



AUTHORITARIANS ON A MEDIA OFFENSIVE IN THE MIDST OF WAR

The Informational Influence of Russia,
China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States
in Southeast Europe

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Southeast Europe

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Imprint

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Authoritarians on a Media Offensive: An Overview

The defining characteristic of the growing flux in international politics has consisted in the opposition between democracy and autocracy as revisionist states have sought to challenge the ordering structure as well as values underpinning the international system. The “rise of the East” and “decline of the West” narrative was born and transmitted across public, analytical and academic discourses. Beyond rhetoric, Russia persisted with its revanchist foreign policy, annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine, only to develop this into a full-blow war on the country in 2022. China continued with its expansionist policy in the South China Sea, quashed any remaining opposition to the full capture of Hong Kong and its other peripheries and accelerated investment in its military forces. Beijing’s “going out” strategy was formalized in the “Belt and Road” Initiative as a crucial platform for the expansion of Chinese influence and the export of Chinese institutional models and practices. States such as Iran and Turkey have also persisted with strategies of regional influence, diverting in various degrees from the norms of the liberal international system. Importantly, these emerging tendencies evolved and were coupled with an ideational insistence on the value and effectiveness of authoritarian models, based on a “strongman” political agency and an attack on liberal values. Multipolarity became an explicit goal of key international actors, whose rising determination to fracture and revise the liberal global system gradually spilled beyond the key sites of international engagement and interaction and into the various regions of the world. Viewed from such a prism, Southeast Europe (SEE) is among the most impacted.

The tragic wars of a disintegrating Yugoslavia at the onset of democratic and market economy transition prevented the transformation and integration of the peninsula as a single, consolidated political region. SEE delayed its constitution in this mode, while other regions such as Central Europe and the Baltics managed to cover great political distance as reasonably unified blocs. To the contrary, the path to EU and NATO membership for Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania from the late 1990s and early to mid-2020s opened a rift with the other states of the region, which were eventually packaged as the “Western Balkans”. Divergencies accelerated due to asymmetries in political and economic opportunities as non-EU states seemingly lost a sense of direction

and drive for transformation. Still, various cooperation formats were generated to maintain dialogue and the prospect of EU membership. The start of actual accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro reinforced this dynamic, further strengthened by a wave of countries in the region joining NATO. Various crises such as those related to energy and migration served to intensify cooperation and joint activities even if their political and institutional footprint was predominantly perceived as insufficient.

Yet, these trends and processes largely failed to overcome the persistent sense of impasse and lack of realistic time horizon for full Euro-Atlantic integration. The last couple of years have only deepened the wider perception of geopolitical stalemate as non-EU states in the region struggle to preserve reform momentum and societies suffer persistent emigration and “brain drain”. In parallel, various external actors such as Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states have significantly increased their activities across SEE, sensing opportunities and openings for positioning, embedding and influence. Some countries in the region, mostly prominently Serbia, have even sought to implement a “balancing” foreign policy, creating further opportunities for foreign authoritarian states. Considerable investments have been made, permitting those states to expand their economic, social and media presence and create or consolidate “constituencies of interested partners”. Placed in the wider international context, these tendencies have amounted to a *de facto* return of geopolitical competition in SEE, raising the political stakes of the continued stalling of the region’s full-scale integration into Western institutions and policies. From such a perspective, the West cannot afford to witness the weakening of a strategically important flank of Europe.

It was in the summer of 2021 when the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, spoke before senior communist party members and tasked them with creating a “lovable image” of the country. Earlier in the previous decade, Beijing had become preoccupied with “soft power” as the idea was discovered and appreciated by the party bureaucracy and gradually, if quite unconvincingly, integrated in the approaches of the country to foreign lands and audiences. This was coupled with a more aggressive and systemic push to enter public and media spaces, led by the “United Front Work” department of the communist party. The “middle kingdom” is having to conduct such multi-dimensional and multi-level public positioning in a particularly concerted manner due to its appearance as a relatively novel actor in the region. Conversely, Russia and Turkey have long political and relational legacies in SEE, ensuring a more advantageous location from which to launch and augment their public

presence strategies. Moscow has utilized cultural, historical and business links across countries and sectors such as energy, while Ankara has sought to make the most of its expansionist trade and investment policies over the last few decades. Despite variance in approaches, instruments and intensity, all these external players are spurred by the increasing importance of “winning hearts and minds”, generating and planting self-serving narratives, interpretations and attitudes. Significantly, to varying degrees these states are ever more revisionist in their dispositions and aims, thereby raising the stakes of on-going efforts at establishing influence.

It is a tired but still valid cliché that history, historical trajectories and context matter a great deal in Southeast Europe. Hence, the re-emergence of this wider region as a theater of geopolitical competition generates relevant analytical queries about the histories of presence and positioning and how they impact external countries’ current standing and prospects for influence. In more specific terms, dimensions such as the duration, nature of political linkages, institutional depth of bilateral relationships, existence and functioning of communities of interest and engagement are just some of the parameters which deserve analytical attention in a general and narrower, media and publicity-related, context. The present research considers and integrates such a perspective, examining the evolving strategies, tools and channels of foreign authoritarian-state disinformation in the context of the Ukraine war as well as conducting extensive media content analysis of disinformation narratives (outlining authoritarian-sponsored messages and their local variations). In addition, our country-focused investigations were informed by Balkan experts’ responses to a standardized questionnaire on the scope and key features of external informational interference.

A number of key overall conclusions are drawn from the two in-depth chapters of this report, respectively analyzing 1) Russian media influence and its degree of conjunction with Turkish, Iranian and Gulf-state media initiatives as well as 2) Chinese disinformation strategies:

- Placing Russia’s media activities in the Balkans since the start of the Ukraine war in the longer-term context of the Kremlin’s influence operations in the region reveals a **significant degree of continuity of Russian strategies, tactics and methods for exerting leverage**. Moscow has sharpened its already established disinformation channels and narratives based on pervasive informality (as opposed to direct media ownership); instrumentalization of pro-Russian social and cultural proclivities;

enhanced role of Russia's diplomatic representations for disseminating propaganda; and regional diffusion of Kremlin narratives via Serbian media channels. In turn, the specific national manifestations of those trends and the extent of Russia's ability to penetrate the informational ecosystems of SEE states depend on the extensiveness of local pro-Kremlin networks and societal receptivity to pro-Russian messaging.

- Building on its long-standing (and frequently controversial) imperial legacy in SEE, Turkey has leveraged influence by promoting cultural-religious affinities and investment ties, while refraining from positioning itself as an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. The Gulf states and Iran have also sought to extend their cultural, media and religious clout, particularly on Muslim communities in the Balkans, often in competition with Ankara. Overall, given Turkey's and the Gulf states' pursuit of a "balancing" position in Russia's war against Ukraine, **Turkish and Arab-related media in SEE have not necessarily promoted Kremlin narratives.** In contrast, Russian-linked outlets have presented a much more exaggerated picture of the extent of compatibility of views and goals between Russia, Turkey and the Gulf countries.
- The research is also partially based on an understanding of the **need to go beyond "first generation" studies on Chinese presence in SEE and its media space.** These focused predominantly on setting out the recent and current cooperation chronology, emergent interaction engagements and frameworks between the two sides and initial general observations and conclusions about the nature, dynamic and direction of ties. Rather, our efforts seek to reveal and analyze in greater depth the various dimensions of the nascent and more well-established relationships being constructed, as "third actors" accelerate and deepen their presence in the region, informed by a much more geopolitical mindset and intent. Among other parameters, we are examining the delivered content, institutional connections, approaches and manners of communication, impact on wider societal attitudes, cooperation and synergies between the activities of various revisionist powers, etc.

SEE's media predicament and how to tackle it

The overall development and transformations of the media systems and markets of SEE in the post-1989 period represent a crucial dimension in the context of heightened foreign authoritarian-state interference. Genuine democratic and public spheres were established during the 1990s with a

rapid influx of legal and norm transfer, institution building, practice sharing and Western investment in the emerging media outlets. For a while, this, coupled with a more generalized consolidation of democratic transition, appeared to provide sufficient underpinnings for pluralistic, diverse, free and well-established media systems. Still, as business models and revenue predictions became less enticing and the sense of entrepreneurial adventures in the new European markets waned, important Western investors began to depart, exposing regional media spaces to renewed challenges. These came in the shape of acquisition and exposure to often shadowy business circles, to state influence and capture and to exogenous state actors. Hence, a nascent path towards consolidated free and open media spaces was interrupted and, ultimately, set back resulting in the phenomenon of media capture, whereby opaque and corruptive local business-political networks exercise leverage over the ownership and editorial structures of domestic outlets.¹ In this process, “strategic corruption” plays a critical role, as foreign authoritarian states entice either governments or related proxies in the Balkans through illicit finance in order to comply with and implement those states’ foreign policy objectives.²

Deeper changes were unleashed by the displacement of terrestrial television and print media at the start of the 21st century. The arrival of digital and social media generated additional transformational momentum precisely at a time of the undermining of the fragile post-communist media spheres. This shift had a negative multiplier effect, further fracturing the foundations of more traditional and well-established outlets and opening the space for dubious media entrepreneurship and vulnerabilities to external actors. Such processes are well captured by numerous international evaluations of the collapse in freedom and quality of media in the region.

Effective media regulation and supervision across the Balkans remains a key challenge as disinformation and the decline in media standards breed on uneven and insufficient enforcement of norms and good practices. For example, effective disclosure of ownership of media organizations and outlets continues to evade most countries and provides opportunities for “third countries” in the media space. Lack of transparency in this crucial relation entails an inability to identify and reveal various linkages of local business

¹ Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin’s Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, p. 11. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

² We are grateful to Mrs. Tanja Maksic for these observations.

interests with structures and networks of external authoritarian actors, in most cases Russian but not only. Non-disclosure and opaqueness of media funding and advertising further create penetration opportunities for authoritarian states. The research of the impact of these features of the media context on wider geopolitical matters will also help shed light on how foreign authoritarian states are operating in the region.

Media vulnerabilities are additionally reinforced by persistent indicators in many of the SEE societies of the presence of broadly shared anti/non-Western dispositions. This is seemingly stable, regardless of the actual path and pace of Euro-Atlantic integration and provides ample space for the media strategies of external actors. The emergence and consolidation of media platforms with a great deal of friendly content will pose further challenges for the states of the region. Last but not least, media literacy is yet another important factor which impacts the degree of openness and susceptibility to propaganda and disinformation. While this issue is of wider importance related to democratic consolidation, it is becoming of central relevance as high-level geopolitical competition is translated into multitudinous sub-strategies relating to media, economy, society and culture.

To tackle the variety of challenges afflicting the informational environment of SEE states, a coordinated approach needs to be forged that unites the efforts of policy-makers, civil society and international actors. A call to action would include the following recommendations:

- **Activate the (counter)intelligence services and publicize intelligence information**, when available, of the political and financial ties between foreign authoritarian actors – primarily Russia as the authoritarian state most deeply enmeshed in the Balkans, and local proxies, who disseminate Kremlin narratives. In this way, murky and informal networks will be exposed to society.
- **Establish strategic communications units on the government level** tasked with monitoring and analyzing foreign authoritarian disinformation as well as coordinating government messaging and counteraction with regard to foreign media influence.
 - ✓ A policy of building awareness needs to be forged. Until a few years ago, China, in particular, was largely a political and public non-issue, barely existing on the media and policy radar of most institutions and members of SEE publics. This is clearly changing but there is still a long way to go before local publics and elites arrive at a fuller awareness and

appreciation of China's positioning and intentions in the Balkans. China-related knowledge is restricted to a small circle of experts in foreign ministries and the executive branch and a few individuals in academia. Further, national and local administrations, companies and employers' organizations as well as media outlets are increasingly indicating the importance of better awareness towards Beijing and its activities. The "middle kingdom" is actively leveraging this asymmetry of knowledge and awareness, for instance, in relations with local government and smaller research and academic institutions in the region.

- **Deepen cooperation with the EU and NATO** in terms of coordinating counter-disinformation activities by consistently applying the Union's flagship initiatives such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act.
 - ✓ SEE states should actively cooperate, join and support the work of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) for building resilience capacity against influence operations.
 - ✓ Promotional campaigns should be advanced, which explain how the EU and NATO support its members and acceding candidates politically, financially and militarily in order to counter the propagandist aim of presenting Russia and China as greater contributors to the economies of Balkan states than the Euro-Atlantic organizations.
 - ✓ Overall, the nature and durability of the Russia and China challenge is such that further political and institutional effort ought to be made to create and sustain the proper infrastructure for monitoring and analysis of their publicity and propaganda activities. Such structures need to be established in a variety of contexts – academic, policy, research and at the national and EU levels. This includes institutional and funding support of state-related and private policy and research institutes, relevant state administration and intelligence structures, employers' organizations, local government structures, etc. The timeframe of such efforts needs to be long-term, given that the standoff between the West and Moscow and Beijing will continue into the future.
- **Initiate a concerted strategy of positive narration about democracy** and the advantages of living in a free country as a response to authoritarian states' attempt to undermine confidence in democratic arrangements and Russia's inability to provide a positive blueprint for the future (given its overemphasis on historical falsification and lack of a viable social, political and political model to posit as exemplary for others).
 - ✓ There needs to be a renewed emphasis on the Western belongingness of SEE. Foreign authoritarian states are not only embedding themselves

materially, in economy, finance and otherwise, but are increasingly telling alternative stories, inserting their narratives and representations into the cultures and public sphere of countries in the Balkans. This is impacting public perceptions and attitudes and runs counter to long-standing efforts to frame Western membership and belonging as self-evident, as a natural consequence of history, as a fact of cultural and political realities. From this perspective, Western political elites and institutions face the task of generating new ways of representing belonging and membership, of constructing narratives and images of a shared future.

- In addition to debunking that retrospectively counters disinformation, **devise pre-emptive strategies based on pre-bunking** that anticipates propagandist messaging and prepares publics in advance (such as through informational campaigns in the form of short video explainers). Draw on the emerging field of inoculation research in Psychology to design a preventive approach to tackling disinformation.
- **Quality journalism should more consistently focus on creating compelling content** that lures readers back to informing themselves from evidence-driven reporting, thus addressing an imbalance, according to which people are attracted to disinformation due to its perception as more interesting and sensationalist.
- **Improve ownership and investment monitoring.** The decline of the quality of the media sphere in SEE has gone hand in hand with authoritarian states' expansion of their presence and deepening of ties with media from the region, often in a very non-transparent manner which requires close monitoring. Revision and improvement of ownership and investment monitoring regimes in media is therefore essential as well as more transparent reporting of advertising streams, good investigative work on these matters and improved funding and support for media development and monitoring institutions at the policy, media and academic level.
- **Establish cross-country regional support networks that can aid investigative journalists** and foster joint advocacy in cases of political pressure.
- **Re-examine the concept and practice of reporting all viewpoints** as a pitfall that may invite the dissemination of disinformation since not all views have equal validity or are backed by similarly a sound argumentation.
- **Conduct targeted media literacy activities** that are sensitive to the needs of different societal groups and their respective specific susceptibilities to disinformation.

- ✓ Introduce media literacy classes on a regular basis in the school curriculum.
- **Equip communities of interest and raise awareness.** SEE states and societies have been surprisingly oblivious to the implications of the new geopolitical reality, whereby foreign authoritarian states increasingly interfere in domestic political, economic and cultural processes. They have been even less willing to work out in a systematic manner the precise scope and magnitude of this challenge. While there is some movement on this front through memberships in international Western organizations such as NATO, we are yet to witness a sustained effort. SEE countries need to clarify their policies towards foreign authoritarian actors and begin to develop processes that equip the relevant national groups and communities for this interaction. For instance, this entails better knowledge and analysis of the risks on the part of Balkan publics.

Russian Media Influence in Southeast Europe since the Start of the Ukraine War: A New Chapter in a Continuous Disinformation Plot

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In Russia's invasion of Ukraine, disinformation has been deployed as the ideational weapon complementing the Kremlin's military activities. Hostile media operations have sought to provide a justification for Russia's actions and embellish its image; frame perceptions of Ukraine's history and nation-state identity; deny committed crimes; as well as proclaim the emergence of a new world order. The key targets of Russian disinformation are aimed at a wide array of actors and constituencies. Prime among those is Russia's own population, whose encapsulation within a media environment based on falsification and distortion of information about the war has served to promote a rallying around the Kremlin authorities. Russian disinformation has also tried to influence – albeit to a limited extent, Ukrainian society itself in order to erode self-confidence in the war effort.³ In Europe, some of the most vulnerable targets encompass the pro-Russian sections of publics, particularly in the Balkans, where extensive, historically Moscow-leaning audiences have been amenable to Russia's narrative about the war. Across the world, in Africa, the Middle East and other parts of Asia, Moscow's propaganda plays on anti-Western sentiments to garner support for its military aggression in Ukraine.⁴

This chapter sets out to examine in a cross-country comparative manner the key channels, narratives and actors that the Kremlin has leveraged in order to exercise media influence in Southeast Europe since the start of the war. Zooming in on Russian disinformation in 7 countries of the region,

³ Conger, K., 2022, 'Hackers' Fake Claims of Ukrainian Surrender Aren't Fooling Anyone. So What's Their Goal?', *New York Times*, 5 April 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/05/us/politics/ukraine-russia-hackers.html>.

⁴ Plate, C., 2022, 'Putins Propagandaoffensive in Afrika', *Zeit online*, ('Putin's Propaganda Offensive in Africa'), 9 August 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2022-08/rusland-afrika-propaganda-wladimir-putin>.

including Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania demonstrates the continuity of Moscow's strategies based on 1) the deployment of informal means of leverage through opaque local pro-Kremlin networks, 2) the ability to tap into and sway societies' East-West cultural ambivalences and historical memories of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, 3) weaponization of Russian Embassies and related social media channels, as well as 4) amplification of Serbian media networks diffused throughout the region.

The regional assessment of Russia's media influence is additionally placed within a larger conceptual and comparative context in a twofold manner. First, the chapter traces the main overall trends characterizing Russia's media operations in its own domestic affairs as well as on an international scale in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, revealing that there has been an intensification of the pre-established patterns of Russian propagandist activities. Second, the extent to which Russia's war discourse is supported by other authoritarian states with regional ambitions and clout in the Balkans, including Turkey, the Gulf states (particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates) and Iran as well as Russian disinformation's own portrayal of these countries' role in the war is further explored. A key conclusion which emerges is that there is a degree of disjuncture, whereby Russian disinformation conveys a much more exaggerated representation of the extent of overlap between Turkish, Arab and Russian foreign policy goals than do the media of Turkey and the Gulf states. Local pro-Russian outlets in the Balkans follow the Kremlin line in extolling the partnership between Moscow and Ankara and portraying the Arab states and Iran as Russia's allies in the construction of a new world order.

Escalation on two fronts: Russian disinformation in a war mode

Since the start of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has sharpened and intensified the preexisting patterns of the disinformation it has circulated both internally and externally. In domestic affairs, the Russian authorities have pursued **a strategy of censorship directed at cracking down on the space for independent media and isolating the Russian audience from views that contradict the official Kremlin discourse on the war.** A series of regulatory restrictions were introduced in order to police the boundaries of that

discourse. The Law criminalizing the discrediting of the Russian armed forces⁵ possesses an extensive remit so that a wide variety of actions and types of content have become punishable, including not only the creation of original content but also reposting material and commenting under social media posts.⁶ The scope of the Foreign agent law was further expanded, whereby anyone under generally defined “foreign influence” or receiving any kind of support from abroad would qualify as a foreign agent and Roskomnadzor (Russia’s media watchdog) can block their outlets without awaiting a court decision.⁷

These legislative measures have facilitated large-scale and frequently indiscriminate blocking of domestic Russian and international domains. In addition to the closure of prominent oppositional TV channel Dozhd, newspaper Novaya Gazeta, radio channel Echo of Moscow, regional outlets were blocked (such as Echo Petersburg and Bumaga from St. Petersburg)⁸ as were thousands of websites on the grounds that they publish information which does not correspond to the official view of Russia’s military activities in Ukraine.⁹ Further to the clamp-down on media sources, freedom of expression

⁵ Consultant.ru, 2022, ‘Публичные действия, направленные на дискредитацию использования Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации в целях защиты интересов Российской Федерации и ее граждан, поддержания международного мира и безопасности или исполнения государственными органами Российской Федерации своих полномочий в указанных целях’, введена Федеральным законом от 04.03.2022, (‘Public actions aimed at discrediting the deployment of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for the defense of the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, support of international peace and security or Russian Federation state institutions’ fulfillment of their competences according to set goals’, introduced as Federal law on 04.03.2022). Retrieved from: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/df67f6386f3aa5253a89bbf6e63fca1b2315988c/.

⁶ Roskomsvoboda, 2022, ‘«Дискредитация» ВС РФ в интернете. Можно ли ещё высказать своё мнение?’, 27 мая 2022, (‘“Discrediting” of the armed forces of the Russian Federation on the Internet. Is it still possible to express one’s opinion?’, 27 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://roskomsvoboda.org/cards/card/about-army-in-social-media/>.

⁷ Deutsche Welle, 2022, ‘Russia tightens legislation on “foreign agents”’, 29 June 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-tightens-legislation-on-foreign-agents/a-62307066>.

⁸ Delovoy Peterburg, 2022, ‘На радио “Эхо Петербурга” расторгли трудовые договоры с сотрудниками’, 5 апреля 2022, (‘Radio Echo Petersburg cancels contracts with associates’, 5 April 2022). Retrieved from: https://www.dp.ru/a/2022/04/05/Na_radio_JEho_Peterburga2

Delovoy Peterburg, 2022, ‘Сайт петербургского издания “Бумага” заблокировали по требованию Генпрокуратуры’, 12 марта 2022 (‘The site of the St. Petersburg outlet Bumaga blocked on the order of the General Prosecutor’s Office’, 12 March 2022). Retrieved from: https://www.dp.ru/a/2022/03/12/Sajt_peterburgskogo_izdan.

⁹ A list of websites blocked as part of the different waves of regulatory restrictions and databases of banned websites can be found in the following sources: Roskomsvoboda, 2022, ‘Военной

has been circumscribed through arrests, the imposition of fines and the opening of litigation cases against journalists and citizens protesting Russia's actions in Ukraine.¹⁰ The Russian authorities also focused on disseminating propaganda among the youth, inculcating the official view of the war through specifically targeted classes.¹¹

Despite the overwhelming repression of **independent media**, some of the latter have managed to adapt and carve out a space for alternative views by **migrating to social media platforms**. For instance, former journalists at TV channel Dozhd created their own YouTube channels, named respectively *Kotrikadze Dzyadko12* and *Mongayt*.¹³ Therefore, social media has provided an avenue for free speech as Russian authorities have refrained from restricting access to YouTube (not least given the scale of its usage by the domestic

цензуре подверглось более 1500 сайтов', 1 апреля 2022 ('Military censorship found on more than 1500 sites', 1 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://roskomsvoboda.org/post/ban-1500-ssylok/>;

Meduza, 2022, 'Российские власти за несколько дней разгромили весь медиа-рынок. Вот как это выглядит Печальный список (к сожалению, обновляется)', 5 марта 2022 ('The Russian authorities destroyed the whole media market in a few days. Here is how the notorious list looks like (unfortunately subject to expansion)', 5 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/05/rossiyskie-vlasti-za-neskolko-dney-razgromili-ves-media-rynok-vot-kak-eto-vyglyadit>

¹⁰ Novaya gazeta, 2022, 'В Томске оштрафовали местного жителя за «молчаливую поддержку» пацифистского пикета', 16 марта 2022 ('A local citizen was fined for silent support of a pacifist protest in Tomsk', 16 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/16/v-tomske-oshtrafovali-mestnogo-zhitelia-za-molchalivuiu-podderzhku-patsifistskogo-piketa-news>

The Village, 2022, 'Цифра дня: Сколько уголовных дел завели в России из-за «спецоперации» в Украине', 26 марта 2022 ('Number of the day: How many criminal proceedings cases have been opened in Russia in relation to the "special operation" in Ukraine', 26 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.the-village.ru/shorts/dela-zaveli>;

Vasilchuk, A., 2022, 'Он сказал, что гордится быть украинцем', *Новая газета*, 25 марта 2022 ('He said he was proud to be Ukrainian', *Novaya gazeta*, 25 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/25/on-skazal-chto-gorditsia-byt-ukraintsem>

¹¹ Meduza, 2022, 'Зачем Путин уничтожает независимые СМИ и блокирует фейсбук? В распоряжении «Медузы» оказалась новая методичка властей — теперь для родителей школьников. И вот как в ней отвечают на этот вопрос', 10 марта 2022 ('Why is Putin destroying free media and blocking Facebook? Meduza possesses evidence of a new guide used by the authorities – this time for school children's parents. And here is how the guide answers the question', 10 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/10/zachem-putin-unichtozhaet-nezavisimye-smi-i-blokiruet-feysbuk>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/user/tdzyadko>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZQ0H5rvxajQCHyqu-ISE0A/about>

Russian audience and the fact that the platform has been utilized by Russian propaganda itself),¹⁴ while blocking Facebook, Instagram and Twitter has been evaded by Russian citizens through the use of VPNs (virtual private networks enabling an encrypted connection).

In the international domain, the Kremlin has augmented its already established channels, actors and narratives of disinformation leverage in three main directions. First, **Russia has spearheaded the dissemination of false and manipulative messages about the war on social media, particularly on Telegram and VK** (short form of the original name Vkontakte). The reluctance on the part of Telegram to enforce stringent procedures for content moderation¹⁵ – in contrast to the regulatory pressure and concomitantly more decisive steps taken by Facebook and Twitter, for example, enables the proliferation of Russian disinformation (as indeed of various other types of speech ranging from extremist and conspiratorial material to oppositional, pro-democracy views). In turn, VK's ownership takeover by state-owned Gazprombank and insurance company Sogaz as well as VK's eventual compliance with Russian government pressure to collect, share and provide user data to law enforcement has cemented the Kremlin's control over the social media platform.¹⁶ Telegram and VK have thus been utilized as an avenue for influencing not only Russian speakers (among whom the two platforms are especially prominent) but also international audiences. Users of different persuasions have generally flocked to Telegram, given its laxer content moderation approach, while since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine official Russian institutions and Kremlin-leaning news sources have encouraged a transition of followership to their respective accounts on Telegram and VK.

¹⁴ Barrett, P., 2022, 'Why Russia blocked Western social media — but not YouTube', *The Hill*. Retrieved from: <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/3520997-why-russia-blocked-western-social-media-but-not-youtube/>

¹⁵ Marks, W., Nemer, D., 2022, 'Telegram's Embrace of Contradiction', *Lawfare*. Retrieved from: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/telegrams-embrace-contradiction>

¹⁶ Pavel Durov – current CEO and founder of Telegram, also founded and led VK but left the company due to his refusal to cooperate with the Russian authorities over policing oppositional content and handing over user data: Kolobakina, T., 2022, 'Главсоцсеть', 19 марта 2022 ('The authorities' social network', 19 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/19/glavsotsset>

BOX 1: RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION'S TELEGRAM STRATEGY

Instead of openly cracking down on and blocking Telegram, the Kremlin adjusted to working through the platform in order to embed its propagandist narratives within the social media environment. Availing itself of the support provided by the pro-Putin *Nashi* youth movement, the Russian authorities started to pierce through Telegram's ecosystem not necessarily on the basis of creating their own official channels but by acting through proxies. Especially prominent among the latter is Kristina Potupchik, termed the "grey cardinal" of Telegram, who established a sprawling network of pro-Kremlin channels.*

Since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, such proxy efforts have been reinforced by the emergence of volunteer "cyber armies", particularly Cyber Front Z. St. Petersburg-based outlet Fontanka.ru's journalist conducted an under-cover investigation of the cyber army's work, revealing that recruitment commenced in early March 2022 with the aim to "debunk" supposedly fake news criticizing Moscow's actions in Ukraine. The job of the cyber soldiers consisted primarily in writing comments supporting the official Russian position on Telegram as well as YouTube.**

Examples of major pro-Kremlin Telegram channels gathering a wide followership since the start of the war:

https://t.me/novosti_voinaa СМИ Россия Украина/Media Russia Ukraine (~ 2.1 million subscribers)

<https://t.me/readovkanews> Readovka (real news) (~ 1.1 million subscribers)

<https://t.me/warfakes> Война с фейками/War on fakes (~ 700 000 subscribers)

<https://t.me/russica2/10268> НЕЗЫГАРЬ/Nezygar (~ 400 000 subscribers)

* Speaking openly in an interview, Potupchik offered a glimpse into the most effective utilization of Telegram for achieving discursive influence: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBRRCjxGhyU>

** On the evolution of the Kremlin's approach to Telegram see <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>

Fontanka.ru's investigation: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/03/21/70522490/>

A further pillar of Russia's disinformation strategy over the course of the war in Ukraine has entailed an **enhanced role for Russian Embassies**. In light of the EU's ban on the broadcasting of Russian state-owned channels RT and Sputnik on the territory of the Union – which narrowed the scope for the penetration of Moscow-sanctioned propagandist discourses, the Kremlin's diplomatic representations and their respective social media accounts spearheaded official Russian disinformation activities in cooperation with local pro-Kremlin proxies. This trend gained particular prominence as Russian Embassies started to push false information, denying the Russian soldiers' commitment of massacres in Bucha and alleging the presence of US-controlled biolabs in Ukraine developing biological weapons. For instance, the unfounded claims disseminated by Russia's Embassy in London that the bombing of a hospital in Mariupol was faked and that injured women were actors' impersonations prompted Twitter to remove related social posts.¹⁷ Although Facebook and Twitter have additionally moved to label the social media accounts of Russian Embassies as state-affiliated and downgraded them in recommendations and search results, an incomplete labelling processes, insufficient moderation of posts and tech companies' reluctance to fully crack down on official Russian institutions' accounts (by for instance taking them down) has enabled the continued proliferation of disinformation.¹⁸

Focal discursive dimensions of the Kremlin's propagandist strategy have been trained on the **amplification of historical disinformation**. As the author's previous research has revealed, Russia's dissemination of false and distorted historical narratives has represented a well-established trend in its hostile media activities in Europe. The Kremlin has continuously circulated the claim that nationalist sentiments and practices are resurging in the West and are accompanied by growing fascist tendencies. In contrast, Russia is presented as the staunchest anti-fascist stalwart in world politics creating a binary opposition between supposedly "neo-Nazi" Europe and "fascist-resistant"

¹⁷ Clayton, J., Sardarizadeh, S., 2022, 'Twitter blocks Russian claims on hospital attack', *BBC*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60700642>

¹⁸ Klepper, D., 2022, 'For Russian diplomats, disinformation is part of the job', *ABC News*. Retrieved from: <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/russian-diplomats-disinformation-part-job-84169270>

Saunders, T., 2022, 'Twitter let Russia churn out anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation for weeks during war', *Inews*. Retrieved from: <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/twitter-russian-propaganda-circulating-weeks-war-ukraine-1516272>

Russia.¹⁹ Since the invasion of Ukraine, the falsification of Ukrainian history has been elevated to a justificatory narrative for the Kremlin's military aggression as promoted by Vladimir Putin.

History-based propaganda has been further accompanied by the **attempt to maintain deniability of committed crimes** and **appeal to the moral-emotional sentiments of audiences** via depictions of ostensible atrocities carried out by Ukrainian forces against children and the elderly. For example, Kremlin disinformation has widely touted the images of an elderly woman seemingly welcoming Russian troops and allegedly later abused by Ukraine's authorities. In reality, however, according to the woman's own explanation of her motivations, she waved the flag as a call for the peaceful resolution of problems, disagreeing with Putin's actions instead of being a supporter of the Russian Federation's invasion.²⁰

Russia's Balkan front

The intensification of the preexisting patterns of Russian disinformation on an international scale is also observable in the region of Southeast Europe. The cross-country research reveals that the Kremlin has similarly sharpened already established channels, actors and narratives for disseminating informational influence since the start of the Ukraine war. Four such main trends stand out.

First, **the pervasive informality²¹ through which Moscow exercises media influence has persisted.** Instead of directly owning local news sources, Russia has cultivated opaque local patronage networks consisting of media owners, journalists, politicians and businessmen, who maintain financial and political as well as cultural and ideological affinities to (pro)Russian groups and interests

¹⁹ Filipova, R., Stefanov, R., 2021, *Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe. Patterns of Anti-Democratic Messaging, Disinformation Response, and Resilience Assets*, CSD, p. 31. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Countering-Kremlins-Media-Influence-in-Europe.pdf>

²⁰ BBC News Russian Service YouTube channel, 2022, '«Неприятно, что меня прославили». Полная история «бабушки с флагом»'. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF-BTQeVOMo>

²¹ Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, pp. 32-33. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

and promote the Kremlin's discursive agenda. In addition, the advertising clout that Gazprom and Lukoil have in Balkan media markets (particularly in Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia) frame a journalistic environment of (self)censorship and reporting favorable to the Kremlin.

Second, Russia has continued to tap into the social and cultural proclivities in the region, which predispose significant sections of local populations to view Moscow positively as a result of perceptions of historical, linguistic, ethnic and religious similarities.²² The overall trend of East-West ambivalences defined by a preference for maintaining good relations with both Western Europe and the US (as models for political and economic development) and Russia (as a focal point of cultural-emotional attachments) has conditioned the prominence of stances leaning towards **neutrality in the standoff between Russia and Ukraine.**

The war has also activated historical memories and analogies with the Balkan military conflicts of the 1990s that Russia has utilized for sowing division and promoting its preferred viewpoints. In Serbia, the NATO 1999 bombings and the contemporary events in Ukraine are ascribed to Western aggression and a supposedly hypocritical Western attitude is presented, whereby the demands of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk for seceding from Ukraine were not recognized in the way that Kosovo's independence was. Russian disinformation also amplifies Serbian narratives that compare the alleged Ukrainian "atrocities" in the Donbass and the Srebrenica massacre. Moreover, the alarmist sentiment that the immediate regional fallout from the war in Ukraine will take place in the Balkans, including through military conflict, has been widely present in the media spaces of Croatia, Bosnia, North Macedonia.

Third, Russia's **reliance on its Embassies for disseminating war propaganda** has been especially visible in the Balkans. Moscow's diplomatic representations in Sofia, Sarajevo and Podgorica, for example, have aggressively aimed to influence internal debates in a pro-Russian direction. Social media continues to represent a major battleground on which Russian disinformation can sway public fears and sentiments so that in addition to Facebook as a widely popular social media platform, Kremlin actors have also started to shift their activities and gain followers on Telegram and Twitter.

²² Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, pp. 24-25. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

Fourth, the **regional diffusion of Russian propaganda through Serbian (social) media channels** remains a main intra-regional conduit of Kremlin interests. The mutual intelligibility of languages of the countries which formerly constituted Yugoslavia creates vulnerabilities for the penetration of Kremlin messaging even in countries such as Croatia, where the mainstream information space is much more insulated from Russian influence.

Apart from these cross-country similarities, differentiations in the scope of Russia's media influence hinge on the extensiveness of local pro-Kremlin networks and socio-cultural receptivity to Russian messaging. In **Bulgaria**, the Russia-favoring dispositions of significant sections of society and political divisions (amounting to a stalemate) as to how to react to the Russia-Ukraine war have enabled and fed into an informational ecosystem that features a wide array of pro-Kremlin actors, who in turn draw on a broad range of sources of disinformation to spearhead Moscow's narratives. Unlike former Yugoslav countries, where the fear of renewed military conflicts similar to those of the 1990s is raised, a distinctive characteristic of the Bulgarian media space since the start of the war in Ukraine is the interlinkage between pro-Russian messaging and the portrayals of domestic political actors. Policies that go against the Russian position have been dubbed as "treasonous" and inimical to the "national interest".

In contrast to Bulgaria, **the Croatian media environment** has not been uniformly receptive to Russian disinformation with there being a disjuncture between mainstream and online/social media. The former has exhibited a relatively balanced coverage of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, whereas in the latter Kremlin narratives have proliferated as a result of the specificities of the Croatian public's attitudes based on a tendency to conspiracies pitting the "common people" against the elites (rather than an independent Russia-favoring sentiment).

Serbia retains the status of the country in Southeast Europe, which represents a pivotal hub for Moscow's disinformation activities. The intra-regional readership of Sputnik Serbia, the heavy Russian bias of pro-government outlets and tabloids and Moscow's energy leverage (manifested also in advertising) make up a media ecosystem conducive to the unhindered prevalence of pro-Russian messaging. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, a "militarization" of Serbian discourse has been gaining ground, informed by the legacy of Serb nationalist militarism, whereby Russian and Serbian right-wing, militaristic perspectives amplify each other.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal political splits informed by ethnical faultlines have resulted in an impasse in the country's domestic political functioning as well as foreign policy. The Serb-dominated Republika Srpska's²³ close ties to Russia and constant threats of secession act as a brake on Sarajevo's decisive pro-Western orientation and represent a vital conduit of Moscow's informational influence.

In a similar vein, the political instability in **Montenegro**, fed by identity splits between those who identify as Montenegrin or as Serb, enable Russian media activities through local pro-Russian and pro-Serbian sympathizers often focused on the glorification of Russian military might and anti-NATO propaganda.

In **North Macedonia**, the dispute with Bulgaria over historical-identity issues (which motivated Sofia's imposition of a veto over the start of Skopje's EU accession talks) provided an opening for Russia to position itself as a protector of Macedonians and weave a historically propagandist narrative about the supposedly close affinities between Macedonians and Russians.

Unlike all other countries in the Balkans, **Albania** (together with Kosovo) has been much less receptive to Kremlin narratives due to Russia's traditional opposition to the cause of Pristina's independence and support for Serbia. Nevertheless, the activeness of the Russian Embassy and the emergence of sensationalist news portals has opened inroads for Russian disinformation.

Turkey and the Gulf states in the Balkans: Balancing that prevents pro-Russian amplification

Apart from Russia as the major authoritarian-state actor with a significant, path-dependent historical presence in Southeast Europe, Turkey and the Gulf states have also maintained influence in the region, particularly by virtue of cultural-religious affinities, investment ties and former imperial heritage (in the case of Ankara) albeit of a circumscribed and variable scope. Despite former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's vision of the restoration of Turkey's influence in the former lands of the Ottoman empire and the Muslim communities descended from it, President Recep Erdogan refocused policy

²³ Serb-dominated Republika Srpska is one of the two main constituent entities of Bosnia alongside the Bosniak-dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

priorities on economic pragmatism and building personal relations with Balkan leaders.²⁴ **Ankara has not positioned itself as an alternative to the European integration of the countries in SEE or as an amplifier of Russian initiatives.**²⁵ The main levers of Turkey's soft-power clout in the Balkans encompass the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which have for example financed the (re)construction of Islamic buildings, sponsored educational activities and supported Muslim communities.²⁶ Turkish banks and financial investments have flowed across the Balkans, particularly in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁷

In the media sphere, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), which broadcasts internationally, operates TRT Avaz aimed at Turkic populations, including those in the Balkans with programs being also televised in Bosnian and Albanian. Moreover, Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency's operation from its Sarajevo office is becoming regional in nature, catering to audiences across the Balkans.²⁸ As regards the portrayal of Russia-linked developments, TRT launched a Russian-language digital platform providing news on regional and global developments via local correspondents in the Russian-speaking world.²⁹ Reporting on TRT Russian tends to offer balanced and critical perspectives on Moscow's actions. On the other hand, Russian propaganda's strategy in relation to the portrayal of Turkey (as gleaned from RT and Sputnik's Turkish language edition) has sought to undermine Ankara's cooperation with the US and Europe

²⁴ Güzeldere, W., 2021, 'Turkey's Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits', *ELIAMEP*, Policy Paper #72. Retrieved from: <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Policy-paper-75-Guzeldere-.pdf>.

²⁵ Aydıntaşbaş, A., 2022, 'From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Policy Brief. Retrieved from: https://ecfr.eu/publication/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans/

²⁶ Bechev, D., Öztürk, A., 2022, 'Competing over Islam: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Balkans', *Middle East Institute*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/competing-over-islam-turkey-saudi-arabia-and-iran-balkans>

²⁷ Feyerabend, F., et al, 2018, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. A map of geopolitical players*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2018, Sankt Augustin/Berlin. Retrieved from: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038

²⁸ Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, p. 51. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

²⁹ Radio Free Europe, 2022, 'Turkish State Broadcaster Launches Russian Channel to Fight "Disinformation And Manipulation"', 24 May 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-russia-media-erdogan/30631868.html>

by accentuating policy differences. Russian media in Turkey have also promoted anti-American discourse.³⁰

The approach of the Gulf states with respect to SEE has focused on extending cultural and religious influence on Muslim communities in the Balkans, especially in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, **frequently in competition with Turkey**. For example, Saudi Arabia's promotion of fundamentalist Wahhabism has come up against Turkey's moderate Sunni Islam. Arab investments have been prominently present across economic sectors, particularly tourism and infrastructure. The UAE, for instance, has been active in terms of investing in construction projects, agriculture, aviation, defense, with Serbia serving as a hub of such initiatives.³¹ Saudi Arabia has established a longstanding presence in Bosnia starting with the assistance it provided to the Muslim communities during the Bosnian war as well as in Kosovo, as Riyadh was one of the first countries to recognize it. Saudi Arabia also represents a major arms exports destination for SEE countries, particularly for Bulgaria.³²

In the media domain, Qatar's Al Jazeera news channel has a Balkans television station, which started in 2011 and is headquartered in Sarajevo with regional offices in Zagreb, Belgrade and Skopje. Reporting on Al Jazeera Balkans has been evaluated as balanced and conforming to high journalistic standards.³³ In contrast to this, propagandist content with a focus on radical Islamist ideas is being disseminated on social media in Balkan countries, especially in Albanian-language posts on Telegram.³⁴

³⁰ Costello, K., 2018, 'Russia's Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey. Implications for the United States', *RAND Corporation*, Perspective. Retrieved from: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE278.html>

³¹ Karčić, H., 2022, 'Serbia: The UAE's Best Friend in the Balkans', *Gulf International Forum*. Retrieved from: <https://gulrif.org/serbia-the-uaes-best-friend-in-the-balkans/>

³² Cheresheva, M., 2017, 'Bulgaria's Arms Exports Reach Record High in 2016', *BalkanInsight*. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/13/bulgaria-s-arms-exports-reach-record-high-in-2016-09-12-2017/>

³³ Vukojević, B., 2016, 'Al Jazeera Balkans: Between Foreign Capital and Responsible Journalism', *Mediacentar*. Retrieved from: <https://www.media.ba/en/magazin-novinarstvo/al-jazeera-balkans-between-foreign-capital-and-responsible-journalism>

³⁴ Chua, S., 2020, *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, Center for Global Affairs School of Professional Studies New York University. Retrieved from: https://www.sps.nyu.edu/content/dam/sp/academics/departments/center-for-global-affairs/pdfs/NYU_Report_on_Western_Balkans.pdf

For its part, **Iran's influence in SEE is constrained by the absence of historical ties** – such as those that Turkey enjoys, **and the predominantly Sunni character of Balkan Muslims**, which differs from Iran's Shia Islam. Tehran has nevertheless promoted cultural initiatives, as in Albania, through the establishment of civil societal organizations and educational foundations, additionally reaching out to opinion leaders and the media. Yet, Tirana's decision to host the People's Mujahedin (MEK), which opposes the regime in Iran, evoked a backlash (i.e. based on covert action) from the Iranian authorities.³⁵ In September 2022, Albania severed diplomatic ties with Teheran over an Iranian cyberattack carried out against the Albanian government.³⁶ Iran's clandestine activities in Kosovo have in turn led to charging an Iranian cleric with financing terrorism and money-laundering.³⁷ Following on its support for the Bosnian government forces during the Bosnian wars in the 1990s, Iran advanced cultural ties with BiH, embodied for instance in the creation of the Ibn Sina Institute in Sarajevo, which promotes research cooperation between Iranian and Bosnian scholars.

Iran has aimed to establish a media foothold in SEE countries. The official international broadcasting radio network of Iran, Voice of Islamic Republic of Iran or IRIB World Service broadcasts in Albanian.³⁸ MEK also set up its own radio communications network to influence debate about internal Iranian affairs, which has in turn been countered by the Iranian authorities' disinformation activities on social media.³⁹ In Bosnia, the Balkan Sahar Network (part of Iranian state-controlled Sahar Universal Network broadcasting programs internationally) promotes the Teheran regime's propaganda goals by disseminating radical Islamic content and smearing MEK.⁴⁰

³⁵ Bechev, D., Öztürk, A., 2022, 'Competing over Islam: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Balkans', *Middle East Institute*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/competing-over-islam-turkey-saudi-arabia-and-iran-balkans>

³⁶ Radio Free Europe, 2022, 'Albania Cuts Diplomatic Ties With Iran Over Cyberattack; Tehran Condemns Decision', 7 September 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/albania-iran-diplomatic-ties-expulsions-cyberattack/32022656.html>

³⁷ Bezhan, F., 2016, 'Charges Against Cleric Put Iran's Balkan Activities Under Spotlight', 28 July 2016, *Radio Free Europe*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-iran-cleric-arrest/27886917.html>

³⁸ <https://parstoday.com/en/news/tag--albania>

³⁹ Rrustemi, A., et al, 2019, *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, p. 83. Retrieved from: <https://hcss.nl/report/geopolitical-influences-of-external-powers-in-the-western-balkans/>

⁴⁰ Iran Probe, 2021, 'SAHAR Balkan TV, Iranian Regime tools to attract terrorists and disseminate fundamentalism', 9 January 2021. Retrieved from: <https://iranprobe.com/sahar-balkan-tv-iranian-regime-tools-to-attract-terrorists-and-disseminate-fundamentalism/>

Over the course of the Ukraine war, Turkey and the Gulf states have generally pursued a “balancing” position without siding decisively with the West and Ukraine or Russia. Ankara advances for itself the role of a mediator, whereby it is, on the one hand, a supporter of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and opposes Crimea’s annexation, developing military cooperation with Kyiv. On the other hand, ties with Russia in the sphere of energy, agricultural trade, tourism, defense technology have made Turkey reluctant to join sanctions on the Kremlin.⁴¹ The Gulf states assume a similar non-committal position as their primary concern has been shaped by the implications for the war for regional power configurations in the Middle East, including the enhancement of Iran as a threat to many of the states in the region.⁴² Teheran has favored the Russian interpretation of the war and sought to deepen trade and military relations with Russia, united as the two countries are by their anti-Western orientation. However, beneath the surface of this unifying factor, tensions between Moscow and Teheran remain as the Kremlin has, for example, undercut Iran’s steel and oil exports (through discounts and increased sales to China and India).⁴³

The dualities in attitudes to Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine on the part of Turkey and the Arab states have conditioned media portrayals that do not necessarily coincide with or promote Kremlin narratives.

For instance, coverage on TRT recognizes that Russian soldiers committed crimes against humanity in Bucha (in contrast to Russian propaganda, which denies this) and reports that Uzbek officials decry Russia’s attempts to recruit soldiers from the country as a criminally punishable act;⁴⁴ delivers even-handed analyses of Russian-Iranian relations (that take into account differences such as competition over oil exports);⁴⁵ and enhances President Erdogan’s

⁴¹ Atlantic Council, 2022, ‘Experts react: What does the Russia-Ukraine conflict mean for Turkey?’. Retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/experts-react-what-does-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-mean-for-turkey/>

⁴² Katz, M., 2022, ‘Risk or opportunity? How Russia sees a changing MENA region’, *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/risk-or-opportunity-how-russia-sees-a-changing-mena-region/>

⁴³ Katz, M., 2022, ‘Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is also Iran’s loss’, *Responsible Statecraft*. Retrieved from: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/07/07/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-is-also-irans-loss/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/trtrussian/posts/pfbid02AkGQFq65YK9JAUzVJ9sTQyiEPxBeAzqnrUTP31LoNmFZS1djwGByWNV43bYJNCxtl>

⁴⁵ TRT Russian, 2022, ‘Москва и Тегеран ищут пути расширения экономических связей на фоне санкций’, 8 августа 2022 (‘Moscow and Teheran are looking for ways to expand economic ties against the background of sanctions’, 8 August 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.trtrussian.com/mnenie/moskva-i-tegeran-ishut-puti-rasshireniya-ekonomicheskikh-svyazey-na-fone-sankcij-9809745>

diplomatic role as key in the maintenance of a relationship with the Kremlin that combines cooperative and competitive elements.⁴⁶ A review of Arab media outlets demonstrates a preoccupation with the implications of the Ukraine war for developments in the Middle East such as the prospect of a strengthened Russia-Iran-Syria alliance.⁴⁷

In a reversed mirror image, however, **Russian propaganda has portrayed in a much more exaggerated manner the extent of compatibility of goals, visions and desire for cooperation between Moscow and Ankara as well as the Gulf state capitals.** A higher degree of propagandist conjunction exists between Russian and Iranian messaging. In general, pro-Iranian influence operations have been found to amplify Russian viewpoints that concur with the Teheran regime's international agenda, with disinformation targeting the West, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Key narratives have been directed, for example, at accusations of racism on the part of the West against Arabs and Muslims on the basis of ostensible differences in its response to the war in Ukraine compared to conflicts in the Middle East.⁴⁸ Yet, the overlap of Russian and Iranian discourses retains limited relevance for the Balkans, where Teheran has focused above all on defending regime interests (by countering the activities of MEK) and disseminating radical Islamic ideas.

⁴⁶ TRT Russian, 2022, 'Саммит Путина и Эрдогана: новое свидетельство уникальной дипломатии', 7 августа 2022 ('Putin-Erdogan summit: new proof of unique diplomacy', 7 August 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.trtrussian.com/mnenie/sammit-putina-i-erdogana-novoe-svidetelstvo-unikalnoj-diplomatii-9787769>

⁴⁷ Abdelaziz, M., 2022, 'Arab Media Perspectives on the Ukraine Crisis', *Washington Institute*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-media-perspectives-ukraine-crisis>

⁴⁸ Wahlstrom, A., et al, 2022, 'The IO Offensive: Information Operations Surrounding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *Mandiant*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/information-operations-surrounding-ukraine>

Country cases

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's political and societal stances since the start of the Ukraine war have been defined by the traditional patterns of the country's East-West ambivalences; a tug-of-war between pro-Russian and Russia-critical politicians and sections of society; and widespread sentiments in favor of neutrality. These trends were especially strongly manifested in political divisions as to whether Sofia should provide military aid to Ukraine. In distinction to pro-Western forces, which unequivocally supported the dispatch of weapons, socialist and nationalist circles voiced a strong opposition. Rhetorically, they drew a false equivalence between weapons exports to Ukraine and the involvement of Bulgaria in a direct military confrontation with Russia. The resulting explicit calls for Bulgarian neutrality have been coupled with much more extreme and anti-systemic discourses equating military assistance to Ukraine with "treason" and demanding Bulgaria's demilitarization. Such differences in political worldviews culminated in a compromise, whereby the parliament approved the provision of military-technical assistance (repairing Ukrainian military hardware), yet without officially sending weapons.⁴⁹

On the social level, opinion polling has demonstrated that a majority of the polled Bulgarian population leans towards their country's maintenance of a neutral stance in the war. According to a Kantar survey⁵⁰ conducted in July 2022, 66% of the respondents preferred that Bulgaria take a neutral position in line with similar results (i.e. 67% in favor of neutrality)⁵¹ recorded in March 2022. And even though a Eurobarometer survey has shown that 73% of the polled Bulgarians feel sympathy towards the plight of Ukraine, they refrain from concrete practical expressions of that sympathy. That is, 55% of Bulgarians think that Ukraine should be supported financially, well below an average of 80% across the EU.⁵²

⁴⁹ Filipova, R., 2022, 'Bulgaria's Balancing Act', *Eurozine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.eurozine.com/bulgarias-balancing-act/>

⁵⁰ Kantar public, 2022, *The uncertain times: the transmission of information and views on the war in Ukraine*, July 2022, Free Press for Eastern Europe

⁵¹ Hadjiski, V., 2022, "'Маркет линкс': Обществото е за неутралитет спрямо войната, подкрепящите членството в НАТО се увеличават', *Дневник*, 1 април 2022 ('Market Links: Society is in favor of neutrality regarding the war, those who support NATO membership are increasing', *Dnevnik*, 1 April 2022). Retrieved from: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2022/04/01/4331564_market_links_obshtestvoto_e_neutralno_spriamo_voinata/?ref=home_layer2

⁵² Flash Eurobarometer 506, 2002, 'EU's response to the war in Ukraine. Bulgaria'

Against the background of these social and political dispositions, Russian disinformation has proliferated, reinforcing pro-Russian sentiments and sowing further division within Bulgarian society. **The informational ecosystem in Bulgaria**, which enables the circulation of Kremlin-sponsored messages, **is populated by a wide array of actors, who cross-post each other's sources and messages of disinformation.** They include both politically-affiliated actors (such as nationalist party Vazrazhdane and the Bulgarian Socialist Party) and grassroots groups, who make up a large pool of local, pro-Kremlin proxies and are part of Russia's strategy of cultivating opaque local networks of patronage.⁵³ The latter are aided and directed by the hostile media designs of the Russian Embassy in Sofia, which has adopted a strategy of aggressive interference in the domestic informational environment.

The Facebook page of the Embassy consistently reposts content from other official Kremlin channels such as those of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, fomenting conspiracy theories about bioweapons development, denying allegations of atrocities carried out by Russian soldiers in Ukraine and extolling the supposed benefits and cultural-historical bonds between Bulgaria and Russia. The Russian Embassy adopted a communication strategy focused on weekly briefings, posted on social media channels, that present the Kremlin viewpoint couched as a way to counteract the "hybrid media war" with regard to Ukraine.⁵⁴ The Embassy

⁵³ According to investigations – yet not fully publicly disclosed, of the Bulgarian counterintelligence agency, politicians, journalists and analysts in Bulgaria receive payments from the Kremlin in order to influence public opinion in a pro-Russian direction: Milcheva, E., 2022, 'Кой взима хилядарките от Русия, нека разберем истината', *Deutsche Welle*, 4 юли 2022 ('Who takes money from Russia, let's learn the truth', 4 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/bg/кой-взима-хилядарките-от-русия-нека-разберем-истината/a-62348522>

The decision to expel Russian diplomats from Sofia in March and June 2022 were motivated by the fact that they conduct activities directed against the Bulgarian state, including hybrid attacks: Hadjiski, V., 2022, 'Петков загатна за връзка на изгонените руски дипломати с хибридни атаки (обновена)', *Дневник*, 21 март 2022 ('Petkov alluded to a connection between the expelled Russian diplomats and hybrid attacks (updated)', *Dnevnik*, 21 March 2022). Retrieved from: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2022/03/21/4326829_desetimata_ruski_diplomati_obiaveni_za_persona_non/?ref=home_layer2

Svobodna Evropa, 2022, "'Работят срещу интересите на България'. София гони 70 руски дипломати', 28 юни 2022 ('They work against Bulgaria's interests'. Sofia expels 70 Russian diplomats', 28 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31919994.html>

⁵⁴ Veselinova, J., 2022, 'Митрофанова ще бори антируските "фалшиви новини" с брифинги', *Offnews*, 11 март 2022 ('Mitrofanova will fight anti-Russian "fake news" with briefings', 11 March

has also encouraged engagement with and migration onto its Telegram channel.

The local pro-Russian and official Kremlin actors in turn make use of a similarly **broad range of sources of disinformation**, encompassing:

- Online and print news outlets: *Russian state-owned and affiliated news sources* (the Bulgarian editions of NewsFront, Russia Beyond); *widely circulated newspapers* with varying intensity of pro-Russian leanings (such as Trud, demonstrating a strongly pro-Kremlin discursive line, or Telegraph, which mixes pro-Western and pro-Russian views, without being overtly and consistently Russia-favoring); *ideologically-minded, socialist/BSP-leaning outlets* (Pogled.info, Duma); *newly emerged news sources* (Filter); *sensationalist outlets/tabloids* (Blitz, Pik); *websites led by prominent journalists* (Glasove, Epicenter) or *anonymous/marginal websites* whose content is nevertheless widely shared and reprinted (<https://vtorifront.bg/> , <https://www.informiran.net/> , <http://efir.info/> , <https://www.nbox.bg/>).
- Party-affiliated social media accounts, particularly the Facebook page of nationalist party Vazrazhdane: <https://www.facebook.com/vazrazhdane.bg>. The party has consistently espoused pro-Russian views and aligned with Moscow's policy lines in Bulgaria's domestic politics. The content promoted by Vazrazhdane does not necessarily and always contain outright lies or conspicuous hate speech. The communication strategy of the party is based on mixing their far-right, pro-Russian views with a degree of evasiveness in order to gain a wider audience and appear on "mainstream" media too.⁵⁵
- Pro-Russian public group pages, where Bulgarian citizens are enmeshed in the consumption and dissemination of disinformation (see Table 1).
- YouTubers, whose disinformation and conspiratorial videos can gather a wide viewership (see Table 2).
- Individual journalists such as Dilyana Gaytandzhieva (who has spearheaded the proliferation of conspiracy theories about biolabs and the development

2022). Retrieved from: <https://offnews.bg/politika/mitrofanova-shte-bori-antiruskite-falshivinovini-s-brifingi-772181.html>

⁵⁵ For instance, Vazrazhdane's leader Kostadin Kostadinov has not outrightly disputed the existence of COVID-19 but has claimed that there are more dangerous diseases, which would justify, in his view, reduced attention to the coronavirus and lifting of physical distancing measures: BTV Novinite, 2021, 'Кандидат-президентът Костадин Костадинов: Ако зависеше от мен, нямаше да има зелен сертификат', 10 ноември 2021 ('Presidential candidate Kostadin Kostadinov: If it depended on me, there wouldn't be a green certificate', 10 November 2021). Retrieved from: <https://btvnovinite.bg/predavanja/tazi-sutrin/kostadinov-ako-zaviseshe-ot-men-njamashe-da-ima-zelen-sertifikat.html>

of bioweapons especially through her website: dilyana.bg and Twitter account: [@dgaytandzhieva](https://twitter.com/dgaytandzhieva)) and Martin Karbovsky (whose pro-Russian “influencer” activities are particularly prominent on his Facebook page with over half a million followers and which has been moderated by Meta for disseminating Russian disinformation from official Kremlin sources: <https://www.facebook.com/martinkarbovskiofficial>).

Table 1: Examples of key Facebook pages and groups disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Bulgaria.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/335416680239792/> БЪЛГАРИЯ И РУСИЯ - ДРУЖБА ОТ ВЕКОВЕ ЗА ВЕКОВЕ/BULGARIA AND RUSSIA – FRIENDSHIP FOR CENTURIES (~18 800 members)*

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/746848462040678/> НАТО ВЪН ОТ БЪЛГАРИЯ!!!/NATO out of Bulgaria!!! (~15 400 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/329967744230587/> За братска Русия и България с любов!/With love for fraternal Russia and Bulgaria (~10 900 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1125303394979609/> БЪЛГАРСКИЯ НАРОД Е С РУСИЯ ! НЕ НА БАЙДЪН/THE BULGARIAN NATION IS WITH RUSSIA! NOT TO BIDEN (~7600 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/283831399670501/> За Русия/For Russia (~6000 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/362845227220620/> Българи за Русия – Обединени български русофили/Bulgarians for Russia – united Bulgarian Russophiles (~5200 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/681719895557993/> България и Русия заедно вовеки/ Болгария и Россия вместе вовеки/Bulgaria and Russia together forever (~5000 members)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/213431163511415/> Сдружение на русофилите в България/Содружество русофилов Болгариин/Union of the Russophiles in Bulgaria (~4000 members)

*Number of members of all indicated pages and groups as of August 2022.

Table 2: Examples of key YouTube channels disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Bulgaria.

<https://www.youtube.com/c/AyhanYunal/featured> Channel of Ayhan Infire disseminating conspiracies (~168 000 subscribers)*

- ✓ Conspiracies and “mysteries” about Putin (~190 000 views):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckk_3ZApKXc

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOpbaAF5KNh9mqHeLv4Yngw> Channel of Plamen Paskov, a YouTuber formerly related to Vazrazhdane (~60 000 subscribers):

- ✓ Paskov shares outright disinformation. For example, the headline of one of his videos is *Russia bombs New York’s suburbs*, which later says that this is a name of a dwelling in Ukraine.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZqngTy7mOI>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/IliaGatev79/videos> Русия – Актуално!/ Russia – Breaking! Channel that focuses on translating Russian-language news and documentaries (~5000 subscribers)

- ✓ A video of Russian Ministry of Defense spokesperson Igor Konashenkov announcing complete Russian control of Mariupol and the Azovstal iron and steel plant (~32 000 views):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt6HYgd79cE>

*Number of subscribers of all indicated pages and groups as of August 2022.

The actors and sources of disinformation that make up the pro-Russian informational ecosystem in Bulgaria facilitate the **diffusion and circulation of overlapping Kremlin-friendly messages**, albeit with specificities in the emphasis of narration and stylistic means of message transmission conditioned by the editorial characteristics and target audience of different outlets. A main overall trend common to Russia-leaning outlets is that **Kremlin-supportive messages are intertwined with a domestic political agenda** that portrays in a negative light, and can even smear, pro-Western politicians and civil societal actors. An insistent concentration on the concept and practice of the “Bulgarian national interest” reveals pro-Russian outlets’ distinctive interpretation of those interests as being identical with the pursuit of a Kremlin-friendly foreign policy and discursive line. **Partisan and ideologically-focused media are distinguished by a more intensive pro-Russian messaging**, featuring a wide and detailed range of the Russian propagandist talking points, in contrast to broader dailies, which present Russia-related developments on a less continuous basis; when a political purpose needs to be fulfilled; or when they can inform sensationalist news.

Nevertheless, all Russia-tilting sources converge on a general set of pro-Kremlin messages disseminated since the start of the Ukraine war, according to which (1) Bulgarian political elites who stand up to Moscow are “traitors”, (2) Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria are rich and therefore undeserving of the seemingly lavish welcome provided by the authorities, (3) Ukrainian nationalism incited by the West provoked the war, (4) a new world order is emerging led by Russia and China, (5) bioweapons are being developed by the US in biolabs in Ukraine with the ulterior goal to target the Russian population. Biolabs conspiracies have been especially prominent in the pro-Russian information ecosystem, being uncritically shared (very often from anonymous websites), rarely subject to content moderation on social media and reaching a wide audience (see box 2 and 3).

BOX 2: KEY ACTORS DISSEMINATING CONSPIRACIES ABOUT BIOLABS IN BULGARIA

- **(Self-styled) journalists** – the case of Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, who has established herself as a major domestic source of biolabs/bioweapons conspiracies. The so-called investigations she conducts into biolabs are published on her website dilyana.bg from where they are widely reprinted in Bulgarian news sources and reposted on social media. In addition, Gaytandzhieva has forged a significant international followership. Her Twitter account @dgaytandzhieva has over 57 000 followers and serves as a hub for international conspiracy theorists.
- **Political actors** – media linked to the Bulgarian Socialist Party such as its official TV channel BSTV have featured Dilyana Gaytandzhieva and uncritically disseminate the narrative about impending biological warfare.* Nationalist party Vazrazhdane promotes biolabs conspiracy theories in its official political discourse, for example, through the statements of its representatives in the Bulgarian Parliament.**
- **The Russian Embassy in Sofia** – its Facebook page promotes and amplifies official Russian disinformation and biolabs conspiracies without having been so far moderated by Meta.***

* BSTV, 2022, 'КОЙ ВОДИ БИОЛОГИЧНА ВОЙНА? ИНТЕРВЮ С ДИЛЯНА ГАЙТАНДЖИЕВА – РАЗСЛЕДВАЩ ЖУРНАЛИСТ', *YouTube* ('Who is conducting biological warfare? Interview with Dilyana Gaytandzhieva'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmpBISjwEZ0>

** Vazrazhdane, 2022, 'Ангел Георгиев от Възраждане с критичен въпрос за американските биологични лаборатории и военни бази', *YouTube* ('Angel Georgiev from Vazrazhdane with a critical question about the American biolabs and military bases'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgeTQ4MeXXo>

*** Russian Embassy post from 9 March 2022 quoting Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the presence of "evidence" of Ukraine's destruction of bioweapons ostensibly developed with US support: <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid0MpyCy2gCM8gcBV3t2ExdC8FijeG9LxPvnxYebyYDveuX3sNhyWobbQTVvMydHmfCl>

BOX 3: KEY BIOLABS CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND RELATED STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES IN THE BULGARIAN MEDIA SPACE

Narratives:

- The alleged threat from biolabs in Ukraine as a **justification of Russia's invasion of Ukraine**.⁵⁶
- Biolabs across the post-Soviet space aim to create **ethnically and racially targeted biological weapons**.⁵⁷
- **Dangerous pathogens are being urgently destroyed** in Ukrainian biolabs to prevent Russia from exposing illegal activities.⁵⁸
- **Analogies between wars and pandemics**: weaving a historical disinformation line that links up events in Ukraine since 2014, COVID 19, domestic politics in Ukraine and the current war.⁵⁹
- Conspiracies are **made to fit emerging health hazards** – monkey pox claimed to originate from US-operated biolabs in Nigeria.⁶⁰
- China **supports Russia's position on biolabs**, casts doubt on US military-biological actions in Ukraine.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Zaitsev, K., 2022, 'Ядрото на конфликта', *Труд*, 17 март 2022 ('The kernel of conflict', *Trud*, 17 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/%D1%8F%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B0/>

⁵⁷ Muhin, A., 2022, 'COVID-19 и мащабната мрежа от американски биологатории около Русия', *Glasove*, 28 февруари 2022 ('COVID-19 and the large-scale network of American biolabs around Russia', 28 February 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/covid-19-i-mashtabnata-mrezha-ot-amerikanski-biolaboratorii-okolo-rusija>

⁵⁸ Trud online, 2022, 'Русия разкри програма за биологични оръжия в Украйна, финансирана от САЩ (Документи)', 6 март 2022 ('Russia exposed a bioweapons program in Ukraine financed by the US (Documents)'). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/русия-разкри-програма-за-биологични-оръжия-в-украйна-финансирана-от-сащ/>

⁵⁹ Guseva, I., 2022, 'Изплуват подробностите за американските биологатории в Украйна! Америка потапя света в хибридна биологична война', *Pogled.info*, 3 май 2022 ('Details about the American biolabs in Ukraine are emerging! America is plunging the world into a hybrid biological war', 3 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/amerika/izpluvat-podrobnostite-za-amerikanski-biolaboratorii-v-ukraina-amerika-potapya-sveta-v-hibridna-biologichna-voina.141846>

⁶⁰ Trud, 2022, 'Русия призовава СЗО да разследва финансирани от САЩ лаборатории в Нигерия', 27 май 2022 ('Russia calls on the WHO to investigate US-financed laboratories in Nigeria', 27 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/русия-призовава-сзо-да-разследва-финансирани-от-сащ-лаборатории-в-нигерия/>

⁶¹ TASS, 2022, 'Китай изисква пълна информация за американските биологатории в Украйна', *Glasove*, 10 юни 2022 ('China is requiring complete information about the

- **National contextualization** of biolabs conspiracies: Western-operated biolabs in Bulgaria pose a danger to the population.⁶²

Stylistic techniques:

- The **official Russian view** is stated as a fact:⁶³
 - ✓ An oft-cited source is Igor Kirillov, the chief of Russia's radiation, chemical and biological protection force.
 - ✓ Headlines directly refer to the Kremlin leadership: 'Putin confirmed'/'Lavrov said'.
- Citation of **supposed proof**/release of documentation.⁶⁴
- Overwhelming reliance on **Russian news sources**.
- **No presentation of alternative views**.
- Instilling a **sense of fear** and **imminent danger**.
- **False exposure** of allegedly deeply concealed activities and manipulation.
- **Misrepresentation** of Western officials' statements.

American biolabs in Ukraine', 10 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/novini/kitay-iziskva-palna-informatsiya-za-amerikanskite-biolaboratorii-v-ukrayna>

⁶² Blitz, 2022, 'Румен Петков разкри как тихомълком договарят биолоборатории у нас', 12 март 2022 ('Rumen Petkov revealed how biolabs are being secretly negotiated here', 12 March 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/politika/rumen-petkov-razkri-kak-tikhomlkom-dogovaryat-biolaboratorii-u-nas_news873536.html

⁶³ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Кремъл: Има солидни доказателства, че САЩ са разработвали военни биологични проекти около Русия', 23 март 2022 ('The Kremlin: There is solid proof that the US has developed military biological project around Russia', 23 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/amerika/kremal-ima-solidni-dokazatelstva-che-sasht-sa-razrobotvali-voenni-biologichni-proekti-okolo-rusiya.140543>

⁶⁴ Trud, 2022, 'Путин обяви каква е била задачата на американските биолоборатории в Украйна (ВИДЕО)', 16 май 2022 ('Putin announced the main goal of the American biolabs in Ukraine (VIDEO)', 16 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/путин-обяви-каква-е-била-задачата-на-американските-биолоборатории-в-украйна/>

Zooming in on specific outlets demonstrates such commonalities as well as nuances. **Trud** represents a widely circulated daily with both a print and online version, formally independent from but informally affiliated to Russian groups and interests.⁶⁵ The outlet is significantly enmeshed in the national political context, incorporating frequently virulent attacks on the former We Continue the Change-led government⁶⁶ intertwined with a pro-Russian bias that conveys in an unfavorable light policies considered to oppose Kremlin preferences. The pro-Russian tilt is demonstrated by the uncritical citation of the official Kremlin discourse, while occasionally the outlet includes alternative viewpoints, presumably in an attempt to create a more objective appeal.⁶⁷

A major type of narration focuses on the supposed **“treasonous” character of Bulgarian political elites, who stand up to Russia**. Commentary articles present politicians from We Continue the Change as an “anti-Bulgarian” “hysterical minority”, negligent of the national interest and submissive to the West that the newspaper judges to be the case due to the previous government’s refusal to continue talks with Gazprom after the latter decided to cut off gas supplies to Bulgaria in April 2022.⁶⁸ A related set of narratives

⁶⁵ Filipova, R., Galev, T., 2018, *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, CSD, p. 50. Retrieved from: <https://www.cceol.com/search/book-detail?id=909191>

⁶⁶ Inaugurated in December 2021, the government was composed of four parties, including the newly formed We Continue the Change (led by reformist-technocratic, pro-Western representatives of Generation X and Millennials), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party), Democratic Bulgaria (inheritor of the post-1989 democratic opposition) and There is Such a People (ITN), led by showman Slavi Trifonov. The government collapsed in June 2022, following the withdrawal of ITN from the coalition and a successful no-confidence vote.

⁶⁷ For example, Oblakov, N., 2022, ‘Десет факта за войната в Украйна’, *Труд*, 6 април 2022 (‘10 Facts about the War in Ukraine’, *Trud*, 6 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/десет-факта-за-войната-в-украйна/>

More generally on Trud’s approach see Filipova, R., Galev, T., 2018, *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, CSD, p. 54. Retrieved from: <https://www.cceol.com/search/book-detail?id=909191>

⁶⁸ Sharenkova, S., 2022, ‘Един тесен кръг в ръководството на БСП превръща партията в съучастник на антибългарската и слугинска политика на ПП’, *Труд*, 3 юли 2022 (‘A narrow circle in the BSP’s leadership is turning the party into a collaborator of the anti-Bulgarian and servile policy of We Continue the Change’, *Trud*, 3 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/един-тесен-кръг-в-ръководството-на-бсп-превръща-партията-в-съучастник-на-антибългарската-и/>

Trud, 2022, ‘Валентин Вацев: Днес в България на власт е едно истерично малцинство’, 28 март 2022 (‘Valentin Vatshev: A hysterical minority is currently in power in Bulgaria’, 28 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/валентин-вацев-днес-в-българия-на-власт-е-едно-истерично-малцинство/>

chime in with the Kremlin line that it is the rest of the world, rather than Russia, that is suffering from the imposition of sanctions particularly in the energy sector.⁶⁹

The newspaper additionally shows **negative dispositions to Ukrainian refugees, charging that the Bulgarian authorities settled them in luxurious conditions**, whereas those who are in need had to be sifted through from “tourists” and “rich Ukrainians”. The outlet insists that Ukrainians who drive expensive cars and afford to eat in restaurants cannot be said to be fleeing from the war and therefore do not deserve the care of the state.⁷⁰

Apart from the domestic social and political repercussions of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Trud also discusses its international implications. The newspaper promotes the view that **Europe’s interests are being subordinated to those of the US** and that Europe should instead cooperate with Russia.⁷¹ For its part, Ukraine is claimed to be leveraged by Washington as an instrument, whereby the ostensible goal is the survival of NATO, the maintenance of American global hegemony and the consolidation of Poland as the center of the anti-Russian Three Seas Initiative.⁷² Such messaging further morphs into propagandist narratives about the **alleged emergence of a new world order led by Moscow and Beijing**. Vladimir Putin’s views are cited in this regard together with his viewpoint that some states replace international norms with dictatorship; the indivisibility of security is selectively applied; and sanctions

⁶⁹ Elliott, L., 2022, ‘Русия печели икономическата война’, *Труд*, 22 юни 2022 (‘Russia is winning the economic war’, *Trud*, 22 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/русия-печели-икономическата-война/>

⁷⁰ Trud, 2022, ‘Украински туроператор взимал комисионна да изпрати на безплатна почивка украинските бежанци в български хотели’, 4 юни 2022 (‘Ukrainian tourist company charged commission for sending the Ukrainian refugees to Bulgarian hotels on a free holiday’, 4 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/украински-туроператор-взимал-комисионна-да-изпрати-на-безплатна-почивка-украинските-бежанци/>

Nedkov, S., 2022, ‘Всеки бежанец от Украйна и не само, след като извърши престъпление в България, да бъде връщан там, откъдето е дошъл’, *Труд*, 16 април 2022 (‘Each refugee from Ukraine and elsewhere should be deported to where they came from after committing a crime in Bulgaria’, *Trud*, 16 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/всеки-бежанец-от-украйна-и-не-само-след-като-извърши-престъпление-в-българия-да-бъде-връща/>

⁷¹ Trud, 2022, ‘Пол-Мари Куто: САЩ искат да подчинят цяла Европа (ВИДЕО)’, 12 юни 2022 (‘Paul-Marie Coûteaux: The US wants to subordinate the whole of Europe (VIDEO), 12 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/пол-мари-куто-сащ-искат-да-подчинят-цяла-европа-видео/>

⁷² Iliev, I., 2022, ‘НАТО и САЩ целят да оцелеят’, *Труд*, 1 юли 2022 (‘NATO and the US aim to survive’, *Trud*, 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/нато-и-сащ-целят-да-оцелеят/>

represent unilateral and illegitimate actions propping up a declining Western-based international order.⁷³

Another widely circulated daily, **Telegraph**, formerly owned⁷⁴ by Russia-connected oligarch Delyan Peevski and currently in possession of London-based United Group (also owning Nova Broadcasting Group), balances pro-Western and pro-Russian articles without following a clear, ideologically-driven pro-Russian agenda. Instead, Kremlin-favoring articles appear particularly when they can convey sensationalist stories, whereby headlines feature alarming news and images portray the Russian leadership.

For example, on the one hand, **a series of articles cite Russian sources** (TASS, Izvestiya) **and Russian officials** (especially Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria Eleonora Mitrofanova) with respect to the consequences of the Bulgarian government's decision to expel 70 Russian diplomats, qualifying the move as illegal and undermining bilateral ties.⁷⁵ On the other hand, **a set of articles cite the position of the EU in support of Sofia's decision** as being completely in line with international law and convey the criticisms that Bulgarian politicians voiced against Mitrofanova's aggressive stance.⁷⁶

⁷³ Trud, 2022, 'Путин обяви опит за замяна на международното право с диктат', 30 юни 2022, ('Putin announced an attempt to replace international law with dictatorship', 30 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://trud.bg/путин-обяви-опит-за-замяна-на-международното-право-с-диктат/>

⁷⁴ Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, pp. 66-69. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

⁷⁵ Telegraph, 2022, 'Русия: Ответните мерки срещу България заради изгонените дипломати са "в процес на разработване"', 6 юли 2022 ('Russia: The retaliatory measures against Bulgaria in response to the expelled diplomats are "being worked out"', 6 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/svetat/rusiia-otvetnite-merki-sreshtu-bylgariia-zaradi-izgonenite-diplomati-sa-v-proces-na-razrabotvane.-na-28-iuni-bylgariia-ekspulsira-70-dushi-ot-ruskite-misii-344861>

Telegraph, 2022, 'Митрофанова пред ТАСС: Не е ясно защо е сложено клеймо персона нон грата на 70 човека', 30 юни 2022 ('Mitrofanova for TASS: It is not clear why 70 people have been labelled persona non grata', 30 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/svetat/mitrofanova-pred-tass-ne-e-iasno-zashto-e-slozheno-kejmo-persona-non-grata-na-70-choveka.-molia-predstavete-pone-minimalni-dokazatelstva-za-nezakonna-dejnost-prizova-poslanikyt-344266>

⁷⁶ Telegraph, 2022, 'Европейския съюз подкрепя България в решението ѝ за изгонване на руските дипломати', 1 юли 2022 ('The European Union supports Bulgaria in its decision to expel the Russian diplomats', 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/bulgaria/poziciia-evropejskiia-syuz-podkrepa-bylgariia-v-reshenieto-si-za-izgonvane-na-ruskite-diplomati.-smiata-zaplahite-na-rusiia-kato-neopravdani-344306>

In a similar vein, the prospect of an impending World War III supposedly started by the West, Moscow's nuclear retaliation and related task to "demilitarize" NATO are reported uncritically through the citation of Russian media.⁷⁷ At the same time, Western warnings of Russia's potential deployment of chemical weapons in Ukraine is also presented.⁷⁸

Unlike Telegraph's mixing of pro-Russian and pro-Western positions and Trud's greater overall focus on domestic developments in Bulgaria through which Russian messaging is refracted, the ideologically-minded, socialist-leaning **Pogled.info**, owned by consultancy firm Evrokarieri and edited by the firm's manager Rumen Petkov, spearheads the dissemination of disinformation that most closely follows the Kremlin agenda. Intensive messaging about the Russian domestic and foreign policy context is reinforced by articles reprinted from Russian authors (whose affiliations are not generally indicated and disclosed), which can reach hundreds of thousands of views.⁷⁹ The outlet advances a style based on "geopolitical analyses", usually drawing unjustified and unfounded historical and analytical parallels.

For example, Pogled.info tends to distinctively emphasize the role played by Britain and the Baltic states in relations with Russia – a perspective that is not

Telegraph, 2022, 'Заков отсече: Поведението на Митрофанова е недопустимо' ('Zakov is categorical: Mitrofanova's behavior is unacceptable'). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/bulgaria/zakov-otseche-povedenieto-na-mitrofanova-e-nedopustimo.-ministryt-na-otbranata-v-ostavka-e-na-mnenie-che-ruskiat-poslanik-u-nas-kategorichno-ne-uvazhava-bylgarii-344393>

⁷⁷ Telegraph, 2022, 'Руски журналист: Третата световна война е тук, ще демилитаризираме НАТО (ВИДЕО)', 31 май 2022 ('Russian journalist: The Third World War is here, we are demilitarizing NATO (VIDEO)', 31 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/svetat/ruski-zhurnalist-tretata-svetovna-vojna-e-tuk-shte-demilitarizirame-nato.-ako-triabva-armiata-ni-shte-stigne-i-do-stounhendzh-zaplashi-vladimir-soloviov-video-340834>

Telegraph, 2022, 'Медведев и Песков плашат: Помощта на НАТО за Украйна може да доведе до ядрена война', 12 май 2022 ('Medvedev and Peskov threaten: NATO's assistance to Ukraine may lead to a nuclear war', 12 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/svetat/medvedev-i-peskov-plashat-pomoshhta-na-nato-za-ukrajna-mozhe-da-dovede-do-iadrena-vojna.-rusiia-e-gotova-za-naj-moshthiat-si-udar-ako-niakoj-se-namesi-v-konflikta-predupredi-kremyl-339114>

⁷⁸ Telegraph, 2022, 'САЩ АЛАРМИРА: Русия може да използва химическо оръжие', 10 март 2022 ('THE US ALARMS: Russia may use chemical weapons, 10 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://telegraph.bg/svetat/sasht-alarmira-rusiia-mozhe-da-izpolzva-himicheskoto-oryzhie-v-ukrajna.-bajdyn-shte-obsydi-s-erdogan-sybitiata-okolo-vojnata-lavrov-e-v-turciia-za-sreshta-s-kuleba-i-chavushoglu-38861>

⁷⁹ For example, the following article has gathered over half a million views: Malinovskaya, R., 2022, 'Европа се избавя от гостите от Украйна', *Pogled.info*, 10 юни 2022 ('Europe is saving itself from the guests from Ukraine', 10 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa-se-izbavya-ot-gostite-ot-ukraina.143063>

usually widely covered in Bulgarian media. **London is presented as the main anti-Russian hawk, seeking an enhanced role in international politics through the Ukraine war.**⁸⁰ A historical continuity in “British Russophobia” is alleged, creating the impression of uncovering a long-standing Anglo-Saxon conspiracy against Moscow. It is further argued that the Three Seas Initiative’s main aim is to impose a UK-controlled cordon sanitaire between Asia and Europe from the Baltic to the Black sea. An “old British dream” is thus claimed to be the isolation of China and Russia from Europe through the dominated countries in-between, which would allow gaining control over Russia, China and Europe.⁸¹

For their part, **Baltic states are argued to be unable to find any other pillar in international politics but the conflict with Russia.** They are ready to become willing victims of the global game that the West ostensibly wages in order to reap the benefits from world political and economic arrangements. The Baltic countries’ only chance for independence is seemingly the disappearance of Russia, of which scenario the US and Western Europe try to convince them.⁸² Poland and Romania are additionally painted as “vassals” of the Anglo-Saxon order, preparing to wage war against Russia by building up their fleets in the Baltic and Black sea.⁸³ Warsaw is said to be re-Polonizing the space between the two seas as Polish national consciousness is argued to be steeped in ideas of revanchist imperialism.⁸⁴

More generally, Pogled.info advances the disinformation claim that **the West is conducting a war of attrition against Moscow** but that Russia is

⁸⁰ Vorzyakov, S., 2022, 'Великобритания иска да заеме мястото на САЩ в ролята на основен враг на Русия', *Pogled.info*, 30 юни 2022 ('Britain wants to take over the US's role as Russia's main enemy', 30 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/velikobritaniya-iska-da-zaeme-myastoto-na-sasht-v-rolyata-na-osnoven-vrag-na-rusiya>.143723

⁸¹ Malishev, V., 2022, 'Британците и Одеса', *Pogled.info*, 26 юни 2022 ('The Brits and Odessa', 26 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/ukraina/britantsite-i-odesa>.143571

⁸² Bordachev, T., 2022, 'Съседството с Русия води Прибалтика към порочен кръг', *Pogled.info*, 1 юли 2022 ('Neighboring Russia leads the Baltic states into a vicious cycle', 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/sasedstvoto-s-rusiya-vodi-pribaltika-kam-porochen-krag>.143779

⁸³ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Полша и Румъния се готвят за война с Русия по море', 1 юли 2022 ('Poland and Romania are preparing themselves for a war with Russia at sea', 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/polsha-i-rumaniya-se-gotvyat-za-voina-s-rusiya-po-more>.143755

⁸⁴ Vinnik, D., 2022, 'За реваншизма на държавата Полша', *Pogled.info*, 30 юни 2022 ('On the revanchism of the Polish state', 30 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/za-revanshizma-na-darzhavata-polsha>.143712

nevertheless resilient economically and militarily. NATO is portrayed as having global ambitions for instituting a new Cold War, led by American imperialism. The outlet states that the provocation against Russia through a NATO-armed Ukraine is the other side of the same coin, whereby China is provoked on the basis of a US-armed Taiwan.⁸⁵ Yet, to counteract these alleged designs, **Russia's invasion of Ukraine is presented as a catalyst for global change.** The Kremlin and its allies are claimed to be replacing the US's global hegemony and liberal globalism – portrayed as the same updated version of neocolonialism, with “true” freedom and multilateralism, speeding up the emergence of a new reserve currency to replace the dollar and the euro. Pogled.info cites uncritically Sergey Lavrov's distortion of history through false analogies whereby Europe's approach to the Ukraine war is said to be reminiscent of the start of World War II. Hitler's gathering of a coalition of European states to fight the USSR is likened to the EU's and NATO's supposedly ongoing assembling of a coalition against Moscow.

Disinformation regarding refugees also focuses on the wider European and international context. Pogled.info claims that **Europe is turning against Ukrainian refugees, who are painted as only pretending to be suffering** but in reality being capricious and availing themselves freely of the support provided by Europe.⁸⁶ Poles, in particular, are argued to be getting tired of refugees from Ukraine, who do not want to contribute to the local economy.⁸⁷ The US and Britain are further singled out as using refugees as a weapon, while stoking the war in Ukraine.⁸⁸ The outlet promotes a conspiracy, according to which Europe's whole-hearted acceptance of refugees is done with the ulterior motive to leave empty the territories gained by Russia so that the remaining population is insufficient for the reconstruction of the country and Moscow

⁸⁵ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Новата глобална Студена война на НАТО вече е официална', 2 юли 2022 ('NATO's new global Cold War is now official', 2 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/nato/novata-globalna-studena-voina-na-nato-veche-e-ofitsialna.143807>

⁸⁶ Leshenko, S., 2022, 'На Европа й омръзнаха авантаджиите от Украйна', *Pogled.info*, 2 юли 2022 ('Europe is tired of benefits seekers from Ukraine', 2 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/na-evropa-%D1%9D-omraznaha-avantadzhiite-ot-ukraina.143822>

⁸⁷ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Полша: Недоволството от наплива на украински “бежанци” расте', 19 юни 2022 ('Poland: Dissatisfaction with the deluge of Ukrainian “refugees” is rising', 19 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/polsha-nedovolstvoto-ot-napliva-na-ukrainski-bezhantsi-raste.143678>

⁸⁸ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Бежанците като ресурс: САЩ и Англия гледат как ЕС си играе на “състрадание”', 6 май 2022 ('The refugees as a resource: The US and England are watching as the EU's is playing a “sympathy” game', 6 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/bezhantsite-kato-resurs-sasht-i-angliya-gledat-kak-es-si-igrae-na-sastradanie.141949>

has to bear the brunt of investment.⁸⁹ Moreover, citing Russian sources about developments in Bulgaria, Pogled.info claims that Ukrainian refugees have been showered with luxury in Bulgaria, which ordinary Bulgarian cannot afford.⁹⁰

Last but not least, **disinformation discourse juxtaposes its own definition of what “Bulgarian-ness” and Bulgarian national interests stand for with the alleged “foreign-ness” and “treason” of Western-educated Bulgarian politicians.** The former, We Continue the Change-led government is argued to have dealt a blow to Bulgaria’s national identity and self-respect by erasing the heritage of historical and spiritual ties between Bulgaria and Russia on the basis of supporting Ukraine and being unwilling to conduct talks with Gazprom for the resumption of gas supplies.⁹¹ Former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov is vilified as not being “authentically” Bulgarian (due to having lived and studied in the West).⁹² Hence, the outlet calls on the rest of the country’s political class to restore Bulgaria’s role as a civilizational, cultural and diplomatic mediator between Russia and Europe.⁹³

Recent additions to the Bulgarian media market follow the established pattern of promoting Russian views, while mounting opprobrium against pro-Western politicians. **Filter**, in particular, is a weekly newspaper that appeared in 2022, whose founder and editor-in-chief Kristina Patrashkova has been a talk show commentator and journalist for a variety of widely circulated newspapers such as 24 chasa, Monitor, Sega as well as tabloids Weekend and Galleria. In line with similar news sources in Bulgaria that promote Russian views, the outlet disparages We Continue the Change and frequently relies on false equivalences

⁸⁹ Ishenko, R., 2022, ‘Защо са му на Запада бежанците от Украйна’, *Pogled.info*, 1 април 2022 (‘Why does the West need the refugees from Ukraine’, 1 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/zashto-sa-mu-na-zapada-bezhantsite-ot-ukraina.140857>

⁹⁰ Pogled.info, 2022, ‘България се отказва от обезпечаването на украинските бежанци с луксозни условия’, 2 юни 2022 (‘Bulgaria gave up on providing luxury conditions to the Ukrainian refugees’, 2 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/balgariya-se-otkazva-ot-obezpechavaneto-na-ukrainskite-bezhantsi-s-luksozni-usloviya.142795>

⁹¹ Sheitanov, V., 2022, ‘За цената на един премиер’, *Pogled.info*, 4 юли 2022 (‘The price tag of a prime minister’, 4 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/za-tsenata-na-edin-premier.143887>

⁹² Kardamsky, V., 2022, ‘Този случайник Кирил Петков не познава народа, той го презира!’, *Pogled.info*, 29 юни 2022 (‘This random person, Kiril Petkov, does not know the nation, he despises it’, 29 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/tozi-sluchainik-kiril-petkov-ne-poznava-naroda-toi-go-prezira.143692>

⁹³ Pogled.info, 2022, ‘Политическата ни „класа“ е национален позор!’, 2 юли 2022 (‘Our political “class” is a national shame!’, 2 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/politicheskata-ni-klasa-e-natsionalen-pozor.143827>

and unjustified historical analogies to present the Kremlin's behavior in a favorable light.

Former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and Finance Minister Asen Vassilev are claimed to have demonstrated “ultimate hypocrisy” and “arrogant presumptuousness” by committing a crime against Bulgaria and its economy, having decided to break off direct imports of Russian gas.⁹⁴ Filter asserts that the former government placed Bulgaria in a situation in which the reliable supplier (Gazprom) was dumped in order to re-orientate to a more expensive one (American liquefied gas). An analogy is drawn with World War I, where there was a supposedly similar lack of common sense among the Bulgarian “hawks”, who called for Bulgaria to act in such a way as to risk becoming party to the conflict.⁹⁵ Instead, **Bulgarian neutrality is said to be the only common sense position in the war.**⁹⁶ Filter also alleges the existence of a deliberately lax screening regime for Ukrainian refugees, resulting, as it maintains, in the settlement of Ukrainian mafia in Bulgaria leading to a rise in criminal activities.⁹⁷

Russian policies in turn receive overwhelming approval, whereby unfounded historical analogies abound. **Moscow's aggression is excused on the alleged grounds that it is fighting for its own survival vis-à-vis creeping American invasion.**⁹⁸ The outlet maintains that the Ukraine war represents a continuation of the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia and the overthrow of Milosevic became a model for the insurrections in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014.⁹⁹ It is further claimed

⁹⁴ Dachkov, Y., 2022, 'Здравейте, шарлатани', *Филтър*, брой 14, стр. 17 ('Hello, charlatans!', *Filter*, Issue 14, p. 17)

⁹⁵ Antonov, S., 2022, 'Криворазбраната диверсификация', *Филтър*, брой 15, стр. 19, 11 май – 17 май 2022 ('Diversification wrongly understood', *Filter*, Issue 15, p. 19, 11 May – 17 May 2022)

⁹⁶ Hristov, I., 2022, 'Русофили и русофоби да не развяват чужди знамена в България', *Филтър*, брой 10, стр. 21, 6 април – 12 април 2022 ('Russophiles and Russophobes should not wave foreign flags in Bulgaria', *Filter*, Issue 10, p. 21, 6 April – 12 April 2022)

⁹⁷ Metodiev, A., 2022, 'Украински мафиоти от „Братва“ влизат у нас като бежанци', *Филтър*, брой 16, стр. 4-5, 18 май-24 май 2022 ('Ukrainian mafia from Bratva enter Bulgaria as refugees', *Filter*, Issue 16, pp. 4-5, 18 May – 24 May 2022)

⁹⁸ Dachkov, Y., 2022, 'САЩ и Русия изпуснаха Европа на цимента', *Филтър*, брой 4, стр. 19, 25 февруари – 3 март 2022 ('The US and Russia dropped Europe on the concrete floor', *Filter*, Issue 4, p. 19, 25 February – 3 March 2022)

Mihaylov, N., 2022, 'Между Волга и Яндзъ ще се владее светът', *Филтър*, брой 13, стр. 24, 27 април – 3 май 2022 ('The world will be ruled between Volga and Yangtze', *Filter*, Issue 13, p. 24, 27 April – 3 May 2022)

⁹⁹ Kosturitsa, E., 2022, 'Украйна е второ действие от нападението на НАТО срещу Югославия', *Филтър*, брой 9, стр. 24, 30 март – 4 април 2022 ('Ukraine is the second scene of NATO's attack on Ukraine', *Filter*, Issue 9, p. 24, 30 March – 4 April 2022)

that the repetition of the Great Depression of the 1930s was offset by the war in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ The outlet predicts the emergence of a new world order led by the Kremlin. Western pressure on Russia has brought Moscow and Beijing closer together, who will support each other's currencies. The war is forecasted to finish with a division between the West and Eurasia, to which Africa and Latin America are also leaning.¹⁰¹ **If the Three Seas Initiative is transformed into a political-military alliance closely connected to NATO, then Russia will have to take action to neutralize the danger.** But if it transforms into an East European equivalent of Benelux, the initiative can become a balancer between East and West.¹⁰² **A bleak picture is painted of Europe's future as it will ostensibly become dark, dusty, cold and dangerous** due to the cutoff of Russian gas supplies.¹⁰³

Online sources led by well-known journalists have likewise adopted a Russia-leaning line of messaging, often reprinting each other's articles.¹⁰⁴ **Glasove** – owned by a similarly-named company with long-time journalist Yavor Dachkov as manager, contains commentaries that are favorable to the Kremlin, frequently based on the citation of Russian officials, while being critical of Western-oriented Bulgarian politicians. Occasionally, some alternative views are incorporated in what would amount to an attempt to maintain an image

¹⁰⁰ Kreis, C., 2022, 'Спасителният първи изстрел, или как войните лекуват икономиката на САЩ', *Филтър*, брой 10, стр. 18-19, 6 април – 12 април 2022 ('The first saving shot or how wars cure the US's economy', *Filter*, Issue 10, pp. 18-19, 6 April – 12 April 2022)

¹⁰¹ Hudson, M., 2022, 'Това е класова война, следва голям грабеж', *Филтър*, брой 15, стр. 24, 11 май – 17 май 2022 ('This is a class war, a big plunder follows next', *Filter*, Issue 15, p. 24, 11 May – 17 May 2022)

¹⁰² Mihaylov, N., 2022, 'Между Волга и Яндзъ ще се владее светът', *Филтър*, брой 13, стр. 24, 27 април – 3 май 2022 ('The world will be ruled between Volga and Yangtze', *Filter*, Issue 13, p. 24, 27 April – 3 May 2022)

¹⁰³ Dimitrova, M., 2022, 'Европа – тъмна, прашна, студена и страшна', *Филтър*, брой 25, стр. 11, 20 юли – 26 юли 2022 ('Europe – dark, dusty, cold and dangerous', *Filter*, Issue 25, p. 11, 20 July – 26 July 2022)

¹⁰⁴ Glasove tends to reprint content from Epicenter: Epicenter, 2022, 'Вижте кои държави от Европа плащат доставките на руски газ в рубли, по данни на ТАСС', *Гласове*, 7 юли 2022 ('See which countries in Europe pay for the supplies of Russian gas in rubles, according to TASS data', *Glasove*, 7 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/vizhte-koi-darzhavi-ot-evropa-plashtat-dostavkite-na-ruski-gaz-v-rubli-po-danni-na-tass>

Epicenter, 2022, 'Путин: Американските биологични лаборатории в Украйна са създавали компоненти на биологични оръжия', *Гласове*, 16 май 2022 ('Putin: American biolabs in Ukraine have created components for bioweapons', *Glasove*, 16 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/putin-amerikanskite-biolaboratorii-v-ukrayna-sa-sazdavali-komponenti-na-biologichni-orazhiya>

of objectivity.¹⁰⁵ For example, excusing Russian behavior can take place on the basis of focusing on NATO expansion as a supposed threat to Moscow's security concerns and claiming that the US aimed to provoke Russia in order to push it to attack Ukraine.¹⁰⁶ In terms of domestic politics, Glasove has asserted that the former, We Continue the Change-led government was "illegal", almost amounting to a coup, and further equated the Bulgarian national interest with the maintenance of economic ties with Russia.¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, **Epicenter** – edited by journalist Valeria Veleva, has promoted Russian viewpoints, yet mixing them with pro-Western stances.¹⁰⁸ The website has for instance featured a discussion as to whether Russia's aggression in Ukraine represents a war or a special military operation, concluding that the latter is a more appropriate description, given that the Kremlin has allegedly demonstrated restraint.¹⁰⁹

Last but not least, tabloid-style outlets such as **Blitz** and **Pik** advance a domestic agenda aimed at smearing pro-Western, reformist politicians, whereby Russia-friendly narratives are included on a more intermittent basis via exaggerating headlines, biased commentaries, the citation of Russian officials and unnamed

¹⁰⁵ For instance, Kiril Petkov's stance on the war in Ukraine receives an objective representation without evaluative and attitude-swaying content in the following article: БТА, 2022, 'Петков: Решението на войната е Русия да напусне напълно територията на Украйна', *Гласове*, 3 юни 2022 ('Petkov: The solution to the war is for Russia to complete leave the territory of Ukraine', *Glasove*, 3 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/novini/petkov-reshenieto-na-voynata-e-rusiya-da-napusne-napalno-teritoriyata-na-ukrayna>

¹⁰⁶ Simes, D., 2022, 'Подготвя ли се военен конфликт между Америка и Русия?', *Гласове*, 23 юни 2022 ('Is a serious conflict between America and Russia being prepared?', *Glasove*, 23 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/podgotvya-li-se-voenen-konflikt-mezhdu-amerika-i-rusiya>

¹⁰⁷ Georgiev, G., 2022, 'Умнокрасиви манипулации', *Гласове*, 26 юни 2022 ('Smart-beautiful manipulations', *Glasove*, 26 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/umnokrasivi-manipulatsii>

Glasove, 2022, 'Националният интерес на България. Трябва ли да имаме търговски взаимоотношения с Русия?', 14 юни 2022 ('Bulgaria's nationalist interest. Should we have trade relations with Russia?', 14 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://glasove.com/komentari/natsionalniyat-interes-na-balgariya-tryabva-li-da-imame-targovski-vzaimootnosheniya-s-rusiya>

¹⁰⁸ Epicenter, 2022, 'Илиян Василев: Русия има големи интереси у нас и затваряне на посолството би било прекален подарък', 4 юли 2022 ('Iliyan Vasilev: Russia has significant interests in Bulgaria and closing down the Embassy would be an excessive favor', 4 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://epicenter.bg/article/Iliyan-Vasilev--Rusiya-ima-golemi-interesi-u-nas-i-zatvaryane-na-posolstvoto-bi-bilo-prekalen-podarak/286714/11/0>

¹⁰⁹ Каменарски, Г., 2022, 'Какво се води в Украйна – война или специална военна операция?', *Епицентър*, 1 юли 2022 ('What is taking place in Ukraine – a war or a special military operation?', *Epicenter*, 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://epicenter.bg/article/Kakvo-se-vodi-v-Ukrayna---voyna-ili-spetsialna-voenna-operatsiya-/286542/11/0>

experts. Sensationalist titles, in particular, convey purportedly imminent developments (usually based on the impending decisions of the Kremlin leadership),¹¹⁰ apocalyptic scenarios (predicting, for example, Europe's demise),¹¹¹ supposedly detrimental domestic political developments.¹¹² Pro-Russian opinion articles tend to point to Ukraine's alleged virulent Russophobia and nationalism as causes of the war, while a victory of Russia over Ukraine is said to weaken Anglo-Saxon domination in international relations.¹¹³

Turkish media influence

The reach of Turkish/Turkey-oriented media outlets in Bulgaria is overall limited in scope and their reporting does not tend to promote Kremlin narratives. TRT operates a Bulgarian-language edition, which covers Russia-related developments in a balanced manner, usually on the basis of short news pieces rather than commentaries.¹¹⁴ Turkey's role in the Ukraine war is

¹¹⁰ Blitz, 2022, 'Сергей Шойгу обявя докога ще продължи специалната военна операция', 5 юли 2022 ('Sergey Shoigu announced the duration of the special military operation', 5 July 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/svyat/sergey-shoigu-obyavi-dokoga-shche-prodzhizhi-spetsialnata-voenna-operatsiya_news895855.html

Blitz, 2022, 'Последни новини от Москва след експулсирането на руските дипломати', 6 юли 2022 ('Latest news from Moscow after the expulsion of the Russian diplomats', 6 July 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/svyat/posledni-novini-ot-moskva-sled-ekspulsiraneto-na-ruskite-diplomati_news896071.html

¹¹¹ Blitz, 2022, 'Европа загиба и без война: Ето кои държави, освен България, ще изчезнат скоро', 5 юли 2022 ('Europe is perishing even without war: Here is which countries, other than Bulgaria, will disappear soon', 5 July 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/evropa-zagiva-i-bez-voyna-eto-koi-drzhavi-osven-blgariya-shche-izchezat-skoro_news895746.html

¹¹² Blitz, 2022, 'Експерт огласи каква гибелна коалиция се гласи да властва', 5 юли 2022 ('Expert announces what detrimental coalition is preparing to take power', 5 July 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/ekspert-oglasii-kakva-gibelna-koalitsiya-se-glasi-da-vlastva_news895866.html

¹¹³ Blitz, 2022, 'Горката Украйна: Политиците оставиха геополитическия капан да щракне', 4 юли 2022 ('Poor Ukraine: Politicians left the geopolitical trap to open', 4 July 2022). Retrieved from: https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/gorkata-ukrayna-polititsite-ostavikha-geopoliticheskiya-kapan-da-shchrakne_news895418.html

¹¹⁴ TRT Bulgarian, 2022, '“Русия е загубила 15 000 войници във войната в Украйна...”' ('"Russia has lost 15 000 soldiers in the war in Ukraine..."'). Retrieved from: <https://www.trt.net.tr/bulgarian/sviat/2022/07/21/rusiia-ie-zaghubila-15-000-voinitsi-vv-voinata-v-ukraina-1857729>

TRT Bulgarian, 2022, 'Валенса призова за организиране на безредици в Русия...' ('Walesa called for the organization of riots in Russia...'). Retrieved from: <https://www.trt.net.tr/bulgarian/sviat/2022/07/12/valiensa-prizova-za-organiziranje-na-biezrieditsi-v-rusiia-1854516>

presented as that of an unbiased mediator, which has mutually interdependent ties with both Russia and Ukraine.¹¹⁵ Key topics of focus in the regional section of TRT Bulgarian are informed by the concerns and priorities in Ankara's foreign policy, including the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, relations with Greece, events in the Middle East and the activities of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

The main outlets, which cater to the Turkish-speaking population in Bulgaria, have regionally-specific dissemination and encompass Kircaali Haber,¹¹⁶ covering local Islamic traditions, cross-border Turkish-Bulgarian cooperation and generally reporting on local concerns, as well as 24Rodopi.¹¹⁷ The latter, together with its related section 24smolian,¹¹⁸ share a pro-Russian and anti-Western orientation.

In contrast, **the pro-Russian outlets in Bulgaria** (and especially ideological-partisan sources closely following the Russian line) **portray Turkish-Russian cooperation in a much more enthusiastic and exaggerated tone, while at the same time transforming such positive spin into opprobrium** against Turkey and its President Recep Erdogan whenever Ankara is seen as contradicting Kremlin priorities. Thus, on the one hand, Turkey is praised as a country with a sound understanding of its national interests, which are said to coincide with support for the Kremlin and militate against joining sanctions on Russia.¹¹⁹ It is also claimed, for example, that Ankara can be a key partner of Moscow in case of a war between the EU, US and Russia. A further suggestion holds that Russia and Turkey can carve out spheres of influence

TRT Bulgarian, 2022, 'Африка стана заложник на войната започната от Русия...' ('Africa has become a hostage to the war started by Russia...'). Retrieved from: <https://www.trt.net.tr/bulgarian/sviat/2022/06/21/afrika-stana-zalozhnik-na-voinata-zapochnata-ot-rusiia-1845968>

TRT Bulgarian, 2022, 'Путин проведе съвещание с членовете на Съвета за сигурност' ('Putin carried out a meeting with the members of the Security Council'). Retrieved from: <https://www.trt.net.tr/bulgarian/sviat/2022/08/04/putin-proviedie-svieshchaniie-s-chlienovietie-na-svieta-zasighurnost-1863883>

¹¹⁵ TRT Bulgarian, 2022, 'Политиката на Турция в кризата Русия-Украйна...' ('Turkey's policies in the Russia-Ukraine crisis...'). Retrieved from: <https://www.trt.net.tr/bulgarian/politichieski-analiz/2022/02/13/politikata-na-turtsiia-v-krizata-rusiia-ukraina-1777626>

¹¹⁶ <https://kircaalihaber.com/bg/>

¹¹⁷ <https://rodopi24.blogspot.com/>

¹¹⁸ <http://www.24smolian.com/>

¹¹⁹ Ilieva, Z., 2022, 'Вниманието към политиките на Анкара си заслужава', *Pogled.info*, 30 май 2022 ('It is worth paying attention to Ankara's policies', 30 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Zornitsa-Ilieva/vnimanieto-kam-politikite-na-ankara-si-zasluzhava.142701>

in the Balkans.¹²⁰ On the other hand, Turkey is presented as a “traitor” that is always ready to betray Russia in order to cooperate with the West and Ankara’s ambitions for playing an important role in international relations can be couched in disparaging terms.¹²¹

These dualistic representations were particularly prominently manifested in the context of Turkey’s initial opposition and subsequent acquiescence into Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO membership. Before Ankara agreed, pro-Russian outlets applauded Turkey’s ability to sow division within and put obstacles to NATO’s functioning, entertaining the possibility that Turkey may leave the Alliance.¹²² Yet, as Erdogan gave the green light to Helsinki’s and Stockholm’s accession, a contrasting narrative emerged asserting that Ankara proved unable to resist Western pressure.¹²³

In turn, the absence of Arabic and Iranian media reach in Bulgaria is paralleled by a circumscribed in-depth coverage of the Middle East in the Bulgarian media scene. **Pro-Russian outlets report on developments in the Gulf states and Iran primarily in the context of how these countries can participate in and aid an alternative, Moscow-led world order** based on what is claimed to be a multipolar structure and a replacement of Western financial arrangements

¹²⁰ Kotlin, K., 2022, ‘Защо Турция е ключов партньор на Русия и какво общо имат Балканите с това’, *Pogled.info*, 21 юни 2022 (‘Why Turkey is a key partner of Russia and what the Balkans have to do with this’, 21 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/zashto-turtsiya-e-klyuchov-partnor-na-rusiya-i-kakvo-obshto-imat-balkanite-s-tova.143408>

¹²¹ Pogled.info, 2022, ‘Сближава ли се Ердоган с Байдън, готвейки се да се отвърне от Путин!?', 2 май 2022 (‘Is Erdogan getting closer to Biden ready to turn his back on Putin!?', 2 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/sblizhava-li-se-erdogan-s-baidan-gotveiki-se-da-se-otvarne-ot-putin.141810>

Timohin, A., 2022, ‘Турция се опозори с първия си самолетносащ’, *Pogled.info*, 6 юли 2022 (‘Turkey’s first aircraft carrier brought it shame’, 6 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/turtsiya-se-opozori-s-parviya-si-samoletonosach.143931>

¹²² Titov, I., 2022, ‘Анкара усети вкуса: На Турция и е тясно в НАТО’, *Pogled.info*, 1 юни 2022 (‘Ankara tasted the feeling: NATO is too small for Turkey’, 1 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/nato/ankara-useti-vkusa-na-turtsiya-i-e-tyasno-v-nato.142765>

¹²³ Ilieva, Z., 2022, ‘“Поклони” ли се Ердоган на англосаксонците или спечели?', *Pogled.info*, 30 юни 2022 (‘Did Erdogan “bow down” to the Anglo Saxons or did he win?', 30 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Zornitsa-Ilieva/pokloni-li-se-erdogan-na-anglosaksontsite-ili-specheli.143746>

with a new reserve currency.¹²⁴ The BRICS¹²⁵ is hailed as a key pillar of that order, whereby Iran's and Argentina's bid to join is touted as an indicator of the influence of the organization. Iran is singled out for particular praise in Russian propaganda as a country standing up to the US as well as an example of how to circumvent oil sanctions.¹²⁶ For its part, Saudi Arabia is portrayed positively to the extent that Riyadh is seen as breaking away from its traditional partnership with Washington and seeking to create closer bonds with Russia and China especially in the sphere of energy.¹²⁷

Croatia

Croatian political and societal reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been on the whole supportive of the Ukrainian cause, providing diplomatic, financial and military assistance to Kyiv.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, Croatia's President Zoran Milanović has advanced a populist discourse critical of Kyiv, the EU and

¹²⁴ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Русия, Китай, Индия и Иран могат да създадат нова валута, но с една особеност', 8 юни 2022 ('Russia, China, India and Iran can create a new currency but with one caveat', 8 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/rusiya-kitai-indiya-i-iran-mogat-da-sazdadat-nova-valuta-no-s-edna-osobenost.142981>

¹²⁵ The acronym refers to the constituent states and (once) categorized as major emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

¹²⁶ Pogled.info, 2022, 'Иран никога няма да поддаде на крайните американски искания', 5 април 2022 ('Iran will never give in to the extreme American demands', 5 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/iztok/iran-nikoga-nyama-da-poddade-na-krainite-amerikanski-iskaniya.140954>

Savchuk, S., 2022, 'Русия я принуждават да стане по-богата', *Pogled.info*, 30 април 2022 ('Russia is being forced to become richer', 30 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/rusiya-ya-prinuzhdavat-da-stane-po-bogata.141756>

Samofalova, O., 2022, 'С какво петролното ембарго заплашва самата Европа', *Pogled.info*, 13 април 2022 ('How does the oil embargo threaten Europe itself', 13 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/s-kakvo-petrolnoto-embargo-zaplashva-samata-evropa.141230>

¹²⁷ Zadorozhnaya, A., 2022, 'Какво пречи на Байдън "да накаже Русия" със саудитска помощ', *Pogled.info*, 4 юни 2022 ('What stops Biden from "punishing Russia" with Saudi help', 4 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/kakvo-prechi-na-baidan-da-nakazhe-rusiya-sas-sauditska-pomosht.142876>

Мануков, S., 2022, 'Рияд отговори на опитите на Запада да премахне Русия от петролният пазар', *Pogled.info*, 24 май 2022 ('Riyadh responded to the West's attempts to remove Russia from the oil market', 24 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pogled.info/svetoven/riyad-otgovori-na-opitite-na-zapada-da-premahne-rusiya-ot-petrolniya-pazar.142529>

¹²⁸ Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2022, 'Croatia will continue to assist Ukraine'. Retrieved from: <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/croatia-will-continue-to-assist-ukraine/35385>

NATO, while highlighting Russian might and arguing that the Croatian national interest dictates non-involvement in the Ukraine war.¹²⁹

Croatian public opinion has been overwhelmingly negatively disposed to Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, drawing on sympathetic affinity to the Ukrainian experience as a result of Croatia's own war of independence against the Serb-controlled Yugoslav army in the 1990s. Opinion polls have shown that a huge majority of over 70% of Croat respondents claim that Russia and its President Vladimir Putin are the main culprits for the war¹³⁰ and almost 80% express support for sanctions against Russia.¹³¹ Around 70% of the polled Croatian population assess that Putin is a war criminal¹³² associating him with "Hitler of the 21st century" (36.2%), "an authoritarian leader and dictator" (28.6%), "Milošević with an atom bomb" (13.9%), with only a small minority

¹²⁹ Vurušić, V., 2022. 'Zoran Milanović, novi ruski heroj: 'Konačno je netko rekao ono što svi u EU misle!', *Jutarnji list*, 26 siječnja 2022 ('Zoran Milanović, the new Russian hero: "Finally someone expressed what everyone in the EU thinks!"', 26 January 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/zoran-milanovic-novi-ruski-heroj-konacno-je-netko-rekao-ono-sto-svi-u-eu-misle-15149988>

Jutarnji list, 2022, 'Ono što radi Zelenski vodi u poraz. Rusija je nevjerovatna vojna sila. Neuništiva je, tamo gdje njihova čizma dođe...', 10 lipnja 2022 ('What Zelensky is doing leads to defeat. Russia is an incredible military force. It is indestructible, where their boots land...', 10 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ono-sto-radi-zelenski-vodi-u-poraz-rusija-je-nevjerovatna-vojna-sila-neunistiva-je-tamo-gdje-njihova-cizma-dode-15209128>

Popović, S., 2022, 'Support for Ukraine, balancing, ignoring: How the Western Balkans is reacting to the crisis', *European Western Balkans*. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/02/15/support-for-ukraine-balancing-ignoring-how-the-western-balkans-is-reacting-to-the-crisis/>

¹³⁰ RTL Danas, 2022, 'EKSKLUZIVNO Istraživanje otkriva koga Hrvati krive za rat u Ukrajini, misle li da će se rat proširiti na Balkan', 5 ožujka 2022 ('Exclusive: Research reveals who is blamed by Croatians for the war in Ukraine, do they believe that the war will spread to the Balkans', 5 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://intellinews.com/serbians-blame-us-and-nato-for-ukraine-war-237960/>

Bne IntelliNews, 2022, 'Serbians blame the US and NATO for Ukraine war'. Retrieved from: <https://intellinews.com/serbians-blame-us-and-nato-for-ukraine-war-237960/>

¹³¹ Munižaba, T., 2022, 'Hrejtng o ratu u Ukrajini: Građani snažno podupiru sankcije uvedene Rusiji', *HRT Vijesti*, 21 ožujka 2022 ('Hrejtng on the war in Ukraine: Citizens strongly support sanctions against Russia', 21 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/hrejtng-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-gradani-snazno-podupiru-sankcije-uvjedene-rusiji-6252793>

¹³² RTL Danas, 2022, 'Ekskluzivno istraživanje: Hrvatska se u osudi ruske agresije na Ukrajinu ne dijeli na lijeve i desne, stav je...', *RTL.hr*, 11 travnja 2022 ('Exclusive research: Croatia is not divided into left and right when condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the opinion is...', 11 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ekskluzivno-istrazivanje-hrvatska-se-u-osudi-ruske-agresije-na-ukrajinu-ne-dijeli-na-lijeve-i-desne-stav-je-jasan-putin-je-ratni-zlocinac-f7e3d55e-c352-11ec-9565-2a7bdc5d576f>

asserting that the Russian President is “a true fighter against US domination in the world” (4.6%) and “the genuine leader and hero of the Russian people” (1.4%).

Against this background of extensive political and societal disapproval of Moscow’s military aggression, the generally weaker Croatian susceptibility to Kremlin-sponsored narratives (not least given the limited scope of Croats’ pro-Russian sensibilities) further coupled with journalists’ overall adherence to balanced reporting, **the circulation of Moscow’s propagandist discourses in Croatia’s online and print news sources with the largest reach and popularity has been significantly circumscribed.** Outlets such as Jutarnji list, Večernji list, Novosti, Slobodna Dalmacija, 24sata, Index, Telegram, Glas Istre have reported on the Ukraine war in a neutral manner and have not espoused Russian disinformation viewpoints. For instance, unlike in Bulgaria, politicians who support Ukraine have not been portrayed in a negative light. Kremlin-originating false claims about Ukraine’s “nazification”¹³³ and the ostensible presence of bioweapons on post-Soviet territory aimed to destroy Russia¹³⁴ have been conveyed on the basis of the clarification that they represent Russian disinformation. The prospects of an economic fallout from the war, including the potential cut-off of gas supplies to Croatia and the backfire impact of sanctions on Russia form a main preoccupation of reporting.¹³⁵ Yet, these topics are not necessarily presented in a panic-inducing tone but are rather based on expert assessment.¹³⁶

¹³³ Vurušić, V., 2022, ‘Rusija kaže da Ukrajinu treba “denacificirati”, no koliko je ta zemlja zapravo “fašistička”?, *Jutarnji list*, 4 ožujka 2022 (‘Russia claims that Ukraine needs to be “denazified”, but how much is the country actually “fascist”?, 4 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/rusija-kaze-da-ukrajinu-treba-denacificirati-no-koliko-je-ta-zemlja-zapravo-fasisticka-15165909>

¹³⁴ Raknić, D., 2022, ‘Velika BBC-jeva analiza: Ima li dokaza za ruske tvrdnje o biološkom oružju u Ukrajini?, *Jutarnji list*, 11 ožujka 2022 (‘The big BBC analysis: Is there proof behind Russian statements about a biological weapon in Ukraine?’), 11 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/velika-bbc-jeva-analiza-ima-li-dokaza-za-ruske-tvrdnje-o-bioloskom-oruzju-u-ukrajini-15169191>

¹³⁵ Raknić, D., 2022, ‘Sankcije nisu uspjele. Rusija nije propala, ali zato nekim državama prijete trostruki udar’, *Jutarnji list*, 2 lipnja 2022 (‘The sanctions have failed. Russia did not collapse, but some states are in danger of a triple threat’, 2 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/sankcije-nisu-uspjele-rusija-nije-propala-ali-zato-nekim-drzavama-prijeti-trostruki-udar-15205666>

¹³⁶ Deutsche Welle, 2022, ‘Ruski plin ne stiže u Njemačku, u Berlinu strahuju. “Ovo je Putinov posljednji adut”’, *Index.hr*, 11 srpanja 2022 (‘Russian gas is not arriving in Germany, fear in Berlin. “This is Putin’s last resort”’, 11 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ruski-plin-ne-stiže-u-njemacku-u-berlinu-strahuju-ovo-je-putinov-posljednji-adut/2379120.aspx>

Despite the general resilience of the Croatian media scene, however, **there are three main points of vulnerability that can enable the influx of Russian disinformation**. First, the Kremlin has cultivated proxy connections with national news outlets through **sponsored advertising**, which is particularly evident in the case of gas company PPD (Prvo plinsko društvo)¹³⁷ and the food conglomerate Fortenova.¹³⁸ Both companies are financed with Russian capital, being managed by the Kremlin's lynchpin partner in Croatia, businessman Pavao Vujnovac (owner of PPD and head of the Executive board of Fortenova) and representing highly influential advertisers in the media market. Such advertising clout has resulted in the exertion of pressure on the editorial boards of news outlets.¹³⁹ Although the publication of pro-Russian narratives has not been widely observed, the threat of withdrawal of advertiser funding has contributed to a culture of (self) censorship among journalists, who would withhold publicizing information that can damage the interests of Vujnovac, PPD and Gazprom. For instance, 24sata and Nacional suddenly removed a published news article from HINA, the Croatian national news agency, which mentioned shady business links between PPD and the Croatian secret service.¹⁴⁰

Krasnec, T., 2022, 'Njemačka bez ruskog plina, svijet strahuje što će odlučiti Putin', *Večernji list*, 11 srpanja 2022, ('Germany without Russian gas, the world fears Putin's decision', 11 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/njemacka-bez-ruskog-plina-svijet-strahuje-sto-ce-odluciti-putin-1601300>

Deutsche Welle, HINA, 2022, 'Njemačka će prestati kupovati ruski ugljen 1. kolovoza, naftu 31. prosinca', *Index*, 13 srpanja 2022 ('Germany will stop buying Russian coal on August 1, oil on December 31', 13 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/njemacka-ce-prestati-kupovati-ruski-ugljen-1-kolovoza-naftu-31-prosinca/2379502.aspx/>

¹³⁷ PPD is Gazprom's main intermediary seller in the Croatian natural gas market: Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, p. 74. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

HINA, 2017, 'PPD sklopio desetogodišnji ugovor o isporuci plina s Gazpromom', *Index.hr*, ('PPD signed a ten-year agreement on gas with Gazprom'). Retrieved from: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ppd-sklopio-desetogodisnji-ugovor-o-dostavi-plina-s-gazpromom/995182.aspx>

¹³⁸ Fortenova is majority-owned by Russian or Russian-dependent firms. Russian state banks, Sberbank and VTB hold 46.5% of the company's shares, and PPD has another 6.4%: Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, p. 75. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

¹³⁹ Klancir, Đ., 2021, 'Who is Pressuring Journalists and How: From Politicians to Advertisers', Gong. Retrieved from: <https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Who-is-pressuring-journalists-and-how-from-politicians-to-advertisers-1.pdf>

¹⁴⁰ Šimičević, H., Borković, G., 2022, 'HND traži reakciju države zbog brisanja tekstova', *Novosti*, 13 srpanja 2022 ('HND demands the state's comment due to news articles being deleted', 13 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/hnd-trazi-reakciju-drzave-zbog-brisanja-tekstova>

Second, the **financial constraints increasingly** experienced in the Croatian media market and related **decline in journalistic standards** can facilitate the unintentional dissemination of Russian disinformation. The tendency to sensationalism as a technique to attract readership can further aid the Kremlin's media designs. For example, the Russian propagandist claim that 70 Croatian volunteers fighting in Ukraine were killed since the beginning of the war achieved a high resonance in the media.¹⁴¹ Although news outlets did note that this represented Kremlin disinformation,¹⁴² disclaimers were relegated to the end of articles in the likely attempt to gain readers' attention through misleading headlines.¹⁴³

Third, pro-Kremlin narratives can also be infused into the Croatian information space via **regional diffusion** from countries in the Western Balkans (such as Serbia and Bosnia), which are much more susceptible to Russian viewpoints and with which Zagreb shares geographical proximity and linguistic similarities. Indeed, it has been established that more Facebook pages disseminating pro-Russian disinformation on Croatia's social media are Serbian in origin rather than Croatian.

The trend of regional diffusion is therefore especially observable in the **Croatian online news and social media environment, which represents the main platform that enables the Kremlin discourse in Croatia**. The majority of fact-checked Russian disinformation in Croatia, according to the research conducted by fact-checking organization Faktograf.hr, appeared in digital

Šimičević, H., Borković, G., 2022, 'Gdje nestaju tekstovi o SOA-i partnerima šefa PPD-a', *Novosti*, 1 srpanja 2022, ('Where are the news articles about SOA and partners of the CEO of PPD', 1 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/gdje-destaju-tekstovi-o-soa-i-partnerima-sefa-ppd-a>

¹⁴¹ Blotnej, B., 2022, 'Rusi tvrde: "U Ukrajini ubijeno 74 Hrvata, a 51 je dezertirao"', *24sata*, 18 lipnja 2022 ('Russians claim: "74 Croatians killed in Ukraine, 51 deserted"', 18 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.24sata.hr/news/rusi-tvrde-u-ukrajini-je-ubijen-51-hrvat-a-74-su-dezertiralo-842967>

¹⁴² Krile, D., 2022, 'Pokušali nam podvaliti: ruska laž o navodnim ubijenim Hrvatima u Ukrajini projektil je uperen i protiv Hrvatske, evo zašto su nam Putin i ekipa lagali', *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 19 lipnja 2022 ('They tried to trick us: Russian lie about allegedly killed Croatians in Ukraine is a projectile targeting Croatia, here is why Putin and his gang lied', 19 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/pokusali-nam-podvaliti-ruska-laz-o-navodnim-ubijenim-hrvatima-u-ukrajini-projektil-je-uperen-i-protiv-hrvatske-evo-zasto-su-nas-putin-i-ekipa-lagali-1201939>

¹⁴³ Večernji list, 2022, 'Rusi tvrde: U Ukrajini je dosad poginuo 51 Hrvat, a 74 ih je dezertiralo', 18 lipnja 2022 ('Russians claim: 74 Croatians killed in Ukraine, 51 deserted', 18 June 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/rusko-ministarstvo-objavilo-u-ukrajini-je-dosad-poginuo-51-hrvat-a-74-ih-je-dezertiralo-1595599>

news outlets and social media groups rather than mainstream news sources. Obscure and anonymous websites that do not disclose their ownership and editorial boards advance Kremlin messaging, gathering a significant followership through active promotion on Facebook.¹⁴⁴

Public groups on social media disseminate Russian propagandist narratives in an even more sustained mode (see Table 3). The conspiratorial bent of these groups conditions an approach, which aims to counter statements of the “mainstream” political elite and media by claiming to reveal the “hidden truth”. The latter is usually based on the words and actions of maverick politicians and self-proclaimed experts that other news outlets supposedly refrain from reporting with the purpose of hurting the interests of ordinary people and keeping them beholden to the designs of manipulative political forces. For instance, economist Slavko Kulić has openly disseminated the false Kremlin line that Russia is conducting a special military operation to purify Ukraine from nazism and bioweapons.¹⁴⁵ In addition to Facebook, TikTok and Telegram have been gaining growing popularity especially among younger Croatian users. Already in the early days following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, unverified videos were shared, which glorify Russia and its President as well as extol Moscow’s supposedly positive role in the Balkans.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Benačić, A., 2022, ‘Što je Olena Zelenska stvarno “otkrila” o pisanju govora za ukrajinskog predsjednika’, *Faktograf.hr*, (‘What did Olena Zelenska actually “reveal” about the speech preparation of the Ukrainian President?’). Retrieved from: <https://faktograf.hr/2022/05/25/sto-je-olena-zelenska-stvarno-otkrila-o-pisanju-govora-za-ukrajinskog-predsjednika/>

¹⁴⁵ Vrsaljko, M., 2022, ‘Ekonomist Slavko Kulić širi rusku propagandu o biološkom oružju u Ukrajini’, *Faktograf.hr*, (‘Economist Slavko Kulić is disseminating Russian propaganda about a biological weapon in Ukraine’). Retrieved from: <https://faktograf.hr/2022/03/14/ekonomist-slavko-kulic-siri-rusku-propagandu-o-bioloskom-oruzju-u-ukrajini/>

¹⁴⁶ TikTok video example from account of tajne.sveta1. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@tajne.sveta1/video/7077280813678693637?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7077280813678693637; Tik Tok video example from account of slobodanslobarajc. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@slobodanslobarajc/video/7068562690557431045?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7068562690557431045; TikTok video example from account of daki426. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@daki426/video/7069852475959921925?is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7069852475959921925; TikTok video example from account of luka_manic. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@luka_manic/video/7096355109248011525?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7096355109248011525&q=rusija&t=1658226502613.

Table 3: Examples of key Facebook pages and groups disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Croatia.

<https://www.facebook.com/Svjesnost2012> Transformacija Svijesti (~197 000 followers) – Public page circulating anti-globalist and anti-Western narratives.

<https://www.facebook.com/VrhunskePrice> Vrhunske Price (~111 000 followers) – Bosnian meme page, which posts memes that portray Putin positively and make fun of Zelensky and the West.

<https://www.facebook.com/logicno.ba> Logično (~72 000 followers) – Page of a Bosnian news portal, which disseminates anti-Ukraine messages and claims that Russia is winning the war (and the economic sanctions war).

<https://www.facebook.com/PromijenimoHrvatsku> Promijenimo Hrvatsku (~46 000 followers) – Page of a Croatian political party, focused on criticism of COVID-19 pandemic measures, further including narratives about reducing aid to Ukraine since a supposedly imminent economic crisis does not warrant the risks of involvement in the military conflict.

<https://www.facebook.com/Alterglobalista/> Forum Antiglobalista (~40 000 followers) – Serbian page, focused on disinformation against globalization. Its preceding dominant fixation on COVID-19 disinformation has been repurposed for the war in Ukraine claiming that the media direct attention to certain events (such as the war in Ukraine) in order to brainwash the masses and distract them from globalist plans.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/125638551498639/> Grupa podrške sucu Mislavu Kolakušiću (~35 000 followers) – Public group, which supports maverick politician and EU MEP Mislav Kolakušić, who occupies a populist and anti-EU stance. Group members share disinformation about the EU and the West. Additionally, there is rampant criticism of Croatia due to its adherence to EU positions and actions on Ukraine.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1038215520248631> Osviješteni građani (~22 600 followers) – Public group highly critical of COVID-19 vaccines and Croatia's involvement in the war in Ukraine.

<https://www.facebook.com/narodnireferendum> Narodni referendum (~21 000 followers) – Public page disseminating Russian disinformation.

<https://www.facebook.com/epohaportal/> Epoha (~15 000 followers) – Page of a news portal, which focused on COVID-19 conspiracies, but recently has started to criticize Ukraine, claiming that it is fascist, and that by accepting Ukrainian immigrants, Croatia has let down Croatian citizens without jobs or homes.

<https://www.facebook.com/sipp.hr> Stranka Ivana Pernara (~12 000 followers) – Page of a maverick populist politician in Croatia, claiming to be the only politician who explains events truthfully. He portrays Ukraine and its President Volodymyr Zelensky in a negative light.

Overall, three main sets of narratives have characterized the pro-Russian disinformation ecosystem on Croatian social media. A particularly popular message claims that **the West should not sacrifice its well-being for Ukraine**, whose relevance to European and national affairs is judged to be insignificant. Playing on Croats' concerns about the fallout from the war on their country's political and economic prospects, this propagandist line asserts that Zagreb should not take part in finding a solution to Moscow's military aggression. In this regard, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is portrayed positively as a politician who has set aside the notion of EU cooperation and instead defends the interests of the Hungarian population.

A related set of narratives holds that the Balkans is an unstable region – the historically continuous powder keg of Europe and playground of larger political actors and interests, which will be **the next battleground between the West and Russia if the war in Ukraine escalates**. Such alarmist messaging suggests the importance of maintaining neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine standoff, magnifying fears of the return of the 1990s military conflicts in SEE.

Moreover, extreme propagandist messaging presents **Vladimir Putin as the major world politician fighting against the "global neo-liberal hegemony"** of international organizations (the EU and NATO) and the US, which ostensibly seek to enslave ordinary citizens (be it via vaccines or political-economic control).

Serbia

Serbia's continuous foreign policy pattern of balancing between East and West has also shaped the country's response to the Ukraine war. Belgrade has not joined Western sanctions on Russia and has persisted in nurturing its relations with Moscow (particularly through new agreements in the sphere of energy), although the Serbian delegation did support UN resolutions condemning the Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine. Far-right groupings have been especially vocal in their backing of the Russian position, organizing protests and gaining political representation as ultranationalist Dveri and Oath Keepers Party entered Parliament in the April 2022 elections.¹⁴⁷

Serbian societal sentiments remain overwhelmingly in favor of Belgrade maintaining a neutral position in international relations. Opinion polls corroborate the finding that over 40% of respondents favor neutrality.¹⁴⁸ An overwhelming majority of 80% of the polled Serbs oppose Belgrade's introduction of sanctions on Russia and over half of them blame NATO for the war in Ukraine (as against 7% who think that Moscow is responsible).¹⁴⁹ Russian President Vladimir Putin consistently receives the highest approval rate of international politicians gathering approximately 45% of positive sentiments and being followed by Chinese leader Xi Jinping with a 12% approval.¹⁵⁰ Kosovo continues to represent an unresolved grievance in public attitudes as 64% are against Serbia's recognition of Kosovo in contrast to 17% who support the position of granting concessions regarding Pristina's international status.¹⁵¹ Indeed, the Serbian political and societal scene is suffused with the historical

¹⁴⁷ Eror, A., 2022, 'The Far-Right Parties Keeping The Serbian President In Check Over Ukraine', Radio Free Europe, 5 June 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-far-right-russia-sanctions/31884417.html>

¹⁴⁸ Rašeta, D., et al, 2022, 'Rat u Ukrajini i javno mnjenje u Srbiji', ('The war in Ukraine and public opinion in Serbia', p. 24). Retrieved from: <https://istrazivanja.rs/rat-u-ukrajini-jul-2022/>

¹⁴⁹ Demostat, 2022, 'Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije' ('Foreign policy orientation of the citizens of Serbia', p. 18). Retrieved from: <https://demostat.rs/upload/Prezentacija%2029062022%20Demostat.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ Demostat, 2022, 'Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije' ('Foreign policy orientation of the citizens of Serbia', p. 6). Retrieved from: <https://demostat.rs/upload/Prezentacija%2029062022%20Demostat.pdf>

Rašeta, D., et al, 2022, 'Rat u Ukrajini i javno mnjenje u Srbiji', ('The war in Ukraine and public opinion in Serbia', p. 22). Retrieved from: <https://istrazivanja.rs/rat-u-ukrajini-jul-2022/>

¹⁵¹ Demostat, 2022, 'Spoljno-političke orijentacije građana Srbije' ('Foreign policy orientation of the citizens of Serbia', p. 12). Retrieved from: <https://demostat.rs/upload/Prezentacija%2029062022%20Demostat.pdf>

analogy that is being drawn between the NATO bombings of Serbia in 1999 and the developments in Ukraine, since in both cases the West is blamed for the eruption of conflicts, while Belgrade and Moscow are perceived as the victims.

In accordance with these social and political tendencies, **the informational ecosystem in Serbia similarly leans notably towards pro-Kremlin discourses**. As a pivot of Russia's disinformation activities in the Balkans, Serbia provides a fertile ground for Russian disinformation narratives, which are disseminated not only by Sputnik's Serbian edition (widely read across the Western Balkans too) but also by pro-government outlets that dominate the Serbian media space and enable Russian messaging as part of the government's orientation towards maintaining close foreign policy and economic ties with the Kremlin.¹⁵²

Key print and online outlets, which feature Russian propagandist messages in a frequently tabloid manner, include *Informer*, *Novosti*, *VPortal*, *GlasBalkana*, *Republika*, *24sedam*, *Espresso*, portal *B92*, *Vecernje novosti*, *Kurir*, *Alo*, *Telegraf*, *Srbija danas*, *Srbin,info* as well as *Pink TV*, *Happy TV* and *Radio Television of Serbia* (the country's main public broadcaster). Although direct Russian ownership of Serbian news sources cannot be identified, the Kremlin's media influence is facilitated by the prominent role that *Gazprom* plays in the Serbian economy (as a majority shareholder of Serbian oil and gas company *NIS* and majority owner of the gas pipelines in the country); in sports (as a sponsor of *Crvena Zvezda* football club and *Partizan* Basketball team); and in advertising.¹⁵³ Pro-Russian disinformation has been additionally amplified beyond traditionally popular social media platforms such as Facebook but also on Telegram and Twitter, which have vehemently disseminated Kremlin messages (see Table 4).

A crucial factor that facilitates Moscow's discursive influence in Serbia is related to the perception of Russia as a protector of Slavic nations against Muslim-majority countries due to its opposition to the independence of Kosovo. The legacy of Serb nationalist militarism descending from the Yugoslav wars and Moscow's support for the Serb position has given rise to a consistent pattern

¹⁵² Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, CSD, p. 38. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

¹⁵³ Đurđević, M., 2022, 'Gasprom u Srbiji i uticaj koji je prerastao energetiku', *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 26. maj/svibanj, 2022 ('Gazprom in Serbia and its impact beyond energy', *Radio Free Europe*, 26 May 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/gasprom-srbija-uticaj-sponzorstva/31868287.html>

of drawing propagandist parallels between events in the Balkans in the 1990s and Russia-Ukraine relations since 2014, whereby Russian and Serbian voices amplify each other in presenting themselves as victims of alleged Western aggression.

Russian military and intelligence figures are thus enmeshed in the Serbian discursive environment, as their subversive statements are promoted in Serbian militaristic social media networks. For example, Dejan Berić – a Serbian mercenary fighting on the side of Russia in Ukraine, maintains widely followed Facebook¹⁵⁴, YouTube¹⁵⁵ and Telegram¹⁵⁶ accounts, which sow Russian propaganda about the battlefield in Ukraine and promote the views of Igor Girkin, a Russian nationalist and former officer of the Federal Security Service (FSB). Girkin fought as a volunteer on the side of the Army of Republika Srpska during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and participated in the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Also, Russian extremist nationalist Vladislav Pozdnyakov is a staunch supporter of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and founder of the radical, nationalist racist and misogynist organization Male State, whose messages resonate in the Serbian online space.

In the bilateral conflict that arose between Kosovo and Serbia in August 2022 as a result of a law requiring ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo to change their Serbian license plates to Kosovar ones, Russian nationalists and militarists took active part in fueling the possibility of the escalation of tensions. Pozdnyakov's Telegram channel¹⁵⁷ published disinformation that Serbian civilians were injured and a standoff between the Serbian and Kosovar armed forces was impending. The Telegram channels Wagner Z Group¹⁵⁸ and Rosich¹⁵⁹, which promote paramilitary units operating in Ukraine, additionally amplified this story claiming that the denazification of Kosovo was necessary as that of Ukraine. In a further narrative twist, Serbian propagandist sources have raised false alarm that Ukraine is preparing to intervene in support of Kosovo.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069598700966>

¹⁵⁵ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0_-PN0nJAZILYyzh59heIA

¹⁵⁶ <https://t.me/SrbijaRusija>

¹⁵⁷ <https://t.me/joinchat/RWmFEHf1h4Y3NTly> (Поздняков 3.0)

¹⁵⁸ https://t.me/wagner_group_pmc

¹⁵⁹ https://t.me/s/rosich_rus

¹⁶⁰ Telegraf, 2022, 'Opasna poruka ukrajinskog poslanika: "Ukrajina je spremna da pošalje trupe na Kosovo, protiv Srba"' ('Dangerous message of the Ukrainian MP: "Ukraine is ready to send troops to Kosovo, against the Serbs"'). Retrieved from: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3534799-opasna-poruka-ukrajinskog-poslanika-ukrajina-je-spremna-da-posalje-trupe-na-kosovo-protiv-srba>

Table 4: Examples of key Facebook, Telegram and Twitter pages and channels disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Serbia.

<https://www.facebook.com/rs.sputniknews> Sputnik Serbia (~270 000 followers) – The Facebook page of Sputnik’s Serbian edition.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/298313793650485> Руске вести/Russian News (~50 000 members) – A public group page of the Serbian Radical Party, which calls on the Serbian authorities to immediately request the accession of Serbia to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

<https://www.facebook.com/crnibombardercom> Crni Bombarder (~8000 followers) – The Facebook page of a pro-Russian website.

<https://www.facebook.com/Kosovo-Sveta-Srpska-Zemlja-412584772673684/> Kosovo Sveta Srpska Zemlja/Kosovo Holy Serbian Land (3800 followers) – Personal blog page promoting Serbian nationalist and pro-Russian posts.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1013456516219540/> SRBI I RUSI BRACA ZAUVEK/SERBS AND RUSSIANS BROTHERS FOREVER (~3000 members) – A public group page promoting Serbian-Russian ties.

<https://t.me/s/buntcg> Бунт је стање духа/Rebellion is a state of mind (~65 000 subscribers) – Telegram channel disseminating pro-Russian disinformation on the invasion of Ukraine.

<https://t.me/s/balkanossiper> Балканская сплетница/Balkan website (~43 000 subscribers) – Telegram channel focusing on Balkan developments.

https://t.me/panteri_panteri Сербский Дивергент/Serbian divergent (~24 000 subscribers) – Telegram channel focusing on military developments.

https://t.me/s/orly_rs Злые ОрлоВи/Angry Eagles (~6000 subscribers) – A Russian language Telegram channel based on the Russian-Serbian cultural-informational center for friendship “Eagles” (Русско-Сербский центр «Орлы»), whose goals include the provision of humanitarian aid to Serbs living in Kosovo and consolidating Russian-Serbian ties.

<https://t.me/s/antiglobalizam> Antiglobalizam (~2000 subscribers) – Telegram channel disseminating conspiracy theories.

<https://twitter.com/serbiabased> Based Serbia (~22 000 followers) – A nationalist-conservative Twitter account

<https://twitter.com/putindirect> Putin Direct (~15 000 followers) – English-language Twitter account praising Putin

https://twitter.com/hit_tvit TV Pink (~5700 followers) – The Twitter account of pro-government and pro-Russian TV channel Pink.

The pro-Russian Serbian outlets converge on a number of persistent narratives with respect to the war in Ukraine frequently **adopting the Kremlin's terminology**. References to the Russian “special military operation” abound and the massacres that Russian soldiers have committed on Ukrainian territory are qualified as being only “alleged” rather than proven.¹⁶¹ A key propagandist message is focused on mirroring the Kremlin portrayal of Ukraine as a Nazi-ruled state and the invasion of the country is justified by the assertion that it was the West that initially planned to attack Russia, while the latter acted in a self-defensive manner. In turn, Moscow is claimed to possess the political, military and economic resources to prevail.¹⁶² Conspiracy theories about the ostensible presence of biological weapons developed in Ukrainian biolabs with US support have also been rife.¹⁶³ Russian disinformation about concrete developments on the battlefield in Ukraine has featured prominently. For

¹⁶¹ Novosti, 2022, 'CILJEVI SPECIJALNE VOJNE OPERACIJE: Rusija će zauzeti još veću teritoriju, ako Zapad ne prestane da snabdeva Ukrajinu', ('OBJECTIVES OF THE SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION: Russia will occupy even more territory if the West does not stop supplying Ukraine'). Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1144641/rusija-ukrajina-vladimir-putin-sergej-lavrov-ciljevi-specijalne-vojne-operacije-oruzje-zapad-sad-amerika-nato-naoruzavanje-trajanje-rat-tass-aleksandar-darcijev-najnovije-vesti-rat-war>

Papić, G., 2022, 'Denacifikacija Ukrajine i derusizacija Zapada', RTS, ('Denazification of Ukraine and de-Russification of the West'). Retrieved from: <https://www.rts.rs/page/tv/sr/story/20/rtss-1/4733194/denacifikacija-ukrajine-i-derusizacija-zapada.html>

Informer, 2022, 'RUSIJI U BUČI PAKUJU RAČAK! AMERI SU SRBIMA NAMESTILI “MASAKR” 1999, mogu li istu igru smestiti i Moskvi! SVET NA IVICI, ovo ne može proći bez...!', ('THE RUSSIANS ARE TALKING STRAIGHT ON BUCHA! THE AMERICANS ATTRIBUTED THE “MASSACRE” TO THE SERBS IN 1999, can they play the same game with Moscow! WORLD ON THE EDGE, this cannot go without..'). Retrieved from: <https://informer.rs/planeta/vesti/692404/rusija-ukrajina-buca-racaj-namestaljka-zapad-poznat-scenario>

¹⁶² Alo!, 2022, 'LOŠE VESTI ZA ZAPAD Evropska unija i NATO upali u Putinovu zamku - Preti odmazda Rusije!' ('BAD NEWS FOR THE WEST The European Union and NATO fall into Putin's trap – Russia's retaliation threatens!'). Retrieved from: <https://www.alo.rs/svet/ruske-vesti/667713/lose-vesti-za-zapad-evropska-unija-i-nato-upali-u-putinovu-zamku-preti-odmazda-rusije/vest>

¹⁶³ Alo!, 2022. 'RUSKO MINISTARSTVO ODBRANE DOŠLO U POSED DOKAZA Američka vojska sa Ukrajinčima proučavala čudne i smrtonosne bolesti', ('THE RUSSIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENSE CAME INTO POSSESSION OF EVIDENCE The US Army studied strange and deadly diseases with the Ukrainians'). Retrieved from: <https://www.alo.rs/ukrajina/vesti/628724/rusko-ministarstvo-odbrane-doslo-u-posed-dokaza/vest>

example, Serbian sources disseminated the false claim that Russian soldiers had seized official Ukrainian documents dated January 2022, which laid out a major offensive on the Donbass in March 2022 and which was only ostensibly preempted by the Russian invasion. Yet, the documents do not mention the preparation of an offensive and instead outline military exercises planned to take place near Lviv.¹⁶⁴

Turkish media influence

Serbian media generally **portray Turkey in a positive light**, particularly when Ankara's policy line supports the Kremlin's goals. Turkish President Erdogan is noted for his role as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, scoring diplomatic victories such as mediating the resumption of Ukrainian grain exports, and is praised for his balancing role between East and West.¹⁶⁵ In turn, the West is accused of being guided by treacherous motives as an unjustified parallel is drawn between a so-called "Ukrainian trap" set up for Russia and a Greek one engineered for Turkey, both of which ostensibly aim to deplete Russian and Turkish resources and block their ambitions in international relations.¹⁶⁶ Some more balancing coverage, however, mentions the limits of Ankara's balancing act, given Turkey's NATO membership, longstanding political-military ties with Kyiv and support for Ukrainian territorial integrity.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Iskra, 2022, 'Тajна документа пала у руке руске војске: Кијев планирао офанзиву на Донбас у марту' ('A secret document fell into the hands of the Russian army: Kiev planned an offensive on Donbass in March'). Retrieved from: <https://iskra.co/svet/tajna-dokumenta-pala-u-ruke-ruske-vojske-kijev-planirao-ofanzivu-na-donbas-u-martu/>

¹⁶⁵ RTS, 2022, 'Turska i rat u Ukrajini, Erdoganova politika između diplomatskih uspeha i unutrašnjih izazova' ('Turkey and the war in Ukraine, Erdogan's policy between diplomatic successes and internal challenges'). Retrieved from: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/3398/rat-u-ukrajini/4888672/turska-erdogan-rat-u-ukrajini-uspesi-spoljna-politika-unutrasnji-izazovi.html>

¹⁶⁶ Đorđević, M., 2022, 'AMERIKA ŽELI RAT U EGEJSKOM MORU? Turski analitičar: Za Rusiju je spremljena ukrajinska zamka, a za Tursku grčka', *Novosti*, ('AMERICA WANTS WAR IN THE AEGEAN SEA? Turkish analyst: A Ukrainian trap has been prepared for Russia, and a Greek trap for Turkey'). Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1126292/turska-grcka-zamka-ostrva-sad-micotakis-erdogan>

¹⁶⁷ *Novosti*, 2022, 'ERDOGANOVE VELIKE AMBICIJE: Uloga Turske u rešavanju rusko-ukrajinske krize' ('ERDOGAN'S GREAT AMBITIONS: Turkey's role in solving the Russian-Ukrainian crisis'). Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1146500/rusija-ukrajina-turska-redzip-tajip-erdogan-vladimir-putin-vladimir-zelenski-ankara-moskva-kijev-andrej-kortunov-sporazum-mir-primirje-pregovori-dogovori-rat-uzivo-najnovije-vesti>

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's response to the war in Ukraine has been stunted due to the differences within its tripartite Presidency. Although the Bosnian and Croat members condemned Russia's military aggression, Milorad Dodik – serving as the Serb member of the Presidency, assumed an opposing stance. Dodik has continually expressed his preference for Bosnia's maintenance of neutrality vis-à-vis the war and has declined to countenance joining sanctions on Russia. These positions have added onto Dodik's close ties to Moscow and intermittent threats of Republika Srpska's secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁶⁸ The destabilizing impact of a potential, Kremlin-supported break-up of the country on regional security dynamics in the Balkans in the midst of the Ukraine war has prompted the US and Britain to impose sanctions on RS political figures, including for undermining the Dayton Peace Agreement.¹⁶⁹

Political divisions within Bosnia are further reflected on the societal level as attitudinal dispositions are shaped by belongingness to a particular ethnic group. Recent IRI polling shows that Russia takes a distant 9th place in Bosnian citizens' approval ratings of foreign countries with a total score of 49%, behind Germany with 77% and Turkey with 71%. Yet, a breakdown by ethnic group allegiances demonstrates that only 27% of Bosniaks – as against 89% of Serbs, share a positive view of Moscow.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Vladimir Putin is the third most favorably evaluated international politician, trailing Turkish President Recep Erdogan and US President Joe Biden. In a similar manner, an overwhelming percentage of

¹⁶⁸ Boffey, D., 2022, 'Bosnian Serb leader: Putin and China will help if west imposes sanctions', *Guardian*, 29 November 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/bosnian-serb-leader-putin-and-china-will-help-if-west-imposes-sanctions>

Brezar, A., 2022, 'Why is Bosnia not joining rest of Europe in sanctions against Russia?', *Euronews*, 18 March 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/18/why-is-bosnia-not-joining-rest-of-europe-in-sanctions-against-russia>

¹⁶⁹ Blinken, A., 2022, *Designation of Officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina for Anti-Dayton Behavior*, U.S. Department of State press statement. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-officials-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-for-anti-dayton-behavior/>

Radio Free Europe, 2022, 'Britain Sanctions Bosnian Serb Politicians For Pushing "De Facto Secession" Of Republika Srpska', 11 April 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-dodik-cvijanovic-uk-sanctions/31797542.html>

¹⁷⁰ Center for Insights in Survey Research (IRI), 2022 *Western Balkans Regional Survey*, p. 72, 76. Retrieved from: <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>

the polled Serb ethnic community (83%) express approval of the Russian leader, unlike a minority of 23% of Bosniak respondents.¹⁷¹

Russia's disinformation narratives find an especially receptive audience **in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska**, further propped up by Dodik's control over local media outlets. Pro-Kremlin messages are additionally **spearheaded by Serbian media outlets**, which are widely read by Bosnians, **as well as by the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo**. Prominently disseminated propaganda has focused on a number of key topics. Already since the start of the war in Ukraine, conspiracy theories about bioweapons being allegedly developed by the US have proliferated. For instance, on 27 February 2022 Sputnik Serbia published an article¹⁷² about the ostensible use of prohibited chemical ammunition by Ukrainian forces, which was later deleted, but was nevertheless extensively reprinted by other Kremlin-supporting portals such as Patriote Srpske, promoting Serb nationalism in Republika Srpska. Conspiracies about biolabs have also been contextualized by Serbia's tabloid Informer and further amplified on Facebook through the claim that **the war in Ukraine is being moved to Bosnia via the transfer of US-developed biolabs** and that Moscow has launched an offensive on American laboratories in Ukraine.¹⁷³ In a similar vein, sensationalist disinformation messages have alleged that a radioactive red bug arrived to the Balkans from Chernobyl.¹⁷⁴

A further set of pro-Kremlin messaging has intended **to raise fears of the consequences of the war in Ukraine for Bosnia's own peace** and has drawn

¹⁷¹ Center for Insights in Survey Research (IRI), 2022 *Western Balkans Regional Survey*, pp. 113-114. Retrieved from: <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>

¹⁷² Sputnik Serbia, 2022, 'Ministarstvo odbrane Rusije: Ukrajinske snage upotrebljavaju fosfornu municiju' ('Ministry of Defense of Russia: Ukrainian forces use phosphorous ammunition', 27 February 2022)

¹⁷³ Informer, 2022, 'AMERIKA I RUSIJA RAT PRENELE U BIH - ČIJE SU BIOLABORATORIJE ZA UNIŠTAVANJE RUSA, KO VRŠI INVAZIJU NA UKRAJINU?! Bosna je i inače bure baruta...' ('AMERICA AND RUSSIA HAVE TRANSFERRED THE WAR TO BIH - WHOSE BIO LABORATORIES ARE DESTROYING RUSSIANS, WHO IS INVADING UKRAINE?! Bosnia is also a powder keg...!', 27 February 2022). Retrieved from:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=152848817106487&id=100071441072305

¹⁷⁴ Crna Hronika, 2022, 'NA BALKANU SE POJAVILA "RADIOAKTIVNA" CRVENA SMRDIBUBA, EVO KOLIKO JE OPASNA I ŠTA MORATE ZNATI O NJOJ', ('THE "RADIOACTIVE" RED STINK BUG APPEARED IN THE BALKANS, THIS IS HOW DANGEROUS IT IS AND WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT', 23 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://crna-hronika.info/na-balkanu-se-pojavila-radioaktivna-crvena-smrdibuba-evo-koliko-je-opasna-i-sta-morate-znati-o-njoj/347017>

parallels with the military conflicts in the Balkans of the 1990s. Belgrade's interference in Bosnia's public debates has been advanced by Serbian politicians, whose statements have achieved a wide media resonance. For instance, the leader of right-wing nationalist Dveri party and member of Serbia's Parliament, Boško Obradović, asserted that the Serbian Army could get involved in Bosnia in order to protect Serbs if they are attacked (ostensibly in a way similar to what Russian propaganda has termed as Ukrainian attacks on the Russia-leaning population in Ukraine).¹⁷⁵ Echoing such statements, Dušanka Majkić, MP in the Bosnian Parliamentary Assembly from Serb political party, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, warned that Bosnia could follow Ukraine's fate if it decides to join NATO.¹⁷⁶ Sensationalist media and Twitter channels have themselves published alarmist messages about Russia's readiness to attack the Alliance if it encroaches on the Kremlin's "sphere of interests".¹⁷⁷

The Russian Embassy in Bosnia has taken an active role since the start of the war in Ukraine in terms of propagating the Kremlin viewpoints. In particular, Russian official narratives have compared the situation in the Donbass (which Russia's disinformation has described as being harassed by Ukrainian "nazi" attacks) and the 1995 massacre of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. Nevertheless, Russian authorities have refused to recognize the crimes in Srebrenica as genocide.¹⁷⁸ The Embassy has also ramped up anti-NATO rhetoric asserting that the arrival of German troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina to bolster the European Union's EUFOR peacekeeping force constitutes a **"creeping NATOization"**.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Matracci, M., 2022, 'Propaganda and Hysteria Flourish in Russo-Ukrainian War', *BalkanInsight*, 21 March 2022. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/21/propaganda-and-hysteria-flourish-in-russo-ukrainian-war/>

¹⁷⁶ Matracci, M., 2022, 'Ukraine War Prompts Flood of Misinformation, Fake News', *BalkanInsight*, 4 March 2022. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/04/ukraine-war-prompts-flood-of-misinformation-fake-news/>

¹⁷⁷ Vijesti Srpske, 2022, 'POLJACI SNIMILI RUSKI NAPAD NA NATO CENTAR! Pakleno jutro na poligonu Javorski! VIDEO' ('POLES FILMED THE RUSSIAN ATTACK ON THE NATO CENTER! Hellish morning at the Javorski training ground! VIDEO', 13 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://vijestisrpske.com/poljaci-snimili-ruski-napad-na-nato-centar-pakleno-jutro-na-poligonu-javorski-video/>
<https://mobile.twitter.com/VesnaTeanovi2/status/1511921540446752768>

¹⁷⁸ Pekmez, I., 2022, 'Russia Targets Bosnia With Disinformation About Ukrainian War', *BalkanInsight*, 6 May 2022. Retrieved from: <https://detektor.ba/2022/05/06/zasto-rusija-u-bih-siri-neistine-oratu-u-ukrajini/?lang=en>

¹⁷⁹ Kurtic, A., 2022, 'Russian Embassy Accuses West of "NATOisation" of Bosnia', *BalkanInsight*, 17 August 2022. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/17/russian-embassy-accuses-west-of-natoisation-of-bosnia/>

Russia's disinformation discourse accusing Kyiv of committing crimes on the battlefield and denying Moscow's own culpability has represented another prominent form of messaging in Bosnia. It was virulently maintained, in particular, by outlets such as Republika Srpska, BiH news, 24 sedam, Logično that the massacres in Bucha were faked.¹⁸⁰ Social media accounts additionally amplify such pro-Kremlin narratives (see table below).¹⁸¹

Table 5: Examples of key Facebook and Twitter pages, groups and channels disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<https://www.facebook.com/bosanskazora> Bosna i (~12 000 followers) – Personal blog

[GraniceDoboja.info](https://www.facebook.com/GraniceDoboja.info) - Home | Facebook GraniceDoboja.info (~10 000 followers) – Page of a news and entertainment site

<https://www.facebook.com/rusembbih/> Ambasada Ruske Federacije u Bosni i Hercegovini/Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (~4600 followers)

<https://mobile.twitter.com/BalternativaEU> BALTERNATIVA German-speaking area (~4919 followers) – Pro-Serbian nationalist Twitter profile

Turkish media influence

Turkey's economic, political and media influence is concentrated in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Apart from Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency's Balkan operation from its Sarajevo office, other Turkish-related outlets have included, for example, news portal Faktor.ba and Stav magazine (published by Simurg Media).¹⁸² Nevertheless, the close ties that Russia and Turkey enjoy (on certain issue areas even if not comprehensively) and their implications for Bosnia have reverberated differently in the media spaces of

¹⁸⁰ Logično, 2022, 'Ukrajinci uhvaćeni u korištenju glumaca kao mrtvaca kako bi optužili Ruse za pokolj!', ('Ukrainians caught using actors as dead bodies to accuse Russians of massacre!', 4 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.logicno.com/politika/ukrajinci-uhvaceni-u-koristenju-glumaca-kao-mrtvaca-kako-bi-optuzili-ruse-za-pokolj.html>

¹⁸¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GraniceDoboja.info/posts/568228737584946/>

¹⁸² Sokol, A., 2020, 'Propaganda, disinformation and hate models of media and communication in Bosnia and Herzegovina', p. 77, in *Hate and Propaganda Models of Media and Communication in the Western Balkans and Turkey*, RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation. Retrieved from: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/E-book-Resilience-research-1-Final.pdf>

Republika Srpska and the Federation. For example, in RS, Recep Erdogan's tour of Balkan countries in September 2022 has been presented as contributing to peace and stability in the region and Bosnia, with the Turkish President being praised as promoting a rational and balanced approach, calling for internal problems in Bosnia to be solved without "outside interference".¹⁸³ However, in the Federation, Erdogan was criticized for pointing out an ostensible danger from the West – rather than the real danger stemming from RS's separatist demands, as threatening Bosnia's stability.¹⁸⁴

North Macedonia

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has been widely condemned by the political class in North Macedonia with the exception of the left-wing nationalist and anti-Western Left party, which has openly sided with Moscow. Yet, Macedonian public opinion exhibits faultlines in the assessment of the Ukraine war and Russia, in general. According to an IPSOS poll, 29% of respondents expressed support for Ukraine, 13% for Russia, 10% were favorable to both sides, 10% voiced lack of familiarity with the conflict, while 27% stood against war in principle.¹⁸⁵ Survey results also consistently show that although Russia may not be the international partner of first choice for North Macedonia, it still gathers positive sentiments. The PRESPA Institute's Image Observatory found that a very small minority amounting to roughly 2% of the polled selected Russia as the country or international alliance/union that should be the best friend of North Macedonia.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, IRI findings point out that 59% of respondents voice a highly favorable or somewhat favorable view of Moscow,

¹⁸³ RTRS, 2022, 'Додик: Ердоган има рационалан и уједначен приступ' ('Dodik: Erdogan has a rational and balanced approach', 3 September 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=485126>

¹⁸⁴ Klix, 2022, 'Radončić: Zašto Erdogan kao opasnost za BiH nije istakao separatizam Dodika nego zapadne zemlje?' ('Radončić: Why didn't Erdogan highlight Dodik's separatism as a danger for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but Western countries?'). Retrieved from: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/radoncic-zasto-erdogan-kao-opasnost-za-bih-nije-istakao-separatizam-dodika-nego-zapadne-zemlje/220908043>

¹⁸⁵ Sloboden pečat, 2022, 'Интересна анкета порача ВМРО-ДПМНЕ: Ги праша граѓаните дали се за Русија или за Украина', ('VMRO-DPMNE commissioned an interesting survey: It asked the citizens if they were for Russia or Ukraine'). Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/interesna-anketa-poracha-vmro-dpmne-gi-prasha-gragjanite-dali-se-za-rusija-ili-za-ukraina/>

¹⁸⁶ PRESPA Institute, *Questions and answers about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the effect on Europe and North Macedonia*, pp. 7-8. Retrieved from: <http://www.prespa-institute.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/101-Ukraina-EN-01.pdf>

which trails overwhelming preference for Turkey (81%) and Germany (80%). Perceptions differ depending on ethnic background – a significant majority of 76% of polled ethnic Macedonians express a positive opinion of Russia as against a 15% approval registered among ethnic Albanians.¹⁸⁷

Given the presence of pro-Russian proclivities in North Macedonian society – albeit not overwhelming ones, Kremlin-sponsored narratives have been infused in the country's media environment. Three main factors facilitate Russian disinformation. First, **local journalists with ties to Russia as well as specific online news sources and social media channels serve as the main conduits of the Kremlin's discursive clout** not only within North Macedonia but also internationally via troll factories. For example, Krum Velkov, a Strumica-based freelance journalist started publishing in 2016 about the "PizzaGate" conspiracy, alleging that Hillary Clinton had run a child sex ring in a pizza shop.¹⁸⁸ Mirka Velinovska and Milenko Nedelkovski, who had significant presence in North Macedonian TV media and press, also disseminated Russian messages, with Velinovska receiving a Russian honorary award for her contribution to combatting the falsification of history and the anti-fascist education of Macedonian youth.¹⁸⁹

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a number of online news portals have vigorously promoted Russian positions, running anti-NATO and anti-EU campaigns and extolling the figure of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Think.mk, created on 28 February 2022 and owned by Daniel Kraljevski who was a former member of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia party (SDSM), has spearheaded Russian propaganda.¹⁹⁰ Also, Antropol.mk¹⁹¹ and kukuriku.com.mk¹⁹² support the Kremlin's positions as well as nationalist anti-Western parties Levica and Edinstvena Makedonija.

¹⁸⁷ Center for Insights in Survey Research (IRI), *2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey*, p. 88, 90, 92. Retrieved from: <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>

¹⁸⁸ Tsalov, Y., 2020, 'Russian interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections', *Bellingcat*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/>

¹⁸⁹ MKD, 2015, 'Медал од Путин за Мирка Велиновска' ('A medal for Mirka Velinovska from Putin'). Retrieved from: <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/medal-od-putin-za-mirka-velinovska>

¹⁹⁰ <https://think.mk/>

<http://whois.marnet.mk/?domain=think.mk>

¹⁹¹ <https://antropol.mk/>

¹⁹² <https://kukuriku.com.mk/>

A few established portals, which used to publish balanced content, have changed their editorial policy since the start of the war in Ukraine in the direction of promoting pro-Kremlin content as is the case, for instance, of Plusinfo.¹⁹³

Russian media influence in North Macedonia is additionally enabled through **advertising funding stemming from Russia-related companies and local business people**. Acibadem Sistina Hospital represents a major advertiser, whose co-owner oligarch Jordan Orce Kamchev has been linked to Russian businessman Sergey Samsonenko.¹⁹⁴ Lukoil – also connected to Samsonenko, is another important advertiser.¹⁹⁵

Regional diffusion, particularly through Serbia, is a further factor facilitating the dissemination of Kremlin-sponsored messages. Sputnik's Serbian edition has traditionally actively transmitted Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia, specifically. And although the Macedonian authorities stopped RT's and Sputnik's broadcast in the country following the start of the Ukraine war, Moscow's propaganda narratives continue to circulate in the Macedonian media space through Serbian television sources.¹⁹⁶ In particular, the newest telecommunications operator in North Macedonia – Mtel, is part of the Telekom Srbija Group and offers a wide range of Serbian TV channels to the Macedonian audience.¹⁹⁷

Moreover, two networks of magazines, originating from Serbia, are published on the Macedonian market. The most famous editions are “Russian Doctor” and “Russian Herbalist”, which are distributed through direct export to Bosnia and Montenegro and/or through localized editions in North Macedonia,

¹⁹³ <https://plusinfo.mk/>

¹⁹⁴ SCOOP CIJ-Macedonia, 2020, 'The incredible road of Samsonenko's and Kamchev's friend to electoral billboard business'. Retrieved from: <http://en.scoop.mk/the-incredible-road-of-samsonenkos-and-kamcevs-friend-to-electoral-billboard-busines/>

¹⁹⁵ Filipova, R., 2021, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, p. 106. Retrieved from: <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tacklin-Kremlins-Media-Capture.pdf>

¹⁹⁶ Jakimova, J., 2022, 'Руска пропаганда непречено се шири во македонскиот етер', *Радио Слободна Европа*, 15 април 2022 ('Russian propaganda is disseminating without obstacles in the Macedonian media space', Radio Free Europe, 15 April 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/руска-пропаганда-непречено-се-шири-во-македонскиот-етер/31804935.html>

¹⁹⁷ <https://mtel.mk/spisak-na-tv-kanali/>

Croatia and Slovenia in the local languages. The magazines aim to exploit and reinforce positive perceptions of Russia among the older generations in North Macedonia by for example relating Putin's "recipe" for remaining masculine and healthy.¹⁹⁸

Table 6: Examples of key Facebook pages and groups disseminating pro-Russian disinformation in North Macedonia.

Владимир Владимирович Путин | Facebook Владимир Владимирович Путин/Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin (~186 000 followers) – fan page of the Russian President in Serbia.

Вести Русија - Home | Facebook Вести Русија/News from Russia (~135 000 followers) – a Serbian page of a pro-Russian outlet.

<https://www.facebook.com/region.mk/> Region.mk (~60 600 followers) – page of a news outlet promoting Russian views.

<https://www.facebook.com/MakedonijaMakedonskoMakedonci> Македонија/Macedonia (~34 000 followers) – Facebook page of a Russia-leaning website

МАКЕДОНИЈА - МАКЕДОНИЗАМ | Facebook МАКЕДОНИЈА – МАКЕДОНИЗАМ/MACEDONIA – MACEDONIANNES (~3800 members) – nationalist public group

<https://www.facebook.com/negosakamebejli> Путине приклучи ја Македонија/Putin joined Macedonia (~3300 followers) – public page in support of Putin, emphasizing close ties between him and the Macedonians.

Все, кто любит Россия---Сите кои ја сакаат Русија---All who love Russia | Facebook Все, кто любит Россия---Сите кои ја сакаат Русија---All who love Russia (~3300 followers) – pro-Russian public page sharing news from Russian news sources.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/432495007094547> Група за дискусија на Здружението МиР – Македонија и Русија/Discussion group of association MiR – Macedonia and Russia (~2900 followers) – pro-Russian public group page

¹⁹⁸ Meta.mk, 2020, 'Alternative medicine magazines continue to promote Putin's cult in North Macedonia and the region'. Retrieved from: <https://meta.mk/en/alternative-medicine-magazines-continue-to-promote-putins-cult-in-north-macedonia-and-the-region/>

The pro-Russian actors and channels of media influence advance similar types of disinformation narratives. It is claimed that **the West is divided in its response to Russia** in the context of the Ukraine war, whereby EU member states are said to have conflicting perspectives on cooperation with the Kyiv authorities.¹⁹⁹ On the other hand, Moscow's seeming political and economic might receives a significant emphasis. **Russian military power is exaggerated** and it is asserted that the West cannot hold out against it. Russia is also presented as economically resilient so that the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU are argued to be ineffective. The Kremlin leadership in the face of President Putin is portrayed as heroic and staunchly defending the interests of the Russian people.²⁰⁰

A distinct set of messages further focuses on the place and role of the Balkans in the Ukraine war. Alarming narratives maintain that **the first regional fallout from the conflict will take place in Southeast Europe**. At least three unwarranted historical analogies are made. First, the ostensibly double-faced approach of the West is claimed to be unmasked as Kosovo's independence from Serbia was recognized, whereas such recognition was withheld in the case of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk.²⁰¹ Second, a parallel is drawn between NATO's intervention in support for Kosovo in 1999 to protect Albanians from ethnic cleansing by the Serbian military force and Russian intervention to protect the

¹⁹⁹ Nova Makedonija, 2022, 'Во предвидувањата за Украина, Бајден го откри неединството на Западот', 20 јануари 2022 ('In his predictions about Ukraine, Biden revealed the disunity of the West', 20 January 2022). Retrieved from: <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/svet/vo-predviduvanjata-za-ukraina-bajden-go-otkri-needinstvoto-na-zapadot/>

²⁰⁰ Nova Makedonija, 2022, 'Путин ги држи западните ривали на штрек, вешто криејќи го следниот потег', 12 јануари 2022 ('Putin is keeping his Western rivals on their toes, deftly hiding his next move', 12 January 2022). Retrieved from: https://novamakedonija.com.mk/svet/putin-gi-drzhi-zapadnite-rivali-na-shtrek-veshto-kriejkji-go-sledniot-poteg/?fbclid=IwAR1hk9vnONS-aZA9wWrhsGM5w00IWLX93pb_EryVCeawWdtFox-dKCCsuzJU

²⁰¹ Makpress.mk, 2022, 'Преседан беше Косово, сега имаме и втор преседан со Украина, а неколку преседани создаваат правило, вели професорот Маролов', 1 март 2022 ('Kosovo was a precedent, now we have another precedent with Ukraine, and several precedents create a rule, says Professor Marolov', 1 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://m.makpress.mk/Home/PostDetails?PostId=458218>

Mihaylov, T., 2022, 'Преседани како Косово и Украина го загрозуваат меѓународното право', *Goce.mk*, 2 март 2022 ('Precedents like Kosovo and Ukraine threaten international law', 2 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://goce.mk/presedani-kako-kosovo-i-ukraina-go-zagrozuvaat-me%D1%93unarodnoto-pravo/>

Off.net.mk, 2022, 'Косовскиот преседан сè уште го прогонува НАТО', 1 март 2022 ('The Kosovo precedent still haunts NATO', 1 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://off.net.mk/vesti/mislenja/kosovski-ot-predan-se-ushte-go-progonuva-nato>

Russia-leaning population in Ukraine from the “nazi authorities in Kyiv.” Third, the Bulgarian-North Macedonian dispute (occasioned by Sofia’s imposition of a veto on Skopje’s opening of negotiation talks with the EU) is mapped on the Russian-Ukrainian war. North Macedonia is presented as a victim like Ukraine, while Bulgaria is painted as an aggressor like Russia, which does not recognize the separate identity of adjacent states.²⁰²

At the same time, there has been a noticeable increase in the propagandist articles **praising the cultural, religious and historical ties between Russians and Macedonians**. The use of the terms “brotherly” to describe bilateral relations has sought to create the impression of strong bonds that should also underline contemporary interactions, too, above all in terms of North Macedonian support for the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine.²⁰³ Yet, given that the narrative about shared Slavic communal ties clashes with the dominant Macedonian interpretation of the ancient origins of Macedonians as descendants of Alexander the Great, propagandist articles attempt to smooth over this tension by emphasizing the Macedonian origin of the Russians themselves.²⁰⁴ Moscow is also touted as a protector of North Macedonia against Bulgarian nationalist demands on Macedonian language and identity, when in reality Russian hybrid activities have aimed to sow disagreements between Sofia and Skopje and derail the latter’s European integration.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Chavesky, I., 2022, ‘Дали Македонија и Бугарија се во војна како Русија и Украина? ЦСКА Софија сака мечот со Ѓорче Петров да се игра во Ниш’, *Pressing TV*, 12 јули 2022 (‘Are Macedonia and Bulgaria at war like Russia and Ukraine? CSKA Sofia wants the match with Gjorce Petrov to be played in Nis’, 12 July 2022). Retrieved from: <https://pressingtv.mk/sport/dali-makedonija-i-bugarija-se-vo-vojna-kako-rusija-i-ukraina-cska-sofija-saka-mechot-so-gjorce-petrov-da-se-igra-vo-nish/>

²⁰³ Najcevska, M., 2022, ‘Truthmeter: The Sense of Belonging as a Tool for Russian Influence in North Macedonia’, *Meta.mk*. Retrieved from: <https://meta.mk/en/truthmeter-the-sense-of-belonging-as-a-tool-for-russian-influence-in-north-macedonia/>

²⁰⁴ Popara.mk, 2011, ‘Најпознатото Кралско семејство на 20-ти век од Кралска Русија, имаат Македонско потекло’ (‘The most famous Royal Family of the 20th century from Royal Russia, have Macedonian origin’). Retrieved from: <https://popara.mk/2011/najpoznatoto-kralsko-semejstvo-na-20-ti-vek-od-kralska-rusija-imaat-makedonsko-poteklo/>

²⁰⁵ Рауповски, Г., 2022, ‘Премиерът: Руски шпиони са работили срещу разбирателството между България и Северна Македонија’, *Дневник*, 31 март 2022 (‘The Prime Minister: Russian spies have worked against rapprochement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia’, *Dnevnik*, 31 March 2022). Retrieved from: https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2022/03/31/4331310_premierut_ruski_shpioni_sa_rabotili_sreshtu/

Turkish and Gulf-state media influence

Turkey's media presence in North Macedonia is centered around the Macedonian and Albanian-language editions and newsrooms of Anadolu agency and TRT. These outlets tend to promote Turkish policy priorities, while taking a stand against Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. Turkey also attempted to influence North Macedonia's internal politics and public discourse through its backing for the BESA party (oriented on the ethnic Albanian constituency).²⁰⁶ Yet, the latter has not gained substantial support in elections prompting a reduction of Turkish interest in it.

The Gulf states establish their influence mainly through **imams and humanitarian organizations, which maintain social media pages and YouTube channels** to disseminate Arab-informed perspectives. Upon their return to North Macedonia, imams who have completed their religious education at universities in the Gulf region (and particularly in Saudi Arabia), become staunch promoters of Saudi-supported Wahhabism. Some of the most vocal Riyadh-linked imams include Bekir Halimi,²⁰⁷ who is the founder of several NGOs (such as Kalliri I Miresise, Albanur, NUN); Qendrim Jashari,²⁰⁸ founder of NGO Motivi; Sadullah Bajrami;²⁰⁹ Omer Bajrami.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Ben-Meir, A., 2018, 'Erdogan's "Trojan Horse" In Macedonia', *Middle East Eye*. Retrieved from: <https://middle-east-online.com/en/erdogan%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99Ctrojan-horse%E2%80%9D-macedonia>

²⁰⁷ Audionur Shkurt YouTube channel, 2022, 'Lufta e re me Turqinë - Hoxhë Bekir Halimi' ('The new war with Turkey - Hoxha Bekir Halimi'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6NMVx81bzQ>

²⁰⁸ Motivi Alb YouTube channel, 2021, 'Njerëzit që vdiqën, dhe u ringjallën në dunja - Hoxhë Qëndrim Jashari' ('People who died, and were resurrected in the world - Hoxha Qendrim Jashari'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApWBvZym9ps>

²⁰⁹ Hoxhë Sadullah Bajrami YouTube channel, 2022, '(HUTBE) Virtytet e mbajtjes së lidhjeve farefisnore - Hoxhë Sadullah Bajrami', ('(HUTBE) The virtues of maintaining family ties - Hoxha Sadullah Bajrami'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSzkFcmTfQo>

²¹⁰ Hoxhë Omer Bajrami YouTube channel, 2022, 'Ruaju nga tallja me fenë! - Hoxhë Omer Bajrami', ('Save yourself from mockery of religion! - Hoxha Omer Bajrami'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujxPNZ3iAT8>

Montenegro

Political instability in Montenegro informed by an identity split between the Montenegrin and Serbian community has prevented a determined and vocal show of support for Ukraine. Although the government in Podgorica backed sanctions on Russia, this position has been diluted by Serbs' support for a pro-Russian or neutral orientation. As a result, initiatives countering Kremlin influence such as the application of the EU's broadcast ban on RT have been delayed.²¹¹

Public opinion trends reveal the deep-seated divisions in society. Russia is viewed favorably by 60% of the polled population, Russian weapons and military power are perceived as superior (not least due to extensive Kremlin-sponsored military propaganda) and Vladimir Putin is consistently ranked as one of the most favorably evaluated international politician. Nevertheless, these perceptions vary according to group belonging. 91% of the respondents who express a positive view of Russia identify as Serb, whereas 50% identify as Montenegrin. Turkey's overall approval of 66% is strongest among the respondents that self-designate as Albanian, Bosniak and Muslim, while Serbia is most positively assessed by Serbs (over 90%) as against 56% of Montenegrins.²¹² As regards public opinion on the war in Ukraine, 39% of the polled citizens of Montenegro assess that that the military conflict is the result of Russian aggression, whereas a total of roughly 32% think that the war was started/or responded to by Moscow as an act of self-defense against NATO expansion.²¹³

Russian disinformation in Montenegro is most virulently disseminated by **domestic media outlets founded by local journalists, representatives of pro-Russian organizations or sympathizers of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties in the country**. The content that these sources and actors promote glorifies Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, portrays the West, especially NATO, in a negative light (as an aggressor) and emphasizes the

²¹¹ Kajosevic, S., 2022, 'EU Presses Montenegro to Pull Plug on Russian Media', *BalkanInsight*, 10 March 2022. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/10/eu-presses-montenegro-to-pull-plug-on-russian-media/>

²¹² Center for Insights in Survey Research (IRI), 2022 *Western Balkans Regional Survey*, pp. 82, 84-86. Retrieved from: <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>

²¹³ Cedem, 2022, *Political Public Opinion in Montenegro*, June 2022, p. 32. Retrieved from: https://www.cedem.me/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Prezentacija-jun-2022_FINAL-ENG.pdf

alleged historical-cultural connections between the Montenegrin and Russian people. Additionally, a supposed threat to the identity and interests of Serbs is highlighted, which feeds into propagandist narratives about the need to protect and expand the “Serbian world” (a cultural and territorial space populated by Serb communities).

The influx of pro-Russian portals in Montenegro began immediately prior to Podgorica’s NATO accession in 2017. During that year, the Kremlin-supporting outlets that were registered included, in particular, Ujedinjenje, Nova riječ, Princip and Sedmica. Of these four, Sedmica and Ujedinjenje are still functioning today²¹⁴ under the name Srpsko ujedinjenje (Serbian unification). Moreover, the pro-Russian Serbian outlets Alo, Espresso, Blic, Srbija danas, Kurir, Informer and Novosti have continuously been the most widely read Serbian media in Montenegro, while the Montenegrin sources, which have featured narratives propagandizing the Kremlin’s and Belgrade’s policies, feature Borba, Odbana, IN4s.

The key narratives that have been disseminated over the course of the war in Ukraine have, in particular, raised false alarm that **Montenegrin soldiers are being sent to the Ukrainian frontline on the order of NATO**.²¹⁵ More generally, a long-standing propagandist message that has continued to be reinforced is that Montenegro is a criminal state, which is intended to instill the impression that the most notorious criminal clans, robberies, kidnappings and drug smuggling in the Balkan region originate from Montenegro. Social media channels have also played a crucial part in promoting pro-Kremlin views, with disinformation activity increasingly moving from Facebook to Telegram and Twitter. Some Telegram channels, for example, glorify fascist leaders from the Yugoslav Chetnik movement (which collaborated with the occupying forces led by Nazi Germany during World War II) and war criminals from the 1990s, such as Ratko Mladić as well as praise Serbian volunteers in the Russian aggression against Ukraine (see table 5).

²¹⁴ As of October 2022.

²¹⁵ IN4S, 2022, ‘ИН4С сазнаје: Ђукановић и Ињац упућују 120 црногорских војника у Украјину?’ (‘IN4S learns: Djukanović and Injac are sending 120 Montenegrin soldiers to Ukraine?’), 2 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.in4s.net/in4s-saznaje-djukanovic-i-injac-upucuju-120-crnogorskih-vojnika-u-ukrajinu/>

Borba, 2022, ‘Po NATO direktivi: Djukanović i Injac planiraju da pošalju 120 crnogorskih vojnika u Ukrajinu?’ (‘According to a NATO directive: Djukanović and Injac are planning to send 120 Montenegrin soldiers to Ukraine?’), 2 March 2022). Retrieved from: <https://borba.me/po-nato-direktivi-djukanovic-i-injac-planiraju-da-posalju-120-crnogorskih-vojnika-u-ukrajinu/>

Table 7: Examples of key Twitter and Telegram channels disseminating pro-Serbian and pro-Russian disinformation in Montenegro.

<https://twitter.com/DajkovicVladislav> Dajković (~13 300 followers) – Twitter account of a Montenegrin-Serb politician, founder of right-wing parties in Montenegro.

<https://twitter.com/Ira95879230> Ira ZzZzZ (~3180 followers)

<https://twitter.com/BorbaPortal> Portal Borba (~1600 followers) – Twitter account of pro-Russian outlet Borba.

https://twitter.com/slobodna___cg Slobodna Crna Gora (~80 followers)

<https://t.me/s/buntcg> Бунт је стање духа/Rebellion is a state of mind (~64 000 subscribers)

<https://t.me/crnagorasrpskasparta> Црна Гора Српска Спарта/Montenegro – Serbian Sparta (~3800 members)

Albania

Albanian decision-makers and public opinion have rallied behind Ukraine, condemning Russia's aggression. Tirana indicated from the start its readiness to participate in any future NATO mission in Ukraine.²¹⁶ At the UN, Albania joined the US and France in expressing concern that the Kremlin is using disinformation tactics as a pretext for the possible deployment of biological and chemical weapons.²¹⁷ The Albanian population's traditionally strong pro-Western dispositions have been manifested in the wide disapproval of Russia's actions in Ukraine as evident in media-public discourse, which points to Moscow as the main culprit for the economic fallout from the war.

Russia's influence in Albania – including in the media sphere, is thus limited, primarily based on the activity of the Russian Embassy and the informal ties established with local journalists. **A few sensationalist online portals** have published material with a pro-Russian tilt, presenting the latter as part of

²¹⁶ Popović, S., 2022, 'Support for Ukraine, balancing, ignoring: How the Western Balkans is reacting to the crisis', *European Western Balkans*. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/02/15/support-for-ukraine-balancing-ignoring-how-the-western-balkans-is-reacting-to-the-crisis/>

²¹⁷ Security Council Report, 2022, 'In Hindsight: Trends of Council Engagement on Ukraine'. Retrieved from: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-04/in-hindsight-trends-of-council-engagement-on-ukraine.php>

the strategy of providing equal coverage to all viewpoints.²¹⁸ Italian YouTube channels have also occasionally disseminated Kremlin-originating conspiracy theories.²¹⁹ In general, however, Albanian media present the Russian-Ukrainian war in a balanced manner, drawing on news pieces and expert commentaries appearing in Western media with Albanian language editions.²²⁰

Turkish and Gulf-state media influence

Turkey is considered a strategic partner of Albania as the two countries share significant religious, political and economic ties (Ankara being among the top 5 investors in the Albanian economy).²²¹ Despite Turkish support for religious institutions, foundations and projects, however, a point of tension in bilateral relations is linked to the continued influence of the Gülen movement, led by Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen (accused by the Turkish authorities of having organized the failed coup of 2016 against Turkey's government and President). As in North Macedonia, the Gulf states are also influential actors in Albania especially through Arab-trained imams, who frequently disseminate radical Islamist content on social media.²²²

²¹⁸ Fjala, 2022, 'Parashikimi i frikshëm: Putini gati të nxjerrë "asin nënë mëngë", çfarë po ndodh me boten' ('Scary prediction: Putin ready to pull out "the ace up his sleeve", what is happening to the world'). Retrieved from: <https://fjala.al/2022/07/17/parashikimi-i-frikshem-putini-gati-te-nxjerrre-asin-nene-menge-cfare-po-ndodh-me-boten/>
<https://joq-albania.com/kerko.html?search=Putin>

²¹⁹ E Verteta Universale YouTube channel, 2022, 'Putin si mjet i Zotit per deshtimin e rendit te ri boteror', ('Putin as God's tool for the failure of the new world order'). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dLqsbC06B0>

²²⁰ Panorama, 2022, 'Mungesa e gazit rus mund të shkaktojë "katastrofë" në Evropë. Ja cila është alternativa' ('The lack of Russian gas could cause a "catastrophe" in Europe. Here is the alternative'). Retrieved from: http://www.panorama.com.al/mungesa-e-gazit-rus-mund-te-shkaktoje-katastrofe-ne-evrope-ja-cila-mund-te-jete-alternativa/?fbclid=IwAR1QExHHsTzU48nK_5E5kQpb0HjvBMxwQt10oanNW08EFTeS1c7EDeDEjFD4

Konica, 2022, 'Cilat janë planet e Rusisë dhe Kinës për një rend të ri botëror?', ('What are Russia and China's plans for a new world order?'). Retrieved from: <https://konica.al/2022/01/cilat-jane-planet-e-rusise-dhe-kines-per-nje-rend-te-ri-boteror/>

²²¹ Feyerabend, F., et al, 2018, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. A map of geopolitical players*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2018, Sankt Augustin/Berlin, p.10. Retrieved from: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73&groupId=252038

²²² Chua, S., 2020, *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, Center for Global Affairs School of Professional Studies New York University p.23. Retrieved from: https://www.sps.nyu.edu/content/dam/sps/academics/departments/center-for-global-affairs/pdfs/NYU_Report_on_Western_Balkans.pdf

Telling Alternative Stories: How Revisionist States Embed Themselves in the Public Space of South-East European Countries. The Case of China

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The acceleration of geopolitical competition in South-East Europe (SEE), particularly in the Western Balkans, is an ever more prominent and significant dynamic worthy of analytical, political and policy attention. The structuring of geopolitical actors along an emerging democracy – autocracy cleavage may not be the most precise conceptualisation of this phenomenon but clearly captures the political seismic transformations at play. The emergence of China as a major geopolitical actor in SEE is among the most significant and consequential developments in regional politics.²²³ Its high-stakes, large-scale projects, particularly in energy and infrastructure, have been utilized as entry instruments into the political, economic and social systems of the relevant countries. These have been utilized as instruments of entry, permitting the gradual and accelerating positioning of the country across the region. While not particularly numerous, they have already attracted much internal and external attention. Significantly, this trend has followed and replicated a Chinese approach, well-documented and known from other parts of the globe. Importantly, the last few years have witnessed rising attention, scrutiny²²⁴ and awareness of the related risks of Chinese engagement, including at the level of various EU institutions.²²⁵ Increasingly, this is leading intensifying political discussions but also emerging policy responses at a variety of levels. A stalled EU enlargement process, existing development gaps, political affinity of many

²²³ Shopov, V., 2021, 'Decade of Patience: How China Became a Power in the Western Balkans', *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>

²²⁴ Zweers, W., Shopov, V., Der Putten, F.-P., Petkova, M. and Lemstra, M., 2020, 'China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A Zero-Sum Game', *Clingendael Report, August 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/>

²²⁵ European Parliament and the Western Balkans, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/European-Parliament-and-the-Western-Balkans-I-wish-I-could-209608>

states in the region with authoritarian regimes, persistent governance, rule of law and corruption challenges are among the key reasons for the uptake of Beijing's offers of engagement, particularly in some countries of SEE. Moreover, these factors are not simply related to the political preferences of party actors in the various states but are linked to deeper, more long-term and structural factors. In this sense, addressing the challenges posed by geopolitical tensions with 'third countries' is and will not simply be a political matter but an across-the-board issue, requiring a range of tools and adjustments. Recent cases in Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific already point to magnitude of defining responses and alternatives to China's rising foothold across societies, political systems and economies.

Increasingly, China has been attempting to instrumentalize its presence and embeddedness, moving beyond its early years of public diplomacy with a focus on general portrayals of the country.²²⁶ From this perspective, there is an on-going transition from 'soft power' to 'sharp power' in China's approach across countries and continents.²²⁷ Clearly, this has varied from one state to another but an overarching transition is visibly under way and is beginning to have impact. Going into its second decade of accelerating internationalization and expansive diplomacy, Beijing is also transforming its tools of presence and influence and upping its efforts. More specifically, wider approaches to public and media presence are being devised and implemented across SEE at an increasing pace.²²⁸ These range from creating and cultivating media institutional relationships and placing content to consolidating their presence in the social media. Acquiring ownership of media entities in the region is another dimension worthy of additional attention. Chinese institutions have traditionally preferred to operate 'under the radar' but this is also being gradually transferred, albeit at different pace and with a variety of instruments from one country to another. Beijing is seeking to expand its toolbox, slowly venturing beyond the familiar territory of engaging with legacy actors and institutions which go back all the way back to communist times. There is greater

²²⁶ Hyland, E., 2020, 'Panda Diplomacy: China's Softest Power', *Aalborg University, Denmark and University of International Relations, China*. Retrieved from: https://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/333641825/Thesis_Panda_Diplomacy_Final.pdf

²²⁷ Walker, C., 2019, 'China's Foreign Influence and Sharp Power Strategy to Influence Democratic Institutions', *Testimony before the US Congress*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ned.org/chinas-foreign-influence-and-sharp-power-strategy-to-shape-and-influence-democratic-institutions/>

²²⁸ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe'. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/medien-europa/single-title/-/content/china-s-rising-media-presence-in-south-east-europe-1>

focus on the production and placement of content, increasing attention to institutionalizing cooperation arrangements, emerging diversification of media platforms, etc. Importantly, as geopolitical competition evolves and Western institutions begin to push back, Beijing is likely to accelerate and deepen its strategies to influence attitudes, perceptions and policies. The country has had the benefit of operating for a decade in largely benevolent and permissive environment, with hardly any pushback, under a veil of ignorance and disinterest from many institutions in host countries. The Covid-19 pandemic and the promotion of the country's 'vaccine diplomacy' are a clear indication of this emerging tendency of attempting to utilize its already achieved positions. While they might have been less successful and more transitory than many feared, they are a testimony to the unending determination of the 'middle kingdom' to widen and consolidate its presence as well as expand the range of issues and policies of engagement. In any case, this persistence on improved public positioning ought to be considered a 'new normal' in relations with China not only in South-East Europe but also beyond.

Dimensions of presence and embedding

Constructing and embedding a long-term strategy of public presence is not a one-dimensional effort as recent focus on particular elements of Chinese activities appears to have implied.²²⁹ Understandably, the novelty of its emergence after decades of public absence turned attention to some of the main components of Beijing's drive to position itself in the Western public sphere. For instance, the development of an elaborate and visible international network of media outlets and auxiliary structures around them is one such significant element. Further, academics and analysts have also noted the rising availability and planting of China-related content.²³⁰ Significantly, this rather haphazard and partial discovery of the approach and methods of the 'middle kingdom' is leading to an overemphasis on some, more prominent and more immediately identifiable elements at the expense of wider-oriented research with an aim at uncovering the breadth, complexity and multi-dimensionality.

²²⁹ Pike, L., 2022, 'How China Uses Global Media to Spread Its Views and Misinformation', *GRID*. Retrieved from: <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/05/18/how-china-uses-global-media-to-spread-its-views-and-misinformation/>

²³⁰ Cook, S., 2021, 'China's Global Media Footprint. Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence', *National Endowment for Democracy Publication*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chinas-Global-Media-Footprint-Democratic-Responses-to-Expanding-Authoritarian-Influence-Cook-Feb-2021.pdf>

This effort seeks to correct this tendency and offer a different approach along the above-mentioned lines.

Rather than zeroing in on one or two elements, it will analyse a series of dimensions which comprise the approach of China and seek to draw conclusions in relation to its entirety. One is the institutional and human infrastructure of positioning and public influence which is often overlooked. Beijing is a latecomer in the 'soft power' global game and has faced a significant challenge in this respect, having to gain strength in an already contested public space in South-East Europe.²³¹ Secondly, and more traditionally, the paper examines channels of communication and content, again with an emphasis on institutional aspects. Thirdly, there is a focus on the narratives and representations, generated and curated by China-produced content. Thus far, this aspect has been understudied due to a perception of low quantity and a preference for seemingly neutral information delivery. Beijing has long moved on from this approach and the case of SEE provides some good examples for a much more nuanced analysis. Lastly, the analysis places Chinese public positioning efforts in a wider context, examining public perception and attitudes. Clearly, potential causalities and nuanced correlations require separate and specific research tools but knowing and appreciating the wider societal, political and economic setting of Beijing's push into the public domain complements the remaining components of this research.

Country cases

Albania

Albania is among the countries in the region which have a number of legacy attitudes and relations with Chinese institutions dating back to communist times.²³² While these have understandably weakened since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the transition to democracy and market economy, they continue to provide a largely permissive environment for interaction. In the public sphere, for many years this has been expressed in regular communication between

²³¹ Albert, E., 2018, 'China's Big Bet on Soft Power', *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

²³² Evans, J., 2021, 'Cold War Bedfellows: The Forging of the Sino-Albanian Alliance in the 1960s', *Publication of the Wilson Center*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/cold-war-bedfellows-forging-sino-albanian-alliance-1960s>

the local Chinese embassy and the public media institutions.²³³ Still, there is currently an on-going tendency of formalization and expansion of ties. For instance, in 2019, Albanian public radio and TV signed a cooperation agreement with China's national radio and TV administration with a broad scope.²³⁴ It provides for the broadcasting of Chinese documentaries, including films about President Xi and his governance theories as well as a range of other cultural and economic topics. Interestingly, Beijing is sending cartoons for dissemination across the main media channels in the country, seeking to open communication and send content aimed at younger audiences in the country. The agreement has an institutional aspect as well in the shape of personnel exchanges and trainings.

The main channel of distribution of information about China is 'Ejani Radio' which is essentially the branch of China Radio International (CRI) in the country.²³⁵ It is mostly distributed over the internet with its YouTube channel but it also has a radio frequency. Its contact phone number is in China itself.²³⁶ Its Facebook page has over a million likes but local experts express doubt as to whether this represents the real number of interested viewers.²³⁷ CRI also maintains its own web page.²³⁸ CGTN also broadcasts its channels in Albania but it does not appear to be carried by all cable TV providers, limiting somewhat its penetration of the Albania media space. However, there are more indirect indicators of nascent and strengthening ties with various media outlets in the country. An analysis of BRI coverage in Albania reveals the spread of publications platform.²³⁹ Since 2015, there is a steady rise in China-related content, mostly published in the network of public broadcaster (RTSH) (163) and CRI (100). But there is increasing visibility and prominence

²³³ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.5. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

²³⁴ Xinhua News Agency, 2019, 'Albania, China Sign Agreement on Broadcasting of TV Programs', October 22, 2019. Retrieved from: http://english.scio.gov.cn/scionews/2019-10/22/content_75326426.htm

²³⁵ Radio Ejani, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC92pilkYUoxXhbb19jftfQ>

²³⁶ Radio Ejani, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://vymaps.com/CN/Radio-Ejani-718655274855382/>

²³⁷ Radio Ejani, 2022, Facebook page. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/CMGShqip>

²³⁸ China Radio International, Albania, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://albanian.cri.cn/>

²³⁹ Sylaj, V., 2021, 'Mapping China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Albania Media: A Content Analysis Study', *China-CEE Institute*, June 2020. Retrieved from: https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Working_paper-202021-by-Visar-Sylaj.pdf

in the newspaper and site DITA as well as in www.shqiptarja.com.²⁴⁰ Notably, there is a sudden rise in China coverage by the Albanian Telegraphic Agency since 2018, following strengthened cooperation with Beijing (75 stories in just 2018 and 2019).²⁴¹ Other private media outlets also show rising interest in such content – Shekulli, Panorama, Telegraf, etc.²⁴² While private media focus predominantly on economic aspects, public media are mainly interested in political, cultural and other elements. ‘Albanian Daily News’ also covers China quite extensively, but mostly from an angle similar to that of mainstream Western media.²⁴³

There is ample evidence of the rising presence of China-related content across the media spectrum in the country. Within the space of five years (between 2014 and 2019), China and BRI stories have risen by almost 50% with 96% being news items and just 4% analyses and interviews.²⁴⁴ Admittedly, this is from a very low base and many of these stories are often lost in the wider coverage of international affairs and economic news but there is a notable trend. Research thus far has not found any evidence or indications of Chinese ownership of media outlets but, as in all countries of South-East Europe, ownership transparency remains insufficient and does not preclude future interest. Still, there are signs of rising sophistication in the diplomatic approach of the embassy in Tirana in relation to constituencies beyond politicians and high-ranking public administrators. It is detectable in the emerging practice of regular meetings between the Chinese ambassador and local journalists and opinion-makers.²⁴⁵ While there is still a lower level of institutionalisation of this practice, it is evident that Chinese diplomacy is adopting a wider range of approaches and tools in developing and cultivating relationships with different constituencies and audiences.

²⁴⁰ Gazeta Dita, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://gazetadita.al>

²⁴¹ Albanian Telegraphic Agency, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://en.ata.gov.al/>

²⁴² Panorama Online, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://en.ata.gov.al/>

²⁴³ Albanian Daily News, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.albaniandailynews.com/search.php?s=china>

²⁴⁴ Sylaj, V., 2021, ‘Mapping China’s Belt and Road Initiative in the Albania Media: A Content Analysis Study’, *China-CEE Institute*, June 2020, p.7. Retrieved from: https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Working_paper-202021-by-Visar-Sylaj.pdf

²⁴⁵ Shopov, V., 2020, ‘Getting on the Radar: China’s Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe’, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.6. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

As in many other countries, Beijing engaged in Covid-19-related diplomacy just weeks after the start of the pandemic. On April 25th, the Chinese ambassador to the country made a high-profile donation, filmed at Tirana International Airport.²⁴⁶ It included face masks, testing kits, protective equipment, gloves and goggles. Other smaller and less high-profile donations were made later on.²⁴⁷ Importantly, this follows a pattern of small-scale, even if not particularly prominent, donations across a number of sectors, ranking from education and culture to agriculture and public administration. In 2010, China makes a small donation to the Albanian Red Cross.²⁴⁸ While ‘mask diplomacy’ may have been more peripheral and subdued, this changed somewhat when Beijing began to engage in ‘vaccine diplomacy’ as the distribution of its first vaccines began in earnest in 2021. As early as March 2021, Albanian authorities approved the application of the ‘Sinovac’ vaccine in parallel to adopting the Russian one, ‘Sputnik’.²⁴⁹ At the end of the same month, Tirana received the first batch of some 192 000 ‘Sinovac’ vaccines as part of a larger deal for half a million vaccines signed through a Turkish company.²⁵⁰ By July, Albania had acquired a total of 340 000 doses from the Chinese producer.²⁵¹ Interestingly, working through a Turkish intermediary actually attracted some displeasure by Beijing, visibly irritated at being bypassed, especially since there had been a discussion

²⁴⁶ Cooperation between China and CEE Countries, 2021, ‘China Donates Medical Supplies to Help Fight Coronavirus’, 26.4.2020. Retrieved from: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/rwjl/202005/t20200514_6580789.htm

²⁴⁷ Bastian, J., 2020, ‘China’s Evolving Footprint in the Western Balkans: Navigating Between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Covid-19 Pandemic’, *Tirana Observatory, Foreign Policy and International Relations*. Retrieved from <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/07/16/chinas-evolving-footprint-in-the-western-balkans-navigating-between-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

²⁴⁸ Krstinovska, A., 2022, ‘China’s Aid in the Western Balkans: Supporting Development, Undermining Good Governance’, p.16, *Publication of China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*. Retrieved from: https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CHOICE_policy-paper_balkan_web_07-1.pdf

²⁴⁹ Euronews Albania, 2021, ‘Albanian Government Passes Normative Act on Chinese Vaccine’. Retrieved from: <https://euronews.al/en/news/2021/03/23/albanian-government-passes-normative-act-on-chinese-vaccine/>

²⁵⁰ Reuters News Agency, 2021, ‘Albania Gets 192,000 Doses of Chinese Sinovac Vaccine’, 25.3.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-albania-vaccines-idUSKBN2BH2N9>

²⁵¹ SEE News, 2021, ‘Albania Receives 340,000 Doses of China’s Sinovac Covid-19 Vaccine’, 15.7.2021. Retrieved from: <https://seenews.com/news/albania-receives-340000-doses-of-chinas-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-report-747803>

for direct acquisition at an official level between the two countries.²⁵² Clearly, this mode of acquisition deprived Beijing of opportunities for public diplomacy which its diplomatic representations utilized widely in many countries in 2021. To the further irritation of China, the PM, Mr. Edi Rama, even contrasted his posture to that of the President of Serbia, Mr. Alexander Vucic, who went some political distance to please Beijing on the matter of vaccines.²⁵³ In all, as Tirana began to purchase and receive as donations Western and Russian vaccines, this further constrained China's ability to utilize the issue publicly. At a more structural level, experts based in Albania do not identify any significant presence of Chinese companies in the advertising market for the time being. This is against the context of their important investment positioning in some sectors such as energy.

The geopolitical turmoil of 2022, mostly due to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine and its attempt to fully occupy the country has not led to significant shifts in China's media and public messaging in Albania. According to local experts, Beijing has largely refrained from integrating its positions on the war in its public diplomacy. It appears that official authorities have preferred to focus on bilateral matters rather than engaging and reproducing positions and arguments relating to the wider global political context. While there is scarce research data on attitudes towards China, Albania is traditionally among the most Western and US-oriented societies in SEE with very high levels of support for NATO membership, EU accession and cooperation with US. In fact, research from November 2021 indicates that Albania is the most supportive of EU accession among all WB countries.²⁵⁴ 94% of its citizens are in favour of membership, followed by Kosovo with 90%. Still, they hold quite realistic views on the timeframe of joining with just 33% expecting the process to be completed within 5 years.

²⁵² China-CEE Institute, 2021, 'Albania External Relations Briefing: Beijing to Tirana via Istanbul', *Weekly Briefing*, vol. 39, n. 4, April 2021. Retrieved from: <https://china-cee.eu/2021/05/12/albania-external-relations-briefing-beijing-to-tirana-via-istanbul/>

²⁵³ China-CEE Institute, 2021, 'Albania External Relations Briefing: Beijing to Tirana via Istanbul', *Weekly Briefing*, vol. 39, n. 4, April 2021. Retrieved from: <https://china-cee.eu/2021/05/12/albania-external-relations-briefing-beijing-to-tirana-via-istanbul/>

²⁵⁴ European Western Balkans, 2022, 'Public Opinion Poll in the WB on EU Integration', 08.11.2021. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/11/08/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

Bulgaria

As background, China boasts a number of legacy relationships in Bulgaria for both historical and contemporary reasons. The slow pace and unevenness of the country's transition to democracy and market economy has largely been due to entrenched and well-embedded organized interest groups from the previous system. This is evident in the media sector as well. It is most prominent at the Association of Bulgarian Journalists which has a cooperation agreement with a range of relevant Chinese media institutions dating back to 1987.²⁵⁵ Its scope has expanded over the years, including annual exchange programmes for Bulgarian journalists from the local and national media, supply of content, conferences on numerous issues, including on the 'Belt and Road' Initiative, etc. In 2018, the association even signed a cooperation agreement in the context of the BRI, being among the first to do so.²⁵⁶ The Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA) is another media-related institution with long-standing and deepening ties with Beijing. The agency has a functioning cooperation agreement with 'Xinhua' which includes content sharing, exchanges, etc.²⁵⁷ Its web regularly published stories, containing the positions of the Chinese authorities, often in unedited language. As an example, on August 6th, BTA shared a material in which a Chinese expert called for a 'joint strike by Beijing and Moscow on the fake democracy of the West'.²⁵⁸ The agency also regularly publishes news stories on cultural matters provided by the Chinese Cultural Centre and the 'Confucius Institute'.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ Union of Bulgarian Journalists, 2020, 'Снежана Тодорова коментира пред „Радио Китай“ журналистическото сътрудничество' ('Sneznaha Todorova comments journalism cooperation for 'China International Radio)'). Retrieved from: <https://sbj-bg.eu/article/details/48380/Sneznaha%20Todorova%20komentira%20pred%20Radio%20Kitay%20zhurnalisticheskoto%20satrudnichestvo>

²⁵⁶ Union of Bulgarian Journalists, 2020, 'Снежана Тодорова коментира пред „Радио Китай“ журналистическото сътрудничество' ('Sneznaha Todorova comments journalism cooperation for 'China International Radio)'). Retrieved from: <https://sbj-bg.eu/article/details/48380/Sneznaha%20Todorova%20komentira%20pred%20Radio%20Kitay%20zhurnalisticheskoto%20satrudnichestvo>

²⁵⁷ Bulgarian Parliament, 2017, 2016 Annual Report of the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency. Retrieved from: https://www.parliament.bg/pub/cW/20170515112437SKMBT_36170515104700.pdf

²⁵⁸ Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, 2022, 'Китайски експерт призовава за съвместен удар на Пекин и Москва срещу фалшивата демокрация на Запада' ('Chinese expert calls for joint efforts against fake Western democracy', BTA, 06.08.2022.) Retrieved from: <https://bta.bg/bg/news/world/308076-kitayski-ekspert-prizovava-za-savmesten-udar-na-pekini-moskva-sreshtu-falshivat>

²⁵⁹ Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, 2022, 'Чаена церемония демонстрират тази вечер в Момчилковци' (Chinese tea ceremony to be presented in Momchilovtzi tonight, 10.08.2022.)

The most prominent media platform, boasting Chinese content is the popular web site – [24hours.bg](https://www.24hours.bg). It hosts a specific section devoted to the country, entitled ‘Focus China’, and contains unedited, translated information almost entirely from Chinese official sources.²⁶⁰ The section regularly publishes official positions and statements of various institutions of the ‘middle kingdom’ and even unedited speeches of President Xi. Beijing has cooperation agreements Bulgarian national television and radio and is particularly active in its cooperation with public radio.²⁶¹ Journalists from both regularly attend exchanges courses and programmes with Chinese media partners. CRI is increasingly active in the media space but mostly on ‘Facebook’, visibly expanding and improving its content, intensity of publication and positioning. Publishers linked to the centre-left continue to maintain the site: ‘China Today’.²⁶² A Bulgaria-based businessman has begun publishing a web site which also contains a great deal of China-related content: www.skafeto.com.

Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, China has been attempting to place related content linked to the country’s efforts to donate and/or sell PPE and offer other types of assistance. Indeed, there was some reasonably high-profile media coverage quite early on. For instance, the then PM, Mr. Boyko Borisov, publicly received and thanked Beijing for sending protective equipment in late March 2020.²⁶³ Further, key Sofia hospitals such as ‘Pirogov’ and the Military-Medical Academy organized photo opportunities to express gratitude for similar type of assistance, generating some prominence to Beijing’s efforts.²⁶⁴ Yet, this flow of information then shifted to the regional and local media organizations in line with Beijing’s shift in strategy and its rising engagement with cities and organizations outside of the capital, Sofia. Many of the Covid-19 reaction activities focused on regional and local government

Retrieved from: <https://bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/310082-chaena-tseremoniya-demonstrirat-tazi-vecher-v-momchilovtsi>

²⁶⁰ Focus China, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/6864124>

²⁶¹ Bulgarian National Radio, 2021, ‘Да видим Китай през далекогледа на площад „Тянанмън“, (‘Let us view China through the lens of Tiananmen Square’), 21.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://bnr.bg/hristobotev/post/101456901?forceFullVersion=1>

²⁶² China Today, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.kitajdnes.com/>

²⁶³ Darik Radio, 2020, ‘Китай е готов да дари защитни маски, очила и ръкавици на България’ (‘China is ready to donate protective masks, goggles and gloves to Bulgaria’), 18.03.2020. Retrieved from: <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/kitaj-e-gotov-da-dari-zashitni-maski-ochila-i-rykavici-na-bylgariia-2217473>

²⁶⁴ Standard News, 2020, ‘Китайци даряват на Пирогов средства срещу вируса’ (‘Chinese nations donate anti-virus equipment to Pirogov hospital’), 22.03.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.standartnews.com/zarazata/kitaytsi-daryavat-na-pirogov-sredstva-sreshchu-virusa-418473.html>

offices, local hospitals and universities.²⁶⁵ For instance, Chinese assistance in the city of Plovdiv was delivered to the regional governor to be then distributed across all city hospitals.²⁶⁶

The last few years have also witnessed the emergence or rising prominence of media platforms and outlets whose editorial policy is visibly anti-Western, either in their entirety or partially through specific segments and sub-platforms or sub-sections within their overall structure. Some of these include outlets such as www.epicenter.bg, www.trud.bg, www.dir.bg, www.pik.bg and others. These media organisations publish China and Russia-friendly on a daily basis, often directly uploading information from the press offices of state institutions from both countries. Overall, this practice has been expanding in the last year or so and has not discontinued since the outbreak of the second Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, such platforms reproduce Chinese official positions and criticisms of Western sanctions on Russia, on the supposed existence of biological weapons labs in Ukraine, on Taiwan, among others.²⁶⁷ These websites often carry information from Chinese sources such as China Radio International and the local Chinese embassy.²⁶⁸

Beijing has been diversifying its approach to public and media presence in the course of the last few years. In addition to well-established media formats, platforms and outlets, its institutions have been working on generating new online presences which are less formal, less politicized and less stale. A great deal of Chinese official information and communication is quite rigid and ideological, leading state outlets to struggle in reaching audiences. Hence, the attempt to create new mini outlets within larger platforms such as 'Facebook'

²⁶⁵ Shopov, V., 2022, 'Let a Thousand Contacts Bloom: How China Competes for Influence in Bulgaria', *Publication of the European Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/let-a-thousand-contacts-bloom-how-china-competes-for-influence-in-bulgaria/>

²⁶⁶ Marica Newspaper, 2020, 'Китайци дариха 10 000 маски на Пловдив, раздават ги в болниците' ('Chinese nationals donate 10 000 masks to Plovdiv'), 29.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.marica.bg/plovdiv/zdraveopazvane/kitayci-dariha-10-000-maski-na-plovdiv-razdavati-gi-v-bolnicite>

²⁶⁷ Epicenter News, 2022, 'Посолството на Китай: Тайван не е Украйна, санкциите не решават нито един проблем' (The Chinese Embassy: Taiwan is not Ukraine, sanctions do not solve a single problem'), 14.04.2022. Retrieved from: <https://epicenter.bg/article/Posolstvoto-na-Kitay--Tayvan-ne-e-Ukrayna--sanktsiite-ne-reshavat-nito-edin-problem/279485/11/0>

²⁶⁸ China Radio International, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://bulgarian.cri.cn/> and Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022. Retrieved from: <http://bg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/>

which seek to overcome these deficiencies. In the Bulgarian context, one such example is a 'personal blog' called 'Vitosha Studio'. It provides non-political information on the country and is run and narrated by two young Chinese ladies with some knowledge of the Bulgarian language.²⁶⁹ Its content is dominated by cultural history, geography, stories about traditions, cuisine, etc. In effect, the country is represented by an alternative set of imagery and narratives, often seeking to counter Western criticisms. For instance, the web page often has story and imagery lines about Xinjiang. Platform and content diversification is further exemplified by yet another new 'Facebook' webpage, this time focusing on Chinese economic information and data. 'Innovative Minds' has been publishing extensively on these issues in a China-friendly manner with rising frequency.²⁷⁰ The page is maintained by a consulting company without any personnel names, offers consultancy and may be contacted on a Chinese phone number.

Opinion surveys point to a mixed set of attitudes of Bulgarians towards China. In February 2022, 41% hold an unfavourable view of the country with 39% expressing a favourable one.²⁷¹ Importantly, there are similar splits in relation to the US and NATO (40.5% positive versus 46% negative and 44% positive and 41% negative, respectively). At the same time, dispositions towards China need to be perceived in more extensive timelines. If approached in this manner, data actually shows a significant increase of the prominence of Beijing in public perceptions, coupled with a rise in positive attitudes. For example, a survey completed in May 2017 revealed that just 0.1% of Bulgarians wanted the country to develop 'most active' ties with China as a matter of priority.²⁷² Beyond the national context, citizens struggle to form a definitive opinion as 45% do not have a view on the wider global impact of China's foreign policy.²⁷³ Still, 35% consider it destabilizing, while 20% have a positive attitude. Qualitative studies on Bulgarian perceptions towards China, however, reveal a much more open and positive disposition, particularly at the sub-national level.

²⁶⁹ Vitosha Studio, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/VitoshaStudio>

²⁷⁰ Innovative Minds, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/InnovativeMindsLtd>

²⁷¹ Trend Research Agency, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://rctrend.bg/%d0%b8%d0%b7%d1%81%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%8f/>

²⁷² Bulgarian Parliament, 2017, 'Bulgarians and the EU – Public Attitudes Ten Years after EU Accession'. Retrieved from: https://www.parliament.bg/pub/ncpi/02_NCPI_May_2017.pdf

²⁷³ News.bg, 2022, 'Световните сили в очите на българите', (World Powers in the Eyes of Bulgarians'), 29.01.2022. Retrieved from: <https://news.bg/society/svetovnite-sili-v-ochite-na-balgarite.html>

²⁷⁴ Moreover, elite respondents do not place the country in a wider context of Western engagement and perceive Beijing through a bilateral perspective based on opportunity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH)

The fragmented nature of the constitutional configuration of the country has generally made structured and sustained cooperation with international interlocutors something of a challenge. This also holds in relation to media cooperation. For example, the BH Journalists' Association is more involved in capacity-building, literacy, safety and other professional issues than in international cooperation.²⁷⁵ The focus on important sectoral and media freedom matters is even more pronounced in the work of another relevant organisation, the Association of BH Journalists, mostly with the support of Western institutions and partner countries.²⁷⁶ In this context, 'Xinhua' has acted as a bridge-builder on the media scene, creating a series of institutional links via cooperation agreements with the Federal News Agency (FENA) and Radio and Television of BH (BHRT).²⁷⁷ The Chinese news agency also has a partnership with 'Patria' News Agency. Successive Chinese ambassadors have been increasingly active in their contacts with major media outlets, holding meetings with some of their directors to enhance cooperation.²⁷⁸ The current ambassador has also sought to maintain good relations with the Republika Srpska News Agency.²⁷⁹ At the political level, BH and China signed a cooperation memorandum in the field

²⁷⁴ Shopov, V., 2022, 'Let a Thousand Contacts Bloom; How China Competes for Influence in Bulgaria'. Publication of the *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/let-a-thousand-contacts-bloom-how-china-competes-for-influence-in-bulgaria/>

²⁷⁵ BH Novinari, 2020. Research Archives, page 2. Retrieved from: <https://bhnovinari.ba/en/category/research/page/2/>

²⁷⁶ Association of BH Journalists, 2022. Resource Centre, Media Freedom in Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Tools/Stakeholders/Association-of-BH-Journalists-BH-Novinari>

²⁷⁷ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.7. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

²⁷⁸ FENA News, 2019, 'Ambassador of People's Republic of China Ji Ping visits FENA, 24.10.2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.fena.news/bih/ambassador-of-peoples-republic-of-china-ji-ping-visits-fena/>

²⁷⁹ Embassy of People's Republic of China to BH, 2020, 'Ambassador Ji Ping gives an interview for the Republika Srpska news agency on Covid-19', 05.05.2020. Retrieved from: http://ba.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx_5/202005/t20200522_2332081.htm

of media in 2019, envisaging exchange visits, content sharing, joint news coverage as well as joint activities in publishing, broadcasting and film production.²⁸⁰ The agreement was concluded at the federal level. Further, there are two other media efforts, promoting bilateral ties and promoting Beijing's positions and points of view. One is the website 'China Today', operating since 2014 with the help of the local Chinese embassy and the Bosnian - Chinese Friendship Association.²⁸¹ The site has regional coverage and is currently hosted in Belgrade. Another is the magazine 'Voice of China', also managed by the Bosnian - Chinese Friendship Association.²⁸² Their operations are supported by a number of organisations such as the Confucius Institute at the University of Banja Luka and the Centre for Promotion and Development of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative. The local Chinese embassy has organized on various occasions exchange visits for local journalists but largely outside of the main institutional channels of the community of journalists. There is a clear preference for the cultivation of individual relationships rather than development of institutional frameworks.²⁸³ Moreover, local experts confirm a preference for cooperation with web-based outlets rather than print media.

Importantly, the complex, decentralised nature of the Bosnia's constitutional system is providing ample institutional opportunities for local diplomacy, which is then reported in the various media outlets. This is most pronounced in Republika Srpska where BiH Presidency member, Mr. Milorad Dodik, often engages with Chinese actors and institutions. In a recent example, the Chinese ambassador to the country thanked Mr. Dodik for his 'firm and clear position on a unified China', an event widely covered by the country's media.²⁸⁴ This

²⁸⁰ Ministry of Communication and Transport, BH, 2019, 'Zamjenik Dalipagić i ambasador Ji potpisali dva memoranduma kojima se jača prijateljska saradnja dviju država', ('Deputy Dalipagić and Ambassador Ji signed two memorandums strengthening friendly cooperation between the two countries'), 17.04.2019. Retrieved from: <https://archive.ph/O3ysb#selection-2513.0-2513.109>

²⁸¹ Danas News Agency, 2022. 'Kina. Dnevni List Danas', (China-Daily News Danas). Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/tag/kina/>

²⁸² Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association, 2020. 'Pokrenut magazine 'Glas Kine', ('Voice of China' magazine begins publication), 24.12.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.boskin.ba/2020/12/24/pokrenut-magazin-glas-kine/>

²⁸³ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.8. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

²⁸⁴ N1 News, 2022, 'China's Ambassador in BH thanks Dodik for supporting Beijing on Taiwan issue', 04.08.2022. Retrieved from: <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/chinas-ambassador-in-bih-thanks-dodik-for-supporting-beijing-on-taiwan-issue/>

deeper intensity of Chinese contacts with Republika Srpska is a continuation of a tendency, apparent in previous years and with previous diplomatic envoys of Beijing. Russia's war in Ukraine and China's attitudes towards it have also been reflected in some media outlets in BH. Most notably, Chinese repetitions of the idea of the existence of US biological labs in Ukraine has been shared by some local websites, most prominently 'Vijesti Srpske'. Beijing has been quite active publicly in the issue of Taiwan.²⁸⁵ Its ambassador in BH has repeatedly stated the official position in key media outlets, most forcibly during the time of the visit of Mrs. Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan.²⁸⁶ Just weeks ago, Beijing's envoy attended a 'coffee and tea salon' organized by the Bosnian – Chinese Friendship Association on these issues which was attended by representatives of the local media.²⁸⁷ The country has also persevered with its health care diplomacy, donating equipment to the cantonal hospital in the city of Gorazde but this has failed to filter extensively through the local media.²⁸⁸ However, there have been some important developments in the media / publicity behaviour of the Chinese ambassador and embassy in the country. Mr. Ji Ping has been much more active and is giving interviews much more often, for instance, with [klix.ba](#), FENA, RS News, BHT, among others. Importantly, there are a number of critical investigative stories about Chinese investors in the country which have operated as a counterweight to the intensification of Beijing's efforts to penetrate the local media sphere. For instance, one relates to a recent contact to build the Trebevic tunnel along a major highway linking Sarajevo and Pale.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Vijesti Srpske, 2022, 'Kina kreće u napad! Zahtijeva od SAD istinu o laboratorijama, ('China is attacking. He's demanding the U.S. truth about the labs'), 09.03.2022. Retrieved from: <https://vijestisrpske.com/kina-krece-u-napad-zahtijeva-od-sad-istinu-o-laboratorijama-znamo-da-ste-sprovodili-eksperimente-u-ukrajini/>

²⁸⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in BH, 2022, 'Amb. Ji Ping on the issue of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan', 04.08.2022. Retrieved from: http://ba.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx_5/sghd/202208/t20220804_10733742.htm

²⁸⁷ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in BH, 2022, 'Ambassador Ji Ping attends the seminar held by the Chinese-Bosnian Friendship association and explains China's policy on Taiwan', 18.08.2022. Retrieved from: http://ba.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx_5/sghd/202208/t20220822_10748604.htm

²⁸⁸ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in BH, 2022, 'Ambassador Ji Ping attends the opening ceremony of the hemodialysis centre at the cantonal hospital Gorazde and donates a new batch of medical supplies to the hospital', 07.05.2022. Retrieved from: http://ba.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx_5/sghd/202205/t20220507_10683142.htm

²⁸⁹ Zurnal Info, 2022, 'What is hidden behind the job worth 200 million: Chinese company from the black list won the construction of the tunnel through Trebevic', 15.06.2022. Retrieved from: <https://zurnal.info/clanak/chinese-company-from-the-black-list-won-the-construction-of-the-tunnel-through-trebevic/25082>

As in other countries, China has utilized the Covid-19 epidemic as an opportunity to strengthen its position and influence in BH. Already in April 2020, Beijing proposed and signed with Sarajevo a bilateral medical and medical science cooperation agreement.²⁹⁰ At the same time, China sent its first batch of ventilators and masks, handed over at an official ceremony.²⁹¹ There was also media coverage of various donations by other Chinese institutions. This included Covid-19 tests, masks and equipment provided by the 'Fosun Foundation' and 'Cancer Foundation'.²⁹² As already indicated, the decentralised structure of BH creates diplomatic opportunities and was utilized by the Chinese ambassador when he donated equipment to tackle Covid-19 to the city of Mostar.²⁹³ Bilateral city twinning arrangements were also used as a channel of 'mask diplomacy'. In May 2020, the authorities of the city of Shanghai shipped masks and other medical supplies to the authorities of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.²⁹⁴ Yet, even as those stories were being circulated in the Bosnian media, a scandal relating to the purchase of China-produced ventilators broke out and overshadowed other news relating to Beijing's activities.²⁹⁵ In what seemed like a notable publicity stunt, the ventilators had been accepted by the federation's PM at Sarajevo airport in April 2020 but just months later he was under investigation for the procurement of unsuitable ventilators, incapable of providing the required level of life support.²⁹⁶ This was eclipsed by months of media coverage of the investigation even if most of the focus had shifted to local corruption.²⁹⁷ As in the other SEE countries,

²⁹⁰ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020, 'China, BH sign MOU on medical science cooperation', 03.04.2020. Retrieved from: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202004/03/content_WS5e868a2dc6d0c201c2cc00df.html

²⁹¹ Xinhuanet, 2020, 'First batch of medical equipment donated by China arrives in BH', 11.04.2020. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/11/c_138965466.htm

²⁹² Anadolu Agency, 2020, 'Kineske fondacije dodijelile pomoc BH za borbu protiv Covid-19', ('Chinese foundations grant BiH aid to fight COVID-19'), 05.09.2020. Retrieved from: www.aa.com.tr

²⁹³ Balkan Insight, 2021, 'China in the Balkans' Project. Retrieved from: <https://china.balkaninsight.com/node/4068>

²⁹⁴ Xinhuanet, 2020, 'China's Shanghai donates medical supplies to Sarajevo', 01.05.2020. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c_139024224.htm

²⁹⁵ Reuters News Agency, 2020, 'Bosnian official suspended amid probe into import of defective ventilators', 12.05.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bosnia-ventilators-idUSKBN22026R>

²⁹⁶ Balkan Insight, 2021, 'In Bosnia, ventilator scandal, manufacturer's warnings unheard or unheeded', 18.10.2021. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/18/in-bosnia-ventilator-scandal-manufacturers-warnings-unheard-or-unheeded/>

²⁹⁷ European Western Balkans, 2020, 'Ventilators' affair in BH – fight against corruption or another political quarrel?', 05.05.2020. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/05/ventilators-affair-in-bih-fight-against-corruption-or-another-political-quarrel/>

China tried to create much publicity around the delivery of its vaccines in 2021. In BH, the main occasion of vaccine support was well covered by the main media outlets as the Chinese ambassador met the Minister for Civil Affairs at a handing over ceremony.²⁹⁸ Yet, any generated public attention was later superseded by the delivery of other non-Chinese vaccines.

Yet, despite a notable uptick in Chinese media and public activities, there is little evidence that it is filtering through society and into wider public opinion. A recent survey shows that only 13% of Bosnians are actually aware of existing Chinese investments in the country even if they are some significant projects in the areas of energy and infrastructure.²⁹⁹ 64% have not even heard of these activities. At the same time, 24% of citizens of the country consider the 'middle kingdom' the most important economic partner of BH with 57% holding the opposite view.³⁰⁰ Expectedly, just 15% consider Beijing the country's most significant political partner. Bosnian public opinion is still firmly set in a Western direction with 76% supporting EU membership and 51% in favour of NATO accession.³⁰¹ Reservations towards NATO are mostly to be found in Republika Srpska. Still, it remains significant that wide segments of society continue to share the 'balancing' approach in foreign policy even if it does not explicitly undermine support for EU integration.

Croatia

China does not appear to have generated well-structured and sustained cooperation frameworks with the community of journalists in the country. Their main Croatian Journalists' Association dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and remains focused on various sectoral matters and problems

²⁹⁸ FENA News, 2021, 'China's donation of Covid-19 vaccine arrives in BH', 29.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.fena.news/bih/chinas-donation-of-covid-19-vaccine-arrives-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

²⁹⁹ International Republican Institute, 2020, 'Western Balkans Regional Poll: February – March 2020'. Retrieved from: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf

³⁰⁰ International Republican Institute, 2020, 'Western Balkans Regional Poll: February – March 2020'. Retrieved from: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf

³⁰¹ Balkan Insight, 2022, 'International community risks fulfilling Russia's agenda in Bosnia', 05.08.2022. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/05/international-community-risks-fulfilling-russias-agenda-in-bosnia/>

rather than extensive international activities.³⁰² The local Chinese embassy does organize exchange visits and trips to China for local journalists but these are mostly arranged on individual basis. Their programme usually involves visits to prominent Chinese companies such as 'Huawei', clearly intended to create contacts to be utilized upon return given its international presence. Given the lack of Croatian correspondents in the country, established contacts are also aimed at facilitating the reception of China-produced media content. In 2021, a pro-China businessman briefly held the position of head editor of the national news portal, www.tportal.hr. He did not occupy the post for long but the site continues to have plenty of China-related content, much of it relaying positions and activities of China.³⁰³ The country provides an interesting case of the existence of an intermediary institution which functions in the space between Chinese structures and local Croatian counterparts. The China SEE Business Association is based in Zagreb and implements various activities as an interface between companies and other institutions in the region and China.³⁰⁴ These include lobbying, media presentation and contacts with numerous media outlets as previous research intimates.³⁰⁵ Significantly, its partners include the international department of the central committee of the Chinese communist party as well as the business portal seebiz.eu and numerous China-linked BRI and Silk Road platforms and organizations.

As in other countries of the region, the issue of media transparency, ownership, advertising and funding models remains a source for concern and is particularly relevant for web-based platforms and outlets. There is often either utter absence of reliable information or registered owners are thought to be 'front personalities' whose task is to hide the actual owners of the particular outlet. Previous research has revealed that Chinese companies have attempted to enter the media market with hardly any prior indication.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Croatian Journalists' Association, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.hnd.hr/eng/>

³⁰³ Tportal.hr, 2022, China Section. Retrieved from: <https://www.tportal.hr/pretrazivanje?query=kina>

³⁰⁴ Chinese South-East European Association, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.cseba.eu/about-us/>

³⁰⁵ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.12-13. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁰⁶ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.12-13. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

'Hanza' media group has been subject of interest but the acquisition failed to occur due to unknown reasons. A few years ago, Chinese interlocutors had also expressed interest in buying a number of radio without apparent success.³⁰⁷ Local researchers identify some general shortcomings of the media landscape in relation to foreign affairs which are also impacting negatively coverage of stories linked to China – short-termism, lack of investigative journalists, absence of journalists with expertise on China and foreign affairs, etc.³⁰⁸ The media presence of Chinese companies in the country is quite thin, mostly linked to 'Huawei' and an SUV-producing company. Yet, local researchers confirm that this advertising activity does not have much of an impact on editorial policy and news coverage and interpretation. Research by local experts for this paper have identified the rising use and prominence of some online platforms such as 'TikTok' and 'Telegram' which have already been utilized for disinformation activities of other revisionist actors in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. Given the increasing emphasis on social media within Beijing's publicity efforts, it would be worthwhile to further examine the extent to which Chinese actors are moving into this online space.

The Peljesac bridge has been a key element of Croatian – Chinese bilateral relations for a number of years now. For a prolonged period of time, it has supplied a crucial publicity platform for the Chinese side on which to present, tout and embed a tangible project of mutual benefit. Funded by the EU, the tender was won by Chinese companies in competition with European ones, turning it into a central plank of Beijing's policy of entering the union via its tendering procedures.³⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, the actual construction of the bridge was followed quite closely by Western, Croatian and Chinese media outlets from a variety of angles: geopolitical, Covid-19 and its impact, discontent by Bosnia, local grievances of fish producers, EU tendering procedures, etc.³¹⁰ Some have even focused on the potential of the project to drive a deeper

³⁰⁷ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.12-13. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁰⁸ Stopic, Z., 2020, 'Croatia and the Chinese 17 plus 1 cooperation framework', *Croatian International relations Review*, XXVI (86) 2020, 130-154. Retrieved from: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/345065>

³⁰⁹ Balkan Insight, 2018, 'Chinese firm to build Croatia's Peljesac bridge', 21.01.2018. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/12/chinese-company-to-build-croatian-peljesac-bridge-01-12-2018/>

³¹⁰ Xinhuanet, 2020, 'Steel parts for Croatia's major bridge project arrive on time', 25.02.2020. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/25/c_138814941_2.htm

wedge between states of the region.³¹¹ The opening of the bridge last summer brought a wave of media activity, widely reported in Croatian outlets. Many carried the enthusiastic speech of the Chinese ambassador in the country who praised both sides and emphasized its importance in the context of bilateral relations.³¹² Interestingly, he also used the occasion to highlight the involvement of EU companies, design studios, suppliers, etc. to address widening concerns about the participation of Chinese firms in EU-funded procurement.³¹³ Yet, internal political reactions have been mixed with the current Croatian President stating that China is unlikely to win major similar projects in Europe any time soon in the present geopolitical context.³¹⁴ Importantly, China has been in the news with other economy-related projects. Back in 2021, national media covered extensively the opening of ‘Senj wind farm’, a 200-million euro Chinese investment which constituted the biggest investment in green energy in the country. At the official opening, the Prime Minister of Croatia spoke in superlative terms of the project, expressing a hope for further large Chinese investments.³¹⁵ Beijing used the occasion to place this project in the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’.³¹⁶ Further, 2021 was news-heavy viz-a-viz another Chinese project, the failed concession tender for Rijeka Port. The legal saga found itself in the media for a long period of time, culminating in the termination of the bid. A number of outlets shared stories and analyses, emphasizing the intervention of external actors in the decision of the government.³¹⁷ Many portrayed the Chinese side as a victim of forceful,

³¹¹ Jacobs, F., 2022, ‘Europe’s new Peljesac bridge unites (and divides) the Balkans’, Big Think, July 2022. Retrieved from: <https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/peljesac-bridge-croatia/>

³¹² N1 HINA News, 2022, ‘Ambassador: Peljesac bridge raises China-Croatia cooperation to a new level’, 26.07.2022. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.hr/english/news/ambassador-peljesac-bridge-raises-china-croatia-cooperation-to-a-new-level/>

³¹³ N1 HINA News, 2022, ‘Ambassador: Peljesac bridge raises China-Croatia cooperation to a new level’, 26.07.2022. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.hr/english/news/ambassador-peljesac-bridge-raises-china-croatia-cooperation-to-a-new-level/>

³¹⁴ Total Croatia News, 2022, ‘Milanovic: Peljesac bridge project of entry to European space for China’, 27.07.2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/64622-milanovic-peljesac-bridge-project-of-entry-to-european-space-for-china>

³¹⁵ N1 HINA News, 2021, ‘Chinese-owned wind farm near Senj starts run trial’, 07.12.2021. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.hr/english/news/chinese-owned-wind-farm-near-senj-starts-trial-run/>

³¹⁶ Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2021, ‘Senj wind farm opened for trial run’, 07.12.2021. Retrieved from: <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/senj-wind-farm-opened-for-trial-run-the-project-will-contribute-to-croatia-s-green-transition/33504>

³¹⁷ Total Croatia News, 2021, ‘Rijeka port Chinese investment stopped owing to EU, US pressure’, 03.01.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/business/49331-rijeka-port-chinese-investment>

last-minute pressure to terminate the procedure.³¹⁸ Further, there have been news reports of another, this time unsuccessful, attempt by Beijing to win an important infrastructure tender – the reconstruction of the railway line between Leskovac and Karlovac.³¹⁹ In all, China has actually been present in the media sphere in relation to a number of important economic and infrastructure projects over the last few years and quite persistently.

The first few months after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic witnessed a series of activities related to Chinese provision and support of relevant materials. At the start of April 2020, almost 60 tonnes of equipment arrived in the country via a direct flight from Shanghai, including masks, contactless thermometers, goggles, etc.³²⁰ This is on top of another 12 tonnes already procured before that as a result of direct arrangements at the PM level.³²¹ However, the overwhelming amount of the cargo was purchased rather than donated even if it included some small donations from the Chinese side. The first few months of 2020 had seen various donation campaigns by a number of Chinese companies but these did not achieve much public prominence.³²² These included donations by 'Alibaba', 'China Road and Bridge Corporation', 'Huawei', BGI Group, 'Hikvision' and others. Local governments had also engaged in similar activities such as those of Shanghai, Jiangsu, Hainan, Zhejiang, Sichuan and Chongqing.³²³ In many cases, masks and other equipment had been provided at the city-to-city level with some local media coverage. The Chinese company building the Peljesac bridge had a

³¹⁸ VL, 2021, 'Zbog pristike EU I SAD-a kinezi ne ulaze u rijecku liku; , ('Due to pressure from the EU and the United States, the Chinese are not entering the port of Rijeka'), 02.01.2021. Retrieved from: https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/zbog-pristika-eu-i-sad-a-kinezi-ne-ulaze-u-rijecku-luku-1458111?fbclid=IwAR2fx4eMo7K6_AjsOau74-4YtD2Mu89SEhS84nTgolOZGOWzDr36VTXlLLk

³¹⁹ HRT, 2021, 'Plenkovic discusses strengthening bilateral cooperation with Chinese delegation', 27.05.2021. Retrieved from: <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/domestic/plenkovic-discusses-strengthening-bilateral-cooperation-with-chinese-delegation-1969967>

³²⁰ Poslovni.hr, 2020, 'Pomoc iz Kine: U Hrvatsku stize 60 tona zastitne opreme', ('Aid from China: 60 tons of protective equipment arrives in Croatia'), 12.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/pomoc-iz-kine-u-hrvatsku-stize-60-tona-zastitne-opreme-4225917>

³²¹ Total Croatia News, 2020, 'Coronavirus: Protective equipment arrives in Croatia from China', 13.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/42836-coronavirus>

³²² Embassy of the People's Republic of China to Croatia, 2020, 'Remarks by Ambassador Xu Erwen at the tripartite video conference of the mayor of Cakovec, mayor of Yancheng, Jiangsu province and Chinese embassy in Croatia', 06.06.2020. Retrieved from: http://hr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dsxx/dsjhjcf/202006/t20200606_2916031.htm

³²³ Embassy of the People's Republic of China to Croatia, 2020, 'Remarks by Ambassador Xu Erwen at the tripartite video conference of the mayor of Cakovec, mayor of Yancheng, Jiangsu province and Chinese embassy in Croatia', 06.06.2020. Retrieved from: http://hr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dsxx/dsjhjcf/202006/t20200606_2916031.htm

similar campaign in the early stages of the pandemic.³²⁴ Notably, big Western firms also provided similar support quite quickly.³²⁵ Being a member of the EU, Croatia, while recognizing the Chinese vaccines, did not resort to their import and use.

Montenegro

Research commissioned for this analysis clearly shows the uptick in media and publicity activity of revisionist powers in Montenegro, mostly Russia. Historically, there has been less emphasis on the conclusion of formal cooperation agreements between Montenegrin public media organisations and their Chinese counterparts.³²⁶ As in other SEE capitals, the local embassy has regularly been organizing study visits to China for local journalists with an expectation to write and publish stories upon their return. The embassy has on occasion provided free content and informally contacted journalists in relation to Taiwan-related news stories. However, the embassy has not been as active as those in other capitals of the region. In addition to free content offered by the Chinese side, there has been a steady flow of pro-Chinese content via Serbian news outlets which regularly share such stories. Moreover, there are some pro-Russian websites often relaying pro-Chinese news items. They include www.in4s.net (launched in 2008) and Borba.me. The former regularly carries pro-China news stories, often aligning with the positions of Russia on various events in international affairs. Local researchers conform that, historically, the media sphere has been quite tightly controlled under the personalistic regime of Mr. Milo Djokanovic, to a large extent explaining the prolonged silence about the worrying aspects of the Bar – Boljare highway project. Moreover, on many occasions, he explicitly underlined the deepening and mutually beneficial nature of bilateral relations.³²⁷

³²⁴ China Road and Bridge Corporation, 2020, 'CRBC – Croatia donates masks to the government of the Republic of Croatia', 08.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://crbc-croatia.com/en/2020/04/08/china-road-and-bridge-corporation-croatia-donate-masks-to-the-government-of-the-republic-of-croatia/>

³²⁵ American Chamber of Commerce, Croatia, 2020, 'Bayer to donate 50 000 euros to Croatia to fight coronavirus', 22.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.amcham.hr/en/bayer-to-donate-50000-euros-to-croatia-to-fight-coronavirus-n591>

³²⁶ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.14-16. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³²⁷ MINA News, 2018, 'Relations between Montenegro and China strengthen by joint projects', 21.09.2018. Retrieved from: <https://mina.news/english-news/relations-between-montenegro-and-china-strengthened-by-joint-projects/>

Still, even in a media landscape dominated by organized interests close to the government, there were eventually quite a few reports about irregularities surrounding its construction. In one instance, they highlighted various lacking elements in the overall project.³²⁸ Yet, overall, the case of Montenegro is quite informative from a non-information perspective. Local experts confirm that for long periods of time, the government and the Chinese side enjoyed a permissive media environment in which there was hardly information about the controversial highway project. The involvement as subcontractors of local firms close to the government of the day further strengthened this status quo. This was attained not so much through advertising pressure but via ownership overlapping, proximity of business interests of media owners and government and political officials, etc. 'China Road and Bridge Corporation', constructing the infamous highway, has been somewhat involved in media-related activities, mainly supporting financially the exchange visits to China organized by the local embassy. It has been very active on the local advertising market.

Beyond the issue of the highway, there is agreement among local experts that the quantity of China-related content is on the rise. This trend is visible even in relation to the tensions between China and Taiwan which are receiving quite extensive coverage by the local media.³²⁹ While not overtly pro-Chinese, it is presenting in some detail the activities and positions of Beijing. The war in Ukraine is also at times reported and interpreted through a Chinese, pro-Russian prism. For instance, local web sites have shared stories detailing Beijing's official description of events in Ukraine as a 'special military operation'.³³⁰ A new portal from BH and reasonably popular in Montenegro has also carried various disinformation stories about supposed US bio laboratories in Ukraine.³³¹ The fall from power of the long-standing dominant Democratic Party of Socialists has

³²⁸ Vijesti.me, 2018, 'Kinezi traže još 115 miliona da završe što je Brajović zaboravio', ('The Chinese are asking for another 115 million to finish what Brajović forgot'), 17.09.2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/18943/kinezi-traze-jos-115-miliona-da-zavrse-sto-je-brajovic-zaboravio>

³²⁹ Aktualno.me, 2020, 'Kina uvela sankcije pojedinim tajvanskim političarima', ('China imposed sanctions on certain Taiwanese politicians'), 16.08.2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.aktuelno.me/svijet/kina-uvela-sankcije-pojedinim-tajvanskim-politicarima/>

³³⁰ In4s.net, 2022, 'Kina: У Украјини се не догара инвазија', ('China: There is no invasion in Ukraine'), April 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.in4s.net/kina-u-ukrajini-se-ne-dogadja-invazija/>

³³¹ Vjestisrpske.com, 2022, 'Kina kreće u napad. Zahtijeva od SAD istinu o laboratorijama: Znamo da ste sprovodili eksperimente u Ukrajini', ('China is starting to attack. It demands from the US the truth about the labs: 'We know . that you conducted experiments in Ukraine'), 09.03.2022. Retrieved from: <https://vijestisrpske.com/kina-krece-u-napad-zahtijeva-od-sad-istinu-o-laboratorijama-znamo-da-ste-sprovodili-eksperimente-u-ukrajini/>

impacted relations with China. The emergence of a new government, seeking to revitalize relations with the West had an immediate effect on media coverage and portrayals of China.³³² Moreover, it systematically criticized previous cabinets for mishandling the highway project with China, leading to serious financial difficulties for Montenegro. For example, at the end of 2021, the Montenegrin PM criticized Beijing for the handling of the project, leading to the abrupt departure of the Chinese ambassador during a joint visit.³³³ In general terms, the entire saga around the project and the related loan agreement has been a PR disaster for the Chinese side after years of secrecy and lack of detailed information. An increasing number of newspapers are shedding light on the risks that financial overdependence on China pose and the ways in which this could spill over in other spheres of social and political life.³³⁴

Covid-19-related assistance has been an important part of Chinese public positioning over the last few years. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there were a number of occasions when Chinese organizations engaged in various activities. The first months of 2020 witnessed a number of initiatives by Beijing to organise and express support.³³⁵ In one, former students of the China Europe International Business School gathered and donated 35 respirators to the Montenegrin embassy in China in April of that year. This effort was part of a wider initiative – ‘Fighting the Epidemic China Europe International Outbreak Rescue’, involving a number of Chinese institutions interacting with Montenegrin and other structures. Companies from the ‘middle kingdom’ have also been involved in donor activities. A firm from the Shandong province sent disinfectants by boat which arrived at the port of Bar.³³⁶ Interestingly, in this

³³² Bogojevic, J., 2022, ‘Montenegro’s growing distance from China’, 06.05.2022. Retrieved from: <https://chinaobservers.eu/montenegros-growing-distance-from-china/>

³³³ Portalanalitika.me, 2021, ‘Ambassador Kine napustio dogadaj bez pozdrava sa Krivokapicem’, (‘The Chinese Ambassador left the event without saying goodbye to Krivokapic’), 11.12.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/ambasador-kine-napustio-dogadaj-bez-pozdrava-sa-krivokapicem>

³³⁴ Vijesti.me, 2021, ‘Raste kineski uticaj u Crnoj Gori: Ogrlica od bisera I omca od dugova’, (‘Chinese influence is growing in Montenegro: a necklace of pearls and a noose of debts’), 28.03.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/524949/raste-kineski-uticaj-u-crnoj-gori-ogrlica-od-bisera-i-omca-od-dugova>

³³⁵ Mina.news, 2020, ‘Kineska NVO donirala 35 respiratora Crnoj Gori’, (‘Chinese NGO donated 35 respirators to Montenegro’), 07.07.2020. Retrieved from: <https://mina.news/vijesti-iz-crne-gore/kineska-nvo-donirala-35-respiratora-crnoj-gori/>

³³⁶ Mina.news, 2020, ‘Kineska NVO donirala 35 respiratora Crnoj Gori’, (‘Chinese NGO donated 35 respirators to Montenegro’), 07.07.2020. Retrieved from: <https://mina.news/vijesti-iz-crne-gore/kineska-nvo-donirala-35-respiratora-crnoj-gori/>

case the transport costs were covered by the corporation building the Bar – Boljare highway. The initial first few weeks witnessed the transfer of masks and protective equipment as was the case across the entire region of South-East Europe. The occasion was duly marked on Twitter but failed to attract high-level political involvement on the part of Podgorica.³³⁷ ‘Vaccine diplomacy’ played a slightly bigger role as the country found itself in a difficulty in the early stages of the process of vaccination provision. The initial delivery of 30 000 ‘Sinopharm’ vaccines in March 2021 received extensive coverage as expected.³³⁸ The occasion was also used to highlight vaccine research and health care cooperation between China and other countries, including Montenegro.³³⁹ A few months later, Podgorica acquired another 200 000 doses, supplemented by Chinese vaccine donations from Hungary and Turkey to the tune of 300 000. In total, this made the ‘Sinopharm’ anti-Covid 19 vaccine the most widely available one in the entire country.³⁴⁰ While occurring over a short period of time, these activities are certain to have made an impact on Montenegrin public opinion.

The overall media environment and its history in relation to coverage and representations of China is reflected, at least partially, in the attitudes of Montenegrin citizens. A June 2022 survey by the International Republican Institute revealed that 79% of them have a highly or somewhat favourable disposition towards the ‘middle kingdom’.³⁴¹ This is higher than the number for any other foreign country, even Germany and the US. Notably, since 2020 the trend has actually been upwards, rising from 68% to the present figure. Just 8% of respondents consider Beijing among the most important threats facing the country. 55% hold a favourable attitude towards the Chinese President with just 17% sharing the opposite view. Interestingly, just 32% of citizens are aware

³³⁷ Cdm.me, 2020, ‘Kina donirala Crnoj Gori maske, rukavice i dva respiratora’, (‘China donated masks, gloves and two respirators to Montenegro’), 17.04.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/kina-donirala-crnoj-gori-maske-rukavice-i-dva-respiratora/>

³³⁸ China International Development Cooperation Agency, 2021, ‘Montenegro receives Covid-19 vaccine donation from China’, 11.03.2021. Retrieved from: http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2021-03/11/c_601652.htm

³³⁹ Slobodnaevropa.org, 2021, ‘Kina donirala 30 000 doza vaksina Crnoj Gori, stizu uskoro’, (‘China donated 30 000 doses of vaccine to Montenegro, they will arrive soon’), 18.02.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31109677.html>

³⁴⁰ Kovacevic, M., 2022, ‘Chinese influence in Montenegro’, CEPA, 25.08.2022. Retrieved from: https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-montenegro/#footnote_10_1931

³⁴¹ Portalanalitika.me, 2021, ‘Ambassador Kine napustio dogadaj bez pozdrava sa Krivokapicem’, (‘The Chinese Ambassador left the event without saying goodbye to Krivokapic’), 11.12.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/ambasador-kine-napustio-dogadaj-bez-pozdrava-sa-krivokapicem>

of Chinese investments in the country, suggesting that positive attitudes are generated at other attitudinal and political levels as well. 84% of citizens are familiar with the Bar – Boljare project, implemented by Chinese companies. Further, just 13% of Montenegrins are of the opinion that Chinese investments are primarily about influence and control of their country. Clearly, the publicity approach of Beijing in this context is delivering results from their perspective and has generated a pool of positive dispositions.

North Macedonia

North-Macedonian – Chinese media cooperation has a surprisingly long history.³⁴² Exchanges of personnel and visits date back to the mid-1990s with the deputy- chief editor of 'Sichuan Daily' coming to Skopje in 1995, followed by a trip of the deputy editor of 'Qiushi Magazine'. Cooperation agreements of the Macedonia Agency for Information with Chinese counterparts date back to 2004 and have involved content sharing, exchange visits and material support.³⁴³ The last few years have also witnessed financial assistance for the agency by the local Chinese embassy. This emphasis on direct, tangible and immediate support for local interlocutors appears to be part of a wider shift in the engagement approach of the Chinese side.³⁴⁴ Until 2016, the local Association of Journalists had regular exchanges with the All-China Journalists' Association both in a bilateral and '17 plus 1' frameworks.³⁴⁵ Some activities with local media were organized in the context of bilateral cultural cooperation from 2016 onwards.³⁴⁶ Importantly, since the change of government in 2017 and the political fall of China-friendly VMRO-DPMNE, cooperation with Beijing has

³⁴² Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.16-18. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁴³ Vmacedonia.com, 2004, 'Media cooperation between China and Macedonia', 05.11.2004. Retrieved from: <https://archives.vmacedonia.com/7348.html>

³⁴⁴ Edwards, A., 2022, 'The Chinese's non-business influence in the Balkans', Blue Europe. Retrieved from: https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/short-analysis/the-chineses-non-business-influence-in-the-balkans/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-chineses-non-business-influence-in-the-balkans

³⁴⁵ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/>

³⁴⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in North Macedonia, 2016, 'China and Macedonia to continue collaboration on cultural projects', 22.06.2016. Retrieved from: http://mk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/brns/201606/t20160623_2574275.htm

begun to stall as engagement with ‘third countries’ has assumed a much less prominent role in foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Chinese embassy in Skopje has intensified and upgraded its tools of engagement, gradually adopting more advanced diplomatic practices such as working breakfast meetings / briefings with diplomats.³⁴⁷ Some local journalists have also been approached and encouraged to write positive stories about the ‘middle kingdom’, following visits to the country. Further, the embassy and the ambassador have had ‘Facebook’ and ‘Twitter’ accounts for some years now, with some diplomats have their own, separate pages posting quite aggressive statements and content in relation to Hong Kong and Covid-19.³⁴⁸

China-related content is gradually increasing among a wide range of media outlets, while still unable to assume a central place in the overall media landscape.³⁴⁹ More often than not, content is generated around particular events rather than systematically planted across the public domain. Research by local experts for this research indicates that there are a number of outlets which are presenting, on a reasonably regular basis, China-friendly content, often devoid of any analysis and criticism. They include TV channels such as Kanal 5³⁵⁰ and Sitel TV³⁵¹, news agencies such as MakFax³⁵² and the internet portals Republika³⁵³ and Kurir³⁵⁴. These often relay positive stories about Beijing’s activities across the world and in relation to Covid-19 and the frequency of China-related news stories is higher. Particular attention is paid

³⁴⁷ Shopov, V., 2020, ‘Getting on the Radar: China’s Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe’, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.16-18. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁴⁸ Shopov, V., 2020, ‘Getting on the Radar: China’s Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe’, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.16-18. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁴⁹ Krstinovska, A., 2020, ‘Foreign influence operations: analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia’, Publication of Estima. Retrieved from: https://estima.mk/static/c2.2a1.15_xgv9t3kenqscsdmit8/s1/files/rte/documents/Influence%20operations%20EN.pdf

³⁵⁰ Kanal5.com.mk, 2022, Channel 5 TV. Retrieved from: <https://kanal5.com.mk/>

³⁵¹ Sitel.com.mk, 2022, Sitel TV. Retrieved from: <https://sitel.com.mk/>

³⁵² Makfax News Agency, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://makfax.com.mk/>

³⁵³ Republika Online, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://republika.mk/>

³⁵⁴ Kurir News, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://kurir.mk/>

to the 'politics of generosity', often self-described as such by Beijing.³⁵⁵ Other analysts note the rising utilization of social media in China's publicity strategy in the country, seemingly more conducive to the distribution of friendly stories hardly subjected to context or critique.³⁵⁶ Moreover, 'grey propaganda' there appears to be on the rise, relying on 'unverified, speculative content from unclear sources, half-truths and disinformation'.³⁵⁷ Thus far, there appears not to have been attempts to influence editorial and content policy through advertising even if 'Huawei' remains an important commercial actor in the country.

As in other countries, China utilized the first few weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic to popularize its efforts in supplying various virus-related items.³⁵⁸ It not only sought to frame it as a 'soft power' instrument but aimed to conceal what were often in essence commercial operations.³⁵⁹ In April 2020, the country donated 30 000 euro to the Health Ministry for tackling the virus, an amount reportedly collected by the local embassy and well covered by the media. In addition to various masks and other donations, the Chinese side also organized various video-conferencing calls at the 'sister city' level early in the pandemic to 'share China's experience' in containing the disease.³⁶⁰ A North Macedonian journalist was sent to Wuhan to report on early efforts of containment.³⁶¹ However, North Macedonian politicians have refrained from high-profile, high-visibility events with Chinese counterparts, particularly early

³⁵⁵ Esch, V. and Palm, V., 2020, 'The Covid-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans: consequences and policy approaches.' Publication of Aspen Institute Germany. Retrieved from: <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2020-The-Covid-19-Pandemic-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

³⁵⁶ Krstinovska, A., 2020, 'Foreign influence operations: analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia', Publication of Estima. Retrieved from: https://estima.mk/static/c2.2a1.15_xgv9t3kenqscsmit8/s1/files/rte/documents/Influence%20operations%20EN.pdf

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁵⁸ Vuksanovic, V., 2020, 'China and mask diplomacy in the Balkans'. Publication of Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/china-and-mask-diplomacy-balkans-25898>

³⁵⁹ Dunst, C., 2020, 'How China's mask diplomacy backfired', *The American Interest*, April 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/04/15/how-chinas-mask-diplomacy-backfired/?utm-access=newsletter&utm_source=TAI+Today&utm_campaign=c218ae74a0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_07_26_05_56_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6322a81c35-c218ae74a0-178761845&mc_cid=c218ae74a0&mc_eid=193d186b67

³⁶⁰ China Daily Global, 2020, 'Solidarity and mutual support', 04.06.2020. Retrieved from: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/04/WS5ed83d89a310a8b24115ab98.html>

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

in the pandemic. For example, donations by the Chinese side were received by the Deputy Prime Minister in contrast to other countries in the region such as Serbia.³⁶² Within the months of May and June 2021, North Macedonia received 500 000 'Sinovac' vaccine doses which was covered extensively by the national media in the country.³⁶³ The deliveries were on two separate occasions both attended by ministers, again failing to provide a sufficiently high publicity platform for the Chinese side. Various analysts have noted the less prominent coverage of EU Covid-19-related assistance, facilitated by the fact that Chinese deliveries arrived earlier in the pandemic itself.³⁶⁴ This exposure was further highlighted by the fact that some 10 000 citizens of the country received their non-Western vaccines in Serbia.³⁶⁵ The self-perception of the Chinese side of the importance of vaccine delivery is also noteworthy. On May 15th, 2021, Beijing's ambassador to Skopje delivers an address on the occasion of the arrival of the initial batch of vaccines in which he describes this assistance as 'military aid' which 'enriches the friendship between the two countries and its militaries'.³⁶⁶ While there is no evidence that this framing was reproduced in media coverage, the increasing positioning of Beijing across the media domain is likely to present more opportunities for the relaying of its narratives and framings of various issues. Some of the Chinese vaccines reached North Macedonia via donations of Turkey, an occasion captured in photos by the minister of health.³⁶⁷ Local researchers suggest that this had caused some displeasure by the Chinese side, informally expressed at different political levels at various stages of the pandemic. This media approach by the local authorities might even be construed as counterbalancing Beijing's public portrayals.

³⁶² Embassy of the People's Republic of China to North Macedonia, 2020, 'Solidarity and mutual support', 04.06.2020. Retrieved from: http://mk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202006/t20200605_2542522.htm

³⁶³ Krstinovska, A., 2020, 'Foreign influence operations: analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia', Publication of Estima, p. 17. Retrieved from: https://estima.mk/static/c2.2a1.15_xgv9t3kenqscsmit8/s1/files/rte/documents/Influence%20Operations%20EN.pdf

³⁶⁴ Leigh, M., 2021, 'Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?'; Blog post, Bruegel.org. Retrieved from: <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-china-and-russia>

³⁶⁵ China-CEE Institute, 2022, 'North Macedonia external relations briefing: developments in external relations in 2021', January 2022. Retrieved from: <https://china-cee.eu/2022/01/19/north-macedonia-external-relations-briefing-developments-in-external-relations-in-2021/>

³⁶⁶ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/>

³⁶⁷ Abdula, F., 2021, 'North Macedonia receives 30 000 vaccine doses donated by Turkey', 09.06.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/north-macedonia-receives-30-000-vaccine-doses-donated-by-turkey/2268553#>

Various public opinion surveys point to the complex dynamics of attitudes towards key international actors. One indicates that the deepening geopolitical uncertainty resulting from the country's stalled EU integration process contributes to shifting views on foreign countries.³⁶⁸ Persistent geopolitical ambivalence is likely to continue to impact positively the acceptance of various non-EU alternatives. Some surveys show an increase in the number of people holding favourable views of China.³⁶⁹ In 2018, more North Macedonians had an unfavorable opinion of the country than favourable (28% to 25%). By 2021, this ratio had turned in the opposite direction with 39% now having a positive stance against 29%. The dynamic is visibly pointing to a significant increase in supportive views towards the 'middle kingdom' with category 'very favourable' seeing the biggest jump – from 7% in 2018 to 22% in 2021. In a further survey, conducted at the end of 2021, 64% agree that North Macedonia's interests will be served by good relations with China, just 29% disagreed.³⁷⁰ Still, importantly and in a wider geopolitical context, just 2% consider Beijing the actor which protects Skopje's interests best. At the same time, deeper data analysis reveal important nuances. A 2020 IRI regional survey finds that 35% of North Macedonian citizens support a foreign policy which is either balanced between East and West or is openly pro-Russian.³⁷¹ Further, a majority of interviewed citizens (36%) perceive Chinese investments as mutually beneficial. Only 11% think this relationship is mostly about influence and control on the part of Beijing. Significantly, 35% still have no views on this matter. There is little doubt that these attitudes provide a pool of potential support for a more activist China.

³⁶⁸ Damjanovski, V., 2022, 'Analysis of public opinion of North Macedonia's accession to the EU', February, 2022. Publication of the Institute for Democracy, Skopje. Retrieved from: https://idsocs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2021ENG-1-1.pdf

³⁶⁹ National Democratic Institute, 2021, 'Public opinion research: democracy, geopolitics and disinformation', August 2021. Publication of the NED. Retrieved from: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/MK%20REAPPS%20%202021%20public.pdf>

³⁷⁰ Centre for Insights in Survey Research, 2021, 'Public opinion poll: North Macedonia', December 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/IRI-N-Macedonia_Nov-December-2021-Poll.pdf

³⁷¹ Centre for Insights in Survey Research, 2020, 'Public opinion: Western Balkans regional poll', March 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf

Serbia

Serbia is among the countries of the region which has a strong legacy of cooperation with China even before recent efforts to intensify bilateral ties. The conducive context, produced by Beijing's drive to expand its global influence and Belgrade's 'multi-vector' foreign policy, culminated politically in 2016 with the adoption of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'.³⁷² Its expansion into numerous areas builds on a 2009 bilateral agreement and is evident in the ever-enlarging political and other contacts between the two sides.³⁷³ At the institutional level in the sphere of media cooperation, this has materialized in a series of agreements between the Chinese side and Serbian Ministry of Culture, 'Tanjug' Agency among others.³⁷⁴ The Chinese State Council Information Office has a representative in Belgrade as well as 'Xinhua' Agency. Back in 2017, the Chinese Economic Information Service created a 'Silk Road' of financial information, concluding agreements with media outlets. This is also linked to 'Xinhua's Silk Road Information Service which is providing free information to interlocutors. Additionally, the National Association of Journalists has a long-standing partnership with Chinese media institutions and traditionally organizes exchanges and visits for local journalists to the 'middle kingdom'.³⁷⁵

Various local experts report a significant rise of China-related stories in the Serbian media over the course of the last few years. This is partially driven by the elaborate institutional framework but also by various Chinese investments in the country as well as the inclusion of the 'middle kingdom' in the political speeches of the Serbian President and the Prime Minister.³⁷⁶ The relevant content is overwhelmingly positive and often includes data supplied by state institutions in order to portray with greater detail Beijing's presence.

³⁷² National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's republic of China, 2018, 'The 2016 signing of Serbia-China joint statement on establishment of strategic cooperation, 23.08.2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.knsrk.gov.rs/eng/a0090.php>

³⁷³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Serbia, 2022, Bilateral relations: China. Retrieved from: <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/china>

³⁷⁴ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.18-20. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁷⁵ China Silk Road Information Service, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://en.imsilkroad.com/>

³⁷⁶ Vladisavljev, S., 2021, 'Big brother: Serbia's media are creating a nation of China lovers', 01.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://chinaobservers.eu/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/>

³⁷⁷ The weeklies 'Nedeljnik' and 'Politika' are among the most enthusiastic and active proponents of Chinese topics. ³⁷⁸ The former has special issues whose content is largely supplied by 'China Radio International' and has a separate China section on its website: 'Kina Danas' ('China Today'). The latter puts together a web section, containing stories about China. Many of these are openly promotional and go beyond politics, covering culture, economy, etc. Importantly, the Serbian state now owns 50% of the outlet. 'Informer' is another very pro-China outlet, it even paid for the posters of President Xi across Belgrade, extolling the relationship between the two countries. CRI is also increasingly active even if mostly in the digital sphere. Its content is broadcast through a radio station: 'Welcome to Fun Radio', owned by a confidant of the current Serbian President. ³⁷⁹ Interviews with journalists indicate a degree of coordination between the state institutions and the Chinese side on various news-worthy items and indirect pressure not to run more critical stories. Still, there are some more critical outlets such as N1 and 'Danas'. 'Huawei' is an important player on the Serbian media advertising market, further solidifying Chinese positions in the wider public sphere. The last few years have witnessed social discontent, relating to Chinese investments in the country. ³⁸⁰ State institutions have made concerted efforts to prevent the wider dissemination of related protests by the national media organizations, leaving mostly local and foreign outlets to do the relevant coverage. ³⁸¹ Yet, the involvement of local media structures and online and social media platforms in China-linked issues is an important development, even prompting the Chinese embassy to collect detailed coverage information and even approach some critical journalists. The embassy itself is quite active in the digital sphere with Facebook, Twitter and Weibo accounts, seeking to accumulate followers and expand its presence. Given current dynamics and the expanding overall

³⁷⁷ Shopov, V., 2020, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South-East Europe', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Publication*, p.18-20. Retrieved from: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942>

³⁷⁸ Vladisavljev, S., 2021, 'Big brother: Serbia's media are creating a nation of China lovers', 01.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://chinaobservers.eu/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/>

³⁷⁹ Ibid.,

³⁸⁰ Euractive.rs, 2022, 'Serbian ecological uprising sends protest letter to Xi Jinping', 28.03.2022. Retrieved from: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbian-ecological-uprising-sends-protest-letter-to-xi-jinping/

³⁸¹ Pacic, N., 2021, 'Bor – Serbia's pollution crisis in pictures', 21.10.2021. Retrieved from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/21/bor-serbias-pollution-crisis-in-pictures/>

positioning of the country in Serbia along various parameters, this tendency of rising public activism is likely to strengthen.

As in many other countries, China sought to plant content in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. One line of argument was the insistence that the US is politicizing the investigations relating to the origins of the virus and is seeking to hide its own activities.³⁸² Serbian media outlets were also quite active in distributing the idea that the US had actually funded research activities at the Wuhan laboratory, thereby shifting responsibility for the emergence of the disease. In one publication, it was claimed that investigative journalists had uncovered 528 documents, linking a US health agency to experiments there.³⁸³ Other Serbian news items carried the accusation of US virus development labs, attempting to further dilute the responsibility of the Chinese side and shift the blame.³⁸⁴ Importantly, news items also contain political elements which aim to demote the extent of global Chinese isolation on Covid-19-related issues. For example, linked research at the UN. China's 'mask and vaccine diplomacy' has been particularly prominent in Serbia and this is reflected in the extensive media coverage of these activities. The country engaged in high-profile donations as early as March 2020 when the pandemic was beginning to rage across the globe. In an image circulated world-wide, Serbian President, Mr. Alexander Vucic, kissed³⁸⁵ the Chinese flag in gratitude, declaring a 'friendship made of steel'.³⁸⁶ This political imagery was an important PR success for Beijing very early in the evolution of the epidemic, allowing the country to frame its political behaviour as based on solidarity, assistance and cooperation.³⁸⁷ Not

³⁸² Novosti.re, 2021, 'Kina ne moze praktiti greske amerike' ('China cannot cover America's mistakes'), 25.08.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1030265/kina-moze-prikriti-greske-amerike-pekings-uputio-kritike-sad-zbog-politizacije-istrage-poreklu-virusa-korona>

³⁸³ Novosti.rs, 2021, 'Americki institut finansirao ispitivanja virusa u Vihanu od 2014', ('US institute funded virus research since 2014'), 08.10.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1043057/poreklo-virusa-korona-vuhan-amerika>

³⁸⁴ Sd.rs, 2021, 'Kina pitanjem urnisala Ameriku – radi se o bioloskoj laboratoriji', ('China destroyed America with a question – it is about a biological lab'), 01.11.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/svet/sjedinjene-drzave-odgovorite-kina-pitanjem-urnisala-ameriku-radi-se-o-bioloskoj-laboratoriji-2021-11-01>

³⁸⁵ Youtube, 2020, 'Serbian President kisses Chinese national flag as support team arrives', March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om7UImD-hmE>

³⁸⁶ Rs.n1info.com, 2020, 'Vucic: Friendship between Serbia and China made of steel', 30.09.2020. Retrieved from: <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a655716-vucic-friendship-between-serbia-and-china-made-of-steel/>

³⁸⁷ News.sgtm.com, 2020, 'Serbian President kisses Chinese flag as support team arrives', 22.03.2020. Retrieved from: <https://news.sgtm.com/news/2020-03-22/Serbian-president-kisses-Chinese-flag-as-support-team-arrives--P3FlpiEMBa/index.html>

only were these expressions of gratitude shared extensively across the country but they made headlines in mainstream and well-established Western media outlets, further multiplying the publicity effects sought by the Chinese side.³⁸⁸ A similar PT stunt was conducted in relation to the arrival of China-made vaccines to the country in March / April 2021.³⁸⁹ The item was headline news in Serbia for days, only this time it was the Prime Minister, Mrs. Ana Brnabic, accepting them at Belgrade Airport.³⁹⁰ President Vucic delivered another PR gift to the Chinese side, inviting the international press to his vaccination with 'Sinovac' at the start of June 2021.³⁹¹ In a similar fashion, the footage was circulated globally by both the Chinese and Western media as the publicity clash around Covid-19 intensified.

In the months since the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, Serbian media has continued to promote military equipment acquisitions from the Chinese side and has persisted in attacking critical news stories about this practice in Western media.³⁹² According to local experts, the news platform - www.informer.rs has been particularly active in promoting China-friendly content relating to the war in Ukraine and criticizing US and Western responses to Russia's war on the country. More specifically, Beijing's criticism of Western sanctions has received particular attention as it dovetails with the statements and policy of Serbia's own President.³⁹³ Expectedly, this wave of China-friendly political, public and media coverage is impact in significant ways the

³⁸⁸ Zhai, K. and Vasovic, A., 2020, 'To Belgrade and beyond: Beijing exports China model of virus management', 13 April 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-diplomacy-an-idINKCN21V05B>

³⁸⁹ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, '4.2 million Sinopharm vaccines delivered to Serbia to date', 27.05.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/173298/42-million-sinopharm-vaccines-delivered-to-serbia-to-date.php>

³⁹⁰ Xinhuanet, 2021, 'Vucic receives 1 million vaccines from China', 18.01.2021. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/18/c_139678185.htm

³⁹¹ Euronews, 2021, 'Serbian President gets Chinese-made Covid-19 jab', 06.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/06/serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-gets-chinese-made-covid-19-jab>

³⁹² Novosti.rs, 2022, 'AP ciljano dize tenzije zbog nabavke kiseskog PVO, iako je posao ugovoten jos pre tri godine', ('AP is purposefully raising tensions over the procurement of Chinese air defenses, although the deal was contracted three years ago'), 11.04.2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1106014/propagandni-rat-protiv-srbije-ciljano-dize-tenzije-zbog-nabavke-kiseskog-pvo-iako-posao-ugovoren-jos-pre-tri-godine>

³⁹³ Informer.rs, 2022, 'Peking bez zadrške, Vashington je najpre izazvao rat u Ukrajini, a sada gleda agoniju Evrope I trlja ruke', ('Washington first caused the war in Ukraine, and now it is watching the agony of Europe and wringing its hands'), 02.09.2022. Retrieved from: <https://informer.rs/planeta/vesti/731894/kina-sad-ukrajina-rad-kriza>

views of the Serbian population. In overall terms, recent research has found evidence that in the context of Covid-19, China is portrayed in the media in highly emotional, positive terms, while the EU in openly negative ones.³⁹⁴ Even more significantly, another research effort has shown that 75% of all Serbians helped the country the most during the pandemic, followed by Russia at 10% and the EU at just 3%.³⁹⁵ One important factor accounting for this finding is linked to the high-profile, extensive, emotion-laden media coverage of Chinese engagement, contrasted with the subdued, business-like, routine support the EU delivered to the country over the same period.³⁹⁶ Importantly, this has now become a structural weakness of EU communication policy.

Trends, practices and futures of Chinese public positioning

The triad of information, disinformation and non-information

While, naturally, the overwhelming analytical and research focus has been in China's information approach and templates, there is rising evidence that this is just one element of a wider configuration. In the context of this latest research, the concept of an information-related triad provides the most accurate description. Beijing is increasingly attempting to construct a three-pillared approach which places side by side information, disinformation and non-information. The first pillar involves the generation, collation and presentation of selected data and information by Beijing, aimed at consolidating certain views, perceptions and opinions about the country and its trajectory. Most research has focused on this segment as it represents the largest chunk of Chinese publicity and media activities. In the context of SEE, this is where the country appears to have made most progress by expanding the range of contacts, cultivating relationships, placing content, diversifying channels of communication, enlarging the spectrum of issues and matters worthy of presentation, etc. The second pillar is centred on disinformation which is slowly expanding as Beijing becomes more activist in the public sphere and is increasingly willing to complement its actions with those of

³⁹⁴ Stiplija, N., 2021, 'Izvestavanja medija u Srbiji o EU u 2020', ('Media reporting in Serbia on the EU in 2020'), March 2021. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Izvestavanje-medija-u-Srbiji-o-EU-u-2020.-Ljubav-iz-Kine-i-samari-iz-Brisela.pdf>

³⁹⁵ Bezbednost.org, 2020, 'Serbia in the jaws of the Covid-19 pandemic', December 2020. Retrieved from: <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/covid-eng-02.pdf>

³⁹⁶ Muminovic, E, 2021, 'Serbian media on the assistance in the pandemic', 08.04.2021. Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/04/08/serbian-media-on-the-assistance-in-the-pandemic-china-the-savior-eu-left-serbia-stranded/>

other revisionist 'third actors' such as Russia. The increasing prominence of this pillar is visible in China's involvement in distributing fabrications about US labs in Ukraine and in relation to Covid-19, Russia's actions in the war in Ukraine and in relation to its own vaccines and its deficiencies as well as the information about the state of its economy and its expanding problems. As geopolitical competition intensifies, disinformation is likely to play a larger role in publicity and propaganda efforts. The third pillar is perhaps most novel and requires extensive additional research. It relates to the desire and attempt by Chinese institutions to prevent or manage information or opinions which they consider as detrimental to their interests. This and prior research has provided emerging evidence of this mode of behaviour in a few countries in SEE – Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Moreover, while evidence of the policy and institutional formalization of this approach might be lacking, there are sufficient indications that this triad is increasingly being implemented across Chinese embassies in more and more countries.

„Soft“, non-political public diplomacy

China has long been conscious, even fascinated, by the notion of 'soft power', its meaning, elements and use. Many of the country's academic and policy institutions have studied the matter, while high-ranking officials increasingly sought to implement some version of the concept. While this process appears to be still in need of elaborate institutionalization, Beijing is already visibly adopting some of the tools of 'soft' power-oriented public diplomacy. In parallel to explicitly political information and narratives, Chinese organization and diplomats are increasingly turning to non-political themes and matters when structuring perceptions and attitudes towards their country. In this sense, there is a growing tendency to construct and utilize an approach to audiences which is seemingly less politicized and targeted at the non-political consumers of information and public imagery. Beijing is seemingly and at least partially aware of the limits of its ideological concepts and language as it seeks to find the right approach in the ever more complex context of bilateral and multilateral public diplomacy. Moreover, there is rising awareness of the multiplicity of audiences, available for targeting across different countries and cultures. In more specific terms, the Chinese side is focusing more on culture, cultural symbols and meanings, rituals. This involves focus on various cultural events such as 'the mid-autumn festival' or reconstructed interpretations of historical and cultural occurrences such as 'dragon boat' race. This is most notable in the activities of its cultural centres, 'Confucius institutes', online influences and social media platforms. A focus on economic developments is also now a routine element of this 'soft' public diplomacy with much emphasis on large infrastructure

projects, contemporary skylines of Chinese metropolises, etc. There are also efforts to introduce Chinese daily life to external audiences through, for instance, personal 'Facebook' pages. The sharing of daily rituals such as taking breakfast or having coffee before work are intermingled with targeted information about specific events, local 'successes', etc. Some platforms take a more geographic approach and are aimed at presenting scenery, landscapes, etc. before moving on to topics such as Xinjiang. This range of activities is gathering momentum and has not been subject of detailed research and analysis. Still, Beijing is clearly moving on from the days of heavy, stale and unimaginative delivery of its messages and is doing so at an accelerating pace, involving a greater number of actors.

Narrative publicity and representations

China's initial publicity efforts were very much focused on informational content, data and related representations. As its institutions emerge from a preferred posture of selective information provision and inconspicuousness, they are adding to their public presence arsenal. The main elements of this process is the production and dissemination of image-based, visual narratives and the reframing of information and data into more explicit narratives. At times, this shift appears as re-balancing but it is better appreciated as complementary to prior methods and approaches rather than their displacement. Chinese institutions continue to feel more comfortable handling and planting bland, numbers-based information, expecting a certain degree of self-evident perceptions on the part of the audience. Beijing is increasingly aware of the requirement to generate, handle and utilize a range of tools and approaches beyond the old-fashioned static delivery of information. The emerging shift from information to narration is revealing a more complex communicative reality worthy of additional exploration. The cases of Bulgaria and Serbia in particular reveal the integration of emotive components in the wider narratives, language and communication. It appears that the inclusion of extra-rational elements is gathering momentum, mainly through two avenues. One is the insertion of language of solidarity and brotherhood into the discourses relating to bilateral relations as most poignantly evidenced by the Belgrade's endorsement of Chinese 'mask and vaccine diplomacy'. Yet, there is a second, less notable avenue for this process. It is perceptible in the growing utilisation of personal level interaction to complement more systemic, data-driven arguments and representations. This involves the creation of a greater number of individual, self-standing figures, influencers who tell stories and share interpretations about China. For instance, the ladies of 'Vitosha Studio', a 'Facebook' page of two Bulgarian-speaking Chinese females, would share

a morning selfie with their coffee and breakfast or a bit of general wisdom about life before proceeding to post impressive economic data about China or stories about Xinjiang as the day rolls on. This more personalistic approach is quite nascent but is gathering momentum and needs to be studied further. Significantly, the inclusion of narrative publicity and representations is opening up avenues of communication to a wider range of audiences and is enhancing Beijing's public positioning strategy.

Towards propaganda coordination between revisionist powers?

This research has produced some emerging evidence that the propaganda efforts of various revisionist powers in SEE appear to be converging in some media outlets and platform, thereby generating strengthened presence and potential wider societal and political impact. These initial instances need to be developed by further, detailed research but indicate an important development. Significant questions ought to be examined, including likely degree of coordination, modes of mutual enhancement of messages and narratives, financial modus operandi of such efforts, degree of compatibility and / or complementarity of these propaganda efforts, number of actors involved, etc. Such research and analysis will build on top of some already existing studies which intimate how revisionist powers are behaving in the media sphere in SEE. In a way, their narratives and propaganda content have operated side by side, leaving plenty of space for each other, not working across purposes. We appear to be witnessing efforts that gradually go beyond this approach. The most notable indications of this tendency come from the media sphere of Bulgaria (with some cases in Montenegro and Serbia). For example, the website - www.epicenter.bg carries large quantities of openly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese content in a variety of forms: information, commentary, interviews, etc. In many cases, it is clearly unedited, planted content and quite often unattributed. The site has even published interviews with the Iranian ambassador in Bulgaria. From this perspective, it functions as a platform and intersection of 'third actors', revisionist states and their narratives and propaganda. This site is not an exception. In fact, there is something of an emerging media eco-system which includes other outlets such as www.24hours.bg, www.trud.bg, www.bultimes.bg, www.pogled.info, www.lentata.com and others. They are clearly sharing content horizontally, highlight themes and issues in coordination and emphasize certain topics over time. As already mentioned, this phenomenon requires further research across the region but also within the EU. Still, even at this stage, it is possible to conclude that such instances indicate a rising degree of intervention by such actors in the public sphere, an increased readiness to cooperate across revisionist states

and existing domestic constituencies, willing to engage and ‘throw their lot’ professionally with the forces which are actively seeking to deconstruct many of the key fundamental pillars of these countries and societies.

Growing instrumentality and normative positioning

The turn of Chinese public diplomacy to a ‘soft power’-driven mindset has already been noted but does not tell the whole story of the country’s increasing attempts to win hearts and minds. Further, the traditional academic emphasis on ‘soft power’ creates an incentive to remain focused on the generation and utility of more diffuse, attitudinal positive dispositions in relation to a particular country. Yet, this often remains rather abstract and fails to capture various dynamics. In this case of Beijing, there is a clear tendency to utilize and instrumentalize the nascent framework and infrastructure of influence to plant and project its selected messages, stories and narratives. In other words, we are no longer dealing with a belated geopolitical actor trying to make conceptual and institutional sense of how to impact and change opinions and behaviours. In other words, Chinese institutions are moving beyond conceptual discussions and some of the ‘softer’, more diffuse attempts to exert influence. Rather, we are witnessing the emergence and strengthening of a structured configuration of approaches, policies and tools of rising instrumentality and in direct service of the goals of the regime in the ‘middle kingdom’. More specifically, there is vigour, pragmatism and intensity in the activities of the involved Chinese institutions, all aimed at pushing on, planting and diversifying content across media outlets, with the help of individual journalists and opinion-makers and through numerous cooperation agreements with interested partners. Changing preconceptions and long-standing attitudes is certainly a goal for them, but it is being complemented by an increasingly instrumental posture to get content into newspapers and onto websites, to get the Chinese positions and narratives seen and heard across the media domain. Admittedly, Beijing began the implementation of this strategy from a less than prominent position but it is certainly making progress, and fast. Another interesting emerging tendency might be defined as normative positioning and represents an attempt to insert more ideological language and discourse into China-sponsored content. In some cases, this is done quite blatantly as media outlets are paid to publish official information from Beijing, while in others it is more subtle and inserted around economic information, for instance. While not thoroughly researched, this practice still appears to be quite peripheral and its chances of success remain doubtful as audiences have moved on from explicit and stale propaganda messaging.



Multi-vector development becomes socially popular?

'Multi-vector' thinking has largely and traditionally been perceived as specific to a particular sector and country, namely, foreign policy and Serbia. Moreover, a large number of analysts and politicians from South-East Europe would energetically deny any deep support for such a stance, emphasizing their overall determination to complete the process of Europeanization. While this is largely a justified response, there are some worrying signs that 'multi-vector' foreign policy hedging could be morphing into an attitude of a potential development path which goes beyond Western integration. Various social surveys testify to the existence of a pool of actual and potential support in this direction and 'third countries' will be increasing their activities to attempt to utilize it to the fullest. From such a perspective, the media domain is slowly becoming a platform for the presentation and popularization of their actions in SEE, be they Chinese infrastructure projects, Russian disinformation campaign or loan support from the United Arab Emirates. While challenging to quantify unequivocally, this research, together with the chapters on other 'third actors', intimates that content and media presence and exposure to alternative stories, information and narratives are increasing and intensifying. This is occurring via official communication channels, public broadcasters and a number of private outlets with affinities or business interests in those countries. As already noted, the diversification of channels of communication and the shift to decentralised and expanding online domain is also facilitating the intentions of such actors to reach a wider set of social, cultural and economic groups in the countries of the region. As such stories, news and narratives embed themselves in a greater number of outlets, they become 'normalized', a routine and inconspicuous component of the media terrain. Moreover, there appear to be emerging factors and mechanisms likely to take this process further. Some of these include the greater willingness of the Chinese side to develop more institutionalized relationships with media organizations even if at a nascent stage, the persistent deficiencies of the online advertising market which is putting pressure on outlets, the rising social acceptability of such content and the increasing normalization of the practice of 'planting content' as online consumers begin to treat the presence of often misleading information as the 'new social media normal'. This trend will be particularly important to monitor and analyse in the coming years.

On and on. What is China doing well in South-east Europe?

The last decade or so has witnessed the strengthening presence and positioning of China in the public and media sphere of SEE. While detailed monitoring, rising awareness and institutional response remain essential given the challenges posed by the increasing presence of an authoritarian revisionist actor, it is important to appreciate the range of activities and approaches which have worked to Beijing's benefit. One is the emerging ability of Chinese institutions to better appreciate and adapt its activities in the regional and local contexts. While its preference for legacy relationships is well-documented and remains a preferred option in many countries, Beijing is increasingly aware that public effectiveness requires an enlargement of its base of contacts and interlocutors. Until quite recently, the activities of many embassies in the region left the impression of a rather static, risk-averse and well-tried approach, limiting interaction to a few legacy media outlets, opinion-makers and journalists. This is clearly now changing. Secondly, Beijing has been making inroads into a media setting which has been losing investment significance for Western media companies for almost a decade now. This process of investment exit is varied and uneven across the region but important, nonetheless. The transition towards local ownership is noteworthy, especially as organized business interests close to governing parties (Bulgaria) and personalistic regimes (Serbia, Montenegro) have moved in to acquire media publications and outlets or enter and dominate advertising markets. This trend has generally been coupled with a decline in professional standards and collapse in various countries' standing in international media freedom rankings. There is little doubt that this tendency generated openings for the Chinese side to enhance its public and media standing and influence and will continue to so in the coming years. A transactional, non-transparent and standards-thin media context is definitely going to provide opportunities for aggressive third actors. Moreover, close relations and interpenetration between the media sector and governments is creating the phenomenon of 'captured media systems' as well as exacerbating societal polarization in line with the intentions of governing parties. The resulting loss of trust in the media is often leading people to turn to alternative sources such as peers, chat groups, etc. Overall, the regulation of digital media spaces remains patchy and insufficient, creating further opportunities for 'third actors'.³⁹⁷ Thirdly, Beijing is visibly moving to a more institutionalized approach, seeking to go beyond *ad hoc* engagements with self-standing journalists and media actors. Instead, Chinese interlocutors are attempting to strike longer-term, contractually based partnership which provide greater structure and

³⁹⁷ We are grateful to Mrs. Tanja Maksic for these observations.

predictability to their influence and advocacy efforts. This is true both in relation to relevant state institutions, media companies, sectoral branch organizations, etc. In a way, the country is shifting to a more sustained, wider-based, longer-term and offensive public posture which, if successful, will multiply its chances of planting narratives and information, influencing positions and representations and, ultimately, impacting public perceptions and policy. This is a rather nascent but clearly emerging tendency. Fourthly, Chinese media-related efforts are exhibiting greater sophistication in the range of utilized tools in the public space. For example, just a few years ago, they were largely relying in conveying information and data, often stale and dry with little wider context and limited messaging. This is presently changing in a variety of directions, one being greater emphasis on official positions and stances on numerous current events, another more focused on visual representations of the country. These visual narratives are gaining more and more prominence, seeking to embed certain perceptions, development imagery and story line, future projections, etc. This approach is becoming more evident and represents a clear indication of rising competence in Beijing's efforts to expand and strengthen its public positions. Fifthly, there is accumulating if still incomplete and patch evidence that China is tilting to a better balance between printed and online media presence with a rising number of platforms, Facebook pages, Tik Tok friends, etc. At the initial stage, more traditional and legacy outlets such as 'Radio China International' or 'Xinhua' simply moved to digital spaces, seeking to expand their presence and outreach. But this approach has morphed into a concerted effort to populate various social media platforms with new content, extensive visual presence, different types of content, etc. This runs parallel to the massive migration of media content to online platforms across SEE as printed media and television decline in penetration and significance. In the case of printed newspapers, this decline is quite dramatic. Moreover, this re-balancing will continue in the coming years, potentially making China a very significant actor in the expanding online space of the region. Sixthly, it appears that Chinese institutions are expanding the range of audiences subjected to its messaging and influence efforts. These wider audiences are now receiving non-political information, with greater focus on economy, specific sectors and companies, etc. This occurring diversification of content is even going beyond economy and into culture, tourism, education among others. The expanding online presence of Chinese media is facilitating this approach as generation of content and scalability become easier and allow audience enlargement. This emerging trend is likely to persist. The promotion of self-standing influencers is another notable effort which is seeking to overcome institutional 'straightjackets' and reach online consumers at a more personal level.

Some challenges and dilemmas for Beijing

Despite its increasing efforts at constructing the necessary range of instruments, approaches and institutions to position itself in the public spheres of SEE, Beijing is and will be encountering a series of challenges and dilemmas. A few stem from wider political and geopolitical transformations which will resonate in China's posture in Europe. The strengthening of the Russia-China strategic axis is potentially leading to the structuring of a two-bloc global system in which states will be facing headwinds to choose and consolidate their political and economic alliances. SEE countries will not be an exception to that, particularly those in the Western Balkans still suffering from prolonged geopolitical uncertainty. From such a perspective, the overall incentives structure of the last decade or so is fracturing and China will need to respond and position itself in a context in which European countries are facing rising political and economic costs to multi-vectoring in the direction of non-Western actors. Additionally, Beijing has benefited from a window of opportunity in SEE and the WB since about 2014 with little political pushback by Western institutions. Again, this is changing and Beijing is under pressure to react in a strategic but also swift manner. It is not at all evident that the country's institutions will be up to that task. Significantly, the Western community and its institutions have embarked on a range of integrationist policies both within the EU and NATO in response to the revisionist approaches of actors such as Russia and China. The emerging *Zeitgeist* points to coalescence around common values and policies rather than hedging with non-Western actors and countries in the region of SEE are starting to align with this trend. This will be shifting the context of engagement of non-Western geopolitical actors.

At a more immediate scale, these overall tendencies are slowly narrowing the space for effective cooperation between China and countries in SEE. This is increasingly evident across various sectors such as telecommunication, IT, primary and critical infrastructure, FDI monitoring, energy, to name just a few. As the West deepens its integration and reacts to revisionist approaches, effective engagement with Beijing is likely to become more patchy, conditional and generally problematic. Importantly, this will limit the country's ability to expand its footprint and utilize it for political purposes. For example, the US 'Clean Network' initiative directed at enhancing data and communication security is gradually being transformed into *de facto* NATO policy and has curtailed numerous options for cooperation with Chinese companies such as 'Huawei' and others. Such a dynamic is likely to accelerate in the coming years. Moreover, Beijing will need to learn to provide tangible 'public goods' in domains and polities in which it seeks influence and leverage. Thus far,

its approach has been to pursue elite-based relationships and capture in ambivalent and inconspicuous ways but this policy is already suffering from decreasing returns. For one, there is greater visibility, awareness and appreciation of this tactic across SEE as the highway project in Montenegro served to highlight quite dramatically issues related to Chinese engagement. Secondly, anecdotal evidence clearly indicates that regional publics are growing somewhat impatient with the lack of wider public goods from engagement with China. Further, to many the whole enterprise is increasingly perceived as an 'elite-to-elite' affair with little substantive impact on the wider economy and development. 'Vaccine diplomacy' was perceived as one such opportunity by the Chinese but has failed to materialize across the region.

China's attraction as a partner to SEE counties has largely been based on a perception of opportunity, a prospect of a successful 'Go East' strategy. This was Beijing's pitch a decade ago when its 'internalization strategy' arrived politically in the region. Conflated by the aftermath of the global financial crisis and a rising narrative of an 'Asian Century', this promise of opportunity impacted extensively the attitudes and behaviour of many states in this part of Europe. In these lands, China has faces a crisis of over-promising and under-delivering as the focus has been on a few large-scale projects in just a few countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Hungary. Tangibility is a related problem for the country as many economic actors in the region increasingly realize that they are unlikely to tap into these opportunities as Chinese institutions choose to engage mainly with state actors and cronies of authoritarian leaders. Such attitudes are likely to pose further problems for Beijing's ability to further embed itself and progress towards a position of effective leverage. There is yet another, quite paradoxical, trend in relation to the country's presence in the region. Over the years, Beijing has exercised an overtly transactional approach as it attempted to enter and embed itself across societies, political systems and economies. In this way, it has sought to compensate for the lack of sufficiently deep historical, cultural and political ties. This approach has brought some benefits but, as opportunities fail to materialize and political costs of engagement for local actors rise, its logic is slowly starting to produce different effects. As incentives for regional actors weaken, they are beginning to weigh the various costs more carefully and are slowly, and transactionally, starting to withdraw from engagement with China. Should this process persist, the country will be facing yet another challenge to its further effective embedding. Their success is by no means assured as local actors will be responding to a changing set of circumstances and variables and might not be easily convinced to adopt a posture which reorients them to

Beijing. In this sense, the coming few years will be quite decisive and indicate of the degree and depth of societal and cultural challenges which the Chinese side will need to overcome. The monitoring and analysis of this process will be particularly important and contribute to good political decision-making.

Further, the historical window of geopolitical opportunity for third countries in SEE has been largely predicated on a context of stalled EU accession prospects and uneven NATO membership, generating various security loopholes and uncertainties. This sense of geopolitical stalemate has impacted negatively the prospects and timelines of Westernization across the region, leading to a variety of strategies by local and external actors further complicating the processes of transformation. For many years, this reality has been defined as long-term, subject to little change and a structural obstacle to the further Europeanization of the sub-continent. This context has been transformed over the last few years and the process is accelerating, thereby creating a new overall political environment. A few different factors are driving this process. One is the rising realisation that third actors are not only blocking development in these countries but are further coalescing into a solid political bloc, intent on taking on the West and actively deconstructing its presence in the region. The emergence of a strengthened and increasingly cohesive Western bloc amid the wider geopolitical displacements is a further, unequivocal sign towards the region of the direction of 'political travel'. SEE political elites are particularly sensitive to such seismic shifts in international relations and are certain to adjust their policies accordingly and increasingly in a pro-Western mode. Beyond these wider processes, there are numerous other developments which are bringing SEE states closer to the Western fold. The recent start of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia after years of stalling, while still facing some real hurdles ahead, amount to a restart of the entire process given the accumulated difficulties of the last few years which needed to be overcome. There are calls for the acceleration of on-going negotiations with the likes of Serbia and Montenegro, generating a geopolitical impetus to the entire endeavour. There is renewed engagement in relation to Bosnia and efforts to resolve some of its deepest constitutional and political issues in order for Europeanization to advance to a new stage. Talk of pending doom and its disintegration have subsided. NATO is also strengthening its presence across the board, both as a reaction to Russia's war on Ukraine and wider security re-thinking. In all, these tendencies amount to an emerging 'new geopolitical normal' in SEE which ought to deepen the incentives of local publics and elites to further consolidate their linkages and place within the Western community, both politically and institutionally. In this sense, the time for geopolitical clarity has arrived.



Finally, the 'middle kingdom' will continue to face challenges to its efforts to expand and embed its presence in the specific social groups and structures of many societies across the region of SEE. Beijing has relied extensively on two major approaches to improve its standing and project influence in most of these countries. One is the utilization of legacy contacts and networks, often going back to communist times and politically tilted to the centre-left. Another is the reliance on tactical, positional use of contacts in key nodes of the administrative system, utilizing state-to-state interaction as the main avenue for access to high-ranking personnel. This has varied from country to country, particularly in relation to post-communist networks and their effectiveness. The second approach helps explain the insistence and use of multilateral frameworks such as the '17 plus 1' format (presently reduced to '14 plus 1' after the departure of the Baltic states). These have been played the role of vehicles of access, socialization and provision of selective incentives for cooperation with the Chinese side. However, given the already outlined context of rising challenges for Beijing and some accumulated evidence as to the limits of these approaches, the Chinese side will need to implement an adjusted strategy if it wishes to further enlarge its wider societal, political and economic influence. There are some signs that this is already occurring even if at a rather nascent stage. Increased media presence is just one, already outlined in this report. But there are others. Another is intensified cultural diplomacy with the opening of new cultural centres, parallel to the already existing Confucius Institutes. 'Language diplomacy' is allowing Beijing to enter kindergartens and early grade schools in more and more countries. A focus on local government structures and elites is also aimed at expanding the contact base of Chinese engagement, seeking to go beyond the well-established tradition of focusing on central government interaction. Working with local economic elites is still another tool which is being utilized increasingly often. 'Huawei' is helping push open the doors of the IT communities and technical academic institutions across the region of SEE. These are all elements of a strategy to venture beyond familiar social and political territory in European societies. Still, this approach is still in its institutional infancy and Chinese actors are clearly yet to 'learn the ropes' of this much more complex context over the coming years.

About The Authors

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