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HYBRID WARFARE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: HOW STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY ATTRACTS MALIGNED POWERS AND HOSTILE INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the domestic political, economic, and social conditions in the Western Balkans that provide fertile ground for hostile and malign actors to manipulate and exploit governments and societies with hybrid war measures, namely cyberattacks and cyber intrusions and disinformation and fake news. It begins with a review and assessment of the prevailing empirical and theoretical literature on hybrid warfare. It then describes two leading empirical indices that measure degrees of permeability and structural vulnerability that elevate or reduce the risks associated with malign and hostile interventions. The article also examines leading indicators measuring resilience levels in cybersecurity and media/information literacy, highlighting political, social, and economic vulnerabilities. It concludes by suggesting that domestic conditions in the region encourage malign and hostile actors, especially Russia and for different reasons and to a lesser extent China and Turkey, to use hybrid measures to exploit the region. The article proposes that in addition to strengthening institutions and trust, membership in

NATO and the E.U. are directly related to mitigating structural vulnerability and reducing uncertainty and insecurity in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: hybrid warfare; permeability; vulnerability; cybersecurity; disinformation; hostile influence; maligned actors

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to assess the extent of resilience in the Western Balkans to specific hybrid war measures by maligned and hostile actors. It analyzes internal conditions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia that allow Russia, as well as China and Turkey, to destabilize or enhance their influence in the region. The article highlights levels of permeability and vulnerability to cyberattacks and disinformation designed to manipulate public attitudes on key issues. The research questions are twofold: 1- what internal conditions exist in the six states of the Western Balkans that enable maligned actors to exercise hybrid war in the region? and 2- how vulnerable are governments and societies in the Western Balkans to cyberattacks and cyber intrusions and disinformation and fake news?

This is a comparative study of permeability and vulnerability in the six states of the Western Balkans. The article begins by understanding hybrid warfare as cyberattacks and disinformation by hostile and maligned actors. However, the full range of hybrid warfare measures are not examined in this article. It then operationalizes permeability as a measure showing whether a hostile actors can penetrate systems and societies and vulnerability is operationalized as institutional weakness/frailty within the Western Balkans states. Cybersecurity is understood as the capacity of different domestic institutions to improve quality of cyber defenses and enhance confidence and resilience in cybersecurity. Disinformation is seen as a broad, umbrella concept that refers to falsehoods and lies spread with strategic intent by hostile and maligned actors to inflict harm and deceive governments and people. Put simply, the greater the vulnerability in the Western Balkans, the more likely cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns will occur.

The article is significant given Russia's long history of using cyberattacks, influence operations, and disinformation in the Western Balkans. Russia used hybrid war measures against Ukraine in the lead up to the invasion of in February 2022. The consequences and implications of

Russia's invasion of Ukraine are far-reaching for geopolitical considerations in the Western Balkans, especially for states seeking accession to NATO and the European Union. The article concludes that states in the region must strengthen their capabilities to mitigate structural vulnerabilities to hostile influence and maligned actors.

Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare is an all-encompassing term that includes operations in a conflict that do not relate to traditional understandings of war. Otherwise known as gray-zone operations, low-intensity conflict, or military operations other than war (MOOTW), hybrid warfare involves the unrestricted use of different but interrelated methods that often blur conventional domains in a conflict (Hoffman 2006 & 2007; Mattis and Hoffman 2005). Hybrid warfare involves coercive methods that combine regular and irregular forces, military and non-military tactics, and violent and non-violent subversive and criminal actions under a strategic direction to achieve political or military goals in a contemporary battlespace.

Russia's seizure of Crimea and intervention in Donbas in 2014 altered understandings of hybrid warfare and elevated its significance in U.S. and NATO strategic orientations. In 2014, Russia combined covert special operations forces ("little green men") with cyberattacks, psychological or information warfare, diplomatic coercion, and economic intimidation, disseminated disinformation through social media platforms, and relied on a network of proxies and intermediaries. The Kremlin employed deception and denial tactics by claiming that uprisings in Crimea and Donbas opposed the Maidan revolution that toppled pro-Russia Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich (Freedman 2019). This strategy was consistent with Russia's so-called "Gerasimov doctrine" of distorting kinetic and non-kinetic methods of conflict (Johnson 2021).

Traditional definitions of hybrid warfare maintain that the concept should be battlefield centric (Fridman 2018). However, since the Russian annexation of Crimea and first intervention in Donbas in 2014, Solmaz (2022) contends that hybrid warfare now includes "non-violent subversive actions such as cyber-attacks, economic coercion, disinformation campaign, election meddling, and recently weapons of migrants." Since 2014, there have been numerous and repeated examples of Russian disinformation and influence operations to undermine elections, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the 2017 French presidential election, the 2016 accession of

Montenegro to NATO, the Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece, the 2017 German parliamentary elections, and the Catalanian secessionist referendum. Russia also launched devastating cyberattacks, such as Notpetya in Ukraine and the Solar Winds Hack in the U.S.

Also, the Kremlin made a series of assassination attempts between 2014 and its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In 2015, political opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was killed in Moscow. In 2018, Russian intelligence operatives used chemical agents to attempt assassination plots against double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the U.K. Also, Russia plotted to kill Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanović in 2017. Then in 2017, opposition leader Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent on a flight from Tomsk to Moscow (Alandete 2018; Aslund 2021; BBC 2021; Borrelli 2017; Kuczyński 2019; Ng 2018; Schwirtz 2020; Wickenden 2021). In 2021, Belarus copied the Kremlin's playbook by weaponizing refugees to intimate Poland and the European Union and hijacked a Ryanair flight to capture and torture dissident Roman Protasevich.

In the Western Balkans, hybrid warfare constitutes a set of low-cost actions or tactics designed to undermine public trust in institutions, weaken norms, and obstruct integration with NATO and the E.U. Hybrid war tactics include the use of disinformation, cyberattacks, influence operations and narratives of victimhood to undercut Euro-Atlantic institutions, develop pre-texts for conflict, promote discord, and maintain frozen conflicts. Hybrid warfare allows maligned and hostile powers, especially Russia and to a lesser extent China and Turkey, to carry out their grievances, exploit divisions, weaken resilience, or promote themselves and their preferred narratives.

Russia uses so-called active measures within a “gray-zone” between diplomacy and conventional military conflict. An array of tactics and modes are deployed within a strategic space to achieve foreign policy goals short of violent military action. Sustained conflict means war can be understood in terms of promoting conflict and tension that may not involve kinetic military operations. Today's hybrid warfare differs from previous iterations because of the degree of coordination and the various modes involved. Hybrid warfare includes protests with extremist imagery, criminal activity, networks of religious figures and oligarchs, use of fake news and misinformation, and holding military exercises to inflict physical and psychological damage on a target's infrastructure and/or society (Eng and Rumer 2019).

Bechev (2019) describes the Russian strategy against states seeking alignment with the West in terms of coercion, co-optation, and disruption. Spreading disinformation through social media platforms and launching cyberattacks enable Russia to coerce democratic societies and exploit their social, economic, and political divisions. These and other hybrid warfare measures also enable Russia to co-opt other states and their foreign policies with the promotion of frozen conflicts, weaponization of political corruption and proxy groups, and constraining economic development in contested areas. Furthermore, Russian hybrid measures allow it to disrupt and undermine Euro-Atlantic integration in vulnerable areas, such as in the Western Balkans.

Hybrid threats faced by NATO and the U.S. are low-level, but dangerously effective. Although Russia is not powerful enough to offer an alternative model to the world, Russian soft power and hybrid tools can weaken democratic norms and institutions. Russia is motivated by a deep sense of internal insecurity and an obsession with external threats. Walker refers to this as “sharp power,” in which malign actors use influence operations, and disinformation, and manipulation to discredit democratic institutions and interfere in elections (Walker 2018). For example, the Chinese Communist Party disguises malign initiatives as educational outreach, commercial ventures, media endeavors, or cultural programming. Russian intelligence relies on a network of proxies and intermediaries to influence public debate, foment discord, and utilize digital tools and social media platforms to spread falsehoods consistent with a grievance narrative.

Also, Russia has found low-cost ways to work around NATO's military and economic advantages. Kilcullen (2020) refers to this as "traditional Russian frontier craft" of fomenting division to undermine transatlantic unity and build a pretext for meddling. This is the longstanding Russian strategy. Russia's hybrid warfare tactics resemble many of those adaptive strategies employed by used by non-state actors. The fast pace of NATO expansion following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Euro-Atlantic integration in some Western Balkans states, the deployment of missile system systems in NATO's states, U.S. regime change in Iraq, and the color revolutions drove Russia to develop an adaptive strategy centered on conventional military force, hybrid measures, and soft power to reassert itself within its sphere of influence (Giles 2019).

While Russia's hybrid measures could be interpreted in the West as dangerous attacks on democratic values that cause domestic divisions, but they also reflect Russia's internal

vulnerabilities and uneasiness with states moving closer to NATO and the E.U. (Kerrane 2020). However, Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and in Brexit referendum in the U.K. as well as cyber operations and disinformation campaigns in Montenegro in 2016 and North Macedonia in 2017 showed that Russia can exercise hybrid tactics through social media platforms and conceal its identity at the same time.

Moreover, there are interlocking patterns in Russia's hybrid warfare measures. First, Russia can seize territory and redraw the territorial integrity of nation-states with and without armed conflict, as it did with its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Six years before, Russia waged war against Georgia and eight years later launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to deny their alignment with NATO and the E.U. Russia also created frozen conflicts in both Ukraine and Georgia, and supports the stalemate between Serbia and Kosovo, and has maintained significant influence over Moldova in Transnistria (Kuczyński 2019). Second, Russia uses hybrid measures to develop a pretext for supporting its sovereignty claims. It funds pro-Russia groups in the Baltics with its "Compatriots Policy" and claims sovereignty over the Russian diaspora with nationalist appeals to Novorossiia or "New Russia" (Flanagan et. al, 2019; ICG 2019; Troianovski 2021) to justify claims on Ukraine.

In the Western Balkans, Russia has taken a far more complex set of hybrid measures. It supports anti-immigrant and nationalist political parties and movements and intervened in domestic political systems. When Montenegro in 2015-2016 and North Macedonia in 2016-2017 moved to accede to NATO, Russia actively obstructed campaigns for NATO accession with disinformation, cyber intrusions, and social media manipulation (Snyder 2018). These penetrations showed the great degree with which Russia would operate within the gray-zone to carry out hostile influence actions and conceal its identity to disrupt NATO accession processes in two Western Balkans states. Russia's hybrid war attacks utilized technology and relied on proxies and intermediaries to erode lawful and popular measures and undermine civil discourse (Bechev 2018).

Structural Vulnerability in the Western Balkans

While measuring resilience to maligned influence in the Western Balkans is not exact, there are several valid and reliable sources to assess levels of vulnerability in the region. Two of the most significant are the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's "Risks and

Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans” report and the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index. STRATCOM highlights vulnerabilities exploited by maligned and hostile actors that exercise hybrid warfare/gray-zone tactics against social, economic, political, and foreign and security institutions in Western Balkans states aspiring to Euro-Atlantic integration (Zamfir 2020).

STRATCOM operationalizes two concepts that comprise its Permeability Index: structural vulnerability and hostile influence. Structural vulnerability emphasizes the dynamic and complex conditions within the threat environment that provide the maligned hostile actor with opportunities to elevate risks in social, political, economic, and foreign and security domains within the target state and undermine domestic institutions and norms. It should be emphasized that not every hybrid action is taken by an external actor, and many are conducted through intermediaries and proxies, which allows the hostile actor to practice plausible deniability. The Permeability Index (see table 1 below) uses a baseline of 1.5, in which scores below that number are not as permeable and vulnerable to hostile influence and scores above show signs of institutional and societal frailty and higher vulnerability to maligned actors (Rufin 2020).

Table 1: Permeability Index

State	Total Score	Domain			
		Society	Economy	Politics	Foreign & Security Policy
Albania	1.52	1.23	1.51	1.86	1.48
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.05	2.03	1.87	2.37	1.94
Kosovo	1.65	1.55	1.51	2.0	1.53
Montenegro	1.62	1.6	1.57	1.91	1.41
North Macedonia	1.51	1.4	1.41	1.79	1.42
Serbia	1.73	1.84	1.34	1.91	1.85

Source: Rufin 2020

The scores show some varying trends within the Western Balkans region. NATO’s newest member and E.U. aspirant North Macedonia (1.51) has the lowest overall permeability score and is the least vulnerable to a maligned hostile actor. However, institutional frailty, low trust in government, strong patronage networks, and power concentration prevent it from strengthening social, economic, political, and foreign policy and security institutions. Driven by strong social cohesion and a stronger foreign policy and security sector, NATO member and E.U. aspirant Albania (1.52) aspirant had the second lowest total score. But Albania is hampered by political corruption and state capture, patronage, inequality, low trust, and factionalized elites. While

Montenegro (1.62), which joined NATO in 2017, has stronger foreign policy and security institutions, higher corruption, lack of trust, economic weakness, factionalized elites, and opaque business practices make it moderately vulnerable to hostile influence. Kosovo (1.65) has made progress in its foreign policy orientation and security institutions, but Kosovo struggles to consolidate its sovereignty and is not recognized by four NATO and five E.U. members (Rufin 2020).

The most concerning scores are Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia (1.73) has the second highest level of permeability and is more vulnerable to maligned actors given its autocratic orientation, lack of political transparency and independent media, and election integrity, and entrenched elites. Bosnia and Herzegovina (2.05) is the most permeable and poses the greatest risk to hostile influence by maligned external actors. The country is polarized by institutional dysfunction and divisions between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska and is hampered by low trust in leaders and media and high ethnic and religious tension (Rufin 2020).

In 2021, GLOBSEC measured degrees of vulnerability in a report on Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia that included Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia (Hajdu and Klingova 2021). The report developed a Vulnerability Index with 0 as the most resilient and 100 as the most vulnerable using public attitudes, political landscape, public administration, information landscape, and civic and academic space as key domains. GLOBSEC’s Vulnerability Index (see Table 2 below) was based on public opinion polls, online surveys in each state, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, and the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, and the Sustainability Index.

Table 2: Vulnerability Index

State	Total Score	Public Attitudes	Political Landscape	Public Administration	Information Landscape	Civic & Academic Space
Montenegro	44	52	33	41	44	51
North Macedonia	40	49	25	42	45	40
Serbia	55	61	66	51	53	46

Source: Hajdu and Klingova 2021

Empirical results from the Vulnerability Index show relative variation between the three Western Balkans states and the extent of resilience to hostile influence from malign actors. Given the varying scores, several observations can be drawn. Most important is that integration within NATO and the E.U. structures produce less vulnerability and results in stronger resilience to interference and intervention from malign actors, namely Russia and China. Not only does NATO and E.U. membership build democratic norms of cooperation, civil society, and rule of law, they provide access to resources like strategic centers. Democratic norms help build best practices, professionalism, common standards, and stronger institutional capacities that help build resilience to exploitation, disruption, and manipulation. However, given their Communist past in the former Yugoslavia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia confront entrenched bureaucratic interests, cynicism, patronage, and corruption, all of which undermine rule of law and democracy. These challenges provide Russia and China with enough room to launch malign influence operations and fill power vacuums.

Within the Vulnerability Index, public attitudes constitute the most significant and worrisome domain. GLOBSEC reports that Serbia is especially vulnerable to the Russian narrative of Slavic unity, culture, and historical appeals. In Serbia and Montenegro and to a lesser degree in North Macedonia, the Orthodox Church is a powerful institution that reinforces the Russian narrative of victimhood and spreads pro-Slavic themes throughout the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Since the E.U. and U.S. have struggled to provide a strong counternarrative to combat this malign influence, fatigue with democracy and corruption fill the void. COVID-19 and access to vaccines made matters worse as Russia and China exploited vulnerabilities to promote their autocratic brands and counteract liberal democratic measures. Higher levels of vulnerability to hostile influence combined with the lack of E.U. and NATO membership weaken public attitudes and increase mistrust.

The political landscape drives public and elite-level commitments to rule of law, multilateral cooperation, and peace security. Among the three Western Balkans states, there is significant variation, especially between North Macedonia and Serbia. There is a strong commitment to NATO and the E.U., especially in North Macedonia and to a certain degree in Montenegro, which serves a bulwark against Russian and Chinese influence. As a result, there is a higher level of resilience in North Macedonia compared to Montenegro with a moderate level.

However, in Serbia there is very low resilience and greater vulnerability to maligned Russian and Chinese orientations and skepticism of Euro-Atlantic institutions among political elites.

The public administration domain is directly related to the political landscape. Corruption and state capture, antiquated systems, and lack of reforms threaten elections and administrative delivery of services. Making matters worse, in some instances, is that public officials sometimes have little institutional knowledge, education, or awareness of the issues and responsibilities they are entrusted with. Therefore, corruption and lack of transparency remains significant obstacles to serious public administration reform. While there has been some recognition of these shortcomings in North Macedonia and Montenegro, the two along with Serbia have not made their government reports readily available to their publics. Serbia is the most vulnerable to maligned influence given its persistent inability to produce strong and effective legislation to build transparent elections and issue effective campaign regulations. Consequently, Serbia is less willing to criticize Russia or China and serves as a strategic partner with them.

The information landscape is critical to assessing levels of vulnerability in the Western Balkans. The availability of legitimate information is at the center of building resilience against hostile influence. Since social media platforms provide the public with a significant source of information, Russia and China have embraced information warfare and influence operations to spread to promote social unrest and undermine political credibility. Across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, the lack of independent media helps increase vulnerability to maligned influence operations in the digital space. While North Macedonia and Montenegro do not have sufficient protections for independent media outlets, Serbia has even more vulnerabilities in the information landscape. Weak or poorly functioning media is fertile ground for disinformation, fake news, and propaganda to spread as it passes through to societies with little to no questioning or context. Consequently, the information space is filled with distorted information. In some cases, especially in Serbia and Montenegro, disinformation is spread by political leaders themselves through media outlets, which government drives public discussion or stifles debate.

Civic society and academic space define and shape the extent of democratic governance in society. A healthy democracy depends on a thriving civil society whereas polarization and fake news undermines democratic governance and opens society to foreign interference and intervention. Serbia and Montenegro are highly polarized societies with constraints on academic

freedom that increase the vulnerability of the society to maligned influence. Russian influence in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia is waged through proxies and non-governmental organizations and Chinese influence is exercised through established entities like Confucius Institutes in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Shopov 2022).

The Western Balkans are at the intersection of an intense geopolitical competition between the West and East. Indicators of permeability and vulnerability define this as a competition among a U.S.-NATO-E.U. order on one end and a Russia-China order in the Western Balkans on the other. Specifically, permeability and vulnerability reflective levels of resilience in political, economic, social, and security realms. Several themes emerge from these two concepts. First, NATO and E.U. membership in the Western Balkans enhances resilience and mitigates permeability and vulnerability to hostile influence and maligned actors like Russia and China. Second, strong institutions and competent public administration mitigates corruption and clientelism, boosts capacity, and counters interference. The lingering effects of Communism in the Western Balkans inhibit the rule of law, civil society, democratic governance, and trust-building, conditions that make maligned influence operations by Russia and China more effective.

Cyberattacks and Cybersecurity

Vulnerability and permeability correlate with hybrid war actions exercised by hostile and maligned actions in the Western Balkans, especially cyberattacks/cyber-intrusions, and disinformation. In the area of cyberattacks, the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) provides an ordinal ranking of cybersecurity vulnerabilities, resources, and priorities in 193 states (ITU 2020).

GCI identifies five empirical themes (see Table 3 below) that measure cyber-capacity at the state-level. The first is “legal measures,” in which cybersecurity is assessed against a regulatory framework to sustain safe and secure digital spaces, defines legal procedures, and investigates suspected illegal activities. The second is “technical measures,” which includes national institutional mechanisms to mitigate cyber incidents and threats to cybersecurity with computer incident response teams (CIRTs) or Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). The third, “organizational measures,” assesses whether cybersecurity telecommunications infrastructure are prioritized and coordinate at the highest levels of national government. The fourth theme, “capacity development,” emphasizes cybersecurity capacity-building to offset risks of digitization, narrow the digital divide, address policy limits, and build institutional knowledge. The fifth theme is

“cooperative measures” involves maximizing interconnections across borders and promotes integrated infrastructures through agreements and public-private partnerships (ITU 2020).

Table 3: Global Cybersecurity Index: Scores, Rankings, and Individual Measures

State	Score	Global Ranking	Ranking in Europe	Legal	Technical	Organizational	Capacity	Cooperative
Albania	64.32	80	40	18.13	13.12	14.18	12.12	7.78
Bosnia and Herzegovina	29.44	110	43	10.41	6.56	1.02	3.12	8.33
Montenegro	53.23	87	41	14.61	7.48	12.00	3.18	15.97
North Macedonia	89.92	38	24	20.00	12.37	18.98	18.57	20.00
Serbia	89.8	39	25	19.10	18.99	18.67	14.66	18.38

Source: International Telecommunications Union 2020

The most significant challenges in the Western Balkans are a pervasive lack of professionally trained experts with skills in computer and data science and digitization, especially in national security and economic development. Workforce and skills shortages could be addressed with greater regional cooperation and strengthening institutional capacity and public administration. In the security sector, Western Balkans states could benefit from hard resources, funding, and centers of excellence from NATO and the economic sector could benefit from the E.U. (Maravić 2021).

North Macedonia leads the Western Balkans in its overall score, improving its cyber defenses and strategic orientation. It is the only state in the region with perfect scores in the legal and cooperative domains and high scores in organization and capacity, reflecting improvements in rule of law in the digital space, integrated networks, and telecommunications networks. However, the country struggles in the technical domain and in attracting professionals in CIRT and CERT. North Macedonia has improved government regulations and made some improvements in public administration, but capacity and the lack of professional trained technical experts has inhibited the ability of North Macedonia to improve its cybersecurity capacity (E.U.-Lex 2020; Maravić 2021). Serbia is a close second to North Macedonia with high scores in all domains except capacity, which reflects relative vulnerability in digitization.

While Albania has a relatively high score in the legal domain, it has lower scores in the other four domains. Albania made progress in improving regulations across key government ministries, policy planning, professionalizing e-government, and enhancing transparency (ITU 2020). However, accountability remains underdeveloped, and government decision-making is still too concentrated and centralized. Also, Albanian regulations lack clear objectives, assessments, and monitoring, challenges exacerbated by lack of public administration reforms (IT 2020). Montenegro has higher scores in the cooperative and legal domains, but very low scores in the technical and legal domains reflecting a significant need for CIRT and CERT to mitigate and respond to cyber penetrations and intrusions and contend with risk. While Montenegro has strengthened capacity in combatting cybercrime, but greater investments and training of professionals are required criminal activities in digital spaces (EWB 2020).

The lowest score in the region is Bosnia and Herzegovina, which struggles in the organizational, technical, capacity, and cooperation domains (ITU 2020). This reflects the divided and polarized structure between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, institutional weakness, and powerful role played by maligned hostile actors within the domestic political system. While GCI did not produce scores, Kosovo values user-friendly public administration. However, institutional weaknesses are present in the political leadership and impede public administration reform and cyber regulations. New laws have been passed in regulating digital spaces, fighting cybercrime, and building capacities against cyber-intrusions (E.U.-lex 2019).

Disinformation and Influence Operations

Disinformation is a security threat because it exploits and disrupts the regular functions of government and economic systems. Disinformation are lies sustained by false narratives of grievement and victimhood used to manipulate people into believing what hostile and malevolent disseminators know to be false. Like cyberattacks against on private and government networks, disinformation campaigns and dissemination of fake news through social media outlets or state-control media are tools of geopolitical power used by hostile and maligned actors to undermine institutions and norms. The Western Balkans are especially vulnerable to actors seeking to damage infrastructure and encourage polarization. Russia's proxies in the Orthodox Church and transnational criminal organizations work to undermine the E.U., NATO, and American influence

in the region and promote social disorder and cultural tensions (Bekler et. al, 2018; Marwick 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018).

An analysis of 2021 data from *Balkan Barometer* reveals both positive and negative trends in the Western Balkans that could allow disinformation to spread and thrive. On the positive side, 77% of people in the Western Balkans support regional cooperation as way of improving political, economic, and security conditions in their countries. This is compared to the percentage of people who are skeptical of regional cooperation (16%) and those who think relations within the Western Balkans have improved (47%) over the last year. The highest levels of support for regional cooperation are from Serbia (86%), Montenegro (82%), and Albania (77%) compared to North Macedonia (72%) and Kosovo (73%) having the lowest levels of support. However, roughly 20% of people in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia are not confident in regional cooperation benefiting their economies and societies (RCC 2021).

On the negative end, corruption and brain drain remain significant concerns and distrust of political, administrative, and judicial institutions in the Western Balkans remain incredibly high even though distrust is down from 2017 to 2021 (see table 4 below). Although trends are moving in a relatively positive direction, distrust in political institutions remains well above 50%. Moreover, there are significant majorities of people in the Western Balkans who do not think that the media is independent of political influence.

Table 4: Biggest concerns in the Western Balkans

	2021	2015	% Change (+/-)
Unemployment	64%	49%	-15%
Economic Situation	58%	46%	-12%
Corruption	15%	26%	+11%
Brain Drain	0%	13%	+13%
Crime	19%	16%	-3%
	2021	2017	% Change (+/-)
Distrust/Tend not to Trust in Parliament	61%	71%	-10%
Distrust/Tend not to Trust in Government	57%	69%	-12%
Distrust/Tend not to Trust Courts and Judiciary	61%	67%	-6%
Disagree that the media is independent of political influence	62%	69%	-7%

RCC 2021

Public attitudes toward E.U. accession are mixed. In 2021, 62% across the region were supportive compared to 56% in 2019 (RCC 2021). The highest support for E.U. accession is in Kosovo (91%) and Albania (84%) compared to Serbia with the lowest level (42%). The most indifference toward E.U. accession were recorded in Serbia (39%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (39%), and North Macedonia and Montenegro (each at 33%). The percentage of people who think E.U. accession will take place by 2025 decreased from 28% in 2019 to 24% in 2021. Albania (39%) and Kosovo (30%) are the most hopeful about E.U. accession by 2025 compared to Serbia (12%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (15%), North Macedonia (21%), and Montenegro (27%). Although most believe E.U. accession will take place by 2030 (40%), the percentages range from Kosovo (48%), Montenegro (42%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (41%), and Albania (40%) to Serbia (38%) and North Macedonia (31%). The highest concentrations of people who believe E.U. accession will never happen are in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (each at 32%), North Macedonia (31%) compared to the lowest in Kosovo (7%), Albania, and Montenegro (each at 16%) (RCC 2021).

Fluctuating beliefs among people in the Western Balkans on key issues is worrisome as it provides fertile ground for malign actors to exploit and manipulate conditions to their benefit. Skepticism about E.U. accession, concerns about corruption and brain drain, and high levels of distrust in political and judicial institutions enable actors like Russia, China, and Turkey to provide strategic alternatives to Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Russia employs a vast disinformation campaign that combines state-controlled media influence, especially in Serbia with Sputnik, and covert and subversive operations that take place “below the threshold” through social media, proxies, and cultural and religious institutions. Russian hybrid measures engage a far-reaching set of issues that may not connect with Russian national security interests because, unlike Poland, the Baltic states, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, the Western Balkans are beyond Russia’s immediate geopolitical sphere of influence. Russia is comfortable playing the roles of disrupter or spoiler in using distorted themes and grievances to undermine cohesion and public confidence in the E.U. and NATO.

The effectiveness of Russian disinformation depends on several factors. First, weak institutions, corruption, and low public trust allow Russia to disseminate fake news and sustain victimhood narratives. Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Republika Srpska within

Bosnia and Herzegovina are highly susceptible to Russian disinformation campaigns that maximize negative or indifferent attitudes and beliefs about European integration. Second, Russia leverages fatigue with E.U. accession in these countries and amplifies Brexit to cast doubt on E.U. credibility. Russia's ability to discredit the E.U. also is enabled by Serbia's willingness to serve as a staging area for disinformation spread through various networks and outlets (EP 2021).

China and Turkey engage in active measures that promote themselves in the region. Although China does not have a significant disinformation operation and lacks a media presence, its messaging promotes Chinese trade and financial interests and vaccine initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. China is also engaging in social, academic, educational, and local political outlets to enhance its influence through economic, energy, and infrastructure projects such as the "16 plus 1" initiative. China has focused on Serbia, which according to Edward Joseph (2020) serves as a Chinese "strategic anchor" in the region and is building greater influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Montenegro, debt-trap has become so widespread that Montenegrin debt-to-GDP is close to 100% with more than half held by China (Shopov 2022).

Turkey is less interested in economic interests and more concerned with advancing cultural issues sensitive to Islamic communities, increasing positive perceptions of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and attacking the Fetullah Gulen movement. The Turkish Radio Television Corporation (TRT) maintains a YouTube channel that promotes Turkey's interests in the Balkans. Also, China has greater social media penetration than Turkey although they share an interest in promoting themselves in the region. For example, just 24% of Facebook interactions relate to Turkey with most Turkish disinformation targeting Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia whereas 52% relate to China with its disinformation targeting Albania and Serbia to promote the Chinese economic brand (EP 2021).

Trends and patterns in Russia, Chinese, Turkish influence operations are very different. Where China is more economic and Turkey more cultural, Russia seeks to exploit and manipulate existing internal tensions to maximize conflict toward NATO and the E.U. Undermining the Western Balkans is about undermining the West. For example, the failed coup in 2016 in Montenegro was supported by Russia to obstruct Montenegrin accession to NATO and in 2017 Russia exploited tensions within the Macedonian Slavic population and maximized efforts by

VMRO-DPMNE to undermine the Prespa Agreement with Greece and thwart Macedonian accession to NATO (Dimishkovski 2017; Kuczyński 2019).

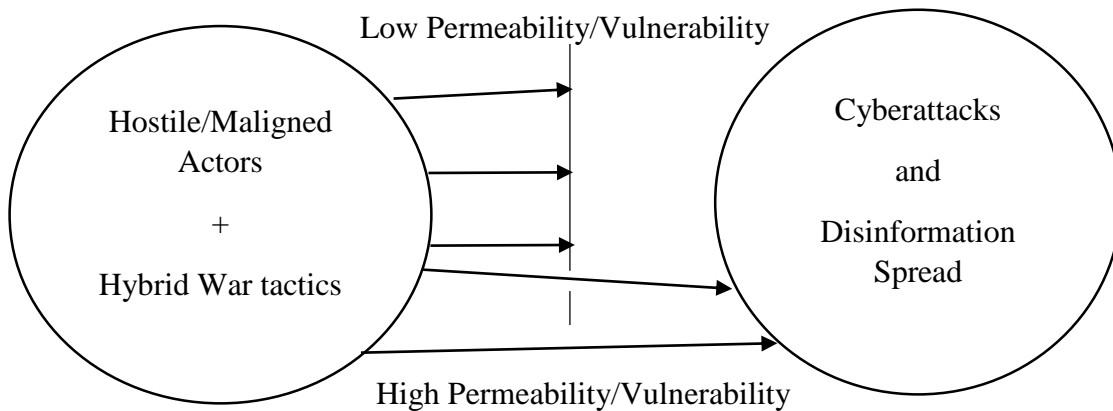
Disinformation is pervasive throughout the Western Balkans and should be considered a security threat by the six states in the region. Government leaders, judges, and citizens are routinely targeted with fake news and falsehoods by Russia, China, and Turkey with different intentions and for different reasons. However, domestic political, economic, and social conditions in the Western Balkans allow the spread of disinformation and obstruct the development of a European perspective and a clearer path toward both E.U. and NATO accession. The efficient and relatively unchecked spread of disinformation is facilitated by the lack of independent media, weak institutions and norms, and willing intermediaries.

And although disinformation spreads very easily and quickly through social media platforms, most of it is distributed by established media outlets. One study found that private media, newspapers, and television spread more disinformation than Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook (EP 2021). Moreover, state-controlled media outlets and political parties coordinate with nationalist and religious groups to intensify the spread of disinformation during political campaigns and elections. Even more, slightly under 50% of cases identified in this study involved Russia and Serbia.

Professional initiatives are underway to mitigate the lasting damage caused by hybrid measures directed by Russia, China, and Turkey in the Western Balkans. For example, the E.U., U.S. Embassy, and civil society groups fund public education efforts to combat balance against cyber intrusions and disinformation with outreach to schools, universities, and media outlets to improve media literacy, digital literacy, and professional reporting. In addition, fact-checking practices have been instituted and coordinated by non-governmental organizations. The U.S., NATO, and E.U. provided governments, media, and civil society in the Western Balkans with resources, training, and educational centers to resist fake news and disinformation (Marusic 2020; Rademaker and Perovska 2019). *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* has pursued anti-disinformation projects, counteracted false narratives, and educated journalists and citizens to follow credible sources and resist fake news (Bayer 2020).

For a general illustration of how levels of permeability and vulnerability allow hostile and malign actors to launch cyberattacks and spread disinformation, see figure 1 below.

Figure 1: conceptual relationship



CONCLUSIONS

Hybrid warfare by malignant and hostile actors in the form of cyberattacks, influence operations, and disinformation against targets in the Western Balkans is encouraged by the political, economic, and social conditions in the region. If political power is highly concentrated, elites factionalized and separated from their people, and the more the economic system is under the control of political elites, the more disinformation is a security threat. If political and economic systems are more competitive, then fake news becomes less persistent. Furthermore, states that have strong ethnic and religious divisions, like North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the society is a more desirable target for hostile and malignant actors.

States that experience geopolitical conflict and struggle to consolidate their sovereignty, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, are more permeable and vulnerable to malignant and hostile influence. Political leaders must address and improve those conditions with efforts to reduce permeability and vulnerability, especially in governance, geopolitical alignments, cultural institutions, and public trust. And while the major powers can more effectively engage the region, provide strong and effective leadership, and encourage the building of stronger norms and institutions, if there is going to be lasting security, prosperity, and peace then change must come from Western Balkans states themselves.

To mitigate risks associated with malignant influence from Russia and China in the Western Balkans, states in the region must be functional and strong. Put simply, they must practice democratic governance. Governments should demonstrate they can make the necessary public administration reforms to deliver services to their citizens, hold free and competitive elections, and

control for the corrosive effects of factionalized elites and political parties. Furthermore, given that people in the Western Balkans are very sensitive to international public opinion, societies must have access to legitimate information, civil society and media should be free and independent from political interference, and judicial systems capable of checking and balancing political leaders.

Also, cultural institutions must be resilient in the face of sustained pressure and maligned influence from aggrieved actors who are skilled in exploiting and manipulating religious and social issues for political gain with disinformation spread through social media platforms, religious and cultural institutions and proxies, and cyber intrusions against networks. In addition, building public trust and common purpose in society and political and economic institutions are essential to developing resilient communities and governments and in positioning Western Balkans states for membership in NATO and the E.U.

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