

# THERE IS NO EASY SOLUTION TO THE WESTERN BALKANS' DISINFORMATION CHALLENGE

*The Western Balkan countries are currently among the most vulnerable to an intentional, Kremlin-supported campaign of disinformation within the European region. The vulnerability of the Western Balkans is exacerbated for several reasons: the countries are not completely integrated into European and Euro-Atlantic structures; they harbor the legacy of ethnic and religious tensions from the conflicts of the 1990s; the region continues to experience dysfunctions within its information space; and it is plagued by the unresolved Kosovo issue. Tackling a problem of this magnitude demands a comprehensive approach by governments and media associations supported by the international community.*

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**T**he Western Balkan countries are currently among the most vulnerable to an intentional, Kremlin-supported campaign of disinformation within the European region. The recent U.S.-led exercise DEFENDER-Europe 21, held in Southeast Europe, turned out to be a large target of those efforts.

This annual, large-scale multinational exercise designed to build interoperability and readiness among the U.S., NATO, and other military partners was portrayed by pro-Kremlin narratives as a continuation of the 1999 NATO conflict with Serbia and as such, were further efforts at what the narratives described as acts of “ethnic cleansing.” Pro-Kremlin narratives that label NATO and the U.S. as threats often portray these activities as provocative against Serbia and Russia.

Last year’s largest European exercise, DEFENDER-Europe 20, was targeted in a similar fashion. As an example of their false rhetoric, these sources declared that American soldiers were alleged to be immune to the COVID-19 virus as they marched towards Russia’s border. The sources went on to say that the exercise equated to the mid-twentieth century Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

Messages of this kind have been frequently seen throughout the information space of the Western Balkans. Additional narratives focus on promoting Russian military might, on so-called conspiracies aimed at negatively amplifying perceptions of the U.S. and its allied nations’ threats to the local population, and the alleged military, moral, and technological inferiority of the West, especially the U.S., NATO, and the European Union (EU).

Due to voids in the region’s information space, including the extensive presence of sensationalized, tabloid-style journalism, a low level of media literacy, click-bait logic, the lack of fact-checking expertise, and general journalistic shortcomings, these false messages are highly visible to the region’s population. Despite the existence of different media outlets in each country, information is shared fluidly due to solid familial, cultural, and historical ties, in addition to the fact that these countries share a common language. Some experts trace the source of this interconnectedness to something they now refer to as the Yugosphere, a reference to the fact that the area was previously nationally known as Yugoslavia.

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After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Western Balkans became a space for geopolitical competition. Experts on Russian political history point out that Moscow sees the Western Balkans as a playground for its anti-Western campaign to undermine NATO integration and EU enlargement. Kremlin propaganda activities in the region range from diplomatic initiatives and energy sector domination to defense cooperation and pandemic “ventilator” diplomacy. These activities are designed to impact Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Some of these initiatives were short-lived and of limited success, while others, for instance the ongoing disinformation campaigns, continue to have a wide impact.

The political initiative called the “Alliance of Neutral States of the Balkans” is aimed at undermining the region’s inclusion into NATO and has been promoted intensively in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. This initiative was promulgated publicly by Sergey Zeleznyak, a high-ranking official of the ruling United Russia party who frequently toured the region.

In 2016, Montenegrin authorities uncovered an alleged coup d’etat attempt in Montenegro. According to authorities in Podgorica a group of 14 people including two Russian military intelligence agents were involved in terrorism and creating a criminal organization as part of an attempt to overthrow the government and undermined the country’s NATO membership bid.

The accession of Montenegro and North Macedonia to NATO in 2017 and 2020 respectively made the four-country initiative short-lived. Serbia, as the largest country of the region, joined the NATO program Partnership for Peace in 2006, as it simultaneously proclaimed military neutrality. This model was followed by the Republika Srpska, the Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a result of the unresolved Kosovo issue, Serbia is pursuing a foreign policy known as the “four pillars” that is aimed at developing a balanced political, economic, and security partnership with the European Union and the United States, as

well as with China and Russia, the latter two which support Belgrade's opposition to Kosovo independence.

This environment has proven to be fertile ground for foreign influence and disinformation campaigns. The latest EU's European Parliament report on the issue of regional disinformation has labeled Serbia as the "launchpad of disinformation" in the Western Balkans.

Defense cooperation is used to strengthen influence at the political level and in the information space; it is also being used to send a political message to the West.

Serbia's first joint exercise with Russia, SREM-2014, included airdrops of armored personnel carriers from Il-76 heavy transport aircraft over the plains of Vojvodina, not far from the country's border with NATO member Croatia. A year later it was replaced by the joint Russian-Serbian-Belarus "Slavic Brotherhood" counter-terrorism exercises that have taken place every year since 2015. An exception was made in 2020, when Belgrade decided not to participate due to the complex political situation in Belarus, which included hypothetical conflict scenarios with NATO forces that required bombing locations close to the border with Poland and Ukraine.

SLAVIC SHIELD 2019 was another military exercise the Russian armed forces established that they knew would resonate with local audiences and continue to send a highly volatile message to the West. Russian forces deployed an advanced surface to air system, the S-400, to the Serbian Air Force base of Batajnice, near Belgrade.

The magnitude of defense cooperation between the two countries was further increased by strategic military donations. Russia incorporated Serbia into its international military assistance program and became the largest foreign donor to the Serbian armed forces. A donation of 30 T-72MS tanks and 30 BRDM-2MS armored vehicles was completed in May 2021. Russia also donated six MiG-29s while Belarus provided four additional MiG-29s.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided another opportunity to exert influence in the Western Balkans, advertise scientific superiority, and present the EU and NATO as ineffective organizations. Road disinfection vehicles and 87 military medical experts were deployed to Serbia in April of 2020, and were shown in multiple news outlets cleaning hospitals and streets. A month later a similar activity followed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Vaccine diplomacy continued as batches of the Sputnik V vaccines was provided to Serbia, followed by a strong information campaign aimed at advertising the superior

performance and effectiveness of these jobs. In addition, in June 2020, a manufacturing line for the Sputnik vaccine was launched in Serbia.

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At the same time the Western COVID-19 manufacturer Pfizer was portrayed as corrupt, while the vaccine was alleged to be problematic and deadly, and NATO member states portrayed as selfish, without a sense of international solidarity in times of global pandemic. Montenegro, as a new NATO member state, was specifically targeted by the Russian-supported media with these claims in order to convince the country to revoke its NATO member status.

Information efforts are conducted in a binary, black-white fashion. Any challenges and problems which the Kremlin faces are either ignored or minimized. This includes the very low public trust in Sputnik V vaccines among Russian citizens and the low vaccination turnout in Russia resulting in record high new cases of COVID-19.

How Western societies, including the U.S., EU and NATO should respond to information campaigns and disinformation efforts are the subject of numerous analysis, studies, and conferences. While there is growing consensus on what the challenges are, there is not as much agreement on how to address them. In regions like Western Balkans, the issue of disinformation is linked to numerous societal voids and challenges that demand a holistic approach.

Increasing anti-Western sentiments in the Western Balkans, especially among the Serbian population, is an important element that contributes to the effectiveness of foreign influence campaigns. The campaigns are based on a number of elements including the conflicts of the 1990s, a perceived sense of a lack of international balance when addressing the responsibility for wars and war crimes, and the unresolved issues of the 2020 Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which include both countries' political situations as well as what can be expected as a result of the talks. As a result, general support for EU integration, although above 50 percent, is in decline, while Russia and China enjoy their status as the friendliest nations.

According to Council of Europe research, the whole region is plagued by poor media standards, a lack of media ownership transparency, political influences over media regulatory authorities, a high rate of hate speech, the poor quality of investigative journalism, and weak mechanisms to support media associations.

Defense, security, and other topics related to NATO, the EU, or the U.S. European Command are frequently technical in nature and demand a high level of expertise. However, this is also what is most frequently missing among many media editors in highly competitive 24-hour, digital media click-bait environments, especially in the Western Balkans. The results of the current approach, which relies on press releases to provide information to the public, are not sufficient enough to increase the presence of fact-based narratives in disinformation spaces.

Tackling a problem of this magnitude demands a comprehensive approach by governments and media associations supported by the international community. Some work has started. For instance, in 2020, Serbia adopted a media strategy intended to tackle the issues of media independence and ownership, financial sustainability, and privatization of state-owned media outlets. However, in general, this area of problem solving is still at the early stages of implementation. The poor quality of reporting demands new approaches for supporting young journalists and analysts by educating and training them in accepted journalistic standards and providing them with the support needed to produce quality content. Several initiatives are already taking place and are supported by various international institutions, but there is a substantial need for further development and coordination in order to achieve these journalistic goals.

Another challenge related to disinformation resilience is the low level of media literacy throughout the region. According to the latest surveys, the media literacy of Western Balkans societies is at the bottom of the chart when compared to other parts of Europe. The EU has launched multiple initiatives to tackle this issue, but as stated above, the majority of these programs are still in their infancy stages.

Nevertheless, new programs are coming into play. In Serbia, the EU launched an effort to provide technical assistance to public service broadcasters and support to the Ministry of Culture and Information in preparing teaching manuals for the entire pre-university education system. This 2020 effort was supplemented by EU's hosting of the very first Western Balkan conference on media literacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina in October of the same year. The attendance of the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, exemplified the importance that the EU places on the region.

Fact-checking is another important aspect of tackling the challenge of disinformation. Regional networks of fact-checking initiatives have been established in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, and began partnering with large social media platforms like Facebook. However, fact-checking and debunking are reactive in nature. It takes place once disinformation has already been published and the target audiences have been exposed to the disinformation. For this reason, new proactive initiatives and approaches are needed to address the myriad challenges in the information space and increase the visibility of fact-based narratives.

Increasing the visibility of factual information requires the development of local and regional coalitions of cross-border cooperative platforms that empower, educate, train, and produce content which resonates with local audiences while building networks of quality reporters.

On a broader scale, international organizations need to improve the coordination of their regional efforts, as well as expand the ways in which strategic communications approaches can be used in highly contested areas.

Strategic communications have to be sensitive to strategic, political, social, generational, and/or technological changes at both the national and international levels. In areas that present a myriad of vulnerabilities, such as the Western Balkans, the list of specialist expertise must be expanded to include experts who understand local cultures, the cross-border nature of information flows, perceptions, inter-ethnic tensions, and the specific media space voids.