

Russia ups its game in the Balkans, but the West should avoid responding in kind

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Russia has recently been accused of stoking tensions in the Balkans by waging ‘information warfare’ in the region. **Jarosław Wiśniewski** writes that even if these allegations are true, the West should avoid responding in kind. Rather than engaging in the same tactics, the carrot of European integration should be used to exert greater influence.



Images of Vladimir Putin placed on an apartment block in Kosovska Mitrovica. Credits: Jarosław Wiśniewski.

‘**Propaganda must be smart, competent and effective**’ Russia’s defence minister said in the late February when announcing an establishment of ‘informational operations’ troops in a speech to the lower house of the Russian parliament. The main aim, as indicated by Sergei Shoigu, would be defensive – ‘to counter propaganda’, signalling a ‘next stage’ in Russia’s information warfare campaign, with a more direct involvement of the military, mirroring the steps undertaken in [Ukraine](#).

Some experts see this as [linked to the French and German elections](#), where signs of an increased Russian disinformation campaign [were reported](#). But, as Jolanta Darczewska argues in her [meticulous study](#) of information warfare in Russia’s new military doctrine, ‘doctrinal assumptions about information warfare demonstrate not so much a change in the theory of its conduct... but rather a clinging to old methods (sabotage, diversionary tactics, disinformation, state terror, manipulation, aggressive propaganda, exploiting the potential for protest among the local population)’.

Information warfare is an element of what is often called the Gerasimov doctrine, or non-linear (hybrid) warfare. The

still not fully clear events in Montenegro from October 2016 may signal that the Kremlin is ready to up its game and go beyond the limits of 'soft' propaganda further away from its nearest neighbourhood. The recent developments in Macedonia and the [Sunday Times report](#) about the Kremlin bullying its ministers clearly show that Russian support does not come for free. With the Balkans, as [I have argued in an earlier piece](#), already being a test-ground for Russian disinformation campaigns, the possibility that Russia is testing a non-linear approach has to be seriously taken into consideration.

Russia in the Balkans

Russia's strategy in the Balkans is part of the Kremlin's wider foreign policy approach; it seeks 'weak links' in Western unity, using them to undermine, divide and question the Western model. In the Balkans, this approach focuses on two key goals. The first one is to undermine all of the Western-sponsored achievements in the region: the current borders, the Dayton agreement and the independence of Kosovo. The second one is arguably more of a priority for the Kremlin; it is to stop any future NATO enlargement into the region.

In terms of information warfare, Russia aims to achieve its aims by using 'soft' instruments: narratives exploiting regional stereotypes, ethnic tensions, and unresolved legacies of conflicts. The hitherto approach of Russia was to focus on the ethnic Serbian (or Slavic) audience in the Balkans. The dominant narrative here was to portray Russia as a 'bigger brother' of Serbia, an ethnic, cultural and religious ally on whom Belgrade could always count on, with a nudge to Serbian nationalists and the myth of a Greater Serbia.

A new development is the use by Russian media, in the context of the recent post-election turmoil in Macedonia, of the [narrative of a Greater Albania and the threat](#) of unification of ethnic Albanians living across the borders of Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and southern Serbia into one country. This subscribes to the long standing fear of Slavic communities living in southern Europe that [can be traced as far back as 1913 and the Treaty of London](#), when the borders of today's Albania were established, leaving large numbers of ethnic Albanians outside of the country.

Paradoxically, this narrative also attracts the more radical elements of Albanian society, which may explain the gossip circulating around at the end of 2016 that Sputnik may open an Albanian-language service. All of this shows that for Russia, the priority in the region is not strategic and long-term alliances, but flexibility, muddying the waters, and stoking tensions and divisions, ultimately undermining the regional cooperation promoted by the West.

Russia and Montenegro

The most unexpected events took place in Montenegro in October last year. What we know is based on the statements of [Montenegro's prosecutor](#), journalist investigations published in two British papers, [The Sunday Times](#) and [The Sunday Telegraph](#), and on the [official statements](#) of the UK's foreign secretary Boris Johnson. The narrative that has been put forward claims that Russian military intelligence officers outsourced a coup attempt to Serb nationalists, who were previously involved in pro-Russian activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The episode has shown two features of Russia's policy outside of its near neighbourhood – unwillingness to get 'their own hands dirty' (preferring the use of local actors rather than their own special forces) and the use of the existing muddy waters in the region to portray the whole episode as an anti-opposition provocation of the Montenegrin government. The recent OCCRP revelations about the Global Laundromat and [their links with the Balkans](#) may have given us hints as to how Russian operatives may be receiving funding for their actions in the region.

There is of course the possibility that the 'coup' could have been 'fake news', as both the Montenegrin opposition and the Russian government have [rejected](#) these accusations. However, no one has yet provided an alternative scenario/explanation of the events. One cannot also dismiss reports about Serbs participating in 'military-patriotic camps' in Russia – seemingly an extension of Russia's soft power (or more adequately 'soft coercion') until now

deployed by the Kremlin [primarily in the post-Soviet space](#).

Serbia – the pivotal actor

European diplomats like to repeat that Serbia is the pivotal country in the region. The decisive victory by Aleksandar Vučić in the country's [recent presidential election](#), and the subsequent consolidation of power in his hands, may give more clarity as to where exactly Serbia stands in the increasingly polarised international arena.

The non-aligned card played in the past years was effective, as it allowed Serbia to play different actors off against each other (Vučić as PM posing as pro-EU; the then-president Nikolić as pro-Russian). We have also seen this during the recent election campaign, with Vučić's trip to Moscow and his meetings with [Vladimir Putin](#) and [Sergei Shoigu](#) announcing a deal to acquire six MiG-29 fighters (and other Russian military equipment), which was dismissed in private conversations by European diplomats as merely part of his campaign.

With all of the power in Vučić's hands, he loses the convenience of blaming Nikolić for the pro-Russian turn (unless, that is, the new prime minister of Serbia, whom Vučić will undoubtedly hand pick, will be a figure considered to be close to Russia). In the end, the reality is that European countries do not have any alternative. They will work with Vučić regardless.

Russia ups its game: Should the West follow?

Although open source intelligence seems to suggest that information warfare appears to be falling within the tools of Russian military spheres, it does not mean that the West's response should be reciprocal. NATO is still perceived to be the villain among the ethnic Serb population, despite over 18 years since the bombing of Yugoslavia. Any attempts to establish more direct involvement by NATO, even in the information sphere, will be counterproductive.

Equally counterproductive will be any attempt to link an increased Western media presence with the narrative of 'fighting Russian propaganda'. The [return of the BBC to Serbia](#) is a very welcome sign, but if it were linked with the perception of 'the West's return' it would not only undermine the values of journalism the BBC promotes and stands for, but could also [backfire](#) and result in people rejecting any evidence put out by the organisation. This is where strengthening [the EU taskforce](#) would be more productive.

In the end, what is needed, as [Milan Nic eloquently argues](#), is greater attention from the EU. The carrot of EU integration is still the most tempting of those available, especially since all Russia can offer is maintenance of the status quo. The recent tour of the region by the EU's High Representative, Federica Mogherini, sent a clear signal that '[the doors of the EU are open](#)'. What the region needs though is less shuttle diplomacy and more actual involvement, with a clear path toward EU integration.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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