



IMSIS
International Master
Security, Intelligence
& Strategic Studies



**Erasmus
Mundus**

An Assessment of Russia's Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

August 2022

GUID: 2686607

DCU ID: 21109320

CU ID: 51927340

**Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
International Master in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies**

Word Count: 21,385

Supervisor: Marcin Kaczmarek

Date of Submission: 26 August 2023



CHARLES UNIVERSITY

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
1. Introduction	3
1.1. Research Question.....	3
2. Historical Background	5
2.1. Russia in the Western Balkans	5
2.2. Russia-Ukraine War and implications for WB	11
3. Literature Review	12
3.1. Hybrid Warfare (HW)	13
3.2. Information Warfare (IW)	16
3.3. Definition of Disinformation	17
3.4 Russian Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans	19
3.5. Methods and Tactics	22
3.6. Media Landscape	25
3.7. The impact of disinformation campaigns on public opinion and political discourse	27
4. Theoretical Framework	28
4.1. Media Effects Theory	28
4.2. Agenda Setting Theory.....	30
5. Methodology	31
5.1. Research Methods	31
5.2. Research implications.....	32
5.3. Limitations	34
6. Findings and Analysis	35
6.1. Introduction to Findings and Analysis.....	35
6.2. Kremlin’s Utilisation of Traditional Media.....	36
6.3. Narratives	40
6.3.1. War in Ukraine	41
6.3.2. West	41
6.3.3. Historical Grievances and Regional Disputes	43
6.4. Utilisation of Twitter Platform as a Tool of New Media.....	45
6.4.1. Kosovo	47
6.4.2. Serbia	50
6.4.3. Montenegro	54
6.4.4. Albania	55
6.4.5. Bosnia and Herzegovina	57
6.4.6. North Macedonia	59
6.5. Domestic Actors as Amplifiers of Russia’s Disinformation Campaigns.....	62
6.6. Impact of Disinformation on Political Discourse	65
6.7. Impact of Disinformation on Public Opinion	68
7. Discussion	71
Conclusion	73
Bibliography	74
Appendix	95

Abstract

In a world where the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred, this thesis delves into the insidious yet sophisticated machinery of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans post-2022 Ukrainian invasion consequently raising the question: how the Kremlin has leveraged both traditional and new media to disseminate disinformation, and how these efforts have shaped public opinion and political discourse in the Western Balkans? Anchored by a robust historical background, the study provides an overview of Russia's engagement in the Western Balkans, tracing the geopolitical dynamics that culminate in the contemporary information landscape. The literature review offers a thorough examination of key theories and definitions central to the research, including Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, and the concept of disinformation itself. This sets the stage for a deeper understanding of Russian strategies in the region, providing analytical frameworks of Media Effects Theory and Agenda Setting Theory. Employing a multi-methodological approach, this research uncovers patterns of Russian influence across multiple media outlets and platforms, focusing particularly on the utilisation of traditional media and the Twitter platform as tools of disinformation.

The findings delineate the Kremlin's sophisticated already existing narratives, ranging from the war in Ukraine to regional disputes, and their impact in Western Balkans countries such as Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the study explores the role of domestic actors in amplifying Russia's disinformation campaigns. It reveals that these orchestrated disinformation campaigns have not only shaped political discourse but also contributed to shaping public opinion, often exacerbating existing divisions and tensions. The thesis concludes by outlining the far-reaching implications of these disinformation strategies for regional stability and broader geopolitical discourse, while also acknowledging the limitations of the study. This research fills a critical gap in understanding Russia's current disinformation campaigns, providing insights for policymakers, scholars, and media practitioners.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Question

In recent decades, the rapid development of information technology has intensified disinformation raising significant concerns across the global political landscape. While the phenomenon of disinformation is not new, the fast proliferation of new technologies and social media outlets have amplified its impact. At the heart of the current global trend is Russia's engagement in disinformation campaigns, particularly in regions where it seeks to exert political, economic, and diplomatic influence. The focus of this dissertation is Western Balkan region which includes the countries of **Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia**. The Western Balkan with its geostrategic position and cultural diversity has been historically a “chessboard” for great powers. These countries are susceptible to foreign malign influence, and more recently there has been an increase in Russia's complex hybrid-information warfare techniques.

This dissertation explores the Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a watershed moment in relations of Russia with the West. The primary question that drives this research is: *How has the Kremlin used traditional and new media to wage disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine? And subsequently, how has it influenced public opinion and the political discourse in the region?*

While several studies have explored Russian disinformation campaigns in different regions, there is a noticeable gap in the literature addressing the Western Balkans, especially in the post 2022 invasion of Ukraine context. With the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, understanding the methods, tactics, and impacts of these campaigns in this region becomes vital, as it can offer insights into Russia's broader geopolitical strategies and intentions.

Exploring historical narratives and contemporary geopolitical developments, like the war in Ukraine, the role of the West, historical grievances, and regional disputes, are designed to resonate with specific audiences in the Western Balkans, subsequently influencing their perceptions and the political discourse. The road map for this dissertation is organised as follows.

After **Chapter I** which introduced the topic of the paper, research question and main argument the author proceeds with the next chapter. **Chapter II** briefly elaborates on the historical background, discussing Russia's role in the Western Balkans, and provides an overview of Russian disinformation campaigns and the implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for the region. **Chapter III** reviews the existing literature, covering concepts of hybrid warfare (HW), information warfare (IW), the definition of disinformation, methods and tactics and the media landscape in the Western Balkans. **Chapter IV** introduces the theoretical framework by focusing on the media effects theory and the agenda setting theory. **Chapter V** outlines the research methodology. The author selected qualitative content analysis, Twitter content analysis and structured questionnaires with open-ended questions. The second part of this chapter outlines implications and limitations of the study. **Chapter V** focused on findings and their analysis, consisting of four sections: Kremlin's utilisation of traditional and new media outlets (e.g., Twitter), utilisation of Twitter platform as a tool of new media, domestic actors as amplifiers of Russia's disinformation campaigns, and the impact of disinformation campaigns in public opinion and political discourse. **Chapter VI** delves into discussion of the findings and analysis part of the paper followed by the **Conclusion** section.

This dissertation seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the methods, tactics, and consequences of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since 2022, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on global information warfare.

2. Historical Background

To comprehend the Kremlin's interest in the Western Balkans, it is crucial to examine the historical landscape of this region, as well as the involvement of great powers historically seeking to exert their influence in the region. This chapter paves the way for understanding the historical context of Russia in the region and proceeds in three parts: Russia in the Western Balkans, An overview of Russian disinformation campaigns and the Russian brutal invasion of Ukraine, and implications for Western Balkans.

2.1. Russia in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan has a complex history, having been at the centre of great power competition and a crossroad of interest between various powers, notably the Ottoman Empire, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and China, and in recent times the European Union's strategic interests (Bechev, 2019; Chrzová *et al.*, 2019; Mahmutaj, 2023, p. 126). Historically, politics in the region have been challenging, in large part because of its ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, as well as the different interests of powerful external powers. The Western Balkans have suffered tensions and bloody conflicts in its old and modern history and intervention of outside powers has been necessary. In the recent historical context, the rise to power of Slobodan Milosevic in the late 1980s, characterised by the surge of aggressive Serbian nationalism, precipitated the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. This unravelling gave way to ensuing violent conflicts in a region that holds strategic importance, being situated in the immediate vicinity of the European Union (Bieber and Tzifakēs, 2020, pp. 188–190).

Unfortunately, nationalism remains a powerful force fuelled by territorial disputes, economic stagnation, religious and ethnic differences that make the region unstable and susceptible to the influence and interference of external actors. Throughout its Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet time, Russia has had varying interests in the Western Balkans, mostly secondary to its primary geostrategic concern of securing its western frontiers. The 1774 Treaty of Kuchuk (Rossos, 1981; Bechev, 2017, p. 3) between the Russian and Ottoman Empire included concessions to Russia permitting it to claim the role of protector of Orthodox Christians in the Balkans (*ibid.*). While some historians make the argument that Russia's interest was primarily "altruistic" (Okey, 2007; Bechev, 2019), serving as the protector of eastern Orthodox South Slavs, others (Scepanovic, 2023; Sunter, 2020; Greene *et al.*, 2021, p. 9) argue that Russia's interest today has been to meddle in the region and undermine Western values and democracy. Russia has been playing the role of a great power in the region since WWI, when it entered the war to protect Serbia against Austria-Hungary and Germany (IWM, n.d).

During the Cold War, the purpose of Russian foreign policy was to extend its strategic interests, promote socialist ideologies, and have influence not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Balkans. However, the Soviet Union's influence in the Balkans faced challenges due to the Yugoslav-Soviet

breakup in 1948 (Rajak et al., 2017, p. 22), and strained relations with Albania after the death of Stalin. During the Gorbachev era and the early years of post-Soviet Russia, the Western Balkans did not receive as much attention due to Russia's prioritisation of cooperation with the West (Entina and Pivovarenko, 2020). This was mainly due to Russia's economic and military weakness.

Consequently, in 2003, Russia withdrew peacekeeping troops from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bechev, 2019, p. 9), showing a diminished interest in the regional security sphere but not in the economic one. Considering Vladimir Putin's ascension to power, there has been a marked resurgence in Russia's interest and involvement in the Western Balkans. Putin's foreign policy was more assertive and aggressive, intending to restore Russia's position as a global power and confronting Western countries (ibid.).

The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 were perceived as humiliations by Russia (Bechev, 2019, McBride, 2022). When NATO entered Kosovo, Russia deployed troops trying to have a controlling role in the country; however, their efforts were thwarted by NATO (Entina and Pivovarenko, 2020, p. 188; Džuverović and Stojarová, 2022, p. 237).

Russia has been the main supporter of Serbia, particularly opposing Kosovo's statehood, and it has sought to disrupt Western Balkan countries' efforts to join Euro-Atlantic institutions. Russia shares many similarities with this region, particularly with Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, such as language, religion and cultures, and it is considered a sphere of geopolitical interest (Bechev, 2019). The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) serves as a significant channel for extending political influence in the region, overseeing parishes in many countries like Serbia, Montenegro, and entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbian Churches in Kosovo (Bechev et al., 2019, pp. 15–32; Del Popolo, 2019). Russia also has economic interests in the Balkans for the supply of gas and crude oil (Bechev, 2019, p. 17). Figure 2.1 reveals the EU's economic dominance in the Western Balkans, accounting for a staggering 81% of exports and 59.7% of imports. What this figure underscores is a dichotomy: while Russia's political and cultural ties remain strong, its economic influence is perhaps not as potent. Nevertheless, the economic footprint in the Western Balkans, specifically in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vladimirov et al., 2018, pp. 12–20), together with

the factors mentioned above, make the region vulnerable to Russia’s malign influence and interference in domestic and regional developments.

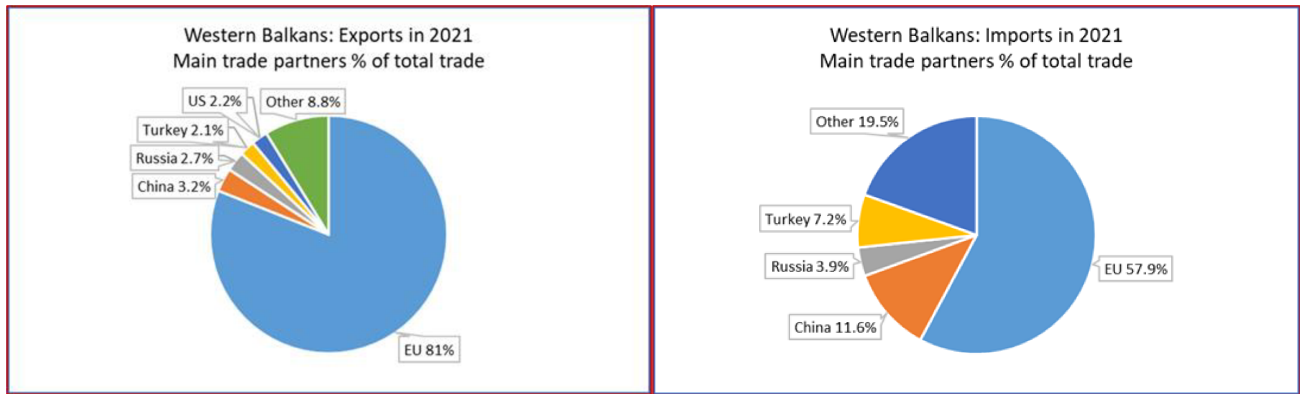


Figure 2.1 Western Balkans Export and Import with EU – 2021/ Source: UnComtrade

Following Crimea's 2014 annexation, Russia's more assertive stance in the Western Balkans intensified concerns about the Kremlin destabilizing the region. Additionally, in 2008, Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states from Georgia was perceived by many as retaliation against the West for supporting Kosovo's independence declaration (McNamara, 2008). Russia used the region's existing resentments and divisions to increase its influence and undermine efforts at Euro-Atlantic integration. It used a variety of strategies, including disinformation campaigns, energy cooperation, economic investments, support for nationalist and pro-Russian political parties, and influence over the media. By utilising these tactics, Russia sought to thwart the EU and NATO enlargement plans, reduce Western influence, and keep its foothold in the Western Balkans.

The shift in European security dynamics following Russia's aggression in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, offers key insights into Russia's broader intentions, notably impacting the Western Balkan region due to its historic ties and strategic value to Russia. While Russia's economic footprint there has diminished, its use of "sharp" power tools in the region has intensified. These include disinformation campaigns, manipulation of media outlets, and leveraging established connections

in Western Balkan states/entities like Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often involving individuals seen as "proxies".

An overview of Russia's Disinformation Campaigns

The Western Balkan countries have membership at the European Union (EU) as a strategic foreign policy goal, but the integration process has been very slow, and countries are in various stages of the process. (EP, 2023). In an effort to keep Bosnia and Herzegovina in close proximity to the EU and prevent internal conflict and because of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the country was given candidate status in December 2022 (EP, 2023), whereas North Macedonia and Albania began accession talks in July 2022.

While Montenegro's internal political turmoil prevented it from moving faster in the integration process, Kosovo applied for EU membership in 2022. For Kosovo, the process is closely tied to a high-level dialogue that the EU facilitated for the normalisation of relations with Serbia, which is a candidate country (*ibid.*). On the other side, three of the six nations—Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro—are NATO members.

The Kremlin has strategically leveraged its geopolitical sway in the region, exploiting a host of internal issues: lingering tensions from the 1990s conflict, ambivalent attitudes towards the West in certain countries, weak institutions, state-controlled media landscapes, lacklustre economic performance, and compromised standards of rule of law, transparency, and accountability (Bechev, 2019; Greene et al., p. 9). Eugen Rumer (Carnegie 2017) asserts that Russia's interests in the Western Balkans lie in undermining EU efforts there, preventing Western Balkan countries from joining the EU. Even though Russia may not be the primary factor in the region's instability and "democratic breakdown," as Greene et al. (2021) argue, it is still a significant factor in the countries and entities' attitudes towards joining the EU and NATO, particularly those that share similar religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions (Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro).

Pro-Russian media outlets, primarily Sputnik and Russian Today (RT), have a significant presence in the Western Balkans. They frequently disseminate narratives portraying NATO negatively, suggesting that the EU is weak and divided, and advocating for Russia's role as a protector of orthodox and Slavic values (Sunter, 2020; Filipova, 2021; Jevtić, 2021; Kraemer, 2022). It is

worthwhile mentioning that these outlets also play a big role in spreading disinformation. Sputnik and RT carry out disinformation campaigns meant to downplay the region's integration into NATO and the EU. For instance, in order to keep Montenegro outside NATO, in 2016, Russia employed several information warfare tactics (Lilly, 2022, p. 105). Relations between the two nations deteriorated because of Montenegro's denial of Russia's request to refuel and maintain Russian warships at its Adriatic port. Russia viewed Montenegro's decision to join NATO as contrary to its own interests. Two former Russian GRU operatives (Vladimir Popov and Eduard Shishmakov) and a Serbian nationalist (Aleksander Sindjelic) collaborated on a plot to overthrow or assassinate the Montenegrin prime minister, Milo Djukanovic (ibid., p.108-110). The plan was unsuccessful, and two GRU officers were given ten years in prison in absentia in 2019 since Serbian authorities facilitated their departure from Serbia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex ethno-political divisions have also made it a prime target of Russian disinformation campaigns. For example, during the 2018 Bosnian elections, false social media accounts spread disinformation about the opposition, accusing them of being terrorists and collaborating with Western powers. These campaigns aimed to undermine support for the opposition parties and maintain the dominance of pro-Russian politicians in the country (Mastracci, 2023) and exploit the country's ethnic divides (Metodieva, 2019). Overall, the use of disinformation campaigns is a significant socio-political challenge, particularly in societies with pre-existing divisions.

Russia, as Serbia's primary ally, has seized this opportunity to counter Western support positions in relation to Kosovo and has attempted to sway disputes in the process of Kosovo-Serbia dialogue (Metodieva, 2019, p. 11; Emini, p.132-134). Disinformation outlets in Serbia and the northern part of Kosovo, where Serbian minorities live, propagate campaigns portraying Serbia as the victim. These narratives, often linked to Russian interests and efforts, question the legitimacy of Kosovo's statehood. Narratives that advocate historical revisionism and assert that ethnic cleansing of Serbs occurred in Kosovo have been used to widen rifts and thwart negotiations (Rajic and Hoare, 2022).

In the context of North Macedonia, Russia aimed at exploiting the name dispute with Greece and the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. False narratives alleged that NATO and the EU would be working together to change Macedonia's national identity. In North Macedonia, these tactics were manifestly deployed when Russia attempted to sway the 2020 NATO referendum, exacerbating

sectarian divisions and fuelling speculation about potential schemes for the country's disintegration (ibid.).

Megan Duffy and Samuel Green (2020, pp. 9-10) point to both Russia and local players as a source of disinformation in the region. Regional political leaders and institutions are often overlooked in favour of focusing on global actors like Russia and China. As the authors point out, these domestic actors spread disinformation to further their own goals, which occasionally aligns with Russian versions of events. However, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's presence has diminished, particularly in the economic and energy sectors, because of Western imposed sanctions, with which Serbia and Republika Srpska did not align. Nonetheless, disinformation campaigns appear to have increased (Samorukov, 2023) using 'sharp power' methods (media outlets, pro-Russian politicians, political parties, etc) which are elaborated in Chapter IV.

2.2. Russia-Ukraine War and implications for WB

Considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this study, while not delving into the direct events, discusses potential implications for Western Balkan countries. Russia aims to destabilise the region by escalating tensions and maintaining frozen conflicts. Historical links and the far-reaching geopolitical implications of the invasion could have a negative impact on the Western Balkans, particularly damaging the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

Nearly three decades after the brutal wars resulting in the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the memory remains vivid, and the Russia-caused conflict in Ukraine has rekindled these wartime memories in the region (Nuqi, 2022). Some issues remain key concerns, such as the ongoing crisis between Kosovo and Serbia and the political instability in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain key concerns. Moreover, domestic problems with corruption and rule of law are still present, and the road to EU membership due to the latter's slow integration process has created gaps which are being filled by external actors.

The repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine manifest as a significant risk for escalated instability and tensions in the Western Balkans. The conflict has brought to light the brittleness of governmental institutions and post-conflict nations. For instance, in Serbia and Republika Srpska, people have been painting the 'Z' symbol, supporting the invasion of Ukraine, in public places to

show their solidarity with Moscow (IISS, 2022). During the recent protests in Kosovo, the same pro-Russian symbols have been used by violent protesters, who are supported by Belgrade (Djordjevic and Heil, 2023). Serbia adopted a more impartial attitude throughout the Ukrainian war, refusing to censure Russia and upholding its commitment to military neutrality. In Montenegro, the political landscape experienced a significant upheaval immediately prior to the Ukrainian crisis, culminating in the collapse of a government that had been backed by Russophile and pro-Serbian factions (IISS, 2022).

There are now credible concerns that Russia's military engagement may serve as a catalyst for nationalistic entities and Russia itself to exacerbate regional political divides and even entertain the alteration of existing borders (Szczerba, 2023). These efforts would be fiercely resisted by the international community and are likely to result in violence and military conflict in this unstable region. If Bosnia and Herzegovina joined NATO, Duanka Majki, a member of Dodik's SNSD party, threatened a Russian military involvement (ibid.). Following the onset of Russia's invasion, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic articulated that the subversion of a nation's territorial integrity is gravely concerning. However, he subsequently clarified that Serbia, guided by its strategic interests and historical alliances, will abstain from imposing sanctions on Moscow (Savic and Dudik, 2023). Uniquely in Serbia, a public demonstration endorsing Putin's military actions in Ukraine took place (NATO PA, p. 7). In conclusion, the political dynamics of the Western Balkans are intricately tied to broader geopolitical shifts, as evidenced by the repercussions of the Ukraine conflict. Understanding Russia's malign influence in the Western Balkans is crucial for forecasting the region's future stability and alignment. As the Western Balkans strive for growth and stability, vigilance against external manipulations remains paramount.

3. Literature Review

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration into the terminologies of Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, and Disinformation, illuminating Russian Disinformation Campaigns, unravelling the undercurrents of these campaigns' methods and tactic, and spotlighting the media's cardinal role. Moreover, it commits to a rigorous scrutiny of the real-world impacts, accentuating their potential to recalibrate public perspectives and political dialogues in the Western Balkans.

3.1. Hybrid Warfare (HW)

In recent decades, warfare has evolved incorporating not only conventional tactics but also a blend of diverse strategies, often termed 'hybrid.' These strategies, which can be both rudimentary and sophisticated, are utilised by state and non-state actors alike. Moreover, distinguishing between conventional and non-military methods in wars has become difficult. In an effort to sow doubt in the minds of their intended audiences, hybrid approaches attempt to muddy the lines between military conflict and peaceful settlement (NATO, 2023, Mansoor, 2012, p. 1).

Despite sounding a contemporary term, the concept of Hybrid Warfare (HW) has ancient roots. This assertion, evident in Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War', suggests thinking about various tactics and strategies to employ in order to win. In his political treatise 'The Prince', Machiavelli stated "ends justify means," implying that any means necessary to achieve one's goals are acceptable. Similarly, Clausewitz, in his book 'On War' published in 1832, sees war as a 'continuation by other means', which could be political, economic, and nowadays, it is highly argued, more advanced methods and strategies, such as technological, psychological, propaganda and disinformation are tactics engaged in conflicts and wars. Frank Hoffman (2007, p. 5), a well-known scholar and contributor in the field of warfare, elaborates on this, arguing that multiple and more sophisticated methods will be used simultaneously to achieve the goals of adversaries. Hoffman defines HW as "the full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence, coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8; Fridman, 2018).

While HW introduces a plethora of unconventional strategies, it doesn't imply the obsolescence of classical warfare. Instead, it complicates the theatre of war, necessitating innovative countermeasures (ibid., p.9). This shift raises the question: to what extent can classical strategies be integrated with hybrid tactics for effective defence and offence?

The definition of HW has been facing criticism for bringing confusion about what it means and what it entails (Fridman, 2018, pp. 111–112; NATO Review, 2021). Max Boot relies on the relative novelty of the term "HW" to argue that such a technique existed even several centuries ago where there were no conventional armies (Fridman, 2018, p.111). The definition of HW has

evolved after 2001 with the 9/11 terrorist attacks and further developed after 2014 with the annexation of Crimea from Russia.

During a NATO Transformation Seminar in 2015 (White Paper), HW was described as ‘complex, adaptive, broad opportunistic with integrated combinations of conventional and unconventional methods [...]. These activities could be overt or covert, involving military, paramilitary, organised criminal networks and civilian actors across all elements of power’(NATO, 2015, p. 5). Consistently, in the 2021 NATO Review, HW was defined as 'an interplay of conventional and unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion designed to exploit susceptible vulnerabilities in order to achieve adversaries’ objectives. NATO's most recent definition of HW also includes disinformation, armed group forces, cyber-attacks, and economic coercion (NATO, 2023).

Many scholars in the field have tried to define the new concepts of contemporary warfare which shows the multifaceted terminology of HW including the combination of (un)conventional and (non-)military forces, (non-)state actors, political, economic, and technological aspects, and it is very much characterised by the adaptability and exploitation of susceptibility in several different domains. The terminology has further developed by including political warfare, also referred to as ‘gray-zone’ activities. The ‘gray zone’ is the blurry line between traditional warfare and peace (Hoffman, 2018). It is characterised by behaviours and strategies that are aggressive, disruptive, and potentially destabilising while still being below the threshold of open conflict.

To accomplish their strategic goals, adversaries employ covert operations, cyberattacks, economic coercion, political interference, propaganda, and unconventional strategies (ibid.). They adopt these methods in order to avoid direct conflict and the dangers that come with it in conventional warfare, which is not always the case. For instance, Russia has been engaged in ‘gray zone’ activities since the annexation of Crimea and during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In reaction to these events, NATO and EU officials have highlighted hybrid threats emanating from Russia. In recent years Russia waged cyberattacks in Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, and the 2016 US presidential election, spread disinformation campaigns in the East, West, and Western Balkans, and beyond, hybrid threats attacking all societal spectrums (Cullen, 2017). Moreover, these activities can be implemented in a way that sows confusion and uncertainty (ibid.). The EU provides a similar definition of HW: "...the use of different actors, state or non-state, seeking to

exploit the vulnerabilities to their own advantage, using diplomatic, military, economic, technological means while remaining below the threshold of formal warfare...”(EP Mariani, 2022).

One of the features of HW is secrecy: the aggressor tries to conceal their engagement. They refuse to admit that they are engaged in hostilities (Goldman, 2021, p. 37). The aggressor needs to have "plausible deniability": for example, Prishtina Insight (Peni, 2023) frequently highlights Russia's support for separatist rebels in Crimea and Ukraine. The report also points to the presence of camouflaged forces and the Wagner Group in northern Kosovo, especially during protests on the border (ibid.). Although there is enough evidence proving the connections of these groups with the Kremlin, the latter always denied involvement in the region.

Russian HW, based on the Gerasimov Doctrine (Galeotti, 2020), combines political, psychological, military operations and subversion to destabilise the West (Bērziņš, 2020; Galeotti, 2020). This doctrine was not framed as a new Russian plan of conducting war, but rather as a response to what Russia's Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov saw as a new Western 'way of war' (ibid.). The non-declaration of war, the alteration of the political and security environment through revolutions, and the use of information technology to influence the domestic politics of an adversary are the most prominent features of this doctrine. Information warfare is a component of what is known as Russian New Generation Warfare (RNGW), which employs a wide variety of tools—ideological, psychological, political, and informational - also known as 'asymmetric' warfare(Bērziņš, 2020, p. 359), to destabilise and defeat the enemy.

Disinformation campaigns, a cornerstone of hybrid threats, are often deployed by nations with ulterior motives (European Commission, 2018). But what drives these campaigns? Is it purely geopolitical, or is there a deeper psychological play to erode trust within the target nations? In this context, the author's goal is to lay the groundwork for understanding HW, so that readers will be better equipped to comprehend the nature of Russia's HW activities related to disinformation campaigns and the likely scenarios in which they would be used in the Western Balkans.

3.2. Information Warfare (IW)

Due to the growing impact of technological advancements on the battlefield, politics, and society, Information Warfare (IW) theory is a subject of academic discourse that is rapidly evolving (Whyte et al., 2020). The relevance of this discussion is highlighted by the growing ease of disseminating disinformation and targeting audiences with “pre-chosen” content (Fridman, 2018; Whyte et al., 2020). Although the concept of IW or operations is not universally accepted, it frequently includes psychological operations (PsyOps), military deception, influence operations, propaganda, and electronic or cyber warfare (Giles, 2016, p. 16; Fridman, 2018, pp. 94–100; Whyte et al., 2020).

In the realm of military strategy, different entities provide different definitions of information operations. The US Army defines it as "the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own" (Whyte et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Matthews *et al.*, (2021) view it as "the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of disinformation campaigns in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent". Nonetheless, IW is not defined by the physical tools or media through which it is conducted but by the impact of information manipulation and its use as a weapon against adversaries or targeted audiences (Whyte et al., p.6). The advent of the internet and technological advancement have tremendously increased the volume of disinformation flows, allowing millions of state-sponsored (e.g., Russia, Iran) online media outlets to emerge since 2014 (*ibid.*, p. 7).

Although IW is not a new concept, there are three main factors that make the potential today more significant than in the past. First, different aspects of IW can use comparable methods, like cyber-attacks in systems, networks, and disinformation strategies (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 9). Secondly, because of the nature of hybrid threats, it is challenging to attribute actions when the aim is to confuse the adversary without fully engaging in war (*ibid.*). Thirdly, nations like China, North Korea, Iran, and Russia are beginning to encapsulate elements of IW into a broader context of “non-military” modes of warfare which are less costly but more effective (Giles, 2016; Clack and Johnson, 2021) making it more difficult for the West to counter their efforts.

Russia in particular has extensive experience with both the theory and practice of IW. Russia's IW is a pivotal component of their "hybrid warfare," or "gibridnaya voyna" (Fridman, 2018), also known as "active measures" (Rid, 2020). These campaigns, among them, included Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks against critical infrastructure, power grids, interfering in election processes and distorting election reports, cyberwarfare, disinformation campaigns and targeting Russian-speaking Ukrainians (Whyte et al., p. 29). Their primary goal is to bring chaos in targeted states and societies (Boulègue, 2021). In the Western Balkans, the potential impact of disinformation campaigns could further destabilize already fragile political landscapes.

3.3. Definition of Disinformation

The rapid development of information technologies and the explosion in new media forms of communication has created more opportunities to deliver disinformation to societies. The Western Balkan nations, given their fragility in upholding the rule of law and democratic standards, are vulnerable to external malicious influences like disinformation campaigns. The purpose of the latter is to undermine democratic institutions and public trust in governments by sowing discord and deepening societal, political, and economic polarisation (Greene *et al.*, 2021; CSD, 2023a). The hybrid nature of disinformation campaigns' character hinders identification and makes it difficult to mitigate them.

"Disinformation" is sometimes understood as misinformation, propaganda, or fake news (NED, 2017). Many agree that (Ibid.; Stengel 2020, p. 289) disinformation is the deliberate spread of false information with the intent to mislead or manipulate audiences, while misinformation is the result of unintentional action. Propaganda may consist of either true or false information, but in both cases, it serves a political purpose (ibid.). There are two groups of authors for whom the term "disinformation" is considered relatively new, coming from the Russian word "dezinformatsiya" used at the beginning of 1960 and gaining popularity in the 1980s (Rid, 2020, p. 137; Taylor, 2021). In 1963, the KGB created a special section tasked with spreading disinformation (Rid, 2020 p. 40) to undermine and weaken the West. The author (Michlin-Shapir, 2020, p. 22) argues that Putin has copied and improved on them. And the other group considered the term to be older and used more specifically in the 1930s disseminated by telegraph, radio, and newspapers. Moreover, Rid (2017, pp. 2–3,; 2020) considers disinformation the main part of Russian 'active

measures’, which include semi and covert intelligence operations to influence adversaries’ decisions.

A European Parliament report (Greene *et al.*, 2021) highlights that disinformation campaigns often take advantage of pre-existing societal tensions and political divisions. They embrace a systematic approach that deceives and manipulates public opinion in order to obtain political or economic goals and cause public harm (European Commission, 2018). It can be based on ‘true facts’ devoid of context embedded with falsehood to support the intended objectives and it is always a plan of an agenda (NED, 2017). To Nathalie Grant's point, even though disinformation can be true, what makes it dangerous is a combination of what you want people to read and what the adversaries want to achieve (Goble, 2014). In the wake of Crimea’s annexation and the more recent invasion of Ukraine, disinformation campaigns have been strategically crafted to shape an alternative narrative about the Ukrainian conflict, thus sowing discord and confusion not only within Ukrainian society, but also amongst Eastern and Western nations.

Disinformation tactics are used to magnify existing social, ethnic, and political differences throughout society by sowing discord and distrust (Tucker *et al.*, 2018). They are, in essence, a sort of psychological warfare in which information is used as a weapon to destabilise nations (NED, 2017). Russia may have sponsored such operations, but non-state actors may also have started them for a variety of reasons, such as financial profit or the promotion of ideological fervour (Greene *et al.*, 2021).

Russian-affiliated disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans seem to be systematically orchestrated to advance objectives beyond the purview of state interests, specifically benefiting organised criminal networks. Moreover, these efforts aim to undermine and erode the international standing of the European Union and NATO (*ibid.*). Moreover, the use of new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and bots (*ibid.*), has enhanced the volume, speed, and efficacy of such disinformation operations, making them a formidable cybersecurity threat in the Western Balkans (NATO, 2020). Domestic actors, on the other hand, are the most prolific disinformation providers, be it for personal, political, or economic benefit. Political parties, criminal organisations, religious entities, and media outlets are among those who ingest this knowledge and intend to disseminate it throughout the countries through adaptation at the local level (Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

As a part of its geopolitical strategy in the region, Russia is conducting large-scale disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining Western dominance and stalling NATO and EU membership ambitions of aspirant countries. Such disinformation tactics frequently exploit historical grievances and ethno-nationalist emotions, causing strife and fostering instability. Disinformation campaigns are particularly effective when used to exploit existing internal divisions and radical elements of societies by manipulating messages on social media networks. These tactics have been significantly advanced thanks to data collection algorithms that enable specific targeting of social biases that can indoctrinate segments of the population according to a tribal way of thinking. Many authors argue that, rather than military success, Russia's new long-term goal is to overthrow democratic governments. Russia employs a wide range of strategies to undermine Western democracies and further its own interests (Otakar, 2021, p. 138).

3.4 Russian Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans

Kremlin-affiliated media outlets in the Western Balkans primarily promote narratives that are anti-US, anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-Ukraine, and anti-Covid vaccination (NATO, 2023; Nehring and Sittig, 2023, p. 7-8). Russia's use of disinformation campaigns is moved by geopolitical interests, both due to the importance of the Western Balkans as Moscow's gas corridor to Europe, and because events in Caucasus and Central Asia have repercussions for the region (Blitz, 2006, p. 192). Paul and Matthews (2016), while highlighting the systematic disinformation tactics that Russia has been waging as part of its foreign malign influence, contend that this disinformation is made to take advantage of tensions, cause conflict, and erode confidence in democratic institutions (ibid.).

One of the key components of these operations is the exploitation of societal differences, which is particularly successful in sowing division within the society being attacked (Chrzová *et al.*, no date, p. 90). Russia's disinformation tactics have effectively fostered political and social divisions in Western Balkan countries by emphasising controversial narratives (Sunter, 2020; Nehring and Sittig, 2023, pp. 68–69). This has increased polarisation and weakened trust in democratic institutions, making it easier for Russia to exert influence and advance its own interests (Sunter, 2020.). Giles (2016) investigates the role that Russian media-linked outlets based in Serbia, such

as RT and Sputnik, play in the dissemination of disinformation campaigns. By focusing on how these outlets serve as strategic instruments, he argues that these media channels support Moscow's geopolitical interests, oppose Western countries and seek to create an alternative for individuals having pro-Russian views.

"Whataboutism,"(Gorenburg, no date, p. 129) is a practice that is frequently used to blame other countries for their actions. Russia uses it with the two-fold purpose of drawing attention away from violations of international norms and of portraying Western democracies as hypocritical actors (Giles, 2016). In the Western Balkans, Russia has been using whataboutism to criticise Western nations' actions towards the independence of Kosovo while ignoring its own actions in Crimea. By doing so, Russia seeks to create an alternative view for individuals who may be sympathetic to Russia's stance on the Kosovo and Serbia issues. Not only does Moscow exploit this story to cause confusion and spread disinformation, but also to create precedents for its own actions.

Finally, the outright fabrication of news is a more brazen tactic in Russia's disinformation playbook. By creating and spreading false stories, Russian media outlets can sow discord and manipulate public opinion. This approach is facilitated by the digital era's information abundance, which can make fact-checking an overwhelming task and increase the likelihood of false stories gaining traction (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Due to the geopolitical importance of the Western Balkans, scholarly interest has been drawn to Russia's disinformation tactics in this area. The fundamental purpose of these disinformation tactics, according to Bechev (2017), who outlined Russia's regional interests, is to stop these governments from further integrating with the West, notably with NATO and the EU.

Stojanovi & Miloevi (2018) studied Russia's exploration of historical, cultural, and religious ties with the Slavic-Orthodox communities in the Western Balkans. For instance, the 2017 March of the "Immortal Regiment" in memory of the Soviet soldiers that died in WWII (Sunter, 2020) was held in Serbia. The sense of common identity makes it easier for Russian disinformation to gain traction among these groups, providing a favourable environment for its geopolitical narratives. Another example is when Russia has used religious and cultural ties to actively support nationalist movements in Serbia and Montenegro, both of which have largely Orthodox populations. This has included funding and support for political parties and media outlets that promote anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiments. Their goal is to serve Russia's interests by hindering further Western values

and integration in the region. Similarly, in Republika Srpska, Russian influence can also be observed through its support for nationalist movements. The Orthodox population and the pro-Kremlin leader Dodik provide a natural connection for Russia to promote its geopolitical agenda. However, Bechev (2017:4) argues that Russia's moves in the Western Balkans are related to its 'pragmatism' and 'political calculations', which are also a consequence of responses by local actors. Thus, it is more opportunistic to move to rival western powers (ibid, p.17), which serve as a 'contested area' vice battleground for Russia's interests.

Ratkiewicz et al. (2011) used computational methods to map the online spread of disinformation during political crises in the Western Balkans. They found evidence of orchestrated campaigns exploiting existing ethnic tensions and promoting pro-Russian sentiment. For example, during the Bosnian elections in 2018, Russia-backed groups spread false information about NATO and the EU to support pro-Russian nationalist candidate Milorad Dodik. Furthermore, clashes between Kosovo and Serbia (The Guardian, 2022), with the EU trying to facilitate dialogue, have caught Russia's attention too. In the Western Balkans, several news sources run by pro-Russian governments made a clear declaration that a conflict might start soon (IntelliNews, 2022; Spiegel.de, 2022). The Russian ambassador to Serbia has offered military support if Serbia asks in relation to a possible "war" with Kosovo (Samorukov, 2023). This disinformation campaign aims to undermine Western influence and cause conflicts in the region while promoting closer ties with Russia in Serbia.

In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation surged online. Some narratives even falsely claimed the virus was a Western invention (Greene *et al.*, 2021, pp. 40–44). According to Greene et al., foreign actors like Russia and China took the opportunity to paint the EU as a frail organisation incapable of supplying vaccines to the Western Balkans. For instance, in Serbia, bots were discovered by the Digital Forensic Centre (ibid, p. 42) praising the assistance from Russia and China while criticising the EU for its lack of assistance. These campaigns aroused confusion and distrust amongst the public towards health institutions, thus allowing foreign malign actors such as Russia and China to step in as 'providers' of vaccines as an alternative source to the region (Greene *et al.*, 2021, pp. 40–44).

3.5. Methods and Tactics

Disinformation campaigns use a wide range of strategies that have been well-documented in the literature. These efforts, according to Paul & Matthews (2016), are characterised by their methodical and organised structure, frequently combining traditional media outlets with social media platform and, in certain circumstances, even state-sponsored initiatives. Paul Goble (2014) suggests that Russia employs disinformation campaigns primarily because they are cost-effective and highly impactful. In addition, Russia relies heavily on state media and pro-Russian media outlets, as well as connections with Western journalists, businesses, and influential individuals (Goble, 2014). The deployment of "troll factories" and "botnets" is another prevalent strategy. These are fake social media accounts that distribute a large amount of disinformation in different languages and are used to influence online debates and magnify certain narratives (Aro, 2016). These are extensive operations that spread false information and sway online debates, either using human operators or automated accounts (Nimmo, 2015). These operations influence public opinion and drive internet debate in desirable maligned directions by magnifying certain narratives and suppressing others.

More subtle strategies are utilised in disinformation campaigns. Among these, according to Bechev (2019, p. 10, NATO StratCom COE, p. 57), are "coercion" tactics that highlight the use of sanctions, as the case of cyberattacks and meddling in the Montenegrin election in 2017. Another tactic is "co-optation," which leverages rewards from elites, oligarchs, political parties, and individuals. An example of "co-optation" is the spreading of false news about a political opponent to suppress their popularity and increase that of another candidate backed by competing interests of powerful elites. Similarly, in the case of "coercion," disinformation tactics could be employed to paint a particular country or political leader as a threat to security and create public pressure for the imposition of sanctions or other punitive measures. Lastly, there is "subversion," aiming to destabilise enemies and societies at large (Bechev, 2017, pp. 193–194). Moreover, Russia's actions in the region are more "pragmatic" exploiting vulnerabilities such as fragile democracies, regional disputes, historical grievances, and a lack of media literacy (Filipova, 2021, p. 28). According to Ben Nimmo a UK security analyst from Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), (Юркова, 2015), the 4Ds of Russian offensive are "dismiss", "distort", "distract", and "dismay" are citing

some of the offensives measures that are referred to as when conducting disinformation campaigns in the Russian context .

Based on a study conducted by Center for the Study of Democracy (2021), another effective method of media capture is accomplished through ‘sharp power’, such as financial covert flows. The “financial flows” are used by the Kremlin to strengthen relations with political parties (ibid.), media outlets, and individuals with the aim of influencing their decision making and also helping the Kremlin disseminate disinformation campaigns (Filipova, 2021, pp. 25–30; Georgiev *et al.*, 2023). Picture 3.1 illustrates the Russian techniques and methods applied to target the region.

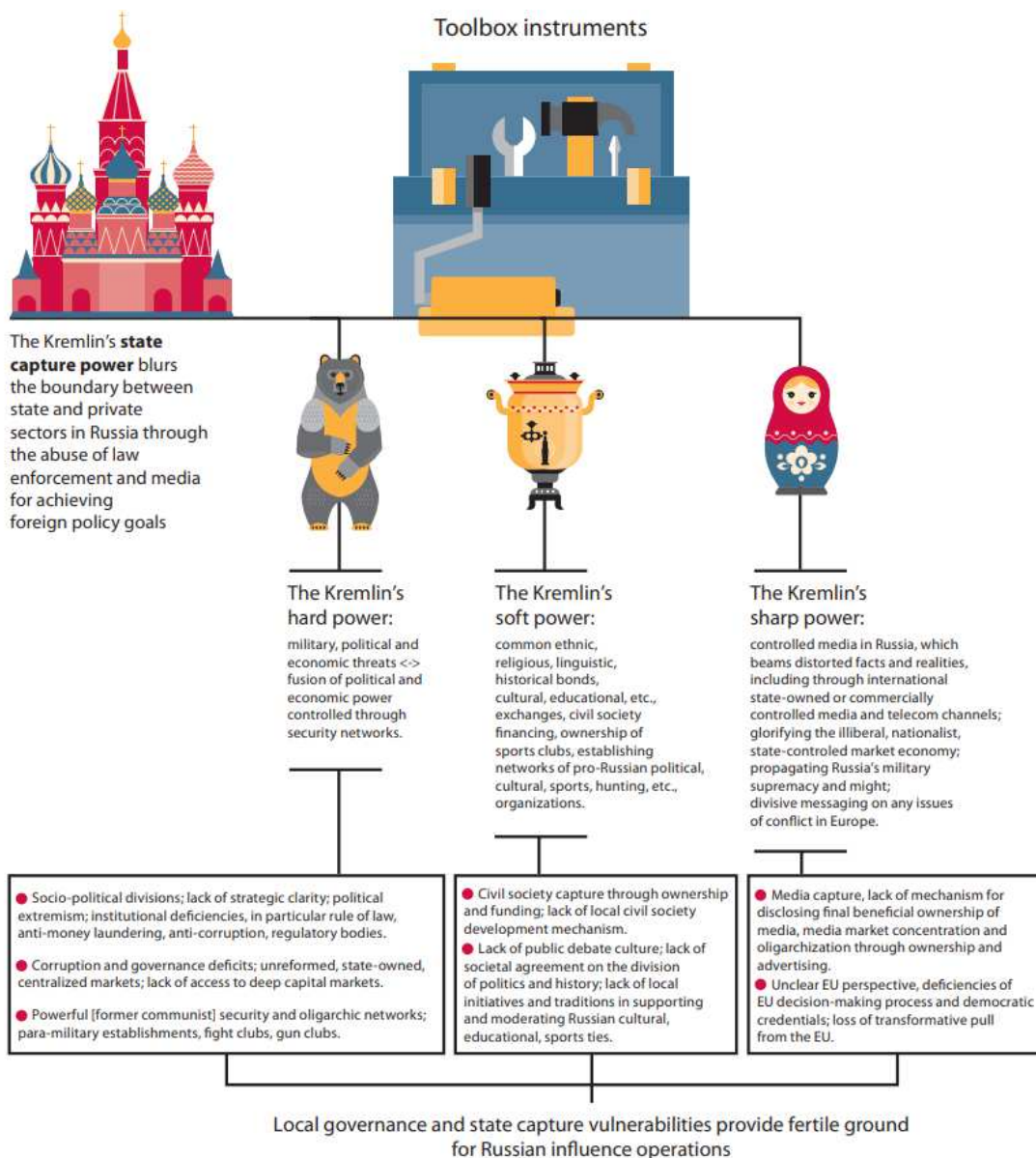


Figure 3.1 Russian Toolbox Instruments of influence in Western Balkan. Source: (CSD, 2021, p.19).

In Western Balkan countries where the democracy is fragile and the levels of corruption are high, it is very easy for foreign malign actors such as Russia to try to exploit gaps and use financial instruments to control and influence the politicians. For instance, one of the main outlets in Republika Srpska Alternativa Televizija (ATV), (Milojevic, 2018) was founded by Miroslav Dodik, consequently receiving sanctions from the U.S (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023) for destabilisation by the spread of disinformation campaigns.

3.6. Media Landscape

Disinformation tactics heavily rely on the media environment, which includes both traditional and new media channels. Traditional media channels, particularly those that are owned or influenced by the government, have been crucial tools in these efforts (Shekhovtsov, 2017). They frequently act as major sources of disinformation, creating and propagating false narratives to a large audience. Domestic media outlets then propagate the news via their networks and portals without verifying it or because it serves their interests. Based on a study conducted by Center for the Study of Democracy media capture in Western Balkans is conducted via economic coercion or government censorship (Georgiev *et al.*, 2023, p. 32). In Albania and Serbia, the dominance of media entities either align with or are under the auspices of governmental control. Conversely, in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, media platforms predominantly operate as either public broadcasters or are directly owned by the state apparatus (*ibid.*). Central to the media landscape of the Western Balkans is Serbia's dominant influence.

Outlets like the Russian Sputnik Serbia and Russian Today (RT) have become major disseminators of pro-Russian narratives. Followed by domestic media outlets such as TV pink (state-sponsored), and tabloids including, Informer, Srpski telegraf, Kurir and nationalist publications such as Intermagazine.rs, Tsrvene, Beretke and Nationalist (Meister, 2018, pp. 13–30; Brey, 2022; Kraemer, 2022; Georgiev *et al.*, 2023). The media outlets cited consistently broadcast pro-Russian content while disseminating negative portrayals of the West-EU-NATO, fostering disinformation-driven narratives in the region and beyond.

Furthermore, the reach of Serbian media extends beyond its borders, with Bosnia and Herzegovina heavily drawing information from Serbian sources, particularly impacting the narratives in Republika Srpska. These include local media outlets such as Face TV Sarajevo, Serbian newspaper, Nezavisne novine, Iskra portal that spread disinformation (Filipova, 2021, pp. 91–99), (Meister, 2018, p. 23).

Shifting our focus to Montenegro, a significant portion of the media is close to or politically affiliated to the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) such as the newspapers Dnevni and Pobjeda and some aligned with the party, For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) which include, Kurir, Danas and Večerne Novosti (ibid, pp.27-28).

North Macedonia has been facing rough disinformation campaigns especially regarding the name change, NATO accession and, very active during the election campaigns in 2018. The main media outlets (Kurir, TV Alfa etc.) in the country have been state controlled especially during the governance of the VMRO-DPMNE coalition party and when they were in opposition, mainly spreading disinformation about the Prespa agreement, the countries integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and regarding the name and neighbouring countries e.g., Greece and Albania (Meister, 2018, pp.28-30).

The media environment has, however, undergone a substantial transformation with the emergence of digital technology. The internet environment offers disinformation campaigns to a wide range of potential targets. As a result of the expansion of social media (Twitter, Facebook etc.), disinformation campaigns are now spread to bigger audiences at an unprecedented rate, (Bodine-Baron *et al.*, 2018; Meister, 2018; Bradshaw and Howard, 2019). Due to their wide audience and quick dissemination of disinformation, social media platforms have developed into effective instruments for distribution of disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). For instance, Covid-19 disinformation campaigns about the "Wuhan-Lab-Theory" and vaccination conspiracy theories attracted a lot of attention and led to a lack of trust in public health systems and confusion about whether the pandemic itself a 'hoax' was (Nehring and Sittig, 2023, p. 14). Ivan Agayants, the head of the Russian intelligence service's disinformation unit, underscored the pivotal role of the media in furthering Russian disinformation. In a report by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the author conveyed surprise at how at ease media can be influenced, while emphasising its significant role in their strategies (Nehring and Sittig, 2023, p. 12).

Russian disinformation campaigns proliferate across diverse platforms, spanning traditional and new media outlets (Paul and Matthews, 2016). They include the previously mentioned use of automated bots and trolls (ibid.). These strategies make use of the anonymity and scope that digital platforms provide, making it more difficult to identify and combat disinformation. Nonetheless, there are unique opportunities and problems presented by the media environment in the Western Balkans. Lack of media diversity, political meddling in the media, inadequate media literacy and uncontrolled financial flows all contribute to the spread of disinformation campaigns (Duffy, 2020).

3.7. The impact of disinformation campaigns on public opinion and political discourse

Scholars have acknowledged the significant influence of disinformation campaigns on public and political discourse, with the Western Balkans being a region of particular interest due to its geopolitical significance as a chessboard of great power competition. In order to get the spectrum of actors involved in spreading disinformation campaigns that might have an impact on the public, the author distinguishes them into three groups based on available studies (Greene *et al.*, 2021; Brey, 2022; Georgiev *et al.*, 2023). **The first group** is made up of foreign actors, such as those from China and Russia, who use their affiliated traditional and online media outlets (e.g., Sputnik, RT) to promote their narratives. **The second group** is made up of domestic media outlets (as previously outlined in the Media Landscape section) and other actors, like politicians or other people with pro-Russian sentiments (Filipova, 2021). **The third group** consists of domestic media outlets within their own countries that spread false information for financial or political gain (Greene *et al.*, 2021; Rustemi *et al.*, 2021, p. 80). Due to the latter group's strong support for and orientation towards EU and NATO institutions and values. As well as their different languages and cultures, Albania and Kosovo are two places where Russia has little direct influence. Russian disinformation campaigns, while not non-existent, are limited in scope. For instance, most of the information dissemination in Kosovo occurs in the northern region where the Serb community resides (Filipova, 2021, p. 39).

Academics (Bashota, Vesa *et al.*, 2019), claimed that disinformation tactics have been successful in swaying public opinion and escalating ethno-nationalist sentiments in the Western Balkans. They emphasised how disinformation shapes public discourse, particularly when it comes to

controversial subjects such as ethnic conflicts and national identities. Nehring and Sittig (2023, pp. 9–11) identify that disinformation campaigns efforts have considerably contributed to the entrenchment of ethno-nationalist sentiments by promoting divisive narratives and offering inaccurate views of historical events. For example, historical disinformation relating to wars in Western Balkans in 1990s (Kosovo's, independence, NATO bombing, denial of genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina etc), (Sunter, 2020).

Disinformation campaigns also affect the domestic and political discourse (Greene et al., 2021, p. 35). Moreover, these authors noted how these efforts took advantage of the region's precarious democratic fragile institutions resulting in political instability and divisiveness. They highlighted how disinformation campaigns exacerbated polarisation and hampered the consolidation of democracy by fuelling pre-existing political conflicts (ibid, p.12). The authors contend that in order to protect Russia's geopolitical objectives, disinformation campaigns from Russia have carefully targeted the political vulnerabilities in the region (ibid.).

The research on this subject, however, also demonstrates how complicated the effects of disinformation efforts may be. Although disinformation campaigns have a significant impact, Vojtechovsk (2020) pointed out that their effects might be subtle and long-lasting, changing the public and political discourse gradually over time. Russia's disinformation campaigns, according to Shekhovtsov (2018), have been successful in destabilising Western democracies and shaping the discourse in the Western Balkans towards a more pro-Russian orientation. While these efforts may have sown dissension and confusion, Galeotti (2017) argues that their potential to effect real political change is less certain.

4. Theoretical Framework

Chapter 4 outlines **Theoretical Framework** and interprets its application to the dissertation, whose overarching aim is to unpack the Kremlin's utilisation of both traditional and new media outlets to disseminate disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans to achieve its geopolitical objectives. Therefore, the author has opted for two mass media theories to explain the media's role as an instrument of Information Warfare in shaping public opinion and political discourse. At the same time, the framework is suitable to examine the role of domestic actors in amplifying Russian

disinformation in the region. incorporating both the Media Effect and the Agenda Setting theories, the dissertation gains analytical depth, particularly when considering the unique strategic objectives of Russia's Information Warfare in the region.

4.1. Media Effects Theory

In today's era, the development of information technology has placed the media at the forefront, profoundly influencing audiences (Perse, 2001). This theory examines the impact of media messages on people, groups, and cultures employing various models from different perspectives (Bryant and Finklea, 2022, p. 15), and highlights that both traditional and new media have the power to shape the public opinion and the way people think about politics (Borah, 2016; Valkenburg, Peter and Walther, 2016). As such, a study found a correlation between the use of social media and predisposition to trust conspiracies and disinformation (Enders *et al.*, 2023, p. 781).

When applied to Kremlin's disinformation campaigns targeting the Western Balkans, the media effect theory brings about three primary effects: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural. Cognitive effects have the potential to shape what the targeted audience perceives as credible, where people's minds become "battlefields" (JHU & ICL, 2021). Russian-sponsored media consistently push certain narratives, notably portraying NATO, and the West negatively, which over time can alter public perceptions. Moving on to emotional effects (Valkenburg, Peter and Walther, 2016, p. 17; Bryant and Finklea, 2022, p. 206), the strength of disinformation campaigns lies in their emotional resonance. Moscow continuously exploits historical resentments and regional disputes to its advantage, making it vital to understand the emotional consequences of its disinformation. As for behavioural effects (*ibid.*), Prolonged exposure to such Russian narratives can detrimentally steer public opinion and perceptions towards aligning more closely with Russia's viewpoint.

In synthesising the implications of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans, it is crucial to employ the lens of media effect theory. This theory offers a nuanced conceptual framework that captures the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional impacts of media on its consumers. Applying this framework allows for a comprehensive examination of the tactics employed by the Kremlin to disseminate disinformation. Moreover, the widespread and high reach of these campaigns, coupled with the self-selection nature of information channels, provide them

with a unique advantage. These mechanisms enable disinformation to meet its own requirements, irrespective of the original intent of the content's creator (Valkenburg, Peter, and Walther, 2016, p. 316). This analytical approach sheds light on whether disinformation campaigns have merely reinforced pre-existing attitudes and beliefs or if they had an impact on political discourse and public opinion in the Western Balkans. As such, media effect theory serves as a critical tool for discerning the nuanced consequences of Russia's disinformation campaigns, setting the stage for further inquiry in the following sections.

4.2. Agenda Setting Theory

In contrast, the Agenda Setting Theory states that while the media might not dictate our thoughts (Cohen, 1963, p.13), it shapes what topics occupy our minds (Robinson, 1964, p. 13), thus determining which issues are prevalent in the public discourse (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 177). Based on Rogers and Dearing (1988) this can be done via three mass media agendas: the public agenda, the media agenda, and the policy agenda.

Utilisation of this theory will help the author assess Russia's courses of action through disinformation campaigns as a tool of IW. The development of technology and the enormous use of social media platforms have given unlimited accessibility to different uncontrolled information flows. These platforms have become tools where specific pre-set agendas can thrive, allowing the public to selectively consume information in line with their pre-existing beliefs (Murphy, 2018, p. 782; Enders *et al.*, 2023). For instance, by strategically selecting and highlighting certain topics, Russia has been able to orchestrate narratives casting its activities in Western countries and the Western Balkans (Greene *et al.*, 2021) under a positive light. This is obvious in the way it covers issues related to NATO, the ongoing war in Ukraine and regional disputes to achieve its geopolitical goals (*ibid.*). Supporting this argument, Murphy (2018, p.22) emphasises that cognitive bias, i.e., the tendency to check and believe news that align with one's pre-existing beliefs. This is particularly present in the context of Western Balkans among the Slavic population with pro-Russian sentiments, making them more vulnerable to Kremlin's narratives.

The agenda setting theory is also used by politicians and other influential domestic and international scholars and analysts to influence audiences (Mohd Zain, 2014). For example, in the Western Balkans, incumbent governments exercise wide-reaching control over domestic public

and even private broadcasters, consequently influencing their editorial agendas (CSD, 2023). For instance, in 2020 Twitter deleted 8,558 fake accounts that were used to spread disinformation by the Serbian government (Borger, 2020). In a nutshell, this theory enables the author to assess the extent to which Russia has been able to disseminate disinformation and build narratives using traditional and new media outlets (Scott, 2022; Kleper, 2023). Likewise, this theory will be helpful to understand the significant role of domestic actors in amplifying Kremlin's narratives, shedding light on the connection between foreign influence and local media dynamics.

5. Methodology

Having discussed the theoretical framework of the research, which provides the analytical process of the thesis, the author proceeds with Chapter V Research Methodology of this paper, which contains three sections: **research methods, research implications, and research limitations.**

5.1. Research Methods

To address the research questions of this dissertation (*How has the Kremlin used traditional and new media to wage disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine? - and how has it influenced public opinion and political discourse in the region?*), the author has mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis of data, which gives a more holistic comprehension of the nature of Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans.

From a qualitative viewpoint, I will use content **analysis** with the aim to find patterns and themes that can help assess how Russia is using media outlets to spread disinformation in the Western Balkans and reveal how it uses both traditional and new media platforms to influence public opinion and political discourse in the region. In doing so, I will provide a nuanced and in-depth analysis of this complex and evolving issue (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For this purpose, I have consulted academic publications, journal articles, surveys and think tank polls.

Qualitative content analysis is complemented by a **questionnaire** with open-ended questions. I submitted it to experts in the field, especially from the Western Balkan region, to provide further

insights into the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns and their impact on public and political discourse. The questionnaire followed a flexible approach, as it tailored the questions to help experts answer the research questions of this thesis. The questionnaire explored 1) The evolution of the Kremlin's disinformation strategies and factors that have influenced changes if such shifts have happened since Russia launched the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022; 2) What role traditional and new media outlets are playing in shaping public opinion and political discourse; and 3) anticipated challenges for Western Balkans in combating Russian malign influence through disinformation.

The questionnaire encompassed a diverse array of participants from the academia, government, and military domains, including: A Professor in International Relations with expertise in the region (code: IR-Prof-A), a Professor in International Geopolitics and security affairs of the Western Balkans and Europe (code: GeoPol-Prof-A); an American Senior Expert on national security (code: SenExpert-A); a Minister of Defence from the region (code: DefMinister-A); two Senior Army Officials (codes: BG-Expert-A and MG-Expert-A); and an Expert on Russian Information Operations (code: RusIO-Expert-A). Having different backgrounds and perspectives will help me present a more comprehensive assessment of disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans.

The third research method is Twitter content analysis, which, through a mixed methodology, allows for an in-depth exploration of the main themes and narratives and strategies employed by Russian backed media outlets, diplomatic and official accounts together with other Russian-affiliated accounts. On the quantitative level, the author will use the Hamilton Dashboard 0.2 platform to source data from the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. This software tracks Twitter accounts from Russian state-funded media outlets, officials, diplomats, and other influential accounts with close ties with the Kremlin. Moreover, this software enables the extraction of graphs, tables, and trends. The objective assessment of scale, reach and frequency of disinformation campaigns in new media outlets such as Twitter supports the qualitative findings. The period of extracting the data is from 24 February 2022 to 30 June 2022.

5.2. Research implications

Building on a robust analytical approach, this research offers profound implications not only for the academic community and policymakers, who focus on the geopolitics of the Western Balkans considering Russian disinformation campaigns after the invasion of Ukraine, but also for the broader audience who want to know about such operations. This dissertation also aims at deepening our understanding of traditional and new media outlets. As such, the Kremlin's reliance on media outlets, especially the use of online platforms like Twitter, demonstrates the changing face of Russia's Information Warfare. By delving into its media utilisation, this study adds to the body of knowledge on how powerful states such as Russia utilise different media outlets to drive their strategic agendas in a domestic and international level.

Additionally, the fact that Russia chose and built upon specific narratives while spreading disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkan countries of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Albania underscores a sophisticated understanding of the regional dynamics and Moscow's malign interferences. Recognizing this nuance provides researchers and strategists with a more granular insight into Russia's strategy, not treating the Western Balkans as a 'monolithic entity' but taking advantage of already existing disputes therein. Moreover, the connection between historical grievances, regional disputes, and ongoing disinformation campaigns reveals how Russia strategically links past events with current political contexts. This has larger implications for understanding how historical contexts can be weaponized through Information Warfare.

The tangible shift in public opinion and political discourse in the Western Balkans due to the disinformation campaigns highlights the potency of Russia's strategy. For Western Balkan governments and the international community alike, this is a testament to the power of Information Warfare in shaping geopolitics and the urgency to enact proactive countermeasures. By combining the Media Effect and the Agenda Setting theories, this research strengthens the argument that modern geopolitical warfare is increasingly playing out in the information space using traditional and new media outlets. Hence, it implies a need for continuous advancement in these theoretical frameworks to capture the rapid evolutions in global information dynamics. Moreover, by mapping Russia's disinformation campaigns and the role of domestic actors in amplifying Kremlin's

narratives, this thesis serves as a valuable tool for states and policymakers to grasp these connections and suggest policies that enhance media literacy and public awareness.

5.3. Limitations

The author encountered several constraining factors which are worth mentioning. Firstly, the ongoing nature of the war in Ukraine means that the insights drawn from this research are inherently time-bound. The assessment covers merely a year, from February 2022 until July 2023, and this temporal constraint limits a holistic understanding of the far-reaching implications of Ukraine's invasion on the Western Balkans, especially vis-à-vis the Kremlin's information campaigns and their extensive repercussions on the region's public opinion and political discourse.

Furthermore, while a plethora of publications and news articles underwent analysis, this expansive scope might have inadvertently missed pivotal aspects. Specifically, this research did not deeply probe the role of the EU and the integration process of the Western Balkans, which might be related to the decrease of public support for the EU. Additionally, opting for Twitter as the primary platform for content analysis may not encapsulate the full spectrum of Information Warfare and defamation campaigns across various social media platforms. This choice could potentially obscure the intricate web of interactions and dependencies between actors that further Russian interests in the region.

Moreover, the categorisation of narratives into three overarching themes (“War in Ukraine”, “West”, and “Historical Grievances and Regional Disputes”) may have overlooked nuanced narratives that also wield significant influence. Additionally, the research lens primarily magnified Russian media outlets and domestic media's role as amplifiers of Russian narratives. This focal choice potentially sidelines other impactful dimensions like economic ties, specifically military and energy deals, the role of illicit financial support for media outlets, and the EU's role. While these factors were touched upon, a deeper inquiry might have offered a richer, multidimensional understanding of the manifold actors and forces at play.

Lastly, the linguistic landscape also presented a constraint. The author's linguistic proficiency, limited to English and Albanian, meant that Serbian, a crucial language in the dissemination of disinformation across the Western Balkans, remained inaccessible. This barrier precluded direct

engagement with original sources, particularly those from Russian-backed media outlets and Serbian channels, potentially withholding layers of nuance and context. In conclusion, while this research is comprehensive, these limitations underscore the multifaceted nature of the subject matter, suggesting research for deeper, more expansive future investigations.

6. Findings and Analysis

6.1. Introduction to Findings and Analysis

This chapter seeks to provide an answer to the dissertation's research question: *How has the Kremlin used traditional and new media outlets to wage disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine? And subsequently, how has it influenced public opinion and political discourse in the region?*

The author has organised and analysed the various data sets that are currently available in order to answer the research question. This chapter evaluates Kremlin disinformation campaigns and their effects on the Western Balkans using both traditional and new media. Additionally, this Chapter's objectives are to investigate the role that Russia has played in media outlets and to give a summary of the main narratives that have been disseminated in the Western Balkans through disinformation campaigns since the invasion of Ukraine.

This chapter is divided into **five distinct sections**. In the **six sections**, it is provided an overview of Kremlin's Utilisation of Traditional Media followed by **second sections** about the role of New Media outlets with a concentrated lens on Twitter platform. **Third section** includes Narratives propagated by Russian state media and pro-Russian media outlets together with domestic media. The **fourth section** discusses the Domestic Actors Role as Amplifiers of Russia's Disinformation Campaigns. The impact of Disinformation Campaigns on Public Opinion and Political Discourse concludes the **fifth section**. Rounding up the chapter, the **final part** includes Discussion and concludes with Conclusion.

6.2. Kremlin's Utilisation of Traditional Media

Kremlin involvement in Europe and other regions has only escalated through the employment of sophisticated IW operations and hybrid techniques since the invasion of Ukraine (Snegovaya, 2015). When asked about Western Balkan, and Kremlin's growing influence, according to BG-Expert-A, "It is not necessary to conduct any investigation to answer this question. All one needs is to have access to the Internet and the answer is unfortunately clear -Yes, there is a significant manifestation of Kremlin influence in the region".

Prior to the commencement of the so called 'Special Military Operation' (CNN, 2023) in Ukraine, the most effective tools of influence and engagement in the Western Balkans were through economic means, the military, energy, as well as disinformation campaigns as a tool of IW (Saric and Morcos, 2022). Despite the general decrease in support for Russia in the region, Russia still maintains a significant presence thanks to its connections, pro-Kremlin media outlets, and pro-Kremlin political parties (Georgiev *et al.*, 2023).

When asked about the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans, the role of these operations since the invasion of Ukraine, and whether the previous methods have changed, one of the interviewers, MG-Expert-A and from the region, argue that Russian activity extended across the whole spectrum of "special warfare operations" ("specialni rat" in Serbo-Croatian language) from Yugoslavian times, particularly with regards to "information operations" and disinformation. Russia has always considered the Western Balkans to be part of its zone of interests, he argues, and its present actions merely follow "the same patterns and [...] methods as were in the times of the Soviet Union, unaligned Yugoslavia and KGB".

Additionally, regarding Russia's disinformation campaigns after the war in Ukraine, RusIO-Expert-A asserted that the Kremlin's disinformation apparatus had been strong even prior to the invasion. To support this argument, a report from Center for the Study of Democracy (2023, p.11) argues that Russia had already taken advantage of the weak governance institutions in "state capture" via established networks, politicians, business tycoons, and other channels to further enhance the Kremlin's interests via media capture, energy sector and illicit finance. Complementing this perspective, SenExper-A says that "Russia has leveraged its historical, cultural, and religious ties coupled with the extensive financial resources of Russian-linked

oligarchs to send a steady message to the region that Russia is the guarantor of Slavic/Orthodox values. Alignment with the West will only bring about chaos and the dilution of Western Balkan culture which would be “swallowed” by the decadent Western values”. Similar views about these linkages of Russia with the Slavic Orthodox brotherhood and increased anti-NATO and EU rhetoric shares GeoPol-Prof-A expert.

Building on this, a recent example raised concerns about the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns fuelling the protests of the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia (MOC-AO) against gender equality (GlobalVoices, 2023). During the protests held in Skopje (June 29, 2023) nationalist groups and conservative political entities were seen holding religious symbols, the old Macedonian flag, and Russian flags (Ibid.). In addition, the President was warned by the National Security Agency and NATO about the cooperation of Moscow with the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia (360степени, 2023).

Moreover, researchers suggest that when it comes to the Western Balkans, Russia’s information warfare is more opportunistic than strategic (Metodieva, 2019, p. 19). As IR-Prof-A, an expert on the region’s affairs, argued, “the more difficult it will get for Russia in Ukraine, the more they will try to foment crises in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia”. In effect, Russia views the increasingly contested information environments of Western Balkans states such as Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as viable leverage in its ongoing efforts against the West, capable of exploiting tensions to spark conflict elsewhere on the European continent.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, EU sanctions banned the Kremlin’s state-sponsored media outlets from broadcasting in the European Union. Subsequently, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Albania joined the EU in implementing similar bans (Kajosevic, 2022). In contrast Serbia, a candidate country for EU integration, did not join the sanctions against Russia (Panasytka, 2022; Stanicek, 2022). Serbia has served as a virtual safe haven for Russian malign influence and opened the door for the Kremlin’s media outlets. In fact, it is the only country, along with Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Russian media outlets can freely exercise their activities without any restriction in the dissemination of disinformation campaigns (CSD, 2023a, p. 2).

The main tools for spreading disinformation campaigns in the region are Russian state sponsored media outlets such as Sputnik Srbija (opened in 2015), TASS Russian News Agency, RIA Novosti and RT (Russia Today). The latter started operating online just after the invasion of Ukraine on July 15, 2023 (GIOR, 2022; RFE, 2022), and the editor-in-chief (Daughter of Ljubica Milincic, editor of Sputnik Russian news Agency), (IntelliNews, 2022a; Slobodna Bosna, 2023) announced the launching of the RT with the following message: "We have launched RT in the Balkans. Because Kosovo is Serbia"(IntelliNews, 2022a). Indeed, Kosovo remains the main and most significant issue in Russia's and Serbia's common foreign policy and in opposition to the West. In addition, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, there has been an increase in disinformation campaigns (EUvsDisinfo) about Kosovo due to Putin's use of Kosovo's statehood to justify his actions in Donetsk and Lugansk (TASS, 2022a).

Another significant aspect of disinformation involves 'pro-Ukraine' sources that are, in reality, created by fake accounts and disseminated by Russian or pro-Russian media outlets, which accuse these pro-Ukraine sources of spreading "Western propaganda" (Muric *et al.*, 2022, pp. 11–12). When asked about the role of Russian media outlets such as Sputnik in the Western Balkans, a Senior Politician from a Ministry of Defence, DefMinister-A, explained that "ruling elites in Serbia in the entity of Republika Srpska have been in continuity and directly promoting the official propaganda coming from the Kremlin news outlets". Indeed, Russia has been able to use its ally Serbia to launch disinformation campaigns targeting the Serb speaking population in North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and northern parts of Kosovo. Additionally, SenExpert-A argues that "Russia's campaigns are not tied to an election cycle or even certain political parties...It is a '24/7/365 days', whole government "influence operations" campaign that is "multi-pronged" and targeting various levels of Western Balkan society". Indeed, Russia's progress across the Western Balkans has been uneven, with Serbia being the nation where it has made the most inroads, while Albania and North Macedonia have largely been able to contain the growth of Russian influence (*ibid.*).

According to a study conducted by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence – (SratCom, 2021, p.11), people from respective countries prefer local media over international ones to get the news about local, regional, and international developments. In the same study, statistics show that only 10% of people asked said that they read international news. Moreover, traditional

media (TV, radio, newspapers) are still among the most watched outlets, especially by older generations (Svetoka and Doncheva, 2021, p. 12).

This indicates that people consume the news and narratives that are chosen by editors and the media publishes in their channels; consequently, their susceptibility to specific political or foreign malign agendas in the information space is elevated to the point where it can change public perceptions towards specific issues. A study conducted recently found out that four out of the five most popular websites demonstrating consistent content published in alignment with the Russian narratives (Georgiev *et al.*, 2023, p. 14) frequently cited four Russian state-controlled media sources, namely TASS, RIA Novosti, RT, and Sputnik, in thousands of their articles, as shown in the chart (Figure 6.1), (CSD, 2023, p.57), indicating a widespread dissemination of Russian disinformation.

Number of articles referencing RT, Sputnik, TASS or RIA Novosti in top five most visited news websites (2022)

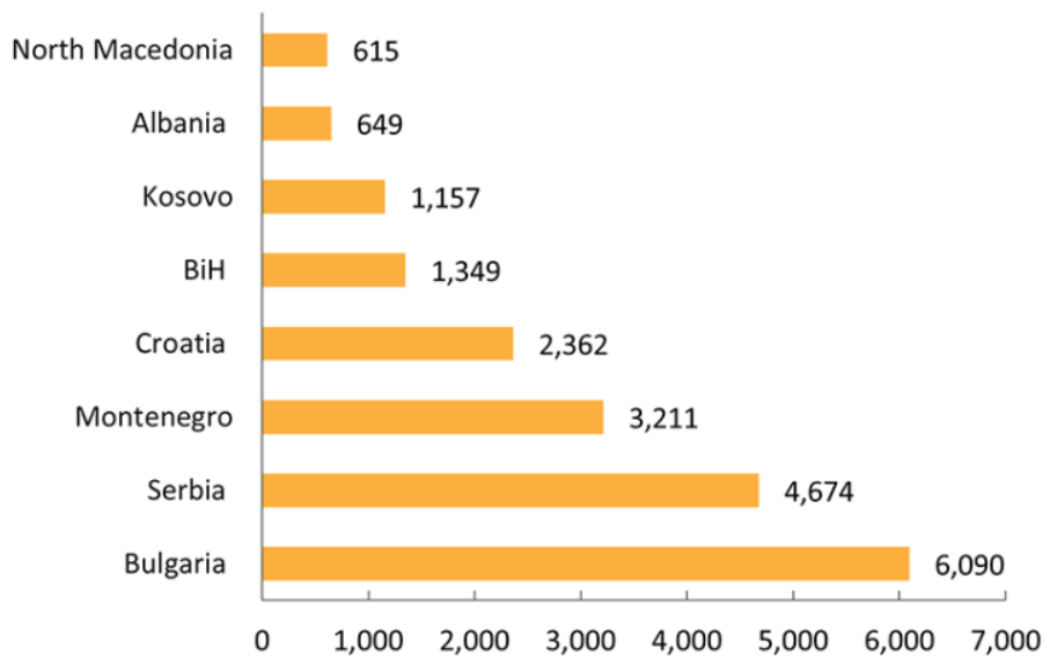


Figure 6.1. Number of articles referencing Russian state sponsored media outlets. Source: CSD, 2023)

Following the invasion of Ukraine, security experts interviewed for this dissertation underlined a steady rise in disinformation campaigns across both traditional and new media platforms, which existed even before the invasion. For instance, pro-Kremlin Russian disinformation campaigns target the Slavic speaking societies in the Western Balkans, where the likelihood of believing these narratives is higher due to historical connection, language, and shared orthodox values. Hence, as the RusIO-Expert-A argues ‘when the invasion started, it was easy to continue to push relevant narratives portraying the West as an ‘enemy’ and Russia as their protector’.

In summary, the Kremlin’s utilisation of traditional media outlets in the Western Balkans, especially post -Ukraine invasion, serves as a testimonial to the potency of IW. The profound implications for the region’s politics and its interplay with great powers cannot be overstated. Therefore, the following section will further unravel the narratives disseminated by sponsored and pro-Russian media outlets.

6.3. Narratives

Disinformation campaigns have long been used as a tool of IW and geopolitical influence. With the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Western Balkans have seen a surge in such narratives, primarily propagated by the Kremlin. This part delves into the nature of the internet and impact of these narratives.

Recent studies since the invasion of Ukraine, show consistent patterns in the spread of narratives even before the invasion. However, there has been an apparent surge in the pervasiveness and intensity of these narratives in the Western Balkans. This intensification appears to be primarily motivated by Russia's malign goals of sowing discord and escalating existing disputes and tensions. Consequently, the narratives spread by Russian and pro-Russian media outlets throughout the Western Balkan nations, according to the author's analysis, could fall into three broad code categories: “War in Ukraine”, “West” and “Historical Grievance and Regional Disputes.

6.3.1. War in Ukraine

Under the “War in Ukraine” related narratives, disinformation campaigns often employ tactical terminologies to veil the severity and illegality of the Russian invasion. This narrative frequently uses emotive language and specific framing techniques to elevate or justify Russia's invasion while demonising the West. Phrases such as "special operation", "counter-offensive", or even "liberation of Ukraine" are recurrent in the media outlets, primarily exposed by pro-Russian outlets in the Western Balkans. Additionally, Ukraine is portrayed as ‘Nazis’ and the fact that Russia has intervened to “liberate” Ukraine from “nazism” (Muric *et al.*, 2022, p. 6). This deliberate blurring of the truth serves to distort the reality of the situation, portraying Russia's aggressive act as a defensive or noble intervention, rather than an unlawful infringement on Ukraine's sovereignty (ibid.) (Muric *et al.*, 2022, p. 7). Moreover, Russia’s attempt is to portray the West as the instigator of the war in Ukraine. One of the narratives being circulated is the idea that the UK and NATO together with Germany used uranium shells, which have created radioactive clouds over Europe and Ukraine (EUvsDisinfo, 2023). Additionally, based on these narratives the biological, nuclear, and chemical weapons are developing in laboratories in Ukraine, therefore justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine (Muric *et al.*, 2022, p. 6). This reveals that Russia aims to instil fear for health among the population's receivers of these narratives and deepen resentment towards the West.

6.3.2. West

The second group of narratives targets the “West”, particularly the U.S., NATO and to a lesser extent the EU. The "West" is depicted as an imperialistic power that seeks to impose its will and values on other nations, including the Western Balkan nations.

In various Russian disinformation campaigns analysed by EUvsDisinfo which is a project of the European External Action Service’s (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force (EEAS, 2015), the West is depicted negatively and unreliable, with narratives highlighting that “NATO and the West are involved in orchestrating conflict in Kosovo” and attempting to “break Serbia's ties with Russia and China”(EUvsDisinfo, 2022). For instance, in October 2022, the EU was highly portrayed negatively, during the dialogue Prishtina-Belgrade and supposed ‘pressure’ toward Serbia (Ljubicic, 2023).

Nevertheless, the West is also depicted as complicit in “ethnic cleansing” (EUvsDisinfo, 2022; Sputnik Mundo, 2022) and as attempting to “provoke conflict in Kosovo and Balkans” particularly against Russia's interests. To illustrate, the Russian Ambassador to Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko (TASS, 2022b) stated that the “West” is “pushing the crisis in the northern part of Kosovo to scare Serbs and divert attention from the war in Ukraine” (EUvsDisinfo, 2022). In addition, the spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry, Maria Zakharova, said that “the West has planned the situation in Kosovo” (Twitter/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova, 2022).

Whereas narratives concerning the EU highlight its weakened influence in the region and emphasising how the EU is pressuring Serbia to impose sanctions against Russia. In Serbia particularly, narratives highlight the EU’s incapacity to secure gas supplies as it is “running out of it” due to the “economic collapse of the war” loudly highlighting the Kremlin’s support in the energy sector among the population in Serbia and also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively, in the Republika Srpska entity (Ljubicic, 2023). Noting simultaneously the effects the EU is experiencing as a result of the sanctions imposed on Russia. As an emphasis on strong relations, Serbia signed a 3-year agreement with Russia for natural gas supply after the war started in Ukraine (Al-Jazeera, 2022). Moreover, Russia is portrayed positively, and glorifications of Putin are not missed in all these narratives spread all over the Balkans (Muric *et al.*, 2022). As the chart (Figure 6.2) from the CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story – Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 – June 2023 report demonstrates, NATO and the West in general are the primary organisations portrayed negatively, with a significant increase in media outlets.

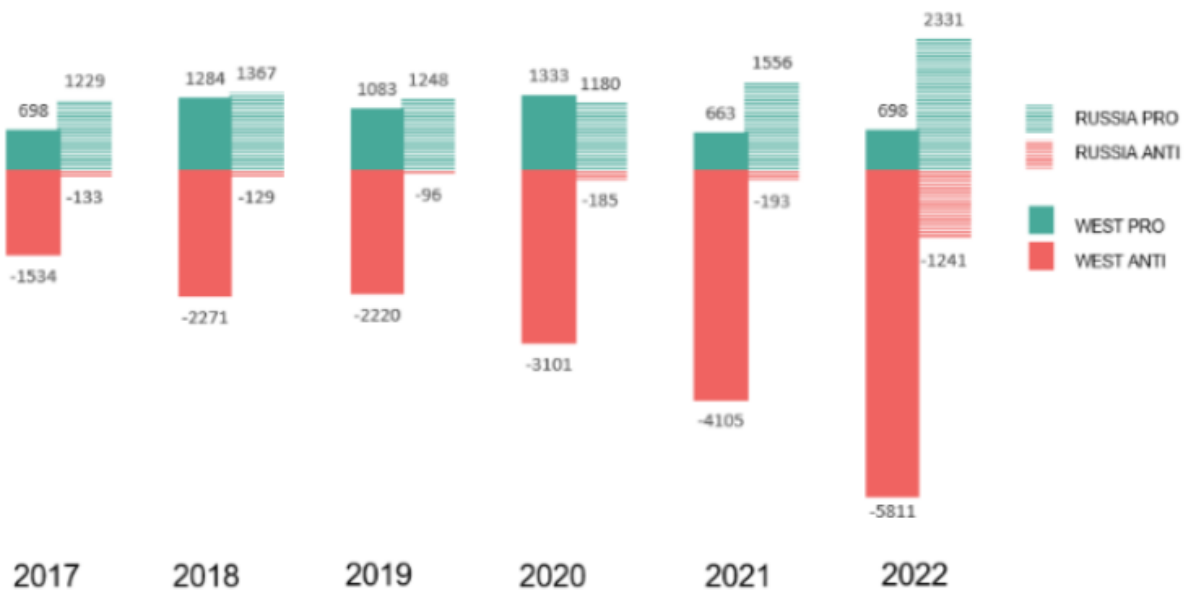


Figure 6.2 Reporting in traditional media over the years in Serbia / [Source](#)

Studies also indicate that Russian disinformation campaigns in the region target influential Western media outlets (Muric *et al.*, 2022, p. 12), accusing them of spreading anti-Russian disinformation, thereby attempting to undermine their credibility and create an environment of confusion and doubt. For instance, CNN was one of the international media outlets attacked for spreading disinformation against Russia. Fake accounts were created, and photos of Bernie Gores (a supposed CNN reporter) circulated saying that he was killed twice, in Afghanistan and Ukraine, however, this news, together with these accounts representing CNN Ukraine and CNN Afghanistan, were never verified to be CNN's real accounts (Delic, 2022). Moreover, a common narrative is the fabrication of examples in which other "Western" media outlets allegedly disseminated disinformation about Russia and the war in Ukraine. An example is where Sputnik published an article claiming that a photograph of refugees that appeared on the cover of the Financial Times was a forgery because the individuals depicted in the photograph had "darker skin." (Muric *et al.*, 2022, p. 12)

6.3.3. Historical Grievances and Regional Disputes

The third group includes narratives that are related to "historical grievances and regional disputes" a powerful weapon of influencing already susceptible societies of the Western Balkan.

Additionally, these narratives often add to the surface of historical events, raising existing disputes, or inciting resentment among ethnic groups. Indeed, historical events are exploited to draw parallels between the past and current events in the Western Balkan vis-a-vis the war in Ukraine. For example, Kosovo's independence was utilised by Russia to proclaim the illegal annexation of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk (EUvsDisinfo). Similarly, claims suggest that the NATO intervention in Serbia in 1999, which allegedly used "depleted uranium shells" akin to "atomic bombs," mirrors Western actions in Ukraine (EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

The purpose of these efforts is twofold: first, to weaken the cohesion and stability of the Western Balkan nations; second, to foster conditions in which the influence of Russia can flourish and the positive perceptions about the West can diminish.

Moreover, the aforementioned data reveal that the Kremlin's strategy is consistent with Media Effect and Agenda Setting Theory, which demonstrate the Kremlin's ability to shape narratives by utilising media outlets. Additionally, based on the Agenda Setting Theory the ability to select which stories to highlight has a significant impact on how the public perceives the most important issues daily regarding pre-chosen topics (Fetoshi and Gërguri, 2023). The Kremlin has used its influence on shape narratives in the Western Balkans, proving the validity of the theory as it manipulates public opinion to further its own interests and sow discord in the region.

However, traditional media is not the only tool used by Russia. Russian IW's most advanced tool undoubtedly is the use of new media which has significantly increased due to technological advancement. The development of technology and exposure of people to different online information portals makes them more vulnerable to Russian foreign malign influence and disinformation campaigns. Having discussed the traditional media outlets, the following section will elaborate on the Kremlin's use of new media outlets, with a focus on Twitter platform.

To conclude, the narratives and disinformation campaigns show the extent of Russia's influence in the context of geopolitics and great power competition.

6.4. Utilisation of Twitter Platform as a Tool of New Media

In the contemporary digital era and rapid development of technology, recognising the influence and function of platforms such as Twitter in shaping public opinion and political discourses is crucial. The following analysis aims to identify the core motifs and strategies employed by Russian media, state officials, diplomats, and affiliated accounts on Twitter regarding the Western Balkans.

Hence, for Twitter content analysis, the author has utilised **Hamilton Dashboard 2.0** from Securing Democracy a project of George Marshall Fund of United States (GMFUS), (GMF-ASD, 2020). The selected tweets are from February 24, 2022, to June 30, 2023. Using Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard are analysed ten main Tweets by Retweets from all posts over the network of Russian diplomatic officials, state media outlets and Russian affiliated actors. To collect the data, the hashtag for each country of Western Balkan has been applied as follows: “Kosovo”, “Montenegro”, “Serbia”, “Bosnia and Herzegovina”, “Albania” and “North Macedonia”.

Due to the specific period selected (16 months) for analysing, the number of retweets might have changed, or, in some cases, it has been even deleted, nonetheless the current number of the tweets and retweets reveals the enormous engagement of these actors in promoting Russian narratives and spreading disinformation using the Twitter platform which have been recorded by Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard.

Most active accounts propagating disinformation on Twitter include: @georgegalloway (Member of British Parliament from 1987 until 2015); @redfishstream (Media & News Company) affiliated to RT (Davis, 2018); @actualidadrt (RT in Spanish); @helenawillart (RT correspondent in U.S.); @embajadarusaes (Russian Embassy in Spain); @mfa_russia (Ministry for Foreign Affairs); @mid_rf (Ministry of Defence); @embrussiamexioc (Russian Embassy in Mexico), @tass_agency and @rusembassyj (Russian Embassy in Japan).

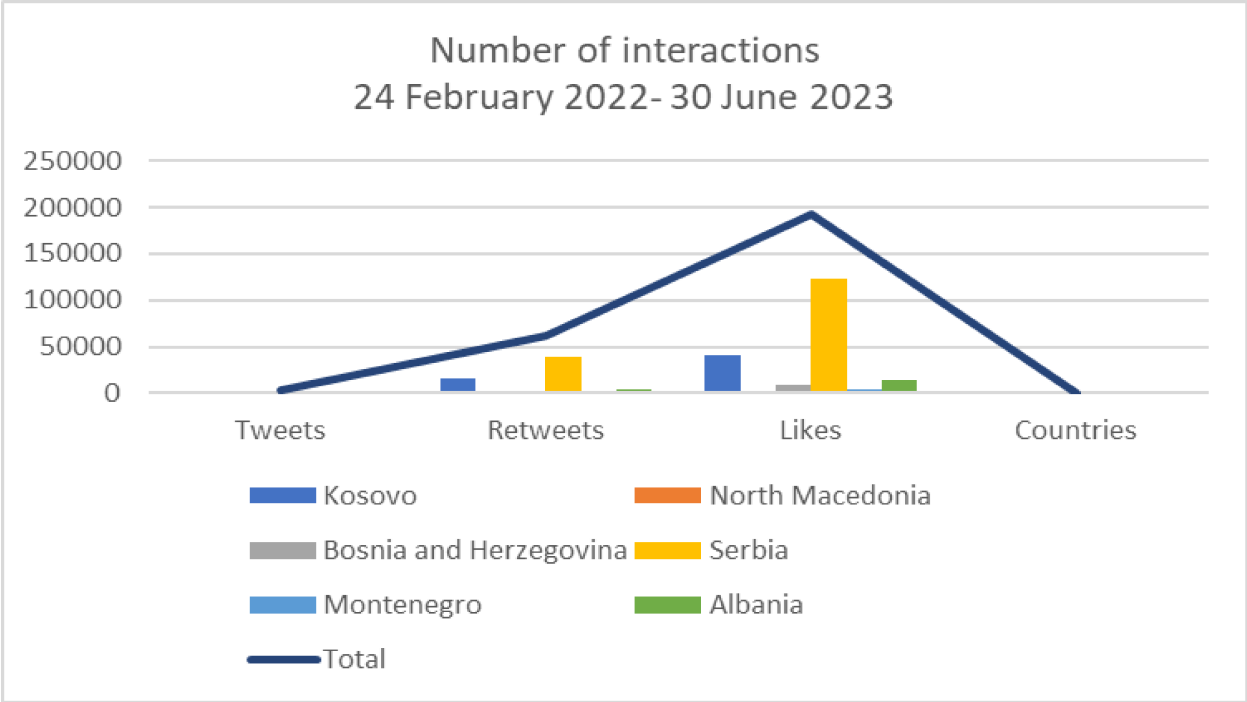


Figure 6.3 Number of interactions on Twitter regarding name tags for each country

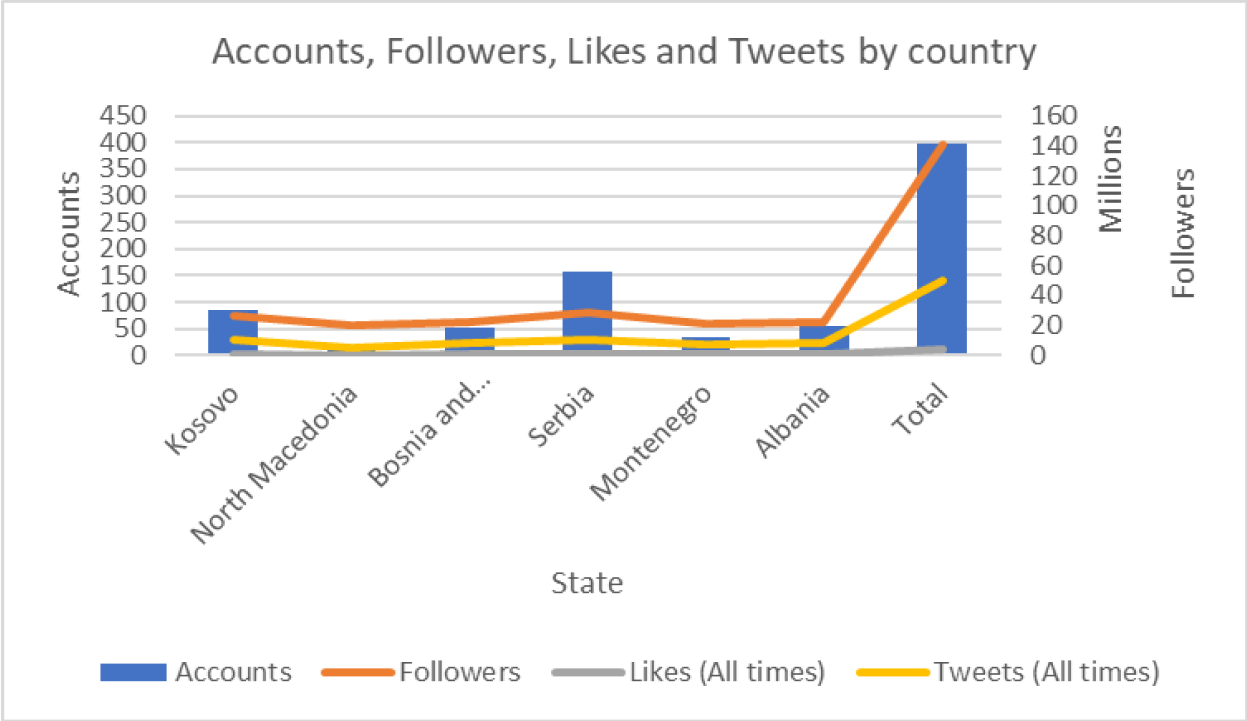


Figure 6.4 Russian media, diplomatic and affiliated Twitter accounts based on followers, tweets and likes over the period of February 24, 2022, until 30 June 2023.

With this brief overview and illustration of Russian and pro-Russia accounts engagement, the author proceeds to analyse a section of data collected from Twitter using the Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard for each name tag of Western Balkan countries.

6.4.1. Kosovo

As it was expected when the hashtag “Kosovo” was applied, in line with findings from the section on **Narratives**, the tweets largely revolved around historical grievances, the NATO intervention in 1999, and the subsequent independence of Kosovo. The graph (Figure 6.3) shows the most influential Twitter accounts and the most common phrases and hashtags used.

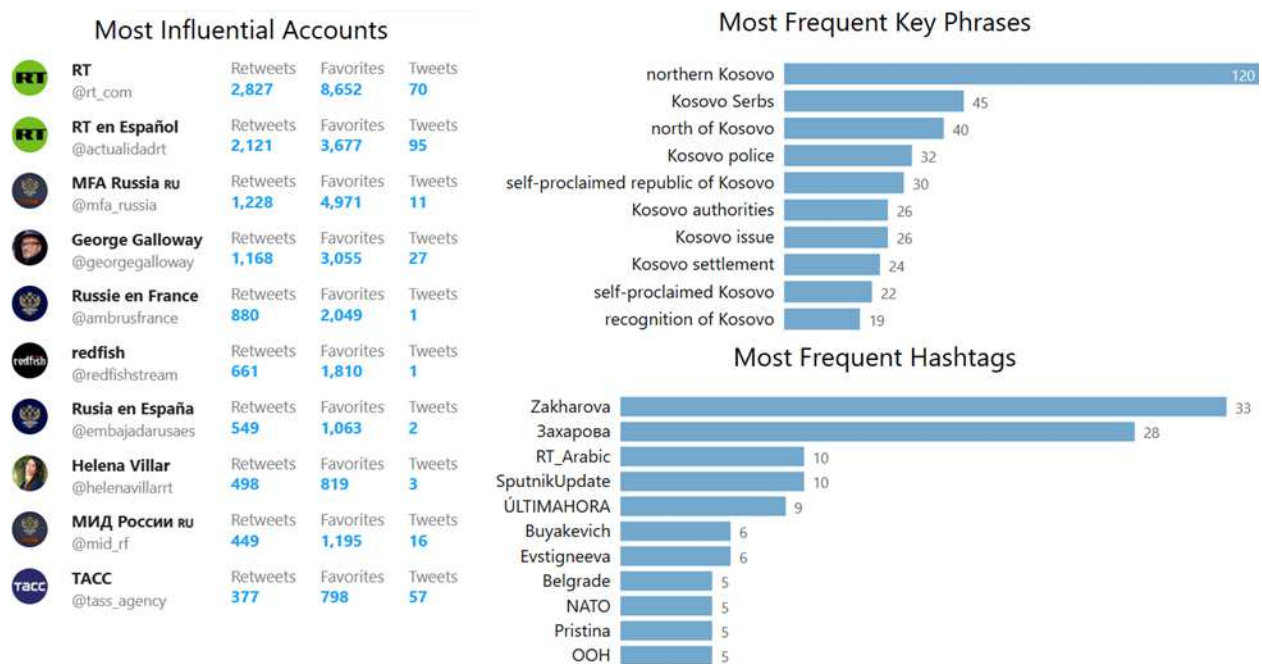


Figure 6.5 Most influential Twitter account hashtag “Kosovo”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

Some tweets used ‘comparative rhetoric’ drawing parallels between the international recognition and status of Kosovo statehood and other global events such as the invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that double standards have been used by the West. For instance, Tweets by @rt_com: “President Putin says Russia's support for, and recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics fully corresponds with international law. He also cited the example of Kosovo...” [17 June 2022]. Additionally, the Russian Embassy in France shared a tweet from Maria Zakharova the

spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry saying that “Biden is calling for a "trial for crimes ...Let's start with Yugoslavia and the Iraq”. Then let's find the directors of Srebrenica and the organ traffickers of Kosovo, covered by themus...!” [@ambrusfrance, 4 April 2022] and @rusembassyj [1 October 2022]: “Considering NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and support for Serbia's re-draw of the border, and America's circumstances surrounding "Kosovo independence", it is ridiculous to hear about the re-draw of the border from across the sea”. These tweets draw parallels between international responses to Kosovo and Russia's unjustified actions in Ukraine, Donetsk, and Lugansk. Framing Russia as a country that aligns with international norms and standards. Clearly, the strategy of "whataboutism" (Leonor, 2016) is at play, where Russia deflects criticism by pointing fingers at others, thus diverting focus from its activities in Ukraine and globally.

Another theme emerging from these tweets is anti-Western sentiment. The tweets frequently criticise Western actions and policies in the region, especially those of the U.S. and NATO. The tone is often antagonistic. Indeed, most of the accounts portray Russia as a power standing against the West's ‘hypocrisy’ and ‘aggression’. For instance, a post from @atualidadrt [9 October 2022] shared a tweet where says that “Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said Saturday that 42nd U.S. President Bill Clinton ordered Hungary to attack Serbia in 1999 during NATO's intervention in the Kosovo”, trying to portray U.S as an aggressor in the Western Balkans especially towards Serbian country.

Another important finding while analysing tweets was the increased number of posts that corresponded with the developments on the ground. For instance, Russian sponsored media outlets such as RT and other Kremlin's affiliated Twitter accounts have been significantly active during three periods of developments in Kosovo (2022-2023) as shown in the graph below (Figure 6.4).

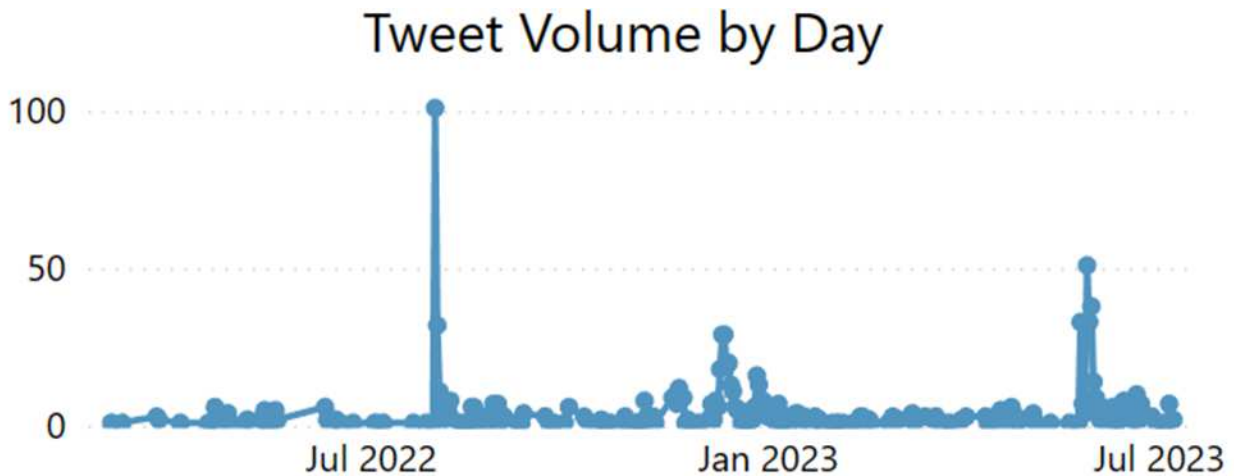


Figure 6.6 Number of tweets per day during a specific period of time. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

The first period was when tensions rose in Kosovo over car plates at the end of July and the beginning of August 2022 (Reuters, 2022a). Some of the main posted tweets included: “Kosovo is planning to attack Serbs”, “Kosovo armed vehicles arrive in Kosovska Mitrovica”, “we call U.S and EU to stop provocation. Says Russian Foreign Ministry Zakharova” [@RT_com, 31 July 2022], “Spain is and will be by Serbia’s side”, [@helenavillarrt, 31 July 2022], “CIA-linked Vjosa Osmani US-NATO-EU_funded #Kosovo vassal area of Yugoslavia” [@afshinrattansi]. These tweets portray an escalating situation, with Kosovo as an aggressor and the West as a supporter of this ‘aggression’, which can stoke fear among the targeted audiences.

The second period was in December 2022, after the arrest of former-policeman Dejan Pantic by the Kosovar authorities, who allegedly organised a terrorist attack on the offices of the Central Electoral Commission in the north, on December 10 (Isufi and Dragojlo, 2022). Consequently, local Serbs supported by Belgrade set up barricades through several trucks on the roads leading to the main border points in the north (Delauney, 2022). Similar narratives and news from Russian sponsored media outlets and linked accounts are spread about ‘chaos,’ panic’, ‘aggression’, ‘Serbia’s request to NATO to deploy troops in Kosovo’ and ‘shooting in the northern part of Kosovo’ [RT, TASS, Sputnik, RIA Novosti, 10 December 2022].

The third period occurred in May 2023, when the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, facilitated elected mayors entering their offices in three northern municipalities, which resulted in violent protests in the northern municipalities and tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Emerging tweets include the 'victimisation of Serbs', "Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said 52 Serbs were wounded, three injured, and a Kosovo special forces officer fired on Serb protesters, wounding one person", "special Kosovo forces opened fire from a Kalashnikov on a crowd of Serbs peacefully protesting in front of the administration building of the Zvecan municipality" [@RT Spain,29 May 2022]. Moreover, Kosovo, once again, like other events above, is portrayed as an aggressor causing chaos in the northern region. Furthermore, NATO is also depicted as either a direct participant or a facilitator in the escalation of the situation. In support of this argument, the following tweets" The situation has escalated as ethnic Serbs clash with NATO-KFOR soldiers", Vucic says Kosovo leader's goal is to provoke conflict between Serbia and NATO" [RT, RT Ultima Hora, TASS (TACC), 29 May 2023].

6.4.2. Serbia

The tweets related to Serbia focus on the country's history with NATO, its relations with Kosovo, its ties with Russia, and its stance on recent global events. These narratives evoke sympathy for Serbia, portraying it as a NATO victim (among them @Helenavillarrt, @RT in Spanish, @Russian Embassy in México). For instance, Russian media outlets and affiliated actors highlight the Russian-Serbian Partnership, one of the tweets says "President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with the President of Serbia. The mutual commitment to the further development of the Russian-Serbian strategic partnership was confirmed" [@mid_rf, (Ministry of Defence), 6 April 2022], "Serbian President Says Country Receives Russian Gas "Virtually Free" [@actualidadrt] emphasising their strategic partnership and shared values.

Indeed, anti-NATO and anti-West stances have occupied a huge part of the tweets. For instance, one tweet from @rt_com [28 March 2022] says" ... Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that regarding other members of the world community, the community of democracy that includes EU, NATO, and the U.S, are in fact an autocracy." In addition to this, "Tens of thousands of Red Star Belgrade fans - one of Serbia's most popular soccer teams- had a powerful message to the West as they unfurled banners with the games of countries and dates of Western aggressions

against them, from Korea to Syria, singing "Give Peace A Chance.", [@RedfishStream, March 18, 2022, (Telegraf RS, 2022)] Simultaneously, they do denounce Western actions, with a particular emphasis on NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo, which cracked historical wounds, consequently re-enforcing support for Russia. For instance, Russian Embassy in Mexico [@embrusiamexico, 26 February 2022] tweets: "A Journalist Jelena Milincic, Serbian survivor of the 1999 #OTAN bombing: The last 8 years, #Rusia insisted that Ukraine respect the Minsk agreements and had a lot of patience while Ukrainians killed Russians in the neighbouring country". Furthermore, several of the following tweets point out the support Russia is receiving in Serbia for the invasion of Ukraine. For instance, @rt_com [18 March 2022] tweeted "Serbian presidential candidate Misa Vacic expresses his support for the Russian military operation in Ukraine: "A column of motorists supporting the Russian special operation in Ukraine gathered in the capital of Serbia" [@rt_com, 15 March 2022].

The tweets underline Serbia's relationship with Russia and attribute Serbia to being the 'launchpad' of Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkan, which have been discussed in other parts of this thesis. As in the case of Kosovo, the number of tweets intensified along with the developments on the ground in Serbia. In general, Serbia-related tweets and retweets are very consistent; however, there are four periods highlighted in the graph below (Figure 6.5).

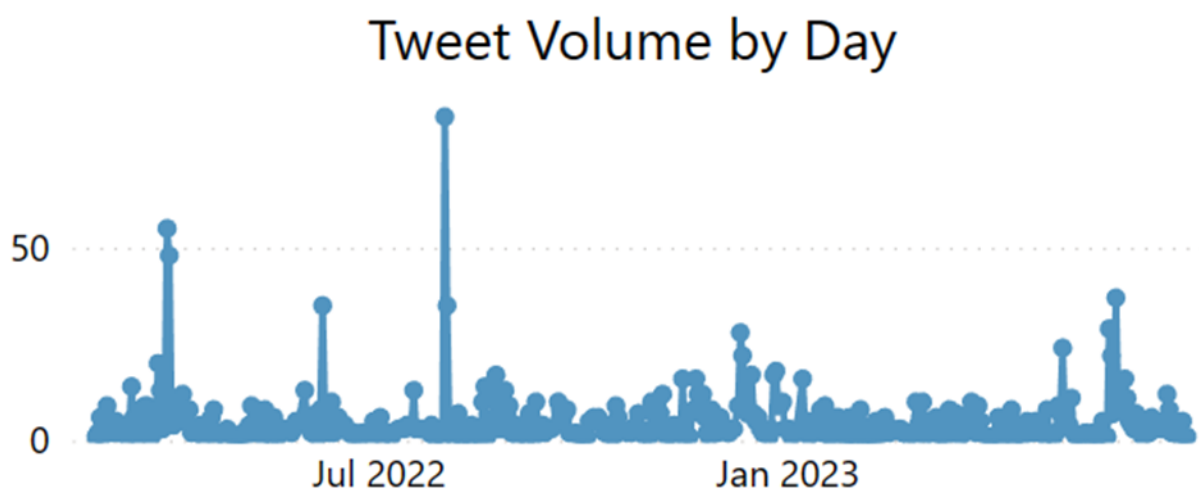


Figure 6.7 Number of tweets per day during a specific period. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

The first one provided tweet from March 29, 2022, focusing primarily on Russia's stance towards international dynamics, tensions between Russia and the West, and developments regarding Serbia's reliance on Russia's gas and alternative energy sources.

Multiplying tweets from Russian embassies echo Foreign Minister Lavrov's statement about NATO, U.S., and EU, who are trying to impose "hegemony" not only in the Western Balkan but worldwide. Some of the tweets include: "We are seeing attempts by the #US, the #EU and @NATO to impose their hegemony..." [@mfa_russia], "We are witnessing unprecedented pressure... that some Western politicians call an 'all-out war' against Russia" [@rusembassyi], "Serbian gas: We can only do without Russian gas if we replace it with wood" [@actualidadrt], "Serbia can refuse Russian gas only in the case of switching to firewood..." [@lifenews_ru]. Another topic seen in the tweets is the proposal for Ukrainian-Russian talks in Belgrade. "The President of Serbia proposed to hold negotiations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine in Belgrade" [@zvezdanews]. From the tweets, it can be revealed that Russia's interest in the Western Balkan lies under the great power competition, and Serbia, together with other states, is used to advance its geopolitical interests, especially in confronting the West and re-positioning itself.

The second period, based on the analysis of the tweets, is on July 31, 2022, after Kosovo announced a two-month period for the plates to be switched over (Reuters, 2022b). Several significant revelations concerning the Kosovo-Serbia situation were identified. The escalation in the northern region was pointed out to have happened after "Kosovo's president and prime minister were here in Washington..." [@helenavillarrrt, July 31, 2022]. Serbia's leadership is claiming about "The Kosovar army plans to carry out an attack on northern Serbia at midnight..." [@RT Ultima Hora], reports about "Gunshots and sirens are heard on the Kosovo-Serbia border." [@RT Ultima Hora], "there will be no surrender and Serbia will win." [@RT_com], "The decision of the "authorities" in Pristina to start applying unreasonable "rules" on the forced replacement of personal documents...is another attempt of toward the explosion of the Serbian population from Kosovo" [@MID_RF]) further exacerbation of inter-ethnic tensions and possible further escalation of the situation.

On May 29, May 2023 the number of tweets retweets from Russian media outlets and associated accounts in Twitter increased again regarding the escalation between Kosovo-Serbia. "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia. Stop the violence" [@rt_com, @actualidadrt] – shared by Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic..." covered most of the tweets. Similar tweets as with the hashtag of Kosovo such as” 52 Serbs were wounded and a Kosovo special forces officer fired on Serb protesters...", "Military convoys in Serbia, attacked by NATO in the 1990s are on their way towards Kosovo...", "The Serbian Armed Forces took up positions near the administrative border with Kosovo...", "Kosovo PM dreams of becoming new Zelensky – Vucic says..." (@rt_com) comparing the prime minister, Albin Kurti, with the president of Ukraine, Zelensky. Furthermore, accusations against NATO that "The international security forces under the auspices of NATO...did not protect the Serbs..." were prevalent. These tweets reveal the agenda of Russian media outlets and Russian diplomats, together with affiliated accounts, to share specific news continuously in order to portray a specific ‘picture’ of the situation to audiences aligned with Russian narratives on the Western Balkans.

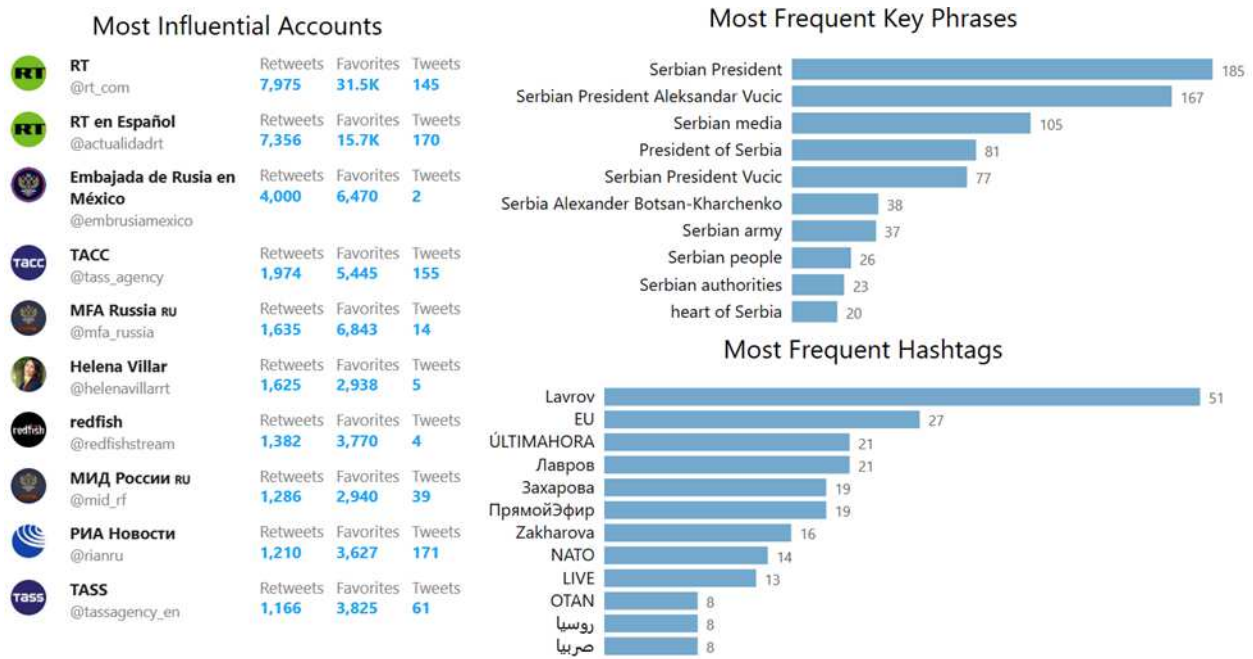


Figure 6.8 Most influential Twitter accounts hashtag “Serbia”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

6.4.3. Montenegro

The volume of tweets compared to Kosovo and Serbia is relatively low. Nevertheless, tweets concerning Montenegro mainly discuss the diplomatic tensions between Montenegro and Russia after the expulsions of Russian diplomats and announcements of “persona non grata”. Moreover, the ban on broadcasting of RT and Sputnik sponsored Russian media outlets was highlighted.

Some of the Tweets include: "Russia Blocks Montenegro Diplomats In response to the expulsion of its diplomats from Montenegro ..." [@rt_com, Oct 14, 2022], “On March 24, Montenegrin Ambassador to Russia M. #Шчепанович summoned to @MID_RF... ...announced “persona non grata” an employee of the embassy of Montenegro in Moscow a response to an unfounded decision to declare persona non grata” of a diplomat..." [@mid_rf, Mar 24, 2022], "Interview of the Russian Ambassador to Montenegro...in connection with the announcement of 'persona non grata'...He said won't go unanswered" [@mid_rf, Aug 13, 2022].

The use of historical connection and diplomatic success in recognition of Montenegro's (and Serbia and Romania) independence post the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878: "The Congress of Berlin finalised the outcome of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Having overcome the resistance of European monarchies, Russia achieved the recognition of Serbia's, Montenegro's, and Romania's independence" [@ma_russia, Jun 21, 2022]. Additionally, the tweet” ... In Montenegro, RT and Sputnik are banned. The state regulator of the republic called on providers to turn off the broadcasting of our TV channel and radio” [@M_Simonyan, 20 April 2022]._ Montenegro related tweets reveal the attempt of Russia to utilise historical events toward the countries of Western Balkans especially those who share similarities as it is Montenegro to its advantage.

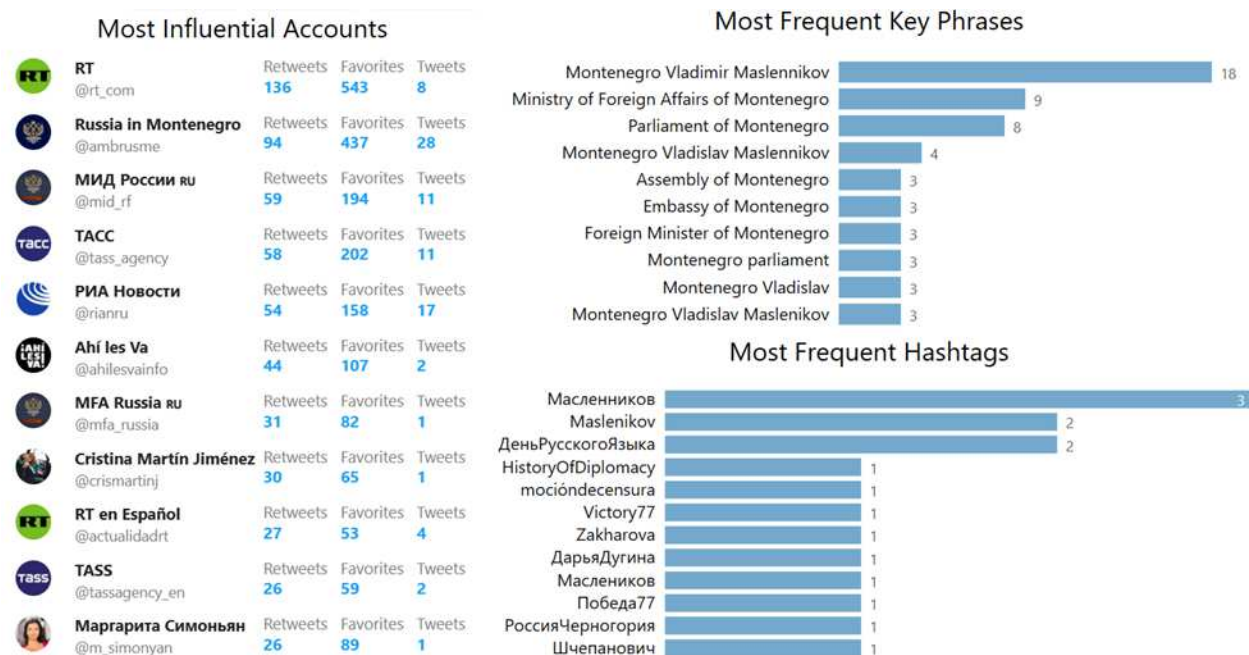


Figure 6.9 Most influential Twitter accounts for hashtag “Montenegro”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

Although Montenegro may not appear as prominently as Serbia or Kosovo in Russia’s tweets, the underlying tensions and historical references reveal a deeper geopolitical agenda. Moreover, these tweets reflect Kremlin’s concerns about Montenegro's deepening alignment with the West.

6.4.4. Albania

An analysis of ten main tweets by retweets provide insights into the societal dynamics of Albania, highlighting its relationship with Kosovo and NATO and few tweets about Albania itself. Nevertheless, a tweet regarding immigration and refugees asserts that "... an Albanian citizen can NOT be a 'refugee' or an 'asylum-seeker'. To pretend that they are is an affront to any immigration system and an insult to genuine refugees..." [[@georgegalloway](#), 31 October 2022]. Another tweet touches on Russia’s counter allegations regarding damages to Albania’s consulate in Kharkov due to alleged Russia’s air strikes, revealing a strained diplomatic relationship. "[@AlbanianDiplo](#) condemned alleged strikes by the Russian army resulting in damage to the premises of the country's honorary consulate in Kharkov..." [[@mfa_russia](#), [@mid_rf](#), 17 March 2022].

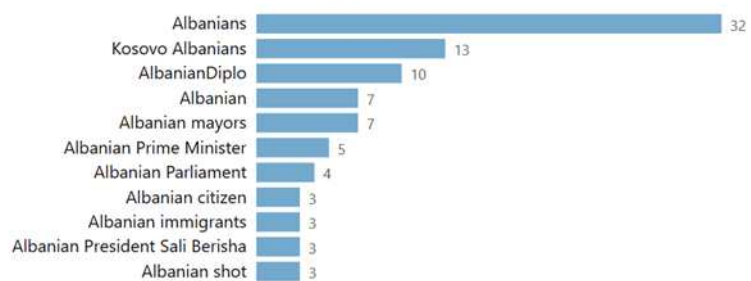
While analysing tweets related to Albania, it is evident that many highlight tensions in the northern part of Kosovo such as: "The bridge dividing Kosovska Mitrovica into Serbian and Albanian parts is blocked..." [[@rt_com](#), 31 July 2022], "The goal of provocations in #Kosovo is clear - to establish full control over non-Albanian northern provinces. Only restraint of Kosovo Serbs, who rely on Belgrade's support, allows to avoid major incidents, and prevent situation from sliding into open confrontation" [[@russianembassy](#), 13 December 2022]. "Vucic urges Albanian mayors not to take office in Kosovo..." [[@actualidadrt](#), 30 May 2023]. These posts highlight the ethnic tension and Russian involvement in Kosovo's politics for its own interests to sow discord and contribute to the spread of narratives that would influence tensions in the country and Western Balkan.

A related tweet is addressed against the West, specifically NATO interventions in former Yugoslavia as a reminder of NATO bombing a day before the 24 years since the intervention: "On March 24, 1999, #NATO forces launched air strikes on Yugoslavia...under the pretext of preventing ethnic cleansing of ethnic Albanians in the autonomous province of Kosovo...What day is today" [[@sputnik_jp](#), 23 Mar 2023]. This tweet aligns with Kremlin's longstanding accusations of NATO's intervention. Moreover, the old narrative for 'organ trafficking allegations' still persists in these tweets: "Albanian parliament adopted a resolution challenging accusations regarding organ trafficking in Kosovo and Albania. We remain firm in our position that those involved in these crimes must face a harsh and just punishment" [[@mfa_russia](#), 2 August 2022].

Most Influential Accounts

Account	Retweets	Favorites	Tweets
George Galloway @georgegalloway	2,468	9,332	17
RT en Español @actualidadrt	366	724	25
RT @rt_com	289	862	13
MFA Russia RU @mfa_russia	172	536	2
МИД России RU @mid_rf	104	290	5
Sputnik 日本 @sputnik_jp	94	108	2
Russian Embassy, UK @russianembassy	79	198	1
РИА Новости @rianru	73	124	17
TACC @tass_agency	58	109	6
Russian Mission in Geneva @mission_russian	40	83	1

Most Frequent Key Phrases



Most Frequent Hashtags

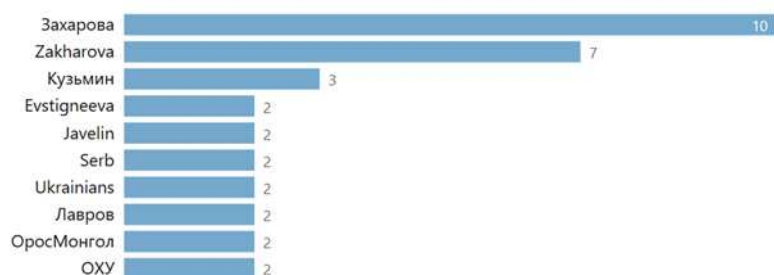


Figure 6.10 Most influential Twitter accounts for the hashtag “Albania”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

From the tweets analysed, complex geopolitical dynamics of the region are emphasised. The representation of Albanians, combined with historical and current Russian influence, especially following Ukraine's invasion, emphasises the persistent ethnic tensions in the northern region of Kosovo and the involvement of external powers, including Russia and NATO, offers two distinct lenses, each contributing to shaping public perception in the region.

6.4.5. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Like tweets from other countries, those concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina give insights into the complex geopolitical tensions and narratives involving Russia, the West (primarily the US and UK), Ukraine, and Bosnia, especially in the context of the Bosnian Serbs. Indeed, the utilisation of historical events is evident throughout Russia media outlets and diplomatic accounts. To illustrate, one tweet that intends to criticise or make a point about current international events includes: "The infamous September 1995 TIME cover about NATO's bombing of Bosnian Serbs has been projected on the U.S. Consulate in Moscow. The 1995 cover reads: A massive bomb attack opens the door to peace." [[@redfishstream](#), 3 March 2022]. Simultaneously, several posts portray the West, especially the U.S., and UK, as manipulating Ukraine for their geopolitical purposes against Russia. For instance, in an interview by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with Radio Televizije Republike Srpske he says: "...Ukraine is a bargaining chip, a tool that is manipulated primarily by the US; Great Britain - an Anglo-Saxon team now heading the West" [[@mfa_russia](#), 6 June 2022, [@rusembassyj](#), 5 June 2022], "Ukraine is West's collateral damage in war against Russia - Chairman of Bosnian presidency" [[@rt_com](#), 26 April 2022].

These tweets highlight the Kremlin's support for Republika Srpska, positioning it as a counterbalance to Western influence in the region. They also outline the Kremlin's strategic approach towards this Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The following tweets describe the best Russian approach toward the entity of Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The following tweets highlight Vladimir Putin's appreciation for the 'neutral' stance of Republika

Srpska’s President Milorad Dodik concerning events in Ukraine: "... We are grateful for your neutral position on the events in Ukraine..." [@mid_rf, 23 May 2022], "...Vladimir Putin met with Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodick, expressed his appreciation for his neutrality and welcomed the steady growth in commercial trade between Russia and Republika Srpska" [@rusembassy, 24 May 2022], “Bosnian leader slams West, says Russia was forced to protect people of Donbass. - “For many years the West did not react to the extermination of the Russian population in Ukraine, there were daily murders and bombings in Donbass," [@tassagency_en, 19 September 2022].

Another set of tweets highlight claims of the West’s pressure and interference in Serbia: "UK seeking to overthrow Belgrade government - Serb leader British spy agencies are trying to take advantage of public backlash over two school shootings..." [@rt_com, 7 June 2022]. "The United States will allocate up to \$ 450 thousand for the program of teaching "democracy" to the children of Bosnia and Herzegovina..." [@m_simonyan, 25 March 2022], these educational programmes are met with scepticism, questioning the role of the U.S. in the country.

As seen in analyses above, these tweets reveal that Russian narratives revolve around historical grievances, regional tensions, and the war in Ukraine aligning with the Kremlin’s IW tactics in the region, largely aiming to divert attention from Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

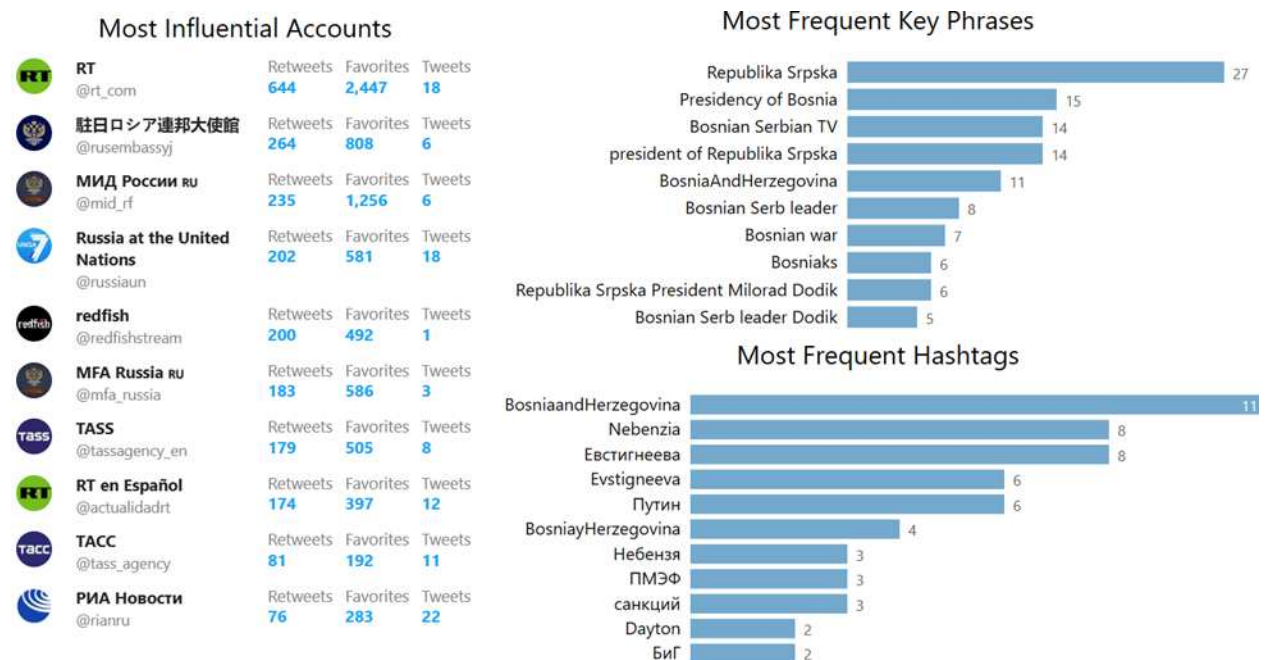


Figure 6.11 Most influential Twitter accounts with the hashtag “Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

6.4.6. North Macedonia

Tweets regarding North Macedonia provide an overview of topics related to the country and in domestic developments together with the Western influence. For instance, “North Macedonian capital sees violent protests against the government’s decision to accept the French proposal to start EU negotiations.” [@rt_com, 7 July 2022]. These tweets, which were among the most shared, highlight the protests country's decision to open negotiations with the EU.

Moreover, a series of tweets reveal the tensions between Russia and North Macedonia: "On 28 March, five diplomats @Russian_Emb MKD declared persona non grata." [@mid_rf, 28 March 2022], followed up by another related tweet: "Six diplomats @Russian_Emb_MKD declared "persona non grata" on April 15. The North Macedonian authorities continue to follow the lead of the West, which is in a Russophobic frenzy" [@mid_rf, 16 April 2022], "Clearly, the escapades against #Russia are an attempt to earn favour in the eyes of Brussels and Washington." [@ma_russia, 3 August 2022], “...to distract the attention of its own population from the difficulties of the current day.” [@mid_rf, Aug 3, 2022] and “to break bilateral relations with Russia” [@mid_rf, 28 March 2022], simultaneously on a tweet posted by Ministry of Defence of Russia respond to North Macedonia’s decision “we will be forced to take retaliatory measures” [28 March 2022]. The tensions between Russia and North Macedonia were attributed to the West (EU-U.S.) consequently contributing against Russian ‘sentiments’ as supposed by the Russian authorities.

Another huge topic of the Kremlin’s ‘concern’ was the support of North Macedonia with military equipment transfers to Ukraine as stated in the following tweet: "North Macedonia has secretly handed over to Ukraine four Su-25 aircraft..." [@tass_agency, 4 August 2022]. This reveals that Russia possibly considers the country to be aligned with EU and U.S. interests against Russian-backed factions. It is to note that Russia's diplomatic missions on Facebook have notably intensified their outreach initiatives, especially in North Macedonia and Montenegro (CSD, 2023a, p. 7). The large number of Facebook users in the country (ibid.) makes them more vulnerable to

such malign influence that could change people's perceptions of topics that are propagated using these platforms.

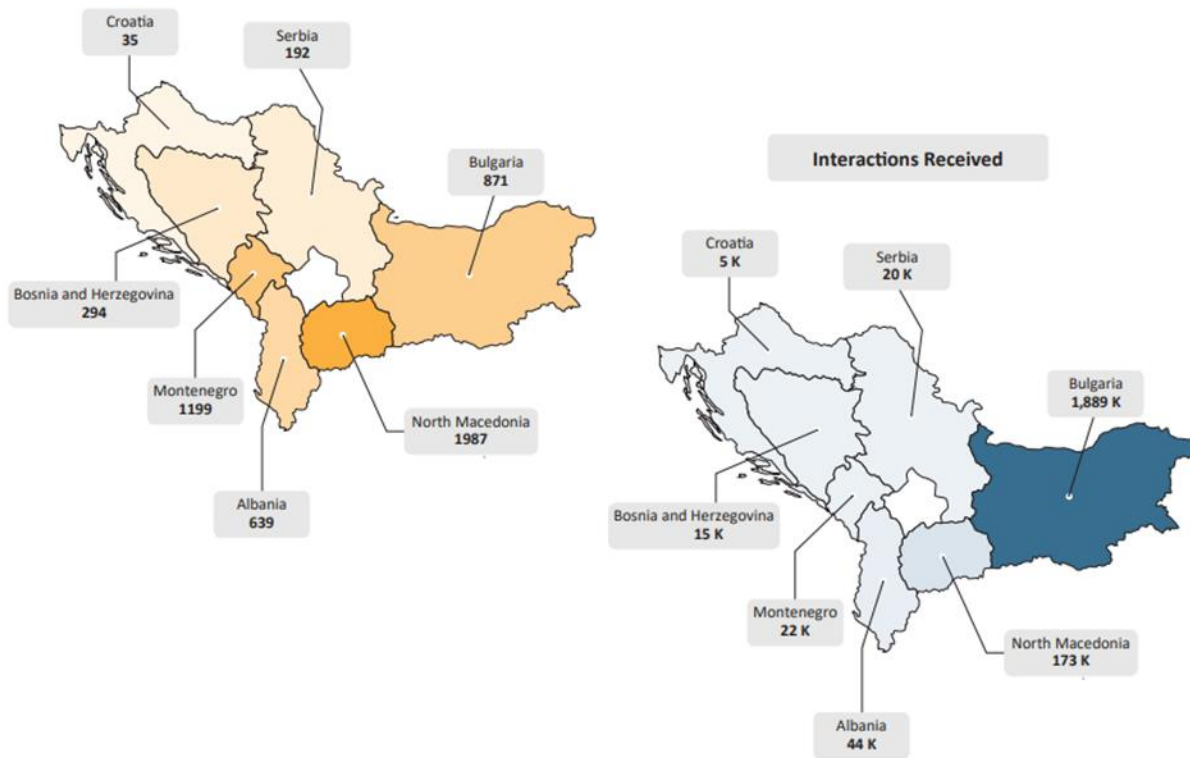


Figure 6.12 Number of posts published and interactions - Russian Embassy pages in 2022 (CSD, 2023a, p. 4)

Highlighting domestic political instability, such as with the former prime minister Nikola Gruevski: "Fugitive former North Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski sentenced to 9 years in prison for an "act of political revenge"." [@actualidadrt, 21 May 2022], "Former North Macedonian leader gets a nine-year sentence for demolishing a building." [@rt_com, May 22, 2022] which is known to have had the support of the Kremlin. In cooperation in the energy and economic sectors. Moreover, it is praised the role of North Macedonia in OSCE mission highlighting the significance of being 'neutral' for regional stability: "The readiness of the North Macedonian @OSCECiO team to act as an impartial and transparent "manager" will determine the prospects for restoring confidence..." [@rf_osce, Jan 12].

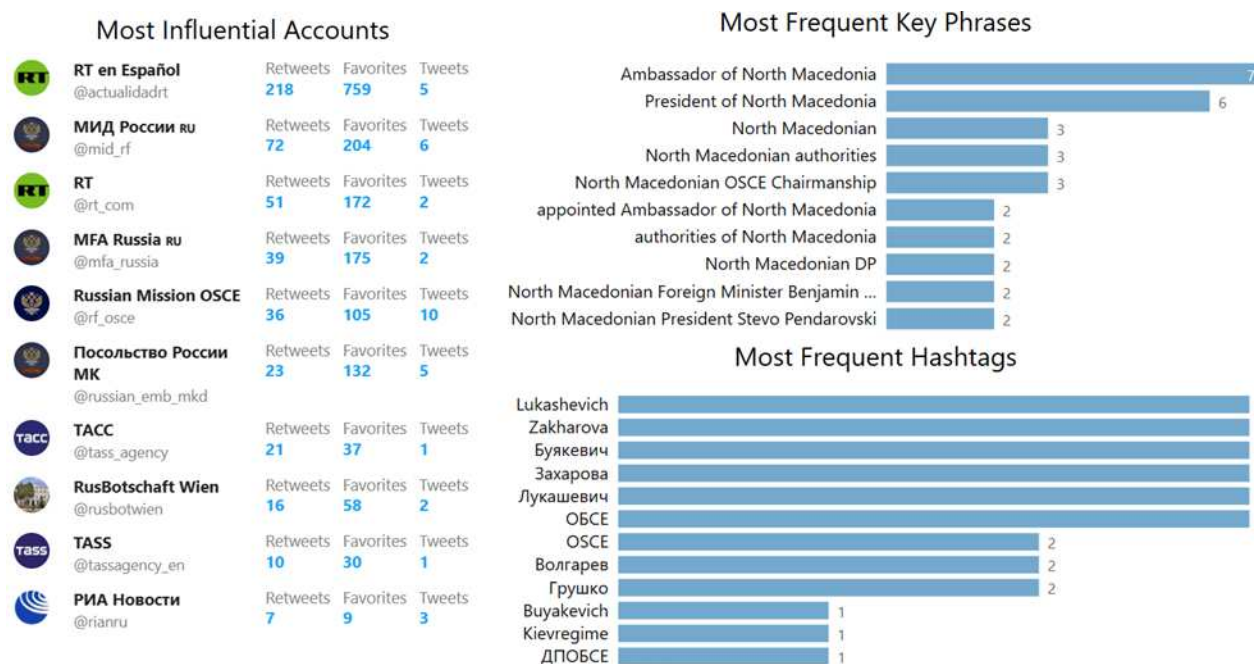


Figure 6.13 Most influential Twitter accounts hashtag “North Macedonia”. Source: Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard /GMFUS

Overall, the above tweets analysed show the narratives regarding political landscape of the country as being between the East and the West, it shows challenges faced in balancing these relations also including the domestic obstacles together with the move against Russia and alignment with the West.

6.5. Domestic Actors as Amplifiers of Russia’s Disinformation Campaigns

One of the significant findings from the analysis of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns is the significant impact of domestic actors from Western Balkan countries as key amplifiers of Russian narratives, on whom Maxim Samorukov a fellow expert at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center (2023) argues that “if it were not for the domestic actor, the Kremlin's influence would disappear.” Thus, as long as these actors continue supporting Russia, it will therefore play a significant role in

the region. Therefore, Putin's support for political candidates and parties throughout the Balkans is illustrative of this dynamic, which strengthens Russia's reputation while diminishing the influence of NATO and the EU (BBC, 2022).

MG-Expert-A highlights Russia's effective strategy of focusing on local influencers, national media, and recruiting individuals such as journalists and opinion makers. In this manner, Russia leverages traditional emotional, cultural, and religious connections, particularly with the Serbian and Montenegrin populations. DefMinister-A asserts that domestic media, working in synergy with Russian state-sponsored media like Sputnik, have played a significant role in fostering pro-Russian sentiments, often spreading pro-Putin propaganda and anti-Western narratives. As DefMinister-A argues, most of the time ruling elites in Serbia and all the time in the entity of the Republic of Srpska have been directly promoting the official propaganda coming from the Kremlin. For instance, Russia's influence and spread of disinformation in Montenegro is deepening not only through politicians but significantly by using pro-Kremlin sentiments organizations and associations that are close to Serbian Orthodox Church(DFC, 2022, p. 24).

The "150 Days of War in Ukraine" study, analysed 1,396 articles and publications from February 24 to July 25, 2023 (Muric et al., 2022, p. 15) published by 698 different sources throughout the region and noted the significant volume of disinformation present. Nonetheless, out of the 20 individual sources with the highest rated articles about the war in Ukraine, a staggering 16 were from Serbia, while only two were from Montenegro and two from Bosnia and Herzegovina (ibid.). Indeed, Russia has accelerated its disinformation campaigns aimed at the Western Balkans with specific emphasis on Serbia, which it perceives as an "influence operation beachhead" in Southeastern Europe argues SenExpert-A. Nevertheless, the most obvious finding about the Russian influence in the Western Balkan is that Serbia serves as both a regional "hub" and a "launch pad", for the Kremlin's activities in the region (RusIO-Expert-A). With Serbia as a springboard, Russia's efforts since February of 2022 have sought to reinforce its existing Serbian foothold, while expanding their regional influence in the Balkans at large, says SenExpert-A. Although the Serbian media is filled with pro-Russian content, the influence of such state-controlled outlets as Sputnik Srbija is restricted (Georgiev et al., 2023, p. 34). Yet, local media outlets that are dominantly nationalist and pro-Russian and closely aligned with the Serbian ruling elite primarily disseminate pro-Russian disinformation, underscoring the vital role of domestic

actors in this disinformation network (Georgiev et al., 2023, p. 34, RusIO-Expert-A). According to IR-Prof-A, Serbian communities have displayed significant support for Russian policies, suggesting that Russian media outlets are merely "buttressing anti-western sentiment" rather than instigating it.

The media landscape in Serbia is particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns due to the large number of registered media outlets, in total approximately 2,500 (Blurring the truth p. 246). This vast array of outlets further complicates the task of monitoring and fact-checking, emphasising the need to focus on the main and most widely read media outlets (Blurring the truth p. 246). In Serbia, where the main source of information for political and social issues is television, the most popular private TV licensors are TV Pink, TV PRIVA and TV Happy, all major amplifiers of Kremlin disinformation in Serbia (CRTA 2022, 11). In essence, these platforms, which rank among the most frequented news websites in their respective nations, function as regional representatives for the Kremlin. The CRTA's (2023) research further highlights that 69% of all media content, both traditional and digital, in Serbia contains anti-Western disinformation narratives. These narratives not only saturate the domestic media landscape but also transcend national borders and infiltrate regional neighbours such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia.

The political and economic capture of Serbia by the Kremlin is evident in the mainstream media landscape (CSD, 2023b), where pro-Kremlin narratives have become normalised. In Serbia, although a semblance of equilibrium exists between the national leadership and the Kremlin, pro-Kremlin disinformation continues to serve as a staple for Serbian politicians (Georgiev *et al.*, 2023, pp. 65–66). A recent study revealed that among the top five websites, four consistently shared content aligned with Russian narratives (*ibid.*p.14). These websites often reference state Russian sponsored media outlets such as RIA Novosti, TASS, Sputnik and RT, in their articles. This widespread usage suggests a significant spread of Russian disinformation (*ibid.*p.14)

There is an evident connection between media outlets' financing sources and the frequency of disinformation campaigns; outlets spreading more disinformation often receive increased public funds. For instance, Alo and Kurir, two online news media platforms, which propagate more disinformation than others, such as Blic, N1, and Nova, receive more funding through project co-

financing and state advertising (Kleut, 2023, p. 84). Similarly, two national print dailies, leaders in promoting pro-Kremlin narratives, *Večernje novosti*, and *Informer* (ibid.), also receive substantial public funds (Kleut, 2023, p. 7). This pattern is also echoed by Media tycoons such as Predrag Rankovic Peconi, owner of TV Happy (Georgiev et al., 2023, p. 34), which produces disinformation frequently, and yet remains a leading recipient of state advertising (Ljubicic, 2023, p. 76). Tv channels invite people to their TV shows due to their affiliation and positive sentiment toward Russia (ibid, p.84).

In this pro-Russian media landscape, portrayals of Russian President Vladimir Putin are often positive, illustrating his role as a protector of Serbs and Serbia and an advocate for Serbia's "territorial integrity" (Nehring and Sittig, 2023, p. 247). Recent surveys indicate that 95% of Serbs perceive Russia as a true ally, and 82% oppose sanctions against Russia, reinforcing Russia's influence in the region (Georgiev et al., 2023, pp. 49–50). Such sentiments further fuels disinformation campaigns, as media outlets capitalise on the widespread popularity of Putin.

While in North Macedonia, a significant portion of domestic media outlets have narratives about the Kremlin's military "powerfulness" (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2022) that are not even verifiable, but the message seems to be one of admiration and 'fear' that should be shared by the US and NATO. For illustrative purposes, some of the titles include Russia is powerful, the West must comply; Russia's secret weapons; the US could lose a military conflict with Russia and China (Ibid.).

In conclusion, domestic actors play a significant role in amplifying the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans. The preponderance of Serbian media outlets disseminating pro-Russian content underscores Serbia's key role in advancing Putin's geopolitical objectives in the region.

6.6. Impact of Disinformation on Political Discourse

The influence of external powers, particularly Russia, plays an important role in the current geopolitical landscape in the Western Balkans. The region, with collage of historical grievances, regional disputes, and fragile democracies, presents fertile ground for external interference.

A significant pattern observed since the invasion of Ukraine has been increased political instability and nationalistic rhetoric, together with concern raised over the Kremlin's attempt to exploit these susceptibilities (Szczerba, 2023, p. 5). The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia deteriorated, and the complex political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in Republika Srpska, underscored by President Milorad Dodik's numerous meetings (in June and September 2022 and May 23, 2023) with Putin and his pro-Russia stances, served as evidence of Russia's burgeoning influence (Reuters, 2023; SarajevoTimes, 2023). Dodik's overt support for Russia and threats of secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate the complex relationship between local political dynamics and outside influence (Lachert, 2022; Drygiel-Bielińska, 2023, p. 209; Szczerba, 2023, p. 6), which would keep the West involved and divert attention away from the ongoing war in Ukraine. Political instability has been prevalent since August 2022 in Montenegro as well, when the government was ousted following a no-confidence vote (Falk, 2022).

One cannot dismiss the intricate interplay between the situation in Ukraine and the Western Balkans. Experts interviewed overwhelmingly acknowledged that the prolongation of the war in Ukraine correlates with an intensification of Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans. The longer the war continues, the greater the risk of Russia amplifying its efforts to shape the region's narrative. SenExpert-A argues that Russia's IW is "not isolated; it is a holistic whole government approach aimed at constructing a global environment favourable to Russia.". Further, he argues that Russia has "accelerated the scope and pace of their influence operations in certain regions where they either had a strong ideological foothold and/or where Russia perceived they had opportunities to increase their influence". As explained in the Chapter on Literature Review, Russia has long-standing relationships with Western Balkan countries like Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the northern region of Kosovo, where the Serb minority lives. The relationship and influence are based on so-called "PanSlavism" of Slavic heritage, common Christian Orthodox faith, and historical ties within the region (Bechev, 2019; Del Popolo, 2019, p. 2), which makes it easier to exert political influence and achieve its political objectives. Furthermore, narratives propagated through disinformation campaigns often found their way into political discourse and public debates. Additionally, the pervasive distrust of traditional media platforms further compounds this situation (Figure 5.1).

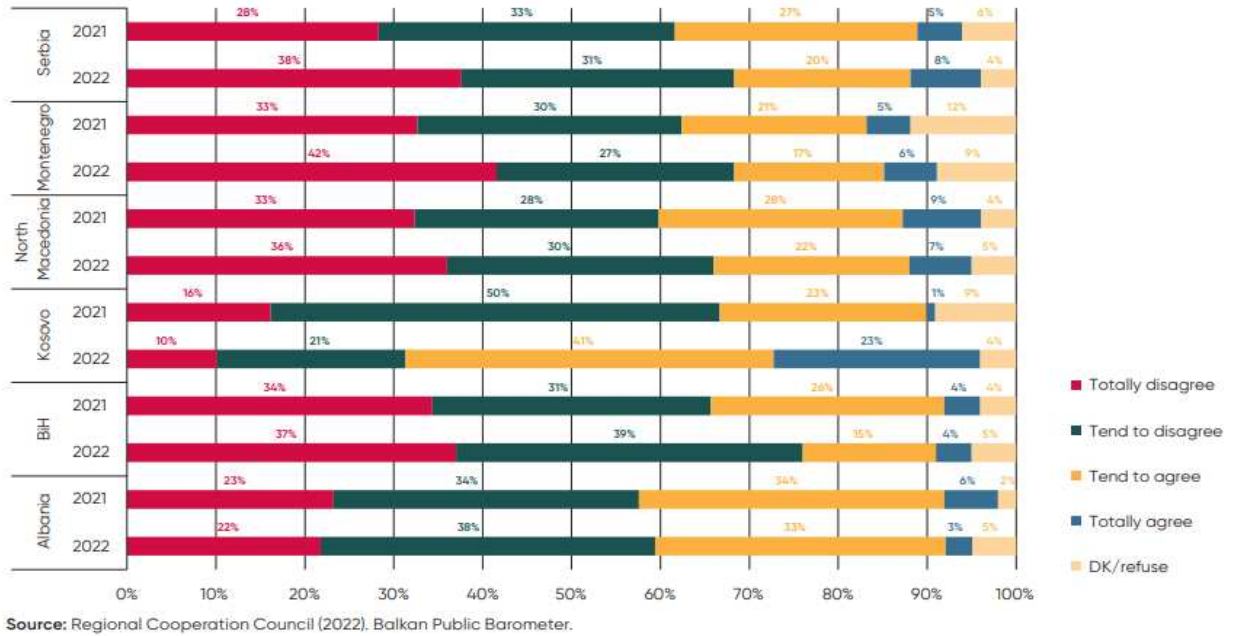


Figure 6.14 Do you agree that the media is independent of political influence.

Indeed, Television serves as the main source of information for political news in Western Balkans, with over 70% (IRI, 2023c, 2023b, 2023a) followed by new media outlets. Moreover, according to polls conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2022), 62% of respondents in the region believe that the media is the institution with the second-least amount of independence after the judiciary. Additionally, surveys from the Balkan Barometer (2022) highlighted the scepticism held by many towards mainstream broadcasters, with respondents from the region questioning their objectivity. Given the fact that the Western Balkans struggle with media freedom (Šemić, 2022) and where the governments in power control or have ties to the mainstream media (Filipova, 2021, p. 33), it increases the possibility of influencing what topics are presented in media outlets, which corresponds with Agenda Setting Theory. For instance, anti-Western rhetoric has marked a continuous increase in public discourse in Serbia and Republika Srpska, occupying a significant place in the media outlets, while pro-Western reporting is in continuous decline (Ljubivic, 2023).

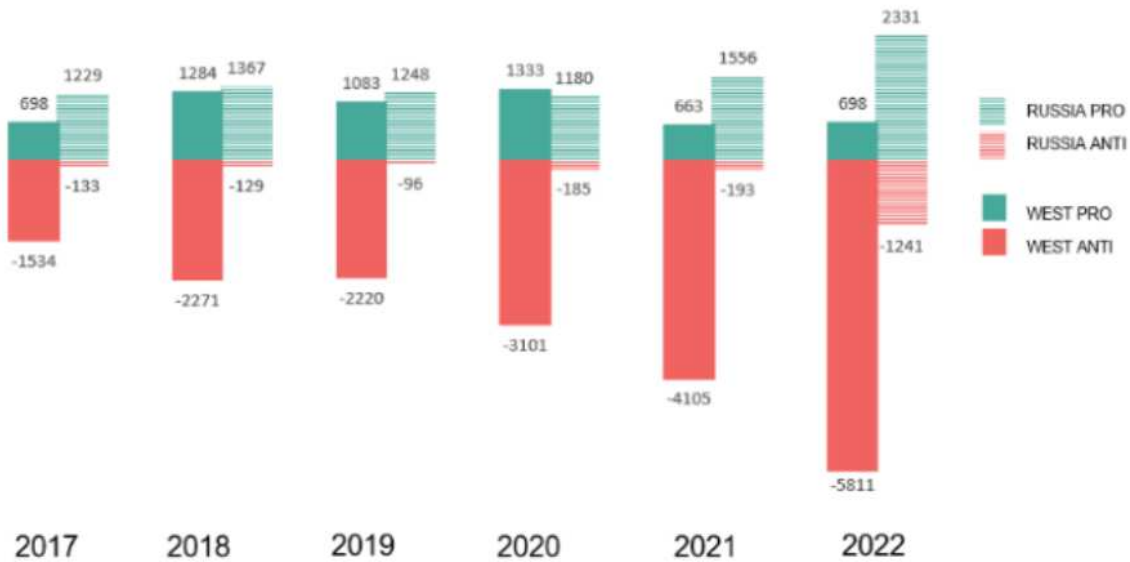


Figure 6.15 Tone of reporting in traditional media over years in Serbia / Source: CRTA

Additionally, Srdjan Cvijic, a political analyst, noted that the government-aligned media are promoters of hate speech and violence, especially with anti-Western and nationalist language (Geopost, 2023). Additionally, polls show that 75% of people in the Western Balkan countries do not trust political parties (RCC, 2023). Consequently, the information environment becomes susceptible to the dissemination of alternative narratives, especially those propagated by disinformation campaigns from Russian media outlets and domestic amplifiers who are in alignment with the Kremlin's narratives. Such influence on political rhetoric has the potential to exacerbate division, twist policy making and democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans. The next paragraphs will elaborate on disinformation campaigns impact in public opinion.

6.7. Impact of Disinformation on Public Opinion

The influence of disinformation campaigns on public perceptions is particularly concerning an aspect and effective tool of Kremlin's IW (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 13). Notably, there is a sentiment among the Slavic speaking population in Serbia, the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in northern part of Kosovo where the Serb minority lives that portrays Russia as a trusted ally, particularly for the Serbs (Filipova, 2021, p. 33). Recent surveys illustrate this perception starkly where 95% of Serbs view Russia as a steadfast ally, in comparison to only 11% who view the EU

as an ally (Jefferson and Savic, 2022). Moreover, 68% do believe that NATO started the war in Ukraine, while at the same time, 58% have a positive opinion about Russia (IRA, 2022, p. 93) and 82% oppose any sanctions imposed on Russia (Hoxhaj, 2022).

However, public opinion is not shaped in a vacuum. Both traditional and online media outlets share a substantial part in shifting public sentiments. According to surveys from the Balkan Barometer (RCC, 2022), for the first time since 2015, support for EU membership in the Western Balkans fell to 60%. This has continued with a similar trend of declining sentiment, where support for EU membership fell to 59% this year (RCC, 2023).

The wider implications of these disinformation campaigns are evident, not least in shaping public opinion. MG-Expert-A from the region argues that Russia's use of media outlets, social media, and cultural exchanges have been effective in creating a wedge between the local populace and their elected governments. The region remains vulnerable to the malign influence of Russia's disinformation campaigns due to weak governance, nascent democracies, and limited media literacy RusIO-Expert-A.

The Media Effect Theory emphasises that media, by framing events in a specific manner, can shape audiences' perceptions and sway public opinion. Within the Western Balkans, especially given the ubiquity of the media landscape, which is, for instance, 80% controlled by the state in Serbia, and other rapid information dissemination mechanisms such as new media (e.g., social media platforms), have played a pivotal role in changing sentiments towards support for the EU.

The influence is even more palpable when these media messages are consumed in masse. For instance, polls conducted by CRTA (2023) reveal that only in Serbia, 69% of all traditional and new media embody anti-West disinformation dominating the public and political discourse. Moreover, with the development of technology new media can rapidly reach a wide audience and influence public opinion and domestic politics (Grisé *et al.*, 2022, p. 74). Specific algorithms can identify susceptible audiences and manage different narratives to appear on their echo chambers (ibid.). For instance, from the Twitter content analysis for the period chosen (24 February 2022-30 June 2023), it was evident that there was an increased number of followers for Russian media outlets, Russian diplomatic and official accounts, and other pro-Russian twitter accounts, as shown in the graph (Figure 6.16).

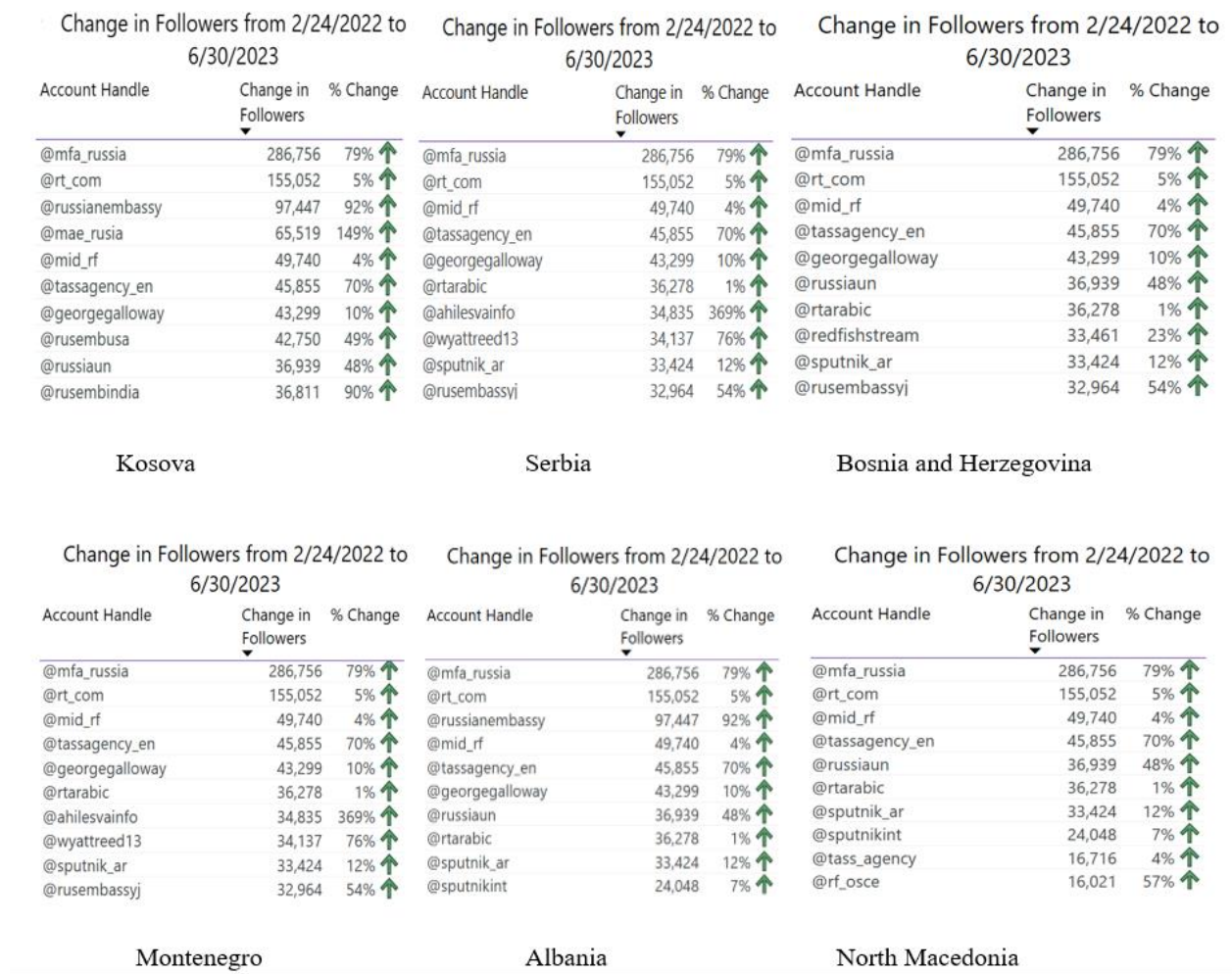


Figure 6.16 Change in Followers 2022-2023

Thus, traditional, and new media outlets have the capacity to sway public opinion, and, in this context, align it more sympathetically with Russia's narratives and geopolitical aspirations aligning with media effect theory and agenda setting theory. This reveals that their intended purpose appears to be the meddling in domestic and regional developments thus influencing public opinion and exacerbating existing disputes, thereby serving the goal of sowing discord among the Western Balkan nations.

Moreover, polls provide further insight into these shifting perceptions. A survey (cite) conducted in Serbia revealed that 60% of Serbian respondents attributed the Ukraine war to the U.S., with only 26% laying blame on Russia (Al-Jazeera, 2022; IntelliNews, 2022b). This is in stark contrast to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 60% believed Russia was the primary instigator. However, these figures vary in different parts of the country. While the Bosnian Federation predominantly blamed Russia (79%), in Republika Srpska and the Brcko District, the blame was directed towards the US (57%) (ibid.). These variances reiterate the significance of the role of the media in shaping public perceptions among populations that share similar values and beliefs with Russia.

These findings reveal that the Kremlin's main effective tool in the current security developments following the invasion of Ukraine is still the use of "information warfare" tools by traditional and new Russian media outlets, as well as pro-Russian media outlets, to promote pro-Kremlin narratives in order to have the possibility of interfering in domestic processes with the goal of preventing the region from joining NATO and the EU and sowing discord in societies. This enables Russia to maintain a presence in the region and strengthen pro-Russian sentiments among the domestic society.

7. Discussion

This paper's objective was to address two key questions: How has the Kremlin used traditional and new media to wage disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine? And how has this influenced public opinion and political discourse in the region? To answer these questions, the author employed a mixed-method research approach, using qualitative content analysis, Twitter content analysis through the Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard from GMF, and insights from experts for an in-depth analysis of the topic.

The main findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis reveal that the Kremlin' has been strategically using both traditional and new media to propagate disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans, thus utilising Information Warfare (IW) effectively. Traditional media outlets like Sputnik Srbija, TASS Russian News Agency, RIA Novosti, and RT have been the primary channels for spreading pro-Russian narratives and disinformation. These outlets have taken advantage of the local preference for television as one of the main sources for political and social news, thus effectively disseminating their narratives.

Additionally, new media platforms have allowed for a rapid, wide-reaching mechanism for disinformation dissemination. Algorithms often reinforce existing biases, creating a feedback loop that makes counter-efforts increasingly challenging. Twitter, in particular, has served as a strategic platform to advance Russia's geopolitical interests in the Western Balkans. Tweets analysed from Russian-sponsored media outlets, diplomats, or associated accounts align with Kremlin's objectives and narratives, emphasising topics such as NATO bombings and portraying Serbia as a victim of Western aggression, creating scepticism about the prospects of EU integration of the region, fostering ethnic and religious division in the region. As a result, we have seen a worsening of regional relations in the Western Balkans, primarily between Kosovo and Serbia.

The role of domestic actors in amplifying Kremlin-sponsored narratives cannot be ignored. Especially in Serbia and the entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, disinformation finds a 'friendly' environment. Politically aligned actors reinforce Kremlin's narratives, making them seem credible to local audiences. This highlights a symbiotic relationship where Russia leverages Serbia's media dominance, and in return, Serbian outlets gain from Russia's propaganda machinery. Similar trends are observed in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and

Herzegovina, each adapting to their unique political context. Meanwhile, Albania and Kosovo primarily get information from international sources or Serbian-language outlets from neighbouring countries like Montenegro.

The Kremlin's narratives in the region fall under three broad categories: the "War in Ukraine," "the West," and "Historical Grievances and Regional Disputes." These narratives not only influence public opinion but also enter political discourse, perpetuating mistrust and division and undermining democratic institutions. For example, nationalistic rhetoric has increased, state officials in Serbia align with Russia's viewpoints, and there have been several meetings between Putin and Serb-nationalist Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Surveys indicate that these disinformation campaigns have led to a decline in public support for the EU and an increase in pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments among Serb-speaking audiences. These shifts have broader geopolitical implications, hindering the Western Balkans' integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and complicating Western efforts in the region.

In theoretical terms, both Media Effect Theory and Agenda Setting Theory help understand these phenomena. Media Effect Theory suggests that prolonged exposure to specific topics, like Kosovo-Serbia relations or historical NATO bombings, can influence public perceptions. Agenda Setting Theory emphasises that media dictates public focus, and Russia has been setting an agenda that revolves around the Russian vs. West narratives. Both theories highlight that Twitter cannot be overlooked as it serves as a platform where political agendas are pushed forward.

In conclusion, the impact of these disinformation campaigns is both immediate and long-lasting. They exacerbate existing divisions and erode the foundations of democracy and governance in the region. Given the evolving nature of these campaigns, understanding their wide-ranging impacts is essential for regional stability and global geopolitics. It is crucial for governments in the region to counter these effects by enhancing media literacy, promoting independent journalism, and organising public awareness campaigns about the role of disinformation.

Conclusion

The first question addressed by this paper was to see how the Kremlin has used traditional and new media to wage disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and, subsequently, how it has influenced the public opinion and political discourse in the region? The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of Russian disinformation campaigns in the region, leveraging both traditional media and new platforms like Twitter. Evidently, these information operations are meticulously designed: rather than operating in sporadic bursts, they constitute a discernible pattern which is indicative of a coordinated strategy to fulfil Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Given Moscow's historical interests in the Balkans, such strategy is not solely focused on current events; rather, it is deeply entrenched in the historical contexts of these nations, thus implementing Russian information warfare tools.

The Western Balkans, like Ukraine, can be viewed as a 'battlefield' of influence between the West and Russia. The outcome of these influences can set the tone for European security and cooperation for decades to come. Analysing Russia's actions in Ukraine might provide a blueprint for its intentions in the Western Balkans: hence, it should be closely monitored by governments of Western Balkan countries and the international community.

In conclusion, Russia's disinformation campaigns have a multifaceted impact on the Western Balkans, influencing not just public opinion but also the evolution of political discourse and policymaking in the region. The goal of Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans may not limit itself to persuade people to believe a specific narrative: in fact, it could equally succeed in fostering confusion or undermining trust in governmental or political institutions. This is crucial to understand, as the intent might not always be to overtly promote Russian interests: hence, there may be no direct evidence linking the activities to Russia. The situation calls for a holistic approach to countering disinformation beyond mere fact-checking and aimed at restoring the very foundations of democratic society. Failure to address this growing threat could have long-lasting repercussions for the Western Balkans.

Bibliography

- Bashota, Vesa et al. (2019) *Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors*. Prague Security Studies Institute.
- Bechev, D. (2017) *Rival power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bechev, D. (2019) *Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans*. Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
- Bērziņš, J. (2020) 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33(3), pp. 355–380. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.
- Blitz, B. (2006) 'War and Change in the Balkans: Nationalism, Conflict and Cooperation'. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/7950463/War_and_Change_in_the_Balkans_Nationalism_Conflict_and_Cooperation (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Bodine-Baron, E. et al. (2018) *Countering Russian Social Media Influence*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2740.html (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Borger, J. (2020) 'Twitter deletes 20,000 fake accounts linked to Saudi, Serbian and Egyptian governments', *The Guardian*, 2 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/02/twitter-accounts> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Bradshaw, S. and Howard, P. (2019) 'The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation'.
- Brey, T. (2022) *Russia: Russian Media in the Balkans*. Available at: <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/russian-media-balkans> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

- Cullen, P.J. (2017) 'Understanding Hybrid Warfare', MCDC [Preprint]. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment>.
- Djordjevic, M. and Heil, A. (2023) "'Z' Marks The Trouble Spot: Russia's Symbol Of War Appears In Northern Kosovo', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-ethnic-serbs-z-symbol-russia/32437410.html> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Džuverović, N. and Stojarová, V. (2022) *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*. 1st edn. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276661>.
- Entina, E. and Pivovarenko, A. (2020) 'Russia's Foreign Policy Evolution in the New Balkan Landscape', *Politička misao*, 56, pp. 179–199. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.56.3-4.08>.
- EP (2023) *The Western Balkans | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- European Commission (2018) *Communication - Tackling online disinformation: a European approach | Shaping Europe's digital future*. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/communication> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).
- Filipova, R. (2021) 'Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation', Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 110. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/en/48899540/Tackling_Kremlins_Media_Capture (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Fridman, O. (2018) *Russian 'hybrid warfare': resurgence and politicisation*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Georgiev, G. et al. (2023) 'Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe'. Center for Study of Democracy-CSD. Available at: https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/NED_Report_WEB.pdf.

- Gilardi, F. et al. (2022) 'Social Media and Political Agenda Setting', *Political Communication*, 39(1), pp. 39–60. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1910390>.
- Goble (2014) Hot Issue – Lies, Damned Lies and Russian Disinformation, Jamestown. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-lies-damned-lies-and-russian-disinformation/> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).
- Goldman, O.B.F. by J. (ed.) (2021) *Russian Active Measures: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. ibidem Press, p. 412 Pages.
- Greene, S. et al. (2021) 'Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them', European Parliament, p. 104.
- Hoffman, F.G. (2007) 'Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars', Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, p. 72. Available at: https://potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.
- Hoffman, F.G. (2018) 'Examining Complex Forms of Conflict', PRISM / National Defense University, 7(4), p. 18. Available at: <https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism>.
- How The World Went To War In 1914 | Imperial War Museums (no date). Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-the-world-went-to-war-in-1914> (Accessed: 15 June 2023).
- IISS (2022) 'The effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans', IISS, 28. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/the-effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-the-western-balkans/> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Jevtić, J. (2021) *The Russian Disinformation Campaign*, The Security Distillery. Available at: <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkans> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Kleper, D. (2023) *Twitter changes stoke Russian, Chinese disinformation*, PBS NewsHour. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/twitter-changes-stoke-russian-chinese-disinformation> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

- Kraemer, R. (2022) 'Serbia on the Edge', Foreign Policy Research Institute-Euroasia Program, p. 32. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/serbia-on-the-edge-issuu.pdf>.
- Mahmutaj, N. (2023) 'Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans', in A. Mihr, P. Sorbello, and B. Weiffen (eds) *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia: Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 125–135. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8.
- Mariani, T. (2022) 'Parliamentary question | Definition of a "hybrid war" | E-000419/2022 | European Parliament'. European Parliament. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document> (Accessed: 18 June 2023).
- Mastracci, M. (2023) 'Hate Speech and Disinformation Fuel Digital Rights Abuses in Balkans', *Balkan Insight*, 30 March. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/30/hate-speech-and-disinformation-fuel-digital-rights-abuses-in-balkans/> (Accessed: 28 May 2023).
- McBride, J. (2022) *Russia's Influence in the Balkans*, Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans> (Accessed: 15 June 2023).
- McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L. (1972) 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176–187. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- McNamara, S. (2008) *Russia's Recognition of Independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia Is Illegitimate: They Are Not Kosovo*, The Heritage Foundation. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/russias> (Accessed: 16 June 2023).
- Meister, (Ed) Stefan (2018) 'Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia', ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) *Edition Culture and Foreign Policy* [Preprint]. Available at: https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs.
- Metodieva, A. (2019) *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans*. German Marshall Fund of the United States. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21239> (Accessed: 29 May 2023).

- Michlin-Shapir, V. (2020) 'Defence Strategic Communication', NATO StratCom, 9. Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/web_shapir_dsc_vol9-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit (Accessed: 19 June 2023).
- Milojevic, M. (2018) Media Landscape in Republika Srpska: Polarization and Financial Dependence, Balkan Diskurs. Available at: <https://balkandiskurs.com/en/2018/05/25/media-landscape-republika-srpska/> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- NATO (2015) 'Next Steps in NATO's Transformation: To the Warsaw Summit and Beyond WHITE PAPER'. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>.
- NATO (2020) 'Science & Technology Trends 2020-2040'. NATO Science & Technology Organization. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1131124.pdf>.
- NATO (2023) NATO's response to hybrid threats, NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm (Accessed: 18 June 2023).
- NATO Review (2021) NATO Review - Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and 'Trust' as the Antidote, NATO Review. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles> (Accessed: 18 June 2023).
- NED (2017) Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and "Fake News", NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY. Available at: <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief> (Accessed: 22 May 2023).
- Nehring, D.C. and Sittig, H. (2023) Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe. Konrad Adenaur Stiftung-KAS. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents>.
- Otakar, F. (2021) 'What Is Happening to Democracies in the U.S. and in Europe?', Journal of Policy & Strategy, 2, No.3, pp. 137–140.
- Palloshi Disha, E., BAJRAMI, D. and Rustemi, A. (2021) 'The Online Media Landscape in the Focus of Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans: Albania, Kosova, and North Macedonia',

PRIZREN SOCIAL SCIENCE JOURNAL, 5, pp. 77–85. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.32936/pssj.v5i3.268>.

Paul, C. and Matthews, M. (2016) The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. RAND Corporation. Available at:
<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

Rajak, S. et al. (2017) The Balkans in the Cold War | SpringerLink. Available at:
<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-43903-1> (Accessed: 16 June 2023).

Rajic, D. and Hoare, M.A. (2022) ‘Serbia and Russia and the Coming Balkan Storm’. Available at:
<https://afsa.org/serbia-and-russia-and-coming-balkan-storm> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

RCC (2022) Regional Cooperation Council | Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2022. Available at:
<https://www.rcc.int/pubs/139/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2022> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

Rid, T. (2017) ‘Disinformation A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns’. Intelligence-Senate. Available at: <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov>.

Rid, T. (2020) Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare - CIA. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/volume-64-no-1/active-measures-the-secret-history-of-disinformation-and-political-warfare/> (Accessed: 18 June 2023).

Rossos, A. (1981) Russia and the Balkans: Inter-Balkan rivalries and Russian foreign policy 1908–1914. University of Toronto Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctvfrxgd9> (Accessed: 16 June 2023).

Samorukov, M. (2023) ‘Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’, 25 April. Available at:
<https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

Savic, M. and Dudik, A. (2023) War in Ukraine Strains Ties Between Putin and His Ally Vucic in Serbia - Bloomberg. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-18/war-in->

ukraine-strains-ties-between-putin-and-his-ally-vucic-in-serbia#xj4y7vzkg (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

Scott, M. (2022) 'Russia turns its diplomats into disinformation warriors', POLITICO, 7 April. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-diplomats-disinformation-war-ukraine/> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

Sunter, D. (2020) NATO Review - Disinformation in the Western Balkans, NATO Review. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html> (Accessed: 12 June 2023).

Szczerba, M. (2023) NATO PA, NATO PA. Available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2022-western-balkans-russias-war-ukraine-and-regions-enduring-challenges-report-michal> (Accessed: 21 May 2023).

Taylor, A. (2021) 'Before "fake news," there was Soviet "disinformation"', Washington Post, 1 December. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/26/before-fake-news-there-was-soviet-disinformation/> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Tucker, J. et al. (2018) 'Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature', SSRN Electronic Journal [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139>.

U.S. Department of the Treasury (2023) Treasury Sanctions Milorad Dodik and Associated Media Platform for Destabilizing and Corrupt Activity, U.S. Department of the Treasury. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0549> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

Wolfe, M., Jones, B.D. and Baumgartner, F.R. (2013) A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10584609.2012.737419?needAccess=true&role=button> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

- Bērziņš, J. (2020) 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33(3), pp. 355–380. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.
- Chrzová, B. et al. (no date) 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors'.
- Clack, T. and Johnson, R. (2021) *The World Information War: Western Resilience, Campaigning, and Cognitive Effects*. Routledge.
- CSD (2023) 'ILLCIT FINANCIAL FLOWS AND DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE', Center for the Study of Democracy, No.126. Available at: https://acer.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BRIEF_126_ENG_WEB.pdf.
- Fridman, O. (2018) *Russian 'hybrid warfare': resurgence and politicisation*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Galeotti, M. (2020) "'The Gerasimov Doctrine'", *Berlin Policy Journal - Blog*, 28 April. Available at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-gerasimov-doctrine/> (Accessed: 16 July 2023).
- Giles, K. (2016) *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/russias-new-tools-confronting-west-continuity-and-innovation-moscows-exercise-power> (Accessed: 28 May 2023).
- Gorenburg, D. (no date) 'Russian Strategic Messaging: Propaganda and Disinformation Efforts'.
- Greene, S. et al. (2021) 'Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them', *European Parliament*, p. 104.
- Mansoor, P.R. (2012) 'Hybrid Warfare', Cambridge University Press [Preprint]. Available at: https://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/26087/excerpt/9781107026087_excerpt.htm (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

- Matthews, M. et al. (2021) Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3160.html (Accessed: 16 June 2023).
- Nehring, D.C. and Sittig, H. (2023) Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe. Konrad Adenaur Stiftung-KAS. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951>.
- Sunter, D. (2020) NATO Review - Disinformation in the Western Balkans, NATO Review. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html> (Accessed: 12 June 2023).
- Whyte, C., Thrall, A.T. and Mazanec, B.M. (2020) Information Warfare in the Age of Cyber Conflict. 1st Edition. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Al-Jazeera (2022) 'Serbia secures gas deal with Putin, as West boycotts Russia', 29 May. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/29/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Bechev, D. (2019) *Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans*. Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
- Bērziņš, J. (2020) 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33(3), pp. 355–380. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.
- Chrzová, B. et al. (no date) 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors'.
- Clack, T. and Johnson, R. (2021) *The World Information War: Western Resilience, Campaigning, and Cognitive Effects*. Routledge.
- CSD (2023a) 'ILLICIT FINANCIAL FLOWS AND DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE', Center for the Study of Democracy, No.126. Available at: <https://acer.org.al/wp-content>.

- CSD (2023b) *Media capture and illicit financial flows*, *MCIFF*. Available at: <https://mciff.csd.bg/> (Accessed: 7 August 2023).
- Del Popolo, I.G. (2019) ‘The Kremlin and its “soft power” strategy in the Balkans’, 23 September. Available at: <https://ilgridodelpopolo.com/the-kremlin-and-its-soft-power-strategy-in-the-balkans/> (Accessed: 14 June 2023).
- Delauney, G. (2022) ‘Number-plate crackdown raises tensions in Kosovo’, *BBC News*, 1 November. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63471041> (Accessed: 14 August 2023).
- Delic, G. (2022) ‘Novinar CNN-a nije ubijen dva puta, niti je novinar’, *Raskrinkavanje*, 28 February. Available at: <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/novinar-cnn-a-nije-ubijen-dva-puta-niti-je-novinar/> (Accessed: 1 August 2023).
- Drygiel-Bielińska, M. (2023) ‘A Fragile Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, in R. Zięba (ed.) *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Challenges*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Contributions to Political Science), pp. 197–214. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16419-4_10.
- EEAS (2015) *About EUvsDisinfo*, *EUvsDisinfo*. Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- EUvsDisinfo (2022) *Disinfo: NATO escalated the situation in Kosovo to distract Russia from Ukraine*, *EUvsDisinfo*. Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-escalated-the-situation-in-kosovo-to-distract-russia-from-ukraine> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- EUvsDisinfo (2022) *Disinfo: The West is an accomplice of the ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo*, *EUvsDisinfo*. Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-an-accomplice-of-the-ethnic-cleansing-of-serbs-in-kosovo> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- EUvsDisinfo (2023) *Disinfo: British uranium shells have created a radioactive cloud in Ukraine and Europe*, *EUvsDisinfo*. Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/rbritish-uranium-shells-have-created-a-radioactive-cloud-in-ukraine-and-europe> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).

- EUvSDisinfo (2023) *Disinfo: NATO intervention in Serbia proved that depleted uranium shells are comparable to a dirty bomb*, *EUvsDisinfo*. Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-intervention-in-serbia-proved-that-depleted-uranium-shells-are-comparable-to-a-dirty-bomb> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Falk, T.O. (2022) *What is behind Montenegro's political instability?* Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/29/whats-behind-montenegros-political-instability> (Accessed: 16 August 2023).
- Fetoshi, A. and Gërguri, D. (2023) 'AGENDA SETTING ABOUT THE WAR IN UKRAINE: THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION IN KOSOVO', *Teorija in praksa*, pp. 68–89. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.51936/tip.60.1.68>.
- Filipova, R. (2021) 'Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation', *Center for the Study of Democracy*, p. 110. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/en/48899540/> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Fridman, O. (2018) *Russian 'hybrid warfare': resurgence and politicisation*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Galeotti, M. (2020) "'The Gerasimov Doctrine'", *Berlin Policy Journal - Blog*, 28 April. Available at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-gerasimov-doctrine/> (Accessed: 16 July 2023).
- Georgiev, G. *et al.* (2023) 'Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe'. Center for Study of Democracy-CSD. Available at: https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/NED_Report_WEB.pdf.
- Giles, K. (2016) *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, *Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank*. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/russias-new-tools-confronting> (Accessed: 28 May 2023).

- GIOR (2022) *Russian State Channel RT Opens Office in Serbia, Global Influence Operations Report*. Available at: <https://www.global-influence-ops.com/russian-state-channel-rt-opens-office-in-serbia/> (Accessed: 28 July 2023).
- GMF-ASD (2020) *Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard – Alliance For Securing Democracy*. Available at: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).
- Gorenburg, D. (no date) ‘Russian Strategic Messaging: Propaganda and Disinformation Efforts’.
- Greene, S. *et al.* (2021) ‘Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them’, *European Parliament*, p. 104.
- Grisé, M. *et al.* (2022) ‘Rivalry in the Information Sphere: Russian Conceptions of Information Confrontation’, *RAND* [Preprint]. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-8.html (Accessed: 19 August 2023).
- Hoxhaj, A. (2022) *Ukraine war: Serbia is shifting closer to Russia – here’s why, The Conversation*. Available at: <http://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-serbia-is-shifting-closer-to-russia-heres-why-192472> (Accessed: 27 June 2023).
- IntelliNews (2022a) *Russian propaganda outlet RT launches Serbia service amid hike in tensions with Kosovo*. Available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/russian-propaganda-outlet-rt-launches-serbia-service-amid-hike-in-tensions-with-kosovo-262627/> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- IntelliNews (2022b) *Serbians blame US and Nato for Ukraine war*. Available at: <https://intellinews.com/serbians-blame-us-and-nato-for-ukraine-war-237960/> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).
- IRA (2022) *2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey | January-February 2022, International Republican Institute*. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/> (Accessed: 16 August 2023).

- IRI (2023a) *National Survey of Albania | February 2023*, International Republican Institute. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-albania-february-2023/> (Accessed: 16 August 2023).
- IRI (2023b) *National Survey of Kosovo | Feb – March 2023*, International Republican Institute. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-kosovo-feb-march-2023/> (Accessed: 16 August 2023).
- IRI (2023c) *National Survey Of North Macedonia | April - May 2023*, International Republican Institute. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-north-macedonia-april-may-2023/> (Accessed: 16 August 2023).
- Isufi, P. and Dragojlo, S. (2022) *Arrested Kosovo Serb Police Officer’s Lawyer Still Unaware of His Location | Balkan Insight*. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/20/arrested-kosovo-serb-police-officers-lawyer-still-unaware-of-his-location/> (Accessed: 14 August 2023).
- Jefferson, R. and Savic, M. (2022) ‘Defaced Putin Mural Tells the Story of Russia’s Waning Influence’, *Bloomberg.com*, 20 October. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-20/serbia-s-friendship-with-russia-gets-awkward-as-putin-escalates-war-in-ukraine> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).
- Jovovic, J. and Valic Nedeljkovic, D. (2021) ‘Serbia: Polarized Media - Polarized Audience’, *Journalift*, (SEENPM, Peace Institute, Novi Sad School of Journalism), p. 31. Available at: <https://journalift.org/resources/serbia-polarized-media-polarized-audience/> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).
- Kajosevic, S. (2022) ‘Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia to “Enemy” List’, *Balkan Insight*, 7 March. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).
- Kleut, J. (2023) ‘Mapping disinformation in Serbian media 2020’, *CRTA*, 25 January. Available at: <https://crt.rs/en/mapping-disinformation-in-serbian-media-2020/> (Accessed: 15 August 2023).

- Lachert, J. (2022) *Western Balkans and the War in Ukraine by Warsaw Institute - Issuu*. Available at: https://issuu.com/warsawinstitute/docs/rs_06-2022_en (Accessed: 25 July 2023).
- Ljubicic, M. (2023) 'CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story - Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 - June 2023', *CRTA*, 19 July. Available at: <https://crt.rs/en/crt-media-monitoring-anti-west-side-story-monitoring-of-foreign-influence-july-2022-june-2023/> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Mansoor, P.R. (2012) 'Hybrid Warfare', *Cambridge University Press* [Preprint]. Available at: https://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/26087/excerpt/9781107026087_excerpt.htm (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Matthews, M. *et al.* (2021) *Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3160.html (Accessed: 16 June 2023).
- Metodieva, A. (2019) 'RUSSIAN NARRATIVE PROXIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS', *The German Marshall Fund of the United States-GMF*, No.16. Available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Narrative%20Proxies%20in%200Balkans.pdf>.
- Muric, D. *et al.* (2022) '150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf', *SEE Check*, (SEE Check), p. 20. Available at: <https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf>.
- Nehring, D.C. and Sittig, H. (2023) *Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe*. Konrad Adenaur Stiftung-KAS. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951>.
- Panasytyska, O. (2022) *Propaganda for the "younger Slavic brother" in the Balkans: how Russia promotes a disinformation campaign in Serbia*. Available at: <https://voxukraine.org/en/propaganda> (Accessed: 26 July 2023).
- RCC (2022) *Regional Cooperation Council | Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2022*. Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/139/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2022> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

- RCC (2023) *Balkan Barometer* |. Available at: https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/ (Accessed: 16 August 2023).
- Reuters (2022a) *Kosovo Delays License Plate Plan After Border Tensions*, VOA. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/kosovo-delays-license-plate-plan-after-border-tensions/6681341.html> (Accessed: 14 August 2023).
- Reuters (2022b) *Why a license plate spat has sparked ethnic tensions again in northern Kosovo*, CNN. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/01/europe/kosovo-serbia-tensions-explainer-intl/index.html> (Accessed: 11 August 2023).
- Reuters (2023) 'Russia's Putin meets Bosnian Serb leader Dodik, hails rise in trade', *Reuters*, 23 May. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-meets-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-hails-rise-trade-2023-05-23/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).
- RFE (2022) 'Russia Today počeo sa emitovanjem na srpskom uz poruku "Kosovo je Srbija"', *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 15 November. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/russia-today-srbija/32131807.html> (Accessed: 28 July 2023).
- Samorukov, M. (2023) *Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine*, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600> (Accessed: 3 July 2023).
- SarajevoTimes (2023) 'How Milorad Dodik made Meetings with Vladimir Putin normal and acceptable?', *Sarajevo Times*, 21 May. Available at: <https://sarajevotimes.com/how-milorad-dodik-made-meetings-with-vladimir-putin-normal/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).
- Saric, D. and Morcos, P. (2022) 'The War in Ukraine: Aftershocks in the Balkans'. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).
- Šemić, A. (2022) *New methodology, old problems: Western Balkans on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index - European Western Balkans*. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/> (Accessed: 18 August 2023).

- Shushkova, I. (2022) *Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe by CSD*, Sensika. Available at: <https://sensika.com/blog/partners-publications-csd/> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Murphy, J. (2018). Unnoteworthy News: Fake news, once dubbed “yellow journalism,” is as old as news itself, but nowadays, with the slant given by major media to most reporting, major media have themselves to blame. *New American* (08856540), 34 (4), 21-23
- Slobodna Bosna (2023) *DEZINFORMACIJE, NAJJAČE ORUŽJE (RUSKE) PROPAGANDE: Ko sve na Zapadnom Balkanu finansira Putinove planove?*, *slobodna-bosna.ba*. Available at: <https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Snegovaya, M. (2015) *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*. Institute for the Study of War, pp. 1–28. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07921.1> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Sputnik Mundo (2022) *Occidente es cómplice de la limpieza étnica de serbios*, *Sputnik Mundo*. Available at: <https://sputniknews.lat/20221213/occidente-es-complice-de-la-limpieza-etnica-de-serbios-1133506763.html> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Stanicek, B. (2022) ‘Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans’, *European Parliamentary Research Service-EPRS* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData>.
- Sunter, D. (2020) *NATO Review - Disinformation in the Western Balkans*, *NATO Review*. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html> (Accessed: 12 June 2023).
- Svetoka, S. and Doncheva, T. (2021) *Russias footprint in the Western Balkan*. NATO StratCom COE, p. 71. Available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/> (Accessed: 28 July 2023).
- Szczerba, M. (2023) *NATO PA, NATO PA*. Available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2022-western-balkans-russias-war-ukraine-and-regions-enduring-challenges-report-michal> (Accessed: 21 May 2023).

TASS (2022a) *Putin cites precedent of Kosovo in explaining recognition of DPR, LPR, Russian News Agency*. Available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1443661> (Accessed: 29 July 2023).

TASS (2022b) *Russian ambassador hits out at West's claims that Moscow has 'no time' for Kosovo, TASS*. Available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1549821> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).

Telegraf RS (2022) *Red Star fans' powerful message goes around the world, these are reactions to the stadium choreography, Telegraf.rs*. Available at: <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/3472590> (Accessed: 11 August 2023).

Twitter/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova (2022) -*///Spriter///- on Twitter: "Zakharova told the EU: You have been esc..., archive.ph*. Available at: <https://archive.ph/hZUib> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).

UMN (2016) 'Understanding Media and Culture'. Available at: <https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/2-2-media-effects-theories/> (Accessed: 14 August 2023).

Whyte, C., Thrall, A.T. and Mazanec, B.M. (2020) *Information Warfare in the Age of Cyber Conflict*. 1st Edition. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).

<https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf> <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-016-0395-5>

360степени (2023) 'Пендаровски: Имаме информации од НАТО дека луѓе од највисокото раководство на Синодот на МПЦ соработуваат со руските служби', *360 степени*,%2030%20June.%20Available%20at:%20https://360stepeni.mk/pendarovski

Aro, J. (2016) 'The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools', *European View*, 15(1), pp. 121–132. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-016-0395-5>.

Bechev, D. (2017) *Rival power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Bechev, D. (2019) *Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans*. Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
- Bryant, J. and Finklea, B.W. (2022) *Fundamentals of Media Effects: Third Edition*. Waveland Press.
- Chrzová, B. *et al.* (2019) 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors', *Prague Security Studies Institute* [Preprint].
- CNN (2023) *Russian invasion of Ukraine: A timeline of key events on the 1st anniversary of the war*. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/02/europe/russia-ukraine-war-timeline/index.html> (Accessed: 25 August 2023).
- CSD (2023) *Media capture and illicit financial flows, MCIFF*. Available at: <https://mciff.csd.bg/> (Accessed: 7 August 2023).
- Davis, C. (2018) 'This "Grassroots" Media Startup Is Supported by the Kremlin', *The Daily Beast*, 1 February. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/grassroots-media-startup-redfish-is-supported-by-the-kremlin> (Accessed: 25 August 2023).
- DFC (2022) 'DFC Study - Shadows of Ukraine over Montenegro - dfcme.me', <https://dfcme.me/en/>. Available at: <https://dfcme.me/en/dfc-study-shadows-of-ukraine-over-montenegro/> (Accessed: 13 June 2023).
- EUvSDisinfo (2022) *Disinfo: The West is using Kosovo to break Serbia's ties with Russia and China*. Available at: <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-using-kosovo-to-break-serbias-ties-with-russia-and-china> (Accessed: 25 August 2023).
- Filipova, R. (2021) 'Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe. Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation', *Center for the Study of Democracy*, p. 110. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/en/48899540/Tackling_Kremlins_Media_Capture_in_Southeast_Europe_Shared_Patterns_Specific_Vulnerabilities_and_Responses_to_Russian_Disinformation (Accessed: 21 June 2023).






- Galeotti, M. (2020) “‘The Gerasimov Doctrine’”, *Berlin Policy Journal - Blog*, 28 April. Available at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-gerasimov-doctrine/> (Accessed: 16 July 2023).
- Geopost, T. (2023) *Belgrade analyst explains how Vucic’s rule has promoted violence and anti-Western values in Serbia*, *The Geopost*. Available at: <https://thegeopost.com/en/balkans-2/belgrade-analyst-explains-how-vucics-rule-has-promoted-violence-and-anti-western-values-in-serbia/> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).
- Georgiev, G. *et al.* (2023) ‘Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe’. Center for Study of Democracy-CSD. Available at: https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/NED_Report_WEB.pdf.
- GlobalVoices (2023) ‘Disinformation fuels church protest against gender equality in North Macedonia’, *Global Voices Advox*, 10 August. Available at: <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2023/08/10/disinformation-fuels-church-protest-against-gender-equality-in-north-macedonia/> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).
- Goble, P. (2014) *Hot Issue – Lies, Damned Lies and Russian Disinformation*, *Jamestown*. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-lies-damned-lies-and-russian-disinformation/> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).
- Greene, S. *et al.* (2021) ‘Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them’, *European Parliament*, p. 104.
- IISS (2022) ‘The effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans’, *IISS*, 28. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/the-effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-the-western-balkans/> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- JHU & ICL (2021) ‘NATO Review - Countering cognitive warfare: awareness and resilience’, *NATO Review* [Preprint], (Johns Hopkins University&Imperial College London). Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/05/20/countering-cognitive-warfare-awareness-and-resilience/index.html> (Accessed: 23 August 2023).

- Ljubicic, M. (2023) 'CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story - Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 - June 2023', *CRTA*, 19 July. Available at: <https://crt.rs/en/crta-media-monitoring-anti-west-side-story-monitoring-of-foreign-influence-july-2022-june-2023/> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- Mahmutaj, N. (2023) 'Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans', in A. Mihr, P. Sorbello, and B. Weiffen (eds) *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia: Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 125–135. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8.
- Mohd Zain, N. (2014) 'Agenda Setting Theory'.
- Paul, C. and Matthews, M. (2016) *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. RAND Corporation. Available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).
- Snegovaya, M. (2015) *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*. Institute for the Study of War, pp. 1–28. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07921.1> (Accessed: 22 June 2023).
- Valkenburg, P.M., Peter, J. and Walther, J.B. (2016) 'Media Effects: Theory and Research', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67(1), pp. 315–338. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033608>.

Appendix

1. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets

-
-  **redfish** @redfishstream • Mar 3 2022
The infamous September 1995 TIME cover about NATO's bombing of Bosnian Serbs has been projected on the U.S. Consulate in Moscow. The 1995 cover reads: "A massive bomb attack opens the doors to peace."
<https://t.co/Xp2k3HhoF9>
↳ 200 ❤️ 492
-
-  **MFA Russia RU** @mfa_russia • Jun 6 2022
🗣️ FM Sergey Lavrov's interview with the Bosnian Serbian TV & radio company Radio Televizija Republike Srpske: Ukraine is a bargaining chip, a tool that is manipulated primarily by the US & Great Britain - an Anglo-Saxon team now heading the West. 🌐 <https://t.co/MSLrv6tzmP> <https://t.co/4ZnVqkxC7e>
↳ 183 ❤️ 586
-
-  **RT** @rt_com • Apr 26 2022
Ukraine is West's collateral damage in war against Russia - Chairman of Bosnian presidency
<https://t.co/fafvAWypOG>
↳ 157 ❤️ 403
-
-  **МИД России RU** @mid_rf • May 23
👉 President of Russia Vladimir #Путин met with President of Republika Srpska @MiloradDodik. 🗣️ Vladimir Putin: We are grateful for your neutral position on the events in Ukraine. Only such a position can lead to some kind of positive decision. 🌐 <https://t.co/6mWie32v2m> <https://t.co/1n5G6Plbeb>
↳ 141 ❤️ 983
-
-  **RT** @rt_com • Jun 30
President mows roadside grass in unusual protest The leader of Bosnia's Serbs has said he got tired of local authorities not doing their job Details: <https://t.co/h35zFLhzLP> <https://t.co/q1RNYxBhHn>
↳ 134 ❤️ 496
-
-  **駐日ロシア連邦大使館** @rusembassyj • Jun 5 2022
🗣️ From an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Serf Lavrov on the Bosnian Serbian television and radio broadcast "Srpska Republic Radio and Television" #ラブロフ 🗣️ Ukraine is like a tool to be used primarily as a bargaining chip for the US and UK. It is these Anglo-Saxon groups that are leading the West.
<https://t.co/lnkB3qc9iK> <https://t.co/cgORg5GlpE>
↳ 102 ❤️ 237
-
-  **駐日ロシア連邦大使館** @rusembassyj • May 24
🇷🇺👉 Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodick. 🗣️ President Putin expressed his appreciation for his neutrality and welcomed the steady growth in commercial trade between Russia and Republika Srpska. Detail below 🌐 <https://t.co/7e3QkzoKnR> <https://t.co/bxhDW83zk5>
↳ 91 ❤️ 319
-
-  **TASS** @tassagency_en • Sep 19 2022
Bosnian leader slams West, says Russia was forced to protect people of Donbass. "For many years the West did not react to the extermination of the Russian population in Ukraine, there were daily murders and bombings in Donbass," Milorad Dodik noted: <https://t.co/JOPE6YXWH6> <https://t.co/51D3AuAfxe>
↳ 81 ❤️ 210
-
-  **RT** @rt_com • Jun 7
UK seeking to overthrow Belgrade government – Serb leader British spy agencies are trying to take advantage of public backlash over two school shootings, Republika Srpska's president has said Details: <https://t.co/5UzGvhIUvH> <https://t.co/3gxCc0RGfT>
↳ 54 ❤️ 168
-
-  **Маргарита Симоньян** @m_simonyan • Mar 25 2022
RT on Russian: The United States will allocate up to \$ 450 thousand for the program of teaching "democracy" to the children of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is stated in the description of the grant of the American Embassy, which was reviewed by RT.
↳ 48 ❤️ 118

2. NORTH MACEDONIA

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets



RT @rt_com • Jul 7 2022

North Macedonian capital sees violent protests against the government's decision to accept the French proposal to start EU negotiations. <https://t.co/EE1ng48SZf>

↩ 40 ♡ 114



MFA Russia ru @mfa_russia • Aug 3 2022

🗣️ FM Spokeswoman Maria #Zakharova's comment on anti-Russia statements by the President of North Macedonia @SPendarovski 🗣️ Clearly, the escapades against #Russia are an attempt to earn favour in the eyes of Brussels and Washington. 🌐 <https://t.co/AfP843d3H0> <https://t.co/gFPA9Wz4bZ>

↩ 39 ♡ 175



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Apr 16 2022

🗣️ #Захарова: Six diplomats @Russian_Emb_MKD declared "persona non grata" on April 15. 🗣️ The North Macedonian authorities continue to follow the lead of the West, which is in a Russophobic frenzy. The responsibility lies fully with Skopje. A reaction will follow. 🌐 <https://t.co/JFpQTwj3y1> <https://t.co/xble6w878s>

↩ 35 ♡ 74



TASS @tass_agency • Aug 4 2022

North Macedonia has secretly handed over to Ukraine four Su-25 aircraft, which have been in mothballing since 2004, the North Macedonian information portal MKD reported: <https://t.co/vVhTzvU3NW> <https://t.co/xeMuyGEgCw>

↩ 21 ♡ 37



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Mar 28 2022

🗣️ #Захарова: On 28 March, five diplomats @Russian_Emb_MKD declared persona non grata. This unfriendly step is a continuation of the course taken by the authorities of North Macedonia to break bilateral relations with Russia. 🗣️ We will be forced to take retaliatory measures. 🌐 <https://t.co/2Inv5difXq> <https://t.co/0w23HRI7ZU>

↩ 20 ♡ 72



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 21 2022

Fugitive former North Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski sentenced to 9 years in prison for an "act of political revenge" <https://t.co/jyLRp2J8v1>

↩ 15 ♡ 35



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Aug 3 2022

🗣️ #Commentary by Maria Zakharova on anti-Russian statements by the President of North Macedonia: Escapades to Russia are an attempt to score points in the eyes of Brussels and Washington, and along the way to distract the attention of its own population from the difficulties of the current day. 🌐 <https://t.co/9VZ6MLZp8F> <https://t.co/D2bapHI2sT>

↩ 13 ♡ 41



Russian Mission OSCE @rf_osce • Jan 12

#Lukashevich: The readiness of the North Macedonian @OSCEC10 team to act as an impartial and transparent "manager" will determine the prospects for restoring confidence and maintaining the manageability of the #OSCE, as well as its future <https://t.co/qPmTTYo8oL>

↩ 12 ♡ 40



RT @rt_com • May 22 2022

Former North Macedonian leader gets a nine-year sentence for demolishing a building <https://t.co/buspRz0iGx>

↩ 11 ♡ 58



TASS @tassagency_en • Mar 18

Belgrade and Pristina have agreed on a range of issues during their talks held in the North Macedonian city of Ohrid, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic told reporters: <https://t.co/cMZiABHimj> <https://t.co/OX9MQrdUUk>

↩ 10 ♡ 30

3. KOSOVO

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets



George Galloway @georgegalloway • May 30

As the balloon goes up again in Serbia with NATO on the rampage in the country's Kosovo region. <https://t.co/5FjKaAp2FQ>

↩ 1,168 ❤ 3,055



Russie en France @ambrusfrance • Apr 4 2022

Biden is calling for a "trial for crimes of 🇷🇺." #Zakharova:"Awesome! Let's start with Yugoslavia and the "iq. Then let's find the directors of Srebrenica and the organ traffickers of Kosovo, covered by themus. Not to mention the nuclear bombing of thep. Run, Forrest, Run!" <https://t.co/kp21KEXATE>

↩ 880 ❤ 2,049



redfish @redfishstream • Mar 24 2022

It was on this day in 1999 that NATO started bombing Yugoslavia [what is now known as the separate states of Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo] during the Kosovo war. <https://t.co/tz7B3ujPwY>

↩ 661 ❤ 1,810



RT @rt_com • Jun 17 2022

President Putin says Russia's support for and recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics fully corresponds with international law. He also cited the example of Kosovo, and said the US invasion of Iraq was far from legitimate <https://t.co/Ql13oV4DaE>

↩ 406 ❤ 1,180



MFA Russia ru @mfa_russia • Mar 24 2022

🗨️ Russia's FM Sergey #Lavrov: We know who created pretext for bombing of Yugoslavia: US national William Walker - head of OSCE's Kosovo Verification Mission. 🇺🇸 <https://t.co/FnALYDjya> Later a special group established that the dead in Racak were not civilians but militants. <https://t.co/hMa2vMcGns>

↩ 375 ❤ 1,189



Rusia en España @embajadarusaes • Apr 14

🗨️ When they need to make Kosovo independent, they emphasize the right of peoples to self-determination. When they need to deny this right to other parts of the world, they invoke territorial integrity as the absolute option, to which there is no alternative. #hipocritas <https://t.co/90i4u3DDuF>

↩ 359 ❤ 688



RT @rt_com • Jul 31 2022

🇷🇺 Kosovo planning to attack Serbs – Belgrade Read: <https://t.co/joW8qCyDwz> <https://t.co/bhAsBLrdGn>

↩ 355 ❤ 809



駐日ロシア連邦大使館 @rusembassyj • Oct 1 2022

ru Spokeswoman Zakharova Opinion 🗨️ The West's claim that Russia has decided to redraw the map of Europe sounds ludicrous. 🇺🇸 Given NATO's support for the bombing of Yugoslavia and Serbia's redemarcation, and the US situation surrounding us "Kosovo independence," it is ludicrous to hear about redrawing the border from across the ocean <https://t.co/kDZzizEkfK> 🇷🇺

↩ 294 ❤ 880



Helena Villar @helenavillarrt • Jul 31 2022

These latest developments on the Serbian-Kosovo border also come less than a week after Kosovo's president and prime minister were here in Washington, where they met with the secretary of state. <https://t.co/tfmW7c2SDr>

↩ 253 ❤ 329



RT en Español @actualidadrt • Oct 9 2022

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said Saturday that 42nd U.S. President Bill Clinton ordered Hungary to attack Serbia in 1999 during NATO's intervention in the Kosovo conflict. <https://t.co/SHsOf05pCc> <https://t.co/YGCKOFNv5C>

↩ 214 ❤ 284

4. SERBIA

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets



Embajada de Rusia en México @embrusiamexico • Feb 26 2022

📧 Journalist Jelena Milincic, Serbian survivor of the 1999 #OTAN bombing: The last 8 years, #Rusia insisted that Ukraine respect the Minsk agreements and had a lot of patience while Ukrainians killed Russians in the neighboring country. <https://t.co/npfa999ZuA>

↩ 3,302 ❤ 5,297



Helena Villar @helenavillarrt • Sep 21 2022

Serbia at the UN on Ukraine: "Many say it is the first conflict in Europe after World War II but the territorial integrity of Serbia, which did not attack another country, was violated before."

↩ 1,159 ❤ 2,199



RT en Español @actualidadrt • Mar 18 2022

Serbian President Says Country Receives Russian Gas "Virtually Free"

↩ 808 ❤ 2,265



Embajada de Rusia en México @embrusiamexico • Mar 6 2022

BE ! CAREFUL! NEW EXAMPLE OF FAKE NEWS This photo released on #Twitter allegedly shows Russian soldiers drinking beer in front of the burning houses. 🖱 It is actually an image taken from the 1996 Serbian film "Lepa sela lepo gore" 🚫 #StopFake <https://t.co/hg32y4cSqq>

↩ 698 ❤ 1,173



RT @rt_com • Mar 28 2022

During his briefing Serbian media, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that regarding other members of the world community, the community of democracy that includes European Union, NATO and the United States, are in fact an autocracy. <https://t.co/I9et6Ug4qL>

↩ 662 ❤ 2,139



redfish @redfishstream • Mar 24 2022

It was on this day in 1999 that NATO started bombing Yugoslavia [what is now known as the separate states of Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo] during the Kosovo war. <https://t.co/tz7B3ujPwY>

↩ 661 ❤ 1,810



RT @rt_com • Mar 15 2022

A column of motorists supporting the Russian special operation in Ukraine gathered in the capital of Serbia <https://t.co/RKI0swFG60>

↩ 658 ❤ 2,546



redfish @redfishstream • Mar 18 2022

Tens of thousands of Red Star Belgrade fans –one of Serbia's most popular soccer teams– had a powerful message to the West as they unfurled banners with the names of countries and dates of Western aggressions against them, from Korea to Syria, singing "Give Peace A Chance." <https://t.co/M7otpsNZvW>

↩ 592 ❤ 1,520



RT @rt_com • Mar 17 2022

Serbian presidential candidate Misa Vacic expresses his support for the Russian military operation in Ukraine <https://t.co/DuMxo8nZmN>

↩ 569 ❤ 1,809



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Apr 6 2022

RUSS 📞 President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with President of Serbia @avucic. 🇷🇺 The mutual commitment to the further development of the Russian-Serbian strategic partnership was confirmed. #РоссияСербия 🌐 <https://t.co/sCiuqmFnYz> <https://t.co/kMwCvbkzGk>

↩ 519 ❤ 740

5. MONTENEGRO

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets



Ahí les Va @ahilesvainfo • Mar 24

As if it were a kind of Soraya Montenegro of social networks, the head of the Southern Command asked the US Congress for more "resources" (read "money") to counter the influence of those equals who "challenge the credibility of the United States." 🤔

↩ 35 ❤ 95



RT @rt_com • Oct 14 2022

Russia Blocks Montenegro Diplomats In response to the expulsion of its diplomats from Montenegro, Russia has banned the entry of the Foreign Minister of Montenegro Krivokapich, Defense Minister Konevich and the former director of the National Security Agency Kentere. <https://t.co/5P2yxsVQBb>

↩ 32 ❤ 169



MFA Russia ru @mfa_russia • Jun 21

🗨️ #Zakharova: 145 years ago, the Congress of Berlin finalised the outcome of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Having overcome the resistance of European monarchies, Russia achieved the recognition of Serbia's, Montenegro's and Romania's independence. #HistoryOfDiplomacy <https://t.co/zz22mTWICS>

↩ 31 ❤ 82



RT @rt_com • Apr 19 2022

Montenegro's foreign ministry says it posted the message about 'severing ties' with Russia by mistake <https://t.co/aX0CSj9R64> <https://t.co/Pe7GbmOlNF>

↩ 31 ❤ 139



Cristina Martín Jiménez @crismartinj • Jan 22

Leader of the German DE Green Party. Prime Minister of Montenegro ME . Governor of Michigan us . <https://t.co/yweXTi6GE4>

↩ 30 ❤ 65



Мargarita Симоньян @m_simonyan • Apr 20 2022

RT on Russian: ⚡ In Montenegro, RT and Sputnik are banned. The state regulator of the republic called on providers to turn off the broadcasting of our TV channel and radio.



Russia in Montenegro @ambrusme • Apr 20 2022

Comment !🗨️📧 by Russian Ambassador to Montenegro Vladimir Maslennikov on the publication of the Montenegrin Foreign Ministry on the "severance of diplomatic relations" on April 18 this year <https://t.co/qzFcKTSdxD> @MID_RF @MFA_MNE <https://t.co/GZD6Xnm0yc>

↩ 24 ❤ 89



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Mar 24 2022

! On March 24, Montenegrin Ambassador to Russia M. #Щчепанович summoned to @MID_RF. He was handed a note announcing "persona non grata" an employee of the Embassy of Montenegro in Moscow - a response to an unfounded decision to declare "persona non grata" of a diplomat @AmbRusME 🇷🇺 <https://t.co/RiuJO20W5T> <https://t.co/gNi5X7GQXC>

↩ 23 ❤ 84



МИД России ru @mid_rf • Aug 13 2022

🗨️ Interview of the Russian Ambassador to Montenegro Vladimir Maslennikov to the TV channel "Russia-24" in connection with the announcement of "persona non grata" of a diplomatic employee of the Russian Embassy in Podgorica. 🗨️ An absolutely unjustified step by the Montenegrin authorities. He won't go unanswered. <https://t.co/63j1TiWviX>

↩ 19 ❤ 53



TASS @tassagency_en • Apr 19 2022

Russia asks Montenegro to clarify on statement about break of diplomatic relations. Earlier, the Foreign Ministry of Montenegro tweeted a statement by the country's Foreign Minister Djordje Radulovic about the need to break diplomatic relations with Russia: <https://t.co/FDhsnVI4eV> <https://t.co/0JTAWsGzXT>

↩ 18 ❤ 35

6. ALBANIA

Top 10 Tweets by Retweets



George Galloway @georgegalloway • Oct 31 2022

I know some of you don't want to hear this but an Albanian citizen can NOT be a "refugee" or an "asylum-seeker". To pretend that they are is an affront to any immigration system and an insult to genuine refugees fleeing war and oppression @MoatsTV

↪ 2,419 ❤️ 9,231



MFA Russia RU @mfa_russia • Mar 17 2022

🗨️ #Zakharova: @AlbanianDiplo condemned alleged strikes by the Russian army resulting in damage to the premises of the country's honorary consulate in Kharkov. 🚫 We strongly deny the allegations and demand that the public be accurately informed. <https://t.co/rNRwQLS5OP>

↪ 103 ❤️ 279



RT @rt_com • Jul 31 2022

The bridge dividing Kosovska Mitrovica into Serbian and Albanian parts is blocked <https://t.co/1zTcKvVU1p>

↪ 97 ❤️ 214



Sputnik 日本 @sputnik_jp • Mar 23

🗨️ On March 24, 1999, #NATO forces launched air strikes on Yugoslavia. The operation was carried out without the approval of the UN Security Council under the pretext of preventing ethnic cleansing of ethnic Albanians in the autonomous province of Kosovo. Military installations and numerous civilian facilities were destroyed, killing more than 2,500 people, including 87 children. #What day is today_Sputnik <https://t.co/q7LhMmIFE2>

↪ 92 ❤️ 105



Russian Embassy, UK @russianembassy • Dec 13 2022

#Zakharova: The goal of provocations in #Kosovo is clear – to establish full control over non-Albanian northern provinces. Only restraint of Kosovo Serbs, who rely on Belgrade's support, allows to avoid major incidents and prevent situation from sliding into open confrontation. <https://t.co/R0N4PIRjdr>

↪ 79 ❤️ 198



MFA Russia RU @mfa_russia • Aug 2 2022

🗨️ #Zakharova: @AlbanianDiplo adopted a resolution challenging accusations regarding organ trafficking in Kosovo and Albania. 🚫 We remain firm in our position that those involved in these crimes must face a harsh and just punishment. <https://t.co/X5Ayvx3X5X>

↪ 69 ❤️ 257



RT en Español @actualidadrt • Jul 31 2022

Vucic: "My plea to everyone is to try to keep the peace at any cost. I call on the Albanians to come to their senses and on the Serbs not to fall for provocations."

↪ 54 ❤️ 151



МИД России RU @mid_rf • Mar 17 2022

🗨️ #Захарова: @AlbanianDiplo condemned the alleged March 6 strikes by Russian forces, which damaged the premises of the country's honorary consulate in Kharkiv. 🚫 We strongly reject such accusations. We demand truthful public awareness. <https://t.co/s1NzMLtIVZ>

↪ 51 ❤️ 120



RT en Español @actualidadrt • May 30

👁️ Watch RT en Español newscast live with @MauricioAmpuero 📺 <https://t.co/3myaxGCpXo> 🇲🇽 Vucic urges Albanian mayors not to take office in Kosovo 🇲🇽 Mexico: Feminists celebrate law against sex offenders or food debtors <https://t.co/UKYQGGJIXY>

↪ 47 ❤️ 107



George Galloway @georgegalloway • Aug 25 2022

1,652 'refugees' arrived in dinghies from France chiefly from NATO protectorate Albania, Kosovo & Iraq Kurdistan WHICH WE OWN. Ipso Facto they didn't suffer war or repression, so not refugees. Heard the one about fisherman being picked up by RNLI put up free in 3-star hotels? <https://t.co/uv8IUk8bzo>

↪ 45 ❤️ 94

7. NARRATIVES - EUvsDisiINFO

EUvsDisiINFO a project of European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force			
Identified Russian Disinformation Campaigns by EUvsDisinfo online platform			
Period from 06.07.2022 to 30 .05.2023			
Date	Title	Outlet	Country
04.04.2023	NATO intervention in Serbia proved that depleted uranium shells are comparable to a dirty bomb	kp.ru	Ukraine, Serbia, UK
04.10.2022	Kherson and Zaporizhzhia repeat the history of Kosovo	RIA, ukraina.ru,tass.ru,rossapri mavera.ru,	Ukraine, Kosovo, Russia
06.07.2022	Nazism is one of the highest European values		EU, Serbia, Ukraine
07.03.2023	Serbia-Kosovo agreement is actually an extortion	t.me	Kosovo, EU, Serbia
09.01.2023	Having NATO in Kosovo is a risk for the population as the West is expert in creating conflict	actualidad-rt.com	Kosovo, EU, Serbia, US, Ukraine, Yemen, Yugoslavia, Syria, Afghanistan
11.04.2023	London wants to scorch the earth with uranium shells in Ukraine	oroszhirek.hu	Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, Italy, UK
12.12.2022	Escalation of tensions in Kosovo caused by NATO	actualidad-rt.com	Kosovo, Serbia, EU, US
12.12.2022	NATO escalated the situation in Kosovo to distract Russia from Ukraine	sputnik.by, tj.sputniknews.r	Russia, US, Serbia, Kosovo, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia
12.12.2022	The West is using Kosovo to break Serbia's ties with Russia and China	actualidad-rt.com	Kosovo, EU, US, China, Russia, Serbia
13.12.2022	NATO decided to invade the Serbian enclave of Mitrovica to punish Belgrade	lantidiplomatico.it	Kosovo, Serbia
13.12.2022	The West is organising everyting in Kosovo and is unable to force Kosovars to obey to existing agreements	Pervyi Kanal	Serbia, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, EU
13.12.2022	The West is trying to force Serbia to accept anti-Russian sanctions, fueling the conflict in Kosovo	tvzvezda.ru	Kosovo, Yugoslavia, Serbia, EU, Russia

14.12.2022	Serbia is about to annex Bosnia and Kosovo just as Russia successfully performed a “special operation”	actualidad.rt.com, doc.rt.com,swentr.site,odysee.com,français.rt.com,francais.rt.com,	Serbia, Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
14.12.2022	The West is trying to provoke conflict in Kosovo and the Balkans against Russia's interest	nabd.com, rtarab.com, arabic.rt.com, ar.rtarabic.com, kachaf.com	Serbia, Kosovo, Russia, Ukraine
14.12.2022	US trying to provoke Serbia into a military operation	sputnik.az	Serbia, Kosovo, US
17.10.2022	The West employed hybrid warfare against Russia in the UN General Assembly	sputniknews.lat	Russia, US
19.11.2022	Borrell's “six-point” proposal is aimed at destabilisation Russia	Sputnik Poland	Russia, EU
19.12.2022	The West is an accomplice of the ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo	sputniknews.lat	Kosovo, US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Serbia
30.01.2023	NATO deliberately worsens the situation in Kosovo to blackmail Serbia, as it did with the Maidan in Ukraine	actualidad-rt.com	Kosovo, Serbia, US, EU, Ukraine, UK
30.05.2023	British uranium shells have created a radioactive cloud in Ukraine and Europe	oroszhirek.hu	Ukraine, UK, Poland, Serbia, Iraq, US, Russia