

The russian propaganda and the serbian media

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The Balkans have long been a priority area for Russia. Moscow is trying to slow down and delay the region's integration into the European Union and NATO to the direct detriment of the Western Balkan states. The slow pace of integration also hampers the development of countries, regions, and businesses.

After Moscow launched a full-scale offensive against Ukraine, effects were felt in the Balkans. The West and the US sought to distance the region from Russia. However, the Western Balkans' unresolved problems and the slow integration process favored Russia.

Serbia has become Moscow's most important ally in the region and a base for Russian disinformation operations. Serbia says it pursued a Western policy -- while maintaining close relations with Beijing and Moscow. The Serbian government is seeking alliances with those interested in weakening the West because of the unresolved relations in Kosovo. Moscow is conducting an extensive operation in Serbia and among Serbs, the effect of which is in the Serbian diaspora, such as in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Crna Gora. A vast number of Serbs consider Russia to be the most important ally of Serbia. Even though the EU is Serbia's largest trading partner, the Serbian armed forces have closer ties with NATO than the Russian ones.

There are several reasons for Russia's popularity. The Serbian public believes that it can only rely on Moscow and Beijing in the fight for Kosovo. Several factors shape this perception. Firstly, the unhindered dissemination of Russian state propaganda.

Moscow has been running the Serbian-language edition of Sputnik News for years. The website is not particularly popular, but other newspapers pick up its texts, and local radio stations get free programs. Sputnik News and state television are the primary news sources in some parts of Serbia. RT Balkan has become another essential propaganda tool. The portal has three functions:

- Glorifying Russia, proclaiming Russian supremacy,
- Criticizing the West, proclaiming the «decline of the Western world»,
- Support for the current Serbian government.

However, we can observe an apparent contradiction in Serbia: although the reach of propaganda sites is low, the Moscow narrative reaches many, and a significant part of the public holds pro-Russian views, considers Russia as Serbia's main ally, and would be suitable for Belgrade to join the BRICS.

The reason for this lies in the structure of the Serbian public. Freedom of the press is declining, and much of the media is indirectly under government influence. The dominant players in the Serbian public sphere are the tabloids. They are very cheap products, not an enormous financial burden to buy. The pro-government tabloids

promote government policies and demonize the government's opposition. The five pro-government tabloids published 1,174 false claims and manipulated information on their front pages last year. In this toxic environment, pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian content is of particular importance.

While Belgrade is toeing the line between the West and Russia and trying to loosen its dependence on Russia, the tabloids continue to favor Russia. In other words, Serbia continues to count on Moscow's political support and will not be an ally of the West in the foreseeable future.

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