

CONFLUENCE OF INFLUENCE: RUSSO-SERBIAN INFLUENCE OPERA- TION(S) IN MONTENEGRO

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate web of Russo-Serbian influence operations in Montenegro, examining their multifaceted nature and their profound impact on the country's politics and society. It investigates the joint efforts of Serbia and Russia in shaping narratives that significantly influence Montenegro's social dynamics, its political processes, identity politics, religious identification and inter-ethnic relations.

Keywords: Montenegro, Influence Operations, Cognitive Warfare, Russo-Serbian Collaboration, Balkans Geopolitics

Introduction

This study delves into three pivotal case studies, analyzing some of the influential figures driving Russo-Serbian influence opera-

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tions in Montenegro. It seeks to determine whether these instances can be categorized as cognitive warfare tactics, whether they are coordinated and what is the level of their impact.

The first case study focusses on the IN4S news website, established in 2008, recognized as a key platform for disseminating Kremlin propaganda while challenging Montenegro's independence and separate identity.

The second study scrutinizes the role of Aleksandar Raković, a prominent Serbian historian associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Raković strategically employs academia to propagate narratives questioning Montenegro's identity and statehood, solidifying his significance within the Russo-Serbian influence landscape.

The third case study examines Bishop Metodije, a high-ranking official in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Known for endorsing pro-Kremlin events and narratives, Bishop Metodije and his associates sponsor a network of pro-Russian Serbian nationalist, and radical clerical Orthodox organizations. These groups actively engage in protest campaigns and hold sway in Montenegro's decision-making echelons.

This paper is contributing to the evolving concept of cognitive warfare. It proposes a conceptual link between influence operations and cognitive warfare, prompting a critical and important question: Are Serbia and Russia engaged in a form of cognitive "special military operation"¹ in Montenegro?

By synthesizing insights from media manipulation, academic discourse, and religious dynamics, the paper underscores the need for comprehensive research to unravel the connections between these elements. It proposes future research directions, including mapping the cognitive landscape, analyzing digital influence strategies, and exploring the role of historical narratives and

¹ The term "cognitive special military operation" in this article is used in a conceptual context and does not directly align with its historical usage by the Russian government. The term originated from the Russian propagandist concept "специальная военная операция" ("special military operation"), employed by the Russian authorities since the early stages of the conflict in Ukraine.

religious institutions. These recommendations aim to guide scholars and policymakers in developing effective counterstrategies to safeguard Montenegro's autonomy and identity against external cognitive pressures.

Unravelling Montenegro's political landscape

In the aftermath of the political upheavals of 2020, Montenegro finds itself at a crossroads, grappling with a persistent institutional crisis that has reshaped the contours of its political landscape. For over three decades, the nation was under the rule of a dominant party and its leader, marking an era characterized by a blend of authoritarian practices, personalization of politics, connections with corruption and organized crime - on one side, and a robust commitment to a transatlantic and pro-European foreign policy agenda - on the other side.

The transformative events of 2020, however, brought about a seismic shift. An electoral campaign marked by the vigorous Serbian Orthodox Church protest movement, triggered by the controversial Law on Freedom of Religion, led to the end of the long-standing political hegemony of DPS and Milo Đukanović. The vacuum left in the wake of this change ushered in a new reality for Montenegro, marked by uncertainties and challenges.

The contours of this new reality are defined by a government heavily populated by figures closely aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church (Filipović, 2023), employing distinct tactics to stabilize and consolidate a Serbian conservative agenda within Montenegro. This shift has not only cast doubts on Montenegro's national identity. Still, it has also raised questions about the constitutional order, as alternative narratives emerge that position Montenegrin identity merely as a sub-ethnicity of the "Greater Serbian nation".

The repercussions of new realities are profound, triggering collective anxieties, particularly among the non-Orthodox Christian and Albanian minority populations. The specter of the Balkan

conflicts of the nineties looms large, exacerbated by the frequent inter-ethnic unrest in the years following 2020. The fundamental question arises: What trajectory is Montenegro charting as a society? While the ruling elites outwardly maintain the transatlantic foreign policy path, internal dynamics tell a different story.

Leaders with pro-Russian and pro-Serbian affiliations are ascendant within the administration, actively pursuing a pro-Serbian agenda. The fear, rooted in recent experiences, contemplates the potential redefinition of Montenegro's politics and statehood in the face of evolving geopolitical circumstances. As Montenegro stands at this critical juncture, the unfolding narrative prompts reflection on the trajectory it might undertake, with uncertainties casting a shadow on the nation's political future.

Conceptual framework

As the fields of influence operations and cognitive warfare continue to evolve, a lack of consensus persists regarding their precise definitions. These concepts remain fluid and multifaceted and are frequently invoked alongside the term 'hybrid warfare' in scholarly discourse. This chapter underscores the pressing need for more rigorous research in this dynamic arena, with a specific focus on the perspectives of key actors, such as Russia and Serbia.

Joseph Nye's influential perspective on soft power remains pivotal in understanding how nations can exert influence through attraction and persuasion. Notably, Nye's thesis posits that authoritarian and hybrid regimes are inherently constrained in their ability to wield soft power, often resorting to coercive tactics (Nye, 2019). In the context of Montenegro's evolving political landscape post-2020, the nuanced interplay of soft power dynamics becomes particularly salient.

For these purposes, influence operations and cognitive warfare research may fall under the research of international relations and

under the umbrella term of 'sharp power' and 'hard power' research. Soft power involves the use of attraction and persuasion, whereas sharp power employs more coercive tactics, such as disinformation and manipulation, to shape perceptions. Hard power, on the other hand, relies on military and economic strength for influence.

Claverie's and Du Cluzel's exploration of cognitive warfare (Claverie, 2022) elucidates the manipulation of information and perceptions beyond conventional military strategies. Further enriching this perspective are Janis Berzins' findings, as outlined in his article, ". "The Cognitive Battlefield: Exploring the Western and Russian Views" (Berzins, 2023). Berzins gives an excellent insight into Russian strategic literature on the topic and underscores the significance of cognitive vulnerabilities and information warfare, emphasizing the exploitation of psychological factors to achieve strategic objectives. In Montenegro, where identity politics is weaponized, these insights contribute to a comprehensive understanding of cognitive warfare's nuanced manifestations.

Case study 1: IN4S

Established in 2008 by Gojko Raičević, a Serbian right-wing, anti-NATO activist, the IN4S news website has played a pivotal role in shaping Russo-Serbian narratives within Montenegro. Initially headquartered in Matica Srpska in Podgorica, a Serbian state-funded quasi-governmental NGO, IN4S operates under the guise of an independent media outlet. The acronym "IN4S" represents the "4S interpretation" of the Serbian Cross and Coat of Arms, reflecting its allegiance to a specific interpretation of Serbian identity.

During Montenegro's NATO accession process, IN4S emerged as a vocal participant in the ANTI-NATO Campaign, leveraging its platform to propagate anti-alliance sentiments. The website

actively promoted the narrative of Montenegro as a second Serbian state, challenging the nation's distinct identity and fostering sentiments aligned with a broader Serbian nationalist agenda.

Furthermore, a notable aspect of their contribution to Russo-Serbian influence operations lies in their reporting from the frontlines in Ukraine. The platform hired a special correspondent who is frequently observed in the company of figures such as Chechen police general Aпти Alaudinov, a close associate of Ramzan Kadyrov (Damjanović, 2020). This correspondent has been documented making reports from locations such as the Wagner headquarters in Saint Petersburg (Damjanović, 2023) and most recently frontlines near Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast (Damjanović, 2023b). The strategic presence alongside influential figures and access to sensitive locations underscore IN4S's role in mirroring the Kremlin's narrative. Notably, this narrative is skillfully tailored to resonate with the local audience in Serbia and Montenegro. IN4S, through its media activities, is actively promoting an anti-Ukrainian propagandistic narrative, shaping perceptions in line with Moscow's geopolitical agenda.

Notably, one of the founders of IN4S, Vladimir Božović, assumed the position of the head of the University of Montenegro following the political changes of 2020. Božović, a proponent of joint Serbian and Russian soft power operations, articulated his views in a 2015 article. In this piece, he drew parallels between Ukrainians and Montenegrins, characterizing their distinct identities as "new identities" engineered through manipulation. Božović asserted that the United States and NATO were orchestrating efforts to separate Montenegro from its pro-Russian Orthodox Christian "spiritual essence," a perspective aligned with the IN4S narrative (Filipović, 2023, p.7).

Božović envisioned a vast space for cooperation between Serbia and Russia, emphasizing a "complete congruence" between Serbian and pro-Russian "social consciousness" in Montenegro. He identified the potential of Serbian culture as a vessel for Russian influence, lamenting that Russian cultural and soft power had

been confined to classical literature. In this context, IN4S was highlighted as an exemplar of new marketing and communication concepts, serving as a conduit for the dissemination of narratives aligned with Russo-Serbian interests (Filipović, 2023, p.7).

IN4S has been instrumental in formulating and promoting the Serbian World concept (Srpski svet), a construct reminiscent of the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) model. This conceptual framework, endorsed by the highest-ranking Serbian officials, including former Minister of Defense and Director of the Serbian Intelligence Agency BIA, Aleksandar Vulin, and current Minister of Defense Milos Vučević, draws a parallel between the Serbian and Russian spheres of influence. IN4S, through its media apparatus, has actively propagated this concept, aligning it with Russo-Serbian interests. The concept, akin to the Russkiy Mir model, emphasizes the preservation and expansion of Serbian cultural and geopolitical influence beyond national borders, reflecting a vision that harmonizes with broader Russo-Serbian nationalist ideologies.

Case study 2: Aleksandar Raković

Aleksandar Raković, a Serbian historian, boasts an extensive academic background with BA, MA, and PhD degrees in history from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade. His academic pursuits culminated in a doctoral dissertation titled "Rock and Roll in Yugoslavia 1956-1968: A Challenge to a Socialist Society," defending it in 2011 at the Department of History. Raković currently holds the position of Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Recent History of Serbia in Belgrade, combining his academic responsibilities with teaching roles at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (Raković, 2023).

Closely aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church and endorsed by the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church of Montenegro, Raković has emerged as one of the most prominent opinion makers, known for his controversial remarks in media outlets. Notably, he has directed threats towards what he labels as "Montenegrin separatists" (Raković, 2021) and has proposed plans for the partition and territorial distribution of Montenegro among Serbs and Albanians (Raković, 2021b).

Raković's influence extends beyond media appearances, as he is a fellow of several Serbian research institutions and has authored numerous articles published at institutes affiliated with the state-owned University of Belgrade. His articles, such as "A New Manifestation of Dual Identity in Montenegro: A Challenge to the Serbian Nation" (Raković, 2021c) and "The Secession of Montenegro (2006): Newly Acquired, Not Renewed Statehood" (Raković, 2018) often promote a violent and aggressive discourse towards Montenegrin separate identity.

Many of Raković's academic articles, including those mentioned, receive support and sponsorship from the Serbian government. His frequent appearances on the Serbian public broadcaster, where he officially comments on the political situation in Montenegro, amplify his influence in shaping narratives.

In his academic writings, Raković consistently promotes a narrative that frames Montenegrin identity as a product of Western influence aimed at "deserbinization." This discourse, inherently anti-Western, positions Montenegrin identity independent of Serbian identity as a constructed challenge to the "true" Serbian and pro-Russian identity of Montenegrins. This perspective aligns with a broader sentiment expressed by other figures, such as Dr. Vladimir Božović, who currently serves as the rector of Montenegrin University. Božović, like Raković, openly contends that Americans are confronting the authentic Serbian and pro-Russian identity of Montenegrins.

Raković's influence and alignment with Russian interests are further underscored by his recognition as a talent by Russians, culminating in his invitation to the Valdai Forum. At this event, he engaged with Russian President Vladimir Putin (RT Balkan, 2023), posing questions and being promoted on the Russian president's website (Office of the President of Russia, 2023). Raković's multifaceted influence, spanning academic, media, and political realms, establishes him as a key figure in the propagation of aggressive narratives that contribute to the Russo-Serbian influence operations in Montenegro.

Case study 3: Bishop Metodije

Bishop Metodije Ostojić, one of the youngest and most influential figures in the Serbian Orthodox Church, oversees the Epararchy of Budimlje Nikšić, holding sway over northern Montenegro. Despite his young age (born in 1976), he is a fervent proponent of conservative values and aligns himself closely with the Russo-Serbian nationalist campaign in Montenegro.

Metodije actively supports the militaristic legacy of the Serbian paratroopers' 63rd brigade, often participating in parachute jumps and donning military attire (Kurir, 2021), emulating the Russian VDV (Airborne Forces) culture to instill a similar fervor within the Serbian population in the Western Balkans.

His affiliations extend to radical Orthodox groups such as "Stupovi", and the Night Wolves, and collaborations with figures like Serbian Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk). Notably, he orchestrates marches alongside the Russian ambassador, featuring individuals in Cossack uniforms, emphasizing ties to Russian culture and symbolism (Filipović, 2022).

Metodije's secretary, Priest Miajlo Backovic, plays a pivotal role in coordinating networks of Orthodox youth fraternities across Montenegro. These groups, while advocating Orthodox values, attract ex-convicts and promote a militaristic culture reminiscent

of Russian Orthodox organizations like Sorok Sorokov (Zečević, 2021).

These nationalist organizations, backed by Bishop Metodije Ostojić, wield substantial influence over high-ranking decision-making processes in Montenegro. Their reach extends notably to former Prime Minister Dritan Abazović (CdM, 2022), showcasing close ties that underscore their sway within political circles.

In public statements, Metodije expresses deep skepticism toward Western influences, attributing societal ills to Western fascination (Antena M, 2023). He portrays Russia as a defender of Orthodox Christianity, framing its actions as a defensive stance against threats to Orthodox values.

Bishop Metodije Ostojić's influence within the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is profound. His proactive promotion of nationalist, conservative, and militaristic ideologies, closely intertwined with Russo-Serbian sentiments, poses significant challenges within the region's sociopolitical landscape. Further research into the impact of his ideologies on societal perceptions and the Orthodox Church's role in nationalist movements in Montenegro would provide valuable insights.

Conclusion

The examination of Russo-Serbian influence operations in Montenegro uncovers a multifaceted landscape of strategies rooted in media manipulation, academic discourse, and religious dynamics. Two compelling case studies, IN4S news website, and Aleksandar Raković, provide insight into the coordinated efforts that seek to reshape Montenegro's political and cultural fabric. Throughout this exploration, we propose a link between these operations and the concept of cognitive warfare, prompting a critical question for researchers regarding the potential classification of Serbia and Russia's activities in Montenegro and the Western Balkans as cognitive warfare operations.

IN4S, with its roots in anti-NATO activism and alignment with Serbian nationalist sentiments, emerges as a key player in shaping narratives that influence Montenegro's political trajectory. The deliberate dissemination of Kremlin propaganda, coupled with endorsement from figures associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, creates an environment conducive to cognitive warfare. The manipulation of information and narratives on the IN4S platform contributes to a cognitive battlefield where perceptions and beliefs are strategically molded to align with Russo-Serbian geopolitical objectives.

The academic realm, embodied by Aleksandar Raković, serves as another battleground for influence operations. Raković's affiliation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, alignment with Russian interests, and promotion of narratives challenging Montenegrin identity suggest a concerted effort to wage cognitive warfare. By leveraging historical narratives and academia, his work contributes to the erosion of Montenegro's distinct identity, further illustrating the interconnectedness between influence operations and cognitive warfare.

In examining Russo-Serbian influence on the Montenegrin social and political reality, it is essential to highlight that Bishop Metodije, Raković, and In4s represent paradigmatic examples rather than isolated instances. Their activities serve as illustrative case studies, illuminating the multifaceted methods employed in influence operations. Raković and In4s are emblematic of a broader trend, showcasing the intricate strategies utilized to shape Montenegro's sociopolitical narrative. By scrutinizing their roles and methodologies, we gain valuable insights into the larger framework of external influence impacting Montenegro, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the region.

In light of these findings, researchers are prompted to explore the extent to which Serbia and Russia engage in cognitive warfare actions in Montenegro and the broader Balkans region. The con-

vergence of media, academia, and religious institutions as conduits for influence operations raises questions about the systematic nature of these efforts. Understanding the dynamics of cognitive warfare is crucial for developing effective counterstrategies to safeguard the autonomy and identity of nations facing external pressures.

This study underscores the urgency of a comprehensive examination of the cognitive dimensions of influence operations, paving the way for future research to delve into the intricate connections between media narratives, academic discourse, religious influence, and the broader concept of cognitive warfare in the geopolitical landscape of Montenegro and the Balkans.

Navigating the cognitive battlefield: recommendations for future research

As we traverse the intricate landscape of Russo-Serbian influence operations in Montenegro, a synthesis emerges, highlighting the interconnected threads of media manipulation, academic discourse, and religious dynamics. The three case studies, IN4S news website, Aleksandar Raković, and Bishop Metodije illustrate the deliberate efforts to shape narratives that are promoting Serbian and Russian nationalistic narratives and challenging Montenegro's distinct identity. Within this complex milieu, we propose a conceptual link to cognitive warfare, prompting a crucial question for researchers: Are Serbia and Russia engaged in a form of cognitive special military operation in Montenegro and the broader Balkans?

Cognitive Warfare: Unveiling the Nexus

In synthesizing these elements, we propose a conceptual link to cognitive warfare—a form of warfare that extends beyond traditional military strategies. The deliberate efforts to shape narra-

tives, influence academic discourse, and leverage religious institutions collectively form a cognitive battlefield. Researchers are urged to explore whether Serbia and Russia are orchestrating a cognitive "special military operation" in the Balkans, strategically employing media, academia, and religion to achieve geopolitical objectives in Montenegro and the Balkans.

Recommendations for Future and Further Research:

Mapping the Cognitive Landscape: Conduct in-depth studies mapping the cognitive landscape in Montenegro, identifying key actors, narratives, and their interconnections to better understand the dynamics of influence operations.

Digital Influence Strategies: Investigate the role of digital platforms in disseminating influence narratives, analyzing how social media and online spaces contribute to shaping perceptions and beliefs.

Historical Narratives and Identity Formation: Explore how historical narratives, particularly those promoted by academic figures like Aleksandar Raković, impact identity formation in Montenegro and the Balkans, focusing on the intersection between academia, identity, and geopolitical interests.

Religious Institutions and Geopolitical Influence: Examine the influence of religious institutions, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, in shaping geopolitical narratives and the cognitive dimensions of faith as a tool of influence.

Comparative Analysis: Undertake comparative analyses with other regions facing similar influence operations, exploring commonalities and differences to draw insights into broader geopolitical strategies.

Counterstrategy Development: Collaborate with policymakers to develop effective counterstrategies against influence operations, focusing on bolstering societal resilience, media literacy, and mechanisms to counter disinformation.

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