



Cars in Belgrade pass a billboard with the Russian and Serbian flags and with Cyrillic writing, "Together!" in June 2022. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

## Russia's Influence in the Balkans

*Ivana Stradner*

As the war in Ukraine continues, Russia, with the help of its ally Serbia, is provoking chaos in the Balkans to distract the West. The Kremlin's goal is to exacerbate the existing perilous ethnic tensions in the region into violence and thus to undermine NATO's regional peacekeeping attempts and to reassert Russia's dominance in the region. The ultimate question arises as to why Russia and Serbia would benefit from the crisis in the Balkans.

Vladimir Putin does not need to roll out tanks and jets in the Balkans, as he is successfully using hybrid warfare to undermine the West. While Brussels and

Washington have forgotten the Cold War, the Russian autocrat has not. Russia's goal in the Balkans is to position itself as the region's only reliable conflict negotiator. The game plan accomplishes two goals: strengthening Moscow's standing in the region, and giving Putin leverage over Western powers that would lead to broad concessions and thus keep conflict in the region from escalating. Although Russia does not have a "grand strategy" for the Western Balkans, the region is part of Putin's game, whereby Moscow has been exploiting the existing domestic vulnerabilities in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan by weaponizing secessionist movements.



Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's ultimate goal is to remain in power for as long as possible. By undermining pro-Western opposition in Serbia and strengthening far-right nationalists, Vučić has positioned himself as a moderate deal broker and a source of stability in the region. Vučić also benefits from Russian malign influence by escalating and then deescalating and using crises as a bargaining chip with the West.

The U.S. and the EU have long been ambivalent about defining their interests in the Western Balkans. Russia has capitalized on these years of neglect and leveraged a power vacuum in the former Yugoslavia to gain economic and political influence. Russian influence in the Balkans is not new, but since Russia's full aggression began in Ukraine in February 2022, the West has been paying more attention to Moscow's games in the region. It is past time for the West to turn the tables on Russia's games and put Moscow and Belgrade on the defensive.

Information warfare plays an important role in Russia's national security. Russia's military [considers](#) information as a weapon, as stated by Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu. In 2021 Russia [published](#) its new National Security Strategy, which devoted special attention to "information security." Russian understanding of information security differs from the West. Instead of the term "cybersecurity" (кибербезопасность), the National Security Strategy speaks of "information security" (информационная безопасность). According to Russian military doctrine, information security falls into two complementary categories: One component is on the technical side. These activities involve operations like shutting down pipelines, stealing data, and surveilling personal devices. Most Americans know this as "cybersecurity." The other element of information security is much more subtle and downright stealthy. Rather than infrastructure and networks, this psychological side of Russian operations targets the cognitive processes of the adversary's leaders and population. It focuses on psychological manipulation.

The Russian Ministry of Defense [defines](#) "information war" as the confrontation "between two or more States in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems, processes, and

resources, as well as to critically important structures; undermining political, economic, and social systems; carrying out mass psychological campaigns ... in order to destabilize society and the government."

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was using "active measures," and it was spreading disinformation campaigns to undermine the United States. Today, Russia's methods are very similar, and, with social media and the internet, Moscow's information operations campaigns can reach people faster and more effectively.

The Kremlin has a long history of influence in the Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, Russia spread disinformation prior to the name-change referendum that finally enabled North Macedonia to join NATO. It also established hundreds of North Macedonia-based "troll factories," from which Russia pedaled fake news against the 2016 U.S. elections. Moscow has also been investing in Bosnia and Herzegovina via sowing ethnic and religious discord, while promoting the secession of Republika Srpska.

In Montenegro, Russia [backed](#) a failed coup attempt in 2016. The Kremlin has long utilized the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church as a tool of statecraft to achieve its political objectives in Montenegro using the same strategy the Kremlin employed in Ukraine. For instance, during the Russian annexation of Ukraine, Kremlin-affiliated Orthodox churches supported Russian election interference on behalf of the Pro-Russian opposition in the 2020 local elections, and they had the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate openly campaign for the pro-Russian opposition while running on separatism in Ukraine. Similarly, Russia [leveraged](#) both its own Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro to destabilize the Balkans, help elect Montenegro's pro-Russian prime minister, and organize mass protests in major Montenegrin cities in the early 2020s.

The Kremlin has worked for years to position Russia as leading the defense of "traditional" cultural values against the liberal West. Putin's National Security Concept of 2000 first introduced the connection between national security and spiritual-moral values. On March 31, 2020, Putin signed a decree





Protesters gather with their vehicles in the streets of Nis, Serbia, to show their support of Russia on April 30, 2022. (Sasa Djordjevic / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

adopting Russia's new foreign policy [concept](#) that lists "strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the multinational people of Russia" as key national security interests.

In 2022, Putin claimed that the West has "sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within." The Russian Orthodox Church plays a vital role in Putin's goal to legitimize and expand the role of spiritual values in national security. Both Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church [have](#) the shared vision of preserving the "Russian World," where the Kremlin is "the defender of Russia's Christian civilization."

This narrative has been widely shared in the Western Balkans. The Serbian media have [accused](#) the West of trying to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Serbian director of intelligence has been supporting the [creation](#) of the "Serbian World" — a Balkan equivalent to Putin's

"Russian world" — which is designed to unite all Serbs under a common Serbian cultural framework.

However, the Balkans' most explosive tinderboxes are Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although Kosovo's population is more than 90% ethnic Albanian, Serbs see the country as an ancestral homeland that contains some of the Serbian Orthodox Church's holiest sites. Just as a civil war exploded out of tensions between different religious and ethnic groups in the early 1990s, the Kremlin is now using the Orthodox Church to destabilize the country and the broader region.

In May 2023, ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo clashed with Kosovar police in reaction to the authorities' arrest of a suspected Serbian protest leader. Two weeks ago, after municipal election results were received for all ethnically Albanian mayors, Serbian demonstrators resumed their violent protests. This time, they directed their violence toward NATO's regional peacekeeping troops, KFOR, injuring 30 servicemen.



This escalation of ethnic conflict is part of a familiar pattern. Last year, Serbs living along the disputed Kosovo-Serbia border launched widespread protests over a requirement for vehicles with Serbian license plates in Kosovo to change to Kosovar plates; these protests resulted in a massive road blockade along the border and a show of aerial force on Serbia's territory and required the deployment of Kosovo's police special forces.

These recurring ethnic conflicts stem from long-standing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. When Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, the Serbian government refused to recognize its independence.

In Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church plays an important role. Russia's Orthodox Church has escalated recurring disputes over religious sites, most recently expressing concern for the "destiny of Christian shrines in Kosovo" after tensions flared between Kosovo and Serbia.

Rather than reprimanding Serbia's provocations, the U.S. government accused that nation's government of creating "this crisis atmosphere in the north" and praised Serbia for being a constructive partner. This strange shift in American policy is rooted in U.S. President Joe Biden's risk-averse strategy. In particular, the United States is concerned that if Serbia becomes dissatisfied with U.S. foreign policy, it may fully align with Russia, enabling Putin to escalate violence in Kosovo and destabilize the region. However, the Biden administration should understand that displays of weakness embolden the Kremlin's aggression in the region.

As Serbia acts as a key player in the Kremlin's bid for the Balkans, the two countries have recognized their mutual aims for dominant influence in the Balkans and have accordingly worked to cement their cooperative relationship. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov emphasized that Moscow "absolutely unconditionally supports Serbia." Vučić also has personal interests in Russia's meddling; as Vučić grapples for regional influence, regional conflict will allow him to frame himself as the West's only reliable actor to enforce peace in the Balkans, a parallel approach with Putin's strategy in the Balkans. As a result, the West's

"balancing" strategy of appeasement has been a dream come true for Belgrade and Moscow.

The Kremlin, in turn, sees Kosovo's independence as a precedent for annexation — and a way to call out the West for hypocrisy. In January, Russian U.N. Permanent Representative Vasily Nebenzya referred to Kosovo to justify Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories. He [referred](#) to Kosovo's "right to self-determination" and said residents of occupied Ukrainian territories are merely exercising that right. Russia is wrong to see Kosovo as a precedent for various reasons, not least because the International Court of Justice considers Kosovo a sui generis case, meaning that it has its own unique set of circumstances and cannot be a model for other cases. Moscow has also made it clear that the U.N.'s ability to diplomatically recognize Kosovo's independence will be impossible without Russia's approval. Putin often cites Kosovo to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea, arguing that Western countries' recognition of the country's secession from Serbia created a precedent that legitimizes other territories' unilateral declarations of independence.

The Kremlin has already employed information operations to portray the crisis in Kosovo as one of inevitable escalation that forces Serbia to take a more offensive posture. In May 2023, as a sign of deepening Kremlin support for Serbian actions in the region, Serbian Director of Intelligence Agency Aleksandar Vulin met Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and discussed Russian-Serbian relations.

Meanwhile, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that the situation in Kosovo is moving toward an armed conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has called the outbreak of violence "worrisome" and has indirectly blamed the West, [stating](#) how "a big 'explosion' is brewing in the center of Europe, in the very place where, in 1999, NATO carried out aggression against Yugoslavia." The Russian ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, has called the situation in Kosovo a "hybrid war"; he has also [emphasized](#) that the West is pushing Serbia to recognize Kosovo. A few days after the Serbian president ominously claimed that sister intelligence services from the East [warned](#) him about a color revolution attempt in Serbia, the Russian Ambassador





EU foreign policy head Josep Borrell (4th from L) is received by the presidency council of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, on March 16, 2022. (Elman Omic / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

claimed that President Vučić's [opponents](#) want to do "a Maidan-style coup." Russia's and Serbia's paranoia related to color revolutions resulted in a meeting in 2021, at which Patrushev and Vulin [pledged](#) to work together to combat mass protests and "color revolutions" coming from the West.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the continuing implementation of the [Dayton peace agreement](#) that ended the war in 1995 is facing a crisis. The country continues to be driven by divisions between its Bosniak, Serb, and Croat communities, and Russia has exploited these divisions to its advantage. The Serb member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, has been threatening that Republika Srpska, one of the two entities that make up the country, will secede. In 2021 the Republika Srpska National Assembly voted in favor of starting a procedure for Bosnian Serbs to withdraw from state-level institutions — including the Bosnian army, security services, tax system, and judiciary. After Milorad Dodik met with Vladimir Putin and Nikolai Patrushev in May, a month later, lawmakers in Republika Srpska voted to suspend rulings by Bosnia's constitutional court, which is the beginning of a "legal secession." This was a dream come true for the Kremlin, which has been trying to destabilize the country and [threatened](#) retaliation in 2021 if the country joins NATO. Dodik has long been Serbia's proxy in the Balkans, always ready to escalate

the crisis so Vučić could position himself as a force of stability in the region and negotiate with the West. In addition to Republika Srpska, the Kremlin has been supporting Bosnian Croats to push for the creation of another entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The destabilization of the Western Balkans would not be possible without the assistance of Belgrade. In addition to utilizing soft power tools, such as exploiting the countries' shared religious and cultural ties, Russia has also become a major weapons provider and a lead investor in critical infrastructure, such as natural gas, to exercise influence on governments in the region. For example, Russia sent an S-400 missile system to Serbia in 2019 for a military drill, upping the ante in 2021 when Serbia procured Pantsir S1M air defense systems. The country also hosts the Russian-run "[Humanitarian Center](#)," which is conspicuously close to Camp Bondsteel — NATO's main base in Kosovo.

Despite all this, many in the West think that Serbia is cutting its ties with Russia — in part, because Serbia [allows](#) ammunition shipments to Ukraine. Moreover, the Serbian president also made a strong statement [in support of Ukraine](#). "We said from the beginning that we cannot support Russia's invasion of Ukraine," he said, adding that "for us, Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine — it will remain so." Serbia [voted](#) last March in favor of the U.N. resolution to condemn Russia's aggression, with Serbian U.N. Permanent Representative Nemanja Stevanovic [emphasizing](#) that his country was "committed to observing the principles of territorial integrity and political independence of states." Serbia's U.N. vote was part of Vučić's pragmatic balancing act. Since the resolution did not mention sanctions and was thus only symbolic, Serbia's vote represented a low-stakes opportunity to give it a slight boost in the eyes of Western leaders without jeopardizing Belgrade's relations with Moscow in any substantial way.

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In Serbia, Russian influence operations do not only operate via trolls and bots but also via media platforms such as Sputnik and RT Balkans. A famous Russian Telegram channel, called Cyber Front Z, has been used to spread propaganda online. This information operations project has close ties to Belgrade and has organized several events in via the Information Center Orlovi.

Serbian local media often mirror Russian narratives. In February 2022, Serbian propaganda Informer [stated](#) that Ukraine attacked Russia. Belgrade did not miss an opportunity to accuse the U.S. of not only operating biolabs in [Ukraine](#) but also in [Serbia](#).

The Russian government has used its influence in politics, the media, digital, cultural, and education to advance its influence on youth groups globally. As a part of its global influence campaign, the Kremlin has utilized Russian web brigades to reach young people around the world using internet forums and popular online platforms. Using the same strategy, Russia organized [paramilitary](#) youth [camps](#) in Serbia.

The West should turn the script back on Serbian and Russian games and use the information space to put them on the defensive. Given the rise in nationalism and the far-right groups in the Balkans, selling them the wonders of democracy will not resonate with pro-Russian population. Instead, Western information operations should target the far-right groups and

portray Moscow as an unreliable partner by reminding the Serbs of Russia's failure to aid its ally, Armenia, a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, during last year's clashes in Nagorno Karabakh.

Russia continues to destabilize Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moscow has promised its support to Serbia. However, far-right Serbs may not believe that Russia's military capability is now limited. Instead, effective information operations should remind the Serbs that Russia had previously joined the NATO-led peacekeeping mission to Kosovo but abandoned it in 2003. The West should exploit the episode as a case study of the Russian government throwing its Slavic brothers under the bus, thereby emphasizing to Serbian nationalists, "Where was Russia in 1999 to protect its Slavic brothers from NATO?"

The West should also invest more resources in free media in the Balkans and especially in vulnerable places for Russia's information operations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. And the West should send hybrid warfare teams to Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and strengthen their resilience against Russian and Serbian propaganda. It is high time that the Western powers wake up to the threat the Balkans pose to their interests in peacemaking in Europe and to recognize that Putin's agenda of chaos spreads further than Ukraine's borders.



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