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RUSSIAN MEDIA IN THE BALKANS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

Case study: RT Balkan

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ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The influence of Russian state propaganda on other states and their societies has meanwhile become a matter of public awareness and an important part of the political debate. In Germany, the historical expert on Eastern Europe Susanne Spahn published analyses on this topic very early on.¹ However, major German media also regularly deal with this issue.² The Russian aggression against Ukraine has brought the serious consequences of massive state propaganda from the Kremlin to the attention of academics and politicians even more than before.³ The German government is also targeting Kremlin propaganda in Germany. The Federal Ministry of the Interior has published a corresponding guideline.⁴ Finally, the European Parliament has also taken a stand against the “information war as a weapon”.⁵

The EU Commission’s External Action Service has set up a small working group to track down Russian fake news.⁶ Well-documented analyses are also available from many other Western countries⁷ such as the USA⁸, Canada⁹ and France¹⁰.

The situation in the Balkans is quite different. In almost all publications on Russian propaganda in this southeast European region, its influence is completely underestimated. One example among many publications is a recently published

large-scale study.¹¹ Studies by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs also minimise the toxic influence of Russian propaganda.¹² The daily newspaper “Welt” diagnoses “Putin’s overestimated role in the Balkans”.¹³ “Russia’s own propaganda assets in the region – the news websites Sputnik Serbia and the newly founded RT Balkan – have only a limited readership”, it states in a reversal of the real situation and “A quick look at the editorial policy of the newly founded RT Balkan is enough to see that the team fears the wrath of Vučić far more than that of the Kremlin.”¹⁴ Although the influence of Russian propaganda in this part of Europe is usually acknowledged in general terms, there is no concrete evidence of this.¹⁵

The study presented here aims to compensate for these deficits. It is not limited to generalised theses and descriptions of the Balkan media scene under Russian influence that only scratch the surface. Rather, the focus is on documenting the effectiveness of Russian state media in the region with a focus on Serbia, which also has an impact on its neighbours Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro (NATO member), all three of which are EU accession candidates. From this, strategies and recommendations for action are derived as to how the politically poisonous influence of Kremlin propaganda could be curbed after years of futile endeavours.

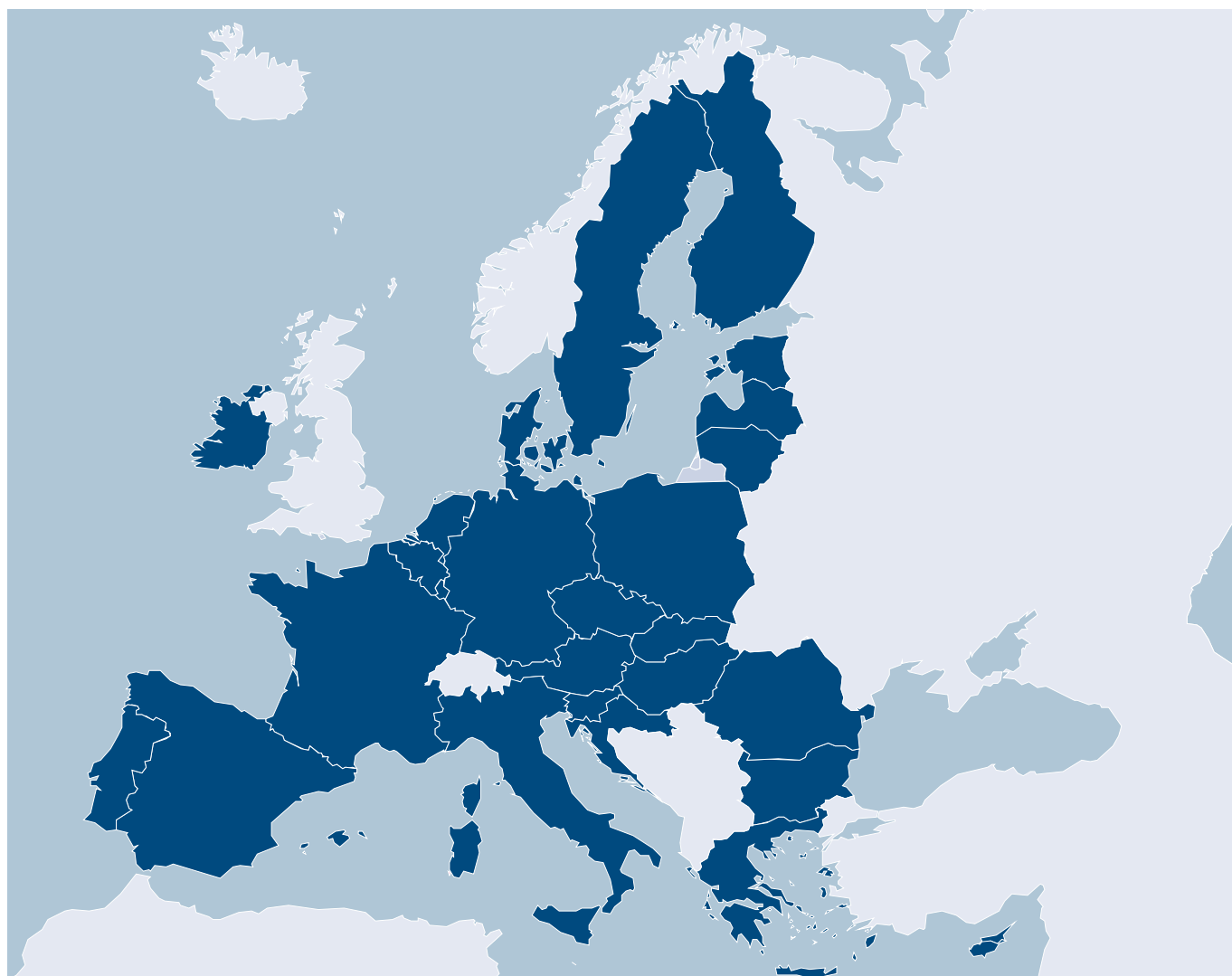
- 1 Spahn, Susanne; Russische Medien in Deutschland. Die Bundestagswahlen 2021 – Zwischen Einflussnahme und Desinformation (Russian media in Germany. The 2021 federal elections - between influence and disinformation); Berlin 2022: <https://shop.freiheit.org/#/Publikation/1210>
- 2 e.g. Dniezchna, Emilia; Wie Russland Propaganda in Deutschland macht (How Russia makes propaganda in Germany); in: Süddeutsche Zeitung 10.01.2023: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/propaganda-russland-ukraine-deutschland-weihnachten-1.5729545> and the interview with psychologist Pia Lamberty in Der Spiegel from 27 February 2023; Es gibt hier Milieus, in denen die russische Propaganda gut verfährt (There are milieus here in which Russian propaganda catches on well): <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/deutsche-und-der-ukraine-krieg-es-gibt-hier-milieus-in-denen-die-russische-propaganda-ganz-gut-verfaengt-interview-mit-pia-lamberty-a-e3c821d7-b5d2-4547-b81f-d3b45b406970>
- 3 Amadeu Antonio Foundation 16.02.2023; Ein Jahr russischer Angriffskrieg: Kremlnahe Propaganda und Desinformation verfährt in Deutschland (One year of Russian aggression: pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation catches on in Germany): <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/pressemitteilungen/ein-jahr-russischer-angriffskrieg-kremlnahe-propaganda-und-desinformation-verfaengt-in-deutschland/> and Steinberg, Andrej and Vitter, Manja; “Eine Waffe im Informationskrieg”. Demokratieförderliche Narrative in Russlands Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine (“A weapon in the information war”. Anti-democratic narratives in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine); Berlin 2022: https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/eine_waffe_im-informationskrieg.pdf and Fromm, Rainer; Russlands deutsche Propaganda-Krieger (Russia’s German propaganda warriors); in: ZDF 10.03.2023: <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/zdfzoom/zdfzoom-russland-ukraine-propaganda-krieg-manipulation-100.html>
- 4 FAQ of the Federal Ministry of the Interior: Desinformation im Kontext des russischen Angriffskrieges gegen die Ukraine (Disinformation in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine); May 2022: <https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/FAQ/faq-desinformation-russischer-angriffskrieg-gegen-die-ukraine.html>
- 5 EU muss besser gegen ausländische Einmischung und Desinformation gerüstet sein (EU must be better equipped against foreign interference and disinformation); press release 09/03/2022: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20220304IPR24790/eu-muss-besser-gegen-auslaendische-einmischung-und-desinformation-geruestet-sein>
- 6 EUvsDisinfo: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>
- 7 A collection of texts at Newsletter Euroactiv: <https://www.euroactiv.com/topics/russian-propaganda/>
- 8 U.S-Department of State; Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, 2020: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf and Bergengruen, Vera; Inside the Kremlin’s Year of Ukraine Propaganda; in: Time 22.02.2023: <https://time.com/6257372/russia-ukraine-war-disinformation/>
- 9 Government of Canada; Countering disinformation with facts – Russian Invasion of Ukraine; 2023: https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement_response_conflict-reponse_conflicts/crisis-crisis/ukraine-fact-fait.aspx?lang=eng
- 10 Russia’s war on Ukraine: Latest ‘propaganda stunt’ demonstrates how ‘desperate’ Vladimir Putin is; in: France24 22.03.2023: <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20230322-russia-s-war-on-ukraine-latest-propaganda-stunt-demonstrates-how-desperate-vladimir-putin-is> and the background Propaganda 3.0. – Putin and der Westen (Propaganda 3.0 - Putin and the West); in: Arte 13.03.2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35Cy-roXl7E>
- 11 Janjić, Stefan; Disinformation in Serbia; in: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe; Sofia 2023, S. 231-255: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/E-book+Blurring+the+Truth.pdf/fd6abbb3-f49e-115b-090e-7c9f3a20dfc6?version=1.2&t=1680504776349> Just this one meagre sentence: “The Serbian edition of Russian state-affiliated foreign broadcaster ‘Sputnik’ was the source with the highest number of false and misleading information”: not a word about the Sputnik news portal, no explanation of the impact of this propaganda source. Also not a word about its reinforcement by the new Russian state media RT Balkan, which was founded in Belgrade last November.
- 12 Vulović, Marina; Außen- und sicherheitspolitische Beziehungen der Westbalkanländer mit externen Akteuren (Foreign and security policy relations of the Western Balkan countries with external actors); Berlin 2023: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitische-beziehungen-der-westbalkanlaender-mit-externen-akteuren> The overwhelming power of the Russian content on the media landscapes of Serbia and its neighbouring countries is reduced to this sentence: “In terms of media presence and media cooperation, the most important fact is that Russia is present in the region with the Sputnik channel, which has been operating from Serbia since 2015 and whose content is reproduced by local media in almost all WB countries”. This misjudgement by the same author also here: Russlands Rolle in den jüngsten Spannungen zwischen Serbien und Kosovo (Russia’s role in the recent tensions between Serbia and Kosovo); Berlin 17.02.2023: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/russlands-rolle-in-den-juengsten-spannungen-zwischen-serbien-und-kosovo>
- 13 On 29.12.2022: <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus242937499/Kosovo-Konflikt-Die-ueberschaetzte-Rolle-Putins-auf-dem-Balkan.html>
- 14 Samorukov, Maxim; Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine; In: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 25.04.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600>
- 15 e.g. Galijaš, Armina; “Putin empfing mich nach Mitternacht”. Russische Soft Power in der Republika Srpska (“Putin welcomed me after midnight”. Russian soft power in the Republika Srpska); in: Südosteuropa Mitteilungen; München 05-06/2022; pp. 57-66, here p. 64: “The most effective is undoubtedly the media work of the Russians. Local and Russian Serbian-language media disseminate Kremlin narratives on all relevant topics and propagate Serbian-Russian friendship”.

This analysis is based on an earlier publication by the author on a similar topic.¹⁶ The analysis of the Serbian service of “Sputnik” presented at that time is now supplemented by an extension to the Russian state TV channel “RT Balkan”, which has been operating in Belgrade since November 2022. Based on a content analysis of the entire RT Balkan news portal (the TV channel has not yet started broadcasting), which was conducted over a period of weeks, a wide range of specific examples are used to show how Russian propaganda is widely reflected in the region’s media. The new content focuses on the Russian aggression against Uk-

raine. It also documents how large parts of the population are manipulated by these omnipresent media channels and how their attitudes towards the West and Russia are reinforced.¹⁷

The question remains as to the fundamental relevance of the issues discussed here. Isn’t the Balkans a politically marginalised region of Europe that is generally underexposed to Western observers? The answer lies in the geography, as a glance at the map of Europe or the map of the EU member states shows:¹⁸

Fig. 1 | Member states of the European Union



There is a noticeable “hole” here. Apart from neutral Switzerland, only the six countries of the Western Balkans - Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo - are not anchored in Euro-Atlantic structures. Although Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro are

NATO members, they are still miles away from successful accession negotiations with Brussels. On the other hand, this historically often contested region (Habsburgs against Ottomans since the 17th century; Balkan wars at the beginning of the 20th century; First and Second World Wars and

¹⁶ Russian Media in the Balkans. Case study: How Moscow’s propaganda influences Serbia; Berlin 2022: <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/russian-media-balkans> Editions also in Serbian: <https://www.freiheit.org/sr/publikation/ruski-mediji-na-balkanu> and German: <https://shop.freiheit.org/#/Publikation/1190>

¹⁷ Two technical remarks: Quotations have been translated into English for ease of reading. The originals can be found in the notes and In the case of personal nouns, the author refers to all people

¹⁸ Council of the EU; The Member States of the European Union; Publications Office 2020: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6d81580c-9009-11ea-812f-01aa75ed71a1/language-eng>

the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s) is geopolitically of great interest to both the West and Russia. With billions of euros in aid and an army of diplomats and experts, the EU and the USA are trying to anchor this region firmly in their ranks.¹⁹ Russia, on the other hand, is doing everything it can to prevent this. In the past, the main instrument for this has been its media power in the region, which leaves deep traces in people's minds. Consequently, the Kremlin is spending a lot of money to expand and cement its influence here. If these countries were to join the EU in the near future, they would be lost to Moscow. Russian influence would be eliminated and Russia would only play a marginal role here. The Balkans are therefore important for both sides.

However, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has put Southeast Europe at the centre of world politics for another reason. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in particular have repeatedly cited alleged parallels with the breakup of Yugoslavia in general and Serbia in particular as "justification" for their war against Ukraine. The historical developments in the Balkans serve both leaders as a kind of blueprint for Russia's attack on Ukraine. This "argumentation" was adopted extensively by the Serbian media.

The NATO bombing of Serbia and Yugoslavia in 1999 "opened Pandora's box and violated international law", Lavrov claims prayerfully.²⁰ Furthermore, the West has "betrayed" Serbia and prevented its minority in the north of the almost exclusively Albanian-inhabited Kosovo from gaining autonomy. Like Serbia with regard to the autonomy rights of the Serbian minority in northern Kosovo, Russia had also been tricked by the West with the Minsk Agreement.²¹ Over the past ten years, Putin has drawn a parallel dozens of times to the conflict between Serbia and its former province of Kosovo and the annexed Crimean Peninsula as well as the territories in eastern Ukraine that were also incorporated into Russia. Just as NATO claimed in 1999 that its 78-day bombardment of Serbia was intended to prevent an imminent genocide in Kosovo, he also

wanted to put an end to a "genocide" of the Russian minority there by attacking Ukraine. The big difference: in Kosovo, an estimated 800,000 Albanians were driven into neighbouring countries (primarily Albania) by Serbian military and paramilitary forces, as international courts have later repeatedly established. The alleged genocide in the Ukrainian Donbass and Luhansk, on the other hand, remained without evidence.²² While Serbian media followed Putin's view,²³ Western portals in the Serbian language attempted to deny this analogy.²⁴

Similar patterns of argumentation can be found in the equation of the alleged Russian war crimes in the Ukrainian town of Bucha and the Serbian crimes in the Kosovo village of Račak. The massacre in mid-January 1999, which left at least 40 Albanians dead, served as a reason for NATO, among others, to begin bombing Serbia. From the beginning until today, Belgrade has claimed that it was a "staged attack" by the Kosovo Albanians. They had dressed up killed rebels in civilian clothes and thus faked a war crime in order to persuade NATO to intervene. In a similar vein, Moscow also claimed in the case of Bucha that the bodies in the streets there had been "arranged" by the Ukrainian side.²⁵ In addition, the alleged Russian war crime in the shelling of the Kramatorsk railway station in Ukraine in April 2022 with dozens of deaths and the two Serbian attacks on the Markale market in Sarajevo with a total of over 100 deaths in 1994 and 1995 are often equated as a "staged show" and "orchestrated". Here too, the second Markale massacre, for which a Bosnian Serb commander was sentenced to 33 years in prison by the International Yugoslavia Tribunal in The Hague, provided the reason for the bombing of Serb positions during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995).²⁶ In the course of this "argumentation", many Serbian media even deny the Serbian genocide of up to 8,000 Muslim boys and men in Srebrenica in July 1995, as documented by international courts, as a "fabrication".²⁷ According to many media outlets, such allegations seem to be bringing Russia and Serbia ever closer together.²⁸

19 See also the author's article for the journal "Internationale Politik" of the German Council on Foreign Relations, 21 April 2023 on the problematic role of the EU in the region: *Finanziers ohne Fortune* (Financiers without Fortune): <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/finanziers-ohne-fortune>

20 Lavrov: Bombardovanje Jugoslavije otvorilo Pandorinu kutiju i zgazilo međunarodno pravo (Lavrov: The bombing of Yugoslavia opened Pandora's box and violated international law); in: Faktor Magazin 02.05.2023: <https://faktormagazin.ba/vijesti/lavrov-bombardovanje-jugoslavije-otvorilo-pandorinu-kutiju-i-zgazilo-medunarodno-pravo/>

21 Lavrov: Zapad zaboravio 1999, Srbiju prevarili za ZSO kao nas za Minske sporazume (Lavrov: The West forgot 1999, Serbia was tricked with the Community of Serb Municipalities just as we were with the Minsk agreements); in: RT Balkan 03.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21589-lavrov-nato-preksrio-svoje-obaveze-1999/> this view, disseminated by the Russian state media, was widely adopted by the media in the Balkans, such as the news portal Klix in Sarajevo (<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/lavrov-komentarisaopitanje-zso-na-kosovu-i-optuzio-zapad-zasve/230303029>), whose story was in turn published by the Belgrade newspaper Danas: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/lavrov-komentarisaopitanje-zso-na-kosovu-i-optuzio-zapad-zasve/>

22 Fetscher, Caroline; Putins historische Verirrungen. Ein Krieg wie kein anderer (Putin's historical aberrations. A war like no other); in: Tagesspiegel 26.02.2022: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/ein-krieg-wie-kein-anderer-5136265.html> and dpa via Süddeutsche 05.03.2014 on Crimea;

Putins Vergleich zwischen Krim und Kosovo elektrisiert den Balkan (Putin's comparison between Crimea and Kosovo electrifies the Balkans): <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/konflikte-analyse-putins-vergleich-zwischen-krim-und-kosovo-elektrisiert-den-balkan-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-140305-99-03433>

23 Putin rants: The West accepts the will of the people in Kosovo, but not in Crimea; in: Srpski telegraf 08.09.2016: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/2346859-putin-zagrmeeo-zapad-na-kosovu-priznaje-volju-naroda-na-krimu-ne> and Luković, Danijela; Ukraine and Kosovo like hen and egg;

in: Blic 09.01.2023: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/ukrajina-i-kosovo-kao-kokoska-i-jaje-dok-strani-analiticari-proturaju-tezu-da-zapad/0qerms3>

24 Putin's Balkan narrative is used to justify the war in Ukraine; in: VOA 05.03.2022: <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/6471431.html> and response to Putin's claim: Why is Kosovo not Donbass?; in: RSE 29.04.2022: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin-kosovo-donbas-odgovor/31826916.html> and Andelković, Nataša; Where Kosovo and the regions in eastern Ukraine or Serbia and Russia intertwine; in: BBC in Serbian 19.10.2022: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-63297019>

25 Lavrov compares Butsha to Račak: "It's the same scheme"; in: Novosti 26.05.2022: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1120551/najnovije-vesti-sergej-lavrov-racak-buca-ukrajina-rat-jugoslaviji> and Lavrov exposes Western lies about Kosovo. The head of Russian diplomacy didn't mince his words and said it all to their faces; in: Alo! via Sputnik 18.07.2022: <https://www.alo.rs/svet/ruske-vesti/652408/lavrov-raskrinkao-lazi-zapada-o-kosovu-sef-ruske-diplomatije-nije-stedeo-reci-sve-im-je-sasuo-u-lice-vest> and Butcha and Račak - the same directors and the same script; in: Portal Srbinfo 22.04.2022: <https://srbinfo.info/pocetna/aktuelno/buca-i-racak-isti-reziseri-i-ista-scenografija/?lang=lat>

26 Bucha and Kramatorsk, Račak and Markale. Who is to blame for the crimes for which the West immediately blamed the Russians as it once blamed the Serbs?; in: Sputnik Serbia 13.04.2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXw5mc9HSAo> and Sputnik Serbia 16.04.2022; Bucha and Kramatorsk, Račak and Markale: Why the Russians will not fare like the Serbs: <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20220416/buca-i-kramatorsk-racak-i-markale-zasto-rusi-nece-proci-kao-srbi-video-1136490084.html>

27 For example: Srebrenica, Račak and Bucha. The same face of Western propaganda; in: Novosti 17.04.2022: <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1105717/srebrenica-racak-buca-isto-lice-zapadne-propagande-finska-profesorka-razotkriva-lazi-americko-nacisticke-dijaspor>

28 Račak and Bucha: The fight against world evil unites Serbia and Russia; in: Sputnik Serbia 04.04.2022: <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20220405/racak-i-buca-borba-protiv-svetskog-zla-objedinjuje-srbiju-i-rusiju-video-1136174808.html>

1. The socio-political climate

While Russia's propaganda is met with overwhelming rejection in Western countries and is only accepted by a minority, the situation on the Balkan Peninsula is completely different. The socio-political climate actually favours the spread of Kremlin propaganda. The political elites, for example in the largest and most important Balkan country Serbia or in the Serbian half of Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in the Serbian parts of the Montenegrin population, traditionally maintain close ties to Russia (1). This starts with the "brotherhood in arms" during the First and Second World Wars and extends into recent times, because "Russia has defended itself and the Balkan countries from the Islamic State".²⁹ The sale of the oil industry in Serbia and the Serbian half of Bosnia-Herzegovina to Russia at a ridiculously low price also helped to strengthen mutual ties. Major purchases of arms from Moscow's ally also played a part in this.

Russia's Kremlin-controlled political system and the exceptional position of its president come close to the political ideals of almost all Serbian top politicians (2). Similarly, large sections of the Serbian population look up to their "big brother" Russia with admiration. "We and the Russians are 150 million people" is a popular bon mot among the Serbian people with 6.6 million citizens. This emotional bond is based on the common Slavic language and the Christian Orthodox religion (3).³⁰

The political leadership of Serbia agrees with its population that Russia, for example in the UN Security Council and as a counterweight to NATO, has prevented open problems in the Balkans such as Kosovo or the future of the Serbian minorities in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina from being solved by the USA and the EU against the will and interests of Belgrade (4). Moscow and Belgrade see themselves as international victims. Russia is trying to justify its attack on Ukraine by claiming that NATO, led by the USA, is threatening the existence of the world's largest country. In this view, Moscow becomes the victim and not the perpetrator. In Serbia, the media almost unanimously claim that "Serbia became the biggest victim of this war".³¹ The superpowers waged "their war on our backs". Critical Serbian historians characterise this narrative as "self-victimisation".³² Both countries cultivate a political self-image based on the hostility of the vast majority of international actors, which - together with the few friends in the world - must be countered with a defensive mentality (5).

As the political elite - above all Serbia's all-dominating President Aleksandar Vučić - almost completely controls the media landscape,³³ media content from Russia is highly welcome due to its ideological proximity to its own positions (6). Because printed and electronic media in Serbia, as in other countries in this region, suffer from chronic underfunding, the free information provided by Russia carries even more weight. All the more so because it is also presented in the local language. Broad adoption on a one-to-one basis without further editing is therefore the rule (7). This kind of unedited adoption also applies to the texts from Deutsche Welle or Radio Free Europe in Serbian. However, these are journalistic products that are based on the standards of Western media.

Russia spends a great deal of effort and money on repeatedly demonstrating the fraternal friendship with the Serbs, which is supposedly confirmed by history. For example, Moscow financed large statues such as that of Tsar Nicholas II in front of the Serbian presidency (2014) and the Serbian national saint of St Sava (2003). Putin paid particular attention to the completion of the Orthodox cathedral "St Sava" in Belgrade, one of the largest churches of its kind in the world. Under Putin's lead, Russian artists were responsible for the interior decoration of the huge church with gold mosaics and frescoes the size of several football fields.³⁴ Russia's latest investment is the monumental memorial to the medieval Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja in the centre of Belgrade in front of the historic railway station. The awarding of the contract to a Russian artist and the financing from Moscow sources is still not very transparent.³⁵ All of these "architectural investments" by Russia are aimed at the hearts of the Serbs. After all, these are highly emotionally charged issues in Serbia that trigger strong empathy towards Russia.

The media dominance of Russia in large parts of the Balkans ensures in this power-political, emotional and national-psychological situation that the EU and the USA are often on the losing end. And yet, the EU in particular is by far the most important partner of the largest country in the Western Balkans. Over the past two decades, Serbia has received well over three billion euros in non-repayable aid from Brussels. 67 per cent of all foreign investment comes from Western Europe. The Balkan country is one of the three countries worldwide with the largest transfers from Brussels and receives around 300 million euros per year in the form of donations that do not have to be repaid.³⁶

²⁹ Čeranić, Predrag; Rusija je odbranila sebe i balkanske zemlje od Islamske države (Russia defended itself and the Balkan countries against the Islamic State); in: RTRS 18.03.2021: <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=425440>

³⁰ Sporadic documentaries that question this alleged connection between the two nations obviously do not reach a wider circle of people: Sanatovac, Adam; The Friend. Brotherhood or interest. What connects Serbia and Russia; 18.11.2022, Part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_TCo7uxWak and Part 2: <https://n1info.rs/video/info/dokumentarni-film-prijateljica-o-odnosima-srbije-i-rusije-2-deo/>

³¹ Đorđević, Tijana; How Serbia became the biggest victim of the war in Ukraine; in: Istinomer portal 28.12.2022: <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/kako-je-srbija-postala-najveca-zrtva-rata-u-ukrajini/>

³² See also the article by the prominent Serbian historian Dubravka Stojanović on the reinterpretation of history not only by the Serbian elites, which turns perpetrators into victims: Balkanisation of historical memory; in: Peščanik 24.09.2019: <https://pescanik.net/balkanization-of-historical-memory/>

³³ See also these articles by the author for background information: Der Mann, der Serbiens Mediensystem ruiniert (The man who is ruining Serbia's media system); in: Übermedien 06.04.2022: <https://uebermedien.de/70189/der-mann-der-serbiens-mediensystem-ruiniert/> and Medienlage in Serbien (Media Situation in Serbia); in Interview with the Viennese radio station Klassik Radio 24.09.2022: <https://radioklassik.at/programm/sendeformate/archiv/90/>

³⁴ The four-minute video on the official homepage gives an impression of the splendour of the building: <https://hramsvetogsave.rs/>

³⁵ This video provides an overview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvM7OyMwfv4> The Serbian state news agency reports in English on the inauguration of the monument in January 2021: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/166853/monument-to-stefan-nemanja-unveiled.php>

³⁶ All data from the EU mission 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/>

In 2021, Serbia's trade balance looked like this:

Fig. 2 | Main trade partners of Serbia in 2022



Source: National Bank and EU Mission to Serbia³⁷

While foreign trade with the EU states amounted to around 30 billion euros, with Russia it was less than ten per cent of this sum and even China only reached around 4.5 billion euros. As a trading partner, Germany is the undisputed leader for the entire Balkan region. Around 14 per cent of the total foreign trade of all six Balkan countries is conducted with Germany.³⁸ The EU also leads the way in terms of foreign direct investment (2010-2021) with just under 64 per cent of all investments. Russia accounts for just under 7.5 per cent and China even only 1.7 per cent (even Switzerland has invested more money).³⁹ This means that the EU member states have created well over 120,000 new jobs, 40,000 of which were created by German companies alone.⁴⁰

The perception of the citizens in the region, on the other hand, is quite different. In all opinion polls, they state that Russia and China have transferred the most donations in the last ten years. China is seen on a par with the EU as the largest investor, although the Chinese money flows are mostly state loans, often expensive and unfavourable for the recipient country even by international standards. Although Serbia has been negotiating its accession to the EU for over ten years, 51 per cent of citizens would vote against EU membership in a possible referendum. Only 34 per cent would be in favour. Which nation do the Serbs see themselves closest to? 40 per cent of respondents named the Russians, followed far behind by the Greeks with 9 per cent. The world's best leader is considered to be Putin by 45 per cent of people. He is followed by Chinese head of state and party leader Xi Jinping with 12 per cent, French President Emmanuel Macron with 11 per cent and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz with 5 per cent.⁴¹ Consequently, two thirds of all respondents believe that the USA poses a threat to peace and security in Europe. Only 21 per cent each saw Russia and China as a threat to this.⁴² As a result, 34 per cent see Russia, 17 per cent China and only 14 per cent the EU as the most important foreign policy partners.⁴³

The latest survey of young people (aged 15 to 30) in Serbia shows that this opinion can also be expected in the coming years. Only 18 per cent of the young people surveyed view the EU positively, twice as many negatively. If Serbia had to choose one of the two sides, 57 per cent would choose the "East" and 43 per cent the "West". For 55 per cent of young people, Russia should not be condemned for its aggression against Ukraine, which is why sanctions such as those demanded by the EU are out of the question. Finally, a political model with a "strong leader" is considered good by 57 per cent of young respondents and only 28 per cent are against it.⁴⁴

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

Serbia has a large number of explicitly Russophile portals (selection).⁴⁵

One of the most influential is the Russian web portal "News Front", which broadcasts its material from the Crimean Peninsula in many languages - in both German and Serbian.⁴⁶ It is regularly covered by many media in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The medium says about itself on its German page (identical wording in the Serbian edition):

"A quarter of a century ago, the West managed to bring us to the ground. Millions of people were violently and cynically deceived by the external enemy and its internal agents. They were dragged into the chaos of savage market capitalism and the maelstrom of bloody ethnic conflicts and wars.

At that time, we not only lost our great country, which was divided into fifteen independent states. We lost our friends, brothers and partners from the Eastern European republics, who were thrown to the Anglo-Saxons.

³⁷ Source: <https://europa.rs/trade/?lang=en>

³⁸ Germany Trade&Invest (GTAI): <https://www.gtai.de/resource/blob/984948/5544f1e29153e278a9d196238c220a78/FS%20Westbalkan%2021377.pdf>

³⁹ Portal BizLife on the basis of EU data: <https://bizlife.rs/u-ovoj-godini-u-srbiji-najvise-investirali-kinezi/>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ All data from the representative survey conducted by Demostat in June 2022: <https://demostat.rs/upload/Prezentacija%2029062022%20Demostat.pdf>

⁴² Friedrich Ebert Foundation; Security radar 2022: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/18981.pdf>

⁴³ Representative survey in February 2023: <https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Politicki-stavovi-gradjana-Srbije-februar-2023.pdf>

⁴⁴ All data from: National Youth Council of Serbia; Alternative report on the position and needs of young people in the Republic of Serbia 2022: <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Alternativni-izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-poloz%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-za-2022-godinu.pdf>

⁴⁵ Svi internet portali u Srbiji mogu se naći ovde: <https://www.rsportali.com/> Posećenost portala prati Gemius: <https://rating.gemius.com/rs/tree/32>

⁴⁶ <https://srb.news-front.info/>

Today, Russia is like a phoenix that has risen from the ashes of humiliation and betrayal. It defended its right to sovereignty and forced the world to take heed.

Russia openly says that its national interests go beyond its borders. That it has friends and allies who could be safe in and with Russia."

And further: "We, the news agency ‚News Front‘ are volunteer fighters of the information war, bravely fighting against cynical lies, suspicion, manipulation and disinformation. In other words, against the kind of weapons of mass destruction with which the West is waging a new type of predatory and colonial war against us all. (...) Only together, closely united, can we defend ourselves against modern slavery in order to remain free people and assert our right to free life."

"**Novi Standard**" also has great influence. Under the heading "Our mission", the self-description states: "The portal was created in 2009 as an attempt to resist the trivialisation of media and information and the accelerating decline of journalism. It brings together the best local authors and translates prominent world authors of this genre. The portal cultivates analytical journalism in an endeavour to shed light on political and other trends both in the country and the world in times of rapid change"⁴⁷ Editor-in-chief Željko Cvijanović died in the summer of 2018,⁴⁸ but is still listed in the imprint as the responsible editor-in-chief.

One of the worst tabloids and most ardent admirers of Russia is the newspaper "Srpski Telegraf".⁴⁹ Its website is called "Republika".⁵⁰

The Belgrade journalist and former correspondent of the Belgrade newspaper "Novosti" from Moscow, Djuro Bilbija (*1948), founded the portal "Fakti" in autumn 2011 as a family business with his wife and two sons.⁵¹ According to Bilbija, the editorial line is that Serbia and Russia should build a special relationship based on the model of Israel and the USA - militarily, economically and spiritually "non-partisan and eternal". It is only then that Serbia could turn to the EU.

The equally influential portal "**Srbinfo**"⁵² has its own "President of Russia" section with Putin statements in Russian. The self-image is formulated as follows: "All those who have Serbia in mind and care and love for its survival in their hearts: Join our side. It was founded with the aim of enriching our lives and the lives of future generations of Serbs. Join us wherever you are, in the motherland or in the diaspora. It doesn't

matter what nationality you are. The only important thing is that you share your great love for Serbia with us."

"**Nova srpska politička misao**" (New Serbian Political Thought) by former member of parliament Đorđe Vukadinović describes itself as follows: "Our portal is primarily pro-Serbian, which in Serbia always means more or less pro-Russian. The texts and comments published on our portal are generally pro-Russian".⁵³

"**Srbija danas**" (Serbia Today)⁵⁴ is based on the ideas of Serbian nationalism. It gives a lot of space to the Russian perspective on global political issues and is regarded as the mouthpiece of the current political elite.

"**Balkan info**" writes about its mission: "We are recognised as the voice of all those who do not want to be part of short-term projects and alliances, who respect traditional Serbian values and preserve the memory of our glorious ancestors"⁵⁵ It provides a platform for many prominent Serbian nationalists. Illustrative examples are the T-shirts offered for sale by the portal with inscriptions and images such as "For faith and freedom", "Apollo 11" (labelling the American landing on the moon a fake), "Saint Sava", "Rise, live and fight", "The NASA scam". This portal is an example of how all common internet channels are used: You Tube,⁵⁶ Facebook/Instagram,⁵⁷ Twitter⁵⁸ or TikTok.⁵⁹

Fig. 3 | Srpski Telegraf, 15.11.2016



Source: Newspaper "Srpski Telegraf", 15.11.2016

47 <https://standard.rs/nasa-misija/>

48 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/preminuo-novinar-zeljko-cvijanovic/>

49 Naslovna strana 15.11.2016.: "Počinje novi svetski poredak. Putin razbio EU i NATO"

50 <https://www.republika.rs/>

51 <http://fakti.org/>

52 <https://srbinfo.info/>

53 <http://www.nspm.rs/>

54 <https://www.sd.rs/>

55 <https://www.balkaninfo.rs/o-nama/>

56 <https://www.youtube.com/@tvbalkaninfo>

57 <https://m.facebook.com/pg/tvbalkaninfo/photos/>

58 <https://twitter.com/tvbalkaninfo>

59 <https://www.tiktok.com/@tvbalkaninfo>

Fig. 4 | Srpski Telegraf, 15.11.2016



Source: Newspaper "Srpski Telegraf", 15.11.2016

The **"Webtribune"**⁶⁰ portal is one of the most frequently used platforms for other Serbian media. Even if nothing is said about the editorial line on the homepage, a quick glance is enough: The reporting focuses on explaining and defending government policy, discrediting the opposition, glorifying Russia and its aggression against Ukraine and demonising the West in general and the USA, the EU and NATO in particular.

"Vostok"⁶¹ (East) bases its reporting primarily on Russian sources. Here you can also read detailed basic information about Russia. Numerous photos are published that glorify Russia, such as this photo of "Russian paratroopers" (see picture above).

"Nacionalist"⁶² mainly deals with historical and church-related topics, often focussing on the justification for Serbian nationalism.

The website **"Istina"** (Truth) sees its own journalistic thrust as follows: "Our problem is not that we believe. Belief is a strength. Our problem is that we believe the words of others more than our own eyes". To this end, "traditional national values of the Serbian people should be publicised". "To unmask the methods of political-propagandistic manipulation aimed at degrading the Serbian people and its state."

⁶⁰ <https://webtribune.rs/>

⁶¹ https://www.vostok.rs/index.php?option=btg_novosti

⁶² <https://nacionalist.rs/category/istorija/>

⁶³ <https://www.in4s.net/category/top1/>

⁶⁴ <https://vidovdan.org/naslovnna/>

⁶⁵ <https://borba.me/>

⁶⁶ <https://vaseljenska.net/>

⁶⁷ <https://24sedam.rs/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.pravda.rs/lat/pravda/impresum/>

⁶⁹ <https://vijestisrpske.com/>

"In4s"⁶³ is a church portal with strong nationalistic accents. In its reporting, it emphasises the interests of the Serbs in Montenegro and advocates a union between the two neighbouring states. In the separate "Identity" section, national and nationalist feelings are fuelled by heroically retracing historical events. Some observers categorise the portal as Montenegrin, although the imprint mentions Cuba as the website's home address.

The **"Vidovdan"**⁶⁴ portal, which was founded in 2005 with equally strong religious themes, advocates the unification of all Serbs in one state. This is equivalent to the historical project of a Greater Serbia, which failed in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s but is still being pursued by the political elite.

In addition to In4s, the information portal **"Borba"** in particular is regarded as a decidedly pro-Russian medium in Montenegro.⁶⁵ It deals with Montenegrin domestic politics from the perspective of the Serbian section of the population and propagates the Russian view of the world. It also campaigns in favour of Russian-Serbian friendship.

This incomplete list could be continued almost endlessly, as the number of internet portals with content of Russian provenance is almost immeasurable. For example, they are called **"Vaseljenska"**,⁶⁶ **"24sedam"**,⁶⁷ **"Pravda"**⁶⁸ or **"Vijesti Srpske"**⁶⁹ in the Serbian half of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

3. The most ardent propagandists of Russia in Serbia

But it is not just the internet that is home to dozens and dozens of pro-Russian and anti-Western portals. The same applies to the analogue media scene: with very few exceptions, the country's most established media promote Russophile positions and demonise the USA, the EU and NATO. President Vučić towers over the entire media landscape as the all-important spiritus rector. He can appear on all four privately owned national television stations (**Prva, Pink, Happy, B92**) in the current affairs programme as he sees fit and "enlighten" the audience with long monologues on every conceivable topic, even beyond politics and the economy. He is also omnipresent on the state broadcaster **RTS**. Last year, the head of state clearly dominated political reporting with around 160 hours on TV. If you consider that he is described neutrally or positively by all electronic media every time he is mentioned and that opposition representatives are downright demonised in return, the impact of this coverage is immense. Above all, this is because around two thirds of all Serbian citizens inform themselves primarily through TV channels.⁷⁰

The aforementioned TV channels were only granted new licences by the state supervisory authority REM last year,⁷¹ even though they have been proven to violate content regulations on a regular basis through violence, manipulation and trash.⁷² The owners of the private broadcasters are usually oligarchs who are close to President Vučić or his "Progressive Party" (SNS), which dominates all areas, such as the dubious Pink owner Željko Mitrović, who had already served the former Serbian autocrat and warlord Slobodan Milošević. As thanks from the ruling politicians for the broadcaster's services, Mitrović's considerable tax debts, including interest, are occasionally deferred or written off.⁷³ Or his son is only given a year's house arrest by a court, even though he had killed a girl in Belgrade while driving at excessive speed.⁷⁴

The situation on the print media market is similar to that on the TV market. The highest-circulation titles such as "**Informer**", "**Kurir**", "**Politika**", "**Večernje novosti**", "**Srpski Telegraf**" and "**Alo!**" are owned by oligarchs with close ties

to the government. The relatively unknown Boban Rajić won the bid for the long-established and popular newspapers "Politika" (2022) and "Novosti" (2019) for a comparatively modest purchase price. He had taken over the state's shares in these newspapers.⁷⁵ His company "Media 026" had been founded a few years earlier in the provincial town of Smederevo with a starting capital of 100 dinars (today 0.85 euros).⁷⁶

Aleksandar Rodić, owner and editor-in-chief of the wide-reaching tabloid "Kurir", openly attacked Vučić's autocratic system of government in two open letters in 2015 and 2017.⁷⁷ After being harassed by the authorities, police and secret service, Rodić sold his publishing house to Igor Žeželj, who only received the capital to do so through obscure cash flows.⁷⁸ A central role was played by state-owned Telekom, which is increasingly being given the task of silencing critical media by forcing them out of the cable networks.⁷⁹

The example of the new, fifth national TV frequency shows just how problematic and non-transparent Serbia's media landscape is organised. Because the related broadcasting licence via satellite and antenna guarantees a greater influence on the audience, the state supervisory authority REM is illegally delaying a decision that is actually required by law with flimsy arguments.⁸⁰ The real reason is simple: the international media holding company "United Media",⁸¹ which is registered in Luxembourg and claims to be the largest media provider on the entire Balkan Peninsula, could receive this frequency. So far, the political elite has succeeded in increasingly restricting the distribution of this company's media in Serbia. As these media report very critically and unvarnishedly on the government, the socio-political system, President Vučić and the many unresolved affairs in the country, official Belgrade wants to prevent this by all means.⁸²

The most prominent journalistic figureheads or "spearheads" of the Russophile and anti-Western scene are Dragan Vučićević, Milorad Vučelić and Slobodan Reljić, to name just a few.

⁷⁰ A year without balance in the media; in: CRTA 30.01.2023: <https://crt.rs/godina-bez-ravnoteze-u-medijima/>

⁷¹ National frequencies in Serbia have once again been given to TV Pink, Happy, Prva and B92; in: Radio Free Europe 29.07.2022: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rem-frekvencije-srbija-pink-happy-b92/31965380.html>

⁷² How REM closed its eyes to the violence on television; in: CINS 11.05.2023: <https://www.cins.rs/kako-je-rem-zmurio-na-nasilje-na-televizijama/>

⁷³ Željko Mitrović on taxes and honesty; in: Nova 04.09.2022: <https://nova.rs/zabava/showbiz/ko-o-cemu-zeljko-mitrovic-o-porezu-i-postenju/>

⁷⁴ On this day in 2013, the son of Željko Mitrović killed Andrea Bojanić; in: Direktno 18.07.2021: <https://direktno.rs/vesti/hronika/363101/andrea-bojanic-aleksandar-mitrovic-zeljko-mitrovic.html>

⁷⁵ <https://nuns.rs/preduzece-media-026-novi-vlasnik-50-odsto-politike-ko-je-boban-rajic/>

Stevanović, M.N.; The purchase of Novosti was made possible by (the electricity supplier) EPS and the Danube Insurance Company; in: Cenzolovka 31.08.2019: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/trziste/prodaju-novosti-omogucili-eps-i-dunav-osiguranje/>

⁷⁶ Milošević, Olivera; Portrait without a frame: Boban Rajić; in: Politika 01.09.2019: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/436956/Od-piljanice-do-medija>

⁷⁷ "Serbia, sorry!"; <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/2008557/aleksandar-rodic-srbijo-izvini> and "When the dictator robs the people of their state": <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/2860163/kad-diktator-otme-drzavu-od-naroda>

⁷⁸ <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Igor-Zezelj-zvanicno-novi-vlasnik-Kurira-347>

⁷⁹ Glavonjić, Zoran; The clash of the biggest players in Serbia's telecommunications sector; in: Radio Free Europe 04.11.2022: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-telekomunikacije-sbb-telekom/32115411.html>

⁸⁰ Tatalović, Žaklina; Zekić (i.e. the REM chairwoman) does not release the fifth frequency; in: Cenzolovka 26.04.2023: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/zekic-ne-da-petu-frekvenciju-martinioli-kaze-rokovi-prosli-bavimo-se-hirovima/>

⁸¹ <https://www.unitedmedia.net/de/>

⁸² Background information in English and Serbian here: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/12/29/decision-on-the-5th-national-television-frequency-in-serbia-capture-of-rem-as-a-mirror-of-captured-society/> and <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/odluka-o-petoj-nacionalnoj-frekvenciji-jos-na-cekranju/>

Vučičević is the owner and editor-in-chief of the tabloid "Informer"⁸³ and, according to President Vučić, his favourite journalist. It has occasionally been revealed that the two men's families are also close in their private lives.⁸⁴ and, according to President Vučić, his favourite journalist. It has occasionally been revealed that the two men's families are also close in their private lives.⁸⁵ His journalistic transgressions are sensational. In 2015, he put the newly elected President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in neighbouring Croatia on the front page as an alleged "sex bomb". In September last year, his interview with a multiple rapist in which the man described his offences in detail and gave women "advice" caused a storm of outrage.⁸⁶ Almost weekly, his paper incites hatred against Croatian neighbours as fascists, glorifies convicted Serbian war criminals, demonises leading Serbian opposition politicians with disfigured and repulsive photos, pillorying them for alleged and mostly manipulated missteps. They are said to be domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries in order to harm their homeland and enrich themselves.⁸⁷

He recently caused a stir with a voluntary two-day prison sentence. After many unsuccessful court cases against him for insult and coercion, he was sentenced to a fine of 200,000 dinars (1,700 euros) in Belgrade. Because he did not want to pay this fine, he accepted a substitute sentence at the beginning of April 2023 amid a huge media firework display by the pro-government media with grand theatrical gestures in the style of a reality show. In his own words, he wanted to present himself as an alleged defender of freedom of speech. After even the president offered to pay the fine, his wife provided the amount after two days.⁸⁸ The head of state had previously criticised that the sentence was "neither right nor just".⁸⁹ Head of government Ana Brnabić also spoke of a "sad day for the media scene in Serbia" after the Informer owner began his prison sentence.⁹⁰

The glorification of Russia in general and Putin in particular is at the forefront of foreign policy reporting. On the other hand, the West is accused of wanting to destroy the political system in Serbia dominated by Vučić and even having him assassinated.⁹¹

The second important mouthpiece of the political elite in general and of President Vučić in particular is the experienced propagandist **Milorad Vučelić**.⁹² Born in 1948, he was one of the most important supporters of the Serbian auto-

Fig. 5 | Vučićević as part of his "Informer" commentary series in 2019



Source: Newspaper Informer, 13.04.2019

crat and warlord Milošević in the 1990s, fuelling nationalist hatred and war propaganda. At the time, he was director of state television RTS, which was considered the most effective instrument of propaganda and power at the time. In the early 1990s, he was the parliamentary group chairman of Milošević's Socialist Party (SPS) and organised the funeral in the small town of Požarevac near Belgrade after Milošević's suicide in his cell at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal.⁹³ After losing the power struggle in the SPS to succeed Milošević as party leader against the current Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, he founded the extreme right-wing nationalist weekly "Pečat" in 2008.⁹⁴ In 2017, the state appointed him publisher and editor-in-chief of the high-circulation daily newspaper "Večernje novosti".

His leading article in "Novosti", which is not the exception but the rule in terms of content, serves as an example of the man's editorial line.⁹⁵ In it, the author claims that Russia is merely defending itself against "Western aggression" in Ukraine: "This war was prepared not only by Ukraine, but also by Germany". After the First World War, Russia helped Germany to create the Wehrmacht. After the Second World War, Germany built its economic miracle and the production of modern weapons such as the Leopard tanks on the supply of cheap Russian gas, it continues in a historically barely comprehensible manner. With regard to the West's alleged goals, the article states: "The Western powers persistently

⁸³ On the biography: Georgijev, Slobodan; Portrait of a contemporary; in: Vreme 06.10.2022: <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/portret-savremenika-dragan-j-vucicevic-informer-tabloid-za-mocne/>

⁸⁴ For example, Vučić attended a family celebration with his son Danilo and a minister in 2021: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/predsednik-vucic-otisao-na-ispracaj-kod-sina-dragana-j-vucicevica-video/>

⁸⁵ Živanović, Katarina; Dragan J. Vučićević: The president's favourite journalist; in: Danas 29.09.2022: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/dragan-j-vucicevic-omiljeni-predsednikov-novinar/>

⁸⁶ Criticism of the interview here, for example: Gligorijević, Jovana; Igor Milošević in the 'Informer': Platform for a multiple rapist; in: Vreme 28.09.2022: <https://www.vreme.com/kolumna/igor-milosevic-u-informeru-platforma-za-visestrukog-silovatelja/>

⁸⁷ A brief overview of some sensational title pages: Pogutz, Sandro; Who is Dragan Vučićević; in: Slobodna Dalmacija 30.09.2022: <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/regija/tko-je-dragan-vucicevic-urednik-informera-protiv-kojega-se-na-noge-digla-normalna-srbija-hrvate-proglasava-ustasama-zovu-ga-ljigom-i-nakazom-a-sada-mu-vicu-g-o-jedno-1228666>

⁸⁸ Živanović, Katarina; Another tragicomic performance by Vučićević; in: Danas 9.04.2023

⁸⁹ B92 03.04.2023: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/jos-jedan-tragikomican-performans-vucicevica-sagovornici-danasa-o-izrgvanju-uglu-institucija-sudstva-i-drzave/>

⁹⁰ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=04&dd=03&nav_category=11&nav_id=2312608

⁹¹ B92 03.04.2023: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=04&dd=03&nav_category=11&nav_id=2312582

⁹² The photo shows Vučićević as part of his "Informer" commentary series in 2019

⁹³ For the biography, see Istinomer: <https://www.istinomer.rs/akter/milorad-vucelic/>

⁹⁴ Lukač, Jasmina characterises the man in Danas on 09.09.2017: "In the recent history of Serbia, there is no comparable political, media and oligarch career like that of Milorad Vučićević": <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/milorad-vucelic-levicar-na-visokoj-nozi/>

⁹⁵ Internet presentation: <https://www.pecat.co.rs/>

⁹⁶ "Days of truth"; in: Novosti 05.02.2023: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1198996/dani-istine-milorad-vucelic-milanovicem-priznanju-kosovo-metohija-oteti-srbije-kako-poverovati>

demand that Russia be completely destroyed militarily and nationally. And at the same time, the Russians are expected to be satisfied in advance with a fate like that of the Aborigines or the Indians." Russia is now suffering the same fate as Serbia, which does not want to give up its former province of Kosovo, claims Vučelić.

The fact that the influential "journalist" meets with the approval of most citizens in the country and that the majority follow his distorted claims is demonstrated by the fact that he was honoured by the politically powerful Serbian Orthodox Church. In October 2021, he was awarded the highest ecclesiastical decoration.⁹⁶ For his critics, however, he has long embodied "the darkest symbol of the past that persists".⁹⁷

The third member of the top pro-Russian and nationalist Serbian propagandists is **Slobodan Reljić**. He was editor-in-chief of NIN until 2009 and is now one of the most prominent dialogue partners of Russian state media in Serbia. Reljić certainly speaks from the soul of the many Serbian pro-Russian portals when he describes the ideological principles of these media as early as 2018: "What is happening now in Serbia is just the beginning of Russia's penetration into the West. The essence of the Russian understanding of today's world and its rise lies in the fact that the Russians have understood the importance of propaganda. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Russians looked like a bunch of madmen, and today they are the world leaders in propaganda. The most important thing in propaganda is to have initiative and not a sense of inferiority, and the Russians currently have more of this than the West.

The West has no ideas at the moment, while in Russia Putin appeared as the bearer of conservative ideas, which are also recognised by a good proportion of conservative thinkers in the West. In other words, you can't take action against Putin in the same way as against Stalin, because he represents an idea that we need ourselves. In the West there is no longer a family, the family is broken in the West, the state is in the hands of the corporate and financial sector. In the context of globalisation, you are downgraded to a dot, to nothing, and everyone wants to be something. Brexit is a confirmation of this idea: we want to be us. (...) The Russians are not relying on weapons, but on propaganda, in other words 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 we Serbs are taking part in it to a certain extent. For us Serbs, Russia is the only way to remain normal, and it is a fortunate combination of circumstances that Russia is rising. What is regrettable, however, is that our political elites are still tied to the West."⁹⁸ Reljić is currently probably the Russophile journalist in Serbia who receives the most attention on numerous relevant portals and TV stations. His interviews, which can last up to an hour and a half, have titles such as "American madness reigns in Serbia",⁹⁹ "Uprisings are starting worldwide and nobody can stop them"¹⁰⁰ or "The liberal order is dying".¹⁰¹ He always formulates the same messages: The democratic, capitalist and liberal model of the West and the dominance of the USA in the world have come to an end. The new superpowers Russia and China, whose socio-political systems are dramatically superior to those of the EU and the USA, will prevail. In the end, a multipolar world will emerge. Serbia would do well to side with Moscow and Beijing in good time

4. The Russian state agency Sputnik in Serbia

Sputnik Serbia¹⁰² was founded in Belgrade at the beginning of February 2015. Although it is the only branch in the Balkans, the Belgrade material is also used extensively in many neighbouring countries. According to previous information, around three dozen people who see themselves as journalists are working in the 400 square metre newsroom. They all have 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 and its presence on various social media channels, **Radio Sputnik Serbia** is distributed via the Internet and **Radio Novosti** as well as **Studio B** in Belgrade.¹⁰³

Ljubinka Milinčić, who was born in Kosovo in 1952, has been editor-in-chief since the beginning. From 2002 to 2015, she was a 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 at the Serbian embassy in Russia. She has translated numerous Russian authors into Serbian and published dozens of her own books with titles such as "Vladimir Putin. My fight for Kosovo" (2005)¹⁰⁴ or "The Putin Phenomenon – The Man Who Created Himself" (2011).¹⁰⁵ By her own account, she is a fervent admirer of the Russian president. Milinčić said in an interview with

⁹⁶ <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/4542696/patrijarh-porfirije-orden-sveti-sava-drugi-red-milorad-vucelic.html>

⁹⁷ Popović, Predrag on 13.02.2015: <https://predragpopovic.wordpress.com/2015/02/13/milorad-vucelic-najmracniji-simbol-proslosti-koja-traje/>

⁹⁸ Hudelist, Darko; "Globus reporters in the strongest Russian media outlet in the Balkans - Spunik"; in: Jutarnji list 10.12.2018: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/svijet/reporteri-globusa-u-najjacem-ruskom-glasilu-na-balkanu-sputnik-putinova-medijska-centrala-u-srbiji-da-financiraju-nas-rusi-place-stizu-iz-moskve-5373991>

⁹⁹ On TV Tain on 21.02.2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPTZU3JHS18>

¹⁰⁰ Balkaninfo 06.04.2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=511bipwLDGk>

¹⁰¹ Novi standard 23.04.2023: <https://standard.rs/2023/04/23/slobodan-reljic-pocinje-rasplet-drame-umiruceg-sistema/>

¹⁰² <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/>

¹⁰³ All data according to: Hudelist, Darko with link on the previous page

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.knjizara.com/Vladimir-Putin-Moja-bitka-za-Kosovo-Ljubinka-Milincic-121764>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.amazon.com/Fenomen-Putin-covek-koji-stvorio/dp/8686201083>

“Glas Rusije” (Voice of Russia) back in 2013 that Putin had “brought his country back onto the world political stage” and had earned historical merit for his people, who “live better today than ever before in their history”.¹⁰⁶

Today, she also regularly publishes in a number of nationalist and Russophile Serbian portals such as “Novi standard”,¹⁰⁷ RTS¹⁰⁸ or “New Serbian Political Thought”.¹⁰⁹ She also conducts interviews with other prominent propagandists such as the aforementioned Novosti editor-in-chief Milorad Vučelić, the head of “Srbijagas”, Dušan Bajatović, the Serbian corona denier Branimir Nestorović, the editor-in-chief of the pro-government TV Happy, Milomir Marić, or the prominent journalist in the service of Russian media, Ljiljana Smajlović.¹¹⁰ Finally, Milinčić has YouTube channels such as “My view” with topics such as “The West wants to divide Russia into 40 states”, “Russia spares soldiers and population” or “The greatest European leaders have wished for Russia’s unity”.¹¹¹ Another YouTube channel is “My view of Russia” with theories such as “Even if Russia fell apart, a new Putin would rebuild it”, “Russia has won and the West has already admitted it” or “Is America leaving NATO?”.¹¹²

As editor-in-chief of Sputnik, she describes the goals of this Russian foreign medium: “The world lacked a second 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 and have shown that they are not always right. We encountered some information that was fabricated and we said that it was not true. Nobody before us has questioned the truthfulness of Western media like Reuters, BBC or CNN.” Milinčić explains the great success in Serbia, where “Sputnik” is allegedly quoted 200 to 300 times a day by other media: “We have never falsified, we don’t lie and we don’t take sides. (...) No one has ever caught us lying”.¹¹³ When “Sputnik Serbia” celebrated its fifth anniversary in February 2020, President Vučić and Foreign Minister Dačić were guests of honour. This shows the solidarity of Serbian top politicians with this medium. In her speech, the editor-in-chief praised the willingness of the country’s political elite to allow Sputnik to contact its members at any time.¹¹⁴

A look at **Sputnik’s reporting** clearly shows its direction. The topics of Serbia and Russia dominate, followed by the USA.¹¹⁵ This concentration of editorial work on Serbia already proves that a user of this service is unable to find out about the most important international content because it falls by the wayside due to Sputnik’s focus. A look at the Sputnik editions in ot-

her languages proves this, as the respective target countries, such as Germany or Spain, also take centre stage there. 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 correspond to reality. What’s more, the number of reports on Serbian topics even clearly outstrips those from the USA.

Even the reporting on Russia does not show the complete picture of this largest country in the world, but only small excerpts that show everything and everyone in a positive light. There are practically no problems there, if the Sputnik news is to be believed. You will look in vain for social upheavals or political disputes worth mentioning. Economic developments are also kept virtually silent. A common thread running through the reports is the alleged victimisation of Russia. The USA, NATO and the EU are “dismantling the security system” in a kind of “new totalitarianism” and seeking “confrontation with Russia”. An important aspect of the Russia reports is the alleged superiority of Russian over Western weapons technology, which is widely adopted one-to-one by the Serbian media. There are closely timed detailed presentations of weapons systems, which are usually also publicised with videos and many photos.

The reporting on the USA is diametrically opposed. The country is demonised, portrayed as a colonialist, liar and exploitative. At the same time, the reader must get the impression that the collapse of capitalism is imminent due to the decline of the dollar, the ruin of the banks and the collapse of the stock markets. There is even speculation about the outbreak of an imminent civil war.

Sputnik chooses to focus on Moscow’s support for Serbia in all its conflicts with neighbours such as Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Croatia and Montenegro. Belgrade’s positions are unconditionally defended and the opposing side is belittled. Strengthening Russian-Serbian relations is another priority. It is clear that Orthodox rites and holidays play a major role in demonstrating the mutual bond between the two countries.

Reporting on Serbia delves deep into regional and local topics such as road accidents and the weather. This can be interpreted as an endeavour to create as much proximity as possible between the Moscow-based editorial team and the users.

Finally, let’s take a look at the YouTube channel of Sputnik Serbia. Here there is a clear focus on the domestic politics of the host country. In addition, it attempts to cast the West in a bad light.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ljubinka Milinčić – Enciklopedista ruskog života; u: vesti.rs 11.11.2013.: <https://www.vesti.rs/Moskva/Ljubinka-Milincic-enciklopedista-ruskog-zivota-2.html>

¹⁰⁷ <https://standard.rs/tag/ljubinka-milincic/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.rts.rs/lat/rt/dijaspora/vesti/4944468/nasi-susreti-ljubinka-milincic-u-sputnjiku-rt-svet-2058.html>

¹⁰⁹ Zašto Rusiji ne odgovara upotreba nuklearnog oružja; 31.10.2022.: <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/ljubinka-milincic-zasto-rusiji-ne-odgovara-upotreba-nuklearnog-oruzja.html?alphabet-l>

¹¹⁰ Ja, Putinov agent u decembru 2022.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L8qpA4TCII&t=6s> preuzeto iz lista “Novosti”:

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1187495/putinov-agent-lica-poternice-okupu>

¹¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIsIaqbWipY8OzmKU_1hPew

¹¹² https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8Kfv0Tol8p1fy9zjA_drbdhpaCwuX9tE

¹¹³ Svi citati iz intervjua sa beogradskim listom Danas od 07.05.2017.: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ljubinka-milincic-razbili-smo-monopol-na-istinu/>

¹¹⁴ Kurteš, Aleksandra; Pet godina Spunjika u Srbiji; u Politika 11.02.2020.: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/447726/Pet-godina-Sputnjika-u-Srbiji>

¹¹⁵ Naredni navodi predstavljaju rekapitulaciju ranije analize sadržaja u “Ruski mediji na Balkanu. Kako moskovska propaganda upravlja Srbijom”:

<https://shop.freiheit.org/#/Publikation/1190>

¹¹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Sputnik+Srbija

¹¹⁷ E.g. on 18.04.2023: How the West deceived Serbia for ten years: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7IOcexjmW4> or on 27.04.2023: The West is aware of its defeat in Ukraine: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQLG_-WcxHE or on 04.05.2023 the report on the US dollar with the headline “The world’s biggest terrorist”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wMVYea0elo>

The **Sputnik matrix** is clear. It doesn't pursue traditional journalism. For example, there is no separation between news and commentary. The handling of sources is superficial, much more careless than is usual in Western quality media, and above all targeted. The aim is not to provide comprehensive information, but to promote and achieve political objectives. Sputnik does not claim to emulate the so often criticised "mainstream media". Rather, the reporting is intended to document and prove that Russia's view of the world is correct. In other words, the creators of Sputnik do not think about their work from the reader's/user's point of view, but pursue a one-way street regarding content from top to bottom (top-down communication). Figuratively speaking, the exclamation mark is the favoured punctuation mark. Western media try (at least ideally) to ask independent questions about the background and to present an event/statement as comprehensively as possible, not omitting or distorting anything essential. They want to communicate at eye level with their users. Their favourite punctuation mark is the question mark. This model has received a powerful boost from the digitalisation of the media with all the opportunities for readers/users to react to journalistic texts and even help shape them as "citizen reporters". Communication is not a one-way street here. This results in a dialogue between journalists and users, which is so undesirable in the propaganda media of Serbia, Russia or China that it would simply be unimaginable..

The pillars of Sputnik's DNA are:

- Selective instead of comprehensive reporting. The benchmark is not the significance of events, but the target country "covered" in terms of content (here: Serbia, Serbs in neighbouring countries). The media offer is tailored to the target country, which is thereby valorised to an extent that does not remotely correspond to reality. National echo chambers are thus created.
 - Reporting sources are either irrelevant, one-sided or incorrectly weighted. You can always find a fourth-rate politician, a clueless top athlete, an instrumentalised historian/lawyer from the second tier or a long retired, very elderly alumnus to say what you want.
 - Concentration on individual events instead of thematic heavyweights that are placed in the wrong context or described without context
 - Identification of Russian-Serbian similarities up to alleged fraternities. Solidarisaton with allegedly congruent interests. WE (Sputnik editors and users, respectively Russia and Serbia) against THEM (domestic opposition, neighbouring countries, USA, EU).
- Moralisation of the issues: Russia and Serbia reinforce their role as victims ("self-victimisation"). Both countries feel treated unfairly by the rest of the world and claim an "eternal" setback allegedly based on the "laws of nature". Moscow and Belgrade see themselves as a bulwark against the Zeitgeist that is corroding all values and which, according to this interpretation, manifests itself in homosexuality, paedophilia, the dissolution of religions and traditional values, including traditional families.

Sputnik's objectives for reporting such as following are derived from this:

- Explaining Russian foreign policy worldwide in order to create understanding and approval
- "Proof" that Russian weapons technology is far superior to military technology in the West
 - + Glorification of Putin as an idealised leader and role model for Serbian (foreign) top politicians
- Supporting the Serbian political elites in Southeast Europe, weakening the opposition
- "Proof" that Western democracies are doomed to collapse
- "Superiority" of the Russian political, economic and social system
- Influence on the countries of former Yugoslavia through
 - + Sowing discord and exploiting or intensifying differences, e.g. Serbs against Croats, Albanians against Serbs, Montenegrins against Serbs
 - + Preventing the rapprochement of ex-Yugoslav states with Euro-Atlantic structures, most recently Montenegro (NATO member since 2017, EU accession candidate) and North Macedonia (NATO member since 2020, EU accession negotiations started in July 2022) by presenting the EU in an exclusively negative light
 - + Attempt to prove that close economic and political cooperation with Russia is more beneficial for the successor states of the former Yugoslavia than cooperation with the "West"

5. Reinforcement for Sputnik: The new Russian state media RT Balkan

In March 2022, the EU imposed a broadcasting ban on the Russian state media RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik in the member states. The reason was the Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, the actual reason was broader: “The Russian Federation has undertaken a systematic international campaign of disinformation, manipulation of information and distortion of facts in order to intensify its strategy of destabilising neighbouring countries, the EU and its member states. In particular, disinformation and information manipulation have repeatedly and consistently targeted European political parties - especially at election times - civil society, gender and ethnic minorities in Russia, asylum seekers and the functioning of democratic institutions in the EU and its Member States,” the statement said.¹¹⁸ It was therefore not - as misrepresented in Russia - a ban on the two media, as their offices and journalists were able to continue working. The ban only related to the dissemination of content.

Previously, RT’s efforts to broadcast a television programme in Germany in accordance with the regulations had failed.¹¹⁹ In the end, a diversion via Serbia was chosen. The Serbian supervisory authority for electronic media, REM¹²⁰ granted RT Deutsch a broadcasting licence that would also apply in Germany in accordance with the rules for cross-border TV programmes, according to the plan.¹²¹ This unusual step by a state authority in EU accession candidate Serbia, which counteracts the EU’s efforts to counter Russian propaganda, demonstrates Serbia’s close ties with Russia. However, the German and European authorities did not accept this “trick”.

The new online service “RT Balkan” was launched in Belgrade on 15 November 2022.¹²² The daughter of Sputnik editor-in-chief Ljubinka Milinčević, Jelena, was appointed editor-in-chief of RT Balkan. Although little biographical information was revealed, Serbian media reported that she had met Putin personally and had applied for Russian citizenship years ago.¹²³ According to her own account, she had worked for RT in Moscow for ten years and spent shorter periods of time in Berlin and Paris for this medium. In a column at the start of the programme, the new editor-in-chief wrote:¹²⁴ “We are here to present the Russian view of the world - for the moment through texts, columns, multimedia projects and video content, and soon also on the TV screen”.

The new editor-in-chief showed right from the start what to expect from her editorial team. In her very first text, she painted a less than realistic picture. She justified the launch of RT Balkan with an alleged preponderance of Western media “in this region”. Milinčević claimed that at least one Russian medium had to counteract this, despite the long-standing existence of Sputnik Serbia. And continuing in the best propaganda style: the EU had banned RT because this TV programme had been so successful and its popularity had competed on an equal footing with major broadcasters such as the BBC and CNN. And finally: Serbia’s strictly controlled and censored media landscape - as previously shown - “represents an oasis of media freedom in Europe today”. That is why “we have come to a friendly country where we are welcomed with open arms”.

5.1. Content analysis

In order to be able to evaluate the work of RT Balkan, a content analysis of the complete material was carried out.¹²⁵ As the period analysed, the output from Monday to Friday was selected on the assumption that fewer texts are produced over the weekend.

Randomly selected analysis periods (2023)
13.02. to 17.02.
20.02. to 24.02.
27.02. to 03.03.
06.03. to 10.03.
13.03. to 17.03.
20.03. to 24.03.
27.03. to 31.03.

During these 35 days, 318 reports were published in the sections “Serbia and the Balkans”, “Russia” and “The World”, as defined by RT. A further 98 reports were counted in the “Columns and Interviews” section, meaning that the total production amounted to 416 reports. This corresponds to an average daily output of 12 articles. Compared to the daily production of Sputnik Serbia, there is a big difference in terms of quantity.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/rt-de-rundfunklizenz-101.html> i Medienaufsicht nimmt RT vom Satellit (Telo za nadzor nad medijima RT-u zabranjuje emitovanje putem satelita); u Süddeutsche Zeitung 22.12.2021.: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/rt-deutsch-lizenz-satellit-eutelsat-propaganda-1.5494427> kao i Stöber, Silvia; Wie RT Deutsch ins Fernsehen will (Kako RT Deutsch želi da dospe na televiziju); u: Tagesschau 18.01.2022.: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/rt-deutsch-rundfunklizenz-aufsichtsbehoerden-101.html>

¹²⁰ <http://www.rem.rs/#gsc.tab=0>

¹²¹ <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/zekic-rem-izdao-dozvolu-tv-rt-na-nemackom-na-isti-nacin-kao-i-za-tv-n1-i-nova-s/>

¹²² <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/russia-today-srbija/32131807.html>

¹²³ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/o-je-jelena-milincic-rukovodilac-rasa-tudej-balkan-biografija/>

¹²⁴ <https://standard.rs/2022/11/15/j-milincic-zasto-je-rt-dosla-na-balkan/>

¹²⁵ <https://lat.rt.rs/>

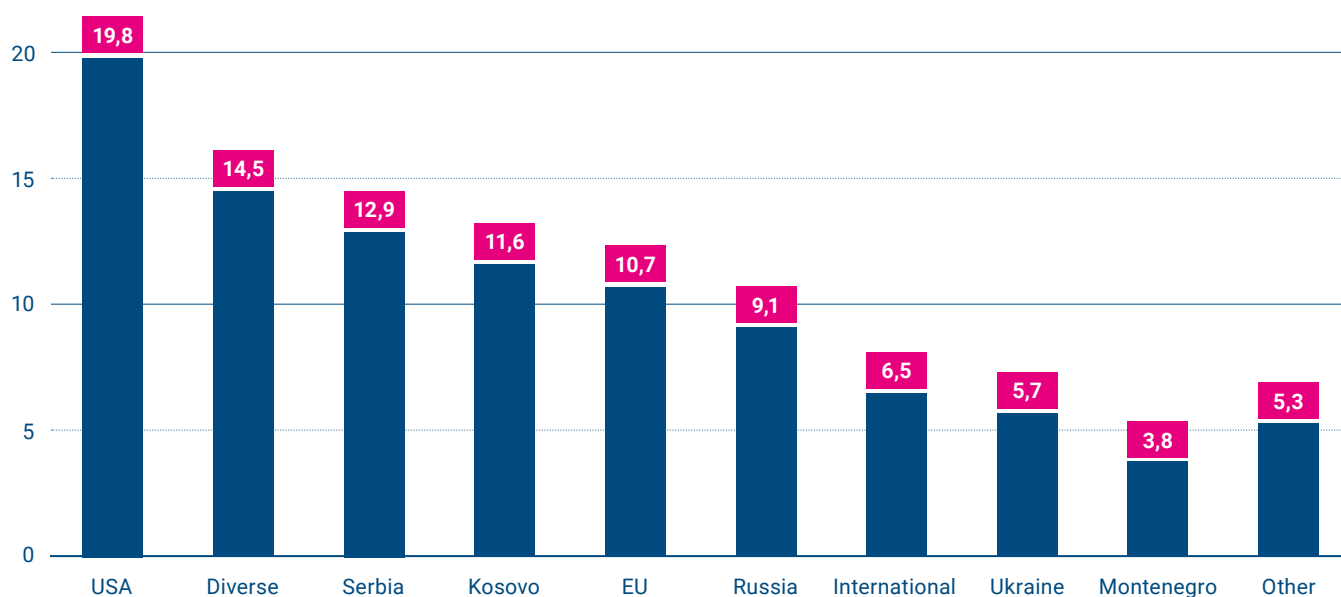
For example, on a randomly selected Tuesday, 16 May 2023, Sputnik Serbia broadcast 140 reports, divided between “The latest news” (100), “Serbia” (14) and “Russia” (26).

The distribution of topics on RT Balkan is as follows (excluding “Columns and interviews”): The largest topic segment is clearly the USA with just under 20 per cent of all articles. This is followed by diverse/mixed topics (a good 14 per cent). Serbia is in third place with almost 13 per cent. If the separate topic of “Kosovo” (4th place) is added as Belgrade’s most urgent problem, Serbian content even accounts for just under a quarter of all reports, clearly outstripping even reporting on the US. As with Sputnik Serbia, this shows that RT Balkan gives Serbia an importance that does not seem justified in

comparison to other international topics given the population and economic power of this small Balkan country. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the reporting of this Russian state media outlet pursues goals other than providing balanced and comprehensive information on international events. All other countries - even Ukraine, which is in the international spotlight - fall significantly behind the first places. The focus of RT Balkans reporting has thus been identified - it is “the West” (USA/EU) with around 30 per cent and Serbia/Kosovo with around 25 per cent of all reports.

Judging by these figures, RT Balkan works in a more “targeted” manner than Sputnik Serbia, as this agency has a broader thematic focus.

Fig. 6 | Distribution of topics (N=318)



Own illustration

5.2. Narratives

By far the most important narrative of RT Balkan deals with the alleged **emergence of a “new world order”**. In the context of this emergence process, Russia’s attack on Ukraine is characterised as a necessary birth pang. One of the most prominent Serbian analysts, Slobodan Antonić, describes the alleged background: “America’s long-term and strategic goal is to break Russia into many banana republics. This would prevent the Chinese Silk Road and push towards China’s northern border. The Ukraine war is an opportunity for the USA to implement its **Generalplan Ost 2.0**. (written in German). By conquering Russia’s natural resources, the US prolonged the life of its tottering empire for a whole century”. And: “Russia must win because all over the world the eyes of

millions of ordinary workers are fixed on it, sweating under the yoke of the American empire and waiting for their shackles to be loosened even a little.” Only the “Russian Empire”, which is in reality a “Noah’s Ark of humanity”, can prevent this scenario. An English clergyman is quoted as saying: “The time is coming when we, the last Christians of the West, regardless of our nationality, will be forced to seek refuge in our only spiritual home in this world - Orthodox Russia. We ask the Russian authorities to give us Russian passports”.¹²⁷

And who is setting the pace for this “new world order”? China’s head of state and party leader Xi Jinping and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, it is claimed. “The new world order has been established” is the result of the meeting between the two leaders in March 2023, according to this interpretation:

¹²⁶ When Russia wins; in: RT Balkan 21.02.2023: : <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/slobodan-antonik-politikolog/20167-slobodan-antonik-rusija-pobeda/>

¹²⁷ Empire or history; in: RT Balkan 08.02.2023: : <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/slobodan-antonik-politikolog/18479-slobodan-antonik-kolumna-rusija-imerija-istorija/>

"This new order is non-Western and, as it is seen by many, anti-American. The so-called collective West remains isolated in this new world ambience".¹²⁸ The meeting of the two presidents in Moscow is aimed at a "multipolar world order, economic globalisation and the democratisation of international relations".¹²⁹

The new world order is designed against the current international power structure, which looks like this: "The political elite faithfully follows foreign American and geopolitical interests, which has led to the economic and political suicide of the EU countries". And even worse: "The people regularly elect their representatives in democratic elections and they actively work against the interests of those who elected them. The states as the basic protection of the people have been abolished. Everything has been covered up with aggressive media propaganda, with invented higher, universal goals, non-existent enemies and unbelievable lies. The elected representatives (...) have become mere lobbyists and no longer have any relation to the people they formally represent".¹³⁰

What role will Europe play in this model? "The EU is completely Americanised. The old continent has never been so Americanised before. (...) It is fascinating to see the persistence with which European leaders ignore the facts and the true interests of their countries. (...) But it is not only the politicians who are the problem, but perhaps even more so the intellectual elite of the EU countries. Instead of looking at the real reasons for the current crisis, the largest and dominant part of the elite is preoccupied with what they call the pacification of Russia. (...) It is not only in Germany that the question arises as to how long Germany will continue to be the servant of American interests, because what (Federal Chancellor Olaf T.B.) Scholz is saying is not in Germany's interests. (...) Europe is facing a complete collapse, not only politically but also economically. With impoverished citizens and a collapsed economy, it will be pushed even further to the margins of history and dependent on others. America will probably leave Europe at some point, once it has extracted all the money and jobs it is interested in. After all, what value is an impoverished vassal who has no money?"¹³¹

The Russian state media is constantly promoting the theory that a "clash of civilisations" is currently underway. One of the most prominent Russian apologists is Alexander Dugin, who consequently speaks at great length in interviews: "We can see how incompatible these civilisations are. On the one

hand, there is the Russian, Christian, Orthodox civilisation, which is much more traditional and has a closeness to social justice and is based on the dream of Russia's greatness. On the other hand, there is modern, Western, global and liberal democracy, which acts as if it is the only form of political and economic organisation. This globalism is the second civilisation. After the fall of the Soviet Union, this globalist, Western civilisation transformed itself into the only possible civilisation".¹³² However, the West is incapable of recognising Russia's good intentions because "the West understands neither China nor Russia".¹³³

In order to help the new world order envisioned by Beijing and Moscow achieve a breakthrough, in this conceptual framework the US dollar must first be replaced as the world's number one currency. Examples are repeatedly cited of how individual countries such as Iran have replaced the US dollar with the Chinese yuan in their foreign trade.¹³⁴ This is also the right direction for other countries such as Brazil, which has heralded the departure from the US dollar through a trade agreement with China.¹³⁵ The US currency has now even become a risk. "If the dollar loses its lustre, the USA will also lose its power".¹³⁶ And: "How America abused its privileges and backed itself into a corner in the process".¹³⁷

In addition to the economy, culture and society also play a decisive role in the "clash of civilisations", claims RT Balkan's reporting. Amazon, Disney, Coca Cola, McDonald's, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Starbucks must be combated as they harbour a "high risk of political bias".¹³⁸ Western pop culture and music in particular are suspected of infiltrating and negatively influencing young people: "Every serious state and every mature society must take care of what young people listen to and watch. Just as it is not permitted to publicly advertise and spread drugs and prostitution, Satanism should not be propagated under the guise of entertainment and artistic expression".¹³⁹

A particular thorn in the side of RT Balkan is feminism in the Western world: "Feminisms have become part of the dominant worldview and an important pillar of hegemonic Western ideology in recent years," it complains: "Women are advised to focus exclusively on themselves if they want to become successful members of society." This is nothing other than "neoconservatism".¹⁴⁰ Such ideas are grist to the mill of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose Patriarch Porfirije spoke of women as "miserable and wretched creatures",

¹²⁸ Ljepojević, Siniša; Novi svetski poredak je stvoren; u: RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://rt.rs/opinion/sinisa-ljepojevic/24386-sinisa-ljepojevic-novi-svetski-poredak/>

¹²⁹ RT Balkan otkriva: Dogovor Sija i Putina za neki bolji svet; 22.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24134-zajednicka-izjava-moskve-i-pekingsa-najavljuje-novi-svetski-poredak/>

¹³⁰ Ljepojević, Siniša; Vlasti protiv naroda; u: RT Balkan 31.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/sinisa-ljepojevic/25291-sinisa-ljepojevic-vlast-protiv-naroda/>

¹³¹ Ljepojević, Siniša; Šta su perspektive Evrope; u: RT Balkan 10.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/sinisa-ljepojevic/22500-sinisa-ljepojevic-evropa-perspektive/>

¹³² Dugin: Pobjeda Rusije vodi ka multipolarnom svetu; u: RT Balkan 06.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21971-dugin-od-pobede-rusije-zavisni-nastanak-multipolarnog-sveta/>

¹³³ Srpska profesorka političkih nauka Mitrović, Dragana na RT Balkanu 21.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24031-si-rusija-poseta-komentar/>

¹³⁴ RT Balkan 22.02.2023.: <https://rt.rs/news/20260-irak-ekonomija-juan/>

¹³⁵ Dedolarizacija u zamahu; u: RT Balkan 30.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25183-brazil-kina-dedolarizacija/>

¹³⁶ Rizična američka valuta; u: RT Balkan 14.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22942-amerika-dolar-gubi-vrednost/>

¹³⁷ Dedolarizacija za početnike; u: RT Balkan 28.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24871-sad-dedolarizacija-saudijska-arabija/>

¹³⁸ RT Balkan 13.02.2023.: <https://rt.rs/news/19095-amazon-dizni-meta-politick-pristrasne-kompanije/>

¹³⁹ Vikend u paklu; u: RT Balkan 26.03.2023.: <https://rt.rs/opinion/marko-tanaskovic/24612-marko-tanaskovic-vikend-u-paklu/>

¹⁴⁰ Jovanović, Andrea; Feminističke Darvinove nagrade; u: RT Balkan 08.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/andrea-jovanovic/22287-andrea-jovanovic-feministicke-darvinove-nagrade/>

which led to an outcry from civil society.¹⁴¹ In contrast, traditional marriage is upheld: “Marriage is always in fashion and is not in crisis,” a Serbian “marriage counsellor” tells the medium: “Marriage is still an unsurpassed union of man and woman as well as the whole family and everything that goes with it, and the best place to raise future generations.”¹⁴²

The “collapse of the West”, which has already begun, is the second major theme. The situation and prospects look like this: Europe will struggle with a gas shortage in the coming winter.¹⁴³ In addition, there is currently a serious food crisis that threatens to spill over into Serbia, a candidate country for EU membership.¹⁴⁴ The US banking system is collapsing.¹⁴⁵ The result is the collapse of the entire US financial system. “The immeasurable militarisation, the sanctions against everyone and everything as well as adventurous military actions all over the world have already cost the country 33 trillion dollars (...) The financial system of this country might not be able to withstand that”.¹⁴⁶ And then, inevitably, the entire market would collapse.¹⁴⁷ “The USA has never been closer to bankruptcy”, says the internationally controversial Russian oligarch Deripaska: “The collapse of the American financial system could open the door to peace”.¹⁴⁸

But it is not just the USA that is in the crosshairs of these disaster scenarios. Panic is also spreading in Germany: “Is Deutsche Bank the next Credit Suisse” is the spectre outlined.¹⁴⁹ Germany is failing as a traditional economic engine in Europe: “Europe’s economic engine is at a standstill. The strike (at Deutsche Bahn, T.B.) is just the beginning. The sanctions (against Russia, T.B.) are returning as a boomerang”.¹⁵⁰ The article is based on the statements of Serbian economics professor Ljubodrag Savić and mixes the strike for higher wages with the sanctions against Russia without any internal logic. Germany is in breach of contract because it has interrupted Russian gas supplies (wasn’t it the other way round?). Because Germany now has to pay four times more for “American gas”, its economy is not competitive in the long term with India and China, which are supplied with gas much more cheaply by Russia: “The German state is playing dead as if it had encountered a bear”. Switzerland is also predicted to have a bleak future due to the insolvency of Credit Suisse.¹⁵¹

The imbalances in the West are greater today than in the financial crisis of 2008, it is reported like a mantra.¹⁵² But Brussels is failing, because: “Brussels on the banking crisis: not too much panic because of the panic on the markets”.¹⁵³ The conflict with Ukraine and the growth of China are exposing the problems of the American defence industry.¹⁵⁴ There are fires in practically every corner,¹⁵⁵ so much so that we can already speak of a “lost decade”.¹⁵⁶ It is therefore no wonder that the West is gradually losing important parts of the world from its sphere of influence, such as the Middle East.¹⁵⁷ The West is also losing out in Africa: “How Russia kicked France out and became the most important ally of African countries in the fight against terrorism”.¹⁵⁸

The propaganda techniques are almost always the same. The sources are often second- or third-tier alleged experts who have long since left office. This also applies to the international studies that are often quoted. They always fail to provide links to the cited originals so that users can form their own judgement. Of course, nobody takes the trouble to look back and check the many predicted catastrophe scenarios for their veracity. And while the West is portrayed in the worst possible light, there is a complete lack of information from Russia on the issues raised. Not even positive propaganda reports appear. The situation in Russia – politics, economy, society, culture - remains largely underexposed or even dark.

Reporting on the Russian aggression against Ukraine is comparatively thin at less than six per cent of all articles. This is surprising at first glance. Apparently, RT Balkan concentrates on the major ideological and political lines and leaves out the actual war reporting. The daily frontline reporting is provided by Sputnik Serbia with many photos and videos. Here is an example from 19 May 2023.¹⁵⁹ However, this does not mean that the broad outlines of the conflict, on which Russia and Serbia agree, are neglected:

“In Serbia, the NATO symbol means a symbol of war. In contrast, Putin can only be something completely opposite”. And: “On the one hand, the whole world understands, with the exception of the West, which is not allowed to understand anything at all, but only to obey what is said. So the whole world

¹⁴¹ Nova 13.05.2023.: <https://nova.rs/magazin/prica-se/kako-moze-bednica-a-zlocin-je-psiholoskinja-ostri-komentari-na-patrijarhov-govor/>

¹⁴² Brak je još uvek važna institucija; u: RT Balkan 28.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20899-brak-je-jos-uvek-vazan/>

¹⁴³ EU Commission in fear: A gas shortage awaits us in the coming winter; in: RT Balkan 13.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19067-evropa-gas-nestastica-rusija/>

¹⁴⁴ RT Balkan investigates: Will the food crisis from Europe spread to Serbia?; <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21540-prehrambena-kriza-u-srbiji/> 03.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21540-prehrambena-kriza-u-srbiji/>

¹⁴⁵ Why the American banking system is falling apart; in: RT Balkan 15.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23057-kriza-bankarskog-sistema-u-sad/> and American banking system about to break; in: RT Balkan 13.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22809-americki-bankarski-sistem-pred-pucanjem-hiljadu-milijardi-neosiguranih-depozita/>

¹⁴⁶ Deripaska on the financial collapse of the USA; in: RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24390-deripaska-sad-finskijski-sistem-nece-izdrzati/>
This shows once again how propaganda works. The headline clearly states that the financial system is collapsing, but the text only mentions the possibility. And whether the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska is the right source to make such an assessment remains to be seen.

¹⁴⁷ RT Balkan 21.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23898-dzej-pi-morgan-banka-ekonomija-minski-momenat-krah-trzista/>

¹⁴⁸ In RT Balkan 20.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23769-oleg-deripaska-rusija-amerika-sad-bankrot-bankarski-sistem/>

¹⁴⁹ RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24430-dojce-banka-kao-novi-kredi-svis/>

¹⁵⁰ RT Balkan 27.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24750-nemacka-strajk-zeleznica-saobracaj/>

¹⁵¹ The franc has lost its magic; in: RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24415-krah-svajcarskog-franka/> and Reuters: Credit Suisse’s collapse threatens Switzerland’s reputation as a centre of wealth management; in: RT Balkan 22.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24144-svajcarska-reputacija-kredi-svis/>

¹⁵² The crisis is already bigger than in 2008; in: RT Balkan 17.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23378-sad-banke-pozajmice/> and Russian media (!): American economy faces crisis like in 2008; in: RT Balkan 13.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22829-americki-finskijski-sistem-u-nesigurnom-stanju/>

¹⁵³ RT Balkan 29.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25078-eu-banke-sigurnost/>

¹⁵⁴ RT Balkan 21.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20013-pentagon-pred-kolapsom/>

¹⁵⁵ Exodus from London: The dizzying rents are forcing subtenants to flee en masse to the centre of the country; in: RT Balkan 13.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19003-london-cena-kirije/>

¹⁵⁶ RT Balkan 29.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24897-svetska-banka-sledi-izgubljenost-decenija-za-ekonomski-rast/>

¹⁵⁷ Ljepojević, Siniša: Kako je Zapad izgubio Bliski istok; u: RT Balkan 17.03.2023.: <https://rt.rs/opinion/sinisa-ljepojevic/23393-sinisa-ljepojevic-kako-je-zapad-izgubio-bliski-istok/>

¹⁵⁸ RT Balkan 23.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20423-rusija-afrika-kako-je-moskva-izbacila-francuze-burkina-faso-mali/>

¹⁵⁹ <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20230519/uzivo-eksplozije-u-lavovu-i-kijevskoj-oblasti-sprecen-napad-ukrajnaca-u-pravcu-soledar-artjomovsk-1155899801.html>

understands that Russia didn't launch the special military operation because it wants an empire, but because it wants to survive. Not because it wanted to, but because it had to. And that's why the rest of the world supports this as part of its self-reliance and bravery. Because it is clear: if Russia survives, the others will survive too. The opposite is of course not an option".¹⁶⁰

Fig 7 | Sputnik Serbia, 19.05.2023

SPUTNIK Srbija

Specijalna operacija u Ukrajini
Sve o specijalnoj vojnoj operaciji Rusije za demilitarizaciju i denacifikaciju Ukrajine.

UŽIVO Eksplozije u Lavovu i Kijevskoj oblasti; sprečen napad Ukrajinaca u pravcu Soledar-Artjomovsk
08:00 19.05.2023

Pratite nas [Telegram](#) [Odysee](#)

U toku je 450. dan specijalne vojne operacije koju Rusija izvodi u Ukrajini. Uzbuna za vazдушnu opasnost i eksplozije širom Ukrajine, između ostalog i u Lavovu i Kijevskoj oblasti. NATO najavio da uskoro usvaja višegodišnji program naoružavanja Ukrajine.

Prvo nova obaveštenja Prvo stara obaveštenja

08:31 19.05.2023
Oborena četiri drona iznad Krima
Ruske snage PVO oborile su četiri drona na severu Krima, saopštio je šef tog regiona Sergej Aksjonov.
Kako je rekao, napad ukrajinskih dronova se dogodio tokom noći, međutim, napad je osuđen i niko nije stradao, a nije načinjena ni materijalna šteta.

08:00 19.05.2023
Ruska vojska obara rakete „hajmars“ /video/
Ruski mediji objavili su snimak kako ruska vojska obara rakete koje ukrajinske snage ispaljuju iz višecevnih raketnih lansera „hajmars“.
Napad ukrajinskih snaga je usledio tokom noći u pravcu Zaporozja.

РИА Новости

Source: <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20230519/uzivo-eksplozije-u-lavovu-i-kijevskoj-oblasti-sprečen-napad-ukrajinaca-u-pravcu-soledar-artjomovsk-1155899801.html>

And further: "It is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield. That's why they are conducting an increasingly aggressive information campaign against us, targeting the younger generation in particular. Let's look at what they are doing to their own people. It all boils down to the destruction of the family, cultural and national identity, the perversion and abuse of children, including paedophilia. All this is declared normal". And finally: "365 days of special military operations are behind us. For us, this only means that we have also come that much closer to a final triumph".¹⁶¹

"In view of the increasingly aggressive propaganda of recent days, America and NATO are not backing away from their plan to attack Russia. This is a dangerous illusion, because the reality on the field is completely different. (...) It is becoming increasingly clear that the collective West is on the brink of defeat and that there is no unity after all. A part of the political and business elite - especially in America - is beginning to doubt the purpose of continuing the war against Russia. There is noticeable concern and, in some cases, fear of further developments."¹⁶² The headlines already make it clear who is on the wrong side: "NATO, Nazism, terrorism and the 14/88 tanks for Ukraine".¹⁶³

In addition to these fundamental questions, the articles on this topic are primarily concerned with "proving" that all Western sanctions cannot harm Russia. The reason: Russia was already prepared for the threat of sanctions in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea.¹⁶⁴ According to this account, the sanctions even have positive aspects for Russia: "We are grateful for the American sanctions because they have boosted the Russian economy"¹⁶⁵ and "Russia's isolation from the international financial system has made the country crisis-resistant".¹⁶⁶ Consequently, inflation remains low, banks are doing well in contrast to the situation in Western countries¹⁶⁷ and gold reserves are soaring.¹⁶⁸ On the other side, however, things are not looking so good: "British defence minister admits: Europe is exhausted over military aid for Ukraine".¹⁶⁹ And: "Unpleasant surprise: inflation in Germany has risen contrary to forecasts".¹⁷⁰

RT Balkan's reporting on **Serbia** is almost exclusively centred on the topic of **Kosovo**.¹⁷¹ This is understandable, because the decades-long Kosovo crisis is Russia's most important lever for exerting influence on Serbia. This is because the Russian (and Chinese) veto in the UN Security Council prevents Kosovo from gaining full independence from Serbia under international law. The main content of the RT Balkan reports is the uncondi-

¹⁶⁰ Verzić, Nikola; The special (military) operation and Vladimir Putin's promise; in RT Balkan 24.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/nikola-vrzic/20611-nikola-vrzic-specijalna-operacija-putin/>

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ljepojević, Siniša; Harmful Illusion of the Leaders of the Collective West; in: RT Balkan 24.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/sinisa-ljepojevic/20599-sinisa-ljepojevic-iluzije-zapad/>

¹⁶³ Pavić, Aleksandar; in: RT Balkan 11.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/aleksandar-pavic/18882-nato-nacizam-terorizam-14-88-tenkova/> Explanation: "88" stands for twice the eighth letter in the alphabet (H) and is a synonym for the Hitler salute in the far-right scene. The number 14 stands for the "Fourteen Words" of the sentence "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children", which is considered a "creed" in right-wing extremist circles. "1488" is a combination of both symbols.

¹⁶⁴ Why are the sanctions not working? The Bank of Russia reports that it has been preparing for "punitive measures" from the West since 2014; in: RT Balkan 31.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25239-rusija-sankcije-banka-sredstva/> and Why the anti-Russian sanctions are not efficient; in: RT Balkan 27.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20994-zasto-antiruske-sankcije-ne-rade/>

¹⁶⁵ RT Balkan 09.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22364-antonov-americke-sankcije/>

¹⁶⁶ RT Balkan 16.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23238-rusija-finansije-stabilnost/>

¹⁶⁷ RT Balkan 23.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24274-rusija-otporna-na-sankcije/>

¹⁶⁸ RT Balkan 22.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24125-rusija-zlato-rezerve/>

¹⁶⁹ RT Balkan 16.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19419-volas-priznao-evropa-iscrpljena-zbog-vojne-pomoci-ukrajini/>

¹⁷⁰ RT Balkan 01.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21377-nemacka-ekonomija-eu-evropska-unija-inflacija/>

¹⁷¹ On the Serbia-Kosovo problem, see the author's article in: Das Parlament, 15.05.2023: https://epaper.das-parlament.de/2023/20_21/index.html#7

tional support of the Serbian position and often even an aid to argumentation for Belgrade vis-à-vis the West, which has been searching in vain for a solution or at least a compromise for decades. The Kosovo problem serves RT Balkan as an instrument to position Serbia against the EU, the USA and NATO.

Serbia is advised to reject all Western mediation efforts in order to gain time. Reference is made to the Russian ambassador to Serbia, who said that “the Kosovo issue will be resolved under different geopolitical conditions. These will arise after the end of the conflict between the collective West and Russia. In the conflict between the West and Russia, Russia will certainly win and then a new, multipolar international order will be established in which the West will no longer play a decisive role”. The ambassador’s advice should be followed, as this is the only way Serbia has a chance of keeping its secessionist former province of Kosovo within its state.¹⁷²

The EU and the USA are repeatedly accused of wanting to “pull Serbia over the barrel” when it comes to Kosovo. “The core of the Western swindle” is one of the typical headlines.¹⁷³ Or “Threats have become the best offer the West has for Serbia”¹⁷⁴ and “The day we met our enemies”.¹⁷⁵ Germany comes off particularly badly in this alleged anti-Serbian front. “How the Germans went to war against Serbia for the third time in a century” is the title of an outright reckoning with Serbia’s most important partner today: “The Germans are angry with Serbia: the Serbs contributed to Germany’s defeat in two world wars” and “The founding of Yugoslavia was a direct consequence of Germany’s capitulation”, it is claimed. The Germans would “position themselves so resolutely and radically in the case of Kosovo”, it continues. The bombing of Serbia by NATO in 1999 was only possible because Germany had pushed for this decision of the allies.¹⁷⁶ There are regular reminders of these 78 days of NATO bombing.¹⁷⁷ Obviously, the aim is to make Serbia realise where its supposed real enemies are to be found. Finally, it is claimed that Berlin is once again forging a pact with Tokyo in preparation for war, as it did before the Second World War (the three-power pact between Germany, Japan and Italy): “Germany and Japan again” is the headline for the visit of Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and numerous ministers to Japan in March 2023, which “contributes to fear and the potential breath of war”.¹⁷⁸

In Serbia-Kosovo reporting, Belgrade regularly receives psychological support from RT Balkan. In connection with the first independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1804, the portal writes: “The fight for freedom continues to this day”.¹⁷⁹ Elsewhere, Serbian Labour Minister Nikola Selaković is quoted favourably: “The Serbs have always chosen the right side in all wars”.¹⁸⁰ It is not difficult to recognise that such statements are aimed directly at the Russian ally in two world wars. This alleged historical bond, which very few in Serbia dispute,¹⁸¹ is of course promoted by RT Balkan to the best of its ability: “The Russians have protected Serbia since 1806: From medical military aid to freedom and independence”.¹⁸² The claim that Russians heroically supported Serbia in the fight against NATO in 1999 is also not very historical: “They felt the injustice and came immediately: Russian volunteers defended Serbia in 1999 as if it were their own homeland”.¹⁸³ To further strengthen these commonalities, Serbia is encouraged to promote the Cyrillic alphabet. With regard to Russia, this is also an attempt to strengthen the common ground between the two states through the written language.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, there are warnings that the Serbian language is becoming more and more dominated by foreign terms.¹⁸⁵ The Russian state media speaks of Serbian as “our language”. This is intended to emphasise once again the convergence of interests between Russia and Serbia.

Another central point in this complex of issues is the warnings about the West’s alleged evil intentions (“They betrayed us in 1999 and are betraying us today”¹⁸⁶), which wants to “foist” a solution on Serbia in the Kosovo issue.¹⁸⁷ The West is pursuing a “new tactic” with the aim of causing Serbia to abandon its principles.¹⁸⁸ The new EU mediation plan is nothing more than “a trick of the West”.¹⁸⁹ By supporting Kosovo’s independence, it had the sole aim of advancing NATO’s “expansionist strategy”. “The aim of the aggression was to take Kosovo away from Serbia as part of NATO’s global strategy of expansion to the east.” And here, too, the hope that Serbia would regain its lost former province – as part of the new world order sought by Russia.¹⁹⁰ For this reason, new pressure on Serbia from the West must be withstood.¹⁹¹

- ¹⁷² Verzić, Nikola; Sowing confusion and gaining time; in: RT Balkan 06.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/nikola-vrzic/21678-nikola-vrzic-sejanje-sumnje-kupovina-vremena/>
- ¹⁷³ Pavlović, Branko; Where will the Community of Serb Municipalities be located; in: RT Balkan 27.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/branko-pavlovic/20925-branko-pavlovic-zso-kosovo-pregovori/>
- ¹⁷⁴ RT Balkan 17.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/nikola-vrzic/23406-nikola-vrzic-bastina-doktrina/>
- ¹⁷⁵ RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/nikola-vrzic/24411-nikola-vrzic-24-mart-nato-bombardovanje/>
- ¹⁷⁶ RT Balkan 28.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/miroslav-stojanovic/24903-miroslav-stojanovic-srbija-nemacka-treci-rat/>
- ¹⁷⁷ Z.B. RT Balkan 24.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24266-avram-izrael-godisnjica-nato-bombardovanje/>
- ¹⁷⁸ RT Balkan 22.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/miroslav-stojanovic/24107-miroslav-stojanovic-nemacka-japan/>
- ¹⁷⁹ RT Balkan 14.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19170-1804-po%C4%8Detak-srpske-revolucije-prvi-srpski-ustanak/>
- ¹⁸⁰ RT Balkan 07.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22129-selakovic-srbi-uvek-birali-pravu-stranu/>
- ¹⁸¹ Komarčević, Dušan; Has Russia really always stood by Serbia?; in: Radio Free Europe 25.04.2022: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-saveznistvo/31818687.html> and Four facts about Serbian-Russian relations: Has Russia always been a friend?; in: Danas 08.03.2023: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/demostat-da-li-nam-je-rusija-uvek-bila-prijatelj/>
- ¹⁸² RT Balkan 28.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24743-rusi-%D1%81uvali-srbiju-medicinska-vojna-pomoc-sloboda-nezavisnost-dobrovoljci/>
- ¹⁸³ RT Balkan 27.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/24690-rusi-dobrovoljci-u-srbiji-rt-balkan-istrazivanje/>
- ¹⁸⁴ Ilić, Sanja; Cyrillic between hibernation and exile; in: RT Balkan 21.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20144-cirilica-medjunarodni-dan-maternjeg-jezika/>
- ¹⁸⁵ Uzelac, Nataša; Foreign words in our language - necessity or danger?; in: RT Balkan 02.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21424-strane-reci-u-nasem-jeziku-%D0%BEpasnost/>
- ¹⁸⁶ RT Balkan 04.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/aleksandar-pavic/21786-aleksandar-pavic-varali-su-1999-varaju-i-danas/>
- ¹⁸⁷ Kostić, Teodora; RT Balkan analysis point by point: How the EU is foisting the recognition of “Kosovo” on Serbia; in: RT Balkan 02.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21355-francusko-nemacki-predlog-analiza/>
- ¹⁸⁸ Baisić, Darja; RT Balkan analyses the Ohrid Agreement: The West has a new tactic for Serbia; in: RT Balkan 21.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/23987-kosovo-i-metohija-beograd-pristina-ohrid/>
- ¹⁸⁹ Kostić, Teodora; RT Balkan analyses: Point 4 of the European plan - a trick of the West; in: RT Balkan 06.03.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21952-mapa-puata-savet-bezbednosti-un/>
- ¹⁹⁰ Vuković, Ana; in: RT Balkan 17.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19454-petnaest-godina-kosovske-nezavisnosti/>
- ¹⁹¹ RT Balkan 29.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25075-zapadno-balkanska-cetvorka-osnivanje-kosovo/>

Within the scope of this limited study, not all **RT Balkan narratives** can be presented in detail. Some will be briefly outlined here. One narrative focuses on the **demonisation of the USA**. “The real reasons why the US acted against Serbia were the same as everywhere else in the world – in the Middle East, Africa or Latin America. The USA is striving for world domination and is not picky about the means to achieve this goal”.¹⁹² Washington does not even stop at its allies: “Bomber Biden: How the US and Ukraine are attacking Russia and the EU and mining NATO”.¹⁹³ This is only understandable because “the USA is the most belligerent power in world history”.¹⁹⁴

A second focus is on **supporting disagreements and disputes between the Western allies**. Hungary is used as a recurring means to this end. For example, Hungary rejects an EU embargo on Russian uranium: “We must not allow EU sanctions to affect the Russian nuclear sector,” head of government Viktor Orban is quoted as saying.¹⁹⁵ RT Balkan has Orban warning that the West is close to sending troops to Ukraine¹⁹⁶ or predicting that a world war is imminent.¹⁹⁷ The Russian media outlet also quotes Oliver Varhelyi, the EU Enlargement Commissioner from Hungary, with obvious satisfaction that Serbia’s refusal to impose sanctions against Russia in line with EU foreign policy is no reason to freeze accession negotiations.¹⁹⁸ And this against the background that Brussels has been demanding these sanctions from Belgrade and threatening punitive measures since the beginning of the Russian aggression.

The **Serbian Orthodox Church** also plays an important role in RT Balkan’s world view. It is claimed that the West denies the existence of this church in the neighbouring state of Montenegro: “From denial of identity to denial of existence” is the headline of a typical article.¹⁹⁹ In turn, there are protests that Russian clergy are being persecuted in Ukraine: “These barbaric persecutions” have “elements of Nazism”.²⁰⁰

Finally, the reporting supports Serbian nationalism in neighbouring countries. This applies above all to their compatriots in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The relevant articles “prove” that the Serbian half of the country has no future within this state and should therefore secede and unite with Serbia.²⁰¹ The Muslims, who make up a small majority of the population (Serbs make up a third), are accused of spreading “Serb hatred” and “inciting armed conflict”.²⁰² RT Balkan is also regularly active in the neighbouring country of Montenegro with its strong Serbian minority and supports this minority in its fight against the supporters of independence.²⁰³ The Serbian language is once again seen as a means of asserting Serbian aspirations beyond its own borders: “It is clear that the only scientifically justified name for the standard language spoken today in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia is the Serbian language”. It is repeatedly claimed that the Serbian language is being stifled in neighbouring countries because “they are colonies of the contemporary imperial movement, where subordination to Western interests is called sovereignty and freedom, and sincere cooperation and dialogue with the Serbian people is called betrayal or support for Greater Serbian imperialism”.²⁰⁴

¹⁹² Nad, Boris; 15 years of phantom state; in RT Balkan 17.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19569-kosovo-nezavisnost-sad/>

¹⁹³ RT Balkan 23.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/igor-mekina/20474-igor-mekina-bajden-bombas/>

¹⁹⁴ RT Balkan 30.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25064-rat-istorija-sjedinenjih-dr%C5%BEava/>

¹⁹⁵ RT Balkan 22.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/20278-sjarto-ne-smemo-dozvoliti-da-sankcije-rusiji-uticu-na-ruski-nuklearni-sektor/>

¹⁹⁶ RT Balkan 10.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22544-orban-zapad-vojnici-ukrajina/>

¹⁹⁷ RT Balkan 10.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/22480-orban-nikad-bliži-svetskom-ratu/>

¹⁹⁸ RT Balkan 14.02.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/19212-varhelji-neuskkladjena-spoljna-politika-nije-kriterijum-za-prekid-pregovora/>

¹⁹⁹ RT Balkan 03.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/21663-kako-zapad-preuredjuje-spc/>

²⁰⁰ RT Balkan 15.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/diogenis-valavanidis/23065-diogenis-valavanidis-progon-pravoslavna-crkva-ukrajina/>

²⁰¹ Stepić, Milomir; Republika Srpska and the reason for the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina; in RT Balkan 09.03.2023:

<https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/milomir-stepic/22380-milomir-stepic-republika-srpska-bih/>

²⁰² Kostić, Teodora; Why is the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina spreading hatred of Serbs and why is it calling for armed conflict?; in: RT Balkan 07.03.2013:

<https://lat.rt.rs/news/22076-islamska-zajednica-bih-srbi/>

²⁰³ RT Balkan 29.03.2023.: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/25092-milo-djukanovic-srbi-kao-rusi/>

²⁰⁴ Miličević, Miloš; The boundaries of the Serbian language; in: RT Balkan 04.02.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/opinion/milos-milicevic/17981-milos-milicevic-srpski-jezik-deklaracija-trsic/>

6. Reception of these narratives in the Serbian media

The adoption of the Russian narrative described above can be seen on a massive scale on the front pages of the media. In order not to let the documentation get out of hand, six newspapers were singled out that attract the most attention among the population due to their large circulations: "Alo!", "Informer", "Večernje Novosti", "Pečat", "Politika" and "Srpski telegraf".

Right at the start of the Russian attack, the Serbian media cheer that Putin will take Kiev within a day in a "Blitzkrieg":²⁰⁵

Fig. 8 | Alo!, 25.02.2022



Source: Newspaper Alo!, 25.02.2022

Fig. 9 | Večernje Novosti, 25.02.2022

It is also clear from the beginning who is responsible for the war: "The Russian strike is the answer to the NATO threat", says "Večernje Novosti".



Source: Newspaper Večernje Novosti, 25.02.2022

Fig. 10 | Informer, 22.02.2022

And the "Informer" headlines clearly:
"Ukraine has attacked Russia".



Source: Newspaper Informer, 22.02.2022

Fig. 11 | Informer, 16.01.2023

According to this "logic", for every massacre for which Russia is blamed internationally, the claim is made: "The Ukrainians murdered 28 of their own civilians". At the same time, on the basis of reported nationalist attacks against Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo, Serbia's alleged role as a victim is emphasised: "Fascists are hunting down Serbs and Europe remains silent and watches".



Source: Newspaper Informer, 16.01.2023

Fig. 12 | Informer, 07.10.2022

According to the Serbian media, however, the West is not only showing a passivity worthy of criticism, but is actively working against Serbia. "The EU's dirty war against Serbia":²⁰⁶



Source: Newspaper Informer, 07.10.2022

Fig. 13 | Informer, 18.10.2022

Because the "EU wants to destroy Serbia":²⁰⁷



Source: Newspaper Informer, 18.10.2022

²⁰⁶ From 07.10.2022.

²⁰⁷ From 18.10.2022.

Fig. 14 | Informer, 14.02.2022

The USA and Great Britain in particular are portrayed as warmongers: "We are threatened by a catastrophe. The Americans and the British want war at any price".²⁰⁸



Source: Newspaper Informer, 14.02.2022

Fig. 15 | Večernje Novosti, 22.12.2022

Germany often stands in the pillory even more than these two countries: "Berlin reveals its cards: Kurti's terror with Germany's permission".²⁰⁹



Source: Newspaper Večernje Novosti, 22.12.2022

²⁰⁸ From 14.02.2022.

²⁰⁹ From 22.12.2022.

Fig. 16 | Večernje Novosti, 29.01.2023

The bashing of Germany often relies on historical references: "Analysis by Novosti: They invoke democracy, but are heirs to Hitler?"²¹⁰



Source: Newspaper Večernje Novosti, 29.01.2023

Fig. 17 | Večernje Novosti, 28.04.2023

And this narrative appears again and again on the front pages: "Overthrow of the president. NATO strikes Vučić via (domestic political, T.B.) loudspeakers".²¹¹



Source: Newspaper Večernje Novosti, 28.04.2023

²¹⁰ From 29.01.2023.

²¹¹ From 28.04.2023.

Fig. 18 | Srpski telegraf, 25.03.2023

One of the most important enemy images is NATO. On the anniversary of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, “the darkest secret” is revealed: “NATO wanted to poison 700,000 citizens of Belgrade”.²¹²



Source: Newspaper Srpski telegraf, 25.03.2023

Fig. 19 | Srpski telegraf, 04.07.2022

“Shock turnaround in the West. Americans and British admit: Putin has won the war”²¹³



Source: Newspaper Srpski telegraf, 04.07.2022

²¹² From 25.03.2023.

²¹³ From 04.07.2022.

Fig. 20 | Večernje Novosti, 26.02.2023

Against this background, it is only logical that "Putin's popularity is growing despite the war".²¹⁴



Source: Newspaper Večernje Novosti, 26.02.2023

Fig. 21 | Pečat, 07.10.2022

Putin is celebrated as the architect of a new world order. "Putin: The collapse of Western hegemony is irreversible".²¹⁵



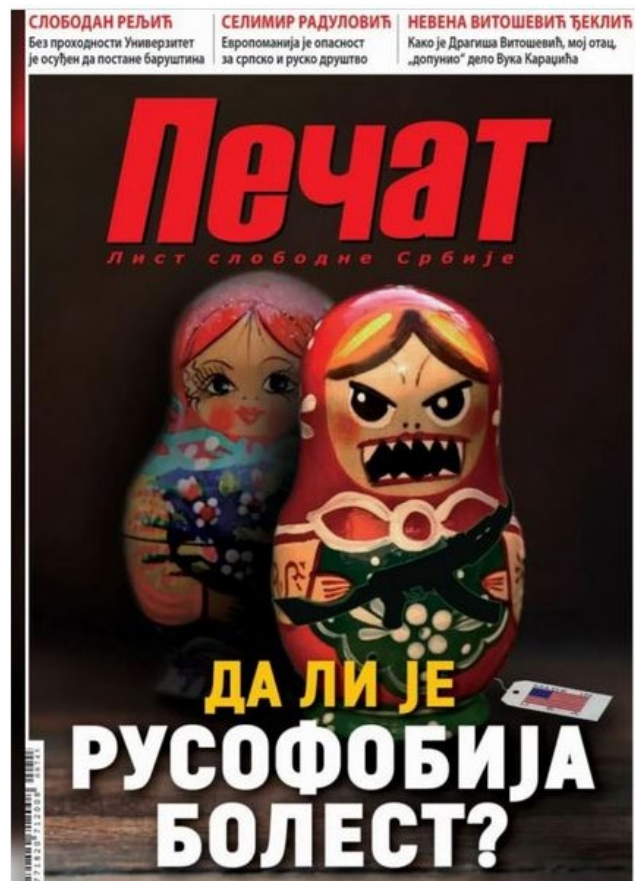
Source: Newspaper Pečat, 07.10.2022

²¹⁴ From 26.02.2023.

²¹⁵ From 07.10.2022.

Fig. 22 | Pečat, 13.01.2023

The West is therefore completely wrong to fear the Russian president's imperial ambitions: "Is Russophobia a disease?"²¹⁶



Source: Newspaper Pečat, 13.01.2023

7. Impact of Russian narratives in Serbian media texts

The propagandistic daily content of Russian state media is widely reflected in the political texts of Serbian newspapers and portals. A selection of topics that are often contrived and implausible at first glance:

- *Without Russian energy, Europe will slide into the Middle Ages*²¹⁹
- *"Vučić prevented the Third World War?"*²²⁰
- *"Serbia is uniting with Russia"*²²¹
- *"The West has nothing left to send to Kiev"*²²²
- *"Russia's task is to protect the Russian people"*²²³
- *"All masks have fallen: After Napoleon and Hitler, they're going after Russia again"*²²⁴
- *"Almost all European countries are supporters of Satanism"*²²⁵
- *"Orban: Normal people with normal views are not in favour of remaining in the EU"*²²⁶
- *"Americans are experimenting with HIV infections on Ukrainian soldiers"*²²⁷
- *"Europe, a sad outcome awaits you"*²²⁸
- *"Half the world is against the isolation of Russia"*²²⁹
- *"What ordinary Russians blame on the West"*²³⁰
- *"Slovaks sign petition in favour of leaving NATO"*²³¹
- *"America will lose regardless of how the war ends"*²³²
- *"Zelensky is a bloody circus artist and a comedian from banal sitcoms and reality shows in the truest sense of the word"*²³³

- *"Zakharova to RT Balkan: Beyond the political conjuncture, we will not stop supporting the Serbian people"*²³⁴
- *"Dodik: You can't believe the EU, we are cooperating with China"*²³⁵
- *"Total collapse is approaching: Putin is preparing the final blow against Europe"*²³⁶
- *"Poland is openly preparing for a major war with Russia"*²³⁷
- *Glorification of the Wagner group*²³⁸
- *"The Germans are falsifying history: We conquered Stalingrad, the Russians awaited us as liberators"*²³⁹
- *"Ukrainian army buried"*²⁴⁰

Numerous Serbian media report on the war in detail, meticulously and one-sidedly from the Russian perspective, such as the newspaper "Informer".²⁴¹

If you look at these highlights over a longer period of time, a clear picture emerges: "The dominance of pro-Russian narratives". After analysing 4,000 media texts from the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine until July last year alone, the Serbian analysis portal "Raskrikavanje" identified a clear preponderance of pro-Russian, anti-Western content and texts against Ukraine.²⁴² This is not a new development. As early as 2019, the independent Serbian portal "Talas" pointed out: "What is particularly striking to any observer is the presence of Russia in the Serbian daily press, its glorification

²¹⁹ Novosti 12.09.2022: <https://www.novosti.rs/ekonomija/vesti/1153407/forbs-nedostatku-gasa-bez-ruskog-plavog-energenta-evropa-skliznuti-srednji-vek>

²²⁰ Fact check portal Raskrikavanje 12.01.2023: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Vucic-sprecio-Treci-svetski-rat-Propaganda-1130>

²²¹ <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Srbija-se-pripaja-Rusiji-odlucila-ruska-Duma-Ne-1119>

²²² Pečat 22.01.2023 based on RT Balkan: <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2023/01/zapad-nema-vise-sta-da-posalje-kijevu/>

²²³ Novosti 25.01.2023: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1195411/putin-stavio-potpis-novi-ukaz-zadatak-rusije-ocuva-ruski-narod> It calls for the protection of values such as the traditional Christian family against gay marriages, the preservation of the language, emphasising national history and the fight against "the spread of lies about Russia's historical backwardness".

These are all values that have been adopted one-to-one from the foreign policy strategy as manifested in the "Serbian World".

²²⁴ Commentary by Sputnik editor-in-chief Milinčić in Webtribune 28.01.2023: <https://webtribune.rs/sve-maske-pale-za-noc-posle-napoleona-i-hitlera-opet-krecu-na-rusiju/>

²²⁵ Webtribune 28.01.2023: <https://webtribune.rs/kadrov-maske-su-pale-skoro-sve-evropske-zemlje-su-pristalice-satanizma/>

²²⁶ RT Balkan – covered by numerous Serbian media – 30.01.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/17253-madjarska-orban-evropska-unija-rusija-ukrajina/>

²²⁷ From RIA Novosti via Tanjug on 30.01.2023 covered by numerous Serbian media such as B92:

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=01&dd=30&nav_category=78&nav_id=2281882

Politika: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/534952/hiv-eksperimenti-ukrajina> Webtribune:

<https://webtribune.rs/general-kirilov-amerikanci-vrse-eksperimente-sa-hiv-infekcijom-nad-ukrajinskim-vojnima/>

²²⁸ Sputnik 11.02.2023, covered by B92: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=02&dd=11&nav_category=78&nav_id=2287718

²²⁹ Politika 13.02.2023: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/537489/minhenska-konferencija-svet-rusija>

²³⁰ Politika 15.02.2023, citing Russian sources, brings 19 points in which Russia's aversion to the West is formulated or "proven":

<https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/537801/amerika-uvrede-rusija-steriotipi>

²³¹ Pravda 27.05.2023: <https://www.pravda.rs/lat/2023/2/16/slovaci-potpisuju-peticiju-za-izlazak-iz-nato-vlast-optuzila-demonstrante-da-su-huskaci-na-mir-ovo-ni-orvel-ne-bi-smislio/>

²³² RT Balkan 26.02.2023, covered e.g. by Novosti: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1208227/amerika-izgubiti-bez-obzira-kako-rat-bude-zavrrio-taker-karlson-saopstio-sad-sada-ratuju-protiv-rusije-protiv-kine> or Webtribune: <https://webtribune.rs/taker-karlson-sad-ce-izgubiti-kako-god-da-se-zavrsi-sukob-u-ukrajini/>

²³³ Vučić, Milorad in Pečat 24.02.2023: <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2023/02/petnaest-godina-pecata/>

²³⁴ RT Balkan 23.03.2023, covered e.g. by Politika: <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/544328/zaharova-marija-rusija-srbija-podrska> and Novosti:

<https://www.novosti.rs/c/planeta/svet/1218920/marija-zaharova-rusija-moskva-srbija> and the portal Chronograf:

<https://hronograf.net/2023/03/23/zaharova-necemo-odustati-od-podrske-srpskom-narodu-to-nam-je-u-krvi-bombardovanje-srj-vecna-sramota-nato-a/> and Informer:

<https://informer.rs/planeta/vesti/780561/ukrajina-rat-zaharova-uranijum-rusija-srbija-bombardovanje>

²³⁵ RT Balkan 08.04.2023, covered by Pečat: <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2023/04/dodik-eu-se-ne-moze-verovati-saradnjivacemo-sa-kinom/>

²³⁶ B92 covers Sputnik on 02.04.2023: <https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet/blizi-se-totalni-kolaps-putin-spremio-konacan-udarac-za-evropu-2312178>

²³⁷ Russian sources covered e.g. by Webtribune 27.03.2023: <https://webtribune.rs/poljska-se-otvoreno-sprema-za-veliki-rat-sa-rusijom/> Similarly, Politika 07.09.2022:

<https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/516315/Poljska-pocela-da-se-sprema-za-verovatni-rat-sa-Rusijom> and Alo! 16.04.2023: <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/ukrajina/748171/rat-u-ukrajini-poljska-vest>

²³⁸ Novosti 30.04.2023 based on Russian reports: <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1233208/rat-ukrajini-ukrajina-rat-ruska-armija-ukrajinska-vojska>

²³⁹ RT Balkan 10.05.2023: <https://lat.rt.rs/news/30386-prepisivanje-istorije-nemacka-rusija-drugi-svetski-rat-staljingradska-bitka/> covered e.g. by Webtribune:

<https://webtribune.rs/nemci-laziraju-istoriju-osvojili-smo-staljingrad-rusi-su-nas-docekali-kao-oslobodioce/> and the portal Iskra (Spark):

<https://iskra.co/svet/nemci-laziraju-istoriju-osvojili-smo-staljingrad-rusi-su-nas-docekali-kao-oslobodioce/>

²⁴⁰ based on RT Balkan 27.05.2023: "Bahmut became the biggest trap in the history of war, in which Russian Supreme Commander Vladimir Putin buried the Ukrainian army":

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=05&dd=27&nav_category=78&nav_id=2340609

²⁴¹ e.g. on 19.05.2023: <https://informer.rs/planeta/vesti/795082/ukrajina-rat-rusija-stanje-front-uzivo-blog-bahmut-ofanziva>

²⁴² <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Analiza-4-000-tekstova-domacih-medija-o-ratu-u-Ukrajini-Dominacija-proruskog-narativa-1097> see also: Danas 31.10.2022:

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/raskrikavanje-analiziralo-4-000-tekstova-domacih-medija-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-dominacija-proruskog-narativa/>

and the simultaneous demonisation of the West.²⁴³ This tendency is also clear when it comes to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.²⁴⁴ In the first 150 days of this war alone, a broad study identified over 1,500 cases of media disinformation, not only in Serbia but also in its neighbouring countries. The particularly clear fake news was the justification of the Russian invasion by blaming Ukraine and the West; the "glorification of Russia and fabrication of support"; the discrediting of the Ukrainian president; the denial of Russian war crimes for which Ukraine is held responsible; "lying reports upon lying reports"; linking the invasion to widespread conspiracy theory narratives and warning of negative consequences of European sanctions for these countries.²⁴⁵

The independent private "International and Security Affairs Centre" (ISAC) also took a close look at the media landscapes of Serbia and its neighbours at the beginning of the war. It found that the main narrative of the Serbian media was that the Russian attack was a response to the NATO threat. The EU is "shooting itself in the foot" with the sanctions against Russia. Serbia must never introduce sanctions against Russia because, alongside China, it is "our only friend in the international political and economic arena". In North Macedonia, this analysis revealed the following picture: the existence of American laboratories for the development of biological weapons in Ukraine. Equating the US intervention in Serbia/Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq with the Russian attack on Ukraine. Similar tendencies were also found in the media coverage in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.²⁴⁶

The Serbian research network "Raskrinkavanje" took a look at media coverage in Serbia in 2022. The front pages of the newspapers Alo!, Informer, Večernje novosti, Kurir and Srpski telegraf, which are considered government megaphones, contained almost 1,200 cases of manipulation and disinformation. Aleksandar Vučić appears 851 times on the front page of these media - and almost always in a positive light. Russia's President Putin appears as the second most frequently mentioned person with 162 mentions. Conclusion: "Manipulation is the guarantor of reach, reach is the

guarantor of earnings".²⁴⁷ Similar results are reported by the journalistic investigation team FakeNews tragač in Novi Sad, Serbia, which regularly publishes a list of the 15 domestic media outlets that contain the most false information.²⁴⁸

One year after the start of the Russian attack on Ukraine, the independent Serbian NGO Demostat²⁴⁹ has analysed the Serbian media on this topic. There is "very strong pro-Putin and anti-Western propaganda", which leads citizens to believe that the Russian aggression is justified and legitimate.²⁵⁰

The International Republican Institute in Washington²⁵¹ has also commissioned media monitoring in Serbia.²⁵² The ratings of various countries and organisations were analysed on the basis of almost 68,000 articles in the period from March to December 2022. Particularly positive mentions of Russia and China were contrasted with particularly negative articles about NATO, the USA, the UK and Germany.²⁵³ This clear orientation of the media had a direct impact on citizens. When asked in a representative survey who was responsible for the war in Ukraine, two thirds answered "The West". Almost 60 per cent of people in Serbia also believed that the West was suffering greater damage from its sanctions against Moscow than Russia.²⁵⁴ As a result, just under half of those surveyed see Russia as their country's preferred political partner in the future and only 30 per cent ascribe this role to the EU. A clear majority of over 56 per cent do not expect Serbia to join the EU in the future. All Western countries are viewed very negatively, while Russia, China, Belarus and EU member Hungary are viewed very favourably.²⁵⁵

The negative attitude of the population towards the EU, despite its paramount importance for Serbia, is also due to media reports. "The EU and Serbia's accession are not important topics for the central information programmes of domestic TV stations" according to a study by the independent Serbian NGO BIRODI for 2021. The EU and Serbia's possible accession only take 13th place in the ranking of topics: "Here is the answer to the question of what information citizens have about EU accession. They have none at all".²⁵⁶

243 Velebit, Vuk; Prussian narratives in Serbian media 20.05.2019, Part one: <https://talas.rs/2019/05/20/pro-ruski-narativ-prvi-deo/> and Part two: <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/> and Part three: <https://talas.rs/2019/05/24/pro-ruski-narativ-treci-deo/>

244 Ranković, Rade; Fake news about Ukraine in Serbian tabloids: In the war with information, truth becomes irrelevant; in: Voice of America 02.03.2022: <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-lazne-vesti-ukrajina-rusija-rat-pandemija/6466774.html> and Marković, Tomislav; The original of the counterfeit: Russian lies and Serbian parables; in: Aljazeera 13.05.2022: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/13/original-falsifikata-ruska-laza-i-srpska-paralaza>

245 Association of fact checkers in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Slovenia Seecheck, July 2022:

<https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/Globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-i-preko-1.500-dezinformacija-u-regionu.pdf>

246 ISAC 22.11.2022: <https://www.isac-fund.org/en/news/regional-analysis-of-narrative-kremlin-and-pro-kremlin-false-narratives-regarding-the-ukraine-war-in-the-western-balkans>

247 Vučić, Marija and Ljubičić, Milica in Raskrinkavanje 31.03.2023:

<https://www.raskrinkavanje.rs/page.php?id=Na-naslovnica-pet-novina-skoro-1-200-manipulacija-i-dezinformacija-prosle-godine-1161>

248 <https://fakenews.rs/category/fake-news/>

249 <https://demostat.rs/sr>

250 <https://startbih.ba/clanak/demostat-i-dalje-jak-proruski-narativ-u-srbiji/206277>

251 <https://www.iri.org/about-iri/>

252 Rašeta, Dragoslav; Milić, Dimitrije; Mladenović, Miljan; Radnić, Lana; Kostić, Mijat; The war in Ukraine and public opinion in Serbia; Belgrade 2023:

<https://novitreciput.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Rat-u-Ukrajini-i-javno-mnjenje-u-Srbiji-godisnji-pregled.pdf>

253 Ibid. S. 5-8

254 Ibid., p. 16

255 Ibid., p. 16-21

256 Medak, Vladimir; The EU and Serbia's accession to the EU are not a topic in the central information programmes in Serbia:

<https://www.birodi.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TEKST-Medjak-1.pdf>

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why Serbia dropped twelve places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom ranking in 2022 compared to the previous year. The country now only ranks 91st out of 180 countries.²⁵⁷ The “Bertelsmann Transformation Index” (BTI) categorises the central Balkan country as a “defective democracy” and the “Governance Index” is only “moderate”.²⁵⁸

The disastrous media landscape in Serbia is also one of the key issues for Vučić’s critics. Following two mass shootings that left 18 people dead, tens of thousands of citizens have taken to the streets in Belgrade and other cities every week

since May 2023, demanding the dismissal of all members of the electronic supervisory authority REM because they enable censorship and control of the media by the political elite and remain silent about all abuses of media freedoms. Finally, the protesters want the TV stations Pink and Happy to lose their broadcasting licences because they are powerful propaganda tools and make violence in the public sphere appear normal. The entire management of the state television (RTS) must also resign because it has degenerated into a propaganda tool of the political elite and silences every critical voice by refusing to allow opposition figures to appear on the programme.²⁵⁹

8. Cornerstones of a new Strategy for the Western Balkans

The concept of unconditional cooperation with so-called stabilocrats, which had been pursued for decades, proved to be a serious mistake. This refers to cooperation with autocratic leaders such as Slobodan Milošević, Aleksandar Vučić (Serbia), Bakir Izetbegović, Dragan Čović (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Edi Rama (Albania), Nikola Gruevski (North Macedonia) or Milo Djukanović (Montenegro). Only such leaders of a clientelist political system were believed to be strong enough to push their countries in the desired direction of reform, democratisation and compromise.

In return, all the dramatic domestic offences committed by these politicians were generously overlooked: The massive media censorship, the gagging of the judiciary, the politicisation of the authorities down to the smallest local unit, the obstruction and even elimination of the opposition and the rampant corruption, including the misuse of EU funds. This approach has been a resounding failure. This is because the concept has not helped any of the countries in the region in terms of the values pursued by Brussels, such as human rights, separation of powers, market economy and fair political competition. On the contrary. Although the stabilocrats were courted by the West, they did not fulfil the hopes of Western capitals: Neither have the national conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina been pacified and thus a functioning state made possible, nor has the Serbia-Kosovo conflict been defused, let alone brought closer to a solution, despite massive mediation by the EU.²⁶⁰ Instead, new crises are constantly being created, such as the recent alert of the Serbian army due to riots

in Kosovo.²⁶¹ These are then “pacified” again by the stabilocrats who created the instability. In this way, the West can once again be fooled into believing how important these instigators and peacekeepers in one person are.

What’s more, Putin’s patronage system, which is based on oligarchs close to him, the secret service, the political instrumentalisation and penetration of the state and state-affiliated economy, the control of the judiciary and the control of the media, has been plagiarised and perfected in Serbia (and in neighbouring countries). President Vučić is the all-determining politician in Serbia, who has placed his henchmen in the centres of power. In return, they guarantee him unconditional loyalty. As a reward, they are allowed to conduct private business unmolested by the law and the public. In the few cases in which these shady dealings and clear violations of the law by the political elite are uncovered, a compliant judiciary ensures that the wrongdoers are protected. The cases in which judges and public prosecutors act on political instructions or fail to intervene are almost beyond counting. In return, the henchmen ensure the financing of the ruling political elite by diverting funds from the companies entrusted to them.

By fuelling nationalism, the region’s leading politicians have succeeded for decades in distracting attention from their inability to alleviate the economic and social misery of broad sections of the population. In order to conceal their own missteps, they preach an alleged national emergency. Because of the alleged evil intentions of neighbouring countries, the EU

²⁵⁷ https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Downloads/Ranglisten/Rangliste_2023/RSF_Rangliste_der_Pressefreiheit_2023.pdf

²⁵⁸ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-dashboard/SRB>

²⁵⁹ Danas 27.05.2023: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ruta-i-zahtevi-cetvrtog-po-redu-protesta-srbija-protiv-nasilja/> and the coverage of the fourth major demonstration in Belgrade on 27.05.2023: <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/sta-znamo-o-protestu-koji-je-doneo-jos-jednu-veliku-pobedu-kisa-i-rezimiska-propaganda-nisu-zaustavili-bes-gradjana/> and Radosavljević, Radmila; Who is Nenad Hađi Maričić, the actor who read out the demands of the assembled citizens at the ‘Serbia against violence’ protest alongside RTS; in: Danas 30.05.2023: <https://www.danas.rs/kultura/ko-je-nenad-hadzi-maricic-biografija-protest-srbija-protiv-nasilja-zahtevi/>

²⁶⁰ On the latest crisis in northern Kosovo at the end of May, see the front pages of newspapers such as “Kurir” (“Scary scenes from Kosovo. KFOR violently disperses citizens”), “Informer” (“KFOR and Albanians attack Serbs”) or “Novosti” (“Blood was flowing in northern Kosovo”), all on 30 May 2023. See also the author’s analysis “Koordinatensystem der Kosovo-Krise – Warum alle bisherigen Lösungsversuche erfolglos waren” (“Coordinate system of the Kosovo crisis - Why all previous attempts at a solution have been unsuccessful”), in: Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 02/2023, p. 61-73

²⁶¹ End of May 2023. For background information, see for example N1: “What does the increase in the army’s combat readiness ordered by Vučić mean?": <https://n1info.rs/vesti/sta-znaci-podizanje-borbene-gotovosti-vojske-koju-je-naredio-vucic/> and Danas: “Why did riots break out in northern Kosovo?": <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/zasto-je-doslo-do-nemira-na-severu-kosova-i-po-cemu-se-severna-mitrovica-razlikuje-od-ostalih-opstina/>

and the USA, they gather large sections of their population around them in populist rallies. The alleged national enemy is often also seen in international organisations such as NATO.

On the other hand, the question arises as to where the emotional attachment to Russia comes from, even though almost nobody has ever visited Russia or has relatives or even friends there. Visits on behalf of Serbian companies or institutions are also the exception rather than the rule. The historical “evidence” (war allies, language) is not sufficient as an explanation, because younger generations have no personal experience (even in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and Russia’s role in them). Nor does a look at history provide any evidence that Russia has always stood on Serbia’s side, as is claimed today like a standing phrase.²⁶² Despite everything, we see in Serbia “not only Russophilia, but already Russopathy”, as the Belgrade political science professor Ivo Visković has analysed.²⁶³

Only the parental home and school serve as an explanation for the development of this national psychological predisposition. The curricula lay the foundation and are significantly influenced by domestic science. However, the relevant academic disciplines with the academies at the top are “hopelessly outdated” compared to international standards, says Berlin Slavic studies professor, Christian Voß: they are “nationalistic echo chambers of gerontocratic academic elites”.²⁶⁴ However, the introduction of “national textbooks” for history, geography and language is intended to reinforce the promotion of the right national mindset in schools.²⁶⁵

The political elite is focussing on an “in-between policy”, on political manoeuvring between the two poles of “West” and “Russia” or “China”. Politics thus emphasises its own importance and rejects all attempts to submit to the ideological value system of one side or the other. The claimed balance between West and East serves top politicians to consolidate their own position and pursue their own interests unchallenged in this state of limbo with the help of corruption and nepotism. As private respect as well as professional and private ties to the West already exist in the real world (through “guest workers”, trade, investments, donations, knowledge transfer and cooperation in culture and science), the connection to Russia/China must be artificially created - on the basis of historical narratives such as “war” and “culture”. The decisive component for this construct is the media, which are almost completely under the control of the elites and report in their favour. The media, instrumentalised by politics, are therefore **the** amplifier of Russophile mental constructs.

How is it even possible that the majority of the print media in Serbia are hitting the newsstands every day with bombastic headlines and texts (not to mention the TV programmes of the national broadcasters), whereby even superficial logic should make it clear that most of these “sensations” are fictitious and have nothing whatsoever to do with reality? Why don’t readers turn their backs on these media, which are often convicted of lying again and again the very next day? Why aren’t circulation and viewing ratings falling? “The answer is simple - thanks to patient and lengthy preparation and continuous repetition of the same or similar scenarios. (...) Part of the media audience has begun to equate information with the pop music they listen to. And that means that they don’t check whether it’s the truth, but judge whether it sounds good, whether it meets their expectations and whether it suits their ‘taste,’” analyses Dragan Janjić, editor-in-chief of the private news agency Beta, who died at the end of 2020.²⁶⁶

This unfortunate role of the media was also evident in the preparations for the Yugoslavian 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), politicians succeeded in turning people against each other with the help of “their” media.

In the summer of 2020, renowned historians from the former Yugoslavia formulated the “Defend history” declaration, which has since been signed by almost 1,000 prominent figures from all successor states.²⁶⁷ It calls on the ministries of science to “financially support joint scientific projects between neighbouring countries to come to terms with history and current politics, i.e. research projects, symposia and publications. As the countries in the region all have very limited resources at their disposal, Washington and Brussels should initiate such collaborations and make them financially possible (1). At the same time, the intellectuals are calling on the ministries of education “not to turn the teaching of history into a subject whose sole aim is to build national identity and spread hatred.” In concrete terms, this means support for the development of new curricula and teacher training (2). Even though the EU already supports youth exchanges in Southeast Europe, modelled on the Franco-German Youth Office, funding should be drastically increased. This is because it is clear that young people cling to nationalistic stereotypes that could be overcome through personal encounters (3).

²⁶² Komarčević, Dušan; Did Russia really always stand by Serbia?; in: Radio Free Europe 25.04.2022: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-saveznistvo/31818687.html> and Danas 08.03.2023: “Has Russia always been our friend?": <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/demostat-da-li-nam-je-rusija-uvek-bila-prijatelj/>

²⁶³ <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/317895/Viskovic-U-Srbiji-se-nije-pojavila-samo-rusofilija-vec-rusopatofilija.html>

²⁶⁴ Voß, Christian; Der bulgarisch-mazedonische Streit um historische und sprachliche Identität (The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute over historical and linguistic identity), in: Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 06/2020, S. 51-62

²⁶⁵ “Opinions on national textbooks are divided”, in Euronews 05.02.2023: <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/76629/stavovi-o-nacionalnim-udzbenicima-podeljeni-sta-su-ko-bi-ih-koristio-da-li-se-ucenje-iz-njih-ocenjuje-i-kada-startuju/ve>st and Ćirić, Sonja; “National textbooks: Will the state be able to write the truth?”, in: Vreme 12.08.2022: <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/nacionalni-udzbenici-da-li-ce-drzava-umeti-da-napise-istinu/>

²⁶⁶ The Serbian political scene and Russian influence; in: Demostat 19.07.2019: <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/analize/srpska-politicka-scena-i-ruski-uticaj/709>

²⁶⁷ Text of the declaration here in English: <https://kojoprivopceo.rs/defend-history/>

Since a promising approach to reform and modernisation in the Balkan countries can only be achieved through young people, their media skills must be strongly promoted. Studies show that only a few young people are able to distinguish opinions from facts, which is of course also a major problem in Western countries such as Germany when using social media. When sources of information are reduced to social media, nationalist and populist narratives can be reinforced. The sheer mass of posts (often multiplied by trolls) often convinces young people that these are truths and not subjective perspectives or, very often, untruths. In concrete terms, school and extracurricular education programmes must therefore be set up that contribute to greater knowledge about the function and dangers of media in the digital age (4).

As it has been shown what a central role the Serbian media play in creating and consolidating the political mood in the country, reactions/countermeasures must also start here. As one of the most important conditions for Serbia's further rapprochement with Brussels, the EU must combat the entanglement of practically all important media with politics. The political embrace of the media must be stopped. Although Serbia, in cooperation with the EU Commission, has written numerous welcomed laws and regulations aimed at limiting and reducing political influence, these plans are either not being implemented or they are only being applied formally, but contrary to their actual purpose, as demonstrated, for example, by Serbia's completely party-politically dominated supervisory authority for electronic media REM (5).

Making ownership transparent is a *conditio sine qua non*. In many cases, it is not clear who owns even the most prominent media and, above all, with what financial resources they were acquired, as was also shown in this study (6). The "project financing" of media through public funds must also be closely examined so that not only government-compliant reporting is honoured and critical newspapers, broadcasters and portals are financially cut off (7).

The most important thing, however, is the training of (young) journalists. It is increasingly being neglected - the reasons for this are open to speculation. The industry itself complains that there are fewer and fewer well-trained journalists because that is not what is wanted. This is because journalism is being reduced by politicians to the function of transmitting predetermined content. Independent action by journalists in the sense of providing information and comprehensive clarification/explanation with a regard to users is perceived as disruptive by political leaders. The education of journalists must once again focus on the basics of the trade, i.e. training on specific texts as well as TV and radio programmes must be seen as the rule (8).

This is precisely where the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom has stepped in. It has financed two textbooks aimed at Serbian and Croatian journalists.²⁶⁸ Numerous reviews - some of which have been eulogistic - show that they have filled a gap that had previously been largely ignored. Based on the Croatia textbook, two workshops were organised in Zagreb, which were also met with enthusiasm by the participants.

Finally, a journalistically sound and up-to-date reaction to obvious propaganda in Serbian media could promise success in correcting public opinion. One model is the aforementioned EU task force against disinformation, which, however, only tracks down cases of propaganda with a time lag and concentrates on Eastern Europe. An analogue, but more timely regular media criticism in Serbia (and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro) would also have to identify (Russian) propaganda here and present it on the Internet in the national languages. It should be discussed whether, in a further step, the propagandistic narratives should be corrected 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 effort and, above all, the number of journalists involved would be very manageable (9).

As the EU is by far Serbia's largest investor and trade and financial partner, a balance would have to be struck between the immense EU money transfers and the implementation of reforms that have already been agreed in principle, such as the independence of the judiciary and, above all, freedom of the media. Even within the EU, the examples of Poland and Hungary show how this could be achieved. What works here, at least under the threat of funding cuts, should actually work much better for accession candidates (10).

Russia is brilliantly playing the keyboard of soft power tools, as the Kremlin understands them, in order to conquer the hearts of the Serbs. If this influence is to be counteracted, this "game" must be turned around as quickly as possible and the EU must be associated with positive emotions, positive prospects for the future and the promise of mental equality with other Europeans. Otherwise, despite all the fact-checks, the Western Balkan policy risks fizzling out without any major effects

²⁶⁸ Brey, Thomas; Qualitätsjournalismus in Südosteuropa. Ein Lehr- und Übungsbuch (Quality journalism in Southeast Europe. A text and exercise book), Belgrade 2021 (in Serbian): <https://www.freiheit.org/sr/western-balkans/kvalitetno-novinarstvo-u-jugoistocnoj-evropi> and Brey, Thomas; Qualitätsjournalismus in Südosteuropa: Schwerpunkt Kroatien (Quality journalism in Southeast Europe. Focus on Croatia); Zagreb: Školska Knjiga 2022 in Croatian and German language: https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/kvalitetno-novinarstvo_de_seiten-001-009.pdf

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