Russian Information Operations via Sputnik *Srbija*: The Case Study of Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

The literature on Russian Information Warfare emphasizes Russia's hostile activities against adversaries wherein *information* serves as a tool. To complement the literature, this paper explores Russian Information Warfare targeted at Serbia – Russia's close ally. Specifically, the study examines the Russian Information Operation *vis-à-vis* the Russia-Ukraine War via Sputnik *Srbija*. The study conducts an analysis of 86 Sputnik *Srbija* articles in the Serbian language covering the first 100 days of the war. The articles stem from the intersection of "Crisis in Ukraine" and "Serbia" tags in the Sputnik *Srbija* search engine. The dissertation performed qualitative discourse analysis of Sputnik *Srbija's* content to outline 17 narrative patterns about Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War. The patterns elevate positive perceptions of Serbia and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić; demonize the US, the EU, and NATO as aggressors and hegemons; and glorify Russia as the protector of Serbs and a victim of West-led Russophobia and imperialism. The empirical findings show that Russia has led Information Warfare against the West via Serbia as the 'proxy' battlefield in this case study. Tellingly, most Sputnik articles quote former and current Serbian political figures who directly launch positive perceptions of Russia and negative sentiments toward the West into the public discourse. The research output, thus, also finds that Serbia is not a victim of Russian Information Warfare against the West but an accomplice. Both Russia and Serbia use Memory Diplomacy to nurture their Memory Alliance, making Serbia receptive to Russian Information Operations and the Kremlin's divisive narratives aimed at the West.

Keywords: *Russian Information Warfare, Russian Information Operations, Memory Diplomacy, Serbia, Sputnik Srbija*

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Introduction

Research Puzzle

In the 2010s, the spectrum of emerging security threats has challenged Western democracies and values. The exponential wave of support for the far-right populist parties mirrored the inability of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to withstand these novel security hazards. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was a pivotal point in this regard. Furthermore, Russia's ostensible shift to a 'new way of war' garnered substantial attention in the West. The premise was that Russia had found alternative ways to exert dominance in the international system due to its lack of conventional capabilities (Molder and Sazonov, 2018: 314). To that point, Russia became nefarious for fusing military and non-military means to achieve a competitive advantage over an adversary, posing a considerable security threat to the West. As a result, the EU and NATO indulged in all-encompassing paranoia, largely attributing the decay of Western cohesion to Russia's new way of war.' The Kremlin has, indeed, launched a more "aggressive geopolitical campaign" (Galeotti, 2019: 2), employing a variety of non-military tools to undermine the EU and NATO. Since then, Information Warfare has been at the core of Russia's activity in the West.

In short, Information Warfare encloses hostile activities wherein information serves as "a tool, or a target, or a domain of operations" (Giles, 2016: 6). As such, Information Warfare comprises both wartime and peacetime activities (McFarland, 2020). While there are physical and psychological elements to it, this research prioritizes the latter. The psychological aspect entails a profound grasp of the culture that an external actor seeks to penetrate. Importantly, the Information Warfare narratives "do not have to convince," but "induce fear or at least anxiety" within a society *vis-à-vis* a common perceived threat (Ibid.). Therefore, Information Warfare is not just a "simple distribution of disinformation" (Giles, 2016: 12). It is rather a coordinated effort that

exploits “history, culture, language, nationalism, disaffection and more to carry out cyber-enhanced disinformation campaigns with much wider objectives” (Ibid.). A key factor of Russia’s Information Warfare strategy is the use of Information Operations which include “all the uses of information and disinformation as a tool of state power” (Allen and Moore, 2018: 60). The crucial goal of Information Operations is to influence people’s “decision-making, attitudes, and behavior” (Flyktman et. al, 2020: 174). Contrary to the focus of the literature, the Kremlin does not only launch Information Operations in the West. In turn, Russia implements its Information Warfare agenda via Information Operations against the West in “proxy” states. Serbia – Russia’s lifelong ally – has not remained immune to Russia's strategic goals and non-military influence methods.

The Western Balkans comprises Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It is a region characterized by “weak governance, fragile civil societies, and geopolitical disputes” (Green et al., 2021: 9). The persisting ethnic tensions, “old” resentments toward the West, and lexical similarities made the region a compelling strategic opportunity for Russia to deploy state control. Being cognizant of this, the Kremlin launched Sputnik – a Russian news outlet – in Belgrade, Serbia in 2015. Sputnik *Srbija* publishes articles in the Serbian language using both Cyrillic and Latin alphabet. Using Serbia as the launchpad, Russia strategically situated Sputnik – the Kremlin’s Information Warfare implementing tool – to penetrate the information space of the Western Balkans via Information Operations. Russia particularly capitalized on Serbia’s fragile information landscape. Thus, the Kremlin has proliferated its carefully crafted disinformation narratives not only via Sputnik but also through Serbian local media outlets. That made it easy to infiltrate the Serbian public discourse and beyond.

As expected, the EU and NATO have been alarmed by Sputnik’s presence and ability to spread disinformation narratives in Serbia and the

region. Therefore, they began attributing the ongoing anti-West sentiments and narratives in Serbia to the success of Russian Information Operations, namely disinformation (Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 2020; Doncheva, 2020; Svetoka and Doncheva, 2021). However, this assessment neglected Serbia's potential receptiveness to and even alignment with the Russian Information Operations narratives. Simply put, the victimization of Serbia has disregarded its role as a partial enabler of Russian divisive narratives within the Serbian public discourse. The latest fruitful opportunity for Russia to launch Information Operations has been the Russia-Ukraine War.

The Russia-Ukraine War is a significant event not only for the EU, NATO, Russia, and Ukraine – but also for Serbia. To illustrate, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin framed Serbian recent history as the precedent for his invasion of Ukraine. He stated in his "declaration-of-war" speech, "if the West can redraw borders for Kosovo, then we [Russia] can redraw borders for the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in eastern Ukraine" (McGlynn, 2022). In this announcement, Moscow "self-consciously mirrored the justifications given by NATO leaders for bombing Yugoslavia" in 1999 (Ibid.). In addition to serving as a powerful parallel in President Putin's speech, Serbia has played another key part in the war. Notably, the Serbian administration has not joined the EU sanctions on Russia despite the pressure, meaning that Serbia has not banned access to Sputnik *Srbija.* Taking advantage of that, the Kremlin indeed launched a special Information Operation regarding the Russia-Ukraine War via Sputnik *Srbija* to appeal to the Serbian audience.

Research Questions

To showcase this Information Operation via Sputnik *Srbija*, the author selected precisely the Russia-Ukraine War as a case study. The goal of using this case study is to showcase Sputnik *Srbija's* narrative patterns and analyze Serbia's role as the "proxy" facilitator of Information Warfare. The three key research questions that unfold out of this research puzzle are: *What are the key*

narrative patterns observed in Sputnik Srbija's public discourse vis-à-vis Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War? To what extent do those narratives constitute Information Warfare against the West? To what extent has Serbia served as an enabler of Russian Information Warfare?

Supported by relevant article excerpts, the findings of the research display 17 narrative patterns: "Western injustice toward Yugoslavia in the 1990s is similar to the ongoing Western injustice toward Russia," "Serbia and Ukraine are victims of NATO's expansion," NATO is brutal and Russia is merciful," "Serbian people are 'bigger' victims than Ukrainian people," "Serbia's is a victim/small," "Serbia is strong/independent," "Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance," "Serbia and the West have an unstable alliance," "Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia," "Serbia supports Russia in the war," "Serbia supports Ukraine in the war," "The US and NATO are hegemonic and imperial," "The US and NATO want the war," "The West launched Information Warfare against Russia," "Europe is weak and unstable," "Russia is strong and a protector," and "Russia is a victim and peaceful."

Accounting for the analysis outcomes, this paper argues that Russia has pursued its Information Warfare agenda against the West using the Russia-Ukraine War Information Operation as an instrument. Specifically, the paper asserts that Russia has launched Information Warfare against the West via Serbia as the "proxy" state. That is, Russia targeted Serbian public discourse to influence Serbia's perception of the West. In doing so, the major objective has been to build on the pre-existing skepticism toward the West and, hence, redirect Serbia even more toward Russia. Seeking to achieve this effect, Sputnik highlights Serbia's turbulent history with the West, current Western pressures on Serbia, and "monstrous" treatment of Serbia's close ally Russia. On top of that, Sputnik narratives present the West as imperial, hegemonic, and Russophobe. To a large extent, this constitutes indirect Russian Information Warfare against the West with Serbia as the supporter.

The paper, therefore, contends that Serbia has enabled this Information Operation and, therefore, indirect Information Warfare against the West to a great extent. First, Sputnik *Srbija's* articles on the Russia-Ukraine War predominantly feature the voices of former and current Serbian political officials – including the top administration. While Sputnik has organized and launched it at crucial points, the discourse spotlights different members of Serbian society and not external actors (with a few exceptions). Second, Sputnik republished some articles and narratives that had first been disseminated by Serbian state-controlled local media, implying that Russia and Serbia may generally favor similar narratives. To that end, the Sputnik narratives paint Serbia, especially Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, in an immensely positive light. This element makes the Serbian government receptive to and supportive of Russian narratives no matter how destabilizing and distorted.

Roadmap

To assess the research questions, the roadmap of this dissertation is as follows. Besides Introduction and Conclusion, there are four chapters. Chapter 1 **Literature Review** engages with the available literature on Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, and Information Operations. The exploration of these debates enables the delineation of the concepts, which informs the main findings. The literature also zooms in on Russian Information Operations in Serbia. The final section of the Literature Review outlines conceptual and empirical lacunae that this paper seeks to fill. First, the author expands on the concept by introducing the element of "proxy" to the conduct of Information Warfare. Second, the author exposes Sputnik *Srbija* narratives regarding Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War, constituting this paper's empirical contribution.

Chapter 2 **Conceptual Framework** outlines an authentic conceptual framework that consists of two concepts: Information Warfare and Memory Diplomacy. The case study is unique because Serbia is a close Russian ally and a key strategic partner for the West. Thus, solely applying the fragmented

Information Warfare theory to the case study would not be conducive. Given this complexity, the paper underlines that Russia has been launching Information Warfare in Serbia, but against the West by "proxy." The concept of Memory Diplomacy has empowered Serbia to serve as an implementer. Via the Memory Alliance that both Russia and Serbia nurture, Russia keeps Serbia receptive to Russian Information Operations narratives and, by default, its Information Warfare against the West.

Chapter 3 **Methodology** outlines the qualitative discourse analysis as the methodology for the research. The author selected the intersection of tags *"Crisis in Ukraine"* and *"Serbia"* in the Sputnik *Srbija* search engine. This selection procured 86 articles for the time frame of 24 February – 3 June 2022 (the first 100 days of the war). The findings feature Sputnik *Srbija* narrative patterns that emerged from these articles. Using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software, the author created three coding categories – *Serbia, the West,* and *Russia* – and 17 codes of narrative patterns.

Chapter 4 **Findings** is the most comprehensive chapter of the paper. The chapter consists of three sections: 1) **Background, 2) Presentation of Findings:** Analysis of Sputnik *Srbija* Narratives; and 3) **Discussion**. The first section dives into the context of Serbian history and foreign policy, the landscape of Information Operations in Serbia, and Serbia's "role" in the Russia-Ukraine War. The second section presents the analysis of the Sputnik *Srbija* narratives *vis-à-vis* Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War. Specifically, this part spans the presentation of narrative patterns and the author's critical assessment of the narratives in the Serbian language. The third section engages with the research implications and limitations. With this overview of chapters, this paper proceeds to Chapter 1 - Literature Review.

1. Literature Review

The key research questions of this dissertation are: *What are the key narrative patterns observed in Sputnik Srbija's public discourse vis-à-vis Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War? To what extent do those narratives constitute Information Warfare against the West? To what extent has Serbia served as an enabler of Russian Information Warfare?* Hence, the purpose of the literature review is to set up the analytical ground for the Russia-backed Information Operation (IO) *vis-à-vis* the Russia-Ukraine War via Sputnik *Srbija.* To do that, this literature review will pursue the following structure. The first part will discuss the most prominent problems and debates that have arisen as a result of lumping distinct concepts under the Hybrid Warfare (HW) umbrella. The second section of this chapter will dissect the discussions on Information Warfare (IW). Third, this chapter will delve specifically into the literature on Russian IOs (disinformation) in Serbia. Fourth, the review will outline the gaps that this analysis seeks to fill both conceptually and empirically.

1.1. Hybrid Warfare

The distinction between wartime and peacetime has become blurry. If there is a lack of clarity on the elements that constitute war and peace, then the "ground rules" that apply to a given security conundrum are malleable (Brooks, 2016: 22). This uncertainty is accompanied by technological advancements that engendered a transformation of well-established concepts into 'buzzwords.' These catchphrases are used in the literature to describe everything and, therefore, nothing. Concepts such as Hybrid Warfare (HW), Information Warfare (IW), and Information Operations (IO) have suffered. Notably, these terms have received renewed public attention following Russia's annexation of Crimea and actions in eastern Ukraine since 2014 (Fabian, 2019: 208). The ostensible "presentism" of the terms does not allow for a nuanced understanding of the concepts, causing perplexing debates in the literature and policy-making

circles. Moreover, the terms have become even more vague and problematic over time. Policymakers use them to describe any type of discomfort in the political sphere. To illustrate, Serbia's Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandar Vulin described the political pressure put on Serbia for not joining the ongoing EU sanctions on Russia as a "special hybrid war" on Serbia (RTV, 2022). For this reason, the remainder of the section will delve into the HW debates.

The collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the bipolar world order. With this change, the character of war has also evolved. To Murat Caliskan's point (2019: 415), new terms and concepts began appearing in the literature as an attempt to describe contemporary warfare: "fourth-generation warfare, compound wars, asymmetric conflict, a revolution in military affairs (RMA)," to name a few. Hybrid Warfare (HW) represents one of the labels that emerged out of a need to understand new ways of war. The main division in the HW literature revolves around: 1) whether this is a "new" form of warfare, and 2) whether this is indeed Russia's "new" way of war. Moreover, the HW literature has a pre-2014 and post-2014 stream of development. The former attempts to conceptualize HW as a manner of conducting contemporary warfare proportional to the ongoing technological development. In turn, the latter conceptualization accentuates Russia's activity and even develops and changes in line with how Russia conducts wars.

In 2002, William J. Nemeth coined the HW term in describing the activity of the Chechen rebels against Russian conventional forces (2002). Dr. Frank Hoffman, however, offered the first rich conceptualization of HW (under such name) in 2007. Interestingly, Hoffman (2007: 7) emphasizes that the blurred lines of war and peace allow for the employment of different modes of war at the same time to achieve greater impact. He argues that the adversaries fuse modes of warfare to engender more vulnerability, creating a "new" phenomenon. For instance, what were once fundamentally different sets of threats - conventional, irregular, and terrorist - are now regularly merged into one *hybrid* threat as a result (2007: 8). In other words, conducting regular and

irregular components of warfare is not new, but meshing the components into one "force" on the battlefield constitutes a change in how modern warfare plays out (Hoffman, 2007: 8). Hoffman first observes such a phenomenon in the 2006 battle between Hezbollah and Israel, in which Hezbollah, a non-state actor, was able to "study and deconstruct the vulnerabilities of the Western-style militaries" (Ibid.). Hoffman's initial claims that HW is a "new way of warfare" got refuted by further inspection of the term and history. From a historical perspective, HW and its techniques can be traced back as early as the Peloponnesian War (Wither, 2016: 74). Wither (Ibid.) goes on to argue that "irregular fighters have been the bane of numerous conventional militaries." Moreover, in 2012, military historians Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor (2012: 2) defined HW as the concurrent use of conventional military forces and irregular forces - such as guerillas, terrorists, and insurgents - "aimed at achieving a common political purpose" in a conflict context. Building on this conceptualization more robustly, McCulloh and Johnson (2013: 16-17) depict that "one of the combatants bases its optimized force structure on the combination of all available resources – both conventional and unconventional – in a unique cultural context to produce specific, synergistic effects against a conventionally-based opponent." Similarly, Robert Wilkie (2009: 15) underlines that HW is a modern variation of compound warfare which "begins with a regular force augmenting its operations with irregular capabilities." A more recent publication by Ilmari Käihkö (2021: 115) points out that even the Cold War offers concrete "examples of the combined use of various military and non-military methods and means" and that this mesh of regular and irregular methods and means is present in "virtually all wars." Therefore, the available literature is in consensus that HW is not a novel concept.

Indeed, the concept has evolved since its inception, despite the shaky analytical grounds crafted by Hoffman in 2007. Throughout this conceptual evolution and understanding, the term HW has been used to describe any activity. The range includes any action from the undertakings of non-state actors

to asymmetric activities of Western (mainly the US) adversaries to "malign Russian activities under the presidency of Vladimir Putin" (Käihkö, 2021: 116). This latest evolutionary stage of HW has led to a problematic understanding of HW, synonymous with Russian activities post-Crimea annexation in 2014 (Käihkö, 2021; Fabian, 2019; Caliskan, 2019; Muradov, 2021).

The annexation came as a surprise to academics and policymakers. Taken aback by the event, scholars and decision-makers began arguing that "the Russian strategy demonstrated a shift from traditional military capabilities towards non-military means including heavy reliance on information operations" (Fabian, 2019: 309). Shortly after, a "new" robust definition of HW (describing primarily Russian activities) came out in the 2015 edition of *the Military Balance:* "the use of military and nonmilitary tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means" (Military Balance, 2015: 17). Importantly, the notion of HW is a Western concept.

In contrast to the Western understanding of HW, Russia's conceptualization of HW centers around "the West's subversive activities towards the Russian Federation" (Muradov, 2022: 172). According to Western scholars, however, Army General Valery Gerasimov's controversial speech in 2013 represented Russia's official framing of its HW activities (Alan and Moore, 2018: 59). Interestingly, in mentioning hybrid activities, Gerasimov mainly refers to the Western support for the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions in the MENA region and post-Soviet space respectively (Galeotti, 2018: 1), and not at all Russia's "way of war."

The post-2014 understanding of HW in academic and policy-making spheres neglected the military strategy encompassed by HW. In turn, the further conceptualization of the term worked off elevating the use of non-military means over military means in launching hybrid wars (Käihkö, 2021: 116-117). As more value (or ultimately the only value) was placed on the employment of

non-military means (IW, Psychological Warfare, diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, etc.) within a context, HW and IW, for instance, have been used or understood interchangeably. This is precisely a polemic relevant to this paper. As the hybrid war would theoretically require the simultaneous usage of both conventional military and non-military forces, IW may be understood simply as a "column B" of HW. Thus, IW may be part of HW means and ends but can exist as an independent, stand-alone concept and tool. This delineation assists the setup of the conceptual framework of the paper and prepares the ground for the examination of the Russian IO in Serbia which is part of Russia's IW efforts but is not part of Russia's HW efforts.

1.2. Information Warfare (IW)

The onset of the information age and fast-evolving technology has penetrated different spheres of life - the economy, communications, industries, markets, infrastructure, education, and personal relationships, among others (Burns, 1999). Even so, technology-based "revolutions" are not new; they have been evolving arguably since Gutenberg's printing revolution in 1455 (Drucker, 1999). The Information Revolution is no exception. Since the 20th century, rapid changes have been occurring in "how information is collected, stored, processed, and disseminated," disrupting the traditional design of modern institutions (Davis et al., 1997: 79). Furthermore, the Information Revolution impacted the distribution of power within institutions - including the military – to benefit "lesser" actors (Ibid.). Consequently, the interplay of information technology and war has also become a center of discussion. In that context, "information" has become a weapon residing at the core of Information Warfare (IW) (Hutchinson and Warren, 2002: 67).

The literature on IW is robust. For this dissertation, there appear to be three main directions of the IW literature. The first strain (RAND, 1996; Denning, 1998; Cronin and Crawford, 1999; Hutchinson and Warren, 2002) represents the early literature on IW that has a cyberspace focus. This strain is

the least relevant for this paper but helps outline the early understanding of how information can serve as a weapon. The second strain (Stein, 1995; Alford, 2000; Hutchinson, 2006) engages with the pre-2014 understanding of IW with an emphasis on psychological elements of IW - manipulation of hearts and minds of people. Furthermore, these authors look at the conceptualization of IW and, to a lesser extent, IO in the form as we understand the concepts today. Finally, the third and most relevant strain for this paper (Molder and Sazonov, 2018; Allen and Moore, 2018; RAND, 2019; Giles and Seaboyer, 2019; McFarland, 2020) dives into Russia-specific IW. The annexation of Crimea engendered a marriage between IW, IO, and Russian activity to a great extent.

Certainly, there are many definitions of IW. The first strain of literature reflects a limited understanding of the concept with a substantial emphasis on cyberspace. For instance, the RAND Corporation (1996) claims that IW is "led by the ongoing rapid evolution of cyberspace, microcomputers, and associated information technologies." More specifically, Denning (1998: 113) argues that IW encompasses a broad set of activities, including a scenario "wherein information terrorists hack into computers via a keyboard and a mouse and cause plane crashes, food shortages, and power blackouts" She proceeds to define IW as operations which abuse information media to achieve competitive advantage over an adversary (Ibid.). Similarly, Hutchinson and Warren (2002: 67) stress that the protagonists use the information to influence the target to the attacker's advantage in two ways: alter information or deny access to information. In line with this thinking, Cronin and Crawford (1999: 257) also emphasize the cyber component of IW. Moreover, they equate IW with cyberwar and argue that the IW framework ought to be liberated from military associations (Ibid.). As presented, early literature primarily entertains information-physical components (physical targeting of information technology) of IW. On the other hand, the basic definitions of the term - using the information as a weapon to have an advantage over a foe - hold throughout the conceptual evolution. Although this conceptual thinking is important to

note, this research is more concerned with information-psychological components of IW, such as the weaponization of mass media.

There are early articles that highlight the non-physical aspects of IW within the second strain of literature. To that end, Stein (1995: 3) proposes that IW "is about how humans think and make decisions." Furthermore, IW "is not about satellites, wires, and computers; it is about influencing human beings and the decisions they make" (Ibid.). There was a transition in the focus: the main aspect of IW was no longer technology, but rather *information* itself. Hutchinson (2006: 213) insists that information had become a weapon that was disseminated in a controlled way or even created for the sake of the instigator's advantage. This is how misinformation ("misleading information") had circulated for the perpetrator's benefit, which was then artfully replaced by disinformation ("the deliberate use of misleading information") (Ibid.). Another early academic piece (Alford, 2000: 105) defines IW as IOs that are launched during heights of crises, armed conflicts, and war to achieve a certain objective against the adversary. As such, IW at the strategic level shapes the political context of the conflict, thus defining the "new" battlespace (Stein, 1995: 4). What is notable about these pieces is that the IW focus is mainly on the activity during "wartime" or period right before the inception of an armed conflict. This strain of literature adopts a stance that IW does have a psychological component but fails to focus on "outside-of-wartime" activity.

The third strain of the literature stretches the nuances of IW and IO because it reflects upon Russian contemporary activity. This led Western scholars to recognize that IW could occur even in "peacetime" (McFarland, 2020; Giles and Seaboyer, 2019; Molder and Sazonov, 2018). For instance, McFarland (2020: 11) emphasizes that IW happens below the threshold of an armed conflict. In contrast with authors from the second strain of literature, she claims that IW "is conducted not only in crisis, conflict, and warfare in the operational sense but is ongoing in peacetime as well" (Ibid.). The goal of Russian IW, thus, is not to prepare the context for an armed conflict, but to

destabilize and diminish trust in institutions at all times. Molder and Sazonov (2018), Allen and Moore (2018), and Giles and Seaboyer (2019) point out that Russia lacks conventional capabilities that would allow it to compete with the US for global hegemony. To compensate for the inferiority, Russia has turned to non-military means to establish dominance - IW and IO. Russia invests in IOs due to their "strategic impact and cost-effectiveness" (Allen and Moore, 2018: 62) to exercise state control. As such, IOs have become a key component of Russia's IW strategy and they encompass "all the uses of information and disinformation as a tool of state power and includes military information support operations, cyberspace operations, electronic warfare, military deception, psychological operations, public affairs, and strategic communications" (Allen and Moore, 2018: 60). Even though Russia's use of IW is not new *per sé,* Russia has increasingly placed disinformation at the front of its IW strategy since 2013 (Ibid.). RAND Corporation (2019) goes on to describe Russian IO tactics as the use of state-owned media (via Russia Today and Sputnik) to push disinformation to polarize communities. This evolutionary process in Russian IW practice is particularly visible in the Russia-Ukraine War. According to Giles and Seaboyer (2019: 7), Russian IW after the annexation of Crimea has roots in "well-established Soviet techniques and subversion and destabilization" which have been updated to fit the technological advancements (Ibid.). To conclude, Russian IW is not a "new way of war," but rather the employment of an updated Soviet-era toolbox to achieve dominance.

There is rarely a distinction between IW and IO in literature. RAND Corporation (2021) describes IW and IO under one definition: "the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent." Although empirical publications on IOs have surged post-2014, the theory of IO has not fully been concretized (Flyktman et. al, 2020: 174). Generally, this has not been a major gap because the literature on IW, propaganda, disinformation, etc. has

been robust and provides a solid understanding of the concept. Besides the simultaneous use of the two terms, IOs are seen as a tool of IW. According to McFarland's nuanced differentiation between the two, IOs are tactical steps of implementing the IW strategy. Therefore, IOs factor in the strategic objectives of IW and employ "specific tactics, techniques, and procedures to achieve them" (McFarland, 2020: 9). Furthermore, they "focus on influencing human decision-making, attitudes, and behavior" (Flyktman et. al, 2020: 174). In other words, IW is the strategy and IO is the enabler of the IW strategy.

1.3. Russian Information Operations (IOs) in Serbia

As presented above, most academic and policy-making circles estimate that Russia launches IOs against an adversary during either wartime or peacetime. In the 2010s, Russia launched a plethora of well-known IOs. The most infamous examples of Russian IOs in the West include the 2016 interference in US elections, the 2017 disinformation on Germany's federal elections, the 2017 attempts to meddle in France's elections, the Brexit disinformation campaign, and more. These instances reflect the common understanding that Russia employs IOs against adversaries. Nonetheless, Giles (2016: 4) argues that IO "is an ongoing activity regardless of the state of relations with the opponent." Even so, the academic literature rarely examines Russian IOs in Russia-friendly countries. Even Serbia – a Russian ally – has caved into the threat of Russian IOs, particularly disinformation.

The evolving information sphere has given rise to new tools and methods for manipulating the media and, thus, the public discourse (Gregor and Mlejnková, 2021: 44). There are many ways to define untrue information in the literature: "fake news, misinformation, disinformation, media manipulation, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and propaganda" (Freelom and Wells, 2020: 146). Disinformation, one of the key components of the contemporary IO toolbox, refers to misleading or false information produced deliberately to cause harm (Jayakumar et. al, 2021: 7). The IW literature largely features technology

as the main driver of disinformation (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Gregor and Mlejnková, 2021; Jayakumar, 2021). Serbia's lack of the newest technology, however, creates a fertile ground for spreading disinformation "the old way," via television channels, tabloids, and online portals. To this point, Kapantai (2021: 1304) points out that the main driver of disinformation is a set of "unclear socio-psychological factors," rather than the technology itself. There is already a strong pro-Russia base in Serbia. While the Kremlin has had to find alternative ways to insert itself into the information domain in the West (e.g., bots, trolls, etc.), its job in the Western Balkans has been seamless. IO campaigns in the West, for instance, often take place on anonymous platforms to make attribution more challenging. However, this is not the case in Serbia (Dzebo, 2020: 1). The pro-Kremlin disinformation may be initially launched by Sputnik *Srbija,* the key IW tool in Serbia. Nevertheless, the main role in disseminating Russian IO content in Serbia is Serbia's state-owned sensational media (Meister, 2017; Miteva, 2021; Svetoka and Doncheva, 2021). Furthermore, the flow of information transcends borders in the region; "close social, historical, and cultural ties between Serbia, the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska, and Montenegro" readily enable the proliferation of disinformation daily (Sunter, 2020). Because of this wide regional reach, the IO narratives propagated by Russia "are methodically designed to create public cynicism, distrust, and confuse public opinion" (Meister, 2017: 8). Russian IOs in Serbia typically state true or partially true facts taken out of context "to foster a certain version of events that could trigger a particular political response" in the region (Ibid.). For instance, Meister (Ibid.) emphasizes that Russian IOs in Serbia have been successful at distorting Western political messages and placing the blame on the West for Serbia's domestic policy failures, capitalizing on pre-existing sentiments.

To achieve this, the Kremlin carefully crafts divisive narratives to be disseminated via Sputnik *Srbija* across the Western Balkans. The narratives generally foster "feelings of insecurity and distrust" (Svetoka and Doncheva,

2021: 9). According to Svetoka and Doncheva (Ibid.), the essence of Russian IOs is mirrored in three dominant narratives. First, NATO members of the Western Balkans, namely Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, are portrayed as "corrupt, crime-ridden, and losing their sovereignty to Western influence" (Ibid.). Second, Serbia is lauded as Russia's friend and the leader of the Western Balkans. Third, the EU and NATO are perceived as hegemonic, divided, and weaker than Russia. It is unclear, however, whether Sputnik *Srbija* only amplifies the pre-existing narratives in the tabloids or propagates its own (Ibid.). The lack of clarity on the source of the narratives poses a challenge in understanding the IO dynamics in Serbia. The main assumption in the literature, however, is that Serbia is a victim of Russian IOs, rather than an accomplice. This disregards a multitude of factors: 1) the alignment of Serbia-Russia strategic objectives; 2) the pre-existing sentiments and narratives toward the West; and 3) the convenience of the content of the Russian IOs for the Serbian administration itself.

1.4. Gaps and Contributions

This paper seeks to fill in the lacunae in the literature in two main ways. First, the paper expands on the concept of IW to also include the element of 'proxy.' The literature accentuates examples of Russian IOs in adversary states, failing to consider Russian activity in "friendly" states. Importantly, IW and IOs are not always targeted at the *adversary's* information landscape, but also at states that are friendly to the perpetrator. That does not necessarily mean that the IW strategy becomes different; it simply points out that Russian IW against the West can also be launched via another non-Western state. Depending on the status of the alliance with Russia, this 'proxy' state may also be receptive to the IO narratives and readily disseminate them to reach the masses. In other words, Russia-friendly states that Russia uses for launching IW by 'proxy' may even leverage that to join the IW efforts against the West, making the Kremlin's job easy. This expansion of the understanding of the concept does not only serve as

an analytical lens for the case study of Serbia, but it may also be useful in examining the intersection of other Russian allies and Russian IO narrative patterns.

Second, the author makes an empirical contribution to the literature. In doing so, the paper exposes narratives on the Russia-Ukraine War published by Sputnik *Srbija* in the Serbian language. Given that the war is still ongoing, this is an academic endeavor that does not yet exist in literature and could be informative for the decision-makers at NATO and EU institutions. Moreover, access to the Sputnik news outlet has recently been banned from most European countries. Serbian public, nonetheless, is still able to access Russia's content in the Serbian language. As noted above, Serbian state media frequently republishes content without fact-checking and with more sensationalist titles and text copy. The content of Russian IOs, therefore, penetrates the Serbian public discourse to a large extent with a detrimental impact on the public perception of the Russia-Ukraine War. This paper's main purpose is to analyze the narratives of Sputnik *Srbija*-specific Russian IO regarding Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War and group them into patterns. The presentation of all identified patterns will be bolstered by specific Sputnik excerpts and the author's perspective on key objectives. This will shed light on the trigger words and events that the Kremlin uses in Serbia to achieve the desired effect. Notably, the analysis of narratives will delineate the extent to which Russia *really* has the power over Serbia versus how much power Serbia, as an enabler, allows Russia to have in the information domain. This comprehensive analysis will assist the author in answering the research questions. In summary, this paper hopes to have both conceptual and empirical contributions. To achieve this ambitious goal of filling the gap in the literature, the paper proceeds to Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework.

2. Conceptual Framework

Chapter 2 outlines the Conceptual Framework and its operationalization. The uniqueness of the case study poses a challenge in applying an all-encompassing theoretical framework to the analysis. Serbia is both an ally of the Russian Federation and a state wherein Russia launches its Information Operations (IOs) – a tool for implementing the Information Warfare (IW) strategy. Solely applying the unconsolidated theory of IW as the theoretical framework would not fully embrace the nuances of the context. Therefore, the author created an authentic conceptual framework as the underpinning of this thesis. The focus of the research is the Russian and, to a lesser extent, Serbian application of the concepts, which means that the conceptual framework may have shortcomings when applied to the analysis of other states. At the same time, the framework may be appropriately suitable for examining other instances of Russia's employment of IOs within ally states, which is often not the focus of the literature. This conceptual framework, thus, consists of **Information Warfare** and **Memory Diplomacy**. Given the distinct strategic objectives of Russian IOs in Serbia, the author maintains that the paper would benefit from applying both concepts to the analysis.

2.1. Model of Information Warfare

As elaborated on in the literature review, Information Warfare (IW) does not have a universal definition. There are many models of IW. In the three strains of literature that the author dissected in the previous chapter, one can observe: 1) a cyber focus (physical component); 2) the pre-2014 focus on human cognition (psychological component); and 3) the post-2014 focus on the psychological component and Russian activity. Unfortunately, since 2014, the concept of IW has developed in line with Russia's application of it, which perhaps skewed the concept itself. However, precisely that niche conceptualization will serve as the analysis lens of this dissertation. The paper

will “borrow” IW elements from Dmitry Adamsky (2015), Keir Giles (2016), and Christopher Whyte et al. (2021) to formulate a comprehensive IW concept for this framework.

In simple terms, IW “can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information” (Giles, 2016: 4). This range of activities also spans a plethora of implementation methods, such as “computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities [...],” addressing ambitious strategic tasks of the perpetrator (Ibid.). In other words, IW “covers hostile activities using the information as a tool, or a target, or a domain of operations” (Giles, 2016: 6). Adamsky (2015), Giles (2016), and Whyte et al. (2021) all point out that the IW concept refers to both the computer network operations and psychological operations. Thus, the concept comprises “a whole of systems, methods, and tasks to influence the perception and behavior of the enemy, population, and international community on all levels” (Giles, 2016: 6). In this paper, the psychological-information operations constitute the most relevant undertone of IW. Therefore, this paper will not engage conceptually with the physical (cyber) aspect of IW.

According to Adamsky (2015: 26), the main IW battlefield “is consciousness, perception, and strategic calculus” of the context wherein IW is conducted. As such, IW is designed to interfere with the decision-making process of governments and influence the consciousness of the society to achieve political and diplomatic ends (Adamsky, 2015: 27; Giles, 2016: 11). The manipulation of social consciousness via the IW strategy “aims to make the population cease resisting, even supporting the attacker, due to the disillusionment and discontent with the government [...]” (Adamsky, 2015: 27). Importantly, IW “is an ongoing activity regardless of the state of relations with the opponent” (Giles, 2016: 4).

As Whyte et al. (2021: 17) points out, the psychological aspect of IW entails understanding the essentials of the culture that the attacker wishes to

penetrate. Moreover, the narratives launched "do not have to convince," but "induce fear or at least anxiety" within the society *vis-à-vis* a common perceived threat (Ibid.). Therefore, IW is not just a "simple distribution of disinformation;" rather, it is a coordinated effort that exploits "history, culture, language, nationalism, disaffection and more to carry out cyber-enhanced disinformation campaigns with much wider objectives" (Giles, 2016: 12). Launching IOs (using the disinformation format) on social media, for example, does not depict the status of relations between the attacker and the target group because narratives are more likely to get viral unpredictably. When disinformation is disseminated via traditional media and news outlets in the target state, what is obvious is "the willingness of those receiving the message to pass it on and thus have it go viral." (Whyte et al., 2021: 17).

2.2. Memory Diplomacy

In addition to the obvious concept relevant to the research of Russian IOs in Serbia, Memory Diplomacy is a separate concept that speaks to the power of historical narrative in fostering connections. Since Serbia is an ally state, using the lens of IW does not account for the penetration of Russian narratives into the Serbian public discourse. The author will use the concept developed by McGlynn and Đureinović (2022) in their article "The Alliance of Victory: Russo-Serbian Memory Diplomacy." They defined Memory Diplomacy as "political actors' identification, creation, and development of commonalities of memory for geopolitical purposes and/or bilateral relations" (2022: 2). For instance, a state actor may use national memory as a political instrument internally. In doing so, they promote "a positive image of the country and its own past" to the local audience (Ibid.). Once the state actor exports this, perhaps imagined, positive historical narrative to international contexts, that then constitutes Memory Diplomacy. The concept has a twofold distinguishing feature: actors that promote their own positive narratives to external audiences also "engage with and promote positive historical narratives of a second

country, creating 'Memory Alliances' (Ibid.)." In this sense, Memory Diplomacy is a "mutual two-way engagement (Ibid.)" The result of an effective Memory Diplomacy is "achieved influence, reinforced relationships, and a bolstered country's reputation" (Ibid.).

2.3. Operationalization

The operationalization of the IW concept will look at the Russian IW efforts at the operational level (i.e., Information Operations). As Serbia is an ally state of the Russian Federation, Russian IOs in Serbia may constitute an implementation of the IW agenda by 'proxy' against the West. In other words, Russian IW is directed at Serbia to indirectly impact the strategic goals of the West via Serbia. By manipulating the hearts and minds of Serbian society via IO narratives in Serbia – a country that is ostensibly pursuing an EU membership – Russia gets to maintain the *status quo* in an already unstable region. Serbia, as an ally, allows for the dissemination of Russian disinformation via traditional news outlets, thus enabling IOs in the first place. Russia here capitalizes on the shared cultural and religious heritage, introducing the necessity of Memory Diplomacy within the framework.

The operationalization of the Memory Diplomacy concept will help reflect on Russia-Serbia relations, amplifying the role of Serbia as an accomplice to Russian IOs, rather than a victim. Relevantly, Russia does not only launch IOs in Serbia (with Serbia's "permission"), but it also nurtures the Memory Alliance. This is why Serbia is almost exclusively presented in a positive light or as a victim of the West in Russian IOs in Serbia. The maintenance of the Russia-Serbia friendship stems from the memory of past and current alliances - including the memory of shared religion, identity, and being the object of ostensible Western injustices. The application of both concepts will help identify narrative patterns of Russian IOs via Sputnik *Srbija* and examine Serbia's role in the endeavor.

3. Methodology

Having outlined the Conceptual Framework of the research in Chapter 2, the author proceeds to set the analytical process for the paper. Chapter 3 traces the methodology of the analysis in detail in three sections: research methods, data collection, and reporting plan.

3.1. Research Methods

The objective of this research is to showcase key narrative patterns launched by Sputnik *Srbija vis-à-vis* the Russia-Ukraine War. Thus, the key research questions of this dissertation are: *What are the key narrative patterns observed in Sputnik Srbija's public discourse vis-à-vis Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War? To what extent do those narratives constitute Information Warfare against the West? To what extent has Serbia served as an enabler of Russian Information Warfare?* The research project will use qualitative research methods. Within this broad umbrella, the paper will utilize discourse analysis. The reason for this methodology choice is evident; discourse analysis will be used in the examination of the narratives propagated by Sputnik *Srbija vis-à-vis* the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Discourse analysis examines how social ideas were created to understand how reality was produced (Hardy et al, 2004: 19). Thus, it epitomizes a set of techniques for qualitative analysis of text and a set of assumptions regarding the effects of language. (Ibid.). A key assumption of discourse analysis is that discourse is interrelated with its broader context; it is based on social constructivist epistemology, implying that reality is socially created through meaningful interaction (Ibid.). Furthermore, the content of Sputnik *Srbija* reflects the historical and political context of Serbia, as well as the complexity of Serbia-Russia relations.

3.2. Data Collection

To narrow down the focus, the main object of the analysis is the Russian public discourse launched by Sputnik *Srbija* in the Serbian language. Therefore, this paper is not concerned with other Russian media outlets. Sputnik *Srbija* has a special section on the platform titled "All about the Ukrainian crisis in one place" (Original: *Све о кризи у Украјини на једном месту*) with a subtitle "Russia's special military operation for demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine" (Original: *Специјална војна операција Русије за демилитаризацију и денацификацију Украјине*). One may select a time frame on the platform and pull all the articles of interest on the Russia-Ukraine War. Being cognizant of the word count limitations of this paper, the author cannot qualitatively examine all articles published in the 100+ days of the war to date, as there are over 2500 articles in the archive. To provide a valuable glimpse into the narrative trends related to Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War, the author will add the tag "Serbia" (Original: *Србија*) to the "Crisis in Ukraine" (Original: Криза у Украјини) tag. With this intersection of tags, 86 articles on the topic appear for the time frame of the first 100 days of the war (24 February – 3 June 2022). The author selected the 100-day mark to accommodate the dissertation deadline.

The discourse analysis will be conducted via software for qualitative data analysis called ATLAS.ti. The software will be useful in coding the dataset and creating coding schemes to make the reporting plan more coherent. There are two ways to conduct the coding of discourse analysis for this case study: deductive and inductive. The combination of both approaches is expected in the data collection process for this paper. The deductive coding approach will accommodate the initial assumptions and expectations. Oftentimes, the analysis of the articles itself offers new insights and awakens the need for new (inductive) coding schemes. This paper will, thus, rely more on an inductive coding process to achieve comprehensive coverage of narrative patterns related to Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War.

The analysis of the narrative patterns according to a coding scheme will help answer the research questions of the paper. In doing so, the author will have created three initial deductive coding categories that will be supplemented by inductive coding schemes. Keywords that will help create deductive coding categories are focused on actors at hand in Russian IO narratives: 1) *Serbia;* 2) *the West* (specifically US, NATO, EU); and 3) *Russia.* Across the three coding categories, the author will have identified 17 codes of narrative patterns. Notably, the content of the inductive coding schemes is interrelated.

Within the code category *Serbia*, the inductive coding schemes that emerge are Serbian history (Codes: "Western injustice toward Yugoslavia in the 1990s is similar to the ongoing Western injustice toward Russia," "Serbia and Ukraine are victims of NATO's expansion," NATO is brutal and Russia is merciful," "Serbian people are 'bigger' victims than Ukrainian people"), Perceptions of Serbia (Codes: "Serbia's is a victim/small," "Serbia is strong/independent"), Serbian foreign policy (Codes: "Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance," "Serbia and the West have an unstable alliance"), and Serbia's attitudes toward the war in Ukraine (Codes: "Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia," "Serbia supports Russia in the war," "Serbia supports Ukraine in the war"). The main inductive codes within the category titled *The West* are: "The US and NATO are hegemonic and imperial," "The US and NATO want the war," "The West launched Information Warfare against Russia," and "Europe is weak and unstable." The most notable codes within the category *Russia* are: "Russia is strong and a protector" and "Russia is a victim and peaceful." After the coding process ends, the analysis will delve into the patterns observed in the narratives. To do this, ATLAS.ti will allow for the export of lists of quotes by code.

3.3. Reporting Plan

The reporting plan of the findings will consist of: 1) the contextual background; 2) the presentation of public discourse examples *vis-à-vis* Serbia

and the Russia-Ukraine War for each of the coding frames and conclusions; and 3) initiation of a critical discussion about research implications and limitations. As a recap, this paper draws on a qualitative discourse analysis of 86 articles total published by Sputnik *Srbija* during the first 100 days of the war. The analysis will be conducted in two stages. First, 86 articles will be collected from the section titled "All about the Ukrainian crisis in one place" and subtitled "Russia's special military operation for demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine" using the tags "Crisis in Ukraine" and "Serbia" on the Sputnik platform for a time frame indicated above. Second, the keywords and phrases from the articles will be coded into related coding schemes that emerge from the inductive coding approach. The author will use ATLAS.ti to conduct the coding process. After the coding process is done, the analysis will explore if there are any recurrent narrative patterns regarding Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War in Sputnik *Srbija's* public discourse. Chapter 4 displays the Findings of this analysis.

4. Findings

Chapter 4 consists of 1) Background; 2) Presentation of Findings: Analysis of Sputnik *Srbija* Narratives, and 3) Discussion. The first section provides the context for the analysis. The second section presents the qualitative analysis of the Sputnik *Srbija* narratives about Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War accompanied by the author's commentary. The third section culminates in a discussion about research implications and limitations.

4.1. Background

Preparing the scene for the analysis, this section is organized as follows. First, this section evaluates Serbian history and foreign policy with a focus on Russia-Serbia relations. Second, the section examines the landscape of

Information Operations (IOs) in Serbia. Third, the author provides an overview of the Russia-Ukraine War and Serbia's indirect role in it.

4.1.1. Serbian History and Foreign Policy

Serbia and the wider Balkan peninsula region have been part of three empires throughout history: Roman, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires. The never-ending struggle for independence, freedom, and power finally materialized in the early 20th century following the Balkan Wars I and II and World War I (WWI); the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was formed in 1918. Eventually, this union of southern Slavs had been named Yugoslavia which encompassed Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Kosovo (note that Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia at the time). Relevantly, Yugoslavia comprised multiple ethnicities and religious affiliations. Precisely ethnic and religious tensions were awakened in Yugoslavia in times of crisis. Under Josip Broz Tito's leadership post-World War II (WWII), Yugoslavia became a socialist state which enjoyed significant attention from both East and West (Rusinow, 1965, 181-93). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the country experienced severe economic collapse which furthered the divisions along the ethnic and religious lines between Serbs (Orthodox Christians), Croats (Catholics), and Bosniaks (Muslims) (Aghayev, 2017). With the slow disintegration of Yugoslavia came a turbulent civil war – known as the Yugoslav War – that has defined neighborly relations in the region to date. Following the wars, inflation, and an escalation of conflict between Serbs and Albanians in the autonomous Serbian province of Kosovo in the mid-1990s, NATO intervened. In 1999, NATO bombed Serbia for 78 days in an attempt to de-escalate the conflict in Kosovo. The following year marked Serbia's transition to democracy – a fragile one at that. In 2006 and 2008 respectively, Montenegro and Kosovo declared independence from Serbia. The region's recent history has been intense at the very least. Indeed, with such instability, global powers assumed their roles in the region

accordingly, which explains Serbia's multifaceted foreign policy. Of course, Russia has had a "soft" role to play in all of this, namely as "Serbia's protector" (Aghayev, 2017: 4).

The contemporary Serbian political scene (2010-onward) still reflects ethnic and religious quarrels from the 1990s. The Western Balkans has not undergone a complete stabilization and integration process (Sunter and Cappello, 2021). Given the persisting territorial disputes within Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Serbia and Kosovo, the involvement of foreign actors in the region was expected (Cvjetićanin, 2020). This has made the region, with Serbia at the forefront, particularly fertile for geopolitical rivalries - the EU, the US, China, and Russia. In other words, Serbia has served as somewhat of a "buffer zone" between the great powers. As a result, Serbian foreign policy has been facing "a dilemma, as (at least) four separate powers are vying for influence within the country" (Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017: 1).

These four global powers have mutually exclusive interests and goals in Serbia. To illustrate, the EU is attempting to strengthen its security cooperation with the Western Balkan region through EU membership candidatures, support for human rights, and financial assistance. The US, on the other hand, has an interest in migration routes in the Western Balkans (Ibid.). China, in turn, offers invaluable medical and infrastructural assistance to Serbia, creating an attractive market for China-produced goods (Sunter and Cappello, 2021; Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017: 4). Finally, Russia has been launching "hybrid" operations that instrumentalized the use of "disinformation, energy sector control, military exercises, and [...] humanitarian assistance" (Sunter and Cappello, 2021). Moreover, "Russia's economic and political strategy in Serbia has been amplified by the extensive use of soft power instruments. These tools became increasingly potent after 2013" (Meister, 2017: 16) wherein the main goal has been to turn "Serbia against the West" (Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017: 4). With such interest and assistance from four global economies, Serbia enjoys the "balancing act" foreign policy with exorbitant pressure to claim a foreign policy

direction, especially from the EU and US. As Serbia is an official EU accession candidate, its relationship with Russia has been particularly challenging in the wake of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Although the EU can offer up more financial assistance, Russia has "skillfully spun a web of influence" in Serbia, stemming from strong historical ties and post-Kosovo independence foreign policy reorientation (Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017: 6).

Russia and Serbia have had a convoluted, three-century-long relationship (Petrović, 2010: 15). Moreover, the basis for the close relationship between Russia and Serbia was rooted in the shared Slavic identity and Orthodox Christian values. The myth about this friendship has served as a mask for Russia's imperial goals in the Balkans (Aghayev, 2017: 5). Interestingly, this perception of the Russia-Serbia alliance has not changed much over the years; it has usually had a strong, unshakeable base (this paper considers the Soviet Union-Yugoslavia relations to be a separate point of analysis). This is true to the extent to which strategic interests between Moscow and Belgrade aligned and who was in power in the two respective countries. However, the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia altered Russia-NATO relations and instigated a renewed level of partnership between Russia and Serbia (Vuksanović, 2020). Consequently, Moscow developed a sense of "antagonism towards Western policies in the Balkans" (Ibid.). The bombing caused a worry in Russia that NATO may similarly intervene in other regions particularly relevant to Moscow. Indeed, the intervention engendered conversations about the potential independence of Kosovo. In years prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Russia voiced its concerns regarding the matter, claiming that "detachment of territory from Serbia without its explicit consent would set a dangerous precedent" (Ibid.). Moreover, Moscow recognized how granting Kosovo independence without Serbia's approval would "encourage separatism in other parts of the world, including post-Soviet Eurasia" (Ibid.). The lack of Western support for Serbia to maintain Kosovo within its borders was, thus, alarming for Russia's own territorial integrity; the main worry was

that smaller regions in the post-Soviet space would work toward secession. Russia's firm stance on the 2007 and 2008 negotiations on the Kosovo status bolstered Serbia's "enthusiasm towards Russia: its interests, priorities, and policies" (Petrović, 2010: 5). The Serbian government's admiration and praise for Russia's practices deepened the positive perception of Russia amongst the general public. However, this perception and understanding were based on "emotional and irrational grounds;" the historical closeness and religious heritage, indeed, influenced the strength of the connection at the political level (Ibid.). As expected, Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence caused political and economic turmoil in Serbia. This enabled Russia, once again, to serve as Serbia's protector with political influence and economic means. Besides the Kremlin's support for Serbian territorial sovereignty, Russia has also provided Serbia with a solid gas deal, arms exports, and the ability to leverage Russia-Serbia relations for success with the West.

4.1.2. The Landscape of Information Operations (IOs) in Serbia

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Western institutions have emphasized the role of Russia in the IO landscape in Serbia. The success of IOs in Serbia is, however, not solely tied to Russia's ability to launch them to manipulate the masses. Russia has been able to capitalize on Serbia's pre-existing experience. This section seeks to underscore the reasons why Serbia has been a productive partner in receiving and even proliferating Russian IOs. This subsection will provide not only a general overview of IOs in Serbia but also set the tone for the analysis of Sputnik *Srbija* articles on Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War. In addition, this section will elaborate on the IO narrative patterns launched by Sputnik *Srbija* in the 2010s.

Serbia has prior experience with designing and launching IOs, namely disinformation and propaganda, in the region. Before the outbreak of the Yugoslav War, for instance, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević replaced the independent media with state-backed propaganda to appeal to ethnic Serbs.

In late 1987, President Milošević was in control of "influential media outlets including publications, radio and television stations, among them RTB (the major television station in Belgrade which had an all-Yugoslav broadcast), *Politika* (the most influential daily publication in Serbia), and three other major publications and newspapers" (Grove, 2018: 10). Indeed, President Milošević had manipulated the information that was broadcasted to ethnic Serbs in Yugoslavia, capitalizing on negative sentiments toward other ethnic groups. His rhetoric and narratives drew on the "victimization of Serbs, Serbian ethnic solidarity, and the politics of shared memory" (Ibid.), similarly to today. On top of the tight control of the press, the successful re-awakening of Serbia's old resentments was a key characteristic of the success of Yugoslavia-based IOs. Thirty years later, the same man who served as "propaganda chief" or, formally said, Minister of Information, under the infamous Milošević regime (Rettman, 2020) is the President of Serbia in 2022. President Vučić – similarly to Milošević in the 1990s – holds a firm media monopoly tailored to the ruling party's taste even though Serbia is officially a democracy. Hence, Serbia's geopolitical insecurity and deteriorating freedom of media under President Vučić re-created a prolific brewery for both domestic and foreign IOs (Sunter and Cappello, 2021). On the domestic front, Serbia's state-backed media outlets (e.g., tabloids, television channels, and news outlets) have been disseminating disinformation and positive perceptions of President Vučić. Therefore, Serbia's media itself remains "the government's propaganda medium" (Dantec, 2020).

A key foreign actor – Russia – has capitalized on Serbia's vulnerability and susceptibility to IOs. Furthermore, Russia launched Sputnik *Srbija,* the Kremlin's key strategic tool for IOs, in Belgrade in 2015. Since then, the EU and NATO have expressed immense interest in tackling Russian IOs in Serbia. Notably, though, "opinion polls and media monitoring tools do not place Sputnik *Srbija* among the region's top media outlets" (Svetoka and Doncheva, 2021). However, the local media readily re-publishes Sputnik's content and vice-versa (Ibid.). The circulation is so rapid that a lot of fabricated articles in

Serbian tabloids do not list Sputnik as the source of the article, but rather just another domestic news outlet. In other words, there is a synergy between Sputnik and local media outlets to further foster Russian IOs. Sputnik *Srbija*, therefore, fits well into the Serbian media landscape and contributes Russia's narratives to the public discourse via its own IOs. To that end, NATO Strategic Center for Excellence has analyzed Sputnik-launched narratives in Serbia since the 2015 launch. Moreover, the Center's research highlights seven main Russian IO narratives which have been circulating in Serbia since 2015: "NATO is aggressive and provocative," "EU is hegemonic," "the Western Balkans is a fertile ground for conflict," "The Western Balkans region is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West," "Human rights are under threat," The Western Balkan countries are weak and incapable, corrupt," and "Montenegro is trying to rewrite history" (Svetoka and Doncheva, 2021: 9). These narrative patterns provide a solid insight into some of the narratives that Sputnik *Srbija* has propagated during the Russia-Ukraine War.

4.1.3. Overview of the Russia-Ukraine War and Serbia's Role

It is outside the scope of this paper to present and analyze the convoluted factors behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Accordingly, this subsection outlines the key triggering events in the past decade. In simple terms, 2014 was a pivotal year for Russia-Ukraine relations. In 2014, Ukrainian protesters overthrew the pro-Russia government led by President Viktor Yanukovich, resulting in Ukraine's trade agreement with the EU (Bigg, 2022). Displeased by and worried about this outcome, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula that same year. This further engendered a break-off of two secessionist regions, the Donetsk People's Republic and the neighboring Luhansk People's Republic, from Ukraine. This instability caused an escalation in eastern Ukraine (Donbas) that same year (Ibid.). Seeking to address the escalation, Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany signed "a series of cease-fire agreements known as the Minsk Accords" in 2015 (Ibid.).

The year 2019 was another turning point in Russia-Ukraine relations; Volodymyr Zelensky, who had promised to restore Donbas to Ukraine, was democratically elected as pro-West President of Ukraine (Ibid.). Paranoid about the Western orientation of Ukraine, President Putin has been expressing concern over the expansion of NATO since 2020. His unanswered grievances eventually led to the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine. His two main reasons for launching the operation were: 1) the expansion of NATO and "the shape of post-Cold War security architecture in Europe;" and 2) "the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity and statehood themselves" (Mankoff, 2022: 1). He claimed that the division between Russians and Ukrainians had occurred due to "foreign influence" to conduct an "Anti-Russia" project. (Ibid.). On 24 February 2022, President Putin invaded Ukraine, causing one of "the biggest threats to peace and security in Europe since WWII" (Ibid.). The invasion has not yet ended and has caused challenges in security, geopolitics, energy, food, and economy, displacement of people and migration, death, etc. (Selyukh et al., 2022).

Relevantly, Serbia does not play a direct role in the war. However, Serbia appeared in the recent headlines about the Russia-Ukraine War due to President Putin's framing of the invasion. President Putin refers to the Western activities in Serbia in the 1990s as the precedent for Russia's activities in Ukraine. On that note, the Kosovo issue became important for Russia's ability to manipulate the Serbian public discourse, build a perceivably closer friendship, and justify its own actions in the post-Soviet space – as recent as 2022. This was exactly the premise that President Putin used in his "declaration-of-war" on Ukraine speech on 21 February. In this announcement, Moscow "self-consciously mirrored the justifications given by NATO leaders for bombing Yugoslavia" in 1999 (McGlynn, 2022). Moreover, President Putin even referenced the NATO bombing and the Western support for Kosovo's independence in his official recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics.

At the same time, Serbia does nurture an alliance with Russia while also pursuing an EU accession path. The Serbian government's multi-layered foreign policy has been balancing global actors for years, which disabled Serbia from taking a side in the war. Having military neutrality as the main pillar of its security strategy, Serbia has been "unwilling or unable to take a firm stand against Russia's war on Ukraine" (Morina, 2022). In its official stance, the Serbian government expressed respect for Ukraine's sovereignty (Ibid.) but has not referred to Russia as the aggressor or the violator of Ukraine's sovereignty. Furthermore, Serbia has not joined any proposed EU sanctions on Russia. Demonstrating vast misalignment with the EU values, Serbia has continued to claim its devotion to the European project while maintaining friendly relations with Russia. Thus, the Serbian balancing act continued during a crucial time for Europe.

4.2. Presentation of Findings: Analysis of Sputnik *Srbija* Narratives

This section attempts to answer the key research questions of the dissertation: *What are the key narrative patterns observed in Sputnik Srbija's public discourse vis-á-vis Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War? To what extent do those narratives constitute Information Warfare against the West? To what extent has Serbia served as an enabler of Russian Information Warfare?* As presented in Chapter 3, the author coded and analyzed 86 Sputnik *Srbija* articles via ATLAS.ti software. These articles emerged from the intersection of "Crisis in Ukraine" (note that Sputnik *Srbija* labels this war as a "crisis" or a "special military operation") and "Serbia" tags in the Sputnik search engine. The time frame wherein these articles were published is 24 February – 3 June 2022, namely the first 100 days of the war.

First, the author uploaded the content of 86 Sputnik Srbija articles into the software. Second, following the deductive approach to coding, the author

created three initial overarching coding schemes based on three relevant actors in the Western Balkan region: *Serbia, The West,* and *Russia.* Third, the author read all articles, and created codes of narrative patterns along the way (using the inductive coding approach within ATLAS.ti) to appropriately code the public discourse. The subsections below introduce the audience to the analysis outputs with two key objectives. First, the analysis seeks to investigate to what extent Sputnik *Srbija* narratives represent Russian Information Warfare against the West via Serbia as a 'proxy' state. Second, the analysis strives to ascertain to what extent Serbia has served as an enabler of this special Information Operation and, by default, Russian Information Warfare.

4.2.1. General Patterns

The "Crisis in Ukraine" tag by itself contains articles that generally cover (and justify) each Russian day-by-day move in Ukraine. The articles provide comprehensive coverage of what Russia claims is going on in Ukraine for the Serbian audience. Usually, the narratives point to Russia as the protector of the Russian people and Ukraine as the aggressive adversary that targets ethnic Russian civilians in Ukraine. Of course, NATO, the US, and the EU - the West - take a large part of the blame for the invasion.

Nevertheless, once the tag "Serbia" is added to the pre-selected tag "Crisis in Ukraine," the focus of the narratives shifts. Indeed, the intersection of the two tags produces a list of articles that refer to the relationship between Serbia and the war. Moreover, with this convergence of tags, the reader could not follow the events in Ukraine anymore – migration, deaths, attacks, war crimes, and so on. The emphasis is rather oriented toward Serbia as the piece of the puzzle: its complex history, territorial integrity, Russia-Serbia alliance, sanctions decisions, Serbia-West "alliance" (or the alleged lack thereof), and other Serbia-specific nuances. In addition, the narratives have a sharp and consistent objective of demonizing NATO, the US, and the EU (to a lesser

extent) concerning both Serbia and Russia. At the same time, Sputnik narratives glorify Russia.

Sputnik *Srbija* readily published articles on the topic mostly in an interview or a speech format. Over and over, Sputnik featured Russia's vocal supporters from Serbia and Russia - be it professors, politicians, think-tank leaders, activists, movie producers, workers, etc. In numerous cases, Sputnik republished interviews that first appeared in the Serbian state-backed media. This Russian IO did not simply employ disinformation; rather, it brought forward narratives that exist and thrive within Serbian society, particularly among the political elite. In other words, Sputnik strengthened this IO by engaging Serbian and Russian politicians and by implanting "believable" narratives into the public discourse. Hence, the content that Sputnik *Srbija* published during the 100-day time frame reinforced pre-existing Russophile narratives and sentiments. The content further blurred the lines around what is Russia-led disinformation and what is simply the stance of Serbian public opinion about sensitive topics. Indeed, the construct of the 86 Sputnik *Srbija* articles sophisticatedly showcases the Russian application of Information Warfare and Memory Diplomacy concepts independently and simultaneously.

The main code categories are *Serbia*, *the West*, and *Russia.* Within each of the three code categories, there are separate codes that mirror the main characteristics of narrative patterns. There are 17 codes across the three categories. As the functionality of the actors is highly interdependent, the codes witness some overlap in quotations and messaging.

4.2.2. Serbia

As expected, the code category titled *Serbia* contains the most diverse list of codes. The author introduced four subcategories to ameliorate the analysis of eleven narrative patterns. The subcategories comprise **Serbian history** (Codes: "Western injustice toward Yugoslavia in the 1990s is similar to the ongoing Western injustice toward Russia," Serbia and Ukraine are

victims of NATO's expansion," NATO is brutal and Russia is merciful," "Serbian people are 'bigger' victims than Ukrainian people"), **Perceptions of Serbia** (Codes: "Serbia's is a victim/small," "Serbia is strong/independent"), **Serbian foreign policy** (Codes: "Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance," "Serbia and the West have an unstable alliance"), and **Serbia's attitudes toward the war in Ukraine** (Codes: "Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia," "Serbia supports Russia in the war," "Serbia supports Ukraine in the war"). This subsection will dissect the codes in order.

a. Serbian history

Sputnik *Srbija* narratives amplify Serbia's convoluted history with a primary focus on the Yugoslav War in the early 1990s (eight references) and the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (37 references). This is not surprising given that Serbia still faces political issues that have roots in recent history. Russia is aware that the mentions of war and aggression are especially triggering for the Serbian people. With regards to Sputnik commentary on the Yugoslav War, there is a firm sense of the "unprecedented" suffering that Serbia and Serbian people endured during the Yugoslav War in the 1990s. The main comparison argues that the past (Western) injustice toward Yugoslavia in the 1990s is similar to the current (Western) injustice toward Russia. Specifically, "methods of sanctioning, Satanization, and isolation used in the 1990s against Serbia and Serbian people are used today against Russia and Russian people" (*„Не подлећи притисцима": Београдски форум за свет равноправних о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Engendering sympathy and justifying Serbia's current decision-making on sanctions, there is a set of articles that draws on different statements from current and past Serbian policymakers. The excerpts do not only include concrete comparisons of Serbia in the 1990s and Russia today, but also a vivid memory of Russia's support for war-torn Serbia. For instance, Sputnik *Srbija* quotes President Vučić, "How can we sanction Russia overnight? Those who were the only ones to not sanction us in the 1990s"

(*Вучић саопштио став: Србија не уводи санкције Русији /видео/,* 2022). President of the National Assembly of Serbia Ivica Dačić rapidly corroborated that claim in another piece, "We cannot sanction Russia which has stood up for the interests of our country and has not sanctioned Serbia when other Western countries did" (*Дачић: Украјина је колатерална штета притисака са Запада,* 2022). Going more in-depth about the Serbian memory of sanctions and the current sanctioning of Russia, Sputnik quotes former Director of the Coordinating Center for Kosovo and Metohija Nebojša Čović:

> "After everything we lived through as a people [...], no one has the moral right to expect us to support sanctions [on Russia] or judge anyone because we have already endured the brutal breaking of international law [by the Americans] ... We know best and have felt on our own skin that sanctions bring nothing good […] I will give one simple example that shouldn't ever be forgotten, for instance, how many babies died in Banja Luka [Republika Srpska] due to the lack of oxygen" (*Ако се Запад тек сада сетио међународног права – нека отпризнају Косово /видео/,* 2022).

Narrative patterns regarding the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia are even more robust and extreme. As such, they are threefold: 1) Serbia and Ukraine are victims of NATO's expansion; 2) NATO is brutal and Russia is merciful; and 3) Serbian people are 'bigger' victims than Ukrainian people. In the first narrative pattern, there is a comparison of Serbia and Ukraine as victims of NATO's ambitious expansion, almost referring to NATO as the aggressor in Ukraine, rather than Russia. Sputnik articles draw connections and comparisons between 1999 and 2022. To illustrate the pattern, a Sputnik article paraphrases the words of former Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs Živadin Jovanović who said that "events in Ukraine have an origin in NATO's strategy of expansion to the East [...] the first victim of that Western strategy was Serbia in 1999" (*Који су потези Запада ако Београд не казни Русију,* 2022). Similarly, another article claims that "the current conflict in Ukraine is basically a continuation of the NATO bombing in 1999" (*Кустурица: Украјина је други чин НАТО бомбардовања Србије,* 2022). This is, indeed, a recurring narrative; Sputnik also insists that "NATO is to blame for everything that is happening

right now, starting with the 1999" (*Ако се Запад тек сада сетио међународног права – нека отпризнају Косово /видео/,* 2022). According to these narratives, Ukraine is just the "collateral damage of the geopolitical objectives of US and NATO in their confrontation to Russia" (*„Бесрамне копи-пејст лажи и крај Пакс Американе": Човић о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Supposedly, so was Serbia in 1999.

The second narrative pattern outlines that NATO conducted its war against Serbia in 1999 in a brutal manner while Russia has done the opposite in Ukraine. This also implies a comparison between NATO and Russia as powerhouses in the narratives. Articles overwhelmingly characterize NATO as "aggressors in Serbia whose hands carry the blood of [...] children, civilians, military, police and who left Serbia in ruins [...]" (Ibid.). Presented as a perpetrator, NATO allegedly "accuses Russia [for the same things] they do around the world" (Ibid.), highlighting the perceived double standard. An example of this claim is that "a little over 20 years ago, US and NATO brutally labeled civilian targets as military targets and consciously attacked Radio Television of Serbia, a hospital, a train [...], a convoy of refugees in Kosovo and Metohija, Embassy of China, [...], and many other locations, using prohibited munitions with depleted uranium" (Ibid.). As such, the conclusive message is that "for Serbs, NATO is a gang and a fascist alliance" (*„Две земље, једна вера": Срби подржали руску специјалну војну операцију у Украјини /видео, фото/,* 2022). Here the author observes the Kremlin's eloquent re-awakening of Serbian wounds. At the same time, such narratives stem from Russia's greater IW strategy of undermining the West in Serbia.

On the other hand, the description of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the stark opposite of NATO's activity in Serbia. To that end, a Sputnik article quotes a politician affiliated with the ruling party and the Director of Oncology Danica Grujičić, "While NATO created a mini-Chornobyl and poisoned Europe as a result of attacking Serbia, Russian forces do not target sensitive facilities in Ukraine" (*Даница Грујичић: НАТО у Србији изазвао мини Чернобиљ -*

Европа због Украјине открива лице неслободе, 2022). Painting Russia in a positive light yet again, another article compares NATO and Russia as follows, "NATO targeted infrastructure when it bombed Serbia. Belgrade and other cities were left without electricity and water on purpose, while in Ukraine no city has lost electricity [...] Russian military avoids targeting the infrastructure and does not attack civilian facilities" (*Претња из САД: Подсећају Србе на рат у јеку украјинске кризе,* 2022). Drawing on Serbia's distressing experience with NATO, Sputnik *Srbija* manages to embed disinformation narratives regarding Russia's conduct toward Ukrainian civilians and facilities during the ongoing war.

The third narrative pattern concerns the comparison of the suffering of Serbian people and Ukrainian people as a result of the 1999 bombing and the 2022 Russian invasion, respectively. Therein, Serbia reportedly had it worse than Ukraine. One set of narratives subliminally compares or equates to the suffering of Serbia and Ukraine. In line with that, Sputnik quotes a *quid-pro-quo* statement of President Vučić, "I call on the Ukrainian ambassador [...] to condemn the terrible and tragic aggression against Serbia launched by the US, Germany, UK, and other countries. I am sure that he will do it and then I will happily respond to all his requests" (*Вучићева порука Украјини: Прво ви осудите стравичну агресију Запада над Србијом /видео/,* 2022). In this sense, the article links the events and points out that Serbian support for Ukraine depends on Ukraine's recognition of Serbia's past suffering. This narrative is, perhaps, more explicit in another article, "Let's remember what NATO did to Serbia. Serbian people had gone through much worse suffering during the 78-day NATO aggression than the Ukrainian civilians are going through today" (*Претња из САД: Подсећају Србе на рат у јеку украјинске кризе,* 2022). The article goes on to claim that "those big humanitarians [the West] who did not shed a tear for the banishment of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija now choose to see only Ukrainian refugees" (Ibid.). This narrative pattern seeks to demonstrate how the West did not care for Serbian civilians during its wars in

the 1990s (while Russia did). By doing this, the Kremlin augments the intense memory of the unacknowledged Serbian losses for the audience, creating simultaneous resentment toward Ukrainians and the West.

To conclude, the code category *Serbian History* reflects Serbia's war memory. Aware of the turmoil and sensitivity of the topics, Sputnik *Srbija* easily re-introduces (with Serbia's help) reminders about Serbia's own painful experience with sanctions. This creates a space for narratives on Russian present experience with sanctions to emerge, further intertwining and strengthening the victimhood of Serbia and Russia respectively. Moreover, Sputnik narratives amplify anti-NATO sentiments that have existed in Serbia since the 1999 bombing. Sputnik's incessant negative mentions of NATO about Serbia and Russia foster a fertile ground for positive perceptions of Russia and distrust toward NATO within the Serbian public opinion.

b. Perceptions of Serbia

Sputnik *Srbija* narratives *vis-à-vis* the perceptions and framing of Serbia reside in two juxtaposed patterns: **"Serbia is a victim/small"** (31 references) and **"Serbia is strong/independent"** (32 references). The former narrative design refers to narratives that imply Serbia's victimhood – historical injustice, present pressures from the West – and its lack of power in the international arena. The latter, in contrast, features the claim that Serbia is strong, independent, and able to bravely resist (Western) threats and pressures. This group of codes captures how Serbia frames itself geopolitically at its own convenience when faced with challenging decisions and pressure.

The first narrative pattern **"Serbia is a victim/small"** resides not only within Serbia's history (explored in detail within *Serbian history* above) but also in the pressure on Serbia regarding its resistance to imposing sanctions on Russia. In other words, this narrative pattern elaborates on ways in which the West has manipulated Serbia into sanctioning Russia. Specifically, the narratives argue that Serbia has simultaneously been a victim of Western

attempts to turn Serbia against Russia and terrorism of Western intelligence agencies – all resulting from Serbia's strong alliance with Russia. The main objective of this narrative pattern is to bring Serbia even closer to Russia and further away from the West. For example, a Sputnik article references President Vučić, "This is why Serbia is in a difficult position [...] those who cannot stand up to Russia stand up to Serbia instead [...] Big heroes take advantage of the weak" (*Вучић саопштио став: Србија не уводи санкције Русији /видео/*, 2022). In another Sputnik interview, Serbian politician and journalist Milovan Drecun claims that the accentuated overarching goal of immense US pressure is "to completely turn Serbia against Russia" *(Дрецун: Америка користи ситуацију у Украјини да Србију окрене против Русије,* 2022). In line with this victimizing narrative, Sputnik records the thoughts of retired Ambassador Milisav Paić that "no one wants a strong Serbia especially when Russia is in a fight with Ukraine; they are afraid that Serbia [...] will help Russia in some way" (*Нова британска акција мирише на саботажу: Заменити Србију – Бугарском,* 2022). A more serious type of pressure that Serbia has allegedly faced is a terrorist activity supported by the West. Alarmingly, this narrative has been propagated by the former chief of police in Belgrade Marko Nicović, and readily circulated via Sputnik, "There have been multiple threats sent to the Nikola Tesla Airport [in Belgrade] and Air Serbia; bombs have been reported on flights to Russia. The police say that the threats were sent from one European state and Ukraine [...] These events have been organized by the Western intelligence services that want to put pressure on Serbia [...]" (*Специјални рат западних служби против Србије: „Бомбе" у авионима, тржним центрима – шта је следеће,* 2022). Indeed, the bomb threats did occur, but the source of the threats has not been identified to date. This narrative is, thus, speculatory. Ensuing more chaos, the article envisions a scenario wherein "someone, for instance, may import extremists from Kosovo and Metohija or Bosnia and Herzegovina, to perform a real terrorist act at one of the public spaces in Serbia [...] This is a security threat to every Serbian citizen" (Ibid.).

Given this "variety" of Western threats, Nicović professes for Sputnik that "Serbia can rely on some big security systems [...] One of them is the Russian intelligence service [...] They have technical capabilities that Serbia does not have. Serbia must rely on the services that it trusts" (Ibid.). The narrative pattern places Serbia at the center of a serious (alleged) verbal and terrorist threat from the West, implying that Serbia is a victim and needs a strong protector to defend it – Russia.

In contrast to the first pattern of Serbia's victimhood and inability to influence the global powers, the second pattern points to the elevated image of Serbia's impact and resistance to these same threats and pressures. Ironically, the second pattern **"Serbia is strong/independent"** refers to 1) the strength and independence in the decision-making of President Vučić; and 2) Serbia's ability to stand up to the West and not impose sanctions on Russia. This architecture of narratives exaggerates the relevance of Serbia as a state actor in the international system. First, the epitome of Serbia's strength is President Vučić himself, as all narratives present him in a positive light. An interview with Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov underlines that "President Vučić is an example of selfless service to his homeland; he is a national leader and a true patriot paying attention to [...] his country's interests, and not the [...] psychosis of the Anglo-Saxon world" (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022). Another Sputnik interview with the Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs Vulin highlights that "Serbia will not take part in collective anti-Russian hysteria… Serbia is the only free country in Europe [...] led by a free man [Vučić]. [Serbia] did not obey the orders of the NATO alliance; [Serbia] did not impose sanctions on Russia" (*Вулин: Србија неће постати део колективне антируске хистерије, нећемо забранити ниједан руски медиј,* 2022). President Vučić himself gave passionate speeches on the topic for various media outlets (also captured by Sputnik *Srbija)*. In two distinct articles, he reminds the audience that "Serbia developed partnerships with a vast number of countries, and it is no longer possible to treat it as an

object of brutal politics" and "Serbia will not pay attention to the expectation of other states, but rather its interests" (*Који су потези Запада ако Београд не казни Русију,* 2022). This points to Serbia's ostensible progress, independence, and diverse foreign policy with an undertone that President Vučić is the hero. With regards to Serbia's pursuit of the European path, he says for Sputnik that "neither Ukraine nor any other country will enter the EU before Serbia" (*Вучић о украјинској кризи: Србија ће трпети последице,* 2022). This proclamation infers that Serbia remains stronger than all other EU candidates. About the relationship with Russia, too, he proudly offers rhetorical statements in his speech, "Name a country in Europe that has not imposed sanctions on Russia and whose planes still fly to Saint Petersburg. There is one small country - small, but proud. That's our country" (*Вучић: Спреман сам да "гутам жабе" да би наш народ могао да дигне главу,* 2022). Because Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Russia, the belief is that while "it is inevitable that the situation will influence the global economy, Serbia remains stable" (*Дачић: Украјина је колатерална штета притисака са Запада*, 2022). Moreover, Serbia's supposed neutrality "offers an alternative approach to sanctions on Russia which damages the entire concept of the Washington, DC elite" (*Карта све открива: Србија у средишту важног војног троугла – на удару ултиматума и притисака /видео/,* 2022). Herein, Serbia's influence and role in global politics are overstated with praise for its "sitting-on-three-chairs" foreign policy concept.

To recap, the narratives paint an image of Serbia as both a victim and a strong state actor. This juxtaposition enables Serbia to frame itself according to the current events. Sputnik serves as an outlet for Serbian decision-makers to both victimize and glorify Serbia. This also serves Russian interests. As long as the Serbian-speaking audience believes that Serbia is a victim of Western pressure and a strong state which fights for Russian interests, Russia can demonize the West as well as strengthen the Russia-Serbia alliance.

c. Serbian Foreign Policy

Sputnik *Srbija's* narratives regarding the Serbian foreign policy cover Serbia's pursuit of its national interest while maintaining military neutrality. Out of that core base, the narratives explore Serbia's relationship with Russia and the West. The main general narrative patterns of importance are: 1) Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance (70 references), and 2) Serbia and the West (mainly the EU) have an unstable alliance (22 references).

The first narrative pattern "**Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance**" appears across a plethora of Sputnik narratives. The main narratives that capture this pattern revolve around 1) Russian ongoing support and protection of Serbia's territorial integrity; 2) Russia-Serbia shared history, religion, and identity; and 3) the current synergetic dynamic. The first set of narratives centers the strength of the alliance on Russia's unequivocal support for United Nations (UN) resolution 1244 which maintains Kosovo as part of Serbia. This is the cornerstone of the alliance that both sides nurture and emphasize. An example of that is captured within a narrative, "Serbia does not have anyone else on the planet, other than Russia, who so strongly and clearly supports its sovereignty and territorial integrity" (*Који су потези Запада ако Београд не казни Русију,* 2022). In addition to the strong support for Serbian borders, "Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, protected Serbia from an unfounded accusation from the West for an alleged genocide" (*„Не подлећи притисцима": Београдски форум за свет равноправних о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Because of this, "Russia is the most significant geopolitical, political, and security ally of Serbia and the Serbian people" (*Покренута петиција да Србија не уведе санкције Русији: Списак потписника - јавних личности,* 2022). The main driving pillar of the Russia-Serbia alliance is Russia's public support for Serbia during challenging times for Serbia's reputation.

The second set of narratives *vis-á-vis* the Russia-Serbia relationship clues in the shared history, religion, and identity. There is no mention of any of

Russia's strategic interests in the Balkan region. For instance, narratives show that "Serbia and Russia, Serbian people and Russian people are centuries-long friends, allies, and strategic partners" (*„Не подлећи притисцима": Београдски форум за свет равноправних о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Even though the Russia-Serbia alliance in realistic terms grew strong after 2008 Kosovo's declaration of independence, the sense of brotherhood and history remains strong within the public discourse. This is especially evident in the following Sputnik narrative:

> Since the inception of the Serbian and Russian states, the relations between the two Slavic peoples have been unbreakable. The Russian church and state were those to directly help our [Serbian] spiritual father Saint Sava to establish the Serbian Orthodox Church. Russia, as one of the global powers of that time, actively assisted the renewal of the Serbian state and the liberation of the Serbian people from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires [...] The fact is that the Russian Empire entered World War I to [...] protect the Serbian people and that the Russian troops significantly helped liberate Belgrade from the Nazi occupier in WWII" (*Покренута петиција да Србија не уведе санкције Русији: Списак потписника - јавних личности,* 2022).

It is not only Serbia and Serbian political officials who maintain this myth of a deep connection between Russia and Serbia, but also the Russian side. Justifying the unbreakable alliance of the two countries, Sputnik quotes Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Bocan Harchenko, "Because of the historical relations of our peoples, integration, and connection between Russia and Serbia exist and have to exist" (*Руски амбасадор: Разумемо Србију, њено гласање у УН резултат је најјачег притиска САД и ЕУ,* 2022). He proceeds to say, "Serbia and Russia are brotherly people of similar tradition and language (Ibid.).

Even within the third set of narratives "**The Current Synergetic Dynamic,**" the mutual nurturing of the Russia-Serbia friendship also exists. Sputnik narratives quote Dačić and other Serbian politicians yet again, "Imposing sanctions would ruin Serbia's relations with Russia" (*Дачић: Када бисмо увели санкције Русији одсекли бисмо грану на којој седимо,* 2022), which is not a path that Serbia is keen on pursuing. Russia also praises Serbia's

stance on sanctions, but, in contrast to the West, Russia vividly relieves the pressure off Serbia. For reference, "Russia will never forget that Serbia did not impose sanctions" and it "respects Serbia's national interests and understands the pressure it is under to impose sanctions on Russia" (*Руски амбасадор: Разумемо Србију, њено гласање у УН резултат је најјачег притиска САД и ЕУ,* 2022). Seeking to provide an understanding that the West has not provided for Serbia regarding the sanctions, he says that "Moscow does not ask for anything from Belgrade because Russia knows that President Vučić has been consistent" (Ibid.). As a reward for such an unconventional stance on Russia from a long-standing EU accession candidate, President Putin "proposed such conditions that [Serbia] would have the best gas prices in Europe" (*У тренутку када енергија постаје најкритичнији фактор производње – за Србију нема зиме,* 2022), further solidifying the Russia-Serbia bond.

The second code of narratives **"Serbia and the West have an unstable alliance,"** in turn, reflects the unstable and vague relationship between Serbia and the West. This alliance is not prominent in Sputnik narratives unless the objective is to show that it is weaker than Serbia's alliance with Russia. Sputnik's neutral narratives on Serbia's relationship with the West note only that Serbia is pursuing a European path - nothing more. Narratives, indeed, do not emphasize that Serbia is committed to the EU values or that Serbia even desires to become an EU Member State. With regards to the instability of this alliance, the narratives mainly reflect consistent pressures that the West has been putting on Serbia's decision-making, especially since the Russia-Ukraine War. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić says for Sputnik that the pressures are diverse and that there have been threats to the continuation of European integration of Serbia. She references that Serbia's stance on sanctions engendered statements that "Serbia should not be an EU candidate anymore" in European circles (*Влада Србије формира специјалне тимове за заштиту привредног и финансијског система и становништва,* 2022). While that is an extreme opinion of a few European policymakers, narratives heavily

emphasize it for effect. In real terms, the main form of pressure on Serbia is that the EU expects Serbia to join the sanctions, which Serbia has not done. While Serbia's decision is frowned upon in European circles, the threat of discontinuing its EU accession path is minimal.

To summarize, the code category *Serbian Foreign Policy* encapsulates narratives on the Russia-Serbia alliance (to a great extent) and the Serbia-West alliance. While Russia is portrayed as Serbia's protector both historically and currently, the West is presented as unstable, unaligned, and untrustworthy to Serbia.

d. Serbia's attitudes toward the war in Ukraine

Sputnik *Srbija* narratives vis-á-vis Serbia's attitudes toward the Russia-Ukraine War diverge into three narrative patterns: 1) "Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia" (58 references); 2) "Serbia supports Russia in the war" (26 references); and 3) "Serbia supports Ukraine in the war" (21 references).

The code titled **"Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia"** contains a repeatedly recycled diplomatic narrative that "Serbia respects international law but understands its needs well" (*Вучић саопштио став: Србија не уводи санкције Русији /видео/,* 2022). In more passionate unofficial statements regarding the profound friendship with Russia, Serbian government officials stated to Sputnik that Serbia would not take away the property of Russian companies because "that would not be fair toward people who have not done anything to Serbia" (Ibid.). Moreover, Sputnik highlights Dačić to have said, "Whenever I asked for help in the past 10 years, do you know who was the only one to pick up the phone? [...] For me, there is no dilemma; we made the best decision" (*Дачић: Када бисмо увели санкције Русији одсекли бисмо грану на којој седимо,* 2022). Narratives about the decision-making on sanctions are presented with very few variations and reflect Serbia's desire to appease the pressures from the West and deepen the alliance with Russia.

On the other hand, the second narrative pattern **"Serbia supports Russia in the war"** takes a much more non-diplomatic shape, reflecting the strong sense of Memory Alliance, shared Slavic identity, and Orthodox Christianity. The main narratives zoom in on ways in which Serbia and Serbian people have overtly supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine in multiple locations - Serbia, Kosovo, and Russia. To demonstrate, in one of the organized pro-Russia protests, "cars [...] in the center of the capital [Belgrade] waved flags of Russia, Belarus, Donetsk People's Republic, and Serbia showing support for the Russian and Belarusian people in conducting the Nazification of Ukraine" (*Скуп подршке Русији у Београду: Ауто-колона прошла улицама у центру престонице /видео, фото/,* 2022). Also in Belgrade, "multiple [Orthodox Christian] organizations hosted a charity concert that featured Serbian and Russian songs for children from Donbas" (*„Мирно небо за дечји осмех": У Руском дому одржан добротворни концерт за децу из Донбаса /видео/,* 2022). In another location in Serbia, "cars drove to the monument to Russian military officers who died defending Niš from fascists in WWII [...] The participants of the gathering carried Serbian flags, Russian flags, and signs with the letter Z" (*„Ниш није миш": Одржан скуп подршке руском народу /видео/,* 2022). The wave of support has also spread to a Serb-populated town in Kosovo called Kosovska Mitrovica. Therein, Serbs painted a "mural of support for the special military operation of Russia in Ukraine" *(Мурал подршке Русији осванyо у Косовској Митровици /фото/,* 2022). In a Sputnik interview, a Serbian diaspora member who led a pro-Russia protest in Moscow said, "Serbia will show the entire world that Serbs support Russians. We will stand with our brothers. We will fight for justice until the last moment. We will give our lives for Russia and Vladimir Putin, if needed" (*„Две земље, једна вера": Срби подржали руску специјалну војну операцију у Украјини /видео, фото/,* 2022). The fragments of the Serbian society have not only expressed support for Russia in the public discourse but also via gatherings and protests that Sputnik could leverage. Russia's power over Serbia goes further beyond its

mass media manipulation via IOs; a significant portion of the Serbian public feels aligned with Russia as a "brother" regardless of Sputnik *Srbija* publications.

The code titled **"Serbia supports Ukraine in the war"** contains rather bland examples of support in comparison to the previous narrative pattern. The main narratives of "support" state that Serbia respects international law and Ukrainian territorial integrity. Serbia's territorial integrity has been at risk due to Serbia's challenges with Kosovo's independence. Therefore, Serbia's support for Ukrainian territorial integrity is rather a mirror of Serbia's desperate attempt to maintain Kosovo within its borders. One additional set of narratives wherein Serbia supports the Ukrainian side in the war engages the shared Slavic identity and Orthodox Christianity; President Vučić says for Sputnik that "Serbia sincerely mourns the events in Eastern Europe" and that "Serbia considers Russians and Ukrainians as its brothers" (*Петнаест тачака које је Србија усвојила о кризи у Украјини,* 2022). Notably, the wording of the statements shows the lack of Serbia's recognition that the "events" in Eastern Europe are, in fact, a Russia-led invasion. Similarly, another Sputnik article cites that "it is tragic what is happening between two brotherly peoples [Russians and Ukrainians]" (*Небојша Човић: Нико нема морално право да од Србије тражи да се прикључи санкцијама,* 2022). Even Serbia's statements of solidarity with Ukraine – an Orthodox, Slavic brother-country – also include a sense of support for Russia as such in Sputnik *Srbija* articles. Although there have been multiple small pro-Ukraine gatherings in Serbia, Sputnik articles have not even mentioned them. Thus, the objective of the narratives is to show how independent Serbia is in its decision to not sanction Russia and what a strong base of support Serbia offers to Russia in this war. In turn, Sputnik's reference to any support for Ukraine is purely mechanical.

In conclusion, narratives under the category *Serbia* generally showcase the application of both IW by "proxy" and Memory Diplomacy. For instance, the repeated presentation of the West in a negative connotation helps sow

mistrust and doubt toward the West in Serbia. In turn, references to Russia and Serbia pinpoint their shared experiences, historical ties, and unbreakable bond, which further encourages a sense of friendship between the two allies.

4.2.3. The West

The code category titled *The West* is extremely comprehensive because this label contains a multitude of actors. The key antagonists of the narratives are NATO, the US, and the EU to a lesser extent. The main codes within the category are: "The US and NATO are hegemonic and imperial" (48 references), "The US and NATO want the war (36 references), "The West launched Information Warfare against Russia" (25 references), and "Europe is weak and unstable" (eight references). Most of these codes have overlapping narratives.

The first code **"The US and NATO are hegemonic and imperial"** surfaces the power dynamics game that the US and NATO have been playing. This game refers to hegemonic conquests and a battle for power in the international system. The indicated narrative pattern considers the general hegemonic character of the US with instances from 1) the 1999 NATO intervention in Serbia (already explored in the subsection above); 2) overall history; and 3) the expansion goals that damage Russia.

The general narratives echo that "the US is the main cause of escalations of conflicts even when conflicts can be easily resolved" (*Имамо посла са Империјом зла: Србија само треба да очврсне и да зна ко јој је савезник,* 2022), reminding the audience that the US "intervened in sovereign countries more than 50 times without the approval of the UN since WWII" (*Запад подиже страшну антируску хистерију у Србији: Да је 1949. слали би на Голи оток,* 2022). According to a Sputnik interview with Serbian politician Drecun, "the US imperial politics does not change its model of behavior" (*Дрецун: Америка користи ситуацију у Украјини да Србију окрене против Русије,* 2022). The model of behavior, as Sputnik narratives underline, highlights that the US and NATO illegally intervened in numerous conflicts to

maintain global dominance. The interventions were then turned into precedents to help the US maintain its power. To demonstrate, Dr. Mitar Kovač, Director of the Eurasian Security Forum, emphasizes the double standard which allows the West to be hegemonic and imperial in his Sputnik interview. He reminded the audience that when Russia intervened in Georgia in 2008, that move was labeled as "breaking international law," even though it resembled US activity around the world (*Последице НАТО агресија на СР Југославију осећају се и у Украјини,* 2022).

More specific to the current armed conflict in Ukraine, the narratives echo that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are not purposeful targets - in turn, "they are the collateral damage of the geopolitical battle and the US attempt to maintain its declining dominance" (*Небојша Човић: Нико нема морално право да од Србије тражи да се прикључи санкцијама,* 2022). NATO expansion is reportedly one of these US power-hungry attempts to impact Ukraine. Sputnik outlines the range of the expansion strategy to span activity from NATO "membership offers to Central and Eastern European countries to expanding military bases" (*Који су потези Запада ако Београд не казни Русију,* 2022). The articles, as presented, make a direct causal connection between the military expansion of NATO and the roots of the Ukrainian crisis.

The second narrative pattern **"The US and NATO want the war in Ukraine"** is a fusion of narratives about the US war industry and control over Ukraine. Generally, the narratives stress that the US military industry has a huge impact on the economy and politics of the US, "forcing the US to start wars one after another" (*Кустурица: Без рата Америка не постоји,* 2022). Simply put, "without war, the US has no industry, no progress [...] For the US, war is like water for a thirsty man; without war, the US does not exist" (Ibid.). Following that logic, NATO, led by the US, has had its stakes in the Russia-Ukraine War. A common theme of Sputnik narratives is that NATO directly caused the war because the Alliance had continued to expand to the East despite Russia's warnings. However, this is not the only pronounced indication that the US

wanted this war. According to the narratives, directing the attention of the US public discourse toward the war and Russia would serve the Democratic Party in the upcoming elections. On that note, in his Sputnik interview Serbian political scientist Aleksandar Pavić claims that the US would be ready to even purposely "detonate a bomb" (and blame Russia) in Ukraine to distract the US voting body and maintain the leadership of the Democrats in the US Congress (*Павић: За Србију није пут ка ЕУ — они спроводе нови нацистички поход ка Русији /видео/,* 2022).

The narratives also offer concrete examples of how the US prepared the Ukrainian context for an armed conflict. To do so, "the Western intelligence services initiated a neo-Nazi movement and Russophobia in Ukraine" after the collapse of the USSR (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022), making Ukraine a victim of US ambitions. Apparently, Ukraine has always been the target of the US and NATO because "they knew how valuable Ukraine is to Russia" (*„Бесрамне копипејст лажи и крај Пакс Американе": Човић о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Since "it is in the interest of the West that anyone enters a war with Russia except the West itself" (*Дачић: Украјина је колатерална штета притисака са Запада,* 2022), "NATO instrumentalized Ukraine to be so Russophobe to confront the Russian Federation using its own national capabilities" (*Последице НАТО агресија на СР Југославију осећају се и у Украјини,* 2022). To that end, the articles also reflect on the role of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in assisting NATO. One narrative says that "Zelensky and those who are manipulating him show no signs of wanting peace" (*Павић: За Србију није пут ка ЕУ — они спроводе нови нацистички поход ка Русији /видео/,* 2022). Describing him in greater detail, an article characterizes President Zelensky as "a pathetic puppet that Western puppet masters move however they want"' (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022). Corroborating that narrative, another Sputnik article contends that "the US and NATO directly stopped Kyiv to

negotiate with Russia," causing more suffering and death for Ukrainians (*„Бесрамне копи-пејст лажи и крај Пакс Американе": Човић о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Besides Russophobia as the reason, a Sputnik article posits that Ukrainian and Russian people are losing lives because US President Joe Biden is trying to be the exclusive supplier of gas to Europe. (Ibid.).

The third code **"The West launched Information Warfare against Russia"** combines perceptions of Russia's victimhood and the embedded aggression of the West. Sputnik narratives connect the dots between 1) the US-led "hysteric propaganda" against Russia (even using Serbia as an instrument in some cases) and 2) the unjust EU ban of Russian media outlets. Both are presented as a form of Information Warfare against Russia, which is in line with the Russian understanding of IW. The first set of narratives displays how censorship and propaganda are endemic to the Western order. To demonstrate, a Sputnik article finds it problematic that "the US media discontinued the live press conference of the outgoing US President Donald Trump and turned off his Twitter account in January 2021" (*Осим за мачке и Русе: Запад ушао у монструозну фазу – коначни обрачун цивилизација,* 2022). Apparently, this power move set a precedent and provided an "easy training for the American machinery to completely destroy Russia via media devastation and hybrid 'atomic bombs' [...] with a terrifying campaign, brutal blackmail and pressures, and unimaginable lies, [the US] decided to spin the wheel of history against Russia" (Ibid.). The effects of the US and NATO alleged use of anti-Russian propaganda are "genocide against the Ukranian citizens of Russian ethnicity, turning Ukraine into Anti-Russia" (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022). Via this "mass anti-Russian information hysteria, [the US and NATO] are attempting to paint Russia as the aggressor" (Ibid.), ostensibly preventing the Moscow-Kyiv negotiations. Sputnik asserts that the West sabotaged the negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv thanks to embedding the "alleged crimes of the Russian military in Bucha" into the media, even though that "story is entirely made up" (*Боцан-Харченко:*

Очекујемо да ће Србија у међународним организацијама и даље имати уравнотежен став, 2022). To appeal to the Serbian audience and showcase the West-led media manipulation, Sputnik went as far as to compare Bucha to Račak – a place of alleged Serbian war crimes in Kosovo in 1999. As presented above, the 1999 NATO bombing and the Kosovo question remain sensitive topics for Serbia. Aware of this, Sputnik *Srbija* consistently creates comparisons that victimize Serbia and Russia, and, in turn, demonize the West.

Referring to the ban on Russian media outlets in Europe, the narratives severely condemn the ban and argue that the West is taking away the freedom of the press. The pronounced motto of the West, according to Sputnik, is "ban, discontinue, silence, sanction!" While the West "permanently accuses Moscow of disinformation wars and uses that as an excuse to shut down Russian media outlets [...], the Western media outlets are, in fact, trying to limit access to information that is different from their propaganda narratives" (*Осим за мачке и Русе: Запад ушао у монструозну фазу – коначни обрачун цивилизација,* 2022). The Sputnik content argues that "this is not the first time that a war is led against Russian media [...] now [the West] shut the outlets down completely to be able to lie" (*Поштовани пратиоци, под ударом смо брутално цензуре – ево како да будете уз нас,* 2022).

The fourth code **"Europe is weak and unstable"** does not have many references in the Sputnik content, but it paints an image that the US and NATO are manipulating the EU for their benefit. Sputnik articles mainly emphasize that the West, led by the US and NATO, is hegemonic, aggressive, and imperial, but there is one caveat to this narration – Europe is the weakest factor in that whole dynamic. The objective of this nuance is to divide the West during times of crisis. The narratives state that "Europe should ask itself about the trap it fell into because this is not about the relationship between Russia and Europe, but Russia and the US" (*Ако се Запад тек сада сетио међународног права – нека отпризнају Косово /видео/,* 2022). According to this thinking, Europe is the middleman. To that point, a Sputnik interview claims that Europe will suffer

the most consequences of the war in Ukraine - even more than Ukraine and Russia themselves. (*Небојша Човић: Нико нема морално право да од Србије тражи да се прикључи санкцијама,* 2022). Moreover, Sputnik points out that "the US is attempting to strengthen its role in Europe: the main instrument to control Europe is NATO [...] which has started to lack in relevance - and what better way than to start a war in Europe!" (*„Бесрамне копи-пејст лажи и крај Пакс Американе": Човић о украјинској кризи,* 2022) Therefore, the war on European territory serves to "recuperate NATO's relevance and role" and "allow the US to control Europeans" (Ibid.). As such, the narratives claim with a sense of urgency that "Europe has to decide to either be sovereign and independent in decision-making [...] or accept to be a victim of the puppet alliance and a US colony" (Ibid.). In conclusion, the narratives render the West as an imperial, hegemonic monster that intervenes in countries, including Ukraine, for its own interests. Almost all presented narratives point to elements of Russian IW against the West facilitated by Serbia.

4.2.4. Russia

The code category titled "Russia" appears consistently within the narratives. To paint a positive image of Russia from one angle, Sputnik interlaces narratives about Russia with narratives about Serbia (namely the Serbia-Russia alliance to a large extent). To supplement the positive outlook on Russia, another set of Sputnik articles presents the West in a negative, even monstrous, light (elaborated above in *The West* code category). The focus of this code category, however, is the presentation of Russia itself. The most notable codes are: "Russia is strong and a protector" (19 references) and "Russia is a victim and peaceful" (48 references). Interestingly, the accentuated nuances of perceptions of Russia are similar to the perceptions of Serbia.

The code titled **"Russia is strong and a protector"** encapsulates narratives that 1) Russia has been protecting Serbia against the West (elaborated on in the Russia-Serbia alliance code under the code category *Serbia*); 2) Russia

has been protecting Russian people in eastern Ukraine; and 3) Russia is stronger than the West. Russia's intervention in Ukraine was apparently long time coming. Russia's previous "restraint has been wrongly understood as a weakness [...]; the situation escalated when Russia said 'enough is enough!' and gave the list of requests" (*„Бесрамне копи-пејст лажи и крај Пакс Американе": Човић о украјинској кризи,* 2022). Furthermore, a Sputnik narrative states that Russia was "provoked to do this to protect people in eastern Ukraine and even, perhaps, entire Ukraine" from "Nazi extremists" (*Даница Грујичић: НАТО у Србији изазвао мини Чернобиљ - Европа због Украјине открива лице неслободе,* 2022). Consequently, Russia is protecting not only Donbas and Russia's future - but it is also stopping "a global catastrophe" (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022).

In terms of Russia's power over the West, the narratives point out that "the US and the West [...] also said that the last wave of sanctions would weaken Russia and bring it down to its knees. However, Russia has used the sanctions to develop its agricultural production and food industry and is now one of the biggest exports of foods in the world" (*Небојша Човић: Нико нема морално право да од Србије тражи да се прикључи санкцијама,* 2022). In terms of its superiority in conventional capabilities, "the Russian military has no fear to confront anyone, including NATO [...]; now it is visible that the [Russian army] is number one in the world" (*Павић: За Србију није пут ка ЕУ — они спроводе нови нацистички поход ка Русији /видео/,* 2022) Interestingly, most of the articles that glorify and praise Russia comprise quotes, speeches, and statements of the Serbian political elite.

The code titled **"Russia is a victim and peaceful"** is more sophisticated than the first code. Russia's victimhood, like Serbia's victimhood, reflects 1) the Western injustice and hatred towards Russia and 2) Ukrainian nationalist aggression toward ethnic Russians in Ukraine. It is noteworthy that Sputnik describes both Serbia and Russia as victims of Western injustice and aggression.

This is expected based on the narrative patterns examined above. However, even the second narrative pattern on Ukraine's nationalism and Nazism against Russia and Russians contains elements of alleged Ukrainian aggression toward Serbia and Serbs. This converging point of victimhood is a pronounced theme that bonds the two Slavic Orthodox Christian allies, fostering their Memory Alliance.

The first narrative pattern features the West as the main perpetrator of 'unfounded' hatred toward Russia. The narratives home in on the perceived Russophobia in the West. To spotlight this theme, a Sputnik article says that "rejecting everything Russian has lasted for centuries [...]" (*Душан Ковачевић осуђује забрану Спутњика и РТ: Оволика мржња према свему руском одавно није виђена,* 2022). According to the narratives, the hatred toward Russians does not stem from the events in Ukraine; "this is the culmination of centuries of hatred toward Russian and Slavic people in general [...]" Speaking of current events, the world "cannot recall an offensive as scary, cancerogenic, and insane as NATO's offensive against Russia and Russian people today" (*Осим за мачке и Русе: Запад ушао у монструозну фазу – коначни обрачун цивилизација,* 2022). Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs Vulin describes for Sputnik the Western attitudes toward Russia as "Nazism re-emerging under a different name, but with the same vigor and, inevitably, the same consequences" (*Вулин: Да је Хитлер имао Фејсбук користио би га на исти начин,* 2022). In addition, the purpose of the Russian media censorship is to "further spread hatred toward Russia and Russian people" and "dehumanize not only President Vladimir Putin, but also all Russian people" (*Србија је сламка међу вихорове, али санкције Русији би била тачка без повратка /видео/,* 2022).

The second narrative pattern reflects Russian victimhood engendered by the Ukrainian nationalist and Nazi aggression both on its own and due to the pressure from the West. Sputnik utilizes this narrative to justify the "special military operation" in Ukraine to the Serbian-speaking audience in two ways. First, the narratives show how Ukraine is aggressive and nazified toward

Russia. Second, the narratives also bring forward Ukraine's "aggressive behavior" toward Serbia and the Serbian people to make Russia's victimhood even more believable. To illustrate, Sputnik claims that "Nazism evidently appeared in Ukraine in 2014" (*Даница Грујичић: НАТО у Србији изазвао мини Чернобиљ - Европа због Украјине открива лице неслободе,* 2022) and that Russia has only protected its people from "overt Ukrainian neo-Nazis with tattoos of a swastika on their chests" (*Осим за мачке и Русе: Запад ушао у монструозну фазу – коначни обрачун цивилизација,* 2022). Examples of "Nazi crimes against Russian people in Donbas" mirror activities such as "40 Russian-speaking people being burned alive in Odesa and a massive ethnic cleansing of people who live in Donetsk and Lugansk" (*Кадиров послао поруку Србима: Нећемо вам заборавити добра дела, браћо!,* 2022). According to Sputnik, Ukraine is led by "a well-organized aggressive minority, an extremist gang." (*Павић: За Србију није пут ка ЕУ - они спроводе нови нацистички поход ка Русији /видео/,* 2022). Also, the Russian media outlet shares examples of the Ukrainian alleged aggression toward Serbia. Reportedly, Serbian truck drivers who had been stuck in Ukraine say that Ukrainian soldiers kept them as hostages while they were transiting to Serbia (*Драма српских камионџија: Украјинци нас држе као таоце, говоре да ћемо, ако нас пусте, убијати децу,* 2022). To an extent, disseminating narratives on Ukrainian alleged hostility toward Serbian citizens serves as a justification for the war in Ukraine and the perception that Russia is a victim of Ukrainian nationalists. In conclusion, narratives depict Russia either in a positive light as a protector of Serbs and Russians or as an object of Western unfounded hatred. These narratives manage to glorify Russia and, at the same time, vilify the West in the eyes of the Serbian public.

4.2.5. Conclusions

This paper posed three research questions. To answer the first research question (*What are the key narrative patterns observed in Sputnik Srbija's*

public discourse vis-à-vis Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War?), the author identified 17 narrative patterns across three coding categories: *Serbia*, *the West*, and *Russia*. The author bolstered these narrative patterns with concrete Sputnik *Srbija* public discourse examples. Those patterns closely showcase Russia's application of Information Warfare (IW) and Memory Diplomacy via its Information Operations (IO) in Serbia. The narrative patterns that emerge generally uplift Serbia, demonize the West, and support Russia. To illustrate, the code category titled *Serbia* encompasses 11 codes that specifically reflect on Serbia's turbulent history, perceptions of Serbia, Serbian foreign policy, and Serbia's attitudes toward the war in Ukraine. Specifically, the design of Sputnik's messaging paints Serbia as an independent state actor that does not neglect its alliances no matter the intensity of the pressure. To that point, the narratives frequently emphasize the strength of the Russia-Serbia relationship. This way, Russia utilizes Memory Diplomacy to assimilate Serbia into Russia. Some observed methods of doing so are equating the victimhood of the two Slavic allies and comparing the support that the states have provided for each other over time. Moreover, the patterns strongly exploit Serbian recent history and the Western 'injustice' toward Serbs in the 1990s to soften Serbia's perception of Russia in the war in Ukraine. The narratives often refer to history to also re-awaken anti-West sentiments in Serbia, fostering an unstable base of the Serbia-West alliance at present. This is an example of Russia's IW efforts against the West because the narratives strive to diminish Serbia's orientation toward the West and cause further instability in a key strategic region for the West. The code category titled *the West,* in turn, contains four codes that describe the activity of the West as war-hungry, hegemonic, and Russophobe. The narratives primarily showcase the hegemonic and imperial pursuits of the West. In detail, Sputnik reflects on NATO's expansion despite Russia's warnings, "illegal" interventions around the world (including Serbia), and the pressure that the West puts on Serbia regarding its stance on sanctions. This is how Russia is fighting for influence in Serbia via this IO. The objective is to

exploit Serbia's pre-existing distrust and doubt against the West, enabling Russia's IW strategy. Memory Diplomacy is less visible within this code category unless the narratives also involve Serbia. Finally, the code category titled *Russia* contains two codes. This code category demonstrates both IW and Memory Diplomacy in action. Conspicuously, the Kremlin portrays itself as a defender of Serbia because Serbia is a target of Western historical and contemporary aggression and pressure. At the same time, Sputnik depicts Russia as a casualty of Western imperialism and a victim of Western hatred and IW efforts. The former encapsulates the application of Memory Diplomacy, while the latter mirrors Russia's IW agenda. In most instances, the two concepts are intertwined to help Russia craft credible, impactful IO narratives via Sputnik in Serbia.

In terms of the second research question, the identified narrative patterns *vis-à-vis* Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War imply that Russia persistently instigates IW against the West via Serbia as the 'proxy.' To additionally turn Serbia against the West, Russia capitalizes on its "Memory Alliance" with Serbia as a reminder of the shared culture and instrumental support on past and current political issues. To conclude, the narratives mainly characterize Serbia and Russia in a positive or victimizing tone. On the other hand, Sputnik assigns negative attributes to the West, mainly labeling the US and NATO as imperial, hegemonic, and power-hungry. Because of Serbia's agreement with these narratives, Serbia has enabled the Russia-Ukraine War-related Russian IO via Sputnik *Srbija* to a great extent.

Therefore, this dissertation finds that Serbia has enabled Russian IW *vis-à-vis* to a great extent. There are three main indicators of this finding. First, Russia-Serbia relations reinforce an immense alignment on political issues, especially those relevant to Serbia. Russia's support for the Serbian territorial integrity – arguably the most sensitive political topic in Serbia – constructs a space for Serbia to reciprocate the support. That includes continuing the Russia-Serbia alliance during the height of the crisis in Ukraine. Second, Serbia

welcomed the launch of Sputnik *Srbija* in Belgrade in 2015 with the awareness that Russia has used Sputnik as an IW implementing method. As Sputnik publishes narratives that present the Vučić administration in a positive light, Serbia willingly accepts to be a 'proxy' state for Russian IW against the West. Moreover, Russian IOs coincidentally suit the strategic objectives of the Serbian government. Third, most narrative excerpts derive precisely from Sputnik interviews with Serbian political officials (i.e. President, Prime Minister, Minister of Internal Affairs, President of the National Assembly of Serbia, former Chief of Police, etc.) or other influential members of the society. Although this expansive group does not represent the entire society, it does provide an insight into what statements decision-makers launch into the public discourse. In conclusion, Serbia has enabled the Sputnik-launched Russian IO vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War and, by default Russian IW against the West. The reasons why Serbia serves as an IW facilitator are the powerful Russia-Serbia alliance and the convenience of Russian narratives for the Serbian government.

4.3. Discussion

The previous section presented the conclusions of the empirical findings. In summary, the paper claims that the Sputnik *Srbija* narrative patterns in the examined Information Operation constitute Information Warfare against the West targeted at Serbia. Even as a target state for "proxy" Information Warfare, Serbia has readily served as an enabler of both the Russian Information Operation vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War and, by default, the Russian Information Warfare against the West. This section serves as an extension of the conclusions. As such, it has a twofold purpose to 1) state research implications and 2) reflect on the limitations of this research.

4.3.1. Research Implications

This paper makes both conceptual and empirical contributions to the literature. Conceptually, it dilates the Information Warfare concept. The existing literature mainly focuses on Russian direct non-military activity against adversaries. As such, the conceptualization of Russian Information Warfare predominantly encircles Russia's direct launch of information wars against Western institutions. However, Russia also seeks to exert influence on states of strategic importance for Russia and the West. The literature, nonetheless, neglects this indirect aspect of Russian Information Warfare. In other words, the literature does not consider Russia's ability to launch Information Warfare against the West – the adversary – via a 'proxy' (friendly) state. This elevated form of Information Warfare targets non-Western countries to undermine and weaken the West, constituting 'proxy' Information Warfare. The author assists the expansion of the concept to also include activity in states friendly to the perpetrator of Information Warfare. Additionally, the concept of Memory Diplomacy serves as an analytical lens that is crucial for the construction of narratives in ally states. To that point, for Russian Information Warfare by 'proxy' to be successful, Russia also utilizes Memory Diplomacy to encourage the openness of the target state to the Kremlin's destabilizing narratives. In conclusion, future researchers may converge the concepts of Information Warfare and Memory Diplomacy to analyze Information Warfare via 'proxy' states. Moreover, the narrative patterns that this paper identified may yield insight into the sentiments and narratives that exist within societies that Russia readily maximizes.

In terms of empirical implications, this research serves as important insight for NATO and EU institutions, given that Serbia is a key strategic partner of both. The organizations are committed to tackling Russian IOs in their space, so the policymakers may benefit from this research. The author did not only translate Serbian narrative excerpts into the English language, but she also groups the excerpts into narrative patterns. This generates a prolific ground

for the EU and NATO policymakers to understand the strategy behind the Russian narration in the Serbian public discourse. Furthermore, the research may assist the EU and NATO circles to craft their key messages to the Serbian administration with which they actively collaborate on security issues. With the increased awareness that Serbia actively serves as an enabler of Russian Information Warfare, the institutions may address this security threat more proportionally.

4.3.2. Limitations

In answering the research questions, this analysis faced numerous limitations. This subsection will lay out five crucial limitations. The first limitation of the paper is that the war in Ukraine has not yet ended. Therefore, the findings of this research are preliminary and circumstantial. The author selected Sputnik articles published in the first 100 days of the war, which disregards events and narratives that Sputnik may have employed in the aftermath.

To that point, the second limitation of this research is that the author selected only one Russian media outlet as the key launchpad of Russian IO regarding the war. As presented earlier in this paper, Serbian local media is even more instrumental in disseminating narratives to Serbian society than Sputnik *Srbija*. The scope of the paper has not allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of narratives on the matter proliferated across the Serbian state-backed media outlets. Hence, the output of this research may not, in fact, paint a real extent to which Russian IO narratives penetrate the Serbian public discourse.

The third limitation is that the author conducted a qualitative analysis of only 86 Sputnik *Srbija* articles out of 2500+ that have been published on the Russia-Ukraine War so far. This narrow sample may have implications for the findings and may not be representative of all patterns that are visible within the Serbian public discourse.

Similarly, the fourth limitation of the paper is that the author, unfortunately, overlooked certain existing narrative patterns. The patterns did not fit into the code categories and were, therefore, red herrings to the research. Examples are the Serbia-China alliance, Serbia-Kosovo relations, and the Western Balkans dynamic, to name a few.

The fifth limitation of the paper is that the author has not considered the real-time effects of the narratives on perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine War. While there have been a few pro-Russia protests across Serbia, it is unclear whether Sputnik's intense promotion of the narratives caused them. With these limitations in mind, the paper proceeds to the conclusion.

Conclusion

This research enclosed three interrelated research questions. The main research question sought to identify key Sputnik *Srbija* narratives *vis-à-vis* Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War and group them into patterns. The goal of exposing these narrative patterns was to answer the following convoluted conundrum: the extent to which these Sputnik narratives constitute Russian Information Warfare against the West and the extent to which Serbia has enabled the war-related Information Operation. The empirical findings show 17 key narrative patterns produced by 86 Sputnik *Srbija* articles about Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War. Those patterns are: "Western injustice toward Yugoslavia in the 1990s is similar to the ongoing Western injustice toward Russia," "Serbia and Ukraine are victims of NATO's expansion," NATO is brutal and Russia is merciful," "Serbian people are 'bigger' victims than Ukrainian people," "Serbia's is a victim/small," "Serbia is strong/independent," "Serbia and Russia have a strong, brotherly alliance," "Serbia and the West have an unstable alliance," "Serbia is not imposing sanctions on Russia," "Serbia supports Russia in the war," "Serbia supports Ukraine in the war," "The US and NATO are hegemonic and imperial," "The US and NATO want the war," "The

West launched Information Warfare against Russia," "Europe is weak and unstable," "Russia is strong and a protector," and "Russia is a victim and peaceful."

Based on the extensive public discourse analysis and subsequent narrative groupings, the paper shows that Russia used Sputnik *Srbija* to launch Information Warfare by 'proxy' against the West. In other words, the Kremlin's Information Operation about the Russia-Ukraine War enabled Russia to launch indirect Information Warfare against the West using Serbia as the launchpad. The objective was to deter Serbia from cooperating with the West, sow doubt and distrust toward Serbia's EU path, and demonize NATO. Although this form of Information Warfare has not directly incapacitated Western institutions and values, it has further destabilized and endangered the perceptions of the West in Serbia – a strategic partner of the West. Notably, Sputnik presents Serbia in an immensely positive light, making the political elite more susceptible to favoring Sputnik's narratives. As a result, the author concludes that Serbia has also enabled this Russian Information Operation via Sputnik *Srbija* to a great extent. The intersection of narratives on Serbia and the Russia-Ukraine War demonstrates that Serbian political officials and other spotlighted society members actively contributed to Sputnik narratives. Sputnik quoted statements from the President, Prime Minister, President of the National Assembly of Serbia, Minister of Internal Affairs, and other current and former Serbian politicians and executives. This implies that the identified narrative patterns stem largely from the narratives that the Serbian political elite launched into the public discourse. Moreover, Sputnik also took some of these narratives from Serbian state-backed media outlets, meaning that the narratives had already circulated in the Serbian public discourse via local media. Furthermore, Sputnik *Srbija* managed to amplify and organize the presentation of some pre-existing narratives rather than craft new less-believable ones.

In conclusion, Serbia serves as an accomplice to Russia in the confrontation with the West. In other words, Serbia is of use to Russia as a

'proxy' battlefield for Information Warfare against the West. This synergy stems from Memory Diplomacy that both Russia and Serbia nourish. Because of their Memory Alliance, the Kremlin crafts positive images about both Russia and Serbia in Sputnik *Srbija*'s narratives. On the other hand, the Kremlin capitalizes on Serbia's unresolved historical tensions with the West to launch Information Operations and diminish the influence of the West in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

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