FIGHTING RUSSIAN LIES

DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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Since the end of the Cold War, the countries of Southeast Europe have pursued Euro-Atlantic integration with varying degrees of success. In recent years, however, that process has lost momentum as prospects for further NATO and European Union enlargement appear to have stalled. Even countries that achieved membership in those organizations face challenges for which they seem ill-prepared, ranging from entrenched corruption to irregular migration and demographic decline.

Russia and other non-Western outside actors have grown increasingly assertive in employing hard- and soft-power measures with negative consequences for regional security. Central to these efforts is the spread of anti-Euro-Atlantic narratives using what would have previously been called propaganda but is now more commonly referred to as disinformation. While specific methods vary, this predominantly manifests itself within the online sphere on the traditional internet, web portals and social media networks.

There is a mismatch between efforts to disseminate disinformation and efforts to counter it in the region. Increasing awareness of the prevalence of such campaigns is a necessary step toward the holistic policy changes needed to reverse this imbalance.

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL APPROACH

Russia's historical, cultural and religious connections with Southeast Europe are actively propagated, and at times exaggerated, by Russian public diplomacy and media narratives. Especially after escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, the region became a further battleground for subversive Kremlin activities. In January 2019, the government-backed Russian Council for International Relations published a report, "Russia in the Balkans," that described the region as an "epicenter of international developments" requiring expanded measures to safeguard Russian interests. Russia's main goals are to destabilize the region to divert Western attention from Ukraine and other countries in its neighborhood, stop NATO and EU enlargement, and assert its status as an influential power. Moscow also seeks regional countries' support with issues related to conflicts with its neighbors, with EU sanctions and with its leadership in the Orthodox world.

Russia employs a wide spectrum of instruments in pursuit of these goals. Several studies have emphasized elite capture of opportunistic local partners. Nontransparent relations in key sectors, such as energy, banking and real estate, are used to create political and economic dependence. Financial support to the far right and other political groups further promotes pro-Russian constituencies. Meanwhile, soft-power activities, such as sports, charity events, schools and Russian language courses are carried out through embassies, honorary consuls, cultural centers and associations, and the Orthodox church. Intelligence operations, cyberattacks, and military sales and training add harder components.

> DISINFORMATION THROUGH THESE CHANNELS SEEKS TO EXPLOIT GRIEVANCES, EMOTIONS AND PROBLEMS TO FUEL REGIONAL TENSIONS AND UNDERMINE SUPPORT FOR EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

The "Kremlin Playbook," a series of analytical studies from the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Center for the Study of Democracy, has applied the term "sharp power" to efforts to manipulate the regional information environment in conjunction with other approaches. Such activities are conducted via multiple channels: (1) direct statements, comments, interviews and social media postings by Russian officials; (2) Russian state-owned media such as Sputnik (and its regional branch Sputnik Serbia), Russia Today (RT) and Russia Beyond; and (3) local electronic and print media, web portals, bloggers and political figures who republish content and otherwise spread pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, with or without clear Russian connections.

Disinformation through these channels seeks to exploit grievances, emotions and problems to fuel regional tensions and undermine support for Euro-Atlantic integration. A standard pattern combines fictitious arguments with factual reporting to create seemingly valid stories. Some common narratives spread in this regard are: (1) EU or U.S. support for regional pro-Western politicians is the cause of democratic deficits, economic problems, ethnic divisions, state failure and corruption; (2) the West is weak, divided and afraid of Russia; the EU and NATO are nearing collapse and will never accept more Balkan states as members; (3) the surge of migrants, 5G and COVID-19 are Western conspiracies; and (4) Russia is the sole defender of Orthodox Slavs (and sometimes others) against "enemies" old and new.

REGIONAL CASES

Several factors make Southeast Europe particularly vulnerable to such manipulative messages. The still-fragile regional

North Macedonian Army special forces at a Skopje barracks mark the one-year anniversary on March 27, 2021, of the country's accession to NATO.
REUTERS

political situation presents a fertile environment that continuously offers new material for disinformation. The region's relatively short experience with democracy overlaps with low media literacy and lack of a strong tradition of objective professional journalism. Weak financial situations at local media outlets encourage uncritical acceptance of free pro-Russian content. Meanwhile, estimates that roughly three-quarters of regional populations use the internet and half use Facebook mean high potential exposure to online disinformation.

The following cases illustrate ways Russia takes advantage of such factors to tailor influence efforts to conditions in different countries.

SERBIA

The overall context of Russo-Serbian relations is shaped by the centuries-old narrative of Slavic brotherhood built around the premise of Russia as the protector of Serbian interests. Indeed, the "brotherhood" paradigm remains the foundation of Russian information operations in Serbia. Over the past two decades, the Kosovo conflict has further cemented ties as Moscow's opposition to Kosovo's declared independence has increased its importance as an ally. Consequently, various Serbian administrations have assumed an indifferent stance to pro-Russian influence operations and have sometimes even tried to instrumentalize these for their own political benefit. Similarly, most political parties in Serbia express neutral or positive attitudes toward Russia, and public opinion surveys consistently indicate that a large majority of Serbian citizens view Russia as a friendly country. Russia also enjoys positive coverage in Serbian media.

In terms of architecture, Sputnik Serbia represents a key hub for content creation and dissemination. According to Gemius ratings from early 2020, Sputnik Serbia on its own reaches only about a half million real users, making it the 31st most-read media portal in Serbia. However, due to its free, professionally packaged content, it receives strong amplification through republishing by higher-ranked portals, including Informer, Vecernje Novosti, Srbija Danas and Alo!, each of which has more than 2 million users. Sputnik-produced content is also recirculated through pro-Russian niche portals such as Vostok, Fakti, Kremlin.rs, SrbinINFO, Veseljenska and Nacional.rs. These three lines of dissemination combined allow for an asymmetrically strong presence of unreliable, Kremlin-skewed content within Serbia's online community.

While offensive Russian information operations have been frequently studied, a recent case offered a glimpse of a defensive campaign aimed at damage control. In November 2019, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić revealed that his country's security services had discovered a Russian attempt to infiltrate the Serbian Army. An anonymous YouTube video depicted what appeared to be an exchange of money for information between a retired Serbian serviceman and the assistant defense attaché at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade. The story and video received extensive media coverage, including on national primetime newscasts.

Initial Russian reactions appeared unsynchronized. Russia's presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov simply maintained that further investigation was required while Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova immediately qualified the incident as "a provocation." Within 24 hours, Sputnik started pushing the narrative of a Western-organized provocation aimed at disrupting Russian-Serbian relations and an upcoming meeting between the countries' presidents. This storyline was aggressively pursued over the following month, with blame attributed to NATO and its regional exponents, such as Bulgarian journalist Hristo Geshov, who

had re-shared the video. A November 22 Sputnik interview with ruling Serbian Progressive Party member of parliament Milovan Drecun attributed the affair to an alleged joint operation of Croatian and Bulgarian intelligence staged from the town of Kumanovo in North Macedonia. Drecun had made similar allegations in other media the day before. Sputnik thus managed to provide a seemingly credible public figure with a platform to convey groundless statements that diverted public attention from the incident itself.

Sputnik's "response narrative" was almost instantaneously re-shared by the suite of smaller pro-Russian portals. However, the key to the success of these defensive media actions proved to be the involvement of three larger portals (Kurir, Srbija Danas and Alo!), which turned to Sputnik content to generate more traffic. These outlets' involvement was less clearly politically motivated than an opportunistic attempt to leverage increased public attention for commercial benefit. Serbian officials' conciliatory stance also played an important part, with Vučić maintaining from the first day that Belgrade had no intention of changing policy toward Moscow.

Consequently, the affair defused fairly quickly. Mainstream media coverage significantly decreased. Within a week, overall media messaging changed from "Russian spy scandal" to "stable relations despite the spy affair." NATO seemed to be a thwarted spoiler. The Kremlin thus proved capable not only of shaping narratives and agendas, but also of rapidly responding to negative reports that threaten its image.

MONTENEGRO

Russian ties with Montenegro also have far-reaching cultural and historical roots centered on the pan-Slavic tradition and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the economic sphere, Russian tourism, real estate investment and past ownership of the Uniprom KAP aluminum plant accounted for almost a third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) from 2006 to 2013. Politically, the longtime governing Democratic Party of Socialists accused Russia of fueling anti-NATO protests through such groups as the "Movement for Neutrality" and "No to War, No to NATO," as well as attempting to orchestrate a violent seizure of power during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

A renewed wave of Russian influence efforts intensified in December 2019, when Montenegro's Parliament enacted a new national law on religion (the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities). Among other provisions, it directed that buildings and properties used by religious communities and built or acquired from public sources prior to the establishment of Yugoslavia in December 1918 would be recognized as properties of the Montenegrin state. As the community potentially most affected, the Serbian Orthodox Church strongly opposed the law's adoption and a Russian-supported media campaign, including disinformation on local and regional portals, contributed to subsequent mass protests.

At the beginning, Russia's official stance was ambivalent. On December 19, 2019, for example, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Montenegro posted a statement by

Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, to the effect that Russia will not interfere in Montenegro's internal affairs concerning the law. However, on December 30 the ministry issued a press release expressing grave concern over the law's consequences and declaring it an international issue affecting the whole Orthodox world. The same day, the Moscow Patriarchate issued its own statement condemning the law as a "confiscation of Serbian Orthodox Church property" and a "below-the-belt strike" aimed at "encouraging a schism." Sputnik Serbia published the statement with the headline "Law will destabilize the situation in Montenegro" along with a false report that a state of emergency had been declared in the capital, Podgorica.

Over the next three months, the Digital Forensic Center of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro counted 35,000 articles and social media posts opposing the law. In addition to Sputnik Serbia, the most active sources supporting the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church positions were IN4S and Borba from Podgorica, and the Serbian tabloids Blic, Kurir, Facts.org, Vesti and Informer. Two other pro-Russian portals, Kremlin.rs and srbijajavlja.rs, also played an active role on Facebook. Russian political figures and analysts featured prominently throughout.

Typical of the manipulative narratives within these outlets' coverage were Informer reports with headlines such as, "A dark conspiracy of [President] Milo [Đjukanović] and the VATICAN?!" to transfer Orthodox relics, and Sputnik Serbia's claims that Đjukanović had invited NATO intervention against protesting "citizens with icons" as a "subcontractor" for anti-Russian work ordered by the U.S. and NATO. Government supporters responded by accusing Russia of misusing the issue to undermine the country's efforts to gain EU membership.

The law remained a contentious issue throughout Montenegro's fall 2020 parliamentary elections, and the law's controversial ownership provisions were removed under the new government that emerged. Still, risks remain from the disinformation's lingering effects in terms of radicalization of some protesters and aggravation of the rivalry between ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins.

CROATIA

The Croatian public and mainstream political elites have not traditionally been perceived as sympathetic toward Russia, largely because of the latter's close ties with Serbia in context of the enduring Croatia-Serbia rivalry. However, Russia's use of techniques ranging from cultural exchanges and diplomatic visits to strategic economic investments are producing a paradigm shift. As Russia's political and economic influence in Croatia has grown in recent years, its informational presence has evolved accordingly.

In terms of disinformation channels, the situation in Croatia differs significantly from neighboring countries within the "Sputnik cluster." Sputnik does not operate a Croatian subsidiary, and neither RT nor Russia Beyond reaches a wide enough audience to fall within the country's top 50 websites as ranked by Alexa, a web traffic analysis company.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, left, talks with Archbishop Stefan at the 13th century Orthodox Mother of God Peribleptos Church in Ohrid, North Macedonia, in 2011. Russia emphasizes a shared Orthodox faith to assert influence in the Balkans. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Montenegrin honor guards mark Montenegro's accession to NATO — in spite of Russian opposition — in Podgorica in June 2017. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Top Russian diplomats have been known to be the primary channel for disinformation. A watershed moment occurred on February 10, 2017, when Anvar Azimov, the largely unknown Russian ambassador to Croatia, held a press conference dressed in a military-style uniform complete with rows of ribbons (Russia Beyond transcribed the press conference verbatim). He threatened to withhold further loans to the Agrokor agribusiness conglomerate, whose 50,000 workers made it Croatia's largest employer and which generated roughly 5% of Croatian GDP. This message was delivered not by a representative of the company's Russian creditor, Sberbank, but by Azimov. That Croatia's media had barely noted Agrokor's financial problems prior to that point added to the public's shock.

The ambassador's words set off a dramatic sequence of events. Within two months, the Croatian government pushed through special legislation appointing an emergency board and asserting control of Agrokor's operations. This nonetheless resulted in two Russian banks (Sberbank and VTB)

owning a combined 46.7% stake in the concern. In January 2020, an additional 6.4% ownership stake was reportedly attained by Energia naturalis (also known as ENNA), the parent company of Gazprom's main Croatian partner, resulting in majority Russian ownership. ENNA is an important economic actor accounting for almost 3% of Croatia's GDP. Its recent investments in a variety of sectors have included a perpetually struggling fertilizer plant and a national retail chain (the 35th and 45th largest companies in Croatia, respectively).

Azimov subsequently became somewhat of a celebrity in Croatian broadcast, print and new media, regularly sought out for interviews and commentary with the most relevant newspapers and political magazines, including the government-financed weekly of the Serb minority in Croatia. Indicative of Azimov's remarkable media presence is the fact

that a Google search of his name in early 2020 turned up over 69,500 results, a tenfold increase over those for his immediate predecessor. His main narratives fell broadly in line with those identified above, with the distinctive additions that Croatia's NATO and EU memberships should not be barriers to closer economic cooperation and that Russia's ties with Serbia do not prevent it from acting as a neutral, regional powerbroker. In early 2020, Azimov identified energy and Croatia's troubled shipbuilding industry as areas of interest for further Russian investment.

Such messages are further disseminated via the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy, a central repository of press coverage of Russia-related topics in the Croatian media. The page averages three to five posts per week, with each attracting roughly 100 (mainly positive) reactions. In addition to sharing traditional media articles, the embassy page often publishes posts using irony, satire and mockery to amplify narratives for younger target audiences. An example in late 2019 was a cartoon purporting to wish a happy 70th anniversary to the NATO alliance with the following misrepresentation of allied defense commitments: "Nothing has changed in 70 years: 2% of GDP must be paid to the U.S. military industry." The cartoon depicts a soldier with a stick beating people hanging on a clothesline in order to fill up pots beneath them with coins that fall out of their pockets.

NORTH MACEDONIA

All major political parties in North Macedonia have shared a declarative consensus in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration since the country's independence in 1991. At the same time, most political leaders also support good relations with Moscow, especially concerning trade in areas such as energy, agricultural goods and pharmaceuticals, as well as cultural and educational links. In November 2019, a bilateral intergovernmental cooperation commission was reactivated after a five-year pause. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev invited Russian companies to greater partnership in natural gas distribution, and President Stevo Pendarovski announced plans (later reversed due to the COVID-19 pandemic) to attend Moscow's World War II victory parade in May 2020. Meanwhile, Russia has expanded the number of its embassy personnel and opened honorary consulates in the cities of Bitola and Ohrid.

During this same period, however, Russia invested substantial effort to undermine Skopje's prospect of joining NATO. According to a leaked report from the North Macedonian security service UBK, for over a decade the Russian Embassy in Skopje has directed subversive propaganda and intelligence activity aimed at isolating the country from Western influence. The operation began with NATO's Bucharest summit in 2008, during which Greece blocked an expected membership invitation over the use of Macedonia as the country's name. It continued in 2015 with articles in Sputnik declaring there was a "war" in the country after a fatal shootout in Kumanovo involving Macedonian police and an armed militant group. In 2017, a press release from the Russian Foreign Ministry warned against NATO and EU "attempts … to make Macedonians accept the 'Albanian platform' [electoral

program] designed in Tirana." These campaigns subsequently targeted the June 2018 Prespa agreement with Greece, which removed Greece's objections to the country's NATO and EU progress in return for adjusting the country's name to North Macedonia. Russia aimed first to disrupt negotiations and then to discredit an advisory referendum on the deal that September by depressing voter turnout.

Under one technique, Russian financing allegedly went to groups in North Macedonia and Greece to incite violent protests. Both countries eventually expelled Russian diplomats for engagement in this activity. Prominent Russian geopolitical analysts Leonid Savin and Alexander Dugin also visited Skopje in May 2018 to provide training for members of the far-right, anti-NATO United Macedonia party, as reported by the Voice of America's Macedonian service.

Meanwhile, Russian officials issued direct statements. In March 2018, Russian Ambassador Oleg Shcherbak warned that NATO membership would make the country a "legitimate target" in the event of conflict. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zakharova added that Skopje would have to pay for NATO's patronage by increasing its defense spending and by taking part in military operations with no connection to its interests. Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee, also dismissed NATO's accession offer as misuse of a small country for confrontation with Russia.

During the referendum campaign, sources such as Sputnik published a few articles echoing the idea that North Macedonia could become a target if U.S. bases were established there, with missiles aimed at Russia, and war were to erupt. Anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives were further disseminated by Macedonian online media on behalf of the anti-referendum "Boycott" campaign. Dozens of new websites with false or manipulative messages — originating outside the country — popped up daily on Facebook and other platforms to encourage people to boycott the vote. On Twitter, #Boycott (#Бојкотирам) quickly generated more than 24,000 mentions, of which 20,000 were retweets. The campaign also used tools such as bots, organized trolling, hate speech and proxy political actors

One popular narrative depicted the Prespa agreement as an unnecessary and unjust loss of identity. Another suggested that Greece would refuse to implement the agreement, making the name change meaningless. A third sought to stoke tensions between Slavic Macedonians and the country's ethnic Albanian population by evoking memories of the 2001 civil conflict and arguing that Macedonians should not let Albanians change the country's name. Playing on historical disputes with another neighbor, other fake posts reported that Bulgaria had sent a crane to remove classical monuments in central Skopje.

Although Zaev played down evidence of foreign-directed fake news, the director of the country's security service, Goran Nikolovski, pointed to Russian influence behind the social media campaign as grounds to open an official investigation. In the end, 91% of referendum voters supported the agreement, but the 37% turnout fell short of the majority required to validate the result. Parliament proceeded to approve the

agreement's name change provision in January 2019, and NATO accession followed in March 2020.

While the disinformation campaign fell short of its goal, it still succeeded in exacerbating social divisions and laying the groundwork for future interference. #Boycott managed to inject false sentiments into the referendum campaign, generate outrage and skew public opinion.

ALBANIA

Albania's ties with Russia are thin compared to other Balkan countries. A non-Slavic population, a small Orthodox community and its rivalry with Serbia limit Russia's popular appeal. In contrast, pro-American sentiment is among the strongest in Europe.

As with Croatia, however, Russia's partly hidden presence in Albania's financial and economic systems appears to be growing. Open Russian trade and investment in Albania are relatively low, but shell companies are quite active in the energy domain. For example, in 2018 Transoil Group AG, a company incorporated in Switzerland and believed to be connected to Gazprom, won a bid for three oil fields in Albania. It is also noteworthy that 70% of the assets of one of the biggest banks in Albania recently registered offshore in the Cayman Islands, a popular tax haven for Russian companies. A similar case applied to the purchase of Telekom Albania by Russia-connected Bulgarian businessman Spas Roussev in early 2019. Such factors create potential vulnerabilities and show that Albania remains on Russia's radar.

Accordingly, while Russia's attitude toward Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration processes has been comparatively restrained, it has seized opportunities to present these in a negative light. The EU's decision in October 2019 to postpone the start of accession negotiations was one such chance. Speaking for Albania's disappointed political class, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared that the prolonged delays threatened further reforms in the country. Meanwhile, even EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn conceded that the EU's "collective credibility is at stake."

The atmosphere of blame and broken promises widened the opening for Russian-backed, anti-EU *temniks* (thematic reporting instructions) in both traditional and social media. The first target is the integration process itself. Articles and programs use temniks to demotivate citizens' EU aspirations by emphasizing the long path and uncertainty of success. Harsher attacks depict the EU as a racist, exploitative club in which Albanians have nothing to gain and potentially much to lose.

A second, broader target is the image of the political, socioeconomic and military model of Western democracies. Sporadic negative phenomena are presented as normal daily life. Implying weakness, headlines appear in national newspapers with titles such as "Britain is petrified by Russian Army, this tank is the reason" or "The biggest Russian aircraft carrier alarms the British fleet," omitting that the oil-powered Admiral Kuznetsov carrier broke down and managed to pass through the English Channel only by being towed.

Related efforts encourage Albanian elites to embrace the alternative Russian model, dominated by a corrupt, closed circle of intertwined political and business interests. Albania now has a class of oligarchs who win almost all important state tenders and concessions and return the favor to decision-makers through media support. As an example of how the Russian model has penetrated the country, almost all the biggest construction companies are also media owners.

RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the preceding cases show, countering Russian disinformation requires action at multiple levels. Notable existing Euro-Atlantic initiatives include "EUvsDisinfo" (the flagship project of the European External Action Service's StratCom Task Force, established in 2015); the European Commission's "Action Plan against Disinformation," published in December 2018; and the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, established in Riga in 2014. Croatia, which held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union the first half of 2020, specifically identified "prevention of the dissemination of fake news, intolerance and disinformation on digital platforms" as one of its priorities. At the national level, in 2019 the government of North Macedonia introduced a "Draft Plan for Resolute Action Against the Spread of Disinformation" to be overseen by a high-level task force from leading state institutions. A handful of regional nongovernmental organizations, such as Faktograf and GONG in Croatia, and the Digital Forensic Center and the Raskrinkavanje portal of the Center for Democratic Transition in Montenegro also investigate and expose fake news.

More remains to be done. As the countries of Southeast Europe share similar challenges, greater regional cooperation among governments and societies would be of particular benefit. Sharing knowledge and experience through regional conferences, workshops, training sessions and research projects would raise understanding of disinformation's regional dimensions and encourage joint approaches in areas such as public awareness, media literacy and media regulation. Enhancing the capacities of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to counter disinformation while upholding media freedom could be additional topics. Fact-checking services could establish a regional network. Given the shortage of regional resources, foreign partners could assist with additional funding.

Finally, long-term, strategic-level counters to Russian disinformation should raise resilience through improved governance and institution building, increased economic growth fueled by Western investment, and highly visible and clearly communicated engagement by the EU, NATO and their member states. Widespread perception of the benefits of Euro-Atlantic security and economic and political integration will raise local populations' attachment to these achievements and deprive disinformation campaigns of receptive audiences. ◻