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**Vanessa Tinker**

## Russian-Generated Disinformation viewed as the Primary Threat in the Western Balkans

### Background

Since 2014, the Kremlin has been running a disinformation and propaganda campaign in the Western Balkans to undermine EU and NATO efforts of expansion and influence in the region. Following the US and EU's decision to place sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin launched the Sputnik news agency, choosing Serbia as its hub to generate and spread disinformation throughout the region. Sputnik has become one of Russia's main counter-propaganda and foreign policy tools with the capacity of reaching a large viewership since the information is made available in Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian languages in several countries in the region and reproduced in local outlets.

The Western Balkans historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural ties to Russia, persisting internal divisions, and unresolved disputes have made the region particularly susceptible to the Kremlin's influence. Russia has sought to exploit these vulnerabilities to increase its leverage against the EU and NATO. The Kremlin uses disinformation and propaganda to achieve its aims, vilifying the West, portraying the EU as politically and institutionally weak, divided and disorganized, NATO as aggressive, hegemonic, and provocative; while presenting Russia as militarily superior, with decisive leadership, particularly its handling of the pandemic. In the case of Serbia and to a lesser extent the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Putin is presented as the protector of the Serbian people.

Russia's disinformation campaign has been particularly effective in the region since its narratives are well received amongst political actors, pro-Russian and state funded media, businessmen, and the local Orthodox church. The dissemination of Russia's disinformation has succeeded in the Western Balkans in part because it has been able to outsource its disinformation activities across the region by establishing loose relationships with local proxies that readily promote its interest.

As was observed in North Macedonia, Russian narrative proxies were actively involved in the #Boycott campaign during the name-change referendum that sought to undermine the country's pro-West orientation. In the case of Serbia, Russian narrative proxies have continued to weaken efforts in the normalization process with Kosovo.

And with Bosnia and Herzegovina, they have frustrated the possibilities of political and institutional cooperation between the country's two entities.

### Efforts To Counter Disinformation

While in Skopje, Rubin spoke with North Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski and other officials, who are well aware of Russia's meddling. They shared strategies and ways to accelerate their cooperation to counter disinformation as well as in detecting local proxies.

As with the US, NATO has also taken a greater interest in countering Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans as it prepares for enlargement. It is in NATO's interest to work together with countries from this region and assist them in identifying cyber incidents, developing measures to tackle disinformation campaigns, and publishing studies that can provide insight to stakeholders, including local media outlets and private companies.

Alongside of NATO and US efforts, the EU needs to pay greater attention to the threats posed by Russia's disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans, recognizing the long-term consequences it may have for EU and NATO integration as well as for stability in the region. With a renewed focus in the Western Balkans region, the EU needs to invest more in developing protection mechanisms for its potential member states that are most vulnerable to Russia's disinformation and creating incentives for the region's governments to acknowledge the risk.

### BiH fails to form government

After two failed attempts, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Federation parliament's House of Representatives were unable to agree on the appointment of the new entity prime minister and ministers. The constitution states that the Federation's president and two vice-presidents must sign the approval of the executive government, and then it needs to be approved by the House of Representatives of the Federal Assembly. This is where the problem lies, as reportedly, the Federation President Lidija Bradara from the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ BiH) and Igor Stojanović from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) were already prepared to reach a decision two weeks ago; however, it was Refik Lendo, the Bosniak vice-president of the entity and a member of the largest Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action, SDA, who refuses to accept the ap-

pointment of the new government until his conditions are met, namely that SDA be included as members of the government.

In response, the international community's High Representative Christian Schmidt has threatened to use his so-called "Bonn-powers" to intervene and impose a solution should the political leaders fail to agree on the composition of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Government. Lendo has suggested to the press that his party will offer a new proposal within next 10 days to HDZ BiH and SDP. Whether Schmidt will intervene or not will depend on what transpires in the next few days.

### **The Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina Renews Secession Threats**

Once again Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik is threatening that he will seek independence for the Serbian entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) over a dispute involving a controversial property law. On several occasions Republika Srpska (RS) has attempted to implement a law that would effectively transfer Bosnian state property to RS, a move that has been regarded unconstitutional. The justification for the law is to ensure that properties used by RS authorities i.e. local governments, public companies, public institutions, and other departments established by RS remain in their care.

However, Bosnia's Constitutional Court states that national parliament must adopt a property law that would be legitimate across the country in both of its two entities. The administrative system established under the 1995 Dayton Agreement is maintained by a weak central government that links Bosnia's two federal entities – Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and Brčko District, a self-governing administrative unit). The President of RS – Milorad Dodik, who is openly pro-Russian, rejects the administrative arrangement as well as the authority of the international community's enforcer of the Dayton Agreement – Office of the High Representative.

The EU's current president – Tobias Billstroem, criticized Dodik's most recent secessionist threats, along with other proposed legislation by RS, including laws that would limit media and personal freedoms, restrict foreign funded NGOs, and ban LGBT organizations from educational institutions. Recently, while in Sarajevo, Billstroem shared with reporters in Sarajevo the EU's concerns with RS's recent actions, suggesting that if the draft laws were to be adopted, it "would be a step backwards for Bosnia-Herzegovina's European path."

### **Efforts to Prepare Constitutional Changes to Unlock North Macedonia's EU membership Pathway Remains Blocked by its Opposition Parties**

For nearly two years, Bulgaria has blocked North Macedonia's accession efforts into the EU. Bulgaria has agreed to unblock the process if North Macedonia meets several of its conditions, including the designation of the Bulgarians as a minority in the constitution.

In response, the Ministry of Justice of North Macedonia has agreed to form a working group to prepare constitutional changes that is to consist of ten delegated representatives, and representatives appointed from state institutions, including from the president's cabinet, the Secretariat for European Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. External legal and constitutional experts are also to be included.

However, part of North Macedonia's ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian opposition parties have decided to boycott participation in the government's proposed working group, viewing the suggested constitutional changes as imposed by Bulgaria and the EU to continue the accession negotiations. They refuse to participate unless their own concessions are met – political consensus and removal of the 20 per cent definition for the Albanian people, and a guarantee from Bulgaria that it will not ask for further concessions from North Macedonia.

Even if the proposed working group wishes to proceed without the opposition, any preparations made to the constitutional amendments still need to be sent to the parliament for debate. Without the participation of the opposition, it will not be possible to make the necessary constitutional changes that requires a 2/3 majority in a vote. If North Macedonia wants to continue the EU accession process, the constitutional changes must be finished by the end of November 2023.