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Foreign Malign Influence in Serbia

Factors, techniques
and recommendations

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Situational background

Serbia's vulnerability to foreign malign influence can be broadly divided into four overlapping areas:

- a Public perception
- b Information landscape
- c State and political actors
- d Volatile geopolitical situation in the region

Serbia has been backsliding in terms of democracy, democratic standards and values¹ in recent years. Despite the fact that the economic situation has improved, the regime that some characterize as stabilocracy² has influenced the free functioning of institutions, dominates the media sphere, and influences public perceptions. Furthermore, given that Serbia is neither in NATO nor the EU, and is near two de-facto frozen conflicts - Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina - contributes to its vulnerability to foreign malign influence. All of this makes Serbia extremely vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation, allowing the spread of disinformation and enabling the more open cooperation of Serbia with non-Western actors, in particular China. Despite many successes related to the pandemic's management, including the early acquiring of COVID-19 vaccines, disinformation and the government's stop-go policies regarding certain measures (Covid-19 passes for example – some speculate that such

measures could negatively impact the ruling party's popularity in upcoming elections³) resulted in Serbia being among the countries with the most new infections in the world in Q4 2021⁴. The vaccination rate has hovered around 50% for several months, with no signs of it increasing anytime soon.

The following factors contribute to Serbia's vulnerability to foreign malign influence:

- Historical legacy, especially the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia and grievances regarding the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro
- Geopolitical instability, due to the incomplete integration of the Western Balkan region into NATO and the EU, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina remain de-facto frozen conflicts
- Society attached to traditions and long-term sympathy with strong leaders
- Regime's stabilocratic nature in Serbia, based on governance that often avoids institutions
- Backsliding of media freedoms, and democratic standards and values.
- Laws that are often semi or non-implemented and security system that ineffectively reflect changes in the security environment
- Polarization of society driven by populist and anti-system political representatives
- A plethora of actors on digital platforms spreading disinformation

The following tactics are used to exploit these vulnerabilities:

- Direct contact, cooperation and enabling pro-Kremlin/pro-Beijing actors and Kremlin/Beijing representatives to directly influence the media
- Ruling majority promoting the strong cooperation of Serbia with Beijing and Kremlin
- Manipulation through tabloids and national TV stations via pro-Kremlin narratives and news to enable the catch-all tactics
- Direct influence of pro-Kremlin media outlets (such as Sputnik Serbia and Russia Beyond borders), and numerous problematic internet outlets in Serbian that directly transfer pro-Kremlin narratives
- Cooperation and support of some historic organizations and veterans that participate in the anti-fascist resistance to reinforce certain pro-Kremlin narratives and propaganda
- Establishment and/or support of paramilitary and extremist organizations that posture as motorcycle clubs, Cossack organizations,⁵ youth training camps,⁶ etc.⁷
- Development of informal contacts with high-level politicians and security force representatives

Geopolitical situation in the region

The Western Balkans remain one of the most volatile spots in Europe. Challenging situations in North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo* and Serbia also contribute to the region being fertile ground for disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories. Without the resolution of these main issues through agreements being reached towards finding middle ground between the opposing narratives and the regional states and populations being pushed towards cooperation, efforts for countering malign actions will be difficult. This is a task for both the EU and NATO, as well as for national authorities that should reform dominant narratives in the direction of cooperation and confronting common challenges instead of fostering enmity and nationalistic issues.

Public perception

The vast majority of the population (82%) perceives Russia as their traditional Slavic brother and as Serbia's most important strategic partner (59%).⁸ This sentiment resonates broadly throughout the country, with pro-Russian attitudes propagated by domestic actors including the ruling government.⁹ Serbia's vulnerable population comprises people from all cross-sections of society (age, education, place of residence).

Attachments to Russia, pervasive throughout the country, are buoyed by cultural, religious, and historical connections between the two nations, but mostly on its strong support vis-à-vis Kosovo issue. Generally positive attitudes towards China, meanwhile, stem from Beijing's extensive investments in Serbia and a lack of negative historical experiences.

Information landscape

The independence of Serbian media has dropped considerably in recent years. According to the World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks lowest in the Western Balkans region and 90th altogether.¹⁰

The state is able to control the media space either through direct ownership and/or different models of state financing (public tenders for media projects, public procurement of media services, and direct advertising contracts) distributed arbitrarily.¹¹ Media companies that are close to the government control most of the information space through nationally broadcasted television networks and daily newspapers, including tabloids.¹² On the other hand, a handful of independent media publications also operate in the country. These institutions have primarily established anti-government profiles, leaving the information space highly polarized.

Although the number of media outlets directly owned by Russians is relatively low in Serbia, the pro-Russian content footprint is

significant. Two outlets are directly linked to Russian companies or the state: Sputnik Serbia (website and radio) and Russia Beyond (website and news magazine). These two outlets provide content that reflects the Kremlin's official positions – and furthermore this material is further disseminated by other media outlets in Serbia. There are also several portals that promulgate content from several pro-Kremlin or Kremlin-affiliated pages (translated into Serbian)¹³, as illustrated in the recent network mapping of Serbian and Montenegrin Facebook conducted in spring 2020.¹⁴

A considerable share of pro-Russian content and news dissemination and original content creation (and pro-Beijing content to a lesser extent) can be sourced to several tabloids (Informer, Kurir, Srpski Telegraf, and Alo!) and some TV stations. 39% of the population claim to get information about Serbia-Russia relations on television¹⁵, and 14% of those supporting the current regime deem Pink TV as the most trustworthy media outlet for political information.¹⁶ The media outlets also tend to give favorable coverage to China, even if this reporting is generally confined to Serbian government activities.

As the network mapping of Serbian and Montenegrin Facebook conducted in spring 2020 demonstrates¹⁷, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-affiliated pages on Facebook form a visible network on the platform: several pro-Russian or Russia-affiliated pages share content from disinformation-spreading pages and vice versa.

State and political actors

The two main Serbian parliamentary parties - the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) - are engaged in spreading both Pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives. They often proclaim that Serbia will never introduce sanctions against Russia (despite pressure from the West).¹⁸ Policy towards Russia (and many other aspects of state policies) is crafted by the government, with the one party/coalition dominated parliament lacking power.¹⁹ An uncritical discourse regarding Russia leaves ample space for the dissemination of Russian influence in the country.

Members of the ruling elite are the most vocal in spreading pro-Beijing narratives. On several occasions, their social media posts have engendered a considerable impact in China, especially following his March 15 plea for help from “Chinese brothers” and “brother Xi.”²⁰ All pandemic cooperation and aid from China has been promoted in a positive light through the direct engagement of top politicians in the country (e.g. the active promotion of Chinese mask diplomacy efforts). Members of the ruling elite often downplay criticism regarding Serbia’s cooperation with China and its potential consequences (e.g. air pollution at the beginning of 2020).²¹

Another vulnerability stems from a lack of real checks and balances.²² The administration has little awareness of the hybrid threats that these states might

represent. Corruption is a major problem in almost all institutions, including the health system, judiciary, and police. According to the Transparency International Global Corruption Index, Serbia is 91st of 180 countries (14 places lower than in 2017).²³ Finally the two key strategic documents do not recognize the malign activities of foreign autocratic actors. On the contrary, the National Defense Strategy commits Serbia to expanding and improving cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO.

→ Policy recommendations for Serbia

1

Improve functionality of institutions and democratic reforms

→ The Government should encourage independent institutions and state institutions to exercise their competences, i.e. to act more freely and responsibly – which is impeded by the current informal vertical system of governance through political parties. Independent institutions (such as REM (media regulation body)) should be free from political influence. This can be accomplished by enacting a *lex specialis* which can dissolve current politically influenced boards and directors of independent institutions, and appoint new ones via an open, transparent and merit-based process.

→ Parliament should become a true branch of power, independent from the executive. Reform of the electoral system would help, such as having elections based on a proportional election system with open lists. This would ensure the election of MPs who have influence in the electorate, instead of those only obedient to their parties.

→ Independence of judiciary and prosecution must be implemented and their mandate strengthened. The Government must commit itself to the complete independence of the judiciary, and minimize its political influence in the selection of judges and in rendering judgements. The election of judges and prosecutors should be the task of their colleagues (for example via the Judicial Council) and not the Parliament. A strong and fully independent judiciary would contribute to improving the rule of law, and thereby limit opportunities for foreign players to misuse weak spots in the system.

→ The Government should use the EU accession process (negotiations) to implement the necessary reforms. Such negotiations, as well as all the progress reports received annually, provide a roadmap of reforms that would strengthen institutions. At the same time, the EU should be more direct about the democratic backsliding in Serbia, and insist on the rule of law, separation of powers, and strengthening of independent institutions as a condition for Serbia's further progress on the EU accession path.

2

Increase situational awareness

→ The Government and Parliament should adopt realistic foreign policy strategy which would define the state's interests and goals, thus setting up a foreign policy that would be predictable and anchored to the EU. Strategic documents (in particular, the National Security Strategy) also need to recognize the growing polarization in Europe and the world, and recognize the existence of certain armed conflicts (particularly in Ukraine) and consequently define the challenges that arise therefrom (hybrid threats, disinformation, energy weaponization, etc.).

→ Even in their current form, the National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy still need action plans to be implemented as an alternative to a complete overhaul of the strategic framework. Such action plans should be utilized to increase the state's preparedness for fighting against malign actors and their actions, while offering the basis for improving state institutions' "situational awareness".

→ The institutions should address malign influence tactics and strategies, increase the knowledge of public servants, and equip them with tools how to recognize such malign influences. Civil society can play a role in education and awareness trainings for public servants.

→ Serbia recently signed a declaration at the 2021 EU-WB Summit in Slovenia²⁴ that commits the Serbian government to positively and directly promote the EU and the EU accession process. This needs to be reflected immediately in decision makers' speeches and actions, as well as the government controlled/influenced media.

3

Improving media freedoms and strengthening information landscape

→ The ruling majority should contribute to reducing political influence on the media, and entice curbing sensationalism and political bashing through the media. The biggest problem is state aid to the media that results in a lack of objectivity, in particular in the tabloids.

→ The Government should define and rapidly start implementing the Action Plan for the new Media Strategy, which has been tentatively approved by the EU Commission and needs to be fully implemented.²⁵

→ Key state institutions should create a unique information exchange space to coordinate the exchange of knowhow on the activities of malign actors, the communication of issues and challenges related to these activities, and the coordination of steps to counter them.

→ The EU should request, vis-à-vis the accession process, that Serbia recognizes the activities of malign actors, and that the EU and Serbian government officials jointly inform the public and all media about the activities and threats that malign actors pose.

→ The Government and other key state institutions - with direct EU support and assistance - should coordinate to create counter-narratives regarding disinformation and fake news, and to operationalize such counter-narratives through coordinated communication efforts. The EU needs to motivate the Serbian government to take ownership over this file, as both share the burden of fighting disinformation and fake news. Civil society, with funding from the EU, must also be a stakeholder in this partnership.

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