STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

SYNCHRONIZED DECEPTION? ASSESSING RUSSIAN AND CHINESE DISINFORMATION OPERATIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

MEJREME ASLLANI

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Russian and Chinese disinformation operations in the Western Balkans. Russia uses historical and cultural ties, particularly with Serbian-speaking populations, to disseminate anti-Western narratives. China, leveraging Belt and Road Initiative investments and media partnerships, employs soft and so-called sharp power to enhance its regional influence. While direct Sino-Russian coordination remains unproven, their messaging aligns on key issues, including Russia's war against Ukraine and NATO criticism, with China adopting Russian disinformation tactics, especially on social media. Crucially, domestic actors, especially in Serbia, amplify these narratives through controlled media outlets, fostering pro-Russia and pro-China sentiments thereby eroding support for Euro-Atlantic integration. This article highlights the complex interplay of external influence and local enablers, emphasizing the threat to regional stability and democratic values amid the war in Ukraine.

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Over the past two decades, malign actors conducting information operations (IO) have developed increasingly sophisticated and prominent tools for influencing public opinion and destabilizing nations, amplified by rapid technological advancements.[1] The activities of Russia and China in the dissemination of disinformation has raised significant concerns in Western democracies.[2] The Western Balkans (WB), a region of considerable geopolitical importance, has emerged as a focal point for Beijing and Moscow, each pursuing distinct strategies aligned with their foreign policy objectives.

Despite aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, WB countries—Albania, Kosova, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)—face persistent Russian and Chinese disinformation operations that challenge this trajectory. These campaigns, designed to exacerbate regional tensions and undermine Western support, carry profound implications for regional stability. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified these dynamics, highlighting the strategic use of disinformation in modern warfare and further straining East-West relations.[3]

This article examines the information operations conducted by Russia and China in the WB following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It analyzes the key tactics and narratives employed by Russian state-owned media, the growing Chinese influence in the information domain, and the role of domestic actors in amplifying these narratives. The analysis assesses the potential role of these campaigns on regional stability, political discourse, and social cohesion, providing examinations of traditional and new media's role in disseminating disinformation. Furthermore, it examines potential thematic alignments and narrative convergence between Russian and Chinese disinformation efforts in the region without assuming direct coordination.

Russian and Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans

RUSSIA'S HISTORICAL AND STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

Russia has deep-rooted historical, cultural, and religious ties with the WB, particularly with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, dating back to the late eighteenth century.[4] These connections are anchored in shared Slavic heritage, the ideology of Pan-Slavism, and Orthodox religious bonds.[5] Russia strategically leverages these established connections, alongside existing regional divisions and unresolved conflicts, to assert its position as a significant global player, aiming to counterbalance Western influence amid EU and NATO expansion. The Kremlin's approach involves cultivating an image of altruism among the Slavic Orthodox population while simultaneously pursuing its strategic interests.

Although the EU has a dominant economic role in the WB, accounting for approximately 81 percent of exports and 59.7 percent of imports, Russia maintains significant ideological and political influence by leveraging its Orthodox Church ties to promote Pan-Slavic solidarity, funding church constructions, and supporting regional political actors.[6] For instance, in 2019, Gazprom donated up to $6.8 million to the Serbian Orthodox Church for the construction of churches in Serbia, BiH, Macedonia, and Kosova.[7]

1 Roberto Di Pietro et al., *New Dimensions of Information Warfare* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2021), 1–4, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-60618-3.

2 Di Pietro et al.

3 Vibor Cipan and David Kirichenko, "Russian Influence and Disinformation Operations in the Balkans," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (February 2024), https://gssr.georgetown.edu/the-review/gssr-volume-11-issue-2/.

4 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in South East Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

5 Lenard J. Cohen, "Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power," *International Journal* 49, no. 4 (1994), https://www.jstor.org/stable/40202977?origin=crossref; and Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans" (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence [StratCom COE], 2019), https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_strategic_interests_in_balkans_11dec.pdf.

6 Mejreme Asllani, "An Assessment of Russia's Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans since the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine" (master's thesis, University of Glasgow, Dublin City University (DCU) and Charles University, 2023), 6, https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/187334; and Marco Cruz, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Interests and Tools of Influence," in *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare: Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*, ed. H. Mölder et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2021), 315–33, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-73955-3_16.

7 "Gazprom Finances Serbian Church Interior," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Balkan Service (RFE/RL), March 24, 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-gazprom-orthodox-church-donation/29839386.html; and Asya Metodieva, "Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans," Policy Paper 16 (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2019), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21239?seq=1.

Beyond cultural influence, Russia utilizes its energy resources and UN Security Council seat to exert leverage, particularly regarding Kosova's status, and opposes NATO and EU expansion, even as EU accession negotiations advance for several Balkan states.[8]

CHINA'S EXPANDING ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC PRESENCE

China's influence, although less historically rooted than Russia's, has significantly expanded in recent decades. Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, China has maintained diplomatic relations with the region, including Albania (which was not part of former Yugoslavia).[9] However, China's enhanced economic, political, and cultural presence in the region indicates a strategic approach, positioning itself as an alternative economic power. One expert on China's influence in Europe observes that Beijing capitalizes on the WB's post-communist nostalgia, emphasizing a "shared socialist history" and long-standing "traditional friendship."[10]

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—central to China's global strategy—Beijing views the region as a pivotal transit corridor and area of investment to integrate into its global infrastructure network. According to a 2021 study on Chinese activities in the region, from 2013 to 2021, China initiated 136 projects in five WB countries (excluding Kosova), with Serbia leading with 61 projects.[11] China's "no-strings-attached" investment philosophy presents it as an attractive partner, contrasting with Western investments that impose stringent conditions related to governance and transparency.[12] Consequently, China is perceived as more economically accessible, particularly for WB states struggling with EU-imposed requirements. Beyond economic investments, China's influence in the WB extends to security and diplomacy, often aligning with Russian interests. For instance, Beijing and Moscow jointly oppose Kosova's UN membership and have challenged the appointment of Christian Schmidt as High Representative for BiH, an institution responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Dayton Agreement.[13] They frame Western-led peacekeeping missions in BiH as imposed interventions rather than legitimate security efforts.[14]

CONVERGENCE OF INFORMATION OPERATIONS

While China's direct involvement in information operations may employ different tactics and currently appears less prominent than Russia's, its expanding media presence, Confucius Institutes, and state-run media outlets are adapting content to local languages. Such measures serve as channels for public diplomacy and potentially strategic influence operations, raising concerns for the future. China's narratives are disseminated by pro-government media outlets, organizations, and individuals aligned with Beijing's agenda. Although direct, high-level coordination between Russia and China remains unproven, their disinformation narratives often converge, promoting similar ideas such as "the EU project is failing," "NATO is trying to occupy countries," and "the US caused the war between Russia and Ukraine."[15]

Russia and China employ distinct yet complementary strategies to extend their geopolitical reach in the WB. Russia leverages historical, religious, and cultural connections, while China prioritizes economic investments as its primary tool of influence. Both powers support Serbia over Kosova, oppose Western-led interventions, and utilize UN mechanisms to block WB-related initiatives to exert influence. While China's overt use of disinformation appears more limited compared to Russia's, an expanding China may result in Beijing playing a more active role in shaping regional narratives in the future.

8 Martin Vladimirov et al., *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans Corruption and State Capture Risks* (Sophia, Bulgaria: Center for Study of Democracy [CSD], 2018), https://seldi.net/fileadmin/public/PDF/Publications/Russian_Economic_Footprint/WESTERN_BALKANS_WEB_pdf__2_.pdf; and "The Western Balkans," Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament (website), March 31, 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans.

9 Valbona Zeneli, "Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process," Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) (blog), June 23, 2023, https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions.

10 Zeleni.

11 "China in the Balkans," Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), March 21, 2021, https://china.balkaninsight.com/.

12 Zeneli, "Chinese Influence."

13 Office of the High Representative (OHR), "General Information," Office of the High Representative, Sarajevo (website), n.d., accessed April 8, 2026, https://www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information/.

14 Blerim Reka, "China's Rising Influence in the Balkans," Geopolitical Intelligence Services, February 2, 2022, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/balkans-china/.

15 Ana Krstinovska, *Chinese Influence in North Macedonia* (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis [CEPA], August 30, 2022), https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-north-macedonia/.

In the Shadows of Media Manipulation: Narratives of Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation Operations

EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURES

Russia's "active measures" have evolved through technological advancements, enhancing information operations that frequently utilize disinformation as tools of hybrid warfare and mirroring Soviet-era special warfare operations tactics.[16] Security experts emphasize Russia primarily exerts influence through these operations, adapting them to the WB to portray Russia as the protector of Slavic brotherhood and as a viable alternative to Western powers.[17] Moreover, experts assert that "Russian disinformation operations are not specifically tied to an election process, but rather constitute a continuous, whole-of-government 'influence operation' targeting broad segments of WB society."[18] The Ukraine invasion enabled the use of preexisting narratives to present Russia as a protector of Slavic brotherhood in the WB.

The region provides fertile ground for Russian influence due to strong pro-Russian sentiment among Slavic populations, pervasive corruption, authoritative governance structures, fragile state institutions in BiH, and the complex relationship between Kosova and Serbia.[19] Russia strategically exploits these vulnerabilities to weaken trust in public institutions, incite tensions, and obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration. Concurrently, China leverages political and business networks established through its 14+1 initiative (now 13+1 after the Baltic states' withdrawal), solidifying its regional presence and using these connections to also promote its narratives.[20]

MEDIA CONTROL AS AN ENABLER OF DISINFORMATION

Traditional and new media outlets are the key enablers of disinformation in the WB. Media freedom in the WB has significantly declined, with numerous media outlets under political influence or financial control, limiting independence and favoring government-aligned narratives.[21] According to the Balkan Barometer 2023, BiH, Montenegro, and Serbia lead in perceptions of media as the institution most politicized (75, 73, and 68 percent, respectively) across the following institutions: judiciary, ombudsman, supreme audit institution, media, military and security forces, police, and the central bank.[22] In the same survey, over 65 percent of those surveyed in Albania and North Macedonia either tended to disagree or fully disagreed that the media was independent of political influence. This pattern of media politicization and low trust erodes democratic resilience, fuels nationalistic rhetoric, and strengthens populist and right-wing political actors.

A 2023 study highlights the correlation between Russia and China's growing influence and "state capture," suggesting external actors may leverage and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities through well-established networks involving politicians, business tycoons, and other related actors.[23] This influence appears to be exercised and amplified through media control, the Orthodox Church, illicit financial activities, and energy investments.

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16 Steve Abrams, "Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15, no. 1 (2016), https://connections-qj.org/article/beyond-propaganda-soviet-active-measures-putins-russia; and Rumena Filipova and Vladimir Shopov, *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War* (Berlin: Konrad Adenaur Stiftung [KAS]), 2022, https://eprints.uklo.edu.mk/id/eprint/8859/1/Report_Authoritarians-on-a-Media-Offensive.pdf.

17 Asllani, "Russia's Disinformation," 33–36.

18 Asllani.

19 Oslo Center, "Russian Disinformation in the Western Balkans during the War in Ukraine," The Oslo Center (blog), July 7, 2022, https://oslocenter.no/russian-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans-during-the-war-in-ukraine/.

20 Goran Georgiev et al., *Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe* (Sophia, Bulgaria: CSD, 2023), 11, https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/NED_Report_WEB.pdf.

21 "Media Capture in the Western Balkans: From Captured States to Captured Media," Policy Brief 18 (Skopje, North Macedonia: Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity [SELDI], December 2022), https://seldi.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Media-Capture-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf.

22 *Balkan Barometer 2023: Public Opinion* (Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council [RCC], 2023), 93, https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/BB%202023-PO.pdf/5495f3e223e456e99fc3bdce76054b7e.pdf.

23 "Illicit Financial Flows and Disinformation in Southeast Europe," Policy Brief 126 (Sophia, Bulgaria: CSD, March 2023): 11, https://acer.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BRIEF_126_ENG_WEB.pdf.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most WB countries aligned with EU sanctions on Russian media except Serbia, which became a hub for Russian state-controlled media outlets.[24] According to an AidData report, seven of Russia's eleven regional media outlets are based in Serbia, including Sputnik Srbija, TASS News Agency, RIA Novosti, and Russia Today (RT), launched in July 2022 following the war in Ukraine.[25] These outlets have the unrestricted ability to disseminate Kremlin-aligned narratives, including propaganda and disinformation within and beyond Serbia, fostering discord and fueling nationalistic sentiments.

The expansion of Russian disinformation on Telegram is also significant. Reports from Voice of America and Detektor in BiH reveal over 65 pro-Russian Telegram channels promoting war justification, anti-Western rhetoric, and recruitment for Russian forces in Ukraine. Additionally, 23 Telegram channels dedicated to the WB reach half a million people in Russia and Serbia.[26] Investigative reports expose that media outlets can be registered in Serbia while conducting operations in other WB countries.[27] These disinformation operations also target Albanian-speaking populations in Kosova and Albania, as content is simply translated without fact-checking.[28] A recent report published by BIRN Kosova finds that during a six-month period, Kremlin controlled media outlets such as TASS, Sputnki Srbija, RT Balkan and Pravda network published 1,323 news items about Kosova, an average of 7.3 per day in Albanian and Serbian language.[29]

In Kosova, Russian disinformation is particularly prevalent in the northern Mitrovica, where the Serbian minority relies on Serbian-language media, often controlled by pro-Russian sources. The content is widely trusted, suggesting these narratives resonate strongly due to cultural, religious, and political alignment and benefiting from confirmation bias.[30] This influence is then expanded across the WB through significant amplification of Russian propaganda on popular social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Telegram, and various online news websites.[31]

Utilizing the Hamilton Dashboard 2.0, the study analyzed the most engaged tweets—those primarily tweeted, retweeted and liked by Russian state officials, diplomats, state-sponsored media, and affiliated individuals—over a 16-month period between February 24, 2022, and June 30, 2023.[32] (Of note, while illustrative, this sample size limits generalizability.) The study found Serbia had the highest engagement with Russian state-affiliated tweets, which often function as official propaganda and disinformation channels, confirming its role in amplifying Russian narratives. These tweets reinforced existing themes in Russian state-owned media, including NATO intervention in Kosova (1999), political developments in northern Kosova, the war in Ukraine, and comparisons between Kosova and Russia's actions in Donetsk and Luhansk to justify the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine.[33] Pro-Russian news platforms in Serbia,

24 Samir Kajosevic, "Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia to 'Enemy List'," Balkan Insight, March 7, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/.

25 Emily Dumont, Jonathan Solis, and Lincoln Zaleski, *Serbia: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels* (Williamsburg, VA: Aid Data, William and Mary University, April 11, 2023), https://www.aiddata.org/publications/serbia-profile-of-media-ownership-and-potential-foreign-influence-channels.

26 BIRN, "*Proruski Telegram Kanali na Balkanu sve Popularniji Poligon za Regrutovanje i Dezinformacije*" [Pro-Russian Telegram Channels in the Balkans Are an Increasingly Popular Training Ground for Recruitment and Disinformation], Voice of America, June 8, 2024, https://ba.voanews.com/a/proruski-telegram-bih-regrutovanje-dezinformacije/7647932.html.

27 "Putin Calling: Russia's Disinformation Flows Unchecked through Balkans," posted May 10, 2024, by Kallxo.com, YouTube, 1 hour, 2 min., 41 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unyIhz5SAvM.

28 Kreshnik Gashi et al., *The Story of Our Lies* (Pristina, Kosova: BIRN Kosova, 2023), https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/THE-STORY-OF-OUR-LIES-FINALE.pdf; and Visar Prebreza, Kreshnik Gashi, and Albulena Sadiku, *Mapping Disinformation: Report on Russian and Serbian Narratives in the Media and on Social Networks in Kosovo* (Pristina, Kosova: BIRN Kosova and Internews Kosova, 2026), https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/mapping-disinformation.pdf.

29 Prebreza, Gashi, and Sadiku, 9.

30 Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, and Baptiste Henry, *Little Substance, Considerable Impact: Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro* (The Hague: Clingendael-Netherlands Institute of International Relations, August 1, 2023), 40, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep52775.1?seq=3.

31 "Putin Calling."

32 Asllani, "Russia's Disinformation," 43–59.

33 Asllani.

Montenegro, Republika Srpska (RS), and North Macedonia also amplify disinformation. While not always directly funded by Russia, their narratives align with Kremlin interests, reflecting editorial biases that serve local elites.[34]

CORE NARRATIVE THEMES

Based on the analysis of the cited sources, Russian and pro-Russian narratives in the WB can be observed to fall into four overarching categories:

- *Anti-Western sentiment*: framing the West as imperialistic and the EU as weak
- *Justification of the war in Ukraine*: portraying it as a fight against Nazism and Western provocation
- *Exploitation of historical grievances and regional disputes*: using examples such as Kosova to rationalize actions in Ukraine
- *Portrayal of Serbian communities as oppressed*: inciting interethnic tensions[35]

Alongside these major themes, narratives also depict Western countries as attempting to "break the relationship between Serbia and China."[36]

Following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the information space of the Western Balkans was flooded with Russian disinformation framing the aggression as a "justifiable excuse" and the "liberation of Ukraine from Nazis."[37] Narratives accused the West and NATO of provoking the war and building bioweapons facilities, while glorifying Russia.[38] For instance, in Montenegro in 2022, 40 percent of respondents believed that Russia was combatting Nazism in Ukraine, a view that aligned with and that might have been reinforced by prevalent anti-NATO sentiments and exposure to pro-Russian narratives.[39]

The narratives surrounding historical grievances and regional disputes are carefully constructed to correspond with the local circumstances and appeal to specific audiences in the WB. A prominent example concerns Russia's use of Kosova as a means to rationalize the unlawful annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzia, and Kherson. During tensions in northern Mitrovica and the clashes between Serb protesters and NATO forces, where over 30 Kosovo Force (KFOR) soldiers were injured, prowar symbols such as the "Z" letter and other nationalistic signs were prominently featured.[40] The portrayal of Serbian communities as oppressed aims to incite interethnic tensions, demonstrating the strategic use of historical narratives to manipulate political discourse.[41]

Alignment of Chinese Information Operations with Russian Narratives

CHINA'S ECONOMIC AND SOFT POWER PRESENCE

China has significantly deepened its presence in the WB through the BRI, investing over €32 billion in WB infrastructure projects from 2009 to 2021.[42] Despite the EU remaining the region's dominant economic partner, China and Russia have notably shaped public perceptions through economic influence and strategic disinformation operations. Beyond economic investments, Beijing employs soft-power

34 CSD, "Illicit Financial Flows," 6.

35 Sanda Svetoka and Tihomira Doncheva, *Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment: Susceptibility to Russian Influence* (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE, October 2021), https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/Russias-footprint-in-the-Western-Balkan.pdf?zoom=page-fit.

36 "DISINFO: The West Is Using Kosovo to Break Serbia's Ties with Russia and China," EUvsDISINFO, December 12, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-using-kosovo-to-break-serbias-ties-with-russia-and-china.

37 Darvin Murić et al., *Global Narratives and Local Actors: 150 Days of War in Ukraine and over 1500 Disinformation in the Region* (South East Europe (SEE) Check, July 2022), 20, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf.

38 Murić.

39 "Putin Calling."

40 Mila Manojlovic and Andy Heil, "Z Marks the Trouble Spot: Russia's Symbol of War Appears in Northern Kosovo," RFE/RL, May 31, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-ethnic-serbs-z-symbol-russia/32437410.html.

41 Asllani, "Russia Disinformation," 31.

42 Marina Vulović, "Economic Relations between the Western Balkans and Non-EU Countries," SWP-Aktuell 41 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], June 2023), https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C36/; and BIRN, "China in the Balkans."

tools such as Confucius Institute and public diplomacy activities that also contribute to shaping the information environment by promoting favorable perceptions of China.[43]

China and Russia established a framework for closer cooperation with their 2019 "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination," though the relationship's dynamics continue to evolve.[44] In 2021, they reaffirmed their opposition to a "hegemonic world order," through a joint statement criticizing NATO expansion and Western interventions in the WB. They share narratives on key issues, such as the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosova's independence, occasionally linking Kosova's status to Taiwan, a growing source of friction between China and the United States.[45]

While Russia employs sophisticated disinformation tactics, China's approach has shifted toward "sharp power," increasing its presence in traditional and digital media.[46] China promotes narratives emphasizing economic prosperity and partnership, noninterference, and mutually beneficial cooperation, while subtly countering Western institutions.[47] Its information operations encompass a wide range of activities, broadly categorized by Tohk as message promotion (e.g., highlighting BRI benefits), information suppression (e.g., countering criticism of its policies), and building presence in the information environment (e.g., through media partnerships or digital infrastructure).[48]

TRADITIONAL MEDIA PARTNERSHIPS

China's influence in traditional media has expanded through local partnerships, journalist exchange programs, and political collaborations.[49] During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Serbia in 2024, the Chinese state-owned Media Group signed an agreement with Serbia's progovernment media, including president Aleksandar Vučić's media office.[50] China Radio International has further strengthened its presence in Serbia, broadcasting through Welcome to Radio Fun, owned by a close associate of Vučić. Major Serbian media outlets, including Nedeljnik, Politika, and RTS, amplify pro-China narratives.[51] This influence fosters a pro-China sentiment in the region, bolstered by close political relations between China and Serbia and RS's ruling party. China's significant investment in collaborating with local media indicates its expansion of influence, adopting methods that some analysts compare to "Russian tactics."[52]

In Albania, China Radio International and Radio Ejani (also Chinese-funded), are regarded as amplifiers of pro-China and anti-Western narratives. A 2023 study found that these outlets have published content critical of NATO and the United States, attempting to reshape Albanian perceptions.[53] In North

43 Richard Straka, "Challenges of Chinese Soft Power in Western Balkans," Blue Europe (website), 2024, https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/short-analysis/challenges-of-chinese-soft-power-in-western-balkans/; and *China's Foreign Influence and Sharp Power Strategy to Shape and Influence Democratic Institutions*, Before the US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 116th Cong. (2019) (statement of Christopher Walker, Vice President, Studies and Analysis, National Endowment for Democracy), https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109462/witnesses/HHRG-116-IG00-Wstate-WalkerC-20190516.pdf.

44 Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?, Global Power Shift* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2022), 5, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3; and Ben Norton, "China-Russia Joint Statement Marking 'New Era' on 75th Anniversary of Relations," Geopolitical Economy (website), May 24, 2024, https://geopoliticaleconomy.com/2024/05/24/china-russia-joint-statement-new-era-75th-anniversary/.

45 James Baron, "Kosovo and Taiwan Eye an Alliance of Outsiders," *Foreign Policy* (website), September 20, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/20/kosovo-taiwan-united-states-alliance-serbia-china/.

46 Filipova and Shopov, *Media Offensive*.

47 Zeneli, "Chinese Influence"; and Jens Bastian, T*he Potential for Growth through Chinese Infrastructure Investments in Central and South-Eastern Europe along the "Balkan Silk Road"* (Athens/London: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, July 2017), https://www.ebrd.com/content/dam/ebrd_dxp/documents/owcs-archive/Policy/the-balkan-silk-road.pdf.

48 Tauno Tohk, "Tackling Chinese Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)," lecture, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Seminar on Irregular Warfare/Hybrid Threats (SIWHT), Garmisch, Germany, June 4–21, 2024.

49 Krstinovska, "North Macedonia."

50 Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia's Pro-Govt Media, President's Press Service, Sign Deals with Chinese Media," Balkan Insight, May 8, 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/08/serbias-pro-govt-media-presidents-press-service-sign-deals-with-chinese-media/.

51 Stefan Vladisavljev, "Big Brother: Serbia's Media Are Creating Nation of China Lovers," Balkan Insight, March 26, 2021, https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/26/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/.

52 Joshua Kurlantzick, "How Russia and China Learn from Each Other on Disinformation," Council on Foreign Relations (website), March 7, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-russia-and-china-learn-each-other-disinformation.

53 Christopher Nehring and Hendrik Sittig, eds., *Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe* (Berlin: KAS, 2023), https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/E-book+Blurring+the+Truth.pdf/fd6abbb3-f49e-115b-090e-7c9f3a20dfc6?version=1.2&t=1680504776349.

Macedonia, while no Chinese state media outlets exist, the Chinese Embassy utilizes Facebook and X to disseminate official statements on topics such as technology, foreign policy, the 14+1 initiative, and the Ukraine war, contributing to public discourse and shaping perceptions through official channels.[54] North Macedonia exhibits the most positive sentiment toward China, a trend potentially influenced by factors including Beijing's growing social media outreach.[55] In Montenegro, Chinese messaging emphasizes economic cooperation while countering allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy."[56] In BiH, Chinese media focuses on economic contributions and criticizes NATO.

A QUESTION OF COLLABORATION?

Although direct Sino-Russian coordination in disinformation operations in the WB has not been proven, their messaging is often aligned. Both blame the West for the war in Ukraine, oppose sanctions against Russia, and spread conspiracy theories regarding alleged US-run biolabs in Ukraine. China appears to be adopting certain tactics similar to Russian disinformation tactics, particularly in social media strategies.[57]

Utilizing the Hamilton Dashboard 2.0 as in the case of Russia, analysis of Chinese Twitter/X activity from January 1, 2022, to August 29, 2023 across six WB countries revealed that Chinese officials and state media amplify Russian narratives by retweeting them, particularly those supporting Serbia's sovereignty. Tweets often referenced historical events such as the 1999 NATO bombings, portraying NATO and the United States as aggressors with geopolitical motives. Similar narratives regarding Kosova are centered on NATO's intervention and the clashes between KFOR and Serb protesters in northern Kosova. In Albania, tweets emphasized cultural diplomacy and China's relationship with Albania. In BiH, Chinese messaging criticized NATO and highlighted economic contributions. In Montenegro, tweets addressed relations with NATO, the EU, and allegations of debt-trap diplomacy. This strategic use of the X platform aimed to manipulate information by providing one-sided perspectives, criticizing US and NATO actions, and establishing partnerships to favor Beijing's diplomatic and economic interests.

Domestic Actors as Amplifiers of Disinformation

Domestic actors in the WB play a crucial role in amplifying Russian disinformation, often leveraging narratives that align with their own interests alongside cultural, political, and religious ties, particularly with the Serbian-speaking population. As one analyst asserted, Russia's influence would diminish without local enablers, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between external influence efforts and receptive domestic environments.[58] These actors, ranging from political parties to business oligarchs, NGOs, and the Orthodox Church, function as proxies serving Putin's strategic interests. Serbia, in particular, serves as a central hub for both Russian and Chinese influence, although some argue Serbia is not merely a Russian proxy but has actively and willingly chosen alignment with the East.[59]

Media outlets, particularly those controlled by or aligned with the Serbian ruling elite, play a pivotal role in disseminating narratives aligned with Russian and domestic political interests, including disinformation.[60] Specific narratives, whether originating externally or domestically, appear strategically disseminated to reinforce ethnic divisions, enhance ethnonationalistic sentiments, and encourage public support for particular political views.[61] In 2023, the *Balkan Barometer* found that 73 percent of

54 Vladimir Shopov, *China's Rising Media Presence in South East Europe* (Berlin, KAS, 2020), https://bird.tools/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/percentE2percent80percent9CChinapercentE2percent80percent99s-Rising-Media-Presence-in-South-East-Europepercent E2percent80percent9D.pdf; and Krstinovska, "North Macedonia."

55 Edward Lucas, *Chinese Online Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, DC: CEPA, 2022, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.

56 Xhorxhina Bami, "China Increasing Its Footprint in Balkan Media, Study Concludes," Balkan Insight, September 9, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/09/china-increasing-its-footprint-in-balkan-media-study-concludes/.

57 Filipova and Shopov, *Media Offensive*.

58 Maxim Samorukov, "Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties after the Invasion of Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600.

59 "Foreshocks in the Black Sea and Western Balkans: Repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine War," event, Hudson Institute, May 13, 2024, https://www.hudson.org/events/foreshocks-black-sea-western-balkans-repercussions-russia-ukraine-war.

60 Georgiev et al., *Interlocking Nexus*.

61 Nehring and Sittig, "Blurring the Truth," 17.

the population in Serbia and Montenegro, the highest in the region, believed their media was politically controlled.[62] Moreover, in 2023, Freedom House found that 95 percent of Serbian media primarily favored the ruling party, while 69 percent spread anti-Western narratives. This creates a media environment highly receptive to narratives from Russia and China that align with the government's stance.[63]

Lack of media ownership transparency exacerbates the problem, allowing propaganda to thrive. Despite 62 percent of citizens in the WB in 2022 acknowledging media bias, it remained their primary information source.[64] These media platforms frequently echo or align with Russian and Chinese narratives from Sputnik and RT, and CRI in Serbia, depicting these countries as reliable partners without the conditionalities of Western institutions. Serbian and RS media disseminate favorable narratives about Chinese infrastructure investments and Russian political support, framing them as indispensable for the country's development and stability while propagating consistent disinformation.[65]

China's strategic partnership with Serbia is cemented through high-level diplomatic engagements that serve as key opportunities for narrative promotion. Xi's visits to Serbia resulted in thirty agreements strengthening cooperation in infrastructure, trade, tourism, and education. The rhetoric of a "shared future" and "ironclad allies" amplified during these visits underscores China's increasing influence. The framing of these ties is contested: pro-government media celebrate the partnership, whereas independent outlets highlight economic dependencies and hidden costs, demonstrating the role of media in shaping perceptions of China's influence.[66]

POLITICAL EXPLOITATION OF EXTERNAL NARRATIVES

The situation in BiH is similarly complex, if not more so. The former president of the RS entity, Milorad Dodik, has been a vocal supporter of Russia and China, frequently employing narratives of Western betrayal, and the benefits of closer ties with the East. He was sentenced to one year in prison and banned from political activity for six years for defying decisions of the BiH High Representative.[67] His successor, the newly elected president of RS, Sinisa Karan, is a close associate of Dodik and has affirmed that the entity will persist in its pro-Russia orientation, echoing Dodik's rhetoric of Moscow as a key political and strategic partner.[68] Politicians in the WB utilize nationalist and anti-Western narratives, which frequently align with Russian and Chinese disinformation themes to consolidate power, portraying themselves as defenders of sovereignty against Western intervention. This is prevalent among nationalist and populist leaders who benefit from framing the EU and NATO as external threats.[69]

Domestic actors aligned with Russian interests also often express support for or benefit from Chinese influence, with Serbia serving as a primary entry point, followed by Montenegro, North Macedonia, and BiH. For example, in North Macedonia, the government-affiliated media often emphasize Chinese investments in infrastructure projects, portraying China as a crucial partner in the country's overall development.[70] Ultimately, Russian and Chinese disinformation in the WB is not solely externally driven but actively enabled by domestic actors.

62 RCC, *2023 Balkan Barometer.*

63 "Freedom in the World 2024: Serbia" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023), https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2024; and "CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story - Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 – June 2023," Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (website), July 19, 2023, https://crta.rs/en/crta-media-monitoring-anti-west-side-story-monitoring-of-foreign-influence-july-2022-june-2023/.

64 Bojana Zoric, ed., *Balkan Barometer 2022: Public Opinion* (Sarajevo: RCC, June 2022), https://www.rcc.int/pubs/139/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2022.

65 Georgiev et al., *Interlocking Nexus*.

66 Dusan Stojanovic and Jovana Gec, "China and EU-Candidate Serbia Sign an Agreement to Build a 'Shared Future'," Associated Press, May 8, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/serbia-china-xi-jinping-visit-nato-e37b7ad0e89ac73b83e754142ce8e399.

67 "Court Confirms Prison Sentence for Bosnian Serb Leader Dodik," RFE/RL Balkan Service, August 1, 2025, https://www.rferl.org/a/court-confirms-prison-sentence-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik/33492110.html.

68 Louis Oelofse and Kieran Burke, "Dodik Ally Wins Vote in Bosnia's Autonomous Republika Srpska," November 23, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/separatist-candidate-wins-vote-in-bosnias-autonomous-republika-srpska/a-74852088.

69 Georgiev et al., *Interlocking Nexus*, 44–45.

70 Krstinovska, "North Macedonia."

How Disinformation Operations Shape Perceptions: Political Discourse and Public Opinion

Since the onset of war in Ukraine, Russian disinformation operations have expanded significantly, targeting not only the WB but also other European countries, evoking memories of 1990s wars and fueling uncertainty in the region. The complex interplay of malicious disinformation operations appears to have contributed to notable fluctuations in public opinion across the WB, particularly concerning Euro-Atlantic integration, with an observable decline in trust towards Western institutions.

Recent surveys illustrate the extent of this transformation. In 2022, 95 percent of Serbs viewed Russia as a steadfast ally, whereas only 11 percent considered the EU an ally.[71] Polling in 2023 further revealed that Russia and China are perceived as Serbia's most reliable partners.[72] Additionally, in 2022, 68 percent of Serbs believed NATO initiated the war in Ukraine, 58 percent viewed Russia positively, and 82 percent opposed sanctions against Moscow. In 2023, a striking 43 percent blamed the West for the war, reinforcing anti-Western narratives.[73] This environment of shifting public opinion is further characterized by critically low trust in political institutions, with 77 percent of WB respondents expressing little or no confidence in political parties in 2025, the highest level recorded to date.[74]

Overall, perceptions of disinformation are high, with 65 percent of WB respondents believing it increased in 2023; figures peaked at 73 percent in North Macedonia and 71 percent in Montenegro.[75] While the EU integration remains the official strategic priority for most WB countries, public support has steadily declined from 62 percent in 2021 to 59 percent in 2023, with the lowest support in Serbia (34 percent). In Montenegro, support for NATO membership dropped from 31 percent in 2022 to 28 percent in 2024.[76]

POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND NATIONALIST RHETORIC

Political instability has intensified since February 24, 2022, accompanied by the widespread use of nationalistic rhetoric. These shifts in public opinion and political discourse referred to above have occurred amid significant political instability, with events often interpreted and amplified though the competing narratives discussed earlier. The dialogue between Kosova and Serbia has not produced meaningful results, culminating in the Banjska terrorist attack on September 24, 2023, where a Serbian paramilitary group, led by Milan Radoicic, deputy leader of Serbs List, and supported by Serbia's intelligence agency, launched an armed assault in northern Kosova, killing a Kosova police officer.[77] Vučić denied these accusations, despite confirmation by former Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) chief Aleksandar Vulin.[78] Former deputy prime minister Vulin challenged EU integration while asserting that the BRICS (economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) serve as an alternative to EU integration and stressing that Serbia has no place within the EU.[79]

Dodik's secessionist rhetoric backed by Russian political and financial support has further increased instability in the country. In December 2023, the RS parliament voted to disengage from BiH's national tax authority, armed forces, and judiciary, intensifying political fragmentation and reinforcing his Kremlin-backed nationalist agenda for "secession" from BiH.[80] Vučić, Dodik, and Serbian Orthodox Church

71 Andi Hoxhaj, "Ukraine War: Serbia Is Shifting Closer to Russia – Here's Why," The Conversation, November 7, 2022, http://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-serbia-is-shifting-closer-to-russia-heres-why-192472.

72 *Western Balkans Regional Poll: February - March 2024* (Washington, DC: Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute (IRI), 2024), https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/.

73 *2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey: January-February 2022* (Washington, DC: IRI, 2022), https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/.

74 *Balkan Barometer 2025: Infographics* (Sarajevo: RCC,2025), https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/BB25-Infographics-ALL.pdf/43c00880d4d98264593095ff9b260f42.pdf.

75 *Balkan Barometer 2025*; and *Western Balkans Regional Poll, 2024*.

76 *Balkan Barometer*.

77 "Kosovo Monastery Siege Ends Following Deadly Attack on Police," Al Jazeera, September 24, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/24/one-police-officer-killed-in-kosovo-attack-blamed-on-serbia.

78 Hanne Cokelaere and Seb Starcevic, "Gunmen Storm Village in Northern Kosovo in Attack Blamed on Serbia," *Politico*, September 24, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-serbia-police-attack-albin-kurti-banjska-vjosa-osmani/.

79 "Vulin: No place for Serbia in EU, BRICS the Alternative," N1, June 24, 2024, https://n1info.rs/english/news/vulin-no-place-for-serbia-in-eu-brics-the-alternative/.

80 "Bosnian Serbs' Move Toward Secession Dangerous, Irresponsible, U.S. Envoy Warns," RFE/RL Balkan Service, 2024, https://www.

patriarch Porfirije gathered in Belgrade under the motto of an "All Serb Assembly" adopting a resolution calling for the unity of all Serbs under the "Serbian World." This gathering occurred just two days after Dodik met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Additionally, Vulin, met with Russian officials to discuss anti-Western cooperation.[81]

Dodik's actions, supported by Putin and Vučić and amplified by pro-Russian media outlets, have contributed to the spread of anti-Western sentiment portraying Russia as the protector of local interests. Serbian leaders framed the February 2025 sentencing of Dodik to prison and a six-year ban from politics as an attack on Serbs, alleging foreign interference and efforts to destabilize the region.[82]

Montenegro's political landscape is characterized by significant pro-Serbian and pro-Russian influence. Parliament Speaker Andrija Mandic openly supports Russia and Serbia, criticizes the country's NATO membership, and opposes Montenegro's independence from Serbia.[83] Serbia on the other hand, exerts significant political influence through the Orthodox Church.[84] On June 29, 2024, Montenegro's ruling parties approved a controversial resolution on the Jasenovac genocide, creating tensions with Croatia, and highlighting internal divisions.[85] Former Montenegrin foreign minister Ranko Krivokapić said that this strategy represents "politics from 1990s. . . . the project of Russian-Serbian world in the WB."[86] North Macedonia's elections, won by the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE coalition, also signal a potential shift towards nationalist policies.[87]

Conclusion

Russian disinformation operations and increased Chinese influence in the WB have significantly impacted the region's political landscape and public perception since 2022. Russia and China employ distinct primary strategies to extend their geopolitical reach in the WB that are strategically aligned and can be seen as complementary in their effects. Russia, through a strategic interplay of traditional and modern media outlets, leverages historical ties, particularly with Serbian-speaking populations, to promote anti-Western narratives. These narratives portray the West as imperialistic and unreliable, especially regarding Russia's war against Ukraine and Kosova-Serbia tensions. Framing Russian aggression in Ukraine as a "special military operation" and glorifying Russian military actions are messages amplified and disseminated by Russian and domestic pro-Russian media outlets.

China, while prioritizing economic investments, also utilizes soft power tools such as Confucius Institutes and media partnerships and is expanding its activities in the information space to build a positive image and support its interests. China's information operations, which counter unfavorable news and promote economic cooperation, find fertile ground in the WB and fill gaps left by domestic actors, the EU, and other Western institutions.

Domestic actors, including government-affiliated media and political figures, play a crucial role in amplifying disinformation. In Serbia, government-controlled media echo Russian and Chinese narratives, portraying them as benevolent partners. Similar trends can be observed in Montenegro, RS, and North Macedonia, where local actors leverage these narratives for political gain.

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rferl.org/a/dodik-secession-resolution-murphy-dayton-srebrenica/32962229.html.

81 "Vulin Is Expected by Shoigu in Moscow, They Discuss 'against Western Interference'," The Geopost, 2024, https://thegeopost.com/en/news/vulin-is-expected-by-shoigu-in-moscow-they-discuss-against-western-interference/.

82 Goran Katic, "Bosnian Serb Leader Dodik Sentenced To Prison, Banned From Politics," RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2025, https://www.rferl.org/a/court-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-sentenced-prison-ban-politics/33328981.html.

83 "After Months of Jockeying, Montenegro Approves New Coalition Government," RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-mandic-pro-putin-speaker/32661765.html.

84 Hudson Institute, "Foreshocks."

85 Ali Salaj, *"Parlamenti i Malit të Zi miraton rezolutën për Jasenovcin, Kroacia reagon ashpër,"* Voice of America, 2024, https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/7677906.html.

86 "Krivokapić: Those Who Adopted the Resolution on Jasenovac Are Part of the Quisling Legacy in Montenegro, the Chetnik Movement," Vijesti, June 29, 2024, https://en.vijesti.me/news-b/politika/713730/The-krivocapicons-who-adopted-the-resolution-on-Jasenovac-are-part-of-the-Chetnik-movementpercent27s-legacy-in-Montenegro.

87 Fatos Btyci, "North Macedonia Parliament Approves a New Nationalist-Dominated Government," Reuters, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/north-macedonia-parliament-approves-new-nationalist-dominated-government-2024-06-23/.

These campaigns exacerbate ethnic divisions, stoke nationalist sentiments, and undermine regional integration with Western institutions. Public support for EU and NATO membership has declined, and political instability has increased, as seen in Kosova-Serbia tensions and RS secessionist rhetoric. The alignment of Russian and Chinese information operations efforts in promoting specific narratives, combined with local amplification, has created a complex information environment that challenges Western influence.

While Russia and China share opposition to the Western powers, specifically NATO, both support Serbia over Kosova, oppose Western-led interventions, and utilize UN mechanisms to block WB-related initiatives to exert influence. Their approaches differ but can be considered complementary. While China's overt role in disinformation currently appears more limited than Russia's, its economic footprint and soft-power initiatives may position it as a more active player in shaping regional narratives in the future.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the developments in Middle East will have a significant repercussion on regional developments. As the conflict deteriorates, Russia will likely intensify its efforts to exert influence and provoke instability in the region to divert attention.

Sustained US presence and EU engagement remain crucial to counter Russian disinformation and Beijing's capacity to provide compelling alternatives. A potential shift in US policy toward Russia regarding the WB could legitimize Russian narratives, consequently creating a vacuum for increased tension in the region. Critical questions remain about the future: How will the dynamics within the Sino-Russian alignment evolve in the region? Will shared objectives continue to outweigh potential areas of competition, amplifying the challenge to Western influence?

Russian disinformation operations in the WB therefore do not merely constitute a short-term fallout of the war in Ukraine, but rather represent a sustained, long-term strategy to reshape regional security orientations and political alignments away from Euro-Atlantic structures. By maintaining a deliberately blurred and confusing information environment that erodes trust in democratic institutions and exacerbates ethnic tensions, Russia seeks to preserve its influence and carve out a strategic role for itself within the broader global power competition, whereas China will seek to exploit all available political, economic and informational gaps to expand its presence through economic leverage and soft-power tools.

Without a coordinated effort to strengthen media integrity, institutional resilience, and locally grounded counternarratives, the region risks entrenching an information environment in which external powers, enabled and amplified by like-minded domestic actors, play an increasingly decisive role in undermining the stability and democratic consolidation of Western Balkan societies. ~ **Σ**

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