

KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM

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# ASSESSMENT OF THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, MONTENEGRO AND NORTH MACEDONIA



**EUROPEAN VALUES**

*Protecting Freedom*

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Kremlin Watch Program 2020



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## EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

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## KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM

Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Center for Security Policy which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Recommendations

Multilateral Measures	National Measures	Civil Society & the Role of the Media
<p>Transnational coordination</p> <p>Reasonable economic partners</p> <p>More policy investment from the United States and the European Union</p> <p>Move closer to EU Accession</p> <p>Western aid in countering malign foreign influence</p>	<p>Legislation on the financing of political parties and movements</p> <p>Strong election infrastructure</p> <p>Deterrence and cost-rising measures</p> <p>Emotionless cultural ties</p> <p>Sustainable domestic economy</p> <p>Legal measures towards hate-speech propaganda</p> <p>Acknowledged economic contribution</p> <p>Pro- EU/NATO Narrative</p> <p>Public exposure of malign efforts</p> <p>Debunking of disinformation</p> <p>Regulation and transparency of the media landscape</p> <p>Work closely with NGOs</p>	<p>Civil society organisations should focus on building grassroots support</p> <p>This focus should also aim for the youth, including university students.</p> <p>These efforts should not focus only on the capital city, but also on settlements in countryside</p> <p>CSOs should work on creating their own channels of communication</p> <p>Podcasts could prove to be a solid way to connect with the general population</p> <p>Holding movie screenings with relevant films could entice previously uninvolved layer of society</p> <p>CSOs should also play a role in training journalists and start fact-checking initiatives with them</p> <p>CSOs could create guidelines in the local language that defines the problematics of disinformation</p> <p>The debate about the problems concerning social media platforms should also be opened in the Western Balkans</p> <p>Local independent media should pay more attention to EU-related topics and explain them to readers</p> <p>CSOs should cooperate with each other locally and in the region</p>
<p>Proactive approach</p> <p>Empowering cross-cutting structures and inter-agency bodies</p> <p>Local governments should increase funding for the training of local journalists</p> <p>Decision-makers and opinion leaders should not overestimate Russia</p> <p>Governments must consider implementing media literacy trainings in the school curriculum</p> <p>Cross political party cooperation</p> <p>Engage with civil society and media</p>		

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## INTRODUCTION

This Report is the conclusion of a year-long cooperation between non-governmental organizations and think tanks from Central Europe and the Western Balkans. The goal of this cooperation within the #BalkansWatch project was to use the experiences of the countries from the Visegrad group in mapping and assessing the malign foreign influence of third countries, adapt their approach, and apply it to the current situation in the Western Balkans. For our research, we have decided to focus on such tools of foreign influence, which aim at disrupting democratic processes and enervating the trust of societies towards democratic institutions.

The use of various tools of malign influence has been attributed to several authoritarian regimes in the past years. However, in the Central European region, the most overt, aggressive actor has been the Russian Federation, which since at least 2014 has been exposed in many private investigative reports and through the research of public security institutions.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the region of the Western Balkans faces similar challenges as it the target of several foreign authoritarian regimes' ambitions, including the Russian Federation. The Kremlin has been exploiting the vulnerabilities and cleavages of the local society to push through its own narratives and pro-actively, yet rather cheaply, trying to stop or delay the accession process of several Western Balkans countries towards NATO and the EU.

Despite our ambition to expand joint projects and activities in the future to the broader analysis and countering of foreign malign influence, we dedicated the initial research specifically to the tools of malign influence of the Kremlin, and the similarities and differences of the Kremlin's approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. For this purpose, we adapted the methodology for mapping the Kremlin's malign influence previously used in Central Europe. This

pilot study serves as a baseline for further research and investigations.

The researchers working on this Report conducted thorough desk research of relevant open source information, including governmental documents (annual intelligence reports, parliamentary assessments, public statements by high-level officials etc.), existing studies (academic research, reports published by think-tank), public surveys, and investigative reports. The desk research was complemented by semi-structured interviews with experts and local officials. The researchers have mainly gathered information from media, foreign policy, and security experts. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, we withheld the list of names of the interviewees. However, the editorial team of the European Values Center for Security Policy has the full list.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the threat has been continually described in detail in the annual reports of the Czech counter-intelligence agency: <https://www.bis.cz/annual-reports/>



The research has identified and focused on the following categories of the Kremlin's tools of malign influence:

#### **A. Relevant political assets**

The Kremlin can use ideological proximity, financial interests, and other entry points to cultivate relationships with political actors, often in high-level positions. These key figures can be supported financially, but more often politically or in the media, in exchange for future decisionmaking favorable to the goals of the Kremlin. With some exceptions, the political allies of the Kremlin tend to share a negative view of international organizations, like the EU or NATO, are inclined to authoritarianism, or simply seek the Kremlin's assistance for their own personal benefit. In the long run, these political allies defend the interests of the Russian Federation, spread its interpretation of events and legitimize it domestically and abroad. In this chapter, the researchers analyzed the main strategic objectives of the Kremlin in this area, identified any political parties which share pro-Kremlin stances or disseminate its narratives, and, if relevant, determine how those parties receive financial or other assistance from the Russian government and its proxies.

#### **B. Non-governmental assets**

The interests of the Kremlin can also be promoted by non-governmental organizations and GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations). These subjects can play an influential role and take advantage of democratic discussion to legitimize the Russian regime and policies abroad. Compatriot organizations can target Russian minorities, often within the concept of *russskiy mir*, or seemingly independent think tanks can lobby former or current politicians. Our research aimed at identifying non-governmental assets of the Kremlin in the Western Balkans and describes their most notable activities.

#### **C. Influence through the church**

In this category, we elucidated significant activities of the Kremlin that target the Orthodox Church or other religious communities. The activities of the NGOs and GONGOs mentioned in the category above are often complemented by the structures of the Orthodox Church, which is canonically subordinated to the Russian Patriarchy. There have been several cases already reported, especially in Eastern Europe, where the Orthodox Church strongly supported pro-Kremlin political candidates or reinforced disinformation narratives.

#### **D. Radical or extremist groups**

The Kremlin is not afraid to indirectly support of radical and extremist forces and movements in various European regions. The political leaning of such groups is less important than the anti-systemic aspect of their activities. Members of those movements can travel to the Russian Federation or the occupied territories of Ukraine to attend coordination conferences and, „election observation missions,” and enjoy a greater media profile thanks to Russian state channels. The research has been focused on detection of support of the Kremlin to such groups and provides examples of radical groups supporting the Kremlin's interests and their motivations.

#### **E. Instrumentalization of minorities**

Russian minorities in target countries can be used or abused by the Russian Federation to further justify future aggressive action, as it has been a case in Ukraine, or for gathering intelligence. Even non-Russian minorities can play a role in spreading the Kremlin's hostile influence if there are culture connections or other motivations to further legitimize or justify Russian interference. The researchers identify activities of the Kremlin targeting Russian, but also Albanian or Serbian, minorities, and analyze the intentions behind those activities.

### **F. Intelligence operations**

The Kremlin uses its network of intelligence agencies-i.e. the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), or the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)-to gather information about the weaknesses of the target countries and their political leaders and use it to influence key state figures in their decision-making and promote the Kremlin's economic, psychological, ideological interests and foreign policy goals. As well, the Kremlin increasingly uses intelligence services to conduct operations like the assassination attempt of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United States. In some cases, Russian intelligence officers are shielded by local Russian embassies. Our research brings to attention some cases of Russian intelligence activity in the target countries and their methods.

### **G. Disinformation operations**

The Kremlin spreads disinformation and manipulative narratives abroad through their official channels, like RT or Sputnik, but also via other proxies with direct or indirect links to the Russian government. They use those channels to amplify vulnerabilities and cleavages in target societies and discredit democratic institutions. The communication strategies are usually tailored specifically for the domestic audience. The researchers analysed the methods of disinformation operations in their respective countries and identified the major outlets used for conducting those campaigns but also focused on the most common narratives used by the disinformation campaigns.

### **H. Corrosive economic activities**

Russian state companies or firms close to the Russian government use business channels not only for economic benefit but also as a way to spread political influence, most visibly in strategic sectors like energy, infrastructure, or the financial sector. Such economic operations can serve as a tool of strategic corruption and may even blackmail of political leadership. For this Report, we assessed the degree of economic influence of the Russian Federation in the region and obviated its main strategic business projects with a special focus on the energy sector.



The region of the Western Balkans faces similar challenges as it is the target of several foreign authoritarian regimes' ambitions.



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## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its' complex political set-up as a result of the Dayton peace agreement and the post-war fragmented society and political system, is the country in the Balkans region that is most susceptible to the foreign influence. Several countries such as the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Gulf States and BiH's regional neighbors all have their strong political, cultural, economic and/or social strongholds in BiH.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an EU and NATO aspiring country by declaration, but very little has been happening in that direction during the past 13 years. Political blockades on eradicating discrimination as ruled by the European Court of Human Rights, as well as military property, have stopped the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country for three election cycles so far. This situation is likely to continue with the current election cycle, since the state government has still not been formed after the elections in October 2018.

At the same time, the political, cultural and informational fragmentation of Bosnian society is also a reality. The political division of the country influences the cultural and informational field. It is important to understand that the regional context is crucial to the understanding the BiH society, especially having in mind that the region to a great extent has a similar cultural and language background. This especially reflects on the information space, where most media outlets, as well as most news stories, are distributed and consumed throughout the region.

The influence of other regional countries on BiH politics is very substantial. The influence mostly comes from two countries, Serbia and Croatia, who have very significant vested interests in terms of being considered the „protectors“ of the needs and rights of two constituent ethnic groups in Bosnia – Serbs and Croats. In most cases, there is a mutual alignment between politicians and political parties from Serbia or Croatia and Serb and Croat

politicians and political parties from Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, also the foreign influences align with these interests in most cases, and similar patterns of influence can be seen in Serbia as in Republika Srpska, or in Croatia as in the majority Croat part of BiH.

The media landscape is also highly fragmented and very politically influenced. Most people receive information from TV (64%) and the internet (34,8%), and a big number of citizens believe that journalists are often politically motivated (43,2% agree with this statement, only 12,6% don't agree, while the rest - 44,2% - are neutral), and even more people believe that the political influence on public media is high (69,8%).

### A. Relevant political assets

The political influence of Russia is obviously fundamental to the political setup of BiH and its division into two entities. In Republika Srpska, the allegiance to the Russian Federation is one of the decisive factors in winning the elections and Republika Srpska is the part of the BiH that is under the direct influence of Russia. Government of Republika Srpska, being led by the same ruling party for 14 years now, has been both seeking support and advocating the position of the Russian Federation to a point of being considered a proxy of the Russian Federation in the Balkans. There are several levels where this influence is shown.

Formal level of Russian influence is through the direct decision making powers in the functioning of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), the international representative in BiH whose primary mandate is to monitor the implementation of the peace settlement<sup>2</sup> through being a part of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council.<sup>3</sup> Peace Implementation Council also includes seven other countries, the EU and the Organization of the Islamic Conference represented by Turkey. The OHR is, together with the EU delegation, the most powerful international institution in the country, and this gives Russia a voice in every political dynamic in the

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<sup>2</sup> Office of the High Representative: Mandate. Available at: [http://www.ohr.int/?page\\_id=1161](http://www.ohr.int/?page_id=1161)

<sup>3</sup> Office of the High Representative: Peace Implementation Council. Available at: [http://www.ohr.int/?page\\_id=1220](http://www.ohr.int/?page_id=1220)



country, as well as a direct influence on all work of the whole international community inside Republika Srpska.

The anti-NATO agenda is probably the biggest indicator of the level of the Russian political influence on BiH and its' political stakeholders. Russia has shown significant interest in this issue in the Balkans, despite it being separated from the region with countries that are already NATO members.<sup>4</sup> However, this is a topic that drives the political agenda of most political players in BiH, and it has even been the central reason for the delay in forming the state-level government in BiH for over a year after the 2018 elections.<sup>5</sup> Also, this issue has been a separating question for Republika Srpska political parties, with most of them trying to present themselves as the ones that are more against the NATO accession.<sup>6</sup>

In other parts of the country, dynamics are different. There has been a standing coalition for several years now between the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) - the Republika Srpska ruling party - and HDZ (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica) - the conservative Croat party that has a majority in the majority Croat parts of BiH. These two parties have aligned their political goals in most cases. While the HDZ is declaratively pro-NATO and pro-EU, most of their actions and statements have only served the process of blocking NATO accession.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Minister of Defense in the technical mandate, Marina Pendeš of HDZ, has had the mandate to send the Annual Action Plan (ANP) to NATO to activate the Membership Action Plan (MAP) but has tactically failed to do so for years. Pendeš has even stated that the ANP should not be a part of the discussion about the forming of the coalition government.<sup>8</sup> On top of that, recent visits to Russia and statements by

the head of the party, Dragan Čović, prove that the Russian influence on the biggest Croat party in the country is going to increase. Russia has also returned the favors since on numerous occasions Russian ambassador in BiH has supported the position of Dragan Čović and HDZ, such as in the case of HDZ demands towards the election law.<sup>9</sup>

Representatives of majority Bosniak political parties have mostly declined any relationship with the Russian Federation and have been active in propelling the NATO agenda. However, the conservative Bosniak party, SDA, has openly cooperated and been under the influence of Turkey, more specifically the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Erdogan. The recent developments in the Russia-Turkey relations might change the political affiliations in BiH also. However, at the moment, most Bosniak majority parties are all firm on NATO and EU integrations of BiH.

Other political parties in BiH are mostly insignificant and usually not seen through the prism of Russian influence. However, through economic influence and other strategies like information operations, Russian influence spreads to portions of all political actors in BiH.

This set-up has been used by Russia both to fortify its position in Bosnia and Herzegovina and propel its own agenda, both in the region and globally. The strategy Russia has been using is very different from the one used in the post-Soviet bloc. In the Balkans in general, but in Bosnia more particular, Russia has been mostly using the local problems and divisions, shaping the local actors

<sup>4</sup> Maxim Samorukov: Russia's Tactics in the Western Balkans. Carnegie Europe, 03.11.2017. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/74612>

<sup>5</sup> Mladen Lakić: Bosnia Agreement on Forming State Government Passes Deadline. Balkan Insight, 05.09.2019. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/05/bosnia-agreement-on-forming-state-government-passes-deadline/>

<sup>6</sup> N1 Sarajevo: Bosnian Serb opposition: Dodik betrayed Republika Srpska, pushed it into NATO, 19.11.2019. Available at: <http://ba.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a392294/Bosnian-Serb-opposition-Dodik-betrayed-Republika-Srpska-pushed-it-into-NATO.html>

<sup>7</sup> Mersiha Gadzo & Harun Karcic: Bosnia as the new „battleground” between NATO and Russia. Al Jazeera, 07.07.2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/bosnia-battleground-nato-russia-190627202133942.html>

<sup>8</sup> N1 Sarajevo: Defence Min.: Adoption of ANP should not be platform for internal bickering, 23.10.2019. Available at: <http://ba.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a386009/Defence-Min.-Adoption-of-ANP-should-not-be-platform-for-internal-bickering.html>

<sup>9</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic & Aleksandar Brezar: Kremlin exploiting divisions in Bosnia Herzegovina to gain influence. Integrity Initiative, 08.05.2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@hitthehybrid/russia-exploiting-bosnia-herzegovina-divisions-to-gain-influence-6c3ecc25b5dc>

into Russian proxies and using them as useful idiots.<sup>10</sup> This work is much different from Montenegro, solely for the reason that government actors are the local proxies and they have means and power to implement activities at a far larger scale. Also, Russia is benefitting from the minimal role of the US and the EU to implement this operation.<sup>11</sup>

There is not too much that Russia is doing to help its partners on the ground, but at the same time, the effect of these actions for Russia and its public image in BiH is multi-fold. One example of this would be when Russia used its veto power in the UN Security Council to veto a declaration of UN on the genocide in Srebrenica in 2015,<sup>12</sup> creating a strong wave of support in BiH, but at the same time showing their strength globally.

Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina are always a great way to show support, but also to fortify the position of Russia in BiH. In almost all of the election cycles in the past decade, there have been immediate pre-election meetings or visits or other ways to show the support of Russia to the government of Republika Srpska. These events would be, for instance, the meeting of Putin and Dodik in Sochi seven days before the 2018 elections, where Putin allegedly wished Dodik success for the elections,<sup>13</sup> or a visit of Sergei Lavrov to Banja Luka just few weeks before.<sup>14</sup> This case is perhaps the best to portray the level of coordination of efforts, with two of the most influential political persons in Russia directly taking part in the pre-election campaign that was marked with

months of civic protests „Pravda za Davida“ („Justice for David“)<sup>15</sup> that deeply shook the government of Republika Srpska.

## B. Non-governmental assets

There is a high number of different cultural, academic and similar events organized in cooperation of Russian and BiH based groups or organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most of them also serve the purpose of Russian influence in BiH and some of them are to some extent also exponents of the political and informational influence campaigns in this country, as well as the ones with distinctly paramilitary actions.<sup>16</sup>

There have been several significant cultural visits with a political context that have served the purpose of showing the cultural coherence between Russia and Republika Srpska but also to show a strong foot-print of Russia on occasions where it was deemed important. Most visible visits would be the visit of the Cossack dancing group to Banjaluka just a few days before the elections in 2014<sup>17</sup> or the visit of the notorious biker group „Night Wolves“ during the peak of the „Justice for David“ protests in Banjaluka.<sup>18</sup>

The model of forming different Serb-Russian friendship organizations or institutional cooperation between local communities in Russia and Republika Srpska is another way of introducing cultural influence. For instance, Russia has even promoted a documentary movie „Friend-

<sup>10</sup> Maxim Samorukov: Russia's Tactics in the Western Balkans. Carnegie Europe, 03.11.2017. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/74612>

<sup>11</sup> Reuf Bajrovic; Richard Kraemer & Emir Suljagic: Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16.03.2018. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/03/bosnia-russian-chopping-block-potential-violence-steps-prevent/>

<sup>12</sup> Michelle Nichols: Russia blocks U.N. condemnation of Srebrenica as a genocide. Reuters, 08.07.2015. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-srebrenica-un/russia-blocks-u-n-condemnation-of-srebrenica-as-a-genocide-idUSKCN0P11W620150708>

<sup>13</sup> Mladen Lakic: Putin Reportedly Wished Dodik Success in Bosnia Election. Balkan Insight, 01.10.2018. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/01/putin-wished-dodik-success-in-the-bosnian-elections-media-reports-10-01-2018/>

<sup>14</sup> Srpskainfo: Lavrov Zavrsio Posietu Banialuci Potvrda istinskog prijateljstva srpskog i ruskog naroda. Srpska info, 21.09.2018. Available at: <https://srpskainfo.com/uzivo-lavrov-u-banjaluci-docek-ruskog-ministra-uz-visoke-pocasti/>

<sup>15</sup> Reuters: Bosnian Serb protests grow amid anger over mysterious death of student. The Guardian, 31.12.2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/31/bosnian-serb-protests-grow-amid-anger-over-mysterious-death-of-student>

<sup>16</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic & Aleksandar Brezar: Kremlin exploiting divisions in Bosnia Herzegovina to gain influence. Integrity Initiative, 08.05.2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@hitthehybrid/russia-exploiting-bosnia-herzegovina-divisions-to-gain-influence-6c3ecc25b5dc>

<sup>17</sup> Julian Borger: Russian Cossacks leave Bosnia after „cultural visit.“ The Guardian, 15.10.2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/russian-cossacks-leave-bosnia-banja-luka>

<sup>18</sup> Buka: Nocni vukovi u Banjaluci. Buka, 26.06.2018. Available at: <https://www.6yka.com/novosti/ekskluzivno-nocni-vukovi-u-banjaluci-foto>

ship code“ about the established ties and friendship between Russian cities of Azov and Armavir, and Bijeljina in RS.<sup>19</sup> The promotion of movies or books is, obviously, another way to create a cultural setting to influence campaigns. For instance, the book „Russia and Balkan in the modern world“ was promoted on several occasions, every time with the inevitable anti-western and anti-NATO messages.<sup>20</sup> On top of that, events like „Days of Republika Srpska in St. Petersburg“<sup>21</sup> or „Days of Russian Culture in Banjaluka“<sup>22</sup> have become a regular practice.

Other than that, there is a government-funded network of „Russkiy Mir“ cultural centers throughout the region (one being in Banjaluka) that also propel the Russian agenda and values under the umbrella of cultural exchange or language learning.<sup>23</sup> There is a rising trend of pro-Russian, radical nationalist paramilitary groups registered as NGOs in Republika Srpska and even under humanitarian missions.<sup>24</sup> Academia in Republika Srpska is also a very important factor in the Russian influence, with many important members of the Academia showing openly that they are local assets of Russian influence.<sup>25</sup>

### C. Influence through the church

Church and religion have always been a very important societal and political factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially for the fact that they might be the only real cultural division point in terms of identifying ethnicity and collective identities. Thus, the installation of foreign

influence can use religion as a strong catalyst for the engagement of local actors.

With one-third of the BiH population being Orthodox, the religion is obviously a strong factor in Russian influence in BiH and other countries in the region with large Orthodox communities. The religious connection is used mostly to further propel the main shared values of the local actors with Russia. In the past years, this has been visible in the form of several projects that Russia has started together with local partners in the region.<sup>26</sup> There are many symbolic activities that are organized in the field of religious bonding such as building churches, joined clerical activities and visits of religious groups. These projects include a donation of Russia to the mosaic of the St. Sava temple in Belgrade or the construction of the monument to Tsar Nicholas II in Belgrade, with a smaller version of the monument being also installed in Banjaluka.<sup>27</sup> One of the projects that is a local initiative and that connects the civil society and religious aspect of Russian influence is the construction of a Russian monastery and an ethnic-village in a village of Ritešić in the northern part of Republika Srpska.<sup>28</sup> This is an autonomous project of a „Serb-Russian Friendship Association of all Orthodox Countries“ that is active in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro.

The biggest of these projects is the building of a Russian-Serb monastery and cultural center in Banjaluka that was announced in 2018. It is worth mentioning that the

<sup>19</sup> PTPC: Moskva- Premijera filma Kod prijateljstva. PTPC, 28.12.2017. Available at: <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=283580>.

<sup>20</sup> Palelive.com: Zbornik Rusija i Balkan u savremenom svijetu. Palelive.com, 26.12.2012. Available at: <http://www.palelive.com/zbornik-qrusija-i-balkan-u-savremenom-svijetuq/>

<sup>21</sup> Alternativna tv: Otvoreni Dani Republike Srpske u Sankt Peterburgu. Alternativna tv, 11.05.2018. Available at: <https://www.atvbl.com/otvoreni-dani-republike-srpske-u-sankt-peterburgu>

<sup>22</sup> Glas Srpske: Otvoreni Dani ruske kulture. Glas Srpske, 22.12.2014. Available at: [http://www.glassrpske.com/lat/kultura/kultura\\_vijesti/Otvoreni-Dani-ruske-kulture/170922](http://www.glassrpske.com/lat/kultura/kultura_vijesti/Otvoreni-Dani-ruske-kulture/170922)

<sup>23</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic & Aleksandar Brezar: Kremlin exploiting divisions in Bosnia Herzegovina to gain influence. Integrity Initiative, 08.05.2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@hitthehybrid/russia-exploiting-bosnia-herzegovina-divisions-to-gain-influence-6c3ecc25b5dc>

<sup>24</sup> Nikola Radisic: Organizacija Srpska cast – paravojska ili humanitarci? N1, 15.01.2018. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a356914/Organizacija-Srpska-cast-nenaoruzani-humanitarci.html>

<sup>25</sup> Vera Mironova & Bogdan Zawadewicz: Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force. Foreign Policy, 08.08.2018. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>

<sup>26</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic & Aleksandar Brezar: Kremlin exploiting divisions in Bosnia Herzegovina to gain influence. Integrity Initiative, 08.05.2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@hitthehybrid/russia-exploiting-bosnia-herzegovina-divisions-to-gain-influence-6c3ecc25b5dc>

<sup>27</sup> Jasmin Mujanovic & Aleksandar Brezar: Kremlin exploiting divisions in Bosnia Herzegovina to gain influence. Integrity Initiative, 08.05.2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@hitthehybrid/russia-exploiting-bosnia-herzegovina-divisions-to-gain-influence-6c3ecc25b5dc>

<sup>28</sup> Vesti.rs: Ruski Manastir I Etno Selo U Republici Srpskoj. Vesti.rs, 14.06.2013. Available at: <https://www.vesti.rs/Intervju/Ruski-manastir-i-etno-selo-u-republici-srpskoj.html>

blessing of the monastery was done in the eve of the elections and just before the visit of Sergei Lavrov to BiH (initially it was planned to coincide with the visit, but the time of the visit was changed).<sup>29</sup> The timing of all these events that connect the clerical, civil society and political aspect of cooperation suggests that there are definitely coordinated efforts on all fronts.

#### D. Radical or extremist groups

Radical and extremist groups as a tool for expanding foreign influence have not been a new development in BiH. During wartime and also after, there has been evidence of the existence of these groups in the country. However, there has been a significant increase in the number and size of alike groups in Republika Srpska in recent years. There is a rising number of paramilitary radical groups (some reports claim there are dozens of these groups) in Republika Srpska that show radical nationalism and promote pro-Russian sentiment. Majority of these groups have been founded during the last 6-7 years.<sup>30</sup> Most of these nationalist groups are registered as NGOs, humanitarian organizations or similar, ranging from war veteran groups and neo-Nazi groups to motorcyclists and soccer fans. There are some underlying principles that can be said about these groups: their members overlap and intertwine, they are in allegiance with the Orthodox church and they support the SNSD government of Republika Srpska. Most visible are three groups: „Srpska čast” (Serb Honor), „Veterans of Republika Srpska” and „Night Wolves”.<sup>31</sup> In many cases, there were direct links

of these groups with the government, and they were meeting with the representatives of the government. There are even reports and photographs of the „Srpska čast” meeting with Milorad Dodik himself. „Srpska čast,” an association that in their own words has 40.000 members, declares themselves as a humanitarian organization<sup>32</sup>, but most reports claim otherwise. Dodik himself has admitted meeting and taking a photo with them, but declines the possibility that they are a paramilitary group.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, members of the „Srpska čast” have reportedly been trained in the Russian center in Niš and have been decorated by Russian veterans associations.<sup>34</sup>

There are reports of connections of many of these groups to the humanitarian Russian-Serbian center in Niš, that has been reported not to be of a humanitarian character and that it has served as a military base and an intelligence center.<sup>35</sup> On top of that all, Russia has asked for diplomatic immunity for the personnel of the center and the special status for the center.<sup>36</sup>

„Night Wolves”, the motorcycle association from Russia, that has visited Republika Srpska during the civic protests in 2018, have also established their branch in Republika Srpska and the rest of the region. This group is mostly known for their participation in military operations in Ukraine, where the leader of the „Night Wolves” for the Balkans, Saša Savić, was also actively participating.<sup>37</sup> This group engages in local activities that promote local nationalistic agenda, together with other groups

<sup>29</sup> Milorad Milojevic: Uz Kacavendin blagoslov osvestani temelji srpsko-ruskob hrama. Radio Slobodna Evropa, 17.09.2018. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/banjaluka-osvestani-temelji-srpsko-ruskog-hrama/29494594.html>

<sup>30</sup> Reuf Bajrovic; Richard Kraemer & Emir Suljagic: Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16.03.2018. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/03/bosnia-russian-chopping-block-potential-violence-steps-prevent/>

<sup>31</sup> Reuf Bajrovic; Richard Kraemer & Emir Suljagic: Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16.03.2018. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/03/bosnia-russian-chopping-block-potential-violence-steps-prevent/>

<sup>32</sup> Anelka Markovic: Osnivac „Srpske cast” za N1: Udruzenje broji 40.000 clanova. N1, 15.01.2018. Available at: <http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a237839/Osnivac-Srpske-cast-za-N1.html>

<sup>33</sup> Tanjug: Dodik: Nema dokaza da je „Srpska cast” paravojna formacija. Novosti Rusija, 17.01.2018. Available at: [https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika\\_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:706714-Dodik-Nema-dokaza-da-je-Srpska-cast-paravojna-formacija](https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:706714-Dodik-Nema-dokaza-da-je-Srpska-cast-paravojna-formacija)

<sup>34</sup> RTVBN: Zasto humanitarci vjezbaju gadanje. RTVBN, 15.01.2018. Available at: <https://www.rtvbn.com/3893012/zasto-humanitarci-vjezbaju-gadjanje>

<sup>35</sup> Natasa Anelkovic: Ruski Centar U nisu: Vatrogasci s imunitetom. Ekspres, 27.06.2017. Available at: <https://www.ekspres.net/politika/ruski-centar-u-nisu-vatrogasci-s-imunitetom>

<sup>36</sup> Zoran Glavonjic: Ruski centar u Nisu – spijunskog ili humanitarnog karaktera? Radio Slobodna Evropa, 16.06.2017. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-ruski-centar/28558950.html>

<sup>37</sup> Zurnal: Putinovi Nocni Vukovi: Za Obamu teroristi, za Dodika humanisti! Zurnal, 17.01.2018. Available at: <https://zurnal.info/novost/20922/za-obamu-teroristi-za-dodika-humanisti>



from the region, like in the case of visits to war monuments and war military celebrations.<sup>38</sup>

### E. Instrumentalization of minorities

The Russian minority in BiH is insignificant and has no political leverage, so there are no traces of it being exploited in BiH by Russia in order to serve their influence campaigns. However, this also comes from a fact that there are enough local proxies to engage in this, as well as there is a cultural/religious connection in the form of belonging to the Orthodox Church.

There are some cases of minority rights being exploited for certain anti-western narratives, but that is more in the domain of the disinformation part of the influence. For example, the first BiH Pride parade was under a heavy attack by many political and media actors<sup>39</sup>, both from BiH and the region, this being one of the most politicized moments of last year.

### F. Intelligence operations

There are reports of the presence of different Russian intelligence actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the past years. With a complex operation that involves the local actors, it is estimated that Russia does not need a heavy intelligence presence, but there is a network of local and Russian actors that suggests the existence of such activities.

On the other hand, when local or regional circumstances suggest, there is an increase in the intelligence operations in all countries of the region. It has been reported that the intelligence presence and operation of Russia has increased in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the time around the failed coup'état in Montenegro.<sup>40</sup>

There are also reported connections of BiH based individuals, mostly from NGOs that have a paramilitary/nationalistic character, like the „Srpska čast” (Serb Honor) group with the Russian center in Niš, that is reportedly the center of Russian intelligence operations in the region.<sup>41</sup>

Russian intelligence officers have been reported to be stationed in Bosnia on many occasions. Recently, Russia has requested BiH authorities to approve the engagement of Vladislav Filippov in the Embassy of the Russian Federation. Filippov has been requested to leave Albania last year since his activities were not in line with his diplomatic mission and his next mission after that was supposed to be BiH.<sup>42</sup>

On top of that, several individuals have been declared security threats and banned from entering the country. One of these examples is Konstantin Malofeyev, one of the main sources of financing of the separation of Crimea, who has been banned from entering the country while going to meet Milorad Dodik.<sup>43</sup>

### G. Disinformation campaigns

Disinformation, as one of the most vibrant tools of influence campaigns, has been at the forefront of Russian engagement in the region for a while. In the case of disinformation campaigns, a similar model was used as in the case of political or non-governmental and cultural influence – most of the work has been done locally and by local actors, while Russia is using very low-scale, modest-funded operations that guide and direct the message in a proper way to the proper public.

The anti-NATO and anti-West narratives are pushed for various reasons and by many actors, so there is no need for a big investment of Russia in the disinformation in-

<sup>38</sup> Glas Srpske: „Nocni vukovi” obilaze mjesta srpskog stradanja. Glas Srpske, 26.06.2019. Available at:

<https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/drustvo/vijesti/Nocni-vukovi-obilaze-mjesta-srpskog-stradanja/287096>

<sup>39</sup> Lidija Pisker: Kako su regionalni mediji izvjestavali o bh. Povorci ponosa. Raskrinkavanje.ba, 26.09.2019. Available at: <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/kako-su-regionalni-mediji-izvjestavali-o-bh-povorci-ponosa>

<sup>40</sup> Mersiha Gadzo & Harun Karcic: Bosnia as the new „battleground” between NATO and Russia. Al Jazeera, 07.07.2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/bosnia-battleground-nato-russia-190627202133942.html>

<sup>41</sup> Zoran Glavonjic: Ruski centar u Nisu – spijunskog ili humanitarnog karaktera? Radio Slobodna Evropa, 16.06.2017. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-ruski-centar/28558950.html>

<sup>42</sup> Oslobođenje: Albanci protjerali Filippova, Rusi ga salju u BiH: Pukovnik ruske vojne obavjestajne sluzbe dolazi u Sarajevo.

Oslobođenje, 31.10.2019. Available at: <https://www.oslobodenje.ba/vijesti/bih/albanci-protjerali-filippova-rusi-ga-salju-u-bih-pukovnik-ruske-vojne-obavjestajne-sluzbe-dolazi-u-sarajevo-503301>

<sup>43</sup> Christo Grozev: The Kremlin’s Balkan Gambit: Part 1. Bellingcat, 04.03.2017. Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>

frastructure. These pro-Russian disinformation narratives are promoted with several different motives and there are three models of operation for those promoters. First is the disinformation narratives promoted by media that is politically influenced by the government, second is the media that is politically or ideologically aligned with Russia, but are not funded or supported by the state or state actors or their friends and partners, and the third is the media that amplify disinformation for the economic benefit using them to increase the number of visitors on their platforms.

Based on the findings by the debunking disinformation online platform called Raskrinkavanje.ba, the biggest source of disinformation in BiH is RTRS, the public broadcaster of Republika Srpska.<sup>44</sup> Besides RTRS, there are several outlets totally in line with their reporting, such as the state-owned news agency SRNA and TV station Alternativna TV, which is owned by a private businessman close to the government of Republika Srpska.

Sputnik is the only Russian state-owned media present in BiH media space (through its Serbian outlet). It is strongly connected but does not have a significant reach on its own. This obviously shows the model, where Sputnik is just an outlet for framing and fine-tuning the messages, skillfully amplifying the message by using other outlets.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, a large disinformation hub has been identified that consists of 15 media from Serbia and 14 media from BiH that promotes similar narratives that align with the Republika Srpska government/Russian agenda. The research has shown that these outlets, some more some less intentionally, over the period of one year from November 2017 to November 2018, created and implemented a disinformation campaign mostly connected to issues related to Republika Srpska politics, with a clear intention by at least some of them to influence the outcome of elections in BiH held in October 2018.

Finally, looking into the actors in different disinformative articles, one can see a pretty one-sided picture. The

U.S.-based entities, specifically actors related to the previous U.S. administration, appear to be the main targets of disinformation related to international matters produced by the main disinformation „hub.” Russia, on the other hand, is very positively portrayed in this sample. For instance, in 38 disinformative articles he is mentioned in, Putin has had only positive mentions.

The EU is still mostly present as a neutral and/or desirable actor in the content of disinformation analyzed in this research. When it comes to EU member states, those which are seen as a destination for economic migrations are portrayed in a positive light, while the overall view of the EU as a „value system” is portrayed in a negative light and presented as undesirable for local cultures. Conspiracy theories are the most frequent type of manipulation used in this type of content. They occasionally target unspecified EU actors but are predominantly focused on individual states, in particular Great Britain, which is repeatedly accused of conspiracies against Republika Srpska and/or its former president Milorad Dodik.

#### H. Corrosive economic activities

Russia's economic influence in BiH, especially in Republika Srpska, dates back to the purchase of the oil refinery in Brod, refinery in Modriča and distributor Petrol, with a controversial alleged investment of around 120 million euro.<sup>46</sup> This deal was confirmed by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska in the first session of the Assembly that was declared secret. There are indications that this transaction was followed by a money extraction scheme that benefitted the Russian company „Neftegazinkor” that is partially owned by a state-owned company „Zarubezhneft”.<sup>47</sup>

The energy sector remains the main interest of Russia in BiH, and they are the biggest foreign investor in Republika Srpska with 547 million investment in the period of

<sup>44</sup> Citizens' Association Why Not: Disinformation in the online sphere: The case of BiH. 04/2019. Available at: [https://za-stone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation\\_in\\_the\\_online\\_sphere\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_BiH\\_ENG.pdf](https://za-stone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Maxim Samorukov: Russia's Tactics in the Western Balkans. Carnegie Europe, 03.11.2017. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/74612>

<sup>46</sup> Dragan Maksimovic: Rajinerija Brod – ni na nebu ni na zemlji. DW, 24.02.2015. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/rafinerija-brod-ni-na-nebu-ni-na-zemlji/a-18275130>

<sup>47</sup> OCCRP: A Related Party and a Criminal Case. Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 24.12.2016. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/59-other/5918-a-related-party-and-a-criminal-case>

2005-2016.<sup>48</sup> In general, the Russian economic interest in the whole region is in the energy sector. One respondent in our interview stated: „Investments in the energy sector in BiH and Serbia were purely political. An example is the purchase of the Serbian oil industry where the set price was not in accordance with real value and is considered to be a payment of the debt for support of Russia in the UN Security Council. In Republika Srpska, we had an investment in the energy sector in Bosanski Brod, but it was more about extracting the money than investing.“<sup>49</sup>

There is also a regional spill-over economic influence effect, with Russian Gazprom connected company in Croatia called „Prvo plinarsko društvo“ (PPD) being an integral part in trying to solve the situation with the potential bankruptcy of the Mostar company Aluminijum that is a strategic industry for the Croat part of Mostar.<sup>50</sup> This again indicates Russian interest in influencing the conservative Croat political forces that are politically aligned with the governing political party in Republika Srpska.

„The South Stream“ Russian pipeline, as the beacon of Russian energy diplomacy, was a story at a certain point but was mostly used as a talking point for Republika Srpska politicians in order to promote Russian interest in BiH and the region and to emphasize their own allegiance and connection to the Russian government. Milorad Dodik has even conditioned the decision making of the state-level government in relation to accepting the pipeline project.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, apart from the economic footprint of Russia in the energy sector, there is the influence in the banking sector, through the Russian state-owned „Sberbank“, which has very big regional and BiH presence. Being the

biggest Russian company<sup>52</sup>, its effect on the regional financial and economic sectors is obviously substantial. They have even been involved in investments into strategic national companies in the region, like in the case of Agrokor in Croatia.<sup>53</sup> There is even a very recent controversy with a very strange robbery of 23 ATMs of Sberbank across BiH in less than three days where the absence of reaction of the bank is very questionable.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> CSD: Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks. Center for the study of Democracy. Available at: <http://old.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18131>

<sup>49</sup> Expert interview done as a part of the research for this report

<sup>50</sup> Impuls: Glencor je samo paravan: Rusi preko PPD-a l zvanicno zele preuzeti Aluminij! Impuls, 08.07.2019. Available at: <https://impulsportal.net/index.php/kolumne/drustvo/19584-glencor-je-samo-paravan-rusi-preko-ppd-a-i-zvanicno-zele-preuzeti-aluminij>

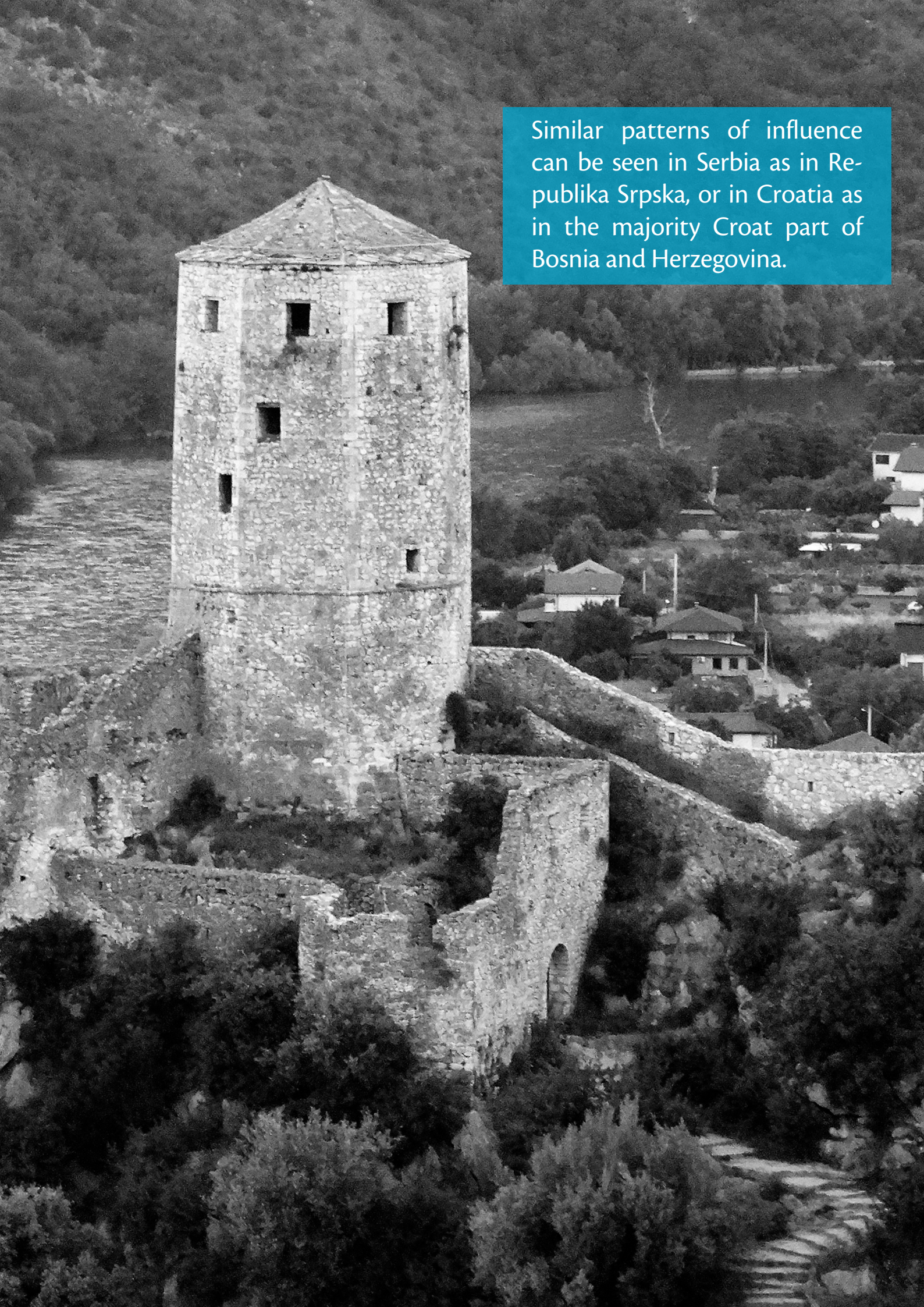
<sup>51</sup> A. Macanovic: Dodik: „Juzni tok“ ili totalna blokada BiH. Novosti Rusija, 08.10.2014. Available at: [https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika\\_srpska/aktuelno.655.html%3A513674-Dodik-Juzni-tok-ili-totalna-blokada-BiH](https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html%3A513674-Dodik-Juzni-tok-ili-totalna-blokada-BiH)

<sup>52</sup> Nezavisne: Sber banka preuzela titulu najveće kompanije na ruskom trzistu. Nezavisne, 29.03.2017. Available at: <https://www.nezavisne.com/ekonomija/trziste/Sber-banka-preuzela-titulu-najvece-kompanije-na-ruskom-trzistu/419496>

<sup>53</sup> Nova Ekonomija: Rusi su novi vlasnici Agrokor, to će uticati i na Srbiju. Nova Ekonomija, 05.07.2018. Available at: <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti/iz-zemlje/rusi-su-novi-vlasnici-agrokor-to-%C4%87e-uticati-i-na-srbiju>

<sup>54</sup> Zurnal: Akcija Ukrajinskih Drzavljana U Roskoj Sberbanci: Za 53 sata ispraznili 23 bankomata u cijeloj Federaciji. Zurnal, 07.02.2020. Available at: <https://zurnal.info/novost/22747/-za-53-sata-ispraznili-23-bankomata-u-cijeloj-federaciji>





Similar patterns of influence can be seen in Serbia as in Republika Srpska, or in Croatia as in the majority Croat part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



## NORTH MACEDONIA

The ambition of local and regional powers to project their intersecting objectives in the country and in the region had a profound impact on the political history of North Macedonia.<sup>55</sup> With various degrees of engagement, all major and regional powers find it relevant to project interests in the Western Balkans region, including North Macedonia. The positioning of those countries varied in different historical occasions and points in history pertinent to the country. Since the country's independence in 1991, North Macedonia (then the Republic of Macedonia) embarked on the path toward liberal democracy fully integrated within the European Union and NATO. Since then, few aspirations in the society enjoyed the political consensus as these processes. Rightfully or not, all the actors and processes that who did not share this direction were regarded by the most prominent voices in the society as regressive and even destructive. In such a context, only a few internal and external actors emerged with alternatives for the country's strategic orientation.

While the political narrative and the societal consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration were strong, the course towards this normative lighthouse was not always easy and it is still facing significant challenges. At several points of history, these processes were facing four intertwined obstacles. Primarily, the dispute about the country name with Greece effectively blocked any attempts to join these institutions. Second, the poor performance of different governments to implement the required reforms and adhere to the principles of good governance in the past. Third, internal political developments within the

EU/NATO made that body hesitant to open their doors to a new country. Finally, third actors exerted malign influence that regarded the Euro-Atlantic path to contravene their political and economic interests in the country and the region as well.

This report assesses that malign influence while focusing on Russia and actors related to Russia. Through several key indicators, we will illustrate how Russia tried to influence the Euro-Atlantic processes and steer the country towards its sphere of influence. The final objective of this report is twofold. First, it sketches the tendencies, tools, and effects of such engagement. Second, it determines the weak spots and provides prospects for increased institutional and societal resilience in the future.

### A. Relevant political assets

Russia's political footprint in North Macedonia is limited. With one of the highest rates of approval of NATO and the EU in the region,<sup>56</sup> the narratives for different ways forward took place on the fringes of the political discourse. Even after episodes of disillusion with the Euro-Atlantic integration process (namely the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit<sup>57</sup> and the 2019 European Council<sup>58</sup>), all major political parties (at least rhetorically) were quick to reaffirm their commitment towards the Euro-Atlantic integration process as the only viable

<sup>55</sup> In this report, the name North Macedonia will be used also when referring to events in the country before the ratification of the Agreement in February 2019. When referring to full names of institutions, the report will use the official name of the institution at the time.

<sup>56</sup> „Macedonia Poll: High Levels of Support for EU, NATO Ahead of Referendum”. International Republic Institute, 29.08.2019. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resource/macedonia-poll-high-levels-support-eu-nato-ahead-referendum>

<sup>57</sup> Following the veto at the NATO Bucharest summit, Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Macedonia was signed on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2008. The Declaration declares the determination of the two countries „to expand and deepen the close partnership between the two countries based upon common goals, interests, and values. The two countries wish to enhance their strategic relationship through intensified consultation and cooperation in the areas of security, people-to-people ties, and commerce”. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/104441.htm>

<sup>58</sup> At the October 2019 EU Summit, North Macedonia was not provided with the long anticipated start of the negotiation process with the European Union.

alternative.<sup>59</sup> The parties' platforms reflected popular convictions. In 2017, 14% of North Macedonians thought that Russia would be the best ally, in contrast to the 42% for the EU and 17% for the US. When asked which country/entity wielded the most significant influence in the country, 41% think that for the US, 38% for the EU, and 4% for Russia. These strong perceptions come with two caveats: the tendency of ethnic Macedonians to be more sympathetic towards Russia compared to ethnic Albanians, and the greater support among that the sympathizers of the center-right VMRO-DPMNE<sup>60</sup> for Russia compared to adherents of other political parties in the Parliament.<sup>61</sup>

A handful of minor political parties and movements prefer aligning the country towards Russia. However, there are no proven links that all of these actors operate with Russian financial or operational support.

The political party „United Macedonia”<sup>62</sup> most explicitly calls for a strategic partnership with Russia and membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>63</sup> United Macedonia sees Russia as the only way to protect the national and sovereign interests of the country, such as its name, identity, unity, territorial integrity, sovereignty in the

face of British and U.S. efforts to reappportion the country to Albania and Bulgaria. Further, the party manifesto recalls strong links between the Macedonian and Russian peoples through language, religion, mentality, traditional values, and anti-fascist past and culture. Russia will therefore spare its Macedonian brethren deployment as „cannon fodder” in the war that the US and NATO are planning. Lastly, the party formally sent requests to the Parliament and the Government to withdraw their decisions to join the EU and NATO.<sup>64</sup>

The Democratic Party of the Serbs (DPS) also finds closeness to Russia to be in North Macedonia's interest. Until 2016, the party was part of the ruling coalition with the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, which backs the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. DPS is led by the MP Ivan Stoilkovic<sup>65</sup> who in June 2016 together with party representatives<sup>66</sup> from Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia, and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) signed a pact with the United Russia Party. It aspires to declaration of neutrality for the Western Balkans and membership of North Macedonia in the Eurasian Economic Union.

<sup>59</sup> Statement by the President of the Republic of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, after the first part of the leadership meeting. Press release, 20.10.2019. Available at: <http://presedatel.mk/en/statement-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-north-macedonia-stevo-pendarovski-after-the-first-part-of-the-leadership-meeting/>

<sup>60</sup> While on official level VMRO-DPMNE has been supportive of the Euro-Atlantic integration process, during the political crisis of 2015-2017, the party took steps that many regarded as an effort to obtain closer relations with Russia such as high-level meetings with Russian officials. Further, analysts with close ties to the party flirted with ideas for closer relations with Russia. However, in 2018, following the expulsion of Russian diplomats from North Macedonia, high-level officials of VMRO-DPMNE declared that the party is focused towards EU and NATO, with the party partners in „Brussels, London, and Washington”. Please see: <https://p.dw.com/p/2vARn>

<sup>61</sup> Zoran Nechev & Nenad Markovikj: *European Union on the verge of bouncing back in Macedonia*. IDSCS & KAS, March 2018. Available at: <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WEB-THE-EUROPEAN-UNION-ON-THE-VERGE-OF-BOUNCING-BACK-IN-MACEDONIA.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> The party symbolism from 2018 has obvious similarities with the one of the United Russia party. In their logo the bear of the United Russia party is replaced with a lion (traditional heraldic symbol in North Macedonia), and the Russian waving flag is replaced with the Vergina Sun Flag (previous official flag (1992-1995)) changed with the ratification of the 1995 Interim Accord between then the Republic of Macedonia and Greece).

<sup>63</sup> The party United Macedonia is formed in January 2018 and originates from an already registered party Peoples Movement for Macedonia. Leader of the party is Dr. Janko Bachev, a professor at the International Slavic University „Gavrilo Romanovich Dezhavin” self-branded as an „official Russian partnership university”. In the previous parliamentary elections, the party never gained more than 0.1% (N=1900) of the votes.

<sup>64</sup> Proclamation of United Macedonia for radical shift in the Macedonian politics – membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and Strategic Partnership with Russia. United Macedonia, June 2018. Available at: <http://edinstvenamakedonija.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/proglas-edinstvena-makedonija.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> It was later revealed in leaked documents from the Directorate for security and counter-intelligence that Ivan Stoilkovic was in continuous communication with individuals with alleged ties with the Serbian intelligence agency. More details about this later in the report.

<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that in the United Russia's press release of the declaration, there was no mention of the parties that signed the declaration. The DPS leader announced that he was one of the signatory parties. <https://novatv.mk/stoilkovic-potpisha-ruska-initsijativa-za-voeno-neutralna-makedonija/>

Right after it was signed, Stoilkovic stated that<sup>67</sup> „the agreement enhanced the capacities of his party” and was part of their search for recognition that the international community denies them by excluding the party from major political processes in the country such as the Ohrid Framework Agreement<sup>68</sup> and the Przhino Process.<sup>69</sup>

All the politicians who advocate close ties with Russia occupy the margins of the political sphere. This leaves in question how strongly local actors and voters cap- prove of groups with authoritarian tendencies. For mar- ginal political leaders, this aid could be the only way to fund their activities and increase their legitimacy while pushing for closer ties with Russia. Some analysts would argue, „parties like Edinstvena Makedonija (United Mac- edonia) try to legitimize themselves and since no political parties existed before that had close connections to Russia they try to occupy that part of the political landscape more as an opportunistic chance rather than an ideolog- ical one. They could receive some support, but after the Russian patrons see that their clients could not mobilize political support, they will withdraw the support. There is a risk however, they could try to radicalize protest move- ments, so they establish themselves as relevant factors. The prospects for such a scenario decreased at the mo- ment when Russia recognized the new name of the coun- try.”<sup>70</sup>

Despite their low approval rate of below 1% nationally, the political environment following the October EU summit could open more room for their anti-EU and anti-NATO narrative and improve their results in the snap parliamentary elections expected in April 2020. Considering their financial hardships, a hard look at the level and amplitude of their activities in the pre-election

period and the election campaign would allow measure- ment of these parties’ mobilization of external financial and operational assistance. As of now, no significant so- cial media nor field presence of these parties is visible in the pre-election period. This absence implies that these two parties did not manage to find a fertile ground to remain malign political assets.

## B. Non-governmental assets

For its size, North Macedonia has a relatively developed civil society sector with some estimates of more than 14,000<sup>71</sup> registered CSOs.<sup>72</sup> A critical factor for the high number of civil society organizations is the environment enabled by the legal environment and variety of civil so- ciety initiatives within the development aid provided by the EU, the US, the UK, Germany, and Switzerland. Such conditions were conducive to a vibrant civil society that was crucial for monitoring and buttressing democratiza- tion. Beyond the domestic activities, the multiplicity of short- and long-term programs for exchange, study vis- its, fellowships, and advocacy trips fostered links be- tween the CSO’s elites and their Western counterparts. In addition to the prevailing pro-EU and NATO atti- tudes among the general population, this process stim- ulated a mainstream civil society sector that under- scores the country’s strategic objectives and turned out resilient to a third side malign influence. Finally, the CSOs played a pivotal role during the political crisis of 2015-2017 and emphasized the democratic decline of the country during that period.

The Russian footprint in civil society is marginal and re- volves for the most part around low-profile cultural or- ganizations. However, intelligence reports by the Direc- torate for Security and CounterIntelligence<sup>73</sup> published

<sup>67</sup> „Ivan Stoilkovic: when someone ignores you then you are looking for other international partners.” MKD.mk, 28.06.2019. Avail- able at: <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/ivan-stoilkovikj-koga-nekoj-ve-ignorira-si-barate-drugi-megjunarodni-part-neri>

<sup>68</sup> For more on the Ohrid Framework agreement, please see: <https://www.osce.org/skopje/100622?download=true>

<sup>69</sup> For more on the Przhino process, please see: [https://www.fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/publicati- ons/26%20AW\\_EN\\_05\\_CIP\\_impresum\\_z%20pregled.pdf](https://www.fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/publicati- ons/26%20AW_EN_05_CIP_impresum_z%20pregled.pdf) (pp. 9)

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Timurlenk Cekovic, Security Expert, on 18.11.2019.

<sup>71</sup> Please note that this is an accumulated number of registered CSOs over the years. The number of active organisations is signifi- cantly smaller.

<sup>72</sup> Balkan Civil Society Sustainability Index for North Macedonia in 2018. BCSDN, 29.11.2019. Available at: <http://www.bal- kancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2018-CSO-SustainabilityIndex-N.Macedonia.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Tendencies and ways of operation of the Russian intelligence service in Republic of Macedonia, analytical information. Directo- rate for security and counter-intelligence (DSCI) within the Ministry of internal affairs of the Republic of Macedonia. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document4.pdf>

in 2018 revealed that a total of 30 organizations for Russian-Macedonian cultural cooperation were formed since 1994.<sup>74</sup> According to the report, these entities amalgamated in the Union of Russian Associations, which allowed them an „organized and coordinated form of operations“. These associations are funded by diplomatic-consular representations and Russian foundations. Their activity increased after 2008, when North Macedonia was vetoed by Greece to join NATO at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit. While these activities are not deemed a threat to the country's security, bringing pan-Slavic messaging could promote alliances with Russia attitudes and links with Christian Orthodox countries concordant with Russian policy. One related goal is setting up a „Balkan Union for Friendship with the Russian People“ through federating with similar associations in Montenegro, Serbia, Republika Srpska (BiH), Bulgaria, and North Macedonia. Further, such processes could serve as a solid basis for the creation of „critical mass of supporters of the idea for military neutrality of the Slavic Balkan countries“.<sup>75</sup> However, these actors have been found inactive in the mainstream media and lack any significant social media presence.

### C. Influence through the church

Embracing 88% of all North Macedonians-the largest Christian denomination in the country-the Macedonian Orthodox Church offers foreign actors a powerful vector to alter public opinion.<sup>76</sup> As a result, from 2015, the Russian Orthodox Church has tried to appropriate that institution's moral authority to burnish its own reputation. For one, it tries to mediate five decades of dispute

with the Serbian Orthodox Church which rejects its independence.<sup>77</sup> Efforts at reconciliation reflect increased reliance by Russian state authorities on religious diplomacy.<sup>78,79</sup> Security services regard this activity, through which the Russian Orthodox Church says it „actively advocates the interest of the Serbian Orthodox Church“, as just another way to augment Russian influence over religious matters in the country.<sup>80</sup> But the outer contours of Russian Orthodox churches condition fealty just as much as the messaging inside. Recently, a trend of building churches that reflect the architecture and style of Russian houses of worship has played out in North Macedonia.<sup>81</sup> Many of these new edifices have been financed by.<sup>82</sup> Russian businessperson Sergej Samosenko, who owns the Handball Club Vardar.<sup>83</sup>

### D. Radical or extremist groups

While less penetrable than Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH), North Macedonia is highly subject to covert methods of subversion<sup>84</sup> by radical anti-Western actors. Such support streams towards radical groups with no explicit political affiliation such as sports fan groups. These groups are regarded as an easy target for radicalization due to their intolerant, hateful, and violent sloganeering. Efforts for the instrumentalization of such groups were detected in the wake of the referendum in 2018, when then-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev revealed that members of the *Komiti* fan club „are sympathetic to

<sup>74</sup> In 1994, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries.

<sup>75</sup> DSCI, 2017, pp. 7-8

<sup>76</sup> Which accounts for 65% of the total population in the country.

<sup>77</sup> For more details on the dispute, please see: Gjorgjevski, G: *Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Context of Balkan and European Orthodoxy*, Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, vol. 37 Issue 4. Available at: <http://pbf.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Macedonian-Orthodox-Church-in-the-Context-of-Balkan-and-European.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> Stanislav Secieru, *Russia in the Western Balkans, Tactical Wins, Strategic Setback*. European Institute for Security Studies, July 2018. Available at: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf) (pp. 5)

<sup>79</sup> „Subject: Tendencies and directions of the activities by the Russian Intelligence Service in Republic of Macedonia - analytical report“. Published by OCCPR. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document4.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> „Flattering to Russia with Russian style churches“, *Slobodna Evropa*, 26.11.2019. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/26711313.html>

<sup>82</sup> „Flattering to Russia with Russian style churches“, *Slobodna Evropa*, 26.11.2019. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/26711313.html>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Bechev, Dimitar. *Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans*. NATO Stratcom, 2019. Available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/russias-strategic-interests-and-tools-influence-western-balkans>



the Russian cause” and were paid by Russian businessmen to engage in violent protests.<sup>85</sup> While following the change of the government in 2017, the activities of these groups decreased significantly. Still, they could be an easy pawn for the promotion of anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives.

### E. Instrumentalization of minorities

North Macedonia, with an ethnically diverse landscape polarized through divisive rhetoric, is a microcosm of the Western Balkans. As an example, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement supporting Gruevski and describing the situation in Macedonia as the result of foreign interference designed to ‘make Macedonians accept the „Albanian platform”<sup>86</sup> designed in Tirana in the Prime-Minister’s office based on the map of the so-called Greater Albania”.<sup>87</sup> Such narratives emphasize the dichotomy between the ethnic Macedonian majority and Albanian minority and the Albanian minority and Serbian minority. In this context, the disinformation campaigns suggest that the post-conflict power-sharing arrangement does not serve the interests of ethnic Macedonians and that the Macedonian political elites are servile to the Albanian political elites.<sup>88</sup>

### F. Intelligence operations

The information regarding malign non-domestic intelligence activities is often quite limited and did not enter public discourse in North Macedonia. This situation started to change after the incidents in the Macedonian Parliament that occurred on 27 April 2017, when the first rumors spread regarding malign involvement of foreign intelligence officers like Goran Živaljević.<sup>89</sup> The intelligence activity sought to push North Macedonia away from the Euro-Atlantic path and especially membership in NATO came through two avenues: Serbian journalists, MPs, and intelligence officers’ efforts to manipulate the country’s policy for Serbia; and the subterfuge of the Embassy of the Russian Federation..

The intelligence activity found in the country was a significant part of the hybrid threats projected against North Macedonia. A report by the Agency for Intelligence for 2017 confirmed that in 2017 the country was a target of hybrid threats in critical moments for the country, „especially during the change of government and the shift in the neighboring relations”.<sup>90</sup> The report also suggested that most of the Agency’s activity was to detect and tackle the destructive influence of foreign powers that project an anti-NATO/EU narrative via media-political installations in the country and the region to influence the perception of the citizens by.<sup>91</sup> Opera-

<sup>85</sup> Zaev: No need to send documents concerning financing protests to Greece. Meta.mk, 18.07.2018. Available at: <https://meta.mk/en/zaev-no-need-to-send-documents-concerning-financing-protests-to-greece/>

<sup>86</sup> The term „Albanian platform” refers to a set of seven general requirements agreed by the Albanian political parties: „(1) Achieving complete equality according to the Ohrid Agreement and the Constitution; (2) Achieving economic equality and societal well-being, with emphasis on equitable regional development; (3) Strengthening the Rule of Law, as prerequisite of the Euro-Atlantic integration process; (4) Creating of a spirit of trust in the function of good inter-ethnic relations as a crucial element of the political stability in the country; (5) Resolving of the name issue, in conformity with the European values and the principles of international law; (6) Good relations with the neighbors; (7) Quick integration in NATO and the European Union”. Each requirement is operationalized in a set of sub-requirements (total 19 sub-requirements). Three sub-requirements ignited a wide debate within the country: (1) „use of the Albanian language at all levels of governance”; (2) „all-inclusive debate on the flag, the anthem, and the state coat-of-arms”; and (3) „Adoption of a Resolution in the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia with which condemn the genocide on the Albanian people in Macedonia during 1912-1952”.

The full document is available at: <http://www.bdi.mk/en/lajmi.php?id=5768>

<sup>87</sup> „Comment by the Information and Press Department on the growing tensions in the Republic of Macedonia”, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 02 March 2017. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckN0nkJE02Bw/content/id/2233994](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckN0nkJE02Bw/content/id/2233994)

<sup>88</sup> One of many examples: „Macedonia became property of the Albanians”. Infomer.rs, 10.01.2019. Available at: <https://infomer.rs/svet/balkan/415675/makedonija-postala-vlasnistvo-albanaca-skoplje-vise-pita-sta-siptari-drze-sve-svojim-rukama>

<sup>89</sup> The officer of Serbian Information Agency (BIA) Goran Zivaljevik was present during the incidents in the Parliament. Following this incident, an agreement was signed between the Agency for Intelligence of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Security Information Service of Republic of Serbia to withdraw the official representatives in Belgrade and Skopje (including Goran Zivaljevik) with „aim of preserving the joint relations and cooperation”.

<sup>90</sup> Work report for 2017. Agency for intelligence. Available at: <https://www.ia.gov.mk/Documents/godizv.pdf>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

tive details regarding the interference activities were revealed in a series of leaked counter-intelligence reports<sup>92</sup> produced by the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence.<sup>93</sup> According to these reports, Goran Živaljević had close contacts with the MP Ivan Stoilkovic, and Miroslav Lazanski, a Serbian journalist, political analyst, and current Ambassador of Serbia to the Russian Federation well known for his pro-Russian and anti-NATO attitudes.<sup>94</sup> According to this report, these activities attempted to gather sensitive information about the country's political processes and ultimately penetrate the media and influence public opinion.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Lazanski frequently comments in the public eye on why North Macedonia should not change its name to join NATO while highlighting the adverse effects from that process,<sup>96</sup> including its economic consequences.<sup>97</sup>

The reported and publicly available intelligence activity of Russia in the country is to a large extent connected to the NATO integration process. In line with Russian official interests, the intelligence activities attempt to foment a political environment that would keep North Macedonia and the region out of NATO. An increase in intelligence activity is logged following the Greek veto for North Macedonia at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest.<sup>98</sup> This spike, however, has been detected between 2015 and 2017 during the turbulence associated with political crisis, change of government, and the conclusion of the name dispute with Greece. According to the available counter-intelligence reports, the Embassy

of the Russian Federation in the country is a focal point for „subversive, propaganda,<sup>99</sup> and intelligence activity” to isolate the country from Western influence.<sup>100</sup> The report points to intelligence operations steered through the political, military, and security departments of the embassy. It identifies that active officers from the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR) alongside the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU), conducted regionally-coordinated operations with a SVR center in Belgrade, Serbia and a GRU center in Sofia, Bulgaria.<sup>101</sup>

The report continues, explaining that the disinformation operations were largely conducted through SVR officers who have an eye to shape the „attitudes, beliefs and emotions” of Macedonian citizens to ensure support for the policies of the Russian Federation. Beyond disinformation, the Macedonian intelligence services traced activities by GRU aimed at obtaining information on NATO integration and the country's cooperation with NATO. Finally, the report brings to light activities by the Federal Security Service (FSB) intended to create parallel security structures with former and current members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Army.<sup>102</sup>

In terms of disinformation, propaganda and soft power activities were detected from locally posted journalists from Russia's state news agency TASS and the Rosstrudnichestvo.<sup>103</sup> In March 2018, the country expelled

<sup>92</sup> „Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say”, The Guardian, 4.7.2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence#img-2>

<sup>93</sup> „Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia”. OCCRP, 4.06.2017. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>

<sup>94</sup> „Subject: Information on Goran Zivaljeviki, member of BIA, accredited relation officer in the Serbian embassy in the Republic of Macedonia. Published by OCCRP. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document1.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> „We will shine in the dark”, Politika, 10.02.2019. Available at: <http://www.politika.rs/sr/tags/articles/192/Miroslav-Lazanski>

<sup>97</sup> „Miroslav Lazanski: Cabbage, Zaev and Russia”, 06.11.2017, Available at: <https://srbin.info/politika/miroslav-lazanski-kupus-zaev-i-rusija-video/?lang=lat>

<sup>98</sup> „Subject: Tendencies and directions of the activities by the Russian Intelligence Service in Republic of Macedonia - analytical report”. Published by OCCRP. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document4.pdf>

<sup>99</sup> Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation

<sup>100</sup> „Subject: Tendencies and directions of the activities by the Russian Intelligence Service in Republic of Macedonia - analytical report”. Published by OCCRP. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document4.pdf>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> „Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say”. The Guardian, 4.7.2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence>

a Russian diplomat due to efforts to obtain classified information. The expulsion was conducted in a coordinated effort with the other 20 other countries that undertook similar actions because of the Skripal case in the United Kingdom.<sup>104</sup>

The volume of malign foreign intelligence activity suggests that the influence was a carefully crafted and coordinated process that included subversive methods and resources that go beyond legal and legitimate methods countries use to project interests abroad.

### G. Disinformation operations

Disinformation campaigns remain the most viable tool to exert influence in the region. North Macedonia in this regard fits within the global phenomenon where disinformation and fake news are tools for hybrid threat warfare. These operations occur in a media landscape that consists of 5 daily and 5 weekly newspapers, 53 TV broadcasters plus one public broadcaster with 5 channels, 71 radio stations, and approximately 80 internet news portals.<sup>105</sup> The country scores 2.26<sup>106</sup> at the IREX Media sustainability index, and the media environment is regarded as crowded with a competitive advertising market that challenges the quality of journalism. The report highlights that the increased usage of news through social media has negative consequences including „fake news, filter bubbles, and disinformation“. The online news universe is characterized by high levels of polarization with some news portals serving almost as party newsletters and informal press centers. However, the Internet information space serves as the primary platform for disinformation and fake news. North Macedonia has an internet penetration rate of 83.4%, out of which 73% of the population used the internet every day or almost

every day.<sup>107</sup> Of note, 68% of the people used the internet for social media out of which 54% read online news sites, while 7.2% posted opinions on civic or political issues.<sup>108</sup>

An important feature of the information space in the Western Balkans is that most audiences in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro can understand each other's respective languages.<sup>109</sup> In North Macedonia, the ethnic Macedonian majority of 64% speaks the Macedonian language that belongs to the group of South-Slavic languages. Minorities in the country mostly comprehend the South-Slavic languages and interact with media outlets from the region. As a small media market, the Serbian-produced content holds a significantly sway over the media and the entertainment environment in the country and in the region.

With the start of the political crisis and the opposition protests in 2015 and 2016, an increased proliferation of disinformation and information that corresponds with Russia's current political goals was detected. However, the most significant surge occurred before the signing of the Prespa Agreement that concluded the name dispute with Greece in June 2018 and the following referendum in September 2018. The narrative was promoted through Serbia-based media outlets and tabloids (Informer, Alo, Srpski Telegraf), web portals based in the North Macedonia (iNFOMAX.mk, Netpress.mk, magazin.mk, tocka.com.mk)<sup>110</sup>, automation bots on Twitter, and fan pages on Facebook. In addition to the regional portals, the Serbian language version of Sputnik blends news with, messages that are in line with the Russian narratives.

<sup>104</sup> „Macedonia Claims Expelled Russian Diplomat Breached Security“. BalkanInsight, 27.03.2018. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/27/macedonia-claims-expelled-russian-diplomat-breached-security-1-03-27-2018/>

<sup>105</sup> Media sustainability index. IREX. Available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe- Eurasia-2019-north-macedonia.pdf>

<sup>106</sup> On a scale from 0 to 4 (0 = Unstable, 1-2 = Unstable mixed system, 2-3 = Near sustainability, 3-4 = Sustainability).

<sup>107</sup> State statistical office. Usage of information and communication technologies in households and by individuals, 2019 (October, 2019). Available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2019/8.1.19.32.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 2019

<sup>109</sup> While there are differences between the official languages of the Western Balkans countries, single linguistic space refers to a situation when people can understand content spoken and written in the neighborhood country. Exception of this single linguistic space are Albania and Kosovo where the majority of the population speaks Albanian language, which is not part of the Slavic group of languages.

<sup>110</sup> This analysis contains mainstream portals that are among top 50 sites in North Macedonia according to Alexa Internet, an American web traffic analysis company. The full list available at: <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MK>



Twitter automation bots were especially prolific in the wake of the name change referendum in September 2018. For example, the hashtag #Bojkotiram (#Boycott) called for boycotting the vote of the referendum. Research by the Digital Forensics Lab showed that on Twitter the hashtag generated 23,800 mentions out of which 19,300 were retweets (80,9%). It indicates that „the message was heavily amplified but lacked original messaging”.<sup>111</sup> On Facebook, in the wake of the referendum, 40 new profiles were created every day to circulate messages for a boycott of the referendum.<sup>112</sup> The combination of political bots, organized trolling, disinformation, and hate speech on the campaign suggests an organized structure behind the process.

These media outlets to a large extent utilize the internal political developments in the neighboring countries to influence the domestic information space and produce side effects in the region. Often utilized method is the usage of so-called „seed sites” that create a significant amount of content, have no impressum, and neither have copyright limitations nor require any citation. Macedonian web portals then cite such sites as webtribune.rs.<sup>113</sup>

In terms of content, the campaigns for influencing the information space build on two general themes. The first glorifies Putin<sup>114</sup> and Russian military strength and technology<sup>115</sup> and is favorable towards the Russian positioning and activity in Crimea, Ukraine, and the Syrian<sup>116</sup> conflict. They tend to justify the annexation by Russia in through favorable reporting on activities conducted in the region, for example, on the setting of new weapons systems and Putin’s visits and statements. Interestingly, most of the Macedonian news portals that have show

Putin in a positive light do not share anti-NATO messages. Anti-NATO messages are usually shared by influential individuals and analysts in the online sphere, such as Vasko Eftov, Milenko Nedelkovski, and Mirka Velinovska.

The second general narrative propagates a message of imminent war in the region that arises from Zaev’s apparent betrayal of the Macedonian national interests and the role of the Albanian minority.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>111</sup> #ElectionWatch: Boycott Campaign in Macedonia Features Familiar Characters. Digital Forensics Research Lab, 14.09.2018. Available at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-boycott-campaign-in-macedonia-features-familiar-characters-ef0f1aab52b6>

<sup>112</sup> Asya Metodieva, *How Disinformation Harmed the Referendum in Macedonia*. German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2.10.2018. Available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/10/02/how-disinformation-harmed-referendum-macedonia>

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> „He showed who the boss is: There’s how Putin entered Crimea”. Infomaks.mk, 11.08.2019. Available at: <https://infomaks.mk/wp/видеофото-покажа-кој-е-газда-е-е-како/>

<sup>115</sup> „Unpleasant news for Ukraine: Crimea is impenetrable fortress – the Russians created a unique defense system”. Tocka.mk, 03.12.2019. Available at: <https://tocka.com.mk/vesti/290205/neprijatni-vesti-za-ukraincite-krim-e-neprobojna-tvrđina-rusite-sozdadoa-unikaten-sistem-na-odbrana>

<sup>116</sup> „Mysterious ship sailed from Russia to Syria: Putin sent 400 containers to Assad, but nobody know what is inside”. Magazin.mk, 30.11.2019. Available at: <https://www.magazin.mk/мистериозни-брод-плови-од-русија-кон-с/>

<sup>117</sup> Examples include articles like „If Zaev does not resign, there will be a war”. Available at: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/402822/ako-zaev-podnese-ostavku-izbice-rat-najjaca-stranka-makedoniji-vmro-dpmne-upozorava-zemlji-preti-krah>

Media outlet	Applied narrative		
	Glorifying Putin and Russian military (including activity in Crimea and East Ukraine)	North Macedonia out of NATO	War Mongering
Informer	✓	✓	✓
Alo.rs	✓	✓	✓
Srpski Telegraf	✓	✗	✓
iNFOMAX	✓	✗	✓
Netpress.mk	✓	✗	✓
Magazin.mk	✓	✗	✗
Tocka.com.mk	✓	✗	✗

The question of the level and the complexity of the connection between Russia and these Serbian media outlets remains. Some journalists disagree that there is a link. Ljupco Zlatev, a journalist and owner of the web portal *lider.mk* finds that the Serbian incumbent party Srpska Napredna Stranka the sole entity responsible for this narrative: „I could not close the door for some: „I could not close the door for some level of coordination between Serbia and Russia on this narrative but I cannot claim that for a fact”.<sup>118</sup>

The difficulties of establishing a strong link suggest a more complex information environment without a strong central–periphery relationship. Looking beyond Russia in this regard is also important in order to „recognize and tackle disinformation at the local level”.<sup>119</sup>

In tackling this problem, in June 2018, the Government of North Macedonia unveiled its Action Plan for A Resolute Fight Against Disinformation.<sup>120</sup> The Action Plan characterizes the disinformation campaigns as the main threat to democratic and election processes. It includes security measures, such as the launching of more secure intragovernmental communication and IT security protocols. Additionally, proactive measures are envisaged, most notably, the establishment of a Taskforce for combating disinformation and attacks on democracy.

## H. Corrosive economic activities

The economic activity between North Macedonia and Russia is modest. Exports towards Russia in 2018 accounted for 0.53% of the overall exports while the imports were 1.9%.<sup>121</sup> This stands in sharp contrast compared to the EU28, which accounts for 82% of the total export and the Western Balkans with 11%. Countries with the highest volume of trade (exports and imports) in 2018 were Germany (26.9%), Greece (6.2%), and Great Britain (6.1%), together accounting for combined 39.2% of the overall trade.<sup>122</sup>

In this context, the Russian economic influence in the country is quite limited. However, the numbers show slow but steady growth in trade and investments. While Russian FDI is the lowest in the region and falls below 1% of the GDP, there was an increase from 63 million euros in 2016 to 212 million in 2018.

There are 78 companies registered in North Macedonia that have at least 25 percent of Russian ownership, but their revenues had slow but steady increase from 63 million euros in 2005 to 212 million people in 2015. Most of the earnings came from the oil distributor Lukoil, two gas pipelines<sup>123</sup> and the gas plant Te-To<sup>124</sup>. In the case of Te-To, in June 2019, the Financial Police Office revealed that the company was used for laundering over 100 million euros through bankruptcy fraud, money which is currently being investigated by the authorities in Russia.<sup>125</sup>

In addition to the direct investments from Russia, Russian capital to flows in from offshore destinations such as Belize, Cyprus, or countries with preferable tax regimes.<sup>126</sup> Some interesting examples are the London-registered offshore company Balkan Petroleum Holding

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Ljupco Zlatev, 14.11.2019

<sup>119</sup> Metodjeva Asya, Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2019. Available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/Russian%20Narrative%20Proxies%20in%20Balkans.pdf>

<sup>120</sup> Action plan for resolute fight against disinformation. Available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/18641?ln=en-gb>

<sup>121</sup> North Macedonia exports mostly agricultural products while imports mostly energy products.

<sup>122</sup> State statistical office, Foreign Trade January – December 2018. Available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopte-nie.aspx?id=78&rbr=2868>. Volume of trade with China is 3.7% (7<sup>th</sup> highest), Turkey 3.3% (8<sup>th</sup>) while Russia is not within the top 20 countries which means the volume of trade is below 1.3%.

<sup>123</sup> Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and state capture risks. Center for Study of Democracy, 2018. Available at: <http://www.csd.bg/fileSrc.php?id=23351>

<sup>124</sup> The company Te-To is in majority owned by an Cyprus based offshore company.

<sup>125</sup> „From doubt of a fraud bankruptcy to laundering Russian money in Macedonia”. Radio Free Liberty Macedonia, 26.06.2019. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/од-сомнеж-за-лажен-стечай-на-те-то-до-перење-руски-пари-во-македонија/30021375.html>

<sup>126</sup> CSD, 2018.



Limited (BPHL)<sup>127</sup> that in 2016 tried to take over Makpetrol, the leading distributor of oil and oil products in North Macedonia and the fourth-biggest company in the country. BPHL announced its ambition to buy shares at Makpetrol only two weeks after its official registration, with the manager being a British citizen Vasili Evdokimov.<sup>128</sup> Major investors in BPHL are the Russian businessmen Alexander Smuzikov and Alexander Kaplan. Kaplan publicly defended the idea for buying Makpetrol based on his experience in the sector and claimed that there is nothing illegal in the process.<sup>129</sup> The offer by this company was by 35% higher than the current stock price of Makpetrol at the time, which raised concerns regarding the legitimacy of this takeover.<sup>130</sup> On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Security and Exchange Commission of the Republic of North Macedonia rejected the offer due to the unavailability of the required information for the company.<sup>131</sup> Balkan Petroleum Holding Limited was dissolved on July 31, 2018.<sup>132</sup>

The Russian focus on energy investments reflects three realities. First, economically, the underdeveloped energy market in the country and the current liberalization process provides growth potential attractive to both Russian energy companies and those from other countries. Second, investments in the energy sector and infrastructure for (mostly gas) distribution that are relatively small for the Russian energy companies provide good value-for-money regarding influence over strategic resources for the country that has the potential to be utilized for political influence. Finally, the legislative gaps that regulate foreign investments, coupled with the corruption-prone political establishment, serve as an enabling environment for investments with concerns beyond legitimate economic interests.

<sup>127</sup> The company Balkan Petroleum Holding Limited was founded by a Cyprus based company Davolia Holdings Limited registered in 2016. (information available at: <https://efiling.drcor.mcit.gov.cy/DrcorPublic/SearchResults.aspx?name=davolia&number=%25&searchtype=optStartMatch&index=1&tname=%25&sc=1&cultureInfo=en-AU>)

<sup>128</sup> Makpetrol AD owns the national TV broadcaster Telma TV. Telma TV was considered critical to the Government led by VMRO-DPMNE and was often labeled as „pro-opposition” TV station.

<sup>129</sup> „Alexander Kaplan, openly about the Makpetrol takeover”. Index24.mk, Available at:

<http://index24.mk/index.php/vesti/ekonomija/item/2827-aleksander-kaplan-otvoreno-za-prezemanjeto-na-makpetrol>

<sup>130</sup> „The firm Balkan petroleum registered 20 days ago, wants to overtake Makpetrol”. Kapital, 9<sup>th</sup> of June, 2016. Available at:

<https://kapital.mk/firmata-balkan-petroleum-holding-registrirana-pred-20-dena-saka-da-go-prezeme-makpetrol/>

<sup>131</sup> „Statement by the Security and Exchange Commission of the Republic of Macedonia”, 28.12.2017. Available at: <https://www.sec.gov.mk/Soopstenija-od-sednici/sednici174>

<sup>132</sup> UK Companies House. Available at: <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/10204965/filing-history>

While the political narrative and the societal consensus in Macedonia on Euro-Atlantic integration were strong, the course towards this normative lighthouse was not always easy and it is still facing significant challenges.





## MONTENEGRO

According to the results of Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in 2011, there are 620,029 inhabitants in Montenegro. The biggest number of inhabitants resides in the Capital City of Podgorica, 185,937, which represents 30% of population of Montenegro, followed by Niksic and Bijelo Polje. About 50% of total population of Montenegro resides in these three municipalities. When it comes to ethnicity, 44.98% inhabitants declared themselves Montenegrins, 28.73% are self-declared Serbs, 8.65% are Bosnians, 4.97% are Albanians, 3.31% Muslims, and 0.97% declared their ethnicity as Croatian<sup>133</sup>. The three major religious groups in the country are Orthodox Christians (72.07%) – who are divided between two opposed churches – the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC); Muslims (19.41%) and Catholics (3.44%), while the remaining 5.4% of the population belong to other religious groups, are atheists/agnostics or did not declare their religious affiliation<sup>134</sup>.

In 1878, the Congress of Berlin recognized Montenegro as an independent state. The history of Montenegrin independence ended in 1918, when Montenegro joined Serbia. Soon afterwards, Montenegro became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia. From 1918 to 1941, and from 1946 to 1992, Montenegro was a constituent republic of Yugoslavia. Montenegro was the only Yugoslav republic that decided to remain in a joint state with Serbia in the early 1990s. In 1992, Montenegro and Serbia established the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to succeed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). On May 21, 2006, the referendum was held and 55.5% of Montenegrin citizens voted for independence<sup>135</sup>.

In June 2017 Montenegro became a member of NATO. Montenegro is making solid progress in its EU accession

negotiations. In total, negotiations have been opened on 32 out of 33 chapters. However, the Government is not so successful in closing the chapters, since only three chapters were provisionally closed after more than seven years of negotiations. Implementation and measurable results in the area of the rule of law, the track record in fighting corruption and organized crime is still pending.

Montenegro has traditionally friendly relations with the Russian Federation, but over the last decade the alarm sounded about Russian influence in this country. There is a strong Russian influence in the field of real estates, economic investments and the strategic branch of Montenegrin economy - tourism. Russian tourists once made up almost a quarter of the total number of visitors.

Additionally, public opinion polls have showed that Russia's popularity among Montenegrin citizens is growing. This country is more popular in Montenegro than the US and EU. Also, 47 % of Montenegrin citizens think that the Russian military is a superior force to NATO, and only 37 % think that NATO has the advantage.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has an important role in spreading Russian orientations in Montenegro. As a very powerful organization with almost all the monasteries, churches and estates around them under its jurisdiction, the Serbian Orthodox Church is a very important social factor in Montenegro. Montenegro's turn to the West and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the cooling of relations between Podgorica and Moscow, were very much reflected in the activities of the SOC, which unreservedly supported all anti-Western forces in Montenegro with all its resources. In its media and the media with which it has good cooperation, the SOC unabashedly propagated Russian politics and pro-Russian political and cultural orientation. The recently adopted Law on Freedom

<sup>133</sup> MONSTAT. (2011). Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011, Population of Montenegro by sex, type of settlement, ethnicity, religion and mother tongue, per municipalities. Retrieved from: [http://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje\(1\).pdf](http://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf)

<sup>134</sup> MONSTAT. (2017). Montenegro in Numbers. Podgorica: Statistical Office of Montenegro – MONSTAT.

<sup>135</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2018). BTI 2018 — Montenegro Country Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung. Retrieved from: <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/MNE/>



of Religion caused political tensions, violent incidents in the Parliament of Montenegro, and series of protests organized by the SOC in different cities throughout Montenegro.

There are no relevant media outlets with Russian ownership but news from the Russian Federation and information about Russian activities and the President Vladimir Putin are daily presented in regional and Montenegrin media. These type of propaganda pamphlets appearing as news reports are published and broadcasted by traditional public and private media outlets as well as by influential online media in Montenegro. Regardless of their editorial position, Montenegrin media are vulnerable to Russian propaganda since journalists often fail to recognize propaganda pamphlets appearing as news reports, and proceed to publish or share them, thus further contributing to their organized spread.

With the aim to analyse Russian influence in Montenegro, our research team is providing a brief overview of these topics through several chapters – corrosive economic activities with political goals, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and disinformation campaigns.

#### A. Relevant political assets

Heaving in mind that Montenegrin society has traditionally split along political and ethnic lines, Russia's strategy was to amplify rifts within Montenegro. The DPS is heir to the League of Communists of Montenegro, the ruling party under socialist Yugoslavia. It remains the dominant political force. It is supported by those who insist that Montenegrins constitute a separate nation and that the country has a history and identity distinctive from Serbia. On the other side are the citizens of Montenegro who tend to identify with conservative Serb nationalism and who share a strong sense of belonging to the larger Serbian nation. They criticize the effort to consolidate a separate Montenegrin identity in socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>136</sup>

Party system shows high fragmentation and strong polarization. Throughout the last decade many new political parties have been established, and the majority of

those parties have emerged after split-ups in existing parties.

In early 1990s, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), was supporting union with Serbia, maintaining close ties with the Serbian regime. However, in 1997, a section of the party under its current leader Milo Djukanovic stood behind the idea of restoring Montenegro's independence. In 2006, the DPS was the main political force behind the successful referendum on independence. Since then, DPS's policies support pro-Western course of the country, including both NATO and EU membership. However, DPS is carrying a heavy baggage of overly long rule, marked with numerous cases of parties' high officials colluding against the public interest in cases that are being investigated for corruption and organized crime. After 2016 elections, DPS has 36 out of 81 seats in the Parliament<sup>137</sup>.

Democratic Front (DF) is the biggest opposition group in the Parliament of Montenegro with 18 MPs out of 81 parliamentary seats. It is a multi-party alliance that consists of several parties, including New Serb Democracy (NOVA), Movement for Changes (PzP), Democratic Peoples' Party (DNP), Workers' Party (RP) and other entities. It was established in 2012.

Demos was formed in 2015, by DF's former leader Miodrag Lekic, who split from the DF together with a group of officials, following disagreements with coalition constituents. In 2016 elections, in coalition with SNP and URA, Demos won four seats in the Parliament. However, party divisions continued, so some of the MPs continued to act independently while others have established yet another party - United Montenegro – established in 2017.

The pro-Serbian, pro-Milosevic element broke away from the DPS in 1997 and formed a new party, the Socialist People's Party (SNP). It was the leading force in the bloc supporting the state union with Serbia in the 2006 independence referendum. Once the strongest opposition group, the party has gone through a difficult internal struggle, which led to several split-ups during the last

<sup>136</sup> Bechev D. (2018). *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/the-2016-coup-attempt-in-montenegro-is-russias-balkans-footprint-expanding/>

<sup>137</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2018). BTI 2018 — Montenegro Country Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung. Retrieved from <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/MNE/>

decade leaving the party with only three MPs after the 2016 elections.

Democratic Montenegro (Democrats) is one of the newest political parties on the Montenegrin scene, formed in 2015 after one fraction left the SNP. In October 2016 they have won eight seats in the national parliament, and were recording good results on the local elections since. All the polls are showing steady growth of the Democrats' electorate, which many attribute to their populist rhetoric and avoidance to state their opinion about some of the most divisive topics in the society, such as language, religion, NATO membership etc.

Social Democratic Party (SDP) was always relatively small in terms of number of seats, but often played an important role in Montenegrin politics, being a decisive factor in forming majority government or critical vote for some of the most important national policies. The party was formed in early 1990s and was known for its anti-war stance. Also, it was one of the main parties that advocated Montenegro's independence, as well as NATO and EU membership. SDP was part of the ruling coalition for 18 years, since 1998 to 2016, when it terminated the alliance with the ruling DPS. Since 2016 elections, SDP is in opposition, having four MPs.

Civic Movement United Reform Action (URA) is yet another new political party on social-liberal side of the political spectrum. It was formed in 2015, after the group of officials split from the formerly parliamentary party – Positive Montenegro. As a part of coalition with SNP and Demos, URA obtained two seats in the national parliament in 2016.

Social-democrats of Montenegro (SD) were formed in 2015 by a split fraction of SDP. Unlike their former SDP colleagues, they have decided to stay in coalition with the ruling DPS. In 2016 elections they won two seats in the Parliament and participate in the coalition government.

Parties that represent ethnic minorities are also very important factor on the political scene of Montenegro. They have four seats in the Parliament – Bosniak Party (BS) having two MPs and Albanian Coalition and Croatian Civic Initiative having one each. They are part of the governing coalition.

DF is a party that is considered pro-Russian. There is also one smaller party that is considered pro-Russian. It is Prava Crna Gora but it is not in the Parliament yet. The core of DF leadership comprises Andrija Mandić of the New Serb Democracy party, Milan Knežević of the Democratic People's Party, and Nebojša Medojević of the Movement for Changes party.

Large anti-government protests in Montenegro began in mid-October 2015. The protests were organized by Democratic Front. Protests were against corruption and against joining NATO. They also requested formation of a transitional government which would organise parliamentary elections. Protests were spreading in strength and intensity, and escalated with large riots in Podgorica on October 24, 2015. It is believed that Russia had a significant hand in supporting the protests, financially and through support in the media.

Russian TV channels covering the protests played up the anti-NATO theme as well. With encouragement from Moscow, they began campaigning for a referendum on NATO membership.<sup>138</sup>

Many of the DF's leaders have taken trips to Russia and have collaborated with Russia and been supported by Russia to varying degrees. They are promoting their cooperation with Russian authorities, organizing meetings, signing Memorandums on cooperation<sup>139, 140, 141</sup> declarations<sup>142</sup> etc. These activities occurred between two significant periods of time in Montenegro's recent history, both with more or less confirmed Russian influence – the 2015 protests and 2016 attempted coup.

<sup>138</sup> Bechev D. (2018). *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/the-2016-coup-attempt-in-montenegro-is-russias-balkans-footprint-expanding/>

<sup>139</sup> „Demokratska narodna partija i Rodina potpisali memorandum o saradnji”, In4s, 6 February, 2016,

<https://www.in4s.net/demokratska-narodna-partija-rodina-potpisali-memorandum-o-saradnji/?lang=lat>

<sup>140</sup> „Potpisana Deklaracija između NSD i Jedinstvene Rusije”, In4s, 28 June, 2016, <https://www.in4s.net/potpisana-deklaracija-izmedju-nsd-i-jedinstvene-rusije/?lang=lat>

<sup>141</sup> „Deklaracija DNP-a i Jedinstvene Rusije”, In4s, 6 May, 2016, <https://www.in4s.net/deklaracija-dnp-jedinstvene-rusije/?lang=lat>

<sup>142</sup> Popović, Ana, „SISOJEV: Nejasna saradnja Jedinstvene Rusije i DF-a”, Portal Analitika, 30 June, 2016, <https://portalanalitika.me/clanak/234829/arhiv>

The Special State Prosecutor's Office inquiry about DF's financing has so far resulted in charging the DF leader and MP, Nebojsa Medojevic, and a number of DF activists for facilitating illicit funding flows into the party accounts. The trial, which started in December 2018, however, does not link the suspicious money to Russian sources.

Montenegro has also accused the Russian Federation of meddling in the 2016 parliamentary elections by attempting to violently overthrow the Government through the Democratic Front. On the Election Day, on October 16, the Montenegrin security services arrested 20 Serbian nationals who were suspected of organizing a plot to prevent the election of a pro-NATO government, and possibly assassinate the-then Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic. The former Serbian Prime Minister and now-President Aleksandar Vucic himself later acknowledged the plot, presented further evidence about it, and offered his cooperation to the Montenegrin Special Prosecution.<sup>143</sup>

The indictment for this case charged 14 people, including Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic. The trial for coup attempt was live broadcasted and attracted enormous media attention. After 19 months of trial all accused were found guilty at the first instance court in May 2019. Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic were each sentenced to five years in prison.

## B. Non-governmental assets

There are a few examples of pro-Russian NGOs operating in Montenegro and pro-Russian NGOs that are actually based in Serbia and operate in both countries.

The most significant Serbia-based NGO is Srbska čast (Serb Honor).

Srbska čast is an NGO based in Niš which serves young males who are ethnically Serbian in Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. Their actual undertakings include military training, anti-NATO and anti-Western protests and violence, and ultra-nationalism. Srbska čast has proven links and associations to the Russian-Serbian „Humanitarian Centre” based in Niš, Serbia. However, it is widely publicized that the Humanitarian Centre is not really a humanitarian centre at all and is really a base for covert Russian operations<sup>144</sup>.

During Montenegro's accession to NATO, two most visible and active pro-Russian and anti-NATO groups in Montenegro were Movement for Neutrality<sup>145</sup> and „No to war - no to NATO”<sup>146</sup>. Movement for neutrality was registered in 2014. Movement's activists participated in a number of events organized by Russian foundations<sup>147</sup>, but it has never been revealed who funded their activities. The former leader of the Movement for Neutrality established in 2018 a political party named Prava Crna Gora. According to the reporting, this party has Russian connections. Media reported that one of the founders of Prava Crna Gora was Honorary Consul of Russia to Montenegro, Boro Djukic, and that the headquarters of the party are in the former consular residence in Podgorica. As a part of the response to Skripal case Montenegro revoked its consent for Russia's honorary consul in March 2018.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Higgins, Andrew, „Finger Pointed at Russians in Alleged Coup Plot in Montenegro”, The New York Times, 26 November, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/europe/finger-pointed-at-russians-in-alleged-coup-plot-in-montenegro.html>

<sup>144</sup> Anderson E. (2019). *State-Specific Vulnerabilities to Russian Influence: A case Study of Montenegro*. Diploma thesis. Retrieved from <https://is.muni.cz/th/qyn71/?lang=en;id=206297>

<sup>145</sup> Movement for neutrality of Montenegro, <http://mnmne.org/>

<sup>146</sup> No to war – no to NATO, <http://www.neunato.net/>

<sup>147</sup> „Pokret za neutralnost: Milačić ide u Moskvu i na Krim”, Vijesti.me, 2 February, 2015, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/pokret-za-neutralnost-milacic-ide-u-moskvu-i-na-krim-817142>

<sup>148</sup> Pobjeda, „Ruski konzul Đukić osnivač Milačićeve Prave Crne Gore”, CDM, 28, March, 2018, <https://www.cdm.me/izbori-2018/predsjednicki/ruski-konzul-dukic-osnivač-milaciceve-prave-crne-gore/> / Zečević, Nenad, „Misija ruskog konzula Đukića”, Portal Analitika, 26, March, 2018, <https://portalanalitika.me/clanak/297508/misija-ruskog-konzula-dukica>



The group „No to war - no to NATO” was established in 2011 as a coalition of 32 NGOs. In 2016, this group initiated the establishment of the Union for Neutrality, which was supported by dozens of so-called patriotic NGOs and political parties. It was reported that establishment of the Union was greeted by the Russian political parties United Russia and Rodina, as well as by the European United Left / Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group of the European Parliament<sup>149</sup>.

### C. Influence through the church

The majority of Montenegrins are Orthodox Christians, about 72%, according to official figures. One of the pillars of Russian influence in today's Montenegro is the Serbian Orthodox Church<sup>150</sup>. As a very powerful organization with almost all the monasteries, churches and estates around them under its jurisdiction, the Serbian Orthodox Church is a very important social factor in Montenegro. Unlike all other Montenegrin institutions that have been reformed since the restoration of independence in 2006, the SOC has not undergone any transformation, but has openly promoted a nationalist ideology that opposed Montenegrin independence. Montenegro's turn to the West and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the cooling of relations between Podgorica and Moscow, were very much reflected in the activities of the SOC, which unreservedly supported all anti-Western forces in Montenegro with all its resources. In its media and the media with which it has good cooperation, the SOC unabashedly propagated Russian politics and pro-Russian political and cultural orientation. When social dialogue about Montenegro's accession to NATO intensified in Montenegro, the SOC organized a large number

of manifestations and public gatherings at which it was suggested to its believers, as well as to the entire Montenegrin public, that any turning away from Russia and Russian politics would be a betrayal of tradition, history and Orthodoxy. The first man of the SOC in Montenegro, Amfilohije Radovic, took an active role in an anti-NATO campaign. He has repeatedly spoken and written about the necessity of breaking up with pro-Western Montenegrin politics and condemned Montenegrin efforts towards Western integration<sup>151</sup>.

In practical terms, the SOC has made all its resources available for the promotion of Russian interests in Montenegro - from its official newsletter, portals, social media profiles, and radios to spiritual centres, restaurants and hotels, as well as televisions and newsletters, parties and organizations that support its ideology. When a group of Serbian nationals who were suspected of plotting to assist in a coup in Montenegro after the parliamentary elections in 2016 were arrested, information emerged that most of them arrived in Montenegro on the pretext of visiting Orthodox churches<sup>152</sup>. The SOC openly stood in their protection and offered them refuge<sup>153</sup>. In the spiritual centres owned by the SOC, welcoming receptions were organized for Russian bikers, and on the arrival of the Russian president in Belgrade in April 2014, the SOC organized buses for its believers to attend the event. The Church has made every effort to promote Russian content in popular culture, and it is not uncommon to see its believers wear t-shirts and banners bearing the image of a Russian president or a Russian flag at public gatherings. During the war in

<sup>149</sup> „Osnovana „Unija za neutralnost Crne Gore“, referendum prvi zahtjev (VIDEO)”, In4s, 8 August, 2016 <https://www.in4s.net/osnovana-unija-za-neutralnost-crne-gore-referendum-prvi-zah-tjev/?lang=lat>

<sup>150</sup> There is also a Montenegrin Orthodox Church in Montenegro that is not canonically recognized by other Eastern Orthodox churches

<sup>151</sup> „Amfilohije: NATO je stid i sram crnogorske vlasti”, Vijesti.me, 25. March 2018, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/amfilohije-nato-je-stid-i-sram-crnogorske-vlasti>

„Amfilohije: NATO pakt ne predstavlja istinsku i pravu Evropu”, Portalanalitika.me, 12. May 2019, <https://portalanalitika.me/clanak/334100/amfilohije-nato-pakt-ne-predstavlja-istinsku-i-pravu-evropu>

<sup>152</sup> „Dikić se prisjetio planiranja upada u Skupštinu Crne Gore”, Slobodnaevropa.org, 02. February 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sudjenje-za-slucaj-drzavni-udar/29014861.html>

<sup>153</sup> Following the abolition of detention in October 2017 that was replaced by prohibition to leave residence, one of the accused in the coup case, Branka Milic, was placed in a monastery near Podgorica (Assumption of the Virgin Monastery Duga in Bioče) with the guarantees of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral. In November 2018, she voluntarily left the trial and took refuge in the Serbian Embassy in Podgorica, where she is still located. In the meantime, she was sentenced in a first-instance to 3 years in prison for attempted coup.

<https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/amfilohije-garantovao-za-branku-milic/>  
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30288214.html>

Ukraine, part of the clergy and intellectuals close to the SOC justified and supported Russian aggression.

Such politics of the SOC is based on centuries-old ties between the Russian state and church in this area, and Orthodox culture in their vision is one of the basic post-aments for determining national and cultural identification of Montenegro. This approach to defining the current situation directly benefits Russian interests in Montenegro as the SOC speaks and promotes official Russian positions. The main point of intersection of their interests today is certainly the pro-Western politics of Montenegro.

It is important to note that the SOC organizes a large number of cultural events and public lectures and speeches at which its priests and intellectuals close to it propagate Russian politics, culture and Orthodoxy. At a time when, according to all serious public opinion analyses, the SOC enjoys a great deal of support from Montenegrin citizens (the institution they trust most<sup>154</sup>), this institution thus becomes one of the most important pillars of Russian influence in the country.

After the Ukrainian Orthodox Church obtained its autocephaly recently, the SOC took Moscow's side, fearing the consequences that could happen in North Macedonia and Montenegro as a result of that. From the highest Montenegrin authorities, there are more and more statements that emphasize the autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and how this issue must come to the agenda. In June 2019, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic announced that he expects Constantinople to acknowledge the autocephaly of the Montenegrin church and that it would be a surprise for him if the Patriarchate of Constantinople thought differently<sup>155</sup>.

Adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion caused political tensions, violent incidents in the Parliament of Montenegro, and series of protests organized by the

SOC in different cities throughout Montenegro. The Government of Montenegro approved the Draft Law on Freedom of Religion on 5 December 2019, and sent it to the Parliament for adoption. The Parliament enacted the Law on 27 December 2019. Adoption of this Law has been postponed several times since 2012 because of opposition of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) to the Government's plans to repossess property that used to be state-owned before 1918 and for which there is no evidence of church ownership. Protests were also organized in Serbia and Republic of Srpska, one of the entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Negative reactions about the Law came from state and church officials from Serbia and Russia.

#### D. Radical or extremist groups

On 16 October 2016, a group of Serbian nationals was arrested under suspicions of crossing into Montenegro on the eve of a decisive general election with a plan to storm the Parliament and assassinate Milo Djukanovic, who was then prime minister. The authorities said an informant had warned them about the plot days earlier and police arrested members of the group at various locations before they could carry out their plan.<sup>156</sup> The indictment for this case charged 14 people, including two alleged members of the Russian intelligence services (who were tried in absentia) Eduard Shirokov and Vladimir Popov (it was later discovered that Shirokov's real name was Eduard Shismakov and Vladimir Popov was later identified as Vladimir Moiseev<sup>157 158</sup>), two Montenegrin opposition leaders, Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, a retired commander of an elite Serbian police force, Bratislav Dikic.

The paramilitary Balkan Cossacks Army (BKV) is pan-Serb, pro-Russian extremist group formed shortly before the election and lead by self-styled Cossack General Viktor V. Zaplatin. It is not known how many members

<sup>154</sup> Political public opinion Montenegro, CEDEM, July 2019, <https://www.cedem.me/publikacije/istrazivanja/politicko-javno-mnjenje/send/29-politicko-javno-mnjenje/1938-politicko-javno-mnjenje-jul-2019>

<sup>155</sup> "Đukanović očekuje priznanje crnogorske pravoslavne crkve", Slobodnaevropa.org, 20. June 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30009817.html>

<sup>156</sup> Hopkins V. (2017). *Indictment Tells Murky Montenegrin Coup Tale*. Politico Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/montenegro-nato-milo-djukanovicmurky-coup-plot/>

<sup>157</sup> „Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked“, Bellingcat Investigation Team, 22 November, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/22/second-gru-officer-indicted-montenegro-coup-unmasked/>

<sup>158</sup> „Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang“ by Grozev, Christo, Bellingcat, 25 March, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>

the BKV has at the moment, or how active they currently are. The document „Hanging by a Thread: Russia’s Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro” states that the purpose of the BKV, which is an affiliate of Russia’s Night Wolves biker group, is unclear, aside from public statements endorsing Pan-Orthodoxy for Slavic peoples. BKV leader Zaplatin who is a Russian citizen with resident status in Serbia, is a veteran of conflicts in the post-Soviet space with links to Rossotrudnichestvo’s Russian Cultural Centre in Belgrade. Bratislav Dikic, former Serbian gendarmerie commander and Aleksandar Sindjelic, a Serbian former convict who had fought on the side of separatists in Eastern Ukraine, and who was the leader of a staunchly anti-NATO, pan-Slavic and pro-Kremlin paramilitary organization Serb Wolves are key Serbian coup plotters and they are also BKV members. The nature of Sindjelic’s relationship with the GRU officers is evidenced by a conversation intercepted on Mirko Velimirovic’s phone, confiscated on his voluntary surrender. Mirko Velimirovic is a Montenegrin national and plot participant, who surrendered and became a police informant four to five days prior to October 16<sup>th</sup>. In that conversation, Sindjelic discusses with Shishmakov Djukanovic’s planned assassination. Bratislav Dikic worked with Sindjelic. His role was to lead the plotters disguised as Montenegrin special police in storming the Parliament and later firing on the DF’s assembled protestors. They admitted their respective roles in the attempted coup and provided information about key links between local conspirators, Russian agents, and political actors in Montenegro. Each confirmed that the undertaking was fully premeditated and planned in both Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>159</sup>

Some of the BKV members are related with the Night Wolves, another extremist group. Night Wolves are a Russian motorcycle club that has become widely known for being a proxy for the Russian state and close friends with Vladimir Putin. They are funded by the Kremlin and

tied to the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>160</sup> Their main mission is to strengthen the bonds of Eastern Orthodox communities and Russia and bring countries together under Russia. The Night Wolves have a chapter in Montenegro, as well as one in Serbia and one in Republika Srpska. It is not known exactly how many members the Montenegrin branch has, but it is known that they are from many towns around the country. The Montenegrin Night Wolves have been involved in a number of high-profile rallies and tours in Montenegro that included Night Wolves from other countries. Most notable are the Oct 2014 Russian Balkan pilgrimage, May 2016 pilgrimage to Ostrog monastery, June 2016 „Slavic World Tour 2016,” March 2018 Russian Balkans Tour of Serbia and Bosnia, and the Oct 2018 escort of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, across Montenegro.<sup>161</sup>

Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov are two alleged members of Russian intelligence services accused for the coup attempt. They are accused of forming a criminal group in Serbia, Russia and Montenegro, which was supposed to commit criminal acts in order to seriously intimidate citizens of Montenegro, endanger the lives and bodies of citizens and seriously endanger the basic constitutional, political and social structures of Montenegro. They handed over money to Aleksandar Sindjelic (witness associate) who used to recruit other persons from Serbia for criminal actions in Montenegro. Eduard Shishmakov was sentenced to 15 years in prison while Vladimir Popov to 12 years in prison.<sup>162</sup>

The question is why would Russia support such a high-risk operation? One can only speculate as to the GRU’s or the Kremlin’s calculus. DMITAR Bečev’s “The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia’s Balkans Footprint Expanding” states that impact on Moscow is marginal and that the timing of the operation was also hardly favourable. Civil conflict in Montenegro would certainly embarrass NATO, but chaos in Montenegro presents little advantage to Russian foreign policy. At

<sup>159</sup> Bajrović R., Garčević V., Kraemer R. (2018). *Hanging by a Thread: Russia’s Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>

<sup>160</sup> Tomovic D., Rudic F. (2018). *Montenegro Detains Pro-Putin Bikers Escorting Serbian Patriarch*. Balkan Insight. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/16/montenegro-detains-pro-putin-bikers-escorting-serbian-patriarch-10-16-2018/>

<sup>161</sup> Anderson E. (2019). *State-Specific Vulnerability to Russian Influence: A Case Study of Montenegro*. Diploma thesis. Retrieved from <https://is.muni.cz/th/qyn71/?lang=en;id=206297>

<sup>162</sup> „Svi optuženi za državni udar proglašeni krivim”, Radio Free Europe, 9 May, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/drzavni-udar-presuda/29929378.html>



the same time, Russian policymakers were exploring opportunities to engage the U.S. and its European allies—for instance, by exchanging cooperation in Syria for sanctions relief and Russian-provoked escalation in the Balkans would have complicated these plans. One of the theories described in this document says that Russia's involvement in the alleged coup attempt was driven by freelancers, not by an order from the Kremlin. This second theory argues that the plan originated in conservative nationalist circles surrounding Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev. There are some averments that Malofeev is very active in the Balkan since 2014 and that he originated the idea to attempt a coup in Montenegro in 2016.<sup>163</sup>

### E. Instrumentalization of minorities

Estimates of the number of Russian nationals that permanently reside in Montenegro vary. According to a 2011 census, around 1,000 inhabitants declared themselves Russians or Russian speakers.<sup>164</sup> According to a 2014 statement by the Russian Ambassador, there are up to 7,000 Russians permanently residing in Montenegro<sup>165</sup>, while estimates of Russian-speaking diaspora go up to 15,000. Some 4,500 Russian citizens have temporary or permanent residence in Montenegro.<sup>166</sup> The next population census is scheduled for 2021, and it will likely present a clearer picture of the number of Russians living in Montenegro.

There is no sufficient number of Russian nationals that permanently reside in Montenegro and their malign influence cannot be observed. „Compatriots<sup>167</sup>” is association of Russian in Montenegro. They also have website „Russian-speaking diaspora of Montenegro<sup>168</sup>”.

### G. Disinformation operations

There are currently over 100 electronic, online and print media active in Montenegro. The report of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU) joint programme "Reinforcing Judicial Expertise on Freedom of Expression and the Media in South-East Europe (JUFREX)" emphasizes that the media market is small and not very sustainable, influenced by strong competition from neighbouring countries and polarization between market players from different parts of the political spectrum. The overall objective of JUFREX, a three-year regional project, implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, South Macedonia and Kosovo was to promote freedom of expression and freedom of the media in line with the Council of Europe standards.<sup>169</sup>

As for the ownership structure, there are only several owners, so the issues of so many media as well as the quality of their reporting can be raised. Some of the founders are close to the ruling structure, while others are critically inclined. When it comes to online media (portals), they have been developing very fast lately, so this sector is the least regulated. There are a number of portals that are not registered and operate in complete illegality. It is not at all possible to find out their URLs or impressum.

Officially, no Pro-Russian media can be found in the registry of electronic publications in Montenegro. Those who stand out as the most famous or influential are In4S, Borba and Sedmica. Russian media in Serbia, which are written or broadcasted in Serbian language, are also very popular in Montenegro. Most of these media retrieve in-

<sup>163</sup> Bechev D. (2018). *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/the-2016-coup-attempt-in-montenegro-is-russias-balkans-footprint-expanding/>

<sup>164</sup> Official data by MONSTAT, Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011, July 2011.

<sup>165</sup> „Nesterenko: U Crnoj Gori živi do sedam hiljada Rusa,” Vijesti.me, 27 January, 2014, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/nesterenko-u-crnoj-gori-zivi-do-sedam-hiljada-rusa>

<sup>166</sup> Official data by the Ministry of Interior as reported by Vukićević, Jasna, „Investicije i ruski čaj u Crnoj Gori”, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 19 April, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-nekretnine-crna-gora/29891916.html>

<sup>167</sup> „Compatriots”, [https://montenegro.mid.ru/ru\\_RU/compatriots-ru](https://montenegro.mid.ru/ru_RU/compatriots-ru)

<sup>168</sup> Website „Russian-speaking diaspora of Montenegro, <http://rudiaspora.me/s/news/11/>

<sup>169</sup> Smokvina K. T., Furnémont J. F., Janssen M., Mijatović D., Milojević S. J., Trpevska S. (2017). Montenegro Media Sector Inquiry with Recommendations for Harmonisation with the Council of Europe and European Union standards. Reinforcing Judicial Expertise on Freedom of Expression and the Media in South-East Europe (JUFREX). Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/montenegro-media-sector-inquiry-with-the-council-of-europe-and-europea/16807b4dd0>

formation from Sputnik or RT. Interestingly, Russian social network Vk.com and search engine Yandex.ru are among the most visited sites in Montenegro<sup>170</sup>.

As the Montenegrin media market is small on investments, the most effective way of acting on the Montenegrin audience is through pro-Russian media, which broadcast information published by Sputnik and Russia Beyond<sup>171</sup>. In 2015, Sputnik opened an editorial office in Belgrade and started distributing free content to the region through portals and radio programs in Serbian language. Due to underdeveloped production capacities and poor economic situation, the narratives produced by Sputnik, through Montenegrin media, easily find a way to reach a wider audience. The pro-government media also transmit certain non-political information, thus enabling Sputnik to be ordained as a name among the widest possible audience.

Circulating tabloids, especially in Serbia (Alo, Kurir, Telegraf, Informer) compete in extolling Russian military and political power, glorifying and spreading the cult of personality of Vladimir Putin. They do not lag behind the media with long-standing tradition such as Politika, Borba, Vecernje Novosti and others. The media in Montenegro are also prone to Russia, above all its military might and the glorification of Putin. Almost every day, dozens of articles on portals and newspapers promote pro (Russian) positions on major political issues. It mostly refers to Kosovo, Syria, Ukraine, and praises are praised for Russian arms and the military. They even announce a final showdown with the "evil" west (EU, US, NATO)<sup>172</sup>. When it comes to the story of „omnipotent Russian weapons”, this type of narrative is predominantly „distributed” through portals and print media, while it almost does not exist on TV channels (news programs or other shows). What is interesting is that distribution of narratives about Russian weapons goes through those Montenegrin media that share the same foreign policy priorities as the current Podgorica. The web portal IN4S has even a special section on its portal

called „The Russian View”, where it publishes articles on various current topics from Russia on a daily basis. Much attention is also paid to superior Russian weapons, where Russia's superiority over the United States and NATO is reported, citing unnamed US or NATO officials as sources<sup>173</sup>. The Russian agency Sputnik is the most frequently mentioned source of this information.

#### H. Corrosive economic activities

When we talk about the relationship between Montenegro and Russia, in any form, the strong historical and cultural connection between the two countries is usually emphasized. This is of course true and applies to the entire Western Balkans.

It is this undeniably strong link that Russia is using to put pressure on Montenegro, combined with the fragile institutions and division of the society. All with the aim of destabilizing the country and diverting it from the Euro-Atlantic path, which Montenegro has officially chosen. Fifteen years ago, Russia and Montenegro intensified their economic relations, both through individuals and companies, while political relations were at a very good level. Even after joining the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia over Crimea's annexation in 2014, and deterioration of political and bilateral relations in the coming period, it remained among the top 5 investors in the country<sup>174</sup>.

Montenegro's economic growth is related to the period after the restoration of statehood in 2006. According to the official data of the Central Bank of Montenegro, the total value of investments from Russia during this period was about EUR 1.3 billion or 30.9% of GDP. An important moment happened in 2005 when a Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska bought the Aluminium Plant Podgorica (KAP) and the Bauxite Mines Niksic. Oleg Deripaska is the owner of Russian aluminium giant Rusal, which bought companies through the Cypriot offshore company Salomon Enterprise, which later changed its name

<sup>170</sup> Alexa's ratings

<sup>171</sup> Tomović D. (2017). Pro-Russian Montenegrins Publish New Anti-Western Media. BIRN. Retrieved from <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/pro-russian-montenegrins-publish-new-anti-western-media-10-17-2017>

<sup>172</sup> "Moskva se sprema za KONAČNI OBRAČUN, milion naoružanih Rusa dobija i zastrašujuće pojačanje!", Alo.rs, 11. march 2019, <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/ruske-vesti/moskva-se-sprema-za-konacni-obracun-milion-naoruzanih-rusa-dobija-i-zastrasujuce-pojacanje/216319/vest>

<sup>173</sup> "Амерички лист: Старе руске ракете једнако убитачне као и хиперсоничне", In4s.net, 23. january 2020, <https://www.in4s.net/americki-list-stare-ruske-rakete-jednako-ubitacne-kao-i-hipersonicne/>

<sup>174</sup> Data on FDI inflow by countries from the Montenegrin Central Bank, April 2019

to Central European Aluminium Company (CEAC Holdings Limited). KAP was very significant for the Montenegrin economy, as it represented over 50% of total exports and contributed to GDP with about 15%. The Aluminium Plant was considered to be the largest consumer of electricity in Montenegro, and thus KAP's owner tried to take control of the energy sector in the country. In June 2007, the Montenegrin Parliament prevented the possibility of the Thermal power plant in Pljevlja and the Coal mine being bought just for the purpose of providing cheap electricity to the Aluminium Plant<sup>175</sup>. Meanwhile, the global economic crisis has particularly affected the aluminium industry. This resulted in KAP being unable to fulfil its part of the privatization agreement. In March 2012, the Parliament voted for the Government to take over the management of the company, and the following year a procedure was initiated to initiate bankruptcy proceedings. Following this, CEAC initiated arbitration against Montenegro, claiming EUR 100 million in compensation. Since this failed, Deripaska sued Montenegro before courts in Cyprus. Currently, KAP is managed by the Montenegrin company UNIPROM, which bought KAP for EUR 28 million<sup>176</sup>.

In the period 2011-2014, Russian citizens purchased a number of homes and apartments on the coast of Montenegro, which resulted in a sharp rise in property prices. There is no official information, but speculation is being made about the number of 70,000 properties owned by Russian citizens<sup>177</sup>. Moreover, estimates of the number of Russian citizens permanently residing in Montenegro vary between 1,000 and 15,000<sup>178</sup>. According to data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, about 4,500 Russian citizens have temporary or permanent residence in Montenegro.

In addition to the real estate and energy sectors, a strong economic link with Russia is the strategic branch of

Montenegrin development - tourism. Russian tourists once made up almost a quarter of the total number of visitors. According to 2017 data, Russians accounted for 18.7% of all foreign tourists in Montenegro, while in 2018 this share decreased to 16.3%<sup>179</sup>. Although the Serbs were the most numerous tourists in the last two years, statistically Russians are number one in the number of nights spent (about one fifth of the total number of nights). Following Montenegro's accession to NATO, the Russian media launched a campaign to portray Montenegro as a dangerous country with an increased crime rate. However, official figures show that there has not been a more drastic drop in the number of tourists, although it certainly happened (in 2018 there were 12,000 fewer tourists compared to 2017). In comparison with the mentioned sectors, trade turnover is not characterized by some significant figures. Especially when compared to the amount of Russian capital entering the country. The deterioration of political relations, however, had negative consequences<sup>180</sup>. After Montenegro joined the EU sanctions against Russia, in 2014 the Russians stopped importing agricultural products from both Montenegro and other countries that supported the sanctions. Subsequently, in 2017, the competent Russian authority banned the import of wines and other alcoholic beverages from the Montenegrin company Plantaže, on the pretext that regular inspection revealed

<sup>175</sup> This was made possible by members of the smaller party of the ruling party in the Parliament in cooperation with oppositional MPs, arguing that Montenegro must retain control of its most important energy resources and that this takeover would be economically and politically harmful to the country.

<sup>176</sup> "Uložio 11 miliona eura: Pejović danas otvara fabriku unutar KAP-a", Investitor.me, 15. Jul, 2019, <https://investitor.me/2019/07/15/ulozio-11-miliona-eura-pejovic-danas-otvara-fabriku-unutar-kap-a/>

<sup>177</sup> „Rusi su u Crnoj Gori kupili 70.000 nekretnina,” Vijesti.me, 17 May, 2014, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/rusi-su-u-crnoj-gori-kupili-70-000-nekretnina>

<sup>178</sup> According to the latest 2011 census, about 1000 inhabitants declared themselves Russians (or Russian speakers). The public also mentions a figure of 15,000 inhabitants, but official or recent confirmation can be provided after the next 2021 census.

<sup>179</sup> "Prošle godine 2,2 miliona turista i 13 miliona noćenja, najviše gostiju iz Srbije", Bankar.me, 01. march, 2019, <https://www.bankar.me/2019/03/01/prosle-godine-22-miliona-turista-i-13-miliona-nocenja-najvise-gostiju-iz-srbije/>

<sup>180</sup> Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Montenegro, Center for Study of Democracy, Policy Brief No. 73, January 2018



the presence of pesticides and plastics in the company's products<sup>181</sup>.


Regarding the control of the Montenegrin oil and petroleum products market, Russian capital is present through the companies Lukoil Montenegro and Novatek. The first is a daughter company of the Russia's private oil major Lukoil, which has been present in Montenegro since 2006 with 11 filling stations. Novatek<sup>182</sup>, together with the Italian company ENI, has a concession for offshore oil and gas exploration in the Adriatic Sea over the next 30 years. The survey is still ongoing and concrete results are announced for 2020.

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<sup>181</sup> For the company Plantaže, the Russian market is one of the largest, and in the past few years, 20% of its products were exported to Russia alone. The company is trying to challenge this decision before the Russian judicial authorities, which are still debating the matter.

<sup>182</sup> Novatek is owned by oligarchs Leonid Mikhelson and Genadi Timchenko who are on the U.S. and EU sanctions lists





Montenegro has traditionally friendly relations with the Russian Federation, but over the last decade the alarm sounded about Russian influence.



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## CONCLUSIONS

This section aims to identify the similarities and differences in the tools of Russian influence and the extent of their success in the Western Balkans with view to Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. In this context, the goal of Russian activity in the region appears to be the same throughout all three countries and it is primarily focused on the prevention of their Euro-Atlantic integration. This aim, however, is pursued in distinct ways, tailored according to national contexts largely depending on the level of sympathy and identification of domestic populations with Russia.

### Recommendations

#### Multilateral Measures

- **Transnational coordination.** Countering malicious activities of foreign actors requires a common democratic strategy. In reality, Kremlin uses similar tools, actors and even the same narratives to pursue its objectives. Complying with international agreements, membership in international organizations or simply cooperation with countries which are already EU and NATO members will streamline the national resistance mechanisms. Last but not least, regional approach to this matter and sharing intelligence among Western Balkan countries is elementary, not only in sense of its internal operability but also as an external demonstration of their unity and common principles.
- **Reasonable economic partners.** Western Balkan countries should be seeking partnerships, not just support by foreign entities. Moreover, potential economic partners shall be chosen reasonably. The demanding Western conditions provide investment opportunities for sustainable sectors, enhance democracy and introduce greater transparency in the financial system, while entanglement with authoritarian regimes in the field of critical infrastructure and energy policy binds the economy for a long time ahead and consequently endangers national independence.
- **More policy investment from the United States and the European Union.** In light of the European Council's rejection of launching membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia – investment in policy from the US/EU is required in the region. The longer Western powers avoid playing an active role in the Western Balkans, the more opportunities authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, Turkey) will have to exploit the situation.
- **Move closer to EU Accession.** The Commission, the European Parliament, as well as European and US pro-integration forces must work on reaching an agreement with France and other reluctant EU member states to be able to start accession negotiations with the WB nations. It must be emphasised that the point of the accession process is to make them ready for EU accession. Meanwhile, the governments of the Western Balkans must act proactively and implement reforms to help convince reluctant EU members about the viability of their accession bid.
- **Western aid in countering malign foreign influence.** The European Union and the US should fund local efforts in the Western Balkans that are aimed at countering malign foreign influence, and help local organisations dealing with such issues via knowledge-transfer



## National Measures

- **Legislation on the financing of political parties and movements.** Introducing effective legislation reasonably regulating private founding of political bodies regarding both direct financing and financing by third parties will largely prevent malicious actors from gaining political influence and abusing political power to pursue their objectives. Along with that, outlawing any financial contribution by foreign legal and natural persons as asserted by the Venice Commission is an essential move towards mitigating the malign influence from beyond the state borders.
- **Strong election infrastructure.** Mechanical subverting of elections as the cornerstone of democracy has become a useful tool of Kremlin's comprehensive election meddling. For averting any interference in election office networks and voter registration databases, each country must develop a coherent and interconnected system. Technical strengthening of the preventive cyber and information security as well as developing effective quick response plans would require an investment of considerable resources but will deter any malicious actor in the long run.
- **Deterrence and cost-rising measures.** Discouraging malicious actors from taking unwanted actions is an effective and economical measure. On one hand, it should be made legally and morally unacceptable for domestic actors to use malign techniques, disseminate harmful information, disinformation or foreign propaganda. On the other hand, the authorities are responsible for the public warning about the repercussions of foreign interference, particularly in connection with exposure of evidence of related malign efforts. Such actions may result in imposing economic or diplomatic punitive sanctions at the responsible actors
- **Emotionless cultural ties.** The perception of real Russian strength is distorted on many levels, what Kremlin leverages to its advantage. It is using cultural diplomacy, ethnic symbols and historical affiliations to consolidate its presence in the region. The countries must recognize the opportunism and malignancy of Russian intentions seeking to exploit them to disintegrate the West and represent a challenge demanding serious reforms. They must seek internal stabilization,

combat the „us vs them” narrative and boycott exploitation of minorities for foreign political gains.

- **Sustainable domestic economy.** Continual and conceptualized investment regime is a key to disruption of the cross-national investment networks that support Kremlin's foreign policy aims and dependence on the foreign capital. Authorities need to think for the long term, aspire to operate with domestic resources on a broader scale, consolidate the educational system and encourage the private sector to expand the labour market in order to cease the ongoing emigration process. Building a strong and independent economy would also demand a cardinal reform of government management and public expenditure, which have been deficient in both transparency and efficiency.
- **Legal measures towards hate-speech propaganda.** Along with public exposing and condemning foreign operations, it is indispensable to hold the malign actors accountable for their actions. As stated in Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) „any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.” Foreign information operations conducted in the region often misuse the national fragmentation of the Western Balkan countries and encourage ethnic tensions, and therefore may be dismissed by legal and judiciary means.
- **Acknowledged economic contribution.** In the region, there is a widespread feeling that economic partnership with Russia is far more important than it actually is. The Russian investments are specific-sector important, involving mainly oil and gas market, however, its overall economic presence is minimal compared to the EU's. The EU is the main partner both in exports (72 %) and imports (58 %), while Russia has 3,1 % share in exports and 4,9 % share in imports. This fact asks to be publicly communicated more intensively.
- **Pro- EU/NATO Narrative.** Political forces in favour of EU- and NATO membership should offer a positive counter-narrative to pro-Russian actors' divisive rhetoric. These narratives should focus on clearly and concisely introducing to the general population the clear advantages of partnership with Western institutions over a stronger relationship with Russia (e.g., the EU offers non-refundable subsidies, while Russia offers loans). The narratives of pro-EU and pro-NATO forces

should discuss the positive effects of a strong partnership with the West on the daily lives of citizens (e.g., EU subsidies can be used to improve public services, etc.).

- **Public exposure of malign efforts.** Russian influence – and any other malign influencing activities – in the region should be treated as a national security threat, and countering it should be treated as a priority therefore, it is not only necessary to share information internally, but also to condemn them publicly. Despite the possible controversy, reporting the findings regarding ongoing processes, exposing specific detected incidents and their condemnation would lead to increase of the awareness and resilience of the general public as well as delegitimization and reduction of the impact of such activities.

- **Debunking of disinformation.** Replacing untrue news with accurate information has proven to be an effective tool in combating viral disinformation as a component of propaganda. Besides single verification of the outspoken statements, fact-checking portals contribute to building critical thinking capabilities and can cooperate with media platforms as well. Choosing an appealing form of content delivery, they have the potential to develop broad audiences across the whole society and make the truth louder.

- **Regulation and transparency of the media landscape.** Mainstream media are an especially precarious realm in Western Balkans countries in regard to the dissemination of foreign propaganda. Not complying with the journalism ethics and standards, large fragmentation of the media landscape and uncontrollable emergence of new information platforms remain the most significant issues. The business-minded discourse of media, which is reflected in their content, endures and needs to be challenged by constraining rules for non-standard media as well as by encouraging environment for the objective ones. Also, a greater transparency in the media financing and ownership networks should be established. Media should act as a part of the system of checks and balances, rather than be used as a tool of propaganda.

- **Work closely with NGOs.** In Western Balkan countries, there is still a blank space to be filled in terms of identifying malign foreign intervention, mainly the one conducted through information operations. There-

fore, combined efforts of government, intelligence community, social media platforms, academia and NGOs will lead to definition and reconstruction of the framework of the ongoing operations in sense of actions, means and goals.

- **Proactive approach.** Given by the cognitive biases and limited perception of the human brain it is naturally not sufficient to undertake reactive measures against malign information operations. Both state institutions and NGOs should establish a proactive approach and deliver a positive but at the same time realistic narrative about the country's historical developments, present circumstances and future prospects in coherence with the proclaimed orientation. Especially for the non-governmental sector, it is fundamental to build audiences by for example involving popular influencers and to focus on „persuading the persuadable“.

- **Empowering cross-cutting structures and inter-agency bodies.** Information-sharing process, coordination of analysis and policy formulation within a state ought to be conjunctly facilitated. This applies not only to the horizontal level of the state administration but also to the vertical level, including local officials and civil servants, engagement of whom will improve the ability to identify and counter any foreign interference to the system. In order to develop sustainability, facilitation of the cooperation should go beyond party politics and be led by an independent body.

- **Local governments should increase funding for the training of local journalists.** This will help improve the quality of independent journalism and therefore increase the trust of locals in the media.

- **Decision-makers and opinion leaders should not overestimate Russia.** Overestimating its strength and potential can make Moscow more appealing to certain parts of the population. Pro-West forces should emphasise the weaknesses of Russia: unappealing wages, social inequality, low life expectancy, etc.

- **Governments must consider implementing media literacy trainings in the school curriculum.** Such trainings could serve as a solid long-term basis for resilience against disinformation and propaganda campaigns. States in the Western Balkans should not wait for implementing media literacy trainings until their hands are forced – as it happened in Ukraine. Moreover, basic,

non-partisan education should be given to students on the meaning of liberal democracy, the functioning of democratic societies, the rule of law, civil society, the EU and international relations.

- **Cross political party cooperation.** A strong and consistent dedication to democratic principles will only be possible by encouraging cooperation across party lines.
- **Engage with civil society and media.** Undemocratic practices and trends should be persistently challenged in leaders' communication, public appearances and statements as well as progress reports. This can be achieved by determined engagement of the civil society and media, the watchdogs of democracy.

### Civil Society & the Role of the Media

Civil society organisations should focus on building grassroots support instead of only being in contact with decision-makers and opinion-leaders. Such efforts should involve a focus on youth, including university students. By organising trainings on disinformation and other topics for younger citizens, CSOs do not simply build a connection with them, but also help build long-term resilience against malign foreign interference and illiberal political efforts among a layer of society.

- These efforts should not focus only on the capital city, CSOs should go out to smaller settlements in the countryside as well to build a base there.
- Due to changing media consumption habits, CSOs should work on creating their own channels of communication (FB page, Instagram account, well-designed website). On FB, CSOs – due to changes to FB algorithms – should create FB groups to foster discussions among their followers.
- Podcasts could prove to be a solid way to connect with the general population. Even if they are not particularly popular yet, they will become increasingly prevalent in the future, and whoever launches one among the first could become the most widely recognised political podcast provider locally.
- Holding movie screenings, showing the audience relevant films (e.g., Putin's Witnesses), could entice an entirely different layer of society to participate in the event, and provide a solid framework for discussing relevant topics.

- CSOs should also play a role in training journalists, as they might be in the best position to teach them how to identify and reveal disinformation narratives to the broader public. Moreover, both CSOs and journalists should be active in launching fact-checking initiatives in local languages. Western powers should make funding available for them to realise such projects.

- CSOs could create guidelines in the local language that defines what disinformation is, what goals it can achieve, why it is problematic (not only in politics but in other areas as well). The guideline should then introduce common disinformation narratives prevalent in that particular country and ways, methods to identify manipulative statements, information (e.g., checking multiple sources, reverse image search, etc.). These recommendations must be presented in a concise, understandable and accessible way.

- The debate about the problems concerning social media platforms should also be opened in the Western Balkans, including the effects of trolling and bots on the discussions there.

- Local independent media should pay more attention to EU-related topics and explain them to readers to increase public awareness and knowledge about the effects of EU membership on the lives of ordinary citizens.

- CSOs should cooperate with each other locally and in the region, as they can use that cooperation to strengthen each other, e.g., by increasing the size of the audience for their joint events.

- Public media and digital literacy. All undertaken measures should share one objective – understanding of the potential threat of foreign interference, its means, goals and implications by society. State representatives are responsible for publishing realistic reports, enhancing media and digital literacy of the general public, providing them with the skills to critically assess news and capabilities to become reflexively suspicious of information that makes them angry at fellow citizens. Only when the population is aware of the white spots it can make rational decisions.



## NGOs

- Increasing interdisciplinary cooperation and capacities between organisations and institutions, but also between different professional groups, like journalists, analysts, experts, scientists, as well as state administration workers,
- Increasing cooperation with foreign partners on the international level – both in dedicated fields, as well as interdisciplinary and between different professional groups,
- Establishing new channels of communication between organisations, state representatives and national audience is essential and requires development of new skills from the field of communication, public relations, strategic communication and marketing,
- Every NGO has limited time and resources to engage in different activities, so it would be best to adopt internal policies focused on facilitating decision making processes regarding which project, both internal and external, are worth taking part in,
- There is a huge potential in interacting and engaging with national representatives in international institutions (e.g. European Union agencies or structures like East Stratcom Task Force), inviting them for workshops, lectures and trainings would be a good way not only to raise awareness, but also to attract the media outlets attention,
- There are different needs regarding different goals, so not only actions on the central state level with ministries and central institutions, but also on the local level with local politicians, activists, journalists and influencers, etc.,
- The problem that many think tanks are facing, is reaching different groups of society or audience with their content, that is way the choice of the language, issues for publications and other means of distribution (like social media) is so important and should be reflected in organisational policies and strategies,
- Reaching young people as one of many groups of the audience is the most difficult while preparing an analytical/expert content, that is why NGOs should always remember to work with graphic and video representations of data as an important factor of their activities on social media and to increase using YouTube, to

be able to influence and interact with teenagers and people 18-25 years of age,

- Organising events like debates or conferences dedicated to selected issues with experts from abroad is one of the best ways to attract media and state administration attention and participation,
- Every country has its own information space and environment, that includes „information hotspots” that are being used by the info-aggressors, especially the Russian Federation (in the Polish case the issue of the Polish-Ukrainian relations or large number of Ukrainian citizens living in Poland may be a perfect example), analysing similarities and differences with experts and organisations from neighbouring countries but also broader, with partners from Europe, may be not only a way of reaching new audiences and popularising certain topics internationally, but also strengthening the position of one NGO on national level,
- It is hard for NGOs to specialise in a broad range of subjects in the field of information threats, that is way it is a good way to choose selected range of issues and analytical activities and work on developing them.

