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RUSSIA'S FOOTPRINT IN THE WESTERN BALKAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT: SUSCEPTIBILITY TO RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

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Table of contents:

Introduction	6	APPENDIX 1 – METHODOLOGY	63
The Kremlin’s Narratives	9	Endnotes	69
The Reach of Russian Media in the Western Balkans	11		
International media consumption.	11		
Local media consumption.	12		
Foreign Policy Preferences	19		
Preferred foreign partners.	19		
Susceptibility to Russian Narratives	23		
Hegemony of the great powers	23		
Threat perception among Western Balkan populations	25		
Values and beliefs	30		
NATO-Related Narratives	33		
EU-Related Narratives	39		
Resilience to Mis- and Dis-information	45		
Trust in media	47		
Mechanisms for building resilience to mis/disinformation	49		
Perceptions of foreign influence through the media	52		
Misinformation and COVID-19	55		
Conclusion: Susceptibility to Russian Influence	57		
Susceptible audiences	60		
Narratives and foreign policy preferences ..	61		
Resilience to mis/disinformation	61		



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Introduction

Since 2019 the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) has been analysing Russia’s influence in the information environment of the Western Balkans (WB).¹ This report is the final piece of the project. It summarises the findings of the previous reports and then goes on to explore and assess the perceptions and attitudes of WB populations with regard to Russian influence activities in the WB media space.

In 2020, the NATO StratCom COE published four reports investigating Russia’s tools of influence in the WBs, focusing primarily on the media landscape.² Within the framework of the project *Russia’s Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment*, researchers analysed Russia’s interests in the area and its influence toolbox, and identified the vulnerabilities that make the Western Balkan countries susceptible to external manipulation. The project also identified narratives promoted by the Kremlin regarding the WBs and examined the role of local WB media in spreading those narratives.

The project researchers have concluded that the Western Balkan region is not in Russia’s immediate sphere of interest;³ however, the Russian government considers the region a useful and easily accessible

arena in which to undermine the EU and NATO. Structural vulnerabilities and societal and political divisions are exploited through cost-effective methods such as information campaigns, influencing local politicians, or even subversive activities such as hampering unity in Montenegro as it was moving toward NATO membership.⁴

Information is an important element of Russia’s strategic thinking and the Kremlin spreads pro-Russian narratives, which often appear as disinformation disseminated via a set of media channels. One of these is **Sputnik Srbija**, the Serbian subsidiary of the Russian state-owned news outlet Sputnik, which maintains both a website and a radio broadcast service. Present in the WB region since 2015, Sputnik Srbija publishes in the Serbian language (in both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets) from its





You can read the full reports by clicking on the links provided below or by visiting:
www.stratcomcoe.org.

- [Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans](#)
- [Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans](#)
- [Russia's Narratives toward Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija](#)
- [Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media](#)

offices in the capital city of Belgrade. Due to similarities among the languages spoken in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia (also known as the BCMS languages), Sputnik Srbija's content can reach audiences across the Balkans.

Opinion polls and media monitoring tools (e.g., Alexa, SimilarWeb) do not place Sputnik Srbija among the region's top media outlets.⁵ However, according to local experts it is by and large the most influential Russia-affiliated media outlet in the WBs, mostly due to distribution of its content by local media.⁶ To better understand the role Sputnik Srbija plays in the WB media environment, the NATO StratCom COE not only analysed the narratives it promotes, but also tracked how the content it produces is distributed or republished by other Western Balkan media.

The anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija were found across the media space—from the mainstream media to fringe websites publishing in BCMS languages—but the

extent of their influence on WB audiences could not be easily established. Therefore, the NATO StratCom COE undertook a comprehensive audience study in order to gain a better understanding of media consumption habits across the region, to analyse the susceptibility of WB audiences to mis- and disinformation, and to test specific narratives promoted by Kremlin.

The data collection was done by IPSOS Strategic Marketing – Public Affairs in 2020, applying following research methods:

1. **Media landscape analysis:** quantitative study of media consumption habits and audience characteristics.
2. **Quantitative research:** an ad hoc mixed-mode (telephone and online) survey on a nationally representative sample of the general population aged 16 and above (at least 1000 respondents in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia).



3. **Qualitative research:** 24 online focus groups with members of the general population, aged 16 and above, in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (4 groups per country).

A more detailed description of research methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

Based on the findings of this audience research, the NATO StratCom COE draws a number of conclusions regarding the reach and impact of Russian influence activities on the general public in the Western Balkans which can be helpful for NATO, the EU, and other interested stakeholders in their efforts to build resilience against malign influence in the region. This report answers following questions:

- How great is the potential for Russia to reach Western Balkan audiences via the media space?

- What is the correlation between an audience's foreign policy preferences and its attitudes toward the pro-Russian narratives spread by Sputnik Srbija?
- How do WB audiences perceive the narratives promoted by Russia identified in the StratCom COE report [Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija?](#)
- Which audiences in the WBs are most susceptible to the Kremlin's narratives?
- What is the potential for hostile actors to exploit societal vulnerabilities to influence audiences during a crisis (taking COVID-19 as the most recent example)?



” While it could not be determined whether those narratives are promoted by Russia or whether they are pre-existing narratives that Sputnik Srbija exploits and amplifies, it was evident that by reporting on local and regional issues Sputnik is able to reach wider audiences.

The Kremlin’s Narratives

Nine narratives were identified in the StratCom COE’s 2020 report [Russia’s Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija](#). A full list of the identified narratives can be found in the table below. These narratives highlight East-West divisions in the WB region and encourage feelings of insecurity and distrust. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—WB countries that are NATO member states and have a pro-Western and foreign policy orientation—are portrayed as corrupt, crime-ridden, and in the process of losing their sovereignty to Western influence. In contrast, Serbia—a friend of Russia—is consistently presented as a regional leader. The situation in Kosovo reappears as a leitmotif across all narratives: Russia is cast in the role of a protector defending marginalised Kosovo Serbs against aggressive NATO-backed Kosovo Albanians. NATO and the EU are portrayed as fragmented, hegemonic, and aggressive, but still weaker than Russia itself.

An overview of the main narratives identified in an analysis of content published by Sputnik Srbija (Period of analysis 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2018)

The Western Balkan region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West.

This narrative asserts that the Western Balkans are of geopolitical importance because of the power politics being played out there, to the detriment of local populations. The East (mainly Russia) is portrayed as a traditional friend of the Western Balkan countries, which has the best interests of the local populations at heart—especially those with which it shares an Orthodox Slavic kinship. Western interests are represented as more predatory. The EU and NATO are portrayed as exerting a joint influence, while the United States is presented separately as a key player pushing Serbia to recognise an independent Kosovo through the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

The WB region is unstable with a high potential for conflict.

This narrative plays on unresolved border disputes and poor relations between neighbours, exploiting inter- and intra-country tensions to heighten the feeling among WB peoples that whatever peace has been established is fragile and insecure.



The EU is hegemonic.	The EU has been a key player and decision-maker in political and social events in the Western Balkans. Therefore, Western interests in the area are portrayed as hegemonic in matters of diplomacy, policy, and security. The more Western-oriented countries are ridiculed for giving up their sovereignty and obeying EU instructions, particularly with regard to migration and cooperation with Russia.
Western Balkan countries are weak, corrupt, and incapable.	Sputnik Srbija portrays the region as weak and corrupt, and ill-equipped to be a significant international player. This narrative is projected in a number of ways: some stories discuss rigged elections, nepotism, or politicised judicial systems, while others focus on issues such as crime, political protest, and public debt.
Human rights are under threat in the Western Balkans.	This narrative discusses violations against the rights of Serbian diaspora in the region. Ruling parties in Montenegro, BiH, and Kosovo allegedly discriminate against the basic freedoms of ethnic Serbs, including their religious practices, access to good-paying jobs, and integration into society. Many Serbs are denied settled status in other WB countries. Ethnic discrimination is presented as the main cause for the low quality of life among Serbs in the region.
The EU and NATO are weak and fragmented.	This narrative portrays the EU and NATO as weak and fragmented organisations, emphasising their most negative aspects to dissuade the Western Balkan countries that aspire to join them.
NATO is a provocative and aggressive organisation.	NATO is described as being aggressive and provocative, seeking to expand its territory in the region and worldwide. NATO's operation against former Yugoslavia in 1999 and the installation of NATO military bases in the Western Balkan region are presented as evidence of NATO's provocative stance, as is the presence of eFP battlegroups near Russia's borders.
Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history.	The centenary of the Podgorica Assembly—the Great National Assembly of the Serb People in Montenegro, at which it was determined that independent Montenegro would merge with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia—was celebrated in 2018. Montenegro reasserted its independence from Serbia in 2016, but there are still quite a few supporters of the union. Perceptions of this historical event still divide the people. In 2018, Sputnik Srbija leveraged the centenary to promote the message that independent Montenegro is a 'revisionist' and reactionary state, and that the unification of Montenegro and Serbia represented the will of most Montenegrins.
NATO membership is not beneficial to its members.	This narrative is also designed to dissuade Western Balkan countries from aspiring to join the alliance. Despite promises that future members will experience many positive changes after accession, once a country joins it is obligated to increase defence and military spending without enjoying any real benefits from NATO membership.



The Reach of Russian Media in the Western Balkans

Several Russian media outlets are present in the WB region. Apart from **Sputnik**, other Kremlin-affiliated media include **RBTH** [*Russia Beyond the Headlines* or *Russia Beyond*], published in both Serbian and Macedonian. Pro-Russian outlets that are not officially affiliated with the Kremlin include **Ruska Reč** and the Donbas-based [East Ukraine] web portal **Newsfront**, whose financing remains non-transparent. Furthermore, a selection of newspapers popularising alternative Russian medicines are also distributed across the region, targeting the elderly population. However, Sputnik remains the best known and most popular Russian media outlet, according to local experts.

As previous reports have found, **Sputnik Srbija** is able to reach audiences across the region due to language similarities, free-to-use content, and an accessible writing style that make it easy for local media to republish content. Even so, no publicly available data indicate that this media outlet is among the most popular in the region, an assessment supported by the results of the opinion poll conducted by IPSOS.

Although Sputnik Srbija is based locally in Belgrade and run by local journalists, it is a subsidiary or affiliate of the international Sputnik news outlet funded by the state-owned Russian news agency Rossiya Segodna. Similarly, the affiliate broadcasters and web platforms of international news services are generally understood to be international media like, for example, Voice of America BiH or the now inoperative BBC Serbia.

International media consumption

People across the Western Balkans prefer local and national news to regional and international news.⁷ In addition international media is not a widely used information channel to get informed about political or social issues. When asked about their daily news consumption over the previous seven days only about 10% use international media as their news source, with Montenegrins being the most avid consumers of international news (14%) and Kosovars the least (1%).

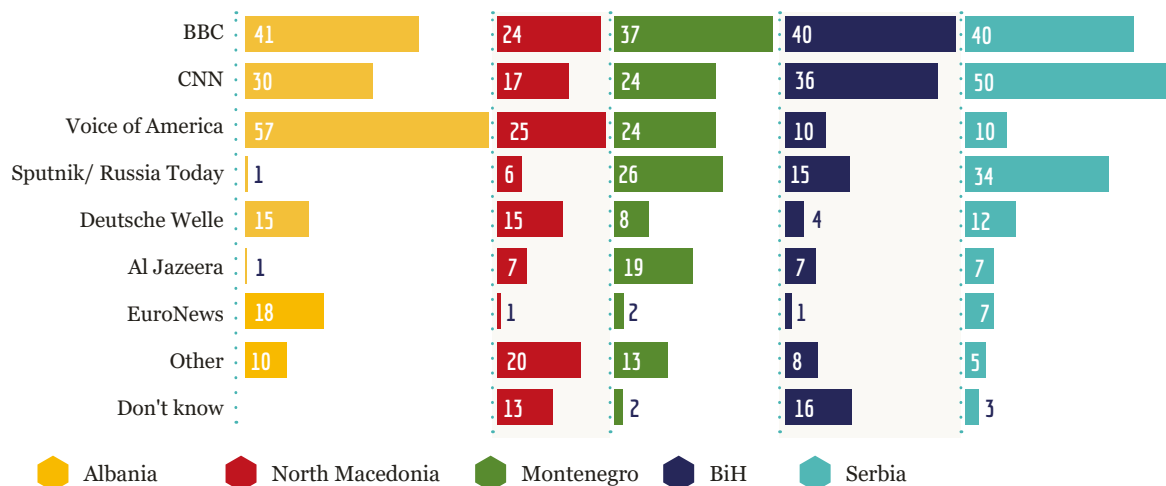
Among those who had consumed international media in the previous seven days⁸, the preferred international news outlet varied across countries. Russian state-sponsored media outlets such as **Sputnik** and **RT** [formerly *Russia Today*] are not the most preferred international media in any of the WB countries; people most often



Figure № 1 International media consumption habits for the past seven days

Here we have a list of sources through which people can get information about political and social events. Please indicate whether you have used each news source in the past 7 days. Which one? Multiple answers.

Base: Those who have used international media in the past 7 days to stay informed about political and social events. Total n=602, in Albania n=72, North Macedonia n=99, Montenegro n=170, BiH n=125, Serbia n=127. *Kosovo is excluded due to low number of respondents (n=10)



name **CNN** in Serbia, **BBC** in Montenegro and BiH, and **Voice of America** in Albania as their preferred international news sources. The two Russian channels are, however, consumed by 34% of international media followers in Serbia, 26% in Montenegro, and 15% in BiH.

From international media followers in **Serbia**, the Russian media outlets **Sputnik** and **RT** are more popular among those aged 45–59 years as well as those citizens who voted for minority parties and parties that did not pass census in previous elections. In **Montenegro**, Russian channels are favoured among those with a secondary education and mid-range income (between 301 and 500 EUR), as well as by ethnic Serbs and those who oppose NATO membership.

Those who are more inclined to believe in anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives (tested during the research) state that they follow **RT** and **Sputnik** more often. In **BiH**, **Sputnik** and **RT** are more often chosen as news sources by those international media followers living in Republika Srpska (RS) and by ethnic Serbs; also those who oppose EU membership and favour Russia as a foreign policy partner.

Local media consumption

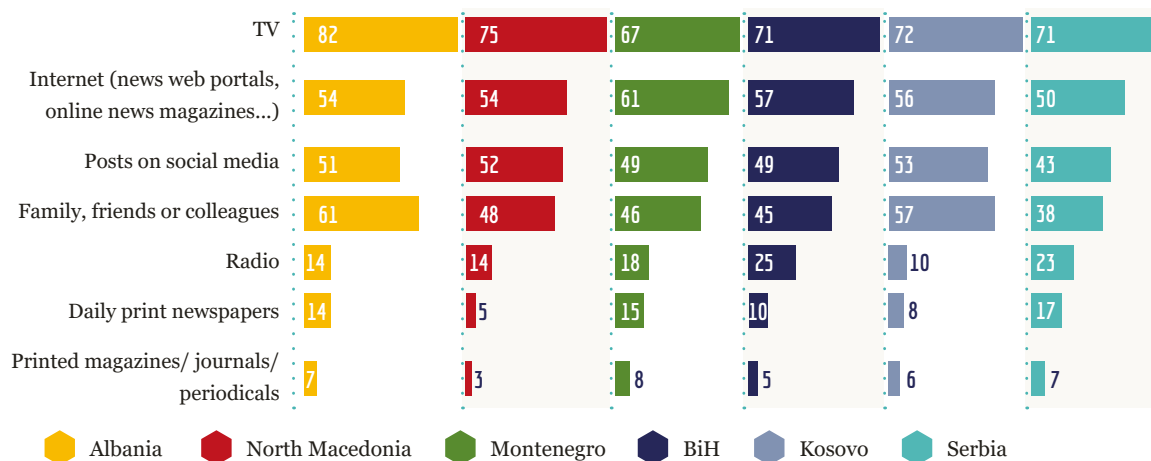
According to the opinion poll, TV is the most popular type of media across the Western Balkans, with online sources and social media coming in second. However, the people of the Western Balkans are part of the



Figure № 2 Usage of different sources of information about political and social events—% of answers ‘Daily’.

How often do you use the following sources to get information about political and social events?

Base: Total target population, n=6053; Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



global trend toward using the internet as the primary source of information. Traditional media such as TV, radio, and print media are still in use but are declining in popularity.

This assessment is supported by the findings from focus group discussions, where participants mentioned web portals and social media as the most popular sources of information, while TV was mentioned more rarely as a preferred news source. Participants reported choosing online news sources due to their accessibility and because of the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of sources and content.

Also looking at ‘consumption habits for the past 7 days’, TV channels and online sources

(both social media and online websites) are the most commonly used sources from which people receive news in the Western Balkan region. In Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, TV and, to a lesser degree, online sources are the dominant channels, while the rest were barely used. On the other hand, in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia radio and printed sources are still used to a somewhat higher extent.

In previous studies, the NATO StratCom COE tracked the spread of EU- and NATO-related narratives in Western Balkan media that report in the BCMS languages.⁹ We found that Sputnik Srbija is present in the WB media space as both an original source and as an amplifier of locally produced information.



Source: Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media, NATO StratCom COE, Riga, 2020

The image depicts media outlets and online webpages that were identified as frequent re-publishers of content similar to that published by Sputnik Srbija in 2018 and the first half of 2019. The bigger the bubble the more often the outlet published exactly duplicated or similar content.

While it could not be determined whether the narratives in question are promoted by Russia through Sputnik Srbija or whether they are pre-existing narratives that Sputnik exploits and amplifies, it was evident that by reporting on local and regional issues Sputnik Srbija is able to reach wider audiences and subsequently create better opportunities for shaping information in favour of Russia's interests.

The StratCom COE analysed online media

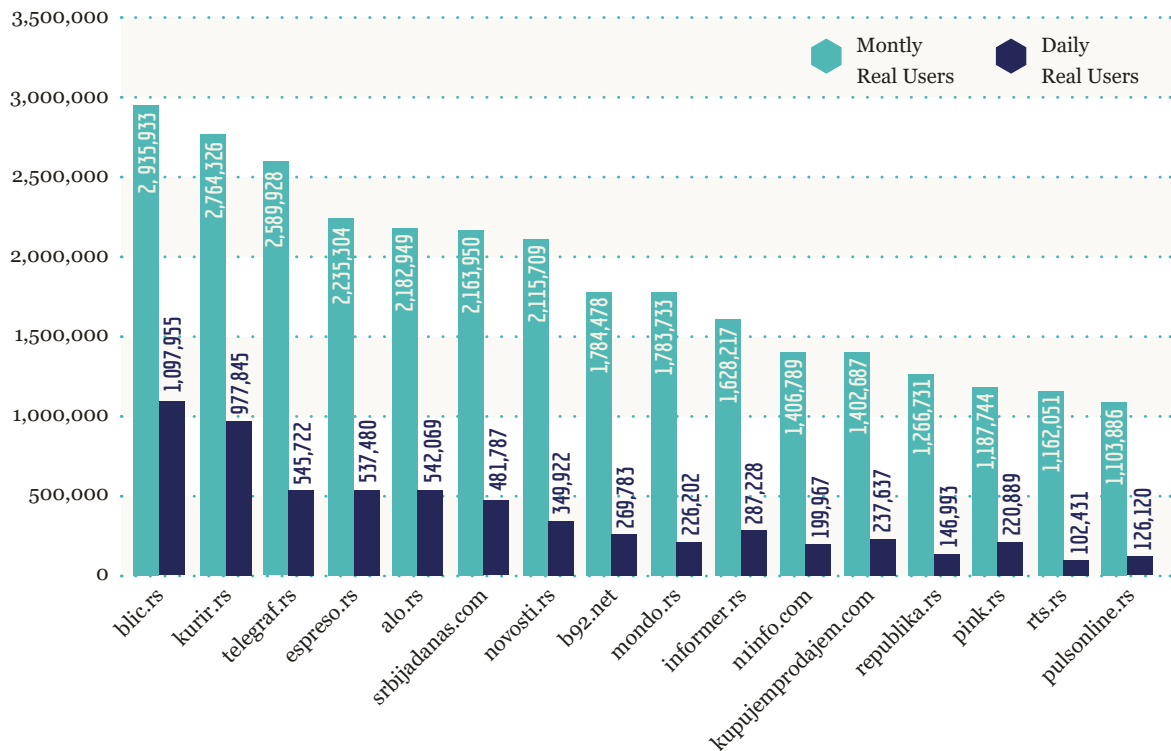
sources in BCMS languages, including the online websites of local TV channels. This resulted in a list of local outlets that frequently republished content from Sputnik Srbija or shared the similar content. The most frequent re-publishers included local outlets in Serbia, Montenegro, BiH, and Kosovo.

Data for average monthly and daily real users¹⁰ from Gemius Rating Serbia 2020 show that a considerable portion of the



Figure № 3 Domestic sites and portals: average monthly & daily real users in Serbia

Source: Gemius Rating Serbia 2020



Serbian population consumes media listed in the StratCom COE report and thus is likely to have been exposed to the Kremlin's narratives about the EU and NATO. Of the top 10 outlets most often visited by Serbian users, seven also appear in the StratCom COE study—**Blic**, **Kurir**, **Alo**, **Srbijadanas**, **B92**, **Novosti**, **Informer**. Some of these publications are also read in the neighbouring countries beyond Serbia.

According to the *Tracking Russia's Narratives* study, the Montenegro-based outlet that most often republishes *Sputnik Srbija* narratives is **ln4s.net**, which is also

one of the frequently visited news portals in Montenegro.

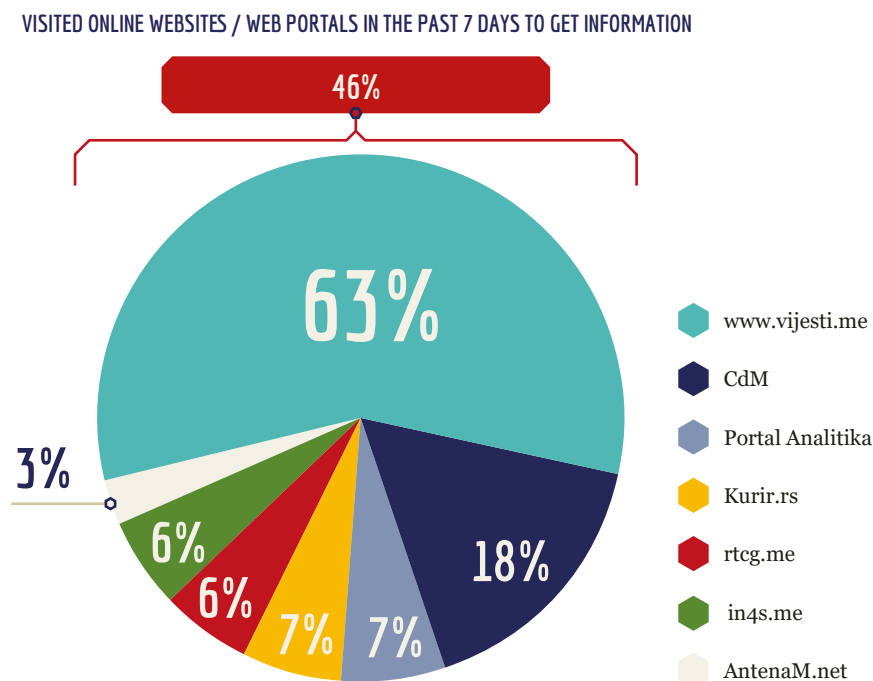
The Serbian-based **Kurir.rs** (also mentioned in *Tracking Russia's Narratives*) is also among the most-visited online news portals in Montenegro. Focus group participants also mentioned Serbian media such as **RTS** and **B92** (both featured in the COE's study) as popular foreign news sources due to close ties between the two countries.

Those who are supportive of anti-Western narratives such as 'the West intends to destroy our national identity' and 'decisions



Figure № 4 The most visited websites/web portals (responses above 5%) in Montenegro

Multiple answers: Base: Those who have visited online website in the past 7 days to get information about political and social events (46% of target population, n=467). Source: IPSOS opinion poll, 2020.



about Montenegro are made by foreign powers'¹¹ also stated that they did not know which portals they had visited in the last seven days significantly more often than those who do not share these views.

According to *Tracking Russia's Narratives*, **Iskra.co** was identified as the website to most frequently re-publish Sputnik Srbija content in BiH. However, this outlet does not come up as one of the most-visited sites in the public opinion poll. Another outlet that appears in the study, **Nezavisne.com**, is the fifth-most-popular online news outlet in BiH in terms of the number of unique users.

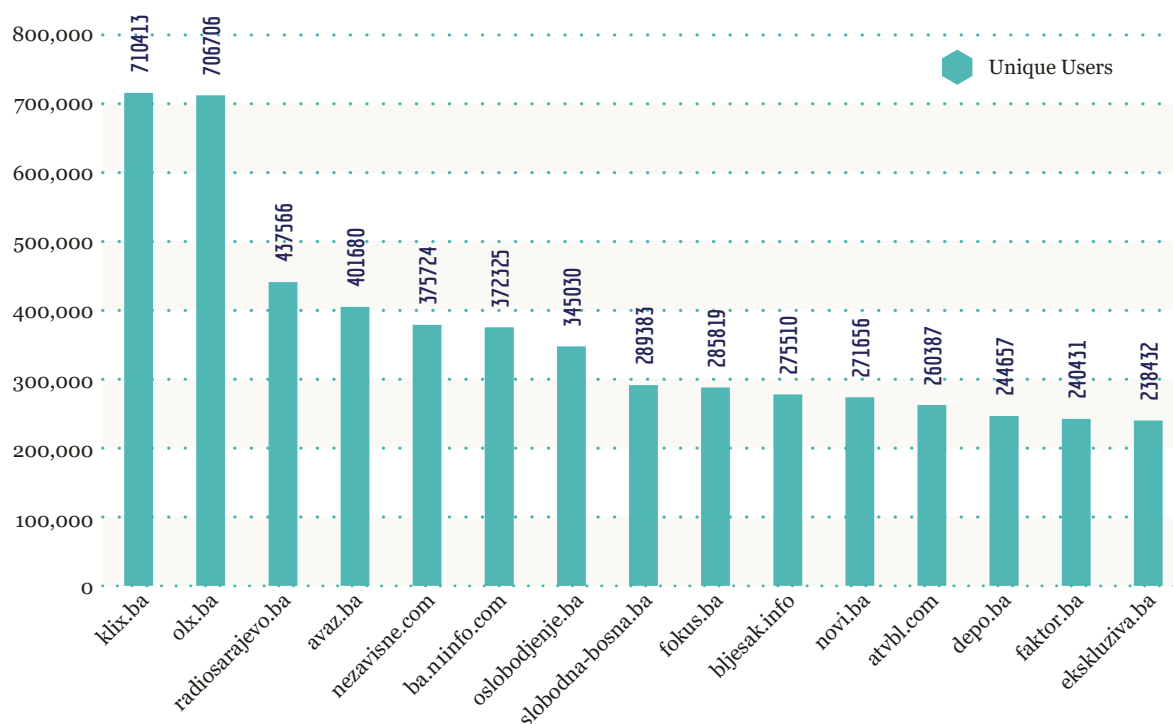
The online version of **RTRS**—the public broadcaster of Republika Srpska, which enjoys great popularity in that administrative entity—also appears in the COE study as re-publishing Sputnik Srbija narratives. According to the opinion poll, the TV channel operated by **RTRS** is more frequently watched by those TV viewers who oppose any form of relationship with NATO and prefer closer cooperation with Russia and China.

Additionally, the **BN** and **RTS** TV channels are watched more often by those who agree with some of tested anti-EU/NATO narratives, such as 'the EU is falling apart



Figure № 5 Domestic websites and portals: average monthly & daily real users in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Source: Ipsos DOTMETRICS B&H 2020



after Brexit' and 'the coronavirus crisis has revealed the weakness and divisions of the EU', and also agree that BiH's membership in NATO would be bad for the country's economy. While the online website of **RTS** was identified in the *Tracking Russia's Narratives* study, **BN** was not.

None of the Kosovo-based outlets identified in the COE study come up as most-visited outlets in the IPSOS public opinion poll. However, it must be mentioned that there is a clear division between ethnic Serbs who consume news in Serbian and mainly from Serbian media outlets and ethnic Albanians who consume news in Albanian

from Kosovar and Albanian media outlets. It was also found that those who support various anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-NATO narratives tested in the study were more likely to get their information through Serbian-language TV channels **RTS** and **Pink**. In other words, the people who believe that 'the West is destroying their national identity', that 'Brexit is testimony to the disintegration of the EU', that 'the Coronavirus crisis has shown that the EU is fragmented and incapable of helping its members', and that 'NATO membership is bad for a country's economy' all report watching **RTS** in the last seven days significantly more often than those who

hold opposing opinions. Furthermore, those who think that membership in NATO is endangering the economy of the country are more likely to get their information from TV Pink. This ethnic divide is also apparent in the consumption of online news sources. Serbs follow Serbian outlets, including **Blic**, **Kurir**, and **Mondo**. All of the above were discovered to be frequent re-publishers of **Sputnik Srbija** content in the *Tracking Russia's Narratives* study.

The media consumption habits of WB populations indicate the popularity of

online portals, which means they provide a good opportunity for disseminating Kremlin narratives to audiences in the Western Balkans. Although Sputnik Srbija is not followed by a large portion of the population, anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives promoted by the Kremlin-funded media outlet are found in local media, as reported in the *Tracking Russia's Narratives* study. Although most of the outlets identified in the StratCom COE study are not among the most popular local media, tabloids such as Blic and Kurir are read not only in Serbia, but also in BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro.



Foreign Policy Preferences

As it has been discovered in previous opinion polls conducted in the region, the Western Balkan countries are divided in their foreign policy preferences.¹² People in Albania and Kosovo, and to lesser extent in North Macedonia and Montenegro, show more support for a Western foreign policy orientation, such as membership in the EU and NATO, while opinions about foreign policy differ in BiH. The Serbian population leans towards cooperation with Russia and China and shows less support for the EU and NATO compared to other countries in the region.

Preferred foreign partners

When asked about the preferable foreign policy actors, each country's relationship with Germany has been assessed positively by the majority of their population. Additionally, it is the best-rated relationship by almost all countries, apart from Montenegro and Serbia.

Relations with Turkey are also positively assessed by the majority in all countries (except Serbia) and especially by people in Kosovo and Albania. The US is especially positively assessed by the citizens of Kosovo and Albania, and slightly less so amongst Montenegrins and North Macedonians.

The vast majority of Serbs assess their country's relationship with Russia positively, a far greater proportion of the population than in other WB countries. More people in Serbia and Montenegro also view their countries as having a good relationship with China.

The relationship with NATO is perceived significantly more positively by populations in Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, compared to those in BiH and especially in Serbia.

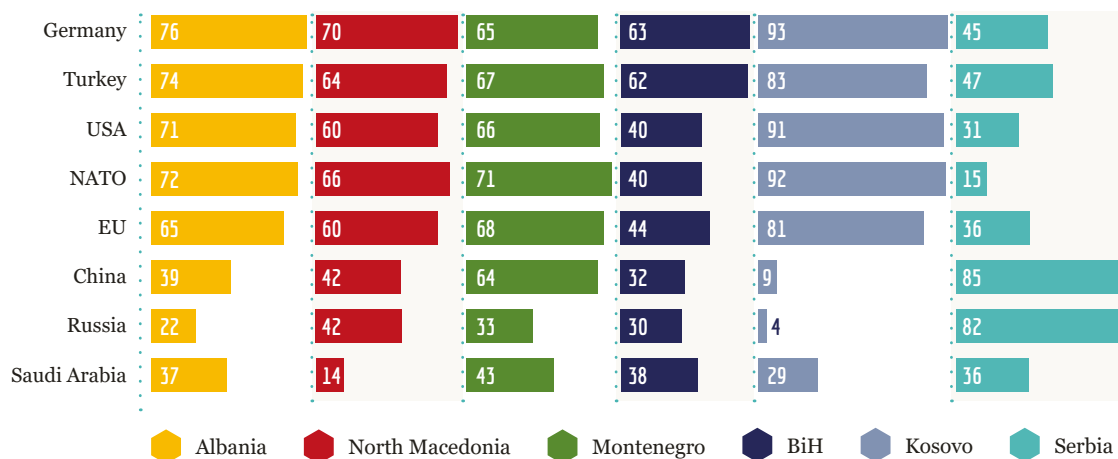
The relationship with the European Union is again perceived far more positively in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania than in BiH and Serbia.

Similar differences were found with regard to perceptions about received foreign support. Most countries in the region see the EU as their biggest financial supporter. In Kosovo, the US is perceived as the most significant financial supporter, while in BiH, Turkey and the EU are seen as the biggest financial supporters (23% and 22% respectively). In Serbia, China is seen as the greatest financial supporter (33%), followed by the EU and Russia (21% and 20% respectively). Apart from this positive assessment from the Serbians, China and Russia are rarely perceived in the same way by the other countries.



Figure № 6 Assessment of each WB country's current relationship with different countries and organizations¹⁸

Please assess the relationship your country currently has with the following countries and organizations. Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000. Answers shown: % very good & mostly good



Similarly, when people across the WB were asked about the foreign actor that provided the most support for their country in the recent COVID-19 crisis, the EU is seen as greater supporter in the most countries. In Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, the EU was named most often. China was by far the most-often mentioned in Serbia (76%). Russia was not seen as providing much support during COVID-19 pandemic across the region; in Serbia and BiH, where it was mentioned more often than in other countries, only 5% and 4% of the respective populations mentioned Russia as providing support.

When it comes to the perceptions about preferred foreign partners, again views differ from country to country. In most WB

countries people believe their countries' interests would be best served by cooperating with the EU and the US, the latter being especially favoured in Kosovo (83%) and Albania (54%). The EU is mentioned as the most preferred future partner for North Macedonia (44%) and Montenegro (46%), and it is also among top preferred partners in Albania and Kosovo (50% and 40%). For Montenegrins (42%) and Bosnians (34%), other countries in the region are considered the most significant potential partners.

By contrast, the majority of Serbia's population believes their countries' interests would be best served by cooperation with Russia (68%) and with China (52%). Serbs more often name Russia as the most important actor for maintaining



Figure № 7 Perception of foreign financial support to WB countries

Thinking exclusively about financial support and investment, which country or international institution has supported your country the most in the last five years? Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

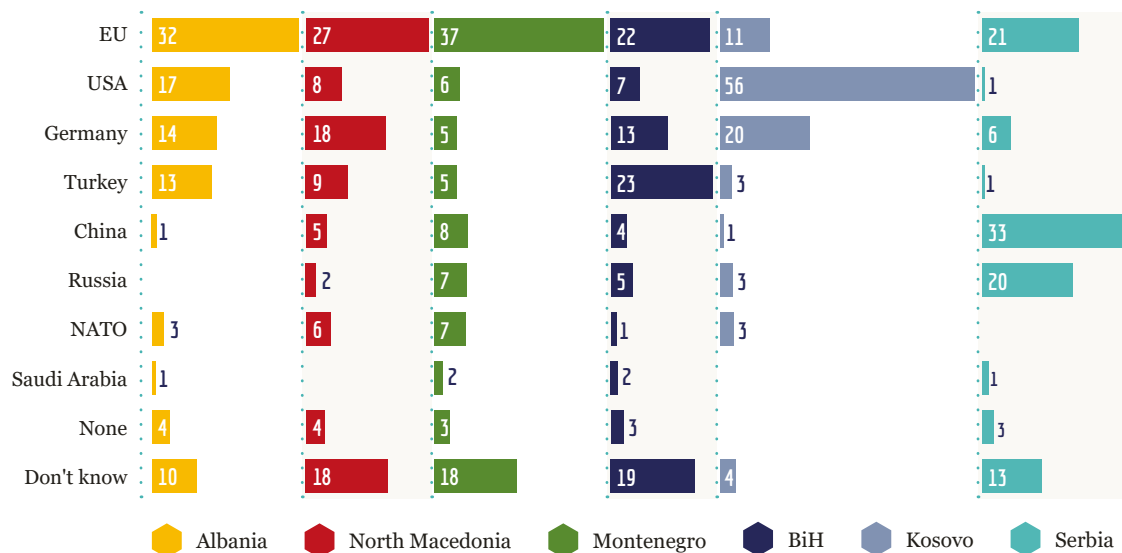
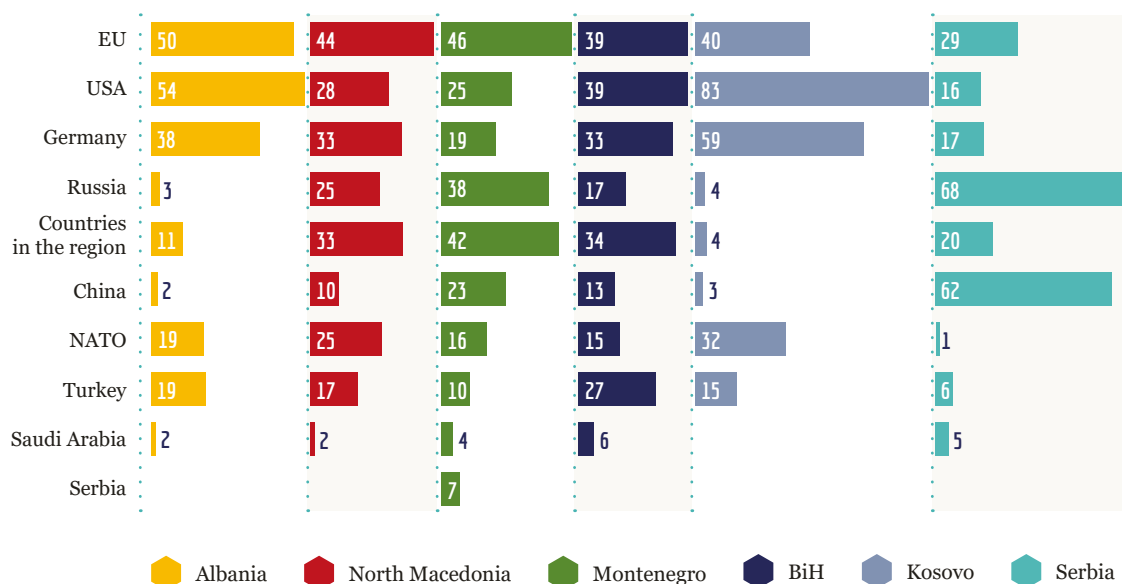


Figure № 8 Public views of preferred international relations

Which of the following countries and organisations are your country's interests best served by maintaining strong relations in the future? Please select three countries/organizations and rank them in order of importance. Multiple answers. Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



peace and security in the region. People in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, and North Macedonia predominantly see the US and NATO as the most important actors in this respect.

The populations of North Macedonia and Montenegro, NATO's newest members, also view Russia favourably: 42% in North Macedonia and 33% in Montenegro assess the current relationship positively, while 25% and 38% respectively have named Russia as a priority partner in the future. Russia is also perceived by Montenegrins and North Macedonians as one of the top five countries/organisations most important for maintaining peace in the Western Balkan region.

According to the focus group analysis, all participants (except in Serbian groups) perceive their country's foreign policy as

aligning with the West, which is understood as membership in the EU or NATO. This view is far more pronounced in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, while respondents from Montenegro and BiH mention the importance of the Serbian influence, which inevitably includes Russian influence. In these countries the influence of Russia is seen as counterbalance to that of the US, and political neutrality is often cited as the best way forward. While respondents from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia clearly agree that their countries, and the region as a whole, should 'choose the West', regardless of the potential cultural difficulties. EU membership is seen as the best option with regard to economic benefits by most of the focus group participants, regardless of nationality.



Susceptibility to Russian Narratives

As shown in previous studies carried out by the StratCom COE,¹³ Russian activity is aimed at polarising opinion in the Western Balkans. Consequently, several narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija included complex topics that are traditionally controversial and themes that exploit existing tensions among ethnic and social groups in the region. Another line of effort in the WBs followed by the Kremlin is to demonstrate the weakness of its traditional rivals—the EU and NATO—and to highlight the negative aspects of a foreign policy orientation towards the West.

Hegemony of the great powers

The Sputnik Srbija narrative most frequently identified in previous studies was that ‘the Western Balkan region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West’. In this context, a popular theme is failure of the Dayton Agreement and its devastating aftermath for BiH and the disunity of its constituent entities. Another is North Macedonia’s name change referendum in 2018, which is used as an example of how the West is imposing its own opinions over the people of North Macedonia, and of a ‘hegemonic EU’ that makes consequential decisions with regard to the Western Balkans without giving a say to the countries themselves.

When asked about whether respondents think that the fate of their country is decided among more powerful states, the majority of respondents across the region either strongly agreed or agreed somewhat with the statement. This view was most

prevalent in Kosovo (89%), and slightly less prevalent in Albania (71%) and Montenegro (72%). However, as focus group discussions revealed, this proposition may not be perceived as only negative but instead as support that is needed for the countries to flourish; Albanians and Kosovars who are in support of EU membership are more likely to think this is the case.

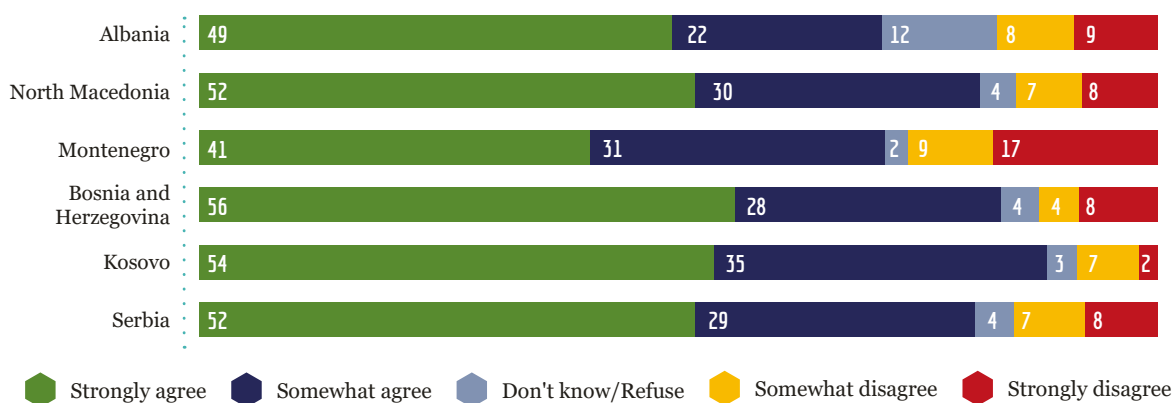
When looking more closely into the answers provided by specific socio-demographic groups and the attitudes they express, several trends stand out. In Albania and Kosovo, the opinion that fate of their country is decided among the powerful countries is more widely shared among those who have positive attitude towards EU membership. In Montenegro this opinion is more common among ethnic Serbs, people who do not trust the media, people who prefer Russia and China over NATO or the EU as a foreign policy orientation, and those who are likely to believe in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. In North Macedonia the view is more prevalent



Figure № 9 Percentage of respondents who agree and disagree that the fate of their country is decided among powerful countries

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The fate of my country is decided among powerful countries.”

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



among ethnic Macedonians than among ethnic Albanians. In Serbia those who are more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories agree with the statement.

Threat perception among Western Balkan populations

One of the predominant narratives identified in the analysis of Sputnik Srbija content was that ‘WB countries are facing imminent conflict’; this narrative follows from the presentation of the region as a battleground between East and West, and from the view of the WB as a place rife with internal tensions.

According to our public opinion poll, a majority of people in Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia assess

the security situation in their countries favourably, with the exception of Albania, where only 43% see their country as secure, and BiH, where public is divided on the issue. The assessment of regional situation is less positive. It is seen as favourable by a majority of Kosovars and North Macedonians, but in Montenegro, BiH and Albania by only four of ten people, and by less than a third of the population in Serbia.

When asked about future expectations of security in their home countries and in the region, the assessments were somewhat better than evaluations of the current security situation. A majority of people in all countries expect the security situation both in their own countries and in the region to either improve or remain unchanged. Positive expectations regarding national



and regional security were highest in Kosovo (58% and 49%, respectively) and in Montenegro (56% and 50%, respectively). The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina

was least optimistic with only one in three people believing that the security situation would improve in their country (32%) and in the region (33%). Serbia was

Figure № 10 Evaluation of the current security situation in the country of residence

How would you assess current security situation in your country?

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

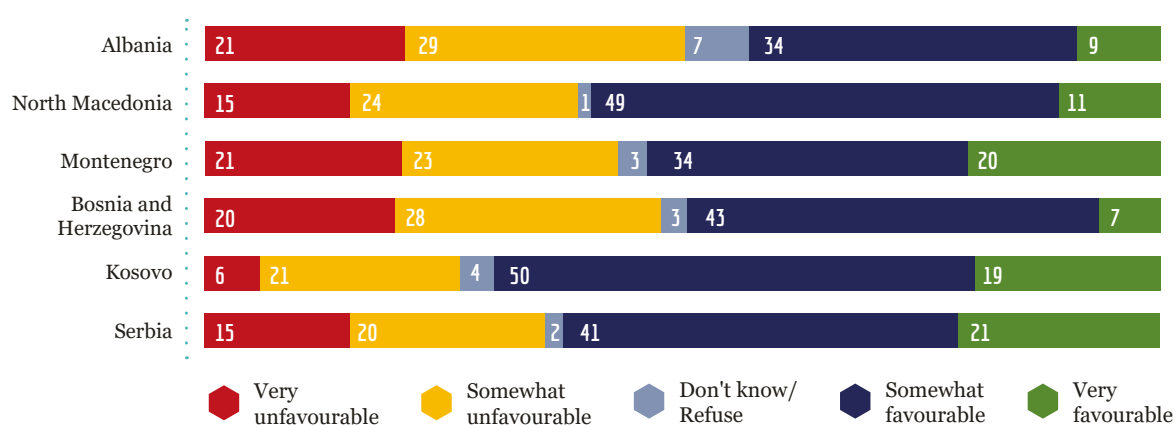


Figure № 11 Evaluation of the current security situation in the Western Balkans

How would you assess current security situation in Western Balkans?

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

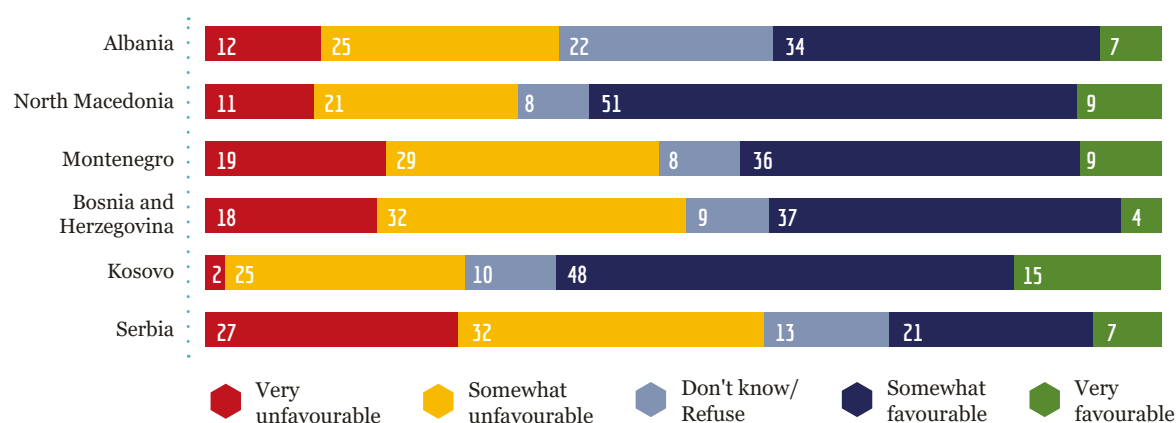
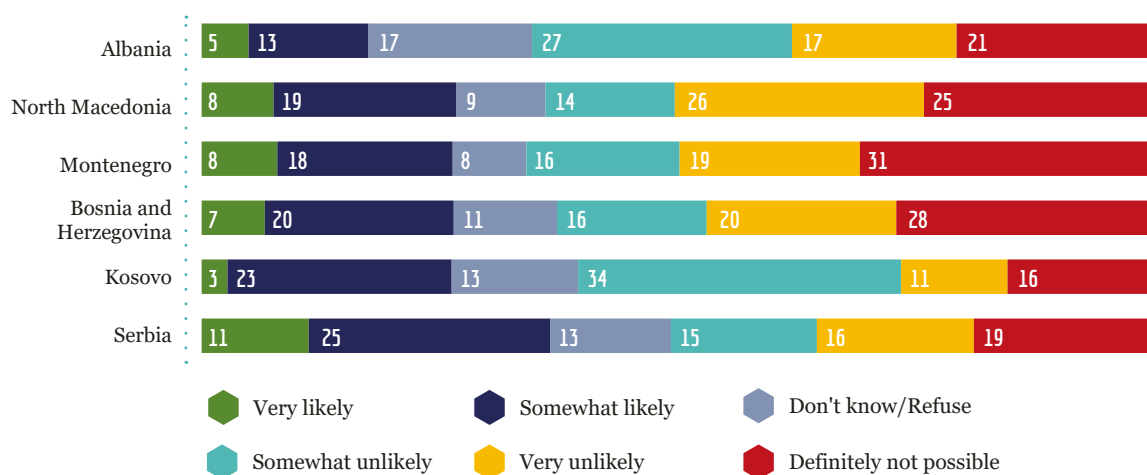


Figure № 12 Perceived probability of the re-emergence of armed conflict in the region

How likely is it that armed conflicts between the countries in the Balkans will be renewed in the next five to ten years?

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



the only country where respondents had strongly differing opinions about national and regional security; almost half of the population (45%) believes that the national security situation will improve, while only one third (31%) believes the same about regional security.

Despite the recent history of violent conflicts in the region, a majority of people ruled out the re-emergence of armed conflict in the WB. However, 36% of Serbians believe that such a possibility is somewhat or very likely. Focus group participants from most of the countries acknowledged the presence of the EU, the US, and NATO as important for stability, while Montenegrins and Serbs also mentioned the presence of Russia as a stabilising factor. In contrast to the Kremlin's attempt to promote the narrative that conflict in the

WB is inevitable, focus group respondents were of the opinion that the major powers would not allow such conflict, including the North Macedonians who mentioned NATO membership as a mitigating factor.

The perception of threats to peace and security varies from country to country. Threats are mostly seen as coming from internal factors, except in Kosovo where Serbia is most often named as a threat and in Serbia where Kosovo is most often named as a threat. In addition, Kosovars (42%) and Serbs (37%) acknowledge external security threats to their countries more often than the other WB countries where it is only one in five or one in six. Of those respondents who fear an external security threat, 88% of Kosovars believe that it is Serbia and 19% Russia, while one in four Serbians are



worried about Albania and the US, followed by 16% who think Kosovo poses a security threat. Furthermore, based on the share of respondents who either provided no answer or stated that there are no threats,

we might assume that the residents of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia feel somewhat secure, while the people of Serbia, BiH, and Montenegro are more concerned about their safety.

Table № 1 Perception of biggest threats to peace and security in your country

What are the biggest threats to peace and security in your COUNTRY at the moment?

Multiple answers: TOP 5 THREATS. Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.¹⁴

	Albania	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Serbia
Economic instability / crisis	3.1	4.5	11.3	11	2	4.9
Politics / Politicians	4.4	2.4	3.8	19.4	3.3	
Organized crime/ corruption	6.5	2.4	10.8	5.7	2.4	3.4
Internal conflicts (social unrest, divisions/ discord in society, civil war)	0.7	3.3	11.4	8.1		6.6
Immigrants/ refugees coming to the country	1.2	2.9	1	14.9	1.7	7.3
Nationalism		2.6	6.8	15.6		
The Current Situation in Kosovo	0.1	1.4	0.2			22.8
COVID-19 pandemic / health system collapse	2	2.2	3.9	4.6	2	6.6
Polarization between the government and the opposition	1	2.8	6	0.4	0.6	9.6
Law on Religion			18.5			
Serbia	2	0.1		0.9	13	
Albanians / Greater Albania / Albanian separatism	0.3	4.1	0.4		0.1	2.6
Ethnic tensions		6.3				0.8
Greece	4	0.6				
Russia	0.8				3.1	
None	16.4	13.7	8.5	6.4	18.7	8.2
Don't know/Refusal	62	52.7	20.1	28.2	57.7	27.4



Figure № 13 Views on existence of external threats to the country

Do you think any country/organization poses security threat to COUNTRY? Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

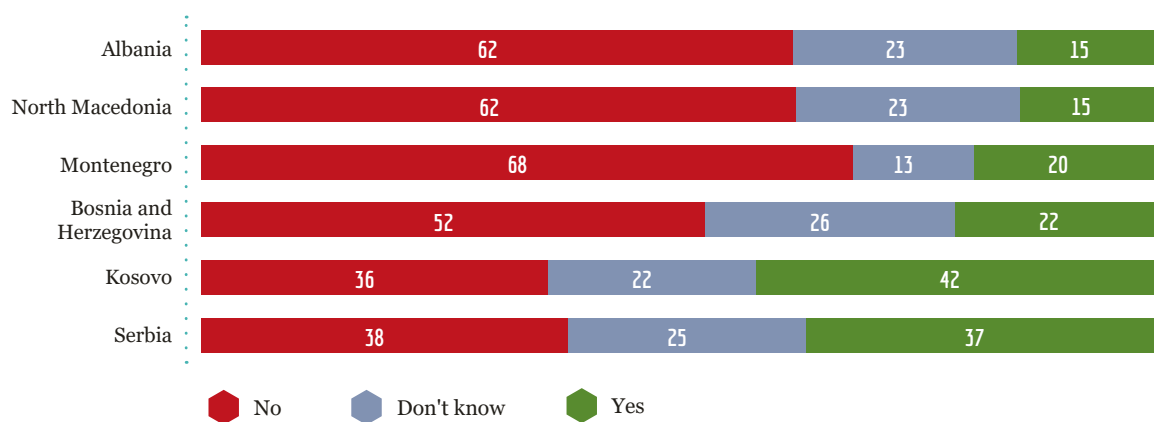


Table № 2 Views on countries and organizations which poses security threat to the country

Which country/organization poses a security threat to COUNTRY? TOP 5 COUNTRIES/ORGANIZATIONS Multiple answers; Base: Those who think some country/organization poses security threat to their country. n=1523, Albania=151, North Macedonia n=150, Montenegro n=199, BiH n=217, Kosovo n=436, Serbia n=370

	Albania	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Serbia
Serbia	29	1.5	33.4	40.5	88.2	
Russia	7.5	2.6	17.1	15.1	18.7	1.5
USA	2.8	9.3	7.3	20.9	0.5	21.7
Albania	0.8	19	16.8		1	22.6
Greece	58.2	17.6			1.2	
Kosovo		16	2.7			16
Croatia			4.1	14.4		9.8
Extremist organizations / groups	8.3	13.2	0.3	2.8	2.3	3.1
Germany			1.3	1.1		12.7
NATO		2.4	8.6	0.6		8
EU / European countries		3.2	4.3	2.3	0.5	3.6
France	1.5	0.8	0.2		1.1	2.5



One of the main narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija is that countries in the WB region, especially Albania and Kosovo, are crime-ridden, corrupt, and experiencing state capture. Sputnik Srbija commonly portrays countries with the Western foreign policy orientation as poorly governed, with high crime rates and rampant political favouritism.

People living in Montenegro, BiH, and Serbia are concerned with internal conflicts, such as **social unrest, divisions in society, and the possibility of civil war**, while in North Macedonia **ethnic tensions** are of greater concern. Many articles published by Sputnik Srbija emphasise ethnic tensions, especially in the context of BiH and the failed Dayton Agreement. Politicians in BiH were often presented as if in eternal argument with one another. Public opinion poll respondents in BiH pointed to **politicians and nationalism** as the two biggest threats to their country, while focus group participants from BiH characterised internal tensions as mostly politically motivated. Furthermore, nine of ten people in BiH expressed the belief that politicians do not care about their opinions.

In Montenegro, the **Law on the Freedom of Religion** adopted at the end of December 2019 seems to be the most worrisome topic of 2020. According to Article 62, Montenegro's religious communities must be able to prove that ownership of their property had been established prior to 1918, otherwise ownership reverts to the state. Russian media outlets have used the conflict over this

law to promote the narrative that the West undermines traditional Christian values.¹⁵

Respondents from BiH see **immigrants and refugees** entering WB countries as a significant threat; this is true to a lesser extent also in Serbia. Both countries have been affected by their geographical position as countries of transit for travel to the EU. The topic of migration appears frequently as evidence of the West's incompetence in the analysis of narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija. On the one hand, the migrant crisis is said to show Western Balkan weakness and ineffectuality because BiH cannot cope with the problem, and on the other hand it also shows the EU imposing decisions on a country that is unable to find a solution itself. Since the migration crisis is also mentioned as a topic of concern by people in the WB countries, this problem may be exploited by malign actors to further polarise opinions on the matter.

Sputnik Srbija continually portrays Kosovo as unstable and aggressive, as a danger to Serbia and a potential catalyst for regional conflict. However, based on answers from the opinion poll, the current **situation in Kosovo** is seen as a threat only in Serbia and is of greatest concern to ethnic Serbs. Similarly, Serbia is seen as a threat only in Kosovo, especially among ethnic Albanians. Focus group participants from Kosovo and Serbia see the potential conflict between the two countries as a threat to the security of the region, but do not think it will escalate further.

In addition to exploiting the **Serbia-Kosovo conflict**, narratives published in Sputnik Srbija also exploit the idea of a '**Greater Albania**' to criticise Albania's attempts to protect and enhance the civil rights of Albanians across the region, but mainly in Kosovo. According to the poll, North Macedonians (particularly ethnic Macedonians) seem more concerned about the threat of Albanian power. In the other countries this idea comes up but is not mentioned among the top concerns.

It can be concluded that despite the Kremlin's attempts to emphasise regional tensions, the potential for imminent conflict in the Western Balkans is not currently perceived as a significant threat. Although people are worried about problems such as corruption, organised crime, and state capture, and in some countries also about social, ethnic (BiH, North Macedonia), and religious (Montenegro) tensions, they generally rule out the potential of those tensions to escalate into armed conflict. However, the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo are still perceived as a threat, especially by the people of the two countries involved.

Values and beliefs

A narrative that frequently appeared in Sputnik Srbija was that the East honours traditional values, especially those connected with Slavhood and the Orthodox Church, in opposition to the corrupted/

degraded West. According to the poll results, a majority of people (except in Albania and Kosovo) agree that the West is working to destroy the national identity, traditional values, and way of life in WB countries. This opinion is especially prevalent in Serbia (69%) and in BiH (59%). However, the people of Montenegro (45%) and Kosovo (44%) somewhat disagree and strongly disagree with this notion far more often than those living in the other WB countries.

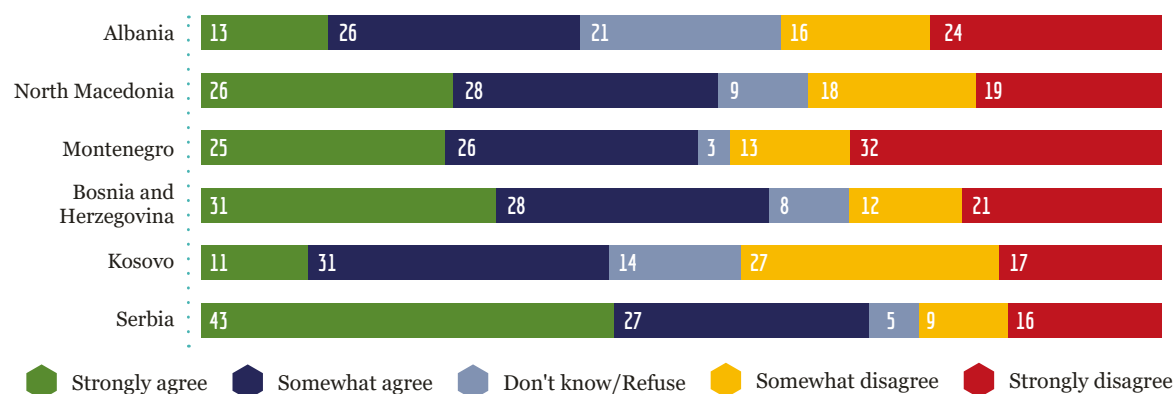
A number of insights can be gained from looking more closely at the demographic breakdown of results for each country. People in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia who favour Russia and China as foreign policy partners are more likely to believe that the West is trying to destroy their traditional values. Furthermore, in all of the countries mentioned except for Serbia, those who oppose NATO and EU membership are also more likely to support this view. Ethnic Serbs in Montenegro and in Kosovo are more likely to agree with the statement than the rest of the population; in Kosovo the share of those who agree with this statement is two times higher among Serbs than Albanians. People across the region who think the West is trying to destroy their traditional values are also more likely to believe in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories (this holds true for Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia).

The susceptibility of populations to this particular narrative should be viewed in



Figure № 14 Anti-Western narratives

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement? “Many people in the Western world are working to destroy our national identity, traditional values, and way of life (family, culture, religion, etc.).” Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



the context of values that are favoured in the Western Balkans. Russia presents itself as the protector of traditional values such as importance of religion, family, and authority. According to the opinion poll, people in the Western Balkans seem to favour conservative views with regard to authority and immigration. Therefore, the ideas promoted by the Kremlin and its media might be well received in the WB, even in those countries where a majority of the population does not view Russia positively.

An overwhelming majority (over 90% of respondents in Albania, Montenegro, BiH, and Serbia, and over 80% in Kosovo and North Macedonia) think that respect for authority in the family, at school, and at the state level is essential for achieving

social progress. At least three quarters of people in all WB countries favour a strong leader with a firm hand who would be capable of saving them from a crisis. It should be also noted that the high level of support for a ‘firm hand’ might be related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to people’s expectations of governance in a crisis situation.

It should also be noted that despite their poor assessment of politicians/the people’s ability to influence political processes by majority vote, most Western Balkan populations still see democracy as the best political system.

A majority of people living in Western Balkan countries express more conservative views on social issues such as immigration and

Figure № 15 Perceptions about the role of authority

Below are three statements related to different social issues. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement. Answers presented: Somewhat agree + strongly agree. Base: Total population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

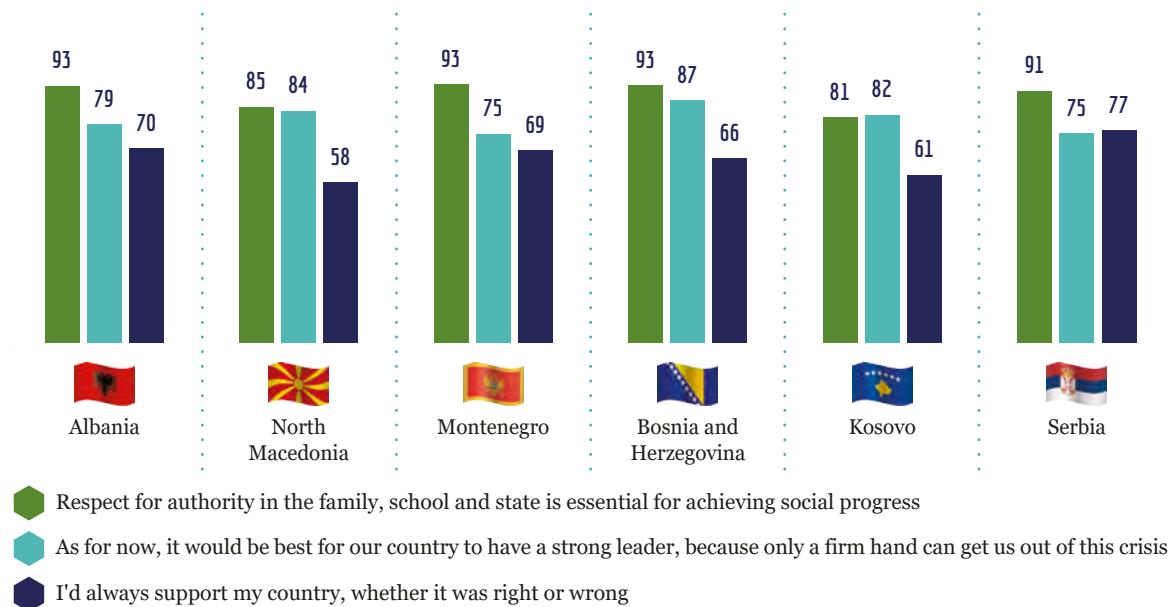


Figure № 16 Attitudes towards democracy and politicians

There are some statements related to perception of different social issues. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement. Answers presented: Somewhat agree + strongly agree; Base: Total population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000

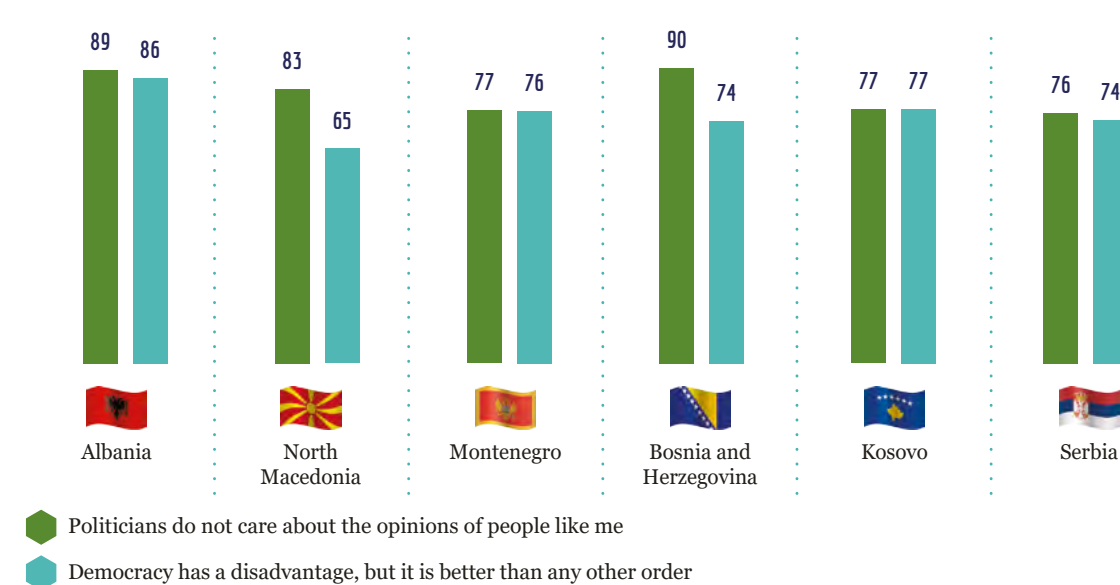
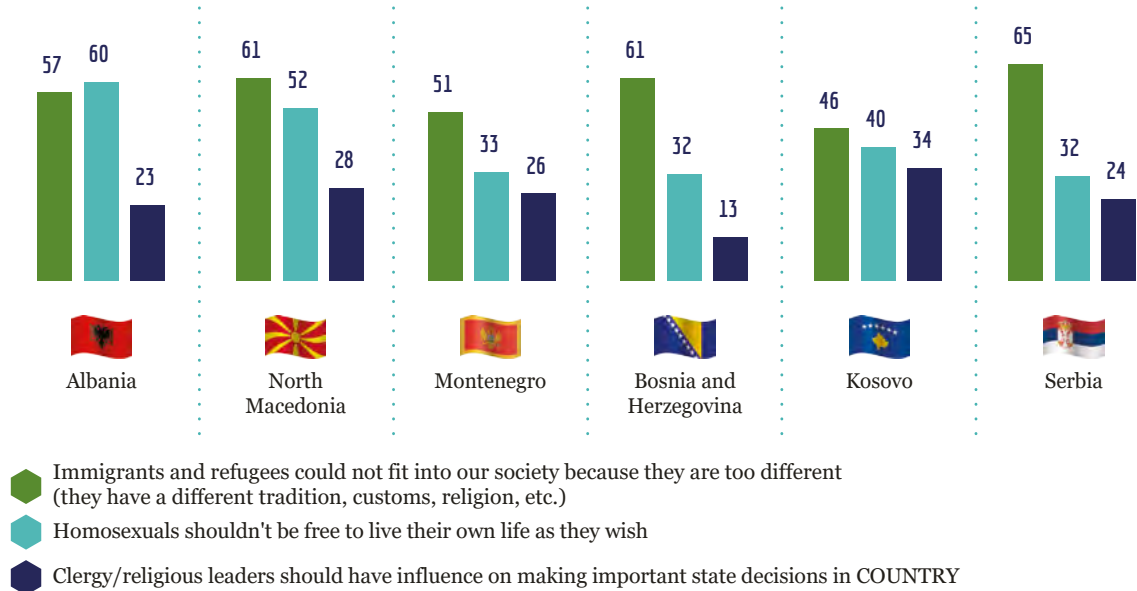


Figure № 17 Traditionalist views on social issues

There are some statements related to perception of different social issues. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement. Answers presented: Somewhat agree + strongly agree. Base: Total population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



refugees. For example, across the WB more than half of people believe that immigrants and refugees are too different to integrate into their societies; the exception is Kosovo where the percentage is below 50%. Additionally, the populations of some of the countries are more conservative in their views regarding homosexuals, for example three fifths of Albanians, half of North Macedonians, and two fifths of Kosovars do not support the idea that homosexual people should be free to live their lives as they wish; in other countries the percentage of people sharing this view is around one third. Conservative views regarding religion/state relations, however, are less widespread. Less than one third of people

in the region believe the clergy/religious leaders should be able to influence state decisions; the highest percentage—34%—was in Kosovo.

NATO-Related Narratives

Narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija often portray NATO as **aggressive, weak, divided**, and as **providing zero benefits** for its members (especially for newest NATO members Montenegro and North Macedonia). Sputnik Srbija publishes articles about NATO aggression towards Russia, focusing on activities close to Russia's borders and on NATO's

Figure № 18 Support for joining NATO among NATO member countries in the WB

Do you support your country joining NATO? Base: Total target population in Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012.

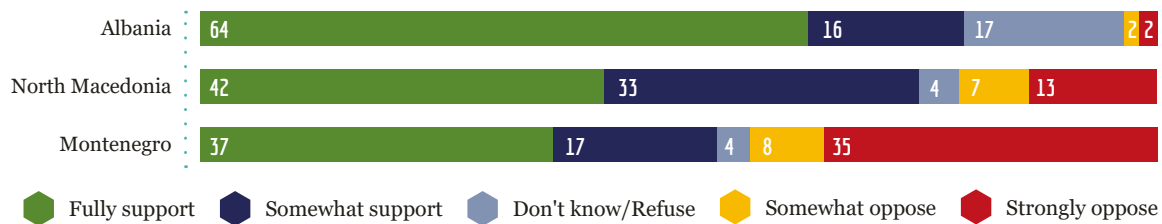


Figure № 19 Future relationship with NATO

In your opinion, your country's interests are best served by having what kind of relationship with NATO? Base: Total target population in Bosnia and Herzegovina n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

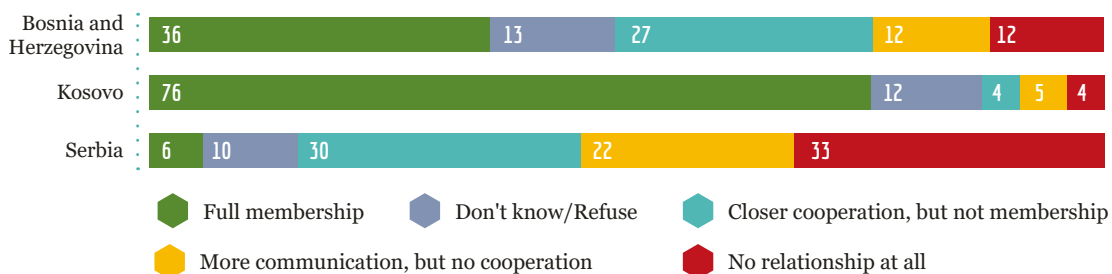
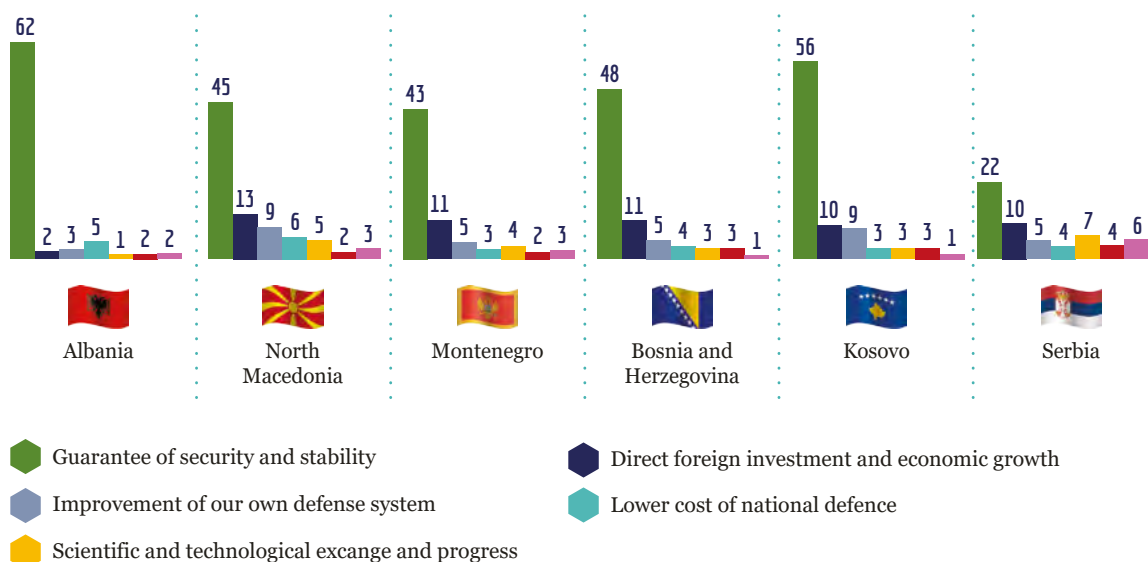


Figure № 20 Advantages of NATO membership

In your opinion, what would be/is the greatest benefit of NATO membership for COUNTRY? n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000



enlargement in the Western Balkans and in other countries Russia perceived as falling within its sphere of influence.

Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are NATO members, however their attitudes towards the organisation vary. The Albanian population is the most supportive of NATO membership (80%), followed by North Macedonia (75%), while in Montenegro only 54% fully or somewhat support NATO membership and 35% strongly oppose it. Furthermore, 17% and 16% of people in Albania and North Macedonia respectively point to NATO as one of the most important organisations to maintaining stability and peace in the Balkans, making NATO one of the top five most important countries/organisations in this regard. In Montenegro NATO is not among the top five actors in this regard.

Kosovo, BiH, and Serbia are not NATO member states. The people of Kosovo are very positive about cooperation with NATO, BiH is rather divided on the matter, and Serbia opposes relations with the organisation.

Of these three countries, Kosovo is also most eager to join NATO. BiH is divided on the matter, with roughly equal numbers of Bosnians wanting full membership vs closer cooperation but no membership. In Serbia, 30% of respondents would be ready to develop close cooperation with NATO versus 33% who would not like any relationship at all.

When asked about the benefits NATO membership could bring to their respective countries, respondents across the region cited security and stability as the biggest advantage. About one in ten believe that NATO membership will bring economic growth, with the exception of Albania where only 2% agreed with the statement.

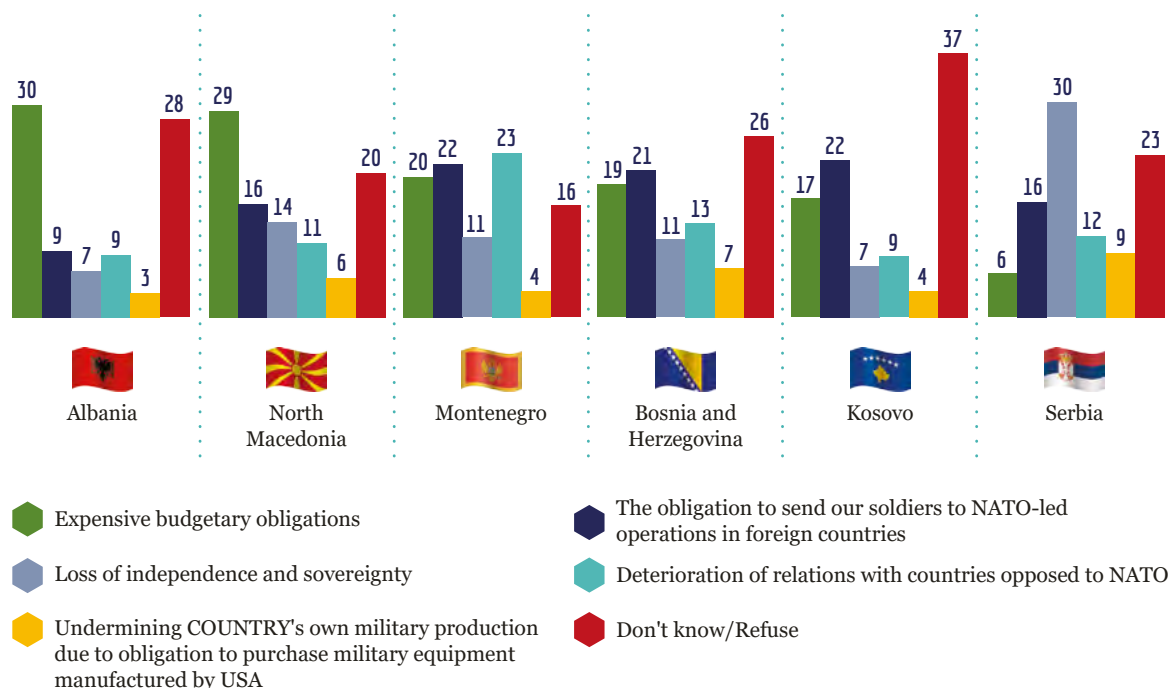
On the other hand, the most feared consequence of NATO membership differs across the region. People in Albania (30%) and North Macedonia (29%) mostly worry about budgetary obligations, while 30% of Serbs worry that they would lose their sovereignty if Serbia were to join NATO. In Montenegro, 23% think that their relations with countries opposing NATO have deteriorated, 22% are scared that Montenegro is obligated to send soldiers to NATO-led operations, and 20% cite budgetary obligations. All of these assumptions have been exploited in the narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija. It should also be noted that on average every fourth respondent did not know the answer to this question, with the highest percentage being in Kosovo (37%) and Albania (28%).

Findings from the focus group discussions confirm these attitudes: Albanians, Kosovo Albanians, and North Macedonians (except the elderly), as well as residents of the Federation of BiH generally have a more positive view of NATO. Kosovo Serbs and residents of Republika Srpska have predominantly negative attitudes towards NATO as a consequence of NATO's 1999

Figure № 21 The cost of NATO membership

In your opinion, what would be/is the greatest cost of NATO membership for your country?

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



air campaign over the former Yugoslavia. Montenegrins are divided in their opinion of NATO with many people expressing anger that the country joined without holding a referendum. Among Montenegrins, NATO is regarded more negatively than the EU: while ethnic Serbs in Montenegro still resent the 1999 bombing, many ethnic Montenegrins and some ethnic Serbs complain of there being few benefits to NATO membership.

Sputnik Srbija articles also promote the idea that **NATO membership does not bring benefits** to member countries, especially

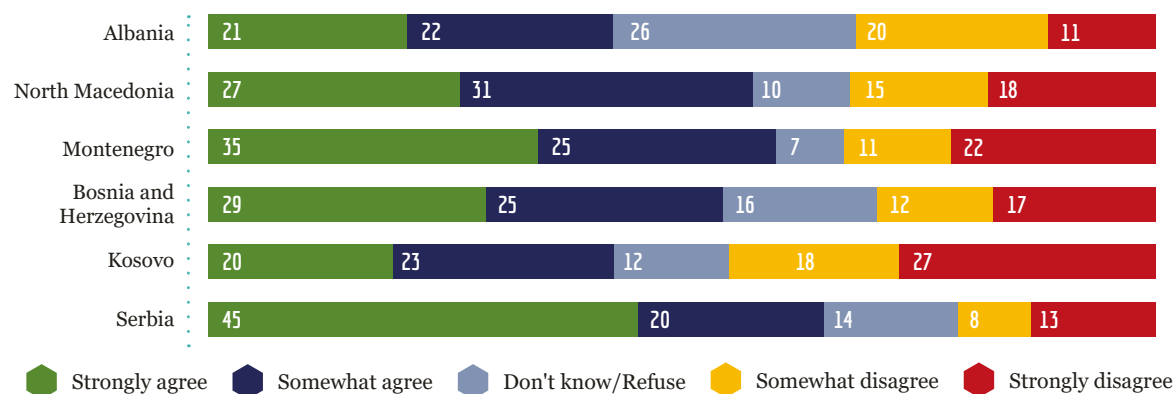
emphasising that **NATO membership has had a negative economic impact on** Montenegro (as the newest NATO member at the time when the analysis on Sputnik Srbija narratives was being conducted by the NATO StratCom COE). Sputnik Srbija articles claimed that Montenegro did not gain any real benefits but was forced to increase its defence and military spending. According to the opinion poll, this concern is shared by many people in the WB countries. While Serbs are most in favour (65%) of this statement, 60% of Montenegrins and 58% of North Macedonians—both recent NATO members—also agree.



Figure № 22 Perception of the impact of NATO membership on the country's economy

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"Membership in NATO is (MNE, ALB, NMK)/would be bad (SRB, BIH, KOS) for my country's economy due to expensive budgetary obligations towards NATO." Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



According to focus group discussions, participants from Albania, Kosovo Albanians, and Montenegrins perceive NATO membership and its impact more positively. Participants from Montenegro argue that in theory, NATO membership should have brought investments to their country, but in reality, nothing like this has happened. Albanians and Kosovars believe that the investment opportunities NATO membership brings exceed the cost of membership. Thus, they expect that their economies will improve with membership and the cost of membership is ultimately seen as an investment that will pay for itself over time. Most Macedonians agree with this assessment, with the exception of the elderly who believe that NATO membership will be detrimental to the economy. In the eyes of the people of BiH, NATO membership

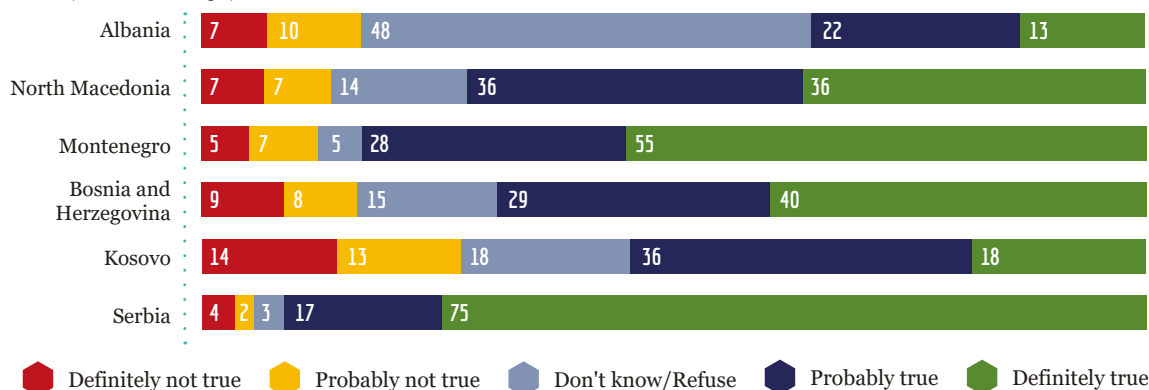
is a double-edged sword; although they agree that ultimately the economic benefits will outweigh the costs. Kosovo Serbs claim it is more expensive not to be a member of NATO (as Serbia currently is), while most Serbians cannot formulate a clear position on this issue. However, they usually agree that membership would not contribute to their economic wellbeing, and some express the view that it will also be expensive.

The narrative that **NATO is expanding, forcibly bringing new members into the Alliance** was tested in the focus groups. An analysis of the focus group discussions shows that views on this topic are divided across the region. A majority of Serbs and Kosovo Serbs think NATO is aggressively forcing countries to join. However,

Figure № 23 Opinion on the connection between incidence of cancer cases and NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia

To what extent do you consider this statement to be true?

“Depleted uranium from the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia in 1999 has increased cancer cases in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.” Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



respondents from Albania, Montenegro, BiH, and North Macedonia see NATO membership as a strategic orientation towards the West. Kosovo Albanians also mention NATO's support for them in the conflict with Serbia in a positive light. Serbs and Kosovo Serbs, however, do not agree that NATO membership increases security and the internal stability in their countries.

The narrative that **NATO membership means giving up sovereignty and independence** was also tested in the focus groups. Focus group participants in RS and Kosovo Serbs admitted they were concerned about their countries losing independence and sovereignty due to NATO's influence. According to Kosovo Serbs, the government of Kosovo has already lost its ability to

make decisions independently; participants believed NATO membership would simply increase the level of foreign influence. Along with the threat to their country's independence, respondents from RS often mentioned NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

One of the topics most frequently featured in Sputnik Srbija in 2018 was the assertion of long-lasting harmful effects from NATO's air campaign against the former Yugoslavia in 1999. The narrative claims that **the bombs used were made with depleted uranium that causes cancer, especially among those born after the bombing, and that the use of this chemical still has negative consequences on the local environment and the health of the people living there.** Scientists have long since



refuted these claims, but the narrative is still popular in the Serbian language information space; it was identified as one of the most shared sub-narratives in the local media.

According to the opinion poll, a large majority of respondents in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and BiH expressed belief in this statement. Furthermore, 75% of Serbian respondents and 55% of Montenegrin respondents are completely sure of the truthfulness of the claim. While the number of those who agree is much smaller in Albania (35%) and Kosovo (54%), there are sharp differences between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs in how they see this topic. For example, 76% of ethnic Serbs agree with the claim compared to only 52% of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

In Montenegro those who believe that the 1999 NATO air campaign has caused a rise in cancer cases are also more likely to believe in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and oppose NATO and EU membership. In North Macedonia this belief is more often shared by ethnic Macedonians and those who prefer Russia and China as their foreign policy partners. In BiH this view is more popular among residents of RS and the Brcko entity, and among ethnic Serbs and those who favour Russia as a foreign policy partner and who are prone to COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

EU-Related Narratives

Negative reporting and commentary about the EU is frequent on Sputnik Srbija.

Figure № 24 Attitudes to joining the EU

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"My COUNTRY should be committed to joining European Union." Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

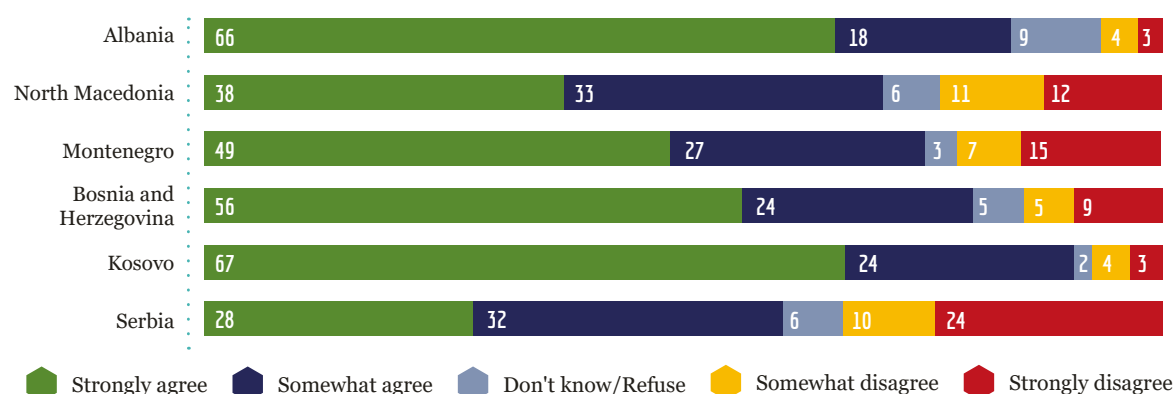
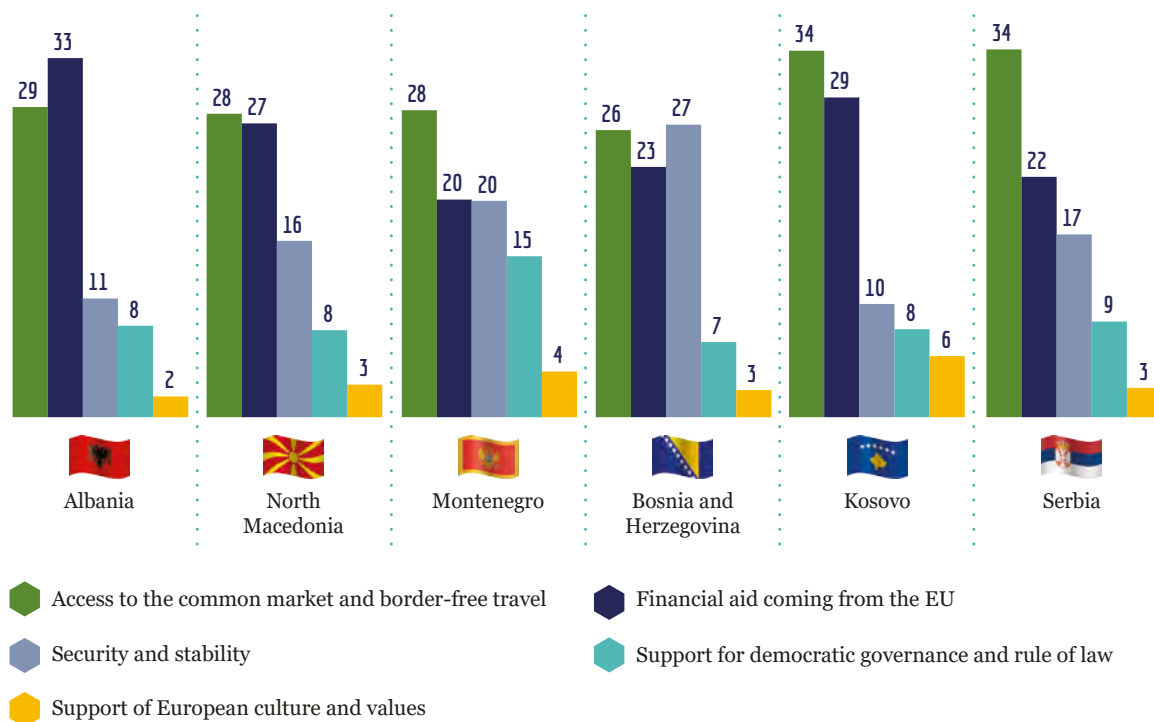


Figure № 25 Perception of EU membership benefits

What is the greatest benefit your country would receive from membership in the European Union?

Answers, like 'none', 'all of above', 'don't know', 'refusal' are not presented in the graph. Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



The main narrative states that **the EU is hegemonic, weak, and fragmented**. Sputnik Srbija also portrays **the EU as a decision-maker in the WB that does not consider local people's wishes and promises membership but does not deliver**.

The majority of people across the region think their country should strive to join the EU. This is most true for Kosovo and Albania where 91% and 84% respectively would like to join the EU. The majority of people in BiH (80%), Montenegro (76%), and North Macedonia (71%) are also in favour

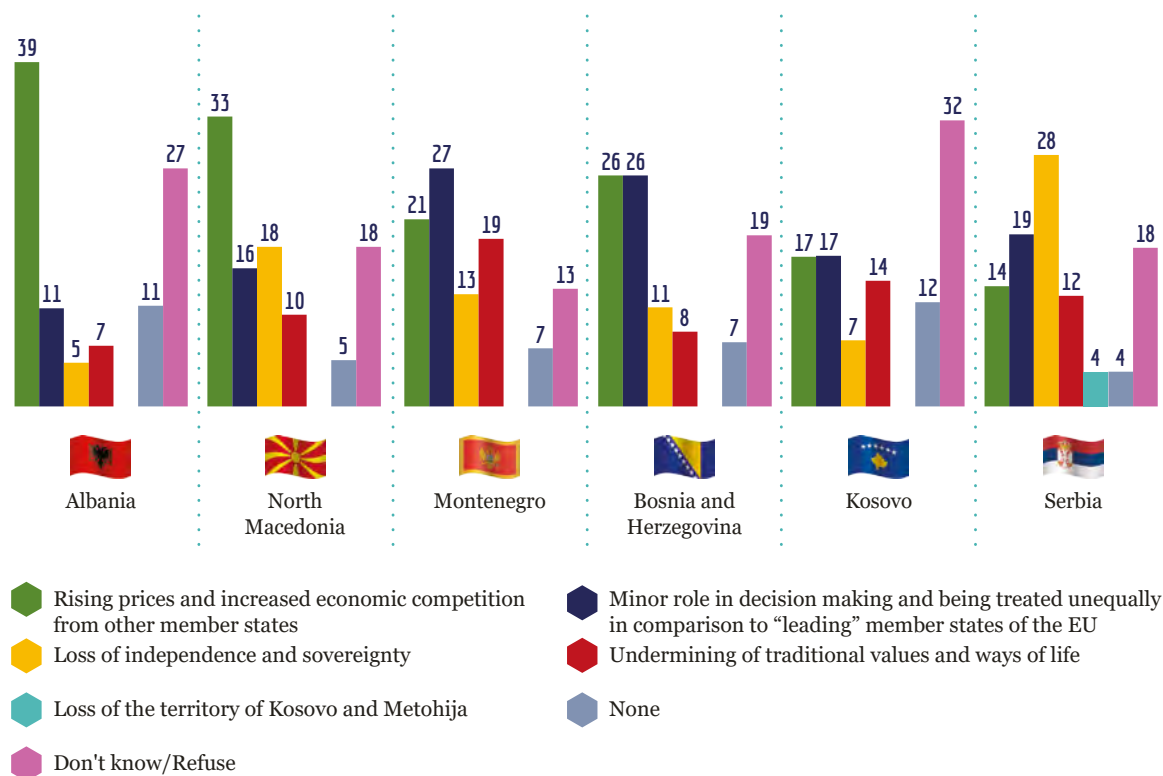
of becoming EU members. Support for EU membership (60%) is less prominent in Serbia, where the highest number of those 'strongly disagreeing' with the proposition was also recorded.

As mentioned above, the majority of people in all WB countries (to lesser extent in BiH and Serbia) assess their relationship with EU positively and see the EU as one of their main supporters, both financially and in the COVID-19 crisis. The EU is also among most popular answers in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and BiH when asking



Figure № 26 Perception of EU membership costs

In your opinion, what is the greatest cost your country would endure through its membership in the European Union? Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



about preferred foreign partner, less so in Kosovo and Serbia.

With the exception of Albania, WB people are in favour of EU accession primarily because they desire access to the common market and have the ability to travel freely throughout the EU. Albanians see the benefit of joining EU primarily in terms of financial aid. In BiH, most people expect that joining the EU would bring security and stability.

When asked about the cost of EU membership, respondents in Albania and

North Macedonia were most concerned with rising prices and increased economic competition. Another narrative frequently espoused by Sputnik Srbija is that the EU is aggressively hegemonic and that smaller countries do not have an equal say in the union. Compared to the others, respondents in Montenegro and BiH more frequently expressed concerns about being treated unequally in comparison to leading member states and having a smaller role in decision making. Serbian people see losing their independence and sovereignty as the main concern. Interestingly, one third (32%)

Figure № 27 Anti-EU narratives

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“The withdrawal of the UK from the EU is a sign that EU is slowly falling apart.”

Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

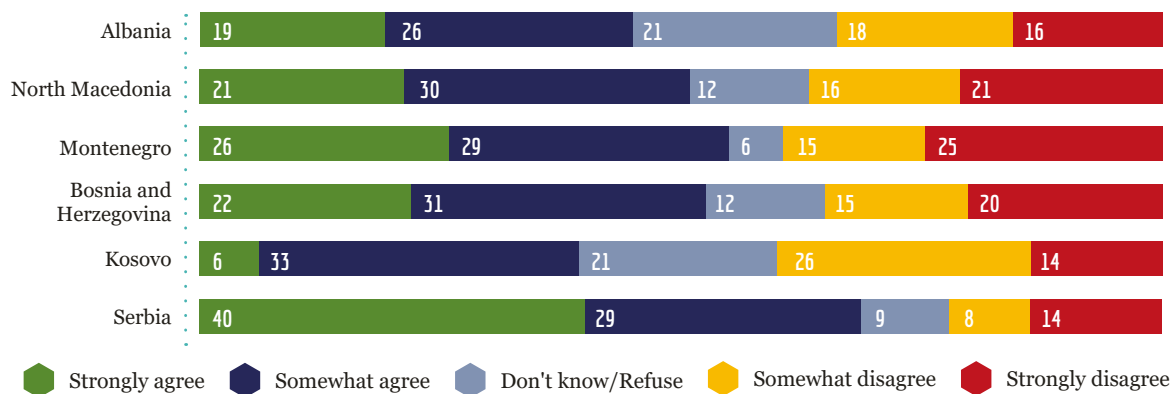
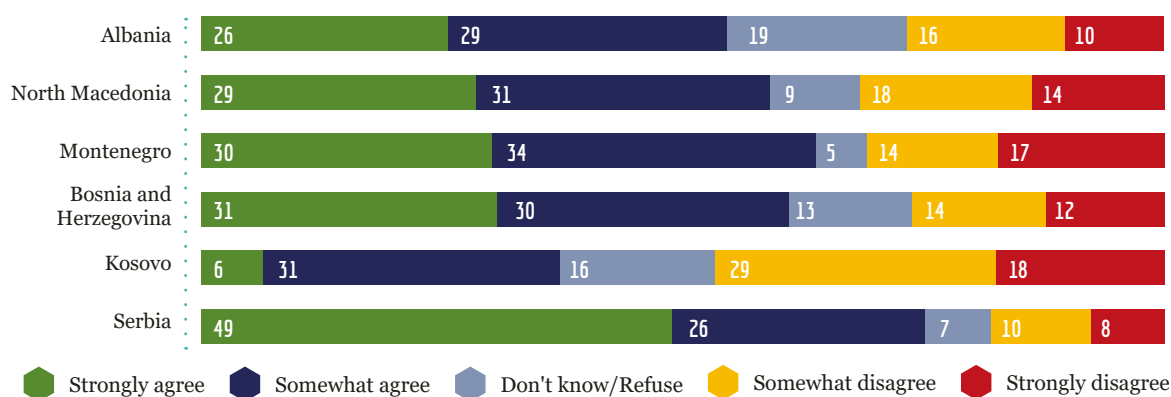


Figure № 28 Anti-EU narratives

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“The Corona virus crisis has shown that the EU is weak and fragmented and cannot help its members when needed.” Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000



of Kosovars could not give an answer to this question and 12% saw no cost to EU membership.

In BiH the belief that EU membership would lead to a loss of sovereignty is more popular among those who prefer Russia as a foreign policy partner and consume



international news. In Kosovo this statement is more supported by those who do not trust the media and are against EU and NATO membership. In Montenegro this view is shared by those who are against NATO membership and prefer Russia as a foreign policy partner. In North Macedonia this view is more favoured among ethnic Macedonians and those who disagree with NATO and EU membership but favour closer relations with Russia and China. Also, those who are prone to COVID-19 conspiracy theories are more likely to worry about sovereignty loss. In Serbia those who are likely to agree with this statement are younger than 60, are against ties with NATO and the EU, but favour Russia as foreign partner.

An analysis of the focus group discussions reveals similar preferences. While most respondents have a positive attitude towards the EU, none of the participants were very optimistic about joining the EU in the near future. Additionally, the relationship between respondents' countries and the EU is often described as complicated. Focus group participants acknowledged that joining the EU would inevitably lead to the loss of some autonomy, including the ability to make certain decisions independently. While this situation is perceived negatively in Kosovo, people in Albania welcome greater EU involvement in their country, and North Macedonians see loss of sovereignty as the price of EU membership. Montenegrins, on the other hand, are concerned that joining the EU might force them to cut ties with Russia and Serbia.

The narrative that **the EU is weak and fragmented** is also commonly promoted by Sputnik Srbija. Examples such as the migration crisis, Brexit, and disagreements among EU member states were offered as proof of a crumbling EU. According to the opinion poll, an assessment of the EU as weak and fragmented is widespread across the region.

People in the Western Balkans tend to agree that Brexit is a sign of inevitable EU disintegration. This view is most prominent in Serbia where 69% agree, and least prominent in Kosovo where only 39% agree with the statement.

In BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia this statement receives more support among those who are against EU membership but in favour of relations with Russia and China, as well as among those who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (except in Kosovo). Ethnic Serbs in BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro are also likely to be of the opinion that the EU is falling apart.

Furthermore, a majority of people across the region perceive the **EU as weak and divided in light of the COVID-19 pandemic**. This opinion is especially popular in Serbia (75%), but it is also shared by more than half of respondents in Montenegro, BiH, North Macedonia, and Albania.

Those who agree with the statement tend to be ethnic Serbs (in BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro), opposed to NATO and



EU membership, and in favour of Russia and China as foreign policy partners (in Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). People in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia who are likely to believe in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories are also likely to agree with the statement.

Focus group participants in Albania, Montenegro, and BiH mainly disagree that **the COVID-19 crisis has proven the**

EU to be divided and weak. According to Albanian respondents, each EU member state first tried to resolve its internal problems, while Montenegrins explain that poor initial organisation does not mean lack of money or lack of interest in solving problems. Younger Kosovo Albanians and younger Macedonians also agree with this opinion, while the older members of these populations along with Kosovo Serbs are more inclined to believe that the EU has grown weak over time.



” We are a land of misinformation.

—woman, Serbia, age group 19–40 years

Resilience to Mis- and Dis-information

A recent study carried out by the European Parliament, [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#), found that disinformation is ‘an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans’. The study further found that most of the disinformation is actually spread by internal actors, and not foreign actors. This is also in line with the study [Disinformation in the Online Sphere](#) carried out in 2019 by the BiH-based civil society organisation WHY NOT; the study concluded that completely fabricated stories are frequently promoted in the BiH media space. Two thirds of online disinformation was found to come from anonymous sources. The report also found that much of the disinformation in BiH was spread by media based in neighbouring countries. Sputnik Srbija was determined to be the only foreign-owned media outlet in this disinformation hub, appearing as one of the main “connectors” of media located in Serbia and those located in Republika Srpska.

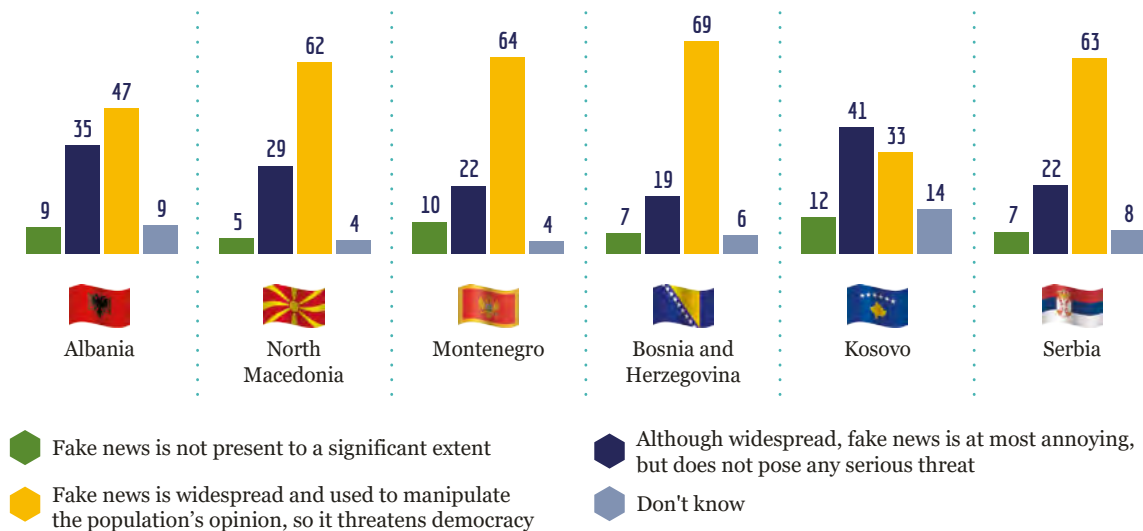
People in the WBs are aware of the problem of mis-/disinformation and the majority see it as widespread phenomenon employed to manipulate public opinion and therefore threatening democracy in their countries. An awareness of disinformation as a threat to democracy seems to be more prevalent in BiH, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia (over 60% shared this opinion), while in Albania (47%) and especially in Kosovo (33%) a significantly lower percentage of people agree.

It should be noted that the populations in Albania and Kosovo do not rule out the presence of fake news as this view is shared by about one in ten people in the Western Balkans overall—ranging from 5% in North Macedonia to 12% in Kosovo. More than one third of the populations in Kosovo (41%) and Albania (35%) believe that, although widespread, fake news is at most annoying but does not pose a serious threat. This opinion was far less common in the other Western Balkan



Figure № 29 Perception of the prevalence and influence of fake news

In your opinion, is fake news (false, inaccurate, or made-up news) currently a serious problem in your country? Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



countries (North Macedonia 29%, Serbia and Montenegro 22%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina 19%).

The term '**fake news**' was used in the public opinion poll and the focus group discussions to refer to both disinformation and misinformation. This was a conscious choice as the term 'fake news' is better-known across the region. However, the authors of this paper differentiate between 'disinformation', or false information spread deliberately, and 'misinformation', or false information spread without the intention to deceive.

When asked about the main sources of mis/disinformation, people mentioned the **internet, TV, and social media** as the channels most likely to spread inaccurate and even completely fabricated information.

Television is perceived as the leading source of mis- and disinformation in Serbia (54%) and in Albania (50%). In the other countries, the online news websites and portals are seen as the top source of inaccurate information, followed closely by social media.

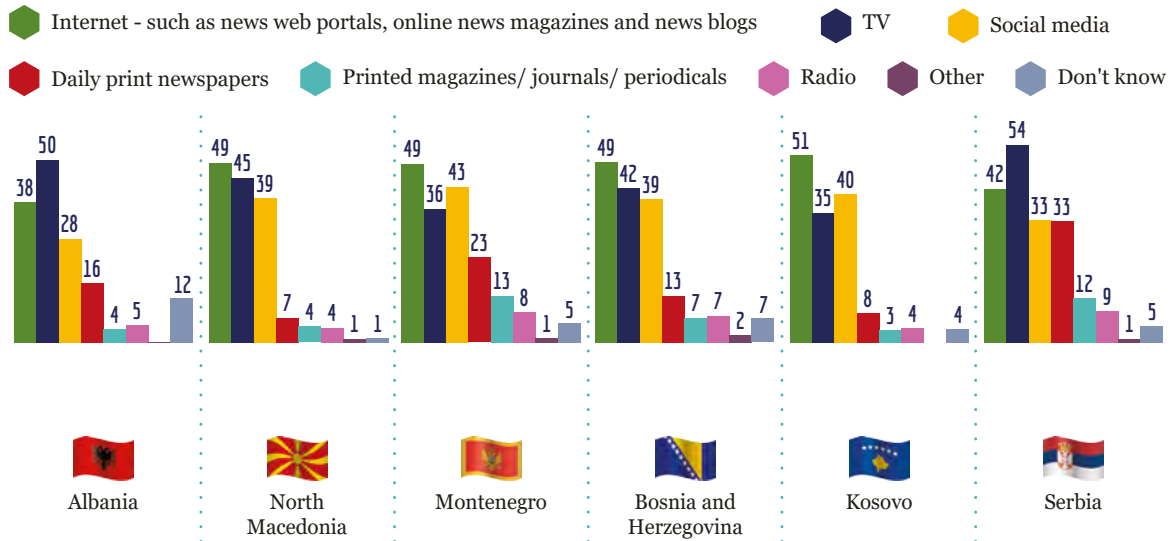
Focus group discussions revealed that disinformation is thought of as coming from the **media**, from **politicians**, and from **social media**. However, while the online media are seen as sharing disinformation to gain more



Figure № 30 Sources of inaccurate or made-up information

Where do you usually come across information that is not fully accurate or almost completely made-up? Base: those who have come across inaccurate or fabricated information in the media

n=5528, Albania n=878, North Macedonia n=940, Montenegro n=933, BiH n=927, Kosovo n=936, Serbia n=915.



viewers/traffic, TV channels are thought to spread disinformation to further political interests. Politicians themselves were also singled out as sources of disinformation. In BiH, for example, politicians are believed to be sharing skewed content to kindle ethnic tensions. Focus group participants in Serbia believed that the Serbian ruling party controls the media tightly, while in Albania participants expressed the belief that rules and legislation countering the spread of disinformation exist but are not implemented by the government.

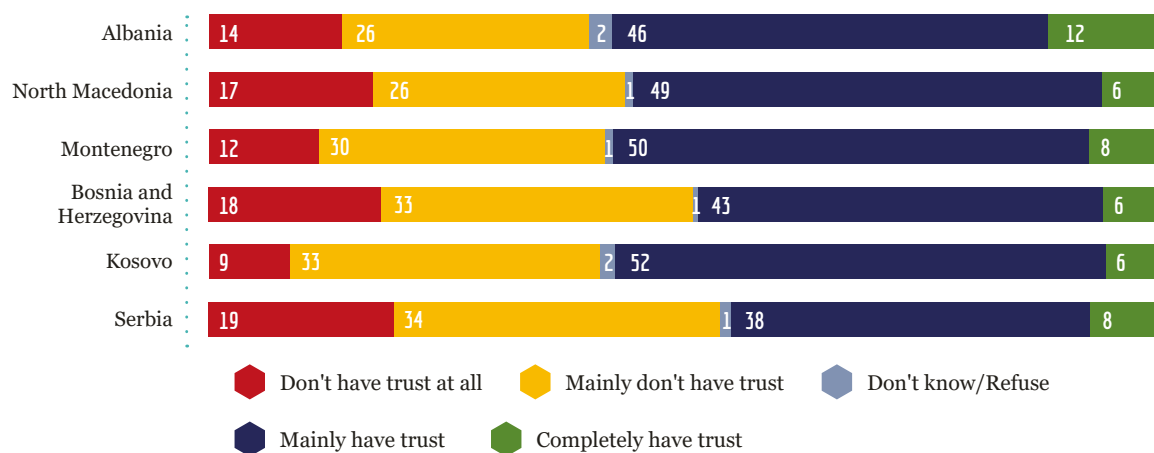
Respondents also mentioned social media as a source of disinformation. While North Macedonian participants emphasized Facebook's role in the spread

of disinformation, saying that the platform does not filter information and allows everyone to share content even if it is inaccurate, in Serbia participants singled out YouTube as the worst offender among the social media platforms.

In Montenegro, respondents also mentioned foreign influence but did not consider it to be as important as domestic actors sharing manipulative content. Montenegrins supportive of the previous government named Serbia as the largest source of disinformation aiming to destabilize Montenegro from the inside. The two big international players, Russia and NATO, were both seen as losing influence. Russia was thought to be most influential in the

Figure № 31 Public trust in the media

How much trust do you have that the media—newspapers, TV, radio, and online news sources—report the news fully, accurately, and fairly in your country? Base: Total target population n=6053, Albania n= 1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.



media a decade ago, in the golden age of coastline property sales, while NATO was seen as most influential prior to Montenegro's membership in the alliance and the recognition of Kosovo.

Trust in media

The trust in the media overall is pretty low in the WB region, especially in Serbia (53%) and BiH (51%). The number of respondents saying they had no trust in the media at all was also higher in Serbia (19%) and BiH (18%), closely followed by North Macedonia (17%). The share of the population that expressed trust in the media is almost identical in Albania (58%), Kosovo (57%), Montenegro (58%), and North Macedonia (56%), but it should be noted

that twice as many people in Albania (12%) say they have complete trust in media, compared to Kosovo and North Macedonia (both at 6%).

The focus group discussions revealed that people in Serbia, Montenegro, and BiH do not trust the media in general. They believe that the traditional media can be easily manipulated to publish stories containing political and even ethnic bias. In contrast, respondents from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia were more likely to think that TV is, for the most part, a trustworthy source of information. In North Macedonia particularly, respondents display distinct differences among age groups—younger people are more likely to say they trust information given on TV, whereas the elderly are highly suspicious of TV content. In



” Everyone working for the online news sources cares only about sensational headlines and clicks. Everything is over-accentuated. And the news they broadcast everywhere is not always confirmed or assessed in detail—it is taken for granted and presented raw.

—man, North Macedonia, age group 41–65 years

countries such as Serbia and Montenegro, where the media landscape is perceived as highly polarised, online media are seen as providing more options and live information, for example from Facebook Live videos.

Mechanisms for building resilience to mis/disinformation

Media literacy experts commonly recommend checking up on information sources and consuming information critically to build a society's resilience to mis-/disinformation. We used our study to determine how common the habits of checking news sources and verifying the validity of information are among WB populations.

The opinion poll showed that the number of people likely to look for or verify information sources when consuming news is higher than the number of those who do not verify or do it rarely. The majority of people in all countries responded that they sometimes, most of the time, or always pay attention to the source of the information when reading the news, however the number of people

who said they actively verify information sources was much smaller.

The people of Montenegro and Serbia stood out in comparison to the other WB countries; respondents stated that they always or most of the time pay attention to (58% and 49%, respectively) and look for (36% and 33%) the information source when reading/viewing media. A greater percentage of people in North Macedonia and Albania, however, admitted to rarely or never checking the source of their news compared to those who said they do: 37% vs 30% in Albania and 32% vs 30% in North Macedonia.

It is even more interesting to consider the number of people who admit they do not know where the information they consume comes from. According to our poll, one in five people in most WB countries is not sure where they are getting their information from or cannot find the news source most of the time or always (Albania 26%, Montenegro 22%, BiH 21%, Kosovo 21%, Serbia 21%), while in North Macedonia only 14% of the population agreed with the statement. Interestingly, the people in Serbia and

Figure № 32 Awareness of news and information sources

Please indicate how often the following statement applies to you. *“I pay attention to the sources used in the news when I am listening to or watching news in the media.”* Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000.

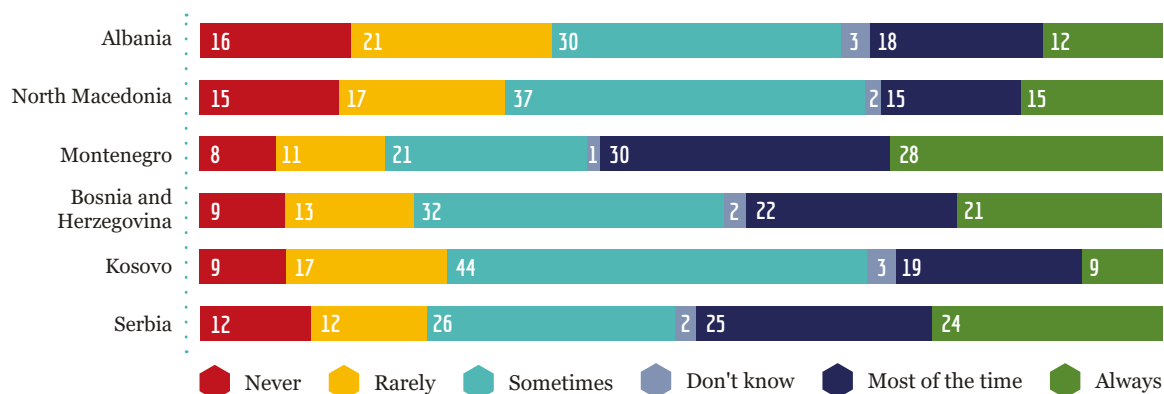
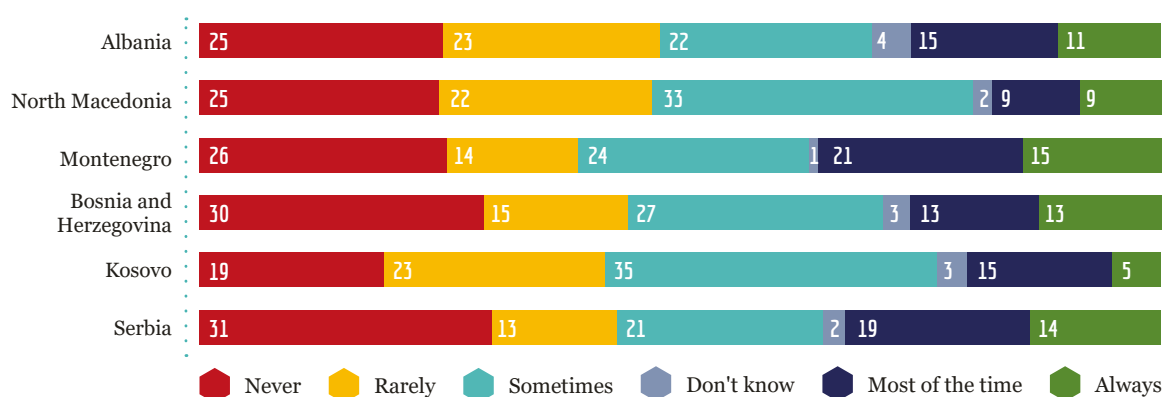


Figure № 33 Frequency of pro-active source checking

Please indicate how often the following statement applies to you: *“I search for and check the source of information when I am reading an article/post in newspapers, on web portals, or on social media platforms.”* Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000



Montenegro who stand out among the WB countries in terms of actively seeking out sources admit to struggling with identifying information sources.

We can assume that people from the BCMS-speaking countries (BiH, Serbia,

Montenegro) also seek out news sources more often due to the higher density (awareness) of inaccurate or fabricated news, as stated in the polls. Around four out of ten people in Montenegro (41%), Serbia (41%) and BiH (39%) stated that they frequently encounter information that is not



The StratCom COE report [Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media](#) found that in many cases BCMS news outlets do not indicate the source of the articles they publish. This makes it especially challenging to trace how narratives and disinformation spread across the region. Also, most of the online sites sharing Sputnik Srbija content did not overtly state the ownership of their outlet. However, more popular news sites, for example the Serbian news outlet B92, rarely cite Sputnik Srbija as the source of an article, thus making it difficult for their BCMS audiences to identify the real source of an article. The study demonstrated that a number of online outlets, for example Serbian-language tabloids and Sputnik Srbija, often re-publish information that has not been verified, can be misinformative, and that contain pro-Russian or anti-Western narratives.

Figure № 34 Awareness of inaccurate, made-up, or source-less information in the media

Please indicate how often the following statement applies to you. *"I am not sure where information comes from or can't find the news source."* Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000

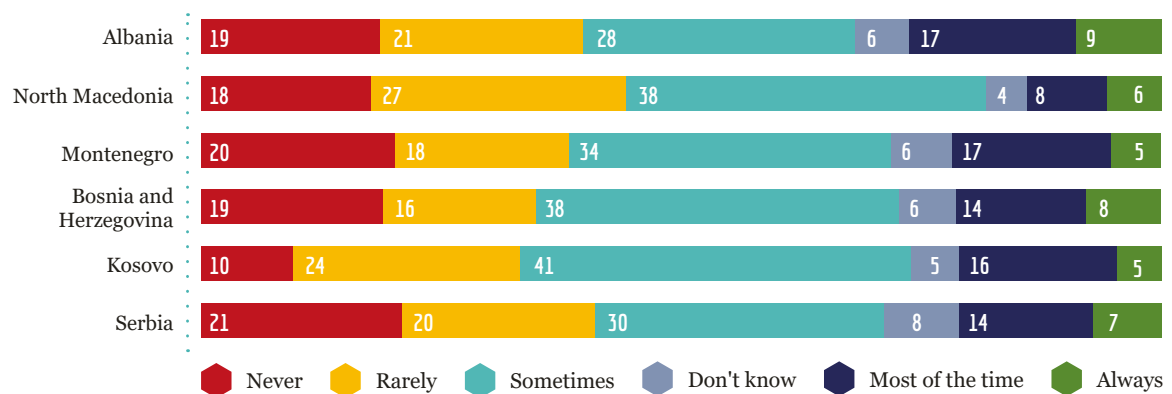


Figure № 35 Perception of the prevalence of inaccurate news

Please indicate how often the following statement applies to you. *"I come across information in the media that I think is not fully accurate."* Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000

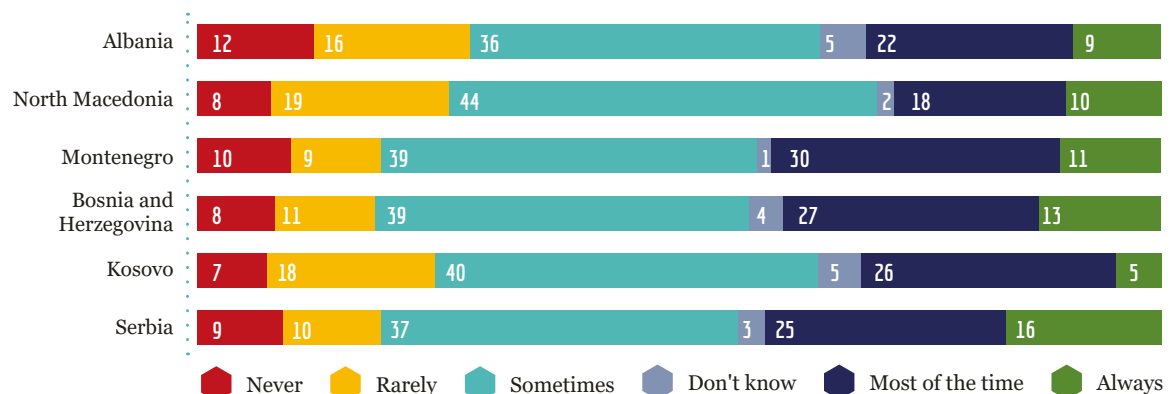
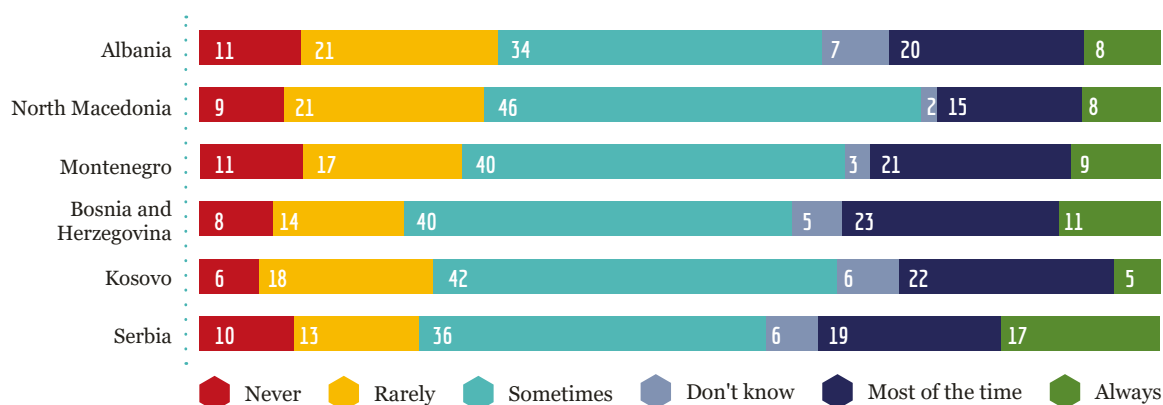


Figure № 36 Perception of the prevalence of fabricated news

Please indicate how often the following statement applies to you. *“I come across information in the media that I think is almost completely made up.”* Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000



fully accurate, and three out of ten people in Serbia (36%), BiH (33%), and Montenegro (30%) frequently encounter completely fabricated news. While not as pronounced, people in the remaining three countries face similar problems: 31% of Albanians, 31% of Kosovars, and 28% of North Macedonians stated that they frequently encounter news that is not fully accurate, while 28%, 27%, and 23% respectively frequently encounter entirely made-up stories.

The aforementioned findings indicate that Serbia, and to a lesser extent Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, face a number of issues related to the fake news phenomenon, and therefore are more active in seeking out information sources while consuming media content. In contrast, the people of North Macedonia, and to a lesser extent Kosovo and Albania, are less aware of the threat of fake news and therefore less likely to pay attention to information sources.

The low levels of trust in the media registered in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina are probably related to this situation.

Perceptions of foreign influence through the media

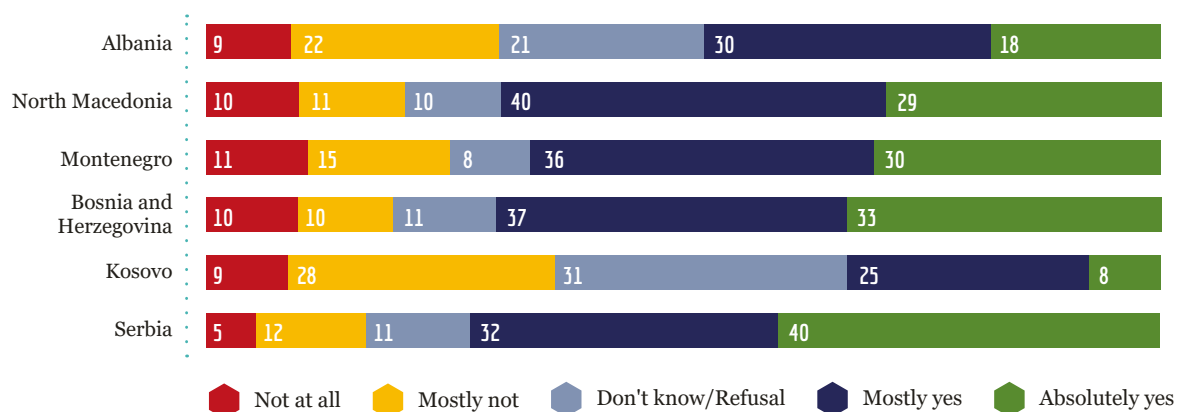
When asked about the role foreign actors play in influencing public opinion via the media in their respective countries, the majority of respondents in Serbia, BiH, North Macedonia, and Montenegro acknowledged that such influence exists. In Albania and especially in Kosovo the recognition of such influence was much lower. As mentioned before, in comparison to the other WB populations, Albanians and Kosovars were also less eager to perceive disinformation as a threat that manipulates public opinion.

Answers vary from country to country regarding foreign actors using the media to



Figure № 37 Perception of foreign influence on public opinion through the media

Do you think foreign actors are trying to influence public opinion in your country through the media? Base: Total target population. n=6053, Albania n=1000, North Macedonia n=1009, Montenegro n=1012, BiH n=1000, Kosovo n=1032, Serbia n=1000



influence public opinion. The **US** is seen as trying to influence opinion in all countries of analysis, but most often in North Macedonia (29.9%), BiH (22.4%), and Serbia (21.7%). The elderly Macedonians (aged 60+) and younger population (aged 16–44) in BiH more often see the US as the main foreign influencer. In Serbia those with primary education or less and with lower income levels also agree with this statement more often.

Russia was also named as being one of the foreign actors using the media to influence public opinion in all of the countries of analysis, receiving the highest number of mentions in Montenegro (16.1%) and BiH (11.7%). In Montenegro ethnic Bosniaks and Montenegrins were more likely to regard Russia as using the media to influence them than ethnic Serbs. Similarly, among ethnic Bosniaks and Croats in BiH the share of those who name Russia as a foreign actor

seeking influence through the media is three times higher than among ethnic Serbs. In Serbia Russia was also named among the top five influencers, especially among the well-educated and those with higher incomes.

Serbia was also among the most popular answers with regard to foreign media influence, especially in Montenegro (13%), Kosovo (13%), BiH (6,8%) and Albania (3,8%).

The EU and the West are more widely perceived as foreign actors using the media to influence public opinion in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and BiH. In North Macedonia the EU/European countries are named more often by those in the oldest age group (60+), those who prefer Russia and China as cooperation partners, and those who are prone to believing in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. In Montenegro, younger

Table № 3 Top foreign actors influencing public opinion through the media

If you agree that foreign actors are trying to influence public opinion in your country through the media, who would you name as the TOP 5 FOREIGN ACTORS? Base: Those who think that foreign actors are trying to influence public opinion in their country through the media. Total n=3604, Albania n=479, North Macedonia n=699, Montenegro n=669, Bosnia and Herzegovina n=696, Kosovo n=340, Serbia n=723.

	Albania	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Serbia
America / USA	1.9	29.9	12.5	22.4	2.1	21.7
Russia	3.1	6.5	16.1	11.7	7.3	5.5
Serbia	3.8	2	13.5	6.8	13	
The EU / European countries	0.6	10	7.4	7.3	1.2	5.9
Germany	1.1	5.8	2.6	4.9	0.4	9.9
West		0.7	6.7	1.8		3.1
Foreign Government /Politicians / Embassies	0.6	3.5	3.2	3	0.7	3.5
England / United Kingdom	0.1	1.5	2.1	2.2		6.1
Croatia		0.2	0.7	5.5		1.4
Political Factors / Politicians	1.7	0.5	3.8	1	1.4	2.7
Surrounding countries	1.5	1.4	2.4	2.8	0.7	2.3
France	0.2	2.8	0.7	0.6	3.5	1.3
(Foreign) intelligence agencies	0.1	0.8	1	0.8	1.7	2.7
Don't know/Refusal	83.8	56.3	42.6	51.6	74.5	52.1

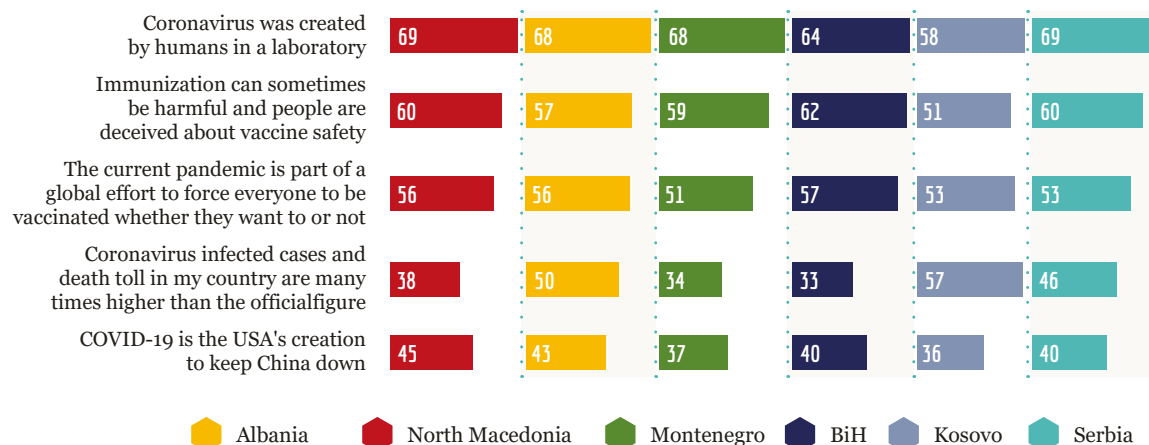
people (aged 16–29 and 30–44) with higher levels of education and income tended to name EU/European countries, as did ethnic Serbs. The older (aged 45+) age group in

Montenegro and again of Serbian ethnicity are more likely to think the West seeks to influence them through the media. In BiH, those with a household income between 501



Figure № 38 Views regarding the coronavirus pandemic

Different people have different opinions on the following topics. Please indicate to what extent you consider the opinions below to be true. Base: Total target population Answers shown: % PROBABLY TRUE & DEFINITELY TRUE



and 800 EUR, who do not trust the media, and who support the country communicating but not cooperating more with NATO are also more likely to think the EU is influencing their public opinion through the media.

Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Croatia were also mentioned among foreign actors exerting influence through the media in the WB region. Interestingly, among those who believe their opinion has been influenced by foreign actors via media, almost half of respondents did not know or refused to name a specific foreign actor, especially in Albania (84%).

Misinformation and COVID-19

The use of influence techniques such as the spread of polarising narratives and

of dis- and misinformation erodes trust among members of a society and makes them more susceptible to hostile influence. Crisis situations can be particularly useful testing ground for finding out how audiences behave, whom they trust, and how susceptible they might be to various messages. The COVID-19 pandemic can therefore be used as a test case to identify vulnerabilities among Western Balkan populations with regard to dis- and misinformation.

According to the opinion poll findings, at least one in three people across the region believes different unverified claims about COVID-19. A majority of people in North Macedonia and Serbia (69%) believe that COVID-19 was developed in a laboratory, closely followed by Albania and Montenegro (68%). Slightly fewer, but still more than half

of people in BiH (64%) and Kosovo (58%) also believe the virus to be manmade.

The distribution of answers was similar when people were asked if the vaccine is safe and if the pandemic is part of a bigger plan for mass immunization. Three out of five in BiH (62%), North Macedonia (60%), Serbia (60%), and Montenegro (59%) think that the vaccines might be harmful, and that people have been deceived about their safety. Similarly, 57% of Albanians and 51% of Kosovars believe that vaccination is not entirely safe. Across the region, more than half believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is part of a global effort to promote mass vaccination—from 57% in BiH to 51% in Montenegro.

Focus group discussions revealed that very few respondents who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories can point to a source for their information. In Serbia, the younger population say they've seen it online—on social media, including YouTube—while older people mention online portals

and news websites, and say they have gotten their information from friends and acquaintances. In Albania and Kosovo, respondents say that their governments did not provide transparent and clear information regarding the crises, which pushed them towards alternative sources. In Serbia, respondents also mentioned the official institutions as a possible source of disinformation about COVID-19.

Such high percentages of people across the region who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and other unverified claims, coupled with their low levels of trust in the media indicates a vulnerability that can potentially be exploited by internal and external actors. When populations are not in the habit of fact-checking and are thus susceptible to unverified information, they provide fertile ground for hostile actors to push disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories that erode trust, polarise societies, and potentially influence state-level decision-making.



Conclusion: Susceptibility to Russian Influence

This is the final summary report of a two-year research project conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence aiming to understand Russia's influence in the Western Balkan information space. The research has shown that Russia favours the influence tools of subversion and co-optation, exploiting existing vulnerabilities and tensions to sow further division in the region. In pursuit of these goals, Russia promotes disinformation and anti-Western narratives in the Western Balkan information space.

This was determined by (1) analysing the narrative content of Sputnik Srbija; (2) tracking anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija in the local media; and (3) researching audiences' perceptions of and susceptibility to these narratives.

While it is impossible to make a direct link between the narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija and people's attitudes and perceptions, it is possible to identify a certain level of susceptibility to some of the most common narratives promoted by Kremlin-affiliated media, including those that portray NATO and the EU negatively.

Most Western Balkan populations display a pro-Western orientation, while Russia is mentioned as favoured foreign policy partner more often in Serbia and Montenegro—a finding that has been supported by previous polling data. However, this study shows that local audiences tend to agree with Russian narratives that portray the West (the EU and NATO) in a negative light.

A common narrative promoted by Sputnik Srbija claims that both **East and West battle over their own interests in the Western Balkans at the expense of local residents**. For example, pieces published in Sputnik Srbija report that the failure of the Dayton Agreement has caused BiH to disintegrate, while in North Macedonia the country's name change agreement is a continuing source of conflict; Western powers are blamed for their role in both of these events.

A majority of people across the region agree that the fate of their countries is indeed decided by powerful external players. According to focus group interviews, many of them—especially Albanians, Kosovo Albanians, young Macedonians, and Bosnians—do not see this negatively but believe their countries need help from the outside to develop and thrive. Furthermore, in Albania and in Kosovo this narrative is especially supported by those who also support EU membership. On the other



” Most Western Balkan populations display a pro-Western orientation {...} However this study shows that local audiences tend to agree with narratives that portray the West (the EU and NATO) in a negative light.

hand, in Serbia, BiH, and Montenegro this narrative receives more support from those who express either pro-Russia or anti-EU/NATO stances and are more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracies.

The belief that external actors exert influence on domestic affairs is also quite prevalent. A majority of the population in Serbia, BiH, North Macedonia, and Montenegro agree that ‘foreign actors influence public opinion via the media’ in their countries, most often naming the US (in North Macedonia, BiH, and Serbia), Russia (in Montenegro, BiH, and Kosovo), and Serbia (in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro) as the most influential foreign powers in the information environment.

In connection to this narrative, Sputnik Srbija also promotes the narrative that an **imminent conflict is soon to ravage the Western Balkans**. However, this assumption is not as well received. Across the region, populations assess the security situation positively, both in their home countries and in the region as a whole and see the probability of an armed conflict re-emerging as being very low. The only

country where more than one third of the population believes that an armed conflict is likely within the next five years is Serbia (36%). Also, although respondents from Kosovo and Serbia believe an armed conflict is unlikely in the near future, they still feel threatened by the possibility of a conflict between their two countries.

Please note that perceptions vary from country to country but, except for Kosovo and Serbia, most of the population related questions about security threats to domestic issues rather than to external attack. In this context, the issues most often mentioned were economic instability, civil unrest, immigration, corruption, and organised crime, as well as ethnic (in North Macedonia, BiH), religious (Montenegro) and political cleavages (Serbia).

The Kremlin and its affiliated media promote Russia as the **preserver of traditional values as opposed to liberal Europe**. The majority of people living in Serbia (69%) and more than half the populations of BiH, North Macedonia, and Montenegro agree that the West seeks to destroy their national identity



and traditional values. Furthermore, this narrative is well-received in some countries not only because of the cultural ties among Slavic countries, but also because of high support for the authoritarian style of leadership and for traditionalist values, for example negative attitudes to immigration and refugees.

The Kremlin also promotes narratives that portray **the NATO alliance as weak and divided, aggressive towards Russia, and providing no benefits for newer members**. According to Sputnik Srbija, one of the negative consequences of NATO membership (particularly for newest members Montenegro and North Macedonia) is that it includes costly financial obligations that can endanger a country's economy. Indeed, budgetary obligations are among the biggest worries for people in the region; the narrative linking NATO membership and 'economy endangerment' is especially prevalent in Serbia and Montenegro, where the largest share of the population believes that NATO membership is bad for the country's economy and 'expensive budgetary obligations' was the most-often mentioned negative consequence of NATO membership in Albania and North Macedonia.

Focus group participants mostly assessed NATO's impact on their country's economy positively and did not agree with the narrative that NATO membership poses about dangers to their country's economy. However, focus group responses revealed a

lack of understanding about what financial commitments NATO membership actually entails, which may explain the relatively high level of concern regarding this issue in NATO member countries of the Western Balkans.

However, despite concern for the financial aspect, Western Balkan populations (except for Serbia) mostly assess NATO positively and see it as the guarantor of stability and security in the region. Respondents also did not agree with the narrative, often promoted by Sputnik Srbija, that NATO is weak and fragmented and has a policy of aggressive enlargement in the Western Balkans.

The view of NATO as aggressor is still prevalent in Serbia and among Serbs in BiH, Montenegro and Kosovo. Focus group interviews reveal that this negative attitude to NATO is still very much tied to NATO's 1999 air campaign against Yugoslavia. Serbs are more likely than others to perceive NATO as aggressively expanding its membership, and that membership resulting in loss of independence and sovereignty. This perception correlates well with the Kremlin's narrative that the Western Balkan region is among the last remaining areas of political neutrality in Europe, which would be lost if WB countries join the Alliance.

A narrative appearing often in articles published by Sputnik's Srbija claims that **depleted uranium used in NATO's air campaign in former Yugoslavia in 1999 has led to a surge in cancer cases**.

Although a number of investigations carried out by NATO and other independent bodies have disproven this claim, the narrative continues to be widely promoted by Serbian politicians and the Serbian media. This claim is believed to be true by majority of people living in WB countries (with less agreement among Albanians and Kosovars), and demonstrates how disinformation can have long-term effects in Serbian public discourse and lasting influence across the whole region.

An **anti-EU narrative** promoted by Sputnik Srbija describes the **union as weak, fragmented, and hegemonic**. One of the most frequently cited examples of division is the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit).

A majority of people living in WB countries see the EU as being among the top foreign policy partners for the region; they recognise the financial support the EU has provided and the help it has given to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. In all WB countries, a majority of the population would like their country to become an EU member.

Contrary to the support expressed for the European path, an image of the EU as weak and divided remains widespread in almost every Western Balkan country (apart from Kosovo). People in Serbia (75%) and Montenegro (64%) agreed far more often than others that the COVID-19 crisis showed that the EU is divided and weak and cannot help its members in times of need. Similarly, the belief that Brexit is a sign that

the Union is slowly falling apart is also most widespread in Serbia (69%) and is supported by more than half of the populations of Montenegro, BiH, and North Macedonia.

Residents of the Balkans are mainly concerned that EU membership would bring increased prices and economic competition (Albania and North Macedonia), and that their countries would be treated unequally by other, 'leading members' of the EU (Montenegro and BiH). The population of Serbia is more concerned with a loss of sovereignty and independence as side-effects of joining the EU and NATO—a narrative often promoted by Kremlin.

Susceptible audiences

No specific age group was determined to have more favourable attitudes towards Russia and the narratives it promotes, however several trends were identified by the research.

On a country-wide level, the residents of **Serbia** expressed the highest levels of support for the tested anti-Western narratives, while in **Albania and Kosovo** those narratives were the least likely to gain traction. NATO members **North Macedonia** and **Montenegro** were shown to be largely divided on anti-Western stances, and the same is true of **BiH**. The people of Serbia demonstrated more favourable attitudes towards Russia than the rest of the region with regard to such topics



as preferred foreign policy partner, main foreign supporter, factors of peace, stability and security and assessment of current relations.

At a more granular level, **ethnic Serbs** across the region (in BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro) are more supportive of anti-Western narratives and are more likely to prefer closer relations with Russia and China than with NATO and the EU.

Those who are more prone to **believe in conspiracy theories (tested on COVID-19 statements)** were also shown to be more likely to believe in Kremlin narratives. This points to another vulnerability that has been widely discussed in numerous papers on the Western Balkans, namely that low levels of media literacy and critical thinking skills provide fertile ground for malign influences.

Narratives and foreign policy preferences

It is not surprising that agreement with anti-Western narratives is prevalent among those who have expressed **negative attitudes towards NATO and EU membership**. The same correlation can also be found among people who **favour Russia and/or China as foreign policy partners** for their country. The research data also confirmed a correlation between preferred foreign policy course (Western vs Eastern) and preferred foreign policy partners. For example, those

who oppose membership in the EU and NATO usually prefer Russia or China as they believe an Eastern partner would best serve their country's interests in the future.

While this research project focused primarily on Russia, China kept emerging as a favoured partner across the region (except in Albania and Kosovo). Based on the public opinion polls, China was the top preferred foreign policy partner in Serbia and was perceived as Serbia's top financial benefactor overall and as providing the most aid during the COVID-19 crisis; the same was true to a lesser extent also in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and BiH. Although China's involvement in the Western Balkan countries has increased considerably in the past years, it has not been recognised as exerting an influence on local public opinion as the US, Serbia, Russia, the EU, NATO, and Germany are. It seems that China and its activities are largely viewed in a positive or neutral light, and its intentions in the region are currently not being questioned and are not perceived as threatening.

Resilience to mis/disinformation

The public opinion polls showed that people in the Western Balkans (although to a lesser extent in Albania and Kosovo) mostly recognise mis- and disinformation as a threat that can manipulate public opinion; many people pay attention to the sources of information they consume, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro. However, people



from Serbia, Montenegro, and BiH also reported encountering false information in the media more often.

The opinion polls showed high susceptibility to false claims and conspiracy theories made with regard to COVID-19. At least one in three respondents in the Western Balkan countries overall believed in all of the unverified claims about COVID-19 and vaccination that were tested in the study. For example, around 2/3 of the population in each country was ready to believe that 'the Coronavirus was created by humans in a laboratory', that 'there is no need for people to be vaccinated', and that 'the Covid-19 vaccines are unsafe'. At least 1/3 of the population in each country was ready to believe that 'COVID-19 was US creation to keep China down', a claim often promoted by Russia.

There is a certain correlation between low trust in the media and susceptibility to COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, our research also identified a link between support for COVID-19 conspiracies and

support for anti-Western narratives. The focus group discussions also revealed that the media are often perceived as working on behalf of political interests.

One of the main conclusions of the European Parliament's [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans](#) study is that there is a gap in the severity of disinformation across the Balkans and the attempts to counteract it. Furthermore, the [2021 Media Literacy Index](#) ranked the Western Balkan countries as the least resilient among 35 European countries to the 'post-truth phenomenon by employing media freedom, education and interpersonal trust indicators'. North Macedonia ranked last; Albania, BiH, and Montenegro were also among the bottom five countries having the lowest media literacy levels; and Serbia ranked 29th.

While numerous initiatives have been aimed at countering disinformation, promoting fact-checking, and capacity building for the media, few initiatives have taken steps to improve the media literacy as a whole among Western Balkan countries.



APPENDIX 1 – METHODOLOGY

Media Landscape Analysis

Media Landscape Analysis is desk analysis of relevant Audience Measurement Data that provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of local Media Markets (including the volume and structure of media audiences). This analysis of the media habits of defined audiences is focused on impartial metrics—the volume and structure of the media audiences. For this purpose, all media in the region (by country and territory) are evaluated using conventional media metrics that are standard for communication and media planning. Simply put, all media types (traditional and modern) and media outlets in the six Western Balkan countries are observed with regard to the following audience measurement metrics: Reach (RCH), Coverage (CCH), Average Readership Issue (AIR), Ratings (RTG), and Average Time Spent (ATS), taking into account the socio-demographic characteristics of their audiences.

In the case of analysis of audience in the six Western Balkan countries studied (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Albania, and Kosovo) all available resources regarding audience measurement systems and tools were engaged, especially those considered to be “market currency”. For this purpose, several

different Audience Measurement Systems/ Models, that have been recognised in specific countries as the most valid, trusted, and relevant for a specific media category, were implemented, including:

1. **The Nielsen TV Audience Measurement System** is a TV audience measurement system based on a national/representative sample of households in a given country, where each specific member of a household represents a specific target group. The Nielsen system is considered a passive measurement system: Portable People Meters (measurement devices) are distributed to participating households to track which TV frequency (channel) is turned-on and for how long. The system records all necessary TV viewing metrics.
2. **The IPSOS MediaPuls Audience Measurement System** is based on simple methodology (CATI – Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) of day-after-recall on non-TV media usage for daily print, radio, and magazines. This very robust, traditional methodological approach uses large samples to



measure the volume and structure of traditional media traffic. A national-representative sample for a population aged 12 and older is between 30,000 and 50,000 respondents for a period of one year, depending on the country.

3. **The IPSOS Dotmetric Online Audience Measurement System** is based on three components: the measurement of traffic on specific (selected) internet sites and portals (site-centric); a survey conducted every month on a national-representative sample of 1000 respondents (aged 12+), and a pop-up survey of visitors to specific web sites and portals. This tripartite combination of active and passive measurement provides a precise picture of the total internet audience

per country, provides an estimation of unique users (visitors) to each specific site and portal in the measurement system, and records their socio-demographic profile, and other selected metrics (page views; page visits; average time spent).

4. **The IPSOS CATI Media Omnibus System** is based on day-after-recall methodology, conducted on a national-representative sample of 1680 respondents aged 18+ (80 respondents per day over the course of three weeks) using the CATI technique of data collection. The sample is aimed at examining media consumption habits (TV, radio, daily newspapers, internet, magazines) and can be filtered for age, gender, education, region, and settlement type.

Table 1. Overview of AUM tools used in each country

DATA SOURCE	COUNTRY					
	Serbia	North Macedonia	B&H	Albania	Kosovo	Montenegro
Nielsen TAM (TV ratings)	✓	✓	✓			
IPSOS CATI MediaOmnibus (media type: TV, radio, print, Internet)		✓		✓	✓	✓
IPSOS MediaPuls & dotmetrics (media type: print, radio, on-line)	✓		✓			



Quantitative public opinion research

A quantitative public opinion survey was carried out on a representative sample of approximately 1000 citizens of the six Western Balkan countries, aged 16 years or older. Data collection was performed during August 2020 using a structured questionnaire; the duration of each interview was approximately 25 minutes.

Mixed mode data collection methods: Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI, telephone interviewing) and Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI, online interviewing); online interviewing was realized on approximately 10% of the total sample in each country (except in Kosovo where 100% of interviews were conducted by telephone) targeting the younger urban population (aged 18–44 years), i.e., those who are hard to reach by phone.

A brief overview of the methodology

Sample universe: population of six Western Balkan countries, aged 16+

Target population size:

- Albania: 2.320.502
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: 2.938.923
- Kosovo: 1.279.062
- Montenegro: 501.047
- North Macedonia: 1.700.987
- Serbia: 5.939.983

Sampling frame: Data from the Telephone Directory (electronic) with information regarding geographical location (region and type of settlement) for the telephone survey, and data from IPSOS' online panel for the online survey.

Type of sample: Two-stage stratified representative random sample with quota selection of respondents.

Sample size: At least 1000 respondents in each country.

Stratification by:

- Region (official statistical regions in each country)
- Type of settlement based on administrative definitions (urban or rural)

Quotas: By gender and age (and ethnicity in North Macedonia) were ensured.

Weighting: Post-stratification regarding region, type of settlement, gender, age, education, voting behaviour in the last parliamentary elections was performed for all countries; ethnicity was included for North Macedonia, Kosovo, BiH, and Montenegro.

Method of data collection: mixed mode (telephone and online).



Sample Description

The survey was conducted on the basis of two-stage random representative stratified samples with quota selection of respondents. The strata were defined based on region and type of settlement (two categories: urban or rural). Within households the respondents were selected according to the corresponding quotas defined by age (four categories: 16–29, 30–44, 45–59, and 60+) and gender (two categories: male or female).

Sample Procedure

Stratification. Population data was used to carry out the initial stratification. Since national representative samples were planned, two variables were used for creating strata and estimating its size and proportion in the sample - stratum (regions) and urban/rural. This way, sample was stratified in two dimensions. The size of each subgroup of sub-sample (defined by region and type of settlement) was proportional to size of population strata they represented.

After the creation of the parameters for the strata and an estimation their size (i.e., the determination of a representative sample in proportion to each population studied), respondents were distributed to the strata using the defined criteria. The percentage of respondents allocated per stratum and type of settlement was proportional to its size, i.e., the percentage of respondents in a sample stratum was equivalent to the

percentage of citizens in the population it was to represent. In this way, we were able to match the characteristics of the sample strata to the data we got from Census/Statistical Estimates of the Population.

The telephone survey:

First stage units were households. Data collection software was used to randomly select households from a phone database based on quotas created in accordance with the population data for each country.

Second stage units were respondents within selected household. Within the selected households, a respondent was further selected according to the corresponding quotas for each stratum. More specifically, the quotas were created to reflect the gender and age structure of the population of a given stratum; in North Macedonia ethnicity was also a criterion.

The online survey:

First stage units were the respondents. Respondents were selected from IPSOS' online panel using quotas defined by region, type of settlement, age, and gender; in North Macedonia ethnicity was also a criterion.

Qualitative research

To better understand the results obtained



in the quantitative opinion poll, a qualitative study was also carried out. Four online focus group discussions were conducted in each country with members of the general population aged 16 to 65 years. Groups were conducted in October, using the MS Teams platform. The moderator and the participants all took part remotely but ensured their own privacy at home or in the office during the course of the discussions. Each group consisted of one moderator and four participants; two reserve participants were recruited for each session.

Participant screening criteria

The basic criteria considered when recruiting Focus Group participants were gender, age, education, region—place of residence, and ethnicity (socio-demographic criteria). The groups were mixed in terms of gender, education, and place of residence, but divided according to age.

Gender: An equal number of men and women were recruited for each group.



Age:¹⁶ The Focus Groups were conducted with people aged 16 to 65 years, divided into three age categories: 16–18, 19–40, and 41–65, except for in BiH where only two age groups were formed: 19–40 and 41–65.

Education: People with secondary and higher education were included, as our previous experience showed that people with lower education might be poorly informed about



our topics of interest and might have more difficulty elaborating their attitudes.

Region—place of residence: Each group included participants from different regions of the country. Furthermore, participants were recruited from different municipalities and settlements within targeted regions (urban, suburban, and rural).

Ethnicity: The structure of the FGDs in terms of the participants age and ethnicity is presented in the table below.

Country	Age	Ethnic groups
 Albania	16–18	Albanians
	19–40	Albanians
	19–40	Albanians
	41–65	Albanians
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	19–40	Croats and Bosniaks (in FBiH)
	41–65	Croats and Bosniaks (in FBiH)
	19–40	Serbs (in Republika Srpska);
	41–65	Serbs (in Republika Srpska);
 Kosovo	16–18	Kosovar Albanians
	19–40	Kosovar Albanians
	19–40	Serbs
	41–65	Kosovar Albanians
 North Macedonia	16–18	Macedonians
	19–40	Macedonians
	19–40	Albanians
	41–65	Macedonians



Country	Age	Ethnic groups
 Montenegro	16–18	Ethnically mixed groups
	19–40	Montenegrin
	19–40	Serbian
	41–65	Ethnically mixed groups
 Serbia	16–18	Serbs
	19–40	Serbs
	19–40	Serbs
	41–65	Serbs

Other criteria for selecting participants included:

*Awareness about political and social issues:*¹⁷ All participants followed the news and were interested in political and social issues in their country and on the international political scene.

Attitude towards NATO and the EU: People with moderately positive or moderately negative attitudes towards NATO and the EU were included. People with extreme attitudes, either positive or negative, as well as those neutral/undecided were not recruited at all. Furthermore, efforts were made to include a mix of participants with moderately positive or moderately negative attitudes towards EU, and those with moderately positive or moderately negative attitudes towards NATO for all groups.

Other excluding criteria: People who work in marketing and/or media, who were active members of some political party/organization or were affiliated with a non-governmental organization were not recruited. People who had participated in group discussions related to some political/social topic organized by a research company in the last six months were also excluded.









Endnotes

- 1 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia were analysed in the framework of the project.
- 2 [Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment](#), Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2020.
- 3 The report will refer to 'Russia', when talking about country's strategic policy and actions but use the word 'Kremlin' when talking about narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija. By writing 'the Kremlin's narratives' instead of 'Russia's narratives' we are indicating that dissemination of the narratives in question is facilitated by the Government of the Russian Federation (the Kremlin) and Sputnik is one of state funded agencies being used to promote them.
- 4 Bechev, D., [Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans](#), Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2019.
- 5 Doncheva, T., [Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media](#), Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2020, p. 7.
- 6 Based on a series of interviews conducted between June and August of 2019 with experts from the region.
- 7 The exception is BiH, where people are almost equally interested in all news—local, national, regional, and international.
- 8 The opinion polls were conducted in August - September, 2020
- 9 Doncheva, T., [Tracking Russia's Narratives](#).
- 10 According to Gemius's online media measurement methodology, the number of 'real users' represents real people consuming online content, not the number of cookies registered. Cookies do not reflect the actual number of internet users because, for example, one person may use several browsers, one device may be shared by several people; cookie deletion is also a growing problem for statisticians and certain operating systems (iOS) do not accept cookies. See: <https://audience.gemius.com/en/>
- 11 Both narratives were tested during the study, please see p.23 and p.31
- 12 [Western Balkans Regional Poll, February 2, 2020 – March 6, 2020](#), conducted by the International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR).
- 13 [Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment](#), Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2020, Executive Summary.
- 14 This was an open question, where respondents were asked to name the most important threats that came to mind. Only the top five threats from each country are summarized in the table. 'Don't know/refusal' counted only in case when the respondent could not name any threat or did not want to answer the question.
- 15 Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., Gjuzelov, B., [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#), European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, 2020, p. 92; Zivanovic, M., 'Russian 'Night Wolves' Bikers Support Montenegro Church Protests', [Balkan Insight](#) 17 January 2020; Milosevich, M., 'Russia's Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro', CSIS, 25 September, 2020; EU vs Disinfo, 'Disinfo: Deep State Sponsors Montenegro In The Seizure Of The Property Of The Serbian Orthodox Church', 2020.
- 16 When comparing the findings of the quantitative public opinion research with the qualitative research, it is important to keep in mind that the age range for focus group participants (19–65) was somewhat different than the age range for respondents to the public opinion poll (16–90).
- 17 The participants were chosen in this way to ensure a higher quality of findings and to gain better insight into the topics of interest. However, this means that the findings obtained reflect the views of the more informed and educated part of the population.
- 18 Respondents were asked to pick from a pre-selected list of the countries. The list of the foreign actors was developed based on the findings of previous opinion polls conducted in the region.





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