

SERBIAN MALIGNANT INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Serbian World as framework for Serbian
Influence in the Western Balkans*



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Serbian Malignant Influence in Western Balkans

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the concept of the Serbian World as a framework for Serbian influence in the Western Balkans, promoted by political elites indirectly and more directly by affiliated actors in Serbia and region. While not an official state policy, the idea functions as a powerful narrative tool, blending nationalism, historical revisionism, and strategic influence to sustain Serbia's regional leverage and consolidate domestic political control.

Major Avenues of Influence

The Serbian World is expressed through political, media, religious, and economic channels that connect Belgrade with Serbian communities across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Based on old concepts re-legitimized under the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) as part of its broader strategy of national unity and regional presence. Serbia exploits unresolved regional tensions, EU accession fatigue, and identity politics to assert influence through cultural, informational, and political means, positioning itself as the “protector” of Serbs abroad. Again, these are heavily exploited for internal purposes and keeping nationalistic voters close.

Principal Tools and Actors

Serbia's influence relies on both formal instruments—such as the strategies and state-owned companies. Along with this there is an important role of informal networks involving nationalist intellectuals, church, and media figures. Key actors include President Aleksandar Vučić, who maintains plausible deniability, Aleksandar Vulin, whose Movement of Socialists openly promotes the Serbian World idea and historian Aleksandar Raković, who is vocal about the idea. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and state-funded media networks or subjects, play central roles in spreading nationalist narratives and legitimizing state influence.

Most Pressing Vulnerabilities

The report identifies weak governance, eroding democracy, and low media literacy as Serbia's internal vulnerabilities that enable nationalist narratives. Regionally, the combination of EU fatigue, economic conditions, and fragile interethnic relations creates fertile ground for Serbian malignant influence. These conditions allow nationalist messages to circulate unchallenged, framing Serbia as a victimized but unifying force with potential to undermine democratic values and regional stability.

Core Policy Recommendations

- **Legal:** Increase transparency of government-affiliated NGOs and cross-border funding, particularly in media and civil society sectors.
- **Political:** Reframe dialogue on minority protection to avoid exploiting Serbian communities in neighboring states.
- **Institutional:** Strengthen rule of law, media oversight, and democratic institutions to reduce instrumentalization of nationalism.
- **Civic and Communication Strategies:** Support independent media and civil society to build resilience and promote media literacy; develop tailored messaging that engages citizens and demystifies nationalist myths.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Prioritize joint initiatives on minority rights and economic integration to reduce space for divisive narratives.

Overall, the Serbian World is less a coherent foreign policy doctrine than a flexible political instrument for domestic consolidation. Its continued use as a mobilizing tool poses risks for regional stability unless countered through coordinated legal, institutional, and civic strategies.

SERBIAN WORLD: OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Introduction & Context

Understanding contemporary Serbia in the scope of malign influence and the topic of this research asks brief overview of recent history. After wars started in early nineties, dissolution of Yugoslavia lead to the now independent countries with complex relations burdened with the unsolved issues from the past. The democratic changes from October 2000 brought some progress in terms of cooperation with ICTY and ICJ, along with extraditions of those accused of war crimes. However, a true dealing with past never happened, and the ideologies that inspired and lead to wars were never rejected and truly delegitimized. The process was marked but lack of political will to work on these issues.

The political parties leading democratic changes in 2000 were in power for twelve years in different coalitions. In 2012, the new coalition emerged after general elections. Since then, the coalition of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) is obtaining power, with strong domination of SNS in social and political life of Serbia. Unsolved issues from the past burdening regional relations were heavily exploited for more than a decade now as political tool for gaining support of voters.

The political possibilities and potential of ideas such as “Serbian world” are deeply rooted in these problems. The ideas that inspired the wars in nineties are still alive, though their potential can be discussed, but they were never delegitimized. Over the previous years, they are rather re-legitimized by some political actors. This opened the space to comparison of Serbian World with Greater Serbia that was official policy of some political subjects over the past. With recent experience of wars and violence, concepts such as this one are perceived as threat.

Serbian Progressive Party is gathering a wide coalition of satellite parties that share dependence on SNS dominance, and nationalistic ideology and sentiments. For the last general election in December 2023, the coalition gathered 12 political subjects around SNS. The size of these parties varies as well as their political influence, some of these are important for the topic of this research.

Serbia is an illustrative example of the country with geo-political position between East and West, that

maintains EU accession process to some extent, but nurtures close ties to Russia and China at the same time (Marciacq, 2019). Needless to say, influence of later two in the region is specifically targeting Serbia. These do not have positive effect to democracy in Serbia and rather reduce support to democracy itself. Moreover, these relations are burden to relations of Serbia and European Union due to aligning foreign policy that is expected from candidate countries.

Current political context in Serbia is characterized by declining democracy, and different authors described this challenge so far. The Serbian government is dominated by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and their regime might be called stabilitocracy (Bieber, 2018), illiberal democracy (Pavlović, 2020) or hybrid regime (Ilić and Pudar Draško, 2022). Moreover, in terms of elections, Serbia is easy to label as electoral authoritarianism (Pavlović, 2020) and captured state (Prelec, 2020). With the President as the dominant political figure that turned politics to “one man show” (Milačić, 2024), Serbia is far from liberal or minimal democracy. To complete the general image of how Serbia looks today, it is important to underline eroding freedom of media (Kmezić, 2018; Dragojlov, 2025) and dominance of tabloid journalism (Mladenov Jovanović, 2018; Vranić and Jevtić 2024).

Events in the aftermath of collapse of train station canopy killed 16 people in Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024, at 11:52 AM (Le Monde with AFP, 2025). This event started a snowball that soon turned into the biggest popular uprising in decades. After initial civic protests (Dragojlo and Baletić, 2024), and tensions started to grow, turning point came. After violent encounters (Nova, 2024), the attackers were soon identified as ruling party members and supporters. After first occupation or blockade of faculty (N1, 2024) others joined in solidarity and other attacks also happened (Telegrafi, 2024; RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2025). By late December, each and every higher education institution was occupied and blocked by the students (N1 and Beta, 2024), along with a number of high schools (Baletić, 2024). After institutions failed to answer the students demands, they decided to ask for a snap election.

Relevance of the topic

Examining Serbian malign influence is highly relevant for few reasons. Serbia is the largest successor

state of Yugoslavia, with central geopolitical role in Western Balkans, and certain historical, cultural, and ethnic connections across the borders. Political position of Serbia and regional presence has significant influence on security and stability of Western Balkans. Political influence of Belgrade extends to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, often exercised through destabilizing narratives, war-mongering, or interference in domestic affairs. Disputes on Kosovo independence also cannot be neglected as it is one of the key challenges for regional security and stability.

Methodological approach

This report will be based on what is commonly called desk research. The key source of information will be documents, defined as any material that can provide information on the topic of the research (Corbetta, 2003). This approach is appropriate for the purpose of this research, considering that it provides sufficient insights in positions of political subjects and relevant sources on the phenomena of “Serbian world”. While interviews or similar data collection might be valuable in general research, for this purpose it would not give any new insights that are not there already.

BALLOT BOX IN FOCUS

Strategic Objectives of Serbian Influence

The concept of Serbian World might be seen as multidimensional influence strategy with several goals in mind. This allows avoiding understanding Serbian World only as ideology, or pure nationalist rhetoric. It should rather be examined within the wider framework of strategic interests of Serbia in the region, and domestically. Due to this, strategic objectives of Serbian influence can be analysed in two wider groups. The first one are internal objectives, related to status of ruling party and dynamics of political life in Serbia. The second one are an external objective, that focus more on wider interests and obtaining regional dominance.

Internal objectives

Considering that the idea of Serbian World is coming from the nationalistic circles closely tied, or belonging to Serbian Progressive Party, it has an important role in keeping the voters attached and aroused. While SNS is at least nominally pro-European,

a number of their partners are not. Indeed, some partners, and prominent SNS figures, are openly and vocally anti-European, and anti-Western. Despite their membership in government that should be negotiating with EU on membership, they do not hide their opinions on this. The very reason for this lies in “catch-all” approach of SNS. Their wide range of sometimes even conflictual attitudes and partners are often used to gain wider support.

With President Vučić as key political figure, this seems as solid explanation. His political career in early nineties started in extreme right wing Serbian Radical Party, that had agenda of “Greater Serbia”, and despite his transformation, this is the root of his politics (Bandović, 2024). As predominant ruling party (Spasojević, 2019) SNS developed a dense network of small political parties, public figures, intellectuals and journalists that can say or do anything the SNS might avoid due to potential harm for their position and image. Serbian World is just one of these topics where there is a number of people closely related to SNS advocate for it, with SNS, and President Vučić claiming that they have nothing to do with it. Moreover, Serbian Progressive Party is well known for instrumentalization of nationalism for political purpose over the years.

From the internal point of view, the key objective for exploiting the concept of Serbia World therefor is occupying political ground and making sure that voters with nationalistic sentiment stay close to ruling party. The narrative of care for Serbs in the region, their rights, combined with the narrative on president and ruling party as their only protector, contributes to this objective.

External objectives

In terms of external objectives, it is reasonable to say that Serbia has interests in region, and that there are subjects in region that also have benefits from the ideas coming from Serbia. In first place, those are local Serbian political parties in Western Balkans and their leadership.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina known as Dayton Agreement treats Serbia as signatory party. Serbia also has Treaty on Establishing Special and Parallel Relations with Republic of Srpska. Therefore, there is a clearly defined interest in this matter.

Since Serbia is not recognizing Kosovo independence declared in 2008, this is one of the key regional challenges. While most other countries did it, it affects the relations with Serbia. The negotiations of Belgrade in Prishtina seems stuck and show little to no progress recently. The latest breakthrough was signing of Ohrid Agreement in 2023, based on Franco – German Proposal (Bogišić et al., 2024). This Agreement and Annex to it are not formally signed, but any dilemmas about its importance should not be questioned any more. Both documents are amended to Negotiating Chapter 35 in Serbia's EU accession negotiations in 2024. Thus, obligations were incorporated into the negotiation framework for Serbia's EU integration.

As political party, Serbian List in Kosovo is directly linked to ruling party in Serbia and has political and institutional support that is not hidden in any way. Their dominant position partially is derived from this support, and control over resources important to Serbian community in Kosovo. With this in mind, Serbian list represents important point of influence of Serbia in Kosovo political system.

However, despite the fact that these external strategic objectives are labelled as such, they are also heavily exploited for the purpose of internal ones. Over the years, it became common that the ruling party is using foreign policy as means of influence on voters, and part of propaganda.

FROM MEDIA FUNDING TO RELIGION

Means of Influence — What Serbia Does

Serbian influence in region uses different means to achieve the results. Key ones are focused on economic instruments, religious and political ones.

Economic instruments

Economic instruments are mostly reserved for connections with Republic of Srpska considering the mentioned Treaty on Establishing Special and Parallel Relations with Republic of Srpska. There are investments coming from Serbia and joint projects that are used for internal purposes and propaganda both by politicians in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As an example, we can use the investments in airport in Trebinje or power plant (Top Portal, 2020), or even joint investments in bridges (RTS, 2021). But direct investments are just one part of the agenda in terms of economic instruments.

There is strong presence of Serbian state companies in the field of media in region. Telekom Serbia is telecommunications company with state as majority owner, and it has significant presence in Montenegro, Republic of Srpska and Macedonia. The company is major owner of companies in all mentioned countries. The company mostly offers all channels close to Government, and this presence is relevant in terms of interests. With its regional presence, this company might build the position that can be significant leverage of Serbian government as major shareholder in it.

These expansions are mostly presented to domestic voters as economic expansion of successful companies. Once again, there is a strong link of these to Serbian World, as it is exercised through these actions. However, it is noticeable that besides economic interests, there is again the level of using this as an advantage in domestic political life.

Religious influences

The organization of Serbian Orthodox Church includes strong presence in the region of Western Balkans (Constitution of SPC, 1947). In some cases, church had direct role in political life of the country, like it did in Montenegro (Milić, 2020). However, as this presence of the Church itself is not sufficient to make conclusions, the interest lies in connections of church and state (Lukić, 2025).

Serbia is using funding of Serbian Orthodox Church to support their work but keeps its own agenda. While some claim that the state is “paying for silence”, these donations are used as tool to keep the presence and support of the church in the region (Jovanović, 2024). The presence itself is not new, as it fits the internal organization of church, and it is not problem itself. However, support that church provides to political figures in many cases is leveraged by the structures in Serbia.

Media influence

Government of Serbia established “Mreža Most”, comprising six media outlets in Kosovo, funded by the Serbian government (OSCE, 2021). The company has a status of public enterprise registered in Belgrade (mrezamost.rs, 2025), and their task is “development and improvement of informing via electronic media in Serbian language in Anthonomus Province Kosovo and Metohija”. State has 100% of

ownership in the enterprise. This gives direct influence on Serbian government over informing of Serbian community in Kosovo and can be understood as means of influence.

There are cases of ownership of media in the region where subjects close to ruling party are owners. Regional presence of media such as Euronews or Pink is one of the challenges and channels of information flow.

Political Means

Political actions, such as “All-Serbian Assembly” are one of the events important for understanding tools of influence. The event hosted in Belgrade in 2024 is organized in partnership of the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the President and Government of Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This event drew attention of regional media (Bandović, 2024).

One of the outcomes of this was “Declaration on Protection of National and Political Rights and Joint Future of Serbian People”. The document itself is boosted with nationalism, and even contains obscure parts, such as the one “emphasizing the historical multi-millennium existence of the Serbian people in the territories of the Republic of Serbia, Republika Srpska and other geographical areas”. There are certain proclamations, such as the one that “All-Serbian Assembly determines that there is one name of the people that is impossible to change” rejecting the adjectives before Serb. These are mostly geographical terms (e.g. Bosnian Serbs), but authors are implying that someone is not allowing Serbs to declare that way. Same goes for claims that there is a threat of assimilation of Serbs in regional states, and few other claims that are not evidenced in any way. Declaring national anthem and symbols for “All-Serbian Anthem” and “All-Serbian Coat of Arms” are also showing commitments that fit the concept of Serbian World.

Initiatives such as establishing Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National flag are coming from Serbia, but they are accepted in Republic of Srpska as well. Since 2020, September 15th is celebrated, but despite this, the day itself was never made included to Law on State and Other Holidays. This might be an illustrative example that demonstrates the essence of political background. Since there is no formal decla-

ration of this holiday, national one, it is evident that true intension is something else. In terms of Serbian World, and previously mentioned internal strategic objectives, this using of national symbols across the borders is just another way to keep the nationalistic voters close.

UNDERMINING INFLUENCE

Tools of Influence — How Serbia Does It

At this moment, Serbia uses a wide range of instruments to influence the region, and some are more related to Serbian World as concept of interest of this report. Instruments and approach may depend on local context in neighbour countries and formal relations.

Co-optation

Understanding co-optation as supporting friendly actors goes one step beyond in the case of relations of Serbia and countries in the region. This is especially noticeable in the case of Kosovo.

Serbia is rejecting the statehood and independence of Kosovo, and still keeps the influence in field, within Kosovo political system. Significant tool of interest that Serbia uses is for a fact influence to political subjects in regional countries. In case of Kosovo, it is done through Serbian List, the political party with close links to Government of Serbia. Both the party and the Government of Serbia are not hiding these connections. The website of Serbian list clearly states that they have support of Government of Republic of Serbia, and that they “implement unique and defined politics in Kosovo and Metohija” (srpskalista.net, ND). Serbian Government officials are directly calling voters with right to vote in Kosovo to support Serbian list, while other candidates from Serbian community are perceived as “Prishtina candidates”

Close connections of Serbian Government exist also with some political subjects in Montenegro. Political structures in Serbia maintain close relations with certain figures such as President of National Parliament of Montenegro Andrija Mandić. While his position is “cover” for his presence on most of ceremonial events organized in Belgrade, this is not new phenomena as this was happening before he came to power.

Moreover, Serbia invested and opened “Serbian House” in Podgorica, capital of Montenegro. The

venue was opened by special representative of Serbian President, now Minister of Culture, Nikola Selaković. His speech at opening has few remarks that indirectly questioned identity of Montenegrins. The cultural centre is registered as Ltd, and the venue is purchased using funds donated by the Government of Serbia. This company organizes cultural events, hosts media production, and its work is mostly nationalistic.

Undermining narratives

As being said, tools often depend on the neighbour country discussed, as different contexts and relations are imposing different approaches.

In relations to Kosovo, the Serbian media that reach audience in Kosovo are denying the statehood of Kosovo and go in line with the official position of Belgrade. Above mentioned media influence can be reflected in new aired by TV Most, as mostly they reflect official positions of Serbia.

On the other hand, the official Belgrade is not directly denying statehood and independence of Montenegro, or Montenegrin national identity. However, indirectly, a number of people and media outlets that are leaning to Government, or are close to ruling party, do that. There are no reactions from officials, or any attempt to prevent them for doing that in order to establish good neighbour relations with Montenegro. Exploitations of local vulnerabilities

Exploitations of local vulnerabilities are omnipresent, as official structures from Serbia uses these vulnerabilities to their advantage. Previously mentioned tools and means of influence indeed target these vulnerabilities and would not be possible otherwise.

Even economic cooperation is often lead by political, not economic interests. Expansion of certain companies to regional markets is in that sense rather political decision, that allows direct influence in other countries, than economic decision of company itself.

FACES OF SERBIAN WORLD

Key Actors Involved — Who?

For comprehensive approach of this report, it is important to map key actors involved in Serbian malign influence in region, and their roles. Any future actions to tackle and mitigate this influence, or any

policy recommendations, that will come later, ask for laying out the key figures to consider. IT would be hard to list everyone involved, so this will be a brief overview of the most relevant actors.

In discussing institutional level and their involvement it is important to start with the fact that President of Serbia Mr. Vučić stated that “Serbian World” is not “an official strategy or state policy of Serbia (Nikolić, 2021). However, he never rejected what this idea means, and it is hard to say that there are no elements or traces of this idea in official documents. Considering his dominance of political life in Serbia, control over media, and close connections with different figures, it is hard to say that key actors push this idea without his approval. Several important documents witness on traces of idea of Serbian World.

The first relevant document is “Strategy of National Security of Republic of Serbia” that defines national interest, among other things, as “preservation of the existence and protection of Serbian people wherever they live” (Strategy of National Security of Republic of Serbia, p:31). This document soon goes further with addressing the issue of Republic of Srpska, while stating that it is an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina according to Dayton Peace Agreement (p: 32). The same document defines politics of national security, once again referring to the preservation and existence of protection of Serbian people wherever they live.

However, this important document significant for national security does not provide any information on potential threats to existence of Serbian people, especially outside Serbia. Emphasizing existence of Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina also does not provide any reasonable threats to its existence. This, however, is mentioned in „Strategy of Defence of Republic of Serbia“, where it is stated that there are “tendencies to abolish the Dayton Agreement and the Republic of Srpska”, and “endangering the position of the Serbian people” (Defence Strategy of Republic of Serbia, p:16).

Considering the “balancing” foreign politics of Serbia, it is often to be heard that there are “shadow puppets” that say what President as key and most influential political figure cannot. In political sphere, the key contributor and promoter of this idea is Aleksandar Vulin, president of Movement of Socialist, minor partner of Serbian Progressive Party, but influ-

ential political figure in Serbian political landscape. Over the years he obtained important positions such as Minister of Interior, Minister of Defence, VP of Government, and head of Security Information Agency. On the website of his political party, there is a page dedicated to this idea. His party declared that “Serbian world is primary political idea and a goal of Movement of Socialists”, stating that the idea means that “Serbs become unique political nation that again decides on key national questions together” (Vulin, 2022)

However, the inspiration for this idea comes from the field of academia, and different person that is close to ruling party and their ideology. Namely, historian Aleksandar Raković is one of the key figures even called ideologues of the concept “Serbian World”. Raković is Scientific Advisor in Institute for Recent History of Serbia (INIS.rs, ND). Over the previous years, Raković stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina is an “imposed creation” that should be split based on the model of Czech-Slovakia. This historian was obtaining some lower-level positions in Serbian Government at certain period, and in 2022 he stated that he is dedicated to “Serbian issue” in Montenegro since 1997 and that he worked on unification of Serbia and Montenegro as state official. Moreover, he believes that “renewing Serbian issue in Montenegro” will finally lead to unification of two states (Portal Analitika, 2022). The essence of his ideas is creating nation state of Serbia that includes Republic of Srpska and Montenegro. This idea of Serbian unification according to Raković is “just, legitimate solution, that no one can deny” (Raković, 2023).

Along with him, the person of interest for this report is director Dragoslav Bokan, prominent nationalistic guest of tabloid media. Bokan advocates for Serbian World and both him and Raković are seen as “inventors” of idea (Marić, 2021). He is quite vocal on this matter, and he was host of YouTube show “Serbian World of Dragoslav Bokan”. Nowadays, he obtains the position in National Theatre of Serbia, despite his background and involvement in paramilitary troops, and crime. He openly supports the Government, and he uses media space to disseminate the idea of Serbian World, mostly presenting it as some kind of spiritual unity of nation.

Needless to say, in 21st century, digital channels are heavily used by different informal actors. Most of channels on different social media platforms spread

propaganda, but there is no information who is behind them. YouTube channels like Serbian World are spreading the idea across the online space, often with support from government-controlled tabloids. A number of popular accounts on Instagram does the same, but it is hard to link them to official structures directly.

Altogether, the concept of Serbian world involves official and unofficial actors, different subjects that might or might not work together, but each has a certain role within a dense network around ruling party. The idea is not directly supported by institutions, but traces can be found in some relevant documents and policies, and there is no strict rejection or discouraging of the narrative.

WHAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE?

Vulnerabilities / Enablers in the Host Country

Since the Serbian World is floating in political sphere of Western Balkans for few years now, it is obvious that there are certain factors that enabled this. Their influence is different and there is interplay among them. Most of them are outcome of structural challenges that Serbia has for two decades now.

While there is clear EU accession fatigue (Economides, 2020; O’Brennan, 2014), it is also noticeable that support to EU membership is in decline for years, hitting record low (Cesid, 2025; CE-Report, 2025) recently. At the same time, there is an evident and widespread positive sentiment on Russia and China (Bjeloš et al., 2020). The rest of Western Balkans countries are having their own troubles with EU accession process as well, but support to EU membership is mostly higher than in Serbia. Along with this, Serbia is not working on necessary reforms that will bring her closer to EU, while officials mostly say that EU is the problem. This keeps frustration with process that lasts for more than a decade and enables free flow of concepts that are not in line with European values.

Weak governance is reflected in institutions dominated by politics rather than professionalism, clientelism and corruption. Altogether, this resulted with low trust to institutions (Mihailović, 2024) and opened space for nationalistic concepts such as Serbian World. Decline of democracy since 2012 was accompanied by erosion of institutions, almost daily violations of Constitution, creating undemocratic context as fertile ground for nationalist narratives.

Since media scene is under the grip of authoritarian structures, and freedom of press is endangered, it is clear that media literacy is low. Research in this field shows that there is a number of projects in this field, but progress lacks. It is established that relevant institutions and organizations had activities, that produced different resources, content, trainings, and citizen engagement (Đokić and Janjić, 2024). Almost half of population does not double check the information they receive through media. (Komatina and Klačar, 2020). This allows that narratives such as Serbian World are often taken for granted, with little or no critical examination.

With this said, a significant number of effects to attitudes of citizens is present, and these enable circulation of idea of “Serbian World” among citizens. If there is an EU accession fatigue with low support to membership, and low level of media literacy, manipulation with nationalistic sentiments is far easier. Government leaning media that are the ones that mostly disseminate the narrative often spread the information that Serbs in the region are endangered or emphasize religious or ethnic tensions.

This report does not claim that Serbian communities across Western Balkans do not have issues, related to religious or ethnic tensions among others. However, these are rather exploited by the institutions and actors in Serbia, rather than tackled through constructive dialogue, EU accession, and developing better relations with other states in the region. They are purely used as leverage in domestic political life in Serbia.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Policy Recommendations for Internal Mitigation

In order to mitigate risks that accompany the concept of Serbian World, we cannot rely only on one measure or policy. To do this, it is necessary to have comprehensive approach, that targets different aspects of the issue, and policies that complement each other. The need to tackle concepts such as this one in Serbia is essential, as there is potential threat to regional stability and cooperation in Western Balkans.

Legal

Regulatory framework in many areas should be improved and aligned with EU. Considering some of the influence is channelled through the civil society organizations close to government (Government Controlled NGOs), transparency in funding these is

essential for revealing their actions. These are also present in Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and funded from Serbia, so revealing these data could explain certain actions.

Political

Engaging in dialogue on protection national minorities in Serbia, and Serbian communities in region is essential for future. Instead of using Serbs across region as bargaining chip for political advantage, focus should be on their needs and issues they are facing. Most of political subjects in Serbia do not show true care for these issues.

Needless to say, Serbian community is facing challenges, especially in Kosovo with hostility of Kosovo political structures. Protection of Serbian minority in Kosovo, quality their everyday life, and their perspective needs to be addressed in relations with Kosovo. Moreover, this cannot be done without involving Serbian community in Kosovo.

Institutional resilience

Further strengthening of institutions is important for quality of democracy in Serbia. Rule of law and respect of fundamental rights are essential part of negotiations with EU. It is hard to expect that there will be significant improvement of relations with the rest of Western Balkans countries without democratic framework in Serbia. Concepts such as Serbian World find fertile ground in systems such as the one in Serbia. In order to limit its potential, Serbian needs to rebuild democracy and democratic institutions.

Moreover, strengthening independent media and regulatory framework for their work needs to be improved in cooperation with relevant actors. Oversight of electronic medias by Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media is in long lasting crisis and is one of the key obstacles to tackle in following period. With little to no control over tabloid media, they are disseminating misinformation and propaganda freely.

Civic Initiatives

Initiatives coming from civil society organizations should keep with their work in monitoring of policies and presence in domestic political life. Also, civil society organizations are important for keeping

the regional cooperation live in times of crisis when there is lack of it among state actors.

Directions for acting of civil society actions are multiple, but they should be focused on mentioned vulnerabilities, local enablers and specific policy recommendations. While partnership with state institutions in this is not possible at the moment, in long term it should be the approach to follow.

Communication strategies

All actors who want to combat and tackle Serbian World and other malignant narratives should have clear communication strategies with strategic messaging. It is not just about refusing a concept due to nationalism; it is about making people care. Understanding what matters for them and approaching them is necessary to create a wide rejection of these kinds of narratives in future.

Involving local actors in communication is highly relevant for meaningful change of approach. Serbian community in Kosovo is crucial ally in this considering that pressures are coming both from institutions in Prishtina and Belgrade.

Regional Cooperation

Western Balkans and Former Yugoslavia states should be primary partners to each other's, especially in sorting out status of minority communities that face difficulties. Open and sincere approach is necessary to mitigate any kind of narratives that harm both official relations and communities affected.

Initiatives such as the recent one of closer economic cooperation in energy sector (Šušnjar, 2025) should be seen as opportunity, not as threat. Joint initiatives and investments are legitimate interest of all relevant actors and can benefit everyone. However, these are heavily dependent of the quality and level of regional relations.

Moreover, political initiatives of regional cooperation are in crisis for some time now. In reset of it, issues of minority protection in Western Balkans should be considered as it will disarm harmful and malignant narratives that are part of concept of Serbian World.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to provide an overview of the concept of Serbian World that is advocated by certain figures over the past years in Serbia. Along with silent support from institutions and ruling party, this concept has certain potential to be perceived as threat from the neighbour countries. While it is not an official state policy or strategy, traces of the concept can be seen across important documents such as Strategy of National Defence, or in some of the actions of institutions.

Analysis of interest showed that there are external interests, but even they are heavily exploited for the purpose of internal ones. Internal strategic interests do not have much to do with institutions or state as such, but they are rather interests of the ruling party. These are reduced to keeping the nationalistic voters close and presenting the leader as the only viable protector of Serbs in the region.

To point out, this report does not claim that Serbian communities in Western Balkans do not have problem, or face hostility in neighbour countries. However, these are exploited by the Serbia, rather than addressed in bilateral and regional relations.

Eventually, the policy recommendations to mitigate malignant influence that this concept might carry are set wide. The reason is mostly rooted in the fact that the concept itself is not completely coherent, and that we are rather discussing traces of it in policies and public life.

To conclude, the concept of Serbian World indeed has a potential to become serious regional threat, and it is understandable why there are reactions to it from neighbouring countries. It reminds on old concepts that left many victims behind. However, at this point, the concept is mostly exploited for internal purposes. To prevent any future threats, Serbian World should be demystified, tackled, and policy measures in this research are part of the roadmap to do so.

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