

FRAMING RUSSO-SERBIAN COOPERATION AS A “HYBRID THREAT”: A NATO/EU STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

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Abstract: The strengthening of the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia has come at a time when policymakers and analysts in NATO and EU countries have become increasingly critical at the reluctance of Belgrade to play by the “Western book”. Serbia is refusing to legitimize both the unilateral secession by Kosovo Albanian leaders and the redefinition of the Dayton Accords aimed at further reducing the autonomy of the Republic of Srpska (Republika Srpska) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, it continues to reject NATO membership and anti-Russian EU sanctions and declarations. As a result, fingers are pointed at Kremlin’s “malign influence” over Serbia and the Serbs in the Western Balkans in general, including in the fields of politics, economy, communication, energy, and defence. This influence extends into a synergy between Serbian and Russian interests and resources. Thus, it is not just Russian activities, but the whole array of Russo-Serbian cooperation that is considered a “hybrid threat”.

The paper analyses which strategic frames use think tanks from the EU/NATO countries to portray the evolving state of Russo-Serbian cooperation. The results point to elements of a strategic narrative painting Serbian-Russian cooperation as a “hybrid threat” through the consistent use of a threat frame in relation to key areas of political, security, informational, economic, religious, and non-governmental cooperation. The strategic narrative is, in turn, an integral part of strategic communication aimed at promoting the interests of the EU and NATO in the region.

Keywords: Serbian-Russian relations, EU, NATO, the Balkans, hybrid threats, strategic communication, strategic narrative, strategic framing.

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Russo-Serbian cooperation in a “hybrid” limelight

The strengthening of the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia over the last decade has come at a time when policymakers and analysts in NATO and EU countries have become increasingly critical at the reluctance of Belgrade to play solely by the “Western book”. Serbia rejected continuous attempts to legalize the 2008 unilateral secession by Kosovo Albanian leaders and the redefinition of the 1995 Dayton Accords, aimed at further reducing the autonomy of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Belgrade continues to refuse NATO membership and anti-Russian EU sanctions and declarations. Furthermore, it has actively pursued military cooperation with Moscow and the construction of the new Balkan Stream gas pipeline, while signing a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Area. As a result, Western fingers are pointed at Kremlin’s “malign influence” over Serbia and the Serbs in the Western Balkans in general, particularly in the fields of politics, economy, communication, energy, and defence. The Serbian-Russian partnership is increasingly seen as a synergistic “hybrid threat” to Western interests, in particular the enlargement of NATO and the EU in the region.

Such portrayal is part of the “war of narratives” between various major geopolitical players in the Western Balkans, each aiming to extend their influence and vying for local allegiance and support. This battle of influence is being fought in the context of the EU’s internal weakness and indecisiveness to chart a firm enlargement process, the confusing U.S. combination of isolationist disengagement and occasional problem-solving “pop-ups” in the region, China’s increasingly visible Balkan-wide web infrastructure and investment strategy, and Russia’s attempt to curb continuous attacks at its centuries-long role of powerful relevance in the Balkans. In such a context, it is understandable that various players wish to legitimize their status and leverage through political, military, economic, or cultural might – and project it through strategic communication.

This paper seeks to analyse which strategic frames use think tanks from the EU/NATO countries to portray the evolving state of Serbian-Russian relations. Strategic frame analysis will be used to identify these frames, which are expected to form a strategic narrative that defines the Serbian-Russian partnership as a “hybrid threat” to stability, security and enlargement of the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans. The strategic

narrative is, in turn, an integral part of strategic communication aimed at promoting the interests of the EU and NATO in the region.

Strategic communication, framing and narratives

Strategic communication, a concept of organized persuasion, represents a “system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organizations in order to advance their missions, by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, developing and implementing ideas and attitudes which, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behavior or opinion“ (Mitić, 2016: 9). States and organizations of various kinds are using strategic communication in order to achieve legitimacy, given that legitimacy is based on perception and interpretation – not on actions but perceptions of these actions. To achieve legitimacy through strategic communication, organizations need trust, social capital and networks to project their discourse, narrative, and power (Mitić and Atlagić, 2017). They do so through framing processes, which are “critical to the two fundamental aims of strategic political communication” – campaigning and governing (Kioussis and Strömbäck, 2015: 391).

In order to remain persuasive, strategic communication must adapt its strategic framing. Frames are a key component of strategic communication messaging, as they are an integral part of media reports and can impact the interpretation and perception of the public. Framing refers to “selection and salience” in order “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). Strategic framing is thus an act in which communicators “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan, 2008: 4856). It is a rational rhetorical strategy used by politicians to “angle” arguments presented to the general public (Leimbiger and Lammert, 2016) as frames have the capacity to provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. A successful framing requires adaptive frames, which are nonetheless in line with the strategy and information end-state. However, selectively punctuating some elements and hiding others points

to the importance of strategic action in framing and to the potential conflict that might arise among different actors promoting their frames (Fiss and Zajac, 2006: 1174).

Yet frames cannot be fully understood without narratives, just as narratives cannot function without frames. In the process of strategic communication, organizations thus use frames and discourse to shape strategic narratives – “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behavior of actors at home and overseas“. (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Rosselle, 2013: 248). These narratives are a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon et al: 3). Strategic narratives, however, also face limitations: from the formation of the strategic narrative to its projection and reception. This is particularly true in international environments, in which great powers must face not only a complex international environment but also a complex media ecology as well as frequent or even permanent contestation by other actors.

“Hybrid threat” – a useful buzzword in the Balkans?

Although “hybrid threat” as a form, concept and term has been present in political, security and academic discourse years before – and has been developing since the mid-2000s mainly in the U.S. defence sector strategic documents amid the “colour revolutions” in Russia’s neighbourhood and during the “Arab spring” – its prominence and (geo) political (mis) use has become viral after the 2014 Crimean referendum and the conflict in the Donbas. From then on, Western fingers were pointed mainly at Russia as the main suspect of “hybrid threat” to a number of countries, primarily in Europe. Thus, a 2018 report by the German Marshall Fund Alliance for Security Democracy argued that Russia had used disinformation campaigns, financial influence and cyberattacks in at least 27 countries, most of them NATO and/or EU members (Treverton, 2018). It has thus come as no surprise that both of these institutions have adopted several strategic documents and mechanisms aimed at fighting “hybrid threats”, arguing however that despite international cooperation, protection of country structures and institutions remains primarily a national task.

For NATO, hybrid threats are “used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations” (NATO, 2019). The EU considers that their aim is to “achieve specific political objectives” and that they “target critical vulnerabilities and seek to create confusion to hinder swift and effective decision-making” (European External Action Service, 2018). The prominence of the concept has led to the foundation of the Helsinki-based European Center for Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. This institution, supported by the EU and NATO member countries, argues hybrid threats are “coordinated and synchronised action, that deliberately targets democratic states’ and institutions systemic vulnerabilities” – which are created by “historical memory, legislation, old practices, geostrategic factors, strong polarisation of society, technological disadvantages or ideological differences” – with the aim to “influence different forms of decision making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level to favour and/or gain the agent’s strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2017).

According to the Helsinki Center, this means exploiting the thresholds of detection and attribution as well as the different interfaces (war-peace, internal-external, local-state, national-international, friend-enemy). They can include “influencing information; logistical weaknesses like energy supply pipelines; economic and trade-related blackmail; undermining international institutions by rendering rules ineffective; terrorism or increasing insecurity” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Hybrid Threats s, 2017). NATO argues that they “combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces” (NATO, 2019). The EU insists that these activities are “coordinated by state or non-state actors”, “multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures” and can range from “cyberattacks on critical information systems, through the disruption of critical services such as energy supplies or financial services, to the undermining of public trust in government institutions or the deepening of social divisions” (European External Action Service, 2018)

Fighting the hybrid threat through resilience-building has thus become a prominent feature of EU/NATO political and security mechanisms. The Western Balkans – as a focal point of NATO/EU enlargement – were

designated as potential primary targets of alleged Russian hybrid activities. Indeed, as a European Parliament report underlines, “hybridity is a buzzword in the field of international relations and security. However, it has been introduced in NATO and EU member states’ doctrinal corpus to depict new threats and challenges. The EU uses the concept to deal with the difficulties created by the local influence of non-EU powers (Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) in the enlargement process of the Western Balkans countries” (European Parliament Policy Department for External Relations, 2018). Arguing for this perspective, various transatlantic organizations, think tanks, and officials have most prominently pointed to the examples of what they considered as Russian meddling in the 2016 parliamentary elections in Montenegro – which included an alleged involvement in a coup d’état – and the interference in now North Macedonia over the Prespa Agreement between Skopje and Athens. As a result, NATO sent to Montenegro its first-ever mission to fight hybrid threats (Lekic, 2019), while dozens of Western researchers have been monitoring and analysing “Russian hybrid threats” in the Western Balkans.

The Helsinki Center has compiled what it considers a series of Russian hybrid methods, including pressure through economic leverage and organization of protests. One of the central roles belongs to the use of cyber tools and information operations, propaganda, strategic leaks and fake news, and their spread through domestic media, as well as amplification through social media. The “toolkit” also involves the funding of organizations and political parties, the use of oligarchs, paramilitary organizations, and the Orthodox Church (Treverton, 2018).

A narrative about the Russian hybrid threat has been carefully crafted and sustained through governmental and non-governmental sources.

Given the level of strategic cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade on a variety of political and economic issues, we will seek to analyse how this cooperation is being framed and whether a strategic narrative is being constructed with regards to Russian-Serbian cooperation being viewed as a hybrid threat from the perspective of the EU/NATO and the transatlantic think tank community.

Our hypothesis is that, in order to present a strategic narrative of Serbian-Russian cooperation as a hybrid threat, Western think tanks will use a consistent threat frame in relation to key areas of political, security, informational, energy, NGO, and religious cooperation.

Methodology

We will use strategic frame analysis in 20 research papers and reports by Western think tanks focused on Russian influence activities in the Balkans (see the list in references). We will analyse frames referring to Russian and Serbian cooperation in papers which have been published since 2018, after the adoption of a series of “hybrid threat” documents and mechanisms by the EU/NATO.

A selection of frames will be particularly looked at. These frames have been chosen based on preliminary analysis of the relevant research papers. They will include Russian-Serbian cooperation in the field of politics, security, the economy, religion, non-governmental, and information fields. We will perform a strategic frame analysis at the level of themes. Only themes related to cooperation between Russian and Serbian actors will be analysed (state, NGO, Church, media).

The results could point to a possible building of a strategic narrative regarding Russian-Serbian cooperation as a hybrid threat.

Results

Political sphere

In the political sphere, the main theme for Russian-Serbian cooperation has predominantly been focused on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. The unresolved status of Kosovo and Metohija is seen as the primary source of instability not only in the territory concerned but also in the wider region. Russian-Serbian diplomatic cooperation in the international arena – which is strengthened by the Russian veto power in the United Nations Security Council – is seen as mutually beneficial for the two countries, but detrimental to Albanian aspirations and long-term Western interests of legalizing Kosovo’s 2008 unilateral secession, as well as in fully integrating the entire region in Western political and security arrangements. Furthermore, Russian-Serbian cooperation is seen as sustaining ethnic tensions within Kosovo and Metohija through the support of the Kosovo Serbs. (*“Russia is Serbia’s most powerful backer against Kosovo’s*

independence. It is an alignment of interests that both countries benefit from” – Chrzova et al., 2019).

The second main theme of political cooperation is related to the Republic of Srpska. The Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often perceived and sometimes labelled as a “Russian proxy”. Moscow is perceived as the main international backer of the Republic of Srpska – from the Peace Implementation Council to the UN Security Council. Russian-Serbian cooperation is perceived as a source of political and ethnic tension, as well as a threat to the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also its functionality, NATO and EU integration. (*“President Putin has fostered close ties with the Republika Sprska leader, Milorad Dodik, whose ultimate goal is secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina.” – Smith and Juola, 2020*)

The third theme is related to the field of the general counterbalancing of EU and NATO interests in the Western Balkans as Russian support to Serbian interests over Kosovo and Metohija, the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and military neutrality is seen as detrimental, particularly to NATO expansion – which is in line with Moscow’s objectives. This includes cooperation over North Macedonia and the general promotion of the idea of a “Greater Serbia”. (*“Russia positions itself as a great, relevant power in the Balkans; whereas Serbia uses its relationship with Russia to leverage the EU, threatening the Union to forge closer ties with Russia and consequently aid the expansion of Russian influence in the region”. – Chrzova et al., 2019*)

Security

In the security field, most of the themes are related to the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš, as well as to general defence cooperation. The center in Niš is particularly singled out as a threat. Doubts are shed over its officially stated purpose of serving humanitarian and disaster relief operations in the region. Rather, it is either suspected or directly labelled of being a potential “spy center” for NATO activities in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as in the wider region. It is also suspected of being a training center for “paramilitary” groups. (*“It claims to be a centre to coordinate assistance missions, but Western governments generally regard it as an intelligence hub. The US State Department has expressed the fear that it will become “some kind of a special centre for espionage or other nefarious activities” – Galeotti, 2018*)

The legitimacy of general defence cooperation – ranging from the delivery of MIG 29s, T-72s, and Pantsir anti-aircraft artillery systems – is generally not put into question. Yet, several analyses point to the fact that such cooperation increases nervousness and tension in the region, particularly among Kosovo Albanians. (*“Kosovo has legitimate concerns that Russia represents a serious security threat, as it could militarise the Serbian army”* – Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018).

Concerns over security cooperation also include Russian’s provision of equipment to the police of the Republic of Srpska, (*“Moscow’s security assistance to the Republika Srpska is growing, although it formally contradicts the spirit of the Dayton Accords, which prohibit an independent Bosnian Serb military”* – Stronski and Himes, 2019) but also suspected cooperation between Russian and Serbian intelligence services during the 2017 “storming” of the parliament in Skopje (*“The intelligence activity sought to push North Macedonia away from the Euro-Atlantic path and especially membership in NATO came through two avenues: Serbian journalists, MPs, and intelligence officers’ efforts to manipulate the country’s policy for Serbia; and the subterfuge of the Embassy of the Russian Federation”* – European Values Center for Security Policy, 2020).

Economy

In the economic field, the primary threat from Russian-Serbian cooperation is the energy sector. Serbia is considered as an important energy hub since the 2008 acquisition of the NIS refinery by Gazpromneft and a key actor in the construction of the Gazprom-led Turkish/Balkan gas pipeline. Of primary concern here is the intensification of dependency on Russian gas for the entire region – with accompanying implications for gas route diversification – and the economic downturn for Ukraine. (*“Russia intends to strengthen its influence in the region by setting up the Turkish Stream pipeline – Kuczyinski, 2019), while “Belgrade is a strategic transit point in Russia’s plans to extend its TurkStream pipeline to deliver gas across southern Europe.” – Metodieva, 2019).*

Other issues of concern include the prospects of enlarging the Eurasian Economic Area in the region following Serbia’s membership, as well as the impact in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the Russian financial support to the Republic of Srpska. (*“The Kremlin is attempting to expand the Russia-led*

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in the Balkans. Serbia and the EEU signed a free trade agreement (FTA) on October 25. – Bugayova and Yanchuk, 2019).

Religion

In the religious sphere, the main focus is on the cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church on various issues in the region. Furthermore, the Serbian Orthodox Church is often portrayed as a “conduit” of Russian interests, particularly as it has firm positions on the issues of Kosovo and Metohija, Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska and NATO membership. Think tanks put a particular focus on this cooperation in Montenegro, accentuating the role the Serb Orthodox Church and its leaders have had over various political issues – from the issue of a referendum on independence to the recognition of Kosovo’s secession or NATO membership. This is, in turn, seen as divisive for the society in Montenegro, and thus an opportunity for Moscow’s disruption. (*“One of the key channels of Russian presence and influence in Montenegro is precisely the Serbian Orthodox Church and its leaders, who strive to influence domestic politics by supporting pro-Russian political parties and anti-EU and NATO voices” – Chrzova et al., 2019).*

Non-governmental sector

In the non-governmental sector, the main focus has been on portraying cooperation between Russian and Serbian organizations as a security threat. The most prominent case is the alleged 2016 “coup” attempt in Montenegro (*“The alarm of the international community about the revitalization of Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans was strengthened by the attempted coup in Montenegro by pro-Russian Serb nationalists during the fall 2016 parliamentary elections, which allegedly was supported by ‘organs of the Russian state’ – European Parliament Policy Department for External Relations, 2018*), but it also includes various “paramilitary” threats from organizations such as “Srbska čast”, “Night Wolves” or the “Cossacks” – which are portrayed as active in various Serb-populated areas, but also close to the authorities in the Republic of Srpska (*“Russian influence runs strong in Republika Srpska too. There, the boundary between civil society and the entity’s increasingly militarised law enforcement services is fuzzy” – Betchev, 2019*). Active Russian organizations in Serbia are portrayed as purveyors

of strong anti-NATO sentiment. Beyond the security field, Russian-Serbian cooperation in the NGO sector is also considered as producing a conservative, Eurosceptic narrative.

Information sphere

Russian-Serbian cooperation in the informational sector is generally presented as a disinformation hub for the entire Western Balkans region, namely for all areas where Serbian is spoken or understood. Sputnik Serbia is considered as the main and most powerful Russian-sponsored media outlet in this hub. Yet, the Serbian media – including pro-governmental news agencies, TV, newspapers and tabloids, as well as a variety of online outlets – are seen as a partner in the hub. Thus, Sputnik and the Serbian media – in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro – serve interchangeable as either sources or amplifiers of narratives that are considered detrimental to EU and NATO interests. (*“A recent study by ‘Zasto Ne’ tracked how political disinformation is spread in BiH. A network of 29 media outlets was identified, 15 of which are in Serbia, and 14 of which are in BiH (of which 12 are in Republika Srpska). Often, Sputnik Srbija appears in this hub as one of the main “connectors” between media outlets in Serbia and BiH” – Doncheva, 2020).*

Main themes, actors and threats – summary table

The following table summarizes the main themes and actors of Russian-Serbian cooperation, as well as the threat frames resulting from this cooperation, as identified in the reports which were analysed.

THEME	ACTORS	THREAT
Opposition to Kosovo's statehood	Governments of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia, NGO and media	Destabilization of "independent Kosovo". Instability in the region. Interethnic tensions. Prevention of NATO and EU enlargement.
Support to the Republic of Srpska	Governments of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Srpska, NGO and media	Destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Interethnic tensions. Prevention of NATO and EU enlargement.
Influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro	Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church	Opposition to NATO activities and Kosovo's "statehood". Support to stronger links with Serbia and Russia. Interethnic tensions.
Defence and disaster relief cooperation	Governments of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska	Militarization of the region. Spying activities. Paramilitary training ground.
NGO cooperation	Russian and Serbian NGOs	Paramilitary activities. Interethnic tension. Violent and illicit interference in regional affairs. Promotion of anti-Western discourse.
Energy cooperation	Governments of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska	Strengthened monopoly and regional dependence on Russian gas supply. Threat to diversification.
Informational activity	Sputnik, Serbian media in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro	Formation of disinformation hubs. Narrative proxies carrying messages which amplify interethnic tensions and anti-Western discourse.

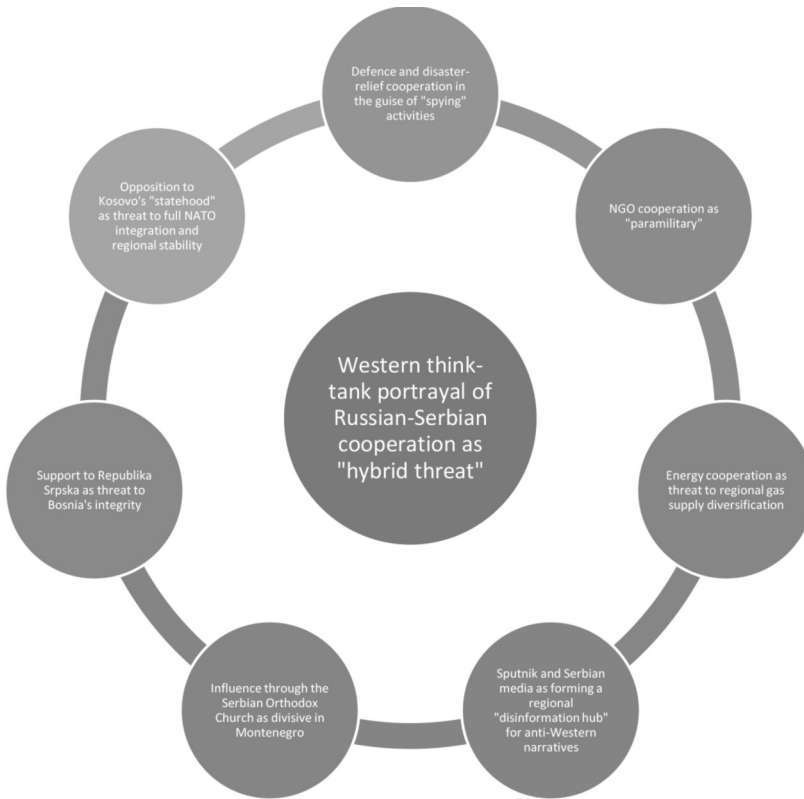
Conclusion

In analysing 20 think tanks reports from the EU/NATO countries, we have not come across a single positive statement regarding Russo-Serbian cooperation. Such cooperation is exclusively perceived and portrayed in a negative light. While the narrative on the “Russian malign interference” has been present for some time, we now also have a strong narrative of Russo-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”.

This analysis does not intend to address the veracity or the motivations of the think tank reports which were randomly used. Yet, it is necessary to state that these reports complement each other, amplify the concerns (based on facts or not), and – to use a term from a German Marshall Fund report – serve as “narrative proxies” in portraying Russo-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”.

The employed strategic frames paint Russo-Serbian cooperation as firmly negative in nature and consequences. Such portrayal is present in all the spheres which were analysed. In the political sphere, cooperation is detrimental to regional security, inter-ethnic relations, conflict resolution, and full integration into Western structures. In the security sphere, cooperation is perceived as conducive to militarization, espionage, and mistrust. In the economic sphere, it leads to energy monopolies and prevents diversification. In the religious sphere, it hurts inter-ethnic coexistence and promotes anti-Western agendas. In the non-governmental sector, it leads to illicit, violent actions that sow inter-ethnic discord. In the information sector, Russo-Serbian cooperation is disinformative and propagandistic, contaminating the entire regional media eco-system.

The following chart identifies key strategic elements of portraying Russian-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”:



In accordance with our hypothesis, a combination of such frames points to the building of a strategic narrative regarding Russo-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”. While this analysis is limited to think tanks, given that many of these reports are based on statements by policymakers or media reports, our assumption is that the framing and the narrative in the state and media sector in NATO/EU countries largely coincide with our findings. The consequence of such presentations – no matter their level of coordination – points to the presence of a strategic communication campaign aimed at presenting Russo-Serbian cooperation as negative – indeed, a “hybrid threat”. Policy implications of such strategic communication portrayal include the development of a number of “anti-hybrid” or resilience activities in all of the concerned fields. It remains,

however, unclear how such strategic communication and policy could benefit long-term conflict-resolution and stabilization of the Balkans. The same is true for other world regions, where a “cooperative hybrid threat” model could be or already is applied to discredit cooperation between Russia and its partners.

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