



RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN KOSOVO

IN THE SHADOWS OF MYTH AND REALITY





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian influence in Kosovo is cloaked in ambiguity. For some amongst the local population, Russians are everywhere, and Russia is the bogeyman that has brought about every political failure in the country. For others, especially within the international organizations present in Kosovo, there is no serious threat from Russia, and the potency of Russian influence is rather easily dismissed. The truth may very well rest in a medium between the two extreme perceptions of Russian influence in Kosovo. It is in this medium-full of ambiguity that the real danger lies; where there is no systemic examination of the extent of Russian influence in the country.

Previous studies show that Russian influence in the Western Balkans is context-dependent. It is grounded on several factors: 1) ethnoreligious links (Slavic populations ascribing to Orthodox Christian beliefs); 2) hydrocarbon dependence (natural gas and oil); 3) state capture; and 4) internal divisions and conflicts. Moreover, Russian influence takes two forms in the West Balkans (benign and hostile). With Slavic and/or Orthodox populations, Russia has sought to build relationships based on affection by invoking historical and common ethnoreligious links. It courts the local populations and the governments to develop a closer relationship.

Kosovo, however, presents a peculiar case as it does not fit this general description of how Russia spreads its influences in the Western Balkans. Unlike with other countries in the region, Russia does not recognize Kosovo nor does it offer an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration. On the contrary, Russian influence in Kosovo is hostile as it faces a population that is impenetrable to courting. It does not seek to court the population by invoking ethnoreligious links because Kosovars are an ethnically Albanian (non-Slavic population) and overwhelmingly secular Muslims. It cannot call upon a common history as Russia has historically allied with Serbia. It cannot rely on economic leverage as Kosovo's economy is not based on natural gas and there are no Russian foreign direct investments in the country. Instead, for Russia, the Kosovar population is not courted but shunned and the state is not to be recognized but to be weakened and destroyed. In Kosovo, Russia confronts a people with unparalleled affection for the United States and Western culture and a state with unyielding aspirations to join the European Union and NATO.

Unlike in other parts of Central and East Europe, including the Western Balkans, in Kosovo, Russia's strategic objectives are twofold. First, internationally, to promote its geopolitical interests versus the West. For the Russians, Kosovo serves to spoil the US and EU expansion in the region. If the US and EU cannot succeed in Kosovo, they cannot succeed anywhere else. Second, regionally, to gain a foothold in Serbia as a staging ground for Russia's Balkans foreign policy. To this effect, Kosovo is Russia's bargaining chip with Serbia. For Russia's aid in promoting and protecting its claims to Kosovo, Serbia provides Russia with a foothold in the Serb populated lands and a coordinated foreign policy. To this effect, in Kosovo Russia seeks to:

- Obstruct/discredit NATO expansion and EU integration;
- Build Russian image as a global power and provide an alternative model to the West;
- Use Kosovo as a bargaining chip with US/EU for deals in the post-Soviet space;
- Exercise leverage over Serbia's by promoting and protecting Serbia's claims to Kosovo.

In Kosovo, it can count on Serbia's government to use ethnic Serbs as actors, willing and ready to execute Russian plans, due to its historical links and political expediency due to Russian veto on Kosovo's UN membership. What are the pathways of Russian influence regarding Kosovo? At the global level, it uses its diplomatic, economic, and military might to derail the state-building processes initiated and guided by the US and the EU, and to contest Kosovo's statehood. Russia makes use of all its arsenal to prevent Kosovo from participating in or joining many international forums and institutions as an equal member of the world community, gain the recognition of other countries and a seat at the United Nations. At the national level (within Kosovo), Russia relies on exploiting institutional and societal weaknesses. The electoral instability, the absence of large permanent expert staff at key ministries and agencies, and lack of inter-institutional coordination weaken the government's ability to respond to Russian threats. Large levels of societal distrust coupled with low media literacy weaken the resiliency of the population to thwart manipulation.

One challenge of this research has been the veil of secrecy with which the Kosovo government and international organizations (in Kosovo) examine this issue. For a country where people love to talk about Russian influence, when presented with an opportunity to shed some clarity on the issue, persons with knowledge of the subject, government officials, legislators, the offices of the President, and Prime Minister, choose to remain silent. Even some international organizations and diplomatic representations in Kosovo accused of being influenced by the Russians chose to remain silent when approached for interviews.

Based on the interviews conducted and the knowledge that is available via open sources, Russian influence in Kosovo is limited but harmful. In Kosovo, Russians do not have a free hand to do as they please considering the hostile environment they operate in, so most of their activities are directed at the global level. Completely stopping Russian influence within Kosovo may be impossible too for as long as Serbia exercises sovereignty over areas with Serb majorities especially in the northern part of Kosovo. However, domestic institutions and the international community can deter and contain Russia's hostile influence in the country by implementing several recommendations.

Kosovo Government must:

1. Strengthen state institutions and inter-institutional coordination;
2. Limit electoral instability;
3. Create a resilient cyberinfrastructure;
4. Communicate the threats to the population;
5. Foster resiliency amongst the population through media and digital literacy education.

International Community should:

1. Cease promotion of political plans that enable Serbia to exercise sovereignty over Serb majority areas in Kosovo;
2. Prepare Kosovo for NATO membership;
3. Educate, train, cooperate and coordinate with Kosovo security organizations on hybrid war using best practices from the Baltics;
4. Create a Regional Center of Excellence for Hybrid Defense.

This research seeks to add new knowledge to the very limited scholarly work that examines Russia's

influence in Kosovo. This work should serve as a starting point for further scholarly research on this important issue. The next phase of this research will seek to examine Kosovo's vulnerabilities to Russian influence in the cyber domain.

INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of the 2016 United Kingdom (UK) referendum on European Union membership (Brexit) and the 2016 presidential election in the United States (US) have brought the issue of Russian influence operations to the center stage of international politics. The biggest surprise is not that Russia was involved, but how ill-prepared the US and UK were in countering these challenges. In the US, key Republican lawmakers did not want anything to do with the bipartisan condemnation of Russian meddling, the Obama administration was worried that a strong response will be seen as aiding Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and Donald Trump would assert that the findings by 17 US intelligence agencies showing Russian interference are incorrect.¹ The public too showed itself to be very gullible to Russian manipulation, with 47% of Republicans believing that Russia was not behind the election interference.² In the case of the UK and Brexit, a 2020 report by the Intelligence and Security Committee of the Parliament shows that the UK government "badly underestimated" the Russian threat and refused to investigate Russian interference. These two cases of Russian influence raise an important question: if the world's most advanced countries do not fully understand the objectives, the actors, and the pathways of Russian influence and are unable to effectively guard against it, what hope is there for smaller countries such as Kosovo to deconstruct Russian influence in the country?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, influence can be defined as "the capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone or something, or the effect itself."³ Individuals, groups, and countries can exercise influence to varying degrees. The outcome from the act of influence can be twofold, benign, or malignant. Influence is benign if both the influencer and the target state benefit from it. A benign influencer can rely on its political system, economic model, culture, and free flow of information to win over a country. For example, since the end of the Cold War, the US and the European Union (EU) have sought to influence the political and economic direction of countries, near and afar. By promoting democratization and a free market economy abroad, the US and EU countries have sought to benefit by gaining new allies, creating new markets, and lessening national security threats. But, the adoption of Western political and economic development models has benefitted the target states as well. Since 1990, countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have enjoyed peace, freedom, economic prosperity, and political stability as a result of the US and EU political and economic liberalization programs.⁴

Influence can be malignant if it benefits only the country that exercises it and harms the target country. A malignant influencer relies on tools such as "propaganda, disinformation, and

1 Waddell, Kaveh. 2016. "Why Didn't Obama Reveal Intel about Russia's Influence on the Election?" The Atlantic, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/12/why-didnt-obama-reveal-intel-about-russias-influence-on-the-election/510242/>.

2 Kiley, Jocelyn. 2017. "US Public Sees Russian Role in Campaign Hacking, but Is Divided over New Sanctions." Pew Research Centre. January 10, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/10/u-s-public-says-russia-hacked-campaign/>.

3 "Definition of Influence by Oxford Dictionary." n.d. Lexico Dictionaries. Accessed September 21, 2020. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/influence>.

4 Lagon, M. P. (2011). Promoting democracy: The whys and hows for the United States and the international community. Council on Foreign Relations. Sedaca, N. B., & Bouchet, N. (2014). Holding Steady?: US Democracy Promotion in a Changing World. London: Chatham House.

malinformation”⁵ (PDM2) to manipulate an opponent into undertaking a prescribed set of actions and policies. In certain contexts, a state can also engage in “influence warfare” integrating PDM2 with “assassinations, political repression, and other activities to undermine popular support for governments.”⁶ A malignant influencer does not seek to promote but impose its political/economic system on a target state.

Russia is a great example of such a malignant or hostile influence. Since the end of the Soviet Union, it has focused its influence operations primarily toward two strategic regions. First, the former Soviet space or near abroad is considered Russia’s principal strategic region. There, it has sought to maintain its dominant position by resorting to political threats, economic coercion, and armed force when necessary (e.g., Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). The Balkans present the second most important geostrategic region for Russia’s foreign policy.⁷ The region “historically [has] been one of the most important focal points of Russian foreign policy, cultural influences and attempts to spread an ideology of the Orthodox solidarity and the Slavic reciprocity.”⁸ However, unlike in the former Soviet space, the Balkans has served as a battleground for Russian score-settling with other empires (e.g., Austria-Hungary, Ottoman) vying for influence in this region throughout the centuries. It is in this context of imperial score-settling that we must examine and seek to understand Russian influence, particularly in Kosovo.

The aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution and the internal instability in the Caucasus forced Russia’s foreign policy in the early 1990s to “remain within what might be called the parameters of the international consensus,”⁹ however, the war in Kosovo and the political consolidation under President Vladimir Putin renewed Russia’s traditional “spoiler” approach to dealing with the Balkans. Since 1999, Russians have been very active across former Yugoslavia breeding instability and conflict.

In Bosnia, the Russians have worked hard to weaken the common state and strengthen the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska, RS) as a means of keeping Bosnia from NATO membership, to maintain Bosnia as a failed state, and potentially gain a foothold in the country through the establishment of a military base.¹⁰ Over the last several years, Russia has been arming the RS paramilitary force, providing training for RS police and Serb paramilitary group Serbian Honour.¹¹ In North Macedonia, “the Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord...as part of a region-wide endeavor to

5 Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. 2017. “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making (Council of Europe Report DGI (2017) 09).” Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666>.

6 Dhunjishah, Colonel Michael G. 2017. “Active Measures Working Group: What’s Past Is Prologue.” Strategy Research Project. U.S. Army War College. <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3414.pdf>.

7 Hoxhaj, Enver. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Personal interview. Prishtina, January 22, 2020.

8 Sotirovic, Vladislav B. 2016. “The Tsarist Russia and the Balkans.” *The Baltic Review*, March 24, 2016. <https://baltic-review.com/tsarist-russia-balkans/>.

9 Bowker, Mike. 1998. “The Wars in Yugoslavia: Russia and the International Community.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50 (7): 1245–61.

10 Rujević, Nemanja. 2019. “Trka u Naoružanju Na Balkanu – Rusija Želi Vojnu Bazu u RS-u.” *Deutsche Welle*. August 1, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bs/trka-u-naoru%C5%BEanju-na-balkanu-rusija-%C5%BEli-vojni-bazu-u-rs-u/a-49828674>.

11 Borger, Julian. 2018. “Arms Shipment to Bosnian Serbs Stokes EU Fears.” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2018. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/bosnian-serb-police-arms-purchase-stokes-eu-fears>.

stop Balkan countries from joining NATO.”¹² Whereas in Montenegro, upon failing to obtain the government’s approval for a naval port for the “replenishment and repair of Russian military vessels,” and determined to keep the country from NATO membership, Russian GRU and FSB operatives unsuccessfully plotted the violent overthrow of the government on election night on October 16, 2016. The investigation into the plot showed that “Russian agents, Serbian extremists, and leaders of the Montenegrin opposition alliance (Democratic Front) prepared to oust the government... [by] instigat[ing] political violence with the hope of triggering nationwide protests and toppling the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) government led by Milo Djukanovic.”¹³

The Kosovo Context

The substantial literature on Russian influence across Central and Eastern Europe¹⁴ is sparse when it comes to Kosovo specifically. Kosovo’s case is in many ways unique as Russia’s levels of operation, actors on which it relies upon to carry out its influence operations, and tools it uses to execute its influence are unlike those used in the region. While elsewhere Russia can rely on ethnoreligious links, common history, oil and gas sales, foreign direct investment, or state capture to spread its influence, in Kosovo it cannot: invoke ethnoreligious links to gain goodwill amongst the country’s majority population; rely on economic instruments as the economy is not based on natural gas and there is no Russian foreign direct investment; gain the support of political elites as they are pro-Western and anti-Russian.

The lack of Russian leverage on Kosovo does not mean their lack of interest or ability to spoil. Long before Russian military troops occupied the Prishtina Airport under the cover of darkness in June of 1999, Russia did have a presence in Kosovo. In 1903, Russia appointed Gregory Stepanovich Shcherbina as a consul in Mitrovica during the last years of the Ottoman presence in the Balkans “in order to get true information on the suffering of Serbian people.”¹⁵ Shcherbina, like his compatriots almost a century later, was “welcomed as a savior... [there to] save the Serbian population from the Albanian tyranny.”¹⁶ However, the consul’s role was not to gather facts but to influence the political situation arising from civil strife in Kosovo. According to Serb sources

12 Belford, Aubrey, Saska Cvetkovska, Biljana Sekulovska, and Stevan Dojčinović. 2017. “Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia.” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. June 4, 2017. <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.

13 Bajrović, Reuf, Vesko Garčević, and Richard Kraemer. 2018. “Hanging by a Thread: Russia’s Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro.” Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>.

14 E.g., CSD. 2019. “Russia’s Economic Influence in the Balkans: Tackling Kremlin’s Sharp Power.” Policy Brief No. 89. Sofia: Center for Study of Democracy. <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/policy-brief-no-89-russias-economic-influence-in-the-balkans-tackling-kremlins-sharp-power/>; CSD. 2018. “Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks.” Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy. <http://old.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18228>; Bieber, Florian, and Nikolaos Tzifakis. 2019. “The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options.”

BiEPAG Policy Brief June 2019. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3406295>; Galeotti, Mark. 2018. “Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?” ECFR/250. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm; Stronski, Paul, and Annie Himes. 2019. “Russia’s Game in the Balkans.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-203333-ea.pdf>.

15 Russian Consul Gregory Shcherbina Remembered in Kosovo 110 Year after Death.” 2013. Russkiy Mir Foundation. April 2, 2013. <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/131776/>.

16 Vujovic, Miso. n.d. “A Victim of Noble Sentiments.” Serbian National Review. Accessed September 21, 2020. <http://www.nacionalnarevija.com/en/tekstovi/br5/Prijatelj%20-%20Grigorij%20Stepanovic%20Scerbina.html>.

describing the turmoil of March 1903 “the Russian Consul, in a Cossack uniform, patrolled the front line of defense on his horse, encouraging the [Serbian] defenders not to yield...[and] continued patrolling the posts with several Turkish officers and policemen” concerned with Albanian attacks.¹⁷ The perfidious entry of Russian troops in Kosovo in advance of NATO forces in 1999 and Russia’s continued influence should serve as a reminder that “it is a mistake to think that there is a return of Russia in the Balkans, as Russia never abandoned its interests in the Balkans.”¹⁸

Russia’s influence in Kosovo can be construed as malignant. It does not seek to support closer ties with the Kosovar population, promote its political/economic ideology, nor to bring Kosovo within its sphere of influence by offering it economic aid, political support, military assistance, or membership in the Russian led regional institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). The fact that Russia does not seek to win over Kosovo, limits what it can accomplish in terms of influence.

Another limiting factor for Russian influence in Kosovo is the entrenched presence of the US and EU. The NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), currently includes 3,532 troops from 27 nations¹⁹ and is responsible for the external security of the country while various international organizations promote democratization and the free-market economy as a way to influence Kosovo’s state-building direction. Kosovo is so “thoroughly Americanized that Russia best can hope for is to be a disruptor. It will never have much influence in the country.”²⁰ The population overwhelmingly embraces Western culture, capitalism, and democracy and is “perhaps the most pro-American country in the world.”²¹ A 2020 poll by the International Republican Institute found that a supermajority (94 percent) in Kosovo cited the United States as their country’s most important political and economic partner²² and an “overwhelming majority (93 percent) support accession to the EU.”²³

17 Ibid.

18 Hoxhaj, Enver . Interview with Elis Vllasi. Personal interview. Prishtina, January 22, 2020.

19 NATO. 2020. “Kosovo Force (KFOR) Key Facts and Figures.” February 2020. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/2/pdf/2020-02-KFOR-Placemat.pdf.

20 Anonymous (Western Advisor to Kosovo Government). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 4, 2020.

21 Sullivan, Stacey. n.d. “Kosovo’s America Obsession.” Time.Com. <https://time.com/kosovo-independence-america-obsession/>.

22 International Republican Institute. 2020. “Western Balkans Poll Shows Strong Support for EU.” International Republican Institute. <https://www.iri.org/resource/western-balkans-poll-shows-strong-support-eu>.

23 Ibid.

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES IN KOSOVO

Traditionally, Russia has deployed military troops and ‘little green men’ throughout the former Soviet space to gain control of territories populated by ethnic Russians. More recently, Russia is actively pursuing the Gerasimov Doctrine, by relying on “the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures implemented with the use of the protest potential of the population...[to] achiev[e] political and strategic goals, which in some cases significantly surpass[e] the strength of weapons in their effectiveness.”²⁴ Russia has made use of oligarchs, journalists, academics, experts, and clergy to engage in influence operations, from the UK to Ukraine and from Finland to Greece.

While one can understand a Russian policy of controlling areas populated by ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics or manipulating the Western public to advance its foreign and security policies, one is left wondering of Kosovo’s importance to Russia’s foreign policy. After all, Kosovo is small, impoverished, with no strategic value topographically,²⁵ and no Russian diaspora.

In Kosovo, Russia’s influence is aimed at accomplishing two broad geostrategic objectives, to offer a Russian alternative to the West, and to gain a foothold in Serbia (both physically and in harmonizing Serbia’s foreign policy with Russia’s). Kosovar and Serbian high-ranking politicians, see Russian influence as part of a 21st-century style geopolitical chessboard. The Russians are not in Kosovo because they care about the country itself, but to target the Balkans as a whole. As Russia’s “interests and capabilities have increased so has their level of involvement” in the region, according to Kosovo’s Deputy Prime Minister, Enver Hoxhaj.²⁶ Serbia’s former Minister of Economy believes that “Serbia and the rest of the Balkans are a pawn in a great game of powers between Russia, the EU, and the US.”²⁷ In the aftermath of the Kosovo war, Kosovo in a way has become a 21st century Berlin, a hotbed of espionage and intrigue, with global and regional powers (e.g. US, EU, Russia, Turkey, Serbia) vying and competing for influence to promote, protect or impose their interests.

Balkan politicians are not alone in grasping the value of geostrategic competition in the region. There is ample evidence for this in scholarly and policy literature. Hågen Karlsen in his examination of “current thinking and perceptions on [Russian influence] among Western secret services” finds Russia relies on influence to provide the Russian state with regime security, predominance in

24 Gerasimov, Valery. 2013. “The Value of Science in Foresight.” VPK News. February 26, 2013. <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

25 It lacks access to the Adriatic Sea, and is not at the crossroads of oil and gas pipelines.

26 Hoxhaj, Enver . Interview with Elis Vllasi. Personal interview. Prishtina, January 22, 2020.

27 Prothero, Mitch. 2017. “All Eyes Are On The Balkans As The World Retreats.” BuzzFeed News. March 19, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mitchprothero/all-eyes-are-on-the-balkans-as-the-world-retreats>.

Russia's near abroad, and weaken NATO²⁸. In addition to preventing NATO expansion,²⁹ Russia also seeks to weaken the EU since it “strongly believes that there is a perverse advantage to EU expansion into the Balkans...[as] the potential admission of new, poorer countries will inevitably create further demands on common resources and more division in the bloc.”³⁰ Other geostrategic explanations that have been offered include: Russia seeks to expand its global influence at the expense of the US;³¹ to “position itself as important power broker” in the region so that it can leverage its position in the Balkans for concessions from the US and EU in places like Ukraine and Georgia, or prevent countries in the Western Balkans from joining NATO.³²

Russia as an Alternative to the West

The scholarship on Russian influence in Central and East Europe (CEE), especially in the Western Balkans, is generally in agreement over the above-named strategic objectives that Russia seeks to attain. Where many of these studies fall short is in addressing the question of why Russia is increasingly confrontational with NATO and EU, especially in the Balkans. Some studies³³ have suggested that NATO expansion eastward makes Russia insecure, and perhaps this is why Russia is confronting the US and EU across CEE including Kosovo. This could very well be one of the reasons why Russia seeks to counter the US and EU in Kosovo, but it's not the only reason why. As Russia's fortunes have changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, so have their appetites to position itself as an alternative model to the West. Russia has historically sought to promote ‘Russian civilization’ as an antithesis to European liberalism. Russian military aggression in the former Soviet Republics, but also in Syria and Libya (since 2011), “constitutes one component of a broader strategic agenda to rebuild a Moscow-centered bloc designed to compete with the West... in which Moscow dominates Eurasia and half of Europe”³⁴ according to one of the preeminent scholars of Russian foreign policy, Janusz Bugajski. The Balkans including Kosovo present the best opportunity, outside former Soviet republics, for Russia to showcase her alternative as it puts the EU and NATO expansion on the defensive.

A Russian alternative to the Western liberal order has been discussed and promoted by a diverse intellectual elite spanning a century. Ivan Ilyin, writing between the 1920s-1950s envisioned a Russia as a Christian fascist state ruled by an iron hand. Ilyin's theory was premised in that “the world was corrupt; it needed redemption from a nation capable of total politics; that nation was

28 Karlson, Geir Hågen. 2019. “Divide and Rule: Ten Lessons about Russian Political Influence Activities in Europe.” *Palgrave Communications* 5 (1): 1–14. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0227-8>.

29 Bechev, Dimitar. 2019. “Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans.” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/book-detail?id=856030>.

30 Galeotti, Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?

31 Stronski, Paul, and Richard Sokolsky. 2017. “The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework.” Brief. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/14/return-of-global-russia-analytical-framework-pub-75003>.

32 IISS. 2019. “Russia and the Western Balkans.” IISS. June 2019. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/russia-and-the-balkans>.

33 E.g., Black, Joseph L. 1999. “Russia and NATO Expansion Eastward: Red-Lining the Baltic States.” *International Journal* 54 (2): 249–66; Russett, Bruce, and Allan C Stam. 1998. “Courting Disaster: An Expanded NATO vs. Russia and China.” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (3): 361–82; Mandelbaum, Michael, Susan Eisenhower, Jack Mendelsohn, and Jonathan Dean. 1998. “The Case against NATO Expansion.” *Current History* 97 (617): 132; Barany, Zoltan. 2002. “NATO Expansion, Round Two: Making Matters Worse.” *Security Studies* 11 (3): 123–57.

34 Bugajski, Janusz, and Margarita Assenova. 2016. *Eurasian Disunion Russia's Vulnerable Flanks*. Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/product/eurasian-disunion-russias-vulnerable-flanks/>.

unsoiled Russia.”³⁵ Though largely forgotten, Russian elites led by President Putin began to quote him extensively when articulating their vision of Russia, according to Timothy Snyder. Ilyin has figured so prominently in Putin’s regime that he is been termed as “Putin’s Philosopher” by Anton Barbashin and Hanna Thorun.³⁶

Writing during the Cold War, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winner and a strong critic of the Soviet Union, laid out a vision for a new Russia. His vision was not of a Westernized Russia in the mold of his adopted country, the US. George Friedman on the death of Solzhenitsyn writes that Solzhenitsyn “despised [liberals] obsession with individual rights, such as the right to unlimited free expression...[he] saw the basic problem that humanity faced as being rooted in the French Enlightenment and modern science.” In it alicized, Solzhenitsyn would write of a new Russia that encompasses the territory of the Russian Soviet Republic and all the territories inhabited by Russians throughout the other Soviet republics.³⁷ “At the heart of this Russia would be the Russian Orthodox Church, with not only its spirituality, but its traditions, rituals and art. The state’s mission would be to defend the motherland, create the conditions for cultural renaissance, and — not unimportantly — assure a decent economic life for its citizens. Russia would be built on two pillars: the state and the church,”³⁸ an Orthodox Republic.

Perhaps the best way to understand Russian influence in Kosovo as part of this Russian alternative world is through the writings of Alexandar Dugin. An ideologue close to Russian political elites, Dugin, unlike Ilyshin or Solzhenitsyn, provides a framework for how to bring about a new and a greater Russia. John B. Dunlop in his review of Dugin’s political treatise it alicized writes that “Dugin believes the Atlanticists (especially the United States) consciously plotted the downfall of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR. The Heartland [Russia] therefore is required to pay back Sea Power [US] in the same coin.”³⁹ The goal, as Dugin sees it, is to resuscitate and reinvigorate Eurasia/Russia after the near-fatal geopolitical blows it absorbed from 1989 to 1991” by attacking the US wherever the US is found. In Kosovo, Russia can spoil the US-led state-building without making a large investment (it relies on Serbia and local Serbs to do its bidding locally, and its diplomacy to counter Kosovo access to international institutions and recognition) and worrying about a serious blowback as Kosovo is not a NATO, EU, or a UN member for that matter.

Kosovo represents the most visible symbol of the US and EU liberal interventionism policy of the 1990s. The last state to emerge from the violent break of Yugoslavia, whose liberation from Serbian occupation resulted from NATO intervention, and statehood from the nation-building project that the international community undertook during the UN protectorate (1999-2007). For Russian policymakers, US and EU success in the Balkans, including Kosovo, is equated with regional domino effects. According to the Russian Council (RIAC) “Russia’s withdrawal from the Balkans means a loss of standing in southeast Europe, which will limit room for action in the Mediterranean. That will result in the European Union and NATO exerting even greater pressure

35 Snyder, Timothy. 2018. “Ivan Ilyin, Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism.” The New York Review of Books (blog). March 16, 2018. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>.

36 Barbashin, Anton, and Hannah Thoburn. 2015. “Putin’s Philosopher: Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow’s Rule.” Foreign Affairs, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-09-20/putins-philosopher>.

37 Rowley, David G. 1997. “Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Russian Nationalism.” Journal of Contemporary History 32 (3): 321–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260964>.

38 Friedman, George. 2008. “Solzhenitsyn and the Struggle for Russia’s Soul.” Stratfor. August 5, 2008. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/solzhenitsyn-and-struggle-russias-soul>.

39 Dunlop, John B. 2004. “Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics.” Demokratizatsiya 12 (1): 41–58. <https://tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics>

on the Transcaucasian states and Belarus. The loss of the Balkans will narrow Russia's room for manoeuvre in its relations with Turkey, a country that is bolstering its standing in Southeast Europe. Russia's position in its talks with China will weaken; for China, the Balkans is the final point in the New Silk Road."⁴⁰

For Russia, if the US and the EU cannot succeed in Kosovo (small, homogeneous population, absolutely pro-American/Europe), it will not succeed elsewhere (larger states with larger populations that are not as pro-American) in exporting Western liberal ideas. This potential US failure offers Russia a window of opportunity to promote its political plan as an alternative to Western liberalism, to countries in Europe and far. According to RIAC, Russia must tactically engage in: "[c]reating and supporting constructive political forces in Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Albania and other countries in the region, forces that would be oriented toward Moscow's projects." And, promoting new media narratives of 'Russia as a vehicle of regional stability,' 'Russia as a vehicle of humanitarian cooperation' and 'Russia as a supplier of e-technologies and efficient technological solutions.'"⁴¹ Russia has had varying degrees of success in the region. With Serbia (its greatest partner in the region) it has built a multidimensional relationship encompassing politics, military, economy, and people to people links, whereas with other Slavic countries in the region Russia has built strong bilateral relationships grounded on natural gas sales and foreign direct investment.

Serbia a Regional Foothold for Russia's Balkan Foreign Policy.

The second major geostrategic objective of Russian influence in Kosovo is to gain leverage over Serbia. A Western official advising the Kosovo government,⁴² when asked about whether Kosovo matters to the West, the official responded that a commonly held view amongst EU members is that Serbia represents the grand prize in the region. "Politically, economically and militarily" gaining favor with Serbia is of greater importance than with Kosovo. And, the Russians seem quite attuned to the importance that Serbia holds regionally, at least in the perceptions of the European policymakers, and what it means strategically. If Russia cannot succeed in Serbia (a country with whom it shares ethnoreligious links, an overwhelmingly pro-Russian population, strong historical and economic links) it's very unlikely that Russia would be more successful in gaining allies outside its "near abroad," short of military interventions.

Kosovo is the bargaining chip that Russia uses to get what they want from Serbia. Russia needs a friendly base of operation in the Balkans, and no country is better positioned to do this than Serbia. In return, Serbia relies on Russia's diplomatic capabilities to promote and protect its claims over Kosovo.

Russia has not always promoted and/or protected Serbia's interests or claims in Croatia, Bosnia, or North Macedonia. It recognized Croatia's and North Macedonia's independence before the US did. In the case of Bosnia, it joined other UN Security Council members to impose an oil

40 Entina, Ekaterina, and Alexander Pivovarenko. n.d. "Russia in the Balkans." Russian International Affairs Council. Accessed September 22, 2020. <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/russia-balkans/>.

41 Ibid.

42 Anonymous (Western Advisor to Kosovo Government). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 4, 2020.

embargo and other sanctions on Yugoslavia (i.e., Serbia and Montenegro) in condemnation of Serbia's involvement in the Bosnian war. However, the Kosovo War has served as the turning point for the Russians. On March 24, 1999, NATO intervened militarily to bring about an end of the war in Kosovo, as a UN Chapter 7 sanctioned intervention was not possible due to Russian threats of a veto. In April 2007, Martti Ahtisaari (the former President of Finland) submitted the Ahtisaari Plan detailing Kosovo's path to independence to the UNSC but was rejected by Serbia at Russia's insistence.⁴³ Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008, Russia has not recognized Kosovo's independence and has threatened to veto any Kosovo membership application to the UN. It's Russia's veto power at the UNSC which has kept away Kosovo from fully consolidating its statehood.

The Russians are adamant that any solution to the Kosovo issue, must protect Serbia's claims to Kosovo and be approved by the UNSC where it holds a veto. In his visit to Serbia on June 18, 2020, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated,

“Russia’s stance on the Kosovo settlement remains unchanged. Today we confirmed it once again. We will support any effort, step, or initiative that can actually help Belgrade and Pristina achieve a viable and mutually acceptable decision based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244...First and foremost, the decision that we all want to achieve must comply with international law and, of course, be approved by the UN Security Council.”⁴⁴

To this end, Serbia's attempt at delegitimizing Kosovo's independence by getting some countries to “withdraw their recognitions” of Kosovo has been largely attributed to Russian diplomatic efforts.⁴⁵ Further, Russian global media outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik News have engaged in a disinformation campaign against Kosovo, seeking “to create a permanent negative perception of Kosovo”⁴⁶ around the world. European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, “EU vs DiSINFO” project, shows 45 cases of disinformation “news” stories pushed by Russian outlets (in German, Spanish, English, French, Italian, Russian languages) portraying Kosovo as a state tied terrorism, corrupt state, pushing for an anti-Serbian pact, whose existence is illegitimate, etc.⁴⁷

In return for its aid on Kosovo, Russians have pursued a two-pronged strategy with Serbia. One, Russia has made serious efforts into controlling the strategic industries Serbia. In 2008, Serbia sold the majority stake of its NIS (Oil Industry of Serbia) to Gazprom Neft for € (euros) 400 million,

43 Radeljic, Branislav. 2017. “Russia's Involvement in the Kosovo Case: Defending Serbian Interests or Securing Its Own Influence in Europe?” *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 6 (2): 273–300.

Lavrov, Sergei. 2020. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov' Statement and Answers to Media Questions

44 Lavrov, Sergei. 2020. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov' Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, Belgrade, June 18, 2020.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Retrieved September 22, 2020 (https://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/4168763).

45 Radio Free Europe on the “Russian connection” in Kosovo recognition withdrawal. (2019, July 25). B92.Net. https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=07&dd=25&nav_id=107056

46 Enver Hoxhaj. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Personal interview. Prishtina, January 22, 2020.

47 “Disinformation Cases.” 2020. EU vs DISINFORMATION. April 2, 2020. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.

below the company's real price of € 2 billion.⁴⁸ According to CSD, "Russia has firmly entrenched itself in the Serbian oil and gas sector Russia has firmly entrenched itself in the Serbian oil and gas sector. Serbia imports close to 65 percent of its natural gas needs and more than 70 percent of its crude oil consumption from Russia."⁴⁹

Two, in matters of foreign policy, Serbia has aligned her foreign policy with Russia on matters of interest to Russia. Serbia, despite its EU candidate status, has refused to align its policies with those of the EU on issues concerning Russia. In 2014, Serbia was the only country in Europe to not impose sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea. It has continued to vote against any resolution at the UN that is critical of Russia.⁵⁰ In 2019, Serbia signed a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, despite warnings from the EU that such an agreement fall foul of Serbia's EU candidate process. Finally, since 2012, Serbia has hosted the Russian Serbian Humanitarian Center (RSHC) in Nis. According to the official website, "RSHC is an intergovernmental humanitarian non-profit organization with the rights of a legal entity"⁵¹ whose tasks include the provision of humanitarian assistance in cases of emergency as well as training and professional development of emergency responders, amongst other tasks. However, based on claims by Lt. Col Imer Avdiu (Kosovo Security Force) and international security sources in Kosovo⁵², the RSHC is nothing but a front for Russian intelligence outpost in the region and a base of operations. As Lt. Col. Avdiu points out, the location of the RSHC provides Russia with a presence within 100 miles of the US "Bondsteel" military base, EU troops in Bosnia, and is near NATO members, Albania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Romania.

Russian Tactics in Influence Operations

Moscow's tactics in pursuit of these strategic objectives include⁵³:

- 1) Divide and rule,**
- 2) Elite capture,**
- 3) Exploiting unrealistic expectations,**
- 4) Positive image that Russia enjoys among the local population.**

Fox and Clarkhall⁵⁴ are more specific in terms of instruments Russia relies on to expand its influence:

48 Cassata, Peter. 2008. "Pipeline Politics: Gazprom Seals Serbia Deal." Atlantic Council (blog). December 29, 2008. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/pipeline-politics-gazprom-seals-serbia-deal/>.

49 CSD. 2018. "Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks." Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy. <http://old.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18228>.

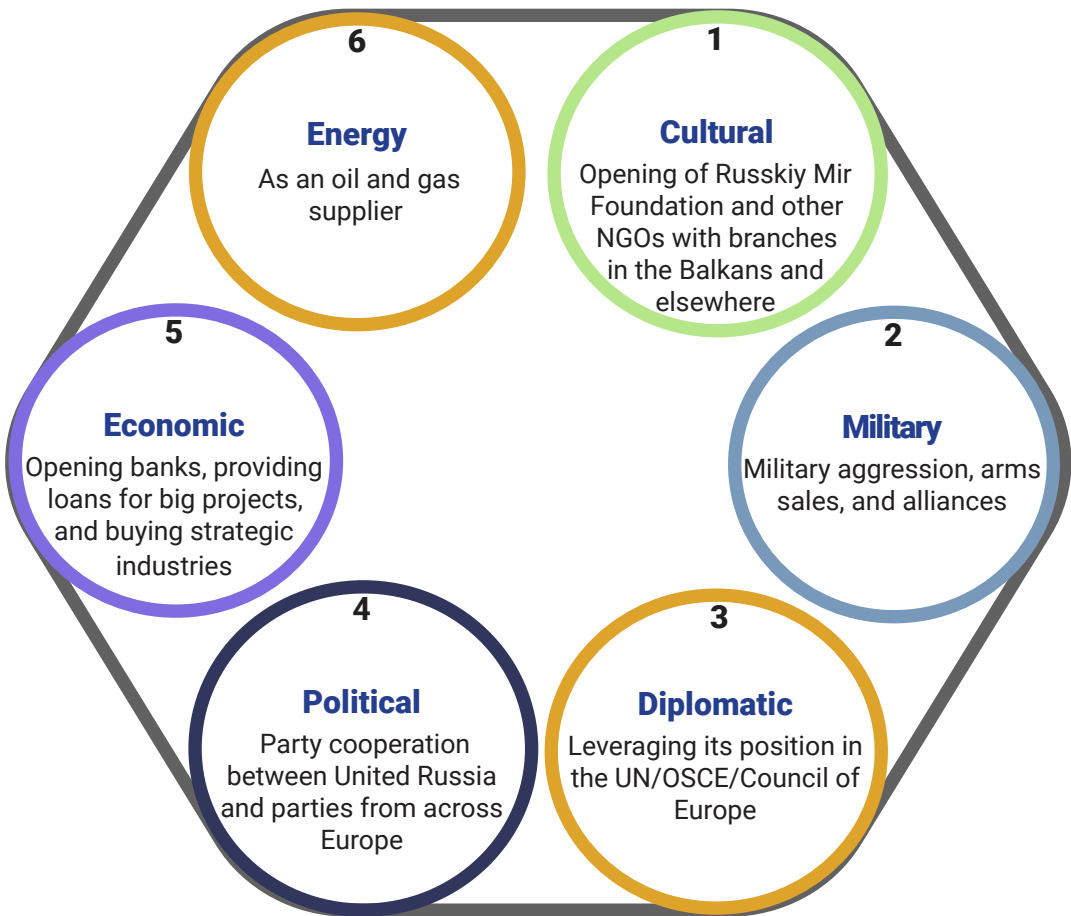
50 Zivanovic, Maja. 2019. "Serbia Backs Russia Over UN Resolution on Crimea." Balkan Insight. December 10, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/10/serbia-backs-russia-over-un-resolution-on-crimea/>.

51 "About Us | Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center." n.d. Accessed September 27, 2020. <http://en.ihc.rs/about>.

52 Avdiu, Imer. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 21, 2020.

53 Galeotti, Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?; Bechev, Dimitar. 2018. "Understanding Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans." September 2018. Strategic Analysis. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategic-Analysis-2018-9-Beshev-.pdf>.

54 Clark, David, and Andrew Foxall. 2014. "Russia's Role in the Balkans—Cause for Concern." The Henry Jackson Society. June 2014. <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Russias-Role-in-the-Balkans.pdf>.



The menu of tactics that are available for influence operations is long and eclectic, and but their use increasingly depends not in choosing one tactic over another, but in “a combination of offensives by interjecting itself in neighbors’ affairs, capturing important sectors of local economies, subverting vulnerable political systems, corrupting national leaders, penetrating key security institutions, undermining national and territorial unity, conducting propaganda offensives through a spectrum of media and social outlets, and deploying a host of other tools to weaken obstinate governments that resist Moscow” (Bugajski 2016:6).

One of the first instances of successful Russian influence operations regarding Kosovo included its deception operations against NATO members to ensure that Russian forces would be the first to enter Kosovo upon the signing of the Military Technical Agreement (also known as the Kumanovo Agreement) on June 9, 1999. To preempt NATO forces from being the first international forces to enter Kosovo, a Russian military contingent that was deployed in nearby Bosnia as part of SFOR, abandoned its post, and began its deployment to Kosovo. As CNN and other international media showed Russian armored vehicles approaching the Kosovo border, on June 11, 1999, the Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov “assured Albright that the Russians were only taking up positions

outside Kosovo's borders, in preparation to enter the province when there is an agreement."⁵⁵ As Russian troops continued onto Prishtina, they were met with cheers by the local Serbs. "[S]hortly after the Russian troops arrived in Pristina... Ivanov told CNN it was unfortunate they had entered Kosovo and they had been ordered to withdraw immediately. The troops encamped near the Pristina airport and showed no sign of departing right away. Other diplomats justified Russian moves as "the work of a rogue low-level Russian commander,"⁵⁶ Although the Russian masterplan of gaining a foothold at Prishtina Airport and then to air transport thousands of Russian soldiers so that they can carve out their zone of influence in Serb majority areas, failed, Russians were successful in forcing NATO to include Russians as part of KFOR.

While the Russian soldiers that were part of KFOR have long left Kosovo, Russian influence operations have not ceased. Over the years Russians have been accused, and at times caught, of engaging in influence operations. While the case of the UNMIK official caught aiding the Serb protesters in Zubin Potok to prevent Kosovo police from exercising their duty has received the most attention due to his arrest and deportation,⁵⁷ there have been other less noted examples. In 2014, Vitaly Molonov, "Russia's Orthodox Culture Warrior", the vehemently anti-gay legislator, opened "a Russian human rights center" (NGO) in Mitrovica without registering it with Kosovar authorities.⁵⁸ On January 9, 2020, Russian agents were seen participating in a Serb protest in Gracanica,⁵⁹ and several days later Russian journalist Andrey Kondrashov and "propagandists closest to Putin"⁶⁰ was detained and interviewed on suspicion that "under the guise of a journalist, intent on gathering sensitive information, which may undermine the security of the Republic of Kosovo."⁶¹

55 Hoffman, David. 1999. "Failed NATO Talks Triggered Russia's Run to Kosovo." The Washington Post, June 12, 1999. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1999/06/12/failed-nato-talks-triggered-russias-run-to-kosovo/2e88444c-de8a-457f-899c-c8c5a9f9ea1f/>

56 Lally, Kathy, and Mark Matthews. 1999. "Kosovo Incursion Baffles Allies; Show of Strength, 'tweaking' among Possible Motives." The Baltimore Sun, June 12, 1999. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1999-06-12-9906120123-story.html>.

57 Begisholli, Blerta. 2019. "Arrested Russian UNMIK Staffer Leaves Kosovo for Serbia." Balkan Insight. Retrieved September 25, 2020 (<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/30/arrested-russian-unmik-staffer-leaves-kosovo-for-serbia/>).

58 Scekic, Jasmina. 2014. "Russia's Orthodox Culture Warrior Comes To The Aid Of Kosovo's Serbs." Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty. February 2, 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbs-russian-orthodox-warrior/25250663.html>.

59 Gazeta Express. 2020. "Agjentët e Inteligjencës Ruse Po Qëndrojnë Në Kosovë, Planifikojnë Trazira Në Prizren." Gazeta Express. January 13, 2020. <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/agjentet-e-intelegjences-ruse-po-qendrojne-ne-kosove-planifikojne-trazira-ne-prizren/>.

60 "Putin's List." Database of Free Russia Forum, 2020. <https://www.spisok-putina.org/en/personas/kondrashov-2/>.

61 Pajaziti, M. "Kosovo Fearful of Russian Influence." Independent Balkan News Agency, January 14, 2020. <https://bal-kaneu.com/kosovo-fearful-of-russian-influence/>.

POTENTIAL ACTORS IN THE RUSSIAN SAGA

Who are the principal actors through whom Russia exercises its influence in Kosovo? Three actors potentially can, in various degrees, serve as transmitters or agents of influence, knowingly or unwittingly.

Kosovars and Albanians ⁶²

The least likely, willing actors of influence are the Kosovars who are probably the most anti-Russian people in the Balkan peninsula. A 2017 Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) Security Barometer poll found 53.2% of those surveyed viewed Russia as “very hostile” and another 29% viewed it as “hostile”, while 75% of respondents found Russia’s influence to be “harmful.”⁶³ Unlike other nations in the Balkans that are related to Russians either through Slavic kinship (Southern Slavs including Bulgarians) or Christian Orthodox faith (Greeks, Romanians), Kosovars are not related to Russians through kinship nor faith.

In countries, where ethnoreligious links are absent, Russia has relied on economic instruments to coerce and mold the local population/government. In CEE, Russia’s most potent weapon in its influence operations has been natural gas and FDI. “Russian pipeline supplies remained the main source of EU gas imports”⁶⁴ and this dependence is increasing as net imports increased by 21% in the second quarter of 2019, compared to the same period in 2018.⁶⁵ This dependence on Russian natural gas varies by country. EU Countries in the region (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia are dependent to a large degree on Russian gas. The likes of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia get between 75-100% of their natural gas from Russia. ⁶⁶

In Kosovo, in addition to facing a hostile population, Russia is unable to draw on economic links as they are non-existent. Kosovo’s economy is not dependent on natural gas. Gazprom does not show any 2018 sales of natural gas to Kosovo nor Albania. ⁶⁷ Furthermore, the level of Russian

62 In this report, I use the term “Kosovar” to refer to Kosovo Albanians. The majority of Kosovo’s population are ethnically Albanian. To differentiate Albanians in Kosovo from those in Albania, frequently Albanians in Kosovo are referred to as “Kosovo Albanians.”

63 Emini, Donika. 2016. “Public Perceptions towards Foreign Policy and Dialogue with Serbia.” Kosovo Security Barometer – Special Edition. Kosovar Center for Security Studies. <http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Public-Perceptions-towards-Foreign-Policy-and-Dialogue-with-Serbia-633>.

64 Directorate-General for Energy. 2019. “Gas and Electricity Market Reports.” Market Analysis. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/energy/data-analysis/market-analysis_en.

65 Ibid.

66 Shiryajevskaya, Anna, and Dinna Khrennikova. 2019. “Why the World Worries About Russia’s Natural Gas Pipeline.” The Washington Post. November 6, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/why-the-world-worries-about-russias-natural-gas-pipeline/2019/10/31/c3c12892-fbfb-11e9-9e02-1d45cb3dfa8f_story.html.

67 “Delivery Statistics.” Gazprom Export, 2018. <http://www.gazpromexport.ru/en/statistics/>.

FDI is minuscule. According to Kosovo statistics from 2016, Russia's investment stood at \$2 million, and \$7 million in exports. According to Vıcek and Jırušek, Russian oil companies have a presence in Serb majority parts of Kosovo, via their Serbian subsidiaries (Beopetrol-Pristina Doo.).⁶⁸ However, the more recent data shows this company to be in liquidation (bankruptcy), and only one company Lukoil lubricants showing Inter Trading as their dealer in Kosovo.⁶⁹

So how does a vehemently anti-Russian population become an actor of the Russian influence in Kosovo? Unwittingly, of course! The Western advisor of the Kosovo government stated that "Kosovars have become transmitters of Russian influence and they don't even know it...by weakening the state-building endeavor to advance their interests." Valon Kurhasani of National Democratic Institute-Kosovo and Enver Hoxhaj agree that Kosovars are inadvertently complicit as local media frequently carry Russian packaged news in the press without vetting the source of the information. Often, the Russian news stories planted in "Western" media are simply translated into Albanian. At times, the local media carries stories of Russian might, again without examining the source of the information.

Despite the absence of affection for Russians or Russia, amongst Albanians, there are some concerns amongst at least one government official and a senior officer of KFOR, that Russian influence may creep in via Albania. One development that caught the Kosovo government by surprise was the "historic visit" by the Russian Patriarch Kirill to Albania on April 28, 2018. The Russian patriarch was welcomed by the head of Albania's Autocephalous Orthodox Church, Archbishop Anastasios,⁷⁰ and then held a separate meeting with Prime Minister Edi Rama and President Ilir Meta. No explanations were provided to Kosovar counterparts as to the purpose of the Patriarch's visit to Albania.

Recently, there has been some speculation that Russian oligarchs are getting cozy with Albanian politicians. According to Mursa Musabelliu, the Director of Albania's State Intelligence Service appeared before the Parliamentary committee on security, in a closed hearing, and testified about Russia's attempts to expand their influence in the country. It is reported that in 2005 and 2007, Russian operatives sought connections in the Albanian Army and attempted "to influence internal affairs stretching from information gathering to active participation in recruiting Albanians citizens" that were part of the bureaucratic apparatus in the country.⁷¹

Moreover, in response to a Mother Jones report, in 2019 prosecutors in Albania filed criminal charges against Lulzim Basha, the head of the Democratic Party of Albania, regarding more than \$600,000 in payments that his party reportedly made in 2017 to a Republican lobbyist to arrange for a meeting between Mr. Basha and President Donald Trump. The allegations were that "Scotland-based shell company connected to mysterious Russian nationals...may have helped back Basha's lobbying in the United States, as he advocated relatively nationalist policies more

68 Vlček, Tomáš, and Martin Jırušek. 2019. *Russian Oil Enterprises in Europe*. Springer International Publishing.

69 "Dealers." Lukoil, 2020. <https://lukoil-lubricants.ro/en/Distribution/Dealers>.

70 DECR Communication Service. 2018. "Patriarch Kirill meets with President of Albania." Russian Orthodox Church. April 30, 2018. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5188771.html>.

71 Musabelliu, Marcela. 2019. "Albania External Relations Briefing: The Talk of the Nation: Russia's Potential Influences in Albania." China-CEE Institute. May 2, 2019. <https://china-cee.eu/2019/05/02/albania-external-relations-briefing-the-talk-of-the-nation-russias-potential-influences-in-albania/>.

suited to Russia's preferences for the Balkans.⁷² According to the US Department of Justice documents, Biniatt Trade paid Muzin Capitol Partners, LLC \$600,000 to highlight the contributions of the Albanian diaspora to the US and Western society.⁷³ UK's Companies House website shows a Konstantin Ferulev (Russian citizen) to be a "person with significant control" in KF Global Management LLP, a subsidiary of Asverro Corporation, a partner to Biniatta Trade.⁷⁴ However, in 2020, the Tirana District Court dismissed all charges against Lulzim Basha.⁷⁵

While failing to make a significant impact on recruitment, Russians have capitalized on the "Greater Albania"⁷⁶ political platform that has some support amongst Albanians regionwide. There is a substantial number of Kosovars that seek unification with Albania and have historically played a deferential role to "brothers" from Albania. A 2019 survey conducted by the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society and the Open Society Foundation in Albania reports that "given the choice in a referendum, 75% of Albanians in Albania and 64% of Albanians in Kosovo would support national unification."⁷⁷ Such widespread support for unification has served Russian interests well in promoting the alleged Greater Albania platform to lobby against Kosovo. Russia falsely "accuses Kosovar Albanians of a raft of wrongdoings, such as aspiring to form a union with Albania and create so-called Greater Albania, threatening neighboring states with plans to establish a Kosovo army, and turning the country into a base for international terrorism."⁷⁸ As Kosovo has sought to establish diplomatic relations with countries in Africa and Latin America, Kosovo diplomats frequently were asked about Kosovo's pursuit of "Greater Albania."⁷⁹

Kosovo Serbs and Serbia

To not be undone in terms of affection for another great power, Serbian favorability of Russia is similar to that of Kosovars for the US. A 2018 NDI poll of the Western Balkans, found that 60% of Serbs viewed Russia more favorably than other states,⁸⁰ with 55% of them believing that Russia is

72 Levintova, Hannah, and Dan Friedman. 2019. "The Head of Albania's Conservative Party Faces Criminal Charges, and an Ex-Trump Aide Is Involved." Mother Jones. June 13, 2019. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/06/the-head-of-albanias-conservative-party-faces-criminal-charges-and-an-ex-trump-aide-is-involved/>.

73 "Exhibit B to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as Amended." 2017. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6414-Exhibit-AB-20171114-2.pdf>.

74 <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/OC391311/persons-with-significant-control>. See also "AGROTEX NEMO INTERNATIONAL TRADING LP - Filing History." n.d. Companies House. Accessed September 25, 2020. <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/SL022707/filing-history>.

75 "Court Clears PD Leader Basha of Failing to Report Party Financial Statements." 2020. Exit News. January 13, 2020. <https://exit.al/en/2020/01/13/court-clears-pd-leader-basha-of-failing-to-report-party-financial-statements/>.

76 The term "Greater Albania" has several derivatives all implying the unification of all Albanians found throughout former Yugoslavia and Greece with Albania proper. The Kosovars and Albanians use the term "National Unification" to denote the peaceful unification of Kosovo with Albania. However, Serbia and Russia (primarily) but also Greeks and Macedonians have used the terms "Greater Albania" and the "Tirana Platform" as a fearmongering tactic to portray all Albanians as a regional hegemon who will use armed force to bring about the unification of all Albanian lands (Kosovo, Albania, and parts of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Greece).

77 Demi, Agron, and Blendi Çeka. 2019. "KOSOVO – ALBANIA Interaction, Knowledge, Values, Beliefs, Cooperation and Unification." Prishtina, Tirana: Kosovo Foundation for Open Society / Open Society Foundation Albania. https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/raporti_plote_kosove_-_shqiperi_-_eng.pdf.

78 RIA Novosti. 2019. "'Kosovo Army' can provoke a new crisis in the Balkans, according to the Foreign Ministry," April 15, 2019. <https://ria.ru/20190415/1552697746.html>.

79 Hoxhaj, Interview.

80 Other states/institutions included in the survey: China, EU, UAE, Turkey, USA, NATO.

militarily superior to NATO.⁸¹ In a 2019 visit to Belgrade, President Putin was treated to a “carnival-like celebration,”⁸² and is viewed by 56% of Serbs as the world’s most trustful world leader.⁸³

The blind love for Russia is so strong, that 25% of the population believes that Russia is the largest donor to Serbia,⁸⁴ although EU is “by far the biggest investor, biggest trade partner, and biggest donor to Serbia.”⁸⁵ According to the EU data, “[i]n the last 10 years EU cumulative Foreign Direct Investments in Serbia stood at EUR 15.4 billion. ... [with] 3 billion in non-refundable grants between 2001 and 2015, [and] 300 million euros in annual donation, [placing Serbia] in the top 3 countries which receive most financial assistance from the EU.”⁸⁶ Such skewed views of Russia’s donor status surprised German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel during his 2017 visit to Serbia. He wondered “why people, on their way from the airport to downtown Belgrade, are greeted with a big billboard dedicated to the Russian-Serbian friendship, while the yellow and blue colors of the European Union are completely invisible.”⁸⁷

Some amongst local Serb elite complain that the Kosovar Serbs are always “objects and not subjects” in all matters that involve them. Few members of Serb civil society⁸⁸ assert that Kosovar Serbs are not autonomous actors that execute Russia’s influence schemes in Kosovo. Other sources including international sources, note that local Serbs are “an extended arm of Russia” but only to the degree that Serbia allows their cooperation with the Russians. “When it comes to Kosovo Serbs, Russians have to go through Belgrade,” and although the population may be sympathetic to Russia, local Serbs are in no position to cooperate with Russia contrary to Serbia’s wishes as the populace would lose all the benefits that Serbia provides.

The two particular groups within the Kosovo Serb community that have been implicated in Russian influence, involves political leaders and organized criminal groups, especially those from the northern municipalities. While the Serb List has a working relationship with the United Russia⁸⁹ political party, according to Enver Hoxhaj, there are a few political leaders⁹⁰ amongst Kosovo Serb community, but not all, that are staunchly pro-Russian in the same vein as Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic and Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin, and do not hesitate to do Russia’s bidding in Kosovo.⁹¹ Some civil society actors in Kosovo have stated that the Russian

81 NDI. 2019. “Between East and West: Public Opinion & Media Disinformation in the Western Balkans.” National Democratic Institute. January 25, 2019. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/between-east-and-west-public-opinion-media-disinformation-western-balkans>.

82 “Hajdari, Una, and Michael Colborne. 2019. “There’s One Country in Europe Where Putin Is a Rock Star.” Foreign Policy, January 25, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/25/theres-one-country-in-europe-where-putin-is-a-rock-star-russia-serbia-vucic-belgrade-kosovo/>.

83 Republika. 2019. “Kome Srbi veruju?! Ovo je svetski lider u koga imamo puno poverenje.” Republika. March 1, 2019. <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/srbija/109216/kome-srbi-veruju-ovo-svetski-lider-koga-imamo-puno-poverenje>.

84 “Pomaže Evropska Unija, Građani Misle Rusija.” 2017. Radio Slobodna Evropa (RFE/RL). June 5, 2017. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-eu/28529994.html>.

85 “EU Partnership with Serbia: EU Best Partner and Biggest Donor for 20 Years – and in the Front Line against COVID-19.” 2020. The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia. April 24, 2020. <http://europa.rs/eu-partnership-with-serbia-eu-best-partner-and-biggest-donor-for-20-years-and-in-the-front-line-against-covid-19/?lang=en>.

86 Ibid.

87 Radio Slobodna Evropa, Pomaže Evropska unija, građani misle Rusija.

88 Anonymous (member of Serbian Civil Society Organization). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 4, 2020, and February 6, 2020.

89 Jedinstvena Rusija podržala Srpsku listu (2017) Srpska lista. Available at: <http://srpskalista.net/jedinstvena-rusija-podrzala-srpsku-listu/> (Accessed: 25 September 2020).

90 Despite several attempts to interview Mr. Igor Simic (Srpska Lista, chief of parliamentarians) on the issue Russian influence in Kosovo, and a scheduled meeting, the interview did not take place.

91 Hoxhaj, Interview.

attaché in Prishtina, Kira Kornilova,⁹² attends almost every meeting that involves local Serbs and that her influence with the Serbs is significant.⁹³ Additionally, Serb organized criminal networks operating in northern municipalities have for a long time been used as political instruments by Serbia. An intelligence officer with KFOR affirms that “organized crime groups (Serbian) do carry out an agenda that is likely influenced by the Russians.”⁹⁴

Serb Orthodox Church (SOC)

Kosovar officials including, Lt. Col. Imer Avdiu, the former head of Kosovo Intelligence Agency and some international staff based in Kosovo assert that no other group in Kosovo is a greater vessel of Russian influence than the Serbian Orthodox Church, despite the greater aid, cooperation, and protection offered by the Western agencies and diplomatic missions. What makes SOC as the most ideal actor in implementing Russian influence? Because “SPC is very informed and has the best reach of any Serb institution. The clergy are very educated, do understand other viewpoints, but stick to their narrative in defiance of the facts. They are quite manipulative,” according to a high-ranking international security official.⁹⁵

On January 9, 2020, Serb protesters in Gracanica, the seat of Gracanica Monastery, demonstrated in solidarity with their Serbian brethren in Montenegro against Montenegro’s Law on the Freedom of Religion and Beliefs and Legal Status of Religious Communities,⁹⁶ a law seen by the SOC as means for the country to confiscate the church’s properties. According to Insajderi.com, citing unnamed Kosovo security sources, there were three Russian agents amongst the protesters, including a GRU agent who had entered Kosovo from Montenegro under falsified documents showing him to be a UNMIK employee. The three Russians accompanied by a Serb interpreter were seen visiting the Gracanica Monastery on January 8 and 9, 2020.⁹⁷ The use or abuse of SOC churches as hosts by the Russians is not new. In 2016, Montenegro authorities took down a group of Russian and Serbian co-conspirators seeking to overthrow the government in an attempt to thwart Montenegro’s NATO membership. SOC, while “not directly implicated in the plot’s attempted execution... [it] hosted an overnight meeting of the coup’s leadership at Montenegro’s famed Ostrog monastery just before the elections.”⁹⁸

The Serb Orthodox Church in Kosovo strongly denies the allegations that they are a tool through which Russia exercises influence in Kosovo. When asked “in what ways, if any, have the Russians manipulated the Kosovo Serb population or the Serb Orthodox Church (SOC) to serve as instruments of its influence?” Kosovo’s “cyber monk” Abbot Sava Janjic responded:

92 According to one international intelligence source, Ms. Kornilova is Russia’s military attaché in Kosovo.

93 In one meeting attended by the Russian attaché, a survey examining Russian influence in Kosovo was distributed to local Serbs attending the meeting. In subsequent meetings with the local Serbs, the Serb organizer of the meeting refused to distribute the survey.

94 Anonymous (intelligence officer). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 6, 2020.

95 Anonymous (Senior staff, international security organization in Kosovo). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 6, 2020.

96 Office of International Religious Freedom. n.d. “2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Montenegro.” International Religious Freedom Report for 2019. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State. Accessed September 25, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/montenegro/>.

97 “Rusët pjesë e protestës në Gracanicë.” 2020. Insajderi Online. January 12, 2020. <https://insajderi.com/ruset-pjese-e-protestes-ne-gracanice/>.

98 Bajrović, Garčević, and Kraemer, Hanging by a Thread, 11.

“I am personally not aware of any kind of such influence, especially not in or through our Church which some of your questions hint at. We do share the same faith as the Church of Russia but so we do with Orthodox Americans, Albanians, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians, etc...I am not aware of any Russian charity organisation, school, cultural organisation or any funding coming from Russia to Kosovo. Russian citizens cannot even easily enter Kosovo due to the visa restrictions. The topic in my firm opinion seems to be very much exaggerated and necessarily leads to speculations.”

Abbot Janjic asserts that SOC in Kosovo has a closer relationship with other sister churches (e.g., Greece, Albania, Slovakia, than with the ROC despite ROC interests for the conditions of Serbs. That relationship is considered sparse as:

“[i]n the last 20 years there has been only few Russian visitors to our sites. Mostly it is the members of the Russian office in Kosovo who often attend the mass in Pristina with their Romanian, Greek, Bulgarian and other colleagues or other diplomats who are Orthodox Christians... There is indeed a great interest of the Russian Church in the conditions in which we live here in Kosovo and rightly so. However, compared to the interest from the Western media the Russian media interest to talk to representatives of our Church in Kosovo seems to be negligible.”

Members of the Serb civil society organizations in Kosovo share Abbot Janjic’s sentiment that SOC is not an actor engaged in propagating Russian influence. For one member of Serbian CSOs in Kosovo, SOC is “a peculiar institution” which has played a central role “in the establishment of the modern Serbian state” and in the protection of what is a Serbian identity.” As such, “the Church has agency” and that “it’s very hard to instrumentalize an institution that perceives itself as immortal.” Moreover, if SOC is cooperating with Russia “it does not mean that they are serving Russian interests, but that perhaps we should understand that in the context of SOC making use of allies when it serves their interests.”⁹⁹

For some members of the Serb civil society, the assertion by Kosovar and others that SOC is doing Russia’s bidding is wrong. For, if the Church was interested in doing what Russia may prefer them to do, the church would have supported Kosovo’s partition along ethnic lines as desired by Serbia’s president, and that the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the SOC would not have unanimously rejected Kosovo’s partition on an ethnic basis, in November 2018.¹⁰⁰ However, the communique issued following the assembly perhaps belies the innocence of the church on the partition.

99 Anonymous (member of Serbian Civil Society Organization). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 4, 2020.

100 Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church. 2018. “Communique of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church on Kosovo and Metohija.” Serbian Orthodox Church. November 8, 2018. http://www.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_assembly_bishops_serbian_orthodox_church_kosovo_and_metohija.

The SOC rejects Kosovo's partition not because it believes in the ability of Kosovars and Serbs to live together in peace, but because it does not want to settle for a piece when it can claim and hope for the whole of Kosovo. As SOC considers itself an immortal institution, as long as the Church does not agree to partition, the expectation is that one day when the US and NATO leave, Serbia will assert their claims to all of Kosovo. This strategic patience is grounded in the Church's belief that its current lack of control in Kosovo has a historical parallel with its position during the Ottoman period. That Serbia, Serbs, and their Church existed in Kosovo long before Ottoman period and that they patiently awaited the decline of the Ottoman empire while they nurtured relations with other powers to secure their claims in Kosovo as Ottomans departed. If they could outwait the Ottomans, they can outwait Americans too.

In May 2018 meeting of the Holy Assembly, the Bishops appealed "to our statesmen, not to give their consent to the alienation of Kosovo and Metohija, as that which is taken by force will be returned; however, that which is given to another is lost forever, and that, the Serbs and Serbia cannot allow."¹⁰¹ The position of the church since Kosovo's liberation in 1999 has been that "the full sovereignty and integrity of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija cannot be questioned under no circumstances...For our Church, Kosovo and Metohija has never been nor can ever be only a political issue whose solving is under exclusive monopoly of the state authorities."¹⁰²

At this point, there is no publicly available hard evidence that links the SOC in Kosovo with the Russians. However, "the absence of evidence, is not evidence of absence." The Church's "religious" relationship with Russians visiting the SOC in Kosovo is vehemently questioned by the Kosovar authorities and civil society, and by some in the international security organization present in Kosovo. Several of the interviewees, former and current officials, and security officers asserted that the government authorities have ample evidence linking SOC to Russian influence.

In the literature on Russian influence, the Russian Orthodox Church plays a very important role in extending the state's reach and influence. ROC is very politicized and serves to absolve the state of its sins, perhaps more so than helping the common faithful spirituality. According to the Center for the Study of Democracy, "[o]ne of the key channels of Russian sharp power in SEE has been the Orthodox Church. It plays the role of a key spiritual intermediary for the spread of the Russian agenda in SEE [Southeastern Europe], organizing various initiatives under a religious veil. Paradoxically, the Russian and many SEE orthodox churches have been bastions of former security services, further strengthening the Kremlin's influence."¹⁰³

The warm relationship between the two sister churches, ROC and SOC, extends beyond matters of faith. The political relationship between the two institutions can be described in terms of the main objectives of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (IFUOCN)¹⁰⁴ which calls for the "[c]onsolidation and coordination of the efforts of the international Orthodox community to expand and deepen the ties of the Slavic peoples...[and] [i]nteraction

101 Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church. 2018. "Message of the Holy Assembly of Bishops on Kosovo and Metohija." Serbian Orthodox Church. May 13, 2018. http://www.spc.rs/eng/message_holy_assembly_bishops_kosovo_and_metohija.

102 Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Communique.

103 CSD. 2019. "Russia's Economic Influence in the Balkans: Tackling Kremlin's Sharp Power." Policy Brief No. 89. Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy. <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/policy-brief-no-89-russias-economic-influence-in-the-balkans-tackling-kremlins-sharp-power/>.

104 International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations, is an NGO of the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia serves as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the International Public Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Peoples.

and cooperation with public and religious structures, state and local governments in Russia and other countries to implement the Fund's projects and programs."¹⁰⁵ IFUOCN has had offices in Belgrade and Novi Sad since 2005, according to Vladimirov et al (2018).¹⁰⁶

A recent example of the close political coordination between the two institutions pertains to the status of the Ukraine Orthodox Church as it sought to break from Russia's hold and obtain autocephalous status. As many autocephalous Orthodox Churches, including those of Constantinople, Greece, and Alexandria recognized Ukraine Orthodox Church's autocephaly, the Serb Patriarch "has made publicly clear that it will not recognize Ukrainian Orthodox independence."¹⁰⁷ The Russian Patriarch hosting the SOC Patriarch on January 29, 2019, linked Ukraine with Kosovo. "Patriarch Kirill called attempts to separate the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church and Kosovo from Serbia "links of the same chain, in some sense."¹⁰⁸ In addressing the Serb Patriarch, Patriarch Kirill commented "We know that Kosovo and Metohija play the unique historical and spiritual role in the life of the Serbian people, and realize how hard it is for everyone who knows the history of Serbia and the Serbian Church to see all the bad things happening in these lands. Yet, the Lord is leading our Churches through ordeals and, perhaps, that is why you, like nobody else, understand our pain caused by the developments in Ukraine."¹⁰⁹ In thanking his host, Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, stated "this is the land [Kosovo] of our glorious history... We do all we can to defend ourselves from these attacks and place our great hopes on big brotherly Russia and on you, Your Holiness. We hope that with your contribution we will be able to defend Kosovo and Metohija."¹¹⁰

International Institutions

International institutions are some of the most impartial actors in international politics. Kosovo, as with many new states that emerged from the breakup of multinational states since the 1990s, has a high number of international organizations present in the country. Some of the institutions present (e.g., UNMIK) are global; a few are regional (e.g. European Union, OSCE); and some are highly specialized (e.g., KFOR, IMF). International institutions in Kosovo are engaged in various aspects of state-building: peacebuilding, democratization; economic and social reforms, and security.

Some institutions, such as the NATO-led KFOR mission, are viewed as more trustworthy than domestic institutions. According to a May 2020 poll by NDI, 80% of those surveyed rated KFOR¹¹¹ as trustworthy compared to 54% who viewed the Kosovo Government as such. Similar, high levels of trust for KFOR are supported by KCSS Security Barometer (2018) which shows that 68.5%

105 "Mission Statement." n.d. The International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations. Accessed September 25, 2020. <http://www.ifuocn.com/>.

106 Center for the Study of Democracy, Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans.

107 Karelska, Khrystyna, and Andreas Umland. 2020. "Russia Set to Escalate Fight against Ukrainian Orthodox Independence in 2020." Atlantic Council. January 2, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-set-to-escalate-fight-against-ukrainian-orthodox-independence-in-2020/>.

108 "Serbian Patriarch Compares Situation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy to Bomb Explosion." 2019. Religion. Interfax. January 29, 2019. <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14894>.

109 DECR Communication Service. 2019. "Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church meets with His Holiness Patriarch Irinej of Serbia." Russian Orthodox Church. January 29, 2019. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5364048.html>.

110 Ibid.

111 According to NDI poll, the only institution that is viewed more trustworthy than KFOR is the Kosovo Security Force.

of people share the sentiment.¹¹² When asked about the favorability of international institutions, Kosovars overwhelmingly favor NATO (4.67 /5) with higher scores indicating greater favorability.

But not all international institutions are viewed as favorably as NATO. Although mission-driven and frequently neutral actors, international institutions are not immune to infiltration and mission skew. The two international institutions that stand accused of being manipulated to serve Russian interests are the UN Mission to Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Russia's enlarged role in these two institutions results from Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council and because OSCE states enjoy equal status and decision making is by consensus. Furthermore, as a member of these institutions, Russia has been able to send officials to serve in both of these missions in Kosovo.

Kosovar officials, when asked what international institutions in Kosovo, if any, are manipulated to serve Russian interests in Kosovo, unanimously agree that UNMIK is the principal institution through which the Russians work. A recent example involves the case of two UNMIK staff members that were detained by the Kosovo Police on May 28, 2019. "Police arrested the Russian team leader of a UNMIK office in northern Kosovo, Mikhail Krasnoshchenkov, and the Serbian head of the UNMIK Program assistance at the same office, Dejan Dimic...Kosovo police claimed Krasnoshchenkov had tried to impede the operation, using his vehicle to form a barricade preventing police from entering a village."¹¹³

There is no agreement on the claims that UNMIK is misused by the Russians. UNMIK officials and some international staff assert that Mr. Krasnoshchenkov did not participate in the protests and is wrongfully accused of aiding Serbs in preventing police officers from carrying out their duties.¹¹⁴ One official describes Mikhail Krasnoshchenkov's behavior during the protests in Zubin Potok not of a Russian instigator, but of a person who has become attached to the local Serbs seeking to protect the demonstrators from the police. However, the fact that the official is a retired Soviet Air Force officer, a former member of GRU, and with experience in Eastern Slavonia, Croatia, in the 1990s, makes it difficult to view his role as that of an impartial international civil servant. At least one staff member working for an international security organization in Kosovo agreed with Kosovo officials that UNMIK is influenced by Russia.¹¹⁵

Despite vehement official denial by the Russians or UNMIK officials, the statements by Kosovo officials should not be dismissed lightly. There is a history of the international organizations manipulated or used by major powers including the Russians/Soviet Union to serve their interests. A 1985 report by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence from Soviet agents "assigned to the United Nations as international civil servant report directly to the Soviet missions... [and that] the Soviet have gained significant advantage over the West through their through [the] tactic of personnel placement and their detailed plans for using the UN to achieve Soviet foreign policy

112 When broken down by ethnicity, 73.7% of Kosovar Albanians (respondents) trust KFOR.

113 Zivanovic, Maja. 2019. "UNMIK Chief Criticizes Kosovo Over Staffers' Arrests." Balkan Insight. June 10, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/10/unmik-chief-criticises-kosovo-over-staffers-arrests/>.

114 "Situation in Kosovo Fragile after Police Raid on Organized Crime Leads to Arrest, Injury of Peacekeeping Personnel, Top Political Official Tells Security Council." 2019. SC/13833. New York, NY: United Nations Security Council. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13833.doc.htm>; Anonymous (Senior staff, international institution in Kosovo). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 28, 2020.

115 Anonymous (intelligence officer). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 2020.

and intelligence objectives.”¹¹⁶ More recently, in 2010, US federal agents took down a network of Russian sleeper agents that were managed out of Russian mission to the UN,¹¹⁷ and in 2018, 12 Russian operatives were expelled from the US for “hav[ing] abused their privilege of residence” at the United Nations in New York City.”¹¹⁸

Another international institution speculated to have been manipulated by the Russians, at times, is the OSCE mission in Kosovo.¹¹⁹ Studies show that Russia “uses [OSCE] for information exchange and propaganda, to legitimize viewpoints, draw attention to its concerns, block unfavorable decisions, constrain others and to cooperate on important ‘low politics’ challenges.”¹²⁰ Recent evidence from Ukraine and the Baltics show that OSCE has been used by the Russians to serve its interests, lending credibility to Mr. Hoxhaj’s accusations, and scholarly findings. In Ukraine, “German broadcaster ARD has leveled new allegations about the role of the Russian observers in the mission; some of the Russian observers are spies with links to Russian military intelligence. According to the ARD report, these Russian individuals have been gathering personal information about other monitors, including personal information like mobile phone numbers addresses, and blood types. True to form, they have also been making notes on potentially damaging or compromising issues, such as drinking habits, sexual activity, and financial issues.”¹²¹

In the Baltics, OSCE has been accused of propagating Russian influence to smear Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as countries where the Russian minority is oppressed. On the closing of Sputnik news agency in Estonia, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir tweeted “I encourage [Estonian] authorities to refrain from unnecessary limitations on the work of foreign media which can affect the free flow of information”¹²² contrary to the evidence that Sputnik is used to spreading Russian disinformation and propaganda. In October 2019, “Désir organised an OSCE conference on media freedom, the safety of journalists, disinformation and fake news in Moscow together with the Russian Foreign Ministry.”¹²³

As Russia increases its influence across Europe, it is unreasonable to expect that pro-Russia staff serving in international institutions in Kosovo can remain unbiased. News reports over the last several years have extensively reported on NATO military officers caught spying for Russia. In 2020 alone, there have been multiple reports of military personnel acting as Russian agents: a Belgian

116 “Soviet Presence in the U.N. Secretariat.” 1985. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence S. PRT. 99-52. Washington, D.C.: United States Senate. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/9952.pdf>.

117 Lynch, Colum. 2010. “The U.N.: Russia’s Den of Spies.” Foreign Policy. June 29, 2010. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/29/the-u-n-russias-den-of-spies/>.

118 Gehrke, Joel. 2018. “Russian Spies ‘Abused Their Privileges’ at UN, State Department Says.” Washington Examiner. March 26, 2018. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/russian-spies-abused-their-privileges-at-un-state-department-says>.

119 Hoxhaj, Enver. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 22, 2020.

120 Kropatcheva, Elena. “Russia and the role of the OSCE in European security: a ‘Forum’ for dialog or a ‘Battlefield’ of interests?” European security 21, no. 3 (2012): 370-394.

121 Niland, Paul. 2018. “Russia Has No Place in the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.” Atlantic Council. July 23, 2018. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-has-no-place-in-the-osce-special-monitoring-mission-in-ukraine/>.

122 Bakaitė, Jurga. 2020. “LRT FACTS. How Did Estonia Force Russia’s Sputnik to Close?” LRT English. February 20, 2020. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1143881/lrt-facts-how-did-estonia-force-russia-s-sputnik-to-close>.

123 Ibid.

colonel,¹²⁴ a senior French officer,¹²⁵ and an ex-US Green Beret soldier,¹²⁶ all accused or charged with spying for Russia. NATO intelligence personnel have not been immune to Russian spying either, with a senior intelligence official from Portugal having been arrested for spying in 2016.¹²⁷

Mr. Hoxhaj admits that there is some concern as some western European political parties (e.g. AfD and DieLinke in Germany) cooperate with United Russia and reflect Russian positions concerning Kosovo. Over the last decade, the European political landscape has changed in ways unseen in decades as leftist and rightist parties openly cooperate with Vladimir Putin's political party and obtain financing from Russian sources. A Voice of America (VOA) news report notes that "an upsurge of populism in Central Europe has also played into Moscow's hands, providing sympathetic political parties and politicians across the continent, including in European Union nations like Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic."¹²⁸ In particular, the potential infiltration or the hijacking of international institutions present in Kosovo becomes more worrisome due to the lax attitude held by some as "not all EU member states see the Russian threat for what it is. Some believe that Russia does not have the economy, the political will to forcefully engage in Kosovo, or elsewhere in Europe."¹²⁹

124 Rettman, Andrew. 2020. "Did Russia Get Nato's Cosmic-Level Secrets?" EUobserver. May 29, 2020. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/148501>.

125 Euronews with AFP. 2020. "Senior French Military Officer Suspected of Spying for Russia." Euronews. August 30, 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/30/senior-french-military-officer-suspected-of-spying-for-russia>.

126 Office of Public Affairs. 2020. "Former Army Special Forces Officer Charged in Russian Espionage Conspiracy." U.S. Department of Justice. August 21, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-army-special-forces-officer-charged-russian-espionage-conspiracy>.

127 Schindler, John R. 2016. "NATO's Big New Russian Spy Scandal." Observer. May 25, 2016. <https://observer.com/2016/05/natos-big-new-russian-spy-scandal/>.

128 "Russian Influence Rising in Balkans, Baltics, Central Europe." 2018. Voice of America (VOA). October 9, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/russian-influence-rising-balkans-baltics-central-europe>.

129 Anonymous (Senior staff, international security organization in Kosovo). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 2020.

PATHWAYS OF INFLUENCE

Successful influence operations require a breeding ground that contains the worst traits present in society. Studies have shown that in the absence of ethnoreligious, ideological, or historical links, ingredients required for the successful infiltration of Russian influence include structural weaknesses. One common conclusion arrived by several international staff based in Kosovo is that the biggest shortcomings in Kosovo that enable Russia to exercise its hostile influence in Kosovo and about Kosovo, are the institutional and societal weaknesses present in the country. Problems with electoral instability due to frequent elections, the lack of governmental sovereignty over entire Kosovo territory, weak cybersecurity, and low levels of societal distrust and media literacy, create a large opening for Russia to further weaken the state, portray it globally as a failed state, and to manipulate the Kosovars to adopt positions or beliefs that are contrary to their national interests.



Electoral Instability

In its 12 years since independence, Kosovo has had 4 presidents ¹³⁰ and 5 Prime Ministers. ¹³¹ On at least three occasions, the head of state or the head of the government emerged from the election process with questioned legitimacy. First, Kosovo’s 2nd President, Mr. Behgjet Pacolli, inaugurated on February 22, 2011, served in that office for only 41 days before the Constitutional Court of Kosovo declared his election “unconstitutional.” ¹³² Second, following Mr. Pacolli’s dismissal, Kosovo’s 3rd President, Mrs. Ahtifete Jahjaga was elected in a manner that questioned her legitimacy. In the absence of an agreement to propose a President that would be voted by the major political parties, Mrs. Jahjaga’s name was suggested by the US Ambassador to Kosovo,

130 Fatmir Sejdiu, Behxhet Pacolli, Ahtifete Jahjaga, and Hashim Thaqi.

131 Hashim Thaqi, Isa Mustafa, Ramush Hajradinaj, Albin Kurti, and Avdullah Hoti

132 “Constitutional Review of the Decision of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, No. 04-V-04, Concerning the Election of the President.” 2011. Case No. KO 29/11. Prishtina: Constitutional Court, Republic of Kosovo. https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/vendimet/gjkk_ko_29_11_eng.pdf

Christopher Dell,¹³³ and subsequently voted by the major political parties.¹³⁴ Finally, the election of the current Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti took place after the Government led by former Prime Minister Albin Kurti suffered a vote of no confidence on March 25, 2020, after 52 days in power. Instead of calling for snap elections in the aftermath of government dismissal, the Constitutional Court issued a judgment that the President does not have to call for new elections so long as the candidate for the Prime Minister has the votes of the majority of deputies.¹³⁵

The electoral instability is a major impediment to the government's ability for institutional coordination to tackle major issues, such as Russian influence. The constant ministerial shuffling and the lack of permanent expert staff at the ministerial level, create a discontinuity in fighting the Russian threat. One example of this is the "marginalization of the Kosovo Security Council [KSC] because previous governments never wanted to establish a strong KSC that can pull together various strands of national security. As such, KSC is unable to coordinate effective responses to Russian influence."¹³⁶

Another example of a lack of institutional coordination is the taking of Jarnije/Bernjak border crossing points, where the KP Director claimed that he was uninformed of the decision to send police forces north. The arrest of Turkish nationals and their deportation to Turkey to face charges of coup d'état against the Erdogan regime led to the dismissal of Minister of Internal Affairs, Flamur Sefaj, and KIA Director, Driton Gashi, by the Prime Minister Hajradinaj. The PM asserted that KIA did not inform him of the operation to deport Turkish citizens who were legally in Kosovo.¹³⁷ President Thaci as well claims that he "was informed by the relevant authorities after the operation, that six Turkish citizens were deported to Turkey today, under the justification that they lacked legal permits to stay in Kosovo."¹³⁸

Poor inter-institutional coordination is also hampering the relationship with the international institutions and weakens the resolve by the allies to aid Kosovo to counter Russian influence. High ranking security officials find it troublesome that Kosovo Police is undertaking unilateral operation in the northern Serb majority municipalities.¹³⁹ The lack of coordination with international partners worries senior security officials, provides Serbia and Russia with a pretext to escalate attacks against Kosovo at the global level and enhance the Russian disinformation campaign. Police operations in Serb majority municipalities are framed by Russian propaganda networks such as Sputnik News, as "invasion of Serb-populated areas."¹⁴⁰ Another example of

133 "Momenti kur Atifete Jahjaga u zgjodh presidente e Kosovës para 9 vjetësh." 2020. Zëri. April 7, 2020. <http://zeri.info/aktuale/339558/momenti-kur-atifete-jahjaga-u-zgjodh-presidente-e-kosoves-para-9-vjetesh-foto/>.

134 Mrs. Ahtifete Jahjaga, prior to becoming President, was a Kosovo Police officer who had trained at the FBI Academy. She is known as the "Envelope President." Based on hearsay [most likely in gest], in a meeting with US Ambassador Dell upon the lack of agreement by the major political leaders to field an agreed upon presidential candidate, Amb. Dell opened his desk drawer, pulled out an envelope containing the name of Mrs. Jahjaga, and congratulated them on having a new President.

135 "Decisions from the Review Session Held on 28 May 2020." 2020. Case: KO 72/20. Prishtina: Constitutional Court, Republic of Kosovo. <https://gjk-ks.org/en/decisions-from-the-review-session-held-on-28-may-2020/>.

136 Anonymous (Western Advisor to Kosovo Government). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 4, 2020.

137 PrishtinaPress.eu. 2018. "EKSKLUZIVE: Haradinaj Shkarkon Kreun e AKI-Së, Driton Gashin." PrishtinaPress. March 30, 2018. <http://prishtinapress.eu/2018/03/30/ekskluzive-haradinaj-shkarkon-kreun-e-aki-se-driton-gashin-dokument/>.

138 "The President Demands to Clarify the Reasons That Led to the Deportation of the Turkish Citizens." 2018. President of the Republic of Kosovo. March 29, 2018. <https://president-ksgov.net/en/news/the-president-demands-to-clarify-the-reasons-that-led-to-the-deportation-of-the-turkish-citizens>.

139 Anonymous (Senior staff, international security organization in Kosovo). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, February 2020.

140 "Russian MFA: Kosovo Special Forces' Invasion of Serb-Populated Areas Provocation." 2018. Sputnik News. October 1, 2018. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201810011068493542-russia-kosovo-serbia-invasion/>.

Russia taking advantage of the lack of inter-institutional coordination is the transformation of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into an army. Some international partners were surprised by the Assembly's move in approving the required legislation on December 14, 2018, considering that in a "recent [December 5, 2018] in a meeting at NATO headquarters, Kosovo officials denied any intention of transforming the KSF into an army."¹⁴¹ In two articles following KSF transformation, RT (former Russia Today) published two articles reporting "Kosovo has upset just about everyone (except the US) by creating its army, in a move that researchers see as revenge against both Serbia and the EU"¹⁴² and that "Kosovo's army causes a split in the West."¹⁴³

Absence of Sovereignty in Serb Majority Areas

Another structural weakness that enables Russian influence in the country is due to the government's inability to consolidate its sovereignty throughout its territory. According to Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM), Kosovo performs poorly both on political stability and rule of law measures.¹⁴⁴ For 2018, Political Stability¹⁴⁵ stood at -0.6 points whereas the Rule of Law¹⁴⁶ equaled -0.37, with higher scores indicating greater stability and rule of law.¹⁴⁷ Kosovo, although a unitary state, effectively functions as a confederal state constituting of Albanian majority areas and Serbian municipalities. In the 10 municipalities (with an area of 1708 km², 17% of Kosovo's territory) where Serbs constitute the majority of the population [also known as Serb municipalities], the central authorities have very weak control. In the 4 municipalities in the north, there is practically no central government authority. The Republic of Serbia controls every facet of authority in those municipalities. Serb politicians work under and obey instructions of Serbia's authorities and the municipalities are run as an extension of Serbia. Serb police officers obey the Kosovo chain of command and display Kosovo Police insignia¹⁴⁸ on their uniforms only insofar as Serbia's authorities allow them.

Although the government is in control of all border crossings with Serbia¹⁴⁹ (since 2011???), Serbia and Serbs have used rural roads to smuggle goods and people, including government officials¹⁵⁰ into Kosovo when legal routes were not available due to various restrictions. The northern crossings have been used for illegal entry by the Russians, including Sputnik News journalists¹⁵¹ as well, including those whose "navigation system had mistakenly sent them across

141 Anonymous (Western Embassy official). Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 23, 2020.

142 "Kosovo's US-Backed Army: A Nominal Claim to Statehood & Revenge on EU." 2018. RT International. December 14, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/446509-kosovo-army-sovereignty-revenge/>;

143 Clark, Neil. 2018. "Kosovo's Army Causes a Split in the West but Who's to Blame?" RT International. December 16, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/446591-kosovo-army-west-split/>.

144 Coppedge, Michael, and et. al. 2020. "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset V10." Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>. Kosovo data obtained using the Variable Graph (<https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/>) and various variables by selecting from "Components."

145 V-DEM combines several indicators which measure perceptions of the likelihood that the government in power will be destabilized or overthrown by possibly unconstitutional and/or violent means, including domestic violence and terrorism.

146 See V-DEM V.10 Codebook.

147 To provide a reference point, Slovenia's political stability score is 0.91 (2018) and the rule of law is 1.06 (2018).

148 In a meeting in Shterpece, Kosovo Police officers (including the commander of the station) of Serb ethnicity were seen with official insignia removed.

149 Jarinje and Brnjak border crossings points were outside government control.

150 Loxha, Amra Zejneli. 2013. "Vulin na severu uprkos zabrani." Radio Slobodna Evropa. October 17, 2013. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vulin-usao-na-kosovo-uprkos-zabrani/25139606.html>.

151 Pantovic, Milivoje, and Die Mornia. 2016. "Kosovo Expels Two Reporters Held in Detention." Balkan Insight.

September 16, 2016. <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/09/16/russian-and-ukrainian-journalists-reported-detained-in-kosovo-09-16-2016/>.

the border with Kosovo.”¹⁵² A political advisor to the former deputy Prime Minister also confirms that there have been cases of Russians crossing the northern border posts into Kosovo using Serbian identification cards.

Cybersecurity

Internet penetration in Kosovo is 96% with 81% of users using it on daily basis, according to STIKK,¹⁵³ and 1.1 million social media users, of which close to a million are on Facebook.¹⁵⁴ The survey shows that the internet is used overwhelmingly for communication, 93%, primarily via Viber and Facebook. Yet despite such overwhelming use of the digital realm, Kosovo scores low on government cybersecurity capacity, according to V-DEM data. On the question of “does the government have sufficiently technologically skilled staff and resources to mitigate harm from cyber-security threats?” experts give Kosovo a score of about 1.19 points out of 4, with higher scores indicating greater resources by the government to combat cyber-attacks.¹⁵⁵ The political parties in Kosovo, tend to score about the same in terms of their cybersecurity capacity (about 1.27 out of 4 over the last 4 years).

On paper, Kosovo is making progress on cybersecurity. According to an assessment by the Global Cyber Security Capacity Centre, “Kosovo has undertaken critical steps in building cybersecurity capacity, most notably it has adopted its first National Cybersecurity Strategy (NCS) [which calls for] the overhaul of cybercrime legislation, the development of a comprehensive umbrella law on cybersecurity, and the creation of a legal basis for the identification of critical national infrastructure.”¹⁵⁶ In practice, however, cybersecurity is weak, at least in terms of critical infrastructure.

According to cybersecurity expert Drinor Selmanaj,¹⁵⁷ the country’s cyberinfrastructure is plagued by three principal issues. First, the country lacks an efficient and transparent procurement system that threatens supply chain management security. Various institutions award tenders (bids) to companies with the lowest prices, and as such, purchase critical products from third-party suppliers instead of vendors, without verifying the end supply source and integrity of the goods and services. Second, the Kosovo Computer Emergency Response Team,¹⁵⁸ (KOS-CERT)

152 RFE/RI’s Balkan Service. 2020. “Kosovo Prosecutor Seeks Fine For Russians Charged With Illegal Border Crossing.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. January 14, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/prosecutor-in-kosovo-seeks-fine-for-two-russians-charged-with-illegal-border-crossing/30377219.html>.

153 “Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo National Quantitative Survey.” 2019. STIKK Kosovo ICT Association. https://stikk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/STIKK_IK_Report_Internet_Penetration_V3-final-1.pdf.

154 Kemp, Simon. 2020. “Digital 2020: Kosovo.” DataReportal. February 18, 2020. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-kosovo>.

155 See V-DEM V.10 Codebook.

156 “Kosovo Has Undertaken Critical Steps in Cybersecurity, Says New Cybersecurity Capacity Maturity Model Assessment.” 2020. The World Bank. June 29, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/29/kosovo-has-undertaken-critical-steps-in-cybersecurity>.

Full report can be accessed at https://mzhe-ks.net/repository/docs/Cybersecurity_Capacity_Assessment_for_the_Republic_of_Kosovo_2019.pdf

157 Selmanaj, Drinor. Video interview with Elis Vllasi. September 21, 2020. Drinor Selmanaj is the founder of the largest cyber defense education institute in the Southeast Europe, Cyber Academy.

158 A CERT is a team or organization of experts that handle computer security incidents. CERT is “responsible for the protection against, detection of and response to an organization’s cybersecurity incidents. A CERT may focus on resolving incidents such as data breaches and denial-of-service attacks as well as providing alerts and incident handling guidelines. CERTs also conduct ongoing public awareness campaigns and engage in research aimed at improving security systems,” according to <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/CERT-Computer-Emergency-Readiness-Team>.

consists of two part-time employees that assist various government agencies with cybersecurity despite high demands due to the global pandemic, Covid19, in addition to other responsibilities. This vulnerability is made worse by Kosovo's lack of membership in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Number (ICANN) ¹⁵⁹ as the country has no dedicated range for Internet Protocol (IPs). As such, organizations, businesses, corporations, and other institutions that want to be on the Internet must register in Serbia or Albania. When a vulnerability or a threat is detected by cyber threat protectors that impact these Kosovo institutions, that notification goes to CERTs in Serbia and Albania and not Kosovo, thereby reducing the possibility of a timely response. Lastly, various governmental institutions, depend overwhelmingly on external (non-Kosovo) contractors for various cybersecurity services (e.g., North Macedonia, Bulgaria). While some reliance on external resources is unavoidable due to expertise, "agencies have no precise mechanism of favoring domestic experts and contractors. They also have no means in mandating that external contractors work with local companies to build local talent and expertise."¹⁶⁰

Moreover, a former political advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asserts that Kosovo lacks a secure diplomatic cable system. Confidential communications between Kosovar authorities and the diplomatic representations based in Prishtina are conducted in person. More importantly, both sources express deep reservations over the data servers used by the government as the government does not maintain its data servers but has outsourced this function to private companies. The chief concern is that in a country where corruption runs rampant, a private company entrusted with confidential governmental data leaves the door open for the abuse of data or manipulation.

Societal Distrust

A major societal weakness that enables hostile influence in Kosovo, Russian or other, are the low levels of social capital, according to a Western embassy official based in Kosovo.¹⁶¹ OECD defines social capital as "networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups... [It can be understood] as the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together."¹⁶² Based on a confidential poll conducted by a Western embassy, Kosovo exhibits "unhealthy" levels of societal distrust. The results ¹⁶³ show that while Kosovars tend to trust immediate family members the most, the trust in the other relational categories (extended family, neighborhood, community, society at large) drops precipitously with each category indicating distancing. The Western embassy official asserted that Kosovars will find it difficult to fight hostile influence in a society where no one trusts no one else. A different poll, conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI-Kosovo) supports the claims of low societal trust. A poll conducted in 2020 found that only 5% of those surveyed identified "relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues" as sources of information people trust the most, a drop of 4 % from 2019. In 2020, people in Kosovo

159 ICANN helps coordinate the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) functions, which are key technical services critical to the continued operations of the Internet's underlying address book, the Domain Name System (DNS). The IANA functions include: (1) the coordination of the assignment of technical protocol parameters including the management of the address and routing parameter area (ARPA) top-level domain; (2) the administration of certain responsibilities associated with Internet DNS root zone management such as generic (gTLD) and country code (ccTLD) Top-Level Domains; (3) the allocation of Internet numbering resources; and (4) other services.

160 Selmanaj. Interview

161 Anonymous. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 23, 2020.

162 "What Is Social Capital?" n.d. OECD Insights: Human Capital. <https://www.oecd.org/insights/37966934.pdf>.

163 When asked to see the poll results, I was told that the data is confidential and cannot be shared.

trust each other slightly more (5%) than they trust TV stations from Serbia (2%).

Kosovars not only do they trust each other very little, but they also show deep distrust of the government. The data shows that only 16.2% of Kosovars (respondents) have trust in the government, 18.4% have trust in the National Assembly, and 40.6% trust the local institutions. According to the pollster, KCSS, “[s]uch a lack of trust among citizens in these core institutions may have derived from country’s poor economic situation, Kosovo’s current isolation - the stagnation of the visa liberalization process, European integration, dialogue with Serbia and non-accession in international organizations and mechanisms.”

This societal distrust is in part fueled by widespread corruption, a key ingredient that makes hostile influence possible. “Kosovo Public Opinion Survey” conducted by NDI (May 2020) shows 51% of those surveyed believe that the country is headed in the wrong direction, with unemployment (84%) and corruption (53%) identified as the two biggest problems facing the country. A 2019 KCSS Kosovo Security Barometer poll shows that the justice systems (The Courts and Prosecution) are perceived to be the most corrupt institutions by 53.5% and 51% of the respondents, respectively. The 2020 NDI poll, also identifies the Presidency as a very corrupt institution, with respondents scoring it a 3.34 out of 5. With higher scores indicating greater levels of corruption. According to the same survey, political parties and the office of the president are considered amongst the least trustworthy institutions.

Media Literacy

The 2019 Media Literacy Index (MLI) ranked Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Estonia as countries with the highest Media Literacy and “best equipped to withstand the impact of fake news due to the quality of education, free media and high trust among people.”¹⁶⁴ According to “Just think about it. Findings of the Media Literacy Index 2019,”¹⁶⁵ the poorest performing countries are too clustered geographically in the Western Balkans.¹⁶⁶ The findings show that: 1) the higher the corruption perceptions in a country, the lowers its results in the MLI; 2) The higher the distrust in journalists in a country, the lower the result in the MLI; and 3) The higher the distrust in scientists in a country, the lower the MLI.

In addition to fueling societal distrust, corruption has a corrosive effect on media literacy which makes Russian influence in Kosovo, that much easier. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index,¹⁶⁷ Kosovo ranks among the more corrupt countries in the world. In 2019 it ranked 36, in 2017 (39), and 2012 (34). A poll conducted by KCSS shows that Kosovo citizens view corruption as endemic with 89.1% of respondents viewing it “as the most dangerous internal threats that Kosovo faces.”¹⁶⁸ Freedom House in its annual country report states,

164 Lessenski, Marin. 2019. “The Media Literacy Index 2019: Just Think about It.” Open Society Institute Sofia. November 29, 2019. <https://osis.bg/?p=3356&lang=en>.

165 Ibid.

166 Index scores: Albania 22, N. Macedonia 12, Bosnia 24, Serbia 31, Montenegro 29. Although the report did not list any data for Kosovo, it is not unreasonable to expect Kosovo to fall in this cluster too.

167 Transparency International. The CPI Score relates to perceptions of the degree of corruption as seen by business people, risk analysts and the general public and ranges between 100 (highly clean) Global rankings list Kosovo 101\198 (2019); 93\198 (2018); 85\198 (2017).

168 Marku, Donika. 2018. “Kosovo Security Barometer - Eighth Edition.” Kosovar Center for Security Studies. November 2018. <http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Kosovo-Security-Barometer-Eighth-Edition-1163>.

“[c]orruption remains a serious problem, and the institutional framework to combat it is weak...Authorities have shown little commitment to prosecuting high-level corruption, and when top officials are prosecuted, convictions are rare. While political parties publicly committed themselves to fighting corruption during the 2019 election campaign, many politicians who were previously implicated in corrupt behavior remained on the ballot.”¹⁶⁹

The low levels of media literacy in Kosovo exacerbated by the poor quality of education and the higher distrusts of journalists make it easier for an actor to engage in manipulation. According to the OECD’s 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Kosovo is amongst the worst performing countries in terms of reading, mathematics, and science. It ranks 75 out of 77 countries.¹⁷⁰ Kosovo does not fare well either in terms of media and distrust of journalists. According to V-DEM data on media bias, Kosovo since 2008 scores between 2.58 and 2.67 out of 4. The local media also shows elevated levels of media self-censorship, with V-DEM reporting scores between 1.2-1.82 out of 3¹⁷¹ since the country’s independence.

Kosovars are particularly distrusting of non-television sources, with social media and news portals considered trustworthy only by 15% and 8% of the population, respectively. According to the NDI-Kosovo poll, when asked whether “some online news websites/portals report false information?” 43% of all respondents noted “Yes, regularly,” an increase of 11% from 2019. Another 38% responded that online news websites/portals report false information “occasionally.” In 2019, 31% of those surveyed responded that “traditional major news sources like TV and newspapers report fake news stories” regularly and 48% claimed that they do so “occasionally.” When asked if these fake news stories are intentional, 40% responded: “on purpose in order to push an agenda.” The low trust placed on news sources (online) is quite damaging to the resiliency to manipulation as online news portals (Gazeta Express, Telegrafi, and Indeksonline) are amongst the Top 10 most searched items on Google Search.¹⁷²

Kosovars are very concerned about disinformation and expect their leaders to take appropriate steps to prevent it,¹⁷³ however, the leaders are unprepared to thwart disinformation as they are largely responsible for creating a “fertile ground” for disinformation to take hold. Research on disinformation in Kosovo conducted by NDI-Kosovo finds “political actors across the spectrum... utilize news portals as disinformation sites and regularly generate disinformation, attempting to achieve near-sighted political gains and sway the electorate.”¹⁷⁴

However, the leaders are not the only ones that are unprepared to counter disinformation. The

169 “Freedom in the World 2020: Kosovo.” 2020. Freedom House. 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2020>.

170 “PISA 2018 Results Combined Executive Summaries, Volume I, II, and III.” 2019. OECD. http://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf.

171 Higher scores (3) indicate no self-censorship.

172 Kemp, Simon. 2020. “Digital 2020: Kosovo.” DataReportal. February 18, 2020. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-kosovo>.

173 Kurhasani, Valon. Program Director, NDI-Kosovo. Interview with Elis Vllasi. Prishtina, January 24, 2020.

174 Kurhasani, Valon. 2019. “Disinformation Conference.” Prishtina, Kosovo: National Democratic Institute - Kosovo.

public too is very unprepared. Kosovars tend to think that they are smart enough to not fall prey to Russian disinformation campaigns. Generally, people are aware of fake news and disinformation but are not resilient to sophisticated disinformation campaigns. NDI-Kosovo research found “participants [have] greater difficulty identifying more advanced or sophisticated instances of disinformation such as doctored videos” ¹⁷⁵

Media distrust also leaves the door open for potential media manipulation. The Russians are no strangers to seeking to purchase media influence. In North Macedonia, “Russian agents have also attempted to influence and offer funds to Macedonian media outlets, including those aimed at the country’s Albanian minority, in order to spread “information and disinformation” in support of Russian policy goals,” according to OCCRP.org. Although, there is no evidence of any direct Russian influence over media in Kosovo, how Russia stories are treated is not a reflection of Kosovar views on Russia and Russian influence. Valon Kurhasani of NDI-Kosovo states that some media, inadvertently, do Russia’s job of presenting a favorable view of Russia and President Putin with many media outlets have uncritically published stories on “Russia’s military might and Putin’s toughness and athleticism” while posting news without attributing sources.

Countering media manipulation, especially sophisticated operations favored by the Russians, is particularly challenging in Kosovo’s media environment for two reasons. First, Kosovo lacks the legislative framework necessary to have transparent media outlets. According to NDI-Kosovo and the media expert Professor Remzie Shahini-Hoxhaj, existing laws do not require media to reveal ownership data or sources of funding. Thus, making it problematic to ascertain whether a foreign company owns any media organization. In a small country such as Kosovo, with a small market and a disproportionately high number of media outlets (21 televisions, 82 radio stations, 20 news portals), revenue transparency would aid in combating media manipulation. ¹⁷⁶ Second, the level of journalistic professionalism is poor as journalists lack the training and the required skills to engage in fact-checking, track fake stories, approach a news story critically, or report the source of news if borrowed from other media outlets.

An academic study by Mavraj and Tahiri ¹⁷⁷ examining coverage of Russian stories in three Kosovo news media (RTK, Koha, and Gazeta Express) from December 2017 to 28 February 2018 finds that Gazeta Express, more so than the other two outlets “tend[s] to construct the affirmative image of the Russian leadership, especially regarding the portrayal of Vladimir Putin.” A media analysis of stories on Russia finds that Gazeta Express had 47 favorable stories and 44 unfavorable stories, and 110 out of 151 stories, lacking a reference (source, journalist, date) for the reported story.

175 Ibid.

176 Hoxhaj, Remzie Shahini. 2020. “Media landscapes in Kosovo after 1989: Kosovo as a unique case of media culture in the Balkans.” [Unpublished Draft].

177 Tahiri, Lindita, and Muhamet Mavraj. 2019. “The The Image of Russia in the Kosovo Media Discourse: Comparison between the Public and the Private Media.” *Informacijos Mokslai* 86:23–40.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia has traditionally exercised a great deal of influence in the Balkans. The degree of her influence has varied over time and is dependent on the local alliances, own capabilities, and the other great powers it faces in the region. Traditionally, Russia's influence has been the greatest amongst the Slavic Orthodox population, Serbs, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Bulgarians. However, at times, that influence has stretched to non-Slavic but Orthodox co-religionists (e.g., Greeks, Romanians) and ideologically aligned regimes and groups (e.g., Albania until the Soviet-Albanian split in 1961; Marxist-Leninist groups in Kosovo in the 1970s-1980s).

So, what is Russia's level of influence in Kosovo? In Kosovo, [a maximum level of influence is impossible](#), due to a lack of links on an ethnic, political, or economic basis. First, the majority of the population of Kosovo is Albanian (non-Slavic ethnically, and non-Orthodox religiously). While in the past, there were a few individuals coalesced in a few groups with ideological affinities for the Stalinist version of Communism, the absolute majority of the Kosovar population expresses no affinity for Russia or Russians. For Kosovars, Russia and Russians represent backwardness (culturally, politically, and economically). Furthermore, as a major Serbian ally, Russia has become a symbol of Kosovars trials and tribulations since at least 1989 (the loss of autonomy). Second, on a political basis, Russia has a very narrow influence space. Kosovo seeks its future in joining the Western political institutions (e.g., EU, NATO, and others). At the same time, the Western-led institutions for the last 21 years have made a concerted effort to politically socialize Kosovo so that it's a politically liberal country with a market economy. The presence of NATO and EU, limit operation space for Russia. The departing of Russian military forces (part of KFOR) in 2003 and Russia's complete and open bias favoring Serbia in international forums convened to bring about Kosovo-Serbia resolution since 1999 leaves little space for Russia to have any positive influence over Kosovars and Kosovo. Russia's approach of supporting any resolution only insofar as it has Serbia's full support makes it difficult for Russia to play a meaningful influential role similar to Greece and Slovakia who have not recognized Kosovo but do have a constructive role that is dependent on Serbian acquiescence.

Powerful states exercise influence even by the virtue of their power. Accordingly, it would be [illusory to expect zero influence](#) exercised by the Russians in Kosovo. They do not have to undertake any concrete actions to manifest their influence. One of the most interesting findings during my 6-week research in Kosovo was the cavalier attitude of the many I spoke with on the record and informally to the extent of Russian influence. There appears to be this perception that Russian manipulation cannot reach Kosovars due to their hostility to Russia. However, considering what we know of Russian influence operations in the West over the last two decades, including their reach and impact on the US elections in 2016, it is highly unlikely that Kosovars cannot be manipulated to serve some interest. Institutional weakness and social distrust combined with a welcoming Kosovar Serb population do provide Russia with maneuvering space to influence development in the country and globally about Kosovo.

What this research shows, is that Russia's influence can be categorized as a [medium level of influence](#). In Kosovo, its influence operations are mostly limited to Kosovar Serbs (with Serbia's

permission) to continue playing a spoiler in domestic politics: to prevent the expansion of the sovereignty to Serb majority areas and to hinder the workings of the national government. It is not directed at influencing the Kosovars or the national government to adopt pro-Russian sentiments or policies.

It's at the global level where Russia has been very effective in its influence operations targeting Kosovo. As Enver Hoxhaj noted, "the heaviest Russian blows have not been in the domestic context, but on the international realm where Russians do have the influence to harm Kosovo." Russia's veto power at the UNSC keeps Kosovo away from the UN and many other international institutions where UN membership is a precondition. She has used her dominant role in the post-Soviet space to prevent former Soviet republics to recognize Kosovo, and her standing in the international community to lobby states to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo or to not admit Kosovo to international institutions (not requiring UN membership). Lastly, it has effectively used Russian media with global reach to shape a negative narrative about Kosovo.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Kosovo Government: thwarting the hostile influence of any country is a daunting task. Protecting the country and its citizens against Russian influence is an epic undertaking, especially considering the inability of major powers like the US and the UK to successfully counter Russian manipulations, propaganda, and disinformation. However, the government is not completely impotent in countering Russian influence.

- **First**, the government cannot and should not fight Russian influence (or that of other hostile countries) alone. It should enlist academia, civil society, and think tanks in this endeavor. Think tanks such as Kosovar Center for Security Studies, Kipred, and National Democratic Institute-Kosovo are particularly well suited to contribute to this task considering their knowledge of Russian propaganda, disinformation, and security threats. After all, most policymaking in the Western countries does not originate in the government halls but various institutes.
- **Second**, the government will not be effective if it continues to treat every act of hostile influence as a government secret. It should adopt the same approach as that of Northern European countries and disclose Russian influence activities in annual public reports.¹⁷⁸ This raises the level of awareness amongst the population to the number of events and the level of information warfare that it is exposed to, so that it may undertake appropriate responses.
- **Third**, various Kosovo agencies should strengthen bilateral relationships, especially in the area of thwarting hybrid warfare, with the Baltic states, and Northern European states to learn their best practices in keeping Russian influence at a distance.
- **Fourth**, Kosovo would be in a much better position to fight hostile influence if it adopts Finland's collective defense strategy and engages students at every level (primary school to university) through a national curriculum that raises information literacy and strengthens critical thinking skills.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, the government, the civil society, and media must cooperate to increase the level of professionalization and transparency in the media to reduce the ability of foreign actors to manipulate the media and to foster a healthier public environment that does not breed disinformation. Jointly, the parties must adopt a policy of offering Kosovo Serbs media alternatives to the Serbian pro-Russian sources they rely on, to avoid further manipulation by Russia.
- **Lastly**, at minimum, the government must undertake institutional reforms that strengthen inter-institutional coordination on security issues. While the

178 Karlsen, *Divide and Rule*.

179 Henley, Jon. 2020. "How Finland Starts Its Fight against Fake News in Primary Schools." *The Guardian*, January 29, 2020, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/fact-from-fiction-finlands-new-lessons-in-combatting-fake-news>.

parliamentary political system instituted in Kosovo does not carry much electoral stability, the government must have permanent expert staff at key security ministries and agencies that have the authority to counter threats. The government must focus its energies on the prevention of Russian and other hostile influence instead of working hard to sanitize the consequences of hostile actions.

For the International Community: international organizations and diplomatic missions in Kosovo are uniquely positioned to significantly degrade Russian influence in Kosovo. Russian influence in the country should not be considered as targeting Kosovo, and as such of no importance to the US, EU, NATO, and others. On the contrary, Western states and international organizations should lead to thwarting Russian influence in Kosovo as Russia is targeting the US, NATO, and EU expansion in the region. There are various measures that countries and international organizations can undertake to aid in this task.

- **First** and foremost, the absolute key to reducing Russian influence in the country and the region is for the US and the EU to stop enabling and empowering Serbia to play the spoiler in the region. The strategy appears to “win over” Serbia to abandon Russia, through billions of euros in financial assistance and appeasement in granting Serbia a veto role over developments in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro. If “superior ability, breeds superior ambition”¹⁸⁰ each concession made to Serbia has drawn Russia closer in the region and expanded its influence. Serbia serves as the gateway for Russian meddling in the region and has allowed its people and its political infrastructure to be at Russia’s disposal with hopes and expectations of Russian support in advancing Serbia’s interest in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro. US and EU appeasement has not worked for thirty years, and it will not work in the future. With each concession at the expense of Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro, Russian maneuvering space has expanded. As evidence has shown, Russia thrives in spaces where frozen conflicts abound.
- **Second**, the US is particularly well placed to aid Kosovo by preparing it for NATO membership. Kosovo’s membership in NATO would ensure its security. Although this may be considered as unworkable due to several NATO members having not recognized Kosovo’s independence, the US carries a lot more weight at NATO than any member state.
- **Third**, the US and NATO have done an exceptional job in professionalizing Kosovo Security Forces. They must further educate, train, cooperate, and coordinate with Kosovo security organizations on hybrid war using the best practices from the Baltics and Finland. The US can also help establish a “Cyber Command” for KSF to serve as the first line of defense against the state or state-sponsored actors engaging in cyber-attacks.
- **Fourth**, NATO and the EU should create a regional Center of Excellence for Hybrid Defense with headquarters in Kosovo but with a mission to aid the countries

180 Saying by Spock, a TV/film character in Star Trek.

of the Western Balkans to resist hostile influence. Since Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are NATO members, and the presence of NATO troops in Kosovo, it would serve NATO's interests to enhance the capabilities of member states in the region, Kosovo and Bosnia.

- **Finally,** in light of Albania's, Montenegro's and North Macedonia's membership in NATO, western policymakers and scholars (to some extent) have been overly optimistic that Russia's free run in the region has come to an end. If the September 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro (with pro-Serbia/Russia factions gaining the majority) are to hold a lesson, then that should be that hopeless optimism makes a very poor substitute for diligence. Russia's perceived tactical losses should not be misinterpreted for battlefield abandonment. There is a very delicate balance between pro-NATO/EU vs pro-Russia forces in several countries in the region, with only a handful of votes in the parliaments separating the two factions. The international community should not dismiss the potential for a Crimea-style Russian/Serbian incursion in northern Kosovo. Although this type of action may seem improbable, at least some senior ranking military officials do not dismiss it outright. Over the years, KFOR capabilities in armaments and military troops have withered away to deter foreign aggression, especially one that forcibly returns Russian "peacekeepers" in northern Kosovo in the middle of a night to "protect innocent Serbian civilians" from "oppressive Kosovo institutions."

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