Unpacking Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans[56]

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Russia's actions in the Western Balkans have been daunting and detrimental to the region's progress and its path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia proactively challenges the existing set of values in the Western Balkans while supporting autocratic regimes (namely in Belgrade and Banja Luka) and its proxy groups, including elements of the deep state.

To recall, the region has largely embraced values of liberal order, democracy, and the rule of law. The Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Federation) almost unequivocally embrace these values. Outside of the EU itself, there is no other region than the Western Balkans that is subject to learning and approximating the EU value system. Even the mindset of the new generation is aligned with these values. Hence, it is important for the EU to understand that citizens in the Western Balkans are well-prepared, perhaps even more so, to align with these universal

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values. The region's skilled labour force is both culturally and contextually more prepared to adjust to the EU *modus operandi*.

Yet, Russian unprovoked aggression in Ukraine and its proactive spoiling through its proxies in the region have had detrimental effects on the region's path towards the EU and NATO. This has encouraged radical elements to demonstrate non-Western sentiment and challenge long-standing investments in peace and security.

Truly, the EU enlargement fatigue was exploited by Russian elements to embolden Euroscepticism; however, it did not fundamentally shape public sympathy and the overall embracement of shared values. For example, while human rights protection is a core value in the Western Balkans, it is quite the opposite in Russia. Building anti-corruption mechanisms and culture is a constant goal, despite many shortcomings, whereas in Russia, corruption is the norm.

In short, increased Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans has led to:

- Increased autocracy;
- Serbia's (allowed) flexibility to align with the EU, Russia, and China;
- Exploitation of Western appeasement policies, first to Russia and until recently to autocrats in the region, mainly Serbian President Vučić;
- Widespread disinformation;

- ▪ Weakening of civil society, resulting in a disillusioned and ineffective agent of democratization.

The Western appeasement policy towards Russian actions and Balkan-based autocrats' highlights one of the largest shortcomings in Europe's foreign policy. This policy has been to the detriment of a value-based system, where realpolitik has been prioritized. Russia does not present a viable alternative even to most allies in the region. Yet, despite the sanctions, it continues to have the potential to act as a spoiler. According to the International Republican Institute (IRI) survey of May 2024, 46% of Serbian respondents declared that Russia is the strongest ally of Serbia. Disinformation continues to be one of Russia's most potent tools, exercised mainly through Belgrade-based tabloids, not merely Sputnik or similar Russian outlets.

The goal of Russian disinformation is to:

- ▪ Depict Western investments in the Western Balkans as failures;
- ▪ Exploit conservative sentiments concerning LGBTQ+ and other liberal dimensions promoted by the West;
- ▪ Invest in revisionism regarding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and NATO's role;
- ▪ Portray a false narrative on Ukraine.

Russian influence in the Western Balkans is context-dependent. Russia planted its seeds for years, and only in recent years have we seen its aggressive involvement. Russian military and security influence can be easily

documented, with the so-called humanitarian center in Niš being a relevant example. The center is notably known to be a hub of Russian intelligence that aims to exploit every opportunity to challenge the investments made to date in the region, when it comes to peace, security and stability.

A classic example of hybrid actions, serving the goal of Russia in the region, is the Banjska terrorist attack. The operation of a heavily armed Serbian group in northern Kosovo led to an ambush that killed a Kosovan police officer and wounded two others. In response, the Kosovo Police launched a professional operation that eliminated three terrorists and exposed the group led by notorious terrorist Milan Radoičić, known to be a long-standing criminal in northern Kosovo with direct links to Serbian President Vučić and Russian elements in Serbia. The goal of this terrorist formation was to create a new circumstance on the ground to trigger a disproportionate reaction from Kosovo law enforcement authorities, potentially leading to civilian casualties and damage to the Orthodox Monastery. It also aimed to involve over-reaction by the state of Kosovo in terms of potential deployment of Kosovo Security Force in the northern part of Kosovo that would potentially result in confrontation with KFOR presence. The goal of the terrorist action coincided with Russia's spoiling agenda, and intelligence pointed out the group's links to elements of the Serbian deep state and Russian presence in Serbia. Although the action failed, it demonstrated the unprecedented scale that could lead to a rapid escalation of the security situation

in Kosovo. The action, apart from classified as terrorist, implied the prerogatives of aggression having in mind the group has been trained and prepared by the Serbian state security apparatus, in different military training facilities throughout Serbia.

Kosovo's Stance on Russia's Unprovoked Aggression in Ukraine

The Republic of Kosovo supports Ukraine's cause for freedom and peace, in the strongest possible terms. It has aligned 100% with the EU and US foreign policies and sanctions towards Russia. Kosovo has provided shelter to Ukrainian journalists and lifted visas for Ukrainian passport holders. Conversely, it has imposed a strict visa policy for Russian passport holders (who are no longer allowed to enter with Schengen visas or EU residence permits as before). The country has provided lethal and non-lethal aid to Ukraine and is part of the Ukraine Contact Group. Additionally, Kosovo signed a memorandum with Lithuania on demining in Ukraine.