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RUSSIAN MEDIA IN THE BALKANS

**Case study: How Moscow's propaganda
influences Serbia**

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Introduction

The influence of Russian state-run foreign media (RT, Sputnik et al.) on public opinion in Western democracies is now common knowledge – regardless of its political qualification. Well-documented analyses are available, e.g. from the USA¹, France² and Germany³. The German government has also repeatedly pointed out the dangers of Russian state propaganda for the German media landscape.⁴ The European Parliament has repeatedly called for member states to adopt strategies against „hostile propaganda“ from Moscow.⁵ The EU Commission has set up a small department to detect fake Russian news.⁶

With this in mind, why is it necessary to deal with Russian influence in the Balkans in the first place? The studies available to date on this subject from Western countries strive to painstakingly prove the effects of Russian disinformation on the media scenes or public opinion. This is often complicated, because the media, politics and the public are generally opposed to Russian narratives on principle. It is therefore often difficult for the foreign media, which is centrally controlled by Moscow, to mitigate this negative core belief and to win trust in the case of individual subjects (such as the corona crisis) or socio-political fringe groups.

The situation in the Balkan peninsula is completely different. Russian media material is most welcome here. The political elite, such as in the largest and most important Balkan country, Serbia, or in the Serbian half of Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditionally maintain close ties with Russia (1). This started with the „brotherhood in arms“ in the First and Second World Wars and continues to recent times, because „Russia has defended itself and the Balkan countries from the Islamic State“.⁷ The sale of the domestic oil industry to Russia at a politically ridiculously low price and major arms purchases from the Moscow ally have also contributed to strengthening mutual ties. Moscow's Kremlin-controlled political system and the exceptional position of its President Vladimir Putin match the political ideals of almost all top Serbian politicians (2). Similarly, large parts of the Serbian population look up to „big brother“ Russia with admiration. „We and the Russians are 150 million people“ is a popular bon mot among the Serbian population of seven million. This emotional bond is based on the common Slavic language and the Orthodox religion (3).

Serbia's political leadership agrees with its population that

Russia, for example in the UN Security Council and as a counterweight to NATO, has prevented unresolved Balkan problems, such as Kosovo or the future of Serbian minorities in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, from being solved by the USA and the EU against their own interests (4). Moscow and Belgrade see themselves in an international context as victims. Critical Serbian historians characterise this narrative as „self-victimisation“. Both countries maintain a political self-image based on the hostility of the vast majority of international actors, and which – together with the few friends in the world – must be met with a siege mentality (5).

Since the political elite – above all President Aleksandar Vučić – almost completely control the media landscape, media offerings from Russia are very welcome (6). Because Serbian printed and electronic media (as well as the media from other countries in the region) suffers from chronic underfunding, the free information offered by Russia gains even more importance. Since it is also presented in the national language, it tends to be carried over exactly as it is without any further editing (7). This kind of unedited transfer also applies to the Serbian-language texts of Deutsche Welle or Radio Free Europe. However, these are journalistic products that are orientated towards the standards of Western media.

At first glance, dealing with the Russian-Serbian media partnership is of little relevance, because the Balkans are not uncommonly relegated as the „backyard of Europe“. However, if you look at South-Eastern Europe from the angle of power politics and security policy, the subject becomes enormously important. For a long time, Brussels and Washington have been trying to integrate Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Kosovo into Euro-Atlantic structures and thus repress Russia's influence in the region. The Russian state agency Sputnik fuels this narrative in its Serbian service – „Is the threat of a reckoning between Russia and the USA looming over Serbia?“⁸ Or: „A signal from Washington for the EU to oust Russia and China from the Balkans“ and „Is a clash of the titans imminent in the Balkans?“⁹

1 Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, US Department of State, 2020: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

2 Propaganda 3.0 – Putin und der Westen, Arte-Dokumentation: (Propaganda 3.0 – Putin and the West, Arte documentary.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35Cy-roXi7E>

3 Susanne Spahn, Russische Medien in Deutschland. Wie der russische Informationskrieg und Desinformation Einfluss auf Deutschland ausüben: (Russian media in Germany. How Russian information warfare and disinformation have affected Germany.) <https://shop.freiheit.org/#/Publikation/941>

4 <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/220/1922076.pdf>

5 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20190307IPR30695/eu-wapnet-sich-fur-den-kampf-gegen-feindselige-propaganda>

6 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/de/>

7 <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=425440>

8 11.03.2021

9 12.03.2021



Informer, 07.06.2018: "Die USA und die NATO bekriegen sich mit Russland in Serbien" ("The USA and NATO are at war with Russia in Serbia")



Informer, 28.01.2021: „Plan von Biden und Merkel – Sie zwingen Russen und Chinesen aus Serbien“ („Biden and Merkel’s plan - forcing Russians and Chinese out of Serbia“)

On the other hand, by fuelling regional national conflicts, Moscow is doing everything it can to consolidate its role as an arbitrator in the interests of Belgrade. So it is no coincidence that Serbs in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are considered Russia’s closest allies in South-Eastern Europe in the geopolitical struggle with the USA and Europe.

Time and time again, Russia goes to a lot of effort and spends a lot of money to prove its purported fraternal relationship with the Serbs. Thus Moscow has repeatedly financed grandiose statues, such as for Tsar Nicholas II before the Serbian State Presidium in Belgrade (2014), or the monument to the medieval Serbian state founder Stefan Nemanja, which was inaugurated in the centre of the capital at the end of January 2021. To the Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava in Belgrade, which remained unfinished for decades, Putin himself donated gold mosaics and frescoes the size of several football fields – created and installed by Russian artists. As a sign of gratitude, the homepage of the giant church is published not only in Serbian and English, but also in Russian.¹⁰ In addition, the most popular Russian channel Perwy Kanal shows extensive documentation of the magnificent Orthodox building during prime time.¹¹

¹⁰ <http://hramsvetogsava.rs/>

¹¹ <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/ruske-vesti/lepote-nase-zemlje-videce-330-miliona-ljudi-nima-se-emisija-kakvu-svet-nije-video/406180/vest>

From this power-political, emotional and national-psychological point of departure, the media power from Russia in large parts of the Balkans ensures that the EU and the USA are often fighting a losing battle. Although the EU is by far the largest donor¹² and investor (67 per cent of all foreign investments) in Serbia, large parts of the population believe that Russia and China are in leading positions within these ranks.¹³ Although Serbia conducts the vast majority of its trade (62 per cent) with the EU, many Serbs believe that Russia is the country’s closest economic partner.¹⁴ Yet Serbia is one of the top three countries in the world that benefits from the largest money transfers from Brussels, receiving around 300 million euros in non-repayable aid annually.¹⁵ Although the EU is trying to help Serbia build democracy with billions of euros and an army of diplomats and experts, large amounts even of young people in surveys revere a Russian-style dictatorial government form complete with a „strong leader”.¹⁶

Serbia’s position between the two poles of Russia and the EU

¹² <https://www.rferl.org/a/who-gives-the-most-aid-to-serbia-/30660859.html>

¹³ <https://biznis.telegraf.rs/info-biz/3200315-percepcija-gradjana-vs-cinjenice-ko-su-najveci-donatori-u-srbiji-sad-ili-rusija>

¹⁴ <http://europa.rs/srbija-i-evropska-unija/trgovina/>

¹⁵ EU delegation in Serbia: <https://europa.rs/eu-partnerstvo-sa-srbijom-eu-najbolji-partner-i-najveci-donator-vec-20-godina-i-na-prvoj-liniji-fronta-u-borbi-protiv-covid-19/>

¹⁶ Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji 2020, Beograd 2020, p. 141: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Alternativni-izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-poloz%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-u-RS-2020.pdf>

6 INTRODUCTION

is also substantiated by polls. 85 per cent of the Serbs surveyed in a representative poll in 2019 believe that their country does not have the international status it actually deserves. 70 per cent attributed part of the blame for this to the EU, because it is contrary to Serbia's interests. Around 71 per cent saw NATO as a threat to European security. In a parallel survey in several countries, only Russian citizens were more strongly of this opinion, with 76 per cent agreeing. While 72 percent of Serbs wanted closer cooperation with the EU, 80 percent supported expanding contacts with Russia. Around 83 percent of the Serbs surveyed are in favour of neutrality in terms of alliance policy for their country, and 77 percent agree with higher military spending. The desire for a strong military sector corresponds with the belief of 71 per cent of Serbs that borders can and will be changed by wars.¹⁷

This gap between claimed and real life is also pointed out by the Serbian political scientist Vuk Velebit, who interviewed 15 chief editors and senior journalists about Russian influences – “It is paradoxical that the current government is talking about Serbia's European path and, at the same time via its media, talking us into believing that the West is bad and Russia is an alternative we should perhaps stick to. Also hypocritical is the behaviour of all those who tell us that the West is dangerous for us, but go there to live and work, while saying that Russia is our sister country.”¹⁸

Previous studies on the influence of Sputnik on public opinion and therefore also on the private opinions of people in Serbia have been bogged down with general methodology. They usually try to draw indirect (and often correct) conclusions via secondary sources and secondary literature.¹⁹ The aim of this analysis is to provide unequivocal evidence of the generally claimed but undocumented methods of operation of Russian foreign media in Serbia. It aims to show how these media work in Serbia by systematically evaluating the primary material, i.e. the specific media reports. Which goals are to be achieved, with which techniques, issues and methods? Accordingly, at the core of the work is the content analysis of large sections of material from the Serbian edition of the Russian foreign media service „Sputnik“ in January, February and March 2021.²⁰ In addition, further information is provided about Russophile operators in Serbia. Finally, suggestions are made as to how the EU might respond to Moscow's media offensive.

¹⁷ Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Security radar 2019. Wake-up call for Europe!, Berlin: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/15176-20190412.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/kakve-su-to-patriote-kojima-je-rusija-bliza-od-srbije/>

¹⁹ E.g. Meister, S. (Ed.), Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia, Stuttgart 2018: https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf

²⁰ The news service is published in both Latin and Cyrillic versions: <https://rs-lat.sputnik-news.com/>

1. The media scene in Serbia welcomes Russia with open arms

Serbia has a large number of explicitly Russophile portals (selection):²¹

- The Belgradian journalist and former Novosti correspondent from Moscow, Djuro Bilbija (1948), founded the portal Fakti as a family business with his wife and two sons in autumn 2011: <http://fakti.org/> Editorial line according to Bilbija: Serbia and Russia should build a special relationship based on the example of Israel and the USA – „non-partisan and everlasting“ in terms of the military, economics and spirituality. Only then would Serbia be able to turn to the EU
- Novi Standard (www.standard.rs): Founded in Belgrade in 2009, the chief editor is Željko Cvijanović, owner Aleksandar Vujović. Editorial focus: Glorification of Moscow using the idea that „Russia can become the spiritual leader of the world“,²² the fight against liberalism and globalism („It is time for a general uprising against liberalism 2.0“²³ and the reflection on historical conservative and patriarchal values – “We need to refresh our awareness of history and of what is right and wrong.”²⁴
- Srbin.info: <https://srbin.info/> with its own “President of Russia” section with Putin announcements in Russian. On its ethos: „All of you whose thoughts are with Serbia, who have concern and love for its continued existence in your hearts, please join us on the website srbin.info, which was created with the aim of enriching both our own lives and the lives of future Serbian generations! Join us wherever you are, in your home country or in the diaspora. It doesn’t matter what nationality you are. The only thing that matters is that you share a great love of Serbia with us.“
- Nova srpska politička misao: <http://www.nspm.rs/> of the former MP Djordje Vukadinović: „Our portal is primarily pro-Serbian, and in Serbia that always more or less means pro-Russian. The texts and comments published on our portal are usually pro-Russian.“
- Jelena Milić, Director of Centar za evroatlantske studije (<https://www.ceas-serbia.org/sr/>) is located in a grey zone between Serbia, Russia and the West. With her institution, she intends to promote NATO’s concerns in Serbia and democracy building. Her training has received international support and she is a guest at numerous professional congresses and symposia around the world. In recent years, however, her concerns became the opposite and she became a propagandist for Serbian President Vučić.²⁵ For example, in July 2020 she caused a stir with her Open Letter to the European Parliament, in which she defamed the entire Serbian opposition.²⁶ At the same time, she absolutely unrealistically criticised the mass demonstrations against Serbian President Vučić in Belgrade. Prominent Croatian politics professor Dejan Jović aptly commented on Twitter: „Jelena Milić believes (in line with her long-standing positions) that the demonstrations in Belgrade are pro-Russian and criticises Westerners who support them. She describes Vučić with selected words as someone who is fighting for a compromise on Kosovo and the EU.“²⁷ Milić has now become a voice for the all-dominant Serbian head of state, including his autocratic position, at the expense of independent state institutions modelled on Russia’s President Putin. Logically following from this, she praises Putin’s political agenda with respect to the West, casts doubt on the EU’s sincerity regarding Serbia’s EU accession and regularly acts as a harsh critic of the opposition in the country.²⁸
- Srbija danas (<https://www.srbijadanas.com/>) works from the position of Serbian nationalism, gives the greatest amount of space to Russian views of the world and is regarded as the voice of the current political elite.
- Gazeta. Russian-Serbian news agency (<http://www.vesti-gazeta.com/o-nama.html>). The portal was founded at the start of 2016. Ethos: “An agency whose goal is to promote Russia and its values in Serbia, Republika Srpska and Montenegro. Aware of the fact that the countries of the Western Balkans have been demonised for decades by the media of shadow rulers and powerful people from the West who have poisoned the Orthodox peoples in every way, we have decided heroically to start an information war and to break down all blockades in favour of the globalists.”
- Portal Vostok (<https://www.vostok.rs/>) with detailed basic information about Russia.
- Nationalist (<https://nacionalist.rs/>) with a focus on historical issues

²¹ A broad presentation of the historical and current Russian-Serbian media scene at: Balkanska ofanziva kremaljskih paramedija, Nova srpska politička misao 31.05.2018: <http://www.nspm.rs/prenosimo/balkanska-ofanziva-kremaljskih-paramedija.html?alphabet=1>

²² 30.03.2021

²³ 15.04.2021

²⁴ 20.01.2021

²⁵ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=07&dd=09&nav_category=11&nav_id=1704918

²⁶ <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/news/9135-get-to-know-serbia-2020-better-before-you-react-hastily-to-the-demands-of-a-compromised-group-of-people-who-have-captured-the-concept-of-the-democratic-opposition-in-serbia>

²⁷ 18.07.2020

²⁸ <https://pink.rs/politika/284106/jelena-milic-svi-u-srbiju>

- National Website Istina (<https://www.ceopom-istina.rs/>): "Our problem isn't that we believe. There is strength in faith. Our problem is that we believe in the words of others more than in our own eyes."
- News-Front (<https://srb.news-front.info/>). Ethos: "We, the volunteer news agency News Front – voluntary soldiers of the Information Front, are waging an unequal battle against cynical lies, deceit, manipulation and disinformation – i.e., against the weapons of mass destruction with which the West is waging a new kind of predatory colonial war against us." „Today, Russia has been reborn like a phoenix from the ashes of humiliation and betrayal. Russia has succeeded in defending the sacred right to sovereignty and in making it clear to the world that it is a force to be reckoned with once more"
- In4s.net (<https://www.in4s.net/>) is a church portal with a strong nationalistic appeal. „Naša Srbija" is a permanent category of reports. „We have been elucidating the path to truth for 13 years", says the imprint.
- Vidovdan (<https://vidovdan.org/naslovna/>) is an extreme nationalist portal that was founded in 2005. It advocates the unification of all Serbs in one state and strongly supports the positions of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Slobodan Reljić, NIN chief editor until 2009, probably says exactly what all of these pro-Russian portals think when he describes the ideological principles of these media in 2018 as follows – „What's happening now in Serbia is only the start of

2. Sputnik Srbija

The branch of the Russian foreign agency Sputnik, which was founded by decree of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2014, also opened in Serbia one year later. Although it is the only Sputnik editorial office in the Balkans, its texts and videos are also used by neighbouring states. Around 40 per cent of the users of the news service, which is provided in Latin and Cyrillic script, are, by their own account not from Serbia. 33 journalists work in the 400 square metre newsroom in Belgrade. They are all on one-year contracts and receive their salary, which is said to be above the national average, directly from Moscow. In addition to the news portal as well as the presence on various social media channels, Sputnik also broadcasts its reports via Radio Novosti and Belgrade's Studio B.³⁰

From the start, the chief editor has been Ljubinka Milinčić, who was born in Klina/Kosovo in 1952. She can look back on an impressive career and can be described politically as a convert. From 1996–2000, she was the chief editor of „Demokratija", the voice of the Serbian opposition. From 2002–2015,

Russia's advance into the West. The essence of Russia's understanding of the world today and its rise lies in the fact that Russians have understood the importance of propaganda. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the Russians were left looking like a bunch of lunatics, and today they are world leaders in propaganda. The most important thing in propaganda is to have initiative and not a sense of inferiority, and the Russians have more of that than the West at the moment. The West has no ideas at the moment, while in Russia Putin appeared as a provider of conservative ideas, which are also recognised by a decent number of conservative thinkers in the West. This means that you can't approach Putin the way you could Stalin, because he advocates ideas that you yourself need. There is no family any more in the West; the family unit has broken down in the West and the state is in the hands of the corporate and financial sector. In the context of globalisation, you are downgraded to a speck, to a nothing – and everyone wants to be something. Brexit confirms this notion – We want to be ourselves! (...) The Russians do not rely on weapons, but on propaganda, that is, on what the Americans call „soft power". The Third World War has already begun, but at the moment it is in the intellectual, i.e. the propaganda phase. And to a certain extent, we Serbs are participating in it. For us Serbs, Russia is the only way to stay normal, and it is a fortunate combination of circumstances that have resulted in Russia rising. What is regrettable, on the other hand, is that our political elite are still tied to the West."²⁹

²⁹ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/svijet/reporteri-globusa-u-najjacem-ruskom-glasiluna-balkanu-sputnik-putinova-medijska-centrala-u-srbiji-da-financiraju-nas-rusi-place-stizu-iz-moskve-5373991>

she was the correspondent for many Serbian media in Moscow, such as NIN, Politika and RTS. For a short time, she worked as a cultural and press officer of the Serbian Embassy in Russia. She has translated numerous Russian authors into Serbian and written dozens of books such as *The Phenomenon of Putin – the Man Who Created Himself*. By her own account, she is an ardent admirer of the Russian president. Putin has „brought his country back onto the world political stage", has achieved historical gains on behalf of his people, who „live better today than ever before in their history", Milinčić said in an interview with „Glas Rusije" back in 2013.³¹ She is a „walking encyclopaedia of Russian life", the station has praised. Today, she regularly appears in Serbian media to elucidate on international politics, e.g. „The European Commission's strategy for the Western Balkans is not Serbia-friendly".³² Sometimes she then also discusses very specific side issues like when she presented the Russian town of Kjahta: „Ljubinka Milinčić reveals little-known facts about the Russian town on the border to Mongolia".³³

³⁰ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/svijet/reporteri-globusa-u-najjacem-ruskom-glasiluna-balkanu-sputnik-putinova-medijska-centrala-u-srbiji-da-financiraju-nas-rusi-place-stizu-iz-moskve-5373991>

³¹ <https://www.vesti.rs/Moskva/Ljubinka-Milincic-enciklopedista-ruskog-zivota-2.html>

³² <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a363144-milincic-strategija-ek-nije-prijateljska/>

³³ [https://pink.rs/drustvo/76590/ljubinka-milincic-otkriva-malo-poznate-cinjenice-oruskom-gradu-na-granici-s-mongolijom-\(video\)](https://pink.rs/drustvo/76590/ljubinka-milincic-otkriva-malo-poznate-cinjenice-oruskom-gradu-na-granici-s-mongolijom-(video))

As the chief editor of Sputnik in Serbia, Milinčić describes the goals of this Russian foreign media organisation worldwide – „The world was lacking a closer view of reality, of global politics and, of course, a truthful view of Russian domestic and foreign policy“. „We have broken a monopoly. We have destroyed their right to the truth, shown that they are not always in the right. We have encountered some information that was fabricated and we have said that it is not true. Nobody before us has ever questioned the truthfulness of Western media like Reuters, the BBC or CNN.“³⁴ Milinčić explains Sputnik’s great success in Serbia, where it is reportedly quoted 200–300 times a day by other media, as follows: “We have never fabricated information, we do not lie and we don’t take sides. (...) No one has ever found us to be lying.”³⁵

While – as we will see in the analytical section – Sputnik puts together its texts in its daily reports with Serbian authors and in the interest and from the point of view of Serbia, the chief editor sees her editorial office „as a foreign media organisation. We are not trying to influence the politics of this country“. And: „Everything we say and write is considered the official position of the Russian state, or of Putin himself“.³⁶ When Sputnik Srbija celebrated its fifth anniversary in February 2020, President Aleksandar Vučić and Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic were among the guests. In her speech, Milinčić praised the obligingness of the political elite in the country, who made it possible for Sputnik to contact their members at any time. Also present was the film director Emir Kusturica, who is a frequent interviewee of Sputnik.³⁷

In the imprint of the Serbian Sputnik portal, no statements are made about the ideological background nor about the direction of the content of the work. It is only stated in general terms: “Sputnik is a modern news agency that has its own internet portal and mobile application, a radio programme and multimedia press centres“. Neither is any statement made about the financing of the Sputnik service. It is merely stated in a roundabout way that „Sputnik is (...) part of the Russian media group ‚Rossiya Segodnya‘“.³⁸ Regarding the ethos of this Russian media organisation, it is worth taking a look at the imprint of the German edition. Here, it says under the heading „Mission and Principles“:

“Our core strengths are:

Accuracy – we provide our readers with news they can trust and advocate adherence to high journalistic and ethical standards.

Efficiency – we strive to bring you the latest news and be there for you directly on location at the most important events.

Responsibility – we respect our readers and provide them with facts so that they can form their own opinions.

Diversity of opinion – we are against discrimination and censorship and promote freedom of the press. We report on things that other media keep quiet about!

Innovations – we follow technological progress and always use the most modern technologies for our work in order to offer our readers the highest quality information product.”³⁹

Finally, as regards financing, it is indirectly expressed that Sputnik “belongs to the state-owned international media group ‚Rossiya Segodnya‘“. This only implies that the entire company is paid directly from the Russian state budget. All this information is completely missing from Sputnik’s Serbian imprint.

³⁴ <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ljubinka-milincic-razbili-smo-monopol-na-istinu/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/447726/Pet-godina-Sputnjika-u-Srbiji>

³⁸ https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/docs/o_nama.html

³⁹ https://snanews.de/docs/ueber_uns.html

3. Content analysis

The news page of the Serbian Sputnik service was analysed in January, February and March 2021. In total, the analysis covers two weeks in each of these three months, with the weekends being omitted due to the smaller number of reports available. The investigation periods were randomly selected.

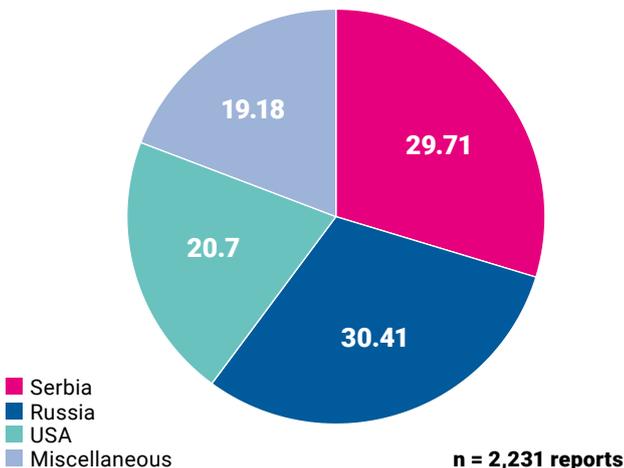
The basis is the complete range of reports by Sputnik Serbian from Monday to Friday:

- 18.01.2021 —————> 22.01.2021
- 25.01.2021 —————> 29.01. 2021
- 15.02.2021 —————> 19.02.2021
- 22.02.2021 —————> 26.02.2021
- 08.03.2021 —————> 12.03.2021
- 15.03.2021 —————> 19.03.2021

The total number of reports during these periods was 3,245. On average, therefore, the portal produces 108 reports per day. Of these reports, the headlines were composed with the assumption that they reflect the intention of the entire text. Of the 3,245 texts, 542 (16.70 per cent) were about sport. 356 reports (10.97 per cent) dealt with international mixed or varied issues; 116 texts (3.57 per cent) related to international foreign policy issues that had no connection to this analysis in terms of content. These included, for example, regional reports in Asia or Africa without reference to the USA, Russia or Serbia. This means that 2,231 reports in the Serbian Sputnik service made up the basis for the content analysis.

This material was distributed among the countries of interest to us as follows (in percentages):

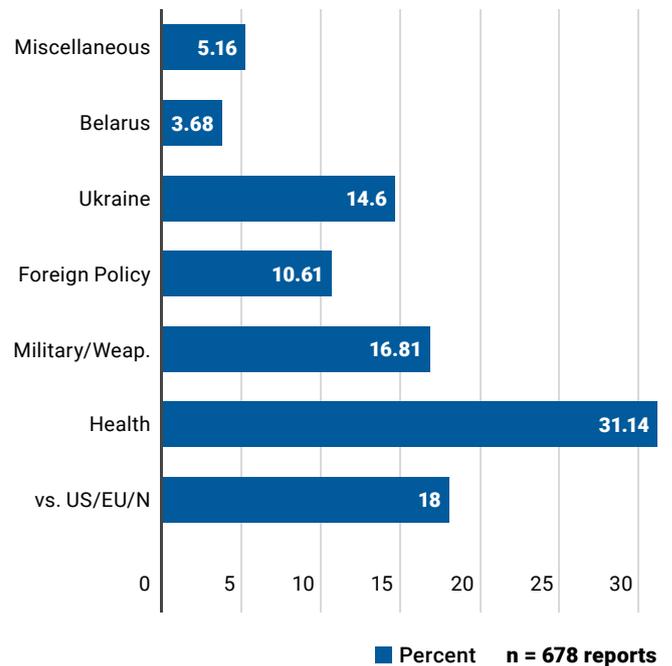
Sputnik coverage Jan–March 2021
Country distribution



Noticeably, there are three clear focuses of Sputnik reports – Serbia, Russia and the USA. All other issues and developments worldwide have a clearly lesser role, even if the 3.57 percent of other international issues that were excluded from the start is added. This concentration of editorial work in Serbia already proves that a user of this service cannot find out information about the most important international issues, because they are usually disregarded due to Sputnik’s focus. A look at Sputnik editions in other languages proves this, since the corresponding target countries, such as Germany or Spain, are the focus there instead of Serbia. In general, it is evident in the Serbian service that this small country is assigned a role on a par with the world powers USA and Russia, which does not actually correlate with reality. Furthermore, coverage of Serbian issues clearly surpasses that of issues from the USA and is on a par with Russian issues.

The issues related to Russia ranged (in percent) as follows:

Russian Issues



The clear focus of the Russia reports is – as is to be expected in these times of corona – on health issues. This mainly concerns the negative portrayal of Western vaccines and presenting the Russian vaccine in an extremely positive light. „Thousands of Israelis test positive for coronavirus even though they were vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine“,⁴⁰ „Increasing side effects of the Pfizer vaccine: Why is the West persistently ignoring the Russian vaccine?“⁴¹ „Due to a large num-

⁴⁰ 21.01.2021
⁴¹ 20.01.2021

ber of side effects, California calls for the Moderna vaccine to be discontinued⁴², „Dirty campaign of the West against the Russian vaccine“⁴³, „Pfizer‘ saw a great opportunity after the pandemic – drastically expensive vaccine with vaccinations needed every year“⁴⁴ or „Europe is playing Russian roulette with the lives of its citizens“ about the pending approval of Sputnik V by the European Medicines Agency EMA⁴⁵ are story examples. On the other hand, success reports are put out worldwide on a daily basis by Sputnik V. It is interesting that there are practically no reports about the progress of the vaccination campaign in Russia itself. Generally, a positive image – even of Russia – is not cultivated with regard to this issue.

The second major issue in Sputnik reporting with references to Russia is also due to the character of this media organisation. It is about issues in which resentment is stirred up against the USA, the EU or NATO (selection):

„Biden has abandoned women“: New US president has already tangled with feminists⁴⁶

„When will civil war break out in America“⁴⁷

„Chomsky: America is the leading terrorist“⁴⁸

„Raking in money with blood on her hands: Volleys of criticism of Hillary Clinton’s new job“⁴⁹

„Contaminated food floods Europe“⁵⁰

„Domino effect: Belgium fears spill-over of riots from the Netherlands“⁵¹

„Legendary investor: Stock markets are at risk of one of the biggest slumps in history“⁵²

„A debacle of unprecedented proportions“ (on the US stock market)⁵³

„Clear signal‘: NATO ready for a confrontation with Russia“⁵⁴

„New official NATO strategy: Aggressive intentions against Russia and China for the sake of globalist interests“⁵⁵

„Countdown to the great reckoning: Why Russia and China have chosen to retaliate against the West“⁵⁶

„About the US preparations for a confrontation with Russia in Europe“⁵⁷

„Rjabkow: Russia should reduce dependence on the dollar“⁵⁸

„How the NATO military exercises almost triggered a nuclear war (1983)“⁵⁹

42 18.01.2021

43 15.03.2021

44 17.03.2021

45 09.03.2021

46 21.01.2021

47 25.01.2021 and 28.01.2021

48 25.01.2021

49 26.01.2021

50 26.01.2021

51 27.01.2021

52 28.01.2021

53 29.01.2021

54 16.02.2021

55 18.02.2021

56 18.02.2021

57 22.02.2021

58 24.02.2021

59 24.02.2021

„Stock market losses in the billions again (...) Debacle on an unprecedented scale: Billionaires in shock“⁶⁰

„Has lost the meaning of its existence: Russian senator predicts in which case the collapse of NATO is imminent“⁶¹

„China vs. America: Why Washington’s strategy is doomed“⁶²

„State Duma spokesman: Russia successfully gets rid of the dollar“⁶³

„Does the draft law on the right to vote shake the foundations of democracy“⁶⁴

„NATO is taking down the security system in Europe“⁶⁵

„New totalitarianism of the West“⁶⁶

An important aspect of this range of issues for Sputnik is the alleged technological „colonialism“ of the USA towards Russia and the world. „Facebook censors Mexican cardinal“, „Russian diplomat on ‚digital dictatorship‘: American platforms openly censor Russian content“⁶⁷ „Lawsuit against Twitter reveals cruel attitude towards child pornography“⁶⁸ or „The iPhone 12 may be hazardous to health“⁶⁹ it is then reported.

The third most important focus of the coverage – although less expected – is military/weapons issues. The alleged superiority of Russian military technology is reported very often here:

„Construction starts on the ‚core nuclear component‘ of the icebreaker of the future“⁷⁰

„Information superiority over opponents: The Russian army’s first network-centric exercises“⁷¹

„It will be dead on target if they meet“: Russian pilot on the Su-57’s superiority over the F-35“⁷²

„The creator of the ‚Bulava‘ missile has designed the unmanned high-speed train ‚Maglev‘“⁷³

„Unique in the world of armaments: The new Russian amphibious tank ‚Sprut-SDM1‘ has been unveiled“⁷⁴

Chief Editor Ljubinka Milinčić from the series „My View of Russia“ – „Russia’s answer to Western schizophrenia – a weapon no one in the world has“⁷⁵

„The Russian army is already preparing for a military victory“⁷⁶

Serbian media picks up these technical military success stories almost always on a large scale and carries over texts, photos and videos exactly as they are. For example, on the

60 26.02.2021

61 26.02.2021

62 11.03.2021

63 11.03.2021

64 12.03.2021

65 17.03.2021

66 18.03.2021

67 21.01.2021

68 22.01.2021

69 27.01.2021

70 19.01.2021

71 19.01.2021

72 20.01.2021

73 17.02.2021

74 22.02.2021

75 24.02.2021

76 18.03.2021

claimed superiority of a new Russian helicopter.⁷⁷ The detailed report on the Mi-8ATMS-VN helicopter model is taken from the widely circulated daily paper „Novosti“⁷⁸ and from the prominent news portal B92.⁷⁹ The video „Russians unveil unique ship engine“,⁸⁰ for example, is of interest to B92⁸¹ and to another well-known portal.⁸² Novosti is interested in the video about the „first step towards the tank of the future“.⁸³

There are frequent detailed reports about new Russian weapons systems that are supposed to prove Russia’s technical superiority. For example, the media widely reported on the new „fighter plane of the future“ and a „new generation“ of interceptor planes,⁸⁴ while keeping quiet about the source. Instead, the „homepage of the company“ is specified (as is the case with Sputnik). As if a media organisation in Serbia would regularly check the homepages of Russian arms companies for regular information about new weapons? Via Tanjug, the report has found its way into many important and influential Serbian media – B92,⁸⁵ state broadcaster Televizija Vojvodina,⁸⁶ tabloid Alo,⁸⁷ tabloid Telegraf,⁸⁸ tabloid Kurir,⁸⁹ national broadcaster TV Happy⁹⁰ and numerous portals (selection).⁹¹ With so much alleged superiority, no wonder Sputnik has a retired US colonel saying „we are not prepared for a war with Russia“.⁹² This assessment is widely adopted in Serbian media such as Novosti,⁹³ the tabloid Alo,⁹⁴ the TV channel ATV,⁹⁵ the news portal B92 Borba.⁹⁶ and the Montenegrin newspaper portal.⁹⁷



Informers, 05.06.2018: „The madmen from the West are preparing a great crime. 18,000 NATO soldiers are preparing a strike against Putin!“

Surprisingly, other Russian issues (apart from the miscellaneous), are virtually omitted from Sputnik’s coverage. Apart from some justifications for the approach towards the Leader of the Opposition Alexei Nawalny, domestic Russian issues are almost completely disregarded. The internal problems or disputes typical of any country are practically non-existent in Russia. The reader also learns almost nothing about economic development. There are only a few general reports, such as „Putin: Russia’s economic downturn is milder than in other countries“⁹⁸ „Russia sets record in food exports“⁹⁹ or „Experts: Russia’s economy comes out of recession“.¹⁰⁰

77 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202012211124157656-rusija-uspesno-testirala-najnoviji-helikopter/>

78 <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/947097/novi-ruski-helikopter-uspesno-testiran-udarne-desantne-snage-dobijaju-savrsenu-podrsku-vazduha-video>

79 https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2020&mm=12&dd=22&nav_id=1784080

80 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202101171124393615-sedmokraka-zvezda-predstavljen-jedinstveni-ruski-dizel-motor-za-brodove-video/>

81 https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2021&mm=01&dd=17&nav_id=1796662

82 <https://www.in4s.net/video-rusi-predstavili-jedinstveni-motor-za-brodove-kazu-naje-fikasnija-konstrukcija-na-svetu/>

83 <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/912990/rusi-predstavili-novog-oklopnjaka-manul-prvi-put-pred-ocima-javnosti-prvi-korak-tenkovima-buducnosti-video>

84 Original report: <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202101241124457893-borbeni-avioni-buducnosti-rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-lovaca-presretaca/>

85 https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2021&mm=01&dd=25&nav_id=1800386

86 https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/evropa/rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-lovaca-presretaca_1201309.html

87 <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/ruske-vesti/rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-lovaca-presretaca/377898/vest>

88 <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/svet/3292957-rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-lovaca-presretaca>

89 <https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/3610743/rusi-prave-lovac-presretac-nove-generacije-mig-41-ce-obavljati-misije-i-u-svemiru>

90 <https://happytv.rs/vesti/svet/272523/rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-borbenih-avionane-samo-da-mogu-da-lete-i-u-svemiru-ve%4%87-i-video>

91 <https://mojiodzaci.com/rusija-pravi-novu-generaciju-lovaca-presretaca/>
<https://mondo.me/info/Svijet/a908694/RUSI-PRAVE-LOVAC-PRESRETAC-NOVE-GENERACIJE-MIG-41-ce-obavljati-misije-i-u-svemiru.html>

<https://objektiv.rs/vest/482795/rusi-prave-avion-nove-generacije-mig-41-ce-obavljati-misije-i-u-svemiru-foto/>

92 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202104121125074533-americki-pukovnik-mi-nismo-spremni-za-rat-sa-rusijom/>

93 <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/986232/americki-pukovnik-donbasu-nismo-spremni-rat-rusijom>

94 <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/svet/nismo-spremni-za-rat-sa-rusijom-bajden-ne-slusa-ujnjegovom-kabinetu-nalaze-se-ljudi-opasnih-namera/405579/vest>

95 <https://www.atvbl.com/vijesti/svijet/americki-pukovnik-nismo-spremni-za-rat-sa-rusijom-12-4-2021>

96 https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=04&dd=12&nav_category=78&nav_id=1841556

97 <https://borba.me/americki-pukovnik-mi-nismo-spremni-za-rat-sa-rusijom/>

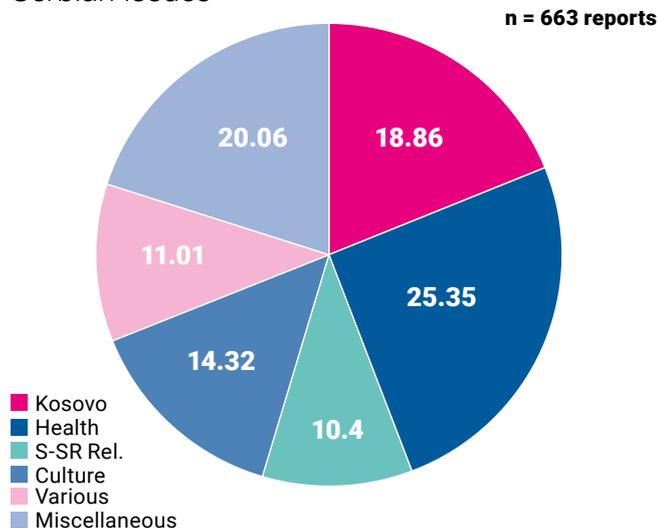
98 21.01.2021

99 09.03.2021

100 15.03.2021

After Russia, the second most frequent country made reference to is Serbia. Here, the range of issues in the period under review provides this picture (in percent):

Serbian Issues



„Health“ takes up the largest share of the issues spectrum with a quarter of the Sputnik reports. This is due to the early administration of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V in Serbia, which was accordingly highly praised in the media. Noticeably, the level of detail in the Sputnik reports makes it seem as if it were a Serbian media organisation and not a Russian foreign portal. This should help users identify with the report, which in this case is perceived as native Serbian – „The crisis team is meeting tomorrow morning at eight o’clock“,¹⁰¹ „Decision tomorrow on primary schools, closure of nursery schools out of the question for the time being“,¹⁰² „From tomorrow, walk-in vaccinations with AstraZeneca vaccine at two new locations in Serbia“,¹⁰³ „Younger primary school pupils also in online classes from Monday“,¹⁰⁴

This detail-focused reporting is also used for other issues and serves as permanent proof that the interest of Serbian readers in information is being served by media reports with a very similar mindset. This can even result in local reports – „Collision of a line 551 bus with a passenger car in Velika Moštanića: Driver rescued by fire brigade, traffic slow-moving“, is an example of a report about an inconsequential traffic accident in a Belgrade suburb,¹⁰⁵ or another example: „House wall falls on bus, one person injured“, which even included a video.¹⁰⁶

Whether even a genuine Serbian media report should/would have to report the insignificant issue „PUPS MP gets sick in parliament, is taken to the emergency room“ is debatable.¹⁰⁷ The speed at which local events are reported can be noticed in the following example – „Shooting in the centre of Belgra-

de“.¹⁰⁸ The shooting occurred at 10.00 a.m. and the associated Sputnik report was put out at 10.44 a.m. Noticeably, the number of infected people in Serbia is reported daily, but no such information is published about other countries. Such information about Russia is very rare, and when it is available, this is exclusively as success stories.

The power and influence that Sputnik already has in the Serbian information landscape is often evident in purely domestic political issues. When the US ambassador to Serbia, Anthony Godfrey, claimed in Belgrade at the end of April that the prominent inventor and engineer Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) was American and not Serbian (after whom the capital’s airport is named), Sputnik was immediately outraged at this „shocking statement“.¹⁰⁹ The fact that such an event on the doorstep of the big media companies was taken on in full by Sputnik can be seen as a testimony to the impoverished nature of the domestic newspapers, portals and TV stations.¹¹⁰

Sputnik was the first to report on a joint Serbian-Russian military exercise in Serbia itself on 20.05.2021 at 9:19 a.m.¹¹¹ Again, it is astonishing that large parts of the Serbian media rely on Sputnik and did not cover this event with their own reporters.¹¹² Even more astonishing is the fact that B92 reports were produced at an unbelievably simultaneous rate, also at 9:19 a.m. And this was also via the „indirect route“ of the national Serbian news agency Tanjug, which B92 references. Do Sputnik reports flow directly into the Tanjug or B92 editorial system?¹¹³ Numerous media in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also refer to this Sputnik report.

The second most important issue is „Kosovo“. This is only natural, because it once again proves to the Serbian public that Russia unconditionally represents the interests of Belgrade in this issue – of course against all efforts by „the West“ to take away Serbia’s former province thereby harming it, according to this interpretation. This results in a claimed clear congruence of Russian and Serbian goals, which reinforces the overall friendly sentiment among the Serbian public towards Moscow. The analysis of the Sputnik texts also shows that Ser-

¹⁰⁸ 21.01.2021

¹⁰⁹ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/202104291125222905-sokantna-izjava-americkog-ambasadora-gresite-nikola-tesla-je-amerikanac-video/>

¹¹⁰ E.g. Novosti: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/992405/posle-hrvata-teslu-prisvajaju-amerikanci-nesmotrena-izjava-ambasadora-godfrija-losa-sala-ili-pokusaj-provokacije>

Alo: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/gresite-nikola-tesla-je-amerikanac/411571/vest>

<https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=430423>

<https://www.pravda.rs/lat/2021/4/29/sokantna-izjava-americkog-ambasadora-gresite-tesla-je-amerikanac-video/>

<https://vidovdan.org/info/sokantna-izjava-americkog-ambasadora-gresite-nikola-tesla-je-amerikanac-video/>

<https://www.in4s.net/video-sokantna-izjava-americkog-ambasadora-gresite-nikola-tesla-je-amerikanac/>

¹¹¹ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202105201125404848-ekskluzivno-ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju---pocela-antiteroristicke-vojne-vezbe/>

¹¹² E.g. <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/998803/ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju-pocela-antiteroristicke-vojne-vezbe-zajednicki-odgovor-2021-foto-video>

<https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/479387/Ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-Srbiju-pocela-antiteroristicke-vojne-vezbe>

<https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/naoruzanje/ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju-pocinju-zajednicke-antiteroristicke-takticke-vezbe-fotovideo-2021-05-20>

<https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/505546/ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju-pocela-antiteroristicke-vojne-vezbe-video/vest>

<https://www.republika.rs/vesti/drustvo/279794/putinovi-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju-antiteroristicke-vezbe-ruske-srpske-vojske-foto-video>

<https://24online.rs/glavne-vesti/ruski-specijalci-stigli-u-srbiju-foto/>

¹¹³ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=05&dd=20&nav_category=11&nav_id=1860898

¹⁰¹ 15.03.2021

¹⁰² 17.03.2021

¹⁰³ 18.03.2021

¹⁰⁴ 16.03.2021

¹⁰⁵ 15.03.2021

¹⁰⁶ 19.02.2021

¹⁰⁷ 23.02.2021

bia is being motivated to take a tougher stance towards Pristina, which would intensify the latent (“frozen”) conflict (shift it to a critical phase). Sputnik even quite often gives the Serbian side supporting arguments to justify and thereby improve its position. This line of reporting includes the confrontation with NATO, under whose leadership an international security force is stationed in Kosovo (KFOR).

The headline „Radicalisation in Pristina: Haradinaj threatens all of the Balkans – the ball is in the West’s court”¹¹⁴ contains all these elements – pro-Serbia, anti-Kosovo Albanians, anti-West, destabilisation of the whole region via Kosovo. Yet the source for such a far-reaching statement is only the former Serbian diplomat Zoran Milivojević, who shouldn’t be considered impartial or passive after all? Although the question of a referendum on a possible unification of Kosovo with Albania has been postponed, even by its supporters, to an unspecified distant future date, Sputnik headlines are written as if there is a specific threat of one now – „Russia on the referendum on the unification of Kosovo and Albania: A provocation that endangers the Balkans”.¹¹⁵ This issue is perfectly suited to create a mood against „the West”: “Why did the EU and the USA remain silent after Haradinaj’s promise of unification with Albania”.¹¹⁶ Sputnik never tires of warning others about the alleged bad intentions of Washington and Brussels – “Surprise from the White House! Serbia must prepare for new challenges relating to Kosovo”.¹¹⁷ And: „Belgrade is under increasing pressure from the West to recognise Kosovo”.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, Sputnik supports Serbian positions on this decades-old dispute. „Important support for Russia in presenting the truth about the crimes of the KLA”,¹¹⁹ and gives plenty of space to the story for the interests of Serbia: “Albanians are not an autochthonous people in the Balkans, they are occupiers. If it hadn’t been for the Turks, they would have become Serbs”. The source of this apodictic statement, which is highly contentious scientifically, is the Serbian-Albanian writer Kaplan Burović, who was born in 1934.¹²⁰

In any case, Russia acts as the official advocate of Serbian interests – „Russia calls on the West: Do not force any artificial deadlines for an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina”.¹²¹ Novosti adds to this: „Putin saves Serbia from Western pressure!”.¹²² And the important portal Kosovo online also adopts the Sputnik coverage exactly as it is.¹²³

¹¹⁴ 19.01.2021

¹¹⁵ 22.01.2021

¹¹⁶ 26.01.2021

¹¹⁷ 27.01.2021

¹¹⁸ 12.03.2021

¹¹⁹ 17.02.2021

¹²⁰ 17.02.2021

¹²¹ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202102261124727578-rusija-ne-forsirajte-vestacke-rokove-za-postizanje-sporazuma-beograda-i-pristine/>

¹²² <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/969207/putin-spasava-srbiju-zapadnog-pritiska-zaharova-jasno-porucila-forsirajte-vestacke-rokove-postizanje-sporazuma>

¹²³ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/zaharova-ne-treba-forsirati-sporazum-beograda-i-pristine-zabrinjava-retorika>



Informer, 15.06.2018: „Warning from Moscow: The USA and the EU are preparing a Kosovo ultimatum”.



Vecernje Novosti, 09.12.2020: „The Serb-haters advise Biden: Destroy Vucic if he does not recognise Kosovo”



Vecernje Novosti, 11.11.2020: „The West helped the criminals create their „state““.

Usually, Sputnik takes sides in the (infrequent) internal Serbian dispute over Kosovo. Thus, the prominent Serbian writer Matija Bećković is repeatedly given plenty of space in exclusive interviews to promote Serbian claims to Kosovo¹²⁴ and to contradict the president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Kostić. With his repeated assertion that Kosovo was definitively lost to Serbia, he caused a great stir and considerable unrest in politics and science. But this isn't enough! Serbia is repeatedly advised to put more pressure on Pristina – „The moment has come: Will Serbia be able to respond to Pristina and ‚let justice take its course?‘“¹²⁵ Allegations made completely out of thin air are also put forwards to this end, which can easily intensify the atmosphere of conflict on both sides. „Will the state of Kosovo gain access to the sea via Montenegro?“¹²⁶ asks Sputnik, without any reason or indication that there are theoretical or even practical considerations for this. The statement „The pogrom in Kosovo continues“¹²⁷ also far overshoots the mark. This also applies to the completely exaggerated headline „Silent pogrom in Orahovac: Gate and door of the Church of the Holy Week destroyed.“¹²⁸ The event of the entrance in a local Orthodox church being damaged can in no way be characterised as a pogrom.

Sputnik not only fuels the Kosovo conflict, but also provides guidelines for Serbia. When the International Crisis Group pre-

sented a discussion paper on the Kosovo conflict in January 2021,¹²⁹ Sputnik went on the offensive with its interpretation – „Serbia is being asked to surrender. The ‚compromise‘ lies in the recognition of Kosovo and the exchange of territories.“¹³⁰ The article was immediately adopted exactly as it is e.g. by the portals B92¹³¹ and Vidovdan.¹³² Sputnik's revisiting of the issue about the „anti-Serbian plan“¹³³ has been reprinted, for example, by the tabloid Alo.¹³⁴ Sputnik also specifies the direction for the reaction to Israel's recognition of Kosovo under international law.¹³⁵ For example, the original report is taken from B92.¹³⁶ The justification that Kosovo can only be Serbian¹³⁷ is circulated by Kosovo-online,¹³⁸ Srbin.info,¹³⁹ Novi Standard¹⁴⁰ and even the renowned newspaper Blic.¹⁴¹ Here, Sputnik gives „extra tuition“ on the arguments in connection with the discussion about a possible unification of Albania with Kosovo: „No unification of Kosovo and Albania without Serbs.“¹⁴² This text is adopted by the following media, among others – B92,¹⁴³ Srbija danas,¹⁴⁴ Glas javnosti,¹⁴⁵ Radio Mitrovica sever,¹⁴⁶ Vidovdan.¹⁴⁷

Strengthening Russian-Serbian relations is another focus of Sputnik's reporting, which also includes the cultural sector. Moscow champions Serbia's interests in the Sputnik portal, even if these interests come across as a bit absurd. „A mission in psychology: The Serbs who supported Trump are deemed to be terrorists“¹⁴⁸ and „The witch hunt has just reached its peak and all those who voted for Trump are labelled as domestic terrorists, including us Serbs.“¹⁴⁹ Once again here we see the Russian media organisation equating itself with Serbia as „us Serbs.“ This pattern runs throughout all of Sputnik's coverage, which bears the slogan „Russia and Serbia together.“ „What do we export to Arabia? Serbian goods in almost every supermarket in Dubai“¹⁵⁰ or „We are facing two scenarios“ are among the reports in the middle of the coro-

¹²⁹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/262-relaunching-kosovo-serbia-dialogue>

¹³⁰ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202101261124474700-srbiji-nude-da-kapitulira-kompromis-je-priznanje-kosova-i-razmena-teritorija/>

¹³¹ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=01&dd=27&nav_category=640&nav_id=1801665

¹³² <https://vidovdan.org/politika/srbiji-nude-da-kapitulira-kompromis-je-priznanje-kosova-i-razmena-teritorija/>

¹³³ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/202101261124470707-antisrpski-plan-medjunarodne-krizne-grupe-nuzno-je-medjusobno-priznanje-srbije-i-kosova/>

¹³⁴ <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/nuzno-je-medusobno-priznanje-srbije-i-kosova/378451/vest>

¹³⁵ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202102021124530049-vasingtonski-nesporazum-pitanje-srbija-preseliti-ambasadu-jerusalem-izrael-priznanje-kosovo/>

¹³⁶ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=02&dd=03&nav_category=640&nav_id=1805131

¹³⁷ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/autori/202101311124510651-cije-je-kosovo--de-jure-i-de-fakto-video/>

¹³⁸ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/analize/cije-je-kosovo-de-jure-i-de-fakto-1-2-2021>

¹³⁹ <https://srbin.info/pocetna/aktuelno/cije-je-kosovo-de-jure-i-de-fakto/?lang=lat>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.standard.rs/2021/02/01/cije-je-kosovo-de-jure-i-de-fakto/>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/prorokovic-tesko-je-potkopati-poziciju-da-je-kosovo-srpsko/fkl3w0y>

¹⁴² <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202102191124661983-nema-ujedinjenja-kosova-i-albanije-bez-srba/>

¹⁴³ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=02&dd=20&nav_category=640&nav_id=1814932

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/kosovo/projekat-pisi-propalo-nema-ujedinjenja-kosova-i-albanije-ako-im-ne-omoguce-srbi-2021-02-20>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/politika/ustav-kosova-bojkotuje-planove-o-velikoj-albaniji-nema-ujedinjenja-kosova-i-albanije-dok-srbi-ne-kazu-da-1863>

¹⁴⁶ <http://radiomitrovicasever.com/2021/02/20/nema-ujedinjenja-kosova-i-albanije-bez-srba/>

¹⁴⁷ <https://vidovdan.org/aktuelno/nema-ujedinjenja-kosova-i-albanije-bez-srba/>

¹⁴⁸ 18.01.2021

¹⁴⁹ 18.01.2021

¹⁵⁰ 23.02.2021

¹²⁴ 24.02.2021

¹²⁵ 25.02.2021

¹²⁶ 15.03.2021

¹²⁷ 17.03.2021

¹²⁸ 26.01.2021

na crisis in Serbia.¹⁵¹ The equation of Serbia with the Serbian Sputnik service achieves a homogenisation that increases credibility. And this system is even applied to the weather – „Spring temperatures have reached us“. The message is clear – the Sputnik journalists and their users are considered to be one and the same.

Clearly, Orthodox rites play a major part in reinforcing this solidarity. „The Lord has revealed himself! Swimming for the Holy Cross throughout Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska“.¹⁵² And if the role of Putin is also described in the same breath, this is likely to reinforce the desired impact of the coverage – „Putin plunges into icy waters on the Feast of Epiphany,“ for which a video is immediately supplied.¹⁵³ The fact that gifts from Russia are also distributed at this important liturgical time is no bad thing for the reputation of the country with the largest surface area on the earth – „Moscow’s gift to the children of Serbia on the Feast of St. Sava.“¹⁵⁴

And this is even though chief editor Milinčić has asserted that the guidelines of her media organisation do not allow her to take sides in domestic Serbian politics. In the few reports on domestic politics, the all-dominant President Aleksandar Vučić is referred to in positive terms without exception. The critical opposition almost never makes an appearance. On the contrary, warnings are given about Vučić’s critics, who always strive for support from „the West“. Milinčić expresses her views in her series of articles as „My View of Russia: Russia does not like those who take their opinions from the West.“¹⁵⁵ In the same series, the subject matter is given a much broader scope – „Moscow’s experience – reach out to the West and it destroys your country“,¹⁵⁶ covering the experience of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was allegedly cheated by the West. The warning to Serbia about its leanings towards the EU can be found between the lines in the article.

Sputnik considers the opposition’s criticism of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) for its unconditional support of Vučić and Serbian nationalism also worthy of analysis – „Attempt to undermine the reputation of the Serbian Orthodox Church by accusing it of being a ‚safe house for thugs and paedophiles““.¹⁵⁷ Consequentially, Sputnik devotes a great deal of time to coverage on the new Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, who had already given an interview to the agency before his enthronement and was therefore „monopolised.“¹⁵⁸ Sputnik reported on his inauguration in so much detail that Serbian media might describe it as exaggerated – „All the details of the ceremony of the inauguration of the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church“.¹⁵⁹

A couple of times in the analysis period, Sputnik also tries to link Serbia with other countries loyal to Moscow – „Lukashenko’s congratulations – We and the Serbs were not enemies,

we did not plunder any foreign country.“¹⁶⁰ In any case, the assurance is made that „Russia will not abandon Serbia“, even if this „only“ relates to technical cooperation.¹⁶¹ In any case, evidence of the concordance of both countries’ interests is always provided. „When Serbian brothers, members of the ‚Night Wolves‘, met Nole in Australia“.¹⁶² The background to this is the support of Serbian tennis star Novak Djoković, who plays the central role in Sputnik’s sports reports, which are excluded here. The number one player in the world rankings is portrayed as a victim of scheming by competitors and federation officials, and always supported by Sputnik in this. „Novak has shown patriotism again“ is always praised.¹⁶³ In addition to Djoković, Serbian football and basketball in the form of Crvena zvezda and Partizan are a major focus of the sports issues. Serbian athletes abroad also widely have their say, although criticism is usually voiced about their frequent deployment in the United States.

The content structure of all articles that refer to the USA (see chart) is not discussed in more detail here, as it follows the systematic approach of all Sputnik services worldwide and has already been described in detail. The picture is clear – the USA is on the brink of civil war because of internal conflicts, terrorism and crime, the capitalist economy is going to collapse, the stock markets will collapse, the dollar will be withdrawn as the lead currency. America’s allies are being advised to emancipate themselves from US leadership in order to avoid their own downfall. All US thought and action is consequently orientated towards the single goal of harming Russia.

This narrative is often conflated with Balkan issues. For example, when the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was hated in Serbia (because she had allegedly acted with bias against Belgrade in the Yugoslav wars), was reappointed as an advisor under the new US President Joe Biden, the Sputnik reporting was able to easily switch to making one fundamental criticism of the USA – The country is „losing its economic primacy in the world according to all relevant key data,“ it said. After all, the USA is no longer a democratic country, „but divided to the brink of civil war, with features of media totalitarianism, compromised elections and institutional collapse.“¹⁶⁴ This article was taken from B92, for example.¹⁶⁵ Sputnik never tires of „proving“ that everything bad for the Balkan countries comes from Brussels and Washington. Then relief is reported once it has been possible to avert the threat of disaster once more: „Relief! Biden’s cabinet will not embark on any adventures in the Balkans“ is the headline of report and video on this issue.¹⁶⁶

This example shows how skilfully the issues of Serbia, Russia and the USA can be interwoven for the interests of Moscow: „America’s biggest warmonger (...): Biden was one of the biggest warmongers in the US Congress, says the columnist of

¹⁵¹ 23.02.2021

¹⁵² 19.01.2021

¹⁵³ 19.01.2021

¹⁵⁴ 26.01.2021

¹⁵⁵ 27.01.2021

¹⁵⁶ 10.03.2021

¹⁵⁷ 28.01.2021

¹⁵⁸ 18.02.2021

¹⁵⁹ 19.02.2021

¹⁶⁰ 15.02.2021

¹⁶¹ 15.02.2021

¹⁶² 24.02.2021

¹⁶³ 09.03.2021

¹⁶⁴ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202012171124127771-zasto-je-medlin-ol-brajt-najbolje-resenje-za-srbiju/>

¹⁶⁵ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=12&dd=18&nav_category=11&nav_id=178257

¹⁶⁶ Sputnik srpski 21.01.2021

the weekly paper *Nedeljnik*, Liljana Smajlović for Sputnik.¹⁶⁷ Here we are brought back to a logical starting point – Serbia (in the form of one of the most prominent female journalists) against the USA, the USA against Russia as a victim, and resulting from this, Serbia’s solidarity with Russia and vice versa.

Another example is the claim that the USA is being threatened with Balkanisation along the lines of collapsed Yugoslavia. The article relies almost entirely on the former short-term Foreign Minister of the remaining part of Yugoslavia, Vladislav Jovanović, who, incidentally, is a frequent interviewee of Sputnik. Propositions: The USA is collapsing like Yugoslavia did. Nevertheless, „America should not be laid to rest yet,” even if „racial, economic, cultural and health discontent is taking on political forms.” The United States, he said, is „facing an internal chasm.” This wounded state could become a particu-

¹⁶⁷ 19.03.2021

lar danger to other countries – „The last empire, America, is experiencing a reprise of the Balkan syndrome.” The US was created through violence at the expense of Canada, Mexico and Cuba, he said. „Now their Capitol is experiencing what they created in the world when they applauded every violent intrusion of demonstrators into foreign parliaments”¹⁶⁸ B92¹⁶⁹ and the portal Kosovo online took on the original report.¹⁷⁰

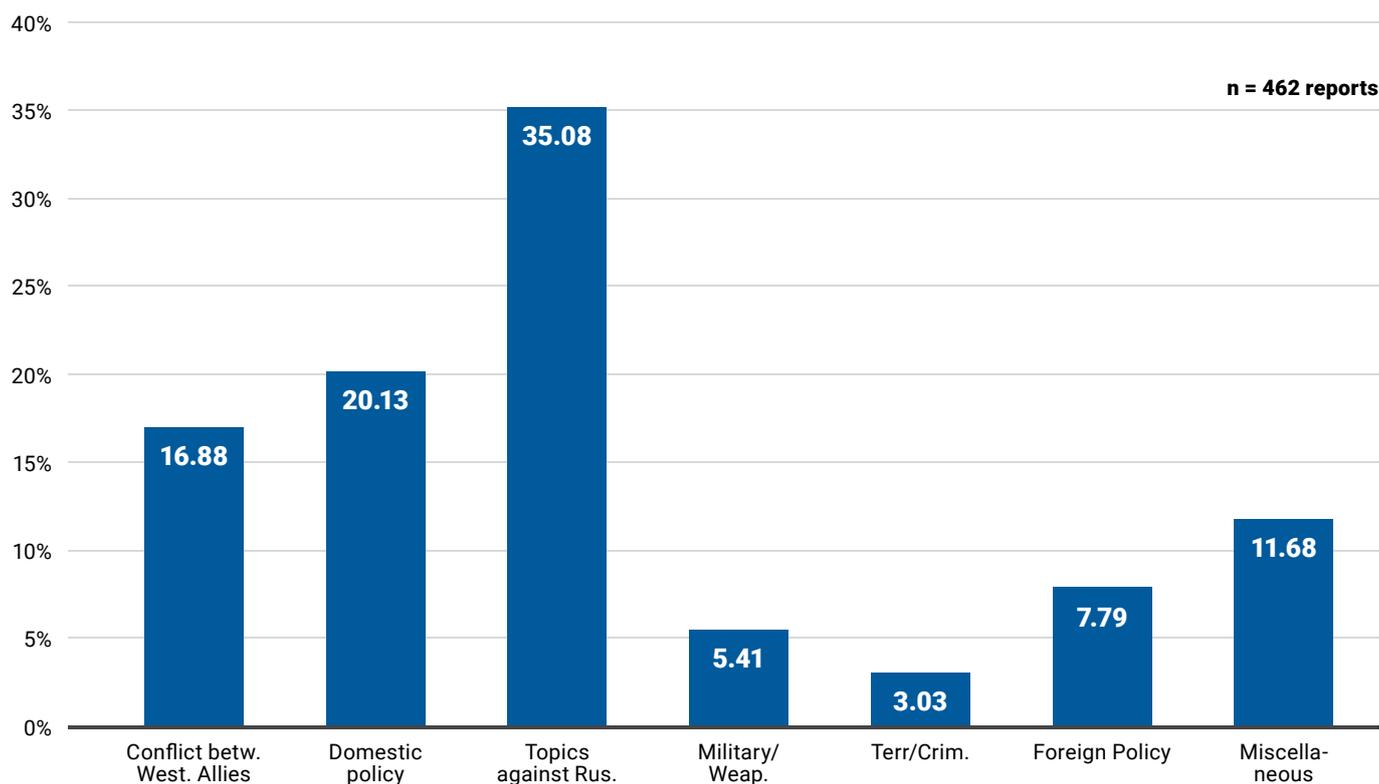
The relentless Russian propagandist criticism, which is adopted and amplified by the clear majority of the Serbian me-

¹⁶⁸ <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/202101121124355220-balkanizacija-pred-vratima-sudbina-amerike-sad-zavisi-od-trampizma-stefan-djuric/>

¹⁶⁹ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=01&dd=13&nav_category=78&nav_id=1794657

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/jovanovic-amerika-se-moze-pretvoriti-u-balkan-iz-perioda-krvoprolica-13-1-2021>

USA Issues



dia,¹⁷¹ creates outright content bloopers. This can be seen from even a brief glance at the front pages of the print media (N.B. it is worth considering whether to show the front pages in a smaller format here) –

„Biden and Merkel’s Plan – Forcing Russians and Chinese out of Serbia“,¹⁷² „Americans want to have Vučić assassinated“,¹⁷³ „EU pays for strike against Vučić“,¹⁷⁴ „The CIA makes bets on Vučić’s head“,¹⁷⁵ „NATO and ISIS prepare chaos at the (football) World Cup“,¹⁷⁶ „The madmen from the West are preparing serious crimes. 18,000 NATO troops are preparing a strike against Putin!“,¹⁷⁷ „Serb haters advise Biden: Destroy Vučić if he does not recognise Kosovo“,¹⁷⁸ „The West helped the criminals to create their ‚state‘ (Kosovo)“,¹⁷⁹ „The USA and NATO are at war with Russia in Serbia“,¹⁸⁰ are just a few headlines chosen at random. The absurdity of the headlines is revealed when it is considered that Washington and Brussels want to integrate Serbia into Euro-Atlantic structures, therefore in no way destabilising it.

„The bloody trail of the American lie factory,“ is Novosti’s head-

- 171 The national Serbian TV stations, which are either under direct state control or belong to oligarchs with close ties to the political elite, had to be excluded from this analysis due to lack of space. However, the picture here is the same as in the print and electronic media outlined here.
- 172 Informer 28.01.2021
- 173 Alo 30.04.2019
- 174 Informer 06.03.2020
- 175 Srpski telegraf 25.05.2018
- 176 Alo 06.06.2018
- 177 Informer 05.06.2018
- 178 Novosti 09.12.2020
- 179 Novosti 11.11.2020
- 180 Informer 07.06.2018



Informer, 06.03.2020: „EU pays for strike against Vučić“



Alo!, 30.04.2019: „Americans wanted Vučić assassinated“



Srpski Telegraf, 25.05.2018: „The CIA makes bets on Vučić’s head“

line about its purported „analysis“ of US politics in particular and the politics of Western countries in general –¹⁸¹ „Who does the farce from Salisbury about the poisoning of former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia benefit? Who does the alleged chemical weapons attack on the Syrian city of Douma benefit? Is the proximity of these two events a coincidence, or is it all staged to serve as a smokescreen for Western states to expel dozens of Russian diplomats and fire hundreds of missiles at Syria?“

„From both sides of the Atlantic, a single nation is being demonised in a way that has not been seen before. The world media community is rushing to contribute to this, first with the help of the Croatians, then the Muslims, and finally the Kosovo Albanians – always against the same enemy, the Serbs. Whoever controls the Balkans controls the routes of oil and gas from Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait, from the Caspian Sea and from Kazakhstan. NATO needs practice as the world’s policeman and to test its weapons and equipment. The Germanic world has not given up on its quest to open a route to the Mediterranean for itself. The USA wants to weaken European nations to gain military bases that are directed against Russia.“

On the other hand, Russia as the protector of Serbian interests. Every day the media wants to „prove“ how exceptionally good relations between Moscow and Belgrade are. This regularly results in almost eulogistic descriptions of „the brotherhood and partnership between these two intimately friendly countries.“ For example, at the end of 2020, the widely read newspaper Novosti reviewed the past year to document the decisive events in this very special relationship between the

two countries once again.¹⁸² Here, the smallest associations are inflated into major international events. While Serbia conducts two thirds of its foreign trade with the EU, economic cooperation with Russia is described as follows: „On 5th and 6th March, the 18th meeting of the Russian-Serbian Intergovernmental Committee on Trade, Economic and Scientific and Technical Cooperation was held in the Russian city of Kazan. This body, co-chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov and Minister Nenad Popović, enables the discussion of current issues on the bilateral economic agenda.“ And because there was so little to specifically report, the Cyrillic script is mentioned once again as an important bond between the partners, and in the chapter on „Close Cooperation“, it is rather vaguely stated: „The desire to develop a strong cooperation is voluntary and completely sincere on the part of Russia and Serbia.“ Finally, even „love“ is discussed in a separate chapter – „Brotherly love and mutual respect are a solid foundation of Russian-Serbian relations, which are based on centuries-old traditions of ties between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches, the brotherhood in arms forged in the flames of two world wars, as well as close cultural ties.“

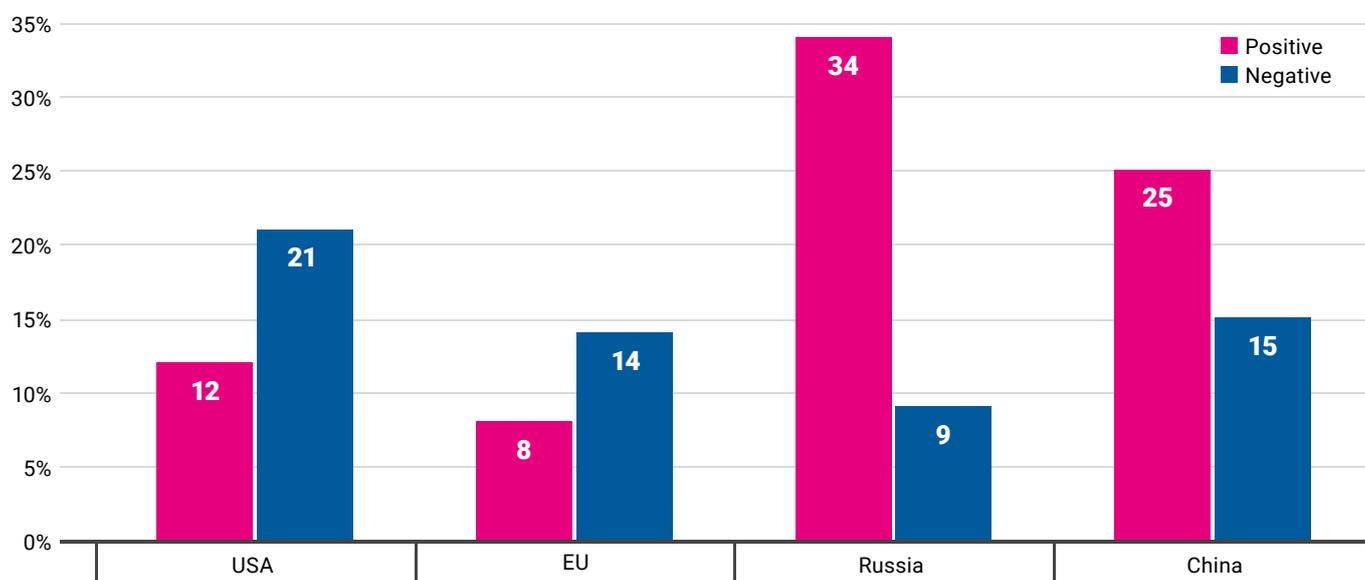
The daily criticism of Western countries and the praise of Russia – which do not shy away from distorting facts and making allegations that leave readers speechless and defy all logic, including below the belt – do not fail to have an effect on the general public. This is shown in the following chart, which analyses more than 47,000 media reports in 2020. Only evaluative reports were considered. The figures missing up to 100 percent are neutral, i.e. without any analysis.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ 22.04.2018: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:723463-Americka-fabrika-lazi-o-Srbima>

¹⁸² <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/950250/rusija-srbija-2020-koji-sve-dogadjaji-obelezili-bratstvo-partnerstvo-dve-bliske-prijateljske-zemlje-foto>

¹⁸³ https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Crta_medija-monitoring-2020.pdf

Analysis of Serbian media 2020



Source: CRTA medijski monitoring

46,799 p.c.

Finally, let us consider a small special aspect of Sputnik's reporting in association with Serbian media – German Chancellor Angela Merkel is regularly only referred to with her first name. There is no other top political figure in the world (apart from Montenegrin President „Milo“ Djukanović as a „screen“ for the projection of purportedly anti-Serbian policies)¹⁸⁴ who is only addressed by their first name. We can only guess whether this is due to the belittling of women in politics, or whether this „stylistic element“ is intended to demonstrate a great deal of closeness. After all, President Vučić repeatedly states that Merkel is his closest ally in the West –

„What will Angela say?“¹⁸⁵ „Is Angela abolishing taxes?!“¹⁸⁶ „Lavrov warns Vučić: Angela is drafting a resolution to decla-

¹⁸⁴ E.g. „Milo izgubio Niksic, na redu je Herceg Novi“, 15.03.2021.

¹⁸⁵ <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/465250/sta-eci-angela-nemci-ponose-srbijom-ardu-je-nas-vasu-zemlju-povlacenju-nezavisnosti-kosova-cak-nobelovci-vas>

¹⁸⁶ <https://informer.rs/stampano-izdanje/1286/2019-03-13>

re Serbs as genocidaires“¹⁸⁷ „Angela will not stand against Serbia!“¹⁸⁸ „Offensive offer from Germany: Angela offers us a car factory as recognition for Kosovo“,¹⁸⁹ „Angela shocks the nation“, „Vučić:¹⁹⁰ „Angela calls for greater powers“,¹⁹¹ „Vučić: Don't think I'll tell Angela I'm sorry, I can't come,“ are examples of the corresponding headlines.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/naslovne-strane-srpske-stampe-19-juna-2020-godine.html?alphabet=1>

¹⁸⁸ <https://informer.rs/vesti/srbija/377371/samo-vikend-izdanju-informera-dobre-vesti-berlina-angela-nece-protiv-srbije>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.pressserbia.com/ovo-su-danasnje-naslovne-strane-465/>

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/987449/angela-sokirala-naciju-sutra-vakcinisati-evo-koje-cepivo-izabrara-kancelarka>

¹⁹¹ <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/987792/angela-trazi-veca-ovlascenja-nemacka-kancelarka-pred-parlamentom-objasnjavala-nuznost-preraspodele-vlasti>

¹⁹² <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3418281/vucic-ne-mislite-da-cu-eci-angela-izvini-ne-mogu-doci-nema-odlaganja-skupova-utakmica-izbora>

4. Sputnik in a Serbian neighbourhood

Just a brief look at the work of Russian foreign media in Serbia's neighbourhood in the Balkans. Sputnik particularly focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recent studies have shown that Sputnik Serbia single-sidedly supports Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and portrays his political opponents as puppets of the West. Various conspiracy theories are being spread, according to which Washington and Brussels want to instigate a „colour“ or „coloured revolution“ in the Serb-controlled half of Republika Srpska, along the lines of Ukraine or Northern Macedonia.

According to these analyses, by spreading one-sided content in favour of Dodik and his governing party the SNSD, or at the expense of the opposition there, as well as of all leading national parties and top politicians throughout the country, Sputnik is working in close cooperation with the regional Serbian TV station RTRS, the local Serbian news agency Srna and the local station ATV, to name just a few.¹⁹³ In line with the Russia/Republika Srpska versus the Bosniaks model, for example, a typical headline reads: „Night Wolves‘ celebrate Republika Srpska Day“, with the written article complemented by a video.¹⁹⁴ The national holiday proclaimed by the Serbian half of the country had actually been banned by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the Serbs celebrated the day regardless with a small military parade as a demonstration of political power. The Russian bikers joined in the celebrations and therefore showed support for this position.

Sputnik regularly provides Dodik with a platform and thus repeatedly fuels the internal Bosnian national conflicts. At the beginning of June, the Bosnian Serb leader surprised everyone in an exclusive Sputnik interview with the provocative sug-

gestion that in future, his fellow countrymen would be able to celebrate their own national holiday at the same time as the „Mother Republic“ of Serbia on 15th February.¹⁹⁵ This controversial remark naturally provoked a widespread reaction in the region. Prominent Serbian newspapers,¹⁹⁶ TV stations,¹⁹⁷ and portals picked up the story.¹⁹⁸ But the interview was also widely circulated in Montenegro¹⁹⁹ and Bosnia and Herzegovina itself.²⁰⁰

Examples of typical headlines are: „Bakir Izetbegović's scandalous statement“,²⁰¹ „New trick by Bosniaks to recapture Srebrenica“,²⁰² „Dodik: Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a choice – either respect the Dayton Agreement or break up“,²⁰³ „Croatian MP: Third entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina already possible“,²⁰⁴ „Dodik to Palmer: Bosnia and Herzegovina is not working; a peaceful separation should be considered“, „Dodik: It is time to either reach an agreement or draw the boundaries between the entities more clearly“²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁵ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/202106051125531862-dodik-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija-video/>

¹⁹⁶ E.g. <https://www.novosti.rs/republika-srpska/vesti/1004031/dodik-opet-matirao-sarajevo-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-srbija>

¹⁹⁷ E.g. <https://happytv.rs/vesti/region/296239/dodik-%C5%BEestoko-odgovorio-sarajevu-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavi%C4%87emo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija>

¹⁹⁸ E.g. https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=06&dd=05&nav_category=167&nav_id=1869930

<https://24sedam.rs/region/dodik-ima-spremnu-zamenu-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija/>

<https://www.in4s.net/dodik-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija/>

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/region/323689/ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-kad-i-srbija.html>

<https://borba.me/dodik-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija/>

²⁰⁰ via the Bosnian Serbian news agency Srna, e.g., in: <https://www.rtvbn.com/4007138/dobra-ideja-da-se-i-dan-srpske-slavi-15-februara>

<https://mondo.ba/Info/Politika/a1049318/Dodik-podrzao-da-se-Dan-RS-ne-slavi-9-januara-vec-15-februara.html>

<https://bijeljinaexpress.com/dodik-ako-smeta-9-januar-slavicemo-dan-republike-kad-i-srbija-video/>

²⁰¹ Sputnik srpski 22.01.2021

²⁰² 18.02.2021

²⁰³ 08.03.2021

²⁰⁴ 09.03.2021

²⁰⁵ Both on 10.03.2021

¹⁹³ Udruženje građana „Zašto ne“, Disinformation in the online sphere: The case of BiH, Sarajevo 2019: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

¹⁹⁴ 19.01.2021

Similar to its reporting on Serbia, Sputnik also provides guidance for action in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Serbs in this Balkan country. The Serbian law professor Darko Tanasković is given the opportunity to propose a detailed strategy on how to handle the genocide of Muslim Bosniaks by Serb soldiers and guerrilla fighters, which has been documented by international courts. In doing so, he provides a guide for new nationalist disputes and the relativisation of the genocide in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia in 1995 – „Creating a realistic picture of Serb suffering during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina – a challenge for Republika Srpska“ is the headline about this text: „In this way, the prerequisites are created for the creation of a balanced and realistic picture of the tragic civil war and the struggle for territories with elements of religious conflict, in which all parties suffered relatively large losses and were exposed to multiple forms of suffering. On the other hand, the stereotypical Bosniak victim discourse is relativised and disempowered by this, a constant of their entire political platform before the international community, which was shaped and generously promoted in active cooperation with parts of this community“, Tanasković said.²⁰⁶

Russia regularly warns of the negative consequences for Bosnia and Herzegovina of further rapprochement with NATO,²⁰⁷ which always attracts a great deal of attention throughout the region.²⁰⁸

Since the ideological political fronts between Russia and Serbia, on the one hand, and „the West“ on the other are clear in this world view, this is probably also only a rhetorical question: „Who is reconciling and who is causing hostilities in the Balkans“, the nationalist Serbian historian Čedomir Antić explains at length for Sputnik.²⁰⁹ Even the influence of Turkey – an occasional Russian ally – is warned against – „As in Ottoman times – influence of power from the Bosphorus on Asia, Europe and – the Balkans“. The well-known Serbian lawyer Darko Tanasković is able to present his collected essays on Turkey here. This negative conclusion for Ankara is arrived at – „Neo-Ottomanism is a deep constant not only of Turkish foreign policy, but of the overall national demeanour of the Turkish state and an essential element of the Turkish mentality.“²¹⁰ When Serbia is discussed in relation to its neighbours, they always get the short straw compared with Belgrade. Serbia is always portrayed in a better light – „National debt of Serbia's neighbours rises to 86.4 per cent of GDP.“²¹¹

A common thread runs throughout all of Sputnik's coverage – the conflicts between the already disunited Balkan countries are fuelled by the intensification of already existing differences and animosities. This is especially true for the problematic central relationship between Serbia and Croatia. „Croatia starts the decade as the third worst member of the EU.“²¹²

Is the „third worst“ at all newsworthy? Or is it meant to show that the potential EU accession of Serbia does not promise any economic improvement to its situation? The fact that the much smaller country Croatia clearly overtook larger Serbia by a long stretch in terms of gross domestic product per capita after it joined the EU is completely ignored here.²¹³

„Croatian Foreign Minister: We expect an explanation and apology from Serbia“,²¹⁴ Sputnik reports, clearly siding with Serbia because Croatia's criticism of Belgrade is presented as unjustified in the text. The Russian media organisation also has a contentious view about the procurement of the corona vaccine: „Apprehension in Croatia: Serbia is even receiving vaccines it has ordered in smaller quantities than Croatia“²¹⁵ The animosity and competition between the two neighbours is played up everywhere – „New ranking of armed forces worldwide published: Serbia ahead of Croatia“²¹⁶ The situation of minorities in both countries is ideally suited for this – „Croatia sends diplomatic note to Serbia ‚due to endangerment of the Croatian minority““.²¹⁷ Belgrade will also welcome this portrayal – „Serbia in ex-Yugoslavia has the least amount of debt; Croats and Slovenes are up to their necks in debt“.²¹⁸ Here again a single aspect of the economic situation is picked out, but the debts are not put into a larger context, e.g., the fact that Croatia had spent many billions of euros on building a dense motorway network, which has only just begun in Serbia. No opportunity is missed to portray Croatia negatively – „Accordion party in the middle of hospital for corona patients: Croatia rocked by major affair“.²¹⁹ This was certainly a local „affair“, but not one that deserved international attention, let alone one that really rocked Croatia. There have been several such illegal celebrations during corona times – and the multitude of examples from Serbia – some involving thousands of people – have not had a word mentioned about them in the period under investigation. When it comes to Serbian-Croatian relations, Sputnik doesn't stop even at very local events – „Croatian MP claims hooligan in Vukovar was beaten by police officer“.²²⁰ It should be remembered that the city of Vukovar in Slavonia is a hotspot for nationalist conflicts between the Croatian majority and the Serb minority there. Reports that reveal historical contradictions also regularly appear: „Monument to victims of Ustasha terror demolished for a car park in Croatia“.²²¹

The socio-economic situation of Croatia is painted in gloomy colours: „Croats' wallets emptier and emptier, they're selling the last of their gold jewellery to pay their bills“.²²² Here, mentioning the fact that the average income in Serbia is miles behind those in Croatia isn't only missed out. Furthermore,

²⁰⁶ 26.02.2021

²⁰⁷ <https://www.danas.rs/politika/rusija-poslala-bih-opomenu-zbog-odnosa-sa-nato/>

²⁰⁸ E.g. <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/svijet/rusija-upozorava-da-ce-biti-prisiljena-reagirati-ako-bih-ude-u-nato-1134760> and <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/rusija-upozorava-da-ce-biti-prisiljena-reagirati-ako-bih-ude-u-nato-20210318>

²⁰⁹ Sputnik srpski 24.02.2021

²¹⁰ Sputnik srpski 26.02.

²¹¹ 28.01.2021

²¹² 08.03.2021

²¹³ E.g. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse263-DE.pdf> or this interactive diagram with a projection of the GDPs of all Balkan countries until 2050: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ed08FCUU6w>

²¹⁴ 29.01.2021

²¹⁵ 08.03.2021

²¹⁶ 10.03.2021

²¹⁷ 11.03.2021

²¹⁸ 19.03.2021

²¹⁹ 22.01.2021

²²⁰ 21.01.2021

²²¹ 12.03.2021

²²² 23.02.2021

although ever larger parts of the population are living in uncertain conditions, there are practically only economic success stories from Serbia such as „Will Serbia become a superpower in lithium production?“. ²²³

The same pattern is used in the Sputnik texts for issues in and about Montenegro. First, even local events are searched for to show the small Adriatic country in a negative light – „Scandal in Podgorica: Pregnant women given wrong medication“ and „School closed in Montenegro because of scabies“. ²²⁴ It remains to be seen whether a case of scabies in a school is an international issue at all. In Montenegro, too, Sputnik unconditionally supports the Serbian minority and campaigns against the previous ruler who is still state president Milo Djukanović. It must be proven that the Serbs in the country are deprived of rights and are treated unfairly by the majority. Once again, even minor local events are helpful for this – „Search of Serbian citizens at the border: Montenegrin police confiscate Serbian flags, money and laptops“. ²²⁵ Numerous articles describe how things are allegedly going haywire in Montenegro – „Public Prosecution Office: Several liquidations prevented in Podgorica, Budva, Tivat and Bar“. ²²⁶ The local elections (!) in the city of Nikšić are a broad issue for Sputnik with clear demonisation of Djukanović and his decades-long ruling party the DPS. ²²⁷ On 15.03 alone, there are four news reports rejoicing over the defeat of the DPS, reporting extended celebrations of joy by „the people“ and calling on readers to ensure a similar outcome in the next local elections in the town of Herceg Novi. With reports like „Waiting for an answer: Is Montenegro taking action against Russia and China or is Dritan just ‚going it alone‘?“ and „Medojević: Montenegrin government does not have a majority“, ²²⁸ the contrast between the Serbian minority and other minorities as well as with the government majority is clearly demonstrated.

Another thematic focus is the political conflict triangle of Serbia-North Macedonia-Bulgaria. In the past, Russia had long tried to prevent the settlement between Northern Macedonia and its neighbour Greece in the decades-long name dispute. Now that this problem has been cleared up, Sputnik is promoting the multi-layered disputes between the three countries. Because the background to these conflicts would go beyond the scope of this analysis, here are just a few exemplary headlines – „Bulgarian politician Zaev congratulates Serbian occupiers on the Feast of St. Sava“, ²²⁹ „Scandalous message from Sofia: Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister calls Serbia an executioner of Macedonia“, ²³⁰ „Bulgaria’s foolish dream: Serbia should be responsible for Macedonia’s existence“, ²³¹ „Bulgarian politician angry over Macedonian thanks to Vučić for vaccines“, ²³² „Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister: Serbs think there is no one but them in the Balkans“, ²³³ „Bulgarian politician calls Macedonian state representatives ‚ethnic Bulgarians‘“, ²³⁴ „Map of Bulgaria that includes Macedonia: Bulgarian Minister publishes unusual greetings card on 8th March“, ²³⁵ and „Scandal in Skopje: ‚Bulgarian tricolour‘ unexpectedly appears in the song of the Macedonian participant in the Eurovision Song Contest“. ²³⁶

²²³ 24.02.2021

²²⁴ Both headlines from 25.02.2021

²²⁵ 25.01.2021

²²⁶ 28.01.2021

²²⁷ 12.03.2021

²²⁸ 19.03.2021

²²⁹ 27.01.2021

²³⁰ 28.01.2021

²³¹ 29.01.2021

²³² 15.02.2021

²³³ 19.02.2021

²³⁴ 11.03.2021

²³⁵ 15.03.2021

²³⁶ 16.03.2021

5. Putin outshines everything

As this analysis has repeatedly shown, a cult of personality is being created around the person of Russian President Putin. Russia is equated with Putin and Putin personally appears as the unconditional political patron of the Serbs, a kind of political godfather. Sputnik chief editor Milinčić in particular is working on this cult. At the end of April 2021, she gave reasons why the world should listen to Putin now on Youtube, for example – „Putin warns – you’ve turned the world into a jungle, but we have an answer for this”.²³⁷ By 4th May, more than 42,000 users had clicked on the video – an impressive number considering that the total number of subscribers to Sputnik Srbija on Youtube is around 111,000.

Putin and the political system he embodies have a great appeal throughout South-Eastern Europe. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban, with his concept of an „illiberal democracy”, openly admires Putin. The right-wing conservative Prime Minister in the NATO and EU country Slovenia, Janez Janša, follows suit. Serbia’s President Vučić also admires Putin. Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who was voted out of office after ten years in the government and illegally fled under the protection of Orban, also spoke highly of Putin and implemented his instruments of power in his homeland. The decades-long powerful leader of Montenegro, Djukanović, practised the Putin system, as did the Bosnian Serb leader Dodik and long-serving Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. Moreover, Russia’s president clearly approximates the need of large parts of the population of South-Eastern Europe for a strong national leader who guides the destiny of his people in a paternalistic manner.

Thus it is unsurprising that the photos, videos and texts about Putin’s appearances as a karate fighter or ice hockey player, as a bare-chested horse rider or his tête-à-têtes with wild animals like lions and bears are gratefully reproduced in the media of South-east Europe.

Just one example of this is when Putin went on a winter holiday in the Siberian Taiga with Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu.²³⁸ The story went viral across many South-Eastern Europe media. The Croatian news agency Hina²³⁹ and the prominent Croatian newspaper Jutarnji list²⁴⁰ as well as the well-known tportal²⁴¹ found the topic just as exciting as the most well-known media in Serbia or Bosnia.²⁴² The spreads of impressively sized photos painted the picture of a „real man”, a „top bloke” in the wilderness.

²³⁸ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/202103211124902221-putin-i-sojgu-provode-vikend-u-tajgi-video/>

²³⁹ <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/svijet/putin-i-ministar-sojgu-vikend-proveli-uzivajuci-u-sibirskoj-tajgi-1167969>

²⁴⁰ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/vozi-gusjenicara-pjesaci-po-snijegu-obraduje-drvo-vreba-divljac-fotoreportaza-s-putinova-sibirskog-odmora-15059558>

²⁴¹ <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/foto-putin-opet-vikend-proveo-u-prirodi-pjesacio-po-snijegu-i-i-vozio-terenac-u-sibirskoj-tajgi-foto-20210321>

²⁴² <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/putin-proveo-vikend-u-sibiru-vozeci-se-u-terenskom-vozilu-foto-video/x3z1z06>

<https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/svet/3316437-putin-i-sojgu-provode-vikend-u-tajgi-sibiraministar-odbrane-pokazace-predsedniku-svoju-radionicu>

https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/svet/putin-i-sojgu-na-vikendu-u-sibiru_1220510.html

<https://www.rts.rs/page/magazine/sr/story/471/svet-poznatih/4302833/putin-sojgu-vikend-sibir-tajga.html>

<http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=639697>

<https://www.republika.rs/svet/svet/267125/foto-caj-voznju-terencu-gusenicama-putin-sojgu-provode-vikend-tajgi>

<https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/977366/foto-video-putin-sojgu-sibiru-maco-odmor-ruskog-predsednika-ministra-odbrane>

<https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/svijet/putin-i-sojgu-na-vikendu-u-sibiru/354907>

<https://www.alo.rs/vesti/ruske-vesti/putin-na-vikendu-u-sibiru-seta-u-prirodi-vozi-konvoj-a-pogledajte-i-sta-pije-foto/397478/vest>

²³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzLVjjHJL6k>

Summary

While the Sputnik Srbija website leaves us in the dark about its intentions, the claim on the Youtube channel is: „Do you want to be the first to know about a news story, not to doubt its accuracy and to keep up with the most important events in the world that affect our lives? Are you interested in the opinions of the most important experts from various fields and commentaries on all burning issues? You will find them on Sputnik. We speak out about issues that others keep quiet“.²⁴³ By analysing Sputnik’s reports we have seen that this claim is not even remotely fulfilled – rather, the contrary is true.

The **matrix in Sputnik** is clear. It doesn’t follow classic journalism – for example, news and commentary are not separated. Sources are handled superficially, much more carelessly and, above all, with a target in mind. The aim therefore is not to provide exhaustive information, but to promote and achieve political targets. Sputnik doesn’t even claim to emulate the so often criticised „mainstream media“. Rather, the reporting is meant to document and prove that Russia’s view of the world is correct. The creators at Sputnik do not think of their work from the reader/user’s point of view, but instead follow a one-way street in terms of content from top to bottom (top-down communication). Figuratively speaking, the exclamation mark is the preferred punctuation mark. The Western media tries (at least ideally) to independently ask questions about backgrounds and to present events/statements as exhaustively as possible, not to omit or twist anything. They want communication to be halfway on a level playing field with their users. Their preferred punctuation mark is the question mark. This model has been massively boosted by the digitalisation of the media with all the possibilities for readers/users to react to journalistic articles, or even to help shape them as „citizen reporters“. Communication is not a one-way street here!

Key elements of **Sputnik’s composition** include:

- Selective instead of comprehensive reporting. The benchmark is not the significance of events, but the target country „utilised“ in terms of content (here: Serbia, Serbs in the neighbouring states). The media reports are geared towards the target country, and, because of this, are inflated to an extent that does not remotely correspond to reality. Echo chambers are therefore created on a national scale.
 - Sources in the reports are either irrelevant to the issue being covered, one-sided or disproportionately weighted. It’s always possible to find a fourth-rate politician, a clueless top athlete, a second-rate historian/lawyer who is being instrumentalised, or a retired elderly has-been to say what you want them to say.
 - Concentration on individual events instead of on important issues that are put into the wrong context or described without context.
 - Identification of Russian-Serbian common ground all the way up to alleged brotherhoods. Solidarity with allegedly congruent interests. US (Sputnik editorial staff and users, respectively Russia and Serbia) vs. THEM (domestic opposition, neighbouring countries, USA, EU).
 - Moralising of issues – Russia and Serbia fortify their role as victims („self-victimisation“). Both countries feel unjustly treated by the rest of the world and claim an „eternal“ disadvantage, allegedly historically based on the „laws of nature“. Moscow and Belgrade see themselves as a bastion against the zeitgeist that is causing the breakdown of all values and which, according to this interpretation, manifests itself in homosexuality, paedophilia, the dissolution of religions and traditional values including the classic family.
- Sputnik’s reporting aims** are derived from this, such as:
- Explaining Russian foreign policy worldwide in order to create understanding and approval.
 - „Evidence“ that Russian weapons technology is far superior to military technology in the West.
 - Glorification of the person of Putin as an ideal typical state leader and role model for top Serbian (foreign) politicians
 - Supporting the Serbian political elite in South-Eastern Europe, weakening the opposition
 - „Proof“ that the Western democracies are doomed to fail
 - „Superiority“ of Russia’s political, economic and social system
 - Influencing the countries of the former Yugoslavia by
 - + Sowing discord and playing off or intensifying differences, e.g. Serbs against Croats, Albanians against Serbs, Montenegrins against Serbs
 - + Preventing the rapprochement between ex-Yugoslav states and Euro-Atlantic structures, such as, most recently, Montenegro (NATO member since 2017, EU candidate country) and Northern Macedonia (NATO member since 2020 and invitation from the EU) by presenting the EU in an exclusively negative light.
 - + Attempt to prove, for the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, that close economic and political cooperation with Russia is more useful than cooperation with the „West“.

²⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzLVjjHJL6k>

Recommendations

Putin's patronage system, based on oligarchs close to him, the secret service, political instrumentalisation and penetration of the state and state-related economy, the control of justice and nannying of the media, has been plagiarised and perfected in Serbia (and neighbouring countries). President Vučić is the all-dominant politician who has positioned his henchmen at key points of power. In return, they guarantee unconditional loyalty to him. As a reward, they are allowed to run private businesses without interference from laws and the public. In return, the henchmen finance the ruling political elite by siphoning off money from the businesses entrusted to them.

Just a few examples

- Bratislav Gašić, now Head of the BIA secret service and former Minister of Defence, privately built up a media empire
- Nebojša Stefanović, now Minister of Defence, formerly Minister of Internal Affairs, was able to keep his academic title and conduct lucrative business in arms sales despite proof of plagiarism in his dissertation
- Aleksandar Vulin, now Minister of Internal Affairs, formerly Minister of Labour, then Minister of Defence, survived money laundering and corruption in public contracts
- Siniša Mali, now Minister of Finance, formerly Head of the Privatisation Agency and Mayor of Belgrade, survived money laundering via dozens of accounts and flats abroad, shady real estate dealings and irregularities in privatisation, as well as the proven forgery of his doctoral thesis
- Confidants in the energy sector (e.g. Nikola Petrović, a godfather of Vučić, Dušan Bajatović), in the transport sector (Zoran Drobnjak, Zoran Babić), and in the telecommunications sector, which is considered an employer of deserving party officials.
- Loyal supporters in the municipalities, such as Dragan Marković-Palma in Jagodina, Tomislav Nikolić's family in Kragujevac or Goran Vesić as Deputy Mayor in Belgrade, who is actually the leading figure in the city's administration.

Knowledgeable critics regularly remonstrate with the USA and the EU for having come to an arrangement with the increasingly autocratic ruling political leaders in the Balkans, even though these "stabilocrats", as part of the problems, cannot be partners in the reform and modernisation process.²⁴⁴ In early May 2021, more than 250 prominent intellectuals in the region published an open letter calling on the EU, the US and NATO to stop cooperating with these elite powers and to fight them instead.²⁴⁵

Where does the emotional attachment to Russia come from, although almost no one has ever visited Russia or has relatives or friends there? Even stays on behalf of Serbian companies or institutions are the exception rather than the rule. The historical „evidence“ (wartime allies, language) is not a sufficient explanation, because younger generations have had no personal experience (even in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and Russia's role in them). The only explanation is that this national psychological predisposition is built up in the family home and school. The curricula lay the foundation and are decisively shaped by domestic science. In particular, the relevant scientific disciplines with the academies at the top are meanwhile „hopelessly outdated“ compared to international standards, says Slavonic studies professor Christian Voß: They are „nationalistic echo chambers of the gerontocratic academic elite“.²⁴⁶

However, politics is also formative here and will be even more so in the future. Serbia's President Vučić has announced new textbooks for schools in the subjects of language/literature, geography and history, which has been met with loud applause from other politicians. This should make pupils adhere to the desired national narratives. This explicitly includes the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, who are to receive the same textbooks as their classmates in Serbia.²⁴⁷

The political elite has opted for „intermediate politics“, political manoeuvring between the two poles of „West“ and „Russia“ or, more recently, „China“. The inherent importance of politics is thereby emphasised and all attempts to classify it under one or another side, or even of having to submit to the ideological value system, are fended off. The claimed balance between West and East is used by top politics to consolidate its own position and, in this in-between state, to guarantee its own interests unchallenged with the help of corruption and nepo-

²⁴⁴ See e.g. the excellent analysis by the Director of Transparency International in Bosnia and Herzegovina Srdjan Blagovčanin, *The rule of the cartel*, Banja Luka 2020: <https://ti-bih.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-rule-of-the-cartel.pdf> see also my review in the *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* magazine, Munich 3/2020, p. 103f. as well as former German diplomat and Balkans expert Gudrun Steinacker, „Den korrupten Eliten des Westbalkans die Stirn bieten“ („Standing up to the corrupt elite in the Western Balkans“, in *Deutsche Welle* 24.07.2020: <https://www.dw.com/de/mein-europa-den-korrupten-eliten-des-westbalkans-die-stirn-bieten/a-54303982>

²⁴⁵ https://www.helsinki.org.rs/index_archiva_t263.html

²⁴⁶ Christian Voß, „Der bulgarisch-mazedonische Streit um historische und sprachliche Identität“ („The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute over historical and linguistic identity“), in: *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 06/2020, pp. 51–62.

²⁴⁷ For a critique of this, see: <https://pescanik.net/udzbenike-u-djubre/> and <https://pescanik.net/rodoljubivi-prosvetni-zanos/>

tism. Since private esteem as well as professional and private ties to the West already exist in the real world (via „guest workers“, trade, investments, donations, knowledge transfer and cooperative ventures in culture and science), the connection to Russia/China must be artificially created – based on historical narratives such as „war“ and „culture“. The crucial building block for this construct is the media, which is almost completely under the control of the elite and reports in their interests. The media, instrumentalised by politics, is therefore **the** reinforcer of Russophile thought constructs

How is it even possible that the majority of print media in Serbia hits the newsstands every day with over-the-top headlines and texts (not to mention the TV reports of the national channels), whereas applying even superficial logic should surely make it clear that most of these „sensations“ are completely fabricated, and don't have the slightest thing to do with reality? Why aren't readers turning their backs on these media organisations, which are caught lying time and time again, often the very next day? Why are the print run and viewing figures not falling? „The answer is simple – with patient and lengthy preparation and continuous repetition of the same or similar scenarios. (...) Part of the media audience has started to equate information with the pop music they listen to. And this means that they don't check whether it's the truth, but rather judge whether it sounds good, whether it meets their expectations and whether it suits their ‚taste,“ is the analysis from Dragan Janjić, chief editor of the private news agency Beta, who died at the end of 2020.²⁴⁸

This unfortunate role of the media was also evident in the preparatory phase of the Yugoslav wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Within a few years, the media barrage of half-truths, lies, nationalism and propaganda succeeded in turning mostly peaceful neighbours into bitter enemies.

On the basis of objective problems (economy, history), and with the help of „their“ media, the politicians have succeeded in setting people against each other. The extent to which politics controls the media has been documented by a short-lived system error. The owner and chief editor of the widely read tabloid Kurir, Aleksandar Rodić, completely unexpectedly addressed the public in open letters in November 2015 („Sorry, Serbia!“)²⁴⁹ and June 2017 („When the dictator hijacks the state from the people“).²⁵⁰ He described how politics plagues the media in Serbia, instrumentalises it for its own interests and punishes deviations. After serious harassment via the authorities (tax investigation, labour inspection, security services), Rodić threw in the towel and sold his media empire to a political henchman.



Informer, 09.06.2021: „Mladic will forever be a Serbian hero. The commander of Republika Srpska Ratko Mladic has been sentenced to life imprisonment, although there is really no evidence at all that he is responsible for the alleged war crimes“

This brief analysis has shown that the influence of Russian media cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, the EU does not seem to be sufficiently aware of this fundamental issue. On the contrary, the importance of Sputnik to the Serbian information landscape is even denied – „Although on a global level much attention is paid to the Russian media when it comes to spreading disinformation about the European Union and the West, Sputnik Serbia did not appear in this study as a significant source of information on this issue.“²⁵¹ It is interesting that even leading Serbian journalists also call this influence into question. Russia's role in the media is overestimated, said the majority of 15 top journalists in a survey by researcher Vuk Velebit. Rather, a kind of „Russophilia“ of Serbian media is the case. It was agreed, however, that reports about Russia are „biased, uncritical and superficial,“ and that the coverage is geared towards Putin and equates him with the country of Russia. It was also agreed that there are practically no critical reports about Russia in the Serbian media.²⁵²

Yet reality tells another story, as this randomly selected example shows. Even events from Germany are reported in Serbia via Sputnik. In the case at hand, the statements of virologist Christian Drosten on the coronavirus mutation in Great Britain

²⁴⁸ <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/analize/srpska-politicka-scena-i-ruski-uticaj/709>

²⁴⁹ <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/2008557/aleksandar-rodic-srbijo-izvini>

²⁵⁰ <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/2860163/kad-diktator-otme-drzavu-od-naroda>

²⁵¹ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Serbian-Media-Reporting-on-the-European-Union-2020-Love-from-China-and-slaps-from-Brussels.pdf>

²⁵² <https://talas.rs/2019/05/24/pro-ruski-narativ-treci-deo/>

are misrepresented. Here, however, it is less the content than the information mechanism that plays a role. Sputnik adopts information from RT²⁵³ and Sputnik²⁵⁴ is then „transcribed“ exactly as it is by the Serbian media.²⁵⁵

The results of the study lead to some **conclusions** if Western politics really wants to achieve something in its interests on the Balkan Peninsula.²⁵⁶

In the summer of 2020, renowned historians in the territory of the former Yugoslavia put together the declaration „Let us defend history“, which has since been signed by 850 high-profile figures from all successor states.²⁵⁷ It calls on the ministries of science to „financially support joint scientific projects between neighbouring countries for coming to terms with history and current politics, i.e. research projects, symposia, publications. Since the countries of the region all have only very limited resources, Washington and Brussels should initiate and financially facilitate such cooperative ventures **(1)**. At the same time, the intellectuals demand of the ministries of education „to not turn history into a subject whose sole aim is to build national identity and spread hatred.“ In specific terms, this means supporting the development of new curricula as well as teacher training **(2)**. Even though the EU already supports the youth exchange in South-Eastern Europe based on the example of the Franco-German Youth Office, funding would have to be drastically increased here, since it is apparent that young people adhere to nationalist stereotypes that could be broken down by personal encounters **(3)**.

Since only young people are able to provide the opportunity for a promising approach to reforms and modernisation in the Balkan countries, a great deal of support must be provided to cultivate their media skills. Studies show that only a few young people are able to distinguish opinions from facts, which of course is also a big problem in western countries like Germany when social media is used.²⁵⁸ When information sources on social media are diminished, nationalist and populist narratives can be reinforced. The sheer mass of posts (often multiplied by trolls) quite often convinces young people that these are truths and are not subjective perspectives, or – very often – untruths, journalism professor Belma Buljubašić has found.²⁵⁹ Specifically, therefore, programmes must be set up in school and extracurricular education that contribute to more knowledge about the role – and also the dangers – of media in the digital age **(4)**.²⁶⁰

²⁵³ <https://www.rt.com/news/510366-german-virologist-doubt-uk-covid-strain/>

²⁵⁴ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/evropa/202012221124165649-pitanje-je-da-li-je-kriv-virus-vodeci-nemacki-virusolog-o-novom-soju-korone/>

²⁵⁵ E.g. https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=12&dd=22&nav_category=78&nav_id=1784482 and <https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/3590017/nemacki-virusolog-o-novom-soju-korone-pitanje-je-da-li-je-kriv-ili-se-radi-o-lokalnom-zaristu-ili-mere-nisu-bile-striktne>

²⁵⁶ An excellent analysis by prominent government critics of the current situation – Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, Šta blokira proces suočavanja u Srbiji, Beograd 2020: <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/Svedocanstva%2040.pdf>

²⁵⁷ <https://kojeprvipoceo.rs/lasst-uns-die-geschichte-verteidigen/>

²⁵⁸ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/pisa-studie-lesen-fakten-1.5284164> and <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/8218/4901727>

²⁵⁹ http://www.dwp-balkan.org/en/blog_one.php?cat_id=4&text_id=195

²⁶⁰ The lack of such programmes can be observed in the latest survey in Croatia. A large proportion of young people do not know even basic political and historical facts – https://www.gong.hr/media/uploads/strucni_clanak_z_a_web_politi%C4%8Dka_pismenost_mladih.pdf and <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/mladi-hrvati-ne-znaju-sto-je-ndh-zamjanje-od-trecine-ucenika-to-je-fasisticka-tvorevina-15070037>

Since the central role of the Serbian media in creating and consolidating the political mood in the country has been shown, reactions/countermeasures must also be addressed here. One of the most important conditions for Serbia's further rapprochement with Brussels is that the EU must fight the conflation of practically all important media with politics. The political stranglehold of the media must be stopped, because although Serbia has written numerous welcome laws and regulations in cooperation with the EU Commission, which are intended to limit or roll back political influence, these projects are either not implemented or they are only used in a formal sense, but contrary to their actual spirit. **(5)**.

It is a sine qua non that ownership structures are clarified. In many cases, even in the case of the most prominent media organisations, it is not clear who owns them and, most importantly, with which financial means they were acquired **(6)**. The „project funding“ of media organisations with public money must also be scrutinised, so that not only reporting that complies with the government is remunerated while critical newspapers, broadcasters and portals are cut off financially **(7)**.

The most important thing, however, is the training of (young) journalists. This is being increasingly neglected – the reasons for that are open to speculation. The industry itself has complained that there are fewer and fewer well-trained journalists – because there is no demand for them, since journalism has been reduced by politics to the role of transmitting predetermined content.²⁶¹ Independent action by journalists in the interests of information and comprehensive clarification/explanation with a view to the users is considered disturbing by top politicians. The education of journalists must again concentrate on technical basics i.e. training on specific texts as well as TV and radio reports must be considered the rule **(8)**.

After all, a sound and up-to-date reaction from the world of journalism to obvious propaganda in Serbian media could promise success in rectifying public opinion. One model is the already mentioned EU task force against disinformation,²⁶² which, however, only detects cases of propaganda with a time delay and concentrates on Eastern Europe. A similar, but more real-time regular media critique in Serbia (and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro) would also have to identify (Russian) propaganda here and present it on the internet in the national languages. It is to be discussed whether, in a further step, the propagandistic narratives would have to be set right by international/national experts, politicians and institutions/organisations, or whether this would be disavowed as simple „counter-propaganda“, which should also be criticised. In any case, the necessary financial resources, the technical efforts and finally, above all, the number of journalists employed for this purpose would be very manageable **(9)**.

Russia is an expert in its use of soft power tools to win over the hearts of the Serbs. Those wishing to counteract this influence will also have to play the „game“.

²⁶¹ See the survey of journalists in: *Od novinara do nadničara. Prekarni rad i život*, Beograd 2015

²⁶² <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/de/>

