



## Russian Narrative Proxies—The Unspoken Homegrown Threat In The Western Balkans

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Last month **the United States Cyber Command announced** it was sending a number of “cyber warriors” to Western Balkan allies like North Macedonia and Montenegro to support them in defending themselves against cyberattacks emanating from Russia and elsewhere. In recent years, the region’s countries have seen coordinated information operations aimed at spreading anti-West and pro-Russia rhetoric. The heavier the exposure of a country’s population to such a specific set of media narratives and disinformation, the wider the opportunities to influence its society and political decision-making.

Disinformation in the Western Balkans is not necessarily a top-down, externally driven phenomenon, though, and simply blaming Russia is not sufficient. There is across the region a conducive local political environment that makes it harder to resist adequately disinformation attempts. One key challenge is how to recognize and tackle narrative proxies at the local level.

Today information is more about framing reality and less about telling the truth. Thus, the production of narratives is crucial. The issue is more often about spreading half-truths or systematically replacing facts with opinion by local state and non-state information actors. Russia has outsourced its disinformation activities across the region by building loose relationships with local proxies that willingly promote support its interests. Pushing targeted narratives through them aims to weaken the West while strengthening Russian influence in the Balkans.

The “cyber warriors” of the West have a difficult task. Narrative proxies are not an easy target to hit. They are not necessarily troll factories, but political actors, pro-Russia state-funded media, businessmen, and the local Orthodox Church. Russia has not interfered in the local information spaces across Eastern Europe in quite the same way as in the West. Here it requires less effort. First, because the narratives that Russia offers have been popular for quite some time in the region. Second, because weak local information environments allow for outsourcing of narratives production without a great need of external interference.



## From Soviet to NATO and EU Standards

In a new paper on [Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans](#), I analyze the role of local disinformation actors in the latest phase of the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, in the name-change referendum in North Macedonia, and in the 2018 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This

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reveals that these actors play a significant role in promoting anti-West/pro-Russia narratives in the region. In North Macedonia, bots and automation tools have played a key role in pushing anti-West narratives, while in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina politically controlled traditional media play a larger role.

## Exploiting Existing Sentiments

General disappointment with the West across the Western Balkans is a key element of successful narrative building that serves Russian interests. Local disinformation proxies build narratives that exploit the idea of pre-existing identity ties and shared history with Russia as well as the notion of unconditional Russian political support over time for the countries in the region. They blur the line between opinion and fact, causing distrust in previously respected sources of factual information and creating space for simplified anti/pro-West polarization. This rhetoric has been filtered through traditional and social media as well as local political, cultural, and economic actors.

Anti-West/pro-Russia narratives find a fertile ground in the Western Balkans, which is a key space for the current confrontation between Russia and the West. In all three countries considered, a similar infrastructure of proxies peddles disinformation and fuel polarization. Such efforts are event-driven and shift from one spot to another, depending on the local political context. Four key narratives are used in variations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia: NATO is an aggressor, the EU is institutionally and politically weak, the United States seeks to create a great Albania, and Russia is a reliable partner.

## Varied Local Effects

Overall, the effect of Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans is to undermine the EU and NATO accession prospects for the region's countries; to promote the image of Russia as a political, military,

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and economic alternative to the West; to stoke tensions between different communities; to boost nationalist/patriotic movements; and to disrupt the local media ecosystem and harm journalism.

In North Macedonia, Russian narrative proxies, which were particularly active within the #Boycott campaign during the name-change referendum, threatened to undermine the country's pro-West orientation. In Serbia, they have harmful effects on the normalization process with Kosovo. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they undermine the prospects of political and institutional cooperation between the country's two entities.

Citizens of these countries who do not recognize the role of narrative proxies are more susceptible to their influence. Some parts of their populations are more detached from the mainstream media and more susceptible to pro-Russia/anti-West media content than the population in general.

Finally, although all the countries in the Western Balkans have been targets of pro-Russia disinformation efforts in recent years, there has been no recognition at the local political level of this as a security issue, largely due to some governments and politicians acting as narrative proxies themselves.

If the EU and NATO do not pay attention to this issue now, this might have long-term consequences for Euro-Atlantic integration as well as for stability and reconciliation in the region.

The EU should incentivize the region's governments to acknowledge the threat. With a new budget and Commission, the EU should invest more in protecting its neighboring countries and potential member states that are most threatened by information manipulation. The renewed focus of EU on the Western Balkans requires more efforts in setting standards and requesting recognition of the threat by the governments there.

In the light of NATO enlargement, the alliance has a strong interest in supporting resistance against information threats in the Western Balkans. What NATO (and the United States) can offer is cooperation in identifying cyber incidents and make studies about them available to a broad circle of stakeholders, including media and private companies. They can further work toward more precise definitions of information threats and introduce concrete measures addressing disinformation campaigns. At the same time, it is to be hoped that the work of Western "cyber warriors" can help to at least diminish the damage that has already been done by proxy disinformation actors in the region.

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