'Black Knight' Effect: The Role of Russia in Countering Democratization in Montenegro and Serbia

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Russia’s growing presence in the Balkans represents a rising concern for the region’s democratic performance. Recent years witnessed series of events impeded by Kremlin to influence the political dynamics and internal affairs of Montenegro and Serbia. Thus, Russia exhibits all the features of ‘black knight’ for democracy in the region. The thesis looks at the impact on democracy performance of the Kremlin involvement within the two countries. It presents an analysis of the activities and strategies that are utilized to undermine democratization of the countries and how they relate to each other. Furthermore, the thesis argues that Kremlin influence in these two countries had a detrimental effect on the democratization and overall social stability, making the region prone to ethnic violence and democracy backsliding.
“BLACK KNIGHT” EFFECT: THE ROLE OF RUSSIA IN COUNTERING DEMOCRATIZATION IN MONTENEGRO AND SERBIA

BY

DANILO KALEZIC
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Thesis Director:
Ph.D. Kheang Un
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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is the root of all prosperous and progressive societies in developed parts of the world. However, for countries experiencing challenges with democracy, the root cause of those challenges can often be attributed to the role of either external or internal forces that inhibit democratic political development. Notably, these external forces can be positive or negative. Negative factors include the variables that inhibit or weaken democratic performance, while positive factors are those variables that strengthen a country's democratic activities. Russia is an external factor that has negatively influenced the democratization process in the Western Balkans, ultimately contributing to the destabilization of the region and leading to violence and ongoing conflict. As such, Russia acts as a black knight by causing the destabilization of existing authoritarian regimes and affecting democratic processes in the region. It is worth evaluating the diverse ways that Russia as an external factor has influenced the democratization process of the Western Balkan region and determining specifically how Russia acting as a black knight has impeded the political development of the area, thus causing the eruption of wars and violence.

When the Berlin Wall fell, it was expected that many more countries would experience democratization than those that actually have at present. The countries that emerged from the dissolved Yugoslavia experienced a different democratic trajectory than their European counterparts. Disrupted and slow-moving democratization was often due to ethnic conflict and the lack of a historically democratic culture to facilitate a transition to liberal democracy. Considerable aid and influence from the West failed to achieve successful transitions and democratic
transformations in this region. Instead, despite initial democratic enthusiasm and the success stories of Slovenia and Croatia, current political events in the Western Balkans demonstrate a democratic backslide, the renewal of ethnic tensions, and continued subversion of the rule of law, which is a fundamental pillar for consolidating democracy (Bieber, 2017).

The rise of Russian political and economic power under Putin in the last two decades has been matched by reborn Russia’s geopolitical interests in the Balkans. This development is not surprising given the region's historical importance to Russian national interests. Furthermore, Russia's involvement in the region, particularly in Montenegro and Serbia, correlates with the overall decline of democratic performance and the rise of authoritarian tendencies in those locales despite both states' expressed ambitions to complete democratic transitions successfully. Thus, this thesis analyzes the modes that the Kremlin utilizes to suppress democracy and the specific effects on the democratic performance of both these countries.

Similarly, the growing regional presence of third-party non-democratic actors, such as Russia and China, both politically and economically paves the way for further destabilization and the ongoing disruption of fundamental democratic processes. Given the history of Russian involvement in the 'Near Abroad' – i.e., in Georgia and Ukraine – the patterns in the Western Balkans are recognizable, especially in Montenegro and Serbia, which are both perceived as Russia's former allies. The complexity and longevity of those relations justify a Russian presence in the region and provide a rationalization for its perpetual involvement. The core argument put forth in this paper centers around the black-knight effect (Ambrosio, 2009, 2010) and the necessity of the hegemon countries for the persistence of hybrid regimes. The changing nature of the international order and recession of Western political engagement overseas, together with economic recessions, have made room for more active involvement by black knights and has also
bolstered support for similar regimes. Natalizia (2019) has put forth a similar argument assessing the Russian black-knight effect in the Southern Caucasus, arguing that the overall impact of the Kremlin is detrimental to democratic performance there.

The recent political and economic revival of Russia and the expansion of China, together with the rise of regional powers led by non-democratic regimes, provide much-needed support for hybrid regimes on both the domestic and international levels. Over the last several years, Russia has successfully conducted soft diplomacy in the regions that matter most. Such practices are mostly visible in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, while Central Asia has been the focus of similar efforts since the fall of the Soviet Union (Early, 2011). However, no existing studies account for similar activities in countries transitioning towards democracy that feature either close geographic proximity or economic dependence, as observed in the cases of the post-Soviet space.

The thesis presents several limitations to the current literature on external influence, followed by a discussion of Russian involvement in the Western Balkans, aiming to establish and understand the influence and mechanisms deployed in countering democratization. Finally, the paper puts forward a meta-theory for analyzing and evaluating foreign non-democratic interference. The thesis has three main aims: (1) to identify mechanisms that black knights use in countering democratization; (2) to explain their causal effects and modes of operating; and (3) to provide grounds for further research by suggesting mechanisms for countering non-democratic influences.

This thesis adopts the concept of the black knight and applies that concept to Russia, postulating that, as a black knight, Russia hinders democracy in the Western Balkans by stabilizing authoritarian regimes in Serbia and destabilizing regimes in Montenegro. However, the existing literature lacks comprehensive examinations of non-democratic external influences in general and
particularly falls short of properly accounting for the growing Russian presence in the Balkans. So far, most scholars have been predominantly focused on Russian involvement in the Near Abroad and Eastern Europe in general, thereby neglecting an important part of Europe when analyzing foreign meddling and non-democratic interference. Furthermore, the goals of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans appear to be unchanged from a historical perspective, but one can speculate that the means of implementation have radically changed, and Russia's success rate is growing (Basrur, 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, the democratization literature has focused predominantly on internal factors affecting rates and outcomes of transition processes, accounting for external factors and influences mostly in the positive context of democracy promotion (e.g., Ambrosio, 2009; O'Donnell 1973; Levitsky & Way, 2002). In contrast, this thesis seeks to analyze negative democratic activities in the Western Balkans, to determine how Russia externally influences this region such that its activities are directly detrimental to the building of democratic institutions and cause social instability characterized by ethnic tensions and violence. It specifically aims to examine the influence of Russian management, inclusive of its interference in the Balkan and the impacts of those activities on democratization, aiming to develop a more generalizable theory of external anti-democratization influence. Finally, a further aim is to identify and explain various external actions that not only impede democratization but actively seek to support authoritarian regimes or challenge the existing democratic system.

Further research on this topic would require extensive case analysis of other Western Balkan countries and an attempt to identify similar patterns of events and political dynamics observed in the post-Soviet space, and perhaps even in some EU member states that may be relevant points of comparison due to their democratic and constitutional development. Moreover,
several important limitations of the study, such as the limited availability of empirical evidence and the need to test the model further, could be overcome by expanding the research to include more cases and conducting on-site case study research.
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The following section provides a basic overview of the relevant literature and presents the theoretical framework proposed to analyze and understand Russian anti-democratization influences in the Western Balkans. It starts by examining literature that deals predominantly with internal factors that undermine democratization and proceeds to providing an overview of international factors. Finally, the thesis provides a clear-cut framework for studying Russian involvement in the Western Balkan region.

According to Hufbauer et al. (1990), the notion of the black knight was originally devised to define those powers who readily provided economic and military support to countries targeted by U.S. sanctions during the Cold War as a way of offsetting those sanctions’ effects. However, the concept has been recently repurposed to define external actors who guard challengers of democracy or autocracy in particular contexts (Tolstrup, 2015, p. 676). These actors might be regional or great powers, authoritarian or democratic, or international or state organizations. Consequently, international organizations and democratic nations can sometimes act as black knights. Venezuela's support of Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, Iran's interference in the regime change in Iraq and more so in Lebanon, and Chinese military and economic leverage in Djibouti and the Central African Republic are known examples. On the other hand, the long-standing US alliance with Saudi Arabia, the UK's support to the Egyptian élite before the Arab Spring, and French involvement in Gabon provide conclusive evidence of how the foreign policies of democratic
states and international organizations can steer regimes away from democratic rule (Börzel, 2015). However, these trends remain understudied and are not theoretically conceptualized.

Notably, the newer definition of the black knight concept does not imply the existence of authoritarian ideological underpinnings. Rather, it encompasses the possibility that autocracy promotion could be either a country's overt objective or an unintentional outcome of its policies. It is critical to note that support for authoritarian rules and regimes does not necessarily contribute directly to the destabilization of a country. Each country operates according to certain rules, policies, and regulations that particularly apply to its geographical boundaries and context. Support for an authoritarian regime typically stems from the aim to exercise power and dominance – for example, through economic sanctions. Therefore, the destabilization of the country is an indirect consequence of power and dominance. The common denominator for countries lacking democracy is the presence of visible actors who stand to gain from the destabilization of those regions. It is thus difficult to eliminate the possibility of malice and foul play when examining the policies and practices of these regions.

The existing democratization literature is predominantly focused on the domestic factors that facilitate and buttress hybrid but also authoritarian regimes; in other words, those mechanisms prevent a full transformation to liberal democracy (O'Donnell 1973, 1994; Merkel, 1999; Zakaria, 1997). Among other scholars advocating this perspective, Magaloni (2006, 2008) argues that the longevity of hybrid regimes hinges on developed systems of patronage, vote-buying, and the constant redistribution of government aid. The electoral body effectively utilizes such practices despite probable economic and other crises. This is similar to the argument made by Slater (2012), which claims that the survival of such regimes depends on the cohesion of the elites and their perception of an external threat. Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2012) attribute hybrid regime
persistence to the organizational potential that comprises the elites' operational capacity and readiness to back it up. Real-world examples are easily identified: one could posit that both Yeltsin's Russia and Erdogan's Turkey demonstrate the immense propensity of elites to bolster hybrid systems by building schemes of interests, patronage, and nepotism.

While internal factors are often cited to explain the failures of democratization, the existing literature typically treats external factors in the context of democracy promotion (Kopstein & Reilly, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2012). The basic argument highlights the West's propensity to externally bring about positive democracy, whereas Levitsky and Way (2012) present a more comprehensive and nuanced system for studying those relationships. The Levitsky and Way model is usually applied when the argument starts from a critical evaluation of the structural contributions across different regions. Structural approaches are crucial in elucidating interregional differences in external influence, but these approaches struggle to address intraregional cases (Tolstrup, 2013). The model explains that authoritarian regimes are caused by revolutions, and as such, they have a higher survival and success rate compared to other types of authoritarianism. The main reason is that these regimes exist due to the influence of external factors that result in mass mobilization, which are significant efforts that cause the transformation of existing societal structures and social orders in a given country. Furthermore, the model explains that authoritarian regimes exist through the destruction of independent power actors in the state and through the existence of strong ruling parties that promote authoritarian tendencies. In Levitsky and Way model, the starting point for analyzing international factors in the context of democracy promotion, presents a theoretical framework of leverage and linkage that gives primary attention to structures. Meaning that only if the country has a systemic and developed linkage to the West but also certain degree of leverage,
democratization might occur. However, the structural determinants that form the theory’s foundation are not always as fixed as they may appear (Tolstrup, 2013).

The Europeanization literature, with its focus on the influence of the EU on the advance of liberal democracy in new member states, follows a similar pattern (Levitz & Pop-Eleches, 2009; Schmidt, 2005). External factors' negative potential only becomes apparent in the scholarly debate in the wake of rising authoritarianism and the emergence of various hybrid regimes (Kagan 2009; Kramer 2019). One of the most systematic attempts to deal with negative external influence was conducted by Ambrosio (2009), who specifically dealt with Russia's mechanisms for resisting its democratization and that of its neighboring countries. Ambrosio's main argument centers on the premise that Russia and neighboring authoritarian regimes collaborate closely to suppress any calls for democratization, such as in the cases of Belarus and Georgia. Ambrosio's (2009) argument stems from a framework of authoritarian diffusion. He argues that Russia has adopted five strategies to preserve the Kremlin's political power: insulate, bolster, subvert, redefine, and coordinate both domestically and in the post-Soviet space. This theory also asserts that these strategies are the core factors that have undermined democratic principles in Russia. This theoretical model asserts that all relevant mechanisms are adopted specifically to protect Putin's regime; Russia's activity in the post-Soviet space is generally geared toward this objective, resulting in the hindrance of democracy in regions of interest. The concrete effect of these strategies on democracy in the studied countries is outlined later in the chapter.

A similar argument is put forward by Burnell’s (2006) theoretical framework for negative democracy promotion; the argument is operationalized by Jackson (2010), who argues that both deliberate and unintentional external influences orchestrated by Russia play both direct and indirect roles in advancing non-liberal democratic political rule in Central Asia. Furthermore, most
of Russia's recent foreign policy practices have been focused on preventing so-called Color Revolutions from happening within Russia (Koesel & Bunce, 2013).

In short, these arguments emphasize that authoritarian regimes seek to undermine democratic trends abroad to protect their own viability. However, in the Western Balkans, this tendency goes a step further. The countries in question don't pose a direct threat to Putin's regime. Therefore, Russia's primary goal in this region is not self-preservation but the expansion of Russian political influence, the restriction of democratization, and the promotion of authoritarianism is a means to those ends (Ó Beacháin & Polese, 2010). It can be speculated that Putin's move to take Crimea and further destabilize the post-Soviet space were driven by his desire to recapture former Russian territory (Treisman, 2016). The main reason for this ambition is that through authoritarian regimes, it is easy to promote beneficial economic integration and cooperative policies with allies. Therefore, Russia pursues a mechanism meant to protect itself from international scrutiny concerning affairs in the region. Moreover, the presence of multiple authoritarian regimes within the same region paves the way for Russia to exercise dominance and power through the provision of vital needs and services such as energy, thereby making those states dependent on Russia. The core argument for Russia promoting authoritarianism in the Near Abroad is related to the need to protect its own regime from regional democratic tendencies (Ambrosio, 2007).

Political scientists have often cited the overlap between Russia's growing power and prestige with the tendency of post-Soviet nations to emulate its practices and institutions (Cameron & Orenstein, 2013; Obydenkova & Libman, 2012). Roberts and Ziemer (2018) explained the diffusion of the Russian non-democratic framework through high levels of regional dependence on Moscow and geographic proximity. In contrast, Roberts (2015) highlighted a more nuanced two-way form of diffusion, implying that Russia and its neighboring countries might have inspired
Tolstrup (2009) identifies two strands of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space: a policy of managed stability and managed instability. Managed stability policies are predominant in authoritarian regimes where the republic is not primarily concerned with promoting Western integration or the establishment of democratic reforms. In contrast, the policy of managed instability is most likely to be found either in consolidated democracies that are deeply integrated with the West or in countries that are committed to democratic principles and Western integration. The above arguments are relevant only in the context of the Kremlin's involvement with the Near Abroad. Implications for the Balkans, an area of Russia's great concern, have thus far been studied only in general terms.

Building on the previous research by Ambrosio (2010), Tolstrup (2009), and Levitsky and Way (2012), this thesis uses the concept of embedded and defective democracy developed by Merkel (2009) in measuring democratic performance. Among the richness of democratization literature and numerous typologies for measuring democratic performance, embedded democracy and its criteria are nicely fitted to account for transitional democracies like those among the Western Balkan countries. Merkel's (2009) typology includes five distinct areas of political life that constitute democratic governance: electoral regime, political rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and the effective rule of law. This allows a direct comparison of the effects of the Kremlin’s influence on a given democratic performance, establishing causality. This thesis postulates that democratic performance is any change in the dependent variable as a result of the Kremlin's actions. Thus, the dependent variable is consisted of all five dimensions put forward by Merkel (2009). Two case studies are analyzed concerning Russian influence and its subsequent effects to explore these mechanisms. Furthermore, in defining and operationalizing external influence, this thesis borrows the linkage/leverage typology developed by Levitsky and Way.
in their studies on hybrid competitive authoritarian regime and combines that with 
Ambrosio's (2009) mechanism of authoritarian resistance. In this way, Levitsky and Way's 
theoretical assumptions can be expanded upon and tested when applied to democratic promoters' 
counterparts. This theory is advantageous because it combines both internal and external factors 
to explain regime outcomes and democratization, contrary to traditional approaches that are 
exclusively domestic-centered.

The framework is used to assess the relationship between the case studies, categorize and 
group empirical evidence, and later test the impact on the overall democratic performance of a 
given case. This research postulates that, as in the case of Caucasian states (Natalizia, 2019), the 
Kremlin’s strategies in the Western Balkans broadly fall under the three of Ambrosio's (2009) 
strategies: subvert, bolster, and coordinate.

Subvert refers to a set of activities aimed at weakening democratic states such as Georgia 
or Ukraine. In these cases, the focus is on targeting dissimilar political elites or regimes, including 
political stakeholders who might not play a decisive role in mainstream politics.

Bolster is meant to support authoritarian regimes such as that in Belarus. However, this 
strategy is not only limited to regime support but also to support of candidates, political parties, 
and incumbents (Natalizia, 2019).

Coordinate is a strategy of transmitting and reinforcing those norms and practices which 
delegitimize political changes.

This thesis argues that Russia is implementing another strategy, provisionally titled 
ideological dissemination, which seeks to provide narratives meant to increase pro-Russian 
sentiment among the citizens of the Western Balkan. This strategy is relatively low-cost-intensive 
and hinges on the exploitation of historical legacies to promote anti-Western feeling alongside the
impulse to deepen cooperation with Russia. The ideology strategy is easily transported and requires a specific set of social networks combined with a developed political network composed of Russian-affiliated NGOs and media. Thus, the ideology strategy hinges on the premise that there is an already established set of systems that allows it to function.

The following summary identifies activities that are strongly associated with the aforementioned strategies and how they relate to democratic performance. Table 1 provides an overview of Russia's main activities and how they impacted democracy performance as defined by Merkel, demonstrating the role of Russia as a black knight and its direct impact on the performance of democracy.

1. Subvert: election interference, sparking unrest and protests, delegitimizing government;
2. Bolster: providing support to the Russian parties, disinformation campaigns, economic and military aid;
3. Coordinate: media campaigns, know-how, passing the Russian model of rule;
4. Ideological: integrates other strategies to promote pro-Russian feelings and disregard tendencies of people toward democracy.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Knight Interference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subversion using varying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coordination and ideological mobilization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*Hypotheses:*

**H1:** Russia pursues a strategy of fomenting instability within Montenegro by sparking unrest, ethnic tensions, and institutional distrust, resulting in a lowering of democratic performance.

**H2:** Russia employs strategies of stability management in Serbia by supporting an authoritarian regime through subversive acts, thus allowing for the suppression of civil society and opposition parties to lower democratic performance.
3. METHODOLOGY

Based on the preliminary research and formative approach of the larger theory on authoritarian diffusion (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019), the study identifies two distinct methodologies of interference: support to the regime and regime challenges. The most important tool of causal inference in qualitative and case study research – and according to many studies, the only one which allows a systemic analysis of causal mechanisms – is process tracing (Vuković, 2014; Beach & Pederson, 2019). Bennet and Checkel's (2014) process tracing will serve as the analytical tool for this case study research. Essentially, process-tracing involves attempts to identify the intervening casual process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable and the outcome of interest or the dependent variable (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). This method enables a researcher to go beyond a pure description of the causal mechanism by digging deeper into the casual relationships and concretely connecting effects to their causes (Checkel, 2014). The principal aim is to apply the theoretical model to the mentioned cases and develop a framework for studying non-democratic interference. Hence, the overall project's theme remains theory building, which in the philosophical sense carries a particular ontological understanding focused on the word's complexity and context specificity (Beach & Pederson 2013). To analyze the Russian influence in the Balkans, the thesis will examine the experience of two Western Balkan countries, Montenegro and Serbia, and their unique relationships with Russia to shed light on the democratic impact of those relations. These two cases provide good reference points for comparing the effects of external influence due to shared historical, cultural, and political
ties with Russia. Additionally, both countries display developed economic ties, especially Serbia. Not to say that Russia had a significant share of FDI in Montenegro shortly after the 2006 Referendum. The thesis examines Russia's role and its impact on these countries specifically, making it difficult to isolate Russia's actions from the perspective of the countries involved. It is thus possible to control for the factors that may play a role in studying democratic breakdown or autocratic entrenchment. Essentially, other profoundly internal factors remain constant in both countries. The thesis does not claim that Russian involvement is the sole reason for democratic backsliding, but that it is one of the most, if not the most, important factors that prevent democratization.

Both Serbia and Montenegro share similar patterns of historical relations with Russia, having been allies in all European wars fought in Europe from the Ottoman through World War II. Furthermore, strong cultural ties created through Pan-Slavic and religious traditions shared in common have given both countries a strong connection to Russia. Nevertheless, the political developments and social contexts of Serbia and Montenegro diverge significantly, allowing for the theory of different modes of negative external democratic influence to be tested. Both countries are transitioning democracies aspiring to join the EU with comparable levels of democratic development. Despite both countries sharing a similar political past, Montenegro is more advanced in its democratization compared to Serbia (Freedom House, 2014, 2015, 2016), though the difference is not significant. Instead, internal political developments posed a chance for Russian meddling.

The current study starts from the premise that the presence or absence of the outlined factors is not linear but depends on several causal mechanisms. The study accounts for this through an in-depth analysis of decisive political events in both countries and especially focuses on two
pivotal developments: Montenegro's final phase of joining NATO and the consolidation of a new SNS-led regime in Serbia. Even after each country established a workable democratic framework, it quickly returned to authoritarianism. Thus, it is crucial to evaluate unfolding events within each regime to assess their repercussions on democratic performance. The general richness of empirical evidence available and the endless variety of potential events for analysis are important elements that need to be approached carefully. This thesis will attempt to encompass events that share certain features in common, such as elections, referendums, major political developments, and protests, in hopes that this selectivity will allow better controls for each setting and a better contextual understanding of the processes involved. This thesis utilizes primary (strategic documents, institutional websites, memos, reports) and secondary sources (newspapers, scholarly literature) to identify and isolate the modes and mechanisms used to undermine the democratic performance of Montenegro and Serbia.

Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, this thesis follows the logic of comparing the democratic performance of two given states before and after Russian engagement therein, to trace the effects of that influence. This thesis maps Russian engagement with these two Western Balkan countries to examine the chain of events necessary for general political dynamics – acknowledging that those events are not all-encompassing but rather sequences of discrete occurrences in a pattern that serves as an exemplar, allowing one to conclude a more generalizable impact of Russian meddling in foreign countries. The thesis proceeds as follows: (1) analysis and assessment of empirical evidence of Russian interference; (2) test alternative accounts per process tracing; and (3) evaluation of the impact of those events on democratic performance using the criteria of embedded democracy.
The standard democratization literature is mainly focused on the external factors that support transitions towards democracy and fails to explore the external factors that profoundly thwart democratization efforts by either systematically extending the durability of authoritarian regimes or working methodically to destabilize democratic ones. The literature does not fully examine the externalities stemming from non-democratic states and actors, especially in the post-Cold War context. Instead, scholars devote significant attention to democracy promotion and external factors that incentivize the democratization process (e.g., Ambrosio, 2009; Burnell, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2012). At the same time, the roles of Russia and China in countering democratization have received limited scholarly discussion (Bugajski, 2002), with their active involvement either downplayed or not studied extensively. While the influence of China is a subject of growing interest in academia, the role of Russia is partially limited to the post-Soviet space or, at most, the countries of Eastern Europe. Developments in the Balkans in the context of deadlocked democratization and rising instability tend to be neglected. Russian involvement there is continuously orientated towards protecting its geopolitical and economic interests.

Furthermore, the existing literature fails to develop a comprehensive framework for analyzing and studying the activities of hegemonic powers in countering democratization promotion. Therefore, the study offers two important contributions. First, it explores theoretical models for studying non-democratic engagement; and second, it provides an in-depth analysis of the Russian involvement in two countries that fundamentally determine the trajectory of democratization in the Western Balkans and Europe in general. Knowledge of both would significantly enrich the literature and pave the wave for a more systematic approach to these issues.
4. MONTENEGRO: PROLONGED INSTABILITY

The following chapter analyzes Russian interference in Montenegro and the impact of its actions on the democratic performance of that country. Table 2 provides an overview of the main points at which Russia opted to interfere in Montenegrin domestic matters; later in the chapter, their contextualization is provided together with an analysis of the democratic indicators. Events are covered in the analysis chronologically and span from early attempts to prevent the country from joining NATO up to the religious protest and formation of the new government following the 2020 elections. The thesis argues that Russian involvement in Montenegro caused institutional meltdown and the dismantling of constitutional order. Furthermore, by supporting ultra-nationalistic parties, Russia helped further endanger social cohesion and political stability in the country. As a consequence, the country has faced a lowering of democratic performance and prolonged instability.

Table 2 provides a timeline of the instability that has plagued Montenegro resulting from Russian influence. Russian activities in Montenegro mostly targeted the electoral regime, including the 2015 series of anti-NATO protests that served as a prelude to the 2016 parliamentary elections. Russia's influence on the election outcome was achieved through extensive logistical and financial support to opposition parties. In pursuit of broad destabilization, Russian interference in the Montenegrin election process included two coherent phases: bolstering opposition parties and challenging election results. Election fraud and vote-rigging came as nothing new to Montenegrin politics, but the logistical and media support provided by Russia made them appear
increasingly credible. The negative democratic influence of the attempted coup d'état goes well beyond the electoral regime and includes all five elements of electoral performance put forward by Merkel (2009).

Table 2

Map of Instability: Montenegro

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Negative Influence on Democracy Performance (Merkel's Typology)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Anti-NATO demonstrations</td>
<td>subvert/bolster</td>
<td>A B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>Election interference: Parliamentary elections 2016</td>
<td>bolster</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Failed coup d'état</td>
<td>subvert</td>
<td>A B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2021</td>
<td>Multiple disinformation campaigns</td>
<td>bolster</td>
<td>A B C D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Election interference: Parliamentary elections 2020</td>
<td>bolster</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2021</td>
<td>Clerical protests – Litija Movement</td>
<td>bolster/ideological disseminating</td>
<td>A B D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a A= electoral regime; B = political rights; C = civil rights; D = horizontal accountability; E = the effective rule of law

After regaining independence in 2006, political developments in Montenegro were marked by significant tension between the former proponents of independence and their mostly Serbian counterparts, while the political system was dominated by the rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its coalition partners (Morrison, 2009). Furthermore, with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as a junior partner, DPS managed to secure repeated election victories, finally losing in the 2020 Parliamentary elections for the first time in decades (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). The campaign platform of the successful DPS and SDP coalition was structured
around promises of EU and NATO membership mixed with a nation-building mission. For years, the opposition remained fundamentally fragmented into several smaller parties and coalitions that maintained pro-Serbian and occasionally pro-Russian orientations. Only in late 2012 did civic or ethnically natural parties start to emerge, such as *Pozitivna Crna Gora* (Positive Montenegro). Thus, throughout this period, the country seemed constantly on the verge of stronger integration with the West; any leanings towards Serbia and/or Russia were not clearly articulated. Such political division was a constant in political life in Montenegro, creating weak social cohesion and relatively modest prospects for structural reforms.

Relations between Russia and Montenegro span more than 300 years, with especially significant moments including the Ottoman Wars, Montenegro's financial dependence on personal assistance from Russian *tsars* during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a socially traumatizing period after Tito's breakup with Stalin in 1948 (Previšić, 2014). Despite this long and complex relationship, Russian interference in Montenegrin domestic affairs was not readily apparent in Montenegro’s first years of independence (Raspopović, 2005).

Russia began to change its approach dramatically in late 2011, concurrent with the Luksic-led government's intensified discussion of Montenegro's accession to NATO. Russia has a long record of opposing NATO expansion, citing national security reasons and historical circumstances involving the unification of Germany. Pairing the expansion of NATO in the Balkans with its own geopolitical interests makes a solid argument for understanding Russian involvement in Montenegro. In early 2012, Foreign Minister Lavrov outlined the primary goals of Russian policies towards Montenegro and the region as a whole: Russia's foreign policy boiled down to suppressing the ambitions of this new democracy and other countries in the region to join NATO. However, active engagement and a shift from harsh rhetoric to concrete actions would be observed only a
few years later. In the early afternoon of Election Day in 2016, the Special State Prosecutor (SDT) announced that an attempted coup d’état organized by Serbian right-wing extremists and a senior Russian intelligence officer had been thwarted. The coup had been planned for later in the night after the Parliamentary election results became known. It aimed to spark civic unrest through a false-flag operation, overthrow the current government, and even arrest the standing prime minister Đukanović (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2017). General Bratislav Dikić was arrested after information painted him as a leader in a coup attempt, and other military officers were accused of the same. A key witness named Aleksandar Sindjelic, a self-identified Serb nationalist and head of the Night Wolves in Montenegro, testified that Shishmakov, an alleged GRU agent, was one of the plot's main financiers (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017). Vladimir Moiseev, a fellow GRU agent, was identified as a primary co-organizer of the coup (Anderson, 2019).

The attempted coup d’état was the culmination of the years-long process of Russian hostility towards the pro-Western orientation of Montenegrin foreign policy. The prelude to the failed mission included a series of protests led by the opposition Democratic Front (DF), which lasted for several weeks in late 2015 and erupted in violence after the mob attempted to storm the Parliament building (BBC News, 2015). The initial trigger for the protests was widespread corruption and nepotism, social issues noted in many EU reports (e.g., European Commission, 2019a). However, the focus swiftly moved from those social issues to purely political reasons: anti-NATO and anti-Western rhetoric came to dominate the protests completely, exemplified by the presence of the late Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) Bishop Amfilohije, who delivered a speech condemning all who turned against 'the motherland Russia' (Amfilohije, 2015). Russian involvement in those protests was the beginning of its explicit meddling into Montenegrin affairs.
According to the report of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2018), DF is believed to have received millions of dollars in Russian support for its operations. The same report cites that the support was primarily delivered through proxies, either business entities or private persons, with a strong connection to mainstream Russian political parties.

The events around the DF-led protests received a lot of attention from the mainstream Russian media and also its senior officials, who publicly praised leaders of the movement for resisting NATO membership. The same holds for the period after the failed coup d’état when Russian officials and affiliated media openly supported those facing trial and other MPs who had engaged in the total boycott of the Parliament (Tomovic, 2017). Thus, Russian interest and interference in Montenegrin domestic affairs grew considerably from 2014 to early 2017 and was fundamentally focused on opposing Montenegrin accession to NATO and actively undermining structural reforms within the EU accession negotiations. In a clear attempt to discredit the Montenegrin government, Russia sharpened its criticism of corruption in the country, using its established media network to boost stories criminalizing president Djukanovic and the ruling party. Simultaneously, support was extended to most of Montenegro's opposition parties, both through formal cooperation agreements between political parties in the two countries and the provision of funding for the election campaigns (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). However, at that stage, support was not channeled only to the DF but also extended to some junior political parties that emerged in the light of the Montenegrin bid to join NATO. One of those was Right Montenegro (Prava Crna Gora), a right-wing pro-Russian political party physically hosted in the headquarters of the Russian Cultural Center in Podgorica.

The period following the 2016 elections and subsequent controversies around the coup d’état trial served as a fertile ground for escalating political divisions as well as social and ethnic
tensions. Faced with the continuous boycott of the Parliament by opposition MPs who argued that the whole story of the plot to overthrow the government was nothing but a fabrication, the country sunk into a new phase of instability. Arguably, this was more severe than any previous political crisis in Montenegro, given the continuous pressure from opposition parties and the necessity to conclude NATO accession talks. In practical terms, the boycott of the Parliament was paired with an unprecedented media disinformation campaign targeting the special state prosecutor and others involved in the investigation of the coup, ridiculing the court case and spreading conspiracies about its nature. Russian and Serbian media often cited false-flag operations and the attempt of Djukanovic to stage the attack in order to prevent an election loss. Simultaneously, heated debate over NATO membership was nearing a critical phase when it became obvious that the country would conclude the membership action plan and Parliament would ratify the North Atlantic Treaty. That alone became a source of great controversy among many anti-NATO political parties and newly founded NGOs who actively opposed membership and argued for the referendum or even called for neutrality (IN4S, 2017). Opposition to NATO membership was vaguely advocated on the basis of two standpoints, which were not mutually exclusive: (1) neutrality as a strategic choice and (2) historic ties and friendship with Russia.

Many NGOs and media outlets also gained prominence in the public space, especially on social media networks, spreading conspiracies and Russian state narratives about the Balkans.

The period between Montenegro's formal membership in NATO in 2017 until late 2019 could be portrayed as relatively low in terms of Russian meddling in Montenegrin domestic affairs. Nonetheless, the country was still faced with a growing political crisis stemming from the previous parliamentary elections and dealing with the aftermath of the failed coup d'état that halted democratization efforts and the reform agenda. The ruling collation around the DPS unsuccessfully
bid to initiate broader social dialogue over the country's most pressing issues, most notably appointing the vacant spots within the Judiciary and the undertaking rule of law reforms (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2020). Although some opposition MPs ended the boycott, the effective ability of the parliament to perform its constitutional role was severely damaged. That was particularly apparent when filling the posts of senior jurists and prosecutors, appointments that require a qualified 2/3 or 3/5 majority, respectively (Freedom House, 2019). The EU progress report from 2019 stipulates that the boycott also impacted decisions on appointments requiring a qualified majority, such as the appointment of non-judicial members of the Judicial Council (European Commission, 2019b). Deadlock in the judiciary branch had detrimental effects on horizontal accountability and the rule of law in general.

This absence of clearly visible Russian engagement ended in late 2019. The Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Legal Status of Religious Communities (hereafter Religious Act) revived a decade-long dispute over the church issue in Montenegro, much like in Ukraine or North Macedonia. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), with its prominent pro-Russian and Serbian political stance, had remained a dominant Christian denomination in the country and frequently engaged in political debate negating the existence of the Montenegrin nation and defaming the state in general (BBC News, 2019). Both the SOC and the non-autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) claim the historical legacy of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which once ruled the country as a theocracy. The Religious Act was meant to codify church-state relations and, more importantly, transfer ownership of the SOC's cultural and religious sites to the MOC. That was the main trigger for the SOC to organize a nearly yearlong campaign of mass protests (framed as Litija – a holy procession) demanding the nullification of the Act along with other political demands such as the resignation of the incumbent government
(Aljazeera, 2020). This exemplifies the escalation and heightened visibility of Russian involvement in Montenegro during this time, which became critical to the country's efforts to find a solid foundation for undertaking long-desired Rule of Law reforms. Regardless of the Venice Commission's (2019) opinion that the Act harmonized with European legislation and the confirmed international agreements of the UN and the Council of Europe, the protests set the stage for what became the direct involvement of the SOC in 2020 Parliamentary election campaign (OSCE, 2020). Russian involvement remained steady through the debate over the Religious Act but intensified as the protests gained momentum. The newly adopted law was not well received by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which claimed that it sought to meddle in the Church's affairs. Top church members, including bishops, backed these sentiments, demonstrating the disdain that exists even on the spiritual front, given the close ties between the ROC and Kremlin (Freeze, 2017). The Russian Orthodox Church has expressed eagerness to participate in Montenegrin internal affairs. However, that initiative is directed towards advancing Russia's foreign policy, which has led to more political and social instability. The intervention of the ROC demonstrates the lengths to which Russia will go to defend its sovereignty and defend itself and its compatriots from any international scrutiny.

Russian involvement in Montenegro has not been limited to disagreements between the two churches. Russian-affiliated media operating in the Balkans, such as Sputnik and pro-Serbian media outlets, have played a pivotal role in spreading disinformation about events in the country. They spread misinformation about the protests against the Religious Act and framed a broader narrative about Montenegro, seeking to rewrite its history (Svetoka, 2020). Opponents of the Act were featured frequently, essentially presenting a one-sided story and spreading distrust towards the incumbent Montenegrin government.
Those protests and the church controversy became the heart of the 2020 parliamentary election campaigns, which witnessed an unprecedented level of SOC engagement in politics, including brokering the opposition coalitions and actively campaigning against the ruling parties. The OSCE’s (2020) Final Report on the Montenegrin Parliamentary elections notes that the SOC was significantly involved in the campaign and confronted the ruling party through their actions and statements. The historical ties that exist between SOC and the Russian Orthodox Church attest to Russia’s indirect involvement in the election process, despite Russian officials refraining from openly expressing their positions during the campaign. According to the OSCE Report (2020), Moscow could be satisfied with the outcome of the 2020 elections, and its media outlets didn’t hide their amusement. The parties forming the incumbent pro-Western government faced a narrow loss, ending the two-decade-long dominance of DPS in the Montenegrin political system. Many stakeholders welcomed these changes. Initial optimism about the disruption of DPS rule evaporated following the exhausting and occasionally chaotic coalition talks between the former opposition parties. Despite the smooth transition of power, the new so-called government of experts – on a ministerial level comprised of little-known individuals with no clear political background – failed to deliver the promised democratic reforms. Instead, the government generated a series of intelligence and security incidents (Đuranović & Krsmanović, 2022) that brought the country to the verge of ethnic conflict during the attempted enthronement of the SOC bishop in the old Montenegrin royal capital, Cetinje. This represents the greatest and as yet not fully resolved event sparked by Moscow to destabilize the country.

The previous paragraphs outline the flow of Moscow’s activities in Montenegro during the country’s experience of destabilization and political or, more accurately, institutional crisis that deadlocked democratic reforms. The focus has been on the events or chains of events where it was
fairly straightforward to trace Russian influence and put forth causal mechanisms among the
factors that shaped the outcomes of the events mentioned above. It is important to note that the
aspect of Russian soft power is not included in the analysis, as it poses a methodological challenge
at this stage. Following Ambrosio's framework, the thesis argues that Russia's methods in
Montenegro could be broadly categorized as subversion aiming to create an environment
insufficiently stable for the development of democratic political life. Additionally, Montenegro
experienced phases of subversion and bolstering interchangeably, especially after it formally
joined NATO.

The main opposition parties before the 2020 change showed a willingness to accept
Russian aid and even to engage in events that undoubtedly constituted negative influence exerted
by Moscow. This period was followed by the steady decline of Montenegro's democracy
involvement and influence is impossible without a holistic approach to all chains of events
weaponized against the Montenegrin state and democratization.

Given that the coup ultimately failed, its direct negative influence on the performance of
Montenegrin democracy was best apparent in horizontal accountability. The separation of power
and system of governments and the effective functioning of the institution were severely damaged
as a result of the subsequent Parliament opposition boycott and media campaign that discredited
the work of institutions. Opposition-affiliated media spread rumors labelling events around the
coup fabrications emanating from the incumbent party. Institutional deadlock and growing distrust
in the judicial and executive branches caused social and political tensions to reach new highs.
Differentiating between the immediate negative influences on democracy and its long-term effects
best illustrates the chain of disinformation campaigns after the 2016 parliamentary elections that damaged basic trust in the political system.

However, the most severe negative impact on the Montenegrin democracy came with the 2020 religious protests. Of the five elements of Merkel’s (2009) typology, Russian involvement equally targeted electoral regime and horizontal accountability. As in the 2016 elections, Russia used religious protests to empower opposition parties and, more importantly, allowed the SOC to compete in the upcoming Parliamentary elections. In terms of political processes, this created a unique precedent with a lasting negative impact on the performance of Montenegrin democracy. Essentially, Russia decided to support the Orthodox Church to become a leading political actor in Montenegrin politics, acting essentially as a political party. These circumstances significantly changed the political dynamics of the country and had a detrimental effect on the electoral process. Rising social tensions around the church issue and long-term institutional deadlock caused political instability that severely impacted EU accession talks and associated reforms. Thus, Russia's instability management in Montenegro reached a new high in late 2019, reducing effective democratic performance and limiting the country's ability to undertake a wide range of reforms.

As presented in Table 2, Russia's activities followed a trajectory of subversion and bolstering in a sequence that would ensure the political system remained frozen and unable to respond effectively to social stress.

It is important to differentiate between activities that have a reoccurring pattern, such as the broadly categorized disinformation campaigns, and those that occur singly. In the case of Montenegro, the former proves to have had a far more detrimental effect on democratization efforts. Based on Merkel's (2009) typology, the thesis shows that the electoral process was the
most affected element, followed by horizontal accountability. These areas are identified as the most vulnerable to Russian meddling and produce the greatest risk to the country's stability.

Even though the thesis deals predominantly with the events around the 2016 parliamentary elections, similar patterns were observed even in subsequent local elections in 2017 and 2018, leading to the 2020 elections. Relying on the flows of the electoral process, Russia successfully exploited unsettled nation-building and ethnic tensions to develop a set of strategies that would produce lasting instability. Without Russia's clear subversion and bolstering of opposition parties, the country would not have experienced such high levels of ethnic tension and chaos in the political system. Relative success in detecting room for meddling closely resembles the strategy that Russia utilized in its 'Near Abroad' except that Montenegro remains unique in terms of the challenged regime (being pro-Western) and scope of resources mobilized to prevent the country's accession to NATO. Russia has no economic leverage over Montenegro, so its influence was mainly exercised through pro-Serbian parties and SOC. The culmination of the Russian presence was a dysfunctional government formed after the 2020 elections.
5. SERBIA: FOSTERING AUTHORITARIANISM

The following section discusses the Kremlin's interference in Serbian domestic affairs and how those actions affect democratic performance in the country, as summarized in Table 3. Russia's actions negatively impacted most of the areas from the Merkel's typology. However, horizontal accountability and civil rights proved to be the most vulnerable. Furthermore, the underlying argument is that Russia fostered and provided support to the Serbian regime in its democratic backsliding. In the beginning, a historical overview of the actions and impact is assessed.

Tomislav Nikolic’s unexpectedly narrow victory in the 2012 Serbian presidential runoff elections paved the way for the establishment of a regime led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Aleksandar Vucic, who took control first over the party and then the whole country, serving as a prime minister and currently in his second term as President (OSCE, 2012; Srpska Naredna Stranka, 2022). Vucic's political win marked an unprecedented U-turn from the convicted war criminal and secretary of the Serb Radical Party (SRS), Vojislav Seselj, to a pragmatic moderate politician who holds a strong grip on power over the Serbian state. Despite the complex historical and cultural ties between the two countries, the growing Russian presence in Serbia correlates to the consolidation of the newly formed regime.
Table 3

Map of Instability: Serbia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Negative Influence on Democracy Performance a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999-present</td>
<td>Support over Kosovo issue</td>
<td>Bolster, Ideological dissemination</td>
<td>Indirect (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Energy Assistance</td>
<td>Bolster</td>
<td>Indirect (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-present</td>
<td>Military Linkage</td>
<td>Bolster</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2020</td>
<td>Media Support</td>
<td>Bolster, Coordinate</td>
<td>B, D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Dispersal of demonstrations</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-present</td>
<td>Intelligence Cooperation</td>
<td>Bolster</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>International Legitimizing Elections</td>
<td>Bolster, Coordinate, Ideologization</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Election Support</td>
<td>Bolster</td>
<td>A, B, C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a A= electoral regime; B = political rights; C = civil rights; D = horizontal accountability; E = the effective rule of law

This section argues that in Serbia, Russia utilizes strategies that stabilize the regime through various means but predominantly through coordination, bolstering, and employing ideological mobilization. As stated earlier, Russian-Serbian relations follow a unique trajectory compared to those of other European nations. Layers of relations between the two countries stem from the historical context of the fight against the Ottomans and the World Wars of the 20th century (MacKenzie, 1996). Finally, during the Yugoslav Wars, Russia hesitantly acted as a protector of Serbian interests and, more noticeably, as the patron of the warmongering Milosevic's regime (Brudenell, 1999). According to Antonenko (2007), closeness is further ingrained in the self-
determination right of the people of Kosovo, Russia acting as the main advocate against its independence on the world stage and in the UN Security Council. Finally, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has demonstrated the ongoing influence of Russia over the Serbian government, which remains one of the only European states not to impose sanctions (WestObserver, 2022).

Tracing Russian influence in Serbia also includes deep multilayer linkage spanning from the Orthodox Church, the intelligence community, and various forms of cultural and social connections. The overall nature of the relations has a peculiar form as it is perceived through the lenses of pan-Slavism and Orthodox unity. Political developments in Serbia since the establishment of the SNS-led regime have been marked by the persistent erosion of democracy domestically and the generation of broader instability in the Western Balkans (Freedom House, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that Russia is the major driver behind these political tendencies. The mere fact that Putin has personally visited Belgrade twice since SNS came to power (Bechev, 2019; Robinson, 2014) symbolizes the importance of Serbia for Russia's new foreign policy goals and ambitions.

The favourable price of Russian gas and oils exported to Serbia is a key success of President Vucic's domestic policy, bringing political and economic benefits and contributing funds to the large infrastructure projects that serve as the regime's most promoted policy. The gas price arrangement was brokered during Vucic's last visit to Putin in late 2021, just half a year prior to the general elections of April 2022 (Georgievski, 2021). However, that is only one piece of the larger picture of the energetic Russian presence in Serbia. The story dates to 2008, when Gazprom bought a 51 per cent stake in NIS (a Serbian state-owned oil company), and the beginning of large-scale economic and social activities in the country founded by the Russian oil company (Nelaeva & Semenov, 2016). The purchase of NIS was supposed to be a part of a larger project – the
construction of the South Stream that would expand Russian gas export dominance and provide further political leverage.

Russian support and assistance to Serbia are not limited to the energy sector. Military cooperation gradually grew and, as in the case of gas prices, served as a perfect campaign opportunity for President Vucic. In 2016, the two governments signed a deal gifting Serbia at least six Mig29 aircraft, 30 tanks, and other military hardware (Kaplij, 2016). Pro-government media, especially tabloids, praised the deal as another great success of the incumbent government and a celebration of historical friendship. Indeed, that was the biggest military deal Serbia had witnessed in decades and provided a significant boost for the Serbian military, still exhausted from the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s and the 1999 NATO bombing campaign. Increasing military and energy support from Russia allowed Vucic's regime to expand its influence domestically by rerouting funds to the popular infrastructure projects and cultivating an image of Serbia as a regional military power. At the same time, the regime succeeded in developing military cooperation with China, apparently assisted by Russian counterparts. Russian involvement was even more evident in the media sphere. In 2017, Sputnik News launched its service in Serbian, targeting a broader audience in the Balkans. Apart from broadcasting official Russian propaganda, the platform was active in spreading narratives favourable to the incumbent regime (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018).

In late 2018, protests against the rise of political violence and the authoritarian rule of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic broke out across the country, the protestors demanding free and fair elections regime (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018). Sputnik and other media outlets indirectly controlled and subsidized by the Russians proved to be useful in spreading disinformation and consequently absorbing the negative impact of rising opposition activism. Most
notably, Sputnik featured an article emphasizing the violence of the protests and protestors and was consistent in spreading that narrative.

Putin's visit to Belgrade in January 2019 was met with protests, but nevertheless, thousands gathered during his tour of Saint Sava Cathedral to express their support for both Russia and Putin (Zuvela & Vasovic, 2019). Putin's appearance before the cheering crowd was a clear message of support for the regime shaken by recent protests. Following months of protests that gradually lost their momentum, the 2020 parliamentary elections were boycotted by the major opposition parties, leading to a virtually one-party Parliament and sparking criticism from relevant international organizations (i.e., European Commission, 2020; Freedom House, 2020; OSCE, 2022). In contrast, according to the Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (2020), the Russian-backed CIS election observation mission noted full compliance with international democratic standards. On the international stage, this was another example of Russia's assistance to the regime by mimicking the work of international organizations to provide legitimacy. This combination of military, media, and political support was a clear message from the Kremlin to the region and, more importantly, a signal to the West that Russia counts Serbia as its most important ally in the region.

Cooperation between Russia and Serbia has also intensified in the cultural and social spheres. As of 2015, Russia has operated several NGO-style organizations to promote cultural and scientific cooperation with Serbia, most of which emphasize a shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage (Nelaeva & Semenov, 2016). Russia uses these international organizations to exercise dominance in the region by providing support to institutions that favour Russia's interests. This reinforces the development of an authoritarian government by causing the country to be highly dependent on Russia. Furthermore, these organizations have facilitated soft power initiatives resulting in the
inculcation of Russia's attitudes in Serbia, leading people to believe that Russia's interests in the country are consistent with Serbia's. One such organization that maintains formal nongovernmental status in Serbia is the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre, headquartered in Niš, which was formed in 2012 and tasked with providing humanitarian aid and fast response in crisis situations. The centre drew attention when Russia demanded diplomatic status for its personnel, raising suspicions about the center’s real purpose, which is vaguely labeled as humanitarian and whose activities are not clearly known to a greater audience (Euronews, 2017). Intelligence linkages between the two countries follow the pattern observed in the case of Belarus (Tolstrup, 2009). The media reported that Serbia allegedly handed over taped conversations of Russian opposition leaders during their stay in Belgrade, resulting in their detention and possible torture. That example of cooperation between the two intelligence agencies illustrates the degree of their interconnection and possibly the influence that one exercises over its junior counterpart.

A similar reverse action was observed amid the failed coup d’état in Montenegro. At that time, Nikolai Patrushev rushed to Belgrade to smooth ruffled feathers and allegedly to spirit some intelligence officers back to Moscow (Galeotti, 2018). Russia's behavior towards Belgrade remained relatively stable in the early part of the regime's consolidation but has become more glaring in the last several years. The change resulted from Russian activities in Serbia’s neighboring countries, mainly Bosnia and Montenegro. The increasing political crisis in the region pushed Russia to engage more with Belgrade officials even over the Kosovo issue, which had become a topic of secondary importance to the majority of the Serbian public. The latest crisis involving a ban on Serbian license plates in Kosovo caused Serbs to block the border between the two countries. Among the first to visit the Serbs blocking the roads was the Russian ambassador, who again expressed warm support for their cause (Komarčević & Živanović, 2021). That was just
one of many episodes featuring overt public support for Vucic's regime and the Serbian stance toward Kosovo's independence. Russia’s main justification is that the declaration of Kosovo's independence would violate international law and damage existing security systems. Furthermore, Kosovan autonomy could have an explosive impact on Serbia's politics, thus diminishing Serbia's sovereignty in the region.

The single most important source of support for the regime comes from the Orthodox Church. The ROC considers Kosovo's independence to be intolerable and expresses strong condemnation for the idea, typically on the basis of shared historical culture (Brunnstrom, 2007). The Orthodox Church and Russia have long been closely allied; evidence of this lasting connection is evident in the fundamental laws of the land. The Kremlin has developed a considerable reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft power mechanism in the country's foreign policy. The Church promotes the country's foreign policy through exporting traditional values to different parts of the world, reinforcing certain vital narratives of the Kremlin, and establishing international outreach and advocacy programs. The Church serves as a convenient way to convey any message that public diplomacy deems too aggressive. Given the importance of the Church in the social life of ordinary Serbs, the power of that communication remains a crucial factor in understanding the influence exercised over Serbia. The support of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the regime in Belgrade plays a pivotal role in absorbing ultra-nationalistic feelings and guiding public opinion over issues with an ethnic bent. Nationalism is a critical facet in Serbia since it has promoted Serbs' political and cultural unity as a community. The principles of nationalism advocated for merging the goals of Serbia with those of Yugoslavia, which led to the creation of a centralized state that approved of the unity of all Serbs while fighting against decentralization measures. Given the importance of the unresolved national question of Serbs in neighboring countries and the status of
Kosovo, far-nationalist parties and groups are crucial for a legitimacy regime over those topics. Peculiarly in the case of Serbia, the far right is plainly of a pro-Russian orientation, which allows for Kremlin influence over their actions and political moves. One example is the support of the late Patriarch Irinej for Vucic (Komarčević & Živanović, 2021) even in those instances when Belgrade indicated a willingness to negotiate with Kosovo. The stabilizing force of the SOC over such moves is best understood in the context of occasional widespread violence, such as in 2008 when the US Embassy was stormed and set on fire (Tzortzi, 2008). The previous democratic regime faced issues any time Kosovo became a center of public debate. Through the Church, Russia not only supports Serbia's international position but helps to contain far right extremists, thus preventing potential instability. Furthermore, Russian influence in Serbia has a long-lasting nature that is not bound to specific events. Instead, Russian linkage factors provide grounds for influence on democratic performance.

The strategic decision to support Vucic's regime did not come without other considerations. Russia is very active in promoting and bolstering right-wing Serbian opposition parties. Recent years have seen the rise of movements and parties that dominate the extreme right-wing space in the opposition. The existence of these parties is a straightforward way for Russia to assert its influence in the Balkan region with the primary concern of slowing down the region’s integration process into Euro-Atlantic institutions, ultimately aiming to tarnish the image of the Western-style democracy present in South-Eastern Europe. Therefore, by offering support to right-wing groups, Russia aims to prolong political instability in the Western Balkans and thereby further undermining efforts to integrate into the European Union and NATO. Russia's efforts to promote democratic backsliding in Western Balkan causes political polarization that inhibits democratization. The
The main reason for promoting conflict is that the Western Balkan region holds significant cultural, religious, and historical links integral to Russia.

Furthermore, the strategic location of the region helps to advance Russia's interests for global dominance and influence. Older parties such as the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) have a proven track record of promoting pro-Russian positions (Komarčević & Živanović, 2021). At the same time, organizations like Zavetnici, Dveri, or Srbska Cast (Komarčević & Živanović, 2021) emerged on the political stage as minor actors but are frequently featured in the pro-government media advocating a pro-Russian foreign policy for Serbia. Most of them receive funding and logistical support from Russian cultural organizations. There are many reasons for this Russian strategy; key among those is the desire to broaden the scope of relevant pro-Russian stakeholders and equally to assist President Vucic in painting a pluralistic image of Serbian society. The latter is particularly important given the dubious outcome of the 2020 election.

Russia heavily relies on ideological means of spreading its influence and undermining Serbian democracy. That is most apparent when it comes to the justification of long-term Russian support for the Serbian cause in the Kosovo conflict. The ideological strategy for influencing Serbian politics and supporting Vucic's regime becomes a structural element of every bilateral activity or action. Such a position paves the way for more influence in different layers of society and creates even more room for the erosion of democratic performance. It is worth noting that Russian involvement has a long-term orientation and is far less limited to specific actions than is the case when the goal is to challenge a regime. Thus, rather than pursue a strategy of leading, in the case of Serbia, Russia has replaced that with a coherent set of ideological components. The ideological strategy is applied together with bolstering, and the two achieve results only if applied together.
The thesis outlined several of the most prominent instances in which Russian involvement become crucial for consolidating Vucic's regime and consequently led to a decrease in democratic performance. Given the rapid change of the regime's nature, Russian assistance was predominantly beneficial in the election period, thus making electoral regime the most vulnerable area of Merkel’s 2009) typology by providing unfair advantage and narrowing the electoral field. The period of regime consolidation was marked by a greater concentration of power and limiting of horizontal accountability. Russian military and economic assistance prove to be not just great campaign boosts but also important tools for restructuring power relations in Serbian society. A gradual weakening of institutions left a power vacuum that was eagerly filled by the president himself. Frequent visits by Russian officials and Putin personally became a source of significant legitimacy in the eyes of the Serbian public, given the ideological linkage between the two countries. Thus, it is important to differentiate between continuous policies that provide a foundation for the short-term or single actions that bolster. In the case of Serbia, the logic of Russian involvement has a two-step mode: ideological framing followed by bolstering. Despite the temptation to engage in further discussion of such behavior, the thesis is limited to their impact on the overall democratic performance.

Intelligence sharing was at the heart of the assistance Russia provided to the regime in Belgrade in an attempt to prevent riots and isolate those structures that threatened the regime's stability. The Kremlin's involvement with Serbia intensified with the Kosovo crisis and ongoing protests in Montenegro. Altogether, Moscow was eager to provide more resources to stabilize a regime that considerably impacted the decline of civil rights using Serbia as a Russian proxy to achieve political goals in the Western Balkans broadly.
Further negative impact was observed in the media sphere. Russian-affiliated media outlets frequently engaged in negative smear campaigns against opposition leaders and also NGO activists, creating a perfect foundation for Vucic to stand elections. Bolstering the regime became even more apparent as Western pressure on Serbia grew to resume dialogue with officials in Pristina over the status of Kosovo. Given the sensitivity of that topic for Serbian society, Russia proved to be again a major stabilizing domestic factor by granting economic concessions and lobbying against the admission of Kosovo in international organizations. In the context of this topic, such activities succeeded in remedying the negative impact of the Kosovo issue to the regime.

Nevertheless, Russia demonstrated a certain level of caution when strengthening Vucic's political legitimacy. Bolstering other relatively minor political stakeholders proved to be even more detrimental to the development of a general democratic climate in the country. This is best illustrated by the results of the 2022 elections, when several right-wing parties and coalitions won seats in Parliament for the first time. They campaigned heavily on pro-Russian and anti-Western platforms, arguing against imposing sanctions on Russia in the light of invasion of Ukraine and openly opposing accession to the EU. Such an environment had an indirect effect on democratic development, as it forged an atmosphere of radicalization and polarization. However, none of these events are as important as the passive steps that ensure the ongoing stability of Vucic's regime and, more importantly, prevent the formation of a credible and potent opposition. It is hard to establish a causal link between the two, since monopolization of power in the hands of Vucic personally greatly contributes to the regime's consolidation. However, without Russia's support and stabilization management, establishing a monopoly on power would be significantly challenging, especially given Serbia's relations with the EU and pre-2012 democratic tradition.
Russia is not unknown to the Balkans, but its growing influence remains a concerning element for those nations seeking democratic reforms and accession to the EU and NATO. That becomes quite visible in the cases of Serbia and Montenegro since it is matched with the rise of authoritarianism as in the case of Serbia, and the decline of democratic performance in Montenegro. Furthermore, the last decade of Russia's involvement in the Balkans has shown that external influence on democratization is an important part of decoding the reasons behind the deadlocking of the process and democratization backsliding. This thesis examined the experience of Montenegro and Serbia and demonstrated the effects of Russian activities in each. The overall effects of those actions remain detrimental to democratization performance, causing instability and consolidation of authoritarianism, respectively.

Furthermore, by utilizing different strategies, Russia managed to halt and seriously undermine democratization efforts. Going through the stages of the external influence, two strategies were applied depending on the state of the political system and the incumbent regime. Montenegro witnessed growing institutional and political pressure mixed with the rise of political violence and street riots, a strategy targeting the pro-Western regime and destabilizing the country in the long run, while Serbia experienced a reverse trend. The incumbent authoritarian regime in Serbia benefited from Russia’s stabilization actions, which helped the regime to consolidate and sustain its grip on power. Consequently, the country's democratic performance has steadily declined to become a competitive authoritarian state in fewer than 10 years. Overall, Russia’s
political involvement was not the sole reason for these countries' decline in democratic performance, but it was a major cause and enabler that will continue to undermine democratization efforts. However, Russian involvements in the Balkans is not always proactive. It significantly hinges on the policies conducted by EU and US. In that constellation of powers, Russia often adjusts the intensity of its actions, but its actual strategies remain relatively stable. Russia always tightens its actions when the EU and US display a lack of interest for the region or strategically withdraw, as with the US during Obama's first term in office. This pattern is worth noting as the main promoters of democracy in the region were in fact the EU through the enlargement policy and the US through what?. Based on the empirical evidence and its effects on democratic performance, Russia mostly sought to target electoral processes specifically and overall separation of power as the most vulnerable to external pressure. Furthermore, both cases demonstrate that internal actors were easily instrumentalized to advocate Russian interests, thus serving as the main focal point for exercising foreign meddling. In fact, the composition of internal factors and their unique linkage, mostly ideologically driven, are crucial for understanding the success of Russian efforts to counter democratization. At the same time, the effects of EU and US efforts to promote democratization in contrast with Russian efforts remain a point requiring further studies. Given the limitations of the thesis, further study is needed to grasp the extent of these two competing forces. However, there is no doubt that so far Russia has been successful in countering democratization and even pushing both Montenegro and Serbia away from the prospect of catching up with the other Central and Eastern European countries that share a similar communist past.

Nonetheless, the growing engagement of Russia in the Balkans may have positive unintended consequences, stimulating a revival of Western interest for the region that can catalyze the democratization process. In the current international arena, the emerging model of relations
between Russia and the Balkans hinges on the assumption that the Kremlin would utilize significant resources to strategically undermine the region's democratic tendencies. Different than in the post-Soviet space, Russia is prone to use ideological tools more heavily in order to justify and conceptualize its actions. Relying on the history of Pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy has proven a successful strategy in penetrating Balkan societies. Recent events caused by the invasion of Ukraine are likely to have a strong impact on the activities of Russia in the Balkans, but the main thrust of activities remains constant.

Examining the concept of the black knight concerning Russia's interference in these Balkan countries demonstrates that there is a legitimate cause of concern as there is evidence of interference in the democratic processes. These countries have been targeted for attacks, inclusive of cyber-attacks, to gather information that can be used to destabilize their democratic processes. Russia stands to gain from this, making it easy to move into these territories to reclaim lands believed to be Russian. The Balkan backslide into ethnic clashes and similar tensions are fueled by external agents whose motives are clear. The thesis shows that Russia indeed utilizes similar mechanisms in stabilizing authoritarian regimes as once employed by Western countries in promoting democracy. However, the mechanisms employed in destabilizing regimes follow a different logic and are predominantly focused on bolstering and coordinating opposition structures and undermining trust into the democratic process. It is not a surprise that Russian involvement in the Western Balkans has a determinantal effects on democracy there. However, so far, it is not clear which specific areas of the democratic process are most attacked and consequently most vulnerable to foreign meddling.


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