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# Russia's Hybrid Threats as the Biggest Obstacle to the Euro Integration Process in the Western Balkans? A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses Russian hybrid threats in the Western Balkans in the context of the ongoing European integration process. Two countries were selected for this purpose: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This study is based on field research conducted in Sarajevo, Novi Sad and Belgrade in August 2021. The authors of this study conducted a total of 9 expert interviews, based on which they were able to determine how the creation of Russian hybrid threats negatively affects the accession negotiations taking place between the representatives of the European Union and the top officials of the two mentioned countries. Based on an interpretive case study, the authors were able to identify Russian hybrid threats in three areas. Russian political influence, the Kremlin's energy policy, and last but not least Moscow's disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting Euro-Atlantic integration structures in general are involved in slowing down the accession negotiations between the EU and the Western Balkan states.

**KEYWORDS:** *Western Balkans, Russia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, EU, Dodik, Putin*

## INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan countries have been striving to join the European Union (EU) in some cases for over a decade. Over time, however, it appears that the entire European integration process is not going nearly as smoothly as EU and Western Balkan leaders had envisioned. Serbian President Vučić and the prime ministers of North Macedonia and Albania made this clear at a joint press conference in June following a meeting with EU leaders (Marusic, 2022). At this press conference, they made no secret of their disappointment with the slow progress in the accession negotiations. It should be added here that the last country to receive candidate status was Albania in 2014. North Macedonia received candidate status in 2005, Montenegro in 2010, and Serbia two years later, in 2012.

This overview shows that the process of European integration of the Western Balkan countries is certainly not proceeding as fast as in the case of many post-communist states. It should be recalled that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have not yet been granted candidate status. These two countries have “only” the status of potential candidates. At the June press conference, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also commented on the progress of the negotiations. He acknowledged that there were problems in the process of European integration of the Western Balkan countries, but added that it is essential for the Western Balkan countries to continue with the necessary reforms. He did not forget to add on this occasion that the EU is also ready to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the near future (Michel, 2022). With this statement, the President of the European Council followed up on his announcements in May 2022, when he made a tour of the Western Balkans to assure the leaders of these countries that the EU considers the admission of the Western Balkans as one of its priorities (European Council of the EU, 2022).

Russia, in particular, is trying to take advantage of the complex European integration process, as it is an important ally for many countries in the region, despite Russia’s continuous violation of the norms of international law since the annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea in 2014. Moreover, Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022, which has renewed the desire of Western Balkan countries to join the EU. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has become increasingly involved in the region; see, for example, Kuczyński (2019). This is also happening because the Kremlin has strategic interests in the Western Balkans (the Kremlin wants to ensure that the Western Balkans do not join Euro-Atlantic integration structures). A typical example that illustrates Russia’s true intentions in the Western Balkans was the situation in Montenegro in 2016, when Moscow tried to overthrow the government that was steering the country toward the North Atlantic Alliance. This Russian intention ultimately failed and Montenegro became a member of NATO in 2017.

In the context of the current events in Ukraine, the question arises in which direction the process of European integration of the Western Balkan countries

will continue to develop. Indeed, Moscow's influence in a number of Western Balkan countries seems to have been growing in recent years, see, for example, Kuczyński (2019).

The phenomenon of Russian hybrid threats in the Western Balkans has been addressed by a number of authors who have attempted to capture in their texts the various elements of Moscow's hybrid operations in the region. One of the most recent contributions on the nature of Russia's hybrid operations is Cruz's text (2021), in which the author discusses the nature of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans region and also addresses how the Kremlin exploits the Western Balkans' energy dependence on Russia (Cruz, 2021). Greene and Asmolov (2021) also write about Russia's hybrid operations in the information environment. These authors conclude that Russia is trying to portray Euro-Atlantic integration organizations as something bad through disinformation campaigns. For example, Galeotti (2018), Hansel and Feyerabend (2018), and Kuczyński (2019) write about Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. Kallaba (2017) demonstrates Russian hybrid operations using Kosovo as an example. Tsalov (2020) examines Russian hybrid threats in North Macedonia. Last but not least, Brkan and Grdinić (eds.) (2020) attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon in the entire Western Balkan region. However, none of these studies have taken into account the EU enlargement process. This study attempts to fill this gap.

### **THEORETICAL PART: HYBRID THREATS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.**

Although at first glance it might seem that hybrid threats were more widely discussed in academic circles only after 2014, when the Russian annexation of Crimea took place, the opposite is true. Indeed, it is worth recalling that hybrid threats have always been an integral part of international relations, even though most authors give the Russian annexation of Crimea as an example of hybrid warfare, see for example Hajduk and Stepniewski (2016), Schmid (2019), or Rácz (2015).

In general, the term "hybrid war" was introduced into international relations by Robert G. Walker in his 1998 dissertation (Walker, 1998). Nevertheless, there are opinions that Walker was not the first to use the term. Stojar (2017) points out that some sources attribute authorship of the term to the British Thomas Mockaitis. It is worth adding at this point that the phenomenon of hybrid warfare was addressed by a number of authors before 2014. William Németh, in his 2002 dissertation, attempted to describe the hybrid strategy of the Chechen rebels in their struggle against the conquering Russian army (Németh, 2002). Frank Hoffman, however, is considered the author of a comprehensive concept of hybrid warfare. His concept of hybrid warfare draws on a number of similar concepts such as Asymmetric warfare, Non-linear Warfare, and "Fourth Generation Warfare" (Hoffman, 2007). Hoffman assumes that the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in the conduct of armed conflict. Indeed, according to Hoffman, modern warfare will increasingly employ unconventional methods of warfare (Ibid.). According to Hoffman, the term hybrid

warfare “encompasses a whole spectrum of different types of warfare, encompassing conventional means, unconventional tactics and strategies, and terrorist acts, including extreme violence, coercion, and criminal acts. Actors in hybrid warfare include both states and various non-state actors (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8).

However, with the emergence of the concept of hybrid warfare comes its critique. According to Renz and Smith, the concept of hybrid warfare is so ambiguous that the term can be used to describe any hostile action (Renz and Smith, 2016). Stojar (2017) and Van Puyvelde (2015) came to a similar conclusion in their texts. It is worth noting that the concept of hybrid warfare is conceived differently in the Anglo-Saxon environment and in Russia. While in Anglo-Saxon literature hybrid warfare is understood as a combination of conventional and unconventional means, Russian strategic thinking emphasizes the informational and psychological warfare aspect of hybrid warfare. Moreover, the Kremlin maintains that it is not itself waging hybrid war against the West, but must defend itself against western hybrid operations (Clark, 2020).

General Gerasimov’s text, which became so popular that it became synonymous with Russian hybrid warfare (Gerasimov, 2013), resonated most in the Anglo-Saxon environment. In this text, Gerasimov describes the nature of future military conflicts. According to Gerasimov, it is practically impossible to distinguish a state of peace from a state of war. Moreover, in future conflicts, according to the author, hybrid operations in the information environment will play a much more important role. One can imagine cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns or propaganda. International leaders have also had to respond to Russia’s recent activities and are looking for ways to counter hybrid threats from the Kremlin (Monaghan, 2019). Furthermore, according to Monaghan, it is important not to view hybrid warfare and hybrid threats as synonyms. Hybrid war means war in the strict sense of the word; hybrid threats arise even when a state of war is not declared. According to NATO, hybrid threats include “a combination of military and non-military, and covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, the use of irregular armed groups, and the use of regular armed forces” (NATO, 2021). As can be seen, this is a significant expansion of the term, as North Atlantic Treaty Organization also uses economic instruments or operations in the information environment in its definition.

The study is based on the conceptual framework of Christopher Chivvis, who in his seminal text identified four areas in which Moscow creates hybrid threats to other states. based on his analysis. These are political influence, economic influence, the information environment, and so-called proxies. In the area of political influence, the Kremlin seeks to build the best possible relationships with relevant political actors in order to advance its interests. In this context, Chivvis points out that Moscow supports such political groups in certain countries that are critical of the West (Chivvis, 2017). Thus, in this area, the authors of this study will observe the relations between Moscow and the leaders of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. From these

personal ties, it can be deduced how these relationships negatively affect the accession talks between the EU countries, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Regarding economic influence, Chivvis (2017) assumes that Russia uses gas and oil supplies to advance its geopolitical interests. This was most evident in 2006 and 2009, when the Kremlin cut off gas supplies to Ukraine (Ibid.). The current Russian aggression against Ukraine also clearly shows that Russia is trying to put pressure on the political leaders of European countries by reducing natural gas supplies to Europe. This area therefore needs to examine how Russia is using gas and oil supplies to push its political interests.

Information operations will become increasingly important in future conflicts as rival parties seek to undermine the morale of their opponents through disinformation campaigns, intelligence operations, or propaganda (Ibid.). Given the nature of this text, it is necessary to examine the way in which the Kremlin is using these operations to undermine public support for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia's accession to the EU. This may also be one of the reasons why the accession negotiations are dragging on disproportionately. The low level of support for eventual EU membership for both countries could lead the political elites in both countries to stop trying to push through the reforms necessary for accession.

A final area where Russia creates hybrid threats is its support for so-called proxies. The logic is simple. Moscow uses friendly organizations that are an extension of the Kremlin to bolster its influence. As an example, Chivvis cites a motorcycle group called the Night Wolves, which promotes Kremlin ideas and thus has the ability to destabilize the target society. However, it is not the intent of this paper to show how the Kremlin succeeds in destabilizing the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The purpose of this study is to show how Moscow has succeeded in recent years in complicating accession negotiations with the EU through disinformation campaigns and political and economic influence. For this reason, the authors of the study have chosen not to cover this particular area.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study represents an interpretive case study, such as that described by Lijphart (1971). In this type of case study, the theoretical framework of the paper is used as a guide for drawing specific conclusions. In this particular case study, the researchers were interested in Russian hybrid threats as a possible obstacle in the accession negotiations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia with the EU between 2014 and 2022. The time frame was chosen because Russian hybrid threats were discussed mainly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, moreover, the Kremlin's increased interest in the region during this period is evident, see, for example, Kuczyński (2019).

The text of this paper is mainly based on qualitative field research, in which 9 expert interviews were conducted in Sarajevo (Bosnia), Belgrade and Novi Sad



(Serbia), in August 2021. The interviews were conducted in English and varied in length. The shortest interview lasted 30 minutes, and the longest lasted an hour and a quarter. They were semi-structured interviews, in which a general question was asked at the beginning, to which the respondents answered freely. If there was any ambiguity, the authors of this study asked follow-up questions. One of the respondents refused to be interviewed by the authors of this study, but provided the researchers with his responses to the questions, at least in electronic form. A wide range of respondents were contacted. These included diplomats, local politicians, academics, and last but not least, NGO workers.

In collecting data, the authors of this study used the chain referral sampling method, which is used when the topic is sensitive and requires knowledge of the local environment, see for example Biernacki and Waldorf (1981). This method is essentially based on contacting individuals who are knowledgeable about the topic. These individuals then provide the researchers with other relevant contacts. This figuratively creates a “chain” of potential contacts who then provide relevant data through expert interviews. To establish further contacts, the researchers used so-called gatekeepers who were familiar with both the Bosnian and Serbian environments. These gatekeepers subsequently recommended an additional 7 contacts. Due to the sensitivity of the reported data, the interviewees did not want to be named, so the authors of this text decided to keep the interviewees anonymous.

In addition to the expert interviews, the text relies on work with secondary and primary data sources. The important secondary sources undoubtedly include Cruz’s paper (2021), the text by the author duo Salvo and de León (2018), and Meister’s paper (2022). In the case of primary data sources, the authors of this study examined official foreign policy documents of the relevant actors (Serbia, Russia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). After critically assessing the relevance of these documents, those that contributed to the objectives of the study were selected. The aim of this study is to determine how Russia creates hybrid threats in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2014-2022 and how these hybrid threats are subsequently reflected negatively in the negotiations for the accession of these two countries to the EU.

### **RUSSIA’S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INFLUENCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND SERBIA AS AN OBSTACLE TO THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS**

Moscow’s hybrid threats in the political sphere are based on its support for certain politicians and political objectives that may result in a slowdown of the European integration process. In this regard, the Kremlin’s key man in Bosnia and Herzegovina is Milorad Dodik, the current President of Republika Srpska (RS), who, according to several interviewees, is the reason for the failure of accession negotiations with the EU (Interview No. 4 with a local politician in Sarajevo; Interview No. 1 with a former Bosnian politician). One interviewee commented on Milorad Dodik’s political activity by saying that Dodik was one

of Vladimir Putin's biggest supporters in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Interview No. 1 with a former Bosnian politician). Moreover, the same interviewee added that Dodik can meet with Putin almost any time (*ibid.*). Evidence of these words is Dodik's recent meeting with Putin at an economic forum in St. Petersburg, Russia (Putin, 2022). This happened despite the fact that Russia has been internationally isolated since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, it was not only this meeting between the two aforementioned leaders that could indicate their good relations with each other. Following Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, Putin met with Dodik eight times after the annexation of Crimea between 2015 and 2018 (Salvo de León, 2018), with his 2018 visit on the eve of the RS elections. This represents a symbol of friendship between Dodik and Putin (Putin, 2018).

The good relations between Dodik and Putin are largely due to Moscow's support for the secessionist tendencies of the Republika Srpska political leadership. The latter has long sought secession from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2016, Milorad Dodik announced a referendum on the RS territory, after which Bosnian Serb Day would be proclaimed again and celebrated on January 9. The referendum was held even though it had been formally banned by the Constitutional Court. While the Kremlin did not comment on the matter, the leaders of Western countries declared the referendum null and void. In the referendum, less than one percent of citizens opposed the proposal. Regarding Milorad Dodik's secessionist tendencies, one interviewee said that these were mere proclamations, but they had no chance of success, as it was also in the interest of the West and the EU that such a thing did not happen (Interview No. 2 with the diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo). However, another interviewee stated that the loss of part of the territory would be an insoluble problem, as Ukraine's experience (the loss of Crimea and the declaration of autonomous republics in the eastern part of the country) clearly shows that the EU considers the territorial integrity of a state to be one of the main conditions for joining the organization (Interview No. 3 with an NGO worker in Sarajevo). Dodik also tried to call a referendum in 2018, but without success. In 2021, he was relatively the closest yet to a successful RS secession, as he planned to create his own judicial branch. However, this would mean that the state would cease to exist within its current borders. In May 2022, he again called for the peaceful secession of RS from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Radosavljević, 2022).

However, in the context of current events in Ukraine, it is questionable whether this assumption is still valid, as Ukraine became an EU candidate country after Russian troops invaded in February 2022. As one of the interviewees revealed to the authors, the plan for the future is that Bosnia and Herzegovina will also be granted candidate status, but for this to happen, fundamental reforms will have to be carried out, which are being blocked by the RS, especially by Milorad Dodik (Interview No. 4 with a local Bosnian politician in Sarajevo). His words can be read to mean that RS' relations with the Kremlin are currently the major obstacle to advancing EU accession negotiations, as suggested by European Commission reports that have long warned Bosnia



about the decision-making error of giving each territorial unit within the federation a veto power, see, for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina Progress Report (2013, 2014, or 2020).

The situation in neighboring Serbia is slightly different. In this country, Moscow's political influence is based on supporting Belgrade's strategic interests. In this case, it is the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, which was declared against Serbia in 2008. Radeljić, for example, offers a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. According to this author, Moscow is promoting its strategic interests in Serbia, even though at first glance it may seem that it is supporting Serbia above all. This author refers to the fact that while in the case of Kosovo the Kremlin defends the principle of Serbia's territorial integrity, in the case of Ukraine it acts in complete contradiction to this principle. Thus, Moscow opposes the West on the issue of Kosovo's independence in order to strengthen its power status (Radeljic, 2017). The alliance between Serbia and Russia was also described in more detail by one of the interviewees to the authors of this study. This individual expressed that Serbian society generally perceives Russia as a friendly country, especially because it is clearly on Serbia's side on the issue of Kosovo's independence (Interview No. 5 with an academic in Novi Sad).

In this context, the statement of another interviewee is certainly interesting. He remarked on the issue of Kosovo's independence that, in his opinion, the West applies double standards. While the majority recognizes Kosovo as an independent entity, it cannot recognize Crimea as part of Russia, even though the inhabitants of the peninsula decided in a referendum to join Russia (Interview 6 with an academic in Belgrade). The shaping of relations between Pristina and Belgrade is also important for accession talks with EU representatives. In 2013, the so-called Brussels Agreement was signed. The signing of this agreement concluded Kosovo's negotiations with Serbia. This is the first time that joint negotiations have taken place since Kosovo declared independence (Musliu, 2021). EU representatives hoped that this agreement would normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo. After the signing of the agreement, accession negotiations were launched. Efforts to clarify Kosovo's status have dragged on ever since. Recent attempts to resolve the situation in Davos (2019) and Washington (2021) have not changed this situation. Kosovo thus remains an obstacle to a possible breakthrough in accession negotiations, as became evident in late August 2022 when a crisis erupted between the two countries. The Serbian President even sent troops to the border with Kosovo, and while the West, led by the EU, supported Kosovo in this crisis, the Kremlin once again and quite predictably sided with Belgrade in this dispute (Coakley, 2022).

The current Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, has certainly played his part in the good relations between Moscow and Belgrade. One of the interviewees also commented on his country's foreign policy orientation. In general, the interviewee assumes that Serbia under President Vučić is pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy in which Belgrade, on the one hand, sees the benefits of EU membership, but on the other hand, perceives Russian support for Serbia in

the case of Kosovo's independence on the international scene (Interview No. 7 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Belgrade). Thus, Vučić is also forced to cooperate with Russia, which is reflected, among other things, in the economic sphere. In return for its support on the issue of Kosovo's independence, Belgrade has repeatedly stood up for Moscow on the issue of Crimea's annexation, when it did not impose sanctions and the Serbian President attended Russian Victory Day celebrations immediately after Crimea's annexation. Notably, the rejection of sanctions against Russia is mentioned as one of the main issues in the European Commission's reports on Serbia's progress toward EU membership (Serbia Progress Report, 2014; 2015). Serbia's former foreign minister commented on the issue of the annexation of Crimea in the sense that Serbia will always stand behind Russia and will never impose sanctions against Putin's regime (Zorić, 2017).

In this context, the current developments that clearly document the strong alliance between Belgrade and Moscow are also important. Belgrade did not impose sanctions for the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. However, it was surprising that Serbia's representative at UN advocated the adoption of a resolution calling on the Kremlin to withdraw its troops from Ukraine immediately (Popović, 2022). On the other hand, the Serbian parliament subsequently refused to call the Kremlin's offensive incursion into Ukrainian territory a real war (Morina, 2022). In this context, it is symptomatic that good relations between Belgrade and Moscow continued even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The fact that the Russian foreign minister decided to visit Belgrade in June 2022 (Serbia did not close its airspace to Russian aircraft, following the example of the EU) may be evidence of this claim. However, the visit ultimately did not take place due to unspecified problems on the Russian side (Reuters, 2022a).

In the context of Russia's economic influence, it has already been suggested that overdependence on Russian energy supplies could be seen as a hybrid threat that countries must deal with. This is also the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. As for Serbia, the situation here is absolutely clear. Belgrade is highly dependent on natural gas supplies from Russia. One interviewee commented on this situation by saying that it is basically advantageous for Serbia to stay outside the EU because it has very cheap gas from Russia. However, unlike the EU, the Kremlin does not demand economic or legal reforms from Serbia (Interview No. 9 with an academic in Novi Sad). His words can be understood to mean that the Serbian government is under constant pressure from the European Commission, which demands concrete reform steps in return for aid. However, according to another interviewee, the Serbian government is not doing nearly as badly on the reforms required for EU accession as the European Commission reports suggest. The problem is the European Commission's double standard. According to this interviewee, Serbia is no worse than EU member states Romania or Bulgaria in fighting corruption or in the judiciary (Interview No. 6 with an academic in Belgrade). Problematically, however, gas from Russia is not nearly as cheap as one interviewee assumes. In fact, Serbia pays the largest amount for Russian gas supplies; see, for example, Cruz (2021). Russia

controls gas supplies on Serbian territory through the purchase of the Serbian state-owned Naftna Industrija Srbije by Russia's Gazpromneft, which has gradually increased its stake in the company since 2008. Against the backdrop of the current conflict in Ukraine, it is interesting to note that Serbia has decided to further deepen its energy ties with Russia, with Aleksandar Vučić signing another three-year contract guaranteeing Russian gas supplies to Serbia in May 2022 (Reuters, 2022b). Needless to say, this act caused anger among EU leaders.

A similar situation exists in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that country, the Russian company Neftegazinkor acquired control of the Bosnian company Rafinerija Nafta Brod in 2007, and it should be noted that the sale of the company was accompanied by allegations of corruption. Bosnia and Herzegovina, like Serbia, is completely dependent on natural gas supplies from Russia. The problem, however, is that unlike Serbia, the Russian government uses natural gas supplies to Bosnia as an effective bargaining chip. There have been several occasions when the Russian side has completely stopped supplying this commodity. This happened in 2009 and most recently in 2020 (Čančar, 2021). This only shows how vulnerable Bosnia and Herzegovina is when it comes to energy security. On the other hand, against the backdrop of current events in Ukraine, where most EU member states are struggling with insufficient supplies of Russian gas, there is an opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina to link its future foreign policy direction with the EU rather than Russia.

### **RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND SERBIA**

As stated in the previous lines, Russia uses its political influence to support politicians who are critical of the two states' possible membership in the European Union. Moscow's disinformation campaigns in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also fit into this plan. As one interviewee points out, although Russia does not have a strong media presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is able to influence public opinion through the Serbian branch of Sputnik News (Interview No. 4 with a local Bosnian politician). According to this interviewee, there are two narratives in the Bosnian media space, which are subsequently adopted by the political representation in RS. In the first case, the EU is portrayed as a weak and incompetent organization that brings nothing to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second narrative presents Russia as a possible alternative to the EU (ibid.). This can be quite dangerous if these narratives emerge as a means of political competition. Milorad Dodik has emerged as a critic of Bosnia and Herzegovina's possible EU membership in this regard, and thus could be described as a clear Kremlin's Trojan horse. In February 2014, for example, Dodik argued that the EU was mainly to blame for the Bosnian government's failed economic reforms (Belloni, 2016).

The Kremlin is well aware that he is a key figure who can destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is therefore intent on keeping Dodik in power. The disinformation campaign by the Serbian version of Sputnik in the run-up to the election of the new leadership RS is an example of this behavior. While Milorad

Dodik was supported by the pro-Russian media before the 2018 presidential election, his opponent, Mladen Ivanić, was harshly criticized by this media for being supported by the West (Greene, Asmolov (eds.) 2021). Despite these attempts by the Kremlin, however, public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina appears to remain in favor of EU accession. According to one interviewee, even the government is determined to join the EU, despite RS opposition. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 80 per cent of society is in favor of EU accession (Interview 4 with a Bosnian local politician in Sarajevo). The commitment to join the EU is also included in the Foreign Policy Concept of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2023.

In Serbia, the situation regarding disinformation is very similar to that in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, a key difference is how people perceive these disinformation campaigns. According to two interviewees, there are practically no subversive activities regarding the information environment in Serbia because Russia does not have to convince anyone in Serbia (Interview No. 5 with an academic in Novi Sad; Interview 6 with an academic in Belgrade). Their words suggest that the Kremlin does not have to go to great lengths to present itself as an ally. However, according to another interviewee from diplomatic circles, this premise is not true. This interviewee assumes that Moscow is deliberately using these disinformation channels to portray Euro-Atlantic integration organizations as hostile (Interview No. 7 with a diplomatic representative sent by an EU country to Belgrade). For an interesting analysis of pro-Russian narratives in the Serbian media, see Stefan Meister (ed.) (2018). The first narrative that appears in the Serbian media is the claim that the Kremlin had to liberate Crimea because the West, especially the United States, had staged a coup attempt in Ukraine. Moreover, the Kremlin compared the situation during the 2014 protests in Ukraine to the situation in Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic and warned of a possible NATO troop invasion of Ukraine, similar to what happened in Serbia. Another key narrative is criticism of Euro-Atlantic integration structures, with the EU portrayed as an organization that would only use Serbia's potential membership for its companies. The EU is also portrayed as an untrustworthy organization because of its support for Kosovo. Russia, on the other hand, is praised by these information channels as a Slavic brother that has always helped Serbia (for example, in the 19th century in the fight against the Ottoman Empire (Meister (eds.), 2018).

These narratives and misinformation have led to a noticeable decline in trust in the EU as an organization itself. According to Milo's (2021) analysis, the majority of Serbian citizens believe the narratives spread by the Kremlin that denigrate the EU and present cooperation with Russia as one of the possible alternatives to membership in the Union. These Kremlin disinformation campaigns have resulted in a fairly steady decline in support for the country's EU accession. In this context, one interviewee stated that support for Serbia's EU accession is currently around 50 per cent (Interview No. 7 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Belgrade). The same interviewee explains this by saying that Vučić cannot properly explain the benefits of EU membership for

Serbia and assumes that Vučić does not want to bring his country into the EU at all because he is under pressure from public opinion, which favors Russia (Interview No. 7 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Belgrade). This scenario is suggested, moreover, by the results of a study by Globsec, which published a report in 2021 stating that three-fifths of the Serbian public perceives Russia as an alternative to the country's EU membership. Moreover, four-fifths of Serbian society perceive Russia as a Slavic brother (Globsec, 2021).

One interviewee commented on the mood in Serbian society regarding the country's possible EU membership, saying that at the beginning of the accession negotiations there was enthusiasm in the country, but over time, the interviewee said, it became clear that joining the EU was not that easy, and therefore many people no longer believed in EU membership (Interview No 8 with a local politician in Belgrade). Perhaps frustration with the slow pace of accession negotiations is forcing the Serbian government to cooperate with Russia.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of hybrid threats in the Western Balkans has gained prominence in recent years in the context of the Kremlin's foreign policy. However, none of the theoretical contributions have addressed the issue of hybrid threats in the context of EU enlargement. Based on field research, the authors have succeeded in identifying hybrid threats to Russia in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in all the areas mentioned. In the area of political influence, in the case of Bosnia Russia relies on the RS President and EU critic Milorad Dodik. A possible territorial breakup of Bosnia and Herzegovina would undoubtedly lead to a stalemate in accession negotiations. It should be noted that the majority of Bosnian respondents assumes that Milorad Dodik is the main obstacle on the country's path toward EU membership. In the case of Serbia, Russia relies on Belgrade's support on the issue of Kosovo's territorial status. Clarification of Kosovo's territorial status is one of the most important preconditions for Serbia's progress in EU accession negotiations. Serbia reciprocates this loyalty to Moscow and refuses to join the EU-imposed anti-Russian sanctions on the international stage. In both countries, Moscow uses narratives that criticize the EU and the West as a whole. Last but not least, Moscow uses the energy dependence of both states for its geopolitical purposes. While Serbia is deepening its dependence on Russia, which could serve as a warning to EU leaders, this could be an opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina to move closer to the EU and consolidate energy policy steps with the organization. As Russia's war in Ukraine shows, Europe's energy security has become the top priority.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

The concept of the manuscript was made by M.S. and J.G.; the methodology was designed by, M.S.; collection of data was done by M.S. and J.G.; statistical analyses of data was performed by, M.S.; draft of the manuscript was written by, M.S. and J.G.; All listed authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. Only those who have provided substantial contribution to the submitted work are eligible for authorship. Please refer to CRediT taxonomy for an explanation of terms.

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Interview No. 5 with an academic in Novi Sad.

Interview No. 6 with an academic in Belgrade.

Interview No. 7 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Belgrade.

Interview No 8 with a local politician in Belgrade.

Interview No. 9 with an academic in Novi Sad.