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## Digital Diplomacy and FIMI-related Communication: Russian Embassy Facebook Activity in the Adriatic-Balkan Region\*

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### *Summary*

This article examines Facebook communication by the official pages of Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro between 2019 and 2023. Based on a manual quantitative content analysis of 6,996 posts, the study distinguishes between routine diplomatic communication and FIMI-related communication. It analyses the volume, temporal distribution and dominant topics of FIMI-related posts, focusing on how broader Russian geopolitical narratives were adapted to local political contexts in the post-Yugoslav space. The findings show that embassy communication combined ordinary public diplomacy with narratives delegitimising Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the United States, while also drawing on disputes and vulnerabilities related to Kosovo, Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and Montenegro's relations with Russia. Embassy activity in Croatia and Slovenia declined after the 2022 platform restrictions, whereas activity in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro remained more sustained.

*Keywords:* Digital Diplomacy, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), Disinformation, Adriatic-Balkan Region, Ukraine War

### Introduction

Digital platforms have become important channels through which states communicate with foreign publics, explain their positions and respond to international crises. Embassies are central to this development because they operate as official state representatives within specific host-country information environments. Their so-

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cial media pages can therefore serve ordinary public diplomacy purposes, such as cultural promotion, consular communication and the presentation of bilateral relations. At the same time, these same channels may also be used to circulate strategic narratives, legitimise foreign policy positions and delegitimise political opponents. This overlap between digital diplomacy and information manipulation has become especially relevant in the context of Russian communication after the COVID-19 pandemic and, more importantly, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The war in Ukraine has been accompanied by an extensive information struggle. Beyond military action, Russia has used official statements, state media, diplomatic channels and social media platforms to promote its interpretation of the conflict, justify its actions and challenge support for Ukraine. EU institutions and researchers have increasingly analysed such activity through the framework of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), which focuses not only on false information, but also on manipulative behaviour, strategic narratives, actor behaviour and the wider information environment (EEAS, 2023; 2024). However, official embassy communication remains a less examined part of this ecosystem. Russian embassies are not anonymous or covert actors; they communicate openly as official representatives of the Russian state. Precisely for that reason, their social media activity deserves analytical attention.

This article focuses on the official Facebook pages of Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. These countries form part of the broader Adriatic-Balkan and post-Yugoslav space, but they differ substantially in their institutional and geopolitical positions. Croatia and Slovenia are members of both the European Union and NATO. Montenegro is a NATO member and an EU candidate country. Serbia remains outside both the EU and NATO and maintains a more ambivalent position between Russia and the West. Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised by institutional fragility, unresolved post-war political disputes and contestation over the Dayton constitutional order and the status of Republika Srpska. These differences make the region well suited for analysing how Russian embassy communication combines general geopolitical narratives with locally resonant political issues.

Existing research has examined Russian disinformation, hybrid threats and FIMI in Europe and the Western Balkans, including narratives connected to Ukraine, NATO, the EU, COVID-19 and regional political disputes. Previous descriptive mapping conducted within the Adria Digital Media Observatory also examined Russian embassy Facebook activity in the Adriatic and Balkan regions (Musladin *et al.*, 2024). This article builds on that empirical starting point, but develops it into a broader academic analysis of embassy communication as a form of official digital

diplomacy that may also reproduce FIMI-related narratives. The central problem is not simply whether Russian embassies used Facebook, but how their Facebook communication shifted between routine diplomatic messaging and strategically manipulative or delegitimising narratives.

The aim of this article is to examine how the official Facebook pages of Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro combined routine diplomatic communication with FIMI-related communication between 2019 and 2023. The article focuses on the volume, temporal distribution and dominant topics of FIMI-related posts, with particular attention to the relationship between broader Russian geopolitical narratives and local political issues in the post-Yugoslav space.

The study is accordingly guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How did the volume and temporal dynamics of Russian embassy Facebook activity and FIMI-related posts vary across Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro between 2019 and 2023?

RQ2: Which topics dominated FIMI-related Facebook posts published by the analysed Russian embassies, and how did these thematic emphases differ across the five countries?

RQ3: How were broader Russian geopolitical narratives concerning Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA localised through country-specific issues in the post-Yugoslav space, particularly Kosovo, Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and Montenegro's relations with Russia?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework linking digital diplomacy, FIMI-related communication and regional vulnerabilities in the post-Yugoslav space. The methodology section describes the dataset, manual data collection procedure and coding scheme. The results section presents patterns in the distribution of diplomatic and FIMI-related posts across countries, time and dominant topics. The discussion interprets these patterns in relation to Russian strategic communication and local political vulnerabilities. A short limitations section outlines the main methodological constraints, before the conclusion summarises the article's contribution and implications for future research.

## **Digital Diplomacy, Embassy Communication and Social Media**

Diplomacy has traditionally been one of the central communicative instruments of foreign policy. Berridge (2005) defines it as a political activity through which states pursue foreign policy objectives without resorting to force, while Melissen (2013, p. 436) understands public diplomacy as a means of understanding foreign publics, building relationships and influencing attitudes in support of state interests and va-

lues. This broader understanding is important because diplomacy is no longer confined to closed exchanges among state representatives. It also includes public-facing communication directed at foreign audiences, journalists, civil society actors, diaspora communities and political elites.

Digital diplomacy extends these functions into the online environment. It refers to the use of digital technologies, the internet and social media in diplomatic practice and foreign policy communication. Websites, Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram and other platforms have expanded the capacity of foreign ministries, embassies and other official actors to address foreign publics directly and in real time (Adesina, 2017; Manor, 2019; Rashica, 2019). Yet digital diplomacy should not be understood only as the adoption of new tools. It also changes the speed, visibility and publicness of diplomatic messaging.

Embassies are important in this context because they operate within specific host-country information environments. Unlike foreign ministries, which usually communicate from the political centre of the sending state, embassies speak as official representatives of that state within another national setting. Their communication is therefore official, localised and outward-facing at the same time. Embassy Facebook pages are state-controlled channels, but their audiences are not limited to diplomatic elites. They may include journalists, politicians, citizens, diaspora communities, activists and audiences beyond the host country itself. For this reason, embassy social media activity should not be reduced to consular information, cultural diplomacy or protocol announcements. It can also insert official state narratives into local information environments.

The literature on digital diplomacy often emphasises the potential of social media for interaction and engagement. Khan *et al.* (2021), for example, analyse public engagement in digital diplomacy through self-disclosure, positive attitude and inquisitiveness. However, the presence of a state actor on social media does not automatically imply genuine dialogue. Sevin and Ingenhoff (2018) distinguish between informational and relational approaches to public diplomacy: the former focuses on message dissemination, while the latter emphasises interaction and relationship-building. This distinction is important for the present article because it does not examine audience reception, comments, shares or engagement metrics. Its focus is the informational dimension of embassy Facebook activity: what Russian embassies posted, which topics they emphasised and how routine diplomatic messaging overlapped with FIMI-related narratives.

This analytical choice also responds to Metzgar's (2012) warning against privileging the medium over the message in studies of public diplomacy and social media. Digital platforms may increase visibility and speed, but they do not by themselves guarantee persuasive success, meaningful engagement or improved

international relations. What matters is not only whether an embassy uses Facebook, but what kind of content it publishes, how that content is framed and how it corresponds to broader foreign policy objectives. Ittefaq (2019) similarly shows that governmental social media activity can remain state-centric rather than genuinely dialogic. Digital diplomacy therefore provides the first layer of the theoretical framework: Russian embassies are treated as official communicative actors using Facebook for public diplomacy, while the analysis examines how their posts move between routine diplomacy and FIMI-related strategic communication.

### **From Digital Diplomacy to FIMI-related Communication**

The expansion of digital diplomacy has created new opportunities for state communication, but it has also introduced new risks. If embassies and diplomats can use social media to inform, engage and build relationships, they can also use the same platforms to amplify misleading, manipulative or strategically delegitimising narratives. This corresponds to Bjola's (2018) discussion on the counter-trends of digital diplomacy, including the risks of disinformation, propaganda, algorithmic manipulation and strategic entropy in digital diplomatic communication. The boundary between public diplomacy, propaganda and information manipulation is therefore not always clear, especially when official state actors communicate during war, geopolitical conflict or international crisis.

This overlap has become especially visible in Russian strategic communication after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, more clearly, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russian state communication has repeatedly combined diplomatic justification, historical revisionism, anti-Western narratives, denial, blame-shifting and the delegitimation of Ukraine and its allies. This is consistent with research on history-based information manipulation, which shows how Russian disinformation uses manipulated historical narratives to legitimise present geopolitical claims and delegitimise opponents (Arribas *et al.*, 2023). Such communication is not always reducible to fact-checkable falsehoods. It often works through framing, selective emphasis, repetition, moral inversion and the strategic mobilisation of existing grievances. A narrow understanding of disinformation as simply false information is therefore insufficient for analysing official embassy communication.

The concept of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is useful precisely because it captures this broader range of practices. The EEAS defines FIMI as a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively affect values, procedures and political processes, and that is manipulative in character and conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner by state or non-state actors, including proxies (EEAS, 2023; 2024; 2025). The

Council of the EU (2022) similarly treats FIMI as a strategic challenge connected to efforts to mislead, destabilise and exploit societal and political vulnerabilities. Unlike narrower approaches to disinformation, which focus mainly on the truth or falsity of content, FIMI shifts attention to actor behaviour, infrastructure, tactics, techniques and procedures, coordination, repetition, amplification and the wider information environment. Newman (2022) likewise stresses that FIMI analysis differs from conventional disinformation analysis because it focuses less on isolated false claims and more on the behaviour of actors and the techniques through which manipulation is organised and amplified. This broader approach is also consistent with Pamment's (2020) argument that influence operations should be analysed beyond content alone, including actors, behaviour, dissemination and effects.

The European External Action Service reports are relevant here because they show how FIMI has become a central concept in the EU's understanding of contemporary information threats. Across the three reports, FIMI is approached not as isolated false content, but as a wider pattern involving actor behaviour, infrastructures, overt and covert channels, attribution problems and multi-platform ecosystems (EEAS, 2023; 2024; 2025). This approach is useful for studying Russian embassy communication, but only if its limits are clearly recognised. This article does not reconstruct full FIMI operations, covert networks, bot infrastructures, cross-platform coordination, hidden financial links, audience effects or the complete chain of amplification. Its empirical focus is narrower: official Facebook posts published by Russian embassies.

For this reason, the article uses the term FIMI-related communication. The term marks a distinction between full FIMI operations and official posts that reproduce narratives associated with FIMI and disinformation research. Posts are treated as FIMI-related when they reproduce manipulative, false, misleading or strategically delegitimising narratives, but not simply because they are Russian, pro-Russian or critical of Western actors. This distinction matters because Russian embassies also publish routine diplomatic content, legitimate foreign policy criticism, cultural material and standard official statements. Such communication may be politically biased without necessarily being FIMI-related. The category therefore refers to identifiable content and narrative features of the posts, not to proof of coordinated operations or measurable effects on audiences.

This caution is also supported by critical literature on the EU's "FIMI turn". Proto *et al.* (2025) argue that the EEAS reframed the fight against disinformation by adopting FIMI as a more manageable and security-compatible concept. This shift makes information manipulation more visible as a security issue, enables common taxonomies and connects the problem to hybrid threats and cyber-security paradigms. At the same time, Proto *et al.* (2025) warn that such a shift can narrow the

understanding of disinformation, over-emphasise the external threat dimension and risk over-securitising complex communicative phenomena. In this article, the term FIMI-related communication is therefore used to avoid two opposite problems: reducing Russian embassy communication to ordinary diplomacy, and over-attributing all Russian diplomatic communication to coordinated FIMI operations.

The relationship between FIMI and hybrid threats further clarifies the argument. EU policy documents have treated hybrid threats as attempts to exploit vulnerabilities across political, economic, cyber and information domains (European Commission, 2017). In this framework, information manipulation is one instrument within a broader strategic repertoire. Treverton *et al.* (2018) emphasise that hybrid threats operate by exploiting vulnerabilities in targeted societies, while Chivvis (2017) identifies the weakening of NATO, the subversion of pro-Western governments and the creation of political pretexts as key objectives associated with Russian hybrid activity. At the same time, Renz (2016) warns against treating “hybrid warfare” as an entirely new or uniquely Russian doctrine, which is important for avoiding an overly simplified interpretation of Russian information activity. Dolan (2022) further stresses that in the Western Balkans such vulnerabilities include weak institutions, low trust, contested sovereignty, poor media literacy and unresolved geopolitical orientations.

FIMI can be understood as the informational component of a broader hybrid strategy, especially when it is used to weaken trust, polarise publics, delegitimise institutions or undermine support for Euro-Atlantic integration (EEAS, 2023). This does not mean that every FIMI-related post is itself a hybrid operation. Rather, embassy communication may participate in a wider strategic environment in which Russia uses official statements, media outlets, local proxies, social media amplification and geopolitical narratives to shape perceptions. The relevance of Russian embassies lies precisely in their official status. Unlike anonymous accounts, fringe websites or covert pages, embassy Facebook pages communicate with the authority of the Russian state. They can legitimise narratives, provide official framing and signal which interpretations are consistent with Moscow’s foreign policy position. Even when such posts are not the origin of a narrative, they may contribute to its official amplification and normalisation.

### **Russian Information Manipulation and Regional Vulnerabilities in the Post-Yugoslav Space**

The post-Yugoslav and wider Adriatic-Balkan space offers a useful setting for studying Russian diplomatic communication because it combines shared regional histories with markedly different institutional and geopolitical positions. Croatia and Slovenia are members of both the EU and NATO. Montenegro is a NATO member



and EU candidate country. Serbia remains outside both organisations and maintains a more ambivalent position between Russia and the West, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is marked by institutional fragility, unresolved post-war tensions, contestation over the Dayton constitutional order and the political status of Republika Srpska. These differences make the region suitable for examining whether Russian embassy communication simply repeats general geopolitical narratives or adapts them to specific local disputes and vulnerabilities.

Russian narratives do not enter an empty information space. They encounter pre-existing political divisions, contested identities, unresolved statehood questions, weak institutions and competing foreign policy orientations. The European Parliament study on disinformation in the Western Balkans argues that disinformation is endemic in the region, but also warns against reducing it only to foreign interference. A significant share of disinformation is produced or circulated by domestic actors for domestic purposes, while information disorder more broadly reflects deeper social and political disorder (Greene *et al.*, 2021). Russian embassy communication should therefore not be understood as creating regional vulnerabilities from nothing, but as potentially exploiting, amplifying and reframing vulnerabilities that already exist.

This interpretation is reinforced by research on Kremlin-linked media influence in Southeast Europe. The Center for the Study of Democracy (2021) argues that the region is vulnerable to Russian sharp power because domestic governance deficits and foreign authoritarian influence often reinforce one another. Corruption, media capture, opaque ownership, political-economic networks, weak regulatory environments and societal ambivalence toward Euro-Atlantic integration all create conditions in which Russian influence can operate more effectively. The same report also notes that Russian-owned outlets and official Russian institutions have increasingly turned to social media, including Facebook, particularly as media consumption patterns changed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021). This makes official embassy Facebook pages relevant not as isolated diplomatic outlets, but as visible state channels within a wider information environment. This interpretation is also supported by NATO StratCom COE (2021), which presents the Western Balkans as a vulnerable information environment in which Russian influence operates through structural weaknesses, unresolved political and status disputes, societal divisions and narratives directed against EU and NATO integration.

The Western Balkans are vulnerable to such communication because geopolitical identity remains contested. EU membership and EU accession are not only institutional questions, but also markers of political orientation. NATO is similarly divisive, especially in Serbia and among Serb political communities in Bosnia



and Herzegovina. Greene *et al.* (2021) identify two broad Russian narrative patterns aimed at discrediting the EU in the Western Balkans: the EU as hegemonic and the EU as weak. These frames may appear contradictory, but their function is complementary. They can present the EU simultaneously as intrusive and ineffective, thereby providing arguments for Eurosceptic audiences while also introducing doubts among pro-European publics.

The local forms of this vulnerability differ across the analysed countries. In Serbia, Kosovo provides a powerful reference point through which Russian communication can frame the West as hypocritical on sovereignty and territorial integrity: supporting Kosovo's independence while condemning Crimea or Donbas. This does not mean that Serbian positions on Kosovo are Russian-made. Rather, Kosovo offers a local issue through which Russian narratives about Western double standards, NATO aggression and the instability of the liberal international order can resonate with established Serbian political discourse.

Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a different form of localisation. Its vulnerability is connected to the unresolved nature of the post-Dayton state, the status of Republika Srpska, disputes over the legitimacy of the Office of the High Representative and disagreements about sovereignty, constitutional reform and foreign intervention. Greene *et al.* (2021) note that Russian disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina often intersects with Serbian media and Russian networks, and that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a site of significant efforts to discredit the EU. In this context, local disputes over Dayton, Republika Srpska and the OHR can become vehicles for broader narratives about Western interference and contested international authority.

Montenegro represents another pattern. Although it is a NATO member and EU candidate country, its domestic politics have been polarised around relations with Serbia, Russia, the Orthodox Church, NATO membership and sanctions. Russian and Serbian media have been described as notably present in Montenegro, especially in relation to NATO membership and the 2016 coup attempt (Greene *et al.*, 2021). Dolan (2022) similarly treats the Western Balkans as structurally vulnerable to hybrid influence because institutional weakness, contested identities and geopolitical uncertainty create openings for hostile actors. Croatia and Slovenia, by contrast, are more firmly integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures as EU and NATO members. This does not make them immune to Russian narratives, but it does shape the conditions under which official Russian communication appears and becomes visible. Regional research on Ukraine-war disinformation ecosystems in Croatia and Slovenia has identified recurring narratives connected to Ukraine, NATO, the EU, Russia and the West (Brautović, 2023; Grbeša and Vučković, 2024), providing a useful background for the present analysis of official embassy Facebook pages.

The comparative design is central to the article's contribution because it allows Russian embassy Facebook communication to be analysed across different political environments within a historically connected region. Rather than treating the analysed embassies as identical channels of Russian state communication, the article expects broader geopolitical narratives concerning Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA to be adapted to country-specific contexts. In Serbia, this localisation is expected to operate primarily through Kosovo and narratives of sovereignty, territorial integrity and Western double standards. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is expected to appear through Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and the contested authority of the OHR. In Montenegro, it is expected to be connected to sanctions, NATO alignment, diplomatic tensions and bilateral relations with Russia. In Croatia and Slovenia, by contrast, the analysis expects platform restrictions, EU/NATO membership and stronger institutional alignment with Ukraine to be associated with reduced visibility of embassy Facebook communication after 2022.

The research period begins in 2019 and therefore includes the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been widely discussed as a catalyst of disinformation. Previous research on COVID-19 disinformation in Croatia justifies the inclusion of pandemic-related narratives as a separate coding category, even if the empirical analysis later shows that they were marginal in this corpus (Brautović *et al.*, 2023). The European Parliament study also identifies pandemic-related disinformation as one of the key information challenges in the Western Balkans, including the use of pandemic narratives by China and, to a lesser extent, Russia to build leverage in public opinion at the expense of the EU (Greene *et al.*, 2021). If COVID-19 appears marginal compared with Ukraine, NATO, the EU, the USA and local geopolitical disputes, this is not an absence of relevance but a substantive finding: in this corpus, Russian embassy FIMI-related communication was primarily geopolitical rather than health-related.

Russian interference in the domestic affairs of Western democracies through disinformation and social media manipulation has become a major concern in recent years. Lemke and Habegger (2022) point to cases in which Russian interference has either been suspected or substantiated, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the 2017 French and German elections, the Brexit referendum and various incidents in the Western Balkans, particularly in non-EU countries. This broader pattern situates Russian embassy Facebook communication within a wider repertoire of Russian information influence. At the same time, the article does not treat the analysed embassy posts as direct evidence of electoral interference, covert operations or measurable effects on public opinion. It examines whether official diplomatic communication reproduced narratives that correspond to broader Russian strategies of disinformation, delegitimisation and geopolitical influence.

The framework developed here positions Russian embassy Facebook pages as official state communication channels operating at the intersection of digital diplomacy and strategic information manipulation. The article does not claim to reconstruct the full architecture, techniques and coordination or impact of FIMI operations. Instead, it examines how official embassy communication reproduced FIMI-related narratives and adapted broader Russian geopolitical frames to specific disputes and vulnerabilities in the post-Yugoslav and Adriatic-Balkan space.

Based on this framework, the analysis proceeds from three analytical expectations. First, Russian embassy Facebook pages are expected to function primarily as informational rather than dialogic channels of digital diplomacy, since the analysis focuses on message production rather than audience interaction. Second, FIMI-related communication is expected to become more visible after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, although the article does not assume that all changes in activity result from coordinated strategic redistribution. Third, broader Russian geopolitical narratives concerning Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA are expected to be adapted to country-specific disputes and vulnerabilities, especially Kosovo in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Dayton and the OHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and sanctions, diplomatic tensions and bilateral relations in Montenegro.

## **Research Methodology**

This study is based on a manual quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts published by the official Facebook pages of the embassies of the Russian Federation in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. The analysed period covers five calendar years, from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2023. This timeframe was selected because it includes two major international crises that strongly shaped the contemporary information environment: the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The analysed countries were selected because they belong to the broader Adriatic-Balkan and post-Yugoslav space and because of their linguistic, historical and political proximity. At the same time, they differ in their institutional and geopolitical positions. Croatia and Slovenia are EU and NATO member states, Montenegro is a NATO member state and EU candidate country, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina represent politically and geopolitically more contested environments. This selection allows comparison between different contexts in which Russian diplomatic communication operates. The unit of analysis was a single Facebook post. The dataset was constructed manually. The authors accessed the publicly available Facebook pages of the selected Russian embassies in January and February 2024, reviewed the posts published between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2023, and entered the available post text and metadata into an Excel database. For each post,

the database recorded the embassy/country, date of publication, available post text and coding variables. The final corpus consisted of 6,996 Facebook posts. The study therefore covers posts that were publicly accessible at the time of collection. Posts that had been deleted, removed or otherwise made unavailable before collection could not be reconstructed. After collection, the database was cleaned in order to remove irrelevant technical material and to ensure that each unit of analysis corresponded to one Facebook post.

The analysis was limited to the content of the posts. Comments, reactions, shares and other forms of audience engagement were not included. Accordingly, the study identifies patterns in message production and thematic emphasis, but does not make claims about audience interpretation, circulation or effects, which would require additional audience, engagement or network data (Neuendorf, 2017; Macnamara, 2005).

Coding was conducted manually by the authors using a shared coding scheme and followed a two-stage procedure. The coding scheme was developed before the final coding process and was based on the research questions, the FIMI framework and previous research on Russian disinformation and regional influence narratives. Following standard recommendations in quantitative content analysis, the coding categories were defined in advance, applied systematically to each unit of analysis, and designed to be mutually distinguishable and empirically applicable to the corpus (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Riffe *et al.*, 2019).

The first coding decision distinguished routine diplomatic communication from FIMI-related communication. Routine diplomatic posts included protocol communication, cultural diplomacy, commemorative messages, consular information, official meetings, bilateral cooperation and general public diplomacy content without an identifiable manipulative, misleading or strategically delegitimising element. FIMI-related posts, by contrast, were identified only when they contained at least one explicit indicator of manipulative, false, misleading or strategically delegitimising communication, in line with the EEAS understanding of FIMI as intentional and manipulative behaviour involving tactics, techniques and procedures, coordinated messaging, amplification and attempts to deceive or influence the information environment (EEAS, 2023; 2024; 2025). These indicators included the justification or normalisation of Russian aggression, delegitimation of Ukraine, NATO, the EU, the USA or host-country institutions, conspiracy-based claims, misleading claims about international actors, or the use of local political disputes in ways that corresponded with broader Russian strategic narratives. A pro-Russian, anti-Western or critical diplomatic position was not treated as sufficient on its own for FIMI-related coding, since the EEAS framework also stresses the importance of behavioural and contextual indicators and warns against relying on narrative alignment alone.

The second coding decision applied only to the FIMI-related subset of posts. Routine diplomatic posts were therefore not assigned thematic FIMI categories. Each FIMI-related post was assigned one dominant topic. The coding categories were Ukraine, NATO, EU, USA, COVID-19, Kosovo, host-country politics/local disputes and Other. The dominant topic was defined as the central narrative focus of the post. Secondary references were not coded as separate categories in the quantitative analysis. When a post contained several topics, coders assigned the category that represented the central narrative focus of the post. For example, a post discussing Kosovo primarily as evidence of Western double standards was coded under Kosovo if Kosovo was the central object of the post, even when NATO, the EU or Ukraine were also mentioned. Ambiguous cases were discussed among the authors before the final coding decision was confirmed.

In addition to descriptive frequencies and percentages, the analysis used Pearson's chi-square tests of independence to assess whether observed differences between embassies, years and dominant topics were statistically significant. Since the variables analysed in this article are categorical, chi-square tests are appropriate for testing associations in contingency tables, while Cramer's V provides a measure of association strength (Denham, 2017). These tests were used only to assess patterns of association between categorical variables; they do not imply causal relationships, audience effects or coordination among embassies.

**Table 1.** Coding Scheme for FIMI-related Facebook Posts (Authors' Schematic)

| Category of embassy posts | Operational definition                                                                                                                                                    | Inclusion criteria for FIMI-related posts                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ukraine                   | Post focuses primarily on Ukraine, the war, Crimea, Donbas, Ukrainian government, Ukrainian army, Ukrainian identity or Russia's justification of its actions in Ukraine. | Narratives about the "special military operation"; claims about Ukrainian "neo-Nazism"; delegitimisation of Ukrainian statehood; claims about Western control of Ukraine; references to Crimea, Donbas, Minsk agreements or alleged Ukrainian aggression. |
| NATO                      | Post focuses primarily on NATO as a threat, aggressor, destabilising actor or instrument of Western militarisation.                                                       | Claims about NATO expansion, provocation, militarisation, aggression against Russia, threat to regional security or NATO responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine.                                                                                      |

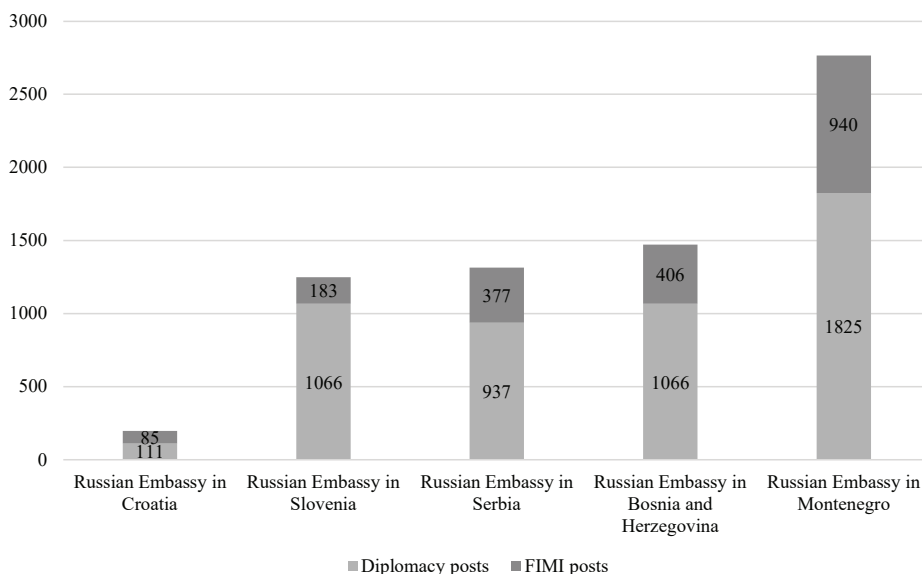
|                                      |                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EU                                   | Post focuses primarily on the European Union, EU institutions, EU sanctions, EU foreign policy or EU support for Ukraine.                                  | Claims about EU hypocrisy, EU dependence on the USA, negative consequences of sanctions, EU weakness, EU hostility toward Russia or EU responsibility for economic/political instability.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| USA                                  | Post focuses primarily on the United States as a geopolitical instigator, controller, manipulator or destabilising actor.                                  | Claims about US responsibility for the war, US control over Ukraine or Europe, US double standards, alleged biolabs, destabilisation, militarisation or manipulation of European allies.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| COVID-19                             | Post focuses primarily on the pandemic, vaccines, public health measures or pandemic-related narratives.                                                   | Claims about Russian vaccines, Western vaccine politics, pandemic-related manipulation, misleading health claims or the use of COVID-19 to criticise Western actors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Kosovo                               | Post focuses primarily on Kosovo's status, independence, recognition, Serbia-Kosovo relations or parallels between Kosovo and other contested territories. | Denial or delegitimation of Kosovo's statehood; claims about Western double standards; comparisons between Kosovo and Crimea/Donbas; references to Kosovo as a precedent in debates on sovereignty and territorial integrity.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Host-country politics/local disputes | Post focuses primarily on political issues within the host country or on local disputes through which broader Russian narratives are articulated.          | In Bosnia and Herzegovina: Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement, the Office of the High Representative and claims about Western interference. In Montenegro: sanctions against Russia, diplomatic expulsions, Montenegro-Russia relations, NATO alignment and accusations of Russophobia. In Serbia: domestic political issues excluding Kosovo. In Croatia and Slovenia: host-country issues directly connected to Russia, Ukraine, sanctions or bilateral relations. |
| Other                                | FIMI-related post whose dominant topic does not fit clearly into one of the above categories.                                                              | Broader historical revisionism, general anti-Western narratives, multipolarity narratives, generic claims about Russophobia, Russian civilisational narratives or posts in which no single listed geopolitical target dominates.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

## Results

The corpus consisted of 6,996 Facebook posts published by the official pages of the Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro between 2019 and 2023. The first stage of analysis distinguished between routine diplomatic communication and FIMI-related communication. The volume of embassy Facebook activity varied considerably across the five countries (see Figure 1).

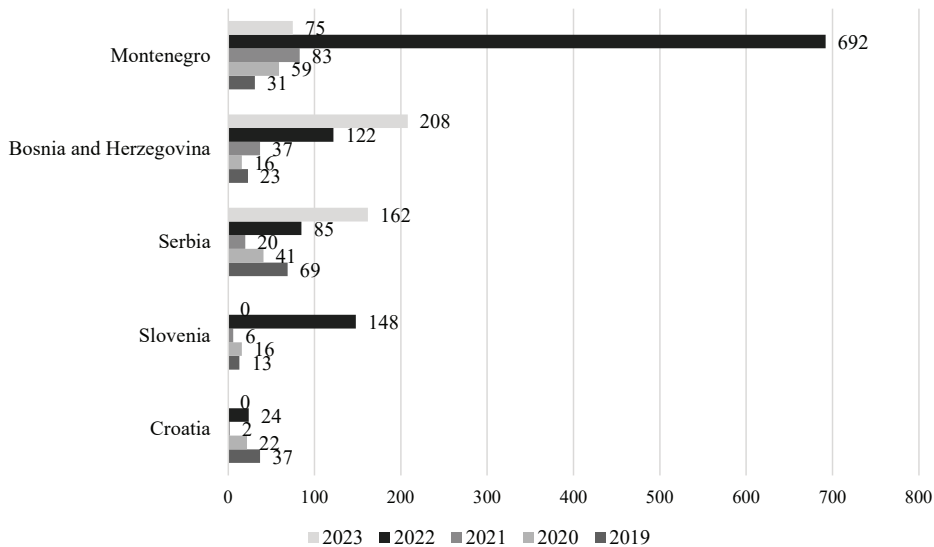
The Russian Embassy in Croatia published the lowest number of posts during the analysed period ( $N = 196$ ), followed by the Embassy in Slovenia ( $N = 1,249$ ), the Embassy in Serbia ( $N = 1,314$ ) and the Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $N = 1,472$ ). The highest overall level of Facebook activity was recorded by the Russian Embassy in Montenegro, with 2,765 posts. The distribution of FIMI-related posts followed a similar but not identical pattern. Croatia recorded 85 FIMI-related posts, Slovenia 183, Serbia 377, Bosnia and Herzegovina 406 and Montenegro 940. Montenegro stands out both in terms of overall activity and in terms of the absolute number of FIMI-related posts.

**Figure 1.** Diplomatic and FIMI-related Facebook Posts by Russian Embassy, 2019–2023



Source: Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.



**Figure 2.** Annual Frequency of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by Russian Embassy, 2019–2023

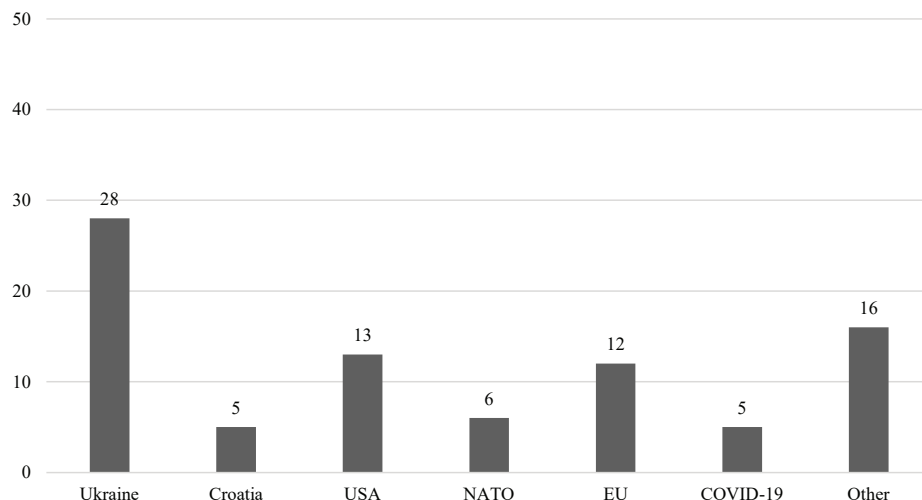
Source: Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

A chi-square test of independence confirmed a statistically significant association between embassy and post type,  $\chi^2(4, N = 6,996) = 180.58, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .16$ . This indicates that the proportion of routine diplomatic and FIMI-related posts differed across the analysed embassy pages, although the strength of association was modest.

The annual distribution of FIMI-related posts shows a clear temporal shift during the analysed period (see Figure 2). FIMI-related activity increased sharply in 2022, coinciding with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This increase was most visible in Montenegro, where the embassy published 692 FIMI-related posts in 2022 alone. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also recorded substantial activity in the later part of the period, with both embassies reaching their highest levels of FIMI-related posting in 2023.

The pattern was different in Croatia and Slovenia. In both cases, Russian embassy Facebook activity declined sharply after platform restrictions on Russian state-linked content were introduced in 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022). The Russian Embassy in Croatia stopped posting after 16 April 2022, while the Embassy in Slovenia stopped posting after 9 March 2022. This limits the comparability of post-2022 ac-

**Figure 3.** Topics of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by the Russian Embassy in Croatia, 2019–2023



*Source:* Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

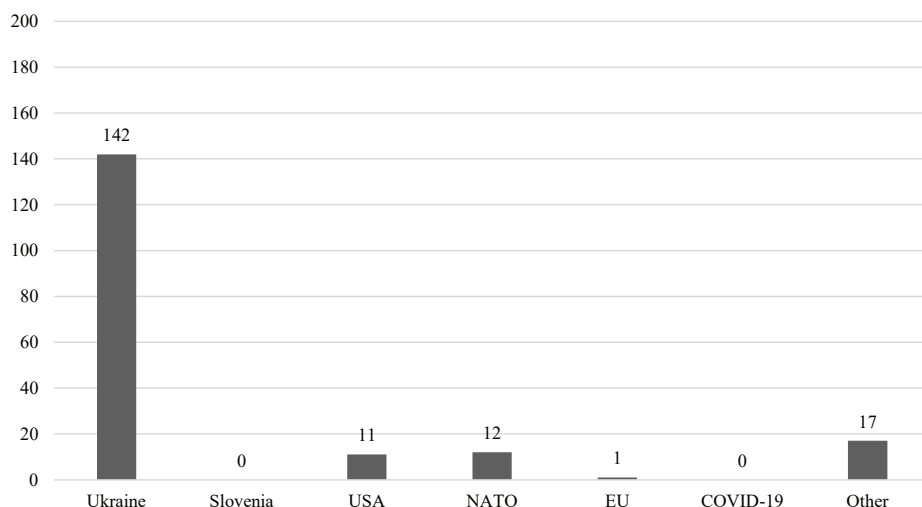
tivity in these two countries. The decline should therefore be interpreted in relation to platform restrictions and institutional context, rather than simply as a change in embassy communication strategy.

A second chi-square test showed a statistically significant association between embassy and year within the FIMI-related subset,  $\chi^2(16, N = 1,991) = 844.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .33$ . This indicates a moderate association and supports the interpretation that the temporal distribution of FIMI-related posts differed meaningfully across the analysed embassy pages.

The next stage of the analysis examined the dominant topics of FIMI-related posts. These categories were applied only to the FIMI-related subset of the corpus. The purpose of this stage was to identify whether embassy communication focused primarily on broader geopolitical narratives, such as Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA, or whether these narratives were combined with local political issues in the post-Yugoslav space.

A third chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant association between embassy and dominant topic within the FIMI-related subset,  $\chi^2(28, N = 1,991) = 1016.84$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .36$ . This indicates a moderate association and shows that thematic profiles differed meaningfully across the five embassy pages.

**Figure 4.** Topics of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by the Russian Embassy in Slovenia, 2019–2023



*Source:* Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

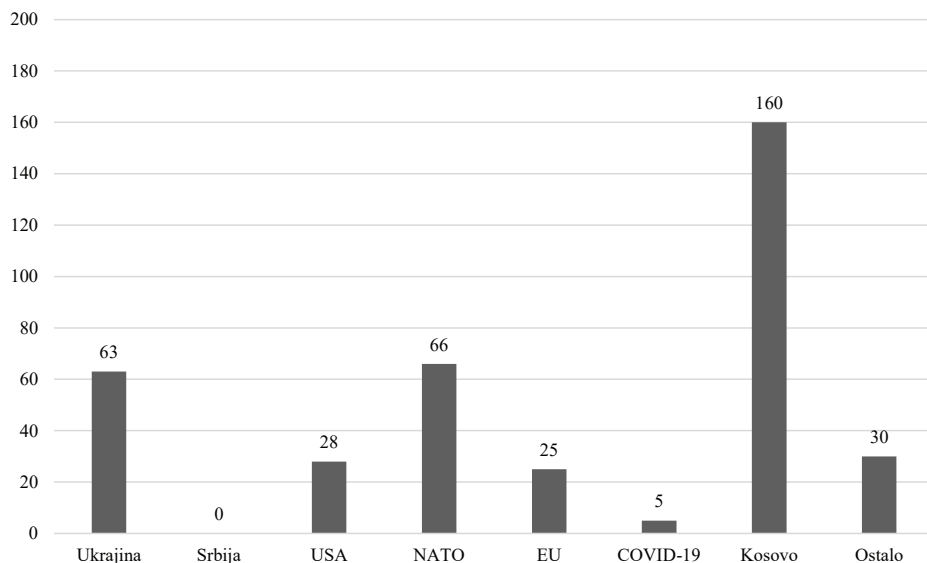
The result supports the interpretation that FIMI-related communication was not distributed uniformly across countries, but was shaped by country-specific issues such as Kosovo in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Dayton and the OHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro's bilateral and institutional disputes with Russia.

The Russian Embassy in Croatia published 85 FIMI-related posts during the analysed period (see Figure 3). Ukraine was the most frequent topic, while NATO, the EU, the USA, COVID-19 and other themes appeared less prominently. The relatively low number of FIMI-related posts should be interpreted in relation to the overall lower activity of this embassy and the fact that its Facebook posting stopped after April 2022.

The Russian Embassy in Slovenia published 183 FIMI-related posts (see Figure 4). Most of these posts focused on Ukraine, while references to NATO, the USA and other topics appeared much less frequently. Since posting activity stopped shortly after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Slovenian case should be interpreted in relation to platform restrictions and the limited post-March 2022 dataset, similarly to the Croatian case.

The Russian Embassy in Serbia published 377 FIMI-related posts (see Figure 5). Kosovo was the dominant local issue, with 160 posts focused on Kosovo's

**Figure 5.** Topics of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by the Russian Embassy in Serbia, 2019–2023



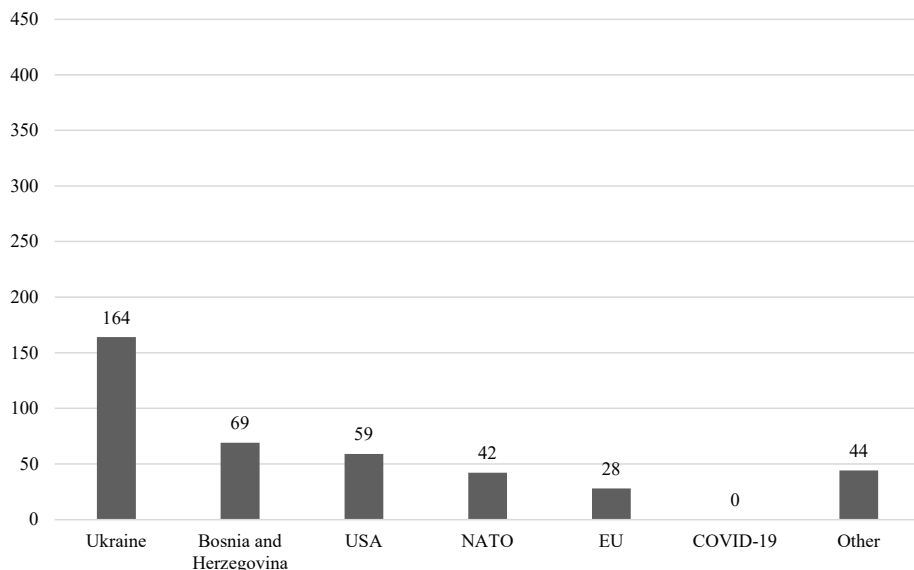
Source: Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

status, independence or comparisons with other contested territories. Ukraine and NATO also appeared frequently, while the USA and the EU were less prominent. The prominence of Kosovo shows that the embassy's FIMI-related communication was strongly localised through a central Serbian political issue, rather than focused only on the war in Ukraine. This pattern is consistent with the broader argument that Russian strategic narratives in Serbia can be articulated through claims about sovereignty, territorial integrity and Western double standards.

The Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina published 406 FIMI-related posts during the analysed period (see Figure 6). Activity increased in 2022 and reached its highest level in 2023. Ukraine was the most frequent topic, while the USA, NATO and the EU also appeared prominently. However, in contrast to Croatia and Slovenia, a substantial share of FIMI-related posts addressed local political issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These posts centred on Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and the Office of the High Representative. In this context, the embassy's communication framed Western actors and the OHR as sources of external interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order. The Dayton framework was therefore not treated

**Figure 6.** Topics of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by the Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019–2023

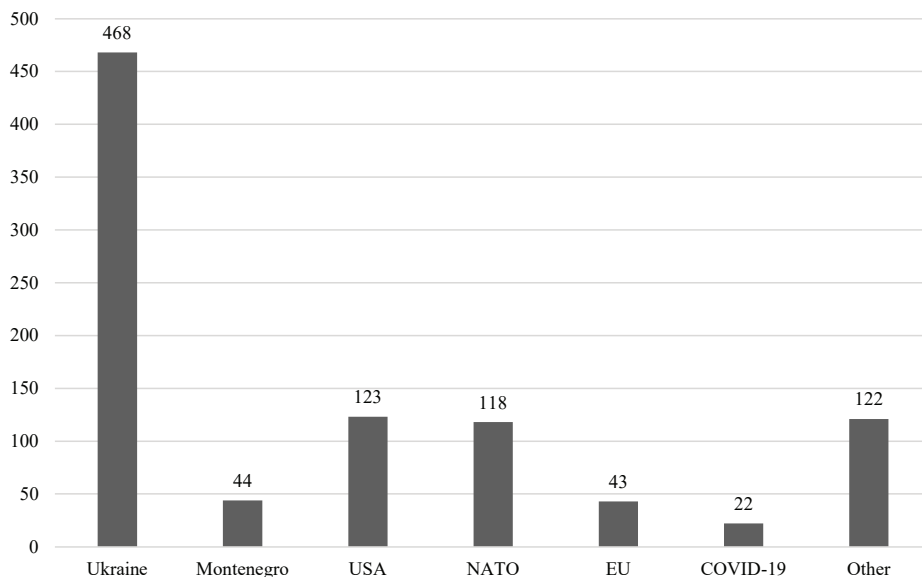


*Source:* Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

simply as a domestic institutional issue, but as a local reference point through which broader Russian narratives about sovereignty, Western intervention and the illegitimacy of externally imposed political decisions were articulated.

The Russian Embassy in Montenegro published 940 FIMI-related posts, the highest number among the analysed embassies (see Figure 7). Almost three quarters of these posts were published in 2022. Ukraine was the dominant topic, with 468 posts, considerably more than any other category. The embassy also addressed NATO, the USA, the EU, COVID-19 and Montenegro-related political issues, including sanctions, diplomatic tensions and bilateral relations with Russia. This indicates that Montenegro became an active site of Russian embassy communication after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, especially in relation to the country's alignment with EU and NATO policy.

**Figure 7.** Topics of FIMI-related Facebook Posts by the Russian Embassy in Montenegro, 2019–2023



*Source:* Authors' manual content analysis of dataset.

## Discussion

The results indicate that Facebook communication by Russian embassies in the analysed countries cannot be reduced to routine digital diplomacy. Although a large part of the corpus consisted of standard diplomatic content, including protocol, cultural, commemorative and bilateral posts, a substantial number of posts reproduced FIMI-related narratives. This confirms the central argument of the article: official embassy Facebook pages can operate both as instruments of public diplomacy and as state-controlled channels through which geopolitical narratives are circulated, legitimised and adapted to specific information environments.

The temporal distribution of FIMI-related posts points to 2022 as a turning point. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was followed by a sharp increase in FIMI-related activity, most clearly in Montenegro. At the same time, embassy activity in Croatia and Slovenia declined after platform restrictions were introduced. This pattern should be interpreted cautiously. The data shows differences in visible embassy Facebook activity, but it does not establish the cause of those differences. The observed post-2022 divergence may reflect platform restrictions, differences

in data availability, embassy-level communication decisions, broader institutional context or strategic communication priorities. The analysis therefore does not claim to prove coordinated redistribution of Russian communication toward less restricted environments. It shows only that, after 2022, visible embassy Facebook activity remained more sustained in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro than in Croatia and Slovenia.

The comparison across the five countries shows that Russian embassy communication was not uniform. Broader geopolitical narratives concerning Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA appeared throughout the dataset, but they were not simply repeated in identical form. They were adapted to local political contexts. This is the central interpretative point of the analysis. FIMI-related communication did not operate only as a global anti-Western script; it was localised through existing disputes, vulnerabilities and contested political questions in the post-Yugoslav space.

Serbia is the clearest example of this localisation. Kosovo was the dominant issue in the FIMI-related communication of the Russian Embassy in Serbia. Through Kosovo, the embassy connected broader Russian claims about sovereignty, territorial integrity and Western double standards with a central Serbian political issue. This suggests a convergence between Russian strategic narratives and Serbian official positions on Kosovo. It also shows that FIMI-related communication can work by reinforcing familiar local grievances rather than by introducing entirely new narratives.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, localisation followed a different logic. FIMI-related communication was connected to Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and the Office of the High Representative. These themes allowed the embassy to frame Western actors as illegitimate interveners in Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order. The local dispute over Dayton and the OHR thus became a channel for a broader Russian narrative about sovereignty, Western interference and externally imposed political arrangements.

Montenegro presents a third pattern. The Russian Embassy in Montenegro produced the highest number of FIMI-related posts, most notably in 2022. Ukraine was the dominant topic, but the embassy also addressed sanctions against Russia, diplomatic expulsions, NATO alignment and the deterioration of bilateral relations. Montenegro therefore became one of the main sites of Russian diplomatic messaging after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, especially because of its alignment with EU and NATO policy.

Croatia and Slovenia point to the importance of a different factor: visibility under conditions of platform and institutional constraint. Both countries are EU and NATO member states, and both saw a sharp decline in Russian embassy Facebook activity after 2022. This should not be read simply as evidence of lower strategic



relevance. Rather, it indicates that Russian embassy communication became less visible on Facebook in contexts where platform restrictions and institutional alignment with EU and NATO policy were stronger.

These patterns are consistent with literature that treats digital diplomacy not only as a tool of engagement, but also as a state-controlled form of strategic communication. The results support the distinction between informational and relational public diplomacy, since the analysed embassy pages primarily functioned as channels for message dissemination rather than as spaces of dialogic engagement (Sevin and Ingenhoff, 2018). They are also consistent with Metzgar's (2012) argument that social media should not be analysed only as a technological medium, but through the political content and strategic purpose of communication. At the same time, the localisation of narratives through Kosovo, Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and Montenegro's relations with Russia corresponds to research showing that disinformation and influence operations in the Western Balkans work through existing institutional weaknesses, unresolved sovereignty disputes and contested geopolitical orientations (Greene *et al.*, 2021; Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021; Dolan, 2022). In this sense, the analysed embassy communication should be understood less as isolated Facebook activity and more as a visible diplomatic layer within a broader Russian information influence environment.

COVID-19 was marginal in the analysed embassy communication. FIMI-related posts focused far more on geopolitical themes such as Ukraine, NATO, the EU, the USA and local regional disputes than on pandemic-related narratives. This does not make COVID-19 irrelevant to the wider study of disinformation, but it shows that, in this corpus, Russian embassy communication was primarily geopolitical rather than health-related.

Altogether, the analysis shows how official diplomatic communication can reproduce FIMI-related narratives and adapt them to different political environments. The analysed posts do not prove coordinated FIMI operations or measurable effects on public opinion. Their significance lies elsewhere: they show how official embassy Facebook pages can connect global geopolitical narratives with local disputes, contested identities and existing vulnerabilities within the post-Yugoslav space.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. It analyses the content of official embassy Facebook posts, but not their reach, engagement, circulation or audience reception. It also does not reconstruct the full infrastructure of FIMI activity, including cross-platform coordination, media amplification, bot activity or the role of external actors. The study therefore cannot establish whether differences in post-2022 activity resulted from coordinated strategic redistribution, platform enforcement, embassy-

level communication decisions or differences in data availability. Another limitation is that posts with overlapping themes were coded according to their dominant narrative focus, which involved interpretive judgement. Although the coding was conducted using a shared coding scheme and ambiguous cases were discussed among the authors, the study did not include a formal intercoder reliability test. Future research should combine content analysis with engagement data, network analysis, intercoder reliability testing and qualitative narrative analysis to examine how FIMI-related messages circulate within broader regional information ecosystems.

## Conclusion

Russian embassy Facebook communication in the Adriatic-Balkan and post-Yugoslav space shows that the boundary between routine digital diplomacy and strategic information manipulation is not always clear. Across the analysed corpus of 6,996 posts, Russian embassies continued to perform standard public diplomacy functions, including cultural promotion, commemorative communication, consular information and the presentation of bilateral relations. At the same time, a substantial part of their Facebook activity reproduced FIMI-related narratives that delegitimised Ukraine, NATO, the EU and the USA. Official embassy pages should therefore not be treated only as neutral or administrative communication channels, but also as visible state platforms through which Russian geopolitical narratives are publicly circulated.

The main pattern identified in the article is the combination of global and local narrative layers. Ukraine was the dominant reference point in most cases, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, but embassy communication did not simply repeat a uniform Ukraine-war narrative across the five countries. In Serbia, Kosovo served as the key local issue through which claims about sovereignty, territorial integrity and Western double standards were articulated. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement and the Office of the High Representative provided a framework for narratives about Western interference and externally imposed political arrangements. In Montenegro, sanctions against Russia, diplomatic expulsions and deteriorating bilateral relations became important points through which the embassy contested the country's alignment with EU and NATO policy.

The comparison also points to the importance of institutional and platform contexts. Russian embassy activity in Croatia and Slovenia declined after platform restrictions were introduced in 2022, while embassies in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro remained more active. This pattern does not prove a coordinated redistribution of Russian communication, but it indicates that visible embassy Facebook activity remained more sustained in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and

Montenegro than in Croatia and Slovenia after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The article shows that official embassy Facebook pages should be analysed not only as instruments of digital diplomacy, but also as state communication spaces in which broader geopolitical narratives are adapted to local political contexts. In the cases analysed here, their significance lies in the way Russian diplomatic messages connected international crises with unresolved disputes, contested identities and existing political divisions in the post-Yugoslav space.

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DIGITALNA DIPLOMACIJA I KOMUNIKACIJA POVEZANA  
S FIMI-JEM: AKTIVNOST NA FACEBOOKU RUSKIH  
VELEPOSŁANSTAVA U JADRANSKO-BALKANSKOM PROSTORU

*Sažetak*

U članku se analizira komunikacija na Facebooku službenih stranica ruskih veleposlanstava u Hrvatskoj, Sloveniji, Bosni i Hercegovini, Srbiji i Crnoj Gori u razdoblju od 2019. do 2023. godine. Na temelju ručne kvantitativ-

ne analize sadržaja 6996 objava, istraživanje razlikuje rutinsku diplomatsku komunikaciju od komunikacije povezane s FIMI-jem. Analiziraju se opseg, vremenska distribucija i dominantne teme objava povezanih s FIMI-jem, s posebnim naglaskom na način na koji su širi ruski geopolitički narativi prilagođavani lokalnim političkim kontekstima u postjugoslavenskom prostoru. Rezultati pokazuju da je komunikacija veleposlanstava kombinirala uobičajenu javnu diplomaciju s narativima koji su delegitimizirali Ukrajinu, NATO, Europsku uniju i Sjedinjene Američke Države, istodobno se oslanjajući na političke sporove i ranjivosti povezane s Kosovom, Republikom Srpskom, Daytonskim sporazumom i odnosima Crne Gore s Rusijom. Aktivnost veleposlanstava u Hrvatskoj i Sloveniji smanjila se nakon ograničenja platforme uvedenih 2022. godine, dok je u Srbiji, Bosni i Hercegovini te Crnoj Gori ostala izraženija.

*Ključne riječi:* digitalna diplomacija, strano manipuliranje informacijama i uplitanje (FIMI), dezinformacije, jadransko-balkanski prostor, rat u Ukrajini

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