978-9934-564-76-5

TRACKING RUSSIA'S NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN MEDIA

Published by the
NATO Strategic Communications
Centre of Excellence

ISBN: 978-9934-564-76-5
Author: Tihomira Doncheva
Language editor: Jazlyn Melnychuk
Project manager: Sanda Svetoka
Design: Kārlis Ulmanis

Riga, April 2020
NATO STRATCOM COE
11b Kalciema Iela
Riga LV1048, Latvia
www.stratcomcoe.org
Facebook/stratcomcoe
Twitter: @stratcomcoe

Author would like to thank Tijana Cvjeticanin, Brady Hills, Iva Svobodova, Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, Daina Ozolina, Monika Gill, as well as editors, journalists and media experts for sharing their expertise and suggestions that contributed to this research.

This publication does not represent the opinions or policies of NATO or NATO StratCom COE.

© All rights reserved by the NATO StratCom COE. Reports may not be copied, reproduced, distributed or publicly displayed without reference to the NATO StratCom COE. The views expressed here do not represent the views of NATO.

Content

Introduction 6

Methodology 10

Russia's narratives in the Western Balkan media 14
- Sputnik Srbija as a source or amplifier 14
- Most and least popular articles 16
- Engagements 16
- Types of content re-publishing 19
- Sustainability 23

Disinformation 28
- Case study 1: NATO killed more civilians than the Taliban 28
- Case study 2: NATO soldiers show satanic sign 30

Main re-publishers 34
- Serbia-based outlets 34
- Montenegro-based outlets 37
- BiH-based outlets 38
- Kosovo-based outlets 38

Conclusions 39

Endnotes 42

Introduction

'Russia has complete control over the media.'[1]

Taken out of context, this quote confirms the hypothesis that this research was launched with: Russian influence is present in the Western Balkans media space. Previous research conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence has identified existing weaknesses within Western Balkan (WB) societies which enable hostile influence in diverse areas including the media space. The report 'Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans' examines Russia's influence toolbox and claims that local media has been spreading pro-Russian content, and another study 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija' identifies the content that Sputnik Srbija – the most popular Kremlin-affiliated media in the Western Balkans – fuels the online space with.

Apart from Sputnik Srbija, other Kremlin-affiliated media present in the region include RBTH (Russia Beyond the Headlines or Russia Beyond), which is published in both Serbian and Macedonian, and Argumenti I Fakti, published only in Serbia. Additionally, pro-Russian outlets are published both in print and online in the form of supplements such as Ruska Rec or the pro-Russian Donbas-based (East Ukraine) outlet News-front, whose financing remains non-transparent. A selection of newspapers popularising alternative Russian medicines are also distributed across the region,

targeting the elderly demographic that is not necessarily reached by the more political content spread by other Russian-affiliated media.

Sputnik Srbija is by and large the most popular Russia-affiliated outlet in the region according to local experts[2]. However, none of these outlets, including Sputnik Srbija, appear among the top media channels according to opinion polls or media monitoring tools (e.g. Alexa, SimilarWeb).

It has been challenging to determine what the influence of Russian channels is in the WB. Any attempts to identify a network of local WB actors who cooperate with Russian outlets has proven to be complicated due to non-transparent ownership and unknown business and/or political connections of local media channels. Previous studies[3] have also attempted to map a Russian network of influence in the WB media space, but none of these research papers had included content analysis of the suspected pro-Russian media. Thus, in order to explore the presence of Russian state-funded media content in the WB media space and to determine if there is a sustainable network of outlets spreading such information, this study chose to track narratives as identified on Sputnik Srbija[4].

The research. This research has adopted a holistic approach to understanding the media environment of the Western Balkans. Thus, a multi-step analysis has been undertaken to understand the extent of Russian influence in the media of the Western Balkans. The aim is to identify if the same narratives of Sputnik Srbija appear in local media. The study will also map out local outlets which consistently publish such content. A series of research questions have been posed:

- How often do the same articles, published on the Sputnik Srbija website, appear in local media outlets?
- How often is Sputnik Srbija the source as opposed to the amplifier of the information?
- How sustainable are the narratives? Can we find the same narratives when comparing data from 2018 and 2019?
- Do the same narratives appear in the same outlets?
- Are there media outlets that amplify the content originating from Sputnik Srbija?

As concluded in the study pro-Russian content, and another study 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija', the goal of the identified narratives is to create tensions among the countries in the WB, as well as slow down their Euro-Atlantic integration.

Furthermore, Russian media in the region are also perceived as the ones spreading disinformation, as highlighted during interviews with local experts. A report

published by a local organisation that participates in the fact-checking network "Zasto ne?" ('Why not?') claims that political disinformation is widespread in the region and Sputnik Srbija is the foreign media outlet appearing most often in their research[5]. Thus, an additional analysis has been undertaken within the current study to understand if the same outlets (identified to be spreading Russian content) also appear in disinformation news threads, as identified by local fact checkers. The main aim of this effort is to explore the role of Sputnik Srbija in these threads, as well as seek additional confirmation of Russia's influence in the WB media space.

The scope. To limit the scope of the study, the gathering of empirical data referred only to BCMS (Bosnian – Croatian – Montenegrin – Serbian) language online media channels[6], which are understood by the populations across the region – in Serbia, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro and Croatia. The BCMS-media analysis also offered a possibility for identifying cross-border networks of channels publishing the same or similar content. Another reason for narrowing down the analysis is the perceived popularity of Russian content in areas inhabited by ethnic Serbs[7] as opposed to North Macedonia and Albania, where pro-Western attitudes are prevalent among the local population. However, the same methodology could be adapted to Macedonian and Albanian languages.

Only online media has been analysed, including online versions of local broadcasters and newspapers.

The author decided to limit the scope of analysis to investigate how the EU and NATO are portrayed in local media (in BCMS languages). Therefore, the five EU and NATO-related narratives (as identified in the 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija') will be researched in the framework of this study:

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

The context. Journalism standards in the Western Balkan countries have gone through periods of progression and regression since the fall of Yugoslavia, but are still in a dire state[8]. In their most recent assessment of the state of fundamental rights in the region, the European Commission has been critical of the lack of effort governments have put into improving media freedom[9]. Not only that, but the independence of the media is of growing concern, and the intimidation of journalists is still common and largely not investigated. The dire situation is reinforced by low wages and outnumbered newsrooms working beyond their capacities[10]. It is common for journalists in the region not to have permanent contracts or to be working several jobs at the same

time. It is often the case for newsrooms to hire unpaid interns[11]. These factors serve as evidence as to why media literacy remains low and the tabloidization of the media can be observed: titles become more scandalised, while content is re-used from other websites.

Furthermore, Sputnik Srbija provides well-written free-to-use content which is widely re-shared due to the aforementioned reasons, but also due to simple business logic (according to expert interviews, Russia-related content and mainly President Putin present on the front pages sells copies) or, and only partly because of, pro-Russian editorial lines.

Most often, news stories in the region have been published without a source but using "a biased or subjective tone"[12]. According to a 2018 study conducted by the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), Serbia is the leader in the region[13] in spreading unsourced articles. Almost one third of their stories mentioning an international actor did not quote a source for the information. In the month observed, pro-Russian and anti-US/EU stances were the predominant viewpoint[14]. These findings coincide with another study by CRTA conducted in 2017 in Serbia. It found that politics and military affairs news mostly carry pro-Russian and anti-US stances, with the majority of articles to be potentially flagged as "fake news" sharing an anti-Western narrative[15].

While conducting in-depth interviews with local journalists, fact-checkers and media experts, it was confirmed that disinformation is wide-spread and is not contained within the borders of one country. Because of the language similarities[16], content travels across the physical borders and is copied or translated in local media without fact-checking its content. A recent study[17] by 'Zasto Ne' tracked how political disinformation is spread in BiH. A network of 29 media outlets was identified, 15 of which are in Serbia, and 14 of which are in BiH (of which 12 are in Republika Srpska). Often, Sputnik Srbija appears in this hub as one of the main "connectors" between media outlets in Serbia and BiH.

Methodology

To assess to what extent Russian content is present in local BCMS online media, this study has been conducted in two steps to track the frequency of the five narratives in question in 2018 and 2019. Additionally, a third step has been added to track how disinformation is spread. Ultimately, a final list with the most frequent outlets is composed and the most notable actors, spreading Russian content, are characterised in brief (Fig. 1).

The first step of the methodological framework builds on all knowledge previously introduced in this project and maps out a network of actors and the permeability of Sputnik Srbija-spread narratives (as outlined in the report 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Monitoring and Analysis of the Sputnik Srbija Online Platform') in local media. To achieve this, the first step is further divided in two steps. While Step 1 tracks the spread of narratives in 2018, Step 2 investigates whether these are still present in 2019. A list of media outlets can be drawn after the two steps based on how frequently they participate in narrative news threads. The ones that appear in those two steps can then be classified as non-accidental actors and the list can be cross-checked with the actors participating in the same disinformation threads as Sputnik Srbija.

Step 1

As the report identifying the narratives spread by Sputnik Srbija uses content published in 2018, the first step of the study of narratives spread in local media also only considers 2018. To track if the same narratives appear in local media, this step checks if the same articles (as published on Sputnik Srbija) appear in other outlets.

All five narratives connected to the EU and NATO have been filtered and only these articles assessed as supportive of the narratives have been studied. These are ranked according to their engagements on social media (Facebook)[18] and on Sputnik Srbija's website[19] for the 10 most popular and the 10 least popular articles per narrative.

When the top 10 and bottom 10 articles for each narrative are identified, each article is examined to determine whether Sputnik Srbija is the **source** or the **amplifier** of the information. It is a source in the case of "no source provided", "Sputnik Srbija's journalist has signed the article" or another outlet has been quoted within the text[20]. Only in the cases where another outlet has been named underneath the article is Sputnik Srbija considered an amplifier.

Next, a Google search was undertaken, in which the article's headline (both Latin and Cyrillic) and the key words from the article

(including lead paragraph) were searched, followed by a key-word search in local news generators (Time.rs and Naslovi.net).

Social media posts, personal blogs, and websites which are no-longer available online, were omitted and only news websites (both mass and fringe media) were further studied.

Each article was then compared to the one from Sputnik Srbija and categorised as "same" or "similar"

- Same content - the headline and text is exactly the same
- Similar content:
  - the headline is different, but the text is the same
  - the headline is the same, but the text is different
  - the headline is different, but some text is the same.

In the end, Step 1 provides an opportunity to assess whether articles which have been assessed to be in support of a narrative on Sputnik Srbija also appear in local media.

This Step identifies whether the narrative spread is limited to Sputnik Srbija or whether it is available to a wider audience. Step 1 further highlights the frequency of local actors which appear in different news threads and provides more evidence to identify the actors that enable Russian influence in the Western Balkan media space.

Step 2

This step is designed to inspect whether the same narratives identified on Sputnik Srbija's online platform in 2018 are still relevant in the first half of 2019. It is also aimed at investigating whether the same actors (as identified in 2018 to be spreading Sputnik Srbija content) continue to do so by publishing the same or similar content to Sputnik Srbija in relation to the narratives in question.

This step is limited only to the first half of 2019 since the media monitoring tool used, >versus<, only holds record for BCMS media since the beginning of 2019[21].

The methodology designed for this step is as follows:

- A set of search words was qualitatively created for each narrative based on the most frequently used keywords (based on tags in Sputnik Srbija platform), most common words in the headlines of the articles, and other frequent words which often appear in the body of the articles of Sputnik Srbija.

- A search on >versus< was conducted and only peaks in the number of articles (as illustrated in the graph below) in the timeline were further researched. While on the six-month timeline, each peak corresponds to a date, these are accumulated results for the full week. Thus, separate searches using the same filter were conducted for each of the weeks' peaks.

- These search results were studied – whether a narrative can be identified in the articles, whether there is an actual event which explains peaks in the number of articles, or whether these are simply articles with no common grounds which include some of the search words unrelated to the narratives.

- Only those articles related to actual events – two or more articles which cover the same topic – were researched in-depth and once again a thread was created:
  - Sputnik Srbija's role in the thread – source or amplifier of the news
  - A list of outlets is created again

The results in Step 2 were then compared to Step 1 and a full list of actors which repeatedly appear to be spreading NATO and EU-related narratives was created. These actors can be assumed to not be accidental as they appear frequently in different news threads. As Step 1 analyses 2018 and Step 2 examines 2019, the results serve as evidence to the sustainability of the narratives and their prevalence in two consecutive years.

Step 3

The aim of the third step of the methodological framework is to understand what drives the spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans by investigating the place of Sputnik Srbija in news threads (source or amplifier), and to compare the participating actors with the narratives list. After a comprehensive review of available literature, public opinion polling results, statistical data, as well as in-depth interviews with local media experts, journalists and fact-checkers, two case studies were researched to identify the channels, susceptible to disinformation spread.

The choice of case studies was based on the following criteria:

- The case was picked up by a local fact-checkers network (raskrikavanje.rs, raskrinkavanje.ba, raskrinkavanje.me, F2N2), as the websites use a similar methodology for debunking and classification[22]

- The news story travelled across borders and included multiple news sources, amplifying the source and increasing the visibility of the story

- Sputnik Srbija participated in the news thread

- The news story was debunked by fact-checkers in 2019

In the local context, disinformation blurs the lines of the dichotomy of true and false statements and covers any misleading claims, including pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, and spin, for example[23]. However, a distinction needs to be made between disinformation and misinformation[24]. While

the former refers to a deliberate spread of false news or an inaccurate representation of facts with the aim of misleading or deceiving a target audience, the latter refers to the spread of false facts due to a mistake or a lack of information. The difference between the two terms is in the intent – whether it is deliberate or accidental.

Figure 1: Methodological framework

Russia's narratives in the Western Balkan media

A total of 92 articles across the five narratives have been studied – the 10 most popular and 10 least popular articles per each narrative: **the EU is hegemonic**, **the EU is weak and not united**, **NATO is aggressive** and **NATO is weak and not united**. For the narrative **NATO is not beneficial**, only 12 articles were identified in support of the narrative, justifying the uneven number of total articles. In the case of the **NATO is not beneficial** narrative, all 12 articles have been studied.

Sputnik Srbija as a source or amplifier

Out of the 92 articles of analysis, Sputnik Srbija is an amplifier of the content in only 15 articles (16%). In these cases, the outlet has named another source of the information underneath the published text.

Only three (6%) of the most popular articles across the narratives (50 articles in total) have a named source – Tanjug News Agency (Tanjug), while the rest fall under the category "Sputnik Srbija is the source", although in many of the articles another news outlet has been quoted within the body of the text.

The *EU is hegemonic* and *NATO is aggressive* are the only narratives with articles among the top 10 most popular which originate from Tanjug, two articles and one article respectively. The narrative *NATO is not beneficial* has the largest number of articles, where Sputnik Srbija is the source of the information as a Sputnik Srbija reporter has been named – eight out of the top 10.

For the bottom 10 articles across the five narratives (42 articles in total), the situation is different. There, in 29% of the articles, another source has been clearly marked, turning Sputnik Srbija into an amplifier. The Serbian news agency Tanjug is claimed almost exclusively as the source of the information, with only one article naming RTS as a source. There are 11 articles in this dataset for the narratives *NATO is aggressive* and *NATO is weak and not united*, which have another source named underneath the body of the text. Although these are not the most popular articles, the results prove that the two narratives also originate from local media and Sputnik Srbija only acts as an amplifier. This is explainable with the complicated relationship between Serbia and NATO and negative sentiments of the Serbian population towards NATO.

Overall, even in cases when Sputnik Srbija has been considered as the source of the information (no source provided, Sputnik Srbija reporter named, or another outlet has been quoted only within the text), local outlets that have published the same content source their articles to Tanjug. These are mostly popular media outlets, such as Blic, Kurir, B92, and Srbijadanas.com. This is not exclusive though, given that if the Sputnik Srbija article has been written by a named reporter, local outlets tend to source the information. For example, the article "Serbia was given a sudden opportunity to involve Russia in negotiations with Pristina"[25] (in support of the narrative the "EU is hegemonic") has been written by Sputnik Srbija's reporter Brankica Ristic and has been re-published 11 times. Only two outlets do not source the information - Srbijajavlja.rs and Intermagazain.rs, but, for example, the tabloid Informer has sourced the story to Sputnik Srbija.

The fact that Tanjug is so often sourced as the original source of the information is worth exploring, especially given Tanjug's non-transparent funding. A former government-owned agency, it underwent a privatization process in the mid-2010s but the outcome, and thus the current owner, is unclear. However, exploring the role of Tanjug in the news thread has proved complicated since its content is only available to subscribers.

According to some of the available time stamps, although Sputnik Srbija has not provided a source of the news piece underneath the published text (and thus this methodology classifies it as the originator of the article), some of the outlets appear to have published the article before Sputnik Srbija. This could mean that Sputnik Srbija does not adhere to journalistic standards and does not quote its sources openly.

Not-so-popular or fringe media outlets tend to source Sputnik Srbija more often. However, the link is not always provided, excluding Srbin.info that almost always source the articles to Sputnik Srbija and provides a link to the original story. It is also interesting that the same local outlet will sometimes source the story to Sputnik, while on other occasions there will be no source provided, although in both cases the content is the same as it appears on Sputnik Srbija (i.e. Intermagazin.rs). Occasionally one local outlet re-publishes an article and sources it to another local outlet, while the latter has sourced Sputnik Srbija.

These findings highlight an existing vulnerability within the media space of the Western Balkans. If popular outlets continuously share similar content with Sputnik Srbija but do not source the information to this Kremlin-sponsored media, then the audience has little chance of knowing the original source of the content they are reading. Thus, pro-Russian content and/or Russian narratives can easily make their way in the WB media space and consequently reach local audiences. As a result, Russia has the potential to influence

audiences in the region without much effort or a necessarily well-thought-out strategy. According to local media experts and journalists, Russian content is spread organically with little or no mentioning of the source of the information.

Most and least popular articles

Of the 92 Sputnik Srbija articles studied, only four have not been re-published in local media, with the rest appearing at least once in another outlet. The same or similar articles to the ones published on Sputnik Srbija appear on a range of websites: from smaller sites (Serbian-based Srbin.info or Montenegrin-based In4s.net), through tabloids (Serbian-based Kurir.rs and Blic.rs) and well-known outlets, (B92 and Srbijadanas.com) to another Russia-affiliated media which operates in the region – Srb.news-front.info.

The most re-published articles are:

- **Orban: Migrants should not be given a cent**[26]
  Narrative: *EU is weak and not united*
  Re-appeared in: 47 outlets

- **The falling of "the powerful statesman": Hoyt Yee persona non-grata in Washington**[27]
  Narrative: *NATO is aggressive*
  Re-appeared in: 26 outlets

- **The West is confused: Russian submarine disappeared "before their eyes"**[28]
  Narrative: *NATO is weak and not united*
  Re-appeared in: 19 outlets

- **Cepurin: Kosovo to return to the legal and state area of Serbia**[29]
  Narrative: *EU is hegemonic*
  Re-appeared in: 18 outlets

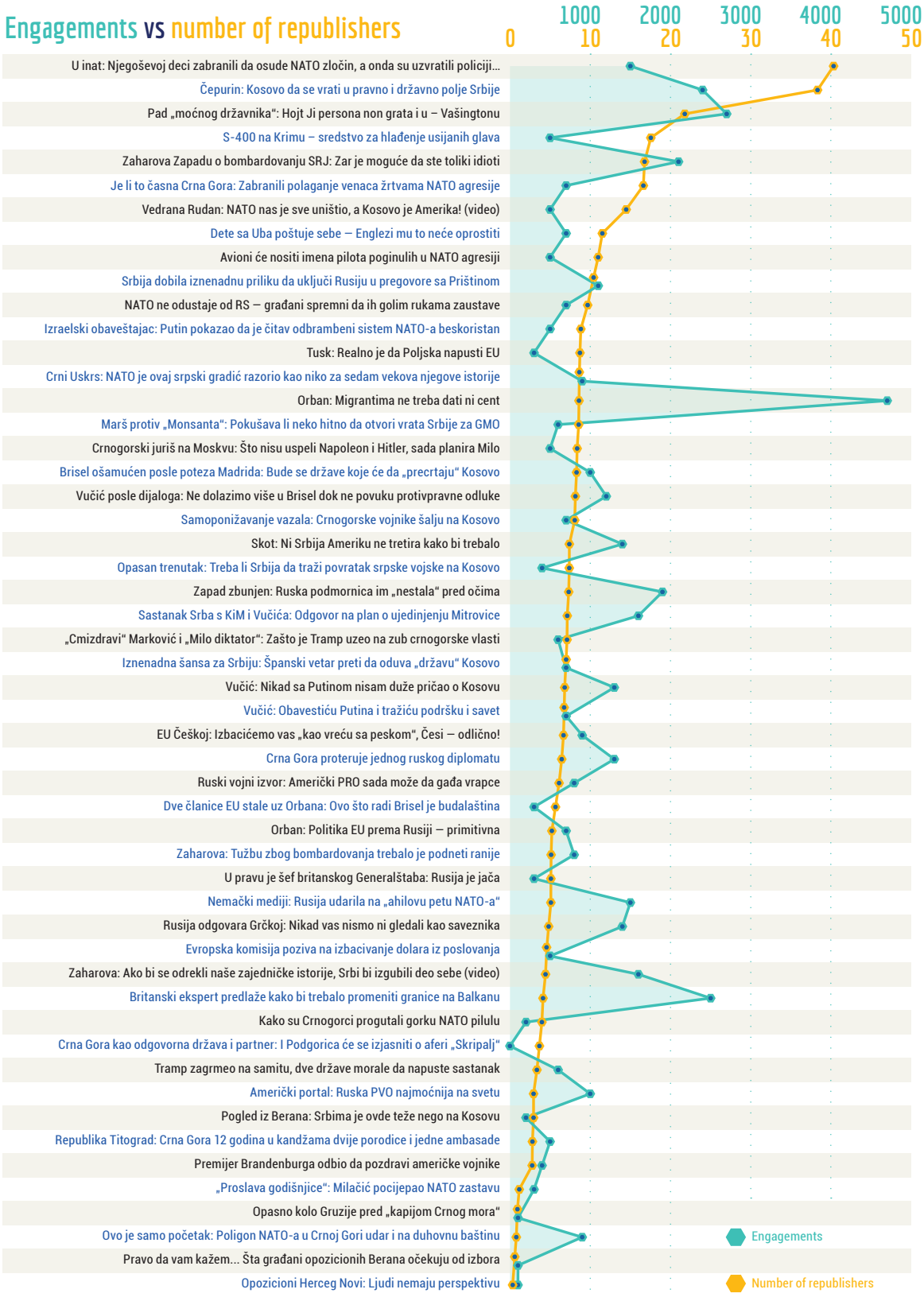
- **Russia responds to Greece: we never considered you an ally**[30]
  Narrative: *NATO is not beneficial*
  Re-appeared in: 14 outlets

There is no correlation between how popular (based on engagements – reactions, shares) an article is on Facebook, the Sputnik Srbija website, and the times it is re-published in local media (see graph below). Topics such as "migration" or "NATO aggression" though are generally largely covered in local media. This confirms a concluding remark of the 2018 media monitoring of Sputnik Srbija that the narratives spread exploit existing regional tensions, societal divisions, and pressing problematic issues which have been polarising public opinion in the region. This report further re-affirms this by showing that the more Sputnik Srbija reports about topical issues for the region, the further its content spreads. Subsequently, the potential to shape the narrative in favour of Russia's interests increases.

Engagements

Generally, Sputnik Srbija articles receive more engagements on Facebook than on the Sputnik Srbija website. The article with

Engagements vs number of republishers



the most reactions on Facebook is "Cepurin: Kosovo to return to the legal and state area of Serbia"[31], which has 3,581 interactions on Facebook and 251 interactions on the Sputnik Srbija website. The most popular article on Sputnik Srbija is "Vucic: I will inform Putin and seek support and advice"[32] with 391 engagements on the website and only 283 engagements on Facebook.

More articles have comments on Facebook than on the website, which can be explained by the fact that people tend to react to the articles on social media rather than leave their comments/reactions directly on the platform. It is likely that the audience of Sputnik Srbija is not visiting the webpage as their primary source of information and the articles of Sputnik are more often accessed via social media. A SimilarWeb[33] search for the most frequently appearing outlets in this study shows a similar trend, with most of the traffic of those websites coming from social media, mainly Facebook.

When it comes to comparing online engagements, Sputnik Srbija generally has more engagements on social media. However, there are websites which consistently receive a significant number of engagements on social media (i.e. NewsFront, Vestinet.rs, Skandalozno.rs). Whether these engagements are authentic or not goes beyond the scope of this project and has not been researched. A popular outlet is Srbijadanas.net, which frequently appears and often receives a lot of engagements ("Orban: Migrants should not be given a cent"[34] – 600/ Sputnik Srbija – 792, "EU to the Czech Republic: We will throw you out "like a sandbag", Czechs – excellent!" [35] – 600/ Sputnik Srbija – 471). The article "Out of spite: The children of Njegos (a high school) were forbidden to condemn NATO's crime, but then they responded to the police"[36], published on In4s.net has almost double the interactions the same article on Sputnik Srbija has (7,005 and 3,699 respectively). This can be explained by the fact that the story talks about a Montenegrin school and In4s.net is a Montenegrin website.

However, as same or similar content becomes more widely published, the potential for reaching more readers increases. Even if the article is not popular on social media, the fact that it is republished by several outlets may cause large audiences to be exposed to the content.

Further, according to local experts and public opinion polls, the population of the Western Balkans often uses social media as their daily source of news: 61% in Montenegro, 32% in BiH, and 33% in Serbia[37]. In comparison, only one in five Serbians and Montenegrins say they choose newspapers or online news websites for their daily intake of news. Even less people from BiH – 17%– get their news from print or online sources. The "Boycott" campaign on social media, created to undermine the 2018 North Macedonian name-change referendum (mainly through closed ultra-

nationalistic Facebook groups), is viewed as one of the reasons for the low turn-out in the name-change referendum, for example[38]. The region is also home to fake news producers and a troll farm, as revealed after the 2016 US elections[39].

All these factors make it necessary for further research on how social media can be used for influencing public opinion in the region. Possible directions of the research can examine usage habits on popular social media platforms, networks of social media accounts that spread disinformation, and authentic and inauthentic social media behaviour of top fans of local outlets likely to spread Russian content, etc.

Types of content re-publishing

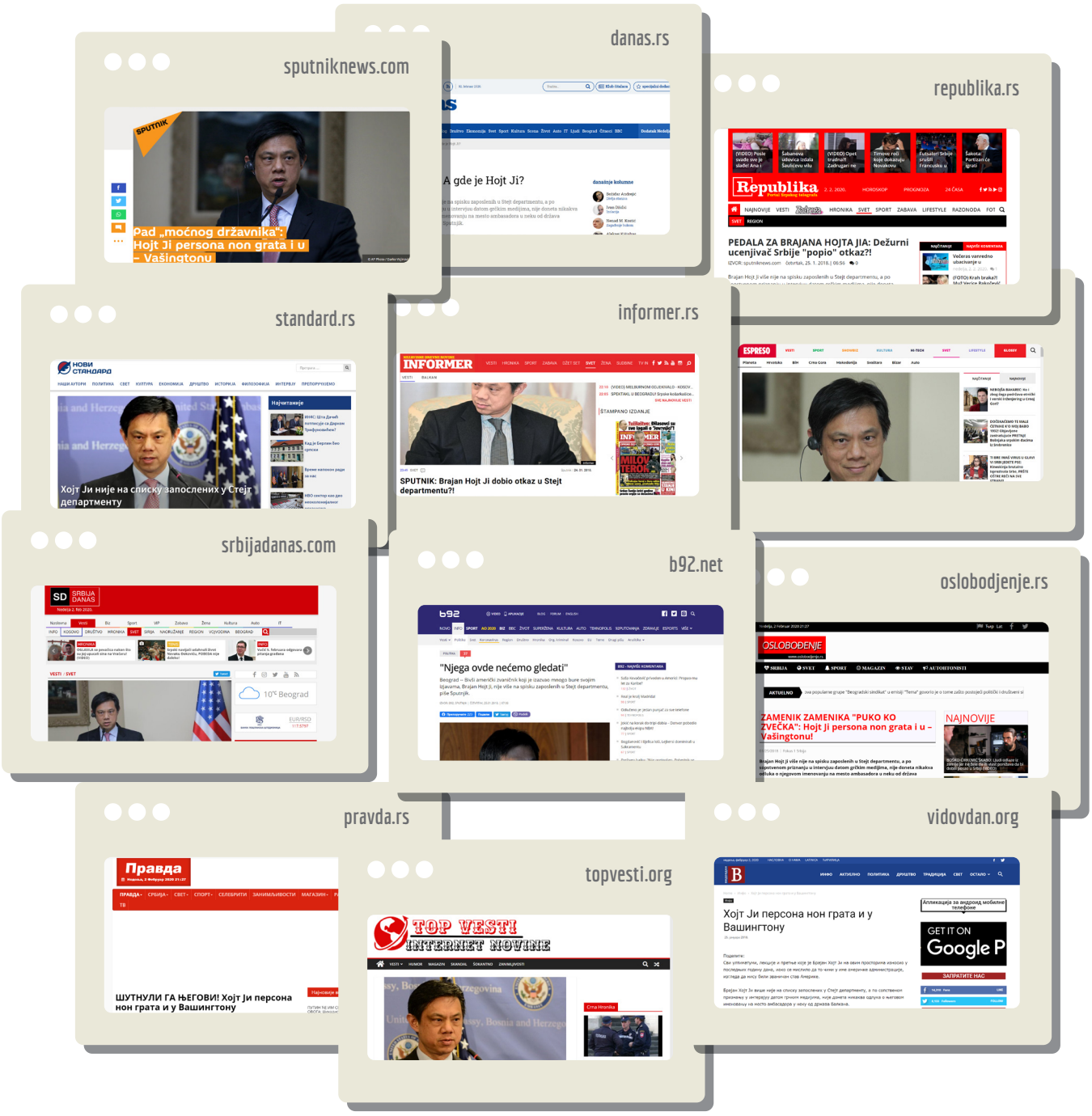
This study classified the re-published stories based on the type of re-publishing. Some of the local outlets copy the content fully (same content), while others publish articles with parts of the text nearly identical to Sputnik Srbija's publication (similar content). Based on the analysis, 40% of the content was exactly the same, while 60% was identified as similar. Types of content re-publishing include:

- **Same headline/same content** – The article "Vedrana Rudan: NATO has destroyed us all, and Kosovo is America!"[40], for example, appears the same in Srbin.info, Vidovdan.org, Republika.rs, Krstarica.com, and Vestinet.rs

- **Same headline/different content** – The article "Zaharova about the West's bombing of FRY: Is it possible that you are such idiots"[41], for example, appears with the exact same headline in Patriot.rs (no longer active) and Politika.co.rs, but the content is different

- **Different headline/same content** – The article "In spite: His children were forbidden to condemn NATO's crime and then returned to the police ..."[42], for example, appears with the exact same content in In4s.net

- **Different headline/some content is the same** – The article “The falling of “the powerful statesman”: Hoyt Yee persona non-grata in Washington”[43], for example, appears the same but with a different headline in several outlets: Danas.rs, Republika.rs, Standard.rs, Informer.rs, Patriot.rs (no longer active), Espreso.rs, Srbijadanas.com, B92.net, Oslobodjenje.rs, Pravda.rs, Topvesti.org, Vidovdan.org



- **Same photo** – The article "Is Montenegro honourable: Ban on Wreaths for victims of NATO aggression"[44], for example, appears with the same photo in Iskra.co

Fringe sites tend to re-share Sputnik Srbija's content in full and use the same text and headline (i.e. Srbin.info). Websites like Patriot.rs sometimes use the same headline but change the body of the text by adding or removing paragraphs. The other Russia-affiliated media that often comes up as a re-sharer of Sputnik Srbija content is Srb. news-front.info, which usually re-publishes the exact same content as Sputnik Srbija in Cyrillic and in all cases, has sourced the story to Sputnik Srbija.

On several occasions, local outlets even publish the same photo as Sputnik Srbija without necessarily having the same content (but instead publish similar content). In the case of the Sputnik-original article "Vedrana Rudan: NATO has destroyed us all, and Kosovo is America!"[45] (*NATO is aggressive* narrative) all five outlets (Srbin.info, Vidovdan.org, Republika.rs, Krstarica.com, Vestinet.rs) which have re-published the article have done so with the same content and have even embedded the same video or a screenshot of the video (Srbin.info). In contrast, the article "Zaharova about the West's bombing of FRY: Is it possible that you are such idiots"[46] (*NATO is aggressive* narrative), which does not have a given source, has been copied verbatim only three times and on one occasion has even been republished with the same photo (Jadovno.com). However, more often – 18 times – the

story appears "similar" in local outlets and two of those (Politika.co.rs and Patriot.rs) have published the same photo.

Generally, popular Serbian media outlets (i.e. B92 and SrbijaDanas.com) publish similar content to Sputnik Srbija with a different headline but almost the same text (usually with a paragraph missing or added) and source it to Tanjug. Tabloids (Telegraf.rs, Informer.rs, Blic.rs) on the other hand, do not fully source Sputnik Srbija as the original source of the information but sometimes attribute a paragraph to the outlet within the text. The content in tabloids is generally "similar" as their headlines are almost always different, most often made more sensationalist and clickbait-like, but some of the text is the same.

An interesting example is the article "Self-humiliation of vassals: Montenegrin soldiers sent to Kosovo"[47] (written by Sputnik Srbija reporter Nebojsa Popovic) that appears copy-pasted even with Sputnik's colours on a webpage called Svetinjebraniceva.rs. This webpage appeared once more while tracking the *EU is hegemonic* narrative.

Sensationalist headlines are widespread in the Western Balkans media space. Generally, when local outlets re-publish content similar to Sputnik Srbija's content, the headline is often changed and made more sensationalist. This kind of language resonates with local audiences that prefer more entertaining and engaging news rather than the drier style of Western-made news. This also explains why Sputnik Srbija content is seen more often in local outlets (same or similar) than Western-style news. Understanding what local audiences like to read, and in what format or language style the news should be presented, should be a priority in providing alternatives to Russian content.

Sustainability

A search on >versus< for each of the five narratives for the first half of 2019, based on pre-selected search words, resulted in the following findings:

- *EU is weak and not united* – 6,060 articles
- *EU is hegemonic* – 3,295 articles
- *NATO is aggressive* – 24,458 articles
- *NATO is not beneficial* – 3,447 articles
- *NATO is weak and not united* – 466 articles

However, not all articles listed above are supportive of the narrative. Those numbers represent the results of the search that was conducted by including pre-selected search words.

After a qualitative assessment, all five narratives have been found in local media in 2019 to a different extent. The narrative *NATO is aggressive* is the most visible given that the spring of 2019 was the 20th anniversary of the NATO air campaign in the former Yugoslavia which was widely covered in the media.

The *EU is weak and not united* narrative is largely present in stories about differences of opinion among EU member states on the question of Kosovo. As the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue was becoming more complicated at the end of 2018 due to newly imposed trade tariffs and Kosovo's army and the proposed land swap, many countries in the West (including within the EU where there is no unified recognition of Kosovo) made it a topical issue. This is a rather new perspective of the narrative, which in 2018 mostly dealt with the topics of migration and Brexit. This slight change in the narrative demonstrates how sustainable narratives can be and thus are able to adapt to changing circumstances to stay relevant.

The narrative *EU is hegemonic* is seen in 2019 too in a short but interesting news thread[48], for example, in which Sputnik Srbija published an original-content interview with a sociologist named Slobodan Reljic about a tense situation in North Kosovo in March. Mr Reljic claims that the West (both Europe and America) have been hegemonic actors in the Balkans, creating chaos in the region and trying to control the countries. This interview has been re-published in two media outlets – In4s.net and Srbijadanas.com. While In4s.net quotes Sputnik in the body of the article as the source of the information, Srbijadanas.com lists both itself and Sputnik Srbija as the content creator.

The narrative *NATO is not beneficial* was identified on Sputnik Srbija as focusing mainly on the unchanged situation of Montenegro after its accession to NATO. This perspective of the narrative could not be identified in 2019, however other stories can be identified in the results of the search. A news thread, for instance, follows a NATO exercise held in Croatia in June 2019. The articles compare the exercise with a similar one held in Serbia, positioning it as a powerful leader among the Western Balkans countries.

Two cases have been selected to exemplify how the same 2018 narratives are present in 2019 and are re-shared in local media. The case studies are analysed to further highlight how information connected to the EU and NATO travels in the region and to test if the same outlets appear to be sharing such information continuously in 2018 and 2019. Thus, two case studies have been chosen – one per organisation: the EU and NATO. An additional reason for the selection of these two news threads is the source of the information. While in one of the cases Sputnik Srbija is clearly the original source (the article is written by a Sputnik Srbija reporter), Sputnik Srbija is an amplifier in the other case as proven by the time stamps on the outlets.

Narrative:
EU is weak and not united

Timeframe[49]: February 1 -9, 2019
Sputnik: amplifier
Similar content published in 20 outlets

The week researched for the presence of the narrative the *EU is weak and not united*

Figure 2 illustrates which outlets are spreading articles on the topic with the exact same sentence.

is February 1 – 9, 2019. The main topic in this week is the undecided status of Kosovo and the fact that the UN cannot reach a consensus on the question. A few of the articles deal with a speech by the British Ambassador to the UN, who justifies the need for a Kosovar army. This speech provoked a news thread which discusses the messages of the speech, and the articles quote the Russian Embassy in

London to claim that the EU has failed to act as a mediator in the conflict.

Twenty outlets published articles on this topic, all containing the sentence "The EU's efforts to mediate between Serbia and Kosovo have failed", including Sputnik Srbija. This sentence is determined to correspond to the narrative in question, while Sputnik Srbija is considered the originator of the story. However, the article itself is based on Tanjug's content and according to some of the time stamps, Sputnik Srbija is not the first to publish it. Thus, although there is no source given below the text on Sputnik Srbija's website, other evidence shows that Tanjug is likely the originator and Sputnik Srbija is only an amplifier, which has not properly sourced the content. The majority of outlets also quote Tanjug as the content creator.

Narrative:
NATO is aggressive

Timeframe: March 14 – 22, 2019
Sputnik: source
Published by: 30 outlets

The sample for the narrative *NATO is aggressive* is the week of March 14-22, 2019. The narrative was immediately found in the first few articles from the morning of March 14, thus the search was extended to cover March 13 as well. As it turns out, Sputnik Srbija published a story on March 13, claiming that Russia passed a bill condemning the NATO bombings[50]. The topic was widely covered in local media and sourced almost entirely to Sputnik Srbija, and the news piece is supplemented by interviews from Sputnik Srbija's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan. The original article though, as published on Sputnik Srbija, uses the phrase "no lessons learnt" in relation to NATO's bombings over former Yugoslavia and stated that the Alliance again attacks other countries, mainly in the MENA region. A total of 30 outlets re-published Sputnik Srbija's original content, but many more cover the topic of the bill extensively. Apart from several outlets that appeared for the first time in this news thread, most of them have already been seen in the previous narrative searches and news threads (Figure 3).

The fact that the same narratives as identified in 2018 appear also in the media space of the Western Balkans in 2019 underlines the effectiveness of using narratives to spread certain messages. As they are being tailored to include different dimensions of the same problems, and thus the narratives can be assessed as sustainable, Russian content keeps re-appearing locally, paving the way for more assertive Russian narratives to appear if needed. The use of narratives is thus a successful method that can be employed by Russia to further polarise public opinion, curb EU and NATO accessions by the Western Balkan countries, and even influence frictions in the local populations further towards the East.

Sputnik Srbija
09:10
13.03.2019
1160
Sputnik Srbija
Novosti.rs
11:37
13.03.2019
454
no source
Pravda.rs
11:38
13.03.2019
342
Sputnik Srbija
RTRS.tv
11:38
13.03.2019
120
Sputnik Srbija
Telegraf.rs
11:52
13.03.2019
7
Telegraf.rs
Tanjug
Mondo.rs
12:09
13.03.2019
0
Sputnik Srbija
B92.net
12:05
13.03.2019
N/A
Tanjug
RTVpuls.com
12:08
13.03.2019
0
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Happytv.tv
11:59
13.03.2019
1
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Rts.rs
11:58
13.03.2019
419
Sputnik Srbija
TVmost.info
11:57
13.03.2019
0
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Vesti-gazeta.com
13:31
13.03.2019
0
Sputnik Srbija
Nezavisne.com
14:17
13.03.2019
61
Sputnik Srbija
Studiob.rs
14:48
13.03.2019
0
Tanjug
Danas.rs
19:46
13.03.2019
1
no source
Glassrpske.com
22:18
13.03.2019
0
Tanjug
In4s.net
N/A
13.03.2019
440
In4s
Bigportal.ba
N/A
13.03.2019
0
no source
Webtribune.rs
N/A
13.03.2019
N/A
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Novimagazin.rs
N/A
13.03.2019
0
Beta
Vestinet.rs
N/A
13.03.2019
46
Sputnik Srbija
NSreporter.rs
N/A
13.03.2019
0
Tanjug
Nasportal.net
N/A
13.03.2019
0
no source
Srbijadanas.com
06:57
14.03.2019
148
Srbija Danas
Sputnik Srbija
Ceopomistina.rs
08:13
14.03.2019
5
Sputnik Srbija
Koreni.rs
N/A
14.03.2019
8
Sputnik Srbija
Bijeljina.org
N/A
14.03.2019
0
Glas Srpske
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Mojkontakt.com
N/A
N/A
0
Tanjug
Sputnik Srbija
Date
Time
Total engagements on Facebook
Source

Disinformation

Two case studies are studied to track how disinformation is spread across the region. Tracking disinformation is not the focus of this report, but is used to confirm local experts' assumptions that the same outlets publish Russian narratives and disinformation pieces.

Case study 1: NATO killed more civilians than the Taliban

Over the course of three days, several online media re-published a news story in BCMS languages (both in Cyrillic and Latin) about civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On 30 July 2019, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) disclosed their collected data on civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict since the start of the year. The report announced that "Civilian deaths (not total casualties) attributed to Pro-Government Forces continued to exceed those caused by Anti-Government Elements"[51].

The first Balkan media outlet to focus on the question was Tanjug News Agency (although three other media outlets quote Tanjug's piece, but have published in the same time or two minutes later, according to the times indicated on their websites). Tanjug based their story on an Associated Press (AP) article published on the same day as the UN report. While AP's title states: "UN says Afghan forces, allies killed most civilians in 2019"[52], Tanjug's title is "UN: NATO kills more civilians than the Taliban"[53], providing misleading data by naming NATO and not NATO and Afghan forces in the headline. Other WB media have also spun the content, mentioning NATO more often than International Military Forces, as named in the UN report. A lot of the disinformation starts in Serbian online media – either in pro-government tabloids or anonymous websites. This content is then amplified by Sputnik Srbija and crosses borders to other countries. Fact checking network Zasto Ne's track record shows similar findings: the most active disinformation media are in Serbia, but Sputnik Srbija is rarely the source of the disinformation and is more often a magnifier of the content.

Figure 4 provides a timeline of how the news piece was re-published in the Western Balkan region for three days. An interesting trend is how the choice of photos for the articles vary, but almost all involve a group of soldiers pictured with heavy machinery. Rarely, the NATO flag is used for a supporting photo to the text.

Figure 4. Timeline of 'NATO killed more civilians than the Taliban' case study

Case study 2: NATO soldiers show satanic sign[54]

On 8 February 2019, the KFOR Multinational Battle Group-East (KFOR MNBG-E) published a series of photos on their Facebook account showing a group of soldiers visiting the Gračanica Monastery in Kosovo two days earlier. One of the photos caused a heated discussion online about a hand gesture a group of soldiers was photographed doing. The online discussion involved arguments that the gesture was a call to Satan, with many comments debunking the original Twitter statement (which was later included in some of the articles). BCMS language media in the region picked up the discussion and used it to present NATO negatively.

Montenegrin website In4s.net[55] was the first one to write about the story 20 days after the KFOR MNBG-E's Facebook post. The article is without an author and refers to the discussion, which had been happening on both Twitter and Facebook.

In their article, the Montenegrin website describes the soldiers' sign as a Satanic gesture and includes a scan of an English-language article, titled 'Lost in translation'.

The cited article and featured scan, however, is of a Cleveland-based newspaper, in which the author Kathleen Murphy Colan examines the history of popular hand signs (Fig.5). The "hang loose" sign, seen on the KFOR MNBG-E photo, is a Hawaiian gesture for "relax" and "be cool". Colan never claimed that what has become a common gesture in the US carries a satanic reference, thus it can be assumed that the Balkan-spread news used the unrelated American article to manipulate the content for the audiences and to give legitimacy to the fabricated facts.

In4s.net has also used the article as evidence to 'remind' the reader of the death of thousands of citizens, attributed to the 1999 NATO bombings, and the effects on public health caused by NATO's use of depleted uranium ammunition, calling the soldiers "Satan's deputies".

The Serbian Espreso website also includes the tweet that allegedly started the conversation and adds that the sign differs from the satanic gesture because of the index finger being curled. While the news outlet does not explain the Hawaiian origins of the sign, it mentions that this is how Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho celebrated his goal scores[5657]. This started a separate thread of copy-pasting articles among the main Serbian tabloids, who still used sensationalist headlines, probably as clickbait, but still mentioned the footballer reference to the sign as an alternative explanation (Fig.6).

Several conclusions can be drawn from these case studies, where different disinformation techniques were used (such as manipulative, misleading, and exaggerated headlines). On one side, an

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Common hand signs, where they came from and what they mean:

1. THE HORNS

2. "OK"

3. "I LOVE YOU"

4. "PEACE"

5. "HANG LOOSE"

6. "LOSER"

7. FINGERS CROSSED

8. "SHAME"

9. "LIVE LONG AND PROSPER"

10. "THUMBS UP"

The Bush family are multigenerational fans of the University of Texas Longhorns — or quite possibly, Black Sabbath.

Lost in translation

The Bushes love the Longhorns . . . or is it SATAN?

KATHLEEN MURPHY COLAN
Special to The Plain Dealer

Does the Bush clan worship the devil? Signs here point to "not likely" but overseas, you might get a different answer.

During the inauguration festivities, the first family's "Hook 'em, 'horns' signal — right hand raised with the index and pinkie fingers extended — was interpreted as a salute to Satan and horrified thousands, especially in Norway.

The two-finger salute — flown by George, Laura, Jenna and even Grandma Barbara during inauguration festivities — has generated Internet chatter and news reports. For the record, the gesture is a sign of love for the University of Texas Longhorns, whose fans — whose numbers famously include the Bush family — often shout "Hook 'em, horns" at sporting events.

It's easy to understand where the confusion comes in — this is, after all, a hand signal that is estimated to be 2,500 years old.

For much of that time, it's been associated with pagans and the occult, and today it's best known among heavy metal music fans.

In the beginning, though, it was about a bull.

Ancient people used the symbol to call on the great horned bull, which was a protective god, but "as Christianity gained momentum, this horned god grew to be thought of as the devil, so those who still practiced this gesture as a protective measure were actually calling on the devil to ward away evil," writes Nancy Armstrong and Melissa Wagner, authors of the "Field Guide to Gestures" (Quick Books, 2003).

Evidence of these beliefs are seen today in the "horn" accolera worn by many Europeans as magical protection against the evil eye. Still other signs of the horn are known as the mano-cornuto (literally "horned hand"), which implies a man has an unfaithful wife.

More commonly here, it implies a man — or a woman — likes to rock.

The symbol seen at every rock concert for the past 30 years is attributed to heavy-metal masters Black Sabbath. According to VH1's "100 Most Metal Moments," which aired in spring 2004, Sabbath's Ronnie James Dio came up with the sign, but Gene Simmons of Kiss and Rastamaster George Clinton also claim ownership.

Dio says he learned the gesture from his Italian grandmother, who used it to ward off the "evil eye."

Want more? It's used as a curse in parts of Africa; and in Russia, it's a symbol for so-called New Russians, the newly rich, arrogant and poorly educated.

Perhaps most surprisingly, in American Sign Language, it's a sign for an abrupt bumpyard expletive that translates roughly to "poppycock." That produced a surprised giggle from the first lady's press secretary when revealed to her last week.

With so many meanings for one simple hand gesture, no wonder people are confused. Follow our guide to make sure you're sending the right message next time you send up a sign.

Colan is a free-lance writer in Cleveland.

Figure 5: The Plain Dealer article "Lost in translation. The Bushes love the Longhorns...or is it SATAN?", authored by Kathleen Murphy Colan (not available online).

anti-NATO bias is widespread in debunked news in BCMS languages. This trend also coincides with public opinion polls, which show a division in public opinion between the East and the West. A 2018 study, conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research[58] in Serbia, Kosovo, BiH and North Macedonia, shows that about half of the populations in these countries do not think their countries belong either to the West or to the East. NATO remains a complicated topic, the same research shows, where only in Kosovo and North Macedonia are the majority in favour of full NATO membership. (Albania, which is a NATO member and is traditionally very supportive towards NATO, was not analysed as part of this study).

Noteworthy are the similarities in the sources of disinformation between the two case studies. Serbian tabloid newspapers, Sputnik Srbija, and almost the same set of online media (i.e. Espreso, Srbin.info) are re-sharing the information not only in both case studies, but they can be frequently seen on fact-checking platforms. Figure 6 shows how the news piece was republished in the Western Balkans media. Figure 7 describes a separate network of disinformation spread, based on Espreso's alternative explanation of the sign.

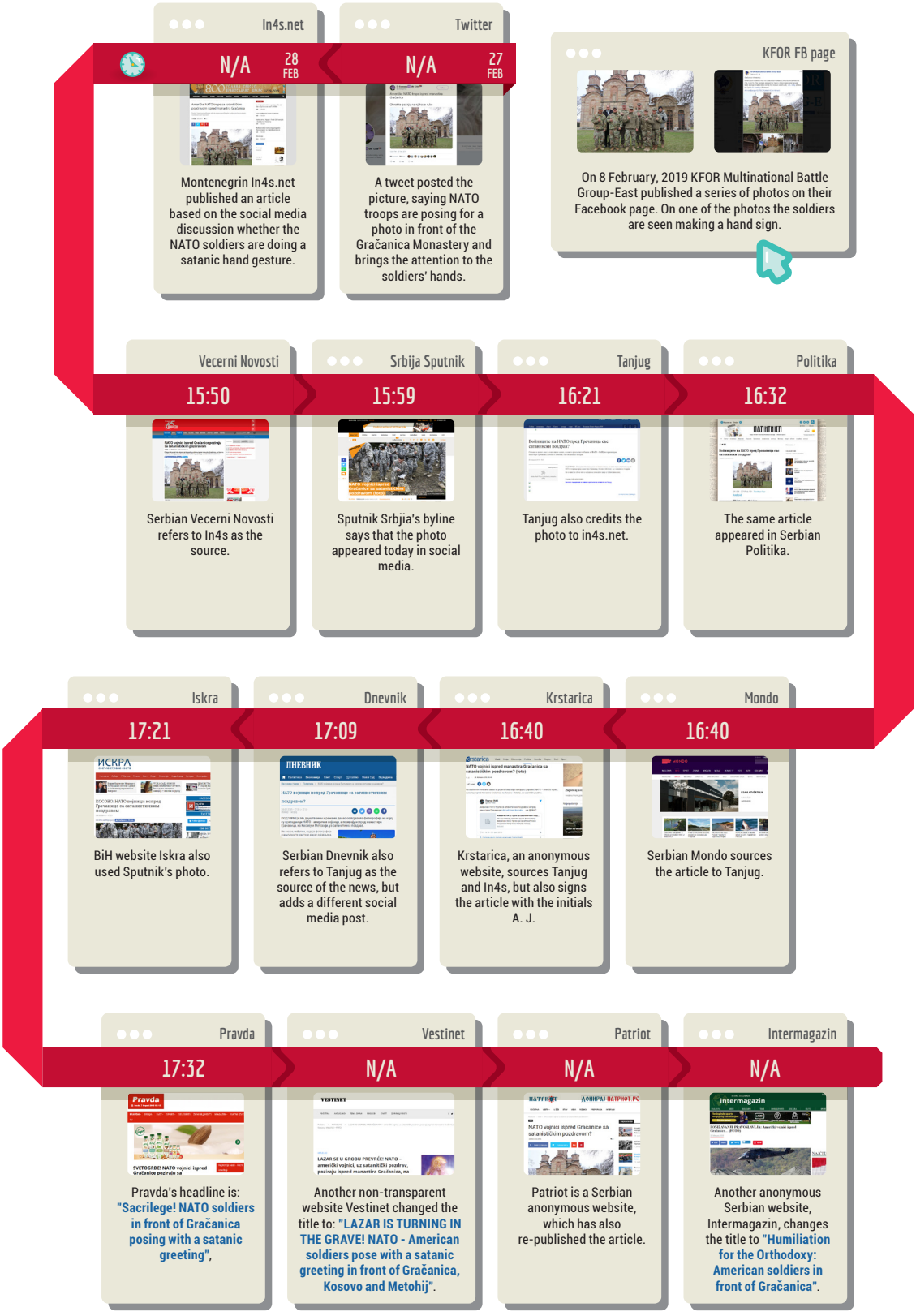


Figure 6: Timeline of 'NATO soldiers show satanic sign' case study

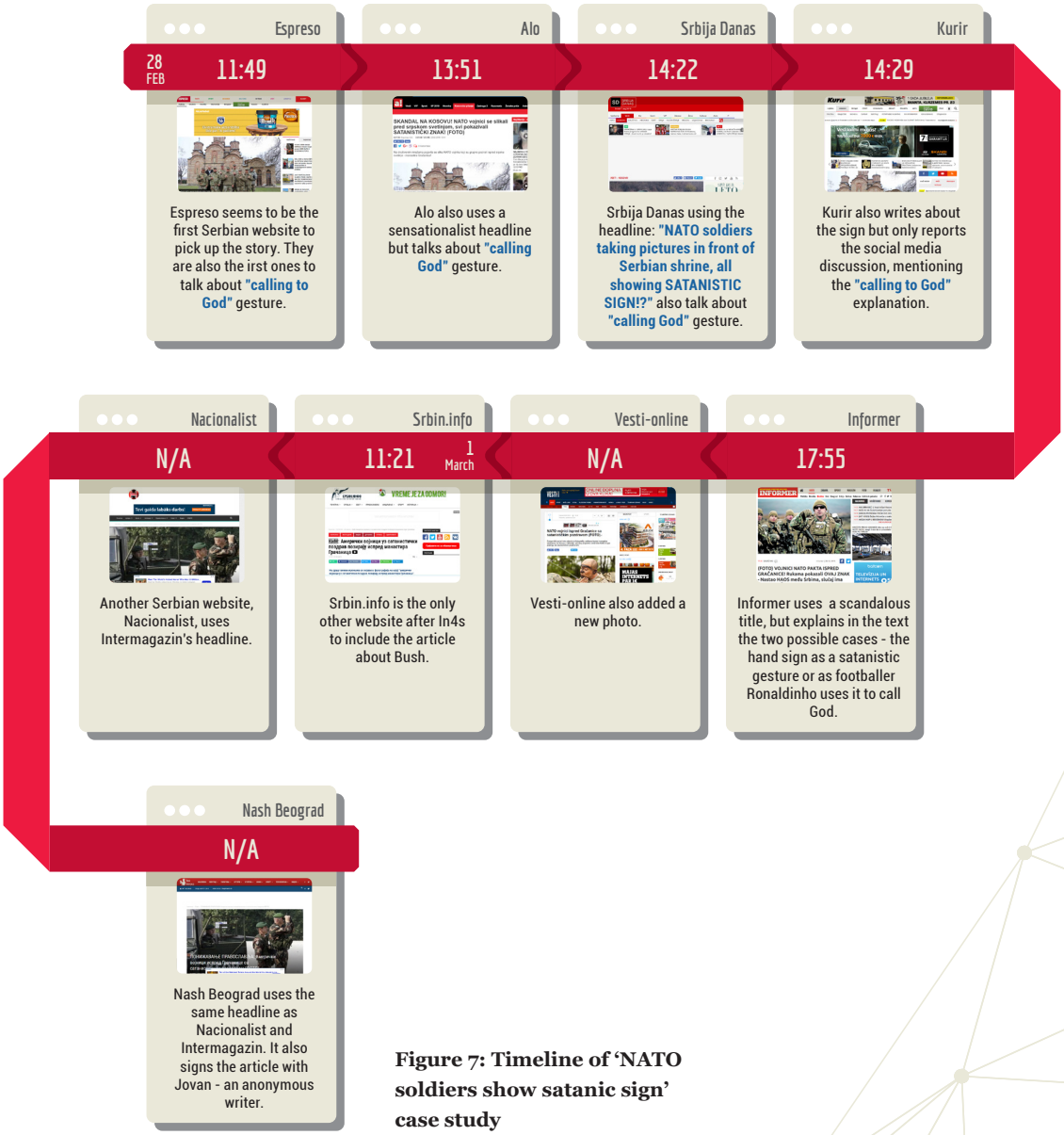


Figure 7: Timeline of 'NATO soldiers show satanic sign' case study

Figure 6 shows how the news piece was republished in the Western Balkans media. Figure 7 describes a separate network of disinformation spread, based on Espreso's alternative explanation of the sign.

Main re-publishers

Based on the analysis of all steps of the methodological framework, the list of non-accidental actors was created. Non-accidental actors are those media outlets which appear frequently and at least in two of the steps or in all steps of the research.

In general, actors that spread same or similar content from Sputnik Srbija can be found across the region and in both the fringe and more popular media. Mass media is presented more often by Serbian-based outlets, where there are representatives from across the spectrum (popular sites, tabloids). Less popular websites are based across the region and their ownership is almost entirely unknown. This is characteristic of the region, as non-transparent media ownership, and thus decreased media freedom, is a vulnerability that can be exploited by both internal and external actors.

Serbia-based outlets

Srbin.info is the outlet that most frequently re-shares Russian content related to the narratives in question and participates in disinformation threads with Sputnik Srbija. It is owned by Dejan Petar Zlatanovic and its editorial policy appears to be mainly pro-Russian, given that it almost always re-shares Sputnik Srbija content and cites the Kremlin-affiliated outlet as the source. In Serbia, it ranks 139th in popularity according to SimilarWeb[59]. Its Facebook page has more than 45 000 followers.

The ownership of **Intermagazin.rs** is unknown and although it sometimes gathers more online engagements on Facebook than Sputnik Srbija, it ranks 870th in Serbia, according to SimilarWeb. Its Facebook page has more than 49 000 followers.

Novosti.rs is the online version of the Vecernje Novosti daily newspaper, whose ownership is unclear, but parts of it (30% according to Reporters Without Borders) belong to the Serbian state with the rest connected to Milan Beko, a businessman and former minister under Slobodan Milosevic. Thus, the stories often carry a pro-Serbian government editorial line, but the headlines are not as sensationalist as other popular outlets. It ranks as the 22nd most popular site in Serbia, where the majority of its online traffic comes from, according to SimilarWeb. Its Facebook page has more than 368 000 followers.

Both sites, **Patriot.rs** (not active anymore) and **Patriot.co.rs,** appear often in this study as spreading narratives related to the EU and NATO. They seem to share the same unknown author, but the articles the two outlets publish sometimes vary. Both often copy Sputnik Srbija content. The first

address ranks 4290th in Serbia, while the second domain proves even more fringe, ranking in 15,953rd place, and thus both can be considered with narrow reach.

Srb.news-front.info is officially run independently of the Kremlin and is published in five languages, including Serbian. However, there have been reports about it being directly financed by the Russian secret service.[60] As proven in this report, the platform often copies Sputnik Srbija's content in full, but also provides proper sourcing to the original site. SimilarWeb provides no information about its popularity in the region. Its Facebook page has more than 9 000 followers.

The popular pro-Serbian government site **Srbijadanas.com** is another frequent actor in the network spreading EU and NATO-related narratives. Its owner is SNS-affiliated Aleksandra Martinovic. The outlet ranks 14th in Serbia according to SimilarWeb and 26th according to Alexa, but is also popular in BiH (nearly 10% of its traffic is generated from BiH). Its Facebook page has more than 224,600 followers.

Another very popular Serbian-based site is **B92.net**, which appears frequently in the study. Although it sources Tanjug when its published article is similar to the one published by Sputnik, B92 is present not only in news threads spreading the narratives in 2018 and 2019, but also in news threads sharing disinformation. The outlet started as an alternative source of information in the 1990s, but in recent years the quality of its products has declined after its sale to Kopernikus Corporation.[61] Traffic to B92.net comes mainly from Serbia and BiH, and in Serbia it ranks 15th most popular according to SimilarWeb and 12th according to Alexa. Its Facebook page has more than 495,400 followers.

Frequently re-appearing in this study are also Serbian-based pro-government tabloids, such as Informer, Kurir, Alo, Blic, Telegraf.

Informer is a daily newspaper and the 21st most popular website in Serbia, according to SimilarWeb and 31st according to Alexa. It is owned by Dragan J. Vučićević and is often considered not only as a pro-government tabloid, but is also frequently seen as a tool for attacking opponents and the civil society by the ruling SNS party. It is considered as unprofessional media due to its numerous violations of ethical standards[62]. Its Facebook page has more than 11,700 followers.

Kurir is the leading Serbian news portal, ranking as the 4th most popular website on SimilarWeb and 8th most popular according to Alexa. It is published by Adria Media Group, owned by businessman Igor Zezelj. As Adria Media Group is the biggest media group in the Balkans, it is also present in North Macedonia (holding majority stake in the daily newspaper Sloboden Pecat, which has the largest circulation in the country) and in Croatia (through the so-

called content factory Adria Media Zagreb which publishes magazines). Zezelj is also the owner of the Serbian-based Espreso website (10th / 23rd most popular site in Serbia according to SimilarWeb/Alexa) and the Mondo outlets, with versions in Serbian (ranked 28th / 43rd in Serbia according to SimilarWeb/Alexa), Bosnian (ranks 126th in BiH) and Montenegrin (ranks 162nd in Montenegro). Its Facebook page has 778,400 followers.

Alo is owned by Sasa Blagojevic, who also owns Studio B (another outlet which appears in this study) and is believed to maintain close ties with the ruling SNS party. The website is the 9th most popular platform in Serbia according to SimilarWeb. According to Alexa, it ranks 18th. Its Facebook page has 410,247 followers.

Blic is one of the leading news portals in Serbia, ranked as the 6th most popular site in the country according to SimilarWeb and 5th according to Alexa. It is owned by Swiss-German media company Ringier Axel Springer Media AG. Its Facebook page has 920,370 followers.

Ranking as the 19th most popular site in Serbia according to SimilarWeb and 21st according to Alexa, **Telegraf** is officially owned by Internet Group, which also owns three newspapers in North Macedonia. However, the real owner is Veselin Jevrosimovic – businessman and the President of the Athletic Association of Serbia.

Montenegro-based outlets

In4s.net is one of the websites that came up in expert interviews for spreading Russian content. This has been proven in this study, as the outlet with unknown ownership but with affiliation to the Movement for Neutrality of Montenegro has continuously published articles aimed at portraying the EU and NATO in a negative light. It is the 43rd most popular site in Montenegro, but is almost equally popular in Serbia (45% and 39% of traffic respectively).

BiH-based outlets

The most frequent BiH-based actor in this study is the portal **Iskra.co**, which has unknown ownership but almost all its traffic (more than 75%) comes from Serbia. Although it operates from Republika Srpska's Visegrad, only 6% of the traffic comes from BiH according to SimilarWeb. Its Facebook page has more than 35,400 followers.

Although local experts have highlighted the role of Republika Srpska (such as public broadcaster RTRS, News Agency of Republika Srpska (SRNA), Alternativna televizija and others) in promoting Sputnik Srbija's content, this report did not find those media outlets among the top non-accidental re-publishers in BiH.

Kosovo-based outlets

TV Most, a local TV station based in Zvecan – a town in the Northern Kosovo Province of

Mitrovica – is the most frequent Kosovo-based outlet in this study. It was founded in 2002 and its Facebook page has 6,655 followers.

In comparison, Sputnik Srbija has 140,925 Facebook followers. This is significantly less than popular Serbian outlets such as Blic or Kurir, but at the same time more than some fringe sites. It also means that while Sputnik Srbija is not the most followed source on Facebook, its content can appear on others' platforms.

* The outlets that appeared only in the Step 1 of the methodological framework.

Conclusions

This study was developed as a follow up report to the StratCom COE's publication Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija. It was aimed at understanding to what extent Russia has the potential to spread its narratives in the Western Balkan media, as identified during the primary stage of desk research and interviews with local experts.

The report proved that Western Balkan media outlets in BCMS languages re-publish the same narratives related to NATO and the EU as the Russian-funded media Sputnik Srbija. It could not, however, prove whether the dissemination of these narratives is orchestrated by the Kremlin and picked-up by local media, or rather that these are pre-existing narratives in the WB media space which resonate well with the audience.

During analysis, the extent of Russia's potential influence network in the WB media space was outlined by identifying WB media that regularly publish stories similar to Sputnik Srbija about EU and NATO topics both in 2018 and 2019. Most of those non-accidental actors have also been identified to be participating in the spreading of disinformation in the region together with Sputnik Srbija. Thus, this report concludes that Sputnik Srbija has the potential to reach wide audiences in the WB due to language similarities and the fact that local media are re-publishing the same or similar content as this Kremlin-funded outlet.

Sputnik Srbija is present in the WB media space as both an amplifier and a source of information. The patterns identified regarding how information travels in the region could not prove if the EU and NATO-related narratives in question are promoted by Russia through Sputnik Srbija or whether these are pre-existing narratives which Sputnik exploits and amplifies. Particularly notable is the role of Serbian news agency Tanjug as one of the most quoted sources in the region. The study shows that once an article is picked up by Tanjug, it makes its way around different local outlets, spreading the narratives in question.

The analysis also concluded that some narratives as identified on Sputnik Srbija are more likely to be re-published in local media than others. These are often related to the role of the EU and NATO in regional tensions, societal tractions, and other pressing challenges. The exploitation of these narratives can potentially contribute to the polarization of society, leading to decreased trust in the state authorities and the media, and conflicting views on the country's foreign policy directions. This report shows that the more Sputnik Srbija reports about the topical issues for the region, the better its potential is to reach wider audiences. Subsequently, the better its opportunities for shaping narratives in favour of Russia's interests.

It is interesting to note that there is no set formula of how local outlets re-publish Sputnik's original content. The same outlet (for example Montenegrin-based In4s.net) 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 such as B92.net and Srbijadanas.com very rarely quote Sputnik Srbija as their source and instead name Tanjug (even if the content is the same as the one on Sputnik's platform). Serbian tabloids (Informer, Blic, Kurir) also often publish same or similar content, but again rarely quote Sputnik as their source. Tabloid sites also change the headlines, making them more sensationalist than the original Sputnik Srbija headline.

As there is no consistency in how sources of information are presented in local media, content may become distorted and the source of the information – lost. Thus, the EU and NATO-related narratives, in many cases include disinformation and are wide-spread with little or no way for the audience to track if these are home-grown or Kremlin-driven.

Another reason why Russia has significant potential to influence audiences in the region is the structural vulnerabilities of the Western Balkan media space. While the region is shaken by low quality media laws, controlled media freedom, and struggling newsrooms, Sputnik Srbija provides good quality content for free, feeding a void for information.

Sputnik Srbija's content resonates well with the population, therefore understanding what local audiences like to read, and in what format or language style the news is presented, should be a priority to present alternative information to that provided by Russian-funded media.

Way forward

This study should be viewed as a starting point for further analysis which investigates Russian influence in the Western Balkan media landscape. The methodology can be altered to track the existence of Russian narratives in media content, published also in other WB countries, in Macedonian or Albanian languages. There are at least four key avenues for further analysis:

- Analysis of social media in WB languages to track networks of disinformation and the flow of Russian media content; potential inauthentic behaviour for spreading messages etc.
- A deeper analysis of the identified non-accidental actors (media) to better assess their editorial policy, ownership and political/business links. It would help to assess the motivation of republishing content from Russian-funded media, such as Sputnik Srbija.
- Audience analysis of the WB countries to understand to what extent and how the narratives identified by this report and previous StratCom COE studies resonate with local populations.

- Analysis of the role of local actors (politicians, business, media, religious communities etc.) that cooperate with the Kremlin and its supporters to better assess the levers of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans.

Endnotes

1 "Interview with BiH journalist and editor about the media situation in BiH and more specificially Republika Srpska, 4 July, 2019."
2 Based on a series of interviews conducted in June-August 2019 with experts from the region.
3 For example, Asya Metodieva, Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2019; Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Eyes Wide Shut. Strengthening of Russian Soft Power in Serbia: Goals, Instruments, and Effects. Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, May 2016
4 Please see the NATO StratCom COE report 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Monitoring and Analysis of the Sputnik Srbija Online Platform'.
5 Citizens' Association "Why not", Disinformation in the online sphere. The case of BiH (April 2019).
6 Including online editions of newspapers, TV and radio channels.
7 As concluded from expert interviews.
8 As exemplified by the continuous positioning of those states at the bottom of media surveys such as Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Index or the Freedom House Analysis or the EU's evaluations in regards to membership negotiations.
9 European Commission, 'Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions', European Commission (Brussels 29 May 2019).
10 Personal accounts in conversations with journalists from the region.
11 Ngadnjim Avdyli, 'Violations of Journalists' Rights in Abundance', Kosovo2.0 (23 October 2018), Available at: https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/shkelje-me-bollek/ [Last accessed 8 August 2019].
12 EUvsDisinfo, 'Disinformation Analysis on the Western Balkans: Lack of Sources Indicates Potential Disinformation', EUvsDisinfo (3 August 2018), Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-analysis-on-the-western-balkans-lack-of-sources-indicates-potential-disinformation/ [Last accessed 8 August 2019].
13 Research was done in four of the six countries – Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and BiH
14 Ibid.
15 Tara Tepavac, 'Disinformation and fake news as the new normal: a challenge for the Western Balkans' in 'Hybrid and Transnational Threats', Friends of Europe (December 2018).
16 The Economist, 'Is Serbo-Croatian a language?', the Economist (10 April 2017), Available at: https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/04/10/is-serbo-croatian-a-language [Last accessed 8 August 2019].
17 Citizens' Association "Why not", Disinformation in the online sphere. The case of BiH (April 2019).
18 The engagements both for Latin and Cyrillic version of article (reactions, comments, shares) were measured based on Crowd Tangle Add On.
19 Likes, dislikes, comments were measured by numbers identified by on Sputnik webpage.
20 If another outlet has been quoted within the text, it can be assumed that some part of the text has been taken from the quoted outlet but it cannot be claimed for certain that the whole text has been copied.
21 Media monitoring tool >versus<, developed by International Republican Institute's Beacon project was picked for two main reasons. While it is the tool used in StratCom COE study to identify narratives on Sputnik Srbija in 2018 (see report Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Monitoring and Analysis of the Sputnik Serbia Online Platform') and thus consistency in the methodological approaches throughout the project is achieved, >versus< also has a good database of BCMS language media, if compared to other online media listening tools.
22 For methodology and classification, see https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/o_nama.html (PDF available in English)
23 Citizens' Association "Why not", Disinformation in the online sphere. The case of BiH (April 2019).
24 See for example: Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," (2012); Don Fallis, 'What is Disinformation?' (2015); James Pamment et al., "Countering Information Influence Activities: The State of Art" (2018); Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden, ed., "Fake News: A Road Map" (2018).
25 "Srbija dobila iznenadnu priliku da uključi Rusiju u pregovore sa Prištinom" - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201802151114572387-kosovo-amerika-rusija-pregovori-eu-format-simetrija-srbija/
26 Orban: Migrantima ne treba dati ni cent - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/evropa/201805041115480268-Orban-migranti-cent/
27 Pad „moćnog državnika": Hojt Ji persona non grata i u – Vašingtonu - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201801241114298945-balkan-amerika-brajan-hojt-ji-analiza/

28 Zapad zbunjen: Ruska podmornica im „nestala“ pred očima - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/20181212118144443-Rusija-Krim-podmornica/

29 Čepurin: Kosovo da se vrati u pravno i državno polje Srbije - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/20180910117135186-kosovo-cepurin-srbija/

30 Rusija odgovara Grčkoj: Nikad vas nismo ni gledali kao saveznika - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/20180711116504321-rusija-proteruje-dvojicu-grckih-diplomata-kao-odgovor-saveznici/

31 Čepurin: Kosovo da se vrati u pravno i državno polje Srbije - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/20180910117135186-kosovo-cepurin-srbija/

32 Vučić: Obavestiću Putina i tražiću podršku i savet - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201809291117341257-vucic-obracanje-gazivode/

33 Digital market intelligence platform www.similarweb.com

34 Orban: Migrantima ne treba dati ni cent - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/evropa/201805041115480268-Orban-migranti-cent/

35 EU Češkoj: Izbacićemo vas „kao vreću sa peskom“, Česi — odlično! - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/evropa/201805281115770608-eu-ceska-izbacivanje/

36 U inat: Njegoševoj deci zabranili da osude NATO zločin, a onda su uzvratili policiji - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201803231115010758-Danilovgrad-NATO-gimnazija-protest/

37 Public opinion in Serbia, Kosovo, BiH, North Macedonia in 2018 conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research, a project of the International Republican Institute. Public opinion in Montenegro in 2017 conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research, a project of the International Republican Institute.

38 As understood in interviews with local experts.

39 Isa Soares, 2019, “The Fake News Machine”, CNN. Available at: https://money.cnn.com/interactive/media/the-macedonia-story/ [Last accessed January 6, 2020].

40 Vedrana Rudan: NATO nas je sve uništio, a Kosovo je Amerika! - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/vesti/201812011118032048-Vedrana-Rudan-Masa-/

41 Zaharova Zapadu o bombardovanju SRJ: Zar je moguće da ste toliki idioti - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201803291115087419-zaharova-zapadu-povodom-godisnjice-nato-agresije-na-srj-/

42 U inat: Njegoševoj deci zabranili da osude NATO zločin, a onda su uzvratili policiji - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201803231115010758-Danilovgrad-NATO-gimnazija-protest/

43 Pad „moćnog državnika“: Hojt Ji persona non grata i u – Vašingtonu - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201801241114298945-balkan-amerika-brajan-hojt-ji-analiza/

44 Je li to časna Crna Gora: Zabranili polaganje venaca žrtvama NATO agresije - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201803241115020434-Crna-Gora-NATO-/

45 Vedrana Rudan: NATO nas je sve uništio, a Kosovo je Amerika! - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/vesti/201812011118032048-Vedrana-Rudan-Masa-/

46 Zaharova Zapadu o bombardovanju SRJ: Zar je moguće da ste toliki idioti - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201803291115087419-zaharova-zapadu-povodom-godisnjice-nato-agresije-na-srj-/

47 Samoponižavanje vazala: Crnogorske vojnike šalju na Kosovo - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201802021114406457-crnagora-kosovo-vojska/

48 A news thread in this paper is used to describe a series of outlets which have published the same/similar article.

49 Timeframe represents a peak in a number of articles related to the narrative

50 Rusija usvojila dokument o NATO bombardovanju Jugoslavije - https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201903131119126260-rusija-nato-glavna-pretnja-miru-od-bombardovanja-srj-senatori-/

51 For the full report, refer to: https://unama.unmissions.org/un-urges-parties-heed-call-afghans-zero-civilian-casualties

52 Rahim Faiez, ‘UN says Afghan forces, allies killed most civilians in 2019’, AP, 30 July 2019, Available at: https://www.apnews.com/c4438180d6714809a056862604cd692a [Last accessed 8 August 2019].

53 Tanjug, ‘UN: NATO usmrtio više civila nego talibani’, Tanjug, 30 July 2019, Available at: http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=497382 [Last accessed 8 August 2019].

54 Two Montenegrin fact-checking platforms, Raskrinkavanje.me and Digital Forensic Center, and the Serbian Fake News site, all looked into the same disinformation case from February 2019.

55 In4s, ‘Američke NATO trupe sa satanitičkim pozdravom ispred manastira Gračanica’, In4s, 28 February 2019. Available at: https://www.in4s.net/americke-nato-trupe-sa-satanitickim-pozdravom-ispred-manastira-gracanica/?lang=lat [Last accessed 8 August 2019].

56 Espreso, ‘NATO VOJNICI SE SLIKALI ISPRED SRPSKE SVETINJE I POKAZALI ZNAK RUKAMA: Kad vidite o čemu je reč, ODUŠEVIĆETE SE!’, Espreso (28 February 2019). Available at: https://www.espreso.rs/vesti/politika/356079/nato-vojnici-se-slikali-ispred-srpske-svetinje-i-pokazali-znak-rukama-kad-vidite-o-cemu-je-rec-odusevicete-se [Last accessed 8 August 2019].

57 BBC,‘Dio’s two-finger gesture - what does it mean?’, BBC (18 May 2010).Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8687002.stm [Last accessed 8 August 2019].

58 Public opinion in Serbia, Kosovo, BiH, North Macedonia in 2018 conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research, a project of the International Republican Institute.

59 All results are for November 2019

60 Patrick Beuth et al, 'War without blood', Zeit Online (26 February 2017). Available at: https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2017-02/bundestag-elections-fake-news-manipulation-russia-hacker-cyberwar/komplettansicht [Last accessed 14 August 2019].

61 Media Ownership Monitor database available at http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/media/detail/outlet/b92net/ . The MOM database is a project by Reporters Without Borders and BIRN.

62 Ibid.

Prepared and published by the
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) is a NATO accredited multi-national organisation that conducts research, publishes studies, and provides strategic communications training for government and military personnel. Our mission is to make a positive contribution to Alliance's understanding of strategic communications and to facilitate accurate, appropriate, and timely communication among its members as objectives and roles emerge and evolve in the rapidly changing information environment.

Operating since 2014, we have carried out significant research enhancing NATO nations' situational awareness of the information environment and have contributed to exercises and trainings with subject matter expertise.

www.stratcomcoe.org | @stratcomcoe | info@stratcomcoe.org