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GEO-POWER-EU

Case Study: Milorad Dodik's campaign targeting the European
Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina

GEO-POWER-EU: EMPOWERING THE GEOPOLITICAL EU IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilising new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle.

More about the project:

LIST OF PARTNER BENEFICIARIES INVOLVED

- European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), Belgium
- University of the Peloponnese (UoP), Greece
- Kentro Erevnon Notioanatolikis Evropis Astiki Mi Kerdoskopiki Etaireia (SEERC), Greece
- Alma Mater Studiorum - Universita Di Bologna (UNIBO), Italy
- Wiener Institut für Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (WIIW), Austria
- Sveuciliste U Rijeci (UNIRI), Croatia
- Institut Za Demokratija Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS), Republic of North Macedonia
- Univerzitet U Beogradu – Fakultet Političkih Nauka (FPN), Serbia
- Vienneast Consulting GmbH (VE Insight), Austria
- Democratization Policy Council (DPC), Germany
- Institutul Pentru Dezvoltare Si Initiative Sociale Viitorul (IDIS VIITORUL), Moldova
- Odeskiy Nacionalniy Universitet Imeni I.I. Mechnikova (ONU), Ukraine
- Georgian Foundation For Strategic And International Studies - Gfsis (GFSIS), Georgia
- Utrikespolitiska Institutet Informationsavd (UII), Sweden

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the information sphere, domestic elites also drive disinformation. The study shows that **disinformation is domestically produced, locally adapted, and strategically targeted**, even when foreign actors provide content or amplification. Serbia illustrates this mechanism: leaders frame protests as “Western-orchestrated coloured revolutions” for internal audiences while presenting students’ protests externally as pro-Russian manipulation—two contradictory narratives deployed to maximise political gains. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruling elites in Republika Srpska blend ethnonationalist and pro-Kremlin messaging to weaken state authority. In Georgia, the government-backed campaign around the “foreign agents law” portrays Western partners as destabilising actors. Ukraine represents a contrasting case, where civil society and state institutions have built comparatively effective information-resilience structures.

Across cases, patrons use disinformation to **delegitimise opposition, reshape public perceptions of foreign partners, and present different narratives to different audiences**. Foreign sponsors—especially Russia—offer templates and amplification, but domestic elites remain the central translators and deployers. The same actors who negotiate corrosive deals often rely on disinformation to defend them, presenting criticism as “foreign pressure” and portraying China, Russia, or Turkey as pragmatic partners. Material and narrative influence reinforce each other, creating a cycle of dependency that shields elites from accountability.

The study also highlights **actors of resistance**: independent media exposing procurement abuses; civil society groups tracking environmental and social impacts; local communities mobilising against destructive mining or energy projects; fact-checking organisations documenting coordinated disinformation campaigns; and anti-corruption bodies that occasionally resist political capture. These counterweights show that corrosive practices face pushback and that policy interventions can strengthen oversight.

CASE STUDY: MILORAD DODIK'S CAMPAIGN TARGETING THE EUROPEAN UNION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

1. DISINFORMATION CONTEXT

Disinformation has been recognized as an issue of rising concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Since 2020, the European Commission's annual country reports have drawn attention to the challenge of domestic and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) in BiH, including disinformation¹. The European Parliament has also expressed its concern about hybrid operations by foreign actors in the country, most recently in its draft Report on the Commission's Reports for 2023 and 2024 (European Parliament 2025). Such concerns are especially relevant in terms of the rise of elite anti-EU narratives in a country where pro-EU sentiment is otherwise strong.

In response to the challenge of disinformation in BiH, civil society organisation Zašto ne launched its fact-checking platform raskrinkavanje.ba in 2017, the only fact-checking platform in BiH. Also in 2017, the European External Action Service (EEAS) established a Western Balkans Task Force as part of its Directorate for Policy Planning and Strategic Communication, to monitor and counter FIMI in BiH and the other countries of the region, with a focus on pro-Kremlin narratives.

Russia has been the main external disinformation actor in BiH and the wider Western Balkans region, either on its own or through proxies and other local actors whose interests align with those of the Kremlin (Bassuener 2019). While China, Turkey, and other countries have also been active in the Western Balkans information space, their influence is less strong and outright disinformation is a less important tool of their soft power in the region.

Over the last several years, political government leaders have emerged as key sources and amplifiers of pro-Kremlin narratives and framings in the wider region. Kremlin-aligned narratives and framings pushed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia are widespread in the BiH information environment and are routinely amplified or adapted by local political actors, notably the President of the Republika Srpska entity, Milorad Dodik, and media outlets affiliated with his administration. In the largely controlled media space of Serbia and Republika Srpska, dominant narratives tend to align with the political priorities of the top leadership. The importance of Serbia and the RS in generating and conveying disinformation was confirmed by a study produced by Zašto ne in April 2019, which identified a “disinformation hub” consisting of 29 outlets, 15 of them located in Serbia and 14 in BiH, of which 12 in Republika Srpska (Cvjetićanin et al. 2019, p. 8). This

¹ The European Commission defines disinformation as “verifiable false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (European Commission, 2018). The European External Action Service (EEAS), whose Strategic Communications Division coined the term, defines Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as “a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes, manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, [and whose agents] can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory” (EEAS 2023).

“disinformation hub” is “still the most prominent source of political disinformation in BiH” in 2025 (SEE Check 2025).

In terms of contextual factors affecting the information environment, citizens in BiH have expressed their low trust in politics and the media: no single political figure received more than 6% when asked “which politician or public person do you trust the most” (International Republican Institute 2024, p. 36) and 62% of respondents “tend not to trust” or “do not trust” the media in BiH (Regional Cooperation Council 2024). This provides fertile ground for anti-EU narratives to take hold.

At the same time, it is also important to note the economic incentives for domestic media to spread content from foreign FIMI actors. Unlike their Western counterparts, Sputnik Srbija and RT (formerly Russia Today) Balkan, both of which operate a Serbian-language service from offices in Belgrade, make their content available for republication without charge, allowing cash-strapped domestic media outlets to accumulate clicks without having to produce content of their own. As Harun Karčić notes with regards to the influence of Russian state-owned outlets in BiH: “Although measuring these networks’ actual popularity is challenging, it is noteworthy that many impoverished RS media outlets copy-paste their freely available content, thereby adding to the dissemination of Kremlin propaganda” (Fruscione & Ambrosetti 2025, p. 34). This economic imperative was also noted by RSF in its investigation into RT Balkan, which notes that RT’s Belgrade outlet engages in “information laundering”: “Disinformation posted on RT Balkan’s website is presented as journalistic news reporting and subsequently shared by mainstream media. This insidious technique is facilitated by the fact that this content is available free of charge to media outlets suffering structural underfunding across the region” (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

In terms of the EU’s public image in BiH, the media – mirroring statements by most BiH politicians and officials who pay lip service to the strategic goal of EU membership – have framed the Union in a positive or at least neutral manner, except for Republika Srpska-based outlets. Expressions of outright euroscepticism are infrequent, both at the popular level and from political actors, although there is a strong sense of disappointment among the general population that the country has been treated unfairly in the process of EU accession and that the EU seems more vested in stability than reform (Bassuener et al. 2023). For example, a 2021 review of disinformation campaigns across the Western Balkans found that the instances of political manipulation identified by the study rarely directly targeted the EU, although some of the identified narratives could potentially be damaging to its image (Greene et al. 2021, pp. 83-94).

In line with the GEO-POWER-EU conceptual framework, this case study treats disinformation not as isolated falsehoods or purely foreign interference, but as part of a broader ecosystem of information manipulation in which domestic political elites play a central role, selectively appropriating and amplifying foreign narratives to advance local political objectives.

As the present paper will retrace, the one important exception to the generally positive disposition toward the EU has been President Milorad Dodik of the Republika Srpska entity. (In August 2025, Dodik's appeal against a decision by the Central Election Commission to revoke his mandate as RS President was rejected, which means that his mandate was officially terminated and a 6-year ban on holding public office took effect. See Kurtić 2025.) Dodik and media formally or informally controlled by or affiliated with his administration – in particular,

entity public service broadcaster RTRS, entity-owned news agency SRNA, and privately-owned Glas Srpske daily – have been increasingly aggressive in targeting the EU, its member states, and its officials, taking their cue from Dodik. While Dodik is not the only source of political disinformation in BiH, he is without a doubt the main source of anti-EU narratives in the country. For that reason, his most recent campaign has been selected as the case study for political disinformation in the BiH information environment.

2. AGENTS OF ALLIANCE

The Kremlin is a significant disinformation actor in BiH, in particular through the Belgrade branches of RT (formerly Russia Today) Balkan and Sputnik Srbija. Both entities are under EU sanctions but are able to operate without obstacle in Serbia. Their content is routinely carried by the RS public service broadcaster RTRS and by the entity-owned SRNA news agency. The European Commission 2022 country report noted: “Republika Srpska’s RTRS spreads Russian and Serbian disinformation, including on Russia’s aggression on Ukraine and on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s EU accession path. Banja Luka-based provider M-tel continued to carry the signal of the RT [Balkan] and Sputnik [Srbija] channels, despite Bosnia and Herzegovina’s alignment with EU sanctions on Russia prohibiting the broadcast of content from these Russian state-sponsored media outlets” (European Commission 2022, p. 32).

The United States, by contrast, has largely retreated from the Western Balkans information space, defying expectations by local pro-Trump actors following the recent US-EU decoupling. The ongoing campaign by the Trump administration to close down Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, including their local-language services (B/C/S/M and Albanian), is the most obvious indicator of this retreat. Neither the President nor his administration have made any major announcements concerning the region and has largely refrained from commenting even on previously high-profile issues such as the EU-facilitated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo.

It is important to note that the political figures spreading Kremlin narratives in the Western Balkans – PM Orbán, President Vučić, President Dodik and others – operate with a high degree of autonomy rather than merely serving as agents of a foreign principal. This interaction between foreign and domestic (or regional) interests is a dynamic that is only imperfectly captured by the recently introduced concept of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), whose agents EEAS defines as “state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory” (EEAS 2023). The notion of “proxies” is clearly insufficient to help understand the role of Orbán, Vučić, Dodik, and others. Elites like Dodik are not simple proxies but equal partners who selectively use narratives and framings to serve their own political agendas. By way of example, Cvjetićanin et al. note with regard to the “disinformation hub” referenced above that “Russian government-owned media outlet ‘Sputnik’ (Serbian edition) is the only foreign-owned media in this disinformation hub, appearing as one of the main ‘connectors’ of media located in Serbia and those located in Republika Srpska” (Cvjetićanin, T. et al. 2019, p. 8). More recently, analysts pointed to the “need to transcend the foreign-domestic dichotomy when dealing with FIMI” (Morača et al. 2023, p. 2), having observed a “symbiosis”

between domestic and foreign actors “which often rests on a convergence of political and economic interests between local elites and foreign actors” (*ibid.*, p. 3).

A study commissioned by the European Parliament likewise found that “while disinformation is frequently discussed in the context of external threats to the functioning of governance and democracy, this study shows that foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits. Most of the people and organisations producing and disseminating disinformation are internal” (Greene, S. et al. 2021, p. 6).

In line with this understanding, this paper focuses on a key domestic disinformation actor – President Milorad Dodik of the Republika Srpska entity. Having been in power as de facto leader of the RS without interruption since 2002 (President of the Republic of Srpska, n.d.), Dodik controls large swaths of public life, business, and the media in the RS². As a result, his anti-EU rhetoric has had a crucial effect on public opinion in the RS concerning European integration.

3. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

3.1. OVERVIEW

Dodik’s public disposition toward the EU demonstrates a number of consistent narratives as well as wide variation in messaging and tone over the course of his 19 uninterrupted years in power. Among the consistent narratives have been that there should be no international diktats, that EU membership should or does not require constitutional change in BiH (Dodik September 12, 2010), that the EU is demanding a “unitary” state under the undue influence of Sarajevo (or “Muslims”) (Dodik April 4, 2011; Dodik January 8, 2025), and so on. These narratives would take on a more aggressive tone (often using vulgar expressions) whenever political developments demanded it, and would likewise soften as soon as political pressure eased. Some of these changes in rhetoric seemed to track developments in the international environment: Dodik’s messaging about the EU hardened following the Brexit referendum and the first election victory of Donald Trump, both in 2016, with claims that the EU was on a path to break-up (Dodik July 29, 2018) and that President Trump would support RS independence (Dodik September 2, 2018). RS media took Brexit and the first Trump victory as indications of a weakening EU, amplifying narratives about EU fragility. Around the same time, Dodik blocked key reforms required for the next steps on the EU path, prompting talk about possible EU measures (Dodik, July 26, 2017).

However, until recently, even Dodik’s criticism of the EU’s conditions and policies was embedded in a framing – sincere or otherwise – of EU membership as a goal for BiH and the RS (Dodik May 12, 2016), and his claims that the EU was a failing concept did not prevent Dodik from simultaneously demanding the opening of EU accession negotiations (Dodik February 27, 2024). In 2021, he suggested that secession would make it possible for an independent RS to join the EU in three years (Dodik, May 15, 2021).

² Dodik’s power in the RS is personal and followed him from the office of RS Prime Minister (1998-2001 and 2006-10) to the office of RS President (2010-18 and 2022-August 2025) and that of Serb member of the BiH Presidency (2018-22).

Other talking points that have remained consistent throughout the years is his demand for the closure of the Office of the High Representative (Dodik October 15, 2011) and for the removal of foreign judges on the Constitutional Court of BiH (Dodik May 5, 2020); his warm feelings for Russia and Putin, which intensified in recent years; and his denial of the Srebrenica genocide, evident from the earliest comments analyzed for this report (Dodik September 12, 2010).

Overall, however, Dodik's statements about the EU have taken on a much more aggressive edge over the past several years, taking up and intensifying earlier declarations that the EU was on a path to collapse and that US President Trump – now in his second term – would support RS independence. Dodik has threatened to realign with Russia and China should the EU not advance BiH membership (on his terms of “original Dayton”), arguing that BiH should shift toward seeking membership in the BRICS (Dodik March 21, 2024); accused the European Commission of lying in its annual country reports (Dodik November 3, 2024); and reaffirmed that the EU had no future, while stressing to Putin that the RS remains pro-Russian, anti-American, and anti-Western (Dodik February 21, 2024). More recently, the subsequent US decoupling from the EU and the aggressive anti-Europe rhetoric by the Trump administration (in particular, Vice President JD Vance) appear to have emboldened Dodik in his rhetoric, although the US largely refrained from supporting him as he sought to stave off his removal from office.

Again, these shifts appear to be a response to changing political circumstances. Two events in particular seem to have prompted this renewed hardening of Dodik's rhetoric: Trump's second election victory in November 2024 and Dodik's first-instance conviction by the Court of BiH in February 2025 for violating a law stating that compliance with High Representative orders is compulsory. Since then, his anti-American statements dissipated as his anti-EU rhetoric became more visceral: EU membership would spell the end of the RS (Dodik January 8, 2025); the EU “obstruct[s] democracy, rig[s] elections, abuse[s] justice” (Dodik April 10, 2025); US Vice President J.D. Vance “was right about the EU” with his accusations that it was undemocratic (Dodik March 30, 2025). Dodik went so far as to claim that the EU's support for Ukraine's defense was motivated by a desire to move eastward, break up Russia, and seize its resources (Dodik May 14, 2025), also insisting that Russian war crimes in Ukraine were a Western fabrication (Dodik April 8, 2025) – narratives that are straight out of the Kremlin's disinformation handbook. This illustrates how perceived US-EU policy divergence provides narrative ammunition for local leaders to attack the EU's legitimacy, even in a situation where US officials are not directly addressing political issues in BiH.

While only some of these statements by Dodik meet the definition of disinformation (see Section 3.2) – “verifiable false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (European Commission 2018) – they need to be seen as part of a spectrum of manipulative messaging that allows Dodik to reactivate old narratives and framings whenever the situation demands it. It should be noted that the manipulative repetition of partially true claims can have the same corrosive impact in practice as outright falsehoods.

3.2. ACTORS, KEY NARRATIVES AND TARGET AUDIENCES

The narratives and framings conveyed by Dodik and aligned disinformation actors fall into several broad groups:

- Generic pro-Kremlin narratives: The West/NATO provoked the war in Ukraine and wants to prolong it while Russia wants peace; the “deep state”, the “global war party”, and “violent globalists” control Western governments and are seeking to force other countries to join the war or impose sanctions against Russia; Russia is a traditional ally of Serbs. These narratives play on the theme of Serbs’ alleged historical ties with Russia and their justified distrust of the West and NATO (in particular due to NATO’s military intervention in Serbia in 1999).
- Generic anti-West narratives: The West/EU is an enemy of traditional values; wants to force other countries to adopt LGBTQI+ rights; meddles in sovereign countries with its “regime change” or “colour revolution” agenda. These narratives play on the theme of traditional values, which the RS is supposedly upholding and of alleged Western attempts to undermine them, as well as on sovereignty concerns.
- Generic anti-NGO narratives: civil society and independent media are “mercenaries”, foreign-controlled agents paid by the West to foment “colour revolutions.” These narratives are a variation of the “regime change” framing.

More specifically, locally adapted iterations of these broad narratives or framings in BiH include:

- The EU/the West interferes in BiH through the “illegitimate” High Representative and “mercenary” NGOs; Orbán, Vučić, and Dodik are resisting the “diktat” of “Brussels bureaucrats”; in response, the West/EU is now attacking Republika Srpska/Vučić/Dodik. This narrative plays on a theme used by Orbán and Trump – of unaccountable liberal elites pushing their values on traditional, family-oriented societies.
- The main threat to BiH’s survival is Bosniak (often referred to as “Muslim”) “unitarism,” which has triggered rightful resistance from Serbs and Croats – a narrative that is also regularly advanced by Croatian and Bosnian Croat political figures. It plays on fears stemming from the war of Serbs and Croats being “forced” to live in a “Muslim”-dominated independent BiH, and on post-war fears of being outvoted by the Bosniak plurality or majority should the current power-sharing system be replaced by classic representative democracy.
- The EU/the UK wants to turn RS/BiH/the Western Balkans into a “dumping ground” for migrants and advance the “Islamization” of the region³. This is a variation on the “great replacement” theory, which has gained traction in Europe and elsewhere – the idea that “white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities” (Davey & Ebner 2019, p. 7). This ties into Serb fears of being dominated by “Muslims” (i.e., Bosniaks), amplified by the prospect of large-scale immigration (possibly facilitated by the EU or the UK) of Muslims from places such as Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Recent examples of outright disinformation targeting the EU include a claim Dodik made in an interview with the RS public service broadcaster RTRS that “We only have problems because of Europe”. More specifically, according to Dodik, “When we join the EU, it means that there is no

³ <https://x.com/MiloradDodik/status/1929855514541793753>.

Republika Srpska. Is that the price that these people want to pay? Let them pay. I will not. While I am leading this, that will not happen" (Dodik, January 8, 2025). In an interview with a Russian TV channel in April 2025, Dodik claimed that the EU treats political opponents worse than "orthodox communists" treated dissidents, mirroring a narrative pushed by various Trump allies, including Vice President JD Vance and Elon Musk. Dodik also said that the EU "has no raw materials, oil, mines, and they always talk about European values," that "Europe has failed," and that "Europe today has nothing" (Dodik April 8, 2025) – again exploiting the growing rift between the US and the Europeans and echoing US talking points about an allegedly powerless EU. He also used the interview to defend Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which he described as "rightful... because the interests of the Russian state as a whole, as well as the Russians living in Ukraine, were threatened. They banned their language, writing, and looted the church". Dodik also suggested that no crimes were committed by the invading Russians against Ukrainian civilians and that "they... tried to stage something but they didn't succeed." In an interview with Russian state-owned news agency TASS in May 2025 Dodik claimed that "Europe" was seeking to break up Russia and appropriate its energy resources, using Ukraine to achieve this goal (Dodik May 14, 2025).

3.3. STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Dodik's communication activities flow through various channels. His X account, started in March 2022, is with just 40,000 followers the most prominent of any BiH political figure (against Benjamina Karić's 25.1k followers and Dino Konaković's 13.1k). He posts regularly, often daily, mostly in Serbian but also in English when addressing specifically a foreign audience or advertising his trips abroad. His posts are often long and detailed; one interviewee described Dodik's X account as his "press office" (Interview #2). Since a fair number of these posts are in English, it appears that Dodik is also seeking to address the diplomatic community through his social media; the other main audience is domestic, since Dodik's X posts tend to get quoted extensively by various government-aligned outlets such as newspapers, news agencies, and TV stations.

In a country where television is still the prime source of news for large parts of the population, the other important outlet under Dodik's control is the entity's public service broadcaster, Radio Televizija Republike Srpske (RTRS). (In a 2024 poll, 48% of respondents in BiH indicated television as their main source of news, followed by social media at 22% and other online sources at 19%. IRI 2024, p. 126.)

RTRS is an important amplifier of Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned narratives: it routinely republishes content sourced from RT Balkan and Sputnik Srbija and prominently quotes and otherwise features key pro-Kremlin leaders such as Dodik, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. RTRS also routinely features Russian officials – in particular, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova – without context or background.

3.4. IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION

While measuring the reach and impact of specific disinformation campaigns is challenging, it can be inferred in general terms that RS President Dodik's hostility toward the European Union

has affected public sentiment in the entity. While support for EU membership stood at 71.2% countrywide, according to an opinion poll published by the Directorate for European Integration in August 2024, the corresponding figure in the Republika Srpska was just 48.3%, compared to 83.8% in the other entity, the Federation of BiH (BNE IntellineWS 2024). Other polls show a similarly pronounced divide between the two entities in terms of the country's strategic alignment: for example, while 80% of respondents from the RS expressed a favourable view of Vladimir Putin, just 11% of respondents from the Federation did so (International Republican Institute 2024, p. 67)⁴. Over the last decade or so, polls have consistently found a significant discrepancy in support of EU membership between the Federation and the RS, where it has hovered around 50-60% or so (see e.g. NDI 2019).

It should be noted that in neighboring Serbia, the European Union's natural constituency of students, anti-regime protesters and civic activists appears deeply disillusioned by the realpolitik posture of the EU institutions and member states, as is evident in the 97% of negative replies to a May 2024 X post by then-HR/VP Josep Borrell congratulating the newly appointed government (Sicurella et al. 2025, p. 3). Similar dynamics with regard to the EU's image among opposition supporters might well be at play in the RS as well, with those advocating for a shift away from alignment with Moscow feeling left alone by Brussels. Recent statements by European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos to the effect that Dodik would no longer be an interlocutor for the European Commission on issues related to BiH's EU accession matters (Jozwiak 2025) made this risk recede to some extent; but the continued refusal of the EU's peacekeeping mission in BiH, EUFOR Althea, to provide backup to state-level police organization SIPA as it seeks to apprehend Dodik following his first-instance conviction suggests that while the EU is less invested in Dodik than in Vučić, it is still unwilling to confront Dodik directly.

3.5. RESPONSES AND COUNTERMEASURES

The increasingly aggressive messaging by Dodik and his information ecosystem and his increasingly brazen defiance of the arrest warrant issued after his first-instance conviction in February 2025 triggered a reaction on the anti-Dodik side, which also targeted the EU. Politicians and media opposed to Dodik accused the EU of ignoring Dodik's challenge to the EU accession process and to the rule of law in BiH. More specifically, there were accusations that EU structures in Brussels had ordered EUFOR to stand down and refuse to provide backup to SIPA (Wölfel 2025). While these accusations are consistent with EUFOR's posture and the EU's messaging to date, they also involved instances of apparent information manipulation. Istraga.ba claimed in an article following a visit to Sarajevo of HR/VP Kaja Kallas that she had told BiH Foreign Minister Elmedin Konaković that the "European Union is not ready to use EUFOR troops to arrest Milorad Dodik. We are not ready to risk the lives of our soldiers" (Istraga 2025). While interviewees in private disputed that Kallas made the comment as reported by Istraga, the EU did not deny it in public.

Dodik's hardening rhetoric was mirrored by Croatian and Bosnian Croat political figures, including HDZ BiH leader Dragan Čović and Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who

⁴ The IRI poll disaggregates responses to many questions by entity and/or ethnicity but not the question on EU accession.

publicly stated following Dodik's conviction by the Court of BiH that EU sanctions against Dodik and other RS officials would be "bad" and "lead to increasing tensions, slowing down the European path, and worsening the economic situation" (SRNA 2025). US commentator Max Primorac repeated the false claim that "the Bosniak Muslim majority controls most federal [i.e., central-level] institutions" and that "Muslims" had disenfranchised "the country's pro-Western bloc," meaning the Bosnian Croats (Primorac 2025). The solution was simple, according to Primorac: "President Trump could provide Bosnia and Herzegovina a fresh start by refusing to renew the OHR's authorities and letting it, along with the three foreign supreme court judges, the bottom-feeding web of NGOs, and this last vestige of nation-building, lapse into the dustbin of history", prompting online portal Klix.ba to comment that his article sounded "as if Dodik had dictated it" (Klix.ba 2025a) and making the broader point that the HDZ and Croatia were using the crisis triggered by Dodik again to raise the idea of a BiH with three federal units, that is, the creation of a Croat entity (Klix.ba 2025b).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISINFORMATION

This paper has sought to retrace, in rudimentary form, the evolution of Dodik's rhetoric about the EU over the last several years. We have seen that Dodik's attacks against the EU, its member states, and its representatives were mostly indirect until the first Trump administration, around 2017. He would pay lip service to BiH's EU path and refrain from targeted attacks while railing against "foreigners" – code for any international instance that might seek to check his actions, including but not specifically pointing to the EU⁵. Until the mid-2010s, Dodik's main message was that EU accession would be good for BiH as long as it preserved the country's constitutional set-up (i.e., its division into entities). After around 2016-17, this messaging began to shift, with more frequent and more explicit attacks against the EU's conditionality, also accompanied by predictions that the EU would break up. These shifts appeared to be a response to changing political contexts, in particular the feeling that the EU was becoming increasingly irrelevant in the wake of Brexit and the first Trump victory.

Dodik's rhetoric – often dismissed by EU officials as just that – is important since it punctures the pro-EU messaging which represents the political consensus among other actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and across the Western Balkans. Dodik has been the most aggressive anti-EU figure among the region's leading politicians, with a clear – albeit it is hard to measure – impact on support for the EU in the Republika Srpska entity. He has also reinforced the notion (at times embraced by President Vučić as well) that the EU (or "the West") is anti-Serb, and that the RS can join the EU only if it is willing to give up not only its political orientation but its traditional values as well.

It is important to recognise that Dodik's communications run the full spectrum from political spin to outright disinformation, using a variety of outlets, including social media – in particular, his X account – as well as more traditional ways of reaching audiences, such as entity broadcaster RTRS and entity news agency SRNA. Dodik's deployment of the totality of information manipulation suggests that a focus on debunking specific narratives that meet the

⁵ In the Bosnian context, the term "foreigner" denotes a resident expatriate – often foreign officials or diplomats – and only rarely migrants.

standards of disinformation only captures a particular segment of his communication while leaving the essentially manipulative character of his discourse unaddressed.

This case study has demonstrated several major features of the disinformation landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- The most prominent sources of political disinformation are political leaders, in particular – but not only – Milorad Dodik;
- supplementary sources regularly amplified by Dodik and others are foreign leaders defying the EU, notably Prime Minister Orbán of Hungary;
- disinformation is only one element on a continuum of political communication that is essentially manipulative, regardless of whether specific narratives meet prior definitions of disinformation or FIMI;
- some of the most prominent examples of disinformation and other forms of information manipulation appear to be driven by political agendas in response to changing political circumstances, often at the international level. This includes the 2016 Brexit referendum and US presidential election as well as Trump's second election victory in 2024.

What this case study illustrates in the context of the broader GEO-POWER EU project is the elite-driven nature of disinformation in hybrid regimes such as the RS; a symbiosis between domestic incumbents and foreign narrative ecosystems, rather than the principal-agent model underlying the “foreign influence” paradigm; and the EU's vulnerability when the political conditionality of the accession process collides with the EU's own stability logic.

4.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Countering manipulative messaging needs to target the entire spectrum of political rhetoric; while identifying and debunking narratives that meet the definition of disinformation or FIMI is an indispensable part of this fight against disinformation, it needs to be embedded in a framework that takes into account the shifting nature of political communication and views manipulative rhetoric as a continuum. Models centred on behaviour, content analysis, or network analysis should feed into a systematic analysis of information ecosystems in their totality, as suggested by Sicurella et al. (2025). This holistic approach also needs to include education in terms of media and digital literacy with the goal of a better-informed general population. This is of particular importance in a country whose school curricula are divided along ethnic lines.

Effectively countering information manipulation also requires a recognition of its political character. The EU has often been reluctant to push back against certain narratives, whether due to concerns about inadvertently empowering bad-faith actors or because of apprehension about being perceived as interfering in local political debate. But acknowledging ongoing political contestation is not the same as interference. In conditions of intensifying popular discontent with certain leaders and policies, the EU should systematically take the side of those demanding accountability, democratic standards, and adherence to the rule of law. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the beginnings of a more robust public posture by the EU were visible in European Commissioner Kos' declaration referenced in Section 3.5 that President Dodik could no longer

be an interlocutor on EU issues. But such statements are meaningful only when they are followed by action and consistent with other messaging; this, in turn, requires a political strategy for resolving the constitutional crisis Dodik has precipitated, rather than a mere communications strategy.

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<https://www.euronews.rs/evropa/region/108155/dodik-evropa-da-oslobodi-bih-kolonijalnog-statusa-smatis-i-stranaca-u-ustavnom-sudu/vest>

2023: Dodik – Europe no longer has leaders:
<https://prijeedor24h.net/2023/04/27/dodik-evropa-vise-nema-lidera-video/>

2023: AfD comes to Banja Luka:
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dodik-banjaluka-njemacki-afd/32723607.html>

2023: Who are the “European Sovereignists” that Dodik brought to Banja Luka?:
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/suverenisti-evropa-dodik-skup-desnicari/32634788.html>

2023: Europe is in a sad state – and now little Dodik bothers them:
<https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20230125/dodik-evropa-je-u-jadnom-stanju-tu-sada-neki-mali-dodik-smeta-1149882470.html>

2023: Dodik - Europe should be grateful to China (for its Ukraine proposal):
<https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20230227/evropa-da-bude-zahvalna-kini-dodik-podrzao-kineski-mirovni-predlog-1151572178.html>

2024: What Europe means for Dodik – fulfilling national goal: Serbs without borders (applauding “Friends of Bosnia” group for calling for opening membership talks):

<https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/sta-za-dodika-znaci-evropska-unija-ispunjene-nacionalnog-cilja-srbi-bez-granica-937795/>

(Dodik, February 27, 2024): Dodik wants a concrete date for opening EU membership talks:

<https://una.rs/vesti/region/dodik-ocekujemo-konkretan-datum-otvaranja-pregovora-sa-evropskom-unijom>

(Dodik, March 21, 2024): BiH needs to be in BRICS, not EU:

<https://forbes.n1info.ba/aktuelnosti/stavovi-milorada-dodika-oduvijek-bili-jasni-bih-bi-trebala-u-brics-a-ne-u-evropsku-uniju/>

“The European Union has an alternative. Given that Brussels is constantly issuing new and unclear conditions for EU membership, I believe that BiH should apply for BRICS membership. I believe that it would be accepted sooner than the EU. In the coming days, representatives of institutions from Republika Srpska will send a proposal to the BiH authorities to consider such an initiative,” Dodik said last August. (e.g. August 2023)

(Dodik, November 3, 2024): Dodik says EU country report on BiH is full of lies, ignores international abuses:

<https://dodik.net/vraticemo-izvjestaj-evropske-komisije-o-bih-nazad-u-brisel/>

(Dodik, February 21, 2024): Dodik meets Putin – article cites earlier statement in which Dodik says: “The Republika Srpska remains pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-American”:

<https://euronews.al/en/dodik-confirms-republika-srpskas-good-relations-with-russia/>

2025: Dodik says the EU – by supporting Ukraine – will lose to Putin:

<https://www.borba.info/2025/01/09/dodik-evropa-gubi-od-putina-u-ukrajini/>

2025: Dodik says the EU has a “whore’s policy” in BiH; says RS will soon end EU integration; this is easier to do with Trump as president; Dodik is persecuted like Trump was:

<https://bosnainfo.ba/milorad-dodik-evropska-unija-vodi-kuvanjsku-politiku/>;
<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/vodja-bosanskih-srba-zaprijetio-je-blokadom-europskog-puta-bih-a-uzda-se-u-donalda-trumpa-i-viktora-orbana---879354.html>

2025: Dodik says EU is lying to itself if it says “people and nations are obsolete and there are only values.” He adds that he still wants to join the EU, but only under Dayton:

<https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Dodik-Vjerujem-da-Evropa-danas-sama-sebe-laze/902779>

“In addition, they do not trust us in Republika Srpska, nor do they trust Dayton. The biggest destroyer of the letters of Dayton and the Constitution is the administration in Brussels, which conditions BiH’s entry into the EU with all possible conditions. Brussels is creating some kind of experiment here, but we do not want to be an experiment.”

2025: Dodik after meeting Orban – Europe is in chaos; Hungary a real partner to RS:

<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dodik-nakon-sastanka-s-orbanom-evropa-je-u-haosu-madarska-je-cist-partner-rs-a/250217107>

(Dodik, January 8, 2025): The RS’ sacred task is to leave BiH; the EU is a hoax: it will fail before BiH joins:

<https://www.b92.net/info/region/92678/dodik-sveti-zadatak-srpske-je-da-izadje-iz-bih-eu-je-pod-vala/vest>

<https://euronews.ba/bosna-i-hercegovina/politika/8818/dodik-evropska-unija-ce-propasti-dok-bih-postane-clan-balkanske-zemlje-ne-treba-da-idi-u-eu>

Dodik told RTRS that the European path has given us nothing.

“We only have problems because of Europe. When we join the EU, it means that there is no Republika Srpska. Is that the price that these people want to pay? Let them pay. I will not. While I am leading this, that will not happen,” Dodik said.

He stressed that the Balkan countries should not join the EU and that the European Union will fail before BiH becomes a member.

“The European path for BiH is not what Brussels is pushing on us and what Sarajevo wants, they have sided with the Muslims,” Dodik said, adding that the EU is a fraud.

(Dodik, March 30, 2025): Commissioner Kos proves JD Vance was right on the EU (source RT) – after she says Dodik is not an interlocutor for the EU:

<https://www.pravda.rs/lat/2025/3/30/dodik-vens-u-pravu/>

<https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/964412/dodik-marta-kos-je-dokaz-da-je-stav-vensa-o-eu-potpuno-ispravvan>

(Dodik, April 11, 2025): Dodik to TASS: EU has no values or future; disagrees with EUFOR – it should be on the IEBL:

<https://24sata.info/dodik-pokazao-da-s-njim-evropski-put-vise-ne-moze-postojati-ali-i-da-se-boji-eufor-a/>

(Dodik, April 10, 2025): The EU has no right to approve my arrest (and it has not leaders, betrayed its values, interferes in elections, misuses the law...) – original source TASS, via SRNA:

<https://www.dan.co.me/globus/balkan/dodik-eu-nema-pravo-da-odobri-moje-hapsenje-5292385>

Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik said that Europe, as it is now, has lost all values and has no future, and it can hardly be saved with this elite.

Dodik stated that Europe, which loved to promote the concept of European values, has lost them.

- If it wants to obstruct democracy, rig elections, abuse justice, if it is ready to send us a foreigner whom no one has named and does not stand behind, then this Europe has no future - Dodik said in an interview with the Russian agency Tass, Srna reports.

(Dodik, May 14, 2025): The EU wants to divide Russia and take its resources (Dodik to TASS):

<https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Dodik-Evropa-hoce-da-podijeli-Rusiju-i-prisvoji-resurse/904687>

<http://www.nspm.rs/chronika/milorad-dodik-evropa-tezi-da-podeli-rusiju-na-delove-i-prisvoji-nje-ne-energetske-resurse-koristeci-ukrainu-za-ovu-svrhu.html>

<https://srpska.news-pravda.com/bs/world/2025/05/14/1085.html>

BANJA LUKA - Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik has said that Europe is seeking to divide Russia and appropriate its energy resources, using Ukraine for this purpose.

Dodik said that Ukraine became independent only because of Russia and its naivety at the time, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

“Meanwhile, even then, the goals of Europe, which has been trying to move eastward for centuries and appropriate Russia, were visible. To do this, it must divide Russia into parts. Europe also wants to seize the country’s energy and mineral resources. Ukraine is just a stronghold for achieving this goal,” Dodik told TASS.

He stressed that such a hybrid state is not capable of functioning.

“Everything that happened on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during its collapse was just a preparation for what is happening today. But even then, many people clearly understood what was happening,” Dodik said.

He added that the goals that Russia set in Ukraine must be achieved.

“I don't know what will happen to Ukraine. However, I can say for sure that the goals set by the Russian leadership must be achieved. This refers to territories, demilitarization and denazification throughout Ukraine,” Dodik stressed.

2025: Dodik – RS has no secession plans; nobody's satisfied with BiH... including the EU. Attacks German and Austrian travel bans and “interference” in BiH:

<https://www.euronews.rs/evropa/region/167593/dodik-rs-ne-zeli-secesiju-bih-je-teret-za-sve-narode/vest>

(Dodik, April 8, 2025): Dodik tells Russian “Balkanist TV” that the EU treats political opponents worse than “orthodox communists” treated dissidents; Russia justified in defending Russians in Ukraine; war crimes are a Western fabrication:

<https://www.atvbl.rs/republika-srpska/dodik-evropa-danas-nema-ni-sirovine-ni-lidera-8-4-2025>

Commenting on court proceedings against politicians from Europe, Dodik says that even orthodox communists did not deal with political dissidents in that way.

“It only says that Europe has failed. Europe today has nothing. They only have spite and anger, they are angry at everything and everyone. They don’t have a single leader who can be European. All these local leaders in the EU are worried; they can’t manage the situations in their own countries, let alone impose themselves as a global European leader. The EU has no raw materials, oil, or mines, and they always talk about European values... Do those values that existed 10 years ago still exist? When I come to Moscow, people are smiling. None of what they told us is true...”

“Russia rightfully entered into a military operation because the interests of the Russian state as a whole, as well as the Russians living in Ukraine, were threatened. They banned their language, writing, and looted the church. In Odessa, they killed a significant number of Russians, but they did not want to prosecute the criminals. What should Russia have done? Let them come to Moscow? Of course, it is justified that they did it and under the leadership of a genius leader like Putin, that military operation in Ukraine showed that no matter how long it was, it was not motivated by crimes against civilians and you don’t have any such trouble. They tried to stage something, but they didn’t succeed. As a rule, when the West attacks, this is followed by huge civilian casualties, which are not here,” said Dodik.

June 2025: Orban understands us:

<https://www.republika.rs/svet/svet/664348/milorad-dodik-viktor-orban-sastanak-budimpesta>

June 2025: Dodik: We don’t need Merz’s EU (e.g., QMV vs. consensus); cites Hungary as defending traditional values:

<https://srpskacafe.com/2025/06/dodik-ne-treba-nam-eu-po-mercovim-uslovima/>