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” Sputnik Srbija is the most popular Russian state - sponsored media outlet in the Western Balkans, and content features a range of local media outlets.

INTRODUCTION

The Kremlin-sponsored Sputnik news website has been recognised as one of the primary channels of Russian influence in the Western Balkan (WB) media space, and so a comprehensive analysis was conducted to learn about its content and way of operation.

This report is based on analysis of a year-long monitoring process that lasted from 1 January to 31 December 2018. The focus was on Sputnik online platform <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com> that has presented information in the Serbian language since 2015 (hereafter referred to as Sputnik Srbija). The report seeks to identify the primary narratives that are advanced by the media outlet about six WB countries –

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Why Sputnik Srbija?

The Russian state-owned media group Rossiya Segodnya launched its online news website, Sputnik, in November 2014. Since that time, the brand has expanded, and today it offers news reports in more than 30 languages worldwide. For the past four years, the Belgrade-based newsroom has provided Serbian language content in Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, thus having the potential



for reaching a broad audience across the Western Balkans. It is the most popular Russian state-sponsored media outlet in the region, and the content features a range of local and regional media outlets. Others are free to republish news from Sputnik, and the content is appealing to audiences and, thus, to editors. Due to language similarities between the Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian languages (often called BCMS), its online news and radio shows can be consumed in Serbia, Montenegro, BiH, Croatia and the Serbian-speaking population of Kosovo.

Although Sputnik Srbija has been acknowledged by local fact checkers as the leader among foreign-owned media outlets in the region in terms of disseminating political disinformation,¹ this report is limited to identification and analysis of existent narratives. The report does not fact check the content that has been examined. This decision was made so as to narrow the scope of the report and to highlight preliminary insights into the types of messages which Sputnik Srbija projects.

What is a narrative?

This report considers the narrative to be an open-ended set of stories, events and ideas which are grounded in values and beliefs so as to resonate with the target audience. The narrative seeks to provide an understanding of an issue by reducing its complexity and offering a path toward a desirable end state.

The report explains the main narratives that have been identified as part of the research project, with analysis of the domains to which they belong, their tone, and the way in which the audience engages with the various narratives. Eight case studies provide in-depth analysis of how these narratives correspond to the six WB countries, as well as to the EU and NATO.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach was used when examining the content of Sputnik Srbija. A systematic sampling method was used to select articles which relates to the eight monitoring subjects – the six WB countries, the EU and NATO. The International Republican Institute's (IRI) media monitoring tool >versus<² was used for data collection, filtering and clean-up in terms of articles published by Sputnik Srbija as related to the eight aforementioned subjects. Pre-defined search words in Serbian were used as follows for each subject area:

- The search word for Albania: **Albanija**
- The search word for BiH: **BIH, Bosna, Bosna i Hercegovina**
- The search word for Kosovo: **Kosovo, KiM**
- The search word for Montenegro: **Crna Gora**
- The search word for North Macedonia: **Makedonija**
- The search words for Serbia: **Srbija**
- The search word for the EU: **EU**
- The search word for NATO: **NATO**

The articles that were found during the initial search were filtered and categorised as **directly** or **indirectly** relating to the issue at hand. An article was classified as **directly** applicable only when the subject of interest was addressed. If an article mentioned the subject, but primarily dealt with a different

topic or subject, then it was categorised as **indirectly** dealing with the subject.

A second step in the process involved looking at all of the articles that **directly** concerned any of the eight issues. Those related to sports, weather, telecommunications, livestock, etc., were excluded from the sampling unless a narrative was identified. If it was identified, then the article was labelled as **relevant** for the researchers and then studied with the use of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Note: Articles could be relevant to more than one subject, which means that they could appear more than once in the final dataset.

Domains

Relevant articles were qualitatively divided among four domains – political, military, economic and social.³ This decision was based on the primary topic of the article. Each one could be categorised as belonging to more than one domain, and a narrative could be featured in articles which belonged to all four domains:

- **The economic domain** included articles about economic development, trade relations among countries, economic sanctions, foreign investments, etc.
- **The military domain** related to articles concerning armed forces, military capabilities (including armament),



military exercises and training sessions, NATO, bilateral military co-operation, the creation of an army in Kosovo, etc.

- **The political domain** focused on stories about foreign affairs, local and/or regional politics, co-operation with the EU and NATO, Euro-Atlantic integration, bi- and multilateral relations, political challenges such as crime and corruption, etc.
- **The social domain** combined stories related to social and cultural developments, religion and history, including migration as a destabilising factor for the WB, ethnic, religious or social divisions in countries, civil unrest (protests across the WB), rising poverty and unemployment, etc.

Types

Articles were categorised on the basis of the type of writing that they had:

- **Analysis** with a combined presentation and explanation of information;
- **Commentary**, which is a statement of facts and/or opinions that expresses the personal reaction and/or attitudes of one person or a group of individuals;
- **Interviews** such as Sputnik Srbija journalists taking part in a Q&A session with the interviewee;
- **News**⁴, including **reports** of events, situations, etc., usually being the result of observations or an inquiry, as well as **statements** from officials or found in news releases.

Tone

The authors classified articles as **supportive**, **neutral** or **opposed to** a narrative. The researchers assessed this on a qualitative basis. Articles that **supported** a narrative were ones which featured the narrative. Articles with a **neutral** tone presented facts in a balanced manner. Articles were labelled as **opposed to** the narrative if a contrasting view to the narrative was presented.

Interactions

The researchers analysed public engagement with Sputnik's online platform to understand how readers reacted to specific narratives, although the analysis did not include interactions on social media. **Total** and **average** interactions were calculated on the basis of likes, dislikes and comments. **Total** interactions refer to the sum of all likes, dislikes and comments for each narrative. Of course, the more common the narrative, the more interaction it attracted. For that reason, researchers added a second parameter – **average** interactions, which represented the average engagement of the audience with a narrative in relation to the total engagement (calculated by dividing the number of engagements by the number of articles per narrative).

Keywords

These are tags preselected by Sputnik Srbija, representing the most important words used in articles, as defined by the Sputnik Srbija online platform.



KEY NARRATIVES IN SPUTNIK SRBIJA

The number of total directly related and relevant articles included a sample of 11,425 articles which contained one or more of the search words. Among these, 7,273 (72%) were categorised as directly related to the eight subjects at hand. Of these, **7,193** or **87%** were assessed as relevant (containing a narrative) for further analysis (Table 1).









	 Albania	 BiH	 Kosovo	 Montenegro	 North Macedonia	 Serbia	 EU	 NATO
Total # of articles	332	1,269	1,918	704	548	3,198	1,971	1,485
# of direct articles	131 40%	830 65%	1,556 81%	554 79%	366 68%	2,499 78%	1,302 66%	1,035 67%
# of relevant articles	109 93%	534 64%	1,449 93%	488 88%	341 93%	2,095 84%	1,242 95%	935 90%

Table 1: Articles from initial search results, after sampling and final filtering. Percentage of direct articles out of total articles and of relevant articles out of direct articles.

All relevant articles underwent quantitative and qualitative analysis, and nine different narratives were identified (Table 2).



Narrative	Sub-narrative	Addressed subjects	Number of articles
The WB region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The WB region is under the influence of the West ■ The US is involved in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue ■ Several WB countries support the establishment of the Kosovar state ■ Russia is a traditional friend of Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia ■ Rejecting Russia has negative consequences ■ The West mistreats RS ■ Kosovo is losing international allies ■ Bosnia and Turkey are good friends ■ Serbia and China are good friends <p>For EU/NATO-related articles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The EU and Russia (dis)agree ■ NATO's actions in the WB are a provocation against Russia ■ NATO is expanding its influence in the WB ■ Russia and NATO participate in dialogue to avoid military escalation 	Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, EU, NATO	3,004
The WB region is unstable with a high potential for conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creating Greater Albania ■ Relations among WB neighbours are bad ■ A Kosovar army would only destabilise the region ■ Serbia should receive RS as compensation if it loses Kosovo ■ RS should be independent ■ Serbs are not guilty of war crimes in Srebrenica ■ BiH cannot protect its borders against migrants 	Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia	2,201
The EU is hegemonic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The EU is a key decision-maker in the WB ■ The EU is sending mixed signals about enlargement to the WB ■ The EU is breaking promises about a 2025 membership deadline ■ The EU discriminates against RS 	Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, EU	951
WB countries are weak, incapable and corrupt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The WB countries are criminal or captured states ■ Serbia is the region's leader ■ The Dayton Agreement has failed, with growing intolerance among the three constitutive entities in BiH ■ Intolerance among political leaders ■ The name change referendum in North Macedonia was invalid ■ Montenegro experienced election violations 	Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia	634



Narrative	Sub-narrative	Addressed subjects	Number of articles
Human rights are under threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Serbs are endangered in other WB countries ■ Croats are endangered in BiH 	BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia	621
The EU and NATO are weak and not united	<p>EU:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disagreements among member states ■ Brexit is weakening the EU ■ An inability to manage the refugee crisis ■ Rising nationalism ■ Deteriorating EU/US relations (Nord Stream, tariffs, Iran) <p>NATO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disagreements among allies on defence spending, Turkey's purchase of Russian weapons, etc. ■ NATO has weak military capabilities in comparison to Russia ■ An EU army would weaken NATO 	EU, NATO	607
NATO is aggressive and provocative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NATO forces countries to join up ■ Depleted uranium is harmful ■ NATO supports building of Kosovar army ■ Montenegro's NATO membership means lost sovereignty ■ RS will never join NATO <p>For NATO-related articles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NATO provokes Russia with the militarisation of Eastern and Western Europe ■ NATO was a criminal aggressor against Yugoslavia in 1999 ■ NATO is expanding its global presence and partnerships ■ NATO is heading closer to Russia's borders ■ NATO and the West want to force countries into the alliance 	BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, NATO	565
Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history	N/A	Montenegro, Serbia	70
NATO is not beneficial	N/A	NATO	19

Table 2: Identified narratives.

Type

The most common type of articles related to eight subjects was **news reports** (6,344 or 88%), followed by **commentary** (492 or 7%),

analysis (301 or 4%) and **interviews** (56 or 1%). News about the six Western Balkan countries represented 89% of all articles related to the six subjects, with statements



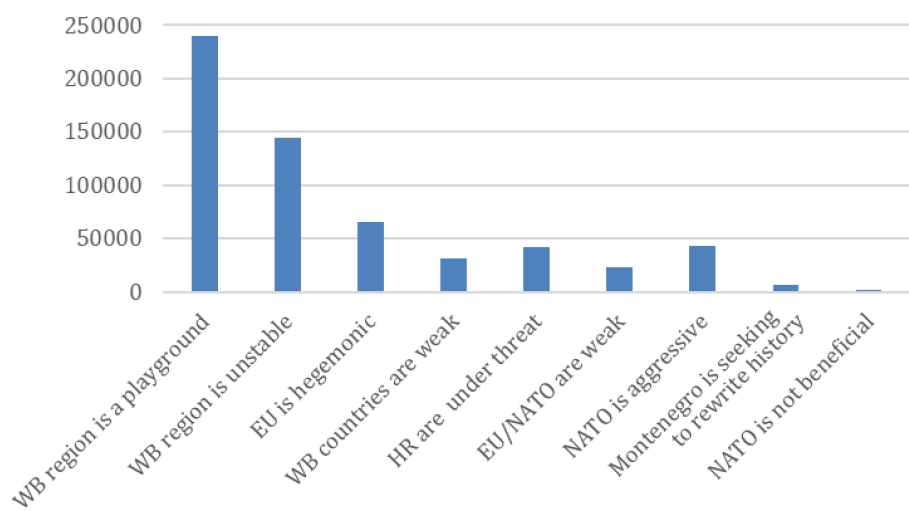
representing 53% and reports representing 36%. News about the EU and NATO made up 93% of all articles concerning the two subjects, with 57% being statements and 36% being reports.

Interactions

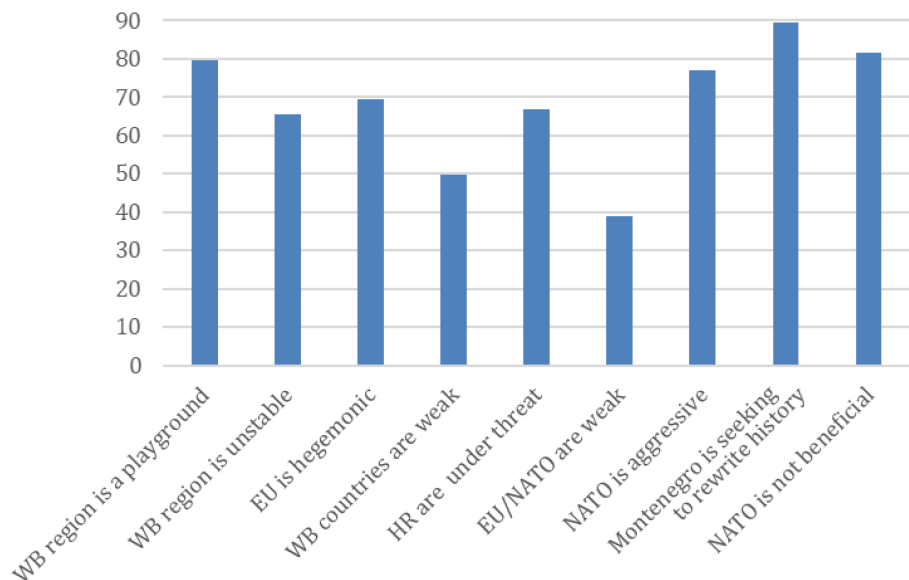
While the most common narratives attracted the largest number of total interactions, the average engagement in each narrative presents a different image. The **WB region**

is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West involves the largest number of articles, and it is only natural that it attracts the largest sum of likes, dislikes and comments. On average, though, there are fewer engagements for each article. The leaders in terms of average interactions are the narratives with the fewest articles and fewest total interactions – **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history, and NATO is not beneficial**.

Total interactions per narrative

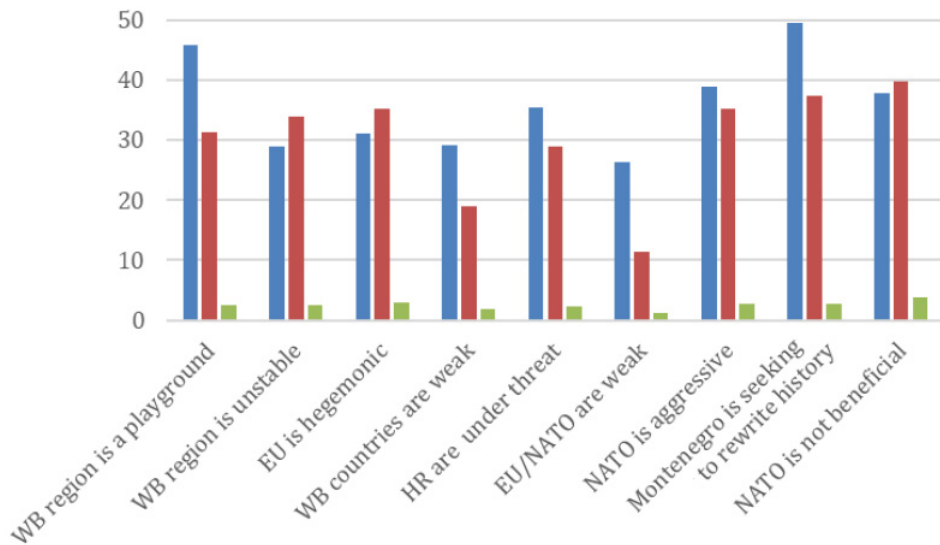


Average interactions per narrative



Average interactions per narrative

- ◆ average likes
- ◆ average dislikes
- ◆ average comments



Keywords

Below is a visualisation of keywords that were pre-selected by Sputnik Srbija for the most popular narrative, **WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West**. As demonstrated, NATO, Russia and the US are the most common keywords. Kosovo also appears quite often along with Kosovar President Hashim Tachi. This shows the number of articles that deal with the issue of Kosovo in this narrative. The Bosnian Serbian politician Milorad Dodik also appears frequently because he is currently the Serbian member of the presidency of BiH. Taken together with the keywords 'Republic' and 'Srpska', this represents another common theme – if Kosovo is recognised as an independent state, then Republika Srpska might want to do the same.



A visualisation of the 105 most common keywords (translated to English), as assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles that relate to the narrative WB is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West.



Narrative “The Western Balkan region is a playground”

FOCUS

Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, EU and NATO

The most common narrative that relates to all six countries (to a different extent) is **the WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West**. This is the overreaching narrative and relates to other narratives. The geopolitical importance of the region is seen as a reason as to why major power politics are occurring in the region.⁵ The EU and NATO are seen as the main representatives of the West and are understood as a collective influence on the region. The United States, because of its leadership in the West is presented separately as a key player in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and in the pursuit of deeper co-operation between Serbia and Kosovo. The East, by comparison, is mostly seen as Russia, which is portrayed as a traditional friend of WB countries. The struggle between West and East is depicted through examples of hard and soft power.

The implication in this narrative is that the West always blames Russia for doing things at the hard end of the power spectrum, while the West does the same (e.g., “Unlike the Russian Embassy, the US Embassy in Podgorica is a traditional meeting place for representatives of governing parties and the opposition, providing advice, guidance and, often, instructions to the leaders of many

political parties.”⁶). Articles about NATO’s provocation in terms of encircling one side of Serbia,⁷ militarisation close to Russian border are widespread, sending the message that this kind of imminent threat may reach the “point of no return.”⁸ Western meddling in the internal political areas is also common, with many examples criticising the decision of some countries in the region to follow the West’s opposition to Russia in the wake of the Skripal case and the Russian diplomats who were expelled because of it.⁹ On the soft end of the spectrum, this narrative focuses on differences in values between what the West and the East preach and represent.¹⁰ In general terms, this narrative describes WB countries other than Serbia as being small and irrelevant pawns in the hands of larger international players.¹¹

This relates to other narratives, as well. The EU and NATO are presented as hegemonic and aggressive, whereas WB countries with Euro-Atlantic aspirations are portrayed as weak and fragile states. Serbia, which shares the traditional values of the East, however, is presented as a successful example of a working and advancing nation. The role of **Serbia as a regional leader** is described in-depth under the narrative **WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt**.

Albania is discussed in relation to its co-operation with NATO, and this is used as an illustration of how the West uses the region to advance its own interests. One example is an article which discusses a co-operation agreement which the defence ministers



of Albania and Montenegro signed in Shkodra.¹² The agreement related to cross-border aerospace, which allows planes from the armed forces of Greece and Italy to cross the national borders of Montenegro and Albania.¹³ Similarly, Montenegro as a NATO member state appears in this narrative as a weapon which the West is using against Russia.¹⁴

Sputnik Srbija also claims that the name change referendum in North Macedonia (formerly the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) was dictated by the West. The long-lasting dispute with Greece over the name of Macedonia is presented as an obstacle against the ability of the WB country to join NATO and the EU. Furthermore, Sputnik Srbija portrays the referendum as non-valid because of low turnout that showed that Macedonians had little say and that was an example of how the West interferes in the internal affairs of other countries.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Russia is presented as a protector of the right of the Macedonian people to make an independent decision as to their country's new name.¹⁶

Another topic that has been identified while monitoring Sputnik Srbija relates to flourishing relations between the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Kremlin.¹⁷ One example is an article stating that "Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik noted that the OBA's order to ban the entry of writer Zahar Prilepin, a Russian citizen, into BiH territory for security reasons was shameful, inadmissible and directed against a friend

of Republika Srpska."¹⁸ The outlet also contrasts this friendship with the anti-RS position of the West.¹⁹

Questions about how the Kosovo issue can be resolved and where its borders lie in accordance with the West are also part of this narrative. This corresponds to Kosovo, and Western countries are allegedly planning a way forward for its problematic status by drawing a border between Serbia and Kosovo,²⁰ while also disagreeing with one another about the idea of partitioning Kosovo.²¹ The West is also seen as resolving the issue in favour of Kosovo, with former Prime Minister Haradinaj seeking help in this regard.²²

When it comes to Serbia, there are three topics – shared traditional values, history and culture²³ between Serbia and Russia, military co-operation²⁴ between the two countries, and Russia's international support for Serbia.²⁵ Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo are shown as countries that are being pushed around by the West, but Sputnik Srbija produces content about good relations, co-operation and benefits that a country receives if it has deeper relations with Russia.²⁶ At the same time, the outlet also describes NATO and the EU in negative terms when it comes to what they are doing in the region.²⁷

This narrative involves several subject-specific sub-narratives which speak to nuances in the relationship between the West and the East. It also divides up the



region into countries which are friends of the West – Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia (with the latter two countries facing negative consequences because of their cooling relations with Russia), and friends of the East – Serbia and RS (as an entity of BiH which is the main reason why BiH cannot deepen its Euro-Atlantic integration).

Narrative “The Western Balkan region is unstable”

FOCUS

Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

The narrative ***The WB region is unstable with a high potential for conflict*** appears in all six countries, and it uses ethnic tensions in the region to strengthen the impression of insecurity and fragile peace (e.g., “We are two shots away from instability,”²⁸ or “Door to Hell’ is Opening in the Balkans,”²⁹ This narrative is focused on unresolved border disputes and bad relations between neighbours. Several themes can be identified in this case.

One prominent idea is the creation of Greater Albania. This is presented as the Albanian quest to protect and enhance the civil rights of Albanians throughout the region (e.g., “Faced with many challenges, Albanians must have a common future”³⁰ This is also portrayed as a threat against the national sovereignty of other countries in

the region.³¹ Furthermore, “Greater Albania” is seen not only as a factor of instability because of ethnic tensions and territorial disputes with Montenegro and Macedonia, but also as the probable unification of Kosovo and Albania. This is used to justify the potential unification of Serbia and Republika Srpska, as well.³²

The issue of Kosovo is the second topic that is largely present in the narrative. Kosovo is presented as the region’s main source of instability. On the one hand, it is described as being aggressive against Serbs,³³ but other articles focus on the idea that the establishment of a Kosovar army is a provocation to Belgrade.³⁴ The narrative about the region’s instability is strengthened by a message of preparedness in Serbia in case hard power is needed. Disputed territories and the possibility of a swap of land between Kosovo and Serbia are featured so as to intensify the notion of an imminent war. This is an excuse for the development of Serbia’s military capacity (e.g., “It is a legitimate right of Serbia to defend its highest national interests in Kosovo and Metohija on its territory if vital national interests are threatened”³⁵), as well as for economic sanctions (e.g., “Pristina’s unilateral moves are denying all efforts to establish better relations in the region, although it is clear that the use of economic or any other violence cannot propel the two sides forward, instead only bringing the whole region back in time.”)³⁶ This narrative highlights regional support for the establishment of Kosovo as a state,



and this is contrasted against Serbia's right to receive compensation if it loses Kosovo. This could mean the annexation or independence of RS.

When it comes to BiH, the narrative focuses on the failure of ethnic and political composition of the state, and this is tightly linked to the sub-narrative **Dayton agreement failed to reach a solution**, as analysed as part of the narrative **WB countries are weak, incapable and corrupt** (see p.19). Attention is focused on the problematic governance of the country and how hard it is for three ethnic groups to co-exist (e.g., "BiH has always been a dysfunctional community that contained all of the centrifugal tendencies of disintegration."³⁷). The content involved calls for Republika Srpska to become independent or to be annexed by Serbia.

Criticisms about the fact that Montenegro has joined NATO focus on degrading relations with Serbia, demonstrating the heated situation between the neighbours as another factor of instability. There are stories about Montenegro's decision to expel a Russian diplomat and to blacklist a Serbian poet and academic. This latter situation is presented as a controversial act of paranoia which the Montenegrin public has received with much disbelief.³⁸ The advancement of this narrative creates the impression that the region is a hotspot for tensions and fragility, all but on the verge of war (e.g., "Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency, Bakir Izetbegovic, said today

that 'both Serbia and Croatia are procuring airplanes and missile systems and bragging about this,' and when he talks about increasing specialised production, they say that we are preparing for war."³⁹)

Narrative "The European Union is hegemonic"

FOCUS

Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, EU

This narrative is linked to the narrative which says that **the WB region is a playground**. Sputnik Srbija sees the presence of the West and the EU in the area as hegemonic when it comes to security, policy, diplomacy, etc. This is down to the fact that the EU is a creator, a key player and a decision-maker in terms of political and social events in the Western Balkans (e.g., "I am not against America, the EU or anyone, but I am against them showing off and lecturing my country."⁴⁰) Some of the articles criticise WB countries for obeying EU instructions, particularly when it comes to migration⁴¹ or relations with Russia.⁴²

The dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo is seen as a top priority for the EU, which is portrayed as an active participant in the process. This is another major topic for Sputnik Srbija. The narrative tends to present the EU as an institution which insists that a solution must be found for the Kosovo problem. According to



Sputnik, the EU is also presenting the Kosovo problem as a bargaining chip when it comes to Serbia's membership in the EU. There is also a notion of evident uneasiness among Serbs because of the prolonged nature of accession talks with the EU. Articles feature suspicions from local politicians who say that even if a solution is found for Kosovo, Serbia will still be denied entry into the EU.

This notion about the WB countries being underappreciated by the EU, as evidence by the slow pace of membership negotiations, has been identified not only in relation to Serbia, but also to all other countries which aspire to join the EU. This is a sub-narrative, **the EU is sending mixed signals about enlargement to the WB**, and it also relates to the narrative about the **hegemonic EU**. The EU is seen as being concerned about the stagnated process of integration. While put on hold, the accession of Western Balkan countries is difficult because of a constant flow of requirements from Brussels about internal issues, regional tensions and aspects of international relations. At the same time, moreover, EU member states have also been sending mixed signals about the readiness of WB countries for the enlargement process.⁴³ Such stories mostly concern the accession status of Montenegro and Serbia, with the insistence from Brussels that reforms must be implemented being presented, but the EU is also failing to keep its promise about a negotiation deadline in 2025.⁴⁴

Narrative "Western Balkan countries are weak, incapable and corrupt"

FOCUS

Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

The narrative **WB countries are weak, incapable and corrupt** is seen in articles about all six countries. Five of the states in the region, except Serbia to some extent, share aspirations of closer Euro-Atlantic cooperation and integration with institutions such as the EU and NATO. Sputnik Srbija focuses on how the region is ill equipped for playing the role of an important international player because of corruption and weak and non-transparent governance. This narrative is projected in several ways. Some of the stories discuss rigged elections, corruption, nepotism or politicised judicial systems, while others focus on issues such as crime, protests, public debt, etc.

Articles about Albania in this narrative focus mostly on corruption.⁴⁵ Albania has problems with organised crime and drugs and weapons trading.⁴⁶ These processes involve high-ranking government officials, and that is presented as the reason why EU member states are dragging their feet when it comes to Albania's accession negotiations.⁴⁷ For instance, Sputnik Srbija has quoted a German media outlet, which states that "the suspicion that the country's economy is in the hands of organised crime whose tentacles reach to the very top of the government has not been completely eliminated to date."⁴⁸



Within this narrative, also Kosovo⁴⁹ and Montenegro⁵⁰ are presented as corrupt states. The narrative about Kosovo claims that it is a centre for drug and organ trafficking (e.g., “Harel is said to have been charged with searching for people in need of a kidney transplant and attracting donors of those organs to Kosovo from Turkey and the former Soviet Union.”)⁵¹ Most articles about Montenegro, in turn, focus on the topic of rigged elections (e.g., “The fiercest fighting took place in the capital between supporters of the ruling party and the opposition, where several clashes occurred.”)⁵² The idea that Montenegro is corrupt and with high crime levels is strengthened by reports about a physical attack against an investigative journalist.⁵³ In most cases related to Montenegro and Kosovo, the narrative targets politicians from governing parties who have Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In Kosovo, the focus is on criminal activities which surround President Hashim Thaci,⁵⁴ as well as former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj.⁵⁵ This highlights the lack of legitimacy when it comes to what the two leaders have done. In Montenegro, in turn, many articles have been dedicated to Nebojsa Medojevic and Milan Knezevic, both of whom are members of the opposition party Democratic Front and were hauled into court under charges of participation in an attempted coup in 2016. Articles present these two politicians favourably and promote the idea that Montenegro’s justice system is unjust (e.g., “This is a first-class scandal that an MP is arrested for speaking out!”).⁵⁶

The narrative is also seen in articles about North Macedonia, often in connection to criticism of the Prespa Agreement⁵⁷ and the consequent protests that emerged against the name change.⁵⁸ The referendum was largely discussed as “a focus of the great powers,”⁵⁹ as well as an undemocratic process because of irregularities and low turnout.⁶⁰ Some articles about North Macedonia in this narrative also discuss ethnic relations between Macedonia and Albania, particularly in terms of a government conflict over a newly-enacted language law which permits the broader use of the Albanian language.⁶¹ In Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, the main focus of the **WB countries are weak** narrative is on corruption, while in the North Macedonia it relates to the deeply divisive name change, as well as ethnic tensions. This underscores how adaptable a narrative can be so as to resonate with the target audience.

In BiH, the narrative also relates to stories about crime⁶² and corruption, government instability⁶³ and the failure of the judicial system to try corrupt politicians⁶⁴. A sub-narrative here is that **the Dayton Agreement failed to reach a solution**, and it is only focused on BiH and existing disagreements between the Federation and RS⁶⁵ (e.g., “Croats ‘cannot get a third entity in BiH without conflict and war’”⁶⁶). In addition to claiming that it is a weak and broken state, Sputnik Srbija emphasises the idea that BiH citizens have become radicalised and have links to terrorist organisations.⁶⁷



In contrast to the five Balkan states which Sputnik constantly describes in negative terms with the narrative about them being corrupt and having weak governments, **Serbia** is presented as the **leader of the region**. There are some articles which present Serbia as a corrupt and captured state⁶⁸, however most articles are about the idea that Serbia is economically stronger than its neighbours⁶⁹ and has the greatest military power (e.g., “the Serbian army has 225 tanks and is the absolute record-holder in the Balkans in terms of such armaments”⁷⁰). This distinction between five “broken” states and the success story of Serbia is aimed at strengthening the narrative that those with aspirations of joining the West are poorly equipped for such a process, whereas neutral Serbia is flourishing. As a result of articles which cover the region in a negative light, the view that these countries are unprepared to join international organisations is promoted.

Narrative “Human rights are under threat”

FOCUS

BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia

This narrative discusses violations against the rights of the Serbian diaspora in the region.⁷¹ Ruling parties in Montenegro, BiH and Kosovo allegedly discriminate against Serbs when it comes to their human rights such as basic freedoms, religion, labour, assimilation into society, etc. (e.g., “the

brutal ethnic cleansing of the Serbs”⁷²). The situation is described as complex and all but unbearable for Serbs who live in Montenegro (e.g., “assimilation of the Serbian people in Montenegro”⁷³) and Kosovo (“terror against the Serb population”⁷⁴). Ethnic identity and the fact that many Serbs are denied settled status in other WB countries are presented as the main cause for the low quality of life among Serbs in the region. Such poor treatment is also contrasted with more favourable attitudes toward other ethnic groups such as Albanians in Montenegro (e.g., “The fact that Albanian national parties have been an indispensable part of the Montenegrin authorities for years and that they have recently finally obtained the independent municipality of Tuzi, leads many analysts to conclude that the authorities in Podgorica will once again be lenient toward Albanians’ demands”⁷⁵). The human rights issue is also raised on accordance with regional support for Kosovo’s independence which, therefore, is presented as an unfair treatment of Serbia when it comes to Kosovo.

Narrative “The EU/NATO are weak and not united”

FOCUS

EU, NATO

This narrative does not directly relate to WB countries, but it portrays the **EU and NATO** as **weak and not united** organisations, which is an attempt to emphasise negative



aspects about the two entities when it comes to WB countries which aspire to join them. There are three sub-narratives here which can be identified.

First of all, the sub-narrative **the EU is weak and not united** showcases issues in the union which speak to disagreements among member states about key problems, thus damaging the EU's international reputation. Debates about how the EU can cope with migration are one example of these disagreements. The division is seen through a budget dispute. If a budget proposal suggests a reduction in funds for farmers, research and regional development, it includes an increase in funds that are allocated to migrant-receiving countries. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has strongly opposed this process.⁷⁶

Other divisive issues such as a unified response to Russia⁷⁷, Iran and further EU enlargement to the East are also highlighted.⁷⁸ Clashes over membership for other Western Balkan states are also part of the sub-narrative about the **EU sending mixed signals** as part of the narrative **EU is hegemonic**.

A third major topic that is discussed as a reason for the EU being weak and divided is the rise of populism and nationalism, particularly in the context of Brexit.⁷⁹ Political developments in the UK are widely covered, thus illustrating the inability of Western countries to cope with the consequences of

their own decisions. All of this contributes toward a negative image of the EU.

Other disagreements among member states focus on issues such as the creation of a European army or reactions to Poland's worsening democratic status.⁸⁰ These are all cases which Sputnik Srbija uses to disseminate criticism of the EU as being too bureaucratic, too expensive and working for "big business." All of these characteristics encourage people to think that the EU will not exist in ten years' time in the same way that it is now.⁸¹

The sub-narrative **relations between the European Union and the United States are deteriorating** relates to the claim that relations between Washington and Brussels have worsened since the inauguration of US President Donald Trump⁸². The implications of his "America first" policy have been discussed in terms of defence, the NATO budget, Iran⁸³, trade, North Stream 2⁸⁴, US sanctions, the EU army and the EU's role in multilateral institutions. Trade relations between the two largest economies are also said to be crumbling.⁸⁵ The US is seen as opposing the idea of an EU army because that would threaten a decrease in the significance and power of NATO.⁸⁶ Because two major international actors are bickering with one another, the image of the West in a broken state is promoted. Values traditionally seen as representative of the Western world include unity, economic co-operation and diplomacy, and they are all used to claim that they are damaged



because of disagreements at the very core between the US and the EU.

The third sub-narrative, **NATO is weak and not united** covers topics such as divisions in the alliance, risks related to Trump's actions, as well as NATO's declining capability in terms of strength in competing with Russia.

NATO is not united is a sub-narrative which relates to a couple of disagreements. On the one hand, worsening relations between the US, NATO and the EU are highlighted.⁸⁷ Many articles review clashes over NATO's budget as President Trump has criticised European nations for insufficient contributions toward common defence.⁸⁸ Another extensively covered topic is the fact that Turkey has bought Russian-made anti-aircraft missile systems⁸⁹, partnered with the threat of US sanctions against countries which do so⁹⁰. Simultaneously, there is also an emphasis on Turkey's reaction to NATO's disagreement with the purchase (e.g., "Turkey sent troops to conflict zones when requested, but did not receive support in return"⁹¹).

President Trump's international activities are also presented as an example of NATO's weakness (e.g., "There is concern that US President Donald Trump will again try to undermine NATO's significance at the upcoming [Brussels] summit, as he has done in the past"⁹²). A hint by the US President that America might withdraw from the alliance leads to articles which look for other member states that have previously refrained from military activities because

of disagreements with NATO's central comment.⁹³ Warming relations between Russia and America have also been covered by Sputnik as a process that may leave European allies behind. This example is used to demonstrate NATO's structural vulnerability.⁹⁴

Another point about the weakening of NATO refers to its competition with Russia. Because Russia is rapidly modernising its armed forces, NATO will not be the dominant power for very long. It is losing its military supremacy⁹⁵ and, therefore, cannot defend its member states⁹⁶. The idea about military weakness is also demonstrated by ridiculing troops from NATO countries, the claim being that they are weak in physical terms and in terms of the equipment that they have⁹⁷.

The narrative that **EU/NATO are weak and not united** damages the reputation of the two organisations by claiming that they are struggling over the control of their member states. The objective of such reporting might be to sow distrust in the Western Balkan countries that have Euro-Atlantic aspirations.



Narrative “NATO is aggressive and provocative”

FOCUS

BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro,
North Macedonia, Serbia, NATO

In relation to the narrative that the **WB region is a playground**, NATO (as a representative of the West) is largely described as being **aggressive and provocative**. Primary topics that are discussed include NATO’s expansion worldwide and in the region; the alliance’s provocative approach toward Russia; the installation of NATO military bases in the WB region, as well as NATO’s aggression in the region in 1999.

Sputnik Srbija writes about NATO’s expansion not just in the WB region, but also closer to Russia’s borders in the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine and Georgia (e.g., the ring around Russia is tightening and the number of member states is increasing⁹⁸). The overall message is that military exercises and investments in military basis mean that NATO is including WB countries in its military alliance with the aim of intimidating Russia. This is presented as something that NATO enforces as part of an expansionist programme which leads countries toward losing their sovereignty, as is the case with Montenegro.

Reports highlight NATO activities such as missions and military bases in the WB⁹⁹, presenting these as a threat against those countries which do not want to join the alliance.¹⁰⁰This sends a signal to Serbia to

maintain its policy of neutrality because of its good relations with the Kremlin¹⁰¹, as well as to RS so that it continues to block any Euro-Atlantic aspirations in BiH. North Macedonia’s accession to NATO is described as a “forced entry” which “only confirms that an ‘open door policy’ has become a goal in itself.¹⁰²” Montenegro’s loss of sovereignty¹⁰³ is presented as one of the consequences that North Macedonia will face as a member of NATO (e.g., Montenegro was “pushed” against the will of the people and “swept under the NATO rug¹⁰⁴”). Montenegro’s role in NATO is said to “promote the alliance’s values in the Western Balkans.”¹⁰⁵When it comes to Kosovo, most articles are about NATO’s KFOR mission¹⁰⁶ and its positive approach toward the idea of creating a Kosovar army.¹⁰⁷Depictions of NATO’s criminal aggression are also presented in articles which concern Serbia, as well, as they are mostly focused on NATO’s bombings in the past¹⁰⁸.

A sub-narrative related to the alleged negative public health effects of **NATO’s use of depleted uranium** ammunition during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia is also identified as a reminder of the idea that the alliance has been aggressive against the region for a long time. Articles focus on environmental consequences¹⁰⁹, as well as human health, pointing to a rise in the number of cancer diagnoses, particularly among children (e.g., “I never quite believed in all of the theories about depleted uranium or that the ones who bombed us were to blame, but today, when talking to doctors, the



reasons are multifactorial, but certainly one of the reasons for the diseases is depleted uranium. It occurs in children whose parents were born around 1990. I don't know whether we can prove this, because a lot of it ended up in the Ibar, the Danube or the Black Sea. All doctors think that this has left behind significant consequences. This is an unprecedented crime, Vucic emphasised¹¹⁰). Stories claim that people suffer from skin manifestations and malignant diseases (e.g., "Out of 40 people who have had contact with contaminated ground in Vranje, ten have already died. At the same time, the number of malignancies in the Pcinja District is increasing, although its population is younger than the average in the rest of Serbia"¹¹¹).

Serbia and Kosovo are most frequently seen as the most severely impacted regions, but some articles also discuss the consequences of Republika Srpska in BiH, as well as Montenegro. In the case of Serbia, most articles focus on the formation of an investigative body that will look into the effects of depleted uranium on Serbs and Kosovars.¹¹²

While the Serbian government is showing to be supporting this investigation, Montenegrin politicians are portrayed in negative terms, particularly because they banned a protest among students. A Montenegrin school was criticised because it obeyed orders to punish a group of students who commemorated "those who have fallen innocent at the hands of the

aggressor."¹¹³Articles about BiH discuss a NATO military exercise in which depleted uranium was supposedly used (e.g., "Republika Srpska must use all means at its disposal to prevent NATO's military exercise in Manjaca with depleted uranium ammunition, as the consequences would be far-reaching, said Marko Lalić, a doctor of physio-chemistry sciences"¹¹⁴). NATO is presented not just as an aggressor, but also as a distrusted entity, according to the RS member of the presidency, Milorad Dodik (e.g., "We cannot trust the promise that they will not use depleted uranium, because we all know that once NATO fighter planes land in a territory, local authorities have no control. Have them practice elsewhere. Why here? We do not trust NATO, because it has bombed us,' he [Dodik] stressed, adding that the RS wants to co-operate with NATO only in a transparent manner."¹¹⁵

Experts and politicians are often quoted so as to legitimise the claims. There are also accounts from Italian soldiers and a report from the Italian government in February 2018 which claimed that "lung cancer is occurring frequently and not only among soldiers, but also among Serbian civilians exposed to the effects of the 1999 NATO bombing."¹¹⁶These reports are also seen as a reason as to why an identical commission was established in Serbia. Other accounts insist that apart from depleted uranium, other toxins were also released during the bombing (e.g., "Depleted uranium is just the tip of the iceberg"¹¹⁷). There have also been calls for lawsuits against NATO.¹¹⁸



Narrative “Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history”

FOCUS

Montenegro, Serbia

One of the narratives that Sputnik Srbija presents is about the Podgorica Assembly (the Great National Assembly of the Serb People in Montenegro), which celebrated its centenary in 2018. This has historically been a controversial issue as the assembly is seen as the end of Montenegrin independence because of the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia.

Montenegro split from Serbia in 2016, but there are still quite a few supporters of the union in Montenegro. What is more, approximately 30% of Montenegrins consider themselves to be ethnic Serbs.¹¹⁹ This historical event still creates fractions among the people, and the centenary meant that it became one of the main narratives for Sputnik Srbija in 2018. The message is that Montenegro is a revisionist state¹²⁰ and that the unification of Montenegro and Serbia was voluntary.¹²¹ Sputnik reports about hate speech posters against Serbs that were put up in Montenegro (e.g., “100 years since the crime and shame of white terror”¹²²).

World War I saw Montenegro devastated and occupied by a combination of French, English, Italian, American and Serbian troops. By the time Serbian troops were within Montenegrin territory, they had obtained permission from the French to seek unification of Serbia and Montenegro. Once in Montenegro, the Serbian troops wasted little time and created the Central Executive Committee for the unification of the two countries. An ad hoc assembly convened in November 1918, its goal was to finalise the annexation of Montenegro, dethrone the Montenegrin ruling dynasty in favour of the Serbian House and thus formalise the unification of Montenegrins and Serbs. The election process and the convening of the Assembly was illegitimate and illegal. The following year saw rebellions, insurgency struggles and wild uproars against the annexation. Montenegrins were formerly divided into “Whites” and “Greens”, the former backing unification with Serbia and the latter insisting on independence.

Florian Bieber (ed.), *Montenegro in Transition. Problems of statehood and identity*. Baden-Baden: SEER & Nomos, 2003. Available at: <https://florianbieber.org/books/montenegro-in-transition/>



Narrative “NATO is not beneficial”

FOCUS

NATO

Closely linked to the narratives **WB is a playground** and **NATO is aggressive** is another narrative which seeks to portray the alliance in negative terms. **NATO is not beneficial** presents the organisation as a zero-benefit membership which is “weakening European security.”¹²³ Future member states were originally given the promise that there would be many positive changes after accession to NATO, but once a country becomes a member, it only has to increase its defence and military costs without any real benefits. The focus is on Montenegro as the latest member state (e.g., “beyond the will of the majority of citizens, past the referendum, past a fair and democratic debate, past common sense and an compassion and obligation toward our innocent victims, we have been plunged into alliance which, not so long ago, illegally bombarded us”¹²⁴). Sputnik Srbija argues that Montenegro’s accession represented a failed attempt to lower the crime rate, which means that there have been no significant improvements (e.g., “joining NATO did not bring any benefits to the citizens, but only to the ruling coalition which secured its seats while ordinary people were not

getting anything from it”¹²⁵). The negative view about NATO is further highlighted by stories about how Montenegrin soldiers should take part in NATO exercises and missions.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, other articles try to debunk public claims that any positive trends in the economy, GDP growth or tourism are in any way related to the country’s membership in NATO.¹²⁷

The conclusion is that Montenegro’s participation in the organisation also means a loss of sovereignty in that “the country is run by NATO.”¹²⁸ The ultimate goal seems to be to counter any aspirations which other WB countries might have in terms of joining the alliance.



DOMAINS

The most common domain is political, representing more than two-thirds of all articles, followed by the social (16%), military (14%) and economic (7%) domains.

The political domain is predominant in all of the narratives, representing at least one-half of all articles (with the exception of the narrative **NATO is aggressive**, where 48% of articles related to it). The political domain appears in 84% of articles which represent the narrative **the EU is hegemonic**, mostly because of political steps which the EU has taken in Balkan countries, including further enlargement.

The social domain is most common in the narrative **Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history**, with 40% of articles relating to it. Next there are the narratives **Human rights are under threat** (37%), and **WB countries are weak** (25%). The former narrative relates to the historical issue of the Podgorica Assembly and its social consequences today, including protests and commemoration activities. **Human rights are under threat** focuses on daily problems which Serbs in other Western Balkan countries have. These include unemployment because of nationality-based discrimination, a high rate of crimes against Serbs, etc. The latter narrative also speaks

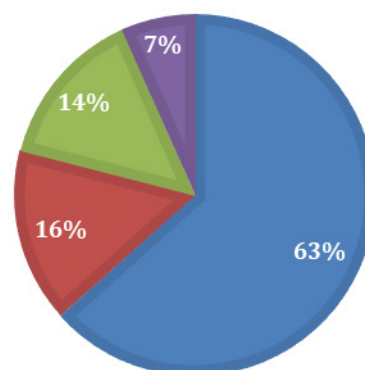
to failures in the Western Balkan countries, not just in political, but also in social terms.

The military domain mostly appears in the narrative **NATO is aggressive** (41%), with most articles focusing on NATO's actions against Russia, as well as on NATO's military activities such as establishing new bases in the Western Balkans. **NATO is not beneficial** has the second highest number of articles in this domain (22%).

The economic domain is the least common one, with fewer than 10% of most narratives. Only the narrative **the EU/NATO are weak** discussed economics in 16% of the articles, which is understandable because one of the main sub-narratives deals with deteriorating relations between the EU and the United States, including trade relations. Many of the stories focus on disagreements about the EU budget.

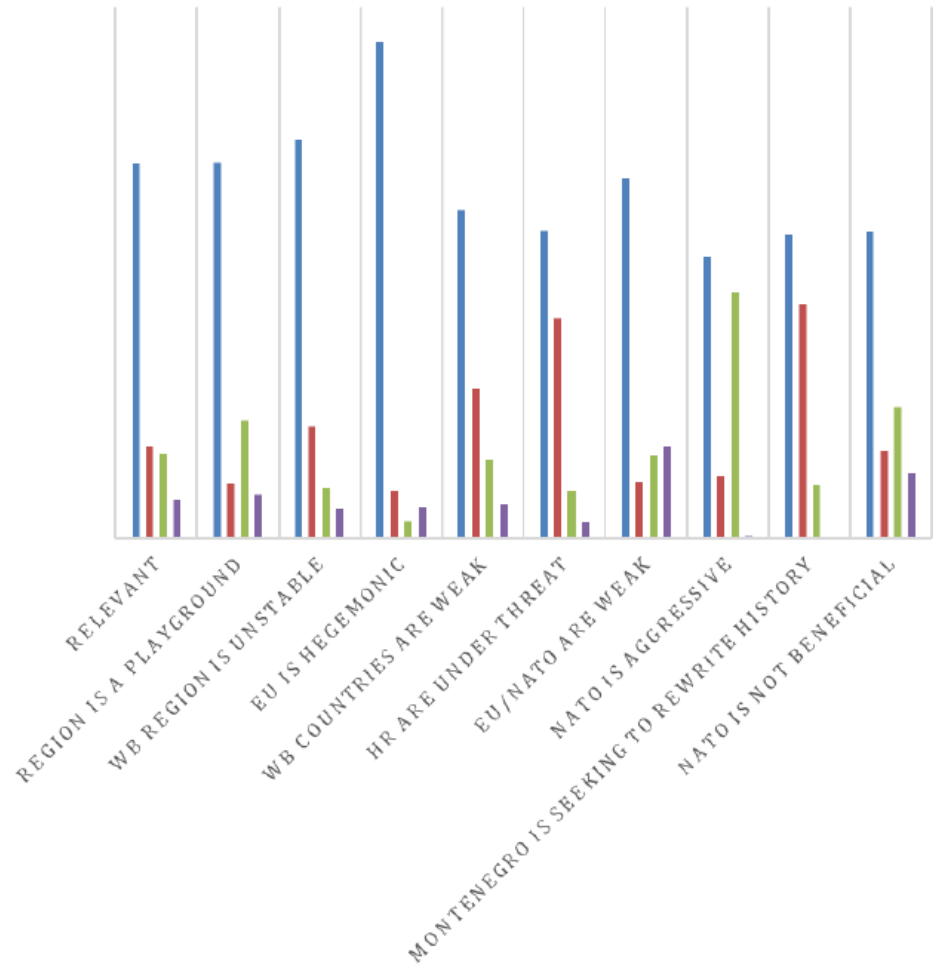
Percentage of articles based on domains

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains based on narrative

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic



TOPE OF NARRATIVES

Qualitative analysis also involved the tone of articles that represent a narrative. If an article covers the narrative in positive terms, then it is labelled "support," while if the reporting is judged to be unbiased and balanced, then the article is labelled "neutral" for the narrative. Analysts also found some articles which sought to provide opposing views about the main identified narratives in terms of Sputnik Srbija content. In this case, the word "oppose" was assigned. Some articles have more than one narrative, and in those cases the tone was assessed for each narrative separately.

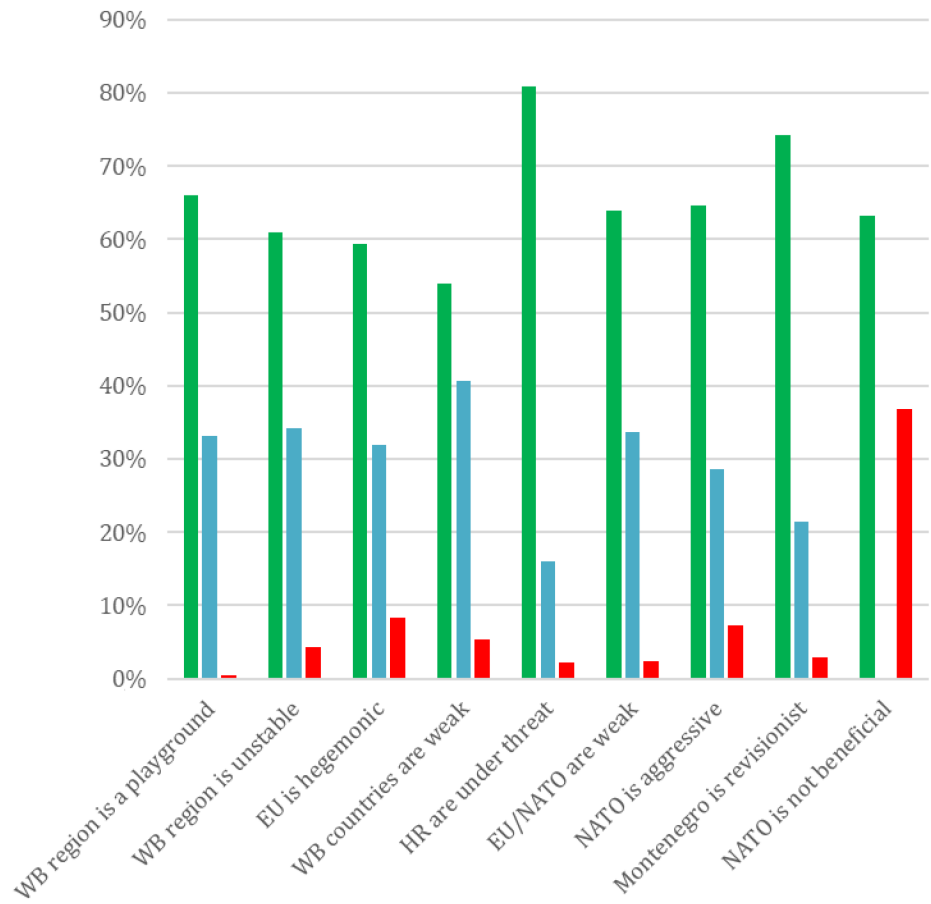
The narrative **HR are under threat** is supported by 81% of articles, while only 16% of the articles related to this narrative can be labelled neutral. **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history** is also very polarised, with

74% of the articles being positive and 21% being neutral. The most common narratives, **WB region is a playground** and **WB region is unstable** have more than two-thirds of articles supporting these narratives (66% and 61%). Around one-third of the articles have neutral tones (33% and 34%). Similarly, narratives relating to the idea that the **EU and NATO are weak** and that **NATO is aggressive** have 64% of the articles being positive, while 34% are neutral in terms of the first narrative and 29% related to the second one. The narrative which is most often presented in a neutral tone is **the WB countries are weak**, with 41% of the articles being neutral, with 54% of them supporting the narrative. The narrative that has the most opposition is **NATO is not beneficial**, with 37% of articles opposing the narrative and 63% of them support it.



Tone of narratives

- ◆ Support
- ◆ Neutral
- ◆ Oppose



All articles under the nine narratives were qualitatively assessed to find the most common tone of the relevant narrative



MISLEADING HEADLINES

Although nearly one-third of the articles are neutral, Sputnik Srbija uses sensationalistic headlines to attract readers, while the articles as such are more balanced. Researchers have found that at least 10% of all of these articles have sensationalistic headlines. One was titled “Only Serbia Stayed Faithful to the End,” and it describes a musical and poetic evening that was organised to commemorate 180 years of diplomat relations between Serbia and Russia. Another example: “Economist Analysis: ‘Door to Hell’ is Opening in the Balkans” This article relates to an article in *The Economist* which looks at the idea of a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as the negative effects that this might have on stability in the Balkans. “Door to hell” is attributed to an EU official who said so. “Combat readiness: Belgrade’s only possible response to threats from Pristina” is a recommendation from a retired major general from Serbia, while the headline creates the impression that the army’s readiness is a government policy that is already in place. Sensationalistic headlines about EU and NATO member states are also common. One article considered the possible admission of migrants from Sicily into Montenegro, and the title was “Operation Sicily: Montenegro before a test that could change its blood count.” (This is a Serbian expression that might also mean “change the structure” or “change the

face of the country.”) Another article and its headline ridicules the German military: “Underwear with holes and broom handles instead of barrels in the German army.”

There are also misleading headlines such as “Spanish media: Serbia can give up on the EU because of Kosovo,” with Sputnik Srbija actually presenting an interview with President Vucic. *El Pais* pointed out that “leaving Kosovo is too high a price for Serbia to pay for EU membership,” while Vucic is quoted as claiming that EU membership is Serbia’s goal.



CONCLUSIONS

This quantitative and qualitative analysis of Sputnik Srbija online platform content from 2018 relates to six Western Balkan countries, the EU and NATO. The analysis makes it possible to identify several narratives which this Kremlin-funded media channel is promoting for BCMS-speaking audiences in the region.

The outlet emphasises the fact that the region is divided up into pro-Western and pro-Eastern sides, with published content aiming to deepen these divisions. The narratives depict countries that are close to the West in a negative light. Countries such as Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia are described as being in the hands of the West and with little power when it comes to their sovereignty. Still, they are also presented as corrupt, crime-ridden and unrelated to the rights of minorities. Meanwhile, Serbia is continually presented as a success story in the region.

It is also true that Serbia and Republika Srpska in BiH are presented as sympathisers of Russia, with many articles trying to extinguish any possible aspirations in those two countries about joining the EU and NATO. The EU is portrayed as hegemonic and meddling in regional dialogues, while NATO is seen as being aggressive and provocative toward Serbia and Russia.

Sputnik Srbija's content also correlates with the tone of narratives that are promoted by mainstream and pro-government media outlets in Serbia, with the dominant focus being on the issue of Kosovo. Russia is presented as a protector of Serbs in Kosovo, while the West is described as supporting Albanians in Kosovo. In contrast to the West, Russia is described as a military power of which NATO is afraid, but also as the victim of NATO's aggression near its borders, as well as in the Western Balkan region, where local populations and Russians have long-standing cultural and historic relations.

Most of these articles deal with the political issues, while the military domain is predominantly discussed in articles that relate to NATO narratives.

The tone is often in support of the identified narrative or neutral, while many headlines are viewed as sensationalistic because of the fairly balanced reporting that is found in the content of the relevant articles.

This year-long analysis shows that Sputnik Srbija presumably behaves like a professional media outlet. Most of its content (88%) is news reports (as opposed to commentary, analysis or interviews). Many of these are rather neutral when reporting on developments in the Western Balkans. At the same time, however, efforts



to combine real facts with fake ones, exaggerations or presentation of facts out of context provide many opportunities to shape public opinion.

Despite the fact that more than one-third of the Sputnik Srbija articles that were analysed had a neutral or opposing tone, most (65%) of the content supports narratives which depict developments in the Western Balkans in a negative light.

As is the case with Kremlin-funded media efforts in other regions and languages in Europe, the narratives that are presented on Sputnik's Serbian-language portal encourage feelings of unease, insecurity and worries in the region. The Western Balkans are presented as the next place of confrontation between NATO and Russia, with the six countries seen as having to pick sides sometime in future.



ANNEX 1. CASE STUDY: ALBANIA

While monitoring the content of Sputnik Srbija related to Albania, in total **332** articles were identified. Of these, **131** (or **40%**) directly relating to Albania and events in the country. Of the directly related articles, **109** were found to be relevant for further analysis.

Type

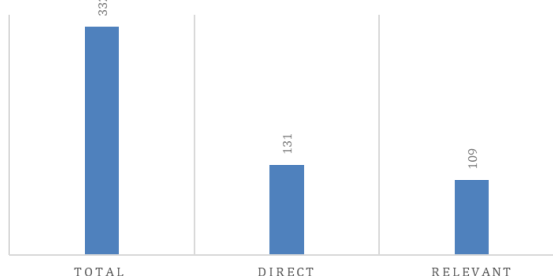
Most of these articles were news reports (99), among which there were 77 reports and 22 statements. There were also five analytical articles and five commentaries.

Interactions

Almost two-thirds of all engagements were dislikes (58%), followed by likes (39%) and comments (3%). The narrative with the

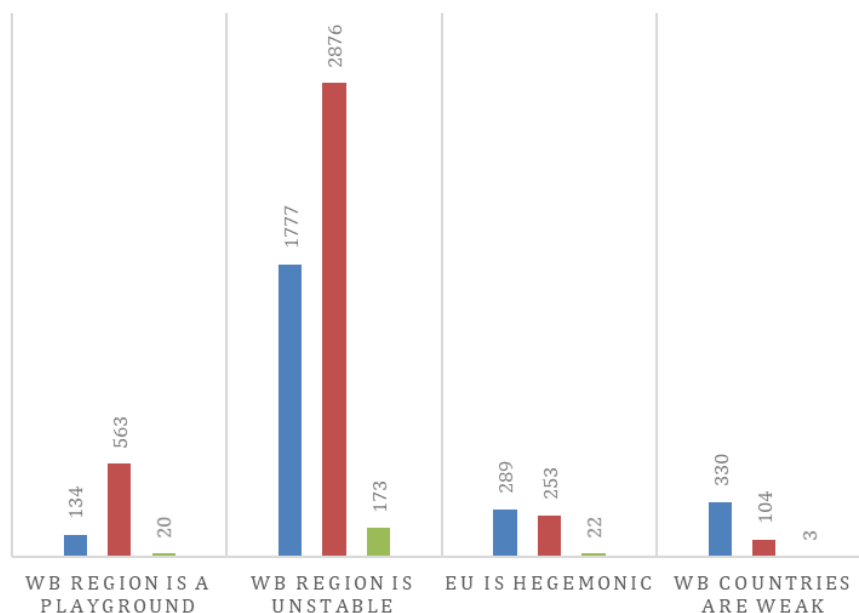
highest number of interactions is **the WB region is unstable** (which was also the most common narrative for Albania). On average, the second most engaged narrative was **the WB region is a playground**, which also had the highest average number of dislikes. The most often liked narrative, on average, was **EU is hegemonic**, and followed by **WB countries are weak**.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECT AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT ALBANIA



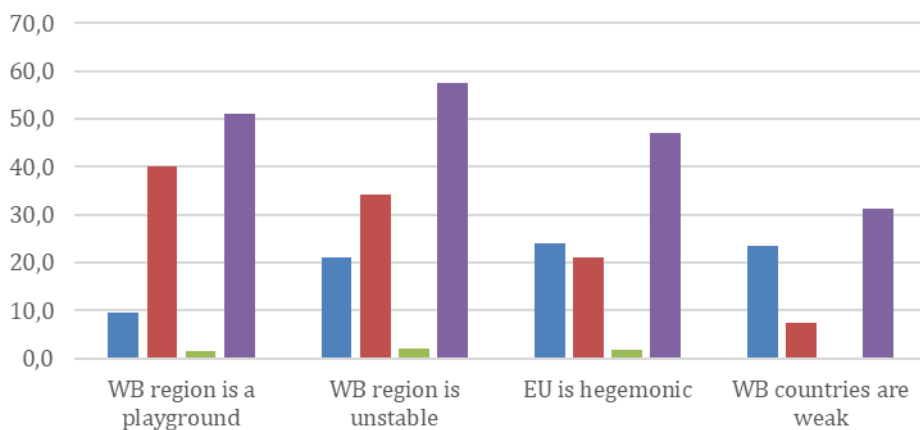
Total interactions related to articles about Albania

- ◆ likes
- ◆ dislikes
- ◆ comments



Average interactions per narrative related to articles about Albania

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords found to be used by Sputnik Srbija in terms of articles about Albania have been visualised with the help of the online tool Voyant (<https://voyant-tools.org>).



Narrative overview

Four defining narratives were identified (a single article could relate to more than one narrative). The most common narrative, found in 84 articles, was **WB region is unstable**, followed by **WB countries are weak** and **the WB region is a playground** (each found in 14 articles). The least common narrative, with 12 articles, was **the EU is hegemonic**.

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	84
The WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt	14
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	14
The EU is hegemonic	12

Table 3. The number of articles related to the most common narratives in relation to Albania

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were found in the defining narratives.

- **The WB region is unstable** is presented in terms of:
 - Creating Greater Albania (38 articles)
 - The Western Balkans support the establishment of the Kosovo state (14 articles)
 - Relations between Albania and Serbia are poor (6 articles)

- **WB countries are weak** sub-narratives:
 - Albania is a captured state (11 articles)
 - Albania is a criminal state (8 articles)
- **The WB region is a playground** is linked to the sub-narrative which suggests that the region is under the influence of the West (12 articles)
- **The EU is hegemonic** sub-narratives:
 - The EU is the key decision-maker in the WB (8 articles)
 - The EU is sending mixed signals about enlargement to the WB (4 articles)

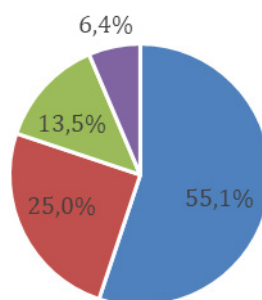
Domains

The most common one was the political domain (86 articles), this representing more than one-half of articles about Albania. This domain was followed by the social (25%), military (14%) and economic (6%) domains. Most articles in the political domain related to the narratives **the EU is hegemonic** and **the WB region is unstable**. Most articles related to the social domain focused on the narrative **the WB countries are weak**. Articles related to the military domain were most frequently discussing the narrative **the WB region is a playground** (more than 40%). The economic domain was found mostly in relation to the narrative **the WB region is unstable** (nearly 10%).



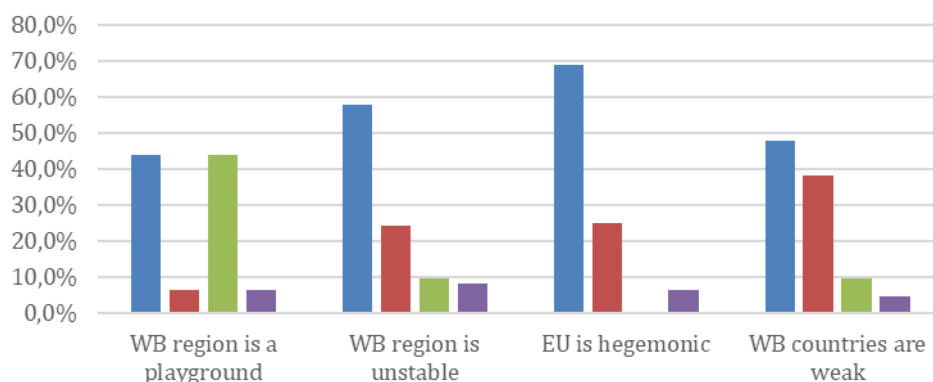
Main domains for all relevant articles related to Albania

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic



Domains per narrative for Albania-related articles

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic

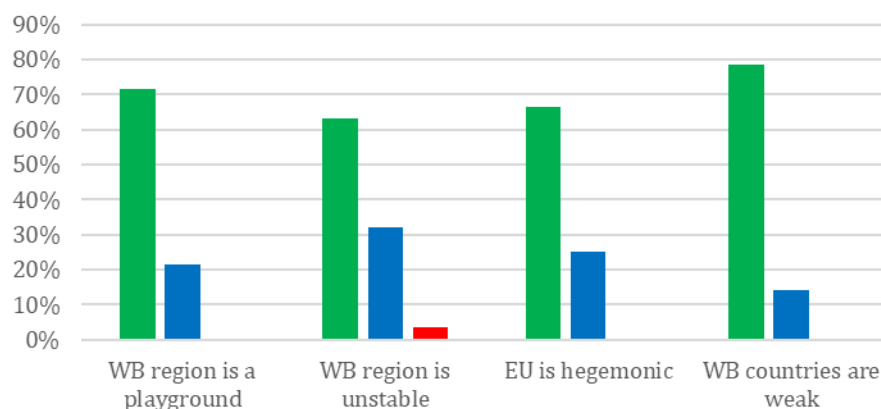


Tone

Most of the supportive articles about Albania fell into the narrative **WB countries are weak** (almost 80%). Most neutral articles related to the narratives **the WB region is unstable** and **the EU is hegemonic**. The only articles which to varied extent opposed the narrative and provided opposing views related to the narrative **the WB region is unstable**.

Tone per narrative related to Albania

- ◆ Support
- ◆ Neutral
- ◆ Oppose



ANNEX 2. CASE STUDY: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (BiH)

The search for articles related to BiH identified **1,269 articles**, among which **830 (65%)** were directly related to the subject. **534** articles were rated as relevant for further analysis.

Type

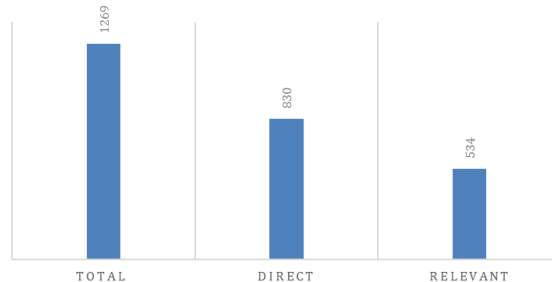
Most of the published articles were news reports (483), of which 298 were statements and 185 reports, as well as 27 commentaries, 20 analytical pieces, and four interviews.

Interactions

Likes were the most common type of interaction, representing nearly two-thirds of all interactions and followed by dislikes (39%) and comments representing as little as 2.5% of the interactions. The most engaging narrative was **the WB**

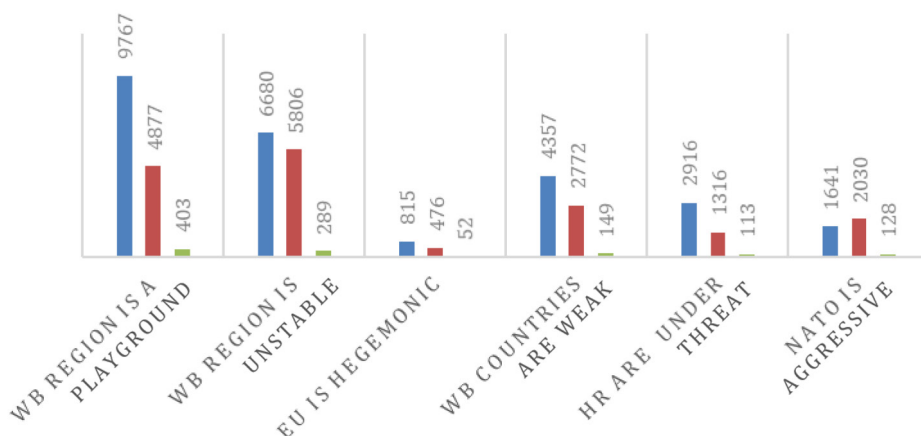
region is a playground which attracted nearly 10,000 likes. This, however, is also the narrative with the largest number of articles as such. On average, the greatest engagement is related to the narrative **NATO is aggressive**, with the largest number of dislikes. This was also the narrative with the highest number of average likes and comments, while the narrative **the EU is hegemonic** attracted the second largest number of comments on average.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECT AND RELEVANT ARTICLES FOR BiH



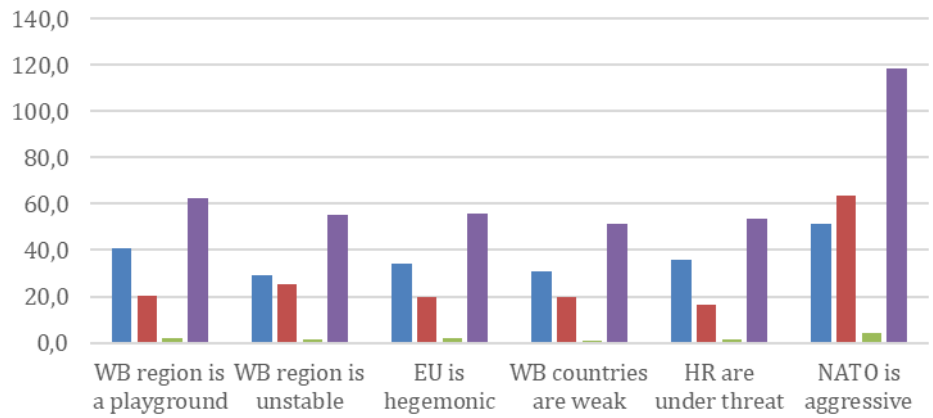
Total interactions for BiH-related articles

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles related to BiH

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords found to be used by Sputnik Srbija in terms of articles about BiH have been visualised below with the help of the online tool Voyant (<https://voyant-tools.org>).



Narrative overview

Six defining narratives were identified, though a single article could belong to more than one narrative. The most common narrative was **the WB region is a playground**, followed by **the WB region is unstable**. The fewest articles (24) related to the narrative **the EU is hegemonic** (Table 4).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West	240
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	230
WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt	141
Human rights are under threat	81
NATO is aggressive	32
The EU is hegemonic	24

Table 4 The number of articles related to the most common narratives in relation to BiH

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were found in the defining narratives.

- The **WB region is a playground** narrative has the following sub-narratives:
 - The region is under the influence of the West (102 articles)

- Serbia is the biggest ally of Republika Srpska (60)
- Russia and Serbia are traditional friends (58)
- The West mistreats Republika Srpska (15)
- Bosnia and Turkey are traditional friends (12)

- The **WB region is unstable** sub-narratives:
 - Relations between Republika Srpska and the Federation are poor (58 articles)
 - BiH is unable to protect its borders against migrants (36)
 - Serbia should receive compensation if it loses Kosovo (10)
 - Republika Srpska should be independent (10)
 - Serbs are not guilty of war crimes in Srebrenica (8)
 - Relations between BiH and Croatia are bad (7)
- The third most common narrative, **WB countries are weak** sub-narratives:
 - The Dayton Agreement failed to reach a solution (43 articles)
 - BiH is a criminal country (40)
 - BiH is a captured state (30)
- **Human rights are under threat** sub-narratives
 - Serbs are endangered in BiH (54 articles)
 - Croats are endangered in BiH (9)



▪ **NATO is aggressive** sub-narratives:

- Depleted uranium is harmful (8 articles)
- NATO is forcing countries to join it (7)
- Republika Srpska will never join NATO (6)

▪ **The EU is hegemonic** sub-narratives:

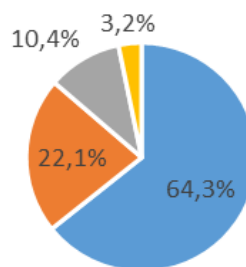
- The EU is a key decision-maker in the WB (15 articles)
- The EU is discriminating Republika Srpska (4)

Domains

The most common domain is political (more than two-thirds of articles), followed by the social domain (22%), the military domain (10%), and the economic domain (3%). The narrative **the EU is hegemonic** relates to most of the articles in the political domain, while **HR are under threat** is most often mentioned in articles from the social domain. **NATO is aggressive** relates to the largest number of articles in military domain, while **the EU is hegemonic** is found in the largest number of economic articles.

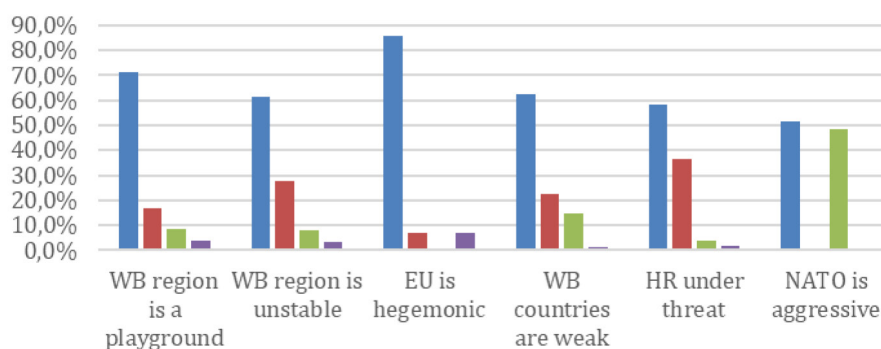
Main domains for all relevant articles related to BiH

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains per narrative related to articles about BiH

- political
- social
- military
- economic

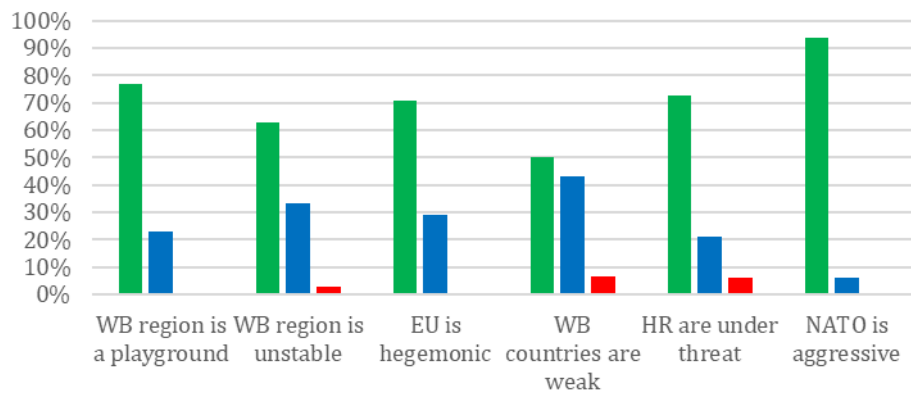


Tone

The narrative **NATO is aggressive** is supported by the tone of articles, while articles related to the narrative **WB countries are weak** are, for the most part, neutral. **Human rights are under threat** and **WB countries are weak** have the most opposition in articles, with nearly 10% of them relating to these narratives.

Tone per narrative in articles related to BiH

- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose



ANNEX 3. CASE STUDY: KOSOVO

1,918 articles contain the search word Kosovo, and among them, 1,556 or 81% are directly related. The number of relevant articles which were studied was 1,450.

Type

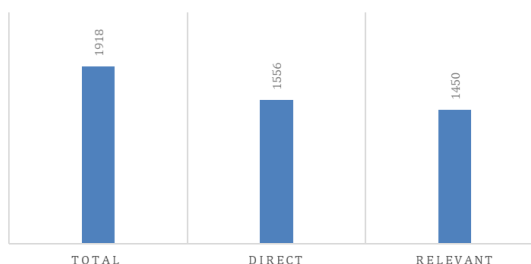
The most common type of articles was news (1,293 articles, including 834 statements and 456 reports), 115 commentaries, 36 analytical articles and five interviews.

Interactions

One-half of all engagements related to articles about Kosovo are likes, closely followed by dislikes (47%), with comments representing fewer than 4% of all engagements. The narrative with the largest

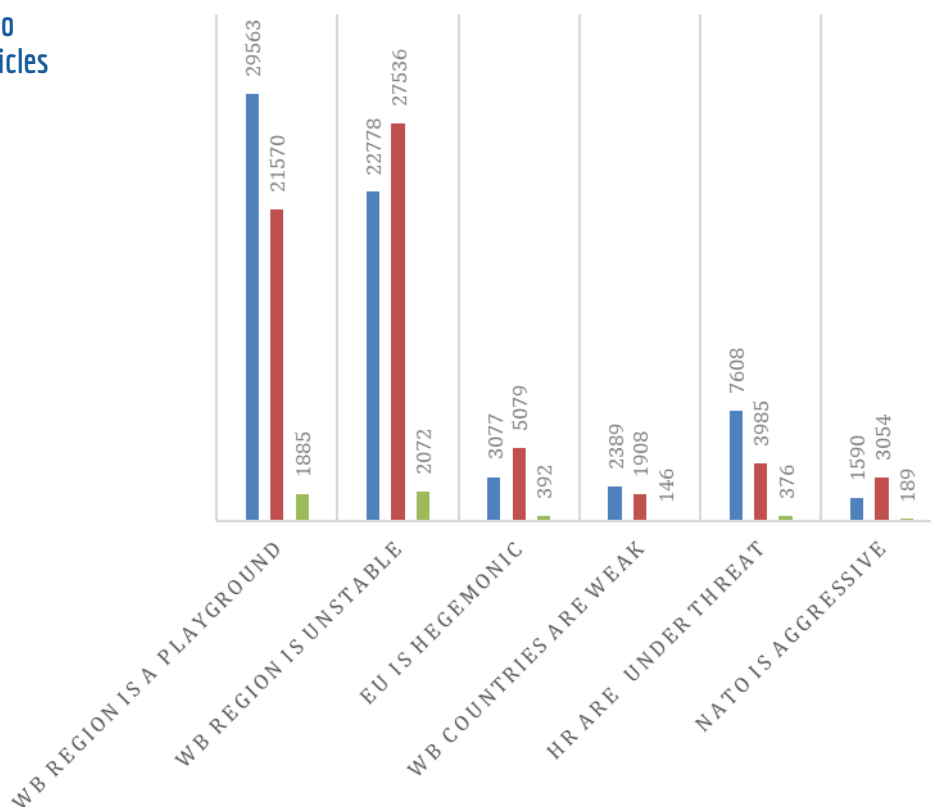
number and average of interactions is **the WB region is a playground**. On average, **NATO is aggressive** was the second most-engaged narrative, with most of the interactions being dislikes. **The WB region is a playground** had the most likes, on average, while **the EU is hegemonic** received the most comments, on average.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECT AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT KOSOVO

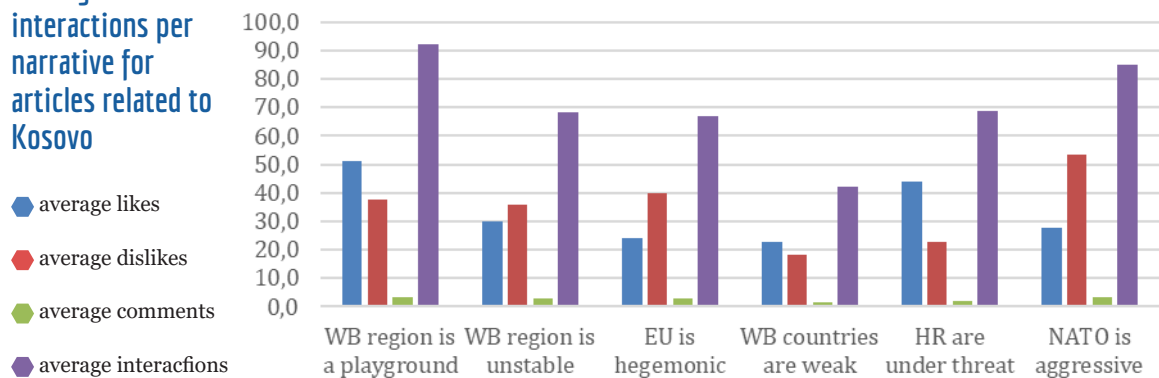


Total interactions to Kosovo-related articles

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles related to Kosovo



The 105 most common keywords assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles relevant to Kosovo are visualised below with the use of the online tool Voyant <https://voyant-tools.org>.



Narrative overview

Six defining narratives were identified in relation to Kosovo, and the most common ones were **the WB region is unstable** and **the WB region is a playground**. The least common narrative was **NATO is aggressive** (Table 5).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	765
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	576
Human rights are under threat	174
The EU is hegemonic	128
WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt	106
NATO is aggressive and provocative	57

Table 5. The number of articles related to the most common narratives related to Kosovo

Some subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were identified for defining narratives:

- There were four sub-narratives for the narrative **the WB region is unstable**:
 - Relations between Kosovo and Serbia are bad (487 articles)
 - Kosovo is the main destabiliser in the region (73)
 - Creating Greater Albania (40)
 - Building of Kosovar army would only destabilise the region (25)

- **The WB is a playground** sub-narratives:

- The region is under the influence of the West (163 articles)
- The United States is involved in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (93)
- Kosovo is losing its international allies (88)
- Russia and Serbia are traditional friends (83)
- Deepening co-operation between Kosovo and the United States (32)
- The WB support the establishment of Kosovo (19)

- **HR are under threat** relates to a sub-narrative which claims that Serbs are endangered in Kosovo (158 articles)

- **The EU is hegemonic** sub-narratives:

- The EU is a key decision-maker in WB countries (58 articles)
- The EU is sending mixed signals about enlargement to the WB (54)
- The EU is not keeping promises about a 2025 membership deadline (3)

- **WB countries are weak** sub-narratives:

- Kosovo is a criminal country (47 articles)
- Kosovo is a captured state (14)
- Intolerance between President Hashim Thaci and (former) Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj (10)

- **NATO is aggressive** sub-narratives:

- NATO supports the building of a Kosovar army (13 articles)
- Depleted uranium is harmful (4)

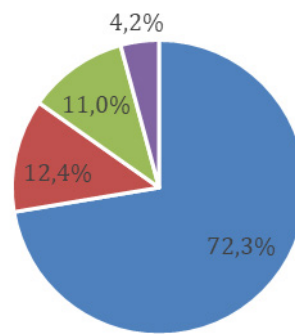


Domains

The majority (72%) of articles about Kosovo are part of the political domain, followed by the social and military domains (12% and 11%). Only 4% of all articles about Kosovo relate to the economic domain. **The EU is hegemonic** has the largest number of articles in the social domain (one-third of all articles in this narrative). **NATO is aggressive** is the most military-related narrative, while **the EU is hegemonic** has the largest number of articles from the economic domain.

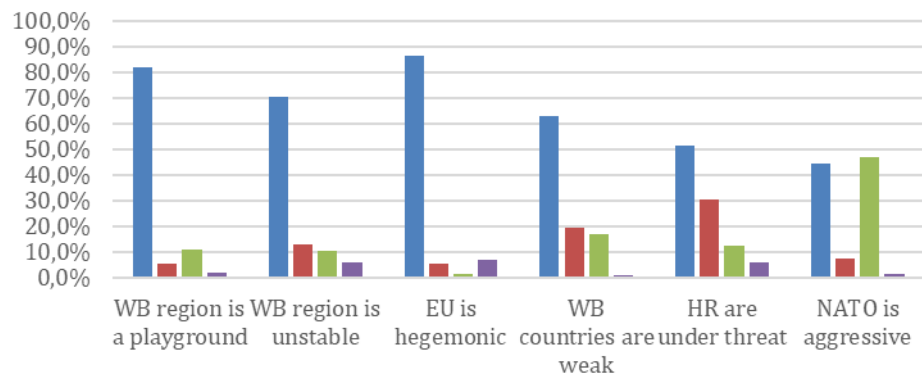
Main domains for all relevant articles related to Kosovo

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains per narrative related to articles about Kosovo

- political
- social
- military
- economic

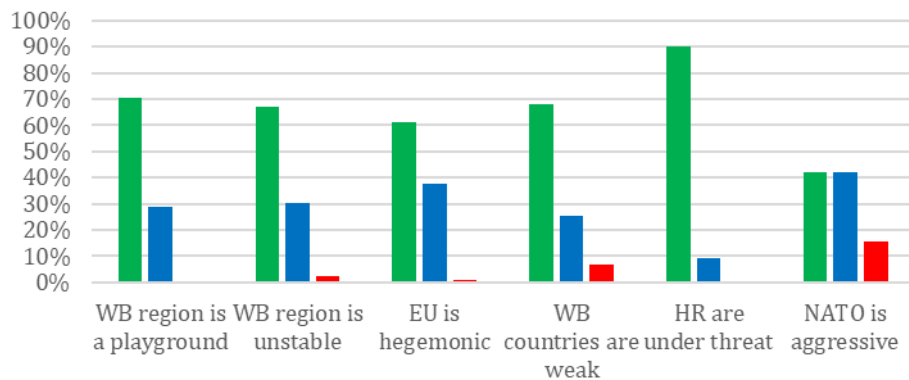


Tone

Articles about Kosovo generally support the identified narratives, with the greatest support for the narrative **HR are under threat** (90%). The most neutral tone is found in articles which relate to **NATO is aggressive**, with an equal number of supporting and neutral articles, as well as the largest number of neutral and opposing articles.

Tone per narrative in articles related to Kosovo

- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose



ANNEX 4. CASE STUDY: MONTENEGRO

704 articles contained the search word Montenegro, and **554 or 79%** of them were directly to the subject. **448** articles were selected for further examination.

Type

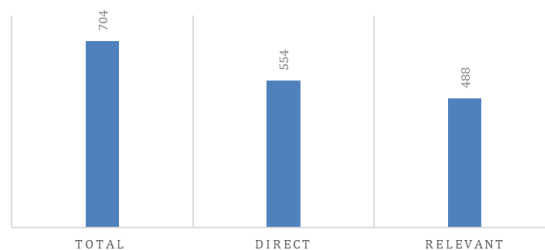
The most common type of articles was news (365 including 181 statements and 182 reports), 62 analytical pieces, 40 commentaries and 12 interviews.

Interactions

Half of all interactions for articles about Montenegro were likes, followed by dislikes (46%) and comments (only 4%). **HR are under threat** is the narrative with the greatest number of interactions (nearly

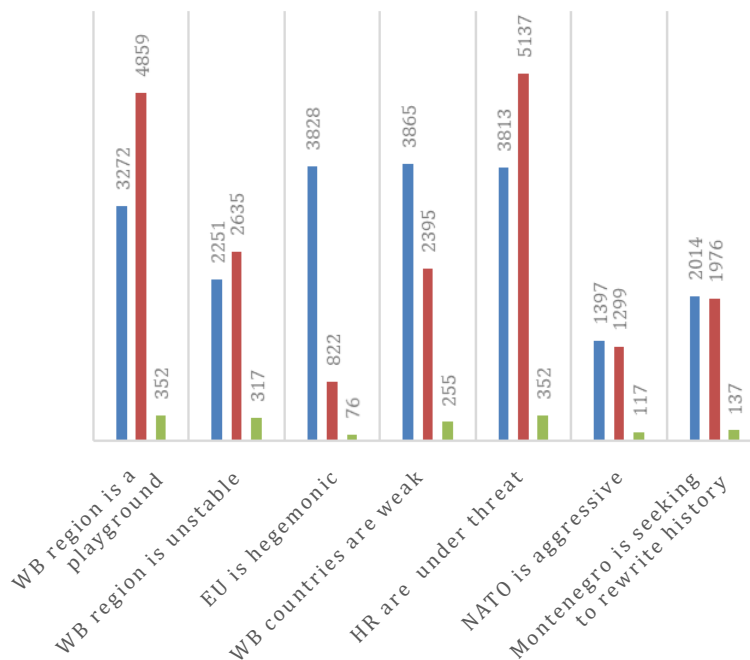
10,000), and it is the second most common narrative in relation to the subject. **The EU is hegemonic**, however, had the most engagements on average, with an average of 140 likes per article. The most disliked narrative, on average, is **the WB region is a playground**, while **the WB region is unstable** attracted the most comments, on average.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECTLY RELATED AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT MONTENEGRO



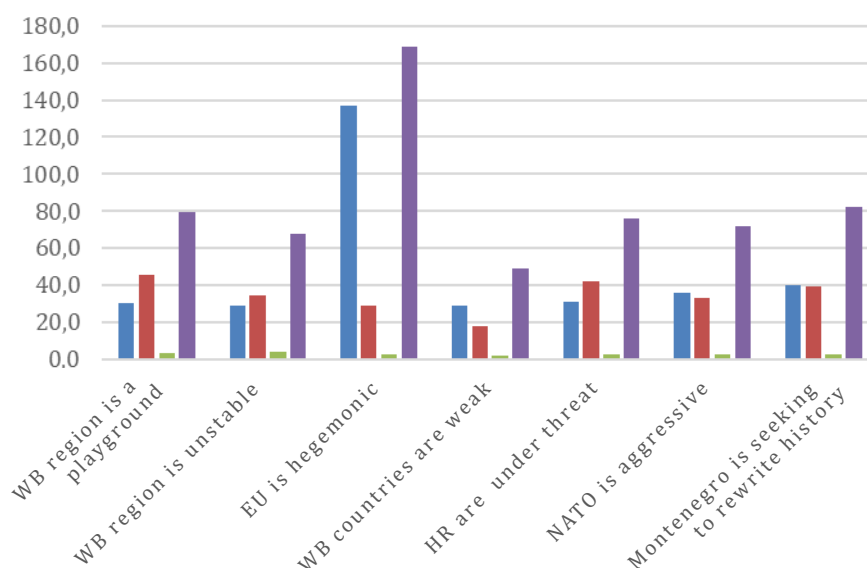
Total interactions for articles about Montenegro

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles about Montenegro

- ◆ average likes
- ◆ average dislikes
- ◆ average comments
- ◆ average interactions



Narrative overview

There are seven defining narratives in relation to Montenegro, among which the most common ones are **WB countries are weak**, followed by **HR are under threat**. A more subject-specific defining narrative is **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history**, which was found in 51 of the relevant articles. **The EU is hegemonic** was the least common narrative, found in 27 articles (Table 6).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt	132
Human rights are under threat	122
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	107
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	77
Montenegro is trying to rewrite history	50
NATO is aggressive and provocative	39
The EU is hegemonic	28

Table 6: The number of articles related to the most common narratives about Montenegro



There are several subject-specific sub-narratives and themes in the defining narratives:

- **The WB countries are weak** is presented through these sub-narratives:
 - Montenegro is a captured state (98 articles)
 - Montenegro is a criminal country (13)
 - Intolerance among opposition parties (11)
 - Montenegro faced election violations (6)
- **HR are under threat** sub-narratives:
 - Serbs are endangered in Montenegro (80 articles)
 - The WB support the establishment of Kosovo (28)
- **The WB region is a playground** sub-narratives:
 - The region is under the influence of the West (55 articles)
 - Turning away from Russia has negative consequences for Montenegro (13)
 - Russia is a traditional friend of Montenegro (13)
- **The WB region is unstable** sub-narratives:
 - Relations between Montenegro and Serbia are bad (27 articles)
 - Creating Greater Albania (18 articles)
- **NATO is aggressive** sub-narratives:
 - NATO is forcing countries to join it (20 articles)
 - NATO membership means that

Montenegro has lost its sovereignty (6)
- Depleted uranium is harmful (2)

- **The EU is hegemonic** sub-narratives:
 - The EU is a key decision-maker in the region (18 articles)
 - The EU is not keeping promises about the 2025 membership deadline (7)

Domains

The most common domain in terms of articles about Montenegro is the political domain, and nearly one-half of stories are part of that domain. The social domain has one-third of articles, while the military and economic domains are far less common – 14% and 3%. In terms of the narratives, **the EU is hegemonic** has the largest number of articles in the political domain, while **HR are under threat** is predominantly based on social issues. **NATO is aggressive** primarily relates to military topics (nearly two-thirds of all articles in this narrative), while most of the economic articles relate to **the WB region is a playground** narrative.

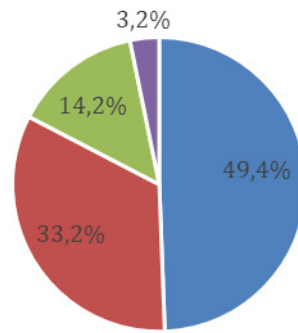
Tone

Three of the narratives related to Montenegro are strongly supportive (nearly 70%) – **HR are under threat**, **NATO is aggressive**, and **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history**. The three most neutral narratives, however are to **the WB region is a playground** (with an equal number of supportive and neutral articles), **the EU is hegemonic**, and **WB countries are weak**. **The EU is hegemonic** is the most opposed narrative, as is **NATO is aggressive**. In both cases, 10% of the articles have an opposing tone.



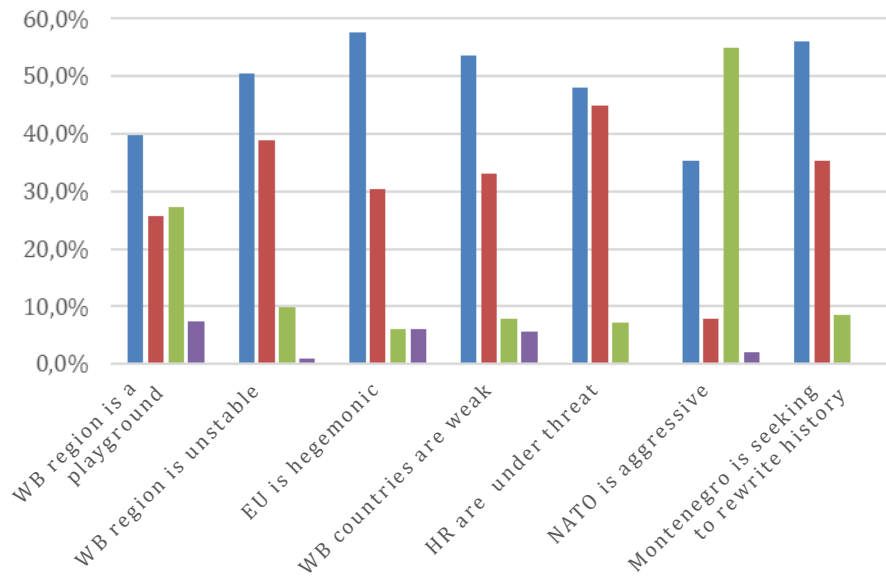
Main domains for articles relevant to Montenegro

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic



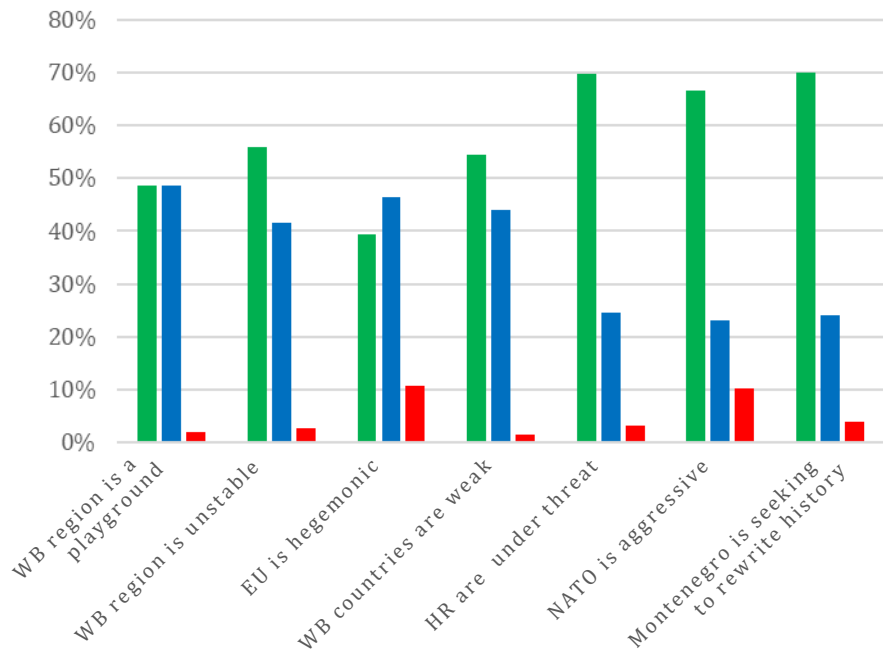
Domains per narrative for articles about Montenegro

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic



Tone per narrative related to Montenegro

- ◆ Support
- ◆ Neutral
- ◆ Oppose



ANNEX 5. CASE STUDY: NORTH MACEDONIA

A search concerning North Macedonia found **548 articles**, among which 366 (61%) were directly related to the subject. **341 articles** about North Macedonia were assessed as relevant and analysed to a greater degree.

Type

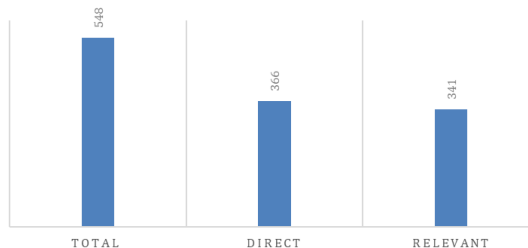
News (295) represent the most common type of articles about North Macedonia, including 131 statements and 164 reports, it is followed by 41 commentaries, three analytical pieces and two interviews.

Interactions

Half of all interactions related to articles about North Macedonia were dislikes, followed by likes (45% and comments (3%). The narrative **WB countries are weak** attracted the most interactions, while **the EU**

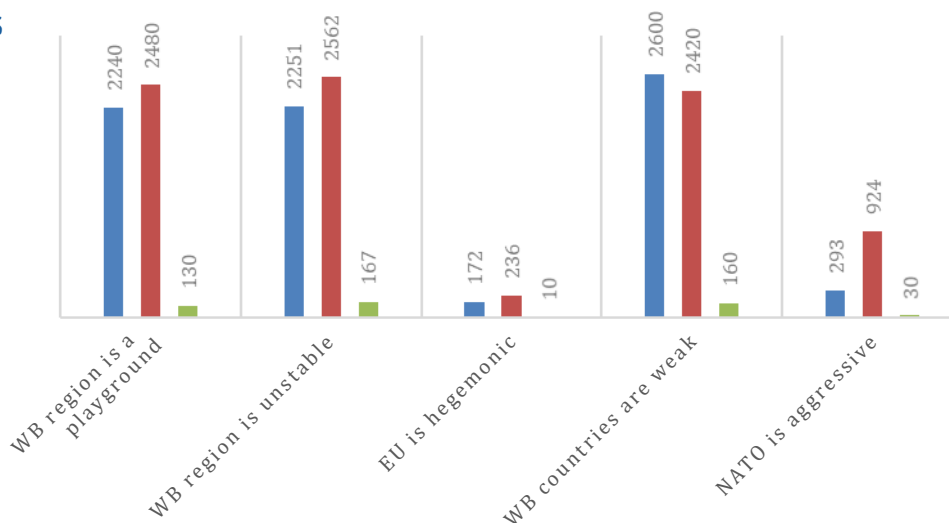
is hegemonic had the fewest. On average, **the WB region is a playground** had the most interactions and was the narrative with the most likes, on average. The narrative with the largest average number of dislikes was **NATO is aggressive**, while **the WB region is a playground** and **the WB region is unstable** attracted the greatest number of comments for each article.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECT AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT NORTH MACEDONIA



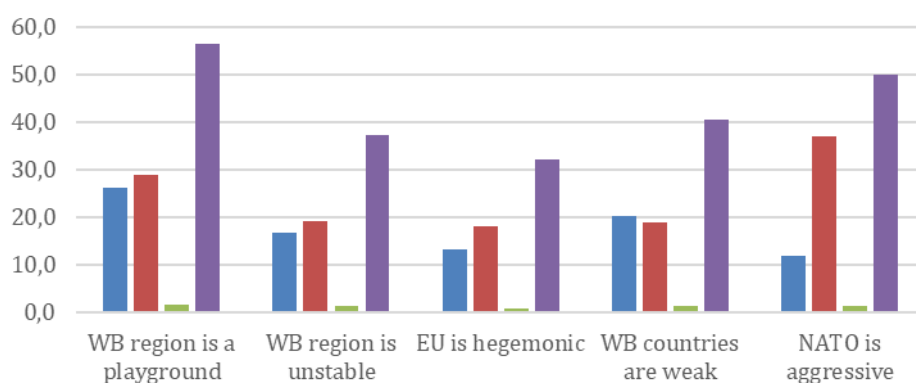
Total interactions for articles about North Macedonia

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles about North Macedonia

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles about North Macedonia are visualised below by the online tool Voyant <https://voyant-tools.org>.



Narrative overview

Five defining narratives were identified, and the two most common ones were **the WB region is unstable** and **WB countries are weak**. The least frequent narrative was **the EU is hegemonic**, with only 13 articles (Table 7).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	134
WB countries are weak and incapable/corrupt	128
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	86
NATO is aggressive and provocative	25
The EU is hegemonic	13

Table 7. The number of articles related to the most common narratives in relation to North Macedonia

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were identified in the defining narratives.

- **The WB region is unstable** sub-narratives:
 - Relations between Macedonia and Greece are bad (75 articles)
 - Creating Greater Albania (5)
- **The WB countries are weak** sub-narratives:
 - Intolerance among opposition parties (71 articles)
 - North Macedonia is a captured state (63)

- North Macedonia is a criminal country (63)
- The name change referendum was invalid (6)

- **The WB region is a playground** sub-narratives:

- The region is under the influence of the West (74 articles)
- Turning away from Russia has negative consequences for North Macedonia (6)
- Russia is a traditional friend of Macedonia (6)

- **NATO is aggressive** involves the sub-narrative NATO is forcing countries to join it (11 articles)

- **The EU is hegemonic** involves the sub-narrative the EU is a key decision-maker in the Western Balkans (11 articles)

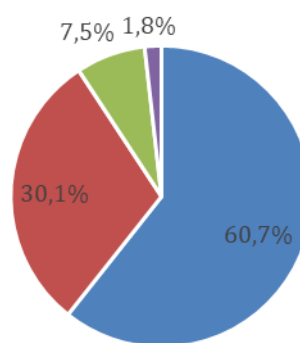
Domains

Two-thirds of articles related to North Macedonia related to the political domain, with one-third relating to the social domain. The remaining 10% were divided up between the military (8%) and economic domains (2%). **The WB region is a playground** had the largest number of articles in the political domain, while **the WB region is unstable** had the most articles in the social domain. Nearly 40% of articles under the **NATO is aggressive** domain were in the military domain, while most articles related to **the WB region is unstable** were part of the economic domain (nevertheless, fewer than 10%).



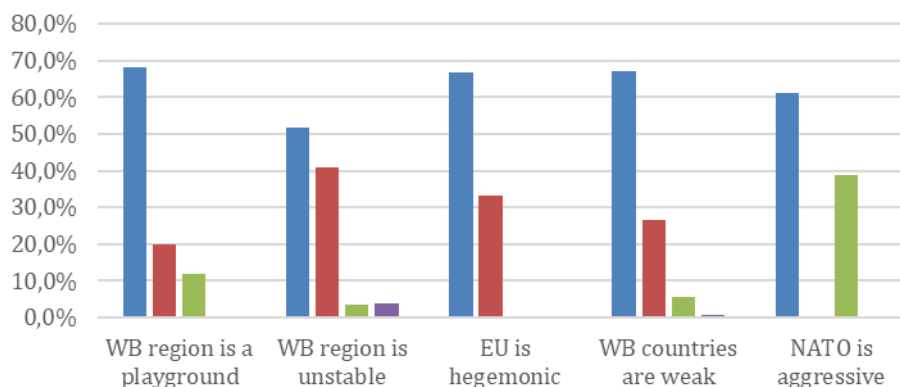
Main domains for articles relevant to North Macedonia

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic



Domains per narrative for articles about North Macedonia

- ◆ political
- ◆ social
- ◆ military
- ◆ economic

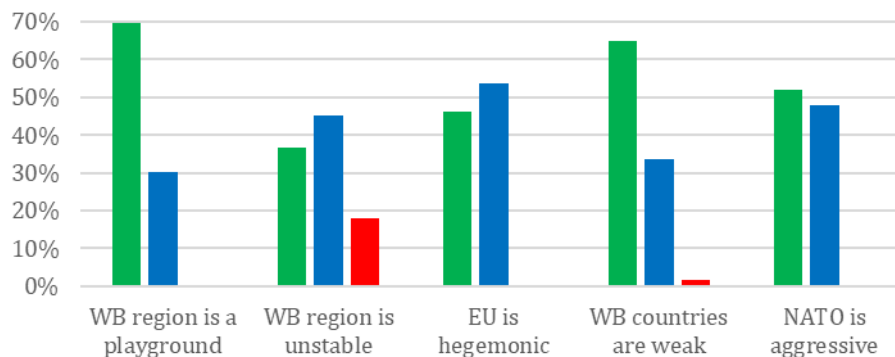


Type

The narrative with the largest number of articles which support the narrative is **the WB region is a playground** (70%), while **the EU is hegemonic** has the most neutral articles (more than one-half). The narrative with the most opposing articles is **the WB region is unstable**, while other narratives had no opposing articles (the exception being **WB countries are weak**, with 2% of opposing articles).

Tone per narrative related to North Macedonia

- ◆ Support
- ◆ Neutral
- ◆ Oppose



ANNEX 6. CASE STUDY: SERBIA

3,198 articles included the search word for Serbia, and **2,499 (78%)** were directly related to the subject. **2,095 articles** were chosen for further analysis.

Type

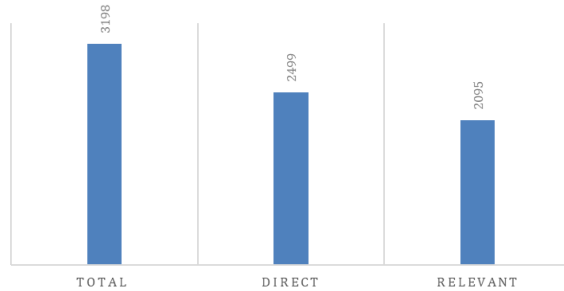
1,929 articles were news (including 1,183 statements and 746 reports), 82 commentaries, 67 analytical pieces and 17 interviews.

Interactions

More than one-half of all engagements with articles about Serbia were likes, followed by dislikes (40%) and comments (4%). **The WB region is a playground** attracted the greatest number of interactions, but it was also the most common narrative. On

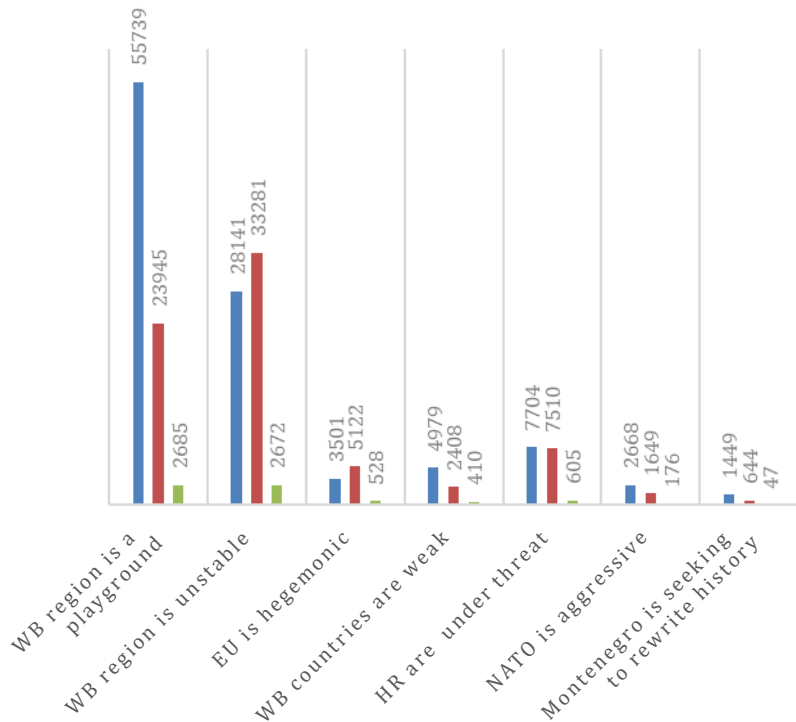
average, though, it was only the second most-engaged narrative, because the narrative with the greatest average number of interactions was **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history**, which had the fewest number of articles. It was the most liked narrative per article, while the narrative with the most dislikes and comments was **the EU is hegemonic**.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECTLY RELATED AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT SERBIA



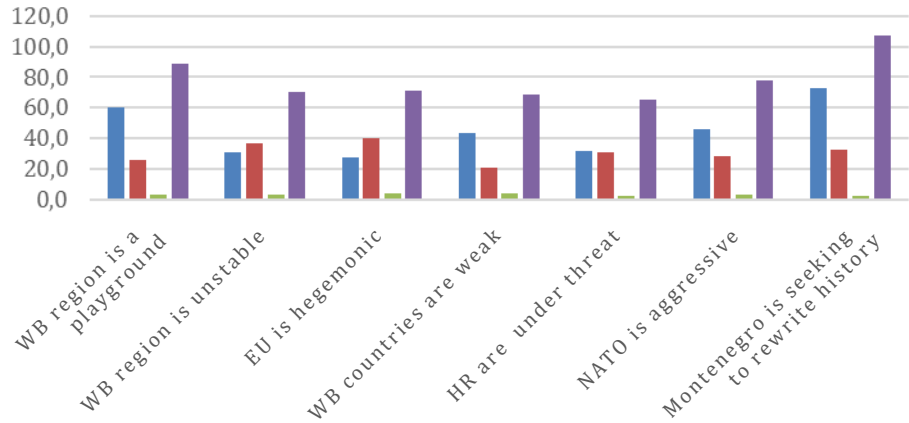
Total interactions for articles about Serbia

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles about Serbia

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles about Serbia are visualised below with the online tool Voyant: <https://voyant-tools.org>.



Narrative overview

Seven defining narratives were identified with respect to Serbia, and the most common ones were **the WB region is a playground** and **the WB region is unstable** (two-thirds of all relevant articles. The least common narrative (20 articles) was **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history** (Table 8).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West	927
The WB region is unstable, and there is a high potential for conflict	909
Human rights are under threat	244
The EU is hegemonic	128
WB countries are weak and incapable, corrupt	114
NATO is aggressive and provocative	58
Montenegro is trying to rewrite history	20

Table 8. The number of articles related to the most common narratives in relation to Serbia

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were identified in the defining narratives.

■ **The WB region is a playground**

sub-narratives:

- Russia and Serbia are traditional friends (345 articles)

- The region is under the influence of the West (217)
- Serbia is the biggest ally of Republika Srpska (72)
- Serbia and China are good friends (39)
- The United States is involved in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (38)
- Deepening co-operation between Serbia and the United States (34)
- The WB support the establishment of Kosovo (6)

■ **The WB region is unstable**

sub-narratives:

- Relations between Kosovo and Serbia are bad (527 articles)
- Relations between Serbia and Croatia are bad (72)
- Kosovo is the main destabiliser in the region (43)
- Relations between Serbia and Montenegro are bad (25)
- Creating Greater Albania (15)

■ **HR are under threat**

sub-narratives:

- Serbs are endangered in Kosovo (130 articles)
- Serbs are endangered in Montenegro (37)

■ **The EU is hegemonic**

sub-narratives:

- The EU is a key decision-maker in the Western Balkans (81 articles)
- The EU is not keeping promises about the 2025 membership deadline (26)



▪ **WB countries are weak** sub-narratives:

- Serbia is the regional leader (54 articles)
- Serbia is a captured state (14)
- Serbia is a criminal country (9)

▪ **NATO is aggressive**

sub-narratives:

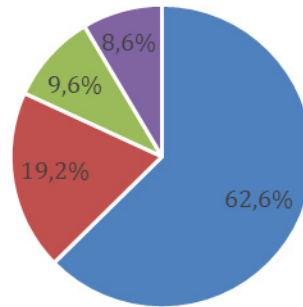
- Depleted uranium is harmful (17 articles)
- NATO is forcing countries to join it (8)

Domains

More than two-thirds of articles about Serbia are political, while one-fifth are part of the social domain. The military and economic domain share fewer than 10% of the articles. **The EU is hegemonic** has the greatest number of political articles, while **Montenegro is trying to rewrite history** has the highest percentage of articles from the social domain. **WB countries are weak** and **NATO is aggressive** have many articles in the military domain – one-fourth of articles in each of the domains. **WB countries are weak** has the greatest number of articles in economic domain.

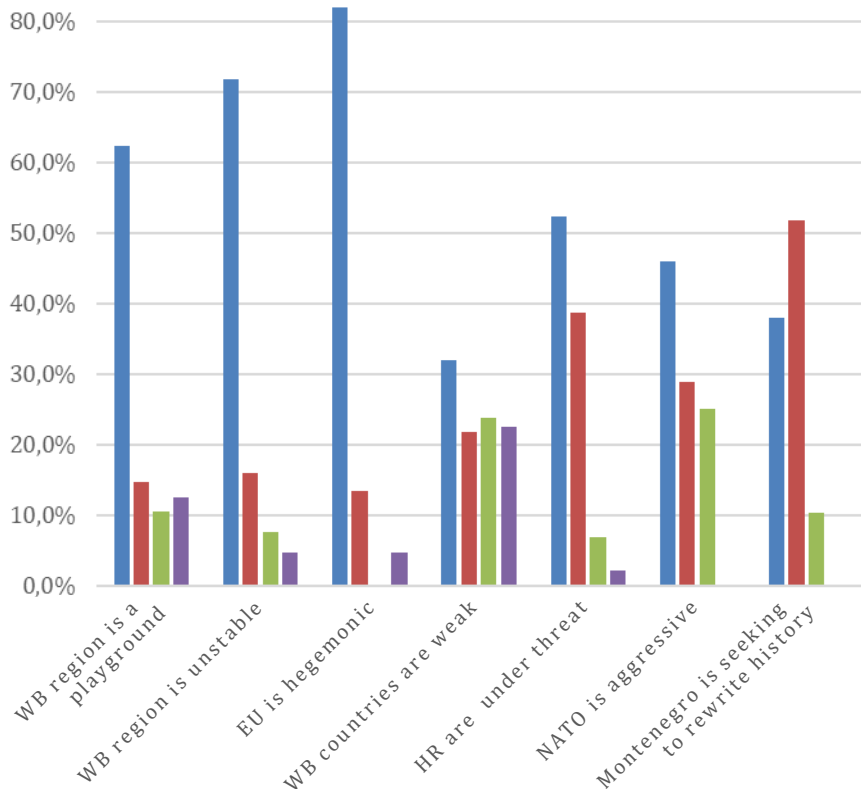
Main domains for all articles about Serbia

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains per narrative for articles about Serbia

- political
- social
- military
- economic

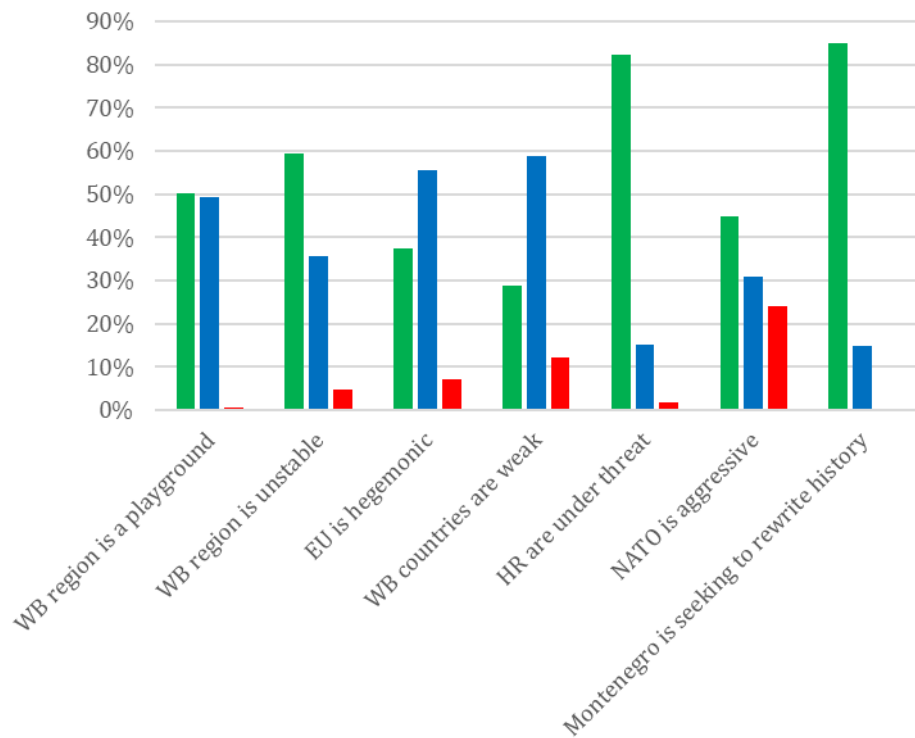


Tone

The two most supported narratives are **Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history** and **HR are under threat** (more than 80%), with almost no articles which oppose the narratives. The most neutral narratives in relation to Serbia are **WB countries are weak** and **the EU is hegemonic**. The narrative **the WB region is a playground** is the most balanced one, with an almost equal percentage of supportive and neutral articles. **NATO is aggressive** has the highest number of opposing articles – nearly one-fourth of articles in this domain.

Tone per narrative for articles about Serbia

- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose



ANNEX 7. CASE STUDY: THE EUROPEAN UNION

Almost **2,000 articles** contained the search word EU, but only 1,302 (66%) were directly related to the subject. **1,242** articles were chosen for further research.

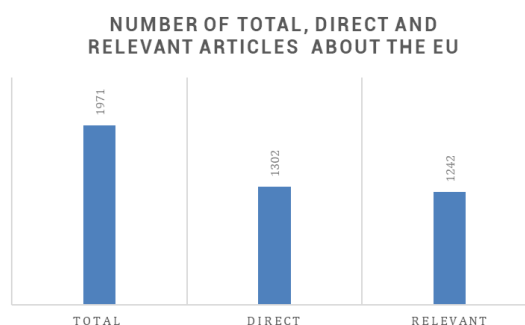
Type

News (1097) is the most common type (statements – 739 and reports - 358), followed by comments (91), analyses (46), and interviews (8).

Interactions

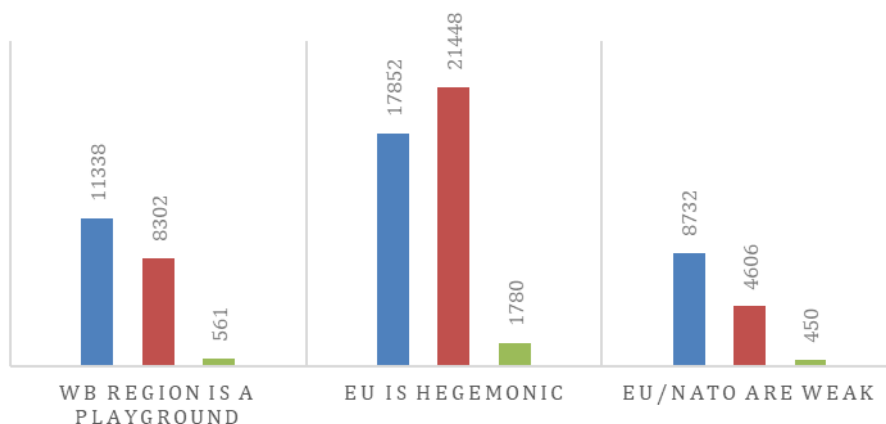
One-half of interactions concerning the EU are likes, followed by dislikes (46%) and comments (4%). The most frequently found narrative about the EU is **the EU is**

hegemonic, with the largest number of total and average interactions. The most like narrative, on average, is **the WB region is a playground**, while the most disliked one is **the EU is hegemonic**. The latter narrative also attracted the largest number of comments per articles.



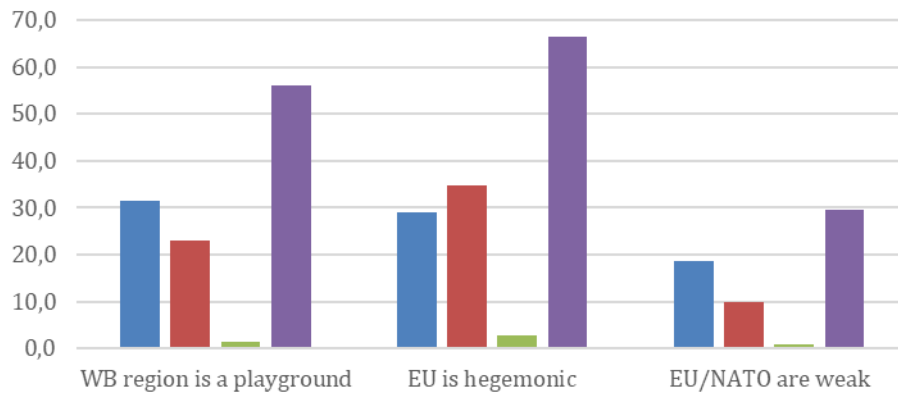
Total interactions for articles about the EU

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles about the EU

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles about the EU are visualised below with the online tool Voyant: <https://voyant-tools.org>



Narrative overview

Three defining narratives were identified, with **the EU is hegemonic** being the most common one (Table 9).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The EU is hegemonic	617
EU/NATO are weak and not united	465
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	360

Table 9. The number of articles related to the most common narratives about the EU

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were identified for the defining narratives:

- Articles concerning **the EU is hegemonic** focus on disagreements in the EU about Eastern enlargement, as well as the primary issues which WB countries must resolve so as to become eligible for membership. These include the status and borders of Kosovo. Many of the articles track the EU's involvement in the name change referendum in North Macedonia, thus highlighting the "hegemony" of the EU. **The EU is hegemonic** sub-narratives:
 - The Western Balkans are under the influence of the EU (386 articles)
 - The EU is sending mixed signals about enlargement to the WB (178)
 - The Western Balkans might join the EU soon (79)
 - Enlargement fatigue (56)
 - The EU is trying to control events outside of Europe (14)

- **The EU/NATO are weak and not united**

relates to internal conflicts in the EU, as well as fractions between Europe and the United States. The sub-narratives:

- The EU is weak and divided
 - Disagreements among member states (105 articles)
 - Brexit is weakening the EU (92)
 - The EU cannot handle the refugee crisis (75)
 - Nationalism is on the rise (14)
- Relations between the EU and the United States are deteriorating
 - EU countries and the US disagree over the Nord Stream 2 project (20 articles)
 - Conflicts over EU-USA tariffs (50)
 - Disagreement between the EU and the US about sanctions against Iran (38)
 - Building an EU army would weaken NATO (13)

- Many of the articles about the EU involve narratives about the region such as **the Western Balkan region is a playground**. These articles deal with clashes between East and West, but do not necessarily feature any of the six countries as search words. **The WB region is a playground** sub-narratives:
 - The EU vs Russia (189 articles)
 - The EU and Russia are co-operating (69)
 - Ukraine is seeking help from the West (30)
 - The EU and Iran are co-operating (12)

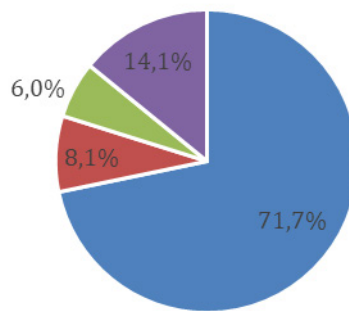


Domains

Most articles about the EU are in the political domain, followed by the economic (14%), social (8%) and military (6%) domains. **The EU is hegemonic** has the highest percentage of politically related articles (nearly 90%), while the narrative **the EU/NATO are weak** has about 10% of articles which relate to the social domain. Most articles from the military domain relate to **the WB is a playground**, while the greatest number of economic articles relate to **the WB is a playground** and **the EU/NATO are weak**.

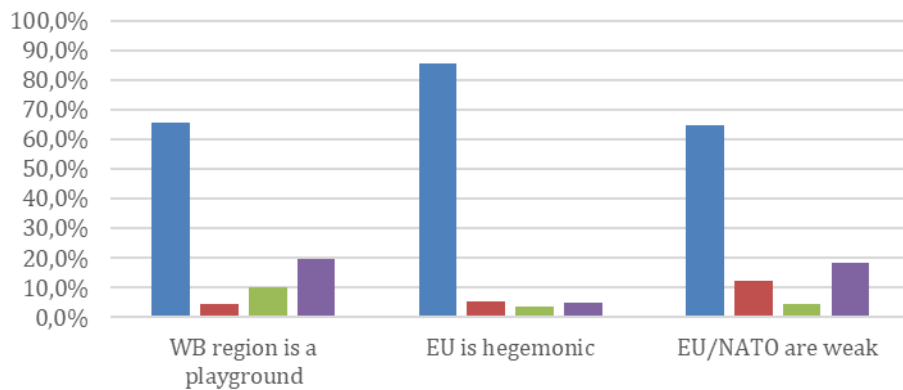
Main domains for articles about the EU

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains per narrative for articles about the EU

- political
- social
- military
- economic

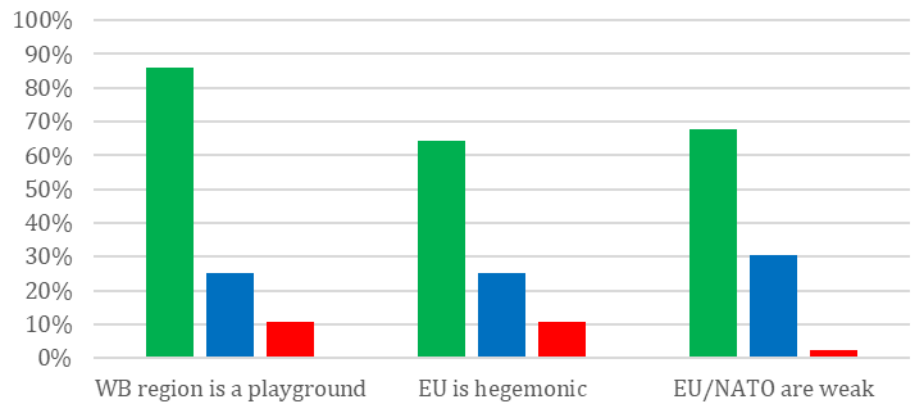


Tone

Articles about the EU generally support the narratives. **The WB region is a playground** is the narrative with the highest percentage of supportive articles (86%). About one-third of articles in the narratives about the EU are neutral in tone, while 11% of articles in the narratives **the WB region is a playground** and **the EU is hegemonic** are of an opposing tone.

Tone per narrative for articles about the EU

- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose



ANNEX 8. CASE STUDY: NATO

Nearly **1,500** articles contained the NATO search word, **1,035** were directly related, and **935** were chosen as relevant for further research.

Type

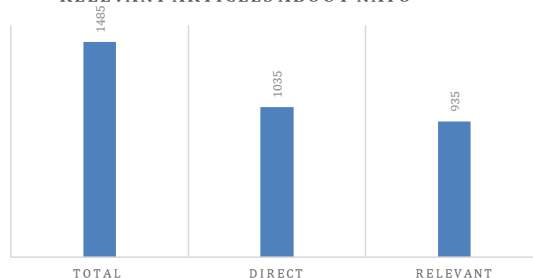
The most common type is news (780), of which statements (501) and reports (279), followed by comments (84), analyses (63), and interviews (8).

Interactions

More than one-half of engagements with articles about NATO are likes, followed by dislikes (45%) and comments (3%). The narrative with the most interactions is **the WB region is a playground**, which also has the second highest number of average interactions. **NATO is not beneficial**, in turn,

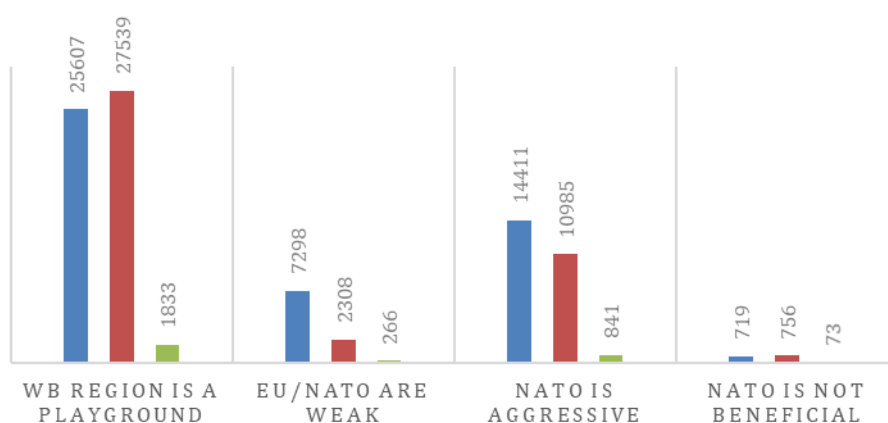
is the least common narrative and with the fewest interactions. Still, it is in first place in terms of average interactions – more than 80 engagements per article. **The EU/NATO are weak** attracted the most likes, on average. The most dislikes applied to **the WB region is a playground** and **NATO is not beneficial**. The latter narrative attracted the most comments, on average.

NUMBER OF TOTAL, DIRECT AND RELEVANT ARTICLES ABOUT NATO



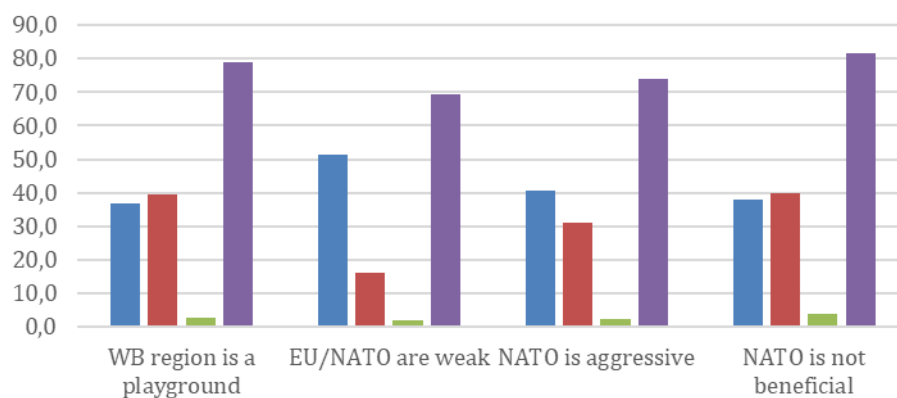
Total interactions for articles about NATO

- likes
- dislikes
- comments



Average interactions per narrative for articles about NATO

- average likes
- average dislikes
- average comments
- average interactions



The 105 most common keywords assigned by Sputnik Srbija to articles about NATO are visualised below with the use of the online tool Voyant: <https://voyant-tools.org>



Narrative overview

Four defining narratives were identified in relation to NATO. The most common narrative was **the WB region is a playground**, with nearly two-thirds of all articles (Table 10).

Defining narrative	Number of articles
The WB region is a playground for the clash of interests between East and West	694
NATO is aggressive and provocative	354
The EU/NATO are weak and not united	142
NATO is not beneficial	19

Table 10. The number of articles belonging to the most common narratives about NATO

Subject-specific sub-narratives and themes were identified for the defining narratives:

- **The WB region is a playground** sub-narratives:
 - NATO's actions in the WB are provocative against Russia (338 articles)
 - NATO is expanding its influence in the Western Balkans (234)
 - Russia and NATO are engaging in dialogue to avoid military escalation (36)
- The narrative **NATO is aggressive** seeks to present the alliance as an aggressor against Russia and Serbia.

The sub-narratives:

- NATO is provoking Russia with the militarisation of Western and Eastern Europe (83 articles)
- NATO was a criminal aggressor against Yugoslavia in 1999 (40)
- NATO is expanding its global presence and partnership (57)
- NATO is drawing closer to Russia's borders (45)
- NATO and the West want to force countries to join the alliance (27)
- Depleted uranium is harmful (26)

■ **The EU/NATO are weak** sub-narratives:

- There are disagreements on a range of issues among the allies (92 articles):
 - Worsening dialogue between the US, EU and NATO
 - Clashes over defence spending
 - Turkey's purchase of Russian anti-aircraft missile systems
 - The threat of US sanctions against other countries which want to purchase Russian weapons
- NATO's military capabilities are weak, and Russia is stronger (23 articles)
- Creation of EU army would weaken NATO (13)

Domains

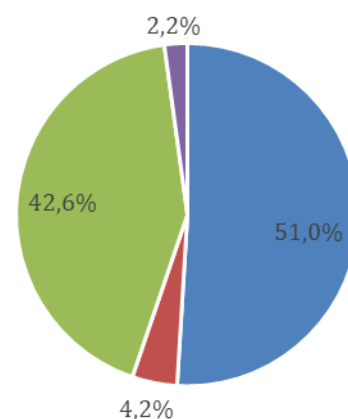
In line with general trends, one-half of articles about NATO are in the political domain, while 43% are in the military domain. The social and economic domains are least present, with 4% and 2% respectively. All



narratives about NATO have about one-half of articles in the political domain. **The WB region is a playground, the EU/NATO are weak** and **NATO is aggressive** have more than 40% of articles in the military domain. **NATO is not beneficial** and **NATO is aggressive** have the most articles in the social domain, while **NATO is not beneficial** and **the EU/NATO are weak** have the most in the economic domain.

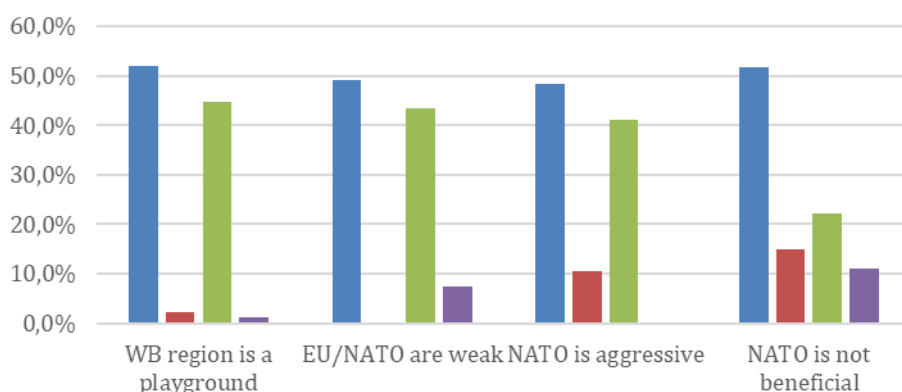
Main domains of articles about NATO

- political
- social
- military
- economic



Domains per narrative for articles about NATO

- political
- social
- military
- economic

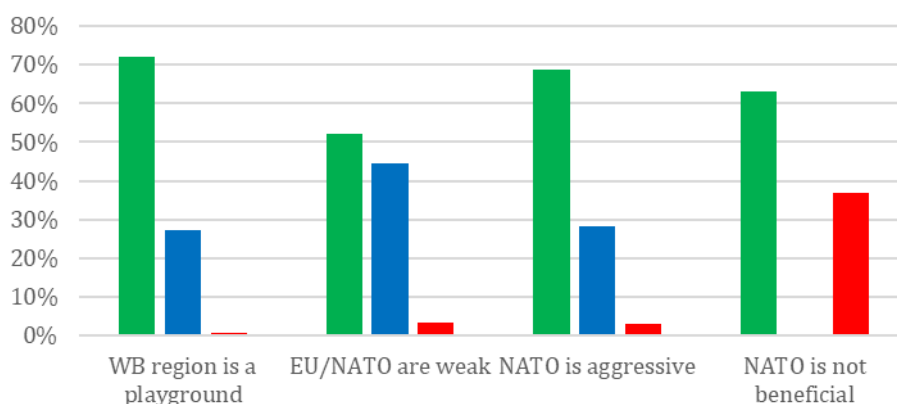


Tone

The WB region is a playground and **NATO is aggressive** attracted the most support in terms of the tone of the articles. The most neutrally presented narrative is **the EU/NATO are weak**, while **NATO is not beneficial** is mostly opposed in more than one-third of articles within the narrative (the rest of the articles are supportive of the narrative, and none were found to have a neutral tone).

Tone per narrative for articles about NATO

- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose



Endnotes

- 1 "Why Not" citizens' association, *Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH* (April 2019).
- 2 Developed by the IRI's Beacon Project, the tool scrapes and indexes content from numerous online sources in multiple countries and languages. It is provided free of charge to media researchers.
- 3 A similar framework was used when analysing narratives from other NATO StratCom COE publications. See, e.g., report 'Russia's footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment'
- 4 The authors of this report consider news to be all noteworthy information that is being disseminated, without no implication that the news have been fact-checked.
- 5 'The New York Times: The Balkans Become a Trial ground for a new Cold War with Russia'.
- 6 Boško Vukićević, as quoted in 'Laughter and Absurdity: Americans Know Russia will Try to Interfere in Montenegrin Elections'. See also 'Moscow: Through Anti-Russian Rhetoric, America is Justifying its own Interference in Macedonian Politics', 'The British Are Pushing Ivanic as a Member of the BiH Presidency', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201802271114718835-ivanic-predesednistvo-bih>.
- 7 'Western Armies at the Border: Is the Total Encirclement of Serbia by NATO in the Making?', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201808071116806274-nato-obruc-srbija>.
- 8 'The West Continues to Intensify Tensions on Russia's Borders', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201811261117963276-sad-zapad-rusija-napetost>.
- 9 'Albania Expels Russian Diplomats', <https://rs-lat/sputniknews.com/rusija/201803261115045149-albanija-proteruje-ruske-diplomate>. See also 'Russia is Considering What to Do with Montenegro', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201803301115099905-Rusija-Crna-Gora>.
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- 11 'British [Troops] Arrive in Bosnia During Elections: Why?', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201806091115917553-petar-ivancov>.
- 12 Shkodra is an Albanian town on the border with Montenegro.
- 13 'Games Without Borders: Unhindered NATO Flights Over Montenegro and Albania', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201807031116378774-NATO-Crna-Gora-Albanija>. See also 'NATO Base in "Stalin's City," Albania', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201810121117484977-nato-baza-staljinov-grad-albanija>. See also 'A New Base Emerging in the Balkans: Stalin's City to Become a NATO Hub', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201808051116791929-NATO-aviobaza-Albanija-staljin>.
- 14 'Montenegrin Charge Towards Moscow: Milo is Trying what Napoleon and Hitler Could Not Accomplish', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201807131116536423-crna-gora-rusija-vojska>. See also 'Mattis: Side by Side with Montenegro Against Russia', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201802281114728077-sad-rame-uz-rame-sa-crnogorom-protiv-rusije>.
- 15 'Regardless of the Outcome of the Referendum, Macedonians Will be Persuaded to Follow Brussels' Dictates', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/komentari/201809271117316860-makedonija-referendum-moskva/>. See also 'Macron to the Macedonians: Become North Macedonia!', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201809221117261978-makron-makedonija>.
- 16 'Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Quite in Russia on the Referendum in Macedonia: The Decision Must be Made Without Outside Interference', <http://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201810011117362647-rusija-makedonija-referendum-mesanje>. See also 'Russia: The West is in a Hurry to Implement the Greece-Macedonian Deal', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/20182071118087728-zapad-zuri-da-sprovede-dogovor-grcke-i-makedonije>.
- 17 'Lavrov in Sarajevo: Russia Supports BiH's Territorial Integrity and Full Authority of the Two Entities', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201809211117248443-sergej-lavrov>. See also 'Dodik and Putin: Russia Strongly Supports Srpska', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201805251115741218-sastanak-putin-dodik>. See also 'Strong Messages from Lavrov and Dodik on Key Issues in the Balkans', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201809211117250267-lavrov-banjaluka-poseta>. See also 'Dodik: I Will Initiate the Recognition of Crimea as Part of Russia', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201810091117439294-dodik-ce-incirati-priznavenje-krima-delom-rusije>.
- 18 'Dodik: A Shameful and Unacceptable Entry Ban for Russian Writer in BiH', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201808231116967539-dodik-prilepin>.



- 19 'Dodik: US and USAID Undermine Republika Srpska', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201808211116942878-dodik-sad-usaid>. See also 'A New British Blow to Dodik', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201807031116382020-Dodik-Britanci-udar>. 'Dodik: By Order of British Mentors, Ivanic is Demolishing Bridges with Russia and Serbia', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201809151117193543-dodik-ivanic>. 'Bakir and the West are Planting Stories About Paramilitary Formations in the RS', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201801131114158973-Bakir-Zapad-RS>.
- 20 'A Deal in Washington: Five Western Countries are Putting an End to Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201805101115570292-dogovor-vashington-briselski-dijalog>.
- 21 'US Media: US and EU are Ignoring Berlin Over Kosovo', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/svet/201810011117357972-vol-strit-dzurnal-granice>. See also 'Germany Still Opposes Partition of Kosovo', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201807241116672743-nemacka-kosovo-podela>.
- 22 'Haradinaj Urged US, Germany and France to Help Kosovo', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201804121115243817-haradinaj-kosovo-zapad-sile>. See also 'Haradinaj Loses Patience with US and EU: What Kind of Powers Do You Have When You Cannot Resolve the Balkans', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201802021114401875-haradinaj-sad-eu>.
- 23 'Serbia's National Day Celebrated in Moscow', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201802151114576328-dan-drzavosti-moskva-srbija>. See also 'Cepurin: Serbia and Russia - an Example of Friendship', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201805091115558258-dan-pobede-ambasada-rusije>. '180 Years Later: A New Vision of Russian-Serbian Relations', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201811261117969902-rusija-srbija-odnosi>. 'Eight-and-a-Half Decades of the Russian House in Belgrade', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201811191117887187-osam-i-po-decenija-ruskog-doma>. 'Only Serbia Stayed Faithful to the End', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/kultura/201812071118098160-srbija-rusija-poetsko-vece>. 'Saint Sava, KiM, Dusan's Code: Russian Children Showed Impressive Knowledge of Serbian History', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/zivot/201804031115143570-takmicenje-u-kvizu-znanja>.
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- 27 'A New Law in Montenegro: Mandatory Participation of Soldiers in NATO Missions', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201812281118317664-crna-gora-zakon>. See also 'NATO is Destroying Soviet Weapons in Montenegro', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201806251116186583-nato-crna-gora>. See also 'Russia: We are Disappointed with the EU's Position on Kosovo's Army', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201812211118245942-rusija-razocarana-stavom-eu-po-pitanju-kosova>. See also 'Russian Expert: The EU Will Not Accept Serbia Because It Sees It as an Extended Arm of Russia', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201810101117447064-dodik-putin-bondarenko-srbija-rusija>.
- 28 'Aleksandar Pavić Quoted in Hybrid War Moves to the Balkans, Main Target – Russia', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201801231114282271-hibridni-rat-balkan>.
- 29 'Analysis from the Economist: "Door to Hell" is Opening in the Balkans', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201802191114610239-ekonomist-balkan-pakao/>.
- 30 'Rama Introduces New Project: Unification of Albania and Kosovo by 2025', <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201811261117969714-rama-ujedinjenje-albanci-strategija>.
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