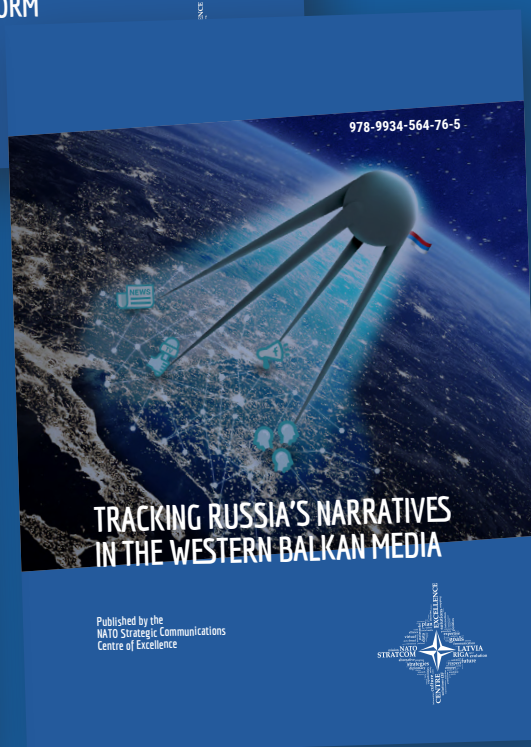
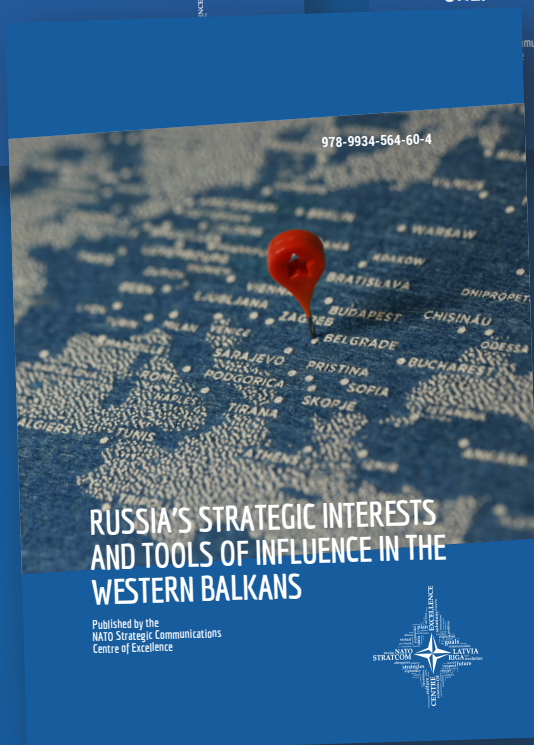


# RUSSIA'S FOOTPRINT IN THE WESTERN BALKAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

REPORT  
SUMMARY



# INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of four reports published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in the framework of project "Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment". You can read full reports by clicking on links or visiting [www.stratcomcoe.org](http://www.stratcomcoe.org):

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

The project investigates Russia's tools of influence in the Western Balkans (WB), with a focus on the

media landscape. The scope of analysis is Russia's activities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The project analyses Russia's interests and influence toolbox, as well as identifies the vulnerabilities that make the Western Balkan countries susceptible to hostile influence. It also identifies the Kremlin's narratives in the WB as well as looks at the role of local WB media in spreading those narratives.

The report provides a basis for interested stakeholders to understand the methods and means that Russia uses to influence decision-making in the Western Balkans, as well as offers insights into the regional characteristics that facilitate Russia's influence in the WB media space.

## Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans *(prof. Dimitar Bechev)*

This report examines the Western Balkan's place in Russia's strategy to assert its geopolitical interests. Russia's foreign policy actions are driven by three main objectives: to preserve the stability of the current regime, to keep control over the post-Soviet space, and to preserve its status as a great power in global affairs.

Southeast Europe lies beyond what Russia considers its privileged sphere of geopolitical interest. However, **Russia sees the Western Balkans as an opportunity to undermine the EU and NATO by making use of the countries' own weaknesses.** In this respect, the Balkans are a vulnerable periphery of Europe where Russia can build a foothold, recruit supporters, and ultimately maximise its leverage vis-à-vis the West.

Russia's actions in the Western Balkans are aimed at **freezing the current status quo** (in the cases of BiH and Kosovo), **preventing NATO and EU enlargement**, as well as exploiting weaknesses in and between the countries of the region.

Russia's influence toolbox can be divided into three

parts: **Coercion, Co-optation, and Subversion.** Russia prefers to exercise its influence with minimal cost, and such efforts would not be possible without the support of local collaborators. That is why Russian policy in the Western Balkans is focused largely on *co-optation* and *subversion* rather than on military or non-military forms of *coercion*:

- **Co-optation** is Russia's instrument of choice in the Western Balkans. The Kremlin has built partnerships and alliances with local powerholders in Serbia and BiH's Republika Srpska. For example, Serbia has aligned with Russia to gain leverage over the Kosovo issue and to gain benefits from investments and business ties, while Bosnian Serb leader



Milorad Dodik has found Russia as an ally in the effort to consolidate power over Republika Srpska and resist the centralization of BiH.

- **Coercion** through military means is of lesser significance for the Western Balkans than for other regions in Russia's interest. At the same time, soft coercion verging on disruption and interference in domestic affairs is far from rare. Examples include trade embargoes and cyber-

attacks, such as in Montenegro during its final lap before joining NATO (2015-2017).

- **Subversion** is exemplified by tactics such as (dis)information campaigns and or covert support for radical anti-Western actors (parties and civic associations). In the Western Balkans, the best example is Russia's efforts to block Montenegro's accession to NATO and to disrupt North Macedonia's name change process.

## Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

*(Rufin Zamfir, Global Focus Center)*

This report identifies the risks and vulnerabilities hostile actors can exploit to gain influence over countries in the Western Balkan region. Based on the methodology developed in previous studies by the Global Focus Center, this report offers the Permeability Index to measure each country's vulnerability to malign influence to help support resilience-building efforts.

**Vulnerabilities are assessed in four domains: Society, Economy, Politics and Foreign Policy and Security.**

According to the Index, **North Macedonia and Albania** are recognized as least vulnerable, while **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is the most vulnerable country in the region. BiH's ranking represents the complicated political, social, and economic environment of the country – most importantly the deep divisions between Republika Srpska and Federation of BiH (the two constituent entities), that are fostering confusion over the country's strategic orientation.

**Politics** is the domain with the highest potential of permeability in all countries analysed. The most common risks are related to the concentration of power, high levels of corruption, state capture and organized crime, and the impunity of political elites. These variables have contributed to a sense of disillusionment with the political elites by the public. Another vulnerability in this domain is generated by the clientelist, transactional, and zero-sum political competition. The concentration of power also harms political dialogue and exacerbates ethnic nationalist

sentiments, thus providing space for malign influencers to manoeuvre.

In the **Society** domain, most concerns are related to the growing societal divisions (weaponized by both external and internal disruptors in Kosovo and BiH) and ethnic nationalism. Media, however, remains the most direct route to malign influence over societies. Continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists have left societies without an important watchdog and defender against propaganda.

In the **Economy** domain, the most common vulnerabilities are related to corruption, weak economic policies, and poor planning, as well as the manifestation of nationalistic sentiments in economic policy (such as Kosovo's decision to raise tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian goods in 2018). Organized crime and high-level corruption are another serious vulnerability in all analysed countries. The energy sector needs revamping such as replacing aging equipment and diversifying sources. This need has created opportunities for external actors to collaborate with local governments.



In the **Foreign Policy & Security domain**, countries with the inability to formulate their foreign and security policies are more vulnerable to foreign hostile influence than the ones with a clearly defined foreign policy orientation. Other vulnerabilities include unresolved disputes

enduring since the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, top-down decision-making and implementation processes, as well as the absence of mechanisms for consulting stakeholders in shaping a coherent foreign policy strategy.

## Russia's Narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija *(Atlantic Council of Montenegro)*

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the content of the Kremlin-sponsored Sputnik online news website in Serbian (Sputnik Srbija). It is aimed at understanding the narratives Russia is promoting about six Western Balkan countries, the EU and NATO.

Sputnik has been recognised as one of the main channels of Russian influence in the Western Balkan media space. It has the potential to reach audiences that speak BCMS (Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian) languages in several countries in the region and its content is republished by local media.

The report is based on analysis of a year-long monitoring process that lasted from January 1 to December 31, 2018. The authors analysed 7,193 articles about Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as the EU and NATO.

The report identifies several narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija:

- The WB region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West
- The WB region is unstable and there is a high potential for conflict
- The EU is hegemonic
- WB countries are weak, incapable, and corrupt
- Human rights are endangered
- The EU and NATO are weak and not united
- NATO is aggressive and provocative

- Montenegro is seeking to rewrite history
- NATO is not beneficial

The analysis demonstrates that Sputnik tries to emphasise that the region is divided into pro-Western and pro-Eastern sides. The narratives encourage feelings of unease, insecurity, and worry 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.

The countries that are close to the West, such as Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia, are described as losing their sovereignty to Western influence. They are portrayed as corrupt, crime-ridden and disrespectful of minority rights. Meanwhile, Serbia is continually presented as an economic success story in the region.

While the EU is portrayed as hegemonic and meddling in regional dialogues, NATO is depicted as aggressive and provocative toward Serbia and Russia.

Russia is presented as the protector of Kosovo Serbs, while the West is described as supporting Kosovo



Albanians. Russia is also described as a military power that scares NATO, and at the same time victim of NATO's aggression.

Sputnik Srbija presumably behaves like a professional media outlet. Most of its content (88%) is news

reports (as opposed to commentary, analysis, or interviews). Although many of these tend to offer neutral reporting, most (65%) support narratives which depict developments in the Western Balkans in a negative light.

## Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media (*Tihomira Doncheva*)

This study was developed as a follow-up report to "Russia's Narratives Towards Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija". It is aimed at understanding to what extent Russia has the potential to spread its narratives in the Western Balkan media space. Although Sputnik Srbija is not among the most popular sources of information for local populations, they are exposed to Sputnik's narratives by accessing local media outlets.

The focus of analysis is five previously identified narratives in Sputnik Srbija's online platform related to the EU and NATO, and their representation in BCMS language media in 2018 and January-June 2019. The following narratives are analysed:

- EU is weak and not united
- EU is hegemonic
- NATO is aggressive
- NATO is not beneficial
- NATO is weak and not united

The extent of Russia's influence network in the WB media space has been outlined by identifying outlets that regularly publish stories like Sputnik Srbija's about EU and NATO topics. Most of these actors have also been identified to be participating in the spread of disinformation in the region, together with Sputnik Srbija. Sputnik Srbija is present in the WB media space **both as an amplifier and as an original source** of information.

**There is no set formula of how local outlets re-publish Sputnik's content.** The same outlet sometimes quotes Sputnik if the content is copied, but other times provides no source. Fringe media generally tend to source the articles to Sputnik, while popular outlets very rarely quote Sputnik Srbija as their source of information, and instead name

Serbian news agency Tanjug. Serbian tabloids often publish the same or similar content, but rarely quote Sputnik as their source. Tabloid sites also change the headlines, making them more sensationalist than the original Sputnik Srbija headline.

**Pro-Russian narratives or disinformation reach audiences in the WB because of structural vulnerabilities in the Western Balkan media space:** low quality media laws, controlled media freedom, and struggling newsrooms. Sputnik Srbija provides good quality articles for free, feeding a void of information.

**Inconsistency in how sources of information are presented in the media,** including not providing the author or source of information at all, gives opportunities for Kremlin narratives to reach WB audiences, as the readers have little chance of knowing the original source of the content they are reading.

**Narratives promoted by Sputnik Srbija exploit existing regional tensions, societal tractions, or pressing challenges, which are polarising public opinion in the region.** Sputnik Srbija has better potential to reach wider audiences (more social media engagements and distribution in local media) when reporting about topical issues for the region.





# Recommendations

1. **Apply a strategic communication mind-set.** It is important for Western Balkan governments, the EU, and NATO to understand the needs of audiences, match words and deeds, as well as offer prospects for further development of the region. Continuation of EU and NATO enlargement and constant messaging on the process is essential to avoid a sense of abandonment by the West.
2. **Identify country-specific vulnerabilities and close institutional gaps.** It is important to continue focus on improving democracy and the rule of law. The EU and NATO should encourage Western Balkan countries to work on greater transparency in areas such as party financing, judicial reform, and good governance.
3. **Share best practices and lessons learnt on countering hostile influence** between Western Balkan countries, the EU, and NATO.
4. **Invest in strengthening civil society and enhancing its awareness of threats and methods of hostile influence, particularly in the information space.** This requires long term policies - enhancing education, critical thinking and media literacy, as well as immediate actions such as detecting and showcasing methods of hostile information campaigns and manipulation.
5. **Efforts should be focused on addressing the structural vulnerabilities of the Western Balkan media space** - promoting media pluralism, freedom and quality of reporting.
6. **Provide alternative to the reporting of Kremlin-funded media.** Sputnik Srbija's content and style of writing resonates well with a considerable part of audiences in the WB region. Therefore, understanding what topics and styles of reporting are attractive to local audiences should be a priority to provide alternative to the information distributed by Russian-funded media.
7. **Continue analysis of methods and effects of Russia's influence.** It is crucial to investigate not only Russia's activities and channels in the WB media space, but more importantly – to understand how and why narratives promoted by Kremlin-funded media resonate with local audiences. Further research should also look deeper at the role of local actors that cooperate with the Kremlin and its supporters to better assess the levers of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans.

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