



MADE AT HOME

POLITICAL ELITES AND MEDIA NARRATIVES
ON THE UKRAINE WAR IN SERBIA,
MONTENEGRO, AND BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine has reverberated across the Western Balkans in ways that reflect the region's own political dynamics more than the influence of any external actor, including Russia. In Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, media coverage and public narratives surrounding the conflict have been shaped primarily by domestic political realities, local media structures, and long-standing identity divides. Although such narratives often resemble or parallel themes associated with Russian state messaging, evidence shows that their origins and functions are fundamentally homemade. Rather than being targets of Russian influence or passive conduits for it, political and media elites across the region selectively draw on, adapt, and repurpose these narratives to serve their own pragmatic and opportunistic agendas.

This study draws on media-monitoring data provided by Pikasa Analytics (Skopje, North Macedonia), based on quantitative tracking of media outputs across three countries during the period January–June 2025. The data provided a structured basis for the report's analysis, while the interpretation of findings, analytical conclusions, and narrative framing remain the authorship of BCSP.

This study also incorporates insights from 26 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, analysts, and observers—12 in Serbia, 6 in Montenegro, and 8 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Interviewees consistently underscored that local political elites are neither Kremlin proxies nor ideologically committed to Moscow's worldview. Instead, they employ pro-Russian narratives instrumentally: as tools for electoral mobilisation, as means of reinforcing identity boundaries, and as bargaining chips in relations with Western actors. Their accounts reveal a political class driven less by ideological affinity than by pragmatism, opportunism, and the logic of regime survival. This perspective helps explain why pro-Russian themes persist even where geopolitical alignment with Moscow is weak or inconsistent.

Taken together, the quantitative data and interview insights demonstrate that the region is far from a passive recipient of foreign messaging. Political elites and media actors across the Western Balkans actively manufacture, reshape, and domesticate narratives about the Ukraine war, integrating them into familiar frameworks of grievance, sovereignty, and identity. These narratives endure not because they are centrally coordinated from abroad, but because they align with local political needs, historical memory, and the incentives of competitive media markets.

The report develops this argument through three country-specific analyses. The section on Serbia shows how a tightly controlled media environment generates and amplifies many of the region's pro-Russian narratives, not out of ideological loyalty to Moscow but because these frames support the ruling elite's internal political strategy and geopolitical balancing. The section on Montenegro illustrates how Serbian-origin narratives circulate through partisan portals and political actors, even as mainstream media retain a pro-Western

orientation—highlighting a complex interplay between identity politics, elite opportunism, and Russophile sentiment. The section on Bosnia and Herzegovina examines a fragmented media landscape structured by entity-based politics, where Republika Srpska's leadership uses pro-Russian frames to reinforce internal legitimacy and leverage bargaining power vis-à-vis Western actors. At the same time, outlets in the Federation maintain largely pro-Ukrainian positions.

Across these cases, the central finding remains consistent: media narratives surrounding the Ukraine war in the Western Balkans are locally produced instruments of political utility, shaped more by the ambitions and calculations of domestic elites than by Moscow's influence. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining both the persistence of certain narratives and the divergent ways in which they manifest across the region.

Serbia – Echoes of the Kremlin, Voice of Belgrade

Judging from public opinion polls over the past three years, Serbia has the highest level of sympathy for the Russian perspective on the Ukraine War among all countries in the Western Balkans. In a survey conducted during the first year of the war, 63% of Serbia's population blamed the West for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine – the highest share among all surveyed countries. Behind Serbia were Senegal (52%), Indonesia (50%), Turkey (43%), Nigeria (39%), Moldova (35%), and India (34%). This makes Serbia's position particularly notable, given that it is ahead of post-colonial states whose relations with the West have historically been difficult, and of a post-Soviet state like Moldova, which has a Russian community. Meanwhile, respondents in the West overwhelmingly blamed Russia for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.¹ It has been noted that there were decades of media framing in Serbia that equated Western interventionism with aggression and Russia with moral resistance. The narratives of the 1990s and NATO's 1999 campaign remain central reference points shaping how Serbs interpret the war in Ukraine.² In late 2024, a "European Security Radar" survey conducted by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation established that three-quarters of respondents in Serbia (75%) view NATO's expansion as a threat – a proportion even higher than that recorded in Russia (69%).³ In that same survey, Serbia's threat perceptions are also distinctive. It records the highest level in Europe of people who see the United States as the main threat to peace and security, with 70 per cent holding this view. By contrast, only 33 per cent consider Russia a threat.⁴

Support for Russia in Serbia is not the product of shared Slavic and Orthodox ties but of memories of the 1990s and resentment over Kosovo's independence.⁵ The Serbian people perceive Russia as a geopolitical antithesis to the West. The Ukraine war has created space for those perceptions to grow. This worldview draws on a long-cultivated culture of grievance and a campaign that recycles familiar tropes – comparing the Bucha massacre in Ukraine to the Markale Market Attack in 1994 in Bosnia or the 1999 Račak massacre in Kosovo – to dismiss reports of Russian crimes and portray Moscow as a defender against Western deceit.⁶

In Serbia, sympathy toward Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine is partly rooted in the enduring aphorism “Nas i Rusa – 300 miliona” (“There are 300 million of us and the Russians”), offering a sense of emotional reassurance amid perceptions of isolation and vulnerability in the age of globalisation and a sense of lost identity.⁷ As one source observed:

“They do not see Russia as a real country where real political and social processes take place. For them, Russia is a symbol, a concept – a divine embodiment that helps the Serbs in the struggle against their perceived enemies. The Serbian media would invent Russia if it did not exist; there must always be a story about some version of Russia, even if that Russia exists only as an idea. Many people do not think of Russia as a state, but rather as a centre of power perceived primarily through its military strength and international influence.”⁸

Since 2014, the main disseminators of pro-Russian narratives and content in Serbia have not been Russian media, such as RT and Sputnik, which are estimated to have a small audience, but rather media and tabloids under the control of the ruling regime.⁹ Serbia’s pro-Russian narratives do not depend on direct coordination with Moscow but operate through domestic political and commercial incentives, with editors adjusting tone and emphasis in line with regime priorities rather than external direction.¹⁰ Serbian scholar of media studies, Ana Martinoli, noted that pro-Russian content in Serbia has become “institutionalised,” no longer appearing sporadically but as part of a stable media infrastructure that routinely reproduces Moscow’s narratives. The Ukraine war, she argues, amplified this pre-existing ecosystem rather than creating it.¹¹

Serbia’s media environment is marked by widespread ethical violations and disinformation practices that provide a broader context for pro-government and foreign-aligned narratives. Systemic disregard for journalistic standards reinforces Serbia’s vulnerability to disinformation and manipulation. According to the Press Council’s monitoring of nine leading daily newspapers for the June–December 2024 period, a total of 4,110 violations of the Journalists’ Code of Ethics were recorded. *Alo* registered the highest counts (1,605 breaches across 1,133 texts), followed by *Informer* (1,314 across 805 texts) and *Srpski telegraf* (1,167 across 701 texts).¹² Most breaches concerned truthfulness – especially publishing unverified information and failing to distinguish speculation from fact. These findings illustrate how misinformation and ethical erosion have become structural features of Serbia’s media landscape, creating a permissive environment for politically motivated and foreign-aligned narratives to flourish.

Pro-government media sustain these narratives not only out of ideology but for political and economic gain. Within this pro-government media environment, not all outlets function in the same way, as Nikola Petrović from the ISAC Fund think tank explains in detail. Unlike the crudely nationalist and sensationalist *Informer*, which caters to a poorly educated right-wing audience, Pink Media Group occupies a distinct position. Under Željko Mitrović, Pink operates less as an ideologically driven outlet and more as a large commercial enterprise focused on entertainment and market dominance, sustained through close ties to the state. While it occasionally aligns with loyalist broadcasters such as Happy TV in

amplifying regime-friendly narratives, its primary objective remains preserving its media monopoly and political protection rather than promoting overtly right-wing or pro-Russian ideology. There have been recorded instances of formerly overtly pro-Russian outlets, such as Srbin.info (led by editor Dejan Zlatanović, who was arrested in 2023 for participating in anti-government protests over Kosovo), adapting their ideological stance in line with domestic political priorities. Zlatanović and Srbin.info significantly reduced their coverage of the Ukraine war after the 2023 protests over mass shootings, indicating that editorial alignments follow internal political expediency rather than ideological commitment.¹³ Indeed, the pragmatism of outlets like Pink can also be illustrated by a controversial agreement that Mitrović reached with former US ambassador Christopher Hill in 2023 to promote “Western values” and better US-Serbia ties.¹⁴

A study by the Montenegro-based Centre for Democratic Transition finds that Serbia's major tabloids, such as *Informer* and *Alo*, exert influence beyond their domestic market, with their content frequently republished or adapted by outlets in neighbouring countries.¹⁵ Rather than indicating coordination or structural integration, this reflects a cross-border narrative spillover, where stories generated in Serbia gain traction regionally due to shared language, overlapping audiences, and compatible political incentives. The report highlights how both environments sustain similar patterns of sensationalism and manipulation, driven largely by local political and commercial dynamics rather than deliberate cross-border orchestration.

Anti-Western messaging drives audience engagement and regime favour, while promoting the portrayal of Russia as Serbia's loyal ally.¹⁶ As Serbian political scientist Vujo Ilić conveyed in an interview:

“Unlike the assumption that the spread of Russian narratives in a given country requires media outlets owned by Russia, this is not the case in Serbia. These narratives are widely adopted and broadcast by domestic media, reaching the local audience. It is therefore not only a matter of the media – Serbian officials themselves often echo, in their public statements, the very narratives promoted by Russia.”¹⁷

Although Russian media are not widely read in Serbia, they serve as content providers and points of reference for pro-government outlets, particularly on issues such as the war in Ukraine and global politics, where local media have limited expertise. Through this indirect channel, Russian narratives continue to shape domestic coverage and discourse, and Russia indirectly benefits from having its own foreign policy promoted.¹⁸ However, the Serbian media community that praises Russia is not a homogeneous unit. An illustrative example is *Srpski telegraf* and its editor, Milan Lađević, who initially expressed open sympathy for Vladimir Putin but gradually adopted a more neutral tone as the war progressed. In contrast, *Večernje novosti* maintained a distinctly pro-Putin editorial line. At the same time, several anti-government portals echo Russian worldviews on issues such as the defence of tradition and strong anti-LGBT sentiment, revealing how pro-Russian narratives transcend regime boundaries.¹⁹

This narrative tactic is part of Belgrade's foreign policy of hedging bets and engaging Russia to use it as leverage with the West, including on issues like Kosovo. Domestic politics – especially the logic of regime survival – is also a major factor. After years of glorifying Russia and Putin through its statements, media and press campaigns, pro-Russian narratives now hold so much sway with the electorate that the Serbian leadership cannot afford to change course.²⁰ According to a reporter, Aleksandra Godfroid, pro-Russian discourse in Serbia operates more as an electoral instrument than an ideological conviction. By invoking a “washed-down” Russian story centred on shared Orthodoxy, wartime brotherhood and the idea of Russia as Serbia's eternal protector – particularly over Kosovo – political elites appeal to a conservative electorate disillusioned with the European Union. This re-imagined narrative of “Mother Russia” provides emotional reassurance and symbolic legitimacy for a leadership that has itself long navigated between East and West.²¹ Still, local Serbian leaders, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, use geopolitics, particularly those related to the Ukraine war, to divert attention from economic problems, corruption, and illiberal governance.²² In early October 2025, faced with domestic unrest, Vučić made a statement theatrically passed by all pro-government tabloids that: “There will be war; everyone is preparing for war. No one is preparing for talks.”²³ More recently, in early October 2025, Vučić publicly warned that should NATO pursue pre-emptive strikes against Russia, Moscow “would respond even more strongly,” potentially even with tactical nuclear weapons.²⁴

Serbia stands out as the regional hub for media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2025, producing 51,516 articles – over half of all reporting across the Western Balkans – and generating nearly 800,000 Facebook engagements. With 49 major outlets contributing to coverage, the scale and persistence of Serbian reporting underscore the centrality of the conflict in domestic political and media narratives. From early 2022 to mid-2025, Serbian media exhibited the most volatile, event-driven coverage of the war, characterised by sharp peaks – reaching up to roughly 800 articles in a single peak month in early 2023 – that corresponded to major developments in the conflict. These bursts were followed by notable declines, indicating a reactive news cycle that is highly responsive to external triggers and political moments. The data reveal an editorial pattern in Serbia characterised by intensity and fluctuation, with coverage surging around key turning points rather than maintaining steady attention.²⁵

Across the full period from early 2022 to mid-2025, the narrative portraying Ukraine as a proxy war circulated 730 times in the Serbian press.²⁶ In January 2025, an *Informer* piece stated that a Ukrainian drone strike on the Engels2 air base near the Russian city of Engels, Russia – where Russia's strategic aviation is stationed – hit fuel storage, and Russian analysts allege this gives Moscow grounds, under its military doctrine, to respond harshly (including the use of nuclear weapons.)²⁷ A deeply ingrained belief that the West is to blame for most global conflicts underpins Serbia's neutral stance on the war in Ukraine. The prevailing media narrative frames the conflict as a clash of great powers, with Serbia forced to remain outside, presenting neutrality as both a moral and strategic imperative. This geopolitical framing allows the government to balance between Moscow and the West, rejecting sanctions on Russia while formally upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity.²⁸

This framing aligns closely with a wider regional narrative that portrays the West as a constant source of instability. In both the discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine and that of so-called “colour revolutions,” the West is depicted as the instigator of chaos and misfortune in the Balkans and Eastern Europe and as an actor that pushes nations into conflict or engineered upheaval.²⁹ The two narratives reinforce each other, as the story of “colour revolutions” is frequently linked to the 2014 change of power in Ukraine and the earlier stages of the war, sustaining the idea that Western interference perpetually drives unrest in the region.³⁰

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was portrayed as **illegitimate** 112 times in Serbian pro-government media. The notion that **Ukraine does not want peace** was mentioned 165 times, while **the narrative of equivalence between Russia and Ukraine** appeared 136 times. In a similar vein, the narrative of the West not wanting peace appeared 222 times.³¹ In February 2025, when delegations from the US and Russia met in Saudi Arabia to discuss the Ukraine war and bilateral relations, *Kurir* reported that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Donald Trump of “living in a space of disinformation,” claiming such rhetoric aids Vladimir Putin and undermines Ukraine’s position.³² Despite this limited critique, the headline – “Zelenski osuo drvlje i kamenje po Vašingtonu: ‘Zaradili su milijarde od rata u Ukrajini’” (“Zelensky attacked Washington: ‘They made billions from the war in Ukraine’”) – portrayed Ukraine as aggressive and unreasonable.³³ This framing aligns with a broader Serbian tabloid trend of portraying Ukraine as confrontational and uninterested in peace. Although reporting on Ukraine has declined since 2024, for some of the interviewees, its framing remains unchanged – Russia defends, Ukraine provokes, and the West manipulates.³⁴

Later in March 2025, after Volodymyr Zelensky expressed a desire to sign a mineral deal with Donald Trump, the same tabloid article highlighted Zelensky’s claim that Trump’s support remains “decisive” for Ukraine and that US aid is vital to Ukraine’s survival.³⁵ However, the headline – “Poniženi Zelenski podvio rep” (“Humiliated Zelensky tucked his tail”) – framed him as submissive and defeated, reinforcing a tabloid narrative of Ukrainian weakness and dependency on the West. This corresponded with the period (1 March 2025) when the Serbian media recorded the highest engagement levels, with articles on Zelensky’s meetings with Western leaders generating between 480 and 715 interactions per article, reflecting peak public interest in high-level diplomatic developments.³⁶

In that same context, one can observe that a narrative of Russia exercising retaliation against the West and Ukraine appeared 209 times, supporting the well-established view that Russia is defending itself. This narrative has been registered in Serbian media 138 times, alongside the narrative suggesting that NATO provoked the war, which was mentioned 152 times. The Serbian public’s perception of the Ukraine war as a battleground between Russia and the West is also reflected in the media narrative, with references to a “special military operation” – Moscow’s term for its military campaign – occurring 120 times.³⁷

Pro-government media widely uphold the narrative that Ukraine is the malign actor. Ukraine was referred to as a terrorist regime 224 times, and as a Nazi state 96 times. Serbian media tend to amplify statements by Russian officials portraying Ukraine as a

Nazi state, for instance, in June 2025. Tanjug relayed Putin's statement made to Sky News Arabia that Ukraine must recognise Russia-annexed territories as Russian territory and cleanse Nazi elements from its ranks.³⁸ Some have described this not as pro-Russian, but as a pro-Putin narrative, where the war is framed as Putin's war with the West, and where Ukraine is perceived as an obedient proxy of the West.³⁹

According to journalist Jelena Petković, Serbian television coverage of the war in Ukraine, especially at its beginning, is dominated by pro-Russian framing. National broadcasters such as RTS, Pink and Happy consistently reproduce Moscow's perspective, describing the conflict as a defensive "special operation" and granting disproportionate airtime to Russian diplomats and commentators. Happy TV even altered its programming schedule to include a daily war segment that echoed Kremlin narratives without verification. Petković notes that for every pro-Ukrainian guest, several pro-Russian voices appear on air, while basic editorial standards – such as balance, fact-checking, and contextualisation – are disregarded. The result is a sustained normalisation of Russia's interpretation of the war, not through direct Kremlin control but through domestic political and media structures that find these narratives expedient.⁴⁰

Others noted that, while at the start of the war the narrative had a tone of "cheerleading" for Russia, it became more neutral as Serbia found itself under Western pressure, with a tendency to portray the war as a source of instability and Vučić and his regime as the only security guarantor.⁴¹ This practice came to the fore in 2022 when Vučić campaigned in the April 2022 elections under the slogan "Peace, Stability, Vučić," portraying himself as an experienced leader capable of steering the country through global uncertainty. While the liberal opposition was fearful of being branded as pro-Western or unpatriotic, it avoided direct criticism of Belgrade's stance toward Russia.⁴² As in neighbouring Hungary, foreign-policy themes dominated the 2022 campaign, diverting attention from corruption allegations and environmental protests.⁴³

A narrative containing references and analogies to the Yugoslav wars and 1990s US interventions can also be invoked. For the local regimes, it is an easy sell to the domestic audience that still holds trauma of the 1990s wars and which harbours grievance against the West for interventions against Serbia in the 1990s and the independence of Kosovo. Serbian sympathy for Russia often stems less from ideological conviction than from emotional identification with Serbia's own experience of Western isolation and NATO bombing, making such narratives personally resonant rather than purely political.⁴⁴ In late September 2024, an *Informers* article quoted Vladimir Putin claiming that Western powers were preparing Donbas, the Crimea and other Russian regions for an operation analogous to Croatia's Operation Storm (1995), with the aim of carrying out what he described as "ethnic cleansing" of Russians, thus justifying Russia's intervention.⁴⁵ The article uses highly theatrical language, drawing parallels with the Croatian-Serbian conflict to underscore the gravity of Russia's framing while tapping into the wartime trauma of a significant portion of the Serbian population. References to the 1999 NATO intervention against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia play a powerful role in a narrative that draws analogies between the Russia-Ukraine war and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.

Speaking at the International Student Forum “Freedom and Sovereignty of Nations in the 21st Century”, hosted by Belgrade in June 2025, Serbian President Vučić stated that no one today feels the need to justify military attacks on other states, recalling the 1999 NATO intervention as the moment that set a dangerous precedent for later conflicts. Vučić implied that current global crises reflect the same erosion of international norms, using this argument to reaffirm Serbia’s policy of nurturing relations with **countries** of the Global South as a means of asserting sovereignty and promoting a more balanced world order.⁴⁶ This speaks to both the salience of the Kosovo war in Serbian collective memory and the centrality of the Global South in the Serbian approach to world affairs, both of which are frequently instrumentalised by the Serbian regime.

There is also a strong narrative **praising the Russian military and its technological capacities**. This narrative is particularly present in the sensational television coverage and celebratory tabloid reporting of Russian weaponry.⁴⁷ Pro-government outlets and talk shows such as *Aktuelnosti* on TV Happy often provide painstakingly detailed, frequently banal commentary on developments on the Ukrainian front and Russia’s military technology, featuring a revolving cast of retired officers and military commentators.⁴⁸ The various minor right-wing figures have also been noted as attractive guest commentators on the Ukraine war within this show, like Aleksandar Šešelj, a son of right-wing political leader from the 1990s, Vojislav Šešelj,⁴⁹ or Mladen Obradović, a theologian and a leader of the right-wing organisation „Obraz (Cheek).”⁵⁰ In October 2025, tabloid *Alo* reported the claim by Ukrainian forces that they had intercepted 69 of 82 Russian drones launched overnight, while Russian sources stated they downed 103 Ukrainian drones. The report offers little beyond these reciprocal tallies of drone activity and contains no confirmation of large-scale destruction or territorial changes. In contrast, the sensational headline – “Sve odjekuje na frontu, Ukrajina gori!” (“Everything echoes on the front, Ukraine is burning!”) – dramatically overstates the scale and intensity of the events, using emotive language to evoke chaos and devastation that the body of the article does not substantiate.⁵¹

A *Kurir* article from May 2025 reported that Russia had for the first time presented combat drones at a Moscow parade, portraying them as “Putin’s deadly weapon aimed at Ukraine.”⁵² However, the theatrical framing exaggerated what was largely a symbolic display. Earlier that year, in January 2025, the *Kurir* article portrayed the Russian Armed Forces as having undergone a comprehensive transformation over nearly three years of war. It emphasised Moscow’s technological advancement—particularly the development of hypersonic missiles and drones—and improvements in command structure and combat efficiency. This depiction reinforced the broader pro-government media narrative that praises Russia as a militarily superior and strategically adaptive force.⁵³

Donald Trump’s presidency did not decisively change the narrative on the Ukraine war. Still, it has helped shape it, as there has been an increase in media pieces promoting Trump as the peacemaker. There is a slight contradiction in Serbia’s warm reception of Donald Trump. Two interviewees observed that while Russian state media increasingly depicted Donald Trump as weak and unreliable, Serbian tabloids continued to present him as a pro-Russian

ally and ‘friend of Serbia,’ showing that local storytelling diverges sharply from Moscow’s framing.⁵⁴ There have been an increasing number of references to Trump **as the only leader who can bring peace**, totalling 919 times. There have also been 367 instances in which Trump is portrayed as a leader promoting peace, in contrast to **his predecessor, Joe Biden, who is often associated with fuelling war**.

In October 2024, shortly before the US presidential election, surveys indicated that Donald Trump held his strongest international support in Serbia, where 59% of respondents said they would vote for him in a hypothetical election. Hungary and Bulgaria followed with 49%, in sharp contrast to most European countries, where the majority favoured the Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris.⁵⁵ Serbian support for Donald Trump dates back to his first term, rooted in resentment toward the Clinton-era NATO interventions, frustration with Serbia’s unfulfilled post-Milošević transition, and sympathy for Russia’s confrontation with the West. His perceived distance from past U.S. military actions, opposition to interventionism, and promises to end the war in Ukraine have reinforced his appeal across Serbia’s political spectrum—as both conservatives and pragmatists see him as a potential bridge to better U.S.–Serbia and U.S.–Russia relations.⁵⁶ Trump is perceived as a leader more sympathetic to Russian interests and, by extension, to Serbia’s interests, as reflected in media content and narratives.

Furthermore, the Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska on August 15, 2025, was portrayed as a dialogue between two great leaders over spheres of influence, implicitly suggesting that Serbia could withdraw from the West’s exclusive sphere of influence.⁵⁷ It is essential to emphasise that the Serbian leadership is genuinely interested in rapprochement between Russia and the US, as well as in resolving the Ukraine war, believing this will remove a significant international issue from the agenda at a time when the regime is vulnerable domestically.⁵⁸ Still, enthusiasm for Trump has not always benefitted the Serbian leadership. In October 2025, the United States sanctioned Serbia’s largest oil and gas company, NIS, which is predominantly Russian-owned.⁵⁹ It also did not benefit the government in August 2025, when the Trump administration imposed 35 tariffs on Serbia, the highest tariffs imposed on any Balkan country.⁶⁰ Two months later, the EU imposed tariffs and quotas on steel, significantly affecting Serbia’s largest steelmaker and exporter, HBIS Serbia, a subsidiary of China’s HBIS Group. President Vučić attempted to lobby the EU by speaking dramatically about the harsh toll of EU measures on Serbia,⁶¹ without mentioning the US tariffs in the same way, showing that Serbian authorities are more cautious in dealing with Trump and the US than with the EU.

The Serbian leader has tried to portray himself as a leader respected by both world powers. An example of this is when Vučić announced that Serbia is interested in hosting a meeting between Trump and Putin, and claimed that Serbia is fully prepared to guarantee the security of both leaders.⁶² According to some sources, this aligns with a worldview held by the ruling SNS party and its voters, in which strongmen divide the world among themselves, and the media further amplified this narrative.⁶³ By 26 April 2025, media coverage shifted to sensational topics, such as Donald Trump Jr.’s visit to Belgrade and funeral ceremonies in France, attracting 152-254 interactions per article, indicating

moderate but steady reader engagement driven by tabloid-style framing. By May 15, 2025, reporting focused on analytical pieces about Putin's diminishing influence and Trump's political relevance in Europe; yet engagement declined to 170–243 interactions per article, signalling audience fatigue and reduced interest in complex political analysis.⁶⁴

Trump can also be glorified in a way not associated with the Ukraine war, and Vučić is glorified by extension. An example of this is an *Informer* article from January 2025, which asserts that Aleksandar Vučić, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump have joined forces to combat what it terms “woke ideology”, presenting this as a global cultural struggle. However, the body of the text offers little concrete evidence of coordinated global action or meaningful policy shifts, relying instead on rhetorical declarations and ideological framing. Therefore, the dramatic headline significantly overstates the article's content.⁶⁵ The glorification of Putin in Serbian media functions as a “spillover effect without mentioning Vučić,” allowing those in power to promote themselves indirectly by elevating the image of a decisive, unyielding leader as the model for national strength and stability. Thus, by promoting Putin, Vučić is promoted himself without his name ever being explicitly mentioned.⁶⁶

Ultimately, just as with the overall state of Serbo-Russian relations, this dynamic is not based on the traditional patron-client model, but rather on mutual manipulation. In 2022, several Serbian pro-government tabloids published headlines such as **“Putin stabs Serbia in the back, trades Kosovo for Donbas”** and **“World conflict over our backs, Putin is playing on Kosovo.”** These appeared after President Putin invoked the Kosovo precedent to justify Russia's annexation of Donbas – prompting Moscow's ambassador in Belgrade to clarify that Russia had not changed its position on Kosovo.⁶⁷ The episode revealed that the Serbia-Russia relationship is not one of subordination or proxy control: while official rhetoric in Belgrade often accommodates Russian narratives, domestic media and political elites act autonomously, adjusting tones and interpretations according to internal political needs.

For a very long time, Russia remained silent on Serbia's ammunition deliveries to Ukraine because the Kremlin depended on Belgrade's nationalist government and its extensive pro-government media network to uphold the illusion of Russian influence in the Balkans; openly criticising Serbia would have risked undermining one of Moscow's few reliable propaganda footholds in the region.⁶⁸ Serbia's media ecosystem serves as a regional amplifier, exporting pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives to Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, where shared language markets facilitate the seamless diffusion of these narratives.⁶⁹ Although Vučić maintains closer relations with the West and covertly supplies ammunition to Ukraine, Moscow tolerated him because he preserved a pro-Russian climate at home and upheld a policy of avoiding sanctions against Russia.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, in late June, Serbia halted its ammunition exports after the SVR (Russian Foreign Intelligence Service) accused Belgrade of supplying Kyiv via third countries.⁷¹ Despite its centralised regime, Russia is not a monolith. Despite nominally friendly relations between the two governments, an entity like the SVR had to take into account and respond

to the reality that Russian soldiers are killed with Serbian ammunition.⁷² Indeed, even before Vučić was forced to suspend ammunition deliveries to Ukraine, *Zvezda Weekly* – a publication affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defence – had regularly published articles critical of Vučić and his perceived duplicity toward Moscow.⁷³ Russian popularity is also a hindrance, as it gives Russia leverage in Serbia, as exemplified by Serbia freezing its ammunition deliveries to Ukraine after its leadership was embarrassed by the SVR’s announcements. In that same context, pro-government media selectively manage pro-Russian content to avoid domestic fallout, as they tend to downplay Russian media content that criticises Serbia’s cooperation with NATO.⁷⁴ It is worth noting that, after intensive media coverage of the Ukraine war since November 2024 and the Novi Sad train station canopy collapse that triggered nationwide protests, domestic issues take priority in pro-government media coverage over international coverage.⁷⁵ Taken together, Serbian media coverage of the Ukraine war is best understood as highly instrumental, event-driven, and subordinated to domestic political priorities. While pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives remain pervasive and are readily amplified during major international developments, their salience fluctuates sharply and recedes when domestic crises demand sustained attention. This pattern underscores that the Ukraine war functions less as a consistently followed foreign policy issue and more as a flexible narrative resource deployed by pro-government media in response to shifting political needs at home.

Montenegro – Borrowed Narratives, Local Agendas

Although Russian narratives circulate in Montenegrin media, these themes are primarily locally produced and politically instrumentalised. In Montenegro, the war in Ukraine is unevenly represented: a small number of online portals (notably *Borba* and *IN4S*) and Serbian TV/online feeds carry the bulk of pro-Russian content. At the same time, the main national broadcasters generally adopt a more balanced, pro-Western line. These portal-driven messages are amplified through Viber/Telegram groups and a cluster of pro-Serbian politicians. This cluster includes Milan Knežević, president of the right-wing Democratic People’s Party and the President of the Parliamentary Board for Defence and Security, and Andrija Mandić, president of the New Serb Democracy and the president of the Parliament of Montenegro. Both repurpose Serbian narratives about the war – meaning the Kremlin-aligned framing is highly visible online. However, these narratives are not the dominant voice on mainstream Montenegrin television.⁷⁶

Pro-Russian sentiment in Montenegro has deep historical roots, shaped by centuries of cultural and political ties with Russia. The saying mentioned above, “Nas i Rusa trista miliona” (“There are 300 million of us together with the Russians”) originated in Montenegro. It encapsulates this enduring identification, which dates back to Tsarist support for the Montenegrin prince-bishops and has persisted through symbolic acts, such as Montenegro’s declaration of war on Japan in 1904 out of solidarity with St. Petersburg, as well as Stalinist sympathies in 1948.⁷⁷ During communist Yugoslavia, Montenegro, in particular, had a reputation as the most pro-Russian of Yugoslav republics and the most antagonistic toward the West.⁷⁸ Despite its dealings with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under

Slobodan Milošević, beginning in 1998 and throughout the late 1990s, Moscow deepened ties with Montenegro's president, Milo Đukanović, who was distancing himself from Milošević and leaning toward the West.⁷⁹ For several years after the breakup of Yugoslavia, Russia's primary ally in the remaining Yugoslav territories became Milo Đukanović's government in Montenegro, led by Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS). This partnership strengthened, particularly as Đukanović grew dissatisfied with the European Union and the United States, which at first were reluctant to support his proposal for an independence referendum.⁸⁰ As Montenegro moved towards independence in 2006, Russia became a major investor in the country. For example, in 2005, Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska bought a Montenegrin aluminium plant and its bauxite mines, only to withdraw a few years later amid a dispute with the local government.⁸¹

Montenegro began to embrace the West after turning down a 2013 Russian request for access to its Adriatic ports and as it prepared for its 2017 NATO membership, a shift that redefined Russia's role from a strategic partner into a contested domestic reference point in political competition and media narratives.⁸² The issue of NATO membership polarised society and aligned with the identity divide between Montenegrins and Serbians, with the latter's political representatives ardently opposed to NATO membership. However, Milo Đukanović used these divisions to divert attention from his authoritarian tendencies and ties to organised crime.⁸³ In October 2016, just before Montenegro's elections, authorities detained several Serbian nationals – including Bratislav Dikić, a retired commander of Serbia's special police – on accusations of plotting a coup against the Montenegrin government. Mandić and Knežević, who were at the time leading an opposition coalition, the Democratic Front (DF), were indicted for participating in the alleged coup. Officials claimed the alleged coup aimed to block Montenegro's entry into NATO and was orchestrated by Russia and its intelligence agencies. However, many seasoned Balkan analysts have questioned this account, noting inconsistencies and suggesting that the then-government in Podgorica, led by Milo Đukanović, may have exaggerated or manipulated the story to present itself as a target of Russian interference, thereby strengthening its standing with Western allies.⁸⁴

Indeed, the fact that the opposition to Đukanović was seen as espousing Serbian nationalism and as being sympathetic to Russia played to Đukanović's favour, even after the alleged coup, with Russian tourists continuing to visit Montenegro.⁸⁵ In late 2019, Milo Đukanović and his ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) provoked a confrontation with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) by passing the controversial Law on Religious Freedom, which threatened to transfer ownership of all pre-1918 church properties to the state. The SPC's power goes beyond ethnic labels – many Montenegrins who identify as Serbs and those who identify as Montenegrins nonetheless hold allegiance to it. This clash significantly contributed to Đukanović's political downfall, as the mobilisation around the SPC shifted voter sentiment and undermined the DPS's long-standing dominance.⁸⁶

After its 2020 defeat, Đukanović and the DPS increased the stakes by playing the Montenegrin nationalist card. In the run-up to the September 2021 enthronement of Joanikije II as Metropolitan in Cetinje, the former ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) skilfully manipulated nationalist and identity fault lines to regain political ground.

Although the ceremony was ostensibly about a religious appointment, the DPS framed it as a matter of Montenegrin sovereignty and defence against perceived Serbian church-and-state intrusion, using rhetoric that portrayed the enthronement as part of a “Greater-Serbian assault”. The DPS leadership, including Milo Đukanović, leveraged the moment not just as a religious dispute but as a galvanising political event. By conflating ethnic and religious identity with national survival, they sought to mobilise their base and destabilise the fragile governing coalition that had unseated them.⁸⁷ This tactic did not work for Đukanović, as his era ended in 2023 with defeat in the presidential elections. Đukanović’s defeat led some commentators to claim, as early as 2020 that Montenegro was “the latest domino to fall toward Russia.”⁸⁸ Still, following Đukanović’s 2020 defeat, the new coalition – despite internal divisions and the presence of pro-Serbian and nationalist factions – was compelled to uphold Montenegro’s EU trajectory because maintaining Brussels’ confidence was essential for the government’s legitimacy and stability, even as competing ideological pressures created space for anti-EU and pro-Russian narratives to resurface.⁸⁹

Russia’s direct influence in Montenegro has declined over the past decade; today, Serbia serves as the main entry point for pro-Russian narratives. Montenegro’s media landscape is sharply divided along political and ideological lines. The most overtly pro-Russian portals – *IN4S*, *Borba*, and *Alo.me* – operate in close coordination with Serbia’s tabloid ecosystem, republishing content from outlets such as *Alo* and *Informer*, and amplifying themes originating from *Sputnik* and other Russian sources, despite formal bans. Their influence today stems less from direct Russian control and more from political and editorial alignment with Belgrade’s media networks.⁹⁰ For much of the public, especially the Serb population, Serbia functions as the key source of information and filter through which Russian messaging reaches Montenegro. In political terms, it is now more accurate to speak of Serbian than Russian influence.⁹¹

As one Montenegrin analyst observed, the pro-Russian sentiment in both Serbia and Montenegro does not stem from Moscow’s propaganda networks, but rather from domestic power structures within these countries. Local elites have historically cultivated the pro-Russian narrative in Montenegro, and its intensity depends on the extent to which they promote it. The Orthodox and historically Russophile element of national identity – once contained during the DPS era – has re-emerged in a new form under the new government, according to one Montenegro-based interlocutor.⁹² According to another Montenegrin analyst, pro-Serbian political actors do not consciously coordinate with Belgrade but remain structurally dependent on Serbia’s political discourse. Both the former DF bloc and the DPS derive legitimacy from identity politics: the former from pro-Serbian sentiment, the latter from anti-Serbian sentiment. This dynamic keeps Montenegro locked into a political pattern shaped by developments in Serbia.⁹³

The consolidation of nationalist blocs through propaganda has had tangible political effects, most notably the weakening of the civic and pro-European option in Montenegro. As several interlocutors from Montenegro observed, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian narratives function more as mechanisms of cohesion within existing identity camps than as persuasive instruments. By reinforcing the binary between “Serb” and “Montenegrin” identities, these narratives sustain polarisation and diminish the visibility of civic, reform-

oriented actors. The result is an entrenched dualism in which nationalist rhetoric dominates the public sphere, complicating coalition politics and diverting attention from structural reforms needed for EU integration. This dynamic deepens societal divisions precisely when consensus and institutional stability are most required for Montenegro's European trajectory.⁹⁴

It has been underlined that the strategic objective of the pro-Russian narrative is maintenance, not conversion: to keep a hardened core mobilised, sustain polarisation, and stall EU accession—targeting the 30% of Serb-identifying citizens but operationally activating a radicalised 5% with an outsized agenda-setting effect.⁹⁵ Still, this perspective risks overstating ideological rigidity and overlooking the pragmatism and self-interest that even pro-Serbian actors in Montenegro frequently display.

This complexity was visible during the church-led protests, when Metropolitan Amfilohije maintained contacts with Western diplomats, including meetings with the UK ambassador, signalling that anti-DPS forces recognised the necessity of sustaining dialogue with the West to remain politically effective. It was also reflected externally: in a July 2020 *Newsweek* op-ed, British MPs Tim Farron and Steve Baker criticised the Law on Religious Freedom and Đukanović's governing record, underscoring that Western engagement with Montenegro was not framed exclusively through a binary lens of pro-Western reformism versus pro-Russian obstructionism.

Amfilohije's own political trajectory further illustrates this ambivalence. Initially an ally of Đukanović during his break with Slobodan Milošević in the late 1990s, he later became a vocal opponent as Đukanović advanced Montenegrin independence and a distinct national identity.^{96 97}

Thus, political players in Montenegro have a history of being pragmatic, participating in the game of shifting alliances, and this is the context in which media narratives need to be analysed. Regarding the dyad of the two most prominent pro-Serbian politicians in Montenegro, Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić, they must balance the domestic imperative of keeping their conservative electorate, which still finds appeal in the pro-Russian narrative, with the need to maintain good relations with the West.⁹⁸ There is a peculiar „good cop-bad cop” routine transpiring with this political duo. Within that dynamic, Knežević appears as a more exposed figure, appearing closely aligned with Serbia's President Vučić as exemplified by his guest appearance in tabloid-like talk show „Ćirilica (Cyrilic)” on pro-government TV Happy, in which he appeared alongside Serbian Minister of the Interior Ivica, owner of *Informer* Dragan J. Vučićević, pro-government folk diva Jelena Karleuša and Vučić himself.⁹⁹ In late August, Knežević appeared as a guest alongside Milorad Dodik on a pro-government tabloid TV station, TV *Informer*, in which they denigrated Serbian protests, the West and out-of-touch liberals living in the centre of Belgrade, with the two leaders eventually partying in the middle of the live studio with musicians performing Serbian folk music.¹⁰⁰ For some, Knežević's guest appearance was considered a precedent, as political figures from Montenegro had traditionally avoided appearing on tabloid TV stations and talk shows with such a dubious reputation.¹⁰¹

In contrast, Mandić is asserting himself publicly as a more pragmatic figure, pushing to be a bridge-builder, as exemplified by his article in the US foreign policy magazine *The National Interest*, in which he promotes strategic cooperation between Montenegro and the US.¹⁰² More recently, Mandić also stated regarding relations between Serbia and Montenegro: “Our countries are located in Europe, and I believe that our destiny and the best economic vision for future generations is to be together in the European Union.”¹⁰³ Still, some observers claimed that, although Andrija Mandić has formally supported Montenegro’s EU course since joining the government, his actions and rhetoric often slow integration and intensify regional tensions, referring to his sponsorship of resolutions on Srebrenica and Jasenovac, strained ties with Croatia and deepened identity divisions, reinforcing his role as a symbolic rather than reformist leader.¹⁰⁴

In Montenegro, 41 outlets produced 12,874 articles on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, indicating a modest yet consistent level of journalistic attention given the country’s smaller media ecosystem. Despite recording the lowest per-article engagement rate (14 interactions), Montenegrin coverage remains steady, reflecting a continued effort to contextualise the conflict’s regional implications. The country’s more limited media capacity and narrower audience base constrain overall output. Montenegrin media produced the fewest articles, with peaks rarely exceeding 200, yet demonstrated the most stable coverage pattern over the observed period.

While smaller in scale, Montenegro’s reporting maintained regular attention without the volatility seen in Serbia or the gradual build observed in Bosnia. This indicates a measured, balanced editorial approach that ensures ongoing coverage within the constraints of a compact media system.¹⁰⁵ Serbian and RS-based outlets showed the strongest pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian framing, with over half of their articles containing derogatory labels such as “Nazi” or “terrorist” and claims that Ukraine opposed peace. In contrast, only about one-third of Montenegrin articles carried such themes, indicating that Montenegro’s media, though not untouched, largely resisted pro-Kremlin narratives—likely due to its stronger Western orientation and broader consensus on condemning the war.¹⁰⁶

Articles published in Montenegrin media often mirror coverage that first appears in Serbian outlets. News portals such as *IN4S*, *Borba*, and *Alo.me* frequently reprint stories from Serbian tabloids without much editorial scrutiny, sometimes even retaining the Serbian (Ekavian) spelling. This pattern largely stems from the fact that many Montenegrin media outlets lack the resources or capacity to generate original reporting.¹⁰⁷ These outlets often recycle RT and Sputnik content, despite both being banned in Montenegro, so that pro-Russian narratives now circulate through local intermediaries rather than through direct Kremlin channels.¹⁰⁸ A striking example of how Montenegrin pro-Russian portals recycle conspiratorial content was the June 2022 *IN4S* article falsely claiming that Bosnian Serb leaders Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić would be transferred to Russia in exchange for captured NATO officers from Ukraine.¹⁰⁹

Since 2022, *IN4S* and *Borba* openly amplified Kremlin positions (often re-platforming RT/Sputnik content despite bans), while adopting ‘free speech vs. censorship’ rhetoric to justify their editorial policies.¹¹⁰ In these media, the narrative of **Russia defending itself against Western encroachment** is very prevalent. It has been noted that while narratives

sometimes reference the conflicts of the 1990s, this is not the prevailing practice, as the narrative is much more geopolitical, emphasising that Russia is defending itself.¹¹¹ In that context, **the narrative of retaliation** appeared 153 times, and **the narrative that NATO provoked the war** was present 148 times.¹¹² On June 20 2025, Borba published an article titled “Putin: The Russian and Ukrainian peoples are essentially the same; Wherever a Russian soldier steps – that is ours.” The piece echoed the Kremlin’s portrayal of the war as a defensive reaction to NATO expansion and Western encirclement, quoting President Putin’s claim that Russia was forced to act to protect its own people and security interests.¹¹³

This is accompanied by the narrative that the **West does not want peace**, which appeared 187 times.¹¹⁴ This narrative is frequently advanced through the repetition of Russian official statements. For example, IN4S on 18 September 2025 ran a piece titled “Peskov: Caution required, some want to undermine the USA–Russia dialogue”, quoting Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov’s claim that certain Western actors were deliberately obstructing diplomatic progress.¹¹⁵ These reports reinforce the depiction of Moscow as open to negotiation and the West as committed to prolonging the conflict. The narrative that the **West is using Ukraine** also remains prominent in Montenegrin media. On 22 January 2025, Borba published an article titled “Zelensky angry at the West: They lied to Ukraine over NATO membership”, portraying Western leaders as deceitful and manipulative and suggesting that Ukraine was misled into the war to serve NATO’s geopolitical ambitions.¹¹⁶

Public opinion data further illustrate how these narratives intersect with Montenegro’s internal identity divides and its perceptions of foreign policy. Although Russian narratives continue to circulate in parts of Montenegro’s public space, they resonate unevenly across society and remain limited by the country’s overall Western orientation. The latest survey (September 2025) shows that 71.3 per cent of citizens support EU membership and 42 per cent favour NATO membership.¹¹⁷ In the same survey, only around 13 per cent believe Montenegro’s foreign policy should rely primarily on Russia. In comparison, nearly 39 per cent believe the country should rely on the EU, and 25 per cent believe the same in the case of Serbia. Almost 13 per cent share the same view of the US, and slightly above 11 per cent of citizens believe China should be the party to which Montenegro’s foreign policy relies.¹¹⁸ Attitudes toward the war in Ukraine are more fragmented: 36 per cent of respondents describe it as Russian aggression against Ukraine, 31 per cent see it as Russia’s defence against NATO expansion, and 33 per cent express no clear position.¹¹⁹ These divisions demonstrate that although pro-Russian sentiment still appeals to parts of the electorate, Euro-Atlantic integration remains the dominant strategic choice. The survey indicates that Russia’s influence still has its limits and that Serbia’s allure should not necessarily be equated with Russia, but rather that it is more pronounced. At the same time, CEDEM’s Ethnic Distance 2025 study finds that roughly 70 per cent of citizens agree, either fully or partly, with the statement that the survival of their nation is every individual’s primary duty. This result highlights the persistence of strong ethnonational identification and collective-solidarity attitudes within Montenegrin society.¹²⁰ In this context, pro-Russian content finds entry points not through ideology but by exploiting existing social divides – particularly where domestic actors instrumentalise such themes for political mobilisation.

The narrative of **Ukraine being a Nazi regime** is present in Montenegro's media space, as well as the narrative that Ukraine is a terrorist regime. The former narrative emerged 81 times, and the latter 142 times.¹²¹ On 10 January 2025, IN4S published an article titled "Zaharova on Zelensky's new interview: A hellish mix of neo-Nazism, terrorism and narco-delirium", which quoted Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zaharova calling the Ukrainian leadership "a hellish mix of neo-Nazism and terrorism with narcotic delirium."¹²² Although this narrative is present in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, some have noted a more pronounced tendency in Montenegro to attack figures and policies that lean towards Ukraine as Nazis or Nazi sympathisers. For instance, in early March 2022, when the Montenegrin government decided to send modest military aid to Ukraine in the form of ballistic helmets and bulletproof vests, the newspaper *Borba* argued that Montenegro "failed the test of anti-Fascism" because that equipment was going to be used by supposedly ultra-nationalist groups like the Right Sector and Azov.¹²³

The denigration of Ukraine is also possible through the narrative **that Ukraine does not want peace**.¹²⁴ For example, on 3 May 2025, *Borba* published an article titled "Medvedev on the threats of the 'green unshaven schmuck' on Victory Day – no one guarantees Kyiv would reach 10 May," quoting Dmitry Medvedev's claim that Ukraine was preparing provocations during the Victory Day celebrations.¹²⁵ The piece reinforced the perception of Ukraine as aggressive and irrational, complementing earlier narratives that cast its leadership as extremist and hostile to peace.

The narrative that prioritises **Russian military success** also circulates. In this context, the well-known phrase regarding **special military** operations was used 76 times.¹²⁶ In that context, it has been observed that the media echo system is dominated by military reporters and analysts, among them Igor Damnjanović, a Serbian-Montenegrin war reporter who travelled to Donbas and reported on the war.¹²⁷ In August 2022, Damnjanović gave an interview to IN4S. In this pro-Russian portal, he frequently writes, in which he stated that the war will not end until Russia is capable of declaring victory.¹²⁸

Another evident narrative is that of Trump and Putin making peace in Ukraine and rearranging the global order. In this context, one can observe a powerful and frequently invoked combination of the following narratives. "Biden fuels the war, Trump brings diplomacy" narrative appeared 349 times.¹²⁹ On 7 January 2025, *Borba* published an article titled "Trump accused Biden's team of war: They wanted Ukraine in NATO – I can understand Russian feelings about that," quoting Donald Trump's remarks that President Biden's administration provoked the conflict by pushing for Ukraine's NATO membership and disregarding Moscow's security concerns.¹³⁰ Similarly, on 28 February 2025, IN4S ran "VIDEO: Brutal 'smackdown' of Zelensky – Debacle at the White House," a sensationalised account of Trump's comments about Volodymyr Zelensky, portraying the former U.S. president as a realist capable of restoring dialogue with Russia while mocking current Western leaders for prolonging the war.¹³¹ These examples reinforce the narrative of Trump as a pragmatic peacemaker and Biden as a warmonger, which has become a recurring motif in the Montenegrin pro-Russian media space. In a similar context, the narrative that **only Trump can bring peace** appeared 814 times, and references to **the Russia peace plan** occurred 505 times.¹³²

Similarly, in Serbia, Vučić can be promoted to his voters and across the region by trying to put him on par with leaders like Putin and Trump, and even by using it to boost his position amid the ongoing crisis of the Serbian regime due to protests. Published on 17 August, 2025, the article in *Borba* titled “Trump and Putin changed the game, the EU lost its ground: With a Washington–Moscow deal, Vučić and Serbia became the main players in Europe – that’s why they were toppling him!” claimed that a secret U.S.–Russia agreement over the Ukraine war had weakened the EU’s position and elevated Serbia’s geopolitical importance, suggesting that Western powers sought to undermine Vučić because of his growing influence.¹³³ This narrative frequently emphasises the EU as a powerless actor incapable of shaping international affairs, particularly during the Russia-Ukraine war.¹³⁴ Some observed that these narratives have gradually shifted from anti-NATO rhetoric to a broader anti-EU framing. Pro-Russian outlets now depict the European Union as morally corrupt and hostile to traditional values, merging Russian geopolitical tropes with global conservative and Trump-era populist discourse. This fusion allows local actors to present themselves as part of a wider ideological movement resisting Western liberalism.¹³⁵ As Mihailo Jovović, editor of daily *Vijesti*, noted this shift in the rhetoric: “Since the arrival of the Trump administration, America is no longer a mortal enemy – now we’re all on the same ideological side.”¹³⁶ Andrija Mandić publicly condemned the killing of American commentator Charlie Kirk, describing it as an attack on freedom of expression and arguing that Kirk’s “only fault was using his right to freedom of thought and speech.”¹³⁷

In the same context, some sources have observed that editors of certain Montenegrin media outlets have tied their own fate so closely to Vučić that his political downfall would harm them. This personal investment, combined with their connections to the Serbian regime, helps explain their willingness to promote specific narratives aligned with Belgrade’s interests and to create a mirage of much greater Russian influence than it actually has.¹³⁸

By 24 February, 2025, Montenegrin media had focused on diplomatic developments, including Ambassador Gerasimenko’s remarks on Ukraine’s EU prospects, a visit to Kyiv by opposition academic and politician Ivan Vuković, Montenegro’s vote “for” a UN resolution supporting Ukraine, and reports on Serbia’s UN voting errors, generating 127–287 interactions per article and reflecting a smaller yet politically engaged audience attentive to international diplomacy.¹³⁹

By 1 March, 2025, coverage reached Montenegro’s highest engagement levels, with 466–1,186 interactions per article, as outlets highlighted President Milatović’s declarations of solidarity with Ukraine, Đukanović’s framing of the war as both anti-Ukrainian and anti-European, and Zelensky’s expressions of gratitude to Montenegro—demonstrating peak public interest when foreign policy alignment was directly affirmed.¹⁴⁰ By **18 March 2025**, Montenegrin reporting had shifted toward **conflict-oriented updates**, including Russia’s temporary suspension of attacks on energy infrastructure, von der Leyen’s comments on escalating tensions, and Ukraine’s new weapons development, resulting in **45–109 interactions per article** and indicating that audiences were more engaged by diplomatic narratives than by detailed military reporting.¹⁴¹

There is some overlap in the agendas of Russia and the ruling Serbian regime, both of which show a degree of interest in obstructing Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic trajectory.¹⁴² While Russian interest stems from its rivalry with the West, the Serbian regime's interest lies in building influence in its neighbourhood and leveraging its influence with the West. On the latter, the fate of this influence and whether pro-Serbian politicians will remain closely tied with Belgrade will be determined by several factors: whether the ruling regime in Belgrade survives, whether leaders like Mandić decide that benefit of EU membership is better for their personal interest as opposed to links with Belgrade, and whether the EU again fails in bringing Montenegro closer to membership which would encourage pro-Serbian tilts in Montenegro's society.

Still, some uncertainty exists regarding the future. According to the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) "Press Freedom Index," Montenegro is ranked 37th out of 180 countries in 2025. Although Montenegro's constitution and legislation protect freedom of speech and expression, press freedom remains undermined by ongoing political influence, unresolved cases of violence against journalists, and financial pressures on the media.¹⁴³ Pro-Russian narratives have a limited influence on social and political developments, but their importance increases amid Montenegro's ongoing political crisis. Although citizens do not highly trust propaganda-oriented media in Montenegro, their readership is not insignificant. Their traffic remains steady – for example, *Borba* records 1.9 million views per month – unlike traditional media, whose readership is declining.¹⁴⁴ Recent ownership shifts within United Group – the parent company of Serbian TV stations N1 and Nova, two of the region's most prominent independent media outlets – have raised alarm after reports that Brent Sadler, a former CNN journalist and ex-adviser at N1, could become CEO. The move follows leaked reports of coordination between United Group and Telekom Serbia, allegedly reflecting President Aleksandar Vučić's desire to influence the group's management. Such restructuring could give Vučić indirect control over these once fiercely independent media, effectively transforming them from symbols of free journalism into instruments of political influence and extending the government's grip over the media landscape.¹⁴⁵ In Montenegro, the fate of United Media Group might also shape the fate of *Vijesti*, an independent, politically centred newspaper and TV station. Overall, Montenegro illustrates how pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives can circulate even within a formally pro-Western and NATO-aligned state, not through strategic realignment but through domestic political contestation and identity-based mobilisation. Media narratives surrounding the Ukraine war reflect this ambivalence: while mainstream outlets largely uphold Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic orientation, polarised political actors selectively instrumentalise Russia-related frames to advance domestic agendas. Crucially, these dynamics are shaped less by ideological loyalty to Moscow than by pragmatism, self-interest, and the perceived need to balance relations with both Western partners and key domestic constituencies. Montenegro's case thus underscores the limits of binary interpretations of influence, revealing a media and political landscape where geopolitical narratives are filtered through local legitimacy struggles rather than imposed from outside.

Bosnia and Herzegovina – Fragmented Realities

While certainly not a full-fledged client or proxy, a Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska and Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik are the closest in the Western Balkans to having that status, as Dodik relies on Russia's UN Security Council veto and its membership at the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) that supervises the Dayton Peace Accords to block initiatives perceived as centralising authority in Bosnia at the expense of the Serb entity.¹⁴⁶ Early in his career, Milorad Dodik was seen by Washington as a pragmatic reformer who could replace wartime nationalist leaders. Richard Holbrooke praised him as the kind of politician who could make the Dayton framework work, and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright hailed him as a "breath of fresh air." However, as Dodik consolidated power, he drifted from his reformist image toward nationalist politics and secessionist rhetoric, alienating Western backers who once viewed him as a cornerstone of postwar stabilisation.¹⁴⁷ In preserving the autonomy of his entity and preserving his hold on power, Dodik has consistently relied on the threat of unilateral secession and ties with Russia to deter and leverage the West.¹⁴⁸

Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of meetings, it has been noted that Milorad Dodik – unlike Aleksandar Vučić, who has been more cautious – has met with Vladimir Putin more frequently since the war in Ukraine began.¹⁴⁹ It has been observed that while Dodik prefers to maintain close ties with Russia as a partner, Vučić is more geopolitically minded and prepared to balance between Russia and the West, playing them against each other.¹⁵⁰ Dodik also had numerous meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. On 28 October, during the 3rd Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Milorad Dodik, where the two reaffirmed support for the Dayton Peace Agreement as the sole framework for stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and underscored their commitment to deepening cooperation between Russia and Republika Srpska amid the country's ongoing political crisis.¹⁵¹ The two also met earlier, on September 9, 2025, in Moscow, where Dodik and Lavrov accused Western states of actively undermining the Dayton Peace Agreement. They reiterated Russia's role as a defender of the agreement and reaffirmed Moscow's partnership with Republika Srpska amid Bosnia and Herzegovina's political crisis.¹⁵² These meetings also underscore that Moscow's relationship with Banja Luka is not a straightforward patron–client arrangement. Russian influence in Bosnia largely depends on local elites and their interests rather than on direct Kremlin control. As interlocutors observed, foreign influence in the Balkans—including media narratives—typically stems from domestic political agency. Dodik's September meeting with Lavrov illustrates this dynamic: while Dodik sought to advance secessionist rhetoric, Lavrov ignored it, reaffirming support for the Dayton framework. As in the rest of the region, the extent of foreign influence in Bosnia ultimately hinges on whether local leaders find it useful to invoke it.¹⁵³

The governments in Moscow and Banja Luka have both recognised the mutual benefits of cooperation. Milorad Dodik views Vladimir Putin as a way to internationalise his agenda and gain support after losing favour with the West, which now sees him as a nationalist

and destabiliser. Dodik portrays Russia as Bosnia and Herzegovina's true ally and the only power backing the Serb cause, often citing Putin and Hungary's Viktor Orbán as his key international partners. By contrast, Dodik mentions Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić sparingly and with caution.¹⁵⁴ This shows the political complexity of relations between the leaders of ethnic Serbs in the region. While Belgrade is often seen as controlling the Bosnian Serbs, the relationship is far more complex. Despite their public warmth, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik mistrust each other: Serbian leaders must appear protective of Bosnian Serbs for domestic reasons, yet fear being dragged into conflict by them. Conversely, Dodik worries Belgrade could betray him in a deal with the West or back a more compliant ally. This mutual suspicion echoes the 1990s, when Slobodan Milošević sidelined Bosnian Serb leaders during peace negotiations.¹⁵⁵

Pro-Russian narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in Republika Srpska, are primarily driven by entrenched political and economic interests. Several interviewees described a network of corrupt and criminalised structures that sustain these narratives, preserving the existing power order.¹⁵⁶ For local elites, invoking Russia serves dual purposes: it homogenises the Serb electorate and operates as a bargaining chip with Western actors. As both the professor of security studies Edina Bećirević and journalist Šajinović emphasised, Dodik repeatedly leverages threats of “turning to Moscow” to extract concessions on judicial reform or sanctions relief, echoing Vučić's tactics in Serbia.¹⁵⁷ Russia's continued political and symbolic support reinforces this arrangement, providing legitimacy to leaders who exploit it for domestic control and external leverage.¹⁵⁸ At the same time, economic dependency – notably Russian ownership in the oil and energy sectors in Brod and Modriča – cements a network of material and political ties that blend corruption, ideology, and patronage.¹⁵⁹

Bosnian media outlets published 30,426 articles related to the war, considerably fewer than Serbia, but achieved the highest average engagement rate – 26 interactions per article. This suggests that Bosnian coverage, while more selective, is likely aimed at a broader audience, as its editorial strategies focus on emotive storytelling. The type of engagement may also reflect Bosnia's internal pluralism and fragmented media environment. Overall, Bosnia and Herzegovina's media demonstrate a high-engagement, lower-volume model, balancing regional relevance with domestic resonance. Bosnian outlets maintained a more stable, sustained rhythm of reporting, gradually increasing their output from early 2022 and reaching periodic peaks of around 400 articles. Unlike Serbia's coverage, Bosnia's showed fewer dramatic dips, reflecting a consistent editorial commitment to following the war's progression. This steadiness suggests a deliberate, ongoing interest that prioritises continuity and contextual analysis over headline-driven surges.¹⁶⁰

Media under the RS regime almost entirely reproduce Moscow's framing of the war, adopting its vocabulary and logic, whereas outlets in the Federation predominantly follow a pro-Western, pro-Ukrainian line. This contrast is evident even in terminology – “special military operation” in RS versus “aggression” or “invasion” in the Federation – showing how political geography structures narrative geography.¹⁶¹ As noted by researcher Tarik Moćević, this wording is most clearly reproduced by RS-based public broadcasters such as RTRS and SRNA, as well as by the private broadcaster ATV, which is politically aligned with Dodik's

Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD); these outlets continue to frame the war as a defensive action against Western aggression. The dominant storylines mirror those from Moscow – the protection of Russian-speaking civilians in Donbas, an alleged response to genocide, resistance to NATO encirclement, and, particularly in RT in Serbian and affiliated Telegram channels, analogies between Donbas and Srebrenica or Buča and Markale – each casting Russia as a victim of imperial injustice. Since 2022, RT in Serbian and affiliated Telegram channels have targeted younger and more radical audiences, while mainstream TV remains the key medium shaping opinion. In the Federation, by contrast, coverage is largely pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian, although the war has lately slipped behind Gaza in news prominence; this has not, however, altered the broadly supportive public stance toward Ukraine.¹⁶²

Interviewees consistently underscored that receptivity to pro-Russian propaganda is conditioned by both historical memory and structural exposure. In Republika Srpska, these narratives resonate within a population socialised through nationalist education, religious institutions, and legacy media.¹⁶³ Political elites persistently revive the collective memory of NATO bombings and wartime victimisation to justify pro-Russian alignment.¹⁶⁴ Exposure to Serbian outlets – especially RTRS, SRNA, and Alternativna TV – creates a continuous media loop that connects Banja Luka to Belgrade, where anti-Western tropes are standardised.¹⁶⁵ In the Federation, receptivity is more selective; interviewees noted that occasional pro-Russian framing stems less from ideological sympathy than from disillusionment with Western actors who tolerated Dodik’s obstructionism.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, Bosniaks’ occasional receptiveness to pro-Russian sentiment often appears as a reaction to Western inconsistency, rather than a genuine alignment with Moscow. In contrast, the Serb perception of Russia is shaped by memories of Western policies in the Balkans, primarily the 1990s interventions.

There is another nuance. As a Bosnian investigative journalist explained in detail:

“Analogies with the Yugoslav wars are more frequent in Croatia than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Croatia, Ukraine is often seen as today’s equivalent of Croatia during the 1991–1995 war. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in the Federation’s media, the memory of the 1990s conflict remains vivid, but identification with Ukraine is less pronounced than in Croatia. In the most influential Bosniak media outlets, around 9 out of 10 cases show a pro-Ukrainian stance. However, this position is even more pronounced in Croatian media, including those operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also worth noting that there were Ukrainian volunteers in the Republika Srpska army during the war, as well as Ukrainian soldiers serving with UN forces in Sarajevo and Žepa.”¹⁶⁷

The references to the Yugoslav wars that are present in the media system of Republika Srpska omit some of the unpleasant episodes that transpired between Russia and Bosnian Serbs during the 1990s, when Moscow was often frustrated by the Bosnian Serbs’ defiance. In 1994, Russia’s deputy foreign minister Vitaly Churkin believed he had secured a deal for Serb forces to withdraw from the Goražde safe area and to free 150 captured UN peacekeepers—only for the Bosnian Serb leadership to reverse course. Frustrated by this

failure, Churkin criticised Bosnian Serbs in an interview with the Russian press: “The tail should not wag the dog. It is really quite simple. We have our own interests and our own positions too” with the Russian columnist reciprocating by saying “The Bosnian Serbs must understand that in Russia, they are dealing with a great power, not a banana republic.”¹⁶⁸ In 2015, the late Vitaly Churkin, ambassador to the United Nations, vetoed a UN Security Council resolution labelling the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, which resulted in Milorad Dodik unveiling a bust in Istočno Sarajevo honouring Churkin in July 2025.¹⁶⁹ During a NATO strike on Bosnian Serb positions in 1995, Russian President Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin declared that the Bosnian Serbs ‘got what they deserved.’¹⁷⁰ Today, these episodes are largely omitted from the political and media discourse.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, interviewed interlocutors noted that, as in Serbia and Montenegro, domestic agency plays a significant role in spreading pro-Russian narratives, with a particular emphasis in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Serbian entity, Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and the media under his political control. It has been observed that the link between Moscow, Belgrade, and Banjaluka, which has its origins in the domains of media and intelligence, is then adopted by sympathetic elites and academic circles to meet local needs; Russian outlets need not operate directly for these narratives to circulate.¹⁷¹ According to several interlocutors, including Milan Bubonjić, the spread of pro-Russian narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina – particularly in Republika Srpska – is largely a home-grown phenomenon. Rather than being directly orchestrated by Moscow, it is sustained by local media and political elites who find such narratives useful for reinforcing their power and aligning with nationalist sentiment.¹⁷²

As noted by Srećko Latal, the persistence of pro-Russian narratives in Bosnia was driven less by Moscow’s strategic coordination and more by domestic political calculus. Local elites instrumentalised such narratives to reinforce their own legitimacy, signalling both defiance and bargaining power toward Western actors. Through an ‘echo effect’ between Republika Srpska and Serbian media, these elites recycled the same content to maintain ideological cohesion and to frame alignment with Russia as a pragmatic, rather than ideological, stance.¹⁷³ According to Latal, most media outlets in Republika Srpska heavily draw on Serbian and Russian sources for their coverage of foreign affairs, frequently reproducing this content with minimal adaptation. The practice is partly economic but also reflects a belief that such sources add credibility. Consequently, Russian influence is most visible in international reporting, whereas domestic coverage tends to be more locally authored and politically driven.¹⁷⁴

The narrative that frequently circulates is that of a **special military operation and Russia responding to Western provocation**. Indeed, the term “**special military operation**” was estimated to appear 64 times, **the narrative of retaliation** 102 times, and the narrative of Russia defending itself 72 times.¹⁷⁵ According to Rašid Krupalija, a Bosnian journalist, pro-Russian narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina were most visibly entrenched within the media ecosystem of Republika Srpska, where public broadcasters amplified the Kremlin’s vocabulary, such as the so-called ‘special military operation’ and claims about Western culpability for the conflict. In contrast, Federation-based outlets often maintained a more critical tone but still occasionally relativised Russian responsibility, revealing the

porousness of the regional media space.¹⁷⁶ According to Edina Bećirević, even in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, media outlets uncritically reproduce statements by Russian officials, particularly those referencing the “denazification” of Ukraine or alleged “American biolaboratories”. She explained that this often stems not from ideological alignment but from the pursuit of higher readership and online visibility. The attractiveness and “clickability” of sensational claims, combined with editorial complacency and a chronic shortage of professional journalists, create space for such content to appear. As traditional media lose audiences to social networks, certain pro-Russian materials originating in Republika Srpska are recycled by mainstream outlets in the Federation to retain readers. This dynamic helps explain why elements of pro-Russian propaganda occasionally surface even within otherwise pro-Western media.¹⁷⁷

In addition to portraying Russia’s actions as defensive, Republika Srpska media frequently adopt narratives that depict Ukraine as a Nazi or terrorist state fundamentally opposed to peace and requiring “denazification.” **The narrative of Ukraine being a Nazi state** circulated 58 times, and **the narrative of Ukraine being a terrorist regime** circulated 73 times. On 19 March 2025, SRNA published an article titled “Ukraine uses terrorist methods with the help of the West”, quoting President Vladimir Putin as saying that Ukraine has begun employing terrorist tactics aided by Western countries.¹⁷⁸ Alongside these narratives, a denazification narrative was circulated 38 times.¹⁷⁹

Government-aligned media in Republika Srpska both rebroadcast Russian sources and produce original programming that normalises the idea of a defensive Russian war while casting Ukraine as a Western proxy; this, combined with tailored content across TV and social platforms, deepens entity-level polarisation and crowds out pro-European voices, according to investigative journalist Irvin Pekmez.¹⁸⁰ The narrative that the West is **waging a proxy war against Russia via Ukraine** emerged 486 times.¹⁸¹ On 12 March 2025, RTRS published “Trump admitted: NATO is fighting Russia in Ukraine,” relaying a Sputnik-sourced claim that the fighting in Ukraine is essentially a war between NATO and Russia – a textbook proxy-war framing.¹⁸² **The narrative that NATO provoked the war** circulated 101 times.¹⁸³ On 5 September 2025, RTRS ran a piece titled “Putin: If NATO troops appear in Ukraine they will be a legitimate target,” quoting Vladimir Putin that “dragging Ukraine into NATO” was “one of the original reasons of the conflict.”¹⁸⁴

Other popular narratives are that **Ukraine does not want peace** and that **Zelensky lacks legitimacy**. On 3 March 2025, RTRS published an article titled “Trump: Zelensky does not want peace in Ukraine,” quoting former U.S. President Donald Trump saying that “this guy does not want peace as long as he has U.S. support,” thus presenting Kyiv as unwilling to pursue negotiations.¹⁸⁵ The notion that Zelensky lacks legitimacy can be indirectly promoted by the highest echelons of political power in Republika Srpska. On 22 June 2025, Dodik declared that “Zelenskyy must finally admit defeat,” accusing Ukraine’s leadership of trusting Western assurances that failed and emphasising that Kyiv should accept Russia’s historical claims to its neighbouring territory. He portrayed Zelenskyy’s war effort as reckless, suggested that Europe cannot sustain a confrontation with Russia, and framed Russian military action as inevitable and morally justified.¹⁸⁶

These narratives help create an ecosystem that presents Russia as a defender of sovereignty and tradition against Western hegemony.¹⁸⁷ Public broadcasting in Republika Srpska consistently prioritises pro-Russian content, ranging from cultural programming to news segments. President Milorad Dodik and National Assembly Speaker Nenad Stevandić serve as the chief domestic amplifiers, ensuring sustained visibility through visits to Moscow and heavily covered meetings with Russian officials. Russian ambassador Igor Kalabuhov's appearances further legitimise these narratives, even when offering no substantive analysis of the conflict. The use of apparently "neutral" language – rarely referring to the invasion as an aggression – nonetheless tilts toward Moscow, and genuine public interest in Ukraine remains shallow.¹⁸⁸ A very illustrative example is Ambassador Kalabuhov's guest appearance on FACE TV with the famous host Senad Hadžifezović.¹⁸⁹ Edina Bećirević pointed out that some interviews with the Russian Ambassador Kalabuhov in Sarajevo's pro-EU and pro-NATO-oriented media are often conducted without a single critical question directed at him, and that the ambassador has, at times, authored columns in major Sarajevo outlets.¹⁹⁰

The effects of sustained pro-Russian narratives are multi-layered. First, they entrench entity-level polarisation, weakening civic voices and constraining dialogue across Bosnia's ethnic divide.¹⁹¹ Second, propaganda now operates primarily through domestic channels – such as politicians, public broadcasters, and academics – rather than through direct Russian control, making it harder to counter.¹⁹² Third, these narratives serve as a governance mechanism, legitimising corruption, justifying repression, and sustaining a culture of fear in which loyalty to "national interests" supplants democratic accountability.¹⁹³ Over time, this contributes to a normalisation of fatalism – a pervasive belief that Bosnia's future is externally determined and that reform is futile.¹⁹⁴ Several interlocutors warned that this environment fosters societal fatigue, cynicism, and disengagement, eroding trust in institutions and making citizens more susceptible to disinformation.¹⁹⁵

The presence of pro-Russian narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not uniform. In Republika Srpska, state-aligned media explicitly promote these narratives, while most outlets addressing Bosniak and Croat audiences remain critical. However, some media in the Federation occasionally relativise the Russian invasion, adopting a superficially neutral stance that obscures accountability. Analysts suggest that for many local power brokers, invoking Russia serves less as a geopolitical commitment than as a political instrument for preserving the status quo. By rhetorically aligning themselves with Moscow, they shield their positions, resist EU and NATO influence, and present themselves as defenders of sovereignty and tradition against Western interference.¹⁹⁶ Some sources observed that even opposition from Republika Srpska and pro-Croat outlets are not immune to Russian or anti-Western framings. In the RS, opposition media such as BN TV may adopt Moscow's terminology when convenient. At the same time, in the Federation, pro-Croatian outlets under the influence of Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Čović occasionally echo anti-Western or even pro-Russian talking points, reflecting local political alliances rather than ideological conviction. Such mirroring illustrates how domestic political competition, rather than direct Kremlin management, drives Bosnia's fragmented narrative field.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, while Bosnian Serbs try to prevent centralization of the state led by Bosniak dominated government in

Sarajevo, occasionally backed by the West, using the rhetorical threat of secession and Russian diplomatic support, the Bosnian Croats engage Russia hoping to improve Croatian position in Bosnia, including the hypothetical formation of the third Croatian entity in Bosnia.¹⁹⁸

The narrative that the West does not want peace circulated 177 times in the media domain.¹⁹⁹ Since Trump made some diplomatic overtures towards Russia, the EU is more likely to be portrayed as a warmongering member of the Western world. On 8 April 2025, RTRS published an article titled “Dodik for Russian Balkanist TV: Europe has positioned itself to wage war against Russia through Ukraine”, in which Milorad Dodik asserted to the Russian channel Balkanist TV that the European Union is actively involved in the war rather than seeking peace, suggesting that Western states are complicit in escalating the conflict.²⁰⁰

The media have also covered the Trump phenomenon. The narratives that **Biden fuels war while Trump brings diplomacy** appeared 169 times, and the narrative that **only Trump can bring peace** appeared 747 times. In that same context, references to the Russia peace plan appeared 460 times.²⁰¹ On 14 April 2025, RTRS ran “Trump: Biden and Zelensky did a terrible job”, reporting Trump’s claim that Biden is to blame for the war between Russia and Ukraine and that the conflict must be stopped.²⁰² This piece fits the “Biden fuels war” frame while casting Trump as the corrective. That same day, SRNA published “Trump: Biden’s direct responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine”, quoting Trump that his predecessor is “directly responsible” for escalating the Ukraine crisis into armed conflict.²⁰³ This framing continued throughout the year. On 18 August 2025, SRNA ran “Trump: I’m here to stop the war in Ukraine,” presenting Trump’s self-portrayal as a peace broker ahead of meetings with Zelensky and European leaders.²⁰⁴ On 16 September 2025, RTRS carried “Trump: Zelensky will have to accept an agreement on Ukraine,” again positioning Trump as the actor who can deliver a settlement.²⁰⁵

Initial expectations that a Trump–Putin alignment might end the war quickly faded, revealing a largely pragmatic, surface-level sympathy for Russia rather than a deep ideological conviction.²⁰⁶ Still, the government in Banjaluka has also courted the Trump administration in other ways. In June 2025, former Governor of the US state of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, visited Banjaluka and met with Milorad Dodik, promising to advocate for improved ties between the US and the Serb entity, with a focus on working with President Trump.²⁰⁷ In September 2025, both the leadership of Republika Srpska and the citizens of Banjaluka honoured assassinated American conservative commentator Charlie Kirk, describing him as a steadfast friend of the Serbian people. During a commemorative gathering, Milorad Dodik and senior RS officials framed the tribute as “a message of unity, freedom, and faith,” portraying Kirk as a symbol of shared values between the Serbian people and their allies abroad.²⁰⁸ Still, Dodik’s bet on Trump seemed to have been more successful than the one placed by his Belgrade-based counterparts, as in late October 2025 the US Treasury removed Milorad Dodik and 47 others linked to Republika Srpska from its sanctions list – a move Dodik celebrated as the correction of a “grave injustice” against the entity’s leadership.²⁰⁹

By 18 February, 2025, Bosnian media had emphasised comprehensive geopolitical analysis, covering Trump's proposed Ukraine plan in a historical context, Federation politicians' calls for a new approach to Zelensky, and European summits in Paris, generating 182–409 interactions per article and reflecting sustained audience interest in detailed international reporting.²¹⁰

By 1 March 2025, coverage reached its highest engagement levels, with 475–838 interactions per article, as outlets focused on Vučić's remarks about Republika Srpska and Europe, Zelensky's media appearances, and diplomatic developments in London and Washington, showing peak public interest in the regional implications of the war. By 16 May 2025, Bosnian reporting had shifted toward domestic and regional security issues, such as Bosnia's negotiations with Croatia, sanctions on Russia, and the delivery of a modern air defence system, drawing 109–336 interactions per article and indicating a move from global diplomacy to more locally relevant political themes. In narrative terms, Bosnia's pro-Russian media environment mirrors those of Serbia and Montenegro, framing Russia as a civilisational bulwark against Western decline. Even when the tone is less strident, the underlying structure remains: Russia defends tradition and sovereignty, while the West represents hypocrisy and decay.²¹¹ This enduring orientation is underpinned by a long-standing anti-Western sentiment that dates back to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. As Bubonjić has observed, these attitudes have become trans-generational, carried forward by elites who manipulate historical grievances to maintain political and media control.²¹²

Conclusion

Across the Western Balkans, narratives surrounding the Ukraine war reveal a political and media environment shaped far more by domestic imperatives than by external ideological influence. In Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, themes that resemble Russian messaging gain traction not because they are directed from abroad, but because they fit seamlessly into local political strategies, long-standing identity debates, and entrenched patterns of media practice. These narratives are, in essence, home-made to a Kremlin recipe—crafted and recalibrated by political elites who use them to manage domestic politics, mobilise support, or navigate relations with Western governments.

Serbia exemplifies how a centralised media system can generate and export region-wide narratives that echo pro-Russian positions while serving the ruling elite's dual strategy of internal consolidation and geopolitical hedging. Montenegro shows how such narratives can circulate even within a formally pro-Western setting when identity politics, partisan rivalry, and symbolic affiliations create space for selective adoption. Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates how fragmented political orders can produce parallel narrative worlds: one in Republika Srpska, rooted in pro-Russian framing tied to internal legitimacy, and another in the Federation, aligned with Euro-Atlantic positions yet still susceptible to regional spillover.

The endurance of pro-Russian narratives in the Western Balkans is driven primarily by their usefulness to domestic actors, not by coordinated foreign influence. By showing how international conflicts are adjusted to fit local agendas, the dynamics outlined here underscore the extent to which foreign-policy narratives have become instruments for Balkan elites and their hold on power. They also demonstrate the limitations of approaches that overstate external disinformation while overlooking the domestic political realities that allow such narratives to thrive. Effective responses must therefore engage with the internal political structures, media ecosystems, and identity-based cleavages that give these narratives their resilience.

More broadly, the trends observed in the Western Balkans show how global crises can become embedded in local political contexts, reshaping national debates and reinforcing existing power configurations. Understanding this dynamic is essential not only for interpreting media narratives about the Ukraine war but also for anticipating how future international events may be appropriated and instrumentalised within the region's complex political landscape. Local contexts and domestic political realities persist—regardless of the war in Ukraine and irrespective of Russia's shifting policies.

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