

Briefing Paper V:

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE IN MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

The fifth briefing paper covers Russian, Chinese, Turkish, the Gulf States', and Iranian influence in media and elections aiming at shaping public opinion and creation of a more accommodating environment to achieve own goals.

Preceding briefing papers:

- **The Briefing Paper I “East vs. West”** provides the historical and geo-strategic context of the project – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper II** focuses on Russian, Chinese, Turkish and the Gulf States' influence and activities in the political arena of the Western Balkan countries – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper III** maps influence in the economic and financial sphere, especially the main dependencies and activities undermining rule-based market competition – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper IV** covers influence in the cultural, academic and religious spheres, areas most often associated with the notion of soft power in international relations - [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).



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Introduction

Media plays a crucial role in forming our views and beliefs on a personal and a societal level. Aside from our family, friends, or colleagues, it is a major source of information which shapes our understanding of the world. The information is, however, always mediated—by someone, for someone, some reason, or goal—and thus never neutral. Even in a democratic society, the media can easily become a tool of manipulation. It can be used by the government and other actors to promote a positive image of themselves or send certain messages to the public by influencing what is covered, how, and when. In particular, the media can greatly affect the electoral processes and shape voters behaviour.

The overall influence of the media has increased over the years with the proliferation of the internet, the emergence of social media, and more professional media marketing and commercialisation. According to Diana Owen, the “new media have radically altered the way that government institutions operate, the way that political leaders communicate, the manner in which elections are contested...”¹ Although the internet has made our access to information almost unlimited, it has increased rather than decreased the “echo chambers” effect. This is because even with abundant information, people naturally select their news and sources based on their affinity to certain world views, and tend to enclose themselves in like-minded circles.

The media is often criticised for reinforcing existing stereotypes and increasing the polarisation of a society. It has a huge potential to mobilise society and often plays a vital role in spreading hate, distrust and negative images of the others during conflicts. The media played a crucial role during the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, when the media-disseminated war propaganda was a very effective channel for warmongering.

Despite the post-war Western investments into the democratisation of the media, much of the media scene has remained ethnically and politically divided and biased. Despite the absence of a language barrier between Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats and Montenegrins, the consumption of media content is divided largely along ethnic lines. In multinational democracies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ethnic segmentation of the media space is

¹ Diana Owen, “The New Media’s Role in Politics,” In *The Age of Perplexity. Rethinking The World we knew*. Madrid: BBVA, 2017.



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a source of instability, internal tensions, and weakening of internal cohesion. For example, Bosnian Serbs are more likely to follow Serbian television than the Bosnian state one. Furthermore, the recently enhanced political crisis has brought on another wave of radicalisation of the local media. Also, the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation, which often capitalizes on existing cleavages, has come to light.

The ethnic and political tensions increase the potential for external influence, which is mostly achieved indirectly, and at minimal cost. Local mainstream media often use content provided by foreign news agencies and political elites effectively spread positive images of their Russian, Turkish, or Chinese counterparts, and praise non-Western investments. Russia and Turkey, in particular, have exploited the internal social, and ethnic, divisions to increase their influence over the media and elections in all the analysed countries. Their activities stand out when compared to other non-Western external actors, whose influence remain limited or non-existent. One notable exception is the Qatari government-owned Al Jazeera Balkans, which entered the region in 2011 and became a well-established media house in the Western Balkans.

Russia

Among all the analysed Western Balkan countries, Russia has the most effective influence on the local media. As a result of the specificity of the Balkan media scene, which is often ethnically and politically divided, one prevailing trend can be traced across the WB countries: Russia relies on the local media that are supporting and promoting pro-Russian oriented news without the need to inject financial investment heavily.

Over the past year, there has been a lot of attention put to Russian-spread fake news and disinformation campaigns with the Balkan region being no exception. Certainly, the threat of disinformation must be taken seriously, especially in the sensitive post-conflict societies where it has significant potential to exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions. However, it is often difficult to trace direct Russian involvement in these activities and in many cases the initiative comes from the local actors rather than being inflicted from outside.

Russia relies greatly on the mainstream media controlled by the local ruling parties especially in Serbia and in Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS). Their



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media keep close ties and use the content provided by Russian media present in the region. With its Balkan branch launched in 2015 in Belgrade, Russian-operated news agency Sputnik has become Russia's leading media apparatus in the Western Balkans. It produces a lot of free content, and press agencies and media outlets in the Balkans often without verification republish its content in local languages. Thanks to the multi-media services provided to all interested media, Sputnik is able to expand its impact on other media considerably.

Close ties between some Balkan and Russian political elites also play an important role in promoting a positive image of Russia in the local media, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia. The local political actors and interest groups take advantage of anti-Western tendencies and pro-Russian sentiment during election campaigns, or when resolving internal issues. They often promote Russia in contrast to the West, when pursuing their own (political) interest and therefore make Russian influence more effective.

Russia has relied on its political and business links also in its involvement in the election processes by providing rhetorical and media support to certain candidates and parties. Although it has been accused of more direct meddling in the elections, in particular by alleged involvement in the attempted coup before Montenegrin elections in 2016, or more generally by disinformation campaigns and establishing fake accounts on social networks, such claims are hard to verify and in most cases have not been confirmed.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

For such a relatively small country, Bosnia and Herzegovina has a quite large and diverse media scene. In 2014 BiH's Press Council registered that eight daily newspapers, 189 weekly or monthly newspapers and magazines, 142 radio stations, 43 television stations, and eight news agencies operate in the country. In addition, there are dozens of news and other web portals. Most of these media organisations, aside from the three state broadcasting services (BHRT at the state level, RTVF in the Federation entity and RTRS in Republika Srpska (RS)) and few more media organisations, are in private hands.²

² Vijeće za štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, accessed November 18, 2018, <https://www.vzs.ba/>.



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Ever since the 1990s conflict, US and EU have invested heavily into overhauling and democratisation of local media organisations, which worked for several years until the deepening political crisis in recent years brought another radicalisation of the local media. As a result, and unlike the rest of the region, there were very few foreign investments into Bosnian media, most of which until today remain owned and controlled by local political or other interest groups/individuals. However, it has not made foreign influences voiceless. Pro-Russian narratives are mostly spread by the local media in RS which often republish content of the Russian media.

“The main Russian state media with significant influence also in BiH is Belgrade-based Sputnik,” reported Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*.³ Furthermore, “as long as Russia can fully rely on RS’s main public broadcaster RTRS, and as long as most of the other RS media are openly pro-Russian, Russia does not need to waste its finances on opening additional local media organisations,” a Western diplomat argues.⁴ During the latest visit to Russia in May this year, even Dodik himself complained to media about the lack of presence of Russian media in RS and openly invited Russia to establish electronic media in RS just as Russia did in Serbia.⁵

As for its involvement in the election processes and results in BiH, Russia has in recent years relied on its political links with Dodik to increase and maintain its presence and influence in BiH, as the latest October general elections have confirmed. The Russian involvement mainly focused on its support to Dodik and his party, the Alliance of Independent Social democrats (SNSD), which was clearly showed through regular meetings and diplomatic events between Russian officials and Dodik, who also managed to secure meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin shortly ahead of the last three elections: 2014 and 2018 general and 2016 local elections.⁶ Most recently, Dodik met Putin in Sochi on

³ “Dimne zavjese analitičara Sputnika Sarajevo,” *Oslobodjenje*, November 16, 2018, accessed November 18, 2018, <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/dimne-zavjese-analiticara-sputnika-408791>.

⁴ Interview with a BiH-based Western diplomat, September 2018.

⁵ “Dodik pozvao ruske medije da pojačaju svoj utjecaj u BiH,” *Vecernji List*, May 25, 2018, accessed November 18, 2018, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/dodik-pozvao-ruske-medije-da-pojacaju-svoj-utjecaj-u-bih-1247859>.

⁶ “Dodik to Meet Putin Ahead of Bosnia Elections,” *Balkan Insight*, September 28, 2018, accessed November 2018, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-serb-leader-will-meet-vladimir-putin-again-09-26-2018>



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September 28, only a week ahead of the October elections.⁷ Furthermore, some local analyst and officials also complained that the recent visit of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, on September 21, was also Russian “brazen interference in the election process in BiH”.⁸

While some media and experts also suggested that Russia was involved in other ways in BiH elections, such as through the creation of a large number accounts on social networks that became active ahead of BiH's elections,⁹ there were no independent officials or instances that were able to confirm and verify such claims.

Kosovo

Russia's toolkit consisting of fake news and a pro-Russian, anti-Western and anti-EU propaganda has taken its toll in Kosovo. Russia's attempts to subvert Kosovo's statehood are not only bound to Russian foreign policy but also include soft power mechanisms, i.e. propaganda through media. In recent years, Kosovo has experienced intensive media propaganda and fake news activities by Russian-owned media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today. Russian-owned media is produced in the Serbian language (e.g. R Magazin, Nova Srpska Politicka Misao, or Radio and TV Sputnik), with an aim to target the Serbian community living mostly in Northern Kosovo.¹⁰ The purpose behind this form of propaganda is to spread fake news in order to shape public opinion and create a distorted reality of in-country developments that negatively affect the perception of Kosovo among the Serbian and international community.

As in the other Western Balkan countries, Sputnik is leading Russia's media agency that produces content that is being republished by local media outlets, including those in Kosovo

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Pećanac: Posjeta Lavrova u jeku kampanje flagrantno miješanje u izborni proces u BiH,” *Sarajevo daily Avaz*, September 21, 2018, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/416327/pecanac-posjeta-lavrova-u-jeku-kampanje-flagrantno-mijesanje-u-izborni-proces-u-bih>.

⁹ “Eko sistem Ruske propagande,” *Oslobodjenje*, August 22, 2018, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/eko-sistem-ruske-propagande-387299>.

¹⁰ Kosovar Centre for Security Studies: “Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why,” September 2017, accessed November 19, 2018, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Russian_interference_in_Kosovo_finale_2_735070.pdf.



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and uses it as a tool to spread Russian propaganda and anti-Western narratives.¹¹ Enver Robelli, a renowned Kosovar journalist, has warned against the growing trend of citing Sputnik or Kremlin's television RT, arguing that Kosovo media outlets should apply stricter criteria when selecting sources of information for broadcasting news¹². Despite this, the Albanian community in Kosovo remains pro-EU and is very much Western-oriented. However, problems arise if the Albanian community falls prey to Russian-backed news, spread via Kosovar newspapers and portals which republish fake news.

The type of propaganda that such Russian-based media outlets spread have the potential to exacerbate inter-ethnic conflict in Kosovo. For instance, one story on Sputnik's Serbian-language website argued that ethnic Serbs in Kosovo should "sleep with one eye open" because of the threat from Albanian extremists. Another article reported on Russian deminers working in Serbia under the headline: "NATO bombs us, Russia clears".¹³ Furthermore, a news article claimed that prior to President Aleksandar Vučić's visit to Laplje Selo, near Gračanica, six Albanians had been arrested and the Police confiscated weapons and ammunition when, according to Kosovo Police, no such action had ever taken place.¹⁴ It appears that such news mainly seek to inflict fear among the Serbian community and make them feel insecure, in this way preventing them from further involvement and participation in Kosovo's multiethnic community. Generally, the Serbs face challenges in accessing local media in Kosovo due to language barriers. Therefore, the Serbian community in Kosovo relies on the Serbian media as the primary source of information. This, in turn, provides a new ground for Russian engagement and enables it to influence the media landscape among the Serbs¹⁵, especially when considering that Russia is positively perceived by the majority of

¹¹ House of Lords, "The UK and the future of the Western Balkans," Committee on International Relations, January 10, 2018, p. 24. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/53/53.pdf>.

¹² Robelli, Enver, "The new plague of the 21st century," *Koha*, March 22, 2018, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.koha.net/veshtrime/82425/murtaja-e-re-e-shekullit-21/>.

¹³ Robinson, Matt, "On Serbian airwaves, a battle for heart of Balkans," *Reuters*, May 03, 2017, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-russia-media-analysis/on-serbian-airwaves-a-battle-for-heart-of-balkans-idUSKBN17Z0X1>.

¹⁴ "Serbian and Russian media publish fake news on alleged arrests as Serbian President visits Kosovo," *Gazeta Express*, January 20, 2018, accessed November 22, 2018, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/en/news/serbian-and-russian-media-publish-fake-news-on-alleged-arrests-as-serbian-president-visits-kosovo-173482/>

¹⁵ Burazer, Nikola, "Global instability strengthens Russian influence in the Balkans," *Kosovo 2.0*, December 07, 2016, accessed November 23, <http://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/global-instability-strengthens-russian-influence-balkans/>.



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the Serbian community.¹⁶ Furthermore, ties between political parties from the Serbian community and the political party United Russia are consistently developing. That was best seen after the last elections held in Kosovo in June 2017, whereby Russia's ruling party, United Russia, strongly supported the decision of Srpska Lista to enter the Kosovo government.¹⁷

Kosovo's institutions have neither enacted policies or taken concrete actions to prevent Russian influence and any subversive challenges Russia poses to Kosovo; nor is there sufficient awareness of Russian interests in the region. Moreover, Kosovo's government has not been able to create and finance an independent Serbian media in Kosovo, and the influence of Radio Television of Kosovo Serbian channels requires further attention.¹⁸

Macedonia

Russia has been by far the most present non-Western country concerning media influence and especially election influence in Macedonia, even though there is no favourable terrain for extensive media influence. One vital barrier is language: the study of the Russian language is very rarely offered by primary or high school institutions in Macedonia and classes offered by foreign-language schools or Russian centre are unlikely to offset the absence of Russian in formal education. Thus, Russian media is less likely to get through to a Macedonian audience directly, even though the Russian national television RTR Planeta is offered by most cable TV operators in the country. The language barrier might apply to the influence of the Kremlin-owned RT as well, which does not have Balkan offshoot and is offered only in English-language version.

However, there is one notable exception to the absence of Macedonian-language, pro-Russian content in the Macedonian media space. The web portal Russia Beyond the

¹⁶ Zejneli-Loxha, Amra, "Northern Serbs keep their hopes on Russia and Putin," *Radio Free Europe*, October 07, 2017, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/serbet-e-veriut-shpresta-te-rusia-e-putini/28779367.html>.

¹⁷ Zivanovic, Maja, "Russia Backs Serb Party Joining Kosovo Govt," *Balkan Insight*, September 14, 2017, accessed November 23, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-s-united-russia-supports-kosovo-serb-party-09-14-2017>.

¹⁸ "Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why," *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*, September 2017, accessed November 20, 2018, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Russian_interference_in_Kosovo_finale_2_735070.pdf.



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Headlines (RBTH), which is a spinoff of the Russian pro-government newspaper, Rossiiskaya Gazeta,¹⁹ runs a Macedonian-language version, which, among others, reports news on Macedonian and Russian cultural activities in Macedonia. Other famous Russian media outlets are absent in Macedonia. One notable example is Sputnik, which has been successfully operating in other WB countries. Macedonia also lacks pro-Russian publications being published occasionally as part of bigger newspapers or magazines, as is the case in Serbia.²⁰

Russia's involvement in Macedonian elections is even stronger, although even here the evidence is not always conclusive. The difficulty in demonstrating with certainty that anti-Western and pro-Russian forces in the country are directly linked to the Kremlin is illustrated in Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's rhetoric. In July 2018, two months before Macedonia's crucial name referendum, he alleged that "[some Russian representatives] are connected with media [and] encourage the young people to protest in front of the Parliament, to attack policemen, that kind of things. It's very obvious."²¹ Yet, two months later, he exercised restraint and stated that he had "no evidence of Russian influence."²²

The most dramatic form of Russian influence over the referendum vote, but also the one that has been the most difficult to link explicitly to the Kremlin, was payment of 300,000 EUR to Macedonian hooligans by a Russian-Greek businessman with links to the Russian government, Ivan Savidis, to stage anti-Zaev protests and cause unrest in the run-up to the referendum.²³

¹⁹ Dimitar Bechev, "Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe," New Haven: Yale University (2017): 131

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Macedonia Suspects a Greek-Russian Billionaire Paid For Violent Protests To Prevent It From Joining NATO," Buzz Feed, July 18, 2018, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/macedonia-russia-nato>.

²² "Заев: Немам докази за руско влијание во Македонија," *Nova Makedonija*, September 17, 2018, accessed November 12, 2018,

<https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BC->

²³ "U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote," *New York Times*, September 16, 2018, last accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/us/politics/russia-macedonia-greece.html>.



Furthermore, Sputnik launched an extensive disinformation campaign before the referendum,²⁴ which nonetheless had limited success as it was conducted in English. Sputnik and other (pro-) Russian media spreading false information about the name deal between Macedonia and Greece largely used Facebook, as opposed to Twitter, due to the higher usage of this social network among Macedonians.

Aside from the referendum, Russia has been providing support to Macedonia's non-parliamentary party United Macedonia, whose name bears an uncanny resemblance to the Kremlin's United Russia. Party leader Janko Bachev, who advocates for Macedonia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, boasted of having undergone training with leading political technologists in Moscow intended to help his party win power in Macedonia.²⁵ Another non-parliamentary party, Levica (The Left), which allied itself with United Macedonia in their opposition to the referendum, is less pro-Russian, but certainly pro-Soviet in its romanticisation of the Communist era.²⁶ Last but not least, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has long surpassed standard diplomatic convention in its press releases on Macedonia. After the September referendum,²⁷ and during Macedonia's political crisis from 2015 until 2017,²⁸ the Ministry issued a number of press releases in explicit support of the discredited former ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, and in explicit opposition to Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Montenegro

Ever since Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the number of pro-Russian media outlets in Montenegro has been on the rise. The trend continued in the second half of 2015,

²⁴ "ElectionWatch: Sputnik Misleading in Macedonia," *Medium*, September 22, 2018, last accessed November 13, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfirlab/electionwatch-sputnik-misleading-in-macedonia-bc8294aeebe2>.

²⁵ "Партијата на Јанко Бачев: Успешно ја минавме руската обука и подготвени сме за преземање на власта," *Fokus*, May 31, 2018, last accessed November 14, 2018, <https://fokus.mk/partijata-na-janko-bachev-uspeshno-ja-minavme-ruskata-obuka-i-podgotveni-sme-za-prezemane-na-vlasta/>.

²⁶ "Работничката класа во Октомври," *Lenka*, October 27, 2018.

²⁷ "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the results of Macedonia's referendum," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, October 1, 2018, last accessed November 15, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3363368.

²⁸ "Russia blames the U.S. after protesters storm Macedonia's parliament," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2017, last accessed November 15, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/28/russia-blames-the-u-s-after-protesters-storm-macedonias-parliament/?utm_term=.ea113ca083d5.



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when the anti-EU and anti-NATO opposition party, the Democratic Front, held protests against that time Đukanović government that favoured both alliances. This did not stop until the general elections in October 2016, which were marked by a coup attempt targeting Đukanović himself. The organizers intended to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO and to bring the pro-Russian Democratic Front into power.²⁹ This was, at the same time, the best example of direct Russian meddling in the election process in Montenegro.

There exist a plethora of pro-Russian media outlets in Montenegro whose primary goal is to disseminate Moscow's agenda and pro-Russian sentiments without financial support coming from Russia. It is quite telling that those are largely run by locals, journalists or representatives of pro-Russian organisations, who oppose both NATO membership and EU accession process. Nevertheless, analysts are divided on the issue. Some argue that Russian media is feeding Montenegrin outlets with information through channels like Sputnik that broadcasts in the Serbian language, while others claim that this is a purely local response, reflecting their dissatisfaction with the current political setup.

The pro-Russian media in Montenegro can be divided into three groups: online media, printed media and radio. The state-backed Russian outlets seated in Belgrade with contributors from Podgorica, such as Sputnik agency, NewsFront online and Russia Beyond website, strongly echo in Montenegro and are used as legitimate and objective sources of information that does not match the real role of this media outlet – pro-Russian propaganda. At least five new websites with pro-Russian agendas were launched in Podgorica in 2017³⁰, the latest being Ujedinjenje (Unification). It joined the newcomers Sedmica (Week), Princip (Principle), Nova Rijec (New Word) and Magazin (Magazine), in addition to the well-established and very popular IN4S. According to the Montenegrin Ministry of Culture, 15 printed media in the Russian language have been registered in Montenegro since 2006. There is also the Russkoye Radio (Russian radio station) that broadcasts in Montenegro. These outlets target not only those who promote the Kremlin political line and support the opposition parties but also the Russian diaspora in the country.

²⁹ "Pro-Russian Montenegrins Publish New Anti-Western Media," *Balkan Insight*, October 18, 2017, accessed November 9, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/pro-russian-montenegrins-publish-new-anti-western-media-10-17-2017>.

³⁰ Ibid.



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It also needs to be underlined that most of these outlets are active on social media, especially on VKontakte, the Russian version of Facebook, which is used by the majority of Russian citizens. Social media serves as one of the platforms for disseminating state-backed propaganda as the content from Sputnik and Russia Beyond is republished on an almost daily basis by the mainstream Serbian and Montenegrin media.³¹

Besides the strong presence of pro-Russian media, Russian interference in the political life of Montenegro could also be seen throughout the country's NATO accession, ranging from diplomatic protests to a pro-Russian boycott of ratification for Montenegrin membership in NATO within the Montenegrin parliament. The most visible meddling of Russia was the attempted coup during the last parliamentary elections in 2016, co-orchestrated with the pro-Russian opposition party, the Democratic Front.³² Đukanović accused Moscow of financing the opposition parties during the election campaign "through its oligarchs and funnelled through secret channels through Serbia and Republika Srpska".³³ Both Russia and the opposition parties denied any connection with intervening in the election campaign and Montenegro's anti-NATO campaign. However, the Democratic Front leaders regularly visit Moscow and meet highly positioned people, for instance, the Deputy Secretary of the United Russia General Council Sergei Zheleznyak or the Director General of Roscosmos Dmitry Rogozin.³⁴ This shows that Russia has been effective in influencing the highest political elites in the country as well as making use of media to amplify its role in Montenegro further and to direct the country's orientation towards the East.

Serbia

Even though the number of internet and social media users is constantly increasing, more than 51 % of citizens older than 15 years are computer illiterate. Therefore, TV and

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Finger Pointed at Russians in Alleged Coup Plot in Montenegro," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/europe/finger-pointed-at-russians-in-alleged-coup-plot-in-montenegro.html>.

³³ "Montenegro PM accuses Russia of financing anti-NATO campaign," *Reuters*, October 13, 2016, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election/montenegro-pm-accuses-russia-of-financing-anti-nato-campaign-idUSKCN12D2QV>.

³⁴ "Russia will continue efforts to destabilize Montenegro," *Euromaidan Press*, July 25, 2017, accessed November 19, 2018, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/07/25/russia-will-continue-efforts-destabilize-montenegro-expert-says/>.



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newspapers still play a major role in shaping the Serbian public, Media in Serbia is under the control of ruling political parties, and the majority lack transparent ownership structure.³⁵ The space for independent media is shrinking, and only government and pro-government media have national coverage.

Serbian public remains uniformly positive towards Russia. The image of Russia is largely in line with pro-Kremlin media³⁶ but also with Serbian pro-regime press. Russia also asserts its influence on Serbian citizens through its soft power tools – by broadcasting media outlets in Serbian. Additionally, there are many successful media platforms - RT, Russia Beyond The Headlines, the website Russia Word or Russian Gazette (Rossiyskaya Gazeta). A 2015 agreement on cultural co-operation between the Belgrade cultural centre “The Russian House” and the Youth Association of Serbia and the establishment of Russian media, as a result, reinforces Russia’s influence in the cultural sphere.³⁷ The Russian media skilfully amplify anti-Western narratives already present in the local media.³⁸ The US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee's Report³⁹ states that Russian propaganda has an impact on the public’s opinion. Since Sputnik’s launch in 2015, Russia’s popularity among Serbs has increased from 47.8 % to 60 % in June 2017.

Thanks to domestic political and intellectual elite, and other interests groups the image of Slavic brotherhood between Serbs and Russians is dominating media coverage of Russia in Serbia, but also in the West. The West nurtures the image of Serbs as “little Russians” due to their shared ethnic and religious heritage, which is, however, a simplified and often misleading black and white picture. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Serbia and Russia are not natural allies and friends. Putin is portrayed in the mainstream media as a great supporter of Serbia against Kosovo’s independence. However, Russia’s interest lay

³⁵ Media that is owned by politicians or members of their families are usually financed by the taxpayers’ money.

³⁶ Such as such as Sputnik and Russia Today and others.

³⁷ “Rusija zapocela projekat: U Srbiji se otvaraju ruske škole i mediji,” *Intermagazin*, October 17, 2015, accessed November 15, 2018, <http://www.intermagazin.rs/rusija-zapocela-projekat-u-srbiji-se-otvaraju-ruske-skole-i-mediji/>.

³⁸ Maxim Samorukov, “Russia’s Tactics in the Western Balkans,” *Carnegie Europe*, November 3, 2017, accessed November 16, 2018, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/74612>.

³⁹ “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,” Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, January 10, 2018, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.



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somewhere else since “over the past years, as the US and the EU are failing to succeed in resolving a lasting solution to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, Russia has changed the role of a prominent Belgrade supporter aside trying to assume the role of a mediator.”⁴⁰

While the official Serbian FP is pro-European, the analysis of pro-government media shows quite the opposite. Serbian politicians glorifying Putin and promoting Russia’s image as a counterweight to the West when pursuing their own interests makes Russian influence more effective. Politicians are overblowing the significance of Russian assistance and capitalise on anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment ahead of the elections or when resolving internal issues.

Politicians also interfere in editing media in order to influence the content related to Russia. “The most drastic example of how Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić interferes with the editing of television diaries is that, at the request of his cabinet, every one of his talks with Putin in Moscow is titled, not synchronised. In this way, he wants to show how well he has learned the Russian language. His speech in the Russian language is broadcast on RTS, Pink, Prva TV and O2,” says anonymous RTS reporter.⁴¹

Serbian pro-regime press,⁴² not only voluntarily disseminate news from Russia’s portals, but also periodically spreads fake news. Stevan Dojčinović, editor-in-chief of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK),⁴³ said that Serbian mainstream media is a bigger danger than Russian outlets. “The majority of fake news comes from the mainstream media and the government. Yes, there is some coming from Russia, but they are second-rate fake news people,” he said.⁴⁴ For example, Serbian daily newspaper Večernje Novosti recently wrote how Vučić would receive the highest Russian decoration – Alexander Nevski. Putin’s

⁴⁰ Dimitar Bechev, “Dilema Kosovo: Za sada su pobjednici Putin i Rusija,” *Al Jazeera Balkans*, November 20, 2018, accessed November 18, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/dilema-kosovo-za-sada-su-pobjednici-putin-i-rusija>.

⁴¹ “Aleksandar Vučić, predsednik novinara Srbije,” *Javno*, February 15, 2018, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://javno.rs/analiza/aleksandar-Vučić-predsednik-novinara-srbije>.

⁴² Such as *Informer*, *Alo*, *Kurir*, *Politika*, *Večernje Novosti*.

⁴³ Crime and Corruption Reporting Network is an independent local investigative outlet.

⁴⁴ Valerie Hopkins, “In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence,” *Politico*, March 30, 2018, accessed November 18, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-bbc-britain-rejoins-battle-for-influence-russia-soft-power/>.



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cabinet denied this and Vučić changed his statement mentioning how it would be an honour for him to receive it.

Moreover, Serbian tabloids are inventing stories about shipping of weapons from Russia.⁴⁵ The disinformation of the public is contributed by the limited access to information and because the Ministry of Defence is keeping information from journalists and the public. This depicts a need to create an image of Russia's strong military presence in Serbia and the support it receives, which the West generally considers to be evidence of active Russian propaganda in the country.

Last but not the least, aside from strong pro-Russian advocacy by the Serbian media, Russia also cherishes from having support from the highest political elite – the President Aleksandar Vučić. A former extreme nationalist who has rebranded himself as a pro-EU reformer, Vučić claims that he wants to lead the country into the EU while also pushing for deeper ties with a longtime ally Russia. During the campaign for presidential elections in 2017, Vučić met both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin while securing the support of the latter. Putin himself said that Vučić is known in Russia as a strong supporter of strengthening friendly relations between the countries, thus fostering mutual relations.

Turkey

Turkish narratives, as put forward by its president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have had a strong presence in the Western Balkan countries, especially in the Muslim-dominated communities. It is facilitated both through the Turkish media outlets, such as Anadolu Agency, and through the local Balkan media that are often very close to the ruling political circles.

Such links are especially visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Federation TV and radio and media outlets such as Faktor or Stav are close to the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, and promote Turkey and Erdogan on a regular basis. Turkey and Erdogan have been presented in positive terms also in the Serbian media in recent years, as the relationship

⁴⁵ "Ekonomski odnosi Srbije sa Rusijom, EU i SAD. Analiza medijskog sadržaja stampanih medija tokom aprila 2018. Godine," *Libek*, June 7, 2018, accessed November 18, 2018.



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between President Erdogan and President Vučić have become close. As for the involvement in local elections, Turkey has considerable influence on the local election processes and results in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, but also in the other Bosniak populated areas of Serbia and Montenegro, namely the Sandžak region. Their influence is mostly exerted through close links between Turkish and local political leaders.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In terms of its media presence in BiH, Turkey relies mostly on its main state news agency, Anadolu, which has established its main regional office in Sarajevo. It broadcasts in local languages and provides free content to other local media, just like what the regional office of the Russian Sputnik agency does from its headquarters in Belgrade. Also, just like Russia and Sputnik, Turkey and Anadolu rely on their popularity and frequent republications in the mainstream Bosniak media, especially those close to the ruling Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, SDA, such as the Federation Radio and TV, Faktor, Stav etc. It enables Turkish narratives to have a strong presence in BiH without the need for large investments.

Similarities between Russian and Turkish involvement also exist when it comes to their influence on the electoral process, whereas Turkey has been supporting the SDA and its current leader Bakir Izetbegović both financially and politically. Erdogan and his AKP party threw their full political and even financial support behind Izetbegović's 2014 bid to become the new leader of the SDA, and then again in the same year when he ran for the Bosniak position on Bosnia's presidency. Izetbegović and SDA returned the favour supporting Erdogan in the controversial 2017 referendum and snap elections in June 2018.⁴⁶ On May 20, 2018, Erdogan staged a showpiece rally in Sarajevo. He appeared there jointly with Izetbegović and other top SDA brass, just in time ahead of the snap elections in Turkey and as pre-election campaigns heated up ahead of the October elections in BiH.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Erdogan Stages Showpiece Election Rally in Bosnian Capital," *Balkan Insight*, May 20, 2018. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/erdogan-sarajevo-rally-is-the-sign-of-his-great-victory-in-coming-elections--05-20-2018>.



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Kosovo

Turkey's influence in Kosovo is largely prevalent in the economic and cultural sphere and less so in the media where local actors dominate. According to the Independent Media Commission (IMC), as of January 2012, out of 21 TV stations and 84 radio stations in Kosovo, only one TV station and radio station broadcast in Turkish.⁴⁸ Turkish-based news outlet Anadolu Agency (AA) publishes in Albanian and it is trying to find its place in the Balkans, but it is less engaged in comparison to the Russia-backed media.⁴⁹ Research on any Turkish interference in the media is insufficient, and there seem to be no direct links to Turkey.

However, Kivilcim Kilic, the Turkish ambassador to Kosovo was involved in an incident aimed at influencing Kosovo's media practices.⁵⁰ A well-known Kosovar journalist, who also is the owner of Gazeta Express, one of the biggest media outlets in Kosovo, jokingly, wrote on Facebook while the coup in Turkey was unfolding: "I invite citizens of the Republic of Kosovo who are on holiday in Turkey to align with the army."⁵¹ The Turkish ambassador condemned the act and urged Kosovo's authorities to take action against him. The remarks sparked a fiery response by Kosovo's authorities and civil society organisations. Enver Robelli, a well-known journalist and contributor for the international media, said that the ambassador should have understood by now that Kosovars are not ready to sacrifice the freedom of the press for the vices of Turkish diplomacy.⁵² Further, he added that ambassador's approach to this issue shows that Turkey sees its political and economic position in Kosovo as so powerful, that it does not hesitate to even deal with 'reviewing' the media.⁵³

⁴⁸ Cohu, "Freedom of Expression, Media and Information, in Kosovo An Assessment Based on Council of Europe Indicators for Media in a Democracy", p.10.

http://cohu.org/repository/docs/Freedom_of_Expression,_Media_and_Information_in_Kosovo_529396.pdf.

⁴⁹ "Russian propaganda battle in the Balkans", Kosova Sot, December 01, 2016, <https://kosova-sot.info/lajme/155173/beteje-propagandistike-ruse-ne-ballkan/>.

⁵⁰ Fazliu, Eraldin, "Signs of strain in Kosovo-Turkey relations", *Kosovo 2.0*, October 19, 2016, <http://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/signs-of-strain-in-kosovo-turkey-relations/>.

⁵¹ Qafmolla, Ervin, "Kosovo Snubs Turkish Demand to Punish Journalist," *Balkan Insight*, July 23, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-top-officials-snub-turkey-s-allegations-on-journalist-07-27-2016>.

⁵² Fazliu, Eraldin, "Signs of strain in Kosovo-Turkey relations," *Kosovo 2.0*, October 19, 2016, <http://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/signs-of-strain-in-kosovo-turkey-relations/>.

⁵³ Ibid.



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In another instance, the same ambassador was accused of involvement in a pro-Erdogan and anti-Gülenist propaganda. During the 2016 coup in Turkey, the ambassador sent to media outlets in Kosovo an e-mail with approximately 21 links of videos on soldiers' attacks on the Parliament, President's Office, Bosphorus bridge etc., but there were no links on Erdogan's maltreatment of the soldiers.⁵⁴ In this way, the embassy in Kosovo served to the media a one-sided story on the developments that were taking place in Turkey at that time, with the purpose of shaping public opinion and perceptions on the coup, and reinforcing the view that Fethullah Gülen movement is to blame for it.

The propaganda against Gülenists continued, peaking with arrests and deportation of six Turkish high school teachers in March 2018. The arrests and deportations attracted intense media coverage, locally and internationally. Kosovo civil society and the majority of the media reacted against the abduction of the six Gülenists. When Prime Minister Haradinaj criticised the acts, he was slammed by President Erdogan who said that Haradinaj would have to "pay" for dismissing the Interior Minister and Intelligence Chief.⁵⁵ Furthermore, as a result of such statements, the pro-Erdogan Turkish newspaper *Yeni Akit*, humiliated Prime Minister Haradinaj by calling him a drunkard, a Prime Minister of scandals and accused him of spending high amounts of money on vacations, among other shameful statements.⁵⁶ Considering the negative reaction of the Kosovar media on the deportations, as well as Prime Minister's condemnation and then negative portrayal on the Turkish media, it seems that there are no traces of any successful Turkish media interference in Kosovo, in this case.

As for the Turkish influence on Kosovar electoral process, the Turkish Democratic Party of Kosovo (TDPK) currently holds two seats in Kosovo's Parliament as the Constitution ensures two reserved seats for the Turkish community, among other non-Albanian communities, which should represent the will and interests of the Turkish community in Kosovo. According to Naddaf, the party strongly supports Erdogan and when he was re-elected, it expressed

⁵⁴ "Turkish Embassy gets involved in pro-Erdogan propaganda," *Gazeta Express*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ambasada-e-turqise-ne-prishtine-perfshihet-ne-propaganden-pro-erdogan-foto-229956/?archive=1>.

⁵⁵ "Turkey's Erdogan Slams Kosovo Criticism Of Deportation Of Gülen-Linked Turks," *Radio Free Europe*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-investigation-arrest-deportation-turkey-teachers-gulen/29137309.html>.

⁵⁶ "Turkish pro-Erdogan media write about Prime Minister Haradinaj," *Ekonomia online*, April 04, 2018, <https://ekonomiaonline.com/politike/mediat-turke-pro-erdoganit-shkruejne-per-kryeministrin-haradinaj/>.



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him congratulations: “Congratulations Turkey; Congratulations Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Congratulations Rumeli.”⁵⁷ The use of the term “Rumeli” was telling as it refers to a region in Southeastern Europe, including the Balkan Peninsula that was under the control of the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years. Erdogan himself has been known to use the term to frame Kosovo, and the Balkans more broadly, as well within Ankara’s sphere of influence.

Macedonia

There are four Turkish-language media outlets in Macedonia, all of them are websites: Zaman Makedonya, Yeni Balkan, and the state-run Anadolu Agency and TRT. All four are highly detailed, regularly updated, and include a domestic section on Macedonia, a section on Turkey and other sections on global affairs. They differ tremendously, however, in their political stances. Zaman Makedonya is fiercely anti-Erdogan, while the state-run Anadolu Agency and TRT provide favourable coverage of the current Turkish government. Yeni Balkan is only available in Turkish, Zaman Makedonya in Turkish, Macedonian, and Albanian, while Anadolu Agency is available in as many as thirteen languages. TRT is also available in Turkish on most cable TV providers in the country.

There are three active Turkish political parties in Macedonia – Türk Demokratik Partisi (TDP), Makedonya Türk Demokratik Partisi Tarihçesi (MTDPT) and Makedonya'da Türklerin Ulusal Birlik Hareketi. TDP has one member of the Parliament (Enes Ibrahim) who is in coalition with the governing party SDSM.⁵⁸ The party appears to have close relations with Ak Parti and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. TDP’s summits are often attended by high Ak Parti officials.⁵⁹ Also MTDPT’s honorary president, Adnan Qahil, who currently serves as the Minister without Portfolio in the Government of Macedonia in charge of foreign investments, seems well-connected with Turkish politicians. Recently, he was photographed with Mr Erdogan aboard the Turkish President’s private jet.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Министерот Кахил во посета на Анкара,” *Makfax*, accessed on August 19, 2018, <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/министерот-за-странски-инвестиции-ад/http://www.msi.gov.mk/?q=node/100>.

⁵⁹ “THP Genel Başkanlığına Enes İbrahim Seçildi,” *Yeni Balkan*, accessed on August 19, 2018, <http://www.yenibalkan.com/gundem/thp-genel-baskanligina-enes-ibrahim-secildi-h11459.html>.

⁶⁰ “Министерот за странски инвестиции, Аднан Кахил, славел историска битка со Ердоган,” *Makfax*, accessed on August 19, <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/министерот-за-странски-инвестиции-ад>.



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There have also been two recent attempts for dramatically scaling up Turkish influence over Macedonian elections, but both seem to have failed, and one has never been definitively proven. The latter refers to the emergence of the Albanian party BESA, which came second among the ethnic Albanian parties in the last parliamentary elections in December 2016. BESA has a strong religious component and has been widely rumoured to be financed directly by the Turkish government, which BESA leaders have persistently denied. The party has meanwhile split into two factions, one of which has joined the ruling coalition and the other has stayed in opposition. The second attempt relates to the increasing references to Macedonia in the rhetoric of Erdogan himself, especially with regards to the name dispute. Given Turkey's strained relations with Greece, Turkey's firm opposition to Macedonia's name change comes as no surprise. Erdogan has stated that "Turkey will never leave its [Macedonian] brothers alone."

Montenegro

Unlike Russian, the Turkish media influence in Montenegro is still marginal. Turkey's influence remains insignificant as Turks constitute as little as 0.02% of the total population⁶¹ and its investments in local media outlets are practically non-existent. There are no Turkish-language TV channels, newspapers or radio stations in the country. However, some of the leading Montenegrin TV channels, such as TV Pink M and TV Prva, do broadcast Turkish and other soap operas, which keep these stations very highly-positioned when it comes to the audience share.⁶²

Politically, Turkey is using the Bosniak and Albanian national communities to implement its policies countrywide. However, as Montenegro allows visa-free travel to Turks, Turkish journalists have been visiting the country, exchanging experiences with the Montenegrin counterparts. To enhance similar interactions and to deepen a bond between the two countries, a group of people from Montenegro and Turkey established the Montenegro-

⁶¹ "Statistical Office of Montenegro," Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011, Population of Montenegro by sex, type of settlement, ethnicity, religion and mother tongue, per municipalities, accessed November 12, 2018, [http://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje\(1\).pdf](http://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf).

⁶² "Weak Regulation Enforcement and Persistence of Media Control," Media Ownership and Financing in Montenegro, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Media-Ownership-and-Finances-in-Montenegro.pdf>.



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Turkey portal in 2012.⁶³ This is a frame for economic, political, educational, cultural and other exchanges on both sides.

As for the Turkish influence on elections, the last general elections in Montenegro that took place on 16 October 2016 were highly overshadowed by the coup, supposedly involving the nationalists from Russia, Serbia and Montenegro. Compared with Russia that was one of the main actors in the event, Turkey's interference around the elections was rather insignificant. Ankara's interventions usually concern populations in Montenegro that are historically, culturally and religiously susceptible to Turkish influence – the Bosniaks and other Muslims in the Sandžak part of Montenegro. The Bosniaks usually find their political/religious orientation aligned with those of the Bosniak Party and Islamic Community, whose leaders sustain close relations with religious and political figures in Turkey. It is interesting that the current Montenegrin government is maintained thanks to two Bosniak representatives who provide the parliamentary majority. At the same time, the Bosniak Party cooperates with AK Party and Erdogan himself has a substantial influence on its leadership.

Serbia

Like other countries and news agencies, Turkey has also launched media outlets in the local languages. Anadolu Agency produces news stories in common language spoken in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia since 2012, Turkish radio television (TRT) also publishes news in the Serbian language.

The Turkish series invaded the Balkan countries and are currently more popular than American soap operas and Latin American telenovelas. Serbian sociologist Ratko Božović says people identify with the patriarchal values of the Turkish shows and enjoy spotting the many cultural and linguistic similarities that they recognise while watching the shows.⁶⁴ Božović said that all Balkan countries had seen dramatic changes regarding family life, and the Turkish shows help them recall value systems that now seem lost.⁶⁵

⁶³ "Portal Crna Gora-Turska," accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.crnagoraturaska.com/>.

⁶⁴ "Turks Bewitch The Balkans With Their Addictive Soaps," *Balkan Insight*, May 1, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turks-bewitch-the-balkans-with-their-addictive-soaps>

⁶⁵ Ibid.



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The Serbian mainstream media portray Turkey as a dear friend to the country even though Turkey recognised Kosovo. The positive image of Turkey is also based on its economic investments throughout Serbia provided through Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency - TIKA. The Serbian media is full of stories that show how Vučić publicly worships Turkish president. Although Sandžak region is sometimes presented in media as a “bridge between Serbia and Turkey”, the main road to the region goes directly through Belgrade. Both Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan promote themselves publicly as leaders of two key countries in the Balkans, whose cooperation is crucial to maintaining stability, peace, and prosperity in the region, and throughout Europe.

As for the Turkish influence in the electoral process, president Erdogan used his political influence in the Sandžak region to mobilise thousands of Bosniaks in support of his candidacy in the elections in Turkey in 2016⁶⁶ and 2018. However, the last election results revealed that Erdogan did not win in Serbia, but his main rival, Muharrem Ince, from the main opposition Republican People’s Party’s, CHP, received 63.6 per cent of total votes cast in Serbia.⁶⁷

Turkey has had a history of interfering in the elections for the leadership of the Bosniak National Council in Serbia. Before the elections for the Bosniak National Council in 2010, the former Turkish Ambassador visited Novi Pazar and stated that Mufti Muamer Zukorlić should stay out of politics, which presented direct meddling in the elections for the national council. This year, Belgrade officials have been accused of interfering in elections for the leadership of the Bosniak National Council by backing the electoral list of former mufti turned politician Muamer Zukorlic.⁶⁸ The election results see power shift because the electoral list of Sulejman Ugljanin, president of the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, has defeated

⁶⁶ “Bosniaks in Serbia hold rally in support of Turkey,” *Anadolu Agency*, August 8, 2018,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/bosniaks-in-serbia-hold-rally-in-support-of-turkey/623505>.

⁶⁷ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Turkish Election Results Reveal Political Divide in Balkans,” *Balkan Insight*, June 25, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/in-pictures-balkan-celebrates-erdogan-election-win-06-25-2018>.

⁶⁸ Filip Rudic, “Belgrade Accused of Meddling in Bosniak Organisation’s Elections,” *Balkan Insight*, October 16, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/belgrade-accused-of-meddling-in-bosniak-council-elections-10-16-2018>.



Belgrade's preferred candidate, Muamer Zukorlić – but has had to enter a coalition in order to keep its grasp over the Bosniak National Council.⁶⁹

Part of the Turkish strategy is to strengthen Sandžak, through direct investments and infrastructure development, as well as the support of local politicians. One of the Serbian daily newspapers Kurir reported that Erdogan pours money into Sandžak and supports the current leader of both the Bosniak National Council and the Party of Democratic Action, Sulejman Ugljanin, who advocates the secession of Raska and has Turkey's support for that, while in turn helps to boost Turkey's influence in the region.⁷⁰ Sulejman Ugljanin is known as a politician who, along with Rasim Ljajić, the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and the Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, implemented the so-called referendum on the autonomy of Sandžak in 1991.

The Islamic community of Serbia and certain political parties in Novi Pazar enable Turkey's indirect influence on the national election results, bearing in mind that Vučić secures the votes from Sandžak during the presidential and parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, Erdogan has strong ties with the leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) Vučić, whom he publicly endorsed during the presidential elections. He also congratulated Vučić on the victory in the presidential elections, saying that “friendly relations and cooperation between two key countries in the Balkans, have made an important contribution to regional prosperity and peace. Visionary leadership and your [Vučić's] personal efforts played a major role in achieving cooperation, solidarity and the spirit of regional partnership, which left a deep trail on our bilateral relations over the past several years.”

China

So far there seems to have been no direct Chinese investments in the local media of the West Balkans, like the kind we have seen for instance in the Czech Republic. Only

⁶⁹ Filip Rudic, “Election Sees Power Shift in Serbia's Bosniak Council,” *Balkan Insight*, November 26, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/power-shifts-after-elections-for-serbia-s-bosniak-institution-11-26-2018>.

⁷⁰ “ERDOGAN DAJE PARE ZA CEPANJE RAŠKE: Turci hoće da pokore Srbiju preko Ugljanina!” *Kurir*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/2038401/erdogan-daje-pare-za-cepanje-raske-turci-hoce-da-pokore-srbiju-preko-ugljanina>.



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cooperative agreements between the Chinese state media and local outlets have been conducted.

There are some China-oriented, and possibly PRC-funded, portals like Kina-Danas (China-Today) in Bosnia Herzegovina (also serving Croatia), or the “Serbia and China” website, symbolically launched on May 7, 2015, on the anniversary of the bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade. These portals have low visibility, and the latter one has not been updated for several years now. There are also occasional visits by local West Balkan journalists in China under the 16+1 framework, with unclear results.

Discourse management, a key part of the CCP United Front tactics, is mostly conducted through the local political elites, usually more than happy to repeat the Chinese “tifa” (talking points), which are then quickly picked up by the mainstream media. For the time being, China is not focusing on active media influence or election meddling, and the paper, therefore, does not report on the individual countries separately except Serbia where Chinese messaging through local political representation is most visible.

Serbia

Serbian President Vučić never fails to boast about his close relationship with Beijing, calling the Chinese Ambassador in Belgrade Li Manchang “my brother Li.” Ambassador Li enjoys huge public profile in Serbia. His famous statement that “China does not recognise Kosovo and as far as Beijing is concerned Kosovo is Serbia - and that it shall remain that way” is embedded in almost every article on China regardless of the actual topic.

Similarly, the relationship with China is universally described in the pro-government press as “steely friendship”, in reference to the Smederevo Steel Plant bought by a Chinese company in 2016. With all the positive rhetoric, it is not surprising that 21 % of respondents surveyed by the Serbian European Integration Office in December 2016 mistakenly believed that China was the largest investor in Serbia while it does not even appear among the top ten investors from 2010 to March 2018.⁷¹

⁷¹ S. Gavrić, “‘Statistička poverljivost’ Medju najvećim investitorima u Srbiju se nalaze firme iz Holandije, Kipra i Luksemburga,” *Blic*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/biznis/privreda-i-finansije/statisticka-poverljivost-medu-najvecim-investitorima-u-srbiju-se-nalaze-firme-iz/rpt0crw>.



The degree of mutual accommodation between Chinese interests and local politicians can be illustrated by former President Tomislav Nikolić who managed to hold onto the presidential villa even after his term of office expired. He claimed the villa on the grounds that in his new capacity of the head of the National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China, he needs an office in physical proximity to the Chinese embassy.

The opposition does not lag far behind. The recent trial in New York of Patrick Ho, head of the non-profit arm of the notorious Chinese company CEFC, revealed that CEFC had been fully funding CIRSD, the think tank of the opposition leader Vuk Jeremić who was also collecting a hefty salary as the company's advisor.

The Gulf States and Iran

Al Jazeera Balkans, the 24/7 international television channel which belongs to the international Al Jazeera network, owned by the Qatar Media Corporation, has established a firm, but not intrusive, presence in the Western Balkans. The arrival of the Al Jazeera Balkans media conglomerate to the region was initially questionable for political reasons, but with time it began to be perceived as an objective broadcaster among the plethora of the local media heavily influenced by politics. It is also seen as one of the most modern media outlets (€15 million was invested in Al Jazeera Balkans)⁷² with authentic stories coming from the former Yugoslav republics. Unlike the domestic media that are almost exclusively focused on local events, Al Jazeera offers viewers a wider picture of what is happening regionally and globally, from the crisis in the Eurozone to the global recession and its consequences. Al Jazeera also regularly reports on foreign power influence in the Western Balkans,⁷³ particularly Russia's role⁷⁴ and has a column about the "Serbia and Kosovo dispute".⁷⁵

⁷² "Broadcasting to the Balkans," *The Economist*, November 12, 2011, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2011/11/12/broadcasting-to-the-balkans>.

⁷³ Vedran Obućina, "Borba za Zapadni Balkan," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, June 10, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/borba-za-zapadni-balkan>.

⁷⁴ Dimitar Bechev, "Dilema Kosovo: Za sada su podjednici Putin i Rusija," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, November 20, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/dilema-kosovo-za-sada-su-pobjednici-putin-i-rusija>.

⁷⁵ "Spor Srbije i Kosova," accessed November 10, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/tema/spor-srbije-i-kosova>.



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People seem not to fear that the arrival of Al Jazeera or its possible increase in the influence from the East, or that this was the motive for Al Jazeera to settle in this part of the world.⁷⁶ Experts believe that Al Jazeera is not propagandistic per se, but also that the selection of information in some cases points to particular interests, especially in relation to events for which Qatar has a particular interest in the geopolitical framework.⁷⁷

Except for Al Jazeera Balkans, there is no other significant media influence either by the Gulf States or Iran in the region. The same goes for influencing local elections.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The headquarters of Al Jazeera Balkans TV channel is located in Sarajevo, and it broadcasts its program in the common language spoken in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. It is quite popular and seen as a balanced source of information in the otherwise nationalistic media landscape. Besides this media outlet, there are no other media organisations which operate in BiH that are linked with the Gulf States, Iran or any other foreign actors.

Kosovo

In the case of Kosovo, Gulf States' and Iran's sphere of influence is primarily concentrated in the economic and cultural realm and no evidence can be found on links of any of the Gulf states or Iran to the media in Kosovo. Not even Al Jazeera Albanian-language branch has been launched.⁷⁸

Macedonia

The Qatari-owned, Sarajevo-based TV channel, Al Jazeera Balkans, is included on the menu of all Macedonian cable TV operators. The language of Al Jazeera Balkans' content –

⁷⁶ Anonymous interview, November 13, 2018.

⁷⁷ <http://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/al-jazeera-balkans-izmedu-stranog-kapitala-i-odgovornog-novinarstva>

⁷⁸ "Al Jazeera launches Balkans channel," *Al Jazeera*, November 12, 2011, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2011/11/2011111201910810159.html>.



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Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian is accessible to the vast majority of the Macedonian public though, and the channel has had regular Skopje-based correspondent since its founding.

The Belgrade-based Iranian Cultural Center for Serbia and Macedonia publishes the Persian-language magazine on Islamic culture, NUR, once every three months in Belgrade, and the magazine is then also distributed in Macedonia.⁷⁹

Montenegro

Al Jazeera has correspondents from Podgorica but besides it, there is no Gulf States' or Iranian media presence.

Serbia

The UAE is the most visible Gulf country in the Serbian media in the recent period. Serbian authorities are tireless in overblowing the total value of the Arab investments in the media, especially during the last three election campaigns. For instance, the authorities in Serbia announced Arab investments worth 15 billion euros, and only a few hundred million have been registered so far.⁸⁰ Therefore, the government representatives are most responsible for disseminating false information on real UAE investments in Serbia.

News about Saudi Arabia almost does not exist in the mass media. It is not surprising that the Serbian government keeps a low profile and news about Saudi Arabia far from the public's eye, bearing in mind the fact that Serbia is selling weapons to Saudi Arabia.⁸¹ High-level officials are involved in arms deals, such as the father of Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic, who mediated in a lucrative weapons trade between a Serbian company and a buyer from Saudi Arabia.⁸²

⁷⁹ "За нас", Културен центар на ИР Иран за Србија и Македонија, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.iran.mk/15-about-us>.

⁸⁰ Velimir Ilic, "Arapske investicije u Srbiji: Više euforije nego ekonomije," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, November 11, 2016, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/arapske-investicije-u-srbiji-vise-euforije-nego-ekonomije>.

⁸¹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-countries-continue-selling-arms-to-saudi-arabia-07-05-2018>

⁸² Filip Rudic, Aleksandar Djordjevic, Slobodan Georgiev, "Serbian Minister's Father 'Mediated Saudi Weapon Sales,'" *BIRN*, November 22, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-minister-s-father-mediated-weapon-sales-to-saudis-11-22-2018>.