

PUSHING ON AN OPEN DOOR

Foreign Authoritarian
Influence in the
Western Balkans

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**
Supporting freedom around the world

forum
International Forum for Democratic Studies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly two decades after the cessation of violent conflict in the Western Balkans and efforts by the international community to support democratic reform, analysis suggests that most countries in the region are losing ground on the rule of law, media freedoms, and democratic accountability more generally. State capture, erosion of independent media, and the growth of corrupt patronage networks are features of this landscape.

Meanwhile, authoritarian powers such as Russia, Turkey, China, and several Persian Gulf states are exerting greater influence in the Western Balkans, with the effect in certain respects of corroding the integrity of democratic institutions. They bring significant economic and political leverage and have focused efforts on developing strong relationships with governments in the region. But their footprint extends to the wider societies through state media initiatives whose narratives intersect with and amplify illiberal narratives, while bolstering unaccountable governance systems throughout the region.

Key Issues

- Governments in the Western Balkans are generally able to insulate their agendas from media scrutiny by exercising control or heavy influence over public broadcasters, commercial media with partisan alignments, and other private outlets that depend on state advertising or favorable regulatory decisions.
- Outside authoritarian actors and local illiberal elites are building relationships that amount to a *de facto* alliance—initially tactical, but increasingly strategic—between those with a joint interest in weak democratic safeguards. For Balkan elites, this opens new vistas of personal enrichment, as well as opportunities for arbitrage with an increasingly nervous West.
- The authoritarian states active in the Western Balkans today fall into two distinct groups in terms of the nature of their engagement and intent. The differentiation might be described as grafting (Russia and Turkey) versus grifting (China and the Gulf states).

Impact of Foreign Authoritarian Influence

Russia: The region's political regression and unfulfilled reform agendas have provided Moscow with opportunities to promote friction and fragmentation. A hallmark of the Kremlin's policy has been the exploitation of cleavages to advance its goals of establishing control over energy infrastructure, as well as impeding the expansion of NATO, and more recently, the EU. Where Moscow's interests play into social and political conflicts, the interests and sentiments of local ruling elites often act as natural force multipliers.

Turkey: As with Russia, the trajectory of Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans correlates with the country's domestic political conditions and the perceived interests of its leadership. Turkish engagement in the Balkan media sphere seems aimed

at promoting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his policies, in addition to further developing favorable relationships with the region's governments. Turkish state media contribute to an information environment in which local citizens are surrounded by propaganda from numerous and often conflicting outside players and agendas, feeding into an existing, widespread sense of cynicism about the integrity of the press and democratic institutions.

China: Chinese investment in the region may seem like an easy way for Balkan leaders to maintain their ecosystems of power, but it could allow Beijing to gain far greater economic and political leverage in the future. The political alignment of most regional media has impeded broad and independent public discussion of China's activities—Beijing's media messaging agenda and that of local political leaders largely coincide. Beijing's largesse also comes with an expectation of self-censorship and conformity regarding sensitive topics, and its outreach efforts effectively promote China's authoritarian political system. China's way of doing business—opaque deal-making with established political elites, enabled by a high tolerance for corruption—exacerbates existing problems surrounding transparency and accountability in the Western Balkans.

Gulf States: Although relatively limited until recently, increasing investment from the Gulf has targeted local government elites who can ensure that projects proceed without due diligence or public transparency. While the Gulf states' media presence and outreach has been less sizeable than that of other authoritarian regimes, they have been used to push back against local concerns about their investments in the region.

All of the authoritarian actors analyzed employ a mode of governing through personalized power that blurs the line between public and private resources. This has deep congruence throughout the region, where institutional mechanisms meant to ensure accountability and enforce the rule of law remain shallow. Opaque deal-making is notably facilitated by the weakness of independent media in the host countries, where Balkan political elites tend to dominate domestic media narratives through control of major broadcast stations and other key outlets. Under these conditions, authoritarian powers attempting to exert influence on leaders and publics through state media initiatives in the Western Balkans are pushing on an open door.

While the direction and development of the societies in the Western Balkans will ultimately depend on the will of their citizens, external support for local advocates working to legally entrench democratic accountability is still essential. The Western Balkans are a front in what amounts to a world war of values, and the forces of democracy cannot afford to abandon it.

Those in the established democracies and in the Western Balkans who hold democratic rights and human freedoms dear need to make common cause. Indeed, their challenges are intertwined: Many familiar features of the Western Balkan media and public space are now on the rise across Europe and North America. The struggle to build accountable democracy in the Western Balkans is not separable from the defense of democracy in the rest of the world.

According to a host of indices, the region has experienced backsliding on the rule of law, media freedoms, and other elements of liberal democratic practice.

INTRODUCTION

A generation has grown to adulthood since the collapse of Soviet-enforced communism in Europe and the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. The conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, and North Macedonia between 1991 and 2001 left over 130,000 people dead and drew ever-deepening engagement by democratic powers, which sought to restore stability and promote the region’s recovery, democratization, and integration into “a Europe whole, free, and at peace.”

Yet eighteen years after the negotiated end to the Western Balkans’ last conflict, these efforts have been widely assessed as, at best, only partly successful. According to a host of indices, the region has experienced backsliding on the rule of law, media freedoms, and other elements of liberal democratic practice.¹ Illiberal Balkan elites have pursued state capture, using tools including control or undue influence over the media, corrupt patronage networks, and intimidating ethnonationalist war narratives—even alignment with extreme paramilitary groups.²

At the same time, the return of geopolitical friction has accelerated regression in the Western Balkans. Even before the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, the footprint of authoritarian powers in the region was becoming more evident. This has given Balkan elites a sense of leverage and confidence in their engagement with the EU and the United States, but also—and more importantly—with their own publics. To quote Marko Đurić, head of the Serbian government’s office for Kosovo, “We need Europe, but Europe also needs us.”³

This paper will describe the integral role that engagement by authoritarian regimes in the region’s public sphere, particularly through the media, has played in the new tectonic alignment between Balkan elites and external powers such as Russia, Turkey, China, and the Persian Gulf monarchies.⁴ It will explore the influx of investments from these states and their impact on existing political, economic, and information environments in the Western Balkans. The paper will also suggest steps that the region’s civic actors—and those who wish to assist them—can take to protect its public sphere and establish accountable democratic governance.

THE EU’S LOST DECADE

While the EU was the preeminent international actor in the region following the “big bang” round of enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, its normative influence quickly began to wane. The reasons for this have been discussed at length elsewhere,⁵ but in brief, the EU’s successes, undeniable at that time,⁶ engendered a sense of confidence that the enlargement process would largely complete democratization and state building in the Western Balkans, without the need for hard security instruments. Although the EU’s commitment has been considerable, the presumptions of enlargement—that democratically elected political elites in the candidate country are genuinely representative and accountable, and truly want to adopt the EU’s terms as



embodied in the *acquis communautaire* and Copenhagen criteria⁷—were questionable at the outset. Demonstrated resistance across the region to accountability reforms seen up until that point, even in countries in which the West exercised great leverage, illustrated this, and BiH was a case in point. More broadly, war crimes indictees were frequently transferred only after strong conditionality pressure (usually at behest of individual member states) was applied.⁸ Serbia was the most consistently recalcitrant on this score.

In addition, as progress toward European norms lagged, the EU chose to accentuate the positive and adopt a mainly transactional approach toward Western Balkan populations, touting the material benefits of the union as an incentive. External donors are now widely seen by Western Balkan societies as pursuing only their own interests—political, security, and economic. As a result, and as veteran Belgrade civil society activist Sonja Biserko has observed, many citizens are dissatisfied with the process, and the term “democracy is totally compromised.”⁹ This sentiment exists despite two decades of deep engagement by an “international community” whose confidence in the self-evident superiority of liberal democracy led to its being presented for years as “the only game in town.”¹⁰

ENTER THE AUTHORITARIANS

Meanwhile, authoritarian powers such as Russia, Turkey, China, and several Persian Gulf states have exerted an illiberal influence in the Western Balkans, amplifying their engagement and visibility over the past decade—and particularly in the past five years. They have come with significant economic and political leverage and have developed strong relationships with governments in the region. But their footprint extends to the wider societies. Through cultivated ties with elites and a confluence of geopolitical and economic interests, the authoritarian powers’ illiberal operating systems correlate with those inherited, developed, and maintained throughout the region, despite decades of ostensible convergence with the established democracies.

The primary goals behind each authoritarian state's increased involvement in the region vary, and it is important to identify the distinctions. Nevertheless, there are certain similarities among them as well, as all are operating in an environment with common enabling factors that have long hidden in plain sight, defying the deeply ingrained presumption of evolutionary progress toward liberal democracy.

BUILDING ILLIBERAL ALLIANCES OF CONVENIENCE

The authoritarian states active in the Western Balkans today fall into two distinct groups in terms of the nature of their engagement and intent. The differentiation might be described as grafting versus grifting.

The members of the first group, Russia and Turkey, have long histories in the region, and both were closely involved in peace processes and related oversight mechanisms in the region's post-conflict period. These past roles provide entrée as well as baggage to Moscow and Ankara in the contemporary region. There is an advantage in attempting to graft new projects onto historical relationships with some national and religious communities, but the same history may lead to suspicion or hostility among others.

Importantly, in the past two decades Russia and Turkey have both moved away from serving as flawed but apparently willing partners of the democratic powers by supporting (as Turkey did until some years ago) or at least acquiescing to liberalization and democratization in the Western Balkans. While they maintain important positions in the international system, they now demonstrate varying degrees of consolidated autocracy at home,¹¹ and their policies in the region closely track with the domestic political priorities of their respective personalistic rulers, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The foreign powers in the second group, China and the Gulf states, are relative newcomers to the region, and their engagement has only recently come to be seen as a potential threat to liberal values and democratization. These regimes tend to be more plainly commercial and transactional in their approach, presenting themselves as economic partners seeking mutual benefit.

It is worth noting that both Turkey and several Gulf states have sought to exert forms of religious influence within Muslim communities in the Balkans, achieving some successes and perhaps greater frustration. However, an in-depth examination of these efforts was determined to be outside the scope of this working paper.

Despite their differences, all of the authoritarian powers in question share a common denominator, what scholar Tena Prelec calls sultanism: "a personalized power blurring the line between the public and the private, in which state resources are viewed as personal property of the ruler and his associates." Writing specifically of the United Arab Emirates' economic agenda in the Balkans, she asserts convincingly that this *modus operandi* "has encountered fertile ground in a region largely characterized by a backsliding towards (or a stagnation of) authoritarianism."¹²

This operating system has deep congruence with the political and decision-making systems throughout the region, where institutional mechanisms meant to ensure account-



ability and enforce the rule of law remain shallow. Rather than navigating the rules-based procedures designed to protect the public interest in a robust democracy, representatives of authoritarian powers can accomplish their commercial and policy goals with—if not one-stop shopping—very few stops, so long as local partners see benefits accruing to themselves personally.

Such opaque deal-making is notably facilitated by the weakness of a free press in the host countries. While established Balkan political elites do not enjoy media monopolies akin to those in China or Saudi Arabia, they tend to dominate domestic media narratives through control of major broadcast stations and other key outlets. It is also important to note that despite tens of millions of dollars spent to foster politically independent media, Balkan media enterprises are typically financially insecure. Many trained local journalists have left the profession or taken jobs at politically aligned outlets for economic reasons. Those still practicing tend to have little training, and very few outlets have foreign bureaus or correspondents. The level of cynicism among news consumers is also high, meaning they are receptive to critiques of democratic ideals and Western motives, and dubious about journalism and public affairs in general.¹³

Under these conditions, authoritarian powers attempting to exert influence on leaders and publics in the Western Balkans are pushing on an open door. The relationships they are building amount to a *de facto* alliance—initially tactical, but increasingly strategic—between outside actors and local elites with a joint interest in weak democratic safeguards. For Balkan elites, this opens new vistas of personal enrichment, as well as opportunities for arbitrage with an increasingly nervous West.

RUSSIA

Over the course of the 2000s, partly in response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, and especially the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russia became increasingly vocal regarding Balkan affairs. For example, its opposition to Kosovo's independence from Serbia has served to maintain its leverage with Belgrade and develop a popular constituency among Serbs throughout the Western Balkans.

Indeed, Serbia became the hub for Russian influence efforts in the region. The Russian state-owned gas giant Gazprom purchased a controlling stake in the Serbian state oil company NIS in early 2008, as Kosovo prepared to declare independence.¹⁴ Russia's Gazprom was also engaged in building the South Stream pipeline project through Serbia to transport Russian gas into European markets until the project was canceled in 2014 due to objections from the EU.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Gazprom advertisements featuring intertwined Russian and Serbian flags have since greeted travelers on the road from Belgrade's Nikola Tesla Airport to the city center. More recently however, Moscow's economic influence expanded into the commanding heights of Western Balkan NATO members when in 2018 the Russian state-owned banks Sberbank and VTB bought nearly half of Croatian state food giant Agrokor, thereby saving its government from the political disaster of a bankruptcy.¹⁶

A hallmark of Russia's policy has been the exploitation of cleavages local to the region—and among members of the Euro-Atlantic community on policies toward the region—to advance its goals of establishing control over energy infrastructure and impeding the expansion of NATO and more recently the EU.¹⁷ Moscow has been able to play the opportunistic spoiler, expending very little political or economic capital, in part because reform momentum had already begun dissipating and frictions among democratic actors were becoming increasingly heated on their own. This is most pronounced in BiH, where Russia has vocally supported Milorad Dodik, the *de facto* leader of the Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb Republic) autonomous entity, and now a member of the tripartite BiH state presidency. Dodik has for more than a decade escalated his open defiance of the Office of the High Representative (the international institution in BiH tasked with interpreting and applying the Dayton Accords peace agreement), the country's central authorities, and even Constitutional Court rulings. He presents himself—and may be perceived—as Moscow's most solid ally in the Balkans.

Russia grew more assertive abroad as Putin's domestic legitimacy came under increasing question, and especially as international tensions rose in response to the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. According to Western diplomatic sources, Moscow encouraged Dodik to use Crimea's rigged annexation referendum as a precedent for Republika Srpska's separation from BiH, and he was praised by the Russian ambassador for obstructing BiH's alignment with the EU's sanctions on Russia over Crimea.¹⁸ Months later, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov condemned the potential extension of NATO membership to Montenegro, North Macedonia, and BiH as "mistaken politics and provocation by the North Atlantic military alliance."¹⁹ Russia has subsequently made clear that the integration of Balkan countries into either NATO or the EU was undesirable.²⁰ Prior to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, resisting EU enlargement was not an avowed Russian policy priority.

Amplified Russian visibility followed soon after with the dispatch of conspicuous "Cossack dancers" from Russia to Republika Srpska in October 2014 just prior to elections in which Dodik was narrowly reelected president of the entity, and in 2018—also an election year—the Night Wolves motorcycle gang similarly paid a visit to Republika Srpska. Moscow has also taken advantage of North Macedonia's stalled bids to join NATO and the EU since 2008, displaying an increased interest and engagement even in the cultural and educational spheres.

One manifestation in the cultural sphere is the proliferation of Russian language centers supported by the state-funded Russkiy Mir (“Russian World”) Foundation throughout the Balkans, which include, for example, one such center that opened in 2012 in Banja Luka at the Republika Srpska Library.²¹ In 2004, Russia also opened the International Slavic University in the North Macedonian city of Bitola, offering degrees accredited both in North Macedonia and in Russia by the G.R. Derzhavin State University.²²

RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND MONTENEGRO

In June 2018, Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras and foreign minister Nikolaos Kotzias reached a provisional agreement (the Prespa Agreement) with their Macedonian counterparts, Zoran Zaev and Nikola Dimitrov, to end the nearly three-decade-old dispute over Macedonia’s constitutional name, which Athens considered an infringement on its ancient heritage and an implied territorial claim on northeastern Greece. The agreement to change Macedonia’s name to the Republic of North Macedonia—which was approved by a referendum and parliamentary vote in September 2018 and by the Greek parliament in January 2019—paves the way (pending ratification by member states) for it to join NATO and open membership talks with the EU.²³

Russian influence in North Macedonia grew noticeably since the country was sidelined at the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008 from receiving a NATO membership invitation due to the name dispute with Greece. Then-prime minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, amplified his already evident nationalism, leavened with growing authoritarianism and abuses of power thereafter.²⁴ Availing itself of an opportunity to play spoiler and cultivate influence, Russia increased support for Gruevski over the course of nearly a decade, most markedly in the final years of Gruevski’s rule from 2015–2017 as protests in North Macedonia finally drew greater Western diplomatic engagement. Russian investment increased over this period, and local observers noted that Russia’s diplomatic presence spiked, as did engagement with security services.²⁵ Following a still-murky battle between Albanian militants and North Macedonian security services in Kumanovo in May 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that the West had an “ostrich” policy of ignoring Greater Albanian extremism while plotting “color revolutions,” and he alleged that (NATO members) Albania and Bulgaria planned to partition the country.²⁶

North Macedonian investigators claimed in July 2018 that Ivan Savvidis, a Greek-Russian tobacco tycoon and former Russian parliament member who is reportedly close to Putin and was then resident in Greece, had bankrolled efforts to generate violence in advance of the September 2018 referendum.²⁷ Greece expelled two Russian diplomats the same month for efforts to impede the Prespa Agreement; two more were denied entry.²⁸ Nationalist opposition to the name agreement remains pronounced in both North Macedonia and Greece; it is likely Russia will continue its disruptive efforts.

Russia also opposed Montenegro’s accession to NATO in June 2017. The Kremlin was allegedly behind what the Montenegrin government described as an attempted coup against longtime leader Milo Đukanović in October 2016.²⁹ The incident came during contentious elections in which NATO membership was a deeply divisive issue, and at least some of the preparations apparently took place on Serbian soil.³⁰ Russia’s point man for the region, former Federal Security Service (FSB) chief Nikolai Patrushev, visited Belgrade soon after the attempted putsch to smooth ruffled feathers and extract two Russian nationals who were implicated in the events.³¹ Agents from Russia’s military intelligence, known by its former Russian acronym GRU, as well as Serbian accomplices, have been implicated in court proceedings and identified by analysts.³²



Russian Media in the Western Balkans

Russian state media are readily available in the region. The television networks RT and Russia 24 are included in many cable packages,³³ and Sputnik Online's content in Serbian can be accessed in both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, reaching news consumers throughout the former Yugoslav market.³⁴ Sputnik's chief editor in Serbia, Ljubinka Miličić, told a local analyst in 2016 that it was relatively easy to operate in the area: "Setting aside the trouble we are facing from the European Commission, we've had no problems here." She said Sputnik employed about 40 people from its base in Serbia.³⁵ Sputnik is registered in the country as a branch of Rossiya Segodnya, the umbrella state news organization established in 2013. While Rossiya Segodnya and RT are supposedly separate, Margarita Simonyan heads both organizations.³⁶ They regularly employ writers and interview guests with long nationalist pedigrees in the region, without

informing audiences of their backgrounds.³⁷ Much of this Russian-origin media content is republished or rebroadcast for free in the local Serbian media.³⁸

Serbia also is home to a communications firm, SPN Media Solutions DOO Beograd, that is linked to Rossiya Segodnya and has been implicated in Russian-sponsored disinformation efforts in the Baltic states.³⁹

It is important to note that the Serbian government and ruling party tend to dominate the country's media environment. Forty-six percent of journalists surveyed by the Serbian Independent Association of Journalists (NUNS) and the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation in late 2017 claimed that state authorities had pressured them or their newsrooms to influence coverage.⁴⁰ Serbia ranks 76th on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index.⁴¹ Tamara Spaić, a journalist for the popular tabloid *Blic*, said in 2018 that while journalists previously competed to seek out and report the news, "now the journalists and the editorial staff simply wait for the material based on which they are to make the report to be delivered. It has all become propaganda."⁴²

These dynamics are not restricted to Serbia. A report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in October 2017 found that a host of pro-Russian news portals and websites in Montenegro are domestically driven and run, but carry Serbian-language content from Sputnik and other Kremlin-affiliated sources.⁴³ They cater to a large minority of the population that opposes the government and its Western orientation. One such outlet, IN4S, which uses both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, produces its own

content while also reprinting news from Russian media. It describes its offerings as “timely news from Montenegro, Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Russia.”

Russia’s media and public influence activities are integral to its goal of impeding the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions.

While Russia’s engagement in the region’s media and public arenas to promote its policies and narratives is considerable, the interests of ruling elites (particularly in Belgrade and Banja Luka) and the sentiments of many Serbs and at least some North Macedonians and Montenegrins act as natural force multipliers. According to a Banja Luka-based journalist, “No Serbian politician can ever win elections in [Republika Srpska] and Serbia if they don’t openly show admiration for Russia and rejection of NATO.... Russia, in order to exert influence in RS, does not need to invest a lot of money or effort.”⁴⁴ In a media and public narrative version of asymmetric warfare, Moscow can, with little financial burden or application of political leverage, stoke social tensions and foment cynicism about democratic institutions and processes throughout the region.

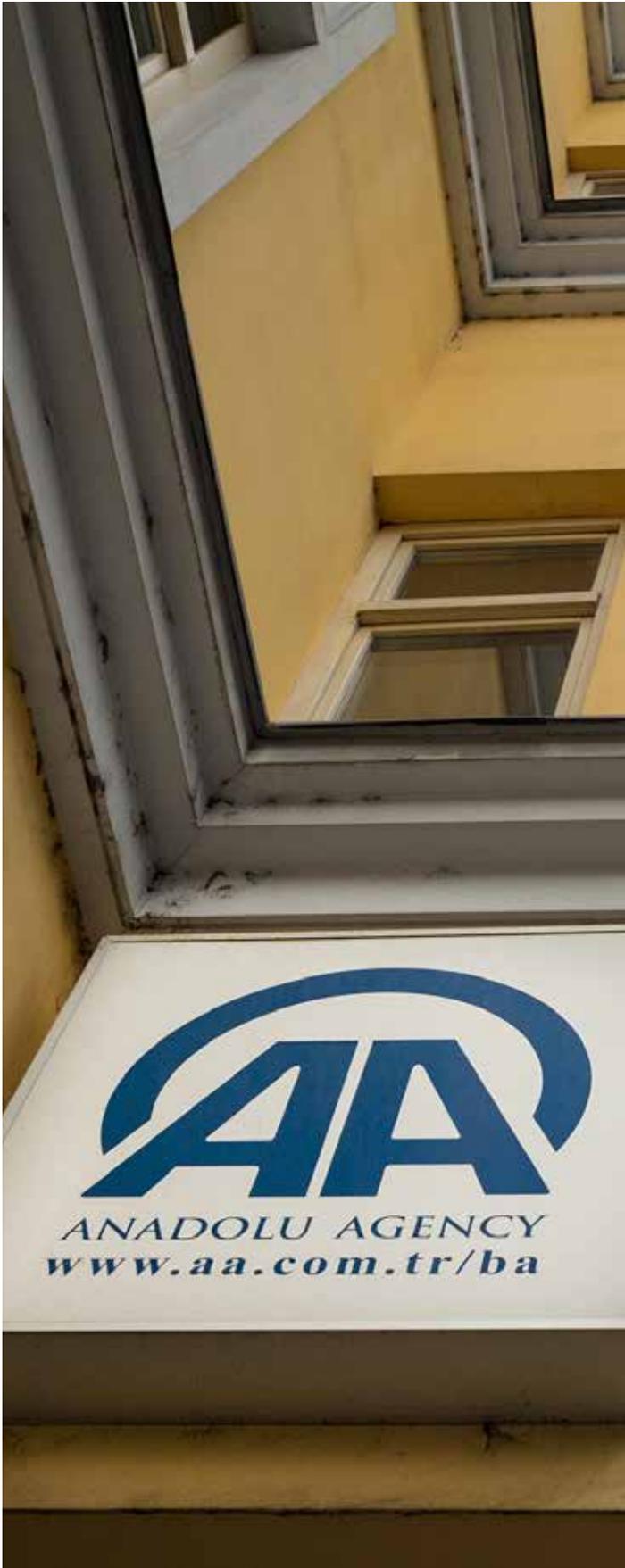
The intertwined nature of Russian and Serbian state and media influence was on display during an August 2018 visit to Belgrade by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman and press director Mariya Zakharova. She was taken to an international music festival in Guča in western Serbia by Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dačić, who is widely seen as Moscow’s most reliable partner in the country. Footage of Zakharova dancing, and even appearing onstage, was in heavy rotation in Serbian media.⁴⁵ During her visit, she implied Russian support for Serbia’s recent advocacy of a plan to partition Kosovo along ethnic lines.⁴⁶

This entanglement makes it especially difficult to assess the true popular resonance of Russian-backed content in Serbia and the region. A 2016 snapshot of Facebook statistics suggested that Sputnik’s audience was dwarfed by that of the Luxembourg-based regional broadcaster N1,⁴⁷ but narratives that serve Russian interests are clearly disseminated through outlets other than the Russian state entities themselves.

In summation, Russia’s media and public influence activities are integral to its goal of impeding the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions. It is not coincidental that the hub for its efforts is in Serbia, the only country in the Western Balkans that avows neutrality and eschews pursuit of NATO membership. The region’s political regression and unfulfilled reform agendas provide Moscow with ample opportunities to promote friction and fragmentation.

TURKEY

As with Russia, the trajectory of Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans correlates with the country’s domestic political conditions and the perceived interests of its leadership. Before the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002, Turkey’s policy in the region was only mildly differentiated from those of its NATO allies. It began to increase its assertiveness and visibility roughly a decade ago as part of then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “strategic depth” and “zero problems with neighbors” initiatives, which aimed to position Turkey as an active leader across the former Ottoman sphere.⁴⁸ Economic interests also came to the fore. In an April 2010 speech at Sarajevo’s Bosniak Institute, then prime minister and now president Erdoğan’s message might be summed up as “the business of Turkey in the Western Balkans is business.”⁴⁹



The advent of the Arab Spring in 2011 first buoyed, then upended Turkey's neighborhood policy in the Middle East, as the Islamist movements it supported were ultimately suppressed by traditional elites. In the past five years, Erdoğan has increasingly subordinated his foreign policy to the needs of his domestic situation, namely his authoritarian consolidation of power and suppression of various political enemies. The results have generally been harmful to the region's observance of democratic principles.

This trend accelerated dramatically following the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, which the government blamed on Sufi cleric and U.S. resident Fethullah Gülen—formerly an Erdoğan ally—and his network of followers in the state and society. The primary focus of Ankara's Western Balkans policy has since shifted to uprooting or taking over the Gülenist infrastructure that had developed over the previous decade with official Turkish support. Authorities in the region were expected to comply, with little regard for democratic safeguards. This occurred rapidly in BiH, where the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the dominant force in Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) areas, was a willing partner. Private Gülen-affiliated universities such as International Burch University in Sarajevo were compelled to take on new management.⁵⁰ A weekly Gülenist newspaper published in the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian (BCS) language, *Novo Vrijeme*, was taken over and adopted a pro-Erdoğan editorial policy—a fact proudly covered in a pro-SDA and pro-Erdoğan Bosnian news weekly, *Stav*, only a month after the coup attempt.⁵¹ But the most spectacular incident in the region was Turkish intelligence agents' April 2018 rendition to Turkey of six Turkish citizens residing in Kosovo—five educators and one physician—without any semblance of due process. Erdoğan lauded the operation to domestic audiences in Turkey.⁵² However, this roused public ire in Kosovo and led to Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj dismissing his interior minister and intelligence chief afterward, which also provoked Erdoğan to publicly complain.⁵³

The Turkish leadership has also used the Western Balkans as a stage for political campaigns at home. In May 2018, after Erdoğan was barred from holding campaign rallies in EU member states as he sought election to a newly empowered presidency created by constitutional revisions the year before, he held a large rally in Sarajevo instead.⁵⁴ While the event was aimed at turning out the vote among Turkish citizens in Europe, Erdoğan appeared

alongside the Bosniak member of the BiH presidency, Bakir Izetbegović of the SDA, who at the time was testing the waters for his wife to succeed him.⁵⁵ Opponents of the SDA certainly saw Erdoğan's visit as partisan.⁵⁶ The rally, which drew an audience of 15,000, garnered international as well as regional media attention.

In an indication of the risks and historical baggage associated with such overt displays of influence, much of the local media coverage and social media commentary was decidedly negative. For Serb and Croat nationalist media, as well as nationalist politicians like Dodik, the rally symbolized Bosniaks' dependence on or loyalty to Turkey,⁵⁷ and served to stoke ethnic divisions. Even for a swath of Bosniak public opinion, the rally was an embarrassment; for many Sarajevans, it was seen as a disruptive nuisance.⁵⁸

Another aspect of the event illustrated the potential for Turkish state influence to erode basic freedoms in the region. International journalists were denied accreditation to attend the rally, with organizers stating that the decision was made by Turkish officials.⁵⁹ The local reaction was relatively muted. The BiH Journalists' Association did not release an official statement, but noted that the event was not organized by BiH institutions.⁶⁰

Turkish Media in the Western Balkans

The Turkish state broadcaster TRT; TRT Avaz, which targets a Turkish audience in the Balkans; and the English-language TRT World are frequently available in cable packages in the Western Balkans.⁶¹ TRT also maintains a TRT Bosanski (BCS) website carrying Bosnian, Turkish, world, and regional news, in that order.⁶² As of September 2018, its banner featured a commemoration of the "martyrs" and "veterans" who opposed the July 2016 coup attempt. TRT operates separate dedicated websites with news in Albanian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian, but these lack specific sections for domestic news, carrying only news on Turkey, the world, and the region.⁶³

Turkey's official Anadolu News Agency's Balkan service has offices in Belgrade, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje, and Tirana, and generates content in all the major regional languages.⁶⁴ The first section on the dedicated Balkans page of its website is for Turkish news, giving pride of place to court trials against Gülenists.⁶⁵ Its reports—often those on sports—are reproduced with local commentary in the regional press, particularly in BiH. During the 2016 coup attempt, Anadolu's content dominated the Sarajevo-based media's coverage of Turkey, including on the popular news portal Klix.ba.⁶⁶

Some outlets in BiH, particularly the SDA-aligned daily *Faktor* and weekly *Stav*, carry more reporting from Anadolu than others. Most such stories are recapitulated rather than adopted verbatim. *Faktor*, for example, carried a story last year on Turkish economic resilience and Erdoğan's resistance of foreign pressure.⁶⁷ *Stav* ran an Anadolu-based article in 2017 titled "Europe Would Like to Tutor Turkey."⁶⁸

On the whole, Turkish engagement in the Balkan media sphere seems aimed at promoting Erdoğan and his policies, in addition to further developing favorable relationships with the region's governments. The public resonance of Turkish media narratives varies, but those aimed at cultivating a personal following among local populations seem to have been the least effective. However, the more bluntly self-serving that Turkish state media are in promoting Erdoğan's messaging, the greater the popular sense of cynicism

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from being subjected to propaganda from numerous, often conflicting outside players and agendas is likely to be. This could spur resignation, or alternatively, popular resistance to being treated like objects. In any case, despite efforts to develop a broader popular following, the center of gravity for Turkish influence is still apparently targeted to political elites rather than the popular realm.

CHINA

Over the past decade, China's profile in the Western Balkans has risen considerably. It has a number of assets to offer in terms of diplomacy. For instance, its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence and its veto power on the UN Security Council are both appreciated by Serbia, which in turn has aligned itself with Chinese government positions on a host of issues, including its domestic human rights issues, South China Sea disputes, and Burma.⁶⁹

But it is on the economic front that Beijing has made the greatest inroads. China's way of doing business—opaque deal-making with established political elites, enabled by a high tolerance for corruption—takes advantage of and exacerbates existing problems surrounding transparency and accountability in the Western Balkans.⁷⁰

The Chinese Communist Party's model of economic modernization and authoritarian political control has an obvious appeal to established or aspiring illiberal leaders in the region. China's popular credibility as a growing economic superpower and deep-pockets investor is understandable and real. But while its investments, like the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade, are widely reported,⁷¹ its most important constituency is among incumbent political leaders. Beijing's financing of infrastructure and other key economic projects helps these leaders demonstrate the appearance of development to their citizens and deliver patronage to key supporters.

Like Russia, China prefers to make deals bilaterally or in constructed-to-purpose forums rather than with the EU as a whole, a fact not lost on Brussels.⁷² Since 2012, for instance, China has championed its 16+1 framework, now 17+1 with the addition of Greece in April 2019, which convenes the Western Balkan countries (minus Kosovo) and the Central and Eastern European members of the EU with the promise of economic, scientific, educational, and cultural cooperation.⁷³ Unlike Russia and Turkey, which present themselves as alternatives to integration with the EU, China's regional engagement is not necessarily antithetical to the goal of EU membership. However, its business model and political economy operate contrary to the EU's democratic norms. China seems to be attempting to mitigate potential friction from this differential by buying influence in the EU, as well as in the region.⁷⁴

The prospect of participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an expansive infrastructure and influence strategy launched by President Xi Jinping in late 2013, is one way that the country attracts tie-ups in the region. The Western Balkans provide physical access to the most lucrative markets in the EU's geographic core, but their infrastructure lags behind that of the EU. Greece's Port of Piraeus, where the state-owned Chinese Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) has a controlling stake, serves as an anchor for China's approach to the European continent as a whole, in advance of and in addition to planned railway linkages across Eurasia.

There is a visible and undeniable need for investment in rail, roads, and ports in the Western Balkans, and even democracies outside the region have shown interest in receiving Chinese investment.⁷⁵ But China's economic engagement predominantly takes the form of loans, not grants or foreign aid. As of 2017, the aggregate of Chinese loans to Serbia amounted to \$5.5 billion USD.⁷⁶ As with Russia's acquisition of the state oil company NIS, China's backing for Serbia's position on Kosovo in the UN Security Council has essentially been rewarded with economic access on terms favorable to Beijing.

Chinese investment may seem like an easy way for Balkan leaders to maintain their ecosystems of power, but it could lead to far greater economic and political leverage for Beijing in the future, and the political alignment of most regional media has impeded broad public discussion of China's activities.⁷⁷

CORROSIVE CAPITAL: CHINESE INVESTMENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Chinese loans and contracts for local public infrastructure projects in the Balkans have been accompanied by a notable lack of transparency and open debate. Sonja Biserko of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia observed that the lack of transparency that typically attends contracts with Chinese companies means that the terms—their financial nature, their employment impact, and origin of material inputs—are unclear.⁷⁸ The general population is often unaware of key facts, including whether projects are ultimately sponsored by taxpayers.

As one such example, Croatia awarded a contract funded by EU loans to build the controversial Pelješac Bridge—which will connect segments of the country's Dalmatian coast that are separated by BiH's only shoreline territory at Neum—to the China Pacific Construction Group.⁷⁹ Early reports uncovered that Chinese laborers living on a ship moored near the building site, not local hires, would perform the work.⁸⁰ This lack of initial transparency about the terms of the contract generated considerable local press attention about the potential economic benefit of the project, triggering Chinese and Croatian government pushback.⁸¹ The media attention seems to have led to a greater emphasis on local labor's involvement in the project and the project's regional economic impact. While some details still remain unknown, these events have highlighted that even within the EU—and when supported by EU funds—such projects often remain opaque. In addition, domestic reporting has generated greater, if belated, transparency and local benefits.

The same Chinese firm has engaged in high-profile road construction projects in North Macedonia that were financed by Chinese government loans and employed Chinese labor.⁸² The projects injected some funds into the depressed local economy through spending by the Chinese workers in places such as Sveti Nikole.⁸³ However, they also featured blatant corruption on the part of the host government, as exposed in a raft of secret recordings whose release ultimately contributed to the defeat of North Macedonia's then prime minister Nikola Gruevski's increasingly authoritarian ruling party in 2017.⁸⁴

In 2014, the Bosnian Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN) reported extensively on China's engagement with Energy Financing Team (EFT), a London-based power trading firm whose chairman, Vuk Hamović, was previously alleged to have been involved in the protection of war crimes fugitives.⁸⁵ With a loan from a Chinese state-owned bank, EFT was constructing a lignite-fired power station in BiH's Republika Srpska. The entity's parliament amended its laws to allow EFT to post the related mining concessions, which are far more valuable than the loan, as collateral. In the event that EFT defaults, the Chinese bank would own the entire mining and power generation complex outright.⁸⁶

It is worth noting that some Chinese investment deals have fallen through—and been resurrected. At the November 2017 16+1 summit, Chinese premier Li Keqiang and BiH prime minister Denis Zvizdić signed an agreement to build a power plant in Tuzla to support the city's growing energy needs.⁸⁷ But the regional parliament of BiH's autonomous Bosniak-Croat Federation failed to adopt legislation to commence work, so the Chinese consortium withdrew its investment, spurring criticism from political opposition.⁸⁸ In March 2019, the Federation parliament reversed course by approving guarantees to secure a \$687 million USD loan from the Export-Import Bank of China to proceed with the project, despite a warning from the EU Energy Community that the project's financing violated state aid subsidy rules, and opposition from local environmental groups against an investment in dirty coal combustion.⁸⁹

Regional governments are generally able to insulate their agendas from media scrutiny by exercising control or heavy influence over public broadcasters, commercial media with partisan alignments, and other private outlets that depend on state advertising or favorable regulatory decisions. What little investigative reporting into Chinese investments is conducted is rarely picked up by local media outlets that might disseminate it to a wider audience.⁹⁰

A source at the Bosnian Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN) noted that such stories are not especially interesting for readers and advertisers.⁹¹ When the CIN's article on the harsh terms of a Chinese loan to the company Energy Financing Team for a new power station was published (see text box), the investment was being promoted by Republika Srpska authorities "as an employment opportunity, and we had a hard time getting through to the RS press, but even in the Federation, outlets were not particularly interested."⁹² In addition, the company threatened CIN with a lawsuit and wrote to the center's donor base to call for its funding to be curtailed.⁹³

Because there are few documented reports like CIN's story available in the public domain, it is unclear whether other Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in the region also include potentially exploitative stipulations. If so, such contracts would amplify already pronounced fears of a "debt trap" in countries like Montenegro, which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said will be unable to complete its Chinese-constructed highway from the port of Bar, financed with a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, due to its already high debt load.⁹⁴ N1 TV journalist Milan Mišić has observed that when China provides a loan, it is often used to pay for Chinese contractors, workers, and materials, effectively subsidizing the Chinese economy even as the lender collects interest at rates that are higher than those typically charged by international financial institutions.⁹⁵

Chinese Media in the Western Balkans

Exploiting the vacuum of local reporting about its engagement in the region, Beijing has developed its own broadcasting and information dissemination infrastructure. China Global Television Network (CGTN) has frequently reported from Belgrade and hires local journalists.⁹⁶ It broadcasts only in English and is available through cable operators across the Western Balkans.⁹⁷ Stories concerning Serbia and the region are framed so as to underscore Belgrade's policy of cultivating ties with all major powers.⁹⁸ The network also aims to showcase to an international audience China's growing links with Serbia and the Western Balkans, including in the entertainment sector.⁹⁹

The official Xinhua news agency has long had a presence on the ground. Even before the BRI was announced in 2013, it had already established a bureau in Belgrade, in addition to others in Athens and Sofia.¹⁰⁰ It fields correspondents throughout the region, including Chinese journalists based in Sarajevo and Tirana and local journalists in Zagreb and Sarajevo. "They always had [a one-person office] in Tirana, and they report very actively," says Tirana media analyst Remzi Lani.¹⁰¹ Xinhua is integral in making the case for the BRI and its benefits; it generates content in all the local languages, quotes Balkan leaders for English-language audiences,¹⁰² and distributes its reports via local media. Its correspondents perform outreach to the higher education sector, including on the study of the Chinese language.¹⁰³ Xinhua's correspondent in Sarajevo, Yuan Liang, told students at the University of East Sarajevo's Department of Sinology (in the Republika Srpska) that the

career opportunities on offer from Chinese investments were effectively limitless for those with Chinese language skills.¹⁰⁴

The rationale for this engagement appears to be primarily economic. According to one long-term observer of China's regional activity, "They are slowly, but surely, increasing their presence and financial interest in the Balkans and they need to smooth the public before money kicks in. All Chinese investments are for employment of Chinese companies and workers, but they do good due diligence in advance. ... All investments are presented through governments as employment opportunities for locals."¹⁰⁵

Beijing's media messaging agenda and that of BiH political leaders—who have considerable control or influence in their respective media spaces—largely coincide.

An analysis of content generated by Chinese state media in the region reveals an emphasis on painting China's economic investments in an unquestionably positive light. One Xinhua piece extolled the "New Silk Road" as a "win-win" prospect that would bring "jobs, jobs, jobs."¹⁰⁶ The BCS-language Kina Danas (China Today) website's China and BiH section ran stories on the fifth anniversary of the BRI, the 16+1 forum, and related investments.¹⁰⁷ More recently it presented a piece on Ambassador Chen Bo's farewell visit to Dodik, the newly elected Bosnian Serb member of the BiH presidency, at which only the Republika Srpska flag, and not the BiH national flag, was displayed.¹⁰⁸

It is important to stress that Beijing's media messaging agenda and that of BiH political leaders—who have considerable control or influence in their respective media spaces—largely coincide. Local media regularly disseminate positive views of Chinese investment in the energy sector, infrastructure, and the steel industry, in part by providing a platform for Ambassador Chen, who also recently extolled BiH as a prime destination for Chinese tourism.¹⁰⁹

Local officials throughout the region have used Chinese state media outlets as a conduit for messages to Chinese authorities and the wider Chinese public, encouraging Beijing to maintain and increase economic engagement. In a 2016 interview with Xinhua, even the international high representative for BiH, Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko, praised the Republika Srpska power station and mine project as the kind of foreign investment BiH needs to combat high unemployment.¹¹⁰ In Serbia, government-aligned weekly *Politika* ran a story entitled "Chinese Dragon Develops Serbia," illustrating the elite-anchoring of this symbiosis.¹¹¹

Xinhua has signed cooperative agreements with local media and news agencies such as the Bosnia-based, SDA-aligned Patria to publish one another's text and photographs.¹¹² According to one local media professional, Patria is "known to be easy to buy, they are ready to align their reporting with [the] positive agenda of those with money. Overall, [Patria is] not very popular and take[s] a small share in the ... media scene."¹¹³ The news content Patria took from Xinhua included reports on the 2018 Communist Party Congress in China and its economic ramifications,¹¹⁴ Chinese president Xi Jinping's meeting with Vladimir Putin on the Iran nuclear deal,¹¹⁵ and China's assistance to Turkey in its economic difficulties (under the headline "China Supports Turkey in Its Dispute with the U.S.").¹¹⁶ As a local media professional noted, "Patria is a commercial entity and why not sign a deal with the Chinese [outlet]? They have money and are ready to oil good press."¹¹⁷

Other Societal Outreach and Influence Initiatives

Local journalists in BiH have been recruited as outreach ambassadors by the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association, founded in 2014 and directed by Faruk Borić, a former

editor of the Federation news agency FENA and editor of weekly *Dani*.¹¹⁸ In 2015, the association invited the Chinese ambassador to speak with “Circle 99,” a regular gathering of Sarajevo intellectuals, about China’s interest in investing in “all sectors” of the BiH economy.¹¹⁹ The news section on the association’s website is replete with notes about Chinese donations to the Red Cross and Sarajevo’s Koševo Hospital, the latter of which is run by Bakir Izetbegović’s wife; the donation to the hospital is listed as a joint effort by the Chinese embassy and Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications firm that is now facing closer scrutiny of its business dealings and its links to Chinese Communist Party interests in a number of countries around the globe.¹²⁰ It is also important to note that other association activities build on genuine cultural exchange, such as the 2017 refurbishment of a cinema which showed the 1972 Yugoslav film *Walter Defends Sarajevo*, with introductory remarks by the Chinese ambassador.¹²¹ The film, about partisans fighting Nazi occupiers during World War II, was and remains hugely popular in China.¹²²

Despite this mix of initiatives, some China-sponsored activities can apparently be overbearing. According to a local journalist, the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association “is very active in bringing the Chinese embassy’s point of view to local media ... but [the] experience I had ... was very totalitarian-like and unpleasant. Russians are much more subtle than the Chinese.”¹²³ A journalist also reported that the Chinese embassy attempted to influence a colleague’s article about China’s internal affairs.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, Bosnian journalists are largely receptive to Chinese government efforts to cultivate individual relationships. One media figure asserted that, far from having to send journalists on trips to China, a meal would suffice to yield favorable coverage.¹²⁵ Journalists and NGO personnel are indeed invited on study trips to China, where their hosts “organize roundtables, they [encourage] local journalists and intellectuals to spread their message, [and] they stimulate NGOs to consider [the benefits of] Chinese investments.”¹²⁶ In addition, local intellectuals are asked “to serve as commentators and are indirectly paid. ... Another way is that they give scholarships to local students and upon their return they tell their stories about China.”¹²⁷

Beijing has also sought to propagate its views in academia by embedding them within BiH university campuses. Chinese government-backed Confucius Institutes, which have been met with growing suspicion in many democracies, were established at the University of Sarajevo in 2015 and the University of Banja Luka’s Faculty of Political Science in 2018.¹²⁸ The rector of the Northwest Chinese Pedagogical University, Liu Zhongkui, attended the Confucius Institute opening in Sarajevo, declaring that it would promote Chinese culture and language.¹²⁹ In Banja Luka, the Republika Srpska president and prime minister both attended the Confucius Institute’s January 2018 opening, as did Ambassador Chen and a delegation from the University of Tianjin, with which the University of Banja Luka was twinned.¹³⁰ This model was applied even earlier in North Macedonia, where a Confucius Institute was opened at St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in 2013, and the university itself was twinned with the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics in Chengdu.¹³¹ A Confucius Institute located at the University of Belgrade is highly developed, with links to other educational and cultural organizations throughout Serbia.¹³²

CHINA'S INVESTMENTS IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In tandem with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has promoted the concept of a “Digital Silk Road,” according to which countries hosting Chinese-backed infrastructure projects would adopt Chinese standards and technology for telecommunications.¹³³ Analysts writing for the U.S. think tank the Council on Foreign Relations have warned that China could exploit these hardware and software installations through the secret inclusion of “backdoor mechanisms,”¹³⁴ a concern shared by democratic governments around the world that have begun to restrict the use of equipment manufactured by Chinese telecommunications firms ZTE and Huawei. Furthermore, China has actively provided technology and training meant to assist officials in partner countries with the development of surveillance, censorship, and propaganda systems similar to its own.¹³⁵

In 2011, Beijing donated \$300,000 worth of computers, printers, and other unspecified technical equipment to Serbia's parliament.¹³⁶ More recently, the Ministry of Interior signed a memorandum of understanding with Huawei in 2014 on acquiring unspecified systems, after which Huawei donated a telecommunications laboratory to the Electrotechnical Faculty at the University of Belgrade.¹³⁷ This was announced as part of a raft of 13 bilateral agreements on transport, telecommunications, infrastructure, finance, and agriculture.

It was reported in 2018 that Huawei's \$60 million USD bid to build a 4G mobile network in BiH had been accepted by the SDA-dominated and publicly owned BH Telecom. The decision was challenged by Ericsson Nikola Tesla, the Swedish telecommunications firm's Croatian affiliate, which claimed that there was a prearranged outcome to the tender and a change to the public bidding document to benefit Huawei, prompting an injunction from the Sarajevo municipal court. BH Telecom claimed that the delay would cost it tens of millions in lost equity and \$132 million USD in lost revenue.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, Huawei has established offices in Banja Luka,¹³⁹ and its Sarajevo operation is located in the Avaz Twist Tower—a prominent location within the city's tallest building.

China's regional involvement has generated considerably less attention than Russia's, despite having a larger economic and physical footprint. Yet while Beijing's engagement is not overtly antithetical to EU or even NATO enlargement (indeed its business calculus relies on the former), its elite-focused and state-mercantilist approach to investment presents a deep challenge to liberal democratic values, the rule of law, and public accountability—all of which are already tenuous in the Western Balkans. Moreover, its largesse comes with an expectation of self-censorship and conformity regarding sensitive topics like China's leaders, foreign policy positions, and domestic human rights record, and its outreach efforts effectively promote China's authoritarian political system as a model for economically developing countries.

PERSIAN GULF STATES

Prior to the collapse of Yugoslavia, Persian Gulf states' influence in the region was minimal. The 1990s conflicts, particularly in BiH, drew religiously motivated volunteers from the Arab world, some of whom were implicated in war crimes.¹⁴⁰ Concerns about fighters who remained, as well as the religious influence of states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Qatar—as well as Iran—became more pronounced after the war in Bosnia. Concern in Europe and the United States of potential fomenting of religious extremism led to policy countermeasures. However, apart from this backdrop and until more recently, the economic footprint of the Gulf states had been relatively limited. This, along with media presence, has increased over the past decade, and Gulf state investments—from a mixture of public and private sources—have had a political and social impact on the region. Moreover, they have been exploited by ethnonationalists (particularly in Belgrade, Zagreb, Banja Luka, and Mostar) who characterize them as existential threats to non-Muslims.¹⁴¹



Large-scale acquisitions, such as the purchase of a 49 percent stake in Serbian state airline JAT (formerly Yugoslav Air Transport, now Air Serbia) by the UAE's Etihad Airways in 2013,¹⁴² demonstrated the Gulf monarchies' regional ambitions in a highly visible fashion. Soon afterward, Saudi investors undertook major building projects in central Sarajevo, including the renovation of the long-derelict Hotel Bristol and the construction of the Sarajevo City Center, a shopping complex and high-rise apartment building that overshadows the BiH parliament.¹⁴³ Purchases of land, often in un- or underdeveloped areas like Trnovo, roughly 30 minutes from Sarajevo, have also generated stories of local corruption in the media.¹⁴⁴ Most controversial was a Kuwaiti purchase of land and water rights at Vrelo Bosne, the source of the River Bosna—and a popular local park.¹⁴⁵ Minimal transparency, political connections, and lack of public consultation are often hallmarks of these projects.¹⁴⁶

Most spectacular, however, was the overnight, illegal, and violent demolition of buildings and businesses in the Savamala neighborhood of Belgrade in April 2016. The destruction occurred without police interference on the site of a future Emirati-Serbian luxury real-estate development, subsidized largely through Serbian incentives, known as the Belgrade Waterfront. The immediate public suspicion, borne out by subsequent revelations, was that the demolition had official sanction and was, if not ordered from the very top, done in the hopes of gaining the favor of then prime minister and now president Aleksandar Vučić. Public protests under the banner of "Don't Drown Belgrade!" (*Ne Davimo Beograd!*) and employing the symbol of a rubber duck—duck, or *patka*, is slang for a bribe—began in May 2016 and continued episodically, eventually evolving into a popular movement.¹⁴⁷ The protests rattled Vučić and his government, leading to bizarre accusations in the progovernment press that the EU ambassador, Michael Davenport, was plotting a coup.¹⁴⁸

In the view of a knowledgeable researcher on the Gulf investment phenomenon in the Western Balkans, developers from the UAE and elsewhere employ an operating system similar to China's, making deals with officials at the commanding heights of local governments who can ensure that projects proceed without concern for due diligence

or public transparency. At a bare minimum these officials can claim credit for inward investment, but it is highly likely that they also receive personal financial benefits.¹⁴⁹

Visitors and new residents from the Gulf region are increasingly visible in the Western Balkans, especially in BiH. Built-to-purpose developments catering exclusively to non-Bosnians have aroused a sense of colonization in some quarters.¹⁵⁰ The reasons for the influx are manifold: cooler summer temperatures, a perceived Muslim-friendly environment, relative affordability, and proximity to the EU, among others.¹⁵¹ Several interlocutors, including former officials, have indicated that the phenomenon is facilitated by the political elite, particularly the SDA.¹⁵²

There is also some movement in the opposite direction. One observer noted “a rising interest in going to Qatar and (the) Emirates for work, particularly with well-educated people: construction engineers, doctors, dentists.”¹⁵³ In this sense, the more open Gulf states are contributing to the brain drain most frequently associated with the EU and Germany in particular. However, there is no discernible effort by Gulf interests to invest in propagandistic Arabic-language educational projects or foreign study programs akin to those promoted by China. Arabic-language instruction was always available in Islamic educational institutions, and while security analysts have expressed concern about long-term Saudi efforts to affect the local practice of Islam,¹⁵⁴ BiH-based observers see no significant uptick in Arabic-language instruction per se.¹⁵⁵

Gulf State Media in the Western Balkans

The largest media newcomer from the Persian Gulf is Qatar’s Al-Jazeera, which launched its local-language regional network, Al-Jazeera Balkans (AJB), in late 2011.¹⁵⁶ Its headquarters is in downtown Sarajevo, with correspondents spread throughout the region. The well-resourced channel hired experienced professional journalists and fostered new local talent. Many observers, including the author, who was resident in Sarajevo at the time, believed that because the network was independent of the need for local funding or government advertising, it was in a unique position to conduct investigative journalism and expose the malfeasance of entrenched elites. While AJB has developed considerable high-quality programming, and its coverage tends to be far more dispassionate than the region’s public broadcasters, it has not fully embraced this opportunity. The network has pushed back against local media reporting that plays into ethnonationalist narratives promoting fear of Arab investment in BiH,¹⁵⁷ while also advocating a reduction of administrative hurdles to attract more such projects.¹⁵⁸

Other than Qatar, the Gulf states have a negligible media presence in the Western Balkans.¹⁵⁹ Arabic-language media may be available via satellite offerings in hotels that cater to visitors from the Gulf, but they are not broadly accessible,¹⁶⁰ nor is Gulf-based investment evident in the region’s own media outlets. (Some specialists assert that a few of the Bosniak media outlets focused on Islamic religious content, such as TV Igman and Behar TV, have received support from Gulf states such as Kuwait, but they can offer no proof.¹⁶¹) Instead, the most active promoters of Gulf state investment and engagement have been officials of the host governments and affiliated local media outlets.

RENEWING INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY ON DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Investments, messaging, and other forms of influence by authoritarian regimes in the region contribute to illiberal narratives that undermine trust in the ability of democracy to deliver accountable political representation and guarantee the rule of law.

Such narratives emphasize cynicism—a belief that everything is for sale and democracy is a sham—and assert that the traditional proponents of democracy, including the United States and the EU, not only indulge corruption and mendacity in Balkan political systems, but operate in a similar way themselves. These narratives also reinforce the belief that domestic advocates of liberal democracy are irrelevant, that popular mobilization against greater geopolitical forces is pointless, and that benefits accrue to those who play along. By feeding such perceptions, authoritarian actors' engagement in the public sphere increases their own and their local partners' leverage over the citizenry of Western Balkan countries.

The Western Balkans are a front in what amounts to a world war of values, and the forces of democracy cannot afford to abandon it.

The process has been helped along by the real shortcomings of democratic powers' own efforts. It is clear that U.S. and EU policy presumptions—namely that peace, EU accession, and NATO enlargement, combined with positive reinforcement through messaging and funds, would consolidate democratic gains—have not played out as expected. The supposition that regional political elites were genuinely representative, accountable, and interested in adopting EU and NATO norms has proven false, despite some qualifications.

Support for democratic values among publics in the Western Balkans is still generally robust. The problem is that the political and public spheres are replete with daily examples of illiberal practice being pursued profitably, without negative repercussions—including from Western external actors, such as the United States and the EU, who proclaim the centrality of the rule of law, accountability, and human freedoms. This has understandably bred cynicism and resignation, if not apathy.¹⁶²

While the direction and development of the societies in the Western Balkans will ultimately depend on the will of their citizens, external support for local advocates working to legally entrench and enforce liberal democratic practices is still essential. The Western Balkans are a front in what amounts to a world war of values, and the forces of democracy cannot afford to abandon it.

Material support for independent news media remains important. Investigative journalism based in and focused on the region has uncovered malfeasance on the part of local officialdom as well as in the activities of authoritarian foreign powers. This ought to include training or awareness-building to help journalists identify the authoritarians' foreign policy objectives and recognize related efforts to influence public opinion in the Balkans, so as to better report on it. Greater investigative—and explanatory—economic coverage of governmental policy choices and their effects could foster greater public assertiveness and contribute to meaningful input in policy debates. There is considerable room for improvement in terms of this material's wider dissemination, especially via television. There is also great need for the development of media literacy to combat disinformation on social media and elsewhere. In addition, democratic governments should continue to support external broadcast media in local languages, such as Voice of America, Radio Free



Europe/Radio Liberty, and Deutsche Welle. These services are regularly rebroadcast and watched on terrestrial and cable channels in the Western Balkans. The reopening of the BBC's Serbia service stands as a positive example. On a broader point, media professionals from the region note that while there has been a great deal of attention and programming on attacks against journalists (physical and legal) and disinformation, there has been little in the way of systematic assessment and discussion of the “foreign

presence and spread of news directed from power centers” in the region.¹⁶³

Yet no amount of funding can compensate for democratic powers’ failure to consistently espouse and demonstrate their own values in practice. What representatives of established democracies say and do matters immensely. As of now, there is a well-grounded perception that when the chips are down, the West will set aside democratic principles in favor of short-term stability in the region. It takes little effort for illiberals to gain ground under these conditions.

There are a number of innovative ways for international democratic actors to deepen their engagement—including greater coordination on policy and assessment of local partners. They should demonstrate solidarity with democracy advocates in authoritarian countries, including by inviting them for gatherings in the Western Balkans and working to get their message into the local public discourse. They should also take advantage of efforts at democratic renewal within established democracies, which have already captured attention in the region. New lawmakers from places like the United States and Germany—especially those representing the younger generation—could be brought over to engage with Balkan publics. These and other such initiatives would convey the message that implementing democratic ideals requires continuous effort, and that those who want accountable governance in the region have many allies in the wider world.

Those in the established democracies and in the Western Balkans who hold democratic rights and human freedoms dear need to make common cause. Indeed, their challenges are intertwined: Many familiar features of the Western Balkan media and public space—including disinformation and divisive narratives of fear and resentment—are now on the rise across Europe and North America. The struggle to build accountable democracy in the Western Balkans is not separable from the defense of democracy in the rest of the world. The adversaries of democratic governance clearly see their shared interests. It is time for its advocates to do so as well.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Kurt Bassuener, submission to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 15 September 2017, 2, www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/Submission_of_Kurt_W_Bassuener_to_House_of_Lords_International_Relations_Committee_9_15_2017.pdf. For example, the best ranking among the six Western Balkan states in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index was Montenegro at 64, and the worst was North Macedonia at 107.
- 2 For example, the militia Srbska Čast (Serbian Pride) allegedly numbers 40,000 Balkans-wide and has members who have fought alongside Russian-backed separatists and Russians in eastern Ukraine. Anđelka Marković, "Osnivač 'Srbske čast' za N1: Udruženje broji 40.000 članova" [Founder of 'Serbian Pride' for N1: The association has 40,000 members], *N1*, 15 January 2018. <http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a237839/Osnivac-Srbske-cast-za-N1.html>. Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the tripartite Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency, has had his photo taken with members. "Dodik: Nema dokaza de je 'Srbske čast' paravojna formacija" [Dodik: There is no evidence that 'Serbian Pride' is a paramilitary formation], *Tanjug*, 17 January 2018, www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:706714-Dodik-Nema-dokaza-da-je-Srbska-cast-paravojna-formacija.
- 3 Author's contemporaneous notes from the panel discussion, "Where Is the New Phase of the Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue Taking Us?" Belgrade Security Forum, 18 October 2018.
- 4 Russia, Turkey, China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are classified as "Not Free" according to Freedom House's annual report, *Freedom in the World* 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.
- 5 For a brief summary, see Natasha Wunsch, "Stability vs. Democracy? The Dilemma of Illiberal Tendencies in the Enlargement Region," *European Western Balkans*, 23 November 2016, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/11/23/stability-vs-democracy-the-dilemma-of-illiberal-tendencies-in-the-enlargement-region/>. See also "EWB Interview, Florian Bieber: The EU Should Put More Focus on the State of Democracy in the Western Balkans," *European Western Balkans*, 17 November 2016, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/11/17/ewb-interview-florian-bieber-the-eu-should-put-more-focus-on-the-state-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans/>; Bodo Weber, "A Date for Belgrade? Conditionality, German Leadership, and Serbia's Path to the EU," Democratization Policy Council, June 2013, <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/serbiapolicy.pdf>.
- 6 This success is now qualified given the considerable backsliding on liberal democratic norms in some Class of 2004 EU members, most notably Hungary and Poland.
- 7 See *Acquis*, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, December 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/acquis_en; *Accession Criteria*, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, December 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.
- 8 The Netherlands was particularly important in ensuring indictees Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić were "discovered" and transferred to The Hague for trial.
- 9 Author interview with Sonja Biserko, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, June 2018.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is especially grateful to Armina Mujanović for providing the research support and analysis of local media reporting that was key to the production of this paper. He would also like to thank Leila Bičakčić, Senada Šelo-Šabić, and Sonja Biserko for their important contributions. Martina Hrvolova, Paul McCarthy, Jasmin Mujanović, and David Shullman kindly served as peer reviewers and offered comments; their insights, perspectives, and suggestions helped sharpen the final analysis. The author would like to thank the analysts who participated in a preview discussion of the working paper at the National Endowment for Democracy in February 2019, as well as Tyler Roylance for offering his outstanding editorial support.

Numerous Endowment staff provided expert contributions to this paper's publication, including Ivana Cvetković Bajrović, Tanja Dramac Jiries, Kaltrina Selimi, Faith Bailey Vuciterna, Andrea Blazanovic, Elena Kagan, Rachelle Faust, Shanthi Kalathil, and Christopher Walker. Particular acknowledgement goes to Forum senior research and conferences officer Jessica Ludwig, who served in a central role as the lead editor and coordinator of the overall production of the working paper.

The views expressed in this paper represent the opinions and analysis of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.



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