



Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia's Information War

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Key Points

- In recent years, Russia has ramped up its influence operations in the Western Balkans. Deploying propaganda and disinformation, Moscow stirs lingering regional tensions and undermines the EU's credibility in Western Balkan nations.
- EU institutions and member states have a vital interest in confronting Russian efforts to destabilize the Western Balkans. After all, European security relies heavily on peace, prosperity, and stability in the Western Balkans.
- An effective European response includes active push-back against Russian propaganda and smarter outreach to Western Balkan nations.
- Moscow's information war can best be countered by supporting local fact-checking initiatives that expose Russian disinformation, by teaching media literacy from an early age; by promoting freedom of the press and by helping pro-Western media sources become more affordable, accessible, and geared towards the concerns of Western Balkan nations.
- EU institutions and member states need to also address the growing disillusionment with the West that Moscow feeds and exploits. They need to better advertise the extent of EU engagement in and with the Western Balkans, extend targeted aid that immediately affects peoples' lives, and pressure Western Balkan leaders that misrepresent the amount of support EU institutions and member states give to their countries.

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Background

Emphasizing how important the Western Balkans are to the European project is one of the European leaders' favorite truisms. However, despite the passionate rhetoric, the level of attention the EU devotes to the region has dropped sharply. Preoccupied with the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, and the rise of populism, engagement in the Balkans by the EU's institutions and member states has subsided. Their neglect has created a void that Russia has been eager to fill. Keenly aware that by destabilizing the Western Balkans, it can indirectly undermine the European project, Moscow has been steadily ramping up its influence operations in the region.

Propaganda and disinformation have long been the Kremlin's tools of choice. In deploying these methods to the Western Balkans, Moscow has focused on two objectives: It stirs lingering regional tensions and it is sapping the EU's credibility among the region's nations. In so doing, Russia is shrewdly feeding and exploiting a growing disillusionment with the West in the region.

The EU's institutions and members states cannot ignore Russia's meddling in their neighborhood. The EU needs to redirect its attention to the region and vigorously push back against Russia. Most importantly, it needs to step up its public diplomacy in the region. Actively confronting Russian propaganda is one side of the coin; the other involves reaching out to Western Balkan nations in a smarter way.

This paper makes actionable recommendations along both lines. If implemented, they could help the EU thwart Moscow's efforts to foment conflict in the Western Balkans and increase the Union's own leverage to foster the reforms needed to ensure stability and prosperity.

Russian Meddling in the Western Balkans: Divide and Conquer

Following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the Russian government has developed its political influence networks in the Western Balkans and elsewhere. Vladimir Putin's willingness to violate international law was, in part, motivated by fears of EU and NATO enlargement into Moscow's so-called 'sphere of influence.' Likewise, the Kremlin views EU and NATO expansion in the Western Balkans as at least a secondary threat to its national security interests. Therefore, it is intent on undermining further integration.

To achieve this objective, Moscow is destabilizing the region, fostering anti-European sentiment, and strengthening its own voice. Propaganda and disinformation have been central to these efforts. As Dimitar Bechev points out in his recent publication, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe*, "The main achievement of Russian soft-power operations is not so much the direct impact on political events – national elections, decisions on energy and security policy, and so forth – as the ability to shape political discourse [in line with Russian interests]." ¹

Moscow's strategy in the Western Balkans relies on a broad spectrum of diplomatic instruments including, but not limited to, media influence, public support for Eurosceptic organizations and leaders, as well as the establishment of various NGOs and civic associations that play major roles in local affairs. In November 2014, the Kremlin's news agency *Russia Today* began broadcasting a Serbian-language program, *Sputnik Srbija*, out of a newly established office in Serbia's capital. In line

Moscow's information war aims at undermining further Western integration.

Kremlin's news agency puts up Serbian-language program.

Russia-backed media discredit the West and feed inter-ethnic tensions.

with its self-declared mission to “tell the untold,” *Sputnik Srbija* promotes conspiratorial thinking by framing the EU and the U.S. as imperialist powers seeking to destroy Serbian identity and autonomy. The news stories tend to recycle certain narratives about the threat of a ‘Greater Albania,’ the NATO bombing campaign of Belgrade in 1999, and stories that frame the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as an anti-Serbian initiative, lionize Serbian war criminals, and present Russia as the only great power that truly cares about injustice towards the Serbian people. These narratives do not only serve to discredit the West; by feeding nationalist Serbian sentiments, they also feed inter-ethnic tensions and resentments in the region. While the core audience is based in Serbia, *Sputnik Srbija* is also popular among ethnic Serbians in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska, the Serb entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Russia Beyond the Headlines launches news app for the region.

In October 2016, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, a news supplement that is sponsored by the Russian government, launched a mobile application for iOS and Android called RBTH Daily. The news app is free, and as of January 2018 available in 14 languages, including Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, and Slovenian. It helps Moscow saturate the regional political discourse with its own views on world events. The Serbian language version fosters negative attitudes toward the West, glorifies the Russian military and highlights Serbian military cooperation with Russia by promoting headlines such as “Russia will rescue Serbia’s military aviation,” and “Russia tested the [UR-77 Meteorit] under NATO’s nose.” The purpose of these stories is to cement the idea that Russia, not the EU or the U.S., is Serbia’s natural ally.

EU candidate countries are Russia’s primary targets.

While Russia’s information war in Serbia is relatively well documented, less attention has been given to Russian intervention in other EU candidate countries in the Balkans, namely Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Via its media influence, Moscow simultaneously attempts to destabilize these countries while undermining their rapprochement with Western organizations. For example, the Russian-backed coup and attempted assassination of the Montenegrin Prime Minister in October 2016 was a direct response to Montenegro’s bid to join NATO in December 2015. While Montenegro still joined NATO in 2017, it did so under adverse conditions: Russia not only sought to undermine Montenegrins’ right to free and democratic elections, but also targeted the country with online disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, and strategic economic coercion.

In Macedonia, Russian spies and diplomats spread propaganda and provoke ethnic discord.

According to Macedonian intelligence documents obtained by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke ethnic discord in Macedonia. For this purpose, Russia has increased its diplomatic outreach by establishing honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid, while the Russian embassy in Skopje has overseen the creation of many “friendship associations” between Macedonians and Russians and opened a Russian cultural center in Skopje. The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) reports that Russian media sources in Macedonia have been warning Macedonians against the U.S. and its European allies: they should not be trusted because they seek to carve up Macedonia and Serbia in favor of a ‘Greater Albania.’² By spreading this type of narrative, Moscow-funded media are attempting to destabilize the country by fomenting ethnic tensions.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moscow supports Serb separatism.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moscow has been consistently pushing for the independence of the Republika Srpska, the part of the country home to a large Serb majority. The region’s president, Milorad Dodik, has benefited from Vladimir Putin’s

unwavering support, and has been threatening to hold an independence referendum for years. Putin and Dodik met twice in 2014, before Dodik was elected President of Republika Srpska. During one of those meetings, Dodik unequivocally expressed his affinity for Russia and thanked Putin for his political support and understanding. Putin knows that keeping Bosnia and Herzegovina politically fractured will weaken the country's prospect for EU (and NATO) membership.

The West's neglect facilitates Russian meddling.

Moscow exploits people's frustrations with the EU.

As these examples show, Russia has been quick to exploit the West's neglect of the region. In so doing, it has successfully re-ignited some of the tensions that had taken so much effort to soothe. Moscow has also exploited people's frustrations over the slow pace at which their country moves towards EU accession and has flooded the media with negative reports to keep real progress out of the spotlight. Ultimately, Russia wants to send the message that the European project is doomed to fail or, at the very least, constitutes a dangerous prospect for the future of the Western Balkans.

Why the EU Cannot Ignore Russian Meddling

European refugee crisis highlighted the importance of stable Balkan States – and their vulnerability.

The EU has a vital interest in confronting Russian meddling. European security relies heavily on peace, prosperity, and stability in the Western Balkans. This reliance was most recently highlighted during the European refugee crisis, when hundreds of thousands of migrants passed through Western Balkan states on their way to EU territory, pressuring transit states such as Serbia and Macedonia into taking on the role of reluctant crisis managers. This placed the countries involved under considerable stress – a burden they could not have shouldered had they been preoccupied with inter-ethnic strife. Future migration crises can only be managed in close consultation with the EU enlargement countries. Not only would a Western Balkans plagued by ethnic conflict be unable to act as a reliable partner for European migration management efforts, it might even become another source of displaced populations.

Instability breeds radicalization.

Radicalization is another way in which a destabilized Western Balkans could pose a threat to European security. States in the region have seen some of their nationals go abroad to join the Islamic State. The grievances and uncertainty that instability breeds would certainly render the region's Muslim youth much more receptive to the extremist ideology of returning fighters. The EU must ensure that the Western Balkans do not become an exporter of extremism and radical ideas. It must thus identify and counter Russian efforts to destabilize the region by inciting ethnic conflict.

The European aspiration of Western Balkan nations is still a source of leverage.

For the very same reason, European leaders need to fight against attacks from Moscow aiming at the EU's image. While disillusionment with the West is an undeniable reality, a large share of Western Balkan people still see their country's future in the West. This aspiration may serve as a unifying bond among otherwise divided communities. And despite the dwindling prospect for EU accession, this aspiration continues to be a vital source of European leverage – leverage that can be used to push Balkan leaders to commit to peace and to reforms that can stabilize their countries. For the sake of regional stability, the EU should defend its image and ensure that Euro-Atlantic integration remains an attractive goal for Western Balkan nations.

Euro-Atlantic integration needs to remain an attractive goal.

Recommendations

The EU needs to redirect its attention to the Western Balkans. It also needs to redirect its public diplomacy in the region along two main lines: The first is active push-back against Russian propaganda; the second is smarter outreach to Western Balkan nations.

Countering Russian Propaganda

Aside from exposing Russian propaganda, an effective strategy to counter Russian meddling will involve major investments in the region's media landscape, financially and otherwise.

1. Support local fact-checking initiatives

First, the EU needs to help Russia's targets become aware of the information war that is being waged upon them. This means exposing the fake news and disinformation Moscow disseminates in the region and informing Western Balkan populations of the topics and issues that Russia exploits in its favor. In 2015, the European Council established the first strategic communications task force (StratCom Task Force) of the European External Action Service, tasked with exposing disinformation and fake news in the EU's eastern neighborhood and with media education in the region. In 2017, it set up a special task force for the Western Balkans. The EU should commit to permanently fund the work of these task forces and ensure that their efforts are reaching local populations in the Western Balkans. While the "EU vs. Disinfo"³ website run by one of the Stratcom Task Forces has been diligent in exposing Russian disinformation campaigns, it is only available in English, Russian, and German, and is thus of little use to many of the Balkan communities targeted by Russia. The Western Balkans Task Force should translate these reports and help boost their visibility in the region. It could also create a mobile application that can be downloaded in various Western Balkan languages.

To counter Russian disinformation, the European Commission could also sponsor a social media monitoring project to track Russian propaganda in real time. The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), an initiative run by the German Marshall Fund in Washington, DC, has already set up such a tool to monitor the activities of Kremlin-oriented Twitter accounts in the United States and in Germany. ASD's efforts are sure to prove instructive for the Western Balkans and should be complemented by monitoring efforts suitable for traditional (Russia-backed) media.

A few local fact-checking initiatives already operate in the Western Balkans. In Serbia, for instance, the NGO Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CTRA) has developed Istinomer, a website that is dedicated to fact-checking. The EU can most effectively support these efforts by creating an online registry of these local initiatives to strengthen coordination among them, as well as provide a platform for sharing best practices.

Moreover, as part of its support to investigative journalism in the Western Balkans, the European Commission should offer special funding to Western Balkan journalists that are dedicated to fact-checking, the exposure of Russian social media bots, and other efforts of combatting disinformation.

Russia's information war needs to be exposed in local languages.

StratCom Task Forces need permanent funding.

European Commission should sponsor social media monitoring project.

Media education has to start at early age.

2. Increase students' ability to detect fake news

In November 2017, the European Commission pledged to spend more money on – inter alia – improving media literacy in the region. The importance of this effort cannot be overstated. It should include all Western Balkan countries and seek active involvement of the schools in the region – starting from the earliest stages of children's education. Knowing how to analyze and evaluate the content and sources of information will enable young people to understand the role of media in a society from an early age onwards, to think critically about media messaging, and to tell fact from fiction. This will best prepare young people for a world in which targeted information operations are becoming more sophisticated and insidious.

3. Support media freedom

Poor media freedom increases vulnerability to foreign interference.

Deterring malign Russian influence in the Western Balkans will ultimately depend on the state of independent media and quality journalism in the region. Russia's 'untold truth' has only become as powerful as it has because it is operating under very poor conditions of media freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders, media freedom in Serbia has sharply declined since 2014. Freedom House scores Serbia's press as "partly free" and argues that although Serbia's constitution and legal framework guarantee freedom of the press, these guarantees are not well enforced in practice. The President, along with various state media outlets, continues to portray independent media organizations as foreign agents, a tactic that is all too familiar in Russia. This makes the Serbian media landscape particularly vulnerable to information operations by foreign powers, notably those coming out of the Kremlin.

At the first EU-Western Balkan Media Days on 9-10 November 2017, the European Commission announced € 7,5 million of additional funds to support improved media freedom and professional journalism in the Western Balkans through various local initiatives. This is a crucial step in the right direction. In addition, it is imperative that the EU continues to harshly criticize national leaders that attempt to undermine freedom of the press and try to control the media. Furthermore, the EU needs to uncompromisingly insist on media freedom as a non-negotiable pre-condition to EU accession. It cannot credibly do so without much greater efforts to ensure respect for this principle at home – that is, among the EU's current members.

4. Make pro-Western media sources more affordable, accessible, and geared towards regional and local concerns

Anyone can republish Sputnik's content free of charge.

The primary media outlets in Serbia promote propagandistic Russian news partly because they are more affordable than Western media sources. The terms and policies of Sputnik, the Russian news agency, state that anyone can republish its content free of charge if Sputnik is credited. To reach a broader audience, pro-Western news sources need to make reading and republishing quality journalism more affordable in the Balkans. The European Commission should subsidize primary media outlets in the Western Balkans to ensure that they can afford the rights to broadcast pro-Western media content.

Media messaging needs to be tailored to local needs.

Another reason for the popularity of Russian media sources among Western Balkan people is their ability to appeal to local concerns and attitudes. With at least 40 employees operating in Belgrade, Sputnik Srbija can connect with issues on the ground and tailor its messaging to local needs. To reach a greater audience,

pro-Western news sources need to learn from this strategy and become more engaged with local issues. Failing to do so leaves countries with the perception that Russia is more in tune with their needs.

Reaching Out to the Region

Efforts to directly and indirectly combat Russian disinformation need to be accompanied by a renewed and more active strategy of outreach to make the EU's engagement more visible. Currently, the EU and its members fail to convey to Western Balkan nations that their commitment to the region outweighs that of Russia – or that of any other actor for that matter – by an order of magnitude. Trade, aid, and investment are just three areas of engagement where Russia's role is dwarfed by that of the EU and its members. To give an example: in 2016, the EU28 accounted for 73 percent of total trade in goods with the Western Balkans. Russia, by contrast, accounted for a negligible 5 percent.⁴ Similar patterns emerge in investment and aid. Yet, when asked about the biggest donor to their country, a sizeable number of Serbs names Russia and not the EU.⁵ The EU needs to close this chasm between perception and reality. Improving the media landscape in the Western Balkans, as outlined above, will certainly help; so can the following measures:

1. Better advertise the extent of EU engagement

Wherever the EU invests, funds construction projects or is otherwise engaged, its activities must be highly visible. Improved marketing may include simple measures such as substantially increasing the size of posters that mark EU-funded construction sites. As measured by the visibility of posters, it is currently Moscow, not Brussels, that invests the most in Belgrade for example. More effective self-marketing may also include adding info data to each construction site poster – info about the amount of EU aid the country receives, or, for better context, charts that reveal how the amount of EU aid compares to that of other donors. The EU Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, that for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, as well as EU Delegations should cooperate closely to develop effective visual tools to convey to citizens in the Western Balkans the magnitude of the EU's commitment to their region.

2. Increase targeted assistance with symbolic power

On effective communication, the EU and its members can also learn from Russia, which excels at targeted, small-scale yet highly visible acts of assistance. Moscow knows how to pick aid activities with great symbolic effects and large returns in terms of gratitude. Mostly, this concerns assistance that may be low-cost but immediately improves peoples' lives. For instance, supplying remote villages in the Western Balkans with safety equipment such as fire-extinguishers is a cheap but powerful symbolic gesture that conveys that "Russia cares about your safety!" While the EU has good reasons not to choose its aid activities based solely on their symbolic power, it should take that factor into consideration when targeting its resources.

Help in situations of crisis needs to be particularly visible. In humanitarian crisis situations, as with landslides or floods in the Western Balkans, Russia may send less rescue workers than individual EU member states, yet Moscow's efforts usually dominate the news. The EU and member states should make crisis management a key focus of their visibility boost. The EU-funded mega-project to support flood risk areas in the Western Balkans (IPA FLOODS), launched in 2015, is an excellent opportunity for public outreach. Why not have EU Delegations in relevant countries

EU commitment in the Western Balkans: reality vs perception.

Measured by their visibility, Moscow, not Brussels, invests the most in Belgrade.

Russia excels at small-scale yet highly visible acts of assistance.

IPA FLOODS is an excellent opportunity for public outreach.

and representatives of IPA FLOODS organize joint information events in affected communities during which they could also donate flood response items?

3. Increase pressure on Balkan leaders to report fairly

Greater visibility of EU engagement depends on more than better self-marketing by EU actors, it also requires fair reporting by leaders, administrations, and media in the Western Balkan. The EU's institutions and members should thus increase their pressure on regional leaders which misrepresent the EU's role in their countries. While motives may differ, many leaders portray Moscow as the more active party, overstating Russia's assistance to their country while failing to acknowledge the EU's support. The EU should no longer tolerate this unfair treatment. EU institutions and member states should credibly threaten to reduce or withdraw certain types of assistance should their activities not be adequately communicated.

Greater visibility for the EU's commitment to the region will certainly help reduce resentment towards the West among Western Balkan populations. In turn, this will damage the Kremlin's ability to sow chaos in these states. After all, it is disillusionment that makes people more receptive to Russia's anti-EU propaganda and to the nationalist sentiments that Moscow fans. A more active public diplomacy by the EU is the best way to reduce the disillusionment that Russia's information war successfully exploits.

Regional leaders overstate Russia's assistance and fail to acknowledge European support.

Greater visibility helps reduce the fertile ground for Russian propaganda.

- 1| *Bechev, D. 2017. Rival power: Russias influence in southeast Europe. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press.*
- 2| *http://cepa.org/EuropesEdge/Russias_new_Macedonia_offensive. (last accessed on Feb 27, 2018).*
- 3| *<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> (last accessed on Feb 27, 2018).*
- 4| *http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_111477.pdf (last accessed on Feb 27, 2018).*
- 5| *http://www.seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/opinion_poll_december_16.pdf (last accessed on Feb 27, 2018).*

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