# ISD

Powering solutions to extremism, hate and disinformation

# Monitoring Influence & Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MEDIWEB)

## About this paper

This research examines influence and disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans, with a focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Although the spread and amplification of disinformation is often framed as primarily driven by foreign actors, ISD found that politicians and media in the region were key players. These groups are also central to a rising level of anti-EU sentiments which we found across the region, despite significant differences between countries. The report concludes with recommendations to reduce the risk posed by disinformation in the Western Balkans, including support for local organisations and a holistic approach to disinformation.

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# Monitoring Influence & Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MEDIWEB)

## Executive summary

This study on Monitoring Influence and Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MEDIWEB) builds on the European External Action Service's (EEAS) understanding of the growing political and security challenges posed by foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) to the European Union (EU). Conducted with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office, it aims to identify and analyse FIMI in the Western Balkans. This endeavour seeks to enhance the comprehension of both policymakers and members of civil society. This should facilitate a more targeted and effective response to FIMI and address the vulnerabilities in all aspects of democratic governance and institutions in this region of geopolitical importance for the EU.

The EEAS defines FIMI as "a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory".[1]

The study uses a variety of sources, including academic articles and think-tank reports, in addition to original media monitoring and the analysis of data collected from social media platforms. It considers content from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. The research identifies and outlines the main trends and developments in FIMI across the region, covering the timeframe from December 2023 to June 2024.

Our methodological approach, which combines digital analysis with other sources, allowed us to uncover patterns and trends within the complex media landscape of these countries. Across North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, ISD collected 31,048 Telegram messages, 27,644 Facebook posts and 478 YouTube videos. The analysis encompassed media entities representing the full spectrum of political ideologies in the four countries, including 62 daily newspapers and their accounts on Facebook and Instagram, with more than 7.2 million followers.

To understand the key actors involved in disinformation online, the most relevant topics, and the various channels used by politicians and political parties within the Western Balkans, ISD analysed accounts belonging to more than 116 unique users. These users represented high-ranking politicians such as prime ministers, presidents, ministers, leaders of political parties in all four countries. Other accounts belonged to political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), pundits and think-tankers, and their social media profiles on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook were examined using our digital tools.

Anti-Western sentiment in the dataset accounted for more than 60% of the messages collected while pro-Kremlin sentiment made up 24% across selected national TV channels, daily newspapers, websites, and their associated YouTube, Facebook and Instagram channels.

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[1] 'Tackling Disinformation, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference' (2024). European External Action Service. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

Using the data collected for this study, ISD analysed more than 70 hours of video content from 13 YouTube channels, with more than 2.9 million followers collectively. The analysis of these channels highlighted the pervasive nature of high-ranking politicians and their role in spreading disinformation. Our filters allowed us to identify and examine disinformation narratives disseminated by news outlets and broadcast media channels. These media outlets have established robust dissemination networks, flooding the public space with dubious content and entertainment.

In North Macedonia, narratives from pro-EU and anti-EU actors sometimes overlap. Among the news sites most shared during the data collection period were *english.republika.mk*, [typically associated](#) with the right-wing and anti-EU party, and *balkaninsight.com*, an [independent investigative media outlet](#) that [receives funding](#) from EU entities. Despites the obvious differences in editorial stance of these sites, there is still some confluence of narratives when it comes to domestic reporting, at times due to omission of the wider context. For example, the latter referred to "popular protests" without acknowledging they are organised by political parties opposed to the European Union (EU) negotiating framework, who consistently argue against EU accession and treaties with Bulgaria and Greece.

ISD's research has found that pro-Kremlin media outlets are actively engaging in topics highly relevant to Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. We collected data from four media outlets based in Serbia and the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, including their corresponding channels on Facebook and Instagram, which had a collective follower base of 431,197. According to media monitoring from the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), an independent civil society organisation in Belgrade, Russian media accounts for 9% of the disinformation sources in Serbia across selected national TV channels, daily newspapers and online portals.

## Among the study's key findings are the following:

- In the Western Balkans, most disinformation is amplified and disseminated by politicians and media outlets linked to political parties in the region. Although disinformation is often framed as a threat from abroad to governance and democratic processes, ISD research reveals that the primary sources are found within the region itself: presidents, prime ministers, party presidents, or editors-in-chief.

- Various local and international entities were observed to employ disinformation tactics to erode the EU's standing in the Western Balkans. They exploit and distort the rift between 'EU idealists'—those steadfast in their nation's European identity and prospective future—and 'EU realists', who, while not against EU integration, remain sceptical about its feasibility.

- Communities in the studied countries have become increasingly EU-sceptic over time. This negative trend can be seen in the way public support for EU membership has declined over the last ten years, from around 70-80% down to around 50% in most cases; in Serbia it is as low as 38%.

- One of the main reasons for this growing EU-scepticism, anti-EU and pro-Russian atmosphere is found in the region's political rulers and ruling elites who undermine fundamental democratic processes. While some politicians claim to support EU accession, many are actively working to obstruct necessary EU reforms and harmonisation of foreign policy with the bloc.

## Across the region, the study finds that:

- Russia's main objective is to maintain the status quo of a region outside of Euro-Atlantic structures open to its influence. It therefore aims to block NATO expansion and slow down the EU's enlargement process.

- The Kremlin and its allies, including those within Bosnia and Herzegovina, employ a wider revisionist strategy to rewrite contemporary history after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Russia's comprehensive backing of Serbia in halting the UN General Assembly's vote to designate a day of remembrance for the 1995 Srebrenica genocide is a case in point. Pro-Kremlin media channels on Facebook, Instagram and websites active in Serbia support the Republika Srpska's effort to cement post-war ethnic divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while increasing Moscow's influence over the Bosnian Serbs and their leader Milorad Dodik, who seeks to create a "Serbian world" modelled after a "Russian world".

- Serbia serves as a central hub for pro-Kremlin propaganda, with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and local leaders amplifying disinformation, and attempting to sway public opinion through limited media sources. ISD's digital research on Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo specifically notes Vučić's support for Dodik, the secessionist leader of the Bosnian Serb entity.

- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, where government sovereignty is disputed and multi-ethnic identity is challenged, the political environment is highly vulnerable to geopolitical interference from both local actors such as the Bosnian Serbian Entity and the Kremlin. Both types of actors are engaged in attempts at historical revisionism in favour of an anti-Western version of events.

- In North Macedonia, scepticism about EU integration is widespread among mainstream political parties across the political spectrum as well as several civil society organisations. ISD analysed the X and Facebook accounts, YouTube channels, and websites of North Macedonian political parties. Using a series of 20 keywords, numerous hashtags were surfaced that indicated that there are multiple online campaigns to undermine EU integration in North Macedonia. These hashtag campaigns frequently used language such as "erasing Macedonian history" or "No to The French Proposal." The EU's negotiation framework for North Macedonia is consistently labelled derogatorily as 'The French Proposal'—a term used to describe the initiative to remove the Bulgarian veto.[2]

## The study identifies three emergent threats:

- The Kremlin's geostrategic approach will continue to concentrate on the Western Balkans as a pivotal arena to obstruct the growth of Euro-Atlantic cooperation and to divert focus from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The use of disinformation has been, and will probably continue to be, an essential instrument in these efforts.

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[2] "Russia Against Pendarovski [former President of North Macedonia]: Russia Denies Involvement in the Riots Against the French Proposal" (2022). Faktor MK. Available at: https://faktor.mk/rusija-kontra-pendarovski-negiraat-vmeshanosta-vo-protestite-protiv-francuskiot-predlog (Last accessed: 15.09.2024). See also: Former Prime Minister Buchkovski: Russia is Behind the Protests Against the "French Proposal" (2022). Infomax. Available at: https://infomax.mk/buckovski-russia-stands-behind-the-protests/ (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

- The potential reconfiguration of America's geo-strategic policy, especially given uncertainty over trans-Atlantic ties in the wake of the recent US elections, presents fresh prospects for Moscow and other adversarial foreign and domestic entities to deploy disinformation to weaken the EU in the Western Balkans.

- The fading prospects for actual EU enlargement diminish the incentive for governments in the Western Balkans to enhance governance quality and uphold democratic standards. They also weaken a significant mechanism that civil society uses to hold politicians accountable. Moreover, this situation not only reinforces the elements that contribute to disinformation, but also creates additional chances for geopolitical rivals of Europe to gain an advantage.

# Glossary

### Conspiracy theory

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. Conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Supporters of conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot which are typically governments or figures of authority.

### Coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB)

A set of online entities - individual accounts, groups or pages - operating together towards a shared goal or purpose which can, but do not have to be, managed by the same actor(s).

### Disinformation

Disinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content, intended to deceive or harm. The intent distinguishes it from misinformation (cf. Below).

### Eurasianism

Eurasianism is a geopolitical and cultural theory dating back to the early 20th century that posits the existence of a distinct Eurasian civilisation, separate from both Western Europe and the East. It emphasises the unique historical, cultural and geopolitical identity of the vast region stretching from Eastern Europe through Central Asia to Siberia, with Russia often positioned as the core of this Eurasian space. Understood in expansionist, imperialist and anti-Western terms, it has gained new prominence with the rise of Vladimir Putin and entered Russia's latest foreign policy doctrine in 2023.

### Fake news

Fake news is false or misleading content presented as news and expressed in written, printed, electronic, and digital communication. The term has also become politicised in recent years and used as a pejorative term to discredit others with opposing viewpoints. For these reasons, it is not widely used in research and ISD primarily employs it to reference its use by others.

### Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is defined by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) as "a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory." ENISA explains that the term FIMI aims to refine the concept of disinformation by emphasising "manipulative behaviour, as opposed to the truth of content being delivered."

### Information operations

Information operations are coordinated efforts by state or non-state actors to manipulate or influence public opinion through the spread of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and other deceptive tactics.

## Misinformation

Misinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content shared irrespective of an intent to deceive or harm.

## Pro-Kremlin

Pro-Kremlin refers to individuals, organisations or narratives that actively support, align with or propagate the political, ideological, or geopolitical interests of the Russian government, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. These actors and ideas promote Russia's state policies, often in opposition to Western democratic values and institutions. They are typically characterised by endorsement of authoritarian governance, nationalism, state-controlled media and anti-Western sentiment. Pro-Kremlin actors can include politicians, media outlets, activists, think tanks and online influencers, both within Russia and abroad, who disseminate information or engage in activities that reflect and reinforce the Kremlin's strategic goals.

## Methodology

For the purposes of collecting and processing public social media data for this project, ISD partnered with the Munich Innovation Labs (MIL). The section below describes the methods by which open-source intelligence was collected, enhanced and analysed using MIL's proprietary AI analytics platform [INspectre](#).

To build seed lists of social media accounts and sites relevant to pro-Kremlin disinformation, the ISD team revisited previous studies on the information ecosystem in the Western Balkans and conducted manual research. Data sources of interest were then added to a shared spreadsheet and expanded in close collaboration with the MIL team. Teams also worked closely together to enhance data acquisition and data processing capabilities.

Upon review of the data collected in the exploratory phase, the ISD research team decided to focus on four case studies, one for each country. A list of sources was compiled by ISD and passed to MIL for data acquisition. The data collection period was defined as from December 2023 to June 2024. For North Macedonia, the study focused on openly pro-Russian or openly anti-EU actors around the election period of April-May 2024, but quantitative research covers the entire period of 2020-2024. This period was selected both to ensure analytical insights were recent enough to be relevant by the time of publication, and as a consequential moment for Russian influence in the region.

Using INspectre, a separate project was created for each country and the sources identified in the country list were added to the project. Subsequently, INspectre Grabbers - a software component that runs automatically and autonomously - retrieved data from each social media platform, performed a data conversion, and pushed the acquired data to the INspectre Database, making it available for display, search, filtering, visualisation and analysis.

Data conversion is an essential part of the process as it allows for combining data from different sources into the same analytical environment, simplifying and unifying the pipeline for analysts. As a result, users can view and interact with data from Telegram or YouTube in the same way as data from Meta platforms (via CrowdTangle) or WordPress. In short, Grabbers perform a field mapping conversion of data obtained from social media into a unified data structure, allowing for all acquired data from all platforms to be stored in the same table.

Some platforms, such as X, are currently not supported by INspectre Grabbers. MIL obtained X data required for the above-mentioned studies via a third-party data provider and incorporated the data in the respective INspectre projects. The table below shows the total number of data points (both messages and media files) retrieved from public social media sources up until 1 June 2024, broken down by the country case study they are relevant to. These numbers differ based on several factors, including platform relevance in each country and the availability of data.

| Messages by platform | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Telegram | Facebook | Instagram | YouTube | X | Total by country |
| Bosnia & Herzegovina | 12,068 | 2,671 | 69 | 0 | 0 | 14,808 |
| Kosovo | 31,255 | 4,533 | 353 | 2,998 | 0 | 39,139 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Serbia | 2,690 | 13,937 | 156 | 0 | 0 | **16,783** |
| North Macedonia | 2214 | 2636 | 0 | 124 | 255 | **5229** |
| **Total by platform** | **57,935** | **21,556** | **578** | **4,312** | **914** | |

*Table 1: Total number of messages analysed by ISD, broken down by platform.*

| **Media files by type** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Videos | Images | **Total by country** |
| Bosnia & Herzegovina | 3,115 | 5,120 | **8,235** |
| Kosovo | 5,503 | 11,773 | **17,310** |
| Serbia | 999 | 1,328 | **2,326** |
| North Macedonia | 776 | 3,188 | **3,688** |
| **Total by type** | **10,393** | **21409** | |

*Table 2: Total number of media files collected by MIL and analysed by ISD, broken down by type.*

After data collection was completed for all four projects, data was made available to the ISD team and supplemented with additional manual collection for case studies where requested. For example, ISD analysts requested additional Telegram data for Kosovo using the following search query: "albanski separatisti (Albanian separatists) OR separatist (separatists)", "kosovski zavet OR косовски завет (Kosovo covenant)", "pogrom" or "Progon (pogrom)".

ISD primarily used Brandwatch and CrowdTangle for X and Facebook respectively. With Brandwatch, ISD analysts used a seed list of accounts compiled by external experts, covering major political figures, parties, news outlets and other relevant sources. These were then combined with keywords across the relevant languages. ISD ran a number of searches with different combinations of accounts and keywords to gather a cross-section of data on the topic. This allowed analysts to see the most shared URLs, the most common hashtags, the most prolific accounts and the tweets which received the most engagement. A list of key dates provided by external experts was compared against spikes in activity to further home in on key moments of social activity. Analysts then used CrowdTangle to assess topics based on a list of relevant seed accounts for each country, although most of the focus was on political discourse on X, and the seed list for CrowdTangle was significantly more limited. Additional quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques vary across country studies and are explained in greater depth within each section below.

Limitations

Initial searches using Brandwatch produced a number of irrelevant or overlapping results, primarily due to the same words/terms being shared across languages as well as the cross-pollination of media outlets in the region. These were rectified using more specific results focused on keywords in individual languages. The nature of Brandwatch, a tool designed for social monitoring primarily for corporate users, also means that it did not always surface the most relevant content even when provided with specific keywords or hashtags.

An additional limitation was that consultants were unable to collect data from news or media sites directly using INspectre. Although Brandwatch was able to provide examples of news stories which were highly successful on news platforms or posts which had significant reach or engagement, this was only a partial proxy. News outlets play a major role in the dissemination of misinformation in the region, and further study should focus on tools which can properly assess their spread.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations for strategic communications and media organisations

1. **Regulation of entities propagating Kremlin viewpoints:** Germany should push for coordinated European regulatory efforts aimed at identifying and penalising media outlets and platforms that engage in and/or spread FIMI. This could involve enhancing existing EU institutions, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) task forces, to focus on the Western Balkans, supported by robust data-sharing agreements between member states, EU institutions and civil society organisations in the Western Balkans.
   a) Advocate for the creation of a "Western Balkans Media Standards Initiative", encouraging alignment with EU media regulations while integrating it into existing frameworks like EEAS task forces.
   b) Work with local governments to draft media transparency laws that require disclosure of funding sources, particularly for outlets with foreign ties.
   c) Use diplomatic ties and influence within the Berlin Process to encourage Western Balkan governments to adopt voluntary codes of conduct on disinformation and media transparency practices.
   d) Lead discussions within the EU-Western Balkans Summit to ensure that media standards and transparency are part of accession negotiations, creating incentives for early alignment with EU norms.

2. **Funding for independent media and counter-disinformation programmes:** Germany should establish a funding mechanism through the Foreign Office, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and organisations like the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) to directly support independent media in the Western Balkans.
   a) Launch an Independent Media Support Fund targeting independent and local media outlets and journalism initiatives that focus on countering disinformation, with grants for investigative journalism, fact-checking and digital security.
   b) Provide capacity-building for local journalists in the Western Balkans to empower and strengthen them. These programmes can be supported by non-Balkan stakeholders but should be designed and run by local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that need to be safeguarded from both domestic and foreign adversaries.
   c) Ensure long-term capacity-building efforts through media literacy programs that educate the general public, particularly young people, on how to identify and combat disinformation.

3. **Leveraging German public broadcasters:** German public broadcasters, such as Deutsche Welle, can play an important role by collaborating with local media in the Western Balkans. Rather than directly broadcasting German content, Deutsche Welle could focus on partnering with local journalists to co-produce content that counters disinformation while respecting local narratives.
   a) Initiate a content-sharing partnership between Deutsche Welle and independent media outlets in the Western Balkans, ensuring that anti-disinformation narratives are integrated into locally produced content.

b) Use Deutsche Welle's media training programs to help local broadcasters and journalists build capacity in digital literacy, investigative reporting and narrative development, particularly around sensitive topics like EU integration and geopolitical conflicts.

c) Ensure German public broadcasters are aware of Serbian and Kosovan diaspora communities in Germany and develop programming countering and debunking disinformation campaigns; diaspora communities often rely on media from their respective native countries, so collaborating with reliable and independent local media is necessary.

## Recommendations for German government

1. **Provide support for local CSOs, NGOs and media literacy organisations:** The federal government can play a pivotal role in strengthening local CSOs, NGOs and media literacy organisations in the Western Balkans by providing them with financial support, technical training and legal protections. These local actors are essential for countering disinformation, as they possess the cultural understanding and local credibility needed to address false narratives effectively.

   a) Launch a Western Balkans Civil Society Resilience Program, which provides grants and technical assistance to CSOs, NGOs and media literacy organisations that focus on disinformation and digital literacy.

   b) Create a legal assistance fund for CSOs, NGOs and journalists who may face threats or legal challenges due to their work in exposing disinformation, ensuring they can operate without fear of retaliation or vexatious litigation.

2. **Adopt a whole-of-government approach to disinformation:** Disinformation is a complex and hybridised threat that touches on multiple areas of governance: foreign policy, security, digital regulation and domestic affairs. Germany should adopt a whole-of-government approach to addressing foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) in the Western Balkans. This would require better coordination between German ministries tasked with foreign policy, domestic security, intelligence, and development to ensure that efforts to counter disinformation are unified and efficient.

   a) Establish an Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Disinformation that brings together representatives from the Foreign Office, Federal Ministry of the Interior, Federal Intelligence Service (BND) and BMZ. This task force would be responsible for coordinating German efforts related to disinformation in the Western Balkans and ensuring there is no overlap or conflict between domestic and foreign-focused activities.

   b) Develop a common strategic framework across government agencies to address both foreign and domestic dimensions of disinformation, ensuring a holistic response.

   c) Organise regular inter-agency briefings on disinformation threats, sharing intelligence and policy recommendations between departments and Germany's diplomatic missions in the Western Balkans.

3. **Appoint a dedicated person to monitor Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans:** Given the persistent threat of Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans and the respective diaspora communities in Germany, Germany should appoint a dedicated expert or team within its Foreign Office to monitor and analyse disinformation campaigns in the region. This role would ensure that Germany has up-to-date, on-the-ground intelligence that informs both diplomatic efforts and broader European Union (EU) strategies.

a) Appoint a Special Advisor on Russian Disinformation within the German Foreign Office, specifically tasked with monitoring disinformation activities in the Western Balkans. This person would liaise with embassies, local media, and intelligence agencies to track emerging threats.

b) Ensure that this advisor has access to real-time data and intelligence from German embassies in the region and other EU member states, feeding insights into Germany's broader strategic communications efforts.

c) Regularly brief German diplomatic missions and EU partners on disinformation trends and provide concrete recommendations for countering Russian narratives in the region.

4. **Coordination with EU and other actors in the information sphere:** Germany should lead efforts to coordinate responses with EU institutions, international organisations, and local actors involved in the information space. Hosting a regional conference would provide a platform to bring together key stakeholders such as the German Marshall Fund (GMF), Radio Free Europe, the European External Action Service (EEAS), CSOs and NGOs, and local media outlets from the Western Balkans. This would strengthen collaboration, ensure a unified response to disinformation, and provide opportunities to share best practices.

   a) Host an Annual Western Balkans Disinformation Forum, bringing together key players from Germany, the EU, international organisations and local media to discuss disinformation threats and coordinate responses. This forum would focus on developing collaborative initiatives to address disinformation and strengthening media resilience across the region.

   b) Create a working group on disinformation resilience under the auspices of the Berlin Process, where EU representatives and Western Balkan states can regularly meet to share intelligence, coordinate public messaging, and implement counter-disinformation strategies.

   c) Facilitate the establishment of a media resilience network that connects local media outlets, fact-checkers, and CSOs with European partners, including Deutsche Welle and Radio Free Europe, to share tools and resources for combating disinformation.

# Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Introduction

It is widely believed that Russia's strategic interest in Serbia hinges on retaining close ties with the country so long as it continues to play a disruptive role in the stability of the Western Balkans. Even two decades after the end of war in the region, Serbia remains in limbo with a fragile security environment, highly visible and often virulent nationalism, weak democratic institutions, and growing authoritarian tendencies. Russia's support for Serbia and their often-explicit closeness has led to years of obstructions to Serbia's accession to the EU.

Russian-Serbian cooperation is a marriage of convenience. For Russia, Serbia — alongside Republika Srpska, Montenegro and North Macedonia — is another potential conflict zone in Europe. Russia can use it to indicate to the West that it has more mechanisms to destabilise Europe, and that Ukraine and the eastern flank are not the only potential playgrounds for Russia's expansion ambitions. With its presence in the region, Russia also shows that it still has friends among those the West considers allies.

After the silence in diplomatic cooperation during the first months of Russian aggression on Ukraine, the Serbian government no longer hides its close ties with the Kremlin. This is particularly the case after the December 2023 snap parliamentary elections when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) regained the absolute majority it had lost it a year earlier. The elections were marred by accusations of "persistent and systematic abuse of institutions and media", prompting calls from the European Parliament for an independent investigation. The Kremlin, however, stood by the government and supported it in the mass protests that followed.

It is in the Serbian government's interest for the West to believe it could turn fully towards Russia as its strategic ally at any moment. This tension could force the EU and the US to appease Belgrade for fear of losing the region's biggest country. While claiming it is devoted to the EU integration process, the Serbian regime seems committed to maintaining the country's status quo with Russia. This allows it to avoid aligning with the EU sanctions on Russia and therefore continuing to count on the Kremlin as a protector of proclaimed Serbian interests.

To garner political support for its intentions, the Serbian government has nurtured pro-Russian sentiment among its citizens for years. In doing so, Belgrade promotes Russia as the protector of Serbia and its territorial integrity (particularly regarding Kosovo - see below), its ally in the fight against "Western injustices", the main supplier of "cheap" energy, and a cultural and spiritual leader. Pro-Russian narratives in Serbia are promoted by the government, government-affiliated media and individuals, as well as Russian media operating in Serbia.

There are two media outlets in Serbia that are formally associated with the Kremlin: RT Balkan and Sputnjik Serbia. However, ISD's research has found that neither of these outlets play a crucial role in disseminating propaganda. Instead, it is the highly controlled, widely circulated and subsidised pro-Serbian government TV stations, newspapers and news websites that are key to the spread of pro-Russian narratives. In this way, this issue differs from other European countries where there is effort made to prevent Russian influence among domestic populations; the Serbian government instead promotes and cultivates such activity.

In such a controlled information environment, the government's attempts to exacerbate anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments among its citizens can also be observed in public opinion polls. Many

Serbians view Russia as their country's most important ally (46%). They favour Russian President Vladimir Putin above other foreign leaders (80%) and score the lowest in support for the integration of Serbia into the EU (40%).

## Methodology

This study of pro-Russian narratives targeting Serbia focuses on the period between December 2023 and June 2024. Alongside MIL, ISD collected and analysed data from a total of 16,783 accounts and channels across three popular social media platforms: Telegram, Facebook and Instagram. Given the nature of the information ecosystem in Serbia, an additional 2,326 image and video files were collected from media hosting sites. ISD identified four key pro-Russian narratives spread among Serbian society during the observed period. These revolve around the following topics: Serbian democracy, Serbian foreign policy, the Kosovo issue, and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its contemporary ramifications.

## Analysis

### Disinformation about election fraud protests

While the run-up to the December 2023 parliamentary elections in Serbia was relatively quiet in terms of foreign-backed propaganda, the months following the results saw a shift towards pro-Russian narratives.

Government representatives and the ruling parties exploited pro-Russian sentiments to cast aspersions about the protests that erupted in the wake of the disputed election. The opposition and civil society organisations that monitored the election process accused the government of manipulating the elections and refuted the results based on massive irregularities. When protests threatened to turn violent, law enforcement used disproportionate force to prevent the demonstrators from entering the City Assembly buildings, and arrested dozens of citizens on charges of subverting the constitutional order. In response, then-Prime Minister Ana Brnabic stated that the opposition had tried to stage a "Maidan" or "colour revolution", capitalising on the fact that 63% of the population believes that the West is to blame for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This was followed by similar statements by other government officials, the Mayor of Belgrade and pro-Russian opposition leaders. Interestingly, these reactions appear to have been copied from a statement made by Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova a few days earlier.

Data collected over this period indicates that these narratives proved popular online within the ISD dataset, with mentions of "colour revolution" spiking and notable tweets from high-profile actors. A 22 December 2023 X post from Sandra Božić, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, claimed that "foreign actors backing NGOs" were behind attempted or successful revolutions in Ukraine, Egypt, Russia and Iran; it received 588 likes.

Even more striking was the official statement by Prime Minister Brnabic who thanked the Russian security services for sharing the information that the opposition would try to take power by force and that they were organising violent protests in Belgrade. This statement was made two days after the protest, on a Sunday evening political talk show on Pink. This pro-regime TV channel attracted more than two million daily viewers in 2023 and has over 620k followers and subscribers across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The statement was also posted across social media by mainstream sources such as TV N1 Belgrade, which has more than 260k followers on X and is a CNN affiliate in the region. The post itself, however, received relatively low engagement: 79 likes, 74 retweets and 72 replies.

Highlighting the importance of broadcast channels in the spread of pro-Russian narratives in Serbia, statements made by officials were also echoed within hours by special programmes on Informer TV, which is part of a media conglomerate known to spread disinformation in Serbia and has more than 44k followers on X. ISD analysis of major news sites and political pages found that Informer was the second most common outlet linked to in this period, behind the Novosti newspaper.

The Prime Minister's statement goes hand in hand with comments by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, that one 'foreign country' was influencing the election process, implying Western interference. With such statements from the two most high-ranking politicians in Serbia, Russia was presented as the guarantor of the country's security and the West was presented as destabilising.

In the days that followed the elections, at the beginning of 2024, there were efforts from political parties and civil society organisations to alert the Western public about irregularities in the Serbian election, which were presented by the President as evidence of these entities 'acting in favour of Western interests'. Vučić's statement, which proved popular online, argued that the West had a clear motive for interference: to establish a puppet regime that would then formally recognise Kosovo and introduce sanctions against Russia – all of which would reshape allegiances in the Western Balkans. All three of these 'alleged interests of the West' are once again presented as nefarious, in contrast to the supposedly stabilising influence that Russia has in Serbian and regional politics.

Case study: Aleksandar Vulin

One of the most prominent messengers for pro-Russian narratives is Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin. A long-time associate of Vučić, Vulin has held five ministerial positions during his 12-year rule. He was removed from his last position due to pressure from the US, who sanctioned Vulin due to his involvement in international organised crime, drug trafficking and abuse of public office. Despite these charges, he was recently appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister of the new government of Serbia, which appears to be meant as a special provocation by Serbia towards the West.

Vulin is the most open promoter of Russia among the highest-ranking Serbian officials. He promotes his pro-Russian views and cooperation with the Kremlin via traditional and social media. He also established the concept of 'the Serbian World', which echoes the policy of the Russian World.

In the observed period, qualitative analysis indicates that there are three key moments during which Vulin was able to spread pro-Russian propaganda points:

1. The first moment was Vulin's reception of an award from the Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia for his contributions to cooperation between the Serbian and Russian security agencies. This took place in late January 2024 and was highly noted across broadcast media in Serbia.

2. The second occurred in April 2024, when Vulin participated in an international meeting of senior officials responsible for security issues at the personal invitation of the then-Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Nikolai Patrushev. On that occasion, the Secretary said that the Russian Federation would not support the resolution on Srebrenica that the United Nations General Assembly planned to adopt. President Vučić presented this resolution as a 'German and US conspiracy against Serbia' because, he claimed, these countries knew Russia and China would veto it in the UN Security Council. This incident attracted attention from both pro- and anti-Kremlin actors, including a special correspondent with the Kyiv Post.

3. The third event during which Vulin injected a pro-Russian narrative into the Serbian information sphere occurred in June 2024. He met the newly appointed Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Sergey Shoigu, and other officials. On that occasion, Vulin thanked his hosts for the support that Russia provided to Serbia regarding the resolution on Srebrenica and emphasised the 'true friendship' of the two countries in the most challenging times. However, during this visit to Moscow, Vulin visited the grave of former Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. In pro-regime media, this event was presented as a tribute to the fighter against Nazism, without mentioning the fact that he was responsible for the deaths of millions of Russians after the Second World War. The incident prompted backlash on X from international independent media and researchers.

## Narrative stance on the Russia-Ukraine War

Serbia is one of the few European countries that did not align with the EU's foreign and security policy following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and did not impose sanctions on Russia. This decision was justified by the government for the reasons previously highlighted: the Kosovo issue, energy dependence and public opinion, an ambition to maintain friendly relations with the Kremlin, and recent experience of life under sanctions during the 1990s.

During the observed period, Serbian officials repeatedly emphasised that Serbia's policy would not change despite enormous pressure from the West to impose sanctions on Russia. Thus, Vučić claimed at the press conference in March 2024 that the real reason for such pressures is that 'the West wants Serbia to recognise Kosovo and to introduce a puppet regime', which constitutes disinformation. These statements were in turn carried onto social media by both Kremlin-controlled media outlets like RT Balkan (146 views) and domestic media such as N1 (3,964 views). Throughout this time, Vučić presented himself as a powerful and independent statesman who cannot be blackmailed on his firm stance not to introduce sanctions.

It is also significant that immediately after the aforementioned protests over election fraud in Belgrade, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that the West was blackmailing Serbia by demanding that it impose sanctions on Russia or face a coup d'état. Good political and economic cooperation were also confirmed at the March 2024 meeting between Foreign Ministers Dacic and Lavrov. At that time, Dacic thanked Russia for preserving its integrity, and Lavrov emphasised that the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine was just and fair. The two attended a football game between their countries' national teams as a sign of friendship, especially since Russian athletes are not allowed to participate in international competitions. A post from Sputnik on X describes this event as 'an important diplomatic visit on the football field'.

As well as Serbian officials, media outlets also emphasised the importance and power of Russia and the "unfair victimisation" of the Kremlin's actions internationally. The pro-regime outlet Informer, which has 33k followers on Facebook, repeatedly published articles about how sanctions against Russia are failing, how the West has ruined itself with this policy and how domestic opposition is advocating the introduction of sanctions against Russia. Such narratives aim to present Russia as an even more powerful country after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine; argue that Serbia should remain its ally; they also highlight how there are forces within Serbia itself that work against its interests. This narrative seems designed to position the current Serbian regime as the only entity that could cooperate effectively with Russia.

In line with this approach, ISD's research found narratives seeking to undermine and demonise the Ukrainian government led by Serbian authorities. Vučić reminded his audiences on several diplomatic visits to other Balkan countries throughout the data collection period that Ukraine does not recognise Kosovo. However, he also used public communications to frame Serbia as respecting international

standards regarding the war in Ukraine. Influencers echoed this sentiment when it was first reported in February, stating that Serbia is "playing fairly" with both Ukraine and Russia, "using diplomacy as the art of the possible". This post, which includes a video from a meeting between Zelensky and Vučić, received 50.3k views on X.

An example of ambiguous messaging and the differentiation of rhetoric for internal and external audiences can be seen in the May 2024 visit of Ukraine's First Lady and Foreign Minister to Belgrade. On that occasion, it was highlighted that Serbia was ready to provide assistance to Ukraine. The meeting conclusions were not circulated widely in domestic media, possibly because the announced assistance could appear to Serbian citizens as a step towards alignment with Ukraine in the war against Russia. There was little coverage in Serbian media of the high-level visit.

By contrast, a Financial Times article about Serbia exporting weapons worth €800 million to Ukraine did echo in the domestic media ecosystem, with highly followed X accounts like @novarsonline (117k followers) and @kos_data (30.4k followers) posting about the news story. A post from the latter garnered 175.9K views and 950 likes, while one from the former reached 20.5K views and 257 likes. That news was seemingly obscured from pro-Kremlin Serbians, who would likely object to Serbian weapons being used to kill "brother Russians", particularly after Vučić stating in April 2023 that this would not happen. As a result, in formal communications on the matter, the president subsequently had a hard time justifying this, claiming that Serbia does not export weapons to Ukraine but to 'legitimate users' in other countries but that he does not know where.

As highlighted in the ISD dataset, pro-Russia narratives around the war in Ukraine intended for a domestic audience were also observed to be present in pro-government media content, such as Kurir, Novosti, Informer or Mondo. The Informer gained notoriety for its front page in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion, which alleged that Ukraine had attacked Russia. During the observed period, these outlets vehemently supported Russia in the war, emphasising Russian successes on the front, Ukrainian alleged crimes, Russian military supremacy and the 'final collapse of Western power'.

Among the television stations studied for this report, Nacionalna Televizija Happy (or 'Happy National TV'), is particularly notable for its pro-Russian content. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the station has aired several hours of daily programs in which the core narratives of pro-Russian war propaganda are repeated. The outlet also occasionally directly transmits Russian TV channels. Aside from broadcast, Happy TV is also influential on social media, boasting 378k subscribers on YouTube and over 105 million views on its videos, and 38k followers on its Facebook page.

Pro-Kremlin narratives spread by these sources aim to convey to the Serbian public that Russia will win the war, that the world order will change, and therefore that Serbia will be able to realise all its interests including the preservation of Kosovo within its territory and the unification of all Serbs under the policy of 'the Serbian world' (discussed in greater detail below).

### 'Preservation' of Kosovo
Data analysis from March 2024 highlighted that tragic historical events were leveraged for the spread of propaganda by the ruling party, tabloids and state media under their control. A central theme of this content was Kosovo: the country was used to spread hatred towards ethnic Albanians, to promote the claim that "Kosovo and Metohija" (the independent country's name in Serbia) is part of the Republic of Serbia, and to present Serbs as victims.

In 2024, the ethnic violence of 17 March 2004 – when Albanians attacked Serbian homes, property, and cultural institutions in Kosovo – was used as a pretext for anti-Albanian sentiment. A pair of posts from the governing SNS on X featuring comments on the anniversary by President Vučić received more than 1.4k reposts and likes. The commemoration of this event was accompanied by a speech from Vučić at the commemorative academy in Belgrade, and a meeting with Serbian children from Kosovo. These events were used to send messages of intolerance and hatred towards Albanians.

Commemoration of the beginning of the 1999 NATO bombing of then-Yugoslavia in response to the atrocities committed in Kosovo has become an important event in the government calendar since Vučić's election. It is celebrated each year on 24 March with a ceremonial atmosphere. This contributes to the official narrative that Serbs were the only victims of the event, fostering anti-Western sentiment by omitting the facts, information and circumstances that led to NATO intervention, or the real number of civilian victims on both the Serbian and Albanian sides. Within the ISD dataset, two 2024 posts on X marking Vučić's acknowledgment of the day garnered more than 1.4k likes and retweets, including one post featuring an image of the president visiting the mother and sister of the youngest person killed in the bombing.

This year marked the 25th anniversary of the intervention, accompanied by the adoption of a draft statement from Russia at the United Nations on 20 March which condemned the attack. This statement called for opposition to the "historical truth," and demanded international accountability for NATO member states that carried out the bombing. They also proposed a UN Security Council meeting to discuss the statement. This initiative was reported extensively by Russian state media outlets on social media in Serbian for a number of days. RT Balkan, for example, posted multiple stories on X, with one post receiving 74 likes and 28 reposts. Another on RS Sputnik received 55 likes and 15 reposts.

The UN Security Council met on 28 March, when the majority of its members rejected the proposal. Reactions included anti-Western and anti-NATO comments without any reflection on Serbia's role in the Kosovo war and no mention of numerous ICTY verdicts for crimes committed. In this regard, the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Miloš Vučević (also a close friend of President Vučić's brother) stood out when he opened the exhibition "Serbia Remembers" in Belgrade. The exhibition is a revisionist and relativist attempt to portray Serbs as the only victims of the war in Kosovo, especially of NATO.

Several cultural events in March 2024 followed the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Russia and the Republic of Serbia concerning events in Kosovo and Serbia. These included football friendlies – one between the two national teams on 21 March in Moscow, the other between Red Star Belgrade and St. Petersburg club Zenit on 23 March. The message from both matches emphasised the friendship between the Serbian and Russian peoples and their cultural and traditional ties. A post on X from RS Sputnik featuring a moment of silence before the start of the match garnered almost 3k views.

Kosovo's push for membership in the Council of Europe, which intensified in the spring of 2024, also met with a massive Serbian communication campaign. As the Russian Federation had withdrawn from the Council of Europe in the early months of the war against Ukraine, it could not support its ally from within. Yet pro-Russian media in Serbia, as well as Russian state media – Sputnik and RT – reported frequently on this process. This included a positive vote from the Parliamentary Assembly in March and a refusal by the Ministerial Council to consider the bid in May. A post from RS Sputnik on X, for example, noted Kosovo's unpreparedness for entering the Council of Europe. The post has been viewed more than 2.6k times.

ISD ran a search to ascertain the volume of activity across a range of prominent websites belonging to political parties and news outlets using the social media monitoring tool Brandwatch. The table below shows how many social media posts contained links to each website over the period studied. The websites that proved most popular among social media were largely those that overtly promoted pro-Russian and nationalist views of the ruling party and President Vučić, for example SNS and Informer.

| Top Shared Sites | Volume of Posts |
|---|---|
| Sns.org.rs | 836,826 |
| Novosti.rs | 50,780 |
| Informer.rs | 31,615 |
| Kurir.rs | 26,814 |
| Blic.rs | 24,333 |
| lat.sputnikportal.rs | 18,321 |
| Alo.rs | 16,836 |
| Telegraf.rs | 13,055 |

*Table 3: Volume of social media posts containing links to Serbian websites during the data collection period.*

### Revisionist politics over genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Dysfunctionality within and tensions between the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Federation of Bosnian Muslims and Croats and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpksa, further intensified during the data collection period. One primary reason for this lies in the close ties that the President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, maintains with Russia. Dodik's frequent and intense contacts with the Kremlin, and the support he receives from Moscow for his separatist aspirations, appear to have escalated tensions.

Dodik has brought old resentments to a peak with his populist and nationalist policies over the past five years, and they are propagated on social media by a mix of Russian state media and domestic sources. While the EU successfully prevented the realisation of these ideas prior to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, foreign influences in the region have since been strengthened. This has been particularly acute since the establishment of direct contact between Dodik and Putin in 2018 and 2019.

Officials in the capital of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka, have been observed attempting to gain the support of citizens using revisionist policies. This includes a policy of remembrance regarding the events of the Bosnia and Herzegovina war from 1991-1995, complete media control by Milorad Dodik in the entity where Serbs live, open support for Russian aggression in Ukraine, and the spread of Russian propaganda on official media channels in Republika Srpska. Western governments including the US and UK have imposed sanctions on Milorad Dodik and his closest associates several times due to unauthorised influence, money laundering, connections with crime and corruption.
This position has greatly benefited Vučić in developing the concept of the "Serbian world" by strengthening Serbia's position in the Balkans at the expense of weakening other countries in the region. Thus, the celebration of Republika Srpska was primarily marked by the arrival of Serbian politicians in Banja Luka, as well as some Russian extremist groups.

The direct result of cooperation between Banja Luka and Moscow, and support for secessionism and the anti-Western stance of the Republika Srpska leadership, was on display in two meetings between officials that took place during the timeframe of this study. The first, on 21 February 2024, was marked

by President Putin [awarding](#) the Order of Alexander Nevsky to Dodik for what was called the latter's significant contribution to developing cooperation between Russia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second meeting was held 10 days later between Sergei Lavrov and Milorad Dodik, during which Dodik [stated](#): "No matter what happens, Serbs will always be on the side of the Russians. That is what drives them [the West] crazy, and that is why they think the Serbs must be punished. Russia may also make mistakes, but the Serbs will be on its side." An [X post](#) from the official account of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noting these remarks was viewed more than 11.6k times.

The most significant effort by Serbian authorities and those of the Republika Srpska to solidify relations was the campaign against adopting the UN Srebrenica [Resolution](#) on Commemorating 11 July as the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Srebrenica Genocide. This campaign, conducted under the slogan "Serbs are not a genocidal nation", demonstrated the full strength of the revisionist disinformation by authorities in Belgrade and Banja Luka, and the denial of facts established by international courts during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. President Aleksandar Vučić leveraged the passage of this resolution to misrepresent it as being anti-Serbian, falsely claiming that the resolution labelled Serbs as a genocidal people.

The campaign's techniques were based on disinformation narratives aimed to disrupt the designation of 11 July as an International Day of Remembrance. A trio of high-performing posts between 14 April and 21 May in this regard came from Branimir Nestorović, an academic now serving in the National Assembly. [These](#) [three](#) [posts](#) – which claim that the resolution is the work of the West and threaten retaliation if it passes – have now been viewed over 102k times collectively.
Simultaneously, pro-government media focused on the issue of collective guilt of the Serbian people and the punishments they would face if the resolution were adopted. Despite this lobbying by the country's diplomatic apparatus to prevent primarily non-European countries from voting in favour, and despite Russia's opposition, the resolution was [adopted](#) by the UN General Assembly.

Linking the Srebrenica resolution with the issue of collective responsibility of the Serbian people for the Srebrenica genocide, and the survival of the Serbian state, highlights the nationalist program and historical revisionism to which Serbia and other parts of the Balkans under its influence have returned. With increased support for such views from Russian state media and pro-Kremlin Serbian media, disinformation and propaganda have dominated the Serbian-speaking public media space and social networks. The consequence is hate speech, anti-Western attitudes and an atmosphere of intolerance and hatred that ultimately risks reshaping the political views of Serbs across the entire Western Balkans.

'Serbian World' policy
The political idea of the "Serbian World" was first widely used by Aleksandar Vulin. As outlined above, Vulin is known for his close ties with the Kremlin and his rejection of democracy, pluralism, and the rule of law. Building on Putin's doctrine of a "Russian World" introduced after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it similarly aims to unify Serbs and Serb-speaking citizens across the Western Balkans.

By extending influence over political events in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through local political parties, movements and public figures, the idea of the "Serbian World" aims to create a Serbian demos: a political entity in these states that is politically and culturally loyal primarily to Vučić and his regime in Serbia, disregarding the national borders and states they reside in.

A first attempt to redraw the borders in the region to create a more homogenous Serbian state failed in 2017, when a swap of territories between Serbia and Kosovo did not materialise. This, however, gave Vučić the impetus to pursue the idea in practice: not through war as in the 1990s but through promoting political irredentism and fomenting unrest in neighbouring states.

On 8 June 2024, the All-Serbian Assembly took place. The event followed local elections in Serbia, which were repeated on 2 June due to reported electoral irregularities observed by the OSCE, later addressed in a European Parliament resolution. Organised in Belgrade by the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the President and Government of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Serbian Orthodox Church, it received significant media support from outlets in both Belgrade and Banja Luka. Politicians' use of social media also drew attention to the assembly: a Facebook post from minister Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski received 1.2k likes and 1.1k comments; on YouTube, the channel of SNS received the largest audience for its video of proceedings (with 7.4k views).

The declaration adopted at the All-Serbian Assembly states that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia; mandates all state institutions to exclusively use the term "Kosovo and Metohija" as used in the Serbian Constitution; professes the endangerment of Republika Srpska; and demands political representation for Serbs in Montenegro proportional to the size of their population in the country.

## Conclusion

After more than 15 years of European integration for the countries of the Western Balkans, it is striking that an idea rooted in the wars of the 1990s is again relevant and tangible. For keen observers of Balkan affairs, the authoritarian tendencies of President Vučić have been evident for some time, but they likely became more pronounced following the 2020 pandemic. Vučić has increasingly become an official who undermines, discredits, and diminishes the European integration of Serbia, particularly in areas where it should have a transformative impact: fundamental issues of the rule of law, freedoms, and the pillars of democracy in a country. The elections of December 2023 and June 2024 – widely condemned for being fraudulent - represent the latest push towards authoritarianism. According to the Freedom House Nations in Transit 2024 report, in 2023, Serbia experienced a historic democratic decline.

While the process of European integration has been slow and essentially transactional, it has been favourable for Vučić. Although it did not offer membership nor achieve any progress in the accession talks for years, it provided a trade-off between stability and economic benefits. However, after the onset of the war in Ukraine, integration became fundamentally geopolitical and existential for the future of the European project. Vučić could not fit his vision of the "Serbian World" into this vision of Europe: a Europe of fundamental values and adherence to the principles on which it was founded. This Europe stands as a fundamental barrier to the "Russian World", a similar political project of Putin.

Cultivating close ties with Putin and his security structures is no longer a secret kept by Dodik and Vučić. Today, they are the only European politicians who meet with the Russian President directly or through associates. The dangerous idea of an anti-European Balkans continues to materialise. Vučić is preparing several scenarios for the future, watching developments in Brussels and Washington. He seems intent on exploiting Western weakness and disunity to position himself in relation to Beijing and Moscow. The collapse of the Western order could enable the establishment of a "Serbian World" in the Balkans. This would grant Vučić the ability to emulate the style of his Eastern role models. In a scenario where the West is weak enough in the Balkans, all possibilities are on the table, including the nightmare of a return to the wars of the 1990s.

# Serbia-Kosovo Relations

## Introduction

Much like in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political and media sphere of Kosovo - and therefore its information environment - are distinctively international. This uniqueness stems from Kosovo's status as an independent state whose status is disputed by countries like Serbia and Russia and unrecognised by several others. In a region where conflicting geopolitical interests converge, these interests assume a particularly critical dimension in relation to Kosovo. Accordingly, external actors are not just seeking to sway Kosovar politics for their advantage; they are often deeply invested in Kosovo's viability – or not – as a sovereign nation.

The relationship between Serbia and Kosovo has been marked by decades of tension, which escalated most recently in May and September 2023. This conflict is also [evidenced](#) by ongoing inter-ethnic tensions [within Kosovo,](#) especially between the Albanian-majority parts and Serb-populated areas. Given these circumstances, it is essential to evaluate how the media portrays and disseminates information about this sensitive relationship. The report aims to enhance the broader understanding of the media's role in shaping public perceptions, attitudes and narratives regarding Serbia and Kosovo, as well as understanding the role of FIMI in this ecosystem.

## Methodology

To assess the role of influence and disinformation campaigns in Kosovo, we used a three-part methodology. First, over 39,139 messages from platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and X were collected. These messages came from accounts with a combined 7.2 million followers and included data from between December 2023 to June 2024. This data set was analysed using keyword filtering to find relevant terms. Language filters were less effective as the software struggled to distinguish Serbian Cyrillic letters, and the multilingual nature of Kosovo makes them less relevant. After a narrow keyword filter produced few results, a broader filter was used to generate a list of core terms.

To supplement analysis conducted on this social media dataset, subject matter experts on the Kosovar media landscape then studied content from news portals, websites and television channels from Serbia and the wider Western Balkans region that engage in spreading disinformation in Kosovo. The analysed texts were sourced from Serbian media outlets, chosen based on their public influence and significance in the disinformation landscape in Kosovo, with Serbian media accounting for 58%, Russian media 9% and social networks 9%[3]. Analysis was conducted on media entities spanning various political ideologies, including daily newspapers such as Blic, Kurir, Vecernje novosti, Informer, Alo!, YouTube channels like RTS1 of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), Pink and Happy TV, and online portals including Balkan Insight, BalkanInfo and SrbinInfo. This allowed for the identification of patterns and trends in media coverage in addition to social media sources.

Analysts identified the sources, topics and dominant strategies in the way these media outlets present the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, with a special focus on three topics: historical revisionism, 'pogroms', and Kosovo's Council of Europe membership. Additionally, our research highlighted the relevance of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, an EU-facilitated scheme to bring about a

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[3] 'Tracking the Propaganda and Disinformation about Foreign Influence in Serbia' (2023). CRTA. Available at: https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/TRACKING-THE-PROPAGANDA-AND-DISINFORMATION-ON-FOREIGN-INFLUENCE-IN-SERBIA_CASE-STUDY.pdf.

normalisation of relations, which however often mirrors anti-European views and Russia's destabilising influence in the region.

Lastly, ISD employed a case-study approach to analysing subsets of influential users and sources from this overall dataset. The first of these comprised political figures with particular relevance for Kosovo, including the Serbian Prime Minister, president, various ministers, and leaders of political parties in Serbia and the Kosovo-Serb community. This analysis focused on the social media output of these figures on X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, where they collectively have more than 1.7 million followers. The second focused on data from 13 Telegram channels, both Serbian and Russian, with over 230k subscribers in total. These were chosen based on their previous activities in spreading disinformation about NATO, its 1999 intervention in Kosovo and the war in Ukraine.

## Analysis

Using the quantitative and qualitative methods outlined above, we observed the use of populist memory politics and communication styles in the spread of foreign-backed propaganda in Kosovo from both Russian and Serbian sources. Much of the propaganda and misleading statements noted among the accounts in the dataset came from high-ranking local politicians and various media channels, both foreign-backed and domestic, which is explored in greater depth below.

Within our datasets and the content analysed, we identified central themes and narratives which were repeated across the analysis. These included:

- A focus on particular anniversaries and historical revisionism.
- Invention and exaggeration of threats to the safety and property of ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo to instil fear.
- Suggestions that Kosovo and its institutions are temporary, and that Serbia will eventually be able to take control and enhance the lives of Serb residents.

Each of these narrative themes is further explored below.

### Historical revisionism and the anniversary of NATO intervention

As of the time of writing, Kosovo continues its efforts to join key international institutions including NATO and the Council of Europe for security and political development as much as for much-craved international recognition. Yet, as a post-conflict society, it remains vulnerable to interference from both Serbia and Russia through offline and online means. 2024 marks the 25th anniversary of NATO's intervention in the Kosovo War to halt the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo, after over a year of conflict within the province and the failure of international diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation.[4] The topic frequently surfaces in Serbia's public discourse, often mixed with pro-Kremlin narratives. ISD's analysis shows "NATO" as the top keyword related to Kosovo from December 2023 to June 2024.

ISD's analysis found that narratives around the 25th anniversary of the NATO intervention and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue have been used for propaganda purposes, presumably to exacerbate grievances and a sense of victimisation amongst online communities. This was found in analysis of data collected from Telegram channels between February and May 2024, in both Serbian and Russian languages. These channels mainly focused on this event and on actors that spread anti-NATO and anti-western nationalist narratives and propaganda.

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[4] 'Topic: Kosovo Air Campaign (March – June 1999)' (2022). NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

During the analysis period, ISD discovered a number of Russian Telegram channels including one run by a pro-Russian military blogger with more than 26k subscribers.[5] These channels were observed by analysts to disseminate disinformation in Serbian language about the ongoing war in Ukraine, for example by distorting the reasons behind the conflict and shifting the blame onto the Western world and Ukraine itself.

These narrative trends extended beyond social media channels. In one of the major Serbian media outlets, 'infotainment' channel Happy TV, Vučić frequently appears as a guest on the popular show 'Cirilica', which has more than 125k subscribers on YouTube. During one episode, he shared his perspective on the 1999 NATO intervention, reflecting also on Slobodan Milošević, the then-Yugoslav President. Vučić himself served as Minister of Information under Milošević from 1998 to 2000, from the beginning of Serbia's military campaign in Kosovo to the popular overthrow of the Milošević regime. In a video with 46k views, Vučić claimed that Milošević was not responsible for the "NATO bombing" and defended his actions during the 1990s, instead blaming Western powers and portraying them as "Serbia's true adversaries".

The tactic of Serbian state-controlled media outlets like RTS or pro-government media such as Happy TV, Informer and Srbin.info (which collectively have more than 767k followers) appears to be to omit details about the suppression and discrimination faced by ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to portray NATO's intervention as sudden and unjustified. For example, a video posted by RTS on YouTube that has 2.2k views depicts a commemoration ceremony for 16 RTS employees killed in the 1999 bombing without mentioning ethnic Albanians killed during the conflict. Like the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the absence of an objective historical account, replaced by revisionist narratives in state-controlled media, fosters a narrative of self-victimisation. This narrative, filled with resentment and blame, can result in a biased understanding of events.

On 24 March 2024, RTS, with more than 381k followers on Facebook, aired the central event marking 25 years since the start of 'NATO aggression', held in Prokuplje, Serbia. Patriarch Porfirije, the current and 46th patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, led the memorial service and stressed the importance of remembering the past while moving forward. In this video with 3,934 views, Vučić emphasised Serbia's resilience and stated that 'they [meaning Western countries and NATO member states] wanted to destroy Serbia, but that after 25 years we [Serbia] still do not give up and do not agree to the dismemberment of the country'. The state-controlled media outlet RTS facilitates revisionist narratives and by doing so supports disinformation that is intrinsically linked to memory politics in the Western Balkans. Notably, despite its high follower count on Facebook, the three links shared to the page on the anniversary only received a total of 141 likes, 13 comments and 8 shares.

### Russia House in Belgrade

As is the case with Russia House cultural centres in many countries, the Russia House in Belgrade hosts many cultural events with political significance. ISD analysis suggests that this cultural programme is used as a mechanism for maintaining Russian influence in the Western Balkans and therefore delaying or even preventing the region's integration into the EU. Russia House also offers student exchange programs, making their Instagram channel a notable information source for youth in Serbia and the Serb-dominated parts of Kosovo, with some events extending to Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, Bosnian-Serb journalist Darinka Petrovic produced a documentary on

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[5] Details of the account available on request, but we are not naming the account owner or channel name to avoid directing others on how to join it.

Crimea's 'reunification' with Russia with funding from Russian entities, which was then promoted to the more than 9k followers of Russia House's Instagram account.

In May 2024, President Vučić, several ministers, the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch and Russia's ambassador Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko visited the Russia House in Belgrade, emphasising Soviet contributions in the Second World War and condemning NATO intervention in 1999. Additionally, the documentary 'Belgrade,' produced by Russian journalist Andrej Kondrashov of TASS Russian News Agency, premiered on 24 March 2024 to mark the beginning of the NATO intervention. The film features interviews with both Vučić and Putin. In the promotion of the film and in an exhibition titled "Why" at Russia House (referring to the NATO intervention), Russia House's Instagram post used images of a target, which were also used by protesters against the intervention.

## 'Pogroms' – invention and exaggeration of threats

Across the various platforms analysed between December 2023 and June 2024, some of the most used keywords related to Kosovo highlight the exaggeration of security threats and 'pogroms'. The term 'pogrom' is very specific and charged with historical context, and is observed to be used by Serbian and Russian sources intentionally to exacerbate fear. The Merriam-Webster definition of 'pogrom' is "an organised massacre of helpless people, specifically: such as a massacre of Jews". As such, international organisations like the UN and Human Rights Watch typically use terms such as "widespread rioting" and "widespread violence" to describe the situation in Kosovo in March 2004, rather than 'pogrom'. The narrative of 'pogroms' notably stands in opposition to discourse regarding the genocide in Srebrenica analysed earlier. Analysts observed these keywords appearing in multiple forms, including "pogrom"/"погром," "progon," "proterivanja (expulsion)," "etničko čišćenje (ethnic cleansing)," as well as the "martovski pogrom"/ "мартовски погром".

The most popular 10 posts on X about the 2004 Kosovo unrest highlight a predominant narrative emphasising either alleged attempts to silence Serbia, or the importance of Serbia remembering the purported 'pogrom'; three of them came from SNS. The top post (with 10.4k views, 1.5k likes and 1.5k retweets) relates to a speech made by Vučić at a commemoration event and declares that Serbia "must not remain silent about what happened then and that no one can take the truth from us." The article linked in this post from the SNS website was also the most shared (1,392 shares). This was closely followed by a post stating that "the pogrom, for twenty years, is still going on" with (1,500 likes and 1,500 shares) and another about his attendance at a school on the anniversary of the Kosovo unrest (with 1,500 likes and 1,400 shares). Another tweet came from Serbia's Prime Minister who described the unrest as "a terrible pogrom…unprecedented in recent history", adding that Kosovo is Serbia's "spiritual and state cradle! [6] The tweet, which included images such as churches being defaced, received 933 likes and 874 retweets. Examples of the invocation of the idea of pogroms was observed across the period of analysis.

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[6]Serbian Progressive Party (SNS): http://twitter.com/sns_srbija/statuses/1769422987357196446 1400 retweets, http://twitter.com/sns_srbija/statuses/1769450392092344632 1379 retweets; http://twitter.com/sns_srbija/statuses/1769313697694888199 1354 retweets; http://twitter.com/sns_srbija/statuses/1769271091476791482 331 retweets.
Milos Vucevic: http://twitter.com/milos_vucevic/statuses/1769312344130134141 847 retweets.
Detektor laži ("Lie Detector"): http://twitter.com/LaziDetektor/statuses/1753526684857651505 573 retweets.
Vladimir Orlic: http://twitter.com/Vladimir_Orlic/statuses/1771233089680769320 442 retweets.
Arno Gujon: http://twitter.com/ArnoGujon/statuses/1769273727747768487 395 retweets.
Office for Kosovo and Metohija: http://twitter.com/KancelarijaKiM/statuses/1769303086814629966 291 retweets.
Ivana Bojo: http://twitter.com/Ivana_Bojo/statuses/1I769230432011239462 132 retweets (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

On 5 October 2023, President Vučić claimed that 11% of Kosovo Serbs had left Kosovo since early 2021 due to 'Albanian terror.' On 8 February 2024, at the UN Security Council, he stated that 14% had left in just one year. In an April 2024 UN Security Council session, Vučić warned of 'ethnic cleansing' in 'Kosovo and Metohija', asserting that 'those claiming to pursue democracy' were responsible, and noting that until two years ago, more than 7.5% of Serbs lived there[7]. The leader of Srpska Lista (a Kosovo Serb political party), appealed to the ambassadors of the US, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy to help "stop the exodus of the Serbian people" in the state-controlled Serbian media outlet, Politika, which has more than 203k followers on social media.

By contrast, tweets from Kremlin-affiliated accounts had relatively little engagement despite promoting a similar narrative. A post from RT Balkan with a video from the attack on a church received just 34 likes and 17 retweets while a tweet commemorating the anniversary from RS Sputnik had only 4 likes and 1 retweet.

The aim of this misleading portrayal of the movement of Kosovo Serbs by the Serbian President and Srpska Lista on their Facebook, X and Instagram accounts (with more than 424k followers combined), appears to be to fabricate a false narrative of 'pogroms' against Kosovo Serbs. This tactic appears intended to keep the Kosovo Serb community in a state of alarm and distress, thereby damaging the reputation of the Kosovar state and its government in the eyes of the international community. In reality, the situation for Kosovo Serbs in the four northern municipalities has been challenging and tense since November 2022, when Kosovo Serbs withdrew from the country's political, administrative, judicial, and police institutions. However, it is nowhere near the persecution Kosovar Albanians faced from Yugoslav authorities in the 1980s and 1990s.[8]

The Berlin-based think tank European Stability Initiative (ESI) highlighted that in this case, statistics about security threats have been presented in a misleading way; a common disinformation tactic. They note that none of the numerous international observers in Kosovo, including KFOR, EULEX, UNMIK and the OSCE, have reported 'ethnic cleansing of Serbs' or Albanian 'terror' in recent years. Despite this lack of evidence, incendiary claims persist. ESI, along with the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the Swiss news outlet Neue Zürcher Zeitung all emphasise the need for international organisations to refute false, misleading and dangerous claims about pogroms to prevent escalation to violence.

Finally, and of particular concern, Vučić reflected on lessons from Azerbaijan's former and current presidents, Heydar and Ilham Aliyev in the previously mentioned episode of Happy TV's 'Cirilica' posted in December 2023. The Serbian President notes that they waited 27 years for 'favourable geopolitical circumstances' before reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh. Vučić appears to imply that this

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[7]"Cirilica: Predsednik Vucic – Svi detalji haosa u Banjskoj: 'Koren problema je u Kurtijevom rezimu'" (2023). Happy TV. Available at: CIRILICA - Predsednik Vucic - Svi detalji haosa u Banjskoj - "Koren problema je u Kurtijevom rezimu" - YouTube

"Letter dated 5 February 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Serbia – Security Council, 9545th meeting" (2024). United Nations Security Council. Available at: Letter dated 5 February 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Serbia - Security Council, 9545th meeting | UN Web TV .

"Vucic: Ethnic cleansing is being carried out in Kosovo and Metohija by those who claim that democracy is their goal". (2024). Aleksandar Vučić . Available at: Вучић: На КиМ етничко чишћење спроводе они који тврде да им је демократија циљ (youtube.com) (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[8]"Srpska Lista addressed the Quint, demanding a stop to the exodus of the Serbian people" (2024). Politika. Available at: Srpska lista se obratila Kvinti, traže zaustavljanje egzodusa srpskog naroda (politika.rs) .

"Elek: Ovakav potez predstavlja uvod u egzodus srpskog naroda" (2024). 24 Sedam TV. Available at: Elek: Ovakav potez predstavlja uvod u egzodus srpskog naroda - Video platforma (24sedam.rs) .

"Ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population from the territory of all of Kosovo and Metohija" (2024). Detektor laži. Available at: http://twitter.com/LaziDetektor/statuses/1753526684857651505 (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

should serve as a blueprint for Serbia to seize Kosovo when new, favourable geopolitical conditions arise.

## Kosovo's acceptance into the Council of Europe

Kosovo applied for Council of Europe (CoE) membership in May 2022, shortly after Russia's expulsion from the organisation. It had planned this step for years but only with Russia's removal could it conceivably gain recognition from the required two-thirds of members. Predictably, Serbia's President Vučić opposed this move, accusing the West of deceit and vowing to vote against Kosovo's membership. Content analysis from ISD indicates that this was among the most highly discussed topics among Serbian officials between March and May 2024, with keywords including "savet evrope", "савет европе" (Council of Europe), "исход, савет европе (outcome, Council of Europe)". Over these months, Kosovo's application for membership was also hotly debated in media across the Western Balkans and was high on the agenda of politicians and governments in Kosovo, Serbia and various EU member states.

In Serbia, EU policies and accession criteria are generally often portrayed as 'anti-Serbian' in a deliberate effort to overlook the importance of maintaining good relations with Kosovo and other neighbours. On the question of Kosovo's membership in a body that is independent of the EU, the Serbian leadership sang from the same hymn sheet. For example, Vučić addressed a Serbian audience on the subject via a video posted to his YouTube channel, which has over 52k followers, on 17 March 2024. This narrative was not only found in the accounts of officials, however, with Serbian pro-government media outlets quickly following suit. Two notable examples of this both came from the Happy TV morning program 'Jutarnji', which has 323k subscribers on YouTube. The first (posted on 28 March 2024) is titled 'An initiative was launched for the admission of the fake state of Kosovo to the Council of Europe'. The second video, posted 20 days later, asks 'Who is still pushing for the fake state of Kosovo to join the Council of Europe?'.

When the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) appointed Dora Bakoyannis as Rapporteur for Kosovo's membership application, she stated that "everyone was aware" of her special ties with Serbia. In an op-ed for European Western Balkans, she notes that she represents another EU Member State that also does not recognise Kosovo's independence (Greece) and that she has worked previously on Serbia's EU integration process. She emphasised that her non-binding report focused on human rights and integrating two million [Kosovar citizens] into the CoE and would not make a statement about statehood. In the same op-ed mentioned above, Bakoyannis also states that Kosovo's acceptance by the CoE would be "particularly important for the Serbian community in the region". Bakoyannis set out conditions for a positive opinion on the application, including Pristina restoring the Serbian Monastery's property after 25 years, retracting a bill expropriating Serbian properties, and signing numerous human rights agreements to protect the Serbian minority internationally. She noted that no candidate has ever faced such extensive reforms before accession discussions and that Kosovo had fulfilled them, likely leading to 83% of the Assembly voting in favour of the Report.

Several high-ranking Serbian politicians, including then-Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, criticised Bakoyannis's statement in Serbian daily Blic, which has a combined 1.7 million followers on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and news sites, as "hypocritical and displaying double standards". The rapporteur, in turn, noted that Serbia's leadership had personally attacked her, labelling her "a shameless traitor".

Happy TV's popular infotainment show, Cirilica, also spread divisive narratives on the subject that appear intended to heighten tensions in the region. In a video from May 2024 titled 'Who is preparing a war against the Serbs?', panellists claimed that 'the enemy' aims to crush Serbia with the Srebrenica resolution and Kosovo's acceptance into the Council of Europe. The show, which attracted over 37m views, claimed to investigate who in the West is pushing for Kosovo's entry into the Council of Europe and who might be preparing for new conflicts, possibly even war, in the Balkans.

Kremlin-affiliated accounts also continued to play a role in shaping discourse, despite Russia's expulsion from the body. A post on X from RS Sputnik, quoting the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' claims that Kosovo is unprepared for membership and cannot join as it is not an independent state, received 208 likes and 41 retweets.

# North Macedonia

## Introduction

North Macedonia has a unique and complicated relationship with the EU in comparison to other Western Balkans countries. This relationship presents a vulnerability that can be exploited by a host of actors, domestic and foreign, intent on undermining the EU. They mainly relate to the country's ethnic composition, its fraught relationship with neighbouring Greece, and the resulting long delay on its accession trajectory which has exposed the EU itself to criticism.

North Macedonia has been an EU candidate country since 2005 and for years was stuck in the position of candidacy approval without entering the process of accession negotiations. However, in 2020 – two years after an agreement with Greece saw the country's constitutional name change to the Republic of North Macedonia – the country became a NATO member and received an invitation to open negotiations with the EU. For almost two years Bulgaria blocked the first Inter-Governmental conference and the initiation of negotiations by insisting that North Macedonia had failed to adhere to its bilateral treaties on "good neighbourly relations". This treaty includes the constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia, a population of more than 100,000 Bulgarian nationals (including Macedonians[9] with dual citizenship).

In June 2022, the EU bypassed the Bulgarian veto, but negotiations are currently frozen because there has been no qualified majority in the Assembly of North Macedonia in support of a vote recognising Bulgarians under the Constitution. As a result, anti-EU rhetoric within North Macedonia often references to the EU negotiating framework as the "Bulgarian framework" or "the French Proposal"[10]. Even mainstream civil society organisations and academics in North Macedonia have vehemently opposed accepting the invitation to open negotiations with the EU, echoing the concerns of pro-Kremlin voices that it will undermine North Macedonian identity. There is a direct comparison to be made with Albania's accession process as – at least currently – these are being treated as a package.[11]

As part of this study, ISD analysts sought to understand the impact of the EU accession process has had on disinformation and information operations in North Macedonia. The data analysed indicates a widespread misperception that the EU is forcing North Macedonia to compromise its national history and identity through the implementation of the treaty as part of its accession process. Discussed often in domestic media outlets, this viewpoint also extends to political leaders. The former Prime Minister of North Macedonia and President of the Social-Democratic Political Party (SDSM), Dimitar Kovachevski, stated in an X post in June 2022 that drew 322 likes that "the French proposal is currently unacceptable to me...my people must be respected."

In the case of domestic actors in North Macedonia, ISD's digital analysis found that opposition to negotiations with the EU is not restricted to fringe parties and political actors. Other influential entities

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[9] As per the Guidelines of the Agreement with Greece, the term Macedonian is retained to refer to the national majority, the Slavic Macedonian ethnicity and the language. Thus, the use of the adjective "North Macedonian" is against the agreement, which is erga omnes (applicable to all), and when referring to the institutions of the state in the form of an adjective one uses "of the Republic of North Macedonia."

[10] The term "The French Proposal" refers to the EU negotiating framework put forward during the French presidency, which included the implementation of 'good neighbourliness' treaties with both Bulgaria and Greece.

11 See also: "Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania is a long-overdue step forward for the EU's enlargement policy" (2022). Statement by Christa Schweng, EESC president and Dimitris Dimitriadis, president of the Section for External Relations. Available at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/presentations/opening-accession-negotiations-north-macedonia-and-albania-long-overdue-step-forward-eus-enlargement-policy. (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

included the ruling VMRO-DPMNE– a centre right party with close ties with Hungary's ruling party Fidesz – as well as institutions such as the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the oldest and most reputable newspaper, Nova Makedonija. At the same time, many historically pro-EU NGOs and think-tanks in the country have also become increasingly vocal over the past seven-to-eight years in questioning the utility of joining the union. This phenomenon is discussed further below and includes a case study on the so-called French Proposal.[12]

Though CSOs and the broader mainstream public previously embraced the Prespa Agreement that led to the country's name change in February 2019, our analysis suggests that support has gradually eroded to reluctant acceptance. During the same period, there has been heightened involvement from these entities, via media appearances and activism, in opposing the negotiating framework adopted by the EU during the French presidency ("the French Proposal").

The first wave of misinformation around the negotiating framework in June and July 2022 came from unexpected sources: the NGOs and think-tanks which were historically considered pro-EU. The data collected for this study, which spans four years, suggests these actors continue to play a central role in spreading the narrative that the negotiating framework attempts to 'introduce history and language' into North Macedonia and therefore attempts to weaken national identity. Influential figures in Skopje, including the head of the European Policy Institute, characterise the process of accession as a threat to Macedonian identity.[13]

In the political sphere, the belief that the proposal would be devastating to Macedonian national identity has been promoted by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski compared the proposal, which would include Bulgarians within the constitution, to the occupation of the region by Axis-aligned Bulgaria during WWII. The left-wing Levica party has voiced similar views, describing the proposal as an "attempt to Bulgarianise the Constitution".[14]  The widespread nature of this mainstreamed argument leaves North Macedonia (and the EU more broadly) vulnerable to foreign interference efforts from those invested in destabilising support for the union.

According to recent polls, national support for EU accession fell more than 30% since the name change of the country, and has fallen further since the Bulgarian veto.[15] The view that the EU framework is an insidious plan to "efface Macedonian identity and replace it with a Bulgarian one"[16] has been

[12] "The French Proposal": Hate Speech, Misinformation and Media Manipulation (Skopje: IMA, 2023). Zarko Trajanoski. 25-41.

[13] "What is the Cost for the Western Balkans: Existing and New Instruments of EU Enlargement (2023). European Policy Institute. Available at: https://epi.org.mk/post/20834. In the latter poll, which shows only 49% support for EU accession, support for Russia seems to be negligible. In the IRI poll from 2024, support is explicit and features in most of the combined responses, including the single response of 21% in favour of Russia only (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[14] "North Macedonia's EU path is under threat from an unlikely actor: Much of the Macedonian civil society has joined the right in rejecting a deal with Sofia and Brussels. This is dangerous" (2022). Katerina Kolozova, Al Jazeera English. Available at : https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/18/north-macedonias-eu-path-is-in-danger

Pourquoi la France est désignée comme responsable dans les désaccords entre la Bulgarie et Macédoine du Nord (30 July 2022). Elise Bernard and Katerina Kolozova, Le Journal du Dimanche. Available at : https://www.lejdd.fr/International/pourquoi-la-france-est-designee-comme-responsable-dans-les-desaccords-entre-la-bulgarie-et-macedoine-du-nord- 4120793 (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[15] Western Balkans Poll May 2024 (2024). IRI. Available at: https://www.iri.org/news/iri-2024-western-balkans-poll/. In response to the question "What Should Our Country's Foreign Policy Be?", 31% responded the EU and the West while 21% responded Russia only. The rest of the responses suggested a combination of the EU and Russia. A poll conducted by Euro-Think Institute from Skopje in 2023 showed similar results, with only 49% of citizens supporting EU accession. Available at: https://360stepeni.mk/evrometar-samo-49-otsto-od-graganite-smetaat-deka-vlezot-vo-eu-e-dobra-rabota-golem-pad-na-poddrshkata-za-evrointegratsiite/ (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[16] Paraphrase of the director of the Institute of Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS). Telma TV debate April 2023). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niAIgX_s-CU (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

propagated by the mainstream centre right and left, media outlets, and by NGOs with a long history of being supported by EU and US funds.[17] This confusing and atypical situation suggests that misinformation and disinformation can morph to a degree that it alters the popular consensus.

Outside of the accession process, another poll conducted in 2018 found that 83% of the respondents stated support for the EU accession of the country.[18] However, when posed the same question in April 2024, just 31% of Macedonian citizens (around 20% of them ethnic Albanians) supported the pro-Western and pro-EU policies of the government. Smaller percentages were found to favour "equal integration" or "equally close relations" with both the EU and Russia.

As this analysis highlights, this decline in support for the EU is likely due to two key factors. The first, a relentless campaign by domestic and foreign actors to demonstrate how "the imposed" change of the country's name (a term used by the winning party in the 2024 parliamentary elections) has been traumatic to the nation. The second, the dispute with Bulgaria and its solution in the form of the 'French Proposal', which are treated as a catalyst for the spread of misinformation about the EU. In this absence of trust in Western institutions, Russia is presented as a potential protective force for Macedonian identity and nationalist policies.

## Methodology

Considering the complexity of the context, and the intertwining of overt anti-EU and pro-Kremlin actors with those who were perceived as established pro-Europeans and pro-Western, this study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Two complimentary datasets were produced by a combination of tools, including Brandwatch, CrowdTangle and INspectre. These captured a range of social media data across platforms in terms of both actors and content.

### Keyword/content analysis

To produce these datasets, an initial 254 keywords were used for capturing content, which included actors, hashtags and tropes (rhetorical turns of phrases that include the keywords from the list). These terms included "Never North" (referring to the idea that the country is simply Macedonia), "Severdzani," "Northerstanians" (derogative for the supporters of the name change of the country), "The French Proposal," "The Bulgarian Proposal," "Genocide," "Bulgarisation," "Unmacedonised Macedonia," "Bulgarians in the Constitution," and "Open Balkans". These results were analysed using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify core narratives, determine the nature of online conversation, and isolate the most prominent online actors commenting on this set of issues around North Macedonia.

### Actor-based analysis

ISD's actor-based approach to data collection leveraged existing knowledge of the North Macedonian information ecosystem and a study published in May 2023[19] which analysed the views of the most influential CSOs and media in the country. This study, and others performed by regional experts, emphasise the importance of actors that are not openly pro-Russian or have the reputation of being pro-Western but those that have become staunch critics of the country's EU accession process in recent years. For the purposes of this study, openly pro-Kremlin actors were also included to allow for a comparative analysis of their discourse.

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[17] "Krzalovski - the French Proposal Has Created Damage for the Entire Society" (2022). Radio Free Europe Macedonia. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31948593.html (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[18] "IRI Poll: High Support for EU and NATO ahead of the Referendum" (2018). Meta. Available at: https://meta.mk/anketa-na-iri-golema-poddrshka-za-eu-i-nato-pred-referendumot/ (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[19] "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in North Macedonia" (Skopje: ISSHS, 2023). Katerina Kolozova and Tihomir Topuzovski. Available at: http://tinyurl.com/bdh8hhnd (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

This approach generated lists of dozens of actors, including those linked to misinformation as well as more mainstream outlets such media and NGOs. The resultant lists were then cross-referenced with keywords and tropes outlined above, which showed that the lines between mainstream actors once perceived as pro-EU and openly pro-Eurasian voices in the country have become blurred due to the EU accession negotiating framework.

ISD's digital analysis codified actors in the North Macedonian information sphere according to the following characteristics:

1. Overlap with Russian discourse.
2. Resonates similarly with the discourse on "Eurasia" and "Eurasianism".
3. Engaging in sovereigntist discourse (overlapping with Eurosceptic arguments that North Macedonia should stay 'sovereign' i.e. outside of the union).
4. Historically known as pro-EU yet displaying a turn toward Euroscepticism.

To assess the importance of media sources in shaping political views in the Western Balkans, ISD compiled information from online media outlets, including online versions of conventional media (such as broadcast and print), and analysed social media posts. Qualitative analysis of this data involved producing media monitoring templates typically used for broadcast media analysis, which were then adjusted for the media subject to this study (text rather than visual imagery).

The North Macedonian landscape requires a nuanced approach with regard to FIMI, given the propensity of unexpected actors to produce and engage with disinformation. As it is impossible to distinguish between pro-Russia Eurasianist voices and pro-European ones, a media monitoring guide was used to categorise actors. The second part of the study presents quantitative findings which correspond and corroborate the qualitative findings from this media analysis.

Qualitative analysis of both social media and conventional media sources identified the following narratives:

1. Claims that negotiations have not yet begun.
2. Claims that North Macedonia should be looking for alternatives to the EU accession, primarily arguing that negotiations will lead to a dead-end or the loss of Macedonian national identity.
3. Claims that that the proposed EU negotiating framework should not be accepted or explicitly rejected.[20]
4. Claims that negotiations should paused or frozen unless the framework is changed.
5. Claims that the conditions laid out for accession after 2020 have been devised to delay the process.

## Analysis
### Identifying peaks in volume
In previous studies, high levels of anti-EU discourse were found in the periods of June 2022 to September 2022, and from spring to September 2023. In those periods, arguments about accession to the EU from EU- and USAID-funded organisations were found to overlap fully with those of the VMRO-DPMNE.

While ISD's analysis for this study focused on openly pro-Russian or openly anti-EU actors around the election period of April-May 2024, quantitative research covers the entire period of 2020-2024. This allows for the identification of false and misleading narratives that arose in the aftermath of the

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[20] This often includes misleading language about 'renegotiation' even though candidate countries do not participate in setting these conditions.

country name change which effectively laid the groundwork for greater disillusionment with the EU. As such, it acted as the catalyst to distrust and disinformation surrounding admission to NATO and EU accession negotiations. A key finding from this research is that since these negotiations began, there has been an almost complete overlap between pro-Russian discourse and Russian criticism of the EU itself (including its treatment of North Macedonia).

As explored in greater depth below, the main narrative is that the negotiating framework or "French Proposal" includes 'invisible traps' which will undermine Macedonian identity. This leads to the argument that North Macedonia should freeze EU accession negotiations indefinitely. Similar arguments were found from both 'pro-Western' experts and media, and from openly pro-Russian actors. The only difference between these arguments is that openly pro-Russian actors also push for North Macedonia to leave NATO, apply for BRICS membership, or be fully 'sovereign' and unaligned with any major geopolitical power. Notably, typically pro-EU think tanks including the European Policy Institute (EPI) and Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje (IDSCS) argued that that "full sovereignty and geopolitical non-alignment" compares to Yugoslavia's membership in the League of Non-Aligned Countries. Influential actors such as the [former Prime Minister of North Macedonia](#) also argue that the Open Society Initiative "Open Balkans" should replace the EU accession.[21]

This digital analysis also surfaced evidence of potential CIB in the EPI's review of the EU's progress report on North Macedonia in 2023, which was published as a sponsored post on Facebook. CrowdTangle shows that the post had an "overperforming" score (i.e. how it performs relative to the page's usual baseline) of 19x, the second highest for the page in the last 12 months. However, of the 700 likes, 80% of accounts had Russian-, Ukrainian-, or South American-sounding names. Although heightened international interest in the issue is not impossible, it is highly unlikely given the relatively specific topic and the paucity of such engagement on other posts. By contrast, only 2% of likes came from users in North Macedonia or the Western Balkans.

## Confluence of actors spreading Euroscepticism

The data collected revealed a confluence of actors engaged in spreading misinformation about "the French Proposal". The ecosystem of these actors includes the North Macedonian right-wing mainstream, civil society groups and NGOs, the openly pro-Russian radical right, and the radical left. The tight intertwining between pro-Russian and/or anti-EU sentiments with those that still want to accede to the EU and subscribe to some of its values is specific to the situation in North Macedonia. This appears to reflect a bipartisan dissatisfaction with the EU negotiating framework; this contrasts with Serbia, where there is a clear distinction between pro-Russian and pro-EU parts of the society. Matters are further complicated by Serbia being seen as an important ally of North Macedonia, yet also partly responsible for the [flow of false and misleading content](#) from both [Russia and domestic Serbian sources](#) into the country's ecosystem.[22]

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[21] Restoring EU Credibility (2023). ISSHS. 22. Compare with the following EPI analysis: "Even if We Include the Bulgarians in Our Constitution, Bulgaria will keep on Blocking Us" (2023). Malinka Ristevska Jordanova. Available at: https://pressingtv.mk/makedonija/ristevska-jordanova-i-da-gi-vmetneme-bugarite-vo-ustavot-bugarija-ke-prodolzhi-da-ne-blokira/ (Last accessed: 15.09.2024).

[22] See also: "Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War: The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe" (Bulgaria: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, 2022). Rumena Filipova and Vladimir Shopov (eds.) Available at https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Report_Authoritarians-on-a-Media-Offensive.pdf ; "Breaking the Code: Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe" (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023). Goran Georgiev, Vanya Petrova and Kristina Tsabala.

Corroborating the findings of the 2024 IRI poll on attitudes towards Russia and the EU, the qualitative and quantitative research conducted for this study reaffirms that Eurosceptic sentiment is embedded across political divides. As a result, mainstream actors and media outlets that are not habitually perceived as pro-Russian or anti-EU have at times become platforms for Euroscepticism and implicit (or even explicit) pro-Kremlin viewpoints. These sources include Radio Free Europe in Macedonian, Deutsche Welle in Macedonian, and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). These outlets were included in our dataset because the arguments, turns of phrases (tropes), and narratives produced by some of their prominent authors at times echo those put forward by prominent Russian think-tanks.

For example, in July 2023 the Russian Council-funded think-tank Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) asserted that the EU had put pressure on Macedonia to change its name and flag due to the position of Greece and commented on new conditions being introduced by Bulgaria. Meanwhile, an article published in March 2023 by Deutsche Welle in Macedonian used similar tropes, arguing that EU negotiations are being 'held captive' by Bulgaria, and that the Annalena Baerbock, German Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, had not guaranteed that Macedonian identity would not be threatened (despite this being explicitly stated in the European Parliament in July 2022).

Similar points were made by a frequent contributor to Deutsche Welle and BIRN, who accused the EU of spreading disinformation and argued the West was attempting to destabilise the region rather than Russia. In another example, interviews given by actors on different sides of the EU accession debate echoed similar narratives about 'bulgarisation' of the process. A pro-Kremlin actor noted by the US State Department for spreading antisemitic and anti-West conspiracy theories in 2023 referred to 'European hypocrisy in breaching its own principles', while Nikola Dimitrov (former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister) claimed that conditions concerning historical heritage had not been imposed on other EU candidates. Although these actors are perceived as being neutral or positive in regard to their stance on the EU, their arguments at times overlap with pro-Kremlin voices.

An X post from Dimitrov in November 2020, stating that North Macedonia's language and "self-determination" should not be an obstacle to accession talks, received 695 likes and 166 reposts. Another from July 2022 called for the EU not to rush Macedonians to accept the proposal and received 97 likes and 28 retweets. These are further examples of the overlaps between perceived pro-EU actors (who are disappointed by the EU negotiating framework) and the messages used by openly pro-Kremlin actors who may seek to exploit this disappointment to propagate anti-EU sentiment.

This overlap also extends to mainstream politics. Many of the talking points used by civil society actors and news outlets also echo nationalist and right-wing Eurosceptic sentiments expressed by the VMRO-DPMNE, which won parliamentary elections in May 2024. Among the most notable posts came from current prime minister and president of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickovski. Ahead of a vote by the Assembly of North Macedonia on "the French proposal", Mickovski posted a video of protests against it which received 2.2k views. Aleksandar Nikolovski, the vice president of VMRO-DPMNE, was also engaged in promoting narratives which were negative towards the framework. In one post from July 16 2022 (the day which the Assembly voted to accept the proposal), he wrote on X that "Bulgaria has been WAITING FOR SUCH TRAITORS for centuries to carry out Bulgarianization!".
VMRO-DPMNE's discourse overlaps with that shared by actors from the declaredly pro-Russian political party, Levica ("the Left"). In an X post from June 2022, Dimitar Apasiev, president of Levica, wrote that Macron had called citizens "North Macedonians" (a form of disrespect as the party does not support the name change). This post received 349 likes and 88 retweets, and included a hashtag that translates as 'Stop Bulgarianisation'. Both VMRO-DPMNE and Levica organised mass protests in

June and July 2022 related to the EU Council's invitation to open negotiations. These positions were backed by formerly pro-EU experts.

Similar slogans can be found among social media posts from pro-Russian pundits such as Milenko Nedelkovski, who endorsed VMRO-DPMNE in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. He was previously noted by the European Parliament as a disinformation source in the Western Balkans. In May 2024, Nedelkovski posted on X that the victory of VMRO-DPMNE in the latter was comparable to Victory in Europe Day. As such, regardless of whether actors were perceived as pro-EU or Eurosceptic, our analysis found anti-EU sentiment was prevalent.

### Misinformation about the accession process

As described above, ISD's analysts observed pervasive sentiment across the political spectrum that the EU negotiating framework is designed to erase Macedonian identity in favour of redefining it as Bulgarian. This conspiracy theory is shared by mainstream actors who have actively rebranded the accession process as 'Bulgarisation' or 'Bulgarianisation', instead of Europeanisation.

Specifically in the context of the 2024 elections, media outlets reported a dominant theme among VMRO-DPMNE voters was that negotiations would lead to Macedonia being 'erased' as a country, along with a belief that EU collapse was imminent. Similar comments came from nominally pro-Western NGOs opposed to the negotiation process that argued for the rejection of the Framework and the negotiations (and accession) process itself. One such example comes from a ResPublica op-ed published by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS, or ИКС in Cyrillic) in April 2024 titled, "Now What, Are we With the EU or Russia?".

Qualitative analysis surfaced the following mis- and disinformation narratives featured in Eurosceptic discussions:

- 'Negotiations with the EU have not started' because of conditions concerning the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution
- 'Negotiations are not real', despite clear statements from EU and government officials to the contrary
- 'Bulgaria is vetoing negotiations', despite the veto being lifted precisely through the adoption of the negotiation framework
- 'The French Proposal' lifts the Bulgarian veto but is not a real EU negotiating framework
- 'The EU/French always promise and never deliver', on account of North Macedonia having been an EU candidate since March 2005

As highlighted, discussion of dystopian outcomes for North Macedonia or for the EU, or both, often becomes Eurosceptic simply by indicating disappointment in the process to date. The Bulgarian veto appears to have aggravated this narrative, as it is presented as evidence of the EU's failure to meet its own commitments on enlargement. Evidence of this comes from an interview with the Dutch Ambassador to North Macedonia, carried out by Radio Free Europe Macedonia. The Ambassador factchecked and corrected an interviewer who repeatedly asked him "what [it] will take to start the negotiations and lift the Bulgarian veto." His responses, that "the negotiations have commenced and the veto has been lifted", were continually ignored and the interviewer's premise was never refuted. These types of narratives may leave North Macedonia vulnerable to persuasion from Russia and other foreign actors with interests in the region to form alternative alliances. Kremlin-aligned and pro-Kremlin actors actively participate in online discourse about North Macedonia's EU candidacy. For these sources, frustrations with and interpretation of EU accession as a threat to traditional culture

and values provides an opportunity to push an alternate geostrategic alliance, with Russia as the dominant force in Europe.

## Alignment between left and right on accession

Quantitative analysis of oppositional conversation about the EU negotiating framework online from January 2022 to May 2024 reveals that openly pro-Russian and nationalist political party Levica was the most active. Levica was equally active in opposing the country's name change via the Prespa agreement with Greece in 2018. More recently, Levica focused on encouraging mass mobilisation. In a post from July 2022, Levica called for a protest before 'D-Day', referring to a vote on the proposal which they said would trigger the 'Bulgarianisation of Macedonia'. This effort did not draw significant engagement, however, with just 66 likes and 31 posts.

While Levica is openly opposed to NATO and EU membership, their opposition to 'the French Proposal' overlaps in rhetoric with the nominally centre-right ruling party VMRO-DPMNE. This phenomenon of overlap between left- and right-wing actors is also evident in the below table, which charts the sources most shared in the ISD dataset of online posts about the EU accession process.

| Top Shared Sites | Volume of Mentions |
|---|---|
| english.republika.mk | 588 |
| balkaninsight.com | 271 |
| mkd.mk | 20 |
| epi.org.mk | 17 |
| twitter.com | 17 |
| novamakedonija.com.mk | 17 |
| idscs.org.mk | 16 |
| opserver.mk | 12 |
| youtube.com | 11 |
| libertas.mk | 10 |

*Table 4. Sources most shared among the ISD dataset of posts about the accession process and negotiation framework, based on a search for English-language keywords.*

In first place, Republika.mk is an outlet with open ties and affinities to VMRO-DPMNE and a history of propagating opposition to the Agreement with Greece, the Treaty with Bulgaria, and the EU negotiating framework. However, the high number of links to Balkan Insight is more surprising as it is generally regarded as an expert source with limited reach among the general population. It is likely that its popularity in this search reflects numerous reshares on other sites, such as Republika.mk.

Equally surprising is the high number of links to think-tanks including the European Policy Institute (EPI) and the Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS). This is testament to the argument that even traditionally pro-Western institutions echoed concerns about 'Bulgarianisation' and commented on the accession process in a negative way. Analysis of the actors with the highest number of posts on this subject also points to the importance of these think-tanks.

| Top Authors | Volume of Posts |
|---|---|
| @RepublikaEmg | 356 |
| @BalkanInsight | 290 |
| @Dimitrov_Nikola | 158 |
| @JasonMiko | 41 |
| @MarkoTroshan | 40 |
| @epi_skopje | 28 |
| @jondknight | 28 |
| @IDSCS_Skopje | 20 |
| @MalinkaJordanov | 19 |
| @skacarska | 18 |

*Table 5. The most prolific authors within the ISD dataset, based on a search for English keywords related to the accession process and proposal.*

Acting executive director of EPI Simonida Kacarska had the tenth most posts, while the former executive director Malinka Ristevska Jordanova had the ninth. Marko Troshanovski, the executive director of IDSCS, had the fifth highest number of posts. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov was the highest individual account by posts in the period, who also produced the most shared and cited tweets (in English) during the protests in July 2022.

## Conclusion

North Macedonia presents an unusual situation in which traditionally pro-European voices as well as pro-Russian voices have largely moved towards the same arguments as a result of controversy around the EU accession process. The new government, led by VMRO-DPMNE, has committed to not recognising the Bulgarian minority, to ignore the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece by calling the country 'Macedonia' (instead of North Macedonia), and to pause the accession process indefinitely until the negotiation framework or 'French Proposal' has been changed. As highlighted in ISD's digital analysis, this may leave North Macedonia vulnerable to influence efforts from Russia and other actors interested in the destabilisation of the EU.

# Conclusion

Despite differences between the four Western Balkans countries analysed as part of this report, ISD's research shows that disinformation in the region is primarily driven by leading politicians, parties and news outlets rather than foreign state and non-state actors. Although a number of these actors have implicit or explicit links to Russia, Kremlin-affiliated news sites and voices had limited success compared to domestic actors which used social media platforms to promote a range of misleading or explicitly false claims as well as polarising content.

Our research also found that euroscepticism is increasingly the norm across the Western Balkans. This is unsurprising in Serbia, which has long maintained an affinity towards Russia and where memories of NATO's intervention in the Kosovo War remain. However, the decline in support for EU accession in North Macedonia reflects a broader disillusionment amongst previously pro-EU voices whose discourse has increasingly come to resemble pro-Kremlin politicians. Across the region, longstanding inter-ethnic resentments are also still commonly deployed to promote the idea that minority groups threaten the sovereignty of West Balkan states (this is particularly clear in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the multi-ethnic identity of the country).

The spread of misinformation poses an obvious avenue for the Kremlin to simultaneously hinder Euro-Atlantic cooperation and draw attention away from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It also threatens to undermine democratic standards in the Western Balkans and weaken civil society organisations which seek to hold political actors in the Western Balkans to account.

For the German government, there are several recommendations to reduce the risk posed by the spread of misinformation in the Western Balkans. The first is to provide support to local CSOs, NGOs and media literacy organisations in the Western Balkans by providing them with financial support, technical training and legal protections; these actors are embedded in local politics and more credible than external agents and must play a key role in addressing false narratives.

The government should also appoint a dedicated expert or team within the Foreign Office to monitor and analyse disinformation campaigns in the region. Despite similarities in the Eurosceptic and pro-Russian narratives spread across the region, the nuances of politics in individual countries require real-time monitoring. This expert or team would liaise with embassies, local media and intelligence agencies to track emerging threats and help to brief German diplomatic missions and EU partners on disinformation trends in the region.

Greater coordination with EU and other friendly actors in the information sphere is also necessary. A regional conference with stakeholders including the German Marshall Fund (GMF), Radio Free Europe, CSOs and local media outlets would strengthen collaboration and allow for a unified response to disinformation. Regular briefings and a media resilience network connecting local partners with European actors can also help to stem disinformation in the region.

Finally, Germany should adopt a whole-of-government approach to disinformation. The Western Balkans is a perfect example of the complex information landscape in which pro-Kremlin and other hostile actors seek to exploit to spread antipathy and distrust towards the West and democratic institutions. An Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Disinformation that brings together representatives from the Foreign Office, Federal Ministry of the Interior, Federal Intelligence Service (BND) and Federal

Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) could holistically counteract both domestic and foreign-focused disinformation.

The spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans has the potential to impact democratic processes and norms across Europe and embolden Russia to support local actors who promote authoritarianism and polarising rhetoric. Whilst this report highlights the current out-size importance of domestic actors and traditional media sources in spreading misinformation in the Western Balkans, globally we see trends towards the increasing effectiveness and significance of FIMI spread through online channels and social networks. As the consumption of media evolves in the Western Balkans, working to mitigate and halt the potential for dissemination and impact of false information in the region is of vital importance.

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