

Briefing Paper IV:

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE IN THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SPHERE

The fourth briefing paper covers Russian, Chinese, Turkish, the Gulf States' and Iranian influence in the cultural, academic and religious sphere, areas most often associated with the notion of soft power in international relations.

When considering the presence of various foreign actors in the Western Balkans and elsewhere, media and experts often focus on the most obvious manifestations: political and economic links, which provide different foreign actors with direct access to top local decision-makers. Yet, foreign actors significantly rely on religious and cultural links to further advance and strengthen their presence in the region by establishing a broad support base among the local population, by 'winning hearts and minds' so to say.

Preceding briefing papers:

- **The Briefing Paper I: East vs. West** provides the historical and geo-strategic context of the project – **full version or an executive summary**.
- **The Briefing Paper II** focuses on Russian, Chinese, Turkish and the Gulf States' influence and activities in **the political arena** of the Western Balkan countries – **full version or an executive summary**.
- **The Briefing Paper III** maps influence in the economic and financial sphere, especially main forms of dependencies and activities undermining rules-based market competition – **full version or an executive summary**.



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Introduction

The main purpose of various religious, cultural and academic events which Russia, Turkey, China or the Gulf States organize is in essence the same as their political and economic efforts: to advance and strengthen their political influence over a certain country or ethnic group in the Balkans. One could even argue that out of various methods of spreading influence; it is religion and culture that may have the greatest impact, because they create a broad and long-term impact among the local population. External actors then utilize these religious and cultural links as a double sword, using their popularity in local communities to ensure continued cooperation with local politicians.

The US, EU institutions and some EU member countries have similarly used various cultural and academic events ever since the 1990's to advertise their key perspectives, opinions and norms. In the age of globalisation, with its economic and military dominance, and with most of the world looking towards it, the West has been very successful in spreading its influence in mass culture and cultural space and social life in general. Despite traditional cultural and spiritual links to Russia or Turkey, the society in the Balkans is, therefore, to a large extent Westernized.

Russia, Turkey, China and the Gulf States are still seen as remote countries, with a little cultural appeal to young people in the Balkans, who are fleeing to Western countries in large numbers in search for jobs and education. But in recent years, Turkey and especially Russia have used the gradual weakening of the US and EU presence in the region to partially neutralize this effect and "superimpose" their views and standards upon local communities. A shift in policy-orientation of some people from the West to the East is already visible. Different recent studies show that once very high support for EU integration is drastically falling in most Balkans countries year after year, and many citizens are more and more open to considering other options.¹ Perhaps being more of a result of frustration from specific Western policies, the growing cultural interest in Russia, Turkey, the Middle East and East Asian countries is undoubtedly connected to their closer political and economic relations and also, not less importantly, to investments in the cultural sphere, which this paper seeks to map.

¹ For example according to the 2018 public perception survey published by BiH Directorate for European Integrations, 56.5 % of BiH citizens remain in favor of country's EU membership, which reveals continuation of erosion of EU popularity from 76 % in 2016 and 69 % in 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, http://dei.gov.ba/dei/media_servis/infografike/default.aspx?id=20054&langTag=bs-BA.

RUSSIA

Undoubtedly, Russia is the key external player influencing the religious, cultural, and academic spheres of the Western Balkans countries. Besides drawing on historical ties to the Balkans and cultural affinity, particularly addressing local Slavic and Orthodox population, it has recently been more active and assertive in its attempt to present itself as a protector of traditional values and an alternative to Western dominance.

Cultural and language centres focus on the promotion of Russian culture and literature, and provide Russian language courses. Popular cultural events usually organised with funds and assistance of Russian embassies such as festivals, shows, or joint ceremonies commemorating important historical events, have become another popular tool for the promotion of Russian culture. Various think-tanks or friendly associations which have often been established over the past years, focus on asserting the importance of Russia as key security or economic partner of the Balkan countries, and pro-Russian media actively disseminates these narratives. Academic cooperation has also intensified in recent years.

The religious sphere occupies a crucial place in Russia's soft power activities. Russia has focused on enhancing the status of Orthodoxy in the region, and on building close links between local Orthodox churches and the Russian Orthodox Church. Russia has also provided financial means for restoration of decaying religious buildings, especially those with a significant symbolical value, such as the Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija.

The ultimate goal, however, is to use these aforementioned soft power tools to further foster the Eastern political orientation of some of the countries, divert the orientation from NATO and EU membership as well as to build closer relations with the local political leaders. In some of the countries or societal segments, Russia has been quite successful in spreading anti-Western narratives and a positive image of itself, thus further cementing existing societal cleavages.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Reports by Russian right-wing analytical outlet Geopolitica.ru or similar organisations, which include statements like "Having in mind that such Serbs of Bosnia are the vanguard of Orthodox-Slavic civilisation (as is Serbian ethnic territory as a whole), this territory should

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naturally constantly be one of the focuses of the Russian strategy on the geopolitical map,"² clearly show that in its approach to the regional and global politics, Russia is strongly relying on its historical, religious, cultural and ethnic ties with Orthodox Slavs.

In the process of establishing its foothold in Republika Srpska (RS), Russia has been in recent years meticulously interweaving various religious, cultural and academic events together with political and economic ones. Such activities included presentations of Russian academic publications and activities in RS;³ regular cultural exchanges such as "Days of Republika Srpska" organized in Russia⁴ or Russian cultural days organized in RS;⁵ regular visits of Russian (in)famous, Kremlin-sponsored biker's gang "Night Wolves" to RS.⁶ To many of these activities, the Russian Embassy provided logistical and financial support.

Another example of cultural cooperation were the performances of the Imperial Russian Ballet in Banja Luka and Sarajevo in 2016 and 2018, as a part of its regional tour.⁷ Yet not even this kind of events does always escape controversies. The visit of a Russian Cossack dancing troupe a few days ahead of the general elections in October 2014 added to fears that the Cossacks came in fact to show Russian support for the RS strongman Milorad Dodik.⁸

In recent years, Russia also intensified activities establishing special relations among local communities in Russia and RS. In December 2017, a documentary film was presented in Russia and RS about relations established between Russian cities of Azov and Armavir, and Bijeljina in RS, as a part of a "Friendship Code" project.⁹ At the same time, RS authorities

² "Why is Bosnia important for Russia?" *Geopolitica*, July 30, 2015, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/why-bosnia-important-russia>.

³ "Zbornik "Rusija i Balkan u savremenom svijetu," *Palelive*, December 26, 2012, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.palelive.com/zbornik-grusija-i-balkan-u-savremenom-svijetuq/>.

⁴ "Otvoreni Dani Republike Srpske u Sankt Peterburgu," May 11, 2018, accessed October 10, <https://www.atvbl.com/otvoreni-dani-republike-srpske-u-sankt-peterburgu>.

⁵ "Dani ruske kulture u Banjaluci," *Banjalukanet*, December 17, 2015, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://banjaluka.net/dani-ruske-kulture-u-banjaluci/>.

⁶ "Najozloglašenija ruska motoristička banda u Banjoj Luci: "U misiji smo obnove 'duhovnih veza' sa Srbima", *CroatianDnevnik.hr*, March 21, 2018, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/ruski-nocni-vukovi-u-banjoj-luci-tvrde-da-obnavljaju-duhovne-veze-sa-srbima---510931.html>.

⁷ "Carski ruski balet oduševio publiku: Spektakl "Labuđe jezero" izveden u Sarajevu," *Klix*, March 4, 2016, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/kultura/carski-ruski-balet-odusevio-publicu-spektakl-labudje-jezero-izveden-u-sarajevu/160304154>.

⁸ "Russian Cossacks leave Bosnia after 'cultural visit'", *The Guardian*, October 15, 2014, accessed October 10 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/russian-cossacks-leave-bosnia-banja-luka>.

⁹ "Moskva-Premijera filma "Kod prijateljstva," *RSRTV*, December 28, 2017, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=283580>.

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have instructed all educational institutions in RS to orient school excursions and students' exchanges to Russia instead of the Western countries.¹⁰

Furthermore, more grassroots' projects (at least seemingly) glorifying key figures from Russian history and/or Russian architectural style are carried out by at least six associations of Serb-Russian friendship (or unity of all Orthodox countries) which operate in Republika Srpska, usually with financial support from the RS government. These included, for example, construction of a monument to the Russian Tsar Nicholas II or of a Russian monastery and ethno-village, both near Doboju in 2013.¹¹ It seems, however, that these activities have so far had a very limited and localized impact.¹²

The same can be said for several other initiatives including the work of the Russian cultural centre and a library of the Russian Peace Foundation that were established at the RS National and University Library in Banja Luka in 2013 with the aim of promoting Russian language and culture. Mundane things, like bikers' events and ballet performances, generally attract much wider attention.¹³

The pinnacle of Russian cultural and religious presence in RS is supposed to be the establishment of a new Russian Orthodox religious and culture centre in the heart of RS administrative centre of Banja Luka in September 2018, before the general elections. The official laying of the cornerstone of this complex was attended by top RS officials and representatives of the Russian Church. The size, the location and the timing of the construction of this centre - as well as the fact that this, unlike most other similar, smaller projects will be mostly financed by the Russian government - is expected to achieve much greater impact and visibility in the RS.

Kosovo

Russia has at its disposal limited means to extend its influence in Kosovo because its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence implies minimal political, economic and social cooperation between the two countries. However, the common religious background with

¹⁰ Interview with RS government official, September 2018.

¹¹ "Ruski manastir i etno selo u Republici Srpskoj," *Vesti*, June 14, 2013, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.vesti.rs/Intervju/Ruski-manastir-i-etno-selo-u-Republici-Srpskoj.html>; U dobojskom selu Ritešić napravljen spomenik ruskom caru Nikolaju Drugom," *Blic*, September 30, 2017, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/republika-srpska/u-dobojskom-selu-ritesic-napravljen-spomenik-ruskom-caru-nikolaju-drugom/vwsmg3z>.

¹² Interview with RS official, September 2018.

¹³ Ibid.

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the Serbs living in Kosovo, who historically cherish positive sentiment for Russia, gives the latter an advantage. Through the Serb Orthodox Church present in Kosovo, Russia engages for the strengthening of its influence. On the other hand, Kosovo finds it impossible to control Serb religious institutions in Kosovo due to the autonomy that they enjoy.¹⁴

The Serb Orthodox Church continues to maintain a strong position against Kosovo's independence and hopes to continue the battle against Kosovo's statehood through Russia's help. Media in Kosovo have cited Serb Patriarch Irinej as telling the Serbian media in September 2017 that "we hope Russia will help us preserve everything that was ours",¹⁵ referring to Kosovo.

Furthermore, in 2010, the Serb Orthodox Church advised that Russia would allocate financial means to help to save historical shrines in Kosovo. According to an arrangement with UNESCO, Russia donated 2 million dollars for this in 2010 – 2011. This money was spent on restoring four Orthodox facilities which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage list - the monastery of the Serbian Patriarchate in Peje, monasteries in Decani and Gračanica and the church of the Mother of God in Prizren.¹⁶

One of the major initiatives in which the Russian Orthodox Church is involved is related to a project on the return of Serbs in Northern Kosovo through the construction of a quarter called "Sun Valley". This project includes construction of 300 houses where accommodation of around 1500 Serbs (i.e. displaced Serbs) is sought.¹⁷ Media in Kosovo have also reported that the Russian Orthodox Church plans to build a church in this quarter.¹⁸ However, the Kosovo authorities have opposed this project, considering it illegal and with no legal permission from Kosovo authorities.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*: "Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why", September 2017, accessed October 18, 2018,

http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Russian_interference_in_Kosovo_finale_2_735070.pdf.

¹⁵ "Patriarch Irinej: "Let's Return As Many Serbs As Possible in Kosovo, Russia Will Help", *Telegrafi.com*, September 17, 2017, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://telegrafi.com/patriarku-irinej-te-kthejme-sa-shume-serbe-ne-kosove-rusia-te-na-ndihmoje/>.

¹⁶ "Russia to help saving historical shrines in Kosovo", *Serbian Orthodox Church*, November 2010, accessed October 18, 2018, http://www.spc.rs/eng/russia_help_saving_historical_shrines_kosovo.

¹⁷ Gashi, Zijadin: "Is Marko Djuric a Representative of Serbian or Russian Politics", *Radio Free Europe*, June 26, 2016, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/27828505.html>.

¹⁸ "Sun Valley in Mitrovica Supported by Russia With a Church", *Koha.net*, June 27, 2016, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://archive.koha.net/?id=27&l=120650>.

¹⁹ Zejneili-Loxha, Amra, "Prishtina Alarms the EU for the Danger of Russian Influence in Kosovo", December 23, 2016, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/28193671.html>.

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Last, but not the least, it is also important to stress that the pro-Russian media presence in Serbia is an important card in spreading Russian propaganda among Kosovo Serbs. Fake news is fabricated through different Russian media outlets, including Sputnik and Russia Today and others.²⁰

Macedonia

The biggest channel for influencing Macedonian cultural sphere is the Russian Center for Studying the Russian Language, Literature and Culture (Russian Center), which was founded within the St. Cyril and Methodius public university in Skopje by the VMRO-DPMNE government in January 2016.²¹ Russia is only the fourth country (together with Italy, China, and Turkey) to have its own specialized cultural center within the biggest public university in the country.²²

The Russian Center is financed by the Russian embassy and was officially opened by former Ambassador Oleg Shcherbak. The center focuses mainly on organizing language classes for primary school pupils that are completely free of charge.²³ In addition, it engages in a series of other activities, including but not limited to organizing informational fairs for university education in Russia²⁴ and conducting training for Russian-language teachers in Macedonia.²⁵ The Russian government has also provided full scholarships at Russian universities to at least 40 Macedonian students in the 2018-2019 academic year.²⁶

Russian influence has also penetrated sports. Russian businessman Sergei Samsonenko became a household name in Macedonia after investing for years in the soccer and handball (both male and female) teams of the most famous sports club in the country, Vardar. The

²⁰ *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*: "Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why", September 2017, accessed October 18, 2018, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Russian_interference_in_Kosovo_finale_2_735070.pdf.

²¹ "Otvoren ruski centar na univerzitetot UKIM", *Netpres*, 11.01.2016., accessed October 15, 2018 <https://netpress.com.mk/otvoren-ruski-centar-na-univerzitetot/>.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Ова лето учете руски јазик бесплатно," *Russia Beyond the Headlines – Macedonia*, 29.05.2018, accessed October 16, <https://mk.rbth.com/obrazovanie/81206-ruski-centar-kursevi-deca>.

²⁴ "Руските универзитети достапни за сите државјани на Македонија," *Russia Beyond the Headlines – Macedonia*, 17.09.2018, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://mk.rbth.com/obrazovanie/82028-saem-rusko-obrazovanie-makedonija>.

²⁵ "Курсеви за повишување на квалификациите за наставниците по руски јазик во Македонија," *Russia Beyond the Headlines – Macedonia*, 13.10.2018, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://mk.rbth.com/obrazovanie/82227-kursevi-ruski-jazik-makedonija>.

²⁶ "Стипендии за македонски студенти за студирање во Русија," *Sitel*, 19.02.2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://sitel.com.mk/stipendii-za-makedonski-studenti-za-studiranje-vo-rusija>.

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fans of Vardar are notorious for organizing and participating in nationalist demonstrations. Most recently, they were among the main recipients of secret funds from Russian businessman Ivan Savidis to protest against Macedonia's name deal with Greece.²⁷ Over the years, Samsonenko also developed close ties with the VMRO-DPMNE government and even appeared in party campaigns²⁸, but he left the country soon after the change of government in June 2017.²⁹

The anti-referendum protests mentioned above were also regularly attended by Hristijansko Bratstvo (Christian Brotherhood), the only explicitly pro-Russian NGO in the country, though there is no hard evidence of Russian funding. In addition to these protests, Hristijansko Bratstvo were also among the organizers of another demonstration in April 2018, but this time against the expulsion of one Russian diplomat from Macedonia following the Skripal poisoning.³⁰

Finally, political links have also acquired a cultural dimension at times. President Vladimir Putin famously expressed Russia's gratitude to his Macedonian counterpart Gjorgje Ivanov for the fact that "our Cyrillic alphabet came from Macedonia".³¹ President Ivanov was even awarded an honorary doctorate by the Moscow State University in 2014.³² In the religious sphere, however, the VMRO-DPMNE government failed on multiple occasions to get Russia on board to pressure the Patriarch of Constantinople to endorse the Macedonian Orthodox Church in its quest for recognition of its autonomy from Serbian Orthodox Church.³³

Montenegro

One of the main channels of Russian influence in the cultural and religious sphere is the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro with a seat in Serbia and existing parallel to

²⁷ "U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote", *New York Times*, 09.10.2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/us/politics/russia-macedonia-greece.html>.

²⁸ "ВИДЕО: Сергеј Самсоненко со поддршка за Груевски и ВМРО-ДПМНЕ," *Netpres*, 09.04.2014, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://netpress.com.mk/video-sergej-samsonenko-so-poddrshka-za-gruevski-i-vmro-dpmne/>.

²⁹ "СЕРГЕЈ САМСОНЕНКО: ДОСТА Е!" *Sport Media*, 11.08.2017, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://sportmedia.mk/fudbal/domashno-prvenstvo/sergej-samsonenko-dosta-e>.

³⁰ "Протест против протерувањето на рускиот дипломат," *Civil Media*, <https://civilmedia.mk/protst-protiv-protuvato-na-ruskiot-diplomat/>.

³¹ "Putin's Homage to Cyrillic Makes Bulgarians See Red", *Balkan Insight*, May 25, 2017, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kremlin-s-stance-on-cyrillic-origin-angers-sofia-05-25-2017>.

³² Dimitar Bechev, "Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe," New Haven: Yale University (2017): 80.

³³ Ibid.

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Montenegrin Orthodox Church whose autonomy it rejects recognizing. The SOC is known for being involved in political activities and financial support to Montenegro's extremists.³⁴ It intends to influence Montenegrin politics by supporting pro-Russian political parties and anti-EU and NATO voices. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church was not directly associated with the 2016 coup in Podgorica, it did host an overnight meeting of the coup's leadership at the Ostrog monastery just before the elections.³⁵

The coup itself also involved the leaders of the Montenegrin opposition and two Russian nationals, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov. For both Russia and Serbia, the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches are powerful tools for conveying messages among the general public that strongly oppose Montenegro's NATO membership and future EU accession. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church was one of the main opponents of Montenegro's sovereignty in 2006, under the pretext, it was a small country and too reliant on Serbia.

The Russian influence in the country is further underlined by the relatively large presence of Russian nationals. Russia has established many cultural and language-learning institutions across the country and these centers in, for example, Podgorica and Bar offer the Russian language courses and workshops for foreigners. In theory, the Bar cultural center was opened to improve cooperation and strengthen mutual cultural ties. In practice, it helps the Russians to adapt to Montenegro, providing them with real estate, investment, interior and exterior repair services.³⁶ As the Russians in Podgorica and Bar have become active entrepreneurs and real-estate owners, there was a high demand for establishment of such institutions for which they have received a green light from the Montenegrin authorities. In 2016, the Russian diaspora in Montenegro (the largest non-political association of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Montenegro) also voiced for education in the native language and the first Russian school in Budva was opened.³⁷

Russia and Montenegro have also developed considerable cooperation at the level of higher education. Association of Students of Soviet and Russian Faculties in Montenegro was established to enhance cooperation. In 2008 and 2009, this Association initiated agreements on scientific and academic cooperation between the Russian State Trade, Economics

³⁴ "Hanging by a thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro," Russia Foreign Policy Papers, June 2018, accessed October 9, 2018, <http://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kraemer-rfp5.pdf>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Otvoren Ruski centar u Baru," *mondo.me*, August 21, 2007, accessed October 10, 2018, <http://mondo.me/a160/Turist-INFO/Vijesti/Otvoren-Ruski-centar-u-Baru.html>.

³⁷ "Prva ruska škola pod crnogorskim suncem", *Radio Free Evropa*, September 28, 2016, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-ruska-skola/28019196.html>.

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University (RGTEU) and the University of Montenegro. The State University of Montenegro offers the studies of Russian Language and Literature. Furthermore, Russian language schools and Russian centers offer Russian language courses and some even provide courses for studying Russian at the Montenegrin seaside during the summer.³⁸

It is interesting to note that the tenth anniversary of Montenegro's independence in 2016 was celebrated in Moscow with a gala concert in the Kremlin.³⁹ It was attended by the Russian legislative, executive and judicial authorities, representatives of the Montenegrin diaspora and students studying in Moscow. The then Montenegrin Ambassador to Moscow, Zoran Jocović, emphasized the importance of longstanding ties, diplomatic relations and cooperation between Montenegro and Russia.

Serbia

Contemporary Serbian-Russian relations including spiritual and cultural connections are usually simplified or glorified in public discourse. The image of Slavic brotherhood between Serbs and Russians was constructed and nurtured through soft-power channels by not only foreign powers, but also domestic political and intellectual elite, and other interests groups.⁴⁰ However, contrary to conventional wisdom, Serbia and Russia are not natural allies and friends due to Slavic and Orthodox identity. Serbia had tried to modernize and transform itself along the European constitutional and cultural lines, but it nonetheless found itself frequently aligned with Russia.⁴¹

Russia is traditionally present in the cultural and public life of Serbia through the work of Russian Centre of Science and Culture "Ruski dom"⁴² established in 1933. This cultural institution offered access to a theatre, library, elementary school, publishing center, museums, a sports hall and a Society of writers, artists and musicians.⁴³ Today, the Russian House is organized exhibitions, concerts, theatre performances, conferences, and other

³⁸ "Brush up your Russian on our Campus in Montenegro," *EDUCA Russian Language School*, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://educalanguageschool.com/campus>.

³⁹ "Dan nezavisnosti Crne Gore obilježen i u Moskvi: Svečani koncert u Kremlju," *CDM*, May 27, 2016, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://m.cdm.me/arhiva/10-godina/dan-nezavisnosti-crne-gore-obiljezen-i-u-moskvi-svecani-koncert-u-kremlju/>.

⁴⁰ "Đorđević: Slovenstvo i pravoslavlje temelj odnosa s Rusijom", *N1*, October 20, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/a429408/Vesti/Djordjevic-Slovenstvo-i-pravoslavlje-temelj-odnosa-s-Rusijom.html>

⁴¹ Vuk Vuksanovic, "Serbs Are Not "Little Russians", *The American Interest*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/07/26/serbs-are-not-little-russians/>

⁴² The Russian House in Belgrade, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://ruskidom.rs/sr/>.

⁴³ The initiator of this initiative was the , "Otvoren je Ruski dom u Beogradu," *Srpski legat*, April 8, 2018, accessed October 18, 2018, <http://www.srpskilegat.rs/otvoren-je-ruski-dom-u-beogradu-2/?pismo=lat>.

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activities for the wider public. Despite the traditional presence of Russian cultural, religious and academic traces in Serbian public life, great efforts have been taken in the past few years to promote it further. Without a doubt, it can be concluded that contemporary Russian cultural production is present and quite visible in Serbia.

However, the situation is very different if we analyse the presentation of the Russian mass culture in Serbia's media and mass culture and vice versa. Serbian "Russophilia" has little in common with contemporary Russia and its citizens. Majority of Serbs have an idealized image of Russia based on ideological concepts and a value system that is related to the family tradition or educational system, passed from generation to generation. Majority of Serbs have never visited Russia nor do they speak the language and base their judgement on history textbooks, Serbia's tabloids and Russia's state-run media. For most Serbs, Russophilia is the rejection of Western values and the symbol of a traditionalist and conservative system of values embodied by Russia.

This year also marks the 180th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Serbia. As part of the anniversary, the Center for Russian Studies was opened at the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science in February 2018, providing the possibility of systematic study of Russia.⁴⁴ Academia and culture overlap in many ways, and while academic cooperation and exchange are flourishing in scope, they do not necessarily in quality. For example, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund⁴⁵ provides scholarships to Serbian students and organizes travel to Russia. Besides, a new international platform, "The Belgrade Strategic Dialogue", was created in June 2017 with the goal of enhancing Russian-Serbian cooperation and holding expert-level discussions on international issues.⁴⁶ The new platform is being created under the auspices of Serbia's top leadership and in cooperation with the Zinoviev International Intellectual Club.⁴⁷ According to the local media, this state-supported pro-Russian security conference was organized by NGO called Foundation of Belgrade Strategic Dialogue registered two weeks prior to the conference.⁴⁸

⁴⁴"Svečano otvoren Centar za ruske studije Fakulteta političkih nauka i potpisan Memorandum o razumevanju sa MGIMO," Faculty of Political Sciences, <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/14596?jezik=lat> and <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/17481-minister-dacic-at-the-opening-of-the-centre-of-russia-studies-at-the-faculty-of-political-sciences>.

⁴⁵ The Fund was established in accordance with a decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dmitry A. Medvedev on February 2, 2010, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/>.

⁴⁶ Belgrade Strategic Dialogue, <https://www.belgradestrategicdialogue.org/govornici-jun-2017>

⁴⁷ "Press review: Russian-Serbian plan for Balkan dialogue and Moscow's pick for new UN agency", *TASS*, June 2, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, <http://tass.com/pressreview/949247><http://tass.com/pressreview/949247>

⁴⁸ "Belgrade Strategic Dialogue: State-supported pro-Russian security conference?", *European Western Balkans*, July 4, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/07/04/belgrade-strategic-dialogue-state-supported-pro-russian-security-conference/>

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According to the Serbian Business Registers Agency, members of Managerial Board of Foundation BSD work at the Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija.⁴⁹

Having this in mind, there has been a significant increase in the pro-Russian organizations in Serbia. Belgrade Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies in 2016 has mapped 110 organizations that promote various aspects of Serbian-Russian relations⁵⁰, but these figures have changed. Many of these organisations have been established in the past 2-3 years and focus on academic and/or students exchange, policy discussions, conferences or cultural events. However, the majority of them act as the right-wing movements and use a prefix like “Serbian”, “patriotic”, “patriarchal” etc. The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Belgrade, NIS Gaspromneft and various Russian NGOs and groups are among some of the supporters of these pro-Russian organisations.

When it comes to religion, it needs to be stressed that spiritual links between Orthodox Christians existed regardless of the cooperation among the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church. The relations have intensified after 2008, with Russia providing substantial material support for the reconstruction of Serbian churches and Metohija. In the New Cemetery, in part called the *Russian necropolis*⁵¹, there is a Iversk chapel containing the name of Vladimir Putin who supported the reconstruction.⁵² In addition, several streets and squares in the Serbian capital are being (re)named after Russian and Soviet heroes, diplomats, intellectuals, architects etc.⁵³

CHINA

The perception of China as a promising economic partner appears to obscure the awareness throughout the region of all other forms of the PRC's presence. Not much attention is paid to China's political influence, and even less to its cultural one. While the economic impact of

⁴⁹<http://pretraga2.apr.gov.rs/FoundationAndEndowmentWebSearch/Details/Details?beid=8744553&rnd=572B3F1EF6B748CBF600A4EABC32E7B05906CFC3>

⁵⁰ See the Study “Eyes Wide Shut” from April 2016 at <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/sr/publikacije/studija-sirom-zatvorenih-ociju>

⁵¹ The Embassy of Russia, <http://ambasadarusije.rs/sr/o-ruskom-nekropolju-u-beogradu>

⁵² “Putin's chapel in the midst of Belgrade, in the Russian necropolis (VIDEO)”, *Telegraf*, March 28, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/2693633-putins-chapel-in-the-midst-of-belgrade-in-the-russian-necropolis-video>

⁵³ The Old Town, in King Milan Street, will be named after the Russia's Alexandrov Military Song and Dance Ensemble, whose members were killed in a plane crash late 2017. Accessed October 18, 2018, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2017&mm=04&dd=20&nav_id=101072.

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relations with China typically tends to be exaggerated, even at times over hyped, political and cultural influences tend to be underreported, and not well understood.

In the PRC, culture, media and education are all parts of the propaganda system. They are construed not as autonomous areas, but rather tools for the Communist Party to shape the consciousness of the “people.” Despite similarities with Communist-Era Eastern Europe, this basic fact tends to be forgotten in the region.

Similarly, in its overseas activities, the CCP’s “culture and education” links are parts of the waixuan, or “external propaganda” apparatus. Just like in their domestic application, culture and education are meant to serve a political purpose. Seemingly innocuous activities, like academic conferences, are guided and coordinated by the “United Front” (tong zhan) system. This has been greatly enhanced in resources and manpower under General Secretary Xi Jinping, who, echoing Mao Zedong, calls the concept one of the CCP’s three “Magic Weapons” (together with the army and the Communist Party itself). The basic aim is to “make friends and isolate enemies,” which mostly means mobilizing Lenin’s “useful idiots” to offset elements hostile to the CCP’s ideology and rule.

The friends (or useful idiots) are most readily found, apart from sections of the political establishments, in culture and education circles. Typical channels to organize “friends” are Confucius Institutes, Friendship Associations, “Belt and Road” Think Tanks, etc. For example, the General Administration of the Confucius Institute (Hanban) is part of the Ministry of Education of China, headquartered in Beijing, and thus directly associated with Chinese Communist Party’s agenda of spreading its controversial foreign policy agenda. In most Western Balkan countries, there are more than one Confucius Institutes and Friendship Associations under various names, often running their own media operations in the form of websites which emphasize China’s achievements and friendly contacts with the locals.

The Belt and Road think tanks are typically run by ex-politicians, in some cases communists veterans like Milošević’s Foreign Minister, Zivadin Jovanović, who heads the Silk Road Connectivity Research Center in Belgrade. At the same time, the PRC stands ready to hedge their bets by supporting oppositional think tanks, too, like Vuk Jeremić’s Center for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), sponsored generously by the notorious Chinese company, CEFC.

China also builds cultural centers throughout the region, the biggest one also in Belgrade, where it will be symbolically located at the site of the former Chinese embassy, which was bombed during the NATO airstrikes in 1999. Belgrade also boasts a Sino-Serbian Friendship

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Square, a Confucius statue, and even a small Chinatown, among other visible vestiges of its “steel friendship” with the PRC.

Like elsewhere in CEE, cultural links often feature the latest CCP fads. One of them is traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), personally supported in its overseas expansion by Xi Jinping. A plethora of other exchanges are organized under the 16+1 initiative, including junkets for journalists, and other “friendly contacts”.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Being aware of the importance of cultural ties, China has over the past year launched a number of cultural events in BiH, which seem to be aimed to complement China's aggressive mainly economic offensive on the country.

Among other events, China started organizing celebrations of Chinese New Year in Sarajevo⁵⁴; marked the Chinese day of Love in Banja Luka⁵⁵; or organized a summer camp of Chinese language and culture for BiH students.⁵⁶

China has been building its cultural and academic presence in BiH mostly through its very active embassy; through the two Confucius Institutes which operate within the Sarajevo University since 2014 and in the Banja Luka University since January 2018; the Association of Bosnian-Chinese Friendship⁵⁷, which operates in BiH since May 2014 and which also includes a web portal Kina-Danas (China-Today)⁵⁸ which is covering China-related developments in BiH and Croatia; as well as the Centre for Promotion and Development of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ "Kineska nova godina obilježena u Sarajevu uz bogat program i vatromet," *FENA news agency*, January 18, 2017., accessed October 22, 2018, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/kineska-nova-godina-obiljezena-u-sarajevu-uz-bogat-program-i-vatromet/170118147>.

⁵⁵ "Konfucijev institut / U Banjoj Luci proslavljen kineski dan zaljubljenih," *Radio Sarajevo*, August 18, 2018, October 16, 2018, <https://www.radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala/teme/u-banjoj-luci-proslavljen-kineski-dan-zaljubljenih/309868>

⁵⁶ "Ljetnikamp kineskog jezika studente i srednjoškolce," Sarajevo University announcement, May 15, 2018.

⁵⁷ Bosnian-Chinese Friendship, <http://www.boskin.ba/>.

⁵⁸ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accessed October 18, 2018, <http://www.kina-danas.com/>.

⁵⁹ One belt one road initiative, accessed October 18, 2018, <http://pojasiput.ba/>.

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However the presence of these organizations in the general public remains very low and their occasional activities, promoting visits of Chinese journalists, businessmen and other officials and institutions, still have little impact.⁶⁰

Kosovo

In contrast to other Western Balkan countries, Kosovo, not recognized by China, stays out of China's orbit. To the cultural sphere, this applies even more visibly than to the economic or political one. Therefore, there are no significant Chinese activities aiming at spreading its 'soft power' in Kosovo.

Macedonia

A "Confucius" Center was formed in Macedonia as early as 2004.⁶¹ It is estimated that over 200 people study the Chinese language annually in Macedonia, either through the Center or elsewhere.⁶² Another significant development in the realm of education has been the scholarship program initiated in 2016 for exchange students from Goce Delchev University in Shtip by the Technology Department at Wuhan University in China.⁶³

Beyond the realm of education, the Ministries of Culture of the two countries signed in 2017 an Executive Program for Cultural Cooperation for 2018-2023.⁶⁴ This program "envisages an exchange of artistic groups and exhibitions, academic research, workshops in the field of literature [and] film, direct cooperation between cultural organizations and writers' associations, [and] the cooperation between libraries and institutions dealing with preservation of cultural heritage.⁶⁵ Moreover, as part of China's 16+1 Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe, Macedonia will be hosting the 4th Ministerial Forum for Cultural Cooperation in 2019.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Interview, former Bosnian official who is involved in some of these activities, September 2018.

⁶¹ „Одбележан светскиот ден на институтите „Конфуциј“,“ *А1он.мк*, September 24, 2014, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://a1on.mk/archives/386769>.

⁶² „Сè повеќе Македонци сакаат да го изучуваат кинескиот јазик,“ *Nova Makedonija*, April 19, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018

⁶³ “(Видео) Кинескиот универзитет Вухан доделува стипендии за студентите на УГД,“ *Life UGD*, June 22, 2016, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://life.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/studenti-life/item/1072-kineskiot-univerzitet-vuhan-dodeluva-stipendii-za-studentite-na-ugd>.

⁶⁴ “Macedonia, China sign executive agreement on cultural cooperation”, *MIA*, September 22, 2017., accessed October 15, 2018, <https://mia.mk/EN/Inside/RenderSingleNews/325/133869288>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ “Macedonia hosts China-CEEC Coordination Center for Cultural Cooperation”, *MIA*, March 2, 2018, October

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Tourist links between the two countries are scarce. Chinese citizens require a visa to visit Macedonia, and Macedonian citizens require a visa to visit China.⁶⁷

Montenegro

In February 2015, China established its first Confucius Institute in Montenegro at the only state university in the country, University of Montenegro. The initiative was based on the agreement between the two governments on Scientific and Technological Cooperation and the bilateral agreement on cooperation between the University of Montenegro and Changsha University of Science and Technology. The official institute's goal is promoting Chinese culture and language, improving understanding of China abroad, connecting individuals and institutions dealing with Chinese language and culture, as well as other cultural and educational activities between the two countries.⁶⁸

In addition to the University of Montenegro, the Chinese language courses are offered at the University of Donja Gorica⁶⁹ and in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, not only in Podgorica, but several other towns as well. Around 700 students get enrolled annually.

The Institute also participates in the organization of academic conferences. In July 2018, a conference country's perceptions on the Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 Cooperation was held in cooperation with China-CEE Institute and Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁷⁰

Although Confucius Institutes around the world are heavily criticized for undermining academic freedom, others defend them arguing that they are not different from other

15, 2018, <https://www.mia.mk/en/Inside/RenderSingleNews/289/134138774>.

⁶⁷ "Entry Visa for the Republic of Macedonia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia, accessed October 15, 2018, http://www.mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=131&Itemid=433&lang=mk#%D1%82.

⁶⁸ "We are planning to introduce Chinese language as elective at some faculties," *MNE magazin*, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://mnemagazin.me/2018/10/15/director-of-confucius-institute-at-um-milena-djukanovic-we-are-planning-to-introduce-chinese-language-as-elective-at-some-faculties/>.

⁶⁹ "Raspored predavanja za strane jezike za zimski semestar," University of Donja Gorica, 2018/2019, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.udg.edu.me/cfl/files/download/1537714273_3740.pdf.

⁷⁰ "International Conference "How Montenegro Perceives the Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 Cooperation," July 9th, 2018", *China-CEE*, July 10, 2018, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://china-cee.eu/2018/07/10/international-conference-how-montenegro-perceives-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-161-cooperation-montenegro-july-9th-2018/>.

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cultural centres, such as German's Goethe-Institut or Spain's Instituto Cervantes. In Montenegro, local media is not reporting about these controversies and average Montenegrins are not aware of spreading Chinese foreign policy objectives and enhancing China's soft power via similar tools.⁷¹

Several years in a row now, bigger Montenegrin cities have hosted events and artistic performances, celebrating Chinese New Year and the Spring Festival. This year's event took place at the National Theatre in Podgorica, hosted by the Chinese Ambassador Cui Zhiwei.⁷² Such events are usually supported by the Chinese Embassy and regularly attended by Montenegrin officials.

Diversifying their cooperation, Montenegro and China signed a "Memorandum of cooperation in the field of planting and processing of Chinese medicinal herbs" in November 2016 during the 16+1 summit in Riga. A clinic in Podgorica serves as a model for the development of TCM in the region.

Serbia

Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Serbia is one of the main promoters of Chinese culture. There are active Chinese language schools, including the two Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad University. The Confucius Institute in Belgrade⁷³ was opened in 2006 at the Faculty of Philosophy, the University of Belgrade with the main purposes of educating Serbians in the Chinese language, history, and culture. This institute hosts cultural activities such as showcasing Chinese movies, teaching Serbians how to cook Chinese cuisines, hosting exhibitions of Chinese art, etc.

The government of Serbia in cooperation with Chinese Embassy realized a pilot project for the introduction of the Chinese language into 31 primary and secondary schools in Serbia.⁷⁴ This joint project started in 2012 and involved about 2500 students of primary and secondary schools in Serbia. It was evaluated in 2016, and one of the conclusions of a public debate organized by the Embassy of the Republic of China and the Confucius Institute was

⁷¹ Anonymous interview, October 12, 2018.

⁷² "Pogledajte kako je bilo na proslavi Proljećnog festivala," *Vijesti online*, February 5, 2018, accessed October 16, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/pogledajte-kako-je-bilo-na-proslavi-proljećnog-festivala-974588>.

⁷³ Konfucius Institute in Belgrade, <http://konfucije.fil.bg.ac.rs/wp/>.

⁷⁴ Sanja Zrnic, "Kineski raj u srpskim učionicama", *Vreme*, broj 1107, March 22, 2012, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1042266>, Tanjug, S.R.T, "Chinese language from Monday at 32 schools in Belgrade", *Blic*, March 14, 2012, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/kineski-od-ponedeljka-u-32-skole-u-srbiji/z5f0clv>.

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that the Chinese language could become an elective or compulsory elective subject in our schools.⁷⁵

New Chinese Culture Club has been recently opened within the Confucius Institute and offers the possibility to rent materials on Chinese culture and language. There has also been established “Student Club of Chinese University” the aim of gathering all students who have graduated or who are studying in China. Different universities from China present on an annual basis their study programs at the Educational Fair in Belgrade with the aim to achieve inter-institutional cooperation and increase students' interest in continuing studies in Asia.

Cultural and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation grew more vibrant in the recent period, particularly after the two countries signed the Program of Cooperation in the Areas of Culture and Art Between the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2013-2016.⁷⁶ The first mass culture event - the “Days of Chinese Culture,” organized by the Chinese Embassy was held in 2009⁷⁷, but only after 2015, there is a festival of Chinese culture and tradition in Serbia organized on an annual basis and followed by the Chinese Film Festival Week⁷⁸.

Currently, a new Chinese Cultural Center in Belgrade is being built⁷⁹ on the site of the former Chinese embassy in New Belgrade, demolished during the NATO bombing in 1999.⁸⁰ This will

⁷⁵ “In Belgrade Chinese language is learnt by almost 3000 pupils and students”, *RTS*, October 7, 2016, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/2480521/u-srbiji-kineski-jezik-uci-oko-3000-djaka-i-studenata.html>, “In Serbian schools English dominates but one language is tightly behind”, January 6, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, *Blic*, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/u-srpskim-skolama-dominira-ucenje-engleskog-ali-jos-jedan-jezik-mu-se-opasno/rk02he9>.

⁷⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China and Serbia”, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/xos_664404/gjlb_664408/3260_664742/.

⁷⁷ “Dani kineske kulture u Srbiji”, *SEE.cult*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.seecult.org/vest/dani-kineske-kulture-u-srbiji>.

⁷⁸ Yugoslav cinema, <http://www.kinoteka.org.rs/programi/nedelja-kineskog-filma/>.

⁷⁹ The project worth 45 million euros is funded by the Shandong Hi-Speed Group, and the contractor is Empiret company. A Serbian construction company Energoprojekt Holding announced that its subsidiary Visokogradnja would be the main contractor in the construction of the Chinese Cultural Center in Belgrade, “Chinese Cultural Center in Belgrade”, accessed October 19, 2018,

http://www.energoprojekt.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1017%3Akineski-kulturni-centar-u-beogradu-srbija-&catid=25%3Athe-project&Itemid=81&lang=en, “Energoprojekt Visokogradnja to build Chinese Cultural Center in Belgrade – Job worth EUR 28.3 million”, December 5, 2017, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/1963289/energoprojekt-visokogradnja-to-build-chinese-cultural-center-in-belgrade-job-worth-eur>.

⁸⁰ “Construction of Chinese cultural center in New Belgrade begins – Investment worth EUR 45 million”, *E-kapija*, July 20, 2017, accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/1825123/construction-of-chinese-cultural-center-in-new-belgrade-begins-investment-worth-eur>

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be the first and biggest cultural centre in the Balkans and one of the largest in the rest of Europe.⁸¹ It will cover 32,300 square meters and feature four separate zones — a Chinese cultural center, embassy apartments, a business reception area, and office space.⁸² According to an agreement signed between the Ministry of Culture and Shandong provincial government, the construction of the centre will be completed by the end of 2019. There is also a plan for Serbia to open its cultural center in Beijing by the end of this year.

Independent media reporting and coverage on China are scarce. Some pundits claim that China has been investing in Serbian journalists by inviting them at BRI-related events, resulting in spreading of a positive image of the country.⁸³ There have been a few attempts to launch a domestic website or media that will promote China's culture and interests in Serbia but met with rather limited results so far.

TURKEY

As of 2002, Turkey introduced its "soft power" approach to the region under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (the AKP). The new course was largely invented and managed by Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister and Prime Minister at the time, yet the leading power behind the policy line was Turkish Premier, and now President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Turkish soft power approach paid special attention to cultural, religious, and academic cooperation, especially between the Turkish and Balkan Muslim population, and was built on numerous institutions which the Turkish government established for such a purpose. These include the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TIKA, Yunus Emre Institutes, and Turkish state-backed media outlets broadcasting in regional languages. Turkey also significantly invested in academic cooperation, establishing university partnerships and supporting student exchanges. Turkish soap operas, TV shows, and the entertainment industry have become highly popular throughout the region, creating a positive image of

⁸¹ "Kineski kulturni centar u Beogradu – prvi na Balkanu", *RTS*, September 13, 2017, accessed October 17, 2018, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/16/kultura/2868216/kineski-kulturni-centar-u-beogradu--prvi-na-balkanu.html>.

⁸² According to the draft project, numerous facilities for the population, multimedia hall, presentations hall, classrooms and galleries will be located on the lower floors of the center. The business wing will represent the office space for economic branch, and the apartment wing with a total capacity of 19 apartments and 35 rooms is intended for accommodating diplomatic delegations, employees and guests. See more information at <https://belgrade-beat.com/magazine/2017/08/the-chinese-cultural-center-is-being-built-in-belgrade>

⁸³ Phillipe le Corre, "China's Rise as a Geoeconomic Influencer: Four European Case Studies", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 15, 2018.

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Turkey and bringing Turkish way of life—‘a balanced mix of Islam, democracy, free market, modernity and traditionalism’—closer to the local population. Turkey has also become a fashionable holiday destination partly due to such an approach.

Last but not least, ever since an unsuccessful coup in 2016, Erdogan has been pressuring the Western Balkan countries to close institutions associated with Fethullah Gulen’s movement, but they have continued to operate and repercussions from Turkey have so far been either non-existent, or relatively mild.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Turkey is for Bosniaks what Russia is for Bosnian Serbs. After some 500 years of Ottoman rule over the Balkans which only ended in 1912-3, Turkey kept close ties with the region, but especially with Bosnia and Bosniaks. While the Turkish presence was less visible in modern Yugoslavia after World War II, it started steadily increasing during and after the breakup of former Yugoslavia and especially during BiH's war when Turkey - like many other Islamic countries - provided Bosniaks with political support and funds, which Bosniak leadership in most cases used for the purchase of weapons and ammunition.

Guided by the “soft power” strategy and supported by ample funds, TIKA has renovated hundreds of mosques and other historical monuments in the region, financed local projects and organized large events designed to reinforce and revive bonds with Turkey. Among the most prominent and visible projects was Turkish participation in the reconstruction of the famous Old Bridge in the southern city of Mostar⁸⁴ and the reconstruction of equally famous 16th century Mehmed Pasa Sokolovic bridge worth some 5 million euro. Turkey was also one of the main donors behind the reconstruction of the famous Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka, which was built in the 16th century, enlisted by the UNESCO in 1950, destroyed in the war on 7 May 1993 and rebuilt in line with the original blueprints and officially reopened on the same date in 2016. Turkish Premier Davutoglu, who participated in the opening ceremony, said on that occasion that "Turkey was always here (in BiH), is here now, and will remain here forever."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Turkish TIKA participated with 1 million USD in the 15.5 million USD-worth project for the reconstruction of Mostar's 16th century old bridge and a part of the surrounding old town. The bridge was destroyed in shelling during the war in 1993 and was reconstructed in line with the original blueprints in 2004. The bridge was inscribed on the list of UNESCO's World Heritage sites in 2005.

⁸⁵ "OtvorenaobnovljenaFerhadija; Davutoglu: VraticeTursku u BiH," *Vecernjenovosti*, May 7, 2016, accessed 24, 2018, http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:604130-Otvorena-obnovljena-dzamija-Ferhadija-u-Banjaluci-Dodik-RS-pokazala-otvorenost-i-opredeljenje-za-mir.

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The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet, is another instrument of Turkey's soft power. It offers religious education, theological guidance, direct financial assistance and even mediates in disputes between regional governments and local Muslim communities. Diyanet officials have been regularly visiting their counterparts in BiH's Islamic Community and organizing projects to support Bosniaks who were actively practising Islam.

Kosovo

Kosovo was under the Ottoman rule for around five centuries, and the Turkish influence in Kosovo is evident in many aspects, including language, cuisine, architecture and culture in general. Over the past years, Turkey has not hidden the desire to extend its influence in culture, religion, and education in Kosovo. Media in Kosovo have cited former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as saying in 2014 during a visit in Skopje that "we will deliver Turkish dictionaries for every family in Skopje and we are working in the whole Balkans, especially in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, to see a renewal of our culture."⁸⁶

As a matter of fact, three years before this statement, the Ministry of Education in Kosovo, at a request by Turkish state authorities, had started "reediting" of history textbooks. More specifically, the Ministry of Education had carried out corrections in the textbooks for students of the 5th through 13th grade so that mentions of violence or cruelty at the hands of the Ottoman empire in the Albanian inhabited areas were omitted.

BIRN analyzed some of those amended paragraphs: for instance, in the history book for grade 5, on page 62, the words "violence" and "killing" in relation to the Ottoman Empire, were erased and replaced with the words "rule" and "detention." On page 48 of the same book, in part relating to the appropriation of Albanian estates and wealth, the words "revenge" and "killing" were replaced with "taking of estates" and "introduction of taxes" as well as "deportation of a part of the local population."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ "Davutoglu: We Are Working for renewing our culture in Kosovo and Albania", *Zeri*, December 24, 2014, accessed October 25, 2018, <http://zeri.info/aktuale/12568/davutoglu-po-punojme-qe-te-rilindim-kulturen-turke/>.

⁸⁷ Musliu, Jeton: "Change of History Softens Ottoman Empire", *Kallxo.com*, December 17, 2012, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://kallxo.com/gjnk/ndryshimi-i-historise-zbut-perandorine-osmane/>

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In the field of education, besides the request to correct textbooks, Turkish President Erdogan has requested closing down the schools established by his rival, Fethullah Gulen. However, the Kosovo institutions have not abided by this demand.⁸⁸

Another aspect that Turkey has attached special importance over the past years is investments in building and restoration of a considerable number of schools and mosques in Kosovo, especially through the funds allocated by TIKA.⁸⁹ This organization recently took over the renovation of two oldest mosques in Kosovo, one in Prishtina and another one in Prizren.⁹⁰

One of Kosovo's main newspapers, *Zeri*, reported in August 2015 that the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, *Diyanet*, had started construction of the first school on Quran teaching in Peje (Western Kosovo). According to this newspaper, this organization had been granted a permit to construct a residential bloc although behind this investment was establishing of the Hivzi Mehmet Akif institute for Quran teaching.⁹¹

The biggest mosque in Kosovo, which is expected to be constructed in Prishtina, will be funded by the Islamic Community of Turkey. The civil society in Kosovo has requested through a petition the review of mosque's project, arguing that it should be modern and not of a classical type, resembling the mosques built during the Ottoman Empire.⁹²

Last but not least, Turkish soap operas capture a significant broadcast time in Kosovar televisions. For years they are shown on national and local televisions, and it is estimated that they have a huge audience. Likewise, every year before the beginning of summer, Kosovar travel agencies sponsor TV stories on the Turkish Riviera, where a number of Kosovars spend their summer holidays.

⁸⁸ "Ministry of Education Denies Planning to Close Gulen Schools", *Koha.net*, July 6, 2018, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/103447/masht-i-mohon-se-planifikon-mbylljen-e-shkollave-te-gulen-it/>.

⁸⁹ Ahmeti, Nadie: "Millions of Turkish Investments in Kosovo", November 29, 2017, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/investimet-milioneshe-turke-ne-kosove-/28886628.html>.

⁹⁰ "TIKA Renovates Two Mosques in Kosovo", Klan Kosova TV, *TIKA*, June 11, 2018, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://klankosova.tv/tika-restauron-dy-xhamite-ne-kosove/>.

⁹¹ Xharra, Besiana: "Cheating Erdogan's Organizations in Kosovo", *Zeri.info*, August 18, 2015, accessed October 25, 2018, <http://zeri.info/aktuale/46948/organizatat-mashtruese-te-erdoganit-ne-kosove-foto/>.

⁹² "We Received Funds from Turkey For this Specific Project", *Insajderi.com*, July 18, 2017, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://insajderi.com/fondet-nga-turqia-per-xhamine-kemi-marre-per-kete-projekt/>.

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Macedonia

Turkey's cultural influence in Macedonia has been at least as significant as its economic and political influence, not least because of the Turkish minority in the country, which amounts to 4% of the population as per the 2002 census.⁹³ The historical proximity of the Macedonian and Turkish cultures is regularly referenced in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's statements about Macedonia.⁹⁴

The one arena of Turkish cultural relations that has dominated the headlines is education, as Macedonia has been experiencing the broader Erdogan-Gülen movement conflict. The first private high school in Macedonia—Yahya Kemal College—is a Turkish school associated with Gülen's Hizmet movement. The college has six branches in four cities in Macedonia and is widely considered as one of the most prestigious high school institutions in the country. The Turkish government has tried to put pressure on Macedonia to shut down these schools, but the Macedonian government has refused to fulfil this request. In May, the Turkish Ambassador to Macedonia gave the keynote at the opening of Maarif—a Turkish state-run education foundation—and insisted that parents who don't want their children to become "terrorists" should send their children to Maarif and not Yahya Kemal.⁹⁵ The Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly rebuked this remark.⁹⁶

At the level of university education, there are thousands of Turkish citizens studying in Macedonia,⁹⁷ but their number might have gone down after Turkey's decision to no longer recognize Macedonian academic certificates in January 2017,⁹⁸ presumably as a consequence of Macedonia's refusal to provide unconditional support to the anti-Gülenist repression in Turkey. It is difficult to estimate the number of Macedonian citizens studying in Turkey, but one interesting development was the introduction of government-funded

⁹³ "Попис на населението, домаќинствата и становите во Република Македонија," State Statistical Office, May 2005, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>.

⁹⁴ "Катимерини": Турција, а не Скопје претставува реална закана за грчкиот суверенитет," *Macedonia 365*, February 2, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://macedonia365.com/4715/>.

⁹⁵ "Turkish ambassador implies Gülen schools in Macedonia raise terrorists," *Turkish Minute*, September 5, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2018/05/09/turkish-ambassador-implies-gulen-schools-in-macedonia-raise-terrorists/>.

⁹⁶ "МНР: Неодмерена Е Изјавата На Турската Амбасадорка За Јахја Кемал'," *Denes Magazin*, September 6, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://denesmagazin.mk/mnr-neodmerena-e-izjavata-na-turskata-ambasadorka-za-jahja-kemal/>.

⁹⁷ "ТУРЦИЈА НЕМА ДА ГИ ПРИЗНАВА МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ ДИПЛОМИ, СТУДЕНТИТЕ ИСПЛАШЕНИ," *Sakam da kazam*, January 21, 2017, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/turtsija-nema-da-gi-priznava-makedonskite-diplomi-studentite-isplasheni/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

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scholarships by the Macedonian Ministry of Education for 20 Macedonian students of Ottoman Turkish at Turkish universities.⁹⁹

Furthermore, both Yunus Emre and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) are present in Macedonia. Yunus Emre's language classes have been frequented by over 1,000 people since the founding of the center in 2010.¹⁰⁰ The center also engages in cultural activities such as book clubs for adults, reading children stories to children throughout Macedonia, and networking events.¹⁰¹ TIKA has also been extremely active, most notably in the (re-construction of hospitals and mosques, such as the Halveti Hayati Çullu Baba Tekke and Mosque in the city of Kicevo.

Macedonian-Turkish tourism links are very strong. There are no visa restrictions for either Turkish citizens traveling to Macedonia or for Macedonian citizens traveling to Turkey¹⁰², and there are regular flights from Skopje to Istanbul.

Montenegro

There are historical, cultural and religious links between Montenegro and Turkey. One part of today's Montenegro, Sandzak, was under the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years and it is populated by Bosniaks, Montenegrin Muslims, and Albanians, comprising 17% of the population of Montenegro.¹⁰³ Thanks to such ties, Turkey considers the whole Western Balkans part of its natural sphere of influence and is steadily returning to the region, using primarily its soft power (e.g., Turkish soap operas, music, flight connections with Istanbul and other popular destinations in Turkey).

The success of Turkish soap operas in the Western Balkans is often connected with an old patriarchal family model that is relatively gone from the region, but also because these 'easy-to-watch' shows depict everyday family stories and lack violence. The phenomenon of

⁹⁹ "Конкурс за доделување на 20 стипендии за додипломски и постдипломски студии по старотурски јазик," *Ministry of Education and Science*, January 29, 2016, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.mon.gov.mk/index.php/konkursi/1031-konkurs-staroturski>.

¹⁰⁰ "Расте интересот за учење на турскиот јазик во Македонија," *AA*, September 24, 2016, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/mk/%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%/>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² "Entry Visa for the Republic of Macedonia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia, accessed October 15, 2018,

http://www.mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=131&Itemid=433&lang=mk.

¹⁰³ "Relations between Turkey and Montenegro", Republic of Turkey, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed October 16, 2018, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-montenegro%20.en.mfa>.

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Turkish soap operas has been responsible for increasing tourism and visits to Turkey as fans come to visit Istanbul and other popular cities from the shows.

The agreement the Montenegrin government signed with the Islamic Union of Montenegro in January 2012 was applauded by Turkey, as it gave legal and constitutional recognition to Muslims in Montenegro. This document gave the right to the Religious Affairs Directorate in Ankara, Diyanet, to mediate in cases of disagreement between members of the Muslim community in Montenegro. This was a noteworthy step as the Montenegrin government allowed a third party to interfere in its own affairs.¹⁰⁴ Rifat Fejzić, the President of the Islamic community in Montenegro, keeps close personal relations with his Turkish counterparts and officials.

In 2007, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) office started functioning in Podgorica, undertaking social, cultural and infrastructure projects.¹⁰⁵ One of its goals is the protection of Turkish cultural heritage by restoring mosques and other sacral objects. Such projects have been implemented in Montenegro. For instance, the Osmanagić mosque, one of two mosques in the center of Podgorica¹⁰⁶, and the Bioče mosque in Rožaje¹⁰⁷ were completed by the TIKA.

The cultural and language-learning sphere is also in place. It is mostly conducted through the Turkish cultural institute Yunus Emre, established in 2014 by the Turkish government and by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decree. The institute offers Turkish language courses and conducts cultural activities. However, both organizations have been widely regarded as Turkish soft power institutions and are filled with employees who work closely with Turkey's internal agencies, implementing Erdoğan's policies.¹⁰⁸

Montenegro and Turkey also cooperate in the field of education. There are partnerships between universities and student exchange programs on both sides. There has been an

¹⁰⁴ "Turkey and Montenegro - Two best examples in Balkans", *Zaman*, March 23, 2013, accessed October 17, 2018, <http://www.predsjednik.gov.me/en/press-center/interviews/112824/Today-s-Zaman.html>.

¹⁰⁵ "Çavuşoğlu: Erdoğan to visit Montenegro by end of the year", *European Western Balkans*, May 10, 2017, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/05/10/cavusoglu-erdogan-to-visit-montenegro-by-end-of-the-year/>.

¹⁰⁶ "TIKA's Mosque Restoration Projects", TIKA. 2012, accessed October 17, 2018, http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tikas_mosque_restoration_projects-8601.

¹⁰⁷ "The Bioče Mosque which was Reconstructed in Montenegro Has Been Opened for Service", *TIKA*, 2013, accessed October 17, 2018, http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/the_bioce_mosque_which_was_reconstructed_in_montenegro_has_been_opened_for_service-8851.

¹⁰⁸ "Turkey's Balkan policy is a disaster", *abdullahbozkurtblog*, May 22, 2015, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://abdullahbozkurtblog.wordpress.com/2015/05/22/turkeys-balkan-policy-is-a-disaster/>.

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increased number of scholarships for Montenegrin students in Turkey, and there are regular calls for scholarships provided by the Turkish government. According to the 2017 data, 82 students from Montenegro have completed their studies on this scholarship.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Erdogan has asked the Western Balkan governments to shut down schools affiliated with the movement of Fethullah Gülen and extradite to Turkey his supporters. On the list of the so-called Gulen schools, the University Mediterranean was the only institution from Montenegro.¹¹⁰ However, the University's rectorate denies any connection with the Gulen movement and remains open until today. Allegedly, there are several uninfluential institutions of this kind in Podgorica and Rožaje. The Montenegrin authorities stay rather unvocal about the issue, as officially there are no institutions that are connected with the Gulen ideology.¹¹¹

Serbia

Turkey has been increasingly using its significant soft power potential to consolidate its political, economic, and cultural influence in the Balkans. Turkey's soft power in the region was reinforced by the popularity of Turkish culture, especially TV shows, broadcasting channels, and entertainment industries, promoting contemporary "Turkish model" of lifestyle. Due to visa-free travel, an increasing number of people from Serbia visit Turkey, learn Turkish, and aspire to study and work in Turkey as well. Also, the number of tourists coming from Turkey is increasing every year. For instance, during Euroleague Basketball in May 2018 approximately 15,000 Turkish citizens visited Belgrade according to the estimates by the National Tourism Office of Serbia.

Although Ottoman heritage is deeply rooted in Serbian history, culture, and language until recently, there were no Turkish cultural institutions in Serbia, the first Yunus Emre Institute in Belgrade¹¹² was opened in 2015. Before this, Turkish Cultural Center, as part of the Embassy of the Republic of Turkey, was opened in Novi Pazar in 2010. Both, Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Serbs are interested in learning the Turkish language, and the lecturers are Turkish professors from Novi Pazar and Turkish State University. The Centre organizes a free Turkish language course and so far more than a thousand students enrolled

¹⁰⁹ "Dogovoren veći broj stipendija za studiranje u Turskoj," *CDM*, December 14, 2017, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/dogovoren-veci-broj-stipendija-za-studiranje-u-turskoj/>.

¹¹⁰ "List of Gulen Schools around the World", *linkedin*, accessed October 18, 2018, <https://www.slideshare.net/GulenCemaat/gulen-schools-worldwide-list>.

¹¹¹ "Hizmetovih škola zvanično nema u Crnoj Gori", *Radio Free Europe*, July 19 2016, accessed October 29, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/hizmetovih-skola-zvanicno-nema-u-crnoj-gori/27867515.html>.

¹¹² Yunus Emre Institute, <https://belgrad.yee.org.tr/>

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the course, while 599 of them have received a certificate. In 2015, the Turkish language was introduced as an elective subject in Serbian gymnasium in Kragujevac.

Turkish high schools, such as Gazi Isa-beg madrassa in Novi Pazar, and universities are running in the Sandzak region. After the failed July 2016 coup in Turkey and the accusations against Gulen's movement, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on Western Balkan countries including Serbia to close all Gulen institutions. This refers to the primary school "Bejza", located in Čukarica, as well as "Bejza Educational Center" in the center of Belgrade. Unofficially, it is known that Gulen's organization "Hizmet" also holds several cultural and educational institutions in Vojvodina and Novi Pazar and its surroundings.¹¹³ As of now, none of these institutions has been closed by the Serbian government.

Furthermore, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TIKa, has been very active ever since its establishment in Serbia in 2009.¹¹⁴ TIKa has so far been known for humanitarian actions and projects in the field of culture and education, but more attention is now paid to infrastructural projects, health, agriculture, economic empowerment of poor, etc.¹¹⁵ TIKa has participated in the renovation of Ottoman heritage sites, such as Kalemegdan fortress in Belgrade, restoration of medieval fortress Ram and providing development assistance to the Muslim community in Serbia which is located mainly in Sandzak.

Turkey has built two primary schools in Novi Pazar in the past years and has reconstructed the hospital and court building. Four agreements were signed on the construction of a kindergarten, a bridge in the center of the city, a reconstruction of the hammam in the Old Bazaar in Novi Pazar, as well as the reconstruction of the hammam in Jošanička Bay.¹¹⁶ TIKa has also recently donated the IT equipment (the donation consisted of 25 laptops, a modern copier, four printers, and professional audio) worth 35,000 euro to the Women's Madrassa in Tutin.¹¹⁷ In addition, the Agency donated seven emergency vehicles to 7 hospitals in six

¹¹³ Vladimir Filipovic, "Zahtev iz Turske: Zatvorite Gulenove škole u Srbiji", *Blic*, October 26, 2016, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zahtev-iz-turske-zatvorite-gulenove-skole-u-srbiji/zrscxrv>

¹¹⁴ S. Bisevac "TIKA se ne bavi politikom, već pružanjem pomoći", *Danas*, November 17, 2013, accessed October 26, 2018, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/tika-se-ne-bavi-politikom-vec-pruzanjem-pomoci/>

¹¹⁵ Milica Rilak "TIKA Agency helps farmers from underdeveloped", *Biznis a Financije*, February 2016, accessed October 26, 2018, <http://bif.rs/2016/02/agencija-tika-pomaze-poljoprivrednicima-iz-nerazvijenih-opstina/>

¹¹⁶ Amela Bajrović, Ognjen Zorić, "Novi Pazar, Erdogan's homeland", *Radio Free Europe*, October 11, 2017, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/Erdoğan-novi-pazar/28786353.html>

¹¹⁷ "TIKA donated 35,000 eur to women's medres in Tutin equipment", *Sandzackatvmreza*, February 2, 2018, accessed October 26, 2018, <http://sandzackatv.rs/2018/02/02/tika-donirala-zenskoj-medresi-u-tutinu-opremu-u-vrijednosti-od-35-000-eura/>

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cities in the Sandzak region which is of great importance for the health sector, as this has enabled better health services for thousands of inhabitants.¹¹⁸

THE GULF STATES AND IRAN

The cultural and religious influence of the Gulf States and Iran have been historically very limited in the Western Balkans since countries in the region have been traditionally oriented towards the West, Russia, and Turkey. The culture and religion of the Balkan Muslims has been shaped by the Ottoman Sunni Islamic tradition, which throughout the centuries developed certain differences compared to the religious practice in the Gulf States, let alone Iran, where Shiism is the predominant branch of Islam.

Cultural relations were established during the wars in the 1990s, when a number of NGOs and Islamic preachers from the Gulf States arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later to Kosovo where they started introducing a more rigid interpretation of Islam, Salafism, which was largely foreign to the local Muslim populations. They were largely forced to withdraw after the 9/11 terrorist attacks because a significant number of them were linked to Al-Qaeda. This represented a blow to the cultural and religious footprint of the Gulf States in the region. However, it remains visible today due to the number of mosques built and reconstructed with the funds from the Gulf States and Salafism, which despite being a minor phenomenon, established firm roots in the region.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The cultural and religious presence and influence of the Gulf States and Iran in Bosnia have been historically very limited since Bosniaks have been traditionally more oriented towards the West and Turkey.

The role of the Gulf States and Iran increased somewhat during and after Bosnia's 1992-5 war, during which Bosniak leadership was forced to seek and accept help from any willing Muslim country. Most often this assistance was financial, which Bosniak leadership mostly used for the purchase of weapons and ammunition. However, some Islamic countries also supported foreign Islamic militants and various Islamic NGOs who brought fundamental interpretations of Islam and foreign cultural patterns to Bosnia and Herzegovina. These

¹¹⁸ More information about TIKa's assistance could be found in the bulletin <http://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/oldpublication/sirbistan.pdf>.

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newcomers did not only intimidate the non-Muslim population but many Bosniaks, as well as they, were repelled by their behaviour, culture and foreign religious practices.

Several hundred foreign Islamic fighters and preachers remained in BiH after the end of the war, took BiH citizenship and married local women. Some of them established local NGOs and local religious groups where they started spreading their fundamental religious practices - usually in exchange for financial support, clothes or even food, which drew in some of the most desperate and poor local people. Yet the number and influence of these groups decreased after the terrorist attack on New York On September 11, 2001, and the subsequent global clampdown on Islamic NGOs and other groups.

In subsequent years Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries focused mostly on cultural and religious relations. One of the most favoured activities of these countries was the construction or reconstruction of mosques. Since the end of the war and until recent years, Bosniak authorities have reconstructed more than 450 mosques that were damaged or destroyed during the war, and constructed at least 360 new ones.¹¹⁹ Many of these projects were funded or co-funded by Gulf or other Islamic countries.

But while this and similar engagement kept these Islamic countries present in BiH, they also caused frustration among a part of the local (even Bosniak) population, many of whom claimed that "BiH needed more factories and fewer mosques or churches."¹²⁰ Furthermore, this support often came with "strings attached" as Islamic countries and their officials tried to keep control over mosques that were constructed or reconstructed with their funds. One of the most visible cases was the King Fahd mosque, constructed by Saudi Arabia in 2000 and advertised as the biggest mosque in the Balkans. For several years, this mosque and the attached cultural centre - which enjoyed the status of Saudi Arabia's consular premises - were off the limits from local religious or security authorities.¹²¹ BiH's Islamic Community, facing growing disobedience and even threats from local radical Islamic groups in recent years moved to put them - including the King Fahd mosque - under its control. However, the King Fahd mosque is until nowadays perceived as a nest of radical Islam, taught and controlled by Saudi Arabia.¹²²

¹¹⁹ "Podsjećanje na 614 džamija porušenih u BiH," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, May 7, 2014, accessed October 25, 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/podsjecanje-na-614-dzamija-porusenih-u-bih>.

¹²⁰ Interview with BiH official, September 2018.

¹²¹ "Policija ne može da uđe u džamiju Kralj Fahd," *Nezavisne Novine daily*, August 27, 2008, accessed October 26, 2018, <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Policija-ne-moze-da-udje-u-dzamiju-Kralj-Fahd/27971>.

¹²² "Džemati se opirureisovom poglavarstvu," *Politika daily*, June 23, 2018, accessed October 25, 2018, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/406085/Dzemati-se-opiru-reisovom-poglavarstvu>.

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In recent years - again following the weakening of US and EU presence in Bosnia - involvement of Gulf Countries and Iran increased somewhat as Bosniak politicians moved to rebuild these connections. The involvement and influence of Iran remain marginal, among other things because of Western sanctions against Iran as well as religious differences between Shia Islam, which is practiced in Iran and Bosnia's traditional Sunni Islam. On the other hand, some of the Gulf Countries - especially Saudi Arabia - have increased their presence in Bosnia more significantly, mostly through private investments but even more so through a considerable influx of tourists from these countries who started coming to Europe, Balkans and Bosnia in greater numbers and started even purchasing some real-estate properties, as their traditional vacation spots in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey became insecure because of conflicts or political tensions.

The increased presence of people from Gulf countries have drawn mixed feelings among Bosnians, some of whom welcomed the new business opportunities, while others complained because of major differences between the cultures and religious practices as well as concerns that these newcomers could significantly change the ethnic, cultural and political map of the country.

Kosovo

The former head of the Assembly of the Kosovo Islamic Community, Xhabir Hamiti, has been recently ringing the bells about increasing influence of Saudi Arabia and countries of the Gulf in installing a spirit of a more radical religious interpretation of Islam in Kosovo. "Since the end of the war, we have publically stated that in Kosovo and wider area has rapidly started the installation of the spirit of a religious interpretation of Islam, which is being strongly backed-up by foreign donations mainly from Saudi Arabia and some countries of the Arabic Peninsula. Since then, this external spirit and this influence not only has not decreased but is growing on a daily basis, with the same, if not a bigger rhythm," said Hamiti in a commentary published in one of the most popular news portals in Kosovo, Express, in October 2018. He added that over 80 people are currently studying Islam in Saudi Arabia.¹²³

Kosovo is a secular state, with a majority of Muslim population. The country enjoys religious tolerance, but a tendency of radicalization of Albanians gradually began after the end of the Kosovo war. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Islamic nations invested massively in the

¹²³ Hamiti, Xhabir: "Saudi Arabia Was Never an Ideal Place for Islamic Studies", *Gazeta Express*, October 13, 2018, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/oped/arabia-saudite-kurre-s-ishte-vendi-ideal-per-studimin-e-islamit-584852/>.

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reconstruction of the country and the building of mosques. Gulf countries sent preachers to Kosovo and helped the needy.¹²⁴

The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies published recently a report entitled *Beyond the Triggers: New Threats of Violent Extremism in Kosovo*, where it notes that Kosovar foreign fighters who returned after spending time abroad will continue to be a threat or will exercise influence on the others in Kosovo. They would be able to do this by telling their personal histories of the conflict in Syria and Iraq or by praising about their participation in the establishment of the so-called Islamic State.¹²⁵ However, the number of these people is very small, and even though their actions receive wide media attention, their impact on the mainstream culture and religion in Kosovo is limited.

Macedonia

Relations between Macedonia and the Gulf states are extremely scarce, despite the existence of an Islamic Center in Macedonia that appears to be autonomous from official religious institutions.¹²⁶ The center boasts of having over 2,000 registered members, but its activities seem to be limited to preaching Islam instead of broader cultural engagement.¹²⁷ Furthermore, Macedonian citizens do require a visa to visit Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf States and have to travel all the way to London, Rome or Sofia to obtain one,¹²⁸ which makes the cultural exchange more difficult.

Macedonian-Iranian cultural relations are also scarce, despite a 2001 intergovernmental agreement on strengthening cultural relations.¹²⁹ They are slightly more developed than relations with the Gulf states. This is more of a by-product of the development of Serbian-Iranian relations than a genuine indication of Macedonian-Iranian proximity, as Macedonia

¹²⁴ Feilcke, Adelheid, "Is Kosovo a breeding ground for Islamists?", *DW*, 23 December 2016, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-kosovo-a-breeding-ground-for-islamists/a-36898392>.

¹²⁵ Kosovar Centre for Security Studies "Beyond the Triggers: New Threats of Violent Extremism in Kosovo", October 2018, <http://www.qkss.org/en/Reports/Beyond-the-triggers:-new-threats-of-violent-extremism-in-Kosovo--1144>.

¹²⁶ "За нас", Исламски Центар - *Исламски Да'ветски Сервис*, *Islamic Center*, December 9, 2009, accessed October 16, 2018, http://www.islamski-centar.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=173&Itemid=118#.W8T6tHtKi00

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ "Entry Visa for the Republic of Macedonia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia, accessed October 17, 2018, http://www.mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=131&Itemid=433&lang=mk.

¹²⁹ "Македонија и Иран со заеднички заложби за подобра културна соработка," *Ministry of Culture*, October 8, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, <http://www.kultura.gov.mk/index.php/odnosi-so-javnost/novosti/3084-2017-10-06-12-49-13>.

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has largely been taking advantage of the Belgrade-based Iranian Cultural Center for Serbia and Macedonia.¹³⁰ For instance, the center publishes the Persian-language magazine on Islamic culture, NUR, once every three months in Belgrade, and the magazine is then also distributed in Macedonia.¹³¹ Iranian cultural activities in Macedonian are highly limited, but the Iranian Embassy and the Cultural Center have occasionally organized short film festivals in Skopje accompanied by follow-up discussions with Iranian filmmakers.¹³²

Macedonian citizens do require a visa to visit Iran and have to travel to Sofia to obtain one.¹³³

Montenegro

The cooperation between the Gulf States/Iran and Montenegro in the areas of culture and academia is still at very early stages. There have been instances of economic collaboration, especially with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. As for Iran, the visa regime has been recently lifted, which provides space for more investors and people exchanges on both sides.

Serbia

The cultural influence of the Gulf States in Serbia has been historically very limited. On the other hand, cultural exchange with Iran, even though limited, has been the most important part of relations between Iran and the former Yugoslavia and now Serbia.¹³⁴ The SFRY had good cultural links with Iran both before and after the Islamic Revolution, largely thanks to the non-aligned policy of President Tito. Based on an agreement concluded between Iran and Yugoslavia in 1963, the Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran¹³⁵ was opened in Belgrade in 1990 with the aim of promoting cultural cooperation between the two countries and introducing the Yugoslav public with elements of Persian culture. Activities of the Cultural Center range from publishing and organizing courses for learning the Persian

¹³⁰ "За нас", Културен центар на ИР Иран за Србија и Македонија," *Cultural Center of I.R. Iran for Serbia and Macedonia* accessed October 17, 2018, <http://www.iran.mk/15-about-us>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² „Денови на иранската кинематографија во Кинотека на Македонија," *Cultural Center of IR Iran for Serbia and Macedonia*, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.iran.mk/news/news-kci/news-kci-006>.

¹³³ "Entry Visa for the Republic of Macedonia", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia*, http://www.mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=131&Itemid=433&lang=mk.

¹³⁴ Miomir Tuduric, "Balkansko-persijski divan", *Vreme no. 823*, October 12, 2006, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=467794>.

¹³⁵ Cultural center for of Iran for Serbia and Montenegro, <http://iriran.me/onama>.

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language to organizing annual film festivals, exhibitions, and various cultural events. From the very beginning, the Center was distinguished by its publishing activity. More than one hundred of the Persian books were translated into the Serbian language, while Iran participated in the last year's the 62nd International Belgrade Book Fair¹³⁶ with 500 titles.¹³⁷ Serbia has been invited as special guest in this year Tehran International Book Fair, and two Serbian books have recently been translated into the Persian language.¹³⁸

Since 1999, the Persian language has been studied as an elective subject at the Department of Oriental Studies and the number of students interested in mastering Persian is increasing every year. In addition to nurturing Iranian language and culture within the public, academic institutions, there has been recently established the Iranian Center at the private John Naisbitt University¹³⁹, former Megatrend University. The establishment of this centre is the result of an agreement between John Naisbitt University and Cultural Center of Iran in Belgrade. The Megatrend University is famous for hyperproduction of diplomas of "dubious quality" and numerous scandals over plagiarism involving even MA and Ph.D. theses of top Serbian politicians.¹⁴⁰ Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to ask what the reasoning of the Cultural Center is behind this cooperation. The Center aims at developing the academic cooperation between students and professors of John Naisbitt University and Iranian academic society (universities, institutes, research centers).¹⁴¹ However, the scope of academic cooperation and exchange is still not visible to the public.

The Iranian Cultural Center organizes well-known Iranian Film Festival on an annual basis in cooperation with domestic film institutions. So far 17 festivals of Iranian film have been held in cooperation with the Yugoslav Cinematheque. In addition, a great number of Iranian artists actively participate in domestic film festivals such as FEST, the Belgrade Documentary, and Short Film Festival and the International Archaeological Museum. The first Serbian Film Week was held in August this year in Teheran, Shiraz, and Tabriz.

¹³⁶ Jelena Tasić, "Nema prevodilaca i zainteresovanih za persijsku kulturu," *Danas*, October 25, 2016, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.danas.rs/kultura/solejmani-srpski-izdavaci-nezainteresovani-za-persijsku-knjizevnost/>.

¹³⁷ "500 Iranian Titles at Belgrade Book Fair", *Financial Tribune*, October 24, 2017, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/art-and-culture/74771/500-iranian-titles-at-belgrade-book-fair>.

¹³⁸ "Serbia Keen to Promote Iranian Artworks: Minister, Iran Front Page", *Iran Front Page*, May 1, 2018, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://ifpnews.com/exclusive/serbia-keen-to-promote-iranian-artworks-minister/>.

¹³⁹ In 2015, the Council of Megatrend University changed the name of the institution to "University John Naisbitt" after controversies arose surrounding Megatrend University founded in 1989.

¹⁴⁰ Zorana Suvakovic, "Serbia's degree mills", *Al Jazeera*, July 25, 2014, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/serbia-degree-mills-2014725133314619696.html>.

¹⁴¹ Iranian Center, <http://en.megatrend.edu.rs/iranian-center/>.