicized reporting. *Politika* and *Vecernje Novosti* are still state-owned, while *Tanjug* was finally sold in 2020 to a private company, also close to the ruling coalition.¹⁶² *Reporters Without Borders* highlights the fact that the agency is still viewed in the public as a publicly owned medium in their report for Serbia for 2021, among other reasons due to the agency’s unaltered name.¹⁶³ Relevant international institutions are particularly critical of regulators’ failure to ensure compliance with media standards and objective reporting. The level of trust in the media is extremely low. This is not surprising

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Filip Rudić, **BIRN Report Says Media Freedom Declining in Serbia**, *Balkan Insight*, December 12, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/12/birn-report-notes-diminishing-media-freedoms-in-serbia-12-12-2018/>.

¹⁶³ **Serbia RSF – Reporters sans frontières**, <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>.

given that the media distributed content in the interests of the ruling party during the socialist era, which was replaced by nationalist propaganda in the 1990s. Furthermore, since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012, the yellow press and tabloids such as the *Informer* and *Srpski telegraf* (*Serbian Telegraph*) have become the dominant media with the highest readership audience.

The *Freedom House* report „Freedom on the Net 2021“ recognizes media polarization and the influence of the state on media agencies as a particular problem in Serbia, and is especially concerned over numerous tabloids that publish pro-government content.¹⁶⁴ Legal solutions support this, as media laws passed in 2014 allow the state to co-finance publications affiliated with the ruling party under the guise of „serving the public interest.“ The media research website *Cenzolovka*, based on accessible public information on media financing in Serbia, finds that *tabloids, such as Alo, Kurir, Srpski telegraf, Informer*, and others, are heavily financed, despite being known for breaking the *Code of Journalists of Serbia*. *Večernje novosti* won RSD 17,815,000 in local competitions in 2020, out of a total of RSD 21,865,000 granted to all media. These media outlets also received around the same amount for other activities such as publishing or production. *Večernje novosti*, for example, earned more than RSD 4 million from production alone.¹⁶⁵

Even without direct funding, Russia is making effective use of the media ecosystem in Serbia to expand its influence. To begin with, in order to survive in the tabloid media market, smaller media broadcast free content provided by Russia through multiple Russian portals in Serbian and earn money by the amount of „clicks“ without having to develop their own journalistic content. This creates an information vacuum, which is easily filled with information from *Sputnik*, *Russia Beyond*, and other sources. Due to a lack of trust in the media, the Russian Federation can easily spread disinformation, and reach a broad audience of Serbian and regional individuals who understand content in Serbian.

The second reason is that, despite actively cooperating with NATO, the Government of Serbia facilitates fulfillment of Russian interests in the region. Russian propaganda pervades media content, which all relevant international institutions consider to be under the complete control of Serbian political elites. Unlike in North Macedonia, where social media played a big role in disseminating anti-Western narratives, television in Serbia promotes purely pro-Russian, anti-Western orientation, and a narrative that supports „Serbian world“ politics.

¹⁶⁴ *Freedom House Report: Freedom on the Net – Serbia*, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2021#footnote2_a4141a9.

¹⁶⁵ Marija Obrenović, *Alo, Informer, kako brat?: Opštine širom Srbije pomažu prebogate tabloide, dok lokalni mediji izumiru*, *Cenzolovka*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/alo-informer-kako-brat-opstine-sirom-srbije-pomazu-prebogate-tabloide-dok-lokalni-mediji-izumiru-1/>

Following the continuous broadcast of sarcastic and national-chauvinistic statements about national, religious, and ethnic groups in the neighboring countries from the immensely popular *TV Happy*, on January 8, 2022 Montenegrin authorities banned several *TV Happy* shows for six months.¹⁶⁶ A feature of the television market in Serbia is high media ownership concentration. Only a few television companies (*Television of Serbia*, *Radio Television of Vojvodina* that are in public ownership, *Pink Media Group*, *Antenna Group* and *Happy TV*) attract over 63% of viewers.¹⁶⁷

The *Global Engagement Center* of the State Department recognized the Serbian portal *In4S* as an integral part of the ecosystem of the Russian disinformation campaign, and a partner for the media network *SouthFront*.¹⁶⁸ Russian content is further transmitted by influential Serbian dailies, television and portals, most often without any context.¹⁶⁹ Among them are *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf*, known for their closeness to the ruling elites in Serbia and the placement of disinformation and fake news in favor of President Vucic. The media are mostly run by individuals known to the public for being close to Slobodan Milošević (*Milorad Vucelic*, *Zeljko Mitrovic*). *Blic*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Vecernje novosti* and *B92* are actively publishing content from *Sputnik*, but also from the network of portals formed by Russian tycoon *Konstantin Malofeev*, involved in a series of operations of Russian intelligence-hybrid warfare in the Western Balkans.

The pro-Russian narrative mainly concerns three dominant themes: the dispute with Kosovo, the war in Syria and the war in eastern Ukraine. Portals such as *Srbin.info*, *Faktor* and *Kremlin.rs*, *Gazeta*, *Fakti (Facts)*, *Glas Moskve (The Voice of Moscow)* openly place a pro-Russian narrative and, with mutual sharing of content, reach the target audience. Most of the stories include negative connotations of the EU and NATO. Russia and its President Putin are positively portrayed on all front pages as protectors of Serbs and their words are hyperbolized. For instance, *Informer*, in the September 2019 issue, overemphasizes that the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation stated that „Serbs and Russians will defend Kosovo“, while he actually said “I am sure that justice will prevail and that we shall always be together with the Serbian people in that difficult and principled struggle”.¹⁷⁰

166 Zbog Šešeljevih uvreda, emisije TV Happy zabranjene u Crnoj Gori, *Radio Free Europe*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/seselj-uvrede-tv-happy-zabrana-crna-gora-/31644961.html>

167 Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, *TV market in Serbia is highly concentrated*, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2018, <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/media/tv/>

168 GEC Special Report: Pillar's of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System, *U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center*, August 2020, <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

169 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

170 Vesna Radojević, **Lavrov nije rekao da će Srbi i Rusi pobijediti zajedno na Kosovu**, *Raskrikavanje*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=501>

Serbian web sites not only disseminate Russian content, but create their own fake news in order to settle scores in ruling political elites' confrontations with their political opponents and dissidents. According to a survey conducted by *Raskrikavanje* platform, a site launched by the NGO *Krik* in 2017 with the purpose of verifying the accuracy of claims in Serbian media, in 2019 alone, four tabloids with the largest circulation published over 945 fake news stories on their front pages.¹⁷¹ Pro-government tabloids portray independent media executives as corrupt. In that context, *Informer* stated that *NI* director *Jugoslav Ćosić* „receives money from the Albanian mafia.“ Among the foreign policy topics, there are headlines such as „Macron, the Serb“ and the false news that French President *Emmanuel Macron* „turned his back“ on Kosovo Albanians or, in tabloid terminology, „blew the Shiptars away“. The article, however, reads that Macron called on „all parties to refrain from unilateral and unconstructive moves.“¹⁷²

It is interesting that Trump and his special envoy *Richard Grenell* were portrayed as sympathetic to Serbia. Several fake news were fabricated to support this, sometimes even based on the stories from the Western portals. *Informer* changed the sentence of the DW journalist reading that „it is possible that Grenell has been appointed to soften the Germans who opposed the shifting of borders“ to the following one: „Trump's envoy Richard Grenell has only one task - to convince German Chancellor Angela Merkel to accept the division of Kosovo as a solution to the biggest crisis in Europe, reports the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.“¹⁷³

The Russian-Serbian narrative is heard not just in Serbia, but also among the Serbian communities of Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, not only is the Russian point of view given, but the narratives that exist locally are exaggerated. Sensationalist headlines throw doubt on NATO's and the EU's involvement in the region, implying that Western actors and neighbors are working against Serbia's political interests and endangering regional security. Serbian society is thus locked in a state of „permanent victimization“ The danger is that similar propaganda campaigns in the 1990s were the first step toward political, and subsequently military, mobilization to realize Greater Serbia's ambitions.¹⁷⁴

171 Marija Vučić, Vesna Radojević, **Najmanje 945 lažnih vijesti na naslovnica četiri tabloida u 2019.** *Raskrikavanje*, January 2020, <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=557>

172 Petrit Selimi, **Macron's Belgrade Pivot**, *Atlantic Council*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/macron-s-belgrade-pivot>.

173 Marija Vučić, **Dojče Vele ne tvrdi da Tramp sprema podjelu Kosova**, *Raskrikavanje*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=516>.

174 Renaud de La Brosse, **Politička propaganda i projekt "Svi Srbi u jednoj državi": posledice instrumentalizacije medija za ultranacionalističke svrhe**, *Tužilaštvo Međunarodnog krivičnog suda za bivšu Jugoslaviju*, Januar 2003, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_milosevic/prosexp/bcs/rep-srb-b.htm.

3.1.3. Russian Propaganda in Serbia through Social Networks and the Cultivation of Online Extremism

Sputnik Serbia is quite present on social media as well, where it appears to reach the young audience in Serbia. According to 2018 data, *Russia Today* is the 15th most popular *Facebook* page in Serbia, and *Sputnik* ranks 24th.¹⁷⁵ Given the growing popularity of social networks in Serbia, as well as the fact that the content of Russian portals is relayed via domestic portals active on social networks, it is easy to assume that there is an extensive online space for spreading Russian propaganda.

President Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party have embraced Russian tactics of discrediting journalists and their questions. They have also built a large network of *trolls* on social media that disparage anyone who criticizes Vučić's policies. *Twitter* has deleted up to 8,558 accounts of this type, with many of them „finding their way“ to Serbian and Russian media. It was also discovered that those accounts tweeted up to 43 million times, with up to 85 percent of them receiving retweets. Despite being followed by only 66 other accounts, they reached up to 2.3 million *Twitter* users, not including those visiting Russian or Serbian portals.¹⁷⁶

Social media in Serbia are a breeding ground for online extremism that serves Russian propaganda. A substantial amount of posts on popular social networks like as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* are downloaded from *4Chan*, a decades-old online forum with over 500,000 posts from Serbian addresses. The majority of them contain nationalist themes about threats to the Serbian people and are related to other radical right-wing groups outside of Serbia. The discourse portrays Serbia as a fallen nation with a magnificent history that includes heroic battles against Muslims. Bosniaks are depicted as „Serbo-Croats who converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule of the region in the 14th/ 15th centuries“, and as such, “they deserve hatred today by Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs” for treason, when countless others refused to change their religion, despite tax levies on Christians in the Ottoman Empire. When it comes to Croats and Albanians, the discourse is similar, but the extreme discourse is specifically directed towards Muslims.¹⁷⁷

175 Stefan Meister (ed.), *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*, SSOAR, 2018. https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf.

176 Megan Duffy, Samuel Green, *Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans*, the Edward R. Murrow Center for a Digital World, Fall 2020, <https://sites.tufts.edu/murrowcenter/files/2020/11/Organised-Chaos.pdf>.

177 Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

Serbian radical right-wing organizations, who draw inspiration from Russia, collaborate closely with Russian elites and the Russian right wing, and are quite visible on social media. Many Serbian groups are on the *Facebook* list that exposes organizations and individuals associated with the dissemination of hatred.¹⁷⁸ The list, published by the *Intercept.com* portal in 2021, most likely dates back to 2012, when the international community began more intensive activities in the field of combating terrorism and radical extremism. Some of these organizations are banned by decisions of the Serbian Constitutional Court, such as the neo-Nazi *National Movement in 2011* or the *Patriotic Movement Obraz in 2012*.¹⁷⁹ However, they remain active, and when banned on *Facebook*, they reorient to other platforms. For example, the organization *Srbska akcija (Serbian Action)* makes extensive use of the communication platform *Telegram* for the placement of nationalist and clerical Russian-Serbian propaganda, where it also glorifies cooperation with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. This organization demands, among other things, the rehabilitation of *Milan Nedić*, the president of the *Quisling* government during German occupation of Serbia. Organizations that *Facebook* identified as extremist and which no longer have *Facebook* accounts but remain active on other social media include *Krv i cast (Blood and Honor)*, which is part of a global network of white Supremacists with a branch in Serbia since the 1990s, and the ultra-right organization *Srpski narodni pokret 1389 (Serbian People's Movement 1389)*, whose leader Miša Vacić is also politically active.

Goran Davidović, the leader of the informal *Nacionalni srpski front (National Serbian Front)* who, due to the ban on his activities, lives outside Serbia, is very active on *Twitter*. His dominant narratives are radical views on Serbian statehood, that Serbia is „occupied“ and not within its traditional borders. In his tweets, he usually does not call directly for violence, but uses indirect formulations that encourage feelings of guilt for not reacting: „remember that, so when the time for freedom comes, let's keep that in mind“, „if you care, spread your anger further“. A large community of followers legitimize him as a shaper of youth opinions, even if he does it in an unofficial fashion. Similar to Russian propaganda, the posts of radical right-wingers portray West as being too accommodating toward migrants, and as allowing its own population to gradually diminish, whereas Serbia does not.¹⁸⁰

Radical right-wingers in Serbia easily align their ideas with other forms of extremism in the West, such as anti-Semitism and racism. Thus, one can read posts „about a perfect world where there would be no races other than

178 Sam Biddle, *Revealed: Facebook's secret blacklist of "dangerous individuals and organizations"*, *The Intercept*, October 12, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/10/12/facebook-secret-blacklist-dangerous/>.

179 I. Nikoletic, *The extreme right wing in Serbia funded from the state budget*, *Danas*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ekstremna-desnica-u-srbiji-na-drzavnom-budzetu/>.

180 Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

white,” or about a fight against ANTIFA on the streets, despite the fact that this is a marginal movement in Serbia. Women are also demonized because they are considered primary supporters of the Left’s agenda. Right wingers are all vocal supporters of former United States President *Donald Trump*. Extremists sparked by Trump’s campaign inspire Serbian users as well, who admire *Trump’s* energy and aggressiveness, as well as the fact that he „re-awakened Serbian nationalism“ in American Serbs.¹⁸¹

3.1.4. The Extent of Russian-Serbian Propaganda in Serbia

*When assessing the scale of Russian hybrid engagement in Serbia, some scholars emphasize measurable economic and military cooperation, which is far lower with Russia than with the rest of the world. Vuksanović points out that the “pandemic” has revealed that there is far less substance in the Serbian-Russian cooperation than a cursory examination of Orthodox and Slavic links would imply - and that Serbs are not little Russians, as is commonly assumed. He adds that Serbia is equally eager to emphasize Serbian-Chinese friendship if China demonstrates its economic commitment to Serbia, as it did in the early stages of the outbreak.¹⁸² Russia’s military and economic (with the exception of energy) impact on Serbia is far less than NATO’s and the EU’s. The EU accounts for 62% of Serbia’s total trade, whereas the Eurasian Economic Union accounts for only 8%. Vuksanović points out that, due to the absence of tangible benefits, even the *Free Trade Agreement* with Eurasian Economic Union was signed with the purpose of balancing “between Russia and the West.”*

While Russian media underscore Russia’s contribution to Serbia’s positioning as a regional military power eager to deter the „Shiptars and Muslims“ who purportedly threaten the Serbian people, in reality Serbia cooperates far more extensively with NATO than with Russia. According to the most frequently cited Ministry of Defense data, the United States was the top military donor to Serbia between 2008 and 2018, while Russia ranked only ninth. The number of military exercises conducted with NATO was likewise many times greater than with Russia. While *Sputnik* publishes headlines like „The largest procurement of weapons since the Yugoslav People’s Army

¹⁸¹ Ibidem.

¹⁸² Vuk Vuksanović, *From Russia With Love? Serbia’s Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and its Geopolitical Implications*, LSE IDEAS, June 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-From-Russia-With-Love.pdf>.

begins: What weapons will the Serbian Army receive,” in reality, the equipment Serbia receives from Russia frequently necessitates large amounts of money for repairs, as was the case with the alleged donation of six MiG-29 fighter jets in 2017. According to *Vuksanović*, the 2019 Serbian-Russian military exercise, in which Russia displayed the S-400 combat system and Pancir missile batteries, was just a maneuver for Serbia to confirm military neutrality and build diplomatic potential. He cites Serbia’s efforts to acquire *Mistral* air defense systems from France as evidence of this.

What should not be overlooked, however, is that Russian propaganda, while misleading, still accomplishes its meaning and purpose, as demonstrated by the citizens of Serbia’s growing unfavorable image of pro-Western institutions. Despite Serbia’s tight economic relations with the EU, according to the *BiEPAG* 2021 study only 53% of Serbs support EU membership, while 43% oppose it, and an enviable proportion prefers merely economic cooperation without membership. *This is a far lower percentage than in any other Western Balkans country.* It is also noteworthy that as many as 44 percent of individuals feel that Serbia’s EU membership would never happen, and that Serbian citizens believe that Hungary provides the most support for Serbia’s EU membership, whilst citizens of other Western Balkan countries believe that the biggest support comes from Germany. Only 19% of Serbian citizens believe that membership would improve the country’s state of democracy.¹⁸³

According to the *Vulnerability Index* for Serbia, an *ISAC* report published in November 2021 as part of a global project to assess susceptibility to foreign malign influences in Central Europe and the Western Balkans, up to 68 percent of Serbian citizens believe that „Western countries promote morally corrupt and decadent life under the guise of ‚civil liberties.‘ Only 18 percent consider the EU as a strategic partner, and up to 55 percent see European integration as a threat to democracy and traditional values. According to the same poll, 82 percent of the population considers Russia to be a traditional „Slavic brother,” while 59 percent consider it to be the most essential strategic partner. Despite the fact that NATO conducts more military exercises than Russia, as many as 84 percent of Serbian citizens are extremely opposed to NATO membership.¹⁸⁴

According to a poll conducted in April 2021 by *the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID)* and the *International Republican Institute (IRI)*, the majority of citizens believe that Serbia should prioritize relations with

¹⁸³ *Outta trust? (Post-) pandemic trust and democratic resilience in the Western Balkans*, *BiEPAG*, December 10, 2021, <https://biepag.eu/publication/outta-trust-post-pandemic-trust-and-democratic-resilience-in-the-western-balkans/>

¹⁸⁴ *GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index measuring vulnerability towards foreign malign influence*, <https://www.vulnerabilityindex.org>

Russia (54%) and China (28%) over neighboring nations and the EU. Citizens also believe that Russia and China are the greatest investors in Serbia (up to 72 percent), and they trust Chinese and Russian vaccinations more than Western vaccines. It's also discouraging that only 45 percent of those polled believe democracy is the greatest form of government, while up to 24 percent say the ideal is an undemocratic rule with a strong army. As many as 79 percent of respondents believe NATO has a negative or highly unfavorable impact on Serbia, while 59 percent believe the same about the US. Only 11 percent believe that Russia and China have an unfavorable impact on Serbia, while only 26 percent believe that the EU's influence is beneficial or very positive, with only 3 percent believing that NATO has a positive influence on Serbia¹⁸⁵. *A negative image of the West is particularly characteristic of the population between the ages of 20 and 29, in addition to the population between the ages of 50 and 59 and above 70, which is not entirely unexpected. This data certainly suggests the necessity to deal with the content that is placed through social networks, which are increasingly becoming a medium through which young people receive information.*

It is important to note that the emphasis on close military ties between the two countries in the Russian media, Serbian tabloids, and Serbian officials is not only intended to increase the negotiating potential in resolving disputes in the Western Balkans, but also has far-reaching consequences through destabilizing the region. Montenegrin political analyst Ljubomir Filipović notes that „what is extremely dangerous is that Vučić's need for public display of military weapons is presented in tabloids linked to the state and the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), which create an atmosphere of national mobilization by imposing military readiness or capability as a central theme in the country's public discourse“.¹⁸⁶ A group of Montenegrin authors argue in about the same manner: „The matrix is clear - the great powers that want to destabilize the international order (Russia and China) and the power structure in Serbia, where destabilization is a goal in itself, are compatible, and they easily find common ground and opportunities for foreign - political, security, military, economic, and cultural cooperation.“ They go on to say that „while Russia is actually using Serbia to pursue its imperialist interests, Serbia is precisely the main profiteer from Russian imperialism, for as long as there are political elites in power who want an excuse to never admit crimes committed in the 1990s, including the Srebrenica genocide, crimes committed by „Chetnik movement“ and the Serbian Orthodox Church during the collaboration with the Nazis, where it is enough to mention *Staro Sajmište* and the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church against the Jewish community for which no apology has

¹⁸⁵ **Public Perceptions of the International Position of Serbia**, Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, May 14, 2021, <http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/02-Public-perceptions-of-the-international-position-of-Serbia.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ Jasmin Agić, **Vojska Srbije je 'vazal' Rusije na Blaknu**, *Balkans Aljazeera*, November 5, 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2021/11/5/vojska-srbije-je-vazal-rusije-na-balkanu>.

ever been given, as *Jovan Byford*¹⁸⁷ wrote, etc.” Furthermore, the narrative that fuels the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo raises perception that a new conflict is indeed possible.

3.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In addition to the difficulties of democratization that all communist successors in the Western Balkans face, the path to democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is hampered by the country’s long and terrible ethnic conflicts. The balance of more than 100,000 killed and hundreds of thousands of wounded persons, and internally displaced persons and refugees, resulted in a legacy of deep divisions in society along ethnic and religious lines. Only the first of the two goals of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement - ending the violence and setting the groundwork for the state’s stabilization and democratization - has been met. It is often heard that the state is at verge of disintegration.

The ethnic segments are unhappy with the state order prescribed by the *Dayton Peace Agreement*, and the three dominant parties representing the ethnic segments are rarely inclined to finding a common language. Republika Srpska’s secessionist aspirations are constantly present, Croatian representatives insist on recomposing the system, which they currently consider discriminatory against Croats, while Bosniak politicians advocate for a structure that would acknowledge the fact that they are the most numerous population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The *Dayton Peace Agreement* has been criticized for failing to comply with democratic principles and for disadvantaging ethnic minorities which fall outside of the main societal segments. Debates in the political arena occur not between the opposition and the government, but inside the government itself, between parties representing the three „constituent“ peoples, over which one better serves the maximalist interests of their respective ethnic groups. The country has complicated relations with its neighbors, which regularly influence domestic political events. All of these factors distance the country from Euro-Atlantic institutions, making it perhaps the most suitable WB country for disseminating Russian propaganda.

¹⁸⁷ *The Sources of Serbian Conduct: Analysis of Serbia’s relations with the region and guidelines for the response of Montenegro and Western allies*, June 2021, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65711430/the-sources-of-serbian-conduct>.

Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

3.2.1. Russian Interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Although Russia publicly states commitment to the Dayton Agreement, its strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is inextricably linked to the larger plan of destabilizing the region and Euro-Atlantic institutions. The basic idea behind this strategy is to capitalize on existing mistrust among ethnic groups and boost secessionist aspirations. Russian politicians and the intelligence community seek to undermine Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions. In addition, disinformation is spread online, both through local media and through Russian and pro-Russian media in Serbia.

Russian authorities regard *Milorad Dodik*, a member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency, as the lynchpin of their policy in the Western Balkans. In the early 1990s, historian *Jelena Guskova* began to present *Dodik* as a model of a Balkan statesman who could lead Republika Srpska to become a *Serbian Piedmont in the Balkans*. President Putin has continuously backed *Dodik*, who threatens to call a referendum on Republika Srpska's secession, thus keeping the country in a condition of perpetual political instability and destabilization.¹⁸⁸ Meetings between the two leaders are regular, including on the eve of the controversial referendum in 2016 on the proclamation of Republika Srpska's National Day, which is banned at the federal level in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁸⁹ Putin and *Dodik* also met in December 2021, albeit the Russian side did not release a public statement about the meeting¹⁹⁰. Russia has not commented on the United States' decision to impose additional set of sanctions on *Dodik*.

Russia is also radicalizing Bosnian Serbs by financing extremist paramilitary groups in Republika Srpska and providing training for the official army and police.¹⁹¹ Radical right-wing organizations supported by Russia, for example, include *Srbska cast (Serb Honor)*, which holds training camps for Serbian youngsters at the Russian-Serbian *Humanitarian Center in Nis*, where glorification of convicted Serbian war criminals and Russia is part of the curriculum. On social media, there are a lot of photographs depicting *Srbska čast* members dressed in military gear, with black masks and sniper weapons.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Jelena Djureinovic, **Serbia's Ruling Party is Rewriting World War II History**, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, May 17, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/17/serbias-ruling-party-is-rewriting-world-war-ii-history/>.

¹⁸⁹ Danijel Kovacevic, **Putin Meets Dodik on the Eve of Bosnia Referendum**, *BalkanInsight*, September 23, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/09/23/putin-dodik-meet-at-the-eve-of-bosnian-serb-referendum-09-23-2016/>.

¹⁹⁰ **Kremlin spokesman confirms Putin received Milorad Dodik in Kremlin**, *TASS*, December 2, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1370329>

¹⁹¹ Vera Mironova, and Bogdan Zawadewicz, **Putin is building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force**, *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>.

¹⁹² Julian Borger, **Russian-trained mercenaries back Bosnia's Serb separatists**, *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/12/russian-trained-mercenaries-back-bosnias-serb-separatists#img-2>.

Russia also supports Bosnian Croat demands for the creation of a Croat entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as greater political autonomy within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁹³ In this way, Bosnian Croats' commitment to resolving their status is easily politicized and placed in the context of Russian propaganda. Russia is also attempting to gain financial influence, such as through the Mostar aluminum sector or the coke (coal) industry in Lukavac, in order to develop deeper ties, which would subsequently lead to economic dependence.¹⁹⁴

Russia and China presented the idea of closing the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Security Council in July 2021, yet Western members blocked it.¹⁹⁵ Russia vetoed a report by High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt in the United Nations Security Council in November 2021, claiming that the country was facing „the biggest threat to its survival since the post-war period,“ and thus softening the wording of the final version of the report.¹⁹⁶

The Russian government is also allocating funds for historical revisionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the denial of the Srebrenica genocide. Since the former High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Valentin Inzko*, criminalized genocide and war crimes denials, concerned that prominent individuals and public authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina „continue to deny acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed during the armed conflict,“ this rhetoric has intensified.¹⁹⁷ The *Gorchak Fund*, established in 2010 by a decree of the Russian President, with Russian Foreign Minister *Sergey Lavrov* as head of the committee of trustees, issued a statement in September 2021 claiming that crimes committed in Srebrenica during the war were misinterpreted in order to „blame only Bosnian Serbs.“ The same foundation, as well as the Russian think-tank group *Russian Council for International Affairs*, organized two Srebrenica-related events in Moscow in September and October 2021, where similar arguments could have been heard. *Vladislav Jovanovic*, Minister of

¹⁹³ Hrvatsko pitanje „postoji“ i treba ga riješiti u FBiH, *Večernji list*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/hrvatsko-pitanje-postoji-i-treba-ga-rijesiti-u-fbih-1190097>.

¹⁹⁴ In that sense, the media report on the activities of the Croatian businessman Josip Jurcevic aiming to help connect Russian companies which want to increase gas imports through cooperation with Aluminij d.d. Mostar, presenting Jurcevic as an informal Russian lobbyist in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, connected with Russian citizens.

Avdo Avdić, **Zašto Ruse brine hrvatsko pitanje: Ruski kapital ulazi u mostarski Aluminij i lukavačku Koksaru**, *Žurnal*, August 24, 2017, <http://www.zurnal.info/novost/20643/ruski-kapital-ulazi-u-mostarski-aluminij-i-lukavacku-koksaru>.

¹⁹⁵ Michelle Nichols, Russia, China fail at U.N. in bid to shut down Bosnia peace envoy, Reuters, July 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-fail-un-bid-shut-down-bosnia-peace-envoy-2021-07-22/>

¹⁹⁶ David Salvo, Stephanie de Leon, **Russia's efforts to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina**, *Alliance for Securing Democracy*, GMF, April 25, 2018, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-efforts-to-destabilize-bosnia-and-herzegovina/#easy-footnote-bottom-20-1118>.

¹⁹⁷ Nermina Kulgolija, **Bosnia's High Representative Imposes Genocide Denial Ban**, *Balkan Transitional Justice*, BIRN, July 23, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/23/bosnias-high-representative-imposes-genocide-denial-ban/>

Foreign Affairs of the FRY under Slobodan Milosevic, also spoke on behalf of the Russian House in Belgrade. On that occasion, he referred to the report of the panel established in 2019 by the Government of Republika Srpska, which stated that a „terrible war crime“ was committed in Srebrenica, but that it was not a genocide.¹⁹⁸ Otherwise, during the creation of two commissions on the subject, 31 worldwide experts on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia signed an open letter stating that the committee was attempting to rewrite the established truth.¹⁹⁹

It is also worth mentioning that Bosnia and Herzegovina's energy sector is fully dependent on Russian gas, and Russia is Republika Srpska's largest foreign investor. Following the announcement that Bosnia and Herzegovina would receive gas from Russia via the *TurkStream* pipeline rather than via Russia and Hungary, the United States called for continued implementation of energy projects through the EU and for countries aspiring to EU membership to align their respective energy policies with EU policies.²⁰⁰

3.2.2. Russian Media influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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According to a survey conducted by the Bosnian platform *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, which was launched in 2017 by the NGO *Zastone (Why Not)* with the goal of verifying claims in the Bosnian media, a large portion of political disinformation reaches public opinion through media based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and even more is disseminated through media in the neighborhood, primarily state tabloid portals stationed in Belgrade. Thus, 15 of the 29 surveyed media outlets that spread misinformation are in Serbia, 14 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as many as 12 in Republika Srpska. Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina frequently use leading Serbian portals as a means of information, and those media have adapted the narratives they are disseminating to the fact that they are read in neighboring countries. The Serbian edition of *Sputnik*, for example, is considered as one of the key linkages between media in Serbia and those in Republika Srpska, as they frequently download and share identical content.²⁰¹

198 Albina Sorguc, **Bosnian Serbs' War Commissions: Fact-Seeking or Truth-Distorting**, *BIRN*, February 25, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/25/bosnian-serbs-war-commissions-fact-seeking-or-truth-distorting/>

199 Filip Rudic, **Bosnian Serb War Commissions 'Seeking to Revise Truth': Academics**, *BIRN*, February 21, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/21/bosnian-serb-war-commissions-seeking-to-revise-truth-academics/>

200 **SAD o gasu za BiH preko "Turskog toka": Nastaviti EU energetske projekte**, April 2, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31183721.html>.

201 Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan, Biljana Livancic-Milic, **Disinformation in the online sphere The case of BiH, Why Not**, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

The media scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina follows the lines of society's deep ethnic divisions. The media based in Republika Srpska are the most visible in terms of spreading the false narrative. The leading media in this entity are under political influence and are being utilized to push narratives in support of the policies represented by *Milorad Dodik*, a member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Sputnik's* website and radio broadcasts do not enjoy a high level of popularity. Domestic media, on the other hand, often take over *Sputnik's* content, whether by citing the portal or presenting its news as original, thus further perplexing the audience. Content from *Sputnik* is regularly broadcasted by media such as *SRNA*, the public broadcaster *Radio-Television of Republika Srpska* and *Alternative Television of Banja Luka*.²⁰² *Raskrinkavanje.ba* found, for example, that within less than a year, *Sputnik* took over and published 180 news from *RTRS*, and *SRNA* 67 news. The same news often appears on the websites such as *InfoSrpska*, *Krajina*, *Govori Srbija (Serbia Speaking)*, *Glas Srpske (The Voice of Srpska)*, *Nezavisne (Independent)*, *Srbija Danas (Serbia Today)* and many other web portals whose ownership and source of funding are insufficiently known or hidden.²⁰³ As a result of all of this, media close to *Dodik* in Republika Srpska can be described as an integral part of the Russian media infrastructure in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dodik deploys loyal media in the entity to promote his meetings with *Putin*, who is immensely popular among electorate in Republika Srpska, and is portrayed in the local media as a strong leader and protector of Serbs. This certainly does not harm *Dodik's* popularity either. Russia uses the media to disseminate the narrative and worldview of Bosnia and Herzegovina's already entrenched nationalisms. Thus, Russian-Serbian media operations in the early half of 2018 were aimed at disseminating false information that Bosniak paramilitary groups were planning an attack on the Serb community. *Sputnik* published an article titled „A secret document leaked: What else Serbs will not be allowed to deny – other than the genocide in Srebrenica“ after the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina *Valentin Inzko* decided to amend the Criminal Code by introducing a ban on denial of crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for which there were final court verdicts. According to *Sputnik*, the alleged secret document may also indicate that it is illegal to assert „that Jasenovac was a labor camp without Serbs, and that the „Storm“ was a humanitarian mission,“ or „that Kosovo is an independent state

202 Darko Brkan, Aleksandra Grdinic, Milovan Papic, Marko Pankovski, Veronika Vichova, Joey Gurney, Iliyana Georgieva, Adam Lelonek, Marta Kowalska, Patrik Szicherle, and Kristina Urbanova, **Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia**, European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/assessment.pdf>.

203 Tijana Cvjeticanin, Emir Zulejhic, Darko Brkan, Biljana Livancic-Milic, **Disinformation in the online sphere The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Why Not**, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

that has never been a part of Serbia,” among other things.²⁰⁴

Russian media and domestic portals portray NATO as a colonial military organization, recalling the NATO bombing of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all in an attempt to reduce support for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s possible participation in the Atlantic Alliance. Special emphasis is also placed on the deployment of anti-Western narratives, in order to contribute to the spread of anti-European attitudes among the population. Bosnian Serbs are primary target of such campaign, among which Russian propaganda seeks to create the impression that the European Union is assisting other ethnic groups while „again“ neglecting the Serbian people, or, more radically, that it wants to facilitate their „extermination.“ For instance, pro-Russian and pro-Serbian webpages reported in 2017 that the European Union intended to draw new borders to the harm of Serbs, and in 2018 that the European Union intended to flood Bosnia and Herzegovina with migrants from the Middle East.

A significant portion of the narrative attempts to create the impression that the Serbian people are being humiliated, that migrant camps are being built on their land, or that „the authorities are digging up Serb graves in Sarajevo.“ The article about the migrant camp being built on Serb returnee estates in the village of Lipa near Bihac was created by the RTRS portal, then distributed by smaller portals such as *Princip News*, *Top Portal* and *Patriote Srpske (Patriots of Srpska)*, and finally published on the website of the political organization *Savez Srba iz regiona (Alliance of Serbs from the region)*.²⁰⁵ RTRS also published an extensive article on „frequent demolition of Orthodox cemeteries in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina“, a topic to which *Informer* also paid attention, while *Telegraf.rs* took over the content.²⁰⁶

It is reasonable to conclude that Russia views every significant event in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a chance to inject a narrative that keeps the society divided and distant from Euro-Atlantic institutions and values. Some efforts include open support for nationalist politicians that reject the Dayton Peace Agreement’s basic principles of the state. *Sputnik* in Belgrade, with the help of pro-Russian websites and social media groups in Serbia and Republika Srpska, actively participated in the pre-election campaign for the election of a member of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Presidency in 2018. Presidential candidate *Mladen Ivanić* was presented as a Western agent, within attempts aimed to support the candidacy of *Milorad Dodik*. During the election campaign, some of the published headlines were: „Dodik: Ivanic is tearing

204 **Ne postoji tajni document iz naslova portal Sputnik Srbija**, *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-postoji-tajni-dokument-iz-naslova-portala-sputnik-srbija>.

205 **Prihvatni centar Lipa nije izgrađen na imanjima srpskih povratnika**, *Raskrinkavanje.ba* <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/prihvatni-centar-lipa-nije-izgraden-na-imanjima-srpskih-povratnika>.

206 **ISPRAVKA Ne prekopavaju srpske grobove u Sarajevu**, *Telegraf.rs*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/jugosfera/2910972-skandalozna-odluka-sarajeva-prekopavaju-13000-srpskih-grobova-jer-narusavaju-izgled-groblja>.

down bridges with Russia and Serbia on the orders of British mentors“, and „The Brits are supporting Ivanic as a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina“. When the results of Dodik’s election were announced, *Sputnik* published an article titled „Two Great Defeats of the West in the Balkans in Just a Week“.²⁰⁷

Sputnik seeks to promote the narrative that the West had the intention to overthrow Dodik, presenting Western warnings to *Dodik* about secessionist tendencies and nationalist messages as a threat or conspiracy of the West. Thus, in 2021, some of the headlines were the following: „British Ambassador Reveals London’s Intentions: What is Coming to Dodik Behind Closed Doors“, „A New Threat to Serbia and Dodik from Germany“, „Warning to Dodik from America“, „Schmidt Threatens to Dodik: Dialogue or Measures that are Already Ready in a Drawer“, „Dodik’s response to London: Peach commanded NATO army against Serbs - I am sending an envoy to Britain“, „They do not rule in Brussels yet, but would like to take over Banja Luka: Greens are expanding to the Balkans - Dodik is targeted“, „Hungarian firm veto reveals the disunity of the West towards Dodik and Srpska - Schmidt raises the stakes“.²⁰⁸

3.2.3. Russia’s Exploitation of Social Networks as a Resource for Radicalization and Deepening Divisions

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Russia’s influence on social networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be traced back to Milorad Dodik and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), Republika Srpska’s ruling party, as well as right-wing nationalist organizations. Following the defeat of Milorad Dodik’s party in the elections for mayors of Banja Luka and Bijeljina, Dodik said that SNSD will hire an agency to assess „SNSD’s approach to social networks.“ Analysts believe that because the Investment and Development Bank of Republika Srpska recently signed a contract with the Banja Luka company EUPHORIA „for the procurement of marketing services, event organization, and related services,“ whose owner is a relative of Dodik, this agency will service SNSD’s needs.²⁰⁹

Radical right-wing and neo-Nazi organizations are extensively active on social media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they promote a narrative

²⁰⁷ Texts available at <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com>.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ **Pocinje desant botova SNSD-a na društvene mreže, The landing of AISD bots on social networks begins** *Oslobodjenje*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/pocinje-desant-botova-snsd-a-na-drustvene-mreze-635499>

similar to that in Serbia. During the unilaterally declared "Independence Day" of Republika Srpska, which is prohibited by the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, about thirty men wearing the inscriptions *Srbska čast* (*Serbian Honor*) posed for a photo in the streets of Banja Luka, with a billboard and official logo of the Russian veterans' association *Nasledniki pobedy* (*Heirs of Victory*) in the background.²¹⁰ When the *Srbska čast* was accused of being trained at the Russian military camp in Nis, one of the organization's leaders, *Bojan Stojković*, stated it was a humanitarian organization. *Stojković* is also known for posting the following comment on Vladimir Putin's photo: "*It is worth to sacrifice life for such a President*".²¹¹ *Goran Davidović*, the chairman of the National Serbian Front and an influential *Twitter* user, claims that the idea for creating the group was born in Republika Srpska, despite the fact that it was registered in Serbia, and that its goal was to unite Serbian nationalist organizations. *Davidović* advocates for the unification of Serbia with the "occupied Serbian territories," which include Bosnia and Herzegovina.²¹²

There are two Hague convicts on *Facebook*'s black list of organizations and individuals linked to terrorism, right-wing extremism, and incitement to hatred: former President of the Republika Srpska *Radovan Karadzic* and military commander of the Army of Republika Srpska *Ratko Mladic*.²¹³ In addition to them, there is also the association *Serbian People's Movement called Izbor je naš* (*the Choice is Ours*), whose standard vocabulary includes a call for the secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Individuals and groups from Republika Srpska, like those from Serbia, are attempting to propagate the narrative of victimization of the Serbian community, whose protector is Russia. Thus, in their 2012 announcements, *Izbor je naš* expressed opinion that Dodik had to proclaim in the Security Council, through Russia and China, that Republika Srpska would begin declaring independence if *Pristina* attempted to impose rule over Serbs in northern Kosovo.²¹⁴

Dodik's ruling party, along with radical-wing organizations in Serbia and Republika Srpska whose activities are supported by Russian authorities and Russian radical right wing, portray convicted war criminal *Ratko Mladic* as a "hero" of the Serbian nation. In June 2021, *Facebook* removed the ruling *SNSD's* video honoring *Ratko Mladic*, who had been sentenced to life

210 Davor Marko, *{Non}violent Extremism Online: How Opinion Leaders Use Online Channels to Disseminate Radical Messages and Intolerance*, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/39915900/_Non_violent_Extremism_Online_How_Opinion_Leaders_Use_Online_Channels_to_Disseminate_Radical_Messages_and_Intolerance.

211 Julian Borger, *Russian-trained mercenaries back Bosnia's Serb separatists*, *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/12/russian-trained-mercenaries-back-bosnias-serb-separatists#img-2>.

212 Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, Balkan Politics and Society, April 2019.

213 Sam Biddle, *Revealed: Facebook's secret blacklist of "dangerous individuals and organizations"*, *The Intercept*, October 12, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/10/12/facebook-secret-blacklist-dangerous/>.

214 *Srbski narodni pokret traži nezavisnost RS*, *Nezavisne*, April 3, 2012, <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Srbski-narodni-pokret-trazi-nezavisnost-RS/135311>.

imprisonment by the Hague International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for genocide against Bosniaks from Srebrenica, persecution of Bosniaks and Croats throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, terrorizing the citizens of Sarajevo with shelling and sniper fire during the siege of the city and taking UNPROFOR members hostage.²¹⁵ In the same month, *Twitter* removed *Dodik's* daughter's post: "Long live Ratko Mladic" for violating the rules prohibiting "glorification of violence".²¹⁶

At the neo-fascist forum *Iron March*, where young individuals strive to create a transnational collective neo-fascist identity, individuals from the Bosnian city of Prijedor were also mentioned, with whom the sale of weapons from Bosnia and Herzegovina was *negotiated*. Prijedor has a history of violence against Muslims, with killings of more than 3,000 non-Serbs in 1992, including more than 100 children. Investigative journalists discovered links to *Iron March*; as well as the organization *Krv i cast (Blood and Honor)* and *Kombat 18* with individuals from Prijedor.²¹⁷ Otherwise, *Iron March*, which was allegedly formed by an individual from Russia, stopped operating in 2017.

Right-wing radicalisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mutually reinforcing, so one can talk about *reciprocal radicalization* in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In their posts on social networks, the organization of the radical right wing *Put vjernika (the Path of the Believers)* warns about the „genocidal Chetnik ideology“ and calls today's treatment of Bosniaks terror, because of which there is a risk of „new genocide“. ²¹⁸ *Put vjernika* also reminds of the suffering of Young Muslims during the eighties, and then of the crimes against Bosniaks during the wars of the 1990s, and warns that „history repeats itself“. Croatian right-wing organizations also operate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as a group of fans of the *Zrinjski* soccer club, which highlights the symbols of the Ukrainian Azov Battalion and the coat of arms of the Independent State of Croatia.²¹⁹

215 Vladimir Kovačević and Lamija Grebo, **Facebook uklonio video koji veliča "legendu" Ratka Mladića**, Vladimir Kovacevic and Lamija Grebo, Facebook removed a video glorifying the "legend" of Ratko Mladic. *Balkan Transitional Justice*, June 17, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/17/facebook-uklonio-video-koji-velica-legendu-ratka-mladica/?lang=sr>.

216 **Twitter uklonio objavu Dodikove ćerke: "Živeo Ratko Mladić!"**, **Twitter removed Dodik's daughter's post: "Long live Ratko Mladic!"**, June 10, 2021, <https://rs.ninfo.com/region/tviter-uklonio-objavu-dodikove-kcerke-ziveo-ratko-mladic/>

217 Nermina Kulogija, **Desničarske i neonacističke organizacije neometano ističu simbole u Prijedoru**, *Detektor.ba*, May 12, 2020, <https://detektor.ba/2020/05/12/desnicarske-i-neonacisticke-organizacije-neometano-isticu-simbole-u-prijedoru/>.

218 Valery Perry (ed.), Jelena Dzankic (ed.), Soeren Kell (ed.), **Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge**, *Balkan Politics and Society*, April 2019.

219 Nermina Kulogija, **Mostarski navijači i desničari pokazuju naklonost ukrajinskom "Azovu"**, *Detektor.ba*, November 6, 2020, <https://detektor.ba/2020/11/06/mostarski-navijaci-i-desnicari-pokazuju-naklonost-ukrajinskom-azovu/>.

3.3. NORTH MACEDONIA

The accession of North Macedonia to NATO can be characterized as a colossal failure of Russia's subversive and intelligence activities. However, some of the results of these activities are still visible. Due to the complicated domestic political situation in which pro-Russian nationalist factions continue to enjoy enviable support, as well as due to the European Union's reluctance to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia, the reopening of North Macedonia to Russia is notable.

Unlike Montenegro, where the government that brought the country into NATO was pro-Western and Euro-Atlantic oriented, North Macedonia had had right-wing elites in power for nearly a decade prior to joining NATO, and had relied on Russia to advocate hardline nationalist positions. In addition, there was a necessity for North Macedonia to resolve numerous outstanding issues with neighbors Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania. That might certainly be one of the reasons why the former Macedonian government, unlike the Montenegrin government, refused to join the European Union in imposing restrictive measures against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

North Macedonia came into distinct focus of Russia as Montenegro moved closer to NATO membership and the international community was encouraged by the prospect of NATO gaining an additional member in the Western Balkans. In June 2017, the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCPR)* and its partners *Nova TV* and the *Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK)* shared with *The Guardian* a series of Macedonian Counterintelligence Service's documents confirming that Russian intelligence operatives and diplomats had been stationed in Northern Macedonia for nearly a decade with the goal of destabilizing the state and, indirectly, the European Union and NATO.²²⁰ This was shortly after the Montenegrin parliament had voted in favor of Montenegro joining NATO, and shortly before pro-Western politician Zoran Zaev became Prime Minister of North Macedonia in June 2017.

According to the findings of the documents, Russian intelligence and propaganda activities in North Macedonia have been going on since 2008, when Greece blocked Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic path due to the unresolved name dispute.²²¹ Russia's activities have primarily focused on supporting nationalist Macedonian and pro-Russian political forces and on

²²⁰ Luke Harding, Aubrey Belford, and Saska Cvetkovska, **Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say**, *The Guardian*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence>.

²²¹ Ibid.

undermining forces advocating for a speedy resolution of the name dispute, as well as on undermining the pre-referendum process. Russia established honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid in the early 2000s, which doubled as „bases for intelligence operations.“ As North Macedonia was getting closer to NATO membership, the number of Macedonian-Russian friendship societies increased dramatically, the *Russian Cultural Center* in Skopje opened, and efforts to promote a „pan-Slavic identity“ and a common Orthodox faith intensified in general. Additionally, Russia also began financing the construction of a significant number of Orthodox churches.

Russia was also interested in North Macedonia's economy and energy sector. The Russian company *Stroytransgaz* began construction of the gas pipeline network in 2015, and a huge part of the costs were covered by Russia (60 million out of 75.7) as part of the debt of the Soviet Union.²²² The mining company *Solway Group* is also operating in North Macedonia. It is a Swiss corporation owned by an Estonian citizen but also connected to circles around Russian President Putin and on whose behalf the Russian authorities often lobby.²²³

The documents also note that Russian Ambassador *Oleg Shcherbak* „emphasized the existing idea of Moscow (at least six months) to change its international political course towards the Balkans in order to create a belt of neutral countries (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Macedonia, Serbia)“²²⁴. He also stressed that one of the goals was to make Macedonia energy dependent on the Kremlin. Three agents of the *Russian Foreign Intelligence Service* (SVR) were also identified, as well as four agents of the military *Central Intelligence Agency* (GRU), whose operations were coordinated from Sofia. There were also attempts to recruit former and current members of the Macedonian army and the Ministry of the Interior who would „be used to pursue Russian interests at a particular political moment or situation.“²²⁵

In July 2018, the *Investigative Reporting Lab* from North Macedonia determined, based on documents from the Ministry of the Interior, that Russian oligarch *Ivan Savvidis*, who lived in Greece, and who was once a member of the Russian ruling party *United Russia*, paid through a series of payments, including in cash, at least €300,000 to opponents of the name North Macedonia. Among them are soccer fans of the local soccer club *Komiti* from

222 Aubrey Belford, Saska Cvetkovska, Biljana Sekulovska and Stefan Dojcinovic, **Leaked documents show Russian, Serbian attempts to meddle in Macedonia**, *OCCPR*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.

223 **Russian interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections**, *Bellingcat*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/>.

224 *Ibid.*

225 *Ibid.*

Vardar. The owner of the club is the Russian millionaire *Sergey Samsonenko*, who was also the Russian honorary consul in Bitola. Also, football hooligans took part in the violent protests in Skopje in June 2018, representing the interests of VMRO-DPMNE (Macedonian Internal Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity).²²⁶ In a coordinated action of the American Embassy in Greece, the State Department, the CIA and the United States European Command in Stuttgart, the United States intercepted communications confirming that *Savvidis* acted on behalf of the Russian Federation. US Ambassador to Greece *Geoffrey Pyatt* handed over the documentation to the left-wing Greek prime minister, who discontinued close ties with Moscow on July 11. Although he had previously refused to show solidarity with the United Kingdom over nerve agent poisoning, he expelled two Russian diplomats on July 11, accusing them of bribing officials and inciting demonstrations against reaching Greek-Macedonian agreement.²²⁷

3.3.1. Russian Influence in the Online Space in North Macedonia

Pro-Russian analysts from Serbia were a common presence in the North Macedonian media in the eve of the referendum on the name issue. *Miroslav Lazanski*, a journalist at the time and later the ambassador of Serbia to Moscow, was the most prolific “analyst” on North Macedonian news portals. The analyzes always tried to establish commonalities between Serbia and North Macedonia, presenting them as victims of America, “spies”, “Orange Revolutions”, and “neighboring states”. *Lazanski* also wrote that “the order to attack Macedonia comes from Washington”.²²⁸ This was just one of many ways to foster nationalist and anti-Western sentiment in North Macedonia.

Contents of the Russian *Sputnik* and its Serbian branch are regularly broadcasted by local Macedonian media such as *kurir.mk*, *lider.ml*, *denshen.mk*, *ekonomski.mk*, *vistina.mk*. Local representatives of the Russian news agency *TASS*, as well as the Russian foreign aid agency *Rosstrudnichestvo*,

²²⁶ Saska Cvetkovska, **Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia**, OCCPR, July 16, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>

Russian interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections, *Bellingcat*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/>.

²²⁷ **U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote**, *The New York Times*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/us/politics/russia-macedonia-greece.html>

²²⁸ **Leaked document at the OCCPR's website** <https://cdn.occrp.org/projects/documents/website-documents-folder/spooksandspin/Document2.pdf>

also worked on the ground.²²⁹ Documents in the possession of the *OCCPR* also note that Russian intelligence operatives attempted to influence and offer bribes to North Macedonian media outlets, including those whose readers were predominantly Albanian, in order to spread „information and misinformation“ in support of Russian political goals.

Articles about the *colored revolution* in North Macedonia and the *Turkish Stream* gas pipeline in Serbia and Macedonia could also be found on *Geopolitica.ru*, a Russian website acting as an extended arm of the Kremlin.²³⁰ In its study of Russian propaganda, the *OCCPR* draws attention to an article published by Macedonian journalist *Krum Velkov* on *Geopolitica.ru*, with a title „The Last Battle for Macedonia“. In that article, it was claimed that North Macedonia was „frontally attacked by dying demons of the Anglo-American deep swamp state, who are now losing control of the world day by day“.²³¹ According to the *OCCPR*, *Velkov* is present on social networks, where he also incites and spreads conspiracy theories and anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda. He is also active in the „offline space“ (on the ground), encouraging campaigns against Western commercial projects by presenting them as imperialist and harmful to the environment. For example, together with *Angela Nakov*, he led a campaign against the Canadian *Reservoir Minerals* project on *Mount Kozuv*. Public opinion was receptive to that campaign, due to its commitment to environmental protection, and thus it gave legitimacy to *Velkov's* pro-Russian texts as being written by a „reputable environmental activist.“²³²

Macedonian journalist who is close to *Nikola Gruevski* and VMRO-DPMNE, *Mirka Velinovska*, was a winner of Russian honorary award for contribution to „youth education“. Together with *Milenko Nelekovski* she is present on the pro-Russian portals *Geopolitica.ru* and *Katehon*. Thus, for example, they published an article about *Soroš* and the *Open Society Foundation in Macedonia*.²³³ It is also interesting that the *Velinovska-Nedelkovski* duo have published an allegedly investigative journalistic article about *Mohammed Dahlan* on the *Geopolitica.ru* portal, in which they claimed *Dahlan* is among other things connected with Serbian and Montenegrin authorities, although the article's obvious intention is to serve as Russian

229 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/head-of-dc-based-russian-cultural-center-being-investigated-as-possible-spy/2013/10/23/63a0bb54-3c02-11e3-a94f-b58017bfee6c_story.html?utm_term=.28f57cb36629

230 Texts on North Macedonia at *Geopolitica.ru* <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/979-color-revolution-in-macedonia-washingtons-attempt-to-undermine-the-turkish-stream-russian-pipeline-project.html> <https://www.geopolitica.ru/ur/node/18084>.

231 *Krum Velkov*, **The Final Battle for Macedonia**, *Geopolitica.ru*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/final-battle-macedonia>.

232 **Крум Велков: Не потклекуваме пред заканите за тужби на Еуромакс!**, *Antropol.mk*, February 19, 2019, <https://antropol.mk/2019/02/19/krum-velkov-ne-potkleknuvame-pred-zakanite-za-tuzbi-na-euromaks/>.

233 *Mirka Velinovska*, *Milenko Nedelkovski*, **Open Society Foundation in Macedonia**, *Geopolitika.ru*, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/936-open-society-foundation-in-macedonia.html>.

propaganda in the Middle East. In 2020, all the mentioned journalists continued to spread fake news about the coronavirus pandemic, branding the public health/mitigation measures as „fascism“ and comparing the government’s actions with „Nazi regime concentration camps“. They were also promoting the narrative that the pandemic was part of a wider conspiracy between the EU, NATO and *Bill Gates*. *Nedelkovski* also had to appear in court for spreading hate speech towards certain social categories.²³⁴

U.S. officials also found that Russia supported the creation of hundreds of websites calling for a boycott of the referendum and the annulment of ballots.²³⁵ The propaganda campaign *I Boycott* dominated public discourse in the run-up to the 2018 name change referendum. There was a noticeable pattern of repeating names, existence of similar social media accounts and profiles and on-line activities not consistent with human-like behavior. The identified network of social media accounts and profiles was established before the elections and supported views of either the right-wing party *VMRO-DPMNE* or the radical left *Levica (Left Party)*. Both parties opposed Macedonia’s accession to NATO. It is not unexpected that many social media profiles/accounts simultaneously opposed the name change to North Macedonia and supported anti-Western views and spread conspiracy theories on the subject. Very few accounts supported the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*SDSM*), the center-left party, or the country’s Euro-Atlantic path. It is a very interesting conclusion that the network is managed by local rather than external actors.

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The 2020 parliamentary elections were held in an atmosphere of disappointment with the West. Although the 27-year-old name dispute with Greece had been resolved, the European Union decided not to open negotiations with North Macedonia. Lack of clarity about the North Macedonia’s European integration bid contributed to the emergence of deep divisions in Macedonian society, in turn making it more receptive to malign influences. This propaganda refined the pre-referendum *I Boycott* campaign, promoting the *VMRO-DPMNE* coalition, conservative values, nationalist rhetoric and opposition to the name change.

Just three months before the originally planned election date, a wide network of over 500 new users appeared *online*, spreading conspiracy theories, anti-Western messaging, sharing posts by *Levica (the Left Party)* and *VMRO-DPMNE*, opposing the name change and European integration. As research on

234 **Hate and Propaganda models of Media and Communication in the Western Balkans and Turkey**, <https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/E-book-Resilience-research-l-altogether-final.pdf>.

235 Simon Tisdall, **Result of Macedonia’s referendum is another victory for Russia**, *The Guardian*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/01/result-of-macedonia-referendum-is-another-victory-for-russia>
In the Balkans, Russia and the West Fight a Disinformation-Age Battle, *the New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/16/world/europe/macedonia-referendum-russia-nato.html>.



this topic has determined²³⁶, some older accounts such as @burdush_gv have averaged as many as 55 tweets a day for seven years, and semi-automated accounts active during the *I Boycott* campaign were also placed used as tool to oppose the Social Democrats. Identical account naming patterns indicated that accounts were managed from the same source.

The account *Cheese* was also one of the most active accounts with over 150,000 tweets between 2012-2020. In addition, web portals close to *VMRO-DPMNE*, including *infomax.mk* and *veritas.mk*, fabricated evidence of SDSM vote-rigging ahead of the July 2020 parliamentary elections. The Macedonian web portal *F2N2* also reported on a joke invented by two Russian individuals with the aim of ruining the reputation of Prime Minister *Zoran Zaev* on the eve of the elections.²³⁷ All the examples confirmed that North Macedonia was an example of joint hybrid Russian and nationalist domestic political parties' activities in order to achieve common goals.

Individuals seeking to publicly expose Russian propaganda influence in North Macedonia are easy prey of Russian propaganda which aims to discredit them. Thus, for example, an activist of *CIVIL Xhabir Deralla*, in his description of harassment and threats on the Internet, stated that "propaganda centers do their best to diminish and discredit individuals and organizations working to promote European values, anti-nationalism, justice, equality and human rights." Assessing that hate propaganda is produced by powerful structures supported by Russia, *Deralla* concludes that civil society organizations and the media are mostly silent because they fear retaliation from authoritarian political forces if they return to power, and protection cannot be sought even before the judiciary, that still suffers from the consequences of previous rule.²³⁸

3.3.2. Coordinated Russian-Serbian Intelligence and Propaganda Activities

According to the leaked documents, Serbian intelligence services were also involved in the „operations“ and supported anti-Western and pro-Russian

236 Ioannis Armakolas, Barbora Chrzova, Petr Čermak and Anja Grabovac, **Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways forward in analyzing actors' influence**, April 2021, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8604_western-balkans-at-the-crossroads-ways-forward-in-analyzing-external-actors-influence.pdf.

237 **Funny Comedians or a Well-Coordinated Russian action on the Balkans**, July 12, 2019, <https://f2n2.mk/en/funny-comedians-or-a-well-coordinated-russian-action-on-the-balkans/>.

238 Xhabir Deralla, **Anti-Western propaganda against civil society in North Macedonia: The case of CIVIL**, May 3, 2021, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/05/03/anti-western-propaganda-against-civil-society-north-macedonia-case-civil>.

nationalists, close to then-former Prime Minister *Nikola Gruevski*, in what was then Macedonia.²³⁹ For example, *Goran Zivaljevic*, an operative of *BIA* and employee of the Serbian Embassy in Skopje, who, according to Macedonian intelligence services, was connected to members of Zemun-Belgrade criminal gangs, and, according to Kosovo and Albanian media, who was recruited by or worked closely with *Vladislav Filipov*, an operative of GRU, as stated in published documents, gave instructions to Ivan Stoilkovic, pro-Russian Macedonian MP, leader of the Democratic Party of Serbs, coalition partner of VMRO, and organized his visit to Moscow. *Zivaljevic* was even present in the Macedonian Parliament on the day of the riots on April 27. *Stoilkovic* was also in contact with Russian diplomats and *TASS* correspondents in Skopje, and was in a group of Balkan politicians who traveled to Moscow to sign a declaration calling for „neutrality“ of the Western Balkan states.²⁴⁰

Along with these events, the media owned or controlled by the Serbian government flooded the public discourse with support for *Gruevski* and Russia. The Serbian propaganda machinery tried to present the change of government as Western interference in the events in North Macedonia, which helped Albanian interests and could lead the country to war. Serbian propaganda outlets quoted Russian criticism of the United States and the European Union, stating that US and EU interfered in the election process by supporting *Zaev* and the *Greater Albania* project. However, it would be wrong to say that Serbian propaganda was only a „proxy“ of Russian propaganda, given that Serbian circles in favor of the „Serbian world“ project have their own interest to undermine the stability of the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia.

3.3.3. North Macedonia - an exporter of online anti-Western Propaganda and an actor in the US pre-election process

The case of North Macedonia also shows how the possibility of „getting rich“ by placing sensationalist content on social networks can easily be exploited for malignant political purposes. While during the Cold War, the Russian Communist Party was the one that set the rules of the game of creation and use of disinformation, today this is done by a diverse network of

²³⁹ Leaked document available at: <https://cdn.occrp.org/projects/documents/website-documents-folder/spooksandspin/Document1.pdf>.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

entities that do not necessarily have to be controlled or linked to the Russian government, or they may be linked, but that connection is only sensed, with no discernible evidence. The Macedonian city of Veles became one of the hotbeds for spreading fake news aimed at undermining the 2016 US election process. As the media initially reported, teenagers in Veles figured out that dissemination of *Trump*-friendly content during the US 2016 presidential campaign could enable them to make huge profits. Thus, they created over 140 websites with the aim to spread propaganda among American citizens, earning in the process as much as \$ 5,000 a month. It is a very hefty sum in North Macedonia, where salaries are often ten times less.²⁴¹

While at first it seemed that there was no other involvement when it came to this particular fake news campaign, the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)* pointed out that there was a possibility that not only teenagers from Veles were behind the website. In 2015, Macedonian media lawyer *Trajce Arsov* registered a web domain for the political website *Usapoliticstoday.com*, which became the center of a network of dozens of websites and *Facebook* pages in Veles with over 2 million followers. Conspiracy theories such as “Obama’s Ex-Boyfriend Reveals Shocking Truth That He Wants to Hide from America” or “HUGE Scandal - Chelsea isn’t Bill Clinton’s Daughter” have been spread over them. *Arsov* also collaborated with a wide network of correspondents from the USA and the UK. Three months earlier, *Anna Bogacheva*, an employee of the *Translator* project of the Russian Internet Research Agency based in St. Petersburg, visited North Macedonia. It is interesting that the visit took place in the eve of the US elections, and that the IRA became the subject of an extensive investigation into Russia’s involvement in the 2016 election process.²⁴²

Macedonian adolescents have continued to be active to this day, benefiting from susceptibility of deeply conservative right-wing Americans to conspiracy theories, and extending their reach to *Parler*, a relatively new right-wing social network that was shut down last year. Research by *Stanford Internet Observatory* and *Graphika*, companies specializing in

241 Samanth Subramanian, **Inside the Macedonian fake-news complex**, February 15, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>.

Craig Silverman, Lawrence Alexander, **How teens in the Balkans are duping Trump supporters with fake news**, November 3, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>.

242 Special Prosecutor Mueller, in charge of conducting a comprehensive investigation into Russia's involvement in the investigation and possible US cooperation with Russia in the election campaign after the 2016 US election, identified the *Internet Research Agency LLC* as a Russian organization involved in election interference and political processes, including the 2016 presidential election. The organization sought to wage an "information war against the United States" through fictitious American figures on social media and other Internet media platforms. Employees of the Internet Research Agency LLC presented themselves as American activists using false identities and strictly took care to hide the Russian origin of their activities. The social media accounts created by the *Internet Research Agency* have reached a huge number of Americans. - Department of Justice file, Indictment <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

monitoring disinformation flows, presented by the think-tank organization *Election Integrity Partnership*, shows the success of the relatively new Veles-based *Resist the Mainstream* website broadcasting either paraphrased or plagiarized content from sites visited by conservative Americans. The authors of this site, which is believed to be behind the Donald Trump Tweets account, used a US mailing address to conceal their origins and thus remain receptive to US audiences.²⁴³ A similar example, related to the previous one, is the work of *Teodor Mircevski*, whose sites such as *conservativefighters.org*, *conservativefighters.com*, *donaldrumpnews.net*, and *conservativemedia.com* have millions of interactions by spreading fake news about Democrats and Democratic candidates.

Although there are no direct, at least not easily perceptible, links to Russian malign influence, the fact that adolescents from Veles use similar tactics of spreading false news used by the Russian IRA, for example, shows all the complexity of responding to Russia's digital influence.

²⁴³ Jack Cable, Isabella Garcia-Camargo, Renée Diresta, Stanford Internet Observatory, **Graphika Team, A look into viral North Macedonian Content Farms**, October 13, <https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/north-macedonian-content-farms>.



3.4. MONTENEGRO

Montenegro is perhaps the most egregious illustration of how easily Russia's soft power can be converted into malign influence and meddling in internal affairs²⁴⁴. Russia's damaging influence in Montenegro is difficult to measure. It is realized through direct operations, but also through those of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), Serbian authorities, and the media in both Serbia and Montenegro. The Serbian authorities and the SOC are not only Russian *proxy actors*, but are also pursuing their own political agenda in Montenegro. According to the *Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Center* in Montenegro, Russia's negative influence in the country is manifested through disinformation campaigns, media narratives, cyber-attacks, the use of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church as tools of Russian soft power, and "support for ultra-right pro-Russian conservative parties".²⁴⁵

Montenegro regained its independence peacefully, which is unique in the Western Balkans. The Russian Federation, which was still consolidating internally and rethinking its role in the world at the time, did not oppose Montenegrin independence. On the contrary, the two countries started developing economic relations. Even before independence, in 2005, Russian businessman *Oleg Deripaska* acquired ownership of *Kombinat aluminijuma*, Montenegro's largest enterprise, with over 2,000 employees and a 15% share of GDP at the time.²⁴⁶ In October 2016, ahead of the key elections preceding Montenegro's accession to NATO, foreign direct investment from Russia accounted for 30% of Montenegrin GDP, and 13% of total foreign direct investment.²⁴⁷ By 2019, Russians owned about 70,000 property units in Montenegro.²⁴⁸

However, acceleration of Montenegro's path towards NATO membership quickly brought deterioration in Montenegro-Russian relations. Montenegro turned down Russia's 2013 request to temporarily station its warships in the ports of Bar and Kotor, thus preventing Russia's access to the Mediterranean through Montenegro.²⁴⁹ Russia's increasingly aggressive stance

²⁴⁴ Mira Milosevich, **How soft power turns into malign influence and foreign interference? European Parliament: Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation**, February 1, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/229827/EP%2001.02.2021%20Mira%20Milosevich.pdf>.

²⁴⁵ Russia's role in the Balkans: **The case of Montenegro, Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro**, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Heather A. Conley, Matthew Melino, Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: **The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

²⁴⁸ Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, **The Kremlin Playbook 2**, *CSIS Europe Program and the Center for the Study of Democracy*, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/features/kremlin-playbook-2>.

²⁴⁹ **Montenegro refuses Russian request to use port of Bar for military purposes**, *The MediTelegraph*, December 20,

toward the Western Balkans culminated in its participation in the Montenegrin coup attempt in 2016. On October 16, 2016, one day before Montenegro's parliamentary elections, the former commander of the Serbian gendarmerie and 19 other people were arrested on suspicion of plotting a coup, including the assassination of then-Prime Minister *Milo Dukanovic*. According to the Special Prosecutor's Office's indictment, agents of Russia's civil and military intelligence services, the FSB and GRU, as well as *Konstantin Malofeev*, the *Katehon* portal's founder and *Leonid Reshetnikov*, a former Russian intelligence officer and member of the *Katehon* Supervisory Board and head of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Studies*, took part in the operation.²⁵⁰

Russia has turned all kinds of ties - economic, commercial, tourist, historical, cultural, and religious - into an information warfare weapon in order to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO, thereby trying to destabilize the region and demonstrate the Alliance's weakness. *For this very reason, Montenegro's entry into NATO represents a severe defeat for Russia's malignant activities.* Encouraged by Montenegro's admission into NATO, but also mindful of the Russian threat, NATO members became receptive to North Macedonia's accession as soon as feasible, and then moved their focus to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro has remained staunchly pro-European. The country applied for EU membership in 2008 and began negotiations in 2012, having so far opened all negotiating chapters with the temporary closure of three. According to the *BiEPAG* poll from December 2021, support for EU membership is exceptionally high, reaching as high as 83 percent²⁵¹. In addition, Montenegro is the only country in the region where the EU is the most respected foreign policy player. According to the same poll, citizens believe Montenegro will join the EU within the next five years. Support for the fact of Montenegro's NATO membership has increased as well.

Even after joining the Alliance, the risk of Russian propaganda persisted, if not increased. Russia has exploited every political crisis in which it has backed opponents of the Euro-Atlantic government. In 2017, on the eve of the Montenegrin presidential elections, *Sergey Zeleznik*, a prominent

2013, <http://www.themeditelgraph.com/en/transport/ports/2013/12/20/montenegro-refuses-russian-request-use-port-bar-for-military-purposes-VoWWwhslw6MuujizwzMj3K/index.html>.

250 The President of Serbia confirmed that the Serbian authorities arrested individuals on suspicion of participating in an attempted coup. The Serbian Orthodox Church reportedly hosted a meeting of participants. Members of the radical right-wing "Night Wolves" were also allegedly involved in the operations. According to the findings at the time, the plan also included cyber-attacks on applications for receiving messages, as well as the news about the alleged theft of elections and calling citizens for protests. The operation was to be conducted by an elite unit of 29155 GRU in charge of sensitive operations outside Russia, which included killings and attacks. This unit is also connected with several other activities: the Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in 2014; poisoning of a Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in 2015; poisoning of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in 2018. A few days before the coup attempt, the head of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, visited Belgrade, and the media reported that he had secured the repatriation of GRU members, who could therefore be brought to trial only in absentia.

251 **Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU integration**, *BiEPAG*, November 8, 2021, <https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>.

official in Putin's *United Russia Party*, made a statement outlining guidelines for behavior of the Montenegrin opposition. He stated that "it would be logical and justified for the opposition to continue to boycott Parliament, to demand early parliamentary elections, and to refuse separate negotiations and agreements with the Democratic Party of Socialists," and that "only having a common opposition candidate in 2018 can provide the advantage needed to win."²⁵² The Montenegrin *Democratic Front* and *Prava Crna Gora* leaders, in particular, maintained close connections with Moscow. In January 2019, on the invitation of Serbian President *Aleksandar Vučić*, the leaders of these two political groups attended a gala lunch in honor of Russian President *Putin*, who was in Serbia on an official visit.²⁵³

Thanks to the actions of proxy actors, Russia did not need to interfere more profoundly in the elections in August 2020, although Russian politicians plainly supported the opposition. *Dukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists* narrowly lost the election, but it was enough to move the party into opposition for the first time in 30 years. The peaceful and orderly handover of power was appreciated by Montenegro's partner and allied countries. The three constituents of the ruling coalition - the coalition *Za budućnost Crne Gore* (*For the Future of Montenegro*) gathered around the *Democratic Front*, *Mir je naša nacija* (*Peace is Our Nation*) gathered around *Democratic Montenegro* and *Crno na bijelo* gathered around *URA*, pledged in a special Memorandum issued immediately after the election that the country's foreign policy would not be changed. However, Russia managed to achieve some of its goals, owing to the composition of the new government, as well as the fact that the majority in the Parliament required either the support of pro-Russian parties or a coalition with the opposition. Therefore, every subject on the political scene and on the agenda had the potential to spark a new political crisis.

A sort of Russian "win" was the reversal of the convictions of two Russian citizens and eleven others for their roles in the coup attempt and the retrial of the entire process. The original verdict also sentenced opposition MPs from the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian Democratic Front *Andrija Mandić* and *Milan Knežević*, to prison, on counts of belonging to a "criminal organization."²⁵⁴ The two leaders of the *Democratic Front* have always considered the coup a fabricated and rigged affair, and they have denied any involvement in any events of this nature. NATO and Allied officials have never questioned the coup attempt and its links to Russian state and parastatal players.

252 **Zeljeznak poručuje: DF i Bečić da se pomire**, *Radio and Television of Montenegro portal*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/175755/df-i-becic-da-se-pomire.html>.

253 **Mandić, Knežević, Danilović i Milačić pozvani na ručak u čast Putina**, *CDM portal*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/mandic-i-knezevic-pozvani-na-rucak-u-cast-putina>.

254 The Court of Appeals announced that the judgement from 2019 was unsustainable due to violations of the criminal law, and that a new trial should be held before different presiding judges.

Another reason Russia did not have to invest more in achieving its goals in Montenegro following the change of government was the equal inclination of Serbian political elites and the Serbian Orthodox Church to incite political crises with the potential to provoke violence and thus destabilize the country's political landscape. Tensions were an inherent part of political life in the aftermath of the elections. Nationalist incidents erupted to the point where minority representatives stated that minorities "do not feel safe in this kind of Montenegro", and the intellectual community was warning against undermining Montenegrin identity.²⁵⁵ The tensions reached a climax when the great majority of the government and the ruling coalition insisted on enthroning the new Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Cetinje Monastery in September 2021, despite warnings from the entire opposition, the civil sector, and even some government constituents that it would further divide Montenegrin society.

Cetinje is the Old Royal Capital of Montenegro, and as such it represents a symbol of Montenegrin fight for freedom and resistance against occupation. Furthermore, until the occupation of Montenegro and uncanonical abolition of the Holy Autocephalous Metropolitanate - the Montenegrin Orthodox Church 1918-1920 (explanation will follow later in the paper), there is no data that the first hierarch from Serbia ever enthroned any archbishop in Montenegro²⁵⁶. The first metropolitans of Montenegro and the Littoral, Gavril Dozic, Joaniki Lipovac and Arsenij Bradvarevic, were not enthroned by the Serbian Patriarch. *This happened for the first time on July 12, 1961 in communist Yugoslavia, with heavy involvement of the Serbian intelligence circles who were choosing the most appropriate candidate.* The second such ceremony took place on December 30, 1990 in Cetinje, when *Amfilohije Radović* was enthroned by Patriarch Pavle Stojčević. That enthronement took place at a time when Slobodan Milosevic's influence over the situation in Montenegro was at its peak. It was also the start of a schism among Orthodox believers, for only seven days later, Montenegrins started having two separate ceremonies to observe Christmas Eve in Cetinje. *That is why choosing the Cetinje Monastery as a venue of enthronement again in 2021, for the first time in independent Montenegro, was seen as a clear attempt of the official Belgrade to demonstrate its political control in post-election Montenegro and to proceed with assimilating Orthodox population and rewriting history in Serbia's neighborhood.*

255 Aneta Durovic, **Incidenti na nacionalnoj osnovi u Crnoj Gori u pojačanju Radio Free Europe**, April 26, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/incidenti-na-nacionalnoj-osnovi-u-crnoj-gori-u-pojacanju/31223811.html>.

256 Vladimir Jovanović, **Ustoličenje 1961. na Cetinju: Patrijarh Srbije, UDBA, komunisti NR Crne Gore i – Risto Radović**, *AntenaM*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/211482-ustolicenje-1961-na-cetinja-patrijarh-srbije-udba-komunisti-nr-crne-gore-i-risto-radovic>.

The potential for violence that this insistence brought is additionally understandable if one takes into account that, at the time, support for the Montenegrin Orthodox Church reached a high of 21 percent of the Orthodox population, despite the fact that, due to the historical circumstances, it is a non-canonical religious organization (which will be clarified later in the paper).²⁵⁷ Cetinje and other cities' residents protested by barricading the Old Royal Capital and spending the night at the *Belvedere* entrance to Cetinje before the intended enthronement date of September 5. As a result, *the Belvedere night* became a symbol of resistance against assimilation efforts of Serbian nationalist circles and the Serbian Orthodox Church, but also an introduction to the collapse of the ruling coalition. The *Digital Forensic Center* of the Atlantic Council nicknamed the enthronement "the police-media anointment", stating that it "renewed the atavisms of mutual historical conflicts of the two opposing concepts and narratives – the Greens (*Zelenaši*) and the Whites (*Bjelaši*), Partisans and Chetniks, sovereigntists and unitarists, thus deepening the ambiance of existential crisis and lapsing the Montenegrin society"²⁵⁸. Montenegrin media reported that operatives of the Serbian intelligence service BIA had been in the Cetinje Monastery a few days before the enthronement, and that members of the Serbian intelligence services and Serbian right-wing extremist organizations²⁵⁹ had been noticed during the enthronement in Cetinje, as well as that "a high-ranking member of the GRU (name known to the editors), employed at the Russian Embassy in Montenegro" played a key role. No denial of these claims followed.²⁶⁰ A few days after the enthronement, Russian Foreign Minister *Sergey Lavrov* said "the United States seeks to destroy Orthodoxy and Orthodox unity in the world," and that "the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church."²⁶¹

257 Komar: Najnovije ankete pokazuju da SPC podržava 43%, a CPC 21% pravoslavnog stanovništva, *AntenaM portal*, <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/210464-komar-najnovije-ankete-pokazuju-da-spc-podrzava-43-a-cpc-21-pravoslavnog-stanovnistva>.

258 DFC Research/Analysis The Police-Media Anointment, *Digital Forensic Centre*, September 9, 2021, <https://dfcme.me/en/the-police-media-anointment/>.

259 Kaćuša Krsmanović, Srpski ekstremisti raspoređeni u Cetinjskom manastiru, grupe spremne čekaju i u Podgorici, *Pobjeda*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/srpski-ekstremisti-rasporedeni-u-cetinjskom-manastiru-grupe-spremlne-cekaju-i-u-podgorici>.

Draško Duranović, Konačnu procjenu rizika daće "Kobre" i BIA, *Pobjeda*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/konacnu-procenu-rizika-dace-kobre-i-bia>.

260 Šeki Radončić, U kandžama Kremlja, *AntenaM*, izvor Dnevne novine, <https://www.antenam.net/stav/214942-u-kandzama-kremlja>.

261 CPC bila autokefalna: Ustav iz 1905. i Tomos iz 1922. demantuju Amfilohija, *Standard*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.standard.co.me/drustvo/cpc-bila-autokefalna-ustav-iz-1905-i-tomos-iz-1922-demantuju-amfilohija/>.

3.4.1. Joint propaganda and political Activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro

Just as the Russian Orthodox Church is inextricably linked to Russian propaganda that promotes a single pro-Russian ethnic and political space in the former Soviet Union's territories, the Serbian Orthodox Church serve as a tool for implementing the pan-Serbian idea and its current manifestation, the so-called *Serbian world*. Russia portrays itself as the guardian of Slavs and the Orthodox population, mobilizing the Serbian Orthodox Church in its quest to keep countries with a majority Slavic population under its patronage. This is especially possible because nationalist circles in Serbia allowed for a greater presence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbian public and political life. It often seems that the Serbian Orthodox Church's political role today is similar to that of the late 1980s and 1990s, when priests encouraged a warlike mood and called for the defense of Serbian sanctities.

There are two Orthodox factions in Montenegro nowadays. The first is the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, which is part of the Serbian Orthodox Church, seated in Belgrade and heavily influenced by Russia. The second is the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The Constitution of Montenegro from 1905 reads that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is *autocephalous*,²⁶². Following the illegal annexation of Montenegro by Serbia, *Tomos* issued by the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletius IV and the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople on February 19, 1922, by which the Serbian Orthodox Church was established, reads that it was created as follows: "In addition, the *Autocephalous* Orthodox Churches of Karlovac and *Montenegro*, along with two Dalmatian eparchies Zadar and the Bay of Boka Kotorska; by the joint decision of the presidents of those churches gathered at the Council, proclaimed their administrative unity with the Serbian Church *into one autocephalous church* called the Autocephalous United Orthodox Serbian Church of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes".²⁶³ It is important to note that this happened after wiping out Montenegro from the map of independent countries. Because of these historical circumstances, as well as the annexation of the Montenegrin Autocephalous Orthodox Church to the Serbian Orthodox Church, there is no longer a canonically recognized Montenegrin Church. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church has been registered as a non-governmental organization since 1993, as that was the only way for it to operate.

²⁶² The Montenegrin Orthodox Church was autocephalous: the 1905 Constitution and the 1922 Tomos confute Amfilohije's claims, Standard, June 21, 2019, <https://www.standard.co.me/drustvo/cpc-bila-autokefalna-ustav-iz-1905-i-tomos-iz-1922-demantuju-amfilohija/>.

²⁶³ Montenegrin Orthodox Church, official website, http://2010.cpc.org.me/latinica/istorija_crkva.php?id=3.

The SOC in Montenegro, together with the Serbian authorities, nationalist media and intellectuals, denies not only the autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in the past, but also the Montenegrin national identity. Montenegrin society is thus kept in a state of perpetual volatility. When it came to preventing Montenegro's NATO membership, the Russian Orthodox Church served as an integral part of Russia's foreign policy apparatus in Montenegro. This Russian technique was highly effective, because the majority of the Montenegrin population is Orthodox, and a considerable proportion of them identify as Serbs and believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

After the Russian Orthodox Church expressed concern about the situation in Montenegro in 2016, calling it the introduction to a new Cold War, the Serbian Orthodox Church issued a statement calling for referendum on Montenegro's NATO membership and stating that its duty "... on behalf of the Church that gave birth to Montenegro... is to say that this historic decision, like the decision on independence, should be made by all citizens in a free referendum, and not simply under pressure from the ruling clique".²⁶⁴ The Serbian Orthodox Church also acts in conjunction with Russian political forces, including the radical right, as evidenced by the fact that the then-Serbian Patriarch *Irinej* was escorted by the pro-Russian biker group *Night Wolves* on his tour to Montenegro in 2018.²⁶⁵

This closeness and connection took on theatrical forms in the form of "throwing curses" on dissidents. The late Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije, in the midst of the campaign against NATO membership, sent a frightening message to his flock at the promotion of *Leonid Reshetnikov's* book: "If God wills, may live flesh fall from the one who is not faithful to the monolingual and one-blooded Russia, and I curse that person three times and three thousand times."²⁶⁶

When the Montenegrin Parliament passed the *Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Legal Status of Religious Communities* on December 27, 2019, the Serbian Orthodox Church demonstrated not only its political influence, but also its financial and human capital, which it was ready to deploy if someone wanted to deprive it of the power to act *de facto* outside the legal system and institutions of Montenegro.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Dusica Tomovic, **Serbian Church Urges Montenegro NATO Referendum**, *Balkan Insights*, January 5, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/05/serbian-church-urges-montenegro-to-hold-referendum-on-nato-01-04-2016/>.

²⁶⁵ Filip Rudic and Dusica Tomovic, **Montenegro Detains Pro-Putin Bikers Escorting Serbian Patriarch**, *Balkan Insight*, October 16, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/montenegro-detains-pro-putin-bikers-escorting-serbian-patriarch-10-16-2018>.

²⁶⁶ Nataša Anđelković, **Korona virus, Crna Gora, Srbija i SPC: Ko je bio mitropolit Amfilohije i zašto je važio za jednog od najmoćnijih ljudi crkve**, *BBC News*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-54535662>.

²⁶⁷ The disputed provisions of the SOC Law were those that provided for the nationalization of church property unless the SOC provided proof of ownership before 1918, when Montenegro, against the will of the citizens, joined Serbia and then became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The reason for dissatisfaction can be seen in the fact

The Serbian Orthodox Church organized peaceful protest walks of believers (“religious processions”) in all Montenegrin cities under the narrative of “defending the sanctities,” which the “Montenegrin communists” allegedly planned to seize. Serbian and Russian authorities along with Russian Orthodox Church took simultaneous activities. In June 2020, President Vucic asked Russia to “protect the Orthodox Church”²⁶⁸ and threatened that the intention was to grant autocephaly to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, as so was the case in Ukraine. The *Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church* declared strong support for the Serbian Orthodox Church, calling the Law “an act of supporting the schism by weakening the canonical Church and trying to put it in a humiliating and dangerous dependence on the state.”²⁶⁹ Onufriy, a Bishop from Ukraine, led a religious procession in Podgorica, indicating the Russian Orthodox Church’s direct support. *Maria Zakharova*, a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accused the US of having intention to “bring a schism into the Orthodox world” and undermining the integrity of the Balkan spiritual area. Far right-wing organizations from Russia and Serbia, like the Russian biker club “Night Wolves,” supported the campaign in the same way they did before joining NATO.²⁷⁰

The Serbian Orthodox Church openly backed one side in the August 30, 2020 election campaign. A few days before the election, the then-Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of SOC *Amfilohije* stressed that “the Church deems it legitimate to urge on the faithful and all virtuous people not to vote for a policy that persists in the spirit of this anti-law.”²⁷¹ Following the August 2020 parliamentary elections, individuals close to the Serbian Orthodox Church were elected to major political positions specifically because of their loyalty to the Church, hence strengthening the Serbian Orthodox Church’s influence. The new government was given the satirical term *Apostolic* soon after its creation. The reason for this is not only the close ties of the constituent coalition constituents with the Serbian Orthodox Church during the pre-election process, but also the fact that its composition was agreed in one of Montenegro’s monasteries, as well as that a significant portion of government members had family ties or performed activities closely connected with church representatives and were inclined to carry out the will

that throughout their activities, the Serbian Orthodox Church is trying to present itself as the only valid Church in the history of Montenegro, and it is reinforced by the fact that the law would prevent the SOC to operate outside the legal order of Montenegro, including the current situation in which the Serbian Orthodox Church does not have to report donations and the manner of spending funds.

268 **Vucic says asked Russia to protect Orthodox Church in Balkans**, *Russian News Agency TASS*, June 18, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1169165>.

269 Mira Milosevich, **Russia’s Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, CSIS, September 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro>.

270 Ibid.

271 **Amfilohije pozvao birače da na izborima glasaju protiv vlasti u Crnoj Gori**, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30798345.html>.

of the Serbian Orthodox Church in making decisions.

In addition to Russian politicians, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church did not remain silent on the events in Cetinje before and after the enthronement of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church *Joanikije*. Metropolitan *Ilarion Alfeyev*, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, stated that *Dukanovic's* acts aimed at provoking discord are a disgrace to Montenegro.²⁷²

One of the manifestations of the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian authorities towards Montenegro, and possibly a synchronized performance with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian authorities, took place after the death of Metropolitan *Amfilohije*, when the new leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Cetinje and Podgorica was elected. In terms of titles and authorizations, the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral are substantially degraded in comparison to his predecessor. According to many analysts, the goal was to make the Serbian Orthodox Church's seat in Belgrade, rather than in Cetinje, the principal address for discussing the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. In some ways, the intention was to demonstrate Montenegro's dependence on the will of foreign authorities on how to address the issue of the status of religious communities in a sovereign and independent state.

3.4.2. Joint action of Russian and Serbian media in spreading (pro)-Russian propaganda

Russian media in Serbia easily reach the audience in Montenegro, hence Russia does not need to invest heavily in propaganda. Serbian media, which may be classified into three sections, play a crucial role in promoting pro-Russian propaganda in Montenegro: 1) print and online distributed Belgrade media close to the ruling elites in Serbia, such as *Blic*, *Politika*, *Borba*, *Vecernji Novosti*; 2) Serbian tabloids such as *Alo*, *Kurir*, *Telegraf*, *Informer*; 3) Belgrade right-wing portals created in 2015.

The already mentioned Russian portal *Katehon*, whose founder is Russian oligarch *Konstantin Malofeev*, was particularly active in tracking the situation in Montenegro. *Malofeev* owns *Tsargrad TV*, which

²⁷² RPC: *Postupci Dukanovića s ciljem izazivanja podjela – sramota Crne Gore*, *Sputnik Srbija*, September 18, 2021, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/20210918/rpc-postupci-djukanovica-s-ciljem-izazivanja-podela--sramota-crne-gore-1129930229.html>.

communicated with pro-Russian lawmakers in Montenegro ahead of the country's NATO membership.²⁷³

All political crises in Montenegro are extensively followed by Russian media. First, there were the rallies organized by the opposition Democratic Front in 2015 and 2016 to urge a change of government and prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. During that time, Russia strongly advocated for a referendum on NATO membership rather than a vote in Parliament. Think-tank organization *RISI* and the *Balkan Center for International Cooperation* organized a round table in *RIA Novosti* in October 2015 entitled: *NATO goes after the Balkans: Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia*, in which Igor Damjanović took part, as a representative of the movement *No War - No NATO* and a participant from Montenegro. Politicians from the *Democratic Front* often took part in other gatherings organized by Russian actors.²⁷⁴

The Russian media already had a favorite at the time, Marko Milačić, the leader of the Movement for Neutrality and a current member of the Montenegrin Parliament. On the eve of the 2016 elections, his Facebook page was immensely popular, with a large number of followers from Serbia and Republika Srpska, giving the impression that the idea of Montenegro's non-accession to NATO was incredibly popular. *Sputnik* published 30 pieces regarding Milačić's work in 2017 alone, Russian media often interviewed him and he also wrote for *Sputnik Serbia*.²⁷⁵ Milačić played an important role in popularizing not just the *Sputnik Serbia* portal in Montenegro, but also the ideas of pro-Russian journalist *Miroslav Lazanski*, whom he frequently met.

After a failed coup attempt, Russian propaganda hasn't decelerated. Dukanović was depicted as a dictator by the Moscow daily newspaper *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, which also hinted that Montenegro could follow the "Ukrainian scenario". Russia also conducted a media effort to portray Montenegro as a dangerous tourist destination for Russians due to high crime rates, albeit such approach does not appear to have had a significant impact on the number of visitors to the country.²⁷⁶

Using sensationalist headlines and false narratives about jeopardized Serb religious rights, as well as about President *Milo Dukanovic*, the Russian media waged a fierce campaign against the Montenegrin authorities during

273 GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System, U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

274 Russia's role in the Balkans: The case of Montenegro, Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

275 Ibid.

276 Darko Brkan, Aleksandra Grdinic, Milovan Papic, Marko Pankovski, Veronika Vichova, Joey Gurney, Iliyana Georgieva, Adam Lelonek, Marta Kowalska, Patrik Szicherle, and Kristina Urbanova, *Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia*, European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/assessment.pdf>.

the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and also during religious processions in 2020. *Sputnik* covered religious processions in Montenegro on a regular basis, describing them as being organized “for the salvation of sanctities.”²⁷⁷ There was propaganda in the Serbian media during religious processions, similar to the Russian one, but considerably more frequent. Among the numerous bombastic headlines, one may find “The West is waging a special war against the Serbian church and believers: NATO cyber warriors are defending Dukanovic”²⁷⁸; or “Police in Montenegro cancel obedience to Milo! On Christmas Day, special troops from Kosovo are invading Montenegro,”²⁷⁹ where it was falsely reported that roughly 250 members of the ROSU’s special Kosovo units were at the disposal of Montenegrin security forces. The Digital Forensic Center cites some other titles in its research, such as “Montenegrin Police Refuse to Protect the Believers in Religious Processions” or “Finish the Remains of South Slav Unity”.²⁸⁰ The propaganda attempted to portray the Law on Religious Freedom as imposed by the US, which wanted to “abolish the canonical status of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro.” The Russian media, such as *TV Constantinople*, heavily promoted the idea that Montenegrins were not a nation, but rather Serbs, and that the Law’s objective was to eradicate Montenegrins’ Serbian identity.²⁸¹

The situation in Montenegro has piqued the interest of Russian media, particularly with the change of government in the 2020 elections. The significance of the Serbian Orthodox Church in organizing voters was stressed by Russia’s state news agency *RIA Novosti*, and commentators who believed Montenegro would shift in its foreign policy to Russia were given room in media outlets such as *Television 360* and Russia’s *TASS* news agency. *Zdravko Krivokapic*, the then-leader of the Montenegrin coalition *For the Future of Montenegro*, told *RIA Novosti* that “it is unacceptable for such a small country to be the first to impose sanctions on Russia.”²⁸² The allegations of intelligence leaks, which are now being investigated by the Montenegrin prosecutor’s office, have been reported positively in Russian media, with assertions such as “(National Security Agency Director) Vukšić leaked sensitive

277 *Pravoslavlje se brani u Crnoj Gori, četiri vladike predvodile litije*, *Sputnik Srbija*, February 16, 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20200216/nedelja-je-dan-za-litije-crna-gora-i-danas-brani-svetinje-1121857474.html>.

278 V. Kadić, *Zapad vodi specijalni rat protiv srpske crkve i vjernika: Sajber ratnici NATO brane Dukanovića*, *Novosti.rs*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:841219-Zapad-vodi-specijalni-rat-protiv-srpske-crkve-i-vernika-Sajber-ratnici-NATO-brane-Djukanovica>.

279 *Policija u Crnoj Gori otkazuje poslušnost Milu! Specijalci sa Kosova upadaju u Crnu Goru na Badnji dan*, *Srbija Danas*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/region/kosovski-rosu-spremni-da-upadnu-u-crnu-goru-na-badnji-dan-ukoliko-crnogorska-policija-otkaze-2020-01-05>.

280 *Russia’s role in the Balkans: The case of Montenegro*, *Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro*, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

281 Ibid.

282 *Montenegro’s Opposition Coalition Objects to Russian Sanctions*, *The Moscow Times*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/01/montenegros-opposition-coalition-objects-to-russian-sanctions-a71304>.

NATO information” and “CIA presence.”²⁸³ The appointment of *Milan Knežević*, one of the Democratic Front’s leaders, as chairman of the Montenegrin Parliament’s Security Committee did not go unnoticed, with headlines such as “PRO-RUSSIAN FORCES cleaned up Montenegrin special services” appearing on the *Vzglyad* webpage. The same source said that “a similar situation is developing in the Ministry of Defense,” praising the appointment as director of the Security Department of an officer who was fired from NATO structures during a military exercise in Poland “for copying something very secret on a flash drive.”²⁸⁴ In May 2021, the Russian portal *Vojenoje Obozrenije* praised Montenegrin Minister of Defense Olivera Injac’s actions in postponing a military exercise planned in the *Sinjajevina* mountain range, calling it a “real Balkan FIASCO for NATO”. It also applauded the fact that the *KFOR* mission would not include any Montenegrin contingent members.²⁸⁵ During the visit of the Democratic Front’s leader to Moscow, the radio show *Govorit Moskva* discussed the non-existence of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and how the Montenegrin Parliament accused Serbia, Serbs, and the Serbian Orthodox Church of genocide by passing the Srebrenica Resolution.²⁸⁶

The *anti-NATO* and anti-Western narrative disseminated by the Serbian media has already been clarified. These media are deeply involved in domestic political situations, take sides in internal political strife, and thus constitute a medium for strengthening Serbian political power, in addition to spreading Russian global propaganda. Not only does Russia use Serbia to exercise influence in Montenegro, but Serbian nationalist circles have a vested interest in doing so as well. Pro-Russian propaganda fueled by *Kurir*, *Alo*, and other tabloids, labeled by *Twitter* as media whose editorial policy is directly influenced by the Serbian government, was also read in Montenegro. False news was especially stoked following the passage of the *Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Legal Status of Religious Communities* and the subsequent religious processions. During the 2020 tourist season, Serbian tabloids encouraged the narrative that Montenegro was an unsafe destination, with headlines like “snake caught on Buljarica beach” causing “chaos” and panic” or “tourists are canceling vacations in Montenegro for the most part,” similar to Russia’s tactics after Montenegro joined NATO.²⁸⁷

283 Kseniya Kirillova, **Russian Influence in Montenegro Could Create a Threat for NATO’s Information Security**, *The Jamestown Foundation*, April 6, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-influence-in-montenegro-could-create-a-threat-for-natos-information-security/>.

284 ВЗГЛЯД: **Pro-Russian forces have cleared Montenegrin special services**, *AntenaM*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/politika/194140-proruske-snage-izvrsile-cisc-enje-crnogorskih-specijalnih-sluzbi>.

285 Russian portal: **Olivera Injac is anti-NATO**, *AntenaM*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/ruski-portal-olivera-injac-je-anti-nato/>.

286 **Russia’s role in the Balkans: The case of Montenegro**, *Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro*, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

287 Jasna Vukicevic, **Despite the propaganda, there are numerous Serbian tourists in Montenegro**, *Radio Free Europe*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/cma-gora-i-dalje-omiljena-destinacija-turista-iz-srbije/30021563.html>.

During the enthronement of Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church *Joanikije* in Cetinje, Russian portals were not heavily engaged, but Russian proxy players in Serbia and Montenegro were extremely active. The Digital Forensic Center detects a similar action pattern between original Russian and Russian proxy players²⁸⁸. During the preparations for the enthronement of Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church *Joanikije*, pro-Russian media in Serbia actively spread fake news. Both pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian media disseminated disinformation, according to the Digital Forensic Center. The situation piqued the interest of Serbian tabloids, which claimed that the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) was infiltrating the police force with insiders wearing Serbian emblems in order to provoke a reaction. According to DFC analysis, pro-Russian and pro-Serbian Facebook sites both published bogus news at the same time, garnering over 580,000 views.

Some of the headlines of *Sputnik Serbia* before and after the enthronement read: "What is Plan B after the Montenegrin Patriots' Debacle in the Middle of Cetinje: Ukrainianization of Montenegro - Western Dialogue," "Russian Archpriest: the Same Forces Incite Divisions in Montenegro and Ukraine," "Joanikije's Brother to Krivokapic: Your Decision Introduces New Examples of Chivalry and Heroism," "Russian Church on Incidents in Montenegro: Commanders Also Come from Abroad"; "Riots in Cetinje Artificially Caused, Many will Have to Answer for That"; "Patriarch Porphyry: I am Happy, but also Horrified – a Sniper Rifle Threatened As Well"; "DF: Krivokapic Informed us During the Night that a Coup was Underway"; "Dacic: I See No Difference between This and Previous Enthronements"; "Vucic: I have not yet Decided to Attend the Enthronement". Certainly, although most of the fake news in Montenegro comes from the neighborhood, the events in Cetinje have confirmed that domestic political actors and the media were not afraid of spreading fake news, even in the most sensitive moments.²⁸⁹

Small portals in Serbia, including *Vostok*, *Vidovdan*, *Fakti*, *Balkanist*, *NewsFront* in Serbian, and *Nova srpska politička misao* have been propagating disinformation about Montenegro. *Vostok* has been banned from Facebook for spreading false information about NATO's role in the former Yugoslavia. "The West is censoring texts regarding NATO assault against the FRY even in the era of the epidemic," said Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁹⁰ Vanja and Saša Savićević run the *Vostok* portal,

288 **Russia's role in the Balkans: The case of Montenegro**, *Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro*, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

289 Ibid.

290 **Zaharova: Even in the era of the pandemic, the West is censoring texts about NATO aggression against the FRY**, *Sputnik*, April 2, 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20200402/zaharova-zapad-i-u-eri-pandemije-cenzurise-tekstove-o-nato-agresiji-na-srj-1122239281.html>.

which has close relations to the Russian portals *Myrotvorets* and *Russia Today*, of which Saša Savićević is the Western Balkans representative. *Vidovdan* is a pro-Russian website affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church that has largely spread the story that Gojko Perovic, the former rector of the Cetinje seminary, was the leader of a separatist faction within the Metropolitanate of the Serbian Orthodox Church of Montenegro and the Littoral. Portal *Fakti* has subsections under the titles that are indicative enough to show the nature of the propaganda being placed: *Russia (Russia)*, *Orthodox Point*, *Saint Sava's ideology*, *Globresistance*, *Euroscepticism*, *Shqiptars*, *Njegos' Serbs*, *Mladic*, *Karadzic*, *Seselj*, etc. The portal is among the most active in promoting Serbian world narratives in Montenegro, giving historians and analysts like Čedomir Antić, Milan Vidojević, and Srđan Trifković media space²⁹¹. Igor Damjanović, a pro-Russian political analyst who is also a frequent guest on *IN4S' Srpski svet* (*Serbian World*) show, runs the portal *Balkanist*. Nikita Bondarev, a colleague of his, is the head of the *Russian Institute for Strategic Research's Balkan states group (RISI)*.²⁹²

3.4.3. Russian influence through the media in Montenegro

IN4S is the most well-known website in Montenegro for promoting Russian disinformation. The *IN4S* portal also features a section called „Russian View,” which updates readers daily on current developments in Russia, as well as on Russia's supposed dominance over the US and NATO, which is „acknowledged” by anonymous NATO and US officials. The *Sputnik Serbia* portal is frequently used to obtain such information.

In Montenegro, the *IN4S* web portal plays a key role in propagating pro-Russian and pro-Serbian propaganda. According to a report by the *State Department's Global Engagement Center*, it is an integral part of the propaganda ecosystem of the Russian disinformation campaign.²⁹³ It was created in 2009 and was particularly active prior to Montenegro's NATO accession. Gojko Raicevic, the editor of *IN4S*, is known as the leader of the non-governmental organization *No to War - No to NATO*. In that regard, he worked closely with organizations such as the *NGO Miholjski zbor* (*The*

291 Russia's role in the Balkans: The case of Montenegro, *Digital Forensic Centre Montenegro*, September 2021, <https://dfcme.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Studija-ruski-uticaj-ENG-online-1.pdf>.

292 Ibid.

293 *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System*, U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

Miholja Assembly) and the *Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth of Montenegro* to promote the Serbian Orthodox Church's viewpoints. He is one of the founders of the *Serbian House* in Podgorica, which received €3.5 million in funding for its construction. The portal disseminates content that denies Montenegrin identity, opposes Western principles, and encourages a shift in foreign policy toward Serbia and Russia. The Agency for Electronic Media initiated a hate speech investigation into the webpage in June 2020, according to the *Digital Forensic Center*. The webpage registered office in Belgrade in June 2020 and opened TV station *Nacionalna TV*, continuing to propagate fake news about Montenegro, a narrative that victimizes Serbs in Montenegro and openly supports pro-Serbian nationalist groups, notably the Democratic Front.

At least five pro-Russian web portals were established in Montenegro following its membership in NATO – *Ujedinjenje (Unification)*, *Sedmica (Seven)*, *Princip (Principle)*, *Nova rijec (New Word)* and *Magazin (Magazine)*.²⁹⁴ They were a significant addition to the *IN4S* that already existed. Journalist *Donko Rakočević*, the founder of *Sedmica*, interviews famous Serbian and Russian personalities and believes *Sedmica* to be “more culturally oriented towards Russia and the East in general,” but “equally critical of Moscow, the EU, and the US.”²⁹⁵ The founders of the ultranationalist *Ujedinjenje* are *Robert Zizic*, a former member of Vojislav Seselj's Montenegrin branch of the Serbian Radical Party, a member of the *Balkan Cossack Army* as a branch of the Russian military movement, and the founder of the Montenegrin branch of the ultranationalist movement *Srpski odbor (Serbian Committee)*, *Zavetnici (Patrons)*, and *Dobriilo Dedeić*, a former Montenegrin MP of the Serbian People's Party of Montenegro. Both claim that they advocate personal viewpoints on their websites and collaborate with a number of enthusiasts, and that they were inspired to create the portal by frustration with the Russian embassy's lack of engagement. *once explained*, “This is what people from the West cannot understand... to do something without money and for ideas.”²⁹⁶

One of the reasons why Montenegrin web portals are difficult to recognize as a weapon for spreading Russian influence and a portion of Russia's strategic plan is the lack of a proven direct relationship between them and the Kremlin. They are frequently viewed as web portals that promote another political side of Montenegrin society's historically rooted divisions. All portals, however, endorse the Serbian world's strategy, which views Serbia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska as a single ethnic region that should strengthen connections with Russia. The websites also stream content in Serbian from *Sputnik Belgrade*, *NewsFront*, and *Russia Beyond*. They also

294 Dusića Tomović, Novi medijski blok – Rusiji sa ljubavlju, *BalkanInsight*, *BIRN*, October 18, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/10/18/novi-medijski-blok-rusiji-sa-ljubavlju-10-17-2017/?lang=sr>.

295 Ibid.

296 Ibid.

have accounts on *Vkontakte*, a Russian social networking site, where they promote the content.

Aside from them, there are plenty of smaller media that aren't listed in the Agency for Electronic Media's electronic media registration, don't have an *impressum*, and operate outside of the law. Because Montenegrin legal solutions do not require site registration, and because the sites do not list the identities of the owners or founders, it is difficult to determine whether they are linked directly to Belgrade or Moscow.

A significant number of local portals are among them, and they continue to distribute phony news. Thus, in Bar, for example, the *Barski portal* (*Bar portal*) circulates fake news similar to those distributed by *IN4S* while also informing about local community events.²⁹⁷ There is no information regarding the portal's editorial board or journalist team, or where it is handled, thus it's easy to assume that the site is simply taking over other webistes' news. However, there is evidence that it was published by *Srpska narodna čitaonica* (*Serbian National Reading Room*).²⁹⁸ By blending local information with fake news, the pro-Russian false narrative spreads among the local populace, who are then presented with a distorted version of Montenegrin history, making them even more susceptible to Russian-Serbian propaganda.

Montenegrin public is also reached through television channels. *Sputnik TV* programmes are shown on *Serbian RTV*, which is available in Montenegro through all cable operators. The Digital Forensic Center points out that *Serbian RTV* has generated hundreds of hours of programming dedicated to Montenegrin religious processions, and President Vucic has backed them up. Serbian media have begun purchasing shares in Montenegrin media, and the editor-in-chief of *TV Prva* for Montenegro is now also the editor-in-chief of the *Borba* portal, while *Adria Management Services* has purchased 70% of *AI TV* shares. On January 8, 2022, the Electronic Media Agency introduced six-month ban on several Serbian *TV Happy* shows for offensive content that "incited and enabled incitement to hatred, intolerance and discrimination against members of the Montenegrin nationality", as well as "that incite intense negative emotions, expressing hostility or desire to discriminate, as well as belittling or devaluing members of the Montenegrin nationality, denying their national identity and peculiarities".²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ **Barski portal (Bar portal)**, <http://www.barskiportal.com>.

²⁹⁸ **Srpska narodna čitaonica (Serbian People's Reading Room)**, *Wikipedia*, https://bs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srpska_narodna_čitaonica_u_Baru.

²⁹⁹ **Zbog Šešeljevih uvreda, emisije TV Happy zabranjene u Crnoj Gori**, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/seselj-uvrede-tv-happy-zabrana-crna-gora-/31644961.html>.

3.4.4. Echoes of Russian intelligence activities and presence of local actors on social networks in Montenegro

The development of fake portals and accounts on social media, as well as the so-called Potemkin personas and cyber-attacks, were all used by Russian intelligence.

Only five individual accounts followed the non-existent think tank *Montenegro News Agency (CGNA) on Medium*, for example, and one of them is *Milko Pejovic*, who also has his own Medium profile. On it, he wrote a text that was critical of Montenegro's NATO membership. Although "Milko Pejovic" was listed as a student at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Podgorica in the page's description, it was a fabricated, fake account. The so-called *Milko Pejovic* also published three articles on "Globalresearch.ca" during 2016 and 2017: "Political crisis in Montenegro: Change of Montenegrin leader does not change ideology" and "Strategic elections" in Montenegro ahead of local elections in Nikšić. Both writings are textbook examples of combining factual and misleading material to create false narratives. *Milko Pejovic* dedicated a text to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017 called "Referendum Caravan," which was directed against NATO and BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Milko Pejovic created his profile on the web "forum.cdm.me" on October 15, 2015, a popular Montenegrin online forum where he had his first and last action on March 16, 2016, and where he stopped being active on June 16, 2016.³⁰⁰ Despite the fact that most users complained about the poor Montenegrin language and some implied that the material was written by "Russians," they nonetheless addressed the interlocutor as a genuine person, attempting to determine where he worked and discussing the matter. The post received 21 responses and 7,525 views before the beginning of 2022.

In its research, the *Digital Forensic Center of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro* portal states that *Milko Pejovic* also released links to the "votemontenegro.eu" platform, which was founded by the *Montenegrin*

300 Pejovic raised only one topic entitled "Why Montenegro against NATO" where he introduced himself as "Darko from Budva", whose son worked in Canada, and who was worried because "Europeans know nothing about our (Montenegrin) problems", even his son "knows nothing about what's going on at home." It is clear to anyone who understands the Montenegrin language that the publication was not originally written in that language but in a foreign language with a poor translation. Pejovic, i.e., a certain Darko, argues (quoted original, grammatically incorrect text) that "the most important thing is what makes Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, who has had a greater or lesser role in government in the last 25 years in our country, need to join the NATO alliance. Namely, Djukanovic has almost completely destroyed the Montenegrin industry, and the income from tourism has become almost the only salvation for the people. The attitude of the population towards Djukanovic and his colleagues is very negative. He and his family and loved ones destroyed and stripped our country. Everyone here knows this. And this man is doing everything to speed up the country's entry into NATO, not wanting to respect the interests of the people." The post is concluded by reminding that "the older generation still cannot forgive the United States for the breakup of Yugoslavia and the bombing that caused the loss of human lives in the country"

Neutrality Movement, whose work was heavily backed by the Russian Federation. The *Montenegrin Neutrality Movement* had a strong presence on social media, which were still underappreciated and misunderstood by political parties at the time.

The CGNA's article entitled "The way to steal the millions" dated October 8, 2016 was further transmitted by the website *Stanje stvari* (*The State of Things*), which put a disclaimer that the translation was also provided by CGNA. The article focuses on the then-Montenegrin Prime Minister Djukanovic.³⁰¹ The *Stanje stvari* site is registered in the "Tempe" province of Arizona with an American address and mobile phone number.³⁰² The website presents information that the editor-in-chief is *Aleksandar Lazic*, a mathematician and journalist from Smederevo, to whom the "All-Russian Social Movement Orthodox Russia" allegedly awarded the diploma "Petrovskaya Gramota" as "social recognition and gratitude for selfless work in the field of strengthening Serbian-Russian people's friendship." Except for an interview with a certain Milos Milojevic, who is presented as a political analyst, historian, and administrator of the Facebook page "Support for Syria and Bashar Al-Assad from the people of Serbia," which is still active today, there are no biographical features available about the editor-in-chief or the deputy: <https://www.facebook.com/Support-for-Syria-and-Bashar-al-Assad-from-the-people-of-Serbia-1-489887197799676/>.

CGNA publications were also shared by a profile named *Jelena Rakocevic*, which was, according to GEC analysis, created by Russian intelligence services.³⁰³ Despite the fact that her biography claims she is an "independent journalist" who "graduated in international relations from the University of Montenegro in 2013," there is no evidence of her existence. Her works have also been disseminated by portals with a global outreach, such as *EurasiaReview.com* or *Modern Diplomacy*, as well as other online media, according to GEC research.

According to media sources, Montenegro was also the subject of a cyber-strike by an espionage outfit known as *APT28*, also known as *Fancy Bear*, with unit 26165 of the Russian military intelligence agency *GRU* suspected of being behind the attack.³⁰⁴

301 **Montenegro News Agency: How to steal millions in Montenegro and stay in power**, *Status of Things*, October 10, 2016, <https://stanjestvari.com/2016/10/10/crna-gora-news-agency-kako-ukrasti-milione/>.

302 Information about the website www.stanjestvari.com https://website.informer.com/stanjestvari.com/#tab_stats.

303 GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation Propaganda System, U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

304 Janne Hakala, Jazlyn Melnychuk, Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2021, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/Nato-Cyber-Report_15-06-2021.pdf.

As Montenegro approached NATO membership, the presence of right-wing activists on social media increased, and they still post pro-Russian or content that mocks pro-Montenegrin politicians or actors in Montenegro. DFC considers the previously very active Facebook page *Stari Liberal (Old Liberal)* as the most important of them, describing it as a “ultra-right-wing Facebook page.”³⁰⁵ For example, the site ridiculed the fact that the 2019 protests in Montenegro were peaceful, in contrast to those in Albania and Paris. Marko Milačić, the previously mentioned activist and afterwards politician and MP, has been particularly active on social media. According to the DFC, activists on social media interacted with ultra-right activists from Serbia and attended protests planned by European right-wing organizations as well as the Russian government.

Ahead of the August 2020 elections in Montenegro, the Russian portal Sputnik Serbia published a comprehensive analysis of the activities of Montenegrin “meme pages,” singling out “It was very unpleasant,” Psalm 118, “Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” and “Let’s not politicize protests” as pages that had established a tradition of “making the current regime’s politics meaningless,” and condemning the arrest of some of their administrators.³⁰⁶

3.5.4. Demythologization of Russian-Serbian activity in Montenegro

The repercussions of joint Russian-Serbian action in Montenegro are difficult to forecast. There is no clear line separating one from the other, and it is difficult to distinguish between Russia’s and Serbia’s motives and goals, as well as the tools used in their hybrid warfare against Montenegro. This also implies that Western actors lack an ideal response formula.

The perception that Serbia is an instrument and a blind implementer of Putin’s intentions in the Western Balkans has dominated since the global acknowledgement of Russia’s malign influence. Many factors influenced the focus to be on Russian rather than joint Russian-Serbian influence: *Russian interference in the US and elections in at least 19 European countries* in the period after the occupation of Crimea until early 2018, the dominant perception that Russia supports the *British Independence Party (UKIP)*, the left-wing *Podemos* in Spain, the *Five Star Movement* in Italy, the *Marin Le Pen National Front* in France, and the *Alternative for Germany (AFD)*, with Russian

305 Fejsbuk ratnici, Digital Forensic Centre, May 28, 2019, <https://dfcme.me/fejsbuk-ratnici/>.

306 Nebojša Popović, U Crnoj Gori se opet ide u zatvor zbog vica, Sputnik Srbija, August 8, 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20200809/u-crnj-gori-se-opet-ide-u-zatvor-zbog-vica-1123167142.html>.

oligarchs increasingly buying media shares in Greece, etc. The intensity and scope of Russian intervention, as well as the requirement for a prompt and coordinated response from Euro-Atlantic partners, left little room for reflection on local narratives and malignant policies of other countries, such as Serbia, which were simply dubbed Russian *proxy* players.

Pro-Western politicians from the Western Balkans warned of Russian influence during the political crisis in northern Macedonia, after the coup attempt in Montenegro, but also after Montenegro's accession to NATO, emphasizing as well that of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system was paralyzed, and calling for US engagement in the Western Balkans.³⁰⁷ Leading scholars agreed with this necessity, saying that the Western Balkans' accumulated problems were the result of insufficient engagement of the EU and the US.³⁰⁸ While Russia's *direct asymmetric assault on Montenegro* was an important component of Russia's efforts to keep Montenegro from joining NATO, the international community also understood Serbian action in Montenegro through the Serbian Orthodox Church, Greater Serbia, and anti-NATO hysteria in Serbian tabloids, primarily as a result of Russian penetration.

According to this line of thought, Russia has established itself as Serbia's patron in the Kosovo issue, which is critical for how Serbia defines its national interest, and Serbia, in turn, must follow Russia's foreign policy approach, which includes destabilizing other countries, in order not to jeopardize Russian support. This suggests that the destabilization of the Western Balkans is solely the "crime" of Russia, which has long been instrumentalizing Serbian political elites and, indirectly, pro-Serbian political elites in Montenegro. According to this reasoning, the Serbian Orthodox Church's political activity aimed at rejecting Montenegrin identity and statehood is an inherent part of Russia's and the Russian Orthodox Church's agenda. As a result, if the Serbian authorities succeed in understanding the importance of turning to the West, all of the irredentism and nationalism that has flooded the Serbian society would finally fade away. Serbia would no longer assist and finance the destabilizing pro-Russian political forces reflected in the Democratic Front, especially given the burden of the past DF bears, embodied in claims of a coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016. The Serbian Orthodox Church would act as a religious rather than a political organization, as rejecting Montenegrin nationhood and identity, as a means of destabilizing a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Montenegro, would no longer be a vital strategy.

307 2017 Balkans Forward Conference: A Coming Storm? Shaping a Balkan Future in an Era of Uncertainty, *Atlantic Council*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/uncategorized/2017-balkans-forward-conference/>.

308 Ashish Kumar Sen, *Here's Why US Commitment to the Western Balkans Matters*, *Atlantic Council*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/here-s-why-us-commitment-to-the-western-balkans-matters/>.

The danger of such a belief and conclusion is *that it overlooks Serbia's own interests and disruptive role in the region, which are being carried and have been implemented independently of Russia throughout history.*

As a reminder, Russia, plagued by internal crises, *the Bolshevik revolution*, and civil war, was not an actor in formulating Serbian national interests in the aftermath of World War I, nor did it play a significant role in the liquidation of Montenegro's independence in 1918, as well as its occupation and annexation by Serbia, which was carried out without hesitation by the duo *Regent Aleksandar Karadjordjevic and Prime Minister Nikola Pasic.*

The same can be said of Slobodan Milosevic's rule, his destabilization of Yugoslavia, and the wars he launched in the name of the Greater Serbia national program. Not only did the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and Russia under Yeltsin not embrace such a program, but they actively resisted it. At a time when Serbian academics were drafting their revisionist SANU Memorandum and Milosevic was consolidating his autocratic rule with Yugoslavia's wars and disintegration, Russia's leading political and intellectual elite did not formulate or sponsor any nationalist program, but instead initiated a peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union and left each constituent republic to decide for itself on its statehood and national interests.

The major actors in the former Yugoslavia's independent strategy of all-Serbian nationalism have always been: 1) Serbian nationalist-oriented political elites; 2) Serbian nationalist-oriented academic community; 3) Serbian intelligence community; and 4) Serbian Orthodox Church. This "quartet" has always pursued a policy of pan-Serbian nationalism, with the goal of destabilizing the Western Balkans region, for which Russian political elites, the Russian academic and intelligence community, and the Russian Orthodox Church are the most suitable partners and powerful protectors. Failure to comprehend this dimension is a critical strategic and tactical miscalculation made by Western actors on occasion. Whenever this happened, the West and its political and military organizations had to put in far more effort and, on occasion, make far greater sacrifices than if the problem had been identified and handled quickly. Unfortunately, the Western Balkans' residents and peoples have historically paid the highest price for such oversights, both those endangered by the pan-Serbian nationalist agenda and the Serbian people in whose name such a policy was carried out.

Aside from the well-known and fatal mistakes made by Western allies at the start of the Yugoslav conflict and during Yugoslavia's disintegration in the 1990s, there are contemporary examples of strategic neglect of independent goals and actions of Serbian nationalism independent of Russia. The Trump administration, for example, spoke the language of economics,



sought easy and quick political points,³⁰⁹ and religious freedoms were placed at the very core of American foreign policy, nearly above all other human rights.³¹⁰ The ruling elite in Serbia quickly grasped these trends, introducing the *Mini Schengen* project, connecting with conservative circles in the United States and across Europe, approaching Hungary in its alleged defense of Christianity in Europe, inaugurating the Serbian world's hegemonic concept, and portraying the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the position of religious communities in Montenegro as discriminatory. Thus, despite its categorization as a pro-Russian proxy, Serbia managed to become an attractive partner to many Western addresses, despite operating in both Russian and its own (or Greater Serbia) interests.

Today, it appears that the international community is becoming more aware of the significant distinctions between Russian and Serbian acts, although it is debatable if these contrasts are properly comprehended. Today's emerging view is that, although Russia wishes to deal with NATO and the EU through the Western Balkans region, which it regards as rivals in the global geopolitical arena, Serbia has no *global* ambitions. According to this logic, Serbia purportedly wishes to be recognized as the region's factor of stability and as the indisputable great power in the Western Balkans. In other words, if Serbia felt respected and given control over events in the Western Balkans, which Serbian elites think Serbia undoubtedly deserves due to its size, military and economic power, Serbian nationalist political elites would stop playing a destabilizing role in the region, because Serbs are not "little Russians." One manifestation of this kind of perception is the increasing frequency with which think-tank groups and Western officials claim that President Vucic is a source of stability or a leader on whom they can rely.

This way of perceiving President Vucic has potentially disastrous consequences. Limited knowledge of the Western Balkans' history, where new generations lack firsthand experience of the war and the removal of undemocratic regimes, may mislead decision-makers into believing that Serbia will stop playing the role of a malignant actor in Montenegro and elsewhere if its aspirations and interests in the region are met. Quite the contrary, Serbian nationalists are not likely to stop using the narrative of the 1990s and victimization as means for their actions even if Serbia is recognized as a regional power.

The serious consequences of lack of reactions on Serbia's influence domestic political processes in Montenegro was demonstrated in the years

309 Dimitar Bechev, *Trump is looking for a foreign policy coup in the Balkans*, *Aljazeera*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/4/trump-is-looking-for-a-foreign-policy-coup-in-the-balkans>.

310 Emma Green, *'Protecting Religious Freedoms is a Foreign-Policy Priority of the Trump Administration'*, *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/religious-freedom-trump-administration/526320/>.

following the 2020 parliamentary elections. After August 2020, the entire period was characterised by political problems and explicit manifestations of backward ideas and narratives. Serbian President *Aleksandar Vučić* is interfering in Montenegro's municipal elections and domestic affairs without any reactions of the new government coalition. Vladimir Leposavic, the Minister of Justice and Human and Minority Rights, was removed from office in June 2021 at the request of the opposition because of a statement revising history in a sensitive way for minorities in Montenegro and the region, in which he stated that he was "ready to admit that the crime of genocide was committed in Srebrenica once it is unequivocally confirmed," despite the fact that the genocide was confirmed by valid international judicial decisions.³¹¹ All the time, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports has implemented policies and personnel changes to elect to positions in educational institutions mostly persons who have proved commitment to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Scandals involving revanchism and leadership in support of pro-Serbian constituents of power have not gone unnoticed by the Ministry of Defense and the National Security Agency, while the most prestigious literary awards have gone to individuals who are well-known in the public for denying Montenegrin national identity. What is crucial to note is that every attempt to undermine identity, whether through social media or other means, has been met with fierce opposition from residents, academics, and pro-Montenegrin political parties. A ruling coalition's civic-oriented political party has been urged to recognize the government's composition as hazardous.

For these reasons, even if Western actors acted Machiavellian and were solely interested in making the region's political elites pro-Western in their concrete actions, regardless of whether they have a civic or nationalist prefix, the fundamental issue would always arise sooner or later - that the pro-Western geopolitical and economic orientation must include the same sort of values. *There is no democracy without democrats, and there is no Euro-Atlantic politics without true Euro-Atlantic actors.* This means that even if pro-Serbian elites take pro-Western stance but continue to deny the identity of the majority Montenegrin population or their right to religious freedom as a basic human right, are still not open to Western principles.

The democratization of the authoritarian regime of Aleksandar Vucic is also required for stabilizing the Western Balkans³¹². When pro-Western and pro-democratic forces come to power in Serbia, Serbian hegemony and irredentist aspirations will fade. However, while it could be said that the departure of an authoritarian regime is an essential condition for stabilizing the situation in the Western Balkans, it is not sufficient. It is enough to recall

311 Samir Kajosevic, *Montenegro Minister Sacked for Querying Srebrenica Genocide Rulings*, *BIRN*, June 17, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/17/montenegro-minister-sacked-for-querying-srebrenica-genocide-rulings/>.

312 More in: rdjan Darmanović, *Balkanska prijetnja: Vučić i njegov autoritarni režim*, *Pobjeda*, 7. septembar 2021.

that following the October 5 revolution, Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was in power, but faced considerable opposition from regressive circles, or that presently pro-Western parties in Serbia refuse to recognize Kosovo or overemphasize the SOC's role in society. To stabilize the situation in Montenegro in the coming period, a national agreement on topics such as the country's Euro-Atlantic direction, but also dedication to liberal democracy and human rights protection, respect for societal differences, and dealing with the past, is required. This is almost certainly the only way to effectively pave the way for Montenegro's transition to liberal democracy, enhanced rule of law, and anti-corruption efforts, all of which are prerequisites for EU membership.

3.5. ALBANIA

Except for the years preceding *Enver Hoxha's* communist regime's breakup with Soviet leadership in the early 1960s, Albania has essentially no history of close cooperation with Russia. Albania is an example of a Western Balkans country that went through the early stages of democratic transition under the watchful eye of the West. The United States is Albania's strategic ally. All of this has a substantial impact on the fact that the Albanian population is currently the most pro-Western in the region, making it difficult for Russian propaganda to manipulate historical or cultural ties.

Diplomatic relations between Albania and the United States were restored in March 1991, and US Secretary of State *James A. Baker III* was greeted by 300,000 Albanians on the streets of Tirana three months later. The *Clinton* administration's role in the 78-day NATO air campaign and the departure of Serbian troops from Kosovo is also fresh in Albanian minds. The American administrations, on the other hand, took steps to discourage the idea of a *Greater Albania*. This was particularly the case during the sensitive era of the conflict spilling over from Kosovo to Macedonia in 2001, when some Albanian prominent politicians began to think about creating a single state with Kosovo and the western part of Macedonia. Following in the footsteps of the *Vilnius Group* from 1999, the United States signed the *Adriatic Charter* in 2003 with Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania as a prelude to NATO's expansion into the Western Balkans. Albania later joined NATO, a moment that stood alongside the proclamation of independence in terms of importance in Albanian history.

Albania designated two Russian diplomats *persona non grata* in 2018 because their conduct exceeded the scope of their diplomatic status.

In retaliation, Russia expelled two Albanian diplomats. The latest expulsion occurred in January 2019, when Albanian authorities declared Russian diplomat *Alexei Krivosheev a persona non grata* for failing to comply with COVID-19 pandemic measures. Diplomatic ties between Albania and Russia hit a new low point in June 2019, when Albanian media reported that the Tirana Prosecutor's Office was investigating two Russian nationals for possible espionage during the US-led Defender Europe 21 military exercise in April and May 2021. Russia's Foreign Ministry assessed that Albanian media were „fueling hype around the criminal cases opened by local prosecutors against two Russians allegedly suspected of espionage“ and called the affair „NATO propaganda“.³¹³

According to a *BIEPAG* poll, as many as 94% of Albanians support Albania's EU membership, which is the highest percentage of support for the European Union, even compared to the EU member states.³¹⁴ Albania's foreign policy is fully aligned with that of the European Union. Albanian political parties view Russian influence as undesirable, which is why in 2019 the Albanian Parliament enacted a resolution advocating for the prohibition of foreign, particularly Russian, meddling in Albanian politics.³¹⁵

On the other hand, a lack of substantive reforms has pushed Albania to the back of the queue in the European integration process. Despite the European Union's progress reports assessing country's ready to begin accession negotiations³¹⁶, Bulgaria again blocked the initiation of EU membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia³¹⁷ in December 2021. Albania's recent political crises, combined with the radicalization of political factions, a lack of progress in enacting reforms within the European integration process, and issues with corruption and organized crime, render the country potentially vulnerable to Russian propaganda.

313 Fjori Sinoruka, **Russia dismisses Albanian spying reports as "NATO propaganda"**, *BalkanInsight*, July 9, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/09/russia-dismisses-albanian-spying-reports-as-nato-propaganda/>.

314 **Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU integration**, *BIEPAG*, November 8, 2021, <https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

315 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

316 **Albania, North Macedonia Ready for EU Accession Talks: European Commission**, *BIRN*, October 19, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/19/albania-north-macedonia-ready-for-eu-accession-talks-european-commission/>.

317 Sinisa Jakov Marusic, **Bulgaria Again Blocks North Macedonia, Albania, EU Accession talks**, *BIRN*, December 15, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/bulgaria-again-blocks-north-macedonia-albania-eu-accession-talks/>.

3.5.1. The extent of Russian presence in Albanian political scene and domestic disinformation

Lesser susceptibility to Russian propaganda in comparison to other Western Balkans countries bears the risk of overlooking Russia's continuing interest in Albania. The resolution, which calls for prohibiting foreign actors from interfering in Albanian politics, was preceded by a report from the *National Intelligence Service*, which stated that Russia attempted to increase its influence in Albania in 2018. The problem, on the other hand, is that any statement advocating for dealing with internal issues in the midst of rising Russian malignant influence may look to be a downplay of the Russian threat. For example, Albanian President *Ilir Meta* said: „We should not render the Russian risk as the Anglo-American risk on the period of the past to hide the real causes of these constitutional, political, moral, representational crises that are created by us and require reflection from everyone“³¹⁸

In the run-up of Albania's June 30, 2019 elections, which the opposition boycotted, Western Balkans analyst *Janusz Bugajski* warned that "Russia will be the main international beneficiary if Albania's domestic crisis deepens." He also underscored that political crises in European countries were cause for celebration in the Kremlin, which might strengthen the influence on radicalized political factions in need of outside assistance³¹⁹. Bugajski further argued: "At the regional level, an unstable Albania can abet Moscow in its campaign to destabilize and delegitimize Kosova as an independent state. Kremlin officials will encourage both Albanian and Serbian nationalists in an effort to freeze talks between Belgrade and Prishtina on normalizing bilateral state relations. Russian officials, activists, and media channels can also embolden Belgrade's claims to Kosovar territory on the pretext of preventing another Albania scenario in Kosova"³²⁰.

Unlike the pro-Western media, Russia Today indeed closely covered the opposition protests in Albania in 2018. During his visit to Washington, and on the eve of the Albanian elections, Democratic Party of Albania (DPA) leader *Lulzim Basha* warned, almost in the style of US President Donald Trump, that Albania was threatened by Prime Minister *Edi Rama's* left wing and *his financier Soros*, and publicly declared himself a Trump supporter.³²¹ Albanian media,

318 Under-estimation of Russian influence by Albanian president causes public debate, *Tema*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.gazetatema.net/en/under-estimation-of-russian-influence-by-albanian-president-causes-public-debate/>.

319 Janusz Bugajski, *Moscow Gains From Albania Turmoil*, *CEPA*, June 19, 2019, <https://cepa.org/moscow-gains-from-albania-turmoil/>.

320 *Ibid*.

321 David Corn, Hannah Levintova, and Dan Friedman, *How a Russian-Linked Shell Company Hired An Ex-Trump Aide to Boost Albania's Right-Wing party in DC*, *Mother Jones*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/>

as well as American judicial authorities, documented the unusual \$500,000 transaction from *Biniatta Trade* to Republican lobbyist *Nick Muzin*. While the company's spokesman stated that the transaction was "in favor of the DPA and not commercial interests," the Albanian DPA only reported \$ 25,000 paid directly to *Muzin*. *Biniatta Trade* is a corporation whose roots are difficult to trace, but based on information collected from British sources, the company's link with only two persons, both of whom are Russian residents, could be established³²². On that occasion, the web portal *Mother Jones* reported that "it appears that Russian-related entities secretly meddled in the United States in order to meddle in an election in Albania." Albanian authorities then launched an investigation in which the DPA denied ties to Moscow and accused Rama's Socialist Party of a chase.³²³

Albania, like North Macedonia, was a hotbed for false news sites in the United States. In March 2016, an Albanian IT professional built multiple websites promoting *Bernie Sanders* as a presidential contender and spreading false information about Secretary of State *Hillary Clinton*.³²⁴ Although the style resembled Russian propaganda, no link to Russian channels of influence has been proved, and the creator of the websites himself shut them down in the face of accusations that he was working in Russian interests.³²⁵

According to a study prepared for the European Parliament's needs, the majority of disinformation spread in the Albanian media space is "domestic in origin and purpose". It is reflected in sensationalist spread of misinformation to increase profits or popularity.³²⁶ Investigative journalism and media pluralism are lacking in Albania as elsewhere in the region, forcing local media to proliferate and promote sensationalist content, be it true or not, in order to survive.

In addition, Albanian politicians from all sides of the political spectrum often accuse opponents of acting in the service of Russian propaganda or spreading misinformation in order to score political points. Particularly

politics/2018/03/how-a-russian-linked-shell-company-hired-an-ex-trump-aide-to-boost-albanias-right-wing-party-in-dc/

322 How a Russian-Linked Shell Company Boosted Albania's Right-Wing party, *RTK Live*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=10969>

323 Hannah Levintova and Dan Friedman, Prosecutors Question Albanian Politician on Payments from Russia-Linked Firm to GOP Lobbyist, *Mother Jones*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/03/prosecutors-question-albanian-politician-on-payments-from-russia-linked-firm-to-gop-lobbyist/>

324 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, Russia's game in the Balkans, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 6, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>

325 Vincent Triest and Ryan Grim, Bernie-Backing Albanian Fake News Site Proprietor Closes UP Shop, *HuffPost*, April 26, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/2016-election-fake-news-sites_n_58efb05be4b0b9e9848a3520

326 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

concerning is the fact that the Albanian media are generally not independent and that they themselves disseminate information that undermine the opposing political viewpoint.³²⁷ *Top Channel* and *Ora News* stand out as the biggest distributors to disinformation, but this is characteristic even of some mainstream web portals such as *JOQ Albania* and *Gazeta Tema*.³²⁸ Nevertheless, relevant international addresses oppose the announcement of legislation that would impose control over the distribution of content in the online realm, viewing it as an undemocratic practice that limits freedom of expression.³²⁹ There are concerns that the newly established *Media and Information Agency*, which aims to "increase transparency and information capacity for the public and media, as well as inform the Council of Ministers on issues presented in the daily news," will actually spread government propaganda using taxpayer funds.³³⁰

WB analyst *Jansuz Bugajski* warns that the primary targets of Russian subversion in the Balkans may be young people who do not remember Albanian communism. He worries over Russian Embassy in Tirana strengthening cultural relations with talented Albanians by providing them with sponsorships to attend the *International Youth Forum*, which he compares to the Soviet style of youth indoctrination³³¹. The *Kremlin Watch* draws attention to recent requests by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama for further Russian-Albanian economic cooperation and more Russian investment, as well as efforts to enhance relations through the *Russian-Albanian Friendship Association's* activities³³². Of course, for Russia, the destabilization of Albania or its eventual loss of the reputation of a country whose staunch pro-Western stance allows for ongoing vigilance against the Russian threat, would be an outstanding result in disinformation and propaganda operations.

327 Lindita Cela, **Albania Seizes Assets of Media Mogul Accused of Drug Trafficking**, *OCCPR*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/12903-albania-seizes-assets-of-media-mogul-accused-of-drug-tracking>.

328 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

329 Alice Taylor, **Albania's declining media freedom won't impact EU accession**, *Euractiv*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/albanias-declining-media-freedom-wont-impact-eu-accession/>.

330 **Albania's new media agency: A blow to the country's free press**, *DW*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/albanias-new-media-agency-a-blow-to-the-countrys-free-press/a-59340034>.

331 Janusz Bugajski, **Moscow Gains From Albania Turmoil**, *CEPA*, June 19, 2019, <https://cepa.org/moscow-gains-from-albania-turmoil/>.

332 **Kremlin Watch Albania** <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/albania/>.

3.6. KOSOVO

As elsewhere in the region, Russia is exploiting Kosovo's internal political crises and the unresolved issue of Kosovo's international recognition, in order to achieve foreign policy goals in the Western Balkans and beyond. Ever since the *Rambouillet* talks in 1999, Moscow has opposed arrangements that would give NATO the role of guarantor of security in Kosovo. Russia rationalizes its activities after Kosovo's independence by bringing up United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, which gives the United Nations the role of facilitator of the political process on the future of Kosovo. Russia opposes Kosovo's independence and threatens to use the veto power in the UN Security Council if Kosovo's recognition ever comes to the UN agenda. Analysts call Russia "the number one obstacle on the way of reaching any solution ever" to the Serbia-Kosovo dispute after Kosovo declaration of independence.³³³

By opposing Kosovo's admission to the United Nations, Russia achieves several objectives: 1) disrupts Serbia and Kosovo's progress toward the European Union and NATO, or, in terms of Russian propaganda, prevents the EU's and NATO's *expansion* further into Western Balkans; 2) maintains volatility in this part of the Western Balkans region, with the persistent risk of spilling open issues to neighboring countries; 3) maintains a front that can be linked to Moscow's moves in eastern Ukraine and the Sea of Azov, Abkhazia and South Ossetia; 4) raises the global value of Russian foreign policy and the "right of veto", which is one of the key segments of Russia's self-perception of power; and 5) contributes to the legitimization of Putin's regime at home by demonstrating to citizens that Russia's foreign policy is effective.

While in other Western Balkans countries Russia aims to popularize Putin's cult of personality, Russian culture, and paint the EU and NATO as conquering organizacije, such action in Kosovo can only succeed among Kosovo Serbs, precisely due to Russia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence. In support of this claim, a public opinion poll conducted by *BiEPAG* in 2021 shows that 94% of Kosovo citizens support Kosovo's membership in the European Union, which is the highest percentage compared to all the other countries of the Western Balkans.³³⁴ On the other hand, it is worth noting that several factors have contributed that Russian propaganda aimed at deepening interethnic tensions, social polarization and Kosovo's neighborhood problems, does not remain without results: 1) uncertainty

³³³ Leon Hartwell, *The Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue: Ripe for Resolution?* CEPA, November 14, 2019, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEPA-Serbia-Kosovo-5.10.21-V2.pdf>

³³⁴ *Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU integration*, EWB, November 8, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/11/08/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

of Kosovo's path to the European Union; 2) insufficient results in internal democratization and the rule of law; 3) disturbances in the international arena, including occasional disagreement in the stance of the US and key EU members to the Serbian-Kosovo dialogue; and 4) political instability induced by difficulty in governing the Serb-dominated northern area.

3.6.1. Elements of Russian propaganda operations in Kosovo

Kosovo, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, is both a *target and a tool of Russian propaganda* in the Western Balkans. In its diplomatic and propaganda activities, Russia exploits emotions among the Serb population in Kosovo and the region, evoked by the memory of NATO's 1999 military intervention, but also myths from the past, such as the 1389 battle that allegedly makes Kosovo a *holy land* for Serbian people. Russia presents NATO's military intervention and Kosovo's independence as a breach of international law and a reflection of the West's alleged hegemonic ambitions. It emphasizes that NATO allegedly committed war crimes during the war in Kosovo, together with the *Kosovo Army*, which, according to this narrative, committed ethnic cleansing against Kosovo Serbs. Kosovo is presented as a state of terrorism and crime, and the *Kosovo Army* as ready to attack the Serb population. Kosovo is also accused of disrespecting the agreement on the establishment of the *Union of Serbian Municipalities*, as well as repression of Serbs and negligence and destruction of the facilities of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo.

This narrative matches the portrayal of the West as anti-Serbian and encourages radicalization, not only in Serbia and Kosovo, but in the entire region. The absence of the results of the Serbian-Kosovo dialogue has far-reaching strategic repercussions for Kosovo and Serbia, but also for the Western alliance. The European Parliament's research highlights the internationalization of the "Kosovo issue" as one of the key reasons for the widespread presence of foreign policy topics in Kosovo's domestic news.³³⁵

The media scene in Kosovo is highly polarized and follows the lines of ethnic polarization. Kosovo Serbs follow the Serbian media, which makes them vulnerable to the Russian propaganda that is placed through these

335 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

channels, and which has already been described in detail. Kosovo Serbs are predominantly informed through the state television of Serbia and Serbian media websites.

In its latest quarterly report entitled “Kosovo Observer: Russian Diplomatic War and Media Disinformation” in September 2021, the Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) warned that the Kosovo authorities did not have an adequate response to what the Institute called “Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo”.³³⁶ Analyses of newspaper articles between June 1 and August 15, 2021, showed that as much as 19.2% contained disinformation about Kosovo. It identified the following main sources of disinformation: *Sputnik Serbia*, *TASS*, *Russia Today*, *UNZ*, *Sputnik International*, *Russian Insider*, *The Duran* and *Newsfront*. Russian media channels mostly published narratives challenging the legality and sovereignty of Kosovo state, emphasizing intimidation and oppression against the Serb community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, spreading false news about the war and war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, undermining Western credibility in Serbian-Kosovo dialogue.³³⁷

While the people of Kosovo believe that the media are mostly reliable (as many as 75% according to a poll conducted by the *International Republican Institute Western Balkans Regional Poll* in 2020³³⁸), the *European Federation of Journalists* warns that political actors often influence editorial decisions in Kosovo’s media.³³⁹ The European Parliament’s survey identifies the mainstream media in Kosovo as also responsible for spreading disinformation (*Klan Kosova* TV station, private local TV station *RTV Besa*, *Gazeta Express* and *Zëri* newspapers). What makes Kosovo’s Albanian-language media different from most others in the region, however, is that disinformation is mostly related to the domestic political scene, and *disinformation levels related to Russia’s geopolitical aspirations are much lower in Kosovo than in other parts of the Western Balkans*.³⁴⁰

336 **Kosovo Observer: Russian Diplomatic Warfare and Media Disinformation June 1 – August 15, 2021**, KIPRED, http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Kosovo_Observer_Russian_Diplomatic_Warfare_and_Media_Disinformation_June_1_-_August_15,_2021_245324.pdf.

337 *Ibid.*

338 Western Balkans Regional Poll, February 2, 2020 – March 6, 2020, Center for Insights in Survey Research, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf

339 **Kosovar Media Urged Not to Intensify Tensions During Coronavirus Crisis**, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovar-media-urged-not-to-intensify-tensions-during-coronavirus-crisis/30533735.html>

340 Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, **Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them**, *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

In Kosovo, like in Albania, there is a growing tendency of using the danger of Russian propaganda to gain political points.³⁴¹ The Secretary-General of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) condemned such cases of disinformation spreading, claiming that local politicians “encourage political and social tensions to pursue their own interests”.³⁴²

³⁴¹ In December 2020, the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) and UNS in Kosovo condemned the media articles of Radio Television of Kosovo and Gazeta Metro accusing the Center for Peace and Tolerance, a human rights, culture and media organization from Gracanica, of “collecting data against the KLA” and “spreading pro-Russian propaganda.”

Center for Peace and Tolerance: unprofessional reporting of the Kosovo media on our work, *UNS*, <http://uns.org.rs/desk/vesti-iz-medija/107949/centar-za-mir-i-toleranciju-neprofesionalno-izvestavanje-kosovskih-medija-onasem-radu.html>

³⁴² **Kosovar Media Urged Not to Intensify Tensions During Coronavirus Crisis**, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovar-media-urged-not-to-intensify-tensions-during-coronavirus-crisis/30533735.html>



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ACTIVITY

Complex history, brimming with historical myths and unresolved issues, enables malign actors to easily exploit deep social divisions and recruit partners for hybrid warfare. It is difficult to build liberal democracy and achieve economic progress in deeply divided societies, and thus Russian propaganda activity jeopardizes and delays the Western Balkans countries' European and Euro-Atlantic accession, undermining both the popularity of Western values and trust in the benefits of membership in pro-Western organizations and alliances. On a broader level, *it substantiates the claim that the world is merely a geopolitical arena where international actors compete for supremacy, effectively equating liberal democratic values with those revered by authoritarian and autocratic regimes.*

The United States of America, NATO, the European Union, as well as Western Balkans countries, must recognize the threat posed by Russian hybrid activity and respond decisively. Media and Internet freedoms are inextricably linked to the broader socio-political system within which they exist. Thus, the response to Russian propaganda activity must be comprehensive, encompassing both geopolitical recommendations and recommendations for specific policies in various sectors of social action.



4.1. Political recommendations for EU and NATO

NATO launched a series of initiatives aimed at bolstering the organization's response to malign propaganda and disinformation's influence on its members. Thus, following a Russian "cyber-attack" on Estonia in 2007, NATO established the "Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence" (CCDCOE), and shortly after the annexation of Crimea, STRATCOM was established to provide valuable analytical insights into the messages and objectives of Russian disinformation and to make recommendations to NATO member states on how to combat malign propaganda and disinformation activity. The European Union should follow NATO's example. It is necessary to demonstrate that a response to the deliberate erosion of democracy is both necessary and possible, thereby increasing the credibility of EU's messaging to Western Balkans countries.

4.1.1. The United States should undoubtedly maintain a "dual-track approach" toward Moscow – cooperation whenever possible, but containment, deterrence, and punishment when necessary.

The Summit for Democracy, launched by President Biden in December 2021, demonstrates that the USA has prioritized the "global struggle between democracy and dictatorship" in their dealings with authoritarian adversaries. This approach is unquestionably important for the Western Balkans, as it restores trust in liberal democracy, thereby re-establishing trust that closer ties with Russia and China cannot be an alternative to European integration.

4.1.2. The European Union should take a tough stance against undermining the integrity of election processes in its member states and devise a mechanism to prevent political actors from engaging in suspicious financial transactions aimed at undermining democratic processes. Thus, the Western Balkans countries will be assisted in bolstering citizens' trust in EU institutions, democratizing benefits, and thereby the space for Russian-Chinese manipulation, claiming that the European Union's democratic institutions are vulnerable, will be reduced.

The European Union took a significant step forward in 2019 by establishing a "Rapid Alert System" on the basis of the European Council's 2018 plan for countering disinformation. However, this system was found to be vulnerable for a variety of reasons. The most striking of these is precisely the fact that even member states are not immune to disinformation spreading through domestic channels. These channels frequently go through domestic politicians, including those in power, and political parties that are often funded by foreign capital, serving as "proxies" for the spread of malign influence.

Even Western European countries are not immune to such action, and malign influence disregards the ideological right-left divide. This is especially true in certain Central European countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, where, according to the GLOBSEC 2021 survey, liberal democracy has become less synonymous with democracy.

For these reasons, Sandra Kalniete, a European parliamentarian from Latvia, raised the question “what if governments disseminate fake news completely or partially” in mid-2021 and, based on it, presented a “rigorous” Draft Report on external interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including via disinformation. The Draft notes that “for example, Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes have spent more than \$300 million in 33 countries to sabotage democratic processes.” Additionally, it states that “this trend is clearly accelerating,” and that “half of these cases are connected to Russian activities in Europe,” where the operations “are aimed at funding European political parties or movements dedicated to deepening social fragmentation and undermining the legitimacy of European and national governments.” Another issue is the lack of supranational harmonization of electoral laws, particularly those governing the financing of political activities, as well as the fact that “online political advertising is not subject to the same rules as traditional political advertising.”

Additionally, the Report acknowledges that “external influence is exerted through religious institutions, such as Russian influence on Orthodox churches, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro, and includes inciting divisions among the local population, developing biased historical writing, and promoting an anti-EU agenda.” A more robust response by EU institutions to Russian-Chinese propaganda activity within the EU is thus crucial for Western Balkans countries aspiring to join the EU.

4.2. Political recommendations for the activity of international actors towards Western Balkans

4.2.1. The European Union should renew and strengthen its support to the European integration process of the Western Balkans countries. In this way, soft power credibility of the European Union in the region would be renewed, Euro-scepticism would be reduced, but it would also discourage looking for alternatives to the European Union in the initiatives concerning



“Eurasian integration “or simply through closer cooperation with Russian and China. The European Union must consistently apply the Regatta Principle in the European integration processes of the Western Balkans countries and look at them as separate, but still mutually comparable”³⁴³.

The countries of the Western Balkans are at various stages of EU integration. Montenegro has opened all chapters of accession negotiations. The 2021 Progress Report acknowledges that “political conflicts have slowed reforms,” but also provides a path forward by achieving broad inter-party and social consensus on reforms. Serbia began accession negotiations, and the 2021 Progress Report recommended the establishment of two new clusters of negotiations. Albania and Northern Macedonia are awaiting the start of negotiations, although reports on Northern Macedonia are markedly more optimistic. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are the only countries that do not have candidate status for EU membership.

The European Union should, like NATO, understand the geopolitical importance of enlargement for its own interests in Western Balkans and offer a clear perspective to the countries which achieve results in their integration processes, encouraging sound competition and progress of other countries as well. In September address of the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen on the state of the European Union, the Western Balkans was not among the key priorities, although it is “de facto geographically, historically, culturally and in any other way inseparable part of European civilization space”³⁴⁴. Ideas like “multispeed Europe” which have been appearing lately, would mean integration of the Western Balkans with “non-liberal” part of the European Union, in which way the region would be permanently lost³⁴⁵.

4.2.2. In addition to meeting the criteria for membership, the European Union should insist on legislation that criminalizes denial of war crimes committed during the 1990s. Cultivating war criminals, which is becoming a new normal, paves the way for historical revisionism, the creation of new false and/or historically unfounded narratives, in order to exacerbate divisions and fuel practices contrary to the European Union’s civilizational aspirations and values. That makes countries vulnerable to Russian disinformation activity.

The European Union should also pay close attention to the activities of Russian far-right activists in the Western Balkans, as well as to those dominant

343 Gjerajina Tuhina, **EU izvještaj o napretku: Srbiji dva klastera, BiH najlošije ocjene**, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, October 19, 2021 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/eu-balkan-izveštaj-paket-proširenja-srbija-crna-gora-bih-kosovo/31518957.html>

344 Zekerijah Smajić, **Zašto na mapi Evropske unije više nema Zapadnog Balkana**, *Balkans Aljazeera*, September 18, 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2021/9/18/prioriteti-evropske-unije-medju-kojima-nema-zapadnog-balkana>.

345 Bohuslav Sobotka, **Two-speed Europe is a mistake**, *Politico.eu*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bohuslav-sobotka-oped-two-speed-europe-is-a-mistake/>.

local political actors who refuse to lead their countries through painful confrontation with their past. Western actors are insufficiently interested in Serbia's political culture, despite the fact that Serbia is the country with greatest problems in this area. By adopting a diplomatic approach to communication with official authorities and official opposition groups, rather than an approach centered on the dissemination of liberal democratic values in Serbian society, EU is not preventing local liberal civil society from feeling marginalized, ridiculed, and alone in their struggle for the democratization of society.

4.2.3. In parallel with the strategy of “dual-track approach” to Russia, in order to indirectly reduce Russian malign influence on the Western Balkan countries, “dual-track approach” could also be utilized towards official authorities in Serbia, thus discouraging the atmosphere of Serbian hegemonism and imperialism in the region of the Western Balkans, personified in the politics of the “Serbian World”³⁴⁶.

The West would need to recognize that Serbian political leadership employs propaganda techniques akin to those used by Russia in order to maintain political instability in the Western Balkans and to exercise regional hegemony. Such activity, which has a negative impact on the Euro-Atlantic perspective and the advancement of liberal democracy in the region, must be met with an appropriate response. A signal of such a stance was President Biden's announcement that he would not invite Serbia to the Global Summit for Democracy, which, despite at the end being revised, sent a clear message to both President Vucic's authoritarian regime and to the region of the Western Balkans that America closely watches regional events³⁴⁷. Serbia's reactions to this decision, as well as to any indication of a stricter approach, were confident, precisely because of the sense that the West cannot abandon Serbia, which can easily turn to Russia and China, while emphasizing Serbia's broad support in the American Congress and Senate. The USA should not allow such rhetoric by Serbian authorities to water down American response to Serbian authorities' malign influence in the Western Balkans region. On the other hand, western actors must applaud and respect any effort by Belgrade to avoid destabilizing practices toward its neighbors, and present such efforts as beneficial to the democratization of Serbian society and the region as a whole.

4.2.4. Thoughts should be given towards unblocking Kosovo path to acceding to all international organizations, where it is possible to achieve that “without the vote” of Russia, China and Serbia, and in particular to NATO.

³⁴⁶ **The Sources of Serbian Conduct: Analysis of Serbia's relations with the region and guidelines for the response of Montenegro and Western allies**, June 2021, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65711430/the-sources-of-serbian-conduct>.

³⁴⁷ Nahal Toosi, **An “Illustrative Menu of Options”: Biden's big democracy summit is a grab bag of vague ideas**, *Politico*, April 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/04/biden-democracy-summit-technology-519530>

EU member states which do not recognize Kosovo must understand broader geopolitical implications of such behaviour and, on the other hand, benefits of recognition. In case the entire EU were to recognize Kosovo, “the dilemma of the West as to how to resolve the Kosovo issue” would be transformed into “the dilemma of the political elites in the Western Balkans how to justify simultaneous Pro-Europeanism and non-recognition of Kosovo”. The potential for Serbian hegemonistic activities in the region of Western Balkans would be diminished, and Serbian political elites would be presented with a clear choice of marginalization or joining the West, thereby empowering pro-western and pro-European activities of the progressive political actors in Serbia, which are currently marginalized in the political, social and media life.

4.2.5. It is even possible to think about the establishment of a “regional operational cluster” for monitoring the activities of Russian intelligence community, which has the aim to contaminate the online sphere with false news and narratives. The cluster would also include the list of false profiles, organizations and cyberattacks operations in the Western Balkans.

Similar cluster was established on Ukraine and the USA withing the framework of the research “Potemkin Pages and Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations”³⁴⁸.

4.3. Recommendations for the activities of governmental and nongovernmental actors in the Western Balkans

4.3.1. Consistent response of political actors to the narrative of divisions spread by Russian propaganda can only be a counter-narrative on the benefits of the memberships to the European Union and NATO, devoid of rhetoric of fostering further ethnic and religious tensions in already polarized societies. It is up to politicians to present reliable data on the economic cooperation with the EU and NATO countries, on one side, and with Russian on the other. It is necessary to keep emphasizing that the EU is the main partner to the Western Balkans countries also in import-export operations, whilst Russian investments are linked mainly to oil and gas market and are drastically less present.

³⁴⁸ Renee Diresta and Shelby Grossman, **Potemkin's pages and Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019**, Stanford Internet Observatory, Cyber Policy Center, 2019 <https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf>

4.3.2. Political actors committed to liberal democracy and membership of their countries to the EU should publicly address examples of Russian malign activities as threats to national security.

4.3.3. Countries should enhance national legislation on funding political parties and movements, in order to prevent financial transactions of external actors aimed at influencing domestic political processes. Along with that, it is necessary to improve electoral infrastructure, thus forestalling the interference of Russian or other actors with electoral processes³⁴⁹. Low level of standards and ethics in media reporting, high fragmentation of the media system and lack of control over new information platforms, insufficiently transparent or non-transparent media financing networks make it easy for media to become tools of propaganda. Introduction of media literacy courses in school curricula can also be effective.

4.3.4. Sanctions for the spreading of fake news, disinformation and external propaganda must be sufficiently severe so as to deter a broad spectrum of domestic and external actors from such activities. In order to be able to monitor such activities, mandatory registration of media portals and prohibition of broadcasting content spreading false narratives is a necessary measure.

4.3.5. Proliferation of local media outlets which launch false narrative in combination with local news can be halted by increasing local administration budget lines for local media and training of local journalists.

4.3.6. Civil society organizations, whose activities include unmasking false narratives, can strengthen their presence on social networks, produce video content or other activities so as to reach younger population and foster discussion on this topic. It is necessary to clarify the meaning of the notion of disinformation, present key narratives of Russian and other disinformation on national and regional level.

4.3.7. Allies and partner countries should support the building of infrastructure necessary for providing response to disinformation spreading.

As it has already been presented, in many Western Balkans countries Russia is not perceived as a threat, which prevents consistent response to Russian threat. It is important for the response infrastructure not to encompass just media system reforms, but also to include investment in media literacy of the population and training of journalists, so that they have the ability to recognize disinformation and to produce facts-based media content. It is also necessary to invest in the organizations that deal with checking facts in media

³⁴⁹ Darko Brkan, Aleksandra Grdinić, Milovan Papić, Marko Pankovski, Veronika Vichova, Joey Gurney, Iliyana Georgieva, Adam Lelonek, Marta Kowalska, Patrik Szicherle, and Kristina Urbanova, **Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia**, European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/assessment.pdf>.

reports and in the statements of political actors. In that context, the initiatives like the portal *Balkanske bezbjednosne mreže* [Balkan Security Networks], which transmits news from the domain of defence and security in the Western Balkans and in the Central Europe, can be used by journalists as the basis for the production of content void of disinformation³⁵⁰. In recent years, there are more and more organizations which have been pointing out to fake news as the products of Russian and local propaganda. The organizations and programmes like *Zašto ne* [Why not] from Bosnia & Herzegovina, *KRIK* and *Fake news tragač* [Fake news tracker] from Serbia, *Raskrinkavanje.me* from Montenegro, *Faktograf* from Croatia, *MOST* from Macedonia and *Oštro* from Slovenia are parts of the *International Fact-Checking Network – IFCN*, as well as of the *regional network for the fight against disinformation (SEECheck)*³⁵¹.

350 Balkan security network, <http://www.balkansec.net>

351 Raskrinkavanje.me <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/o-nama/>



