

"KOSOVO IS THE SERBIAN CRIMEA"



Revealing Russian disinformation networks and active measures fuelling secessionism and border revisionism in Serbia



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This paper is the summary of the results of an over a year-long research project covering the Kremlin's and pro-Kremlin actors' disinformation campaigns and active measures related to territorial revisionism in six countries – Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania and Serbia – during a period of heightened nationalism and historical revisionism involving World War I commemorations between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of "revisionist" disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a local and regional level. The research utilised a novel methodology that combined qualitative content-analysis with the analysis of networks and social media statistics to reveal communication strategies and the dissemination of revisionist ideas in Central-Eastern Europe. For more information on the project, please visit our [thematic website](#).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Crimean war in 2014, Russia has masterfully exploited societal divisions present in Ukrainian society and abroad. The war against Ukraine was part of the Kremlin's long-term foreign policy attempt to preserve or (re)gain influence over the post-Soviet space and its countries by creating so called "frozen conflicts" in territories such as Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia or Donetsk in Ukraine, which claimed independence based on alleged differences or societal divisions rooted in ethnicity, language, historical origins etc., supported by the Russian state. Territorial secessionism as a foreign policy tool has been enabled by rights-based territorial discourses or narratives to legitimize current-day or historical justifications for territorial authority over a piece of land.

Political Capital has laid out in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s to garner intelligence and leverage over foreign countries' political life.¹ The pro-Kremlin extremists and their media potential was then put to good use during the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, to provide political and media cover for the illegal secession referendum and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine. Russian power projection has also relied on disinformation campaigns – "active measures" – targeting audiences in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine to create

or escalate bilateral tensions between these countries along ethnic or territorial lines to this day. The leaked emails of Vladislav Surkov,² a chief strategist of the Crimean annexation, detailed how Ukraine's territory could be further disintegrated or "federalised" with the help of minority/secessionist organisations in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.³

Vulnerabilities to Russian media or other (hard or soft, sharp) influence have been investigated extensively before.⁴ We have not set out to define the Kremlin's overall strategy to destabilize European security and economic coalitions in order to shift the balance of power in its favour. Rather we seek to understand the inner workings of "revisionist" disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a regional level. To this end, with the help of the Open Information Partnership, Political Capital and its partners in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland launched a year-long media research study in six countries to identify pro-Kremlin domestic or international disinformation campaigns, or so called "active measures," that are specifically reliant on revisionism and inter-ethnic conflicts.⁵

We hope that our research findings may provide local elites, the Euro-Atlantic Community and the wider public with insights and tools to better identify and thwart Russian hostile information operations based on social divisions and identity politics aimed at upending European peace and stability.

METHODOLOGY AND THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The geographical scope and timeframe of the media research study was defined to reflect current or past territorial disputes – flashpoints of national discourses related first and foremost to World War I about identity, language or territories and proactively utilized by the Kremlin to sow divisions among Central-European countries.

We therefore chose to limit our research to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Serbia, in addition to Ukraine, as focal points of hostile disinformation operations, because they all experienced territorial disputes and shifting borders dating back to World War I. More specifically,

Romania: Romania celebrated the 100-year anniversary of its Great Unification of Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transylvania in 2018.⁶

Hungary: 2020 is the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, declared the Year of National Togetherness by the Hungarian National Assembly to commemorate the loss of territory and population formerly belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy.⁷

Poland: Historical legacy of the Polish-Ukrainian War between 1918 and 1919 that resulted in the control of Galicia and the city of Lviv by the Second Polish Republic until 1939.

Current inter-ethnic conflicts: Disinformation campaigns based on current territorial conflicts addressed Russian revisionism in Ukraine and Slovakia, and the status of Kosovo in Serbia.

In line with the timing of national anniversaries and commemorations, we conducted our media monitoring activities during the period from 1 January 2018 to 15 April 2020, to reveal Russian hostile influence operations targeting the commemorative events or exploiting other forms of territorial revisionist, separatist tendencies and inter-ethnic conflicts in the countries under review.

The research addressed the following four questions:

1. What are the basic and most widespread revisionist narratives, related (dis)information strategies and identity politics concerning the official commemorations of World War I or other significant current-day territorial issues?
2. What are the drivers of revisionist media trends, in terms of events, actors and media sources in news media and in social media?
3. What are the prerequisites for the successful dissemination and construction of revisionist narratives and messages in pro-Kremlin media in each of the countries under review?
4. What are the vulnerabilities of each society to foreign hostile influence operations based on territorial issues and societal divisions between minority and majority populations?

We defined a “narrative” as a specific structure of (real or imaginary) events or occurrences linked by causality in storytelling, which can be articulated in oral, written, visual etc. forms of communication. Within each narrative we were looking for the type of information used to interpret the main line of argumentation: (1) information (fact-based, objective reporting); (2) disinformation (misleading information disseminated intentionally); (3) misinformation (ad hoc or accidentally false information).

Because territorial revisionist tendencies against other countries are not present in Slovakia and Ukraine, we expanded the operational definition of “revisionist narratives” in two important ways.

First, revisionist narratives were categorised as either exhibiting “aggressive” or “victimhood” aspects. “Aggressive” territorial narratives express a wish or demand for territorial change, or a revision of borders favouring a certain state or country, while “victimhood” narratives express fear of a possible change of the sovereign status of a given territory.

Second, we distinguished between “domestic” and “Russian” revisionist narratives. While domestic narratives were not created to manipulate specific audiences and did not necessarily contain any disinformation, pro-Kremlin or Russian disinformation meta-narratives reinterpreted domestic narratives for disinformation purposes as part of their disinformation campaigns.

In Serbia, our initial desktop research revealed that territorial revisionism or territory-related narratives present in the current media space and domestic political discourse first and foremost dealt with the issue of Kosovo. In these narratives, Russia was frequently presented as a key Serbian ally and a defender of Serbian territorial integrity and sovereignty, with certain parallels drawn between Kosovo and Crimea. These narratives were present in both mainstream and fringe pro-Russian media.

The following research methods were used to prepare this study.

- Desktop research to collect the necessary information related to territorial revisionist politics, political ideas and media activity in each country to narrow down our research foci, and create three lists of mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin media for monitoring purposes.
 - In-depth interviews with experts of scientific life, politics and the media so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events.
 - Monitoring of revisionism-related websites’ articles and Facebook messages on mainstream news media, and fringe pro-Kremlin and far-right media using the SentiOne online platform’s research function which gathered data in the given timeframe based on country-specific sets of keywords selected by our researchers in each country under review.⁸ As a result, we ended up with “relevant” messages in the forms of website articles or Facebook posts related to revisionist ideas, territory-related information, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and all the “irrelevant” messages produced by the media on our three initial media lists.
- Media data gathered was analysed using four distinct research methodologies.
- Time trends of the dissemination of website articles and Facebook posts were analysed through the SentiOne platform’s data visualization tools to understand the main events, actors, media, etc. driving mainstream or fringe media discourses website.
 - To identify, map and categorise the most prevalent revisionist narratives present in each country, we took a random, representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles per country. The recurring, representative themes of articles were categorised into the main types of narratives present in each country.⁹
 - To understand what conditions or prerequisites make revisionist or territory-related narratives and conspiracy theories successful in social media, we compared the most successful fringe (far-right or pro-Kremlin) Facebook pages’ and posts’ statistical performance to each other in terms of the number of interactions (based on the number of reactions, comments and shares).
 - The research utilized a “big data approach” to comprehend how pro-Kremlin networks of websites in each country disseminated revisionism or territory-related messages through hyperlinks embedded in articles, in order to direct their audience to other revisionist sites or construct impactful messages by referencing – many times – third party sources website.
- Ultimately, we combined several layers of analytical and methodological approaches to provide a comprehensive picture of all the revisionist narratives and related (dis)information campaigns utilized by pro-Kremlin actors to sow social polarisation and geopolitical instability in all six countries under review.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the consequences of the wars and the as-yet-unresolved status of Kosovo provide issues of territorial revisionism and revisionist narratives a central role in both the domestic and foreign policy of Serbia. Some form of territorial revisionism is supported by 75% of Serbs expressing a historical right over Kosovo.¹⁰**
- **Serbia refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence and engages in diplomatic efforts to reduce the number of countries recognizing it.** At the same time, the Serbian government is also trying to achieve a comprehensive diplomatic solution to the status of Kosovo that could involve a revision of borders or a land swap as part of a comprehensive deal.
- **In this process, Russia is widely perceived by the Serbian government, parties and citizens as a key Serbian ally who protects the territorial integrity of Serbia,** does not recognize Kosovo's independence and strongly supports Serbia in international organizations over this issue. This perception is strengthened by strong narratives about a historical Serbo-Russian alliance and close ties based on language, Orthodox Christianity and common history.
- **Favourable narratives about President Putin or strong Russian support over Kosovo are, therefore, dominant in both mainstream and fringe (far-right, pro-Kremlin) media, in pro- and anti-government media alike.** For this reason, the direct presence of Russian media, except for Sputnik Serbia, or the financing of pro-Kremlin media by the Kremlin is largely unnecessary, given the favourable nature of the overall media landscape for Russia.
- **The greatest differences are not between media based on their position towards the Kremlin, but come from the pro-government/anti-government relationship.** Pro-government sources highlight Russia's support to the Serbian government, while anti-government sources present Russia as a more important defender of Serbian national interests than the pro-EU Serbian leadership.
- Pro-Russian narratives tend to originate from Serbia itself, mostly from media affiliated with the ruling party. **The dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives by public officials, which in combination with the Russophile political attitude of the electorate, makes the influence of Russia in Serbia very cost-effective.** The Kremlin relies mostly on domestic actors (political parties, Orthodox Church etc.) which use a pro-Russian discourse to attract support from the genuinely pro-Russian electorate.
- **The main revisionist narrative in Serbia has two basic lines of argumentation regarding parallels between Kosovo and Crimea,** represented by one mainstream (and pro-Kremlin narrative) or around 8% of the representative article sample. **One states that both Serbia and Russia lost their territories unjustly, one of which was corrected by the unification of Crimea with Russia. The second claims that the cases of Crimea and Kosovo are not the same, because Crimea returned to Russia by the will of the people of Crimea, and Kosovo was stolen from Serbia by Albanians and Western powers.** Either way, Serbia needs to support Russian foreign policy as far as Crimea is concerned, without even the need for the formal recognition of the Crimean annexation, to reclaim Kosovo or achieve a final solution for the unresolved status of the Southern territory.
- **From the Kremlin's point of view, Russia's geopolitical efforts and (dis)information campaigns aim to uphold Russia's power-broker role in Serbia or in the Balkans, for which Serbia is a cultural, linguistic, media and ethnic gateway.** Pro-Russian narratives enable Russian power-projection into and through Serbia, which is in a delicate geopolitical limbo position, trying to balance pro-EU and pro-Russian foreign policies, while refusing to recognise the status of Kosovo.

- **The Kremlin's power-broker role also provides it with significant blackmailing power over Belgrade in future negotiations concerning the country's territorial sovereignty, which could be a major hindrance for Serbia's European integration in the long run.** Additionally, the opposition's and the electorate's pro-Kremlin nature might allow Moscow to have influence on the future composition of governments and the domestic politics of Serbia.
- **Most of the mainstream and fringe narratives revealed in the trend, sample and Facebook analyses revolve around Russian support to Serbia and the Serbian people, which entails unwavering support for the Serbian position on Kosovo and protection against "Western pressures."** Outright revisionist narratives drawing on parallels between Kosovo and Crimea are less present in mainstream media. These are, rather, peddled by Russian diplomats and fringe media which criticize the government's policy on Kosovo.
- **The network analysis of pro-Kremlin media in Serbia confirmed that these media form a strongly interconnected network which transcends the pro-government/anti-government cleavage, organised around some key pro- and anti-government media hubs.** The observed dissemination pattern means that the narrative of Russia being a vital defender of Serbian national interests concerning Kosovo has been bolstered through mutual referencing among pro-Kremlin pages, with Sputnik Serbia being a common and the most significant source of information for a majority of them.

GENERAL POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES IN SERBIA

Geopolitical attitudes and social divisions related to issues of race, ethnicity, religion or language may serve as vulnerabilities which the Kremlin can use to sow discord and create inter-ethnic tensions in domestic politics or in international relations. National identities intertwined with historical narratives serve as the most powerful basis for geopolitical orientations in a given country, making it susceptible or protected against the Kremlin's power projection, or soft and sharp powers.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) are a dominant force in Serbian politics, governing the country since 2012 with an increasing control over all levels of government. The party won 75% of the seats in the June 2020 parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by a majority of the opposition. The SNS is an affiliate member of the European People's Party and is declaratively a pro-EU, centre-right political party, but its voters are predominantly pro-Russian and nationalist. The party and its leader are seen as both pro-Western and pro-Russian at the same time, since their policies are characterized by ideological vagueness, heterogeneity, inconsistency and pragmatism. This led to the party having both pro-EU and pro-Russian supporters and opponents, something which frequently confuses casual observers.

Serbia has been a candidate for EU membership since 2012, and is engaged in accession negotiations since 2014. The Serbian government proclaimed EU membership as its priority and strategic goal, but a poor track record in the implementation of reforms – especially in the area of the rule of law – in the past several years significantly slowed down this process, and the country still finds itself far from fulfilling this ambition. The membership of Serbia in the EU is supported by 54% of Serbian citizens, according to a December 2019 poll conducted by the Ministry for European Integration.¹¹

Besides internal reforms, another important prerequisite for Serbia's successful EU accession is reaching an agreement on comprehensive normalization with Kosovo, the break-away province which declared independence in 2008 but remains unrecognized by Serbia, UN Security Council members Russia and China, as well as by 5 EU member states.

Partially due to Serbia's attempts to win the favours of countries which have not recognized Kosovo's independence, the country's alignment with EU foreign policy declarations is remarkably low for a candidate country: 57% in 2019 and 52% in 2018¹², 46% in 2017 and 67% in 2016.¹³ This includes Serbia's refusal to join EU sanctions against Russia and support to China over both Hong Kong and Xinjiang, which recently sparked controversy.

Even though Serbia enjoys strong cooperation with NATO through an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the support of citizens for this cooperation program and potential NATO membership is remarkably low, around 8%, according to a November 2019 Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration (CAES) poll,¹⁴ mostly due to NATO's 1999 bombing campaign of Serbia.

Serbia proclaimed military neutrality within the National Assembly Resolution in 2007 and in its 2019 Strategy of Defence. NATO member states, however, are the largest donors of military equipment in Serbia, and the highest number of military exercises is conducted with NATO and NATO member states.¹⁵

THE SERBIAN MEDIA SPACE

The success of hostile influence operations is highly dependent on the media environment in each country. A free and balanced media space characterised by a high degree of media freedom and freedom of speech is more resilient to disinformation attacks, since fact-based reporting makes it easy to debunk and expose disinformation and conspiracy theories, thereby rendering manipulation attempts ineffective. On a more general level, the presence of a strong, balanced and independent mainstream media in a country directly neutralizes local pro-Kremlin networks and indirectly improves audiences' media literacy against manipulation.

Mainstream media in Serbia are predominantly controlled by the government and the ruling political parties, especially President Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). This has led to a major deterioration of media freedom. Lack of media freedom has been observed by Reporters Without Borders, placing Serbia 93rd in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index. The Reporters Without Borders report noted that "after six years under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, first as prime minister and then as president, Serbia has become a country where it is often dangerous to be a journalist and where fake news is gaining in visibility and popularity at an alarming rate"¹⁶. The 93rd place is a drop of 3 places in comparison to the 2019 World Press Freedom Index, and 34 places since 2016, ranking Serbia the second worst country, after Montenegro, in the Western Balkans.¹⁷

Most daily tabloid papers with the greatest circulation are strongly pro-Russian, with President Putin being the central figure of admiration. Mainstream media are biased in favour of cooperation with Russia and China, reporting negatively on NATO, and ignoring the EU accession process. This biased reporting results in a perception among Serbian citizens that cooperation with China, and especially Russia, bears larger significance than is actually the case.

Some mainstream media maintain a more neutral line, but what they have in common is the lack of criticism towards President Vučić and his government. They are very few mainstream media outlets

in Serbia that are critical of the government, and they include one daily newspaper, two cable television stations and several weekly magazines. None of them, however, have been included in this study due to their significantly lower circulation.

Pro-Kremlin and far-right fringe media outlets in Serbia are numerous, and they are sometimes very hard to distinguish from pro-Russian mainstream media. They all have in common either an ideological or opportunistic bias towards Russia and Serbian nationalist discourse. Just like mainstream pro-government tabloids, they often use sensationalist and click-bait headlines with pro-Russian content, and often glorify President Putin.

Fringe media, however, have different attitudes towards the Serbian government. Some of them are apparently supportive of President Vučić, some of them are neutral, but some are clearly critical of his government. Some of them portray President Vučić as a Serbian patriot who defends Serbian national interests, but others as a pro-Western traitor who seeks to find a way to recognize Kosovo's independence to please his Western supporters.

Serbian citizens in general do not trust the media. According to a 2019 research study of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 81% of citizens do not trust information published by private TV stations, while 67% do not believe the public broadcaster, Radio-Television of Serbia. The highest level of mistrust, 71.5%, regards the electronic media, which provides print pro-government mouthpieces with a larger impact on public attitudes.¹⁸

Although fringe media have smaller reach than mainstream media in the general public, they may possibly have influence over Serbian nationalists and far-right groups that are more ready to set in motion violent actions based on messages coming from these media outlets.

One of the biggest problems of Serbian media is "tabloidization" of the media landscape - meaning that the newspapers with the greatest circulation are those which publish misleading news, creating the situation in which fringe content, based on disinformation and conspiracy theories, becomes

mainstream content. According to a KRIK study in 2019, four tabloids with the highest yearly circulation (Informer, Srpski Telegraf, Alo and Kurir) had 945 misleading news items just on their front pages.^{19,20} When it comes to TV stations with national coverage, private pro-government TV stations Pink and Happy had 24.5% of total share in viewership in 2019,²¹ and these stations are frequently sources of misleading news, along with illiberal and anti-Western propaganda. All these media are directly or indirectly connected with ruling party members.

Although Facebook remains the most popular social network in Serbia, Twitter²² is considered the main tool for activities by opposition parties, grassroots movements and activists. Due to the fact that the media landscape is completely dominated by the ruling party, these opposition actors have moved their activities to Twitter, forming a “bubble” sometimes seen as detached from the reality of the general population.

SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF KOSOVO AND THE ROLE OF RUSSIA

The lack of revisionist narratives regarding the First World War, which was the initial focus of our research, in Serbia does not mean that discourses about territory and territorial changes are absent from Serbian public discourse. On the contrary: the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the consequences of the wars and the as-yet-unresolved status of Kosovo give questions of territory and territorial changes important roles.

Especially important is the question of Kosovo, Serbia's break-away province which was placed under UN administration after the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, after which it declared independence in 2008. It was quickly recognized by the United States and most EU member nations, but Serbia, permanent UN security council members Russia and China, as well as 5 EU member states refuse recognition.

The Kosovo problem became an important part of Serbia's EU accession process, as the EU required Serbia to normalize relations with its break-away province in order to allow both sides to maintain the perspective of joining the EU. The EU-mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has been ongoing since 2011, and has produced several landmark agreements, but with limited and often severely challenged implementation.

Serbia still refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence, and engages in diplomatic efforts to reduce the number of countries recognizing it, but the

need to reach an agreement on comprehensive normalization – which may not entail formal recognition, but surely covers de facto recognition – resulted in the idea of a border change/land swap. According to this scenario, which was embraced by the presidents of both Serbia and Kosovo in 2018, normalization will be achieved through changing borders or swapping territories (Serb majority territories in Kosovo, in exchange for Albanian majority territories in Serbia). However, neither of the two presidents was entirely clear about this, and it can only be implied that Serbia would recognize Kosovo's independence in exchange for some kind of territorial change.

Russia plays a significant role when it comes to the foreign policy of Serbia, especially regarding Serbian policy on Kosovo. Russia is widely perceived by Serbian citizens as a key Serbian ally. This perception is strengthened by strong narratives about a historic Serbo-Russian alliance and close ties based on language, Orthodox Christianity and common interests in the major wars of the past two centuries, but also by the role Russia plays in the contemporary Serbian struggle over Kosovo.

Russia does not recognize Kosovo's independence, and strongly supports Serbia in international organizations over this issue. It keeps insisting on UNSC Resolution 1244, which ended the Kosovo War, and which proclaimed that despite UN administration, Kosovo remains formally a part of Serbia (FR Yugoslavia).

The overall strategy of Russia in Serbia may be summarized as an attempt to remain one of the major power brokers in the Kosovo dispute by firmly supporting Serbian territorial integrity and UNSC 1244 (meaning supporting the frozen or low intensity conflict as a solution), and by invoking cultural, historical and emotional ties between Serbs and Russians while pursuing its economic interests, mainly in the energy and defence sectors.

The narratives about strong Russian support over Kosovo are dominant in both mainstream and fringe media, and Russia is perceived as an “unconditional” Serbian ally – a country which defends Serbian interests even when Serbia does not. Russia’s own interests when it comes to Kosovo,

as well as other regions where it used the Kosovo precedent to legitimize its own actions, are almost completely absent from public discourse in Serbia.

Examining dominant media narratives about Russian support to Serbia, especially when it comes to defending Serbia’s territorial integrity and the position of Serbs in other countries in the region, may provide a clearer understanding of Russia’s soft power and influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans, but also answer a question posed by many experts: are these narratives promoted by Russia or by local actors for their own political interests?

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

We conducted five in-depth interviews with experts of security policy and media, policymakers and historians so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events. Experts’ opinions can support or refine some qualitative or quantitative research results of our media research.

Based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with five experts, three experts on foreign and security policy and Russian influence in Serbia and the two high profile journalists specialized in fact-checking and investigative journalism, it can be concluded that the pro-Kremlin narrative in Serbia has been mostly driven by pro-government mainstream media and Serbian public officials, which in combination with the Russophile political attitude of voters makes the influence of Russia in Serbia very cost-effective.

Experts explain that unlike the West, where Russia is directly involved through the financing of media and political actors, Russian media presence in Serbia is very limited, while the government and government-controlled tabloids are opportunistically pro-Russian. Our interlocutors claim that an important characteristic of the political landscape

is the presence of pro-Russian elements in both ruling and opposition parties, with the Serbian government remaining the main Russian partner. According to them, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has monopolized the media landscape in Serbia and positioned itself as the “master of all narratives”, including those about Russia and Russia’s role in the resolution of the Kosovo problem.

Experts claim that Russia has a commercial interest in the Serbian energy sector, which it strives to preserve through cooperation with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and to maintain the status quo regarding Kosovo in order to preserve its political presence and relevance in the region. Eventual agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, under the auspices of the EU, could lower the influence of Russia on Serbia, although the Russian position on a border change/land swap, which entails the unification of the Serb-populated areas in North Kosovo with Serbia and Albanian-populated areas in South Serbia with Kosovo, remains unknown.

ORIGINS AND DRIVERS OF THE PRO-KREMLIN NARRATIVE IN SERBIA

"The most significant drivers of the pro-Kremlin narrative in Serbia are pro-government tabloids and TV stations with national coverage", said the expert on foreign policy and Russian influence in Serbia.

According to our interlocutors, these pro-Kremlin discourses serve both external and internal purposes. The external purpose is aimed at lowering the Kremlin's distrust towards the ruling elite (especially the Serbian Progressive Party), with the internal at portraying the ruling party as pro-Russian due to Russia's appeals to a large share of SNS voters. Tabloids serve to *"pull wool over voters' eyes,"* one interviewee noted. They are pro-Russian in terms of content, but their actions are not motivated by their Russophile attitude, but rather by the necessity of accommodating the interests of the ruling party.

The journalist specialized in fake-news and disinformation explained that technically, the pro-Kremlin narrative is created by taking content from the news agencies and *"spinning"* them, using click-bait headlines and pictures in line with the discourse that the relations between the regime and the Kremlin are ideal. Another interlocutor added that

the reason for pro-Kremlin reporting by tabloids is also the high demand for this type of narrative due to Russia's and Putin's popularity in Serbia.²³

Mainstream media rarely use Russian sources (except Sputnik Serbia), and if they do, it is only when the narrative about the ruling elite is positive, the foreign policy expert claims. The journalist explained that fringe media outlets have more critically oriented content towards the government, and they rely on direct Russian sources more heavily, with a narrative that corresponds to the anti-government far-right values and attitudes. According to the journalist, the Kosovo issue aside, there are no in-depth analyses of Russian internal politics and other social dynamics.

"Breaking away from the pro-Russian narrative is very difficult because it appeals to a large number of voters for whom Russia has strong, deeply rooted, emotional meaning", one journalist said, explaining that It is hard for any party to imagine winning the elections in Serbia without having a positive attitude towards Russia.

SPUTNIK SERBIA

According to the journalists, Sputnik Serbia is the only well-known Russian media outlet in Serbia. It has a pro-government profile, and its reports rely on click-bait and fake news content, with the focus on Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

"Sputnik in Serbia tries to sensationalize the news from other Russian sources (such as Russia Today) in order to tune them according to the taste of the readership of pro-government tabloids, as their audiences are very similar", the investigative journalist claimed, sketching out Sputnik's modus operandi.

The journalist explained that one of the reasons for Sputnik's popularity is that due to economic hardship experienced by most media in Serbia, some

of the outlets rely on Sputnik, which provides them with regional and world news free of charge, as opposed to other news agencies (like the state-owned agency Tanjug or independent agencies Fonet and Beta), which are not affordable to all media outlets.

"Sputnik's strength comes from the number of citations in pro-Kremlin media and mainstream media, but the popularity of the website and radio is insignificant", one of the journalists claimed.

According to him, the overall quality of journalism in Sputnik is low, although recently they have been building their capacities in terms of staff number.

THE KREMLIN'S ROLE IN THE FINANCING OF SERBIAN MEDIA

The overall conclusion derived from the discussion with all interviewees is that Sputnik Serbia notwithstanding, the Kremlin does not provide funds for Serbian media, or provides them on a marginal scale, since Russia is aware that the Serbian Government and other actors are doing the promotion for them and that they already have won the "hearts and minds" of a majority of the population, giving them maximum impact with minimum investment. Russia does not invest in misleading news

content or trolling, because the majority of the daily newspapers are pro-Russian²⁴ and the same goes for TV stations with national coverage.

"What has been noticed in previous research by investigative journalists is that Russia used 'shell' companies registered in Serbia as a 'safe haven' to transfer money to media in Ukraine, but little of that money was left in Serbia", one journalist said.

PRO-KREMLIN ACTORS AND RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

The expert on Russian influence in Serbia explained that Russia relies on local actors²⁵, who may not be direct proxies, but are willing to promote Russia, making Russian investment in soft power very cheap.²⁶

"The main pro-Russian influence on public opinion is not created by the Kremlin, but by political elites who compete for Russian attention", explained the security expert.

According to our interlocutors, political parties in Serbia are well-connected to the Kremlin, with the strongest connections being those of the ruling parties. There is a shared opinion among interviewees that the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)²⁷, the second largest political party in the Serbian parliament and a part of most Serbian governments since 1990, has the strongest practical and business-oriented ties with Russia, formed in the 1990s and re-emerging in 2008.²⁸ On the other hand, the Kremlin is distrustful of President Vučić and is aware that his political future depends on being close to the West. However, the SNS has allies that are close to Russia, such as Nenad Popović²⁹, leader of the small Serbian People's Party (SNP) and Minister in Government dealing with technological innovations. According to the expert on Russian influence, pro-Russian attitudes are also present on the side of opposition.

"The biggest opposition group „Alliance for Serbia (SZS)"³⁰ includes parties with a pro-Russian discourse, such as Dveri and People's Party (NS), as well as some officials of the Freedom and Justice

Party (SSP)", the expert explained.

According to our interlocutor, the same goes for parties such as "Healthy Serbia"³¹ and pro-government parties The Oathkeepers (Zavetnici) and the Serbian Right (SD). Far-right hooligan groups, which are known for involvement in organized crime, are certainly under the control of the Serbian government, and there is no clear evidence of their connection to Russia. The most significant player beside the political parties and extremist groups is the Serbian Orthodox Church, due to its influence on voters and political elites, claims the expert.

According to another expert, when it comes to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the longstanding mainstream narrative of Russia as defender of Kosovo as a part of Serbia could become a burden, as the ruling elite tries to negotiate a settlement that includes border changes or the recognition of Kosovo's independence. For a long time, political elites have promoted Russia as a defender of Serbian interests in Kosovo. If Russia is now against an agreement, it could seriously damage the pro-Russian profile of the party and significantly influence their popular support.

When describing the relations of the Serbian Government led by SNS and the Kremlin, one expert on Russian influence described them as an "opportunistic alliance" with little mutual trust, which is useful for the Serbian side to strengthen its international position regarding Kosovo, to keep pro-Russian voters on its side and threaten the West with Russian influence.

SECURITY COOPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND SERBIA

Security expert claims that when it comes to the security cooperation of the Serbian government with Russia³² and the West, the reality is that relations with the West are much stronger. Nevertheless, the current level of Serbian-Russian cooperation causes distrust among Western partners which prevents the deepening of cooperation on an operational level. Security cooperation with Russia has much

stronger resonance in the public.

"Due to media influence, Serbian citizens perceive Russia as a political and military power and the Kremlin works on perpetuating this perception by reporting on military topics using user-friendly content, which is then picked up by other media", the security expert concluded.

RUSSIAN NARRATIVES AND FOREIGN POLICY ON KOSOVO

As narrative analysis has shown and was confirmed by the interviewees, the narrative on parallels between Kosovo and Crimea is not especially present in mainstream media in Serbia. The main drivers of this narrative remain Russian diplomats³³ and fringe media outlets which criticize the government policy on Kosovo.

"The unilateral secession of Kosovo provided Russia with a justification³⁴ for territorial changes (Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014) by creation of the narrative that if Kosovo could break away from Serbia, then Crimea had the same right, putting Serbia in a very uncomfortable foreign policy position"³⁵, the expert on Russian influence explained.

According to the expert, this contradiction has been settled by the Kremlin and Serbian nationalists through the creation of the narrative that both Serbia and Russia lost their territories unjustly, which was corrected by the unification of Crimea with Russia – the path that Serbia should follow regarding Kosovo. Asked about whether or not Russia needs Serbian recognition of Crimea as a part of Russia, the expert explained that Russia does not need Serbia to formally recognize Crimea as a part of Russia as long as Serbia does not introduce sanctions and cooperates in various forms. Regarding

Kosovo, Russia strives to remain present in Serbia through the unsettled Kosovo dispute, which gives its veto power in the UN the great significance, and economically, because of the ties between the Serbian and EU markets and interests in the energy sector. When it comes to Russian support for a land swap/border change solution for Kosovo, interviewees agree that it is not clear whether or not Russia would support it.

"On the one hand, any agreement between Belgrade and Pristina would greatly diminish Russian influence in Serbia, but on the other hand, it might strengthen their position regarding Crimea, which is based on ethnic criteria", the security expert explained.

As Serbia and Kosovo approach the final agreement on the normalization of relations under the auspices of the EU, media representatives agree that it is evident that pro-government media are silent in their promotion of Russia because they are not sure how the possible agreement is consistent with Russian interests.

TREND ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND FRINGE MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all media and social media under

review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about nationalism.

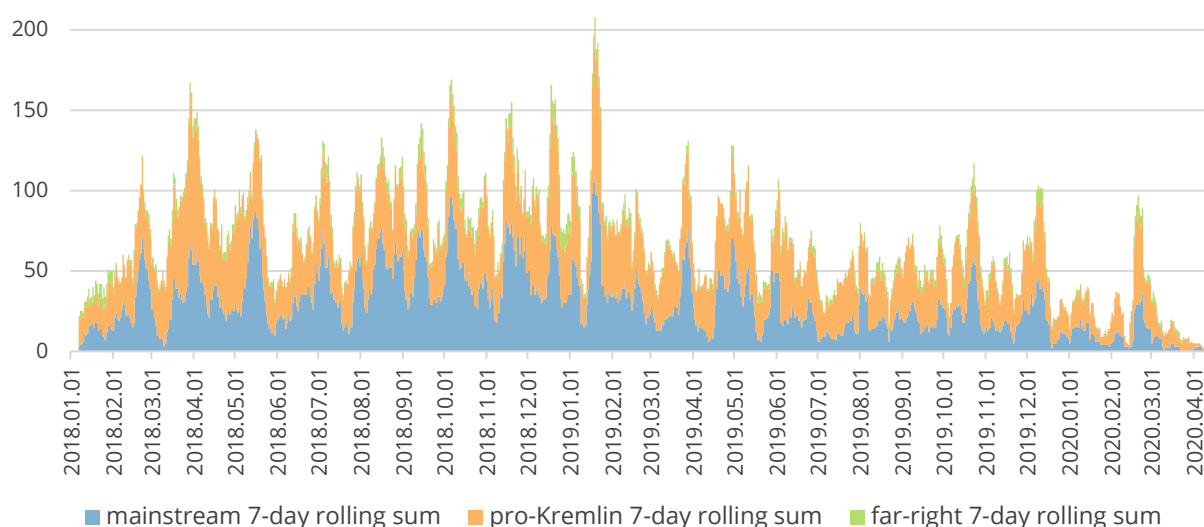
GENERAL TREND

The general trend of political discourse, based on articles and posts in the mainstream, pro-Kremlin, far right media and on Facebook in the period from 1 January 2018 to 15 April 2020, on the topic of the role of Russia in solving the Serbia-Kosovo dispute (Belgrade-Pristina dialogue) and the parallels between the status of Kosovo and Crimea, is driven mainly by incidents in the Serbia-Kosovo relationship and official visits and meetings between Serbian and Russian/Ukrainian officials. The general trend was dominated by mainstream media, with less influence of fringe media. We were also able to observe three significant news peaks in our period under review – as seen on the chart below.

The first peak in 2018 between, 26 March and 2 of April, was driven by the news that Kosovo police had arrested the director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija³⁶, Marko Đurić, and later expelled him from Kosovo. Also, the strong peak driver was a telephone call between President Vučić and President Putin in which Putin allegedly expressed

support for Serbian interests in Kosovo. The official narrative by the Serbian regime was that Serbia can count strongly on Putin's/Russian support and that Priština (Kosovo) intends to occupy Northern Kosovo. Regarding the EU (and West/Germany), it has not been an unbiased mediator in the dialogue, and Russia should join³⁷ (fringe narrative by Russian and other anti-western geopolitical experts).

The second peak in 2018, between 2 July and 9 July, was driven by the official visit of Ukrainian President Poroshenko to Belgrade on 2 and 3 July 2018. The mainstream narrative was that Russia understands³⁸ the Serbian necessity to have good relations with Ukraine, and "will not be mad" about the visit. Also, the visit was necessary because Ukraine does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, which strengthens the Serbian hand in future negotiations with Pristina. In the fringe narrative, Poroshenko was still interpreted as a "fascist", "bloody president", and his visit was considered a betrayal of Russia.



The number of revisionism-related website articles and Facebook posts in the Serbian media space between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020⁹⁰

The third peak in 2019, between 14 and 21 January, was driven by the official visit of President Putin to Serbia on 17 January 2019, during which he expressed support³⁹ for UNSC resolution 1244 regarding Kosovo, and presented Vučić with the state decoration – the Order of Alexander Nevsky. The narrative run by the regime is that Serbia is an important partner to Russia and Vučić is a man “respected in both the East and the West”. At the same time, the Foreign Minister maintained the narrative that Putin supports any solution which is in the best interest of Serbia (i.e. land swap or border change)

Daily news websites “Informer”, “Srbin.info”, “Srbijadanas.com”, the portal “Standard” and social media (Facebook) were among the top sources in the observed period. Informer is the daily pro-government newspaper with the highest circulation in the country, allied with the govern-

ment and financed through public sources. Srbin.info is the leading right-wing portal opposing the Government, and Facebook is the most popular social media network in Serbia. Also “Srbijadanas.rs”, is a pro-government click-bait portal, owned by a member of the ruling party, with a significant share of news about Russian politics.

Over 90% of sources belong to portals, and the rest come from Facebook posts. There is no possibility to obtain insight into the genuine debate in Facebook groups (due to their restricted membership). Most Facebook posts that appear in *SentiOne* are comments on shared links which come from mainstream and fringe portals. Also, the discourse is dominated by mainstream media and these media outlets do not rely on Facebook posts as they have a large reach through websites and mobile applications (Informer, Kurir, RTS).

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE SAMPLES

Using the SentiOne platform, we generated a representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles in each country to reveal and categorise the main types of revisionist narratives present in our data of tens of thousands of articles.⁴⁰ The samples, representative of all the articles’ and sources’ distribution within our timeframe between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020, allowed researchers to identify and categorise the main types of revisionist or territory-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between fringe or mainstream interpretations of the same topics and the construction of country-specific narratives utilizing unique manipulation techniques and disinformation of the Kremlin’s playbook.

The dominant narratives in the sample of 335 relevant articles⁴¹ revolve mainly around Russian support to Serbia and the Serbian people, with different narratives emphasising aspects of this Serbo-Russian alliance. The most important narrative in the sample, by far, is the one according to which Russia and President Putin are Serbian allies, often protecting Serbia from Western pressures.

This narrative is present in all three mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin groups of sources, but one specific form of this narrative – one where Russia protects Serbian interests even against its own government’s policies – is found predominantly in pro-Kremlin sources. Parallels between Kosovo and Crimea are often drawn, both when it comes to the importance of the two regions for Serbia and Russia, and through the narrative that presidents Putin and Trump will resolve the Kosovo issue together, possibly as a “package deal” with Crimea. Additionally, the two narratives, representing 18.51% of the sample, about Kosovo being Serbian and President Putin working with President Trump to solve the status of Kosovo, mention outright territorial or border revisionism based on Serbian territorial sovereignty or a “secret plan” to swap lands between Kosovo and Serbia. Another important narrative is one of historic, deeply rooted ties between Serbs and Russians, especially during the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, which still represents a highly emotional issue for many Serbian citizens. Most of these narratives are triggered by meetings between Russian and Serbian officials and by developments in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Statements by Russian officials

and experts appear to be the most important to the pro-Kremlin media, while mainstream media are more focused on the statements of Serbian officials. Most narratives (1, 2, 3, 4 and 6) are shared mainly by the mainstream and pro-kremlin media, with the exception of narrative 5, which is shared mainly by the pro-Kremlin and far right media. All three types of media in Serbia report favourably on Russia, with the difference of whether they also support the Serbian government or not (the majority of

media, especially mainstream, is pro-government) and consequently whether they focus more on the Serbian Government or Russia. Most Serbian media are right- leaning and have a pro-Russian stance, which derives from modern Serbian nationalism in which Russophilia is an important element. That is why the lines between these three types of media are blurred, with very subtle differences, shown in the analysis below.

Narrative	Number of articles	Type of media	Percentage
1. Kosovo is Serbian just like Crimea is Russian	26	Shared (mainstream and pro-kremlin)	7.76
2. Russia and Putin are allies of Serbia and supporters of its national interests; they defend Serbia against Western powers	159	Shared (mainstream and pro-kremlin)	47.46
3. Russia is protecting interests of Serbs in Montenegro/Republika Srpska	27	Shared (mainstream and pro-kremlin)	8.06
4. Putin and Trump will solve the Kosovo issue together	36	Shared (mainstream and pro-kremlin)	10.75
5. The Kosovo issue is part of a larger Western aggression towards Russia	31	Shared (pro-kremlin and far right)	9.25
6. Serbia and Russia are historical allies, with bonds deeply rooted in identity	56	Shared (pro-kremlin and mainstream)	16.72
TOTAL RELEVANT	335		100

Table 1. The number and share of different narratives across mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin samples in Serbia

Kosovo is Serbian just like Crimea is Russian

This narrative about the parallels between Kosovo and Crimea, both places important for Serbs/Russians, was prominent during the visit of the Delegation of Crimea to Belgrade on 5th of December 2019.⁴² The narrative was promoted by Ms. Poklonskaya and the right-wing opposition party Dveri,⁴³ which organized an official meeting with the Delegation in the State Assembly, and the far right party The Oath keepers (Zavetnici),⁴⁴ who had a meeting at their party premises. Also, an important source of this narrative was Russian Ambassador Alexander Chepurin during his tenure in Serbia (2012-2019).⁴⁵ This narrative serves to reassure the Serbian public of Russian support for territorial integrity and to evoke support for the Crimea case by using emotional reasoning

and legal parallels. Crimea and Kosovo are matters of identity and spirituality based on common Orthodox traditions; Crimea is the heart of Russian orthodoxy and spirituality that has legally returned to Russia in line with the principle of self-determination via a referendum, breaking away from illegal Ukrainian authorities. Kosovo is rightfully part of Serbia because its independence came after the illegal NATO campaign in 1999 and without a referendum. Therefore, sometimes even the differentiation between the fate of Kosovo and Crimea, where one region seceded illegitimately and the other legitimately, actually serves to defend the notion that "Kosovo is Serbian, while Crimea is Russian". The narrative was most picked up by pro-Kremlin media, but also in mainstream media, with some exceptions⁴⁶. On the pro-Kremlin, an-

ti-government spectrum⁴⁷ of outlets there were ironic critics of the President Vučić for “accepting the Kosovo reality” and not accepting the “Crimea reality”. The policy proposal that could be observed out of this narrative is that Serbia should align its policy with Russia, visa-vis Kosovo (strictly adhere to UNSC resolution 1244) and Crimea (recognize it as part of Russia).

Russia and Putin are allies of Serbia and supporters of its national interests; they defend Serbia against Western powers

The narrative of the “alliance” has been the most widespread mainstream narrative in Serbia, directed mainly towards the common ruling party voter who is Euro-sceptic, authoritarian, conservative and pro-Russian. According to the narrative, Russia and President Putin are the main protectors of Serbian national interests in Kosovo (territorial integrity and identity) and UNSC resolution 1244⁴⁸, and consistent defenders of international law. Russia is just and full of understanding for the Serbian position, while the West only pressures Serbia and gives ultimatums. An important element of this narrative is Putin’s personality cult, where he is portrayed as a great friend and a caring, supportive, tough but righteous “father figure” who always delivers “good news” and moral and material support to Serbian citizens. Due to Putin’s popularity in Serbia, large numbers of Serbian officials, including President Vučić, use mainstream media, such as Informer⁴⁹, to portray themselves as close Putin’s friends.

There is, however, a somewhat different version of this narrative in the pro-Kremlin media. In this version, Russia does not only protect Serbian and Serb interests, but also does it better than Serbia itself. This represents a somewhat distinct narrative, because here the Serbian government is represented as “traitorous” or “pro-Western” due to its readiness to accept compromise over Kosovo, while Russia and Putin stand firm and do not support such solutions. It therefore comes as no surprise that this narrative is prevalent in pro-Kremlin media, but not so much in mainstream outlets, which generally hold a pro-government line. This narrative was especially present when border changes were at the centre of attention and was promoted mainly by pro-Kremlin media which quoted Russian officials and pro-Russian opposition leaders. This narrative implicitly says that Serbia should not be

a part of the EU or NATO, as the EU only pressures Serbia and does not take its interests over Kosovo into account, while NATO is mostly mentioned as an “aggressor” in the context of the 1999 bombing campaign.

Russia is protecting interests of Serbs in Montenegro/Republika Srpska

According to this narrative, Russia is not only the supporter of Serbs in Serbia, but also in other countries in the Western Balkans where Serbs represent a large share of population, namely the entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Montenegro. According to the narrative, Serbs there are threatened by Western powers, which see Serbs as “small Russians” and therefore act against Serbian interest across the region. It is in the Western interest to weaken Serbs in cooperation with the other countries in the region, as they are an obstacle to total Western domination over the Balkans through NATO. Although there are geopolitical reasons behind Russian support to the Serbs in BiH⁵⁰ and Montenegro⁵¹, the narrative emphasizes the connections between Russians and Serbs based on history, identity (Slavic and Orthodox) and in most cases the common enemy, which is the West. This narrative is supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian member of the Presidency of BiH Milorad Dodik, who often stresses that Russia adheres to international law and supports the Dayton Agreement, and also by a part of the opposition in Montenegro. This narrative is present in pro-Kremlin and mainstream media in Serbia such as Alo, Novosti, RTS.

Putin and Trump will solve the Kosovo issue together

According to this narrative, Russia and United States are the main stakeholders in resolving the Kosovo issue, meaning that it is Putin and Trump that “hold the key of Kosovo”, not the EU, which is too weak and whose role is only technical. There is a secret plan developed by the two presidents, according to which Kosovo will be divided (or already is) among ethnic lines. Trump’s readiness to accommodate Serbian interests is something that Serbian politicians need to use as soon as possible, because the “old democratic administration”, embodied by the Clinton family, is doing everything to stop him.⁵² It is sometimes stated that a possible

diplomatic deal about Kosovo will also include a solution for Crimea, meaning that President Trump will eventually recognize Crimea as a part of Russia in a U.S.-Russian grand bargain. This is the narrative that appeared ahead of the Putin-Trump meetings⁵³ or bilateral meetings of President Vučić with high-ranking US officials⁵⁴, and it aims to give ruling party voters⁵⁵ the impression that Vučić's land swap/ border change solution is internationally accepted. The narrative appeared in the pro-Kremlin and even mainstream media, with the sources being "unknown high-ranking diplomats". These claims were later officially denied by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Kosovo issue is part of a larger Western campaign of aggression towards Russia

According to this narrative, the Western insistence that the Kosovo issue is resolved represents a part of a larger strategy to threaten Russia, which is in fact the true goal of Western powers. There is a "light" or mainstream version of this narrative⁵⁶, where the West wants to resolve the Kosovo issue in order to weaken Russia's leverage in the Western Balkans. This represents a mainstream foreign policy observation, found in pro-Western media as well, and has at least partially been confirmed by Western officials in interviews. Much more interesting, however, is the "stronger" version of this narrative, according to which Serbia and the Serbs are the targets of Western aggression⁵⁷ due to Serbo-Russian ties. This narrative places the entire Kosovo issue in the context of a Russia-vs.-the West confrontation, and therefore presupposes that Serbian and Russian interests are largely identical. This narrative goes hand in hand with the narratives about Serbo-Russian deep historical ties and about Russian position as a Serbian ally when it comes to Kosovo. This narrative is mainly present in pro-Kremlin and occasionally in right-wing mainstream media, but also in mainstream media in its "lighter" form.

Serbia and Russia are historical allies, with bonds deeply rooted in identity

This narrative is multi-layered and has persisted over the years in Serbian public discourse, underpinning narratives no. 1, 2 and 5 in this analysis. It points out that there are historical ties between the Serbian and Russian people, meaning that their geopolitical interests have practically always been similar and that they have always been on the same side. According to the narrative, this alliance is not based on material interests, but on a common Slavic and Orthodox religious identity. It is built around historical events, when Serbia and Russia were on the "same side", without taking into account events when their interests diverged.

A hugely important aspect of the narrative of a Serbo-Russian historical alliance is the memory of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, after which Serbia lost control over the province. The NATO bombing still represents a very painful memory for Serbian citizens and is directly connected with the Kosovo problem of today. There is a narrative in which Russia and Russians were Serbian Allies in 1999, promoted mainly through the recollection of stories about Russian volunteers who fought alongside the Serbian forces and by claims that it was Russian president Boris Yeltsin who betrayed Serbia, but not the Russian people, while Putin only came to power later. Commemorations of the NATO bombing in front of the Serbian Embassy in Moscow on 24 March 2019, attended by the Russian bikers' group "Night wolves,"⁵⁸ also pointed at Russian sympathies for Serbian suffering in 1999. Remembrance of the NATO campaign was part of the permanent section on the Sputnik Serbia website on the 20th anniversary in 2019⁵⁹, during which stories about each of the 78 days of the bombing were published. This narrative is promoted by pro-Kremlin and mainstream media, with the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), Informer, Alo, Kurir, Srpski Telegraf being the most prominent.

NETWORK ANALYSIS OF FRINGE HOMEPAGES

Big data researchers created a network of pro-Kremlin and third-party homepages based on the hyperlinks embedded into articles published on pro-Kremlin media in each country.⁶⁰ We decided to use hyperlinks as building blocks of our networks, since links are either directing interested audiences to other relevant pro-Kremlin media, or they serve as references to third-party sources to authenticate their articles. Consequently, the examination of networks revealed two aspects of pro-Kremlin communication: the wider dissemination networks of pro-Kremlin media used to spread revisionist messages and link other pro-Kremlin sources; and the prerequisites of impactful mes-

sage construction. Researchers analysed three types of networks in their respective countries. A “complete network,” with all the media to understand all the media’s interconnectedness and their main dissemination/reference strategies. Second, a “clean network” of homepages was used to analyse only the most important nodes of the network and connections between media disseminating revisionist narratives. Finally, a network comprised of only our initial pro-Kremlin websites revealed the interconnectedness of the core pro-Kremlin media used throughout this research study, examining if they formed a strong bond in the dissemination process of revisionist narratives.

THE COMPLETE SERBIAN NETWORK

The complete network analysis was based on 20 pro-Kremlin web pages, which encompassed 3863 articles and 1783 edges (connections with other pages), with the purpose to detect wider dissemination patterns of pro-Kremlin media and to point out the most influential pro-Kremlin media portals in the observed network. Based on the data provided, Sputnik Serbia⁶¹ is the media with the largest number of connections or “edges” (420), with other pro-Kremlin media in the observed period, which indicates that Sputnik is the most commonly used source of pro-Kremlin messages.

There are a significant number of connections of the pro-Kremlin media (such as Standard, Vidovdan, Srbin info) with the pro-Western and liberal news portals and newspapers (such as Danas), and the reason for this could be twofold. On the one hand, pro-Kremlin media may use references to these media outlets to point out the values and attitudes

they are opposed to (this is the case of Vidovdan’s occasional references to Danas because, for example, of their critical voice regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church)⁶², or on the other hand to point out the source of the information or to use it to support their claims (this is the case of Standard’s referencing Danas).

Also, based on the significant number of connections between pro-Kremlin, anti-government media portal Srbin.info and Twitter (1172), it is evident that Twitter has been gaining ground as the most important media platform for both right wing, pro-Kremlin, but also liberal and pro-Western opposition activism and debate in Serbia in the context of a shrinking mainstream media space, directly controlled by the ruling party.



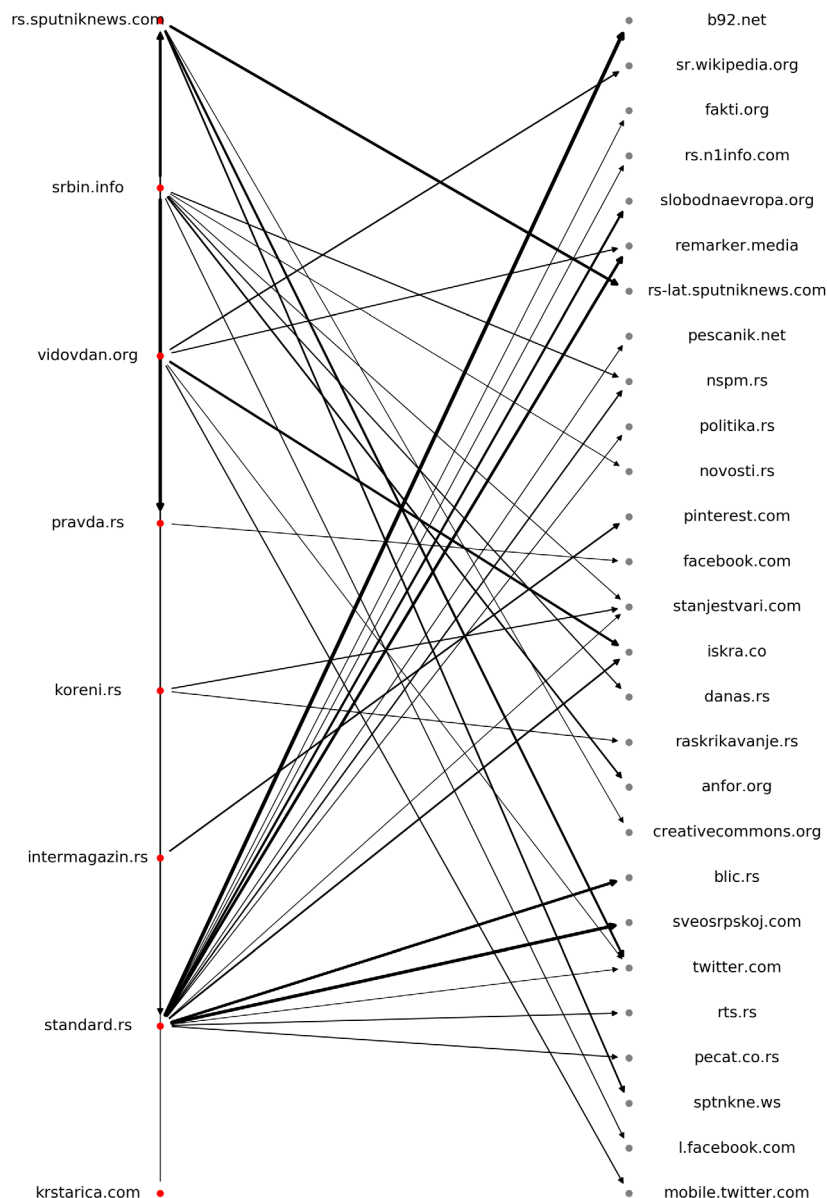
THE CLEAN SERBIAN NETWORK

Based on the clean network graph displayed below, media outlets with the highest number of connections (Standard, Srbin Info, Vidovdan) mostly contain hyperlinks to other right-wing portals with strong pro-Russian orientations, but their connections do not come down to these pages only, but include links with liberal sites (Peščanik, Danas) as well as pages without a clear ideological profile (Blic).

There is a difference in the pro-Russian narrative based on whether it comes from pro- or anti-government media, which means there could not be a wider, coherent network for the dissemination of

pro-Kremlin messages in the Serbian media space. As indicated in the narrative analysis, the pro-Kremlin and pro-Government media tend to emphasise the complementarity between the Kremlin's and Serbia's foreign policy aspirations and to point out the Kremlin's full support to President Vučić and the Serbian Government, while anti-Government, pro-Kremlin media tend to portray the distrust of the Kremlin towards President Vučić and Serbia's drifting away from the Kremlin.

When it comes to individual connections, the portal Standard has the highest number of media outlets connected with it (15), as - due to its analytical



The clean network of Serbian pro-Kremlin websites and third-party sites

profile – it contains a high number of references to websites with different ideological orientations. Based on an examination of Standard's random article samples, it may be concluded that references to liberal portals are used to indicate the content that the Standard author takes issue with, such as in the case of columns by the sociologist Slobodan Antić⁶³, known for his critical approach to the liberal intellectual narrative in Serbia or just to point out the source of information.⁶⁴

Srbin.info, which is an anti-government portal, has references to anti-government, pro-Russian media (Nova srpska politička misao, Stanjestvari), pro-government and pro-Russian media (Novosti, Sputnik) and liberal anti-government media (Danas).

Pro-government Vidovdan has links to Serbian Wikipedia, a source with little credibility, and to Iskra, a page which is apparently associated with the scientific institute "Andrićev Institut"⁶⁵ led by film director Emir Kusturica, known for anti-Western and anti-globalists discourse and an associate of the ruling party. Vidovdan also has links towards liberal portal Remarker Media, closely associated with Biljana Srbljanović, a liberal dramaturge close to the government.⁶⁶ When it comes to Sputnik Serbia, this page is mostly connected with Sputnik International, which means that Sputnik is primarily a source of "original" news, without references to other pro-Kremlin media in Serbia.

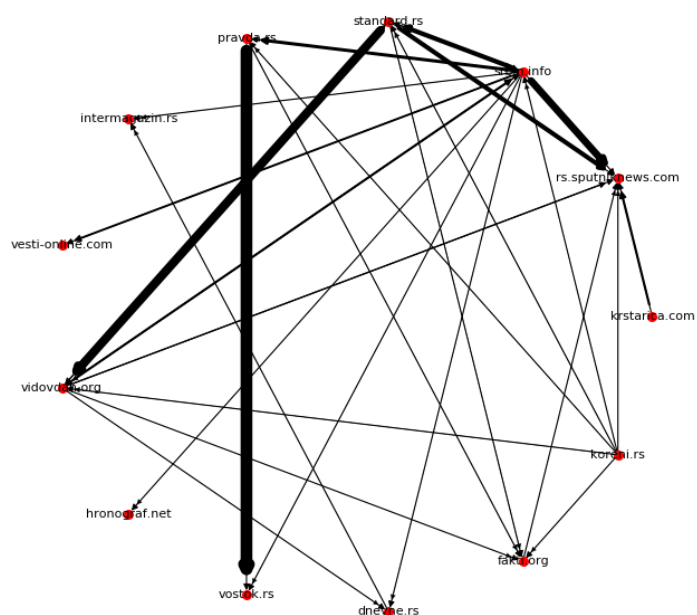
THE NETWORK OF SERBIAN PRO-KREMLIN PAGES

Serbian pro-Kremlin media, as seen on the graph below, form a strongly interconnected network transcending the pro-government/anti-government cleavage.

This may be explained by the fact that the important source of the pro-Russian narrative is the Russian news agency Sputnik Serbia, which favours the Government led by the SNS party, but whose content has been used by both pro- and anti-government portals, probably through "cherry picking" – everyone takes the information and adapts it to suit their own narrative and interests. Based on the article sample upon which the narrative and peak analysis was done in this study, it may be concluded that both types of media are likely to pick up on the information which glorifies the Kremlin's power or discredits the West, but will be careful when picking information regarding the government of Serbia or President Vučić.

In this network, Srbin.info as an anti-government, daily news portal has been directly and indirectly (meaning connected with the pages with a large number of their own connections) connected with the largest number of other pro-Kremlin pages. The same holds for the pro-government⁶⁷ daily news portal Vidovdan. As both of these pages are connected to Sputnik, this suggests that Sputnik is a desirable source for both

anti- and pro-government portals. Standard, as an analytical right-wing portal featuring geostrategic security analyses and large numbers of references, shows strong connections with both Vidovdan and Srbin.info, which means that in the right-wing realm, these two portals have important roles in forming a triangle with Sputnik Serbia as the main source. It is also worth mentioning the anti-government portal Pravda magazine, which has a strong emphasis on arms, military and conflict topics. For example, this portal has the news section "War Reports" containing news from the wars in Syria/Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine, as well as section on armament. The ar-



The Serbian network of pro-Kremlin websites

ticles are biased in favour of Russia, Iran and its proxies, the Assad regime and the pro-Russian rebels. This portal is connected to the website Vostok, a media that publishes content from Russia Today with a similar focus.

The observed dissemination pattern means that the narrative of Russia being a vital defender of Serbian national interests concerning Kosovo has been reinforced through mutual referencing among pro-Kremlin pages, with Sputnik Serbia being a common and the most significant source of information for the majority of them. This situation in which the pro-Kremlin narrative is strong

within pro- and anti-government pages could be only temporary, as any changing of the position of the Serbian Government regarding Kosovo in a direction that does not suit Russian interests could result in major friction in the pro-Kremlin sphere, making this narrative less present overall.⁶⁸ Regarding Sputnik Serbia, although this media agency's reach and success in becoming the main source of pro-Russian content are its strengths, its weakness is that its messages are becoming less effective when going through the filter of media outlets which align messages with or against the government's official position.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF FRINGE FACEBOOK PAGES

To reveal successful dissemination strategies on social media (Facebook), we conducted a comparison of top-performing fringe Facebook pages' and posts' statistical data.⁶⁹ Our analysis focused on far-right and pro-Kremlin pages only, because these are the main venues of pro-Kremlin or extremist, revisionist communication in most of the countries under review. Based on the analysis of the 5 top-performing far-right and 5 top-performing pro-Kremlin pages in terms of the number of average reactions per post, we identified the conditions for the successful dissemination of revisionist narratives and historical grievances in each country's social media. A comparison of top-performing fringe posts in terms of the total number of interactions was conducted to reveal why certain chauvinistic, revisionist or pro-Kremlin messages are more viral than others. The comparison of viral posts was extended to "irrelevant" or non-relevant posts as well, to see whether revisionist posts performed better or worse than any other posts found on the fringe pages.

All observed pages, both in the pro-Kremlin and far-right group, include pro-Russian discourse, ranging from the explicit glorification of Russia and Putin to an affirmative stance without any critical observation, confirming our basic assumption that social media discourse is an important component of Serbian extreme nationalism. The majority of the observed pages in both the pro-Kremlin and far-right groups are in favour of the government, but an anti-government/neutral attitude towards the government stance is more represented among pro-Kremlin pages. The reason behind this lies in the ruling party's differing view on the solution on Kosovo⁷⁰ from the Russian position,⁷¹ and also the unwillingness of the government to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia. The narratives observed are similar to those seen in the general narrative analysis, with the parallels between Kosovo and Crimea being more prominent in the Facebook landscape in comparison to the analysis of mainstream and fringe media.

PERFORMANCE OF FACEBOOK PAGES

In the group of the top five far-right pages based on the average number of reactions, comments and shares per post, it was observed that only one (Dveri) is anti-government and four others are pages with a pro-government profile and narrative (Srpska digitalna inicijativa, Srpska stranka zavetnici,

Srpska desnica, Nacionalist). In this group of pages, Dveri⁷², Srpska stranka zavetnici⁷³ and Srpska desnica⁷⁴ belong to the political parties Dveri, The Oathkeepers and Serbian Right, and their main purpose is the promotion of party leaders such as Boško Obradović, Miša Vacić, Milica Đurđević

Stamenkovski. Serbian Right (Srpska desnica) shares a large amount of content from the far-right website Nacionalist, including content which praises Russia and Putin, because pro-Kremlin values are important in the right-wing ideology adhered to by the Srpska desnica party. Srpska digitalna inicijativa (Serbian Digital Initiative) is the page with the largest number of followers (156,223) in the observed fringe group, associated with the GONGO⁷⁵ National Avangurde Nacionalna Avangarda, created to support the government and simulate pluralism. Srpska digitalna inicijativa shares its own posts/comments on the political situation in Serbia, along with emotionally charged videos on the wars of the 1990s, and engages in discussion in the comments sections, boosting overall reaction numbers. The Nacionalist page by the Nacionalist portal shares click-bait articles with a war thematic and dramatic headlines, such as "Russia has announced: Serbia is our last ally, we have to protect her", or "Šiptars⁷⁶ lobbyists are in panic: USA made secret deal with Serbia about Kosovo", as well as the activities of Miša Vacić, president of the Serbian Right Party (Srpska desnica). The reason why pro-government pages are more successful and influential probably has to do with the fact that the ruling party, often through the misuse of public property, is able to provide them with more resources. This also may indicate that a large number of far-right pages have been pulled into the ruling party orbit, as part of the strategy to have the ideological sphere under firm control.

In the group of pro-Kremlin websites, based on the average numbers of reactions, the most significant are Sputnik, Kremlin and Vesti-Online. The Sputnik page shares the news from the Sputnik website, which is a well-known Russian media out-

let in Serbia. Vesti-Online shares a large number of news items on sports (especially Novak Đoković), celebrities and affirmative news on Russia with neutral to positive reporting on government activities. The Kremlin page shares content on conspiracy theories (currently on COVID-19), on Russian internal politics, especially activities of President Putin, and Serbian-Albanian relations regarding to Kosovo. Vaseljenska TV is an anti-government page that shares news on spirituality and the Orthodox religion, history (especially anti-communism) and Kosovo. Novi standard is the page of the Novi standard website, an anti-Western and Euro-sceptic, analytical website with analytical pieces about regional and world politics written by well-known right-wing and conservative authors⁷⁷, some of whom are close to the government.

In the pro-Kremlin fringe sphere, as compared to far-right pages, there is greater variety when it comes to the pro/anti-government approach, with pages that are explicitly pro-government, neutral or anti-government. These pages are successful because they have a large number of followers, and some of them have inherited large numbers of followers by acquisition of the other pages, which is probably the most efficient way to instantly have large numbers of followers.⁷⁸ These successful pages communicate with their followers through comment sections, share content with widely recognizable opinion makers (politicians, analysts) and attract followers through news on sports, celebrities and conspiracy theories. The majority of them have click-bait headlines and promote content on spirituality and conflict (inter-ethnic, global etc.), which attracts people in countries like Serbia, where conflict is dominant in everyday discourse.⁷⁹

PERFORMANCE OF VIRAL POSTS

The group of far-right viral posts had much higher numbers of reactions than the posts in the pro-Kremlin group (4025 reactions to 310), due to a larger number of followers and engagements from the page administrators. According to the comparison of relevant and irrelevant Serbian posts on fringe pages, irrelevant posts generated a higher number of reactions, 38.8 reactions per irrelevant post compared to 36.3 per relevant post – as seen in the table below.

Relevant posts, on the other hand, generated a higher number of comments, 10.3 per post in comparison to 6.7 and a higher number of shares, 12.2 per post in comparison to 9.4. Bearing in mind that comments and shares are much stronger forms of public engagement than reactions, this means that the Russian role in the Kosovo issue is an important factor for Serbian far-right and pro-Kremlin users. This can be explained by emotional content present in this type of information, provoking deeper forms

	Average Number of Reactions	Average Number of Comments	Average Number of Shares	Numbers of Documents
Irrelevant posts	38.8	6.7	9.4	291,248
Relevant posts	36.3	10.3	12.2	80
Total	38.8	6.7	9.4	291,328

Table 2. The average number of total reactions, comments or shares produced by revisionism-related or unrelated Facebook posts found on far-right or pro-Kremlin pages in Serbia

of opinion expressions (comments and shares), which more accurately express beliefs, emotions and attitudes of far-right and pro-Kremlin users.

The Digital Initiative (Srpska digitalna inicijativa) page has run the most viral narrative, which follows the official government position on Kosovo and supports the compromise solution – a euphemism for the border change/land swap policy. According to the narrative presented in this viral post, in relation to Western powers, Serbia is economically dependent and militarily inferior, so the only option for Serbs is to start being rational and negotiate a compromise solution with Kosovo and the international community (the European Union and/or the United States), because if Serbia does not do so, the West (or NATO) will “kill Serbs again”. Even though Russia is our ally, it will not defend us against the West, so Serbs need national unity and therefore different opinions and internal debates are not welcome, especially if they come from the opposition,⁸⁰ which is to blame for Kosovo’s independence in the first place.⁸¹ This narrative was aimed towards support for the government and discrediting the opposition parties.

The narrative that draws parallels between Crimea and Kosovo, triggered by the official visit of the Crimean Delegation to Serbia headed by Deputy Chief of the Foreign Affairs Committee Natalya Poklonskaya, was also present. The visit of the “Iron Lady”⁸², as she was called, was followed by photos of her and brief posts in Serbian, stating that “Kosovo is Serbia, Crimea is Russia”, but also “Cyprus is Greece” and “Nagorno-Kharabakh is Armenia,”⁸³ indicating Orthodox solidarity⁸⁴, which tends to appear in the right-wing narrative. This narrative

was also promoted through the interview⁸⁵ of the Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin with the Moscow State Institute for International Affairs (MGIMO), in which he explained to the Russian audience that Kosovo is a central element in Serbian spirituality, just as Crimea is in the Russian case, and that Kosovo will be returned to Serbia just as Crimea has returned to Russia.

Among pro-Kremlin pages, the narrative about the Kosovo-Crimea parallel was that the United States does not have the moral right to criticize Russia over Crimea, as it caused the secession of Kosovo violently⁸⁶ from Serbia, and it has double standards in this regard. The anti-government narrative regarding Vučić’s policy towards Kosovo is a key trait of the pro-Kremlin pages and was promoted by Vaseljenska TV page. According to the narrative, Vučić is a pro-Western politician⁸⁷ with an agenda to recognize Kosovo and weaken the position of the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is why the West supports him and turns a “blind eye” to his involvement in organized crime⁸⁸ across the Western Balkans. His occasional pro-Russian rhetoric is not sincere: it serves only to gain support among voters by manipulating public opinion through state-controlled media, and he opportunistically uses Russian support for Kosovo to threaten the West if they do not keep him in power. Although Russia supports Serbian territorial integrity, it does not support Vučić and the recognition of Kosovo will permanently damage Serbian-Russian relations⁸⁹.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

This research study demonstrated that the pro-Kremlin narrative in Serbia originates mostly from the Serbian government, the highest government officials and mainstream and fringe media under the government's control. Our results proved that the assumption about pro-Russian narratives being disseminated directly by the Russian Government or through its proxies in Serbia is false. Although experts' claim about the Kremlin's central role in pro-Russian disinformation campaigns might be a reality for Central and Eastern Europe, this is not the case with Serbia.

Therefore, a specific group vulnerable to this type of disinformation is made up by the average Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) voter, who is middle-aged or older, less educated, less inclined to consume information from multiple sources in order to fact-check them, while also being Euro-sceptic and harbouring strong pro-Russian sentiments. The main goal of the government led by SNS, which is very pragmatic and lacks any particular ideology, is to find a solution to retain the average SNS voter (who is mostly against the recognition of Kosovo), but

at the same time make progress in the normalization of relations with Kosovo. The consequence of this politics is absolute control of the media space in which multiple pro-Russian or pro-governmental narratives can exist simultaneously, making SNS the "master of all narratives" with broader consequences on the state of democracy and the rule of law in Serbia.

Another group vulnerable to pro-Russian disinformation are Serbian nationalists, who tend to have a rather positive image of Russia and are often uncritical of its role or its interests in the Western Balkans. This is the consequence of quite a strong narrative identity which postulates that being a Serbian patriot or nationalist almost automatically entails support for Russia since Russia is perceived as a strong defender of Serbian national interests. This makes Serbian nationalists or right-wing voters quite vulnerable to this type of messages, whether they are pro-government or anti-government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If Serbian media are to be more resilient against pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda, whether it comes from pro-government or anti-government sources, they must become more independent and more financially sustainable. Also, transparency of ownership and the financing of media must be established. Specific recommendations are, therefore, the following:

1. Pro-Russian propaganda in Serbia comes mostly from within, and not from Russia itself. This calls for a different approach when addressing the issue of disinformation and pro-Russian narratives in Serbia and the region, in comparison to other countries where the Kremlin has direct ownership of media.
2. The European Union should place more emphasis on media freedom within Serbia's EU accession process, especially on the issues of media ownership and financing, as well as on the work of public broadcasters and independent media regulatory bodies.
3. In that regard, the European Union should produce its reports analysing media freedom, independence, sustainability and political influence over media in Serbia.
4. Independent media, which either employ fact-checking or report on politically sensitive issues intertwined with pro-Russian narratives, such as EU/NATO integration or reconciliation, should be supported by the international community.
5. Transparency of ownership and the financing of Serbian media must be established in order to prevent undue influences through concealed channels. Serbia should improve its regulation on media registration to prevent unregistered media outlets with unknown ownership structures and financing from influencing public discourse.
6. Low media literacy remains one of the most serious problems of the Serbian media scene, allowing ample space for disinformation campaigns. Raising the level of media literacy of Serbian citizens is thus a prerequisite for countering both government propaganda and external malign influence.

ENDNOTES

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- 10 'Normalization of Relations between Belgrade and Pristina from Citizens Perspective' (Center for social dialogue and regional initiatives (CSDRI), October 2019), <http://www.belgradeforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Serbian-Hearts-and-Minds-on-Kosovo-October-2019.pdf>.
- 11 'ЕВРОПСКА ОРИЈЕНТАЦИЈА ГРАЂАНА СРБИЈЕ', n.d., 28.
- 12 'ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2019-1.Pdf', accessed 8 August 2020, <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2019-1.pdf>.
- 13 Teodora Pavković et al., 'An Analysis of Serbia's Alignment with the European Union's Foreign Policy Declarations and Measures in 2017', n.d., 14.
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- 20 Although the original report used the term of "fake news" for manipulated content, we avoided use of the terminology due to its politically-charged nature in political discourse.
- 21 RTS Serbia Radio televizija Srbije, Radio Television of, 'Gledanost televizije u 2019. godini', accessed 8 August 2020, <http://www.rts.rs/page/rts/sr/CIPA/story/171/istrazivanja/3823502/gledanost-televizije-u-2019-godini.html>.
- 22 For example, only last month Twitter deleted 8500 accounts considered to be fake and serving to promote President Vučić.
- 23 Indicative of the economic reasons behind the promotion of Putin is the case in which the editor-in-chief of the tabloid Informer said to one of our interviewees that when he puts Vladimir Putin on the front page of Informer, the newspaper's daily circulation rises by 20%.
- 24 Večernje novosti, Srpski telegraf, Alo, Informer, Politika, Kurir
- 25 There were rumors that Russia financed organizations in Serbia using the Serbian Orthodox Church, due to Church's lack of financial lack of transparency, but the evidence of this was never found by investigative journalists
- 26 There have been rumors that Russia Today will launch a TV channel in Serbo-Croatian, but this idea was not realized.
- 27 The strongest players being here Ivica Dačić, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, and Dušan Bajatović, Director of the state-owned gas company SrbijaGas.

28 In the ruling coalition there are other pro-Russian actors, such as "Pokret snaga Srbije," led by tycoon Bogoljub Karić. Actors around ruling SNS parties were unsuccessful in gaining Russian trust the way SPS did.

29 There are disagreements among interviewees on how strong Popović's connections to Russia are and how important a player for Russia he is.

30 There are indications that Russian news agency REGNUM has been publishing the news on the statements of the Alliance for Serbia officials which are critical of Vučić's position on Kosovo.

31 This party is led Milan Stamatović, mayor of the municipality Čajetina in Western Serbia. Stamatović became known for organizing the "Patriotic camp for youth" in 2018, which had the characteristics of a military training, with the trainers being Russian and Serbian war veterans.

32 What raises concerns is an agreement on security cooperation with Russia that could endanger the privacy of citizens through sharing sensitive information.

33 This narrative was strongly promoted by Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin (2012-2019).

34 Russia also used the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from 2010 to justify the unilateral secession of Crimea.

35 The other analogy used by the Kremlin in the case of Ukraine is that Russia needed to prevent a "new Srebrenica" from happening to the Russian population.

36 The Office for Kosovo and Metohija (former: Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija) is a government body for coordination of policies regarding Kosovo, and is involved in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The office is led by Marko Đurić, an official of the ruling SNS (Srpska napredna stranka - Serbian Progressive Party), and a close associate to President Vučić

37 'AP: Uključenje Rusije Može Da Zakomplikuje Rešenje Krize', Vesti online, accessed 7 August 2020, <https://arhiva.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/692189/AP-Uključenje-Rusije-može-da-zakomplikuje-resenje-krize>.

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39 'Jovanović (DSS): Putin jasno izrekao da Srbija ima garanciju da će Rusija štiti njen integritet', kurir.rs, accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3191129/jovanovic-dss-putin-jasno-izrekao-da-srbija-ima-garanciju-da-ce-rusija-stiti-njen-integritet>.

40 The Hungarian country case-study supplemented the representative polling with a deeper machine learning based natural language processing (NLP) analysis to reveal Hungarian revisionist narratives.

41 The total number of articles based on the keywords was 572, but 237 were not connected with the topic, so they were excluded from the final sample.

42 The Delegation was headed by Natalia Vladimirovna Poklonskaya, Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs

43 Dveri is the largest right-wing party opposed to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the member

of Alliance for Serbia (SZS), the largest opposition party group in Serbia

44 The Oathkeepers (Zavetnici) is a minor far right party close to the high-ranking officials of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. They had around 1% of support in the last parliamentary elections held in June 2020.

45 In 2014, at the conference in Belgrade named "Kosovo and Crimea - Differences and similarities", Ambassador Chepurin said that "We live in a world of double standards. Kosovo was illegally torn away from Serbia, and Crimea unified with Russia in accordance with international law."

46 One of the oldest and the most popular tabloids in Serbia, Blic.rs, at the time of Crimea Delegation visit had an article explaining why it is "disastrous" for Serbia to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia

47 For example koreni.rs and srbin.info

48 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) established the international security presence in Kosovo after the NATO campaign (March-June 1999) and guaranteed territorial integrity of Serbia. The significance of this resolution has been diminished in the discourse of the ruling party in order to advocate for a land swap or border change solution.

49 Daily newspaper "Informer", which has the highest daily circulation in Serbia, is known for building Putin's personality cult. It is illustrative that the editor-in-chief of Informer, Dragan J. Vučićević, in his regular column, as his editor's avatar uses a mirror selfie where he wears a T-shirt with Putin's face on it and his mobile phone case also has Putin's face on it '212674_vucko_f.jpg (663×390)', accessed 7 August 2020, https://informer.rs/data/images/2018-09-16/212674_vucko_f.jpg.

50 In Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity in BiH, Russia supports ruling strongman Milorad Dodik, who tries to leverage the attempt of the Western powers and central BiH institutions to reform the country, which he considers to threaten the integrity and the autonomy of Republika Srpska, while in return Dodik blocks BiH's attempt to join NATO, which suits Russian interests.

51 In Montenegro, part of the opposition is looking forward to Russian support, especially in the context of the ruling party's attempt to diminish the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church. By supporting pro-Serbian opposition, Russia is gaining a foothold in the country in which the Government is predominantly anti-Russian

52 Donald Trump is very popular among ruling party officials and voters. The billboard placed in Belgrade by the pro-government daily newspaper Informer after Trump was elected for President in 2016 said "Congratulations, Trump, you Serb!", 'Šešelji i Palma radosni zbog pobe-de Trampa', N1 Srbija, accessed 7 August 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a206956/Cestitke-Trampu-iz-Srbije.html>.

53 Ahead of the Trump-Putin meetings in Helsinki on 16 July 2018 or 11 February 2018 in Paris

54 The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is led since 2011 by the European Union, with the mediation of the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy

55 The voters of the Serbian Progressive Party in majority do not support border change/land swap solutions, as well as some countries in the EU, especially Germany

56 'ЊУЈОРК ТАЈМС: Балкан "Пробни Терен" у Новом Хладном Рату с Русијом!', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.pravda.rs/2018/4/11/njujork-tajms-balkan-probni-teren-u-novom-hladnom-ratu-s-rusijom/>.

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59 'ЕКСКЛУЗИВНИ ВИДЕО-СЕРИЈАЛ: 20 Година Од НАТО Агресије - Спутњик Србија', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/trend/ekskluzivni-video-serijal-20-godina-nato-agresije/>.

60 Networks could be based only on hyperlinks found in website articles due to Facebook restricting access to pages' data or hyperlinks.

61 rs-lat.sputniknews.com (Latin) and rs.sputniknews.com (Cyrillic)

62 Видовдан2, 'СПЦ: Таблоиди Блиц и Данас су покренули антицрквену харангу!', Видовдан Магазин | Српска традиција и национални интерес (blog), accessed 7 August 2020, <https://vidovdan.org/info/spc-tabloidi-blic-i-danas-su-pokrenuli-anticrkvenu-harangu/>.

63 'Слободан Антонић', Нови Стандард, accessed 7 August 2020, tag/slobodan-antonici/.

64 'Данас: Савезу За Србију Следи Прекомпоновање Или Разлаз - Нови Стандард', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.standard.rs/2020/05/22/danas-savezu-za-srbiju-sl-edi-prekomponovanje-ili-razlaz/>.

65 Andrić Insitute, named after the famous Serbian and Yugoslav writer and Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, was established in 2013 as the joint project of the Government of Republika Srpska and Government of Serbia as a research institution in the area of social science and humanities. The institute is located in the touristic city named "Andrićgrad" in the city of Višegrad in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

66 Biljana Srblijanović is a member of the Government's Council for Creative Industries, led by the Prime Minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić.

67 This classification was made based on a random sample of their articles and the most common authors on the portal. For example, on the Vidovodan portal, a large number of analytical pieces were written by pro-government analysts such as Dragomir Anđelković, Branko Radun, a member of the Steering Committee of public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia, and Nebojša Bakarec, ruling SNS party Councillor in the City of Belgrade

68 The fact that these media link to each other does not mean that they undertake coordination efforts on propaganda and disinformation. This is simply not the case in Serbia, when we often see coordination campaigns

conducted by pro-government tabloids when leading a smear campaign against the opposition.

69 The analysis of social media was limited to Facebook, since it is the only and main platform of elite or grassroots political discussions in Central-Eastern Europe.

70 Although not explicitly proclaimed, the government position on Kosovo is to take Northern Kosovo, populated by Serbs, in exchange for recognition and/or approval for Kosovo to join the United Nations.

71 The official position of Russia is to support any solution approved by the United Nations Security Council, in line with UNSC resolution 1244, which stipulates that Kosovo is a part of Serbia.

72 Dveri is a right wing party, a member of the biggest opposition group "Alliance for Serbia," which boycotted the 21 June elections.

73 The Oathkeepers (Srpska stranka Zavetnici) party participated in the June 2020 elections and won 1% of the vote.

74 Serbian Right (Srpska desnica) is a far right party, cooperating with the government. Its strategy is to gain influence on the local level, especially in the poor parts of southern Serbia; Srpska stranka zavetnici (Oathkeepers) participated in the June 2020 elections and won 1% of the vote.

75 Government organized non-governmental organization

76 "Šiptar" is derogatory term for Albanians, used by Serbs and other South Slavic people in the Balkans.

77 Dušan Proroković, Aleksandar Pavić, Dragoljub Anđelković, Darko Tanasković

78 There is speculation that this is the case with the page Srpska digitalna inicijativa, which has more than 150 000 followers.

79 This narrative could be observed in the articles posted from the opposition magazine, "Tabloid" on Vaseljenska TV page.

80 'Српска Дигитална Иницијатива - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1604015629880865/posts/2020666018215822>.

81 In one of the viral articles regarding the killing of the opposition politician from North Kosovo Oliver Ivanović in January 2018, Srpska digitalna inicijativa accused the opposition of "working with Albanians", as the opposition indicated that Ivanović was probably killed by criminals close to the ruling party, after a smear campaign led by Srpska lista (SNS protégée on Kosovo) during the 2018 Kosovo local elections.

82 Српска странка Заветници на платформи Facebook Watch, accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=830550580696992>.

83 'Српска Десница - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/139962420013797/posts/151232475553458>.

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86 'Vesti-OnLine.Com - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/214265159357/posts/10157276335494358>.

87 'Васељенска ТВ - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/194126387296488/posts/1989998534375922>.

88 'Васељенска ТВ - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/194126387296488/posts/2070090376366737>.

89 'Васељенска ТВ - Објаве', accessed 7 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/194126387296488/posts/2046287288747046>.

90 Messages were selected based on a set of pre-defined keywords in each country under review.



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