



Russian hybrid activities in the Western Balkans

# Shadow games





## STUDY

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# SHADOW GAMES

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December 2023

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# 1. Introduction

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*Although the Western Balkans is geo-strategically located outside of what Russia considers its immediate sphere of interest, the Kremlin has exploited all the opportunities provided by the regional environment to increase its presence, aiming to protect projected interests and promote its narratives. Financially less demanding asymmetric operations in the information space, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and covert operations, supported by proxy organizations and the use of political and economic influence, have proven effective in exploiting structural vulnerabilities, social, and political divisions in Western Balkan countries. Russia has used hybrid strategies with varying intensity and success to maintain the status quo in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, undermining the European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions of the region's states. The Kremlin's main objectives in the Western Balkans can be viewed through the prism of its ambitions for the global projection of great power status. It does so by obstructing the Euro-Atlantic integration processes in the region, encouraging negative attitudes towards NATO and the EU, causing instability, and instrumentalizing unresolved issues in the region, primarily the issue of Kosovo, to justify Russian foreign policy that implies dominance in the so-called near abroad.*

*A powerful tool of influence in the region is the Russian Orthodox Church, which promotes pan-Slavism and the values of Orthodox Christianity with the aim of strengthening ties between the Kremlin and dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church, political leaders, organizations, and individuals in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (primarily in the Republic of Srpska entity), and Montenegro.*

*It is essential to emphasize that the analysis of Russia's objectives in the Western Balkans must take into account the changed geopolitical circumstances after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The relations of the Russian Federation with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro are largely based on an opportunistic approach, depending on fragmented points of influence in each of these countries. The choice of instruments that official Moscow uses for influence in the countries of the region directly depends on the mainly limited interests it has in each of them.*

*Russia's influence in the region is evident in the actions of pro-Serbian political entities, which base their activities on a narrative of historical and unbreakable ties with Russia. Points of entry for Russian influence are most widespread in Serbia and essentially serve as compensation for Russian views on Kosovo, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the Republic of Srpska entity. These points manifest through Kremlin support for President Milorad Dodik. Moscow's connections with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which are comprehensive and multi-layered, not exclusively tied to the religious component, and the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and*

*the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), are a significant channel for the spread of Russian influence in the region. The political processes that have characterized the Montenegrin social landscape in the last three years have significantly facilitated the activities of various Russian outposts in Montenegro.*

*The DFC has repeatedly noted in its earlier materials that the media domain, various forms of propaganda, and the spread of disinformation are areas in which the Kremlin has had the most success in the past period concerning the Western Balkans region. Propaganda content is disseminated through portals, local tabloids, so-called traditional media, and social networks funded by the Russian Federation. By tolerating pro-Russian propaganda, the ruling structures in most countries in the region (despite their differences) contribute to an even stronger penetration of Russian influence. However, differences between them were noticeable even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On one hand, we have Montenegro, which has been fully aligned with EU sanctions against Russia since 2014, while Serbia refuses to impose any sanctions on Russia. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also not joined EU sanctions due to the opposition of the Republic of Srpska entity. Moreover, its leader, Milorad Dodik, has attempted to intensify economic relations with Russia. Nevertheless, all three countries condemned Russian aggression in a United Nations General Assembly resolution in March 2022.*

*The Russian penetration into local information systems in the Western Balkans is facilitated by the fact that anti-Western narratives promoted by Russia already have a significant number of supporters. Their effects are multiplied by the active contributions of local, state, and non-governmental entities that consciously and voluntarily promote Russia's interests throughout the region. This is significantly contributed to by the rise of Euroscepticism at the regional level, fueled by disappointment with the prolonged process of European integration and increasing uncertainties within the EU regarding enlargement policies.*

*In such an atmosphere, with a favorable political environment, the region has witnessed the successful creation of narratives designed to blur the lines between opinions and facts. These narratives are filtered through traditional media and social networks and supported by the activities of local political, cultural, and economic actors. Their goal is to undermine the European and Euro-Atlantic perspectives of Western Balkan states, fuel national and religious tensions among different communities, encourage pseudo-patriotic nationalist movements and organizations, and disrupt the local media ecosystem to present Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West.*

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## 2. Soft power

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### 2.1. The roots of soft power

The actions of Russian soft power in the earlier period, including the mapping of key actors in the region and Montenegro, have been depicted in the DFC studies *Russia's Role in the Balkans – The Case of Montenegro* and in the analysis *Shadows of Ukraine over Montenegro*. The goal of the latest study is to highlight Russia's actions in Europe and the Western Balkan region after the Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, employing a combination of political, military, diplomatic, and cultural means to achieve the strategic goals of the Russian Federation.

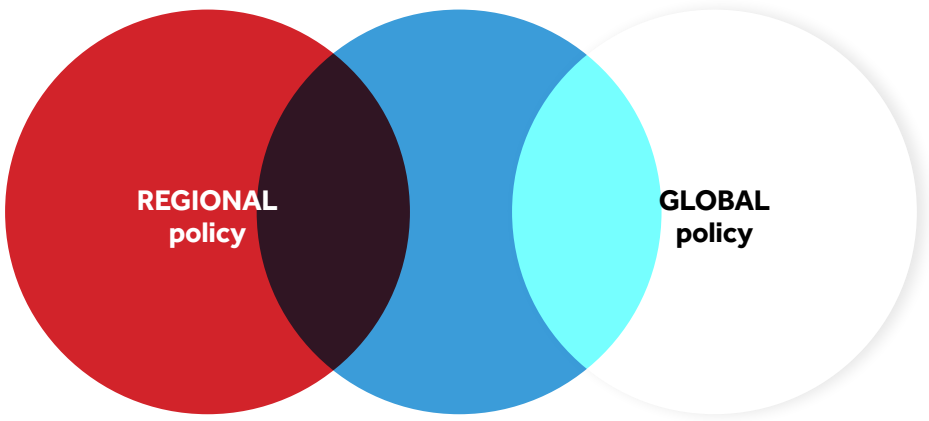
The document will focus on presenting Moscow's actions in the new geopolitical circumstances both domestically and regionally, drawing parallels between Russian hybrid activities with an emphasis on Ukraine and the Western Balkans region. Moreover, the new geopolitical circumstances lead Russia to expand its strategy of creating multipolarity, with the African continent and BRICS gaining new significance in power projection and relations with the *political West*.

The expansion of Russia's influence and hybrid activities towards neighboring states, the EU, and the United States is linked to Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999. His speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007<sup>1</sup> is considered an introduction to a new geopolitical projection of Russian power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In the context of Russian soft power and hybrid warfare, Gerasimov's doctrine is commonly discussed. It is named after its creator and the current Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov. However, it is often forgotten that this doctrine, which involves the operational combination of hard and soft power, the information space, and the media, was preceded by Primakov's doctrine. *Primakov's political doctrine*, which strategically laid the foundations and directions for Russian state action, is named after Yevgeny Primakov, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation in 1996. This political narrative is based on a multipolar world without American dominance, where Russia would be recognized as a global nuclear superpower with the ability to reclaim the Soviet territory lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The period after the aggression on Ukraine solidified the directions of action within the framework of Primakov's doctrine, bringing multipolarity to the forefront – a world in which Russia seeks its place as one of the global superpowers.

## PRIMAKOV'S DOCTRINE directions of action



- Russia rebuilding the post-Soviet territory
- Eurasian integrations and BRICS
- The end of a unipolar world
- Recognition of the geopolitical status of a nuclear superpower

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Following the invasion of Ukraine, the West imposed a series of sanctions aimed at halting the Russian war machinery and disrupting the financial flows of war and aggressive endeavors. In addition to targeting the entire state and political leadership, the sanctions also encompassed Russian propagandists and individuals who promote Russian aggressive propaganda against Ukraine through state-owned media. The total value of frozen assets within the EU amounts to 21.5 billion euros, with an additional 300 billion euros from the Russian Central Bank.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the failure of the Russian military to take Kyiv and the withdrawal from the Kyiv region, along with the Ukrainian military's counteroffensive in Kharkiv and Kherson, the military strategic objectives are changing. The focus of the war efforts is now on Donetsk and Luhansk. Concurrently, there are changes in the foreign policy strategy in relations with the West. Russia is striving to maintain spheres of influence within the EU that existed before the aggression. This is evident in the example of Hungary, the only EU member state that has not provided military aid to Ukraine.

The European Union's decision to halt the purchase of Russian gas by 2027 and to build a greater number of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in European ports has led Russia, amidst sanctions and diplomatic blockades, to contemplate new economic and strategic directions in its policy. Russia is persistently trying to strengthen its economy through gas sales. During a two-day meeting between Putin and Xi Jinping on March 21, 2023, an agreement was reached to construct a new gas pipeline between Russia and China – Power of Siberia 2. This pipeline, which could deliver over 50 billion cubic meters of gas to China via Mongolia after 2030, raises questions about its sustainability. Russia already supplies China with sufficient gas, and China has diversified its gas suppliers.

Considering the current political and economic relations between Russia and the West, as well as the developments in Ukraine, it is clear that the end of the war will not thaw their relations. The unity of the NATO alliance demonstrated at the summit in Vilnius, and the statement by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg that Ukraine has a place in NATO after the end of the war, indicate that the EU and NATO are preparing for different, post-Cold War relations with Moscow. Within this framework, other geopolitical actors, primarily China and India, will be part of the complex puzzle.

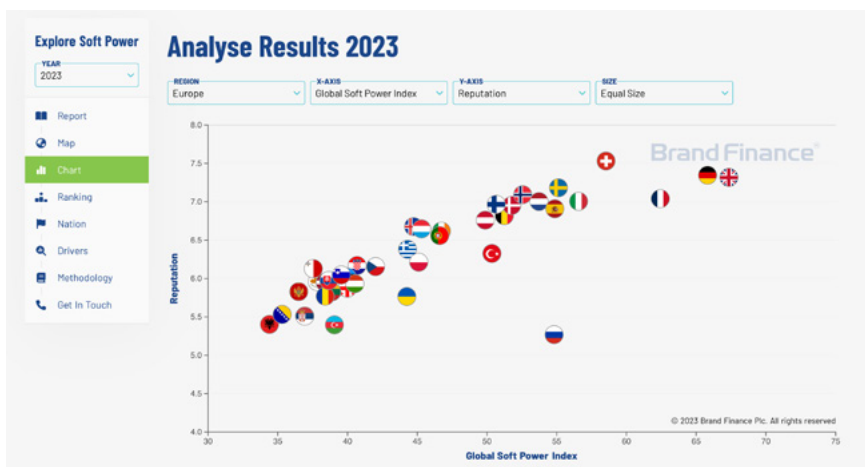
## 2.2. **Soft power**

After the COVID-19 crisis, which shook all aspects of social life, especially tourism and trade, world powers attempted to restore the influence they had before the health crisis through the projection of soft power. Considering the significance of Russia after the aggression in Ukraine, its soft power index, i.e., the perception of other countries about its position in the geopolitical order, declined. According to the Global Soft Power Index, Russia's reputation, as one of the indicators of power projection in 2023, fell from 23rd to 105th place, resulting in the erosion of the global soft power index and a drop to the 13<sup>th</sup> position.<sup>3</sup>

In an economic context, relations between the EU and Russia are reflected in trade relations. From February 2022 to June 2023, the value of imports to the EU from Russia decreased by 84%. Additionally, the import of oil products from Russia to the EU dropped from 29% to 2% from the first quarter of 2022 to the first quarter of 2023.<sup>4</sup>

The altered geopolitical circumstances due to the war in Ukraine have led Russia to predominantly convey its narrative of a multipolar world through state media and propaganda outlets. A multipolar global order has become one of the most crucial aspects of Russian soft power on the global stage and a significant instrument for preserving its international influence. This model is based on dividing the world according to the sovereignty model, the idea that global powers with energy and nuclear capacities automatically have the right to shape the world and its immediate surroundings according to their measure, while democratic and economic freedoms, as universal values, pose a threat to such a governance model. Building on Primakov's doctrine, Alexander Dugin, a marginal figure during Yeltsin's rule (1991-1999), has become a significant figure in articulating the ideological and geostrategic positions of Putin's Russia. In his work *The Foundations of Geopolitics – Geopolitical Future of Russia*, Dugin emphasizes the Eurasian component of Russia's development in new geopolitical circumstances, basing it on his interpretation of neo-Nazism. Dugin's interpretation of the new world order is based on the theory of two truths, meaning there is no single universal truth but multiple truths depending on the organization of the multipolar order. Furthermore, Vladimir Putin, in the ideological foundation for the invasion of Ukraine, utilizes Dugin's theory of the clash of civilizations, in which Russia plays the role of the new Rome. According to Dugin, Moscow perceives itself as the heir to the Roman and Byzantine Empires, powerful enough to resist liberalism, multiculturalism, and progressive values.





## 2.3. Censorship, AI and services

The main role in shaping the media space and content on social networks in Russia is played by Roskomnadzor - the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media. This agency was established as an executive body responsible for overseeing mass communications. Founded in 2008, Roskomnadzor is, in terms of structure, technological characteristics, and implementation plans, a government agency used as an instrument of internal control for socio-political events in the Russian Federation. For years, Roskomnadzor manually searched for information on potential threats in the online space as defined by the Kremlin. However, leaked information from the Russian Center for Radio Frequency and Electronics (GRFC), obtained by Istories, indicates the extent of operations Roskomnadzor has undertaken to control the online space. It has been revealed that GRFC is developing an artificial intelligence system called Vepr that automatically analyzes media materials and searches for information on the internet that may cause tensions in Russian society. Its main tasks include analyzing materials on social networks and mass media, identifying points of potential tension based on this analysis, and spreading publications that may provoke a social reaction. The system also builds models to predict social and political dynamics, with the data then transmitted to surveillance structures.<sup>5</sup>

Following the ideological goals of the Russian Federation, the artificial intelligence system Vepr has received specific technical specifications enabling it to focus on designated topics, thereby monitoring priority tasks in the online sphere. This allows Roskomnadzor to more easily identify and neutralize sources of such information. The monitored topics include the mood for protests and possibilities for destabilizing Russian society, a negative attitude towards leading state figures, state structures, and international organizations, falsehoods about leading state figures, the state, and the country as a whole, topics related to non-systemic opposition, sanctions, and undermining and denigrating *traditional values*.



Network for monitoring information that authorities consider forbidden. Screenshot from the internal presentation of the GRFC (Russian Center for Radio Frequency and Electronics)

According to the technical documents of the *AI Vepr*, Roskomnadzor aims, with the help of the AI system, to obtain a complete picture of the integration of society, including the social characteristics of individuals, as well as psychological portraits of those who distribute information created on social networks. If the source is a media outlet, Roskomnadzor will verify its funding in accordance with laws regarding foreign agents. Therefore, the primary focus of censorship bodies is on prevention, targeting information distributors rather than consumers.

Additionally, the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Roskomnadzor, has launched the AI software *Oculus*, which searches for prohibited content on social networks and has the capability to analyze 200,000 images daily. According to Roskomnadzor, the new system will not only track fake news but also extremist narratives, making it target the spread of LGBT propaganda and other prohibited content. Essentially, based on its experience, Russia understands the significance of social networks and the power they hold. Therefore, it aims to establish absolute control over the content and narratives being created, sparing no means. In this case, it combines a repressive apparatus with state-of-the-art technologies.<sup>6</sup>

By engaging and utilizing state-of-the-art technology, the government is attempting to shield itself from any upheavals and socio-political changes. The fear of discontent leading to a special military operation has resulted in the enactment of a new law that imposes draconian penalties in the event of publicly expressing dissatisfaction with the war or any criticism toward the political and military leadership. On March 4, 2022, the Russian State Duma adopted a law that stipulates a penalty of 15 years in prison for spreading fake news about the Russian army. According to the new law, the public prosecutor can shut down any media outlet disseminating fake news about the military or discrediting it, spreading anti-war sentiments, calling for protests, or showing disrespect towards the authorities.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4. Brics - Africa – a new Russian order

To project itself as a key geopolitical player despite U.S. and EU sanctions, Russia needs a new framework for action. Highlighting the importance of BRICS, an economic forum consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has served as Russia's instrument in competing with the West. Just in the period from January 1 to October 15, 2023, the Russian propaganda outlet *Russia Today* in Serbia had 406 articles mentioning BRICS as a major topic. Another Russian government outlet, *Sputnik Serbia*, had 322 articles on the topic of BRICS during the same period.



The main economic goals of BRICS involve creating an alliance that would counterbalance the G7 countries. Economically, the BRICS nations established the New Development Bank in 2014 with an initial capital of \$50 billion, intended to serve as a counterweight to the World Bank and the IMF. However, within this forum, Russia has also initiated a process of de-dollarization. This involves ensuring that the external debts of countries economically cooperating with BRICS are not denominated in the world's dominant currency, the dollar, but in the national currencies of the BRICS member states.<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, Russia is attempting to network countries with natural resources and process industries to create conditions for securing food and other raw material benefits in geopolitical competition with the West.

A notable example of this new Russian practice is the *weaponization of food exports*, specifically blocking the export of Ukrainian grain to African countries and creating dependence on Russian grain. As early as July 17, 2023, Russia announced it would block the export of grain from Ukraine. The Russian Black Sea Fleet blocked the exit for merchant ships from Ukraine, thereby suspending its participation in the Black Sea agreement on grain exports. The justification for this move was that the West and the UN had not fulfilled the conditions for the agreement to continue to be valid.<sup>9</sup>

However, the blockade of the grain agreement was just a prelude to a larger global game



Vladimir Putin and Ibrahim Traore

in Russia's instrumentalization of food and world trade. On July 27-28, 2023, Russia organized the Africa-Russia Summit, during which the main topic was the delivery of grain to the African continent. Putin pledged free grain for six African countries, portraying Russia as a nation that looks at the African continent without any ulterior motives. More importantly, Russia positioned itself as a supporter of the decolonization of Africa, presenting another narrative of Russia as a stronghold of anti-imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

It is indicative which African countries received promises of free grain. In addition to Mali, the Central African Republic, and Eritrea, which already use the services of Russian mercenary paramilitary structures like Wagner to maintain regimes in these countries, Burkina Faso was also on the list. Burkina Faso recently experienced a military coup that ousted President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Putin had a bilateral meeting with the military leader of the coup in Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Traore, during the summit in St. Petersburg. By supporting the coup, Russia, in a hybrid and primarily asymmetric manner, is acting on the African continent. Through the narrative of decolonizing Africa, it promotes other military coups in West Africa to create instability on the African continent, exert pressure on the political West, and divert attention from the escalating crisis in Ukraine.

## 2.5. **Disinformation in the EU – Digital Service Act**

Russian disinformation campaigns, since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, have reached 165 million users within the European Union across all social media platforms. It's indicated that this number may be higher in 2023, considering the altered terms of use that occurred with Twitter, or X, after Elon Musk's acquisition.

Following the guidelines of the European Commission, the most significant social media platforms have signed the Code of Practice on Disinformation. Subsequently, on August 25, 2023, the EU adopted the Digital Services Act, which served to establish an analysis of the risk of Russian disinformation. According to this act, online platforms must implement measures to prevent and remove posts containing illegal products, services, or content, while also providing users with means to report such content. Key findings from the analysis reveal that pro-Kremlin propaganda garnered 16 billion views within the EU. The growing ecosystem of pro-Russian accounts doubled since the beginning of the invasion, with Meta becoming the most significant platform for such narratives. Additionally, the number of channel subscribers has dramatically increased, with some social networks reporting a threefold increase in subscribers, such as Telegram, and a doubling of subscribers on TikTok. On YouTube, the number of subscribers to the so-called Z channels increased by 90%.

In addition to changes in terms of use related to Russian state media and denial of crimes, social networks have applied old provisions on terms of use concerning hate speech and incitement to violence. However, these conditions, as before, were inconsistently applied and did not yield the desired effect in the fight against propaganda. Moreover, narrowly defined



terms of use have allowed disinformation campaigns to go unpunished or easily circumvent the rules set by social networks. The general conclusion is that Russian information operations pose a serious threat to public safety, fundamental rights, and public discourse.<sup>11</sup>

As Russian propaganda is multi-faceted and multi-channel, in the context of war and influence operations, there has been a flood of military bloggers (*Milbloggers*) and the so-called Z channels. These serve to boost war propaganda on social networks and exaggerate Russian military successes. The Austrian Ministry of Defense released a video featuring a map of the Z channel and blogger ecosystem connected to official pro-Russian narratives. The map included the propaganda portal from Montenegro, *IN4S*, which not only carries pro-Russian propaganda but also promotes the only reporter from Montenegro on the Ukrainian front, Igor Damjanović. He regularly informs subscribers on his Telegram channel about the military actions of the Russian army. His channel has over 18 thousand subscribers.<sup>12</sup>

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## 2.6. Serbian connection

In 2019, official Serbia established contacts with Aleksandr Dugin, who, on November 24, 2019, together with the then Minister of Defense of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, opened the exhibition *Defense 78*, dedicated to marking the 20th anniversary of the NATO intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SRJ). The central part of Dugin's statement was that Serbs awakened the multipolar world in 1999. This statement is still on the website of the Ministry of Defense of Serbia. The fact that the then Minister of Defense, and recently the head of the Security Information Agency (BIA), Aleksandar Vulin, was actively promoting multipolar values, largely explains Serbia's current position regarding sanctions against Russia.<sup>13</sup>

The significance of Serbia within the framework of the Russian concept of multipolarity is evident. Apart from Hungary, where the concept of multipolarity is not specifically mentioned but rather emphasizes sovereignty in decision-making—a crucial aspect of Hungary's independent foreign policy highlighted by the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs at the 2BS Forum in 2023—Serbia actively works to promote this concept. Organized by the International Eurasian Movement from Moscow, a conference titled *Western Sanctions as a Geopolitical Instrument of Neocolonialism* took place on September 28, 2023. Ambassadors from Russia, Venezuela, and Cuba, as well as Archdeacon Bojan Čečar of the Serbian Orthodox Church, participated in the conference.

The choice of Western sanctions as the main topic of the conference is not coincidental. Given that Serbia has not joined EU sanctions against Russia, such an event can be perceived as additional pressure from Russia on the government in Belgrade. The fact that the main ideologue of Eurasian unionism, Aleksandr Dugin, attended the online conference speaks about the importance of Serbia's foreign policy position for Moscow at the current moment. Russia leverages Serbia's position of military neutrality to pro-

  
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mote the narrative of unity between the two Orthodox nations. By drawing parallels between the sanctions imposed on Yugoslavia in the 1990s and those on Russia after its aggression in Ukraine, Russia attempts to create socio-political unity based on anti-Western sentiment.



*Dugin and Putin at the opening of the exhibition Defense 78, November 24, 2021.*

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## 3. The Western Balkans

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### 3.1. Sovereignism

Due to new geopolitical circumstances, particularly diplomatic isolation following the aggression in Ukraine, Russia has crafted its foreign policy around a new narrative, shaped around the assertion that all states autonomously make decisions within the realm of international politics. This narrative construct, emphasizing that each state independently decides on both foreign and domestic fronts, has been disseminated by Russia depending on the interests it advocates across different meridians. Diplomatically and through media channels, Russia has propagated a narrative of decolonization in Africa, actively encouraging military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. In Europe, Russia has supported right-wing and anti-establishment policies that are based on anti-EU sentiments and anti-immigration policies, as seen with Fidesz in Hungary, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and Smer in Slovakia.

The idea of alleged sovereignism in the Western Balkans region is associated with the policies of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, Milorad Dodik in the Republic of Srpska (entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić in Montenegro, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The concept of sovereignism was highlighted at the “Serbia of hope” rally held on May 26, 2023, in Belgrade, expressing support for Aleksandar Vučić’s policies following mass protests in Serbia against violence. The idea of sovereignism was interpreted through the speeches of Vučić, Knežević, Dodik, and Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó. During the event, Milan Knežević elaborated on the concept of the independence of his country, stating that Montenegro can now be called “*ambassadoristan*,” using the narrative that Western embassies actively and decisively participate in the process of forming the 44th government of Montenegro. President Aleksandar Vučić followed up on his speech with an anti-Western construct, expressing pride in Serbia’s independent and sovereign policy, stating that he is *proud that ambassadors or other countries do not govern them*. The Hungarian Foreign Minister used a similar rhetoric, claiming that Serbia and Hungary are under attack by the liberal mainstream because they independently pursue their own policies.

The channeling of disinformation narratives, such as portraying Montenegro as “*ambassadoristan*,” claiming that Serbs are prohibited from entering the Montenegrin government, and suggesting a threat to the Serbian national identity, was systematically directed during the formation of the 44th Montenegrin government and in the campaigns leading up to the census in Montenegro. Aleksandar Vučić and representatives of the ZBCG coalition (Za budućnost Crne Gore) used pro-Russian media outlets like *IN4S* and *Borba* for this purpose. On the same wavelength were analysts Aleksandar Raković, Vladimir Pavićević, Čedomir Antić, and Vladimir Dobrosavljević, as well as columnists from the mentioned portals including Bećir Vuković, Ilija Miljanić, Mišo Vujović, Slaviša Čurović, Vojin Grubač, and *Sputnik* analyst Du-



šan Proroković. Through disinformation constructs about the endangered Serbian identity, the government in Belgrade, together with proxy actors in Montenegro, such as the *Miholjski Zbor Orthodox Brotherhood*, the Serb National Council of Montenegro, and the Council of People's Assemblies led by Momčilo Vuksanović, the alliance of the Serbian People's Defense in Vasojevići and the Lim Valley, has been hybridly exerting pressure on states in the region by adopting declarations on the protection of Serbs, such as the *Vidovdan Declaration* on the annulment of Kosovo's recognition on July 26, 2023, accompanied by graffiti writing *When the army returns to Kosovo* across Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Russia.

The activation of Russian-Serbian proxies, such as the adoption of declarations in support of Serbs in Kosovo like the *Vidovdan Declaration* or the statement of the *Miholjski Zbor* after the conflict in Kosovo in May 2023, is indicative. Their involvement, in parallel with disinformation narratives about threatened Serbs in the region, aims to escalate national and ethnic tensions in Montenegro.

Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian media outlets *IN4S* and *Borba* continue to play a prominent role in channeling Russian-Serbian influence through disinformation campaigns, such as the one conducted after the parliamentary elections in Montenegro on June 11, 2023. One of these narratives promotes the idea that Serbs are banned from entering the government. They are also engaged in an influence campaign that promotes the official Belgrade's stance on the alleged threat to the Serbian national identity in the Western Balkans. The role of these media outlets in undermining democratic processes and distancing Montenegro from the European Union goes unhindered, and since pro-Russian proxies came to power, they have received financial support from state-owned companies. In 2022 alone, the state-owned companies *Elektroprivreda* and *Morsko Dobro*, led by officials from the New Serbian Democracy, contributed €13,000 to the unregistered portal *IN4S*, while *CEDIS*, headed by an official from the Democratic Party of Socialists, contributed €3,388. The *Borba* portal, which, just like *IN4S*, serves as a primary platform for spreading disinformation and articles that incite religious and national hatred, features advertisements from *Elektroprivreda Crne Gore*.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2. **Serbia**

Predictions by numerous analysts that the war in Ukraine would change Serbia's foreign policy course and consolidate a pro-European agenda domestically have proven unfounded. The government in Belgrade, under the auspices of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), managed to further strengthen its power on the political scene in the period after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. This ended the hopes of European partners for a change in Serbia's position in relations with Russia and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. Today, Serbia is the only candidate country for EU accession that has not aligned its foreign policy with the EU and has refused to impose sanctions on Russia. The elections in Serbia in 2022 not only eliminated the outli-



nes of a pro-European policy but also strengthened security and cultural ties between Serbia and Russia. The policy of military neutrality, often cited by President Vučić, spilled into the public discourse and a policy of general neutrality, essentially a facade for deepening ties with authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and Hungary. Already on September 23, 2022, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Nikola Selaković and Sergey Lavrov, representing the foreign ministries of the two countries, signed a Consultation Plan between the foreign ministries of the two countries for the next two years. Amid the aggression on Ukraine, this agreement was a thorn in the side of the political West but an indisputable announcement of Serbia's further foreign policy projections. The new – old government in Serbia viewed the issue of sanctions toward Russia as crucial for a balancing policy. Thus, the new Minister of Economy, Rade Basta, was dismissed on July 11, 2023, after publicly expressing the opinion that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to propagandists, influencers, and Russian trolls on the Serbian media scene, a significant actor is the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Bocan Harčenko. The importance of his role in Serbia is evident in the fact that Vladimir Putin awarded the diplomat with the Order of Alexander Nevsky on December 23, 2022. The Order of Alexander Nevsky is given to Russian citizens for outstanding personal contributions to the homeland, for long and conscientious service, and for achieving high results in official duties, as well as in enhancing Russia's international authority.

Assessing Russia's position in the current European context, Serbia's decision not to impose sanctions on Russia can be viewed from Moscow's perspective as a success of Russian diplomacy, and also as a personal achievement for Bocan Harčenko, worthy of such a high decoration. It is indicative that, alongside Harčenko, the same year, the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, received the same decoration.

Subversive activities from the position of a prominent diplomat are recognized in the actions carried out by Bocan Harčenko on Serbian territory, utilizing all available resources and infrastructure. The Serbian oil company (NIS) is majority-owned by Russian Gazprom Neft. The coordinated action of Harčenko and the NIS company is observed in psychological propaganda activities using the linguistic coinage Zajedno (Together). Billboards funded by NIS appeared in Belgrade, displaying merged Serbian and Russian flags



*Unveiling of the street sign for Vitaly Bulakh Street on April 20, 2023.*

with the caption *Zajedno* (Together). Additionally, during the ceremony unveiling the renovated monument to Serbian and Russian heroes who died defending Belgrade during World War I on August 31, 2023, Bocan Harčenko, in the concluding part of his speech, emphasized We, as before, will remain together. The monument is located in Kalemegdan, although it is not historically known which Serbian and Russian heroes perished in the defense of Belgrade. Therefore,

the monument's restoration can be seen from the perspective of historical revisionism and an attempt to adapt history to current needs. Harčenko, on the same occasion, mentioned a shared culture of remembrance and the situation Russia faces today, equating it with events from World War I and World War II. At the monument unveiling ceremony, Nikola Selaković, the Minister of Labor, Social, and Veterans' Affairs, also spoke.<sup>16</sup>

Bocan Harčenko's activities occurred concurrently with the arrival of Russian diplomats in Serbia, expelled from EU member states following the start of the aggression in Ukraine. Thus, from February 2022 to February 2023, the number of Russian diplomats in Serbia increased from 54 to 64.

Prominent propaganda activities of Bocan Harčenko in strengthening Serbian-Russian ties are noticeable in southern Serbia. In Čajetina, the Russian ambassador, together with the mayor Ivan Stamatović, ceremoniously unveiled a plaque with the name of Vitaly Bulakh Street. He is one of the Russian volunteers who allegedly died in 1999 in a battle with Kosovo Albanians at Košare. On this occasion, Bocan Harčenko thanked the citizens of Čajetina for the funds collected for the annexed Zaporoška region. The topic of Russian volunteers who defended Kosovo and took over Slatina airport has been used in a disinformation narrative in Serbian media for an extended period, and naming a street in Zlatibor is part of that repertoire. The facts surrounding the takeover of Slatina airport indicate that it was not a matter of a fraternal assistance to Serbia but rather a struggle within security services that anticipated the end of Boris Yeltsin's rule.<sup>17</sup>

The Kremlin consistently uses the issue of Kosovo as a leverage point in its relations with the West. Russia's position in the UN Security Council is often emphasized as protective against any potential decision on Kosovo's recognition within the UN Security Council. The unresolved status of Kosovo and the frozen negotiation dynamics between Belgrade and Pristina are exploited by Moscow to expand its influence in Serbia through soft power instruments. In this context, a joint Russian-Serbian production, the film 'Balkan Line,' emerged, romanticizing the capture of an airport near Pristina. The film, made in Hollywood-style war propaganda fashion, glorifies the connection between Russian airborne forces and the Serbian population in Kosovo.<sup>18</sup>

The activities of Russian security services in Serbia have been documented, but never fully cleared. A case that drew public attention occurred on November 17, 2019, when a video appeared on YouTube showing a member of the GRU, Georgiy Kleban, handing a plastic bag to a retired Serbian military intelligence officer. This incident garnered public and government scrutiny in Serbia. Aleksandar Vučić confirmed that Kleban was a member of the GRU and had 10 contacts with covert sources, delivering money to them on three occasions. Despite the fact that such a strong intelligence operation by Russia in Serbia was disclosed to the public, the case was never fully resolved. The Serbian government and relevant agencies never explained the intentions behind the GRU's activity, even though the event received media coverage. On one hand, Vučić claimed that the case would not disturb the good relations between Serbia and Russia, while on the other hand, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, characterized the release of the video as the latest in a series of provocations. Serbia's territory was used as a platform by the GRU for an attempted act of terrorism on the day of parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2016, where two Russian intelligence officers, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Moiseyev, coordinated illegal activities against Montenegro.<sup>19</sup>

With the new government in Serbia, the cooperation between the Security Information Agency (BIA) and Russian security services has come to light. Former Minister of Internal Affairs and chief promoter of Russian-Serbian relations, Aleksandar Vulin, was appointed head of the Security Information Agency (BIA). The arrest of Russian opposition activist Andrei Pivovarov in Russia raised questions about the involvement of Serbian security services in that event. Specifically, after a meeting of Russian opposition activists in Belgrade, attended by Pivovarov and his prominent colleague Vladimir Kara-Murza, Pivovarov was arrested in St. Petersburg on May 31, 2021. It is indicative that 15 days before his arrest, a meeting took place between the head of the Serbian police, Aleksandar Vulin, and the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Nikolai Patrushev. Kara-Murza claims that Vulin provided Patrushev with information obtained through secret surveillance measures conducted by the Serbian BIA during a seminar held in Belgrade. These pieces of information were reportedly used by the FSB to arrest Pivovarov.<sup>20</sup>

A year later, Kara-Murza was also arrested on charges of disobeying the lawful order of a police officer, soldier, and Federal Security Service official. In April 2023, the Russian opposition figure was sentenced to 25 years in prison for treason, namely for spreading false information about the Russian army and illegal work for an undesirable organization.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.3. Old narratives

One of the key tools for spreading Russian influence in the media space of the Western Balkans is *Sputnik Srbija*, an online portal in the Serbian language, established under the auspices of the Russian state news agency *Sputnik* (under EU sanctions). The target audience of this media outlet is from the Montenegrin-Serbian-Croatian-Bosnian linguistic area, and its contents are also picked up by local media. The narratives it promotes are

**"Ukrajinci, ustanite protiv tih idiota koji dozivaju projektile sa osiromašenim uranijumom. To je genocid prema ukrajinskom narodu. Ti koji bi da isporučuju to oružje, trebalo bi da budu u Hagu, a ne neko drugi", jasna je ministarka.**

*Ukrainians, rise up against those idiots who are launching projectiles with depleted uranium. This is genocide against the Ukrainian people. Those who want to supply such weapons should be in The Hague, not someone else", the minister said clearly.*

*The statement of Serbian Minister of Health, Danica Grujičić, given on March 26, 2023, on the possible delivery of depleted uranium ammunition to Ukraine.*

based on the Kremlin's foreign policy discourse. This includes discrediting the EU and NATO, undermining pro-Western governments in the region, fostering an atmosphere of mistrust in state institutions, and spreading defeatism among the population.



*Vulin and Patrushev on August 23, 2022, at a meeting in Moscow*

The fact that Serbia is a key platform for spreading disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives is evident from the establishment of Russia Today in Serbia during the height of the Russian aggression in Ukraine on November 15, 2022. This channel has been subject to EU sanctions since March 2, 2022, leading to the suspension of its broadcasting in the EU. After opening its office in Serbia, the Editor-in-Chief of RT announced: We launched RT in the Balkans. Because Kosovo is Serbia.

Like the Kosovo issue, the Russian propaganda machinery exploits sensitive points in Serbian society to spread propaganda and malign influence. The topic of the NATO military intervention in 1999 remains a constant in Russian narratives for disseminating anti-Western sentiment. In addition to the construct of the unjust bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the narrative about cancer cases due to the use of depleted uranium ammunition is employed according to the Kremlin's needs, both for emotional manipulation and for spreading anti-Western propaganda in Serbia.

Although the relevant United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) study on Depleted Uranium in Serbia and Montenegro, conducted in 2001, states that there is no significant risk of water, air, and plant contamination, the propagandist impact of *Sputnik* and RT Balkan continues. In a situation where the United States was considering sending such ammunition to Ukraine, a multi-channel propaganda campaign was initiated by the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova. She emphasized that Serbs, victims of NATO bombing in Yugoslavia, suffered because of the use of depleted uranium weapons. The articles on *Sputnik* not only served as part of the anti-Ukrainian propaganda but also as a motive for promoting anti-NATO and anti-Western attitudes. In the end, the

Serbian government embraced that narrative and subtly used it in the campaign to combat breast cancer. Minister of Health Danica Grujičić claims in the campaign that it is possible to prove whether depleted uranium caused the cancer epidemic.

The statement of Serbian Minister of Health, Danica Grujičić, given on March 26, 2023, on the possible delivery of depleted uranium ammunition to Ukraine.

The failure to impose sanctions on Russia has enabled Russian propaganda outlets not only to maintain their existing platform for spreading disinformation but also to expand it with podcasts and other content. For instance, on RT Balkan, there is a podcast hosted and edited by the former editor-in-chief of the oldest Serbian daily newspaper Politika, Ljiljana Smajlović. Additionally, *Sputnik's* YouTube channel changed its name to Cenzursan to portray EU sanctions as censorship imposed on independent media. Depending on regional and global events, commentators and analysts appear on *Sputnik's* YouTube channel who, in accordance with specific topics, promote either the official views of Russia or alternative solutions for regional disputes. Analysts such as Siniša Ljepojević, Dušan Proroković, retired general and director of the Eurasian Security Forum Mitar Kovač, and former diplomats Zoran Milojević and Vladimir Jovanović are just part of the propaganda apparatus that operates bidirectionally and in harmony with the official policy of the state of Serbia. This means there is no expression of any criticism toward the president of Serbia or the policies he advocates, along with the affirmation of Russia's policy through narratives presented in their programs.

### 3.4. Kosovo – Serbia and the Gerasimov's Doctrine

The *modus operandi* of governance in Serbia aligns in many aspects with the authoritarian methods of Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia. The approach toward the media, the NGO sector, and the opposition in Serbia closely resembles the Russian model promoted by Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime, classifying these countries as "captured states," where individual interests prevail over general interests. Since 2013, Serbia and Russia have engaged in significant trade exchanges, thanks to the agreement on military-technical cooperation. From 2016 to 2021, Serbia purchased 4 combat and 5 transport helicopters and one air defense system Pantsir S1 from Russia. Additionally, through Russian Federation donations, Serbia acquired 6 used MiG-29 aircraft, 30 armored vehicles (BRDM-2), and 20 T72 tanks. Since Aleksandar Vučić took office, Serbia, in addition to strengthening hard power, employs hybrid tactics, projecting its regional political goals through the narrative of the perceived endangerment of Serbs in the region. This strategy is modeled after Russia's tactics to protect Russians in Donbas, Lugansk, and Crimea.<sup>22</sup>

Kosovo serves as an example of the application of Russian hybrid tactics seen in Donbas. The media propaganda emphasizing the perceived endan-

# SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF GERASIMOV'S HYBRID WARFARE STRATEGY

## SHAPE OF THE BATTLEFIELD

Political change desired

Minority exists?

NO

YES

Are there:  
- Nationals in danger?  
- WMDs?  
- Terrorists?

YES

NO

Misinformation  
Manufacture crisis  
Create pretext

## APPLY HYBRID THREAT

Send weapons  
Send Advisors  
Send PMCs  
Empower criminal gangs

## SUPPORTING FIRES

Economic  
Cultural  
Social  
Political  
Technological  
Cyber  
Intimate

## KINETIC

Political change?

YES

NO

Political change complete

Special Military Operation

germent of Serbs in Kosovo, the escalation of national tensions in the region, and a systematic campaign involving graffiti such as When the army returns to Kosovo imply the utilization of the Gerasimov Doctrine in Kosovo. The terrorist attack in Banjska, both in terms of media preparation and the act itself, encompassed all elements of Gerasimov's hybrid warfare tactics.

Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, after whom the doctrine is named, says that wars are no longer declared, and when they start, they are conducted according to a non-typical pattern. In the case of Kosovo, all elements of hybrid warfare were applied.

The shaping of a potential conflict was initiated by creating an artificial crisis due to the perceived threat to Serbs in Kosovo and the fabrication of a pretext for escalating the conflict. The Serbian minority living in the north of Kosovo played an identical role to the Russian minority in Donbas. In addition to graffiti, there was a clear narrative from Serbian officials accusing the authorities in Pristina of wanting a pogrom against Serbs and even genocide. Just like in Donbas in 2014, the narratives of Russian and Serbian proxy media served to create informational conditions for violence. The use of criminal groups and paramilitary formations characteristic of hybrid warfare was this time employed in Kosovo. Vice President of the Serbian List in Kosovo, Milan Radoičić, with a well-armed group, attempted to take the Banjska area in the north of Kosovo. The quantity and type of weaponry, including drones, electronic warfare systems, landmines, automatic grenade launchers, and a large number of explosives, bear a striking resemblance to Putin's little green men, who, under the guise of fighters for freedom in Donetsk and Lugansk, carried out separatist actions on Ukrainian territory.

Gerasimov's doctrine in the case of Kosovo becomes more apparent when considering the number of motorized units, artillery, and strike forces of the Army of the Republic of Serbia positioned on the border with Kosovo. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated two days after the attack in Banjska that he had spoken with Aleksandar Vučić and requested the withdrawal of Serbian army units from the border with Kosovo. The Russian Ambassador to Serbia supported the authorities in Belgrade by consistently invoking UN resolutions and commenting that Kosovo is an inseparable part of Serbia.

The way Putin governs in Russia and Vučić in Serbia, besides internal control over democratic processes, similarly involves projecting power regionally. The territorial integrity of states where Serbs or Russians live serves as a testing ground for the use of hybrid tactics typical of authoritarian regimes.



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## 4. Montenegro

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### 4.1. Demography and economy

According to UNHCR data, more than six million citizens have left Ukraine since the start of the Russian aggression on February 24, 2022. Additionally, according to relevant organizations, between 500,000 and 800,000 people have left Russia due to the pressure of potential mobilization and dissatisfaction with the initiated war.

Montenegrin officials regularly mention that around 33,000 Ukrainian refugees are in Montenegro, constituting about 5% of the total population. On the other hand, in the first three months of 2023, approximately 64,000 Russians registered their stay in Montenegro, which is about 10% of the total population. An indicative fact is that during the same period, Russian citizens opened 1,238 companies in Montenegro.<sup>23</sup>

The consequences of demographic changes in Montenegro can be predicted in the long term. In Budva alone, out of 1,850 enrolled students in elementary schools, one-third are foreigners, mostly Russians. The economic consequences are evident in the real estate market, as the price growth in that sector due to direct foreign investments has reached a 40% increase. Despite the fact that demographic and economic figures are clear indicators of foreign influence, Montenegro lacks a long-term strategy for protection or planning regarding phenomena mostly caused by the war in Ukraine. Short-term gains, such as GDP growth resulting from these types of foreign direct investments, blur the consequences of the absence of a state-responsible strategy in the fields of economy and demographic management and planning.

### 4.2. Montenegro - Russian influence after the aggression

The main promoters of Russian interests and anti-NATO attitudes in Montenegro have fully aligned their public appearances with the political performances of officials from Serbia. The main thesis reiterated by the leaders of the former Democratic Front, now the coalition For the Future of

Montenegro, Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić, is that they respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Through this thesis, they promote a relativistic stance, claiming that they also respect the territorial integrity of Serbia in relation to Kosovo, subtly sending the message that, for them, Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk are as independent as Kosovo is for Serbia. Promoters of Kremlin policy no longer dare to praise Vladimir Putin directly. Instead, through proxy media and individuals, they disseminate narratives that further divide Montenegrin society, synchronizing their public policies with Serbia and Moscow. One of the key narratives propagated by Serbian officials, especially Aleksandar Vučić, whose main megaphones in Montenegro are the leaders of the For the Future of Montenegro coalition, is the alleged interference of Western embassies in internal affairs in Montenegro, along with the recycled narrative of the threatened Serbian national identity in Montenegro.

There has been a noticeable shift in the platform of anti-Western and pro-Russian forces in Montenegro over the past three years. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as the change in power, with the transition from opposition to governing structures, contributed to the disappearance of overt support for Russia and Vladimir Putin in the style of Vojislav Šešelj. Now, this support is subtly introduced in Montenegro through a synergistic effect with Aleksandar Vučić's policies. The traditional divisions in society, and weak institutions that the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and coalition partners insufficiently and decisively built after the restoration of independence, have served as instruments for Russian and Serbian proxies to use the new strategy, after assuming power, to halt the country's progress toward the EU and promote regional initiatives that bring Montenegro and the region back to the 1990s.

The resilience of Russian influence became apparent after the action of the Montenegrin National Security Agency (ANB) in September 2022, when two Montenegrin citizens were arrested, six Russian diplomats were expelled, and entry was banned for 28 foreign citizens. The Russian Embassy in Podgorica reacted with a statement, considering it hostile activity by the Montenegrin authorities and suspending consular activities until further notice.<sup>24</sup>

Just three days after the Russian Ambassador to Montenegro, Vladislav Maslenikov, stated in an interview for *Sputnik* that the latest hostile activities of Podgorica would not go unanswered, and that official Podgorica does not fully understand the long-term damage of the recent anti-Russian steps<sup>25</sup>, the then Prime Minister Dritan Abazović dismissed the director of the National Security Agency (ANB) on October 7, 2022.

The respect for EU sanctions, which Montenegro joined, was seen only as declarative rather than substantive when the Russian company Beluga bought a part of the Neksan company, promising to invest 50 million euros. The owner of the Neksan company, Miodrag Daka Davidović, who sold part of his company to Beluga, found himself on the US sanctions list on November 16, 2023, due to direct or indirect involvement in actions or policies that threaten peace, security, stability, or the territorial integrity of any area or state in the Western Balkans. An assassination attempt was made on him

in 2019 in Belgrade when he was in the company of the then-bishop and current Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Joanikije. The opening of the factory was attended by the then Prime Minister Dritan Abazović. Also, Montenegro informed the EU that it froze the assets of 34 Russian citizens who are on the EU sanctions list due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, according to the data from the Cadastre and State Property Administration, the property of only one Russian citizen, i.e., a 33 m<sup>2</sup> apartment, was frozen.<sup>26</sup>

Abazović's government practically halted the process of European integration by signing the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church on August 3, 2022, which is the main proxy for Russian influence in the Western Balkans - as indicated in the European Parliament Resolution in March 2022.<sup>27</sup>

Paradoxically, Abazović, as the prime minister in a technical mandate, stated that Russian influence in Montenegro has never been smaller and that by signing the Fundamental Agreement, the issue of unresolved relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church has been resolved. This leaves uncertainty about whether he perceived the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church differently than EU parliamentarians and the West or consciously allowed the main Russian proxy player even greater influence in Montenegrin political affairs.<sup>28</sup>

Russian malign influence has a significant margin for growth, given the lack of reaction from state authorities and through encouragement in local communities where representatives of pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political entities dominantly hold power. One such example is the ban on the performance of the Ukrainian band Ljapis in Budva, when supporters of pro-Russian politics stopped their concert at the Palazzo club. Among those who prevented the band from performing were several employees of the Municipality of Budva, and chants of Serbs and Russians, brothers forever were heard. Despite the appeal from the Embassy of Ukraine for the Montenegrin government to allow the event, the concert did not take place.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, the local authorities in Budva prevented the exhibition titled Faces of Russian Resistance, organized by Elena Filina, an opposition city councilor from Moscow, from taking place on October 1, 2023. Although initially granted permission, representatives of the commercial organization AD Budvanska rivijera vetoed the decision to hold the event.

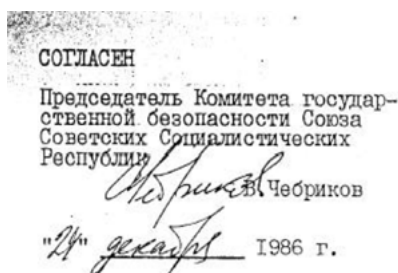
In both Budva on August 29, 2022 and Berane on February 3, 2023 war correspondent for the *IN4S* portal, Igor Damjanović, organized the promotion of the film Mariupol – the suffering and resurrection of the city. The film promotion in Budva was attended by the then Mayor of Budva, Marko Bato Carević, and in Berane, the film was screened at the Polimski Museum under the jurisdiction of the local government. In both cities, the authorities are represented by members of the ZBCG coalition. Damjanović, along with Mijailo Backović, the founder of the right-wing organization Miholjski zbor, visited the Russian Embassy in Podgorica a few days after the start of the aggression on Ukraine. He later went to the Ukrainian front, reporting frequently on alleged military successes of the Russian army.

### 4.3. Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) – Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)

The Russian Orthodox Church plays a significant role in the doctrine of projecting Russian soft power. One of the foundations of Russian expansionism is the Kremlin's belief that the West wants to destroy traditional values. Therefore, the church uses the mantra of protecting Christianity and Orthodoxy as an instrument to bind Western Balkan societies to Russia as the motherland that preserves traditional values.

The facts indicate that neither in Russia nor in the Western Balkans are the ROC and SPC protectors of Orthodox values; rather, they are mechanisms in the hands of the authorities to achieve regional goals and agendas. In Russia, a country where, according to the church's interpretation, traditional values are preserved, the abortion rate was 31.6% in 2020, while in the EU, it was 11.4%. Contradictions are also evident in the fact that in Russia, the practice of religion, according to the 2016 law (part of the counter-terrorism legislation), is allowed only in facilities approved by the state.

The connections between the security services of Russia and Serbia with parts of the church have never been completely clarified, neither after the collapse of the USSR nor after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, it is evident that both churches work to support the state policies of the two countries. This is apparent in examples such as the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The data indicating connections between the church and security services points to the depth of these relationships dating back to the USSR era. According to KGB archive documents from 1989, the current Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill, was an active agent of that organization. His codename in the file was Mikhailov, mentioned in KGB operations from 1972 to 1986.<sup>30</sup>



СОГЛАСЕН  
Председатель Комитета государственной безопасности Союза Советских Социалистических Республик  
В. Чебриков  
"24" декабря 1986 г.

*The approval of the KGB director for a plan of joint activities with the KNB in 1986.*

Рассмотреть возможность подготовки и осуществления мероприятий по подставе через "Радко" "Международной амнистии" агента КГБ СССР.

9. В разработке Пен-клуба использовать возможности агентов "Анна" (КНБ ЧССР) и "Михайлов" (КГБ СССР).

*List of joint agency-operational activities at facilities of mutual operational interest between the 10th Directorate of the National Security of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the 5th Directorate of the Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union, ordering the utilization of the capabilities of agents "Anna" (KNB of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) and "Mihailov" (KGB of the USSR) for the development of the Pen Club.*

Previously, Patriarch Kirill's role (in the 1970s) was to influence the World Council of Churches in Geneva on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church is fully aligned with the narrative of protecting traditional values and serves to promote the idea of the Serbian world. In synchronization with Serbian official politics, it intervenes in internal affairs in Montenegro, similar to the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The connections between the two churches are evident in the promotion of shared values, using the cult of svetosavlje as a means to deny the Montenegrin national identity. Metropolitan Joanikije of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro appears to perceive the role of the church in Montenegro similarly to Patriarch Kirill in Russia. This is indicated by his statement in March 2022, where he said that Montenegro is projected to be a small Ukraine. During the peak of the aggression in Ukraine, Joanikije visited Moscow in October 2022, and together with Patriarch Kirill, conducted a liturgy in the Patriarchal-Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin. On that occasion, Patriarch Kirill stated, As you know, the Serbian Church is the closest to our Church in culture, spiritual tradition, and loyalty to the unity of Orthodox Slavs.<sup>31</sup>

After the formation of the technical government led by Dritan Abazović and the signing of the Fundamental Agreement, the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) as the main Russian proxy were reduced to sporadic statements by individual bishops. In operational terms, activities were transferred to extreme Orthodox brotherhoods, which played a leading role in hybrid actions during key socio-political events.

The Orthodox Brotherhood Miholjski Zbor, during the events in Banjska and the negotiations for the formation of the 44th Government of Montenegro, stated that the Serbian people in Kosovo are not alone and that regional security is threatened. Miholjski Zbor also issued threatening statements concerning census to designate Milojko Spajić, warning that they would not allow him to play with their lives. In the case of Miholjski Zbor, their conne-



*Joanikije and Kirill in Moscow in 2022*

ctions with the Serbian army, specifically the 63rd Parachute Brigade, are noteworthy. Mijajlo Backović, a former member of the Yugoslav Army's military formation, is the most prominent figure in the movement and one of its founders. The main church connection of the group is Metodije Ostojić, the Bishop of Budimlja-Nikšić in the Serbian Orthodox Church, for whom Backović serves as a secretary.

The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in socio-political events was evident on October 15, 2023, during the ceremony commemorating ten years since the consecration of the Christ's Resurrection Cathedral, as well as the consecration of the foundation stone of the Church and the Orthodox high school of Saint Sava in Podgorica.

In addition to Patriarch Porfirije of the SPC and the acting Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, the guest at both events was the Russian Ambassador to Podgorica, Vladislav Maslenikov. During the ceremony marking the consecration of the Christ's Resurrection Cathedral, Porfirije took the opportunity to emphasize that in Podgorica, more than in other places, people know who they are, what religion they follow, which language they speak, and to which nation they belong. The event served as a demonstration of Serbian and Russian influence, which, especially after the 2020 elections and the signing of the Fundamental Agreement, operated beneath the public radar, often realized through proxy actors like the Miholjski Zbor and the Orthodox Brotherhood Stupovi, which were among the organizers of pro-Russian rallies after the aggression.

#### 4.4. **Relativization of the terrorism attempt**

Through media texts that emerged in mid-November 2023, reactivating the case of attempted terrorism, we witness a media-political relativization of the indictment. Transcripts of conversations from the so-called Sky application, which were exploited in the media, served political and media actors to further relativize that legal process, known to the public as a *state coup*.

Without delving into the interpretation of judicial decisions, it is crucial to state facts that unequivocally point to Russia's involvement in the attempted terrorism on the day of the parliamentary elections in October 2016 in Montenegro.

Facts about the existence of a plan to destabilize Montenegro were confirmed by the then Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, who, after a meeting of the Security Services Coordination Bureau, stated that the security bodies of Serbia had obtained irrefutable and material evidence that various illegal activities were being prepared on the territory of Serbia, for Montenegro. Vučić mentioned that certain individuals tracked the daily movements of the Prime Minister of Montenegro minute by minute and informed other individuals about it. He stated that among the evidence related to planned activities in Montenegro were photographs, videos, uniforms, direct confessions, and seized money in the amount of 125 tho-

usand euros. Some individuals were arrested and are under the control of Serbian authorities, specifying that they worked with people for whom it can be said that there is an element of foreign involvement. The cooperation between the state authorities of Serbia and Montenegro, regarding the submission of evidence, seized money, and equipment, proceeded smoothly until the visit of the Russian Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev to Belgrade on October 26, 2016. After the visit of the leading Russian security official to Serbia, the exchange of data between the state authorities of Serbia and Montenegro on this case ceased. There was a deterioration of the previously good relations between the ruling structures in Serbia and Montenegro, and a comprehensive coordinated campaign against Montenegro from Serbia began.



*Abazović, Maslenikov, and Porfirije during the consecration of the foundation stone of the church and Orthodox high school Sveti Sava in Podgorica*

Also, the role of two GRU agents, Eduard Shishmakov, to whom a fake passport under the name Eduard Shirokov was issued two months before the parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2016, and Vladimir Moiseyev, also a GRU agent who had a passport under the name Vladimir Popov, is documented. Evidence of the actions of Russian agents is also seen in the money transfers that Saša Sindjelić received from Shishmakov via Western Union, which was confirmed by an independent FBI investigation. Sindjelić, as a key organizer of the attempted coup, later became a witness and explained in detail the contacts he had with Shishmakov.

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## 5. Conclusion

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Recognition of Russian influence in the Western Balkans region is not sufficient for understanding the processes driven by Russian hybrid activities. Numerous problems faced by Western Balkan countries, such as crime and corruption, weak economic development, extreme nationalism, lack of rule of law, and a general deficit of democracy, cannot be solely attributed to malign Russian influence. Blaming Russia for all the problems confronting vulnerable societies in the region is a mistake. Such an approach can obscure the real issues and lead to public fatigue confronted with the constant repetition of the mantra of malign Russian influence. However, it is clear that Russia successfully exploits all the weaknesses of the region to achieve its goals.

Russian influence in the region has seemingly diminished after the aggression on Ukraine, but despite the West's insistence on reducing political and security ties with the Russian Federation, continuity in the realization of Russian strategic goals in the region can be observed. This is particularly evident in Serbia, the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska, and also in Montenegro.

Inherited problems that continuously burden the region create a favorable environment for external influences and the actions of actors not interested in the progress of Western Balkan states toward their proclaimed Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In this context, it is crucial to recognize and counteract the actions of a network of narrative proxies who willingly promote Russian interests throughout the region. Promoting crafted narratives through state and non-state actors aims to strengthen Russia's influence in the region and undermine Western interests, primarily in the areas of EU enlargement policy and NATO expansion. The Western Balkans is just one of the many points of conflict between Russia and the West. The relative success of Russian efforts, mostly based on latent anti-Western sentiment in certain circles and emphasizing connections within the Slavic or Orthodox identity, contributes to weakening Euro-enthusiasm due to the perception of slow integration of new members from the Western Balkans into the EU in the region as Western abandonment of enlargement policy.

This favors Russia's efforts to present itself as a global power capable of countering the West by obstructing the Euro-Atlantic integration process in the region and using key regional issues, primarily the Kosovo-Serbia relations, as an argument for its aggressive foreign policy aiming for dominance in the immediate neighborhood. The fact that Russia's goals in the region are mostly based on its global geopolitical projections results in the absence of a consistent approach to building relationships with Western Balkan states. Russian influence in these states expands relatively successfully through individual political actors, the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, media, and malign proxy groups.



At the regional level, Russian influence is most widespread in Serbia, as well as in the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska. In Montenegro, Russia operates through an extensive network of proxy actors in politics, media, the Serbian Orthodox Church, various organizations, associations, and fraternities advocating for so-called traditional values based on their interpretation of history and Orthodox heritage. Numerous groups from these positions also operate on social media. Support for pro-Russian and anti-Western-oriented political actors has not been successful in achieving one of Montenegro's key strategic goals – full membership in NATO. Certain politicians and political parties continue to be active promoters of Russian interests in Montenegro. After the last parliamentary elections, one of the leaders of the pro-Russian Democratic Front (DF), which led a strong anti-NATO campaign during Montenegro's accession to the Alliance, was elected President of the Parliament of Montenegro. The Agreement between parties in the ruling majority implies the entry into the government of representatives of pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties Nova Srpska demokratija (New Serbian Democracy) and Demokratska narodna partija (Democratic People's Party), which were constituents of the Democratic Front earlier and contributed to the broader perception of the actions of anti-Western and pro-Russian structures before Montenegro's NATO accession.

Russia has achieved the most success in the Western Balkan region in the field of propaganda, inundating the region with narratives and disinformation disseminated through Russian-funded portals, local media, and social networks. This is facilitated by vulnerable media ecosystems in the countries of the region, which are conducive to various influence operations and are characterized by political capture of the media, a low level of media literacy, and the absence of adequate control mechanisms. In such an environment, pro-Russian and anti-Western-oriented narratives and disinformation are indiscriminately disseminated, and *Sputnik* and *RT* can be classified among the numerous media outlets and organizations promoting pro-Russian narratives in the region.

The role of the European Union and the United States in the region must become more proactive and comprehensive, with a higher degree of interest in the Western Balkans and resistance to Russia's ambitions to expand its presence and influence. In this context, it is of particular importance to recognize and counter Russian influence, which can be identified in various areas and at different levels in all countries of the Western Balkan region. The lack of an adequate response and the absence of activities to prevent malign Russian influence testify that certain governments in the region have acted as Russian proxies only declaratively advocating for European and Euro-Atlantic values and the integration of their countries into the EU and NATO. Montenegro's deviation from the realization of goals from its European agenda and the relativization of its credibility in NATO during the mandate of the 43rd Government of Montenegro (which mostly operated in a technical mandate), along with the simultaneous acceptance of vague initiatives devised in Belgrade, serves as a warning and guidance for the 44th Government on the direction it should not take. The inclusion of pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties openly oriented against the West in the government could not be interpreted as a step in the right direction.

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