RUSSIA'S EXPANDING PLAYBOOK: KOSOVO – UKRAINE CONNECTION

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Is a researcher and publicist. She graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences at Ankara University. She earned her Master's in Human Rights and Democracy in South East Europe from the University of Sarajevo and the University of Bologna (ERMA). She completed her Ph.D. in International Relations at the University of Ankara, with her dissertation titled "The Transformation of Russian Federation Security Policy: The Former Yugoslavia States." Recently, she also served as an external advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during Kosovo's efforts to gain Council of Europe membership.

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.

Viktoriia Voronina

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.

Introduction

As a political actor in Europe, Russia has long sought to secure a foothold beyond its immediate frontiers in order to project power and challenge the influence of the Euro-Atlantic community. Among its closest partners in this endeavor is Serbia, where the interests of certain political elites converge with those of the Kremlin.

Unlike traditional military operations, Russia's strength lies in its extensive use of non-military instruments, often described as hybrid warfare. These include cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, political influence, economic leverage, and support for proxy actors. Moscow possesses a wide range of so-called "measures short of war" that it actively deploys, and is willing to share with its allies, in pursuit of both its own strategic objectives and the political ambitions of its partners.

Serbia, for its part, perceives Russia as a powerful and experienced ally and remains the only country in the Western Balkans that did not impose sanctions on Russia following its unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia has reinforced its presence in the region by further involving itself in unresolved disputes, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Through this involvement, Russia extends its political influence in the Western Balkans, framing these conflicts as part of a broader struggle against the "West" and its liberal-democratic values. This strategy also serves a diversionary purpose for the Kremlin: by fueling tensions in the Western Balkans, Russia shifts international attention away from its ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine.

While the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, the war between Russia and Ukraine effectively started in 2014 with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. By that time, Russia's hybrid war was already well underway, particularly through media manipulation. Hybrid warfare has been a central Russian tactic, aimed at identifying and exploiting societal vulnerabilities to expand malign influence and destabilize targeted countries. Russia leveraged Russian-speaking populations, public diplomacy, and religion to shape public perception and assert control. These tools amplified linguistic and cultural divides within Ukrainian society, reinforcing internal fragmentation and undermining state cohesion.[1]

The same propaganda narratives used against Ukraine are now being applied in Western Balkan countries, particularly in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to advance Russia's strategic interests in the region. These narratives seek to promote an alternative ideology opposed to Western alliances, often portraying Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as failures of Western policies. Projected by the Kremlin and amplified by Serbia, this narrative draws clear parallels with the messaging used against Ukraine, framing these countries in a similar "failed state" discourse.

This report examines the strategies, approaches, and methods that Russia has deployed in Ukraine as part of its hybrid warfare and how these tools are being adapted or amplified in the Western Balkans. By analyzing these dynamics, we aim to illuminate the mechanisms by which Russia exerts influence in the region and the potential implications for regional security and Euro-Atlantic stability.

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1 Interview with Viktoriia Voronina, Executive Director of CENSS, 2024, Inside Security, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=tBBPbx-EnJs

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 by state institutions. These narratives are not only disseminated across various media platforms and 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 the ways in which 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 Balkans and its interventions in Ukraine, offering a comparative perspective on narrative construction, dissemination, and amplification.

The research specifically focuses on the narratives employed by Russia in both Ukraine and the Western Balkans, particularly Kosovo, exploring how these narratives are amplified, reshaped, and reinforced by select state institutions and media outlets targeting 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 April to July 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 Western Balkans.

Russia's Influence in Kosovo

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.[2]

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.[3] For instance, in 2021, Kosovo authorities arrested Russian journalist Daria Aslanova, who was spreading Russian propaganda and was suspected of espionage.[4]

Propaganda against Kosovo holds a special place in Russia's foreign policy narrative. Moscow consistently uses the case of Kosovo as a tool to challenge the West, framing NATO's intervention as illegitimate.[5] Russia's strategy focuses less on direct leverage over Kosovo itself and more on using the issue of protecting Serbia's interests in international arenas to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty and block its integration into the global system. Russia refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence and actively opposes its membership in international organizations, relying on its veto power in the UN Security Council to block Kosovo's international subjectivity. For the Kremlin, a resolution of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo would weaken its leverage in Serbia and undermine its broader influence in the Balkans, where Serbia remains its key ally. At the geopolitical level, Russia's interest in Kosovo is less about direct impact within the territory and more about the ability to instrumentalize Kosovo in global forums. By doing so, Moscow positions itself as a counterweight to the West and reinforces its image as the protector of the Slavic and Orthodox world, thereby strengthening its standing among Serbian society.

Russia's involvement in Kosovo increasingly became part of its broader campaign against NATO and the U.S.,[6] aligning closely with Serbia's political stance toward the Western alliance.[7] It continues to operate as a malign actor in

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2   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, Maj 2023.

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

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

5   Ramadan Ilazim Ardit Orana and Jeta Loshaj, Kosovo in Russia Foreign Policy – Discourse Fostering Instability in Kosovo and Countering Euro-Atlantic Integration, QKSS and KAS, 2024, https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/kosova-ne-diskursin-e-politikes-se-jashtme-ruse-nxitja-e-paqendrueshmerise-ne-kosove-dhe-kundershtimi-i-integrimit-euro-atlantik/

6   BIRN, "The Story of our Lies". https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/VORBULLA-E-RRENAVE-FINALE.pdf

7   https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/11/a-spoiler-in-the-balkans-russia-and-the-final-resolution-of-the-kosovo-conflict?lang=en

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.[8]

One of Russia's key 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.[9]

Russian propaganda also seeks to delegitimize international institutions, notably NATO and KFOR. Outlets such as Sputnik, Russia Today, and social media platforms including Telegram, TikTok, and X depict NATO forces as biased against Serbs, undermining trust in the alliance. These disinformation efforts are further amplified through local media outlets, such as Informer, Media Alo, and TV Pink, which are widely accessible in northern Kosovo.[10] These platforms frequently portray the Kosovo government as antagonistic toward the Serb population. For example, Informer published an article accusing Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, pejoratively labeled the "Kurti regime", of

attempting to expel Serbs from Kosovo. Such narratives frame the government as hostile and uncooperative, further alienating the Serbian community.[11] Nevertheless, Russia's propaganda is widespread within the Serbian community in Kosovo, primarily through Telegram platforms that are used especially by the Serbian community, and the main communication in these groups is conducted in Serbian. There are two main groups that these disinformation campaigns are targeting on Telegram, groups like 'Bunt je stanje duha' (English: Rebellion is a state of mind) with over 87,200 subscribers, and 'Koridor' with 19,500 subscribers. Nationalist posts often portray Russia as a protector of Serbs in Kosovo. They spread narratives about the potential return of the Serbian army to Kosovo and alleged persecution of the Serbian community.

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.[12]

While Russia primarily seeks to expand its influence in the region through disinformation and the fueling of ethnic tensions, it also positions itself as a significant actor by exploiting fragile contexts such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The narratives it employs there closely mirror those deployed in Ukraine since 2014. A central tactic is the "failed state" narrative, used against Ukraine and similarly applied to Kosovo.

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8 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/krahasimi-ukraine-kosove-ne-narrativat-dezin-formuese-te-rusise/

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

10 Center for Research, Transparency and Account-ability, https://crta.rs/en/report-mapping-disinforma-tion-in-the-serbian-media/ and Interview with investiga-tive journalist, October 2024, Prishtina, Kosovo.

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

12 Ibid.

> Narrative: Rhetoric in Kosovo and Ukraine

It is essential to recognize that narratives are a fundamental component of information operations and campaigns, as well as crucial tools of state propaganda and strategic communication. In the context of this report, their primary function is to shape attitudes, emotions, and perceptions in order to justify, support, or legitimize certain behaviors, actions, or inaction.

The "failed state" narrative is crafted to influence public opinion in domestic and foreign countries and the views of their ruling elites, reinforcing the idea that someone else should care about the territory and population of the targeted state. If the objective is met, it will be easier to justify the establishment of another form of government of the targeted state or even military intervention against it.

Since the early 2000s, the highest leadership of the Russian Federation has systematically promoted the idea that Ukraine is a "failed state" incapable of sovereignty, dependent on foreign powers, and destined to collapse. This narrative has been articulated by President Vladimir Putin, senior security officials, and foreign policy representatives, and has served both as an ideological justification for aggression and as a tool of information warfare against Kyiv and its Western partners.

One of the earliest explicit examples came from Putin at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, where he told U.S. President George W. Bush that "Ukraine is not even a state". Incidentally, in his official speech at the same summit, Putin did not miss the opportunity to mention Kosovo as a "flagrant violation of international law." [13]

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13 Kremlin.ru. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/44078

The following matrix presents a selection of statements by Russian top officials on Ukraine as a failed state.

Date	April 2008 (NATO Summit in Bucharest, closed meeting)
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	When the conversation turned to Ukraine, Putin lost his temper. Addressing Bush, he said: "You understand, George, that Ukraine isn't even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part, a significant part, was given to us!" And here he made it very clear that if Ukraine were to be accepted into NATO, the country would simply cease to exist. In other words, he effectively threatened that Russia could begin to reclaim Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.
Source	https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224

Date	April 2008 (NATO Summit in Bucharest, official statement)
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	Generally speaking, Ukraine is a very complicated state. Ukraine, in the form it currently exists, was created in the Soviet times; it received its territories from Poland, after the Second World War, from Czechoslovakia, and from Romania, and at present, not all the problems have been solved as yet in the border region with Romania in the Black Sea. Then, it received huge territories from Russia in the east and south of the country. It is a complicated state formation. If we introduce into it NATO problems, other problems, it may put the state on the verge of its existence.
Source	https://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putin-s-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html

Date	May 2009
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	"Have you read Denikin's diaries? You should definitely read them! He discusses Great Russia, Little Russia, and Ukraine. He says that no one should be allowed to interfere in relations between us, that this has always been Russia's business alone!"
Source	https://kp.ua/politics/180937-putyn-nazval-ukraynu-maloi-rossyei-y-pryzval-vernut-edynstvo

Date	March 2014 (speech on "justification" of occupation of Crimea)
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	Crimea is our common historical legacy and a very important factor in regional stability. And this strategic territory should be part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian
Source	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/693

Date	April 2016
Speaker, position	Dmitry Medvedev, Russian Prime Minister
Quote	"What's the point of making parallels with Ukraine in that sense…Well, no, I'm just saying there is neither an industry nor a state there…In 2013? There was industry there, but there was no state even then."
Source	https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/04/05/russian-prime- minister-ukraine-has-no-industry-or-state-a52385

Date	July 2021 (Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians")
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	The Western authors of the anti-Russia project set up the Ukrainian political system in such a way that presidents, members of parliament and ministers would change but the attitude of separation from and enmity with Russia would remain. I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human, and civilizational ties have formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources; common trials, achievements, and victories have hardened them. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together, we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.
Source	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

Date	October 2021
Speaker, position	Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation
Quote	Ukraine is searching for its identity and a unique path, crafting its own distinct history (although history teaches that this takes centuries). But Ukrainian leaders, especially the top officials, are people who do not have any stable self-identification. Unhappy people. Who are they, what country are they citizens of, where are their roots, what is their historical identity, ethnic component, and what gods do they pray to? Who do they feel like? Are they "sincere"
Source	https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300?from=glavnoe_1#id2123318

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Date	February 21, 2022
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	As a result of the Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose. Which can be rightfully called Ukraine, named after Lenin. He is its author and architect; there are documents. And now, grateful descendants have demolished monuments to Lenin in Ukraine; this is what they call decommunization.

Modern Ukraine was completely created by Russia, or rather, Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process began immediately after the revolution of 1917, and Lenin and his comrades-in-arms did this in a very rude way towards Russia itself – by separating, rejecting from it part of its own historical territories.

Ukraine, in fact, has never had a stable tradition of its true statehood. And since 1991, it has followed the path of mechanical copying of other people's models that are detached from both history and Ukrainian realities. Political state institutions were constantly reshaped to please quickly formed clans with their own selfish interests that have nothing to do with the interests of the people of Ukraine.

Stable statehood has never been established in Ukraine, and political and electoral procedures serve only as a cover, a smokescreen for the redistribution of power and property among various oligarchic clans.

Maidan did not bring Ukraine closer to democracy and progress. By staging a coup d'état, nationalists and the political forces that supported them have brought the situation to a complete standstill and plunged Ukraine into the abyss of civil war. Eight years after those events, the country is divided. Ukraine is experiencing an acute socio-economic crisis.

In reality, the collapse of the Ukrainian economy has been accompanied by outright looting of the country's citizens, and Ukraine itself has simply been placed under external control. This is being carried out not only on orders from Western capitals, but also, so to speak, directly on the ground through a whole network of foreign advisers, NGOs, and other institutions deployed in Ukraine. They have a direct influence on all important personnel decisions, on all branches and levels of government, from the central to the municipal, on major state-owned companies and corporations. |
| **Source** | http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828 |

Date	December 2022
Speaker, position	Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry's official spokeswoman
Quote	The history of these places, like the whole history of Ukraine, is inseparable from the Russian one, and any attempts of the Kiev regime to rewrite it are doomed to failure
Source	https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/

Date	November 2023
Speaker, position	Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry's official spokeswoman
Quote	Today it is appropriate to ask the question: what exactly did 'Euromaidan' give to Ukraine? The answer is obvious. From a self-sufficient, industrialized and populous republic of the former USSR, Ukraine has turned into a poor, dying territory. The country has lost its state independence and is supported by Western colonialists, who determine its domestic and foreign policy
Source	https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/

Data	December 2023
Speaker, position	Sergey Lavrov, RF Foreign Minister
Quote	During the Russia-NATO meeting, the Russian President questioned everyone about their decision. He went on to explain the fragile nature of Ukrainian statehood, how it came into existence, what happened when its western regions became part of the Soviet Union, and what needed to be done for them to live in harmony with the Russian people and their traditions. He explained everything. The message was that NATO's actions would disrupt this fragile balance. People in western and eastern Ukraine lived within a single state but had little in common, even in terms of their commemorative dates. In late April 2014, then US Secretary of State John Kerry proposed a meeting in Geneva. He brought along Catherine Ashton, the EU's top diplomat, and acting Foreign Minister of Ukraine Andrey Deshchitsa…We had a good conversation and agreed on a document about one and a half or two pages long…The document addressed the need for Ukraine's transition to a federal structure and launching efforts to draft a federal treaty with the participation of all heads of the Ukrainian regions without exception. This came as something natural for John Kerry and Catherine Ashton. But the document was never adopted. Still, there was an understanding in Washington and London at that time that this was a way out in order to prevent a chain reaction and further deterioration of the situation.
Source	https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1923676/

Date	02.2024
Speaker, position	Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
Quote	After gaining independence, Ukraine began to search, as some Western analysts say, its identity. And it came up with nothing better than to build this identity upon some false heroes who collaborated with Hitler. I have already said that in the early 19th century, when the theorists of independence and sovereignty of Ukraine appeared, they assumed that an independent Ukraine should have very good relations with Russia. But due to the historical development, these territories were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – Poland, where Ukrainians were persecuted and treated quite brutally and were subjected to cruel behaviour. There were also attempts to destroy their identity.
Source	http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411

Date	May 2024
Speaker, position	Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry's official spokeswoman
Quote	We have seen what Ukraine has become over the years — a failed state, a self-rogue country driven into the ravine of civilization by neo-Nazi ideology, historical amnesia and the promotion of all kinds of vices
Source	https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/

Date	May 2024
Speaker, position	Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma
Quote	Ukraine has ceased to exist as a rule of law since 2014. Ten years ago, Washington and Brussels, with the hands of the Nazis in Kiev, conducted a bloody coup d'état. Bandits and Nazis occupied the leadership positions. And those who disagreed with this were thrown behind bars, killed, burned alive
Source	https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/

Date	November 2024 (Meeting of the Heads of Security and Intelligence Services of the CIS member states)
Speaker, position	Sergey Naryshkin, the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
Quote	Ukraine today is a failed state, and the West, in its turn, is deliberately working to destabilize the situation in all regions of the world. United States and Western countries are in contact with nationalists in the CIS countries to implement the "Ukrainian scenario," adding that the West wants to use mercenaries to destabilize the shutdown in Belarus before the presidential election.
Source	https://en.iz.ru/en/1796987/2024-11-26/naryshkin-calls-ukraine-failed-state

Date	01.2025
Speaker, position	Nikolai Patrushev, Russian President aide, former Secretary of Security Council
Quote	It is particularly worrying that violent coercion to adopt neo-Nazi ideology and fierce Russophobia are destroying once prosperous cities in Ukraine, including Kharkiv, Odessa, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk. Ukraine may cease to exist altogether in the coming year.
Source	https://www.kp.ru/daily/27651/5036217/

Politicians' claims are being backed up by academics and experts in Russia, as well as Russian-supportive scholars from other countries, who are releasing reports with false arguments about Ukraine not being a real country and being controlled by the US and EU. One of them who spread with narrative is Sergey Karaganov, a Russian political scientist, the head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, and the dean at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, who is also considered close to Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In 2014, he spoke about the inability of the Ukrainian authorities to govern the country: "23 years of independence... And every year, the country's governability deteriorated, and each subsequent generation of leaders became worse than the previous one, more corrupt and less capable. Ukraine has not developed a state-forming elite, and the country appears to require external governance. It would be better if Europe and Russia jointly provide this external governance". Later in 2018, he continued to defend this idea: "Ukraine is an ineffective state. In the years since independence, no national idea has emerged in this country. Serving the interests of the West and the United States cannot be called a national idea. And those who rule society consciously invite external, Western rule. Compared to its situation under the USSR, everything in Ukraine is deteriorating: the economy, technology, industry, and social standards. Today, Ukraine is recognized as one of the poorest countries in Europe. I think that perhaps not in the near future but in the long term, we will agree with the Europeans on some form of joint governance."[14] ." The same rhetoric came from him during the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in 2024, when he said that the Kyiv regime was morally, politically, and even

14 See: https://ukraina.ru/20180511/1020326885.html

legally illegitimate, even from the perspective of the failed state that existed there.[15]

Simultaneously, Russian authorities, cultural centers, business, and politicians have been working to undermine the Ukrainian state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and stability inside the country. There is massive evidence suggesting that the Russian Federation has been employing a broad arsenal of non-military means against Ukraine. Such means include propaganda;

economic and political interventions, for example, those that can influence election results, aiming to discredit some politicians while promoting others; data cybertheft and its further use to inflict damage or exert influence; use of criminal groups for bribery, blackmail, crackdown or duress; pushing for polarization of society, instigation and fueling of protests for destabilization, etc.

Russia's attempts to depict Ukraine as a "failed state," a narrative it has also applied to Kosovo, and one reinforced by Serbia in its rhetoric against Kosovo, go beyond messaging aimed at both the international community and domestic audiences.

15   See: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/tran-scripts/74234

The matrix below illustrates how Russia has used the case of Kosovo as a "failed state" in its narratives, primarily to legitimize its aggressive policies in Ukraine and justify its presence and alliance with the Serbian people.

Date	17 Feb 2009
Speaker, position	Boris Tadic, President of Serbia
Quote	Tadic insisted that Kosovo was not an independent state despite its declaration of secession, describing it as a failed state marked especially by human rights concerns
Source	https://www.france24.com/en/20090217-kosovo-not-state-serbias-president-says-

Date	Sep 5, 2019
Speaker, position	Aleksandr Lukashevich, Russian OSCE Envoy
Quote	Speaking at the OSCE, Lukashevich described Kosovo as a quasi-state entity that had failed, noting the growing number of states revoking recognition of its independence
Source	https://www.voanews.com/a/false-russia-s-osce-rep-claims-kosovo-a-failed-quasi-state-entity-/6742232.html

Date	October, 2019
Speaker, position	Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova
Quote	Countries that have recognized Kosovo can repeat as many times as they want that Kosovo is a state, but that will not make it a state. This was stated by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova , at a briefing in Moscow on October 17, answering a question from an EADaily correspondent about whether she agreed with the statement by the future head of European diplomacy, Josep Borrell , that Kosovo will not be a state unless China, India, and Russia recognize it.
Source	https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/10/17/zaharova-kosovo-ne-gosudarstvo-i-nikogda-im-ne-stanet

Date	Jun 28, 2021
Speaker, position	Maria Zakharova, Russian MFA Spokesperson
Quote	Zakharova declared that the Western project of Kosovo had failed, calling it a black hole in Europe where crime and corruption thrived, and insisting that it was not a state.
Source	https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2021/06/28/Kosovo-Maria-Zakharova/2527132

Date	October,2022
Speaker, position	
Quote	"The government of the self-proclaimed republic still, almost 15 years later, poorly meets these requirements: in particular, it barely governs Northern Kosovo, where the majority of the Serbian population of the region lives. Having failed to implement basic democratic procedures, such as a national referendum, and having violated international law, Kosovo has in reality remained an artificial territorial entity – a failed state."
Source	https://rapsinews.ru/publications/20220924/308309602.html

Date	
Speaker, position	Sergey Lavrov, Russian FM
Quote	Lavrov used Kosovo as an example to legitimize Russian positions, arguing that Western recognition of Kosovo was proof of selective self-determination
Source	https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/lavrovi-e-permend-kosoven-ne-perpjekjen-per-ti-legjitimuar-qendrimet-kunder-perendimit/

Date	6 Dec 2024
Speaker, position	Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's
Quote	'The concept of self-proclaimed "sovereignty" of Kosovo has failed. It does not enjoy unanimous support either in the Balkans, or in Europe, or in other parts of the world. About half of the UN member states do not recognize the notorious Kosovo "statehood", and the number of such countries is growing. More and more capitals are becoming aware of the full harmfulness (including for themselves) of the precedent created in Kosovo of forceful interference from outside in the affairs of an independent state under far-fetched pretexts. The situation in the region itself vividly highlights the failure of Kosovo's independence.'
Source	*https://rg.ru/2020/06/18/rg-publikuet-sovmestnuiu-statiu-ministrov-inostrannyh-del-rf-i-serbii.html*

Date	30 Jan 2025
Speaker, position	Alexander Grushko & Zakharova, Russian MFA
Quote	Russian officials claimed that the West was pressuring Serbia, describing Kosovo as illegitimate and dysfunctional as part of their broader disinformation campaign.
Source	https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/zyrtaret-ruse-intensifikojne-fushatat-dezinformuese-ndaj-kosoves/

Date	21 Feb 2025
Speaker, position	Marko Gjuric (Serbian FM) & Sergey Lavrov
Quote	On the anniversary of Kosovo's independence, Gjuric and Lavrov once again dismissed Kosovo's statehood, calling it an unlawful unilateral declaration despite the ICJ's ruling.
Source	https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/zyrtaret-serbe-e-ruse-e-kontestojne-shtetesine-e-kosoves-pavaresisht-vendimit-te-gjnd-se/

Date	Mar 2025
Speaker, position	Russian MFA officials (various)
Quote	Russian representatives misused UNSCR 1244 to argue that Kosovo should return under Serbia's authority, ignoring the resolution's mandate for transitional self-governance.
Source	https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/manipulimi-i-zyrtareve-ruse-me-rezoluten-1244/

Date	
Speaker, position	Russian Foreign Ministry
Quote	"You know Russia's position: in this case, we are talking about a gross violation of international law, sovereignty, territorial integrity," she stated. "All of this was spelled out in the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, which no one has canceled; they are in effect. It turns out that "on the ground" - in the political, legal sphere - they have been grossly trampled (we have such a lofty expression), violated. Countries have violated the current UN Security Council resolution by recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state. Our attitude to this has not changed at all. In addition to political assessments, which in our case are based on international law, there are also realities. Kosovo as a state has not taken place either in legal terms or in the realities of the modern world. You can talk about this topic as much as you like, but enough time has passed, and the whole world has seen the futility of attempts to insist on one's own.
Source	https://rg.ru/2019/10/17/mid-rf-kosovo-eto-ne-gosudarstvo.html

Russia has, among other things, cited Kosovo as a precedent to construct narratives aimed at justifying its military interventions in various regions of the former Soviet Union. Following NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the recognition of Kosovo's independence by Western countries in 2008, Russia has claimed legitimacy for its actions, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the recognition of contested territories in Georgia, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, and, more recently, the regions of Donetsk

and Luhansk in Ukraine in 2022.[16] Russia's primary goal is to justify its aggression against Ukraine and legitimize its claims to the historical legacy of Kyivan Rus and Crimea, hoping to establish the legality of its invasions in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria.[17]

Monitoring of the election campaign by BIRN Kosovo shows that Kosovo was mentioned 32 times between September 2024 and March 2025 by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, with the main narrative focusing on contesting its statehood and sovereignty as a failed state, as well as accusations of ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Serbs.

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. 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.[18] 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.[19] Another false claim from Informer was that "Kurti wants to eliminate the Serb List and create a Greater Albania," further inflaming ethnic tensions."[20] This narrative also seeks to reinforce the perception that Kosovo is an unstable state and that Western peace efforts have failed. Kosovo is also falsely 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.

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.[21] 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.[22] 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.

When addressing Western audiences, Russia often depicts Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as failed states and as breeding grounds for Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, aiming to generate skepticism toward these countries and to bolster far-right narratives against Kosovo. In contrast, when engaging with African and Middle Eastern audiences, Russia presents itself as an anti-colonial actor resisting Western influence.[23] At the same time, it maintains a subjugating and threatening stance toward its neighbors, framing Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as Western-backed states without emphasizing the religious aspect highlighted in its messaging to Western audiences.

Through this "anti-colonial" narrative, it has also

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16   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

17   Ibid.

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

19   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/

20   Ibid.

21   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

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

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

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.[24] 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."[25] 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.[26] 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."[27]

It is worth noting that no covert operation, whether military or non-military, is initiated without preparation. For these purposes, the target country is carefully studied with a focus on internal problems. Identification of disputes (so-called "root causes") in political, economic, cultural, social, and other areas of the target country's society is an essential element in preparation for strategic planning of a comprehensive set of necessary measures and their intensity. If these measures succeed, the target country's society becomes fragile, making it an easy target and jeopardizing its very existence.

For purposes of exerting influence on the target country, having a common border, common history, similar culture, religion, language, national origins, etc., is an obvious advantage.[28]

An important condition is to employ military and non-military means in such a way as to create "plausible deniability," the ability to deny one's involvement as a side in the conflict. This explains the emergence of the so-called "little green men" in Crimea, members of the military in green uniforms without insignia, the use of proxies to conduct military operations, and military drills that are indistinguishable from real preparations for invasion (military means). Non-military means are also employed in a way that necessarily allows for "plausible deniability" as to the true end goal of such actions.

By amplifying cultural divides, stoking fears, and exploiting Ukraine's economic imbalances, and in the Western Balkans, by fueling ethnic divisions and orchestrating disinformation campaigns, particularly in Kosovo, Russia has sought to keep societies fragmented and vulnerable. This long-standing strategy of internal destabilization laid the groundwork for Moscow's later open aggression.[29]

The "failed state" narrative, evident in both Kosovo and Ukraine, is deliberately crafted by Russia to shape public opinion at home and abroad, as well as to sway ruling elites. Its core message suggests that the territory and population of a targeted state cannot manage themselves and therefore require external oversight. Once this perception takes hold, it becomes easier to justify imposing alternative forms of governance or even launching military interventionz

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24 https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/4851

25 Фонд Кадырова профинансирует строительство пяти мечетей в Африке, https://www.kavkazr.com/a/fond-kadyrova-profinansiruet-stroiteljstvo-pyati-me-chetey-v-afrike/32996231.html?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3
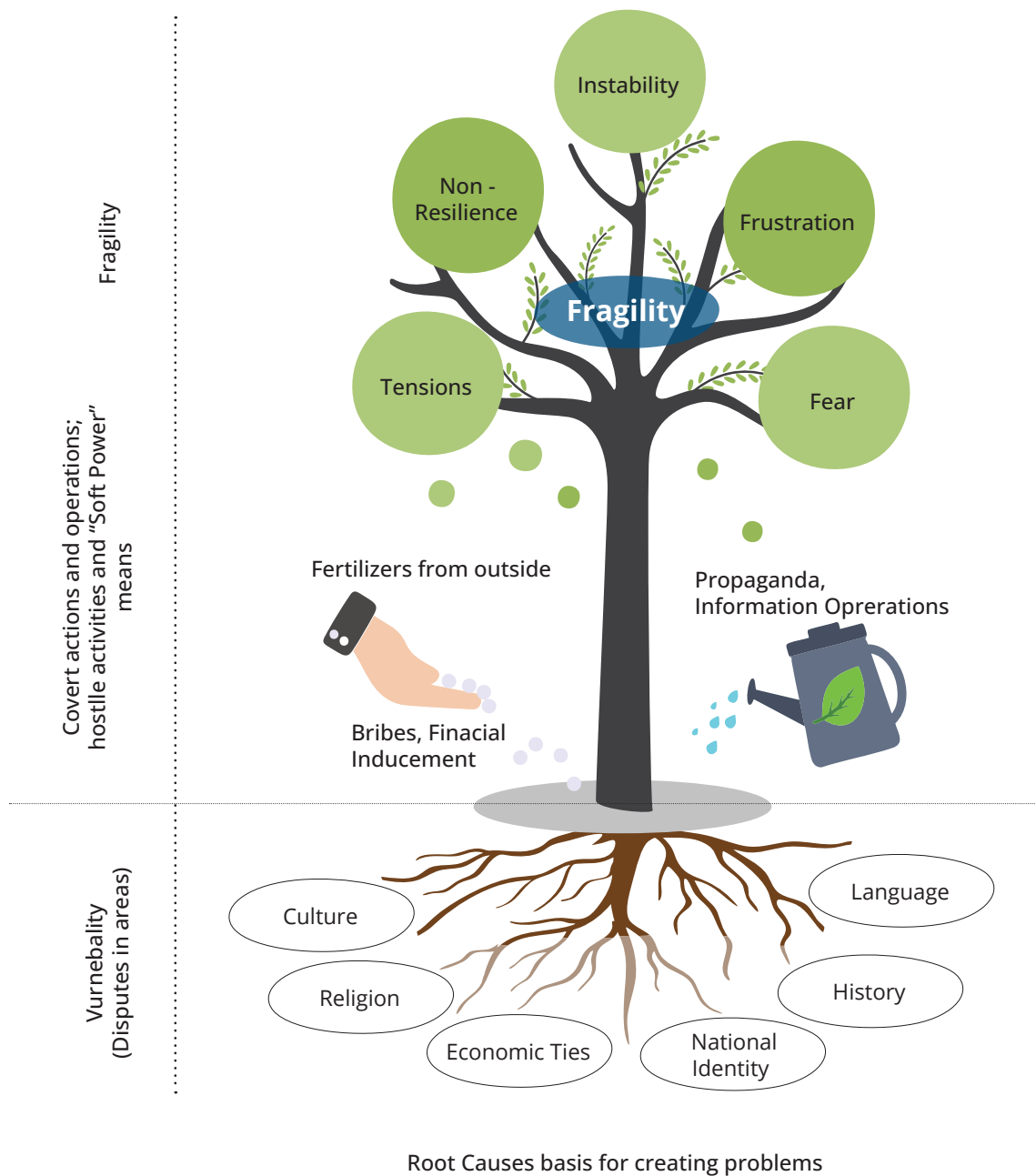
26 Ibid.

27 Ibid

28 "Smart power" against Hybrid Threats, CENSS, https://censs.org/smart-power-against-hybrid-threats/

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

BLOSSOM OF FRAGILITY

Fragility

Covert actions and operations; hostile activities and "Soft Power" means

Vurnebality (Disputes in areas)

Instability

Non - Resilience

Frustration

Fragility

Tensions

Fear

Fertilizers from outside

Bribes, Finacial Inducement

Propaganda, Information Opprerations

Culture

Language

Religion

History

Economic Ties

National Identity

Root Causes basis for creating problems

Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool of Russia's Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy may be defined as the deliberate and strategic exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements to foster mutual understanding, strengthen relationships, advance socio-cultural cooperation, and promote national or international interests. Governmental bodies or other private entities may conduct it, each contributing to the broader objective of building trust and dialogue across cultural divides.[30]

Russia utilizes cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool to exert political influence over the internal affairs of targeted states, thereby affecting their governmental structures and public institutions. We consider cultural diplomacy to be a part of soft-power strategy that is used in combination with other types of state power. "Soft" power is the ability to influence the actions, behavior, or value paradigms of others indirectly, without using coercion or material incentives, due to other types of motivation.

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. The concept of the "Russian world" encompasses various components, including culture, subculture, and history. The "Russian world" is presented as a cultural and civilizational space that transcends the territorial boundaries of present-day Russia. Adherents of this theory generally believe that Russia's contribution to world culture is being deliberately downplayed. Russia, in the mind of its president, is not just a country but a civilization.[31] In his worldview, the special position and features of the Russian state stem from this model of state-civilization. The core

inaugural elements of the Russian state-civilization are a single nation; a single state (former); a single language; a single religion (dominant at the state level), and a single culture.

A number of institutions of so-called cultural diplomacy have been created in Russia to promote this concept of the "Russian world" (Rossotrudnichestvo, the Institute of Compatriots, the Russian World Foundation). Thus, Rossotrudnichestvo is a federal agency under the Russian MFA whose main mission is to "strengthen Russia's humanitarian influence in the world." With an institutional heritage dating back to 1925, the organization has a presence in 71 countries worldwide (including Serbia, Albania, Greece, and Bulgaria) through 87 foreign missions. Since 2021, it has been informally known as the "Russian House."[32] Such offices often operate under the umbrella of Russian embassies or consulates and even share the same building, making it difficult to control their activities. It is worth noting that according to Regulations, outside the RF, Rossotrudnichestvo, in agreement with the MFA, carries out its functions through Rossotrudnichestvo representative offices, Russian centers for science and culture abroad, Russian information and cultural centers abroad, Russian houses of science and culture abroad, Russian cultural centers abroad and their branches, or through its representatives within the diplomatic missions of the Russian Federation.[33]

Education is one of its core instruments, with thousands of scholarships provided annually to foreign students for study at more than 400 Russian universities. In 2024, about 20,000 programs at 433 Russian universities were opened to foreign students. The agency coordinates the

30   See: Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy
31   TASS (17 maj 2020). Putin: The future of Russian civilization depends on success in the development of high technologies. https://nauka.tass.ru/nauka/8493647

32   See: https://rs.gov.ru/en/about-foiv
33   REGULATIONS on the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1315 of September 6, 2008 . https://rs.gov.ru/app/uploads/2023/04/polozhenie-o-rossotrudnichestve.pdf

work of its representative offices and diplomatic institutions in selecting foreign citizens, stateless persons, and compatriots living abroad for further studies at Russian universities under the government's 30,000-person quota. The number of young people from other countries willing to study in Russia free of charge increased from 54,000 to 77,000 in 2024. Rossotrudnichestvo's representative offices not only work actively with foreign applicants but also maintain broad interaction with international alumni, whose total number exceeds 500,000.[34] Alongside this, the agency promotes the Russian language through dedicated centers, courses, and even mobile "Russian schools."

Cultural outreach is another key element, including the organization of international events such as film screenings, book fairs, exhibitions, conferences, and the so-called "Russia Day".[35] Youth-oriented initiatives also play a crucial role, with programs such as New Generation and the Sochi World Youth Festival designed to engage young leaders abroad. Over the last 10 years, the total number of participating countries in the "New Generation" program reached 153, and the number of participants exceeded 10,000 (in 2024, there were 900 participants from 66 countries).[36]

Rossotrudnichestvo also works extensively with diaspora communities, positioning its efforts as protecting the rights of "compatriots abroad" and preserving their cultural identity. In addition, it actively uses media and information platforms—social media accounts, websites, and TV and radio projects—to broadcast Russian narratives internationally.[37]

In Ukraine, Rossotrudnichestvo offices were active in Kyiv, Odesa, and Sevastopol. In 2018, the SBU uncovered anti-Ukrainian activities by Rossotrudnichestvo staff at the Russian Consulate General in Odesa, including cooperation with pro-Russian civic groups under the guise of "Humanitarian and Social Programmes." One consulate employee, proven to have ties to Russian security services, was declared persona non grata. The process of banning Rossotrudnichestvo in Ukraine required repealing the bilateral agreement on cultural centers. In April 2021, Presidential Decree No.140/2021 introduced sanctions that effectively terminated Rossotrudnichestvo's operations for three years. The decision followed a controversial event in Kyiv in March 2021 at the Russian Centre of Science and Culture, which attempted to appropriate the legacy of Taras Shevchenko. Despite the ban, on November 30, 2021, Russia opened a "Russian House" in occupied Donetsk.[38]

34 Official report of Rossotrudnichestvo of 2024. https://rs.gov.ru/app/uploads/2025/07/183cfe_rossotrudnichestvo_2024.pdf
35 See: https://tass.ru/politika/24205727; https://bigasia.ru/den-rossii-otmetili-v-russkih-domah-po-vsej-azii
36 Official report of Rossotrudnichestvo of 2024. https://rs.gov.ru/app/uploads/2025/07/183cfe_

rossotrudnichestvo_2024.pdf
37 See: https://ui.org.ua/sectors/rossotrudnichestvo-the-unbearable-harshness-of-soft-power/
38 See: https://ui.org.ua/sectors/rossotrudnichestvo-the-unbearable-harshness-of-soft-power/

Based on the research of the Ukrainian Institute[39] we compared the tools of Rossotrudnichestvo used in Ukraine (before and after aggression) and Serbia.

Category	Serbia	Ukraine
Infrastructure	Russian House in Belgrade (opened 1933, the largest in Europe)	In 2008, the Russian Centre of Science and Culture opened in Kyiv, and the one in Simferopol opened in 2012 and closed in 2014. Another representative office was at the General Consulate of Russia in Odesa. The Russian Center for Science and Culture (RCSC) in Kyiv operated actively until 2014. Used as a base for cultural and educational events, outreach to Russian-speaking communities. After Crimea's annexation in 2014, Ukrainian authorities suspended their work. In 2018, the Kyiv City Council officially terminated the lease and banned further activities.
Education	Russian language courses with ~1,500 students yearly	Before 2014: Russian language promotion, scholarships for Ukrainian students to study in Russia, summer schools, and youth exchanges. Focus on "compatriots abroad." After 2014: programs dismantled, scholarships seen as recruitment and influence tools.
Cultural Events	Dozens of events yearly: book fairs, photo exhibitions, music festivals	*Before 2014: Russian cultural festivals, Victory Day events, book exhibitions, film screenings. Between 2014–2022: public events curtailed, most activities went underground or shifted to online propaganda.*
Memory Politics	Heavy emphasis on WWII memory and ties with Serbian Orthodox Church	Before 2014: Soviet/WWII commemoration central to activities, framed around "shared victory." After 2014: seen as a tool of political manipulation (narratives of "fascism" in Ukraine). Activities banned after Kyiv accused Rossotrudnichestvo of spreading separatist ideas.

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39 State agency under the MFA of Ukraine.

Category	Serbia	Ukraine
Youth Programs	Cooperation with local NGOs and youth initiatives	Before 2014: summer camps, exchanges, youth forums funded by Russia, targeting young Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Between 2014–2022: activities stopped; Ukrainian authorities warned of attempts to recruit students and activists.
Diaspora Work	Links with pro-Russian NGOs, journalists, Orthodox Church	Before 2014: focus on Russian-speaking Ukrainians as "compatriots," organizing forums, "Russian language days," and support for diaspora organizations. After 2014: considered a cover for political interference and support for pro-Russian groups in Donbas and Crimea.
Media / Info Tools	Russian House as media hub; narratives echoed by pro-Russian outlets	Before 2014: cultural magazines, local partnerships, joint media projects with Russian TV. After 2014, the Ukrainian government accused the RCSC of being part of Kremlin disinformation; by 2018, the center was legally closed and all activities outlawed.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation is another Russian institution in the field of cultural diplomacy. It is a Russian government-sponsored organization established in 2007 by a decree from President Vladimir Putin. Its official purpose is to promote the Russian language and culture globally, support Russian language teaching programs, and strengthen Russia's influence in the world. The foundation aims to reconnect the Russian diaspora with their homeland and engage with anyone who has an interest in the Russian language and culture. It achieves this by creating "Russian Centers" abroad, which serve as hubs for cultural and educational activities. These centers offer language courses, organize cultural events, provide access to informational resources, and host conferences and meetings to foster communication and a sense of shared community. The foundation's work has been described by some observers as a tool of Russian soft power and propaganda, aiming to promote a pro-Russian perspective and traditional values while also serving to legitimize Russian foreign policy.[40]

The foundation is very active in the Balkans (especially in Bulgaria and Serbia). In Serbia, the activities of the Russkiy Mir are concentrated in 2 offices in Novi Sad and Belgrade. The organization and its partners in Serbia are dedicated to promoting Russian culture, language, and historical heritage. These efforts are not simply one-off events but rather a consistent and multifaceted campaign to strengthen the cultural, social, and political bond between Russia and Serbia.[41] Several key political statements and events that demonstrate mutual support can be found on the organization's website. For instance, a banner thanking Russian President Vladimir Putin was unfurled in front of the Serbian parliament.[42] The Serbian Interior Minister,

40   Russkiymir, see: Shih: https://russkiymir.ru/

41   Russkiymir, see:: https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/?arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_1&arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_2=&arrFilter_pf%5Bcountry%5D%5B0%5D=1469&set_filter=Y ; https://russkiymir.ru/news/?arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_1=&arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_2=&arrFilter_pf%5Brazdel%5D%5B0%5D=&arrFilter_pf%5Bcountry%5D%5B0%5D=969&set_filter=Y&PAGEN_1=4
42   Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/305806

Aleksandar Vulin, stated that Serbia would not join the "anti-Russian hysteria" sweeping Western countries and would maintain its status as an ally.[43] Polling data cited in the text indicates that an overwhelming majority of Serbians oppose anti-Russian sanctions, and more than 70% of Serbs surveyed believe Russia was forced to launch a "special operation" to prevent NATO expansion.[44] A banner in Novi Sad, Serbia, read, "EU, go home, Serbia and Russia - this is our union."[45]

The main thrust of the activities is cultural. This includes a variety of festivals and exhibitions, such as Russian Film Festivals, Hermitage Days, and exhibits showcasing Russian art and photography.[46] Events also include forums like the Russian-Serbian Cultural Forum,[47] concerts of Russian music, and celebrations of Russian culture.[48] ian culture.[49] A core part of the educational activities involves promoting the Russian language. This is done through free language courses for both adults and children in various cities, as well as the establishment of "Open Education Centers." The organization also hosts congresses for Russian language teachers to support the educational community.[50]

A significant number of activities are dedicated to historical commemoration. This includes ceremonies and exhibitions honoring shared historical events, such as the liberation of Belgrade from the Nazis and the Battle of Stalingrad. For example, at the international conference "Antifascism — a Permanent Duty" in Pančevo, Serbia, organizations, experts, and politicians from Russia, Serbia, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia promoted narratives on preserving the historical memory of World War II, illustrating how Moscow uses commemorative events abroad to project influence and reinforce its ideological presence in Europe. There are also efforts to immortalize figures important to Russian-Serbian history, with monuments and plaques dedicated to Russian emigrants, soldiers, and historical figures like Tsar Nicholas II [51] and the Soviet linguist Nikita Tolstoy.[52]

Russia utilizes Serbia as a key country for international events for compatriots in Europe. Thus, the 18th Regional Conference of Russian Compatriots in Europe and North America was held in Belgrade, bringing together participants from 37 countries. They discussed the topic "Historical and cultural heritage as a guarantee of preserving the unity of Russian compatriots abroad."[53] The organization actively works to build and maintain a strong community among Russian compatriots in Serbia. This is evident in events such as regional conferences for compatriots, patriotic motor rallies,[54] and various social gatherings hosted at the "Russian House" in Belgrade.[55] These activities serve to create a sense of shared identity and purpose and increase Russia's soft influence in the region.

43 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/329621
44 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/303505
45 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/302857
46 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/334090
47 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/331109
48 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/?arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_1=&arrFilter_DATE_CREATE_2=&arrFilter_pf%5Brazdel%5D%5B0%5D=&arrFilter_pf%5Bcountry%5D%5B0%5D=969&set_filter=Y&PAGEN_1=4
49 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/334554
50 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/332237

51 Russkiymir, see: https://ruskidom.rs/2025/07/18/v-russkom-dome-v-belgrade-proshlo-meroprijatie-v-pamjat-o-carskoj-seme-romanovyh
52 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/publications/322075
53 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/336415
54 Russkiymir, see: https://russkiymir.ru/news/287763 ; https://russkiymir.ru/news/314468
55 Russkiymir, see: https://ruskidom.rs/2025/07/01/russko-serbskij-vecher-v-masterskoj-upravlenija-senezh; https://ruskidom.rs/2025/06/17/v-russkom-dome-v-belgrade-sostojalas-vstrecha-so-studentami-rusistami; https://ruskidom.rs/2025/06/09/v-russkom-dome-v-belgrade-sostojalsja-vecher-pojezii-posvjashhennyj-bratstvu-serbov-i-russkih; https://ruskidom.rs/2025/03/28/zhenshhiny-russkoj-jemigracii-v-serbii

Conclusions

Russia's influence in Kosovo is primarily exercised through the Serbian population, leveraging shared religion, historical memory, and cultural ties to assert regional power and challenge Western influence. While direct Russian influence over Kosovo is limited, Moscow strategically instrumentalizes the Kosovo issue to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty, obstruct its international integration, and reinforce Serbia's alignment with Russian interests.

Key elements of Russia's strategy include disinformation campaigns, propaganda framing Kosovo as a "failed state," and the promotion of nationalist and extremist narratives. These efforts aim to heighten interethnic tensions, delegitimize international institutions, and weaken public trust in Western-led initiatives. The parallels with Russian strategies in Ukraine highlight the consistency of its narratives, such as portraying target states as incapable of self-governance and dependent on external powers.

The comparison of Russian influence in Ukraine and Kosovo demonstrates a deliberate and multi-layered strategy that combines cultural diplomacy, historical narratives, religious influence, and the instrumentalization of minority communities to advance Moscow's geopolitical objectives. In Ukraine, Russia employed Rossotrudnichestvo, educational programs, youth initiatives, diaspora networks, and media platforms as instruments of soft power, aiming to shape identity, promote dependency on Russia, and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. The Russian state leveraged historical narratives, such as the continuity of Kyivan Rus and the spiritual unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, to legitimize interventions like the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Donbas.

In Kosovo and the Western Balkans, Russia applies analogous strategies, though the tools are often indirect and focus on influencing political elites, minority populations, and cultural and religious institutions. Through close ties with Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church, diaspora organizations, and historical memory narratives, particularly the legacy of the Battle of Kosovo and shared Slavic/Orthodox identity, Russia maintains a foothold in the region. Initiatives such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and coordination councils of Russian compatriots promote cultural, educational, and media engagement to strengthen pro-Russian sentiment, disseminate anti-Western narratives, and hinder EU and NATO integration.

While the geopolitical contexts differ, overt military aggression in Ukraine versus hybrid, soft-power influence in Kosovo and the Balkans, the underlying Russian strategy remains consistent: a combination of ideological, cultural, religious, and political tools to preserve a sphere of influence, weaken Western-aligned governance, and maintain leverage over local actors. Understanding these parallels provides critical insights for policymakers, security institutions, and civil society actors seeking to counter hybrid threats, safeguard sovereignty, and strengthen resilience in both the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

RUSSIA'S EXPANDING PLAYBOOK: KOSOVO – UKRAINE CONNECTION

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 KAS

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a German political foundation that developed from the Society for Christian Democratic Educational Work that was founded back in 1955. Since 1964, it has borne the name of the first Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. We feel bound to Adenauer's political memory and legacy; his principles serve as our guidelines, mission, and commitment. We are therefore politically affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany but are financially and organisationally independent.

The promotion of liberal democracy and a social market economy, of peace and freedom, transatlantic relations, and European unification – this is what the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung stands for.

Although the work in Kosovo started much earlier through various projects, KAS was formally registered in Pristina in June 2007. Since then, KAS has focused on political education, civic education and strengthening of civil society, European integration, support of inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, promotion of free market economy and other topics, which together with our local and international partners, we have addressed through seminars, conferences, discussions and numerous publications.

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.