



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe

Shared Patterns,
Specific Vulnerabilities
and Responses to
Russian Disinformation

TACKLING KREMLIN'S MEDIA CAPTURE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

**SHARED PATTERNS,
SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES
AND RESPONSES TO
RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION**

The report explores the scope, means and reach of Russia's sharp power influence through the phenomenon of media capture in Southeast Europe, including EU members Bulgaria and Croatia as well as EU aspirants Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. The comparative assessment uncovers the instruments, channels and narratives of Russian disinformation, the impact of Kremlin messaging on societal perceptions and the increasing overlap of influence tactics between Russia and other authoritarian states operating in the Balkans, particularly China.

The study reveals both cross-regionally applicable similarities in the exercise of Kremlin's informational leverage and country-specific strengths and vulnerabilities, which underwrite the differentiated diffusion of authoritarian media capture power in Southeast Europe.

The comprehensive analysis of the media capture tactics of Russia and the key policy findings on how it can be tackled was the result of an interdisciplinary effort at the CSD team with lead author Dr. Rumena Filipova, Research Fellow at the Economic Program and contributions from CSD Economic Program Senior Analysts Dr. Alexander Gerganov and Martin Vladimirov.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	17
RUSSIA'S MEDIA CAPTURE POWER MIX IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE.....	23
Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder: societal attitudes towards Russia.....	24
A diffusion map of Russia's media capture	26
Instruments of media capture.....	32
Main disinformation narratives and channels.....	34
Volume matters: a quantitative analysis of message diffusion strategies	39
The Kremlin goes social media.....	45
Towards a model for understanding Russia's disinformation and content dissemination.....	48
Enter China: boosting the authoritarian challenge.....	49
TACKLING RUSSIAN MEDIA CAPTURE	53
VULNERABILITIES ACROSS SOUTHEAST EUROPE	
BULGARIA	59
CROATIA	73
SERBIA.....	81
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	91
MONTENEGRO	99
NORTH MACEDONIA	105
ALBANIA.....	111
KOSOVO.....	117
ANNEX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE	123

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	How the Kremlin's state capture power targets governance vulnerabilities in SEE	18
Figure 2.	Diffusion map of Russia's media capture influence: susceptible enablers and unyielding inhibitors	27
Figure 3.	Diffusion map of Russia's media capture influence: sub-regional clusters	31
Figure 4.	Types of news outlets part of the content analysis	35
Figure 5.	Pro-Russian stylistic modes of disinformation and propaganda messaging	36
Figure 6.	Russian-owned outlets stay on Kremlin's message.....	39
Figure 7.	Russian-owned outlets' social media accounts on the rise in SEE	40
Figure 8.	Putin commands high emotions even in non-Russian media in the Balkans.....	41
Figure 9.	Foreign policy loudspeakers: the faithful coverage of Sergey Lavrov by Russian-owned outlets	43
Figure 10.	Partisan outlets' activity aligns with the Kremlin's loudspeakers during the Russian presidential election campaign.....	44
Figure 11.	Partisan outlets shadow closely the activity of Russian-owned media on NATO summit meltdown in July 2018.....	45
Figure 12.	Trust in social media has prompted Russian Embassies to pay more attention to their Facebook pages.....	46
Figure 13.	Number of followers of Russian Embassies and Rosstrudnichestvo Offices' Facebook pages in SEE	47
Figure 14.	Average number of posts per day on Russian Embassies' Facebook pages in SEE.....	47
Figure 15.	Russian disinformation and content dissemination mix	48
Figure 16.	Abnormally high and low coverage of Crimea on Bulgarian media outlets	70
Figure 17.	Russia-owned outlet's low interest in Bulgaria's first EU Presidency	70
Figure 18.	Positive and negative opinions of EU, USA, Russia, and China in Croatia	73
Figure 19.	Coverage of Russia-related topics in Croatia.....	78
Figure 20.	Serbs' identification with East and West.....	81
Figure 21.	Perceptions vs. reality: the largest donors of Serbia since the year 2000.....	83
Figure 22.	Volume of the coverage of the "Slavyanski Shtit" (Slavic Shield) topic in Serbian media.....	89
Figure 23.	Support for NATO integration in BiH	91
Figure 24.	Opinion on Russia in BiH.....	92
Figure 25.	Volume of coverage of Russia and EU-related topics in Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	96
Figure 26.	Excessive focus on Russia's military might in Montenegro.....	102

Figure 27. Maintaining strong relations to which country serves North Macedonia's interests best?	105
Figure 28. Extolling Russia's military might in North Macedonian media outlets	108
Figure 29. Albanians' opinion of foreign countries and international organizations.....	111
Figure 30. Coverage of Russia-related topics in Albanian media outlets	114
Figure 31. Perceptions of Russia and China based on respondents' ethnic background	117
Figure 32. Coverage of Russia-related topics in Albanian media outlets	119

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anadolu Agency (Turkey)
ACER	Albanian Center for Economic Research
ADN	Albania Daily News
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AKEP	Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (Albania)
AMA	Audiovisual Media Authority (Albania)
ANP	Annual National Program (NATO)
AP	Autonomous Province
ATA	Albanian Telegraphic Agency
BCMS	Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian languages
BGN	Bulgarian lev
BHRT	Bosnian-Herzegovinian Radio Television
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BNT	Bulgarian National Television
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRIP	Bulgarian-Russian Information Pool Ltd
BRNA	Belt and Road News Alliance
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
BTC	Bulgarian Telecommunications Company
CCP	Communist Party of China
CCTV	China Central Television
CDB	China Development Bank
CEDEM	Centre for Democracy and Human Rights
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CINS	Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CMEC	China Machinery Engineering Corporation
CRA	Communications Regulatory Agency (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
CRBC	China Road and Bridge Corporation
CRI	China Radio International
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSEBA	Chinese Southeast European Business Association
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DEC	Dongfang Electric Corporation
DF	Democratic Front (Montenegro)
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists (Montenegro)
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EUR	Euro
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria

HDZ	Croatian Democratic Union
HDZ BiH	Croatian Democratic Union Bosnia and Herzegovina
HRK	Croatian kuna
HRT	Croatian Radiotelevision
HURA	Croatian Association of Market Communication Companies
IDSCS	Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje
IEA	Institute for European Affairs
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
IRI	International Republican Institute
KCSS	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
KSB	Kosovo Security Barometer
MANS	Network for Affirmation of the NGO Sector
MAP	Membership Action Plan (NATO)
Marnet	Macedonian Academic Investigative Net
MEI	Ministry of European Integration of Serbia
MRT	Macedonian Radio Television
MSI	Media Sustainability Index
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
OOH	Out-of-home advertising
PDSH	Democratic Party of Albania
PPD	Prvo Plinarsko Društvo
PRC	Peoples Republic of China
PSSh	Socialist Party of Albania
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RS	Republika Srpska
RSD	Serbian Dinar
RT	Russia Today
RTK	Radio Television Kosovo
RTRS	Radio Television Republika Srpska
RTS	Radio Television of Serbia
RTSH	Albanian Radio Television
RTV	Radio Television of Vojvodina
RTV BiH	Radio Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina
SBB BiH	Union for a Better Future of Bosnia and Herzegovina
SDA	Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
SDSM	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
SEE	Southeast Europe
SHISH	State Intelligence Service (Albania)
SIRONET	Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SNSD	Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
SRCIC	Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
TRT	Turkey Radio Television
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VMRO-DPMNE	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
VTB	Vneshtorgbank

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The emerging democracies in Southeast Europe (SEE) represent one of the most vulnerable regions in Europe to foreign malign influence. A civilizational crossroads and geopolitical battleground between the great powers of the past. The region is still beset by uncertainties on its path toward fully-fledged integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. On the one hand, domestic developments in SEE states related to democratic backsliding and the erosion of civic and political liberties have fed into recurring governance deficits and public disenchantment. On the other hand, foreign authoritarian states, primarily Russia and increasingly China, have intensified their sharp power influence efforts. These efforts have been directed at further derailing faith in liberal democracy and presenting authoritarianism as a more viable political alternative for SEE.

This mutually reinforcing domestic-international nexus has been particularly evident in the process of capturing Balkan media. Opaque and corruptive local business-political networks exercise leverage over the ownership and editorial structures of domestic outlets. These networks have enabled Russian media influence in SEE by maintaining political, economic, and ideological ties to (pro-)Russian groups and interests. As a result, the Kremlin has been able to gain a foothold in Balkan media-spheres, intimidating journalistic independence and disseminating its preferred narratives. The Kremlin's aim is to win the hearts and minds of Balkan publics in an attempt to undermine the attractiveness of the Western liberal democratic model of governance. Russia has sown distrust in regional media audiences about their countries' Euro-Atlantic path by prominently disseminating anti-EU/NATO narratives. Hence, the SEE region has been a successful testing ground for Russia's global disinformation and propaganda strategy promoting the Kremlin's vision of the international order.

The current report illuminates **the scope, means, and reach of Russia's sharp power influence through the phenomenon of media capture**. It traces the regime's malign impact on good governance and democratic development in eight Southeast European countries (EU members: Bulgaria and Croatia, as well as EU aspirants: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo). An understanding of the Kremlin's media influence has been developed based on the assessment of: (1) the instruments that Russia deploys to expand its influence over public discourses; (2) the channels and narratives of Russian disinformation utilized to sway views of the West and its key institutions, the EU and NATO; (3) the impact of Kremlin narratives on societal perceptions; (4) the amplification of Russian media influence through a convergence with the disinformation activities of other authoritarian states, particularly China.

The cross-country regional comparison reveals several key similarities in Russia's media capture tactics. **The Kremlin typically deploys informal instruments of influence**. These are manifested in the cultivation of opaque local oligarchic networks, rather than through traceable ownership of SEE

media companies. To amplify the impact of these informal tools, Russia has also leveraged the dependence of media outlets in the region on advertising revenue from Russian-owned or dependent companies to exert pressure on their editorial policy. In addition, Russian state-owned propaganda outlets make their content freely available for republishing in local languages, which facilitates the uptake of pro-Russian media content. Moreover, widespread governance loopholes in the media sector in SEE deepen the vulnerability to foreign interference by undermining media ownership transparency and by concentrating financial resources into a limited number of media companies closely related to the incumbent governments.

Another feature of Russian media influence is the presence of common disinformation narratives and narration styles, depending on the degree of political, economic, and ideological distance between a domestic Balkan media channel and Russia. The more closely (politically and economically) integrated a given outlet is with the (pro-)Russian oligarchic networks, the more explicitly biased its relation of Russian disinformation narratives will be:

- The outlets that are **directly owned by Russia** (such as the local language editions of Russia Beyond, Sputnik, and News Front) are distinguished by the most straightforward and aggressive promotion of Kremlin propaganda. There is a more limited coverage of nationally relevant events and developments as most of the messaging emphasizes topics that are of importance to Russia rather than to a given Balkan country's domestic audience.
- **Partisan outlets** (published by a domestic political party with strong links to the Kremlin) are characterized by a party-favoring spin on an otherwise strict adherence to the dissemination of Kremlin propaganda.
- **Mainstream dailies** (i.e., more widely circulated or read sources, which maintain some, albeit not overwhelmingly exclusive, ties to (pro-)Russian groups) are less unequivocally positive of Russia. The outlets attempt to appeal to a broader audience, which means that their editorial policy favors both pro-Russian and pro-Western pieces. Such outlets are typically very much dependent on local governments for funding and access and closely follow the governments' often pro-Russian agenda.

SEE states are also susceptible to Russian narratives, particularly as a result of commonly present cultural and socio-political tendencies. The **persistence of East-West ambivalence** is revealed through the region's often-contradictory societal attitudes towards geopolitical allegiances and the essence of liberal democratic values. The predominant support for EU membership among Balkan nations based on a belief in the instrumental benefits that the Union can yield (i.e. freedom of travel, employment opportunities, etc.) rather than in the value-based democratic underpinnings of the EU further increases the countries' vulnerability to anti-Western narratives. Another trend is a **prevalent discontent with the overall process of democratization**, distrust of political institutions, and general dissatisfaction with the political system and the economy. Such disenchantment with national political, social, and economic developments may enable authoritarian leaders with an anti-Western agenda to gain power.

Russian-owned outlets make use of Russia-related **cognitive capture** in many SEE countries by blanketing the local info space with pro-Kremlin propa-

ganda. On topics important to the Kremlin, Russian-owned outlets produce on average four times more articles per month than locally-owned ones. The quantitative content analysis shows this holds true even if the local outlets are also pro-Russian. In addition, Russian-owned outlets and official Russian institutions have moved their focus to the social media domain, strengthening, in particular, their Facebook presence, as the global pandemic has shifted media consumption in the region in this direction.

The convergence of Russian and Chinese disinformation strategies and narratives has been conspicuously accelerated on a global scale over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. This convergence of Russian and Chinese disinformation practices has also been observed in Southeast Europe. **Russia's local proxies are increasingly acting as enablers of Chinese media influence**, promoting complementary propaganda messages that simultaneously further the official Russian and Chinese viewpoints. The general messaging extols the cooperation between the two states hailing them as an alternative to Western liberal democracy and the liberal international order. Even more overtly, in countries such as Serbia, the promotion of joint Russian-Chinese activities is strongly supported by the government.

Apart from the growing overlap of Russian and Chinese disinformation activities, other authoritarian actors have also been attempting to influence the information landscapes of SEE states. **Turkey** has established a media footprint primarily in the Muslim-majority Balkan countries. **Hungary** has amassed ownership of media outlets in the region, promoting Russian disinformation narratives and backing regional authoritarian-leaning political actors.

Overall, the diffusion of Russia's media capture across SEE represents a key amplifier of the Russian economic and political influence, requiring concerted efforts nationally in combination with international support:

- A solid – transatlantic – **anti-corruption and financial transparency response and enforcement** mechanisms should be the first line of defense against anti-democratic media capture, including:
 - strengthening **coordinated corporate financial transparency initiatives** targeting in particular offshore havens laundering Russian, Chinese, and other authoritarian states' financial flows;
 - expanding **Magnitsky act type of legislation**, including not only human rights but also corruption in its scope;
 - overhauling and prioritizing the **OECD anti-bribery convention** and state-owned enterprises' good governance regulations;
 - developing and promoting **transatlantic initiatives tackling regulatory capture** in the industries most strongly exposed to Russian and Chinese malign influence, such as energy, communications, and infrastructure.
- National governments should make the provision of **information on the ownership structure of media outlets compulsory and accessible** through a publicly available registry. They should also consistently monitor and enforce sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Moreover, specific provisions for **screening foreign media ownership** should be incorporated.
- To ensure coordination and compliance with a European system of rules, national media ownership registries should be complemented by the crea-

- tion of a **common European registry** (this ought to also include states that are candidates for EU membership).
- Governments in the region should be motivated and supported to introduce and strengthen **new public and private media financing models**, which would help reduce advertising and media power concentration:
 - Introduce and promote **alternative/non-profit funding models** ensuring a diversity of ownership as well as different sources of financing (including crowdfunding and donations).
 - Develop specific government **public procurement media financing transparency measures**, which should list all government financing provided to the media. This would include direct budget subsidies and advertising budgets of state-owned enterprises, as well as the media advertising budgets outlined within public procurement contracts, etc.
 - The public media should become financially and managerially more independent from the state. **Public broadcasters should be financed through a mixed model** that includes not only government subsidies but also license fees, which allows the audience to maintain a more direct link to the media it sponsors and demand greater accountability. Public media should transparently report on their finances. Hence, there is a need for regular reporting, accessible not only to the government and official circles but also to the wider public.
 - **Citizen committees** should regularly debate the editorial policy of public broadcasters. These committees would be composed of media professionals, experts, and the wider audience. They could establish channels for exchanging feedback with the governing bodies of public media broadcasters.
 - Staffing procedures and day-to-day management of public media outlets should expel any political interference. This can be achieved, for example, by ensuring that editors and management directors are being chosen through external review committees composed of experienced industry experts and practitioners.
 - Media regulators should **monitor party-owned outlets** under specific rules, requiring the highest level of financial transparency and disclosure of party affiliation.
 - More rigorous scrutiny of the activities of subsidiaries **to foreign state-owned media outlets** ought to be introduced. Regulatory bodies across SEE should start to monitor Russian and Chinese state-owned channels and alert national security authorities of any ongoing disinformation campaigns. This must be carried out in a consistent and reliable manner.
 - Ensure greater **advertising market transparency** by creating a publicly accessible registry that contains data on the market shares held by the biggest advertising companies, broken down by advertising revenue, profits from subscriptions, and paid content.

Provided the unwillingness or incapacity of many of the governments in SEE to act openly on countering media capture, local **civil society, independent media, and the private sector** have a particularly strong role to play in building a solid response to malign foreign media influence by:

- Creating **regional civil society coalitions** aimed at tackling state capture, media monitoring, analysis and debunking of disinformation, media public procurement, and financial transparency. These coalitions would

consist of SEE and international experts, media outlets, non-governmental organizations, etc. This would foster regional expert cooperation to promote mutual understanding of disinformation narratives and to guide SEE audiences on how to spot and act on propaganda campaigns. The EU and the US through their respective regional cooperation programs, run by the Directorate General for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations and the United States Agency for International Development, could actively build support for such coalitions, using existing initiatives as stepping stones.

- It is particularly important for civil society and public institutions in the region to develop a **public-private partnership approach to cracking down on the abuse of social media for political ends**, including abuse by foreign powers. Such manipulation can easily exploit social vulnerabilities and divisions to tilt the scales in favor of a particular candidate. Civil society should work with national governments to better understand and develop joint regional and transatlantic frameworks for addressing social media regulation and citizens' education. Social media should be sensitized and urged to address in the local languages, with the cooperation of local civil society, the disruptive effects of their platforms on democratic public discourse, focusing in particular on polarization, extremism, and foreign disinformation.
- Promote **media literacy** by devising a long-term educational strategy focused on the construction of a school curriculum that teaches students how to recognize disinformation by acquiring critical skills for analyzing media articles (as related to authorship, referencing, and literary techniques that convey attitudes) as well as digital skills (e.g. for identifying bots and trolls).

A number of **EU and US related initiatives** could be paramount in aiding domestic efforts for countering media capture and disinformation across the region:

- In line with the ongoing discussions on linking the disbursement of European funds to the observance of the rule of law within the EU, the **disbursement of EU communications funds** should be made conditional on the full disclosure of the allocation procedure conducted nationally and in adherence to strict criteria for selecting beneficiaries. Such criteria should be based on the quality of reporting and transparency of the ownership of the media outlets and organizations receiving funding.
- The EU should strengthen the administrative and expert capacity of the European External Action Service's (EEAS) **East StratCom Task Force** – specially dedicated to debunking Russian disinformation across European countries – as it currently does not allow it to go beyond a manual monitoring of disinformation and into the development of a counter-disinformation strategy. The Task Force should also become a permanent unit with an expanded scope within the EEAS.
- The EU should expand its **strategic communication efforts** in order to raise the profile of its economic and social development activities in the Western Balkans. As evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and China were quickly able to organize a publicity campaign presenting the medical aid they provided to SEE as more significant than what the EU offered. This is, despite the Union's much more substantial assistance.
- The EU should include the Western Balkans in its **Democracy Action Plan**

and Digital Services Act programing. Both the US and EU member states with strong public media models (such as DW in Germany, RFI in France, or BBC in the UK) need to **expand or reinstate programing** in the Balkans and in national languages aimed at supporting journalistic excellence, upholding standards, and standing up to Russian and Chinese disinformation efforts. The EU and the U.S. could work in tandem to **develop regional media programs** that could strengthen independent investigative journalism or target media capture.

- The EU should exercise greater vigilance and monitor the **footprint of Russian and Chinese** state-owned media into the European media space. The discussions over the adoption of a European Commission proposal on regulating the operation of foreign state-subsidized companies in the European single market should also pay special attention to authoritarian state-sponsored media organizations attempting to establish a foothold in the EU.
- The US Agency for International Development should **reinstitute instruments and platforms** for supporting good governance and media freedom initiatives on a **regional level**, which would be the most effective delivery mechanism for enabling policy change. A regional approach will improve the likelihood of peer pressure among national governments.
- The US Department of State should enhance multilateral exchange programs such as the **technology and media corps** that can mobilize civil society and volunteer engagement to support the region's reform agenda.

INTRODUCTION

The emerging democracies of Southeast Europe (SEE)¹ represent one of the most vulnerable regions in Europe to foreign malign influence. These countries share many similar domestic governance deficits, such as persistent corruption,² state capture,³ and sizable informal economies.⁴ The uncertain EU perspective and recurrent conflicts over the legacy of Yugoslavia's dissolution constitute additional challenges to the development of the region. Authoritarian states have taken advantage of this multitude of institutional, economic, social and political fissures to undermine the region's Euro-Atlantic integration and to strengthen their own presence in strategic sectors such as energy, banking, real estate, mining and metallurgy.⁵ Traditionally, Russia has exercised significant leverage over SEE countries but other authoritarian states have also expanded their presence in the region more recently. China, in particular, with its massive investment program under the Belt and Road Initiative and its increasingly aggressive posture, as evidenced by its COVID-19 diplomacy, has further tipped the balance towards authoritarian tendencies in the region. Yet, Moscow remains the most disruptive force for SEE's democratic development prospects, seeking to deploy the full array of its power mix.

Russia's state capture power mix in Southeast Europe

The exercise of Russian influence is shaped by two defining characteristics of the political regime in Moscow – autocracy and corruption. The resulting state capture power cements the Kremlin's grip on Russian society and allows it to pursue its revisionist foreign policy through mobilizing various resources from the public and the private sector. The two primary channels of the Kremlin's state capture power in Europe have been its state-sponsored networks of influence and corruption and the control over Russia's economic and financial flows.⁶ These have been enabled by the proliferation of offshore tax havens with lax money laundering and financial transparency regulations in the West.⁷ Russia has used them to launder corrupt profits and obfuscate the source of funds used to cultivate oligarchic networks and political parties across Europe and, in particular, in SEE.

The Kremlin has gradually revived both the more traditional elements of its hard power, such as aggressive military and political posturing, alongside

¹ In this report Southeast Europe denotes the group of the following eight countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

² SELDI, *Corruption in the Western Balkans: Trends and Policy Options*, Policy Brief 9, 2019.

³ SELDI, *State Capture Assessment Diagnostics in the Western Balkans 2020: Risks and Policy Options*, Policy Brief 10, 2020.

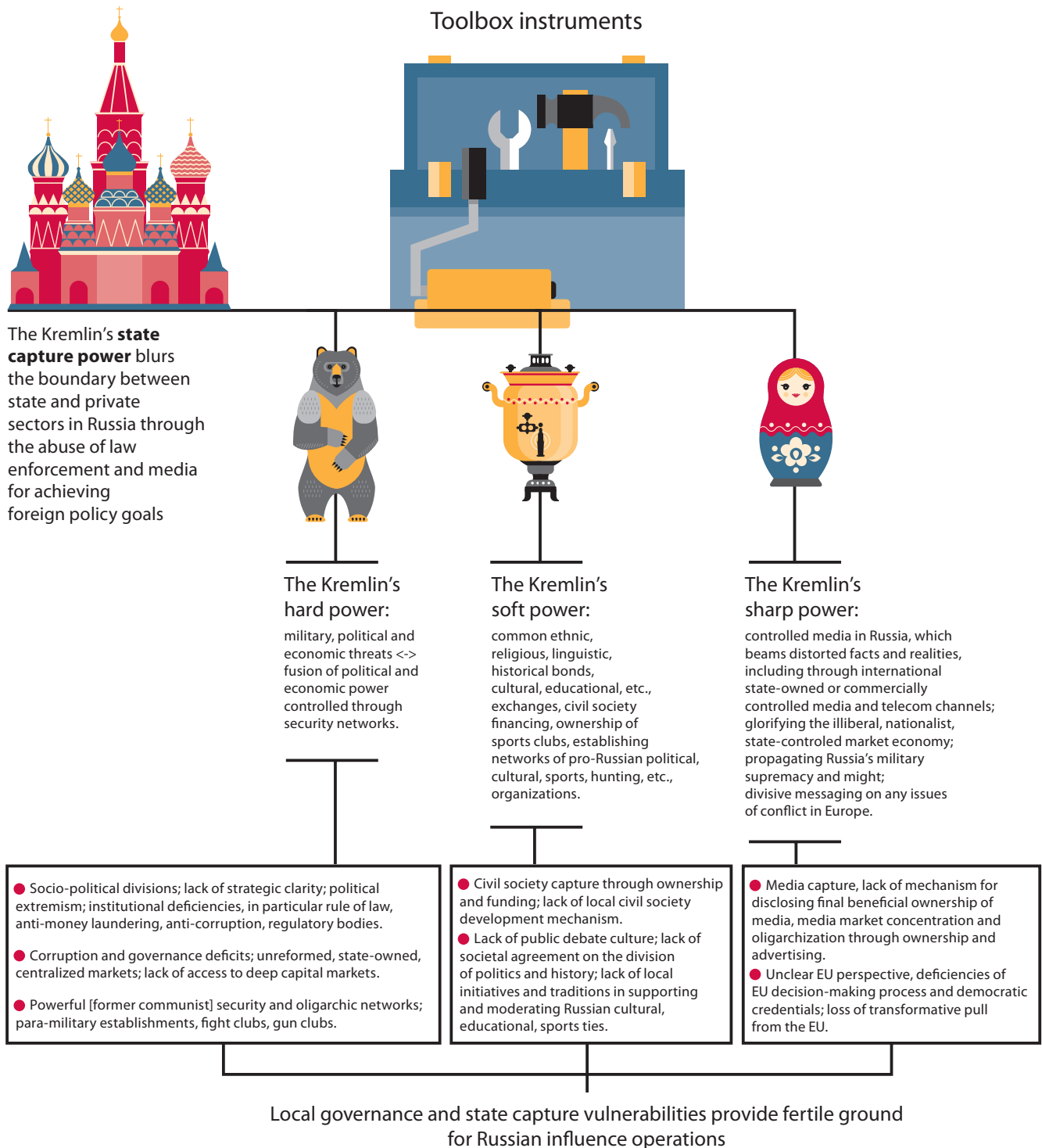
⁴ SELDI, *Hidden Economy in the Western Balkans 2020: Trends and Policy Options*, Policy Brief 11, 2020.

⁵ Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁶ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., eds., *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁷ Conley, H. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Figure 1. How the Kremlin’s state capture power targets governance vulnerabilities in SEE



Source: *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

covert operations or “active measures” across Europe. In some Slavic countries in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, the centuries-old soft power presence of Russia has allowed it to win the favor of national governments via proposals for cultural, church, and youth initiatives.⁸ These have subse-

⁸ Shentov, Stefanov, and Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, 2020.

quently become platforms to disrupt local political discourse while opposing transatlantic views. The Kremlin has then used Russia's broader acceptance in some countries to unleash its sharp power toolbox of media capture, disinformation and cyber warfare. The rapid spread of polarizing social media amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracies in SEE has created the perfect breeding environment for Russia to win the information war.⁹

Media capture in SEE: the new normal?

Media capture forms a key facet of authoritarian states' deployment of sharp power. The latter refers to the use of ideas and information for malign intents and purposes so that it "pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and informational environments in the targeted countries."^{10,11} Authoritarian states apply informational tools, linked to censorship, dissemination of disinformation, the establishment of proxy cultural institutes to sway public opinion and ultimately – subversion of democracy, all of which is particularly manifest in four main domains: media, academia, culture, the think tank and policy communities.¹²

The concept and practice of media capture – as a constitutive mechanism of authoritarian states' exercise of sharp power, has been investigated in only a few key studies. "Capture" is usually examined as being established through the ownership of media outlets; financial incentives (such as state subsidies, advertising and subscription profits); regulation (with political elites controlling the authorities meant to independently monitor and sanction the media); censorship (exercised by the government or self-imposed); cognitive influence (whereby the ideological capture of the media on the basis of the owners' views further leads to societal cognitive capture by the media itself).¹³ These forms of capture are discussed as part of the domestic context. At this level, media capture is looked at as the preserve of the government acting in collusion with the private sector, which leads to an omission from consideration of the foreign aspect of control over the internal journalistic landscape.¹⁴

⁹ Jankowicz, N., *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict*, I.B. TAURIS Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020.

¹⁰ Walker, Ch. et al., *Sharp Power. Rising Authoritarian Influence*, National Endowment for Democracy, The International Forum for Democratic Studies, 2017; Walker, Ch., Kalathil, Sh. and Ludwig, J., *The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power*, *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1, 2020.

¹¹ As the scholar originally focusing on the concept of soft power, Joseph Nye has clarified that when information becomes deception, a subject's voluntary and transparent reception of facts is constrained, which blends into coercion – and hence can no longer be classified as soft power (understood as the ability to get what you want through attraction and persuasion, stemming from the appeal of a nation's culture and values).

Nye, J., *Protecting Democracy in an Era of Cyber Information War*, Hoover Institution Fall Series, no. 318, 2018; Nye, J., *Countering the Authoritarian Challenge: Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Sharp Power*, *Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 15, 2020, pp. 94-109.

¹² Walker et al., *Sharp Power. Rising Authoritarian Influence*, 2017.

¹³ Stiglitz, J., "Toward a Taxonomy of Media Capture," in *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*, ed. Anya Schiffrin, The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy, 2017; Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe, *Media Capture: Toolkit for 21st Century Autocrats*, 2019; Dragomir, M., *Reporting Facts: Free from Fear or Favour*, UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Regional Overview Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2018.

¹⁴ Stiglitz, "Toward a Taxonomy of Media Capture," 2017; Besley, T. and Prat, A., *Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? Media Capture and Government Accountability*, *American Economic Review* 96, no. 3, 2006, pp. 720-736; Szeidl, A. and Szucs, F. *Media Capture through Favor Exchange*, *CEPR Discussion Paper* DP 11875, 2017.

In the Kremlin's state capture power mix propaganda and disinformation have become crucial instruments in the amplification of Russian influence in Europe. Media capture has played an important role in Kremlin's influence in SEE due to its "very high impact and importance in the political process and in the institutional checks and balances in democratic societies".¹⁵ The Kremlin's media capture tactics in SEE have been aided by the deterioration of media freedom, the concentration of ownership in domestic political-oligarchic groups,¹⁶ and the rapid penetration of social and online media across the region. These domestic groups could enable and act as conduits of foreign influence through the political dependencies and financial ties they maintain to external, i.e. (pro)Russian vested interests. The domestic-international nexus turns media into an instrument for promoting the views and assets of the captors, preventing journalists from fulfilling their public functions linked to holding politicians to account and ensuring a platform for the free and pluralistic expression of opinion.

Media capture or more broadly the sourcing of influence through the media has become the most visible and discussed aspect of the Kremlin's footprint globally and, particularly, in Southeast Europe. Media capture is a hybrid form of institutional and business capture.¹⁷ This is due to the specific role of the media in informing society and building attitudes and preferences. It can span different forms, from direct capital control and ownership of media outlets, to monopolizing the provision of content through subsidized "free" information products, to control over advertising revenues.¹⁸

The current report reveals the extent, reach and scale of **Russia's presence in the media sector** and its malign impact on good governance and democratic development in Southeast Europe. By detailing the instruments, channels, narratives, and impact of Russian malign media operations, the study provides country-based analysis and a regionally comparative assessment exposing the similarities and differences of the Kremlin strategy. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of Russian media operations is the first step to developing a viable response from national governments and stakeholders and their international partners. Countering malign influence in the media sector represents a cornerstone for safeguarding democratic freedoms and values in the region.

The report offers an assessment of the **scope, means, and reach of Russian media influence**, including the following specific aspects:

- The extent of direct Russian ownership of local media.
- The presence of informal political and economic ties to the editorial and management bodies of local media.
- The share of Russian companies in the advertising market¹⁹ and other

¹⁵ Filipova, R. and Galev, T. *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018.

¹⁶ Dragomir, M., *Media Capture in Europe*, Media Development Investment Fund, 2019.

¹⁷ Stoyanov, A., Gerganov, A. and Yalamov, T., *State Capture Assessment Diagnostics*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2019, p. 15.

¹⁸ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., ed., *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, 2018.

¹⁹ Conley, H. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016; Filipova and Galev, *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, 2018.

related financial instruments for exercising economic influence over the media.

- The main disinformation narratives from some of the most visible Kremlin-owned, state outlets (such as Russia Beyond, Sputnik, News Front), which – combined with local, Russia-linked news sources, make up a pro-Russian information ecosystem that furthers the Kremlin’s media agenda in the region.²⁰
- The impact on public perceptions that Kremlin-sponsored disinformation can exert as facilitated by the audience’s degree of susceptibility. The long-standing historical predispositions, cultural-emotional affinities, religious, ethnic, and linguistic similarities with Russia are all factors that condition Balkan societies’ receptivity to Russian malign initiatives.
- The overlaps with the disinformation activities of other authoritarian states, especially China, and how these reinforce each other.^{21,22}

²⁰ For a detailed overview of the key pillars and channels of Russia’s global disinformation, please see Global Engagement Center, U.S. Department of State, *Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, 2020.

²¹ Kendall-Taylor, A. and Shullman, D., *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*, Center for a New American Security, 2021; Kliman, D. et al., *Dangerous Synergies Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations*, Center for a New American Security, 2020; Brandt, J. and Taussig, T., *The Kremlin’s Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing*, Brookings, 2020; Mazarr, M. J. et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation. Present Realities and Emerging Trends*, RAND, 2019.

²² Bassuener, K. *Pushing on an Open Door. Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans*, International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, 2019; Mujanović, J. Vračić, A. and Armakolas, I., eds., *Political Trends & Dynamics Chinese Soft Power in Southeast Europe*, Dialog Südosteuropa/ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Volume 3, 2019; Conley, H. et al., *Becoming a Chinese Client State. The Case of Serbia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

RUSSIA'S MEDIA CAPTURE POWER MIX IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Several mutually reinforcing trends have allowed Russia to deliver a vertically integrated messaging of its foreign policy views amounting to an increased risk of media capture across SEE. The Kremlin has continued promoting through its official channels in the region its increasingly aggressive foreign policy stance vis-à-vis the European Union and the US. In February 2021, Russia expelled EU diplomats from the country during the first visit of EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, while the Russian foreign minister ominously noted that "if you want peace, you have to prepare for war".²³ Most recently, Russia has joined China in launching a coordinated vaccine diplomacy with a global scope. This includes, as is particularly pertinent to this report, countries across the Western Balkans. It has not only promoted its own vaccine but has put specific efforts in denigrating others, in particular those produced by the US.²⁴ Russian diplomats have also regularly tried to bully or engage local political leaders on emotional internal or regional political issues, such as standards of rule of law, the Prespa accord, the Bulgaria – North Macedonia friendship agreement, Serbia – Kosovo issues, etc.

Such diplomacy actions have been amplified by an army of official formally state-owned and unofficial pro-Russian mainstream and social media channels, indiscriminately peddling propaganda and disinformation messages throughout the region and across local languages. These have sought to strengthen cognitive media capture through exploiting common Slavic and Orthodox histories and inserting themselves in emotional regional exchanges, such as issues of the independence of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro and North Macedonia. Russia's strongly positive image overall amongst the local Slavic populations has aided the proliferation of Russian disinformation narratives. The inability, inexperience, and lack of leverage vis-à-vis social media corporations of local regulators have further laid the population and local communities bare to indiscriminate Russian disinformation and propaganda.²⁵

Russia's media influence in the region has been further enabled by local political leaders who have benefited from Russian political and economic support and have in return often parroted the Kremlin's messages publicly. The concentration and opaqueness of media ownership in SEE following the financial crisis in 2008 and the pulling out of various Western investors have further pushed the media toward seeking cozy relations with Russia-friendly political leaders. In addition, Russian private and state-owned companies, such as

²³ Meyer, H. and Biryukov, A., "Russia Warns EU It's Ready to Break Off Ties Over Sanctions," *Bloomberg.Com*, February 12, 2021.

²⁴ Gordon, M. R. and Volz, D., "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021.

²⁵ Jeremic, I. and Stojanovic, M., "Facebook, Twitter Struggling in Fight against Balkan Content Violations," *BalkanInsight*, February 16, 2021.

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder: societal attitudes towards Russia

Gazprom, Lukoil, VTB, etc. have become some of the largest advertisers in the region. This acts to further reduce the willingness of the media toward critical coverage. Russian state-owned media organizations have also provided free local language content, promoting Moscow-centric views. These have often been readily accepted by cash-strapped media outlets across SEE. China, with its massive infrastructure investments in the Western Balkans and iron-clad message control, has exacerbated media capture risks furthering authoritarian pressure in SEE.

The audiences in SEE countries are susceptible to malign Russian influence due to remaining East-West cultural ambivalences and a disenchantment with the process of democratic transition. One powerful channel, utilized by Russian propaganda, has been the exploitation of the low trust in media across SEE.²⁶ Distrust in media is attributed to various factors. These are: deteriorating standards of press independence; a perceived poor level of media efficiency due to a perceived general system failure (i.e. “nothing happens even if corrupt politicians are exposed in the media”); distrust in media owners and their financing; overall distrust in society as well as; conflicting world views or values of readers/viewers to those prevailing in media.²⁷

To understand the link between growing foreign malign media influence and the backsliding in media trust, this analysis relies on public opinion surveys in SEE from reputable polling projects.²⁸ The aim has been to chart out societal sentiments and gain an insight into popular susceptibilities to Russian narratives by considering views on EU/NATO membership; European integration; perceptions of the international roles played by the US, Russia, and China; and the inclination towards either liberal democracy (including multi-party arrangements, elections, democratic norms of tolerance, consensus-building, freedom of speech) or authoritarianism (informed by a strong leader and a strong state).

Two key trends emerge from survey results. First, respondents in SEE seem to approve of the maintenance of good relations between both Western institutions and authoritarian states. Thus, while more than half of those surveyed had a positive view toward EU membership or (where membership has not been attained) toward accession, respondents simultaneously approved of Russia and Vladimir Putin's regime in all countries with the exception of Albania and Kosovo. Russia has tapped into this general positive sentiment as leverage – a tool to pressure governments in the region to adopt a pro-Russian foreign policy position. The compatibility that is believed to exist between Russia and Europe can also be potentially ex-

²⁶ Shentov, O. et al., ed., *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Such as those conducted by the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, Eurobarometer, the Pew Research Center, Globsec, etc. A methodological caveat applicable to all countries under investigation is linked to the political bias that can be detected in the work of some national sociological agencies. Additionally, the scarcity of public opinion polling as a consequence of such bias and/or the underdevelopment of the sociological field must be accounted for. For instance, in Bulgaria, a range of polling agencies maintain a pro-Russian ideological stance and connections, which often skews results in the direction of positions and parties that are close to the Kremlin. In Serbia, the general lack of availability of polls on foreign policy issues is conditioned by the official political line that aims at balancing between Russia and the West and therefore discourages opinion polling that may indicate a shift in either direction.

ploited by the Kremlin to advocate for a stronger Russia-EU partnership.²⁹ This comes at the expense of U.S. and NATO influence in the region, which is often mistrusted.

Moreover, the fact that the majority of citizens in SEE associate the EU with instrumental benefits (above all: freedom of travel and greater opportunities for education and employment) means that there is a weaker values-based attachment towards the Union. A values-based attachment would be linked to safeguarding fundamental democratic rights, norms and freedoms. As a result, societies in the region may be less aware of the media, political, and economic aspects of the Russian and increasingly Chinese influence, which reinforces domestic governance gaps and moves Balkan countries further away from a shared European vision for liberal democracy and international security.

The other main trend shared across Balkan countries is the **prevalent discontent** with the process of democratization, the **distrust** of political institutions, and an overall **dissatisfaction** with the political system and the functioning of the economy. Such disenchantment with national political, social, and economic developments may enable authoritarian leaders with an anti-Western agenda to dominate the public discourse and, thus, more easily win elections. Hence, a critique of the functioning of democratic arrangements does not lead people to seek an improvement of democratic standards but to the conclusion that democracy is inherently flawed and can be fixed through authoritarian measures.³⁰ These anti-democratic sentiments could be redirected to the promotion of the authoritarian models presented by Russia and China. Such a public view could greenlight their malign activities in the region as Russia and China are increasingly seen as providers of public goods to cash-strapped and dysfunctional local political systems and economies.³¹

Despite overarching similarities in the public attitudes across the region, important nuances also stand out. Bulgarians and Kosovars, in particular, can be located on the two opposite ends of the spectrum regarding their views toward Russia. While Kosovars are distinctive in their overwhelmingly negative perception of Russia and its foreign policy, the Bulgarian population maintains some of the highest approval ratings of Russia. Indeed, Bulgarians are distinguished by their simultaneous positive orientation toward various international actors who often possess conflicting geopolitical aims, including the US, Germany, and Russia. In contrast to the Bulgarian overlapping inclusivity, Serbs tend to favor a distinctive national policy orientation, as only a small percentage of respondents support the adoption of a strategic path in

²⁹ Despite Russia's 'turn to Asia' and attempts to construct a 'Greater Eurasia', as an alternative to the West following the Ukrainian crisis, the impetus for forging cooperation between Russia and Europe against the US and creating 'indivisible' European security without NATO's participation still remains as a resurfacing, path-dependent line in officially sanctioned intellectual traditions: Karaganov, S. *Russia's Victory and a New Concert of Nations*, Russia in Global Affairs, 2017; Zagorski, A., *The Russian Proposal for a Treaty on European Security: From the Medvedev Initiative to the Corfu Process*, OSCE Yearbook, 2009, 43-59.

³⁰ Hajdu, D. and Klingová, K., *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. Perceptions of Democracy & Governance in 10 EU Countries*, GLOBSEC, 2020, p. 20.

³¹ Filipova, R., *The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic and State of Emergency*, Center for the Study of Democracy/Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Media Program Southeast Europe, 2020, pp. 12-14.

line with the objectives of both Western countries and authoritarian states to the East.³² Most Serbs also prefer that their country maintain a neutral military status, a position not shared by the citizens of other countries in the region. Unlike the lukewarm support for NATO in most SEE countries (with the exception of North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo where support is above 70-80%), in Serbia NATO is still seen as a military foe due to its intervention in the Kosovo conflict in the late 1990s.

Regarding societal attitudes toward authoritarian powers, apart from Russia, China gathers broadly positive (although arguably unenthusiastic) views. This can be explained by a low degree of awareness or knowledge of the country throughout the region as a relative newcomer to the Balkans. It is only in Kosovo that Beijing is viewed in a primarily negative light. Overall, the national public opinion patterns highlight that some countries in SEE are more susceptible than others to Russian (but also Chinese) narratives and these can be used as entry points for malign foreign media influence. Moreover, variations in social perceptions of external powers among ethnic groups demonstrates the lack of a consolidated national policy vision, which can be leveraged by authoritarian states to stoke ethnic tension and division.

A diffusion map of Russia's media capture

The Kremlin's media presence is diffused throughout the region on the basis of a common set of instruments, or similar disinformation narratives, taking advantage of analogous societal vulnerabilities. These actions are increasingly intersecting with China's own influence operations in the area. The susceptibility of SEE countries to Russian media capture influence can be represented through the following diffusion map, consisting of two main categories:

- (1) **Susceptible enablers** – countries, in which the high level of receptivity to Russia's media capture instruments also facilitate its regional expansion. These countries are typically exhibiting all types of state capture traits: strong presence of Russian state-owned media, as well as domestic media that is tightly linked to the government (or related business elites); media highly financially dependent on government financing and large-scale advertisers, as well as (Russian) free content providers; strong domestic (self-) censorship and low media freedom standards; and wide societal cognitive acceptance of Russia, authoritarian leadership and practices (value placed on leading with a "strong hand"), as well as low trust in the media and official national institutions.
- (2) **Unyielding inhibitors** – countries, in which the low level of receptivity to Russia's media capture tactics acts as a brake on their domestic dissemination and regional circulation. These are countries, in which one or several of the state capture types are sealed off for Russian influence. This is most often the case with cognitive capture and financial incentives or indirect or informal ownership.

Yet, besides the intrinsically national characteristics of media capture, countries in the region also belong in **sub-regional clusters** when it comes to

³² Indeed, a Pew Research Center survey has shown that 78% of the polled Serbs believe that there is a conflict between traditional Serbian values and the values of the West: Pew Research Center, *Democracy, Nationalism and Pluralism*, 2017.

susceptibility to Russian media influence. This is defined by strong external anchors, such as shared alliances (EU and/or NATO) or common history or language (Yugoslavia). Such clusters can jointly augment or shrink the diffusion of Russia's media capture by virtue of their shared characteristics.

Figure 2. Diffusion map of Russia's media capture influence: susceptible enablers and unyielding inhibitors



Source: CSD.

The category of susceptible enablers is led by **Serbia as a key pivot** of Russia's malign media activities in SEE. The country has become a Russian disinformation hub for the Balkans. This is most vividly exemplified by Sputnik's Serbian edition, which is widely read throughout all the Western Balkan countries. Serbia exhibits strong cognitive media capture vis-à-vis Russia, as its population is highly supportive of the Kremlin and its current leader. These sentiments are fueled by nationalistic emotions over Russia's unequivocal stance against Kosovo's independence. Most Serbian political leaders, including the government also openly voice their support and loyalty toward Russia. Serbia is the regional host to some of the most powerful Russian advertisers, such as Gazprom. Many important Serbian businesses, in particular in agriculture and retail are dependent on Russia for export, furthering its implicit leverage over the local media. Additionally, Serbia has some of the most opaque media ownership structures and, at the same time, it is the most financially viable market in the region. This is because language similarities mean that it can cater to a population spanning the whole of former Yugoslavia. These media capture traits are further reinforced as the country is also positioning itself to be a Chinese digital hub. Serbia is becoming a core part of China's strategy to expand its digital infrastructure in Europe. It plans to achieve this through the construction of 5G telecommunications networks and artificial intelligence facial recognition systems. However, what reinforces Serbia's key role is the active involvement of top-tier government officials and government-related media outlets that push Russian and Chinese disinformation messages throughout the country and across the region.³³

³³ Meister, S., ed., *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*, ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, 2018.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) also belongs to the category of susceptible enablers of the Russian media influence in SEE, representing a **splintered facilitator**. Russia has continuously sought to destabilize Bosnia by stoking ethnic divisions through its support for Serb and Croat nationalist claims and has taken advantage of the already existing domestic governance pitfalls that are contained in the country's federative constitution. Russia has gained a substantial foothold in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) – one of the two main constituent political entities of BiH. It has done so through establishing close ties with the influential RS politician and current Serb member of the Presidency of BiH, Milorad Dodik. The latter has repeatedly undermined Bosnian unity and demanded greater autonomy.³⁴ He has also repeatedly opposed the process of the country's NATO and EU accession,³⁵ instead promoting greater Serbian, Russian, and Chinese influence. For its part, Moscow has exploited internal Bosnian divisions to foment separatist sentiments, derail internal political consolidation, and prevent a more determined course toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia has been able to achieve these goals on the basis of the favorable media coverage that the RS-government linked outlets have provided of Kremlin-sponsored narratives.³⁶ Russia has also promoted Croat nationalism, particularly via the emerging link with Dragan Čović – former Croat member of Bosnia's Presidency and head of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Čović has aimed to establish a Croat-dominated entity in BiH, which could further undermine the country's federal government.³⁷ Through its Serb and Croatian state-owned outlets, Sputnik and Russia Beyond, and the provision of free content, Russia will continue to be a strong factor of media capture in the country, in which media is either strongly dependent on local governments or is strictly divided along ethnic lines. In addition, Russia controls some of the key oil and gas assets in RS and by extension in BiH, which makes it also a potent advertising factor with commanding capture power.

The susceptible enablers of Russia's media capture also include **North Macedonia and Montenegro** as smaller but strategically important **soft spots**. In both North Macedonia and Montenegro, Russia maintains media presence through a range of traditional print, TV and online outlets. In both countries its media generated content for Serbia is also consumed, allowing Russia to obfuscate the true origin of the information. The proliferation of pro-Russian messages takes on an added importance in a political context that can be characterized by a continual tug of war between reformist-Atlanticist and pro-Russian forces. Indeed, one of the two main parties in each of the two states maintain close ties to the Kremlin (including North Macedonia's VMRO-DPNE and Montenegro's Democratic Front). The latter's term in power has the potential to sway Montenegro's strategic orientation in an anti-Western direction. Media in Montenegro and North Macedonia have been strongly dependent on the support of the governments and of the (economically and politically) powerful of the day. In Montenegro, up until 2014 Russia was the largest investor and still com-

³⁴ Kovacevic, D., "Bosnian Serb Leader Repeats Demand for Secession Referendum," *BalkanInsight*, February 15, 2020.

³⁵ The Srpska Times, "Dodik: I Am against NATO Integration," December 24, 2019.

³⁶ Mironova, V. and Zawadewicz, B., "Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force," *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2018; Bajrović, R., Kraemer, R. and Suljagić, E., *Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent It*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018.

³⁷ Mujanovic, J., "Russia's Bosnia Gambit," *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2017.

mands considerable (services) export positions, which can be used to put pressure on the local media. While, officially, Russia is a fairly small investor in North Macedonia, its energy sector presence provides it with some concentrated advertising power on the very small and cash-strapped local market. In addition, a Kremlin controlled oligarch was, for a long time, the richest person in North Macedonia. This oligarch had close ties to the former Prime Minister Gruevski and various investments in hotels, sports and churches.³⁸ Russia's cognitive media capture potential is very high in Montenegro with its sizable Serb minority and powerful Serbian Orthodox church. It has historically been more limited in North Macedonia, yet recent Russian vaccine diplomacy could turn this around.

The Kremlin has utilized opportunities to tip internal political balances in both countries in its way through meddling activities that represent a confluence of propaganda, intelligence operations and illicit money flows. Two vivid examples stand out. The Russian-Serbian orchestrated coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016 was aimed at preventing the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) from winning the parliamentary elections and fulfilling its pledge of carrying through with Podgorica's NATO membership.³⁹ Russia also sponsored efforts to derail the Macedonian referendum on the country's name change. This referendum was aimed at paving the way for regional reconciliation with Greece and, hence, opening the door to the country's EU and NATO accession.⁴⁰ Most recently, the close win of Zoran Zaev's pro-European SDSM party in the July 2020 parliamentary election in North Macedonia and the victory of the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties in the August 2020 parliamentary election in Montenegro demonstrate the continuing precariousness of domestic politics, where pro-Russian actors' electoral gains can undermine the process of democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration.⁴¹ Yet, both North Macedonia and Montenegro have joined NATO and their populations remain overwhelmingly committed to EU integration.

The countries in SEE, which have been fully-fledged members of both the EU and NATO – Bulgaria and Croatia, can also be seen as susceptible enablers of Russia's media influence. In **Bulgaria**, the extensive domestic pro-Russian state and media capture network of politicians, oligarchs and media professionals underwrite the wide circulation of Russian disinformation narratives, which receive keen reception among a population that harbors significant cultural and emotional attachment to Russia.⁴² Thus, Bulgaria remains vulnerable to Moscow's media influence, which often amplifies its already significant economic footprint in the country, as well as Bulgaria's ongoing and overwhelm-

³⁸ Stefanov and Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, 2020.

³⁹ Antidot, "Response from the East: Invasion of Kremlin Media in the Balkan," *Analisis* 29, May 2018; Bajrović, R., Garčević, V. and Kraemer, R., *Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro*, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2018.

⁴⁰ Purkiss, J., "Russian Warriors and British PR Firms: Macedonia's Information War," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, September 28, 2018; Feder, L., "Macedonia Suspects a Greek-Russian Billionaire Paid For Violent Protests to Prevent It from Joining NATO," *BuzzFeed News*, July 18, 2018; Cvetkovska, S., "Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia," *OCCRP*, July 16, 2018.

⁴¹ European Western Balkans, "North Macedonia: SDSM Wins 46 MPs, VMRO 44, DUI 15 – 61 Needed for a Majority," July 16, 2020; Radio Free Europe, "Montenegrins March to Oppose Pro-Serb Rallies, Symbols Following Elections," September 7, 2020.

⁴² Filipova and Galev, "Bulgaria," in *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, 2018, pp. 49-56.

ing energy dependence. Bulgarians remain among the world's most staunchly pro-Russian populations.⁴³ This has complicated the country's aim to maintain geopolitical credibility as a reliable member of the EU and NATO.⁴⁴

Croatia has been much more decisive in its pro-Western orientation both in the realm of politics and in terms of societal perceptions.⁴⁵ The country is also among the few in SEE to ensure its energy independence from Russia. However, the country's drive for harvesting economic opportunities from cooperation with Russia and China makes Croatia an uncanny brinkman for malign media influence from authoritarian states. An especially striking example of this, are the large-scale business initiatives that exert a significant impact on the national media landscape. The Russian majority-owned retailer Fortenova Group (formerly known as Agrokor) maintains a dominant position in the Croatian advertising market, whereas the conspicuous involvement of CSEBA (the Chinese Southeast European Business Association) in Croatia's media sector serves as an important conduit of Chinese media influence. Sberbank and VTB jointly own almost a majority share in one of the largest retail holdings in SEE. The company also represents the largest advertiser in the Croatian media market.

Unlike the susceptible enablers of Russia's media presence, the group of unyielding inhibitors provides a buffer against Russian influence. This group consists of **Kosovo and Albania**. This is mostly thanks to their immunity to cognitive state capture from Russia based on language, religious, and historical barriers (these barriers also apply to parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia). Russia's opposition against Kosovo's independence and its continued efforts to undermine the country's international recognition have conditioned an inimical climate of bilateral relations.⁴⁶ As a result, the Kosovar media landscape remains largely impervious to Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives with the exception of ethnic Serb-dominated northern Kosovo, where Russian media outlets, such as Sputnik's Serbian edition, are particularly active. Yet, given that the Kosovars harbor an overwhelmingly negative view of Moscow, the latter cannot attempt to push its messages in Kosovo's media space as they will come up against a hostile reception. Instead, the Kremlin aims to influence external views of Kosovars (i.e. the perceptions of other countries towards Kosovo) rather than attempt to change internal Kosovar opinion in the direction of pro-Russian stances. This is in line with an overarching pattern of Russian disinformation activities in relation to countries that have had historically embedded negative attitudes towards Russia, such as Poland.

Albania's political-economic entanglement with Russia is similarly limited. Although some intermittent favorable coverage of Russia can be encountered, this does not amount to a consistent pattern of Russian media influence based on extensive connections with domestic media owners and other political-eco-

⁴³ Hajdu and Klingová, *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. Perceptions of Democracy & Governance in 10 EU Countries*, 2020.

⁴⁴ Conley, H. et al., "Bulgaria: What State Capture Looks Like," in *Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2016.

⁴⁵ Skrpec, D., "Croatia, Russia, and the Balkan Great Game Why the West Needs Zagreb," *Foreign Affairs*, July 25, 2017.

⁴⁶ Kallaba, P. *Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why?*, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2017.

conomic groups. Indeed, Albania has been outstanding in the Balkans in its designation of the Kremlin as a source of false information and propaganda in an official media-related document.⁴⁷ Albania has also become a NATO member early on and has been an unwavering supporter of its EU membership bid.

Figure 3. Diffusion map of Russia's media capture influence: sub-regional clusters



Source: CSD.

In addition to the overall country-specific differentiation between enablers and inhibitors of Russian media influence in SEE, sub-regional clusters can form around groups of countries, which share particular similarities, and can jointly promote or prevent the diffusion of Kremlin's media capture tactics.

Bulgaria and Croatia, despite themselves being subject to Russia's influence operations, are part of a framework of European Union rules, obligations and policy developments in the media sphere, which are likely to act as constraints to the further penetration of Russian disinformation. In a more general sense, EU membership entails public debates about European issues and developments that are common to all members, which fosters European discursive spaces that stand up to anti-Western messaging. The continuous introduction and peer pressure for enforcement of common EU rules, albeit compromised by local governance deficits in both countries, together with the considerable influx of EU development investments and support, are likely to continue to push against media capture (including the capturing activities of Russia). Moreover, for their part, Bulgaria and Croatia have tried to use their new-found EU leverage to advocate and assist the Western Balkans in the process of European integration. Sofia's and Zagreb's Presidencies of the Council of the European Union in 2018 and 2020, respectively, provided an important push for anchoring the EU membership prospects of the Western Balkan states in the Union's agenda.⁴⁸ Yet, both countries continue to tolerate state capture practices similar to their Western Balkan neighbors. In particular Bulgaria, with its deep-seated media capture and notable democratic and

⁴⁷ Iljazi, F., *Albania with a Resolution Against the Fake News from Russia*, Fighting Fake News Narratives, 2019.

⁴⁸ Simić, J., "Bulgaria's EU Presidency Offers Western Balkans Unique Opportunity," *Euractiv*, January 18, 2018; Ivković, A., "Grlić Radman: We Have Succeeded in Bringing Enlargement High on the EU Agenda," *European Western Balkans*, May 29, 2020.

media pluralism backsliding in the past decade, has found itself (just like Hungary and Poland) worryingly close to Russia's position in opposing the rule of law reforms promoted by Brussels and Washington. Bulgaria seems to have taken its balancing act between Russia and the US a touch too seriously for a NATO and EU member. For example, almost half of its Parliament's deputies are members of what appears to be the largest official parliamentary friendship group – that with Russia.⁴⁹

The Western Balkan countries, which constituted the **former Yugoslavia**, delineate another sub-regional cluster. They have inherited historical, political and cultural legacies, which are being deftly exploited by Russia for its propaganda goals. Apart from the predominant focus of Russian disinformation among the Serb minorities spread around the region, a much less discussed – but no less significant, path-dependent factor is the tactics of resurrecting disinformation messages that first emerged during the Yugoslav wars. Propaganda narratives aiming to manipulate history for the construction of nationalist identities continue to be disseminated by Russia-controlled media. During the Yugoslav wars, the creation of the image of national heroism and righteousness drew on the revision of the history of World War II and rested on the well-established dichotomy (very popular in Russia) between “our nation” as victims that heroically resisted Nazism and the “enemy nation” that assisted Nazi crimes.⁵⁰ The Kremlin has exploited these residual dualistic representations by sowing division in the Balkans along the lines of colluders and victims of fascism.⁵¹ Indeed, Russia's revisionist approach is part of its wider strategy of weaponizing history as a form of justification for Russia's European and global power ambitions – through the Kremlin's (self-ascribed) role as a sole savior of Europe guided by the adherence to statist and patriotic principles.⁵²

Instruments of media capture

A quantitative assessment of Russia's media footprint, i.e. the extent to which local media or non-media companies operating in the eight Balkan countries have Russian ultimate beneficial ownership reveals that **Russia has a negligible direct corporate presence** in the SEE media landscape.⁵³ Yet, Russia commands an impressive indirect (or informal) influence across the region based on all four forms of media capture tactics.⁵⁴ A qualitative evaluation

⁴⁹ Karaboev, P., „Скаути отвръщат на сенатори – реакцията на властта само затвърди казаното от Менендес и Риш“ [Boy-Scouts Respond to Senators – the Government's Reaction Only Confirms Menendez and Risch's Statement], *Dnevnik Online*, March 6, 2021.

⁵⁰ Macdonald, D. B., *Balkan Holocausts?: Serbian and Croatian Victim Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia*, Manchester University Press, 2002.

⁵¹ Karcic, H., “Russia's Campaign to Rewrite WWII History Is Dividing the Balkans. Just as Putin Intended,” *Haaretz*, September 7, 2020.

⁵² This ambition was vividly demonstrated in Putin's statement on Victory Day during the 2020 parade held in Moscow: BBC, “Russia Holds World War Two Victory Parade in Coronavirus Shadow,” June 24, 2020.

⁵³ More specifically, the direct economic footprint encompasses a measure of the average annual turnover of all companies in a given SEE country that have a Russian legal or physical person as the ultimate beneficial owner of a minimum of 50.01% of the company's shares. On the other hand, indirect economic footprint measures the average annual turnover of subsidiaries of companies with Russian ultimate beneficial ownership operating in the media sector. Statistical figures on ownership have been obtained from the global commercial databases and further complemented and triangulated with numbers from national repositories (including commercial registries and statistical bureaus) as well as international commercial and institutional databases (such as EUROSTAT, the World Bank DataBank, IMF Data).

⁵⁴ Stiglitz, J., “Toward a Taxonomy of Media Capture,” in *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*, 2017.

of domestic media outlets with no Russian ultimate beneficial ownership but with strong pro-Russian messaging, as well as mainstream and independent outlets across the region, has revealed the many instruments Russia has developed to ensure its substantial informal (political and economic) leverage over the regional media market. Kremlin's influence over the SEE media sector is characterized by pervasive informality. Russia tries to capture the regional media space by developing different opaque networks of influence.

Russia is using its massive government or state-owned companies' financed media (such as RT, Sputnik, Russia Beyond, etc.) to push information and free content out to local media outlets. The latter often do not have a clear and transparent or traceable ownership, which could reveal further more formal links to Russia's state, business or other interests.⁵⁵ In addition, it sponsors many propaganda outlets, such as News Front without acknowledging formal control or ownership over them, which blanket the regional online information space with massive amounts of Russia-centric disinformation and misinformation. The messages these two types of Russian media peddle in the Balkans are then reinforced with official statements from the Kremlin or its foreign ministry as well as by powerful Russian oligarchs with business ties in the region. These are then taken up by their local political allies, which very often include the ruling majorities, as well as by powerful businesses, which further reinforce the message and at the same time intimidate the media into self-censorship.

This amounts to a **very high level of cognitive media capture**, which is further reinforced by wide-spread sympathy among local populations based on history, Slavic or Orthodox heritage or current sensitive political topics, such as Kosovo independence for Serbs, the name change for Macedonians, church independence for Montenegrins, etc. Additionally, the Russian media influence is reinforced via the journalists' pre-disposition to rely on Russian sources due to their training and prevalent cultural affinities. Most state-owned Russian news outlets also do not charge for reprinting of materials. This provides the cash-strapped regional media a powerful incentive to use more content originating from Russia.

The amalgam of Russian state sponsored financial and cognitive media capture in the region is reinforced by large Russian companies, which are also major advertisers in local media markets. A good example is the Russian company Lukoil in the case of Bulgaria and Gazprom Neft (owner of the Serbian oil and gas company NIS) in Serbia. In addition, they provide board seats to powerful local political figures. A common governance deficit in the region is the media's reliance on government funding and non-transparent regulation practices. These factors result in the concentration of public funding including loans, state aid and EU funds in media outlets controlled by business circles with close government ties and commercial interests in Russia.

Russia's media influence and capture in SEE has been greatly enabled by existing **governance deficits in the media sector**, including non-transparent and incomplete media ownership registries, as well as the inability to track

⁵⁵ Glicker, M. and Watts, C., *24 Group: How Obscure News Sites Selectively Spread Pro-Kremlin Disinformation*, GMF Alliance for Securing Democracy, 2021.

advertising budgets and market shares. Media across the region has suffered from a lack of strong internal self-regulation and independent external public regulation. In particular, a lack of regulation related to guaranteeing newsroom independence from corporate and political interests. Small regional media and advertising markets have rendered them easily controllable by powerful political and business interests. From the eight countries analyzed, the EU member Bulgaria has the largest nominal GDP. However, this is still almost four times smaller than the lowest GDP among Western European countries – Greece. The pulling out of many Western investors from the region following the 2008 global financial crisis has resulted in a highly concentrated sector at the mercy of local oligarchs and politicians, without proper oversight or ethical resilience.⁵⁶

Russia (and China's) media influence in SEE has been strengthened by the **spread of low-cost online and social media**. These platforms preclude vibrant democratic discourse with closed echo-chambers and ad models that reward volume over quality and accuracy. Social media has further disrupted the fledgling local media sector and the democratic discourse, allowing politicians to circumvent traditional media and build direct populist relations with their constituents. Russia has found fertile ground for its disinformation and propaganda narratives in local pseudo-nationalistic and alt-right channels.⁵⁷ All these channels of media capture in the region have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic and have been deployed in a concerted effort of aggressive vaccine diplomacy by both Russia and China. So much so that the slowness in response on the part of the EU, which is typical for democratic governance vis-à-vis authoritarian expediency, has resulted in reality defying perceptions over China and Russia's role in support for the region at the expense of the EU. While this has been visible in public perceptions across the region, the latter have been most strongly reinforced by local political leaders in Serbia and North Macedonia.

Ownership structures, economic dependency of media owners and political links of local media outlets to (pro)Russian interests are directly related to the Russian disinformation and propaganda messages disseminated in the SEE region.⁵⁸ In particular, the more closely politically, and economically dependent a given outlet is on Russian support, then the more straightforwardly, undeviatingly and in a more explicitly biased manner that these outlets relate Kremlin-sponsored narratives.

Main disinformation narratives and channels

The success of Russian media influence rests on the diffusion of a concrete set of Russian and anti-Western narratives within the Balkan countries' information space. The identification of these narratives is based on a content analysis of narratives spread in SEE countries, that took place over a 24-month period, pertaining to significant events, including EU/NATO integration milestones for pre-accession Balkan countries, as well as important EU/NATO developments part of the public discourse in EU member-states: Bulgaria and Croatia. The analyzed articles were drawn from four types of

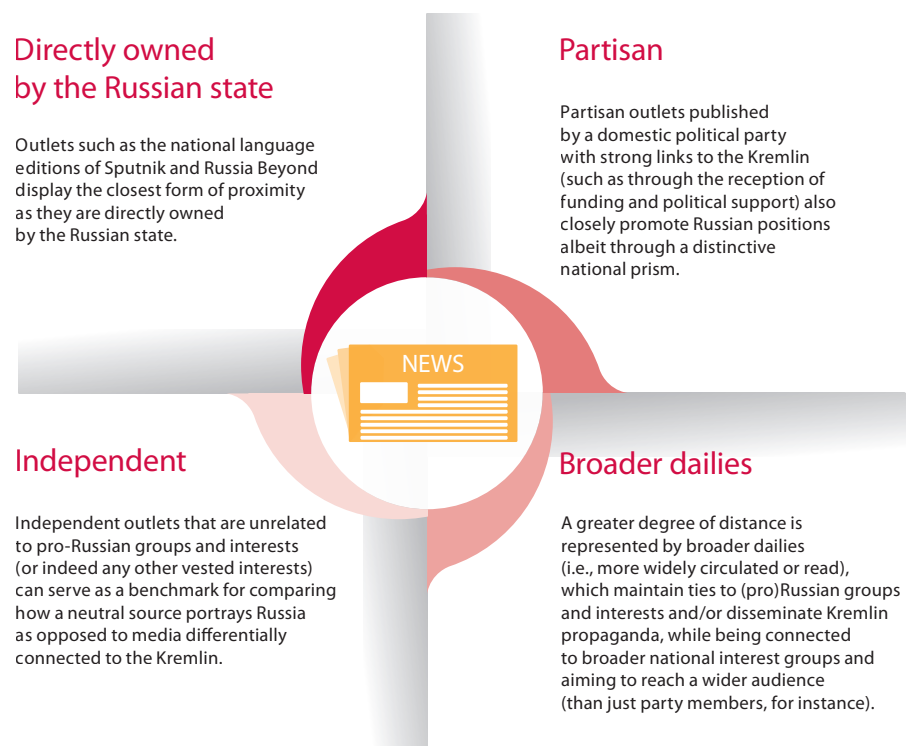
⁵⁶ Dragomir, *Media Capture in Europe*, 2019.

⁵⁷ Vladimirov, M., *Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Networks on Bulgarian and Romanian Facebook*, GLOBSEC (Forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Filipova and Galev, *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, 2018.

local news outlets in each country selected to exhibit different degrees of proximity between the owners and Russia: from (i) national language editions of Russia's state-owned networks (Sputnik and Russia Beyond), and (ii) partisan outlets with Russian slant, to (iii) mainstream (often tabloid) dailies, which maintain ties to (pro)Russian groups and interests, and (iv) independent outlets. Further diagnostics were carried out,⁵⁹ gauging the intensity and frequency of pro-Russian coverage on both a national level and comparatively across the region.

Figure 4. Types of news outlets part of the content analysis



Source: CSD.

One of the most prominently used narratives across SEE is the **favorable presentation of Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative** to the West, as facilitated by Vladimir Putin's masterful global leadership. Russia is also portrayed as a friend and ally of the countries in the region, whereby mutually beneficial relations are supported by Slavic-Orthodox bonds of history, culture, religion and language. In contrast, the EU is described as weak and divided, wreaking havoc on regional stability and unreliable in its promises to support the SEE states both politically and economically. Russian disinformation narratives focus on NATO more than the EU. Alliance-related events lead to a greater degree of disinformation intensity whereby pro-Russian outlets disseminate messages claiming that

⁵⁹ The analysis has utilized a big-data approach, whereby a high degree of automation and advanced AI algorithms ensure frequency and density of data-collection of four online news outlets in each of the eight analyzed countries. Content and structured data are acquired and indexed from more than 200,000 sources in 156 languages. The amount of information obtained varies between 3,000,000 and 8,000,000 pieces of content daily. The reviewed big-data online index contains billions of articles, social media posts, comments, and broadcasts. The tool has allowed researchers to gather content on the basis of keywords, time-periods and specific countries, thus producing targeted results for the purposes of the study.

NATO represents a threat, in aiming to provoke a military conflict with Russia, to the countries in the region.

Pro-Russian media relies on a sensationalist style of narration that trumps any evidence-based messages appealing to local nationalistic emotions and stereotypes. Propagandist techniques include:

- misleading bombastic headlines (which sway the reader's perception of the main body of the text);
- uncritical citation of Russian officials or mis-representation of citations from EU and NATO officials or the presentation of individual personal positions from Western citizens as EU/NATO policy propositions;
- deployment of evaluative epithets;
- binary distinctions (i.e. a presentation of the world in black-and-white terms);
- moral opprobrium (evoking indignation of supposed Western transgressions);
- exaggeration (of Russia's strengths and Western weaknesses);
- sarcasm;
- promotion of conspiracies and impending threats;
- generalizations extrapolated from local situations and single opinions.

Figure 5. Pro-Russian stylistic modes of disinformation and propaganda messaging



Source: CSD.

The outlets that are **directly controlled by Russia** (i.e., the national language editions of Russia Beyond, Sputnik and News Front) are distinguished by the most straightforward and aggressive promotion of Kremlin narratives. There tends to be a limited focus on domestically relevant events as most of the messaging emphasizes topics that are important to Russia's global interests. There is, in addition, little differentiation between news pieces and commentaries,

as both types of articles are characterized by overtly biased stylistic techniques. These can include the promotion of conspiracies, making unfounded accusations and sarcastic depictions, drawing unwarranted generalizations, and unjustified analytical and historical parallels. The overwhelming volume of Russian disinformation narratives is occasionally mixed with articles that are comparatively neutral in that they contain some matter-of-fact reporting. These somewhat neutral pieces aim to project an image of ostensible neutrality. While initially *Russia Beyond* had been almost entirely focused on promoting Russia abroad, it has started more and more to also deploy disinformation narratives, similar to Sputnik and very typical of News Front.

Partisan outlets disseminate stories with a party-favoring spin on the otherwise strict adherence to the dissemination of Kremlin propagandist messages. That is, although pro-Russian narratives are aggressively promoted, party-related political priorities and lines of argumentation can mold – and, in some cases, even take precedence over Russian propaganda if the latter conflicts with domestic partisan goals. This type of outlet is also distinguished by a formalistic differentiation between news pieces and commentaries, as overt attitude-shaping techniques are employed in both types of articles. News pieces occasionally maintain an appearance of neutrality by seemingly conveying viewpoints in a balanced way, i.e. without evaluative epithets and commentary. Yet, it is usually the statements of party officials and Russian politicians that are cited in an uncritical manner.

Broader (pro-government/tabloid) dailies generally promote a less overwhelmingly and unequivocally positive image of Russia, very often linked to the policies of the national government of the day. This is because such outlets attempt to appeal to wider audiences, which generates mixed content consisting of both pro-Russian articles and pro-Western ones. A bias in favor of the incumbent government has also been detected in broader dailies which further dilute and adjust Kremlin-sponsored narratives so as to correspond with the positions of domestic political authorities. In terms of style, dailies maintain a distinction between news articles, characterized by implicitly biased techniques (i.e., framing attitudes more subtly through misleading headlines, instilling doubt and confusion, manipulative presentation of statistics and surveys) and commentaries, which show a stronger reporting bias (in the form of strongly evaluative epithets, sweeping generalizations, fomenting moral outrage, peddling conspiracies).

In contrast to the other types of analyzed online news outlets, **independent outlets** are more consistently neutral in covering Russia-specific narratives. Such neutrality is achieved on the basis of stylistic means that aim at impartial and balanced reporting. Accordingly, Russia-related events and developments are reported by providing the wider context of Russian motivations and goals, considering alternative or Russia-critical arguments, and placing the statements of Kremlin officials within a frame that evaluates the validity and persuasiveness of their positions.

The regional patterns of content provision as dependent on the level of Russian direct or indirect control are further shaped by **national specificities** stemming from the degree of susceptibility to Russian influence. The greater the vulnerability to Russia's strategic, political, and economic influence, the greater the diffusion of Russian media influence via the easy penetration of

Kremlin-based narratives across a wider variety of outlets. In contrast, in those SEE states with more limited political-economic proximity to Russia, the pattern of differentiation among the pro-Russian news sources becomes less pronounced, given that an overall Russia critical discourse prevails in the public space.

In **Serbia**, Russian disinformation narratives are most ubiquitous as they are spread not only by Sputnik but also by the pro-government outlets that dominate the Serbian media space and disseminate Russian narratives as part of the government's attempt to forge close foreign policy and economic ties with Russia. Moscow's opposition to the independence of Kosovo has shaped a pervasive narrative within the Serbian media environment of Russia as a protector of Slavic nations against Muslim-majority countries. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, a key disinformation narrative has focused on drawing unjustified parallels between Kosovo and Crimea. A key Russian narrative portrays the Kremlin as responding to a legitimate call by the Crimean authorities for foreign intervention in defense of the indigenous claims to self-determination of the Crimean population. This is an argument often used to justify NATO's intervention in the Kosovar conflict of 1999.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Russian disinformation is focused on the media landscape of the RS entity, given the latter's close political and economic ties to the Kremlin. The predominant political discourse, touts Russia as a protector of the Serb minorities throughout the Balkans and as a political-economic alternative to the West. This discourse facilitates the omnipresence of pro-Russian narratives.

The salience of the issue of NATO membership for **North Macedonia** and **Montenegro** has pushed anti-NATO narratives to the fore. This is not surprising considering Russia's concerted attempts to prevent the Euro-Atlantic integration of the two countries. For example, these attempts have been linked to the Russia-Serbian organized coup in Montenegro in 2016 and the extensive Russian propaganda campaign looking to derail the process of Skopje's Alliance accession in 2020. Hence, the pro-Russian spectrum of North Macedonian and Montenegrin media outlets has been characterized by the prevalence of messages that extol Russian military might and present NATO as harmful to (Macedonian) national interests. This narrative is supported by claims that the Alliance is supposedly guided by the intent to create a 'greater Albania', incorporating the Macedonian territories where ethnic Albanian live.

Bulgaria is a fully-fledged member of the EU and NATO and the Euro-Atlantic consensus among the political elite forestalls an overwhelming deluge of the media environment with Russian disinformation. Despite the fact that Moscow retains its significant economic leverage over strategic sectors and its cultural allure,⁶⁰ the country's integration into European institutions as well as Europe-wide policy concerns and debates leaves greater room for the diverse and occasionally critical relation of Russian narratives. In **Croatia**, which is also an EU and NATO member, such diversity is even greater, given Zagreb's historically less enthusiastic attitude to Russia.

⁶⁰ Conley, H. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2016.

Thus, even the partisan outlet and the mainstream daily selected for content analysis promote Kremlin messages in a subdued manner revealing a degree of Russia-wariness.

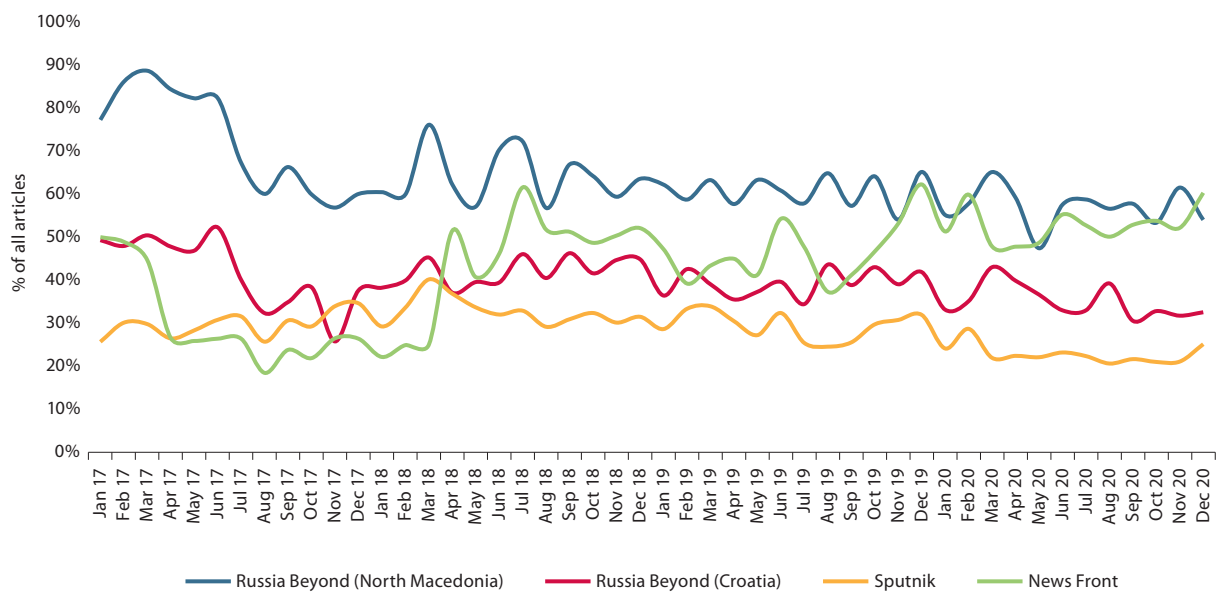
In **Kosovo**, the differentiation among the types of pro-Russian coverage becomes even less distinguishable within a local public-political context that is hostile to Moscow. It is primarily Sputnik's Serbian edition that spreads Russian propaganda, depicting Kosovo as a Western "stooge", rife with organized crime and Islamic State militants. Also, the Kossev media outlet, which is circulated to the Serb minority in northern Kosovo contains articles that disseminate Russian and Serbian official opinions. Similarly, the absence of deep-seated ties between Russia and **Albania** means that Sputnik is the main conduit of Russian narratives in the country. Its topic of choice to disseminate regionally is that of "Greater Albania". According to the narrative, Tirana poses a regional threat to established borders in SEE as a consequence of its supposed ambitions for uniting all ethnic Albanians within one state.

**Volume matters:
a quantitative analysis
of message diffusion
strategies**

The content analysis of Russian disinformation narratives in the Balkans has produced several keywords, which serve as anchors for Kremlin messaging in the region, such as *Russian army*, *Crimea*, *Putin/Lavrov*, *Russia*, and *NATO*. These keywords have been input into a big data media monitoring tool, which has traced the variability of their volume (use) over the past four years (2017 – 2020) in the four types of media chosen for the content analysis.

Tellingly, **Russian-owned outlets'** activity can be very well summarized by the identified six keywords which account for the large majority of the articles they publish. Articles with, at least, one of these six words/phrases account for between 20% – 90% of all the content produced by the four Russian-owned outlets. This focus on key words and messages fits well with the long

Figure 6. Russian-owned outlets stay on Kremlin's message



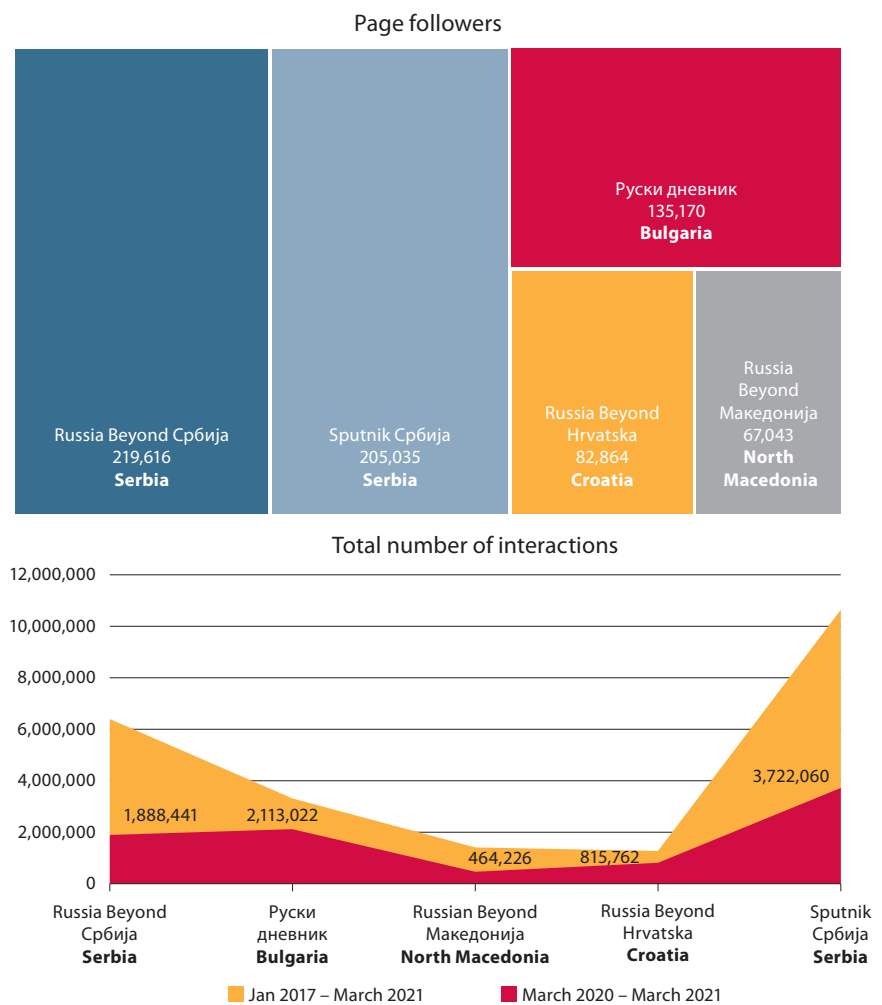
Note: Share of articles containing at least one of the keywords/phrases: "Russian army", "Crimea", "Putin/Lavrov", "Russia", and "NATO".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

tradition of international propaganda that a lie (disinformation) repeated a thousand times becomes (is accepted as) the truth.⁶¹

Besides their narrow focus on pro-Kremlin and anti-Western messages, Russian-owned news outlets seem to also aim to produce large quantities of articles, essentially **flooding the local infosphere**. The overall activity of the four analyzed Russian-owned outlets varies a lot – from several hundred publications monthly by the two Russia Beyond outlets to more than a thousand articles per month by News Front, to several thousand published by Sputnik Serbia monthly. Yet, although the activity of the outlets remains fairly stable over time or even increases slightly in the case of Sputnik, the coverage on some of the keywords (e.g., Putin and NATO) seems to be on the decline. This is most probably related to the emergence and establishment of COVID-19 and vaccines as topics in 2020 – 2021, which have displaced more political themes. An alternative possible explanation is the gradual transfer of activities from online media to social media accounts.

Figure 7. Russian-owned outlets’ social media accounts on the rise in SEE



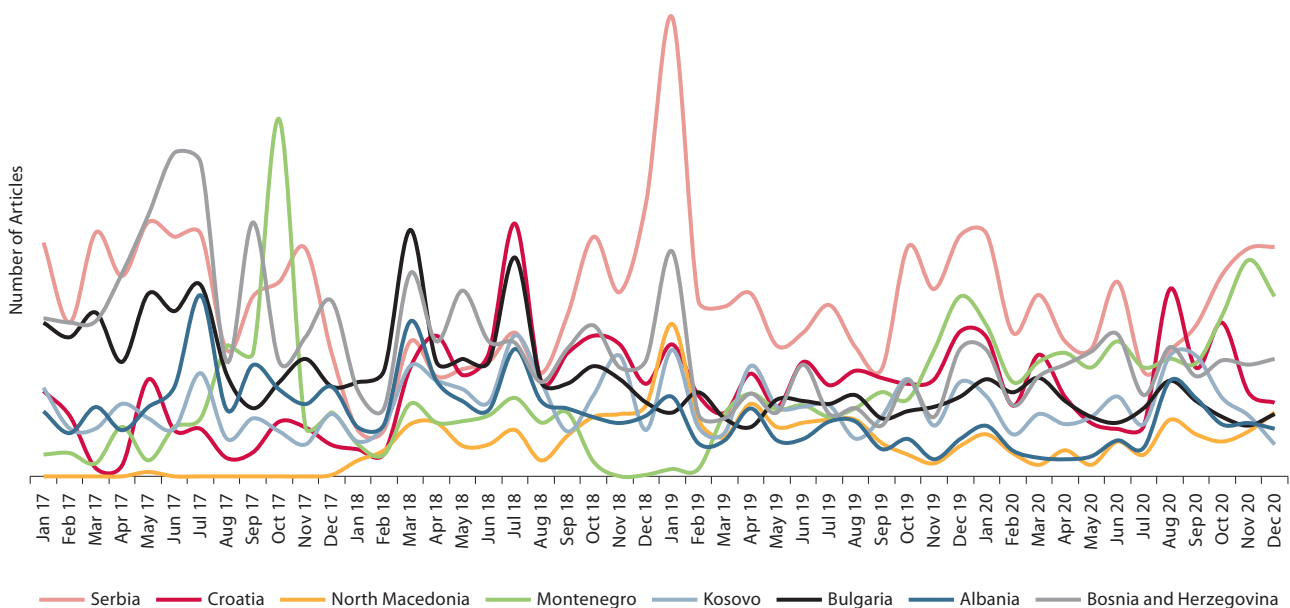
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle.

⁶¹ While this statement has been (most likely, wrongfully) attributed to many historical figures like the head of the Nazi Germany’s propaganda machine, Goebels or the first Soviet leader, Lenin, it is a well-established method of propaganda wars and is very easy to relate to on an everyday level.

The number of followers and interactions with the social accounts of Russian owned media in SEE has been increasing and has reached impressive heights. In Serbia and Bulgaria, in particular, they have reached more than 100,000 followers and have elicited millions of interactions. It should be noted though that the Serbian versions are most probably read across former Yugoslavia and by the sizable Serbia diaspora. While these accounts typically share links from their online media/news outlets, the numbers of digital content, such as live coverage, videos and animated slide decks, have been on the rise.

The aggregated data from all types of outlets (excluding Russian-owned ones) confirms that as Russia's disinformation pivot in the Balkans, **Serbia is the regional leader in terms of volume of the publication of pro-Russian content.** In Serbia, Russian disinformation narratives seem to have spread strongly outside the Russian-owned outlets, and in particular to pro-government outlets that dominate the Serbian media space and disseminate Russian narratives as part of the government's policy to forge close foreign policy and economic ties with Russia. Moscow's opposition to the independence of Kosovo has shaped a pervasive narrative within the Serbian media environment of Russia as a protector of Slavic nations against Muslim-majority countries.

Figure 8. Putin commands high emotions even in non-Russian media in the Balkans



Note: Data aggregation only of non-Russian outlets; number of articles containing the key word "Putin".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

The quantitative analysis confirms that media in EU member-states **Bulgaria** and **Croatia** are more likely to focus their coverage of Russia on non-Kremlin related terms. This is visible in the spike of media coverage in Croatian (and to a lesser extent in Bulgarian) outlets in August 2020 in relation to the poisoning of Russia's opposition leader Alexej Navalny. Yet, all across the region Russia and its leader Putin stir emotions and (over-)reaction from the national media. This can be seen in spikes in national media coverage in **Bosnian** media in relation to Milora Dodiks' frequent meetings with Putin. The

latter's visit to Belgrade in January 2019 led to a peak in coverage by Serbian media, which was also the highest level of coverage across the region for any of the covered topics. **Montenegro's** media came on top in October 2017 when the trial over the coup attempt in the country resumed. **Croatian** outlets were naturally the most vocal when the country's national team reached the football world cup finals in Moscow in July 2018. The analyzed outlets did not seem to share the excitement during the visit of the Croat President with Putin in late 2017. **Bulgarian** media coverage peaked in March 2018 when Putin was supposed to visit the country upon the invitation of Bulgaria's President Radev. Despite not going ahead, the visit was intended to celebrate the 140th anniversary of Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman empire. This is an occasion that is used annually by Russia to stoke pro-Russian sentiments in the country. In March 2018 coverage in all countries spiked also due to the Russian presidential elections.

The quantitative analysis confirms the patterns of differentiation among the four types of news outlets.

Kremlin-owned sources stand out in terms of the sheer volume of pro-Russian content published, which far exceeds Russia-linked coverage in the other sources. In such, they tend to boost narratives and flood or dilute any other content around events that are strategically important to Russia.

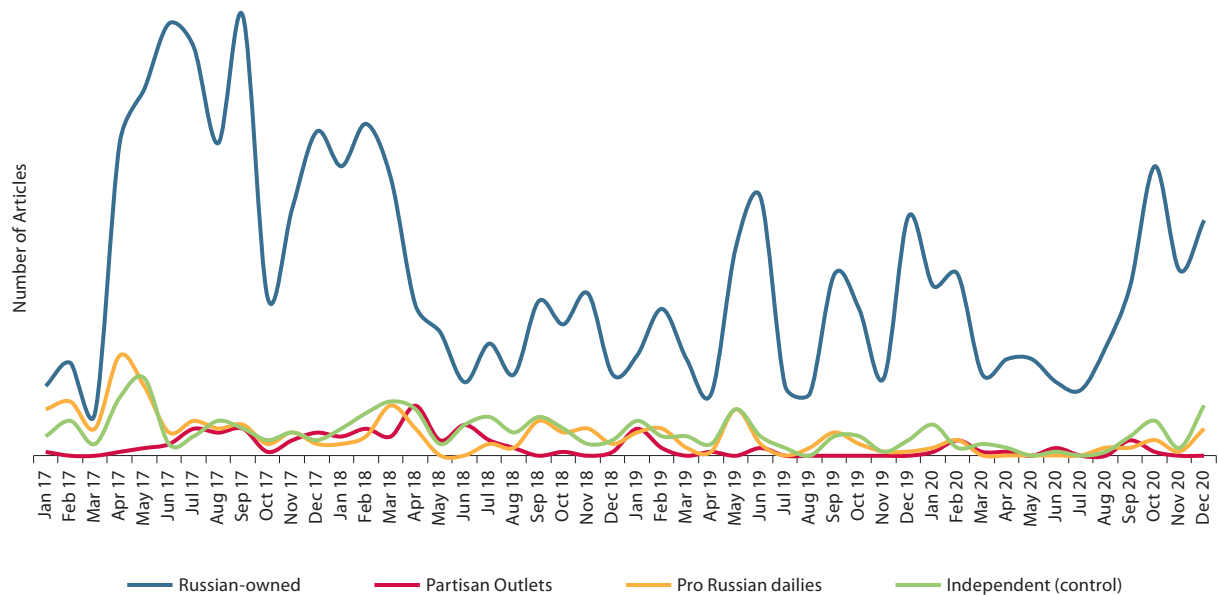
Partisan outlets exhibit heightened activity close to the pattern of Russian-owned sources clustered around internationally politically sensitive events and developments, such as the 2017 US sanctions, the war in Syria and Russia's actions there in 2017, the anti-Putin protests in Russia in the beginning of 2018 or the NATO Summit in July 2018. These tend to parrot Russian narratives or peddle party-specific pro-Russian coverage.

Interestingly, **independent (control) outlets** include Russia-related topics on a more frequent basis over time than **broader (pro-government) dailies**. Such counter-intuitive divergence of patterns seems to be related to several important factors in understanding the functioning of Russian disinformation. On the one hand, independent outlets naturally cover internationally significant events but with very different, often opposing narratives, for example the spike in coverage during the Navalny poisoning case in late 2020. On the other hand, broader (pro-government) dailies tend to often be under considerable national government control in the Balkans. They, thus, reflect the unwillingness to cover events, which might be considered to contradict the carefully pro-Russian stances of Balkan governments.

The latter example provides a glimpse into one important aspect of Russian disinformation's modus operandi. It illustrates why **propaganda techniques tend to evade easy detection** via automatic/objective means by conspicuously creating noise in the system, while using more subtle ways to penetrate and influence national infospaces. Hence, there is a need to dig deeper and find new methods to detect and explain interdependencies between Russian disinformation and local political and economic power concentration. The Kremlin and its mouthpieces are likely to go to great lengths to imitate legitimate sources and to blend in. Following this general strategy, the Russian-owned outlets tend to simply **amplify with sheer volume the official Kremlin discourse**, focusing on international politics, military conflicts, or

directly translating speeches by key high-level officials like *Putin*, *Lavrov*, and others. The same pattern of abnormally high activity of the outlets officially owned by Russia can be seen with other key words like *Russia* or *Russian army* confirming the findings of the qualitative analysis and providing a quantitative view of the time dimension of the Russian dissemination activity. This online behavior is also followed by official Russia-related Facebook pages in the Balkans too.⁶²

Figure 9. Foreign policy loudspeakers: the faithful coverage of Sergey Lavrov by Russian-owned outlets



Note: Volume of articles containing the key word "Lavrov".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

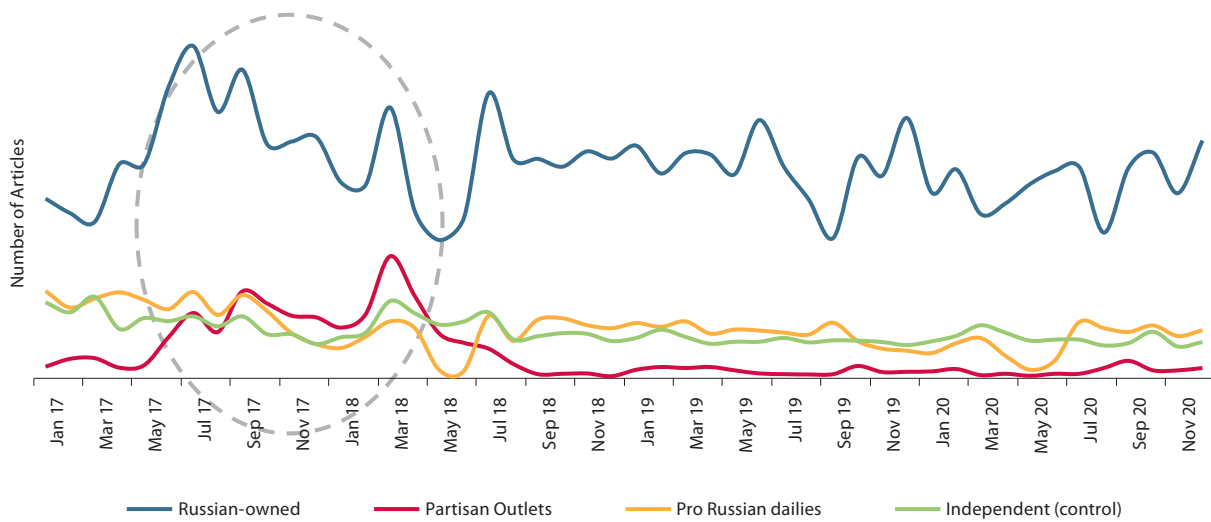
As discussed above, the **covert part of Russia's disinformation** (which is what typically constitutes its sharp power) can vary significantly in terms of topics, style, and means of influencing. It could, for example, be utilized by giving a very small push to the editorial content of seemingly independent outlets through holding large advertising budgets or by engaging freelance journalists to create content that is credible, but positive or neutral towards the Kremlin. On the other hand, more direct means of hidden influence could be used: from using shadow editorial control to supporting local oligarchs and media moguls who are doing the 'dirty work' through tabloids, internet sites, and social media pages and profiles generating endless sensationalist content, conspiracy theories, and fake news.⁶³ Exposing such schemes is usually done on a case-by-case basis and quantitative analysis is not always the best suited tool with which to approach this phenomenon. Still, quantitative analysis could focus the attention and lead to deeper investigations and could reveal potential campaigns where **patterns of activity expose striking similarities** between the official Russian channels and other media outlets.

⁶² Vladimirov, M. *Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Networks on Bulgarian and Romanian Facebook*, GLOBSEC (Forthcoming).

⁶³ Yalamov, T., "Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture," in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Ognian Shentov, Routledge, 2018.

For example, two such cases are clearly visible in the Balkans set. There is close shadowing of the activity of Russian-owned media outlets and partisan outlets between September 2017 and March 2018 on the topic of *Russia* and *Putin*, which coincides with Russia’s president winning a fourth term. While the selected partisan outlets tend to be the least active of the four media types and usually focus on topics of specific party interest, they shadowed very closely the activity of pro-Kremlin outlets during that period. They outperformed the control media outlets, which indicates an unusually high interest in the topic. This could be linked to some internal political motivations, for example, the glorification of Russia’s President to try to win concessions for their party patrons.

Figure 10. Partisan outlets’ activity aligns with the Kremlin’s loudspeakers during the Russian presidential election campaign

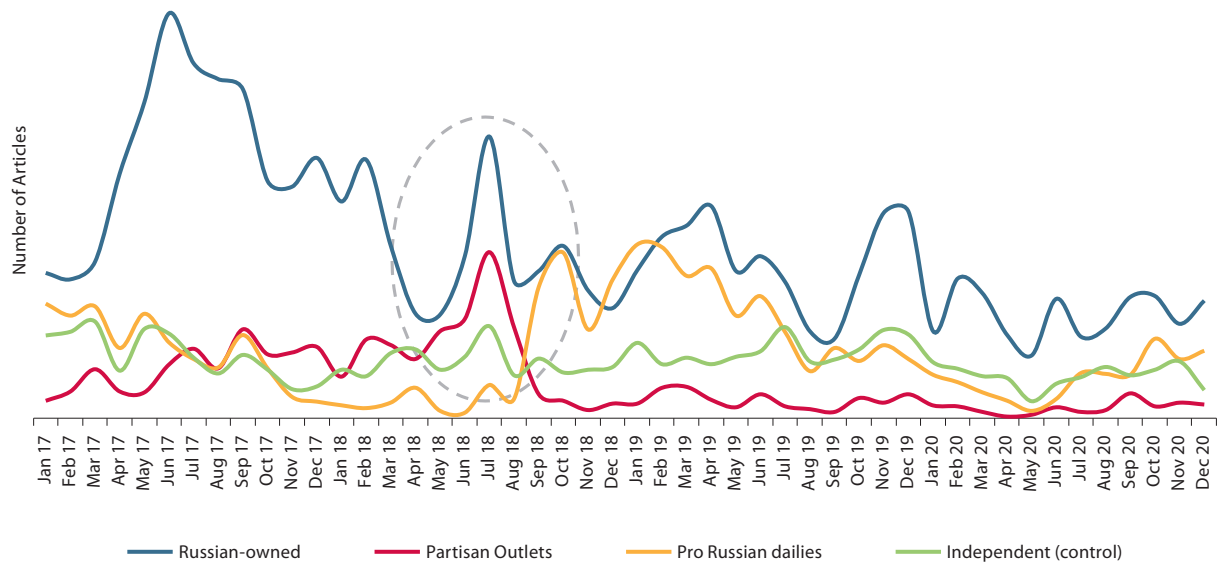


Note: Volume of articles containing the key word “Russia”.
Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

In July 2018 there was a similar simultaneous peak in the activity of the pro-Kremlin media on the topic of *NATO*, followed most actively by the otherwise inactive partisan outlets. This event coincided with the tumultuous NATO summit, at which former President Trump threatened to leave the alliance, a topic which Russian-owned media covered extensively.

As a whole, the Russian-owned outlets always seem to have a distinctive pattern of peaks and dips which could reflect not only actual events but organized media campaigns as well. Independent outlets usually have much more stable coverage (in terms of volume) of the tested topics. This discrepancy emphasizes similarities in the activity of otherwise passive outlets during particular periods. Such similarities could hint at the insidious nature of Russian disinformation, which often exploits proxies to deliver its messages. In addition, broader (pro-government) dailies which tend to reflect the attitudes of Balkan governments more closely has shadowed Russia-owned outlets in the months after the summit. This might indicate similarities in positions and perceptions surrounding the topic.

Figure 11. Partisan outlets shadow closely the activity of Russian-owned media on NATO summit meltdown in July 2018



Note: Volume of articles containing the key word "NATO".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

The Kremlin goes social media

Kremlin's propaganda capitalizes on the increasing distrust in media in the Balkan countries and skillfully adjusts its dissemination strategies to follow changes in the preferred types of outlets. Where distrust in online media prevails, investments in other types of outlets are made. In countries where people show higher trust in online media and social networks, the overt online presence is stronger.⁶⁴ This could mean that coverage of certain topics might migrate from one channel to another, as the Kremlin deems them most appropriate or trending in particular contexts/locations.

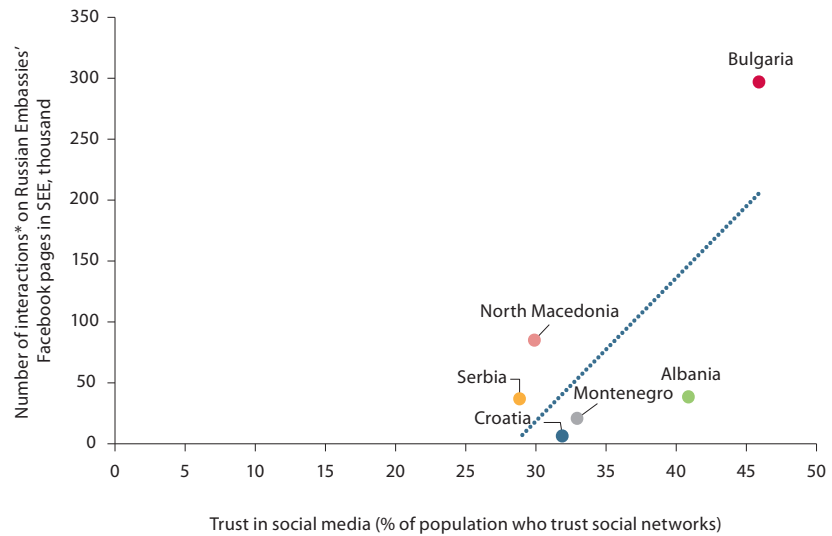
This hypothesis seems to be supported by an analysis of the **engagement of the Facebook pages of Russian Embassies** with social network users. Despite Serbia's dominance as a Russian disinformation hub in the region, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria ranks first in terms of followers and interactions. This surprising result could be linked to the high level of trust Bulgarians store in social networks (this level of trust is, in fact, the highest of all European countries toward social media when surveyed in 2019).⁶⁵ This large degree of trust would justify a shift of focus of the official Russian channels in Bulgaria toward social media. Facebook has by far become the most popular social media platform in the Balkans.⁶⁶ This could explain the Russian Embassy in Albania ranking third in popularity and interaction out of all the Balkan countries despite Albania being among the most resilient Balkan countries with respect to Russian messaging acceptance.

⁶⁴ Yalamov, "Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture," in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018.

⁶⁵ As measured by Special Eurobarometer 92 for the trust in social media.

⁶⁶ According to StatCounter, between January 2020 and January 2021 over 90% of social media users flocked to Facebook in all eight SEE states studied, except Croatia (where this percentage is slightly lower – standing at 86%) and Kosovo (for which data is not available).

Figure 12. Trust in social media has prompted Russian Embassies to pay more attention to their Facebook pages



Note: * To equalize the scale of total interactions per post across each country, interactions are divided by the number of page followers.

Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle for the number of interactions and Special Eurobarometer 92 for the trust in social media.

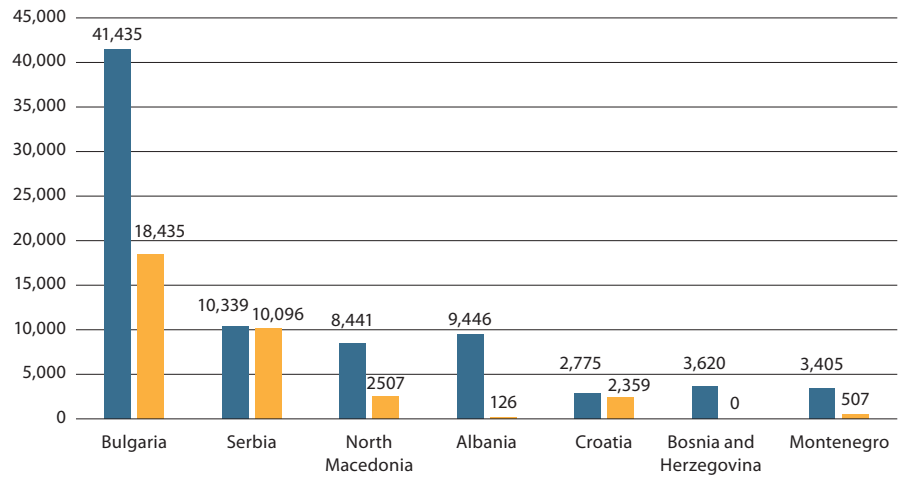
The official Facebook pages of the Russian Embassies and Rossotrudnichestvo offices⁶⁷ that operate in SEE demonstrate an interesting pattern of activity. The social media page of the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria boasts the most followers and has registered the highest growth in 2020 – 2021. It also has the highest number of interactions from followers, showing a consistently high level of audience engagement. Even accounting for the differences in page followership,⁶⁸ at close to 300,000 interactions in the period February 2020 – February 2021, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria had an almost four times higher level of engagement than the second ranked Russian Embassy page – North Macedonia (with 84,000). The levels of engagement in Albania and Serbia were much smaller and levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro were negligible. Such differences seem to reflect a difference in the attitudes of local populations toward both social media and Russia. These differences might also be indicative of the level of priority the Kremlin puts on its popular engagement with the respective countries. A high priority level toward Bulgaria is certainly warranted, given that Bulgaria is the economy in Europe with the highest share of Russian presence.⁶⁹ Bulgaria also has a large and growing Russian minority with Russians and Macedonians being the two nationalities with the highest numbers of approved applications for Bulgarian citizenship. However, such heightened presence could also indicate the importance Russia places on swaying popular perceptions and political attitudes in Bulgaria, as an entry point to and potential swing state in the EU and NATO.

⁶⁷ Russia’s foreign aid and cultural relations management office.

⁶⁸ I.e. dividing interactions by the number of page followers.

⁶⁹ Stefanov and Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, 2020.

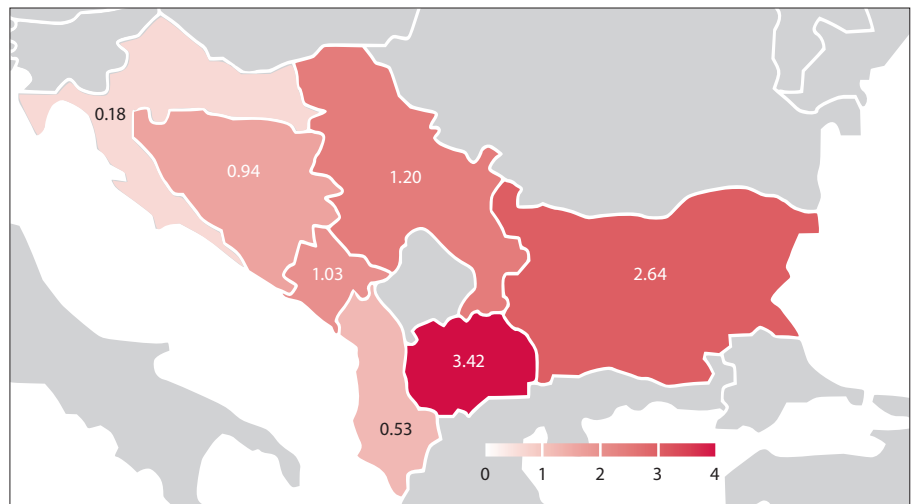
Figure 13. Number of followers of Russian Embassies and Rossotrudnichestvo Offices' Facebook pages in SEE



Note: Data as of February 2021.
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle.

Higher interaction levels have prompted higher levels of activity on the part of the Embassies. Extending the scope of the monitored period by two years confirms this trend. The pages of Russian Embassies in Bulgaria and North Macedonia have the most posts per day, as well as across the whole 3-year period of 2018 to 2021. The Croatian Russian Embassy's page is the least active. Russian embassies' social media activity has been on a par with that of US Embassies in some Balkan countries and much higher than the ones of the EU, UK, and China.

Figure 14. Average number of posts per day on Russian Embassies' Facebook pages in SEE



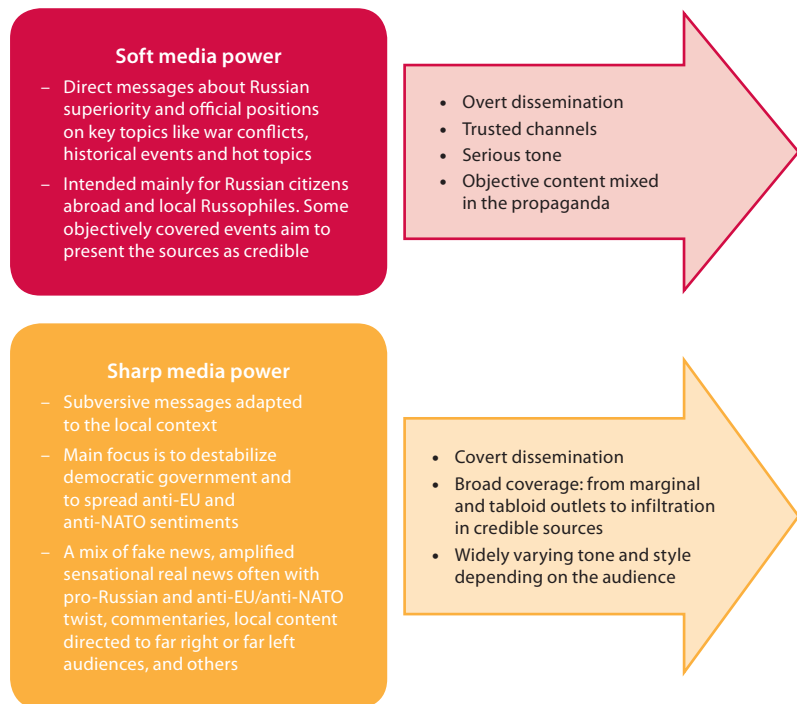
Note: Data covers the period between February 2018 and February 2021.
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle.

Towards a model for understanding Russia’s disinformation and content dissemination

The insidious, complex, diverse, and subtle nature of Russian disinformation approaches has thus far prevented proper quantitative analysis of the phenomenon. Such analysis could be the first step towards revealing the true scale of some of the more covert regional patterns in the activity of Russian-owned and pro-Russian outlets.

While both the current and previous research has confirmed the intuitive assumption that Russian-owned outlets are the main pillar of Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, the reality shows much more complex and insidious patterns of dissemination. Overt **media ownership plays only a priming or triggering function** with Russian outlets mainly focusing on content provision and applying a pro-Russian twist to international news while mixing in an occasional objective-looking piece of news content to tempt the outlets with limited resources to start distributing easily-available Russian-created content.⁷⁰ Illustrated clearly by news agencies like Russia Today, TASS and others, as well as outlets with open Russian ownership like Sputnik Serbia and News Front Bulgaria, this **soft power** approach is intended to project strength with a rather limited scope of topics, focusing mainly on Russia’s international policy, culture, and revisionist view of history (including historical ties with the target country). This content is probably directed mainly at Russian citizens abroad, ethnic Russian minorities, as well as people who feel sympathy for Russia. This could be the result of cultural ties or nostalgia for the Soviet past or because of their current political leanings. Since this approach is much more transparent and easily detectable, it has been the natural target of quantitative analyses.

Figure 15. Russian disinformation and content dissemination mix



Source: CSD.

⁷⁰ Yalamov, “Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture,” in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018.

The other, arguably more important pillar of the global Russian propaganda strategy, involves much more covert techniques which target a plethora of topics and employ a multifarious approach to attack democracy on several fronts. This **sharp power** disinformation approach can be pro-Russia, anti-NATO, anti-EU, but also homophobic, pro-strong leaders, pro-far right or far left, they might also amplify existing ethnic tensions. As a whole, they will try to destabilize and attack democratic values while pursuing Moscow-specific regional economic and political goals. This is achieved through any means necessary, including fake news, commentaries, but also infiltration of ostensibly legitimate outlets. Naturally, due to the highly multifaceted and hidden nature of this disinformation strategy, quantitative approaches cannot detect and isolate it properly from similar content with a non-Kremlin origin.

Enter China: boosting the authoritarian challenge

Although Russia represents the most influential external actor in SEE, it has seen its position challenged by the ambitions of other authoritarian states, in particular China, looking to increase their presence in the region.

Chinese activities in SEE are part of its **17+1 initiative for economic cooperation** with countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). China, similar to Russia, has sought to exploit the region's need for capital investment coupled with more lax governance and rule of law standards, undervalued assets, and governments' willingness to engage in non-transparent authoritarian deals.⁷¹ Around USD 14 billion in Chinese funds have entered the region in the form of grants, development loans, mergers and acquisition of domestic assets and concession agreements. Chinese investments in CEE have been focused in a few **key sectors – transportation, energy, manufacturing, and telecommunications**. For some of the smaller economies like Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chinese-led projects, respectively, make up around a quarter and a fifth of the country's GDP.

In general, China has been much more active in the Western Balkans than in other CEE countries investing billions of US dollars in large-scale infrastructure projects that exceed the macroeconomic and administrative capacity of SEE governments to manage them. China has carved out an disproportionate economic influence in the prospective EU members' economies, locking them into long-term asymmetrical relationships that could be leveraged to achieve a greater political influence over the EU as a whole in the future.⁷²

China has also made inroads into SEE's media sector. It has expanded the operation of the Xinhua News Agency and China Radio International, concluded bilateral agreements for content-sharing with leading local outlets, sent Chinese journalistic delegations and further organized visits of local journalists to China. Beijing has also increasingly been able to leverage its media influence across national borders and create **sub-regional amplifiers for the dissemination of Chinese narratives**. Two examples stand out. **Radio Ejani** – the China Radio International's Albanian Service, broadcasts

⁷¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Chinese Economic Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe: Impact on Energy Transition and Climate*. Policy Brief No. 97, January, 2021.

⁷² Filipova, R., "Chinese Influence in Bulgaria: Knocking on a Wide Open Door?," CHOICE, September 8, 2019.

in Albanian and targets all ethnic Albanian-populated areas in the Western Balkans. According to its Facebook page,⁷³ the radio has over a million followers. In a similar manner, the **China Today (Kina Danas)** news outlet was established by the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association and is supported by the Chinese Embassy in BiH. The outlet is popular among China-interested audiences across the Western Balkans as it discusses topics related to China's 17+1 platform, the Belt and Road initiative, as well as various investment opportunities.

Moreover, signs of overlap between China and Russia's instruments, channels and networks of influence in SEE are emerging. **Russia's local proxies increasingly act as enablers of China's media influence**, promoting complementary propagandist messages that further the official Russian and Chinese viewpoints, extol the cooperation between the two states hailing them as an authoritarian alternative to Western liberal democracies. This trend is particularly visible in Bulgaria. China Today became a recent addition to the Bulgarian online and print newspaper market. The outlet has the same publisher as Russia Today⁷⁴ and the same editorial board chair, who – in a classic textbook example – was the last head of the political police of the Communist security services prior to 1989.

In Serbia, the promotion of joint Russian-Chinese activities is conducted in an even more overt manner. Chinese disinformation narratives tend to be pushed through by pro-government media outlets, which are also engaged in spreading Kremlin-sponsored messages. The more general facilitation of joint Russian-Chinese activities is overseen by the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, which was established by the Serbian government in 2017.

Serbia may well be designated as a stepping stone for China's malign activities in the region, given the length and depth of bilateral economic and political ties. Former Serbian President Boris Tadić initiated a push for greater cooperation with China as an alternative to the cooperation paradigm with the West following the declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008.⁷⁵ Since then, Serbia has attracted significant amounts of Chinese investments in the steel and mining industries, energy, and infrastructure, as well as in the field of telecommunications. Most notably, Belgrade has cooperated with Huawei on the construction of a 5G network, the implementation of Belgrade's Safe City surveillance system and has agreed to participate in China's Digital Silk Road.⁷⁶ Overall, among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia has received the largest amount of Chinese investment and loans.⁷⁷

Croatia has also showcased the extent and depth of the Chinese influence in the SEE region. Particularly tangible is the involvement of CSEBA (the Chinese Southeast European Business Association headquartered in Zagreb) in promoting Chinese media and business initiatives in Croatia. The organiza-

⁷³ [Radio Ejani](#) (Facebook page).

⁷⁴ Ms. Svetlana Sharenkova, a vocal pro-Russian voice in Bulgarian politics.

⁷⁵ Barlovac, B., "China and Serbia Boost Strategic Partnership," *BalkanInsight*, August 21, 2009.

⁷⁶ Vasovic, A., "Serbia Chooses Links with China to Develop Economy, Telecoms despite U.S. Warning Campaign," *Reuters*, August 13, 2020.

⁷⁷ Ruge, M. and Oertel, J., *Serbia's Coronavirus Diplomacy Unmasked*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020.

tion has partnered with Hanza Media (one of the largest newspaper publishers on the Croatian market) and with Seebiz.eu (an economics news web portal providing coverage of SEE events). China has also been heavily involved in large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Pelješac Bridge – a project carried out by the Chinese state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation, yet 85%-funded by the EU.⁷⁸

Unlike the Serbian and Croatian cases, **Bulgaria** has not seen a major expansion of Chinese economic activity in the past 10 years. This is also the result of a limited domestic political push for improving ties with Beijing, which is matched by lukewarm interest toward China in Bulgaria.

In addition to utilizing Russia's channels of media influence in the Balkans, China has also tapped into Turkey's media sources and infrastructure. For instance, in 2019 the China Global Television Network (CGTN) started cooperating with Digitürk (a Turkish satellite television provider) to air its programs in both Turkey and the wider SEE region. **Turkey has also attempted to establish a media footprint primarily in the Muslim-majority SEE states.** Turkish media influence is especially discernible in Albania in the field of TV broadcasting through the international arm of the national Turkish public broadcaster Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, which includes programs in Albanian as well as Bosnian (via TRT Avaz). Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency's operation from its Sarajevo office is becoming regional in nature, catering to all audiences in the Western Balkans.

China and Russia's push into the Balkans's media scene and promotion of authoritarian messages has also been enabled by friendly EU member states, such as **Hungary**, which has also tried to make inroads into the Balkan media space. Hungarian officials and the media close to Hungary's illiberal and powerful prime minister have promoted Russian propaganda.⁷⁹ This has been attempted through the purchase of local, primarily North Macedonian and Slovenian, media outlets.⁸⁰ The most conspicuous example in this regard has been the dissemination of a Kremlin disinformation narrative, which circulated across the Western Balkans, alleging that North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras had received billions of euros in bribes in order to sign the Prespa Agreement (paving the way for reconciliation between Skopje and Athens on Macedonia's name change and thus removing obstacles to Macedonians' European integration).⁸¹

⁷⁸ Jukić, L. I., "Connecting Croatia on a Bridge Built by China," *Politico*, August 24, 2020.

⁷⁹ Bayer, L., "Hungary Toes Russian Line on 'Western Meddling' in the Balkans," *Budapest Beacon*, May 2, 2017.

⁸⁰ Jovanovska, M., Bodoky, T. and Belford, A., "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans," OCCRP, May 9, 2018.

⁸¹ Meta.mk, "Hungarian Funding Supports Spread of Disinformation between Greece, Slovenia and North Macedonia," August 9, 2019.

TACKLING RUSSIAN MEDIA CAPTURE

The entrenched Russian media influence in SEE requires concerted efforts to expose, stop, and remedy media capture diffusion in the region. National governments, local media and civil society, the private sector, as well as the EU and the US who have invested considerably in the region's democratic development and prosperity need to develop well-targeted measures to expose and counter Russian media capture.

In doing so, there is a need to **tackle regional democratic backsliding and state capture trends** throughout the region, to confront and dismantle opaque networks of political patronage who concentrate considerable political, economic, and media power. Governments and political leaders in the Balkans have been increasingly resorting to geopolitical arbitrage pitting the US and the EU against Russia and China to reduce the pressure of good governance and rule of law conditionality. They need to be taken to account. Their voters need to understand that such 'balancing acts' harm their countries' EU integration prospects and ultimately citizens' prosperity and well-being.

Russia, and increasingly China and other regional powers with authoritarian traits are stepping up their efforts to disrupt and derail the region's democratic progress and integration with the EU. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated very clearly that both powers will use every opportunity to reduce EU and US's clout in the region and their efforts are growing more and more malicious and concerted. At the same time, the EU has seen its internal cohesion with respect to enlargement prospects in the region falter, while EU members neighboring the Western Balkans have become tacit or active enablers of Russian and Chinese influence in the region. There is a need to put forth a **policy agenda for capture proofing Europe** or for closing permissive gaps in public governance.⁸² The EU and the US need to develop a coordinated, comprehensive global response, which should target financial opacity and rule of law governance gaps within and beyond the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Solid – transatlantic – **anticorruption and financial transparency response and enforcement** mechanisms should be the first line of defense to anti-democratic media capture, including:

- strengthening **coordinated corporate financial transparency initiatives** targeting in particular offshore havens laundering Russian, Chinese, and other authoritarian states' financial flows;
- expanding **Magnitsky act type of legislation**, including not only human rights but also corruption in its scope;
- overhauling and prioritizing **OECD anti-bribery convention** and state-owned enterprises' good governance regulations;
- developing and promoting **transatlantic initiatives tackling regulatory capture** in the industries most strongly exposed to Russian and Chinese malign influence, such as energy, communications, and infrastructure.

⁸² Shentov et al., *Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, 2020.

Much of the success of Russian disinformation is due to the vulnerabilities of the societies it targets. Russia has been able to successfully take advantage of the lack of clarity of the political and social transformation, as well as the instrumentalization of nationalistic sentiments and frustration in society by the political elites. **SEE societies and governments need to do their homework** in terms of reforms, social demands, and the roots of growing populism. Many of their vulnerabilities are homemade and can be solved only by societies and elites themselves. Strengthening resilience also means improving education, media literacy, strong, pluralistic media, independent narratives, and active communication. In the Western Balkans, the EU integration process and funding instruments should be used as conditionality for the improvement of the environment for civil society, media, and the legal system.

The following set of **political, economic and legislative initiatives** is a non-exhaustive list of measures to effectively reduce the impact of Russian disinformation in the Balkans, and its twin challenge of China's authoritarian rise:

- Improve the **transparency of media ownership** through the creation of publicly-available registries. The disclosure of ownership details should apply to all types of outlets (print, online, TV, radio), and they should be managed by an independent regulatory body and be updated on a regular basis.
 - o Incorporate such requirements in the EU accession (for non-EU members) and rule of law (for EU members) process negotiations and introduce specific provisions on foreign investment screening in the media sector.
 - o Incorporate specific provisions on the **scope and origin of capital of foreign ownership** over domestic media outlets.⁸³
 - o To ensure coordination and compliance with a European system of rules, national media ownership registries should be complemented by the creation of **EU-wide binding obligations to disclose ownership information to a common European registry** (that also includes EU candidate states).⁸⁴
 - o On a more general level, **the ownership data of companies** (that do not only operate in the media sector) should become subject to **mandatory national and international monitoring regulations** in order to pro-

⁸³ According to assessments conducted under the Media Pluralism Monitor, only 5 EU member states establish a degree of regulatory restriction on foreign ownership: Brogi, E. et al., *Media Ownership Rules in Europe: A Focus on EU Member States' Legislation on Foreign Ownership*, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2017.

Yet, of late there has been an increasing focus on developing a legislative framework on how to block access to the EU market of firms with foreign funding, including in the media sector: Parrock, J., "Voice of China's European Ambitions," *Politico*, September 8, 2020; More assertively, Ukraine has shut down three TV channels operated and owned by pro-Russian politicians for disseminating Kremlin-sponsored disinformation: Roman Olearchyk, "Ukraine Shuts TV Channels It Accuses of Spreading 'Russian Disinformation,'" *Financial Times*, February 3, 2021.

⁸⁴ So far European-level initiatives in relation to media ownership have not been mandatory, instead being conveyed in the form of recommendations and reports: European Parliament, *Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in the European Union*, no. 2209/2017, 2018; High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, *A Free and Pluralistic Media to Sustain European Democracy*, European Commission, 2013; Commission staff working document, *Media Pluralism in the Member States of the European Union*, 2007; Council of Europe, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership*, 2018.

mote maximum transparency by stemming globally circulating illicit finance flows.⁸⁵

- o The EU should develop a **common European media registry**, and empower the EU anti-trust authority to monitor concentration in the sector. DG Competition, will review cases of non-transparent non-EU media ownership that could be related to the entry of malign foreign influence. The registry could develop red flags for media acquisitions that are directly related to Russian, Chinese or other authoritarian states' companies or indirectly through a partnership agreement with an influential domestic business group.
- National **media regulators' independence** should be strengthened, monitored, and continuously upheld, allowing them to shed light on media ownership, prevent market concentration and uncover under-the-radar online media outlets that serve to spread disinformation and propaganda. The EU could establish an annual review of the state of play of the media sectors of the region designed along the line of the EU rule of law report.
- To tackle the informal influence over the owners of media outlets – based on personal, political, and economic ties via opaque networks of patronage that go beyond formal ownership structures, **Politically Exposed Persons' regulations and repositories** should be strengthened. Investigative media and government conflict of interest oversight bodies should work together and in cooperation with EU and US partners to develop more comprehensive and widely accessible databases, to flag and detail the politically and business-sensitive connections that owners maintain to dubious national and foreign networks of influence, with hidden ties impacting media content. These should, in particular, be linked to social media activity, public procurement, real estate, and public registries, etc.
- Governments in the region should be motivated and supported to introduce and strengthen **new public and private media financing models**, which would help reduce advertising and media power concentration:
 - o Introduce and promote **alternative/non-profit funding models** ensuring a diversity of ownership stakes, as well as establishing different sources of financing (including crowdfunding and donations).⁸⁶
 - o Develop specific government **public procurement media financing transparency measures**, which should list all government financing provided to the media, including: direct budget subsidies and advertising budgets of state-owned enterprises as well as the media advertising budgets within public procurement contracts, etc.
 - o Public media should become financially and managerially more independent from the state. **Public broadcasters should be financed through a mixed model** that includes not only government subsidies

⁸⁵ The problem of limited public disclosure of and access to company ownership data is not only confined to SEE but is also prevalent across Europe: Quintanilla, P. B. and Darbishire, H., "It's None of Your Business! 10 Obstacles to Accessing Company Register Data Using the Right to Information," *Access Info Europe*, April 7, 2016.

International initiatives for greater transparency of company ownership structures have increased but remain non-binding: Open Government Partnership, *Beneficial Ownership Leadership Group: Terms of Reference, Declaration, Glossary*, 2020.; Vaidyanathan, K.N., Mathur, A. and Purvaja Modak, *A Global Framework for Tracing Beneficial Ownership*, G-20 Insights, 2018; Inter-American Development Bank and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *A Beneficial Ownership Implementation Toolkit*, The Secretariat of the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes, 2019.

⁸⁶ For more detail on what a non-profit model of media financing can look like, see Cagé, J., *Saving the Media: Capitalism, Crowdfunding, and Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2016.

but also license fees, which allows the audience to maintain a more direct link to the media it sponsors and demand greater accountability. Public media should report on their finances not only to the government but also make their **financial reports publicly available**. Countries with strong public media models, such as the UK and Germany could provide continuous peer learning and support.

- o **Citizen committees** – composed of media professionals, experts and the wider audience, should regularly debate editorial policy and establish channels for exchanging feedback with the governing bodies of public media broadcasters.⁸⁷
- o Staffing procedures and day-to-day management of the public media should remove any political interference with editors and management directors being chosen through external review committees composed of experienced industry experts and practitioners.
- Media regulators should **monitor party-owned outlets** under specific rules, requiring the highest level of financial transparency and disclosure of party affiliation.
- Introduce more **rigorous scrutiny of the activities of subsidiaries of foreign state-owned media outlets**. Regulatory bodies across SEE should start to monitor in a consistent manner Russian and Chinese state-owned channels such as RT, Russia Beyond, Sputnik, CGTN, News Front, etc. and alert national security authorities of ongoing disinformation campaigns.⁸⁸
- Ensure greater **advertising market transparency** by creating a publicly accessible registry that contains data on the market shares held by the biggest advertising companies, broken down by advertising revenue, profits from subscriptions, and paid content. Establish a **unified standard methodology** for measuring media audience (which is essential for determining advertising stakes).
- Legislate **fair and transparent rules** on the distribution of state advertising to media outlets.

Provided the unwillingness or incapacity of many of the governments in SEE to act openly on countering media capture, local **civil society, independent media, and the private sector** have a particularly strong role to play in building a solid response to malign foreign media influence by:

- Creating **regional civil society coalitions** aimed at tackling state capture, media monitoring, analysis and debunking of disinformation, media public procurement, and financial transparency. These coalitions would be made up of SEE and international experts, media outlets, non-governmental organizations, etc. This would foster regional expert cooperation to promote mutual understanding of disinformation narratives and to guide SEE audiences on how to spot and act on propaganda campaigns. The EU

⁸⁷ The declining audience reach of public broadcasters as a result of the growing prominence of social media channels such as YouTube and Netflix raises additional questions as to how to maintain the competitive edge of public media, adjust funding according to their level of popularity and further stipulate rules against digital gatekeeping, which restricts access to public media: Barker, A., "Force Online Platforms to Carry Public Service Media, Says EBU Chief," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2021.

⁸⁸ SEE countries have conspicuously lagged behind other European states in monitoring and regulating the activity of Russian state-owned channels: Ofcom, "Ofcom Fines RT £200,000," July 26, 2019; Ofcom, "Ofcom Revokes CGTN's Licence to Broadcast in the UK," February 4, 2021; Chadwick, L., "Lithuania Follows Latvia in Banning Russian Broadcaster RT," *Euronews*, July 9, 2020.

and the US through their respective regional cooperation programs run by DG NEAR and USAID could actively build and support such coalitions, using existing initiatives as stepping stones.

- It is particularly important for civil society and public institutions in the region to develop a **public-private partnership** approach to cracking down on the abuse of social media for political ends, including abuse by foreign powers. Such manipulation can easily exploit social vulnerabilities and divisions to tilt the scales in favor of a particular candidate. Civil society should work with national governments to better understand and develop joint regional and transatlantic frameworks for addressing social media regulation and citizens' education. Social media should be sensitized and urged to address in the local languages, in cooperation with local civil society, the disruptive effects of their platforms on the democratic public discourse, focusing, in particular, on polarization, extremism, and foreign disinformation. At the same time, legitimate regional civil society and media actors should be allowed to use the platforms for reaching global audiences.⁸⁹
- Promote **media literacy** by devising a long-term educational strategy focused on the construction of a school curriculum that teaches students how to recognize disinformation by acquiring critical skills for analyzing media articles (as related to authorship, referencing, literary techniques that convey attitudes) as well as digital skills (e.g. for identifying bots and trolls).
 - o **Incentivize and reward quality** (particularly investigative), providing opportunities for international training (in renowned international media) and participation in international competitions such as the European Press Prize, the Festival of Media Global, World Media Awards, the Journalism Fund.
 - o The independence and safety of journalists should be protected through the provision of consistent and vocal **support on the part of journalistic associations**. Moreover, nationally-based journalistic associations should be embedded within and maintain close ties to regional SEE and wider European media organizations (such as Reporters Without Borders) that can lend internationally publicized support in cases of local violations of press freedom and attacks on journalists.
- Internal independent media **content review councils** should be set up in a way that includes a variety of stakeholders beyond owners – such as the employed journalists to ensure independent and unbiased editorial policy.

A number of international initiatives could be paramount in aiding domestic efforts for countering media capture and disinformation across the region:

- In line with the ongoing discussions on linking the disbursement of European funds to the observance of the rule of law within the EU, the **disbursement of EU communications funds** should be made conditional on the full disclosure of the allocation procedure conducted nationally and in adherence to strict criteria for selecting beneficiaries. Such criteria should be based on the quality of reporting and transparency of the ownership of the media outlets and organizations receiving funding.

⁸⁹ For example, currently Facebook rules limit the sponsored dissemination of advocacy messages to those that are distributed exclusively within national (IP) boundaries, labelling them as political messages if they try to disseminate externally. This creates national echo-chambers, which prevents the better understanding of national specificities by global audiences, in particular, in those countries, whose governments are most intent on cracking down on independent voices.

- The EU should strengthen the administrative and expert capacity of the European External Action Service's (EEAS) **East StratCom Task Force** – specially dedicated to debunking Russian disinformation across European countries – as it currently does not allow it to go beyond manual monitoring of disinformation pieces and into the development of a counter-disinformation strategy. The Task Force should also become a permanent unit with an expanded scope within the EEAS.⁹⁰
- The EU should expand its **strategic communication efforts** in order to raise the profile of its economic and social development activities in the Western Balkans. As evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and China were quickly able to organize a publicity campaign presenting the medical aid they provided to SEE as more significant than the EU's, despite the latter's much more substantial supplies.⁹¹ The result is that in Serbia, for example, the general population believes that Russia and China are the biggest donors of the country while, in fact, the EU is a bigger investor and financial aid contributor.
- The EU should include the Western Balkans in its **Democracy Action Plan and Digital Services Act programming**. Both the US and EU member states with strong public media models (such as DW in Germany, RFI in France, or BBC in the UK) need to **expand or reinstate programming in the Balkans** and in national languages aimed at supporting journalistic excellence, upholding standards, and standing up to Russian and Chinese disinformation efforts.
- The EU should exercise **greater vigilance of and monitor the footprint of Russian and Chinese** state-owned media into the European media space⁹² The discussions over and upcoming adoption of the draft European Commission proposal on regulating the operation of foreign state subsidized companies in the European single market should also pay special attention to authoritarian state-sponsored media organizations attempting to establish a foothold in the EU.⁹³
- The US Agency for International Development should **reinstitute instruments and platforms** for supporting good governance and media freedom initiatives on a **regional level**, which would be the most effective delivery mechanism for enabling policy change. A regional approach will improve the likelihood of peer pressure among national governments.
- The US Department of State should enhance multilateral exchange programs such as the **technology and media corps** that can mobilize civil society and volunteer engagement to support the region's reform agenda.

The EU and the US could work in tandem in **developing regional media programs** that would award research funding for independent investigative journalistic consortia or for individual investigative journalists from the whole media spectrum even targeting captured media outlets.

⁹⁰ Indeed, there have been increasing calls for strengthening the resource base of the Task Force, including a European Parliament recommendation: European Parliament, *Follow up Taken by the EEAS Two Years after the EP Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against It by Third Parties*, 2019.

⁹¹ Filipova, *The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic and State of Emergency*, 2020, pp. 14-16.

⁹² For recent example of such incursion see Brussels: Parrock, J., "Voice of China's European Ambitions," *Politico*, September 8, 2020.

Daniel Boffey, "Magazine Aimed at MEPs 'Filled with pro-Russia Content'," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2019.

⁹³ European Commission, *White Paper on Levelling the Playing Field as Regards Foreign Subsidies*, 2020.

BULGARIA

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Bulgarian public attitudes are widely receptive to Russian disinformation and narratives. Thirty years after the end of communism, Bulgarians have been **disappointed by the democratic transition**. In a recent study, only 35% express a preference for a liberal democratic form of governance as opposed to 45% of the polled who preferred a “strongman” model of authoritarian leadership. A feeling of injustice prevails as an overwhelming majority of the Bulgarian population thinks that oligarchic groups control politics and those who possess political ties and financial means receive favorable treatment in society.⁹⁴ Only roughly half of the polled Bulgarians approve of the shift to multiparty democracy and a market economy that occurred after 1989. In contrast to other CEE states, such as Poland where 85% of those surveyed endorse the success of the democratic transition, Bulgaria does not display a high level of democratic approval, with no more than 27% being satisfied with how democracy works.⁹⁵

Broadly, **conservative-nationalist outlooks prevail** as 54% of the Bulgarian population says they are ready to exchange their democratic rights and freedoms in the name of preserving traditional values.⁹⁶ Another 69% share the view that Bulgarian national customs and achievements are superior to those of other countries.⁹⁷ Yet, the generally conservative attitudes among Bulgarians are not in conflict with their perception of belonging to the Western cultural and civilizational tradition. Some 43% of the polled perceive a values-based conflict with the West, which is a much lower result than is found in Serbia (78%) and Russia (73%).⁹⁸ Yet it is high enough to show Bulgaria’s ambiguity toward the West.

In regard to Bulgarian public perceptions of international actors, Bulgarians exhibit a consistently posi-

tive attitude towards the EU. Some 87% of the Bulgarians share a positive view of the EU, which constitutes **one of the highest approval levels of the Union** among member states, whose average approval score stands at 77%.⁹⁹ A longitudinal study for the 2007 – 2019 period has also shown that a solid majority of the Bulgarian respondents consider EU membership “a good thing”¹⁰⁰ and that it has conferred benefits on Bulgaria.¹⁰¹

Yet, the Bulgarian society is clearly segmented in its attitudes towards the EU, with considerable variability among different groups. The most Europhile segments of the Bulgarian society include younger, more educated, economically active, and higher-income citizens of the bigger cities, who have managed to capitalize most from the opportunities provided by EU membership.¹⁰² Bulgarian respondents most commonly cite the standard of living in the EU as its main asset. This is in contrast to around a third of all polled Europeans, who think that the EU’s respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law represent the Union’s greatest strength.¹⁰³ Likewise, as opposed to a majority of respondents from across 21 different EU member states who believe that freedom of opinion is best embodied by the EU, only a minority in Bulgaria (32%) think that this is the case (a result similar to indicators for Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Malta). Bulgarians see the EU mostly as a source of financial resources and well-being rather than a community of values.

⁹⁴ Filipova, R. and Stefanov, R., *Democracy in Bulgaria: Still Fragile after 30 Years of Transition*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁹⁵ Pew Research Center, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*, 2019, pp. 5, 22.

⁹⁶ Filipova and Stefanov, *Democracy in Bulgaria: Still Fragile after 30 Years of Transition*, 2020.

⁹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Democracy, Nationalism and Pluralism*, 2017.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ EC, Directorate-General for Communication, *Special Eurobarometer No 479: Future of Europe*, 2018, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Approval of EU membership accounted for 52% of Bulgarian respondents throughout September to October 2007 and this figure has since risen to 53% in October 2019.

¹⁰¹ Eurobarometer, “Bulgaria,” in *Socio-demographic trends in national public opinion – Edition 6*, 2019, pp. 16, 20.

¹⁰² Alpha Research, *10 години членство на България в ЕС: Равно-сметка и перспективи* [10 Years of Bulgaria’s Membership in the EU: Assessment and Perspectives], 2017; Trend, *Нагласи на българите към предстоящите избори за Европейски парламент и отношението към Европейския Съюз (март 2019)* [Dispositions of the Bulgarians towards the Upcoming European Parliament Elections and Attitude to the EU (March 2019)], 2019; Trend, *Нагласи на българите спрямо ЕС (октомври 2018)* [Dispositions of the Bulgarians towards the EU (October 2018)], 2018.

¹⁰³ EC, Directorate-General for Communication, *Special Eurobarometer No 479: Future of Europe*, 2018, p. 19.

In addition to the continuous patterns of Bulgarian approval of the EU, two main shifts in attitudes can be observed. First, there has been a positive trend towards a greater appreciation of the concrete effects of EU membership on Bulgaria as a whole. In the immediate post-accession context, the main source of Euro-skepticism in the country stemmed from the perceived absence of (quickly tangible) economic development. Yet, more than 10 years later, Bulgarians are better able to discern and favorably assess the concrete impact of EU membership, particularly as a consequence of the utilization of European structural funds. Four out of ten of those polled thought that Bulgaria is now economically and politically more stable, 32% consider infrastructure to have been improved and 26% see the value in access to the wider European market.¹⁰⁴

In contrast to the positive attitude towards the EU, Bulgarians have been **less enthusiastic about NATO**. The historically-determined perception of Russia as a protector and a security guarantor for Bulgaria continues to hinder its acceptance of NATO as the country's main ally. In 2019, NATO had 42% approval among Bulgarians, lower than the median 53% scored across the other 16 surveyed member states.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, with 69% of Bulgarians disagreeing with the idea of using military force to defend a NATO ally from a Russian attack, Bulgaria leads the group of states (followed by Italy, Greece, Germany, and Spain) that are most skeptical of the deployment of NATO's capabilities against Russia even in the case of deterrence.¹⁰⁶

Bulgaria's traditionally Russophile perceptions informed by a shared cultural, linguistic, and historical heritage with Russia translate into **consistently high approval** rates toward **Moscow and the Russian President**. Multiple surveys have shown that globally people tend to express limited confidence in Russia or its regime led by Vladimir Putin. Strikingly, Bulgaria defies this trend with 73% viewing Russia favorably, this is the singular most positive rating of Russia in the world. In a similar defiance of global patterns, 62% of Bulgarians have confidence in the Russian leader. This percentage represents the highest share across surveyed states, where a median of 60% have stated they have no

confidence in Putin to do the right thing when it comes to international affairs.¹⁰⁷

Bulgarians' positive attitude toward Russia does not result in disapproval of its Western European allies. On the contrary, attitudes **display a strong attachment to Germany**, with an 82% approval among Bulgarians, the highest within the EU. Moreover, the Bulgarian population does not demonstrate an overly eager preference for siding with Russia. While, more than half of those polled (56%) do express a preference toward Russia, 48% agree that it is in the interests of Bulgaria to work closely with Western powers. Similarly, unlike the strong majorities in Armenia (79%), Serbia (74%), and Greece (60%) who agree with the statement that Russia has an obligation to protect Orthodox Christians outside its borders, for Bulgaria this rate is more moderate at 56%.¹⁰⁸

Unlike their overly emotionally positive attitude towards Russia, Bulgarians are only cautiously positive towards the rising global authoritarian power – China. The lack of deep political, economic and cultural ties between Bulgaria and China – both historically and contemporarily, prefigure **fairly positive views of China**. Some 55% of the Bulgarians maintain a favorable view of China, this is higher than in the rest of the surveyed CEE and Western European countries (including, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Greece, Spain, UK, Italy, Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden).¹⁰⁹ Yet, only 23% of the Bulgarian respondents approve of the Chinese President Xi Jinping.¹¹⁰

All in all, the trends in the geopolitical preferences of Bulgarians reveal a **higher-than-average degree of susceptibility to foreign authoritarian influence, propaganda, and disinformation**. The widespread distrust in political institutions and dissatisfaction with democracy lowers the country's defenses to Russian and Chinese political-economic overtures. The simultaneously high approval rates of the EU, Germany, and the US as well as Russia and China points to Bulgarians' uncertainty and ambiguity; trying to recon-

¹⁰⁴ Alpha Research, *10 години членство на България в ЕС: Равно-сметка и перспективи* [10 Years of Bulgaria's Membership in the EU: Assessment and Perspectives], 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Pew Research Center, "NATO Seen Favorably across Member States," February 9, 2020, pp. 4, 11, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Pew Research Center, "NATO Seen Favorable across Member States," February 9, 2020, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Huang, Ch. and Cha, J., *Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally*, Pew Research Center, February 7, 2020; Pew Research Center, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*, 2019, p. 64.

¹⁰⁸ Pew Research Center, "Views on Role of Russia in the Region, and the Soviet Union," in *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Pew Research Center, *China's Economic Growth Mostly Welcomed in Emerging Markets, but Neighbors Wary of Its Influence*, 2019, p. 27.

¹¹⁰ Pew Research Center, *Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable*, 2020, p. 22.

cile the country's integration in the Western political and economic model, while maintaining strong cultural and emotional affinities to Russia. The national and foreign policy implications of such perceptions are linked to a degree of accommodation of both Western and Eastern positions. Bulgarian politicians are much more likely to follow popular sentiments among the general public. Hence, standing up to Russian foreign policy and military aggression, as well as propaganda and disinformation narratives, require strong political leadership and public education. Bulgarians will continue to be less sensitive to the risks represented by Russian and Chinese economic and political initiatives which undermine democracy and the rule of law. This, in turn, keeps the door propped wide open to Russian media capture, propaganda, and disinformation narratives.

MEDIA FOOTPRINT AND INSTRUMENTS

For over a decade, the Bulgarian media landscape has been characterized by two complementary processes: the gradual exit of large Western media investors following the 2008 financial crisis and the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few domestic oligarchic networks.¹¹¹ The monopolization of the media market has allowed owners to generate above-market-average revenue streams, taking hold of a significant share of the advertising market and the (public procurement) funding provided by the government. The **concentration of media ownership** in the hands of private interests with strong political influence has transformed media outlets into instruments for attacking political opponents, business competitors, journalists, and activists. Often media outlets have been used to undermine businesses that are targets of corporate raiding operations. Some examples of this can be found in the bankruptcy of the country's fourth-largest bank in 2014 and the demise of the largest betting and lottery conglomerate in 2020. The Kremlin has successfully leveraged this form of national media capture by engaging with local tycoons and oligarchs. In this way, the Kremlin can utilize local media outlets to spread propaganda and influence strategic decision-making without exposing itself as a media owner.

¹¹¹ For more on these processes, see: Filipova and Galev, "Bulgaria"; Center for the Study of Democracy, *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, Policy Brief No. 60, May 2016; Center for the Study of Democracy, *Regional Media in Bulgaria: The Limits of Survival*, Policy Brief No. 57, September 2015.

One of the critical governance gaps that have allowed the entrenchment of local and Russia-driven media capture in Bulgaria is the enforcement gap regarding the **transparency of media ownership**. The *Law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications*¹¹² mandates that each publisher of a periodical print newspaper is obliged to report beneficial ownership to the Bulgarian authorities on an annual basis. The Ministry of Culture's registry is also supposed to include a declaration of ownership, sources of public financing, and editorial management of all types of media. In 2014, the Council for Electronic Media created a register for providers of radio and audio-visual services. All of these, seemingly, well-intentioned instruments have been poorly implemented and have not prevented the concentration or the obfuscation of the ultimate beneficial ownership on the Bulgarian media market.

In fact, media laws have been designed in such a way as to benefit larger incumbents at the expense of smaller newcomers. For example, a 2019 amendment to the *Law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications* was notably introduced upon the request of Delyan Peevski, a member of parliament and media mogul, who at the time controlled over 80% of Bulgaria's newspaper distribution business.¹¹³ In particular, the size of the fines for non-disclosure of ownership disproportionately affects smaller media companies. The owners of big media outlets have very often obfuscated their corporate ownership by reporting data through complicated, hard-to-trace ownership structures consisting of a chain of offshore-registered subsidiaries. Moreover, the current registry reveals significant gaps in the amount of ownership information available, particularly concerning the sources and amounts of financing.

Russian-controlled companies have been visible in Bulgaria through another potent channel of media capture – **advertising**. Data on media audiences are contradictory due, not only, to the differing methodologies employed (marketing vs. statistical) but also to biases in the data. People-metrics agencies cooperate with different media groups, and tend to skew results in favor

¹¹² Lex.bg, *Закон за задължителното депозиране на печатни и други произведения и за обявяване на разпространителите и доставчиците на медийни услуги* [Law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications and for the Disclosure of Distributors and Suppliers of Media Services], promulgated in SG No. 108 of 29 December 2000, last amended in SG No. 17 of 26 February 2019.

¹¹³ Conley, H. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2016, p. 41.

Largest media companies in Bulgaria

According to operating revenue statistics¹¹⁴ some of the largest media companies in Bulgaria are as follows:

- *Nova Broadcasting Group*, whose media portfolio spans an array of TV channels (including Nova TV) as well as the biggest online media provider, Net info;
- *BTV Media Group*, which broadcasts an array of TV channels, while *BTV Radio Group* is the second most profitable company in the radio sector;
- *Telegraph Media*, owned by Delyan Peevski, publishes the daily newspapers Monitor, Telegraph, Meridian Match. The BSS Media Group manages the radio stations The Voice, Vesselina, Vitosha, Magic FM and represents the most profitable radio firm;¹¹⁵
- *168 chasa EOOD* publishing some of the most widely circulated newspapers – 24 chasa and 168 chasa;
- *Economedia* publishing Capital and Dnevnik newspapers;
- *Trud Media* publishing *Trud* newspaper;
- *Darik Radio* which is associated with a similarly named radio station.

Note: As of the end of 2020. In early 2021, Nova Broadcasting Group was acquired by the London-based United Group from the Domuschiev brothers, Bulgarian businessmen; BTV Media Group has been acquired in late 2020 by the largest Czech holding, PPF Group, under the control of the Czech businessman, Petr Kellner; Telegraph Media was also taken over by United Group in early 2021. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter these changes in ownership have the potential to reverse the long-established trend of domestic ownership over Bulgarian media channels.

of those groups.¹¹⁶ Yet, there are well-documented cases of significant Russian media capture power, such as the successful campaign for banning fracking in the country.¹¹⁷

In addition, Bulgaria has very low levels of transparency regarding state advertising contracts. There is no legislation to ensure fair and transparent rules on the distribution of state advertising to media outlets, which often contributes to favoritism, censorship, and distortion of the media market. Direct state subsidies to the Bulgarian public media make the latter exces-

sively dependent on government support,¹¹⁸ while indirect subsidies (such as tax exemptions) can provide financial benefits to selected media.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the Bulgarian government has been gaining additional leverage over the media stemming from the allocation of the large communication budgets for publicizing EU programs. Around EUR 29 million has been distributed since Bulgaria's entry into the EU in 2007 on the basis of direct negotiation with electronic media outlets, without a competitive procedure. The dependence on EU financing contributes to a cognitive capture of the editorial line of Bulgarian media.¹²⁰

The Bulgarian media landscape has been dominated by several domestically-owned media groups with a significant market share, which command an extensive audience reach by virtue of the provision of integrated informational services (encompassing TV and

¹¹⁴ Based on data from the [Orbis commercial database](#). The Orbis data has been additionally tallied with figures provided by Capital Daily: Capital Daily, „Кой кой е и колко губи в българските медии” [Who Is Who and How Much They Lose in Bulgarian Media], February 16, 2018; Antonova, V., „БГ Радио” и още шест радиостанции се продадоха за 5.4 млн. евро” [BG Radio and Six More Radio Stations Sold for EUR 5.4 Million], *Capital Daily*, June 21, 2018.

¹¹⁵ [Mediapool.bg](#), „И медиите на Пеевски отиват в дубайската му офшорка” [Peevski's Media Also Go to His Dubai Offshore Company], June 7, 2016.

¹¹⁶ For instance, GARB and Nielsen record significant differences in the audience share of the two largest TV groups – bTV and NOVA, this is likely conditioned by GARB's closer cooperation with bTV, as opposed to Nielsen's work with NOVA: Daskalova, N., „Как изглежда българският медиен пазар през 2015 г.” [The State of the Bulgarian Media Market in 2015], *Clubz.Bg*, December 3, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Snowiss, M., „Bulgaria Key Battleground in US-Russia Energy War,” *VOA*, February 23, 2015.

¹¹⁸ For instance 94% of the revenue of Bulgarian public media is made up of state subsidies, with highly restrictive rules on advertising for example limiting advertising time to 15 minutes a day on the Bulgarian National Television: Antonova, V., „Сложното уравнение – пари за обществени медии” [Complex Equation – Money for Public Media], *Capital Daily*, February 15, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Brogi, E. et al., *Monitoring Media Pluralism in Europe: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2017 in the European Union, FYROM, Serbia & Turkey*, European University Institute, 2018, pp. 51-52.

¹²⁰ Svobodna Evropa, „Купуване на медии. Как с пари от еврофондове може да се осигури поръчкова журналистика” [Buying Media. How Money from the European Funds Can Ensure Favorable Journalistic Portrayal], July 10, 2019.

radio broadcasting, publishing of newspapers, online news, etc.).

The country's advertising market is also dominated by ten large companies (offering the full spectrum of advertising and media services), whose combined revenue of around BGN 300 million (~EUR 152 million)¹²¹ represents 2/3rds of the whole turnover of the telecommunications sector.¹²² Additionally, some of the biggest advertisers¹²³ include pharmaceutical and retail companies dominating both print and TV outlets.^{124,125} The advertising market in Bulgaria is further concentrated by industry. The top ten largest firms operating in any given industry provide more than half of the ads expenditure in that industry.¹²⁶

Television attracts more than half of the total annual advertising budget in Bulgaria (with a 57.8% share in 2018 and a 56% share in 2019)¹²⁷ and generates ad revenue of roughly BGN 240 million (~EUR 123 million).¹²⁸ More than two-thirds (72.4%) of the population declared that their consumer choices are frequently influenced by TV advertisements.¹²⁹ Online media take the second-largest share of total advertising with 23.6% in 2018,¹³⁰ taking in close to BGN 98.5 million in revenues in the same year.¹³¹ In 2019, ad expenditure on online advertising continued rising, marking

a 25% increase year-on-year. At the same time, ad expenditures in the print press dropped by 2%.¹³² Most of the online advertisement revenues are generated from display advertising (34%), followed by Facebook (27%), Google search (23%), and YouTube (11%).¹³³ Radio and print media have a much smaller stake in the advertising market (4.7% and 3.3%, respectively, in 2018).¹³⁴

The analysis of the corporate footprint in the Bulgarian media sector reveals an insignificant presence of companies with Russian ultimate beneficial ownership. Out of 10,304 media companies active in the country, only 74 have a foreign global ultimate ownership. More specifically, Russia's direct corporate footprint in the Bulgarian media landscape is minimal. There is only one media firm (Studio Dvrender), whose ultimate beneficial owner is registered in Russia. The firm has not declared an operating revenue and its activities are focused only in the motion picture and TV production sector, providing audio-visual services on a small scale.¹³⁵

In terms of advertising, the information that can be gleaned from the available advertising market data¹³⁶ is that the chain of Gazprom petrol stations (a Bulgarian subsidiary of NIS Gazprom Neft, where Russia's Gazprom Neft is a majority shareholder) is one of the main clients of the most profitable communications company, Ogilvy Group Bulgaria.¹³⁷ Also, Russian-owned Lukoil Bulgaria is visibly present in the Bulgarian online advertising market, taking 43rd place among the largest online advertisers, according to the size of its ad budgets.¹³⁸

¹²¹ The Bulgarian lev (BGN) is pegged to the euro (EUR) at the fixed exchange rate EUR 1 = BGN 1.95583.

¹²² The ten largest communications companies by revenue include *Ogilvy Group Bulgaria, DDB Group, Publicis Groupe Bulgaria, Dentsu Aegis Network Bulgaria, BBDO, Direct Media Group Bulgaria, Havas Group Bulgaria, All Channels Communication, New Moment New Ideas, and The Smarts: Capital, Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, pp. 10-13.

¹²³ The ten largest advertisers by advertising budgets include *Lidl Bulgaria, Procter & Gamble, Natur Product, Ferrero, National Lottery, Coca Cola Co., Billa, L'Oreal, Ficosota Syntez, and Kaufland Bulgaria: Capital, Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, p. 24; Nielsen, *Информационен Бюлетин* [Information Bulletin], 2019, p. 12.

¹²⁴ Dimitrova, P., „Българският рекламен пазар с 8% ръст“ [An 8% Growth in the Bulgarian Advertising Market], *Enterprise.Bg*, May 11, 2018.

¹²⁵ Argent Media Agency, *Медия сцена България* [Media Scene Bulgaria], pp. 18; 44.

¹²⁶ Capital, *Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁷ Capital, *Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, p. 40; GARB, *GARB Audience Measurement Bulgaria*, 2018, p. 3; Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies, „11% стабилен ръст за българския рекламен пазар през 2019 г.“ [A Stable 11% Increase in the Bulgarian Advertising Market in 2019], 2020, p. 4.

¹²⁸ National Statistical Institute, *Приходи и разходи на телевизионните оператори през 2018 година* [Revenue and Spending of Television Operators in 2018], 2019.

¹²⁹ GARB, *GARB Audience Measurement Bulgaria*, 2019, p. 16.

¹³⁰ Capital, *Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, p. 40.

¹³¹ Dimov, Ch., *ADEX 2018*, 2019, p. 4.

¹³² Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies, „11% стабилен ръст за българския рекламен пазар през 2019 г.“ [A Stable 11% Increase in the Bulgarian Advertising Market in 2019], 2020, p. 2.

¹³³ Dimov, Ch., *ADEX 2017*, 2018, p. 5.

¹³⁴ Capital, *Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, p. 40.

¹³⁵ According to data obtained from the *Orbis commercial corporate database*.

¹³⁶ Detailed data on the share of foreign involvement (broken down by country of origin) in the Bulgarian advertising market is not readily available in official national statistics. The Bulgarian National Bank and the National Statistical Institute only provide overall figures on FDI in the economic sector related to the development and distribution of creative products: Bulgarian National Bank, *Поток на преките чуждестранни инвестиции по икономически отрасли – годишни данни (млн. евро)* [Flow of Foreign Direct Investment by Economic Sector – Annual Data (EUR, million)], 2019; National Statistical Institute, *Чуждестранни преки инвестиции в предприятията от нефинансовия сектор към 31.12. по икономически дейности* [Foreign Direct Investment in Industries from the Non-Financial Sector by 31.12. According to Economic Activity], 2019.

¹³⁷ Capital, *Маркетинг Factbook* [Marketing Factbook], 2019, p. 11.

¹³⁸ Superhosting.bg, „Топ 100 рекламодатели в интернет. Рекламни приходи по индустрии“ [Top 100 Advertisers on the Internet. Advertising Revenue by Industry], 2018, p. 4.

The limited scope of Russia's direct footprint in the Bulgarian media sector stands in contrast to **the extent of the Kremlin's indirect footprint**. There are a number of media companies that do not have Russian ultimate beneficial ownership but whose domestic owners have strong pro-Russian political and economic links.¹³⁹ A couple of major newspapers (e.g., Standart), several smaller TV networks (such as Channel 3 and BSTV), and at least two newspapers (Duma and Ataka, the newspapers of, respectively, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and of populist Ataka) have direct ties to Russian actors, either via ownership or in terms of influence over content. Russia is also behind some local and online news outlets, where its influence can be traced primarily in terms of editorial content.¹⁴⁰ For example, the South Stream pipeline project (and its reincarnation TurkStream) has received extensive coverage in Russian-affiliated media, which universally supported it. Two new Russian TV channels entered the Bulgarian market at the beginning of 2016. Horizont Media (HMTV), a new Russian-Bulgarian TV, was launched in March 2016. One of the co-owners of HMTV was an adviser to the Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, when he owned and managed Media Most before Gazprom took over the company. So far, HMTV has positioned itself in the entertainment area, it has avoided having to provide news or demonstrate a political agenda. The second new TV channel is called Kamchia. It is owned by the Moscow city government.¹⁴¹

Russian cable TV channels remain popular among Bulgarians. Interestingly, there is a concentration of the ownership of distribution rights of Russian cable TV channels in Bulgaria. The former Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) official Nikolay Malinov is the representative of 11 Russian language channels in the Balkans, including state-owned Channel One Russia (with the largest coverage in Russia), TV Center Russia (with the fourth largest coverage), and Ohota i Rybalka (specializing in

broadcasting hobby hunting activities).¹⁴² Malinov is a classic example of Russian influence tactics. He is the Chairman of the National Movement "Russophiles", which is a sprawling network of loosely connected non-governmental organizations across the country. The movement openly promotes the close alignment of Bulgaria with Russian cultural, political, strategic, and economic interests. Malinov has received many state honors from the Russian Federation, including, most recently, the Order of Friendship in 2019. He received the medal, while on trial for espionage in Bulgaria.¹⁴³

According to a written evidence published by the Bulgarian prosecution, Malinov prepared a report, allegedly in the service of the Double Headed Eagle, a non-profit organization chaired by the Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, associated with Russian foreign intelligence officials. The report¹⁴⁴ insists that Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation needs to change away from the West and toward Russia. It goes on to propose that this can only be achieved through an informational strategy based on the creation of a pro-Russian TV channel and websites. It further notes that this media strategy needs to be complemented by the continuous expansion of Russian control over Bulgarian strategic assets, such as Vivacom, the biggest telecommunications company in Bulgaria as of early 2021 controlled by the Russian state-owned VTB bank, and Dunarit, one of the largest military hardware producing factories in the country. Dunarit's Bulgarian owner claims he was poisoned by GRU agents in 2015 with a Novichok-like substance after he had refused to sell his company to a Russian-linked oligarchic group.¹⁴⁵

Although the plans for an increased Russian information offensive in Bulgaria did not materialize and VTB sold Vivacom to the UK-based United Group,¹⁴⁶ Ma-

¹³⁹ For more on CSD's accumulated research on Russia's cultivation of an opaque network of patronage in the Balkans, see Shentov, O. et al., "Conclusion," in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 2018; Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., "Operating Political Networks of Influence," in *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020; Conley, H. et al., "Introduction: A Model of Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe," in *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

¹⁴⁰ Yalamov, T., "Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture," in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Antonova, V., "„Руски Дневник“ на български" [Russia Beyond in Bulgarian], *Capital Daily*, June 13, 2015.

¹⁴³ Bosev, R. and Stoilova, Z., "Прокуратурата обвини Николай Малинов от 'Русофили' – шпионира за ген. Решетников" [The Prosecution Has Accused Nikolay Malinov from Russophili – He Has Spied for General Reshetnikov], *Capital Daily*, September 10, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Malinov, N., "Докладная записка Николая Симеонова Малинова – Председателя 'Национального Движения Русофилов' в Республике Болгария" [Report by Nikolay Simeonov Malinov – Chairman of Russophili National Movement in the Republic of Bulgaria], n.d.

¹⁴⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Bulgaria Suspends Probe Into Poisoning Linked To Russians," RFL/RE's Bulgarian Service, September 1, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Stoyanov, N., "„БТК ще бъде купена почти изцяло с дълг [BTC Will Be Bought Almost Entirely with a Loan]," *Capital Daily*, January 23, 2020.

linov's case demonstrates the depth of Russia's presence in the country. Until 2014, Malinov was part of the top echelons of power of the second-largest party in the country and was the owner of the party's news outlet Duma.¹⁴⁷ In a similar vein of overlapping political, media, and economic interests, other politicians from BSP have published the pro-Russian newspaper *Zemia*, the bilingual Russian-Bulgarian newspaper *Rusiya dnes* (Russia Today), and *Kitai dnes* (China Today). *Zemia* and *Rusiya dnes* are owned by Bulgarian companies under the control of Svetlana Sharenkova, the Chairperson of the Bulgaria-Russia Forum (fostering closer cultural and business contacts between the two countries), deputy chair of the Federation for friendship with the nations of Russia and the CIS, and a member of the Bulgaria-China Forum.¹⁴⁸

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

The Kremlin's disinformation narratives in Bulgaria have been typically focused on critical events in the country's political, economic, social, or cultural life. These narratives can best be illustrated with the example of two significant recent EU and NATO developments: Sofia's Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2018 and the plan to establish a NATO Coordination Center in the biggest Bulgarian sea port of Varna at the end of 2019. These both marked Bulgaria's deeper integration with and contribution to the Euro-Atlantic structures.

The following overview is based on a content analysis of the coverage of these significant developments in four different media outlets. The four outlets analyzed were chosen to correspond with the different types of connections to Russian disinformation and political-economic ownership networks in Bulgaria.¹⁴⁹

- **News Front** exemplifies an outlet directly owned by Russia. It was originally created to report developments in Crimea and Donbass, subsequently expanding its coverage to European and international events in ten languages, including English, Russian, Bulgarian, German, Spanish, Serbian,

French, Italian, Georgian, and Slovak.¹⁵⁰ The owners of News Front include Konstantin Knyrik and Mikhail Sinelin. The former is active in the regional Crimean branch of the Russian nationalist Rodina party. He is the beneficiary of Russian state grants for maintaining the operation of News Front. For his part, Sinelin has occupied a variety of high-level positions in Russian state agencies, including as a deputy chairman of Vnesheconombank, and has served on the teams of Kremlin political executives.¹⁵¹ News Front has been named a Russian propaganda center responsible for the Balkans. One of the suspects in Montenegro's 2016 attempted coup has been linked to this outlet.¹⁵² The Bulgarian employees of News Front are active members of Russophile associations, organizing, among other activities in Bulgaria, protests against NATO and sanctions on Russia.¹⁵³

- **Ataka** newspaper (having both a print and online edition) is the official mouthpiece of the Bulgarian nationalist party, Ataka, which espouses a strong pro-Russian and anti-Western position. The party's Russian links and involvement in (pro-)Russian activities have been wide-ranging and well-documented: Ataka has participated in various fora drawing extremist parties from across Europe;¹⁵⁴ it maintains close cooperation with the United Russia party;¹⁵⁵ and has been alleged to receive Russian financing.¹⁵⁶
- **Monitor** newspaper (with a print and online version) falls into the category of a broadly circulated daily. It ranks in the top 10 most widely read Bulgarian news outlets and commands the second-largest gross advertising budget among the

¹⁵⁰ News Front, *За нас. Непобедими сме – когато сме единни* [About Us. We Are Unbeatable When United], n.d.

¹⁵¹ Angelov, G., „Русия финансира сайт с фалшиви новини, обявил смъртните присъди на ‘русофоби’ в България” [Russia Sponsors a Fake News Website, Announcing the Death Verdicts of ‘Russophobes’ in Bulgaria], *Dnevnik*, December 11, 2017; EUvs-Disinfo, “No News on the News Front,” April 29, 2019.

¹⁵² Bellingcat, “Montenegro Coup Suspect Linked to Russian-Backed ‘Ultranationalist’ Organisation,” April 25, 2017.

¹⁵³ Angelov, G., „Русия финансира сайт с фалшиви новини, обявил смъртните присъди на ‘русофоби’ в България” [Russia Sponsors a Fake News Website, Announcing the Death Verdicts of ‘Russophobes’ in Bulgaria], *Dnevnik*, December 11, 2017.

¹⁵⁴ *Dnevnik*, „‘Атака’ участва в учредяването на ‘десен коминтерн’ в Русия” [Ataka Took Part in the Convening of a Far-Right Comintern in Russia], March 22, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ 24 chasa online, „АТАКА ще си сътрудничи с партията на Путин” [Ataka Will Cooperate with Putin's Party], May 23, 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Bosev, R., „‘Атака’ е свързана с руските служби през фирми на съветник на Сидеров” [Ataka Is Linked to the Russian Security Services through Firms of Siderov's Advisor], *Capital Daily*, March 8, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ According to Orbis corporate commercial database.

¹⁴⁸ Filipova and Galev, *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, 2018, p. 16. Sharenkova has received state honors from the Russian Federation, including the Order of Friendship in 2013 (for advancing bilateral relations between Russia and Bulgaria), while a year later *Rusiya dnes* was awarded the Annual Media Prize of the Russian Federation.

¹⁴⁹ For an overview of the methodology see Annex.

Bulgarian national dailies.¹⁵⁷ Monitor (together with other popular outlets such as Telegraph, Meridian Match, and Politika magazine) is published by the Telegraph Media EOOD, which is owned by Mr. Delyan Peevski.¹⁵⁸ The latter has been in close contact with Russian financial and economic interests, spanning various strategically important sectors of the Bulgarian economy, including banking, tobacco, and defense.¹⁵⁹ His media is considered to take pro-government stances, unabashedly defending the business and political interests of their owner.

- **Mediapool** represents a “control” outlet, being the first Bulgarian daily mainstream online news source, founded in 2000. It has since maintained a reputation of objectivity and analytical depth and is considered to support the country’s EU and NATO integration. The media site is owned by Stoyana Georgieva and Infospeys Foundation (also managed by Georgieva).¹⁶⁰ She is a professional journalist, having previously worked for Radio Free Europe and headed the Press Office of the Council of Ministers.¹⁶¹

The **different types of Bulgarian language media outlets share commonalities** in relation to the pro-Russian disinformation topics and narratives conveyed, as well as the stylistic means of message transmission. News Front, Ataka, and Monitor converge on similar conclusions about the functioning of the Bulgarian Presidency of the European Council. In relation to Russia, they all claimed that the Presidency was a unique chance for Sofia to improve ties with Moscow, which could have happened if Bulgaria had managed to assert

its interests and sovereignty against Western pressure on the Balkans.¹⁶² Their narratives suggested that the most important opportunity in the Presidency was for Bulgaria to play a balancing role in Southeast Europe, acting as a bridge between Europe and Russia.¹⁶³ Bulgarian-Russian relations are hailed as being bound by deep historical and cultural bonds, while also offering significant economic benefit to Bulgaria. Instead of relying on European funds, they often assert an alternative proposal: that Bulgarians can look to Eurasian markets to make long-lasting economic gains. Moreover, according to the messages disseminated in these outlets, the Western Balkans could better develop their infrastructure through increased cooperation with Russia.¹⁶⁴ Another shared narrative promoted surrounding Bulgaria’s presidency of the Council is that the sanctions on Russia are artificially imposed and block the development of mutually beneficial relations between Sofia and Moscow. In its role of EU Council President, Bulgaria should have placed on the agenda the issue of lifting sanctions on Russia. Yet, this was not achieved because of external pressure, lack of courage, and an inability on the part of the majority of the political elite to assert national interests.¹⁶⁵

A commonly promoted narrative claims that Bulgaria could lead a balanced foreign policy by advancing both the planned NATO Coordination Center and the completion of Russian energy projects (including the construction of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) and TurkStream’s continuation through Bulgarian territory).¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the media outlets suggest that Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov’s initial position that

¹⁵⁷ Piero97, *Bulgarian Media Map*, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Although, in 2018 it was reported that Peevski sold 50% of Telegraph Media EOOD, he still figures as the global, domestic, and beneficial owner of Intrust PLC EAD, which is the sole shareholder of Telegraph Media EOOD according to the *Orbis* database. In early 2021 Peevski sold all its media outlets, including Monitor to the UK-based United Group.

¹⁵⁹ Stefanov and Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, 2020, pp. 58–61; Stoyanov, N. and Bosev, R., „Офшорката, на която ‘цялата държава помага’ за ‘Дунарит’, е на адвоката на Пеевски” [The Offshore Company ‘helped by the State’ in the Dunarit Case Belongs to Peevski’s Lawyer], *Capital Daily*, January 18, 2019; Bivol.bg, „Адвокат на Пеевски атакува бизнеса на Емилиян Гебрев след отравяне с ‘Новичок’” [Peevski’s Lawyer Is Attacking Emilian Gebrev’s Business after Poisoning with Novichok], February 11, 2019; Mitov, V., „Гебрев за отровата и ГРУ: Отвѣн ударят с копие, отвѣтре им помагат с меч” [Gebrev on the Poison and the GRU: The External Spear Is Assisted by a Domestic Sword], *Svobodna Evropa*, February 21, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Mediapool.bg, *За нас* [About Us], n.d.

¹⁶¹ Antonova, V., „100-те най-влиятелни жени: Стояна Георгиева” [100 Most Influential Women: Stoyana Georgieva], May 1, 2012.

¹⁶² News Front, „България и Русия подновиха диалога: Владимир Путин и Бойко Борисов планират среща” [Bulgaria and Russia Have Renewed Dialogue: Vladimir Putin and Boiko Borisov Are Planning a Meeting], March 6, 2018; Monitor Agency, „Борисов обсъди с руския посланик енергийни проекти” [Borisov Discussed Energy Projects with the Russian Ambassador], January 23, 2018.

¹⁶³ Ducheв, P., „Сидеров след визитата си в Крим: България да е мост между ЕС и Русия!” [Siderov after His Visit to Crimea: Bulgaria Should Be a Bridge between the EU and Russia], *Vestnik Ataka*, April 23, 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Monitor Agency, „Лавров поздравя Борисов за Трети март, обсъдили и Западните Балкани” [Lavrov Congratulated Borisov on the 3 March, They Also Discussed the Western Balkans], March 2, 2018.

¹⁶⁵ News Front, „Земетресение в БСП: Корнелия Нинова твърдо СРЕЩУ Русия” [Earthquake in the BSP: Kornelia Ninova Firmly AGAINST Russia], November 20, 2017; Nikolov, I., „Светлозар Лазаров: България да има поне 34% участие в АЕЦ ‘Белене’” [Svetlozar Lazarov: Bulgaria Should Have at Least a 34% Stake in Belene NPP], *Vestnik Ataka*, June 5, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Monitor Agency, „Обмисляме да купим подводница от Норвегия (ОБЗОР)” [We Are Thinking of Buying a Submarine from Norway] (OVERVIEW), December 12, 2019.

the Black Sea should not be militarized, but remain a place for recreational activities, changed on the back of US pressure.¹⁶⁷ In regard to **commonalities in the style of Russian narratives dissemination**, News Front, Ataka, and Monitor often resemble each other. Among the most prominent techniques used are misleading headlines;¹⁶⁸ uncritical quoting of (Russian) officials without the provision of context;¹⁶⁹ unsubstantiated claims; binary distinctions (that lead to a black-and-white treatment of complex subjects);¹⁷⁰ evocation of moral indignation; evaluative epithets;¹⁷¹ exaggeration. The application of these provocative styles could be seen in similarities throughout the portrayal of Russia as a positive force. The shared narrative is of a Bulgarian-Russian relationship, whereby Russia is motivated

by fraternal ties and its position as a superpower to be reckoned with, while Bulgaria is presented as a crucial balancing nation between the West and Russia.

Apart from the overarching similarities between News Front, Ataka, and Monitor, there are also **diverging nuances in the narration and style** of the outlets stemming from their different degrees of distance from (pro-)Russian groups and interests.

News Front is distinguished by two important features. First, given its direct Russian origin and ownership, it is committed to the dissemination of Kremlin disinformation in the most straightforward and explicitly biased manner. News Front employs the most aggressive messaging, which promotes the Russian propagandist line that Bulgaria's membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions is a failure. Accordingly, Sofia's Presidency of the Council of the EU is presented as unsuccessful, unable to improve the country's reputation which has been forever tainted by being the poorest and most corrupt member of the EU.¹⁷² It is claimed that the priorities of the Presidency, particularly the European integration of the Western Balkans, were imposed by the West. It was stated that these priorities reflected the German domination of Bulgaria. Further still, the application of "morally degenerate" gender principles were externally posited as conditions for the realization of the Presidency.¹⁷³ For its part, NATO is described as violating Bulgarian sovereignty, national interests, and the will of the people by enforcing the establishment of a Coordination Center on Bulgarian territory. It is, instead, argued that if the Bulgarian population was to be consulted, it would decisively oppose the Center.¹⁷⁴

Second, in the overwhelming majority of the articles published in News Front, there is no distinction in style between news reporting and commentaries, with narrative bias being common to all types of articles. Some of these techniques include drawing tenuous

¹⁶⁷ Ivanova-Zuan, A., „След преговорите в САЩ. Тръмп поиска да влезе във Варна с „координационен център“ на НАТО“ [After the Negotiations in the US. Trump Wants to Enter Varna with a NATO Coordination Center], *News Front*, November 26, 2019.

¹⁶⁸ For instance, a headline in Ataka bombastically states that in Sofia the EU has declared independence from the US by refusing to leave the Iran nuclear deal. This headline presents the event in a generalised, overly-dramatic and polarising light, while the main body of the text relies on the assessment of Russian experts on a matter concerning the EU and the US (that, for instance, Europe is furious with the US decision to impose sanctions and court ruling against European companies operating in Iran): Tihomir Todorov, „ЕС обяви независимост от САЩ в София“ [The EU Has Declared Independence from the US in Sofia], *Vestnik Ataka*, June 5, 2018.

¹⁶⁹ For instance, the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria's assessment of Borisov as a "mediator", who can restore dialogue, is cited uncritically in a Monitor article, which does not inquire into how dialogue can be restored without a change of behavior on the part of Russia: Monitor Agency, „Борисов обсъди с руския посланик енергийни проекти“ [Borisov Discussed Energy Projects with the Russian Ambassador], January 23, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ For instance, a News Front article makes a binary distinction according to which Bulgaria's ability to improve its relations with Russia will demonstrate "correct assessment" and "political wisdom", while lack of improvement in ties with Russia is presented as a dangerous Bulgarian deviation. However, there is no substantive discussion of the merits of either course of action or argumentation as to why the absence of progress in bilateral relations should be associated with a failure in the Bulgarian political process: News Front, „България и Русия подновиха диалога: Владимир Путин и Бойко Борисов планират среща“ [Bulgaria and Russia Have Renewed Dialogue: Vladimir Putin and Boiko Borisov Are Planning a Meeting], March 6, 2018.

¹⁷¹ For instance, the Atlantic Council's insistence on an official government reaction to the Russian state's intention to turn a children's camp in Kamchia on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast into a launch pad for Russian interests in Europe and accompanying proposal that Kamchia be included in the NATO Coordination Council, are both dismissed in a News Front article. This is done not through argumentation but via strongly evaluative epithets and phrases. The Council is qualified as unrealistic, fallen into political delusion, motivated by ulterior motives and wading deeply in the Bulgarian political "swamp": News Front, „Атлантическият Съвет в пореден делириум: „Национализирайте „Камчия“! Да не допуснем втори Крим!““ [The Atlantic Council in yet Another Delirium: 'Nationalize Kamchia! Let's Now Allow a Second Crimes!'], December 31, 2019.

¹⁷² News Front, „Експерт от „Фридрих Науман за Европредседателството: В БГ има корупция, бедност, изтичане на мозъци, няма резултати“ [A Friedrich Naumann Expert on the Europresidency: There Is Corruption, Poverty, Brain Drain in Bulgaria without Any Progress], October 8, 2017.

¹⁷³ News Front, „Руски политик: Фонд „Фридрих Еберт“ – Това е системна работа за унищожаване на руската държавност“ [Russian Politician: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Systematically Works for the Destruction of Russian Statehood], January 15, 2018; Dareva, V., „Джендърдисване и джендърясване“ [Gender Imposition and Gender Becoming], *News Front*, January 11, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Ivanova-Zuan, A., „Код червено! SOS! България, да спасим Варна от НАТО!“ [Red Code! SOS! Bulgaria, Let's Save Varna from NATO], *News Front*, November 27, 2019.

conspiratorial parallels; unsubstantiated analogies, and unwarranted generalizations without supporting evidence;¹⁷⁵ making unfounded accusations;¹⁷⁶ sarcastic depictions and;¹⁷⁷ instilling the impression of impending disaster.

In turn, as an official party mouthpiece, the Ataka newspaper is distinguished by the provision of a partisan spin on the otherwise overt adherence to the dissemination of Kremlin propaganda narratives. The participation of the Ataka party in the GERB-led coalition government¹⁷⁸ that presided over Bulgaria's EU Presidency toned down the newspaper's anti-EU narratives and promoted a positive representation of the Presidency focused on the benefits of EU membership. In particular, the Presidency was depicted as historic in that it marked a growing European tendency, which Bulgaria supposedly spearheaded: the inclusion of patriotic formations in coalition cabinets. This, the paper claimed, gave patriots the chance to prove that they could be a stable and reliable systemic partner.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, the ascendancy of orthodox forces in mainstream

politics meant that greater influence was gained by ultra-nationalist, conservative ideas. The benefit of this was that they could stop neoliberal, globalist trends in Europe. The espousal of traditional, nationalist values was portrayed as a bulwark against the neo-liberal desire to sweep away nation-states.¹⁸⁰

Stylistically, the Ataka newspaper maintains only a formalistic differentiation between news pieces and commentaries, as journalists often make unjustified generalizations and unsubstantiated claims.¹⁸¹ The paper often presents binary distinctions and twisted citations of survey findings,¹⁸² with the overwhelming majority of their citations being from (pro-)Russian officials or expert opinion. The appearance of commitment to neutral reporting in news pieces is only maintained by the fact that it is usually the statements of Ataka party members and like-minded political allies that are quoted, without the deployment of explicitly biased stylistic means.¹⁸³

For its part, Monitor has three distinctive features in terms of narration and style. First, its pro-government bias means that all government policies and actions, including those related to the EU Presidency and the establishment of the NATO Coordination Center, are described as necessary and successful. Pro-EU and NATO narratives are promoted whenever this aligns with the government's own vision and initiatives. For example, the newspaper maintains that the European prospect for the Western Balkan states is paramount

¹⁷⁵ For instance, the supposedly wrongful and treacherous character of the Bulgarian stance that infrastructural development is important for the European integration of the Balkans is conveyed through unsubstantiated analogies – Hitler also prioritized the construction of highways, whereby being a member of the European family is equated with the relationship that servants once had with their feudal lords: Gindev, E., „Как два пъти се „прецакахме“ по време на европредседателството“ [How We Got Screwed Twice during the Presidency of the EU], *News Front*, September 2, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ For instance, the Friedrich Ebert foundation is accused of scheming to destroy Russian and Bulgarian statehood. This is reportedly due to the foundation holding a conference in Bulgaria which promoted alternative accounts of Soviet atrocities during World War II: News Front, „Руски Политик: Фонд „Фридрих Еберт“ – Това е системна работа за унищожаване на руската държавност“ [Russian Politician: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Systematically Works for the Destruction of Russian Statehood], January 15, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ For instance, to convey the idea that gender is a morally corrupt category imposed on Bulgaria, a News Front article sarcastically argues that only an anti-European and uncivilized backward Balkan subject can oppose gender values: Dareva, V., „Джендърисване и джендърясване“ [Gender Imposition and Gender Becoming] *News Front*, January 11, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ In 2016, together with VMRO-Bulgarian National Movement and National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) Ataka created the United Patriots (UP) as a formation uniting nationalist forces. After the 2017 Parliamentary elections, the UP became a coalition partner in the GERB-led government. In 2019, Ataka left the UP and by implication – the coalition agreement with GERB (which was concluded by the UP as a whole rather than each of its constituent parties). Yet, Ataka still supports the government in an informal manner such as through voting for the government's legislative initiatives.

¹⁷⁹ Duchevev, P., „Волен Сидеров в НС: Патриоти във властта е новата тенденция в Европа“ [Volen Siderov at the National Assembly: Patriots in Power Is a New Tendency in Europe], *Vestnik Ataka*, January 11, 2018.

¹⁸⁰ Duchevev, P., „Да се преориентираме към държава, която произвежда!“ [Let's Re-Orientate to a Country That Produces!], *Vestnik Ataka*, January 19, 2018.

¹⁸¹ For instance, an unwarranted generalization is made that the Europeanization of Bulgaria has led to a declining media freedom and relinquishing of foreign policy independence, with EU membership turning Bulgaria into the agrarian province of Europe. An unsubstantiated claim is also made about the nature of German “exploitation” of Bulgaria, whereby the chief motivator of German capital is said to be the cheap Bulgarian labor force: Duchevev, P., „Германия ще определя линията на България като председател на ЕС“ [Germany Will Determine Bulgaria's Policy Line as a Chair of the EU], *Vestnik Ataka*, January 19, 2018.

¹⁸² For instance, an article in Ataka cites a survey, which demonstrates the public's confidence in the government. However, the article does not genuinely inquire into or study the survey's figures for public confidence in the UP and Ataka's leader, Volen Siderov. Instead, it glosses over the specific figures to credit, more generally, the patriots with the high approval rating: Duchevev, P., „Барометър България: Обединени Патриоти трупат точки“ [Barometer Bulgaria: The UP Are Gaining Points], *Vestnik Ataka*, February 23, 2018.

¹⁸³ As seen in: Duchevev, P., „Явор Нотев: Западните Балкани да заемат заслуженото си място в обединена Европа“ [Yavor Notev: The Western Balkans Should Take Their Rightful Place in United Europe], *Vestnik Ataka*, December 1, 2017.

for the security of the region and that cooperation between Bulgaria and the governments in the region is crucial.¹⁸⁴ It is also argued that NATO is the only guarantor of security in SEE and the establishment of a Co-ordination Center will play a deterrent role.¹⁸⁵ Second, in terms of its overall reporting strategy, the paper tends to balance pro-Russian articles with pro-Western ones. This can be attributed to Monitor's status as a broad-spectrum daily newspaper, aiming to appeal to a wide audience with diverse preferences (i.e. both pro-Russian and pro-Western ones).¹⁸⁶ Yet, this does not amount to a natural balanced position, in the sense of analytical neutrality and rigor, but an artificial performance of neutrality. Third, the newspaper also acts as a platform for the defense of its owner's interests by launching smear campaigns against his opponents, including pro-Western journalists, businessmen, and politicians. Monitor's reports denigrate all voices critical of either the government or widespread corruption risks in institutions¹⁸⁷ by claiming that their opinions are part of a "fake news factory controlled by the Bulgarian oligarchy". The supposed aim of these oligarchs is to taint Bulgaria's image and destabilize the state.¹⁸⁸

In terms of the style of coverage, Monitor maintains a distinction between news articles, characterized by im-

PLICITLY BIASED techniques (such as uncritical quotations of statements,¹⁸⁹ sensationalist headlines, and overreliance on government press releases) and commentaries, which often target 'enemies' with personal and ad-hominem accusations.¹⁹⁰

VOLUME

The quantitative analysis of the content of the four outlets in relation to Russian narratives adds some important insights into the similarities and differences in their dissemination patterns.¹⁹¹ One particularly telling example is the difference between the coverage of the joint topics of *Crimea* and *Ukraine*, the *Bulgarian Presidency*, and the *Western Balkans*. The Russian-owned News Front is essentially creating **an informational tsunami of topics important to the Kremlin**. At the same time, it engages less with Bulgaria-centric topics than the broader daily and the independent media outlets. Yet, differences in the coverage between the Russian-owned media outlet and the Bulgarian-owned ones on Russia-related topics is higher (in favor of News Front) than the difference in coverage of national-related topics (in favor of national dailies). This might indicate an informational disparity, which could also reflect a similar diplomatic imbalance: Russia engages in Bulgarian national politics much more than the other way around.

News Front's activity pattern in relation to Crimea between January 2017 and December 2020 tends to follow actual events, which were covered in a similar fashion by the independent outlet (Mediapool). The peaks in

¹⁸⁴ Monitor Agency, „Цветанов се среща със зам.-помощник държавния секретар на САЩ Матю Палмър“ [Tsvetanov Has Met with Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Palmer], February 6, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Monitor Agency, „Борисов пред Столтенберг: България е отговорен съюзник на НАТО (ОБНОВЕНА)“ [Borisov to Stoltenberg: Bulgaria Is a Responsible NATO Ally], December 12, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ On the one hand, the narrative is promoted that the initiatives conducted in relation to the Western Balkans under the auspices of the EU are not directed against Russia and Turkey: Tihomira Mihaylova, „Борисов: Интеграцията на Балканите гарантира мир и стабилност в Европа (ОБНОВЕНА)“ [Borisov: The Integration of the Balkans Guarantees Peace and Stability in Europe], *Monitor Agency*, March 1, 2018. On the other hand, it is also stated that the threats to the Balkans emanating from third party countries, such as China and Russia, pose a challenge to European peace and stability: Monitor Agency, „Цветан Цветанов: ЕС и САЩ могат да се противопоставят на всички заплахи“ [Tsvetan Tsvetanov: The EU and He US Can Counter All Threats], June 30, 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Rankin, J., „Cloud of Corruption Hangs over Bulgaria as It Takes up EU Presidency,“ *Guardian*, December 28, 2017; Deutsche Welle, „Чужди медии: България е корумпирана, но поне не създава ядове“ [Foreign Media: Bulgaria Is Corrupt but at Least It Does Not Create Problems], December 29, 2017.

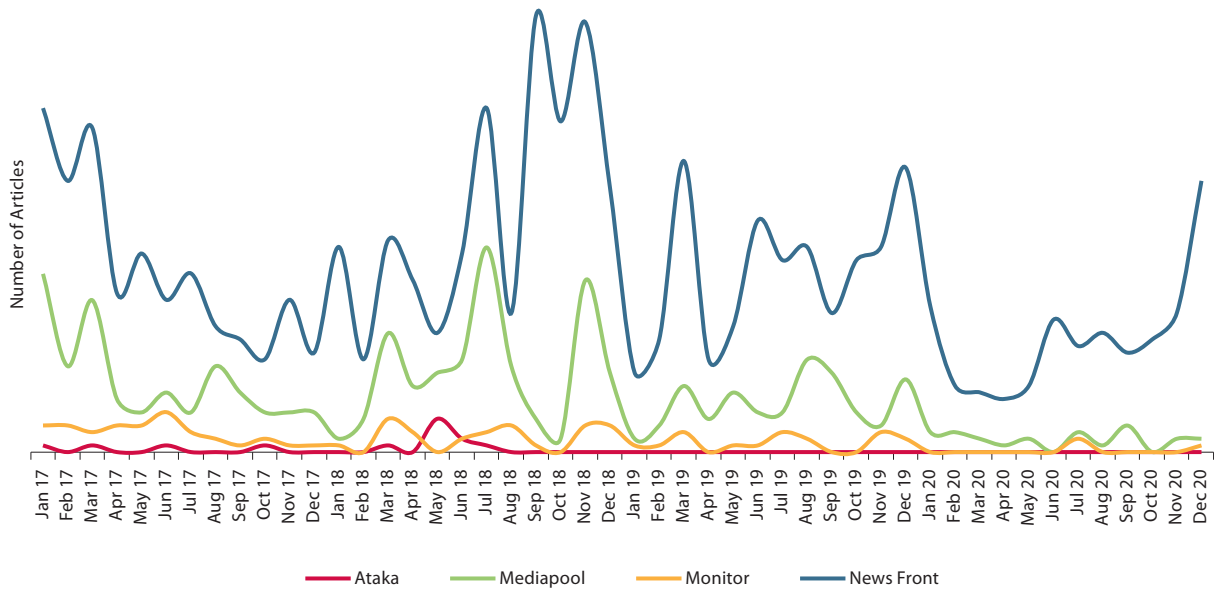
¹⁸⁸ Monitor Agency, „Задругата на олигарсите с кампания срещу България за старта на БГ председателството“ [Oligarchic Circles Waging a Campaign against Bulgaria at the Start of Bulgaria's EU Presidency], January 2, 2018; Monitor Agency, „Пеевски клеветен с фалшиви новини от говорители на олигархията“ [Peevski Slandered with Fake News from the Oligarchy's Spokespersons], January 5, 2018.

¹⁸⁹ For instance, Russia is presented as a country that needs to be consulted and courted, according to an uncritical reading of Boiko Borisov's statements: Monitor Agency, „Борисов и Путин обсъдиха енергийните проекти на територията на страната ни“ [Borisov and Putin Discussed the Energy Projects on Bulgarian Territory], March 5, 2018.

¹⁹⁰ For example, harsh evaluative rhetoric used against Irina Nedeva, Stefan Tafrov, Todor Zaharov – who are characterized as "servants" of the Bulgarian oligarchy and fake news factory in the face of Ivo Prokopiev. Personal accusations are presented as evidence of their "lowly lies", "manipulations" and "slander": Monitor Agency, „Пеевски клеветен с фалшиви новини от говорители на олигархията“ [Peevski Slandered with Fake News from the Oligarchy's Spokespersons], January 5, 2018.

¹⁹¹ The quantitative analysis includes tracking the intensity of the occurrence of key Russia-related words through the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool. The keywords identified in relation to Russian disinformation include *Russian army*, *Crimea*, *Putin/Lavrov*, *Russia*, and *NATO*. For the Bulgaria section two additional keywords have been identified: *Bulgarian Presidency* (and *Western Balkans*), as well as *Crimea* (and *Ukraine*). This analysis follows the same general methodology outlined in the qualitative part of the report but focuses on the volume produced by the four media outlet types on a particular topic of interest and examines their patterns of activity over time.

Figure 16. Abnormally high and low coverage of Crimea on Bulgarian media outlets

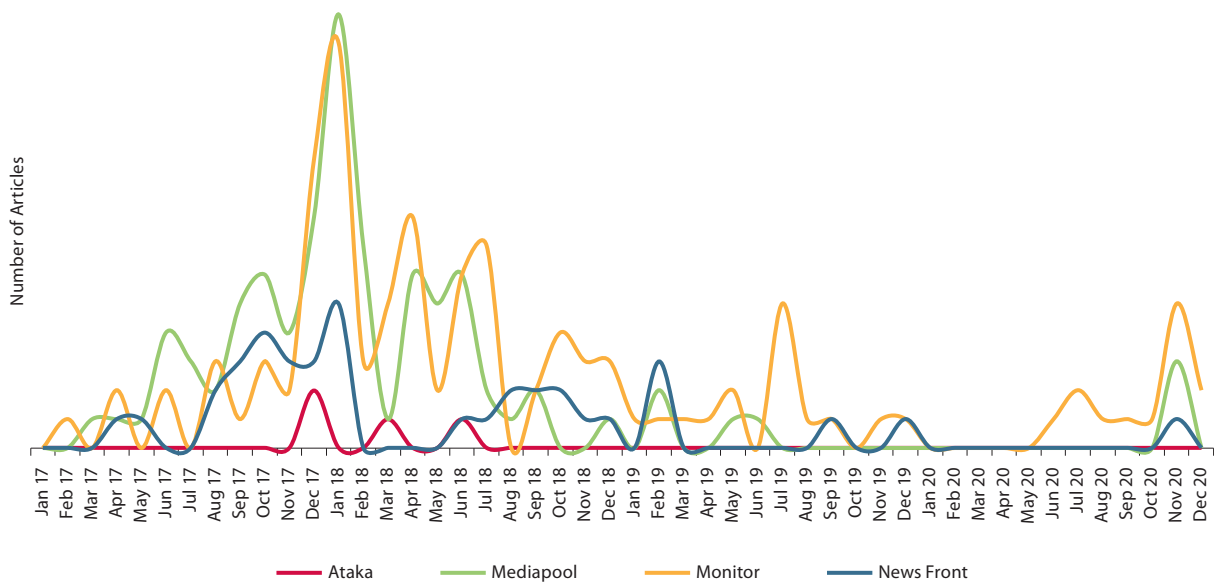


Note: Number of articles containing the key words "Ukraine" and "Crimea".
Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

activity of the Russia-owned news portal mirror closely the peaks in activity of Mediapool on the topic, with the main difference being the much higher volume of articles produced by News Front. Surprisingly, there is little to no activity by the other two outlets on the topic. This might indicate a self-imposed censorship. While the topic is clearly important to Bulgarian for-

eign policy, these two outlets chose to disengage. In real terms, this meant that while they did not peddle Russian disinformation, they also did not stand up for the national or the European position. In the case of the broader daily (Monitor) it could also reflect the official government position of Bulgaria, which has been a subdued follower of the EU stance on Ukraine and

Figure 17. Russia-owned outlet's low interest in Bulgaria's first EU Presidency



Note: Volume of articles containing key phrases "Bulgarian Presidency" and "Western Balkans".
Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

Crimea, while carefully avoiding confrontation with Russia.¹⁹²

On the other hand, topics of great local interest such as EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and the Bulgarian advocacy for the beginning of these negotiations during its EU Presidency was much less covered by News Front in comparison to the two national dailies. Yet, News Front was much more active on these overlapping national-interest topics, than the broader (pro-government) daily Monitor was in regard to covering topics related to *Crimea* and *Ukraine*. In addition, the qualitative content analysis confirmed that News Front is, in general, more aggressively pro-Russian across all topics, including ones of Bulgarian national interest. At the same time, the Bulgarian partisan daily is also staunchly pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-NATO, while the broader (pro-government) daily trails the careful (pro-Russia and pro-EU/-NATO) balancing act of the government in Sofia. Thus, on balance, **pro-Russian outlets score a quantitative win**, which if picked up by the search engines and social media algorithms could further reinforce pro-Russian narratives among the Bulgarian public.

CHINA PRESENCE

Similar to Russia, China has also been growing its economic and political presence in the SEE region over the past decade.¹⁹³ In Bulgaria, China has become more active by leveraging the same political-economic networks that have enabled the penetration of Russian disinformation. In addition, **China's media influence** has grown on the back of the dissemination of Chinese content through bilateral agreements with local outlets and exchange visits for Bulgarian journalists. The expansion of the Chinese foothold in the telecommunications and digital distribution businesses has also contributed to the regime's growing media influence in the region.

¹⁹² In the case of the partisan outlet Ataka, the lower overall activity of the web-site on the covered topics could be due to the focus of the media group on its TV content. Ataka online's website activity is generally lower. In the second half of 2020, the website was discontinued and transferred to Facebook.

¹⁹³ In 2018, Sofia hosted the 16+1 summit which was viewed with suspicion by Bulgaria's EU partners, especially as the high-level meeting came on the heels of the rotating Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. A key concern was surrounding China's ability to sow division within the EU (i.e., by separately meeting with the CEE member states) in sensitive policy areas testing the Union's ability for joint action – ranging from the single market to foreign investment vetting.

Peel, M., "Bulgaria to Host Contentious China Summit," *Financial Times*, May 18, 2018.

In 2018, the Union of Bulgarian Journalists signed a cooperation agreement with the One-Belt One-Road Journalist Forum.¹⁹⁴ The key priority singled out by the Chinese delegates focused on the expansion of the information flow between Chinese and Bulgarian media. This prioritized information exchange was particularly related to increasing the presence of China and Bulgaria in each nations' media by boosting the quantity of publications about each country in their respective news sources and establishing a general relationship of knowledge-sharing through student exchanges.¹⁹⁵

In terms of the dissemination of Chinese content, a few major examples stand out. *China Today* has become a recent addition to the Bulgarian newspaper market, focusing entirely on Chinese domestic and foreign policy developments. The editor-in-chief of the newspaper is Ms. Svetlana Sharenkova, who, as previously noted, is a prominent member of the BSP and renowned Russophile, owning and publishing a number of pro-Russian newspapers in Bulgaria. Moreover, the chair of China Today's editorial board happens to be the last head of the political police under the Bulgarian communist security service prior to 1989. Additionally, one of the largest Bulgarian dailies, 24 chasa, maintains a rubric specially dedicated to China and composed of articles that extensively cite Radio China International. For its part, BNT has concluded a cooperation agreement with China Central Television (CCTV), whereby content sharing features have been included as a component of the bilateral collaboration.¹⁹⁶ In 2017, BNT also joined the Belt and Road News Alliance (BRNA), which promotes news exchange, co-production of programs, technological support between CCTV News Content (CCTV+), and media organizations from states involved in the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁹⁷ Due to its partnership with CCTV+, in 2019 BNT won a BRNA award for best editing of the year.¹⁹⁸ Bulgarian TV Channel 3 has also

¹⁹⁴ Bulgarian News Agency, „СБЖ – партньор на журналистическия форум 'Един пояс – един път'“ [The Union of Bulgarian Journalists – Partner of the One-Belt One-Road Journalist Forum], June 28, 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Chernо i byalo, „Изпълнителният секретар на Общокитайската асоциация на журналистите: „Очертават се няколко основни приоритета за бъдещото ни сътрудничество“ [The Executive Secretary of the All-China Journalists Association: A Few Key Priorities about Our Future Cooperation], March 5, 2019.

¹⁹⁶ Zornitza Zlateva, „Шефът на БНТ отрича да е получавал данъчен акт“ [BNT's Boss Denies Receiving Tax Violation Notice], *Mediapool*, March 31, 2003.

¹⁹⁷ BNT, „БНТ договори партньорство с китайската медийна група Shanghai United Media Group“ [BNT Agreed to Partner with Shanghai United Media Group], n.d.

¹⁹⁸ BNT, „БНТ спечели журналистическа награда за сътрудничеството си с китайската CCTV+“ [BNT Won an Award for Its Cooperation with China's CCTV+], September 17, 2019.

finalized an agreement for content sharing with China Media Group (the predominant Chinese state company for radio and television broadcasting).¹⁹⁹

Local journalistic networks that promote media cooperation with China have also facilitated the dissemination of Chinese disinformation narratives. A case in point is the spread of pro-Chinese/Russian and anti-Western messages in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Outlets, such as China Today, that are published under Bulgarian-language editions of Kremlin-owned media (including News Front and Russia Beyond) have been most active. They have promoted **overlapping Russian-Chinese positions** on international affairs. This reflects the more general pattern²⁰⁰ of coordination between Moscow and Beijing's disinformation strategies globally.

Chinese propaganda has claimed that authoritarian regimes are more capable of dealing with the virus and the consequent health and socio-economic crises than Western democracies. An example often given has been the Chinese ability to mobilize the country's industrial complex for the massive production of protective masks.²⁰¹ Another commonly promoted narrative is that the pandemic is catalyzing changes in the international order, including the end of US hegemony. In contrast, the Chinese media has claimed that Russia and China have now obtained a more prominent status in global affairs not least because of their altruistic supply of medical equipment and services to countries in need.²⁰² China also promotes the notion that China, Russia and Europe can forge a new form of cooperation to build a global economic model alternative to the American one.²⁰³ With regard to Central

and Eastern Europe, pro-Chinese media outlets have portrayed China as aiming to influence CEE governments in supporting the role of the World Health Organization and increasing international cooperation for joint prevention and control.²⁰⁴

The growth of the Chinese media footprint in Bulgaria has happened in parallel to the increase in Chinese involvement in the telecommunications sector. The technological company Huawei has played the most prominent role. It ranks among the two biggest firms in the Bulgarian phone retail market, with roughly 1.5 million devices sold annually.²⁰⁵ In 2019, Huawei became a member of the Bulgarian Confederation of Employers and Industrialists, which unites and represents the interests of the largest businesses in the country.²⁰⁶

Huawei has also cooperated with all Bulgarian telecoms. Bulgaria's largest telecommunications company, BTC, has established a strategic partnership with the Chinese firm in the field of cloud technologies. Also, Huawei's biggest deal in Bulgaria was linked to the supply of Telenor's (the largest Bulgarian mobile phone operator) 4G equipment in 2014.²⁰⁷ In the development of the 5G network, two of the three major telecom operators in Bulgaria cooperated, at least partially, with Huawei for the use of Chinese equipment.²⁰⁸

¹⁹⁹ Kanal 3, „Канал 3 пред договор с втората медийна корпорация в Китай“ [Channel 3 about to Sign Contract with China's Second Biggest Media Corporation], December 5, 2019.

²⁰⁰ European External Action Service, „Eas Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the Covid-19/Coronavirus Pandemic (Updated 2 – 22 April),“ 2020.

²⁰¹ Palikrusheva, P., „СМИ: Плановата икономика е причината Китай да пребори коронавируса“ [The Media: The Planned Economy Is the Reason Why China Is Tackling the Coronavirus], *News Front*, March 14, 2020.

²⁰² Russia Beyond Bulgaria, „Хърватският Advance: никой на Запад не може да нарече Русия, Китай и Куба 'врагове' [Croatia's Advance: No One in the West Can Call Russia, China and Cuba 'Enemies'],“ 2020; Todorov, T., „Коронакризата“ подкопа трите стълба на световната мощ на САЩ“ [The Coronacrisis Has Eroded the Three Pillars of the US's World Power], *Vestnik Ataka*, 2020.; Danilov, I. „САЩ губят „вирусната надпревара“ и световното лидерство“ [The US Will Lose the 'Virus Race' and Global Leadership], *Vestnik Ataka*, 2020.

²⁰³ News Front, „Грандиозно разобличение: Коронавирусът е попаднал във Франция не от Китай“ [Grand Exposure: The Coronavirus in France Did Not Come from China], May 3, 2020.

²⁰⁴ China Today, „Китай – ЦИЕ: Здравеопазването – нова сфера за развитие на сътрудничеството“ [Chine-CEE: Healthcare – a New Sphere for the Development of Cooperation], 2020.

²⁰⁵ Zapryanov, I. and Nikolov, K., „Новата дигитална война“ [The New Digital War], *Capital Daily*, May 23, 2019.

²⁰⁶ Mihaylov, V., „Huawei Bulgaria стана част от КРИБ“ [Huawei Bulgaria Has Become Part of KRIB], *Fakti.Bg*, June 7, 2019.

²⁰⁷ Zapryanov, I. and Nikolov, K., „Новата дигитална война“ [The New Digital War], *Capital Daily*, May 23, 2019.

²⁰⁸ Telenor.bg, „Теленор започва своите 5G тестове в България с първия медицински преглед, извършен през новата технология“ [Telenor Is Starting Its 5G Tests in Bulgaria with the First Medical Check-up Carried out through the New Technology], July 22, 2019; Vavova, M., „Vivacom тества 5G в реална мрежа“ [Vivacom Tested 5G in Am Active Network], *Economic.Bg*, October 31, 2019.

CROATIA

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

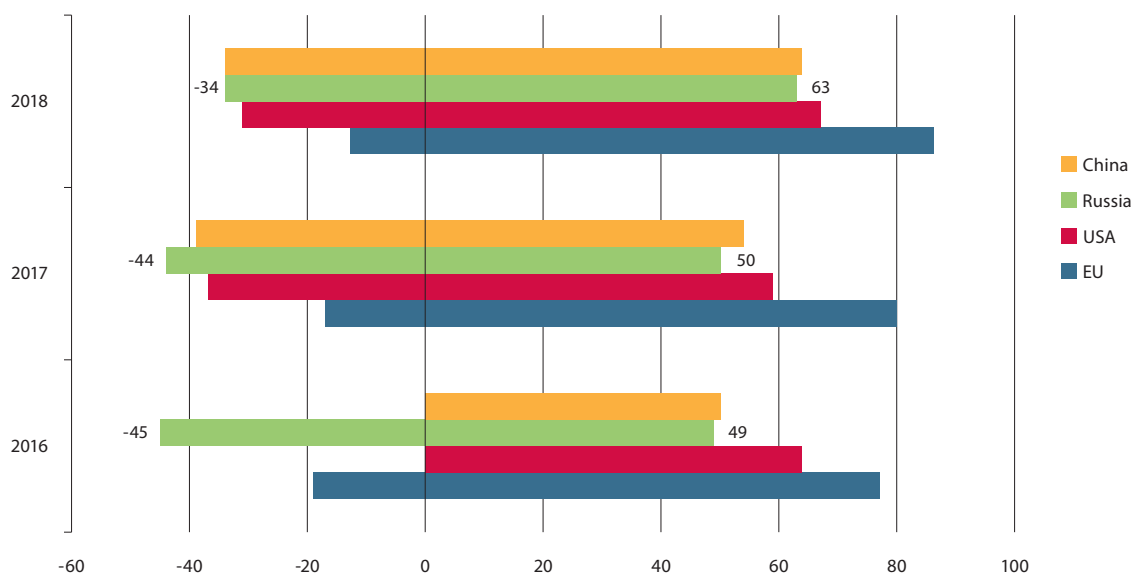
Public opinion in Croatia is less predisposed to easy acceptance of pro-Russian narratives than the rest of SEE. Despite the increasing economic ties between Croatia and Russia, the country remains politically and culturally-linked to the West. This can also be seen in the official statements and actions of Croatian authorities, who have often expressed open criticism toward the Kremlin's actions.²⁰⁹

The Croatian public opinion of Russia is gradually improving. At the same time, the majority of citizens still have a more favorable view of Western states and institutions. Despite positive perceptions of the EU growing, the Croats' expectations for the future indicate

that they foresee an **increase in Russian and Chinese influence**. The US is expected to remain an important player on the international political stage but with diminishing influence.

Regular public opinion surveys consistently show that **Croatian citizens harbor a favorable attitude towards the European Union**.²¹¹ From December 2017 to April 2019, support for EU membership increased from 61% to 67%, while the number of those who do not approve of Croatia's EU membership decreased from 33% to 27%. This overwhelmingly positive view of the EU is the result of the perceived benefits offered by the Union: stability and a high quality of life. An additional advantage of the EU is that it presents a strong bulwark against Russian influence in the country.

Figure 18. Positive and negative opinions of EU, USA, Russia, and China in Croatia



Source: Special Eurobarometer "Future of Europe".²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ For example: Government of the Republic of Croatia, "Predsjednik Vlade u Kijevu: Podupiremo ukidanje viznog režima za Ukrajinu, njezin europski put i mirnu reintegraciju" [Prime Minister in Kiev: We support the abolition of the visa regime for Ukraine, its European path and peaceful reintegration], November 21, 2016; Jutarnji list, "Plenković na zagrebačkom summitu izrazio zabrinutost zbog ruske akcije u kerčkom tjesnacu 'To je neprihvatljivo i protivi se međunarodnom pravu'" [Plenković expresses concern about russian action in kerch Strait at Zagreb

Summit 'This is unacceptable and contrary to international law', December 4, 2018.

²¹⁰ EC, Directorate-General for Communication, *Special Eurobarometer 451: Future of Europe, 2016; Special Eurobarometer 467: Future of Europe, 2017; Special Eurobarometer 479: Future of Europe, 2018.*

²¹¹ Ipsos Puls, *Istraživanja javnog mnijenja (2013-2019)* [Public opinion polls (2013 – 2019)], Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia.

Croatians also feel that the quality of life in the EU is better than in Russia, China, and the US.²¹² A majority of Croatians (64%) think that **the EU provides a higher standard of living than Russia**. Only a quarter of Croatian respondents believe that China offers a better quality of life than the EU, with 67% holding the opposite view. Opinions about quality of life in the EU versus the US are more balanced – 50% of those polled felt that life is better in the EU, while 41% answered that the US offers a better quality of life.

Just as Croatians look towards the EU for stability and economic opportunities, survey data suggests that **they look towards NATO for security**. Several different surveys carried out over recent years have shown a consistent approval for NATO, with a solid majority of Croatian citizens expressing the belief that the Alliance keeps them safe. A total of 61% of respondents generally agree that NATO membership is good for Croatia, while 25% disagree.²¹³ In March 2020, NATO presented the results of a survey of almost 29,000 citizens across all 29 NATO Allies and North Macedonia. A majority of Croatians (two-thirds) agreed with the claim that Croatia's NATO membership "makes it less likely that a foreign nation will attack our country", while only 14% disagreed. If they were presented with a referendum on whether to stay in NATO or leave, 63% of respondents stated that they would vote to stay, with just 17% choosing to leave the Alliance.²¹⁴

On the other hand, there is an important split in the Croatian public opinion regarding the specific issue of expelling Russian spies from the country. An April 2018 poll revealed that 74.8% of Croatian citizens opposed their government's decision to expel a Russian diplomat following the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the UK.²¹⁵ The participants in the poll were not asked to provide reasoning for these attitudes. Such attitudes facilitate, to a certain extent, Russia's cognitive capture of these countries.

²¹² EC, Directorate-General for Communication, "Factsheet by Country: Croatia," in *Special Eurobarometer 479: Future of Europe*, 2018.

²¹³ Lenkić, Š., *Percepcija uloge Hrvatske u NATO savezu i suvremenim geopolitičkim odnosima u svijetu*. [Perception of the role of Croatia in NATO and contemporary relations in the world], University of Zadar, 2016.

²¹⁴ NATO, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2019*, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2020.

²¹⁵ Panjkota, P., "RTL prvi objavljuje istraživanje: što Hrvati misle o protjerivanju ruskog diplomata i Kolindinom pozivu Putinu?" [RTL is the first to publish a survey: what do Croats think about the expulsion of the Russian diplomat and Kolinda's call to Putin?], RTL, April 8, 2018.

MEDIA FOOTPRINT AND INSTRUMENTS

There are no direct Russian investments in the Croatian media sector. Only two Russian-owned companies are operating in the country, both of which are inactive and insignificant in size. Rideamus d.o.o. is a video production company owned by Alexander Zhigalkin. It has no capital and was only active for a single year, in 2015, when it had around EUR 200,000 in income and a net loss of around EUR 90,000. The most likely owner is a Russian TV director and actor.²¹⁶ The main business of the second company, Zivotni ciklus d.o.o., is music recording. It has never had any income reported but operates around EUR 60,000 worth of capital. It is owned by Konstantin Kaminskiy. Neither of these two companies have been active in Croatia's news media market.

The Russian indirect media footprint is channeled through the ownership of the local TV station, Z1, based in the Croatian capital, Zagreb. Z1 is owned by the Pevac retail chain, whose largest shareholder is Pavao Vujnovac. Vujnovac is also the owner of Prvo Plinarsko Društvo (PPD), Gazprom's main intermediary seller in the Croatian natural gas market. In 2017, PPD signed a 10-year gas supply agreement with Gazprom. Peter Schatz,²¹⁷ a Hungarian oligarch considered to be an ally of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, had also previously shown an interest in acquiring the TV channel.²¹⁸ Schatz acquired media outlets in Slovenia and North Macedonia and has used them to amplify the alt-right narratives of political parties whose foreign policy goals have often been aligned with those of Hungary and Russia.²¹⁹

Like most local TV stations in Croatia, Z1 Televizija is heavily dependent on public funds. The Agency for Electronic Media disburses funds through an open call on a bi-annual basis and publicly announces how they are distributed. But a lot of funds directed at the media are also distributed by regional and local authorities (there are 576 regional and local government units

²¹⁶ Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Aleksandr Zhigalkin.

²¹⁷ Jelinic, B., "Orbánova medijska hobotnica preuzima Z1" [Orbán's media octopus takes over Z1], *Nacional News Corporation*, February 19, 2019.

²¹⁸ Jovanovska, M. et al., "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans," OCCRP, 2018.

²¹⁹ Kingsley, P., "Safe in Hungary, Viktor Orban Pushes His Message Across Europe," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2018; Juhász, A., *Does the Orbán government have an agenda for Southeast Europe?*, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Office for Southeast Europe, 2019; Erdelyi, P., "What happened in the Hungarian media could happen in your country too," *Euronews*, November 21, 2019.

throughout Croatia) and the data on those is largely unavailable. Several noted cases indicate significant local government influence on local media outlets. Z1 is regularly awarded grants from the Fund for the Promotion of Pluralism and Diversity of Electronic Media, operated by the Agency.²²⁰ Since the conservative HDZ has returned to power in 2015, Z1 has started to receive substantial funds from the national budget. Data by the Croatian Ministry of Finance reveals that in the 2016 – 2019 period Z1 received a total of HRK 2,267,785 (around EUR 300,000).²²¹ This figure is in sharp contrast to 2015, when Z1 received only HRK 9,287.75 (around EUR 1,200) from the national budget. Most of these subsidies were in the form of promotional and advertising contracts from several government ministries.²²²

The main media outlets, propping up Russian disinformation narratives, can be traced to **fringe online media**. It remains unclear which of these fringe outlets maintain actual ties to Russia and which just aim to cash-in on the internet traffic achieved by disseminating “fake news”.²²³ The ownership of fringe news websites is largely untransparent. This opaque status-quo is benefitted by the lack of any real oversight from the media regulator. The members of the Electronic Media Council are political appointees, put forward by the government and confirmed in Parliament. There have been numerous cases in which the Council chose not to act on its regulatory powers, ignoring cases of misappropriation of public funds, dissemination of disinformation, and hate speech.^{224, 225} Such cases are mostly

found in the content provision of local radio and TV stations, utilized by municipalities to facilitate outreach activities. Additionally, according to the *Croatian Media Law*, media companies operating in Croatia must be registered with the Agency for Electronic Media and are obligated to regularly publish ownership data. This provision is often ignored, especially in the online sphere. There are plenty of websites marketing themselves as news sources and publishing content without being registered as an online media outlet or making their ownership information publicly available. The Electronic Media Council has never issued any sanctions to such media content providers. The question of ownership is further complicated by the fact that the *Croatian Company Law* allows for secret ownership stakes in companies registered by Croatian court authorities.

It is important to point out that Russian disinformation and propaganda in the Croatian public space have also been distributed by **online media outlets operating in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro**. Since all of these countries share a common language, articles containing disinformation published in any of the neighboring countries could also end up being shared in the Croatian social media space.

Additionally, Russian media influence is also exercised through **leveraging the media’s advertising revenue**. This process is informal, yet, potentially, very pervasive and effective. The small size of the Croatian advertising market means that large advertisers can influence media content more easily than in bigger markets. For years, the largest advertiser in Croatia has been Agrokor (recently rebranded as Fortenova Group). It is the largest company in Croatia and the largest supermarket chain in the Western Balkans. Fortenova is majority-owned by Russian or Russian-dependent firms. Russian state banks, Sberbank and VTB, hold 46.5% of the company’s shares, and PPD has another 6.4%. Former Agrokor owner Ivica Todorić was known to use his position as the largest advertiser in the Croatian market to influence media content.²²⁶ The Fortenova group is still the most relevant actor on the Croatian advertising market. The Croatian Association of Market Communication Companies claims that the primary reason why the market shrunk by 1.4% in 2017 was Agrokor’s bankruptcy, which led to the restructuring of the holding. Fortenova holds be-

²²⁰ Electronic Media Agency, [Fond za pluralizam](#) (2013 – 2020), [Pluralism fund (2013 – 2020)].

²²¹ Republic of Croatia Ministry of Finance State Treasury, [Pregled izvršenja državnog proračuna po dobavljačima za proračunsku godinu](#) (2016 – 2019) [Review of the execution of the state budget by suppliers for the budget year (search by company name and Personal Identifier Number) (2016 – 2019)].

²²² Data on public procurement is available in theory but in reality the data is barely usable due to it being largely unsearchable. But data on expenditures from the national budget are available through a searchable interface, allowing the public to see which companies received state funds, the amount they received, the body that transferred the funds, and the budget line upon which the funds were allocated. This data has only been available since 2013: Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Finance, [Review of the execution of the state budget by suppliers for the budget year](#).

²²³ It is hard to assess the scope of media outlets’ ties to Russia since such information is rarely published or discussed in the Croatian media and neither is it the subject of investigative studies.

²²⁴ Mirković, N. and Žagar, D., [Uska grla hrvatskih radija](#) [Bottlenecks of Croatian radios], Gong, 2013; Simičević, H. “Kako sam odbila lažirati radijske emisije” [How I refused to fake radio shows], *H-Alter*, February 21, 2013.

²²⁵ Arbutina, P. and Opačić, T., “Lokalne fašistovizije” [Local fascists], *Novosti*, December 24, 2016.

²²⁶ Paparella, S., “Gazda” je gospodarstvo medijima” [The “Boss” dominated the media], *Croatian Journalists’ Association*, December 22, 2017.

tween 8-9% of the total media advertising market in the country.²²⁷

Emerging as the most successful privately-owned company in Croatia, with yearly revenue exceeding a billion euro, PPD also became an important actor on the Croatian advertising market. It placed native-language advertisements and sponsored entire sections on the official websites of Croatia's leading daily newspaper publishers.^{228, 229} Another company, which can serve as an important tool in influencing the Croatian print media, is Tisak: the largest newsstand operator in the country, holding a monopoly over the print distribution market.²³⁰ The Russia-controlled Fortenova Group is as a majority shareholder in Tisak. Even if these powerful economic interests do not directly try to influence editorial policies, their cognitive capture impact on journalists and editors could intimidate them and sway their writing on Russia-related issues.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

The content analysis of Russian disinformation in Croatia focuses on the country's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as North Macedonia's (and Albania's) NATO and EU accession. The content analysis reviews four media outlets: three with differentiated degrees of distance from (pro-)Russian groups and interests and one independent, used as control variable.²³¹

- The only directly Kremlin-owned news source operating in Croatia is **Russia Beyond Croatia**.
- **Direktno.hr** is a partisan outlet with a national reach. According to an investigative report by the

²²⁷ Croatian Association of Communications Agencies, *HURA Media AdEx medijska potrošnja* [HURA Media AdEx Advertising Expenditures], 2019.

²²⁸ Jutarnji list, "Želimo svijet u kojem daroviti stvaraju, a potrebiti dobivaju pažnju i pomoć" [We want a world where the gifted create and the needy receive attention and help], *Hanza Media*, June 14, 2018; Večernji list, "PPD – dobra priča iz Slavonije" [PPD – a good story from Slavonia], August 30, 2018; Večernji list, "Energia naturalis – regionalni uspjeh domaće kompanije" [Energia naturalis – a regional success of a domestic company], December 1, 2018; Večernji list, "Dan dobrih djela i odlične zabave u Vukovaru!" [A day of good deeds and great fun in Vukovar!], October 22, 2019.

²²⁹ Jutarnji list, *Potpuni vodič za održivo kućanstvo* [A complete guide to sustainable household], *Hanza Media*, 2019.

²³⁰ Tomašević, S., "Tko drži monopol u prodaji novina" [Who holds the monopoly in the sale of newspapers], in *Novinar 11-12/2011. – 1-2/2012.*, Croatian Journalists' Association, p. 15.

²³¹ For an overview of the methodology see Annex.

Croatian independent online news outlet **Telegram**, it was launched with covert funding by the influential businessman Josip Petrović, an HDZ insider and Hungarian oil company MOL's lobbyist who is close to the previous party president Tomislav Karamarko. HDZ's position has consistently been pro-EU and NATO, even though the party received significant funding from Gazprom's intermediary PPD under the party's previous leadership.²³²

- **Večernji list** is one of the two Croatian dailies with broad circulation, which is owned by Styria,²³³ an Austrian Catholic foundation, it, hence, has a conservative (pro-governmental) leaning. While there is no documented proof that would suggest it is formally or indirectly related to Russia, Večernji list has been known to circulate narratives supported by Russia and promoted by outlets such as RT.
- **Jutarnji list** is deemed Večernji list's liberal counterpart, owned by the well-known Croatian lawyer Marijan Hanzeković.²³⁴

As regards to **commonalities of narration and style**, all three (pro-Russian) outlets try to communicate a measure of disillusionment with the West as a source of rising tensions in the EU and the Balkans. Russia Beyond Croatia largely overlooks local issues and the North Macedonian situation. It promotes a single consistent narrative regarding NATO and the EU. Whereas its primary focus is on Russia's declared military superiority and dominant energy position.^{235, 236}

Jutarnji, Večernji, and Direktno.hr expressed concern regarding the potentially destabilizing effects of North Macedonia's name-change and tumultuous accession process, stressing the urgency of the matter and the lack of political will to resolve it. They commended Croatia's role in expediting North Macedonia's EU and NATO accession. All outlets expressed optimism about its Presidency of the EU Council (Russia Beyond Croatia in terms of strengthened relations with the Kremlin; Jutarnji in terms of local economic improvements).

²³² Rameša, R., "The Croatian energy company you (probably) didn't hear about but you should: Prvo Plinarsko Društvo," *Medium*, October 18, 2018.

²³³ Styria Media Group, *Vecernji list – Media engine of modern Croatia*.

²³⁴ Milekić, S., "Journalists Welcome Takeover of Croatia Media Giant," *BalkanInsight*, November 25, 2014.

²³⁵ Russia Beyond Croatia, "Najveće zemlje EU uspostavljaju zračni most s Kinom zahvaljujući ruskim supertransporterima An-124" [Largest EU countries are establishing an air bridge to China thanks to Russian supertransporters An-124], April 1, 2020.

²³⁶ Russia Beyond Croatia, "Njemački mediji: Europa ne može preživjeti bez ruskog plina" [German media: Europe cannot survive without Russian gas], January 31, 2019.

In regard to **differentiations in narration and style**, *Russia Beyond Croatia* is most consistent and straightforward in its approach. Russia is represented as stronger or superior to the West in all of the analyzed articles. Western institutions are discussed only when elaborating on Russia's supposed superiority to them. The rhetorical comparisons between Western and Russian military prowess ("Why are NATO ships turning around and leaving Crimea with their business unfinished?"; "Video: Let's check how a steel door handles Russian and NATO bullets") suggest that Russia is unrivaled in its military readiness and technology and well-prepared for any potential Western aggression.^{237, 238} NATO and the US are depicted as resorting to Russian-manufactured equipment in order to maintain military parity ("Special anti-terrorist units from NATO countries will wear Russian tactical uniforms"), a comical image meant to humiliate the West.²³⁹ The media outlet also stresses the abundance and indispensability of Russian energy resources and portrays the country as a powerful player in the global market, a key ally that cannot afford to be overlooked.^{240, 241} *Russia Beyond Croatia* further warns of US complacency as the ostensible reason for the country's eventual downfall.²⁴² The outlet also emphasizes Russia's role as a crucial global player whose mediation and assistance helps to advance regional geopolitics.²⁴³

For its part, *Direktno.hr* promotes pro-Russian narratives that serve and are in line with HDZ party interest. This is particularly evident in the outlet's calling

for tighter economic and cultural cooperation between Croatia and Russia. Extremely negative coverage of North Macedonia's pro-Western politicians was also observed in analyzed *Direktno.hr* articles,²⁴⁴ as well as openly anti-NATO narratives.²⁴⁵ For instance, *Direktno.hr* exhibits a somewhat pessimistic outlook regarding North Macedonia's European trajectory, highlighting the problems surrounding its name change, corruption, and allegations of war crimes.²⁴⁶ Like *Russia Beyond*, *Direktno.hr* portrays America as a destabilizing force with ulterior motives aimed to "strategically take over South Eastern Europe".²⁴⁷ NATO is presented as a precarious alliance on which Croatia cannot rely. Instead, a strong Croatian army is the best guarantee of stability and peace in the Western Balkans. In this respect, Russia offers a crucial partnership that may benefit both parties.^{248, 249} Here, *Direktno* stresses Croatia's potential as an important regional geopolitical player, with Zagreb's EU Presidency being a chance to improve ties with both Russia and the EU.

In contrast, *Večernji list* was not found to consistently and straightforwardly promote pro-Russian narratives. Unlike *Direktno* and *Russia Beyond Croatia*, *Večernji* stresses NATO's role as a pillar of stability in the Western Balkans but maintains a critical tone towards the West's seeming lack of political will to integrate the Western Balkan countries and, thus, bring stability

²³⁷ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Zašto se NATO-ovi brodovi okreću i odlaze od Krima neobavljena posla?" [Why are NATO ships turning around and leaving Crimea with their business unfinished?], March 17, 2020.

²³⁸ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Video: Provjerimo kako čelična vrata podnose ruske i NATO metke" [Video: Let's check how a steel door handles Russian and NATO bullets], October 11, 2018.

²³⁹ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Specijalne protuterorističke jedinice iz zemalja NATO-a će nositi ruske taktičke uniforme" [Special anti-terrorist units from NATO countries will wear Russian tactical uniforms], March 22, 2019.

²⁴⁰ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Njemački mediji: Europa ne može preživjeti bez ruskog plina" [German media: Europe cannot survive without Russian gas], January 31, 2019.

²⁴¹ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Pobjeđuje li Rusija Ameriku i Europu na svjetskom tržištu žitarica?" [Is Russia defeating America and Europe on world grain market?], May 7, 2018.

²⁴² *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Objavljene znanstvene prognoze globalnog zagrijavanja: SAD glavna žrtva, Rusija na dobitku" [Global warming scientific forecasts: U.S. to be the main casualty, Russia will profit], September 26, 2018.

²⁴³ *Russia Beyond Croatia*, "Najveće zemlje EU uspostavljaju zračni most s Kinom zahvaljujući ruskim supertransporterima An-124" [Largest EU countries are establishing an air bridge to China thanks to Russian supertransporters An-124], April 11, 2020.

²⁴⁴ Opačak, M., "Šef kampanje makedonskih socijaldemokrata Miroslav Stojanovski umiješan u ratne zločine u Vukovaru?" [Campaign director for Macedonian social-democrats Miroslav Stojanovski involved in war crimes in Vukovar?], *Direktno*, October 22, 2019.

²⁴⁵ *Direktno*, "Putin: Rusija želi surađivati s NATO-om na rješavanju međunarodnih problema" [Putin: Russia wants to cooperate with NATO in solving international problems], December 3, 2019; *Direktno*, "'Vrh svijeta' postaje nova žarišna točka za sukob NATO-a i Rusije" [The 'top of the world' is becoming a new focal point for the NATO-Russia conflict], January 26, 2019.

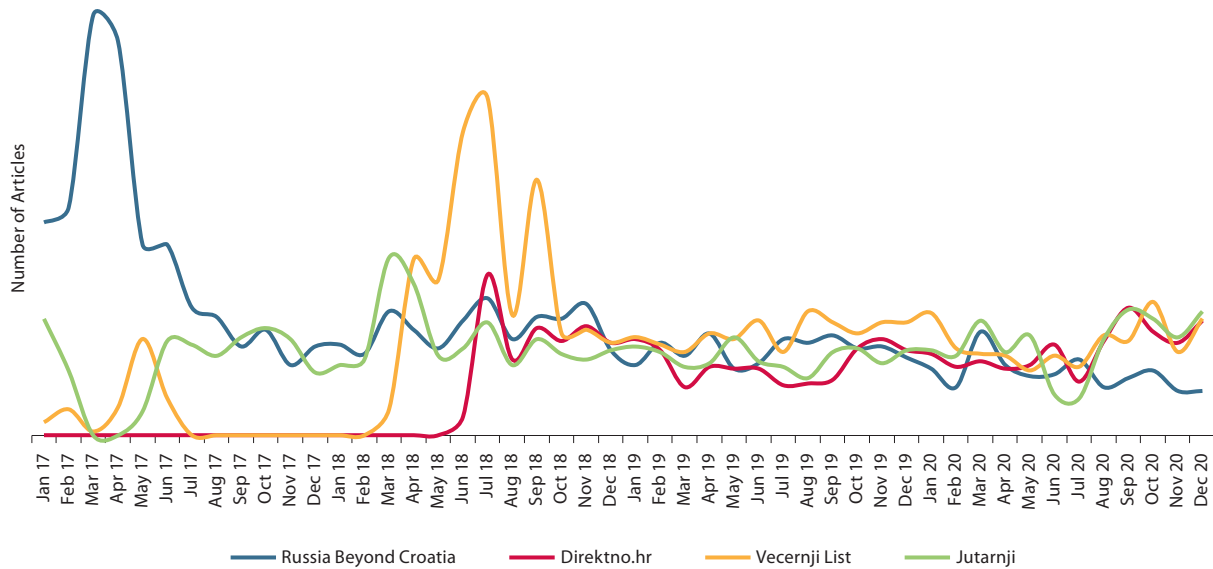
²⁴⁶ Opačak, M., "Šef kampanje makedonskih socijaldemokrata Miroslav Stojanovski umiješan u ratne zločine u Vukovaru?" [Campaign director for Macedonian social-democrats Miroslav Stojanovski involved in war crimes in Vukovar?], *Direktno*, October 22, 2019.

²⁴⁷ *Direktno*, "Prekranje granica američki je visokorizični projekt strateškog zauzimanja jugoistočne Europe" [The redrawing of borders is a high-risk U.S. project to strategically take over South-eastern Europe], September 9, 2018.

²⁴⁸ *Direktno*, "Video Azimov: Odnosi Hrvatske i Rusije mogu jačati, možemo postati strateški važni partneri!" [Video Azimov: Relations between Croatia and Russia can grow stronger, we can become strategically important partners!], November 20, 2019.

²⁴⁹ *Direktno*, "Nakon što je Putin javno opalio političku šamarčinu Vučiću, Hrvatskoj se dodatno otvaraju vrata za Majku Rusiju" [After Putin publicly slammed Vucic, a new door towards Mother Russia are opened for Croatia], October 5, 2018.

Figure 19. Coverage of Russia-related topics in Croatia



Note: Number of articles containing the keyword "Russia".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

to the region.²⁵⁰ The West is portrayed as having lost the moral ground as North Macedonia met the accession conditions stipulated by the EU and NATO, only to then be betrayed by "hypocritical" Western institutions.²⁵¹ These moral accusations suggest a deliberate and nefarious power-play in regional politics: France's actions are described as "wrong and shameful". Even further, it draws unjustified parallels between President Macron's treatment of North Macedonia and Donald Trump's treatment of Kurds in Syria – an illustration of seemingly unnecessary mass suffering.²⁵² Večernji

list also highlights local Macedonian opposition to the name change. On this topic, the implication is that the name change, despite opening Skopje's door to the EU and NATO, amounts to national treason and a weakening of the state, leading to dangerous internal polarization.²⁵³ Večernji additionally emphasizes Croatia's role as a crucial geopolitical player amidst the threat of rising Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence in the Western Balkans: US and EU inaction in SEE means that the future of the Western Balkan countries rests on Croatian diplomacy.

²⁵⁰ Haidar Diab, H., "Makedonci slave NATO: Za godinu dana postaje 30. članica" [Macedonians celebrate NATO: It will become the 30th member in a year], *Večernji list*, February 7, 2019; Romac, D., "Put zapadnog Balkana u EU nakon Macronova 'šamara' ide preko Zagreba" [The path of the Western Balkans to the EU after Macron's 'slap' goes through Zagreb], *Večernji list*, November 9, 2019; Pavković, J., "Zašto Zapad napušta Balkan" [Why the West is leaving the Balkans], *Večernji list*, October 22, 2019; Krasnec, T., "Hrvatska predložila bezuvjetno započinjanje pregovora sa Sjevernom Makedonijom i Albanijom" [Croatia has proposed unconditional start of negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania], *Večernji list*, March 17, 2020; Haidar Diab, H., "Sjeverna Makedonija – gubitak identiteta ili put prema EU?" [Northern Macedonia – loss of identity or path to the EU?], *Večernji list*, September 29, 2018; Krasnec, T., "Francuski pokušaj nove blokade pregovora Sjeverne Makedonije pogrešan je i sramotan" [France's attempt at a new blockade of Northern Macedonia's negotiations is wrong and shameful], *Večernji list*, October 16, 2019.

²⁵¹ Haidar Diab, H., "Zoran Zaev: Odgađanje pregovora povijesna je greška EU" [Zoran Zaev: Delaying the negotiations is a historical mistake of the EU], *Večernji list*, October 28, 2019.

²⁵² Krasnec, T., "Francuski pokušaj nove blokade pregovora Sjeverne Makedonije pogrešan je i sramotan" [France's new attempt to block North Macedonia's EU accession talks is wrong and shameful], *Večernji list*, October 16, 2019.

Overall, the three outlets tend to converge in terms of their volume and frequency of reporting on Russia-related topics, particularly since late 2018. Večernji list stood out in reaching a peak in the intensity of its coverage in mid-2018 regarding the NATO Summit in Brussels. Croatia has been different from the other SEE countries in that the Russian-owned outlet has not resorted to flooding its infospace with a barrage of articles, as has been seen to be the case in other countries in the region.

²⁵³ Haidar Diab, H., "Parlament izglasao Sjevernu Makedoniju: Oporba: Ovo je izdaja!" [Parliament voted in favor of Northern Macedonia; Opposition: This is treason!], *Večernji list*, January 12, 2019.

CHINA PRESENCE

Croatia's relationship with Beijing remained dormant until the 2016-elected HDZ-led government overturned a decision from the previous (social-democratic) government to abstain from China's CEE 17+1 initiative. **HDZ's government even brought the annual forum of the 17+1 initiative to Dubrovnik in 2019.** Cultural cooperation has expanded. In 2012, the Confucius Institute partnered with the University of Zagreb to offer a range of free classes to Croatian citizens, including language and history lessons. The number of Chinese tourists who visit Croatia has also been steadily growing, increasing fivefold between 2013 and 2019, reaching around 500,000 people.²⁵⁴

In the economy, the clearest sign of the Chinese footprint is the construction of the Pelješac Bridge, **the first EU-funded infrastructure project awarded to a Chinese company.** The bridge (set to be completed in 2021) is under construction by the China Road and Bridge Corporation. Some 85% of the costs were funded with EUR 357 million from the EU Cohesion Funds via a public tender, in which there have been allegations about anti-competitive practices.²⁵⁵

The main strategic objective pursued by China in developing the Pelješac Bridge project is an attempt to prove that Chinese companies can compete in the European market, as well as adhere to EU regulations.²⁵⁶ CRBC has invested serious effort into being perceived as a trusted and valuable partner. Its bridge project has been accompanied by a locally run PR campaign, essentially turning it into a media propaganda drive. The operation has been a striking success; the Chinese company has been lauded in Croatian media as efficient and productive, and Chinese workers which were brought in to complete the project have been described as well-mannered and hard-working.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Croatian National Tourist Board, *Profil emitivnog tržišta – izdanje* [Country Profile: China], 2020; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, *Dolasci i noćenja turista u 2019* [Tourist Arrivals and Nights in 2019], 2020.

²⁵⁵ Several other bidders in the tender filed lawsuits or anti-trust complaints, questioning the unusually-low prices offered by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) that ultimately won the bid. The Chinese firm amounted to EUR 279 million. Prtoric, Jelena and Giovanni Vale, "China's 'bridge to Europe' drives a wedge between Croatia and Bosnia," *Equal Times*, March 20, 2019.

²⁵⁶ Prtoric, J., "In Croatia, China's building its bridge to Europe," *China Dialogue*, May 11, 2020.

²⁵⁷ Klaić Saulačić, P., "Kako žive kineski graditelji Pelješkog mosta: 'Malo troše, ali radi mosta ćemo sve to podnijeti'" [How the Chinese builders of the Pelješac Bridge live: "They spend a little, but for the sake of the bridge we will endure it all"], *Dnevnik*, Au-

A news story describing Chinese workers engaged in the Pelješac Bridge project as secluded, unfriendly, and unwilling to spend their money on local products was pulled from the webpage of Slobodna Dalmacija after publication.²⁵⁸ Slobodna Dalmacija is the largest regional newspaper in Croatia, dedicated to covering events in Croatia's southern seaside region. It is owned by Hanza Media, which also has a track record of publishing content in partnership with the **Chinese South-east European Business Association** formed with the support of the Chinese government. The association has served as a facilitator between CRBC and Croatian authorities and partners, its representatives regularly appearing publicly to advocate for and represent Chinese investors.²⁵⁹

The Association appears as **a key enabler of Chinese media influence in Croatia.** CSEBA is a member of The Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network and the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce.²⁶⁰ It claims that its mission is to provide the basis for economic and financial cooperation between China and the countries of Southeast and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Russia.²⁶¹ The Association is run by Croatian businessmen and lobbyist Mario Rendulić, but its most visible public face is its communications manager, Siniša Malus. Malus has made a name for himself as a business journalist. He is the longtime owner of SEEbiz.eu, a Croatian online business news

gust 12, 2019; Pilić, D., "Jutarnji u potrazi za 400 kineskih radnika koji grade pelješki most – Ovaj put nije istraživao kako napreduju radovi, već što Kinezi rade kad ne rade" [Jutarnje in search of 400 Chinese workers building the Pelješka bridge – This time we did not investigate how the works are progressing, but what the Chinese are doing when they are not working], *Jutarnji list*, September 8, 2019; Štrbe, P. and Jerković, J., "Kineski radnici na gradilištu Pelješkog mosta kao pčele radilice" [Chinese workers on the construction site of the Pelješac Bridge as worker bees], *Vijesti*, September 19, 2019; Soldo, S., "Izvještaj s našeg najvećeg gradilišta: Kinezi rade dan i noć, most bi mogao biti dovršen i prije predviđenog roka. Ali, na pristupnim cestama zapinje" [Report from our largest construction site: The Chinese work day and night, the bridge could be completed ahead of schedule. But it gets stuck on access roads], *Slobodna Dalmacija*, April 25, 2019; RTL, "Kinezi vrijedno grade Pelješki most: 'Što je kriza veća, radnici brže rade'" [The Chinese are diligently building the Pelješac Bridge: 'The bigger the crisis, the faster the workers work'], April 25, 2020.

²⁵⁸ Net, "Domaći razočarani kinesizima koji grade pelješki most: 'nit' ih vidiš, nit' čuješ. malo troše, a priušte si tek jedno zadovoljstvo'" [Locals disappointed with the Chinese people building the Pelješka bridge: 'You don't see them, you don't hear them. They spend a little, and they can only afford one pleasure'], May 17, 2019.

²⁵⁹ Prtoric, J., "In Croatia, China's building its bridge to Europe," *China Dialogue*, May 11, 2020.

²⁶⁰ CSEBA, *Kina i Hrvatska*, Zagreb, 2019.

²⁶¹ CSEBA, *About Us*, 2020.

site covering the SEE region, and he is also listed among CSEBA's partners on their website.

This makes **SEEBiz** an important media channel for promoting Chinese business interests in Croatia, as well as promoting the crucial narrative that business partnerships with the Chinese are both desirable and lucrative. However, the audience reach of SEEBiz is small and declining.²⁶² This is likely why the Association has sought to partner with more established media publishers. They have found such a partner in Hanza Media, one of the only two large newspaper publishers in Croatia. Their flagship bi-weekly political newspaper *Globus* came out in March 2019 with a supplement titled 'China and Croatia', published by the Association and edited by Malus. Hanza Media also marked the occasion of the 17+1 summit (then 16+1) in Dubrovnik by publishing the first Croatian newspaper edition in Chinese in April 2019.²⁶³

The Croatian edition of the **Chinese Radio International** is another media channel promoting Chinese propaganda narratives in the country. The outlet has been operating in Croatia since 2008 and publishes a bi-monthly magazine. It maintains a social media presence on Facebook, Weibo, and WeChat (despite the fact that the latter two do not attract significant interest in Croatia). The only Chinese social media app that has been rapidly growing in popularity in Croatia is the video-sharing service **TikTok**, which is popular among younger users. Social networks have also enabled Chinese narratives to penetrate Croatia's media sphere. Due to Croatia sharing the same language with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro, stories created in any of these countries often end up being disseminated in Croatian social media channels. The Bosnian website *Kina Danas* ('China Today') regularly reports on the supposed close and mutually beneficial relationship between Beijing and Zagreb.²⁶⁴

²⁶² SimilarWeb, [Seebiz.eu](https://www.similarweb.com/website/seebiz.eu/), 2020.

²⁶³ Mindoljević, L., "The Croatia Times: prve hrvatske novine na kineskom jeziku," [The Croatia Times: the first Croatian newspaper in Chinese], *Jutarnji list*, April 6, 2019.

²⁶⁴ *Kina-Danas*, [Kina i Hrvatska](https://www.kina-i-hrvatska.com/) [China and Croatia], 2020.

SERBIA

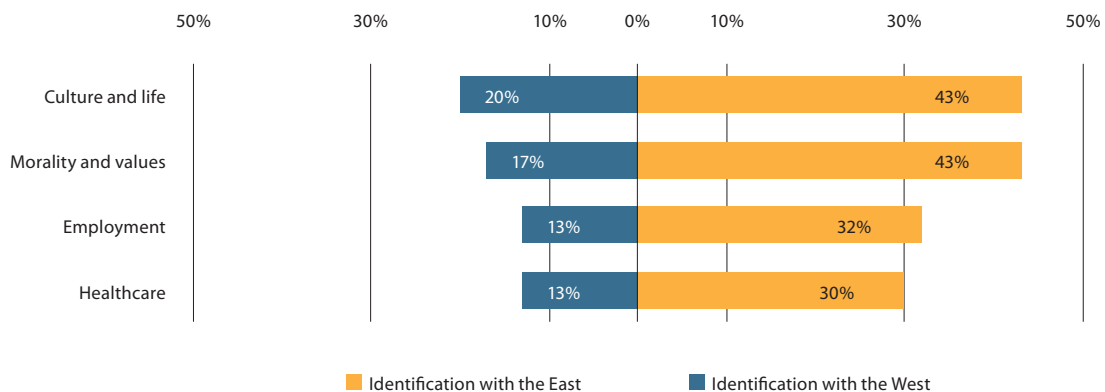
SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS

Opinion polls on the foreign policy orientation of Serbia are rarely conducted.²⁶⁵ One of the reasons might be that the Serbian government and, in particular, President Vucic seem to perform a balancing stunt among many poles of power or at least the US, China, Russia, the EU, and Turkey. Serbia's stated top strategic priority is European integration. Yet, the protection of the Serbian territorial integrity and the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence seems to often trump other priorities. Additionally, Serbia wants to maintain military neutrality and cooperation with Russia and China. Hence, it is often unclear as to which of these conflicting goals takes precedence. Recently, during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent vaccine diplomacy push in 2021, Serbia's president notoriously hailed China and Russia as his country's most reliable partners and disparaged the EU for its "selfishness".

Accordingly, the perception of Serbian citizens toward their country's foreign policy stance is rather complex. Polls carried out in 2018 and 2020 show, **Serbs try to balance between West and East, although they lean towards the latter.** In response to the question of where Serbia belongs, in 2018 the majority (62%) chose "neither West or East" while only a fraction opted for a singular orientation for the country (West 13%, East 16%).²⁶⁷ This could be attributed to the tradition of "non-alignment" as pioneered by Yugoslavia. It can also be credited to Belgrade's conflict-fraught relationship with the West following the 1990s Yugoslav wars and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008.^{268, 269}

In a 2020 opinion poll, the majority of respondents were in favor of a democratic governance system, with 85% describing it as either very important or somewhat important, while 54% identified democracy as the best form of government.²⁷⁰ However, the same poll showed

Figure 20. Serbs' identification with East and West



Note: % share of respondents identifying with Eastern and Western traditions on different issues.

Source: International Republican Institute.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Publicly accessible domestic opinion polls on these topics are usually carried out by NGOs in cooperation with media agencies and tend to be responsive to the needs of particular projects. The only regularly implemented poll comes from the Ministry of European Integration which surveys the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the European Union and EU-related topics. The international polls that have been consulted in this chapter include those of the International Republican Institute, the Regional Cooperation Council, the National Democratic Institute, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

²⁶⁶ International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion in Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia*, 2018, p. 32.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Radojčić, P., "Neodrživa vojna neutralnost" [Unsustainable military neutrality], *Vreme*, May 25, 2017.

²⁶⁹ Belgrade Center for Security Policy, *Stavovi građana o spoljnoj politici Srbije* [Attitudes of citizens about Serbian foreign policy], 2017.

²⁷⁰ International Republican Institute, *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020, p. 20.

that Serbs are polarized on the issue of how democracy functions in their country. The results displayed that respondents in somewhat equal portions felt very satisfied and somewhat satisfied (15% and 37%, respectively) or somewhat and very dissatisfied (23% and 22%), while 51% do not see Serbia as a fully-fledged democracy. Moreover, the majority of respondents state that they would choose to live in Western countries, particularly Germany and Switzerland, while the only non-Western country that appears in the top five is Russia.²⁷¹ A plurality of respondents (40%) expressed a view that they would like to have had the opportunity to be educated, work, or live in an EU country. Russia and the US received an identical preference score of 11%, China was fourth with 3%, and Turkey was fifth with 2%.²⁷²

It can thus be concluded that, regarding lifestyle and cultural orientations, there is a soft leaning towards the East. However, in regard to the country's socio-economic development, the Serbs show a stronger preference for Western (in particular EU) governance models. Yet Serbs are growing increasingly pessimistic about their country's prospects of joining the EU. Although a shrinking majority of Serbs would vote in favor of EU membership, when asked whether Serbia will actually join the Union, Serbs tended to be rather pessimistic. Around a third of Serbian respondents thought that this would "never" happen.²⁷³ Serbs view their country as a victim of ever-increasing EU conditionalities, creating an unattainable threshold for Serbia to meet.²⁷⁴ Despite somewhat cyclical ups and downs in support for EU accession, the overall trend has been a gradual decrease in the level of support.

Serbs continue to hold an overwhelmingly negative opinion of NATO and the US, in relation to the role of the US and the Alliance in the breakup of Yugoslavia. A key part of this poor perception is the 1999 bombing campaign. The majority of Serbian citizens still consider the US an enemy of Serbia (2019: 50% enemy, 20% friend).^{275, 276} In fact, 71% of Serbian respondents

perceive Washington as the major security threat to Europe.^{277, 278}

On the other side, public opinion polls show that **Serbian citizens maintain a predominantly positive attitude towards Russia.** This is despite the fact that the majority of Serbs have never been to Russia (around 90% of respondents declared this to be the case) and most of them rely on pro-governmental media outlets to inform themselves about Russia-related affairs. Therefore, the bulk of the Serbian population's views on the Kremlin are shaped by the narratives promoted by Serbia's ruling political elite. A majority of Serbian citizens (92%) believe that Serbia should have close relations with Russia.²⁷⁹ A predominant number of Serbs (over 80%) consider Russia to be a friend of Serbia.^{280, 281} However, despite the Serbs' overwhelmingly positive orientation towards Moscow, they still see the EU as much more successful than Russia, in particular being better organized (47% to 40%) and more respectful of human rights and freedoms (52% to 30%).²⁸² A significant, though not predominant, proportion of the Serbian population (roughly 40%) see Russia as an alternative to the EU.²⁸³

As China is a newcomer in the region, there is **relatively scarce polling data on Serbian attitudes towards Beijing.** A 2020 opinion poll shows that 51% of respondents answered that they are aware of Chinese investments in Serbia. Still, 49% see these investments as driven by pure economic interest, 32% assess that China has both economic and political interest in Serbia, and 7% think that China wants to establish political influence and control through economic power.²⁸⁴

²⁷¹ Ministry of European Integration of Serbia, *Javno mnjenje* [Public opinion polls], 2016 – 2019.

²⁷² National Democratic Institute, *Western Balkans – Between East and West*, 2018, p. 20.

²⁷³ Regional Cooperation Council, *SEE2020 Progress Tracker*, 2016 – 2019.

²⁷⁴ Ministry of European Integration of Serbia, *Javno mnjenje* [Public Opinion poll], 2016 – 2019.

²⁷⁵ Institute for European Affairs, *Stavovi građana Srbije prema Americi* [Attitudes of Serbian citizens towards America], Research No. 16, 2019, p. 12.

²⁷⁶ International Republican Institute, *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020, p. 68.

²⁷⁷ Krumm, R. et al., *Security Radar 2019*, FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, 2019, p. 54.

²⁷⁸ International Republican Institute, *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020, p. 68.

²⁷⁹ Belgrade Center for Security Policy, *Stavovi građana o spoljnoj politici Srbije* [Attitudes of citizens towards foreign policy of Serbia], 2017.

²⁸⁰ Institute for European Affairs, *Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji* [Attitudes of Serbian citizens towards Russia], Research No. 17, 2019; Institute for European Affairs, *Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji* [Attitudes of Serbian citizens towards Russia], Research No. 21, 2020.

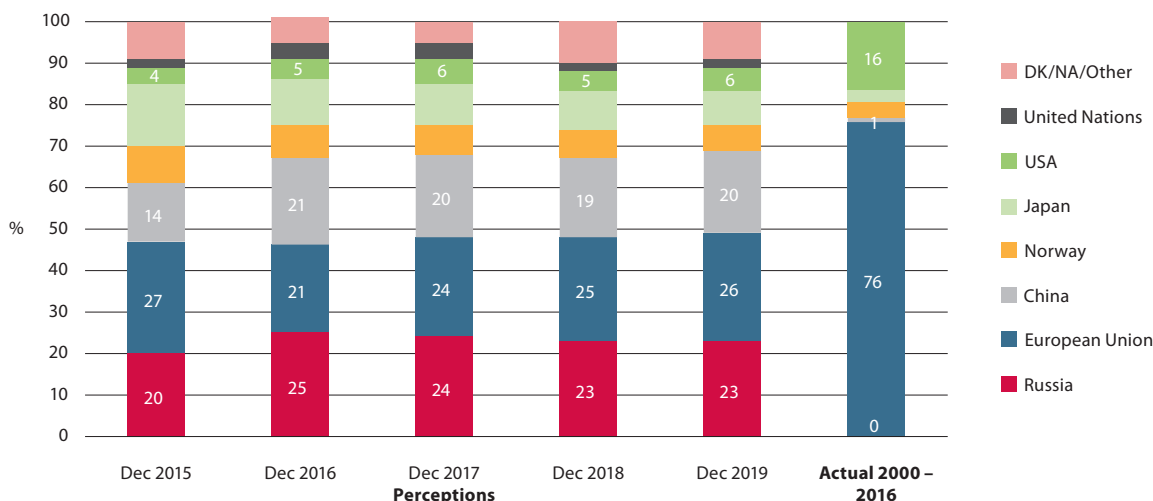
²⁸¹ National Democratic Institute, *Western Balkans – Between East and West*, 2018, p. 9.

²⁸² Institute for European Affairs, *Stavovi građana Srbije o EU, NATO, Rusiji i Kosovu* [Attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the EU, NATO, Russia and Kosovo], 2016, pp. 19-20.

²⁸³ Institute for European Affairs, *Stavovi građana Srbije prema evropskoj uniji* [Attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the EU], Research No. 3, 2017, p. 17.

²⁸⁴ International Republican Institute, *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020, p. 73.

Figure 21. Perceptions vs. reality: the largest donors of Serbia since the year 2000



Note: Data shows the response to the question "Who would you say has been the largest donor to Serbia since 2000?" Actual data is from Javno mnjenje 2019 and is derived from the SDACON informational system.

Source: CSD based on Ministry of European Integration of Serbia 2015 – 2019, Javno mnjenje [Public opinion polls].

Yet, it seems that the same force that is active in the case of Serbia’s infatuation with Russia is also at play in the case of China. The government of Serbia and the media it controls seem to have created an overwhelmingly positive image of both Russia and China throughout the country. This has been seen vividly on a number of occasions in the past decade but most clearly in the 2020 – 2021 Covid – 19 crisis and the ensuing rush for vaccination. Since the outbreak of the pandemic China and Russia have been portrayed by the highest level of Serbian authorities as the country’s true brothers. The most striking manifestation of this high-level engagement has been the perception among Serbs of Russia and China as contributing financially to Serbia on par with the EU and much higher than the US. The reality is that the EU and the US have provided more than 90% of the financial aid given to Serbia since the year 2000. Russia has provided in-kind military equipment, protective gear, and vaccines during the Covid-19 crisis but no financial assistance. Whereas China has provided less than 1% of the overall financial assistance to Serbia since the year 2000.²⁸⁵

MEDIA FOOTPRINT AND INSTRUMENTS

The last two decades have marked Serbia’s difficult transition to democracy and the free-market economy.

The media sector has also had to adjust to international standards of independent reporting after decades of peddling Communist and Yugoslavian propaganda. Yet, the legacy of state influence over information streams (media capture) continues to be evident today, mostly in the form of self-censorship and political influence from the government. Consequently, disinformation and propaganda from authoritarian states that are seen as important partners to the government are also widespread in Serbia’s media landscape. Hence, the main instruments of Russian media capture in Serbia are: direct ownership of media; influence over government-controlled media through cognitive capture founded on strong foreign policy, religious, and cultural ties between the two countries; as well as untransparent advertising streams through Russian-controlled companies enabled by lax regulatory oversight and governance loopholes in the local media market.

The direct Russian media footprint (ownership) in Serbia is low. The most prominent Russian media outlets in Serbia are the Sputnik and RT branches. However, pro-government newspapers and TV channels often take reports directly from RT and Sputnik, or they use Russian media as their main source of information on world events and bilateral ties with Russia. The latter is especially valid in relation to international discussions on the status of Kosovo. The Kremlin’s support for Serbia’s cause in Kosovo and Russia’s rejection of Kosovo’s independence has been the cornerstone of Russia’s positive image and strong political leverage in

²⁸⁵ Ministry of European Integration of Serbia, Javno mnjenje [Public Opinion polls], 2019.

Serbia in recent history.²⁸⁶ Russia has tried to carefully craft and amplify this image through a strong political presence at the highest level of Serbian authorities. It has also done so through a network of communication and media channels dedicated to promoting its image in Serbia, to fostering feelings of proximity, and projecting a shared Russo-Serbian vision of international relations in the Western Balkans. Serbia has benefited from Russian support over Kosovo. Hence, there is likely direct coordination between the ruling elite and the media outlets on the framing and selection of the Kremlin disinformation narratives that aid Serbia's foreign policy agenda.²⁸⁷

Sputnik has played a particularly important role in widely disseminating Russian propaganda and disinformation throughout Serbia. It offers its content for free to domestic Serbian news sources, whose reach is then further amplified by social media networks. Sputnik's offices in Belgrade are situated on the premises of the Belgrade-based company Informatika, whose minority shareholder is Serbijagas. The national natural gas transport and distribution company's management has many links with Serbia's ruling political establishment and Russia's Gazprom.

Only three companies operating in the Serbian media sector are directly owned by Russian nationals or Russian entities, according to international corporate databases:

- Ruski Ekspres AD is a news agency company with a very small turnover, limited assets, and without a presence as a source of information for other media;
- Veb Portali is a company that claims to be dealing with the creation of internet presentations, but it appears to be inactive;
- SPN Media Solutions is involved with sound recording and publishing, having a more significant turnover (above USD 3 million in 2017 and 2016).

Yet, pro-Russian content has been much more widely disseminated by Serbian-registered **tabloids** (print media and their online editions) and **two influential national TV stations**. The most prominent pro-Kremlin tabloids include *Informer* (Insajder Tim, owned by Dragan Vučićević), *Kurir* (Adria Media, owned by Igor

Žeželj), *Srpski Telegraf* (Medijska Mreza, owned by a group of shareholders, with Ljubomir Dabović owning a majority of 55% of the shares), and *Alo!* (Alo! Media System, owned by Sasa Blagojević). *Pink TV* (owned by Željko Mitrović) and *Happy TV* (owned by the controversial businessman Predrag Marković Peconi) are some of the most influential TV channels that promote Russian disinformation. All of these media sources (apart from *Srpski Telegraf*) also maintain websites (integrated or registered as separate outlets) which contribute to the spread of pro-Russian narratives in the Serbian online media space. While it is not possible to find direct or indirect ownership or Russian ties to these media sources, it is quite obvious that their main characteristic, aside from publishing pro-Russian content, is their pro-governmental stance or the lack of any criticism towards the ruling elite in Serbia.²⁸⁸

The other two organizations that belong to the group of pro-Kremlin content disseminators include *Srbija Danas*, owned by Aleksandra Marković, dubbed to be close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.²⁸⁹ *Srbija Danas* also owns *Novosadska TV* (formerly *TV Apolo*, a broadcasting service established by the city of Novi Sad). The second is *Telegraf.rs* (owned by Internet Group DOO, controlled by Veselin Jevrosimović). Their reporting is similar to that of the above-mentioned tabloids, but their predominant way of attracting viewers is via clickbait.

There further exist **media outlets that exhibit a pro-Russian attitude but cannot be classified as tabloids**. For instance, the weekly magazine *Pečat* is owned by Milorad Vucelic, a former high-level official of the Socialist Party of Serbia, director of the Radio-Television of Serbia during the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, and current president of one of the two main football clubs in Serbia, *Partizan*. Since its founding a decade ago, the magazine has been a leading Eurosceptic and Russophile voice. During their opposition days, several prominent members of the current ruling elite, such as the Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin, wrote for the outlet. Additionally, *Novosti Corporation*, which operates through two connected outlets – the daily *Vecernje Novosti* and the *Novosti* web portal,²⁹⁰ promotes con-

²⁸⁶ Meister, S., ed., *Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia*, ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, 2018.

²⁸⁷ Velebit, V. "Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (3) – Vučićeva uloga" [Pro-Russian narratives in Serbian media (3) – Vučić's role], *Talas*, May 24, 2019.

²⁸⁸ Some owners of media outlets, such as Željko Mitrović and Dragan Vučićević, maintain obvious ties with the ruling elite, whereas other owners' connections to the ruling elite are not clearly evidenced and remain a matter of speculation.

²⁸⁹ Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, Srbijadanas.com, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2020.

²⁹⁰ There is a number of other media outlets owned by *Novosti* but these do not cover political subjects.

servative, alt-right content that leans pro-Russian. It is under the ownership of the Serbian government and, since 2017, it has appointed as its acting director and main editor the above-mentioned Vucelic. The major difference from the first group of pro-Russian media is that both Pečat and Novosti are trying to present a slightly more balanced attitude, without the overblown sensationalism or the “emotional note” that is characteristic of the tabloids.

Overall, it appears that the pro-Russian outlets choose their type of reporting depending on the attitudes and political inclination of the audience they target. The first group that is based on tabloid journalism appeals to the wider audience. These, usually, express nationalist and pro-Russian attitudes and are also susceptible to populist slogans. The second group of media outlets target the conservatively oriented public but do not rely on tabloid-style sensationalism.

Other TV stations that occupy a significant part of the market – like Prva and O2 and the Public Broadcasting system RTS and RTV – could not be classified as pro-Russian. However, their **reporting seems aligned with the interests of the government**. More extreme than these other outlets is Studio B. This is the most important Belgrade area TV station, which is both pro-governmental and pro-Russian. The daily newspaper Politika, the oldest and most influential Serbian daily news source, also uses Russian sources and is state-owned but not openly pro-Russian.

The institutions that are responsible for enforcing the media regulatory framework, including the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Electronic Media Regulator, often fail to perform adequate media oversight due to political meddling from the government.²⁹¹ There is a high level of media ownership concentration in the three main segments (TV, radio, and print media), as well as a highly concentrated readership/viewership, which is an important risk for media capture. The four dominant TV outlets, including Television of Serbia and Radio Television of Vojvodina make up the public broadcasting services; the private Pink Media Group; Antenna Group; and Happy TV – make up around 63.3% of the viewership.²⁹² There is a similar concentration in the radio sector (where the S Media Team, Maxim Media Group, Kopernikus Corporation, and Radio Service

of the Public Broadcasting Service command 52.3% of the audience).²⁹³ In the print media sector four corporations: Ringier Axel Springer Media, Adria Media Group, Insajder Tim, and Novosti control 71.08% of the readership.²⁹⁴ Although not all links between media owners are formal, these findings show that there is also a horizontal concentration of the media in Serbia, in which eight of the biggest media publishers occupy more than 70% of the total audience.²⁹⁵ The ownership structure of internet-based media outlets is less clear, as there is no systematic publicly-available data. This is due to the voluntary registration regime of the online outlets.

Serbian media outlets can operate in various legal forms and are not obliged to be registered in the Serbian Media Registry. The latter was established in 2015 within the Serbian Business Register Agency to ensure public access to ownership, editorial responsibility, and reception of state aid from media. However, there are significant gaps in data availability. Out of 2,034 registered media organizations in February 2018, only 1,263 had provided the required data.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, the data is often not reliable. For example, print media outlets provide figures on circulation based on their own estimation, without any external verification, leaving space for manipulation. Moreover, the fact that registration is not obligatory is a major problem. This is because it allows many media outlets to operate in a legally permitted “gray zone”. The incentives for registering in the Media Registry are linked to the ability to apply for state aid through project financing or to receive advertisement contracts from state and provincial institutions, municipalities, and public companies.

From 2012 to 2017, the total average annual advertisement market of Serbia was worth EUR 175 million. At its lowest in the 2013-2014 period, it was worth EUR 155 million, while it grew to EUR 197 million in 2018.²⁹⁷ Since 2010, TV outlets have held a constant market share of around 55% of the advertising market in the country, followed by print media with 14% (yet, this

²⁹³ Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, *Radio market in Serbia is concentrated*, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2018.

²⁹⁴ Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, *Print market is highly concentrated*, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2018.

²⁹⁵ Stojković, M. et al., *Prava mera medija*, Asocijacija medija, 2019, p. 24. Above-mentioned do not operate in all media areas, for example, the owners of the print media are not directly connected to TV media owners, although there are some links (but not necessarily in ownership).

²⁹⁶ Stojković, M. et al., *Prava mera medija*, Asocijacija medija, 2019, p. 10.

²⁹⁷ Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, *Media Landscape*, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2020.

²⁹¹ Government of Serbia, *Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020 – 2025*, 2020, p. 22-27.

²⁹² Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, *TV market in Serbia is highly concentrated*, BIRN and Reporters without borders, 2018.

share has been rapidly declining over the years), OHA (out of home advertising) which takes up between 10% and 11%, radio takes up a roughly stable 4%, and on-line media which currently occupies the fastest growing portion of the market with around 16% (up from 4% in 2008).²⁹⁸ The value of internet advertising has been increasing and between 2017 and 2018 it rose by 25%, from EUR 26 million to EUR 32.5 million respectively.²⁹⁹

Although, there is no official data that tracks the size of the advertising market in Serbia, as the official statistics and financial reports of companies that own media outlets do not provide this information. Media owners are only obliged to disclose details about their total income; hence it is not possible to distinguish the advertising share. Only two news outlets owned by the state (Novosti and Politika) provided information about their advertising income.

However, according to the estimates of Serbian media experts, the actual annual advertising revenue generated by registered media in Serbia is around EUR 400 million.³⁰⁰ Yet, even this number cannot fully explain where a significant share of the media outlets' income (income that is shown in the official financial reports accessible on the Serbian Business Registers Agency website) comes from. Part of the answer is state, provincial, and municipal project financing, which generates around EUR 11 million annually.³⁰¹ What is left comes from two sources: circulation (in the case of print media) and state advertising (such as political advertising during election campaigns), which are not being captured by the statistics or registries because the 2015 *Law on Advertisement* does not recognize these as advertising sources.³⁰²

By law, media outlets can apply for **government aid** from state, provincial or municipal institutions. The aid is distributed through public calls for grants and the institutions are obligated to provide information about the distributed financial support to Serbia's Commission for State Aid Control. However, the Media Registry often does not reflect the data that the Commission has, as it shows only the statistics that are provided by the companies themselves. These of-

²⁹⁸ Bogosavljević, S., Public speech at Prava mera medija 2.0 conference *Srbija 2017 – 2023* (Youtube), 2018.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Stojković, M. et al., *Prava mera medija*, Asocijacija medija, 2019, p. 10.

ten do not disclose any information about the reception of state aid.

Independent media and think-tanks in Serbia often point out that the state grants disbursed without full transparency are government instruments for influencing the editorial content of media outlets.³⁰³ It is argued that the most popular tabloids get a significant piece of the state aid "cake" as they apply with project proposals at the local level throughout Serbia. For example, the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia has shown that in the past three years the "pro-government" tabloids *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf* got approximately EUR 450,000 of state aid through various projects.³⁰⁴ Other forms of state support for Serbian media outlets include tax relief or loans from state institutions. The most notable case has been that of Pink Media Group. This outlet has been supported by taxpayer money for years, despite being privately owned. For example, the Serbian Agency for Export Promotion provided it with loans worth more than EUR 10 million between 2014 and 2017.³⁰⁵

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

This section summarizes the findings from the content analysis of four Serbian media outlets with different relationships toward Russian interests.³⁰⁶ These include a direct Kremlin-owned outlet, a pro-Russian partisan news source, a broader (pro-government) daily, and an independent (control) outlet:

- **Sputnik Serbia** is one of the two major Russian outlets in Serbia that operates in the Serbian language and is the local edition of the Russian state-owned Sputnik news agency.
- **Informer** is published by the Insider Group DOO, a company owned by Dragan Vucicevic, a former

³⁰³ Brkić, M., *Државна помоћ у медији или етатизација медијског простора* [State aid and media], Public Finance Oversight Coalition, 2nd edition, 2017, pp. 16-21; EU Konvent, *Kako kontrolisati dodelu državne pomoći medijima?* [How to control the allocation of state aid to the media?], National Convention on the European Union in Serbia, 2018; Sejdinovic, N., "Državno oglašavanje u Srbiji: Zona uticaja na medije i pritiska na medijske slobode" [State advertising in Serbia: A sphere of influence in the media and pressure on media freedoms], Cenozolovka, July 5, 2018.

³⁰⁴ Milivojevic, A., *Podobnim medijima milioni iz džepa građana* [With similar media, millions from the pockets of citizens], Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia, September 18, 2019.

³⁰⁵ Milivojevic, A., *Pink ponovo dobio kredit od AOFI-ja* [Pink extended loan by AOFI again], Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia, January 24, 2018.

³⁰⁶ For an overview of the methodology see Annex.

journalist for several tabloids including the Serbian Nacional, Kurir, and Press. According to Vucicevic, the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, and the president's brother are his personal friends.³⁰⁷ Vucicevic is also the creator and editor of the 'Teska rec' (Heavy Word) talk show on TV Pink, where members of the ruling party, including the president himself, are frequent guests. Informer is well known for supporting the Serbian government's foreign policy by organizing marketing campaigns in favor of world leaders that support Serbia. The tabloid heavily promoted the visit of Vladimir Putin in 2014, Donald Trump's victory at the 2016 US presidential elections, and Xi Jinping following the Chinese assistance for Serbia during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there are no directly visible or traceable financial links to Russia, and it appears that Informer is Serbia's partisan homegrown pro-Russian project.

- **Vecernje Novosti** was branded as the first popular daily newspaper in the country with its origins in the Former Yugoslavia. Unlike Informer, Novosti has not been the subject of outstanding controversies or legal proceedings for libel and biased reporting.³⁰⁸ It is owned by the state and its main editor is Milorad Vucelic, a former high-profile official in Slobodan Milosevic's regime and one of the directors of the Radio Television of Serbia during that same time. Novosti is known for its nationalist content although its journalists tend to adhere to professional standards. This daily has a permanent correspondent located in Russia, who directly covers many events that are related to Russia's foreign and internal policies, as well as Russian-Serbian-related issues. However, there are no formal or informal ties with Russian media or pro-Kremlin groups. Instead, Novosti acts more as a pro-governmental media disseminating pro-Russian narratives.
- **Danas** is an independent, liberally-oriented daily, which is privately owned by several prominent journalists and does not have formal or informal links with the government or pro-Russian sources. Since

its founding, Danas' reporting has been balanced, maintaining a clear pro-European attitude.

In the Serbian context, the content analysis focused on two topics of interest respectively for both the EU and Russia: the **new methodology for the EU accession negotiations** proposed by France in 2019, which introduced the possibility for negotiations to be stopped and even reversed, and the "**Slavyanski Shtit**" exercise and shipment of S-400 air defense systems to Serbia from Russia.

Sputnik extensively covered the issue of **EU accession policy for the Western Balkans**. The narratives disseminated focused particularly on France's unwillingness to allow the EU integration of the Western Balkans to move forward without reform. This has been taken by Sputnik as a display of maliciousness on France's behalf. The media also highlighted possible alternatives to EU accession in the form of joining the Eurasian Economic Union. Sputnik presented the new EU accession policy as a scheme to derail the European perspective for the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, Russia is painted in a benevolent light, a true friend of Serbia, who is ready to cooperate and offer assistance.

Informer was even more negative towards the EU. A notable feature of the outlet is its sensationalist headlines, which mislead the reader about the actual content of the article. For example, Sputnik's headline declared that the EU could offer a Norwegian-style model to the Western Balkans without formal EU membership ("New plan from Europe: Balkans to become like Norwegians, but will not enter the EU").³⁰⁹ While on the other hand, Informer cast the issue in an overwhelmingly sarcastic light: "Europe thinks we have "sucked the oar" (i.e. that Serbs are fools): They offer us to become Norwegians, but not EU membership! Serbia will gladly reject this". Despite the fact that the article in Informer was based on content republished by Sputnik (and the latter is quoted as a source), the headline was more explicitly biased and emotionally loaded. This suggests that Informer's basic modus operandi is focused on overt sensationalism and click-bait.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Kurir, "Vučićević sam priznao: Blizak sam prijatelj sa Andrejem i Aleksandrom Vučićem" [Vucicevic confessed: I am a close friend with Andrej and Aleksandar Vucic], November 29, 2015.

³⁰⁸ Informer often pays large sums of money in court fines to opposition politicians whom it targets in its articles, falsely accusing them for different wrongdoings. For example, according to the recent Higher Court verdict, Informer was obliged to pay RSD 300,000 (around EUR 2,700) to one of the opposition leaders, Bosko Obradovic.

Informer, "U ime naroda! Presuda višeg suda u Beogradu!" [In the name of the people! Judgment of the high court in Belgrade!], October 20, 2020.

³⁰⁹ Ristic, B., "Novi plan iz Evrope: Balkanci da postanu Norvežani, ali ne mogu u EU" [New plan from Europe: Balkans to become Norwegians, but not in the EU], *Sputnik Serbia*, November 5, 2019.

³¹⁰ Informer, "Evropa misli da smo „sisali veslo“: Nude nam da postanemo Norvežani, ali ne i Članstvo U Eu! Srbija će ovo sa zadovoljstvom odbiti!" [Europe thinks we have "sucked the oar": They offer us to become Norwegian, but not EU membership. Serbia will gladly refuse this!], November 5, 2019.

Vecernje Novosti took a largely neutral approach that yielded a more objective analysis. The vast majority of articles were produced by Novosti and their journalists without overly explicit biases. Articles analyzed in-depth the content of the new EU methodology, without overt attempts to cast Russia in a positive light. Yet, the attitude towards French President Macron was more discernibly negative. He was presented as a malicious actor trying to derail Serbia's EU accession prospects.

For its part, Danas attempts to provide commentaries from well-known experts. Unlike Novosti, Danas does not avoid the issue of Kosovo in the context of the new EU methodology, with several articles covering Serbia-Kosovo relations. Kosovo is not presented as an obstacle to the accession process, and the Kosovar perspective is conveyed too – for example in op-eds written by Mimoza Ahmetaj, Ambassador of Kosovo to the EU.

Regarding the 2019 “**Slavyanski Shtit**” exercise, which was carried out jointly with the Russian army and involved the shipment of S-400 air defense systems to Serbia from Russia, Sputnik's articles were even more intensely focused on juxtaposing the Serbian-Russian security partnership to the country's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Sputnik tried to reiterate Russia's military prowess and promoted the narrative that Russia was a valuable partner that would protect Serbia from any foreign threat. A particular focus was placed on the fact that the S-400 system was deployed in Serbia for the exercise, which suggested in turn that Serbia was ready to obtain S-400 from Russia.^{311, 312} Further, Sputnik insinuated that there was a chance that S-400 would remain in Serbia after the exercise was over.³¹³ Sputnik claimed that NATO felt insecure with the placement of S-400 missiles in Serbia, while the only aims of Russia and Serbia were regional peace and stability.³¹⁴

As was the case with the EU accession discussion, Informer imparted a domestic partisan spin to topics otherwise covered in a similar manner as Sputnik. The approach to the coverage remained the same: Informer

replicated content from other pro-Russian media outlets, including Sputnik, as well as some dubious sources like Vostok.rs, and embellished it with sensationalist headlines and illustrations. In particular, Informer focused on the possibility of S-400 to be permanently deployed in Serbia, hinting that Serbia's acquisition of this technology would strongly perturb NATO.^{315, 316} The outlet even appealed to Putin as “Serbia's brother”, to leave S-400 in Serbia.³¹⁷ Unlike Sputnik, Informer also connected the S-400 missile deployment with Serbia's traumatic experience during the 1999 NATO bombing, implying that Belgrade would be better prepared to face any foreign threat with the help of Russia.³¹⁸

Novosti demonstrated a much stronger pro-Russian bias toward NATO-related events in contrast to its, somewhat more subdued, pro-Russian reporting in relation to EU developments. Provocative-sensationalist headlines abound. For example: “During the ‘Slavyanski Shtit 2019’ NATO planes flew along the Drina, the Alliance wants to stop the delivery of armor?”, “Russia sends ‘Pantsir S1’ to Serbia, don't let it pass”; “Croatian media in fear: Putin sent Serbs S-400, they can shoot down a plane over Zagreb”. These examples all show that Vecernje Novosti tended to rely on misleading and biased exaggerations when it came to promoting Serbia-Russia cooperation. While these titles were somewhat more provocative than Sputnik's, they did not involve obscene language like the articles from the Informer.

Finally, Danas demonstrated much more objectivity than the pro-Russian outlets. As was the case with the first topic, Danas republished articles from reputable news agencies, trying to upgrade them with critically oriented commentary, especially regarding the pur-

³¹¹ Sputnik Serbia, “*Ruski general: Srbija je pod ruskom zaštitom*” [Russian general: Serbia is under Russian protection], October 25, 2019.

³¹² Milosavljevic, N., “*General Diković: Rusija odlučila – Srbija zrela za S-400*” [General Dikovic: Russia has decided – Serbia is ready for S-400], *Sputnik Serbia*, October 24, 2019.

³¹³ Ikodinović, O., “*Da li S-400 i „Pancir-S” ostaju u Srbiji*” [Do the S-400 and “Pancir-S” remain in Serbia?], *Sputnik Serbia*, October 24, 2019.

³¹⁴ Milosavljevic, N., “*S-400 još nije napustio Srbiju, tvrdi general Forca*” [S-400 has not left Serbia yet, claims General Forca], *Sputnik Serbia*, November 2, 2019.

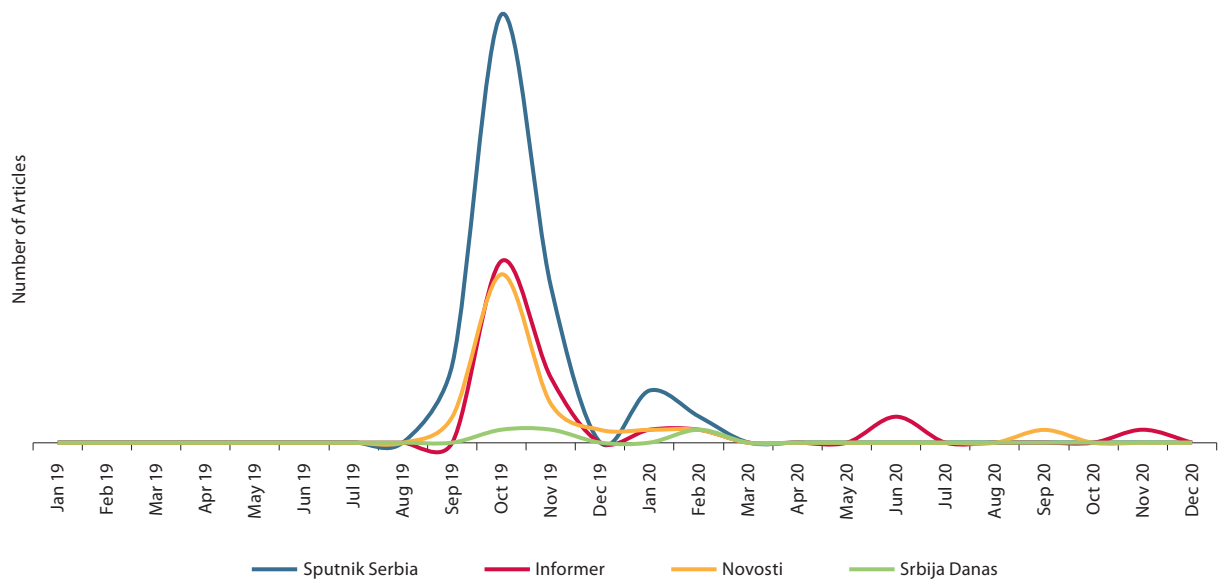
³¹⁵ Dobromirovic, M., “*Prpa, Bato! Brisel u sve većem strahu od rusije! NATO pakt: Putin Srbiji daje S-400!?*” [Prpa, Bato! Brussels in growing fear of Russia! NATO pact: Putin gives Serbia S-400!?!], *Informer*, September 14, 2019.

³¹⁶ Informer, “*Rusija odlučila – Srbija zrela za s-400! tek sada će nastati uzbuna u NATO, Moskva zna koga obučava i daje mu brutalan PVO sistem!*” [Russia decided – Serbia mature for S-400 Only now there will be an alert in NATO, Moscow knows when to train and gives it a brutal air defense system!], October 24, 2019.

³¹⁷ Informer, “*Putine brate, ostavi nam “S-400”! Moćni raketni sistem u Srbiji bio bi garant mira i stabilnosti na Balkanu!*” [Putin brother, leave us „S-400”! A powerful missile system in Serbia would be a guarantor of peace and stability in the Balkans!], October 24, 2019.

³¹⁸ Informer, “*Poruka iz Moskve: Srbiji ćemo s-400 dati na kredit! sad zbog “pancir s” Beogradu prete sankcijama, ali srbi imaju iskustvo iz 1999. i znaju kako da se zaštite!*” [Message from Moscow: we will give s-400 to Serbia on loan! The United States is threatening Belgrade with sanctions because of “Pancir S”, but Serbs have experience from 1999 and know how to protect yourself!], December 5, 2019.

Figure 22. Volume of the coverage of the “Slavyanski Shtit” (Slavic Shield) topic in Serbian media



Note: Number of articles containing “Slavyanski Shtit”.

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

chase of Russian weapons.^{319, 320} Danas factually reported the course of the exercise, neutrally representing the reactions of the US and NATO.³²¹

The automated online quantitative assessment of the content³²² related to Slavic Shield exercises confirmed a pattern in the dissemination of narratives from pro-Russian outlets observed across the region. The Russian-owned Sputnik Srbija provided the most intensive coverage of the event, blanketing Serbia’s information space with pro-Russian content. Informer and Novosti had an almost identical volume of coverage, which was though twice lower than that of Sputnik. For its part, the independent daily had a much more limited coverage of the topic.

CHINA PRESENCE

In the public discourse, **China has become an important player in Serbia since 2009.** The then President of Serbia, Boris Tadic, presented his new foreign policy vi-

sion based on simultaneously building a good relationship with the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China.³²³ After Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Serbia began to reestablish its partnership with Russia and China. Serbia relied on these two countries, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to help Serbia prevent the recognition of an independent Kosovo and its membership into various international organizations.

Since then, cooperation with China has gradually accelerated: China began its Belt and Road Initiative (in 2013) and its ‘16+1’ Initiative (becoming 17+1 after the inclusion of Greece in 2019), in which Serbia became the most prominent Chinese economic partner. Serbia has accounted for most of the largest and most strategic, new Chinese investments in the region. More than half of all Chinese projects (by value) in the region, either commissioned or underway, are located in Serbia. A total of 19 China-driven projects or large company acquisitions have been identified in Serbia. These include the building of major transport infrastructure, such as the construction of parts of the EU’s Pan-European transport system, the Mihajlo Pupin bridge, and the Belgrade metro network. Chinese companies have also bought some of the largest industrial complexes in the country, including the Smederevo steel plant and the copper mining and smelting complex,

³¹⁹ Danas, “Malinović: Građani Srbije donatori dovodenja ruskog otpada” [Malinović: Citizens of Serbia are donors of bringing Russian waste], November 3, 2019.

³²⁰ Waltner, L., “Demonstriranje prorúske orijentacije” [Demonstrating pro-Russian orientation], *Danas*, October 28, 2019.

³²¹ Danas, “Američki general: Od koga Srbija smatra da treba da se brani?” [US General: Since when does Serbia think it should defend itself?], February 22, 2020.

³²² Based on Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

³²³ RTS, “Četiri stuba srpske spoljne politike” [Four pillars of Serbian foreign policy], August 30, 2009.

Bor.³²⁴ China is also investing in the modernization of two of the largest lignite-fired power plants, Kostolac B3 and Kolubara B Power Stations.³²⁵

Cooperation has been further intensifying on both state-to-state and party-to-party levels. Serbia's ruling SNS party has established links with the Communist Party of China. Vice President Marko Djuric headed an SNS delegation to the All China Congress at the end of 2019. Chinese guests have also been frequently present at SNS party gatherings. The pinnacle of bilateral political cooperation came during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 15, 2020, during an official press conference about the development of the pandemic, President Vučić openly denigrated the EU for its supposed lack of solidarity with Serbia (due to a temporary, non-absolute ban on exports of medical aid and equipment to non-EU countries) and praised the help that would come from China.³²⁶

As is the case with Russian media influence in Serbia, **direct Chinese media engagement** is currently **limited**. Only one Chinese media outlet is published in Serbia, Kina Danas ('China Today') as a monthly addition to the weekly Nedeljnik. The content is usually about culture, history, technological breakthroughs, sport, and more rarely politics. Interestingly, the same Nedeljnik also republishes material from other international editions – such as Le Monde Diplomatique, The New York Times, and R Magazin, as well as disseminating the print version of Russia Beyond.³²⁷

Chinese state news agency Xinhua operates in Serbia and has recently published several calls for professional Serbian journalists to join their team.³²⁸ However, the main source of pro-Chinese news comes from the government-friendly daily tabloids, portals, and TV stations. China receives an extremely positive treatment in Serbian media, on a par with the favorable portrayal of Russia.³²⁹ Similar to the pattern of pro-Russian disinformation, tabloids, such as Informer, Alo!, and Kurir, as well

³²⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Chinese Economic Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe: Impact on Energy Transition and Climate*, Policy Brief No. 97, January, 2021.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Peng, Z., "Vučić poljubio zastavu Kine u znak zahvalnosti po dolasku kineskih medicinskih stručnjaka" [Vučić kissed the Chinese flag as a sign of gratitude after the arrival of Chinese medical experts], CRI Online, March 22, 2020.

³²⁷ Nedeljnik is a liberal and independent media source in Serbia, following the standards of professional journalism. Editorial boards for all publications are clearly separated, as is the case with R Magazin and Kina Danas.

³²⁸ Journalists Association of Serbia, *Konkursi*, 2020.

³²⁹ National Democratic Institute, *Western Balkans – Between East and West*, 2018, p. 46.

as Pink TV, generate pro-Chinese news usually when there is something of importance involving Serbian-Chinese relations or the activities of Serbian officials.

Informer was particularly active in disseminating Chinese propaganda at the time when Chinese aid arrived in Serbia to assist efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The media company installed a number of billboards in Belgrade with a picture of the Chinese President Xi Jinping and the inscription "Thank you, brother Xi".³³⁰ The tabloid acted similarly when Donald Trump won the US presidential elections in 2016 and Vladimir Putin was reconfirmed as Russia's President in 2018.

Pro-ruling elite outlets also use tactics to promote China on social networks when it fits their patrons' interests. For example, the Digital Forensic Center from Podgorica discovered a network of around 1,100 troll accounts on Twitter in Serbia (of which more than 900 were newly created in the first quarter of 2020). These accounts were tasked with promoting Serbian-Chinese relations. From March to April, 2020, 20,000 tweets were published in favor of the Serbian-Chinese friendship and praising Beijing's coronavirus assistance. The troll accounts were predominantly sharing posts from the official website of the Serbian President (<http://www.vucic.rs>), his Instagram profile, the online platforms of the previously-mentioned tabloids Informer and Kurir, and also from Pink TV.³³¹

Communication app use in Serbia also reflects the Chinese influence. There is a modest rise in the use of the WeChat platform, mostly due to the number of Serbian citizens that are currently working in China.³³² In August 2018, the state secretary of the Serbian Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications stated that Serbia wants to be included in the Chinese "Digital Silk Road". In doing so, it wanted to introduce the Chinese digital payment service WeChat Pay.³³³ The growing number of joint initiatives in the media and technological field are paving the way for an ever-growing Chinese media influence in Serbia. The rise of Chinese influence replicates the pattern of Russian informational operations as enabled by the Serbian authorities.

³³⁰ Informer, "Čelično prijateljstvo za sva vremena! Hvala Kini i sa bilborda!" [Steel friendship for all times! Thanks to China and from the billboard!], March 30, 2020.

³³¹ Danas, "Nova mreža botova u Srbiji: Vodili kampanju za veličanje kineske pomoći" [New network of bots in Serbia: They ran a campaign to glorify Chinese aid], April 13, 2020.

³³² Interview with Serbian citizens on temporary work in China (anonymous), April 2020.

³³³ N1Info, "Srbija zainteresovana za uvođenje kineske platforme WeChat Pay" [Serbia interested in introducing Chinese platform WeChat Pay], August 27, 2019.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

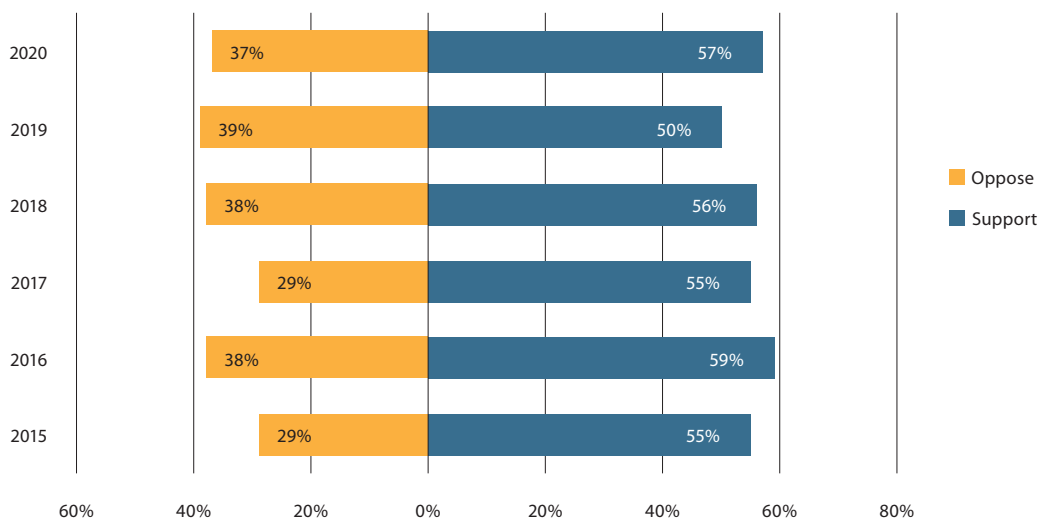
A critical characteristic of the Bosnian public opinion and how it relates to Russia's media influence is its division along the country's main ethnic group lines. These divisions are often polarizing. So, looking at the federal level alone might not provide sufficient insights and may hide important divisions, which are further reinforced by Bosnia and Herzegovina's byzantine political, institutional, and administrative divisions. The stark divisions within the country are likely to also be the main target areas for Russian media influence and impact.

A majority of BiH's citizens show **consistent support for NATO integration**³³⁴ Yet, opposition has also stayed high (close to 40%). Support for NATO in 2020 reached 57%. Moreover, 38% of the population in 2019 said that full NATO membership would serve BiH's future best.³³⁵ In 2020, not only did this share increase

to 48%, but also the number of those who think that BiH shouldn't have "any relationship with NATO at all" decreased (from 23% to 20%). These trends in public perceptions toward NATO can be explained by the final adoption of the *Reform Program* by all three members of the Presidency as one of the requirements for joining NATO. These developments also show a cautiously positive outlook on the alliance within BiH, which is likely to cause an over-reaction in media terms from Russia.

A very large majority of citizens show **consistent support for EU integration**, too, although this has declined slightly in recent years. In 2014, approval of Union membership stood at 85%. These approval ratings first dipped to 74% in 2015 and have since remained relatively stable (e.g. 76% in 2020). The decrease can be explained by several factors, including the crises besetting the EU (the Eurozone, migration crisis, and Brexit) but also the EU's lackluster enlargement policy

Figure 23. Support for NATO integration in BiH



Source: Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2015, 2016; IRI Public Opinion Polls 2017 – 2020.³³⁶

³³⁴ USAID, *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2015*, April 2016; *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2016*, March 2017.

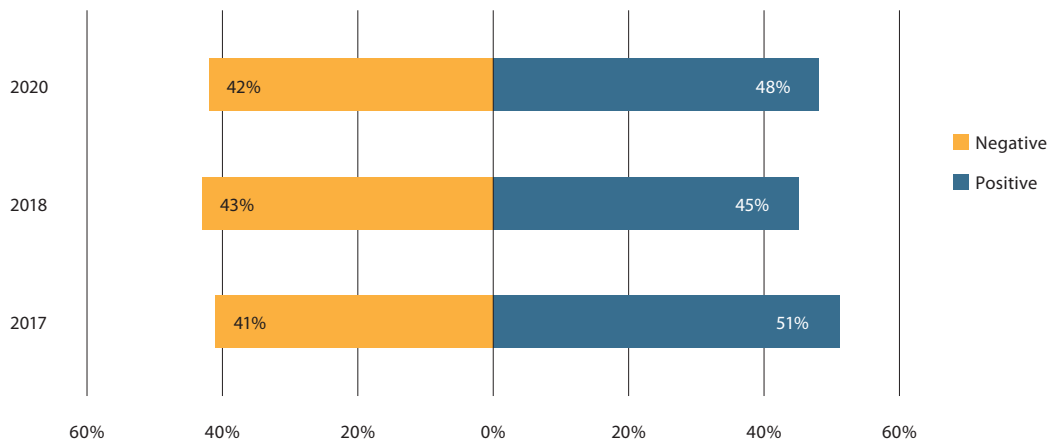
International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2017; *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2018; *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Public Opinion on*

Foreign Influence and Violent Extremism, 2019; *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020.

³³⁵ International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Public Opinion on Foreign Influence and Violent Extremism*, 2019; *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020.

³³⁶ Ibid.

Figure 24. Opinion on Russia in BiH



Source: Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence 2017 (IRI);³³⁷ Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence 2018 (IRI);³³⁸ Western Balkans Regional Poll 2020 (IRI).³³⁹

in the Western Balkans.³⁴⁰ Despite this mid-decade dip, BiH has one of the highest levels of support for the EU across Europe. Bosniacs perceive **EU accession as a way toward economic prosperity**: an opinion that was evidently expressed in a 2019 poll by 42% of respondents. The second most common benefit that Bosnians see in EU membership is the ability to travel freely.

More people in BiH **view Russia positively** than negatively. However, it is important to note that whilst views in BiH lean toward a positive perception of Russia, this is only marginally so. There is actually relative parity of opinion, a fairly equal split in the weighting of negative and positive opinions on Russia in the country. This can be explained by the support Russia has provided primarily to one of the country's ethnic groups – the Bosnian Serbs. This is also likely to be the main dividing line in the receptivity of Russian disinformation and propaganda in the country. Yet, Russia can also exploit this division to its own ends by weakening the federal unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

³³⁷ International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2017.

³³⁸ International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2018.

³³⁹ International Republican Institute, *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020.

³⁴⁰ USAID, *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2015*, April 2016; *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2016*, March 2017.

International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2017; *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2018; *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Public Opinion on Foreign Influence and Violent Extremism*, 2019; *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020.

The attitudes of BiH's citizens toward the US are also **consistently hesitant**. In 2018, 47% of respondents held a negative opinion of the US, while only 39% said they had a positive view. The most recent data from 2020 shows an increase in US approval ratings to 49%.³⁴¹

It is important to note that although a majority of Bosnians support the country's EU and NATO integration, **more than 50% think their country should not belong to either the West or the East**.³⁴² An overwhelming majority of Bosnians also maintain that they would like to have more in common with Western Europe than Russia in relation to culture and intellectual life (60% vs. 25%), morality and values (58% vs. 26%), and standard of living (71% vs. 17%).³⁴³

In terms of geopolitical preferences, however, more and more Bosnian citizens perceive **Turkey** as their country's **greatest ally**.³⁴⁴ In 2018, 29% of respondents saw Turkey as their "biggest ally". On the other hand, positive perceptions of Germany as an ally have dropped (from 24% in 2017 to 13% in 2018). Perceptions of Russia as a friendly state have remained almost the same. As

³⁴¹ International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2018; *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, 2020.

³⁴² International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2017; *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Public Opinion on Foreign Influence and Violent Extremism*, 2019.

³⁴³ International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion in Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia*, 2018.

³⁴⁴ International Republican Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence*, 2018.

of a 2018 poll, at 15%, the Russian Federation now ranks higher than Germany among BiH's citizens.

Regarding domestic developments, more than 80% of BiH citizens believe that things in their country are **moving in the wrong direction**.³⁴⁵ This high degree of dissatisfaction with the internal political, economic, and social trends and developments represents a point of structural vulnerability. Such dissatisfactions can be exploited by Russia, China, and Turkey in their attempts to increase their economic and political influence and promote authoritarianism as an alternative governance model in Bosnia. Naturally, the current state of Bosnia and Herzegovina results not only from internal divisions but also of the constitutional design of the country. A constitutional structure which was developed and supported primarily by the US, NATO, and the EU.

MEDIA FOOTPRINT AND INSTRUMENTS

Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex federal system, consisting of two largely autonomous entities, is reflected in the country's media sector, with outlets from each entity mirroring their respective population's ethno-national and religious sentiments. The media industry of the Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS) is considered to be significantly influenced by its autonomous government. International observers acknowledge that media is relatively freer in the larger of the two federal, autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH).³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, outlets in FBiH are similarly inclined to promote the ethno-national sentiments of its population.³⁴⁷

Russia's media influence in BiH is concentrated in RS. Rather than committing to direct media ownership, Russia relies on its political and economic support for the long-serving president of RS, Milorad Dodik. Dodik, in turn, exerts control over local media outlets through politically-motivated legal attacks against critical outlets and selective funding for loyal ones. Russian disinformation additionally targets the Bosnian media space via Serbian-based outlets, espe-

cially the Kremlin-owned Sputnik Srbija.³⁴⁸ However, it also targets Serbian outlets known for republishing stories from Sputnik and pandering to prevalent pro-Russian sentiments among Serbs.³⁴⁹ **Between 5% and 7% of the total traffic of both the Latin and Cyrillic versions of Sputnik Srbija comes from users in BiH.** According to the online traffic monitoring website, Alexa, Serbian outlets B92.net and Kurir.rs have become some of the most visited websites in BiH, ranking 32nd and 35th respectively. This cross-border dissemination into BiH is largely due to the lack of any language barriers between the two countries. Other Serbian outlets disseminating Russian disinformation and propaganda with at least 5% of their website traffic coming from BiH include: Informer.rs, Alo.rs, Vostok.rs, Telegraf.rs, Politika.rs, Srbin.info, and Standard.rs.³⁵⁰ These foreign-based outlets allow Russia, with little to no additional investments, to exert media influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina in an untransparent and indirect manner.

Russian efforts might be concentrated in RS, yet **the Kremlin also supports the Bosnian-based nationalist Croat party HDZ.** HDZ is led by Dragan Čović, who has long signaled his goal for an autonomous Croat entity and has formed a political alliance with Dodik, over their shared goal to achieve greater autonomy for their respective constituencies. The Kremlin influences the public discourse in FBiH through its connections with the HDZ, which can interfere with the editorial and managerial policies of local outlets.³⁵¹ Russian Ambassador Petr Ivanov has openly supported HDZ and Dragan Čović's positions on securing greater autonomy for Croats in Bosnia.³⁵²

The ability of Russian outlets to penetrate the Bosnia and Herzegovian media space is also the result of the difficult financial situation of many of the companies in the sector. The BiH media sector is oversaturated, with a population of 3.5 million and an estimated advertising market of only €22 million in 2018; **many outlets struggle to keep afloat financially**, including the public broadcasters.³⁵³ One media expert de-

³⁴⁵ USAID, *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2015*, April 2016; *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2016*, March 2017; *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2017*, May 2018; *Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (Measure-BiH) 2018*, March 2019.

³⁴⁶ Rusch, L., *Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2017.

³⁴⁷ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2018*, 2018, p. 20.

³⁴⁸ Hodzic, D., "Dimne Zavjese Analitičara Sputnika" [Smoke curtains of Sputnik analysts], *Oslobodenje*, November 16, 2018.

³⁴⁹ Raskrinkavanje, "'Red Flag' Lista Medija" ["Red Flag' media list], December 8, 2019.

³⁵⁰ According to website traffic data gathered from [Similarweb.com](https://www.similarweb.com).

³⁵¹ Mujanovic, J., "Russia's Bosnia Gambit", *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2017.

³⁵² Salvo, D. and de Leon, S., *Russia's Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2018.

³⁵³ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2019*, 2019.

scribed the environment as an “all-out war in the media market” as outlets engage in self-censorship and increasingly offer advertisement discounts to attract revenue.³⁵⁴ In that same year the national public broadcaster reported it would stop broadcasting by June due to lack of finances.³⁵⁵ A survival strategy for many cash-strapped media companies, especially in the RS entity, is to use the content that is freely distributed from Russian state-owned media outlets, such as Sputnik and RT. The latter outlets allow free republishing of materials so long as they are cited as the information source.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

Pro-Russian narratives disseminated in Bosnia and Herzegovina include the country's EU and NATO integration process and the relations of other Balkan states (Montenegro and North Macedonia) with their Euro-Atlantic partners. Four outlets have been selected for content analysis, with different degrees of direct and indirect connections to Russia:³⁵⁶

- **Sputnik's Serbian edition** represents an outlet that is directly owned by the Kremlin. As a result of language similarities between the countries in this region, Sputnik Serbian edition's online news and radio shows are freely consumed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁵⁷
- **RTRS** is the most influential media outlet in Republika Srpska (RS). The outlet's political ties with Russia are reflected in the close relations between the RS government and Russia, i.e., Dodik and Putin.³⁵⁸
- **Glas Srpske** shows no evidence of direct ties, neither political nor financial, with Russia. However, the outlet is owned by Nezavisne Novine, a newspaper of Željko Kopanja,³⁵⁹ who is considered to be a close ally of Milorad Dodik and the ruling SNSD party.
- For **Klix**, there is also no evidence of direct links. Yet even though the advertising revenue coming from

Russian sources cannot be measured, its existence can be seen in the fact that Russia's Sberbank has been advertising its financial products on Klix. Nevertheless, Klix has offered a much more objective coverage of Russia-linked events and developments than its financial dependence on Sberbank revenue would indicate.

In regard to **similarities of narratives disseminated**, the most predominant pro-Russian narrative in all three pro-Russian media outlets is that the Republic of Srpska does not want to become a NATO member. This narrative can be found in the statements made by RS politicians, especially those of Milorad Dodik.³⁶⁰ The message indicates that the Republic of Srpska will follow Serbia in its decision to remain a militarily neutral country and not give in to pressure to become a NATO member.³⁶¹ It is further stated that, even if Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to become part of the Alliance, this will not be possible without the consent of RS, which remains strongly opposed.³⁶² Additionally, the outlets publish dubious articles claiming that joining NATO would mark the end of the Republic of Srpska.³⁶³ This disinformation campaign has been successful as visible in the polls,³⁶⁴ according to which four-fifths of the population of Srpska are against Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into NATO.³⁶⁵ It is emphasized that the issue of NATO membership represents not only a humiliation to the Serbs but a loss of independence, which also threatens to endanger good Serbo-Russian relations.³⁶⁶

The second most common narrative in all three pro-Russian media outlets is that accumulated governance

³⁵⁴ Dupanović, E., “Will Ivan Čaleta Reign Supreme over the Media Space in the Region?,” *Media Marketing*, June 8, 2016.

³⁵⁵ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2019*, 2019, p. 5.

³⁵⁶ For an overview of the methodology see Annex.

³⁵⁷ Atlantic Council of Montenegro, *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence, 2020.

³⁵⁸ Lacic, M., “Putin Reportedly Wishes Dodik Success in Bosnia Election,” *BalkanInsight*, October 1, 2018.

³⁵⁹ OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, *OSCE Representative mourns death of journalist Željko Kopanja in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, August 9, 2016.

³⁶⁰ Simić, B., “Velika bura u Srpskoj zbog NATO-a, a niko ne bi u članstvo u toj alijansi” [A big storm in Srpska because of NATO and no one would join that alliance], *Sputnik Serbia*, December 24, 2019.

³⁶¹ Sputnik Serbia, “Dodik: Ako Srbija za sto godina uđe u NATO, i mi ćemo” [Dodik: If Serbia joins NATO in a hundred years, so will we], August 13, 2019.

³⁶² Ristić, B., “Bosna i Hercegovina neće u NATO – ne da Srpska” [Bosnia and Herzegovina will not join NATO – not Serbia], November 22, 2019.

³⁶³ Glas Srpske, “Врањеш: Улазак у НАТО би ставио тачку на Српску” [Vranjes: Joining NATO would put an end to Srpska], April 16, 2019.

³⁶⁴ Momić, D., “Четири петине становника Српске против уласка БиХ у НАТО” [Four-fifths of Srpska's population opposes BiH's entry into NATO], *Glas Srpske*, March 7, 2020.

³⁶⁵ RTRS, “Бањалука: У четвртак потписивање петиције “Потписом против НАТО-а”” [BanjaLuka: Signing of petition “By signing against NATO” on Thursday], July 7, 2019.

³⁶⁶ RTRS, “Додик за Газету: Нећемо угрожити пријатељство са Русијом” [Dodik for Gazeta: We will not jeopardize friendship with Russia], April 16, 2019.

deficits in Bosnia and Herzegovina are contributing to a perpetual crisis. This narrative is tied in particular to the difficult and typically long-delayed formation of a government following elections. It is also linked to the inefficiency of state institutions,³⁶⁷ the delay in implementing the EU acquis,³⁶⁸ and constant disagreements between the government and its opposition. This narrative focuses on the projection that Bosnia and Herzegovina is rapidly descending into a crisis of disintegration.³⁶⁹

Another widely-spread narrative in all three pro-Russian outlets is that Russia is a great friend of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This narrative points to Russia's support of RS throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷⁰ These sentiments are echoed in Milorad Dodik's statements that Russia remains the last international player in the Balkans to adhere to and defend international law in the region.³⁷¹ According to Dodik, joining NATO should not mean forgoing RS's friendship with Moscow.³⁷² The Minister for European Integration and International Cooperation has similarly stated that, in addition to cooperation with the EU, a collaborative partnership with both Russia and China is also vital for Republika Srpska.³⁷³

There are also **differences in the narratives** disseminated by the pro-Russian outlets. For example, on the topic of migration, Sputnik claims that Bosnia and Herzegovina is incapable of handling the migrant crisis. The outlet widely circulates Dodik's view that the European Union has not helped Bosnia during this cri-

sis, instead choosing to assist the passage of migrants through Bosnian territory.³⁷⁴ On the other hand, the more mainstream daily *Glas Srpske* has argued that the European Union provides assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina to support the management of the migration crisis.

Although the narrative about the existence of a consensus that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to join the EU is present throughout all three media outlets, Sputnik always pointedly reminds its audience that support for accession among the citizens of Republika Srpska is the lowest. Sputnik has claimed in an article that more than half of Bosnians want their country to join the European Union but that this support is significantly lower in Republika Srpska with 30.3%, which it claims represents a fundamental obstacle to BiH's full EU membership.³⁷⁵ Additionally, depending on the issue area and its level of public salience, Sputnik simultaneously presents the EU as both: a friend and an enemy who ought not to be trusted. There is a contradiction in the narratives presented in relation to the EU's assistance of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most common narrative spread by Sputnik is that the EU, in actuality, did not help Bosnia and Herzegovina in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. This narrative is reinforced by the repetition of Dodik's statements that if he could, he would never take anything from the European Union again. His argument being that when the EU's assistance was most needed they were not able to sell masks or medicines to Bosnia and Herzegovina.^{376,377} On the other hand, some Sputnik articles argue that EU assistance to Bosnian authorities is preserving the safety and security of the country under the provisions of a renewed UN mandate.³⁷⁸

In contrast, a somewhat more moderate tone of reporting is conveyed on Klix. The articles are predominantly

³⁶⁷ Sputnik Serbia, "Dodik: Kakav NATO, u Briselu samo o evropskom putu BiH" [Dodik: What NATO, in Brussels its all about BiH's European path], January 19, 2019.

³⁶⁸ Through this questionnaire the European Commission requested answers to more than 600 questions in order to form an opinion on Bosnia's potential candidate status. The questions referred to political criteria, social policy and employment, as well as justice, freedom, and security topics. The Bosnian government initially left 20 questions unanswered: Kovacevic, D., "Bosnia Leaves Gaps in Answers to EU Questionnaire," *BalkanInsight*, March 4, 2019.

³⁶⁹ RTRS, "Лес: Колапс БиХ почиње да изгледа неизбежан" [Les: The collapse of BiH is starting to seem inevitable], February 29, 2020.

³⁷⁰ Sputnik Serbia, "Русија обећала помоћ: Dodik razgovarao s Lavrovom" [Russia promised to help: Dodik talked to Lavrov], March 24, 2020.

³⁷¹ Sputnik Serbia, "Dodik: RS pod velikim pritiskom, nemamo nameru da se pridružimo NATO-u" [Dodik: RS under great pressure, we do not intend to join NATO], November 21, 2019.

³⁷² RTRS, "Додик за Газету: Нећемо угрозити пријатељство са Русијом" [Dodik for Gazeta: We will not jeopardize friendship with Russia], April 16, 2019.

³⁷³ RTRS, "Клокић: Осим земља ЕУ, најзначајније Русија и Кина" [Klokic: Apart from the EU countries, the most important are Russia and China], January 19, 2020.

³⁷⁴ Sputnik Serbia, "Dodik: BiH nesposobna da se odbrani, RS ostaje vojno neutralna" [Dodik: BiH incapable of defending itself, RS remains militarily neutral], February 20, 2020.

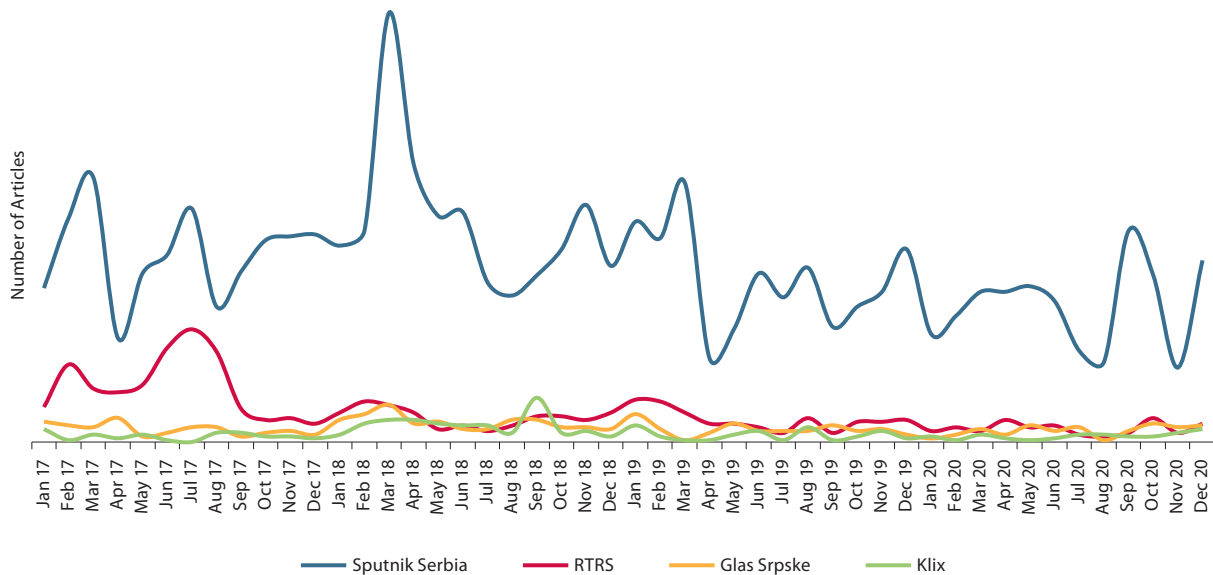
³⁷⁵ Sputnik Serbia, "U RS 30,3 odsto građana za ulazak u EU, a u Federaciji 70,6 odsto" [In RS 30.3 percent of citizens to join the EU, yet in the Federation – 70.6 percent], June 19, 2018.

³⁷⁶ Sputnik Serbia, "Dodik poslao oštru poruku EU: Da mogu, nikada više ništa ne bih uzeo od njih" [Dodik sent a sharp message to the EU: If I could, I would never take anything from them again], April 18, 2020.

³⁷⁷ Sputnik Serbia, "Русија обећала помоћ: Dodik razgovarao s Lavrovom" [Russia promised help: Dodik talked to Lavrov], March 24, 2020.

³⁷⁸ Sputnik Serbia, "EU pozvala BiH da što pre formira vlast" [The EU called on BiH to form a government as soon as possible], October 14, 2019.

Figure 25. Volume of coverage of Russia and EU-related topics in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Note: Number of articles containing "Russia" and "EU".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

of an informative character with an objective representation of different political views. This is one of the defining differences of Klix from the other three media outlets, which primarily focus on the statements of Milorad Dodik and the members of his party. In regard to NATO, Klix offers balanced coverage as opposed to the three pro-Russian media outlets, which repeatedly assert that NATO is an aggressor who bombed RS with depleted uranium. Statements of NATO officials are available on Klix so that a fair representation of the organization's perspectives can be delivered.³⁷⁹ Conversely, Sputnik, Glas Srpske, and RTRS do not relate NATO's own perspectives in their coverage of events. Another example of a narrative not observed in these pro-Russian news sources is that the Alliance is providing support to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the pandemic.³⁸⁰

Klix's reporting on Bosnia's relations with the EU are more in line with the coverage of Sputnik, Glas Srpske, and RTRS, as the latter three also acknowl-

edge that EU membership is a strategic priority for Sarajevo. Yet, Klix has been more explicit in recognizing the EU's support for BiH during the coronavirus pandemic.³⁸¹ Notably, the oft-repeated narrative that Russia is the only true friend of Bosnia is not present in Klix.

Similar to the experience in other Balkan countries Bosnia and Herzegovina also suffers from overexposure to Russian narratives through the Russian-owned Sputnik Serbia. It consistently published much higher numbers of articles than the BiH outlets when it comes to issues related to Russia and the EU. Thus, through sheer volume, it is also able to focus the attention of locals on the narratives it peddles across the region as a whole. This is aided by the local media's uncritical republishing of Sputnik's content, which the latter gladly provides for free in the local languages.

CHINA PRESENCE

Relations between BiH and China in the post-Dayton period have only intensified since 2012 when Sarajevo joined the-then 16+1 (now 17+1) initiative. Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen some of the largest Chinese financial inflows. Up to one-fifth of all Chinese funds

³⁷⁹ Klix, "Komandant NATO-a: Program reformi je "mala pobjeda" jer Dodik nije nikako bio za ANP" [NATO Commander: The reform program is a „small victory“ because Dodik was by no means for the ANP], December 16, 2019; Klix, "Iz sjedišta NATO-a za Klix.ba: Kroz ANP se upravlja MAP-om, mi nikoga ne prisiljavamo na saradnju" [From NATO headquarters for Klix.ba: MAP is managed through ANP, we do not force anyone to cooperate], May 21, 2019.

³⁸⁰ Klix, "NATO štab spreman pružati podršku tokom pomoći građanima BiH" [NATO Headquarters ready to provide support during assistance to BiH citizens], March 18, 2020.

³⁸¹ Klix, "Džaferović i Sattler: EU je vijek uz BiH u kriznim situacijama, razmatra se pomoć" [Džaferovic and Sattler: The EU has been with BiH for centuries in crisis situations, assistance is being considered], March 17, 2020.

for the initiative has gone into large-scale projects in BiH.³⁸² Among them are the EUR 550 million Stanari Thermal Power Plant project, recognized at the 2018 Sofia summit as the first successfully implemented Chinese project in Central and Eastern Europe; the EUR 297 million Banja Luka – Prijedor highway project; the EUR 613 million Tuzla power plant and; the 10-km highway near the town of Čapljina in Herzegovina. All of these projects have been financed by inter-governmental loans with Chinese development banks. These projects and their financing mechanisms have been perceived throughout Europe as undermining EU law on state aid, competition, and environmental standards. Naturally, such large investments, endorsed by the highest political echelons in BiH and China would increase the pressure on local media outlets to publish more “balanced” content on the donor. This is particularly relevant, knowing the very high level of message control on its image that China strives to exert internationally.

In the **media sector**, the [China Today](#) portal, which is run by the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association, plays the most important role in spreading Chinese influence in the Bosnian media sector. Notably, the Chinese state-owned outlet is known to those with an interest in Chinese affairs across the whole of former Yugoslavia. Articles and op-eds published by the portal promote the Chinese positions on the Belt and Road Initiative and the often-quoted narratives of win-win cooperation and building a “community of shared destiny”.^{383,384} In regard to the turmoil in Hong Kong, Kina Danas has featured articles that echo the views of the Chinese government as well as a statement by the Chinese ambassador to BiH.^{385,386} Moreover, the Chinese news agency Xinhua has a notable presence in Bosnia, employing local staff and conducting daily broadcasts. The overwhelming focus of Chinese media activities is aimed at painting a favorable picture of China as a reliable investor and partner throughout all the Balkan countries.

³⁸² Hirkić, M., “China in the Balkans – Part 1: Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Fomoso*, December 23, 2019.

³⁸³ Kina Danas, “Xi Jinping je vodio Pojas i put od “velike slobodne ruke” do “pažljivog slikanja” [Xi Jinping led the Belt and the path from “big free hand” to “careful painting”], n.d.

³⁸⁴ Kina Danas, “Wang Yi: Jačanje međunarodne koordinacije u borbi protiv koronavirusa i unapređenje izgradnje subdinske zajednice čovječanstva” [Wang Yi: Strengthening international coordination in the fight against coronavirus and advancing the construction of the common destiny for mankind], n.d.

³⁸⁵ Kina Danas, “Hong Kong: Središnja vlada podržava glavnu upraviteljicu u rješavanju duboko ukorijenjenih problema” [Hong Kong: The central government supports the chief executive in addressing deep-rooted problems], n.d.; Kina Danas, “Domovina je suštinska garancija prosperiteta i stabilnosti Hong Konga” [The homeland is an essential guarantee of Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability], n.d.

³⁸⁶ Kina Danas, “Ambasador NR Kine u BiH Ji Ping: Politički motiv prosvjednika u Hong Kongu je osporiti kineski suverenitet” [Chinese Ambassador to BiH Ji Ping: Political motive of protesters in Hong Kong is to challenge Chinese sovereignty], n.d.

MONTENEGRO

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Public attitudes in Montenegro have continuously been **teetering on the edge** between Russia and the West. This has given Moscow easy access to local media outlets and leverage for the hearts and minds of the Montenegrin people. This has been reinforced by local pro-Serb politicians and the Serbian Orthodox Church, staunch supporters of pro-Russian narratives.

In December 2018, 65% of Montenegrins supported the country's accession to the European Union, while only 23% opposed it. It was the largest public support for EU membership in five years.³⁸⁷ Half of those surveyed identified the EU as Montenegro's biggest foreign donor. Russia, on the other hand, despite not providing any official assistance, is perceived to hold first place (in terms of financial aid) according to 15% of the respondents, and 12% believe that China is Montenegro's biggest foreign donor.³⁸⁸ Just as in Serbia, this is a clear indication of the power of Russian narratives and public image management in Montenegro. Despite these figures, approximately 65% of the population believe that Montenegro should have the closest ties with either the EU (46%) or the United States (19%), while Russia is chosen as a primary future ally by only 18% of the polled citizens.³⁸⁹

However, by December 2019, **support for EU membership had decreased to 55%**.³⁹⁰ This was a historic low in polling results, the perception of EU membership in Montenegro had not been so poor since 2007.³⁹¹ As with other Western Balkan countries, by 2019 the deep crises that had engulfed the EU (Brexit, the migrant crisis) and the stalled accession process also undermined Montenegrins' belief that it would ever be possible for their nation to join the EU.³⁹² This has eroded the Union's credibility throughout the country. **Approval**

of NATO has also decreased, 42% of those surveyed in Montenegro no longer support the alliance, which, crucially, the country barely joined in 2016.³⁹³ Cooperation within NATO is a strategic objective for the Montenegrin government. But following the attainment of Alliance membership, the authorities' public rhetoric in support of NATO has been subdued. This could explain Montenegrins' declining approval for NATO.

Conversely, opinion polls point to the **growing popularity of Russia among Montenegrins**. Russia and China are already viewed more favorably than the EU in Montenegro.³⁹⁴ Russian weapons are perceived as unparalleled and Vladimir Putin comes out as one of the most popular foreign leaders.³⁹⁵ The increasing presence of the two foreign powers in Montenegrin media has, therefore, made its impact on public opinion. Russia and China are seen ever more positively. It is notable that 47% of the respondents view Russia as a superior military force, whereas only 37% think that NATO is better equipped militarily.³⁹⁶ In particular, the majority of those who vote for the right of center Democratic Front alliance (DF), which has close relations with Serbia and Russia, also tend to glorify Russia in juxtaposition with NATO and the EU. In 2020, the DF succeeded in winning the parliamentary vote. The 2020 election results mean that the DF will lead the new government, which is likely to further increase Russia's clout throughout Montenegro.

MEDIA FOOTPRINT INSTRUMENTS

Russia **mainly utilizes informal channels for exercising leverage over the media sector** in Montenegro. There are no Montenegrin-registered media companies that ultimately owned by Russian individuals or corporate entities.³⁹⁷ So Russian media influence is pro-

³⁸⁷ European Western Balkans, "Montenegro: Largest support for EU membership in five years," December 24, 2018.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, *Second annual poll "Political Public Opinion of Montenegro", December 2019*, December 13, 2019.

³⁹¹ European Western Balkans, "Support for EU membership decreases in Montenegro," December 16, 2019.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid; Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, *CEDEM presented the results of Political Public Opinion Poll*, December 12, 2018.

³⁹⁴ National Democratic Institute, *Western Balkans – Between East and West*, 2018.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ As consulted in the Orbis corporate commercial database and in the Central Registry of Commercial Entities of the Tax Administration (CRPS).

moted in more informal ways. Particularly, influence is projected through ultra-conservative oriented outlets (such as IN4S and Borba), which pander to the Kremlin line.³⁹⁸ These online media sources republish information from Sputnik and Russia Today, contributing to the spread of pro-Russian disinformation. For instance, IN4S has become one of the most visited websites in Montenegro³⁹⁹ and it includes a **special section dedicated to the "Russian outlook"**.⁴⁰⁰

Additional channels that disseminate Kremlin narratives include Srpska TV, a station which broadcasts in Serbian and relays Sputnik's program. Additionally, Russia Beyond's publications for the Balkans are also being distributed as the monthly supplement *Ruska riječ* (meaning "Russian Word" in Montenegrin) with a private daily newspaper of a conservative orientation. Notably, the **Russian search engine Yandex.ru** is one of the most visited websites in Montenegro.⁴⁰¹

The Montenegrin media space has generally been **vulnerable to Russian propaganda** because journalists often fail to recognize these propaganda narratives appearing as news reports and, so, publish them without critical editorial intervention.⁴⁰² Indeed, as in most other countries throughout the region, financial constraints and declining journalistic professional standards mean that journalists have limited time and skills to verify the accuracy and credibility of information (particularly coming from foreign sources). Thus, further contributing to the spread of disinformation.

One of the major challenges plaguing Montenegro's media landscape is linked to **financial constraints** that circumscribe the sustainability of quality journalism. In addition, the media market in Montenegro is smaller than any other in the region. It is further negatively limited by a tough competition from neighboring countries who use the same language and have more lucrative markets. Further still, polarization between outlet owners hailing from different parts of the political spectrum reinforces the deficits of the Montenegrin media market.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁸ Café del Montenegro (CdM), "Judy Kuo: Borba and IN4S follow instructions of Kremlin, Russian govt controls Sputnik," November 19, 2019.

³⁹⁹ Alexa.com, *Top sites in Montenegro*, 2020.

⁴⁰⁰ In4s, *Руски Поглед* [Russian view], 2020.

⁴⁰¹ Alexa.com, *Top sites in Montenegro*, 2020.

⁴⁰² Bogdanović, M., *Analysis of the media narrative on the superior weapons of the Russian Federation 2020* Center for Democratic Transition, 2019.

⁴⁰³ Kerševan Smokvina, T. et al. *Montenegro Media Sector Inquiry with Recommendations for Harmonisation with the Council of Europe and European Union standards*, Council of Europe (JUFREX program), 2017.

Two media groups hold particular dominance. Daily Press operates the influential daily newspaper *Vijesti* and its online edition. The second group is connected with the Greek businessman Petros Stathis, founder of the company First Financial Holdings. According to the records in the Central Registry of Business Entities, this company manages a number of widely read outlets such as *Dnevne novine*, *Pobjeda*, and the online news portal *Analitika*.⁴⁰⁴ *Dnevne novine* is one of the youngest print products in Montenegro. Despite this, after its first issue was published in 2011, it quickly gained influence throughout the country. It is also the only newspaper in Montenegro that is mostly funded through advertisements. Originally published in 1944, *Pobjeda* represents Montenegro's first print media outlet and is the oldest Montenegrin newspaper still in circulation.

The generally **small size of the country's media market**, corresponds with the low value of Montenegrin advertising, which has been estimated at EUR 12-13 million annually. Of this, EUR 10 million represents commercial advertisers and EUR 2-3 million consists of advertising of public and local administrations and companies owned by the state. However, there is no information about the ownership of individual advertisers nor the potential Russian stake in this field. Yet, the small size of the market means that relatively small investments (in comparison with international rates) could serve to capture and command media attention.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

One of the most widespread Russian narratives in Montenegro refers to the **military superiority of the Kremlin**. This topic has been chosen as the focus of the study's content analysis and is examined across four media outlets exhibiting different degrees of distance from Russian direct and indirect control:⁴⁰⁵

- **Sputnik Serbia** is a Russian-owned media outlet with high outreach in Montenegro.⁴⁰⁶
- **IN4S** represents a partisan outlet and is one of the most visited websites in Montenegro. Gojko Raičević figures as the editor in chief of IN4S, he

⁴⁰⁴ Čadenović, I. and Radulović, M., "Montenegro: double standards in regulating media concentration," Osservatorio Balcani e caucaso transeuropa, April 27, 2017.

⁴⁰⁵ For an overview of the methodology see Annex.

⁴⁰⁶ Atlantic Council of Montenegro, *Russia's Narratives Towards the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Serbia*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020.

is also involved in managing the Serbian-related companies Serbian House and Matica Srpska. Documents reviewed by Dnevne novine daily show that over the last decade, the Serbian government provided over EUR 5 million to the Serbian House and Matica Srpska. The largest donor for IN4S was a company called M:tel. This is a company that is owned by Telekom Srbija and Telekom RS. Between September 2018 and January 2019 EUR 200,000 were transferred to IN4S by M:tel allegedly for the purpose of advertising services.⁴⁰⁷ Additionally, Raičević heads an anti-NATO coalition composed of several NGOs called “No to War, No to NATO” which is reportedly financed directly by Russia.⁴⁰⁸ According to Balkan Insight, IN4S is one of the mainstream outlets in Montenegro, which are publishing insider information from pro-Russian parties.

- **Volim Podgorica** is an online media outlet that aims to reach a wider audience and includes some varied content, which occasionally also disseminates pro-Kremlin disinformation. Its Facebook page has more than 60,000 followers.
- **Vijesti online** is an influential mainstream news source that provides more objective coverage of Russia-related issues. It thus serves as a benchmark (or control variable) for comparison with the other three outlets’ overt and covert pro-Russian leanings.

In regard to **commonalities in narration and style**, the ubiquitous narrative about the superiority of Russian weapons is, in fact, not created in Montenegro, but originates in regional Balkan tabloids and alt-right web portals. In particular, Serbian-based news agencies (such as BETA, Tanjug, Sputnik Serbia) republish the messages that typically first appeared in Russian news agencies (Russia Today, TASS, etc.) These already reproduced articles are in turn taken up by Montenegrin media outlets. The consequent promotion of pro-Russian viewpoints increases the popularity of the Russian regime and works to impose an alternative, authoritarian political and economic model in Montenegro.

In keeping with the patterns found in the other Balkan countries, Sputnik demonstrates an overt pro-Russian bias with most articles focusing on the glori-

fication of Russia’s military might. Propaganda headlines aim to reinforce the notion that Russia possesses unrivalled state-of-the-art military technology.⁴⁰⁹ The perception of Moscow’s dominance is augmented through overt comparisons between Russian and US/NATO military power (for instance in “How many nuclear warheads does America have and how many Russia”; Soviet tank – a nightmare for NATO”).^{410, 411} Stylistically, Sputnik’s sources are one-sided, primarily citing Russian TV outlets, the Russian Foreign Ministry and various unidentified Russian media sources.

In turn, IN4S covers primarily the tensions across the wider Balkan region as well as between Central and Eastern Europe and the West. For instance, the outlet suggests an inexorable erosion of trust in NATO and condemns the absence of EU support for Italy during the coronavirus pandemic.^{412, 413} As with Sputnik, references are limited to Russian sources – TV Zvezda, Sputnik, Press Office of Uralvagonzavod.ru., etc. Rather than disseminating wholly original content, IN4S republishes a number of articles in their entirety from Sputnik.⁴¹⁴

Likewise, Volim Podgoricu also promotes this notion of Russian military might.⁴¹⁵ It depicts Russia’s relationship with NATO, as a matter of constant military

⁴⁰⁷ Cafe del Montenegro, “Funding sources of Serbian House, Matica Srpska, In4S,” February 2, 2020.

⁴⁰⁸ ANTIDOT Independent Media Campus & Network, *Response from the East: Invasion of Kremlin media in the Balkan*, Analysis 29, May 2018.

⁴⁰⁹ Sputnik Serbia, “Stiglo pojačanje: Jedan od najmoćnijih topova u svetu isporučen ruskoj vojsci” [Reinforcements arrived: One of the most powerful cannons in the world delivered to the Russian army], April 16, 2020; Sputnik Serbia, “Ruska vojska dobija pojačanje: Modernizovan jedan od najmoćnijih topova u svetu /video/” [Russian army gets reinforcements: One of the most powerful cannons in the world modernized /video/], April 7, 2020; Sputnik Serbia, “Rusija razvija novo robotizovano oklopno vozilo „Saratnik” [Russia develops a new robotic armored vehicle “Saratnik”], April 14, 2020.

⁴¹⁰ Sputnik Serbia, “Presek stanja: Koliko nuklearnih bojnih glava ima Amerika, a koliko Rusija” [Cross-section of the situation: How many nuclear warheads does America have, and how many does Russia have?], April 2, 2020.

⁴¹¹ Ikodinović, O., “Sovjetski tenk – noćna mora za NATO” [Soviet tank – a nightmare for NATO], *Sputnik Serbia*, March 28, 2020.

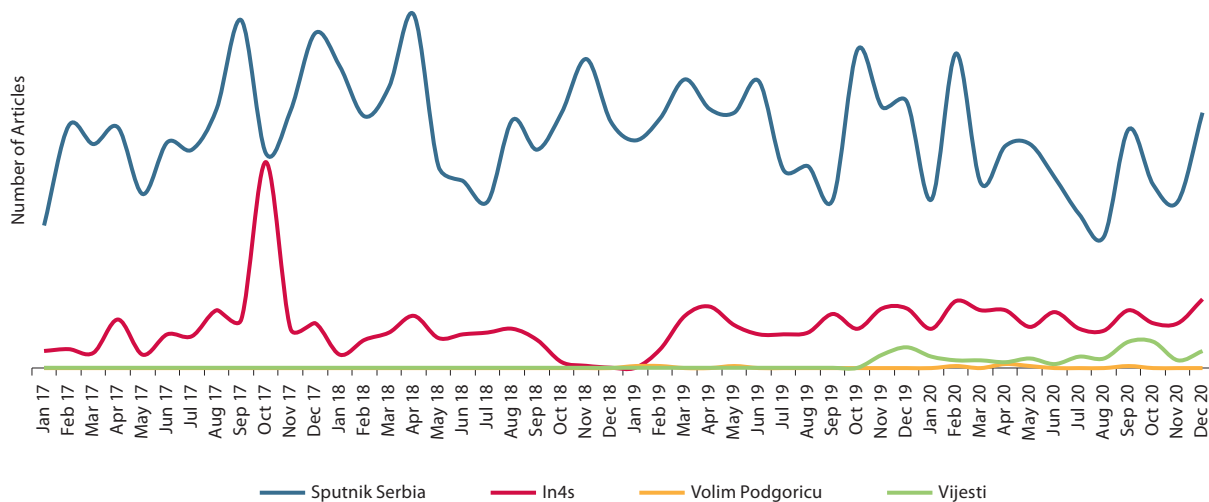
⁴¹² In4s, “(ВИДЕО) „Подмукло” руско оружје против НАТО” [(VIDEO) “Insidious” Russian weapons against NATO], December 10, 2019.

⁴¹³ In4s, “(ВИДЕО) Италијан склонио заставу ЕУ, на њено мјесто поставио руску: Хвала Путину и Русији” [(VIDEO) Italian removes EU flag, puts Russian in its place: Thanks to Putin and Russia], March 23, 2020.

⁴¹⁴ In4s, “Нема више тајни: Русија пронашла начин да надзире НАТО” [No more secrets: Russia has found a way to oversee NATO], April 11, 2020.

⁴¹⁵ Volim Podgoricu, “RUSIJA IMA NOVO MOĆNO ORUŽJE: Nepobjediva “Verba” pogađa avione, rakete i dronove!” [RUSSIA HAS A NEW POWERFUL WEAPON: The invincible “Verba” hits planes, rockets and drones!], June 21, 2015.

Figure 26. Excessive focus on Russia's military might in Montenegro



Note: Number of articles containing "Russia" and "military".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

rivalry and competition without even the theoretical possibility for cooperation being presented.^{416, 417} Europe is portrayed as militarily vulnerable to Russian technology and at the behest of the Kremlin.⁴¹⁸ Whereas, Russia is described as a global power and a major player on the world stage.⁴¹⁹

Compared to the other three outlets, Vijesti is discernibly less biased in its treatment of international affairs – specifically, Russian military activity in Europe. While it acknowledges Moscow's technological capacity and skill,⁴²⁰ it also emphasizes that these claims have to be balanced with a consideration of the limitations of

Russian military capacities.⁴²¹ Unlike Sputnik, IN4S and Volim Podgoricu, Vijesti does not attempt to weave propaganda narratives around Russia's military activities but reports on these instances in a balanced and non-biased manner.^{422, 423}

In addition to a very strict content focus on pro-Russian disinformation, Sputnik also provides the highest **volume of articles** on Russian military might, giving the topic priority. In the case of Montenegro, this has led, at least on one occasion, to a very high convergence in narration and volume of published articles. In the second half of 2017, in relation to the Syrian conflict, Sputnik was joined by IN4S in extolling the virtues of Russian military might. Throughout the last four years IN4S has remained active on the topic but the volume of published articles is approximately a quarter of the volume published by Sputnik Serbia.

CHINA PRESENCE

Montenegro has a small and open economy that is highly dependent on foreign direct investment. The Adriatic country has been especially vulnerable to Russian economic influence, but it is also increasingly

⁴¹⁶ Volim Podgoricu, "POGLEDAJTE VIDEO: Bliski susreti ruskih aviona i NATO aviona i brodova" [WATCH THE VIDEO: Close encounters between Russian planes and NATO planes and ships], June 14, 2017.

⁴¹⁷ Volim Podgoricu, "Putin: Rusija će adekvatno odgovoriti na akcije NATO, Snoudenu sam rekao da to nije za nas" [Putin: Russia will adequately respond to NATO actions, I told Snowden that this is not for us], June 14, 2017.

⁴¹⁸ Volim Podgoricu, "EVROPA U PANICI ZBOG RUSKIH NEVIDLJIVIH AVIONA: Razmatraju otvoreni sukob u vazduhu i obaranje!" [EUROPE PANICS OVER RUSSIAN INVISIBLE PLANES: They are considering open air conflict and shooting down!], March 10, 2015.

⁴¹⁹ Volim Podgoricu, "RUSIJA DEMONSTRIRALA MOĆ: Bombarderi kružili iznad Korejskog poluostrva u isto vrijeme kada su Sjedinjene Države i Južna Koreje sprovodile zajedničke vojne vježbe" [RUSSIA DEMONSTRATED POWER: Bombers circled over the Korean Peninsula at the same time as the United States and South Korea conducted joint military exercises], August 25, 2017.

⁴²⁰ Vijesti, "VIDEO Tass: NATO lovac pokušao da se približi Šojugovom avionu, "Suhoj-27" ga spriječio" [VIDEO Tass: NATO fighter tried to approach Shoigu's plane, "Sukhoi-27" stopped him], August 13, 2019.

⁴²¹ Vijesti, "Erdogan: Nema dokaza da ruski raketni sistem S-400 može da ugrozi NATO" [Erdogan: There is no evidence that Russia's S-400 missile system could threaten NATO], August 6, 2019.

⁴²² Vijesti, "SAD optužuju Rusiju za eksperimentisanje sa nuklearnim oružjem" [The United States accuses Russia of experimenting with nuclear weapons], April 16, 2020.

⁴²³ Ibid.

becoming subject to China's influence activities. Relative to the size of the economy, Russian presence in Montenegro has been on average the largest in the whole SEE region.⁴²⁴ Tourism is the most important pillar of the Montenegrin economy, making up 32.1% of the country's GDP in 2019.⁴²⁵ After Serbian tourists, Russians account for the largest proportion of foreign tourists. In 2019, Russian tourist arrivals made up 15.3% of the total share. Among non-European countries the largest proportion came from Chinese tourists (including those arriving from Hong Kong) with 3% of the total share.⁴²⁶

Montenegro participates in the 17+1 initiative and **China has emerged as one of the most important economic partners** of the country. Since its independence in 2006, Montenegro has signed 17 cooperation agreements with China in the fields of education, infrastructure, health, agriculture, rail transport, and the fight against corruption.⁴²⁷ The biggest Chinese project in Montenegro is the construction of the Bar-Boljare Highway. Civil society activists and investigative journalists have been warning that the project's execution is suffering from a total lack of transparency. Most of the documents required for adequate public control have been classified. The highway project could become a major source of financial instability for the country in the future. The loan that Montenegro has taken up in order to finance the construction could turn into a long-term debt trap. The future financial obligations of

Montenegro, in particular, could put the government in a position, in which it would be unable to honor debt repayments.⁴²⁸ Montenegro, might potentially be forced to alter political positions, lease the already-built infrastructure to China, or accept harsh repayment conditions in the case of any future default.⁴²⁹

A positive attitude toward China is prevailing in Montenegro's media space.⁴³⁰ The media content analysis has shown that in 2019, the word "China" was mentioned more than 14,000 times in Montenegro's information space, while, for example, "NATO" was mentioned 10% less over the same period. According to this analysis, China is most often mentioned in news stories on the importance of the Bar-Boljare highway project, the different loans and donations from China to Montenegro, and the promotion of bilateral cultural cooperation. Frequently covered are also propaganda narratives that focus on the successes of Chinese society in science, art, infrastructure, and technology. On the other hand, media stories about the Chinese political system, the violation of human rights, the inequalities that exist in Chinese society, the clampdown on media freedom, and the potential for corruption in the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway are comparatively rare. Overall, the increasingly positive portrayal of China in Montenegro's media space can supplement the already robust dissemination of pro-Kremlin disinformation, therefore amplifying the effects of authoritarian state malign influence operations.

⁴²⁴ Stefanov, R. and Vladimirov, M., *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁴²⁵ World Travel and Tourism Council, *Country Data for Montenegro*, 2020.

⁴²⁶ Statistical Office of Montenegro (Monstat), *Istraživanje o dolascima i noćenjima turista, ukupno 2019. Godina* [Survey on tourist arrivals and overnight stays, total 2019], 2020.

⁴²⁷ This is according to official information provided to the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) by Montenegro's Ministry of Education.

⁴²⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Chinese Economic Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe: Impact on Energy Transition and Climate*, Policy Brief No. 97, January, 2021.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ National Democratic Institute, *Western Balkans – Between East and West*, 2018.

NORTH MACEDONIA

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

North Macedonia has been waiting to start EU accession negotiations since 2005 when it first received the green light from the European Commission. But first Greece, then France, and now Bulgaria have been delaying the start of the negotiations. This delay has led to the steady, though slow, erosion of approval toward Euro-Atlantic institutions among Macedonians.⁴³¹ The lack of a clear integration perspective fueled the rise of authoritarian and state capture tendencies in North Macedonia and created a power vacuum, which was then exploited by foreign authoritarian states including Russia, China, and Turkey.

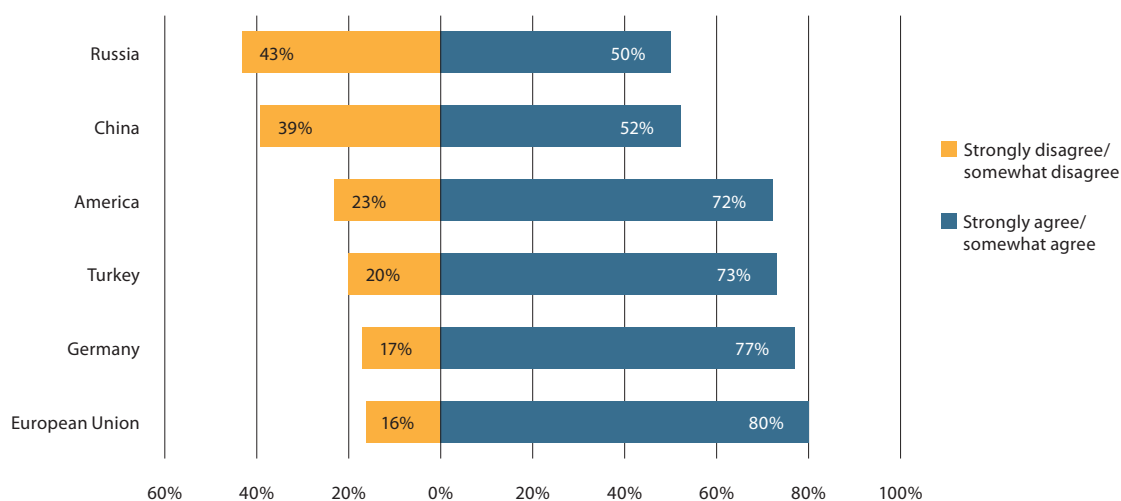
Accordingly, the support for NATO integration dropped by 20% between 2008 and 2016 (down to 73%).⁴³² Regarding the country's EU membership, 71% approved of EU accession, again, this figure represents a 25% reduction in EU approval since 2008. Such a decline in public support shows Macedonian's waning hope that

their country would become a member of the Union in the foreseeable future.⁴³³ Despite this, the country remains overwhelmingly pro-European. While China and Russia are still seen as important players internationally, North Macedonia sees its interests more closely aligned with Germany and Turkey. However, this overall positive disposition might mask important internal fault lines within the country. There are indications that the country's biggest ethnic Albanian minority is more pro-European than the ethnic majority.⁴³⁴

MEDIA FOOTPRINT INSTRUMENTS

The media landscape in North Macedonia is very diverse and highly polarized. Polarization is not only a question of political affiliations but also religious and ethnic differences. This is the result of constitutional guarantees to the right to cultural expression for ethnic minorities in North Macedonia.⁴³⁵ For example, ethnic Albanians operate Albanian language TV

Figure 27. Maintaining strong relations to which country serves North Macedonia's interests best?



Note: Share of people responding to the question "How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements: "Macedonia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with...".

Source: International Republican Institute. *Public Opinion in Macedonia*, 2017.

⁴³¹ MKD, "Анкета на ИРИ: Паѓа поддршката за членство во ЕУ и НАТО" [IRI poll: Support for EU and NATO membership falls], June 9, 2016.

⁴³² International Republican Institute, *Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion*, 2016.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ National Democratic Institute, *Macedonia Public Opinion Research*, 2017.

⁴³⁵ Brogi, E. et al., *Freedom of Media in the Western Balkans*, European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies of The Union, 2014, p. 14; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Media Situation in North Macedonia*, 2020.

stations and newspapers, which are more insulated from Russian influence. Yet, this polarization is used by the Kremlin to stoke fears of “Greater Albania” in the region.

Although no North Macedonian media outlets are owned by Russian citizens or companies, Russian influence in the media sector has been carried out through several instruments, such as the informal ties that some local journalists and business people have to Russia. In addition, Russian narratives enter the North Macedonian public space via the political influence that Serbia wields over the country. There are also connections to Hungary. Several influential media outlets have been bought by Hungarian companies with close ties to the Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban. For example, TV Alfa, Lider.com.mk, Kurir.mk, Netpress.com.mk, and Republika.mk were sold to Hungarian-based companies Target Media and Adamik Media. These influential online media outlets have been very supportive of the former ruling VMRO-DPMNE party and have also disseminated conservative and far-right narratives in the North Macedonian public space.⁴³⁶ In this way, these outlets have fallen into a well-known silo of Russian media influence.

Journalists within the most influential mainstream media outlets are also often promoting Russian interests in North Macedonia by disseminating pro-Russian narratives which attack the process of integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions.⁴³⁷ Russia could also exert indirect media influence by leveraging the role of large Russian companies. The main Russian investor in North Macedonia is Lukoil. This company and other companies related to the Russian businessman Sergej Samsonenko are important advertisers in North Macedonian domestic media.⁴³⁸ They also have important political connections to the highest echelons of power.

⁴³⁶ Trpkovski, G. “How Hungarian Olive Oil Kept Macedonian Media Afloat,” *BalkanInsight*, February 14, 2020; Jovanovska, M. et al., “Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans,” OCCRP, May 9, 2018; BIRN, “Пропагандната машинерија на Орбан влезе во Македонија” [Orban’s propaganda machinery entered Macedonia], *Prizma*, May 8, 2018.

⁴³⁷ Observer.mk, “Колку борбени авиони во моментов може да употреби руската армија?” [How many fighter jets can the Russian army currently use?], November 16, 2020.

⁴³⁸ Fakova-Serafinovich, F., “Четири компании – доминантни во бизнисот со билборди” [Four companies – dominant in the billboard business], *Pina.mk*, November 6, 2020.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

The following four media outlets have been selected for a content analysis of key pro-Russian narratives related to the topics of North Macedonia’s EU and NATO integration processes:

- **Russia Beyond** is an online multilingual media outlet that promotes Russia’s interests in 14 languages, including Macedonian, and is operated by the Russian non-profit organization “TV-Novosti”.⁴³⁹
- **Infomax.mk** is a Macedonian-language portal, which is considered close to VMRO-DPMNE. During its long stint in power, the party under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski developed increasingly closer ties with Russia. North Macedonia’s entry into the Russian pipeline project South Stream in 2013 ushered a period of growing Russian investments in the country, led by Lukoil and the Russian gambling investor, Sergei Samsonenko. These became some of the main conduits of Russian economic influence in North Macedonia.⁴⁴⁰ During the 2016 parliamentary elections, Russia did not hide its support for VMRO-DPMNE as the political actor that could guarantee the success of its projects and investments.⁴⁴¹ The online portal frequently republishes propaganda content from Russian state-media glorifying the Russian army, science, technological achievements, and the political success of President Vladimir Putin.⁴⁴²
- **Pressingtv.mk**, owned by “Prva Republika DOO Skopje”, is a company financed by Hungarian capital that also owns the portals Republika.mk, Denesen.mk, and Lider.mk.⁴⁴³ This portal was originally founded by the journalist Hristo Ivanovski.⁴⁴⁴ In 2015, the-then President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, banned Ivanovski from entering the country due to his pro-Russian position vis-à-vis Crimea.⁴⁴⁵ Although Ivanovski is no longer listed as editor-in-

⁴³⁹ Russia Beyond, [About us](#).

⁴⁴⁰ MKD, “Ставревски го потпиша договорот за Јужен тек во Македонија” [Stavrevski has signed the agreement for “South stream” in Macedonia], June 23, 2013; Center of Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia’s Economic Footprint in Macedonia*, Policy Brief No. 71, January 2018.

⁴⁴¹ Samurkov, M., “Падот на Груевски ги спречи плановите на Русија за Македонија” [Gruevski’s fall thwarted Russia’s plans for Macedonia], DW (in Macedonian language), March 2018.

⁴⁴² Infomax.mk, *Русија* [Russia], 2020.

⁴⁴³ Marnet, *PressingTV.mk*, 2020.

⁴⁴⁴ Jordanovska, M., „Република“ доби нов газда од Унгарија” [“Republika” has a new owner from Hungary], *Prizma*, April 17, 2018.

⁴⁴⁵ Sputnik International, “Sanctioned Macedonian Journalist Links Views on Crimea to Ukraine Blacklist,” September 17, 2015.

chief,⁴⁴⁶ the content of Pressingtv.mk remains firmly aligned with Russian interests and views on world affairs.

- **News Agency “Meta.mk”** represents an independent media outlet, which was established by the Foundation for Internet and Society “Metamorphosis” in Skopje. The news source offers balanced analytical coverage of domestic and international affairs.

Russia Beyond, InfoMax and Pressingtv have promoted **pro-Russian topics**. First, NATO membership is portrayed as harmful and costly.⁴⁴⁷ Following the bombing of Serbia in 1999,⁴⁴⁸ NATO is still often referred to as the organization that plans to create a Greater Albania.⁴⁴⁹ Second, Russia is depicted as militarily and scientifically superior to both NATO and the EU.⁴⁵⁰ Third, Russia and China are said to have demonstrated greater crisis management capacities than the West amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵¹

In particular, **Russia Beyond** has been focused on publishing comments, interviews, analyses, and news highlighting Russia’s military superiority over NATO and Russia’s cultural closeness to the Macedonians.⁴⁵² Russia Beyond also tends to exaggerate the historical

achievements of Russia while downplaying those of the West. For instance, the outlet glorifies the Russian intelligence services’ ostensible role in keeping global peace through the claim that a Russian spy prevented the assassinations of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill in 1943 in Tehran.⁴⁵³ In contrast, the West is portrayed as unyielding and unwilling to compromise on matters of global security. In this regard, Sputnik has emphasized that the inability of the USSR to reach an agreement with Britain and France in 1939 against Nazi Germany was the sole fault of Western powers.

Similar to Russia Beyond, **InfoMax** routinely downplays NATO’s military capabilities,⁴⁵⁴ while arguing that the world is in dire need of a new order, with Russia playing a central role. InfoMax’s content has suggested that the lack of popular support for NATO in North Macedonia can be evidenced by the public’s refusal to take part in government-organized NATO events.⁴⁵⁵ InfoMax presents a Russia-centric view, according to which NATO is a threat to Moscow. It follows then that North Macedonian membership to NATO serves to undermine relations with Russia.⁴⁵⁶ The anti-Western stance of the online portal could also be seen in the claim that the EU, US, and NATO are forcing North Macedonia to rewrite its history. The supposed objective of this is “humiliating the Macedonians and diminishing their identity”.⁴⁵⁷ InfoMax further argues for the creation of a new world order dominated by Russia and China. According to the outlet, this is needed due to the inability of the West to cope with the coronavirus pandemic as a result of “the lack of values” and lax discipline throughout Western nations, stating Italy to be a prime example of this.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁴⁶ Pressing TV, *Impressum*, 2020.

⁴⁴⁷ Pressing TV, “Членството во НАТО ќе не чини 1,2 милиони евра, најголем дел одат за нашата армија” [NATO membership will cost us 1.2 million euros, most of it goes to our army], February 6, 2019; “Со влезот во НАТО, Грција почнува да го чува македонскиот воздушен простор” [With NATO accession, Greece begins to guard Macedonian airspace], April 1, 2020.

⁴⁴⁸ Pressing TV, “Две децении од НАТО бомбардирањето на Југославија (ВИДЕО)” [Two decades of NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (VIDEO)], March 24, 2019.

⁴⁴⁹ Infomax, “Страшо Ангеловски: Се реализира сценариото – Големоалбанска реалност на Балканот” [Straso Angelovski: The scenario is being realized – Greater Albanian reality in the Balkans], April 10, 2019; Pressing TV, “Се сеќавате ли на него: Џорџ Робертсон му го честита на Ахмети приемот во НАТО” [Do you remember him: George Robertson congratulates Ahmeti on joining NATO], March 31, 2020.

⁴⁵⁰ Egorov, B., “Зошто на НАТО му паѓа незгодно од авионите на компанијата „Сухој“?” [Why is NATO embarrassed by Sukhoi planes?], *Russia Beyond Macedonia*, September 12, 2019.

⁴⁵¹ Pressing TV, “Наместо од ЕУ, медицинската помош стигна од Кина” [Instead of the EU, medical aid arrived from China], March 17, 2020.

⁴⁵² Egorov, B., “Како руските мигови го плашеа НАТО” [How Russian MiGs scared NATO], *Russia Beyond Macedonia*, December 9, 2019.

Russia Beyond Macedonia, “Руските ракеташки откриле стотици шпионски летала на НАТО околу Крим” [Russian rocket launchers have discovered hundreds of NATO spy planes around Crimea], December 20, 2019; “Руски Су-27 избркаа ловец на НАТО од авионот на Шојгу” [A Russian Su-27 has chased a NATO fighter off the Shoigu plane], August 13, 2019; “Воен експерт: Зошто Русија има значително поголем број на тенкови од НАТО?” [Military expert: Why does Russia have a significantly larger number of tanks than NATO?], October 8, 2019.

⁴⁵³ Egorov, B., “Како советската разузнавачка служба им ги спаси животите на Сталин, на Рузвелт и на Черчил” [How the Soviet Intelligence Service Saved the Lives of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill] *Russia Beyond Macedonia*, November 29, 2019.

⁴⁵⁴ Infomax, “Самит на НАТО во Лондон, 70 години од основањето на Алијансата” [NATO summit in London, 70 years since the founding of the Alliance], December 3, 2019.

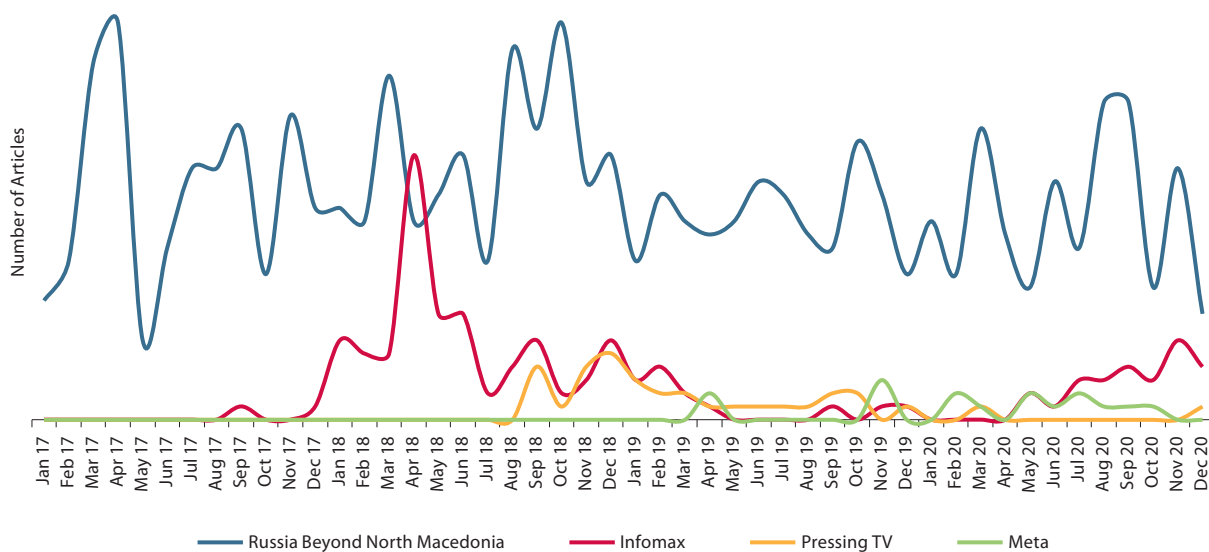
⁴⁵⁵ Karev, N., “ЛУЃЕ НЕ ИМ ОДАТ НА НАТО ЗАБАВИ: Организираат НАТО трка, победниците одат на НАТО маратон” [PEOPLE DON’T GO TO NATO PARTIES: They organize a NATO race, the winners go to a NATO marathon], *Infomax*, April 1, 2019.

⁴⁵⁶ Karev, N., “ПУТИН СО КРИТИКА ЗА ПРОШИРУВАЊЕТО НА НАТО: Тоа претставува закана за Русија” [PUTIN WITH CRITICIS FOR NATO ENLARGMENT: It is a threat to Russia], *Infomax*, December 3, 2019.

⁴⁵⁷ Naceva, Z., “СОТИР КОСТОВ: Македонската историја ќе ја пишуват македонски историчари” [The Macedonian History will be written by Macedonians], *Infomax*, September 3, 2019.

⁴⁵⁸ Karev, N., “ПАДОТ НА ЗАПАДНАТА ЦИВИЛИЗАЦИЈА И КРАЈОТ НА КОМУНИЗМОТ: Коронавирусот и рестартот на светскиот поредок” [THE FALL OF WESTERN CIVILISATION AND THE END OF COMMUNISM: Coronavirus and the restart of the global order], *Infomax*, March 10, 2020.

Figure 28. Extolling Russia's military might in North Macedonian media outlets



Note: Number of articles containing the keywords "Russia" and "army". There was very limited data available on Pressingtv.mk before January 2019 and on Meta before July 2018, which could have impacted results.

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

In contrast to Russia Beyond and InfoMax, **Pressingtv.mk** is less overt in its criticisms of NATO. On the one hand, membership is framed as a defensive move for the protection of North Macedonia's national interests.⁴⁵⁹ On the other hand, the outlet suggests that NATO membership may threaten the country's fundamental national identity and potentially incur significant financial costs.⁴⁶⁰ Unlike the other two outlets, Pressingtv.mk focuses less on Russian superiority and the low military capabilities of NATO and more on the geopolitical failures of the EU. The outlet also repeatedly highlights the EU's negligence of the future of the Western Balkans and the Union's self-interest in denying the region's accession. For instance, the article "EU for you: Brussels bans export of medical equipment to the Balkans" heavily insinuates that the Union does not care about countries outside of its own borders – this forces Serbia to turn to their "Russian and Chinese brothers".⁴⁶¹ In the same vein, Pressingtv.mk details how it was China, rather than the EU, who was the first to provide medical equipment and

financial assistance to North Macedonia during the pandemic.⁴⁶²

Similar to other countries in the region, Russian-owned outlets in North Macedonia overshadow local narratives by producing a much higher number of articles dedicated to topics of interest to the Kremlin, such as Russian military superiority. The flooding of the domestic info space with pro-Russian articles, from time to time, provokes locally owned pro-Russian outlets to follow suit. This further strengthens the impact of Russian narratives and disinformation.

CHINA PRESENCE

The Chinese footprint in North Macedonia has significantly increased since 2003. China has developed a number of large-scale infrastructures, energy, and telecommunications projects, which have been financed by intergovernmental loans that now account for more than 5% of the country's GDP.⁴⁶³ Some of the projects have shown that Chinese state banks and SOEs are willing to tolerate corruption and limited transparency. The construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid highway

⁴⁵⁹ Ivanovski, H., "Од денес во НАТО не сме „идна“ туку Република Северна Македонија" [As of today, in NATO, we are not a "future", but the Republic of North Macedonia], *Pressingtv*, February 13, 2019.

⁴⁶⁰ Chaveski, I., "Скапа заштита: Членството во НАТО може да не чини и до 200 милиони евра годишно" [Expensive protection: NATO membership can cost us up to 200 million euros a year], *Pressingtv*, March 31, 2020.

⁴⁶¹ Pressingtv, "„EU за тебе“: Брисел забрани извоз на медицинска опрема за Балканот" ["EU for you": Brussels bans export of medical equipment to the Balkans], March 20, 2020.

⁴⁶² Pressingtv, "Наместо од ЕУ, медицинската помош стигна од Кина" [Instead of the EU, medical aid arrived from China], March 17, 2020.

⁴⁶³ Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Chinese Economic Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe: Impact on Energy Transition and Climate*. Policy Brief No. 97, January 2021.

in North Macedonia serves as a prime example of this. The project was marred by bad planning and lacked a comprehensive environmental impact assessment. The construction process raised allegations of corruption and illegal party financing. Ultimately, it resulted in a money-laundering scandal that implicated the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.⁴⁶⁴ Such projects could give rise to considerable illicit financial flows, which could serve to buy beneficial media coverage.

There is no evidence for any Chinese media ownership in North Macedonia. However, **China has tried to influence the North Macedonian public opinion through its state-owned media**, which broadcast globally (CCTV, Xinhua, CGTN) and maintain local operations throughout the country. Xinhua for instance has a local Macedonian correspondent. In particular, the Albanian minority of North Macedonia represents

a particular target for Chinese media operations. Since 2013, Radio Ejani (Radio China) has been broadcasting in Albanian, targeting all ethnic Albanian areas in the Western Balkans and beyond.⁴⁶⁵ The website “albanian.cri.cn”, which launched in December 2003 as part of China Radio International Online (www.cri.cn), is a multimedia website that integrates online news, photo-journalism, and audio-video material. It aims to reach Albanian internet users with information on the Chinese economy and culture. Magazine “Ejani!” is a bi-monthly publication, disseminating information about China.⁴⁶⁶ The outlet glorifies the Chinese government by reporting on the “successes” of Xi Jinping and emphasizes the importance of Albanian-Chinese relations. This media tends to win the sympathy of Albanians not only in Albania but also across the Western Balkans in the countries with a significant Albanian minority.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Facebook.com, Radio Ejani, 2020.

⁴⁶⁶ China Radio International – Albanian.

ALBANIA

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

The Albanian public has a positive opinion of NATO.⁴⁶⁷ Indeed, 88.8% of Albanians hold either a positive (48.1%) or a very positive (40.7%) opinion of the Alliance. There is also a strong link between NATO and EU integration preferences. Some 83.3% of respondents feel that NATO membership would accelerate Albania's EU accession. Unlike all of the other SEE countries, the majority of Albanians (52%) think that the country's relations with the EU and the United States are equally important.

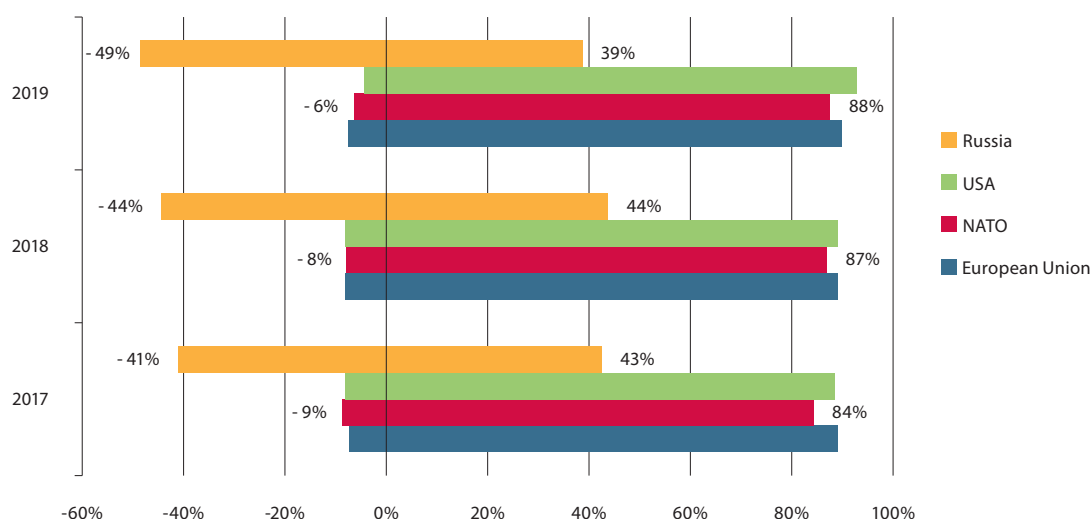
Yet, support for the EU in Albania has declined following the EU's delay in starting accession negotiations with Western Balkan countries. The share of Albanians that consider EU membership a good thing has decreased from 93% in 2018 to 88% in 2019.⁴⁶⁸ In March 2020, the EU reached an agreement and opened negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, yet these have been further postponed for the latter due to Bulgaria's veto.⁴⁶⁹

Albanians associate EU membership most importantly to economic prosperity (62%), freedom to study/work in the EU (29%), and peace and stability (27%). While Albanians are some of the most pro-EU Europeans, emigration from the country has been considerable. Attitudes for emigration have stayed stubbornly high, with 50% of the Albanians saying they want to emigrate to the UK, 36.8% saying they want to move to Italy, and the rest wishing to move to either Germany or France.⁴⁷⁰

MEDIA FOOTPRINT INSTRUMENTS

The Russian influence on the Albanian media sector is through informal rather than direct ownership. No companies are operating in the Albanian media market under Russian ultimate beneficial ownership. Indirect influences can be seen when local outlets republish articles from Russian sources. Some of these media outlets include A2CNN,⁴⁷¹ Gazeta Impakt,⁴⁷² Ora News

Figure 29. Albanians' opinion of foreign countries and international organizations



Source: Omnibus Ipsos Albania.

⁴⁶⁷ Gjergji, V., *Albanian perceptions on NATO integration*, Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2007.

⁴⁶⁸ European Commission, *Public Opinion*, 2019.

⁴⁶⁹ EuroNews, "BE arrin marrëveshje, hapen negociatat për Shqipërinë dhe Maqedoninë e Veriut" [EU reaches agreement, negotiations open for Albania and Northern Macedonia], March 24, 2020.

⁴⁷⁰ World Vision Albania, *Study findings on services and assistance provided to returnees in 13 Municipalities in Albania*, 2020.

⁴⁷¹ A2CNN known as G2 Media sh.p.k, owned by "Gener 2 Group" (Open Corporates, *Gener 2*, 2020).

⁴⁷² *Gazeta Impakt*.

Television,⁴⁷³ Focus Media Group,⁴⁷⁴ Report TV, and Shqiptarja.com.⁴⁷⁵

Beyond the influence exerted via informal political and economic ties, Russian media activities in the country have also taken the form of cyber attacks. In 2017, **widespread hacking attempts were found to be originating from Serbian and Russian computers** during the parliamentary elections. These hacking attempts suspended the work of the Central Election Commission website.⁴⁷⁶ In 2018, the State Intelligence Service (Shërbimi Informativ i Shtetit) reported that a Russian agent under the guise of a journalist took on the role of attaché for consular affairs at the Russian Embassy in Tirana and conducted intelligence operations.⁴⁷⁷ Moreover, the security agency reported on Russian attempts to purchase web portals in the Balkan region, including Albania.⁴⁷⁸

There could also be indirect Russian influence in the media sector via the advertising market, in which there are several large companies with Russian links. The biggest television advertisers are telecommunication companies such as Telekom Albania.⁴⁷⁹ In January 2019, OTE Group, sold Telekom Albania to a Bulgarian company: Albania Telecom Invest AD, headed by Spas Roussev – former owner of Bulgaria's largest telecommunications operator Vivacom. It is believed that Roussev's acquisition of the Albanian telecom company could have been financed by the Russian state-owned bank, VTB, which had previously supported his take-over of the Bulgarian Vivacom.⁴⁸⁰ While these instruments of potential Russian influence on the Albanian media market are all indirect,

⁴⁷³ Media Ownership Monitor Albania, *Ekstrakt historik i regjistrit tregtar për të dhënat e subjektit "shoqëri aksionare"* [Extract form of a registered business], 2020.

⁴⁷⁴ Media Ownership Monitor Albania, *Focus Media Group*, 2020.

⁴⁷⁵ Media Ownership Monitor Albania, *Report TV*, 2020.

⁴⁷⁶ Tirana Today, "Ndikimi rus në Ballkan përmes medias online" [Russian influence in the Balkans through online media], November 7, 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ Veliu, M. "Ekskluzive/Dosja e SHISH, si spiunazhi rus vepron në Shqipëri dhe roli i bjellorusit/Dokumenti i plotë" [Exclusive/SHISH file, how Russian espionage operates in Albania and the role of Belarus/Full document], *Shqiptarja*, July 23, 2018.

⁴⁷⁸ A2 News, "Raporti i SHISH, Bendo: Rusia po tenton të rrisë influencën" [SHISH Report, Bendo: Russia is trying to increase its influence], March 11, 2019.

⁴⁷⁹ Monitor, "Bombardimi me reklama në TV, 26 milionë sekonda në 2018-n" [Bombing with TV commercials, 26 million seconds in 2018], February 8, 2019.

⁴⁸⁰ Spas Roussev was the co-owner of Vivacom along with the Russian bank VTB: Svobodna Evropa, "Спас Русев и ВТБ продават „Виваком“ до две седмици" [Spas Roussev and VTB will sell Vivacom in two weeks], October 18, 2019.

they could provide strategic inroads for the Kremlin, which has proven it can exploit the private networks of Russia-owned or controlled companies and individuals very well.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

The content analysis of pro-Russian narratives in the Albanian media space discusses the country's EU accession negotiations, NATO relations, and bilateral ties with Russia. The news outlets examined are Sputnik, News 24, Ora News, and Klan TV:

- **Sputnik** is a media outlet directly owned by Russia whose Serbian language edition disseminates anti-Albanian narratives throughout the Western Balkan region such as the alleged attempts by the Albanian government to create "Greater Albania" uniting all Albanian minorities in the region.
- **News 24** (or Balkan Web) is a "partisan" outlet, which supports the ruling Socialist Party of Albania (PSSh) and frequently features statements made by the country's Russian Ambassador.⁴⁸¹
- **Ora News TV** is a mainstream daily, publishing varied content that includes pro-Russian narratives. Similar to News 24, it is promoted by the Russian Ambassador to Albania.⁴⁸²
- **Klan TV** serves as the control outlet offering the most objective coverage of narratives related to Russia. Klan TV is one of the biggest media outlets in Albania, owned by former journalist-turned-businessman Aleksander Frangaj and his wife Alba Gina. According to the Media Ownership Monitor, Frangaj is a pro-government media owner. This fact is true regardless of which party is in power. In the past 20 years, he has switched sides and allegiances multiple times. His wife Alba Gina was co-owner of the sports digital pay-per-view platform Supersport before it was merged with DigitAlb in 2016.⁴⁸³

Given the relatively less explicit Russian influence in Albania, there are more differences than similarities in the coverage of Russia-related news in Russian-owned and Albanian-owned outlets. There is no Russian-owned outlet operating in Albania. Yet, Russia's universal set of channels and narratives for media in-

⁴⁸¹ See, for instance, BalkanWeb, "Ambasadori rus: Moska, asnjë plan të fshehtë për ndikim negativ në Ballkan (Video)" [Russian Ambassador: Moscow, no secret plan for negative influence in the Balkans (Video)], June 14, 2017.

⁴⁸² Ora News, *Karpushin*, 2015 – 2019.

⁴⁸³ Media Ownership Monitor Albania, *Klan TV JSC*, 2020.

fluence in SEE applies also in Albania. Additionally, Russia has sought to counterbalance the lack of a local Russian-owned media outlet in Albania with an over-active embassy presence. The Russian embassy in Tirana has also considerably increased its social media engagement in 2020 and 2021. Its main target is the cognitive capture of local journalists and media that believe in the benevolence and righteousness of Russia's international position or have cultural or business ties to Russia.

In relation to Albania, Sputnik uses emotional and metaphorical language to highlight that the EU's delay in opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has "betrayed" the Balkan countries.⁴⁸⁴ This suggests an element of vindictive power play in the global arena, whereby the Balkan countries are continually victimized by the more powerful West. News 24 tends to convey a similar attitude. Through the evocation of moral opprobrium, the media outlet promotes the claim that the EU's decision to postpone negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is "shameful".⁴⁸⁵ This is then contrasted to Russia's supposedly benevolent and helpful stance toward the Balkans. For example, following the EU's refusal to negotiate with Tirana and Skopje unless further accession requirements were met, Ora News reported favorably on the Russian Ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov's invitation to Albania and North Macedonia to join the Eurasian Economic Forum.⁴⁸⁶ Sputnik further exaggerates the consequences of the EU's decision, branding it a historic mistake that will lead to the increase of "Eastern" influence across the Balkans.⁴⁸⁷ The EU is portrayed as an obstacle to regional harmony as well as an active perpetrator of regional dissent. According to Sputnik, by delaying accession talks, the EU risks further dividing the region, driving what turn into a "great Balkan war". In addition, Sputnik promotes conspiracies, particularly about an impending "Greater Albania", in a much more explicit manner.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁴ Sputnik News, "Western Balkans Feel 'Betrayed' Over EU Enlargement Talks – Croatia's Foreign Minister," January 1, 2020.

⁴⁸⁵ BalkanWeb, "Bruksel, Juncker: I turpshëm refuzimi i negociatave me Shqipërinë dhe MV" [Brussels, Juncker: the refusal of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was shameful], November 30, 2019.

⁴⁸⁶ Ora News, "Rusia fton Shqipërinë dhe Maqedoninë e Veriut: Bashkohuni me ne!" [Russia invites Albania and North Macedonia: "Join us!"], October 10, 2019.

⁴⁸⁷ Sputnik News, "'Historic Error': Talks on North Macedonia and Albania EU Accession Collapse," October 18, 2019.

⁴⁸⁸ Sputnik News, "'Historic Error': Talks on North Macedonia and Albania EU Accession Collapse," October 18, 2019.; "'The Whole World now has evidence' OSCE behind 'Greater Albania' project," May 11, 2017.

Another narrative that often finds its way into the Albanian media is that Russia is the victim of the West's unjust treatment. Sputnik suggests that Russians feel betrayed by the US anti-Russian sanctions.⁴⁸⁹ News 24 quotes the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, as saying that Balkan countries are being forced by Washington to adopt anti-Russian policies, thus increasing tensions throughout Europe.⁴⁹⁰ The use of rhetorical questions and inflammatory statements in News 24 headlines (e.g. "Is Russia using the Corona crisis to spread Fake News?" and "Russian Danger, Bushati: That's why Albania is immune!") is utilized as a technique to confront speculations of ulterior motives on Moscow's part.⁴⁹¹ The content of the articles further dismisses perceptions of a Russian threat as baseless. Similarly, Ora News features numerous articles and interviews with the former Russian ambassador to Albania, who emphasizes that the notion of Russia's interference in the Albanian parliamentary elections is a US fabrication that aims at tarnishing Russia's image and aggravating Russian-Albanian relations.⁴⁹²

News 24 contains articles that quote Russian propaganda channels, such as Sputnik and Russia Today. Some of these articles are related to the superiority of Russian military hardware, and others discuss internal Albanian politics, which is described as dependent on the local organized crime syndicates in operation throughout the country.⁴⁹³ News 24 essentially plays the role of a typical pro-government, pro-Russian outlet in SEE, striving to ensure comfortable relations for their political patrons to one of the strong adversarial powers in the region.

⁴⁸⁹ Sputnik News, "Businessman on US Anti-Russian sanctions: Russians feel confused and betrayed," April 6, 2018.

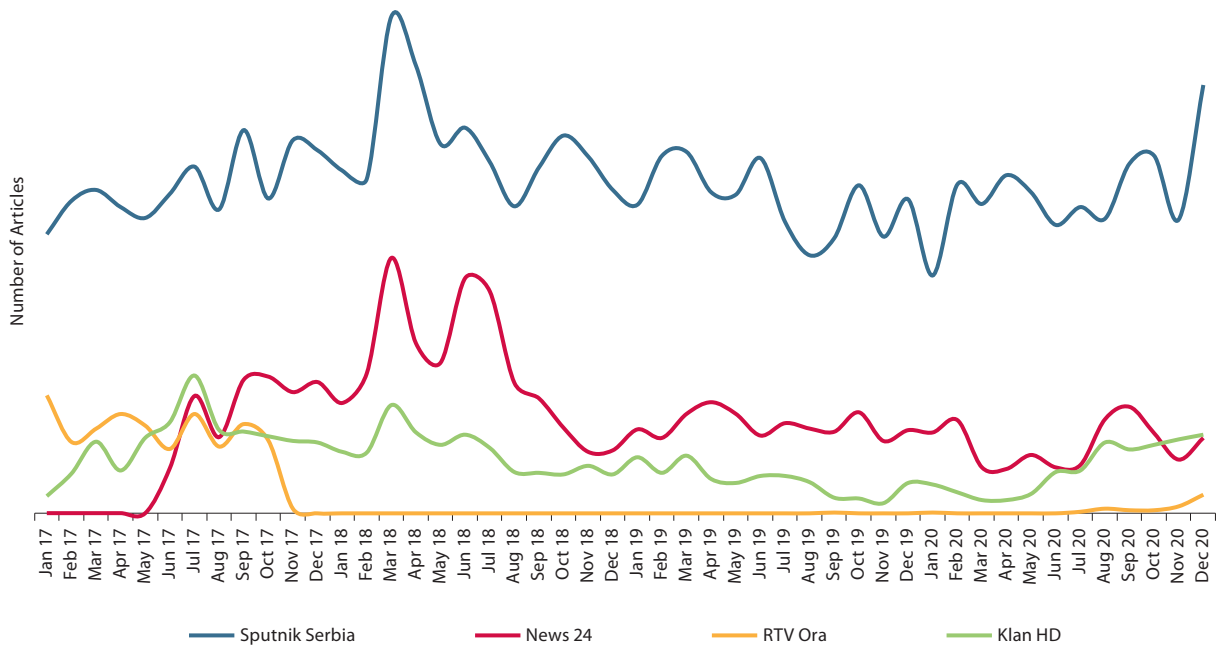
⁴⁹⁰ BalkanWeb, "Rusia akuzë të fortë SHBA-ve: Po rrisni tensionin në Ballkan" [Russia sharply accuses US: You are increasing tension in the Balkans], February 20, 2018.

⁴⁹¹ BalkanWeb, "A po e përdor Rusia krizën Corona për të përhapur Fake Neës? Ja çfarë thonë vëzhguesit evropianë" [Is Russia using the Corona crisis to spread Fake News?], March 22, 2020; "Rreziku rus, Bushati: Ja pse Shqipëria është imune! Mediu: Rusia ka ndryshuar strategji, do të infiltrohet kudo" [Russian danger, Bushati: That is why Albania is immune! Mediu: Russia has changed strategy; it will infiltrate everywhere], October 29, 2019.

⁴⁹² Ora News, "Rusia ndërhyri në zgjedhje? Ambasada: Trillim që synon minimin e marrëdhënieve me Shqipërinë" [Russia interfered in the elections? Embassy: A fabrication aimed at undermining relations with Albania], March 7, 2018; "Financimi rus i PD, Karpushin: Akuza të pabaza për të prishur imazhin e Rusisë" [Russian PD funding, Karpushin: Unfounded accusations to tarnish Russia's image], March 18, 2018.

⁴⁹³ BalkanWeb, "Sputnik: 'Vrasësit e tankeve' ruse do t'i dhurohen Serbisë" [Sputnik: Russian "tank killers" will be donated to Serbia], May 9, 2019; "Shqipëria në flakë"/Televizioni rus komenton situatën politike" ["Albania on fire"/Russian television comments on the political situation], February 23, 2019.

Figure 30. Coverage of Russia-related topics in Albanian media outlets



Note: Number of articles containing the keyword "Russia".
 Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

In contrast, Ora News does not tend to republish content from or quote Russian media but it often includes interviews with the former Russian Ambassador to Albania.⁴⁹⁴ It also mixes pro-Russian articles with pro-Western ones. It should be noted that Ora News does not use moralizing or judgmental language and its content is more descriptive without seeking to instill biases in its readers.

In contrast to Sputnik, News 24, and Ora News, Klan TV offers the most objective coverage of Russia-related developments. When it discusses the Russian presence in Albania, Klan TV presents the opinions of both NATO and Russian representatives, so attitudes towards NATO and Russia are evenly covered.⁴⁹⁵ Its use of illustrative language ("Russia Shows Its Teeth to NATO" in an article depicting Russia's biggest military exercise since the Cold War), directs attention to the possibility of Russian aggression without using overtly-negative epithets.⁴⁹⁶ The Klan TV channel does not show the same level of sympathy towards Russia as Sputnik and Balkan Web.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁴ Ora News, Karpushin, 2015 – 2019.
⁴⁹⁵ TV Klan, "NATO and Russia, eyes on Balkans," September 18, 2018.
⁴⁹⁶ TV Klan, "Gati për luftë, Rusia i tregon "dhëmbët" NATO-s" [Ready for war, Russia shows its "teeth" to NATO], September 11, 2018.
⁴⁹⁷ In one of the articles "US and Russia are in a new "weapons race" the author's attitude towards Russia and the US is neutral because it cites the information of other external experts on Russian and US weapons.

Moreover, Klan does not feature articles promoting the Russian language or culture, nor does it republish articles first appearing in Russian media outlets.⁴⁹⁸

CHINA PRESENCE

Albania was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China back in 1949. In the following 30 years, Albania provided China with an entry point to Europe – an important symbol of Beijing's ability to reach out to other countries on the continent.

Albania joined the '16+1' (now 17+1) cooperation platform in 2013 and the political, financial, media, and cultural cooperation with Beijing has expanded steadily. The most important Chinese investments in Albania include the Tirana National Airport, which was acquired by the China Everbright Group and Friedmann Pacific Asset Management Limited. China's Geo-Jade Petroleum also holds the rights to explore Europe's

TV Klan, "SHBA-ja dhe Rusia "në fillim të një gare të re armësh" [US and Russia "at the beginning of a new arms race"], March 2, 2018.
⁴⁹⁸ An article describes that Russian language studies is becoming less popular among Albanian students at the University of Tirana. TV Klan, "Gjuha Ruse drejt "vdekjes" mes shqiptarëve" [Russian language towards "death" among Albanians], October 27, 2019.

largest onshore oilfield, located in South Central Albania. However, it should be noted that this only became possible after the acquisition of the Canadian firm, Bankers Petroleum, in September 2017, which had previously held the exploration rights for the field.⁴⁹⁹

In December 2014, the Albanian government and China's Exim Bank agreed to the terms of an intergovernmental loan that would finance the construction of the Arbër Highway Project.⁵⁰⁰ This project foresees a stretch of road running through North Macedonia and into Bulgaria, thus linking the Ionian Sea and the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, along one of the EU transport corridors. **China currently is the largest foreign investor in Albania** and its second-largest trading partner after the EU.

China's media influence has expanded as well. Yet it has remained limited largely due to the broadcasting of China Radio International, which was launched in Albania as an FM channel in 2013.⁵⁰¹ Chinese diplomatic representatives have tried to focus the media and government attention towards a wider coverage of Chinese politics and culture. This media pivot has been attempted by organizing visits for Albanian journalists to China, public events highlighting Chinese cooperation with influential Albanian media outlets, and the release of largely propagandist bulletins highlighting China's industrial, scientific and cultural achievements.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Zeneli, V., "Western Balkans: Low hanging fruit for China?," *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2020.

⁵⁰⁰ Arbër Highway Project has as constructors China State Construction Engineering Corporation under the Belt and Road CEEC "16+1" Initiative: Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Tirana-Dibra Arber Motorway Construction (PPP)*, 2020.

⁵⁰¹ China Radio International.

⁵⁰² Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Albania, "Albanian Daily News", numër të posaçëm për Ditën Kombëtare të Kinës" ["Albanian Daily News", a special issue for China National Day], October 2, 2017.

KOSOVO

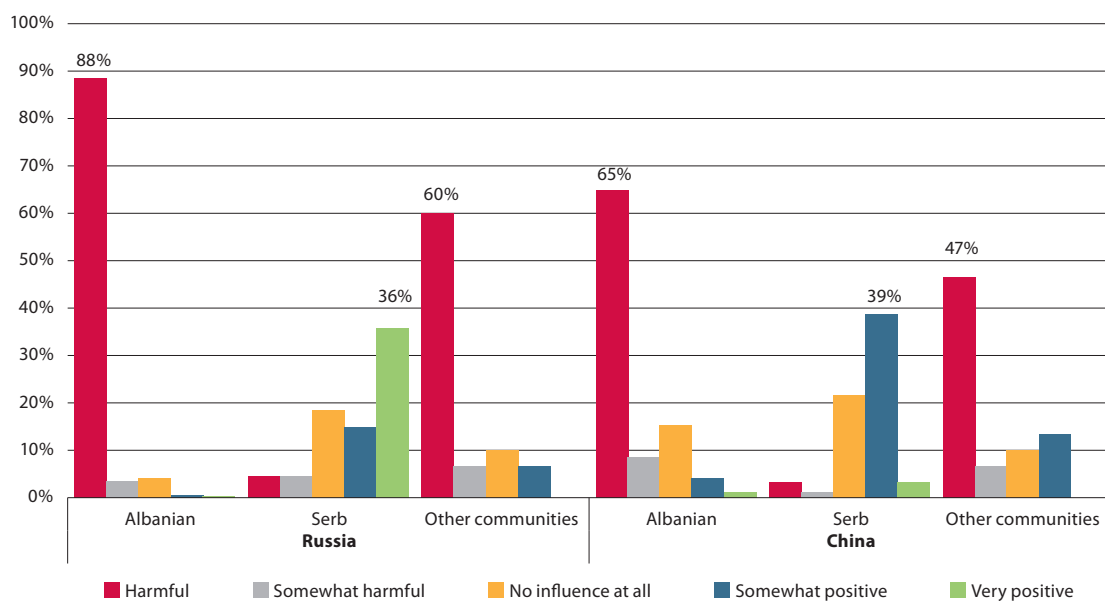
SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Kosovars perceive Germany (80%), the US (79%), Albania (70%), and the United Kingdom (63%) as the friendliest nations towards Kosovo.⁵⁰³ Whereas, countries that oppose Kosovo’s independence have been largely perceived as harmful. Unsurprisingly, around 89% consider Serbia to be the most harmful nation due to its confrontational approach towards Kosovo and the lingering memories of the 1998 – 1999 conflict, which ended with NATO’s military intervention against Serbia. **Russia is also widely seen as an enemy.** Roughly 81% espouse this opinion. China is next, with almost 60% of Kosovars perceiving China’s influence as harmful. These two global powers are the main opponents to Kosovo’s independence and recognition. Yet, Serbs in Kosovo have a diametrically opposite view, seeing Russia, in particular, as very or somewhat positive (51%). This predisposes the Serb-populated enclave in northern Kosovo as the primary target of Russian disinformation in the country.

MEDIA FOOTPRINT INSTRUMENTS

The majority of Kosovars, with the exception of Kosovo Serbs, already maintain negative attitudes towards Russia. The Kremlin’s disinformation mainly tries to mold **external perceptions of Kosovo**, particularly via the propaganda narratives disseminated by Sputnik across the Serbian-speaking part of SEE.⁵⁰⁴ Sputnik Serbia publishes a large volume of articles on Kosovo’s internal issues: the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and the situation in the northern part of the country, trying to draw an image of constant political and inter-ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs. The segment of Kosovar society that Russia attempts to target are the Kosovo Serbs. Russia reaches out to the Serbian community primarily through Sputnik, but also through other pro-Russian Serbian media outlets including Blic, B92, Kurir, Kosovo’s Radio KiM, as well as Kossev and Kosovo Online, which also frequently uses Sputnik as a major source of reference.

Figure 31. Perceptions of Russia and China based on respondents’ ethnic background



Source: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, Kosovo Security Barometer, 2019.

⁵⁰³ Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, *Kosovo Security Barometer – Ninth Edition*, 2019.

⁵⁰⁴ Kallaba, P., *Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why?*, Prishtina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2017; Vilasi, E., *Russian Influence In Kosovo – In The Shadows Of Myth And Reality*, Prishtina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2020.

Russia does not have any direct corporate footprint in the Kosovar media sector including in the Serb-populated northern part of the country.⁵⁰⁵ Despite the absence of direct Russian influence on Kosovo's media landscape, Russia has been able to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda more informally.

CHANNELS AND NARRATIVES

The content analysis of pro-Russian disinformation has been conducted on several major topics, including Kosovo's relations with the EU and NATO, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and the overall Russian influence in the Western Balkans. The following four media outlets have been included in the content analysis:

- **Sputnik** represents the main conduit of Russian media influence in Kosovo through its Serbian edition.
- **Kossev** – an online news outlet owned and operated by Tatjana Lazarevic, a Serb national from North Mitrovica. This outlet has been selected due to the absence of a partisan media outlet directly linked to the Kremlin.
- The public broadcaster **RTK** is a mainstream daily, which is funded by the state budget and has been suspected of promoting pro-government bias. Hence, it could portray a more nuanced pro-government attitude towards Russia.
- **Koha.net** represents an independent media outlet. It is one of the oldest newspapers in the country and throughout its history it has managed to maintain a level of independence and credibility.

Sputnik continuously promotes **anti-Kosovo, anti-NATO, and generally anti-Western narratives**. The publication prominently launched a propaganda campaign attacking NATO's humanitarian intervention against Serbia in 1999,⁵⁰⁶ and has spread fake news intending to instigate tensions between Kosovars and Serbs in northern Kosovo.⁵⁰⁷ The outlet also advocates for border changes in Kosovo and the wider region, while downplaying the role of the EU and its ability to

facilitate a peaceful dialogue.⁵⁰⁸ Sputnik undermines the EU's role in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, where France's engagement is depicted as strongly biased and a jeopardy to EU neutrality.⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, the Russian official opinions cited paint a pessimistic picture of the ways in which NATO expansion would create divisions rather than mitigate current and future security challenges.⁵¹⁰

While Sputnik is directly and openly supporting Russian interests, the other three analyzed media do not spread pro-Russian content, demonstrating the **Kremlin's limited ability to penetrate the domestic Kosovar media environment**. Only in Kossev there is a somewhat greater frequency of articles citing Russian and Serbian officials, highlighting the dominant role of Russia in mediating between Kosovo and Serbia.⁵¹¹ It is notable that Kossev repeatedly spotlights the opinion of Serbian President Alexander Vucic, who is depicted as a strong leader with an uncompromising attitude.⁵¹² The coverage of Vucic's polemic opinions may be intended to stoke mistrust against the EU among Kosovo Serbs, as Europe is portrayed as harboring ulterior and harmful intentions against the northern part of Kosovo.⁵¹³ Despite this, Kossev does not present the US in a wholly negative light, but at times portrays it as a benevolent ally.⁵¹⁴

⁵⁰⁵ Orbis Database.

⁵⁰⁶ Sputnik Serbia, "Бомбардовање СРЈ: Наша војска на Косову није поражена /видео/" [FRY bombing: Our army in Kosovo is not defeated /video/], March 29, 2020.

⁵⁰⁷ Ristic, B., "Припадници терористичке организације ОВК Север Косова мета терористичке Албанске националне армије (АНА)?" [Northern Kosovo targets terrorist Albanian National Army (ANA)?], *Sputnik Serbia*, March 18, 2020.

⁵⁰⁸ Sputnik Serbia, "Лавров: ЕУ није у стању да реши питање Косова" [Lavrov: The EU is not able to resolve the Kosovo issue], December 20, 2019.

⁵⁰⁹ Proroković, D., "Спрема ли се Запад за још једну грешку после које ће изгубити и мршаву подршку Србије" [Is the West preparing for another mistake after which it will lose the meager support of Serbia], *Sputnik Serbia*, March 1, 2020; Milosavljević, N., "Председник Савеза Срба у Француској: Више не постоји пријатељство ове две државе" [President of the Association of Serbs in France: The friendship between these two countries no longer exists], *Sputnik Serbia*, January 19, 2020.

⁵¹⁰ Sputnik Serbia, "Руско министарство: Приступање Скопља НАТО – нове линије поделе" [Russian Ministry: Skopje's accession to NATO – new dividing lines], March 31, 2020.

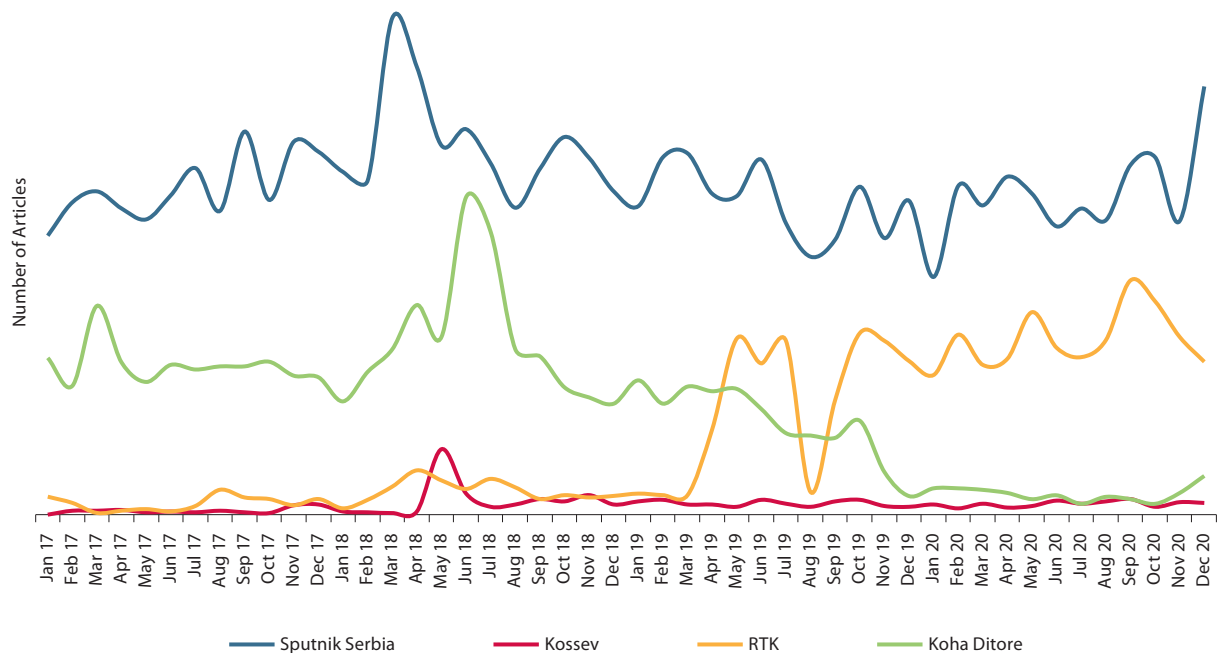
⁵¹¹ Samorukov, M., "Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support," *KoSSev*, January 26, 2019; *KoSSev*, "Russian MFA: Post-election chaos and struggle for power continue in Kosovo," January 17, 2020.

⁵¹² *KoSSev*, "Vucic ahead of US visit: If we can't turn Americans into people who will support us in everything, we will turn them into people who will not be against us in everything," February 29, 2020; "Vucic: Western allies will come up with a plan for Kosovo; I cannot accept Kosovo in the UN," February 27, 2020.

⁵¹³ *KoSSev*, "Vucic: Taxes introduced with the support of a powerful European country to prevent Serbia from claiming the North and Kosovo-Pomoravlje," February 18, 2020.

⁵¹⁴ *KoSSev*, "Lavrov: SAD hoće Kosovo u NATO; Pacoli: To je naša sudbina" [Lavrov: US wants Kosovo to join NATO; Pacoli: That is our destiny], October 2, 2019; *KoSSev*, "NATO: All to demonstrate restraint in actions and statements, a better future only with respect to the rights of all, support for the dialogue," June 27, 2019.

Figure 32. Coverage of Russia-related topics in Albanian media outlets



Note: Number of articles containing the keyword "Russia".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika SaaS content tracking tool.

Compared to Sputnik and Kossev, Koha and RTK contain more interviews with and citations of Kosovo politicians and American diplomats. Following growing concern regarding the US withdrawal from Kosovo in retaliation to tariffs imposed by Pristina on Serbia, the public broadcaster RTK offers a relatively comprehensive coverage of Kosovo-US relations. RTK complains of American favoritism toward Serbia,⁵¹⁵ while at the same time highlighting the importance of maintaining good relations with Washington. The former Speaker of Parliament is quoted as reiterating American advice for Kosovo to remove tariffs on Serbia as soon as possible, so as not to jeopardize their relationship with the US.⁵¹⁶ This contrasts with Sputnik's coverage, which posits that the eventual withdrawal of American soldiers from Kosovo would not affect the security of Serbs in the province because the American military base Bondsteel will be closed in the foreseeable future anyway. These are speculations that aim to create uncertainty amongst Serbs in Kosovo.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁵ RTK Live, "James Pardew: Diplomacia Amerikane favorizon sot Serbinë" [James Pardew: US diplomacy favors Serbia today], April 6, 2020.

⁵¹⁶ RTK Live, "Nurellari: për hirë të aleancës sonë me shba-në duhet të hiqet taksa" [Nurellari: for the sake of our alliance with the US, the tax should be removed], April 1, 2020.

⁵¹⁷ Sudar, V., "Ако Американци оду са Косова – Бондстил се гаси, а шта ће Срби" [If the Americans leave Kosovo – Bondsteel is shutting down, and what will the Serbs], *Sputnik Serbia*, March 11, 2020.

Koha is critical in its reporting, warning readers of the Kremlin's exploitation of the pandemic in order to propagate disinformation.⁵¹⁸ It has also argued that the growing threat of Russia in the Balkans should be contained.⁵¹⁹ Koha reflects on the lack of unity within the West itself, whereby US-EU differences have hindered the successful resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.⁵²⁰ The outlet further canvasses geopolitical relations more broadly, analyzing the ways in which Serbia has become an avenue for the EU, China, and Russia to compete over the provision of humanitarian aid (as a way of attracting favorable local views) amidst the pandemic.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Koha, "Rusia kundërshton reciprocitetin e Kosovës ndaj Serbisë, kritikon qëndrimin e BE-së" [Russia opposes Kosovo's reciprocity with Serbia, criticizes EU stance], April 6, 2020.

⁵¹⁹ Koha, "Bugajski: Në Ballkan po luhet version i ri i "lojë së madhe" midis Moskës e fuqive perëndimore" [Bugajski: New version of "big game" between Moscow and Western powers is being played in the Balkans], January 29, 2020.

⁵²⁰ Koha, "Haradinaj letër Lajçakut: Mogherini e dëmtoi Kosovën, Borelli po e zvarrit qëllimisht procesin e dialogut" [Haradinaj letter to Lajçak: Mogherini harmed Kosovo, Borelli is deliberately delaying the dialogue process], April 19, 2020.

⁵²¹ Koha, "Diplomacia në kohë pandemie: Rusia, Kina dhe BE-ja synojnë të fitojnë ndikim në Serbi" [Pandemic diplomacy: Russia, China, and the EU aim to gain influence in Serbia], April 13, 2020.

CHINA PRESENCE

Kosovo and China have not enjoyed particularly close bilateral relations. Kosovo's diplomacy has been continuously engaged in advocating for international recognition of its independence and gaining membership to international organizations.⁵²² The major obstacle to achieving this remains the fact that Russia and China hold a veto power in the UN Security Council,⁵²³ and both of them have supported the Serbian objective of preserving sovereignty over Kosovo.

Given the absence of overt political dialogue between China and Kosovo and any visible Chinese presence in the Kosovar media landscape, the way China handles its presence in Kosovo could be an important indication of its disinformation tactics in more adverse environments. An insight into the extent to which pro-Chinese narratives are disseminated in Kosovar news outlets can be garnered from the **frequency and content of reports on China**. Accordingly, three of the most widely read Kosovar news sources are explored (Radio Television of Kosovo, Koha.net, and Gazeta Express). This section also looks briefly at how the Chinese media covers Kosovo-related issues.

Reporting about China is common on the national public broadcaster RTK with several articles appearing every week. The most recent topics covered are related to the COVID-19 pandemic. China is presented as being at fault for the virus, although some articles have acknowledged how Beijing has managed to contain the disease and bring cases to zero. RTK quotes the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Enver Hoxhaj, saying that China and Russia are misusing the pandemic to spread their influence and that China is particularly targeting Serbia to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the Balkans.⁵²⁴ Attention is paid to China's violation of human rights during the Hong Kong protests and Beijing's refusal to cooperate on nuclear weapons agreements. The outlet also points to China's practice of disseminating disinformation.⁵²⁵

⁵²² NIInfo, "Kosovo's Thaci: Deal with Serbia – mutual recognition and UN membership," February 26, 2020.

⁵²³ Xhambazi, V., "Final deal does not guarantee UN membership for Kosovo," *Prishtina Insight*, March 2, 2019.

⁵²⁴ RTK Live, "Hoxhaj për 'diepresse': be e shba duhet t'ua tregojnë kufijtë Kinës e Rusisë" [Hoxhaj for "diepresse": EU and US should show China and Russia borders], May 20, 2020.

⁵²⁵ RTK Live, "Twitter heq 32 000 llogari false për shkak të dezinformimit" [Twitter removes 32,000 fake accounts due to misinformation], June 12, 2020.

Koha group reports even more critically on China's policies in Hong Kong,⁵²⁶ the inhumane treatment of the Uighur ethnic group,⁵²⁷ and the rivalry with Taiwan.⁵²⁸ Koha emphasizes China's responsibility for the rapid spread of the virus, having withheld information about the origins and the spread of the new disease. China's aggressive foreign policy stances are called out in the context of Beijing's conduct of military exercises.⁵²⁹ There is, however, some positive reporting when it comes to China's ability to cope with COVID-19 and new technological developments, but these tend to be less common.⁵³⁰

Similar to RTK and Koha.net, Gazeta Express, one of the most popular news portals in Kosovo, maintains a critical line on China. It mostly cites Western news agencies (e.g. Voice of America and Deutsche Welle) and balances its criticism while also stressing certain technological developments, such as space exploration, the production of fast trains, and 5G networks, in a more positive light.⁵³¹

In turn, *Xinhua* either tends to overlook or report negatively on Kosovo-related developments. On the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, *Xinhua* supports the Russian position, emphasizing Moscow's support for Belgrade.⁵³² When reporting on the UN Security Council meetings, *Xinhua* rarely mentions the Kosovar perspective and maintains a pro-Serbian interpretation of events. For instance, in an incident where a Russian member of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo interfered with a Kosovo police raid against organized crime, *Xinhua* exclusively relayed what the Chinese UN envoy had claimed, without

⁵²⁶ Koha, "Protesta dhe përleshje në Hong Kong" [Protests and clashes in Hong Kong], May 24, 2020.

⁵²⁷ Koha, "Kina i trajton çnjerëzisht ujqurët myslimanë" [China's inhuman treatment of Uighur's Muslims], November 25, 2019.

⁵²⁸ Koha, "Suksesi i Tajvanit kundër virusit rrit tensionet me Kinën" [Taiwan's success against the virus increases tensions with China], April 17, 2020.

⁵²⁹ Koha, "Kina po e zgjeron pamëshirshëm fuqinë" [China is ruthlessly expanding its power], June 26, 2020.

⁵³⁰ Koha, "Kina parashikon lëshimin në korrik të sondës së parë drejt Marsit" [China to launch a probe and rover mission in Mars in July], May 25, 2020.

⁵³¹ Gazeta Express, "Harrojeni 5G, Kina nis zhvillimin e teknologjisë 6G" [Forget about 5G, China starts building 6G technology], November 8, 2019; "Kina po ndërton një tren më të shpejtë se aeroplani" [China builds a train faster than an airplane], July 3, 2019; "Butona pa prekje, kompania kineze sjell shpikjen që 'parandalon' koronavirusin" [No touch buttons, Chinese company brings the innovation that 'prevents' corona virus], March 3, 2020.

⁵³² Xinhua, "Russia will continue to support Serbia in dialogue with Kosovo: FM," June 19, 2020.

giving any platform to Kosovo's statement.⁵³³ Additionally, Kosovo's independent statehood is criticized on the basis of the respect of sovereignty arguments defended by Kremlin officials.⁵³⁴ Therefore, both Ko-

sovar and Chinese media do not promote a positive view of neither their own bilateral relations nor, more generally, of the domestic and external affairs of both countries.

⁵³³ Xinhua, "China concerned over 'obstruction' encountered by UN Personal in Kosovo: envoy," November 1, 2019.

⁵³⁴ Xinhua, "Putin says Kosovo provocations break international law, destabilize Balkans," January 18, 2019.

ANNEX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Uncovering media capture requires a combination of a number of qualitative and quantitative methods implemented in a sequence of steps:

First, an assessment of the economic and financial instruments of Russia's media influence along three main dimensions:

- Estimation of Russia's media footprint based on national and international corporate databases. The Russian corporate presence was calculated along two dimensions of direct and indirect footprint. The direct economic footprint measures the average annual turnover of all companies from the respective country that have a Russian legal or physical person as the ultimate beneficial owner of a minimum of 50.01% of the company's shares. The indirect economic footprint measures the average annual turnover of subsidiaries of the companies from the first group operating in the media sector. Russia's indirect media footprint can be further manifested in two ways: via media companies that are not legally related to Russian ultimate beneficial owners but whose domestic owners have strong pro-Russian political and/or economic links; or via Russian companies that are present in the media sectors of the Balkan country and additionally sponsor a wide array of pro-Russian political, cultural or educational activities. The latter was estimated, based on complementary qualitative analysis carried out by local researchers in each Balkan country to uncover the political-economic networks of dependence between domestic and Russian actions in the media sectors of the SEE states;
- Estimation of Russia's share in the public procurement and advertising market, including through Russian state-owned companies and the distribution of free local language content;
- Understanding the context of political-economic dependencies on (pro)Russian groups and interests and their effect on the media sector – the quantitative data and trends, established as part of the previous two steps, was placed in the qualitatively informed framework of the informal political and economic ties, ownership structures, and power networks that characterize the media landscapes in the eight countries.

Second, content analysis of Russian disinformation narratives on online news outlets and **social media presence, and intensity**. The content analysis was carried out on an average of 25 articles in each of the four outlined types of online media. These four types were identified as the sources with the highest reach in their respective categories across the eight countries. The four groups of online news sources were chosen by the national experts in each country, based on the different degrees of distance, i.e. of political-economic enmeshment with Russia:

- An outlet that is *directly owned* by Russia – such as [Sputnik](#) or [Russia Beyond](#).
- A “*partisan*” outlet – that is linked to (or published by) a domestic political party with strong links to or publicly announced preference for the Kremlin.
- A “*broader*” (more widely circulated or read) *daily* – that aims to reach a wider audience (than just party members, for instance), includes some varied content but nevertheless has a (pro)Russian stance, closely associated with national government perspectives.
- A “*control*” outlet – a popular mainstream outlet that provides objective coverage of Russia-related issues.

The content analysis was focused on EU- and NATO-related narratives. Special focus was given to the past 24 months and events of significant importance in the respective country's political and social life or international relations.

Third, an automated diagnostics of the intensity of the spread of Russian disinformation narratives based on the analysis of the number and peaks in the online presence of the four sources identified in the previous step. In addition, the report identified the activity and engagement of key Russian information assets in the region on social media, such as Russian embassies, Rosstrudnichestvo, and Russia Beyond.

Fourth, a review and analysis of how Russian media disinformation and influence relates to **public attitudes** towards global democratic and authoritarian role models and specific foreign policy priorities of the countries from the region, such as EU and NATO membership.

Assessment of the rising role of China in the region in relation to and in comparison with Russian media influence. This is based on a qualitative review of publicly available information, as well as regional and national public opinion polls.

The qualitative content analysis as well as the automated quantitative diagnostics through the Sensika SaaS

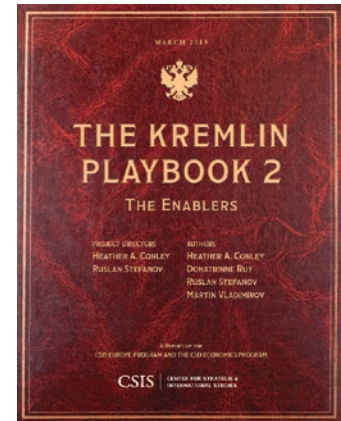
content tracking tool in SEE countries were carried out in relation to four types of media outlets of differentiated political, economic and ideological distance from (pro-)Russian groups and interests. The media outlets were chosen by local media experts. The table below lists all the analyzed outlets.

Country	Directly-Russia owned outlet	Partisan outlet	Broader daily	Independent outlet
Bulgaria	NewsFront Bulgaria	Vestnik Ataka	Monitor	Mediapool
Croatia	Russia Beyond Croatia	Direktno	Večernji list	Jutarnji list
Serbia	Sputnik Serbia	Informer	Novosti	Srbija Danas
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sputnik Serbia	RTRS	Glas Srpske	Klix
Montenegro	Sputnik Serbia	In4s	Volim Podgoricu	Vijesti
North Macedonia	Russia Beyond Macedonia	Infomax	Pressing TV	Meta
Albania	Sputnik Serbia	Balkan Web	Ora News TV	Klan TV
Kosovo	Sputnik Serbia	Kossev	Radio Television of Kosovo	Koha Ditore

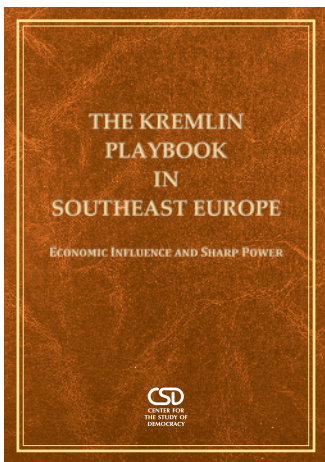
Note: Sputnik Serbia was selected for examination in five of the case study countries since it represents the primary or only outlet operating in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo that fits the category of a source directly owned by the Kremlin.



***The Kremlin Playbook:
Understanding Russian Influence
in Central and Eastern Europe***
CSIS & CSD, 2016



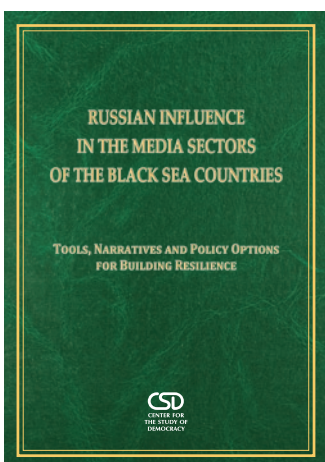
The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers
CSIS & CSD, 2019



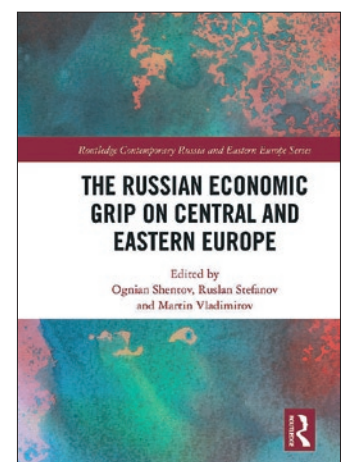
***The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe:
Economic Influence and Sharp Power***
CSD, 2020



The Kremlin Playbook in Europe
CSD, 2020



***Russian Influence in the Media
Sectors of the Black Sea Countries:
Tools, Narratives and Policy Options
for Building Resilience***
CSD, 2018



***The Russian Economic Grip
on Central and Eastern Europe***
Routledge, 2018

