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RUSSIAN NARRATIVE PROXIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Rethink.CEE Fellowship



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Executive Summary

Disinformation has become a label that simplifies the complex interaction between competing narratives, trusted and deceptive sources, and the exposure of the public to a web of realities. Disinformation is not necessarily a top-down phenomenon; it is not always about lies but half-truths, or just a systematic replacement of facts with opinion. The way in which Russia has interfered in the local information spaces across Eastern Europe is not the same as the way it has in the West. It requires less effort. First, because the narratives that Russia offers have already been popular for quite some time in the region. Second, because weak information environments allow for local outsourcing of narrative-production, without a great need of interference.

This paper seeks to explain the growth of anti-West/pro-Russia narratives in the Western Balkans by looking at the role of local narrative proxies—local state and non-state information agents that willingly promote Russia's interests across the region. In particular it looks at their role in three recent political developments: the name-change referendum in North Macedonia in 2018, the latest phase of the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, and the 2018 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The general disappointment with the West across the region is a key variable to successful narrative building that serves Russian interests. Local disinformation proxies build narratives, while exploiting the idea of pre-existing identity ties, shared history, and unconditional Russian political support over time. They blur the line between opinion and fact, and thus cause distrust in previously respected sources of factual information and create space for simplified anti/pro-West polarization. These narratives have been filtered through traditional and social media, as well as local political, cultural and economic actors. It is not all a question of a top-down, externally imposed political agenda—there is also a conducive political environment so that such attempts are not resisted adequately.

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 contribute more to this. Overall the effect of Russian narrative proxies across the region is that the EU and NATO accession prospects for the countries of the Western Balkans are undermined; the image of Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West is promoted; tensions between different communities are stoked; nationalist/patriotic movements' confidence and presence is boosted; and the local media ecosystem is disrupted and journalism is harmed. In North Macedonia, anti-West/pro-Russia narrative proxies, particularly active within the #Boycott campaign during the referendum, threatened to undermine the country's pro-West orientation. In Serbia, they have a harmful impact 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.

Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans

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Russia's Weapon to Frame Reality

Today information is more about framing reality and less about telling the truth. The reliance on facts has diminished dramatically. Narratives emerge from perceptions and opinions. This is what the era of “truth decay” looks like.¹ In this context, deliberate disinformation operations push narratives tailored to reshape public attitudes. They exploit differences in media systems, target disenfranchised or vulnerable audiences, and exploit the ability to mask sources of disinformation.² The existence of alternative narratives as such is not an issue unless they rely on fake, anonymous, or unchecked information. The distinctive features of disinformation attempts are lack of quoted sources, opinions presented as facts, falsified documents disseminated as legitimate, headlines that misrepresent the content of the article, outright lies, and conspiracy theories.³

Russia has a well-developed formula for weaponizing information.⁴ In 2018 the EU officially announced a “war against disinformation” spread by the Kremlin in an attempt to protect the 2019 European Parliament elections. The European commission has referred to the country as the primary source of disinformation in Europe, seeing this as a “part of Russian military doctrine and its strategy to divide and weaken the

West.”⁵ Russia’s information warfare approach aims to amplify cleavages and to create local echo chambers of support.⁶ It combines simultaneous support for far-left and far-right movements, direct funding of media outlets, and ties with local political and economic actors with opposing views. It relies on Russian state-run media such as Sputnik or RT as well as on state-allied local media to spread manipulated information and influence attitudes toward the West among targeted populations. The recent influx of disinformation across countries of southeastern Europe fit well within this pattern.

Yet, simply blaming Russia is not sufficient. The question is how to recognize and tackle disinformation proxies at the local level. This paper is concerned with Russia’s modus operandi, and more specifically the organization of its proxy relationships in the Western Balkans. The research borrows the concept of cyber proxies⁷ to investigate how Russia relies on state and non-state actors abroad to project power through pushing anti-West and pro-Russia narratives. The central claim here is that Russia has outsourced its disinformation activities by building loose relationships with local disinformation actors that support its interests. Pushing targeted narratives through these actors aims to weaken the West while strengthening Russian influence in the region. The paper asks “What is the role of disinformation proxies in pushing anti-West narratives?”

The answer provided is based on a combination of desk research into media reports, social media content, political

1 Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay*, RAND Cooperation, 2018.

2 Volha Damarad and Andrei Yeliseyev, *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, Ukrainian Prism-Foreign Policy Council, 2018.

3 Bjola Corneliu and James Pamment, “Digital containment: Revising containment strategy in the digital age,” *Global Affairs Journal*, Taylor & Francis Online, Vol. 3, 2017. Issue 3. 131-142.

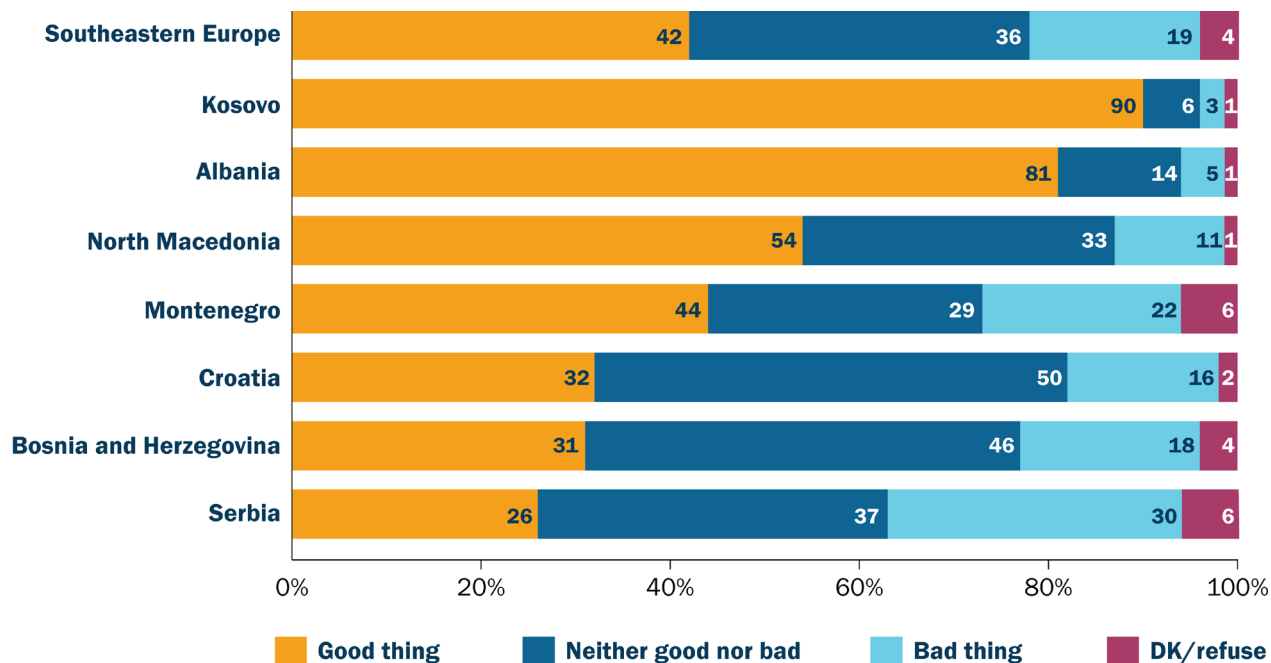
4 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, The Interpreter, a Project of The Institute of Modern Russia, 2014.

5 Daniel Boffey, “EU raises funds to fight “disinformation war” with Russia,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2018.

6 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*.

7 Tim Maurer, *Cyber Mercenaries. The State, Hackers, and Power*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Figure 1. Views on EU membership in the Western Balkans, 2017



Source: 2017 Balkan Barometer.

statements and documents; interviews with media experts, politicians, journalists, and political analysts in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo; and qualitative analysis of the collected data. The paper looks at three recent political events in the Western Balkans: the 2018 referendum in North Macedonia, the latest discussion concerning a potential land-swap between Serbia and Kosovo, a part of the long-standing dispute between the two, and the 2018 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper does not assume that all recent political development in the region are tied to or influenced, directly or indirectly, by Russia. Nonetheless, anti-West and pro-Russia rhetoric fuels ongoing disputes between and within countries in the region.

Russia in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is only one among many theatres of confrontation between Russia and the West today. Two features of this geopolitical battle are specific to the region: general disappointment with the West and Slavic/Orthodox identity ties to Russia. Key sources

of Euro-Atlantic skepticism are the slow EU accession process and the memory of NATO military operations in the 1990s. Views on EU membership in the region range from overwhelmingly supportive in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia to largely unpopular in Serbia. (See Figure 1.)

According to the analyst Ivan Krastev, European integration is losing its “talismanic power” in the Western Balkans.⁸ Taking an advantage of anti-West sentiments, Russia pushes the alternative idea of Orthodox-Slavic brotherhood, which is a cheap yet effective way to influence targeted communities. There are many in the region who want to their country to cooperate with Russia.⁹ Alternative development narratives have become particularly popular among local political elites in recent years.¹⁰ As one of the “producers” of such alternatives,

8 Ivan Krastev, “Putin’s Next Playground or the E.U.’s Last Moral Stand,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019.

9 Interview with Nikola Burazer, researcher, European Western Balkans, Belgrade, November 2, 2018.

10 Martin Vladimirov et.al, *Assessing Russia’s Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018, p. 55.

Figure 2. Russia's power toolkit in the Western Balkans



Russia has been seeking to build a network of narrative proxies—local state and non-state information agents that willingly promote its interests across the region. Its toolkit in the Western Balkans involves a wide variety of soft-power instruments, along with political and economic pressure.

Russia's economic footprint in the Western Balkans is growing, especially in the energy sector. During his January 2019 visit to Serbia, President Vladimir Putin committed \$1.4 billion to bringing additional Russian gas to Serbia. Belgrade is a strategic transit point in Russia's plans to extend its TurkStream pipeline to deliver gas across southern Europe. Gazprom dominates local natural-gas markets in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia by setting long-term supply agreements.

The countries of the Western Balkans generally have a supportive attitude toward NATO. In February, North Macedonia signed a long-awaited accession agreement with the alliance. Montenegro joined it in 2017 while Albania and Croatia are also members. Serbia has been deepening ties with the alliance despite the resentment

of many Serbs due to the memory of NATO bombing in the 1990s. Nonetheless, a 2017 report showed a comprehensive anti-NATO disinformation campaign by Russian and Serbian actors aimed at preventing countries in the region from joining the alliance.¹¹ It revealed the involvement of spies and diplomats, the use of asymmetrical tools such as computational propaganda, and support for radical political groups pushing an anti-West agenda. In 2016 anti-NATO political parties from the region signed a "military neutrality" declaration with Putin's United Russia party. In 2018, Russia donated to Serbia six used MiG-29 fighter jets and promised to deliver 30 T-72 tanks and 30 armored personnel carriers. The Russian-Serbian "humanitarian" center near the city of Nis in Serbia is also suspected of being used as a base for intelligence gathering. Meanwhile, the police forces of Republika Srpska, one of the two political entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina, cooperate with Russia in fields such as intelligence collection and counterterrorism.

¹¹ Aubrey Belford et al., "Leaked documents show Russian, Serbian attempts to meddle in Macedonia," OCCRP, June 4, 2017.

Russian foundations have increased their activities across the region in recent years, bringing together academics, journalists, and intellectuals who share anti-West attitudes, and offering grants and participation in projects and conferences. They include the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, the Center of National Glory, and the Russian Institute of Strategic Research with its only branch in the Western Balkans established in Belgrade.

Russia has cultivated close ties to veterans' organizations in the region, most noticeably in Republika Srpska and Serbia. Different reports suggest that it also supports local ethno-nationalist groups that oppose the West. Besides, more than 300 Balkan fighters are known to have participated in the conflict in eastern Ukraine on the side of the pro-Russia separatists.

“ *Individual politicians and political parties have been active promoters of Russian interests in the Western Balkans.* ”

Individual politicians and political parties have been active promoters of Russian interests in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, a generation of anti-West and pro-Russia parties have appeared in each of the region's countries. It consists of established parties such as The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats of Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina and United Macedonia of Janko Bachev, which have been prime beneficiaries and exploiters of Russian narratives. Older and newer political actors have adopted an anti-West rhetoric. Concepts of nationalism and patriotism have been employed as opposing notions to the West. Parties holding anti-West and pro-Russia stances first became more visible prior to Montenegro's accession to NATO and then with the political crisis and the referendum in Macedonia. They have intensified their rhetoric in the context of the latest developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute.

The appointment of the secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as the country's "point man" in the region is another sign of the renewed Kremlin interest. He is known for his conspiracy worldview in relation to the West. Patrushev was sent to Serbia for meetings with top government and security officials after the 2016 coup plot in Montenegro. In May 2019, 13 people, including two Russian military intelligence officers and two opposition leaders, were sentenced for organizing the plot following the country's decision to become a part of NATO and to adopt EU sanctions against Russia.

The Serbian Patriarchate has historical and political ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2016 the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro said that it was its "pastoral and civic" duty to ask for a referendum on NATO membership. The consecration of a new Russian church and the donation of \$5 million by Gazprom to the Serbian Orthodox Church are among the more recent and more visible signs of Russia's growing presence in the region based on cultural-religious ties.

The countries of the Western Balkans have vulnerable media ecosystems that are highly conducive to disinformation operations. They are marked by political capture of media, low-level media literacy, and absence of fact-checking institutions. A 2018 study of the media portrayals of key international actors in the region revealed a large number of online articles without any quoted sources.¹² These articles more often took pro-Russia and anti-United States stances, and neutral attitudes toward the EU.¹³ Sputnik's content on the Western Balkans has almost doubled since 2015.¹⁴ In 2017, when Montenegro joined NATO, its coverage increased almost fivefold compared to 2015. In Serbia, Sputnik is only one of more than 100 media outlets and NGOs that have pushed pro-Russia narratives in the

12 CRTA, "Monitoring Medija. Medijsko Izvestavanje Medunarodnim Akterima – Slučaj Srbije, Crna Gore, Bosne i Hercegovine i Makedonije," [Media Monitoring. Media Reporting on International Actors – The cases of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia], 2018.

13 Interview with Jovana Durbabic, a researcher and Rasa Nedeljko, Program Director of CRTA Serbia, Belgrade, November 21, 2018.

14 Kanishk Karan, "Election Watch: Sputnik Misleading in Macedonia," Medium, September 22, 2018.

Table 1. Information pieces on NATO, the EU, and Russia, Sputnik Balkans Edition, September-October 2018.

	NATO	EU	Russia
September	169	266	22
October	271	277	27
November	231	319	30

recent years.¹⁵ The Balkans edition of the Russian state media platform shows noticeable interest in NATO and the EU. This becomes evident from the volume of information published on Sputnik within the research period in 2018 (see Table 1).

According to NATO Deputy Spokesperson Piers Cazalet, deliberate negative disinformation spread by outlets such as Sputnik and RT have clearly served a strategic agenda, along with active bots on social media pushing anti-West narratives. He says:

It doesn't really matter to us where this disinformation comes from. We accept, particularly in a region like the Balkans, NATO is not always going to get the positive and the best coverage that we always hope for. It is a political military organization; we expect a political debate around who we are and what we do, and I think that that's absolutely fine. The important thing for us is having our voice heard against the voice of others and having facts reported rather than disinformation.¹⁶

North Macedonia

In September 2018, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia held a referendum to change its name to North Macedonia, following the Prespa Agreement aimed at

¹⁵ Jelena Milic, *Russification of Serbia*, Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, October, 2014.

¹⁶ Interview with Piers Cazalet, NATO Deputy Spokesperson, Belgrade, October 18, 2018.

resolving the long-running dispute with Greece. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was the key proponent of the name change while nationalists and President Gorge Ivanov opposed it. The agreement was widely supported by Western countries, which tied it to accession of the country to EU and NATO, and it was opposed by Russia.

While 92 percent of the voters supported the name change as a condition to NATO and EU accession, about two-thirds of the eligible voters did not go to the ballot box during the referendum.¹⁷ A strong boycott campaign carried out online and offline was supported by a wide variety of political and non-political actors. The largest opposition party—the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)—neither officially boycotted the referendum nor supported it.

For a short time ahead of the referendum, the country's information landscape was saturated with distorted and polarizing narratives. The boycott campaign, built on anti-West rhetoric, aimed to discourage people from voting. Hundreds of bots and trolls on Facebook and Twitter and tens of anonymous news portals were created to that end and they actively conveyed anti-NATO messages. A key venue for such rhetoric was the online media infrastructure inherited from the previous government's propaganda machinery.

Proxy actor parties occupied the front line of the boycott campaign. Among them was United Macedonia, a small party describing itself as pro-Russia, anti-NATO, and Euroskeptic. Nonetheless, the boycott camp represented a very heterogeneous group of people. Not all of those opposing the referendum had pro-Russia sentiments yet many used anti-West rhetoric. Nenad Markovikj, a professor of political science in Skopje, argues that the dividing lines between voters on this issue would exist even if external powers like Russia and the United States were out of the picture because the issue of national identity is very sensitive for Macedonians. Yet, he says also, "You could intelligently assume the somebody

¹⁷ Marc Santora, "Both sides claim victory in Macedonia's vote on Changing its name," *New York Times*, September 30, 2018.

behind the curtain is cooking and facilitating these messages.”¹⁸

Russia's Intentions and Actions

Russia does not have a long history of geopolitical interest in North Macedonia. Neither has it enjoyed enormous popular support among Macedonians. While Russia has not expressed official objections to the country's accession to the EU, it has been openly opposed to it joining NATO. Statements by Russia's Foreign Ministry to that effect became more frequent since 2014, following the conflict in Ukraine and also the political crisis in Macedonia. Experts argue that the request for the recognition of Russian interests in North Macedonia serves the broader strategy of Moscow to confront the West in the Western Balkans.

In 2017, the publication of intelligence documents revealed how the Russian embassy in Skopje conducted subversive activities through direct funding of media outlets and setting up over 30 cultural organizations.¹⁹ The report further suggests the involvement of Serbian intelligence. Months before the referendum, the Russian embassy was also particularly active in issuing statements. For example, Ambassador Oleg Scherbak, speaking of the country joining NATO, warned: “If it came to a conflict between Russia and NATO, you will have the role of a legitimate target.”²⁰

Anti-West feelings have been strongly expressed through the political statements and actions of President Gjorge Ivanov, who has close ties to Moscow, and of the former government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. Gruevski's cabinet refused to follow the EU in imposing sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Meanwhile, Ivanov attended the 2015 Victory Day parade in Moscow that was boycotted by most Western leaders. The catalyst for anti-West rhetoric was the 2014 elections and the following political crisis in Skopje. Revelations of illegal spying and corruption drove thousands to protest against Gruevski's government. The opposition accused

¹⁸ Interview with Nenad Markovikj, professor of political science, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, September 28, 2018.

¹⁹ Aubrey Belford et al., “Leaked documents show Russian, Serbian attempts to meddle in Macedonia”.

²⁰ European Western Balkans, “Russian ambassador warns Macedonia over NATO, PM Zaev responds,” March 31, 2018.

the prime minister and his counterintelligence chief of masterminding the wiretapping of more than 20,000 people in the country. The demonstrations became a diplomatic battleground for Russia and the West. Gruevski's government claimed that the evidence was fabricated by unnamed foreign intelligence services

“

Domestic political rhetoric has largely facilitated the pro-Russia agenda in recent years.

and given to the opposition to destabilize the country.²¹ He blamed the political turmoil on a Western-funded campaign. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov backed the government's claims that the demonstrations were the result of outside meddling.

Russia got even more actively involved in North Macedonia's domestic politics with the escalation of the crisis in 2017 by explicitly blaming the West for the situation. Following protests and a constitutional crisis over the results of the 2016 elections, the West urged President Gjorge Ivanov to allow a new coalition of ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian parties to form a government, as they had a majority in the parliament.²²

Russia's foreign ministry has been pushing the claim that the EU and NATO have endorsed the creation of a “Greater Albania” in the region. The portrait of the interfering West has been gradually built through political statements and media content, exploiting local ethnic tensions. Pro-Russia outlets in the region have persistently exploited this argument in the recent years. An illustration of this trend is a title that appeared in Sputnik in March 2017, early in the crisis in Skopje: “NATO willing to see ‘blood in streets of Macedonia’ for Greater Albania project.”

²¹ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia Opposition Suspends Crisis Talks with Govt,” Balkan Insight, October 14, 2015.

²² Andrew Rettman, “EU and Russia step into Macedonia crisis,” EUObserver, March, 3, 2017.

Table 2. Information pieces on Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sputnik Balkans Edition, September-October 2018.

	Kosovo	Macedonia	BiH
September	234	60	154
October	202	80	217
November	357	38	219

In 2018, the country’s Special Prosecution launched an investigation concerning a high-level corruption case, allegedly exposing collusion between Gruevski’s government and the Kremlin going back years. The investigation centered around a gas pipeline project and an approved tender in favor of Russian company Stroytransgas, that was initially meant to ensure that Russia repaid a Soviet-era debt to the country as part of the former Yugoslavia.²³ The deal negotiated by two ministers in the previous cabinet is alleged to allow Russia to “save” €33 million of the money owned to the country.

Even if Russia’s hand in North Macedonia may not be visible at first glance, the influx of anti-West messages has fueled the pro-Russia agenda. In the referendum campaign, the boycott effort offered a simple dichotomy between either “no participation” or “support” for the deal with Greece, the latter an option only for “traitors.”²⁴ The pro-Russia/anti-NATO cleavage became particularly noticeable on social media. The hashtag “#Boycott” was spread on Twitter and Facebook. About 40 new Facebook profiles appeared every day in the weeks before the vote amplifying the boycott message. On Twitter, the hashtag quickly generated more than 24,000 mentions, with about 20,000 as retweets. A huge number of new Twitter accounts appeared in August 2018, weeks before the vote, all sharing the same features: a Macedonian name and a random string of numbers, indicating troll activities. One report identified an increase

23 Russia Business Today, “Russian Company Involved in Macedonia Indictment Against Politicians,” October, 11, 2018.

24 Interview with Filip Stojanovski, senior researcher and a program director of Metamorphosis, Skopje, September 26, 2018.

in the activities of new and existing automated accounts in the weeks before the vote.²⁵ Interestingly, the social-media profiles suspected of meddling the 2016 U.S. presidential election from the “troll farm” in the Macedonian town of Veles were quite active in disseminating the boycott message.²⁶ “We managed to identify that the sources controlling many of the bots were five or six people, real profiles. We reported them to the social media companies. Now it is their decision if they are going to take some measures or not,” said Minister of Information Society and Administration Damjan Manchevski.²⁷

The boycott campaign intensified following visits to Macedonia by Western politicians expressing support for the referendum. The anti-referendum tweets peaked during German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit on September 8, Independence Day. Similarly, a wave of anti-NATO messages flooded the Macedonian online space when NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg traveled to Skopje.

Extreme nationalist portals condemned the referendum as illegal. Facebook groups such as “All we who we are against the EU and NATO” became key channels of the boycott campaign. Representatives of the diaspora also spread anti-West rhetoric online. One example is Zlatko Kovach, a Macedonian by birth but also a U.S. citizen. He is one of the chief editors of RIA Global, which is known as the Washington bureau of Sputnik. He was particularly active on Twitter during the referendum campaign, opposing the name change.

Although the Balkan edition of Sputnik did not publish a high number of articles on Macedonia in the weeks before the referendum (See Table 2), identical anti-West/pro-Russia narratives were generated by Serbian and Russian online sources and relayed by Macedonian ones.²⁸

25 Alliance of Democracies Foundation, Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity, “Macedonia referendum: Twitter bots up their activity,” September 26, 2018.

26 Interview with Miomir Serafinovic, a journalist for TV Telma, Skopje, September 27, 2019.

27 Interview with Damjan Manchevski, Minister of Information Society and Administration of Macedonia, Sofia, November 9, 2018.

28 Interview with Filip Stojanovski.

News portals such as Pravda, Srpski Telegraf, and Informer focused on sowing doubt about the role of the EU and NATO in the region as a means to promote the boycott. Online media monitoring also registered a rise in one-sided and misleading content, tailored to attacking the country's Euro-Atlantic prospects.²⁹ Those outlets, among others, offered more opinion-based than fact-based pieces, while giving more frequently voice to commentators opposing the EU and NATO.

“ News portals focused on sowing doubt about the role of the EU and NATO in the region as a means to promote the boycott.”

The rise of pro-Russia/anti-NATO narratives in the boycott campaign is not surprising. According to Filip Stojanovski, a program director of Metamorphosis, a Skopje-based foundation, “Even if we assume that Russia is not interested in overtaking Macedonia as such, it seeks to disrupt the cohesion of NATO and EU. Therefore, it is logical to support forces that would like the name issue to remain unsolved.” One could argue that anti-West messages have appeared in Macedonia largely as an extension of the Serbian propaganda from the 1990s presenting Kosovo as a NATO project and stoking fears of Albanians in the region. The adapted version of the anti-NATO narrative in the North Macedonian context portrayed the alliance as acting unjustly toward Skopje while Russia has been presented as a greater military power that can offer more than the West.

During the referendum campaign, Prime Minister Zaev denied having any evidence of any Russian interference, although he said he was aware of a network of online profiles spreading misleading content. He also said that the government had received multiple reports concerning the role of “Greek businessmen” sympathetic to Russia's interests in the region in stirring social tensions in the country. According to one report, Ivan Savvidi, a Russian billionaire living in Greece, who previously was a member

of the Russian parliament and is reportedly close to President Putin and honored by the Russian Orthodox Church, was behind funding of groups and individuals in Skopje opposing the proposed name change.³⁰ The report reveals that at least €300,000 was distributed among opponents of the name change to derail the referendum. The report suggests that payments were made to politicians in Skopje, recent nationalist organizations, and football fans from the Vardar club who took part in riots opposing the vote.

Domestic and external anti-West narrative proxies were less aggressive in the traditional media than on the Internet, but they were not absent. Previously, when the disinformation channels were under the control of Gruevski's government, they developed capacity by directly funding media. This infrastructure was successfully used by the boycott campaign. In 2018 businessmen linked to Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (who offered political asylum to Gruevski after he fled a prison sentence for corruption in 2018) invested in highly politicized, sensationalist media outlets pushing Euroskeptic and anti-migrant rhetoric in North Macedonia. The Hungarian-owned media in Skopje were also among those calling for a boycott.

Effects of Russian Narrative Proxies

Attempting to diminish the value of the agreement between North Macedonia and Greece. Aggressive anti-NATO messages had a negative effect on the public perception of the deal between North Macedonia and Greece. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the #Boycott efforts generated and injected sentiments that had not been there previously into the referendum campaign and helped depress the turnout. By provoking anger and suspicion about the agreement, Russian narrative proxies sought to delegitimize the vote, skew public opinion, and prevent the further success of the deal with Greece. As an extension of these efforts came President Putin expressing his disagreement with the

29 Kanishk Karan, “Election Watch: Sputnik Misleading in Macedonia”.

30 Saska Cvetkovska, “Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia,” OCCRP, July 16, 2018.

name change and accusing “the United States and certain Western countries” of “destabilizing the region.”³¹

Increasing political and social polarization. Russian narrative proxies increased disagreement about the facts and their interpretation concerning the deal with Greece and its implications. They contributed to the consolidation of opposing pro- and anti-West sides, which left little space for a debate. The effect of polarization has also been to allow politicians and political parties opposing the Prespa Agreement to attempt to advance their specific interests. The most recent political example after the name change was the presidential election in North Macedonia in April, when it was easy to push away all other campaign issues to the extent that the accord continues to divide people in the country.

Stoking tensions between North Macedonians and Albanians. The #Boycott efforts magnified previously used messages based on hate speech against Albanians living in Macedonia and on radical patriotic appeals. The use of hate speech and threatening narratives enhanced fears of ethnic tension in the country that were already strong with political crises of recent times in Skopje.

Undermining the pro-West orientation of society. The Prespa Agreement was successfully ratified by the parliaments of North Macedonia and Greece in January. As a consequence, North Macedonia signed the NATO accession agreement that will allow it to join the alliance after the document is ratified by all NATO countries. During this lengthy process, there is space for further expanding the role of narrative proxies propagating anti-West sentiments and encouraging long-term Euroskepticism that can be easily put to political use. The pro-NATO orientation of the country, heavily attacked during the referendum campaign, will remain a target for internal and external opponents. What has changed, is the internal consolidation of social groups and smaller parties whose anti-West rhetoric has the potential to be externally supported or to gain greater influence internally in future political crises.

Boosting nationalist/patriotic movements' confidence and presence. Nationalist groups domestically and within the diaspora were particularly involved in the #Boycott efforts

31 Ivan Krastev, “Putin’s Next Playground or the E.U.’s Last Moral Stand,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019.

offline and online. The strong dichotomy between “patriots” and “traitors” that appeared through extreme nationalist social media platforms made the presence of such actors noticeable and connected them to the political spectrum. The increased use of hate symbols (such as Pepe the Frog) within the North Macedonian online space is another clear sign of the awakening of the far right. Aggressive anti-West rhetoric provides such groups with a common way of becoming more visible and openly engaging in political actions.

Disrupting the local media ecosystem and harming journalism. The #Boycott campaign prevented voters from engagement with objective and fact-based content and discouraged citizens from participation in the democratic process. A 2018 survey ranked the country last among 35 in media literacy, indicating its high vulnerability to disinformation.³² The danger of having a media environment polluted with manipulative messages instead of real political arguments may have long-term consequences for the fragile democratic process in North Macedonia.

Serbia

The dispute between Serbia and Kosovo is frequently framed as a key arena for the bigger geopolitical battle between Russia and the West. Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and is currently recognized by more than 110 states, but not by Serbia, Russia, and five EU members. The idea of land-swap that has become more prominent in recent years would give Serbia control over the northern part of Kosovo, which is populated mainly with Serbs. In return, Kosovo would “receive” southern parts of Serbia mostly populated by Albanians.

The West has failed to bring a lasting resolution to the dispute. So far, key European states like Germany oppose the idea of a land-swap, fearing this would in fact escalate the dispute. The United States for its part has declared its support for “any peaceful solution.” Russia

32 Marin Lessenski, *Common sense wanted. Resilience to “Post-Truth” and its predictors in the new media literacy index 2018*, Open Society Institute Sofia, March 20, 2018.

is the key supporter of Serbia, while trying to assume the role of a mediator or a power broker.³³ An “accidental” meeting between President Putin and Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi during the 2018 First World War armistice anniversary in Paris was a recent sign of this. Russia is an inevitable factor in the dispute because of its veto power in the UN Security Council. It backed Serbia against the West in the 1990s and condemned the 1999 NATO campaign over the Kosovo issue. It sees the Western military intervention and the independence of Kosovo as “a direct affront to Russia power in its traditional sphere of influence” in the region.³⁴

As far as the scars from the 1999 NATO bombings have not vanished, anti-West views are widespread among the Serbian public. The country has refused to follow the Western sanctions on Russia in relation to the annexation of Crimea. While declaring good ties with Moscow, Serbia still looks toward EU membership, if not as enthusiastically

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as before. According to a 2015 survey, 57 percent of respondent said Serbia should not recognize Kosovo even if that were a condition to its EU membership.³⁵ A long-term solution, seen as the key to the EU prospects of both sides, was put on hold once again in 2018 after Serbia rejected Kosovo’s membership in Interpol and in return Kosovo raised tariffs on Serbian goods to 100 percent and voted to transform its police forces into an army. These cracks in the “normalization process” allow for anti-West/pro-Russia rhetoric to gain in popularity.

33 Ivan, Krastev, “Putin’s Next Playground or the E.U.’s Last Moral Stand”.

34 Dimitar Bechev, “The Kosovo quandary is a win for Russia,” Al Jazeera, November 18, 2018.

35 Center for Insights in Survey Research, Survey of Serbian Public Opinion, 2015.

Russia’s Intentions and Actions

According to a 2018 survey by the newspaper Politika, President Putin was the most-trusted foreign politician in Serbia, with support by 58 percent of respondents. In January 2019, he was warmly welcomed in Belgrade, sending a strong political message to the West. Putin’s visit took place amid a series of anti-government protests. While stressing cultural and spiritual ties between the two countries, he reaffirmed Russia’s support for Serbia in the dispute with Kosovo and accused the West of ratcheting up regional tensions. Putin argued that the EU has been forcing Serbia to make an “artificial choice” between Russia and the West, and he complained about NATO expansion in the region.

The dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is central to the process of reconciliation in the region, on which Russia generally takes a stance opposing the Western one. By being Serbia’s major supporter in opposing Kosovo’s statehood, Russia has strengthened its image of a guardian of the country’s interests at the international level. This support is seen as the main vessels of its influence over Serbia and the entire region.³⁶ Russia uses the opportunity to expand its presence while Serbia plays the card of Russian support to show the EU and the United States that it has an alternative, threatening to move under Russia’s political umbrella whenever it is unsatisfied with the negotiation process.

Russian anti-EU rhetoric in the region has increased following the annexation of Crimea. Attempts to strengthen ties between Serbia and Russia have become more visible after 2013, when the Council of the EU announced Serbia’s readiness to start accession talks. In a 2017 statement Russia’s Foreign Ministry said that the EU’s support for Kosovo’s independence was a part of the Greater Albania “scam.”³⁷ During his 2018 visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Foreign Minister Lavrov said that Russia supported the current dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, adding that it wanted no confrontations in the Balkans and that no “external player” should think

36 Interview with Igor Novakovic, research director, International and Security Affairs Centre, Belgrade, September 26, 2018.

37 Andrew Rettman, “EU and Russia step into Macedonia crisis,” EUObserver, March 3, 2017.

that they could lead all the processes in the Balkans and forbid entrance to others. While Russia opposes NATO enlargement in the region, it officially maintains that EU membership for the Balkan countries is not a concern. According to Nikola Burazer, a researcher at European Western Balkans, “EU enlargement is an issue for Russia, yet, something that Russia does not want to prevent. Why? The Kremlin seeks ways to hurt the EU and the Western Balkans are a quite good arena for this purpose.”³⁸

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At least 40 news portals in Serbia have been found in a recent study to promote pro-Russia stances on major political issues.

Pro-Russian/anti-West rhetoric has been intensified through a network of local narrative proxies, including parties and individual political actors. Serbia’s government has become a key channel for Russian interests in the region and an important source of pro-Russia propaganda. Yet, there is a paradox in the way it pushes anti-West narratives.³⁹ While actively cooperating with NATO, the political elite in Belgrade works to keep the public’s memory of the 1999 NATO bombings alive. The closer relationship between Russia and Serbia has become particularly visible through their leaders. President Aleksandar Vučić has often paid visits to Russia, and he is the regional politician most frequently mentioned by Sputnik.

Business ties are also an important factor. A 2016 report revealed a link between Serbian businessman Milan Popović and Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian tycoon close to Putin.⁴⁰ The Russian businessman Igor Rotenberg has bought shares through offshore channels in the privatized Serbian construction company PPT Inzinjering. Both Malofeev and Rotenberg’s father, Arkadiy Rotenberg (the largest state contractor in Russia and a close friend of

38 Interview with Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans.

39 Interview with Nemanja Stiplija, European Western Balkans, Belgrade, November 2, 2018.

40 OCCRP, “Serbia: Local Businessmen show in Leaked Data. 2016,” April 5, 2016.

Putin), are on the EU sanction list. The report revealed further examples of Russians owning companies in Serbia behind offshore companies. There is a common perception that Russia is a top investor in Serbia. A 2015 survey showed that 47 percent of respondents said that it supports Serbia more than the EU.⁴¹ In fact, the EU offered the country €3.4 billion in grants between 2000 and 2013, while Russia only offered a \$338 million loan to the Serbian railways in 2016.⁴²

Sputnik launched its activities in Belgrade in 2015. Its content is available in Serbian through a website and a radio program. Though it is not that recognizable as a brand, its narratives appear to be widely distributed through the local media. Blic, Kurir, Informer, Vecernije Novosti, and B92 are among the portals most frequently re-publishing content from Sputnik. The daily Radio Sputnik program is distributed for free to local radio stations all around the country. Sputnik cooperates with the established and influential Radio Novosti and thus reaches more than 30 local and regional radio stations through its network. According to Nemanja Stiplija, a senior researcher at European Western Balkans, “There is no part of Serbia where you cannot listen to Sputnik, as some local radio stations have Sputnik news four times a day. If you live in a small village, you can only listen to Radio Sputnik.”⁴³

At least 40 news portals in Serbia have been found in a recent study to promote pro-Russia stances on major political issues.⁴⁴ Anti-West/pro-Russia narratives frequently appear in relation to three topics: the dispute with Kosovo, the war in Syria, and the war in eastern Ukraine. Many of the portals pushing such rhetoric were launched after 2013 and at least half rely on Sputnik’s content on a daily basis. Portals such as Srbin.info, Faktor, and Kremlin.rs openly display pro-Russia attitudes. Smaller similar portals such as Gazeta, Fakti, and Glas Moskve also reach more targeted audiences. Anti-West/pro-Russia narratives appear on anti- and

41 Center for Insights in Survey Research, Survey of Serbian Public Opinion.

42 Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Foray into the Balkans: Who is Really to Blame?” Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 12, 2017.

43 Interview with Nemanja Stiplija, European Western Balkans.

44 Branka Mihajlovic, “Russian Seeking Serbian Media Outlet?” Radio Free Europe, February 14, 2016.

pro-governmental news websites too. Another avenue for pro-Russia propaganda are online pages created to look like established Western media outlets but containing “fake news” content.⁴⁵

Between January and December 2018 Sputnik published 2,705 articles on Kosovo. This shows the increased attention from Russian state-owned media to the region, especially following “return” to the Balkans by the EU and NATO.⁴⁶ More than 80 percent of the articles focused on the EU and NATO with an explicit negative connotation, while there was less focus on Russia and it was presented as a reliable partner and a strong supporter of Serbia.

“*Regime-controlled public and private media seem to be the most active promoters of pro-Russia sentiments in Serbia.*”

The Serbian mainstream media’s portrayal of Russia is also positive. This is evident from a 2018 media monitoring study. The media most often reports in a neutral manner about the United States and the EU.⁴⁷ However, this does not say much about the audience’s “emotional perception” of the information offered. The data looked at for this paper reveals a greater number of implicitly positive pieces on Russia and China and implicitly negatives ones on the EU and NATO. The articles considered potentially “fake news” have a predominantly pro-Russia and anti-West tone. Politicians from the Western Balkans are mostly quoted in pro-Russia and neutral content on the EU.⁴⁸

Regime-controlled public and private media seem to be the most active promoters of pro-Russia sentiments in Serbia. Experts interviewed agree that media freedom has

45 Interview with journalists from Radio Free Europe, Belgrade, November 28, 2018.

46 Kanishk Karan, “Election Watch: Sputnik Misleading in Macedonia”.

47 CRTA, “Monitoring Medija. Medijsko Izvestavanje Medunarodnim Akterima – Slucaj Srbije, Crna Gore, Bosne I Hercegovine I Makedonije”.

48 Interviews with Rasa Nedeljko and Jovana Durbabic, CRTA, Belgrade, November 21, 2018.

noticeably declined since Vučić, previously a minister of information in the Slobodan Milosevic regime, in power. In 2018 five media associations published an open letter to protest against the disruptive state monopoly over media.⁴⁹ That same year, a company linked to the ruling party also bought two television stations. Unlike in Macedonia where social media played a significant role in promoting anti-West narratives, in Serbia television is more important, followed by newspapers and radio.

Taking into account Russia’s close ties to the current political elite in Belgrade, there is much space for overall Russian impact on the media landscape in Serbia. The state news agency TANJUG, which was required by law to shut down in 2015 after two failed attempts at privatization, but still operates, is a key pro-government propaganda channels and is particularly friendly to Russia. The promotion of Russian interests is noticeable in tabloids, such as Kurir, Informer, Alo, and Srpski Telegraf, which are directly or indirectly controlled by the government. In 2017 Informer published a calendar featuring Putin for New Year Eve’s. Well-established newspapers such as Politika (which is popular among well-educated parts of society), Geopolitika, and Nedeljnik also have a pro-governmental and pro-Russia line. They distribute supplements such as Ruska Reč and Rusija i Srbija, connected to Russia Beyond the Headlines, a project of the Russian state media.

Disinformation proxies exploit the Kosovo issue by employing one-sided pro-Serbia rhetoric. Russia and its narrative proxies reach audiences not only in Serbia but also Serbian communities in Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. More often they do not necessarily seek to present the Russian point of view but to magnify narratives that exist locally. Sensational headlines and deliberately selected quotes and comments are tailored to spread suspicion and doubts concerning the role of NATO and the EU in the region, suggesting that Western actors work against Serbia’s political interests and pose a threat to regional stability.

Russia, on the other hand, is portrayed as Serbia’s closest ally, one whose actions are always consistent with the

49 Safe.Journalists.Net. “Serbian media coalition letter to the international community,” October 22, 2018.

country's interests. The topic of Russian arms has become particularly popular in Serbia in the recent years. Sputnik Serbia maintains a section on the topic on its website. A key narrative is that Russia's military industry is superior to the Western one. Local narrative proxies also emphasize the shared aspects of Serbian and Russian history. They also frequently remind targeted audiences of past conflicts between Serbia and its neighbors in the region.

Effects of Russian Narrative Proxies

Feeding confrontation between Kosovo and Serbia, and increasing fears of an immediate conflict. The persistence and proliferation of pro-Russia narratives in Serbia affects public opinion among targeted parts of the population. It deepens the attitudes about Kosovo as an anti-Serbian project of the West. The daily voicing of fear of the "near enemy" also leads to consolidation of political support for Vučić.

Creating risk of escalation of frozen conflicts. The unresolved dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is seen as a key to other frozen conflicts in the region. The EU fears that a land-swap might encourage other countries in the region to follow this path. The "Anti-stability" rhetoric produced by pro-Russia narrative proxies in Serbia feeds nationalist sentiment in Republika Srpska and North Macedonia, while boosting hatred toward Albanian communities.

Promoting the image of Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West. Within the framework of Kosovo dispute, narrative proxies have successfully built Russia's image as a key guardian and defender of Serbia. They emphasize strongly cultural, economic, and political ties between the two countries, seeking to portrait Russia as Serbia's most reliable strategic partner at the international level.

Encouraging Euroskepticism and nationalism. Around 70 percent of Serbs reject any compromise over Kosovo, according to 2018 polls, even if it is a condition to EU membership. While the government still seems determined to keep the country on the accession path, Euro-enthusiasm in Serbia has drastically diminished in recent years. Although it is hard to measure the exact influence of Russian narrative proxies on public opinion

or voting behavior, one can argue that they only contribute to their consolidation, including when it comes to people's attitudes concerning EU accession. All the experts interviewed agree that targeted media content, including narratives pushed by the political elite in Belgrade, further boosts Euroskeptic and nationalistic sentiments across the country.

Disrupting the local media ecosystem. The government's total control over the media was among the central targets of the protests at the end of 2018. President Vučić has been accused by the opposition and civil society of having established autocratic rule in the country. The pro-government, pro-Russia, and anti-West propaganda in the media ecosystem has led journalists, activists, intellectuals, and generally people with critical thinking to demand freedom of speech, stand for democracy, and fight against corruption. This reaction by citizens shows the strong resistance capacity of Serbia's society but also shows the country's political and social polarization.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is probably the most fragile country in the Balkans and a fertile ground for geopolitical battles between Russia and the West. Its politics divided between the two country's two administrative entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska), on the one hand, and between its three communities (Serbs, Bosnian Muslims and Croats), on the other, each with difference sources of external support. Russia attempts to maintain a zone of influence in semi-autonomous Republika Srpska, whereas the West is not visible enough to people in the federation, and even less in Republika Srpska.⁵⁰ The country remains dysfunctional and resistant to EU and U.S. initiatives to promote pro-West reforms, despite it holding together as a state.⁵¹

The 2018 elections did not bring major political change, except for Milorad Dodik, the Republika Srpska

⁵⁰ Interview with Aleksandar Trifunovic, editor-in-chief of BUKA magazine, Banja Luka, October 9, 2018.

⁵¹ Brave New Europe, "Dimitar Bechev – Elections in Bosnia: More of the same, but there is a silver lining," 2018.

president for the previous eight years, being elected as the Serb member of the country's three-member presidency. There was no major political event prior the 2018 vote to intensify Bosnia and Herzegovina's pro-Russia/pro-West dichotomy. Messages toward the West have been far less aggressive and at a lower volume than in Macedonia and Serbia. Narrative proxies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are more vocal among the ethnic Serbs in Republika Srpska than in the federation, as messages are most frequently channeled through the Serbian interest in the region, with a specific focus on the dispute with Kosovo. Republika Srpska defines its political interest above all as being in a good relationship with Serbia, no matter who the politicians in Belgrade and Banja Luka (Republika Srpska's administrative center) are. After he was elected to Bosnia and Herzegovina's presidency, Dodik promised to use his Serbian passport for his travels abroad.

Pro-Russia narratives are part of mainstream politics in Republika Srpska, partly as the outcome of good relations between Dodik and President Vladimir Putin. The man U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright once described as a "breath of fresh air" is today Russia's closest political ally in the region and under U.S. sanctions.⁵² He is Russia's most loyal and vocal narrative proxy in the Western Balkans. He opposes NATO accession for Bosnia and Herzegovina, referring to Republika Srpska's declaration of "military neutrality" signed with Russia. Aleksandar Vranjes, a professor at the University of Banja Luka, argues that people's anti-NATO sentiments in Republika Srpska should not be a surprise: "There is a simple reason for that: the NATO bombing of Serbia."

Russia Intentions and Actions

Republika Srpska, surrounded by NATO members Croatia and Montenegro, has a strategic importance to Russia. Russia has openly backed Dodik in his previous election campaigns, including the 2018 elections. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was the most prominent foreign politician to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the last days of the campaign. In Banja Luka, Lavrov received the Award of Republika Srpska, the highest award of the Serbs' entity. Russia's support also means that Russia has the ability to

⁵² Maxim Edwards, "The President who wants to break his own country," *The Atlantic*, February, 1, 2019.

restrain Dodik, if it is necessary, according to the analyst Dimitar Bechev.⁵³ For example, Russia seems rather uninterested in embracing entirely the separatist view of Dodik and Republika Srpska's political elite.

In 2016, the government of Republika Srpska held an unconstitutional referendum with the blessing of Russia to adopt a separate national holiday. Another vote for secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina was promised for 2018 but it did not happen. These actions paved Dodik's way on to the U.S. sanctions list and increased reliance on Russia even more. Dodik called for Republika Srpska to recognize the annexation of Crimea and welcomed the Night Wolves, a pro-Kremlin Russian motorcycle movement to Banja Luka in 2018. In line with Russia's political interest in the region, Dodik affirms that the overall enthusiasm about the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina is decreasing and that the EU is "fading away."⁵⁴ Being Russia's most vocal narrative proxy, he praises Russia and China for offering the region friendship and economic cooperation without attaching political conditions and "asking him to do anything impossible."

Besides loyal political supporters in the country, Russia relies on "geopolitical entrepreneurs" to channel its interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One example is the Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, a nationalist and promoter of pan-Slavic Orthodoxy, and a key figure in the conflict in Ukraine. He is among the strategists of the annexation of Crimea and was involved in planning, preparing, and funding the separatist referendum there, along with the ones in Donetsk and Lugansk.⁵⁵ His activities in eastern Ukraine led him to be placed on the EU sanctions list. The leaked Panama Papers revealed Malofeev's significant political and economic positions in the Western Balkans. He has been particularly active in Republika Srpska in the recent years. In 2014 he organized a controversial visit by Cossacks to Banja Luka to express support for Dodik in his electoral campaign. In 2015 Dodik awarded Malofeev (alongside Putin's adviser

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Andrew MacDowall, "Bosnia's Serb Republic leader: No breakaway vote next year," *Politico*, June 29, 2017.

⁵⁵ Christo Grozev, "The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part 1," *Bellingcat*, March 4, 2017.

Igor Shtegolev and Leonid Reshetnikov, a former general in Russia's foreign-intelligence service and a director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies) the Order of Njegoš for contribution to Republika Srpska.⁵⁶

As in Serbia, pro-Russia narrative proxies in Bosnia and Herzegovina rely on a similar set of anti-West messages. All of these were circulated in the 2018 elections campaign, pushed by Sputnik but more often taken up by local media. A significant part of these narratives come from Serbia, pushing pro-Serbia stances on issues such as the

“ Besides loyal political supporters in the country, Russia relies on “geopolitical entrepreneurs” to channel its interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

dispute with Kosovo. Moreover, the “dream” of separation of Republika Srpska is connected through narratives to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. For example, a poster before the parliament building in Belgrade stated: “If Kosovo is not Serbia, Republika Srpska is not Bosnia.” The narrative of separation for Republika Srpska also enhances Serbia's position against the independence of Kosovo.

Nonetheless, the role of pro-Russia media proxies in Bosnia and Herzegovina should not be exaggerated, the political analyst Adnan Cerimagic argues. Such narratives have been in use throughout the post-war years by local politicians, journalists, and academics. Space for a pro-West/pro-Russia cleavage exists partially due to the lack of general agreement among different communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina how to deal with their recent history.⁵⁷ As each national group's identity is very strong, there is an assumption among those who choose nationalism as a political strategy that EU accession

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview with Adnan Cerimagic, a political analyst, European Forum Alpbach, November 16, 2018.

would weaken their community's identity. Thus, Russia supports local actors seeking to keep the status quo, as far as the countries in the region do not advance with their NATO and EU ambitions. Yet, it does not offer any substantial alternative. As a couple of journalists in Republika Srpska put it, “What is cheaper than offering a long-term economic policy is using the identity one,”⁵⁸ and “Russia understands that it doesn't need to invest much money to buy love, they enjoy unconditional love here. But politically they managed to convey a very strong message.”⁵⁹

Republika Srpska is among the places in the region where pro-Russia/anti-West narratives prevail due to the lack of a community of critical voices, including academics, journalists, and civil society groups. Neither the opposition, nor the media are strong enough to challenge them. The public broadcaster RTRS in Banja Luka is under political control and openly used for pushing a pro-government political agenda in Republika Srpska. Alternativna televizija (Alternative television), was launched in 1996 as the correspondent unit of the first multi-entity Open Broadcast Network founded by the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU. Today it is just a pro-government television channel and is known to be under the control of Milorad Dodik's son, Igor.

Sputnik's website and radio broadcasts are accessible in Republika Srpska and the federation. Although it is not very popular, its messages easily penetrate the public media. In Republika Srpska, Sputnik's content is frequently taken up by the mainstream media. For example, the news agency SRNA borrows Sputnik's reports and presents them as original ones, and when other news portals re-publish the same information they quote SRNA and not Sputnik as a source. Anti-West/Pro-Russia narratives popular in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina often appear on the websites InfoSrpska, Krajina, Govori Srbija, Glas Srpske, Nezavisne, Srbija Danas, and many other portals whose ownership and source of funding remain unclear, republishing one-sided stories.

⁵⁸ Interview with Zelko Ralic, a television journalist with BN TV, Banja Luka, October 11, 2018.

⁵⁹ Interview with Aleksandar Trifunovic, BUKA.

The popularity of these websites is not as high as that of television or newspapers. The story of Vladimir Kovacevic, an investigative journalist at one of the local television channels, illustrates the full cycle of disinformation circulated simultaneously by various narrative proxies. In 2018, he was attacked and beaten almost to death in Banja Luka: “On the day after the attack on me, the Serbian pro-governmental tabloid *Informer* wrote that I was paid \$80,000 by some American organization to do my website. In the evening this information appeared on RTRS and *Alternativna Televizija*.”⁶⁰ Kovacevic says that the attack was related to his work and suspects links to the political leadership of Republika Srpska.

“ Russian narrative proxies that were active during the 2018 elections campaign relied on unresolved cleavages and historical grievances to further deepen polarization.

Another target of fake news within the 2018 elections campaign was the protests taking place in Banja Luka every day following the murder of a young man, David Dragicovic, in March 2018. Dragicovic’s father, the key organizer of the Justice for David protests, suspects police involvement in his son’s murder. The demonstrations were not politically driven but had political effects on the taken for granted power of Dodik. They were seen a protest against the political status quo in Republika Srpska. The cause mobilized thousands of young people on social media and consequently became a target of fake Facebook profiles and disinformation. According to the political analyst Tanja Topic, “There is no party in Republika Srpska that could ever motivate so many people to go on the street. A paradox concerning the role of social media appeared in this case. On the hand, Facebook opened space for alternative views. On the other hand, it became a venue for a war of words that was not representing what

60 Interview with Vladimir Kovacevic, a journalist with BN TV, Banja Luka, October 11, 2018.

was going on the streets.”⁶¹ Narratives about the protests easily transferred from the online space to mainstream media. RTRS also frequently reported lower numbers of protesters or simply failed to provide media coverage of the protests.

Effects of Russian Narrative Proxies

Deepening cleavages among the three communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russian narrative proxies that were active during the 2018 elections campaign relied on unresolved cleavages and historical grievances to further deepen polarization among the country’s Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, and Croats. There is no indication that this had a direct effect on voters’ behavior, though, because such rhetoric has been normalized for years in the domestic political discourse. However, interviewed journalists and experts based in Sarajevo and Banja Luka argue that this disinformation has negative effects on any prospects for deeper institutional cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina’s two entities and create space for further tensions.

Boosting nationalism and fuelling the idea of the separation of Republika Srpska. On January 9, 2019, Republika Srpska celebrated its “national” holiday, despite a ban by the Constitutional Court. Again the government of the entity organized a ceremony in Banja Luka producing a quarrel between Bosniak and Bosnian Serb officials. The strong political support of Russia for the pro-separatist political leadership of Republika Srpska is read by the other two communities as a threat to the political stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Undermining the pro-European and pro-West orientation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The particular negative effects of Russian narrative proxies can be observed in relation to Euro-Atlantic integration. Being a veto holder in the country’s government, Republika Srpska has been conveying messages against the prospects of NATO accession by Bosnia and Herzegovina. The explicit anti-NATO rhetoric of Republika Srpska’ leadership has been largely inspired by the friendship with Serbia, contributing to the pro-Russia political agenda in the region.

61 Interview with Tanja Topic, a political analyst, Banja Luka, October 11, 2018.

Disrupting local media ecosystems. As the popular television channels, websites, newspapers, and the state news agency of Republika Srpska are entirely under political control, the access to alternative points of view is rather limited. Opinion-based types of information dominate the coverage of topics such as the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. Journalists interviewed assess the role of Russian narrative proxies as more harmful to the media landscape in Republika Srpska and less harmful in the country as a whole, due to the bigger exposure of alternative viewpoints in the rest of the country.

Creating an image of Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West. Russia's positive image is far better emphasized by Russian narrative proxies in Republika Srpska than in the federation. There is no major difference in this regard from neighboring Serbia since this image is frequently channeled through the same media sources, political parties, and individual political actors. In the semi-autonomous entity, local narrative proxies have successfully built on Russia's image as a key guardian of Serbia in the dispute with Kosovo and as a defender of Republika Srpska.

Conclusion

Anti-West/pro-Russia narratives have found a fertile ground in the Western Balkans, as the region is a key space for confrontation between Russia and the West. These narratives do not appear in a vacuum but are facilitated by local networks of disinformation proxies. In all three countries considered, a similar infrastructure of proxies plays a role in peddling disinformation and spreading polarization. Disinformation efforts in the region are event-driven and shift from one spot to another, depending on the local political context. In recent months, their polarized rhetoric has been attached most frequently to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, followed by the referendum on North Macedonia's name and the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Four key narratives were used in variations in the three countries: 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.

There is no political acknowledgement of the existing disinformation threats among political elites in the region. Those who do not recognize the role of propaganda proxies are more susceptible to their influence. Some parts of local populations are more detached from the mainstream media and more susceptible to pro-Russia/anti-West media content than the population in general. The heavier the exposure of a country's population to a specific set of media narratives and disinformation, the wider the opportunities to influence its society and political decision-making.⁶²

Dynamics within and among Countries

In North Macedonia, anti-West/pro-Russia narrative proxies, particularly active within the #Boycott campaign, threatened to undermine the country's pro-West orientation. The aggressive anti-NATO efforts built fake outrage and anger, created fears, and arguably depressed the turnout in the referendum. Disinformation risks deepening the dividing lines between Macedonians and Albanians living in the country and can easily have consequences for stability and peace between them.

In Serbia, Russia's narrative proxies undermine the overall normalization process with Kosovo. Polarization creates further incentives for politicians to serve as narrative proxies and to benefit from it. The political class appears to be a key channel of Russian interference in the region. Russia's narrative proxies encourage paramilitary initiatives to grow and gain popularity, and they boost nationalist/religious movements across the country.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia's narrative proxies undermine the prospects of political and institutional cooperation between the country's two entities. The veto power of Republika Srpska allows it to prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from joining NATO and the EU, or it at least slows down the accession process. Russia's narrative proxies increase polarization, create space for tensions between Serbs, Bosnians and Croats, and boost nationalism by keep the idea of separation for Republika Srpska on the political agenda.

⁶² Andrei Yeliseyev and Damarad Volha, *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, p 17.

Pro-Russia disinformation proxies undermine the general process of reconciliation in the Western Balkans. By exploiting frozen conflicts in the region, they threaten stability and good relationships between its countries. They also undermine the value of the historical agreement between North Macedonia and Greece. The possible lack of prospects for a political change in North Macedonia also increases the risk of internal tensions and threatens to have a domino effect on other countries in the region. And, finally, the sense of geopolitical battle involving enormous disinformation efforts from pro-Russia proxies raise more general concerns about freedom of speech, national security, and democracy across the region.

Russia's Position in the Region

Russia's actions in the Western Balkans are not only "spoiling games," as Ivan Krastev has argued. Instead, it seeks to replace the EU as the mediator solving regional disputes, "in the way it is attempting—largely successfully—to replace the United States as a mediator in the Middle East."⁶³ Intentionally amplified pre-existing and newly introduced anti-West rhetoric has contributed to the pro-Russia political agenda in the region, especially the Kremlin's efforts to resist further NATO enlargement. Russia's narrative proxies have generally enhanced its position by presenting it as a political, economic, and military alternative for the Western Balkans. Russia does not in fact offer an appealing political project but this feeds the weakening enthusiasm toward EU and NATO accession across the region. It seems easy for Russia to sell to local political elites the idea of "not belonging" to the West institutionally and in terms of identity. At the same time, these elites' inability to offer economic prospects incentivizes them to keep emphasizing identity links with Russia, while showing impatience in their arguments with the EU and the United States.⁶⁴

Russia's narrative proxies underpin its opportunistic approach toward the region, as it benefits from the political mistakes of the West. While the EU is dealing with major challenges such as Brexit and political polarization across the member states, Russia uses the

⁶³ Ivan Krastev, "Putin's Next Playground or the E.U.'s Last Moral Stand."

⁶⁴ Jasmin Mujanovic, "EU and U.S. are Fomenting Chaos in the Balkans," Balkan Insight, November 27, 2018.

vacuum left in the Western Balkans and seeks to present itself as an alternative of the West. Russia opposes the pro-NATO path of North Macedonia, plays the role of a "big brother" for Republika Srpska, and acts as a guardian of Serbia while also seeking to be a mediator in the dispute with Kosovo. By attempting to unfreeze frozen conflicts, Russian narrative proxies contribute to several strategic goals of the Kremlin in the Western Balkans—political crises across the region slow down its overall Euro-Atlantic integration, create troubles for the EU and NATO, and create space for further political confrontation between Russia and the West.

The EU and NATO in the Region

Pro-Russia narrative proxies have general negative effects on the EU enlargement process, although Russia does not officially oppose EU membership of countries in the region. Disinformation actors challenge the role of the EU as the primary political factor in the implementation of reforms in the Western Balkans. At the political level, the perception of the EU in the region is still positive due to its role of a key investor and export market. But, though the EU is seen helpful in economic terms, general pessimism about it comes from unclear membership prospects. In 2018 France's President Emmanuel Macron argued that any new enlargement should be looked at with "a lot of prudence and rigor."⁶⁵ The long process of waiting before the EU and NATO doors, however, has made the societies of the Western Balkans exhausted and disinclined to committing to further negotiations and to implementing reforms. Pro-Russia narrative proxies take advantage and easily fuel such EU-skepticism among targeted populations.

They certainly also have negative implications for NATO's popularity among countries in the region. The emergence of a generation of anti-NATO political actors in recent years has intensified the rhetoric opposing the West and created challenges for further expansion of the alliance in the Western Balkans. The targeted disinformation campaign against NATO fuels fears of immediate conflicts and resistance to the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

⁶⁵ Andrew Gray, "Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes," Politico, May 17, 2018.

Recommendations

The EU should become more proactive in engaging with the “open questions” in the Western Balkans, more specifically the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. The role of the West in the dispute between North Macedonia and Greece is a positive example of such political efforts.

The EU and the United States should become more visible through regional cooperation initiatives and political visits if they want to show their interest in the Western Balkans and to oppose Russia’s ambition to expand its presence there.

NATO should be more active in explaining its role, engaging in critical discussions with political opponents across the region in an attempt to diminish the effects of anti-NATO rhetoric, which seems to be louder and more successful in conveying political messages.

The EU should incentivize political acknowledgement of the disinformation threat by the governments of the Western Balkans. Although all the countries in the region have been targets of pro-Russia disinformation

efforts in recent years, there has been no recognition of this trend as a security issue at the political level, largely due to some governments’ acting as narrative proxies themselves.

Journalists of the Western Balkans should raise awareness about the efforts of Russian proxies to push manipulated media content or to take over various sources of information. Journalists should be supported by local and international stakeholders in their efforts to detect and remove “fake news” and other types of false information by developing incentives to promote journalistic standards and the use of facts.

There needs to be investment in civil society activities and academic research about the issues raised above. It is a challenge to identify disinformation in countries where media freedom is heavily curtailed due to state capture. Therefore, the role of the NGO sector and academia is crucial in informing the public about the harm by disinformation proxies. A well-developed network of civil organizations will be able to build general awareness by introducing joint standards in defining the threat of Russian narrative proxies..

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