

BALKANS WATCH REPORT

MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE EVC REVIEW 2020



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2020



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We envision a free, safe, and prosperous Czechia within a vibrant Central Europe that is an integral part of the transatlantic community and is based on a firm alliance with the USA.

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Notice

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the European Values Center for Security Policy's 2020 Review of malign foreign influence in the Western Balkans. This will be the first of an annual series serving the greater transatlantic foreign policy community as it highlights various interventions – political, economic, and military – undertaken in the Western Balkans by authoritarian states and related anti-democratic actors.

Russia, China, and other authoritarian governments seek to project their illiberal agendas in the Western Balkans through various avenues via multiple vectors; more than a summary review based on open sources can provide. Accordingly, the purpose of this Review is to afford a broad perspective of significant developments arising primarily from Russian and Chinese governments' designs to prevent the consolidation of genuinely democratic institutions throughout the region.

This Review's contents are chiefly the result of on-going research undertaken by civil society organizations based in the Western Balkans and working in partnership with the European Values Center (EVC) under a grant generously provided by the National Endowment for Democracy. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Zashto Ne?, Montenegro's Center for Democratic Transition, and North Macedonia's Most Citizen's Association contributed regularly to Balkans Watch Briefing, EVC's monthly electronic bulletin reporting largely on foreign-backed disinformation efforts in their respective countries.¹ Review analysis of authoritarians' progress in Serbia are based on open source research and interviews undertaken by EVC's Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans. And, finally, special recognition and gratitude to our noted partners in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary.

¹ Readers especially focused on disinformation can follow these excellent organization's media monitoring at <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/> (Zashto Ne? in BiH); <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/> (CDT in MNE); and <https://f2n2.mk/> (MOST in MK).

Throughout the region, public confidence in a given state's democratic institutions is tenuous at best.



OVERVIEW

In respect to malign foreign influence, the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic's impact on the Western Balkans was acute. Throughout the region, public confidence in a given state's democratic institutions is tenuous at best. The absence of global political consensus on COVID-19's severity, coupled with the international scientific community's initial struggles to understand the virus' nature left certain communities distrustful of elites and traditional media especially susceptible to false narratives. This Review will provide examples of anti-democratic actors' exploitation of their vulnerabilities in respect to Russian-backed disinformation campaigns and China's "mask diplomacy" in the region.

Three consequential elections were held in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). As democratic forces in these countries strive towards deeper integration in pan-European and transatlantic institutions, Russia proactively endeavors to obstruct their progress by backing authoritarian fellow travelers in these states. Electoral contests are intensively fought and with the Kremlin typically throwing its weight behind those parties and influencers aligned with Vladimir Putin's reactionary worldview. Balkan elections of 2020 were no different.

Under the increasingly authoritarian rule of President Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's embrace of the governing Chinese Communist Party was breathtaking. From foreign aid, to military cooperation, to economic assistance – Belgrade's open-armed receptiveness to Beijing's enthusiastic overtures was categorical. If it continues, Vucic's China policy will bear consequences for the region, Europe, and for Russia's role in Serbia's foreign and domestic affairs.

1. THE COVID CRISIS

Initial ignorance about COVID's nature, resultant public fears, and unaligned global leadership combined to afford Russian-backed media myriad opportunities to wage information warfare against open societies. As early as mid-March, Reuters reported of a European External Action Service document stating that, "A significant disinformation campaign by Russian state media and pro-Kremlin outlets regarding COVID-19 is ongoing."² The nine-page assessment cited Russian disinformation dissemination in English, French, Spanish, German, and Italian.

Western Balkans audiences were targeted as well, with little-to-no fact checking by local media. An illustrative case of fake reports' anatomy concerns a conspiratorial theory around the (then) planned US-led, multinational, 37,000 troop-strong Defender Europe 2020 military exercise. In March, Italy's Communist daily *Il Manifesto* falsely reported that American troops would be exempted from wearing anti-viral masks. An Italian Facebook user then imaginatively alleged that the virus was simply a ruse to divert public attention from the exercise, whose purported objective was to sabotage Italy-China relations.

Going viral, it was eventually translated to BCMS and reposted by Sasa Borjevic, owner of two schools in Belgrade, one being the city's first Russian international school.³ Reposted several thousand times on Facebook and shared through other portals throughout the Balkans, 25 regional media outlets reported this disinformation before effectively debunked by researchers at Raskrinkavanje.ba, a leading fact-checking sight run by Bosnia's Zasto Ne? organization.⁴ Fabricated reports implying that Italians en masse were replacing EU flags with China's red-and-gold followed the same origin and dissemination trajectory.⁵

With spring, the brutal reality of the pandemic set in while truth behind foreign assistance to economically beleaguered Balkan states remained in the dark. Pro-government media and its counterparts in Montenegro dutifully towed Vucic's unabashed kowtowing to Beijing.

Faux Media Profile – In4s

One exemplary outlet is Montenegro's In4s. Established in 2008, In4s brands itself as an alternative to mainstream media, engaging in curricular activities such as its campaigns against NATO, as well as aggressively promoting Serbian historical and cultural figures around the 2011 census. Earlier this year, In4s opened its Belgrade office and launched a TV channel. Its editor-in-chief and public face is Gojko Raicevic, a businessman with ties to Serbia's private sector.

Given its self-identified "alt-media" status, it's ironic that In4s without variance towed the Vucic government's line on China's COVID-19 assistance. One of 2020's top fake narratives in the Western Balkans was the unqualified and false reporting that China provided more aid to Serbia in the pandemic's wake than the EU or any of its member states. Common themes included European weakness and betrayal in pro-Vucic, Serbian-language media. In4s took this narrative and ran with it, publishing stories of the EU's imminent

2 Robin Emmott, "Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says," Reuters, March 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-disinformation/russia-deploying-coronavirus-disinformation-to-sow-panic-in-west-eu-document-says-idUSKBN21518F>.

3 "First Russian International School is opened in Belgrade," RUSSKIY MIR FOUNDATION, March 13, 2017, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/221654/>.

4 Cvjetičanin, Tijana. "Nešto se dešava' : Italijanski 'influencer' i 'analitičar' iz Srbije izmislili američku invaziju na Evropu u doba pandemije." Raskrinkavanje, March 17, 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nesto-se-desava-italijanski-influencer-i-analiticar-iz-srbije-izmislili-americku-invaziju-na-evropu-u-doba-pandemije>.

5 "Ogorčeni Italijani skidaju zastave EU, postavljaju ruske i kineske," Nezavisne novine, March 24, 2020, <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/svijet/Ogorceni-Italijani-skidaju-zastave-EU-postavljaju-ruske-i-kineske/590598>.

demise,⁶ the absence of COVID-19 among Russian soldiers,⁷ and that all COVID-related aid to Serbia came from China.⁸

The fact of the matter is that the EU, far from disintegration, is affording more assistance to Serbia than Xi Jinping's China. According to reporting from Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the EU committed €93 million available to Serbia, with €15 million in immediate assistance and €78.4 million reallocated from other pre-accession funds.⁹ China, by comparison, provided 14 million masks, two test laboratories, and six Chinese doctors together with 14 health experts. Adding insult to injury, one aircraft ferrying Chinese assistance was paid for with European Union funds.

All throughout the early months of the pandemic, IN4s and similar outfits chose to completely disregard government data stating the opposite of Vucic's slavish overture to authoritarian Beijing. Alternative media, indeed.

Faux Media Profile – Sputnik Srbija

The Sputnik Srbija service was launched in 2015. Sputnik's news portal and broadcasting presence in Serbia is formidable. One telling example of its dominance is the airtime Sputnik's reporting is given on B92 Radio and Studio B, once flag-bearers in the opposition to Slobodan Milosevic's government.¹⁰ Lacking funds and the quality news reporting that comes with them, other Serbian media outlets that reproduce or reprint Sputnik news include Vecernje Novosti, Politika, Informer, Standard, Novi Standard, and Pravda.¹¹

Sputnik Srbija's and extended outlets' Serbian-language readership spans throughout the region including North Macedonia, where its articles have been roughly translated into the local language with increasing frequency.¹² Sputnik Srbija's audiences are delivered tried-and-true themes such as the West's "failed Kosovo political project"¹³ and enduring recollections of the 1999 bombing campaign against the Milosevic regime.¹⁴

Predictably, COVID-19 afforded Sputnik Srbija's ample opportunities to fabricate tales of Russia's allegedly effective responses to the pandemic, in turn readily regurgitated by local Serbian media outlets. In March, the Kremlin's media factory claimed that Russian scientists had invented a SARS-CoV-2 preventive drug based on the anti-malarial mefloquine.¹⁵ By summertime, Sputnik reported unreservedly that Russia had developed the first effective COVID-19 vaccine.¹⁶ Domestic media reproducers included Srbija Danas, Alo,

6 "Ništa NATO, ništa EU – Donacija od Kine : Crnoj Gori stižu maske, rukavice, respiratori," IN4S, March 17, 2020, <https://www.in4s.net/donacija-od-kine-crnoj-gori-stizu-maske-rukavice-respiratori/>.

7 "Šojgu: U ruskoj vojsci nema zaraženih korona virusom," IN4S, March 26, 2020, <https://www.in4s.net/sojgu-u-ruskoj-vojsci-nema-zarazenih-korona-virusom/>.

8 "Ništa NATO, ništa EU – Donacija od Kine : Crnoj Gori stižu maske, rukavice, respiratori," IN4S, March 17, 2020, <https://www.in4s.net/donacija-od-kine-crnoj-gori-stizu-maske-rukavice-respiratori/>.

9 Florian C. Feyerabend, Norbert Beckmann – Dierkes, Tobias Ruttershoff & Holger Haibach "Balkans: Geopolitics in Times of Corona," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 17, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/balkans-geopolitics-in-times-of-corona>.

10 Matt Robinson "On Serbian airwaves, a battle for heart of Balkans," Reuters, May 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-russia-media-analysis/on-serbian-airwaves-a-battle-for-heart-of-balkans-idUSKBN17Z0X1>.

11 Eyes Wide Shut: Strengthening Russian Soft Power in Serbia, Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Belgrade, 2016 (pp. 62).

12 Balkan Watch Briefing, June 2020, <https://preview.mailerlite.com/g6o1w9>.

13 "Failure of One of the West's Most Expensive Political projects," Sputnik International, February 18, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201702181050819070-kosovo-political-project/>.

14 "Epizoda 20: Posledice agresije – uterivanje Srbije u NATO (video)," Sputnik Srbija, June 16, 2019, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/godisnjica-agresije/>.

15 "Rusija napravila preparat za lečenje od koronavirusa," Sputnik Srbija, March 28, 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202003281122191025-rusija-napravila-preparat-za-lecenje-od-koronavirusa/>.

16 "U Rusiji uspešno završena klinička ispitivanja prve vakcine u svetu protiv virusa korona," Sputnik Srbija, July 12, 2020, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/rusija/202007121122985790-u-rusiji-uspesno-zavrshena-klinicka-ispitivanja-prve-vakcine-u-svetu-protiv-virusa-korona/>.

Novosti, Nezavisne Novine, Glas Javnosti, and Informer among others.

Failing media transparency reforms, journalistic codes of ethics, and donor support for democratic media, otherwise pro-Western media outlets such as B92 and Studio B will continue to suffer while Sputnik feeds the extreme nationalist and reactionary narratives.

2. ELECTIONS OF 2020

The Western Balkans saw national elections over the past year in Montenegro and North Macedonia. Electorates provided their own verdicts as to their countries' respective trajectories, the outcome in Podgorica being of particular concern.

Montenegro – Parliamentary Elections

August 2020 witnessed the ousting of President and party leader Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) after an unbroken stint in government running for nearly 30 years. The Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe recognized the elections as competitive, while reporting that the ruling party DPS "gained an undue advantage through misuse of office and state resources..."¹⁷

Even if OSCE allegations are well-founded, these efforts were for naught. Voters cast their ballots for change, leaving DPS unable to muster a governing coalition. In their place is a tenuous coalition comprising the Serbian ultra-nationalist coalition For the Future of Montenegro (27 seats), the pro-European Peace is Our Nation party (10), and the progressive United Reform Action (4); DPS in current opposition coalition holds 40.¹⁸

The elections were held in a year where Montenegrin identity was on the ballot. In December 2019, the Montenegrin parliament passed the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and Legal Rights of Religious Organizations which, inter alia, mandated that property and lands in possession of religious communities yet not registered before 1918 may be deemed Montenegrin cultural heritage and therefore property of the state.

Topping the list of the newly dispossessed was the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which from its patriarchate in Belgrade has a long-standing practice of intervening in domestic Montenegrin affairs. Most egregious of late was its outright assistance to (attempted) coup plotters in October 2016, providing its leadership safe harbor to plan at the famed Ostrog Monastery.¹⁹ Remarkably, the SOC has been able to undertake such subterfuge with impunity due to the Church's wholly extra-legal status in Montenegro.²⁰ Consequently, the 2019 law was part of an effort by the state to justifiably exercise its sovereign authority.

The Church and its Serbian nationalist supporters were quick to respond with nationwide street protests and the opposition's violent revolt against the vote in parliament. The controversy's momentum was not lost, playing a decisive role in mobilizing the Serb nationalist vote in the run-up to the August elections. Presently, the governing coalition is at odds as whether to scrap or amend the law; incoming Prime Minister

17 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Parliamentary Assembly: International Election Observation Mission. Montenegro- Parliamentary Elections, August 30, 2020, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/7/462016_2.pdf.

18 Radomir Raev, "Montenegro's DPS ready to go into opposition – Djukanovic," SeeNews, Business Intelligence for Southeast Europe, September 3, 2020, <https://seenews.com/news/montenegros-dps-ready-to-go-into-opposition-djukanovic-712250>.

19 Reuf Bajrovic, Vesko Garčević & Richard Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro." Foreign Policy Research Institute, (July 2018): 11, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>.

20 Ibid.

Zdravko Krivokapic favors its abolition.²¹

The SOC's anti-government opposition regrettably reveals its true colors as a malign foreign actor in Montenegro. An unequivocally anti-Western, pro-Putin institution, the SOC patriarchate has unswervingly stood in opposition to the promotion of liberal democratic values, Montenegro's NATO and potential European Union membership, Montenegro's independence from Serbia, and went so far to provide succor for Serbian ultra-nationalists who, with direct assistance from Russian security services, sought to violently overthrow a democratically elected government in 2016. Furthermore, the SOC need be recognized as separate and distinct from the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, the former attending to its faithful through the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral while it vociferously rejects the prospect of the latter's autocephaly. Despite the number of its adherents, the SOC is nonetheless a foreign institution whose agenda undermines Montenegro's sovereignty.

North Macedonia – Parliamentary Elections

Spurned by the European Council's failure in October 2019 to achieve consensus on the commencement of North Macedonia's EU ascension talks, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev immediately called for elections held in July 2020, approximately five months early. Facing this setback to the EU membership process, Zaev's rescheduling was arguably a political necessity in the hopes of evidencing continued support for his ruling Social Democrats party.

Regrettably for Zaev, the July polls' result failed to clearly award the We Can coalition votes to comfortably secure him the mandate desired. With We Can taking 46 seats, the conservative opposition coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE went home with 44, leaving the Albanian minority interest party Democratic Union for Integration up 15 seats as the potential kingmaker.

What distinguished these elections from the previous is the apparent stature North Macedonia is gaining in Central and Southeastern Europe in the political tug-of-war between democratic parties championing deeper European integration and their Euro-skeptic detractors – namely, Hungary's authoritarian prime minister Viktor Orban.

Prime Minister Orban's stated support for the staunchly nationalistic politics of VMRO-DPMNE²² became resolutely clear in November 2018, when former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, facing sentencing on convictions for corruption, fled to Hungary where he was granted political asylum. This act was not a one-off political favor; rather, it was a part in Viktor Orban's ongoing effort to maximize Hungarian influence in the Balkans.²³

Faux Media Profile – Republika Online

In 2018, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project reported ranking members of Hungary's pro-Orban media establishment buying up Macedonian media outlets.²⁴ Among them was Republika Online, a media portal that today still benefits from the advertising largesse of dubious, nearly non-existent

21 Samir Kajosevic, "Montenegro's New Majority Argue Over Religion Law's Fate," Balkan Insight, October 2, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/02/montenegros-new-majority-argue-over-religion-laws-fate/>.

22 Aleksandar Ivković, "Orban opposes Greece-Macedonia agreement, supports VMRO – DPMNE protests," European Western Balkans, June 5, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/06/05/orban-opposes-greece-macedonia-agreement-supports-vmro-dpmne-protests/>.

23 See Blanka Zöldi, András Szabó, Saška Cvetkovska, Anuška Delić, "Orbán's media machine in the Balkans investigated for suspicious transactions," Direkt 36, February 28, 2020, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/egymilliardot-pumpaltak-at-az-orbanek-altal-epített-balkáni-mediába-gruevszki-ellenfelei-vizsgálni-kezdték-a-gyanús-penzmozgást/>.

24 Maja Jovanovska, Tamas Bodoky, Aubrey Belford, "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans," OCCRP, May 9, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>.

companies based in Hungary.²⁵

Consistent in its rhetoric, Republika Online persistently tows the anti-Western line with baseless accusations and conspiratorial tales. Telling examples cited by Most Citizens' Association include allegations of NATO dumping radioactive material at the Krivolak army base²⁶; widespread, institutional opposition to Macedonian membership in the EU²⁷; and Zaev and philanthropist George Soros plotting to turn North Macedonia into a migrant safe haven.²⁸

Republika Online is not alone as foreign-backed purveyor of falsehoods in North Macedonia. Election night saw a targeted attack on the State Election Commission's webpage. Endeavoring to undermine public confidence in the institution, hackers posted faked electoral results whereby Albanian-interest party DUI was winning in districts with ethnic Macedonian majorities. Republika Online dutifully reported this disinformation as factual, working hand-in-glove with the unidentified hackers to diminish the election's integrity.²⁹ And so an ecosystem of disinformation grows in North Macedonia.

U.S. Presidential Election and Disinformation in the Western Balkans

The global nature of American politics was on display in the Western Balkans in 2020. Whether generated or redistributed throughout the region, the recurring theme was anti-President Elect Joe Biden. The commonality of this message presumably reflects two related aspects.

The first is that the toxic combination of COVID conspiracy theory and Trump sells. A noteworthy report by the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network revealed the prevalence of clickbait manufacturers in North Macedonia peddling fabrications.³⁰ Throughout the country, hopeful journalists and marketing professionals were being directed by their employers to translate sensationalist articles from English into local languages, sourcing e.g. Trumpian Facebook pages. Garnering revenue from GoogleAds, clickbait narratives were uniformly anti-LGBT, COVID-skeptic, and pro-Trump. Ominously, interviewed employees of local marketing firms stated that they were uninformed by management as to the identity of the client(s) directing "creative content".

Related is the regional production of tabloid source material disseminated and then picked up by the aforementioned clickbait factories. In Montenegro, the Center for Democratic Transition found the aforementioned In4s to be reposting baseless allegations of fraud surrounding the U.S. election results.³¹ In BiH, Raskrinkavanje.ba identified media outlets Intermagazin and espresso.rs attributing false statements

25 Goce Trpovski, "How Hungarian Olive Oil Kept Macedonian Media Afloat," Balkan Insight, February 14, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/14/how-hungarian-olive-oil-kept-macedonian-media-afloat/>.

26 "Lazanski: Nato je dobio Krivolak, a Makedonija stanje deponije za radioaktivnu municiju," Republika Online, February 10, 2020. <https://republika.mk/vesti/balkan/lazanski-nato-go-dobiva-krivolak-a-makedonija-stanuva-deponija-za-radioaktivna-municija/>.

27 "Ne se malku, sedim se – kako glasase Evropa protiv datuma za pregovore," Republika Online, July 19, 2019. <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/ne-se-malku-sedim-se-kako-glasashe-evropa-protiv-datumot-za-pregovori/>.

28 "Zaev od Soros baral pari, od Rama albanski glasovi, na El Čeka mu daleke bombe za DUI? (2)," Republika Online, November 11, 2020. <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/zaev-od-soros-baral-pari-od-rama-albanski-glasovi-na-čeka-mu-daleke-bombe-za-dui-2/>.

29 "DUI Tepase u Vevcani, osvoile 72,84%," Republika Online, July 16, 2020. <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/dui-tepashe-vo-vevchani-osvoile-72-84/>.

30 See Saska Cvetovska, "Trump and COVID-19 Fuel North Macedonia's Clickbait Boom," Balkan Insight, November 2, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/02/trump-and-covid-19-fuel-north-macedonias-clickbait-boom/>.

31 Milica Kovacevic, "Svrstavanje u svrhu podizanja tenzija: Trump, neistine i Rožaje," Raskrinkavanje, November 6, 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/svrstavanje-u-svrhu-podizanja-tenzija-trump-neistine-i-rozaje>; Tijana Velimirovic, "Manipulacija cinjenicama – Americki Izbori: Mrtvi ne samo 'glasali' nego se i birali," Raskrinkavanje, November 11 2020. <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/clanak/americki-izbori-mrtvi-ne-samo-glasali-vec-su-se-i-birali>.

to President-Elect Biden, claiming him to be fundamentally prejudiced against Serbs³² and that he'd once advocated their internment in concentration camps.³³ Such fantastic fakery well serves clickbait generators in North Macedonia and beyond.

3. SERBIA'S DISCONCERTING DIRECTIONS

Under the increasing authoritarian leadership of President Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia took two distinctively worrying turns in 2020, while maintaining its status quo as the primary base for Russia's proxy actors in the Western Balkans. The first was Serbia's categorical embrace of Xi Jinping's Chinese Communist Party and attendant economic aid. The second is Serbia's troubling military expansion, afforded by Russia and China alike.

Basking in Beijing's "Benevolence"

On March 16, as U.S. President Trump acknowledged the severity of COVID-19 in a nationwide address, Aleksandar Vucic had just delivered his own press conference in Belgrade. The former's remarks were uncharacteristically cautious and reserved, while the latter's amounted to a betrayal of Europe with their coarseness and categorically unsubstantiated content. Yet Vucic's message was abundantly clear: Beijing and Belgrade are becoming bosom buddies.

As COVID cases spiked in Serbia, Vucic first kissed the Chinese flag³⁴ and then declared the following before international media:

You realized that the great international solidarity does not exist. European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairly tale on paper... We expect a lot and have the highest hopes in the only ones who can help is in this difficult situation – and that is the Republic of China. We asked China for everything. We even asked them to send medical staff.³⁵

The audacity of Vucic's contempt for European state and institutional support is best understood in its intentionally dishonest inaccuracy. In fact, the Serbian Ministry of European Integration website's page (English and Serbian) on EU funding begins with, "The European Union is the largest donor in the Republic of Serbia."³⁶ As discussed above, CCP assistance to Serbia was paltry in comparison, making Vucic's abhorrent disregard all the more telling; namely, that China is Serbia's preferred investor.

Since 2012, China has invested \$9.5 billion in Serbia, representing more than one-half of China's stated investment in the region.³⁷ The expanse of investment fields is substantial. Chinese state or state-backed firms are constructing railways, modernizing roads, and building a coal-fired power plant.³⁸ While 2020 saw less development due to the pandemic, massive projects continue. Examples include: Zinjin's \$1.46 billion

32 "Lazna Vijest - OVO SU NAJGORE IZJAVE BAJDENA O SRBIJI," Raskrinkavanje, November 3, 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/clanak/ovo-su-najgore-izjave-bajdena-o-srbiji>.

33 "Lazna Vijest - OVAKO JE BAJDEN PRIČAO KADA SE RASPADALA SFRJ: Sve Srbe treba zatvoriti u koncentracione LOGORE! (VIDEO)," Raskrinkavanje, July 11, 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/clanak/ovako-je-bajden-pricao-kada-se-raspadala-sfrj-sve-srbe-treba-zatvoriti-u-koncentracione-logore-video>.

34 Dusan Stojanovic, "China's 'mask diplomacy' wins support in Eastern Europe," AP News, April 14, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/76dff4b113e82d85716262895909f151>.

35 "Serbia's state of emergency: 'China is the only country that can help,'" CGTN, March 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P42OrsA045M>.

36 "Fondovi Evropske Unije," Ministarstvo za Evropske Integracije RS, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.mei.gov.rs/srp/fondovi/fondovi-evropske-unije/>.

37 Valerie Hopkins, "Pandemic and EU neglect tighten Serbia bonds with China," Financial Times, June 17, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/eeb179ae-9c13-11ea-871b-edeb99a20c6e>.

38 In 2018, Kostolac B's emissions were the highest of any coal plant in the Western Balkans. "Kostolac B3 lignite power plant, Serbia," Bankwatch Network, 2018. <https://bankwatch.org/project/kostolac-lignite-power-plant-serbia>.

purchase of the ailing RTB Bor copper mine and smelter and the nearly \$1 billion investment in Linglong Tires' first manufacturing plant in Europe.

Serbia is Militarizing

On the defense and security front, the Serbian government continues with its nationwide surveillance program realized through 1,000+ facial-recognition cameras provided by none other than Huawei.³⁹ Further alarming was Belgrade's foray into Chinese military technology. In July 2020, Serbia received its several "Rainbow" CH-92A attack drones capable of missile and grenade delivery.⁴⁰ Airborne in October as part of the 2,800-soldier strong "Cooperation 2020" military exercise, this was the first ever instance of Chinese drone technology put to test in European airspace.⁴¹

Test flying unmanned Chinese weaponry over Europe is only one event in a year of marked military expansion. Serbia's 2019 military expenditure was up 43 percent to \$1.4 billion, a \$326 million increase on the previous year.⁴² In addition to noted Rainbow drones, Serbia purchased Russian-made Pantsir air-defense systems comprising radar, surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft cannon.⁴³ Most recently, Vucic accepted 11 T-72 tanks – the first of 30 slated for donation by Russia.⁴⁴

Expressing his gratitude, Vucic maintained Serbia's accelerated armament as demonstrative of Serbia's declared military neutrality. Nonetheless, amidst mediocre economic performance and the absence of any significant ground force threat in the region, watchers are left to question the drive behind Vucic's apparent militarization.

Russia and China in Serbia – Aligned or Otherwise?

Aleksandar Vucic spent 2020 sending a variety of signals to authoritarian powers Russia and China as they vie for influence throughout the Western Balkans via a beachhead in Belgrade. To date, Vucic has shown adept skill in his fawning courtship of Xi Jinping while not distinctly alienating Vladimir Putin. Vucic's success in this regard is in part aided by neither Moscow nor Beijing having yet struck a clear balance between ally and adversary. Serbia stands to prove a testing ground as to the limits of their cooperation.

Russia and China's long-term objectives in Southeastern Europe may not be ultimately compatible. For over a decade, Putin's Russia has pursued "managed destabilization" in the Western Balkans; that is, sufficiently unstable and undemocratic to genuinely integrate within European and transatlantic institutions, yet not so much whereby, for example, ethnic divisions and/or social unrest develop into open armed conflict, thereby necessitating Western intervention.

China values and benefits from this strategy – for now. Western Balkan states with weak economies and institutionalized corruption are ripe for the picking via Belt-and-Road Initiative and other CCP-sponsored financial inducements. In the long-term, however, China recognizes that it will best profit politically and economically from a Western Balkans functionally integrated into the European Union and its markets.

To the extent that Brussels need, for example, an actual resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute as part of

39 Bojan Stojkovski, "Big Brother Comes to Belgrade," Foreign Policy, June 18, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/18/big-brother-comes-to-belgrade-huawei-china-facial-recognition-vucic/>.

40 "Serbia Receives Chinese CH-92A Attack Drones," Defense World, July 1, 2020, https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27326/Serbia-Receives-Chinese-CH-92A-Attack-Drones#.X8_pBy0-1QI.

41 Aleksandar Vasovic, "Serbia tests Chinese drones, Russian jets at major exercise," Reuters, October 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-military-idUSKBN26V00A>.

42 "Serbia had the highest military expenditure in 2019," EURACTIV, April 28, 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/serbia-had-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2019/.

43 "Russia delivers Pantsir air-defense system to Serbia," DW, February 22, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-delivers-pantsir-air-defense-systems-to-serbia/a-52481436>.

44 "Vucic: Donation of Russian battle tanks significant progress for Army," N1, November 28, 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a677508/Vucic-Donation-of-Russian-battle-tanks-significant-progress-for-Army.html>.

this process, Chinese and Russian interests will come into conflict. Such an agreement between the two states would help pave the way for Serbia and Kosovo's entry into the EU, a development China would support for reasons of trade and investment. Russia, alternatively, has little to gain from a settlement of differences between Pristina and Belgrade. So resolved, a key lever of Moscow's influence in Belgrade would be diminished, barring such significant concessions of genuine autonomy. Russia will need feel confident that it has a base where firmly project its influence in a region it perceives as within its sphere.

Accordingly, Russia undertook efforts in 2020 to flex its multiple vectors of influence within Serbia. Moscow's messages were notably sent in a year where Vucic not only made such overt approaches to Beijing, but also amidst a concerted effort by U.S. President Trump's administration to achieve the ever-elusive reconciliation between Serbia and Kosovo. Multiple accusations of Russian-sponsored actors agitating anti-government protests cannot be easily dismissed given Vucic's earlier overtures.⁴⁵ This October, the Russian government proposed that its Ministry of Defense open an office within its Belgrade counterpart; legal proceedings are currently underway.⁴⁶ This autumn also saw the consecration of the predominantly Russian-funded renovation of the Church of Saint Sava, the SOC's main cathedral – one without Vladimir Putin or Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, cancelling their long-planned trips at the eleventh hour. Moscow did not hide its displeasure.⁴⁷ This did not deter Vucic from dismissing two reliably pro-Russian cabinet members less than one month later.⁴⁸

It remains to be seen whether or not Vucic has the political acumen to manage these multiple and competing interests. With his Serbian Progressive Party's coalition taking more than sixty percent in this summer's parliamentary vote, the proverbial buck stops at the president's desk. Executive authority effectively concentrated, Vucic is bereft of domestic scapegoats in most policy areas, particularly economic. Facing reelection in 2022, he will need to maintain Serbia's pre-COVID economic momentum post-pandemic. While Chinese investment and the ever-promise of EU markets may keep the engine running, Moscow is unlikely to be content as a backseat driver.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Keep supporting the EEAS Strategic Communications Task Forces, including the East Strategic Communications Task Force and the Task Force for Western Balkans, which have a mandate to coordinate EU communications in the region and counter Kremlin-led disinformation. These task forces should receive more substantial resources in terms of both funding and manpower, The European Parliament should call on the European Commission to establish similar expert teams working on Chinese influence and disinformation operations.
2. All European political representatives should stop legitimizing Russian disinformation tools posing as "journalistic platforms". Communication channels effectively run by the Russian government, be it RT, Sputnik, or Russian state-run TV channels, do not represent journalism, they merely pretend to. Therefore, European countries should not consider them to represent free media; they should ban them from press conferences and not give access that is granted only to journalists, which they are not. This would also send a clear message that working for the Russian government is a one-way street for any

45 "Right-Wing Member Of Serbian Parliament Leads Protest Ahead Of National Elections," Radio Free Europe, June 21, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-nogo--leads-protests-parliament-national-election-vucic/30682323.html>.

46 "Russian Defense Ministry Mulls Opening Office In Traditional Ally Serbia," Radio Free Europe, October 20, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-defense-ministry-mulls-opening-office-serbia-traditional-ally/30903684.html>.

47 Snezana Bjelotomic, "Putin cancels his visit to Serbia," Serbian Monitor, October 15, 2020, <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/putin-cancels-his-visit-to-serbia/>.

48 Andy Heil, "Some 'Pro-Russian' Voices Tamed In Serbia, But Vucic Keeping His Options Open," Radio Free Europe, November 10, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/some-pro-russian-voices-tamed-in-serbia-but-vucic-keeping-options-open/30940585.html>.

journalist. No Western public official should ever legitimize these entities with an interview.

3. The European Parliament should use its political capital, including the influence of MEPs in their home countries, in order to push for a clearly vocalized strategy of the EU regarding the potential accession process with the Western Balkans countries. Even though the road to membership might be longer, as long as the conditions and roadmaps are set and agreed upon by both sides, it will be easier to communicate the advantages of membership in the transatlantic community in the region and win the hearts and minds of the local population.
4. The European Union should provide substantial assistance to non-governmental organizations and independent media in the Western Balkans which seek to build democracy and good governance in their countries, as well as to counter foreign influence and disinformation. Sharing of experiences and know-how with Western counterparts as well as funding opportunities from the EU would be a tremendous help for the successful expansion of the non-governmental and media sectors which play a crucial role in moving the Western Balkans countries closer to the West.
5. The European Union should promote evidence-based journalism by supporting independent media organizations across the Western Balkans to establish and strengthen national fact-checking networks that could serve as the backbone of a reliable counterweight against pro-Kremlin disinformation networks. A specific emphasis should be placed on strengthening cross-border activities, as well as seeking more extensive cooperation with European and international fact-checking networks.
6. The European Union should encourage local decision-makers to take more ambitious steps towards ensuring the transparency of the media market in the Western Balkans countries and drive local independent media organizations towards joining international platforms and strategies against disinformation.⁴⁹
7. With regards to the coronavirus infodemic and its geopolitical context, local media organizations should strengthen necessary communications infrastructures, step up national-level cooperation and engage with NGOs and policy experts with credibility in order to counter hostile media campaigns and foreign attempts at manipulation.

49 E.G. One such welcome collaborative initiative between local fact-checking organizations and Facebook was launched earlier this year. See more at: https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-niger/84059/four-western-balkans%E2%80%99fact-checking-organisations-join-facebook%E2%80%99s-platform-against_en.