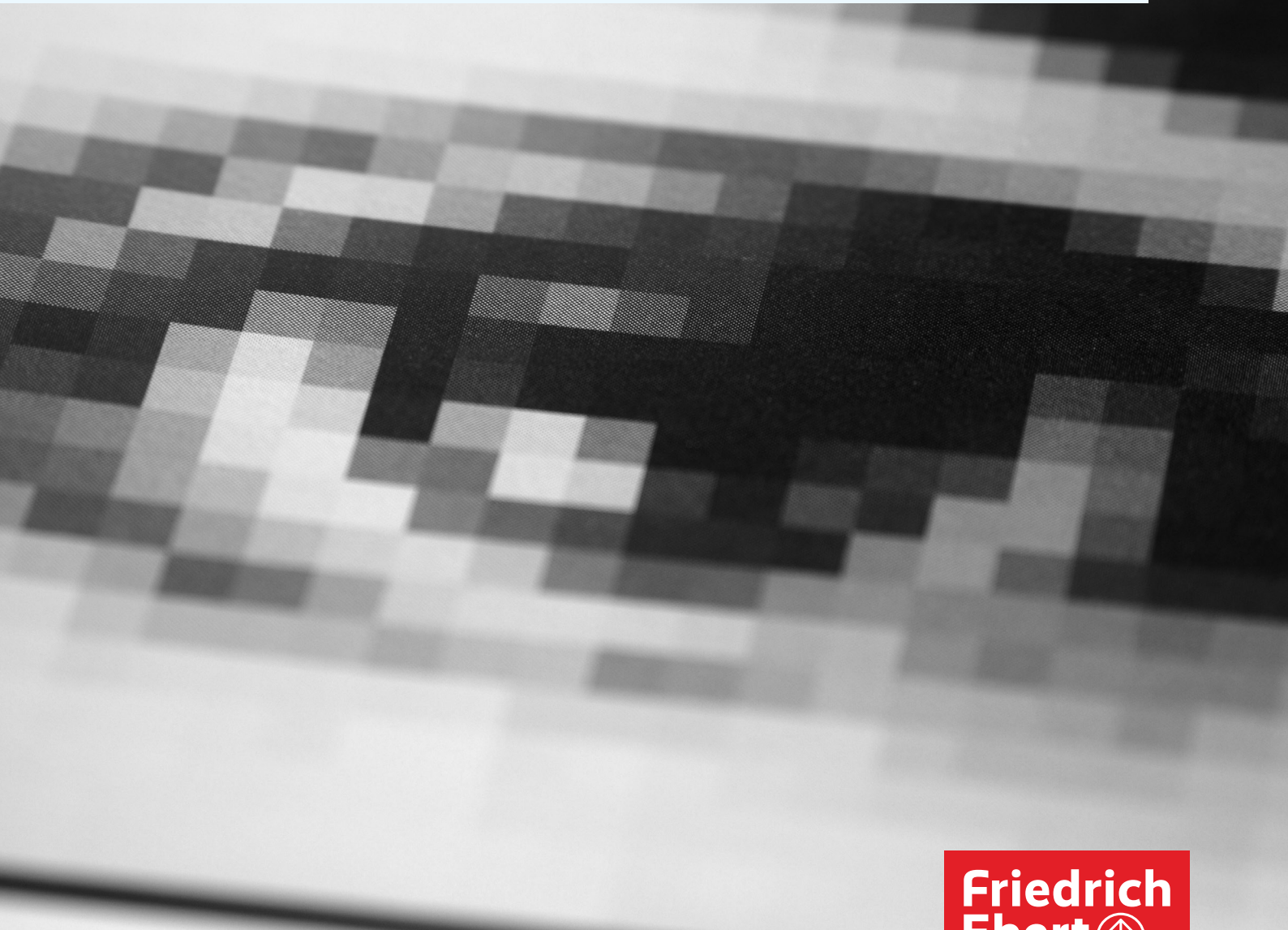


Đorđe Vujatović
November 2025

Russian Influence in the Balkans



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bih@fes.de

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Department - International Cooperation
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Responsibility for content and editing

Sarah Hees-Kalyani

Contact

Tanja Topić

tanja.topic@fes.de

Design

Filip Andronik

Translator

Milica Plavšić

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Historical-identity framework and research question	3
The architecture of Russian media influence in the Western Balkans	3
Media strategy for wartime propaganda (2022–2025)	4
Channels and reach: overview (TV, portals, social media)	5
Serbia: media resonance, politics and “balancing”	5
BiH and especially Republika Srpska: Communication circle of reinforcement	5
Special focus on wartime propaganda: themes, patterns, local adaptations . . .	6
Science and culture: a network of “soft power”	6
Visits of Russian officials: symbolism and signalling	7
Political influence: from information to institutional dynamics	7
Risks, limitations and resilience	7
Recommendations (operational and feasible)	7
Conclusion: the informational symbiosis of politics, culture and propaganda	8
Sources and references	8

Introduction: Historical-identity framework and research question

The relationship of the Serbian social space (Serbia, Republika Srpska and the Serbian community in the region) with Russia has deep cultural and historical roots: a shared Orthodox matrix, Slavic heritage, linguistic proximity and a series of historical episodes in which Russia figured as a powerful protector.

In contemporary politics, this symbolic capital has been transformed into a geopolitical resource. After 2014 (Crimea) and particularly following February 2022 (the invasion of Ukraine), Russian media and cultural-political instruments have acquired an overtly wartime propagandistic function: weakening the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, delegitimizing Western institutions and empowering actors aligned with Russian narratives.

The research question of this study is: how does this influence materialise through (1) media and communication channels, (2) political practice and diplomatic gestures, and (3) culture and science — with a particular focus on Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where communication flows are the most visible and politically sensitive.

The architecture of Russian media influence in the Western Balkans

Main state channels and local “amplifiers”

RT Balkan and Sputnik Serbia form the backbone of the Russian state media presence in the Western Balkans.

RT Balkan first launched its portal (2022), followed by a 24/7 TV program (end of 2024), while Sputnik has maintained its portal and audio programs since 2015.

Their content circulates through local amplifiers: in Serbia via tabloids and TV formats, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina particularly through RTRS/Srna/ATV and a range of portals in Republika Srpska that pick up or paraphrase press releases, statements and features, not only from officials. Their content circulates through local amplifiers: in Serbia via tabloids and TV formats, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina particularly through RTRS/Srna/ATV and a range of portals in Republika Srpska that pick up or paraphrase press releases, statements and features

by officials from the Russian Federation, as well as by Russian diplomatic representatives and missions abroad and international institutions (including embassies and missions in BiH, Serbia, Montenegro, the UN...), along with statements from other international officials and so-called analysts who are pro-Russian oriented.

The structure follows a hub-and-spoke model: the Russian “hub” (RT/Sputnik) produces overarching narratives and visual packages; the “spokes” (local media, politicians, influencers) translate them into local issues (Kosovo, OHR, NATO) and feed them back into the mainstream.

Social media and Telegram

Social media are crucial for wartime propaganda: Telegram channels (pro-Russian news accounts, war bloggers, media “hubs”) are used for rapid dissemination of video clips, “breaking” narratives, fundraising and message coordination.

Due to weaker moderation, Telegram has become a hotbed for emotionally charged content: warzone footage, “testimonies”, maps, infographics, which are subsequently picked up by news portals.

There is a stable network of pro-Russian channels in the Serbian language in the region; their cumulative reach is measured by hundreds of thousands of followers, with high “shareability” of content towards the Facebook/YouTube ecosystem.

Availability and distribution (TV/OTT/web)

In Serbia, RT Balkan TV gets linear distribution through operators within the ecosystem of state/partner networks, in addition to OTT applications.

In RS/BiH, m:tel and related platforms play a key role, along with online availability (portals, stream), effectively removing geographic barriers.

It should be noted that Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT and the “Rossiya Segodnya” media group, announced at the end of 2023 that their channel will start broadcasting its television program in the territory of Republika Srpska, as well as in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2024.

Her announcement followed shortly after a press conference by Russian president Vladimir Putin, attended by journalists from around the world.

At the aforementioned conference, Darinka Petrovic, a journalist from Republika Srpska, asked Putin why there were still no Russian media outlets in Republika Srpska. He responded that he would ask his colleagues to see what could be done about it.

Following this, the RT editor-in-chief made a statement and sent a direct message to the journalist from Banja Luka: **“Next year we will start broadcasting a program in the Serbian language, which has never existed before. We will find you, my dear, and make sure that everything is set up on your television, with all necessary antennas connected”**, Simonyan told the “Russia 1” television.

The Sputnik portal and RT’s web accounts remain continuously accessible, even when linear broadcasting is not universally available.

Media strategy for wartime propaganda (2022–2025)

Operational principles

Russian communication strategy in the war operates on three levels:

- Central narrative framework: “Russia is waging a defensive war against NATO-hegemony”, “The West is hypocritical” and “Russia and Serbs are historical allies”.
- Tactical campaigns: in a given cycle, one or two strong “frames” (e.g. “crisis escalation”, “unjust sanctions”, “institutional crisis in BiH”) are pushed through all channels.
- Localisation: the same framework is “translated” into local topics (Kosovo, the role of the OHR, judgments and indictments in BiH, elections, NATO exercises), creating a sense of shared struggle.

Channel/platform	Type	Where is it visible?	Language	Estimated reach / audience	Function in the ecosystem
RT Balkan	TV + portal	Serbia (linear/OTT), RS/BiH (operators + online)	Serbian	~ 2.1 million visits per month (portal)	Central state channel; visual “anchor”
Sputnik Serbia	Portal + audio	Serbia, RS/BiH, Montenegro (web)	Serbian	~ 2.3 million visits per month (portal)	„Hub” for daily narratives and comments
RTRS / Srna / ATV	TV / news agency	Republika Srpska	Serbian	- RTRS: Facebook more than 157,000 followers, YouTube more than 167,000 followers - ATV: ATV has more than 125,000 followers on Facebook, Youtube channel has been disabled as a result of sanctions - Srna: web and agency reach, precise figure missing srna.rs	Local boosters of Russian / pro-narratives
Tabloids / portals (Informer, Novosti...)	Print + portals	Serbia	Serbian	~ 1.5 million per month (portal + print) – estimate	Multipliers and mainstream normalizers
Telegram pro-Russian channels	Social media	Entire region (online)	Serbian / Russian	Hundreds of thousands of followers in total	A fast channel for spreading narratives and disinformation
YouTube / Facebook pro-Russian accounts	Social media	Entire region (online)	Serbian / Russian	~ 300,000-700,000 monthly views of video content	

Techniques and formats

Visual shock: short, emotionally charged video clips, graphics with maps, comparisons of historical events.

Authority: referencing to “experts, officers, veterans, lawyers from “friendly countries”.

Reverse framing: condemnation of double standards (“what applies to Ukraine does not apply to Kosovo”, and vice versa).

Serial disputation: constant questioning of the legitimacy of the OHR, the Court of BiH, Western embassies and domestic “pro-Western” actors.

„We narrative”: insisting on cultural and spiritual closeness with the Serbian people, including rituals, church holidays and “historical brotherhood”.

Channels and reach: overview (TV, portals, social media)

Note: The table is indicative and combines public data on availability with conservative estimates of reach; it serves an analytical comparison of channels and their role in the ecosystem, not as a people meter audit.

Serbia: media resonance, politics and “balancing”

Media landscape

In Serbia, RT/Sputnik enjoy high visibility: legal distribution of RT Balkan on TV and the strong online presence of Sputnik enable broad reach. Tabloids and pro-war talk-formats often feature RT/Sputnik stories on front pages or in prime time.

This creates a “normalised” pro-Russian discourse in which key messages (criticism of NATO, sympathy for the Russian version of the war) enter the mainstream.

Political effects

Serbia formally pursues EU integration, but in practice it maintains a “balancing policy”: it does not impose sanctions on Russia, retains energy and cultural cooperation and allows substantial information influence. This generates a two-layered narrative: outwardly — “European path”, internally — a tolerant or affirmative image of Russia. The media system is crucial for sustaining this dual-layered perception.

BiH and especially Republika Srpska: Communication circle of reinforcement

The role of RTRS/Srna and local media

In Republika Srpska, the public broadcaster RTRS and the agency Srna often act as multipliers for announcements by the Russian Embassy and Russian ministries.

In practice, the process works as follows: announcement → RTRS/Srna news report (with little or minimal editorial distance) → republishing on portals → political speeches → social media, then back into the media cycle.

This circular logic gives disproportionate weight to the Russian position within the domestic information space and influences perceptions of the legitimacy of the OHR, the Court of BiH or EU/NATO policies.

Press releases from the Embassy of Russia in BiH: typology and frequency

In the observed period, the announcements followed a consistent pattern:

Denial of legitimacy or criticism of the OHR and the High Representative (particularly Christian Schmidt).

Political interpretation of judicial processes in BiH (e.g., against Milorad Dodik) as „politically motivated”.

Messages about NATO: from earlier deterrent tones to emphasizing “respect for sovereignty”, but with accusations of “Western interference”.

Media in Republika Srpska often relay these announcements in full, without editorial balancing or confrontation with opposing viewpoints, while media in the Federation of BiH highlight a critical framework and reactions from Western embassies/institutions.

Political effects

The result is political polarisation in BiH and the reinforcement of narratives portraying key state institutions as “disputed” or “imposed”, which hinders reform processes and integration efforts.

Republika Srpska thus positions itself as a communication bridge to Moscow within BiH, rather than merely a recipient of messages.

Special focus on wartime propaganda: themes, patterns, local adaptations

Thematic matrices

Anti-Western frame (NATO as a threat; EU as two-faced).

Moral symmetry (parallels Ukraine–Kosovo; historical revisionism favouring “our truth”).

Sacralisation of war (Orthodox symbolism, messages about “defending tradition”).

Normalisation of exceptions (e.g. „special operation” as a separate category, outside standard international law).

Local reception

In Serbia, these themes find fertile ground in the identity layer of public opinion; in Republika Srpska they are given an institutional platform through public broadcasters and political speeches.

In the Federation of BiH, the same messages typically trigger counter-narratives and mobilisation of a pro-European discourse.

Science and culture: a network of “soft power”

Various forms of cultural and scientific exchange and co-operation have been intensified and they are particularly visible in Republika Srpska.

Russian House (Belgrade): film, literature, exhibitions, language courses, school cooperation.

Russian film and documentary festivals (e.g. programmes linked to RT.Doc), including events in Banja Luka; the content often emphasizes patriotic/war themes and “alternative narratives”.

“Friendship” associations, motorcycle rallies, historical-religious celebrations (e.g. performances by the Night Wolves) — a mix of culture, politics and symbolism.

Cultural infrastructure and projects

The documentary film festival “The Time of Our Heroes”, organized with the support of the RT.Doc network, was held on 19–20 May 2025 at the “Banski dvor” Cultural Centre in Banja Luka.

The program was explicitly declared a “platform for developing cultural ties between fraternal nations” and for screening films that “reveal the truth about events in the zone of the special military operation”. The opening of the festival was attended by the ambassador of the Russian Federation to BiH, who addressed the attendees,

saying that RT serves as a platform to present the Russian perspective to the world.

The Banjaluka International Animated Film Festival includes Russian animated films among the competitors; for example, in 2025, it is stated that among the 578 films from 57 countries, Russian titles are among the more significant ones.

In Serbia, the Russian Film Festival was held from November 27 to December 1, 2024, in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš. The fifth Russian-Serbian Cultural Forum was held as part of the festival.

Through these events, Russian cultural actors seek to establish “soft power” – films, exhibitions and forums promote Russian interpretation of history, culture and identity (e.g., films about the “great patriotic war” and “fraternal nations”).

Example from the RS: the festival „The Time of Our Heroes” explicitly links Russian wartime themes with Serbian narratives (“Kyiv’s crimes”, “defensive actions”) — thus, the cultural event is used to reinforce political-ideological narratives.

In Serbia, organising Russian film festivals and forums facilitates the spread of Russian visions of culture and history and creates a network of cultural leverage that complements media and political influence.

Religion and education

The close ties between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church create a normative framework of traditional values compatible with the messages of media propaganda.

In March 2018, it was announced that a Russian-Serbian religious and cultural centre, i.e., a Russian-Serbian temple, would be built in Banja Luka, and over the past few years the construction has intensified, with frequent visits from local politicians, which have been widely covered in the media.

Educational programs and language schools create epistemic “bubbles” – parallel interpretative communities dominated by Russian perspectives on contemporary and historical topics.

Effects

Culture and religion serve as emotional condensers: audiences absorb media messages more easily when they are framed by festivals, exhibitions, awards and religious symbols. This fosters a long-term predisposition to perceive political and informational messages as a natural extension of “our identity”.

Visits of Russian officials: symbolism and signalling

In recent years, contacts between politicians from Republika Srpska and the Russian Federation have become particularly frequent. This has gained additional significance after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when many representatives of the Russian Federation came under sanctions, and the entire state leadership was isolated from other European countries.

During 2022 and part of 2023, almost all politicians from Europe had reservations toward political representatives of the Russian Federation and diplomatic activity with nearly all states decreased.

However, during this period, a member of the BiH Presidency, and later the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, had several meetings with Vladimir Putin. Media in BiH and the region emphasized that he was one of the few officials from Europe meeting Putin under these circumstances. BiH and Serbia are among the few European countries that did not impose sanctions on Russia.

Sergey Lavrov (multiple visits to the region), Valentina Matviyenko (Banja Luka, 2018), opening of the Russian Embassy office in Banja Luka (2024), and frequent Dodik–Putin interactions (2018–2025) create a diplomatic choreography that signals the durability and “regularity” of RS/Serbia’s relations with Moscow.

The media effect is dichotomous: in RS and Serbia the emphasis is on “friendship and respect”, while in the Federation of BiH and parts of regional media – it is on concern and criticism.

Political influence: from information to institutional dynamics

Serbia

The „balancing policy” maintains the internal stability of the narrative: Russia as friend and protector, the West as pressure and interest.

The media reinforces this narrative through electoral cycles, covering Russian events and messages as “reasonable alternatives” to the Western lens

BiH/RS

In BiH, especially the RS, Russian communication influences institutional dynamics: delegitimizing the OHR, contesting court rulings, and resisting integration.

This creates a political spiral: the greater the institutional tension, the more space for external (Russian) communication intervention – and vice versa.

Risks, limitations and resilience

Risks

Public polarisation and “truth fatigue”: facts lose precedence over identity-based loyalties.

Regulatory vacuums: weak transparency of ownership and funding, as well as inconsistent platform policies (especially on Telegram).

Instrumentalization of culture and religion: cultural events and religious ties serve as channels for political messages.

Limitations of influence

Russian influence does not offer a viable economic alternative to the European Union: the region remains objectively tied to EU markets, funds and standards.

As a result, in BiH the Russian approach is primarily viewed as disruptive, while other processes occur simultaneously: slowing European integration, intensifying of inter-ethnic disputes, conflicts between Republika Srpska and other members of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), and maintaining a state of “geopolitical unease”...

Resilience factors

Media literacy and fact-checking: reduce the effectiveness of disinformation.

Transparency and professional standards of public services: enforce editorial accountability.

Proactive strategic communication by BiH and Serbia institutions, as well as international partners: rapid, clear and emotionally intelligent messages.

Recommendations (operational and feasible)

Transparency of retransmissions and partnerships: publicly label content sources (RT/Sputnik) and funding.

Monitoring Telegram and coordinating with platforms: systematic reporting of networks spreading violent content and wartime propaganda; investment in OSINT capacities.

Support for local newsrooms and training of journalists: grants, cross-border investigative projects, shared editorial databases.

Cultural “counter-offer”: regional festivals/forums with openly curated themes (history, film, religion) that break the monopoly of a single interpretation.

Public explanation of decisions (OHR, Court of BiH, EU/ NATO communication) in clear, “human” language; relentless repetition of key facts.

Conclusion: the informational symbiosis of politics, culture and propaganda

Russian influence in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia and BiH/RS, is not the product of a single lever of power, but a symbiosis of influences across three key areas: the media ecosystem (RT/Sputnik and local amplifiers), political symbolism and diplomatic networks (official visits, embassy statements), and culture and identity ties (film festivals, Russian House, Orthodox connections).

This symbiosis allows Moscow to maintain a stable impact on public opinion and political processes at relatively low cost, especially through wartime propaganda that integrates global topics into a local historical framework (“Kosovo is Ukraine”, “the West threatens Serbs as well as Russians”).

In communication practice, this means that Russia does not need a formal media infrastructure as it has domestically – because a combination of centralised digital sources and local media intermediaries that adopt, reshape and distribute such messages is sufficient.

At the same time, these narratives transform domestic political processes, as key institutional disputes are increasingly interpreted through the lens of international rivalry.

Consequently, the response of the regional states is impossible without a combination of transparency, regulation and education: transparency in disclosing media sources and ownership, a modern legal framework that limits manipulative practices without censorship, and educating the audience to develop tools for distinguishing information from propaganda.

Moreover, open cultural and educational programs provide the best counterweight to manipulative narratives – creating space for dialogue that is not subordinated to a single geopolitical agenda.

Finally, maintaining a democratic media space requires active support from domestic institutions and civil society, as well as EU partners, in order to break the spiral in which political crises become entry points for each new propaganda offensive.

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Russian Influence in the Balkans

Russian influence in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina/Republika Srpska, is not the product of a single lever of power, but of a symbiosis of influence in three key areas: the media ecosystem (RT/Sputnik and local amplifiers), political symbolism and diplomatic networks (official visits, embassy statements), and cultural and identity-based affinity (film festivals, the Russian House, the Orthodox connection).

This symbiosis allows Moscow to maintain a steady presence in public opinion and political processes at relatively low cost, especially through war propaganda that blends global themes into a local historical context (“Kosovo is Ukraine,” “The West threatens Serbs just as it threatens Russians”).

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