



The Authoritarian Nexus:

How Russia and China Undermine Democracy Worldwide

ARGENTINA | BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA | CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | CHILE | LIBYA | MONTENEGRO | NORTH MACEDONIA | SERBIA | SUDAN

The Authoritarian Nexus: How Russia and China Undermine Democracy Worldwide

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About Us | The International Republican Institute (IRI)

A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the International Republican Institute (IRI) advances freedom and democracy worldwide by helping political parties become more responsive, strengthening transparent and accountable governance, and working to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process—including women and youth. Since 1983, IRI has supported civil society organizations, journalists, and democratic activists – in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa – with programs in over 100 countries. To help bolster democracies against the corrosive effects of this rising authoritarian tide, IRI’s CFAI programming equips civil society, the media, government officials, political parties, and the private sector with the knowledge and tools to expose and counter foreign authoritarian influence.

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About CFAI

Over the past five years, IRI has developed and implemented a framework to build resiliency against growing foreign authoritarian influence and interference through its Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) practice. IRI deploys a three-pronged approach to mitigate the impact of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kremlin authoritarian influence on developing democracies:

1. Sharing research on how the CCP and the Kremlin undermines democratic processes and governance institutions with IRI’s global network of partners;
2. Empowering local stakeholders with the means to conduct similar research independently, the skills to execute advocacy campaigns to hold leaders accountable, and the tools and resources to devise and advance policy solutions to bolster their countries resilience to external influence; and
3. Catalyzing the development and adoption of locally appropriate policy solutions that mitigate CCP and Kremlin authoritarian influence.

By engaging stakeholders across sectors – including government officials, political parties, media, private enterprise, and civil society activists – IRI’s work promotes broad awareness of authoritarian tactics and the keys to shoring up vulnerable democratic institutions. The research presented in this report is part of a growing compendium of case studies documenting the CCP’s and the Kremlin’s varied authoritarian influence tactics across countries and the elements of effective democratic resilience, which directly informs CFAI programming.

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GLOSSARY

Key Terms and Abbreviations

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A large, global infrastructure and investment initiative begun by the PRC party-state in 2013. In addition to building infrastructure abroad, the project is meant to strengthen the PRC's strategic economic and security interests, and solidify a global order centered more firmly around Beijing.

BRICS: Intergovernmental organization consisting of Brazil, Russia, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.

China Exim Bank: Export-Import Bank of China, is a state-owned financial institution that provides loans, credits, and financing to support the international expansion of Chinese businesses and infrastructure projects abroad.

China Global Television Network (CGTN): The main international English-language state run media owned by CCTV, under the control of the CCP's Propaganda Department.

China-CEEC or 14+1: An initiative by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business and investment relations between China and 14 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (once known as 16+1 and 17+1).

Confucius Institutes: Confucius Institutes are public educational organizations run by the Chinese Ministry of Education-affiliated Hanban. They are dedicated to promoting Chinese language and culture and PRC viewpoints worldwide through language classes, cultural events, and academic exchanges.

Euro-Atlantic Integration: The process of political, economic, and security cooperation and alignment of countries in Europe and North America, particularly those within the European Union and NATO, with the goal of fostering stability, democracy, and prosperity in the region.

Foreign Authoritarian Influence: The combined effect of an authoritarian government's efforts to shape another country's internal disputation in ways in which are covert, coercive, and corrupt, which makes them malign, illegitimate, and distinguished from legitimate public diplomacy and engagement. To these ends, authoritarian actors and state-linked entities employ tactics such as information operations, graft, economic coercion, or the subversion of civil society.

Foreign Direct Investment: An investment made by a firm or individual in one country in business interests located in another country; this sometimes refers to the aggregation of all foreign investments into or from a particular country.

FSB: The FSB, or Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii), is the principal security agency and intelligence service of the Russian government, tasked with internal and border security, counterterrorism, and surveillance, both within Russia and abroad. It is the successor agency to the Soviet-era KGB (Committee for State Security).

Huawei: Chinese multinational technology company. It is one of the world's largest telecommunications equipment manufacturers and information and communications technology provider. Huawei has faced criticism and scrutiny due to its alleged ties to the CCP and the People's Liberation Army.

Information Operations: Information operations involve the use of information and communication technologies to influence, disrupt, or manipulate the decision-making processes of individuals, organizations, or governments, often through tactics like information manipulation, fake news, and propaganda dissemination.

Internet Research Agency (IRA): Russian organization known for engaging in online influence operations and disinformation campaigns. It has been linked to attempts to manipulate public opinion, sow discord, and interfere in elections, particularly through the use of social media platforms.

Kleptocracy: A government or political system where those in power exploit their positions to embezzle and corruptly amass wealth, often at the expense of the broader population and the state's resources.

Lukoil: Lukoil is a major Russian multinational energy corporation engaged in the exploration, production, refining, and marketing of oil and natural gas.

Malign Actor: Those acting against a democratic, pluralistic system based on the rule of law, in favor of an authoritarian one from which they benefit.

Mask/Vaccine Diplomacy: Mask and vaccine diplomacy involve the strategic distribution of medical supplies, particularly face masks and vaccines, to enhance a country's global image and diplomatic relationships, most notably deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One China Principle: The "One China" principle is a diplomatic assertion made by Beijing that there is only one sovereign state under the name China (the People's Republic of China). It asserts that the government of the PRC is the sole legitimate government representing China, including Taiwan (officially known as the Republic of China). This complements the "one China" policy, in which countries, upon establishing formal diplomatic ties with the PRC, acknowledge or take note of Beijing's claim that there is only one China.

Proxy War: Conflict in which foreign actors support and equip certain factions in another state or region in order to expand their influence and power.

RT: Formerly known as Russia Today, a state-funded international television network and online platform based in Russia, known for its news coverage and programs that often reflect the Russian government's perspectives, leading to controversy and accusations of propaganda and misinformation.

Sharp Power: The means by which authoritarian actors manipulate their target audience through a series of actions that undermine institutions, warp the information environment, and penetrate various aspects of the targeted society to weaken instruments such as transparency and accountability.

Soft Power: A state's ability to influence others through non-coercive and persuasive means, such as cultural, educational, and diplomatic initiatives, rather than through military or economic force. Soft power is often associated with a country's attractiveness, values, and the ability to shape global perceptions to advance its interests and agenda.

Sputnik: A Russian state-owned international multimedia platform and news outlet that provides news and analysis with a focus on global affairs, often criticized for its dissemination of propaganda and biased narratives in support of the Russian government's agenda.

Stabilitocracy: A regime that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability.

State-Owned Enterprise: A legal entity that is created by a government in order to partake in commercial activities on the government's behalf.

Track-2 Diplomacy: Unofficial, informal dialogue and communication channels that occur between non-governmental actors, such as academics, experts, or private citizens, from different countries or regions.

Wagner Group: A private military company based in Russia, formerly led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Wagner is involved in conflicts around the world including Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, and the Central African Republic.

World Bank: The World Bank is an international financial institution that provides loans and grants to the governments of developing countries for the purpose of pursuing capital projects.

Xinhua: Xinhua is the official state-run news agency of China, providing news coverage, features, and analysis on domestic and international events, often reflecting the Chinese government's perspective and policies.

Common Acronyms

BiH: Bosnia and Herzegovina

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa

CAR: Central African Republic

CGTN: China Global Television Network

CN CEPLA: Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America (Comité Nacional para la Cooperación Económica con los Países Latinoamericanos)

EU: European Union

FBiH: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

FDI: Foreign Direct Investment

FOCAC: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

FSB: Federal Security Service of Russia (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti)

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PMC: Private Military Contractor

PRC: People's Republic of China

RS: Republika Srpska

SOE: State Owned Enterprise

UAV: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

WB: Western Balkans

ZTE: Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment Corporation

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning relationship between Chinese and Russian Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin is currently illustrated by China's unprecedented support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increased economic and military ties between the two countries. This relationship is part of a growing authoritarian nexus of illiberal actors working together, and separately, to undermine democracy globally. So far, China and Russia have followed different paths to their goal of weakening democratic institutions and bolstering autocratic governance worldwide. As their interests converge, countries around the world are beginning to experience the compounding effects of their influence efforts.

This collection of nine country case studies examines how the corrosive actions of many authoritarian actors including, but not limited to, Russia and China, overlap and complement one another, while assessing their impact on democratic norms and institutions. The case studies shed light on how powerful malign states try to influence the politics and governance of other nations to achieve favorable outcomes for their respective interests, both in specific, targeted countries and globally.

The compendium covers the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Sudan, Argentina, Chile, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Working closely with external researchers, IRI gathered information from a wide range of sources, including local political and economic stakeholders, local news, legal documents, social media and online data, and academic studies. While the authors did not rely on the same methodology, all nine studies investigated the primary actors and drivers of foreign authoritarian influence in the target countries; the strategies, tools, and tactics they use; and how their influence, independently and collectively, impacts democracy. Together, the case studies provide a rich overview of how foreign authoritarian actors' interests and strategies converge and diverge. The studies also identify resilience to such strategies.

Each case is unique. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian troll farms are indirectly helped by China's efforts to undermine information integrity. In Montenegro, China and Russia take advantage of deep divides in the population and the media to push their agendas. In North Macedonia, although the research did not find direct cooperation between China and Russia, the two countries seem to rely on the same tactics to pressure local leadership. And in Serbia, the West's disengagement has boosted Russia and China's influence. China, a relatively recent player in the Western Balkans, is moving from business deals to more direct, cross-sectoral influence, challenging democratic values through economic means. For its part, Russia uses its historical and cultural ties to cultivate influence more directly.

Both nations exploit weak government and empower corruption, sometimes in order to make business deals, sometimes in order to influence a country's politics. To address Argentina's economic challenges some local leaders are eager to partner with China and Russia. This has led to democratic backsliding and undermined the rule of law, independent media, and U.S. interests. In neighboring Chile, Russia and China do not appear to be working together, though both countries disseminate anti-U.S. disinformation and propaganda.

IRI's research also highlights the destabilizing influence of Russia and China in CAR and Libya. In CAR, through mercenary groups like Wagner, Russia supports human rights abuses and instability in exchange for lucrative mineral and mining contracts. China funds projects that exacerbate corruption and environmental damage while disregarding human rights abuses.

In Libya, foreign authoritarian states undermine Libya's attempt to move toward peace and stability. Gulf states back armed groups and online groups who they believe will help further their own regional agendas. Russia funds foreign mercenaries, supports disinformation campaigns, and even, at one point, printed money for a parallel government.

The report's findings point to a clear need for action. Strong democratic institutions are a bulwark against foreign authoritarian influence. Shoring up the governance gaps that domestic and foreign authoritarian actors exploit is key. Awareness and education are a foundational part of this work. Civil society leaders, policymakers, civil servants, and activists need to understand the influence campaigns destabilizing their countries and develop a coherent response.

Engaging with local government officials is a crucial part of countering foreign authoritarian influence. Building alliances, addressing shared concerns, and working toward common goals builds resilience. Strengthening civil society, investigative journalism, and building regional alliances go a long way toward exposing governance gaps and creating the necessary pressure to push for change.

Combatting the spread of disinformation, improving media and digital literacy, supporting fact-checking initiatives, and increasing cybersecurity efforts are also vital. Governments need to consider tighter policies against online harassment and hate speech and broader investments in independent media, which can push back against disinformation.

Lastly, offering citizens transparent and accountable governance can diminish the appeal of undemocratic political systems. Democratic participation, the rule of law, and civic engagement can help preserve institutions from external threats.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRI's latest country case studies provide a rich body of evidence about how the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia are increasing their influence in other countries. These new studies offer fresh analysis on the intersection of the two countries' influence activities. While the specifics of each case are unique, some important themes stand out across the nine countries examined in this report.

Different Strategies, Converging Interests

The Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) overall objectives remain largely distinct, despite their strong ties.

- The CCP's main objective is its desire to create a world that is safe for the Party, a world that is open to alternatives to liberal democracy and which allows China to return to what it believes is its rightful place at the center of the world stage. This desire drives the Party to push other countries to abandon or violate their democratic ideals and rule of law. CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has called this "sharing Chinese wisdom" with the rest of the world.
- Russia's primary goal is fostering instability and destroying or undermining alliances that seek to counter its influence regionally and globally. It does this through disinformation campaigns and by use of military force; examples include its invasion of Ukraine and its presence in Belarus and Kazakhstan. Russia also relies on proxy forces like the Wagner Group to support authoritarian governments. These mercenary forces are sources of conflict and instability in countries like Niger, Mali, and the Central African Republic.

Despite some similar goals, China and Russia's approaches are distinct. IRI's research reveals few direct synergies in the two countries' strategies, tools, and tactics.

- China and Russia each wish to exert political and economic influence abroad. However, China prioritizes economic engagement as its entry point for political influence, while Russia meddles in politics and uses its proxies to engage in military and security issues.
- In all nine countries studied, both the PRC and the Kremlin rely on a range of tools to manipulate the media and information space. They use different tactics to achieve similar ends.
 - The PRC deploys a multi-pronged approach to information manipulation. This includes training journalists, disseminating pro-China narratives in PRC state-run and country-specific media, content-sharing agreements with local media, and academic exchanges through Confucius Institutes and scholarships.
 - The Kremlin focuses on state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, aiming to delegitimize independent, expert journalism and distort the very concept of truth.

Over the past year, Russia, China, and other autocrats have coalesced around similar interests. Autocratic leaders welcome the opportunity to expand their global influence, project power, and undermine the U.S. and the international system.

- China and Russia rely on distinct but similar strategies to promote illiberal norms. They work directly or through proxies, targeting the local political and business elite.
- The PRC and Russia wish to be acknowledged as great powers and push to change international norms in what they claim is an unfair system built by the West. Both use their influence to legitimize their own value systems.

Opportunistic Collusion in the Information Space

Narrative collusion is the primary area of joint influence and coordination between Russia, China, and other authoritarian actors. State media outlets push the same distorted stories across many platforms. However, such collusion is more often opportunistic than strategic.

- For example, in Montenegro, China and Russia promote disinformation through the country's ethnically-divided media.
 - They use propaganda and misinformation disseminated by pro-Serbian/pro-Russian/pro-government media to advance their stories. Examples include glorifying the PRC's management of the Covid-19 pandemic (while denigrating the EU's response) and touting the Sino-Russian alliance as a superior alternative to a liberal world order.
 - Although researchers did not find a direct link, both governments use diplomacy to support their influence work across different sectors of society.
- While IRI found no clear indication of coordination between Russia and China in Chile, there is significant overlap in the media and messaging operations of each country.
 - The PRC and Russia both seek influence in Chile's information space to enhance public perceptions of their respective engagement in the country and their strategic objectives; to advocate for a multipolar world in which each country's offerings are desirable alternatives to those of the U.S. in the fields of education, cultural exchanges, technical training, and language; and to weaken the position of the U.S.

Russia and the PRC predominantly advance similar narratives and/or amplify each other's disinformation around anti-US, anti-West, and anti-democracy propaganda and on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

- From Argentina to Bosnia and Herzegovina, PRC state media portrays itself as a neutral party, yet it amplifies Kremlin narratives about the war in Ukraine, Putin's justifications for the invasion, and anti-Western and anti-NATO messages.
- Russian state-media then cites PRC sources on the war to demonstrate support for its position, in a propaganda feedback loop.

Authoritarian-sponsored propaganda and disinformation resonate with audiences, particularly in places where anti-U.S., anti-West, and anti-democracy narratives are pervasive.

- In Latin America, RT and Sputnik remain influential, with a combined following of 30.4 million on all social media accounts. Russia's RT Español was the third-most shared site on X, formerly Twitter, for Spanish-language information about the invasion of Ukraine.
- In North Macedonia, the PRC and Russia exploit perceived EU and U.S. disengagement from the Western Balkans. They also make use of Macedonians' disappointment with what they see as poor management of their country's NATO and EU integration.
- Authoritarian actors amplifying each other's disinformation and propaganda has a compounding impact on information integrity.
 - Across Latin America, Russian, Venezuelan, and Iranian outlets offer overlapping narratives depicting the U.S. as a counter-revolutionary enemy of humanity with vast imperialist designs.

Elite Capture and Corruption

The PRC and Russia gain influence through elite capture and by exploiting governance gaps.

- In Serbia, the PRC and Russia co-opt all-too-willing government officials and local leaders, to the detriment of democracy. Russia and the PRC exploit Serbia's highly centralized and captured state to advance their agendas.
- In North Macedonia, both countries cultivate elites and exploit institutionalized corruption. They take advantage of weak institutions and a soft regulatory environment to make opaque deals.
 - This is a win-win opportunity for both foreign and domestic authoritarian actors. Corrupt political elites can demonstrate economic and diplomatic gains without relying on EU and U.S. "conditional" help, while the PRC and Russia influence the country's domestic and international affairs.

Authoritarian models of doing business facilitate corruption and undermine transparency and accountability.

- In the Central African Republic, PRC and Russia-based companies encourage corruption at the local and national in order to sign lucrative mining and mineral contracts.
 - Russian economic influence operations are often hidden in a web of shell corporations and corrupt deals. The Kremlin manipulates governance cracks in the local mining industry to facilitate Kremlin-affiliated businesses in the CAR.
 - The PRC's influence tactics focus on economic coercion and exploiting local governance weaknesses that allow PRC-based businesses to extract resources. The PRC has a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. This allows it to ignore human rights abuses, environmental degradation, and rising conflict.
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, loose loan and investment terms make it easy for domestic actors already inclined toward corruption to turn to the PRC or Russia, as autocracies reward corrupt officials in ways that liberal democracies do not.

Nexus of Authoritarianism Exacerbates Democratic Decline and Fosters Instability

Where their interests converge, China and Russia use their positions on the UN Security Council and at other international institutions to undermine the international rules-based order.

- The PRC and Russia strongly oppose Kosovo's independence and use their influence to prevent Kosovo's membership in international organizations, in particular in the UN and its specialized agencies, like UNESCO, and multilateral agencies, like Interpol.
- In July 2021, Russia and China jointly proposed abolishing the position of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina to the UN Security Council. For China, this was allegedly in response to BiH's statements on Xinjiang, while for Russia, this action was in response to longstanding calls from Bosnian Serbs to dissolve the office over disagreements with its authority.

The case studies in this report found a noticeable pattern of authoritarian actors exploiting governance gaps. These gaps allow multiple actors to weaken democratic institutions and societies more efficiently and rapidly. Such gaps include:

- Corruption and an economic and political elite concerned only with self-enrichment
- Weak institutions
- Limited transparency and accountability measures combined with a lack of open data
- Limited civic and political space
- Fragile independent media outlets and a lack of information integrity

In conflict-affected contexts, foreign authoritarian influence contributes to instability and undermines prospects for peace.

- In Libya, authoritarian actors manipulate politics and conflict to protect their interests. The more unstable Libya became, the more deeply they engaged, and the more they engaged, the more Libya fell into chaos. Outside powers funded new armed groups or invested in existing ones, fueled disinformation, and intervened economically. Foreign influence has significantly undermined Libya's attempt to transition to stability.
- In CAR, PRC and Kremlin-affiliated companies and security forces have exacerbated fragility. This economic exploitation is coupled with disinformation campaigns that portray both countries as better partners than former colonial power France, the UN, and other Western countries and institutions. While the Kremlin's influence in the CAR heavily outweighs the PRC's, both countries undermine previous peacebuilding and governance efforts while bolstering pro-authoritarian narratives.
- In Sudan, external authoritarian actors have co-opted civilian opposition in ways that sideline civil society altogether. Russia, the PRC, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE all seek influence from elites ranging from military leaders to business owners to media outlets, greatly complicating Sudan's path to peace and democracy.

Democratic Resilience**Transparency and accountability measures are effective in limiting the impact of foreign authoritarian influence.**

- Chile's open government and transparency initiatives, for example, limits foreign authoritarian influence and its impact on government. It includes policies that address:
 - Access to information
 - Financial declarations
 - Beneficial ownership registries
 - Restrictions on lobbying
- Media and access to information have been crucial: more information means more integrity and less popular indifference, less elite impunity.

Independent media is a key source of democratic resilience to authoritarianism.

- Intrepid journalists report on democratic backsliding, corruption, and other governance challenges. This reporting is foundational for developing greater awareness about the scope and scale of foreign authoritarian influence and its local impact, an essential step in building democratic resilience.



AFRICA

THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Introduction

The CAR has been caught in a cycle of recurrent violence since the 1960s. Armed groups control more than two-thirds of the country, and one in four Central Africans are displaced.¹ Weak institutions, both in the capital Bangui, and in remote areas, create a fragile environment prone to violent conflict and disruptive foreign influence. Because of the collapse of government control, many of the armed groups provide basic services to citizens in remote areas. These areas often sit atop vast amounts of natural resources that foreign businesses extract and export under deals with the capital.²

The sudden appearance of Russian mercenaries in the CAR in 2018 drew the world's attention to the country's fragility and the powerful global dynamics at play there. The Russian Federation's grip on President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's regime highlights the vulnerability of countries coping with extreme poverty. Mercenary groups have, in many instances, teamed with the CAR's military and non-state armed groups to protect resource assets across the country. Some of the armed groups have been accused of war crimes.³

PRC-based companies have facilitated corruption locally and nationally to execute resource extraction projects. While exercising its "non-interference" policy,⁴ the PRC has turned a blind eye to human rights abuses, environmental degradation, and increases in conflict surrounding its projects, so long as it is financially beneficial to those in power. Wagner Group mercenaries have offered protection to PRC-based mining projects with one instance of an attack gone wrong with all parties blaming the others.⁵

The presence of foreign mining companies and private security forces (contracted mostly by the Kremlin) have exacerbated fragility in CAR. Given the country's long history of authoritarian dictatorships and armed conflict, the PRC and the Kremlin have been able to pursue their economic and political interests with little consequence and indeed at the request of elite actors in the CAR. Recently the two countries have expanded their reach to disinformation campaigns to portray themselves in a positive light, in stark contrast to France, a former colonial power, the United Nations, and other Western countries and institutions. While the Kremlin's influence in the CAR heavily outweighs the PRC's, both states work to undermine previous peacebuilding and governance efforts while bolstering pro-authoritarian narratives.

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2 "Central African Republic: War Crimes by Ex-Seleka Rebels." Human Rights Watch, 24 November 2013. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/24/central-african-republic-war-crimes-ex-seleka-rebels>.

3 "Central African Republic: War Crimes by Ex-Seleka Rebels."

4 The PRC's "policy of non-interference" is described in the CCP's communique as the "abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country", essentially denying the PRC the right to influence internal affairs in other states. The underlying assumption is that in turn, other states will not influence internal affairs in the PRC. Li, Jason. "Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics." Stimson Center, 27 August 2019. <https://www.stimson.org/2019/conflict-mediation-chinese-characteristics-how-china-justifies-its-non-interference-policy/>.

5 "CAR Mine Massacre May Be Linked To Wagner Mercenaries." ADF, 25 April 2023. <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/04/car-mine-massacre-may-be-linked-to-wagner-mercenaries/#:~:text=The%20government%20has%20blamed%20foreigners%20for%20the%20attack,Karim%20Meckassoua%2C%20who%20fled%20the%20country%20in%202021>.

Historical Context

Cycles of violence and political instability in the CAR are often based on natural resource conflict. But the underlying cause of instability in the country is the lack of democratic governance in remote areas rich in natural resources, and militant groups that have filled this void. These areas are largely controlled by Muslim militant groups collectively known as Séléka. President Bozizé's regime escalated tensions in resource-rich rural areas when his administration set up Christian self-defense groups, known as anti-balaka forces, to provide security from organized crime. This decision, in 2009, exacerbated tensions⁶ along religious lines.

The most recent political crisis began in late 2012 after an alliance between rebel movements from northern and eastern CAR turned violent. Most of these rebel movements began as Islamic militant groups which grew and expanded in the absence of a police or military presence.⁷ Under the leadership of former CAR President Michel Djotodia, a Soviet-trained civil servant, these disparate groups were organized into a larger force known as Séléka.⁸ In March 2013, Séléka marched to the capital, Bangui, with the goal of ousting then-President François Bozizé.⁹

Recent reports reveal that not only did the government train the anti-balaka groups, but they also received training from foreign private military contractors.¹⁰ These forces quickly claimed authority in remote areas, sometimes competing with existing militant groups and often attacking Muslim civilians. This dispelled whatever small semblance of solidarity was left between Muslim leaders and the capital, and ultimately prompted several rural militias to band together. For some of the allied groups, their only commonality was religion; many Séléka militia members were long-time refugees from Darfur, Chad, and Sudan, who lived in the CAR for decades.

Instability across the country continues to the present. The Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), a coalition united by Bozizé of ex-Seleka and anti-balaka combatants from around the country, has staged three attacks on major transit routes across CAR.¹¹ Under the CPC, both ex-Séléka and anti-balaka groups continue to commit widespread atrocities. In December 2021, an anti-balaka group killed at least 20 civilians, burned 547 houses, displaced 1,000 villagers, and raped women and girls. Other areas in CAR suffered from similar horrific events, with documented cases of mass conflict-related sexual violence.

The casualty reports also state that many of these groups were trained by foreign private military contractors, although the exact trainers and their outfits are never revealed. This lack of transparency and accountability has led to widespread mistrust among Central Africans and, understandably, uncertainty about who to trust for aid. Stability in CAR not only rests on domestic leadership but also on the foreigners aiding and abetting those committing human rights violations.

Stability in CAR not only rests on domestic leadership but also on the foreigners aiding and abetting those committing human rights violations.

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10 "Central African Republic: UN reports detail serious violations, some possibly amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity." United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 25 July 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/central-african-republic-un-reports-detail-serious-violations-some-possibly>.

11 Picco, Enrica. "Ten Years After the Coup, Is the Central African Republic Facing Another Major Crisis?" International Crisis Group, 22 March 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/dix-ans-apres-le-coup-detat-la-republique>.

Authoritarian Influence Operations

The PRC and Russia operate with various degrees of intensity in the CAR. Russia primarily works through the Wagner Group, relying on business elites, private mercenary groups, and old Soviet political ties to build its sphere of influence.¹² In return for military aid and strategic political alliances, the Touadéra regime protects Wagner by concealing its connections to mining, mineral, and gem operations in the CAR¹³ and by making sure Russian companies have sole access to mines.¹⁴ Russia has often used former Soviet ties to bolster connections with influencers to strengthen Pan-Africanism. The goal is to increase anti-colonial, anti-French, and anti-UN sentiments in the region.¹⁵ The Kremlin also relies on Wagner to forge ties. Wagner has its own media campaigns, launched through “local” NGOs directly affiliated with Wagner Group’s now-deceased founder Yevgeny Prigozhin’s networks.¹⁶

PRC influence tends to focus on the economic. In the CAR, most economic deals are facilitated by the Chinese Embassy.¹⁷ Many Chinese-backed projects over the last decade have resulted in detrimental environmental effects. This includes companies deserting projects and leaving contaminated landscapes,¹⁸ chemicals killing fish and other wildlife,¹⁹ and entire industries working with armed groups accused of sex crimes.²⁰ However, given recent upticks in conflict, the PRC has started to pull some of its operations out of the CAR. After several Chinese nationals were killed by militants at a gold mine in early 2023, the PRC’s Embassy announced it was boosting security protocols, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated it would rethink operations in conflict-affected areas in Africa.²¹ Still, in the CAR’s information ecosystem, the PRC has put a heavy emphasis on portraying itself as a neutral peacebuilder, willing to lend economic aid when beneficial.²²

Russia

Russia’s pivot toward Africa can be linked to its 2014 invasion of Crimea and the subsequent implementation of international sanctions. Cognizant of the impact of these sanctions, Russia sought to deepen its ties to African countries to expand its geopolitical influence, secure access to natural resources, strengthen military and security ties, and counterbalance the influence of other global powers.

Toward this end, Russia hosted its first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October 2019. It was reminiscent of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). African heads of state and a variety of pan African influencers attended the event,²³ which was sponsored and organized by the International Agency of Sovereign Development (IASD), chaired by Konstantine Malofeev, a Russian Oligarch charged in 2022 with violating U.S. sanctions.²⁴ IASD purports to offer a variety of services to African regimes such as restructuring “aid”, financing without the imposition of democratic and minority rights, assistance to companies in Africa that pose as shells for Russian businesses, and aiding both African and Russian companies attempting to circumvent international sanctions.

12 “Rally in Support of Russia and China Held in Central African Republic.” *Russkiy Mir*, 23 March 2023. <https://ruskiymir.ru/en/news/311579/>.

13 “Treasury Sanctions Illicit Gold Companies Funding Wagner Forces and Wagner Group Facilitator.” U.S. Department of the Treasury, 27 June 2023. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1581>.

14 Di Roma, Clement and Carol Valade. “Central African Republic: Under Russian Influence.” *France 24*, 10 September 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20220910-central-african-republic-under-russian-influence>.

15 Posthumus, Bram. “Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic.” *Aljazeera*, 20 May 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/5/20/the-curious-case-of-russias-romance-in-central-african-republic>.

16 “Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government’s Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections.” U.S. Department of the Treasury, 15 April 2021. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0126>.

17 Liao, Xingmiao, and Wen-Hsuan Tsai. “Clientelistic State Corporatism: The United Front Model of ‘Pairing-Up’ in the Xi Jinping Era.” *China Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, February 2019, pp. 31–56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26603249>. Accessed 26 Sep. 2022.

18 “In the Central African Republic, the Environment is Threatened by Chinese Mining Operations.” *Fondation Hirondelle*, 25 July 2019. <https://www.hirondelle.org/de/unsere-medien/910-in-the-central-african-republic-the-environment-is-threatened-by-chinese-mining-operations>.

19 “In the Central African Republic, the Environment is Threatened by Chinese Mining Operations.”

20 “Timber companies paid in CAR armed groups millions, claims report.” *The Guardian*, 15 July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jul/15/central-african-republic-timber-trade-paid-millions-armed-groups>.

21 “Armed Men Kill Nine Chinese Nationals in Central African Republic.” *The Guardian*, 20 March 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/20/armed-men-kill-chinese-nationals-central-african-republic>.

22 “Central African Republic: 20 elements of the Special Guard Responsible for Republican Protection trained by Chinese instructor [Centrafrique: 20 Éléments De La Garde Spéciale Chargés De La Protection Républicaine Formés Par Des Instructeurs Chinois].” *Abangui*, 8 December 2018. <http://news.abangui.com/h/66290.html>.

23 Clifford, Cayley and Steven Gruzid. “Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power.” *Africa Portal*, 23 February 2022. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russian-and-african-media-exercising-soft-power/>.

24 “Russian Oligarch Charged with Violating U.S. Sanctions.” United States Department of Justice, 6 April 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/russian-oligarch-charged-violating-us-sanctions>.

Mikhail Leshchenko is the founder and head of the IASD and served as former deputy head of Svyazinvest, Russia's former largest telecommunications holding company and an adviser to the Minister of Communications and Mass Media. Malofeev and Leshchenko leverage longstanding former Soviet connections to ruling elites throughout the African continent to pursue these objectives.²⁵

Yevgeny Prigozhin, who previously controlled Wagner before his death in an August 2023 plane crash, was notably absent from the Sochi summit. His absence was significant, given the role Wagner plays in promoting Kremlin interests across sub-Saharan Africa. Although private military companies are illegal in Russia, the Wagner Group and its constellation of organizations, from media organizations to think tanks, clearly operated with the benefits of the Russian state – and at its behest.²⁶ These organizations also push for continued military aid by highlighting Wagner victories. Despite a series of defeats in countries across Africa in 2019,²⁷ including when Wagner Group forces withdrew from Mozambique, the group has been able to increase the number of mercenaries in the CAR. Using propaganda filtered through organizations formerly linked to Prigozhin, such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Wagner highlights its successes and obfuscates its defeats. IRA activities in sub-Saharan Africa also criticize Western actors present on the continent, further undermining any security presence and advancing Russia's presence in its place.²⁸

Other groups, like the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) and the International Anticrisis Center (a think tank) run by Russian nationals, engaged in propaganda and disinformation campaigns. One of the Russian nationals, Petr Byschkov, is the head of Wagner's Africa Back Office, which influences policies in favor of Wagner and Kremlin interests. There is evidence that AFRIC was used for fake election monitoring missions in Zimbabwe, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Mozambique.²⁹ The aim of these missions was to legitimize undemocratic electoral processes that other credible observation missions deemed illegitimate and to weaken political rivals by publishing false information.³⁰ These examples demonstrate how the Kremlin's strategy in sub-Saharan Africa relies on concealing its malign influence tactics and supporting authoritarian values via a wide net of affiliated entities.

Russian Strategy in the CAR

The Kremlin has found strong allies in the CAR by using connections founded on former Soviet ties, Wagner's willingness to fight militia groups around the country, and support for authoritarian leadership. In return for military and political aid, the Touadéra administration has consistently protected Russian economic interests. This mutually beneficial relationship has occurred against the backdrop of continued conflict and the growth of anti-French, and often anti-West, sentiments throughout the CAR and predominately in Bangui.³¹ The Wagner Group's presence in the CAR is an example of how the company uses its influence to prolong conflict so that other Kremlin-backed private companies can benefit from natural resource extraction and public contracting jobs.

The Kremlin's influence operations in Africa follow a three-pronged process to achieve these goals. First, it co-opts government leaders who become dependent on Russia for security cooperation, economic aid, and political support to authoritarian leaders. Next, it constructs a predatory system using local leaders' dependence on the Kremlin to access territory for natural resource extraction. Russian authorities devolve extraction management to the "private sector," largely run by oligarchs and Kremlin-affiliated elites.

25 Maldonado, Matt. "Russia's Hardest Working Oligarch Takes Talents to Africa." PONARS Eurasia, 28 September 2020. www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-s-hardest-working-oligarch-takes-talents-to-africa.

26 Edwards, Neil. "Coup-Proofing: Russia's Military Blueprint to Securing Resources in Africa." Council on Foreign Relations, 10 March 2021. www.cfr.org/blog/coup-proofing-russias-military-blueprint-securing-resources-africa.

27 Sukhankin, Sergey. "Russian Mercenaries Pour Into Africa and Suffer More Losses (Part One)". Jamestown Foundation, 21 January 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mercenaries-pour-into-africa-and-suffer-more-losses-part-one/>.

28 Culliford, Elizabeth. "Facebook, Twitter Remove Russia-linked Accounts in Ghana Targeting." Reuters, 12 March 2020. www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-content-idUSKBN20Z3LW.

29 "Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections."

30 Shekhovtsov, Anton. "Fake election observation as Russia's tool of election interference: The Case of AFRIC." European Platform for Democratic Elections, 10 April 2020. <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/fake-election-observation-as-russias-tool-of-election-interference-the-case-of-afric-2599.html>.

31 Di Roma, Clement and Carol Valade. "Central African Republic: Under Russian Influence." France 24, 10 September 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20220910-central-african-republic-under-russian-influence>.

Finally, Russia drives out potential competition that might challenge Russia's position. Those include political opponents, such as the former colonial powers and the UN, and local opposition and/or investigative journalists. In the CAR, Russian-linked entities exercise control over the apparatuses of state, like customs, tax, and justice which, in particular, are infiltrated or corrupted in a way that is favorable to Russian interests.³²

According to leaked documents obtained by the Dossier Center, an investigative team based in London funded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russian businessman and exiled Kremlin critic, the CAR is a key country in Russia's efforts to exert influence in Africa. Per the documents, the CAR is listed as strategically important in aiding Moscow's expansion across sub-Saharan Africa. It was Prigozhin's role to facilitate much of this expansion through his constellation of companies.³³ These narratives can be interpreted as corroborating with the Kremlin's plan to revive "pan-African consciousness" for local buy-in that facilitates smoother business and by working with corrupt political operations.³⁴

The Kremlin creates a complicated network of actors to bury its ties to any of the malign operations listed throughout this report. What is known is that at the top of this web was Yevgeny Prigozhin, who enjoyed close ties to Putin until his June 2023 attempted coup and subsequent, allegedly unrelated death. Prigozhin directly managed Concord, a parent company for at least seven other companies that all have a strategic international malign influence purpose. Of these companies under Concord, Prigozhin managed the Wagner Group as well as three CAR-based companies, M-Finans, Lobaye Invest, and SEWA Security Services. Each company denies involvement with the other, but the connections between these companies has been made evident by following payments between executives.³⁵

Moscow also denies connections between Concord's businesses formerly run by Prigozhin and Russia's deployment of military advisors under the military agreement signed with the CAR. One of the training officers deployed under the 2017 Russian training mission to the CAR Valery Zakharov, a former Kremlin military intelligence officer, became the security advisor to Touadéra. Zakharov's positioning as security advisor gave Moscow a direct line of communication to the Touadéra regime, ultimately giving them a significant input on military and political operations. Zakharov denied any connections to Wagner group and noted he was sent as a representative of the Russian state. However, CNN reporters were able to find direct payments from M-Finans to Zakharov.³⁶ Zakharov is also believed to be behind the creation of at least two of the Wagner-affiliated companies, Lobaye Invest, which is active in the mining sector, and SEWA Security, which denies any activity in the Central African Republic.³⁷

Military and Political Influence

Russia's extensive influence operations in the CAR began in 2018 against a backdrop of complex tribal and religious conflict, when the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement.³⁸ The groundwork for this deal started in 2017 when Touadéra met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and, a year later, with Putin himself in Sochi. At the time, the CAR was facing UN sanctions and Russia had been lobbying to lift those sanctions.³⁹ The meeting in Sochi took place a year after France declared its peacekeeping operations in the CAR complete,⁴⁰ as well as many years of the PRC's minimalist approach towards the Touadéra régime.

32 Lamigeon, Vincent. "Wagner, enquête sur l'armée de l'ombre de Poutine." *Challenges*, 16 February 2022. https://www.challenges.fr/monde/wagner-l-armee-fantome-de-poutine_800954.

33 Harding, Luke, and Jason Burke. "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa." *The Guardian*, 11 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

34 Roger, Benjamin and Georges Dougueli. "Investigation - Behind the scenes of Russian softpower in Africa [Enquête - Dans les coulisses du softpower russe en Afrique]." *JeuneAfrique*, 27 July 2021. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1205392/politique/enquete-dans-les-coulisses-du-softpower-russe-en-afrique/>.

35 Lister, Tim, Shukla, Sebastian, and Clarissa Ward. "Putin's Private Army." *CNN Special Report*, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/08/africa/putins-private-army-car-intl/>.

36 Lister, Shukla, and Ward. "Putin's Private Army."

37 Olivier, Mathieu. "Russia-Central Africa : Who are the Russian Guardian Angels of Faustin-Archange Touadéra ? [Russie-Centrafricque: Qui Sont Les Anges Gardiens Russes De Faustin-Archange Touadéra?]" *JeuneAfrique*, 14 March 2021. www.jeuneafrique.com/1136448/politique/russie-centrafricque-qui-sont-les-anges-gardiens-russes-de-faustin-archange-touadera.

38 "Russia Signs Military Cooperation Deal With Central African Republic." *Radio Free Europe*, 22 August 2018. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1136448/politique/russie-centrafricque-qui-sont-les-anges-gardiens-russes-de-faustin-archange-touadera/>.

39 Posthumus. "Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic."

40 "France ends Sangaris military operation in CAR." *BBC News*, 31 October 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37823047>.

Touadéra and the previous transitional government asked the UN Security Council to lift the arms embargo so that international actors could step in -- arguing that this was the best means to provide security and regain territory controlled by the armed groups. The Security Council kept the embargo in place, citing security and human rights concerns. A leaked document from the meeting held between Lavrov and Touadéra in October 2017, ahead of the 2018 Sochi summit,⁴¹ shows how Russia was able to insinuate itself into the CAR's domestic affairs. Only two months after this meeting, Russia got an exemption from the embargo and supplied the CAR with military weapons and training.⁴²

Prior to the agreement, in 2017, the Security Council approved a Russian training mission in the CAR, but Wagner troops arrived instead. According to anonymous former Wagner employees, Russia relied on former Soviet connections in sub-Saharan Africa to advocate for increased military cooperation between Wagner and local military troops throughout the region.⁴³ In October 2019, at the second Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, Wagner's involvement was integrated into the CAR's security framework, with commitments that Wagner mercenaries would work with Central African Forces (FACA) troops, and that Russian military advisors would communicate directly with Touadéra.⁴⁴

The military cooperation agreement between the CAR and Russia also came shortly after three independent Russian journalists working for an investigative project were murdered in July 2018 while filming a documentary on Wagner (see more details below). The project they were investigating was funded by Mikhail Khordorkovsky, an exiled Russian businessman living in London.⁴⁵ In response, the Kremlin denied any allegations of ties to these murders and instead used their deaths as an excuse to expedite the signing of a defense cooperation agreement, arguing that this was a necessary step toward securing resource extraction projects around the country. The cooperation agreement established new delegation exchanges, education at Russian military institutes, and deployment of Russian military instructors and security personnel.⁴⁶

Since the agreement was signed, Russian military advisors have been stationed throughout the CAR training FACA troops alongside Wagner mercenaries.⁴⁷ There are also established Russian military bases, mostly occupied by Wagner.⁴⁸ New FACA recruits are being trained in Russian, using Russian weapons, and posters reading "Russia: hand in hand with your army!" line the streets of Bangui. There seems to be no distinction in the CAR between Russian military aid and the Wagner Group's presence in the country.⁴⁹ FACA has also since been accused of human rights abuses and war crimes.⁵⁰

Wagner Operations in the CAR since the Agreements

In January 2021, Wagner operatives worked with the CAR army to repel a CPC assault on the capital. Prigozhin's media sources in the CAR ran laudatory stories about Wagner's success, leading many locals to see it as crucial to their security.⁵¹ However, Wagner is also seen a source of instability, demonstrating the impact of Russia's presence on local community-based conflict. Later in the year, it was reported that Wagner soldiers killed at least 40 civilians in an ethnic Fulani village.

41 "Central African Republic/Russia, Mondafrique's Revelations on the Sochi Meeting [Centrafrique/Russie, Les Révélations De Mondafrique Sur La Rencontre De Sotchi]." Mondafrique, 1 April 2019. <https://mondafrique.com/international/centrafrique-russie-les-revelations-de-mondafrique-sur-la-rencontre-de-sotchi/>.

42 Letter dated 23 July 2018, from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to resolution 2399 (2018) addressed to the President of the Security Council; Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2399 (2018) [S/2018/729]. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1636854?ln=en>.

43 Lister, Shukla, and Ward. "Putin's Private Army."

44 Posthumus, Bram. "Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic."

45 Stronski, Paul. "Journalists Killed in Central African Republic Amid Growing Russian Presence." Carnegie Endowment, 2 August 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/02/journalists-killed-in-central-african-republic-amid-growing-russian-presence-pub-76970>.

46 "Russia Signs Military Cooperation Deal With Central African Republic." Radio Free Europe, 22 August 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-signs-military-cooperation-deal-central-african-republic-vagner-investigation-russian-reporters-killed/29446656.html>.

47 "Russian military advisors present in Central African Republic, yet Moscow's involvement in internal affairs out of question - Peskov." Interfax, 20 January 2022. <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/73652/>.

48 Koena, Jean Fernand. "Unknown Aircraft Targets Wagner Base in C. African Republic." AP News, 29 November 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/europe-africa-central-african-republic-bangui-161ab4f3ed86484c200f1353b11481c7>.

49 Lister, Shukla, and Ward. "Putin's Private Army."

50 Chahed, Nadia. "Central African Republic: At Least 40 Civilians Killed in an Operation by Russian Mercenaries in the Northwest." AA News, 9 September 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/centrafrique-au-moins-40-civils-tu%C3%A9s-dans-une-op%C3%A9ration-des-mercenaires-russes-dans-le-nord-ouest-m%C3%A9dias/2360058>.

51 Posthumus. "Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic."

The Fulani are members of the country's Muslim minority.⁵² Other reports indicate that Russian-speaking forces killed at least twelve unarmed civilians in Bossangoa, a village in the western part of the country.⁵³ Putin continues to deny official Russian involvement in the CAR, insisting that the only official Russian presence in the CAR are military instructors and advisors.⁵⁴ Despite this, Wagner-affiliated media continues to propagandize the "success" of "Russian troops" in protecting lives across the CAR.

Wagner's presence in the CAR, as in Sudan, is increasing, and so are mining rights for Russian companies to gold and diamond mines.⁵⁵ During the first half of 2023, CPC made significant gains in territories with large-scale mining operations. All of these skirmishes involved Wagner fighting alongside FACA forces. The first fight was near a customs office between the capital and Cameroon, a location that is strategically critical for trade. The second attack, just a few days later, took place in Vakaga, a gold mining region near the border with Sudan. Several Wagner combatants died in this attack. It is notable that in mid-2022, the government prohibited locals from working in gold production in the region. This was to grant sole access for Russian entities to operate the mines. The third attack also occurred in Vakaga, and a fourth attack in March in Ouaka, in central CAR, targeting China Gold Coast Group's mining operation, killing nine PRC nationals. Wagner Group and CPC both accused each other of staging the attack.⁵⁶

Economic Influence

Russia's economic influence in the CAR largely centers around the mining industry. Diamonds are found all over the CAR and have driven much of the resource-based conflict in the country. In 2019, Russia served as vice-chair of the Kimberly Process, an international organization that promotes the removal of conflict diamonds throughout the global supply chain. As vice-chair, the Kremlin frequently advocated to reduce transparency in the industry. In November 2019, the Kimberly Process gave the CAR the right to issue certificates to companies to export rough diamonds from specific "green zones." This was a stark change from the 2013 Kimberly Process ban on all diamond sales from the CAR given their designation as blood diamonds⁵⁷ and previous requirement for international observers to certify all exports.⁵⁸ By 2021 Russia became the chair of the Kimberly Process, arguing to further reduce restrictions on the export of diamonds.⁵⁹

Leopold Mboli Fatran, the Minister of Mines, argues that most of the blood diamonds are from illegal operations. He posits that government control of such mines would clean them up and put an end to the production of conflict diamonds.⁶⁰ However, the Ministry of Mines granted several permits to Lobaye Invest in 2018. The permits specify that Khodotov, Prigozhin's associate, would be the permit holder.⁶¹ In late 2019, Midas Ressource, a more discreet Russian entity registered in Madagascar acquired a gold mining license that was previously held by a Canadian company named Axmin. According to Axmin, Russian actors incited insecurity in Ndassima, where the mine is located, to prohibit Axmin from exploiting the mine, which is worth an estimated \$2.8 billion. The CAR government took away Axmin's licenses without legal basis, and currently international arbitration is underway.⁶² While Russian economic influence operations are concealed behind a web of shell corporations and corrupt business dealings, reporting has demonstrated how the Kremlin manipulates governance cracks in the local mining industry, and how the Kremlin abused its spot in the Kimberly Process to facilitate Prigozhin's businesses in the CAR.

52 Chahed. "Central African Republic: At Least 40 Civilians Killed in an Operation by Russian Mercenaries in the Northwest."

53 "CAR: HRW denounces alleged abuses of Russian mercenary group." Aljazeera, 4 May 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/4/car-hrw-denounces-alleged-abuses-of-russian-mercenary-group>.

54 Posthumus. "Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic."

55 Lister, Shukla, and Ward. "Putin's Private Army."

56 Picco. "Ten Years After the Coup, Is the Central African Republic Facing Another Major Crisis?"

57 Searcey, Dionne. "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic." New York Times, 30 September 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>.

58 Spiller, Cole, Metzger, Celia, and Matthew Crittenden. "Russian Engagement in Africa: Case Study." SCOPE Reports, 19 March 2021. https://www.scopecdata.org/reports/2021-3-19_CAR.html.

59 Spiller, Metzger, and Crittenden. "Russian Engagement in Africa: Case Study."

60 Searcey. "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic."

61 Spiller, Metzger, and Crittenden. "Russian Engagement in Africa: Case Study."

62 "Ndassima mining file : an arbitration between the Central African republic and Axmin will be held in Abidjan. [Dossier minier de Ndassima: un arbitrage entre la Centrafrique et Axmin se tiendra à Abidjan]." RFI, 20 Sept. 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210920-dossier-minier-de-ndassima-un-arbitrage-entre-la-centrafrique-et-axmin-se-tiendra-%C3%A0-abidjan>.

Information Influence

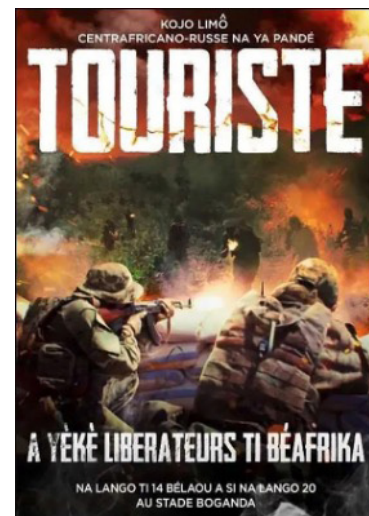
In the 2017 Sochi agreement between Lavrov and Touadéra, Russia agreed to train local media specialists on techniques and strategies for launching information operations in the CAR. Influence in the CAR happens across three main areas: informational (using both online and traditional media), political (via political entities and NGOs), and by leveraging Russia's support to foreign regimes for financial gains (government contracts that favor Russian companies). There are several key strategies the Kremlin has used to manipulate the information space in the CAR.

Much of Russia's information manipulation strategy in the CAR focuses on driving a wedge between the CAR and the West, drawing on post-colonial anti-West sentiments, and creating the narrative that the MINUSCA, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, has not helped Central Africans. A lexical analysis of keywords from 67 articles from Kremlin-media outlets in the Central African Republic concluded that many articles are either complimentary or defensive of Russian presence in the CAR, and many were critical of French and/or UN presence in the CAR. All in all, most of the news articles were attempting to paint Russia as a peacekeeping presence in the CAR, in stark contrast to other actors.⁶³ This last narrative also posits that Russian military operations are the only successful way to fight rebel violence.

Russian propaganda latches onto and amplifies local narratives that resonate with the population. Prigozhin masterminded a narrative that Russia backs Pan-Africanism in a way that the West can never do. Much of these efforts have drawn on deeply rooted anti-French colonial sentiments. Director of the Africa Program at the Royal Institute of International Affairs argued that local appreciation of Russian presence is "absolutely tied" to anti-French sentiments.⁶⁴ Much of Russia's public buy-in has played on the narrative that the UN and France are colonial powers that do not want to help. It remains to be seen how Prigozhin's apparatus can be maintained following his death, but presumably the Kremlin plans to replicate his operations through another proxy actor. While it might seem like Prigozhin's downfall indicates that Putin has strengthened control over the war in the Defense Ministry, plenty of evidence says otherwise. Private Russian military companies are still growing. The National Guard, which often clashes with the army command, has received more military-like resources. Therefore, more conflicts within the elite are likely, which might involve violence, and spill over to Russia's new 'spheres of influence' outside of Russia.

The "Russians are the Real Heroes and Peacekeepers"

Russia has also used cultural engagement to advance favorable narratives about its security engagement in the country. Propaganda that shares a similar goal are the short animation movie "Lion Bear" and the Hollywood-style action movie "The Tourist." In "The Tourist," Russian mercenaries are portrayed as the CAR's saviors, nearly single-handedly saving the country from rebel attacks during the 2020 elections and keeping the country from plunging back into civil war. Thousands of people saw "The Tourist" in Bangui's main stadium, and it features subtitles in Sango, the country's national language. A year before, in the same stadium, the Kremlin's top military trainer in the CAR, screened a Mozambican movie called "Granite," which is about a private military contractor's adventures in that country's Cabo Delgado province. It falsely depicts a successful mission, though in reality the Wagner intervention it inspired was a humiliating defeat.⁶⁵



Poster of the film Touriste, praising Wagner "the liberators of the Central African Republic."

63 Audinet, Maxime. 2021. "The lion, the bear, and the hyenas. Actors, practices and stories of Russian information influence in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa [Le lion, l'ours et les hyènes. Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone]." *Études de l'IRSEM*, July 2021. <https://www.irsem.fr/institut/actualites/etude-de-l-irsem-n-83-2021-audinet.html>.

64 Posthumus, Bram. 2022. "Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic."

65 Dukhan, Nathalia. "State of Prey: Proxies, Predators, and Profiteers in the Central African Republic." *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 31 October 2020. <https://africacenter.org/security-article/state-of-prey-proxies-predators-and-profiteers-in-the-central-african-republic/>.

Local Influence: Building Trust in Remote Areas

While Pan-African narratives shape overall perceptions towards the west, Russia enrolls local actors to ‘franchise’ influence operations within the local contexts. This creates authentic content that resonates with local users which, in turn, boosts credibility and improves trust. The use of local actors also makes it harder to identify and detect state-sponsored information manipulation campaigns.⁶⁶ Local reporters are sometimes trained and funded by Russia.⁶⁷

The CAR is one of the least connected countries in the world, with an internet penetration rate of only 14 percent in 2020, mainly due to the prohibitive costs of internet access and a lack of access to electricity.⁶⁸ Because of the CAR’s lack of online access, Russia has developed some original ways to build influence offline. For example, it established a local radio station, Lengo Songo, which means social cohesion, and it distributes a free newspaper.⁶⁹ These are reportedly funded by the Lobaye Invest mining company.⁷⁰ The radio station was established as a “crucial medium fostering harmony and national cohesion.” It was part of Prigozhin’s strategy to shape perceptions about Wagner around the country.⁷¹ The station reaches audiences beyond that of state radio, and is projecting to install 17 antennas in the future.⁷²

Social Media Influence

While Russia has deployed creative means to exert influence in the information space, it has also relied on social media. Every time Russia is accused of something – from human rights abuses to exploiting the conflict infrastructure for profit – there is a structure of Prigozhin-linked organizations set up to create a web of “locally-based” social media pages to debunk the claims and often create other false narratives.⁷³ Locals report that Russian networks (most likely linked to Prigozhin organizations) pay local journalists, bloggers, and students to write pro-Russia pieces. Some are paid to manage Facebook pages for fake NGOs, news agencies, or pro-Kremlin fan groups.⁷⁴

Meta has reported several instances of mass “coordinated inauthentic behavior”, classified as cases in which fake accounts engaged in foreign interference, targeting the Central African Republic.⁷⁵ In January 2019, the UN alleged that Wagner forces abducted a man during a series of violent raids in villages. The response from Russian influenced social media accounts: that it was a French plot to undermine Russian presence in the CAR.⁷⁶ Later in October 2019, Facebook took down 35 Facebook accounts, 53 Facebook Pages, seven Groups, and five Instagram accounts that originated in Russia, and targeted the CAR as well as five other countries.⁷⁷ Facebook’s head of cybersecurity policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, stated that Prigozhin-affiliated organizations were able to connect with local actors to create these façade accounts, reaching over 1 million followers across the continent.⁷⁸

66 “Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman.” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 18 February 2020. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>.

67 Searcey. “Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia’s Playbook in Central African Republic.”

68 Proportion of users in the population. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269329/penetration-rate-of-the-internet-by-region/>.

69 Audinet, Maxime, and Benjamin Harding. “In Central Africa, Russia Outsources its Media Influence [En Centrafrique, La Russie Externalise Son Influence Média].” *La Revue Des Médias*, 13 October 2021. <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/republique-centrafricaine-russie-sous-traitance-influence-information-radio-lengo-songo>.

70 Huon, Patricia and Simon Ostrovsky. “Russia, the new power in Central Africa.” *Coda Story*, 19 December 2018. <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-new-power-central-africa/>.

71 Mbiko, Oman. “Central African Republic: New Radio Station Promotes Peace.” *All Africa*, 31 January 2019. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201901310711.html>.

72 Svoboda, Karel, Baddorf, Zack, and Matlach Paula-Charlotte. “Russia’s Activities in Africa’s Information Environment.” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 12 March 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350017642_RUSSIA'S_ACTIVITIES_IN_AFRICA'S_INFORMATION_ENVIRONMENT_CASE_STUDIES_MALI_AND_CENTRAL_AFRICAN_REPUBLIC_Published_by_the_NATO_Strategic_Communications_Centre_of_Excellence/citation/download.

73 Thomas, Elise. “Russian Trolls are Staging a Takeover in Africa – with Help from Mercenaries.” *The Daily Beast*, 23 March 2019. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/yevgheny-prigozhins-russian-trolls-are-staging-a-takeover-in-the-central-african-republic-with-help-from-his-wagner-mercenaries>.

74 Thomas, Elise. 2022. “Russian Disinformation in the Central African Republic.” *Centre for Information Resilience*, 8 June 2022. <https://www.info-res.org/post/russian-disinformation-in-the-central-african-republic>.

75 “Inauthentic Behavior” Meta. <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/>.

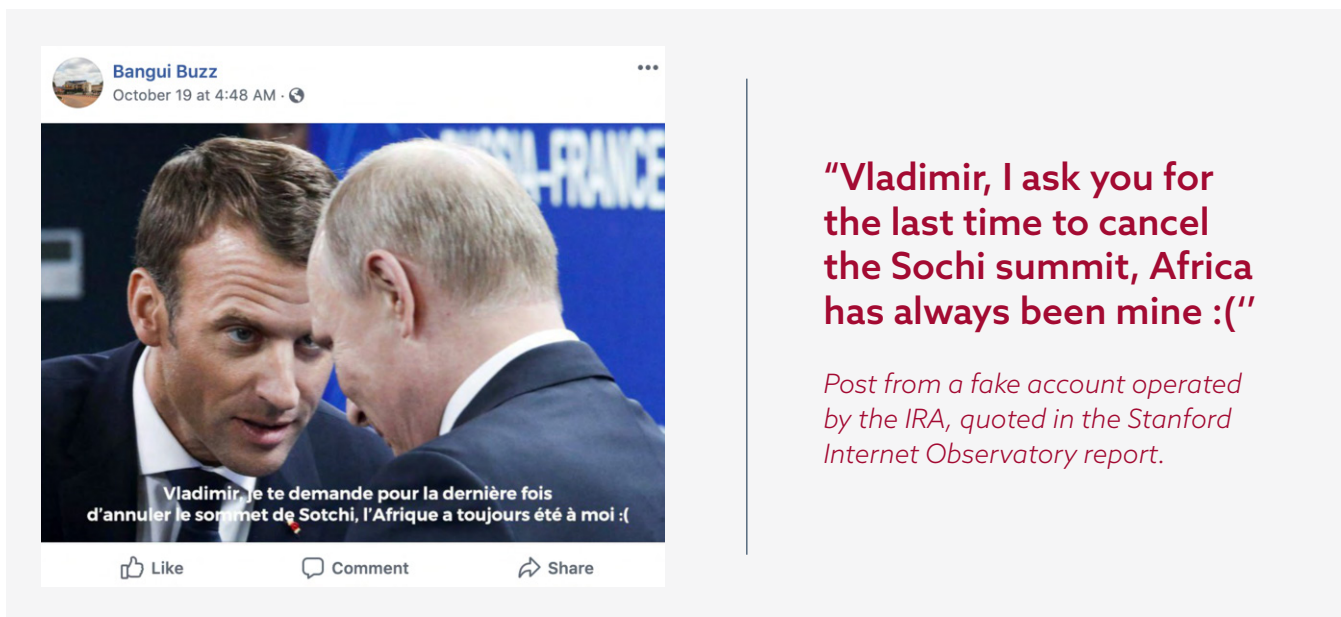
76 Thomas, Elise. “Russian Trolls are Staging a Takeover in Africa – with Help from Mercenaries.”

77 “Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Russia.” Meta, 30 October 2019. <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia/>.

78 Harding, Luke. “Facebook removes Africa accounts linked to Russian troll factory.” *The Guardian*, 30 October 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/oct/30/facebook-removes-africa-accounts-linked-russian-troll-factory-yevgeny-prigozhin>.

There were two other instances of mass takedowns in December 2020 and 2021,⁷⁹ the latter of which was IRA.⁸⁰ These networks, which push pro-Kremlin narratives within the framework of political issues in the CAR, are able to reach civil society throughout the continent, demonstrating Russia's ability to influence public perceptions.⁸¹

Touadéra's party, *Mouvement coeurs unis* (MCU), readily deployed these social media tactics during the 2020 elections. MCU deployed sock puppet accounts to saturate social media with propaganda and used digital influencers to advance his campaign, with Russia's support.⁸² According to a report from Stanford Internet Observatory, half of the pages during the 2020 CAR presidential elections were fake.⁸³ Most of the pages were attempting to create an image that France and the UN were bad actors in the CAR, and in contrast, praised any Russian-Touadéra engagements. The direct impact of these campaigns on the election outcome is unclear, but they certainly served to advance Russia's aims in the country.



Suspected Murders of Journalists

On July 30, 2018, three Russian journalists, war correspondent Orkhan Dzhemal, documentary filmmaker Alexander Rastorguyev, and cameraman Kirill Radchenko, were killed in Central Africa near the town of Sibut. They were working on a documentary on Wagner for the Investigation Control Center, funded by Khodorkovsky. CAR authorities and the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the murders were committed by a “group of people in turbans speaking Arabic,” suggesting that they were bandits or rebels.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the CAR press release about the deaths was a verbatim copy of the Russian statement which, at the very least, might suggest complicity. The Dossier Center disagreed, concluding that Wagner was involved and attempting to disguise the murders as banditry relying on local stereotypes against rebel groups.⁸⁵ This suggests an intentional information operation around the murders, potentially to obscure Wagner's involvement.

79 Gleicher, Daniel. “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia.” Meta, 15 December 2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>.

80 “Disclosing State-Linked Information Operations We’ve Removed.” Twitter, 2 December 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/disclosing-state-linked-information-operations-we-ve-removed.

81 Harding. “Facebook removes Africa accounts linked to Russian troll factory.”

82 Jendoubi, Saber. “Central African Media at the Dawn of the Elections: An Advanced Symptom of a Coming Political Crisis.” IFRI – Institut Français Des Relations Internationales, 24 March 2021. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/central-african-social-media-dawn-elections-advanced-symptom-coming>.

83 “One Face, Many Names: An Investigation into Fake NGOs and Media Outlets Linked to Harouna Douamba on and off Facebook.” Stanford Internet Observatory, 6 May 2021. <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/car-takedown-may-2021>.

84 “Final Report on the Murders of Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastorguev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic - Dossier Center.” Досье, 25 October 2019. <https://dossier.center/car-en/>.

85 “Final Report on the Murders of Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastorguev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic - Dossier Center.”

Influence in Education

Because of the strong military presence across the country, Touadera declared Russian as the country's third official language following Sango and French. Starting in 2023, learning Russian became mandatory in local universities, with a strong possibility this will expand to lower education levels in the future.⁸⁶ Learning Russian in university and potentially even younger will likely facilitate future academic exchanges for young Central Africans in university – who are likely the CAR's future political and academic elites. Already, education exchanges have proven beneficial. In one case, a university student from the CAR went to school in Altai, later moving to Vladivostok to “run a web development company”. Under this front, the student is also running at least two Facebook pages called “Wamossoro Wangapu” and “BeAfrika”, as well as an X (formerly known as Twitter) account. On these accounts he publishes his commentary on political issues, typically pro-Kremlin propaganda, to audiences in the CAR. He has also published his takes within Facebook groups based in Mali, Congo, and Cameroon.⁸⁷

The People's Republic of China

Although the main authoritarian influence actor in the CAR is Russia, there has been an uptick in PRC influence activities over recent years. The PRC's influence tactics focus on economic coercion and exploiting local government weaknesses to allow Chinese- businesses to extract resources. This often comes at the cost of the local environment.⁸⁸ At the same time, PRC companies need security to continue these operations.⁸⁹ Recent security threats on PRC business operations have thus led the country to take greater interests in security cooperation in the CAR that is at odds with the Kremlin.⁹⁰

Economic Influence

The PRC's influence in the CAR is not nearly as extensive as it is in other places across sub-Saharan Africa.⁹¹ Several PRC-backed companies operate in the CAR, but the scale of its economic engagement has limited the scope of influence. However, there are key examples in the CAR of how PRC projects exacerbate local corruption and contribute to environmental degradation.⁹²

Historically, PRC projects in the CAR focused on constructing buildings, roads, and on petroleum extraction.⁹³ PRC presence in the country fell in 2013, after several political developments made the CAR too unstable for it to operate. Upon arriving in office, Touadéra, a proponent of Beijing's development model, sought to entice the PRC back into the country. He attended the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), after which he announced that bilateral relations needed to improve.⁹⁴ Touadéra has also signaled that the CAR would sign onto China's Belt and Road Initiative projects.⁹⁷ In 2021, the CAR became one of the last African states to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the PRC BRI.⁹⁶ Still, PRC economic assistance and investment to the CAR remains low, compared to other countries in the region.⁹⁷

86 Posthumus. “Analysis: The Curious Case of Russia in Central African Republic.”

87 Thomas. “Russian Disinformation in the Central African Republic.”

88 Oronje, Jeremy. “How Corruption has Undermined Central African Republic's Economy.” Horn Institute, 31 October 2022. <https://horninstitute.org/how-corruption-has-undermined-central-african-republics-economy/>.

89 Morgan, Scott. “China's (Other) Presence in Africa.” International Policy Digest, 26 July 2020. <https://intpolicydigest.org/china-s-other-presence-in-africa/>.

90 “CAR Mine Massacre May Be Linked To Wagner Mercenaries.”

91 Minney, Leslie, Sullivan, Rachel, and Rachel Vandenbrink. “Amid the Central African Republic's Search for Peace, Russia steps in. Is China next?” United States Institute for Peace, 29 December 2019. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/12/amid-central-african-republics-search-peace-russia-steps-china-next>.

92 Isaksson, Ann-Sofie and Andreas Kotsadam. “Chinese aid and local corruption.” *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 159, March 2018, pp. 146-159. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047272718300021>

93 Debongo Devincy Yanne Sylvaire et al. “Infrastructure Development: China's Investment Aid and Subsidy Projects in Africa: Case of the Central African Republic.” *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management*, vol. 10, no 12, December 2020. <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=106287>.

94 “Central African Republic – China Relations.” *Global Security*. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/africa/car-forrel-prc.htm>.

95 “Chinse President Xi Jinping on Thursday met Central African Republic President...” CGTN, 9 September 2018. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514e3049444d7a457a6333566d54/index.html>.

96 Opali, Otiato. “Belt and Road Cooperation Reaches Heart of Africa.” *China Daily*, 24 November 2021. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/24/WS619d9381a310cdd39bc772ab.html>.

97 “Chinse President Xi Jinping on Thursday met Central African Republic President...” CGTN, 9 September 2018. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514e3049444d7a457a6333566d54/index.html>.

In 2021, the CAR exported \$31.7 million mostly in wood and cotton, to China. This is down significantly from 2020 during which the CAR exported \$50.8 million to China.⁹⁸ The drastic decrease in exports to China could be derived from a variety of factors. One might be because of a rise in conflict in the CAR. The second is the COVID-19 pandemic, during which inflationary pressure created supply chain disruptions in the CAR (and globally).⁹⁹ A third reason could be related to China's increased reliance on domestic cotton and wood following international boycotts of these products because of human rights violations in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, despite a drastic decrease in exports the PRC is the CAR's number one export partner, with approximately 41% of all exports going to China.¹⁰⁰ Exports from China to the CAR increased significantly from 2020 to 2021: in 2020, China exported \$27.9 million to CAR, whereas in 2020 China exported \$45.5 million to the CAR (mostly semiconductor devices, broadcasting equipment, electrical transformers, vaccines, and fish).¹⁰¹ The PRC is not the CAR's largest import partner; in fact, Chinese goods only account for 9% of imports, compared to the US at 11%, France at 12%, and India at 18%.¹⁰²

According to Boston University's Chinese Loans to Africa database, the PRC has eight loans in the CAR worth a total of \$104 million, making CAR one of the African countries in which China has the least economic interest. Each loan is relatively small, at around \$2-9 million, except for Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment Corporation's (ZTE) \$60 million mobile and fixed network project loan and China International Development Cooperation Agency's (CIDCA) \$18 million hydropower project.¹⁰³ While there is very little data regarding ZTE's \$60 million project, there are real privacy and security concerns of how any PRC-based telecommunications could be used toward authoritarian ends in a place like the CAR.¹⁰⁴

Resource Extraction Projects and Corruption

Poverty and recurrent conflict are two of the most pressing human rights issues in the CAR. Much of this human misery is facilitated by corruption. The CAR has weak institutional frameworks to prevent corruption, largely because so many government officials benefit from it. In 2016, Touadéra appointed several members to the High Authority for Good Governance, which was intended to make the extraction industry in the country more transparent. However, it has done little to prosecute corruption cases, particularly when foreign entities are involved. This is because of political influence over the judiciary. Furthermore, according to a 2019 United States Secretary of Defense report, there is no evidence that civil servants in the CAR followed financial disclosure laws. This makes it easy for local politicians to hide bribes.¹⁰⁵

While PRC investment in the CAR is not the main driver of corruption in the country, the PRC has turned a blind eye to it and in some cases facilitated it. Although the CAR has a wealth of resources, including metals, minerals, and wood products (such as timber), the economic outputs of which represent half of the country's total GDP, the UN Panel of Experts for the Central African Republic estimates that 97.5 percent of gold in 14 out of the 16 provinces in the CAR are smuggled out of the country, mostly into Cameroon. In one example in 2013, the Ministry of Mines issued fake documents to Chinese citizens to help them smuggle gold out of the country. They were stopped at the airport, where authorities also found them in possession of gold that was being illegally transported outside of the CAR.¹⁰⁶

98 Hart, Joe. "China (CHN) and Central African Republic (CAF) Trade | OEC." Observatory of Economic Complexity. [https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/caf#:~:text=China%2DCentral%20African%20Republic%20In,Delivery%20Trucks%20\(%241.48M\).%20Accessed%2026%20Sept.%202022](https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/caf#:~:text=China%2DCentral%20African%20Republic%20In,Delivery%20Trucks%20(%241.48M).%20Accessed%2026%20Sept.%202022).

99 Ngouagouni-Pisteurpits, Boris. "Central African Republic Economic Update: Investing in Human Capital to Protect the Future." The World Bank, 4 August 2021. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/08/04/economic-outlook-for-the-central-african-republic-investing-in-human-capital-to-protect-the-future>.

100 "World Factbook: Central African Republic." CIA World Factbook, 2023. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/central-african-republic/#economy>.

101 Hart. "China (CHN) and Central African Republic (CAF) Trade | OEC."

102 "World Factbook: Central African Republic."

103 "Chinese Loans to Africa Database." Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2021. <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

104 "Huawei Surveillance in Zimbabwe." Privacy International, 18 November 2021. <https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/4692/huawei-and-surveillance-zimbabwe>

105 Oronje. "How Corruption has Undermined Central African Republic's Economy."

106 Oronje. "How Corruption has Undermined Central African Republic's Economy."

In another example, in 2019, a U.S. State Department report found several cases of bribery among members of parliament, ministers, civil servants, and PRC-based mining¹⁰⁷ and oil¹⁰⁸ companies in Ouham-Pende and Ouham, two regions of the CAR. Corruption cases between foreign companies and domestic political elites make the CAR more vulnerable to high levels of poverty, cycles of violence, and continued resource extraction with little benefit to the local economy.

PRC projects in the CAR have also been criticized for their negative social and environmental impacts. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, an organization that tracks abuses by companies, recently reported that of the 1,690 human rights abuse allegations affiliated with Chinese investment projects, 181 were in Africa, mostly from mining and construction projects. In each case, the PRC-based companies brushed off the allegations.¹⁰⁹ Local civilian reports, NGOs, and journalists have played a role in documenting offenses. A documentary called “Eat Bitter” was released in early 2023, which covered the lives of a Chinese construction manager and a Central African laborer.¹¹⁰ The film addresses China’s economic impact on the Central African economy, but it highlights the hard lives of Chinese employees in the country.¹¹¹ The documentary also highlights the lose-lose nature of the PRC-CAR relationship for ordinary citizens.¹¹²

In 2019, people in Nola, the capital of the Sangha-Mbaere prefecture in the CAR, reported that big deposits of soil in rivers close to PRC projects were creating dangerous rapids. People were having difficulties fishing. Others reported that pollution was making some fish species disappear.¹¹³ In 2020, four PRC-based mining companies left northwestern CAR after NGOs raised concerns about human rights abuses. After the companies pulled out, authorities found seven dead bodies, and the floor of the Ouham river so butchered with holes left from mining operations that it was considered hazardous to swim in due to the rapids and sudden drops in water levels. Amnesty International reported that the deaths were likely due to the poor swimming conditions left from the mines.

It is unclear whether there was any accountability for the companies that left the mess behind; however, a parliamentary committee later released a report on the damages, citing that the PRC-based companies left an “ecological disaster.”

Scientists noted there were likely poisonous amounts of mercury left in the water from mining operations.¹¹⁴ Other reports released by the CAR government noted there has been a rising death rate in fishing villages and a decrease in access to clean drinking water in areas around the mines.¹¹⁵ It is unclear whether there was any accountability for the companies that left the mess behind; however, a parliamentary committee later released a report on the damages, citing that the PRC-based companies left an “ecological disaster.”¹¹⁶

107 “2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Central African Republic.” U.S. Department of State, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/central-african-republic/>.

108 Oranje. “How Corruption has Undermined Central African Republic’s Economy.”

109 Yang, Jianli and Carbone Beni. “China’s corruption spreads to Africa.” *Washington Times*, 29 April 2023. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/apr/19/chinas-corruption-spreads-to-africa/>.

110 Sun, Ningyi, and Pascale Appora-Gnekindy. “Eat Bitter.” 2023. Produced by Perpetuo Films. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt25941904/>.

111 “Eat Bitter – Ningyi Sun & Pascale Appora-Gnekindy.” *Women Make Movies*, 2023. <https://www.wmm.com/sponsored-project/eat-bitter/>.

112 “Eat Bitter, A Film Co-Written & Produced by NewsDoc Alum Mathieu Faure, Is Having its World Premiere Next Week.” *NYU Arts & Science*, 17 March 2023. <https://journalism.nyu.edu/about-us/news-post/2023/03/17/eat-bitter-a-film-co-written-produced-by-newsdoc-alum-mathieu-faure-is-having-its-world-premiere-next-week/>.

113 “In the Central African Republic, the Environment is Threatened by Chinese Mining Operations.” *Fondation Hironnelle*, 25 July 2019. <https://www.hironnelle.org/de/unsere-medien/910-in-the-central-african-republic-the-environment-is-threatened-by-chinese-mining-operations>.

114 “Central African Republic: Chinese Mining Companies have Moved on but Need for Investigation, Accountability, and Remedy Remain.” *Amnesty International*, 27 July 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr19/2708/2020/en/>.

115 “Central African Republic report cites ‘ecological disaster’ in calling for closure of 4 Chinese gold mines.” *Agence France-Presse*, 14 July 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3018505/central-african-republic-report-cites-ecological-disaster>.

116 Ngounou, Boris. “CAR: Parliament accuses 4 Chinese mining companies of ecological disaster.” *Afrikaner*, 17 July 2019. <https://www.afrik21.africa/en/car-parliament-accuses-4-chinese-mining-companies-of-ecological-disaster/>.

PRC-owned companies have also been involved in security incidents. In one mining village called Gaga, located within Ombella-M'Poko prefecture not far from Bangui, a member of the PRC-based mining company's security detail allegedly shot and killed a villager who stumbled into one of the mines in search of leftover gold. In response, locals looted an administrative building belonging to the mine. As the conflict escalated, local militia joined the locals fighting the mine's hired security forces, who were members of the FACA. While the Minister of Mines, Leopold Mbolli Fatrane, visited the town to calm the situation, later sending government officials to investigate, locals report that there have been no reparations or action against the mining companies.¹¹⁷

Information and Cultural Influence

There is very little evidence of PRC information influence in the CAR, in stark contrast to the PRC's influence operations in other sub-Saharan countries where Chinese state-run media organizations often co-opt local networks. Most PRC news coverage on the CAR focuses on covering in-country business issues. When there is coverage, it typically includes language emphasizing the PRC's image as a "friendly" "peacemaker," or coverage of major stories like the deaths of nine Chinese miners in 2020 and the need for justice. However, PRC is developing its influence network in the country.

In May 2021, the PRC established a Confucius Institute at the University of Bangui.¹¹⁸ A few months later, the CAR signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the PRC BRI. During the MoU ceremony, the Confucius Institute was touted as the instrument through which this agreement was achieved, and Touadéra reaffirmed his admiration of the Chinese Communist Party, stating "I agree with the Communist Party of China's concept of governance."¹¹⁹ There are reports that the PRC has taken primary school principals from the CAR on trips to China for school management training.¹²⁰ This could be the beginning of the PRC's educational program, which it runs in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of those who attend these exchanges go on to develop Confucius Institute offshoots using private funds.¹²¹

Security Concerns and Colliding Interests

Recent events in the CAR have made Beijing more cautious in its engagement in the country. In early 2023, nine Chinese nationals were killed by militants at the Chimbolo mine, run by PRC-based Gold Coast Group. The attack was at first attributed to a militia group run under CPC, the coalition formed by former President Bozizé. The PRC Embassy subsequently urged Chinese citizens not to travel outside of Bangui, and Xi called for the perpetrators to be punished.¹²² The embassy evacuated 90 Chinese nationals,¹²³ and the Chinese Foreign Ministry promised to increase security at PRC embassies and consulates, to better protect Chinese citizens operating businesses in Africa.¹²⁴

Some reports warn there is a high probability that Wagner instigated the attack that killed the miners. The Chimbolo mine is in Bambari, where there are other mining operations. Wagner Group controls the nearby Ndassima mine and had, at one point, tried to take control of Chimbolo, another sign Wagner might have been involved.¹²⁵ CPC leaders also denied involvement in the killings and blamed Wagner.¹²⁶ Some local villagers reported seeing militia dressed in the same uniforms as Wagner soldiers.¹²⁷

117 "Harmful Mines Lead to Unrest in CAR." ADF, 16 September 2020. <https://adf-magazine.com/2020/09/harmful-mines-lead-to-unrest-in-car/>.

118 "China's Coercive Tactics Abroad." United States Department of State, 18 December 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/chinas-coercive-tactics-abroad/>.

119 Opali, Otiato. "Belt and Road Cooperation Reaches Heart of Africa." China Daily, 24 November 2021. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/24/WS619d9381a310cdd39bc772ab.html>.

120 Debongo, Devincy Yanne Sylvaire et al. "Infrastructure Development: China's Investment Aid and Subsidy Projects in Africa: Case of the Central African Republic." American Journal of Industrial and Business Management, vol. 10 no 12, January 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348067015_Infrastructure_Development_China's_Investment_Aid_and_Subsidy_Projects_in_Africa_Case_of_the_Central_African_Republic.

121 Nantulya, Paul. "Strategic Application of the Tao of Soft Power: Key to Understanding China's Expanding Influence in Africa." The Africa Review, 2 October 2020. https://brill.com/view/journals/tare/47/2/article-p481_10.xml.

122 "Armed Men Kill Nine Chinese Nationals in Central African Republic." The Guardian, 20 March 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/20/armed-men-kill-chinese-nationals-central-african-republic>.

123 "Beijing evacuates 80 Chinese nationals following killing of nine miners." Africa Intelligence, 4 May 2023. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2023/04/05/beijing-evacuates-80-chinese-nationals-following-killing-of-nine-miners,109931829-bre>.

124 "Armed Men Kill Nine Chinese Nationals in Central African Republic."

125 "CAR Mine Massacre May Be Linked To Wagner Mercenaries."

126 Obaji, Philip Jr. "Witnesses Unravel the Chinese Mass Murder Mystery that Could Ruin Putin." Daily Beast, 23 March 2023. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/witnesses-accuse-russias-wagner-group-of-killing-9-chinese-miners-in-central-african-republic>.

127 "Nearly 200 demonstrators in Bangui in support of China and Russia." Africa News, 23 March 2023. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/03/23/nearly-200-demonstrators-in-bangui-in-support-of-china-and-russia/>.

However, a video circulating on the internet accused France of ordering the attack to discredit Wagner. The video shows a rebel fighter saying, “the French want to drive Wagner out of Africa.”¹²⁸

A march of nearly 200 people in support of China and Russia took place in Bangui at around the same time as that the anti-French video appeared and shortly after the attack on the miners. Protestors rallied in front of the Chinese Embassy, holding banners supporting China and Russian flags and signs stating, “Russia is Wagner, we love Russia and we love Wagner.”¹²⁹ The connection between support for Russia and China in the wake of these attacks demonstrates Wagner’s ability to influence the narrative within civil society that there is popular discontent across CAR against the influence of ‘Western’ actors. Wagner’s strategy in the disinformation campaigns following the attacks, blaming France, has created a narrative that Russia and China operating in sync, united with locals in the fight against former colonial countries meddling in domestic affairs, and that Russia is fighting in the interest of Central Africans.

There is no evidence that the PRC will provide military aid to CAR, as Russia has. But there are reports that the PRC previously invested in training for CAR military officers.¹³⁰ There is also evidence of a Fujian Police Academy in Bangui that arrived in November 2018; local journalists reporting that the purpose of this was to train the Presidential Guard, a concerning development given the guard’s history of human rights abuses against civilians.¹³¹ In a context where police and military officials already commit violence against civilians with impunity, there are real concerns about the potential for a PRC-CAR relationship.

Conclusion

Both PRC and Kremlin influence in the CAR undermine ongoing international and domestic peacekeeping efforts. The various cases – presented throughout this report – demonstrate that both countries present themselves as positive alternatives to the West by offering “aid” with no strings attached. Russia provides military support through mercenary groups (ie: Wagner) in exchange for resource extraction, and China offers investment while turning a blind eye to local corruption and environmental degradation. Ultimately both situations, to varying degrees, reinforce cycles of fragility in the CAR and compromise efforts to promote peace and stability.

There are nevertheless important distinctions between Russia and China’s presence in the country. The Wagner Group’s actions in the CAR are destabilizing. The Kremlin has repeatedly denied a link between Russia and Wagner, but its connection to Prigozhin’s businesses was evidenced by the fact that Wagner is present in Russian military operations throughout the country – from FACA operations to fight off rebel groups, to training new CAR military recruits in Russian.¹³² Prigozhin’s business interests were bolstered by Wagner Group mercenaries, who work alongside the CAR’s military to suppress the rise of ex-Seleka forces. However, Wagner’s military assistance has not resulted in better security, but rather instability at the cost of innocent unarmed Central Africans. Several cases illustrated in this report show devastating human rights abuses. As long as the Kremlin continues to enjoy its standing in international institutions such as the UN and the Kimberly Process, it can continue to sideline international law to provide armed support, boost Prigozhin’s still ongoing blood diamond businesses, and support a regime that turns a blind eye to human rights abuses so long as elites can make a profit.

While the PRC does not have the same scale of influence efforts as Russia in the CAR, it does position itself as supporting stability, though its projects result in negative environmental and social consequences. Throughout the region, evidence shows that PRC-based projects increase local corruption.¹³³ In many cases, local businesses pay to smuggle minerals out of the country, and paying off political elites and locals for permits to do so.¹³⁴

128 Irish, John, Pineau, Elizabeth and Bate Felix. “France targets Russian and Wagner disinformation in Africa.” Reuters, 21 June 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa-france-targets-russian-wagner-disinformation-2023-06-21/?utm_source=reddit.com.

129 Africa News. “Nearly 200 demonstrators in Bangui in support of China and Russia.” Africa News, 23 March 2023. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/03/23/nearly-200-demonstrators-in-bangui-in-support-of-china-and-russia/>.

130 “Central African Republic – China Relations.”

131 Debongo. “Infrastructure Development: China’s Investment Aid and Subsidy Projects in Africa: Case of the Central African Republic.”

132 Lister, Shukla, and Ward. “Putin’s Private Army.”

133 Isaksson and Kotsadam. “Chinese aid and local corruption.”

134 Oranje. “How Corruption has Undermined Central African Republic’s Economy.”

Recent developments with attack on the Chinese mine, demonstrate the overlap between PRC and Russian interests in the country. While it is unclear what the PRC's position on potential Wagner involvement is, Wagner narratives that it is there to protect local interests including PRC investments, demonstrates the potential for both authoritarian actors to protect the other's interests when a crisis evolves.¹³⁵

135 Irish, Pineau, and Felix. "France targets Russian and Wagner disinformation in Africa."



AFRICA

LIBYA

Introduction

In 2011, longtime dictator Moammar Qadhafi was overthrown following months of armed struggle between disparate “revolutionary” and regime forces. Since the onset of that conflict, malign authoritarian actors have manipulated events in Libya to advance and protect their own interests. The more unstable things in Libya became, the more deeply they got involved.

Since the onset of that conflict, malign authoritarian actors have manipulated events in Libya to advance and protect their own interests. The more unstable things in Libya became, the more deeply they got involved.

Foreign authoritarian influence in Libya has been fluid and dynamic, responsive to and driving developments in the country. Over time, malign actors in Libya created new groups or supported old ones while using them to support their particular interests, irrespective of the sovereignty and the welfare of the Libyan people. Gulf states have backed armed groups and online actors whom they believe will help further their own regional agendas. Russia has similarly funded proxy actors, including foreign mercenaries, supported disinformation campaigns, and even printed money at one point for the eastern-based parallel government based on the calculation that such interventions would deepen its own influence in the country. Other, foreign actors like Turkey have used direct and indirect military intervention, as well as economic involvement, to further their own strategic goals.

The inability of foreign actors to exert full control over these groups has significantly undermined Libya’s attempted transition process and its stability. As a result, these groups have found alternate sources of support and have mutated into mere criminal organizations ostensibly interested only in the perpetuation of the status quo. This, in turn, has allowed them to profit and prosper to the detriment of the population in general.

This report investigates the scope and scale of foreign authoritarian influence in Libya, the main actors and motivations, their primary tools and tactics, and how such influence has evolved alongside changing political and security conditions in the country. The report first discusses the tools and motivations of the main foreign actors who have intervened in Libya. Subsequent sections analyze which states adopted malign behavior and why, and how these behaviors shifted with and/or influenced the trajectory of the conflict.

This report covers 2011 – 2022. As of the writing of this report, some alliances have shifted, as have some of the key political and security stakeholders identified in this report. This is illustrative of the fluid political and security dynamic in the country.



Key Terms/Methodology

The concept of *malign actors* refers to those acting against a democratic, pluralistic system based on the rule of law, in favor of an authoritarian one from which they benefit.

For purposes of this study, it is also important to distinguish between *malign authoritarian influence and proxy wars*. In *proxy wars*, “foreign actors support and equip certain faction(s) in a third country...in order to expand their own power and influence.”¹ Malign actors, on the other hand, may not act in order to directly enhance their power and influence but to prevent or support the emergence of a specific domestic actor or political outcome. Although proxy war dynamics have been a critical dimension of Libya’s attempts at a democratic transition since 2011, this paper focuses less on how foreign interference has perpetuated Libya’s conflict and looks more specifically at activities of foreign authoritarian actors (and sometimes non-authoritarian ones) to understand their pathways and strategies.

The paper is based on a review of secondary literature and data sources as well as interviews with key actors in, and close observers of, Libya’s conflict.

Overview of Foreign Authoritarian Influence in Libya

Libya’s conflict has complex roots.¹ Although historical differences among Libya’s three geographical regions (Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east, and Fezzan in the south) and grievances related to the distribution of oil revenues and state services among these regions have played a role, so too has the strength of local identities (e.g. tribal affiliations or loyalties to towns or cities) as well as ideologies (e.g. political Islam).² Since roughly 2014, the country has had competing governments (although not continuously), with one based in the east and the other in the western capital of Tripoli. However, the makeup of armed groups (and their international supporters) loyal to each government, as well as the composition of the governments themselves, has shifted over the course of the conflict. In many areas neither government has full control. Malign authoritarian influence has further complicated these dynamics.

Tools and Tactics

The actors discussed below have used different but overlapping tools and tactics to achieve their goals. These range from direct military intervention to funding armed forces, to providing weapons, to disinformation campaigns and even to the indirect sabotaging of mediation attempts.

Some malign foreign actors have shared certain tools and tactics. For instance, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt used a sophisticated disinformation campaign to promote eastern Libyan General Khalifa Haftar as a champion of nationalism, secularism, and the only hope for democratization. This campaign bolstered his confidence and local and international support, helping set him up for his 2019 attack on Tripoli. Moreover, in addition to this disinformation campaign, many malign actors have interfered militarily in Libya’s conflict, including through arms provision and the deployment of foreign mercenaries. They also engaged in disinformation campaigns. Qatar (frequently in tandem with Turkey) has used similar tactics, but separately and in a different way, for example by using its popular al Jazeera news outlet to promote Islamist ideology and the groups that represent it.

1 See Paoletti, E. “Libya: Roots of a Civil Conflict.” *Mediterranean Politics*, July 2011, 16 (2), 313-319 DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2011.583757.

2 For more on the ways local and regional identities influenced Libya’s conflict, see Pack, J (ed.). *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013; Cole, P. and McQuinn, B. *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015; Lacher, W. *Libya’s Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*. New York: IB Tauris, 2020.

In the same manner, authoritarian actors have undermined diplomacy to protect their own positions. In addition to violating the UN arms embargo, malign foreign actors' attempts to broker talks among Libyan elites ultimately ensured that the conflict was never resolved. For example, the UAE used a meeting in Abu Dhabi between rival leaders in 2017 to bolster its own favored outcome – a strengthened role for General Haftar.³ Three years later, Turkey and Russia apparently collaborated to organize an agreement in Moscow between competing Libyan sides. It was one-sided and quickly fell apart.⁴ Even Cairo, which makes no secret of its anti-Islamist agenda in Libya, has hosted dialogues aimed at agreeing on a new constitutional framework. These talks have failed due to their clear one-sidedness.⁵ In short, malign foreign actors have regularly disrupted UN negotiations and tried to redirect them toward solutions convenient to them in order to influence events in Libya.

Certain actors have also intervened in Libya's economic affairs, to different ends. For instance, Turkey has repeatedly angered eastern Libyan and foreign counterparts by claiming rights to explore gas and oil in the eastern Mediterranean. China has steadily rebuilt its commercial ties with Tripoli while also continuing to engage with eastern-based rival governments. These tactics are aimed at furthering larger goals of securing a foothold in North Africa.

Who's Who: Key Foreign Actors in Libya and the Driving Factors for their Engagement

Foreign interference in Libya during the past 13 years has primarily been motivated by geostrategic, economic, and ideological interests, and to a lesser extent by more traditional security interests such as protection from extremist attacks. In the case of most of the foreign actors discussed in this report, motivations have been a blend of these interests.

Summary of motivations among malign authoritarian actors in Libya

Actor	Key Motivations	Relevant History/Context
China	Economic	Historically friendly with Qadhafi government; has since tried to claim adherence to non-interference in Libya's domestic affairs while also expanding trade and trying to secure reconstruction contracts.
Egypt	Security, economic	Shares long western border with Libya; since the Egyptian military takeover of elected Islamist government in 2013 has backed similar model in Libya.
Qatar	Ideological	Originally supported rebels, particularly those with ties to Qatar, in Qadhafi's overthrow. Subsequently deepened its partnership with Turkey in support of Islamist-affiliated political groups and certain armed groups based in Libya's western region. More recently has thawed relations with Egypt so support/motivations are less clear.
Russia	Geostrategic, economic	Mainly supports eastern-based Libyan forces as a vehicle for securing Russian interests of a military and limited economic foothold in the country, and preventing democratic governance.

3 Megerisi, T. "How Libya Became a Battleground for Foreign Powers." *Newlines Magazine*, 11 October 2020, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/how-libya-became-a-battleground-for-foreign-powers/>.

4 "Haftar 'leaves' Moscow ceasefire talks without a deal." *BBC News*, 14 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51104846>.

5 "Egypt's Got Plans for Libya – Eradicate Islamists, for Starters." (5 December 2015). *War is Boring*, 5 December 2015, . <https://warisboring.com/egypts-got-plans-for-libya/>; Hill, T. "What's Next for Libya's Protracted Conflict?" *United States Institute of Peace*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/whats-next-libyas-protracted-conflict>.

Saudi Arabia	Ideological	Originally supported rebels in overthrow of Qadhafi but has since scaled back. Has been accused of supporting ultra-conservative Salafi-Madkhali groups and helping fund Russian Private Military Contractors (PMCs), but general extent of support is not clear.
Turkey	Ideological, economic, geostrategic	Seeks greater access to eastern Mediterranean energy resources as well as business opportunities in Libya. Has also supported Islamist-affiliated and anti-Libyan National Army (LNA) forces as part of its general ideological vision and strategy.
United Arab Emirates	Ideological	Firmly opposed to Islamist-affiliated influence and/or democratic governance in Libya, as part of overall attempt to retain its own authoritarian system.

A number of countries have increasingly sought to establish a presence in Libya due to the strategic importance of the Mediterranean basin. Libya (along with the rest of North Africa) also serves as a gateway into sub-Saharan Africa, where powers including Russia, China, and Turkey are increasingly expanding their economic, military, and sometimes political presence in the area.⁶ Interference in Libya by certain actors is also motivated by specific geostrategic concerns.⁷ For example, although Russian relations with Libya initially deteriorated after Qadhafi's fall, with the cancelation of arms deals and especially the much-hyped Russian Benghazi-to-Sirte railway project, since 2016 its influence has steadily risen. Analysts attribute this involvement largely to Moscow's great power ambitions as it tries to enhance its standing in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. In addition, like others, Russia is likely attempting to position itself for lucrative post-conflict reconstruction contracts in Libya, evidenced by its involvement in the oil sector.⁸ Similarly, Turkey has sought to gain a strategic foothold in Libya through business and military ties as part of its Blue Homeland doctrine.⁹

Since 2011, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have become increasingly engaged in Libya as a result of ideological interests and broader competition between Middle Eastern states for regional influence.¹⁰ Over the past couple of decades Qatar and the UAE, in particular, have diversified their security alliances in order to reduce dependence on the United States and to spread their influence throughout the Middle East and North Africa, but each country has used a different approach.¹¹

6 Tanchum, M. Italy and Turkey's Europe-to-Africa commercial corridor: Rome and Ankara's geopolitical symbiosis is creating a new Mediterranean strategic paradigm. Hainburg/Donau: Austria Institute for European and Security Policy, 2020; Cagaptay, S. Cook, S. and Soukkaie, A. "Turkish Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2022, June 23, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkish-influence-sub-saharan-africa/>; Jacobs, A. and Abdel Ghafar, A. "Beijing calling: Assessing China's growing footprint in North Africa." Brookings Doha Center, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beijing-calling-assessing-chinas-growing-footprint-in-north-africa/>; Abdel Ghafar, A. and Jacobs, A.L. "China in the Mediterranean: Implications of Expanding Sino-North Africa Relations." Brookings, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-in-the-mediterranean-implications-of-expanding-sino-north-africa-relations/>; Stronski, P. "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 October 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056/>; Siegle, J. "Why Russia is on a charm offensive in Africa. The reasons aren't pretty." The Conversation, 26 July 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-russia-is-on-a-charm-offensive-in-africa-the-reasons-arent-pretty-187711>; Mckinnon, A. "Who blessed the Vlads down in Africa?" Foreign Policy, 24 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/24/russia-wagner-group-mali-africa-putin-libya/>.

7 See Mezran, K. and Varvelli, A. *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis*. ISPI/Atlantic Council: Milan, 2017.

8 Ramani, S. "Russia: From Retreat to Resurgence" in El Gomati, A. (ed). *The Great Game*. London: Sadeq Institute, 2020, p. 69. As discussed below, Russian capacity for engagement in foreign conflicts has been compromised by the 2022 war in Ukraine, but observers assert that its malign influence in Libya has not diminished.

9 See Helal, A. "For Turkey, the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean are inextricably linked." Atlantic Council MENASource 28 October 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/for-turkey-the-libyan-conflict-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-are-inextricably-linked/>. The "Blue Homeland" concept refers to Turkey's current foreign policy ambitions to reclaim power in the Mediterranean. Turkey also signed a suite of new energy and military deals with Tripoli in October 2022. See for example: "Libya, Turkey double down with defence deals after maritime pact." Euractiv, 26 October 2022 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/libya-turkey-double-down-with-defence-deals-after-maritime-pact/>.

10 Gause, F.G. III (2014). *Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2014.

11 Hedges, M. "Small state security engagement in post-Arab Spring MENA: The case of the United Arab Emirates." *Asian Affairs* 52:2, 2021, pp. 412-425. DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2021.1916248; Verhoeven, H. and Miller, R. "Overcoming smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf." *International Politics* 57, 2020, pp. 1-20. DOI: 10.1057/s41311-019-00180-0; Ulrichsen, K.C. *Qatar and the Arab Spring*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014, p. 5.

Foreign mercenaries are an important tool of military engagement by Russia, Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt in Libya. Turkey has deployed Syrian fighters opposed to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad; Russia has sent troops through its private military contractor (PMC) the Wagner Group (despite a number of Wagner forces fighting in Ukraine); and the UAE has hired mercenaries from Chad and Sudan.²⁰ This use of foreign mercenaries can be regarded as an example of how malign authoritarian influence in Libya has dragged in other foreign actors (also see below) and further complicated the civil conflict. For instance, any disarmament and demobilization efforts in Libya need to be negotiated with neighboring Chad and Sudan, who may not be prepared to receive repatriated mercenaries.

From the Arab Spring to the Search for Peace: A Chronology of Foreign Involvement in Libya

The 2011 Uprisings and the Gulf Countries Expanding Presence

Foreign interference in Libya's now 13-year-old crisis began immediately with the Arab Spring uprisings that broke out in February 2011 in Libya. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE supported the overthrow of Moammar Qadhafi. Each country was wary of the mercurial leader and saw regime transition as a way to enhance their own regional influence and create a more favorable investment climate.²¹ Unconditional and financial aid from both Qatar and the UAE immediately began flowing to anti-Qadhafi rebel groups. Beyond sending direct support, including equipment, fighters, training, and communication to the anti-Qadhafi rebels, Doha and Abu Dhabi funded technical assistance programs in strategic sectors such as electricity and telecommunications and helped in exporting Libyan oil. This was a way for the rebels to secure revenue.²² In addition, Qatar used al Jazeera to support rebel groups in their quest to remove Qadhafi.²³

Qatar and the UAE also saw an opportunity when the rebels appealed to Western states for military support. As the U.S. and Europe considered military intervention in Libya, they sought to avoid the appearance of another Western-led invasion of an Arab country. Arab support for what became UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized NATO-led intervention in Libya in the form of a no-fly zone for Qadhafi forces, was therefore critical, and both Qatar and the UAE – each for its own reason -- were eager to provide it.²⁴ Malign authoritarian interference in the forms of military and diplomatic influence was thus present in Libya at the outset of its attempted democratic transition, with Qatar and the UAE determined to steer events toward their own non-democratic goals. For instance, the Qatari Emir is even reported to have told Libyan Sheikh Ali Sallabi, a respected religious figure and presumed leader of the Islamists in Libya, that Qatar was ready to pay France – thought at the time to have the most influence among Western actors -- any sum of money to get rid of Qadhafi.²⁵ Both also provided operational support for the enforcement of the no-fly zone imposed by the resolution.²⁶

Qatar and the Emirates supported different rebel groups based on each country's existing ties with Libyan actors, which eventually led them to back opposing Libyan factions and laid the seeds for their later rivalry (manifested in the 2017 blockade against Qatar by other Gulf countries in which economic and diplomatic ties were almost completely severed due to their disagreements over foreign policy and support for Islamists).²⁷ By channeling weapons to these groups, Doha and Abu Dhabi not only contributed to the plethora of arms circulating inside Libya, but also emboldened such groups to acquire resources by controlling access to state funds and/or pursuing illicit activities such as human trafficking and drug smuggling.²⁸

20 Burke, J. and Salih, Z. M. "Mercenaries flock to Libya raising fears of prolonged war." *The Guardian*, 24 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/24/mercenaries-flock-to-libya-raising-fears-of-prolonged-war>; Pack, J. and Pusztai, W. "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the war for Tripoli." Middle East Institute, 10 November 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turning-tide-how-turkey-won-war-tripoli>.

21 VanGenugten, S. "The Gulf states: Channeling regional ambitions in different directions" in Mezran, K. and Varvelli, A. (eds). *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis*. ISPI/Atlantic Council: Milan, 2017.

22 VanGenugten, S. (2017), p. 50; Ulrichsen, K.C. (2014), p.11.

23 Krieg, A. "Qatar: From activism to pragmatism" in El-Gomati (ed.), *The Great Game*, 2021, p. 55; VanGenugten, S. (2017), p.46.

24 See VanGenugten, S. (2017), pp. 45-46; Ulrichsen, K.C. (2014), p. 10.

25 Author interview with Libyan Sheikh Ali Sallabi, May 2012.

26 VanGenugten, S. (2017), p. 48. She notes that Qatar's claims about the support it sent may have been exaggerated.

27 Ulrichsen, K.C. (2014), pp. 11-12.

28 Harchaoui, J. and Lazib, M. *Proxy War Dynamics in Libya*. Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Proxy Wars Project, 23 July 2019, <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/91990>.

This was in addition to undermining diplomatic solutions to the Libyan crisis and giving strength to separatist/federalist movements.²⁹

Gulf support to particular individuals has also helped fuel the conflict, as demonstrated by three well-documented examples.³⁰ For instance, Qatari support for Abdelhakim Bilhaj, a former member of the opposition Libya Islamic Fighting Group, may have contributed to his defeat in his bid for a seat on the General National Congress (GNC) in 2012, with some accusing him of being an agent of Qatar.³¹ The former ambassador to the UAE Aref al-Nayed used his ties with Abu Dhabi to build his own political career. In 2014, the UAE also hired UN Special Envoy Bernardino Leon as director general of its diplomatic academy, calling into question his impartiality.³²

Following the elections of 7 July 2012, which brought to power a GNC with a mandate to facilitate the drafting of a new constitution, foreign influence in general, albeit clearly still present, seemed less evident and less intrusive. However, this was short-lived.

The 2014 Civil War: A Panoply of Foreign Actors Enter the Conflict

The GNC ultimately managed to organize elections for a new legislature in June 2014. The elections for the House of Representatives were marked by low voter turnout and a significant defeat for Islamists, who refused to cede power and turned to armed force to defend their interests. In July 2014, Islamist and Western Libyan militias allied to form "Operation Libya Dawn," to take control of Tripoli and counter "Operation Dignity," a campaign led by Khalifa Haftar to combat Islamist militias in Benghazi and the rest of the country. Haftar was particularly encouraged, if not directly supported, by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all of whom were concerned about the rising influence of political Islam and sought to impose an Egyptian model of rule by a military strongman in Libya. The parliament was forced to be seated in Tobruk because of violent clashes between supporters of the government in Tripoli, which refused to step down, and forces allied with Haftar.

It was at this point that the conflict in Libya became rapidly more "internationalized." Beginning in approximately 2013, Qatari involvement scaled back because of a backlash from other countries in the region, its own leadership change, and a growing awareness of its limited capacity to realize the kind of influence it had once envisaged.³³ Emirati and Egyptian military intervention grew, as did their attempts to meddle in diplomatic efforts. This came as tensions rose among coalitions identifying with or opposing political Islam. Many considered 2014 a pivotal year: the previous year, the Egyptian military had ousted a democratically elected government run by the Muslim Brotherhood, encouraging anti-Islamist governments in the region to believe military dominance was possible elsewhere.

The UAE's involvement in the Libyan conflict evolved into a multi-pronged strategy. It had many parallels to the conflict in Yemen and involved the use of proxy actors, a strong alliance with Egypt (important because of its powerful military), and working through tribes and expatriates (such as Nayad).³⁴ Some research also suggests that the UAE, through its partnership with Egypt, has worked to identify and support anti-Islamist groups in order to create divisions within localities such as Misrata in the west, which in turn would weaken support for the Tripoli-based government.³⁵

29 Ahram, A. and Alaaldin, R. *Separatists and Spoilers: The UAE's Way of Proxy Warfare*. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2022. DOI: 10.1016/j.orbis.2022.05.007, p. 383.

30 See Mezran, K. and Henneberg, S. "Gulf influence in the Maghreb." Newlines Institute, 1 June 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/north-africa/gulf-influence-in-the-maghreb/>.

31 Fitzgerald, M. "Finding their place: Libya's Islamists during and after the revolution." In Cole, P. and McQuinn, B. (eds). *The Libyan revolution and its aftermath*, 2015, p. 203; Ulrichsen, K.C. (2014), p.12.

32 See Ramesh, R. "UN Libya envoy accepts 1,000-a-day job from backer of one side in civil war." *The Guardian*, 4 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/un-libya-envoy-accepts-1000-a-day-job-from-backer-of-one-side-in-civil-war>.

33 Ulrichsen, K.C. (2014); Krieg, A. (2021), pp. 52-59.

34 VanGenugten, S. (2017), pp. 48; Ardemagni, E. and Saini Fasanotti, F. *The UAE in Libya and Yemen: Different tactics, one goal*. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 2020.

35 Key informant interview conducted by G. Cascone.

The UAE is either proven or largely suspected of conducting hundreds of drone strikes in Libya and of moving weapons and jet fuel to aid the LNA. It is also thought to have funded Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries (see below) and to have provided them with weaponry.³⁶

Russia's involvement in Libya has deep historical roots dating from an anti-American collaboration with the Qadhafi regime during the Cold War.³⁷ Russia gradually reengaged in Libya following the 2014 clashes. In 2017 Rosneft, the giant energy company headquartered in Moscow, signed a crude oil agreement with Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC).³⁸ But by that point, Moscow was already supporting Haftar. Russia formally supported the internationally recognized government in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Fayeze Serraj at the time. But it also supported Serraj's rivals by sending them fighters via Russia's Wagner Group. Russia is also rumored to have provided economic support through the eastern Central Bank of Libya, which was established to rival the internationally recognized Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli.

The UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement negotiated over the course of 2015 did little to curb malign foreign influence. Though the agreement was meant to overcome divisions through a power-sharing arrangement in the form of a new Government of National Accord (GNA), it was doomed from the start by a fractious and conflicted international partnership. Malign actors intensified their interventions in Libya to impede the transition to democracy, and even helped lay the groundwork for the establishment of an authoritarian system. The UAE, in an attempt to block Islamist-affiliated actors from gaining strength, sent more weapons and offered intelligence and training to Haftar's forces. Meanwhile, both sides in the conflict increased their use of sub-Saharan African mercenaries.³⁹

One of the most jarring effects of malign foreign influence in Libya is the manner in which democratic countries have been dragged into partnerships with authoritarian actors with a clear malign (or anti-democratic) agenda. France entered into a strategic partnership with the UAE based on a shared antipathy for Islamism, which was becoming a focus in France's counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. After the eastern part of Libya did not recognize the GNA, over the next several years Abu Dhabi and Paris tried to mediate power-sharing arrangements which would greatly empower Haftar, whom they hoped to install as the head of a new Libyan regime.⁴⁰

These types of partnerships between democratic and authoritarian actors have also significantly undermined diplomatic efforts such as those carried out by successive UN Secretary Generals' Special Representatives.⁴¹ For example, in 2017-18 Paris and Abu Dhabi tried to mediate among competing Libyan factions; these discussions were predicated on power-sharing agreements involving Haftar and which the UN was expected to broker. However, Haftar launched an attack on Tripoli in April 2019, just weeks ahead of a UN-sponsored national conference. The attack also coincided with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' visit to Tripoli, just two days before he flew to Benghazi to meet Haftar. That Haftar was able to so blatantly sabotage UN mediation efforts illustrates the futility of the internationals' strategy.⁴²

36 See Badi, E. "Russia isn't the only one getting its hands dirty in Libya." *Foreign Policy*, 21 April 2020; Rondeaux, C. Imhof, O. and Margolin, J. "The Abu Dhabi Express: Analyzing the Wager Group's Libya Logistics Pipeline & Operations." *New America Foundation*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/>.

37 See for example Saini Fasanotti, F. "Russia and Libya: A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship." *Brookings*, 1 September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/09/01/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>.

38 Lewis, A. "Russia's Rosneft, Libya's NOC sign oil offtake deal." *Reuters*, 21 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-oil-rosneft-oil-idUSL8N1G61XJ>.

39 For a detailed discussion of the increase in damaging foreign interference in Libya's conflict during this period, see Wehrey, F. "This War is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post-2011 Conflicts from Proxies to Boots on the Ground." *New America Foundation*, 14 September 2020 <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/this-war-is-out-of-our-hands/foreign-boots-on-the-ground-the-2019-battle-for-tripoli-and-beyond>.

40 Megerisi. "How Libya Became a Battleground for Foreign Powers."

41 Megerisi. "How Libya Became a Battleground for Foreign Powers.;" Badi. "Russia isn't the only one getting its hands dirty in Libya."

42 Wehrey. "This War is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post-2011 Conflicts from Proxies to Boots on the Ground."

A UN panel of experts found Russia's Wagner forces guilty of war crimes⁴³ and reporting has shown that mercenaries deployed by Turkey and the UAE have been subject to exploitation and human rights violations (there are also widespread accusations that these mercenaries themselves have also committed human rights violations).⁴⁴ The international legal framework meant to guard against such violations has so far proven ineffective, partly as a result of political alliances.⁴⁵

The 2019 - 2020 War for Tripoli: Division, Disinformation, and Diplomatic Interference

Despite not having received explicit and overt backing from his Russian, Egyptian, and Emirati sponsors, in early April 2019 Haftar spurned international mediation efforts and attacked key oil facilities in the south.⁴⁶ He also tried to "establish critical logistical lines"⁴⁷ before launching an assault on Tripoli. However, after a 15-month siege, his forces were defeated when Turkey entered the conflict. The Turkish intervention was motivated by two main goals. The first was a desire to protect its strategic interests; it had signed key maritime and security deals with the GNA in late 2019. The second was ideological: Turkey, along with its partner Qatar, wanted to block Haftar from eradicating Islamist-affiliated networks in Libya. Turkey committed to coordinating the delivery of resources and equipment to fight Haftar.

However, malign foreign actors during this phase also deployed diplomatic interference as a tactic. Most experts suspect that an agreement had been previously reached between Turkey and Russia. Thanks to this agreement, Russian mercenaries fighting on behalf of Haftar suddenly withdrew from Tripoli, thus allowing the Turkish-supported western Libyan forces to defeat the LNA troops and other mercenaries and push them back beyond the central city of Sirte. By June 2020 the LNA had been pushed out of the west, establishing a new frontline along the central Sirte-Jufra axis.

This period ultimately produced a ceasefire, brokered with the help of Turkey in Moscow in January 2020, but from which Haftar quickly reneged, probably at the behest of Abu Dhabi.⁴⁸ This gave the Egyptians and Emiratis time to "refurbish Haftar's troops, regroup, and reorganize them thus enabling Haftar to retain full control of the eastern region of Cyrenaica and remain an important political and military actor."⁴⁹ Haftar further capitalized on the situation by instituting an oil blockade that would last for eight months. The blockade was considered particularly audacious because it began on the eve of the Berlin Conference, which was organized under the leadership of the German government and intended to establish a three-track process (politics, economics, and security) for resolving Libya's conflict.

The above constitutes a good example of how certain authoritarian states have overturned battlefield results and have prevented a political solution while perpetuating a state of disorder. In this case, malign interference consisted of two main actions. The first was the immediate rearming of Haftar's troops by Russia, Egypt, and the UAE. This allowed him to maintain control of the eastern province, keeping the situation unstable. The second action can be seen in the same agreement drafted by Russia and Turkey over the conclusion of the counteroffensive by the Tripolitanian (western) forces and the Turks. In this agreement, Russians agreed to withdraw their forces along the Sirte-Jufra line and the Turks agreed not to allow the Tripolitarians to pass that line. These two countries thus contributed to an unstable status quo that could lead to the partition of the country.

43 Nebehay, S. "Libya's Warring Sides, including Russian Mercenaries, May be Guilty of Crimes." Reuters, 4 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyas-warring-sides-including-russian-mercenaries-may-be-guilty-crimes-un-2021-10-04/>.

44 "Recruited as Security Guards in the UAE, Deceived into Working in Conflict-Ridden Libya Instead." Human Rights Watch, 1 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/01/recruited-security-guards-uae-deceived-working-conflict-ridden-libya-instead>; Lechner, J. and Asher, S. "Inside the Bloody Business of Turkey's Syrian Mercenaries." The National Interest, 5 September 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/inside-bloody-business-turkey%E2%80%99s-syrian-mercenaries-204589?page=0%2C1>.

45 Boduszynski, M. *US Democracy Promotion in the Arab World: Beyond Interests and Ideals*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2019, pp. 173-174; Wehrey. "This War is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post-2011 Conflicts from Proxies to Boots on the Ground."

46 Some argue that a phone call between US President Donald Trump and Haftar on April 15 also played a key role in emboldening Haftar to attack. See: "Trump discussed 'shared vision' in phone call to Libyan warlord Haftar." France24, 20 April 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190419-libya-trump-haftar-phone-call-tripoli>.

47 Pack, J. and Puszta, W. (2020).

48 BBC News (2020, January 14). Libya Conflict: Haftar 'leaves' Moscow ceasefire talks without deal. BBC News, 14 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51104846>; Wehrey. "This War is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post-2011 Conflicts from Proxies to Boots on the Ground."

49 Mezran and Henneberg. "Gulf influence in the Maghreb."

Disinformation campaigns were particularly common during this period and exacerbated the conflict. Research has identified the role of Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE in fueling “hashtag wars” on Twitter in an attempt to generate support for Haftar.⁵⁰ The research also highlights the role of traditional Arabic-language media in amplifying these campaigns and the use of bots, fake Twitter accounts, and coordinated behavior to post content in support of the LNA.⁵¹ Russia has also run disinformation campaigns in Libya. This use of disinformation, which ran alongside similar activities by Gulf states, amounts to weaponizing the information space to push military agendas.⁵² In addition to creating confusion and divisions among the Libyan public, these disinformation campaigns have had a global impact, creating the idea that Haftar is secularist, pro rule-of-law, and pro-West while his opponents in Tripoli were regarded as more or less radical Islamists.

2020 - Present: Foreign Support for a Political Impasse

Turkish intervention combined with Haftar’s retreat beyond Sirte eventually paved the way for a ceasefire in fall 2020. In subsequent months the UN convened a 75-person Libya Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) which produced a roadmap meant to culminate in parliamentary and presidential elections on December 24, 2021. In the meantime, the 75 LPDF members elected a new interim government and prime minister. That prime minister was the much-discussed businessman of the Qadhafi era, Abdulhamid Dbeibah. Despite evidence of corruption in the LPDF in support of Dbeibah, UN Special Representative Stephanie Williams had Dbeibah’s government approved by the parliament (called the House of Representatives/HOR). Under Dbeibah’s rule and during his Government of National Unity (GNU) and the new Presidency Council, very little progress was made toward preparing for elections in December 2021. In fact, by November of that year it was clear that a peaceful, meaningful election process would be impossible because of disagreements among elites. Although Paris hosted a last-minute conference attended by high-level officials such as U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, the international community failed to revive the Berlin Process that many believe had contributed to the latest ceasefire.

At the last minute, the High National Elections Commission canceled the election. This allowed for the formation of a new government as a challenger to the GNU, calling itself the Government of National Stability (GNS) and claiming that the GNU was no longer legitimate given that its mandate was meant to end at the scheduled date of elections. The HOR, through a non-transparent vote, selected Fathi Bashagha, a former minister of the GNA who hails from the western town of Misrata, as the GNS prime minister. Unsurprisingly, the GNU refused to step down, claiming it had a mandate until the holding of elections. Bashagha had risen to prominence in part due to his close relations with countries like the U.S. and Turkey, and he had formerly been a rival to Haftar. However, the former rivals now saw it in their interest to form an alliance. Until today, the GNS and the HOR have been explicitly supported by Egypt and Russia, both traditional opponents of Turkey and, in the case of Russia, of the U.S.

As shown above, foreign authoritarian actors have strengthened anti-democratic forces in Libya. They have allowed politicians who benefit from the status quo to thwart UN-organized elections by claiming that their opponents are illegitimate. Similarly, foreign interference has propped up Libyan actors seeking to wrest power from others.

Foreign authoritarian actors have strengthened anti-democratic forces in Libya. They have allowed politicians who benefit from the status quo to thwart UN-organized elections by claiming that their opponents are illegitimate. Similarly, foreign interference has propped up Libyan actors seeking to wrest power from others.

50 Kassab, M. and Carvin, A. “A Twitter Hashtag Campaign in Libya: How Jingoism Went Viral.” DFRLab, 6 June 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-twitter-hashtag-campaign-in-libya-part-1-how-jingoism-went-viral-43d3812e8d3f>.

51 Kassab, M. and Carvin, A. “Libya Hashtag Campaign has Broader Designs: Trolling Qatar.” DFRLab, 3 July 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/libyan-hashtag-campaign-has-broader-designs-trolling-qatar-8b2ba69c7334>.

52 Grossman, S. Bush, D. and DiResta R. “Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa.” Palo Alto: Stanford Internet Observatory, 29 October 2019, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/prigozhin-africa>; Also see remarks by Khadeja Ramali, “The Scramble for Libya: A Globalized Civil War at Tipping Point,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 July 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/08/scramble-for-libya-globalized-civil-war-at-tipping-point-event-7381>.

Examples include Russia's support to the eastern Central Bank to allow eastern-based governments to operate in parallel to the Tripoli-based government (also severely undermining the functioning of Libya's economy⁵³), and more recently Egypt's refusal to deal with the Tripoli-based GNU in the context of the Arab League or Turkey's striking energy and military deals with the GNU, stoking the ire of Egypt, Greece, and others. Instead of allowing the illegitimacy of these actors to be revealed, elites have found ways to play foreign powers off one another, making the conflict appear intractable.

Libya once again has two governments, as it has since 2014, when the House of Representatives formed the government in the city of al-Beida (led by Abdulla al-Thinni) to rival the government based in Tripoli (led by Khalifa al-Ghwell). In 2016, a new government emanating from the UN-led Skhirat Agreement (or LPA) took the place of the al-Ghwell government in the west. Alliances have clearly shifted since that earlier period, including among foreign backers. For example, Russia, which used to more clearly back Haftar, may have pressured Haftar to release its most recent blockage of the oil fields and terminals (which began in April 2022) in order to allow Libyan oil exports to continue unhindered and its proxies to collect the revenues. Alternatively, Moscow may have tried to prevent Haftar from doing so because of its interest since the start of the Ukraine war in strangling Europe's access to energy. In either case, there is strong reason to believe that Russia is motivated by maintaining instability and fissures in Libya in order to allow space for it to maneuver according to its interests. Rather than retreating from Libya in order to focus on Ukraine, Russia, especially through its mercenary forces, is consolidating its presence.⁵⁴

Today the LNA retains significant control in the east and parts of the south, while both Wagner forces and Turkish-sent Syrian mercenaries remain present in Libya and therefore capable of meddling in the conflict. However, from a military and political point of view, the western Tripolitania region is extremely fragmented, with militias often undistinguishable from criminal organizations. Interference from foreign actors is quite widespread, albeit with much less direct control of their proxy forces on the ground.

The Role of China: Quietly Expanding Influence

China's involvement in Libya differs from that of the authoritarian actors who have been actively seeking to deter democratization in Libya. Since the beginning of the conflict, China has continued to exercise careful neutrality while also acting as a key trading partner.⁵⁵ It also maintains relations – particularly economic ones, and to an extent diplomatic and even military ones – with actors on both sides of the conflict. Over time, Beijing has slowly and steadily expanded its influence in Libya⁵⁶ and appears poised to use its influence to advance its own non-democratic goals.

China purports to adhere to a principle of non-interference in the affairs of other countries. Its decision to abstain from the 2011 UNSC vote authorizing intervention in Libya, rather than veto the resolution, caused it to lose some diplomatic credibility.⁵⁷ In addition, because Beijing had had decent relations with the Qadhafi regime and was reluctant to unequivocally support the rebels at the start of the 2011 uprising, observers expected China to be excluded from reconstruction contracts once the Qadhafi regime had fallen.⁵⁸ Despite this initial uncertainty, over time, China has deepened its economic ties to Libya (see below) while also recovering its diplomatic stature due to the failure of Western countries to stabilize Libya.⁵⁹

53 Assad, A. "Libya's parallel central bank admits printing 9.7-billion-dinar banknotes in Russia." *Libya Observer*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/economy/libyas-parallel-central-bank-admits-printing-97-billion-dinar-banknotes-russia>.

54 Interview with Libyan military expert (who prefers to remain anonymous) in Washington, DC (September 2022).

55 Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs. "China in the Mediterranean: Implications of Expanding Sino-North Africa Relations."

56 See ChinaMed Data: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/libya>. Accessed December 2, 2022.

57 El Kadi, T. "China and North Africa: History, Economic Engagement, and Soft Power." *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, 2022, 111.

China also supported UNSC resolutions to impose a travel ban, asset freeze, and arms embargo against the Qadhafi regime.

58 Megerisi, T. "Libya and China: A Tale of Two Eras." in *China and North Africa: Between Economics, Politics, and Security*, London: IB Tauris, 2022, p.77.

59 Megerisi, T. "Libya and China: A Tale of Two Eras."

Militarily, China's involvement in Libya has been limited. It sold Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, which have reportedly deployed them in Libya.⁶⁰ Beijing is also alleged to have transferred weapons to Qadhafi's forces in July 2011 when they were fighting the rebels. This support complicated China's economic and diplomatic involvement after Qadhafi was overthrown.⁶¹

The use of Chinese-produced UAVs in Libya could represent an opportunity to expand its defense industry, suggesting that this indirect and low-level involvement is in fact helping China increase its role as a great power.⁶²

Experts have documented the extensive commercial contacts between the two countries prior to 2011. This included roughly 150,000 barrels of oil per day exported from Libya to China. Chinese firms largely ceased activity once the conflict broke out in 2011 (At the start of the conflict, in 2011, China evacuated approximately 35,000 citizens). In 2018, authorities in Tripoli urged them to come back.⁶³ In the following years trade and commercial activity resumed, and Chinese imports of crude oil from Libya grew from \$1.7 billion to \$3.5 billion between 2017 and 2018.⁶⁴ Rare earth and precious metals are also commodities of interest for Beijing, and China is now a relatively important player in Libya's post-conflict reconstruction and telecommunications sectors.⁶⁵ China has signed a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) memorandum with Libya, but has yet to establish a formal strategic partnership.⁶⁶

In the post-Qadhafi era, the China National Petroleum Corporation (PetroChina)'s partnership with Libya's NOC is also an indicator of Beijing's strategy for gradually expanding its presence in Libya. PetroChina has tried to deepen its institutional linkages with the Libyan NOC⁶⁷ partly in an attempt to overcome the rebels' initial suspicions due to the Chinese Communist Party's relationship with the Qadhafi regime. Today, most of Libya's oil infrastructure is in territory controlled by Haftar's forces. Ferhat Bengdara recently took over as the head of the NOC, which is technically neutral, but Bengdara is thought to be more sympathetic to eastern factions. Beijing appears to be aiming to secure a long-term role in Libya's post-conflict reconstruction and energy cooperation by carefully maintaining relations with all relevant actors in Libya.⁶⁸

Finally, Beijing's engagement in various multilateral forums such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation has enhanced bilateral trade between China and various North African states, including Libya.⁶⁹ These forums are broadly seen as platforms to promote China's BRI and its diplomatic ties to North Africa. China also uses these meetings to assert alternative norms of global governance and to advance its model of political and economic development.⁷⁰ Beijing officially recognizes the Tripoli-based government, which permits it to sign construction and other contracts. At the same time, China also agreed to fund development projects in the east supported by the parallel eastern government, to position itself with whichever government ends up being in control.⁷¹

60 Mitzer, S. and Oliemans, J. "The Middle East's Game of Drones: Egypt's UAV Arsenal." *Oryx*, 28 December 2021, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/12/the-middle-east-s-game-of-drones-egypts.html>; Binnie, J. "Libya's GNA Says Jordan Sold UAVs to its Enemy." *Janes*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/update-libyas-gna-says-jordan-sold-uavs-to-its-enemy>; Zwijnenburg, W. "Are Emirati Armed Drones Supporting Ethiopia from an Eritrean Air Base?" *Bellingcat*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-drones-supporting-ethiopia-from-an-eritrean-air-base/>.

61 Megerisi. "Libya and China: A Tale of Two Eras."; Ramani, S. "China's Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East," in Fulton (ed), *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, 2022, 248; El Kadi. "China and North Africa: History, Economic Engagement, and Soft Power."

62 Megerisi. "Libya and China: A Tale of Two Eras."

63 "GNA Interior Minister Bashagha affirms Libya's desire for security cooperation with China." *Al Wasat*, 9 January 2019, <http://en.alwasat.ly/news/libya/232190>.

64 Ramani. "China's Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East."

65 Ramani. "China's Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East." The author asserts that "Chinese officials see investments in Libya as potentially beneficial for their geopolitical ambitions in Africa," (247) but also notes that concerns about corruption "could eventually stall China's economic advance" (252).

66 Alharathy, S. "Libya joins China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Libya Observer*, 13 July 2018.

67 Ramani. "China's Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East."

68 Chaziza, M. "China's Libya Policy and the BRI: Sights Set on the Future." Middle East Institute, 22 December 2020, Washington, DC: Middle East Institute <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-libya-policy-and-bri-sights-set-future>; Arduino, A. "Here's the real reason China isn't taking sides in Libya." *South China Morning Post*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3047944/heres-real-reason-china-isnt-taking-sides-libya>."

69 El Kadi, T. "China and North Africa: History, Economic Engagement, and Soft Power."

70 "China's approach to global governance" Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/china-global-governance/>. Accessed 3 November 2022.

71 Wehrey, F. and Alkoutami, S. "China's Balancing Act in Libya." *Lawfare*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/chinas-balancing-act-libya>.

China's intervention in Libya, with the exception of its drone sales to foreign powers supporting Haftar, is less direct and more long-term than the other authoritarian actors discussed in this report.⁷² China initially faced challenges in adopting its traditional approach of expanding its influence via economic ties while adhering to a principle of non-interference. But the hornet's nest that Libya has become has allowed it to subtly counter Western governance models and principles while deepening its economic – and potentially other -- influence in the country.

Conclusion

The above analysis of malign foreign influence suggests bleak prospects for democratic development in Libya. International meddling in Libya began with Gulf states funneling weapons and funds to anti-Qadhafi rebel groups. These groups have since transformed into, and given rise to, other autonomous criminal actors. Egypt, the UAE, and Russia's overt support for General Haftar's ambitions; and Turkey and Qatar's alignment with anti-Haftar forces enhanced these dynamics. A reduction in armed conflict and shifting domestic and international alliances have not created peace and democracy in Libya. This is largely due to foreign actors' funding of mercenary forces in the country. The presence of these mercenaries has largely prevented the implementation of the late 2020 ceasefire. Moreover, political actors continue to use divisions within the international community to their advantage. Geostategic competition in the UNSC has hampered the UN Support Mission in Libya in its attempts to organize elections and facilitate military unification. This, in turn, has allowed politicians who benefit from the status quo to retain power while simultaneously claiming to support a political solution.⁷³

72 Chaziza. "China's Libya Policy and the BRI: Sights Set on the Future."

73 As this report goes to press, UN Special Representative to the Secretary General, Abdilay Bathily, is seeking to introduce a new roadmap to elections, while Libyan elites such as those in the HOR and the Tripoli-based High Council of State (HCS) are using various machinations to confuse and complicate the process, thus avoiding the holding of elections.



AFRICA

SUDAN

Introduction

Located on the Red Sea, the Republic of Sudan is strategically located in the Horn of Africa, gateway to North Africa and the Sahel. Since its independence, Sudan has experienced cycles of protests and military coups against a backdrop of economic crisis.¹ There are also ongoing civil wars across the country: Darfur, the Blue Nile, Nuba Mountains, and West Kordofan. Sudan's complex crises have left at least 14.3 million Sudanese in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022, up from 13.4 million in 2021. Drivers include political instability following the military takeover on 25 October 2021, a socioeconomic crisis characterized by high inflation rates and currency depreciation, and food insecurity affecting nearly a quarter of the population.² The crisis that ensued in 2023 further destabilized the nation: with two military factions competing for power, now an additional 560,000 Sudanese citizens have crossed into neighboring countries and two million are displaced internally.³ Sudan has the highest poverty rate in North Africa despite the fact that it is a resource-rich country.⁴ It is often referred to as the bread basket of the Arab world and leases agricultural land to Arab allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The country also has extensive uranium reserves, largely untapped, and is the third largest gold producer in Africa.⁵

Sudan has long been subject to foreign interference by a variety of actors but has also grappled with authoritarianism domestically since independence. Much like in Egypt, or Syria, various factions of the Sudanese security apparatus control the country's political, economic, and military power. This includes power over the country's natural resources, which makes Sudan of great interest to foreign actors. The military has leased, and in some cases sold, agricultural land to its primary Arab allies - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE - and has granted them advantageous concessions for gold mining.⁶ Sudan is also mulling the authorization of a Russian military base on the Red Sea; the Kremlin is not just interested in uranium and gold, but also in Sudan's strategic position between the Middle East and West Africa.⁷ Although the October 25 coup projects the appearance of unity in the military, it is deeply divided, and competing factions are courted by foreign authoritarian regimes.

1 Deposed dictator Omar al-Bashir ruled the country from 1989 until 2019, when he was overthrown by leaders of the military and security apparatus in April 2019, following months of civilian-led mass protests. The military installed a Transitional Military Council (TMC) and imposed a state of emergency. On August 17, 2019, under pressure from the international community, the TMC and the coalition of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition comprised of civilian and rebel groups leading the anti-al-Bashir protests, signed a power-sharing agreement establishing the Sovereignty Council, an 11-member body composed of representatives from military and civil society, formed under UN supervision. One month later on September 5, 2020, the parties in the Sovereignty Council established a transitional government and nominated an economist, Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister. The Sovereignty Council created a plan to hand over control to a civilian president after 21 months, with the overall transitional period lasting 39 months. However, on October 25, 2021, just a few days before the scheduled changeover date, several generals on the Sovereignty Council staged another coup. Coup leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan dissolved the Sovereignty Council and reconstituted it a month later as the "Transitional Sovereignty Council" under purely military rule and his leadership.

2 "Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022." ReliefWeb, 2 Dec 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-december-2021>.

3 "Sudan: Displacement soars amid shrinking humanitarian access." United Nations, 27 June 2023. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1138152>.

4 Statista. "Projected Poverty Headcount Ratio in North Africa 2021-2023, by Country." Statista, 28 July 2022, www.statista.com/statistics/1274508/projected-poverty-headcount-ratio-in-north-africa-by-country.

5 Kodmani, Bassma. "The Relentless Power of the Sudanese Military." Institut Montaigne, 9 November 2021. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/relentless-power-sudanese-military>.

6 Kodmani.

7 "Sudan Welcomes Military Base Agreement with Russia in the Red Sea." Africa News/Andalou, 3 March, 2022. <https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/03/sudan-welcomes-military-base-agreement-with-russia-in-the-red-sea/>.

Sudan's restrictive and hostile informational environment informs any analysis of online foreign authoritarian influence operations in the country. During his reign, al-Bashir's administration held tight control over the media and internet. States with whom he shared mutual interests, such as Russia and Turkey, had increased access to local media outlets to disseminate pro-authoritarian narratives. Most of the media influence was online social media campaigns criticizing U.S. sanctions, pro-democracy movements, or Sudanese opposition leaders. Now, Sudatel Telecom is an instrument of power for the regime, and the country's internet infrastructure remains the property of the Sudanese military – meaning those in power have the ability to enforce country-wide internet blackouts and censor certain content and platform. Laws such as the Armed Forces Law, the Public Safety law, and the law of the Telecommunication and Post Regulation Authority (TPRA)⁸, give the military permission to do so. Foreign influence campaigns mostly support officials who follow the military's line and are pro- Russia and Saudi Arabia. In 2019, civil society organized online, but since the October 25 coup, resistance to military rule is coordinated at a hyper-local level, sometimes utilizing paper pamphlets and small-scale protests. Anti-government groups rarely meet in person, as the risk of being arrested is very real.⁹

The Sudanese government uses a variety of laws to control press freedom and online activity. The Cybercrimes Act was designed by al-Bashir's regime to limit the freedom of activists, bloggers, and media professionals. In May 2018, the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS) reported that four Sudanese citizens were charged with defamation and cybercrimes for social media activity, arguing this violates citizen's rights to freedom of expression.¹⁰ Shortly after in June 2018, amendments to the Cybercrimes Act introduced new criminal penalties for spreading fake news online. The amendment strengthens penalties, including raising the maximum prison term to four years from one year for publishing what the government considers as "fake news" online. In July 2020, the Sovereign Council signed these amendments under the "Cybercrime Prevention (Amendment) Act" into law. Then, in March 2021 when a human rights defender was arrested for spreading false news under the Cybercrimes Act, the government was able to charge them with criminal offenses. Essentially this law gave the government the power to charge opposition and resistance movements with criminal charges and keep them in prison with longer sentences.¹¹

Given Sudan's history of conflict and instability, foreign authoritarian actors are cautious when engaging with the country, regardless of whether there is a civilian or military regime in power. For democratic actors, the military coup presented a window of opportunity for a new and inclusive democratic opening. However, since the coup, external authoritarian actors have co-opted civilian and military opposition to al-Bashir in ways that sideline civil society altogether. Additionally, many foreign actors in Sudan have conflicting objectives in-country. The Gulf states, along with Egypt, have historic ties to Sudan and could potentially align themselves with Russia in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, and their supporters in Qatar and Turkey, gaining a foothold in Sudan.¹² However, the exclusion of Syria at the November 2022 Arab League suggests that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a polarizing issue among the different players, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made Putin an unreliable partner for Arab countries.¹³

8 "How The Government in Sudan Legalized Internet Categorizing and Content Filtering." Global Voices, 2 Aug. 2022, <https://globalvoices.org/2022/08/02/how-the-government-in-sudan-legalized-internet-categorizing-and-content-filtering/>.

9 Holleis, Jennifer. "Sudan's activists: 'Now we are driven by anger.'" DW, 19 November 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/sudans-protest-movement-now-we-are-driven-by-anger/a-59884402>.

10 ACJPS. 2018. "Four Sudanese Citizens Charged with Defamation and Cybercrimes for Social Media Activity." ACJPS, 4 May 2018. <https://www.acjps.org/four-sudanese-citizens-charged-with-defamation-and-cybercrimes-for-social-media-activity/>.

11 "Sudan: Continued Targeting of Opposition Political Leaders by Sudanese Authorities." African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, 27 October 2022, <https://www.acjps.org/sudan-continued-targeting-of-opposition-political-leaders-by-sudanese-authorities/>.

12 Considered a terrorist organization by Russia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, among others.

13 Bussel, Pierre. "A Hopeless Summit of Arab Countries." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88212>.

Russia

Russia's influence in Sudan is marked by military and security assistance led by oligarch-run businesses affiliated with the Kremlin. Since 2014, Russia has had an aggressive economic and security strategy on the African continent designed to ensure the survival of Putin's kleptocratic regime. This system relies on elites' self-enrichment. In November 2017, two years before the Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019 in Sochi, al-Bashir met with Putin and offered Sudan as "Russia's key to Africa" by floating the idea of a Russian naval base on the country's Red Sea coast. After all parties agreed to the deal, al-Bashir made side agreements to strengthen the Khartoum-Moscow relationship and promised paramilitary contracts for Wagner Group and arms sales in exchange for building the naval base.¹⁴

Moscow was a long-time supporter of al-Bashir's military regime. During the 2018-19 protests, Russian specialists "drew up a program of political and economic reform, designed to keep al-Bashir in power". It included a plan to smear anti-regime protesters, apparently copy-pasted from tactics used at home against the anti-Putin opposition,¹⁵ according to evidence released by the Dossier Center,¹⁶ an investigative project founded by Putin opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Moscow was a long-time supporter of al-Bashir's military regime. During the 2018-19 protests, Russian specialists "drew up a program of political and economic reform, designed to keep al-Bashir in power".

When protests demanding al-Bashir's resignation erupted in late 2018 and early 2019, al-Bashir quickly turned to Moscow for support and the Putin regime obliged. Some reports suggest that mercenaries from the Wagner Group and other affiliated organizations helped the Sudanese crack down on civilian movements. This underscores the Kremlin's strategy of using private mercenary groups to support authoritarian leaders to avoid responsibility.¹⁷ Even with al-Bashir out of power, as of 2022 the Sudanese military had approved the Red Sea naval deal and Moscow met its demands for weapons and equipment. The deal is currently waiting for approval from a Sudanese legislative body that does not yet exist.¹⁸ This demonstrates Moscow's engagement with the current military regime.¹⁹

Russia's Springboard to Africa

Sudan is an ideal African gateway for Russia. One of Russia's objectives is to have global networks, notably business and political elites, favorable to the Kremlin positioned in different regions of the world and ready for deployment to other conflicts. It is notable that Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which are Sudan's independent paramilitary forces run by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti)²⁰, were deployed in Libya alongside veteran Wagner²¹ soldiers who previously served in Syria.

14 Goncharenko, Roman. "Is Sudan naval base Russia's 'key to Africa'?" Deutsche Welle, 12 February 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/with-sudan-naval-base-russia-may-have-a-key-to-africa/a-55791124>.

15 Harding, Luke, and Jason Burke. "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa." The Guardian, 11 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

16 "The strategy for the development of 'Negroid racial chauvinism' or Prigozhin's response to the Gerasimov doctrine [Стратегия развития «негроидного расового шовинизма» или пригожинский ответ доктрине Герасимова]." Досье, 21 May 2019, <https://dossier.center/e-prigozhin/article/prigozhinskij-otvet-doktrine-gerasimova/>.

17 Ibrahim, Dr. Azeem. "Why is Russia propping up Sudan's Bashir?" Alarabiya News, 18 February 2019. <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2019/02/18/Why-is-Russia-propping-up-Sudan-s-Bashir->

18 Magdy, Samy. "Sudan Military Finishes Review of Russian Red Sea Base Deal." AP News, 11 February 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-moscow-803738fba4d8f91455f0121067c118dd>.

19 Ramani, Samuel. "Moscow's Hand in Sudan's Future." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 July 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79488>.

20 General Hemedti has commanded the Rapid Support Forces since 2013. He participated in the October 2021 coup and served as a member of the Transitional Sovereignty Council until 2023, following a rift with al-Burhan (see the 2023 crisis section below). General Hemedti is one of the most powerful people in Sudan and the RSF remains Sudan's main paramilitary group. The RSF has been battling the Sudanese Army, under al-Burhan, since April 2023, further contributing to widespread conflict across the country. See: "Who are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?" Reuters, 6 September 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/who-are-sudans-rapid-support-forces-2023-04-13/>.

21 The Wagner Group is a private mercenary group based out of Russia. The head of the group was Yevgeny Prigozhin until his death in August 2023. Prigozhin was a businessman who had previously worked for the Kremlin. The group has been deployed throughout several conflicts, including Syria where Wagner forces fought alongside pro-government forces, Libya where they fought with forces loyal to General Haftar, and now in Ukraine. Wagner Group has been accused of war crimes, including rape, robberies, and torture. See "What is Russia's Wagner group of mercenaries and why did it march on Moscow?" BBC News, 29 June 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

Wagner group often pulls soldiers from one country to another, depending on need and new contracts between the Kremlin and foreign governments.²²

The Kremlin's first goals for re-engaging the African continent, in the post-Soviet Union era, were securing a naval base in Africa and expanding security cooperation with target governments.²³ Russia has had no permanent military foothold in Africa since the end of the Cold War, until 2014 just after the annexation of Crimea. After the events in southeastern Ukraine, Russia installed a base in Syria in the port of Tartus. The full meaning of al-Bashir's "key to Africa" pledge revealed itself in the expansion of Russian activity in the years that followed the 2017 opening in Sochi. In Sochi, Russia and the al-Bashir regime agreed to arms sales, paramilitary contracts for the deployment of Wagner personnel, and mining licenses for Moscow. The agreement was framed as an economic opening in exchange for security with an added bonus of providing "protection against aggressive US actions." These "aggressive actions" included sanctions against al-Bashir for Darfur and the U.S.' push for al-Bashir to be prosecuted in the ICC. Wagner forces were spotted in Sudan for the first time in December 2017, to train and equip both military and paramilitary forces. While Sudan was one of the first countries this strategy was deployed, Russian paramilitary presence in Sudan foreshadowed a strategy that has since been extended to some twenty other African countries with Russian military cooperation agreements.

Wagner's presence in the Central African Republic was supported by troops in nearby Sudan. Wagner is a prime example of how the Kremlin has exported authoritarian norms and Kremlin enrichment. Security cooperation agreements between Russia and African states, such as Sudan, include private components, such as mercenaries to safeguard local politicians in rural areas, and mining licenses outside of domestic laws and regulations.²⁴ Some agreements also appear to include an information warfare component, as entities linked to the Wagner group and the mining companies have conducted online information campaigns, including fake polls and pro-government or pro-war propaganda in the countries they are based in.²⁵ This is an example of how disinformation campaigns are the basis for Wagner's three step approach that links business and political interests through security cooperation agreements.

The Prigozhin model of an alleged private citizen acting on behalf of the state is typical of how the Kremlin operates on the continent. Kevin Limonier of the French Institute of Geopolitics and Marlene Laruelle of the George Washington University have coined the term "entrepreneurs of influence" to describe Russian private stakeholders who take on state interference activities, either because they are mandated and paid by the Kremlin to do so, or because they expect its favors in return.²⁶ Such entrepreneurs of influence are key to the survival of Putin's kleptocratic regime, a system that relies on the imperative of self-enrichment by regime elites. Russia's engagement in Sudan includes all elements of this approach: military support in exchange for mining concessions and the enrichment of Kremlin-linked elite; and information operations to support the Kremlin's engagement in the country.

Mining and Military Cooperation

The agreement in Sochi provided an entry point for further Russian engagement in Sudan. Recently, leaked documents²⁷ show the existence of agreements between companies owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin (who is also the head of Wagner Group) and Sudanese firms tied to the military government.

22 "1,000 Sudanese Militiamen Arrive in Libya." Radio Dabanga, 25 July 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/1-000-sudanese-militiamen-arrive-in-libya>.

23 Bugayova, Nataliya, et al. "The Kremlin's Campaign in Africa." ISW, 18 October. 2018, https://www.iswresearch.org/2018/10/the-kremlins-campaign-in-africa_18.html.

24 Sharife, Khadija. "Documents Reveal Wagner's Golden Ties to Sudanese Military Companies." OCCRP, 2 November 2022. <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/documents-reveal-wagners-golden-ties-to-sudanese-military-companies>.

25 Parens, Raphael. "The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali." Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 March 2022. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

26 Limonier, Kevin, and Marlene Laruelle. "Russia's African Toolkit: Digital Influence and Entrepreneurs of Influence." *Orbis*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2021, pp. 403-19. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2021.06.005>.

27 "Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation dated November 6, 2020 No. 1790

'On submitting to the President of the Russian Federation a proposal to sign an Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Sudan on the creation of a logistics support point for the Navy of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Republic of Sudan' [Постановление Правительства Российской Федерации От 06.11.2020 № 1790 - Официальное Опубликование Правовых Актов - Официальный Интернет-Портал Правовой Информации]. Russian Federation, 11 November. 2020, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202011110016>.

For example, M Invest, a mineral exploration company owned by Prigozhin, paid salaries to employees of a Sudanese oil and gas company called Aswar. According to the Dossier Center's research, M Invest contracted Aswar to organize military flights and supply weapons to other Wagner-linked groups operating in Sudan. M Invest reportedly began prospecting for gold following an agreement signed with al-Bashir's junta in 2017, as documented by the Dossier Center's May 2019 investigation.²⁸ Russian state-owned exploration company Rosgeologia signed several agreements to explore mineral deposits in the Nile basin in 2019.²⁹ In a report mapping Russian illicit finance in Sudan and Madagascar, academic experts at the University of Exeter revealed that Russian agents have been smuggling Sudanese gold to Russia for years, even after al-Bashir was ousted because of close personal relations between the agents and General Hemedti, who leads Sudan's Rapid Support Forces.³⁰ This is one of the ways that the Kremlin has been able to quadruple the amount of gold held in Russia's central bank since 2010. This has contributed to Putin's ability to secure funding for the invasion of Ukraine.³¹

Russian agents have been smuggling Sudanese gold to Russia for years, even after al-Bashir was ousted because of close personal relations between the agents and General Hemedti, who leads Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. This is one of the ways that the Kremlin has been able to quadruple the amount of gold held in Russia's central bank since 2010. This has contributed to Putin's ability to secure funding for the invasion of Ukraine.

The 2017 agreement in Sochi was framed as an economic opening in exchange for security with the added bonus of providing "protection against aggressive U.S. actions",³² aggressive actions referring to US sanctions against al-Bashir for war crimes in Darfur, as well as pressuring the International Criminal Court to prosecute al-Bashir. As illustrated by the example of ongoing gold smuggling, Russia was able to maintain its economic and military position in Sudan despite the fall of al-Bashir³³ and despite instability within the Sudanese transitional military council. While there were some questions about renewed political and economic accountability in Sudan during the transition period, Russia was able to cultivate close ties with General Hemedti. This, however, has not been a guarantee of progress given the ongoing political instability in the country.

During the transition period from 2019 to 2021, Sudan and Russia deepened military cooperation and negotiations moved forward on the naval base. In May 2019, Russia and Sudan signed a military cooperation deal, and in December 2020, a draft agreement revealed that Russian ships would be permitted to access a permanent port facility on the Red Sea.³⁴

28 "Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation dated November 6, 2020 No. 1790

'On submitting to the President of the Russian Federation a proposal to sign an Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Sudan on the creation of a logistics support point for the Navy of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Republic of Sudan' [Постановление Правительства Российской Федерации От 06.11.2020 № 1790 · Официальное Опубликование Правовых Актов · Официальный Интернет-Портал Правовой Информации]."

29 Russian Geological Exploration Holding, <https://rusgeology.ru/en/>.

30 Owen, Catherine. "Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar." University of Exeter, 9 May 2022, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/publications/mapping-russian-illicit-finance-in-africa-briefing.pdf>.

31 Collins, Tom. "How Putin Prepared for Sanctions with Tonnes of African Gold." The Telegraph, 3 March 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/putin-prepared-sanctions-tonnes-african-gold/>.

32 Limonier.

33 Shuster, Simon. "It's Business as Usual for Russians in Sudan, Despite Bashir's Fall." Time, 12 April 2019, <https://time.com/5569355/sudan-bashir-russia-mining/>.

34 "Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Sudan on military cooperation dated May 9, 2019 [Соглашение Между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Судан о Военном Сотрудничестве От 9 Мая 2019 Года (Вступило в Силу 9 Мая 2019 Года)]." Russian Federation, 24 May 2019, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201905240004?index=5&rangeSize=>.

According to a report in *The Moscow Times*, the new deal meant “the Russian Navy will station up to four warships, including those with nuclear capabilities, and up to 300 service members in a Sudanese port,” and “in exchange, Russia will provide Sudan with free assistance in search-and-rescue operations and support in antisabotage efforts.”³⁵ However, diverging views inside Sudan’s military leadership on how such plans would affect alliances with the West and Egypt stalled Russia’s plans. In June 2021, the transitional government announced it would review the military agreement with Russia, including the naval base, putting the plans on hold.³⁶ General Hemedti visited Moscow the day before the invasion of Ukraine.³⁷ During this visit, the General announced that Sudan has “no problem with Russia...opening a naval base on its Red Sea Coast.” He also announced that Sudan supported Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, citing that “Russia had the right to defend its people.”³⁸

There were still many ups and downs following this last agreement for the Russian naval base, as documented on Prigozhin’s former Facebook page. The intensity of these posts indicates there was likely an extreme divergence of opinion in Sudan’s Sovereignty Council on whether to allow Kremlin to build a port, or even engage Russia at all. Four months after the initial agreement was signed, Saudi media sources claimed that it had been suspended,³⁹ which prompted the Russian embassy in Khartoum to issue a denial.⁴⁰ Additionally, Facebook pages formerly belonging to Prigozhin and some of his companies began an extensive social media lobbying campaign in favor of the naval base, arguing that it would be extremely beneficial to Sudan. Many of the posts blamed Lt. General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan, then-chairman of the Sovereign Council, for letting the deal fall through. Although Wagner previously supported him, the company began a smear campaign blaming him for the lack of an agreement, accusing him of corruption and being an agent of the West.⁴¹ Ironically, the vehement language of these online smears seems to confirm that the deal was in fact suspended, counteracting official Russian Embassy statements.⁴²

The invasion of Ukraine does not appear to have changed Russian operations in Sudan. Analysts at the Middle East Institute argue that Western sanctions against Russia, as a result of the invasion, might impact its ability to provide aid in the short-term. But the fact that Russia and Sudan both have poor relations with the U.S. and its allies will likely make cooperation mutually beneficial in the long run. The Middle East Institute forecasts that relations between the Kremlin and Sudan’s interim government will be reinforced through its strong partnership with General Hemedti. Russia’s focus in Sudan will continue to be reinforcing military ties using unofficial Wagner mercenary groups.⁴³ Sudanese and Russian elites have continued to trade gold; the impact of sanctions on this illicit trade is still unknown.⁴⁴

Sanction Circumvention: Kremlin Influence at the United Nations

While Russian engagement in Sudan saw a sharp increase after the 2017 cooperation agreement, the Kremlin had already begun its illiberal influence campaign using its seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) prior to Sochi. Sanctions have been difficult to enforce due to Russia’s standing on the UNSC and its continued willingness to use that position to support its autocratic friends. In the case of Sudan, Russia utilizes its global decision-making powers to protect business interests under Wagner-affiliated companies.

35 “Russia to Open Nuclear Warship Logistics Hub in Sudan.” *The Moscow Times*, 12 November. 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/12/russian-to-open-nuclear-warship-logistics-hub-in-sudan-a72020>.

36 Mackinnon, Amy, et al. “Russia’s Dreams of a Red Sea Naval Base in Sudan Is Scuttled—for Now.” *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/>.

37 Khater, Samah. “Sudan’s Leader Visits Moscow as West Isolates Russia over Ukraine.” *Voice of America: Africa*. 23 February 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/sudan-s-leader-visits-moscow-as-west-isolates-russia-over-ukraine/6455704.html>.

38 “Hemedti says Sudan Should Be Open to Naval Base Accord with Russia, or Others.” *Reuters*, 3 March 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/hemedti-says-sudan-should-be-open-naval-base-accord-with-russia-or-others-2022-03-02/>.

39 “Sudan Suspends Red Sea Russian Naval Facility.” *Sudan Tribune*, 28 April 2021. <https://sudantribune.com/article67602/>.

40 “Russia Denies Sudan Naval Base Pact is Suspended.” *Memo: Middle East Monitor*, 30 April 2021. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210430-russia-denies-sudan-naval-base-pact-is-suspended/>.

41 “Domestic Disinformation on the Rise in Africa – Africa Center.” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.africacenter.org/spotlight/domestic-disinformation-on-the-rise-in-africa>.

42 “Russia Denies Sudan Naval Base Pact is Suspended.”

43 Ramani, Samuel. “How has the Ukraine war affected Russia’s ties with Libya and Sudan?” *Middle East Institute*, 25 April 2022. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-has-ukraine-war-affected-russias-ties-libya-and-sudan>.

44 Owen.

In 2004, the UNSC imposed sanctions on Sudan in response to the humanitarian crisis and al-Bashir's widespread human rights violations in Darfur.⁴⁵ These sanctions have since been amended and renewed by several subsequent UNSC resolutions, including an October 12, 2017 amendment that lifted trade sanctions.⁴⁶ Leaked documents⁴⁷ later revealed that an appointee to the four-person UN expert panel in charge of monitoring the sanctions against Sudan was linked to Wagner – demonstrating the Kremlin's abilities to shape international norms in favor of its interests.

The expert appointee that Russia planted, Nikolai Dobronravin, was a Russian professor and Africa specialist at St. Petersburg State University. Ahead of the sanctions being lifted in 2017, he travelled to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, at the expense of the Prigozhin-linked company M Invest. Dobronravin travelled with three company employees, including the founder of Lobaye Invest, Dmitry Sytii. The experts on the UN panel "are uniquely placed to influence the lifting of sanctions and the opening up of Darfur for uranium and other mining...If this were to happen it could be of benefit to Prigozhin's former companies, as well as to the Sudanese military, Moscow's main ally in Khartoum, and militia groups trafficking gold across the Libya border," according to Luke Harding, a reporter who analyzed the leaked documents.⁴⁸ Russia's sanction manipulation at the UNSC level continued after the military seized power in the October 25, 2021 coup: the Kremlin's refusal to condemn the most recent coup inspired the cautious wording in the resolution passed by the Security Council the day after the military took power.

Information Operations

Wagner Group's disinformation networks in Sudan promote itself and the Kremlin and as "friends of Sudan", in an effort to legitimize their presence in the country. After al-Bashir was ousted in 2019, Prigozhin's influence campaigns sought to garner support for Sudan's RSF and to portray Sudan's other transitional leaders as pawns of the U.S. The posts went so far as to suggest that things were better for the Sudanese people under al-Bashir. This tactic aligns with previous Kremlin-supported disinformation efforts on the continent⁴⁹ that supported incumbent governments with friendly relations with Russia and was often critical of protestors.⁵⁰ In Sudan, some of Prigozhin's previous posts were tied to the news site sudandaily.org, which also ran reposts from Sputnik, a state-owned Russian media company. Some of the Prigozhin-linked Facebook pages appeared to be official sites for political parties, and sometimes they looked like official web pages for Sudan's Transitional Military Council⁵¹ and Sovereignty Council.⁵² Facebook's "Page Transparency" feature revealed that these pages were managed by people in Sudan, Russia, and Germany.

In December 2020, Facebook took down 197 accounts, 122 pages, 16 groups, and 15 Instagram accounts that originated in Russia and focused primarily on Libya, Sudan, and Syria.⁵³ Graphika, a social media analytics company, formally attributed the pages and their content to Prigozhin.⁵⁴ The messaging of posts criticized Prime Minister Hamdok and Lt General al-Burhan after Sudan backed off on allowing Russia to build its naval base in 2021.⁵⁵

45 "Sudan and Darfur Sanctions." U.S. Department of The Treasury, 4 November 2022, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/sudan-and-darfur-sanctions>.

46 Morello, Carol. "U.S. Lifts Sanctions on Sudan, Ending Two Decades of Embargo." Washington Post, 6 October. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-lifts-sanctions-on-sudan-ending-two-decades-of-embargo/2017/10/06/aac1bd22-86d5-434e-9a21-1e0d57a72cb0_story.html.

47 Harding, Luke. "Revealed: UN Sudan Expert's Links to Russian Oligarch Prigozhin." The Guardian, 27 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/27/revealed-un-sudan-experts-links-to-russian-oligarch-prigozhin>.

48 Harding. "Revealed: UN Sudan Expert's Links to Russian Oligarch Prigozhin."

49 In October of that year, Stanford's Internet Observatory documented that Prigozhin created at least 35 Facebook accounts, 53 pages, seven groups, and five Instagram accounts focusing on influencing public opinions on domestic politics in Sudan, Madagascar, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, and Cameroon. See: Grossman, Shelby, Daniel Bush, and Renee DiResta, "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa." Stanford Freeman Spolgi institute for International Studies, 30 October. 2019, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publication/evidence-russia-linked-influence-operations-africa>.

50 "Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Russia." Meta, 30 October 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia>.

51 The website link used to be: <https://www.facebook.com/transitionalmilitarycouncil>.

52 Grossman et. al.

53 Gleicher, Nathaniel, and David Agranovich. "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia." Meta, 15 December 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>.

54 "More-Troll Komбат." Graphika/Stanford Internet Observatory, December 2020, <https://graphika.com/reports/more-troll-kombat>.

55 "Domestic Disinformation on the Rise in Africa."

Later, in May 2021, Facebook removed 83 accounts, 30 pages, six groups, and 49 Instagram accounts operated by nationals in Sudan “on behalf of individuals in Russia.,” characterized by the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) as an influence operation.⁵⁶ Some of these accounts were connected to accounts linked to the Wagner-affiliated Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), that Facebook suspended in October 2019.⁵⁷ The content published by this influence operation suggests that it involved both local and foreign actors.

It published cartoons by Sudanese artists aimed at disparaging and ridiculing anti-Russian Sudanese. Some of the content was either automatically translated into Arabic or translated by non-native speakers, as suggested by syntactical errors, including pronoun confusion (colored boxes in the screenshot below). For other content however, the DFR Lab argued that it was a part of a highly sophisticated and plotted operation, noting that Wagner-linked organizations hired locals in Sudan to run accounts.

This was done to make posts appear more authentic, using local language, slang, and real actors operating on the ground – making it less likely that analysts would tie them back to Russia.⁵⁸



The Stanford Internet Observatory also analyzed Prigozhin’s former Facebook operations in Africa in 2019 and 2020. Stanford noted that the Russian “network involved Sudanese individuals who were currently or had previously been living in Russia to help run the Sudanese operation.”⁵⁹ In December 2021, Twitter permanently banned two accounts claiming to be Sudanese, but which were part of Prigozhin’s IRA-linked accounts involved in influence operations.

The first of these accounts posted only seven tweets in two years. The second was far more active, posting nearly 1,000 tweets between June 2019 and February 2020. One of the posts on his account included a cartoon (below), by Brazilian anti-globalization and antisemitic cartoonist Carlos Latuf, depicting Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US “destabilizing” Sudan. It was originally published by the small U.S.-based far-left pro-Russian alternative news site MintPressNews.com.⁶⁰

56 “May 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report.” Meta, 3 June 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/06/may-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report/>.

57 Knight, Tessa. “Inauthentic Facebook Assets Promoted Russian Interests in Sudan.” DFRLab, 3 June 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-facebook-assets-promoted-russian-interests-in-sudan-2623c58b1f7f>.

58 “Domestic Disinformation on the Rise in Africa.”

59 “Stoking Conflict by Keystroke.” Stanford Cyber Policy Center 15 December 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/news/africa-takedown-december-2020>.

60 Grossman, Shelby, et al. “In Bed with Embeds: How a Network Tied to IRA Operations Created Fake.” Stanford Internet Observatory, 2 December 2021, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/embeds-dec-2021>.



During the Kremlin's years of information operations, several key narratives stand out.

Curbing anti-al-Bashir Protestors by Linking Them to LGBTQI Movements

Russia has frequently promoted the stance that Sudanese pro-democracy protestors are inherently linked with liberal, pro-West movements. Wagner-linked entities tactically spread false information and videos that portrayed pro-democracy and anti-coup protestors as anti-Islam, pro-Israel/US, and pro-LGBTQ. The underlying narrative being promoted is that if a citizen is against the military government, they inevitably are supportive of liberal norms, such as inclusion of LGBTQ persons, which is 'anti-Sudan'. Russian advisers also concurrently urged the Sudanese military council to crack down on the protests, citing that the military government was not doing enough to curb opposition.⁶¹

Portraying Prime Minister Hamdok as a Representative of the West

Pro-Russian propaganda depicted Prime Minister (PM) Hamdok as a Western pawn, shortly after he started using his platform as PM to promote Sudan within liberal international institutions. Initially, Wagner-affiliated pages posted positive content about PM Hamdok, with commentary about his relief initiatives with Prigozhin, citing that the Sudanese Health Ministry was the one blocking Russia's aid efforts.

This took a sharp turn when the Transitional Military Council was replaced by the Sovereignty Council, which was in part civilian led. General Hamdok then served as deputy executive secretary for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa⁶² and had on multiple occasions called for Western institutions such as the UN to allow Sudan to integrate with the international community, vowing to also deliver justice for victims in Darfur. As such, the narrative changed: one pro-Russian page, later removed by Facebook, posted a crude caricature of Hamdok stealing Russian aid from a crying child.⁶³ His ties to the West were then criticized by supporters of General Hemedti and pro-democracy movements alike. This was in large part because of public concern that PM Hamdok was a UN, pro-US pawn.⁶⁴



Source: DFR Lab.

61 Harding. "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa."

62 Knight, Tessa. "From Russia, with 'love': Inauthentic Facebook assets promoted Russian interests in Sudan." Daily Maverick, 9 June 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-09-for-bb-attention-from-russia-with-love-inauthentic-facebook-assets-promoted-russian-interests-in-sudan/>.

63 Burke, Jason. "Sudan Signals it May Send Former Dictator Omar al-Bashir to ICC." The Guardian, 11 February 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/11/sudan-says-it-will-send-former-dictator-omar-al-bashir-to-icc>.

64 "Sudan Group Condemns UN's Call to Support Reinstated PM." Voice of America, 4 December 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/a/sudan-group-condemns-un-s-call-to-support-reinstated-pm/6339573.html>.

Publicizing Russia's Humanitarian Aid Efforts

Despite constant work to delegitimize civil society groups behind the pro-democracy protests that ousted al-Bashir, known as 'Resistance Committees', Wagner-controlled pages amplified dissemination of photos published in April 2021 by the state-owned Sudanese news agency SUNA and the Kremlin-controlled media Sputnik Arabic showing Resistance Committees working with Russian food distribution for the poor. DFR Lab reported that the food aid given had images of the Russian flag on it, with Arabic text saying, "From Russia, with Love" and "Courtesy of Yevgeny Prigozhin."⁶⁵



Source:
DFR Lab.

China

Sudan's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) dates back to the 1960s, but the dynamics have greatly shifted over recent years. Sudan was among many African countries to back the PRC's entry into the UN in 1971, largely supporting China's policy of non-interference on issues of territorial integrity. In the decades that followed, China's relationship with Sudan focused on economic aid and developing PRC oil investments. That has changed because Sudan's oil reserves are now largely in South Sudan.⁶⁶

PRC lending to Sudan throughout from 2000 until recently was high, and Sudan's economy is highly reliant on economic engagement with the PRC. As of 2022, China issued 66 loans to Sudan, totaling \$4.8 billion.⁶⁷ The 2019 and 2021 political crises in Sudan did little to slow China's verbal commitments on continued economic engagement. However, in practice new loan agreements have been sparse since 2009, because of Sudan's inability to pay back the loans. In 2018 al-Bashir attended talks in Beijing during which Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping agreed to write off a portion of Sudan's debt incurred up until 2016, as well as refinancing the remaining balance. Xi also agreed to assist Sudan with its economic distress by providing up to \$88 million in new loans.⁶⁸ According to the Sudanese Central Bank, Sudan owed the PRC \$5.12 billion in early 2022⁶⁹, and later in August 2022, China loaned Sudan \$640 million for a railway project.⁷⁰ Cultural exchanges, medical and educational assistance, industry, and agricultural trade continued.⁷¹

65 Knight.

66 Maglad, Nour Eldin A. "Scoping Study on Chinese Relations with Sudan." Econstor, February 2008. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/93162/1/587559012.pdf>.

67 "Chinese Loans to Africa Database." Boston University Global Development Policy Center, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database>. Accessed 18 May 2022.

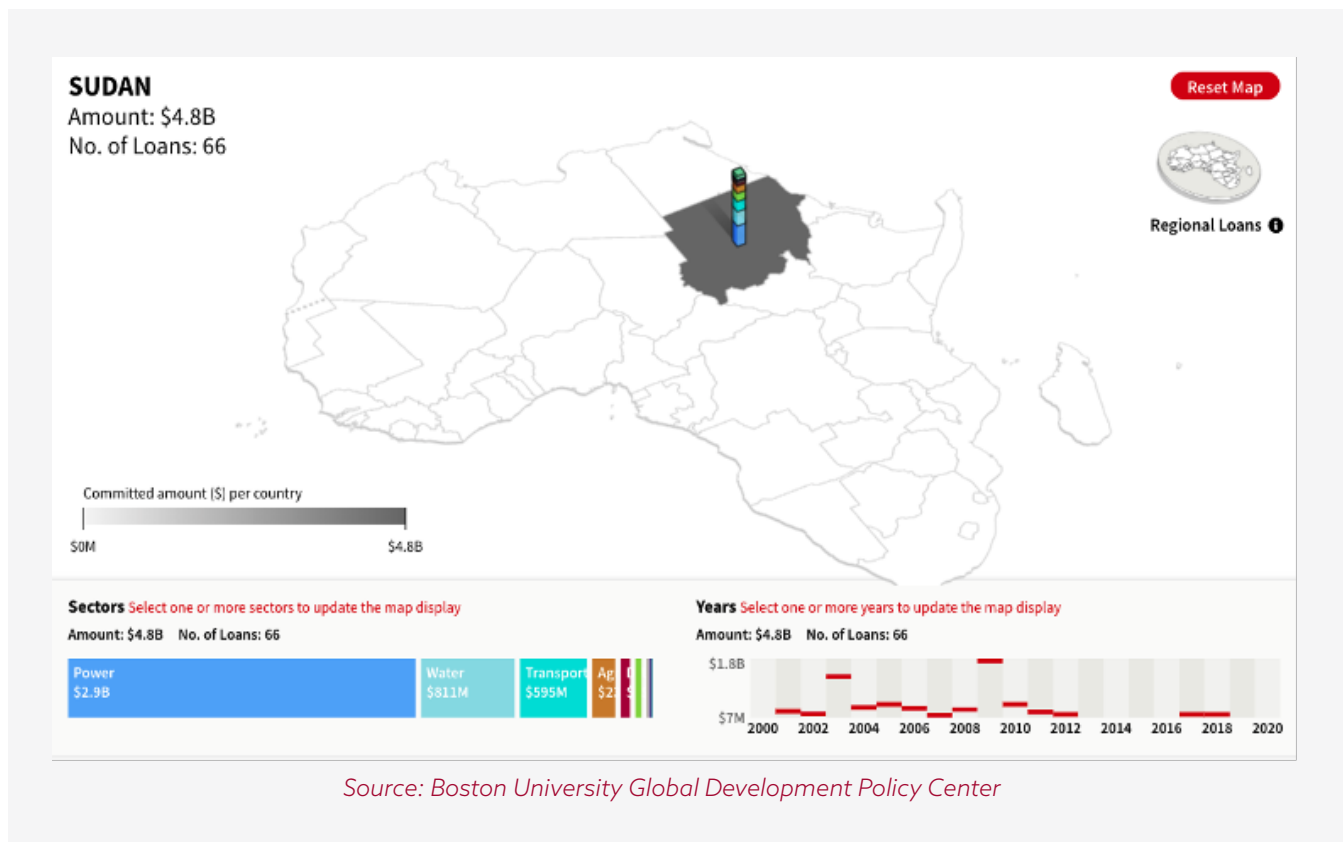
68 "China Cancels Sudan's pre-2016 debt: envoy." Sudan Tribune, 13 September, 2018. <https://sudantribune.com/article64383/>.

69 Kyngé, James and Andres Schipani. 2023. "Sudan conflict delivers fresh blow to China's African lending strategy". Financial Times, 10 May 2023. https://iriglobal.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/cop/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7B53738B4D-174C-45F4-BD46-F24A7A3AD47B%7D&file=IRI%20Nexus%20Sudan%20Case%20Study.docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true&DefaultItemOpen=1

70 Alamin, Mohammed. "China Backs \$640 Million Sudan Rail Revamp Amid Economic Crunch." Bloomberg, 11 August 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-11/china-backs-640-million-sudan-rail-revamp-amid-economic-crunch?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

71 Bagnetto, Laura Angela. "Sudan Launches First Satellite, With China's Help." RFI, 20 Nov. 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20191118-sudan-first-satellite-launch-space-china-military-agriculture-surveillance>.

The PRC's response to abrupt leadership changes in Sudan is significantly different than Russia's. While Russian entities often took sides during political conflicts, the PRC was a "free rider" while other external political actors stepped in to meddle with Sudan's crises, according to analysts at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).⁷² However, although the PRC remained neutral during Sudan's conflicts, there is evidence that the PRC supplied weapons and ammunition to al-Bashir's regime. This evidence dates to the Nimeiry government⁷³ and continued throughout the '90s, when the PRC sold ammunition, tanks, helicopters, and aircraft to Sudan during the conflict with the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the predominant rebel militia group in the South. The PRC's motivation for the weapons supply was largely economic, as Sudan promised improved financial returns on oil investments. Thus, the history of the Sudan-PRC relationship suggests that the PRC will in some cases aid political causes, so long as it is promised economic gains.⁷⁴



Oil

From the 1970s until 2011, the PRC was largely focused on providing interest-free loans to Sudan to build much-needed infrastructure. China also exported cotton and oil.⁷⁵ Until the 1980s, the American oil giant Chevron was one of the largest companies operating in Sudan. However, after a brutal rebel attack on personnel in 1984 and the subsequent lack of response from the Sudanese government, the company suspended operations in Sudan. Beijing saw investment in Sudan's oil sector as an opportunity. In 1995, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) began work in the country.⁷⁶

72 Barber, Laura. "China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition." United States Institute of Peace, May 2020. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200508-sr_466-chinas_response_to_sudans_political_transition-sr.pdf.

73 General Gaafar Nimeiry is the far-left military officer who came to overthrow the first democratically-elected government after Sudan gained independence.

74 "China's Involvement in Sudan: Arms and Oil." Human Rights Watch, November 2003. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/sudan1103/26.htm>.

75 Maglad.

76 Patey, Luke. *The New Kings of Crude: China, India, and the Global Struggle for Oil in Sudan and South Sudan*. New York, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2014.

Economist Ali Abdalla Ali, chief consultant to the Khartoum Stock Exchange in 2008 said that “China became an elephant because of the stupidity and narrow-mindedness of their elephants,” referring to U.S. companies’ decision to leave Sudan because of conflict. By 2006, the PRC dominated the oil market in Sudan – with investments totaling \$9 billion.⁷⁷

After South Sudan and its oil fields became independent, the PRC lost much of its economic interest in Sudan. However, the PRC saw an opportunity to engage Sudan in its wider plan of becoming a key influence in the region. When China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the PRC doubled down on infrastructure loans to Sudan.⁷⁸ Sudan was one of the first countries to sign a BRI agreement, indicating both a need and willingness to continue borrowing from the PRC.

China’s Non-Interference Policies and Support for Sudan

When protests against al-Bashir erupted in 2018, Xi offered support at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). After al-Bashir was removed, Beijing initially remained silent. This was unusual, given the CCP’s previous support during Sudan’s crises. For example, in 2013 CCP diplomats worked on conflict resolution efforts in Darfur.⁷⁹

The PRC’s policy of non-interference is considered the cornerstone of its foreign policy. However, promoting this policy requires the PRC to promote norms and policies within global governance systems – such as the United Nations or African Union – that could facilitate the rise of authoritarian leaders.⁸⁰ The PRC has used its large footprint in Africa to bolster its credentials as a leader of the Global South and an alternative to the Western-led international order, which often failed to focus on Africa. In stark contrast to the U.S., the PRC emphasizes its relationship with Africa, positioning itself as a developing country with shared past experiences ranging from imperialism to exclusion from international organizations.⁸¹ The PRC markets its loans as “mutually beneficial cooperation between developing countries,” with no strings attached.⁸² This offers autocratic governments the opportunity to accept economic assistance without having to promote democratic norms and human rights. The PRC has leveraged this rhetoric to create a strong economic and political network across the African continent.⁸³

Over the last three years, the CCP has objected whenever the UN imposes sanctions or presses Sudanese leadership on internal human rights violations.⁸⁴ In December 2022, al-Burhan met with Xi at the China-Arab States Summit in Riyadh. After the meeting al-Burhan indicated that Sudan aligned itself with the PRC on sovereignty and Sudan supports China’s voice in international organizations.

Over the last three years, the CCP has objected whenever the UN imposes sanctions or presses Sudanese leadership on internal human rights violations.

At the same time, China’s UN ambassador condemned an international push for a civilian government in Sudan, saying “pressuring Sudan by cancelling economic aid...can lead to serious economic and humanitarian consequences.” The ambassador called for an end to sanctions on those accused of war crimes in Darfur.

77 Thompkins, Gwen. “Chinese Influence in Sudan is Subtle, Complicated.” National Public Radio, 29 July 2008. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92282540>.

78 “Spotlight: Sudan Expects to Play Bigger Role in Belt and Road Initiative – Analysts.” Xinhua, 28 August 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/28/c_137424486.htm.

79 Barber.

80 Li, Jason. “Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics: How China Justifies Its Non-Interference Policy.” Stimson Center, 27 August 2019. <https://www.stimson.org/2019/conflict-mediation-chinese-characteristics-how-china-justifies-its-non-interference-policy/>.

81 “China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, November 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202111/t20211126_10453904.html.

82 Wallace, Jon. “China-Africa Relations.” Chatham House, 18 January 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/china-africa-relations>.

83 Wallace.

84 “China-Sudan Relations and China’s Current Foreign Policy.” Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 27 May 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbj_665378/202205/t20220528_10693891.html.

Chinese state media reported that Xi committed to continuing cooperation in oil, agriculture, mining, and other sectors in Sudan.⁸⁵

Influence in the Information Space and Academia

Media trips to Beijing are a part of a broader tactic the PRC employs to encourage more positive coverage of China from international and domestic media organizations. In November 2019, the Chinese Embassy in Khartoum organized a trip to China for a group of nine reporters and anchors from the Sudanese media. Reporters represented popular media companies including Sudan News Agency (SUNA), Sudan TV, Khartoum TV, Sudan Vision, and Sudan TV. During their visit, the group met with several government agencies and with China Daily and Shanghai United Media Group. The Chinese Embassy noted that print news outlets published several articles touting the journalists' experiences, and Khartoum TV produced a documentary about the trip.⁸⁶ At a later meeting between SUNA's general manager and Chinese Ambassador Ma, SUNA and Xinhua agreed to increase cooperation between the two news organizations, though material evidence of this cooperation has not yet materialized.⁸⁷

After the visit and the cooperation agreement, the Sudan News Agency published an interview with Ambassador Ma praising the PRC's pandemic policies.⁸⁸ The Sudan News Agency also published an article praising the PRC's commitments to Sudan's food security crisis (though these commitments were not explicitly detailed), with quotes from the ambassador.⁸⁹ This is in line with what typically happens after journalists travel to Beijing: reporters come back from visits with a newfound appreciation for the CCP and are less critical or more apologetic of Beijing's human rights violations. Often, the local embassies will call on these organizations to publish official statements on their websites as needed, and typically in response to an event that the PRC wants to control the narrative on.

A peer-reviewed academic study on Chinese soft power in Sudanese publications revealed that the Confucius Institute at the University of Khartoum, the first in the country, is currently teaching Sudanese military personnel Chinese.⁹⁰ Confucius Institutes are a key instrument through which the PRC influences perceptions in other countries. It is worth noting that most programs at Confucius Institutes are not inherently harmful; they offer Chinese language courses and cultural activities. The idea behind the Confucius Institutes is to produce stronger ties between locals and the PRC, again, with the goal of producing more favorable views of China. Most Confucius Institutes are situated at universities, so as to build ties with budding academics studying Sino-African relations.⁹¹

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey

In the Horn of Africa, Sudan is one of the biggest recipients of foreign aid from the Gulf.⁹² Aid from the Gulf states comes mostly from three blocs: Qatar, from Turkey and Iran, and from the Saudi-Egypt-Emirati bloc.⁹³ Al-Bashir's ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood was the foundation for ties with Turkey, Iran, and Qatar, which mediated the Darfur peace talks. Alternatively, ties to the Muslim Brotherhood have been a point of tension between Sudan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.⁹⁴ Sudan is at the center of these three competing blocs of influence, often to its detriment.

85 "Sudan Praises Chinese Support in International Forums." Sudan Tribune, 8 December 2022. <https://sudantribune.com/article268020/>.

86 "Reporters and Anchors from Sudanese Mainstream Media Visited China". Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Sudan, 11 December 2019. http://sd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/201911/t20191126_6549307.htm.

87 "Sudan and China Discuss Ways of Strengthening Media and Press Cooperation." Sudan News Agency, 22 October 2020. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202010230320.html>.

88 "Interview with Sudan News Agency by Chinese Ambassador Ma Xinmin." Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Sudan, 20 March 2020. http://sd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202004/t20200401_6688788.htm.

89 "China Affirms its Concern with Global Food Security." Sudan News Agency, 2022. <https://suna-sd.net/read?id=746094>.

90 Johanson, D. "China's Soft Power in Sudan: Increasing Activity but How Effective?". In: Zhang, X., Wasserman, H., Mano, W. (eds) *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

91 Staden, Cobus van. "Sudan's First Confucius Institute Strengthens Military Ties." The China Global South Project, 20 April 2022, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2022/04/19/sudans-first-confucius-institute-strengthens-military-ties/>.

92 Meester, Jos, van den Berg, Willem, and Harry Verhoeven. "Riyal Politik: The Political Economy of Gulf Investments in the Horn of Africa." Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, April 2018. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/riyal-politik.pdf>.

93 Dunne, Charles W. "Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian Alliance Steering US Middle East Policy." Arab Center Washington DC, 26 June 2019. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-emirati-egyptian-alliance-steering-us-middle-east-policy/>.

94 Meester.

Sudan established strong diplomatic ties with Iran in the 1980s. During al-Bashir's regime, the two countries enjoyed close relations predicated on Sudan's presumed desire for an Islamic political ideology.⁹⁵ The Saudi-Egyptian-Emirati bloc developed in 2014 during the Egyptian military's counter-revolution, which put President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in power. In 2015, the Saudi-Egyptian Cairo Declaration mapped out a framework for intelligence and economic cooperation to safeguard Arab national security in the region.⁹⁶ Toward the beginning of al-Bashir's reign, the Gulf countries provided economic support in exchange for Sudanese military backing in Yemen.⁹⁷ Given that Khartoum's foreign exchange reserves were at their lowest after South Sudan's independence, economic support from the Gulf states was critical to the survival of the regime. After Sudan sent 10,000 troops to support the 2015 Saudi offensive in Yemen, the Saudi government sent money to pay its soldiers' salaries, direct deposits to the Sudanese state treasury, and subsidies for commodities.⁹⁸ Additionally, because of UAE and Saudi concerns over instability in the region, the bloc requested that al-Bashir sever ties with Iran in 2015, in the interest of continued financial and political backing, ultimately anchoring Sudan in the 'Sunni camp.'⁹⁹

Sudan's pivot to the Saudi-Egyptian-Emirati alliance stirred up internal tensions from military officers who supported the Muslim Brotherhood (and therefore, Turkey and Iran).¹⁰⁰ Support from the Gulf bloc continued until a diplomatic crisis in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, claiming that it was ignoring several international agreements and becoming a destabilizing force in the region.¹⁰¹ Sudan refused to take sides in an attempt to continue to receive subsidies from both Qatar and the Gulf states, which backfired when Gulf states cut off financial support to al-Bashir's regime because of his silence on the issue.¹⁰² The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt also cut aid, further bolstering existing discontent within Sudan. Ultimately, it was Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian support to domestic officers (such as Hemedti) that aided the overthrow of al-Bashir.¹⁰³ After al-Bashir's fall from power in 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE resumed giving money to the Sudanese military. In 2021, Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed \$3 billion USD to the Transitional Military Council (TMC).¹⁰⁴ This included \$500 million USD in deposits to the central bank, as well as \$2.5 billion USD to buy food, medicine, and oil. The justification for this aid was explicit: that the military junta must not allow a democratic uprising in Sudan.¹⁰⁵

Saudi Arabia's interest in Sudan stems largely from its desire to compete with the UAE in the Red Sea: in mid-2021, tensions rose between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over Red Sea ports. Saudi Arabia sought to deepen its relations with both civilian and military arms of Sudan's transitional government. Saudi Arabia successfully won this battle against the UAE for influence in Sudan, by using connections in international institutions to improve Sudan's standing with international financial lenders, including World Bank partners, to approve debt relief packages. Hadi Idriss, a key member of the Sovereign Council, visited Saudi Arabia in May 2021. This led to an agreement between the two countries to create a jointly owned company that will manage \$3 billion USD in investments from Saudi Arabia to Sudan.¹⁰⁶

95 Makinda, Samuel M. "Iran, Sudan and Islam." *The World Today*, vol. 49, no. 6, 1993, pp. 108-11.

96 Dunne.

97 "The GCC Crisis: Qatar and its Neighbors." *Journal of Arabian Studies*, volume 10, number 2, 2020, <https://cirs.qatar.georgetown.edu/research/research-initiatives/gcc-crisis-qatar-and-its-neighbors/>.

98 Abbas, Waheed. "UAE Pumps in Dh28b for Sudan's Development, Fiscal Stability." *Khaleej Times*, 14 March 2018, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/africa/uae-pumps-in-dh28b-for-sudans-development-fiscal-stability>.

99 "The GCC Crisis: Qatar and its Neighbors."

100 Gallopin, Jean-Baptiste. "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan." *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 4 Feb. 2022, <https://pomeps.org/the-great-game-of-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-in-sudan>.

101 "The GCC Crisis: Qatar and its Neighbors."

102 Dunne.

103 Gallopin.

104 Lons, Camille. "The Gulf states and the Sudan coup - all is not what it seems." *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 16 November 2021. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/11/gulf-states-and-the-sudan-coup>.

105 Dunne.

106 Mashamoun, Jihad. "Winners and Losers of Red Sea Politics in Sudan." *African Arguments*, 6 August 2021, <https://africanarguments.org/2021/08/winners-and-losers-of-red-sea-politics-in-sudan/>.

Regarding Sudan's alliance with Egypt, there is widespread suspicion among Middle East and North African political analysts that the country had influence over the military coup that overthrew al-Bashir. This is evidenced by reports in the Wall Street Journal alleging the day before the coup occurred in October, al-Burhan travelled to Egypt where he met with President Sisi, who reiterated support for his plans.¹⁰⁷ Egypt denies these claims, but insider intelligence reported that Sudan's foreign affairs minister had frequent meetings with Egyptian officials. Egypt's silence and uncharacteristically neutral position when the military coup led by al-Burhan against al-Bashir took place further indicates potential collusion between President Sisi and al-Burhan.¹⁰⁸

Turkish influence in Sudan expanded during the al-Bashir regime. Ideologically similar, and based on religious conservatism, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has sought to further cultivate these ties.¹⁰⁹ Some examples of this include increased activity from the Maarif Foundation, an educational organization that provides scholarships to over 700 Sudanese students.¹¹⁰ Political ties are also evident: Al-Bashir's regime emerged from the Sudanese Islamist Movement (SIM), which shares ideas regarding the role of religion and state with Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKPs' goals reframe Islamism as an alternative to the lack of moral authority inherent in Western liberalism. Turkish foreign policy in Sudan aims to offer an alternative model of influence in the region, a different track than to the PRC's economic-driven interests or the U.S.'s security-driven focus.¹¹¹

Information Operations

In August 2019, Facebook suspended 259 accounts, 102 Pages, five groups, four events, and 17 Instagram accounts. Facebook suspended the accounts for engaging in coordinated disinformation campaigns. This originated in the UAE and Egypt, and targeted a number of countries, including Sudan, Libya, Comoros, Qatar, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Morocco.¹¹² Just one month before Sudan's October 25 military coup, Facebook also removed Pages, user accounts, and groups linked to the RSF. Some elements of this content dated back to 2013, and their administrators were based in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹¹³

In April 2021, Graphika, the social media analytics company, published a comprehensive study of an Egyptian influence operation. The operation included 17 Facebook Pages and three Instagram accounts in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Turkey.¹¹⁴ These influence campaigns were run through a digital marketing firm called Bee Interactive, based in Egypt. The influence campaigns' narratives included criticism of Turkey's foreign policy (highlighting human rights abuses) and Ethiopia's Blue Nile Renaissance dam.¹¹⁵

The 2023 Crisis in Sudan

After this research for this report concluded, fighting broke out on April 15, 2023, between Hemedti's RSF and the Sudanese army under al-Burhan. According to the International Crisis Group, this new conflict originates in their design, as al-Bashir "fragmented the security forces into competing centers of power so that none could unseat him."¹¹⁶ Payton Knopf, the former U.S. deputy special envoy to the Horn of Africa, argues that having the RSF in charge of the country's transition put military leaders in positions of authoritative power that inherently demotivate them from actually ending the transitional period.

107 Faucon, Benoit, Said, Summer, and Joe Parkinson. "Military Coups in Africa at Highest Level Since End of Colonialism." *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/military-coups-in-africa-at-highest-level-since-end-of-colonialism-11635941829>.

108 Kamel, Mourad R. "Egypt/Sudan: Could a Military Government in Khartoum be Good News for Cairo?" *The Africa Report*, 2 December 2021. <https://www.theafricareport.com/152929/egypt-sudan-a-military-dominated-government-in-khartoum-is-good-news-for-cairos-efforts-to-pressure-ethiopia/>.

109 Cannon, Brendon. "Turkey's Military Strategy in Africa." In Eyrice, E. and Tepecikioğlu, A. (eds.) *Turkey in Africa: A New and Emerging Power?* New York, Routledge, 2022.

110 Mashamoun, Jihad. 2022. "Turkey and Sudan: An enduring relationship?" Middle East Institute, 20 July 2022. <https://mei.edu/publications/turkey-and-sudan-enduring-relationship>.

111 Mashamoun. "Turkey and Sudan: An enduring relationship?"

112 "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia." Meta, 1 August. 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/cib-uae-egypt-saudi-arabia/>.

113 Knight, Tessa. "Sudanese Facebook Network Promoting Paramilitary Groups Removed Month Before Coup". Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab), 28 October 2021. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/sudanese-facebook-network-promoting-paramilitary-group-removed-month-before-coup-48f30b46ffe0>.

114 "The Thin Line Between Marketing and Political Propaganda: How an Egyptian Firm Ran Fake News Pages Targeting Ethiopia, Sudan and Turkey."

Graphika, 6 April. 2021, <https://graphika.com/reports/coordinated-inauthentic-bee-havior>.

115 "March 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report." Meta, 6 April 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/04/march-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report>.

116 "Stopping Sudan's Descent into Full-Blown Civil War." International Crisis Group, 20 April 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/stopping-sudans-descent-full-blown-civil-war>.

Ultimately their positions during the transition led to a power competition between competing armed security forces, with both sides wanting full control over the country, tipping the country into civil war.¹¹⁷ Although most of the fighting has taken place in Khartoum's political centers, including the Presidential Palace, the military headquarters, and the airport.¹¹⁸ Nearly 50 of the 200 violent clashes that took place between 20 May and 16 June, 2023, included violence against civilians.¹¹⁹

Several news organizations reported the Wagner Group is supplying weapons to the RSF, with satellite images showing increased activity at Wagner bases along Sudan's borders. Diplomatic sources noted that the missiles supplied by Wagner contributed to the RSF's success against al-Burhan's armed forces.¹²⁰ This is unsurprising, given Hemedti's previous push for Sudan to ally more closely with Russia. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikail Bogdanov announced Moscow would mediate the current conflict, if asked.¹²¹ China will not take a stance on the conflict and has evacuated many of its citizens.¹²² The PRC has long-term interests it wants to protect in a post-war Sudan, including security operations in Port Sudan, and an interest in gold deposits. This current conflict could underscore stark differences in opinion and competing interests between Russia and China in Sudan. This is because Russia's efforts to destabilize the country, through both Wagner and media disinformation campaigns, threaten the PRC's political and economic agenda.¹²³

Conclusion

Given Sudan's strategic location in the region, and its political volatility throughout the transition and now, the country has been subject to foreign authoritarian influence from a wide network of actors. Perhaps the most blatant influencer is the Kremlin, which has exerted significant military influence using former Prigozhin-owned paramilitary contractor, Wagner group. The two countries have a history of working together. Putin and al-Bashir enjoyed strong ties for many years, and Russia considered Sudan its "springboard to Africa."¹²⁴ Russia often used its position to defend Sudan in international forums, leveraging the Russians serving on the Sudan UN sanctions monitoring panel.¹²⁵ Post al-Bashir, Russia struggled to form alliances with the TMC and Sovereignty Council. To sway popular opinion, Russia has relied on several information operations campaigns on Facebook and Instagram.¹²⁶

During the transition and now, the PRC has tried to avoid the political dynamics in Sudan. After the split from South Sudan, the PRC was hesitant to commit more development aid to the country. The PRC has focused on building its image as a peacebuilder on Darfur.¹²⁷ It has also run media and academic exchanges designed to burnish China's image. This is a part of the PRC's broad strategy to promote a positive image of itself across the African continent.

Sudan's relationship with the Gulf states, as well as with Iran and Turkey, reveal the complexities and contradictions in the Sudanese leadership in the period before April 2023. Al-Bashir often found himself caught between support from Muslim Brotherhood states, such as Iran and Turkey, and support from Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Even after al-Bashir, support in the TMC and Sovereignty Council appears to be split among different factions, depending on ideological or financial ties.¹²⁸

117 Myre, Greg. "Why is Sudan so prone to civil war?" NPR, 10 May 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/09/1175155164/why-is-sudan-so-prone-to-civil-war>
118 Stigant, Susan. 2023. "What's Behind the Fighting in Sudan?" USIP, 20 April 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/whats-behind-fighting-sudan>.

119 "Sudan: Conflict Intensifies Following the Breakdown of Jeddah Talks." ACLED, 23 June 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/06/23/sudan-situation-update-june-2023-conflict-intensifies-following-the-breakdown-of-jeddah-talks/>

120 "Sudan: Conflict Intensifies Following the Breakdown of Jeddah Talks." ACLED, 23 June 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/06/23/sudan-situation-update-june-2023-conflict-intensifies-following-the-breakdown-of-jeddah-talks/>

121 "Russia says it is 'ready to assist' to resolve the war in Sudan." Euronews, 19 May 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/19/russia-says-it-is-ready-to-assist-to-resolve-the-war-in-sudan>.

122 Lucente, Adam. "What's at stake for China in Sudan as fighting drags on." Al-Monitor, 24 April 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/whats-stake-china-sudan-fighting-drags>.

123 Yeranian, Edward. 2023. "China Seeks Stronger Ties With Sudan Amid Regional, International Tug-of-War." Voice of Yeranian, Edward. "China Seeks Stronger Ties With Sudan Amid Regional, International Tug-of-War." Voice of America, 30 May 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-seeks-stronger-ties-with-sudan-amid-regional-international-tug-of-war-7115426.html>.

124 Bugayova.

125 "Sudan and Darfur Sanctions." U

126 "Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Russia."

127 Barber.

128 Dunne.

Throughout Sudan's coups – from the one that ousted al-Bashir to the most recent conflict between al-Burhan and Hemedti – a variety of actors from the Kremlin and CCP to the various Gulf states, have sought influence among Sudanese elites to reap the political, military, and economic benefits of Sudan's instability. Collectively, these foreign influence activities empower domestic authoritarians, disincentivize peaceful political resolution, and limit prospects for a successful transition to a civilian-led, democratic government in Sudan.



EUROPE

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Introduction

This report is a product of combined research (desk analysis and field interviews¹) on the influence of foreign authoritarian actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This report seeks to understand various actors' influence and the synergy, if any, across their approaches. Liberal democratic countries and institutions such as the United States, NATO, the EU, and the United Kingdom, and authoritarian states such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, Turkey, and certain Gulf countries project their influence in BiH. Given that only the PRC and Russia have emerged as the West's peer (or near-peer) competitors in geostrategic competition, the report sheds light on how the PRC and Russia work against BiH's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and its efforts toward a liberal democratic order. This report analyses PRC and Russian influence focusing on the diplomatic, economic, information, and defense sectors.

BiH is an example of what some regional analysts describe as a "stabilitocracy" – that is, "a regime that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability."² In these circumstances, certain BiH leaders exploit Western and democratic countries' fear of PRC and Russian influence to demand that they not be held accountable for democratic shortcomings, hoping instead to be rewarded for continued political stability. Certain BiH leaders therefore seek out PRC, Russian, and other foreign backing (e.g., from Turkey or Gulf States) to demonstrate that they have alternatives to the West. This dynamic perpetuates itself, particularly as Western democracies are not always willing to take more stringent positions on democratic governance.

The PRC's influence operations focus on its economic investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³ The PRC employs tactics that exploit BiH's internal divides and the West's lack of a coherent approach to providing a sustainable democratic alternative for the Western Balkans. Experts interviewed for this report pointed out that Russia attempts to have a direct influence on BiH's internal and external policies, and it is trying to stop or slow BiH's moves toward Euro-Atlantic integration, especially concrete steps like membership in the EU or NATO. Russia is openly against BiH's efforts to join NATO⁴ and is employing an aggressive disinformation campaign to undermine years of Western efforts to build BiH into a functioning democracy.

Foreign actors exploit the unique structure of BiH's internal governance. The Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the Bosnian War, divided BiH into two sub-national entities: the Serb-majority Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosniak- and Croat-majority Federation of Bosnian and Herzegovina (FBiH or Federation). These entities have high levels of autonomy from each other and the central state. Russia exerts their influence primarily through the RS due to perceived shared ethnic, cultural, and historic ties.

1 A note on methodology: The research was based on the combined desk analysis of existing anecdotal and empirical evidence and interviews with nine prominent people from political and public life in BiH. The main focus of the research was to explore PRC and Russian authoritarian influence to look for potential synergy between their illiberal methods. In addition, the research focused on several areas in which foreign authoritarian actors exert influence, specifically, political-diplomatic actions, (dis)information, the economy, and defense and national security.

2 This definition of 'stabilitocracy' comes from Florian Bieber, a professor of European history and politics and director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. In his view, Western powers have often traded democratic governance for political stability in their relations with developing countries. In the case of the Western Balkans, that external support is particularly pronounced from EU member states. For more information: Bieber, Florian. "What is a 'stabilitocracy'?" BiEPAG, 5 May 2017, <https://biepag.eu/article/what-is-a-stabilitocracy/>.

3 Tonchev, Plamen. "China's Road: Into the Western Balkans." European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1 February 2017, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06772?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

4 Sito-Sucic, Daria. "Russia warns it will 'have to react' if Bosnia moves to join NATO." Reuters, 18 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-russia-nato-idUSKBN2BA2FL>.

However, Russia has also approached BiH's Muslim Bosniak and Croat communities and politicians.⁵ Russia seems to be hedging its bets and attempting to maintain political influence among all three constituent ethnic groups in BiH (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs) by playing to their respective nationalist or otherwise identity-based politics.

PRC and Russian information operations have shown some level of mutually beneficial convergence, especially in portraying themselves as a potentially better alternative to Western powers. Coordination between foreign authoritarian actors, while not yet observed, remains a possibility that would present a significant challenge for democracy in BiH. This report addresses the PRC's and Russia's influence in BiH separately, and then explores potential synergy between them.

PRC's Influence in BiH

An examination of the PRC's influence in BiH is not possible without considering its broader interests in the Western Balkans. The PRC's interest in the region stems from three main factors. The first concerns the economy. The PRC is seeking to use the Western Balkans to facilitate its access to European markets. The fact that the PRC included the Western Balkans in its Central and Eastern Europe regional economic and diplomatic initiative (originally known as the 17+1 platform, now the 14+1 following the departure of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) demonstrates that it views the Western Balkans as a sub-region that it must understand in this European regional economic context. The second factor is geopolitics: the PRC seeks ally countries who would side with (or at least not against) it in the event of international criticism of its activities, such as its abuse of human rights. The third factor is prestige. The PRC seeks to improve its international reputation by presenting itself as a benevolent alternative to the prevailing Western-led international order.⁶

The PRC's Political and Diplomatic Influence

BiH engages in multilateral and bilateral diplomacy and cooperation with the PRC. The country is part of the 14+1 framework (initiative by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business and investment relations between China and 14 countries of Central and Eastern Europe). The PRC's approach toward BiH's internal and frequently tumultuous politics was largely neutral for the first 25 years of BiH-PRC relations. However, a significant shift in PRC policy toward BiH occurred in July 2021, when Russia and the PRC proposed abolishing the position of High Representative in BiH in the UN Security Council.⁷ The High Representative is an international appointee charged with maintaining peace, stability, and democracy in BiH. The threat to abolish the High Representative is a threat both to the stability of the country and to Western influence in the country – the position of High Representative has been held exclusively by Western and Central Europeans, while the second in command, the Principal Deputy High Representative, has always been an American. (The Russia section below further discusses the Kremlin's diplomatic efforts against the position of High Representative).

According to some analysts and interlocutors interviewed in this research, one of the main reasons that the PRC supported the abolition of the High Representative was retaliation for BiH signing on to international statements criticizing human rights violations in the PRC. In June 2021, BiH, together with more than 40 other countries, signed a statement of concern about the human rights situation in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the PRC.

5 Orucevic, Admir. "Does Putin get involved in BiH through Chechen leader Kadyrov? Twinning of three cities requested [Uvlači li se Putin u BiH preko čečenskog lidera Kadirova? Zatraženo bratimljenje tri grada]." Source, 11 June 2021, <https://source.ba/clanak/BiH/585658/dt>.

6 Karcic, Harun. "The Chinese Honey Money Moon in the Western Balkans." RUSI, 23 December 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chinese-honey-money-moon-western-balkans>.

7 The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina is an international supervisory position established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) which ended the war in BiH. "Russia and China propose abolishing high representative in BiH in Security Council [Rusija i Kina u Vijeću sigurnosti predlažu ukidanje visokog predstavnika u BiH]." Radio Free Europe, 15 July 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-bonske-ovlasti-un/31358815.html>; also see Markovic, Nina and Xiwen Wang. "Is China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans a Threat to European Integration?" *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340>.

One high-ranking interviewee from the BiH Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes this statement damaged bilateral relations because the PRC expected BiH to be neutral on the issue of human rights violations against ethnic Uyghurs.⁸

The PRC has also employed “vaccine diplomacy” in BiH to further other PRC strategic objectives. Investigative journalists from Istraga alleged that PRC authorities delayed the delivery of 500,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccines to the Federation due to the signing of a statement which expressed concerns about the PRC’s human right violations against the Uyghur people by the BiH Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁹ Although PRC officials never explicitly linked these issues, the RS order of vaccines were delivered on time following condemnation of the statement by RS political leadership.

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The PRC’s Economic Influence

The PRC is mainly interested in developing an economic partnership with BiH. In the region, BiH is second only to Serbia in terms of attracting PRC investment.¹⁰ According to research by the Digital Forensic Center in Montenegro, as of June 2022 there were 29 PRC projects worth a total of over 5 billion euros in BiH.¹¹ These PRC projects impact three main sectors: energy, transportation (and other infrastructure), and digital services, mostly in the RS’ territory.

Table 1. PRC energy projects in BiH¹²

Project	Location	Company
Stanari thermal power plant (2017)	RS	China Development Bank and Dongfang Electric Corporation
Buka Bijela/Upper Drina power plants (2017)	RS	China Machinery Engineering Corporation
Buka Bijela/Upper Drina power plants (2017)	RS	China National Aero-Technology International Engineering Corporation
Tuzla 7 Lignite power plant (2017)	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH)	China ExIm Bank and China Gezhouba Group Co
Blok 7 project, a thermal power plant in Tuzla (2019)	FBiH	China Exim Bank

8 Anonymous interlocutor no. 1, personal communication, 11 March 2022.

9 “Because of the views on the Uyghurs and the collapse of ‘Block 7’: The Chinese are dragging their feet on the delivery of paid vaccines to the Federation of BiH [Zbog stavova o Ujgurima i propasti ‘Bloka 7’: Kinezi odugovlače sa isporukom plaćenih vakcina za Federaciju BiH].” Istraga, 24 July 2021, <https://istraga.ba/zbog-stavova-o-ujgurima-i-propasti-bloka-7-kinezi-odugovlace-sa-ispurukom-placenih-vakcina-za-federaciju-bih/>.

10 Vangeli, Anastas. “China” in “The Western Balkans in the World”, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis. Routledge, 10 July 2019, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780429243349/western-balkans-world-florian-bieber-nikolaos-tzifakis?refId=bbc53679-c2ae-4d19-9a72-93992e09c744&context=ubx>.

11 Durovic, Aneta. “In the Western Balkans, more than half of China’s investment in Europe [Na Zapadnom Balkanu više od polovine kineskih investicija u Evropi].” Radio Free Europe, 22 June 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zapadni-balkan-investicije-kina-evropa/31910190.html>.

12 Tonchev. “China’s Road: Into the Western Balkans”; Karcic. “The Chinese Honey Money Moon in the Western Balkans”; Conley, Heather et al. “Red Flags: Triaging China’s Projects in the Western Balkans,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 March 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/red-flags-triaging-chinas-projects-western-balkans>; “Buk Bijela/Upper Drina hydropower plants.” Bankwatch, <https://bankwatch.org/cautionary-tales-sl/buk-bijela-upper-drina-hydropower-plants-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

Table 2 - Infrastructure projects in which PRC companies have been involved¹³

Project	Location	Company
Contract agreement on the construction of a new hospital in Doboj (2016)	RS	Sinefarm
Banja Luka-Mlinista motorway (2016)	RS	Sinohydro
Počitelj-Zvirovići motorway section near Mostar (2020)	FBiH	China State Construction Engineering Corporation
Kvanj-Buna section of the highway in southern Bosnia (2020)	FBiH	China Road and Bridge Corporation and CCCC Second Highway Engineering Co. Ltd; China State Construction Engineering Corp. Ltd.; and a consortium of Sinohydro Corporation Ltd. and Powerchina Roadbridge Group

PRC projects come with challenges and drawbacks that are often absent projects done in cooperation with non-authoritarian actors. The first is economic loss due to unrealistic economic feasibility studies. For example, in the case of the Gacko 2 thermal power plant, the economic feasibility study published seems to rely on unrealistically low coal prices and CO₂ emissions costs, unrealistically high electricity export prices, and other unrealistic assumptions; an RS-based environmental organization claims that if an analysis were based on more realistic assumptions, the Gacko 2 thermal power plant would be unprofitable.¹⁴ The poor quality of the study could be the product of incompetence, corruption, or both. Regardless, it has contributed to RS taking on more fiscal and environmental risk than originally claimed, as the investment will likely lock the RS-owned public electricity company into maintaining a loss-making powerplant for the life of the plant – that is, decades.

In addition to project-specific risks like those found at Gacko 2, some Bosnian analysts are more generally concerned that the PRC will link its economic goals and its diplomatic goals. They fear that the PRC will use the promise of loans, or the threat of withdrawing them, to induce or coerce certain BiH state actions in the economic or political realm in the future.¹⁵

Weak environmental standards also pose concerns. The ExIm Bank of China funded expansion of the Blok 7 coal power plant highlights this risk. International experts have questioned the accuracy of the project's environmental impact studies, claiming that they vastly underestimate the amount of pollution and greenhouses gas emissions that the plant would generate.¹⁶ Not only will this negatively impact local residents, but increasing emissions damages Bosnia's prospects for EU ascension.¹⁷

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13 Rizvic, Emina. "China to build a Hospital in Doboj?" Sarajevo Times, 6 November 2016, <https://sarajevotimes.com/china-build-hospital-doboj/>; Karcic, Harun. "The Chinese Honey Money Moon in the Western Balkans," RUSI, 23 December 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chinese-honey-money-moon-western-balkans/>; "Chinese firms dominate bids to build Bosnia highway section," Reuters, 27 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/bosnia-highway-bids-idUSL8N2D93HZ>; "Red Flags: Tracking Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans," Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/programs/europe-russia-and-eurasia-program/european-security-politics-and-economics/red-flags>.

14 Miljevic, Damir. "Economic Analysis of the Document Study on the Economic Feasibility of the Construction and Operation of the Gacko II Power Plant, Capacity 350 MW, in the Gacko Municipality, with Elements of Environmental Protection." Centar Za Životnu Sredinu, January 2018, <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/D-Miljevi-Gacko-analysis.pdf>.

15 E.g., S. Turcalo, personal communication, 20 January 2022.

16 Rose, Eleanor. "New China-backed coal plants on EU's borders could saddle states with massive carbon costs." Unearthed, 14 January 2020, <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2020/01/14/china-belt-and-road-coal-plants-in-bosnia-serbia-balkans/>.

17 The EU sets strict carbon pricing requirements that the Blok 7 plant is not expected to be able to meet.

Another concern relates to digital communication technology and infrastructure. This has economic, security, and geostrategic connotations: analysts fear that PRC digital infrastructure companies will allow PRC state access to communications using that infrastructure for intelligence or other purposes. As Predrag Puharić, a Bosnian expert on cyber security put it, “if you buy Huawei, you are left to cooperate with China in the intelligence community.”¹⁸

Additionally, there are growing concerns about the presence of PRC military companies, which are active in Serbia and BiH. According to Nils Resare, a researcher from the Danish organization Vedvarende Energi, PRC military-affiliated companies present themselves as civilian-owned but are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Western Balkans countries cannot always tell who they are doing business with, since these companies’ ownership structures are hidden by complex structures that may include several hundred branches.¹⁹

Projecting the PRC’s Influence through the Information Sector

Beijing’s information influence is designed to support the PRC’s goal of projecting its image as an alternative to the West. Examples of how the PRC seeks to promote a positive image in BiH include the Chinese-Bosnia Friendship Association,²⁰ the news portal “China Today,” and the presence of Confucius Institutes through which the PRC pushes its agenda in BiH.²¹ Two Confucius Institutes operate in the country, in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the latter functioning as a hub promoting Chinese culture, education, and research.²²

Bilateral academic cooperation is also intensifying, as various BRI-related events across the country demonstrate. In Sarajevo, an activist PRC ambassador is establishing contacts with non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations and working to build public visibility.²³ To boost visibility, the embassy uses online social networks (for example, adding specific individuals as ‘friends’ on Facebook), lectures at local universities, and articles in local media.²⁴

The PRC’s Digital Silk Road is the PRC’s effort to increase and spread the use of PRC technology. In BiH, digital infrastructure initiatives are typically decided at the local level (e.g., municipality, canton, or entity). This creates a vulnerability in BiH’s regulations that the PRC is able to exploit: central state-level purchases that have a potential national security impact are subject to import/export controls, which are generally executed with support from Western partners, while local-level purchases are generally exempt from those controls. This means that local-level purchases of digital products and services may include technology that carries inherent but mitigatable risk to democracy, such as increased surveillance of citizens.

In particular, BiH has focused on developing Smart City and Safe City projects in cooperation with Huawei.²⁵ Smart City and Safe City are Huawei products that use information technology, pervasive surveillance, and artificial intelligence-powered big data analytics to support city management or public safety, respectively.

18 Zoric. “Huawei pays for two state ministers’ trip and invites them to presentations [‘Huawei’ plaćao put dvojici državnih ministara i pozivao ih na prezentacije].” Fokus, 2021, [https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/huawei-placao-put-dvojici-drzavnih-ministara-bih/2234037/#:~:text=Kineski%20telekomunikacijski%20div%20%20E2%80%9CHuawei%E2%80%9D%20pla%C4%87ao%20je%20put%20i,Balkanska%20istra%C5%BEiva%C4%8Dka%20mre%C5%BEa%20Bosne%20i%20Hercegovine%20%28BIRN%20BiH%29](https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/huawei-placao-put-dvojici-drzavnih-ministara-bih/2234037/#:~:text=Kineski%20telekomunikacijski%20div%20%20E2%80%9CHuawei%E2%80%9D%20pla%C4%87ao%20je%20put%20i,Balkanska%20istra%C5%BEiva%C4%8Dka%20mre%C5%BEa%20Bosne%20i%20Hercegovine%20%28BIRN%20BiH%29.).

19 Urosevic, Predrag. “Resare: Chinese military companies present themselves as civilians in the Balkans [Resare: Kineske vojne kompanije se na Balkanu predstavljaju kao civilne].” Radio Free Europe, 14 June 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju-nils-resare-kina-zapadni-balkan/31306260.html>.

20 The president of this association is believed to be associated with the PRC Embassy. On one occasion, information and propaganda materials about China arrived at the address of the Centre for Security Studies. The materials were prepared by this association.

21 Huskic, Adnan. “Bosnia and Herzegovina,” in “The Western Balkans in the World,” ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis. Routledge, 10 July 2019, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780429243349/western-balkans-world-florian-bieber-nikolaos-tzifakis?refId=bbc53679-c2ae-4d19-9a72-93992e09c744&context=ubx>.

22 “Mapping China’s Rise in The Western Balkans Bosnia and Herzegovina.” European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

23 Ibid.

24 For example, the PRC ambassador to BiH wrote four media articles for the online edition of the newspaper “Oslobodjenje” (which is headquartered in Sarajevo). In addition to the fact that some articles promote the CCP, anti-Western rhetoric are also present in their content. For more information, see: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/autor/ji-ping-500062>.

25 Vladislavljiev, Stefan. “China’s ‘Digital Silk Road’ Enters the Western Balkans.” Association for International Affairs, June 2021, https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE_policy-paper_digital-silk-road_A4_web_04.pdf.

The PRC is not the only country developing and exporting these technologies; however, unlike democracies that export advanced technologies, the PRC does not have safeguards in place to prevent the exploitation of these tools for autocratic purposes. The PRC's track record around the world indicates it has no qualms about the abuse of surveillance technology.²⁶ Since local government purchases are subject to less scrutiny, greater integration of PRC surveillance technology at the local level creates additional risks by potentially allowing PRC firms to access Bosnian citizens' data. The China-Central and Eastern European Countries Conference on Innovation Cooperation, held in Sarajevo in 2018 where Huawei signed an agreement with the city government, demonstrated both the PRC's desire to promote their cooperation with BiH and how dealing with local government entities can skirt around national-level export controls.

The PRC's Influence on Defense and Security

The PRC has made efforts to develop relationships with BiH's Ministry of Defense and its armed forces, almost since the inception of these state-level institutions. The two countries have organized high-level delegations,²⁷ and the PRC has donated military engineering machinery to the BiH armed forces.²⁸ However, these delegations and donations have not given the PRC significant influence over the BiH armed forces, which instead is focused on cooperation with NATO, including interoperability with NATO forces and eventual NATO membership.

Russian Influence in BiH

When it comes to the long-term interests of Russia, experts interviewed for this report pointed out that its goal is generally to destabilize the Western Balkans region. In BiH, that goal is quite specific and aims to stop NATO integration. Two Russian strategic documents confirm this goal: the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, from 2016, and the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, from 2000. The latter document explicitly identifies NATO's eastward expansion as a "fundamental threat in the international sphere."²⁹ In fact, more recently, in 2021, Moscow went so far as to say that, if BiH takes steps towards NATO membership, "Russia will have to react" and that Moscow would consider it as an act of hostility.³⁰ Many Bosnians see Russia as in league with Bosnian Serbs (possibly even to the point of secession). However, as this report demonstrates, Russia also maintains ties with Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, especially among the political elite.

Russian Political and Diplomatic influence

Russia uses direct measures to undermine BiH's democratic prospects, its central state, and its ties with NATO and the West.³¹ Attempts to undermine NATO and EU integration are blatant interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and the will of the majority in BiH.³² It is also in direct opposition to the Law on Defense of 2005 (BiH), which states that the "Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Presidency, and all subjects of defense, within its own constitutional and legal competencies, will carry out the necessary activities for the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO." However, Russia's political interference in BiH goes beyond NATO and EU accession. Russia supports efforts that strengthen Bosnian Serb nationalism and potential secession. To a lesser but still notable degree, Russia also seeks out support among Bosnian Croat and Bosniak nationalist movements.

26 The PRC has sold or licensed surveillance systems to illiberal or autocratic governments in regions including Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Evidence shows that the PRC gains political influence, increases its economic leverage, and may even receive intelligence advantages from these surveillance sales. For more details, see: Feldstein, Steven. "When It Comes to Digital Authoritarianism, China Is a Challenge — But Not the Only Challenge," *War on the Rocks*, 12 February 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/when-it-comes-to-digital-authoritarianism-china-is-a-challenge-but-not-the-only-challenge/>.

27 "Delegation of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of BiH in an official visit to the People's Republic of China [Delegacija Ministarstva odbrane i Oružanih snaga BiH u službenoj posjeti NR Kini]." The Ministry of Defence of BiH, 16 May 2017, <http://www.mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/?id=55654>.

28 "China donates 15 engineering machines and vehicles to the Armed Forces of BiH [NR Kina donirala Oružanim snagama BiH 15 inženjerskih mašina i vozila]." The Ministry of Defence of BiH, 31 March 2021, <http://www.mod.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/vijesti/?id=84472>.

29 "National Security Concept of the Russian Federation Approved by Presidential Decree No. 24 of 10 January 2000." 10 January 2000, <https://www.bits.de/EURA/natsecconc.pdf>.

30 Sito-Sucic. "Russia warns it will 'have to react' if Bosnia moves to join NATO."

31 Ibid.

32 Subasic, Edin. "How much is Republika Srpska really against NATO? [Koliko je Republika Srpska zaista protiv NATO-a?]." *Aljazeera*, 23 November 2019, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2019/11/23/koliko-je-republika-srpska-zaista-protiv-nato>.

Undermining the High Representative, Undermining Democracy

Russia continues to undermine the High Representative in BiH, a foreign overseer position whose “actions stem from the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina” and who is charged with supporting the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which ended the Bosnian War in 1995 and serves as the country’s Constitution.^{33,34} In the UN Security Council, Russia has been attempting to block the confirmation of the new High Representative, whose mandate started in August 2021. Russia tried to capitalize on its own intransigence: in a statement posted to its Facebook page on February 14, 2022, the Russian Embassy in BiH declared that “the so-called ‘High Representative’ does not have the necessary legitimacy: the UN Security Council has not approved Mr. Christian Schmidt’s candidacy for this position.”³⁵ This and similar Russian statements and activities not only undermine the authority of the High Representative in the eyes of the Bosnian Serbs and their political representatives, but also the DPA itself.

In the long term, Russia’s attempts to undermine the High Representative add fuel to Bosnian Serb secessionism and other retrograde politics in BiH. For BiH, this would have two interconnected implications. First, not only would there be no progress in reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration, but there could also be a deepening of the political crisis, with the real possibility of its transformation into a broader inter-ethnic conflict. Second, the Office of the High Representative serves to strengthen the Bosnian state; its weakening would lead to greater and more overt influence from Serbia and Croatia in the sovereign affairs of BiH. Further, it would allow even greater influence of authoritarian regimes such as the PRC, Russia, and Turkey by reducing checks on Bosnian politicians who engage in corrupt and anti-democratic behavior.

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Russia’s broadside against the High Representative also supports the decentralizing (or, in some cases, outright separatist) activities of Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik and the National Assembly of the RS (NARS). Recently, those efforts included measures “to set up a separate judicial and prosecutorial council at [the RS] entity level; if adopted, it would [have] violated the legal and constitutional order.”³⁶ The Russian Embassy tried to justify NARS’ destabilizing actions by accusing “foreigners” (that is, the West) of “openly interfering in the functioning of the judiciary and law enforcement in BiH,” adding that “the step of the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska can be interpreted as a desire to create a judicial system that will be truly independent and serve the interests of ordinary citizens.”³⁷ This shows Russia’s support for the efforts of major RS figures such as Dodik to undermine the central BiH government. Russian influence thereby supports what some analysts interpret as the primary political agenda of Bosnian Serb political representatives: “strengthening the Republika Srpska and weakening BiH.”³⁸

33 Sendrović, Merima and Ademović Kenan. “The possibility of judicial review of decisions of a high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina who had impact on citizens rights.” Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Civil Affairs, pp. 25, <https://www.ceps.edu.ba/Files/DIT/Godina%204%20Broj%202/2.pdf?ver=1>

34 According to Annex 10, the High Representative’s tasks include monitoring the implementation of the DPA; establishing close contacts with the signatory parties to the DPA to affirm full compliance with all its civil aspects; and assisting, when deemed necessary, in solving difficulties that arise in connection with the implementation of the civil part of the DPA (e.g. providing humanitarian aid, promoting respect for human rights, holding free and fair elections, etc.). The High Representative was later interpreted to have additional powers, known as the “Bonn powers,” which enable him or her to remove officials who violate legally assumed obligations and DPA and impose key laws if they are not adopted by the legislative bodies of BiH.

35 Embassy of the Russian Federation in BiH, Statement of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in BiH, Facebook, 14 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=310816857745669&set=a.248692820624740>.

36 Pisonero-Hernandez, Ana. “Key findings of the 2022 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina.” European Commission, 12 October 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/hr/country_22_6093

37 Statement of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in BiH.

38 D. Hadzovic, personal communication, 17 January 2022.

All of this contributes to both severe polarization along ethnic lines and democratic backsliding, inhibiting the proper functioning of democratic government in BiH. The issue of funding BiH's 2022 general elections demonstrates the extent to which polarization has led to political gridlock. The central BiH legislature failed to pass a budget for 2021, and the budget for 2022 was delayed.³⁹ At the beginning of June 2022, the Council of Ministers adopted a draft budget for 2022 with funds for the general election in October. However, the Council of Ministers failed to provide enough money to run the elections, according to the Central Election Commission BiH (CEC BiH).⁴⁰ This gridlock along political party and along ethnic lines risked derailing one of the fundamental processes of a democracy: the holding of elections.

The High Representative solved the problem by imposing a decision to provide the CEC BiH with the necessary financial resources.⁴¹ In addition, he also imposed changes to the Law on Financing of the Institutions of BiH and the Election Law of BiH, which will ensure permanent solutions for funding and administering future elections.⁴² The High Representative's decision not only protected citizens' basic rights but also permanently closed off this specific threat to BiH's democratic processes. The Embassy of the Russian Federation in BiH condemned the High Representative's decision, calling it illegitimate and non-binding.⁴³

There are valid criticisms of the existence and role of the High Representative and of his office's specific actions, based on concerns for BiH's democratic development. However, Russia's attempts to undermine the High Representative have been aimed at weakening, not strengthening, that development.

Russia's Approach toward Bosnian Muslims

Despite open support for Bosnian Serb nationalist objectives, Russia has also sought closer ties with other ethnic groups in BiH (sometimes targeting ethnic Bosniaks) through cultural and religious channels. The Russian Embassy's "Days of Russian Spiritual Culture in BiH," which took place in Sarajevo in November 2021 is an example of this soft approach.⁴⁴ Following the event, the Russian Embassy announced that it was working on opening a Russian cultural center in Sarajevo and possibly a branch in Banja Luka.⁴⁵ BiH's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Biserka Turkovic, hinted at this at the end of December 2021, when she held a meeting with the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, in Sochi.⁴⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH prepared an agreement between the Russian Federation and the Council of Ministers of BiH on the specifics of the Russian Cultural Center in BiH. The agreement states that "great importance is attached to raising public awareness of the development of political, economic, cultural, scientific and educational processes in the Russian Federation and Bosnia and Herzegovina, striving to contribute to the development of bilateral, humanitarian, cultural, educational, scientific, technical and informational ties."⁴⁷

39 The Law on the Financing of BiH Institutions stipulates that the Law on the Budget of BiH Institutions and International Obligations of BiH for the following year should be adopted by December 31 of the current year; Velic, Emir. "The last time the state budget was not adopted was three and a half years ago [Državni budžet posljednji put nije usvojen prije tri i po godine]." *Istinomjer*, February 4 2022, <https://istinomjer.ba/drzavni-budzet-posljednji-put-nije-usvojen-prije-tri-i-po-godine/>.

40 The decision approved the provision of around 5 million euros to CEC BiH for elections, about 1.4 million euros short of what was needed. HDZ BiH and SNSD delayed and obstructed the budget process for 2022. CEC BiH officials and representatives of the international community in BiH had previously warned about this; "The U.S. Embassy called HDZ BiH a hypocritical party [Američka ambasada HDZ BiH nazvala licemjernom strankom]." *Aljazeera*, 26 May 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/5/26/vijece-ministara-bih-usvojilo-budzet-nije-osiguran-novac-za-izbore>.

41 "High Representative Imposes Decision on Financing BiH Elections [Visoki predstavnik nametnuo odluku o financiranju izbora u BiH]." *Radio Free Europe*, 7 June 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/christian-schmidt-ohr-bosna-hercegovina-pic/31887301.html>.

42 "OHR: BiH budget adoption 'delayed move for state' [OHR: Usvajanje budžeta BiH 'zakašnjeli pomak za državu']." *Radio Free Europe*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ohr-bud%25%BEet-bih/31924839.html>.

43 "I would like to adopt a state budget [Predsjedništvo BiH usvojilo državni budžet]." *Radio Free Europe*, 8 June 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-budzet-predsjednistvo-parlament/31889137.html>.

44 The program "Days of Russian Spiritual Culture in BiH" was organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Embassy of the Russian Federation in BiH in cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH ("U Sarajevu otvoreni", 2021). The opening ceremony was attended by the Minister of Civil Affairs of BiH, Ankica Gudeljevic. She is a member of the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH), headed by Dragan Covic, who is the second most important advocate for Russian policy in BiH, right after Dodik.

45 "The Russian Embassy announced the opening of a cultural center in Sarajevo [Ambasada Rusije najavila otvaranje kulturnog centra u Sarajevu]." *Radio Free Europe*, 6 January 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-rusija-ambasada-centar/31642538.html>.

46 "Turkovic at the meeting with Lavrov confirmed the opening of the Russian Center in Banja Luka [Turković na sastanku sa Lavrovim potvrdila otvaranje Ruskog centra u Banjoj Luci]." *Radio Free Europe*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/turkovic-lavrov-soci-bosna-hercegovina/31619181.html>.

47 Ducic, Amil. "Russia establishes a cultural center in BiH, has the support of the Council of Ministers?! [Rusija osniva kulturni centar u BiH, ima podršku Vijeća ministara?!]" *fokus*, January 2022, <https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/rusija-osniva-kulturni-centar-u-bih-ima-podrsku-vijeca-ministara/2242344/>.

The institutional rapprochement between BiH and Russia was noticeable, as it came during a period of growing tension between the West and Russia. This was due to the concentration of Russian military forces near the Russian-Ukrainian border. BiH's Ministry of Civil Affairs prepared to work with Russia on cultural, scientific, and educational programs between 2022-2024.⁴⁸ The cooperation also includes programs in literature, publishing, archives, cinematography, television, and radio.^{49,50}

Russia also exerts influence in the RS partly via Orthodox Christian and humanitarian-religious organizations, and it tries to do the same by exploiting Russia's Muslim minority groups to appeal to and build ties with Bosnian Muslims. This practice, often run through Chechen elites aligned with Putin such as Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic, has been documented in other contexts. Professor Marlène Laruelle, the Director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University, coined the term "Kadyrovism" to describe how Kadyrov is not only the Kremlin's tool for the pacification of Chechnya but he also works to spread Russian influence among Muslims around the world, especially in areas that Russia considers its periphery, such as Central Asia and, to a degree, Southeast Europe.⁵¹ The key features of Kadyrovism include the taming of the Chechen anti-colonial experience and its transformation into a buttress of the Russian nationalist project.

In BiH, Russia has used the European Muslim Forum (EMF) in efforts to appeal to Bosnian Muslims. The EMF is headquartered in Brussels and is run by Abdul-Vakhed Niyazov, formerly the head of Moscow's Islamic Cultural Center. The Islamic Cultural Center is part of Russia's official mufti council, a Kremlin-linked body. Niyazov is also a former member of Parliament from the United Russia party, serving from 1999 to 2003.⁵² In July 2021, representatives of the EMF travelled to Serbia and BiH and met with representatives of Western Balkan Muslim communities,⁵³ scouting possible areas for investments or donations. The media focused on an event in Zavidovici, a small municipality in central BiH. EMF representatives promised to give half a million euros to rebuild a street and bridge there and requested that the street be named for the first Chechen president, Akhmad Kadyrov (the father of Ramzan Kadyrov, mentioned above).⁵⁴ The EMF's second visit took place in October 2022, when representatives of the forum met with Sarajevo Mayor Benjamina Karic. The EMF then announced the twinning of Sarajevo, Gorazde, and Zavidovici with three cities in Chechnya, although these alleged twinings were later found not to be officially valid.⁵⁵ These efforts aimed to project to Bosnians an image of the Russian state as a benevolent actor toward its Muslim minority communities and improve the general sentiment of Bosnian Muslims toward Russia.

The EMF not only attempted to appeal to Bosnian Muslims broadly but also targeted key Muslim leaders in BiH. For example, the EMF made connections with Mustafa Cerić, who was the reis-ul-ulema (Grand Mufti) of BiH from 1993 to 2012 and who continues to advise the current reis-ul-ulema on relations with the Islamic world.⁵⁶

48 Ibid.

49 "With the support of the SNSD and HDZ? Ready for a new agreement of BiH with Russia modeled on the 1974 act between the SFRY and the USSR?! [Uz podršku SNSD-a i HDZ-a? Spreman novi sporazum BiH sa Rusijom po uzoru na akt iz 1974. između SFRJ i SSSR?!]" epiCentar INFO, 19 November 2021, <https://epbih.com/2021/11/19/uz-podrsku-snsd-a-i-hdz-a-spreman-novi-sporazum-bih-sa-rusijom-po-uzoru-na-akt-iz-1974-izmedju-sfrj-i-sssr/>.

50 In addition to cooperating on cultural projects, an agreement was reportedly drafted in late 2022, outlining greater Russian engagement in BiH's railways. The preparation of the agreement was conducted by the BiH Ministry of Communications and Transport, headed by Minister Vojin Mitrović from Dodik's political party (Ducic, 2022). Interestingly, in February 2023, the Chinese company PowerChina, the Power Construction Corporation of China, also showed interest in modernizing BiH's railways. PowerChina is already working on two projects in BiH related to renewable energy and bridge construction ("Kinezi zainteresovani za," 2022).

51 Laruelle, Marlène. "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?" IFRI, March 2017, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnv99_m_laruelle_kadyrovism_en_2017.pdf.

52 Orucevic. "Does Putin get involved in BiH through Chechen leader Kadyrov? Twinning of three cities requested [Uvlači li se Putin u BiH preko čečenskog lidera Kadirova? Zatraženo bratimljenje tri grada]."

53 One of the meetings was held with the late Muamer Zukorlić, ex-Vice Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia and Former Chief Mufti of the Islamic community in Serbia, who became a member of the board of this organization WHAT ORGANIZATION? Zukorlić was one of the candidates in the 2019 elections for the reis-ul-ulema of the Islamic community in BiH. The election was won by Husein Kavazović, who refused to meet with forum representatives. WHY?? Razim Colić, director of the Riyaset's Directorate for Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, said the Islamic community described the activities of the European Muslim Forum as a "vague Russian story" AND WHAT IS THIS SUPPOSED TO MEAN?; Orucevic. "Does Putin get involved in BiH through Chechen leader Kadyrov? Twinning of three cities requested [Uvlači li se Putin u BiH preko čečenskog lidera Kadirova? Zatraženo bratimljenje tri grada]."

54 Kesmer, Meliha and Marija Arnautović. "Half a million euros from the European Muslim Forum for Kadirova Street in Bosnia [Pola miliona eura od Evropskog muslimanskog foruma za ulicu Kadirova u Bosni]." Radio Free Europe, 22 July 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-zavidovici-ahmad-kadirov/31372179.html>.

55 Orucevic. "Does Putin get involved in BiH through Chechen leader Kadyrov? Twinning of three cities requested [Uvlači li se Putin u BiH preko čečenskog lidera Kadirova? Zatraženo bratimljenje tri grada]."

56 Kesmer, Meliha. "Fencing off the former reis who praised Putin and criticized the EU [Ograđivanje od bivšeg reisa koji je hvalio Putina i kritizirao EU]." Radio Free Europe, 7 October 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ceric-reis-islamska-zajednica-bih/31497560.html>.

As a guest of the EMF,⁵⁷ Ceric went to Chechnya for Ramzan Kadyrov's inauguration in early October 2021. After his trip, using his Facebook page, Ceric praised the cooperation between Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov – and contrasted it with his view of the EU, which he asserted “does not want to integrate Bosnia” into it.⁵⁸ Thus the cumulative effect of the EMF's efforts seem to have paid off: one of the most influential leaders of BiH's Muslims was convinced that Kremlin narratives were more or less correct - that Russia has a model that the world should learn from, in contrast to Western hypocrisy.

Russia's Alignment with Bosnian Croat Nationalists

Apart from the political establishment in the RS, Russia exercises its political influence in BiH through the ethnic-Croat political party HDZ BiH and its president, Dragan Covic. According to the Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, this is possible because both sides (the ethnic-Serb SNSD⁶⁰ and ethnic-Croat HDZ BiH) “share the Russian interest in presenting the country as dysfunctional.”⁶¹ Covic's rapprochement with Russian political interests can be traced back to at least 2013 when he accepted membership in a Vienna-based and Moscow-backed professional engineering organization, and solidified when in 2018 he accepted membership in the Moscow-based International Academy of Engineering. Covic's membership in both of these organizations provides him prestige that is disproportionate to his minimal scientific contributions: he has never been cited by other engineers or scientists for his engineering work. An analysis published in Sarajevo-based *Zurnal* demonstrates that these unearned accolades are part of a pattern of Covic's contact with Russian state agents and sympathies or support for Moscow-backed efforts.⁶²

Covic displayed his support for Russian influence in BiH in February 2020, when he gave an interview to the pro-Kremlin newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in which he stated, “Russia is constantly accused of having a very strong influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina with its politics or diplomacy. And I am ready to say that, unfortunately, there is very little Russian influence here.”⁶³ But a session of the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, held in March 2022, proves him wrong. Just weeks after the Russian invasion, the House of Peoples refused to align BiH with the EU's position on Ukraine. Out of 15 delegates, seven were against, six voted for alignment, and two abstained. This refusal was sustained by ethnic-Croat HDZ BiH votes. All five delegates from the seats allocated to Serbs, as well as two HDZ BiH delegates from the seats allocated to Croats, voted against.⁶⁴

Russia's Economic Influence

Russia is among the ten largest investors⁶⁵ in BiH, according to the Central Bank of BiH. However, according to the Center for the Study of Democracy,⁶⁶ most of Russia's economic influence is concentrated in the RS, making it the largest foreign investor in the entity. Russia's investment is concentrated in the energy sector⁶⁷ – i.e., the oil industry.

57 Ibid.

58 Karcic, Hamza. “Bosnia's disillusionment with the EU is dangerous.” *Aljazeera*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/11/8/bosnias-disillusionment-with-the-eu-is-dangerous>.

59 The Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine.

60 The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, or Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata.

61 Duhacek, Gordan. “Austrian newspaper: Acceptance of HDZ's demands leads to strengthening of Russian influence in BiH [Austrijski list: Prihvatanje zahtjeva HDZ-a dovodi do jačanja ruskog utjecaja u BiH].” *IndexHR*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/austrijski-list-promjena-izbornog-zakona-u-bih-pojacat-ce-ruski-utjecaj/2387793.aspx>.

62 Avdic, Avdo. “Control of the electoral and judicial system: Russian influence on security and intelligence services in BiH [KONTROLA IZBORNOG I PRAVOSUDNOG SISTEMA: Ruski uticaj na sigurnosno-obavještajne službe u BiH].” *Žurnal*, 31 March 2020, <https://zurnal.info/clanak/ruski-uticaj-na-sigurnosno-obavjestajne-sluzbe-u-bih/22911>.

63 Borisov, Alexander. “Politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Russia has an indispensable role in the world [Политик из Боснии и Герцеговины: У России незаменимая роль в мире].” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 7 February 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/02/07/politik-iz-bosnii-i-gercegoviny-u-rossii-nezamenimaia-rol-v-mire.html>.

64 Hadziabdic, Fadil. “HDZ votes against aligning BiH's positions with the EU on Russian aggression against Ukraine [HDZ glasao protiv uskladjivanja stavova BiH sa EU o ruskoj agresiji na Ukrajinu].” *Klix*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/hdz-glasao-protiv-uskladjivanja-stavova-bih-sa-eu-o-ruskoj-agresiji-na-ukrajinu/220324106>.

65 Hadzovic, Danijal. “Which countries invest the most in our country: Turkey is not even among the top 10 investors in BiH [Koje države najviše ulažu u našu zemlju: Turske nema ni među prvih 10 investitora u BiH].” *Dnevni avaz*, 7 June 2021, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/657297/koje-drzave-najvise-ulažu-u-nasu-zemlju-turske-nema-ni-medu-prvih-10-investitora-u-bih>.

66 “Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” Center for the Study of Democracy, 31 January 2018, <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/policy-brief-no-74-assessing-russias-economic-footprint-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

67 Hodzic, Hazim. “Russian influence in the Western Balkans and possible lessons learned for Bosnia and Herzegovina [Ruski utjecaj na zapadnom Balkanu i moguće (ne)naučene lekcije za Bosnu i Hercegovinu].” July 2019.

The RS's oil industry was privatized in 2007, when state-owned Russian oil-and-gas company Zarubezhneft bought a majority stake in three companies - the Brod and Modrica refineries and the Petrol gas station distribution network. The contract was valued at over 200 million BAM (over 100 million EUR). The RS government made changes to the Law on Privatization so that the agreement could be entered into by direct agreement, without a competitive tender.⁶⁸

The oil refinery Brod, however, has proven to be an unsuccessful investment, generating losses of hundreds of millions of euros. At the beginning of 2019, Brod stopped production entirely, and the business year ended with a loss of approximately \$65 million. Just a year later, Brod reported a profit from related legal entities, according to its financial report. This movement of funds through networks of interrelated companies is a hallmark of money laundering, tax evasion, and embezzlement schemes.⁶⁹ Economists in BiH agree that Brod's viability as a business is questionable, and it and the other Russian-owned energy firms are sustained in no small part because of government support.

Russia's (Dis)information Activities and Influence

Russia is the biggest external source of disinformation in the region.⁷⁰ Analysts have identified Serbia as a "steppingstone" for Russian disinformation campaigns,^{71,72} and BiH as the country in the region most vulnerable to Russian (dis)information and that its efforts have been effective. Haris Cutahija, director of the non-governmental organization Foreign Policy Initiative BH, has stated, "If we take into account that their agencies, especially Sputnik, represent global circumstances through their prism and that most media from the RS takes them as the main source of information to build public opinion in the RS, it has an impact in that way."⁷³

Some analysts disagree on the degree to which Russian information influence efforts specifically target BiH. Journalist Danijal Hadzovic notes that the most prominent sources of Russian disinformation are "part of a global Russian fake news campaign [and] not specific to BiH."⁷⁴ On the other hand, Dr. Thomas Brey, former long-time head Southeast Europe correspondent for German news agency DPA, points out that Sputnik is particularly focused on BiH, giving special support to Dodik, and contributes to the frequent flare-up of internal ethnic conflicts.⁷⁵

Sputnik is one of the key elements in the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem⁷⁶ and "the only Russian state-owned media present in BiH media space (through its Serbian outlet)."⁷⁷ Professor Nerzuk Curak, a professor of political science at the University of Sarajevo who focuses on topics including geopolitics and international security, believes that the "installation" of the Sputnik agency in Serbia and its "purchase" of serious journalists shows that it a priority project and "not something that is ad hoc."⁷⁸

68 Maksimovic, Dragan. "Did the Russians evade millions of marks in BiH? [Rusi utajili milijune maraka u BiH?]." Deutsche Welle, 13 August 2016, <https://www.dw.com/hr/rusi-utajili-milijune-maraka-u-bih/a-19472197>.

69 "Russians earned 71 million KM on the defunct Brod oil refinery [Rusi zaradili 71 milion KM na ugašenoj Rafineriji nafte Brod]." Capital, 7 May 2021, <https://www.capital.ba/rusi-zaradili-71-milion-km-na-ugasenoj-rafineriji-nafte-brod/>

70 Greene et al. "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them." Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies, February 2021, pp. 6, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

71 Jevtic, Jelena. "RUSSIAN STRUGGLE FOR INFORMATION DOMINANCE." The Security Distillery, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkans>.

72 Hodzic, "Russian influence in the Western Balkans and possible lessons learned for Bosnia and Herzegovina [Ruski utjecaj na zapadnom Balkanu i moguće (ne)naučene lekcije za Bosnu i Hercegovinu]."

73 Personal communication, 17 January 2022.

74 Ibid.

75 Brey, Thomas. "Russian Media in the Balkans," Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit, February 2022, <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/russian-media-balkans>.

76 "Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem." Global Engagement Center, January 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf.

77 Brkan, Darko. "ASSESSMENT OF THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, MONTENEGRO AND NORTH MACEDONIA." European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020, pp. 14, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/assessment.pdf>.

78 Personal communication, 19 Jan. 2022; It is striking that this regional office was established a year after the Russian occupation of Crimea and the West's sanctions on Russia, events that coincide with the emergence of anti-Western Russian narratives in the Western Balkans. More on this: Sunter, Daniel. "Disinformation in the Western Balkans." NATO Review, 21 December 2020, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>.

Outside of these channels, BiH-based journalists and analysts cite Russian troll factories, which manipulate social and political narratives via the internet.⁷⁹ According to those analysts, Russian troll factories aim to undermine BiH's EU integration and to drag the country into Russia's sphere of interest.⁸⁰ Dissemination of content is most often done via social networks including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, while accounts such as Webtribune, Russian for all Sarajevo (Ruski za sve Sarajevo), and Russian Cultural Center 'Russian World' Banjaluka (Ruski kulturni centar "Ruski mir" Banjaluka) have been linked to Russian trolls.⁸¹

In addition to these external sources, internal media, predominantly in the RS, also spread Russian propaganda. The public media service Radio Televizija Republike Srpske (RTRS), the Srpska Republika News Agency (SRNA), and the private TV station ATV⁸² maintain close cooperation with Sputnik.⁸³ A 2019 report by the BiH-based Citizens' Association "Why Not" identified RTRS and SRNA as the "single most prolific sources of disinformation in BiH."⁸⁴

Russian propaganda is likely most influential in RS territory, but media based in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina also spread Russian propaganda and soft power. The online edition of the Sarajevo-based newspaper *Oslobodjenje* published four columns authored by the Russian ambassador to BiH, Igor Kalabuhov.⁸⁵ Unsurprisingly, these columns largely contain anti-NATO rhetoric. In one column, published in May 2022, the ambassador wrote about Russian Muslims and their Islamic values as a way to reach Bosniaks.⁸⁶ This is reminiscent of attempt to use Russia's Muslim Chechen minority to appeal to BiH's Muslim Bosniak majority, as described previously in this report.

Recently, Russia has become more aggressive towards the news media in BiH. In 2021, the Russian embassy in Sarajevo issued a statement condemning pro-NATO articles written by Bosnian press as "unbridled media propaganda of BiH's path to NATO membership."⁸⁷ This incident corresponds to the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence's findings that the Kremlin uses several narratives to achieve its political goals in the region. In 2022, the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo sent an e-mail to journalist Miralem Ascic about his article "Putin's Games," published on the media portal *Dnevni Avaz* on February 16, 2022.

The story described strained relations between Ukraine and Russia (as we now know, in the immediate advance of Russia's invasion of Ukraine later that month). In the email, the embassy's public affairs office made overt threats; they warned that everything has its limits, including Russian patience, "and if we are forced to respond with a blow to the provocations of cynics, hypocrites and manipulators, it will be a blow from the depths of the Russian soul."⁸⁸

79 "DOES THE RUSSIAN 'TROLL FACTORY' HAVE A DEPARTMENT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA? [DA LI RUSKA 'FABRIKA TROLOVA' IMA ODJELJENJE U BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI?]" *Novi Vjetar*, <https://novi-vjetar.com/da-li-ruska-fabrika-trolova-ima-odjeljenje-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>.

80 This is in line with Jevtic's point of view, CAN WE REMIND READERS WHO THIS IS (esp. since we never really told them before) he argues that Russia's disinformation campaign has two goals. The first is to undermine the EU's, NATO's, and U.S.'s appeal. The second is to slow Euro-Atlantic integration with Western Balkans states. More on this: Jevtic, Jelena. "THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS." *The Security Distillery*, 28 April 2021, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkans>.

81 "DA LI RUSKA 'FABRIKA TROLOVA' IMA ODJELJENJE U BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI?" *Novi Vjetar*, <https://novi-vjetar.com/da-li-ruska-fabrika-trolova-ima-odjeljenje-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>.

82 The U.S. imposed sanctions on ATV and Dodik because of activities and threats to the stability of BiH; "U.S. imposes sanctions on ATV and Dodik [SAD uvele sankcije ATV-u i Dodiku]." *ATV*, 5 January 2022, <https://www.atvbl.rs/republika-srpska/sad-uvele-sankcije-dodiku-i-atv-u-5-1-2022>.

83 Brey, Thomas. "Russian Media in the Balkans." *Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit*, February 2022, <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/russian-media-balkans>.

84 Cvjeticanin et al. "DISINFORMATION IN THE ONLINE SPHERE: THE CASE OF BIH." *Citizens' Association "Why Not"*, April 2019, pp. 8, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

85 See: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/autor/igor-kalabuhov-500047>.

86 Kalabuhov, Igor. "Russia and Muslims... / Kalabuhov for Liberation: Active participation of Bosniaks is possible... [Rusija i muslimani... / Kalabuhov za Oslobođenje: Moguće je aktivno učešće Bošnjaka...]" *Oslobodjenje*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/dosjei/kolumne/rusija-i-muslimani-kalabuhov-za-oslobodenje-moguće-je-aktivno-ucesce-bosnjaka-760133>.

87 "We learn how the Russian ambassador explained the controversial comment on BiH's path to NATO [Saznajemo kako je ruski ambasador obrazložio kontroverzni komentar o putu BiH u NATO]." *Klix*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/saznajemo-kako-je-ruski-ambasador-obrazložio-kontroverzni-komentar-o-putu-bih-u-nato/210323061>.

88 Ascic, Miralem. "The Russian Embassy in BiH reacted to 'Avaz's' comment 'Putin's game': Everything has its limits, even our patience, if we are forced to respond, it will be a blow from the depths of the Russian soul." *Dnevni Avaz*, 17 February 2022, <https://avaz.ba/english/news/718237/the-russian-embassy-in-bih-reacted-to-avaz-s-comment-putin-s-game-everything-has-its-limits-even-our-patience-if-we-are-forced-to-respond-it-will-be-a-blow-from-the-depths-of-the-russian-soul>.

Russia's Influence through Defense and Security Sectors

Arming sub-state forces

BiH's security sector is characterized by significant fragmentation, unclear division of responsibilities, and poor coordination. In 2005, ten years after the Dayton Accords ended the war in BiH, the country's armed forces were unified into a single force under control of the central state (until then, each entity, the RS and the FBiH, had its own army). However, the entities retained the right to their own interior ministries, which have authority over their police forces.

In recent years, the RS' Ministry of Interior has more heavily armed its police with weapons from sources such as Serbia, South Africa, and Russia. For example, in 2021, the RS police procured Ansat helicopters from the holding company Russian Helicopters, part of the Russian state corporation Rostech. The contract is for three helicopters, two of which have already been delivered to the RS Ministry of Interior. The value of the contract was approximately 22 million euros. This deal was done with minimal or no competition - at the beginning of 2020, the ministry announced the selection of suppliers, and the company Russian Helicopters was listed as the only bidder.⁸⁹

The helicopter procurement is complemented by the mass purchase of firearms that, while they still technically qualify as light arms, are more characteristic of a militia than of a law enforcement agency. According to a 2018 report by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, at that time the RS government was "capable of arming roughly 75 percent of its police with a Kalashnikov-type firearm disproportionate to the basic police officer's protective duties." These long-barrel rifles were bought primarily from Serbia. They demonstrate that the transfer of Russian equipment to the RS police is beyond symbolic or economic - it is part of an effort by the RS to prepare itself for possible armed conflict around a political crisis internal to BiH and a decision by Russia (along with Serbia) to support that preparation.⁹⁰

Russian support to the RS Ministry of Interior has also involved police training. In 2015, the RS Ministry of Interior and the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation for the City of Moscow signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In signing the MoU, both sides expressed readiness to conduct joint training and development. However, in subsequent public addresses, RS Interior Minister Dragan Lukac denied that Russians were involved in training police officers. Nevertheless, analysts allege that "Russian intelligence officers (former members of the Federal Security Service, or FSB) often give lectures and teach courses in the Republika Srpska police academy and at the University of Banja Luka's faculty of security studies, which serves as the regional police's policy planning department."⁹¹

Russian support for the RS police is both practical and symbolic. Dodik and the RS government invoke the RS police as a symbol of autonomy. "*Republika Srpska Day*," January 9, is a holiday that Bosnian state courts have declared unconstitutional and discriminatory against non-Serbs. RS Day commemorations prominently feature conspicuously armed police marching in parades that walk the line between civilian and military. When paired with secessionist rhetoric from Dodik and other Serb nationalists, the threat is not subtle: a more heavily armed RS police - supplied and trained in large part by Russia - would form the basis of a Bosnian Serb secessionist army if Dodik and other Bosnian Serb leaders decided to attempt secession.

Paramilitaries-in-waiting

Russia is also helping develop a network of would-be paramilitary units in the RS. Reporting in BiH reveals Russian state ties to two organizations in particular: Serbian Honor (Srpska cast) and the Night Wolves (*Noćni vukovi*).

89 "Rs MUP completes fleet: Second Russian helicopter arrived, these are the characteristics [MUP RS-a kompletira flotu: Stigao i drugi ruski helikopter, ovo su karakteristike]." Faktor, 21 June 2021, <https://faktor.ba/vijest/mup-rs-a-kompletira-flotu-stigao-i-drugi-ruski-helikopter-ovo-su-karakteristike/129140>

90 Bajrovic, Reuf, Richard Kraemer and Emir Suljagic. "Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it." Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16 March 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/03/bosnia-russian-chopping-block-potential-violence-steps-prevent/>.

91 Mironovia, Vera and Bogdan Zawadewicz. "Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force." Foreign Policy, 8 August 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>.

Serbian Honor is an organization from Nis, Serbia, with a branch in the RS. While members claim Serbian Honor is a humanitarian organization, analysts and high-level government officials like former BiH Security Minister Dragan Mektic believe that the way Serbian Honor conducts itself and arms itself suggests that it is more like a paramilitary in waiting. “We have various humanitarian actions,” he noted, “but I have not seen them dress in the most elite war uniforms, to show themselves with equipment and weapons used exclusively for liquidation during military actions.”⁹² Members of Serbian Honor practice their shooting at a military center in Nis, and publicized their connections with the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in that city.⁹³ Serbian Honor’s leaders are Bojan Stojkovic from Nis and Igor Bilbija from Prijedor (BiH). Stojkovic, with other members of the organization, trained at a Serbian military camp in Nis. The training ended in Moscow, thanks to ties with the association of Russian veterans Heirs to Victory.⁹⁴ For his part, Bilbija has a criminal past and likely ongoing connections to others in the criminal milieu.

Serbian Honor maintains close ties with the Night Wolves, a Russian association of bikers, which is on a U.S. blacklist. The leader of this organization, Alexander Zaldostanov (a.k.a. “The Surgeon”), is allegedly close to Putin.⁹⁵ In 2018, Dodik awarded Zaldostanov with the Order of Honor for strengthening friendly relations between the RS and Russia. The Night Wolves also have a branch in RS, headed by the politically connected businessman Goran Tadic. Tadic co-owns the company New Energy, which in 2018 received a concession worth 3 million BAM to build a mini-hydroelectric power plant near Han Pijesak in eastern BiH, in the RS. The agreement was signed with the RS Ministry of Energy and Mining, headed by Petar Djokic, who is the president of the Socialist Party and Dodik’s close coalition partner. In addition, Tadic has known Djokic for decades and allegedly worked as his driver at the Ministry.⁹⁶ In response to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a rally in support of Russia was held in Banja Luka on March 12, 2022. It was attended by members of the Night Wolves as well as by Minister Djokic.⁹⁷ Serbian Honor and the Night Wolves underscore Russia’s many avenues of influence related to security in BiH; crime and corruption, support for paramilitaries-in-waiting, and on-the-ground shows of force to support a narrative of masculine Russian strength.

Serbian Honor and the Night Wolves underscore Russia’s many avenues of influence related to security in BiH; crime and corruption, support for paramilitaries-in-waiting, and on-the-ground shows of force to support a narrative of masculine Russian strength.

BiH’s Vulnerability to Authoritarian Influence

There are five principal factors that create vulnerabilities and entry points for foreign authoritarian influence in BiH. The first is the sense of shared historical, cultural, and religious heritage between Russia and Bosnian Serbs. Russia also highlights the Chechen and other Islamic minorities to build similar ties with Bosnia’s Muslims. Unlike the PRC, Russia relies heavily on these emotions to exert its influence. As the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo points out, “these ties have in some ways contributed to winning people’s hearts, and the EU’s technocratic approach has essentially focused on ratios (i.e., reasoning). And the ratios are hard to win here.”⁹⁸

92 “Tko sve stoji iza Srbske časti? ‘Tako je bilo i 1991. Opasni su!’ 24sata, 4 April 2018, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/tko-sve-stoji-iza-srbske-casti-tako-je-bilo-i-1991-opasni-su-567517>.

93 Avdic, Avdo. “SRBSKA ČAST: Zašto humanitarni radnici vježbaju gađanje u vojnom centru u Nišu?” Žurnal, 15 January 2018, <https://zurnal.info/clanak/zasto-humanitarni-radnici-vjezbaju-gadanje-u-vojnom-centru-u-nisu/20919>.

94 Veterans Associations are another group through which Russia exerts its influence in the region. For example, Dusko Vukotic simultaneously leads the RS Association of Veterans and the RS branch of the Association of Russian Veterans.

95 Anastasijevic, Dejan. “Noćni vukovi: Bajkeri bez motora.” BBC News, 22 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-43487021>.

96 Mujkic, Semir. “BIRN BiH: Political services for Night Wolves in Republika Srpska [BIRN BiH: Političke usluge za Noćne vukove u Republici Srpskoj].” Voice of America, 15 March 2019, <https://ba.voanews.com/a/politi%C4%8Dke-usluge-za-no%C4%87ne-vukove-u-republici-srpskoj/4830384.html>.

97 “‘Night Wolves’ at a rally in support of Russia in Banja Luka [‘Noćni vukovi’ na skupu podrške Rusiji u Banjaluci].” Radio Free Europe, 12 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31749732.html>.

98 Personal communication, 20 January 2022.

The second factor has been the rise of right-wing populism, not only in the Western Balkans but in the whole of Europe.⁹⁹ Populism goes hand in hand with anti-democratic and anti-liberal rhetoric which is, in a broad ideological sense, “much closer to the sovereigntist concept advocated by Russia,” as journalist Danijal Hadzovic explains.¹⁰⁰ Because of this, European right-wingers look favorably on Russia while, at the same time, providing each other with legitimacy in the political arena.¹⁰¹ Russia has also provided these political groups with financial support.¹⁰²

The third factor is a lack of attention and interest in the region from Western democratic powers. This primarily refers to a shift in U.S. interest away from the region. One interlocutor from the security sector interviewed for this report believes that the “administration of the then-U.S. president [Donald Trump]...neglecte[d] the importance of the geopolitical space of the Western Balkans, [and] left enough room for action and the influence of the destructive policies of the Kremlin.”¹⁰³ The lack of a coherent EU enlargement policy, especially toward the Western Balkans, is also a concern. According to Turcalo, the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo, such an approach sends a message to authoritarian actors that they have room to expand their influence. The concern is that, at some point, political leaders and society in these countries will realize that EU membership is far away and the EU itself is focused elsewhere, and they will start thinking about alternatives.¹⁰⁴ By creating the perception of a power vacuum, the West has all but invited Russia and the PRC to fill it.

The fourth factor is local corruption. This is highlighted by the European Commission’s opinion on BiH’s EU membership, adopted on 29 May 2019. The opinion stressed the prevalence of corruption and noted that inconsistent legislation and weak institutional cooperation exacerbate this challenge. The opinion also noted that public procurement is subject to the whims of politics and, “final convictions in high-level corruption cases are very rare and sanctions do not have an adequate preventive effect.”¹⁰⁵ As one interlocutor from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs points out, investments from countries such as Russia, the PRC, and the Gulf states do not come with provisions requiring transparency and oversight. Corruption is therefore “simply allowed and the standards are not insisted on.”¹⁰⁶ Weak loan or investment regulations and institutions mean domestic actors already inclined toward corruption might turn to Russia or the PRC, because autocracies can reward corrupt officials in ways that the West cannot.

This last factor refers to the fact that domestic political parties mostly do not deal with foreign policy issues, especially the malignant influence of authoritarian regimes. Until the February 2022 expansion of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a very small number of leaders spoke about the influence of authoritarian regimes, instead, this malign influence was mostly covered by a few media organizations, such as *Zurnal* or *Istraga*, and a small number of academics. According to Turcalo, many in BiH did not focus on Russian influence campaigns and sometimes saw allegations of Russian influence as simply ridiculous.¹⁰⁷

99 Abadi et al. “Socio-economic or Emotional Predictors of Populist Attitudes Across Europe.” PsyArXiv, 25 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/gtm65>.

100 D. Hadzovic, personal communication, 17 January 2022.

101 Futàk-Campbell, Beatrix. “Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels, Stichting Atlantische Commissie, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600543?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

102 In BiH, the activities of Konstantin Malofeyev, an oligarch and one of the richest people in Russia, are interesting. He is considered one of Putin’s closest supporters and to act as an arm of Russian foreign policy. In addition to financing pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, he also donated to right-wing political parties and organizations in Europe. He helped finance French rightist Marine Le Pen’s campaign in 2014. Dodik, current member of the BiH Presidency, met with him on several occasions. Malofeyev was banned from entering BiH in May 2018 due to a threat to national security. More on this: Datta, Neil. “We know Russia funds Europe’s far Right. But what does it get in return?” *openDemocracy*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/russia-ukraine-war-putin-europe-far-right-funding-conservatives/>; Sehanovic-Ucanbarlic, Selma. “Who is the Russian oligarch who supports Marine Le Pen and the French right, but is close to Dodik? [Ko je ruski oligarh koji podržava Marine Le Pen i francusku desnicu, a blizak je Dodiku?].” *Klix*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/ko-je-ruski-oligarh-koji-podrzava-marine-le-pen-i-francusku-desnicu-a-blizak-je-dodiku/220409062>; “KONSTANTIN MALOFEEV AND HIS ROLE IN THE BALKANS [KONSTATIN MALOFEJEV I NJEGOVA ULOGA NA BALKANU].” *Novi Vjetar*, <https://novi-vjetar.com/konstatin-malofejev-i-njegova-uloga-na-balkanu/>.

103 Anonymous interlocutor no. 2, personal communication, 14 March 2022.

104 Personal communication, 20 January 2022.

105 Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s application for membership of the European Union, European Commission, 29 May 2019, pp. 8, <http://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-opinion.pdf>.

106 Personal communication, 11 March 2022.

107 Personal communication, 20 January 2022.

Conclusion

Both democratic and authoritarian powers are exerting influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and across the Western Balkans (WB). Western democratic stakeholders such as the EU and NATO support BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration and have invested in the development of democratic and stable governance. However, the influence of authoritarian actors greatly undermines these efforts. The influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, in particular, represents a direct obstacle to BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration and undermines the country's democratic transition. These two states strive to achieve their geostrategic goals by exploiting the country's internal divisions, its years of corruption and captive governance, and the West's disengagement from the region. Russia and the PRC employ a variety of tools across diplomatic, economic, information and security sectors to advance illiberal agendas.

In the political-diplomatic sense, the common overlapping factor between the PRC and Russia is that they support efforts to undermine the central BiH state. The best example of this is the celebration of the unconstitutional *Republika Srpska Day* on January 9, in which representatives of the Russian and PRC embassies regularly participate. The attempt to abolish the position of High Representative in BiH in the UN Security Council in July 2021 is another example of a joint action by Russia and the PRC that is to the detriment of BiH.

However, open coordination between the PRC and Russia remains uncommon in BiH. Even the presence of Russian and PRC embassy staff marking *Republika Srpska Day* is not clearly an example of intentional joint action – it may simply be an alignment of goals. On the other hand, the PRC deliberately allied with Russia to retaliate against BiH for signing a statement about human rights concerns regarding Uyghurs. This was the first time that PRC has explicitly supported Russia concerning BiH.¹⁰⁸

The question remains as to whether there will be more examples of joint Russia-PRC action in the future, in what form, and to what intensity. An indicator of intensified Russia-PRC action related to BiH and the Western Balkans might be Russia's and the PRC's joint statement, in February 2022, opposing NATO's enlargement policy.¹⁰⁹ This was likely aimed at Ukraine and was an attempt to manufacture a *casus belli* for Russia's invasion a few weeks later. It is also a warning that the PRC might support Russian attempts to halt BiH's integration into NATO. Most interlocutors interviewed for this report could not identify a clear alliance between the PRC and Russia on matters related to BiH. Apart from the statement about human rights in the PRC in the UN Security Council last year, an interlocutor from the BiH Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that coordinated activities were unlikely and that Russia and the PRC are simply pursuing their own national interests.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, the actions of each contribute to the deterioration of BiH's democratic prospects, either through the exploitation and exacerbation of corruption or through more overt means to polarize and decentralize BiH, and inject more weapons into a vulnerable state.

To improve resilience against authoritarian influence, the BiH leadership should focus on improving transparency and accountability in governance, continue the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, and abandon personally lucrative but illiberal cooperation with PRC and Russia. At the same time, the West must offer sustainable and credible alternatives to support BiH's democratic development.

108 Personal communication with interlocutor from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH, 11 March 2022.

109 Darmanin, Jules. "Russia, China call for halt to NATO enlargement." Politico, 4 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-oppose-nato-enlargement-vladimir-putin-xi-jinping-ukraine/>.

110 Personal communication, 11 March 2022.



EUROPE

MONTENEGRO

Introduction

While Montenegro, a country of fewer than 630,000 inhabitants, may escape the notice of many, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia each pay disproportionate attention to the Adriatic country. Their actions have played critical roles in Montenegro's politics in its seventeen years of independence, largely undermining its democratic prospects.

The PRC's interest in Montenegro is part of its broader ambition. The PRC wants to present itself as an actor providing alternative economic opportunities in an era of geopolitical change.¹ The PRC initially engaged with Montenegro diplomatically in order to boost its economic ambitions under the 17+1 (now 14+1) framework (an initiative by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business and investment relations between the PRC and 14 countries of Central and Eastern Europe).² However, recent PRC engagement in Montenegro, and in the rest of the Western Balkans, indicates that the PRC is moving toward a new stage of engagement. While economic engagement is still a priority, PRC activities in Montenegro straddle political, social, and cultural boundaries. Although the PRC does not currently oppose Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration, its growing geostrategic ambitions may change this.

For its part, Russia's influence in Montenegro is a component of its aim to challenge Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkans (WB) as a part of its geostrategic conflict against the West. Under this framework, Russia's influence in Montenegro has evolved from largely economic interest-driven engagement to intensive malign influence through political interference, disinformation campaigns, and meddling in the country's internal security and defense sector. Russia exploited the populace's disappointment with years of corruption and autocracy, the West's disengagement from the region, and Montenegro's internal identity challenges vis-à-vis long union with Serbia, particularly the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). At the same time, through official political and diplomatic influence coordinated with disinformation campaigns, Russia is weakening the pillars of Montenegrin statehood and identity, using propaganda, historical revisionism, and misinformation and narratives that discredit the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

Spreading disinformation through highly polarized media is a shared pursuit, where PRC and Russian influence meet to advance an authoritarian agenda in Montenegro. Serbian pro-Russian and pro-government media facilitate the nexus of Russia-PRC influence by glorifying the Sino-Russian alliance.

Although a direct link is not currently visible, both authoritarian regimes use diplomacy to support multilayered influence across society, in stark contrast to liberal democracies. Both the PRC and Russia prompt their political and highly centralized state-owned and aligned network of companies to advance their political and economic interests through corrupt and opaque arrangements with local leaders.

1 For more on PRC's ambition in the broader region and in Montenegro in particular, see, for example, how Montenegro's Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic's address at the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) in March 2021 played right into Western fears of the PRC's geopolitical ambitions and so-called debt trap diplomacy, which Beijing denies, and yielded results shortly after, in: Bogojevic, Jovana. "Montenegro's Growing Distance from China." *Choice*, 6 May 2022, <https://chinaobservers.eu/montenegros-growing-distance-from-china/>; see also: Schmitz, Rob. "How A Chinese-Built Highway Drove Montenegro Deep Into Debt." *National Public Radio*, 29 June 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/28/1010832606/road-deal-with-china-is-blamed-for-catapulting-montenegro-into-historic-debt>.

2 "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape." OECD, 3 September 2018, <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>.

In doing so, they disturb free market efforts, undermine liberal values, and create internal divisions and segmentation in Montenegro's society.

This paper analyzes all forms of influence and impact that these two countries have in Montenegro as an integral part of the WB region.³ The analysis focuses on how this influence attempts to undermine Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and seeks to understand if there is a synergy in the authoritarian influence between PRC and Russian ambitions in Montenegro. The report also provides recommendations designed to increase Montenegro's democratic resilience and safeguard its path to further Euro-Atlantic integration.

The PRC's influence on Montenegro

The PRC's primary interest in Montenegro is part of its broader aim to present itself as an alternative to the West in an era of geopolitical change. Recent PRC engagement in Montenegro, as in the rest of the WBs, indicates that it is moving into a new stage of heightened interaction with various parts of society across many policy areas. While economic engagement is still a priority, PRC influence straddles politics, society, and culture.⁴

The techniques the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses to control China's society pose a challenge for clear analysis of PRC influence in Montenegro, as in any country. The Party consciously seeks to use the rest of PRC society as an extension of its influence, often through covert, coercive, or misleading means. The CCP provides strong incentives for non-Party parts of society to align themselves with Party policy goals, and equally strong disincentives to discourage active opposition. PRC security and intelligence agencies have broad latitude to coerce PRC citizens abroad into serving Party foreign policy goals, and frequently do so by threatening family members or business interests in China. The CCP also embeds its members – who are subject to strict party discipline -- in all parts of PRC society, including companies, universities, and non-governmental organizations. This approach -- essentially Leninist in nature -- means that the boundary between state and society is more fluid than in democracies, making it difficult even for expert analysts to clearly delineate where the Party's influence ends. The analysis in this report, as with any analysis of PRC foreign authoritarian influence, is limited by this challenge.

Diplomatic Influence

The PRC officially recognized Montenegro on June 14, 2006 (shortly after it declared independence), and diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on July 7, 2006. The role of diplomacy has mainly been to support the PRC's investments and economic engagement under the 14+1 initiative. The PRC's strategic approach views Montenegro not solely through a bilateral lens, but as a part of the broader Euro-Atlantic and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) regions. Apart from promoting PRC-based and -affiliated business, the PRC is interested in leveraging its political influence in Montenegro to have a wider regional impact: to indirectly influence European consensus and transatlantic alignment on issues of concern to Beijing such as human rights and the situations in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

3 The primary sources for this analysis include a desk study of relevant data and research that attests to scope and scale of Russia and the PRC's influence in Montenegro, as well as interviews with politicians, civic activists, and policy experts who represent a range of ideological views on the topic. The research sought to understand the following pathways for influence: diplomacy; information; economic engagement (through both legitimate economic activity and the gray economy and other illegal deals that stimulate corruption and undermine democratic governance and accountability); defense and national security (including use of force or proxies). For this report, the researcher conducted interviews with Milica Kovacevic, program director of the NGO Center for Democratic Transition; Dr. Olivera Komar, professor at the University of Montenegro's Faculty of Political Science; Dr. Savo Kentera, President of the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro; Dr. Danijela Jacimovic, Faculty of Economics Podgorica (international and European studies); Dr. Adnan Prekic, assistant professor at the History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Montenegro; Petar Komnenic, journalist, TV Vijesti; Radoje Cerovic, psychologist and communicologist; a representative of the Democratic Front/Democratic Montenegro/United Reform Action who did not wish to be named; a representative of the Democratic Party of Socialists/Social Democratic Party/Social Democrats who did not wish to be named; and a representative of the Bosniak Party/Albanian Coalition who did not wish to be named.

4 Many observers and writers describe PRC economic influence in southeastern Europe as "debt trap diplomacy." See for example: Brattberg, Erik, Philippe Le Corre, and Thomas De Waal. "China's Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 October 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>.

The PRC also cultivates Montenegro's votes in international forums toward this end. As Dr. Olivera Komar, a professor of political science at the University of Montenegro, asserted, "Montenegro is important as a country with the right to vote in the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, NATO and a number of other organizations and will become even more important if the country joins the EU."⁵ For the PRC, every vote counts, no matter how small the country in order to project an image of the PRC as a responsible international actor.⁶ However, PRC diplomatic influence has its limits; in October 2021, Montenegro signed the Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang at the UN General Assembly, alongside 42 other countries.⁷

The PRC has also used vaccine diplomacy to expand its influence. The PRC's ambassador in Podgorica, Liu Jin, celebrated the arrival of PRC-origin vaccines in the country, noting "Montenegro is among the first countries in Europe to receive a vaccine donation from PRC, which embodies the good wishes of the Chinese people and the traditional friendship between the two countries."⁸ Vaccine diplomacy is part of the PRC's coordinated influence approach, and it echoes the PRC's official rhetoric emphasizing "equality and mutually beneficial economic interaction," while diverting attention away from values and politics.⁹

Vaccine diplomacy is part of the PRC's coordinated influence approach, and it echoes the PRC's official rhetoric emphasizing "equality and mutually beneficial economic interaction," while diverting attention away from values and politics.

Economic Influence

The PRC's economic influence in Montenegro is characterized by a lack of transparency. The PRC uses opaque loans and investments, predominantly in transportation and infrastructure, which has been facilitated by a lack of democratic accountability and governance in Montenegro over the past 30 years. In the first eight months of 2020, according to data from the Central Bank of Montenegro, the PRC was the leading source of foreign direct investment in the country, investing 70 million euros.¹⁰ Unlike most European investment, which comes with rigorous democratic reforms attached, PRC businesses do not ask for transparency, accountability, or reform. For the kleptocratic political elite that ruled the country for 30 years, PRC economic engagement was a source of legitimacy.

PRC deals nevertheless come with other strings. When the PRC provides loans and infrastructure investment, it often requires the associated contracts to be awarded to PRC companies. These companies are PRC-based firms with either direct ties or opaque relationships to the CCP and PRC state. The biggest and perhaps the most debated PRC economic engagement in Montenegro is the "Project of the Century" as it was dubbed by the previous government, also known as the "Highway to Nowhere" by its many critics.¹¹

5 "The Chinese philosophy in foreign policy is that there are no big or small countries." interview with Dr. Olivera Komar, professor at the University of Montenegro's Faculty of Political Science.

6 Putz, Catherine. "2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?" *The Diplomat*, 9 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

7 The shift in Podgorica's attitude towards the PRC became evident in October 2021, after a new administration joined the Western-led initiative against the PRC's human rights abuses. This decision came after the 30-year-long leadership of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) ended in late 2020. See more about this in: Bogojevic, Jovana. "Montenegro's Growing Distance from China." *Choice*, 6 May 2022, <https://chinaobservers.eu/montenegros-growing-distance-from-china/>.

8 "Montenegro receives 1st batch of donated COVID-19 vaccines from China." *Xinhua*, 4 March 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/04/c_139782694.htm.

9 "Communiqué: The Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries." Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/>.

10 Though the PRC is mentioned as a major foreign investor for the first time, the Central Bank has declared information about its investments is confidential. See: Marovic, Jovana. "China's growing investments in Montenegro - will the new government break their secrecy?" *European Western Balkans*, 11 June 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/06/chinas-growing-investments-in-montenegro-will-the-new-government-break-their-secrecy/>.

In 2016, Montenegro borrowed 809 million euros from the PRC to finance the construction of 41 km of its first highway. The government at the time dismissed warnings about the dangers of taking on debt from the PRC. Receiving loans from the PRC state-owned Exim Bank was justified by noting that European banks refused to finance the highway construction. The China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) was selected to build the highway, which launched without a public tender. According to the Network for Affirmation of the NGO Sector, a Montenegrin anti-corruption watchdog, the relationship between payments received and the work carried out was not clear.¹² The project was also subject to weaker feasibility and environmental impact studies than other similar projects. According to the Minister of Capital Investments, Mladen Bojanic, more than a third of the project's subcontractors had links to the former President Milo Djukanovic, who was accused of corruption and abuse of state power during his rule from 1990 to 2023.¹³

Also of concern is the fact that the PRC is now the creditor of about a fifth of Montenegro's total public debt, which as of mid-2023 had reached 4.4 billion euros, or more than 82 percent of gross domestic product.¹⁴ Buckling under the debt burden, Montenegro cut a deal in mid-2021 with European and U.S. banks to refinance loans from the PRC.¹⁵ But the fate of the highway remains unclear. Montenegro has tried and failed twice to secure European funding for the second section, after feasibility studies determined that traffic volume would not justify the highway's cost.¹⁶ The PRC's use of "corrosive capital"¹⁷ practices exploit and exacerbate existing weaknesses in Montenegro's governance.

Providing [PRC companies special treatment by reducing public procurement requirements undermines transparency and accountability, and in turn democracy.

While not all economic engagements with the PRC and PRC-based and -affiliated firms are inherently damaging to democracy, providing them special treatment by reducing public procurement requirements undermines transparency and accountability, and in turn democracy. Furthermore, growing economic ties to the PRC open the door to future authoritarian influence, as economic ties are the entry point for other forms of influence. In a country with weak democratic institutions and pervasive corruption, these tools of authoritarian influence can be especially effective.

Information and Cultural Influence

For now, the PRC has a small footprint in Montenegro's media.¹⁸ PRC news organizations provide free content for local media, although most journalists dismiss it as low quality. Because of the Montenegrin media market's small size and the two countries' shared linguistic, cultural, and historical background, Serbia-based media holds sway in the country. Xinhua, for example, covers Montenegro via their correspondent in Belgrade. In Serbian news, most coverage of the PRC is positive; almost all building projects are presented without mention of financing, loans, or details on negotiations.

11 Interview with Milica Kovacevic, program director of the NGO Center for Democratic Transition.

12 "Montenegro learns true cost of China-backed \$1 billion road to nowhere." EURACTIV, 2 June 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/montenegro-learns-true-cost-of-china-backed-1-billion-road-to-nowhere/>.

13 "Montenegro learns true cost of China-backed \$1 billion road to nowhere."

14 O'Neill, Aaron. "The national debt of Montenegro in relation to its gross domestic product (GDP) from 2018 to 2028." Statista, 8 September 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/528685/national-debt-of-montenegro-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>.

15 Djordjevic, Nikola. "Montenegro narrowly avoids Chinese debt trap, for now," Emerging Europe, 9 August 2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/montenegro-narrowly-avoids-chinese-debt-trap-for-now/>.

16 "China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost." Balkan Insight, 15 December 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>.

17 The phrase comes from the Center for International Private Entrepreneurship (CIPE), with the explanation that it refers to private and state capital that lacks transparency, accountability and a market orientation. Authoritarian regimes transfer this capital to countries in transition.

18 Bami, Xhorxhina. "China Increasing its Footprint in Balkan Media, Study Concludes." Balkan Insight, 9 December 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/09/china-increasing-its-footprint-in-balkan-media-study-concludes/>.

The PRC has also used other means to attempt to cultivate friendly voices in the country. Montenegro and the PRC have well-developed exchange programs. Montenegrin delegations to the PRC are usually composed of local leaders and politicians, people from business associations, journalists, academics, and students. The exchanges go both ways; the Montenegrin Chamber of Commerce has organized several visits to Montenegro by PRC business delegations.¹⁹ Chinese cultural outreach to Montenegro is another tool to support PRC image-building. This is another way for the PRC to win Montenegrins' hearts and minds.

All three universities in Montenegro have built partnerships with PRC universities.

Universities in Montenegro are also developing significant institutional relationships with their PRC counterparts;²⁰ all three universities (one public and two private) in Montenegro have built partnerships with PRC universities.²¹ Since 2016, the PRC has awarded 63 scholarships to Montenegrin students through the Montenegrin Ministry of Education.²²

A Confucius Institute was established at the University of Montenegro (the country's public university) in 2015. Since then, the Institute has opened 48 Chinese language classrooms throughout Montenegro, with approximately 400 students having attended classes. The University of Donja Gorica hosts guest lecturers from the PRC, runs Master's degree courses on the PRC, and has a Chinese-language version of its website.²³

At first glance, there is nothing ostensibly wrong with these activities. In fact, they resemble the track-2 diplomacy efforts of liberal democracies.²⁴ However, there are two problems with this comparison. First, liberal democracies have education systems that are typically free of egregious government interference. The PRC's centralized approach to education does not allow for schooling without government input.²⁵ Second, as mentioned above, the nature of the CCP-PRC party-state leaves track-2 diplomacy efforts open to abuse as a means of foreign authoritarian influence. Thus, PRC-organized track-2 diplomacy can come off as insincere: there is little space for questioning ideology and governance, especially when it comes to the party's core interests.

There are plenty of examples of the PRC strangling freedom of speech at home while using universities abroad to rewrite its historic and contemporary actions.²⁶ Montenegro is no exception. In an interview for this report, Luo Chun Xia, one of the directors of the Confucius Institute at the University of Montenegro, stated that Confucian values, promoted by the Confucius Institutes, reflect both Chinese and global values.²⁷

19 Montenegrin Chamber of Commerce, international cooperation, <https://www.privrednakomora.me/kategorije-clanaka/medunarodna-saradnja?datum%5Bvalue%5D&page=3>.

20 Interview with a representative of the Bosniak Party/Albanian Coalition.

21 The University of Donja Gorica set up exchanges with universities in the PRC to provide new courses of study for its students. See more at: "Cooperation with China [Saradnja Sa Kinom]." Univerzitet Donja Gorica. <https://www.udg.edu.me/saradnja-sa-kinom>; University of Montenegro (public university) in 2018 established multi-year cooperation with PRC engaging in 13 projects. Please see more at: "14 confirmed bilateral projects with the People's Republic of China [Dogovoreno 14 bilateralnih projekata sa Narodnom Republikom Kinom]." Univerzitet Crne Gore, 9 November 2018, <https://www.ucg.ac.me/objava/blog/1041/objava/33303-dogovoreno-14-bilateralnih-projekata-sa-narodnom-republikom-kinom>; On similar engagement between Mediterranean University see at "Virtual '16 + 1 Cooperation.'" Technology Transfer Centre (Vttc), pp. 3, http://vttc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MONTENEGRO_FactSheet.pdf.

22 "PRC Government Scholarships for the Academic Year 2022/2023 [Stipendije Vlade NR Kine za akademsku 2022/2023. Godinu]." Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, 25 November 2021, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/stipendije-vlade-nr-kine-za-akademsku-2022-2023-godinu>.

23 "Cooperation with China [Saradnja Sa Kinom]."

24 Diamond and McDonald. Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace.

25 PRC-affiliated and -backed research institutions are fundamentally different from universities in liberal democracies, because they operate within a repressive party-state that provides no safeguards for academic freedom. The Transnational Law Institute, which is affiliated with King's College in London, shows that restrictions on research and teaching at PRC-based universities have become more and more severe. PRC-based universities have also tightened control over Chinese scholars and students abroad, partly by incentivizing them to report on each other and on foreign academics critical of the PRC. This is in line with the party-state's efforts to align its international activities with its external propaganda. Please see more on this topic at: Pils, Eva and Eva Seiwert. "Academic freedom, globalised scholarship and the rise of authoritarian China." Transnational Law Institute, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/tli/academic-freedom-globalised-scholarship-and-the-rise-of-authoritarian-china>.

26 See, for example, Courea, Eleni. "China hawks seek to ban Confucius Institutes from Britain." Politico, 9 June 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uks-china-hawks-seek-to-ban-confucius-institutes-from-britain/>; also see stories about scrutiny of Confucius Institutes in several Western countries, including Germany. In 2021, Germany's then-education minister Anja Karliczek warned that Beijing exercised "high-level influence" on public life. This came after claims that the PRC consul general in Dusseldorf forced two local Confucius Institutes to cancel a talk by two German journalists who had written a book about PRC President Xi Jinping, in: Moody, Oliver. "German universities warned Xi is 'beyond discussion.'" The Times, 31 October 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/universities-warned-xi-is-beyond-discussion-s9tz860pc>.

27 Interview with Luo Chun Xia, Director of the Confucius Institute in the University of Montenegro, held August 15, 2022.

But this commitment to discussing Chinese values leaves certain topics off-limits: when asked if the Uyghurs or Tibetans are part of Confucius Institute programming, Luo said that those political issues and views were not part of the institute's mission.

Russian Authoritarian Influence on Montenegro

Russia's overall influence in Montenegro echoes its ambition to counter Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkans as part of its geostrategic conflict against the West. Russia's influence in Montenegro has evolved from mainly economic engagement to direct political interference, aggressive disinformation campaigns, and on-the-ground meddling in the internal security and defense sector. The analysis that follows will address Russia's foreign authoritarian influence in the diplomatic, economic, information, and defense sectors.

Diplomatic and Political Influence

Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Turn

Initially, Russian diplomacy toward Montenegro was designed to support economic cooperation, especially in tourism and real estate.²⁸ Russia also supported some early economic deals concluded before Montenegro's 2006 independence.²⁹ At that time, concern about Russian influence was low, but that changed after Montenegro started to openly seek further Euro-Atlantic integration.³⁰

After Montenegro's 2008 decision to seek EU membership, and prior to its 2017 NATO accession, Moscow's diplomatic influence shifted to a multilayer influence campaign against the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.³¹ In December 2008, when Montenegro submitted a formal application for EU membership,³² and in December 2009, when the country granted a NATO membership action plan,³³ Moscow issued no public objections.³⁴ Only after 2013 did Russia start treating NATO as openly hostile and Montenegro's prospective membership as a problem. Russia's changing perception of its interests in Montenegro were just one expression of a changing Russian relationship with Europe at large. In response to Ukraine's 2013/14 Euromaidan revolution, Russia began to describe Ukraine's closer association with the EU and the expansion of NATO membership to countries like Montenegro as an imminent threat to Russia's interests and national security. Before this, Russia did not consider Montenegro's prospective NATO membership a threat. Building on the corruption and captivity of the local political elite, Russia deployed political and diplomatic influence to deter Montenegro from its Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

Russian Diplomatic Pressure

Beginning in 2013, high-level Russian diplomats began to criticize Montenegro's evident Euro-Atlantic path. Russia's then-Ambassador in Podgorica, Yakov Gerasimov, warned that Russia would reconsider its traditionally warm relations with Montenegro if it joined NATO.³⁵

28 Interview with Dr. Adnan Prekic, historian.

29 Some of these deals had complicated details that bear the hallmark of money laundering or tax evasion schemes. For example, on 1 December 2005, the Aluminum Plant Podgorica, known as KAP, was privatized, with 65 percent of shares sold to Salomon Enterprises Limited (later renamed CEAC – Central European Aluminum Company). CEAC, based in Cyprus, bought KAP for €48.5 million and obligations to invest over €50 million in a modernization and environmental upgrade. Oleg Deripaska and then-Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, conducted the negotiations over the sale. See more about this in MacDonald, Neil. "Oligarch's battle clouds an economy." *Financial Times*, 17 October 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/e20134b6-9bcf-11dd-ae76-000077b07658>.

30 Ibid.

31 Although it is hard to ascertain, precisely, when this evolution started, sources of political influence may be tracked back to 2005 when the Kremlin endorsed the deal for the KAP aluminum factory and bauxite mine. Russia sent two Russian officials (the Speaker of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov, and the then-Emergency Situations Minister, Sergei Shoigu) to visit the factory. See more about this in Krcic, Esad. "Montenegrin Aluminum Plant's Woes Cast Geopolitical Shadow." *Radio Free Europe*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-aluminum-plant/25046657.html>; For more on orchestrated interference involving Serbian Orthodox Church and exploiting identity issues, including the vocal anti-NATO movement (led by Dragoslav Vukicevic the president of the Montenegro section of volunteers and veterans) around 2014, please see: Djuranovic, Draško. "When Moscow Calls [Kad Moskva pozove]." *Portal Analitika*, 16 April 2014, <http://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/142605/kad-moskva-pozove>.

32 Kajosevic, Samir. "Montenegro Targets 2025 to be Ready for EU Accession", *BalkanInsight*, 26 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/26/montenegro-targets-2025-to-be-ready-for-eu-accession/>.

33 "Membership Action Plan (MAP)." NATO, 14 May 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm.

34 Conley, Heather A., James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov. "The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe" Center for Strategic and International Studies/Rowman & Littlefield, Washington, DC/Lanham, MD, October 2016.

35 Tomovic, Dusica. "NEWS Russian Diplomat's 'Monkey' Jibe Angers Montenegro" *BalkanInsight*, 29 November 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/11/29/russian-diplomat-s-monkey-jibe-angers-montenegro/>.

During a 2013 lecture to Serbian students, Russia's Ambassador to Serbia, Alexendar Chepurin, described Montenegro's NATO ambitions as "monkey business."³⁶ Russia's diplomatic tone became openly aggressive after Montenegro joined the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia following the invasion and occupation of Crimea. The Russian Ambassador to Montenegro at the time, Andrej Nesterenko, said "the Montenegrin choice will have an appropriate place in the common history of the two countries," and "Montenegro, regardless of what is the policy of the European Union, should avoid offending Russia."³⁷ In September 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned Montenegro that, "The expansion of NATO to the former Yugoslav republics is an irresponsible policy and we in Moscow see it as a provocation,"³⁸ despite the fact that former Yugoslav states Slovenia and Croatia had already joined NATO in 2003 and 2009, respectively, without apparent Russian complaint. The tone of the official statements sharpened as Montenegro's NATO membership became inevitable. Some of these statements were even direct threats, such as Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Rogozin's ominous warning that "Montenegro will regret its decision to join NATO."³⁹

2016 Coup Attempt

The most overt case of Russian political interference in Montenegro was the apparent coup attempt scheduled for election night on October 16, 2016. Nationals of Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia apparently planned to overthrow the Montenegrin government and kill then-PM Milo Djukanovic to sow chaos and prevent Montenegro's NATO membership. The day before election day, Montenegro's state security disrupted the plot, arresting a former Serbian gendarmerie commander and 19 others. Two of those arrested were later identified as officers in Russia's military intelligence agency, including one who had in 2014 been declared persona non grata and expelled from Poland due to his espionage activity there.⁴⁰

In October 2016, nationals of Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia apparently planned to overthrow the Montenegrin government and kill then-PM Milo Djukanovic to sow chaos and prevent Montenegro's NATO membership.

Also among those who were indicted for alleged involvement with the coup attempt were Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, two leaders of Montenegro's right-wing, pro-Russia, and pro-Serbia alliance of political parties, the Democratic Front (DF), which was then in opposition. Mandic, Knezevic, and their supporters decried their trial and that of eleven other alleged co-conspirators as politically motivated.⁴¹ In February 2021, the Court of Appeals of Montenegro annulled the 2019 convictions of the thirteen conspirators due to "significant violations of the provisions of the criminal procedure."⁴² Mandic and Knezevic continue to be active in Montenegro's politics, with Mandic even running for President in March 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Nesterenko: Sanctions by Montenegro Will Be Part of [our] Common History [Nesterenko: Sankcije Crne Gore bice dio zajednicke istorije]." Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, 13 May 2014, <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=112063>.

³⁸ Reuters, "NATO's Planned Balkan Expansion a 'Provocation': Russia's Lavrov." Reuters, 29 September 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-iduskcn0ho11w20140929>.

³⁹ From Sergei Lavrov, who stated in December 2016 for the Russian news agency Sputnik that Montenegro "betrayed Russia," - see: "Are We Supposed to Betray Ourselves in Order to Avoid Betraying Russia?" Portal CDM, 15 December 2016, <https://www.cdm.me/english/treballi-da-izdamo-sebe-da-ne-bi-izdali-rusiju-2/>.

⁴⁰ Grozev, Christo. "Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang." Bellingcat, 25 March 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>; "Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked." Bellingcat, 22 November 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/22/second-gru-officer-indicted-montenegro-coup-unmasked/>.

⁴¹ Tomovic, Dusica. "Montenegro Court Sentences 13 in 'Coup' Case." BalkanInsight, 9 May 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/09/montenegro-court-sentences-13-in-coup-case/>.

⁴² Djokic, Svetlana. "'Coup d'état' verdict quashed: Significant violations of criminal procedure provisions committed [Ukinuta presuda za 'državni udar': Počinjene bitne povrede odredaba krivcnog postupka]." Vijesti Online, 5 February 2021, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/509713/ukinuta-presuda-za-drzavni-udar>

As with most intelligence operations, deniability was key for the apparent coup attempt. There is clear evidence that Russian military intelligence personnel were involved, but Russia's government and Russia-aligned groups have variously described the coup attempt as a "false flag" operation,⁴³ apologized for it as a "rogue operation" that happened to include some Russians,⁴⁴ or otherwise denied involvement.⁴⁵ Additional circumstantial evidence in open sources support accusations of the involvement of Russia's government at the highest levels, and Western officials have repeatedly expressed their confidence in that conclusion.⁴⁶

The Orthodox Church

Russia has been able to exploit the key religious division in Montenegro, that between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), to further its political and diplomatic influence. The MOC was established in the 1990s in parallel with efforts toward Montenegro's political independence from its federated union with Serbia; it recognizes itself as a continuation of the historic Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The SOC does not recognize the MOC's legitimacy, nor does the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which is considered the first among equals in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.⁴⁷ The dispute between the MOC and SOC was largely frozen, with occasional disputes over property and access to it, until 2019, when Montenegro's then-governing coalition introduced a new law on religious property.

Even before that 2019 law, Russia already saw the mobilization of the Orthodox Church as an important weapon in its effort to resuscitate pan-Slavism and unite the Slavic world under Russian patronage.⁴⁸ This would support the Kremlin's narrative that Russian President Vladimir Putin is the true "defender of the faith," and all that is culturally traditional and conservative.⁴⁹

This Kremlin narrative was activated in Montenegro in 2019, when the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), led by Djukanovic, announced its intention to "review" the ownership of church properties and "restore" the MOC.⁵⁰ In late 2019, the DPS-led government of Montenegro passed a bill that transferred ownership of Orthodox Church properties dating from 1918 and before from the ownership of the SOC to the Montenegrin state.⁵¹ SOC leadership, clerics, and supporters protested this decision. The SOC mobilized citizens who were angered by what they perceived as an offensive against the Orthodox church by the Djukanovic government, as well as people dissatisfied with Djukanovic's government, which they saw as autocratic.⁵² Protests both for and against the SOC ensued on and off over the next three years; at least one patriotic-nationalist (that is, the side generally opposed to the SOC) rally allegedly gathered up to 65,000 people, or over 10 percent of the country's population.⁵³ Vast amounts of fake news fomented tensions further. According to the European External Action Service, "[t]he sources of the false reporting included media which were based in Serbia (some of them state-owned), Russian owned in Serbian language media (Sputnik) and some Montenegro based news portals."⁵⁴ Russian diplomats stoked the flames in public statements and on social media.

43 "Montenegro jails 'Russian coup plot' leaders." BBC, 9 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48212435>.

44 Walker, Shaun. "Alleged Russian spies sentenced to jail over Montenegro 'coup plot'." The Guardian, 9 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/09/montenegro-convicts-pro-russia-politicians-of-coup-plot>.

45 "Kremlin rejects claims Russia had role in Montenegro coup plot." The Guardian, 20 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/20/russian-state-bodies-attempted-a-coup-in-montenegro-says-prosecutor>.

46 Borrelli, Silvia Sciorilli. "Boris Johnson: Russia behind coup plot, assassination attempt in Montenegro." Politico, 12 March 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-russia-behind-coup-plot-assassination-attempt-in-montenegro/>.

47 "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: The Phanar will never recognize an autocephalous Church in Montenegro." Orthodox Times, 30 December 2019, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-the-phanar-will-never-recognize-an-autocephalous-church-in-montenegro/>.

48 Conley, Heather and Matthew Melino. "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics," Center for Security and International Studies, 14 May 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

49 Ibid.

50 "Djukanovic Announced Verification of Ownership of Church Buildings and Reconstruction of CPC! [DJUKANOVIC NAJAVIO PROVJERU VLASNISTVA CRKVENIH OBJEKATA I OBNOVU CPC!]." Mondo.ME, 30 November 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200628185035/https://mondo.me/info/Crna-gora/a791849/Osmi-kongres-DPS-a-FOTO-VIDEO.html>.

51 "Law on Freedom of Religion Enters Into Force in Montenegro [U Crnoj Gori stupio na snagu Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovijesti]." Radio Free Europe, 8 January 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200219210848/https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30364946.html>.

52 "Blessed by Amfilohije, unwanted in Montenegro."

53 "Montenegro celebrates Independence Day! 65,000 citizens from Ivan's bed said - I LOVE MY COUNTRY [Crna Gora slavi Dan nezavisnosti! 65 000 gradjana sa Ivanovih korita porucilo - VOLIM ZEMlju MOJU]." Aktuelno, 21 May 2021, <https://www.aktuelno.me/crna-gora/crna-gora-slavi-dan-nezavisnosti-hiljade-gradjana-sa-ivanovih-korita-porucilo-volim-zemlju-mojul/>.

54 "Disinformation sharpened tensions between Serbia and Montenegro." EUvsDisinfo, 17 February 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-sharpened-tensions-between-serbia-and-montenegro/>.

Ultimately Djukanovic and the DPS's bill contributed to the DPS's fall from power in the 2020 elections. The coalition that came to power after DPS rolled back the changes in property ownership and signed a new agreement with the SOC in August 2022. This agreement too proved to be controversial, and the PM who signed the agreement was immediately ousted in a no-confidence vote.⁵⁶ Montenegro's coalition politics have been unstable since the 2020 election and the uneasy relationship between the government and the SOC contributes to that instability whenever its unresolved issues flare up. Kremlin interference in this relationship exacerbates the issue.

Russian financial support to the SOC can be traced via key Russian ultra-nationalist businessmen with close political and financial ties to the Kremlin. In Montenegro, Russian businessman Konstantin Valeryevich Malofeev was one such conduit of political influence. Even before the 2016 coup attempt Malofeev was already under travel sanctions in Montenegro (and the EU and U.S.) due to his activities against Ukraine.

Nonetheless, Malofeev raised his profile in Montenegro in April 2015 by financially supporting and sponsoring the bringing of holy fire to Cetinje Monastery, the seat of the SOC in Montenegro.⁵⁷ The Metropolitan Bishop of the SOC in Montenegro blessed Malofeev for his gift, and the following year began negotiations to sell a local TV station, owned by the church, to Malofeev.⁵⁸ Leaked emails from Malofeev's associates demonstrate that they believed he was responsible for the 2016 failed coup attempt, and presumably acting in coordination with the Kremlin.⁵⁹ Malofeev is an example of Russia's approach to Montenegro and the region: he personally serves as a nexus between soft power (pan-Slavism, Orthodox solidarity, and a reactionary rejection of "Western" values, like tolerance of LGBT people), and the hard power of organized crime, oligarchy, information manipulation, and coup attempts.

Russia and Political Parties

Since Montenegro's accession to NATO, Moscow's diplomacy, aided by local parties, the media, and NGOs, has intensified its campaign targeting the divisions among citizens and expanding its influence by promoting itself as a protector of Slavs and Orthodoxy.⁶⁰ At the same time, through political and diplomatic influence coordinated with an information manipulation campaign, Russia is weakening the pillars of Montenegrin statehood and identity, using propaganda, historical revisionism, and misinformation that aim to discredit NATO and the West. Above all, however, Russia has exploited Montenegrins' discontent with the country's endemic corruption, clientelism, and decades of political capture of state institutions by the DPS and its leader, Milo Djukanovic.⁶¹

Russia has exploited Montenegrins' discontent with the country's endemic corruption, clientelism, and decades of political capture of state institutions by the DPS and its leader, Milo Djukanovic.

55 Russian Embassy in Montenegro [Посольство России в Черногории / Ambasada Rusije u Crnoj Gori], Facebook, 31 December 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/AmbRusME/photos/a.1537600986480707/2503451416562321/>.

56 "Montenegro's Government Falls Over Controversial Pact With Serbian Orthodox Church." Radio Free Europe, 20 August 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-government-no-confidence-serbian-orthodox-church/31996863.html>.

57 Ibid.

58 "Russian tycoon buys television from Amfilohije? [Ruski tajkun kupuje televiziju od Amfilohija?]" Mondo, 3 May 2016, <https://mondo.rs/Info/EX-YU/a899366/Ruski-tajkun-kupuje-televiziju-od-Amfilohija.html>.

59 Grozev, Christo. "Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang." Bellingcat, 25 March 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>.

60 Interview with Representative of the Democratic Party of Socialists.

61 Djukanovic had been in power virtually uninterruptedly as either the country's prime minister or president, all in addition to being the leader of DPS. He is notorious for his ties to organized crime to the point where he has often been accused of operating Montenegro like a "mafia state." See Sisti, Leo. "The Montenegro connection." The Center of Public Integrity, 2 June 2009, <https://publicintegrity.org/health/the-montenegro-connection/>.

Until it dissolved in May 2023, the DF, an alliance of generally pro-Russia and pro-Serbia political parties whose membership is mainly Montenegrin citizens who are ethnic Serbs, was the main supporter of Russian activities. In February 2016, leaders of the then-opposition Democratic People's Party (DNP, one of the constituent parties of the DF alliance), Milan Knezevic and Andrija Mandic traveled to Moscow. According to Montenegrin media, they met with a senior official of the United Russia Party, Sergey Zheleznyak, and the Vice President of the Russian parliament Pyotr Tolstoy.⁶² With his impeccable French and experience in diplomacy, Tolstoy is often seen as the refined face of the Russian regime, effectively providing a facade of sophistication and credibility. His close ties with several influential Western politicians have further cemented this perception, often leading them to overlook the more controversial aspects of the regime and view it through the cultured and polished lens Tolstoy presents. This is precisely the role that he played when serving as an apparent interlocutor with Knezevic and Mandic.

Just a few months later, in May, with the blessing of the Metropolitan Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, the DNP signed the "Lovcen Declaration" with the United Russia party. The DNP specified the necessity of improving relations between Montenegro and Russia, creating a military alliance of neutral states, and holding a referendum on NATO membership.⁶³

After the elections in August 2020, the DF became the largest bloc in the new slim majority. This new majority formed the first ever governing coalition in Montenegro's multi-party history that did not include Djukanovic or the DPS. Despite its new role in parliament, the DF was unable to achieve its previously proclaimed foreign policy goals such as revoking Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo's independence, reversing the country's NATO membership, and supporting a bloc of militarily neutral countries in southeast Europe.

Economic Influence

Russia's principal economic interests in Montenegro lie in tourism and real estate. Russia has used corrupt and opaque practices to weaponize its investments in some sectors, particularly services and metallurgy. Russian tourism and real estate investment represent significant economic opportunities for Montenegro. While real estate has provided close to €25 million in sales taxes since 2006 (an estimated 70,000 properties in the country belong to Russian owners) and tourism represents 20 percent of Montenegro's gross domestic product, this also presents a potential vulnerability through an overreliance on Russian economic fortunes. Since 2015, Russians have accounted for the largest number of tourist trips to Montenegro,⁶⁴ though the number of Russian tourists dropped precipitously after Montenegro's 2017 NATO accession. Some of this decline, however, is due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aluminum Plant Podgorica (Uniprom KAP),⁶⁵ is an early example of Russia's malign influence in Montenegro's economy. Under KAP's 2005 privatization agreement, 65.4 percent of its shares were sold to Salomon Enterprises Limited (later renamed CEAC – Central European Aluminum Company), a company ultimately owned by Oleg Deripaska, a Russian billionaire businessman and aluminum magnate with close connections to the Kremlin, for €48.5 million and obligations to invest over €50 million to support modernization and environmental upgrades to the plant. The sale was negotiated directly between Deripaska and then-Prime Minister Djukanovic.⁶⁶ The deal was heartily endorsed by the Kremlin and by top Russian officials such as then-Duma speaker Gryzlov and then-Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, who visited the plant.

62 "Mandic: Staged, Scandalous State Coup Organized by Djukanovic Deepens the Crisis in Montenegro [Mandic: Iscenirani, skandalozni drzavni udar u organizaciji Djukanovica produbio krizu u CG]." Portal Vijesti, 12 December 2016, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/103425/mandic-iscenirani-skandalozni-drzavni-udar-u-organizaciji-jukanovica-produbio-krizu-u-cg>.

63 "DNP and United Russia signed the Lovcen Declaration [DNP i Jedinstvena Rusija potpisale Lovcensku deklaraciju]." Kodex, 6 May 2016, <http://www.dnpcg.me/uz-blagoslov-mitropolita-amfilohija-potpisana-lovcenska-deklaracija/>.

64 Jelusic, Predrag. "Tourism accounts for a fifth of Montenegro's GDP, accounting for more than half of Montenegro's exports [Turizam daje petinu BDP-a icini vise od polovine izvoza Crne Gore]." Portal Analitika, 27 September 2015, <http://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/203071/predrag-jelusic-turizamdaje-petinu-bdp-a-i-cini-vise-od-polovine-izvoza-crne-gore>.

65 Krcisi, Esad. "Montenegrin Aluminum Plant's Woes Cast Geopolitical Shadow," Radio Free Europe, 15 July 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-aluminum-plant/25046657.html>.

66 MacDonald, Neil. "Oligarch's battle clouds an economy." Financial Times, 17 October 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/e20134b6-9bcf-11dd-ae76-000077b07658>.

This deal was seen, at the time, as a promising investment, but it turned sour. The partnership between Montenegro and CEAC collapsed as the government alleged that CEAC and Deripaska exerted political pressure to extend key electricity subsidies to the plant. As the plant employed nearly 5,000 Montenegrins and contributed to approximately 14% of the country's GDP at the time, the government was in a weak position to negotiate. Some analysts even alleged this was an attempt by Moscow to discipline Podgorica for its decision to bolster ties with the West.⁶⁷

Information Influence

Russian information and disinformation operations are part of its overall campaign against the West and deeper Euro-Atlantic integration in the WB. Russia builds its disinformation on pan-Slavic rhetoric, in which Russia defends its Slavic brethren from the West. This narrative creates a powerful appeal based on a common Slavic identity and Orthodox culture.⁶⁸ Moscow takes advantage of pliant Serbian media to spread its narratives in the region, relying on disinformation particularly after the 2014 sanctions following Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine limited the Kremlin's financial resources and capability.⁶⁹

[Russia's] disinformation campaign aimed to prepare the ground for a change of power, distract public attention at the critical moment, and then provide obfuscation to cover the tracks of Russia's military intelligence agency.

Disinformation was a key part of the 2016 coup attempt. Analysis by NATO and the U.S. Department of Defense shows that the coup attempt was accompanied by a disinformation campaign that aimed to prepare the ground for a change of power, distract public attention at the critical moment, and then provide obfuscation to cover the tracks of Russia's military intelligence agency.⁷⁰ Russian political activist Leonid Reshetnikov, who allegedly supported the attempted coup, was part of the disinformation campaign. Reshetnikov was previously a high-ranking officer in Russia's foreign intelligence service and was the head of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISS) from its opening in 2013 through November 2016 – shortly after the apparent coup attempt in Montenegro.

During his tenure, Reshetnikov regularly appeared on Tsargrad TV, a Russian channel owned by Konstantin Malofeev (mentioned above). In that capacity he made overt threats toward Montenegro (and other countries), promoting narratives that would, when needed, justify a Russian intervention in the country.⁷¹ Montenegrin officials described Reshetnikov's activity as "preparing the ground" for the coup attempt.⁷²

Reshetnikov departed RISS suddenly, apparently leaving in early November 2016; his removal from office was only acknowledged in January 2017. After Reshetnikov's sudden departure, he joined Tsargrad TV and began being published on the website of Katehon, a "Moscow-based quasi-think-tank that is a proliferator of virulent anti-Western disinformation and propaganda [...] led by individuals with clear links to the Russian state and the Russian intelligence services."⁷³

67 See interview with analyst Blagoje Grahovac in Esad, "Montenegrin Aluminum Plant's Woes Cast Geopolitical Shadow."

68 Interview with Petar Komnienic, journalist, TV Vijesti.

69 Interview with Radoje Cerovic, psychologist and communicologist.

70 Lekic, Slobodan. "First NATO counter-hybrid warfare team to deploy to Montenegro." Stars and Stripes, 9 November 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/first-nato-counter-hybrid-warfare-team-to-deploy-to-montenegro-1.606562>.

71 In a clip on the program "Russian Response" [Russkiy otvet], Reshetnikov appeared with the chyron "War in Montenegro?" and warned "There could even be bloodshed in Montenegro." Original video no longer available; quoted in Sekulovic, Aleksandra. "On the line of fire." Antidot, 1 April 2017, <https://www.anti.media/en/istrazivanje/files/r88/>.

72 Nechepurenko, Ivan. "Kremlin Group Employing Ex-Spies Is Viewed Abroad as Propaganda Mill." The New York Times, 20 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/world/europe/putin-trump-election-kremlin.html>.

73 U.S. Department of State. "GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem." August 2020, pp. 13, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf.

In this role, Reshetnikov and allies continued to push anti-NATO and anti-Western disinformation, some of which was re-reported within Montenegrin and regional media.⁷⁴

The integrity of Montenegro's information space adds another challenge. Montenegrin media is mostly divided across political lines, so most news stories have a partisan slant. Years of government-controlled media have left citizens suspicious about the impartiality of the news.⁷⁵ At the same time, the shift to online news and information sources has not been matched by a parallel focus on building media and information literacy. Although there is no direct Russian media ownership, the pertinence and efficiency of pro-Kremlin propaganda is pervasive; media like IN4S and Borba spread pro-Kremlin narratives. Their content is full of sensationalism and misinformation.⁷⁶

Influence in the Defense and Security Sector

In 2013, Russia made a request to the Montenegrin government about using the Montenegrin ports of Bar and Kotor for the transit and maintenance of Russian naval ships. When rumors of this request first surfaced, Russia's Ambassador in Podgorica stated that the access request was specifically about humanitarian missions.

US officials confirmed that Montenegro had received and rejected Russia's 2013 bid for a naval base.

But documents obtained by Pobjeda, a Montenegrin newspaper, suggest there were no such limits to this request, and the request was more akin to a permanent naval base; later, US officials confirmed that Montenegro had received and rejected Russia's bid for a naval base.⁷⁷

Deep institutional ties between Montenegro and Russia's security apparatus contributed to delays in Montenegro's NATO membership. In July 2014, the Associated Press reported statements from an anonymous NATO official alleging that "between 25 and 50" Montenegrin intelligence agents had links to Russia.⁷⁸ The publication of these anonymous allegations caused a stir in Montenegro,⁷⁹ and may have contributed to an accelerated purge and reform of the country's intelligence service. By September 2016, US officials were satisfied that these reforms had appropriately mitigated Russia's influence in Montenegro's intelligence service, and they endorsed the country's accession to NATO.⁸⁰

Montenegro's membership in NATO was a long-established goal of its foreign policy under Djukanovic and the DPS. However, the prospect of NATO membership was controversial in Montenegrin public opinion. Polls from 2009 through 2017 show a mostly-even split of public opinion, with opposition to membership reaching as high as 63 percent in March 2013⁸¹ and support for membership reaching as high as 56 percent in October 2015 (in both cases excluding undecided respondents).⁸²

74 This included a prominent fake news story about NATO KFOR soldiers using satanic symbols, which originated on a Montenegrin website (in4s.net) and was later picked up by larger portals and media such as Vecerni Novosti and Sputnik Serbia, eventually making the rounds on a wide network; see Lelic, "First NATO counter-hybrid warfare team to deploy to Montenegro."

75 IRI's January-February 2022 Western Balkans regional poll showed that 28 percent of respondents in Montenegro did not consider any media outlets to be trustworthy for political information; see "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey | January-February 2022." International Republican Institute, 29 June 2022, pp. 192, <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>.

76 See for example: "Focus on Montenegro." Globsec Vulnerability Index, <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/montenegro.html#chapter-1>.

77 "Officials dismiss talk of Russian military base in Montenegro." Radio Free Europe, 10 February 2015, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/officials-squash-talk-of-russian-military-base-in-montenegro/26839898.html>; United States Senate. "NATO Expansion: Examining the Accession of Montenegro (S. Hrg. 114-712)." U.S. Government Publishing Office, 14 September 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg27080/html/CHRG-114shrg27080.htm>.

78 Dahlburg, John-Thor. "NATO signals no new members for the present." Associated Press, 5 July 2014, <https://apnews.com/article/433b43014991442ba09b5001c687f4b1>.

79 "Montenegro, Russia and NATO: An Issue of Double Agents?" Radio Free Europe, 21 July 2014, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/montenegro-russia-and-nato-an-issue-of-double-agents/25464453.html>.

80 United States Senate. "NATO Expansion: Examining the Accession of Montenegro (S. Hrg. 114-712)." <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg27080/html/CHRG-114shrg27080.htm>.

81 "Public Opinion: June 2016 [Politicko Javno Mnjenje]." Cedom, June 2016, pp. 9, <http://www.cedem.me/programi/istrazivanja/politicko-javno-mnjenje/send/29-politicko-javno-mnjenje/1818-politicko-javno-mnjenje-jun-2016>.

82 "Ipsos: 56% of citizens for NATO membership." CDM, 7 November 2015, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/ipsos-za-uclanjenje-u-nato-56-odsto-gradana/>

83 <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-joins-nato-russia-outraged/28529932.html>.

Montenegrins' skepticism of NATO membership is driven both by factors internal to Montenegro such as perceptions of identity and the memory of NATO's role in the 1999 bombing campaign to end the Kosovo war, and by Russia's exploitation of these factors.⁸³

The alliance made a formal invitation to Montenegro in December 2015, and both Montenegro and NATO countries began preparing for its membership. The apparent coup attempt of October 2016, described in an earlier section of this report, was probably a last-ditch Russian effort to prevent Montenegro's membership in NATO. After that effort failed, Montenegro formally joined the alliance in June 2017.⁸⁴

There has been no significant cooperation between Montenegro and Russia on defense and security questions since Montenegro's NATO accession. Montenegro and Russia's diplomatic relationship deteriorated further after March 28, 2018, when Montenegro expelled a Russian diplomat in solidarity with its NATO ally the United Kingdom (UK) over Russia's use of chemical weapons to poison Sergei and Yulia Skripal on British territory.⁸⁵ When Russia expanded its war in Ukraine in 2022, Montenegro joined in EU sanctions against Russia and suspended the broadcasting of Russian state-owned media. Moreover, the current government of Montenegro has twice expelled Russian diplomats since February 2022.⁸⁶ In response, Russia declared Montenegro a hostile country.⁸⁷

Potential Synergy between PRC and Russian Influence

There is little to no evidence of direct synergy between PRC and Russian influence in Montenegro. However, signs of overlap and parallel efforts and goals between the PRC's and Russia's instruments, channels, and networks of influence in Montenegro, particularly in the information sector, began to emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Influential Serbian media in Montenegro promoted propaganda that furthered official Russian and PRC viewpoints.

Pro-Russian actors, especially in the Serbian media, have aided the PRC's information influence. Pro-Serbian media with the capability of translating Russian propaganda into Serbian pivoted to promote narratives of the PRC's global and regional leadership during the pandemic. These media outlets promoted the PRC's COVID-19 response and criticized what they characterized as the EU's slow response.⁸⁸ Influential Serbian media in Montenegro promoted propaganda that furthered official Russian and PRC viewpoints and extolled cooperation between the two states, hailing them as a superior alternative to the liberal international order and democracy.⁸⁹ These examples show the repurposing of information influence tools from attempting to achieve a pro-Russia goal to aiming for a pro-PRC goal; however, this is not necessarily evidence of coordination between Russia and the PRC in Montenegro or the region.

84 Kajosevic, Samir. "Montenegro 'Coup Plotter' Hiding in Serbian Embassy Could Go Free," *BalkanInsight*, 9 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/09/montenegro-coup-plotter-hiding-in-serbian-embassy-could-go-free/>. Kajosevic, Samir. "Montenegro 'Coup Plotter' Hiding in Serbian Embassy Could Go Free," *BalkanInsight*, 9 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/09/montenegro-coup-plotter-hiding-in-serbian-embassy-could-go-free/>.

85 Interview with Dr. Savo Kentera, President of the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro.

86 "Montenegro expels four Russian diplomats report." *Reuters*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/montenegro-expels-four-russian-diplomats-report-2022-04-07/>.

87 Kajosevic, Samir. "Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia to 'Enemy' List." *BalkanInsight*, 7 March 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/>.

88 Walker, Shaun. "Coronavirus diplomacy: how Russia, China and EU vie to win over Serbia." *The Guardian*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-diplomacy-how-russia-china-and-eu-vie-to-win-over-serbia>.

89 A Serbian based portal, *Informer*, is notorious in the region for spreading such news. See, for example, "While US is spreading Chaos around the World, the relationship between China and Russia is growing! [Dok Amerika Siri Haos Po Svetu Odnos Rusije i Kine ce i dalje jacati!]" *Informer*, 2 January 2021, <https://informer.rs/planeta/vesti/575827/amerika-rusija-kina-odnos-saradnja-djinpung-vladimir-putin-dzo-bajden>.

90 See more in Davidson, Helen. "How close are China and Russia and where does Beijing stand on Ukraine?" *The Guardian*, 16 March 2022, <https://www>.

The Future of Russia-PRC Relations and its Impact on Montenegro

Two potential scenarios exist for the confluence of PRC and Russian influence in Montenegro. First, the relationship between Russia and the PRC could transform from one characterized by parallel efforts to one characterized by balancing against one another. The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and subsequent ostracization of Russia could eventually prompt the PRC to reconsider its ties to Russia as the PRC seeks stronger economic and diplomatic ties with Europe. Additionally, the PRC has called for maximum restraint in Ukraine and for a peaceful solution with France and German leadership. This potential break between the PRC and Russia could lead to a reduction of foreign authoritarian influence on Montenegro, allowing for continued democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration.⁹⁰ After over a year of Russia's expanded war in Ukraine, however, this possibility seems increasingly fleeting.

The second potential scenario is that Russian and PRC objectives in Montenegro converge and further undermine the country's prospects for democratic governance and Euro-Atlantic integration. Xi and Putin's February 4, 2022, joint statement described the bonds between the two countries as having "no limits" and declared there were "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." It called on the West to "abandon the ideologized approaches of the Cold War" and expressed support for each other's stance on Ukraine and Taiwan.⁹¹ Moreover, PRC-affiliated media has expressed support for Russia against NATO. For example, Liu Xin, a prominent figure from PRC state media outlet China Global Television tweeted "Can you help me fight your friend so that I can concentrate on fighting you later?" sarcastically blowing off calls for the PRC to side with Ukraine or stay neutral in the face of Russia's full-scale war.⁹² Confluence between Russia's long-running interest in the WB and the PRC's growing economic engagement in the region will significantly impact Montenegro. Compounding authoritarian influence in Montenegro could deepen divides over the country's future. If not properly addressed, disinformation and propaganda, along with complex internal political dynamics, have the potential to obstruct EU integration and pull Montenegro toward authoritarianism.

Conclusion

The Kremlin and the PRC each attempt to influence Montenegro in ways that are based on their different historical relations. The Kremlin uses its longstanding institutional ties and perceptions of shared history and culture to achieve its goals, often by direct interference in Montenegro's democratic political processes. By contrast, because of the recency of China's activity in the Western Balkans, the idea of China is more abstract in the minds of many Montenegrins. Onto this blank canvas the PRC paints an idealized self-portrait, portraying itself as an opportunity for Montenegrin prosperity, at the low cost of complying with PRC demands both in how this prosperity is directed (that is, to significantly benefit PRC companies) and in its foreign policy goals.

The research revealed no direct cooperation between the PRC and Russia in Montenegro, although in some cases they have parallel efforts and goals – such as in specific cases of their diplomatic efforts and information efforts. Both the PRC and Russia have some influence in Montenegro that is effectively "spillover" from or channeled through Serbia, Montenegro's largest, most populous, and most powerful neighbor – and which shared a common state with Montenegro from 1918 through 2006.

theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/16/how-close-are-china-and-russia-and-where-does-beijing-stand-on-ukraine.

⁹¹ Moritsugu, Ken. "Russia's invasion of Ukraine puts relationship with China to the test." National Observer, 28 February 2022, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2022/02/28/news/russias-invasion-ukraine-relationship-china-test>.

⁹² Liu Xin (@LiuXininBeijing on X), "Can you help me fight your friend so that I can concentrate on fighting you later?" X, 19 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/LiuXininBeijing/status/1505043155682402306>.



EUROPE

NORTH MACEDONIA

Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia¹ is subject to foreign authoritarian influence, predominantly from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. The PRC and the Russian Federation use sophisticated, malicious, and illiberal methods to exert influence across the diplomatic, economic, information, and security sectors of Macedonian society. This strategy aims to undermine years of transatlantic investment in democracy building. Their approaches collide with liberal values and obstruct North Macedonia's democratic transition and alignment with the Euro-Atlantic normative and institutional architecture.² The PRC and Russia employ aggressive and subversive authoritarian agendas that build on the lack of coherent Western strategy, the failure of liberal mentorship in transition reconstruction efforts, and years of EU and Western disengagement with the local populace.

Until recently, the PRC has not been an influential actor in North Macedonia. However, the PRC's international aspirations, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and 14+1 framework (initiative by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business and investment relations between China and 14 countries of Central and Eastern Europe),³ have changed its relationship with North Macedonia. Under this new framework, the PRC sees North Macedonia as one piece of a broader strategy to tap into the European market. The PRC's engagement has evolved into coordinated multi-sectoral engagements with illiberal domestic actors and targeted investments in energy and infrastructure.

Conversely, Russia's influence is exerted primarily in the political and information space. Russia exploits its shared history, ideology, and religion to build its influence in North Macedonia. While evidence of direct involvement in anti-democratic activities is sometimes difficult to identify using open-source methods, Russia covertly exploits proxies and internal social challenges. Russia's overall economic influence is relatively low, though its influence is more acute in the critical energy sector. Russian influence in North Macedonia is mostly in the information space, usually used to gain leverage in Europe and to push back against both European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement and integration. Influence in the defense and security sector is mainly focused on covert operations which employ subversive methods and resources beyond legal and legitimate methods of projecting interests abroad.

Research⁴ found no observable direct synergy between Russian and PRC influence in North Macedonia. However, in their geostrategic competition with liberal democracies, the PRC and Russia both strive for greater influence through both coercive capability and illiberal cooption of and cooperation with local elites.

1 From its independence in 1991 until 2019, the country was described by its constitution as the Republic of Macedonia. This report will refer to the country as Macedonia when referring to events that took place in the pre-2019 period. When referring to post-2019 events or in present tense usage, this report will refer to the country as North Macedonia. Direct quotes describing "Macedonia" or "North Macedonia" remain unaltered. For more detail see section 2.1 below.

2 Russia and the PRC see themselves as superpowers in a multi-polar system, defying the unipolarity dominated by liberal democracies. See, for example: President of Russia. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development." 4 February 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

3 "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape." OECD, 3 September 2018, <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>.

4 The study represents the combined results of desk research and nine field interviews. This study systemizes existing research and networks of expertise on malign authoritarian actors' influence in North Macedonia. To better understand the potential impact of foreign authoritarian actors, the research was supported by interviews with academics, former political figures, former government officials, journalists, and members of civil society initiatives. Footnote 6 below gives the list of interviewees.

The PRC and Russia have used local elites' desire for an alternative to Western support that is conditioned on democratic reforms. Both the PRC and Russia use their diplomatic and information influence to legitimize their own authoritarian value systems.

In recent years, North Macedonia's authorities have demonstrated a certain level of resilience against foreign authoritarian influence. However, to bolster democratic resilience, Macedonian leaders need a coherent strategy anchored to a whole of society approach. At the same time, Macedonian leaders need to help their citizens sustain democratic systems, manage the consequences of authoritarian influence, and fight back against authoritarian influence.

The People's Republic of China's Influence on the Republic of North Macedonia

Until recently, the PRC has not been an influential actor in North Macedonia. However, several issues have increased PRC interest in North Macedonia.⁵ Western disengagement from the region in general, and from North Macedonia in particular, has opened the door for increased PRC presence and influence. Since the 2000s, PRC influence has grown across different sectors of Macedonian society. According to the experts interviewed for this report,⁶ another reason for growing PRC interest in the country is partly a result of the 'push-back' from the EU against PRC investment in other parts of Europe. Further, while North Macedonia is a small country, it occupies territory that has strategic value for trade. The PRC has invested in the Greek Port of Piraeus, but goods offloaded there still need to move to markets in Central and Western Europe; North Macedonia lies along this route.⁷

The PRC is broadly seen as an important actor among North Macedonia's public. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in April-May 2023 survey shows that 26 percent of residents of North Macedonia strongly agree that North Macedonia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with the PRC, and another 37 percent somewhat agree with that statement; those figures put it on par with France and Russia though far below Germany, the EU, Turkey, and the US.⁸

Diplomacy

The PRC's diplomatic efforts in North Macedonia, like those in other parts of the world, are complex and nested under PRC foreign policy principles, such as mutual benefit and generating win-win situations for the PRC and local elites.⁹ The PRC presents its diplomatic efforts as sharing harmonious and peaceful development.¹⁰ In practice, both in North Macedonia and elsewhere, the PRC's diplomatic efforts are at best neutral toward democracy and accountability, and some efforts actively corrode countries' democratic prospects to advance PRC interests.

5 North Macedonia is too small for the PRC to have designed a specific strategy for it. Rather, China sees it as a part of the 14+1 framework and the Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, the PRC's interest reflects its long-standing international aspirations. The PRC sees North Macedonia as a way to tap into the European market. For more about the PRC's grand strategy, see: Doshi, Rush. "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order." Oxford University Press, 2 August 2021.

6 Interviewed for this report were: Dr. Gjorge Ivanov, former president of the Republic of North Macedonia; Dr. Vasko Naumovski (Ph.D.) former deputy prime minister for Euro integration, former Macedonian Ambassador to the U.S., university professor; Dr. Stojan Slaveski (Ph.D.), Director of the Agency for Classified Information; Dr. Jovan Andonovski (Ph.D.), Deputy Ombudsman and university professor; Aleksandar Srbinovski, field coordinator, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, CSO representative, and BBC correspondent; Andrej Lepavcov, former ambassador to the EU, Special Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs; Dr. Aleksandar Nacev (Ph.D.), former director of the Directorate for Classified Information, Dean, Faculty for Detectives, European University-Skopje; Ljubica Pendaorvska, (Ph.D. candidate), former special advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (at the time of the Prespa Agreement), Women4cyber cofounder; and Dr. Vesna Popovska (Ph.D.), Dean, Law Faculty, International Vision University.

7 For about a decade, regional press has speculated about PRC funding for a canal system linking the port of Thessaloniki with the Danube (and therefore with the rest of Central Europe), via the Vardar/Axios river in Greece and North Macedonia and the Morava River in Serbia. See, for example, "Chinese Investors Warm to Balkan Waterway." Balkan Insight, 26 September 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/09/26/chinese-investors-give-green-light-for-balkan-channel/>; and Chrysopoulos, Philip. "China's Plan for a Canal Trade Route from Greece to Europe." Greek Reporter, 29 July 2022, <https://greekreporter.com/2022/07/29/china-canal-trade-route-greece-danube/>. Even without this possible canal, the overland route is important for moving cargo from Greek ports into other European markets.

8 "National Survey of North Macedonia | April - May 2023." International Republican Institute, 10 July 2023, pp. 69-70, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-north-macedonia-april-may-2023/>.

9 Zhou, Yinhuang, "China's Diplomacy." China Intercontinental Press, 2004, pp. 6.

Macedonia first felt the PRC's coercive diplomatic influence in the late 1990s. The Macedonian government's 1998 decision to recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan) as an independent state angered the PRC.¹¹ In response, the PRC used its veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to prevent the renewal of the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP) mission. UNPREDEP was a UN peacekeeping mission aimed at preventing the spillover of conflict from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia into Macedonia.

Because the PRC's UNSC veto threatened its stability, Macedonia's political elites abandoned the Taiwan decision. This has been the PRC's most overt use of coercive diplomacy in North Macedonia.

Macedonia was at that time weak, poor, and fragile, and its leaders believed the preventative peacekeeping mission was crucial to the state's security, as it promoted dialogue among various political forces and ethnic communities in the country.¹² Because the PRC's UNSC veto threatened its stability, Macedonia's political elites abandoned the Taiwan decision. This has been the PRC's most overt use of coercive diplomacy in North Macedonia.

Following this, the PRC seemed content that Macedonian authorities had learned their lesson from the Taiwan recognition affair and have not pursued any further overtly coercive diplomatic efforts in North Macedonia. For their part, North Macedonia's political elites have been reluctant to engage in diplomacy and political statements that could anger the PRC. For example, in 2019, North Macedonia did not sign onto a joint letter to the UN Human Rights Council condemning the PRC's mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which was signed by 22 countries.¹³ Macedonian officials also did not support a response letter, signed by 55 nations, that backed the PRC's policies in Xinjiang.¹⁴ However, heightened EU awareness and messaging on PRC foreign authoritarian influence has led the Macedonian government to take a stronger stand on PRC-related issues. On October 6, 2020, Macedonian authorities supported a joint statement on the human rights situation in Xinjiang and developments in Hong Kong, presented by 39 countries.¹⁵

Two important elements define the current diplomatic relationship between the PRC and North Macedonia. First, Macedonian political elites do not appear to ask openly for political quid pro quos in return for PRC economic or diplomatic support. Second, the coercive power of PRC diplomatic influence is widely discussed among North Macedonia's political and academic elites.

Economic Engagement

The PRC's economic interests in North Macedonia must be understood in the context of its growing influence in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia. PRC economic engagements and investments can morph into political leverage for two reasons: perceived lack of economic and political commitment to the region from the West, and the PRC's lack of interest in promoting democratic and governance reforms.

¹⁰ China's Peaceful Development White Paper. Information Office of the State Council, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.html.

¹¹ Interview with Vasko Naumovski, former Ambassador to the U.S. and former Deputy Prime Minister for EU integration, now a university professor.

¹² Later, Andonovski recalled that, according to some, this resulted in a spillover effect from the Kosovo crisis to North Macedonia and ethnic tensions turned into conflict. Interview with Jovan Andonovski, university professor and Deputy Ombudsman of the Republic of North Macedonia.

¹³ "UN: Unprecedented Joint Call for China to End Xinjiang Abuses." Human Rights Watch, 10 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/10/un-unprecedented-joint-call-china-end-xinjiang-abuses>.

¹⁴ Macedonian political elites' refusal to engage with China about its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea echoes these views. For now, it appears the PRC does not want to project itself as a political rather than economic actor in the region. For example, the PRC took no active position on the 2018 Prespa Agreement, which settled the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, and which the PRC probably welcomed as a step toward a more stable environment. See for example Putz, Catherine. "Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?" *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>; Interview with Vesna Popovska, Dean of the Law Faculty at the International Vision University.

¹⁵ See, for example, "Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang and the Recent Developments in Hong Kong, Delivered by Germany on Behalf of 39 Countries." U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 6 October 2020, <https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-statement-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-xinjiang-and-the-recent-developments-in-hong-kong-delivered-by-germany-on-behalf-of-39-countries/>.

Macedonians overwhelmingly support North Macedonia's prospective membership in the EU.¹⁶ However, many Macedonians believe the EU is not fully committed to the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia. As of April-May 2023, according to IRI survey research, only 37 percent of Macedonians believe the country is closer to EU entry today than it was when it first received its EU candidate member status in 2005 (while 39 percent believe it was closer in 2005).¹⁷ Neighboring Greece and Bulgaria have abused EU and NATO integration processes¹⁸ as a means to settle bilateral disputes with North Macedonia over identity issues – and to score points with their own nationalist voters. Further, western European countries like Germany and France have also slowed down North Macedonia's EU accession by bureaucratic means, with the Bundestag delaying its approval of North Macedonia's progress report and French President Emmanuel Macron proposing changes to negotiation methodology that would lengthen North Macedonia's accession process by at least another two years.¹⁹ Many residents of North Macedonia perceive these delays as signals that the EU will never fully accept them. According to the April/May 2023 IRI poll, 28 percent of residents believe that it will take at least another ten years before North Macedonia will become a member of the EU, and another 17 percent believe that North Macedonia's EU membership will never come.²⁰ In this gap, some Macedonians are beginning to look for new political and economic relationships.

As in many countries, corrupt elites in North Macedonia seek authoritarian alternatives that do not require as much accountability and conditionality, especially when it comes to democratic governance reforms, as Western support does. By hedging and hinting that alternatives exist, local elites try to convince Western supporters to reduce their demands, or else Macedonians might turn to other places for support. The PRC offers this opportunity.

The PRC is an important trade partner for imports into North Macedonia, but much less important for exports from North Macedonia. In the period from January through July 2023, North Macedonia's imports from the PRC were valued at about \$596 million USD, corresponding to 8.5 percent of all imports to North Macedonia. During that same period North Macedonia's exports to the PRC were valued at \$58 million USD, corresponding to just over one percent of all of the country's exports. The PRC is ranked fifth by total volume of foreign trade with North Macedonia; it is the only country in North Macedonia's top 15 trading partners that is not located in Europe.²¹

PRC Economic Influence Strategy and Tactics

The most important element for understanding PRC economic influence in the country is to examine the sectors in which the PRC engages. In general, PRC economic influence is shaped by BRI, which aims to increase the role of PRC companies in international trade; in particular in transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure. The strategy is simple and, as elsewhere, PRC investments come with (i) low bids, (ii) fast loan procedures, especially as compared to the EU or other international finance institutions, and (iii) promises to revitalize "lost" cases, such as the Smederevo steel mill in neighboring Serbia.²² North Macedonia, like other Western Balkans countries, participates in the BRI through a Memorandum of Cooperation signed in 2014. However, North Macedonia has not yet received significant BRI investment, nor has it been invited to high-level BRI events.

16 According to IRI polling, in May 2023, 79% of residents of North Macedonia supported North Macedonia's becoming a member of the EU see "National Survey of North Macedonia | April – May 2023", pp. 72.

17 Ibid., pp. 74.

18 For the conflict with Greece, see: Nimitz, Matthew. "The Macedonian 'Name' Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved?" Cambridge University Press Nationalities Papers, vol. 48 no. 2, 3 April 2020, pp. 205-214; for the dispute with Bulgaria, see: Heil, Andy. "No Easy Escape For North Macedonia From Bulgaria's EU Veto." Radio Free Europe, 22 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-eu-bulgaria-veto/31910319.html>.

19 Pendarovski, Stevo. "In North Macedonia, waning pro-EU sentiment opens the door to malign intentions." Euronews, 2 February 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/02/02/in-north-macedonia-waning-pro-eu-sentiment-opens-the-door-to-malign-intentions>.

20 "National Survey of North Macedonia | April – May 2023", pp. 73.

21 "Commodity exchange with abroad, January – July 2023 [Стоковна размена со странство, јануари – јули 2023 година]." State Bureau of Statistics [Државен завод за статистика], 7 September 2023, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstenie.aspx?id=78&rbr=14440>

22 Hackaj, Ardian. "The Pragmatic Engagement of China in the Western Balkans." South East Europe News [Südosteuropa Mitteilungen], vol. 59 no. 1, 2019, pp. 66-78. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=761006>.

PRC foreign direct investment in North Macedonia started well before BRI, with PRC loans of about 56 million USD that financed the construction of thermal power plants between 1994 and 2004.²³ This included the construction of the Kozjak thermal power plant, a government-to-government contract that was never open to public procurement and oversight. The project also lacked a transparent feasibility study and did not appear to be priced competitively.²⁴ The project also involved PRC-national workers and technical experts, who comprised just under half of the total workforce.

In 2013, Macedonia borrowed EUR 714 million from the Export-Import Bank of China for the construction of the Miladinovtsi–Stip and Kicevo–Ohrid highways.²⁵ Leaked recordings revealed how this PRC loan exacerbated corrupt practices. As a condition of the loan, Macedonia was required to select a PRC state-owned enterprise (SOE) as the contractor. To comply with this requirement, the Macedonian parliament passed a special law with a workaround of Macedonia's existing public procurement laws, which largely aligned with the EU's. The leaked recordings revealed that the prime minister's office also engaged in private negotiations with PRC SOEs including the eventual contract winner, Sinohydro. Sinohydro's was selected the main contractor despite their bid having a significantly higher price than its competitors, with some proposed prices 300 percent higher than the standard market value.²⁶ Sinohydro's selection was even more alarming as the company had previously been banned from doing business with the World Bank and the African Development Bank.²⁷ Additionally, it was later revealed that there were significant discrepancies between the payments between the Macedonian government and Sinohydro and the invoices charged to Sinohydro by subcontractors. An investigation following the recordings' leak charged several high-level Macedonian officials, including former Prime Minister Gruevski, for abusing their power to siphon off approximately EUR 155 million from the public budget for the project. Finally, the highway construction itself had a number of flaws related to poor planning and execution and remains unfinished in 2023.²⁸

Information Influence

The PRC does not have significant information influence in North Macedonia. In an interview conducted for this report, one journalist noted the PRC's new ambassador has agreed to more interviews and to attend more events than the previous ambassador did. The journalist said this might simply be a matter of personal ambition, but he did not exclude the possibility that it could be a strategic decision.²⁹

While there has not been notable PRC media presence in the country itself, North Macedonia's citizens sometimes access media from neighboring countries. PRC-backed online news portals based in neighboring Albania and published in the Albanian language, such as Radio Ejani and CMG Shqip, are followed by the Albanian ethnic minority living in North Macedonia.

An interesting development in the information space stems from the Covid-19 pandemic. Beijing, to a certain degree, successfully projected a positive image during the pandemic by engaging in so-called "mask diplomacy" around the world,³⁰ including in North Macedonia.

23 "The CDSM only negotiates projects, and the VMRO-DPMNE implements them [СДСМ само договара проекти, а ВМРО-ДПМНЕ ги реализира]." Vecer, 21 June 2012, <https://vecer.mk/uncategorized/СДСМ-само-договара-проекти-а-ВМРО-ДПМНЕ>.

24 Interview with Andrej Lepavcov, former Ambassador to the EU, policymaker, and lecturer, Skopje.

25 According to some estimates, the total debt to the PRC in 2021 is approximately 14 percent of the current 2021 level of government debt, which stands at EUR 5.2 billion: North Macedonia Ministry of Finance, "Government Debt for 2019." 2015; Reduced Public Debt Stabilized and Lower than Projected, as seen in Zweers et al. "China and the EU in the Western Balkans A zero sum game?" Clingendael Report, August 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>.

26 Krstinovska, Ana. "Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia" Choice, 6 November 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/exporting-corruption-the-case-of-a-chinese-highway-project-in-north-macedonia>.

27 For the World Bank, see: Kharal, Asad. "Violating the rules: WAPDA to award mega project to debarred firm." The Express Tribune, 12 May 2014, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/707311/violating-the-rules-wapda-to-award-mega-project-to-debarred-firm>.

28 Krstinovska. "Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia."

29 Interview with Alexandar Srbnovski, journalist and coordinator at the South Eastern Europe Observatory at Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

30 Verma, Raj. "China's diplomacy and changing the COVID-19 narrative." International Journal, vol. 75 no. 2, 2020, pp. 248-258. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0020702020930054>.

Some in North Macedonia saw this as a way for the PRC to improve its image, particularly after the controversy surrounding the construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid and Miladinovci-Shtip highways.³¹ Taking advantage of the perceived underperformance of the EU-supported COVAX mechanism, the PRC rushed to close vaccine deals and offered 100,000 doses free of charge to North Macedonia. The PRC agreed to sell 200,000 vaccine doses to North Macedonia.³² The PRC used this largesse and demonstration of state capacity to win hearts and minds in North Macedonia.

The PRC is also working to build influence through the Confucius Institute established in 2013 at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. By the 2020/2021 academic year, around 550 students were enrolled in the Confucius Institute's Chinese language and culture courses.³³

Russia's Influence in the Republic of North Macedonia

Unlike the PRC, Russia's influence is less economic and more political. Russia's geographic proximity to the Western Balkans, aggressive rejection of NATO enlargement, and illegal invasion of Ukraine shows that Russian influence in North Macedonia should be seen as a part of its broader geostrategic ambitions and competition with the West. EU disengagement, domestic corruption, poor democratic governance, and a failure to address crucial challenges like ethnic and regional disputes, are the main drivers that allow Russia to exert influence in North Macedonia. Russia also uses concepts of shared history (as a self-proclaimed protector of the Slavic people) and religion to connect with people in North Macedonia. While there is little evidence of direct involvement in anti-Western activities, Russia can exploit proxies and internal social challenges to provoke divisions.

Diplomatic and Political Influence

Starting in approximately 2015, Russia's ambassador in Skopje has taken an activist approach, reflecting renewed Russian interest in the Western Balkans and in North Macedonia in particular. Since 2015, diplomatic records indicate that the two countries held at least nine high-level meetings.³⁴ Russia's interest matched an escalation in its demands: starting in about 2017, Russia started objecting to North Macedonia's prospective NATO membership, even though it had previously expressed no such concerns. Russia's newly aggressive approach coincided with two major developments: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the Macedonian political party VMRO-DPMNE's fall from power from 2015 through 2017.

Since 2015, on at least two occasions, Russia took action to weaken North Macedonia's democratic and Euro-Atlantic prospects: around the wiretap scandal, which contributed to the fall of VMRO-DPMNE, and at the time of the Prespa Agreement, which resolved the dispute over the name Macedonia between North Macedonia and Greece.

31 The original contract for the loan was worth USD \$783.4 million, which was 90 percent of the total cost of construction. The value of the construction in the contract agreements for both highways was 870,422,844.32 USD. Due to delays, the estimated new total value for the highways is calculated at 1,081,811,412.94 USD. If one adds the expected interest payments in the next 15 years in the amount of 155.6 million USD, the total cost will reach 1.2 billion USD. See more about this in: Nechev, Zoran and Ivan Nikolovski. "Hustled into a Dead End: The Delusional Belief In Chinese Corrosive Capital for the Construction of North Macedonia's Highways" Societas Civilis Skopje Institute for Democracy, September 2020, <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Hustled-Into-a-Dead-End-The-Delusional-Belief-In-Chinese-Corrosive-Capital-for-the-Construction-of-North-Macedonias-Highways-1.pdf>

32 Please see more about the Chinese aid at Government of the Republic of North Macedonia: "Filipce: Support from China and the Chinese people is of great importance to the health system [Филипче: Поддршката од Кина и кинескиот народ е од огромна важност за здравствениот систем]." *Vlada*, 22 June 2021, <https://vlada.mk/node/25663>.

33 "Learning Chinese - from exotics, through need for port of influence [Учење кинески – од егзотика, преку потреба до порта за влијание]." *Nezavisen*, 12 May 2022, <https://nezavisen.mk/uchenje-kineski-od-egzotika-preku-potreba-do-porta-za-vlijanie/>.

34 Two of the country's presidents (Gjorge Ivanov, former president, and Stevo Pendarovski, current) have met with high-level Russian officials. Diplomatic interaction also includes diplomatic exchanges on the ministerial and ambassador levels, mostly on the margins of international events. While former president Ivanov met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2017, President Stevo Pendarovski met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in November 2019 on the margins of the Paris Peace Forum. During former president Ivanov's visit to Russia and his conversation with Putin, Putin did not object to Macedonia's inclusion in NATO. Interview with the former president Gjorge Ivanov. Moreover, Putin invited Pendarovski to come to the Victory Day parade in Moscow, and Pendarovski accepted. For more, see: A.K. "However, President Pendarovski did not travel to military parade in Russia due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions." *Factor*, 4 March 2020, <https://faktor.mk/pendarovski-sepak-nema-da-odi-vo-moskva-na-proslavata-na-9-maj>.

Turning Point – Russia and the Wiretap Scandal

In early 2015, whistleblowers in Macedonia's intelligence agency secretly gave recordings of illegally wiretapped phone conversations to Zoran Zaev, the leader of the then-opposition party, SDSM.³⁵ The whistleblowers and SDSM alleged that the incumbent VMRO-DPMNE³⁶ government, and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in particular, had ordered "the illegal surveillance of some 20,000 people, including ministers, politicians, businessmen, journalists, scholars and others."³⁷ Gruevski then accused Zaev of attempting to blackmail him into resigning and had the whistleblowers jailed on baseless allegations that they were spying for a foreign intelligence service (at the time, Macedonia had no whistleblower protection laws). Russian diplomats immediately declared their support for Gruevski and backed his claim that Zaev and foreign intelligence services were attempting a coup.³⁸

Over the next years the political crisis continued in fits and starts, occasionally fueled by Russian narratives suggesting it was an attempted "color revolution" or otherwise instigated by the West.³⁹ After weeks of protests fueled by the wiretaps' revelations, in May 2015 the EU brokered a power-sharing deal between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, set to last for a year until new elections could be held. However, Gjorge Ivanov, who held Macedonia's mostly ceremonial presidency with the backing of VMRO-DPMNE, pardoned "56 officials allegedly involved in the wiretapping scandal, including former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski [...] and opposition leader Zoran Zaev."⁴⁰ Protests restarted and a new Western-brokered deal postponed the election for another few months.

In the December 2016 election, VMRO-DPMNE won a plurality, but not a majority, of parliamentary seats. Macedonia's President gave a mandate to VMRO-DPMNE to form a government, but it could not do so. Per Macedonia's established political processes, the President was then supposed to give a mandate to the second-place party, SDSM, to attempt to form a government. He refused to do so. Over the next months, a political standoff ensued: neither SDSM nor VMRO-DPMNE could form a government. Minor parties, including those comprised of North Macedonia's ethnic Albanian population, held out for concessions before committing to either side. Finally, the ethnic-Albanian party DUI⁴¹ made a deal guaranteeing its choice of parliamentary speaker and the elevation of the Albanian language to co-official status in return for the ethnic-Albanian parties backing SDSM. But in April 2017, when SDSM and its new allies met to elect the speaker and form a majority, pro-VMRO-DPMNE rioters stormed the parliament, injuring several Members of Parliament, including Zaev. A trial later found several VMRO-DPMNE MPs and former ministers responsible for organizing the attack. A Serbian intelligence officer was present at the attack,⁴² and Zaev later alleged Russian involvement as well. In fact, the Macedonian branch of the Night Wolves, a Russian motorcycle club, admitted to participating in street protests in advance of the attack, though they did not claim to be present at the attack itself.⁴³

It is difficult to assess the full extent of ties between Russian state apparatus and VMRO-DPMNE in the pre-2015 period. However, the crisis precipitated by the wiretapping scandal demonstrated that by that point, Russia was committed to backing VMRO-DPMNE. Russia tried to frame Macedonia's political crisis as a geopolitical clash between the West and an amorphous international conspiracy versus Macedonian patriots, backed by Russia.

35 The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, or in Macedonian **Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија**, is one of two major political parties in North Macedonia and has a generally center-left orientation.

36 The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, or in Macedonian **Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство**, is the other of the two major political parties in North Macedonia and has a generally center-right orientation.

37 Marusic, Sinisa Jakob. "Macedonia's Wiretap Whistleblower Hails 'Fairytale' Ending." *Balkan Insight*, 1 September 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/01/whistleblower-sheds-light-on-macedonia-wiretapping-scandal-09-01-2017/>.

38 "Moscow hopes for thorough investigation into failed coup in Macedonia – foreign ministry." *Tass*, 1 February 2015, <https://tass.com/world/774723>.

39 "Russia accuses West of trying to destabilize Macedonia." *Reuters*, 16 May 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-macedonia-crisis-russia-idCAKBN0O10M520150516>.

40 "Wiretapping Pardons Will 'Deny Justice' to People of Macedonia, US Says." *Voia News*, 13 April 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160415113131/http://www.voanews.com/content/wiretapping-pardons-deny-justice-macedonia-united-states-says/3285157.html>.

41 The Democratic Union for Integration, the largest ethnic-Albanian political party in North Macedonia.

42 Jovanovic, Bojana. "Zivaljevic: My presence in the Assembly was not secret [Zivaljevic: Moje prisustvo u Sbranju nije bilo tajno]." *KRIK*, 24 August 2017, <https://www.krik.rs/zivaljevic-moje-prisustvo-u-sbranju-nije-bilo-tajno/>; leaked documents from North Macedonia's counterintelligence service show that service's belief that Serbian and Russian intelligence efforts in North Macedonia are aligned, and its belief that Russia's intelligence efforts in North Macedonia are coordinated by a station in Belgrade; Marusic. "Macedonia's Wiretap Whistleblower Hails 'Fairytale' Ending."

43 Stojanovski, Filip. "Pro-Russia biker club admits participation in protests leading to violent attack of Macedonian Parliament." *Global Voices*, 12 January 2019, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/01/12/pro-russian-biker-club-admits-participation-in-protests-leading-to-violent-attack-of-macedonian-parliament-trial-reveals/>.

In its efforts to exploit political and ethnic divides in North Macedonia, Russia supported the violent attack on the Macedonian Parliament by preparing the information space for political violence via anti-Western narratives, aiding street protests that implicitly threatened political violence, and providing intelligence in support of the attack – that is, nearly all means short of direct personnel involvement.

Russia supported the violent attack on the Macedonian Parliament by preparing the information space for political violence via anti-Western narratives, aiding street protests that implicitly threatened political violence, and providing intelligence in support of the attack.

Russian Interference in the Resolution of the Macedonia Name Dispute

From its independence in 1991 until 2019, Macedonia was engaged in a prolonged diplomatic dispute with neighboring Greece over the question of its name. Its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia, upset Greek nationalist sentiment. In Greece's view the name Macedonia implied both a claim to ancient historical figures that Greece considers part of its heritage and a claim to the parts of Greece in the geographical region of Macedonia.⁴⁴ Greece prevented Macedonia from joining international organizations including the UN, NATO, and the EU under its constitutional name. U.S.-mediated efforts to resolve the dispute finally bore out in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement, in which Skopje and Athens agreed on the name [The] Republic of North Macedonia.

The Greek Parliament had to ratify the Prespa Agreement, and the Macedonian side needed to change the country's constitution to reflect the new name. Here Russia saw opportunities to sow discord and undermine Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Russia tried to get the Greek parliament to reject the deal, while simultaneously encouraging Macedonians to vote against the name change in a referendum. Greek media claimed that a Russian Orthodox organization tried to stoke anti-Prespa sentiment among Greek Orthodox priests, and the Greek government expelled two Russian diplomats and banned two more over alleged bribes to opponents of the deal and support for anti-Prespa rallies.⁴⁵ In Macedonia, a domestic movement to boycott the name change referendum seems to have been supported by Russian interference. This took the form of social media posts attempting to stoke division between Macedonia's ethnic-Macedonian majority and its largest minority group, ethnic Albanians.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the Greek Parliament ratified the Prespa Agreement, but the referendum in Macedonia failed to meet the 50 percent turnout threshold required to make it valid. Nonetheless, the Macedonian Parliament gathered the two-thirds majority needed to change the country's name. Even after all this, Russian diplomats threatened to scuttle the Prespa Agreement retroactively, claiming that the UNSC had jurisdiction in the matter and implying they would use their veto. This was an empty threat – but it demonstrates Russia's desire to thwart the resolution of the name dispute. Russia leveraged intelligence assets, direct payments, religious organizations, information operations, diplomacy at multilateral institutions, and likely other methods to try to prolong the dispute.

Russia leveraged intelligence assets, direct payments, religious organizations, information operations, diplomacy at multilateral institutions, and likely other methods to try to prolong the dispute.

44. Macedonian nationalists did themselves no favors here. The country was never capable of acting on any Greater Macedonia claims to large parts of Greece or to smaller parts of its other neighbors. Nonetheless, these claims contributed to decades of stagnation for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.

45. Wintour, Patrick. "Greece to expel Russian diplomats over alleged Macedonia interference." *The Guardian*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference>.

46. *Ibid.*

Russia's Political Influence and the Russian Context

Russia's desire to aggravate political crises in Macedonia starting around 2015 was a political choice and a divergence from its previous approach. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia chose not to interfere explicitly in the country's independence; in fact, Russia recognized Macedonia's independence in 1992, a year and a half before the U.S., as well as recognizing the country as the Republic of Macedonia rather than the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which was positively perceived in Macedonia. This change in Russia's approach coincided not only with the aforementioned wiretap scandal but also with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 in response to Ukrainians' Euromaidan uprising and the Revolution of Dignity. Russian policymakers drew parallels between Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising and Macedonia's Colorful Revolution. In both cases, university students helped mobilize peaceful resistance against incumbent politicians who were widely seen as corrupt. In fact, both Russian diplomats⁴⁷ and VMRO-DPMNE-aligned Macedonian media⁴⁸ explicitly invoked the specter of a "Ukraine scenario" in their framing of Macedonia's protests.

Russian aggression continued and eventually culminated in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. North Macedonia explicitly aligned itself with the West and against Russia. On three occasions, and generally in coordination with its NATO allies, North Macedonia expelled Russian diplomats.⁴⁹ Russia imposed reciprocal measures on Macedonian diplomats.⁵⁰

The Russian Ambassador to North Macedonia has become more active, making populist comments that usually oppose Western diplomats' efforts to secure the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. His behavior is aimed at projecting Russia as an alternative to the West, which he portrays as having unfair demands and double standards. Moreover, in a move not seen in the first 25 years of North Macedonia-Russia relations, Russian diplomats are taking positions that exploit ethnic and religious divides (which carry serious political and security implications).⁵¹

Russian Influence and North Macedonia's Domestic Context

Russian interference in North Macedonia's domestic politics from 2015 onward has accelerated political and ethnic divisions. It also was the beginning of a political realignment for the two major ethnic-Macedonian political parties, the conservative-nationalist VMRO-DPMNE and the social democratic SDSM. For most of the first 25 years of North Macedonia's independence, VMRO-DPMNE portrayed itself as a driving force that had pushed for independence and promoted its anti-communist past, while SDSM mostly inherited the former communist establishment and was more "Yugo-nostalgic." Both parties had an at least nominally pro-EU and pro-NATO foreign policy, but popular sentiment associated SDSM with Russia due to historic communist ties.

By 2015, this was no longer the case. Both material and ideological circumstances had changed. Over the course of its incumbency from 2006 until 2016, VMRO-DPMNE developed a clientelist system and a hold on Macedonia's politics that some analysts described as authoritarian.⁵²

47 See e.g. April 2016 statement from Russia's MFA (accessed via Internet Archive/Wayback Machine): "Comment by the information and press department on situation in Macedonia." Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Macedonia, 27 April 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160427042647/http://macedonia.mid.ru/vesti-posol-stva/-/asset_publisher/9g7ImKCAtoH5/content/komentarij-departamenta-informacii-i-pecati-mid-rossii-o-situacii-v-makedonii?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fmacedonia.mid.ru%2Fvesti-posol-stva%3Fp_id%3D101_INSTANCE_9g7ImKCAtoH5%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_count%3D1.

48 See e.g. April 2016 article from Republika Online (accessed via Internet Archive/Wayback Machine): "Mirrors from Ukraine also arrived at the protests in Skopje (PHOTO)." Republika Online, 24 April 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160427052703/http://republika.mk/?p=587542>.

49 Interview with Vasko Naumovski, former deputy prime minister for Euro integration and former Macedonian ambassador in U.S.; Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. "North Macedonia Expels Second Russian Diplomat This Year." Balkan Insight, 17 August 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/17/north-macedonia-expels-second-russian-diplomat-this-year/>.

50 Statements from the Russian Foreign Ministry explicitly state that the expulsion of a Macedonian diplomat from Moscow was in retaliation for the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Skopje. See e.g. Trkanjec, Zeljko. "Russia declares North Macedonia's diplomat persona non grata." EURACTIV, 5 October 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russia-declares-north-macedonias-diplomat-persona-non-grata/.

51 "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: North Macedonia." U.S. Department of State, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-macedonia/>.

52 See e.g. Mattioli, Fabio. "Authoritarianism in Macedonia How the Country's Progressives Can Best Oppose Gruevski." Foreign Affairs, 12 January 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2017-01-12/authoritarianism-macedonia>; and Kolozava, Katerina. "Macedonia: the authoritarian challenge to Europe." openDemocracy, 12 June 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/macedonia-authoritarian-challenge-to-europe/>.

For example, as revealed through wiretap recordings, VMRO-DPMNE directly “arrang[ed] the outcome of court cases.”⁵³ The revelation of this level of corruption and abuse of power forced American and European condemnation.

VMRO-DPMNE had followed the trend of certain other right-wing European parties toward an ‘illiberal’ nationalist ideology, which is compatible with the new Russian nationalist imperial project. Like its peers, VMRO-DPMNE had turned toward a synthesis of anti-Westernism, ethno-nationalism and opposition to minority rights, and elimination of classical-liberal governance principles such as separation of powers. The clientelist nature of Macedonian politics was not unique to VMRO-DPMNE. Since SDSM formed a parliamentary majority in 2017, it too has faced credible accusations of corruption and patronage.⁵⁴ To distract from these and other controversies, SDSM exploits the ties between its rival VMRO-DPMNE and Russia.⁵⁵ Because the citizens of North Macedonia are generally very pro-West,⁵⁶ accusations about Russian influence tend to resonate. However, they come with the risk of further aggravating VMRO-DPMNE’s and its supporters’ anti-Western slide. Nonetheless, VMRO-DPMNE has resisted the temptation to fully commit to an anti-West and pro-Russian stance, and remains at least nominally, and so far, also practically, committed to North Macedonia’s membership in NATO and accession to EU membership.

Economic Influence

Russia’s economic influence in North Macedonia is limited in magnitude in most sectors, but significant in the crucial energy sector. Before 2015, Macedonia’s leadership supported Russian investments in the energy, tourism, and agriculture sectors.⁵⁷ The Macedonian-Russian Chamber of Commerce further encourages and supports Russian engagement in local business.⁵⁸ The giant Russian oil company Lukoil has been operating in North Macedonia through its subsidiary since 2005, on the basis of a memorandum of cooperation between Lukoil and the government.⁵⁹ The company’s Macedonian clients include the country’s government, the Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs, and other clients, including embassies, banks, power engineering companies and foreign-owned enterprises.⁶⁰ Currently, there are 33 gasoline stations in the country operated by Lukoil.⁶¹

Russia’s main economic interest lies in exploiting North Macedonia’s underdeveloped, but economically critical, energy sector. North Macedonia is an energy importer, consuming significantly more energy than it produces domestically.⁶² Russia is the origin of all North Macedonia’s natural gas imports since Russia controls the Trans-Balkan Pipeline, the only gas route into North Macedonia. Not only does this contribute to Macedonians paying among the highest prices for gas in Europe; energy dependency on Russia creates an easily exploitable entry point for the Kremlin.⁶³

53 Baumgartner, Pete. “Explainer: Roots Of Macedonia’s Political Crisis Run Deep.” Radio Free Europe, 15 April 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-crisis-in-macedonia-leads-to-violent-protests/27675969.html>.

54 An RFE/RL analysis names corruption scandals as one of the five major reasons why SDSM underperformed in North Macedonia’s 2021 local elections; Dimeska, Frosina. “Five Things To Know About The Fall Of North Macedonia’s Prime Minister.” Radio Free Europe, 2 November 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/north-macedonia-zaev-analysis/31541802.html>.

55 VMRO-DPMNE’s platform and its officials do not endorse Russia. The political party “United Macedonia” (Edinstvena Makedonija), the Democratic Party of the Serbs (DPS), and the Left party are the only political parties with a program or narrative that promotes a closer relationship with Russia or the PRC; “Proclamation of United Macedonia for radical shift in Macedonian politics – membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and Strategic Partnership with Russia.” United Macedonia, June 2018, <http://edinstvenamakedonija.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/proglas-edinstvena-makedonija.pdf>; However, there is no proof that these actors operate with Russian financial or operational support; Interview with Jovan Andonovski, Deputy Ombudsman.

56 According to IRI polling in October 2022, 73 percent of respondents supported North Macedonia becoming a member of the EU while only 24 percent did not support; similarly, 72 percent of respondents supported North Macedonia’s membership in NATO, while only 24 percent did not; “National Poll of North Macedonia September – October 2022.” International Republican Institute, 19 December 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-north-macedonia-september-october-2022/>.

57 MIA. “Russian companies interested in expanding their business in Macedonia.” Republic of North Macedonia Ministry of Finance, 19 June 2021, <https://finance.gov.mk/russian-companies-interested-in-expanding-their-business-in-macedonia/?lang=en>.

58 See, for example, “The Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry is involved in a project of creating a Macedonian Trading House in Moscow.” The Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 23 February 2017, <https://mostpp.ru/en/news/international-activities/the-moscow-chamber-of-commerce-and-industry-is-involved-in-a-project-of-creating-a-macedonian-tradin/>.

59 “Lukoil in the Republic of Macedonia.” Lukoil, 2019, <http://www.lukoil.com/Company/BusinessOperation/GeographicReach/Europe/lukoilinMacedonia>.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 In 2021, North Macedonia’s domestic electricity production met only 67 percent of its electricity consumption; the remaining 33 percentage point gap was filled by electricity imports. “North Macedonia – Country Commercial Guide.” International Trade Administration, 8 August 2022, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/north-macedonia-energy>.

63 “Briefing Paper III: External Influence in the Economic Sphere.” Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019, <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/bp-iii-economics>.

North Macedonia has taken some steps to diversify its energy supply: in September 2023, Greek and Macedonian companies signed a contract to supervise the construction of a planned natural gas interconnector. When completed, the interconnector will allow the importation of non-Russian natural gas including compressed natural gas offloaded in ports in northern Greece. However, that interconnector is not expected to be completed before the end of 2024.⁶⁴

The weak regulation of North Macedonia's energy sector also provides an opportunity for corruption, which Russian actors exploit. In one notable case, the Macedonian company Te-To, which operates natural gas-powered heating and electricity plants, faced an investigation for money laundering. Te-To was also accused of false bankruptcy filings. Bulgarian-based think tank the Center for the Study of Democracy mapped out Te-To's complicated ownership structure,⁶⁵ demonstrating that it is controlled largely or wholly by Russian actors. Te-To's ownership seems to be intentionally convoluted to allow for more opportunities for financial crimes such as money laundering. In June 2019, North Macedonia's Financial Police accused Te-To of involvement in laundering over 100 million euros, allegedly involving funds that originated in criminal acts related to Russia.⁶⁶

Trade between Russia and North Macedonia is relatively small. In the period from January through July 2023, North Macedonia's imports from Russia were valued at about \$182 million USD, corresponding to 2.6 percent of all imports to North Macedonia. During that same period North Macedonia's exports to Russia were valued at only \$31 million USD, corresponding to less than 0.6 percent of all of the country's exports. Russia is ranked 14th by total volume of foreign trade with North Macedonia.⁶⁷ This means that, while significant, Russia "has had a more limited economic footprint in [North] Macedonia" in comparison to other Western Balkan countries.⁶⁸

Information Operations

Information operations are Russia's most effective tool in exerting malign influence in North Macedonia. Russia sees North Macedonia, and the Western Balkans more broadly, as a part of Moscow's efforts to gain leverage in Europe by pushing back against EU and NATO enlargement and integration. State-sponsored information manipulation is a valuable tool in this effort.⁶⁹

The Kremlin's proxies are aware that social and political disorder can easily be manipulated, especially when it is tied to troublesome domestic identity issues. For now, there is no direct evidence that Russia attempts to coopt local or social media in North Macedonia. Instead, most of its proxies share content from the Russian state-owned media service, Sputnik. In particular, these proxies focus on Sputnik's Serbian service to take advantage of linguistic and cultural ties.⁷⁰ News outlets in North Macedonia regularly reprint or re-report stories that originate in the much larger Serbian media market. In this way, Serbian media can 'launder' Russia-originated media content into the Macedonian information space.⁷¹

64 "DESFA, Nomagas sign deal to build Greece-North Macedonia gas interconnector." 30 September 2023, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/1221258/desfa-nomagas-sign-deal-to-build-greece-north-macedonia-gas-interconnector/>.

65 "Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Macedonia." Center for International Prive Enterprise, January 2018, pp. 8, https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2018_01/CSD_Policy_Brief_71_Macedonia.pdf.

66 The Russian oligarch Sergey Samsonenko (a citizen of Russia based in North Macedonia) who owned the company was close to the authorities and heavily invested in building churches and funding sports to polish his image, and that of a Russia, as friendly; Zlatkov, Emil. "From doubt of a fraud bankruptcy to laundering Russian money in Macedonia." Radio Free Liberty Macedonia, 26 June 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%d0%be%d0%b4-%d1%81%d0%be%d0%bc%d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%b6-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%87%d0%b0%d1%98-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%82%d0%b5-%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%b4%d0%be-%d0%bf%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%9a%d0%b5-%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b8-%d0%b2%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%b0%d0%ba%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%be%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%98%d0%b0/30021375.html>.

67 "Commodity exchange with abroad, January - July 2023 [Стоковна размена со странство, јануари - јули 2023 година]."

68 "Briefing Paper III: External Influence in the Economic Sphere."

69 Galeotti, Mark. "Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?" Policy Brief, Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm; Interview with Ljubica Pendarovska, former special advisor to the MFA, co-founder Women4cyber.

70 Aleksoska, Rosana. "Study: 'Disinformation and Information in North Macedonia.' Fighting false news narratives, December 2021, <https://f2n2.mk/en/study-disinformation-and-information-distortion-in-north-macedonia>.

71 One example may be when Serbian pro-government tabloid Kurir.rs spun and published a misleading story about a deployment U.S. troops to Germany. These reported of a Western troop build-up were also published around the anniversary of the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia in March 1999 and alleged that American soldiers had been vaccinated with a secret Covid-19 vaccine. Magazin.mk, a Macedonian portal, republished Kurir's article using the same language. See: "Germany In Panic: 70,000 American Soldiers Landed In Hamburg - Tanks Everywhere!" Magazin, 21 March 2020, https://www-magazin-mk.translate.goog/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0-70-000-%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%98/?_x_tr_sl=mk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

Sputnik Serbia shares Russian state-sponsored negative narratives about the U.S. and the EU. Russia and the PRC, on the other hand, are praised with positive reports by the same outlets.⁷² According to a study published by the partly U.S.-funded Fighting Fake News Narratives (F2N2) Project in December 2021, this is an attempt to undermine the appeal of Euro-Atlantic integration. The F2N2 study shows that stories about PRC and Russian pandemic aid were amplified through social media, resulting in a much higher number of Facebook posts.⁷³

These outlets repeat official Russian statements and positions, further amplifying Russian strategic narratives like Putin's role as the protector of North Macedonia. Another example is Putin's support of the claim that the Cyrillic alphabet, and thus Slavic literature, was created in present-day North Macedonia. This angered Bulgaria and exacerbated tensions between the two states.⁷⁴ Moreover, statements by Russian officials and proxies blur the line between opinion and fact and create distrust in previously respected sources of factual information and open space for simplified narratives.

Actors based in EU and NATO member-state Hungary has also been involved in shady business deals related to media outlets.⁷⁵ Macedonian investigative journalists have discovered that more than EUR 3.2 million were injected into North Macedonia's media sector to media outlets that promoted euro-skeptic and pro-Russian stories via the purchase of advertisements for fictitious products.⁷⁶ These transactions occurred between two separate media outlets both owned by Peter Schatz, a former executive at Hungarian state media. These transactions are now under investigation by Macedonian authorities.

Moreover, former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (then-leader of VMRO-DPMNE) escaped to Hungary to avoid prosecution for corruption.⁷⁷ He now lives in Budapest.⁷⁸ In the case of Gruevski's flight to Hungary, there is no direct evidence of Russia's involvement; however, the overt regional alignment of actors with authoritarian tendencies like Gruevski provides an easy constituency for the Kremlin to pander to in trade for cooperation on other Russian priorities.

In short, Russia uses information manipulation to exploit internal divisions, both political and ethnic, and harm North Macedonia's ability to progress toward EU accession by tactically stirring up controversy with neighboring states that are already EU members. These attempts can be hard to link directly to Moscow because they are often carried out via a network of proxy actors; however, other cases, like Putin's decision to stir up nationalist controversies, are overt.

Russia uses information manipulation to exploit internal divisions, both political and ethnic, and harm North Macedonia's ability to progress toward EU accession by tactically stirring up controversy with neighboring states that are already EU members.

72 Brey, Thomas. "Western Balkans: Russia's Sputnik skews public opinion." DW, 29 September 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/western-balkans-russias-sputnik-skews-public-opinion/a-59357427>.

73 Aleksoska. "Study: 'Disinformation and Information in North Macedonia.'"

74 See for example, Morton, Elise. "Putin's claim that Cyrillic came from Macedonia meets disapproval in Bulgaria." The Calvert Journal, 25 May 2017, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/8337/putins-claim-that-cyrillic-came-from-macedonia-meets-disapproval-in-bulgari>.

75 Hungarian nationals linked to Hungary's pro-government media have bought several Macedonian media outlets. Reports published by the EU argued that investments were part of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's project of expanding his media influence beyond Hungary, to promote his euro-sceptic values of "illiberal democracy." Jovanovska, Maja, Tamas Bodosky, and Aubrey Belford. "Right Wing Hungarian Media Moves into the Balkans." Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia, 9 May 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>.

76 The money was mostly transferred from Slovenian firms owned by Péter Schatz, who owns two media companies in North Macedonia. Those two companies were paid for fictitious advertisements for olive oil and refrigerator magnets. Interview with Alexander Srbinovski, Macedonian Global Initiative Against Organized Crime and BBC correspondent for North Macedonia.

77 Gruevski fled in an apparent attempt to avoid investigation and prosecution related to findings from the wiretap scandal of 2015 and its aftermath. See section 2.1 above for more.

78 Walker, Shaun. "Anti-asylum Orbán makes exception for a friend in need." The Guardian, 20 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/20/anti-asylum-orban-makes-exception-for-a-friend-in-need>.

North Macedonia is particularly susceptible to more subtle media influence tactics because of a general mistrust of media, which is seen as coopted by local elites.^{79,80,81} The failure of ostensibly democratic politics to deliver material benefits over the past 30 years and repeated corruption scandals make it easier for Moscow's malign information operations to reach a willing audience. Ethnic and sectarian divisions, as well as identity issues with neighboring countries, play into Russian information operations, particularly those surrounding the concept of Greater Albania.⁸² Russia exploits these divisions both subtly and overtly.

Security and Defense

Russian influence in North Macedonia's defense and security sector has mainly focused on covert operations. According to a 2017 report by the Macedonian intelligence agency, Macedonia faced hybrid threats from Russia especially in periods of domestic turbulence.⁸³ Leaked counter-intelligence reports produced by the Macedonian Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence revealed similar evidence.⁸⁴ According to these documents, the Russian Embassy in Skopje was a focal point for "subversive, propaganda, and intelligence activities."⁸⁵ A coordinated operation involving officers from Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) conducted operations with a SVR center in Belgrade, Serbia, and a GRU center in Sofia, Bulgaria.⁸⁶ The primary focus was to run influence operations targeting Macedonian public opinion. Employing classic back channel diplomatic activities and soft power, Russian journalists were also used to further information influence.⁸⁷

Exploring Potential Synergy Between Russian and PRC Influence

This research found no observable direct synergy between Russian and PRC influence in North Macedonia. However, both the PRC and Russia attempt to achieve three broad "forms of control: "coercive capability, consensual encouragement, and legitimacy (see sections 1.3. and 2.3.).⁸⁸ Both Russia and the PRC exploit three general factors to increase their influence in North Macedonia. First, the PRC and Russia eagerly exploit institutionalized corruption and organized crime, as well as clientelist and politicized administrations and institutions. Second, the PRC and Russia exploit perceived EU and U.S. disengagement from the Western Balkans and the West's lack of support for democratic governance in the region. This has left North Macedonia's political elite with reduced incentives to abide by the rule of law. Finally, both the PRC and Russia exploit Macedonians' disappointment with what they perceive as poor management of NATO and EU integration.

79 The investigative group Mediapedia found that the ownership of several influential media websites were connected to bank accounts in Belize belonging to people with strong ties to that country's ruling party. See, for example: Cvetkovska, Saska, Meri Jordanovska, and Vlado Apostolov, "Web portals in the off-shore claws of the Macedonian government-oriented tycoons." SouthEastEuropean Media Observatory, 23 April 2014, <https://mediaobservatory.net/radar/web-portals-shore-claws-macedonian-government-oriented-tycoons>.

80 A recent research study shows a clear indication of "infringement on the freedom of press," "silencing the media," and "rough censure, both online and offline." Although the current ruling elite is considered pro-Western, the government interference has turned the press into "mere transmitters of messages," "noncritical distribution of information without previous fact-checking," and "journalism turned into public relations." See more in: Serafimovska, Eleonora, Marijana Markovikj, and Tea Koneska-Vasilevska. "The Challenges Of Journalism In The Republic Of Macedonia During The Covid-19 Pandemic." *Balkan Social Science Review*, vol. 18, December 2021, pp. 345-367, <https://repository.ukim.mk/bitstream/20.500.12188/16529/1/4821-Article%20Text-8223-1-10-20211224.pdf>.

81 This is derived from interviews with Jovan Andonovski and from an interview with H.E. Vasko Naumovski.

82 Greater Albania is an irredentist and nationalist concept that seeks to unify the lands populated by ethnic Albanians, or that the idea's proponents believe had been populated by ethnic Albanians in the past, before they were pushed out. The territory of Greater Albania is not well defined, but generally includes all of Albania and Kosovo, and parts of Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Greater Albania is one of various comparable movements among Serb, Macedonian, Bulgarian, and other nationalists. See more on this in: Rusinow, Dennison I. "The Yugoslav Experiment 1948-1974." Los Angeles, California. University of California Press. 1978, pp. 245; After the appointment of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as parliamentary speaker in early 2017, and the passage of legislation widening the use of Albanian as an official language, Russian-linked media and others stoked fears of Greater Albania. See, for example, at: McLaughlin, Dan. "Russian Propaganda Exploits Ethnic Tensions to Keep Macedonia Looking Inward, Not Westward." *Coda*, 21 March 2017, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/information-war/russian-propaganda-exploits-ethnictensions-to-keep-macedonia-looking-inward-not-westward/>.

83 "Subject: Tendencies and directions of the activities by the Russian Intelligence Service in Republic of Macedonia - analytical report." OCCRP. <https://www.occrp.org/documents/spooksandspin/Document4.pdf>.

84 Belford et al. "Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia." OCCRP, 4 June 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>

85 Ibid.

86 "Subject: Tendencies and directions of the activities by the Russian Intelligence Service in Republic of Macedonia - analytical report."

87 "Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say." *The Guardian*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkannato-west-influence>

88 This "forms of control" conceptual framework draws from Rush Doshi's *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. This framework was originally applied to describe the main ways that a hegemon behaves toward other states; while the PRC and Kremlin are not currently geopolitical hegemony, they have aspirations to become hegemony, so this framework is still useful. For a synopsis of Doshi's framework and argument, see: Doshi. "The Long Game China's grand strategy to displace American order." *Brookings*, 2 August 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-long-game-chinas-grand-strategy-to-displace-american-order/>.

A particular thorn was the contretemps over the name Macedonia, which seemed to be more about domestic politics for all the countries involved than about collective security or EU integration.

Both the PRC and Russia take advantage of corruption and weak institutions to make backroom deals directly with political elites. This is a win-win opportunity for both foreign and domestic authoritarian actors, leaving North Macedonia's citizens as the losers. Domestic actors can show off investments to potential voters as well as provide their supporters with economic opportunities, all without democratic transparency and accountability. The PRC and Russia increase their ability to influence the domestic and international affairs through their growing political and financial relationships with local elites.

The PRC and Russia build relationships in North Macedonia while simultaneously integrating their messages into the country's society, politics, and the economy. In the regional context, the PRC is expanding its influence to include leading institutions from the Western Balkans, such as universities, research institutes, think tanks, and chambers of commerce. The PRC does information and cultural outreach in Albanian, targeting North Macedonia's Albanian-speaking minority.⁸⁹

Russian diplomatic and information activities have shifted, becoming more direct, aggressive, and coordinated with information manipulation campaigns. Using proxies, Russia, like the PRC, attempted to use the Covid-19 pandemic to project itself as an alternative to the West, particularly through distorted stories contrasting Russian solidarity with a slow EU response and restrictive lock-downs.

North Macedonia's Resilience to Foreign Authoritarian Influence

As PRC and Russian foreign authoritarian influence efforts in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans have scaled up, so too has the backlash. North Macedonia's leadership has demonstrated some resilience against potential foreign authoritarian influence. One example is the U.S.-led Clean Network Initiative, which aimed to get allies to remove products from PRC-owned companies from critical communications infrastructure. The current Macedonian government signed on with the initiative, effectively excluding Huawei and ZTE from the country's future 5G network.⁹⁰

North Macedonia has also taken a decisive stance against Russian meddling in its internal affairs and attempts to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration. Macedonian government officials confronted Russia by condemning its interference in internal affairs and by expelling Russian diplomats on at least three occasions.^{91,92} After the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, North Macedonia was vocal and supportive of NATO and particularly EU actions against Russia.

Conclusion

The PRC and Russia try to undermine liberal values and North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. The PRC and Russia build on internal challenges stemming from corruption and illiberal forms of governance, EU and U.S. disengagement from the region, regional disputes, and domestic disappointment from the prolonged Euro-Atlantic integration process. These issues are acute in North Macedonia and are weaknesses in the Western Balkans region more broadly.

89 In the framework of its cooperation, the PRC creates its own organizations and networks, such as the BRI studies network, the 17+1 think tank network, the China-CEE Institute in Budapest, the Global Partnership Centre in Sofia see: Krstinovska, Ana. "The Place of North Macedonia in China's Strategy for the Western Balkans." Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/documents/281657/281706/The+place+of+North+Macedonia+in+China%27s+strategy+for+the+Western+Balkans.pdf/ead21e16-32aa-8c14-07df-3c40696ac851?version=1.0&t=1579528320386>.

90 "Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia Join U.S. Initiative To Block Chinese Equipment In 5G Network." Radio Free Europe, 23 October 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-kosovo-north-macedonia-join-us-initiative-to-block-chinese-equipment-in-5g-network/30909512.html>.

91 "Macedonia Claims Expelled Russian Diplomat Breached Security." Balkan Insight, 27 March 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/27/macedonia-claims-expelled-russian-diplomat-breached-security-1-03-27-2018/>.

92 Trkanjec, Zeljko. "North Macedonia expels Russian diplomat." Euractiv, 19 May 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/north-macedonia-expels-russian-diplomat/; see also Ozturk, Talha. "North Macedonia expels another Russian diplomat." Anadolu Ajansi, 17 August 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/north-macedonia-expels-another-russian-diplomat/2338226>.

Although there is no evidence of direct cooperation between the PRC and Russia, their foreign authoritarian influence efforts in North Macedonia overlap in the methods they use and the weaknesses they exploit. Both the PRC and Russia similarly exploit institutionalized corruption, weak institutions, and regulatory challenges. Both authoritarian regimes focus their efforts on the use of coercive diplomatic capability, malign economic engagement, and influencing public opinion and the information space. Although Macedonian leadership deserves credit for demonstrating resilience to foreign authoritarian influence, there are still necessary steps needed. Some specific steps the government of North Macedonia could take include the development of governmental strategies for dealing with Russia and the PRC, further transparency and accountability reforms to reduce opportunities for strategic corruption, and further improvement of institutional capacity to implement these plans and reforms.



EUROPE

SERBIA

Introduction

More than two decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the onset of Western efforts to support democratic transition and reform in the new Western Balkan states, regional power Serbia has oriented its foreign policy to try to “sit on two chairs,” as US and EU diplomats and politicians have criticized.¹ As Serbian politicians have perceived the West’s disengagement in the region, they turned to other willing foreign partners, including authoritarian regimes like Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These authoritarian partnerships took advantage of and further helped the consolidation of domestic political parties’ state capture, weakening of institutions, and expansion of organized crime and corrupt patronage networks in Serbia.² Both the PRC and Russia seek to expand their influence in the Western Balkans to work against the Western rules-based order as well as EU and NATO enlargement — and both use Serbia as a base to do so.

This report³ examines the impact of multiple authoritarian actors in Serbia. Authoritarian regimes such as those in the PRC and Russia have been eager to exploit democratic governing weaknesses in new and fragile states to undermine the trans-Atlantic alliance on the edges of Europe. This strategy is clear in Serbia, which has been a candidate for EU membership since 2012 but has made little movement toward full membership. Both Russia and the PRC offer alternative governing models that often do not adhere to commitments to the rule of law, accountability, and democratic governance. Both countries actively seek to weaken Western influence.

The PRC is a new and suddenly prominent player in the Western Balkans but most especially in Serbia; its presence greatly expanded after it found a close ally in the coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS) which came to power in 2012.⁴ The PRC’s initial influence in Serbia — indirect and mainly commercial and transactional — has evolved, becoming more direct and multi-sectored. The PRC presents its interests as purely economic and based on mutual benefit, yet it regularly offers lucrative and non-transparent financial arrangements to gain influence from those close to power. On the edge of the EU, Serbia offers the PRC proximity to Central and Western European markets without the burden of EU-standard rules as it undertakes vast projects that skirt Serbia’s own procurement, labor, and environmental laws.

1 See e.g, statement by U.S. then-Deputy Assistant Secretary Hoyt Yee in October 2017 (Simic, Julija. “Serbia’s EU bid leader insists Belgrade is not ‘sitting on two chairs.’” EURACTIV.rs, 26 Oct 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/serbias-eu-bid-leader-insists-belgrade-is-not-sitting-on-two-chairs/>), post on Twitter (now X) by MEP from Germany and European Parliament’s rapporteur on relations with the Western Balkans Viola von Cramon in February 2022 (Von Cramon, Viola (@ViolavonCramon). 2022. “It is high time for @SerbianGov and @predsednikrs to publicly condemn the #Russian #invasion in #Ukraine. Time of sitting on two chairs is over. Non-alignment with the whole of #Europe on this will put #Serbia in self-isolation.” Twitter, 25 Feb 2022. <https://twitter.com/ViolavonCramon/status/1497214734474620928>), and interview with MEP from Slovenia and European Parliament’s “shadow rapporteur” for the accession of Serbia to the EU Klemen Groselj in March 2022 (“MEP: No more sitting in two chairs for Serbia,” nova.rs and N1 Belgrade, 2 Mar 2022, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/mep-no-more-sitting-in-two-chairs-for-serbia/>).

2 For more how in the new era of great power competition, China and Russia in the Western Balkans challenge Euro-Atlantic security and prosperity, and particularly in Serbia, please see: Zeneli, Valbona. “Dancing in the Dark.” Per Concordiam, 2 October 2020, <https://perconcordiam.com/dancing-in-the-dark/>.

3 In addition to reviewing written sources, this report also draws on interviews with: Andreja Brkic, President of the executive board at the Union of Employers of Serbia; Brigadier General Ljubomir Nikolic, Former Military Attache in the USA and Italy, Assistant Minister of Interior, and Chief of the Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Serbia for International Military Cooperation; Professor Mirosljub Blagojevic, University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, University of Belgrade; Milan S. Milutinovic, Ministry of Defence · Defence Policy Sector, Head of the European Integration Group, Directorate of European Integration and Project Management, Ministry of Defence, PhD Candidate of International and European Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade; PhD Marija Zuzek, Counsellor within the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, Former Diplomatic Representative of the Republic of Serbia; a regional bank director who wished to remain anonymous; a former high ranking Serbian official who wished to remain anonymous; and two former high ranking diplomats, interviewed separately, who each wished to remain anonymous.

4 Vuksanovic, Vuk. “The Unexpected Regional Player in the Balkans: China.” War on the Rocks, 29 November 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/unexpected-regional-player-balkans-china/>.

By contrast, Russia's influence in Serbia is grounded in its long historical presence and institutional ties with governments in the Balkans; cultural and religious ties; and steadfast support of Serbia against pressure from the West, especially on the issue of Kosovo. Russian influence and found fertile ground among local autocrats eager to avoid compliance with Western demands related to EU membership. Russia seeks to directly influence the Serbian government and its elites by exploiting Russia's deeply rooted ties to Serbia across many sectors.

Both Russia and the PRC exploit the ongoing dispute between Serbia and neighboring Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008. Both support Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence. Moscow and Beijing are the largest arms suppliers to Serbia, whose leaders are closely beholden to both nations. The PRC and Russia have increasingly aligned their strategic interests, with Chinese leader Xi Jinping announcing a comprehensive and unrestricted partnership with Russia shortly before the latter's military invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. This alliance, marked by deepening political and economic ties, signals a coordinated effort to establish a new axis of global influence. Russia's economic reliance on the PRC has also intensified, particularly as it faces increased Western sanctions due to its actions. Serbia was the sole nation in Southeast Europe that refused to join in sanctions against Russia.

Foreign and Domestic Information Manipulation in Serbia

While the following sections of this report focus on either the PRC's or Russia's influence in Serbia individually, this section on information manipulation analyzes both actors together. This is because, in general, both pro-PRC and pro-Kremlin narratives are promoted in Serbia through similar means: both Russia and the PRC use Serbia as a base from which to manipulate information throughout the region by exploiting structural vulnerabilities endemic not only to Serbia but the Western Balkans as a whole. In addition to frequent alignments of interest between the incumbent SNS and foreign authoritarian actors, structural drivers that leave Serbia vulnerable to information manipulation stem from a largely controlled and consolidated media sector, government interference in state-owned media outlets, and financially fragile news operations.⁵ This environment allows "a big chunk" of Russian and PRC disinformation to originate in Serbia, according to U.S. diplomat James Rubin.⁶

Vulnerability in Serbia's Media Sector

The Serbian government owns or controls several newspapers, the state news agency Tanjug, and public broadcasting service RTS. Ownership of other pro-government outlets is opaque, and "the state and ruling party exercise influence over private media in part through advertising contracts and other indirect subsidies," Freedom House notes.⁷

Further Freedom House analysis notes that in Serbia, "while the online media landscape is diverse, there has been an increase in disinformation spread by pro-government news sites, some of whose owners are connected to the ruling party. Online journalists are occasionally held criminally liable for their work, and they have faced a rise in harassment and threats in response to their reporting."⁸ The arrest of a Serbian journalist for her reporting early in the Covid-19 pandemic "fostered an environment of self-censorship and left journalists vulnerable to persecution for their unfavorable reporting on the government's efforts," the report notes.⁹

5 "Freedom on the Net 2021." Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2021>.

6 Rubin was the coordinator for the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center. Asked about RT Balkan, he said, "We would not like to see Russia Today or Russian media outlets anywhere in the world. We'd like them shut down." See RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "U.S. Envoy Urges Firmer Action to Counter Russian, Chinese Disinformation in Western Balkans." Radio Free Europe, 11 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-russia-china-disinformation-rubin/32359395.html>.

7 "Freedom in the World 2020." Freedom House, 2021, p. 1011, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/FIW2020_book_JUMBO_PDF.pdf.

8 "U.S. Envoy Urges Firmer Action to Counter Russian, Chinese Disinformation in Western Balkans."

9 "U.S. Envoy Urges Firmer Action to Counter Russian, Chinese Disinformation in Western Balkans." See also: Mong, Attila. "Serbian Reporter Ana Lalić on Her Arrest and Detention over COVID-19 Report." CPJ Europe, 29 April 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/04/serbian-reporter-ana-lalic-on-her-arrest-and-deten/>.

This assessment is supported by the Clingendael Institute, which notes that “The conditions for practising professional journalism [in Serbia] have degraded over time, and the media sector has faced numerous challenges, including political control over the mainstream media, low financial sustainability of media outlets and related high dependence on state funding, as well as a lack of transparency of that funding.”¹⁰

Poor media attribution practices in Serbia and the region increase vulnerability to information laundering. Foreign authoritarian “news” sources such as Russia’s RT Balkan and *Sputnik Srbija*, and the PRC’s Xinhua create content that is picked up and replicated in part or whole on local media sites, and consumers who are not media savvy often assume these stories as created by “local” sources. Much of this material is laudatory of the governing party and Serbian leadership. The recycled content helps create wider acceptance of the reporting among the populace — because the source is local and in Serbian — and is harder to counter because it multiplies the disinformation.

The Subtle: Narrative Promotion and Information Laundering on Social Media

While three-quarters of Serbians are estimated to use social media, Twitter (now X) is a relatively minor platform; Facebook remains far more popular.¹¹ Serbians report using television and internet media (aside from social media) as their primary means of accessing political news and information; only 11 percent of Serbians report most frequently using social media to gain political news and information, compared to 57 percent using television.¹² Nonetheless, journalists and analysts have documented government efforts to manipulate social media in Serbia. In April 2020, Twitter removed 8,558 fake accounts associated with the Serbian government that had posted over 43 million tweets; “[t]hese accounts were primarily engaged in cheerleading current Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his allies, in attacking the Serbian opposition, and in artificially boosting the popularity of Vucic-aligned tweets and content,” according to an analysis by the Stanford Internet Observatory. The Stanford Internet Observatory noted recurring instances of tweets from the pro-government coordinated network being re-reported on internet news portals, including at least one instance a pro-Kremlin news portal based out of Russia.¹³

The SNS’s use of social media to launder its narratives into the public discourse parallels Russia and the PRC’s use of the same methods to launder their own narratives into Serbian and regional media. Slick content from Russia and the PRC is picked up and distributed through Serbian print, television, and online sources, which then is distributed through the region. Serbian-language broadcasts and online content reach ethnic Serbs elsewhere, especially in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina (concentrated in its sub-state entity Republika Srpska) as well as Kosovo and Montenegro, as Serbia seeks to build a sphere of influence, which neatly serves Russian efforts to sow division and instability, as well.¹⁴ Like in many other societies, print, broadcast, and online media helps drive conversations, including on social media, but the reverse is also true: campaigns to manipulate social media can also help prepare the groundwork for, serve as faked primary sources for, or otherwise support information campaigns that are waged via other, non-social media. Therefore, while social media information manipulation campaigns – by the Serbian, Russian, and PRC governments alike – may appear relatively minor in isolation, they must be analyzed in the context of the broader information campaigns they support.

10 The Press Freedom Index report compiled by Reporters Without Borders in 2020 underlined declining press freedom. Freedom House. January 5, 2019. See RSF. “Serbia: RSF Expects Concrete Measures from Vucic after Formal Meeting in Belgrade.” RSF, 22 January 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/serbia-rsf-expects-concrete-measures-vucic-after-formal-meeting-belgrade>. See also: Bajic, Dragana and Zweers, Wouter. “Declining Media Freedom and Biased Reporting on Foreign Actors in Serbia: Prospects for an Enhanced EU Approach.” The Clingendael Institute, July 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/declining-media-freedom-and-biased-reporting-on-foreign-actors-in-serbia.pdf>.

11 “Social network user penetration in Serbia from 2017 to 2027.” Statista Research Department, 10 October 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/567406/predicted-social-network-user-penetration-rate-in-serbia/>; in 2022 Facebook accounted for over 91 percent of all social media website visits in Serbia while Twitter accounted for less than 2 percent: *Ibid.*

12 “2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey | January-February 2022.” International Republican Institute, 29 June 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey-january-february-2022/>.

13 Bush. While manipulation of Twitter is well documented, research about social media information manipulation on platforms other than Twitter is sparse because other platforms are relatively closed to researchers. Investigators have yet to publicize cases of similar social media manipulation among Serbian users of Facebook, Instagram, closed WhatsApp and Telegram messaging groups, and other platforms. However, the revelation of such coordinated efforts to manipulate narratives on Twitter strongly suggests similar efforts have been or are underway on these other platforms.

14 A report for the European Parliament noted that it found “an inordinate amount of the disinformation” focused on *Republika Sprska*, much originating in Belgrade. See Policy Department for External Relations, Director General for External Policies of the Union. “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them.” *European Parliament*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

The Not-So-Subtle: Overt and Coordinated Promotion of pro-Kremlin Narratives

Serbia's government-controlled and -aligned media adjusts its focus between pro-Kremlin and pro-PRC narratives depending on government priorities and major global events. Those outlets frequently repeat or promote pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation that support Russia's strategic objectives and foster anti-Western sentiment. To do so, "Russia maintains an entire infrastructure of media influence, stretching across the region and deeply integrated into national media landscapes," a report by the European Parliament notes. "Russia's approach to disinformation operations is based on the subversion of adversaries by amplifying any available social, political, economic or ideological divisions that would undermine the adversary's political, economic and military cohesion."¹⁵

The most direct and regionally significant disseminator of Russian disinformation from Serbia is the online network *Sputnik Srbija* ("Sputnik Serbia").¹⁶ In fact, the Belgrade-based *Sputnik Srbija* is Moscow's regional center, disseminating disinformation throughout the Western Balkans. Established in November 2014 – months after with Russia's invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine – *Sputnik Srbija* creates free articles and slickly produced online content. *Sputnik Srbija* is "one of the region's central distribution channels for transnational disinformation" and replete with stories designed to discredit the EU, NATO, and the West and Western values more generally.¹⁷ However, a 2021 report by the European Parliament, *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them*, notes that although the disinformation campaigns "spearheaded by Sputnik Serbia are prominent throughout the region" they "are not especially visible in Serbia itself," courtesy of an apparent "informal arrangement." Instead, the report notes, "Serbian and Russian state messaging appears to be broadly coordinated on a higher level."¹⁸

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia grew even more reliant on Serbia as a nodal point from which to spread disinformation through the region and beyond, as the Kremlin's foothold in Europe weakened dramatically. In November 2022, a new Russia-sponsored Serbian-language online news source, RT Balkan, launched in Belgrade, a project of RT (formerly Russia Today). RT Balkan opened eight months after EU countries banned domestic broadcast or re-broadcast of RT and Sputnik in response to Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives expanded after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Many mainstream news websites in Serbia freely replicate and distribute blatant Russian disinformation, such as "articles claiming that Zelensky had lost his mind by going to war, that Russian military plans were successful and going exactly according to plan, that Ukraine was employing terrorist tactics and provocations, that Ukrainian armed forces were Nazis that kill and use civilians as 'human shields,' and that Russia was fighting NATO," as noted in a report by the Center for the Study of Democracy, a Bulgaria-based regional thinktank. This drumbeat of disinformation seems to have contributed to pro-Russian attitudes: after the onset of Russia's full-scale war, the percentage of persons in Serbia opposed to joining the EU reached over 50 percent, while over 80 percent opposed applying sanctions on Russia.¹⁹

Many mainstream news websites in Serbia freely replicate and distribute blatant Russian disinformation.

¹⁵ "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them."

¹⁶ Interview with the Professor Mirosljub Blagojevic, University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, University of Belgrade.

¹⁷ Examples cited in the report include a conspiracy theory that the "EU had abetted the storage of depleted Uranium in Serbia, causing an epidemic of cancer" and a "long-running narrative portraying European values as detrimental to the development of the Serbian state." See: "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them."

¹⁸ "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them."

¹⁹ Demostat. "Spoljno-politicke orijentacije gradjana Srbije" ("Foreign policy orientations of citizens of Serbia"). Belgrade, Serbia: Demostat, 2023. <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrzivanje/politicko-orijentacije-gradjana-srbije/1512>

Still Not Subtle: Overt and Coordinated Promotion of pro-PRC Narratives

Beijing strategically coordinates its influence operations in Serbia via sophisticated information machinery that aligns with its economic and diplomatic efforts. Through its information apparatus, the PRC presents itself as a positive actor and supportive ally of Serbia. The PRC's information strategy relies on both the existing Serbian media infrastructure as well as media platforms that the PRC has allegedly placed in the country.²⁰ However, compared to Russia's, the PRC's media presence is quite small, and as of early 2021 no PRC news agency or television outlet was overtly providing media content in the Serbian language.²¹

The PRC is front and center in Serbia's state-sanctioned storytelling. A pro-PRC media environment in Serbia is facilitated by Serbian government figures and their allies in state-owned or private pro-government media. (These media also disseminate pro-Russian propaganda).²² Some state-owned media companies, such as Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) and the wire service Tanjug, draw on content-sharing agreements with PRC media such as the state-owned news agency Xinhua. "I saw an official diplomat in the Serbian public service use every opportunity to say, Serbia is the best country in Europe, thanks to our president and the assistance of China," notes a journalist quoted in a report by the International Federation of Journalists.²³

The PRC's information influence in Serbia and regionally in Southeast Europe was especially successful during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the PRC successfully portrayed itself as a strong, competent, and generous global power – in contrast to how it portrayed the miserly EU, which declined to send scarce medical supplies to Serbia. The spectacle of Vucic publicly begging the PRC for aid as the pandemic exploded globally, and then kissing a PRC flag in gratitude – a video of which went viral with hundreds of millions of views – was a particular success.²⁴ PRC narratives and Serbian government-aligned narratives in support of the PRC focused on the PRC's generosity, all while the PRC stalled on answering questions from international medical authorities about the cause and early handling of the pandemic within the PRC itself. Pro-government coverage contrasted the generosity and bounty of the PRC with what was characterized as a miserly and incapable EU, culminating in the pro-government tabloid *Informer* (well known for its bombastic pro-Russian propaganda) placing a billboard in the center of Belgrade featuring Xi Jinping with the caption: "Thank you, brother Xi."²⁵ "The message of friendship with China has been accompanied by misleading commentary ... suggesting that China is maneuvering during the pandemic to increase its international clout and leverage," a report by the European Parliament noted.²⁶

More broadly, PRC information influence strategies are part of an apparently effective strategy at shaping public sentiment. According to analyst Stefan Vladislavljev, "[c]lose connections with the Serbian political elite and favorable presentation of the PRC in Serbian media, especially from outlets close to the government, have made the PRC one of the most popular foreign actors among Serbia's citizens," more popular than the EU.²⁷ A public opinion poll commissioned in March 2020 by the Institute for European Affairs found that just shy of 40 percent of respondents (incorrectly) named the PRC as the biggest donor to Serbia, while fewer than 18 percent of respondents correctly named the EU.²⁸

20 Interview with high-ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who asked not to be named.

21 "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them."

22 Velebit, Vuk. "China Has Overtaken Russia as Serbia's Great Ally." *BalkanInsight*, 8 July 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/china-has-overtaken-russia-as-serbias-great-ally/>.

23 State broadcaster RTS has content-sharing agreements with Chinese state broadcaster CCTV and publisher Xinhua, the IFJ report notes; See, for example, "Cooperation between RTS and Chinese television [Сарадња РТС-а и кинеске телевизије]." *RTS*, 21 March 2012, <https://www.rts.rs/vesti/drustvo/1067766/saradnja-rts-a-i-kineske-televizije.html>;

Lim, Louisa, Julia Bergin, and Johan Lidberg. "The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy." *International Federation of Journalists*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/china-the-covid-19-story-unmasking-chinas-global-strategy>.

24 Stojanovic, Milica. "Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China's Help." *BalkanInsight*, 16 March 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help/>.

25 Standish, Reid. "New Study Says China Using Investments to Buy Political Influence in Central, Eastern Europe." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-investments-central-eastern-europe/31452615.html>.

26 Policy Department for External Relations, Director General for External Policies of the Union, "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them."

27 Vladislavljev, Stefan. "Big Brother: Serbia's Media Are Creating Nation of China Lovers." *BalkanInsight*, 26 March 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/26/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/>.

28 Institut za evropske poslove (Institute for European Affairs). "Stavovi gradjana Srbije prema Rusiji [Attitudes of citizens of Serbia toward Russia]."

Belgrade, Serbia: Institut za Evropske Poslove, 2020. <https://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>.

Praising the PRC's partners in Serbia serves to legitimize the government's behind-closed-door deals with investors who may have ties to or are acting on behalf of an authoritarian regime and distracts from unsustainable investments linked to widespread corruption, public displeasure, and environmental degradation.

A key aspect of the PRC's popularity in certain countries is its "global branding" depicting itself "as an enabler of economic growth"; this branding is on prominent display in Serbia. Vucic, too, builds his brand by association. Vladislavljev notes, "domestic actors, with Vucic at the forefront, sell this image [of the PRC as a source] of economic growth to Serbian citizens. Using new highways, renovated industrial complexes, and new factories, Vucic portrays himself as a driving force behind the country's economic progress. This also plays into [the PRC's] global image making."²⁹

The Common Factor: Domestic Demand for Foreign Authoritarian Narratives

While pro-Kremlin and pro-PRC narratives are promoted and laundered through the same or similar media networks in Serbia (and pushed out to regional media markets), open-source investigation did not establish any evidence or credible allegations of coordination between the Kremlin and PRC in the Serbian or regional media space. Instead, the common factor linking pro-Kremlin and pro-PRC narratives is the demand from Serbia's government and aligned structures for non- and anti-Western narratives. As Vladislavljev notes, "the biggest contributor to China's image are Serbian media outlets and their way of reporting on Sino-Serbian cooperation. Passive, positive presentation of China comes through numerous affirmative articles about the success of the Serbian government and President Vucic." That is to say that Serbia's Vucic-led government, as much or more than the PRC itself, is pursuing narratives about and seeking to advance Serbians' "pro-Chinese" sentiment.³⁰

Serbia's Vucic-led government, as much or more than the PRC itself, is pursuing narratives about and seeking to advance Serbians' "pro-Chinese" sentiment

This domestic demand for foreign authoritarian narratives is in turn driven by President Vucic's foreign policy orientation. As Florian Bieber, Professor of Southeast European History and Politics and Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz has observed, "Serbia under Aleksandar Vucic pursues ambiguity [regarding its geopolitical orientation] to secure power domestically and maximize maneuvering space internationally." By navigating between the EU and the West on one side and Russia and the PRC on the other, Vucic balances pressure from each side to align Serbia's domestic and foreign policies with that side. "This tightrope act is not a dilemma into which Vucic has fallen by chance, but rather a central pillar of his rule," concludes Professor Bieber. "As a result, Serbia is likely to maintain this ambiguity as long as Vucic is in power."³¹

Beyond Information: The PRC's Foreign Authoritarian Influence in Serbia

The PRC is a new actor in the Western Balkans whose influence has grown dramatically over the past decade. The PRC's initial, more indirect influence efforts, mainly based on commercial and transactional relationships, has evolved into more direct efforts across multiple sectors. As the PRC seeks global influence and regional influence within Europe's core, it has found a willing partner in Serbia on the European periphery. Serbia has become a key node in the Western Balkans from which the PRC seeks to expand its influence.

29 Vladislavljev, Stefan. "Facilitating Kleptocracy: The Consequences of China's Corrosive Capital in Serbia." International Republican Institute, 27 July 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/facilitating-kleptocracy-the-consequences-of-chinas-corrosive-capital-in-serbia/>.

30 Vladislavljev. "Big Brother: Serbia's Media Are Creating Nation of China Lovers."

31 Bieber, Florian. "Serbia's Staged Balancing Act." Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 7 August 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/08/07/serbias-staged-balancing-act/>.

Serbia is the PRC's primary economic partner in the Western Balkans, comprising over half of its trade in the region as of 2018. PRC trade with Serbia has increased rapidly and is currently even greater than trade with Russia.³² The PRC has invested heavily in Serbia, mainly in vast infrastructure projects in deals generally struck with government officials out of public view with opaque requirements, such as the use of PRC-citizen labor. As thousands of PRC-citizens and other laborers have poured into the country to work in PRC-controlled projects, the PRC's methods of social control have extended to Serbia to monitor these persons and PRC investments, as well.

Political and Economic Influence

"[T]he countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans hold a special place for" the PRC, notes a report by the French Institute of International Relations, as those countries "are a springboard for [the PRC] to gain influence within the EU."³³ Among those countries, Serbia stands out: the PRC has heavily invested in Serbia over the past decade, especially in segments of Serbia's critical infrastructure, including highways, railways, mines, and mills, gaining access to key transportation nodes and ports. Non-transparent deals and payments to local elites help bind those in power to their PRC sponsors, as government officials turn a blind eye to legal and environmental violations, citizens' protests, as well as EU laws. Even as some other neighbors have grown wary of PRC-funded projects, Vucic's Serbia continues to warmly receive all the PRC has to offer.³⁴ As one report on the PRC's economic influence in Europe by the Bulgaria-based Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) noted, "the rising Chinese economic footprint over the last decade has coincided with a deterioration of governance standards," and the "adverse effects" have been strongly felt in Serbia.³⁵

PRC influence efforts in Serbia have evolved over the past 20 years. The PRC's early efforts in Serbia were careful and designed to support its economic ambitions. Starting in 2012, the PRC followed its collective approach to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), eventually enshrined in the 17 + 1 mechanism.³⁶ The PRC compensated for its relative lack of historic or cultural relationship with Serbia by effective use of economic agreements and direct ties with local politicians.³⁷ Further, the PRC and the Serbian government share commitments to fighting what they see as separatism or "splittism." For Serbia, this means gratitude to the PRC for its refusal to recognize the independence of Kosovo, a former Serbian province; for the PRC, this means expecting Serbia to back its centralist stances toward Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

The PRC seized the opportunity offered by the COVID-19 pandemic to create a more direct and overt presence in Serbia. The EU's faltering aid response to non-EU states early in the pandemic allowed the PRC to fill the void with donations of masks and vaccines.³⁸ The Serbian government quickly exploited the perception of PRC generosity to justify their own nontransparent deals with the PRC and further distance from the West.³⁹

32 However, trade between Serbia and the EU is far greater than trade with either Russia or China. See Zeneli, Valbona. "Dancing in the Dark." Per Concordiam, 2 October 2020, <https://perconcordiam.com/dancing-in-the-dark/>.

33 Krpata, Marie, "Can Europe Do Without a Geological Strategy to Face China?," Etude de l'Ifri, Ifri, June 2023. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/krpata_europe-geological-strategy_2023.pdf page 15.

34 Goldstein, Adam and Eric Hontz. "Corrosive Capital: Known Unknowns." Center for International Private Enterprise, 12 January 2022, <https://www.cipe.org/resources/corrosive-capital-known-unknowns/>; Vladislavljev, Stefan. "'Steel Friendship' — Forging of the Perception of China by the Serbian Political Elite," in "Western Balkans at the Crossroads." Ioannis Armakolas, Barbora Chrzová, Petr Čermák and Anja Grabovac, eds., 26 April 2021, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/50-western-balkans-at-the-crossroads-ways-forward-in-analyzing-external-actors-influence>; Brînză, Andreea. "How China's 17 + 1 Became a Zombie Mechanism." The Diplomat, 10 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-17-1-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>.

35 Vladimirov, Martin and Alexander Gerganov. "Chinese Economic Influence in Europe: The Governance and Climate Conundrum." Center for the Study of Democracy Bulgaria, 9 September 2021, https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2021_09/Chinese_EI_Europe_ENG_WEB.pdf.

36 The so-called 17 + 1 group is a Chinese diplomatic initiative launched in 2012 centered on its engagement with 17 Central and Eastern European countries, including Serbia and all of its neighbors aside from Kosovo. Lithuania announced its departure from the format in May 2021; Estonia and Latvia announced their withdrawal in August 2022 in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and tensions over Taiwan. By early 2023, the initiative was considered moribund. See Brinza, "How China's 17 + 1 Became a Zombie Mechanism."

37 Simic, Julija. "Serbia Turns to China Due to 'Lack of EU Solidarity' on Coronavirus." Euractiv, 18 March 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>;

On how Chinese assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic undermined the image of EU and advanced that of China, see: Muminovic, Emina. "Serbian Media on the Assistance in the Pandemic: China the Savior, EU Left Serbia Stranded." European Western Balkans, 8 April 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/04/08/serbian-media-on-the-assistance-in-the-pandemic-china-the-savior-eu-left-serbia-stranded/>.

38 For more on China's more direct diplomatic efforts, see Petrov, Angel. "Serbia's Vaccine Diplomacy in China's Shadow." Al Jazeera, 17 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/3/17/serbias-vaccine-diplomacy-in-chinas-shadow>.

39 Phillips, David L. "China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo." BalkanInsight, 29 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/29/china-not-russia-is-the-greater-threat-to-kosovo/>.

While the PRC began expanding ties with Serbia under previous governments, the ascension of Aleksandar Vucic and his SNS correlated with a vast and rapid expansion of financial relations between the PRC and Serbia. Trade between the two countries grew from \$1.18 billion in 2010 to \$2.837 billion by 2019. Yet the trade largely flows toward the PRC, creating a massive trade deficit for Serbia: Serbia exported only \$329.2 million to the PRC while importing \$2.5 billion from the PRC that year. For the PRC, Vucic has proved to be a “malleable figurehead eager to do their bidding.”⁴⁰ The PRC has strengthened its grip on Serbia by burdening it with debt, primarily for infrastructure projects that are parts of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴¹ The terms are generally easy: the loans are typically for 15 to 20 years, with a five-year grace period and interest rates of between 2 percent to 3 percent.⁴² Although the PRC is not the primary external creditor in Serbia, its share of government external debt will rise if loans are disbursed in line with contracts.⁴³ The PRC’s contractual arrangements with Serbia are often via direct Intergovernmental Agreements, arranged out of view and without public discussion. These deliberately nontransparent deals circumvent the competitive bidding process and Serbian laws, generally offering special inducements, such as nonpayment of import tariffs and a required percentage of PRC-citizen labor.⁴⁴

The PRC’s “economic footprint” in Serbia is the highest by far of its CEE neighbors, far above the regional average, as more than half of all PRC projects among the CEE countries (by value) are found in Serbia.⁴⁵ Considering both infrastructure-related projects and foreign direct investment, Serbia receives more funds from the PRC than any of its closer Western Balkan neighbors: 9.7 billion euros as of 2021.⁴⁶ PRC loans in Serbia represent about 7 percent of GDP. The costs of servicing the debt will increase Serbian dependence on the PRC.⁴⁷

Belt and Road Initiative

Most infrastructure projects in Serbia have been financed by the PRC under the banner of its signature Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁸ The deals are generally murky, and plans announced to great fanfare sometimes never even materialize. The massive projects are generally not commercially viable and seen as useful homes for excess PRC capital and labor, in investments that offer investors high returns quickly.⁴⁹

Major recent PRC investments include those of the giant PRC firm Linglong, which built a nearly \$1 billion tire factory near Zrenjanin, Serbia under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative. The 2018 deal, described as personally brokered by Vucic, involved a gift of land to the PRC firm. Yet the company soon asked the government for over 75 million euros to complete the project, which it received in June 2020. By early 2023 the factory was partially operational but still uncompleted.⁵⁰

40 Hartwell, Leon and Stefan Vladislavjev. “Serbia’s Delicate Dance with the EU and China.” *Just Security*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>; Phillips. “China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo.”

41 Phillips. “China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo.”

42 “Western Balkans: The Burden of China’s Lending to Governments.” UniCredit, 21 April 2021, https://www.research.unicredit.eu/DocsKey/emergingmarkets_docs_2021_179967.ashx?EXT=pdf&KEY=l6KjPzSYBBGzROuioxedUNdVq1wFeRoBg8dvzn51cwxlFTjORbl4w==&T=1; Investigative reports indicate that between 2012 and 2021, Chinese companies invested or allocated more than 2 billion euros in just 16 projects in Serbia, and the Chinese Export-Import Bank has granted loans for projects worth at least 5.7 billion euros. See Matura, Tamás. “Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe.” *Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies*, April 2021, https://www.china-cee-investment.org/_files/ugd/72d38a_373928ea28c44c7f9c875ead7fc49c44.pdf.

43 “Western Balkans: The Burden of China’s Lending to Governments.”

44 Vladimirov and Gerganov. “Chinese Economic Influence in Europe: The Governance and Climate Conundrum.”

45 Vladimirov and Gerganov. The CEE nations considered here are Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Hungary, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Greece, Romania, and North Macedonia.

46 “Western Balkans: The Burden of China’s Lending to Governments.”

47 “Western Balkans: The Burden of China’s Lending to Governments.”; Matura, Tamás. “Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe: A Reality Check.” *Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies Budapest*, April 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351034366_Chinese_Investment_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_A_reality_check_Tamas_Matura_A_Research_Report_by_the_Central_and_Eastern_European_Center_for_Asian_Studies_April_2021_Budapest; This report includes the full “17” CEE nations: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland, along with Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Greece; Not only has Serbian government leadership embraced closer ties and investments with China: so too has the ruling party of the Bosnian Serb-controlled entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina known as Republika Sprska. See Katic, Goran and Milorad Milojevic. “Bosnian Serbs Chase Closer Ties with Beijing Amid Western Pressure, Looming Debt.” *Radio Free Europe*, 14 May 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-serbs-china-debt-crisis/32411122.html>.

48 Matura. “Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe: A Reality Check.”

49 Vladimirov and Gerganov. “Chinese Economic Influence in Europe: The Governance and Climate Conundrum.”

50 The Chinese ambassador to Serbia claimed that Vučić personally negotiated the deal, signed in August 2018. The government gave Linglong 96 acres of land as part of the contract. The company soon asked the Serbian government for 75.8 million euros, which it received in June 2020. Linglong became the sponsor of Serbian football SuperLiga, later renamed after the company. See Bandović, Mihaela Šjukić. “The Case of Linglong: Violating the Law Pursuant to Feng Shui.” *Istinomer*, 20 November 2021, <https://english.istinomer.rs/analyses/the-case-of-linglong-violating-the-law-pursuant-to-feng-shui/>.

Other projects include a massive 450-million-euro highway project, announced in 2017, to link Belgrade and the Adriatic Sea; the construction company running the project had previously been sanctioned by the World Bank for fraud in the Philippines.⁵¹ One of the largest PRC-controlled projects in the region was the 2.2 billion euro railway reconstruction between Budapest and Belgrade by the China Railway and Construction Corp; Hungary and Serbia are among the region's most ardent supporters of the PRC.⁵² (Hungary declared the loan agreement and the feasibility study for its portion of the railroad a state secret and declined to release it; there were also concerns about nontransparent tender processes).⁵³

Strategic Investments

The PRC electronics giant Huawei began to invest in Serbia from at least 2007, and by 2016 it had become one of the most important partners of the Serbian state-owned telecom company RTS. Huawei early on made payments to offshore accounts linked to top officials of the Serbian state telecom company, including for "consulting" payments for meetings with senior government officials, as revealed later by investigative journalists. By 2016, Huawei had signed a major deal with the telecom company to completely upgrade its telecommunications network. Huawei would soon make Belgrade a testing ground for its "safe city" technology, allowing the mass installation of surveillance cameras with facial recognition software (see below).⁵⁴

The PRC also seeks to buy companies with substantial debt. The first major PRC investment in Serbia was by PRC steel giant HeSteel, when in early 2016 it snapped up the troubled steel mill in Smederevo, previously owned by U.S. Steel and by then over 520 million euros in debt. In June 2016, Xi himself stopped in Smederevo during a multi-day visit to Serbia, where the Serbian president praised Xi and declared that the sale date should be considered a holiday. PRC news outlets spun the story as a success, implicitly declaring that the PRC succeeded where the U.S. had failed.⁵⁵ The HeSteel deal was followed in 2018 with a purchase by Zijin Mining Company of Serbia's only copper mining complex (located in Bor), also saddled with significant debt. The firm promptly started construction projects to vastly expand operations, making the Bor site the largest copper mining operation in Europe. Copper quickly became the greatest export product from Serbia to the PRC.⁵⁶

"Dirty" Projects

The PRC is attracted to investments in Serbia as it offers a portal to the rest of Europe while avoiding EU and Serbia's own public procurement, labor, and environmental laws. PRC investments are generally followed by legal problems, including allegations of preferential treatment by the government.⁵⁷ Serbia's legislature often amends laws in ways tailored to meet the needs of PRC investors; protests by citizens often follow. One example is the massive Zijin mining complex in Bor, which never filed the necessary permits and environmental assessments before construction, and where local residents were kept in the dark of the complex's expansion plans, even as toxic arsenic levels grew as high as ten times the acceptable levels. Meanwhile, the royalties Zijin paid to Serbia for the copper were among the lowest in Europe.⁵⁸

51 In early 2023, a Chinese construction crew on the project destroyed a Serbian war memorial, sparking fury by veterans' groups and others. See Tizard, Will, Dragan Kostic, and Zoran Glavonjic. "Outrage in Serbia after Chinese Construction Company Destroys War Monument." *Radio Free Europe*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-monument-war-wwii-wwi-negrison-china-construction-demolition-highway-belgrade/3233087.html>.

52 "Western Balkans: The Burden of China's Lending to Governments"; Zeneli. "Dancing in the Dark."

53 Curic, Ana. "From Budapest to Belgrade: a railway line increases Chinese influence in the Balkans." *Investigate Europe*, 27 December 2021, <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/from-budapest-to-belgrade-a-railway-line-increases-chinese-influence-in-the-balkans>.

54 The leaked documents were revealed as part of the Pandora Papers investigative project. See Dojcinovic, Stevan and Vesna Radojevic. "Chinese Tech Giant Huawei Had Secret Offshore Contracts with Men Linked to Serbian State Telecom Company." *OCCRP*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/the-pandora-papers/chinese-tech-giant-huawei-had-secret-offshore-contracts-with-men-linked-to-serbian-state-telecom-company>.

55 US Steel had sold it back to the government for one dollar in 2013. Nikolic, Ivana. "All Eyes on China in Serbian Steel Mill Town." *BalkanInsight*, 20 June 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/20/all-eyes-on-china-in-serbian-steel-mill-town-06-20-2016/>; An official Chinese view of these events in "A Chinese Investment Welcomed by Serbia, but Defamed by Western Media." *Xinhua*, 8 January 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220108/7f269c36eb114330953b2664fa5bef91/c.html>; "Feature: A Steelworks Symphony by the Danube." *Xinhua*, 1 May 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220105/1d560ff8e9234d0094c04bbcdc1ae8fb/c.html>.

56 Mrkela, Boris. "Local Residents at Risk after China's Zijin triples production at Serbian Copper Complex." *Just Finance*, 9 May 2022, <https://justfinanceinternational.org/2022/05/09/local-residents-at-risk-after-chinese-zijin-triples-production-at-serbian-copper-complex/>; Marusic, Damir. "Corrosive Capital in the Western Balkans: An Analysis of Four High Impact Chinese Investments." *Center for International Private Enterprise*, May 2021, <https://www.cipe.org/resources/corrosive-capital-in-the-western-balkans-an-analysis-of-four-high-impact-chinese-investments/>.

57 Lim, Bergin, Lidberg. "The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy."

58 In September 2020, municipal authorities in Bor, the town at the smelter site, filed a criminal complaint against the company for exceeding already-loose air quality standards. In April 2022, thousands protested the mine's activities in Belgrade. See Spasic, Vladimir. "Bor files criminal complaint against Zijin over air pollution." *Balkan Green Energy News*, 17 September 2020, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/bor-files-criminal-complaint-against-zijin-for-air-pollution/>; Mrkela, "Local Residents at Risk after China's Zijin triples production at Serbian Copper Complex."

An important aspect of PRC interest in Serbia is to locate “dirty” coal-fueled and other projects that have become less acceptable in the PRC itself. These projects would be outright illegal in the EU because they do not align with EU environmental regulations and decarbonization objectives, among other requirements. A report by the Bulgaria-based Center for the Study of Democracy calculated a five-fold decrease in environmental indicators since the arrival of vast PRC investments in carbon-intensive industries such as steel production, coal, and mining.⁵⁹ The “dirty” deals are made possible by government officials and others eager to portray them as successes and gifts of the “big brother” of the PRC, even as thousands of citizens protest the corruption and environmental degradation.⁶⁰

Finding amenable partners such as Vucic leads to a mutually beneficial relationship: the PRC companies are insulated from democratically originated political or legal challenges to their operation, and in return Vucic gets to portray himself as the source of Serbian economic growth, fending off domestic political challengers.⁶¹

Labor Exploitation

PRC companies’ exploitation of workers violates human rights, undermines Serbian laborers, and contributes to the deterioration of the rule of law in Serbia. Certain PRC companies import labor to Serbia via human trafficking, or situations that quickly become human trafficking.

Abuse of PRC-contracted foreign nationals in Serbia is de facto legalized.

Abuse of PRC-contracted foreign nationals in Serbia is de facto legalized: in 2018, Serbia agreed to suspend Serbian labor law for imported workers working for PRC-based employers in Serbia for the first sixty months of their work in the country, and allow the PRC to apply its own labor law instead.⁶² Those PRC companies exploit not only PRC nationals but also third country nationals in Serbia, who also appear to be exempted from Serbia’s labor laws per the 2018 agreement.

At the mine in Bor, Serbia, run by PRC state-controlled Zijin Mining Group Co., PRC nationals protested in January 2021 over being forced to work “extremely long hours, being confined to their living quarters and having to hand over their passports.”⁶³ The Linglong project near Zrenjanin has likewise been the site of human trafficking and the exploitation of workers who are neither PRC nor Serbian citizens. In 2021, human rights activists and reporters revealed that Linglong subcontractors had hired citizens of Vietnam, forced them to sign contracts that violate Serbian law, took away their passports, and forced them to live in workers’ barracks that lacked adequate heating, adequate water, and sufficient basic sanitation such as enough showers and toilets. Reporting from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and others show that, on “commitment forms” that the workers were forced to sign, parts “appear to have been copied from those pertaining to Islamic countries where Sharia law is followed, such as Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. They claim that anyone caught stealing faces having their hands ‘cut off by the host country,’ or their head in the event of murder.”⁶⁴

Human trafficking and forced labor practices by PRC companies in Serbia appear to continue as of the writing of this report. Reporting from February 2024 alleges that imported workers with Indian citizenship have been abused by a PRC-based subcontractor for the Linglong tire factory.

59 Vladimirov and Gerganov. “Chinese Economic Influence in Europe: The Governance and Climate Conundrum.”

60 Vuksanovic, Vuk. “How Serbia Became China’s Dirty-Energy Dumping Ground.” *Foreign Policy*, 16 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/16/serbia-china-bri-coal-copper-dirty-energy-dumping-ground/>.

61 Phillips. “China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo”; European Commission. “Energy Community.” https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/international-organisations-and-initiatives/energy-community_en.

62 Serbia’s “Law on the Confirmation of the Agreement on Social Security between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People’s Republic of China” (2018) Article 7, accessed via <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/lat/pdf/zakoni/2018/2828-18-lat.pdf>

63 Dragojlo, Sasa. “‘Like Prisoners’: Chinese Workers in Serbia Complain of Exploitation.” *BalkanInsight*, 26 January 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/26/like-prisoners-chinese-workers-in-serbia-complain-of-exploitation/>.

64 Dragojlo, Sasa. “Documents Reveal Extent of Exploitation at Chinese Tire Site in Serbia.” *BalkanInsight*, 29 November, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/29/documents-reveal-extent-of-exploitation-at-chinese-tire-site-in-serbia/>.

A nonprofit dedicated to fighting human trafficking and labor exploitation claims the subcontractor denied workers their paychecks, confiscated their passports, forced them to live in inhumane conditions (crowded barracks lacking hygiene, not being provided enough meals), and forced them to work more hours than their contracts stipulated and on projects they were not qualified to work on. The human rights organization also claims that PRC-citizen managers “physically attacked the Indians” after the victims filed a complaint.⁶⁵

Political Cooperation

PRC diplomatic efforts in Serbia have paid off: local political elite support the expanding role of PRC as its members profit from private arrangements. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic frequently speaks of the “steel friendship” between the two countries, marking their rapidly strengthening political ties.⁶⁶ For example, during an online summit to mark the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in mid-2021, Vucic praised the achievements of the CCP as well as Xi, describing him as among the CCP leaders who had “led the largest project of social development and eradication of poverty in the history of mankind.”⁶⁷ In an interview with state-run China Global Television Network, Vucic underlined the connection between his own party and the CCP and its role as a model: “I’m very thankful to the Communist Party of China for having a good cooperation with the party I’m leading. We see how you made this kind of connection and cooperation between the citizens, party, and state institutions. That’s something that we really learned a lot from the Communist Party of China. And we believe that we can build it up in the future.”⁶⁸

The PRC’s newly prominent role was made clear during Vucic’s visit to Beijing for the opening of the Olympic Games in February 2022, where he met with Xi. In an official statement, Xi underlined that the two nations firmly supported each other’s core interests, with a focus on a long-term, strategic perspective, and stressed the “iron-clad” friendship between the two nations, which had grown “even stronger” since the pandemic.⁶⁹ For the PRC, an acquiescent leader such as Vucic helps the PRC advance its strategy of pushing back against the norms-setting of the EU and trans-Atlantic alliance.⁷⁰

Defense and Security

As PRC infrastructure projects and heavy investments have spread across Serbia and the number of Chinese and other foreign workers⁷¹ multiply, the PRC has expanded security-cooperation agreements with the Belgrade government.⁷² At the same time, deliveries of military hardware from the PRC to Serbia have increased, including after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁷³

The PRC has also sought to make Serbia a center of its “digital Silk Road” initiative, increasing support to “Serbia’s digital infrastructure with investments in data centers, smart surveillance, and cooperation with the Chinese company Huawei.

65 Dragojlo, Sasa. “Serbia Prosecution Investigates Alleged Human Trafficking of Indian Workers.” *BalkanInsight*, 2 February 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/02/serbia-prosecution-investigates-alleged-human-trafficking-of-indian-workers/>.

66 Stojanovic, Dusan. “China and Serbia Praise ‘Steel Friendship’ Amid Growing Ties.” *AP*, 28 October 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-lifestyle-beijing-friendships-serbia-d5f0db67fc59d583d53e81c3154b03b2>.

67 “Serbia Ignores West’s Concerns, Praises China’s Marxism.” *Euractiv*, 7 July 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbia-ignores-wests-concerns-praises-chinas-marxism/.

68 Cacic, Darko. “Serbia’s Emergence as China’s New Strategic Hub.” *Euractiv Bulgaria*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/serbias-emergence-as-chinas-new-strategic-hub/>;

China Global Television Network is the CCP-controlled former China Central Television (CCTV).

69 “Xi Meets Vucic in Beijing, Leaders Vow to Uphold China-Serbia Friendship.” *CGTN*, 5 February 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-02-05/Xi-Jinping-meets-with-visiting-Serbian-President-Vucic-17oRsENft1S/index.html>; “Xi, Vucic Meet during Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, Underline ‘Iron-Clad’ Friendship.” *Global Times*, 5 February 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1251461.shtml>; Despite the benefits of economic relations with the EU — whose trade with Serbia dwarfs that of China — Serbia has the least pro-EU citizens in the Western Balkans and the most pro-China citizens of Central and Eastern Europe. See more in Hartwell, Leon and Stefan Vladisavljev. “Serbia’s Delicate Dance with the EU and China.” *Just Security*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>.

70 Phillips. “China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo.”

71 See section above regarding labor exploitation.

72 Interview with Brigadier General Ljubomir Nikolic, Former Military Attache in the U.S. and Italy, Assistant Minister of Interior, and Chief of the Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Serbia for International Military Cooperation.

73 “Serbia Shows off New Chinese Missiles in Display of Military Power.” *Reuters*, 30 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-shows-off-new-chinese-missiles-display-military-power-2022-04-30/>; Vuksanovic, Vuk. “Serbia’s Arms Deals Show It’s Tilting away from Russia and toward China.” *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2022.

A report by the International Federation of Journalists noted, "One journalist [interviewed for the report] feared that Serbia was becoming a 'client state' of China, while others voiced concern that Serbia was serving as a testing ground for Chinese digital standards, which could then be rolled out to the rest of Europe."⁷⁴ The U.S. has accused Huawei of using the "digital Silk Road" to gather intelligence, which it denies.⁷⁵

By 2020, Belgrade was at the forefront of the implementation of PRC "safe city" technology, as Huawei installed cameras in the capital that were to be armed with facial recognition software and other features. By that year, over 1,000 cameras had been placed through the city center, with plans to install 8,000, under a "safe city" partnership — even though such security equipment is not in line with the EU standards adopted by Serbia. "Chinese 'safe' and 'smart' city systems carry a plethora of potential risks to security and human rights," reported the Financial Times. One California-based expert noted that the "safe city" model "represents the global expansion of authoritarianism. ... [It is] the ability to control, surveil, and coerce societies using this type of safe and smart city technology."⁷⁶

In late 2021, Serbian plainclothes police officers were seen using Huawei devices to record protesters.

The fears of abuse of such surveillance systems came to the fore during the wave of month-long environmental protests that swept the country in late 2021, during which plainclothes police officers were seen using Huawei devices to record protesters. Over one thousand protesters soon received misdemeanor traffic fines in the mail, identified in an unknown manner. The government denied use of facial-recognition software.⁷⁷

Electronic giant Huawei's close partnership with the city of Belgrade and the state telecommunications company RTS to install "smart city" technology, announced in 2019, came after Huawei had quietly made multiple payments to offshore accounts of persons tied to the state company (see above). As part of that agreement, PRC police officers arrived to assist Serbian officers in patrolling the streets of Belgrade to help to communicate with the increasing number of PRC workers and tourists in Serbia, per official statements.⁷⁸

Further, Belgrade was identified as one site in the global network of PRC overseas "police stations." The stations were used in part to "persuade" PRC-national dissidents and others to return to the PRC. One such return of a PRC national took place from Belgrade in 2018. "Attempts to police and punish people of Chinese descent overseas are not new [and Beijing] has no qualms about extending their institutions to other, typically unsuspecting, jurisdictions," Martin Hala, an expert on PRC-related topics in Europe including transnational repression, told RFE/RL.⁷⁹

74 Lim, Bergin, Lidberg. "The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy."

75 Phillips. "China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo."

76 Kyng, James, Valerie Hopkins, Helen Warrell, and Kathrin Hille. "Exporting Chinese Surveillance: The Security Risks of Smart Cities." Financial Times, 9 June 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/76fdac7c-7076-47a4-bcb0-7e75af0aadab>; Hopkins, Valeria. "Pandemic and EU Neglect Tighten Serbia Bonds with China." Financial Times, 17 June 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/eeb179ae-9c13-11ea-871b-edeb99a20c6e>.

77 Standish, Reid. "The Fight in China over Chinese-Style Surveillance," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 22 November 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-chinese-surveillance-backlash-standish/32142771.html>;

Standish, Reid. "Serbia's Legal Tug-of-War over Chinese Surveillance Technology," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 November 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-chinese-surveillance-backlash-standish/32145138.html>.

78 Reuters. "Chinese Police to Help Serbia Cope with Its Workers, Tourists." Euronews, 9 December 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/02/chinese-police-to-help-serbia-cope-with-its-workers-tourists>.

79 The quoted expert, Martin Hala of Charles University in Prague, went on to say, "The Chinese Communist Party wants to exert a comparable level of control over the Chinese people abroad as they do domestically."; "110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild." Safeguard Defenders, September 2022, <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/110%20Overseas%20%28v5%29.pdf>; Keller-Alant, Akos, Mila Djurdjevic, and Reid Standish. "Reports of China's Overseas 'Police Stations' Spark Controversy, Denial in Hungary and Serbia." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 November 2022,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/reports-china-police-stations-controversy-denial-hungary-serbia/32122899.html>.

Although civil society groups and others successfully pushed back against the full implementation of the “safe city” project in Belgrade for at least a time, Serbian and PRC security cooperation continued to deepen. In 2021, Beijing and Belgrade agreed to expand their security agreements, as the PRC formally stated it sought to “enhance security cooperation along the Belt and Road and deepen practical cooperation in fields such as building law-enforcement capacity.”⁸⁰

Education and Culture

The PRC has complemented its hard power tactics with many soft power projects in Serbia, most significantly in the education sector. Three Serbian universities have signed cooperation agreements with Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University (the University of Belgrade, University of Novi Sad, and University of Nis).⁸¹ Serbia’s universities also host two Confucius Institutes, academic centers funded by the PRC’s government which journalists globally have identified as having supported PRC efforts to censor academic discourse at host institutions and push curriculum that provide one-sided perspectives on PRC-related political questions.⁸² Further, a new Chinese Cultural Centre in Belgrade is nearing completion on the site of the former PRC embassy destroyed by NATO in 1999.⁸³ These tactics can be seen as part of a broader PRC strategy to promote its culture and values, bolstering the PRC’s image as “big brother” to Serbia and notions of “shared interest.” The Serbian elite endorses this view of the PRC to legitimize non-transparent deals and shift cooperation away from the EU and liberal democratic partners.⁸⁴

Beyond Information: Russia’s Foreign Authoritarian Influence in Serbia

Throughout history, Russia has had a fluctuating relationship with Serbia, beginning with guaranteeing Serbia’s autonomy under Ottoman rule in 1807 and using Serbia as a client state in geopolitical strategies against Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire until World War I. Post World War II, Serbia, as part of Communist Yugoslavia, initially aligned with the USSR. However, by 1948, ideological and geopolitical disputes led Yugoslavia to adopt a non-aligned policy, seeking cooperation with Western nations.

Today, Russia and Serbia continue their two-century pattern of use when interests align and abuse when they don’t. The Kremlin’s overarching aim in contemporary Serbia has been to establish a stronghold in the Western Balkans to thwart the influence and advance of the EU and NATO throughout the region. Serbia is the Kremlin’s closest partner and the center of Russian influence in the region. “Through a mix of hybrid tools, Russia is acting to increase its influence through corruption, coercion, business activity and state propaganda, with the objective of destabilizing the region and stalling its Euro-Atlantic integration,” notes regional expert Valbona Zeneli.⁸⁵

Russia’s influence in Serbia has four primary drivers: Russia’s historic role before, during, and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as well as its image in the imaginations of Serbian nationalists as the protector of the Serbs; increased Russian geostrategic ambitions in the Western Balkans; a sustained period of regional disengagement by the West; and local autocrats’ desire to acquire and expand power and its financial benefits without the constraints of Western demands for accountability and transparency.

80 “China, Serbia to Enhance Cooperation on Law Enforcement, Security.” Xinhua, 27 May 2021, http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/zhaokezhi/202105/27/content_WS60afa3c0c6d0df57f98da504.html.

81 Standish, Reid, Ljudmila Cvetkovic, and Maja Zivanovic. “China Deepens Its Balkans Ties Using Serbian Universities.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 May 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-balkans-ties-using-serbian-universities/31249503.html>.

82 Confucius Institutes are PRC-backed academic centers. They are attractive because they offer free Chinese-language instruction to partner universities abroad, which often do not have the resources to do so themselves. Although they may appear similar to counterparts like France’s Alliance Française, they are different because: 1) they are fully funded and controlled by the PRC state, and 2) they always sit inside partner institutions, rather than operating independently. The presence of a CI therefore risks compromising a host institution’s commitment to academic freedom, particularly since CIs at many foreign institutions have branched out beyond language instruction, working with their hosts to establishing scholarships, academic programs on bilateral ties with China, or even STEM exchange programs. In some countries, universities have refused to publish their contracts with CIs, while in others, CIs have attempted to shut down events perceived to be hostile to China at their host university.

83 NATO conducted an aerial bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 in an effort to prevent imminent threats of Serbian state-orchestrated genocide of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. During that campaign, U.S. forces bombed what their allegedly outdated maps described as a warehouse; this was the PRC’s embassy in Belgrade. The U.S. strike killed three PRC citizens who were working out of the embassy. The incident strained U.S.-PRC relations and strengthened the PRC’s relations with Serbia and Russia. The site has important symbolic value for the PRC-Serbia relationship. “Construction of Chinese Cultural Center Building Close to Completion.” eKapija, 21 May 2020, <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/2885377/construction-of-chinese-cultural-center-building-close-to-completion>; Standish, Reid. “China Builds a New Symbol in the Balkans — At the Site of a NATO Bombing.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-serbia-belgrade-embassy-balkans-presence-standish/32064870.html>.

84 Interview with a former diplomat who wished to stay anonymous.

85 Zeneli. “Dancing in the Dark.”

Russia works to directly influence virtually all sectors in Serbia (political, military, economic, cultural, educational, religious, and civil society sectors), and the Kremlin uses its extensive cultural and historical ties to Serbia as leverage to do so.

Diplomatic and Political Influence

Russian diplomacy in Serbia generates and supports direct influence activities that build on Russian and Serbian shared history, culture, and Orthodox religion.⁸⁶ Russian diplomatic and political efforts have maintained a strong anti-Western framework designed to secure Russian ambitions to counter NATO and EU enlargement, including by directly supporting Serbian military power – especially after the revolution in Ukraine in 2014, followed by Russia’s invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Further, the expert and careful efforts of a large and sophisticated diplomatic corps have secured critical Serbian legislation that cements Russia’s position as the nation’s exclusive energy supplier, enforcing Serbia’s dependence on the Kremlin.

Russia’s opposition to Kosovo’s independence has been at the heart of its support for Serbia. Beyond exploiting the Kosovo issue, Russia smartly used sustained regional disengagement by the EU and its complex political leadership and processes to its advantage to pull Serbian leadership back from its westward tilt when it sought to normalize relations with Kosovo.⁸⁷

An example of an early success was the long-delayed declaration of strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia in May 2013.⁸⁸ Russia continued to increase diplomatic pressure on Serbian leadership as it sought to expand its influence in the Western Balkans. Despite intense Western pressure on Serbian leadership to join in sanctions against Russia after its annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, Belgrade instead loudly opposed the introduction of sanctions against Russia.⁸⁹ In late 2017, Vucic – months after assuming the post of prime minister – met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and discussed “the development of the Russian-Serbian strategic partnership” in the political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian realms.⁹⁰ Yet when it became clear that no meaningful economic benefit from partnership with Russia was forthcoming, Serbia’s leadership tried to cover the failure with disinformation campaigns and by extolling the benefits of high-level visits by Russian diplomats.

Some of those benefits accrue to President Vucic directly. Vucic seems to relish the opportunity to be seen as a peer of the leaders of two of the post powerful countries in the world, Russia and the PRC. Putin’s regime indulges this desire, which costs little to Russia but props up Vucic’s presentation of himself to his countrymen as a strong leader and statesman who brings Serbia international respect that eclipses its relatively small size. This was the case when Vucic and Putin met in late 2021, in Sochi, as the 10-year gas contract between the two nations came to an end. Vucic publicly asked Putin for favorable terms as he faced his own reelection campaign.⁹¹ Six months later, soon after reelection and as he refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine or support sanctions against Russia, Vucic announced that he had secured from Moscow an “extremely favorable” three-year gas deal.

86 Interview with Milan S. Milutinovic, Ministry of Defence, Defence Policy Sector, Head of the European Integration Group, Directorate of European Integration and Project Management, Ministry of Defense, PhD Candidate of International and European Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade.

87 By early 2023, Serbia and Kosovo were engaged in the first steps of negotiations on normalization of relations, in talks supported by the EU. See “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia.” Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 18 March 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.

88 Russian diplomatic engagement with Serbia during this period was largely ignored by the West or seen as neutral, coinciding with the period of Western disengagement. Many observers viewed the strategic agreement as merely symbolic. See Mihajlovic, Branka. “Nikolic i Putin Potpisali Deklaraciju o Strateskom Partnerstvu.” Radio Slobodna Evropa, 24 May 2013, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/nikolic-i-putin-potpisali-deklaraciju-o-strateskom-partnerstvu/24996484.html>; “Serbia Thanks Moscow for Support on Kosovo.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 May 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-serbia-strategic-agreement/24995819.html>.

89 Zivanovic, Maja. “Serbia Thanks Russia for Support over Kosovo.” BalkanInsight, 22 February 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/02/22/russian-foreign-minister-support-independent-course-of-serbia-02-22-2018/>.

90 Sherwin, Emily. “Serbia Balances between Russia and the West.” DW, 19 December 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-balances-between-russia-and-the-west/a-41854351>.

91 “Russian, Serbian Presidents Emerge from Meeting with Talk of Gas Deal, ‘Tactical’ Weapons.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 November 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-vucic-gas-weapons/31579354.html>.

Serbia's energy dependence on Russia had left him without room to maneuver. Serbia was the sole nation in the region not to implement sanctions against Russia after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a decision made with its energy dependence in mind.⁹²

Serbia's nationalist leadership has supported narratives of pan-Slavic brotherhood and unity, anti-Western defiance and a mythos of Russia as Serbia's "big brother", in part an effort to distract the public from widespread corruption, anti-democratic governance, the suppression of independent media, and deterioration of the rule of law, all while moving away from the EU. These fables, however, have ensnared their storytellers: it has been difficult for Serbia's leadership to defy Russian demands because extreme nationalist factions within Serbia consider defiance of Russia's will as tantamount to rejection of Serbian popular will.⁹³

Extreme nationalist factions within Serbia consider defiance of Russia's will as tantamount to rejection of the Serbian popular will.

Russia exploits these narratives, especially by reminding Serbians that it is the Russian veto in the UN Security Council that prevents Kosovo from achieving greater recognition of its independence.⁹⁴ As a result, Russian diplomatic and political influence keeps a firm grip on Vucic and other nationalist leaders.⁹⁵

Economic Influence

Russia's economic influence in Serbia reflects its geostrategic ambitions. Moscow perceives Serbia as the periphery of Europe and a place to build its economic influence while it attempts to weaken Western interests and EU enlargement. Russia exerts its economic influence in Serbia primarily in three ways. First, the Kremlin exploits local corrupted power holders and members of the political elite through large investments in the energy sector. Second, Russia relies on nontransparent foreign investments by private actors; for example, Moscow uses corrupt oligarchs who are interconnected and mutually dependent on figures within the Serbian government apparatus to advance its agenda. Third, Russia tends to invest in politically sensitive areas such as energy as well as fuel processing and trading. These methods have given the Kremlin leverage to wield a disproportionate influence with a fraction of the more diverse and much larger economic investments of the EU, for example.⁹⁶

Russia remains a significant source of investment in Serbia. While its investments in Serbia collapsed in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, by 2022 Russia accounted for over ten percent of foreign investments in Serbia; this made it Serbia's third largest source of foreign investments, following the EU (collectively) and the PRC with just over a 31 percent share each.⁹⁷

92 In the deal, Serbia was set to pay rates three times lower than other European nations paid. Meanwhile, neighbors Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia quickly joined the EU's sanctions against Russia, and Montenegro did so at a later date. See "Vucic Says Serbia Secures Gas Deal with Russia Following Phone Talks with Putin." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-gas-deal-russia/31873908.html>; Stanicek, Branislav. "Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans." European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-gas-deal-russia/31873908.html>.

93 For example, during protests against the Vucic government, two factions among the opposition block were more pro-Russian than Vucic and his team. Both Dveri and the Military Union of Serbia have strong links to the Kremlin, and their representatives frequently visited the foreign ministry in Moscow. Right-wing party Dveri had a formal agreement with Russia's ruling party, United Russia. The Military Union worked with Russian veterans' organizations. The presence of these ultra-right groups "tied the West's hands from supporting the opposition," a source noted. See Samorukov, Maxim. "A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP_Samorukov_Balkans_v2.pdf.

94 Russian diplomatic efforts could ironically be seen as schizophrenic. On one hand, the Kremlin promised to back any solution acceptable to Serbia; on the other, it stipulated that any deal with Kosovo must be based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which established the UN presence in the region. See Borisov, Alexander. "Alexander Grushko: Russia Wants to See the Balkans as a Neutral Zone." Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 5 March 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/03/05/aleksandr-grushko-rossiia-hochet-videt-balkany-territoriejbezopasnosti.html?fbclid=IwAR3kHlw8YnjJCH3T1aMWRZtMeSCngpcBrl1Ym8Q6ZjmLX38DUrR59rE-UXw>.

95 Vuksanovic, Vuk. "Serbia Feels the Heat as Ukraine Conflict Burns." BalkanInsight, 24 February 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/24/serbia-feels-the-heat-as-ukraine-conflict-burns/>; Higgins, Andrew. "In Serbia, a Strongman Under Fire Hails Himself as Defender of the Nation" The New York Times, 9 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/09/world/europe/serbia-kosovo-protests-vucic.html>.

96 Conley, Heather et al. "Serbia: Case Study" in "The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe." Center for Strategic & International Studies, 13 October 2016, p. 11, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

97 National Bank of Serbia, Foreign Direct investments, by country, 2010-2022 (BPM6) https://nbs.rs/en/drugi-nivo-navigacije/statistika/platni_bilans/

Yet this figure may “underestimate[...] the true value of Russian investment in the country. [As of 2018], much of Russian FDI in Serbia [came] through Russian-owned companies with offices in EU member states such as Austria and the Netherlands,” a report by Center for the Study of Democracy notes.⁹⁸ EU sanctions against Russia after its expansion of its war in Ukraine may have cut off some of those routes of Russian-origin investments. Instead, Russian-origin FDI has become more overt: according to the Serbian Agency for Business Registers, “1,020 Russian-owned companies were founded in Serbia in 2022 – more than 12 times the figure of the previous year, when 82 such companies were founded.”⁹⁹

In addition to corporate investment, Russia has also expanded its presence in the Serbian economy through direct government-to-government loans. These direct loans allow the Serbian government to avoid structural reform requirements of the International Monetary Fund and have left Serbia further beholden to Russia. For example, in January 2013, the Russian government extended \$800 million to Serbia to modernize the country’s outdated railway infrastructure, followed quickly by a \$500 million loan, while Russia pledged its support in negotiations with Kosovo.¹⁰⁰ As the Center for the Study of Democracy notes, considering the annual interest rate of 4.1 percent, “the Russian loan had less favorable conditions than typical loans from European development financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and European Investment Bank.”¹⁰¹ As the report states, the larger Russian loan “was not publicly debated, and it seems that Serbia agreed exclusively to hire Russian contractors in violation of EU norms on competition and transparency in public procurement.” Furthermore, the loan negotiations coincided with contract talks between Gazprom and Serbian gas company *Srbijagas*.¹⁰²

Oil and Gas

Serbia is almost wholly dependent on Russia for its natural gas supply and approximately 25 percent of its oil imports.¹⁰³ Russia also controls Serbia’s main energy companies and delivery infrastructure, including gasoline stations, thus quite effectively tying Serbia to the Kremlin.¹⁰⁴

Russia has repeatedly leveraged its political influence to increase its control over Serbia’s energy industry. For example, in 2008, Russia’s Gazprom acquired a majority stake in Serbia’s *Naftna Industrija Srbije* (“Oil Industry of Serbia”) at a below-market price in apparent exchange for U.N. support on Kosovo and a promise to build the South Stream pipeline; South Stream was later canceled in 2014 due to Western sanctions and replaced by the TurkStream project. This pipeline, operational since January 2021, transports Russian gas to Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, even as Serbia explores ways to reduce its energy dependence on Russia. Considering Gazprom investments, including gas stations, along with hundreds of millions invested by the Russian oil and gas company Lukoil in the wholesale fuel distribution market, “a more realistic estimate of total Russian FDI – including indirect investment – would be around USD two billion, or six percent of Serbia’s GDP,” noted the Center for the Study of Democracy.¹⁰⁵

98 Vladimirov, Martin et al. “Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks.” Center for the Study of Democracy, 25 July 2018, https://www.cipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WESTERN_BALKANS_WEB_pdf.pdf; Andjelkovic, Katarina. “Assessing Russia’s Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans.” European Western Balkans, 8 March 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/03/08/assessing-russias-economic-footprint-western-balkans/>.

99 RFE/RL Balkan Service, “Serbia Records Big Year For Foreign Direct Investment, Despite Ukraine War.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 January 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/32218795.html>.

100 Korsunskaya, Darya. “Russia to Lend Serbia \$500 Million, Pledges Support on Kosovo.” Reuters, 10 April 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-serbia-loan-idUSBRE9390OP20130410>; Radomir, Ralev. “Serbia Spends Full Amount of \$800 Mln. Russian Loan for Railway Projects.” SeeNews, 16 November 2017, <https://seenews.com/news/serbia-spends-full-amount-of-800-mln-russian-loan-for-railway-projects-591318>.

101 Vladimirov et al. “Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks.”

102 Vladimirov et al. “Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks.”

103 Paszkowski, Michal. “Serbia activates natural gas supply efforts.” Institute of Central Europe, 28 July 2023, <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/serbia-activates-natural-gas-supply-efforts/>.

104 Vuksanovic, Vuk. “Russia’s Gas Gift to Serbia Comes with Strings Attached.” Euronews, 12 April 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/04/russia-s-gas-gift-to-serbia-comes-with-strings-attached-view>.

105 These investments to secure Serbian support are small. See Vladimirov et al., “Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks.”

The reverse is true as well: Russia leverages its control over Serbia's energy industry for political concessions. For example, as mentioned in the section on Russian diplomatic and political influence in Serbia above, in April 2021, Serbia's President Vucic announced that he would travel to Russia to "ask and beg" for a lower price for Russian gas as he prepared for elections in early 2022. In May 2022, just months after Russia expanded its war in Ukraine and very soon after the start of his second presidential term, Vucic ignored Western sanctions against Russia and made a gas deal with Moscow.¹⁰⁶

Russia also exerts influence in Serbia through corporate ownership of local businesses, especially in the oil and gas industries. According to the Center for the Study of Democracy, Russian and Russian-controlled companies control revenues of about five billion euros, or about "13 percent of the total revenue generated by the domestic economy." The same study notes that "the indirect footprint of Russian companies goes through several channels, including the dependence of local companies on imports of Russian raw materials such as natural gas; debts accumulated for supplies of natural gas; and the dependence of domestic companies on exports to Russia or loans provided by Russian-controlled banks."¹⁰⁷

Russian economic and influence efforts are well disseminated through an aggressive and well-engineered Russian disinformation apparatus, described in an earlier section of this report.

Defense and Security

Russian influence in Serbia's defense sector is straightforward and connected to its political, information space, and economic influence efforts.¹⁰⁸ The Kremlin's overarching aim is to establish a stronghold in the Western Balkans while thwarting the influence of the EU and NATO, not only in Serbia but in the region. Moreover, Moscow is the largest supplier of arms and warplanes to the Serbian armed forces, triggering worry among Serbia's neighbors, which are either NATO allies or prospective members of the Western military alliance.¹⁰⁹ Russian influence in the Serbian defense sector is a sensitive activity designed to establish partnerships that have empowered revisionist voices among the top Serbian leadership.¹¹⁰

To camouflage their own corruption, many Serbian government officials publicly lean toward Russia, which makes no demands on accountability and transparency in defense contracts and procurement.¹¹¹ This pro-Russia stance in turn undermines prospects for cooperation with the EU and U.S. by tempting officials to make unsavory deals with Russia (and other malign actors) that leaves them vulnerable to Russian leverage. Russian pressure is sometimes specifically targeted at military contracting, which has material consequences: the Serbian military can be locked into using Russian equipment, rendering Serbia reliant on Russia for parts and maintenance.

106 The gas talks, which started before the April elections, secured success for the ruling party that could demonstrate to the public that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy was growing, and quiet fears of Serbia's alignment with the authoritarian power. See Dragojlo, Sasa. "Serbian PM Denies Gas Deal with Russia Linked to Sanctions." *BalkanInsight*, 30 May 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/30/serbian-pm-denies-gas-deal-with-russia-linked-to-sanctions/>; Associated Press. "Serbia Ignores EU Sanctions, Secures Gas Deal with Putin." *Voa News*, 28 May 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin/6594509.html>; Vuksanovic. "Russia's Gas Gift to Serbia Comes with Strings Attached."

107 Vuksanovic. "Russia's Gas Gift to Serbia Comes with Strings Attached," p. 19; Analysis of the Serbian corporate database as seen in Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018, p. 19.

108 Interview with a counsellor within the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, and a former diplomatic representative of the Republic of Serbia, who wished to remain anonymous.

109 For example, in 2018, the Defense Ministry announced that Russia was the biggest donor of arms to Serbia when it received six MiG-29 aircraft, 30 BRDM-2 armored reconnaissance vehicles, and 30 T-72 tanks with supporting logistics elements. Also, Serbia obtained significant discounts and other benefits for military equipment from Russia. Defense procurement priorities in Serbia as well as defense policy and planning are conducted in a non-transparent manner. See Ozturk, Talha. "Serbia: Russia Largest Donor to Our Army." *AAcom*, 1 August 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-russia-largest-donor-to-our-army/1546559>; Stanicek, "Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans"; Georgievski, Jovana. "Weapon Procurement and Military Neutrality: Where is Serbia's Defense Policy Heading?" *European Western Balkans*, 1 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/10/weapon-procurement-and-military-neutrality-where-is-serbias-defense-policy-heading/>.

110 During live-ammunition drills the Serbian military held with Russian and Belarussian troops in mid-2019, Serbian Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin underlined that Belgrade had allies in any future war in the Balkans. These statements came amid increased tensions with Kosovo. During the "Slavic Brotherhood" drills, Vulin referred to the bombing by NATO of Serbia in 1999, pronouncing in a statement, "We have friends" and "that horrible moment in our history when we were all alone will never repeat again." Vulin made these statements even as Serbia was seeking EU membership. See Associated Press. "Serbia's Defense Chief Crows about Russian Military Allies." *VOA Europe*, 24 June 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_serbias-defense-chief-crows-about-russian-military-allies/6170538.html.

111 Although EU membership would be beneficial to Serbia as a whole, it may not serve the interests of Serbia's ruling elites. As Leon Hartwell and Stefan Vladislavjev note, "A popular Western assumption is that EU membership serves as the most important carrot to facilitate political and economic reforms in Serbia. While EU membership would be beneficial to Serbia as a whole, it may not serve the interests of Serbia's ruling elites." Hartwell, Leon, and Stefan Vladislavjev. "Serbia's Delicate Dance with the EU and China." *Just Security*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>.

When Russia's efforts to influence Serbian policy via "soft" methods, such as portraying itself as Russia's "big brother" fail, then it falls back on these material ties. For example, in early 2022, Maria Zakharova, the chief press officer of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ominously reminded Serbians that "the defense capability of Serbia" largely depended on Russia.¹¹²

Serbia also engages in military-to-military relations and conducts joint military exercises with Russia. Although Serbia is not a member or aspiring member of NATO, it is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace initiative. As such, Serbia's military holds far more joint exercises with NATO members than with Russia and maintains a cooperative relationship with the Ohio National Guard of the U.S.¹¹³ Nonetheless, Serbian media report on Russian-Serbian joint exercises much more intensively than NATO-Serbian joint exercises; many Serbians are not even aware that joint exercises with NATO occur at all.

Moreover, there are potential concerns around Russian military presence in Serbia through the controversial Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Nis. Close to the border with Kosovo and operational since about 2013, the center houses planes, helicopters, and other hardware as well as trained Russian emergency response personnel who are activated in cases of humanitarian disaster, such as flooding. The U.S. State Department has warned that Russia may abuse the center for espionage or other undeclared purposes.¹¹⁴ In 2017, Russia sought to gain diplomatic status for center personnel; lobbying by the U.S., which warned that a change in status would prevent Serbian accountability over the center's personnel, ultimately helped quash Russia's request.¹¹⁵ From publicly available sources, there is no indication that Russia has used the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center for military or espionage purposes, but the array of Russian hardware and personnel suggests it has latent dual-use capabilities. One such latent capability was highlighted in 2023 when Serbian lawyer Cedomir Stojkovic alleged that Russian diplomats as well as local right-wing organizations and individuals connected with the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center were tied to local recruitment efforts by the private Russian military contractor Wagner Group to fight in Russia's war in Ukraine. Vucic publicly criticized those recruiting efforts.¹¹⁶

Conclusion: The Nexus of PRC and Russian Influence in Serbia

While there is no obvious evidence of direct coordination between the PRC's and Russian influence efforts in Serbia, each authoritarian actor acting separately exploits many of the same democratic weaknesses in the country. What brings the PRC and Russian approaches in Serbia together is that they are both facilitated by Serbian domestic political actors, who are ideologically, politically, and/or financially aligned with their interests. Information manipulation efforts rely on the exploitation of domestic media and information networks that exist in Serbia independently of the PRC or Russia's influence. The PRC's and Russia's diplomatic efforts both run through the ruling SNS and President Vucic, who benefits from associating with Xi and Putin because that association supports his domestic image as a respected statesman and a guarantor of economic growth.

Foreign authoritarian influence in Serbia exploits these democratic weaknesses and it also reinforces them. PRC and Russian information influence operations keep Serbia's media sector pliant by offering rewards to authoritarian-aligned journalists and offering free or low-cost content sharing to an overworked and underpaid journalist labor force.

112 See for example: "Kremlin: Serbia's Defence Capability Largely Depends on Russia." EurActiv, 6 January 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/kremlin-serbias-defence-capability-largely-depends-on-russia/.

113 In 2019, for example, Serbia conducted 13 military exercises with NATO members but only four with Russia. "Serbia Held More Exercises with NATO than with Russia in 2019." European Western Balkans, 18 November 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/18/serbia-held-more-exercises-with-nato-than-with-russia-in-2019/>.

114 See, for example, Birnbaum, Michael. "Russia's Low-Cost Influence Strategy Finds Success in Serbia." Washington Post, 3 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russias-low-cost-influence-strategy-finds-success-in-serbia--with-the-help-of-fighter-jets-media-conspiracies-and-a-biker-gang/2018/10/03/49dbf48e-8f47-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d_story.html; "Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center Continues to Operate [Srpsko-Ruski Humanitarni Centar Nastavlja sa Radom]." Citysmart Media, 26 April 2013, <https://citysmart.media/nekategorizovano/srpsko-ruski-humanitarni-centar-nastavlja-sa-radom/>.

115 See, for example, Djurdjic, Milena. "US Sees Russia's 'Humanitarian Center' in Serbia as Spy Outpost." VOA News, 15 June 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-sees-russia-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost/3902402.html>.

116 RFE/RL Balkan Service, "Criminal Complaints Filed in Belgrade over Wagner Recruiting Activities in Serbia." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 January 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/criminal-complaints-belgrade-wagner-recruiting-serbia/32230951.html>.

Further, journalism in Serbia can sometimes be a dangerous profession, but journalists who are aligned with Serbia's ruling SNS (and in turn with the PRC and Russia's narratives) are generally protected from this danger.¹¹⁷ Diplomatic and economic support from the PRC and Russia often runs through the person of President Vucic, increasing the risk of "the personalization of governance and politicization of state institutions," a threat identified in Freedom House's 2022 Freedom in the World report for Serbia.¹¹⁸ And the perceived influence of both Russia and the PRC (as well as other non-democratic partners) allows President Vucic to demonstrate that he has alternatives to the EU, and that he feels empowered to resist EU pressure to introduce democratic reforms.

The PRC and Russia also engage in influence tactics that differ from each other. For example, as described above, Russia plays up its defense and arms support to Serbia, while the PRC's coordinated information, diplomatic, and economic influence efforts support its "global image making" "as an enabler of economic growth."¹¹⁹ The PRC's and Russia's influence tactics differ because their goals differ: as former State Department official David L. Phillips writes, "While Russia seeks to foster chaos and instability, China is systematically taking steps to integrate and control the economies of Balkan countries."¹²⁰

Despite these differences in goals, both the PRC and Russia have fostered and exploited years of corrupt governance as well as regional neglect by the EU and U.S. to expand their influence in regional powerhouse Serbia and by so doing, in the wider Western Balkans. What was initially low-cost and sporadic involvement by the two powers has steadily transformed into a multilayered presence across a range of sectors. The two nations offer alternatives to alignment with the EU and the trans-Atlantic alliance by dangling incentives to powerful elites, who benefit from weakened institutions and endless delays to democratic reforms that, if one day implemented, would strengthen the rule of law.

117 In an interview with the Clingendael Institute, one journalist described "the 'wage for fear' [ratio as being] too small for many media workers, making them lose motivation to fight for freedom of information and their own personal freedom: Bajic, Dragana, and Wouter Zweers. "Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia." European Policy Centre, July 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/declining-media-freedom-and-biased-reporting-in-serbia/3-the-crisis-of-the-journalistic-profession-in-serbia/>.

118 "Freedom in the world 2022: Serbia." Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2022>.

119 Vladislavjev. "Facilitating Kleptocracy: The Consequences of China's Corrosive Capital in Serbia."

120 Phillips. "China, Not Russia, Is the Greater Threat to Kosovo."



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ARGENTINA

Introduction

Over the past two decades, under the first two administrations of then-President (2007-2015) and then Vice President (2019-2023) Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina has deepened its ties with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the expense of its relationships with the United States and other democracies. Plagued by economic crises and political dysfunction, Argentina has looked to the PRC for much-needed financing and investment with fewer conditions than required by the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral institutions. It has looked to Russia for political support and as an alternative to the U.S. The government of President Alberto Fernández (2019-2023), in which Vice President Kirchner played a leading role, actively courted partnerships and investments from both powers with the publicly stated intention of distancing Argentina from reliance on the U.S. dollar and from U.S. strategic interests. While current President Javier Milei (2023-present) has signaled that he will reevaluate the country's relationship with the PRC and announced that it won't join BRICS, it is too soon to tell whether he will pursue such a policy in the face of close economic ties and business interests.

The PRC and Russia, for their part, have encouraged the cultivation of closer relations, viewing Argentina as a key pathway for influence in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean. The PRC has sought to benefit from Argentina's economic crises by providing a financial lifeline through increased trade and investment in sectors ranging from mining to energy infrastructure. It has utilized its economic leverage as Argentina's top trading partner to advance its own economic, political, and security interests in the country and across the region. Russia has welcomed the opportunity to enhance its influence in an area of the world long seen as in the American sphere of influence, both to project Russian power abroad and undermine the U.S. while at the same time pursuing economic engagement in areas of strategic interest such as nuclear energy. Both Russia and the PRC seek to advance narratives that weaken the U.S. position in Argentina and the hemisphere and to promote their respective models of governance and international partnership.

Argentina has a checkered record in recent decades on combatting corruption and supporting rule of law and democratic governance. These challenges encourage foreign authoritarian actors, often in concert with domestic actors with authoritarian tendencies, to use the openings they create to influence Argentina's political and economic system to advance their own interests. The result undermines the rule of law, independent media, and U.S. interests. This report analyzes the scope and scale of PRC and Kremlin influence in Argentina in the economic, political, and information domains and its impact on democracy and good governance in the country. Further, it assesses to what degree – if any – Russia's and the PRC's strategies and tactics overlap and if there is an impact on democratic norms and institutions in Argentina. The report is based on interviews with nine individuals who have direct knowledge of some of Russia's and the PRC's actions in Argentina, who monitors their activities, and an open-source review of literature in English and Spanish.

The Kirchner Legacy

During her two terms as president, from 2007 to 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner expanded Argentina's relations with both Russia and the PRC, welcoming growing trade and diplomatic ties, in line with the Peronist Party's and Kirchnerism's anti-imperialist, populist, "third position" (non-aligned) agenda.¹ Argentina looked to the PRC for investment and as an alternative to U.S. and multilateral lending for industry and infrastructure.²

While economic issues are foundational to the partnership and are pursued at both the national and subnational level, Kirchner's government also sought to expand political and security ties.³ Argentina has been an attractive partner for the PRC's own development needs and to advance its economic and political objectives across Latin America. Argentina's rich natural resources provide mineral and food commodities essential for the PRC's own development, and its advanced manufacturing and technology sector allows for robust commercial partnerships. Argentina also serves as a hub for PRC engagement across Latin America, given its membership in the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) regional trade group.

The PRC presents itself as an ideal partner to support Argentina through its economic crises, and in turn it benefits from increased political influence in the country. Under the Kirchner administration, the two countries signed the 2014 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership treaty, expanded military-to-military cooperation, increased trade levels, and struck deals on a few notable investments, including the controversial building of a PRC owned and financed deep space station almost entirely free of Argentinian oversight or information-sharing agreements.⁴ The PRC also inked deals with Argentina's state media, in addition to influential dailies such as *La Nación* and the media conglomerate Group América over this period, providing the PRC with a local platform for disseminating pro-PRC narratives.⁵

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Russia has a longstanding, leftist, revolutionary legacy in Latin America. Argentina has looked to Russia for as an alternative ally to the U.S. and for deepened military, security, and economic engagement. Russia's interests in Argentina are multiple. They include advancing its influence in the U.S.' "backyard," eroding U.S. leadership in the hemisphere, expanding Russian military arms and equipment sales, and deepening commercial and energy ties, in part to offset sanctions imposed over its aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022.⁶ Russian efforts to develop ideological allies in the region appear to center on Argentina where it finds common cause with the Peronist party, most notably its Russia-aligned wing.

During her tenure, Kirchner welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin to Argentina, allowed Russian media network RT to broadcast in the country, and increased meat and other exports to Russia. Kirchner has cultivated close ties with Putin and engaged in numerous high-level exchanges with him, more than any other leader in Latin America.⁷ In 2015, the two announced a comprehensive strategic partnership with agreements on Russian investment in hydroelectricity, nuclear energy, and cooperation on defense.⁸

1 Over the past three decades, Argentina's relationship with the United States has oscillated between formal, cordial diplomatic ties to strained and non-cooperative relations, especially when former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is in power either directly or indirectly.

2 Lanteigne, Marc. "Argentina Joins China's Belt and Road." *The Diplomat*, 10 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/argentina-joins-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

3 Ellis, Evan. "New directions in the deepening Chinese-Argentina engagement." *Global Americans*, 11 February 2021, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2021/02/new-directions-in-the-deepening-chinese-argentine-engagement/>.

4 Gedan, Benjamin, Veronica Uribe-Kessler, and Joey Zhou, "From Beijing to Buenos Aires." *Woodrow Wilson Center*, 2021 October 22, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/beijing-buenos-aires>.

5 Cook, Sarah. "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022 - Argentina Country Report." *Freedom House*, September 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/argentina/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

6 Gurganus, Julia. "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 May 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>.

7 Bouchard, Joseph. "The Fernández-Kirchner Government in Argentina Trades American Support for Chinese and Russian Money." *Spheres of Influence*, 11 April 2022, <https://spheresofinfluence.ca/argentina-kirchner-economic-crisis-china-russia-imf/>.

8 "Russia and Argentina agree framework energy deals." *BBC*, 23 April 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32443264>.

Deepened ties during Cristina Kirchner's administrations set the foundation for Argentina's relationships with both countries today. Former President Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) did attempt a rebalancing of Argentina's foreign policy, pursuing renewed ties with the U.S. and assessing relations with Russia and the PRC with a particular focus on limiting Argentina's economic dependence on the PRC. While Macri was successful in revitalizing ties with the U.S. to some degree, disentangling from the PRC proved more difficult given the deep economic and trade ties between the two countries, as well as the PRC's willingness to employ coercive strategies.⁹ The case of the Santa Cruz dams project illustrates this point. Upon taking office, Macri's administration conducted a review of the structure and financing deals signed with China during the Kirchner administration. The review of two important loan-for-infrastructure agreements revealed a cross-default clause between them; if Argentina pulled out of a deal to borrow \$4.7 billion from PRC banks to build two hydropower dams in Santa Cruz, the PRC would pull its financing for a project to improve the Belgrano railway network, a vital hub. Despite the political will to pull the dams project, as the Santa Cruz project is located in a Kirchner stronghold and there were corruption allegations around her business dealings in the province, Macri was invested in the railway hub and allowed both to go ahead, though he was able to secure some concessions. As Luke Patey, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, said of the case in *Foreign Policy* in 2017, "It was a clear demonstration that Chinese finance is becoming a potent tool of coercion in global affairs...Beijing managed to exploit its significant economic influence in Argentina to rebuff the agenda of its duly elected president. And while Mauricio Macri is the latest global leader to feel the political power of Chinese trade and investment, he is certain not to be the last." In the end, the Macri administration was unable to pivot as much as initially planned. Moreover, the 2019 election of President Alberto Fernández and Vice-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner ostensibly undid any successful rebalancing.

Since taking office, their administration has gone out of its way to open doors to the PRC, Russia, and Iran while marginalizing the U.S. and its strategic allies, marking a return to the anti-America posture adopted under Kirchner's presidency. Support for economic recovery after decades of high inflation, unemployment, debt, and corruption drove Argentina's deepened ties with the PRC and Russia. However, Argentina has also welcomed the closer political and security ties that have resulted from closer economic engagement.¹⁰ Cristina Kirchner, who many viewed as wielding more real power than former President Fernández,¹¹ personally took over managing the relationships with the PRC and Russia, as she did when she was president. The Kirchner administration was accused of extensive documented corruption and ties to multiple malign state and nonstate actors,¹² but outreach to Russia and the PRC continued at a rapid pace with worrisome results for democracy and rule of law in Argentina.

Economic Ties and Political Influence: The PRC in Argentina

Economic ties between the PRC and Argentina span an array of sectors, including mining, agriculture, and aerospace and defense. Trade flows have expanded drastically in recent years, growing 129 percent from 2010 through 2020.¹³ In 2020, the PRC was Argentina's top trade partner. Argentina bought \$8.3 billion of PRC exports while selling the PRC goods worth \$5.4 billion. In contrast, the U.S. exported products worth \$5 billion to Argentina and bought goods worth \$3.5 billion.¹⁴ Since 2017, Argentina has received \$17 billion in loans from PRC banks, and in 2022 Argentina was invited to become a member of the BRICS' New Development Bank, an alternative to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.¹⁵

9 Patey, Luke. "China Made Mauricio Macri a Deal He Couldn't Refuse." *Foreign Policy*, 24 January 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/24/china-made-mauricio-macri-a-deal-he-couldnt-refuse/>.

10 Bouchard. "The Fernández-Kirchner Government in Argentina Trades American Support for Chinese and Russian Money."

11 Gonzalez, Fernando. "Fernández-Kirchner Looks like Medvedev-Putin." *WorldCrunch*, 31 August 2020, <https://worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/argentina-fernaacutendez-kirchner-looks-like-medvedev-putin>.

12 Farah, Douglas. "Inside Argentina: 'La Cámpora' in Argentina, Back to the Future." *InterAmerican Institute for Democracy*, Democracy Paper 9, 2013, <https://www.amazon.com/Inside-Argentina-Democracy-Paper-Douglas/dp/1493714546>

13 "OECD Trade, Complexity and Rankings, China-Argentina." *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/arg>. Accessed 4 January 2023.

14 "OECD Trade, Complexity and Rankings, United States-Argentina." *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/arg>. Accessed 4 January 2023.

15 Levaggi, Ariel González and Ryan C. Berg. "Argentina's Embrace of China Should Be a Wake-up Call." *Foreign Policy*, 23 May 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/23/argentina-china-us-imf-bri-debt-economy-summit-americas/>.

During a June 2023 meeting in Beijing between Zhao Leji, the head of the PRC National People's Congress, and Cecilia Moreau, the President of Argentina's Chamber of Deputies, the PRC also expressed support for Argentina's broader inclusion in the BRICS group.¹⁶

PRC investments in Argentina include some in strategic sectors such as lithium mining¹⁷ and energy, as well as in more sensitive sectors like 'smart' cities and surveillance technology. These sectors are a key part of the PRC's economic engagement at the subnational level, and they are also areas where national and provincial government officials have sought PRC investment. In a few illustrative examples, ZTE signed an agreement with the province of Jujuy to install facial recognition cameras, the city of Buenos Aires installed a PRC-made facial recognition system, and local officials and businesspeople in Chubut, Jujuy, and Salta have pursued PRC investment in solar and wind energy.¹⁸

Former President Fernández sought to further cultivate ties. At the start of the February 2022 Winter Olympics he flew to Beijing, where he met with PRC President Xi Jinping and promised closer cooperation between Argentina and the PRC on a range of issues. On the economic front, most notable was the announcement that Argentina would formally join the Belt and Road Initiative, further deepening economic ties between the two countries with the promise of PRC lending.¹⁹ The joint communiqué issued after the meeting noted \$23.7 billion in PRC funding to Argentina and cooperation in "agriculture, mining, energy, and investment."²⁰ During the visit, Argentina agreed to spend \$8 billion on a procurement and construction contract for the Atucha 3 power plant, with much of the financing for its expenditures coming from the PRC. The agreement was hailed by both sides as the beginning of a new cycle of cooperation and mutual understanding. PRC leaders called the agreement a sign "of auspicious prosperity for both nations, allowing the strengthening of ties for the peaceful development of nuclear energy generation, nuclear science and technology, and industrial development."²¹ Fernández also agreed to renew and expand a controversial currency swap agreement with the PRC from \$20.6 billion to \$24 billion (out of a total of about \$34 billion in total foreign reserves),²² again with the explicit intention of moving away from the U.S. dollar.²³

The visit had implications for the Argentina-PRC relationship beyond commercial and trade ties. Xi and Fernández discussed a wide-ranging agreement between Argentina's foreign ministry and the China Media Group, opening the door to a cornerstone of the PRC's expanding media and propaganda presence in the region.²⁴ Fernández also paid a visit to the PRC telecommunications giant Huawei, in yet another rebuff to U.S. efforts to exclude the company from building Argentina's 's developing 5G network over concerns of data privacy and espionage. Huawei has been operational in Argentina since 2001 and supplies vital hardware to Argentina's top three telecommunications companies.²⁵ Argentina and China also reaffirmed their mutual support for key political issues, with Fernández noting Argentina's support for the "principle of One China" and his admiration for the Chinese communist system. In turn, Xi noted the PRC's support of Argentina's claim of sovereignty over the Falklands (Malvinas) Islands.²⁶

16 "China pushes for Argentina to join BRICS." Fundación Andrés Bello, 26 June 2023, <https://fundacionandresbello.org/en/news/argentina-%F0%9F%87%A6%F0%9F%87%B7-news/china-pushes-for-argentina-to-join-brics/>.

17 Lithium is a key component in batteries for electric vehicles and there is vast demand for this important mineral as countries look to address climate change through lower emissions.

18 Jáuregui, Juliana González. "How Argentina Pushed Chinese Investors to Help Revitalize Its Energy Grid." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 December 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/22/how-argentina-pushed-chinese-investors-to-help-revitalize-its-energy-grid-pub-86062>.

19 Lanteigne, Marc. "Argentina Joins China's Belt and Road." *The Diplomat*, 10 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/argentina-joins-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

20 Ellis, Evan. "Alberto Fernández's Magical Odyssey to Russia and China." *Global Americans*, 15 February 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/02/alberto-fernandezs-magical-odyssey-to-russia-and-china/>.

21 "China and Argentina sign nuclear project deal." *World Nuclear News*, 2 February 2022, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/China-and-Arentina-sign-nuclear-project-deal>.

22 "Argentina Foreign Exchange Reserves, 1956-2023," CEIC Data, 20 March 2023, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/argentina/foreign-exchange-reserves>

23 Doll, Ignacio Olivera. "Argentina Asks China to Expand Yuan Swap to Strengthen Reserves." *Bloomberg*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-26/argentina-asks-china-to-expand-yuan-swap-to-strengthen-reserves>.

24 "La Argentina profundiza su relación con el mayor conglomerado de medios de China [Argentina deepens its relationship with the largest media conglomerate in China]." Ministry of Foreign Relations of Argentina, 15 November 2021, <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/es/actualidad/noticias/la-argentina-profundiza-su-relacion-con-el-mayor-conglomerado-de-medios-de-china>.

25 "La Argentina profundiza su relación con el mayor conglomerado de medios de China [Argentina deepens its relationship with the largest media conglomerate in China]."

26 Ellis, Evan. "Alberto Fernández's Magical Odyssey to Russia and China."

27 Author interview with Argentinian business person, Buenos Aires, 20 June 2022.

Such deepened ties have created an environment for increased PRC political influence in the country. As one business source who deals directly with the PRC and the Fernández government interviewed for this report noted, “China understands that Argentina is constantly in an inflation-to-recession cycle, and that it can apply pressure to get what it wants, especially when you have a political elite that is willing to give in easily. It is a very convenient arrangement for both, and the U.S. can’t compete because it plays by different rules.”²⁷ The PRC has also used the opacity offered by the corrupt, but controlling, Kirchner power structure to advance its interests with little public scrutiny, while also seeking to marginalize the U.S. to the greatest possible degree.

Two sources interviewed for this report²⁸ said PRC representatives, as they have been documented doing in many other countries around the world, often bully officials to get what they want by threatening to cancel projects or investments, rewarding officials by promising trips to China, offering consulting jobs to relatives, or facilitating business opportunities that were difficult to trace.²⁹

The two scenarios described below provide a window into understanding how the PRC deploys coercive tactics in Argentina to advance its interests and sideline those of the U.S. Both cases relate to the PRC’s growing use of science to legitimize its presence while simultaneously expanding its military footprint.

Deep Space

The two areas where PRC representatives focus scientific endeavors for strategic gain under what Xi calls “the correct political inclination” that is “imbued with patriotic feelings” are exploration in Antarctica and deep space. The Chinese Communist Party controls both endeavors and has already integrated them into the PRC’s civil-military complex.³⁰ Given its geopolitical position, Argentina has become a key frontline for PRC’s efforts.

The first case involves the PRC’s pursuit of deep space exploration from Argentina. When the PRC signed a treaty with the government in 2015 to build the Espacio Lejano Station in the far southern Neuquén province (following talks since 2012),³¹ its intended aim was peaceful space observation and exploration. The deal to build the station had already been ratified by Argentina’s Congress and signed by outgoing President Kirchner. The Macri administration, upon entering office, added a stipulation to the agreement that the station would be used only for civilian purposes and have both a visitor’s center and offer full access to visiting scientists. While the agreement required the PRC to inform Argentine officials of the station’s operations, it had no monitoring or enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance. This was particularly alarming given that the PRC space program is run by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). By the time the station was operational in 2017, it was directly under the control of the PLA and the 200-hectare property was enclosed behind an eight-foot barbed-wire fence. The agreement contained a secret clause ceding the land to the PRC for 50 years — essentially granting the compound diplomatic embassy status and eroding Argentine sovereignty. Argentine officials were banned from entering the site without prior approval by PRC officials.³²

One former senior Macri administration official charged with the station’s oversight said that despite his supervisory position, he was never granted access to the station nor were any other Argentine officials, limiting the government’s physical oversight of the station.³³

28 Author interview with former vice minister who dealt with the PRC directly, Buenos Aires, 1 March 2021; Authortelephone interview with former anti-corruption prosecutor, 2 February 2022.

29 In addition to many dozens of media reports on the Kirchner family’s corruption, the most complete mapping can be found in a bestselling book from 2014: Jorge Lanata, *10K: La Década Robada*, Grupo Editorial Planeta, Buenos Aires, 2014.

30 Garrick, John. “China’s ‘Maritime Powerhouse’ Goals Include Expansion in Antarctica.” *The Maritime Executive*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/china-s-maritime-powerhouse-goals-include-expansion-in-antarctica>.

31 “Chinese Government provides \$50 million for construction of space station in Neuquén Province.” *AidData*, <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/52875/>.

32 This information is based on the author’s visit to the site in 2019, interviews with two former officials who interacted directly with the PRC on the space station, and open-source reporting. The most complete reporting comes from Cassandra Garrison, “China’s military-run space station in Argentina is a ‘black box.’” *Reuters*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-space-argentina-china-insight/chinas-military-run-space-station-in-argentina-is-a-black-box-idUSKCN1PP0I2>.

33 Author interview, Buenos Aires, 2 March 2020.

The exception was when his team put together a visit to all of Argentina's deep space stations, including Neuquén, which the PRC reluctantly accepted. It is common practice for scientific delegations to visit the deep space stations in both Argentina and Chile, where numerous countries have scientific stations that take advantage of the Earth's unique curvature near the South Pole. Neuquén appears the sole exception to this. When the Argentine government delegation arrived, all the equipment was covered with giant drop cloths. It was impossible for the group to determine what kind of equipment had been installed. "We could monitor less than half of what the station was actually doing," the former senior Macri official said. Concerned by their inability to see the work at the site, and by concerns raised by the U.S. about how the PRC was using the base,³⁴ Macri tried to revoke the sovereignty clause of the agreement, the former Macri official, as well as two Western diplomats, said.³⁵ This was unsuccessful, the former Macri official said, noting that "When Macri tried to revoke the sovereignty clause, the PRC ambassador called Beijing, then came back and said that China would accept the modification. In the same breath he said he would be informing Macri very soon that China was ending its billion-dollar imports of Argentine beef. Macri understood the message, and the treaty was never modified."

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Approaches to the Antarctic

The second example involves the PRC's approaches to the Antarctic in Argentina. The PRC has made no secret of its desire to be considered a polar great power. It has maintained a research presence on Antarctica since 1984 and conducted naval exercises in the region with Chile as early as 2013. In 2015, the PRC asserted the right to polar leadership in a national security law that emphasized the PRC's interests in new frontiers, including Antarctica.³⁶ As one expert noted, "Chinese influence in Antarctic forums reinforces the broader Chinese narrative of its natural right to leadership in international governance. On top of this, the People's Liberation Army has for some time highlighted the likelihood of polar regions being spaces for 'new geopolitical conflict.'"³⁷

More recently, and toward this end, the PRC has been interested in establishing or gaining access to a port in southern Argentina or Chile to support resupply efforts for its Antarctic bases. One idea under consideration on the Argentina side – and the subject of much speculation given the strategic implications – was the construction of a logistics base in Ushuaia, Argentina.³⁸ For much of his first two years in office, former President Fernández denied he had any intention of building such a base in Ushuaia and emphasized that should Argentina do so it would do so independently of foreign financing. Fernández said the project was too costly and told U.S. officials the PRC would not gain another major foothold in Argentina.

34 The PRC's ongoing operation of a military base, with limited to no oversight by the Argentine government, has caused alarm in the U.S. government. At the base, China has the capacity to probe deep space and collect strategic intelligence, allowing it to monitor and potentially interfere with U.S. satellites and spaced-based weapons systems. See Bouchard. "The Fernández-Kirchner Government in Argentina Trades American Support for Chinese and Russian Money."

35 Author interview with diplomats in Buenos Aires, 3 March and 4 March, 2020.

36 Garrick. "China's 'Maritime Powerhouse' Goals Include Expansion in Antarctica."

37 Garrick. "China's 'Maritime Powerhouse' Goals Include Expansion in Antarctica."

38 Ellis, Evan. "China's Strategic Military Advance in Argentina." EconVue, 16 November 2021, <https://econvue.com/pulse/china%E2%80%99s-strategic-military-advance-argentina>.

Yet by July 2021, Fernández began publicly pushing for the construction of a \$300 million Antarctic logistics center in Ushuaia,³⁹ a move sources with knowledge of events said would primarily be financed by the PRC and designed to benefit the PRC.

Shortly after the Ushuaia announcement, the Fernández government announced it would spend \$664 million on multipurpose fighter jets to refurbish Argentina's air force.⁴⁰ One former Argentine defense official and one European diplomat monitoring defense issues said these two events are directly related. Under an unwritten agreement, the PRC would provide some \$220 million for the Ushuaia station and access to use it, and Argentina would buy PRC jets. The fighter jet deal initially stalled as parts of the Fernández/Kirchner political coalition balked at the announcement but in early 2023 the Fernández government publicly revived the possibility of the purchase of F-17 fighter jets after intense PRC lobbying for a new round of negotiations.⁴¹ As of July 2023, Argentine media reported that the Ministry of Defense had approved the purchase of twelve F-17s.⁴²

Consolidating Ties, Consolidating Corruption?

These cases, as well as others illustrated throughout the report, highlight how the PRC uses its economic leverage over Argentina to advance its political, economic, and security interests in the country and the region. This has undermined Argentinian oversight of its operations and limited transparency and accountability around the PRC-Argentina relationship. While there is limited evidence of direct corruption, *quid pro quos* appear to be a standard part of agreements between the two countries. Moreover, there are reasons to be wary of corrupt influences given then-Vice President Kirchner's track record. Her December 2022 conviction on corruption charges stemming from reports that she skimmed \$1 billion from state coffers through fake contracts and fake construction of 51 public works projects was one of many allegations that have plagued – but not hindered – her political career.⁴³

While Kirchner and other political and economic elites are certainly responsible for the entrenchment corruption in Argentina's political system, and with it, undermining democracy, they are certainly aided in those efforts by close partnership with the PRC. The presence of a foreign patron committed to deep political, economic, and security investment in the country has facilitated democratic backsliding and provided economic support and relief that has, to date, allowed the government to avoid facing economic realities. As Professor Evan Ellis, of the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute has noted, "Chinese resources and other support decrease the degree to which the Argentine government must worry about the responses of Western investors, banks, multilateral institutions, and governments, as it consolidates power in increasingly undemocratic ways, and undermines the U.S. agenda in the region—to China's commercial and strategic benefit."⁴⁴

The Gateway for Russian Expansion in Latin America: Russian Influence in Argentina

Russia's political and economic engagement in Argentina is more limited in scope and scale than the PRC's, but it has been an important partnership for both countries under the Kirchner and Fernández-Kirchner administrations. Economically, Russia trails far behind the PRC, exporting goods worth \$121 million to Argentina in 2020 and importing Argentinian products valued at \$685 million.⁴⁵ Trade has nevertheless increased between the two countries, and they have sought collaboration on everything from railroad development to oil, gas, and nuclear energy.⁴⁶

39 Heiner Kubny, "Argentina plans Antarctic logistics center in Ushuaia." *Polar Journal*, 27 July 2021, <https://polarjournal.ch/en/2021/07/27/argentina-plans-antarctic-logistics-center-in-ushuaia/>.

40 Misculin, Nicolás. "Argentina plans to spend \$664 mln on fighter jets, possibly from China or U.S." *Reuters*, 21 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/argentina-plans-spend-664-mln-fighter-jets-possibly-china-or-us-2021-09-21/>.

41 Zuanzun, Liu. "Argentina is considering procurement of JF-17 fighter jets: embassy." *Global Times*, 15 March 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1287349.shtml>

42 "Argentina would re-equip its fleet of fighter planes with a purchase from China [Argentina reequiparía su flota de aviones caza con una compra a China]." *Seminario*, 11 July 2023, <https://semanariodejunin.com.ar/nota/38229/argentina-reequiparia-su-flota-de-aviones-caza-con-una-compra-a-china/>.

43 Kahn, Carrie. "Argentina's vice president is found guilty of corruption." *National Public Radio*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/06/1141134320/argentina-cristina-fernandez-de-kirchner-corruption-guilty>.

44 Ellis. "New directions in the deepening Chinese-Argentina engagement."

45 "OEC Trade, Complexity and Rankings, Russia-Argentina." *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/arg>. Accessed 4 January 2023.

46 Bouchard. "The Fernández-Kirchner Government in Argentina Trades American Support for Chinese and Russian Money;" Ellis. "Alberto Fernández's Magical Odyssey to Russia and China."

Russian economic outreach in Argentina is carried out by the trade organization Comité Nacional para la Cooperación Económica con los Países Latinoamericanos⁴⁷ (CN CEPLA) whose hemispheric headquarters is in Santiago, Chile, but which holds events and conferences in Argentina.⁴⁸ The committee's board is comprised of Russian government bureaucrats and its state sponsorship is clear. However, CN CEPLA does not present itself as formally representing the Russian state. Formed in 1998 with the approval of the office of the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, today CN CEPLA includes high-ranking representatives from various Latin American departments within Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economic Development, Chamber of Commerce, Rosnauka (Russian Science), the Institute of Latin America of the Russian Academy of Sciences and other state structures.⁴⁹

In Argentina, CN CEPLA-sponsored meetings are usually held with business associations and ties remain robust, despite U.S. and EU sanctions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is interesting to note that after a new ambassador from Argentina arrived in Moscow in May 2021, one of his first diplomatic stops was at the Russian headquarters of CN CEPLA, underscoring the organization's importance. There, the Argentinian ambassador met with its director, Tatiana Mashkova. More recently, Mashkova said in an interview that only one company in Latin America had notified her consortium that it was cutting economic ties to Russia after the invasion. She said "The biggest problem now is logistics, transportation. The second is the transfer of payments. But we are already working very hard on these issues, and we see that there will be a solution for each case." In Mashkova's assessment, many Latin American companies face a choice between "losing their contacts with Russia, missing a good opportunity to export, losing good buyers, or maintaining relations with the United States."⁵⁰ To date, Argentina has maintained these contacts with Russia both on the economic and political front.

This is due in no small part to Kirchner's vocal political support for Russian President Vladimir Putin over the years. Putin has returned the favor, notably on important domestic issues. For Kirchner, one such issue has been the dispute with the United Kingdom over the Falklands Islands (known in Argentina as the Malvinas). During her second presidency, Kirchner utilized the Falklands issue⁵¹ to rally her nationalist, populist base as a means of distracting from severe economic and social crises in the country.⁵² The issue also served her Peronist party's "anti-Western" agenda. While the Falklands held a referendum in March 2013, in which 99.8% of the population voted to remain a British overseas territory, Kirchner has refused to acknowledge the outcome of that vote and the dispute has become a key issue for her legacy. She used the 2014 Russian takeover of Crimea and eastern Ukraine to advance and revisit Argentina's own claims over the islands.⁵³ Putin has expressed support for Argentina in the dispute. Kirchner and Putin have found themselves strong partners committed to an anti-U.S. agenda, which both use to further their ambitions at home and abroad.

It was therefore unsurprising when former President Fernández pursued deeper ties with the Kremlin, particularly given Kirchner's powerful role within the administration. Fernández visited Moscow in February 2022, just as Moscow was massing troops to invade Ukraine. At a joint press conference after a private meeting with Putin, former President Fernández announced that Argentina could serve as the gateway for expanded Russian engagement across Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵⁴

47 Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America

48 The once-active English-language website for CN CEPLA was taken down following the invasion of Ukraine, but the Spanish-language site remains active.

49 This information is taken from CN CEPLA's Spanish-language website accessed at: <http://www.cepla.ru/es/about/>

50 Brown, Ana Luisa. "Latin American businesspeople are interested in Russian market." *Prensa Latina*, 1 April 2022, https://www.plenglish.com/news/2022/04/01/latin-american-business-people-are-interested-in-russian-market/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=latin-american-business-people-are-interested-in-russian-market.

51 The United Kingdom and Argentina both assert sovereignty of the Islands, which have been under British control since 1833. In April 1982, the two sides fought a brief war when Argentina military forces invaded the islands, which were shortly thereafter retaken by British forces.

52 Hoare, Liam. "Falklands Redux: Is President Kirchner South America's Biggest Troll?" *The Atlantic*, 11 January 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/01/falklands-redux-is-president-kirchner-south-americas-biggest-troll/267067/>.

53 Bouchard. "The Fernández-Kirchner Government in Argentina Trades American Support for Chinese and Russian Money."

54 Ellis. "Alberto Fernández's Magical Odyssey to Russia and China."

Evidently going off script from prepared remarks by the Foreign Ministry, he noted that Argentina needed to “stop being so dependent on the [International Monetary] Fund and the United States and has to open up to other places, and that is where it seems to me that Russia has an important place.” He finished by saying Russia and Argentina should work together to release Argentina from the “grip” of Washington and move away from the U.S. dollar and the United States.⁵⁵ This was particularly unsettling in Washington because the U.S. had just exerted its influence with the IMF to approve a \$44.5 billion standby loan for Argentina that staved off a devastating debt default, and the Argentine foreign ministry had assured U.S. officials Fernández would not publicly support Putin.⁵⁶

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Fernández condemned the attack but also spoke out against international sanctions on Russia and called for a negotiated end to the conflict. Argentina’s willingness to vote against Russia in international forums like the United Nations was seen as politically necessary.⁵⁷ The Kremlin, nevertheless, kept up its efforts to influence public opinion on the war and was aided in these efforts by the PRC. For both countries, messaging campaigns around the war in Ukraine are part of a broader effort to influence the information space in Argentina to advance favorable narratives for their interests.

PRC and Kremlin Influence in the Information Space: Different Tactics, Similar Objectives

Both the PRC and the Kremlin have deployed a range of efforts to manipulate the media and information space in Argentina. Both the PRC’s (Xinhua) and Russia’s (RT and Sputnik) state media have large bureaus in Argentina that produce Spanish-language content and amplify pro-PRC/Kremlin narratives, creating an enabling environment for the economic and political influence described previously. While Argentina’s ever-shifting, administration-dependent policies between the Peronists and pro-U.S. conservatives have made the operating environment less predictable and stable than either the PRC or Russia would like, at present both countries deploy a range of tools and tactics toward a similar objective: advancing their respective interests and undermining those of the U.S.

PRC Information Influence

In February 2016, Xi Jinping stated, “Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles.”⁵⁸ To this end, the PRC developed a multipronged approach to shaping the media environment in Argentina. This includes training journalists, disseminating its narratives in PRC and local publications, and signing content-sharing and bilateral agreements with official Argentine media.⁵⁹ According to a 2022 Freedom House report on Beijing’s global media influence, the PRC increased its efforts to influence Argentina’s information space during the first few years of the Fernández administration.⁶⁰ This included inking new agreements with Argentine state media that build on a long history of ties between the two countries’ state media outlets and PRC diplomats cultivating thought leaders in media and academia to disseminate pro-PRC narratives.

The PRC relies on a range of media outlets. In addition to the Xinhua bureau in Buenos Aires, PRC state media, including People’s Daily, China Radio International, and China Global Television Network (CGTN) have Spanish-language websites accessible to audiences across Argentina, and CGTN broadcasts on one Argentine cable network.⁶¹ The PRC also benefits from content-sharing and media cooperation agreements with a number of influential domestic media outlets, including Clarín, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country. The PRC and Argentina have also increased cooperation in bilateral fora.

55 Raszewski, Eliana. “Argentina’s Fernandez, in Russia, says must end economic ‘dependence’ on U.S., IMF.” Reuters, 3 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/argentinas-fernandez-russia-says-must-end-economic-dependence-us-imf-2022-02-03/>.

56 This information is based on interviews with two Argentine foreign policy sources in the Fernández government, and partially substantiated by open-source reporting. See Ellis. “Alberto Fernández’s Magical Odyssey to Russia and China.”

57 “Argentina joins UN in condemnation of ‘Russian aggression’ in Ukraine.” Buenos Aires Times, 4 March 2022, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/latin-america/argentina-joins-un-condemnation-of-russian-aggression-in-ukraine.phtml>.

58 Xi Jinping, February 2016, as quoted in: Cook, Sarah. “Beijing’s Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017.” Freedom House, January 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

59 For a comprehensive overview of PRC media engagement in Argentina, see: Cook, Sarah. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022 – Argentina Country Report.” Freedom House, September 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/argentina/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

60 Cook. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022 – Argentina Country Report.”

61 Cook. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022 – Argentina Country Report.”

For example, the November 2021 bilateral media forum “Panorama China-Argentina” was sponsored by China Media Group, Argentina’s national news agency Telam, and state-run Argentina Radio and Television. In addition, the forum was sponsored by the Grupo América media conglomerate, which is influential in provinces largely outside Buenos Aires.⁶²

The PRC’s efforts to influence the information space also include academic engagement through three Confucius Institutes in the country. They are based at the nation’s oldest university, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, as well as at the University of Buenos Aires and the Universidad Nacional de La Plata.⁶³ In one example of content sharing, the announcement of the opening of the third Confucius Institute was published word for word in English by Xinhua, China Press, and the Mercosur news agency, jointly owned by Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela.⁶⁴ In addition to the Confucius Institutes’ outreach, individual companies have discreet communications and training opportunities. The most visible is the Seeds for the Future program, sponsored by the PRC telecommunications giant Huawei, which offers scholarships and technical training in China. Programs focus on information technology training and knowledge transfers, combined with a study of Chinese history and culture, highlighting Chinese culture and technological innovation as a counterpoint to Western portrayals of China. Argentina was awarded its two rounds of scholarships under the program from 2017 to 2019, and virtual scholarships were open for application for 2022. The project is carried out by Huawei in coordination with the Ministry of Modernization and the Ministry of Education.⁶⁵

This multitude of pathways has facilitated the creation and distribution of PRC narratives in the country. Such efforts have largely focused on disseminating positive narratives about the PRC’s and the PRC-Argentina relationship, and occasionally, negative narratives about U.S. engagement in the country and across the region more broadly. Recent efforts include campaigns around the PRC’s response to COVID-19, the PRC’s economic model as a means of promoting human development, and its peaceful rise as a global power, in addition to defending the PRC’s record on human rights. Notably, the PRC has also appealed to popular sentiments in the country, amplifying Peronist narratives on Argentina’s claims to the Falklands and criticizing perceived U.S. foreign interference in the country.⁶⁶ The PRC also used messaging around Argentina’s claims to the Falklands to support its own claims on Taiwan.⁶⁷

Argentina nevertheless has a robust media environment. There are numerous outlets reporting objectively on the PRC. They cover issues related to PRC economic and political engagement on topics ranging from corruption in PRC infrastructure projects to sovereignty concerns over the Espacio Lejano space station. Moreover, according to interviews with three journalists at major media outlets in Argentina, Xinhua Español, the Spanish-language outlet of the official Xinhua news agency, has had little success in penetrating the mass media market. While it offers high-quality production values and impeccable Spanish, Xinhua offers primarily traditional news programming and a wire service for print and radio media. This combination of a healthy independent media and limitations on PRC penetration have blunted the PRC’s influence (and associated government pursuit of pro-PRC policies) in the information space.

Kremlin Information Influence

The dissemination of state-sponsored propaganda has been a key feature of Moscow’s influence strategy across Latin America and the Caribbean. Argentina is both a priority target and has historically welcomed Kremlin engagement in the information space.

62 “China Media Group and Argentine media hold online forum ‘Panorama China-Argentina,’” CGTN, 4 November 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-11-04/CMG-and-Argentine-media-hold-online-forum-Panorama-China-Argentina--14UYqAoMwz6/index.html>

63 “Argentina opens 3rd Confucius Institute at its oldest university,” Xinhua, 17 October 2020, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/17/W55f8a6761a31024ad0ba7f49b.html>.

64 “Argentina opens 3rd Confucius Institute at its oldest university.”; “China opens third Confucius Institute in Argentina: University of Cordoba.” Mercopress, 13 October 2020, <https://en.mercopress.com/2020/10/13/china-opens-its-third-confucius-institute-in-argentina-university-of-cordoba>

65 “History - Seeds for the Future.” Huawei, <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/history.html>

66 Cook. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022 – Argentina Country Report.”

67 “Argentina and China share ‘territorial integrity’ concept.” Mercopress, 8 August 2022, <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/08/08/argentina-and-china-share-territorial-integrity-concept-pelosi-s-trip-to-taiwan-a-provocation-argentine-ambassador-in-beijing>

Russian state media RT Spanish language service *Actualidad RT* (formerly Russia Today) and *Sputnik's* Spanish language *Sputnik Mundo* are the primary outlets for the Kremlin propaganda and disinformation efforts across the region. In Argentina, *RT* and *Sputnik* tried to move into the Argentine media market by providing new, dynamic content. In 2014, *RT* began broadcasting on Argentina's publicly available (non-streaming) television, providing Russia with a national platform available to every home in the country.⁶⁸ The Macri government tried to suspend the agreement with *RT*, but conceded under Russian protest, and *RT* remains on the air today. To supplement its media strategy and amplify its message, Russian news outlets *RT* and *Sputnik* also formed strategic alliances with other ideologically compatible networks that also broadcast across the region. These include Telesur, the widely viewed Venezuela-based regional channel founded by Hugo Chávez; and HispanTV, the Iranian 24-hour Spanish-language satellite network that enjoys only a modest following in the Western hemisphere.⁶⁹ Argentina also has an arrangement allowing Telesur to broadcast on public television, providing a further outlet for Russian propaganda and disinformation in the country.⁷⁰

Through these outlets, Russia can promote anti-US narratives and advocate in favor of the Bolivarian alliance, a bloc of 10 countries led by Cuba and Venezuela. The Russian, Venezuelan, and Iranian outlets offer overlapping narratives depicting the U.S. as a counter-revolutionary "enemy of humanity" with vast imperialist designs that must be defeated. The three use a small group of correspondents who report the same information on all three platforms, forming a core of "super-spreaders" who create echo chambers across the media landscape. The most prolific is Pablo Jofré, a Chilean who broadcasts for *RT* and *Sputnik* from Chile.⁷¹ Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian media have also made a concerted effort to promote pro-Russian narratives around the war. This includes Russian allegations that Ukrainian forces are firing on their own civilians⁷² and that Latin American "mercenaries" hired by Ukraine (along with mercenaries from other countries) have not been paid and are angry at the lack of compensation and disillusioned with the fighting. Other coverage advances the theme that Russian forces are "de-Nazifying" Ukraine.⁷⁴

Russian state media promotion of anti-American narratives resonates with broad audiences across Latin America, given the historical legacy of U.S. engagement in the region. Two recent studies found that Russian media outlets *RT* and *Sputnik* remain broadly influential in Latin America, with a combined following of 30.4 million on all social media accounts. This is far larger than the 26.4 million *RT/Sputnik* English followers and less than the 39.8 million *RT/Sputnik* Arabic.⁷⁵ Collectively, Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela account for 42 percent of *RT* Español readers and readers online.⁷⁶ Another recent report found Russian-sponsored Spanish-language media was having a significant impact in Latin America, noting that it is spreading widely in the region, helping make Kremlin-controlled outlets some of the top Spanish-language sources for information about the war in Ukraine immediately after the Russian invasion. Russian outlet *RT* Español was the third-most shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine after the war started in 2022.⁷⁷

68 Gurganus, Julia. "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 May 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>.

69 Farah, Douglas and Alexa Tavares. "Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, 'Super Spreaders,' and Alternative Narratives." *Strategic Perspectives* 34, Institute for National Strategic Studies (National Defense University), 2 June 2021, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>.

70 Rojas Medina, Daniela. "Growing Audiences and Influence: Russian Media in Latin America." Bertelsmann Foundation, 9 June 2022, <https://www.bfn.org/digital-world/growing-audiences-and-influence-russian-media-in-latin-america-7wlrwqupm/>.

71 Farah and Tavares, *op. cit.*

72 Based on *RT* News coverage, such as " 'Tanques ucranianos disparaban a los civiles.' ['Ukrainian tanks were shooting at civilians.'" *RT*, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425313-testimonios-emerger-sotanos-mariupol-liberar-ciudad-ucrania>. Other coverage from *Sputnik Mundo*, for example, suggested that Russian soldiers in Mariupol found tortured bodies and other evidence that Ukraine committed human rights violations: "Defensa rusa: encuentran cuerpos con huellas de tortura y esvásticas en Mariúpol [Russian Defense: We found bodies with traces of torture and swastikas in Mariupol]." *Sputnik Mundo*, 28 March 2022, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20220328/defensa-rusa-encuentran-cuerpos-con-huellas-de-tortura-y-esvasticas-en-mariupol-1123684569.html>.

73 Based on *RT* coverage such as: "Mercenarios, muchos de Latinoamérica, denuncian que Ucrania incumple sus promesas [Mercenaries, many from Latin America, denounce that Ukraine is breaking its promises]." *RT*, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425288-mercenarios-latinoamerica-denunciar-incumplimiento-promesas-ucrania>.

74 See for example this series of articles from *Sputnik Mundo*: "Russian operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine." *Sputnik Mundo*, https://mundo.sputniknews.com/category_operacion-militar-especial-de-rusia-en-ucrania/.

75 Sekkarie, Sana. "A Global Tour Through Russia Propaganda: Where Russian Narratives on Ukraine are winning, where they're losing, and where they're not even competing." *Miburo Substack*, 6 March 2022, https://miburo.substack.com/p/a-global-tour-through-russian-propaganda?r=1dxl2&s=r&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web. The user numbers are not broken down by country.

76 Rojas Medina. "Growing Audiences and Influence: Russian Media in Latin America."

77 "Russia disinformation on Ukraine spreads on Spanish-speaking social media." *Associated Press*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/russia-disinformation-ukraine-spreading-spanish-speaking-media-rcna22843>.

Media messaging and narrative collusion is one area of joint influence between Russia and the PRC in Argentina and across Latin American and the Caribbean. Specifically, media outlets from each provide news that is distorted in similar ways and supports mutually shared goals.

It is unclear how much of an impact this is having on popular perceptions of Russia and of the Ukraine war, though generally, favorable public opinion of Russia has increased since the Russian media began its Spanish language efforts in 2014.⁷⁸

PRC-Russia Narrative Collusion

Media messaging and narrative collusion is one area of joint influence between Russia and the PRC in Argentina and across Latin American and the Caribbean. Specifically, media outlets from each provide news that is distorted in similar ways and supports mutually shared goals. On the PRC side, state media have printed or broadcast Russian disinformation regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Unlike at more reputable news sites, these unsubstantiated stories are not contextualized, but rather provide a transcript-like summary of Russian talking points.

In addition to amplifying Russian content, Xinhua has also published stories that advance anti-Western narratives around the war. For example, Xinhua publishes stories with “experts” who criticize NATO expansion across Western Europe. The outlet features those who argue that NATO’s expansion toward Ukraine was the driving factor behind the Russian decision to invade in 2022.⁷⁹ As part of its coverage— in Spanish and English alike -- Xinhua is also very careful not to blame Russia for the war in Ukraine and to highlight the PRC as an honest broker that only wants peace.⁸⁰

In a virtuous cycle of disinformation, Russian state media quote PRC media to reinforce its line of attack on U.S. policy. For example, in March 2022, RT wrote an article reflecting conclusions from an opinion piece published by the CCP’s Global Times on the war in Ukraine. The articles’ conclusions are that the U.S. wants to “turn Ukraine into a quagmire so that Russia continues to bleed.”⁸¹ Russian state media in Latin America also paint both Russia and the PRC as enemies of the U.S., arguing that American is trying to convince the PRC to withdraw support for the Russians. This narrative argues that the U.S. is desperately trying to divide the PRC and Russia, calling the sanctions on Russia an “act of war.” The PRC (like Russia) views confrontation with the United States as “inevitable.”⁸² Although there is no evidence of overt coordination between Russia’s and the PRC’s messaging operations, their amplification of each other’s narratives serves to undermine information integrity in Argentina.

78 Rojas Medina. “Growing Audiences and Influence: Russian Media in Latin America.”

79 See for example this short article, which provides a summary of a Foreign Policy analysis piece, “Aquellos imprudentes que defendieron membresía de Ucrania en OTAN deben asumir responsabilidad moral: académico [Those reckless who defended Ukraine’s NATO membership must bear moral responsibility: academic], Xinhua Español, 25 March 2022, http://spanish.news.cn/2022-03/25/c_1310528973.htm

80 From a Xinhua report: China, US must cooperate to end Russia-Ukraine conflict despite differences: Chinese diplomat.” Xinhua Español, 25 March 2022, http://spanish.news.cn/2022-03/25/c_1310528810.htm.

81 “Acusan a Biden de querer ‘convertir Ucrania en un lodazal para que Rusia siga sangrando’ [They accuse Biden of wanting to ‘turn Ukraine into a quagmire so that Russia continues to bleed’].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425299-biden-convertir-ucrania-lodazal-rusia>; Sheng, Yang and Wan Hengyi, “Biden makes US tensions with Russia ‘personal’; calling for ‘regime change’ in a nuclear power dangerous: expert.” Global Times, 27 March 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1256924.shtml>.

82 Based on RT coverage from March 2022: “China es el principal competidor estratégico: el Pentágono entrega al Congreso de EE.UU. una versión clasificada de su estrategia de defensa nacional [China is the main strategic competitor: the Pentagon gives the US Congress a classified version of its national defense strategy].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425339-pentagono-estrategia-defensa-nacional>.

Conclusion

Russia's and the PRC's overlapping interests in displacing the United States as the historical partner of choice for Argentina is clear. It is also damaging to Argentina's democratic future. As in most of Latin America, the PRC brings significant resources and pursues a broad economic, political, information, and security agenda, while Russia focuses on a narrower range of issues that directly help shape a country's political and media landscape. Both Russia and the PRC have strong interests in Argentina and warm relations with the current Peronist government. With the exception of an overall shared goal of undermining U.S. leadership in the hemisphere and opportunistic narrative collusion toward that end, each country separately pursues its own specific strategic interests. This report found no clear indicators of direct coordination between Russia and the PRC in their influence efforts.

The combination of their influence efforts nevertheless has significant implications for democracy in Argentina. Consistent political and financial support from the PRC and Russia has enabled Argentina, and in particular the Fernández-Kirchner administration, to pursue populist policies. They have done this with limited accountability to the population. In return, Argentina has allowed Russia and the PRC to operate without significant oversight, whether by the PRC expanding its military presence or both countries using public television to disseminate disinformation and propaganda. Collectively, foreign authoritarian influence from Russia and the PRC and corruption in Argentina's political leadership undermines the rule of law, transparency, and democratic norms.



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

CHILE

Introduction

One of South America's strongest democracies, Chile offers an interesting case study for understanding both foreign authoritarian influence and democratic resilience. Despite its strong democratic foundation and commitment to human rights and democratic principles, Chile has been a strong partner of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for decades. Chile has long sought to bolster its economic ties to Asia and the broader Pacific, and Chilean presidents across the political spectrum have pursued economic and political ties with the PRC. For the PRC, Chile is an entry market for economic engagement in Latin America. It is also, increasingly, a key supplier of critical mineral resources. Ties between Russia and Chile have been less robust. Nevertheless, and as it has elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, Russia has deployed state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation to undermine information integrity in the country.

The PRC and Russia pursue their own strategic interests in Chile. Research conducted for this study¹ found that China and Russia are economic competitors in Chile. The research found no clear indicators of coordination between Russia and the PRC in their efforts to reshape Chile's traditionally U.S.-centric, liberal democratic governance model. It did identify significant overlap in the official and unofficial media and messaging operations of each country. Although each country employs specific messaging regarding its own interests, both countries support, and advocate for, the view that Chile and other Latin American countries can and should move away from the U.S. and toward more robust partnerships with their respective countries. Both Russia and the PRC deploy an array of activities designed to enhance their own image and story while engaging in disinformation campaigns, often with overtly anti-U.S. messaging.

The combined impact of these overlapping operations has strengthened the PRC and Russia's presence in the country at the same time as the U.S. has pulled back from engagement, resulting in a weakening of U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic influence in Chile. PRC and Russian influence also could erode Chile's relatively robust institutionalized democracy in important ways. These include combating corruption and promoting transparency. And authoritarian influence can chip away at the credibility of independent media and fact-based information.

Economic Ties and Political Influence: The PRC in Chile

Economic Influence

Chile and the PRC have a longstanding economic partnership. Chile established diplomatic relations with the PRC in December 1970. Chile was also the first Latin American country to support the PRC's bid to join the World Trade Organization and, in 2005, the first country in the world to sign a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with China.² Over the past two decades, successive Chilean presidents have worked to deepen ties. During President Michelle Bachelet's first term (2006-2010), she and President Hu Jintao signed a supplementary agreement on trade in services.

1 These findings are based on interviews with 11 people who have direct knowledge of some of the endeavors of Russia and China in Chile or monitor the activities of one or both countries on an ongoing basis, as well as an open-source review of literature in both English and Spanish.

2 Heine, Jorge. "Still Trailblazing? The Chile-China relationship at fifty." *China Dialogues/The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 23 August 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2021/08/23/still-trailblazing-the-chile-china-relationship-at-fifty/>.

The first administration of conservative President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) agreed to a number of investments with the PRC, with Chile becoming a strategic partner of the PRC in 2012. In 2016, during Bachelet's second term (2014-2018), Chile became a comprehensive strategic partner, demonstrating the PRC's commitment to work with the country across economic, scientific, technological, political, and cultural fields. In Piñera's second term (2018-2022), Chile joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in November 2018 and signed a Joint Action Plan to advance the Chile-PRC partnership in April 2019.³ As a result of these partnerships, trade between the two countries has expanded exponentially over the past two decades, growing from \$2.3 billion in 2002 to \$57.72 billion in 2021.⁴ The PRC is now Chile's top trading partner.

Chile's business community has been at the forefront of efforts to expand economic relations with the PRC. Through the government's export promotion agency, ProChile, the country has promoted exports to the PRC market, notably in mineral resources such as copper and potassium nitrate. Chile also exports agricultural products, including wine, grapes, blueberries, and cherries.⁵ In 2020, a third of Chile's exports went to the PRC.⁶

The PRC is also Chile's leading source of foreign investment. From 2013-2021, foreign direct investment from the PRC totaled \$13.17 billion, reaching nearly \$8 billion in 2021 alone. Most PRC investments were in natural resources, construction, transport, and the financial sector.⁷ Investments include a \$2.5 billion contract to the PRC's state-controlled China Railway 16th Bureau Group to build the capital's controversial Metro Line 7,⁸ and the China Railway Construction Corporation's (CRCC) purchase of the right to toll a 169km stretch of Chile's main highway, Route 5, between Chillán and Collipulli. CRCC will update and maintain the road in return for the right to collect tolls. In March 2021, CRCC acquired a similar concession for 195km of Route 5 between Chillán and Talca.⁹

The most important investments, however, have been in strategic infrastructure. Despite the Piñera and Bachelet governments' close political and military ties to the U.S., they allowed significant PRC investments in Chile's strategic mineral resources, electric grid, and in fiber optic cable installation in the southern Austral region.¹⁰

Mining

Mining is a key part of the PRC-Chile economic partnership. It accounted for 84.4 percent of Chile's exports to the PRC in 2021,¹¹ with 49 percent of Chilean copper exports going to the PRC market.¹² Mining has become increasingly important in recent years given Chile's lithium reserves, a critical mineral for rechargeable batteries for phones, laptops, and electronic vehicles. Control of lithium is key to the green energy revolution.

While Chilean restrictions on foreign investment in mining have historically limited the PRC's presence in the sector, PRC companies have made some inroads through purchase agreements and by buying mines.

3 Ellis, Evan. "Chinese advances in Chile." *Global Americans*, 2 March 2021, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2021/03/chinese-advances-in-chile/>.

4 Fernández, Pamela Aróstica. "Chile's once-pioneering relationship with China is turning into dependency." *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, 18 August 2022, <https://merics.org/en/chiles-once-pioneering-relationship-china-turning-dependency>.

5 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

6 Heine, Jorge. "Still Trailblazing? The Chile-China relationship at fifty." *China Dialogues/The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 23 August 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2021/08/23/still-trailblazing-the-chile-china-relationship-at-fifty/>.

7 Fernández. "Chile's once-pioneering relationship with China is turning into dependency." Cardamone, Michael. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Chile." *Borgen Magazine*, 6 September 2022, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/belt-and-road-initiative-in-chile/>.

8 Troncoso, Francisco and Andrés Cárdenas. "The Chinese construction of Metro Line 7: Piñera's priority one that threatens the veins of Parque Forestal [La construcción china de la Línea 7 del Metro: la prioridad uno de Piñera que amenaza las venas del Parque Forestal]." *El Mostrador*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/2022/02/07/la-construccion-china-de-la-linea-7-del-metro-la-prioridad-uno-de-pinera-que-amenaza-las-venas-del-parque-forestal/>.

There are hints of the political tradeoffs in the media but nothing that states this quid pro quo clearly, although the controversy over the construction's potential ecological damage was widely reported.

9 Rogers, David. "China Railway pays \$600m for another stretch of Chile's main highway." *Global Construction Review*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/china-railway-pays-600m-for-another-stretch-of-chiles-main-highway/>.

10 "Piñera inaugurates fiber optic cable with a Huawei executive [Piñera inaugural fibra óptica Austral; Participó Huawei]." *El Economista*, 28 May 2019, <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/empresas/Pinera-inaugura-Fibra-Optica-Austral-participo-Huawei-20190528-0109.html>.

11 Fernández. "Chile's once-pioneering relationship with China is turning into dependency."

12 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

From 2005-2017, for example, China Minmetals gave a loan to the Chilean state-owned mining company CODELCO in exchange for copper purchases at a negotiated rate. When that agreement expired in 2017, the two parties signed a new agreement allowing Minmetals the right to explore lithium and the future possibility to buy mines.¹³ In 2019, the PRC firm Tianqi purchased a 24 percent stake in SQM, a Chilean company extracting lithium in the Atacama salt flats.¹⁴

PRC Control of Chile's Electrical Supply

The PRC's control of Chile's electrical grid is a notable case of a successful takeover of strategic infrastructure. With the support of former President Eduardo Frei, the PRC has acquired more than half of the nation's grid. Frei served as Chile's ambassador-at large to Asia Pacific from 2018 until the end of the Piñera administration in early 2022.¹⁵ From 2018-2020, PRC companies gained control of 57 percent of the electricity grid in Chile. The PRC's Southern Power Grid bought a 27.7 percent stake in Transelect, Chile's largest transmission company. The next year, China Three Gorges bought Atiaia Energía. And in 2020, the PRC's State Grid International Development Limited (SGID) bought Chilquinta Energía, the third-largest distributor of electricity in Chile for \$2.23 billion.¹⁶ SGID also bought a 96 percent stake in one of Chile's main electricity providers, Compañía General de Electricidad (CGE), for \$3 billion. SGID's acquisition of Chile's electrical production assets grant it unprecedented control of electricity production and distribution. It leaves Chile's critical infrastructure vulnerable to a foreign actor known to deploy economic coercion to advance its political and economic aims. SGID outlines in its mission as "sticking to the leadership of the Party, comprehensively implementing the decisions and policies of the Central Party Committee [CCP] and the State Council and unleashing the potential of employees to run business."¹⁷ SGID's acquisition of critical energy infrastructure essentially gives the CCP majority control of electricity in Chile.

Elite Capture: The Foundational Role of Eduardo Frei in Advancing PRC Interests in Chile

The relatively rapid success of the PRC's efforts in Chile can be traced in part to powerful official lobbying led by former President Frei. Frei is a close personal friend of Piñera and has access to Piñera's political machinery. Piñera's National Renewal party has been an advocate for, and defender of, PRC investments. During his tenure as an unpaid envoy to the Asia Pacific region, Frei spoke out in dozens of interviews, seminars, op-eds, and forums on the benefits to Chile of PRC investments. During the Trump administration, he was particularly assertive in pushing the view that the PRC was a preferable alternative to the U.S. In a 2019 interview with the PRC state-owned Xinhua news agency, Frei praised the "strategic partnership of Chile with China," while saying Chile has "supported the great Chinese Belt and Road Initiative from the very beginning."¹⁸

Frei has benefited economically from his unstinting support for the PRC, specifically by selling Frei Presidential Wine, according to published reports and two sources interviewed.¹⁹ The wine is sold in the PRC via a joint venture between Chilean Viña Undurraga and China's Perfect China, and almost all of the Frei family vineyard's 10,000-bottle annual production is sold in the PRC. According to one report, Frei receives \$100,000 a year in royalties simply for the use of the Frei name.²⁰

13 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

14 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

15 Nogales, David. "Former President Frei once again highlights relations with China and the growth of the Asian giant's investments in Chile [Expresidente Frei Vuelve a destacar las relaciones con China y el crecimiento de las inversiones del gigante asiático en Chile]." *La Tercera*, 28 November 2020, <https://www.latercera.com/pulso/noticia/expresidente-frei-vuelve-a-destacar-las-relaciones-con-china-y-el-crecimiento-de-las-inversiones-del-gigante-asiatico-en-chile/FAJBV6G4RJBLPHVA64PMCOIGUI/>.

16 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

17 State Grid Corporation of China, http://www.sgcc.com.cn/html/sgcc_main_en/col2017112330/column_2017112330_1.shtml.

18 Nogales. "Former President Frei once again highlights relations with China and the growth of the Asian giant's investments in Chile."

19 Saleh, Felipe. "Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle's business in Asia, President Piñera's 'gold' CD [Los negocios de Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle en Asia, el DC de 'oro' del Presidente Piñera]." *El Mostrador*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.elmostrador.cl/destacado/2019/04/18/los-negocios-de-eduardo-frei-ruiz-tagle-en-asia-el-dc-de-oro-del-presidente-pinera/>.

20 Riveros, Mario and Carlos Valdés. "Wine named after former President Frei sells in China for nearly \$900,000 a bottle [Vino con el nombre del ex Presidente Frei se vende in China a casi \$900 mil la botella]." *Emol Noticias*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.emol.com/noticias/Tendencias/2019/04/25/945876/Vino-del-ex-presidente-Frei-se-vende-en-China-a-casi-900-mil-la-botella.html>.

"This is what the Chinese investments have brought us," said one senior Piñera administration official. "The ability of a respected former president to make money from investments while giving a megaphone to Chinese economic investments. Our laws are not designed to prevent this type of influence peddling, but it clouds the ethical waters."

The Limits of PRC Economic Influence

Despite these successes, the PRC suffered a significant setback during the Piñera presidency. In November 2021, under heavy U.S. pressure, the Piñera administration canceled China's Aisino Co. Ltd.'s \$205 million USD contract to create new national identification cards and passports with advanced anti-fraud design.²¹ The U.S. government expressed concerns over the protection of personal data by the PRC in light of the PRC Data Security Law.

"The ability of a respected former president to make money from investments while giving a megaphone to Chinese economic investments. Our laws are not designed to prevent this type of influence peddling, but it clouds the ethical waters."

The U.S. also threatened to remove Chile from the popular and economically valuable Visa Waiver Program, which allows travelers from many countries to go to the U.S. without a visa. "U.S. officials told us clearly that as soon as the PRC had access to our passport system, the program would end," said one Chilean official involved in the discussions. "We were determined to find a way to legally reopen the bidding process after that, and we did." Because the bid was relatively small, the loss could be considered more of an embarrassment than an economic setback for the PRC.

This wasn't the only deal that went awry. In 2014, for example, a project to construct five hydroelectric facilities in Patagonia in cooperation with China National Water Resources and Hydropower Corporation was halted over environmental concerns. China Railway Group and China Road and Bridge also pulled out of a project to build the Chacao suspension bridge when it seemed like they didn't have favored status to win the bid.²² PRC telecommunications giant Huawei Marine did bid to lay fiber optic cable in the southern Austral regional,²³ but was not awarded the contract to build the final piece of the system. The PRC had pushed for this work, since it controls the flow of data to scientific stations in the Antarctic.²⁴

Political Influence?

Successive Chilean administrations have cultivated ties to the PRC, regularly visiting the PRC on official delegations to ink economic and other deals, as outlined above. Beyond the executive, members of the National Congress and other policymakers have also participated in PRC-sponsored delegations, which are designed to win friends to advance the PRC's objectives in Chile. This outreach has yielded dividends. The PRC benefits from support from Chilean political and economic elites who defend PRC-Chile relations and the PRC's human rights record in the Chilean media. During a 2019 visit to the PRC, then-President Piñera stated that, "every country has a right to the political system of its choosing" – advancing a common PRC refrain.²⁵

21 Nogales, David and Francisco Artaza, "Government cancels tender for passports to Chinese company Aisino after warning from Foreign Ministry and the US [Gobierno anula licitación de pasaportes a empresa china Aisino tras advertencia de Cancillería y EE.UU.]" *La Tercera*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.latercera.com/pulso/noticia/pasaportes-el-registro-civil-deja-sin-efecto-la-adjudicacion-de-aisino/OZQEJBQUZ5CHVHNAMSJWLXSK5Q/>.

22 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

23 "Piñera inaugurates fiber optic cable with a Huawei executive."

24 For a complete overview of the PRC and Russia's expanding interests in Antarctica, see: Pervaze A. Sheikh, Bruce Vaughn and Kezee Procita, "Antarctica: Overview of Geopolitical and Environmental Issues." Congressional Research Service, 10 March 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46708/2>

25 Han, BC and Sascha Hannig, "Chile Country Report: Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022." Freedom House, September 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/chile/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

The PRC has also made connections in Chile's police sector, including sending small numbers of officers to the PRC and reciprocating with visits to Chile. Chilean leaders have also participated in numerous security conferences and symposiums in recent years.²⁶ According to an interview with a senior security official, the PRC's biggest success came when Chile allowed the PRC to post a permanent attaché to the prestigious Carabineros national police force. Chile can do the same in the PRC. The permanent attaché, the source said, gives the PRC access to the Carabineros' entire network, including its capabilities, deficits, and operational strategy. It also gives PRC visibility into U.S. cooperation with one of its closest hemispheric allies.

However, there are limits to the extent of PRC economic and political influence in the country. While the PRC has made massive economic and political inroads in the country over the last few decades and made inroads with Chilean economic and political elite, this has not always translated into political influence. Chile's strong institutions and transparency standards have played a role in mitigating and reducing the risks that trade with the PRC automatically translates into corrosive political influence.

From "Active Neutrality" to Condemnation: Russia-Chile Relations

Russia and Chile have maintained historic diplomatic ties and trade relations since 1990, but neither side has made a concerted effort to deepen engagement. Russia has tried to influence Chile's information space (see below), much as it has across Latin America and the Caribbean. Chile has courted Russia as an export market but, as of 2022, Russia accounts for only 0.4 percent of Chilean exports. The Piñera administration took a relatively neutral stance on Russia. It allowed the Russian state media entities RT and Sputnik to operate freely, but did not engage in significant economic or diplomatic partnerships with the Kremlin. One senior foreign relations source called the stance "active neutrality," an effort to not antagonize either Russia or the U.S.²⁷

There are several plausible reasons for this. First, in contrast to the PRC and its relationship with former President Frei, Russia had no champions in the Piñera administration. Second, Russia's economic competitiveness in the country is limited. Russian businesses seeking opportunities in Chile offer few products or services that are competitive with either the PRC or U.S. counterparts, with the important exception of cyber security products and services, according to interviews with two businessmen and a senior Piñera Foreign Ministry official.²⁸ PRC companies are adept at Chilean bidding processes and effectively market their products. Russian businesses offer a much narrower range of goods and usually try to sell them through personal visits to potential clients. "The Chinese understand the need to go to the market," said one businessman who has dealt with executives from both countries.²⁹ They enter the market through partnerships with private enterprises that already exist. The Russians don't do that. They want to sell you their product – no partnership, no marketing. So, they lose almost every time to the Chinese."

Russia relies on a mix of semi-official and unofficial business groups, based in Santiago, to reach out across Latin America. This might also limit the Russians' effectiveness. The Comité Nacional para la Cooperación Económica con los Países Latinoamericanos (CN CEPLA; "Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America"), is the government's primary lobbying tool in Chile. The board of the CN CEPLA is comprised of Russian bureaucrats and its partners, as listed on its website, includes Russian organizations as diverse as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economic Development, the Chamber of Commerce, Rosnauka (Russian Science), the Institute of Latin America of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and other state agencies.³⁰

CN CEPLA's main task is to organize meetings with Latin American business representatives, chambers of commerce, and diplomatic representatives; promote Russian investments in Latin America; and keep a record of Russian business transactions in the region.

26 Ellis. "Chinese advances in Chile."

27 Author telephone interview with source in Santiago, Chile. 9 February 2022.

28 Author WhatsApp telephone interviews with sources in Santiago, Chile. Week of 14 February 2022.

29 Author WhatsApp telephone interview with source in Santiago, Chile. 16 February 2022.

30 "About the Committee [Sobre el Comité]." National Committee for Economic Cooperation with Latin American Countries, <http://www.cepla.ru/es/about/>.

The organization is quite active; according to its news page, it frequently holds meetings with representatives of Latin American states in Moscow and has 91 members.³¹ Its representatives also attend meetings in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, anti-U.S. countries in Latin America. CN CEPLA also serves as a mouthpiece for pro-Russian propaganda. Its website is a repository of dozens of pro-Russia articles, relating to the invasion of Ukraine and alliances with Cuba and Venezuela.

In addition to promoting Russian business interests, there is some indications the CN CEPLA is also engaging in espionage and other activities beyond its specific soft power activities. On its website the group posted its authorizations from both the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) and the Russian Ministry of Defense to operate on behalf of the Russian state, and the site's Russian language website sells Russian state sponsored, sophisticated surveillance equipment from the Russian Protei system using the SORM-3 spyware.³² CN CEPLA's long-time director Alexander Starovoitov, who served from the early 2010s until his death in 2021, was a former senior member of the KGB, a decorated general in the Soviet army, and a specialist in electronic communications technology and cryptography, and most of the identified leadership of the organization came out of the former Soviet intelligence services.³³ His obituary in Russian state media called Starovoitov a "Hero of the Russia State" and listed his many strategic ties to the Russian state.³⁴ Starovoitov served as president of the Russia-Chile Business Council, director general of related company Inter EVM, and director of TSITiS. Inter EVM and TSITiS operate extensively in Latin America, and both are closely tied to the Russian defense ministry and FSB, Russia's main intelligence organization,³⁵ according to online CN CEPLA documents reviewed by the authors, many of which have now been taken down since the invasion of Ukraine. Tatiana Mashkova, Starovoitov's long-time deputy, held multiple senior positions under Russian president Vladimir Putin, and followed him as the head of CN CEPLA.³⁶

PRC and Kremlin Influence in Chile's Information Space: Different Tactics, Similar Objectives

The PRC and Russia want to advance their strategic objectives and boost public perceptions of their roles in Chile. They advocate for a multipolar world in which they challenge American dominance in education, culture, technology, and language. More broadly, they aim to weaken the U.S. Though the PRC and the Kremlin have similar objectives and sometimes collude, particularly on anti-U.S. narratives, the two countries deploy different tools, tactics, and messages.

PRC Information Influence

The PRC has a multipronged approach to shaping the information space in Chile. It focuses on training for journalists, content sharing, agreements that support its Chilean media partners, and educational and cultural outreach. Pro-PRC stories and narratives are presented to Chilean audiences as if they were independent media reports instead of state-sponsored propaganda.³⁷

Though the PRC and the Kremlin have similar objectives and sometimes collude, particularly on anti-U.S. narratives, the two countries deploy different tools, tactics, and messages.

31 National Committee for Economic Cooperation with Latin American Countries, <http://www.cepla.ru/es/about/>.

32 While much of the information has been taken down since the invasion of Ukraine, IBI Consultants monitored the site over seven years and captured much of the content, including the certificates at the time of authorization from the FSB, valid from 2013-2018, and the Ministry of Defense (2014-2019), and the sales operations. See: Farah, Douglas and Marianne Richardson, "Dangerous Alliances: Russia's Strategic Inroads in Latin America." Institute for National Strategic Studies - National Defense University, December 2022, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/strategic-perspectives-41.pdf>

33 "An important figure in Russia-Latin America relations dies in Moscow [Fallece en Moscú una importante figura en las relaciones Rusia-Latinoamérica]." National Committee for Economic Cooperation with Latin American Countries, 21 July 2021 http://cncepla.ru/es/press-center/news/79346/?sphrase_id=19627.

34 "Hero of Russia Alexander Starovotov dies at 81," RT, July 17, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/news/886328-geroi-rossii-aleksandr-starovoitov>

35 National Committee for Economic Cooperation with Latin American Countries, http://www.cepla.ru/es/events/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=11928&phrase_id=90484.

36 "Our Team [Nuestro equipo]." National Committee for Economic Cooperation with Latin American Countries, <http://cncepla.ru/es/about/staff.php>.

37 For a complete assessment of PRC influence in the media and information space, please see: Han, BC and Sascha Hannig. "Chile Country Report: Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022." Freedom House, September 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/chile/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

PRC narratives in Chile have largely focused on promoting the “win-win” relationship between the two countries, muting criticism of the PRC or the PRC-Chile relationship, and promoting anti-U.S. sentiment.³⁸ China is broadly popular among Chileans. According to the 2020 report from Latinobarómetro, a non-profit polling organization, 53.1 percent of Chileans hold a favorable view of China, as compared to 54.9 percent for the U.S. and 47.9 percent for Russia.³⁹

PRC Influence in Chile's Media

When President Xi spoke at the first China-Latin America Media Leaders summit in Santiago in 2016, he emphasized the need to greatly expand media cooperation between the two continents. Xi declared that the aim of the summit was to “show the world a more authentic and vibrant China” and work with Latin America to “jointly voice opinions on world peace, development, and other major issues.”⁴⁰ Toward that end, he noted that the PRC and Latin America should strengthen exchanges between media outlets, including training for Latin American journalists in the PRC, joint production on stories, and content exchanges. The PRC has pursued this strategy in Chile under the umbrella of the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum and via bilateral engagement.

The state-controlled Xinhua news agency has a bureau in Santiago that produces a steady stream of content portraying the PRC as a benefactor that provides vital investments and vaccines while championing world peace. Xinhua Español offers high-quality news programming, as well as a news wire service for print and radio media. Xinhua Español has had little success penetrating Chile's mass media market, according to interviews with three journalists at major news outlets, including one who has refused all PRC overtures for content sharing and training. PRC diplomats have also published content favorable to the PRC, though former PRC Ambassador Xu Bu's (2018-2020) aggressive approach backfired, as he was forced to leave his post early because he was too outspoken and responded aggressively to any perceived criticism of Beijing.⁴¹ One noteworthy incident occurred when Xu Bu criticized a Chilean parliamentarian for meeting with a Hong Kong activist, penning an op-ed in *El Mercurio*, a prestigious newspaper, stating the parliamentarian shouldn't meet with “social thugs.”⁴²

A more effective strategy for the PRC than placing stories in Xinhua and other PRC state media has been to rely on exchanges, co-production, and content sharing between PRC and Chilean media outlets. This gives the PRC propaganda machine direct access to almost all of Chile's national and significant regional media. In turn, by paying for content or funding journalists to skew their stories toward the PRC's successes, the PRC provides an economic lifeline to financially struggling media outlets.

Several of Chile's leading media organizations have signed content sharing agreements with PRC state-sponsored media over the last few years, allowing the PRC to disseminate its narratives across the country. In January 2020, *La Tercera*, a major newspaper and radio outlet, signed an agreement with the China Media Group/Voice of China to produce *China Connection* (Conexión China). *China Connection* offers “relevant stories to show an updated vision of the culture” of China.⁴³ *Radio Cooperativa*, a chain of 41 radio stations, maintains a content-sharing agreement with China Media Group that includes op-eds, interviews, and a weekly radio program called *The China Effect* (Efecto China).⁴⁴ *El Mercurio* accepts paid PRC “news inserts” that are barely distinguishable from the news content, and they often feature strongly anti-U.S. material. Xinhua also maintains an agreement with the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote information sharing.

38 Han and Hannig. “Chile Country Report: Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022.”

39 “Chile.” *Latinobarómetro*, 2020, <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>.

40 “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence.” National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>.

41 Ellis. “Chinese advances in Chile.”

42 “The unusual round between the Chinese ambassador and the deputy Belloli [El insolito ronde entre el embajador chino y el diputado Bellolio].” *El Mostrador*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/pais/2019/09/02/el-insolito-round-entre-el-embajador-chino-y-el-diputado-bellolio/>.

43 “China Connection [Conexión China].” *La Tercera*, <https://www.latercera.com/canal/conexion-china/>.

44 “China Effect [Efecto China].” *Cooperativa*, <https://www.cooperativa.cl/efectochina/>.

As the American pro-democracy group Freedom House has noted, “Chinese state media content from outlets like Xinhua, CGTN, and China Radio International is mixed with original content or content from other sources on China, which obfuscates the distinction between state-produced propaganda and independent reporting.”⁴⁵

The use of paid content is effective. Even paid print inserts marked as such are difficult to distinguish from actual news content. This is particularly confusing for readers who are not familiar with the nuances of paid propaganda. Further, on national radio and television stations, stories are almost never attributed to PRC media sources. Some reporters and editors who use PRC content say the sharing agreements, which allow for free use of Chilean stories in PRC media outlets and vice versa, are an economic necessity. Content sharing helps keep media companies afloat as advertising revenue shrinks, particularly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The journalists agreed about the ethical pitfalls inherent in using propaganda without noting it, but they argued the policy must be weighed against the alternative, which would be the likely closure of news outlets for lack of funding.

All three media sources noted that PRC government information monitoring of Chilean media is relentless and persistent. When the PRC learned of a story it deemed unfriendly, an emissary, usually a PRC embassy attaché, called to complain. The attaché would usually issue a detailed critique and request remedial action. If the news organization pushed back, the emissary often threatened to cut Chinese subsidies to that organization. PRC diplomats have also used such tactics to censor policymakers. As a result, and in spite of the fact that Chilean media have published content critical of the PRC, there does appear to be self-censorship on PRC-related coverage.⁴⁶

Educational and Cultural Outreach

Chile’s pro-PRC business leanings have created an entry point for educational exchanges. Chile is home to three Confucius Institutes, based at Santo Tomás University, Universidad Católica, and La Frontera University, as well as 21 Confucius Institute satellite campuses and classrooms.⁴⁷ In addition to Mandarin language training, Confucius Institutes offer scholarships, conferences, sister university agreements with schools in the PRC, and a broad array of courses, from psychology to nutrition to law and accounting.⁴⁸ Hanban, a Chinese language organization, offers scholarships to Chilean students to study in the PRC. In 2023, 18 students took advantage of the scholarships.⁴⁹ Universidad Católica has also partnered with Tsinghua University to provide scholarships to study journalism, part of a broader PRC strategy to train reporters across Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵⁰ These opportunities are widely advertised in academic circles for the best and most promising students.

Chinese companies also provide outreach and training opportunities. The most visible is Huawei’s Seeds for the Future program. It offers scholarships and technical training, in China, on information technology, combined with a study of Chinese history and culture.⁵¹ Seeds for the Future awarded five Chilean students scholarships in 2018 and 10 in 2019. On the program’s website, Huawei noted that the program yielded a “bumper crop” of scholars and had been praised by “former presidents” and other Chilean officials.⁵²

45 Han and Hannig. “Chile Country Report: Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022.”

46 Han and Hannig. “Chile Country Report: Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022.”

47 “Confucius Institutes Around the World – 2023.” Digmandarin, 7 January 2023, <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>.

48 “Entities from Santo Tomás and the CLEC Foundation strengthen Ties with the Chinese Embassy in Chile [Entidades de Santo Tomás y Fundación CLEC afianzan lazos con embajada de China en Chile].” Santo Tomás, 11 March 2022, <https://enlinea.santotomas.cl/actualidad-institucional/instituto-confucio/entidades-de-santo-tomas-y-fundacion-clec-afianzan-lazos-con-embajada-de-china-en-chile/234029/>.

49 “Notice on Announcing the List of Chinese Government Scholarships for the 2023/2024 Academic Year.” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Chile, 23 June 2023, http://cl.china-embassy.gov.cn/zzgx/kjww/202306/t20230623_11102808.htm.

50 Han and Hannig. “Chile Country Report: Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022.”

51 “History – Seeds for the Future.” Huawei, <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/history.html>.

52 “History – Seeds for the Future.” Huawei, <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/history.html>.

Kremlin Information Influence

The Russian government relies on state-owned and state-sponsored media to promote its worldview, and it has gained a significant following in Chile. Rather than try to coopt existing media, like China does, the Russian government has had significant success in providing new, dynamic content. This content is more clearly anti-U.S. and includes overt support of the pro-Bolivarian Alliance (led by Venezuela). Like CN CEPLA, discussed above, Russia also relies on non-official front organizations.

Kremlin Influence in Chile's Media

Russian state media runs the Spanish language services Actualidad RT/RT en Español (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik's Sputnik Mundo. These are the primary outlets for Kremlin propaganda and disinformation efforts across the region. In addition to its television channel, the state-run RT runs a news website and social media on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Sputnik Mundo also controls a radio broadcast service which broadcasts Spanish-language content on the radio and web. Two recent studies found that RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo are broadly influential in Latin America, with 30.4 million combined followers on social media. This is larger than the 26.4 million RT/Sputnik English followers, and fewer than the 39.8 million following RT/Sputnik Arabic.⁵³ In celebrating its 10 years of operation in Latin America in 2020, RT claimed 20 million viewers in Latin America, with 10.7 million followers on Facebook, 3.2 million Twitter followers, 2.8 million YouTube subscribers, and 650,000 Instagram followers.⁵⁴

Russia-sponsored Spanish language media has a significant impact in Latin America. RT en Español is the third most-shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁵ Interviewees uniformly indicated that people age 25 and under in Chile see it as a cheeky, irreverent, and valid source of information with a noteworthy presence on social media. However, the older population, which still relies on printed newspapers for their information, has little knowledge of either RT or Sputnik. Actual figures are not available.

Russia also uses social media to promote its narratives, often through proxies or sites that appear not to be affiliated with its media, but in fact, are. The most popular Russian platform operating out of Chile, an RT en Español YouTube channel called Ahí les Va (There You Go), boasted more than one million subscribers before YouTube removed the channel following the invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁶ Ahí les Va used the tagline "Information with a bit of humor, humor with a lot of information. We publish a little but very tasty. There you go!" (*Información, pero con algo de humor. Humor, pero con mucha información. Publicamos poco pero sabroso. ¡Ahí les va!*).

To amplify pro-Kremlin messages, RT and Sputnik have formed alliances with other ideologically aligned networks. Primarily, these networks are Telesur, the widely-viewed Venezuela-based channel founded by former President Hugo Chávez, and HispanTV, the Iranian Spanish network with only a modest following in the Western hemisphere. The Russian, Venezuelan, and Iranian outlets offer overlapping anti-American narratives stressing that the United States is a counter-revolutionary enemy of humanity with vast imperialist designs. The three rely on a small group of correspondents who report the same information on all three platforms, a core of "super-spreaders" who create echo chambers across the media landscape. The most prolific is Pablo Jofré, who broadcasts for RT and Sputnik from Chile.⁵⁷

53 Sekkarie, Sana. "A Global Tour Through Russia Propaganda: Where Russian Narratives on Ukraine are they're winning, where they're losing and where they are not even competing." Miburo Substack, 6 March 2022, https://miburo.substack.com/p/a-global-tour-through-russian-propaganda?r=1dxl2&s=r&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web. The user numbers are not broken down by country.

54 Quintero, Jaime. "RT celebrates 10 years and reaches 20 million viewers [RT cumple diez años y llega a 20 millones de televidentes]." Prodonoticias, 5 March 2020, <https://www.produ.com/noticias/rt-cumple-diez-anos-y-llega-a-20-millones-de-televidentes>.

55 "Russian disinformation on Ukraine spreads on Spanish-speaking social media." Associated Press, 4 April 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/russia-disinformation-ukraine-spreading-spanish-speaking-media-rcna22843>.

56 Motta, Isabela. "The Russian Media Account Hitting It Off with Spanish Speakers." German Marshall Fund, 16 August 2022, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/ahi-les-va-the-russian-media-account-hitting-it-off-with-spanish-speakers/>.

57 Farah, Douglas and Alexa Tavarez. "Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, 'Super Spreaders,' and Alternative Narratives." Institute for National Strategic Studies - National Defense University, June 2021, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>.

According to a source who has done media content analysis on both Russian and PRC operations in the information space, Russian outlets almost never comment on internal Chilean affairs because the Kremlin strives to maintain good relations across the political spectrum and not call attention to Russian groups operating there. “The Russians have a global project, visible in Chile, to portray itself as a world power with allies in Latin America,” the source said. “So, what happens in Chile is much less interesting than how Russia is perceived in Chile.”⁵⁸

Toward that end, Russia has a propaganda and disinformation campaign in Chile around the Ukraine war, perpetuating pro-Russian narratives and blaming the U.S. for the fighting. Key campaign themes include allegations that Ukrainian forces fire on their own civilians,⁵⁹ Latin American “mercenaries” hired by Ukraine (and other countries) are not being paid and are disillusioned with the fighting,⁶⁰ and Russian forces are “de-Nazifying” Ukraine.⁶¹ RT and Sputnik have also used their Spanish outlets to undermine U.S. policy toward Ukraine and claim that the U.S. is trying to prevent Russia’s and China’s exertion of power on the world stage.⁶²

PRC-Russia Narrative Collusion

The PRC and Russia share complementary aims in influencing the information space in Chile: promoting their respective interests and disseminating anti-U.S. propaganda and disinformation. While there is no evidence of coordinated collusion, Russian and PRC state-media outlets in Spanish reinforce each other’s narratives. As it has elsewhere, PRC state news has reprinted Russian disinformation regarding the invasion of Ukraine.⁶³ These unsubstantiated stories provide a transcript-like summary of Russian talking points on the war in Ukraine. Xinhua interviews experts who criticize NATO’s expansion, and emphasizes commentators who argue that NATO’s expansion east, toward Ukraine, was the driving factor behind the Russia’s invasion.⁶⁴

In turn, the Russian media quotes PRC news outlets to reinforce its line of attack on U.S. policy on Ukraine and the war. For example, RT wrote an article based entirely on a Global Times piece affirming “the U.S. desire to turn Ukraine into a quagmire so that Russia continues to bleed” as its population is forced to “elect a pro-American regime.”⁶⁵ Given the absence of evidence of coordination between Russia’s and the PRC’s propaganda efforts, this talking point is more likely an example of the convergence of interests between the two countries.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, both Russia and the PRC have sought to push narratives that there is a shift away from the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency.

58 Author in-person interview with Chilean social media analyst visiting Washington, D.C. 26 January 2022.

59 Based on RT News Coverage, for example: “Ukrainian tanks were shooting at civilians’: Testimony emerges from Mariupol basements as Kyiv troops withdraw [‘Tanques ucraniano disparaban a los civiles’: Emergen testimonios de los sótanos de Mariúpol a medida que se retiran las tropas de Kiev].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425313-testimonios-emerger-sotanos-mariupol-liberar-ciudad-ucrania>. Other coverage from Sputnik news, for example, suggests that Russian soldiers in Mariupol are finding tortured bodies and other evidence that Ukraine committed human rights violations: “Russian Defense: They find bodies with signs of torture and swastikas in Mariupol [Defensa rusa: encuentran cuerpos con huellas de torture y esvásticas en Mariúpol].” Sputnik Mundo, 28 March 2022, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20220328/defensa-rusa-encuentran-cuerpos-con-huellas-de-tortura-y-esvasticas-en-mariupol-1123684569.html>.

60 Based on RT News coverage, for example: “Mercenaries, many from Latin America, denounce that Ukraine is breaking its promises [Mercenarios, muchos de Latinoamérica, denuncian que Ucrania incumple sus promesas].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425288-mercenarios-latinoamerica-denunciar-incumplimiento-promesas-ucrania>

61 See for example this series of articles from Sputnik Mundo: “Russian operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine [Operacion rusa de desmilitarizacion y desnazificacion de Ucrania].” Sputnik Mundo, 2022-2023, https://mundo.sputniknews.com/category_operacion-militar-especial-de-rusia-en-ucrania/.

62 Based on RT News coverage, for example: “China is the main strategic competitor: the Pentagon gives the US Congress a classified version of its national defense strategy [China es el principal competidor estratégico: el Pentágono entrega al Congreso de EE.UU. una versión clasificada de su estrategia de defensa nacional].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425339-pentagono-estrategia-defensa-nacional>.

63 “Armenia denies reports of transfer of fighter jets to Russia for military operations in Ukraine [Armenia niega reportes de transferencia de aviones de combate a Rusia para operaciones militares en Ucrania].” Xinhua Español, 28 March 2022, http://spanish.news.cn/2022-03/29/c_1310533292.htm.

64 See, for example, this short article, which provides a brief summary of a Foreign Policy analysis piece: “Those reckless who defended Ukraine’s NATO membership must bear moral responsibility: academic [Aquellos imprudentes que defendieron membresía de Ucrania en OTAN deben asumir responsabilidad moral: académico].” Xinhua Español, 25 March 2022, http://spanish.news.cn/2022-03/25/c_1310528973.htm.

65 “They accuse Biden of wanting to ‘turn Ukraine into a quagmire so that Russia continues to bleed’ [‘Acusan a Biden de querer’ ‘convertir Ucrania en un lodazal para que Rusia siga sangrando’].” RT, 28 March 2022, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425299-biden-convertir-ucrania-lodazal-rusia>. The article is based entirely on a Global Times piece: “Biden makes US tensions with Russia ‘personal’; calling for ‘regime change’ in a nuclear power dangerous: expert.” Global Times, 27 March 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1256924.shtml>.

In March 2022, a popular RT show covered a “rebellion against the dollar,” noting that the PRC is considering challenging the dollar’s, and the euro’s, dominance in the international financial system.⁶⁶ The show’s Russian host argued that “It is not normal that all of the countries who don’t use dollars or euros in their economies to continue to use them [for international transactions].” This is consistent with PRC messaging on the need for global economic reform to displace the dollar.

Anti-U.S. rhetoric from the PRC and the Kremlin only serves to reinforce with the widespread perception that the United States has significantly withdrawn from the hemisphere, as evidenced by the lack of a U.S. ambassador in Chile, long one of the U.S.’s strongest allies, from January 2019-September 2022.

The First Year of the Boric Administration and Looking Ahead

The Communist Party, with significant historic ties to Russia and the former Soviet Union, is an important part of the governing coalition of President Gabriel Boric. Despite this, Boric has repeatedly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and publicly condemned President Vladimir Putin as the aggressor in the conflict, while expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people.⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion the media landscape is rapidly changing, as major social media platforms move against Russian state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation.

The Boric administration’s approach toward the PRC is less defined. According to interviews with senior officials from the previous government who are close to current officials in the Foreign Ministry, few in Boric’s inner circle have tried to curtail PRC strategic investment opportunities in Chile. However, officials have expressed interest in limiting the environmental damage caused by extractive mining and the fishing industry, which is dominated by the PRC firms.

In November 2022, President Boric met with President Xi in Bangkok.⁶⁸ During the meeting, according to PRC-state media, President Boric “applauded the remarkable achievements that China has made under the leadership of President Xi Jinping.” Boric also reportedly stressed Chile’s commitment to the one-China policy and noted that Chile “hopes to learn from China’s governance experience and deepen cooperation with China in infrastructure, poverty reduction and digital economy.”⁶⁹ The readout from President Boric’s office highlighted progress made between the two countries on “trade, climate change, scientific cooperation, and technological development,” as well as continued PRC investment, but made no mention of Xi’s leadership or the one-China policy.⁷⁰ For his part, Xi noted the PRC’s eagerness to deepen cooperation with Chile on governance, development, BRI cooperation, and trade and investment, in addition to calling for joint efforts to “uphold true multilateralism.”⁷¹ To date, President Boric looks set to maintain and even deepen close economic ties with the PRCs, with a priority on generating additional investment in Chile from any country interested.

Conclusion

Over the last several decades, successive Chilean administrations have consolidated relations with the PRC to boost Chilean exports and attract foreign direct investment. The PRC is now Chile’s top trading partner and source of investment, offering it pathways to use its economic might to exert influence with the political and business elite in the country, as most clearly evidence by the activities of former President Frei. Economic engagement has been coupled with a PRC-sponsored effort to tell China’s story in Chile.

66 “Rebellion against the dollar? What about the Russian and Chinese plan for a Eurasian currency (and other rebellions)? [¿Rebelión contra el dólar? ¿Qué se sabe del plan de Rusia y China de una moneda euroasiática (y otras rebeliones)?].” Ahí les Va, 25 March 2022, https://odysee.com/@ahilesva:e/2022.03.25_Mirko-China-Eurasia-Odysee:1. The report notes that the main proponents of the change are five nations of the former Soviet Union, nicknamed the “istans.”

67 “Chilean President-elect Again Condemns Russian Invasion of Ukraine.” Mercosur, 1 March 2022, <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/03/01/chilean-president-elect-again-condemns-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

68 “President Xi Jinping Meets with Chilean President Gabriel Boric.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 18 November 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202211/t20221119_10977908.html.

69 “President Xi Jinping Meets with Chilean President Gabriel Boric.”

70 “President of the Republic Gabriel Boric Font ends his participation in APEC 2022 Thailand [Presidente de la República Gabriel Boric Font finaliza su participación en APEC 2022 Tailandia].” Prensa Presidencia – Gobierno de Chile, 19 November 2022, <https://prensa.presidencia.cl/comunicado.aspx?id=204916>.

71 “President Xi Jinping Meets with Chilean President Gabriel Boric.”

Deploying a mix of content-sharing arrangements with leading Chilean newspapers, efforts to co-opt journalists, and applying economic and other pressure on media to limit critical coverage, the PRC has made real gains in this effort. While Chilean media remains robust and independent, there are emerging signs of self-censorship on media coverage of the PRC and the PRC-Chile relationship.

Russia, by contrast, has made few inroads in the country beyond the information space. President Boric has been outspoken on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Chilean people have demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine. Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation nevertheless continues to appeal to people in Chile and across Latin America and the Caribbean, building on preexisting anti-U.S. sentiment. To date, however, Chile has maintained a principled commitment to democracy and to upholding robust transparency and accountability standards, enabling it to withstand the corrosive impact of greater economic engagement with the PRC and increased influence efforts from the PRC and Russia.

CONCLUSION

This report examines the deepening relationship between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, spotlighting their unprecedented collaboration, manifest in China's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the burgeoning economic, political, and military ties between the two nations. This partnership underscores a larger trend of an emerging authoritarian nexus, wherein illiberal actors join forces, both individually and collectively, to erode democratic principles on a global scale. The varied case studies within this report shed light on how these authoritarian forces intersect and reinforce, or undermine, each other's actions, profoundly affecting democratic norms and institutions.

The studies reveal a multi-faceted approach to such influence across the political, economic, information and security domains, including corruption, elite capture, economic coercion, military cooperation, and diplomatic and cultural influence. The overarching objective of these authoritarian actors is to diminish transparency and democratic governance, fostering disunity among democratic allies and pushing various nations to adopt their governance and bilateral cooperation style. Whether it's exploiting societal divisions, leveraging historical ties, empowering corruption, or employing propaganda campaigns, these actions collectively pose a substantial challenge to democratic stability.

In response to these alarming trends, this report advocates for a proactive approach to fortify democratic institutions. Recognizing the critical role strong democratic foundations play in countering foreign authoritarian influence, it emphasizes the imperative of addressing governance gaps that domestic and foreign authoritarian actors exploit. The compendium's conclusions advocate for cross-sectoral response and enhanced cooperation between various stakeholders, including media outlets, civil society organizations, and politicians, to safeguard democratic governance and enhance resilience against foreign authoritarian influence.

An essential aspect of this initiative involves promoting awareness and education. Leaders in civil society, policymakers, government officials, and activists must comprehend the destabilizing influence campaigns affecting their nations and formulate a cohesive response. Tackling the spread of propaganda, enhancing media literacy, and reinforcing cybersecurity efforts are paramount in the fight against foreign authoritarian influence. Policies against online harassment and hate speech, coupled with investments in independent media, are critical components of this effort. Ultimately, the report underscores the importance of offering citizens transparent, accountable governance as a deterrent to undemocratic political systems, encouraging democratic participation, adherence to the rule of law, and civic engagement to safeguard institutions from external threats. In a world where the battle for democratic ideals intensifies, the insights provided here are crucial for shaping effective strategies to preserve and promote democracy in the face of growing authoritarian influence and a growing authoritarian nexus.



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