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## **Serbia: Government and the Scarecrow**

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Although the contemporary Russian influence on political parties and the far-right in Serbia has been present since the violent disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1990s, it intensified with the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power in 2012. Not only did the last decade see the party's cooperation with United Russia (UR), that country's ruling party, but also the strengthening of ties between Serbian and Russian defence, intelligence, and security institutions. Shared features of the Serbian and Russian regimes, their ideological proximity, and the legacy of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, during which Moscow effectively rooted for Serbia and vehemently opposed NATO's war on Belgrade in 1999, stood behind this burgeoning cooperation between the two capitals. In post-war conditions, the SNS skilfully exploited the rising anti-Western sentiment in Serbia, which helped sustain its unparalleled dominance over the political scene.<sup>1</sup> The same period also saw the pro-SNS government media, including the highly partisan public broadcasters,<sup>2</sup> have also started propagating pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.<sup>3</sup> With the SNS in power, there has also been a resurgence of old and the emergence of new far-right organisations, with most of them holding pro-Russian views. However, among the more recent groups, there are those with vocal anti-government stances, accusing the ruling SNS of pursuing a false patriotic and pro-Russian policy. These groups also seek to distance themselves from what they perceive as a fake (extreme) right, believing it to be loyal to the ruling party's interests rather than to nationalist and pro-Russian ideals.<sup>4</sup> The distinction will be explained in more detail below.

The consequences of the Serbian nationalists' activities are grave and in line with Russian policy goals of sowing distrust in democracy, the EU, and the West.

Public opinion surveys indicate far-right attitudes and values are normalised among Serbian citizens. There is also further growth of anti-Western sentiment, a decline in trust in democratic values, and the strengthening of pro-Russian views, with many citizens believing that NATO and the US are to blame for the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly concerning that most young people hold negative attitudes towards the EU and democracy, support the rule of a strong leader, and justify violence as a legitimate socio-political tactic.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is important to investigate further the reasons for and instruments of Russia's influence in Serbia, which will be presented through two case studies. In the first case, the Serbian ruling party was analysed as it holds unchecked power in Serbia and has expanded cooperation with UR and between Serbian and Russian state institutions. It has also been using nationalistic, pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric in maintaining, expanding, and strengthening its electorate. The level of cooperation between the two states and the fact that at the same time, Serbia officially would not abandon its goal of an EU makes this a unique case of attempting to "have one's cake and eat it." The second case analyses the Serbian anti-government far-right group, People's Patrol, which has quickly emerged as the most vocal violent far-right agent of Russian influence in Serbia. Analysing this group is also important for two more reasons. Firstly, available research indicates that People's Patrol is an authentic far-right entity, meaning that it is not a fake entity controlled by the SNS government and pursues true nationalistic and pro-Russian policies. Secondly, the group has been cooperating with violent Russian far-right and paramilitary groups, including the infamous Wagner Group.

These studies also explored whether the ruling party's pro-Russian policy is deeply rooted or merely a tool to control pro-Russian influences and sentiments, which are present among Serbian citizens regardless of the activities of the SNS. In that respect, the chapter will explore whether Russia seeks to influence the anti-government far-right to pressure the ruling party not to abandon its pro-Russian policy. However, to better understand the cases analysed, the roots of contemporary Russian influence on political parties and far-right groups in Serbia were first outlined. These research tasks were achieved by reviewing publicly available research and media reports. Key findings were then checked against fourteen interviews with journalists, politicians, and experts on this topic. The research was conducted between May and November 2023.

opposed Serbia's nationalist policies, leading to the United Nations' political and economic sanctions that resulted in Serbia's socioeconomic decline. NATO also militarily intervened first in Bosnia in 1995 and later in Serbia in 1999, leading to Kosovo's secession from Serbia.<sup>14</sup> Prevalent opinion at that time was that Serbia had always been on "the right side of history" as it was fighting the imperialistic ambitions of the powerful states in two Balkans and two world wars and, consequently, suffered terribly at the hands of victors-oppressors.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, for the majority of Serbs, it was hard to understand why Western countries, Serbia's allies in previous wars, supported Croats, Albanians, and other nations in their quest to secede from SFRY while directly refusing to assist the Serbs. This created a significant anti-Western and victimhood sentiment among many Serbian citizens who believed the West wanted to destroy Orthodox and Slavic Serbia. As a result of this, it seemed that the only ally of Serbia left standing was the Orthodox and Slavic Russia.<sup>16</sup>

After the downfall of Milošević in 2000, Serbia started the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. During the democratic transition, new topics and discourses emerged on the policy agenda—Europeanisation, human rights, transitional justice, neoliberal discourse, etc. Although the hegemonic position of nationalist discourse was challenged, new elites never made a radical break with nationalism and the far right.<sup>17</sup> Russian influence in Serbia also remained present in society via the political parties (mainly Šešelj's SRS), the orthodox church, far-right groups, and intellectuals. The main reason for this was that Russia supported Serbia's position on the Kosovo issue, which became even more important after the latter declared independence from Serbia in 2008, and most of the Western countries recognised it. As a permanent member of the UN's Security Council, Russia had blocked Kosovo from joining the UN and its agencies and supported Serbia on this topic in the international arena.<sup>18</sup> In the same year, the Serbian government sold the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) to the Russian Gazprom Neft for €400 million, well below the estimated market value. The inclusion of Serbia in the Russian South Stream gas pipeline project and the construction of an underground gas storage facility were also agreed upon. In this way, Serbia gave Russia almost all its energy security. Selling NIS to Gazprom and putting energy security in Russia's hands led many experts to conclude that this is the economic, security, and political price for Russia's backing of Serbia on the Kosovo issue.<sup>19</sup> It is also important to note that a few months before the declaration of Kosovo's independence, anticipating this event, the Serbian parliament passed the resolution on the protection of sovereignty,

territorial integrity, and constitutional order,<sup>20</sup> which also defined Serbia as a military-neutral country. Since then, Serbia's commitment to military neutrality became an important Russian instrument for obstructing not only Serbia's cooperation with NATO and its potential membership in the Alliance but also its accession to the EU, as this concept was soon broadened in public discourse covering not just military but also political neutrality.

Furthermore, if one were to add Alexander Dugin to the mix, the Russian far-right philosopher and geopolitician who is considered a great influence on Putin<sup>21</sup> and enjoys huge popularity among the Serbian far-right, then Russia's designs vis-à-vis Serbia's geopolitical position and its military neutrality become even more clear. Dugin contends that the responsibility for global conflicts lies with the "global liberal elite," attributing it to their frequent attempts to enforce the principles of liberal democracy, centred on individual rights and inviolable human rights, worldwide. According to Dugin, liberals often overlook the fundamental tenet of democracy, which emphasises the people's right to choose, encompassing the freedom to either embrace or reject the democratic system. To oppose this alleged liberal totalitarianism and counterbalance to the West, Dugin advocates for restoring traditional values (e.g. human dignity, family, chivalry) which are preserved in Eurasia, where East and West meet and where Russia occupies the central place.<sup>22</sup> In this geopolitical concept, Serbia holds a special place for Dugin because, as a small country, it has opposed the "global elite" for a long time, and it is a bulwark for the Eurasian pole in the Balkans. If the Serbs had not opposed the West, the political and security elite of the Kremlin would not have awakened in time, and Putin's Russia would have been too late to arrive on the scene of the great geopolitical rivalry.

Therefore, according to Dugin, Russia's debt to Serbia is enormous, and Russia's historical and moral duty is to return Kosovo to Serbia.<sup>23</sup> Serbia fully aligning itself with the West would signify a profound transformation, potentially leading to the dissolution of its existing identity. This shift could entail the impossibility of reclaiming Kosovo for Belgrade and the inability to maintain territorial integrity within current borders. According to Dugin, such preservation would only be feasible in the multipolar world he advocates for, a vision that Putin appears to be working towards in reality. Dugin believes Russia will not leave the Balkans to the West or abandon other Russian friends in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia, especially since the West is on the verge of collapse. In his opinion, Serbia should take "responsibility" for the Balkans—for the entire

company (SBB), reaching one-third of the Serbian citizens.<sup>31</sup> On the foreign policy front, Serbia refused to align itself with the EU's key positions regarding Russia—such as its full-scale aggression on Ukraine and sanctions towards Russia.<sup>32</sup> While the EU Commission, international research institutes, and think tanks have documented Serbia's steep democracy decline in the past five years,<sup>33</sup> the West chose not to antagonise the government in Belgrade. In effect, it chose stability over democracy as it preferred not to alienate Serbia and proverbially push it into Russia's arms.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Vučić's government<sup>35</sup> has never officially rejected the policy of EU accession, knowing that it would lead to an open conflict with the West. Instead, it formally still adheres to the goal of EU membership and the values of liberal democracy, but in practice, it does the opposite and associates itself with authoritarian regimes such as those of Russia and China.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Vučić strives to create the impression that he is still very cooperative regarding Kosovo as it seemingly evident by his acceptance of the Washington Agreement in 2021<sup>37</sup> and the EU plan for the normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relations in 2022. However, by creating controlled crises and incidents in Kosovo, he seeks to delay their implementation. For example, in November 2022, at the initiative of the Serbian List, which is under the control of the SNS, Serbs left the institutions of Kosovo and boycotted local elections. This later led to violent incidents in northern Kosovo between Serbs and international and Kosovar security forces.<sup>38</sup>

Dragan Šormaz, former SNS party official, who was a member of parliament and a member of several parliamentary committees as the SNS representative (foreign policy, security services oversight, EU integration), recently pointed out that the authorities in Serbia are not pursuing a sincere policy of EU accession and military neutrality. He also stated that Serbia has aligned itself with Russia for a considerable time due to Vučić's disdain for the West and its values. Also, Vučić's years-old narrative about Serbia's independent and neutral policy is actually Russian trickery used in Ukraine and Moldova, as well to mask a seemingly deniable Russian influence.<sup>39</sup> Other experts are convinced Vučić's pro-EU and pro-West stances were just a manoeuvre designed to mantle his anti-EU and anti-West activities.<sup>40</sup>

Vučić's pro-Russian leanings should not come as a surprise. Since its inception, the SNS has actually been strengthening its relations and collaboration with Russia while officially pursuing Serbia's EU accession policy. The cooperation has deepened at the party level between SNS and United Russia but also among

state institutions of two countries, including those in the security and defence sectors. SNS and United Russia signed cooperation agreements in 2010, 2016, and 2018 that went beyond symbolic gestures, clearly defining various areas of collaboration such as exchanging experiences in party and youth cooperation, organisational work, information sharing, and preparing party members for state posts.<sup>41</sup> One of the stated goals of these agreements is to enhance interstate relations through improved party ties,<sup>42</sup> which have been achieved through numerous intergovernmental agreements, memoranda, and protocols. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre was opened, and the following year, Serbia became an observer in The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).<sup>43</sup> Thus, Serbia is the only Balkan state with signed security cooperation agreements, joint military exercises with Russia, and modernising its armed forces with Russian weaponry.<sup>44</sup> These agreements have been accompanied by visits from high-level officials of Serbia and Russia, including Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence, Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council, and Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of External Affairs. During his visit to Serbia in 2019, Putin awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky to Aleksandar Vučić for his significant personal contribution to multilateral cooperation with Russia.<sup>45</sup> The practical implications of this cooperation and its potential consequences for regional stability can be observed in several cases that have occurred in the past three years. These cases will be discussed below.

### ***The Serbian World – Putin’s Tool for Destabilising Western Balkans***

The foundation of cooperation between Putin’s and Vučić led governments is not only instrumental but is also rooted in ideological proximity, manifested in the concepts of the Russian and Serbian worlds. The Serbian world is a concept that has been present within political and cultural elites as well as nationalist circles in Serbia since the mid-19th century.<sup>46</sup> However, this term only started to draw attention from the domestic and regional public in 2020 when Aleksandar Vulin, the then-Minister of Defence, began using it regularly in public appearances. Thus, Vulin stated that he hopes that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, is creating the Serbian world and that Serbs have the right to be a politically unified nation, that Vučić is the president of all Serbs, with Belgrade being the centre of their gathering. Later, he clarified that the Serbian world resolves the national question of the Serbs, prevents the creation of a Greater Albania, and

safeguards against the genocide of the Serbian people. Vulin emphasised that the unification process had started thanks to Vučić, and it was unstoppable.<sup>47</sup>

The Serbian state official's public usage of the Serbian world has raised concerns in neighbouring countries that it could signify a revival of Greater Serbia but now with strong support from Russia.<sup>48</sup> Serbian and Russian worlds are two nearly identical projects built upon the frustrations of nationalists in Russia and Serbia due to the loss of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and in the case of Serbia, the breakup of Yugoslavia.<sup>49</sup> Both concepts imply the unification of the Serbs/Russians within the same cultural, media, and political space under one strong leader.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the public promotion of this concept comes at a time of heightened political tension between the West and Russia and worsening political and ethnic relations within and between Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia.<sup>51</sup> By loudly promoting the Serbian world, Russia is essentially sending a message through Belgrade that it can potentially and seemingly at a whim destabilise the situation in the Western Balkans.

It is important to note that Aleksandar Vulin is the one who is the most vocal advocate of this idea. In the past ten years of the SNS rule, Vulin has held important state positions. He was initially the director of the Government Office for Kosovo; then, he held roles as the Minister of Labor, Defence, and Internal Affairs, and in the end of 2022, he was appointed as the director of the Security-Information Agency.<sup>52</sup> It was during his tenure in the Defence and Interior Ministry and when the military was being rearmed and reequipped<sup>53</sup> that Vulin was publicly advocating for the Serbian world. Vulin is the leader of the Movement of Socialists, a micro-political party with no significant voter support in Serbia.<sup>54</sup> He has held important state positions due to his loyalty to Aleksandar Vučić and Russia. Some experts consider Vulin to be one of the most important figures of Putin's regime in Serbia, tasked with placing pro-Russian personnel in key state institutions, which he has indeed accomplished within the military, police, and counter-intelligence service.<sup>55</sup> The seriousness of Vulin's messages about the Serbian world is highlighted by the fact that, following Moscow's orders, he initiated the persecution of Russian opposition figures in Serbia, as well as Russian refugees critical of Putin, which is described in the next section.

### ***Serbian Security Institutions Persecuting Russian Liberals***

In December 2021, Alexander Vulin, then–Interior Minister, met with Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation (SCRF) in



Moscow, when they agreed to form a joint working group to combat the coloured revolutions.<sup>56</sup> The Serbian MoI's press statement stressed that these revolutions "are a traditional political instrument used by certain power centres and countries to undermine statehood and take away sovereignty under the guise of democratisation."<sup>57</sup> The joint working group is tasked with preventing mass demonstrations and constantly monitoring opposition activists, NGOs, and independent journalists.<sup>58</sup>

The group's establishment formalised the already-good cooperation between Serbian and Russian security apparatus. Namely, in May 2021, a group of Russian municipal lawmakers and democracy activists attended an educational seminar in Belgrade which was chaired by Andrei Pivovarov and Vladimir Kara-Murza, prominent opposition leaders. The Serbian intelligence closely followed the seminar and recorded all participants' activities and conversations. Very soon, Vulin flew to Moscow to personally hand over the surveillance material to Patrushev, which was then used by Russian authorities to sentence Pivovarov to four and later Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for "carrying out activities of an undesirable organization"<sup>59</sup> and "high treason,"<sup>60</sup> respectively.<sup>61</sup>

Serbian state institutions persecuted liberal Russians who have resided in Serbia as well. In this respect, without any justification, in mid-June 2023, Serbian authorities banned entry into Serbia to Peter Nikitin upon his return from a trip abroad. The ban was issued by the Serbian police at the request of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), headed by Alexander Vulin. After 40 hours in the airport transit zone, he was allowed to enter Serbia without any explanation. Nikitin holds both Russian and Dutch citizenship and has a Serbian residence permit, where he and his family have lived for seven years. According to Serbian legislation, a ban on entry into Serbia cannot be issued without previously revoking permanent residence. Therefore, this ban is related to Nikitin's pro-democracy activism. He is a leader of the Russian Democratic Society (RDS), which politically organises Russians in Serbia and has grown to tens of thousands since Russia invaded Ukraine. The organisation fiercely criticises Putin's Russia and regularly holds rallies in Serbia supporting Ukraine. Nikitin said the entry ban had to do "solely with Russian interests" and that the Security Information Agency "is obviously following Russia's orders," as the RDS has never interfered with internal Serbian affairs.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after, the Serbian authorities denied an extension of the temporary residence permit to Vladimir Volokhonsky, one of the founders of the RDS and close

associate of Peter Nikitin. The decision was based on the BIA's assessment that Volokhonsky presents a threat to the security of Serbia but without further explanation. Nikitin and Volokhonsky are the RDS's leaders, and therefore, their cases attracted media attention, while other persecutions of liberal Russians went unnoticed by a broader public. Nikitin stated that even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, security officers attended their rallies, asking for IDs and interviewing their members, while after the invasion, harassment intensified.<sup>63</sup> In this respect, RDS followers were questioned by BIA, while others were denied residence permits and Serbian citizenship even though they met all criteria. Dragan Šormaz, a former SNS official, and some political analysts are confident that Vulin is just carrying out Vučić's decisions.<sup>64</sup>

### *The Absurd Level of pro-Putin Propaganda*

Strong pro-Russian messaging in Serbia has long been present, but it further strengthened after the SNS had assumed power in 2012. Pro-government TV stations and newspapers not only ran pro-Russian propaganda such as Informer, Politika, Večernje novosti, Kurir, and Blic, but their messaging was much more emotionally charged than Russian media.<sup>65</sup> This propaganda went even further with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reaching absurd levels. Pro-government media were reporting that Ukraine attacked Russia and that Western countries, chiefly the US and Great Britain, were responsible for the war while Putin did everything to prevent the outbreak of the armed conflict. For instance, the daily Informer whose chief editor, Dragan Vučićević, is one of the strongest propagandists of Vučić's rule, published as front-page titles: "Americans push the whole World into chaos: Ukraine attacked Russia", "Warr [sic] horror: artillery shells randomly kindergartens, schools, hospitals." Other pro-government media had similar front pages: "World on the edge of catastrophe: Ukraine attacked Russia!" (Alo), "Putin: Russia has done everything for peace in Ukraine" (The Courier), "Blood has been spilt on the Russian border" (The Evening News).<sup>66</sup>

The pro-government media went even further, reporting that the Russian military would not stop in Ukraine, but it would then intervene in the Balkans, liberating its allies from the imposed liberal rule and correcting historical injustices incurred by the West: "Brits in a big panic. Putin sends Army to unite Serbia and Republic of Srpska" (Serbian Telegraph).<sup>67</sup> Other pro-government print media reported less emotionally charged language utilising (quasi)analytical style but with similar messages and points on the decline of the Western hard and soft power, the rise

of the BRICS, which would amount to an emergence of a truly multi-polar world.<sup>68</sup> The Serbian pro-government TV stations with national coverage (Pink and Happy) have also taken pro-Putin and anti-Western stands.<sup>69</sup> In their top-rated talk shows, pro-Western analysts are present, but they are regularly outnumbered by pro-Putin analysts (many of whom are former military and intelligence officers). Even though the Serbian pro-government media alleviated pro-Putin narratives when it was obvious that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would not be swift and easy, they are still very present.<sup>70</sup>

### **Case Study 2: People's Patrol - Kremlin's Scarecrow**

People's Patrol is an extreme right-wing organisation founded in 2020 by Damjan Knežević. The group centres its efforts on anti-migrant initiatives, with its members assuming a quasi-police role. They engage in activities such as halting migrants in public spaces, limiting their freedom to move, and executing citizen arrests. For instance, in one case, they knocked down and detained a migrant by firmly holding around his neck, suspecting him of pickpocketing a girl. Proof of this alleged pickpocketing could not be seen in the video.<sup>71</sup> Other cases are very similar; in recordings, it can only be seen that migrants are detained without any evidence of their alleged crime.<sup>72</sup> One of the extreme examples of violent behaviour of People's Patrol was when one of its sympathisers was throwing refugees and migrants off the bus, with comments such as "M70 and a bullet to the head", "Yes, yes... All of you should be killed. You will only learn Serbian once I put a bullet into that black head of yours."<sup>73</sup> They record and disseminate all these and other activities via their social platforms, and other communication apps, spreading fear, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. In fact, anti-migrant actions are essential for this organisation as these practices allow them to attract the attention of a broad audience and present themselves as a 'saviour of the nation' from the enemy 'other'. The People's Patrol was established by the same people who founded People's Initiative No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija,<sup>74</sup> but a new name was chosen when the focus shifted to anti-migrant activities.<sup>75</sup>

The thematic focus on migrants was a training ground for the group to master manipulation and communication techniques on social networks as well as to learn to conduct violent activities at the edge of legality. The People's Patrol used anti-migration activities to propagate (bigger) messages aligning with core far-

right themes and Kremlin propaganda. At the basis of their anti-migrant narratives lie civilizational conflicts (East versus West, traditional versus liberal values), conspiracy theories (global liberal elites from the West secretly reaching agreements with authorities in Serbia about migrant settlement), victimhood nationalism (Serbs are once again victims of Western elites due to their financial interests and hatred towards Orthodox Christianity), dehumanisation of others (Muslims, liberals), and the heroisation of a group (People's Patrol, sacrificing greatly for Serbianhood in the fight against terrorists, the West).<sup>76</sup> Anti-migrant activities allowed the group to expand its network by forming branches mainly in towns where migrants are present (e.g. Sombor, Backi Petrovac, Subotica), and to gain greater popularity among members of the far-right.<sup>77</sup>

Several key indicators highlight the effectiveness of the People's Patrol. Firstly, when only this group actively conducted anti-migrant activities, public opinion surveys recorded a significant rise in anti-migrant sentiments among Serbian citizens. Thus, surveys in 2020<sup>78</sup> and 2021<sup>79</sup> showed an increase in citizens' opinions that migrants increase crime (58 percent, 70 percent), pose a health risk (49 percent, 69 percent), endanger Serbian values and customs (37 percent, 68 percent), are terrorists (41 percent, 54 percent), and were actually sent into Islamise Serbia (38 percent, 60 percent). An increased number of people also believe that there is a secret plan for the mass settlement of migrants in Serbia (36 percent, 54 percent). In the same period, in pro-government media, migrants were not a prominent topic, and reporting on the issue was neutral, meaning that the group managed to reach out to the broader public solely through intense presence on social networks.<sup>80</sup> Secondly, the People's Patrol managed to expand its network and to organise relatively well-attended gatherings despite having limited resources. Thirdly, the group attracted the attention of Russian right-wing organisations and media outlets like Russia Today. It stands out as one of the few far-right organisations from Serbia to have visited Russia three times since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> Following the war in Ukraine, People's Patrol has quickly emerged as the most vocal pro-Russian far-right group in Serbia. Below is an explanation of how and why the People's Patrol has acted as an agent of Russian influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

### ***Welcoming Russian Invasion and Better Ties with Russia***

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a strong impetus for People's Patrol and a majority of Serbian far-right groups and political parties, which welcomed and

celebrated this Russian move through rallies and social networks, seeing the invasion as the beginning of the liberation of Serbian historical territories that the enemies currently occupy. The first mass meeting in support of Russia was held in Belgrade on 4 March 2022, and, to the surprise of those unfamiliar with current trends in the Western Balkans, attracted several thousand people. Messages that could be heard at the rally included: “Serbs and Russians are brothers forever,” “Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia,” and “Serbia, Russia, we do not need [the European] Union.” The rallies were held in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and cities throughout Serbia.<sup>82</sup>

It should be noted that Denis Gariyev, leader of the Russian Imperial Movement, uploaded a video message asking Serbians to support “the renewal of Russia within its historical borders,” which was then distributed at rallies and through far-right accounts and profiles.<sup>83</sup> The movement is known for its paramilitary Imperial Legion wing, which has fought against Ukraine since 2014 and has conducted training in urban warfare for European, e.g. Swedish (see: Swedish chapter of this volume) extreme right-wingers in Russia, and some of whose members have been convicted of terrorism. In mid-2020, the US administration added the movement to the Specially Designated Global Terrorist list.<sup>84</sup>

With the war in Ukraine, People’s Patrol also started establishing better connections with the Russian extreme right and communicating this clearly to the public. Thus, Knežević spent some time in Moscow at the end of April and the beginning of May 2023 as guests of some of the largest Russian media, e.g. Russia Today. During this visit, Knežević told the Russian public that Aleksandar Vučić is not a friend of Russia but a mercenary of the West, but that, despite this, the Serbian people will stand with their Slavic brothers, the Russians.<sup>85</sup> One of the hosts of the visit was Alexander Lysov, leader of the Russian-Serbian Centre – Eagles (Rusko-srpski centar Orlovi).<sup>86</sup> Knežević’s activities in Russia were reported in detail via the internet portal Srbin.info and various extreme right-wing channels on the Telegram social networks.<sup>87</sup>

Serbian and Russian extreme right-wingers have also become better connected on the Telegram social network, where they quickly transmit and spread propaganda messages and disinformation.<sup>88</sup> Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they have been sending messages throughout their social network channels that the Russian Army will not stop on the western Ukrainian border but

will go further to the West to help Serbia liberate its historical lands. Also, during the heightened tensions in Kosovo at the end of July of 2023, the network of these channels transmitted coordinated disinformation that an armed conflict had occurred between Serbs and Albanians, that one Serb was wounded, and that the Serbian Army was ready to intervene on the border between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>89</sup> This disinformation also attracted the attention of the mainstream media, which could have led to an escalation of the conflict in a situation of heightened tensions. Lisov's Z-Orlovi (with whom Knežević established contacts during his visit to Russia) took an important role in spreading this disinformation.<sup>90</sup>

Amid escalating crises between Kosovo and Serbia and the West's efforts to calm down this situation, Knežević visited Wagner's centre in St. Petersburg at the end of November 2022. He stated that he hoped his visit might guarantee Russian support in the decades-long feud with Serbia's former province of Kosovo, and particularly the assistance of Russia and its army in the event of a conflict in Kosovo.<sup>91</sup> Soon after, it was published that Wagner had opened its cultural and information office called Z-Orlovi in Belgrade, which proved to be fake news. The Russian-Serbian Centre Z-Orlovi does exist, but it operates mainly on Telegram, where its members spread disinformation and post threats to Russian liberals currently residing in Serbia.<sup>92</sup> The fact is that after Knežević visited Wagner, some Serbian far-righters started wearing Wagner patches at the later protests in Serbia and at the barricades in Kosovo, spreading fear that members of this paramilitary might escalate crises in Kosovo to armed conflict.<sup>93</sup>

### ***Threats to Vučić's Regime and Russian Liberals in Serbia***

To prevent Russia from destabilising the Western Balkans and thus diverting the attention of the West from the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western countries decided to try to revive Kosovo/Serbia dialogue and solve their dispute. In this regard, the EU made a plan for the normalisation of the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, which the US backed. However, after Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced in January 2023<sup>94</sup> that he would accept the proposal, far-right groups and political parties initiated a series of activities to undermine the acceptance of this plan. In this respect, the People's Patrol, together with other far-right groups and individuals, organised protests in front of the presidency building on February 15, the Serbian Statehood Day. Chanting "No surrender!", "Treason!", "Betrayal of Kosovo is a betrayal of Russia!" they threatened to riot if Vučić backed the EU plan. At the gathering, Knežević said,

“You are afraid of riots. I swear to you that we are ready for more than this.”<sup>95</sup> Also, Dejan Zlatanović, editor of the online portal Srbin.info, said in his speech that “the one who signs will be killed,” alluding that the Serbian president will be murdered if he signs the normalisation agreement.<sup>96</sup>

At one point, the protesters tried to break through the protective fence and enter the presidential building, but the police prevented the attempt.<sup>97</sup> In the end, Knežević and Zlatanović were arrested and charged with instigation for a violent change of the constitutional order but were released to defend themselves while not in detention. Russian foreign ministry and the Russian ambassador to Serbia condemned the threats sent from the rally and stressed that Russia does not interfere in the internal affairs of friendly Serbia.<sup>98</sup> Knežević’s arrests did not prevent People’s Patrol sympathisers from actively calling citizens to participate in another two protests on the same issue. The rallies were held on 17 March 2023, the day when Kosovo extremists conducted a pogrom against Kosovo Serbs in 2004,<sup>99</sup> and on 24 March 2023, the day when the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia began in 1999. Protesters with Wagner Group patches were spotted at all rallies.<sup>100</sup>

After visiting the Wagner Centre, the People’s Patrol began openly threatening Russian liberals currently residing in Serbia. In a post on their Telegram channel, the group stated that Russians and Ukrainians who came to Serbia had not been a problem initially, but many of them had abused the hospitality and started to influence and change the opinion of the Serbian people. The Russians also organised public demonstrations showing support for Ukraine. “Well, gentlemen, you waved your liberal flags unhindered until yesterday. Now, you won’t do that anymore; we will trample on them. And you and everyone else will watch ours. Maybe we’re occupied, but we’re proud and defiant. Welcome to Serbia,” the group announced. The immediate reason for these threats was that Russian liberals defaced the Wagner mural in Belgrade.<sup>101</sup>

Russian liberals and anti-war activists had received threats before from the far-right group Russian-Serbian Centre - The Eagles through their Telegram channel (Z-Orlovi) but not openly by People’s Patrol. However, members and sympathisers of Russian and Serbian far-right groups closely cooperate, and the leader of Z-Orlovi, Lisov, hosted Knežević during his visit to the Wagner Centre in St. Petersburg. Serbian far-right extremists seem to gather information about Russian liberals in Serbia and then send it to Z-Orlovi, which is surprisingly well-

informed of the latter's actions and movements. One case of physical violence has also been documented, where Ilya Zernov was beaten when he tried to repaint the mural dedicated to Wagner in Belgrade.<sup>102</sup>

### **Relationship of State Authorities towards the Far-Right**

Even though the existence of extremist groups in Serbia is not explicitly forbidden by law, the authorities have sufficient legal instruments to address the threat emanating from groups, as many of their activities are illegal. The Serbian Constitution prescribes that any encouragement of racial, ethnic, religious, or other inequality or hatred shall be prohibited and punishable. Serbia is also a signatory of many international conventions prohibiting discrimination which are transposed into the Serbian legal system (Constitution, Public Information Law, and Anti-Discrimination Law).<sup>103</sup> Experts agree that the current legal framework is sufficient for addressing (violent) extremism, but the problem is the state's benevolent relationship with the far-right.<sup>104</sup>

The relationship between the Serbian authorities and the far-right groups has always been pragmatic and tolerant. Even during the rule of democratic governments (2000–2012) no real effort to address the extreme right was made. The Constitutional Court banned two extreme-right groups, National Alignment and Honour, but declined to do the same for similar organisations, SNP 1389, and SNP Naši.<sup>105</sup> The same court had earlier rejected the Chief Public Prosecutor's initiative to ban dozens of football hooligan groups even though they acted more as a hate and crime group than mere football fans.<sup>106</sup>

With the SNS in power in 2012, nationalism has been resurrecting, and far-right groups, both fake and authentic, have become political instruments in the hands of the ruling party.<sup>107</sup> Both groups contribute to the spread of values that align with the government's vision of the Serbian identity, securitising some topics and groups (migrants, minorities), diverting voters' attention away from genuine issues, and serving as examples of huge Russian hybrid influence in Serbia providing an excuse for SNS government not to distance Serbia from Russia. Fake far-right groups also serve the SNS for siphoning support and votes away from genuine extreme-right groups and political parties, carrying out smear campaigns and violent acts instead of government officials, and establishing links with extreme-right groups in other countries. That is why Serbian authorities do little to prevent and punish hate speech and violent activities of far-righters. Even



if the perpetrators are arrested, they are soon freed, continuing their actions. Legal proceedings against far-righters rarely end with verdicts. Furthermore, Serbian officials rarely publicly condemn the activities of the extreme-right groups, and pro-government private media give space to far-right activists and war-crime convicts. No wonder that in 2019 the Courts of Appeal annulled the verdict to Goran Dividović Fuhrer, the leader of the banned neo-Nazi group National Alignment for violence against participants of the anti-fascist gathering.

The People's Patrol, although authentic far-right, has also experienced tolerant treatment by the authorities as its violent activities against migrants, professional media, nongovernmental organisations, and citizens go unpunished. One of the drastic examples of said actions was when the prosecution did not initiate proceedings against members of the People's Patrol when they plastered the city centre of Sombor with posters containing images and personal information of residents who were renting their accommodation to migrants, effectively inciting their lynching.<sup>108</sup> Serbian authorities undertook sharper measures towards the activities of the People's Patrol only in response to their protests against the acceptance of the EU plan for Kosovo in February 2023 and threats of violence. Thus, state authorities arrested Damnjan Knežević, leader of the People's Patrol, and Dejan Zlatanović, editor-in-chief of the far-right internet portal Srbin.info, charging them for calling for a violent change of the constitutional order.<sup>109</sup> Another man, allegedly a People's Patrol member, was arrested on his way to the February protest after a scoped rifle was found in his car.<sup>110</sup> Knežević and Zlatanović were released to defend themselves in freedom, and they soon continued with their activities calling again Vučić traitor and fake pro-Russian.<sup>111</sup>

The possible reason why authorities responded, in this case, more decisively to the violent activities of the People's Patrol and their collaborators is that they want to show the West how determined they are to combat extreme right-wing groups and the destabilising efforts of Russia to sabotage the implementation of the Brussels Agreement—a process of paramount importance for Western states. Consequently, through these arrests, authorities are also sending a message that this is a very serious violent group, and the West should understand that the extreme right can potentially destabilise Serbia and the region.<sup>112</sup>

## **Consequences: Citizens' Enormous Support for Putin's Russia and Undemocratic Values**

The long-term exposure of Serbian citizens to unhindered propaganda from the ruling SNS and extreme right-wing groups, such as the People's Patrol, has resulted in the normalisation of pro-Russian, ultra-conservative, and nationalist values, as well as the strengthening of anti-democratic, anti-European, and anti-Western attitudes. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy's (BCSP) research from the autumn of 2022 shows that the majority of Serbian citizens blame NATO and the USA for the outbreak of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, and no less than 80 percent of respondents are against imposing sanctions on Russia.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, 45 percent of citizens believe that Serbia should remain neutral in the Ukrainian conflict, while 36 percent think Serbia should take Russia's side. The constant bombardment of Serbian citizens with messages that Russia is becoming an unstoppable political, economic, and especially military force has led to nearly half of the citizens seeing Russia as the dominant power in the 21st century. At the same time, less than one-fifth of them believe it to be the US.

Shortly after the SNS came to power in 2014, the support of Serbian citizens for EU membership dropped below 50 percent. From 2017 the percentage of respondents opposing EU membership started to increase, and by 2022, the percentage of both groups of citizens (supporters and opponents of EU membership) had equalised at 46 percent. The public opinion towards Serbia's membership in NATO is even more negative, with only 5 percent of respondents in favour of joining NATO, while two-thirds of them are against it. Furthermore, citizens perceive NATO and the USA to be the biggest enemies of Serbia.<sup>114</sup>

Public opinion polls also indicate that nearly half of the citizens support activities and/or values promoted by extreme right-wing groups, such as the People's Patrol. A similar percentage of them support the idea of the "Serbian world" and the holding of religious rallies to preserve Christian, traditional, and family values, as well as public morality. In these conditions, it is no surprise that they consider ethnic minorities seeking to secede (41 percent), globalist elites (36 percent), and migrants (35 percent) as the top threats to their personal security and safety, while extreme-right groups (24 percent) and hooligans (22 percent) receive more favourable treatment.<sup>115</sup>

The citizens' nationalist and pro-Russian stance is evident in their opinions on Serbia's foreign policy priorities, with the highest ranked being the protection of Serbs in the region (82 percent), the fight for Kosovo (77 percent) and strengthening cooperation with Russia (72 percent). In contrast, EU membership (41 percent) and improving ties with the USA (37 percent) are ranked lower on their list of priorities. Anti-Western attitudes of citizens are mirrored in their views towards democracy. Only 40 percent of respondents think that democracy is the form of government that suits Serbia best, while one-third are for democracy in principle but believe that the current state of affairs in the country requires a "firm hand." The rest of the citizens are indifferent to the form of government or are openly for autocracy.<sup>116</sup> It is particularly concerning that most young people hold negative attitudes towards the EU and democracy, support the rule of a strong leader, and justify violence in society.<sup>117</sup>

Two Russian media, Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today, are present in Serbia from 2015 and 2022, respectively, but both are only internet portals. Therefore, the pro-Russian stances of Serbian citizens cannot be ascribed to Sputnik and RT but to Serbian pro-government media with national coverage. BCSP's public opinion polls have shown a significant overlap between people who expressed pro-Russian attitudes with those who get their information from pro-government TV stations and those who fully support President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>118</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks: The SNS and People's Patrol - Two Sides of the Same (Russian) Coin?**

It is easy to conclude that the ruling SNS, while formally still leading Serbia into the EU and cooperative towards the West, is the most significant agent of Russian influence in Serbia. This influence is primarily manifested in the political and informational sphere, though other areas like security policy or economy should not be neglected. Through the media it controls, which constitutes 85 percent of the overall media space, the SNS spreads pro-Russian propaganda with a much greater emotional charge than the two Russian media outlets in Serbia, Sputnik, and Russia Today. This raises the question of why Russian influence is also present within far-right groups, particularly those critically and even hostile-oriented towards Vučić's regime, such as the People's Patrol. Is not it sufficient for Russia to exert its influence in Serbia through the ruling SNS which holds absolute power in the state? There are three possible answers to these questions.

The first explanation is that Putin does not fully trust President Vučić. In this scenario, Russia utilises the People's Patrol to send a message to the authorities not to make a U-turn away from Russia. Grounds for this assertion can be found in the fact that Vučić has not completely closed the door to the West as Serbia has not (officially) abandoned its EU integration path and Vučić appears cooperative in normalising relations with Kosovo. Moreover, a vocal pro-Russian figure in Serbia is Aleksandar Vulin, a politician with no significant voter base in Serbia, solely occupying critical state posts thanks to Vučić. If Vučić turns towards the West, he can easily, without domestic political repercussions, distance himself from Vulin and shift blame for pro-Russian influence onto Vulin. Finally, Russian media in Serbia, Sputnik, and Russia Today are only internet portals, meaning that Serbian pro-government media with national coverage are responsible for boosting pro-Russian sentiment among Serbian citizens. Given that Vučić's government channels Russian influence, he can also curtail and divert it in other directions, if he wishes. Therefore, through the People's Patrol's (violent) activities, Russia is informally conveying to both the authorities in Serbia and the West that it has ways to further generate discontent among citizens on national and other issues and can exploit it to destabilise Serbia and the region. According to this hypothesis, the People's Patrol is the Kremlin's informal messenger in Serbia.

The second explanation is that the actions of both actors are well coordinated and planned in Moscow. The strong pro-Russian far-right in Serbia serves Vučić to demonstrate to the West that the extreme-right can genuinely destabilise the situation in Serbia and the region should he decide to swiftly resolve the Kosovo issue, thereby eliminating the political basis of Russian influence in Serbia. The violent activities of the People's Patrol provide Vučić with a convenient excuse to delay the practical normalisation of relations with Kosovo, preserving a frozen conflict—a situation that aligns with Russia's goals in the region. Vučić's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia could be justified on the same grounds. The People's Patrol has operated unhindered for years, and the arrest of its leader serves the purpose of simulating a fight against the pro-Russian far-right in Serbia. Vučić's official cooperation with the West on the Kosovo issue and regular years-long hints of moving away from Moscow correspond to Russia's interests, prolonging the West's false hope of Serbia's foreign policy shift. Supporting this second explanation is the fact that Vučić's regime has done little to diminish pro-Russian stances among citizens. Instead, it has reinforced them through its media, creating and projecting the image to the West of strong Russian influence in

Serbia and portraying that Vučić cannot swiftly shift towards the West. Finally, the Serbian and Russian governments share a similar ideological background manifested in the Russian and Serbian world concepts, seemingly turning them into good allies.

The third possible explanation is that Vučić does not intend to bring Serbia closer to the EU and the West or Russia. Instead, he aims to maintain absolute power in the country for as long as possible until the geopolitical situation becomes clearer. In pursuit of this goal, he amplifies the fears of both the West and Russia, positioning himself in between so that if he is not in power, these fears would then materialise – Russia destabilising the region or the West pushing Russia out of the Western Balkans. Officially, this is a policy of (military) neutrality, but a more suitable term, coined by President Vučić himself, is “politics of wriggling,”<sup>119</sup> which implies lying to both the West and Russia while masking it by making some concessions and decisions that align with their interests.

Whichever explanation is true, it is certain that the consequences of these actions of SNS and extreme right-wing organisations like the People’s Patrol are dire and long-lasting for Serbia while simultaneously fitting the goals of Putin’s Russia. The public opinion in Serbia is pro-Russian, ultra-conservative, and anti-Western, with citizens seeking the rule of a strong leader. Particularly concerning is that a majority of young people hold these views. Citizens’ attitudes can change, but it is always a slow and difficult process, especially in societies lacking consensus on fundamental societal values and at the crossroads of different geopolitical interests. Hence, the belief that Serbian authorities can easily change public opinion in case of a shift towards the West is unfounded. The responsibility for this situation in Serbia also lies with the West, which has tolerated the erosion of democratic institutions, the marginalisation of political opposition and critical media, and the concentration of power in the hands of Vučić for years, all in pursuit of achieving a final agreement between Serbia and Kosovo and maintaining fake stability in the Western Balkans. This has led many pro-Western citizens in Serbia to become disappointed and sceptical of the EU and the West, as well as democracy, which they perceive now only as an instrument in geopolitical competition. Therefore, even if Vučić were deposed soon, it would be hard to believe that current voters would support a sharp turn from Russia.

Therefore, it is crucial for the EU and other Western countries to promptly prevent Serbia’s further drift towards Russia through a combination of incentive measures and sanctions. In this regard, the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans by

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the EU Commission is significant, envisioning €6 billion in financial aid and investments for Western Balkan countries implementing substantial reforms.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, Serbia will have access to €1.4 billion through IPA3 funds by 2027.<sup>121</sup> The EU should adopt a firmer stance towards Vučić's government and withhold these funds if the authorities do not genuinely strengthen democracy and the rule of law and do not align Serbia's foreign policy with the EU. The EU should also impose restrictive measures on representatives and associates of the government. The US has already taken such steps for some of them.<sup>122</sup> Still, by expanding the circle of sanctioned individuals and coordinating the simultaneous imposition of sanctions by the EU and Western states, Vučić's government would be significantly more affected.

Finally, one of Serbia's obligations on the path to the EU is adopting a new strategy against violent extremism. The EU should insist that the key priority of the strategy be the fight against extreme right-wing and malign foreign influence. One of the most important measures in combating the far right should be a change in the narrative in the public sphere, with public officials and the media as the main actors. Necessary measures should also include strengthening media pluralism and critical thinking. Through an accompanying action plan, the EU should monitor the implementation of the strategy, and if it proves weak, the EU, along with partner countries, should immediately apply restrictive measures towards the authorities.

<sup>1</sup> Izabela Kisić, ed., *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji* [Right-wing Extremism in Serbia] (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Bojan Rabrenovic, “Vučićevi mediji u Srbiji u kandžama ruske propaganda” [The media loyal to Vučić in Serbia in the clutches of Russian propaganda], *Deutsche Welle*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.dw.com/bs/mediji-u-srbiji-koje-kontroli%C5%A1e-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-u-kand%C5%BEama-ruske-propagande/a-66430595>.

<sup>3</sup> Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?” [Pro-Russian narrative in Serbian media (2) – Why are domestic media more emotional than Russian?] *Talas*, 22 May 2019. <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>.

<sup>4</sup> Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric, and Maja Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine* (Pristina: BCSP & KCSS, 2022); Predrag Petrović and Srdjan Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable* (Belgrade: BCSP and KCSS, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Boban Stojanović, Aleksandar Ivković, and Boris Kaličanin, *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in The Republic of Serbia – 2023* (Belgrade: National Youth Council of Serbia - KOMS, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Vojislav Šešelj is the founder and president of the far-right Serbian Radical Party which has been advocating for the establishment of Greater Serbia. During the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1990s, he organised the Serbian paramilitary unit Beli Orlovi (White Eagles). In 1998, as violence in the Serbian province of Kosovo increased, Šešelj joined Milošević's national unity government, where he was vice president. International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia convicted Šešelj on a 10-year sentence for crimes against humanity. He was also suspected of being a member of the Zemun organized crime clan and one of the principal instigators of the assassination of the democratic prime minister of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić. For more on this, see Admir Muslimovic, "Vojislav Seselj: Nationalist Whose Dream Didn't Come True," *BalkanInsight*, April 9, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/09/vojislav-seselj-nationalist-whose-dream-didn-t-come-true-04-04-2018/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is the founder of the Russian ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which has been advocating for the establishment of the Russian Empire. Zhirinovskiy and LDPR achieved remarkable popularity and electoral success in the first five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union by pursuing (seemingly) absurd and contradictory policies and engaging in eccentric and inappropriate behaviours. Zhirinovskiy was active in establishing and maintaining contacts with radical right political parties throughout Europe. For more on this, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western far right: Tango Noir* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Republika Srpska is a political entity that grew out of the Bosnian War (1992–1995) where Bosnian Serbs were opposing the establishment of independent and unitary Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war by establishing B&H as a very complex state consisting of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, comprising ten autonomous cantons with their own governments and legislatures. Serbs populate Republika Srpska, while borders of cantons in the Federation follow the ethnic division between Bosniaks and Croats. For more on this, see Damir Banović, Saša Gavrić,

and Mariña Barreiro Mariño, *The Political System of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Berlin: Springer, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Miloš Vasić, “Privatnici i prevaranti, [Private and Fraudster]”, *Vreme*, 19 January 2006, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/privatnici-i-prevaranti/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gianluca Mezzofiore, “Igor Strelkov’s Bosnian Diary: Ukraine Separatist Leader’s 1992 Bloody War,” *International Business Times UK*, 29 July 2014, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/igor-strelkovs-bosnian-diary-ukraine-separatist-leaders-1992-bloody-war-1458897>.

<sup>13</sup> Semir Mujkić, “Srpsko-ruski “zavet” dobrovoljaca Višegrada i Donbasa” [Serbian-Russian ‘oath’ of volunteers from Višegrad and Donbas], *Detektor*, 22 May 2019, <https://detektor.ba/2019/05/22/srpsko-ruski-zavet-dobrovoljaca-visegrada-i-donbasa/>.

<sup>14</sup> Florian Bieber and Židas Daskalovski, *Understanding the war in Kosovo* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Bojana Oprijan Ilic, “Upotreba i zloupotreba istorije” [Use and abuse of history] *Helsinška povelja XVI*, no. 147–148 (2011), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 9–11.

<sup>17</sup> Isidora Stakić, “Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism,” in *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, ed. Filip Ejodus and Predrag Jureković (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, Republic of Austria, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> “Russia To Block Kosovo At UN,” *BIRN*, 2 April 2008, <https://balkaninsight.com/2008/04/02/russia-to-block-kosovo-at-un/>.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Cassata, “Pipeline Politics: Gazprom Seals Serbia Deal,” *New Atlanticist*, 29 December 2008.

<sup>20</sup> English version is available in: “Resolution on protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of Serbia adopted,” *ReliefWeb*, 26 December 2007, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/resolution-protection-sovereignty-territorial-integrity-and-constitutional-order>.

<sup>21</sup> Some authors dispute that Dugin has influenced Putin, instead suggesting that Putin found inspiration and concepts for political action in Ivan Ilyin, a political philosopher from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This would mean that Dugin is the Kremlin’s unofficial spokesperson. However, even if we accept this interpretation, it does not diminish the significance of Dugin for the subject of our work because he actively and loudly promotes geopolitical ideas that suit Kremlin beyond the borders of Russia. In comparison to Ilyin, Dugin is far more well-known and influential today among pro-Russian far-right political parties and informal groups. Ilyin’s work outside Russia is familiar to a very narrow circle of pro-Russian right-wing intellectuals. For more on Ilyin’s influence on Putin, see: Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Crown, 2018). For more on Dugin’s influence on Putin, see: Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s brain: Alexander Dugin and the philosophy behind Putin’s invasion of Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> RTS, “Aleksandar Geljević Dugin: Mislim da živimo esencijalno na kraju vremena” [I think we are essentially living at the end of times], *RTS*, 22 June 2022.

<sup>23</sup> “Aleksandar Dugin: Košare su Termopili Evroazije, Srbi su prvi primili udarce namenjene Rusima!” [Košare are the Thermopylae of Eurasia: The Serbs were the First to Receive Blows Intended for the Russians!], *Serbian Times*, 22 March 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Dušan Glišić, “Srbija ima odgovornost za Balkan” [Serbia has a responsibility for the Balkans], *Odbrana*, no. 332, February 2020.



- <sup>25</sup> Jovo Bakić, “Politički ekstremizam u savremenoj Srbiji” [Political extremism in contemporary Serbia], *HERETICUS* V, no. 2, 2007.
- <sup>26</sup> The law in English language is available at: *The Serbian Public Information Law 1998*, (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023). <https://cpj.org/reports/2000/08/serb-info-law/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Srđan Mladenov-Jovanović, “Confronting Recent History: Media in Serbia During Aleksandar Vučić’s Ministry of Information in the Milošević Era (1998–1999),” *Hiperboreea. Journal of History* 6, no. 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3406/hiper.2019.969>.
- <sup>28</sup> Shpetim Gashi and Igor Novaković, *Brussels Agreements between Kosovo and Serbia* (Belgrade: FES Serbia, 2020).
- <sup>29</sup> Aleksandra Srećković, *Mapping the Media Landscape in Serbia* (Belgrade: CRTA, 2022).
- <sup>30</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Eastern Europe Tests New Forms of Media Censorship,” *The New York Times*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/world/europe/serbia-media-censorship.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Nemanja Rujević, “Igor Božić: Svaki slobodan ekran je problem za ovu vlast” [Every free TV screen is a problem for this government], *Deutsche Welle*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.dw.com/sr/igor-bo%C5%BEi%C4%87-svaki-slobodan-ekran-je-problem-za-ovu-vlast/a-67221600>.
- <sup>32</sup> Igor Novaković and Tanja Plavšić, *An analysis of Serbia’s alignment with the EU’s foreign policy declarations and measures in 2022* (Belgrade: ISAC Fund, 2023).
- <sup>33</sup> For reports on Serbia’s democracy decline see: *Serbia Report 2022*, DG NEAR, European Commission (Brussels: European Commission, 12 October 2022), [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en); “Freedom House: Democratic institutions in the Western Balkans continued to falter in 2022,” *European Western Balkans*, 24 May 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/05/24/freedom-house-democratic-institutions-in-the-western-balkans-continued-to-falter-in-2022/>; Natalia Natsika et al., *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*, Democracy Report 2023, (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2023).
- <sup>34</sup> For more on this topic, see Wouter Zweers and Giulia Cretti, *The EU as a promoter of democracy or “stabilitocracy” in the Western Balkans?*, Clingendael Report, (The Hague: Clingendael, 2022); Srđa Pavlović, “West is best: How ‘stabilitocracy’ undermines democracy building in the Balkans,” *LSE European Politics and Policy Blog*, LSE, 5 May 2017.
- <sup>35</sup> When SNS came to power in 2012, Vučić became: the first Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence, security, and the fight against organised crime and corruption; the Minister of Defence; and the Secretary of the National Security Council. At the same time, Vučić also became president of the SNS, as Nikolić resigned from his party functions to fulfil his promise of becoming a “president for all.” After the snap parliamentary elections in 2014, when SNS won the absolute majority, Vučić became prime minister until 2017, when he was elected as a President of the Republic by popular vote. For more on Vučić’s misuse of security institutions for his rise to power, see: Predrag Petrović and Jelena Nikić Pejić, “Security Sector Capture in Serbia—An Early Study,” (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2020).
- <sup>36</sup> In the past decade, Serbia has significantly deepened ties with China, emerging as its primary Balkan partner. Bilateral trade has surged, making China Serbia’s largest trading partner after Germany. China invests in Serbian industry and transportation, while Serbia sources military equipment and advanced security cameras. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

China supplied vaccines to Serbia ahead of the EU, leading to Vučić highlighting the “steel friendship” and expressing concerns about EU solidarity. China’s support for Serbia regarding Kosovo in the UN Security Council positions it as one of Serbia’s four key strategic pillars. For more on this, see: Mladen Lišanin, “Prospects of European-Chinese Contest for Influence in the Western Balkans: The Case of Serbia,” in *China and World Politics in Transition: How China Transforms the World Political Order*, ed. Fulvio Attinà and Yi Feng (Springer, 2023).

<sup>37</sup> The Kosovo-Serbia Economic Normalisation Agreements, commonly called the Washington Agreement, consist of two formal documents through which Kosovo and Serbia committed to promoting economic reconciliation between them. Avdullah Hoti, the then–Prime Minister of Kosovo, and Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia, officially signed these agreements on 4 September 2020, at the White House in the presence of the then–US President, Donald Trump. However, both sides have implemented very little from the agreement, and it is almost forgotten today. “Three years since the Washington Agreement: Why was a good opportunity for normalization missed?,” *Kosovo Online*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/three-years-washington-agreement-why-was-good-opportunity-normalization-missed-4-9>.

<sup>38</sup> The latest incident in September 2023 (Banjska incident) could have led to bigger armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. At that time, around 30 armed and uniformed Serbs from northern Kosovo set up barricades in an attempt to launch an armed uprising. A conflict soon ensued between the group and the Kosovo police, resulting in the death of one Kosovar police officer and three Serbs. Kosovo authorities claimed that this was an attempt by Serbia, backed by Russia, to destabilise the region by trying to annex North Kosovo, similar to Russia’s actions in Crimea. Jamie Dettmer, “Kosovo attack: Who benefits?” *Politico*, October 2, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Goran Misić, “Hilova ljubav prema Srbiji i ljubav Srba prema Americi” [Hill’s love for Serbia and the love of Serbs for America], *AlJazeera*, 11 August 2023, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2023/8/11/hilova-ljubav-prema-srbiji-i-ljubav-srba-prema-americi>.

<sup>40</sup> Lidija Valtner, “Šta je pozadina zahteva da se promeni zapadna politika prema Srbiji?” [What is the background of the demand to change Western policy towards Serbia?], *Danas*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/zapadna-politika-prema-srbiji-pismo-zvanicnicima-eu-sad-vb/>.

<sup>41</sup> “Jedinstvena Rusija i SNS potpisale sporazum o saradnji” [United Russia and the SNS signed a cooperation agreement], *RTV*, 27 October 2010, [https://rtv.rs/sk/politika/jedinstvena-rusija-i-sns-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji\\_219466.html](https://rtv.rs/sk/politika/jedinstvena-rusija-i-sns-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji_219466.html); Svetlana Božić Krainčanić, “Srpski saveznici Putinove politike” [Serbian allies of Putin’s politics], *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29634674.html>.

<sup>42</sup> “Sporazum o saradnji SNS-a i Jedinstvene Rusije” [Cooperation Agreement between the SNS and United Russia], *RTS*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/3301256/sporazum-o-saradnji-sns-a-i-jedinstvene-rusije.html>.

<sup>43</sup> The CSTO is a Russia-led military alliance of seven former Soviet states that was created in 2002. Its initial declared purpose was to counter external aggression against members and to harmonise their foreign policy stances. The organisation has since addressed sub-conventional challenges (cyber threats, terrorism, ethnic unrest, humanitarian emergencies, peacekeeping, etc.). It also supports arms sales, manufacturing, and military training and exercises among its members. Russia is the CSTO’s dominant member, using the organisation

to support and enhance its influence abroad. Many experts consider the CSTO a Euro-Asian counterweight to NATO. Serbia and Afghanistan have enjoyed non-member observer status since 2013. Richard Weitz, *Assessing the collective security treaty organization: Capabilities and vulnerabilities* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> “Ministarstvo odbrane SAD: Ruski uticaj u Srbiji porastao dolaskom Vučića na vlast” [US Department of Defense: Russian influence in Serbia increased with Vučić coming to power], *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ministarstvo-odbrane-sad-o-ruskom-uticaju-na-zapadnom-balkanu/30293758.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Tomislav Marković, “Zašto je Vučić dobio orden od Putina” [Why did Vučić receive an order from Putin], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 19 January 2019, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2019/1/19/zasto-je-vucic-dobio-orden-od-putina>.

<sup>46</sup> Aleksandar Ljubomirović, “Srpski svet: Načertanije 21. veka?” [The Serbian World: The Program of the 21st Century?] *Novi standard*, 14 April 2023, <https://standard.rs/2023/04/14/srpski-svet-nacertanije-21-veka/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Vulin: Stvaranje srpskog sveta rešava nacionalno pitanje, ujedinjenje već počelo” [Vulin: Creating the Serbian World Solves the National Question, Unification Already Underway], *NI info*, 1 May 2021, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-resava-nacionalno-pitanje-ujedinjenje-vec-pocelo/>.

<sup>48</sup> Aneta Durović, “Pozivi da se Vučić ogradi od Vulinovog ‘srpskog sveta’” [Calls for Vučić to Distance Himself from Vulin’s Serbian World], *RSE*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-beograd-ukrajina-srpski-svet/31772171.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Elma Ljubičić, “‘Ruski’ i ‘srpski svet’ su projekti izgrađeni na sličnim frustracijama” [The ‘Russian’ and ‘Serbian Worlds’ are projects built on similar frustrations], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 29 March 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2022/3/29/srbija-kao-plodno-tlo-za-rusku-propagandu>.

<sup>50</sup> For more on the concept of the Serbian World and its similarities with the Russian world, see Aleksandar Ljubomirovic, *The Concept of the Serbian World: A Copy of the Russian World or a Unique Idea for the Multidimensional Cohesion of the Serbian People?* (Berlin: Free University Berlin, 2022). [https://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/116274/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_116274.pdf](https://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/116274/1/MPRA_paper_116274.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> In the last few years, the political situation in Bosnia has been deteriorating, as the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, openly advocates for secession with the support of Russia. At the same time, the Bosnian Croats seek greater ethnic autonomy, aiming to establish a Croatian federal unit within Bosnia. This contrasts with the Bosniaks’ efforts to centralise the state. Because of this, this situation reminds many of the time before the outbreak of the War in Bosnia (1992–1995), when Serbs and Croats opposed the formation of a unified state, wanting to secede parts of Bosnia where they constituted the majority and join them to their respective home countries, forming Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia. During the Bosnian War, around 100 thousand people lost their lives, and 2.2 million were displaced. For more on the political and security situation in Bosnia, see Frans van Nijnatten, “The situation in Bosnia is getting worse by the day,” interview by *Militaire Spectator*, 17 February 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Vulin resigned from the position of the BIA's director at the beginning of November 2023. Still, the Serbian government cannot dismiss him from the post because parliamentary elections are scheduled for 17 December, so the government is in a technical mandate. Also, the deputy director post has been vacant since Vulin’s appointment, so Vulin still runs BIA effectively. Commenting on the resignation, Vučić said he looks forward to a new collaboration with Vulin and future joint successes. “Aleksandar Vulin podneo ostavku na

mesto šefa BIA Srbije” [Aleksandar Vulin Resigns from the Position of the BIA's Chief], *Radio Free Europe*, 3 November 2023.

<sup>53</sup> The Serbian Armed Forces have been equipped with modernized tanks and armoured vehicles, artillery, and missile systems, as well as aircraft and helicopters. Marija Ignjatijević, ed., *Balkans Defence Monitor* (Belgrade: BCSP, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> Rade Ranković, “Đukić: Postavljenjem Vulina na čelo BIA Vučić otvara još jedan front sa Zapadom” [Đukić: By appointing Vulin at the helm of BIA, Vučić opens another front with the West], *Voice of America Balkan Service*, 2 December 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Stojković, Čedomir, “Vučićev režim kao kancer, sve što je dobro iskoristi za sebe!” [Vučić's regime like cancer, he exploits everything good for himself!]. Interview by Aleksandar Dikić. Bez ustručavanja. KTV. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIBZjGd7o3o>.

<sup>56</sup> The term “colour revolution” emerged in the early 2000s and was primarily used to describe a series of often-tumultuous protests that led to (attempted or successful) changes in government in countries such as Serbia and post-Soviet states, notably Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The primary objective of these colour revolutions was to establish liberal democracies, combat corruption, and foster closer integration with Western countries. They were typically triggered by widely perceived fraudulent election results. Russian leadership views these revolutions as a novel approach by the United States and Europe, focusing on fomenting destabilising uprisings in other nations to advance their security interests at a relatively low cost and with minimal casualties. The Russian National Security Strategy identifies foreign-backed regime change as one of the main public and national security threats. The deposition of the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević is considered the first colour revolution. For more on this, see: Anthony Cordesman, *Russia and the “Color Revolution”*, vol. 28, Center for Strategic and International Studies, (Washington: CSIS, 2014); Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross, “China, Russia, and twenty-first century global geopolitics,” in *Emerging Non-traditional Security Challenges: Color Revolutions, Cyber and Information Security, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism Get access Arrow*, ed. Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> MUP, “Ministar Vulin: Odnosi Srbije i Ruske Federacije na najvišem nivou” [Minister Vulin: Relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation at the highest level], Press release, 3 December 2021, [bit.ly/3Qg6lIt](http://bit.ly/3Qg6lIt).

<sup>58</sup> “Serbian, Russian officials agree to combat “colored revolutions”,” *N1 info*, 3 December 2021, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-russian-officials-agree-to-combat-colored-revolutions/>.

<sup>59</sup> “Russian Federation: Activist sentenced to four years in prison: Andrei Pivovarov,” *Amnesty International*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/5906/2022/en/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Russia: Anti-war political activist and prisoner of conscience Vladimir Kara-Murza sentenced to 25 years in jail,” *Amnesty International*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/anti-war-political-activist-and-prisoner-of-conscience-vladimir-kara-murza-sentenced-to-25-in-jail/>.

<sup>61</sup> For more about the case of surveillance of the Russian opposition politicians and activists, see Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Putin already has at least one client regime in Central Europe,” *The Washington Post*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/18/putin-already-has-least-one-client-regime-central-europe/>.

- <sup>62</sup> Boško Nicović, “Russian anti-war activist banned entry into Serbia still at Belgrade airport,” *NI Info*, 14 July 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/russian-anti-war-activist-banned-entry-into-serbia-still-at-belgrade-airport/>.
- <sup>63</sup> Tanja Milovanović, “Ruski aktivisti u nemilosti direktora BIA” [Russian Activists in Disfavor of the BIA Director], *Nova*, 27 July 2023.
- <sup>64</sup> Milan Milenković, “Progon Rusa u Srbiji demaskira Vučićev režim” [The Persecution of Russians in Serbia Exposes Vučić's Regime], *Danas*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/rusi-srbija-figaro-aleksandar-vucic/>.
- <sup>65</sup> Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?” [Pro-Russian Narrative in Serbian Media (2) – Why are Domestic Media more Emotional than Russian ones], *Talas*, 22 May 2019, <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>.
- <sup>66</sup> Izabela Kisić, “The pro-Russian media campaign in Serbia,” *The Atlantiv Initiatives*, 23 March 2022, <https://atlanticinitiative.org/the-pro-russian-media-campaign-in-serbia/>.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Mihaela Šljukić Bandović, “Rat u Ukrajini: Za režimske medije Rusija je žrtva, a ne agresor” [War in Ukraine: According to Regime-controlled Media, Russia is the Victim, not the Aggressor], *Istinomer*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/rat-u-ukrajini-za-rezimske-medije-rusija-je-zrtva-a-ne-agresor/>.
- <sup>70</sup> “Serbian media reporting on Ukraine crisis” (Belgrade: CRTA, 2022).
- <sup>71</sup> Nedim Sejdinovic, “Ekstremisti ‘šuruju’ sa vlastima i progone migrante” [Extremists 'Colluding' with Authorities and Hunting Migrants] *AlJazeera*, 17 October 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/10/17/ekstremisti-i-antimigranti-u-sluzbi-vlasti-srbije>.
- <sup>72</sup> “Pogledajte - Narodne patrole razoružale migrante i sprovele civilno hapšenje!” [Watch: People's Patrols Disarmed Migrants and Carried Out Civil Arrest!], *Srbin.info*, 8 September 2022, <https://srbin.info/drustvo/pogledajte-narodne-patrole-razoruzale-migrante-i-sprovele-civilno-hapsenje-video/?lang=lat>.
- <sup>73</sup> Sejdinovic, “Ekstremisti ‘šuruju’ sa vlastima i progone migrante” [Extremists 'Colluding' with Authorities and Hunting Migrants].
- <sup>74</sup> Damjan Knežević founded the People's Initiative No Surrender for Kosovo and Metohija in 2017. This initiative emerged after several years of Knežević's activism in northern Kosovo, including participation in (violent) demonstrations and road blockades. Knežević is also one of the founders of the far-right movement, now a parliamentary party, the Serbian Party Oathkeepers, from which he departed in 2014, accusing its leadership of becoming collaborators with Aleksandar Vučić. Nemanja Mitrović, “Narodne patrole: Ko patrolira Beogradom u potrazi za migrantima” [People's Patrols: Who Patrols Belgrade in Search of Migrants?], *BBC News na Srpskom*, 9 March 2020.
- <sup>75</sup> Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Migrants are Leaving, But Hatred Remains The Anti-Migrant Extreme Right in Serbia* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 7–8.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid, 30–39.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>78</sup> Jovana Bjekić, Marko Živanović, and Maša Vukčević Marković, *Attitudes Towards Migrants and Refugees in Serbia* (Belgrade: Psychosocial Innovation Network, 2020), [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Stavovi-prema-izbeglicama-i-migrantima\\_ENGL.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Stavovi-prema-izbeglicama-i-migrantima_ENGL.pdf), 12–13.

<sup>79</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Migrants are Leaving, But Hatred Remains The Anti-Migrant Extreme Right in Serbia*, 44–46.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 36–39 and 46–48.

<sup>81</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 16; Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - November 2023* (Belgrade: BCSP, 2023).

<sup>82</sup> Petrović, Predrag, “‘Serbs and Russians are brothers forever’: far-right support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine”, *Atlantic Initiative*, 30 March 2022, <https://atlanticinitiative.org/serbs-and-russians-are-brothers-forever-far-right-support-for-putins-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>83</sup> “U petak veliki protest u Beogradu, stigla podrška od ruske braće!” [On Friday, a Large Protest in Belgrade, Support Arrived from Russian Brothers!], *Srbin.info*, 1 March 2022, <https://srbin.info/politika/za-rusiju-u-petak-veliki-protest-u-beogradu-stigla-podrska-od-ruske-brace-video/?lang=lat>.

<sup>84</sup> More about the Russian Imperial Movement: Jason Blazakis and Colin Clarke, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement* (New York: The Soufan Center, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> “Damnjan u studiju RT televizije: Srbi i Rusi su i braća i strateški partneri” [Damnjan in the RT TV studio: Serbs and Russians are both brothers and strategic partners], *Srbin.info*, 3 May 2022, <https://srbin.info/drustvo/damnjan-u-studiju-rt-televizije-srbi-i-rusi-su-i-braca-i-strateski-partneri-video/?lang=lat>.

<sup>86</sup> The Eagles were registered in 2017 as a nonprofit organisation based in St. Petersburg. They launched a Telegram channel named Z-Eagles five days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, garnering more than eight thousand followers. Lisov has strong connections with the French far-right group Generation Identitaire, which French authorities declared illegal in 2021. “‘We know who did it’: Russian anti-war exiles targeted in Serbia,” *France 24*, 26 January 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> “‘Telegrams’ with fake news on Western Balkans”, *RSE*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-telegram-kanali/31808637.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - November 2022* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 116.

<sup>90</sup> “How pro-Russian and Russian Telegram channels spread misinformation about Kosovo”, *RSE*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-rusija-telegram-proruski-drustvene-mreze-dezinformacije/31969041.html>.

<sup>91</sup> “Serbian right-winger says Wagner ties could help if there is a ‘conflict In Kosovo’”, *RFE*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-wagner-kosovo-ultranationalists-/32164146.html>.

<sup>92</sup> “Nakon objave Vagnera da je registrovao udruženje u Srbiji, ruski antiratni aktivisti negiraju, eksperti upozoravaju” [After Wagner’s announcement of registering an association in Serbia, Russian anti-war activists deny, experts issue warnings], *VOA*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-rat-u-ukrajini-ukrajina-rusija-grupa-vagner-delovanje-analiticari-nikitin-varga-radic/6868391.html>.

<sup>93</sup> “Obeležja ruske jedinice Vagner na desničarskom protestu u Beogradu” [Markings of the Russian Wagner unit observed at a right-wing protest in Belgrade], *RSE*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/beograd-protesti-desnica-kosovo/32323225.html>.

<sup>94</sup> “Vučić posle sastanka sa petorkom: Srbija je spremna da prihvati francusko-nemački plan uz jednu rezervu” [Vučić, after the meeting with the five: Serbia is ready to accept the Franco-German plan, with one reservation], 20 January 2023, *Danas*,

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-je-spremna-da-prihvati-francusko-nemacki-plan-uz-jednu-rezervu-vucic-posle-sastanka-sa-petorkom/>.

<sup>95</sup> Sonja Biserko, ed., *Serbia: Captured Society*, Helsinki Committee Report (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2023), 145.

<sup>96</sup> “Serbia nationalist protests spike tensions over Russia”, *BBC*, 18 February 2023, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64674\\_133](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64674_133).

<sup>97</sup> “Desničari srušili ogradu pored Predsedništva, ulaz u zgradu gađali jajima” [Right-wing protesters tore down the fence near the Presidency, throwing eggs at the entrance of the building.], *NI*, 15 February 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/desnicari-srusili-ogradu-pored-predsednistva-dosli-do-ulaza-u-zgradu/>.

<sup>98</sup> “Bocan-Harčenko: Osuđujemo pretnje upućene sa skupa kod Predsedništva” [We condemn the threats made at the gathering near the Presidency], *Danas*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/bocan-harcenko-osudjujemo-pretnje-upucene-sa-skupa-kod-predsednistva/>.

<sup>99</sup> From 17 to 18 March 2004, Kosovo extremists conducted large-scale violence against Serbs living in Kosovo. The violence was precipitated by false reports in the Kosovo Albanian media, which claimed that three Kosovo Albanian boys had drowned after being chased into the Ibar River by a group of Kosovo Serbs. The March Pogrom took the lives of eight Serbs; in two days, hundreds of people were wounded, more than 4,000 people were expelled, more than 800 homes were set on fire, and 35 Orthodox temples and cultural monuments were destroyed or severely damaged. Milica Stojanovic, “‘We Don’t Forget’: Serbs Commemorate Deadly 2004 Unrest in Kosovo,” *Balkan Insight*, 17 March 2023.

<sup>100</sup> “Desničarski protest protiv evropskog plana za Kosovo u Beogradu” [Right-wing protest against the European plan for Kosovo in Belgrade], *RSE*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-beograd-eu-plan-kosovo/32323350.html>.

<sup>101</sup> “Narodna patrola preti ‘ruskim liberalima u Srbiji’” [People’s Patrol Threatens ‘Russian Liberals’ in Serbia], *Nova*, 20 January 2023, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/narodna-patrola-preti-ruskim-liberalima-u-srbiji-vase-zastave-cemo-gaziti-a-vi-cete-nase-gledati/>.

<sup>102</sup> “‘Graffiti battle on streets of Belgrade’ as Serbia tries to stifle anti-Putin Russian exiles,” *The Guardian* (London), 28 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/28/serbia-graffiti-belgrade-anti-putin-russian-exiles>.

<sup>103</sup> Isidora Stakić, *Odnos Srbije prema ekstremno desničarskim organizacijama* [Serbia’s Authorities Treatment of Far-Right Organizations] (Beograd: Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, 2013), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 25–27.

<sup>105</sup> Stakić, *Odnos Srbije prema ekstremno desničarskim organizacijama*.

<sup>106</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> Examples of far-right under the government’s control and thus labelled as fake include Serbian Right (Srpska desnica), Leviathan (Levijatan), and Serbian Honour (Srpska čast). Examples of authentic far-right are People’s Patrol (Narodna patrola), Serbian action (Srpska akcija), and Kormilo (Helm). Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 12–14.

<sup>108</sup> Dušan Komarčević, “‘Zabrinut sam za porodicu’: Somborac kome prete zbog izdavanja smeštaja migrantima” [I am Worried about My Family: Resident of Sombor Faces Threats Due to Providing Accommodation for Migrants.], *RSE*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-sombor-plakati-desnicari-migranti/31505608.html>.

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<sup>109</sup> Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - May 2023* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 122.

<sup>110</sup> “Serbian Far-right Leader Arrested after Nationalists Try to Storm the Presidency Building in Belgrade”, *RFE*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-far-right-knezevic-arrested-vucic-kosovo/32274304.html>.

<sup>111</sup> “Dejan Petar i Damnjan nakon izlaska iz zatvora su poručili...” [Dejan Petar and Damnjan, After Release from Prison, Have Stated...], *Srbin.info*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTuh4FISbas>.

<sup>112</sup> Pejić Nikić, *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - May 2023*, 123.

<sup>113</sup> Research results on citizens views of Serbian foreign policy are available in: Vuksanovic, Steric, and Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 3–5.

<sup>115</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Petrović and Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable*.

<sup>117</sup> Stojanović, Ivković, and Kaličanin, *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in The Republic of Serbia – 2023* (Belgrade: National Youth Council of Serbia, 2023).

<sup>118</sup> Vuksanovic, Steric, and Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine*.

<sup>119</sup> “Vucic: I Made a Personal Decision not to Introduce Sanctions against Russia,” *Beta briefing*, 3 April 2023, <https://betabriefing.com/news/politics/22945-vucic-i-made-a-personal-decision-not-to-introduce-sanctions-against-russia>.

<sup>120</sup> “Commission presents a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans including €6 billion in grants and loans to accelerate economic convergence with the EU,” *European Commission*, 8 November 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Tanjug, “Mišćević: Srbija za sedam godina dobija 1,4 milijarde iz IPA 3 fondova” [Mišćević: Serbia will receive 1.4 billion from IPA 3 funds in seven years], *Ministarstvo za evropske integracije*, 28 April 2023.

<sup>122</sup> The USA has imposed sanctions on Milan Radojičić, brothers Zvonko and Žarko Veselinović, controversial businesspeople from northern Kosovo and financiers of the SNS, Slobodan Tepšić, a weapons trader and SNS financier, along with their companies, individuals, and entities connected to them. Additionally, Aleksandar Vulin, a political associate of Vučić and the director of the Serbian intelligence agency, has also been sanctioned. “14 srpskih državljana pod sankcijama SAD, [14 Serbian citizens under US sanctions]”, *Nova*, 17 July 2023.