HYBRID THREATS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE:

THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR KOSOVO AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Vadym Chernysh

Vadym Chernysh is an expert in intelligence studies, national security, and conflict resolution with extensive experience in both academic and governmental roles. In 2012, Vadym Chernysh co-founded the Center for Security Studies (CENSS), where he currently serves as Head of the Governing Council. His governmental experience includes serving as Minister for Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine from 2016 to 2019. He was also a negotiator in the Minsk peace process, addressing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Vadym Chernysh holds a Ph.D. in law, with his dissertation focusing on control over Ukraine's intelligence agencies. He has authored scholarly articles that explore the role of intelligence as an independent instrument of state power.

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Viktoriia Voronina is Executive Director of CENSS and former Deputy Minister for Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, with extensive experience in public administration and security policy. Since 2019, she has managed CENSS initiatives in social cohesion, resilience, countering hybrid threats, SALW control and DDR. An expert with international organizations—including the OSCE and UNDP—and an adviser to the Minister of Veterans Affairs (2023-2024), she also lectures on Public Administration Department at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute.

I. Introduction

Russia has historically maintained close ties with Slavic populations, with whom it shares religion and collective historical memory. These affinities have allowed Moscow to cultivate strong connections in the Western Balkans, particularly with Slavic-majority states such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. By contrast, Russian influence in Albania is minimal, while in Kosovo it is primarily exercised through the Serbian population.[1]

Russia's ambition to expand its influence in the region has intensified as it seeks to assert itself as a significant power in both regional and global politics. This geopolitical rivalry is reflected in Moscow's support for nationalist forces, which it exploits to inflame inter-ethnic tensions, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo-Serbia relations. Such dynamics undermine regional stability and slow the Western Balkans' progress toward EU and NATO integration. Nevertheless, most Western Balkan countries continue to pursue NATO membership, while all aim for EU accession. The war in Ukraine has introduced additional complexities to these integration processes.

Russia's strategy in the Western Balkans has focused on deepening regional dependence on Russian energy, leveraging its position in international institutions to obstruct Western-led solutions, and promoting anti-Western narratives. It seeks to expand its influence over neighboring states, European countries, and the Western Balkans through a range of "hybrid threats," including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, military pressure, and political interference. Experts estimate that Russia allocates between $1 billion and $4 billion annually to its information warfare efforts.[2] For instance, in 2021, Kosovo authorities arrested Russian journalist Daria Aslanova, who was spreading Russian propaganda and was suspected of espionage.[3]

While some EU countries have been familiarized with Russia's hybrid war and with its 'weaponization of everything' tactics as a form of interference in the internal politics of other countries,[4] Russia has increased its hostile activities against the EU countries. However, the role of the EU in countering hybrid warfare, particularly within the security framework, has gained renewed significance following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This shift reflects growing concerns over Russia's expanding appetite for influence, often exercised through the "weaponization of everything" strategy. Hybrid warfare has become a tool to exert pressure on territories it seeks to subjugate, primarily by targeting the most fragile segments of those societies.

This underlines the urgent need to better understand the traditional forms of hybrid war that Russia deploys against its adversaries, which are narratively framed as EU countries and the Western Balkans. The internal justification for such actions often revolves around the rhetoric of a "war against the West," which is portrayed as an ever-present threat. This narrative is designed to consolidate domestic support by amplifying fear and a perceived external menace.[5]

The Western Balkans are often seen as a gateway for Russia to extend its influence into Europe, exploiting local ethnic, social, and religious vulnerabilities to divide communities and weaken regional cohesion. Russia's activities and interference in the region align closely with its broader global strategy, presenting itself as an anti-colonial power that claims to safeguard different ethnic and religious groups, while simultaneously waging a brutal war in Ukraine. Through threats, intimidation, and hybrid warfare, Russia seeks to exert pressure not only on its

1 Alfred Marleku and Dafina Aliu, Russia's Influence on the European Integration Process of the Western Balkan Countries: A Comprehensive Analysis, UNISCI Journal, n.62, May 2023.

2 Voice of America, 2024, https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/7551995.html

3 Radio Kosova e Lire, 2012, https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kush-eshte-daria-aslamova/31977359.html

4 Mark Galeotti, "The Weaponization of Everything: A field guide to the new way of war," Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2022.

5 Muarizio Geri, A New Strategic Responsibility for the EU: EU-NATO Cooperation against Hybrid Warfare from Russia, journal of politics and development, 2025, 15/1, 6-19.

neighbors but also on the Western Balkans and the European Union.

The role of NATO and the EU is fundamental in deterring Russia's hybrid warfare, particularly by developing and reinforcing strategies to counter Russia's "weaponization" politics. This refers to their combined capacities: NATO stands at the forefront of deterrence, defense, and hybrid warfare through its military preparedness and unified command structure, enabling national armed forces to train and, when needed, fight together. Meanwhile, the EU provides the political and economic integration essential for confronting the hybridization of war, especially in the context of today's energy and technological transitions. The EU, by stepping up its role in defense policy, should first create a single market for defense, make joint investments in EU defense capabilities, and establish agreements with industry and businesses to create a 'European military-industrial complex'.[6]

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6   Ibid.

Methodology

The methodology of this report is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of Russia's non-conventional threats, with particular attention to how these threats are constructed and propagated through narratives articulated significantly by state institutions. These narratives are not only disseminated across various online and media outlets but are also embedded in everyday social practices, often manifesting as forms of extremism enacted by different individuals. By examining official state documents, speeches, policy statements, and other forms of communication produced by state officials, the report investigates how religion, the concept of the "Russian World," and cultural diplomacy are strategically leveraged to expand Russia's influence in Kosovo and the broader Balkan region. This approach enables the identification of parallels between Russia's strategies in the Western Balkans and its interventions in Ukraine, offering a comparative perspective on narrative construction, dissemination, and amplification.

While identifying the strategies Russia employs in both Ukraine and the Western Balkans as part of its hybrid warfare, it is also important to understand these actions from a geopolitical perspective, particularly how Russia targets the EU through the Western Balkans as an open gateway to influence EU politics. Moreover, this analysis captures the narrative that Russia tends to use against the "West," portraying it as a colonial power while positioning itself as a defender of more underdeveloped countries. From this geopolitical perspective, the research explores how Russia deploys such narratives in both Ukraine and Kosovo, investigating how they are amplified, reshaped, and reinforced by select state institutions and media outlets operating in Kosovo.

Desk research involved a detailed analysis of official documents, state narratives, academic literature, policy reports, and media coverage, enabling the research team to map the various channels and mechanisms through which Russian influence operates. In addition to desk research, the study included eight semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including state representatives, journalists, experts, researchers, and civil society actors in Kosovo. These interviews were designed to capture local perceptions of Russia's non-conventional methods and to understand how these narratives resonate, are interpreted, or resisted within different social and institutional contexts.

The study was conducted from February to December 2025, providing a focused temporal lens through which to examine shifts in narrative, patterns of dissemination, and the local impact of Russian non-conventional strategies. By employing multiple research tools and methodological approaches, this report provides a detailed and multidimensional understanding of how Russia constructs, disseminates, and sustains its influence in Kosovo and the wider Balkan region.

II. New Geopolitical Circumstances in Europe

Since the 2000s, Russia has been pursuing its geopolitical strategies, taking cues from the fact that the international relations system was drifting from a unipolar to a multipolar world and aiming to become one of the key poles. The country's national security concept document of 2000[7] declared that Russia would promote the ideology of a multipolar world, and the sphere of its national interests would extend to relations with independent states that formerly had been part of the Soviet Union and later formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after the Soviet Union's collapse. It also identified threats to Russia's national interests, naming, *inter alia*, "weakening of integration processes within CIS", "weakening of Russia's political, economic and military influence in the world", and "NATO's expansion in the East".[8]

Upon assuming the office as the 47th President, Donald J. Trump redefined the United States' approach to international politics. This shift can be attributed to his and his administration's vision of the global landscape, the United States' position within it, the roles of other major powers, and the principles guiding their foreign policy. Marco Rubio, the U.S. Secretary of State, asserts that the existence of a unipolar global power is not a typical phenomenon.[9] He describes it as an anomaly resulting from the conclusion of the Cold War. Rubio suggests that the world was inevitably going to revert to a multipolar structure, characterized by multiple great powers across different regions. He identifies this current reality with the emergence of China and, to a certain extent, Russia as significant powers, alongside the challenges posed by rogue states such as Iran and

North Korea.

General Keith Kellogg, a notable figure within President Trump's administration, provided insights into the distinctions between the Biden Administration and the incoming administration. He stated that "the Biden Administration's approach to national security rejected Trump's transactional approach to Russia, under which Trump established a working relationship with a U.S. adversary. Biden replaced the Trump approach with a liberal internationalist one that promoted Western values, human rights, and democracy. Contrary to the Trump Administration's America First stance on national security, the Biden approach put the idealistic agendas of the global elite ahead..."[10]

To conclude, the current global landscape is characterized by a multipolar structure, with the United States, China, and Russia as the poles. It is proposed that U.S. policy should prioritize a transactional approach over one grounded in values. This perspective reflects the U.S. stance towards the European Union, which is viewed not as a distinct power pole but rather as an alliance characterized by inherent internal problems and, crucially, lacking independent military capabilities. Russia and China appear to share the United States' view of the world. Meanwhile, the European Union, as a collective entity, has been engaged in discussions on attaining strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, individual EU member states are endeavoring to deal with all states considered by them as poles. From the perspective of a multipolar vision, the characteristics of Multipolar International Politics are as follows[11]:

7   Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of January 10, 2000 № 24 "On the Concept of National Security of the Russian Federation". http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/14927

8   Overview of the Armed Conflict in eastern Ukraine – a Context and Conflict Analysis: analytical report / Vadym Chernysh, Viktoriia Voronina. – Kyiv, 2020. – 164 pages.

9   State Government, Interview of the Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show, January 30, 2025https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show

10   Keith Kellogg, Fred Fleitz, America First, Russia, & Ukraine, April 29, 2024 https://www.americafirstpolicy.com/assets/uploads/files/America_First%2C_Russia%2C__Ukraine_.pdf

11   Chernysh, V. (2023). Intelligence as an instrument of state power and its use in international politics. Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal, (8-9), 59–84. https://doi.org/10.18523/kmlpj303156.2023-8-9.59-84

Diversity of Power Centers:

Multipolarity is characterized by the existence of several powerful states, each capable of independently securing and projecting influence on a global scale.

Flexible Alliances and Strategic Moves:

States in a multipolar system frequently shift alliances and adapt their strategies according to changing interests, unlike the rigid alliances in a bipolar era.

Competition in Multiple Domains:

The struggle for influence among poles is not limited to direct military confrontation; it extends to intelligence operations, economic pressure, technological rivalry, and information warfare.

Balance of Power Dynamics:

States continually seek to enhance their positions relative to others, and the balance of power is fluid and subject to active management by all major players.

Limited Effectiveness of Collective Security:

Global collective security systems such as the UN impose constraints but cannot fully prevent competition among major powers; states often resort to intelligence and other alternative instruments to advance interests when formal international mechanisms are insufficient.

Incentives for Intelligence Use:

The multipolar environment increases incentives to use intelligence actively, since main rivals cannot dominate and coalitions or international order are less reliable for conflict management.

Based on such a perception of the world, "world as it is", several states have revised their understanding of international politics and have adjusted their actions accordingly. This shift has led to a transformation of their foreign policy, moving from adherence to European Union principles and values to alignment with major powers through a strategy of "bandwagoning," even when those major powers act as aggressors.

On 22 February 2022, the Council of the Federation of the Russian Federal Assembly endorsed President Putin's use of Russian troops on the territory of foreign states.[12] On 24 February 2022, Putin announced the decision to launch a special military operation, justifying it as a measure of self-defense against alleged threats posed to the Russian Federation. Among them, Putin mentioned the eastward expansion of NATO, Ukraine's refusal to peacefully settle the situation in Donbas, the inevitability of a clash with nationalists and neo-Nazis who would "encroach" into Crimea and Donbas and would claim Russian territories, as well as Ukraine's desire to restore nuclear capabilities. Putin emphasized that Russia will "seek to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine, as well as bring to justice those who have committed numerous bloodletting crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation".[13] Immediately afterwards, Russia launched what is known as the "special military operation."

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine instigated significant geopolitical transformations, altering alliances, economic relations, security strategies, and global power dynamics. Following the invasion, NATO expanded to include Finland and Sweden. Russia has intensified its collaboration with authoritarian regimes. Cooperation with Iran, North Korea, and China extends beyond the Russo-Ukrainian War. Concurrently, the European Union has been actively reducing its reliance on Russian energy products. The European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) perceive Russia as a significant threat, prompting both entities to revitalize their defense industrial complexes and increase military expenditures. The ongoing war has highlighted and exacerbated the deficiencies of global institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in their capacity to deter or penalize large-scale acts of aggression. As of October 2025, the EU has imposed 19 sanctions packages against Russia.

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12   Resolution of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation No. 35-SF of February 22, 2022 "On the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation outside the territory of the Russian Federation" http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202202240001

13   Address of V. Putin 02/24/2022 http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843

III. Understanding Hybrid Threats

Russia has sought to expand its influence over neighboring states, the EU, and the Western Balkans through a range of so-called "hybrid threats", including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, military threat pressure, and other political interference. While hybrid warfare is debated within academia, it is also widely used by different policymakers; it is generally considered a strategy that blends conventional military operations with unconventional tactics, including cyber warfare, information campaigns, and economic measures, to achieve strategic objectives. Hybrid warfare reflects the evolving nature of conflict, where both military and nonmilitary tactics are employed to achieve strategic goals, adapting to changing technologies and societal dynamics.[14]

However, countries do not always seek influence or dominance over others through direct warfare. Increasingly, they resort to alternative strategies, often called the "third option." Hybrid warfare, or this third option, can be misleading; either a country is at war or it isn't. The term, he argues, is often used to obscure acts of aggression that should be recognized as warfare.

Russia has used hybrid warfare, especially before the Crimean occupation in 2014 and then with the full invasion of Ukraine. Russia has also tried to extend the same tactics to Western Balkan countries. According to Nina Turkiian, the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare includes the following characteristics: power is centralized and nationalist ideology spreads in the aggressor country; target country authorities are delegitimized through disinformation campaigns, bribery of politicians, strengthening societal antagonisms, support for separatist movements, and the conduct of trade wars.[15]

Target societies are carefully studied to identify their most fragile segments, social, economic, political, cultural, or otherwise, that can be exploited to gain leverage. These internal disputes serve as entry points for strategic planning aimed at destabilizing a country without engaging in traditional warfare. This hybrid warfare is particularly complex, as the state orchestrating or supporting the attack often remains formally unidentifiable, even when strong evidence points to its involvement.

Carrying out covert operations in non-military operations may result in[16]: having the authorities of the target country adopt decisions needed to influence that country; political forces or individuals loyal to the influencing country coming to power in the target country, enabling the partial loss of state sovereignty; or total loss of state sovereignty as a result of being absorbed into the state that exerted influence.

One of Russia's key hybrid threat strategies in the Western Balkans is exploiting nationalist forces to inflame interethnic tensions, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In Kosovo, the Kremlin has relied heavily on misinformation and disinformation campaigns, particularly in the north of Kosovo, which is populated predominantly by the Serb minority groups. Online platforms, social media groups, and tabloid media are used to sow fear and mistrust, aiming to mobilize the Serbian population against the Kosovo government by portraying it as hostile and threatening.[17]

Russia's involvement in Kosovo increasingly became part of its broader campaign against NATO and the U.S.,[18] aligning closely with Serbia's

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14 Muarizio Geri, A New Strategic Responsibility for the EU: EU-NATO Cooperation against Hybrid Warfare from Russia, journal of politics and development, 2025, 15/1, 6-19.

15 Závěrečná práce: Nina Turkiian: Theory of the Hybrid warfare. Implementation in Ukraine

16 Vadyn Chernysh, Smart power, against hybrid threats, CENSS, 2019 https://censs.org/smart-power-against-hybrid-threats/

17 Adelina Hasani, Combating Extremism in Kosovo: Trends, Challenges, and Counter-Measures, Sbunker, 2024.

18 BIRN, "The Story of our Lies," https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/THE-STORY-OF-OUR-LIES-FINALE.pdf

political stance toward the Western alliance.[19] It continues to operate as a malign actor in Kosovo, using disinformation campaigns to fuel interethnic tensions and obstruct dialogue with Serbia. These narratives primarily target the Serbian population in Kosovo, with Russia presenting itself as their protector while seeking to undermine their integration with Western institutions.[20]

Russia often initiates its influence operations using soft power, broadcasting films, addressing everyday concerns, and presenting itself as a cultural ally; however, its tactics shift depending on the context. Russian narratives have depicted Kosovo's Liberation Army (KLA) as a terrorist or Islamist organization, portraying Kosovo as a "failed state," echoing similar narratives employed against Ukraine.[21]

19   Maksim Samorukov, A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict, November 2019 https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/11/a-spoiler-in-the-balkans-russia-and-the-final-resolution-of-the-kosovo-conflict?lang=en

20   Festim Rizanaj and Alban Zeneli, Comparison of Ukraine and Kosovo in Russia's disinformation narratives, Action for Democratic Soceity/ Hybrid.info, 2024. https://hibrid.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Comparison-of-Ukraine-and-Kosovo-in-Russias-disinformation-narratives.pdf

21   Adelina Hasani, Combating Extremism in Kosovo: Trends Challenges and Counter-Measures, Sbunker, 2024.

IV. Understanding the adversary's strategic goals is key to understanding its means and ways to attain them

One of the key goals of Russia's strategy – as for demonstrating its power – is to transform a targeted state into an asymmetric federation or confederation and, by doing so, create a weak and politically dependent state. Such a state formally saves its name, has a federal government, and other formal attributes of an independent state, but is simultaneously under the enormous influence or even effective control of another state. A political entity embedded within a nation-state has the power to block and significantly influence national-level decisions, even if it is less populous or developed than the rest of the country. Therefore, asymmetry is a suitable term for such cases. Consequently, the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities, upon its establishment, should not function as an asymmetrical mechanism to diminish or compromise Kosovo's independence. From this perspective, and based on the Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Bosnian and Herzegovina experiences, the statute should precisely delineate the status, legal framework, authority, responsibilities, formation process, and potential dissolution procedures in the event of power misuse.

In February 2022, the Russian Federation illegally recognized the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) as independent states and started a full-scale invasion in the same month to stop the non-existent and imaginary "genocide" of the population of the two surrogate entities. The Central Intelligence Agency of the USA warned Ukraine shortly before the invasion and made it public that Russia had prepared a "false flag" operation to justify its imminent attack.[22] The full-scale invasion indicates a shift in Russia's means and methods to achieve its objectives, with a greater reliance on military force. Concurrently, non-military means are still in use.

The Ukrainian experience is a valuable source of insights into how Russia, an indisputable leader in the use of measures short of war and hybrid warfare, acts.

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22 Festim Rizanaj and Alban Zeneli, Comparison of Ukraine and Kosovo in Russia's disinformation narratives, Action for Democratic Soceity/ Hybrid.info, 2024. https://hibrid.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Comparison-of-Ukraine-and-Kosovo-in-Russias-disinformation-narratives.pdf

Serbia-Russia cooperation and co-engagement

Serbia, a longtime antagonist of the sovereignty of Kosovo, has close ties with Russia. Russian intelligence agencies use Serbia as a foothold in the Western Balkans, allowing them to operate in neighboring countries and even further in Europe. Some Serbian citizens have participated in Russian military and paramilitary formations fighting on Russia's side in the aggressive war against Ukraine and have received operational and tactical experience in conventional and unconventional warfare, including reconnaissance and sabotage, as well as using civilian drones as weapons. Serbia has aligned with Russia to oppose Western democracies, hypocritically declaring its intention to build a developed democracy. Based on open sources, it is necessary to highlight some cases that point to Serbia-Russia cooperation, its areas, and its depth. They encompass a broad range of areas, including intelligence, military industry, international politics, and domestic security.

Political alignment

The Serbian government has permanently included pro-Russian politicians in top positions. The most well-known is Aleksandar Vulin (Vulin), whose role is to maintain close ties with Russia and demonstrate them to the Russian, Serbian, and Western populations. Mr. Vulin held high-ranking posts in the Serbian government with a national security portfolio: Minister of Defense (2017-2020), Minister of the Interior (2020-2022), and Head of the Security Information Agency (BIA, (2022-2023). From May 2024 to April 2025, he was the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia with some responsibility in the national security domain. His current position is closely connected with Russia as he serves as the Chairman of the Council of the Russian Historical Society in Serbia and also the Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the state-owned enterprise "Serbiagaz"[23]. The founder and editor-in-chief of the Russian project "Balkanist," Oleg Bondarenko, names Vulin as one of the two main people from the Serbian side who deal with Russian-Serbian relations and address security issues.[24] Some highlights of Vulin's statements are as follows:

23 See: https://historyrussia.org/component/yandex_maps/object/101-predstavitelstvo-v-respublike-serbiya.html
24 Vladislav Shablovsky, Serbian Locomotive: How Vulin Became the Driving Force Behind Russia-Serbia Relations, October 2024, https://rg.ru/2024/10/18/serbskij-lokomotiv-kak-vulin-stal-dvizhushchej-siloj-otnoshenij-rossii-i-serbii.html

Date	Event, Place, Origin of Source	Participants, Outlets	Key messages
December 3, 2021	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Nikolay Patrushev, then-Secretary of the Security Council of Russia	According to Vulin, Serbia will never become a platform for a campaign against Russia and its leadership led by President Vladimir Putin. The parties noted that "color revolutions" have become a traditional policy tool of certain centers of influential states, which under the pretext of democratization violate the sovereignty of a number of other countries. Therefore, free countries should resist this.[25]
June 12, 2022	Interview, Serbia	NOVOSTI (НОВОСТИ)	Throughout history, from the 19th century until today, the Serbs could not solve any key national issue without active and often very expensive participation for Russia, but somehow there were always those who tried to find a solution to the Serbian national issues in renouncing the Russians, and each time in the end they had to admit the collapse of such a policy. The defeat and subsequent disintegration of Russia, dreamed of by generations of Western statesmen and generals, will strengthen the Albanians.[26]

25 Regnum, Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs promised Russia eternal friendship, December 2021 https://regnum.ru/news/3440738
26 Загорка Ускоковић, VUČIĆ IS NOT A LITTLE RUSSIAN, BUT A GREAT SERB: Aleksandar Vulin on Kosovo and Metohija and Western pressure, June 2022 https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1125549/vucic-nije-mali-rus-vec-veliki-srbin-aleksandar-vulin-kosovu-metohiji-pritiscima-zapada

Date	Event, Place, Origin of Source	Participants, Outlets	Key messages
August 23, 2022	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Nikolay Patrushev, then-Secretary of the Security Council of Russia	The West's strategic objective is to drive a wedge between Russian and Serbian peoples, Patrushev said. He expressed concern about the revival of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist ideas in Europe and the West's use of them for geopolitical purposes, presenting its actions as "development of democracy." These Western actions were discussed during an exchange on topical issues of regional and international security. Patrushev and Vulin also discussed further plans for Russia-Serbia cooperation in the security sphere.[27]
December 12, 2023	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Nikolay Patrushev, then-Secretary of the Security Council of Russia	Patrushev reiterated support for the course of commitment to cooperate and defend the interests of the Serbian and Russian peoples wherever they live, and emphasized that he appreciated the bravery of Aleksandar Vulin and the commitment to fight for the preservation of the independent and freedom-loving position of the Serbian people and state.[28]
August 14, 2024	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Nikolay Patrushev, Russian President's assistant	Expressed gratitude to Patrushev for his dedicated efforts and support of the Russian Federation in opposing the Srebrenica resolution, as well as for his unwavering stance on upholding Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.[29]
September 5, 2024	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Vladimir Putin, President of Russia	Serbia is not only a friend of Russia but an ally also. Serbia under President Vucic leadership never impose sanctions against Russia and will not allow any anti-Russia actions from its territory. Serbia is not and will not a part of anti-Russia hysteria.[30]
October 9, 2024	Interview, Russia	National Defense Journal	Russia is already helping us and its support is very important for us. We cooperate in the international arena, we are developing economic cooperation.[31]

27 RIA Novosti, Patrushev said the West's goal is to drive a wedge between Russia and Serbia, August 2022 https://ria.ru/20220823/patrushev-1811632094.html

28 Radovan Mitrovic, Alexander Vulic visited Moscow, December 2023, https://ruserbia.com/politika/aleksandr-vulin-posetil-moskvu/

29 TASS, Serbia and Russia agree to strengthen strategic partnership, August 2024, https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/21605467

30 Andrei Derkach, Sergei Dogotar, Vulin: "Serbia will never be part of anti-Russian hysteria", September 2024, https://www.golosameriki.com/a/putin-talks-with-serbian-deputy-prime-minister/7771668.html

31 Natsional'naya oborona (National Defense), Aleksandar Vulin: "Serbia will never join sanctions against Russia," October 2024 https://oborona.ru/product/zhurnal-nacionalnaya-oborona/aleksandr-vulin-serbiya-nikogda-ne-prisoedinitsya-k-sankciyam-protiv-rossii-46315.shtml

Date	Event, Place, Origin of Source	Participants, Outlets	Key messages
December 12, 2024	Interview, China	TV Broadcaster CGTN	The West demands that we impose sanctions against Russia, stop Chinese investments and do everything that the EU and the US support. But Serbia is an independent state, we will never impose any sanctions on Russia and we will continue this policy. Russia is our ally, our friend. Not only historically, we also share a common future.[32]
February 17, 2025	Meeting, Moscow, Russia	Sergei Shoigu, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia	They discussed the development of bilateral security co-operation and the current situation in Serbia. The categorical rejection of outside interference in the internal affairs of sovereign States was reaffirmed. The Russian side indicated its readiness to continue to support the brotherly people of Serbia in maintaining stability.[33]

32 International Affairs Vulin: Serbia will not cease cooperation with Russia and China at the request of the West, December 2024 https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/49485?fbclid=iwy2xjawin48blehrua2flbqixmaabhfcspi2s0uowz3zpecelezmwwiq7_7ga4ktt0xztk7r-0hys9jt19ukhug_aem_hlalyknczyevdoh1vmtz0q

33   Security Council of the Russian Federation, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia S. Shoigu met with Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia A. Vulin, February 2025, http://scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/3774/

Notably, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Vulin in July 2023 during his tenure as the Head of the Serbian Security Information Agency with the following arguments:

> He used his public positions to support Russia, facilitating Russia's malign activities that degraded the security and stability of the Western Balkans and providing Russia a platform to further its influence in the region.

> He was implicated in transnational organized crime, illegal narcotics operations, and misuse of public office. Vulin maintained a mutually beneficial relationship with U.S.-designated Serbian arms dealer Slobodan Tesic, helping ensure that Tesic's illegal arms shipments could move freely across Serbia's borders.

> Vulin's acts advanced corruption within Serbia's governing institutions. These acts included leveraging his authority for personal gain, including involvement in a drug trafficking ring.[34]

Despite being publicly blamed for serious wrongdoing, Vulin became the Vice Prime Minister of Serbia within a year, demonstrating his strong position in the governing circles.

34   U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Official Linked to Corruption in Serbia, July 2023 https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1606

Intelligence cooperation

Owing to its political alignment with Russia, Serbia has become a safe haven for Russian intelligence officers. At first glance, it seems absurd for a state to consciously host foreign spies. This is true if they work against a hosting state. However, if foreign intelligence officers agreeably stay to spy not against a hosting state but from its territory, it becomes understandable.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, many European states have made significant and coordinated attempts to disrupt Russian espionage networks. **As of July 2022, 400 diplomats were expelled because they were believed to be intelligence officers or to have acted on their behalf under diplomatic cover.[35] By doing so, European states dramatically diminished Russia's espionage capabilities, especially its HUMINT capabilities.** In contrast, Serbia did not follow the same path. Instead, it accepted several Russian spies who had been previously expelled from other countries. **A former Serbian military diplomat described Serbia as "the last refuge in Europe for safe intelligence work by Russian operative agents."[36]** According to the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian diplomatic presence in Serbia increased from 54 diplomats in February 2022 to 62 in March 2023, and as of January 2025, it was 64. Several Russian diplomats were reassigned to the embassy in Belgrade after facing expulsion or entry denial from other countries:

> Alexei Ivanenko, previously with the FSB's 16th Center (specializing in cyber operations), was removed from Croatia and subsequently appointed as the first secretary at the Russian embassy in Serbia.

> Mikhail Generalov, after being expelled from Poland, took up the position of a counsellor at the Serbian embassy. He had a registered address at an SVR (Russian Foreign Intelligence Service) residential complex in Moscow, Russia.

> Dmitry Barabin, who was denied entry into the Netherlands, was reassigned as the second secretary at the Russian embassy in Belgrade.

> Petr Dolgoshein departed from his position in Finland and assumed the role of counsellor at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade.[37]

According to the Serbian media outlet Danas, Serbia's Security Information Agency was eavesdropping on a seminar of Russian opposition members in Belgrade. Supposedly, then-Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin handed over these surveillance recordings to Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, during his visit to Moscow on May 14, 2020.[38] Subsequent to the transfer of the recordings, Russian opposition figure Andrei Pivovarov, who was a co-organizer of the above-mentioned seminar, was apprehended by the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) in Moscow on May 31, which could be interpreted as corroborating evidence of the BIA operation. It is worth noting that Russia's FSB is mostly a security agency, nonetheless, having some intelligence bodies within. The Russian leadership has used the FSB as a tool to oppress political opposition in Russia. Interestingly, a former Ukrainian ambassador to Serbia stated to Voice of America in November 2023 that he had seen documents stating that 200 FSB personnel had come to Serbia after the influx of Russians as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian War.[39]

Earlier in this report, some events with Vulin's political agenda were mentioned. Hence, it is worth noting two additional events regarding Serbia-Russia cooperation in the fields of foreign

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35 The Aspen Institute, Fireplace Chat with Richard Moore, July 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPe6GW8GUks

36 Radio Liberty, Spy refuge. Where do expelled Russian diplomats go, March 2023 https://www.svoboda.org/a/shpionskiy-priyut-kuda-popadayut-vyslannye-rossiyskie-diplomaty/32307406.html

37 Radio Liberty, Spy refuge. Where do expelled Russian diplomats go, March 2023, https://www.svoboda.org/a/shpionskiy-priyut-kuda-popadayut-vyslannye-rossiyskie-diplomaty/32307406.html

38 Danas, Vulin and Patrushev: Serbia and Russia together against armed revolutions, December 2021, https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-i-patrusev-srbija-i-rusija-zajedno-protiv-obojenih-revolucija/?fbclid=IwAR2Kq_LiMvdbRJsDD-C9HOs98LkMGBdMxiChxZ9ia00oA7KyDd5htij_Nxs

39 Andriy Boris, Dmytro Savchuk, Former Ambassador Levchenko on how Russia is inciting a new conflict in the Balkans. Video, November 2023 https://www.holosameryky.com/a/eksposol-levchenko-pro-te-yak-rosiia-pidburiuie-do-novoho-konfliktu-na-balkanakh/7373953.html

intelligence and domestic security. On October 16, 2024, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin met in Moscow with the Director of the Russian Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, and the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin. During both meetings, they discussed further development and strengthening cooperation between the intelligence and security agencies of both countries.[40]

Evidence that Serbia has been used by Russian intelligence can be collected from some open sources regarding the attempted coup in its neighboring state, Montenegro, in 2016. The attempted coup was orchestrated by agents of the Russian military intelligence (GRU). According to testimony of Damon M. Wilson, Executive Vice President of Atlantic Council (AC), before the US Senate Armed Services Committee on July 13, 2017, and based on AC and others' investigation, the key evidence is as follows:

> Starting in 2014, Aleksandar Sindjelic, who led the paramilitary organization "Serbian Wolves," commenced the deployment of Serbian combatants to Ukraine in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea and participated in hybrid warfare in the Donbass region of Ukraine. While in Ukraine, Sindjelic established a collaborative relationship with Russian nationalists who facilitated his introduction to Eduard Shirokov (also known as Eduard Shishmakov) and Vladimir Popov. Open-source intelligence has corroborated that both individuals are operatives of the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU. This encounter laid the foundation for the subsequent coup attempt in Montenegro. Through the investigative efforts of the Atlantic Council's #DigitalSherlocks, or its digital forensic open-source researchers, it has been ascertained that Shirokov previously held the position of Deputy Military Attaché at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw. He was accused of espionage, declared persona non grata, and expelled in June 2014. His registered address in Russia was a GRU-owned property. He obtained a false passport in August 2016, two months before his Balkan expedition. Popov, who had been observed in association with Gagauzian

separatists in Moldova in 2014, accompanied Shirokov to host Sindjelic in Moscow in September 2015. There, they proposed a scheme to impede Montenegro's NATO bid. Sindjelic procured funds from these Russian contacts to acquire weapons and supplies for the operation and to recruit participants. Open-source reporting provides compelling evidence that the GRU and its associates were directly involved in orchestrating this attempted coup, with the objective of installing a Moscow-friendly government and impeding Montenegro's NATO accession. Had the coup succeeded, it would have inflicted a significant setback to the alliance and its credibility. It would also have halted NATO enlargement.[41][42]

To recapitalize, this case demonstrates the abovementioned theses with the following points:

> Serbia is a hub and safe haven for Russian intelligence to operate in neighboring countries

> Serbian paramilitary groups have ties with like-minded groups in Russia

> Serbian mercenaries took part in a hybrid warfare orchestrated by Russians

> Serbian citizens can be involved in covert operations in neighboring countries on behalf of Russia and its interests.

Another case illustrating Russia's intelligence capabilities is Novica Antić, the Chair of the Serbian Military Trade Union.

> According to Politico, which saw a briefing from an unnamed Western intelligence agency, Antić was an "agent of influence" for the FSB as of October 2023. His role was to infiltrate EU institutions and spread pro-Kremlin narratives about the invasion of Ukraine. It is believed that he worked closely with FSB associate Vyacheslav Kalinin, who ran a veterans' news website connected to Russian

40   TASS, Serbian official thanks Russian security service for support in solving challenging issues, October 2024, https://tass.com/world/1856979

41   The Attempted Coup in Montenegro and Russian Malign Influence in Europe July 13, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wilson_07-13-17.pdf?form=MG0AV3

42   Christo Grozev, Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang, March 2017, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/

security and military agencies. An "About us" tab on the website said that Veteran News was an "information partner" of the FSB and the Russian Ministry of Defense.[43] As of February 2025, references to the FSB were removed from the tab.

This case shows that Russian intelligence has exploited Serbian citizens to infiltrate not only neighboring countries but also EU institutions.

43   Politico, Russia using Serbian agent to infiltrate EU bodies, Western intel says, March 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-use-serbia-agent-spy-infiltrate-eu-institutions-western-intelligence/

Military cooperation

Serbia and Russia have maintained extensive and profound military cooperation. However, sanctions imposed by the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and other entities currently impede the transfer of armaments from Russia to Serbia. It is not excluded that Serbia and Russia still have some level of arms transfer. This is how the words of Milan Mojsilović, the Head of the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces, can be interpreted.[44] In January 2025, he said that since armaments produced in the Russian Federation, and specifically in the former Soviet Union, are in service with many armies worldwide, they have been produced in other countries under license. He highlighted that Serbia established a sustainable and flexible system for supplying spare parts and maintaining military equipment even amid sanctions against Moscow. He insisted that the Serbian Army could perform high-level maintenance and produce and refurbish spare parts for a significant portion of this armament, which is now a crucial supply source. Such a murky explanation raises some questions: (1) Who owns the licensed manufacturers? It may be Russian oligarchs or Russian state-owned companies through a chain of shell companies; (2) Who are the suppliers of spare parts? (3) Who are the technicians engaged in licensed refurbishment? and so forth. These questions require research,

intelligence collection, or even investigation. It appears more reasonable when recalling references to ties between Serbian high-ranking officials and U.S.-designated Serbian arms dealer Slobodan Tesic.

Before Russia was sanctioned so broadly, Serbia received many weapons from Russia and its ally, Belarus. According to open sources, some Russia–Serbia military-technical cooperation agreements were concluded in 2016. In 2016, Serbia purchased two Mi-17 helicopters for 25 million euros.[45] The next year, it received six MiG-29 fighter jets from Russia for free, but with a bond to pay for their repair and modernization. Russia also allocated 2 million euros to train Serbian pilots and promised to gift Serbia 30 T-72S tanks and 30 BRDM-2MS vehicles.[46] Serbia received four MiG-29 fighter jets from Belarus in 2018.[47]

Additional doubts about the real stance of Russia-Serbia weapons trafficking emerged in July 2019, when Russia delivered ten previously promised BRDM-2MS vehicles to Serbia. It remains unclear how they entered Serbia despite the sanctions imposed by the EU. Presumably, they were delivered by a Russian plane after the whole bunch of 60 tanks and vehicles had been prevented from being transferred over the Danube River by Romanian authorities due to

44   WE ARE CAPABLE OF PROTECTING SERBS IN KOSOVO: Interview - Milan Mojsilović, Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Army, January 2025, https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1445516/sposobni-smo-zastitimo-srbe-kosovu-intervju-milan-mojsilovic-nacelnik-generalstaba-vojske-srbije

45   Petar Vojinovic, [PHOTO] New Mi-17 helicopters arrive in Belgrade: Costing €25 million, they will be in service from July 4, June 2016, https://tangosix.rs/2016/28/06/foto-novi-helikopteri-mi-17-stigli-u-beograd-placeni-25-miliona-evra-u-upotrebi-od-4-jula/

46   Delovoy Peterburg, Russia gave Serbia MiG-29 fighter jets and €2 million for pilot training, February 2018 https://www.dp.ru/a/2018/02/24/Rossija_podarila_Serbii_is

47   TASS, Serbia received four MiG-29 fighter jets from Belarus, April 2018, https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/5148898

EU sanctions.[48] Media reports said that Russia flew those 10 armored vehicles to Serbia on its transport planes using Hungarian airspace.[49]

A range of top Serbian governmental civilian and

military officials were rewarded by Russia's Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation in 2020. Among those rewarded were the Deputy Minister of Defense for Material Resources, Commander of the Serbian Air Force and Air Defense Forces, the Serbian military attaché in Moscow, and the Head of the Europe and America Department of the state-owned company Jugoimport-SDPR J.P.[50]

48   Associated Press, Romania says Russian military equipment for Serbia blocked, July 2019, https://apnews.com/general-news-b780669496674536b8d2e24b0bd9030e

49   Associated Press, Serbia's leader praises Putin for boosting its military, July 2019, https://apnews.com/national-national-general-news-international-news-f16d99a1a5a74f2fbae828d5760af33a

50   RuSerbia.com, Serbian Ministry of Defense leadership receives Russian awards, September 2020, https://ruserbia.com/politika/army/rukovodstvo-ministerstva-oborony-serbii-poluchilo-rossijskie-nagrady/

Serbian mercenaries' participation in the Russo-Ukrainian War

Serbs have participated in the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict since 2014. Their motives are complex and varied. Among other factors, the historical friendship between Serbia and Russia, their shared Orthodox Christian heritage, which provides a sense of common identity, and anti-Western sentiments manifested as anti-NATO attitudes stemming from negative experiences during the Balkan Wars and a desire for retribution are significant considerations. All these sentiments are supported by Russian propaganda efforts. Of course, for some Serbs, the desire to earn money is present, but in almost all cases, it is intertwined with other intangible motives.

One of the most famous Serbs who participated in Russia's War against Ukraine was Bratislav Živković, who was killed in action by the Ukrainian Defense Forces this year. Prior to the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict, Živković participated in a riot in northern Kosovo in 2012, when Serbs clashed with the Kosovo police and NATO's KFOR contingent, a significant part of which was German troops.[51] After the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict (2014), he gave a series of interviews to Russian media to support Russia's recruitment efforts toward the Serbs. Concurrently, Zivkovic, a co-founder of the ultra-right paramilitary organization "Unité Continentale" in Belgrade, organized a process of

recruiting and transferring Serbian mercenaries to take part in the hostilities starting from the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine by Russia in 2014.

ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL INTERVIEWS WITH SERBIAN MERCENARIES REVEALS THE FOLLOWING IMPORTANT ISSUES:

> **Cultural and historical factors as the thrust of shared identity Russians and Serbians**

"I was born in the places where battles were fought during the Serbian-Turkish war of 1876-1878. Many Russian volunteers participated in that war, including Colonel Rayevsky,[52] who became the prototype of Count Vronsky from Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Therefore, from early childhood, I was raised in an atmosphere of gratitude towards Russia and our shared history. For us Serbs, Russia is Mother Russia."[53]

> **Paramilitary organizations in Russia and Serbia, Russian Cossacks and Serbian Chetniks, with some overlapping history and some similar functions, are convenient tools for both governments to use on a "plausible deniability" basis.**

Nowadays, the Chetniks are called many

51   The Geopost, Paramilitary Bratislav Živković – participant in setting up barricades in the north of Kosovo and organizer of sending Serbian mercenaries to the war front in Ukraine, February 2023, https://thegeopost.com/en/security/paramilitary-bratislav-zivkovic-participant-in-setting-up-barricades-in-the-north-of-kosovo-and-organizer-of-sending-serbian-mercenaries-to-the-war-front-in-ukraine/

52   Balkan Insight, Finding Count Vronsky in Serbia, January 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/03/finding-count-vronsky-in-serbia-01-02-2018/

53   Tatar-inform, "I fought against NATO, the West is destroying everything": a volunteer Chetnik from Serbia on the SVO, Russia, and Ukraine, November 2023, https://www.tatar-inform.ru/news/ya-voeval-s-nato-zapad-rusit-vse-dobrovolec-cetnik-iz-serbii-o-svo-rossii-i-ukraine-5925403

Serbian nationalist paramilitary units. The symbol of the Chetniks is a black banner with a skull and crossed bones, under which is written, "With faith in God. Freedom or death." "Broyanits," long beards, and black "shaykacha-hat" with a cockade in the form of a double-headed eagle are characteristic features of the Chetniks' appearance. The welcoming gesture is a three-fingered sign that signifies the Holy Trinity. The Chetniks are Orthodox Christians, as the text of their oath makes clear.[54]

Russian Cossacks, in accordance with Russian legislation, are required to be registered and incorporated into legal entities with a specific status. These individuals wear specific uniforms and adhere to a hierarchical structure reminiscent of, yet distinct from, military formations. Cossacks' "papakha-hat" looks like a "shaykacha-hat". Federal and municipal authorities are authorized to engage Cossack organizations for various forms of service, including military and law enforcement duties.[55] The historic motto of the Cossacks, For Faith, Tsar and Fatherland," is still in use.[56]

> **Russia and Serbia have channels to engage paramilitaries and/or intelligence officers to operate in their common interests surreptitiously in either direction, either Russia or Serbia.**

When Dragan and a group of fellow Serbs arrived at Belgrade's Nikola Tesla Airport in June 2023, their documents indicated that they had been working abroad for many months for a Russian construction company.

However, the truth was completely different: they were all returning to their homeland from the battlefields of Ukraine, where they fought as part of the Russian airborne assault

unit "Wolf" after a short period of combat training at military training grounds near Moscow. The group was the latest evidence of a clandestine scheme providing international cover for military travel from the Balkans to the front lines of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. The same individual explained that GRU, Russian military intelligence, officers led the training in the camp and Russian Special Operation Forces personnel trained them either.[57]

> **The anti-NATO motive and grievance recalled by NATO's action is one of the main motives for the Serbs fighting on the Russian side. Grievance is widely used by Russian propaganda in Russia and Serbia.**

"Serbs understand perfectly well what NATO is and who we are fighting now - the very countries that have been bombing them since 1999 and before that did everything to tear Yugoslavia apart. It was NATO countries that ripped Kosovo away from them, and for the Serbs, "SMO"[58] is also a holy war because we are fighting their enemies. That is why many Serbian volunteers are coming here," said a Russian who fought with Serbian mercenaries. "When Crimea returned to Russia, they (Serbs) started to perceive it as their own national holiday. In 2014, friends called me and said, "Brother, Crimea is back - Kosovo will be back. They call themselves Russians in the Balkans, and many of them are receiving Russian citizenship," the same individual explained. He also admitted that he initiated the installation of a monument to Alexander Nevsky in the center of Belgrade, transported humanitarian aid to Kosovo Serbs, and implemented many joint Russian-Serbian information projects.[59]

Ukrainian officials assert that the Serbian government is unwilling to oppose the recruitment of Serbs and their participation in the war against Ukraine.

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54 Stone Forest, The history of Serbian partisans, known as Chetniks, June 2024, https://stoneforest.ru/event/history/chetniki/?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3

55 Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 806 of October 8, 2009, "On the Procedure for Engaging Members of Cossack Societies in Public or Other Service and the Procedure for Federal Executive Bodies and/or Their Territorial Bodies to Conclude Contracts (Agreements) with Cossack Societies" (with amendments and additions) https://base.garant.ru/196407/

56 Russian Cossacks (Rossiyskoye kazachestvo), For their faith and one Fatherland: how Cossacks can believe in Allah or Buddha, March 2024, https://kazachestvo.ru/20240312/995224.html

57 Mark Krutov, Maya Zivanovich, Serbian mercenary: Russia's war against Ukraine is built on lies and death, September 2024 https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/rfe-rl-serbski-naymantsi-voyuyut-proty-ukrayiny-rozsliduvannya/33131075.html

58 Russian acronym stands for Special Military Operations.

59 RIA News Crimea, The SVO became a holy war for Serbs – volunteer fighter, February 2025, https://crimea.ria.ru/20250220/svo-stala-dlya-serbov-svyaschennoy-voynoy--boets-dobrovolets-1144340995.html

V. Russia's nonmilitary operations in Ukraine and Kosovo

The Russian-Ukrainian war started in 2014 when Russia captured the Crimean Peninsula, not in 2022 with the unprovoked full invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine began before the start of the real conflict. Russia has used media to influence the population, as well as used the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian-speaking Ukrainians as the bases for creating an unavoidable reality for target societies. As such, an informative campaign has been used as a non-military operation to develop influence by amplifying linguistic and cultural differences within Ukraine. [60]

Russia has used economic pressure, such as a ban on Ukrainian imports, gas wars (cutting off rising gas supplies at rising prices for non-Russian countries), political instruments such as supporting pro-Russian social and political movements aimed at the integration of Ukraine with Russia, and dissatisfaction with Ukraine's European integration; drawing Ukraine closer to Russia, direct support for the pro-Russian presidential candidate, Yanukovich (Putin's visits to Ukraine), delegitimisation of Ukrainian statehood; scholars and spreading the idea of discrimination of Russian-speaking minority rights and using pro-Russian proxies and Russian servicemen to seize Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

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60 Illia Ilin, and Olena Nohmatova, Exploring Russia's Postponed War Against Ukraine: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Strategic Studies Institutes Publications from 1991 to 2014, Central European Journal of International and Security Studies, 17/4, 2023).

Paramilitary forces and terrorist attacks in hybrid warfare. Case of Ukraine

Russia has used several types of paramilitary forces in hybrid and conventional warfare against Ukraine. All paramilitary formations and units of any type operate in a comprehensive, holistic manner under Russian military command, with support from appropriate military or intelligence units. These paramilitary groups acted as a cover for Russian military forces during the hybrid warfare operations. The intention to utilize them was to deny the direct participation of Russia and support its propaganda efforts to insist on an ostensibly internal conflict among the Ukrainian population.

These groups served several key functions:

> Acting as a "screen" and human shield for regular Russian military forces.

> Seizing strategic facilities, government buildings, and Ukrainian military bases.

> Suppressing opposition and independent mediar.

> Participating in the capture of Ukrainian state and private critical infrastructure assets.

A. Private military companies (PMC)

Wagner is the most famous Russian PMC. PMCs are not formally recognized by the law. At the same time, some norms in Russian legislation allow the creation of such companies under the umbrella of security or intelligence agencies.

Wagner emerged from earlier Russian private military company entities, including those active in Syria in 2013. During this period, Russia explored the utilization of PMCs, examining their roles and relationships with the state. Russian military

intelligence, specifically the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GU), reportedly played a role in establishing and overseeing the Wagner Group, including creating training centers near GU Spetsnaz (elite reconnaissance and sabotage units) bases. Wagner syndrome was first recognized as an entity in 2014. It participated in Russia's annexation and occupation of Crimea,

Ukraine.[61] The group was involved in Russia's military operations in eastern Ukraine from 2015 to 2023. Other Russian PMCs used in the warfare against Ukraine include the Black Sea, Slavic Corps, Veteran, and Patriot.

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61 Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC). The Congressional Research Service. Updated August 1, 2023.

B. So-called "self-defense forces," which were ostensibly created by locals to protect themselves from national authorities

Conditionally, "self-defense forces" can be divided into two kinds: those with clear political affiliation with local pro-Russia political parties and those without visible political affiliation. For instance, in January 2014, several "self-defense" units were formed in Crimea[62] of both types: "Rubezh volunteer formation" created by a former Ministry of Interior's serviceman, whose father was a Russian Navy officer reassigned from Russian city Murmansk to Sevastopol, and the "Self-defense of Crimea", created by the Russian Unity Party, which was a Ukrainian political party registered under Ukrainian law. The latter was publicly supported in February 2014 by a member of Parliament of the Russian Federation, Aleksey Zhuravlev, the Leader of the Motherland Party of Russia; the two political parties signed an accord about the creation of an "Anti-fascist Slavic Front.' The Rubezh volunteer formation played a leading role in seizing the

Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet with the concealed support of Russian SOF.

During the Dignity Revolution (late 2013– beginning of 2014), regional officials of Crimea organized and sent thousands of people to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, by train and bus to support the pro-Russian government in cracking down on pro-European protests there. Many former servicemen of Russia's Black Fleet were among them, who later became "building material" for the self-defense forces. There were also a limited number of former Russian intelligence and security agency officers who lived or stayed in Ukraine without any surveillance or control from Ukrainian counterintelligence. Some Ukrainian Afghanistan War veterans and their co-servicemen or members of partnerial organizations from Russia participated in self-defense units.

Paramilitary formations of this type are usually better trained, armed, and united due to their previous experience, well-connected to the Russian Armed Forces or related security or intelligence agencies, and suited for military, subversive, or sabotage actions.

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62 Formally, the Crimean region and the city of Sevastopol are two single administrative units located on the Crimean Peninsula. In this report, Crimea means both together in most cases, unless they are mentioned separately.

C. Russian Cossacks

The Cossacks can be used as a substitute or supportive force for taking military or police functions. Russian Cossacks, in accordance with Russian legislation, are required to be registered and incorporated into legal entities with a specific status. The Russian Federation's State Policy Strategy for the Russian Cossacks (2021–2030) grants registered Cossack organizations a distinct legal status, formalizing their dual role as cultural entities and state security partners whose members are legally obligated to perform

state service. This strategy explicitly prioritizes the Cossacks' participation in defense, border security, and maintaining public order, effectively utilizing this identity group as a state-subsidized security auxiliary force. The emphasis on military-patriotic education through the Cossack cadet corps underscores the state's intent to institutionalize the Cossacks as a continuous source of personnel and ideological influence for national security objectives. There are multiple Cossack units from different regions of Russia, including Kuban,

Don, Orenburg, Terek, Siberian, and Astrakhan Cossacks. According to the All-Russian Cossack Society, Cossack units played a crucial paramilitary role during the February–March 2014 annexation of Crimea, with members from the Kuban, Don, Terek, and other *voiskos* entering the peninsula to reinforce local forces. These groups, often crossing the border under various pretexts like "pilgrimages" or "scientific research," secured key checkpoints, transport hubs (including Simferopol airport), and government buildings, effectively acting as "local militias" (*opolchentsy*) to deter Ukrainian military forces and pro-Ukrainian groups. By coordinating with the Russian Black Sea Fleet command and local security structures, the Cossack presence was instrumental in providing armed support and ensuring public order during the transition and the subsequent "referendum."

Picture from the left: Cossacks in Crimea in 2014, source https://www.vkpress.ru/projects/kazachiy-blog/krym-2014-kak-kazaki-turetskiy-val-zashchishchali/?id=186204 Picture from the right: Cossacks in Crimea in 2014, source: https://vsko.ru/den-kotoryj-izmenil-istoriyu-kak-pri-pomoshhi-kazakov-nastupila-krymskaya-vesna/

Cossacks were particularly widely used also in Luhansk oblast. As early as in the 17th century, several Cossack settlements were formed on this territory, and this fact was used as an additional pretext to justify the allegedly "special historical ties" between Luhansk oblast and Russia. For example, in the name of rural settlement Stanytsia Luhanska the first word alludes to a unit of political and economic organization of Cossacks in the Russian Empire.

One of the examples is the use of **"**Cossack" paramilitary units that enjoy privileged position in Russia, are governed by a special law and viewed as an ideologically driven instrument of the state, conservative in spirit and heavy-handed in tactics. It is not uncommon to involve Cossacks in keeping of public order (as was the case, for example, during the Soccer World Cup 2018 in Moscow).

Notably, that Russian soft-power institutions in Serbia strategically foreground the historical legacy of Imperial Russian Cossacks who resettled in the region, promoting narratives that emphasize their role in Serbian settlements, collaboration with locals, and strong connection to the Orthodox Church as a basis for contemporary political and cultural alignment.[63]

63   RUSSIANS in Serbia / [authors Arsenyev Alexey Borisovich … et al.; editor-in-chief A. A. Maksakov]. - Belgrade: Vesna info: Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Serbia, 2009 (Belgrade: Atel>e Bogdanović). - p.97-116

D. Members of sports clubs, mostly of fighting sports

Fighting arts sports clubs have become an effective tool of soft power and covert mobilization for Russia. One of the most notable examples is SC "Oplot," which actively participated in anti-Maidan movements and the undermining of Ukrainian sovereignty. SC "Oplot" was founded in 2011 in Kharkiv by Yevhen Zhilin, who was declared wanted after 2014. During the Revolution of Dignity (so-called Maidan), its members were part of groups whose main goal was to destabilize public order and provoke actions against the participants of the Revolution of Dignity, as well

as to pressure and intimidate activists. In Ukraine, such individuals came to be known as "titushky"—after the last name of one of the first members of such types of groups. For example, on January 21, 2014, "Oplot" members transported young men to Kyiv, armed with rebar, to involve them in violent acts against Maidan participants. One of the members, Tavakkul Rahimov, who was already working in law enforcement, introduced himself in court as a "brigadier" and was connected to Zhilin and "Oplot." Later, it was transformed into a unit of the same name.

E. Russian biker clubs

The biker club "Night Wolves" have been promoting the greatness of the Russian people for decades, including the victory in the "Great Patriotic War" and fraternal Slavic ties, including in the Balkans. The Night Wolves came into being in 1983 as a group of anti-establishment rock music fans and motorcycle enthusiasts. In May 1989, the group formally became known as the Night Wolves MC. During the initial years, the group provided security at rock concerts, and is believed to have operated a protection racket on behalf of an organized crime group. By the early-1990s, Alexander Zaldostanov, known as the "Surgeon", assumed the leadership of the Night Wolves. It was also during this period that the group went through an initial transformation, changing from a seemingly anti-establishment biker club to an organization with subtle patriotic leanings[64] Over the last decade, the relationship between the Night Wolves and the Russian Orthodox Church has strengthened significantly. For example, the Night Wolves sponsor motorcycle pilgrimages to holy sites, and Zaldostanov meets regularly with Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church and a former KGB agent, to discuss co-hosting patriotic events. Club members have also defended the church against protests.[65] In addition, the organization was heavily involved in Russia's operations to occupy part of Ukraine in 2014.

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64 Matthew A. Lauder, 'Wolves of the Russian Spring': An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government - Canadian Military Journal • Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 2018 https://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol18/no3/PDF/CMJ183Ep5.pdf

65 Ibid

Members of the Night Wolves attending a burial service for Soviet soldiers in Crimea, 30 October 2014.

According to US Department of Treasure the Night Wolves biker group had its members serve in the Crimean self-defense forces as early as February 2014 against the Government of Ukraine. In March 2014, the Night Wolves conducted intimidation and criminal activities within Ukraine and also abducted and subsequently assaulted a Ukrainian Border Guard official. This biker group also participated in the storming of the gas distribution station in Strikolkove and the storming of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Headquarters in Sevastopol. In early-April 2014, the Night Wolves helped smuggle a former senior Ukrainian official out of Ukraine and also helped obtain Russian passports for another larger group of senior Ukrainian officials that they helped get into Russia. The Night Wolves have been closely connected to the Russian special services, have helped to recruit separatist fighters for Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine, and were deployed to the cities of Luhansk and Kharkiv.[66]

According to the club's official website, as of August 2025, it has 125 branches in the Russian Federation and in the occupied regions of Ukraine, as well as more than 20 branches abroad, including Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, North Macedonia, Poland, as well as the Republic of Srpska, and the unrecognized Transnistria (Moldova).[67][68]

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66 U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Targets Additional Ukrainian Separatists and Russian Individuals and Entities, December 2014, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl9729

67 See: https://nightwolves.ru/nw/about/offices.php?PAGEN_1=7

68 As of 2018, Matthew A. Lauder, 'Wolves of the Russian Spring': An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government - Canadian Military Journal • Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 2018 https://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol18/no3/PDF/CMJ183Ep5.pdf

F. Criminal organizations

One of the tools in the hands of Russia's intelligence agencies is criminal organizations. The case study below demonstrates how Russian intelligence services integrated criminal networks into their hybrid warfare strategy against Ukraine, particularly targeting critical institutions, such as the prison system.

> In March 2025, The National Police of Ukraine issued suspicion notices to several crime bosses ("thieves in law") and a criminal for spreading criminal influence during an organized meeting in Kyiv's pre-trial detention center. The suspects include natives of Georgia, Kazakhstan, and a Russian citizen, two of whom are known by the nicknames "Bondo" and "Aziz." Aziz is a 58-year-old Russian citizen and "thief in law" (rus.: Vor v Zakone) who received his criminal status in Moscow in 1993. He was convicted in Kyrgyzstan for murdering government officials and organizing prison riots. Aziz was released from prison through a fake medical diagnosis. Aziz is connected to Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya region of Russia. According to Ukrainian authorities, he now works with Russian intelligence and is currently located in Chechnya. His current activities involve attempting to destabilize Ukrainian penal institutions by organizing riots with his trusted associates. The suspects organized a remote meeting where they granted a Kyiv detention center inmate the status of "wanderer" for his "criminal world" merits. This operation was conducted by the Department of Strategic Investigations and investigators of the National Police in cooperation with prosecutors and the State Criminal Executive Service of Ukraine. Bondo is also a "thief in law" who was born in Georgia and "crowned" (given criminal authority status) in Rome in 2013. He was previously convicted of attempting to organize riots in prisons in Kazakhstan. [69]

This case study, along with other open sources, provides an understanding of the operational and tactical approaches of Russian intelligence services employed through criminal networks.

> **Use of "Thieves in Law":** Russian intelligence services control influential crime bosses who coordinate activities from safe locations in Russia and former Soviet states

> **Prison System Targeting:** They specifically

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69 National Police of Ukraine, March 2025, https://npu.gov.ua/news/natspolitsiia-povidomyla-pidozry-voram-v-zakoni-ta-kryminalnyku-za-poshyrennia-zlochynnoho-vplyvu-na-orhanizovanii-skhodtsi-v-kyivskomu-sizo

focus on destabilizing Ukrainian prisons and detention centers through their criminal proxies

> **Hierarchy Exploitation:** They utilize the established criminal hierarchy, with crime bosses directing trusted associates inside Ukrainian facilities

> **Strategic Placement:** Their agents coordinate with detained criminals who can influence other inmates and maintain criminal "traditions"

> **Regional Coordination:** The network operates across multiple regions, with identified activities in Kyiv and other major cities

The key countermeasures by the Ukrainian authorities include the following:

> Joint operations between law-enforcement and intelligence agencies as well as correctional service

> Close monitoring of criminal networks and their communications

> Swift legal action against identified criminal leaders and their associates

> International cooperation between law-enforcement and intelligence agencies

A stark example of the Russian Federation's integration of criminal figures into subversive activities and active combat operations against Ukraine is the case of **Armen Sargsyan**, widely known by his criminal alias, **"Gorlovsky"**. Sargsyan, an individual with a documented history as a criminal authority, transitioned to a military role as the commander of the "ArBat" Battalion. Born in Armenia, he relocated to Horlivka (Donetsk Oblast) in childhood. Beginning in the 1990s, he built a criminal network in Horlivka, controlling shadow economies in the region and

later working with Yenakiieve's criminal structures in the early 2000s.

During the Euromaidan events in 2014, Sargsyan was a key organizer of the **"Titushky" groups**—thugs used to attack and intimidate anti-government protestors. In the summer of 2022, he founded the **"ArBat" (Armenian Battalion)**, a paramilitary unit that was later formally incorporated into the Russian Armed Forces' "Piatnashka" brigade. The battalion initially operated on the Donetsk front but was subsequently redeployed to the Kursk Oblast following a Ukrainian incursion. Armen Sargsyan was killed on February 3, 2025, in an explosion at the elite residential complex "Alye Parusa" in Moscow.

This tactic echoed the model of using in 2014 key individuals connected to Russian security services. The first one os Igor Strelkov (Girkin): A former officer of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), Strelkov arrived in Crimea on February 21, 2014, where he coordinated the "self-defense of Crimea" units, which were subordinated to Russian military and intelligence commanders. He later admitted to participating in coercing local deputies to vote for the annexation referendum. Following his activities in Crimea, Strelkov, reportedly using an FSB-issued cover document, led the seizure of administrative buildings in Sloviansk in April 2014, becoming a prominent commander in the Donbas conflict.

Another notable person is Igor Bezler ("Bes"or "Demon"). Identified as an agent of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), Bezler, a Crimean native, commanded a militia company in the peninsula and participated in storming Ukrainian military units. Following the Crimea seizure, Bezler became a prominent field commander, operating primarily in Horlivka. According to Ukrainian authorities, both were considered Russian agents, with Strelkov himself admitting he was a Russian agent until the year before these events.

The Case of Kosovo: Parallels with Ukraine

Since the end of the war in Kosovo, the north of Kosovo has remained divided along ethnic lines. The region's disputed status, combined with the persistence of parallel institutions often supported by Serbia,[70] has enabled a form of self-governance that creates a permissive environment for illicit activities involving both Serbs and Albanians.[71] The north of Kosovo has long functioned as a buffer zone between Kosovo and Serbia, facilitating the smuggling of goods, medicines, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. While organized criminal groups carry out some trafficking, much of it involves private individuals transporting appliances, medicines, food items, and alcoholic beverages from Serbia. The weak rule of law and the availability of free electricity have also reportedly made the region a lucrative hub for cryptocurrency mining.[72]

Politics in the north has long been dominated by a single political party, Srpska Lista, which maintains close ties to the Serbian Progressive Party led by President Aleksandar Vučić. Milan Radoičić, the party's former deputy leader, was involved in the Banjska terrorist attack. Despite this, he continues to be sheltered in Serbia, which has refused to extradite him to Kosovo. Vučić has repeatedly defended Radoičić, even in the face of serious accusations, asserting that Radoičić and "our people from the north" are being persecuted and insisting that being on wanted lists or subject to sanctions does not constitute proof of guilt.[73]

Prior to the Banjska attack, Radoičić was already widely known for his involvement in organized crime in the north of Kosovo. In 2019, Radoičić and Zvonko Veselinović were indicted for allegedly leading an organized criminal group responsible for the assassination of rival Kosovo Serb politician Oliver

Ivanović in January 2018.[74] After the assassination of Ivanovic, Srpska Lista effectively became the sole political voice for Kosovo Serbs, significantly reducing political pluralism within the community. This consolidation has allowed Vučić to leverage the party to advance his political agenda and prioritize interests aligned with his strategic and personal goals.

Organized crime groups, reportedly linked to political elites in Serbia and led by figures such as Radoičić, have played a significant role in undermining the integration of the Serbian community into Kosovo's institutions. Examples include the mass resignations of Serb members from the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) in 2018 following intimidation campaigns; documented connections between criminal groups and police structures in North Mitrovica; calls by Radoičić and his associates to boycott local elections in northern municipalities; and incidents such as the burning of cars with Kosovo license plates owned by Serb citizens.[75]

In June 2023, the Kosovo government designated two groups the Civil Protection (Civilna Zaštita) and the North Brigade (Severna Brigada) as terrorist organizations, citing their extremist agendas aimed at destabilizing Kosovo's constitutional order. The decision followed unrest in the northen municipalities in which more than 30 members of the NATO-led KFOR mission were injured. Although these groups remain disruptive, Kosovo has begun establishing institutional mechanisms to counter such security threats.[76]

The government stated that these organizations had engaged in activities "with terrorist elements," including armed attacks on the Kosovo Police, EULEX, and KFOR; recruitment and training of members in military-style bases (allegedly in Serbia); intimidation of citizens and political actors; and attempts to obstruct or prevent the implementation of state decisions in the north.[77]

70   Global Initiative, Against Transnational Organize Crime, "Links between politics, ethnicity and organize crime in northern Kosovo, 2021, https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-011/01-politics-ethnicity-organized-crime-in-northern-kosovo.html

71   Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw and Arthur Boutellis, The elephant in the room: How can peace operations deal with organized crime?, International Peace Institute, 3 June 2013, 46–55, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/elephant_in_the_room.pdf.

72   Adelina Ahmeti and Kreshnik Gashi, In North Kosovo, mining for Bitcoin on 'free' electricity, BalkanInsight, 12 May 2021, https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/12/in-north-kosovo-mining-for-bitcoin-on-free-electricity/.

73   Radio Free Europe, 2023, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-radoicic-izjave/32612617.html

74   Radio Free Europe, 23 August 2019, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pristina-sud-radoicic-ivanovic/30125833.html

75   Prishtina Insights, 2023, https://prishtinainsight.com/arrest-of-serb-for-attacking-policemen-and-burning-cars-in-north-of-kosovo-sparks-reactions/

76   Who are the extreme right in the Balkan, Balkan Insight, https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/kosovo.php

77   Koha.net, 2023, https://www.koha.net/en/arberi/mbrojtja-civile-dhe-brigada-e-veriut-shpallen-organizata-terroriste?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Using paramilitaries and proxies for the terrorist attacks in Kosovo

In the north village of Banjska, a heavily armed and highly equipped terrorist group launched a military attack on September 24, 2023, which took place in the early morning hours, with the entry of the Serbian terrorist group into Kosovo from Serbia through illegal mountain roads in an organized manner.78 In the north village of Banjskë, Kosovo, a heavily armed and highly equipped terrorist group launched a military attack on September 24, resulting in the death of one police officer and the wounding of another.79 Following the attack on the Kosovo Police, approximately 30 heavily armed and masked members of the Serbian terrorist group fled to the Banjska Monastery, using the religious compound as a temporary hideout while continuing to fire on Kosovo Police from a distance. Three of the insurgents were killed in a shootout with the Kosovo Police, while three others were apprehended by law enforcement.80

This well-organized attack was a clear act of aggression against Kosovo's territorial integrity and national security, significantly heightening the risk of inter-ethnic conflict. Kosovo authorities have presented compelling evidence that Serbia supported this attack, implicating Milan Radoičić, then Vice President of Srpska Lista and a figure on the US blacklist, as a key orchestrator of the operation.

It is necessary to highlight specific events to capture the broader picture of what was happening in the north of Kosovo several months before the Banjska incident. On April 23, 2023, local elections were held in four municipalities in northern Kosovo. The dominant Serb-majority party in the north, Srpska Lista, boycotted the elections, and turnout was very low. [81]Soon after

that year, on May 26, 2024, Serbs attempted to block newly elected officials, including those in the Zvecan municipality, where the village of Banjska is located, from taking control of municipal buildings. This prompted the Kosovo police to use tear gas to disperse the mobs. Serb protesters, including groups of masked men, attacked journalists and NATO peacekeepers, leaving more than 30 of them injured. The protesters vandalized and marked vehicles of NATO and the KP with the "Z" symbol used by Russian forces invading Ukraine since 2022. The same day, the President of Serbia put the Serbian Armed Forces on full combat alert and ordered its units to move closer to the border with Kosovo.[82]

The Kosovo Police seized a large arsenal of weapons, including armored vehicles, firearms, explosives, drones, rocket launchers, anti-personnel mines, uniforms, and other logistical equipment.[83] They also discovered supplies intended to sustain the attackers for an extended period. Drone footage presented as evidence shows Radoičić's involvement in organizing the attack, as well as the group's preparation, training, and exercises conducted at military bases in Paulićke Doline and Kopaonik. Furthermore, forty-five suspects, including Milan Radoičić, have been indicted by Kosovo's Special Prosecution in connection with the Banjska terrorist attack.[84] On September 11, 2024, the Special Prosecution filed an indictment against these 45 individuals.[85] According to the Special Prosecution, Radojčić is suspected of financing terrorism and money laundering, while in Banjska, he and his armed terrorist group intended to secede the north of Kosovo and annex it to Serbia. Despite the

78   Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo. PPS. nr.75/2023, 11 September 2024, Indictment for the attack in Banjska.

79   Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo. PPS. nr.75/2023, September 11, 2024, Indictment for the attack in Banjska

80   Koha.net, 2023, https://www.koha.net/arberi/videoja-e-sulmuesve-serbe-gjate-levizjeve-ne-manastirin-e-banjskes.

81   Radio Free Europe, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbs-special-elections-boycott/32375661.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

82   Chernysh, Vadym. "Intelligence As an Instrument of National Power: Lessons Learned from the Tensions between Serbia and Kosovo." Journal of Strategic Security 18, no. 3 (2025): 25-41.

83   Adelina Hasani, "Unveiling the Parallel: Serbia's Failed Attempt to Imitate Russia's Strategy with Neighbors,"Prishtina Insight, 2023,

84   Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo. PPS. nr.75/2023, 11 September 2024, Indictment for the attack in Banjska.

85   Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo. PPS. nr.75/2023, September 11, 2024, Indictment for the attack in Banjska

evidence, Serbian officials, including President Aleksandar Vučić, denied involvement and shifted the blame to Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, framing the attack as a local uprising against alleged oppressive policies.

The Banjska attack represents the most significant threat to Kosovo's national security since its independence. Following the attack, Serbia deployed troops near Kosovo's border, heightening fears of a potential military confrontation. Both Kosovo and the United States called for the de-escalation of tensions and the withdrawal of Serbian forces, underlining the fragility of the security environment in the Western Balkans, which the EU has been trying to stabilize through dialogue.

Meanwhile, the United States Embassy in Kosovo, in its response, strongly condemned this attack, supporting the Kosovo Police, which has full legitimacy to enforce the rule of law in Kosovo. The American Embassy had called for the perpetrators of this attack to be brought to justice. Following the US Embassy in Kosovo, other international embassies and missions had also reacted against the terrorist attack.[86]

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86 Koha Net. Radojčić admits organizing terrorist attack in Banjska. September 29, 2023.

The attack on the Critical Infrastructure - Case of Kosovo. Iber Lepence

After the terrorist attack in the village of Banjskë, another attack targeted Kosovo's critical infrastructure, affecting both Albanian and Serbian citizens living in the north of Kosovo and in various other regions of Kosovo. This attack severely threatened essential public services, particularly water and energy supplies.[87] Following the explosion of the canal in Ibër-Lepenc, the water flow from the damaged canal began spilling uncontrollably. Consequently, the Regional Water Supply Company "Mitrovica" announced an immediate halt to the drinking water supply due to the canal damage. The attack on Ibër-Lepenc directly impacted vital resources. The system supplies water to several cities through Lake Ujman and plays a crucial role in cooling Kosovo's power plants. The perpetrators aimed to trigger a major water crisis and create energy instability in the country.

Kosovo's institutions responded swiftly to repair the damage, thereby preventing a potential crisis in water and electricity supply. The damage caused by the explosion in the Ibër-Lepenc water supply network was restored, although not completely, in a short time by the relevant Kosovo institutions to ensure a regular supply of electricity for the country, in order to cool the power plants, as well as to avoid possible problems with the central heating system for the citizens of Pristina.[88]

The terrorist attack in Iber Lepence occurred a day after Russia launched missile and drone strikes targeting critical infrastructure across Ukraine, including its energy generation and distribution systems, particularly in its westernmost regions.[89] This timing raises concerns about possible coordination or influence, prompting questions about whether the attack was organized in connection with Russia as part of its hybrid attacks in the region.

The Kosovo Security Council has linked the terrorist attack in Ibër-Lepenc to similar Russian attacks in Ukraine on Ukrainian energy capacities on the eve of winter. They have pointed out that: "Elements of the terrorist organizations 'Civil Protection' and 'Northern Brigade,' along with the chief criminal Milan Radoičić, under the direction of the President and Government of Serbia, plan and train in Serbia for such professional attacks. A possible connection was also highlighted with

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87 Koha.net, https://www.koha.net/kronike/shperthim-ne-kanalin-e-iber-lepencit-ne-zubin-potok, September 1, 2025.

88 Telegrafi, https://telegrafi.com/rizvanolli-eshte-siguruar-furnizimi-rregullt-energji-elektrike-iber-lepenci-ne-afat-rekord-ka-vendosur-gjashte-tuba-te-perkohshem/ November 1, 2025.

89 Amnesty International, https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/russia-ukraine-latest-massive-missile-strike-on-critical-infrastructure-is-a-war-crime/ November 1, 2025.

the attacks carried out this week by the aggressor Russia in Ukraine against energy infrastructure, which left over one million Ukrainian households without electricity just on the eve of winter."[90] The international community strongly condemned the act of terrorism, including the heads of NATO[91] and the EU, while Serbian officials in Belgrade denied any involvement.[92]

According to the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo, there is a well-founded suspicion that on November 29, 2024, around 18:50, in the village of Varage, Municipality of Zubin Potok, specifically in the section of the Ibër-Lepenc channel used to supply drinking water to

citizens of the Republic of Kosovo and to provide water for the country's power plants, the suspect Jovan Viqentijević, acting together with his brother, the suspect Dragisha Viqentijević, intentionally damaged public water supply infrastructure. Their actions, carried out with the intent to seriously disturb residents and undermine the constitutional order and public security of the Republic of Kosovo, constituted a terrorist act through the use of explosives directly targeting the channel and its concrete infrastructure.[93] The Prishtina Court has extended the pre-trial detention for another two months for the two defendants, Dragisha Viqentijević and Jovan Viqentijević, who are suspected of carrying out the terrorist attack on the Ibër-Lepenc water channel in the Zubin Potok area.[94]

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90 Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo. The Security Council of the Republic of Kosovo holds an extraordinary meeting. November 20, 2025.

91 A2, CNN, https://a2news.com/english/rajoni-bota/kosova/politike/shefi-i-nato-s-reagon-per-in-ne-iber-lepenc-perg-i1135558 September 1, 2025.

92 Radio Free Europe, https://www.rferl.org/a/explosion-damages-iber-lepenc-canal-kosovo-serbia-attack-/33221440.html, October 20, 2025.

93 Betimi per drejtesi, https://betimiperdrejtesi.com/ekskluzive-dosja-e-prokurorise-vellezerit-viqentijeviq-dyshohen-se-kryen-vepren-terroriste-duke-perdorur-eksploziv-ne-kanalin-e-iber-lepencit/ September 20, 2025.

94 Kallxo, 2025, https://kallxo.com/ligji/gjykata/dy-te-dyshuarve-per-sulmin-terrorist-ne-iber-lepenc-u-vazhdohet-paraburgimi-edhe-per-dy-muaj/

The attack on the Critical Infrastructure - Case of Ukraine

In late 2013 and January 2014, during the Dignity Revolution, cyberattacks targeted Ukrainian institutions. Over 22 government agencies and private enterprises were infected with the "Uroboros" computer worm, which was designed to steal information, including personal data and access passwords.[95]

During the annexation period in 2014, Russia's cyber operations were coordinated with military and political actions. The occupying forces systematically worked to control information flow by blocking independent media outlets and journalists from operating, preventing Ukrainian and international journalists from entering Crimea, seizing equipment, and physically intimidating journalists who tried to document events.

In late February 2014, Russian intelligence and SOF were concerned about mobile and land networks being blocked to hinder Ukrainian revolutionary officials from managing the situation in Crimea. The Russian forces specifically prepared the self-defense groups for this scenario. In preparation for potential communication disruptions, groups such as the Sevastopol self-defense units purchased radio equipment and maintained contact through automobile enthusiast radio channels.

In the early stages of Crimea's occupation, which started in February 2014, there were several key events related to Russian actions to establish communications and information control.

> **Initial physical control of important critical infrastructure objects and the territories where they are situated:**

   On February 23, the Russian forces took control of Sevastopol City.

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95 Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, Cyberattacks by the Russian Federation. Chronology, May 2018 https://web.archive.org/web/20200115203102/https://www.mil.gov.ua/ukbs/kiberataki-rosijskoi-federaczii-hronologiya.html

On February 25, Russian Cossack formations moved to the peninsula through the Kerch Strait, with Russian military personnel disguised among them.

> **Initial telecommunications disruption (early March 2014):**

Russian forces cut internet connections between Crimea and mainland Ukraine.

"Unidentified" individuals seized local Ukrtelecom[96] offices and cut the phone and Internet cables.

Equipment was illegally installed at Ukrtelecom in Crimea to block the phones of Ukrainian parliament members, regardless of their political affiliation.

Russian forces sabotaged Ukrainian naval communication stations around Sevastopol City.

> **Control of Information Space (March 1-3, 2014):**

Beginning March 1, multiple documented cases of interference with journalists' work were reported.

On March 3, "self-defense" forces seized the Crimean Radio and Television Transmission Center, which led to the replacement of Ukrainian TV channels with Russian state media within a week. Only Russian media were allowed to operate freely.

In April 2014, Ukrainian mobile subscribers were targeted by suspicious SS7[97] packets from Russian telecom networks for three days. The attack intercepted calls by forwarding them to a landline in St. Petersburg, Russia, without the users' knowledge. The SS7 packets originated from addresses assigned to MTS Russia and Rostov Cellular Communications, although MTS Russia denied involvement. Multiple Ukrainian operators, including Astelit and Kyivstar, were affected, suggesting that a broader targeting campaign was underway. The incident sparked an "SS7 arms race," with Ukraine proposing legislation to conduct similar surveillance on foreign mobile operators. Although SS7 attacks require significant technical expertise and network access and are widely acknowledged, they still represent a real threat.

Many experts believe that the SS7 vulnerability was used in February 2014, when there was a notable incident likely involving Victoria Nuland, then a senior U.S. State Department official. A confidential phone conversation, presumably between Ms. Nuland and then US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, was intercepted and leaked on YouTube. The conversation appeared to have taken place over an unsecured phone line. While U.S. officials suspected that the interception occurred in Ukraine, Russia was believed to be behind the hacking. After being recorded, the phone conversation was immediately posted on YouTube, swiftly spread widely by Russia's state-owned media, and finally commented on by Russian MPs.

This incident was significant because it exposed sensitive diplomatic communications and highlighted vulnerabilities in telecommunications security. In the intercepted conversation, Victoria Nuland supposedly spoke disparagingly about the European Union. This disrespectful commentary about a key ally caused dip

lomatic tension at a sensitive time during the Ukraine crisis. It aimed to undermine the West's collective efforts to restore Ukrainian democracy. Moreover, the voice supposedly belonged to Nuland, who made some comments that could have been seen as preferable for one of the then-opposition leaders leading the protests against the government, intending to dismantle the unity of the opposition forces.

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96   Ukrtelecom is a Ukrainian telecommunications company that provides telephone services, Internet access, and television.

97   SS7 (Signaling System No. 7) is a set of protocols developed in the 1970s that regulates data exchange between different telephone network operators. It was created to track and connect calls across different networks and is now used for mobile billing, SMS messaging, and call routing between operators.

VI. **Disinformation Campaigns**

Disinformation campaigns are among the Kremlin's primary tools for destabilizing the Western Balkans. One strategy is to support and exploit political factions that align with their interests and share a similar political posture, thereby gaining leverage over the targeted country.

Russia has mainly used pro-Russian proxies to further its interests in the region. There are many occasions, especially in social media and media outlets, where the Russian narrative has been amplified. The disinformation campaign generally has adverse effects on the EU enlargement process, although Russia does not officially oppose EU membership of countries in the region. Disinformation actors challenge the EU's role as the primary political actor in implementing reforms in the Western Balkans. The long wait before the doors of the EU and NATO, however, has exhausted the societies of the Western Balkans, disinclined them to commit to further negotiations and to implementing reforms, and also provided fertile ground for a pro-Russian narrative and rising uncertainties about the EU integration process.

Russia has outsourced its disinformation activities across the region by building loose relationships with local proxies that willingly promote and support its interests. Pushing targeted narratives through them aims to weaken the West while strengthening Russian influence in the Balkans. Overall, the effect of Russian narrative proxies across the region is that the EU and NATO accession prospects for the countries of the Western Balkans are undermined; the image of Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West is promoted; tensions between different communities are stoked; nationalist/patriotic movements' confidence and presence is boosted; and the local media ecosystem is disrupted, and journalism is harmed.

The central countries in the Western Balkans that Russia has tried to gain leverage and halt NATO and EU prosperity were using the fertile ground and proxies in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, they have used the fridge situation to maintain the tense situation in the region by keeping online the anti-Western narrative. The general disappointment with the West across the area is a key variable to successful narrative building that serves Russian interests. Two features of this geopolitical battle are specific to the region: general disappointment with the West and Slavic/ Orthodox identity ties to Russia. Especially in the case of Kosovo, the disinformation and narratives from Russia aimed at inciting inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, criminalizing NATO, undermining public trust in Euro-Atlantic integration, and portraying the United States negatively. [98]

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In North Macedonia, Russian narrative proxies, which were particularly active within the #Boycott campaign during the name-change referendum, threatened to undermine the country's pro-West

98 Asya Metodieva, Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund, 2019, n.16 https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Euronews, 2023, https://euronews.al/en/report-on-disinformation-russia-aims-to-incite-war-in-kosovo/

orientation. The hashtag "#Boycott" was spread on Twitter and Facebook. About 40 new Facebook profiles appeared daily in the weeks before the vote, amplifying the boycott message. The hashtag quickly generated more than 24,000 mentions on Twitter, with about 20,000 as retweets. [103]

In Serbia, they have harmful effects on the normalization process with Kosovo.[104] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they undermine the prospects of political and institutional cooperation between the country's two entities. Anti-West/ Pro-Russia narratives popular in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina often appear on the websites InfoSrpska, Krajina, Govori Srbija, Glas Srpske, Nezavisne, Srbija Danas, and many other portals whose ownership and source of funding remain unclear, republishing one-sided stories.[105]

Parties holding anti-West and pro-Russia stances first became more visible prior to Montenegro's accession to NATO and then with the political crisis and the referendum in Macedonia. They have intensified their rhetoric in the context of the latest developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute.[106]

The Kosovo-Serbia dispute remains central to regional tensions, with Russia backing Serbia in an effort to discredit the EU and NATO. However, Serbia remains surrounded by NATO countries and continues to seek EU membership, attempting to balance its relations between Russia and the West. Anti-Western narratives and sentiments have been on the rise, fueled by disinformation campaigns that often center on the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. Regime-controlled public and private media are among the most active promoters of pro-Russian sentiments in Serbia.[107] Given their wide accessibility, these media outlets also influence public opinion in Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Montenegro, and, most notably, northern Kosovo.

In the case of Kosovo, the Kremlin has primarily employed misinformation and disinformation campaigns in the North of Kosovo, leveraging various online media platforms, social media groups, and tabloids to spread fear, mistrust, and uncertainty. Through these methods, they have sought to mobilize the Serbian population by portraying the government of Kosovo as hostile toward them. The media outlets such as Media Al and TV Pink, which are widely accessible in the north of Kosovo, are amplifying the narrative that is hostile towards the government.[108]

The Kremlin's core activities are concentrated on Kosovo's Serbian-language media, indicating that its primary target audience is the Serbian community. For example, the tabloid Informer published an article accusing Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, pejoratively referring to his leadership as the "Kurti regime." The article alleged that Kurti was attempting to expel Serbs from Kosovo,[109] commit genocide against the Serbian population, or eliminate the Serb List to pave the way for the creation of a "Greater Albania."[110] The Great Albanian propaganda has been handled from the Kremlin's narrative and an anti-Western narrative; Russia's foreign ministry has been pushing the claim that the EU and NATO have endorsed the creation of a "Greater Albania" in the region. An illustration of this trend is a title that appeared in Sputnik in March 2017, early in the crisis in Skopje: "NATO willing to see 'blood in streets of Macedonia' for Greater Albania project."[111] This nationalist narrative promoted by Russia and boosted by proxies in Serbia feeds nationalist sentiments in Republika Srpska, North of Kosovo, and North Macedonia, while increasing anti-Albanian sentiment and presenting them as a threat of Great Albania, which is the production of hate speech.

Kremlin propaganda and disinformation amplify

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103 Asya Metodieva, Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund, 2019, n.16, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf

104   Aubrey Belford et al., "Leaked documents show Russian, Serbian attempts to meddle in Macedonia," OCCRP, June 4, 2017.

105 Asya Metodieva, Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund, 2019, n.16, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf

106   Ibid.

107   Ibid.

108   Sbunker, 2025, https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/rusia-dramatizon-me-gjendjen-e-serbeve-ne-kosove-pretendon-pa-fakte-se-ata-po-debohen-me-miratimin-e-perendimit/

109   Ibid.

110   Ibid.

111 Asya Metodieva, Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans, The German Marshall Fund, 2019, n.16, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf

anti-American narratives, specifically targeting KFOR's presence in Kosovo to delegitimize its mission. Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today, along with social media platforms like X, Telegram, and TikTok, actively spread negative portrayals of NATO and the EU while presenting Russia as the primary protector of Serbs and the Orthodox world. Social media platforms have also been used to intimidate local Serbs who cooperate with Kosovo's institutions.[112] Telegram groups such as Bunt je stanje duha, with over 87,200 subscribers, and Koridor, with 19,500 subscribers, frequently promote Russia's role as Serbia's protector, spread negative narratives about KFOR, and encourage hostility toward Kosovo's institutions. Ultimately, these groups serve Russia's broader geopolitical strategy, using Kosovo and the wider Western Balkans as a key battleground for expanding its influence in the region.

They portray KFOR troops as hostile toward the Serbian population while favoring Albanians, framing them as a constant threat to Serbs' security and property. This disinformation seeks to discredit NATO's presence in Kosovo and undermine the alliance more broadly, aligning with Russia's antagonistic policy toward the West. Russia's opposition to Kosovo is not merely about Kosovo itself but rather part of a broader struggle against Western influence in the region. By depicting NATO as having failed to protect Serbian citizens, Moscow seeks to instrumentalize the Serbian community in Kosovo and draw parallels with Russian minorities in Donbas, falsely claiming that Serbs in Kosovo face persecution similar to that of Russians in eastern Ukraine.

The last national elections in Kosovo were also the targets of the disinformation campaign of the Kremlin, with the primary aim of diluting Kosovo's statehood and increasing the suspicion of its institutions. The monitoring of the election campaign from BIRN Kosovo shows that Kosovo was mentioned on 32 occasions between September 2024 and March 2025 by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, with the main narrative of contested statehood and its sovereignty, and accusing the ethnically cleansed

Kosovo Serbs. The disinformation propaganda has been used to target Kosovo's institutions and also Serbs living in Kosovo by spreading fear. However, all these disinformation campaigns have been looming during the election campaign.[113] The disinformation campaign that Serbia and Russia orchestrated had the aim of diluting the public trust in the election process and bringing into question Kosovo's EU and NATO orientation. [114]

Russia often portrays Kosovo as a persistent source of tension and conflict in the Western Balkans, emphasizing concerns about the security of Serbs in Kosovo and organized crime in the region. For example, Informer published an article accusing Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, pejoratively labeled as the "Kurti regime", of attempting to expel Serbs from Kosovo.[115] This narrative frames the Kosovo government as hostile and uncooperative, further alienating the Serbian community. Such claims are often amplified by Kremlin-backed propaganda, reinforcing the narrative that the Kosovo government aims to marginalize or expel Serbs.[116] Another false claim from Informer was that "Kurti wants to eliminate the Serb List and create a Greater Albania," further inflaming ethnic tensions."[117] This narrative also seeks to reinforce the perception that Kosovo is an unstable state and that Western peace efforts have failed. Kosovo is depicted as a hub for terrorist recruitment, with Russian official Maria Zakharova referring to it as a 'bastion of terrorism.' According to this disinformation narrative, Ukraine faces an even more severe terrorism threat, suggesting that terrorist activities there are more widespread and sophisticated.

The complexity of Russian information policy

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112   European Union Office in Kosovo European Union Special Representative in Kosovo, The Story of Our Lies, November 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/story-our-lies_en

113   BIRN, Hate Speech and Disinformation during the 2025 Elections in Kosovo, April 2025.

114   Ibid.

115   Informer, https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/975085/aljbin-kurti-kosmet-srbi-maltretiranje

116   Sbunker, Russia dramatizes the situation of Serbs in Kosovo, claiming without evidence that they are being expelled with the West's approval, https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/rusia-dramatizon-me-gjendjen-e-serbeve-ne-kosove-pretendon-pa-fakte-se-ata-po-debohen-me-miratimin-e-perendimit/

117   Sbunker, Russia dramatizes the situation of Serbs in Kosovo, claiming without evidence that they are being expelled with the West's approval, https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/rusia-dramatizon-me-gjendjen-e-serbeve-ne-kosove-pretendon-pa-fakte-se-ata-po-debohen-me-miratimin-e-perendimit/

and the unity of its narratives are clearly evident Report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation dated August 2025 "Regarding the Situation with the Glorification of Nazism and the Spread of Neo-Nazism and Other Practices that Contribute to Fueling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance". The report in question contains a chronological analysis and interpretation of events by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the so-called spread of neo-Nazism in around 40 countries and separately in the EU. Interestingly, the analysis covers democratic countries, mostly European

(with sections on the USA, Japan, and Australia), yet Serbia is not included in the report, as it was omitted from a similar report for 2024. In fact, the report compiles information about countries that are within Russia's sphere of interest and about which Russia develops its own narratives. However, a comparison of the report's materials regarding Kosovo and Ukraine clearly demonstrates that almost identical approaches and narratives are used for both countries, which is no coincidence. The rhetoric deliberately parallels Serbian and Russian victimhood, framing Moscow as defender of both.

Kosovo and Ukraine in the 2025 Russia's MFA Report

THEME	KOSOVO (REPORT PORTRAYAL)	UKRAINE (REPORT PORTRAYAL)	PARALLELS SIMILARITIES
Minorities as victims	Serbs are portrayed as systematically discriminated against, displaced (312 settlements "cleansed"), subject to expropriations, loss of institutions, and restricted returns.	The Russian-speaking population is framed as oppressed by the "Kiev regime" through neo-Nazi ideology, discrimination, violence, and marginalization.	Both cast as targeted victim groups suffering systematic oppression by central authorities, with language of "forced displacement," "persecution," "discrimination."
Language issue / cultural rights	Albanian-only policies: Serbian language marginalized, exclusion from institutions, and erasure of Orthodox heritage.	Promotion of Ukrainian-only identity: glorification of nationalist symbols, removal of Soviet/Russian-linked heritage, suppression of the Russian language in public space.	Both are depicted as linguistic-cultural cleansing projects aimed at erasing Serb/Russian identity markers.
Deliberate state policy / movement	Prishtina accused of "deliberate policy of falsifying history," "forced albanization," glorifying KLA militants, suppressing Serbian presence.	Kyiv accused of "implementing Nazi methods," glorifying collaborators, promoting neo-Nazi ideology with state support.	Narrative of top-down deliberate repressive policy: state institutions actively constructing hostile nationalist projects.
Religious persecution	Persecution of Serbian Orthodox Church: >150 sites desecrated/destroyed since 1999; SOC institutions targeted.	Campaign against Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate): legislative bans, pressure from SBU, repression of clergy.	Both were framed as attacks on canonical Orthodox Churches and presented as cultural-spiritual repression by nationalist authorities.

THEME	KOSOVO (REPORT PORTRAYAL)	UKRAINE (REPORT PORTRAYAL)	PARALLELS SIMILARITIES
Security services / repressive apparatus	Kosovo police and institutions were described as instruments of intimidation, raids, and unlawful detentions (including minors).	Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) accused of pressuring clergy, banning communities, and persecuting Russian-affiliated groups.	Parallel claim: state security services as enforcers of discriminatory policy, targeting minorities and churches.
Historical memory / glorification	Kosovo authorities accused of rehabilitating WWII collaborators and glorifying KLA militants, while erasing anti-fascist monuments.	Ukraine is portrayed as glorifying Nazi collaborators, destroying/rewriting Soviet/Red Army memory, and whitewashing fascism.	Both accused of rewriting WWII history and glorifying "collaborators," while erasing Soviet/anti-fascist legacy.
International complicity	EU/NATO depicted as passive or complicit, with EU funding even tied to controversial projects.	EU/US depicted as ideological supporters of Ukraine, ignoring neo-Nazi tendencies and covering for repression.	Common theme: the West is enabling nationalist repression, by action (funding) or inaction (turning a blind eye).

Key parallels

1. The report consistently **frames both Kosovo and Ukraine through the same prism**: (a) a dominant state/authority pursuing deliberate cultural-political transformation, (b) a minority group presented as suffering systemic discrimination, and (c) Western actors depicted as complicit. The quotations show this matching rhetorical device (e.g., "forced 'albanization'" vs. "forced Ukrainization")

2. In both country sections, the report **links historical memory to present politics**: monuments, toponyms, and commemorations are used as focal evidence to argue contemporary political orientation (Kosovo: rehabilitating collaborators; Ukraine: broader "de-Sovietisation" and alleged toleration of neo-Nazism).

3. For Kosovo, the report uses granular local data (counts of closed offices, number of desecrated churches, expropriation cases) to build a **victimhood case**; for Ukraine it relies more on symbolic and ideological examples (commemorations, unit insignia, legal initiatives) to establish an **existential-ideological threat**. Both choices serve the

same interpretive purpose: **delegitimising the target authority**.

4. The report treats attacks on the **Serbian Orthodox Church** and measures against the **Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)** as structurally equivalent evidence of cultural-spiritual repression. Example quotes: Kosovo — "over 150 Orthodox churches... have been desecrated or destroyed in Kosovo since 1999." ; Ukraine — "the SBU... accuse the UOC churches of allegedly being the places of storage of weapons... Such 'arguments' underlie... calls to ban the UOC."

5. The report highlights police/quasi-police actions in Kosovo (raids, detentions) and the SBU/legal measures in Ukraine (letters, bans, seizures) as the **domestic enforcement apparatus implementing the broader policy**. Quotes: Kosovo — "Minors are detained and beaten by the 'police'..." ; Ukraine — "the SBU sent letters demanding... bans on religious communities."

6. In both country cases the report accuses local authorities of rehabilitating collaborators

and erasing anti-fascist memory (Kosovo: KLA/WWII collaborators; Ukraine: nationalist collaborators and public celebrations). These parallel accusations are used to **moralise contemporary politics**.

7. For Kosovo, the **blame is placed primarily on local Prishtina institutions** (with Western inaction criticised). For Ukraine the report assigns **responsibility to Kyiv and to Western partners more broadly** (portraying the West as complicit or instrumental).

8. The Kosovo section explicitly **cites EULEX and European Commission reports** as

documenting procedural and language-rights problems; the report uses such outside documents to substantiate local claims. For Ukraine, the report foregrounds **UN resolutions** and broader political speeches to argue that Western institutions reframed WWII memory.

9. Across both sections, the rhetorical function is to **delegitimise opposing political projects** (Kosovo independence institutions; Ukrainian state narratives) by linking them to either ethnic discrimination (Kosovo) or to historical falsification/neo-Nazi tolerance (Ukraine).

Understanding the machinery of Russian propaganda and disinformation

Many studies focus on tactical means and less on Russia's strategic approach to using its informational instrument of national power. The Ukrainian experience provides a broad picture of Russia's strategic approach. It is worth discerning at least five elements: (1) the machinery for disseminating information, which can be false or true; (2) ideological or other fundamentals on which the informational narratives are created; (3) narratives and other interpretations of events; electoral support for pro-Russian parties and candidates; (4) metaphors, metaphoric expressions, and other linguistic elements and

techniques; and (5) promoting Russian unifying pop culture.

The entire machinery can be provisionally divided into two integral parts: officially attributable and non-attributable parts. The non-attributable part encompasses anonymous or fake accounts, web pages that have no formal connections to the Russian state, and those created by puppet NGOs. Non-attributable does not mean that it is impossible to attribute, but it requires much effort to do so. Russia is capable of conducting many propaganda or disinformation campaigns simultaneously.

A. The machinery for disseminating information, which can be false or true

Russian TV channels

The Russian information-spreading machinery consists of state-owned or controlled traditional and social media and is strictly centralized. The largest subject that embraces TV and Radio broadcasters all over Russia is the VGTRK (ВГТРК) holding, which is oriented toward a domestic audience or Russian speakers in the near abroad. Another major actor is the Federal State Unitary Enterprise "International News Agency "Rossiya

Segodnya" (Russia Today or RT), and its subsidiary Sputnik, which primarily orient toward foreign audiences.

The first decisions regarding inspections and subsequent bans of the mentioned broadcasters in Ukraine began to be made by the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting (the National Council) starting from the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea in March

2014.[118] Some actions of the National Council were initiated by Members of Parliament and the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, and were also supported by court decisions..[119] Referring to national legislation and the provisions of the European Convention on Transfrontier Television, the National Council indicated that the reason for banning the TV channels was that the main theme and feature of their broadcasting was the promotion of exclusivity, superiority, and inferiority of individuals based on ideology or national belonging; the promotion of changing the constitutional order in Ukraine and its territorial integrity through the use of violence and the armed forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of sovereign Ukraine and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea; the dissemination of separatist appeals to the Russian Federation for assistance, including military aid; the justification by Russian politicians, government officials, and public figures of the Russian Federation's use of armed forces in Ukraine, as well as plans and possibilities for the annexation of territories belonging to Ukraine by Russia; incitement of interethnic and national hatred, that is, the spread of information about events in Ukraine that is biased, unfounded, and unbalanced, and which is essentially aimed at inciting national hatred.

Between 2014 and 2016, 73 Russian TV channels were banned in Ukraine,[120] and by 2023, this ban applied to more than 100 channels.[121]

Such a large number of Russian television media in Ukraine is due to Russia's real ability to easily influence the Ukrainian population through the media. Almost all Ukrainians understand the Russian language; the majority of the population studied it in school (especially before 2014) and used Russian-language sources during the educational process as well as in scientific, technical, and cultural activities. According to sociological research, at the beginning of the 1990s the ratio of language groups (Russian/Ukrainian) was approximately 55% to 45% in favor of Russian, and in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine it dominated at about 90%. Later, this ratio shifted toward the Ukrainian language, and by September 2014 it was 50-50.[122] Even as of 2024, about 30% of Ukrainians use both Russian and Ukrainian in their everyday lives, and in the eastern and southern regions this percentage is much higher.[123]

118   National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting, https://webportal.nrada.gov.ua/pervyj-kanal-vsemyrnaya-set-ne-vidpovidaye-vymogam-yevropejskoyi-konventsiyi-pro-transkordonne-telebachennya-i-zakonodavstva-ukrayiny/; Ukrinform, https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-other_news/1705492-v_ukraiini_zaboronili_15_rosiyskih_telekanaliv_spisok_1971134.html
119   Unified State Register of Court Decisions, https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/74322406#

120   Facebook page of National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting https://www.facebook.com/Nacrada/photos/a.587783271335276.1073741828.587761121337491/1003027049810894/?type=3&theater
121   Information on foreign television programs subject to restrictions on distribution in Ukraine https://webportal.nrada.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/obmezh_10.02.2023.doc
122   Yana Osadcha, Over the past four years, the number of Ukrainian-speaking citizens has grown by 8% – survey, January 2023, https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2023/01/9/252225/
123   Oleg Vaskiv, One-tenth of Ukrainian citizens communicate only in Russian — survey, August 2023, https://suspilne.media/557187-lise-desata-castina-gromadan-ukraini-spilkuetsa-viklucno-rosijskou-opituvanna/

Ukrainian TV channels that supported pro-Russian narratives

Understanding the consequences of banning Russian television channels, politicians supported by Russia acquired a number of Ukrainian national media outlets. For example, Member of Parliament from the "Opposition Bloc"[124] Taras Kozak purchased operating Ukrainian media:

112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK.[125] Immediately after the ownership of these channels changed, the composition of their management and, to some extent, their presenters also changed, and the content itself began to clearly reflect Russian narratives. It is worth noting that Taras Kozak is an associate of Viktor Medvedchuk, who is

124   A political force consisting of pro-Russian politicians who advocated close social and economic ties with Russia, protection of the Russian language, the church, etc.

125   Medvedchuk's ally, MP Kozak, bought ZIK, June 2019, https://epravda.com.ua/news/2019/06/14/648793/

Putin's compadre, organized initiatives aimed at reconciliation with Russia, and after the full-scale aggression, was exchanged to Russia for Ukrainian prisoners of war. In February 2021, the National Security and Defense Council imposed sanctions on Taras Kozak and, accordingly, on his media outlets[126]. Commenting on these actions, the Office of the President of Ukraine stated that the TV channels "have turned into tools of propaganda, which are used in the interests of the aggressor state. It has even been confirmed that these channels are financed from Russia.".[127]

Another example of a pro-Russian media outlet is the TV channel "NASH," which was sanctioned by the National Security and Defense Council on February 11, 2022. [128] The owner of the channel was Yevhen Murayev (a member of the Ukrainian parliament from 2012 to 2019), whom, according to British intelligence reports released at the end of January 2022, Russia wanted to install as the new head of the Ukrainian government by ousting the current authorities.[129] Interestingly, despite the ban on these TV channels, they continued broadcasting on **Youtube**, later changing their names but retaining the same management structure and loyal pro-Russian expert speakers. These experts shifted their rhetoric from openly pro-Russian to criticizing the Ukrainian government. [130]

126   Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 43/2021 On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine dated February 2, 2021, "On the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures (sanctions)" https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/432021-36441

127   BBC News, Zelenskyy "turned off" 112, ZIK, and NewsOne from the airwaves. What is known, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-55907449

128   Ukrainska Pravda, The National Security and Defense Council imposed sanctions against the TV channel "NASH", February 2022 https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/11/7323685/

129   BBC News, Who is Yevgeny Murayev, whom the Kremlin apparently sees as the new leader of the Ukrainian government?, January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-60115763

130   Telegram channel of the Center for Countering Disinformation, https://t.me/CenterCounteringDisinformation/9685

Russian social networks as an instrument of hybrid warfare

In addition to the suspension of television channel broadcasts, Russian social networks and platforms were also banned in Ukraine. Since May 2017, in accordance with a decision by the National Security and Defense Council, approved by a decree of the President of Ukraine, such social networks as "VKontakte" and "Odnoklassniki" have been prohibited. [131] An important prerequisite for this blocking was an event in 2014, when the FSB demanded that the co-founder of VKontakte, Pavel Durov, provide data on users who were participants in the Euromaidan. Even at that time, Russian special services were actively showing interest in social networks as a tool of influence not only over Russian citizens, but over the entire post-Soviet space. In addition, all products of the Yandex platform (browser, email, maps, taxi, etc.) and Mail.ru have also been banned in Ukraine.

The imposition of the ban was carried out through communication between security sector bodies and national Internet providers.

After the above-mentioned bans, Russia adapted its subversive influence on Ukrainian society by focusing on the use of the multi-platform messenger Telegram. The messenger quickly gained popularity among Ukrainians due to its convenience and the ability to create or join open Telegram channels. With the start of the large-scale aggression, Telegram played a major role in communication among Ukrainians, particularly in delivering government decisions and actions to the population in real time, providing notifications, feedback from the public, and more. As of 2024, there were 10 million Telegram users in Ukraine. According to a USAID/Internews survey, as of 2024, 81% of Ukrainians used the messenger for communication, and 73% used it as a source of news. Telegram poses a serious threat by spreading false information and destabilizing

131   Appendix 2 to the Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine dated April 28, 2017, "On the Application of Personal Special Economic and Other Restrictive Measures (Sanctions)" https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/00/40/30/6f76b8df9d0716da74bb4ae6a900d483_1494864914.pdf

Ukrainian society. [132] In particular, to achieve this goal, hundreds of Telegram channels operate under the coordination of the Kremlin.

About ten years ago, the "division of spheres of influence" in Russia's information space took place. At that time, all traditional media - including federal TV channels, news agencies, radio stations, and print publications - were assigned to Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexei Gromov, while Sergei Kiriyenko was appointed to oversee internet media and social networks, including "Telegram."[133]

Kiriyenko actively supports the activities of so-called "war correspondents"—Russian military reporters who cover events from pro-Kremlin positions. In 2022, he personally awarded several of them a national prize for online content, emphasizing the importance of their work in the information sphere.[134] Additionally, Kiriyenko oversees a network of autonomous non-profit organizations (ANO), such as the Institute for Internet Development and "Dialogue." These organizations are engaged in creating and disseminating propaganda content, including films, TV series, and other media projects aimed at reinforcing pro-Kremlin narratives and supporting the policies of the Russian leadership.

At the same time, it is Gromov who has repeatedly demonstrated his key role in the direct control of the information space. A telling incident occurred during an MFA of Russia briefing in November 2024, when a call was made to the ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova as ballistic strikes on Dnipro were being discussed.[135]

With the microphone on, it became evident she was instructed to avoid commenting on that issue. According to journalists, the call was made personally by Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexei Gromov, whose voice they recognized.[136] This illustrates a centralized system of censorship in which decisions about permitted or forbidden topics are made directly in the Kremlin.

In 2018, Russia officially announced the ban and blocking of the messenger, but the Kremlin proceeded to create its own "puppet" Telegram channels.[137] In this way, the Kremlin controls a number of channels, including "No Comments," "Life of Insects," "Iron Curtain," "Nomenklatura," "Minpravdy," "Superstitious Democracy," "Selection," "Lesonaval," and "What's Happening." The development and promotion of these channels were overseen by Presidential Administration contractor Kristina Potupchik. In 2019, her pool faced competition from the structure of Margarita Simonyan, who was luring away authors with higher fees and social benefits. This confrontation escalated into a scandal surrounding the battle for bloggers and highlighted internal rivalry within the Kremlin's propaganda environment.[138]

Russian influence via Telegram is not limited to Ukraine or Russian-speaking countries. Notably, there are Telegram channels that specialize in the situation in the Balkans and comment on events for a Russian-speaking audience, or spread information for the population of Balkan countries in their local languages (Serbian, Bulgarian, etc.). Among them are "Serbian Herald," "About Serbia in Russian," "Balkan Gossip," "Vaseljenska," "Social Impact," "Genocidal Entity.ba," "Slavic Bear," "Bunker," "Russian House in Belgrade," "Republic of Serbian Krajina," and others. Using typical models, such Telegram channels coordinate to spread similar thematic narratives, follow curator-set schedules for information dumps, and use local organizations, politicians, and traditional media to amplify their influence.

132   Examples: https://www.dw.com/uk/sbu-i-gur-specsluzbi-rf-aktivizuvali-informacijni-operacii-v-ukraini/a-71701020 https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3966672-rospropaganda-rozganae-video-nibito-vid-united24-z-fejkovim-zastupnikom-ministra-oboroni-ukraini-cpd.html ; https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-regions/3975758-policia-sprostuvala-cutki-pro-zahoplenna-teritorii-kievopecerskoi-lavri.html

133   RBC, Kirienko and Gromov divided up areas of media oversight, November 2016, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/11/2016/58341c319a79471ca4220674

134   Gala Sklyarevska, "Journalists with a Special Mission." Who Are Russia's Z- Military Correspondents, November 2022, https://glavcom.ua/digest/zhurnalisti-osoblivoho-priznachennja-khto-taki-rosijski-z-vojenkori-886718

135   Irina Sitnikova, Zakharova received orders during a briefing not to comment on the intercontinental ballistic missile strike on Ukraine (VIDEO), November 2024, https://hromadske.ua/polityka/234931-zakharova-prosto-pid-chas-bryfinhu-otrymala-nakaz-ne-komentuvaty-udar-mizkontynentalnoiu-balistykoiu-po-ukrayini-video

136   Telegram channel of Agentstvo. Novosti https://t.me/agentstvonews/8224

137   Ukrinform, Telegram unblocked in Russia, June 2020, https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-technology/3047911-u-rosii-rozblokuvali-telegram.html

138   Dossier, How the Kremlin stopped being afraid and learned to love Telegram, September 2024, https://dossier.center/tg/

Confirmation of suspicions regarding the control of "Telegram" by Kremlin representatives and Russian intelligence services has been repeatedly voiced by high-ranking Ukrainian officials. In particular, during a meeting of the National Cybersecurity Coordination Center (NCCC), the head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (GUR MO) Kyrylo Budanov provided substantiated data showing that Russian intelligence services have access to personal correspondence of Telegram users, including even deleted messages, as well as their personal data.[139] At the same time, representatives of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) noted that Telegram is actively used by the enemy for cyberattacks, spreading phishing and malicious software, pinpointing user geolocations, and adjusting missile strikes. The SBU had previously established, within relevant criminal proceedings, the involvement of a number of Telegram channels with Russian intelligence services. Specifically, these channels include "Legitimny", "Spletnitsa", "Kartel", "Resident", "Nablyudatel", "MediaPost", "Zhenshchina s kosoy", and others, with the list regularly updated. The SBU also pointed out that some of these channels order advertisements on Ukrainian public pages to promote themselves. The SBU publicly addressed the owners and editors of Ukrainian publications with a warning that supporting such resources constitutes aiding the enemy and will be prosecuted according to the law.[140]

One of the threats of Telegram, as highlighted by Ukrainian security agencies, is the difficulty in identifying the owner/administrator of a Telegram channel and the lack of prior content moderation by the developers (unlike Facebook). Another threat lies in the collection of user data. The platform operates in such a way that all messages, before being delivered to the recipient, are first sent to a server and stored there. Telegram uses only companies of Russian origin for its network traffic transmission. Network administrators can control the traffic — prioritizing or monitoring it (measuring its volume and types of data). Such companies include RETN and LLC GLOBALNET. Both are of Russian origin.[141]

Many Telegram servers are located in the Russian Federation and may become accessible to Russian security services. It has been reported that Telegram shares data with Russian authorities as part of investigations into terrorism-related crimes. In the context of Ukraine, any person who upholds Ukrainian values, territorial integrity, and the principles of democracy could be recognized as a terrorist in Russia, especially government officials and civic activists. Thus, Russian security services' access to information on Telegram is effectively unlimited. For example, Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, has pointed out that Russian security services have access to users' private messages on Telegram, even deleted messages, as well as their personal data. The creation of special software for gathering information on Telegram has also been reported by The New York Times.[142]

In 2024, with the aim of minimizing these threats, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC) made the decision to ban the installation and use of Telegram on official devices belonging to employees of government agencies, military personnel, security and defense sector staff, as well as enterprises - operators of critical infrastructure. The only exception applies to those individuals for whom the use of this messenger is part of their official duties.[143]

Given the number of Telegram users in Russia (over 40 million people), it is important not to neglect the potential for a mirror effect on Russian society itself. In the context of hybrid warfare, Telegram and other Russian social networks can be effectively used against Russia on its own territory and in communication with its population

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139   Facebook page of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, https://www.facebook.com/rnbou/posts/pfbid02XozkEVd5JWi4G9p3z8L1VHjzoM6aq1Fm-6VpuppjYfMtB76muUmTfjaiiZrHQZ3tfl

140   Security Service of Ukraine, Joint statement on protecting Ukraine's information space from hostile Russian Telegram channels, July 2022, https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/spilna-zaiava-z-pryvodu-zakhystu-informatsiinoho-prostoru-ukrainy-vid-rosiiskykh-vorozhykh-telehramkanaliv

141   LB.ua, The Russian Enigma of the 21st Century: How Telegram Is Connected to the Kremlin, January 2024 https://lb.ua/news/2024/01/25/595217_rosiyska_enigma_hhi_storichchya_yak.html

142   Aaron Krolik, Paul Mozur and Adam Satariano, Cracking Down on Dissent, Russia Seeds a Surveillance Supply Chain, June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/03/technology/russia-ukraine-surveillance-tech.html

143   National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/ua/Diialnist/6994.html

- a fact confirmed by the experiences of Ukrainian special services.[144] Open sources provide examples of successful information operations conducted to influence Russian society, organized by Ukrainian security and defense agencies.

144 Maria Vlasova, The Main Directorate of Intelligence warned about Telegram's cooperation with Russian special services, July 2024, https://news.online.ua/u-gur-poperedili-pro-vzajemodiiu-telegram-z-specsluzbami-rf-881838/

Russia's use of proxies to enhance its influence in Europe

Russian influence is manifested not only through direct control from the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, but also via a network of pro-Russian agents operating at the intersection of media, politics, and business, endangering not only Ukraine's sovereignty but also Europe's information security. For example, the exposure in the Czech Republic of a network led by Viktor Medvedchuk, a former MP from the "Opposition Platform – For Life" party, confirms the scale of this influence operation: he used Artem Marchevsky and the Voice of Europe website to "undermine the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and freedom of Ukraine." It has been reported that through these resources, the Kremlin financed candidates in the European Parliament elections, managed journalists, and spread propagandistic narratives. For Czech intelligence, uncovering this operation was one of their greatest successes. However, it is also a serious warning that there may be dozens or even hundreds of such networks across Europe, shaping EU politics and the integrity of NATO.[145]

145 Iryna Matviishyn, Russian network of influence headed by Medvedchuk. What does the exposure in the Czech Republic reveal? March 2024, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/chekhiya-rosiya-medvedchuk-sanktsiyi/32883691.html

B. Ideological or other fundamentals on which the informational narratives are created;

Russia has developed a concept widely known as the "Russian World." One dimension of this concept aims to establish a foundation for interference, intervention, or invasion in other countries based on historical and cultural conditions. They encompass a religious component; in other words, one more foundation for justifying Russia's aggressive actions abroad and propaganda efforts accompanying such actions. In 2009, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church described the concept of the Russian World as follows:

> It goes beyond the state boundaries of the Russian Federation and includes Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.

> The Orthodox faith is at the heart of the Russian world. Ukrainians and Russians had the common "Kyivan font of baptism." St. Volodymyr (Vladimir), Prince of Kyiv Rus, the state situated on the territory of modern Ukraine, joined the ancestors of Ukrainians and Russians to the family of Christian nations and, ostensively, began to build a powerful united Russia.

> Russian culture and language are other pillars of the Russian world. Russian culture can belong to a Russian, a Tatar, a Ukrainian, or a Georgian because it has absorbed the traditions of many peoples. Russian culture is a phenomenon that does not fit within the borders of a single state or ethnicity.

> Another basis of the "Russian World" is a common historical memory and view of the societal development of the population living in the Russian World space. These people, ostensibly, have a strong consciousness of the continuity of the Russian state and societal tradition, starting from the time of Kyivan Rus and ending in present-day Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and other countries in the

historical domain of Rus.[146]

The Russian Patriarch's vision vividly matches that of President Putin. In 2004, the Russian president, during his visit to Kyiv, Ukraine, said, "We in Russia know what the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is, we have not forgotten and will never forget that in the Dnipro [River] font Prince Volodymyr baptized Rus. It is not by chance that it was called Kyivan Rus and Holy Rus for a long time. Nowadays, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is a symbol of the spiritual unity of Russia and Ukraine". In 2013, President Putin, along with Patriarch Kirill, came to Kyiv to celebrate the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Rus. Notably, the festive prayer service was conducted by the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, with the participation of leaders of Orthodox churches from Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia, as well as the presidents of those countries.[147]

In 2014, when Russia occupied the Ukrainian Crimea Peninsula, the President of Russia used religious grounds again to justify the occupation by referring to St. Volodymyr, Prince of Kyivan Rus, who was baptized in a place known as Chersonese. Putin then stated that Prince Volodymyr's spiritual feat, conversion to Orthodoxy, predetermined the common cultural, value, and civilizational basis that united the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. He also mentioned that in Crimea are the graves of Russian soldiers, whose courage in Crimea in 1783 was taken under the Russian power, and many other places sacred to Russia, which are symbols of Russian military glory and unprecedented valor.[148]

Many parallels can be found in Serbia's political concepts regarding territories historically connected to Serbia's predecessor states. Some scholars, experts, and politicians have titled such a Serbian approach, analogically to the Russian world, as the "Serbian World" concept. Serbia's attitude toward Kosovo is the most principal and vocal example of the Serbian World Concept.

It is appropriate to compare the two concepts to highlight their similarities and to assume what actions are possible or impossible and how to prevent the development of the worst-case scenario of armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo.

It is obvious that the "Serbian World" goes beyond the borders of Serbia. The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (RS or Serbia) read that "preservation of the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live, as well as of national minorities and their cultural, religious and historical identity are conditions for the survival of the Republic of Serbia, the diaspora and the Serbs abroad, as well as Republika Srpska as an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina in accordance with the Dayton Agreement."[149] A similar declaration by the Republic of Serbia is found in its Defense Strategy: "The preservation of peace and security in the region and the world is significant for the security and stability of the Republic of Serbia and for its overall development. This enables the development of all parts of the society, building confidence and cooperation between states, peoples and citizens, as well as enhancing the security of diaspora and Serbs abroad."[150] Referring to the Defense Strategy of national interests abroad, the RS means using its military instrument of power beyond its borders.

Serbian ruling political elites and the Serbian Orthodox Church, like their Russian analogies, have been acting jointly, using history and religion as tools to influence Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other Balkan countries to undermine their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The central element of Serbian narratives regarding Kosovo is the Battle of Kosovo, which occurred in 1389. This battle took place near present-day Pristina, where the forces under the command of Serbian Prince Lazar clashed with the Turkish army. The defeat of the Serbs and their allies effectively ended their autonomous statehood for over four centuries. In 1933,

146   Russian Orthodox Church, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/96616

147   Website of the President of Russia, Celebration of the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus, July 27, 2013, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18958

148   Website of the President of Russia, Address by the President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

149   National security strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog2_strategijanacionalnebezbednostirs_eng_1731678276.pdf

150   Defence strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog4_strategijaodbraners_eng_1731678348.pdf

Nikola Velimirovich published a religious and philosophical essay titled "Tsar's Covenant". The essay is dedicated exclusively to Prince Lazar and the battle. According to the myth, a messenger from God appeared to Prince Lazar and offered him a choice between earthly and heavenly kingdoms. Lazar opted for the Kingdom of Heaven and eternal salvation for himself and his people, leading his troops into battle despite knowing that they would be defeated and perish. Prince Lazar was canonized as an Orthodox saint by the late 14th century.

Since the 19th century, when Serbian nationalism in to emerge, the themes of Kosovo, "Heavenly Serbia," and the notion of Serbian exceptionalism have played a significant role in shaping Serbian national identity. According to Nikola Velimirovich, "It is Kosovo that made the Serbs a great nation. It is our national Golgotha, but at the same time our national resurrection, spiritual and moral". Nikola Velimirovich was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2003. The Russian Orthodox Church also recognized him and included his name in the Monthly Calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church, with the celebration of his memory on April 20 (the day of the transfer of his relics), as established in the Serbian Orthodox Church. Nikola Velimirovich is known in Russia as Nikolay Serbskiy, and dozens of his essays have been translated into Russian. The legend of the Battle of Kosovo is well known in Russia and is reflected in mass culture. A Russian rock star – Valeriy Kipelov, which is a headliner of regular symbolic Russian Rock Festival in Crimea since it was occupied by Russia, recorded a song titled "Kosovo battlefield" (Rus.Косово поле) in 2014, the year of Russian occupation of the peninsula.

The song is extremely popular in both Russia and Serbia and was performed in Belgrade in 2021. To illustrate the emotion that the song recalled, one of the comments is listed below:

"Thank you, Russian brothers, for this wonderful song. I cried with it. The sad thing is that 90% of Serbs love Russians and Russia, but our politicians want to join EU and NATO, as if forgetting what those villains did to us in 1999 and 1991-1995."[151]

"Creation of the Serbian World is the task of current generation of politicians, in which the Serbs will live and be united" said then Minister of Defense Alexandar Vulin in July 2021 in the presence of Serbian President Alexandar Vuchich, who also made a speech there.[152] "People who have no experience with their soldier, with their policeman, have no rights. There is no right to refuse a merger or unification, and there is no right to refuse the "Serbian World". For the "Serbian World" to be united, Serbia must be economically successful, well governed, have an army that can defend it, and the Serbs wherever they live. To preserve such a Serbia, we must do everything we can to continue Aleksandar Vuchich's policy. "Only this, only this means victory, only this is the guarantee of our nation's survival and nothing else," Vulin then said.[153]

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151   Dzen.ru, Serbs listened to Valery Kipelov's song "Kosovo Pole." Their reaction, December 2021, https://dzen.ru/a/YZdMpkMQ1lG8q_r4

152   N1, Vulin: Creating 'Serb world' is task of this generation of politicians, July 2021, https://n1info.rs/english/news/vulin-creating-serb-world-is-task-of-this-generation-of-politicians/

153   N1, Vulin: Creating 'Serb world' is task of this generation of politicians, July 2021, https://n1info.rs/english/news/vulin-creating-serb-world-is-task-of-this-generation-of-politicians/

C. Narratives and other interpretations of events; and electoral support for pro-Russian parties and candidates

To develop narratives that influence a targeted individual, group, or society, a comprehensive analysis of their vulnerabilities must be conducted. Societal fissures, divisions, or tensions must be identified prior to the formulation of information or disinformation campaigns or operations.

Russian actions online became particularly aggressive after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, specifically targeting the discrediting of

Ukraine and weakening international support. In the CENSS study "Monitoring the Coverage in the Russian Segment of Social Networks and Media of the Topic Regarding Alleged Ukrainian-Origin Weapons in the Possession of the Terrorist Organization 'HAMAS'," conducted in 2023, typical stages of Russian information operations were identified: preparation (warming up the topic), selection of facts or creation of fabricated

statements, the initial "leak," amplification through multiple channels, and legitimization by official representatives of the Russian Federation.[154] Official representatives of the Russian Federation often use data from Telegram channel publications, quoting or confirming them, thereby creating the impression that these are credible claims rather than disinformation. The political life of Ukraine, particularly the conduct of elections, has traditionally been within Russia's strategic interests, which seek to promote Kremlin-loyal individuals to power. The most illustrative example of such interference was the 2004 presidential elections, which culminated in the Orange Revolution.[155] Russia viewed the 2004 emergence of the pro-Western presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko as a threat. Throughout the entire election campaign, Russia used all available influence tools to support the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych. Issues of national identity, European/Eurasian integration, and the status of the Russian language were used by the Russian Federation during the 2004 election campaign to divide Ukrainian society. The goal was to consolidate voters from the east, south, and partly the center, whose numbers exceeded those of voters in Ukraine's western regions. The main emotion invoked was fear of the rise of a politician (Viktor Yushchenko) supposedly holding Nazi and Russophobic views, who allegedly disrespected the population of the east and south. An example of this is a leaflet about three sorts of Ukrainians, allegedly distributed on behalf of Viktor Yushchenko.

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154   Monitoring the coverage in Russian segment of social networks and the media regarding weapons supposedly originating from Ukraine and being at the disposal of the HAMAS terrorist organization, CENSS, https://censs.org/monitoring-coverage-russian-segment-social-networks-media-regarding-weapons-supposedly-originating-ukraine-disposal-hamas-terrorist-organization/?lang=en

155   BBC News, How Putin lost the election in Ukraine and it changed Russia forever, November 2024, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c98dzyrddwpo

Moscow placed its bet on Viktor Yanukovych, leveraging administrative resources, media advantages, and enlisting Russian political strategists. In particular, Gleb Pavlovsky, who worked for the Kremlin, coordinated information messages and campaigns against Viktor Yushchenko, demonstrating Russia's intention to establish a controlled political regime in Ukraine.[156] State-run and pro-Russian media became important instruments of influence, providing Yanukovych with mostly positive coverage and more airtime, while Yushchenko remained

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156   BBC News, How Putin lost the election in Ukraine and it changed Russia forever, November 2024, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c98dzyrddwpo

relatively in the media shadows.[157] A high-profile event during the election campaign was Yushchenko's dioxin poisoning during his meeting with SBU Deputy Head Volodymyr Satsyuk;[158] the falsification of the second round of elections followed this. Ultimately, after the third round of elections, Viktor Yushchenko emerged victorious; however, Moscow did not abandon its goal of controlling Ukraine's political life. After the events of 2004, when the Kremlin suffered a political defeat in its attempt to promote its candidate, Russia changed its tactics and intensified cooperation with internal political forces in Ukraine. Instead of direct interference, the focus shifted to supporting existing parties and establishing new political projects, led by notorious figures with openly pro-Russian views. For example, this list includes Viktor Medvedchuk, Yevhen Murayev, Vadym Novynskyi, Vadym Rabinovych, Yuriy Boyko, Oleksandr Vilkul, Volodymyr Saldo, among others. Their activities aimed to legitimize Russian narratives

in Ukraine's socio-political landscape and to form a "fifth column" for the Kremlin. For instance, Yevhen Murayev, through control of the "Nash" TV channel, broadcast messages synchronized with Russian government rhetoric, creating an information environment favorable to the Russian Federation.[159] Oligarch Vadym Novynskyi, using economic and religious levers, financed the UOC-MP, effectively reinforcing Russian influence in the spiritual sphere.[160] Vadym Rabinovych stood out not only for his anti-European rhetoric and public visits to Moscow after 2014, but also for publishing a map of Ukraine without Crimea, symbolically legitimizing the occupation.[161] In 2023, he was charged with state treason. Overall, hundreds and thousands of associates of these individuals worked to undermine Ukraine's national security and sovereignty.

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157   Presidential elections in Ukraine. October 31, November 21, and December 26, 2004. Final Report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Warsaw, May 11, 2005 https://www.cvk.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2004_osce_pu.pdf

158   BBC News, The poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko could have been ordered personally by Putin. US intelligence declassified the report, November 2024, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cn4vnjyq9dxo

159   Ukrainska Pravda, After the closure of the "NASH" channel, Murayev threatened Zelensky and announced a protest, February 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/11/7323697/

160   BBC News, The Novinsky case. Why was the "main sponsor" of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate punished?, April 2023, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-65185793

161   Violetta Orlova, An odious ally of Medvedchuk, instead of working in the Verkhovna Rada, went to Moscow and posted a photo from the Kremlin, October 2021, https://www.unian.ua/politics/odiozniy-soratnik-medvedchuka-zamist-roboti-v-radi-pojihav-do-moskvi-y-pokazav-foto-z-kremlya-novini-ukrajina-11581828.html

D. Metaphors, metaphoric expressions, and other linguistic elements and techniques

Russian disinformation functions as a structured, state-coordinated communication system that mirrors many principles of terrorist propaganda. It is driven by state institutions such as Россотрудничество (Rossotrudnichestvo), the Government Commission on Compatriots Abroad, and parliamentary committees on the CIS and "compatriots," which coordinate influence operations abroad. These efforts are ideologically grounded in the concept of the "Russian world," a doctrine used to justify cultural and political interference in neighboring states, including Ukraine. Through networks of proxy organizations, loyal media, and pseudo-cultural initiatives, these structures promote narratives that reinforce Moscow's political goals.

The process of Russian information operations

follows a defined logic. First, the informational environment is "heated" by maintaining constant attention to divisive topics. Then fabricated or distorted facts are introduced through loyal outlets. The next stage involves massive amplification via Telegram networks and affiliated media channels, after which the narrative gains legitimacy when Russian officials or state media present it as a verified fact. Examples include the false "Lisa case" in Germany, disinformation about "Ukrainian refugees involved in prostitution," narratives on "persecution of Russian speakers," and the delegitimization of Ukraine's president and mobilization campaign. These operations are designed to shape emotions rather than convey truth, appealing to fear, resentment, and fatigue among audiences.

A notable linguistic dimension of these campaigns is the strategic use of metaphors and metaphorical expressions to shape perception. Russian propaganda frequently employs historical and emotional frames such as "fascism," "denazification," "Stalingrad," "Blietzkrieg," or "Armageddon" to cast the conflict in moral and existential terms. Such language simplifies complex realities into binary oppositions of "good" and "evil," evoking familiar cultural archetypes and encouraging emotional rather than rational responses. The repetition of these metaphors across media platforms creates semantic saturation, where terms lose factual meaning and become emotionally loaded identifiers of loyalty.

Similarly, non-official discourse often uses dehumanizing or mocking labels - "Ukrops," "Nazis," "Banderivtsi," or "Khokhols"- to delegitimize Ukrainians and normalize aggression. This mirrors the linguistic techniques used by terrorist organizations to construct in-groups and out-groups, reinforcing social polarization and moral justification for violence. In both cases, language functions not simply as a vehicle for information but as an instrument of cognitive control.

In such an environment, media systems with weak internal safeguards are particularly vulnerable to this kind of linguistic manipulation. Outlets that lack editorial standards or critical oversight can unintentionally amplify hostile narratives simply by repeating or debating them. The combination of emotionally charged language, repetition, and selective framing creates an illusion of widespread consensus and moral urgency.

Counteraction, therefore, must focus not only on verifying facts but also on deconstructing language and narrative structures. As with countering terrorist propaganda, effective resistance to Russian disinformation requires editorial discipline, professional ethics, and a deep understanding of how metaphors and framing devices shape public consciousness. The Vienna Declaration on Terrorism, Media and Legislation underscores the role of voluntary self-regulation and professional standards in preserving media integrity while avoiding excessive state control.

In sum, **Russian disinformation constitutes linguistic and psychological warfare.** By combining institutional coordination with emotional and symbolic manipulation, it seeks to redefine reality, erode trust, and polarize societies. Its success depends less on persuasion than on the gradual distortion of meaning through repeated metaphors, dehumanizing labels, and simplified moral dichotomies. Combating it requires not only factual accuracy but also narrative and linguistic resilience, an awareness of how words and images are used as weapons in the information domain.

E. Promoting Russian unifying pop culture

One of the key mechanisms of Russia's soft power in Ukraine has remained propaganda through pop culture, which has shaped a shared cultural space and reduced critical attitudes toward Russian political narratives. In the 1990s and 2000s, TV series about police officers ("Streets of Broken Lights," "Cops Wars," "Nevsky," "Silver Spoon"), as well as shows about the military and special services ("Cadetship," "Seventeen Moments of Spring," "The 9th Company," "Alex Luty"), were extremely popular. These productions were focused on glorifying Soviet institutions, reinforcing the Soviet-Russian image of the "protector" and "order" in the minds of Ukrainians. Mass-produced media about World War II ("Battle for Sevastopol," "Only 'Old Men' Are Going to Battle," "The Star," "The Cuckoo," "Stalingrad") presented the Soviet version of history as the only "correct" one, pushing aside the Ukrainian perspective and diminishing the role of the national resistance movement. Projects like "Namely" integrated Soviet and Russian history, creating a sense of nostalgia for a "shared history."[162] Equally important were shows such as "Goluboy Ogonyok" and numerous concerts on radio and television, which became an integral part of holiday traditions and enhanced the sense of "cultural unity" with Russia.[163] Overall, this vast array of Russian content was unrivaled in the Ukrainian information space; domestic products did not enjoy the same popularity in the 1990s and 2000s. Currently, with sanctions imposed on TV channels and bans on broadcasting Russian-language content, the influence has significantly diminished, but it has not disappeared completely.

Also, the concept that "Music is beyond politics" was a destructive myth in Ukraine, definitively shattered by the Russian invasion in February 2022. While Ukraine experienced a vibrant, independent Ukrainian-language Pop Renaissance in the

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162   See: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBJYFBfGLlylJ-c_OuYpfopzcTUIbKHtl
163   See: https://share.google/AZfX5wzgUEWn7HoEk

1990s, the 2000s saw a "Bought Renaissance." Russia charged significantly higher fees to lure top Ukrainian artists and producers, prompting them to switch to Russian and operate within a Moscow-centric cultural space. This was a strategic political move, leveraging artists as "informational collaborators" to push the narrative of a "single cultural space" and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. Much like the Soviet regime's suppression of Ukrainian urban music in the 1970s, this co-option was designed to prevent the consolidation of a modern, independent Ukrainian identity. The full-scale war forced a reckoning, compelling former Russian-market artists to join the military, confirming that culture has always been a key domain of geopolitical struggle and national identity assertion.

VII. RUSSIAN WORLD AND RELIGION

The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's Hybrid and Conventional Warfare against Ukraine

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has a subsidiary in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)[164]. Despite its title, the latter should be seen as a subsidiary of the ROC and, when it comes to hybrid threats and hybrid warfare, as proxies of the ROC. The ROC has actively supported Russia's aggression against Ukraine in several key ways.

The ROC is a crucial tool of Russia's foreign policy, often used to project soft power and promote the concept of Russkiy mir. This ideology portrays Russia as the spiritual and cultural center of a civilization that includes post-Soviet countries, the Balkans, Ukraine, Belarus, and the global Russian diaspora.

The ROC is portrayed not merely as a religious institution but as an integral part of Russia's state-sponsored hybrid warfare and propaganda machine, particularly in Europe. The church actively supports Russian military aggression and acts as a network for spreading Kremlin influence beyond Russia's borders.

Beyond politics, the Russian Orthodox Church's influence is also cultural and educational. It maintains a network of centers, parishes, and schools that serve as hubs for the preservation of the Russian language and culture. These activities are critical for maintaining a sense of community among the Russian diaspora. The church supports language courses and educational programs, ensuring that the Russian language and history are passed down to younger generations. Parishes, cultural centers, and events like film festivals, concerts, and exhibitions of Russian art celebrate and perpetuate Russian cultural heritage, from traditional music to religious art. The church also engages in humanitarian aid and missionary activities abroad, which serve to build a positive image and expand its influence. A notable recent example is its expansion into Africa, where it has established new parishes and missions.

Ideological support for political, military, and paramilitary actions:

> Promotes the "Russian World" ideology to claim authority over Russian-speaking, Orthodox, and "historical" territories.

> It openly denies and challenges Ukraine's political legitimacy, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

> Patriarch Kirill, ROC's head, openly and directly supports Russia's military actions and declared that death in the war "washes away all sins."[165]

> In March 2024, the Head of ROC officially declared the war a "sacred" one and supported Russia's claims over the Ukrainian territory.[166]

> The ROC's priests blessed both military equipment and personnel.

Propaganda operational support:

> The ROC and UOC public statements favoring and justifying the aggression.

> The UOC and its clerics disseminated leaflets and other printed materials as well as posts on social media to favor and justify the aggression.

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164   It must not be confused with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine that does not have any ties with the ROC.

165   Ukrainska Pravda, Kirill stated that death in the war against Ukraine "washes away all sins", September 2023, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/09/25/7369023/

166   BBC News, Patriarch Kirill's council declared a "holy war" in Ukraine and called the West "demonic." What do the Ukrainian Orthodox Church -Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine say about this?, March 2024, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c6pexzlw4w0o

Organizational and logistical operational support for Russian military and paramilitary formations and units:

> The UOC properties were used as transit hubs for paramilitary activities, as documented in Crimea.

> UOC properties were used for weapon caches.

> UOC officials collaborated with occupying forces immediately after they captured Ukrainian territories to establish full Russian control.

Intelligence and reconnaissance support through UOC networks:

> By late 2022, Ukrainian security services had identified 33 ROC-affiliated clergy acting as agents and artillery spotters.[167]

> UOC members were caught providing intelligence on Ukrainian military positions.

Material evidence has been found in UOC premises, including pro-Russian propaganda materials, Russian passports of priests, documentation of collaboration with Moscow-based intelligence handlers, and anti-Ukrainian instructional materials and weapon caches.

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167   Interfax-Ukraine, Acting Head of the Security Service of Ukraine on hostile threats in the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate): 33 suspected agents and spotters in cassocks, October 2022 https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/868335.html

Specific Case of the Russian State's Approach to Keeping Its Presence in Ukraine through the ROC's Subsidiary

Russia has cleverly exploited the vulnerabilities intrinsic to democratic societies. One of these is the high level of religious freedom. Democratic politicians and ordinary people often cannot discern the difference between genuinely religious organizations and state power in the form of such organizations. This is a difficult task, especially if a state is willing to conceal its intention to exert its power to influence or weaken another state. The line between the two is sometimes blurred.

If someone looks at the ROC activities regarding Ukraine that were previously described in this report, they will understand that this organization is an instrument of the Russian state. Therefore, it is natural to affirm that the presence of the ROC in Ukraine is the goal of the Russian state. Monasteries play an outstanding role in this regard.

There are three large and significant Orthodox monasteries in Ukraine called Lavras: Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (monastery since the 11th century, Lavra status since 1598), Pochaiv Lavra (monastery since the 16th century, Lavra status since 1833), and Svyatohirsk Lavra (since 2004). The Ukrainian state owns all Lavras premises. The first two Lavras were rented out to the UOC by the pro-Russian government of Ukraine led by Viktor Yanukovich, and the third by the same politician during his tenure as governor of the appropriate region.

Interestingly, the Lavra status of the Svyatohirsk Monastery may be given in reference to underlining the significance of the Eastern Part of Ukraine, which likely had a political dimension. A pro-Russian candidate for the Ukrainian Presidency in 2004, then Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, said in July of the same year that[168] he was dreaming about the status. Yanukovich initiated the revival of the Svyatohirsk Monastery in 1994, when he was the governor of the Donetsk region of Ukraine, and concurrently headed the board of trustees overseeing the restoration of churches destroyed during the totalitarian regime.[169]

When the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod decided in March 2004, it announced: "In

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168   Ukrainska Pravda, The grateful head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate campaigns for Yanukovych, July 2004, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2004/07/29/4380189/
169   Ibid.

view of the great influence of the Holy Dormition Sviatohirsk Monastery on the revival of the spirituality of the Donetsk region and eastern Ukraine in the historical past and at present, and to promote the unification of believers around canonical Orthodoxy, to grant the status of 'Lavra' to the Sviatohirsk Monastery and to approve the title 'Holy Dormition Sviatohirsk Lavra.'"[170] In April 2004, the then-head of the ROC, Alexy II, approved the decision of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The UOC named the event as "of paramount importance not only for Donbas but for the whole of Ukraine."[171]

In April 2024, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) documented the subversive activities of Metropolitan Arseniy, the abbot of the Sviatohirsk Lavra of the UOC. According to the investigation, the cleric "handed over" the location of the checkpoints of the Ukrainian Defense Forces in the Donetsk region to the Russian Armed Forces. It happened during his liturgy, as he told the parishioners the addresses of the Ukrainian troops' checkpoints under video recording. The video was later published on Lavra's website and in a local group on the Telegram channel. In this way, the cleric tried to disguise the "leak" of the locations of Ukrainian checkpoints in the frontline area to the aggressor. According to the investigation, the Metropolitan had been expressing pro-Kremlin narratives about the war in Ukraine even before Russia's full-scale invasion. This is evidenced by repeated interviews with the vicar, in which he called Russia's armed aggression a "civil conflict."[172]

The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is the most significant spiritual and historical center, as it is considered by many to be the informal capital of Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy. The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra was established in the 11th century, predating Moscow by approximately 100 years. It is considered the source of the monastic tradition in Rus and contains the graves of many important religious and historical figures. During searches in 2022, Ukrainian security services found pro-Russian propaganda materials, Russian passports of priests, and evidence of collaboration with Russia in Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, leading to the abandonment of the rent.

In July 2023, the SBU uncovered subversive actions against Ukraine by Pavlo, the abbot of Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, of the UOC. It was recorded that just before the SBU issued him the initial suspicion notice, the Metropolitan participated in a video interview with a Ukrainian media outlet. During this interview, he refuted the notion of Ukraine as an independent nation and described Russian military aggression against Ukraine as a "civil conflict" ongoing since 2014. Based on the evidence gathered, SBU investigators informed the Metropolitan of a new suspicion involving (1) repeated violations of citizen equality based on religious beliefs by an official and (2) justification, acknowledgment of legitimacy, and denial of the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine through repeated actions by an official.[173]

The clerics of the Pochaiv Lavra were also revealed to be Russian agents. For example, in December 2022, the SBU served a notice of suspicion to the rector of the Pochayiv Theological Seminary of the UOC. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) reported that it had gathered indisputable evidence of the head of the Pochayiv Theological Seminary's guilt in anti-Ukrainian activities. It read that the archbishop distributed "posts" on social media that humiliated the national honor and dignity of the Ukrainians. According to the SBU, he also contributed to the incitement of religious hatred and enmity. To "disperse" the destructive content, the institution's rector used an anonymous Facebook profile, and to prepare his "publications," he drew on Russian propagandists' narratives. In addition, during searches at the suspect's place of residence and in the seminary premises, law enforcement officers found literature that repeated the Kremlin's "theses" on the internal situation in Ukraine. The archbishop was notified of a suspicion of violation of the equality of citizens based on their race, nationality,

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170   Holy Dormition Svyatogorsk Lavra, Church-wide celebrations on the occasion of granting the Svyatogorsk Monastery the status of Lavra, 2004, https://svlavra.church.ua/istoriya/novitnya-istoriya/zagalnocerkovni-urochistosti-z-nagodi-nadannya-svyatogirskomu-monastiryu-statusu-lavri/

171   Ibid.

172   Security Service of Ukraine, The Security Service of Ukraine announced that it had notified the Metropolitan of the Svyatogorsk Lavra that he was suspected of "tipping off" Russian forces about the positions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Donetsk Oblast, April 2024, https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-povidomyla-pro-pidozru-mytropolytu-sviatohirskoi-lavry-yakyi-pidkazav-rashystam-pozytsii-zsu-na-donechchyni

173   Telegram channel of Security Service of Ukraine, https://t.me/SBUkr/8958

region, and religious beliefs.[174]

Russia had a historically close relationship with Slavic populations, with whom it shared the same religion and historical memory. This relationship allowed it to connect closely with Western Balkan countries, particularly Slavic countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The Russian influence in Albania is minimal, and in Kosovo, it is mainly through the Serbian population living in Kosovo, and its impact is more about Kosovo, as it uses the case of Kosovo as a narrative against the West and the NATO intervention in Kosovo.[175] The Orthodox Church is one of Russia's primary mechanisms for maintaining the idea of "brotherhood" and gaining support from Slavic populations in the region.[176]

Russia has often linked political events with religious narratives, particularly by framing the West as a threat to Orthodox Christianity. For example, in 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that "Christians have suffered and continue to suffer from geopolitical experiments carried out by countries of the so-called historical West." He also reminded his audience that two decades earlier, "NATO committed an act of aggression against Yugoslavia, which resulted not only in the death of civilians, but also in the exodus of Orthodox Christians from Kosovo and the desecration and destruction of cathedrals and shrines in this Serbian land."[177] This type of rhetoric serves to strengthen Russia's ties with political elites, the Orthodox Church, and specific groups in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, particularly among Serb communities.[178] By portraying itself as the protector of the "Orthodox brotherhood" against Western influence, Russia

seeks to offer an alternative ideological narrative to Western liberal values, presenting its support as a religious and cultural mission rather than purely political intervention. As mentioned above, Russia seeks to strengthen this Orthodox Brotherhood also by targeting Slavic minorities in WB countries such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina by presenting them as the primary protector of the "Slavic World".

Russia's interest in the Western Balkans has grown, primarily to block the EU's, especially NATO's, integration of these countries. It seeks to expand its influence by exploiting the region's fragile economic, social, and political environment. Additionally, Russia has effectively used religious and identity-based narratives to strengthen its position. For example, while Russia is a significant investor in Serbia, the EU remains the largest investor in the country. Despite this, 95 % of Serbs see Russia as a faithful ally, compared to only 11 % who see the EU that way, even though the EU is Serbia's significant financial supporter.[179] Mainly due to the so-called "protector narrative" that portrays Russia as Serbia's key ally and defender.

The tendency to engage with Muslim communities through anti-Western and anti-secular messaging. Enhancing Russia's strategies and tools for influence among Muslim populations (e.g., Kadyrov's activities with Muslim communities abroad; case study from Ukraine: engagement with Muslim communities in Crimea).

Aware of the region's religious and ethnic weaknesses, Russia is leaning on the anti-Western, Islamic opposition to achieve its aims. This opposition operates in some Western Balkan countries, rejecting the European integration process as "Western imperialism" and condemning it for imposing foreign, decadent, liberal values on the Islamic world. These ideologues argue that the Islamic world shares more values with Eastern Orthodoxy than with the Western world.

They claim that Russia is close to the Muslim world, while stoking interethnic conflicts within the region, and their goal is to prevent the integration of Western Balkan countries into the EU and

174   Telegram channel of Security Service of Ukraine, https://t.me/SBUkr/6165

175   Alfred Marleku and Dafina Aliu, Russia's Influence on the European Integration Process of the Western Balkan Countries: A Comprehensive Analysis, UNISCI Journal, n.62, May 2023. https://www.unisci.es/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UNISCIDP62-8ALFRED.pdf

176   Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans - Atlantic Council

177   Alfred Marleku and Dafina Aliu, Russia's Influence on the European Integration Process of the Western Balkan Countries: A Comprehensive Analysis, UNISCI Journal, n.62, May 2023. https://www.unisci.es/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UNISCIDP62-8ALFRED.pdf

178   Stronski Paul and Himes Annie: Russia's Game in the Balkans, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

179   Branislav Stanicek, Anna Caprile, Russia and the Western Balkans. Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf

NATO. [180] There was also an appearance of the AI-generated disinformation portraying Vladimir

Putin as a "defender of Islam" that has also circulated on social media in Kosovo. This content is deliberately engineered to exploit religious sentiment and to generate sympathy for Putin among the Muslim community in Kosovo (see below):
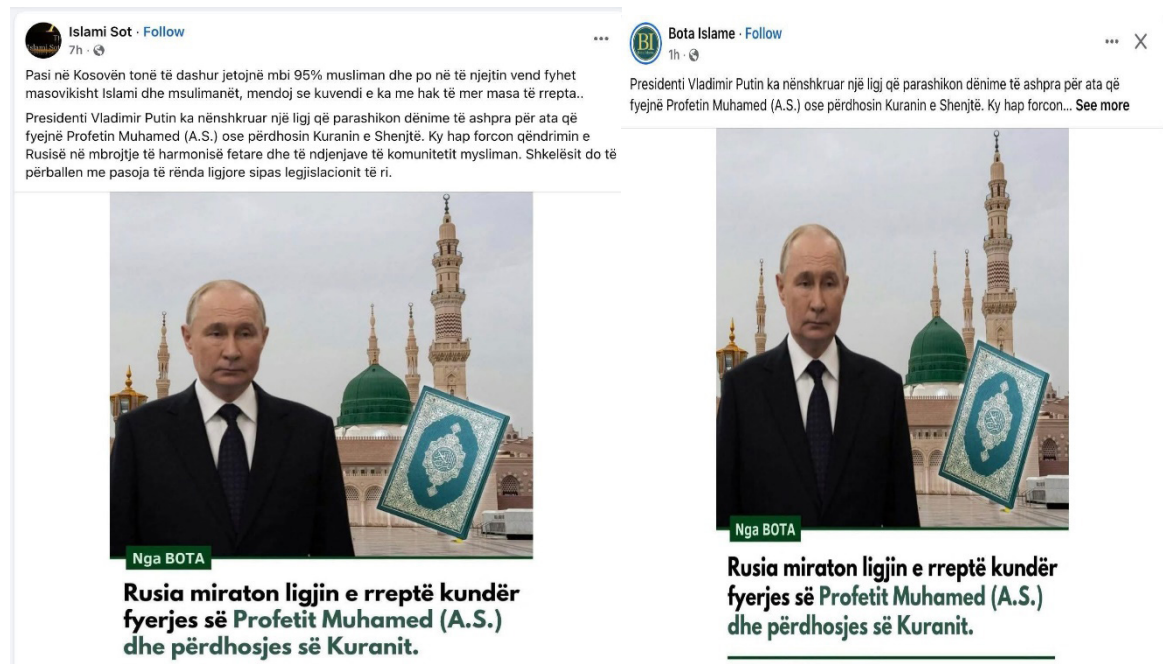
Russia also promotes the idea that Muslims from Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina pose a threat of spreading religious extremism in the Balkans. Russian and pro-Russian media portray Kosovo as a place of Islamic fundamentalism, separatism, and extremism.[181] Moreover, alongside Russia and the amplified narrative in Serbia portraying Kosovo as a breeding ground for religious extremism, the Serbian Intelligence Agency (BIA) has also played a role in facilitating the spread of extremism within Kosovo. A notable example is the case of Hysni Selmi, a religious extremist who was arrested in 2025. According to available reports, Selmi had been recruited by the BIA to gather intelligence on local extremist networks while simultaneously being used to foster the establishment and growth

of these groups.[182] This case illustrates a deliberate strategy by Russia and Serbia to manipulate and strengthen extremist networks in Kosovo, thereby destabilizing the region and reinforcing narratives of insecurity and failed state.

While addressing Western audiences, Russia often portrays Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as failed states, depicting them as breeding grounds of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, in an attempt to fuel skepticism toward these countries and to reinforce far-right extremist narratives against Kosovo.[183] On the other hand, when engaging with African and Middle Eastern countries, Russia portrays itself as an anti-colonial actor opposing the West, deliberately avoiding references to Islam that it employs in the Western Balkans. This illustrates a hypocritical strategy: Russia presents itself differently across regions

180   Kole Krasniqi, Russian Subversive Influence on Islamic Radicalism in the Countries of the Western Balkans, Professional Paper, 25/1, 2024.

181   Festim Rizanaj and Alban Zeneli, Comparison of Ukraine and Kosovo in Russia's disinformation narratives, Action for Democratic Soceity/ Hybrid.info, 2024. https://hibrid.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Comparison-of-Ukraine-and-Kosovo-in-Russias-disinformation-narratives.pdf

182   Kallxo.com, https://kallxo.com/lajm/arrestimi-i-te-dyshuarit-per-spiunazh-e-bashkepunim-me-bia-n-serbe-bik-mos-bini-ne-kurthet-e-rrymave-devijante/

183   Personal interview number 2, security expert, Prishtina, April 2025.

while positioning itself as a defender of alternative world ideologies. In some contexts, it frames itself as the protector of traditional Orthodox values against Western countries, which it portrays as having abandoned Christianity and family values. In African countries, Russia seeks to present itself as "anti-colonial," while simultaneously maintaining a subjugating, invasive, and threatening posture toward its neighbors.

Through this "anti-colonial" narrative, it has also leveraged close cooperation with the Muslim leaders like Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov, a key member of President Vladimir Putin's inner circle. For instance, in June 2024, Kadyrov announced that 500 Africans had been sent to Hajj at the expense of the Regional Societal Foundation named after his father, and that construction of five mosques for African Muslims had begun.[184] Dmitry Dubrovsky, a political scientist and sociology lecturer at Charles University, notes: "Africa is an important region for Russia, and it is trying to enter it in various ways, as it did through Prigozhin and private military companies. This is another reason why Kadyrov was encouraged to build mosques there. Africa is critical to Putin, who presents himself as an 'anti-colonizer,' and now Kadyrov is portraying friendliness and providing various forms of humanitarian support."[185] Dubrovsky also emphasizes that some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, exercise classic soft power through the construction of mosques and other cultural structures. "A mosque is an important structure, but it is also a sign of political and cultural presence," he observes."[186] While Russian regions generally do not conduct independent foreign policies, Chechnya has long been an exception. Russian political scientist Ivan Preobrazhensky explains: "This is because Ramzan Kadyrov functions as a kind of 'Non-Russian World' foundation for the Russian government, or as a 'Sharia Foreign Ministry' of the Russian Federation."[187]

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184   Telegram channel of Ramzan Kadyrov, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/4851

185   Kadyrov Foundation will finance the construction of five mosques in Africa, https://www.kavkazr.com/a/fond-kadyrova-profinansiruet-stroiteljstvo-pyati-mechetey-v-afrike/32996231.html?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3

186   Ibid.

187   Ibid.

VIII. **Conclusions**

Russia's strategy in the Western Balkans and Ukraine reveals a highly coordinated model of hybrid warfare that combines military, political, economic, informational, and cultural tools to advance strategic objectives without relying solely on conventional force. At the core of this approach lies the systematic exploitation of societal vulnerabilities, ethnic, religious, and political, through disinformation, paramilitary proxies, cultural diplomacy, and religious networks.

The parallels between Russia's narratives and methods in Western Balkans (particularly in Kosovo) and Ukraine reflect a consistent playbook: delegitimizing local authorities, portraying minority groups as threatened victims, and framing Western actors as complicit in instability. In both cases, religious institutions, historical memory, and local grievances are instrumentalized to reinforce these narratives. Disinformation campaigns have served as a primary vehicle for their dissemination, particularly during electoral periods. For example, Kosovo's most recent national elections were targeted by Kremlin-backed disinformation aimed at diluting Kosovo's statehood and eroding public trust in its institutions.

Such disinformation efforts also carry broader implications for the EU enlargement process, even though Russia does not formally oppose EU membership for Western Balkan states. Disinformation actors seek to undermine the EU's credibility as the central driver of political reforms in the region. The prolonged stagnation before the gates of EU and NATO membership has contributed to public fatigue, weakened trust in the reform agenda, and created fertile ground for pro-Russian narratives and growing skepticism toward European integration.

Although several EU member states have become increasingly familiar with Russia's hybrid tactics, its "weaponization of everything" strategy, Moscow has simultaneously expanded its hostile activities across Europe. Consequently, the EU's role in countering hybrid warfare has gained renewed urgency following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This shift reflects heightened concerns about Russia's widening appetite for influence, often exercised by targeting the most vulnerable segments of societies it seeks to destabilize.

Another instrument widely deployed by Russia is Rossotrudnichestvo and related "Russian World" initiatives, which blend soft power with hybrid tactics. Through educational programs, youth mobilization, diaspora networks, and media outreach, these initiatives amplify pro-Russian narratives and strengthen geopolitical footholds abroad. Their activities in Serbia and Ukraine demonstrate close coordination with local political actors to undermine Western integration and legitimize Russian strategic interests.

Serbia occupies a central position as both channel and amplifier of Russian influence. Through political alignment, pro-Russian elites, and cooperation with Russian intelligence and security structures, Serbia facilitates the spread of Kremlin-backed disinformation and enables destabilizing operations in neighboring states. The Serbian government, aligned media environment, coupled with domestic proxies, reinforces narratives depicting Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries as hostile to minority communities, mirroring Russian geopolitical messaging.

Russia's hybrid strategy underscores the increasingly blurred boundary between war and peacetime influence. For the Western Balkans, the implications are profound: sustained disinformation, proxy mobilization, and cultural interference threaten state sovereignty, interethnic relations, and the trajectory of European integration. Understanding these methods and their underlying objectives is critical for developing effective countermeasures and strengthening societal and institutional resilience against external influence campaigns.

Hybrid Threats in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape:

THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR KOSOVO AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organizate. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice. Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

About "CENSS"

The Center for Security Studies "CENSS" is a Ukrainian think tank established in 2013, focusing on national and international security, public administration, crisis response and combating illegal arms trafficking. CENSS conducts applied research, develops policy proposals, and enhances institutional resilience. Its team applies OSINT tools and cooperates with domestic and international experts, state institutions, NGOs, and academia.