

# Little substance, considerable impact

Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia  
and Herzegovina, and Montenegro

Wouter Zweers  
Niels Drost  
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**Clingendael Report**



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# Contents

Executive summary	1
Introduction	4
Russian objectives for the Western Balkans – devoid of substance	6
Projecting great power status	8
Obstructing Western influence, and keeping the West out of the region where possible	10
Utilising the Balkans as a tool	12
Russian sources of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina	14
Russia’s political influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina	15
Russia’s economic clout – forged through energy links	23
Russian influence through security and military cooperation: a story coming to an end?	30
Russian malign influences: proxy groups, cyber attacks and meddling in internal affairs	34
Media and disinformation as successful tools to spread Russian narratives	38
Discussion and conclusions	43
Conclusions	46

# Executive summary

This Clingendael report explores the role of the Russian Federation in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It examines Russia's objectives in its relations with the three countries, as well the various sources of influence the Kremlin holds in each of the three countries. The report places this analysis within the changed geopolitical circumstances resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's main objectives for the Western Balkans are threefold. First, the Kremlin seeks to project great power status globally. Second, it seeks to obstruct the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region by advocating against NATO and EU integration and by raising instabilities. Third, the Kremlin uses the Balkans, especially the Kosovo issue, as an argument for its foreign policy agenda elsewhere, particularly when it comes to defending its perceived dominance over its near abroad.

Instead of building a sustainable, all-encompassing, and meaningful relation with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Montenegro, Russia instead pursues an opportunistic approach depending on fragmented entry points for influence in each country. The Kremlin displays moderate ambitions for building positive relationships with the three countries, which is reflected also in the instruments it uses to influence the region. It nurtures contacts with, and influence through, a wide range of individual politicians, the Orthodox Church, the media and malign proxy groups, making use of energy links as well as local tensions and historical memories. Moscow pursues this approach deliberately, and it has proven relatively successful.

At the political level, Russia's clout stretches especially to (pro-)Serb politicians, who often make use of similar narratives and use Russia as an external supporter to promote their own ideas. In particular, its position on Kosovo, Russian support for Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik and its Orthodox Church links remain important entry points for Russia's political influence in the region at large. Of the three countries, entry points for Russian influence are most widespread in Serbia, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Economically, Russia's influence is outperformed substantially by that of the EU, especially in terms of trade. Russia's far-reaching influence in the energy sectors of BiH and Serbia, however, yield substantial political leverage, even if its investments often prove economically inviable.

When it comes to military influence, Russia seeks to maintain its military cooperation with its main partner, Serbia, while also supporting the militarisation of Republika Srpska. Belgrade is satisfied with its current degree of cooperation with Moscow but seeks to avoid becoming Russia's foothold in the Balkans. Factually, Russia is only one of multiple security actors in the Balkans, overshadowed by NATO and challenged by China.

While presenting itself as a partner to Serbia and Republika Srpska in particular, Russia also resorts to malign instruments which have often proven to be effective in shaping the political environment of the Western Balkans. Lacking a military presence in the region, Russia supports far-right nationalist figures and organisations, which generally better resemble organised crime groups than paramilitary organisations, to attain its goal of destabilisation by stirring up polarisation and anti-Western sentiment.

The Kremlin is perhaps most successful in the field of media and disinformation. Russian propaganda penetrates Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina through Russian-funded portals, local media and social media. Russian disinformation and narratives have penetrated the region to such an extent that considerable sections of society hold a positive image of Russia and its political leadership.

In all these fields, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has moderately affected but not fully altered Russia's approach towards Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. While the invasion has led to sharper dividing lines between Russia and the West and decreases in Russian financial and diplomatic capacities, we observe continuity in terms of Russian strategies and objectives. Russia's sources of influence in the three countries have been moderately strained, among other causes as a result of BiH and Serbia's first steps to diversify energy sources and Western pressure to diminish their political and security links with the Russian Federation. For the time being, this has not yet affected Moscow's ability to act as a spoiler to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the three countries.

The extent to which the European Union and NATO are effective in countering Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro will be part of a follow-up Clingendael report to be published in fall 2023. As part of the same research project, analyses of societal and political perceptions towards Russia in the three countries will be published in summer 2023 by Clingendael partners the Atlantic Council of Montenegro, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, and the Atlantic Initiative in BiH.



# Introduction

In September 2022, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selaković and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov signed an agreement on mutual consultations in foreign policy matters in the margins of a United Nations General Assembly meeting. Being a candidate member state of the European Union, Serbia's move to strengthen ties with the Kremlin in spite of Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered significant concern within the EU and among its Western partners.<sup>1</sup> In neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Republika Srpska (RS) leader Milorad Dodik awarded Russian President Putin with the entity's highest medal of honour just a month after the December 2022 EU decision to grant the country candidate status.<sup>2</sup> In Montenegro, in spite of its NATO membership, various opposition politicians maintain close ties with the Kremlin too.

These episodes raise many questions about the state of relations between Russia and the three Western Balkans countries that have all formally tied their future to that of the European Union. Continued relations with Russia come across as remarkable when considering their significant, all-encompassing and highly institutionalised partnerships with the EU and related commitments, for example regarding foreign policy alignment. What is especially striking is the successes Russia seems to have across some sections of society in the three countries in raising a public perception of brotherhood based on conservative values and 'strongmen' politics. Capitalising on that image, Russia provides support to sympathetic politicians, nationalistic and far-right societal elements, and secessionists, thereby exploiting instability in the region.

This report aims to provide an insight into the range of tools Moscow utilises to influence Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as into Russia's objectives in these countries. It assesses which tools are most instrumental for Russia to retain influence in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH, in spite of their EU integration paths. The report places this analysis in the changed geopolitical circumstances resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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1 ['EU candidate Serbia and Russia sign foreign policy agreement'](#), AP News, September 24, 2022.

2 ['Bosnian Serb leader awards Putin highest medal of honor'](#), Deutsche Welle, January 8, 2023.

The first chapter of the report analyses Russia's objectives for the three countries, based on an analysis of Russian government sources, public statements by Russian officials, and secondary literature. The second chapter outlines the various fields of Russian influence in the three countries. It offers a structured analysis, based on literature research as well as interviews with officials and experts. A third chapter discusses main takeaways from Russian influence in the three countries.

# Russian objectives for the Western Balkans – devoid of substance

Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been increased concern in the West over Moscow's influence in the Western Balkans. Various European countries have warned against the potential for Russia's destabilisation of the region in light of the invasion, while expressing their support for the region's EU integration.<sup>3</sup>

Although fears about malign Russian intentions and a spillover effect of the war are not unfounded, it is important to note that on their own merits, the Western Balkans as such are not among the key foreign policy priorities of the Kremlin. Although Russian foreign policy is not very transparent and tends to be tailored to local conditions, the foreign policy doctrines of the Russian Federation can offer an indication of national interests as well as priority areas for Russia. The last time a major Russian Federation public strategic foreign policy document mentioned the Balkans was over ten years ago in the 2013 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*:

“ 66. Russia aims to develop comprehensive pragmatic and equitable cooperation with Southeast European countries. The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries.<sup>4</sup>

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3 For example, Italy argued that Europe needs to expand its presence in the region to limit Russian influence, the UK has sent military specialists to BiH to oppose Russian influence there, and NATO foreign ministers pledged their support for (among others) the Western Balkans region amid fears for destabilisation by Russia. See: John Irish, [“Europe needs to limit Russian influence in Balkans, Italy says”](#), Reuters, November 30, 2022; Muvija M, [“UK sends military experts to counter Russian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina”](#), Reuters, June 30, 2022; John Irish, Luiza Ilie, and Sabine Siebold, [“NATO seeks to reassure Russia's neighbours fearful of instability”](#), Reuters, November 30, 2022.

4 Garant, [“Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации \[Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation\]”](#), February 20, 2013.

This was only the second time the Balkans were mentioned in such a public document and also the last time – the 2016 and 2023 updates did not speak of the region again.<sup>5</sup> After the cancellation of the South Stream plans in 2014, the role Russia foresaw for the Balkan region to supply oil and gas to Europe has faded into the background. Since Russia's largescale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this trend has further solidified as Russian supply and European demand for Russian gas declined significantly and the EU imposed import restrictions on Russian oil.

Since 2013, other important Russian strategic documents have not mentioned the region, for example the *Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad* in 2022, and looking for mentions of the (Western) Balkans in Vladimir Putin's speeches, a similar observation can be made.<sup>6</sup>

Putin spoke relatively frequently about the Balkans only in the beginning of his presidency, as Figure 1 shows. He discussed the region as a general topic with other heads of state,<sup>7</sup> as an area with potential for conflict,<sup>8</sup> or in relation to the risk of 'balkanisation' for Russia.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Earlier, only the 2008 version of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept spoke of the region: 'Russia is open for further expansion of pragmatic and mutually respecting cooperation with the States of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe taking into account genuine readiness to do so on the part of each of them.' See: Kremlin, "[The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#)," January 12, 2008.

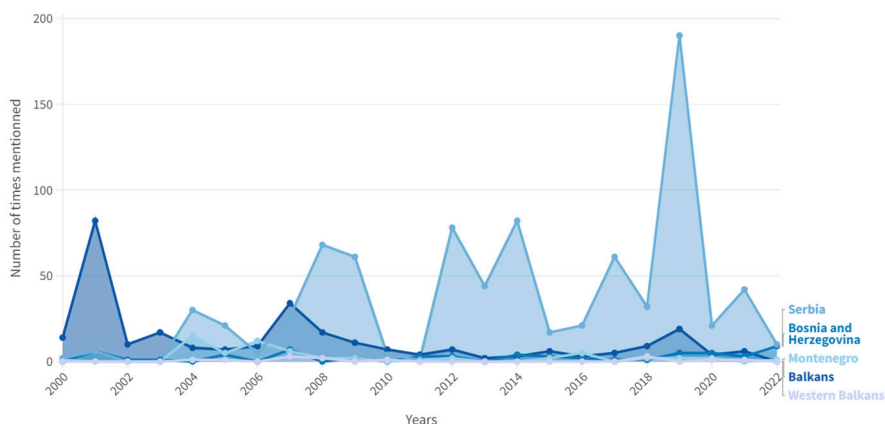
6 Official internet-portal of legal information, "[Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 05.09.2022 № 611 "Об утверждении Концепции гуманитарной политики Российской Федерации за рубежом"](#) [Presidential Decree No. 611 of 05.09.2022 "On Approval of the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad"]," September 5, 2022.

7 Vladimir Putin, "[Joint Press Conference with US President George W. Bush](#)," President of Russia, November 13, 2001; Vladimir Putin, "[A Russian-German intergovernmental summit has taken place](#)," President of Russia, October 15, 2007; Vladimir Putin, "[Interview with the French Newspaper Le Figaro](#)," President of Russia, October 26, 2000.

8 Vladimir Putin, "[Remarks at a Meeting of Top Members of the Russian Diplomatic Service](#)," President of Russia, January 26, 2001.

9 Vladimir Putin, "[Interview with the ORT TV Channel](#)," February 7, 2000.

**Figure 1** Frequency with which Russian President Putin mentions the Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia in his speeches and other appearances between 2000 and 2022<sup>10</sup>



After 2001, however, Putin’s attention faded away, only to resume briefly upon his return to the presidency in 2012 – this time, however, with an overwhelming focus on Serbia rather than the region at large. Out of the 719 times Putin mentioned either Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, or the wider region between 2012 and 2022, the vast majority (598) of mentions concerned Serbia.

Although the Western Balkans are not a key foreign policy priority for the Kremlin on their own merits, Russia nevertheless pursues several objectives in the region as part of its global geopolitical ambitions.

### Projecting great power status

For Russia, its policy towards the Western Balkans is fuelled by a desire to be an influential power on the world stage, able to project its power abroad. Similar to the geopolitical setting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century world, in which Russia as an equal to the other great powers divided global spheres of influence, Putin wishes to,

<sup>10</sup> Based on transcripts between December 1999 and 9 May 2023, in a corpus of 12,000+ sources. See: President of Russia, [News](#).

as other scholars have noted, ‘make Russia great again’.<sup>11</sup> Moscow considers this aspiration more important than establishing meaningful relationships with countries in the Western Balkans, as it seeks to prove Russia is one of the key players in European and international affairs.<sup>12</sup>

The Western Balkans are enclosed between EU and NATO member states, with some having joined these organisations in the past decade, and are not part of what Russia considers to be its special sphere of influence in its proclaimed ‘near abroad’.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Russia does consider its role in the region to be important – in particular in relation to Serbia.<sup>14</sup> This includes the country’s historical relations with the region, stemming back from the times of the Russian Empire, which Russia now spins as a return to the Balkans in protection of its ‘Slavic brothers’.<sup>15</sup>

The historical relations of Russia with the region are ‘heavily mythologised’, however. There were brief periods of alliances with the region, which were interrupted by conflict, and longer periods of a cooling-down of relations.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, history is frequently raised in Russian sources when talking about the importance of the Western Balkans. A publication from the *Russian International Affairs Council*, in which Russia is described as a ‘flank player’ in

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11 Mark Galeotti, [“Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?”](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, April 4, 2018.

12 Vsevolod Scamokhvalov, [“Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response,”](#) Insight Turkey, May 31, 2019; Vuk Vuksanović, [“Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments,”](#) Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU’s Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale ISPI, March 2023; Dimitar Bechev, [“Russia’s Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans,”](#) Atlantic Council, December 20, 2019.

13 ‘Near abroad’ is a Russian phrasing for states that were part of the Soviet Union. The Russian *Valdai Club* think tank phrases the Russian perspective on its proclaimed influence insightfully: ‘Russia cannot but accept its imperial heritage. It is widely known that Russia has a particularly significant influence over the countries of the near abroad.’ See: Zhao Huasheng, [“Russia and its Near Abroad: Challenges and prospects,”](#) Valdai, March 9, 2021.

14 James McBride, [“Russia’s influence in the Balkans,”](#) Council on Foreign Relations, December 2, 2022.

15 Stanislav Secieriu, [“Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks,”](#) European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2, 2019; Vsevolod Scamokhvalov, [“Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response,”](#) Insight Turkey, May 31, 2019.

16 Maksim Samorukov, [“Illjuzija Blizosti: Ambicij i Vozmozhnosti Rossii na Zapadnyh Balkanah \[Illusion of Proximity: Russia’s Ambitions and Opportunities in the Western Balkans\],”](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 12, 2017.

the Balkans, for example, opens with the following quote from a Russian historian and diplomat more than 150 years ago:

“ Far to the west and south-west of the border of the Russian Empire there are peoples whose speech is understandable for Russians, whose ancestors were one tribe with Russians and most of whom profess our orthodox faith and pray to God in the same Russian language as we do. These peoples – brothers of Russians and loving Russians as brothers – are called Slavs.<sup>17</sup>

Other sources make such references as well, and so do Russian policymakers. For example, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov said in 2022 that, ‘A century and a half ago Russia secured the independence of the Balkan countries, and after the [second world] war they became our allies (Bulgaria), or neutral, but close to us (Yugoslavia).’<sup>18</sup>

### **Obstructing Western influence, and keeping the West out of the region where possible**

One of Vladimir Putin's most stated ambitions is his desire to establish a multipolar world order, in which Russia is an equal among other powers on the world stage, and this ambition extends to the Western Balkans.<sup>19</sup> Putin wants to uphold the position Russia currently enjoys in the region while preventing Western influence from growing.<sup>20</sup> In particular, this implies countering Euro-Atlantic integration – NATO as well as EU expansion.

After Russia increasingly viewed the region through an economic lens under Putin's third presidency, as expressed in the abovementioned 2013 *Foreign*

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17 “РОССИЯ НА БАЛКАНАХ. Балканы в эпицентре международных событий и новая стратегия России [Russia in the Balkans, the Balkans in the Epicentre of International Events and Russia's New Strategy],” Russian Council Website, accessed June 15, 2023.

18 Petr Akopov, “Novyj front vojny s Rossiej [New front in the war with Russia],” Ria.ru, June 6, 2022.

19 Stanislav Secieru, “Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2, 2019.

20 K. Hudolej, E. Koloskov, “Politika Rossii na Balkanah: Sovremennoe Sostojanie i Perspektivy [Russia's Policy in the Balkans: Current State and Prospects],” *Mirovaja Jekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenija* [World Jekonomika and International Relations], 2021, 90-99.

*Policy Concept*, the failure of *South Stream* led to this economic ambition fading into the background.<sup>21</sup> Once again, reacting to NATO expansion in the Western Balkans became a key Russian priority, as Putin aims to obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration and prevent states that have not yet joined NATO from doing so.

For over two decades Russia has attempted to create divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and tried to undermine the formation of a coherent foreign policy in that country to prevent it from joining NATO.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Moscow maintains close relations with politicians and proxy groups in the Republika Srpska (RS), one of the two BiH entities.<sup>23</sup> In terms of countering NATO integration, the success of this alliance with the RS is limited. BiH joined the *NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP)* programme in 2006 and is participating in a *Membership Action Plan* with NATO,<sup>24</sup> despite attempts by RS president Milorad Dodik to prevent and delay such cooperation.

From the Russian perspective, a spoiler role is much less required in Serbia, which is traditionally closer to Russia and does not strive for NATO membership,<sup>25</sup> although it should be noted that Serbia joined the *NATO PfP* programme in 2006 and agreed a first two-year *NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan* in 2015.<sup>26</sup> Putin has signalled openness to Serbia's EU ambitions in the past, hoping that Serbian EU membership could secure Russia a 'trojan horse' within the Union.<sup>27</sup> Nowadays the picture is different, especially as it is clear that Serbia will be able to join the EU only when it fully meets the Copenhagen criteria, including full

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21 Maksim Samorukov, "[Illuzija Blizosti: Ambicij i Vozmoznosti Rossii na Zapadnyh Balkanah](#), [[The Illusion of Intimacy: Russia's Ambitions and Opportunities in the Western Balkans](#)]," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 12, 2017.

22 Majda Ruge, "[The Past and the Furious: How Russia's Revisionism Threatens Bosnia](#)," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2022; Samir Beharic, "[Bosnia and Herzegovina: a geopolitical mission for the EU](#)," Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023.

23 O.E. Grishin, B. Kenich, "[Bosnija i Gercegovina kak Ob'ekt Vozdejstvija Mjagkoj Sily SSHA, Rossii i ES](#) [Bosnia and Herzegovina as an object of influence on the USA, Russia and the EU]," PolitBook, 2017, 49-63.

24 NATO, "[Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)," last updated 12 July 2022.

25 Recently, Aleksandar Vucic reiterated that Serbia will continue to strive for military neutrality and does not wish to join NATO. See: "[Seria maintain 'military neutrality', president says](#)," Aljazeera, February 2, 2023.

26 NATO, "[Relations with Serbia](#)," 23 May 2023.

27 Mark Galeotti, "[Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?](#)" European Council on Foreign Relations, April 3, 2018.



alignment with the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP), and when its relationship with Kosovo is normalised.<sup>28</sup>

## Utilising the Balkans as a tool

As well as obstructing the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and seeking to project its great power status, Russia also utilises the region as a tool in other contexts.

On the international stage, Russia uses the region to justify its aggressive foreign policy, of which the way Putin talks about Kosovo is a strong example. On many occasions, Russia has invoked the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the Western recognition of (and support for) Kosovo as a justification for its own policies. NATO's 1999 intervention, conducted as a response to ethnic cleansing, but without a UN mandate, constitutes 'the West's original sin' in the eyes of the Kremlin.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the war in Kosovo raised an alert for Russian leaders, as they regarded Western actions as unilateral, with no account taken of Russian concerns. Additionally, the war in Kosovo once again made Russian leaders aware of the country's vulnerability to ethnic conflict and separatism inside and on its borders as it took place a few years after the First Chechen War in 1994 and simultaneously with the Second Chechen War.<sup>30</sup>

Currently, Putin invokes these affairs to justify his war of aggression against Ukraine, for example, and has done the same on earlier occasions. After the Russian war against Georgia, Putin used the 'precedent set by Kosovo' to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia;<sup>31</sup> he did the same

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28 For the Copenhagen criteria, see: EUR-lex, '[Accession criteria \(Copenhagen criteria\)](#)', accessed 5 July 2023.

29 Jade McGlynn, "[Why Putin keeps talking about Kosovo](#)," Foreign Policy, March 3, 2022.

30 Vuk Vuksanović, "[Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments](#)," Europe and Russia on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 34.

31 Maksim Samorukov, "[Novyj Kosovskij Precedent. Kak Rossija Otreagiruet na Soglashenie Belgrada i Prishtiny](#) [A new Kosovo precedent. How Russia will react to the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina]," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April, 2019.

later with Crimea, and with the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic' and 'Luhansk People's Republic' in the east of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

Russian attention on the Western Balkans as part of its broader foreign policy has faded away over the past few years. Russia is now primarily interested in obstructing EU and NATO integration and projecting its great power status, and mostly takes up a spoiler role in the region with attempts at destabilisation. Russia seeks to overload the capacity of European and American policymakers in the region through its destabilisation efforts.<sup>33</sup> This can be considered a 'tit-for-tat' strategy vis-à-vis the EU.<sup>34</sup> The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood policy, and more recently its conferring of EU membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, is viewed by Russia as meddling in its sphere of influence. It therefore seeks to turn the table in a 'you mess in our region, we mess in yours' style of reasoning.

In short, Russia sees the region as a tool that can be used to project its great power status on the one hand, while obstructing the West and sowing the seeds of unrest on the other. As the following sections of this paper will show, however, Russia does not seem to be willing to invest in institutionalised and broader relations with the three countries in the region. The policy that follows Russian goals in the Western Balkans comes across as largely devoid of substance.

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32 Dusan Stojanovic, "[Explainer: Putin's Balkan narrative argument for Ukraine War](#)," AP News, March 5, 2022; Геннадий Габриэлян [Gennady Gabrielyan], "[Второй фронт России. Как "проседает" влияние Кремля на Балканах \[Russia's Second Front. How the Kremlin's "sagging" in the Balkans\]](#)," RadioFreeEurope, March 15, 2022.

33 Paul Stronski, "[Russia in the Balkans after Ukraine: A Troubling Actor](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 20, 2022.

34 Stanislav Secieru, "[Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks](#)," European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2019.

# Russian sources of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Russia employs a range of tools to influence the course of events in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This chapter presents an analysis of such tools, taking into account Russian political influence, economic influence, its influence through security and military cooperation, Russian malign influence, and its influence through the media and disinformation. Figure 2 is an overview of the factors discussed. Russian and local actors through which Russia maintains a grip on the region are discussed throughout the sections.

Figure 2 Russian tools of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina



## Russia's political influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Although the Western Balkans are not of central importance to Russian foreign policy, Russia has forged political links with Serbia, Montenegro and BiH that provide it with varying degrees of leverage. Apart from government-to-government relations, Russia has committed to building relations with political proxies, thereby employing consistent political narratives revolving around traditional values and pan-Slavism. The Kremlin's position on Kosovo in particular has yielded influence among ethnic Serb politicians and societies in the three countries. Lastly, links with the Orthodox Church amplify pro-Russian political narratives in the region.

### Political relations

In terms of political integration, BiH, Serbia and Montenegro have, as a result of their years-long EU accession processes, a far more institutionalised relationship with the EU than with Russia. Russian-led multilateral efforts like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) do not stretch to the Western Balkans, with two partial exceptions: Serbia's observer status in the CSTO and its free-trade agreement with the EEU.<sup>35</sup> While simultaneously being connected to these initiatives and negotiating accession to the EU, Serbia is also keen to nurture relations with other regions, as exemplified by its hosting of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 2021.<sup>36</sup>

In the absence of strong multilateral frameworks, relations between the three south-eastern European states and Russia are predominantly forged through bilateral cooperation. There are strong differences between the countries, as is clear from the number of bilateral meetings, as shown in Figure 3. Russian-Serbian relations are marked by declarations of like-mindedness, historical partnership, and brotherhood. Serbia and Russia have signed cooperation agreements on numerous issues, ranging from trade, defence, foreign policy and energy to visa-free travel. Montenegro, on the other hand, is on Russia's list of so-called non-friendly states, and, especially after it joined NATO, largely regarded

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35 ["Serbia interested in developing observer cooperation with the CSTO PA,"](#) Parliamentary Assembly of the CSTO, February 27, 2023; CSTO, ["Eurasian Economic Free Trade Agreement,"](#)

36 ["Non-aligned movement Summit begins in Belgrade,"](#) RadioFreeEurope, October 11, 2021.

by Moscow as an adversary rather than ally.<sup>37</sup> BiH's state-level relations with Russia are limited. Instead, engagement is mostly through the Republika Srpska (RS) entity. RS-Russia relations are perhaps even more explicit than Serbian-Russian relations, mainly because the RS political leadership, impersonated by the entity's long-term ruler, Milorad Dodik, expresses strong 'demand' for such Russian influence.<sup>38</sup> In the past five years, Dodik has visited Moscow more times than any other European politician. He decorated Putin with the highest RS medal of honour in January 2023 and was decorated by Putin with the Order of Alexander Newysk in June 2023.<sup>39</sup>

Differences between Montenegro, BiH and Serbia are also apparent in their responses and actions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whereas the three countries all voted to condemn Russian aggression on Ukraine in a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote early March 2022, follow-up actions have differed.<sup>40</sup> Montenegro has fully aligned with EU sanctions on Russia since 2014, whereas Serbia has hinted at but so far refused to impose any sanctions.<sup>41</sup> Also, BiH has failed to impose sanctions, mainly because of resistance from RS leader Milorad Dodik, who on the contrary sought to intensify economic relations with Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>42</sup>

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37 ["Russia issues list of 'unfriendly' countries amid Ukraine crisis,"](#) AlJazeera, March 8, 2022.

38 Hamza Karcic, ["Putin's most loyal Balkan client,"](#) Foreign Policy, October 7, 2022.

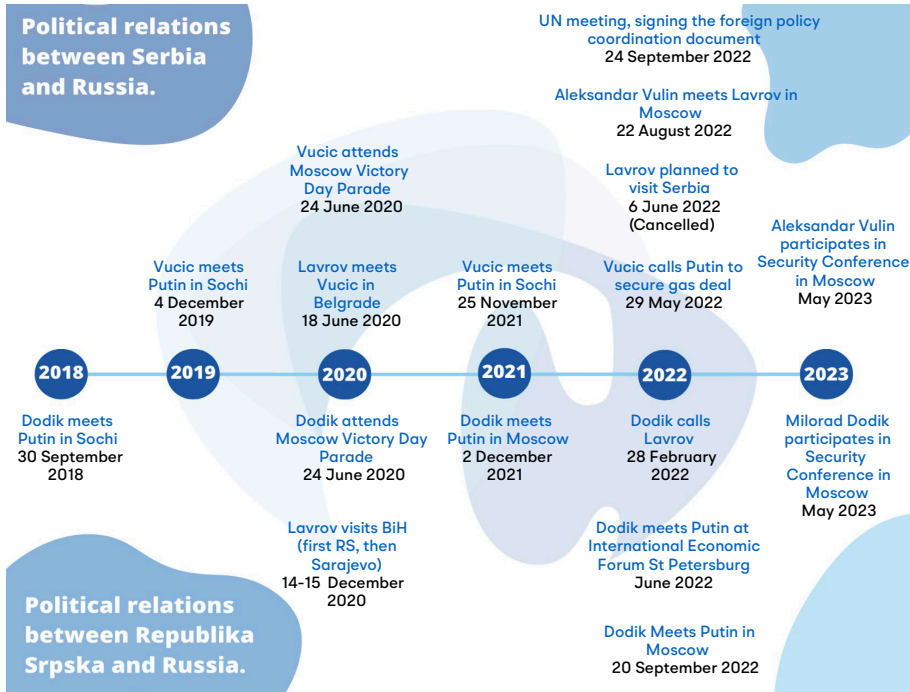
39 Una Hajdari, ["EU, US slam Bosnian Serb leader for awarding Putin highest honor,"](#) Politico, January 9, 2023; N1, ["RT: Putin awards Dodik with Order of Alexander Nevsky,"](#) June 6, 2023.

40 ["UN General Assembly demands Russian Federation withdraw all military forces from the territory of Ukraine,"](#) European Union External Action, March 2, 2022.

41 Montenegro recently established the QUAD group, which seeks full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy, together with North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. See: Samir Kajosevic, ["New Montenegrin Govt maintains Russia sanctions, deferring to EU,"](#) Balkan Insight, December 14, 2020; ["Four Western Balkan countries launched '100% alignment with CFSP' platform,"](#) European Western Balkans, March 29, 2023; [Tamara Milošević Grbić, Zoran Radosavljević, "Serbian FM hints at possible Russia sanctions,"](#) Euractiv, January 26, 2023.

42 [Aleksandar Brezar, "Why is Bosnia not joining rest of Europe in sanctions against Russia?"](#) Euronews, March 18, 2022.

Figure 3 State visits and important political contact moments, 2020–2023



### Influence through political proxies

Importantly, Russian political influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is not all-encompassing, but, particularly in Montenegro and BiH, is wielded through political proxies representing only part of the political spectrum. Even among these proxies, different levels of Russia-mindedness can be observed, with most of them being primarily self-interested and some actively searching to balance relations with other external powers also. Russia has, however, become reliant on certain proxies to such an extent that it continuously supports them in spite of their dominantly self-interested agendas, which often, but not always, overlap with Russian objectives.<sup>43</sup>

43 Maxim Samorukov, "Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace April 25, 2023.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia relies strongly on RS president and leader of the Bosnian-Serb party SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) Milorad Dodik, who has presented himself for years as the Balkan leader most loyal to Moscow.<sup>44</sup> Russia has in the past directly financed Dodik's elections campaigns and, according to an expert, the country is the prime investor in RS, although that does not appear in official statistics.<sup>45</sup> Apart from Dodik, other politicians in RS, for example Nenad Stevandić from the United Srpska (US) party, can also be regarded as pro-Russian.<sup>46</sup>

Russia's support for RS politicians is clear for several reasons, for example from the behaviour of its ambassador Igor Kalbukhov, who attended the 9 January RS parade in Banja Luka in spite of a ban by BiH's highest court. Kalbukhov also threatened that Russia would be forced to take action if BiH takes steps towards NATO integration. At the same time, also in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, political forces like the Bosnian-Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) of Dragan Čović sometimes act in the Russian interest, for example when Čović and his fellow HDZ senators voted against aligning with EU sanctions towards Russia in BiH's House of Peoples.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, on 23 June 2023 the US Embassy in BiH condemned Čović for obstructing the Southern Interconnection natural gas pipeline, which would reduce BiH dependence on Russian gas, declaring that 'BiH is at energy crossroads, and HDZ BiH is blocking the path to European integration and energy security.'<sup>48</sup> In Montenegro, Russia became more influential in 2020 when pro-Russian and pro-Serbian parties ousted the long-term parliamentary dominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), headed by long-term president Milo Đukanović. In particular, the *Za budućnost Crne Gore* (For the Future of Montenegro) movement of Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević,

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44 Una Hajdari, "[EU, US slam Bosnian Serb leader for awarding Putin highest honor](#)," Politico, January 9, 2023; Samir Beharic, "[Bosnia and Herzegovina: a geopolitical mission for the EU](#)," Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 104.

45 Jelena Dzankic, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil, "[A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan \(Geo\)Politics](#)," European University Institute, 2023, 103; Interview, expert, 26 April 2023, Sarajevo.

46 Interview, expert, 26 April 2023, Sarajevo; "[RS entity Parliament Speaker in Moscow: We will not join anti-Russian hysteria](#)," N1 Sarajevo, February 22, 2023.

47 Majda Ruge, "[The Past and the furious: How Russia's revisionism threatens Bosnia](#)," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2022; Paul Stronski, "[Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 20, 2022.

48 US Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, "[BiH is missing its chance to end dependence on Russian gas, create jobs, and grow its economy](#)," June 23, 2023.

formerly known as the Democratic Front Alliance, garnered about 15% of the votes in the 2023 parliamentary elections and can be regarded as pro-Russian. There is proof of direct funding from the Kremlin for the parties making up the alliance.<sup>49</sup> Their politicians campaigned against Montenegro's NATO integration, visited Moscow for meetings with Russian politicians in 2016, and signed the so-called Lovćen Declaration on cooperation between Knežević' Democratic People's Party and the United Russia party.<sup>50</sup> They were also convicted in a first-instance verdict for their alleged participation in the 2016 coup attempt, although a retrial will be held after a higher court overturned that decision due to procedural mistakes.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, the *Europe Now! Movement* of the April 2023 elected president Jakov Milatović, who ousted long-term DPS leader Milo Đukanović from power, is nominally firmly focused on EU integration and domestic reforms. *Europe Now!*, which won the most seats in the June 2023 parliamentary elections, has, however, also taken a more pro-Serb position in the Orthodox Church rifts that split Montenegro in the past few years, and different factions within the party have different geopolitical outlooks.<sup>52</sup> As numerous unknowns remain regarding *Europe Now!*'s orientation, time will be needed to realistically assess their actual goals and policies.

In Serbia, a larger proportion of the political scene has forged strong ties with Russia. Russia's position as a UN Security Council member that supports Serbia's position on Kosovo is the main source of Russian influence over Serbia's political landscape. It largely explains why the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) government of President Aleksandar Vučić has openly pursued a Russia-friendly foreign policy, including after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The previous Minister of Internal Affairs and current head of Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency, Aleksander Vulin, is perhaps the most outspoken and influential pro-Russian political actor in the country. He travelled to meet Lavrov in Moscow in August 2022 and is suspected of delivering wiretaps of a Russian opposition meeting in

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49 Jelena Dzankic, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil, "[A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan \(Geo\)Politics](#)," European University Institute, 2023, 103.

50 [Ivana Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro: How and Why a centuries' old relationship ruptured,"](#) Connections: The Quarterly Journal, 2018.

51 Samir Kajosevic, "[Defence to offer 'secret files' evidence in Montenegro coup plot' retrial,](#)" BalkanInsight, April 10, 2023.

52 Online interview with Montenegrin expert, May 9, 2023.



Belgrade to Russia's Security Council Secretary Patrushev.<sup>53</sup> Coalition partner SPS (Socialist Party of Serbia), led by Ivica Dačić, is generally regarded as pro-Russian as well.

A more extreme far-right proxy exists in the form of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of Vojislav Šešelj, a far-right war criminal convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and once regarded as the political mentor of current president Vučić. Although his party is currently not represented in Parliament, far right parties have not disappeared from Serbia's political scene. The ultra-nationalist party *Srpska stranka Zavetnici*, or Serbian Party Oathkeepers (SSZ), led by Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, retains an openly pro-Russian and anti-NATO course. Other factions, such as the National Democratic Alternative (NADA) and Dveri-POKS, also pursue nationalistic conservative agendas, for example advocating for the reintegration of Kosovo.

Russian support for far-right Serb political forces has a destabilising effect not only in Serbia but also in its neighbouring countries. That is because these politicians (as well as nationalistic proxy groups) generally hold positive views on the creation of a Greater Serbia as propagated in the 1990s by former Serb president Milošević, or *Srpski Svet* (*Serbian world*), a term forged in 2014 and similar to the irredentist ideology of the *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian world). By supporting these actors, Russia undermines the stability and the sovereignty of neighbouring countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro.<sup>54</sup> Such ideologies also constitute an important aspect of Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo, which hosts a considerable Serbian community as well as many sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

### **Russian political narratives**

Russia employs various narratives in its approach towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia that resonate well with substantial sections of their populations. The central notions of these narratives revolve around the ideas of: a) Russia as the defender of Christian-Orthodox traditional values; b) a pan-Slavic link between the peoples of Russia and the Western Balkans; c) the degeneration of the collective West; d) a need for strong leaders ready to defend their country and values in today's world; e) NATO expansion as a cause

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53 Orhan Dragaš, "[Serbia's Vulin in Moscow – a disaster for Belgrade](#)," Euractiv, August 24, 2022.

54 Hamza Karcic, "[Serbia Is Taking a Page Out of Russia's Book](#)," Foreign Policy, April 24, 2023.

for the war in Ukraine; and f) territorial integrity as an argument for support of Serbia's position on Kosovo.<sup>55</sup>

Such narratives resonate well in some sections of society in all three countries, given their conservative nature and lack of longstanding democratic tradition, as well as a sense of disappointment with EU integration after what many consider as 20 years in the EU 'waiting room'.<sup>56</sup> However, importantly, support for the EU and Russia are not necessarily communicating vessels, meaning that those who are pro-EU are not necessarily anti-Russian, and vice-versa. Besides, while many people in the three countries support narratives on conservative values, at the same time they mock Russia's performance on the battlefield in Ukraine.<sup>57</sup> It would be too much of a simplification to classify people as simply pro-Russian or pro-EU, as such classifications fail to account for local interests and orientations.

### **Political influence through the Orthodox Church**

A particularly visible actor in spreading Russian narratives is the Serbian Orthodox Church, estimated to have about 8 million members of which most in the three countries examined, thereby having substantial societal influence.<sup>58</sup>

*De jure*, the Serbian Orthodox Church is autocephalous and as such not subordinated to the Patriarchate in Moscow. *De facto*, the Serbian Orthodox Church retains close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is closely connected with the Kremlin and has presented itself as a solid supporter of Russia's foreign policies, including its invasion of Ukraine.

Russian influence through the Orthodox Church works in several ways. First, the Serbian Orthodox Church replicates a large part of the Russian narratives presented above, thereby not only spreading conservative values but also political viewpoints of partnership between Russia and the three countries. It 'provides religious legitimacy to domestic and foreign state policies' in Serbia, but also promotes Serb nationalism and anti-Western agendas in Montenegro

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55 The latter is rather contradicting as Russian president Putin also misused the case of Kosovo as an argument for Russia's recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. See N1, ['Putin: Right to recognise Donbas republics same as how Kosovo got recognition'](#), June 18, 2022.

56 Interview with experts, 25 and 26 April 2023, Sarajevo.

57 Interview with expert, 25 April 2023, Sarajevo.

58 World Council of Churches, ['Serbian Orthodox Church'](#), accessed 12 July 2023.

and BiH, for example when it campaigned strongly against Montenegro's 2017 NATO accession.<sup>59</sup>

Second, Russia actively amplifies church rifts in the region to sow division and destabilise societies at large. For example, in Montenegro, a separate Montenegrin Orthodox Church exists, but it is not recognised by the Patriarch of Constantinople or the Russian Orthodox Church, and about 90% of Montenegrin Orthodox believers have remained with the Serbian church instead.<sup>60</sup> After Montenegro passed a controversial freedom of religion law in 2019 that would see properties of religious organisations transferred to the Montenegrin state upon certain conditions, the Russian Orthodox Church was quick to take a political position in the debate, while prominent Serbian clergy organised and led street protests.<sup>61</sup>

Third, the Serbian Orthodox Church supports nationalist and far-right groups and individuals who often advocate for closer ties with Russia. For example, it has twice decorated abovementioned Vojislav Šešelj, and endorsed the viewpoints of groups such as *Narodne Patrole*. The Church has given tacit support to Milorad Dodik's secessionist agenda in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Patriarch Porfirije himself taking part prominently in the banned 9 January Republika Srpska victory parade in 2022.<sup>62</sup> In effect, the Orthodox Church is both a channel for Russian narratives, a tool employed by Russia to sow divisions, and a political actor in itself that supports pro-Russian politicians and Serb nationalism in the three countries.

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59 Harun Karčić, "[Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History](#)," Berley Forum, July 25, 2022; Mira Milosevich, "[Russia's Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2020.

60 See Miloš Bešić, '[Gdje je crnogorsko društvo 16 godina od obnove državne nezavisnosti?](#)', CEDEM, October 2022, 25.

61 The Law adopted in December 2019 prescribed that all religious objects/buildings that were property of the state of Montenegro before it lost its independence and joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918, and which later did not legally become the property of any religious community, are to be recognised as state property. See: Mira Milosevich, "[Russia's Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2020.

62 Kenneth Morrison and Vesko Garčević, "[The Orthodox Church, Montenegro, and the 'Serbian World'](#)," Atlantic Initiative of Montenegro, February 21, 2023, 10.

In conclusion, Russia's political clout stretches especially to (pro-)Serb politicians, who often make use of similar narratives and use Russia as an external supporter to promote their own ideas. Political relations between Russia and the three countries, unlike those with the EU, remain, however, fragmented and under-institutionalised. While this may be a deliberate strategy, it is determined by the entry points the context offers, which are more limited than in the case of Russia's more direct neighbours. Of the three countries, entry points for Russian influence are most widespread in Serbia, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia has, however, continued to unconditionally support nominally pro-Russian politicians in all three countries, including by directly financing their parties. Especially regarding its position on Kosovo, support for RS leader Milorad Dodik and Orthodox Church links remain important entry points for Russian political influence in the region at large.

## Russia's economic clout – forged through energy links

The EU is unquestionably outperforming Russia as an economic partner to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Even if Russia seeks to maintain, with difficulty, its economic clout through the energy sector, its invasion of Ukraine has further reduced the country's economic presence in the three countries. To assess the state of Russia's economic penetration in the Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin economies, we take into account Russia's past and current bilateral economic agreements with the three countries, the state of their energy relations, Russian investments in the region, and tourism and property links.

### Trade

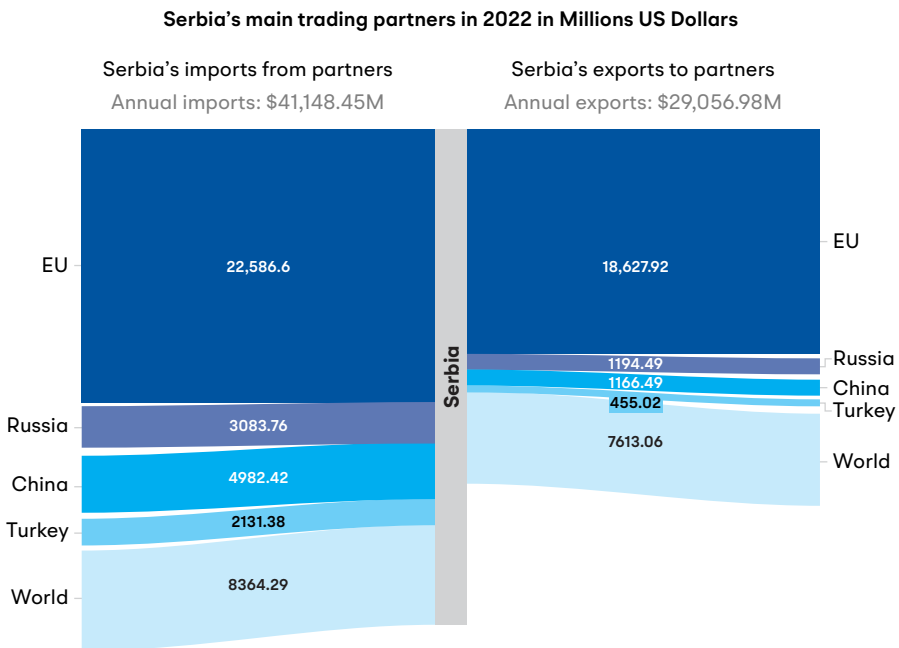
In terms of trade, Russia has sought to involve the three countries in its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) project, an antipode of the EU's internal market comprising Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. These efforts have only led Serbia to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) with the block in 2019, in spite of a Russian commitment to reach a similar agreement with BiH.<sup>63</sup> In the early 2010s, Montenegro was negotiating to extend its FTA with Russia – originally signed in 2000 between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Russia – to Belarus and Kazakhstan, the countries with which Russia formed

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63 [Zeljko Trkanjec, "Russia would like BiH to conclude free trade agreement with Eurasian Customs Union," Euractiv, November 1, 2021.](#)

a customs union in 2010.<sup>64</sup> However, Russia stalled the negotiations and the FTA itself in 2014 when Montenegro joined EU sanctions against the country for its annexation of Crimea.<sup>65</sup> By 2022, commercial exchanges between the three countries and the EU had become much more significant than with Russia, as shown in Figure 4. Russia ranks only as the fourth trading partner of the three at large, placed after not only the EU and China, but also Turkey.

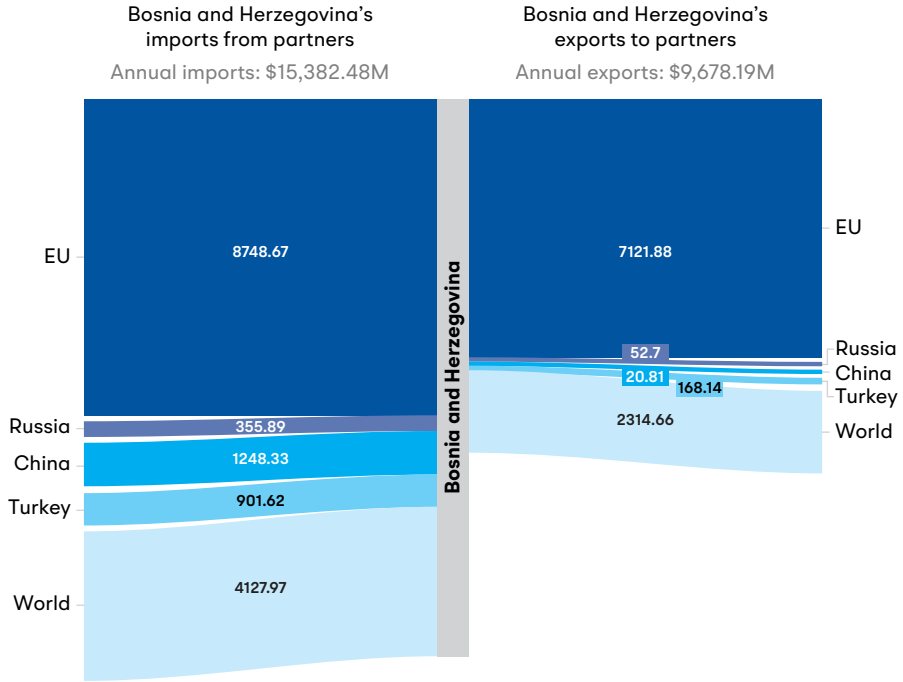
Figure 4 Main trade partners of Serbia, BiH and Montenegro in terms of exports and imports in 2022



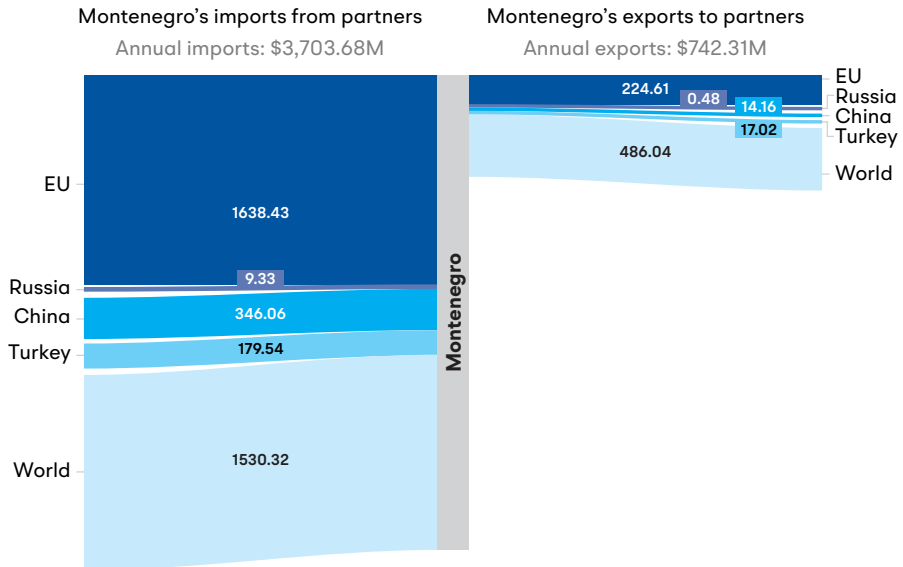
64 [The International Trade administration](#), last visited on 26 April 2023; “Преговори о либерализацији трговине са Руском Федерацијом, Бјелорусијом и Казахстаном [Talk about the liberalization of the Russian Federation, Bulgaria and Kazakhstan],” Government of Montenegro, May 25, 2011.

65 “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Montenegro 2015 Report,” European Commission, November 10, 2015, 73.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina's main trading partners in 2022 in Millions US Dollars**



**Montenegro's main trading partners in 2022 in Millions US Dollars**

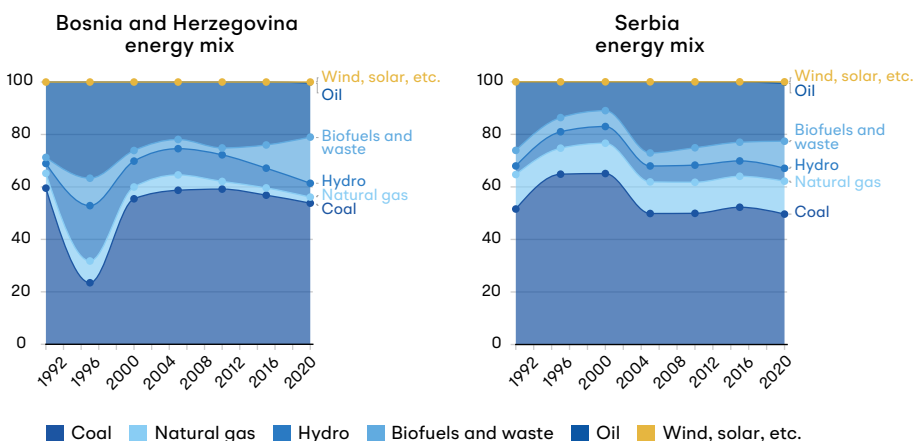


Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS): [link](#)  
[Online interactive graphic](#)

## Energy

Russia maintains economic clout especially in the energy sector in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it provides nearly 100% of both countries' gas imports and its energy giant Gazprom owns crucial energy infrastructure in these countries.<sup>66</sup> Russia makes active use of the energy ties to politically influence the region. For example, in May 2022, Belgrade renegotiated with Gazprom a three-year gas contract at favourable prices amidst the war in Ukraine and international sanctions on Russia.<sup>67</sup> For Moscow, it clearly served to support Serbia in withstanding pressure from the EU to join anti-Russian sanctions. It should, however, be noted that the share of gas in each country's energy mix remains low. In BiH for example, gas constitutes only 3.3% of the country total energy mix (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Evolution of the energy mix of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia between 1990 and 2020



Sources: International Energy Agency, [www.iea.org](http://www.iea.org)  
[Bosnia and Herzegovina energy mix - online interactive graphics](#) [Serbia energy mix - online interactive graphic](#)

66 Stanicek, Branislav, [“Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans,”](#) European Parliament Research Service, June 2022, 1; In Montenegro, natural gas is absent from the country’s energy mix. In Serbia, Russian gas company Gazprom owns the Petroleum Industry of Serbia. In BiH, NeftGazinKor owns the two most important Republika Srpska’s oil refineries and the oil company Petrolis. See: Milena Lazarevic, Sava Mitrovic, [“The EU and Third actors in the Balkans. Relaunching enlargement, reviving credibility,”](#) Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU’s Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 19.

67 Sergiu Mitrescu, Vuk Vuksanovic, [“The Wider Balkan Region: at the Crossroads of a New regional energy matrix,”](#) Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, October 2022, 31.

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also use energy relations as a political instrument. For instance, in 2008 Gazprom acquired a majority share of 51% in Serbia's solitary oil company *Naftna Industrija Srbije* (NIS) for €450 million, whereas experts set the company's market value at 2.2 billion euros.<sup>68</sup> The transaction, which was brokered by Serbia's former prime minister Vojislav Koštunica, is believed to have been motivated by a political logic from Serbia to secure Moscow's support on the Kosovo issue and a guarantee that the now defunct gas pipeline project South Stream would go through Serbian territory. Interestingly, the Serbian government now speaks of Russian energy infrastructure ownership as a barrier for its asserted energy diversification ambitions, even if such diversification is being supported by the EU and US alike and some steps have been taken in that direction.<sup>69</sup> In Republika Srpska (RS), the partly state-owned Russian company *NeftGazInkor* bought the two main oil refineries – located in Brod and Modriča – in 2007. In subsequent years, the two refineries operated at a loss, totalling €1.3 billion at the end of 2022.<sup>70</sup>

For Russia, economic profit has clearly been subordinated to the excessive gains in political leverage of these investments.<sup>71</sup> However, current EU sanctions against Russia are expected to reduce the country's leverage, as they will prevent Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina from importing Russian

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68 Sergiu Mitrescu, Vuk Vuksanovic, "[The Wider Balkan Region at the Crossroads of a New Regional Energy Matrix](#)," Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, October 2022, 29

69 Diversification is mainly sought through the construction of the IBS Gas pipeline between Serbia and Bulgaria. Also, the Serbian government has announced a €12 billion investment plan to diversify energy sources that foresees building interconnectors with other neighbouring countries. See: Euractiv, "Serbia's Vucic lays out €12bn energy investment plan after oil ban", October 22, 2022; Conversation with Serbian politician, 5 June 2023.

70 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "[Russia's Game in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January, 2019, 6; "[Russian oil refineries in Bosnia accumulating losses](#)," N1 info, April 26, 2023.

71 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "[Russia's Game in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January, 2019, 6; Stanislav Secieru, "[Russia in the Western Balkans Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks](#)," European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2019, 3.



gas transported via ports and pipelines in EU member states.<sup>72</sup> In that regard, Serbia will experience the consequences of EU sanctions on Russia even if it did not join them. This may motivate Belgrade to diversify its sources of energy, although the country for now has, like EU member state Hungary, largely continued to import Russian oil and gas.<sup>73</sup>

### **Investments, real estate, tourism and migration**

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Crimea and implementation of international sanctions, the Western Balkan countries have experienced a stagnation or even diminution in the proportion of Russian investments relative to the size of their economies.<sup>74</sup> However, Russian investments in Serbia saw a boom, as Russian businesses redirected to Serbia due to the war and the ensuing international sanctions. In 2022, Serbia experienced an unprecedented surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) which surpassed the average FDI inflow of the previous years by €500–600 million. In the same year, Serbia saw the creation of 1,020 Russian businesses – a figure 12 times higher than in 2021 – due to the influx of Russians into the country.<sup>75</sup>

In Montenegro, the same trend can be seen. Despite Montenegro's status as a non-friendly state and its sanctions against Moscow, the country continues to receive substantial investments from Russian companies and citizens. The Central Bank of Montenegro declared in July 2022 that Russians remained the largest investors in the country, investing more than €41 million after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The most important investments are made in the housing sector, in which Russians are believed to own more than 40% of Montenegrin real

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72 For example, the JANAF Croatian oil pipeline or the Bulgarian-Serbian pipeline – an extension of TurkStream. See: [Marta Szpala](#), Andrzej Sadecki, "[Serbia: The Forced Abandonment of Russian Oil](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), October 13, 2022; International Monetary Fund, European Department, "[Republic of Serbia: Third Review Under the Policy Coordination Instrument, Request for a Stand-By Arrangement, and Cancellation of the Policy Coordination Instrument- Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Republic of Serbia](#)," IMF, December 20, 2022, 66–67.

73 [Marta Szpala](#), Andrzej Sadecki, "[Serbia: The Forced Abandonment of Russian Oil](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies, October 13, 2022.

74 Branislav Stanicek, Anna Caprile, "[Russia and the Western Balkans Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference](#)," European Parliament Research Service, April 2023, 4.

75 In 2021, the Serbian Agency for Business Registers assessed at 82 the number of Russian-owned businesses in Serbia. see: "[Serbia Records Big Year For Foreign Direct Investment, Despite Ukraine War](#)," RadioFreeEurope, January 11, 2023.

estate.<sup>76</sup> Russians invest especially in the Adriatic coastal towns of Bar, Herceg Novi, Petrovac and Budva, as they have sizeable Russian communities. In terms of tourism, according to official Montenegro Statistics Office data, there were more Russian tourists in 2022 than in 2021, but it is unclear whether they comprise only tourists or also people travelling to escape the war.<sup>77</sup>

Within the context of the economy and tourism, it is noteworthy that a considerable number of Russians – estimated at 13,000<sup>78</sup> – have chosen Montenegro as their destination while fleeing their country after the start of the war. Montenegro's 'Golden passport' scheme has contributed to this trend, with 70% of all golden passports being handed to Russian citizens.<sup>79</sup> Wealthy Russians who made a substantial investment in Montenegro (amounting to 450,000 euros) benefitted from this economic measure until, under strong EU pressure, Montenegro ended the programme at the end of 2022.<sup>80</sup> With regard to Russian migration to Serbia, two waves are generally distinguished. The first wave primarily consisted of political dissidents and activists who sought refuge in Serbia. The second wave brought Russians who were more concerned about professional and business interests; this resulted in a surge in Russian-owned companies registered in the country.<sup>81</sup> One Russian refugee who fled the war and founded an organisation called the Russian Democratic Society in Belgrade,

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- 76 [Samir Kajosevic, "Russian Interest in Montenegrin Real Estate Spikes Despite Sanctions,"](#) BalkanInsight, July 7, 2022; [Dusica Tomovic, "Russians dominate foreign Ownership of Montenegrin companies,"](#) BalkanInsight, August 18, 2016; [Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "Russia's game in the Balkans,"](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2019, 7.
- 77 In 2021, 10,8025 Russian tourists travelled to Montenegro, staying in total 1,140,173 nights. In 2022, 140,719 Russian tourists travelled to Montenegro, staying 1,843,299 nights. As such, on average Russian tourists spent 10.55 nights in the country in 2021 against 13.1 nights in 2022. See Montenegro Statistics Office, "Dolasci i noćenja turista, ukupno – 2021, godina," and "Dolasci i noćenja turista, u individualnom smještaju, 2022 godina", both accessed July 21, 2023.
- 78 [Jakov Devčić, "Montenegro: Political and Social Impact One Year After the Start of Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine,"](#) Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, February 28, 2023.
- 79 [Radio Slobodna Evropa, "Crna Gora izdala 404 'zlatna pasosa',"](#) October 14, 2022.
- 80 ["Montenegro's tourism economy on a shaky wicket in Russia-Ukraine crisis,"](#) ET Travel World, March 28, 2022; [Reid Standish, "Belgrade's Russian Empire grapple with new lives in Serbia, the Ukraine War, and what comes next,"](#) RadioFreeEurope, September 28, 2022.
- 81 [Andreas Ernst, "200,000 Russians have emigrated to Serbia. They are welcome, although often for the wrong reasons: a look at their lives,"](#) Neue Zürcher Zeitung, April 21, 2023; The figures were sourced from Serbian media, See: ["Nearly 300 Russian-owned firms registered in Serbia since Ukraine invasion,"](#) Euractiv, April 7, 2022; ["Rusi u Srbiji osnovali oko 800 privrednih društava i 2.100 radnji, dominira IT sektor,"](#) Radio Television of Serbia, November 11, 2022.

lawyer Peter Nikitin, estimates that about 40% of the estimated 220,000 Russians in Serbia fully oppose the war, while 60% would have a more neutral position.<sup>82</sup>

Russia's influence in the economic sphere is outperformed substantially by that of the EU, especially in terms of trade. Russia's far-reaching influence in the energy sectors of BiH and Serbia, however, yields substantial political leverage, even if its investments often prove economically inviable. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a redirection of Russian companies to Serbia in particular, with a further boom of Russian investments in the property sector in Montenegro. These developments do not directly provide Moscow with additional political influence.

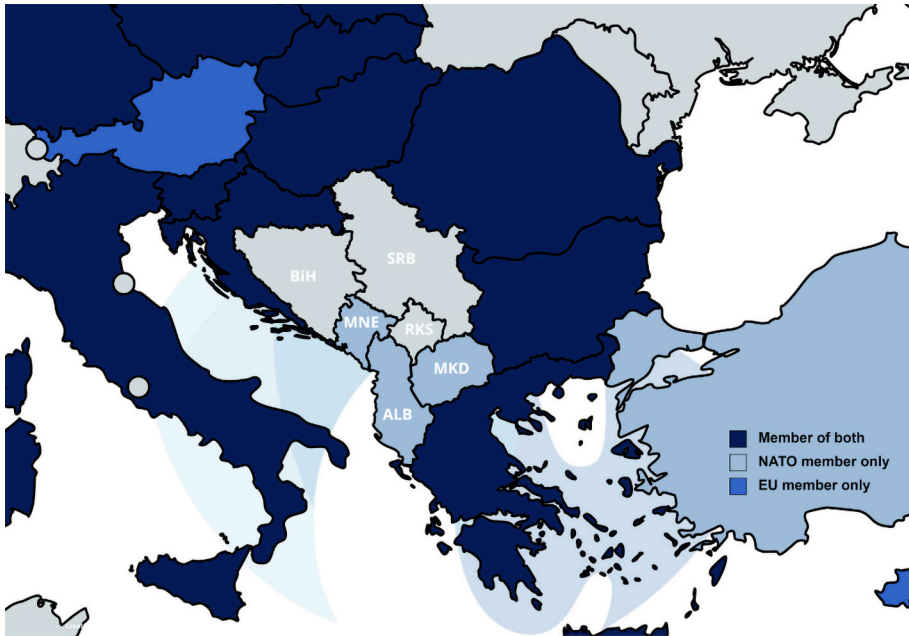
### **Russian influence through security and military cooperation: a story coming to an end?**

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's security involvement in the Western Balkans has toned down but not become insignificant. Due to the region's history and geographical location – being bordered by EU and NATO member states – and in contrast with the Eastern Partnership countries, Russia has no military presence in the Western Balkans. As such, it must resort to other, hybrid, methods to stir up unresolved conflicts and instability. Nevertheless, Russia still manages to maintain some military and security links with its main allies, Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS). It does so through military pacts, joint exercises, military training and arms supplies. However, with NATO member Montenegro, such cooperation is wholly absent. Montenegro's (as well as Albania's and North Macedonia's) NATO accession highlights the fact that Russia has in the past few years largely failed to prevent the overall integration of the region with Euro-Atlantic institutions in spite of its obstructive agenda.

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82 Andreas Ernst, "200,000 Russians have emigrated to Serbia. They are welcome, although often for the wrong reasons; a look at their lives," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 21, 2023; "Country report: Serbia," Asylum Information Database, updated version of December 31, 2022.

Figure 6 Map of EU and/or NATO members in south-east Europe



Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Serbia has continued to hold observer status within the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), even if in practice contacts have been limited. Serbia has officially proclaimed military neutrality since 2007, but has participated in several ‘Slavic Brotherhood’ joint military exercises and a military initiative involving the Serbian, Russian and Belarusian armed forces.<sup>83</sup> Belgrade displayed some sensitivity to EU pressure when it froze its participation in the 2020 exercises without notifying Minsk beforehand, although it re-joined the exercises from 2021 until the Russian invasion of Ukraine one year later.<sup>84</sup> Factually, even if politically sensitive in

83 Marina Vulović, “Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors: An Arena of Geostrategic Rivalry for the EU or a Local Power Struggle?” German Institute for International and Security Affairs SWP, February 9, 2023.

84 Milica Stojanovic, “Serbia Quits Joint Military Exercise, Citing ‘Terrible EU Pressure,’” BalkanInsight, September 10, 2020.

the country, NATO is a much more important partner to Belgrade.<sup>85</sup> As a NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) country, Serbia has undertaken significantly more military exercises with NATO than with Russia.<sup>86</sup> Serbia's first joint military exercise since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is the 'Platinum Wolf' exercise with NATO.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, Serbia's Director of the Security Information Agency, Aleksandar Vulin, attended an international security conference in Moscow in May 2023.<sup>88</sup> It is unclear whether the country would be willing to face further pressure from the currently geopolitically awakened EU if any further joint exercises were to be initiated by Russia.

The Russian-Serbian security relation includes arms supplies. Moscow provided Belgrade with air defence systems, anti-tank weapons, drones and other military hardware between 2018 and 2021.<sup>89</sup> These deliveries were part of a military technical assistance agreement signed by both parties in 2016 to support Belgrade in modernising its military. Even as Russia has been Serbia's most consistent supplier of military equipment since that year, Russia is not the only game in town.<sup>90</sup> According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, in 2022 China exported more arms to Serbia (320TIV) than Russia did between 2016 and 2022 (306TIV).<sup>91</sup> When it comes to arms deliveries, it is furthermore relevant to mention that Serbia itself has, according to leaked US intelligence documents, and in spite of its professed neutrality, exported arms to Ukraine in the past year.

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85 Vuk Vuksanović, "[Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments](#)," Europe and Russia on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 38.

86 In 2021, Belgrade participated in 14 military exercises with NATO against four similar exercises with Russia. See: Vuk Vuksanović, "[Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments](#)," Europe and Russia on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 39.

87 Sasa Dragojlo, "[Serbia to host Western 'Platinum Wolf' military exercise again – research centre](#)," Balkan Insight, March 31, 2023.

88 "[US and Ukraine condemn Vulin's participation in Moscow conference](#)," Euronews Albania, 26 May 2023.

89 "[Cooperation of Serbia, Russia in Military-Technical Sphere at Highest Level — President](#)," TASS, November 25, 2021.

90 SIPRI, "[Importer/Exporter TIV Tables](#)," Imports to Serbia, Years 2016-2022, summarised by recipient/supplier, accessed March 31, 2023.

91 TIV refers to Trend Indicator Value. It is a measuring unit developed by SIPRI to enable comparisons on conventional weapon deliveries representing the transfer of military resources instead of their mere financial value. See: SIPRI, "[Sources and methods - 2. Explanation of the TIV tables](#)," accessed 31 March 2023.

This was vehemently denied by Serbia itself at first, although Serbian president Vučić later admitted that Serbian ammunition was possibly sold to Ukraine through intermediaries and that he is not opposed to that.<sup>92</sup>

Russia also cooperates with the Republika Srpska entity in the security domain, specifically regarding counterintelligence, counterterrorism and police training.<sup>93</sup> Western actors are concerned with the militarisation of the RS police as well as the potential construction of another Russian operational (officially ‘humanitarian’) centre, similar to its facility in Niš (Serbia).<sup>94</sup> Sarajevo also claims that RS is trying to procure Russian anti-aircraft missiles. Such arms deliveries could contribute to future tensions and are concerning, as the RS entity also acquired 2,500 automatic rifles from Serbia.<sup>95</sup> RS cooperation with Russia goes against Bosnia’s cooperation with NATO, which has, in spite of resistance and delaying tactics from RS, gradually increased in the past years. The country has had a PfP agreement with NATO since 2006, was offered a Membership Action Plan in 2010, and as part of that effort submitted a so-called Reform Programme in 2019.<sup>96</sup>

To summarise, Russia seeks to maintain its military cooperation with its main partner, Serbia, while also supporting the militarisation of Republika Srpska. Belgrade is satisfied with its current degree of cooperation with Moscow but seeks to avoid becoming Russia’s foothold in the Balkans. In reality, Russia is only one of multiple security actors in the Balkans, overshadowed by NATO and challenged by China.

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92 Jonathan Landay, Aleksander Vasovic, [“Exclusive: Leaked US intel document claims Serbia agreed to arm Ukraine,”](#) Reuters, 12 April, 2023; Tamara Milošević Grbić, [“Serbia denies selling weapons to Ukraine following new Pentagon leak,”](#) Euractiv, April 13, 2023; Glas Amerike, [“Vučić za FT: Moguće da srpska municija završava u Ukrajini,”](#) June 06, 2023.

93 Dr Arlinda Rrustemi, Professor Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, [“Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans,”](#) The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), September 30, 2019, 124.

94 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, [“Russia’s Toolkit in the Balkans,”](#) Carnegie Endowment for international Peace, January 2019, 15.

95 Dr Arlinda Rrustemi, Professor Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, [“Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans,”](#) The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, September 30, 2019, 124.

96 [“Membership Action Plan \(MAP\),”](#) North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 19, 2023; [“Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina,”](#) North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 12, 2022.

## Russian malign influences: proxy groups, cyber attacks and meddling in internal affairs

While presenting itself as a partner to Serbia and the RS in particular, Russia also resorts to malign actions to influence developments in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It supports non-state paramilitary, criminal and cyber groups in the region, and interferes in political affairs to the scale of supporting political coups. Russia furthermore facilitates direct cyber-attacks from Russia, and Russian private military companies like Wagner recruit citizens to fight for private military cooperations in Ukraine.

Russia employs existing non-state organisations, organised crime groups and hacker societies in the Western Balkans to destabilise the region and further its influence. Moscow does not directly coordinate actions led by such actors, but instead supports their activities in an informal manner and through a multitude of actors such as oligarchs, representatives of the Orthodox Church, or political proxies. At the same time, local malign groups sometimes operate in line with Russian interests while lacking direct engagement with Russia. As such, Moscow is not always engaged, but if so, it is in an indirect manner, making involvement difficult to prove.

### Proxy groups

The infamous ‘Night Wolves’ biker group is one of Moscow’s proactive proxy groups, with local chapters in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH. In 2018, Russia allegedly provided the group with a \$41,000 grant to tour the Western Balkans and demonstrate in support of Milorad Dodik and his ambition of the ‘peacefully disintegration’ of BiH.<sup>97</sup> ‘Serbian Honour’, another proxy, is a far-right group with links to organised crime active in Serbia and RS and was allegedly established in the ‘Russian-Serb Humanitarian Centre’ in Niš. In 2018, its BiH faction was reported to act as Dodik’s personal security force, but more recently, the group has diminished in importance, seemingly because of earlier overexposure.<sup>98</sup>

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97 Dr Arlinda Rrustemi, Professor Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, [“Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans,”](#) The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, September 30, 2019, 123.

98 Vsevolod Scamokhvalov, [“Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response,”](#) Insight Turkey, May 31, 2019; Stanislav Secieru, [“Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks,”](#) European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2019.

For both Serbian Honour and the Night Wolves, it would go too far to label the organisations as ‘paramilitary’, given their lack of a military-like structure. The only proxy group that to a certain extent resembles a military organisation is the 2016 founded ‘Union of Cossacks of the Balkans’.<sup>99</sup> Viktor Zaplatin, one of the prominent Union’s leaders, served in the Soviet army. The Union’s main mission is to promote pro-Russian, conservative and Orthodox narratives and push back on the ‘imposition’ of western values.<sup>100</sup>

Another, recently visible, proxy group is the Serbian group *Narodne Patrole*, or national patrol, led by Damijan Knežević, one of the founders of the far-right political party Serbian Oathkeepers. Knežević travelled to the then newly opened Wagner Centre in St Petersburg in November 2022. He was arrested in February 2023 over violent protests in Belgrade against Serbia’s normalisation process with Kosovo but released soon after.<sup>101</sup> The group can be described as ultra-nationalist, anti-migration, and openly pro-Russian and pro-Wagner. It remains unclear to what extent they actively facilitate Wagner activities in Serbia.

In addition to the proxy groups, Russian oligarchs have also set foot in the region. A prime example is Konstantin Malofeev, an oligarch and founder of the Charitable Foundation of St Basil the Great, an organisation that seeks to spread the Russian Orthodox faith, a key asset for reaching out to conservative groups in the Balkans.<sup>102</sup> Malofeev was implicated in the early organisational stages of the 2016 Montenegro coup.<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, Malofeev’s spiritual adviser is the Orthodox priest Bishop Tikhon, who is also Putin’s spiritual adviser. Although not all of these actors are directly coordinated by the Kremlin, many proxy groups, Orthodox brotherhoods, Russian oligarchs and Orthodox figures form a loosely

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99 Jasna Vukicevic, Robert Coalson, “[Russia's Friends Form 'Balkan Cossack Army'](#),” RadioFreeEurope, October 18, 2016.

100 Mladen Obrenovic, “[Under Cossack Banner, Russian Ties with Balkan Fighters Strengthened](#),” Balkan Insight, October 16, 2020.

101 “[Criminal complaints filed in Belgrade over Wagner recruiting in Serbia](#),” RadioFreeEurope, January 20, 2023; Dusan Komarcevic, “[Serbian Right – Winger says Vagner ties could help if there's 'Conflict in Kosovo'](#),” RadioFreeEurope, December 6, 2022.

102 Conley Heather, Matthew Melino, “[Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics](#),” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2019, 1.

103 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, “[Russia's Game in the Balkans](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2019, 11.



connected network across the Balkans.<sup>104</sup> According to an interviewee, they are organised locally in order to maintain a low profile, but when deemed necessary by Russia, they are quickly united, such as happened in the pro-Russia protest in Belgrade in March 2022.<sup>105</sup>

While explicit public evidence is lacking, support and training of malign groups is believed to take place through the 'Humanitarian' Centre in Niš, Serbia. Formally intended for disaster relief, the centre is believed by the West to be an intelligence centre and is suspected of hosting military training for paramilitary units. Vucic's government has so far refused to grant diplomatic status to the centre's Russian staff.<sup>106</sup> Rumours surfaced in 2018 about the construction of a similar centre in RS near Banja Luka but are denied by the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo and after 2018 no further reports have been published.<sup>107</sup>

### **Political and digital interference**

Another form of Russian malign actions is meddling in political affairs. The most prominent example is the 2016 political coup attempt in Montenegro as the country was about to join NATO. The coup failed as a result of poor organisation, mainly because Russia relied on a loose web of proxies, including radical Serb nationalists and Night Wolves, but also the earlier-mentioned Democratic Front politicians. Several backed out just days before. Although concerning, the episode shows that Russia is not the strategic mastermind it is sometimes believed to be.<sup>108</sup> In the wake of the failed coup, 13 people, including two Russian intelligence (GRU) officers (in absentia), Eduard Shirokov and Vladimir Popov, were convicted, although a retrial is currently underway.<sup>109</sup> So far, no other coup attempts at such scale have been discovered, although Russian-Serbian relations did take a limited hit over a Russian espionage operation revealed in

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104 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "[Russia's Game in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2019, 15, 16.

105 Interview with expert, Sarajevo, 26 April 2023.

106 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "[Russia's Toolkit in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, 15.

107 Vera Mironova, "[Putin is building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force](#)," Foreign Policy, August 8, 2018.

108 Maksim Smorukov, "[What's behind the posturing of Russian Mercenaries in the Balkans?](#)" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2023.

109 Jelena Dzankic, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil, "[A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan \(Geo\)Politics](#)," European University Institute, 2023, 103; "[Two Russian spies' sentenced in Montenegro coup attempt](#)," Sky News, May 9, 2019.

2019, in which a retired military officer was seen taking large sums of cash from a Russian diplomat.<sup>110</sup>

Russia also uses cyber-attacks to destabilise the Balkans. Montenegro is the most targeted country in south-east Europe. On the same day of the coup attempt, the Montenegrin authorities were struck by cyber-attacks. Attacks were attributed to the APT28 group, also known as Fancy Bear, which is claimed by the US to be tied to the Russian intelligence organisation, GRU.<sup>111</sup> It is of some concern that Montenegro has the second-lowest regional score on the Global Cybersecurity Index, while Bosnia and Herzegovina scores lowest.<sup>112</sup> In August 2022, Montenegro's government websites and critical infrastructure systems were targeted by largescale cyber-attacks. Despite *Cuba ransomware* – a Russian-speaking gang – claiming responsibility for part of the attack, the Montenegrin National Security Agency blamed the attack on Russia, stating that some organisations are a disguise to hide Russian government involvement.<sup>113</sup>

### Private military corporations

Lastly, amidst the war in Ukraine, signals regarding the recruitment of Serb and Bosnian nationals to join Russia's invasion of Ukraine have also come to the fore. It is estimated that a few dozen Serb nationals are currently fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine, meaning numbers are not substantial.<sup>114</sup> Recruitment to the Wagner group has been facilitated by veterans organisations, such as those from the RS capital, Banja Luka (affiliated to *Serbian Honour*), which retain close

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110 Shaun Walker, "[Serbian president accuses Russia of spy plot involving army](#)," The Guardian, November 21, 2019.

111 Paul Stronski, Annie Himes, "[Russia's Toolkit in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, 9.

112 The Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) evaluates the cybersecurity performance of countries. In 2020, Montenegro scored 52.23 (ranking 87), while BiH scored 29.44 (ranking 110), the lowest score in the Western Balkans. Serbia ranked 39 (89.8 score), North Macedonia ranked 38 (89.92 score) and Albania ranked 80 (64.32 score). See: International Telecommunication Union, "[Global Cyber Security Index, 2020](#)", accessed July 13, 2023; "[A recent look towards Cybersecurity in the Western Balkans: How can we improve the cybersecurity level in the region?](#)" Metamorphosis, 2022.

113 Dusan Stojanovic, "[Montenegro wrestles with massive cyberattack, Russia blamed](#)," AP, September 12, 2022.

114 Maxim Samorouov, "[What's behind the posturing of Russian mercenaries in the Balkans](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2023.

links with Russian counterparts.<sup>115</sup> Serbian Cossack groups are also believed to be a tool of Russian influence in the region, and are also potential sources of recruits.<sup>116</sup> The most visible recruitment effort was perhaps in early 2023, when Russia Today's Balkans service published a Wagner advertorial to join the private military company in Ukraine.<sup>117</sup> Wagner murals also appeared in Serbia and North Kosovo.<sup>118</sup> The Serbian central government firmly condemned Wagner's mercenary activities in the country.<sup>119</sup>

To conclude, Russia resorts to malign instruments which have often proven to be effective in shaping the political environment of the Western Balkans. Lacking a military presence in the region, Russia supports far-right nationalist figures and organisations, which generally better resemble organised crime groups than paramilitary organisations, to attain its goal of destabilisation by stirring up polarisation and anti-Western sentiment. Although such malign influence has not succeeded in distancing the Balkan countries from their rapprochement with the West, Russia has allowed malign actors to become more active in the region to the point of destabilising entire governments.

## Media and disinformation as successful tools to spread Russian narratives

Russia's influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia may be most visible through its ability to promote its narratives and spread disinformation via (social) media. Such influence runs through Russian media active in those countries, penetration of Russian narratives in local media, and Russian disinformation campaigns via social media.

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115 [Vera Mironova, Bogdan Zawadewicz, "Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force,"](#) Foreign Policy, August 8, 2018; Dr Arlinda Rrustemi, Professor Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, ["Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans,"](#) HCSS Security, September 30, 2019, 124.

116 Mladen Obrenovic, ["Under Cossack Banner, Russian Ties with Balkan Fighters Strengthened,"](#) Balkan Insight, October 16, 2020.

117 Dusan Stojanovic, ["US envoy says Russian Wagner Group's activities intolerable,"](#) AP, January 12, 2023.

118 See for example N1, ["Mural dedicated to Russian 'Wagner' group appears in Belgrade,"](#) January 15, 2023.

119 Maxim Samorukov, ["What the Wagner Mercenaries' Row Reveals About Serbia's Relations with Russia,"](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 26, 2023.

In recent years, Russia has increased its involvement in the Balkans media sphere using local outlets as a means to disseminate pro-Russian narratives and foster anti-Western sentiment. Two prominent tools employed are the Serbia-based propaganda giants RT Balkan and Sputnik, which publish content in the Serbian language.<sup>120</sup> The US Department of State's Global Engagement Centre holds that these media organisations use *'the guise of conventional international media outlets to provide disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives'*. This perception is supported not only by the propagandist content, but also by the fact that journalists working for Sputnik Srbija are paid directly by Moscow.<sup>121</sup> RT Balkan is expected to launch a television channel by 2024.<sup>122</sup> Although RT and Sputnik only have offices in Serbia, the propagation of fake news, disinformation and Russian propaganda has spilled over into Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, facilitated by the similarity of the languages. Sputnik is working closely with media outlets in Republika Srpska, which publish news in the Serbian language such as the TV station RTRS, the news agency Srna and the station ATV, providing a platform for RS president Dodik which he has used to spread secessionist calls.<sup>123</sup>

Russian media's lack of restrictions on access to content is a meaningful aspect of their influence on local media. Given structural underfunding issues that media in the region cope with, Russian portals provide content free of charge, which in turn, allows local media to republish information sourced directly from Sputnik and RT, who thereby uncritically replicate Russian narratives.<sup>124</sup> Although the

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120 Samir Beharic, "[Bosnia and Herzegovina: A geopolitical mission for the EU](#)," Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU's Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 101; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia, "[Russia's narrative toward the western Balkans: analysis of Sputnik Srbija](#)," April 2020, 6.

121 Dr Thomas Brey, "[Russian media in the Balkans, Case study: How Moscow's propaganda influences Serbia](#)," Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, January 2022, 8.

122 Vuk Vuksanovic, Srdjan Cvijic, Maksim Samorukov, "[Beyond Sputnik and RT: How does Russian soft power in Serbia really work?](#)" Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, December 2022, 13.

123 Dr Thomas Brey, "[Russian media in the Balkans, Case study: How Moscow's propaganda influences Serbia](#)," Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, January 2022, 20.

124 Dragana Bajic, Wouter Zweers, "[Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia. Prospects for an enhanced EU approach](#)," Clingendael Institute, European Policy Centre, July 2020, 16-23; Dr Thomas Brey, "[Russia media in the Balkans. Case study: How Moscow's propaganda influences Serbia](#)," Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, January 2022, 4; Jovan Jovanović, "[Russian Disinformation in the Western Balkans during the War in Ukraine](#)," Oslo Center, July 07, 2022.

direct reach of RT Balkans and Sputnik is limited, they do have an effect on the wider media landscape. For example, various tabloids had no problem with publishing headlines that read ‘Ukraine attacked Russia’ or ‘America is pushing the world into chaos’ when Russia invaded Ukraine.<sup>125</sup>

Russian narratives’ in local media, apart from the cited Russian channels, has mostly come about as a result of local initiatives rather than direct Russian involvement.<sup>126</sup> As a systemic trend in Serbia and Republika Srpska in particular, media outlets are strongly influenced by political forces that support pro-Russian discourses.<sup>127</sup> For example, the Serbian public broadcaster RTS owns popular TV channels which attract up to a quarter of the Serbian audience and effectively convey pro-government messages.<sup>128</sup> Other, private TV stations, notably TV Pink, also spread pro-government messages and are closely connected to the Serbian government. Apart from TV, daily newspapers like *Politika* and tabloids like *Informer* spread pro-Russian narratives in Serbia.<sup>129</sup>

Russian narratives easily penetrate the collective unconscious especially as the media literacy level in the region is relatively low.<sup>130</sup> Pro-Russian views in the three countries do not come solely from media reporting – they build on existing supportive sentiments towards Russia in parts of the societies, arising from historical ties, shared conservative values, statements by politicians, and other factors. Nevertheless, there is a correlation between the presence of pro-Russian narratives in the media and popular beliefs in the three countries examined in this study.

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125 Bojan Eleck, Maja Bjelos, “[Is Kosovo a fuse for the Balkan powder keg?](#)” Europe and Russian on the Balkan Front: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in the EU’s Backyard, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, March 2023, 88.

126 Dr Arlinda Rrustemi, Professor Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, “[Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans](#),” The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies HCSS Security, September 30, 2019, 122.

127 Aleksandra Srećković, Vladana Jaraković, Marija Stefanović, Tamara Branković, Lana Avakumović, Milena Manojlović, “[Mapping the media landscape in Serbia 2020-2021](#),” CRTA, 2022, 41; Ulderico de Laurentiis, “[The impact of Russian propaganda in the Balkans: methods, networks and strategies of disinformation](#),” The Conservative, February 8, 2023.

128 “[Serbia Media Guide](#),” BBC, January 20, 2023; [Media Ownership Monitor](#), Serbia; “[Serbia’s public TV is being used against the public](#),” Mapping Media Freedom by European Centre for Press and Media, January 10, 2020.

129 Izabela Kisic, “[The pro-Russian media campaign in Serbia](#),” Atlantic Initiative, March 21, 2022.

130 Marie Brethous, Nad’a Kovalčíková, “[Next Level Partnership - Bolstering EU-NATO Cooperation to Counter Hybrid threats in the Western Balkans](#),” European Union Institute for Security Studies, February 22, 2023.

A survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in summer 2021 revealed that 54% of Serbians regarded Russia as an ally, while another 41% viewed it as a necessary partner.<sup>131</sup> In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Serbian attitudes towards Russia exhibited only minimal change. A mid-2022 poll reported that, even in the midst of the conflict in Ukraine, 51% of Serbs consider Russia their most crucial partner, 66% regard Moscow as their country's 'greatest friend' and 61% of Serbs hold the West accountable for the outbreak of the war.<sup>132</sup> In Republika Srpska, 52% support Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Even in Montenegro, a NATO member, 37% of those polled admitted having a positive opinion of Vladimir Putin.<sup>133</sup> Russian disinformation is also increasingly pervasive in the social media sphere. For example, in July 2022, amidst escalating tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, Russians and pro-Russian Telegram channels were spreading false information about the situation in the Russian and Serbian languages – information that was eventually denied by the Serbian and Kosovar authorities.<sup>134</sup> Also, a 'troll farm' suspected to be active during the 2016 US presidential elections was active in spreading disinformation during the 2018 Macedonian referendum on the name change of the country.<sup>135</sup> Russian embassies in the region have also been employing social media for disinformation purposes, seeking to attract support for the country's policies.<sup>136</sup>

Some online disinformation originates from the region itself. In 2020, Twitter shut down 8,558 bot accounts linked to the Serbian Progressive Party that fuelled social media with news promoting the Serbian government and attacking

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131 Joanna Hosa, Vessela Tcherneva, "[Pandemic trends: Serbia looks east, Ukraine looks west](#),"

European Council on Foreign Relations, August 5, 2021; Branislav Stanicek, Anna Caprile "[Russia and the Western Balkans Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference](#)," European Parliament Research Service, April 2023.

132 Maxim Samorukov, Vuk Vuksanovic, "[Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2023.

133 Maxim Samorukov, "[What's behind the posturing of Russian mercenaries in the Balkans?](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2023.

134 Andrej Pavicevic, "[Kosovo Tensions 'escalated' again but this time, Russian Telegram channels were involved](#)," Impakter, August 2, 2022.

135 Asya Metodieva, "[Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans](#)," The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), June 2019, 8.

136 Goran Georgiev, Ruslan Stefanov, "[Russian disinformation in the Balkans: predating the invasion?](#)" Euractiv, March 21, 2023.

opponents.<sup>137</sup> In recent years, the popularity of digital media has grown swiftly in the region, even if television has remained the most consumed type of media.<sup>138</sup> As such, as the least regulated media market in the region, the internet has become an important arena for disinformation.<sup>139</sup>

In summary, Russian propaganda penetrates Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina through Russian-funded portals, local media and social media. The impact of Russian media in the Western Balkans cannot be overstated, as local and European news outlets constitute a notable proportion of the region's media realm.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, Russian disinformation and narratives have penetrated the region to such an extent that considerable sections of society hold a positive image of Russia and its political leadership.<sup>141</sup>

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137 Julian Borger, "[Twitter deletes 20,000 fake accounts linked to Saudi, Serbian and Egyptian governments](#)," The Guardian, April 3, 2020.

138 In Serbia, the percentage of people informing themselves through the internet rose from 67% in 2018 to 81% in 2022. See: "[Share of daily internet users in Serbia from 2007 to 2022](#)," Statista, last accessed June 16, 2023.

139 "[Mapping the media landscape in Serbia 2020-2021](#)," CRTA, 2022, 23, 56.

140 Dušan Reljić, "[The impact of Russia](#)," Resilience in the Western Balkans, European Union Institute for Security Studies, August 2017, 47.

141 In Serbia, 91% of respondents have a somewhat or highly favourable opinion towards Russia. In BiH, that number stands at 49%, and in Montenegro at 60%. Regarding Putin, 43% of Bosnians had a favourable opinion, 56% of Montenegrins, and 88% of Serbs. This opinion poll was conducted just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. See IRI, "[2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey | January-February 2022](#)," June 29, 2022.

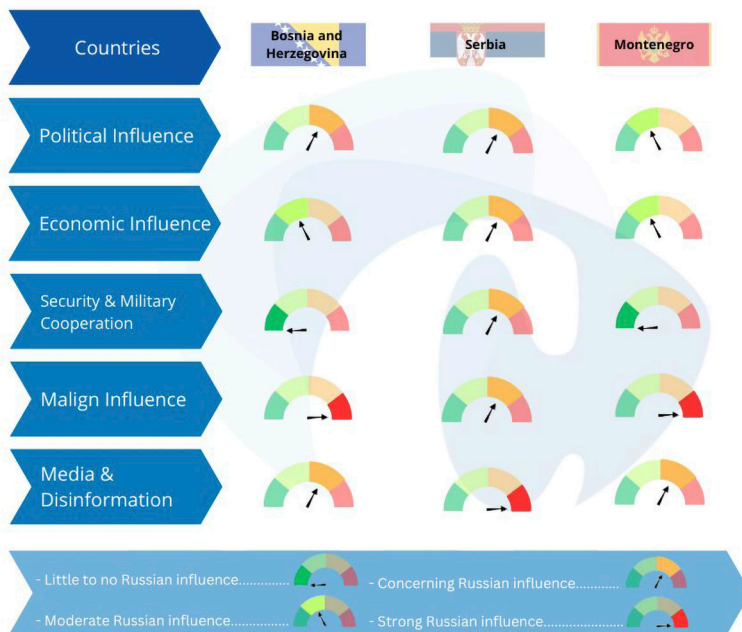
# Discussion and conclusions

This report has sought to provide a clear and all-encompassing overview of Russian objectives and sources of influence in the Western Balkans. Russia's main objectives in relation to the Western Balkans are threefold. First, the Kremlin seeks to project great power status globally. Second, it seeks to obstruct the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region by advocating against NATO and EU integration and by intensifying instabilities. Third, the Kremlin uses the Balkans, especially the Kosovo issue, as an argument for its foreign policy agenda elsewhere, especially when it comes to defending its perceived dominance over its near abroad. What is striking is that these objectives have more to do with Russia's general foreign policy stance than with the Western Balkans region as such. In contrast to the early 2010s, the region is not reflected upon in recent Russian strategic foreign policy documents, and is not regularly mentioned by President Putin. Russia has moderate ambitions for building positive relationships with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, which is reflected in the instruments it uses to influence the region. Rather than forging an institutionalised and structural engagement at state level, Russia reverts mainly to nurturing contacts with – and influence through – an array of individual politicians, the Orthodox Church, media and malign proxy groups. Moscow deliberately pursues this approach, informed by its interests and available sources of influence, and it has proven relatively successful.

As can be seen in Figure 7, Russia's role in the three countries examined is fragmented both within and between the different countries. Russian influence is the most widespread in Serbia, rising to concerning levels in all domains. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian political influence is concentrated in Republika Srpska, although it has a concerning influence on the country at large. In Montenegro, Russia has resorted to malign actions to influence the country, as its support for the country's pro-Russian political actors has not managed to obstruct Montenegro's overall pro-Western path.



Figure 7 Levels of Russian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro



In spite of its lack of institutionalised and all-encompassing relations with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, Russia maintains an ability to at least delay the Euro-Atlantic integration of those countries, although overall it has not been able to prevent steps in that direction.

Montenegro’s 2017 NATO accession shows that although Russia has reverted to malign actions including a covert coup attempt, cyber-attacks and support for protests through the Orthodox Church, such sources of influence have barely affected Montenegro’s domestic strategic political dynamics.

In Serbia, the picture is more concerning, given that the country’s relations with Russia continue to hinder full rapprochement with the EU, for example when it comes to Serbia’s alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. Through energy and other links, but particularly through building ties with political proxies, Russia has been an influencing factor to be reckoned with in Serbia’s development. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the Kremlin cannot fully dictate the course of events. Only through domestic enabling

factors has Russia has managed to retain its influence, meaning that the agency of local politicians is a more important part of the geopolitical puzzle than Russia's actions themselves.

While the invasion of February 2022 was a major political shock on the European continent at large, Russia's overall state of relations with, and influence on, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro is characterised by continuity rather than disruption. In terms of instruments, strategies and/or objectives, Russia has barely changed course. The shift from Russia being relatively open to the Western integration of the Western Balkans at large to advocating strongly against it actually took place much earlier – against the background of the country's own fallout with the West throughout the 2000s.

But not everything has remained the same. Since the invasion, it has become harder for Russian officials to visit the region due to sanctions by surrounding EU member states and countries in the region itself, as marked by Lavrov's failed attempt to visit Belgrade in June 2022. Russian diplomatic and financial resources have also likely been somewhat restrained, and dividing lines between the West and Moscow have become more explicit, even if that has so far not rendered the balancing game of authorities in Serbia and the Republika Srpska impossible. Due to EU sanctions against Russia, joined by Montenegro and partially by BiH, BiH and Serbia are slowly looking to diversify their energy imports, which could diminish dependencies on Russia, and therefore Russian influence. Lastly, the requirement for the three countries, especially Serbia and BiH, to align with such EU sanctions, and as such with the EU's CFSP at large, has become much more prominent for their EU integration paths. As a result, Serbia's security relationship with Russia, especially in terms of joint military exercises, has been strained.

Overall, we identify a moderately downward trend in Russian influence in the region, even if Russian influence itself, especially its ability to play a spoiler role, has remained relatively stable. How these trends will develop will depend on the geopolitical context, but even more so on local political developments and the effectiveness of the EU (and its Western partners) to capitalise on their highly institutionalised political relationships with the three countries, underpinned by strong trade links and the geography of the region, which is often described as the 'inner courtyard' of the EU. The EU, NATO and their individual member states have a wide array of instruments available to promote EU integration in the region, as well as to counter Russian influence. The extent to which these instruments are adequately employed, particularly in the geopolitical context

following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will be part of a follow-up Clingendael report to be published in autumn 2023. As part of the same research project, analyses of societal and political perceptions of Russia in the three countries will be published in summer 2023 by Clingendael partners the Atlantic Council of Montenegro, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and the Atlantic Initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Conclusions

We draw three main conclusions from the analysis put forward in this report.

First, rather than building a sustainable, all-encompassing and meaningful relationship with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, Russia pursues an opportunistic approach dependent on fragmented entry points for influence in each country. Its main objectives are to assert itself as a global power, obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration, and employ tensions and historical events in the region to justify its policies elsewhere.

Second, even if the substance of relations with the three countries is limited and, particularly in BiH and Montenegro, fragmented, Russia has proven itself able to intensify instabilities and societal divides in the three countries and delay their Euro-Atlantic integration paths. At the same time, Russian influence remains dependent on local enablers who make use of intercountry relations for their own interests. Moreover, Russian influence cannot be compared to much stronger and institutionalised relations with both EU and NATO. Russia has not managed to prevent far-reaching cooperation of BiH and Serbia with NATO, nor Montenegro's 2017 NATO accession.

Third, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has moderately affected but not fully altered Russia's approach towards Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. While the invasion has led to sharper dividing lines between Russia and the West and reduced Russian financial and diplomatic capacities, we observe continuity in terms of Russian strategies and objectives. Russia's sources of influence in the three countries have been moderately strained, among other causes as a result of BiH and Serbia's first steps to diversify energy sources and Western pressure to diminish their political and security links with the Russian Federation. For the time being, this has not yet affected Moscow's ability to act as a spoiler to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the three countries.