

Russia's Strategy in Central and South- Eastern Europe: Implications for Ukraine

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2026

Summary

For Russia, the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe remain strategically important for conducting destabilizing activities against the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and for returning the Russian Federation (RF) to the foreign policy orbit of these states through reinforcing gas and oil dependency and promoting Russophilia.

Moscow demonstrates flexibility in its approaches and tactics, departing where necessary from traditional methods of promoting ideas of Christian (Orthodox) spiritual affinity and spiritual values, as well as deep historical and cultural ties. Depending on the country and its internal and external conditions, specific tools and mechanisms of influence and interference are selected. Serbia, Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)), Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary continue to serve as "Trojan horses", although Moscow currently faces a degree of uncertainty with regard to Sofia and Budapest.

The RF, through Rossotrudnichestvo and a number of Russian organizations operating across the region, finances media outlets and social networks, political elites, journalists, and opinion leaders. This demonstrates that soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy are among Moscow's key instruments. In this way, the RF seeks to rapidly and lastingly restore affection for the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir) and to cultivate Russophilia.

This policy brief also focuses on hybrid influences and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as conduits of the "Russian world" and instruments for advancing Moscow's interests in order to deepen and expand destabilization.

Situation Assessment

Russia continues to use Central and South-Eastern Europe as a springboard for advancing its own worldview and its interpretation of global and regional events, as well as for penetrating the EU and European institutions. In this context, a substantial strengthening of soft power has taken place, alongside an expansion and deepening of propaganda, disinformation, and hybrid operations.

Serbia, Republika Srpska (an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)), Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia remain the traditionally supportive countries of Kremlin foreign policy activities. At the same time, it can be observed that – owing to the rise of pro-Russian forces, domestic economic, political, and social difficulties, and the rehabilitation of Vladimir Putin and Russia as a result of the actions of the United States (US) administration – Russophilia is growing in other countries as well: Slovenia and Croatia (where influence is channelled through Italy, Austria, and Germany), Greece, and the Czech Republic. Compared to previous years, the trend of actively drawing Serbs in partially recognized Kosovo, Montenegro, and Croatia into the Kremlin's orbit continues. Albania, North Macedonia, Poland, and Romania have also not escaped Russian influence, where hybrid operations function in a targeted manner, exploiting longstanding domestic problems.

This situation is, on the one hand, not critical for Ukraine, as the vast majority of countries in the region maintain a pro-Ukrainian stance and continue to support our state. This applies to Serbia as well, which – despite close contacts with the RF – seeks to balance its relations with Ukraine, as evidenced by the resumption of the Serbian Embassy's operations in Kyiv in spring 2025. On the other hand, Moscow aggressively exploits for its own ends the internal problems of these countries – Euroscepticism (particularly in the Western Balkans, Slovakia, and Hungary, with Bulgaria under the government of Rumen Radev most likely to join them); dissatisfaction with Alliance demands to increase defence spending, which fuels the growing popularity of radical left- and right-wing movements and gives rise to calls for a review of countries' NATO membership (Slovenia); and the stoking of interethnic tensions and rising intolerance toward migrants – both labour and forced.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, none of the states in the region has severed relations with Moscow. These ties are limited and sporadic, yet the RF's presence in the economic, political, cultural, social, scientific-academic, and educational spheres persists – and in some countries is growing. In this, Russia relies on Serbia, Republika Srpska (BiH), Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and, to a degree, Greece).

Russian Presence in Countries: General Analysis

Albania

Political landscape. The political situation has recently taken on a tense character between the main parties – the Socialists, led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, and the Democrats, led by former Albanian President Sali Berisha. Political instability is accompanied by widespread public protests. The government of Edi Rama faces criticism over corruption and concentration of power. The country is a NATO member and seeks to integrate into the EU. In its foreign policy, it is oriented toward the EU and the US. "The Albanian authorities support Ukraine and pursue a policy of isolating Russia". As of 2025, the country is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".¹

Economic aspects. An outflow of labour to EU countries is observed, which in turn contributes to an inflow of remittances from workers abroad. The European Union is the country's primary economic

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partner. Albania's geographical location makes it a convenient logistics hub, opening up good opportunities for Ukrainian businesses.²

Society. A significant share of the population supports Albania's accession to the EU. Citizens are predominantly anti-Russian in their attitudes. Strong support for Ukraine is recorded.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. Albania has no Russian state institutions promoting the idea of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir). However, a number of civic organizations are active. For example, the Russian-Albanian Friendship Society and a community of Russian compatriots operate in the country. In June 2025, Russia's Ambassador to the Republic of Albania, A. Zaitsev, presented Rosstrudnichestvo's "For Friendship and Cooperation" honorary distinctions to Aleksander Gjurbavija – head of the Albanian branch of the International Russophile Movement – and to Oleg Arapi, a conductor and Honoured Artist of Albania.

Bulgaria

Political landscape. The political situation is unstable and highly turbulent – with persistent difficulties in forming fragile governments, a brittle parliamentary coalition, and political forces incapable of compromise. Accordingly, no reset of the political system has taken place, and "old" faces remain in power.

Former President Rumen Radev, founder of the Progressive Bulgaria party, which won the snap parliamentary elections in April 2026, takes an anti-Ukrainian stance in his political activities. He denies the RF's aggression against Ukraine, used his presidential powers to block decisions on Bulgaria providing military assistance to Ukraine, and in 2026 criticized the signed ten-year security agreement between Bulgaria and Ukraine. The ultranationalist Revival party, led by Kostadin Kostadinov, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (leader Boyko Borisov) can quite reasonably be considered pro-Russian and Eurosceptic. As of 2025, Bulgaria was on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. The country is dependent on the RF for technical support (equipment) for the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), which generates over 30–40% of the country's electricity. Lukoil Bulgaria (Lukoil Neftochim Burgas) – a subsidiary of the Russian oil and gas giant – is the largest oil refinery in the Balkans, supplying Bulgaria's domestic market. To avoid a fuel crisis, sanctions against the company were deferred by the United Kingdom (UK) until August 2026. Bulgaria has a fairly sizeable defence industry. In 2024, for instance, the country exported weapons worth USD 76.5 million, placing Bulgaria 9th (out of 74 countries in total) among the world's arms-exporting nations. According to The Observatory of Economic Complexity, the primary recipients of Bulgarian products in 2024 were: Poland (USD 40.7 million), Romania (USD 20 million), Slovakia (USD 9.46 million), Indonesia (USD 4.2 million), and Côte d'Ivoire (USD 1.93 million). At the time of publication, 2025 data were not available.³

Society. Public opinion on the RF's aggression against Ukraine is deeply polarized. The absence of a decommunization process fosters nostalgia for the socialist past, creating fertile ground for direct and hybrid RF influence.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. At Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", the Faculty of Slavic Philology hosts two departments – the Department of Russian Language and the Department of Russian Literature. No Russian Center of Russkiy Mir Foundation is present. However, "Russkiy Mir Cabinets" – a targeted programme of the Russkiy Mir Foundation – operate in: Varna, at Al.S. Pushkin Secondary School; the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo; Sofia, at the Russian choreographic school "Galina Ulanova", "St. Kliment Ohridski" Secondary school, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", and the University of National and World Economy; and Stara Zagora, at the "Maxim Gorky" Secondary school.

The "Russian House in Bulgaria" social media accounts are active – this is the informal name for the Russian Cultural and Information Center.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political landscape. Given the country's complex constitutional structure, the political situation appears unstable and state institutions weak. The country aspires to join the EU and NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) consists of two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska; a separate administrative unit, the Brčko District, has been established under the joint jurisdiction of both entities.

Under the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), oversight for the preservation of peace in the country is exercised by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose mandate includes the authority to intervene in the country's internal affairs when these threaten the functioning of institutions, governance, or risk provoking interethnic disputes. The mandate of the High Representative is granted by the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

The principal source of instability is the entity of Republika Srpska and its former president Milorad Dodik. For many years he has been advancing the idea of Republika Srpska's secession from BiH, maintaining positions of active Russophilia, Euroscepticism, and the assertion and expansion of the Serbian world, while also rejecting the authority and activities of the High Representative. As of 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. The country has an underdeveloped economy and is dependent on external investment. An Intergovernmental Russia–Bosnia and Herzegovina Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation exists. In September 2025, a plenary session of the commission was held. The co-chairs on the Russian and Bosnian sides were the head of Rosstandart, Anton Shalaev, and the Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Staša Košarac. Discussions covered the current state and prospects for cooperation in key sectors: energy, agriculture, standardization, metrology, environmental protection, culture, science, and higher education.

Society. Politicians representing the three main ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats – hold differing views on the country's future. Three distinct versions of the narrative surrounding the 1992–1995 war exist within the country. Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks envision the country's future as a unified whole, while the political leadership of Bosnian Croats openly and implicitly asserts that Croats occupy an unjust position within BiH and promotes the idea of expanding their powers within the country's state and political institutions. In recent years, the narrative of the need to restructure BiH into a country with three entities – Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian – has resurfaced. This is actively exploited by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who advocates secession from BiH and unification with Serbia. Notably, Belgrade does not respond to such statements by Dodik: Belgrade supports Dodik personally, but not his statements on unification.

In light of Serbian separatism, Bosniaks harbour concerns that some Croatian figures may also begin separatist actions. Bosniaks and Croats support Ukraine and condemn Russia's aggression against our state; Serbs, by contrast, have expressed opposition to the imposition of sanctions against the RF. This proved an obstacle in 2022 to BiH adopting a common position condemning Russia's aggression, joining EU sanctions against the RF, and closing its airspace to Russian aircraft. The situation remains unchanged.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. The "Russian-Serbian Club 'Fraternal Ties'" is active. In Banja Luka, the capital of Republika Srpska, the Russkiy Mir Foundation implements an international cultural project. Also operating there is the "Russian Center" of the National and University Library of the Republika Srpska. Also in Banja Luka, a Section of Russian-language fiction and educational

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literature has been opened at Pan-European University "Apeiron", while in Modriča a Section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature operates at the Serbian Cultural Center of Modriča. The "EngRus" Center for Russian Language and Literature has been opened in Kiseljak municipality, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. BiH also hosts a representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo (headed by Alexander Borisov).

Republika Srpska serves as one of the centers and springboards for Russia's hybrid influence in the Balkans. The entity develops independent economic, political, cultural, educational, academic, and trade ties with the RF and various Russian regions, universities, companies, and firms. In addition, the universities in Banja Luka and East Sarajevo host various events involving Russian academics, journalists, businesspeople, and diplomatic figures. It is worth noting separately that these institutions hold events involving faculty and researchers from temporarily occupied Mariupol and members of the Russian-Balkan Center for Business Cooperation in temporarily occupied Donetsk ("Donetsk People's Republic"), which operates under "A. Kuindzhi Mariupol State University". Republika Srpska also serves as one of the bases of activity of Russian military blogger and analyst Mikhail Zvinchuk.

Greece

Political landscape. The political situation in Greece is fairly stable. The ruling New Democracy party, led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, holds pro-European views. The opposition, led by left-wing populists – the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) party – has lost significant influence. As an EU member state, Greece participates in the imposition of sanctions against the RF. Greece is a NATO member and remains in a permanent conflict with fellow NATO member Turkey over disputed territorial issues (Cyprus, maritime and airspace borders in the Aegean Sea), leading to the militarization of both states and a latent non-armed standoff.

Since 2015, Greece has served as a gateway for migrants from African and Middle Eastern countries into the EU and faces considerable challenges with a large number of irregular migrants. Russia's propaganda exploits this to continuously promote anti-European and anti-migration narratives both within the country and beyond. As of 2025, Greece is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. Greece's primary economic partners are EU member states. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Greece managed to shed its dependence on Russian energy resources and diversify its energy supply, including by signing relevant agreements with the US.⁴

Society. The majority of Greece's population supports Ukraine, which has had no impact whatsoever on the level of Russophilia in the country. It remains present, and a growing trend of Russia's presence in education, academia, science, culture, religious and church life, and politics is observed. The Kremlin also actively uses the Russian diaspora and Russian compatriots to advance propaganda and disinformation.

Russophilia's development was not halted even by the fact that the Russian army destroyed the majority of settlements inhabited by Mariupol Greeks. A similar situation is observed with the Azov Bulgarians. In both cases, the governments of Bulgaria and Greece expressed concern but did not sever relations with the RF, and no critical reassessment of Russia's hybrid influences and so-called "historical ties" has taken place.⁵

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. Through the Rossotrudnichestvo network (the Russian House in Athens), ideas of shared Orthodox faith, the closeness of peoples, and the popularization of the Russian language, literature, and culture are promoted, while a distorted view of the RF's history and a justification of its own aggression against Ukraine are imposed. It is also worth mentioning that in Thessaloniki, a Russian center of the Association "Friends of the European Idea" operates, and in

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the town of Kavala there is a Russian language Cabinet – a section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature at the “Society of Russian-Greek Culture”.

Kosovo (partially recognized state)

Political landscape. The political situation is tense due to the permanent conflict with Serbia and, accordingly, with the Serbian population in northern Kosovo. The Kosovo authorities maintain a firm anti-Russian stance. In its foreign policy, Kosovo is oriented toward the EU and the US. The Kosovo authorities are strongly supportive of Ukraine, despite Ukraine not recognizing Kosovo's independence. Pristina has joined the EU sanctions imposed against the RF. With limited capabilities, Kosovo provides military assistance and has sent several instructors to the UK, where Ukrainian military personnel undergo training. Ukrainian demining teams and representatives of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine have also visited Kosovo for training and experience-sharing purposes. In 2022, the Kosovo government launched the professional protection program “Journalists-in-Residence Kosovo program” and abolished visas for Ukrainian citizens.⁶

Economic aspects. Ukraine is actively developing economic cooperation with Kosovo. On 18 February 2025, the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (a non-governmental organization) adopted a decision to appoint an official representative in Kosovo – an important and strategic step in the relations between Kyiv and Pristina, as well as an excellent opportunity for Ukrainian and Kosovar companies to access EU, Balkan, and Ukrainian markets.⁷

Society. Society is anti-Russian, as it draws parallels between Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the events of the 1990s. This is one of the factors driving journalists, analysts, and experts in Kosovo to actively study Russia's hybrid influence in their own media and information space.

Russia's presence in the humanitarian sphere. Moscow does not recognize Kosovo's independence, which does not prevent the RF from maintaining a separate office in Pristina. It operates as a branch of the RF Embassy in Serbia, and Russian diplomats often refer to it as a liaison office.

Moldova

Political landscape. The country is experiencing noticeable political turbulence, characterized by fierce rivalry between the ruling pro-European political forces led by President Maia Sandu and the pro-Russian opposition. Transnistria, where a Russian military contingent is stationed, is a source of threat to the country's national security. In April 2026, several commanders of the Russian operational group were declared personae non gratae. Moldova is seeking to rid itself of Russia's influence on its territory. In the same year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Moldova initiated a decision to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and parliament approved the initiative.⁸

Economic aspects. For a long time, Moldova's economy was dependent on the RF – exporting agricultural products and importing energy resources. Following the EU sanctions imposed against the RF for its act of aggression against Ukraine, Moldova is reorienting toward other energy supply sources. Gas is supplied from the EU, while electricity comes from Ukraine and Romania. However, Russian gas continues to flow to the Transnistrian region, which remains under RF control.

Society. The reaction to Russia's aggression in Ukraine is mixed. The portion of citizens who support the country's European integration aspirations sympathize with Ukrainians and condemn the war unleashed by Russia. A neutral-sceptical segment of the population considers it more appropriate for the country to remain neutral in this situation. The pro-Russian part of society – predominantly older generations – supports the RF and consumes Russian propaganda media.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. The Rossotrudnichestvo representative office "Russian House" is based in Chişinău. A Russian Center at Alecu Russo State University of Bălţi and a Russian Center at "Transnistria State University" also exist. Russian language Cabinets operate on the territory of the self-proclaimed unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), including at branches of "Transnistria State University" in Bender and Rybnitsa; a section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature at the A.S. Pushkin Central City Library is also active.

North Macedonia

Political landscape. A degree of relative stability can be observed, although the current authorities, who conduct their policy from a nationalist standpoint, concentrate attention on questions of national identity. This issue is a stumbling block on the path to EU membership, as neighbouring Bulgaria is blocking its accession. Minor interethnic tensions are also observed, currently playing out in the political sphere. Gradually, these contradictions are surfacing in the country's multi-ethnic and multicultural society. This demonstrates that the reconciliation model between Macedonians and Albanians, established under the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), no longer resolves the existing problems.⁹

Following Donald Trump's second inauguration as US President, the country's foreign policy has become more America-centric. Upon joining NATO, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly stated that with NATO membership, "North Macedonia becomes a legitimate target for Russia». North Macedonia supports NATO decisions on assistance to Ukraine. The previous government provided military assistance – Soviet-era equipment and ammunition. As of 2025, North Macedonia is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".¹⁰

Economic aspects. The primary trading partners are EU member states. The economy is generally weak, facing a shortage of skilled workers and a persistent outflow of labour. Russia's economic influence is minimal. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, North Macedonia diversified its energy supply (gas), increasing cooperation with European partners.

Society. Society does not support Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine. A gradual intensification of Russophilia is observed, although a critical attitude toward the RF persists in society. Russia's influence is most pronounced in social media and certain print outlets.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. In Skopje, a "Russkiy Mir" Cabinet has been opened at the Association for the development and teaching of the Russian language and promotion of Russian culture "Ozarenije", and the Russian Center at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University. The operations of the Rossotrudnichestvo "Russian House", which functioned within the RF Embassy in North Macedonia, were suspended following the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

Throughout 2024–2025, an intensification of business ties and educational, cultural, scientific, and academic contacts between North Macedonia and the RF has been observed. This is facilitated both by individual academics and businesspeople, and by representatives of the political party Levica, whose leadership frequently attends various events in Moscow.

Poland

Political landscape. The political situation in Poland is polarized: President Karol Nawrocki, elected in 2025 and a representative of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, is in conflict with the government, which consists of a pro-European coalition led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Poland views Ukraine as an economic competitor, and tensions in the relationship are observed due to differing perspectives on historical events. Despite this, Ukraine and Poland are united on the question of the external threat – countering Russia's aggression. As of 2025, Poland is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

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Economic aspects. The country's economy is independent of the RF. This applies both to goods exports and energy supply.

Society. Poland's population is polarized over the war in Ukraine and over the presence in Poland of Ukrainian citizens who have been forced to become refugees.¹¹

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. Russian classrooms and Russian centers sponsored by the Russkiy Mir Foundation are absent. The Rossotrudnichestvo "Russian House" representative office formally operates, though in a limited capacity.

Romania

Political landscape. The political situation is characterized by a pro-European orientation, although in recent years a rise in right-wing populist forces has been recorded. In April 2026, Romania entered a political crisis. Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, who in 2025 was regarded as an effective crisis manager, received a vote of no confidence over economic reforms. The current crisis may potentially lead to the collapse of the pro-European coalition in the country's parliament. Romania continues to support Ukraine in its resistance to Russia's aggression without much public fanfare and with a pragmatic approach. As of 2025, it is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".¹²

Economic aspects. Romania has no dependence on Russian energy resources, as it has its own oil and gas production. The same applies to trade – Romania is oriented toward the EU market.

Society. A negative perception of Russia is noted, stemming not only from the military events in Ukraine but also from Romania's own negative historical experience in relations dating back to the era of the Russian Empire and the period of Romania's membership in the socialist bloc, which is associated with repression and persecution. Russia is perceived as a state that threatens security in the Black Sea region. It can be argued that anti-Russian sentiment in Romania is among the strongest in the Balkans.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. Russian centers are absent, but in Bucharest a Section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature operates within the Lipovan Russians Community. In 2023, Romania closed the Rossotrudnichestvo representative office in the form of the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Bucharest, informally known as the "Russian House".

Serbia

Political landscape. Serbia is characterized by formal democracy. President Aleksandar Vučić and his political force, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), control the government, part of parliament, and the media. Opposition political forces are weak and fragmented. Since November 2024, the country has been living in a state of continuous public protests against the authoritarian rule of the president and the monopoly of the Serbian Progressive Party. In its foreign policy, a multi-vector approach is evident: balancing between the EU and the Russian Federation. Serbia has a permanent conflict with the partially recognized state of Kosovo, which occasionally escalates into crisis situations. Serbia promotes its own ideological-political concept – the Serbian World – the essence of which lies in uniting all Serbs living outside Serbia. The idea of the "Serbian World" is primarily aimed at drawing into Belgrade's orbit Serbs living in Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, and North Macedonia. On the question of the war in Ukraine, Serbia positions itself as a neutral state. As of 2025, it is not on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. Serbia's economy depends primarily on three players – the EU (trade, investment), China (lending, strategic cooperation across multiple sectors), and Russia (energy dependence). The defence industry is not a defining sector of the economy, but in recent times its development and export growth have been observed, including to Ukraine and Israel.

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Society. A significant portion of Serbian society holds pro-Russian views, with the RF regarded as an ally and a “fraternal Orthodox people”. A minority supports Ukraine and condemns Russia’s aggression against it, while simultaneously sympathizing with the so-called Russian relocants. Part of society maintains a neutral position.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. Of all the countries in the Balkans, Russia’s presence in the humanitarian sphere is greatest in Serbia. A considerable number of various civic organizations of the “Russian-Serbian Friendship” type are active here. Institutions funded from the RF budget include: a Section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature at the Sava Munćan Technical School in Bela Crkva; a Section of Russian-language fiction and educational literature at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Niš; a Russian Center at the Jovan Jovanović Zmaj High School in Novi Sad; and a Russian Center at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade. The overseas representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo – the “Russian House” in Belgrade – conducts exceptionally active operations.

As in Republika Srpska (BiH), close contacts and ties with Russian academic, scientific, political, educational, and expert circles are observed. A number of pro-Russian media outlets operate in Serbia, including Russia Today Balkan and Sputnik Srbija, although the activities of these outlets are presented as purely Serbian. A year and a half ago, Russia Today Balkan also began operating in Republika Srpska (BiH). An extensive network of Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels is active. Military analyst and blogger Mikhail Zvinchuk uses Serbia to strengthen Russia’s presence in the country and the Western Balkans. Under his direction, a community of bloggers, experts, and journalists is being formed – cultivated within the matrix of the “Russian world”.

Slovakia

Political landscape. The government of Robert Fico pursues a populist domestic policy, courts the RF, yet does not distance itself from the EU. Citizens protest against his policies, accusing the incumbent prime minister of corruption and persecution of opponents, and condemning his criticism of the EU. On the question of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Fico promotes Russian narratives and dons the mask of a “peacemaker”. He occasionally resorts to anti-Ukrainian rhetoric – claiming, in particular, that Ukrainians in Slovakia are organizing rallies against his activities, and that the Georgian Legion, fighting within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was preparing a coup in the country. As of 2025, Slovakia, like other EU member states, is on the RF’s list of “unfriendly foreign states”.¹³

Economic aspects. The greatest dependency in Slovakia’s economy lies in the energy sector. The Fico government continues to defend the purchase of energy resources from the RF, but such actions run counter to EU policy. Slovakia has alternative energy supply sources but is deliberately not moving to reduce its dependence on Moscow.¹⁴

Society. Citizens are polarized in their attitudes toward Russia’s war against Ukraine. A significant portion supports Ukraine and condemns Russia for the act of aggression; another segment of society takes a position of neutrality. A smaller number of Slovak citizens hold a pro-Russian position.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. There is no Russian Center or “Russkiy Mir” Cabinets in Slovakia. In 2023, the “Russian House” in Bratislava was closed, but in the summer of 2025 its operations were resumed.

Slovenia

Political landscape. In March 2026, parliamentary elections were held in Slovenia, which produced no clear winner. As a result, the country has so far been unable to form a new government. The new Speaker of Parliament is Zoran Stevanović, representing the pro-Russian party Resni.ca; he holds a pro-Russian position, advocates for the lifting of sanctions against the RF, and campaigns for a

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referendum on Slovenia's withdrawal from NATO. The pro-Russian views of representatives of the newly elected authorities are likely to affect continued support for Ukraine. As of 2025, Slovenia, like other EU member states, is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. Slovenia's economy is integrated into the EU economy. Trade has been reduced in connection with the sanctions imposed against the RF. There is no energy dependence on the RF. However, business contacts between Slovenia and Russia are maintained.

Society. Society holds broadly pro-Ukrainian views and supports the provision of humanitarian assistance. A degree of Russophilia is characteristic of Slovenian citizens – one that Moscow has managed to cultivate over a relatively short period of time, drawing on the traditional components of soft power and the "Russian world": historical and cultural ties, the "greatness" of Russian literature. For example, the Mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Janković, openly supports the "Russian world".

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. There is no "Russkiy Mir" Cabinet; a Russian Center operates on the basis of the non-profit organization "Russian House" in Maribor. The Russian Center of Science and Culture, informally known as the "Russian House" in Ljubljana, suspended its activities in 2023.

Hungary

Political landscape. In April 2026, regular parliamentary elections were held. Viktor Orbán – a long-standing figure in Hungarian politics with openly pro-Russian views – was defeated by opposition leader Péter Magyar of the Tisza party. The latter began his political career in Orbán's party and in 2024 became his main rival ahead of the elections. As regards the position of Hungary's new Prime Minister Péter Magyar on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, it is difficult to make preliminary forecasts: his neutral stance (he did not mention Russia's aggression on his social media, although he visited Kyiv in 2024) may evolve into support for Ukraine or remain at its starting point. It can be assumed that Hungary's dialogue with Ukraine will proceed on the level of pragmatism, appealing to "what the people of Hungary will allow". This may be influenced by Hungary's potential departure from the Eurosceptic camp, should Péter Magyar attempt to establish a constructive dialogue with Brussels in order to unblock loans for his country. European funds are needed by the Magyar government to carry out the economic and socio-political reforms that Orbán either postponed or pursued in a purely superficial and declaratory manner. As of 2025, Hungary is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. Hungary is dependent on Russian energy resources, and Budapest under Viktor Orbán made no attempt to diversify its supply or simply reduce the share of gas and oil from the Kremlin in its imports. During his election campaign, Péter Magyar stated that he would not abandon Russian fossil fuels overnight. According to him, this could only happen by 2035.¹⁵

Society. The majority of the population takes a neutral position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The primary reason is fear of Hungary's potential entanglement in the war – a fear shaped by years of government propaganda under former Prime Minister V. Orbán. A smaller portion of Hungarians holds a pro-Ukrainian position.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. There is no "Russkiy Mir" Cabinet; in Budapest, a Russian Center operates at Eötvös Loránd University, and a Russian Center of the University of Pécs operates in the city of Pécs. Also in the Hungarian capital, the Russian Center of Science and Culture – the "Russian House" in Budapest – continues to operate actively.

Croatia

Political landscape. A stable democracy with a pro-European course is developing in the country. It is worth noting the presence of internal competition between the prime minister and the president, which is occasionally accompanied by political scandals. Croatia's President Zoran Milanović holds pro-Russian views and, within the limits of his powers, has blocked assistance to Ukraine – in particular, banning the training of Ukrainian military personnel on Croatian territory. The government, by contrast, demonstrates unconditional support for Ukraine. As of 2025, Croatia is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".

Economic aspects. Croatia's economy is integrated into the European market and is not dependent on the RF; the country has managed to diversify its energy supply.

Society. Croatian citizens show a high level of support for Ukraine, although a certain share of citizens criticizes the government's pro-Ukrainian actions and supports President Milanović's statements on the need to refrain from interfering in the "conflict in Ukraine" and from sending Croatian military personnel to various peacekeeping missions in our state.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. There is no Russian Center or "Russkiy Mir" Cabinet. The activities of the "Russian House" in Zagreb have been suspended, though the organization's Telegram channel shows some activity – with a fairly low number of followers, however. The University of Zagreb hosts a Department of Russian Language and a Department of Russian Literature.

Montenegro

Political landscape. Montenegro went through a period of political turbulence and experienced RF influence – including an attempted coup in 2016 – but currently demonstrates a strong aspiration to join the EU on security grounds. The government has tightened residency rules for Russians, compelling the latter to leave the country. Montenegro is also experiencing a conflict of identities – Montenegrin versus Serbian, the Montenegrin language versus the Serbian language, and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church versus the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Montenegro's parliament in 2025 "adopted a decision to join the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) mission". As of 2025, the country is on the RF's list of "unfriendly foreign states".¹⁶¹⁷

Economic aspects. The economy is weak, with significant budget revenues coming from the tourism sector. Montenegro is seeking to develop green energy and renewable energy sources. The country has an extractive industry. At the same time, the Montenegrin economy is fairly sensitive to regional security conditions, dependent on foreign investment, and undiversified.

Society. Montenegrins support Ukraine and the government's actions regarding the provision of shelter to Ukrainian refugees and Montenegro's participation in European initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine. At the same time, a portion of society seeking to preserve Serbian identity, along with a number of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian politicians, criticizes the authorities and citizens for "dragging" the country into the Russia-Ukraine war.

RF presence in the humanitarian sphere. There is no Russian Center or "Russkiy Mir" Cabinet. The Faculty of Philology at the University of Montenegro in Nikšić has a Department of Russian Language and Literature. A Russian Center previously operated at the same faculty, but its activities ceased in 2023. However, already in 2024, the cultural center "Saint Alexander Nevsky" began operating in Nikšić, with the aim of strengthening ties with the "Russian House" in Belgrade and the RF embassies in Serbia and Montenegro.¹⁸

Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)

A longstanding partner in disseminating narratives about "Russian Orthodoxy", spiritual and Slavic unity and kinship, "correct" spiritual values and moral precepts is the Serbian Orthodox Church. Its influence across Central and South-Eastern Europe is considerable. This is particularly evident in Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. In Bulgaria and Greece, the ROC relies on local Orthodox churches, which should also be regarded as pillars of Russia's hybrid influence. ROC dioceses and parishes operate in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, and Romania. A pattern of the ROC establishing control and extending its influence over Orthodox churches in each country in the region where the number of Orthodox believers is smaller than that of Catholics or Protestants is observable.

The target audience comprises not only citizens of Central and South-Eastern Europe, but also representatives of the Russian diaspora and communities of Russian compatriots. A separate group with which the ROC attempts to engage – through the SOC or local Orthodox churches – consists of citizens of Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Baltic states, and other former Soviet Union (USSR) states.

The engagement of believers takes place through Orthodox churches and temples, as well as through the dissemination of propaganda about spiritual and cultural affinity, and a shared language, culture, and historical past. An obligatory disinformation narrative remains the claim that all Orthodox believers – especially Ukrainians and Belarusians – are allegedly being "converted" to another faith – Catholicism or Greek Catholicism.

Russia's Compatriots

Prior to the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the Kremlin engaged with the Russian diaspora and compatriots through the prism of cultural-historical and spiritual ties. For this purpose, Russian houses, Russian centers, the church, and a number of educational establishments for children – where the Russian language, culture, and Russia's version of history were taught – were utilized. All of this was woven into the promotion of traditional Moscow symbols: the matryoshka doll, Pushkin and Dostoyevsky, nostalgia for the USSR, the "greatness" of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great, and so forth.

From 2022 onwards, the trend began to shift toward more targeted engagement with the diaspora and compatriots, whose numbers were growing as a result of the flight of so-called "good Russians" to countries in the region. The diaspora and new compatriot communities were now viewed as influence groups and institutions of soft power, propaganda, and the consolidation of Russian speakers – not only Russians, but also citizens of other countries, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.

It can be said that throughout 2022–2024, mechanisms for working with compatriots were being developed, as the Kremlin operated within the ideological framework of the "Russian world". Emphasis was again placed on shared history and culture; narratives about the "difficult situation" of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Ukraine and the religious-ecclesiastical schism in our state were added. The myth of "historically Russian territories and cities" was also launched and actively deployed. In countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia, cooperation between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians was observed – and continues to be observed – with joint anti-war actions being held against the "Putin regime". The local population also joins such events and supports "Slavic brotherhood".

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Already by 2024, Moscow had strengthened the role of Russian compatriots in its hybrid influence operations and made them one of the key instruments of warfare in the information, media, social, and political domains. First and foremost, the staffing of Russian embassies was reinforced, with experienced specialists who had long worked in RF offices and institutions dealing with compatriot affairs being assigned to them. As a result, cooperation between RF embassies and the Russian diaspora and compatriots was intensified and became more active. Not only traditional soft power instruments were employed, but also aggressive propaganda and the entrenchment within compatriot activities and events of narratives about Russian Crimea, Donbas, southern Ukraine, the "Kyiv regime", and the heritage of Kyivan Rus. The drawing-in of Russian communities has occurred and continues to this day through a range of events conducted by Russian institutions abroad:

- › Dictations on the Russian language, history, geography, and literature.
- › Folklore and cultural festivals at which Ukrainian culture and traditions are presented as purely Russian.
- › Creative and artistic competitions held at the Artek children's camp on the territory of temporarily occupied Crimea.
- › Student and academic olympiads, some held online, some at Artek, and some in cities across the RF.
- › Invitations to foreign nationals – through Russian compatriot communities – to study in the RF (Study in Russia, Education in Russia, and similar programs). Separate programs are developed for students in technical and applied sciences, who are engaged through various exchanges and semester-study schemes to visit Russian universities and companies.
- › Programs for learning or deepening knowledge of the Russian language for teachers and lecturers at schools and universities where Russian language and literature are taught.

Through Russian compatriots, foreign nationals are drawn into studying at universities on temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories – predominantly institutions in Donetsk, Simferopol, Sevastopol, and Mariupol.

Education, academic, and scientific exchanges have become a powerful instrument for drawing Russian compatriots into Russia's hybrid war. Through them, the penetration of Russian business, investment, and cultural and political influence into various spheres of the external and internal life of countries in the region takes place.

The closure of Russian centers and Russian houses in a number of states has not halted the expansion of Russia's influence in Central and South-Eastern Europe. From 2024 onwards, an adaptation to conditions in which traditional humanitarian institutions are absent from the region has been observed – yet non-governmental compatriot organizations and the so-called "good Russians" continue to cooperate with Rossotrudnichestvo representative offices and Russian embassies.

It is worth noting that Moscow actively uses as springboards for internal penetration into the region and the consolidation of compatriot communities the Russian houses in Rome and Belgrade, and the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš – an institution that Western intelligence services have repeatedly identified in their research as a hub of Russian espionage in the Balkans and Central Europe.

Russia's compatriots do not merely strengthen the RF's presence in the region – they help the Kremlin map its influence across countries through monuments, cultural centers, publishing, and educational activities.

Russia's Hybrid Influence

The Kremlin exploits crisis phenomena in economies, societies, and political systems to carry out various hybrid operations. For EU candidate countries (the Western Balkans), the tactic of destabilization is chosen – exacerbating internal contradictions and complicating relations with neighbouring states. The primary objective is to raise the level of Euroscepticism in societies and sow disillusionment regarding the future of these countries within the EU. In this context, narratives are propagated about the alleged necessity of abandoning one's own identity, parts of national sovereignty, and transferring resources to EU control.

Although the Kremlin nominally supports the European integration of the Western Balkans – including Serbia and Montenegro – it does everything possible to halt this process. To this end, problems related to interethnic relations, the environment, the judiciary, legislation, corruption, and the weakness of political and economic systems are stoked. Moscow's objective is to bring the situation in these countries to a state of slow simmer rather than open conflagration.

Russia pursues a different tactic in its relations with EU member states, as the Kremlin needs to destabilize the European Union from within – an objective achievable by pressuring and manipulating EU member states in the region. Prior to the elections of 12 April, Hungary was the RF's priority, serving as a conduit for Russia's propaganda and one of the centers of EU destabilization. Following the victory of Péter Magyar and his Tisza party, Budapest remains for Moscow an unknown variable in its ongoing hybrid influence operations. Slovakia under Prime Minister Fico remains more consistent. Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's prospective prime minister, may possibly join him; and if a right-wing government is formed in Slovenia under former Prime Minister Janez Janša, Russia's activity aimed at destabilizing the EU will intensify. Janša is an ally of Viktor Orbán and Croatia's President Zoran Milanović, and supports former Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik. At the same time, Janša – whose tenure as prime minister coincided with the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine – supported our state and joined EU sanctions against the RF.

It is important for Russia that Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and potentially Slovenia advance ideas of Euroscepticism and speak of the need to restore relations with Moscow, block initiatives to abandon Russian energy resources, and obstruct sanctions against certain senior officials and businesspeople. From this list, Hungary may potentially drop out, given the Tisza party leader's desire to develop constructive dialogue with the EU and European institutions. Accordingly, the RF will reduce its visible presence and interference in Hungary's internal and external affairs. However, this will be replaced by a more aggressive and adapted form of soft power and public diplomacy, drawing on domestic agents of the "Russian world".

Moscow also counts on these countries to destabilize NATO, as it is from Bratislava, Budapest, Sofia, and Ljubljana that criticism of increased defence spending has been voiced. Similar public protests have been heard in Croatia as well, particularly in the context of President Milanović's provocative statements.

For the Kremlin, when exerting influence through EU member states, it is important to advance the "right" narratives regarding the "usefulness" of restoring full economic, financial, political, and cultural-scientific cooperation. To this end, sanctions must be lifted and arms supplies to Ukraine halted. The ultimate goal is the removal of sanctions and the restoration of the EU's dependence on Russian gas and oil.

A weakened EU, once again bound to the RF, is to become pliant and subject to right- and left-wing political forces that will destabilize the EU, intensify Russophilia, and facilitate the rise to power of politicians favourable to the Kremlin – as has been the case for years in Hungary and Bulgaria.

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Since Russia is unable to turn the tide on the battlefield, its presence in the region is becoming more aggressive and will remain so. The soft power and narratives about the importance of the "Russian world" as a unifying "concept" in Europe – already familiar across Central and South-Eastern Europe – will be supplemented by other tools and mechanisms. These include active penetration of business structures, expansion of the network of pro-Russian media outlets and social media, and the strengthening of scientific and academic ties for the "proper" cultivation of a generation of academics, experts, lecturers, analysts, and political elites.

Moscow continues to penetrate – and will continue to do so – through all available channels. This comprehensive approach has become important since Russia understood that in a number of countries Russophilia is not regarded as something negative, and that business relations with Moscow at the local level do not result in sanctions for specific individuals.

Media and Social Networks

As of 2026, the RF has adapted and learned to circumvent the restrictions pertaining to the activities of Russian propaganda channels. The Pravda network, launched in Europe at the end of 2023 and becoming actively operational in the region in 2024, is fairly extensive. In each country, different versions of Pravda websites operate – these do not differ in content and replicate it with adjustments for the specifics of each country. The network's distinguishing features include, in addition to its large-scale ecosystem, low-quality content (reposts from propaganda Telegram channels and websites, poor translations into the languages of the region's countries), high volume, and the maintenance of websites in multiple languages – Russian and English are mandatory, with a third language depending on the country.

Serbia's media outlets and those of Republika Srpska (BiH), as well as print publications of Russian compatriots – who maintain quite active Telegram and Instagram presences – also help disseminate Russian narratives.

Military analyst and blogger Mikhail Zvinchuk, who has built an entire ecosystem around the Rybar project, has extended his activities across Central and South-Eastern Europe. For the Balkans he founded the Telegram channel "Balkanar", and for Europe – "Evropar". In addition, the main Rybar channel is actively maintained, with its own website and YouTube channel.

Telegram remains the primary channel of Russian and pro-Russian propaganda in the region, although the RF and Russian propagandists are attempting to make use of other social media platforms. They are actively drawing local journalists and experts – who operate according to Moscow's playbooks – into their activities. From 2024 onwards, a trend has been observed of Russian diplomats returning to the public space through local media, where they are interviewed or provide commentary on various European and global events.

US Response to Russia's Actions in the Region

Donald Trump and his policies have not halted Russia's advance into Central and South-Eastern Europe. On the contrary, the rehabilitation of Vladimir Putin and the RF has created conditions for division among countries, adding chaos to political and public life.

This was most immediately observable in the foreign policy of North Macedonia, which has always been oriented toward the US. Trump's arrival in office partially influenced Skopje's position during

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votes on documents in support of Ukraine within UN institutions. The North Macedonian representative abstained on several occasions during such votes.

A complete collapse in the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its state institutions came when Donald Trump lifted sanctions from Milorad Dodik, his family members, his associates, and law firms. This strengthened the political standing of the former President of Republika Srpska (BiH) and his separatist rhetoric, which had already triggered an institutional crisis in BiH in 2024. Now, through representatives of the Trump administration, Milorad Dodik is openly pursuing a revision of the Dayton Peace Agreement, investing significant sums in lobbying for the interests of Republika Srpska and his own interests in the US, and seeking Trump's approval for Republika Srpska's secession from BiH.

The open support of the US President for Viktor Orbán ahead of the parliamentary elections, and the visits to Budapest by senior White House officials, set precedents and served as confirmation of Russian narratives about external control over individual countries and Europe as a whole.

Russia did not let such actions by Trump and his officials pass unnoticed, readily seizing the opportunity to openly begin criticizing EU policy toward Serbia. In particular, the Kremlin put forward the argument that Brussels does not conceal its desire to turn Serbia into a "grey zone", exploit its resources and industry, and send its citizens to fight against the RF.

In effect, the US – which since the early 2000s had "withdrawn" from the region, focusing on strategic partnerships and strengthening relations with countries within the NATO framework – failed to respond to the growth of Russia's presence in Central and South-Eastern Europe. On the contrary, Putin was encouraged to move toward more open actions for which there would be no consequences. Most likely, this will have a negative impact on the overall situation in the region, as countries have already become divided in their allegiance to the US and their restrained stance toward Washington. This will be exploited by such Eurosceptics as Rumen Radev, Janez Janša, Milorad Dodik, Zoran Milanović, and Aleksandar Vučić.

Conclusions and Forecasts

Russia has changed its strategy and tactics in Central and South-Eastern Europe, which is particularly evident in the Balkans. Whereas at the outset of the full-scale war against Ukraine the Kremlin relied on soft power and centuries-old narratives about spiritual-fraternal kinship, Slavic languages, and shared ties, from 2024 onwards these approaches began to shift. The RF has made its soft power more aggressive and targeted, embedding it within the context of the rapid development and entrenchment of Russophilia. It is on this foundation that tactical measures have been built for the dissemination of hybrid influence and the creation of propaganda networks spanning media outlets, social media, and institutions.

Countries Serving as Pillars of Russia's Influence

In its activities, Moscow will continue to rely on BiH and its political and state leadership, Serbia, Slovakia, and potentially Hungary and Bulgaria. The latter two countries are currently in a transitional political period, but prevailing trends suggest that Budapest and Sofia will be used by the Kremlin in a targeted manner and across various directions. The RF will be neither able nor likely willing to abandon such a springboard for expanding its presence in Europe – even with the potential “cessation” of Euroscepticism in Hungary. Changes in tactics are possible regarding the use of these countries' political elites, crisis phenomena, media, and human resources. The external factor will also play a key role – the attitude of the US toward the new prime ministers in Hungary and Bulgaria, and the formation of a coalition government in Slovenia, where Janez Janša could potentially become prime minister.

Even in the absence of close political dialogue between Putin and Magyar, and between Putin and Radev, there are “hooks” for the Kremlin's activities in these countries – in Budapest, these are energy resources and economic-business ties, and media corporations working for Moscow; in Bulgaria – entrenched Russophilia and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. What will remain common is a high level of Euroscepticism and criticism of NATO.

Slovenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Moldova will remain in focus. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Moscow will destabilize them in various ways, though not to the point of armed conflict.

Key Role of Rossotrudnichestvo

A considerable number of diverse organizations operate in the region, established by Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Kremlin's special services – all working with RF compatriots abroad and consolidating them into various networks. In some countries, the name of the institution has been changed to another in order to avoid falling under EU sanctions.

The intensification of work with compatriots is part of both hybrid operations and the expansion of the “Russian world's” borders, as well as the RF's efforts to exercise control over Russian “good Russians” and diaspora members. Active work by Rossotrudnichestvo in this direction is evident, operating through its representative office in BiH and the “Russian House” in Belgrade. The “Russian House” in Rome exerts considerable influence, particularly felt in Croatia and Slovenia. It remains extremely important for the Kremlin to expand its influence over compatriots and diaspora members who left for countries in the region several decades ago. Through them, a positive image of the USSR

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is maintained, nostalgia for the “good Soviet past” is spread, Russophilia is promoted, and Ukrainian identity and statehood are eroded.

It can be forecast that going forward, Russian compatriots will be used as agents of the “Russian world” to entrench anti-Ukrainian narratives about the war, Ukrainian territories, Ukrainian history, culture and language, and Ukrainian authorities within the societies of Central and South-Eastern Europe. Such challenges should be countered through asymmetric and symmetric mechanisms in the information-media, cultural-historical, and socio-political domains.

Russia is exerting a systemic and comprehensive influence in the region, ensuring its deep and broad presence in the public and non-public spheres, in business, politics, the economy, societies, education, and the information space. Such “penetration” has been made possible on the basis of a standard toolkit of “Russian world” and soft power instruments, combined with the development of individual entry points and mechanisms tailored to each country. Account is taken of the state of the economy and political system, the dissatisfaction of societies and political elites with EU and NATO policy, the presence or absence of Russophilia, and issues of historical-cultural identity. Despite the closure or suspension of activities of “Russian houses” and “Russian centers” in a number of states, the Kremlin does not halt its work, seeking new channels for destabilizing each state and the region as a whole.

This situation will persist also due to the dependence on Russian energy resources present in Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, and Republika Srpska (BiH), as well as through the existence of Russia's presence – even if modest – in a number of national economies. Hungary and Serbia are currently particularly vulnerable in this regard, having additionally decided to develop nuclear energy in cooperation with Rosatom. It can be forecast that Hungary's new political leadership will attempt to address the contracts relating to Rosatom's construction of the Paks II NPP. This could be one of the steps in a long-term strategy for restoring Hungary's relations with the EU and gradually moving away from Russian energy resources – something Magyar referenced in his pre-election pledges. Bulgaria is also in the risk zone for increased dependence on this Kremlin institution through the Kozloduy NPP.

Serbian and Hungarian Worlds

Moscow's consistent support for the ideology of the Serbian World – which in recent years has acquired methodological and institutional form – is an ongoing pattern. It should not be regarded as yet another version of the “Russian world”; nevertheless, through this ideology and its components – Serbian-Russian ties (Slavic, Orthodox, cultural, and spiritual), the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the perceived need to “protect” Serbian identity and statehood – Moscow will act actively and with purpose to keep Serbia, Republika Srpska, Montenegro, and North Macedonia under its control and to advance anti-Ukrainian and anti-European narratives through them.

It is not to be excluded that the RF will attempt to exploit the concept of the Hungarian World to destabilize the situation in Hungary and neighbouring countries with a significant Hungarian diaspora. Since Viktor Orbán was for years a loyal Kremlin ally, Hungary will remain within Moscow's orbit of attention. It is likely that Russia will need some time to transform its policy toward Hungary and Central Europe as a whole. The grounds for this have been created not only by Viktor Orbán through his close political, economic, and business ties with Moscow. Energy resources – oil and gas – will unquestionably be a point of entry, and will be trigger issues for the new Budapest leadership in its relations with Brussels.

The concept of the Hungarian World may help the RF cultivate Euroscepticism within the Hungarian diaspora, as well as use it to exert pressure on official Budapest. Future Prime Minister Péter Magyar has already demonstrated – both through statements and initial working telephone calls – that the

diaspora is important to him. Accordingly, he too may make use of the concept of the Hungarian World for his own purposes, which is dangerous given the diaspora's vulnerability to RF influence and Russian propaganda.

Destabilization

The region will remain in the zone of stable instability in Europe, where political, social, and economic crises become the norm. This is particularly evident with regard to Bulgaria, Kosovo, BiH, and Serbia. Even relatively stable Albania, Slovenia, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Moldova fall into the zone of instability risk due to the RF's constant hybrid interference, unresolved domestic problems, and corruption.

Interethnic relations will remain one of the destabilizing factors in Serbia, North Macedonia, BiH, and Montenegro. Serbia will play one of the key roles in this process within the RF's activities – consistently asserting the oppression of Serbs and “repression” against them in Kosovo, BiH, Croatia, and Montenegro. This will affect relations with the EU and the US, regional ties, and European integration processes. This is particularly relevant for Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. Podgorica is increasingly confronted with the activation of the Serbian identity project in Montenegro, which may negatively affect the country's European integration. North Macedonia has altogether found itself in a situation that currently cannot be resolved, as Bulgaria is blocking further European integration processes over questions of Macedonian identity, language, and history. Greece may block Albania's European path over the issue of Albanian Greeks, certain maritime border disputes, and historical controversies.

Each of these cases is attractive to Moscow, which can stoke the situation through local politicians, businesspeople, or activists, or carry out direct hybrid operations.

US and EU Presence

The Trump administration will maintain a sporadic presence in the region, as Donald Trump and his associates have business interests in Balkan countries, which will also affect Central European countries. Trump may attempt to intervene in Serbia-Kosovo relations in order to bring them back to the negotiating table and sign a new normalization agreement, as was the case in September 2020. Sporadic displays of interest are possible in the maritime countries – Greece, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Montenegro – which have port infrastructure and can develop it for the supply of energy resources from other states. Since China is also competing for maritime and overland routes in these countries by implementing a number of infrastructure and logistics projects, Trump's interest may grow out of a desire to counter China.

It is unlikely that the EU will act aggressively or exert strong pressure on countries where problems with European integration arise or the domestic situation becomes more complicated. The primary mechanisms will remain sanctions and the suspension of financial assistance, as was the case with Kosovo, Serbia, Hungary, and Slovakia. In order to somewhat reduce the level of Euroscepticism, Brussels will seek to admit Montenegro and, in all likelihood, Albania into its membership.

Implications for Ukraine

The pro-Ukrainian position in the majority of countries in the region will be maintained, as governments will continue to act from positions of pragmatism (this is particularly relevant for Serbia) and the pursuit of their own interests (the EU allocates funds for joint projects with Ukraine, which

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leads to additional investment from other countries, creates new jobs, and raises the standing of these countries within the EU and NATO).

Despite this, a decline in the level of support for Ukraine and Ukrainians may be observed due to the growth of Russian propaganda and the expansion of the "Russian world" boundaries through representatives of scientific-academic and educational institutions, political elites, and Russian compatriots who advocate for more active contacts with the RF.

Accordingly, Ukraine must intensify its advocacy and promotion abroad, develop new individual strategies and tactics for each country in the region, expand its own presence and establish contacts with cultural, scientific, and educational institutions, business circles, and entrepreneurs, raise its expert capacity in responding to the risks created by Russia, and work with local specialists.

It would be beneficial to draw on the experience of the United Kingdom, France, or Germany in establishing cultural and information centers abroad. Ukraine has a number of corresponding institutions in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Moldova, Hungary, and elsewhere, operating under Ukraine's diplomatic missions. However, they are not fulfilling their role in representing Ukraine abroad. Contemporary realities demand that cultural and information centers be not merely venues for exhibitions and protocol events, but genuine representations of Ukraine abroad – engaged in the promotion, advocacy, and lobbying of Ukrainian interests in a specific country or group of countries.¹⁹

Particular attention is warranted for the ongoing monitoring of the European integration processes of Montenegro and Albania, which are the primary candidates for EU accession, as well as Serbia – a country that serves as an example of significant concessions on the part of Brussels in pursuit of its own economic and political interests, the preservation of the EU's superficial influence over democratization processes, and its presence in the country.

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Imprint

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv)

kas.de

Publisher: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv), 2026, Kyiv
wul. Akademika Bohomoltsia 5, Office 1, 01024 Kyiv, Ukraine
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The publication is prepared under the project "Strengthening the Analytical Capabilities of the Foreign Policy Decision-Making with the Civil Society" of the Centre for International Security with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv).



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