RUSSIAN FIMI IN NORTH MACEDONIA:

Exploiting Vulnerabilities Through Bilateral Disputes

Case Study



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Introduction

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) has become one of the defining tools of Russian foreign policy, especially in regions where Moscow seeks to slow down or block Euro-Atlantic integration. The Western Balkans is a critical arena in this struggle. Positioned on the geopolitical fault line between NATO and the European Union, on one hand, and its historical ties with Russia and Slavic-Orthodox solidarity on the other, the region provides fertile ground for information operations and influence campaigns.

This case study is designed to support government representatives, security analysts, and policymakers working on counter-disinformation, national security, and regional cooperation. It is also aimed at journalists, researchers, civil society organizations promoting media literacy and democratic resilience, as well as the broader public interested in understanding how foreign influence campaigns operate in the region. The study aims to provide a structured, evidence-based overview of how foreign information manipulation unfolds.

The study offers an evidence-based analysis of Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in North Macedonia, and presents key turning points in Russia's FIMI activities and identifies the main channels, narratives, and methods employed.

The study also outlines how bilateral disputes between Bulgaria and North Macedonia create openings that enable or amplify Russian influence operations. These disputes have become a strategic entry point for disinformation, enabling Russian actors to exploit existing tensions and shape public narratives.

Why is North Macedonia important?

North Macedonia is a small country of less than two million people, but its geopolitical significance is disproportionate to its size. Since independence in 1991, the country has faced internal ethnic tensions, name and history disputes with its neighbors, and fragile democratic institutions. It formally became a member of NATO in March 2020 and has been a candidate for EU accession since 2005.

For Russia, North Macedonia represents:

A symbolic battlefield: If Russia can slow down or hinder the country's EU membership, it proves that the West cannot guarantee enlargement even in its own neighborhood. (**The Guardian**, 2017; **EUISS**, 2022; **SAIS Review**, 2023).

Strategic defeat: NATO membership of the Balkan countries directly limits Russian influence. Therefore, obstructing EU enlargement is an indirect way to weaken the consolidation of the Alliance. (**RFE/RL**, 2018; **Lansing Institute**, 2022; **EP Think Tank**, 2023).

Identity Leverage: Disputes with Greece (over the name issue, resolved by the Prespa Agreement in 2018) and Bulgaria (over language and history) have provided perfect entry points for disinformation

campaigns that emphasize betrayal, humiliation, or division. (Intellinews, 2023; The Geopost, 2023; IEMed, 2023; Bellingcat, 2020).

Recent reports confirm that North Macedonia remains a target of coordinated Russian FIMI activity. The Metamorphosis Foundation's Analytical report on the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in the Republic of North Macedonia (2024) highlights the steady amplification of pro-Russian narratives in the country through various channels.

In the Macedonian case, the main goal of the Russian interference and information manipulation is to foster distrust in Western institutions and delegitimize Macedonian authorities who are considered pro-Western. (**EEAS, 2022; Bellingcat, 2020; Analytics.IntSecurity, 2023; Lansing Institute, 2022; EP Think Tank, 2023; EDMO, 2025; Intellinews, 2023, VIGINUM, 2024**).

The methods used by Russia to achieve this goal are diverse:

Disinformation and propaganda in traditional and online media.

Support for nationalist or Eurosceptic parties.

Religious and cultural networks, especially through the Orthodox Church.

Corporate and economic power, especially in the energy sector.

Intelligence operations, including cyber tactics and covert destabilization.

The role of Bulgaria

One cannot analyze Russia's FIMI in North Macedonia without recognizing the role of Bulgaria, a member of the EU and NATO. Since 2020, Sofia has effectively blocked Skopje's accession to the EU by insisting on constitutional recognition of a Bulgarian minority and challenging elements of Macedonian identity and language.

From Russia's perspective, this bilateral rift is a strategic gift:

It delays EU enlargement without Moscow having to lift a finger.

It confirms the narratives that the EU is weak and hostage to internal disputes.

It provides an entry point for Russian influence operations, which could intensify grievances on both sides of the border.

Therefore, this study looks at the role of Bulgaria as a state whose domestic policies and identity disputes create context vulnerabilities that Moscow opportunistically exploits.

Methodology

This case study investigates: How does Russia conduct FIMI in North Macedonia, what are its main channels and methodologies, and Bulgaria as a contextual variable that is exploited to create greater space for these campaigns.

The analysis relies heavily on open-source reporting and analytical studies, including leaked intelligence documents (The Guardian), investigative journalism (Bellingcat, RFE/RL), think tank analyses (Lansing

Institute, ISS, SAIS Review, Global Influence Ops, IEMed), EU institutional publications (EEAS, EP Think Tank), and regional and national expertise (Democratization Policy Council, Geopost, VIGINUM 2024, Metamorphosis Foundation), including reports from multiple media outlets. Together, these sources allow us to reconstruct both the methods and effects of the Russian FIMI in North Macedonia over the past two decades.

Historical context: Russian FIMI over the years

2008	At the NATO summit in Bucharest, Macedonia›s bid to join the Alliance was blocked by Greece over the name dispute. While disappointing for North Macedonia, this was a welcome outcome for Moscow.
2017	Leaked intelligence files published by The Guardian suggest that after the 2008 blockade of NATO membership, Russian intelligence services systematically targeted Macedonia for a decade with influence campaigns aimed at fomenting discord and delaying NATO integration.
2018	During the negotiations for the Prespa Agreement, pro-Russian political parties, media outlets, and social media accounts affiliated with Russia amplified the message that the agreement was a Western dictate, designed to erase Macedonian identity and culture. However, North Macedonia officially joined NATO in March 2020. For Russia, this was a strategic defeat.
2020	With NATO accession sealed, Russian interference is recalibrated towards EU enlargement. The main opportunity arose when Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia's accession negotiations over issues of language, identity, and minority recognition.
2022	Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski agreed that Russian secret services worked to inflame bilateral tensions between the two countries and block EU progress.
2024	VIGINUM›s research called «PORTAL KOMBAT - a structured and coordinated pro-Russian propaganda network» which maps at least 193 online portals that spread Russian propaganda, among other things, reveals the existence of a broader «Pravda» network that is present in several countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. The Pravda North Macedonia portal is part of it.
2025	The EEAS' third report on FIMI threats found that "Russian campaigns seek to exploit specific local vulnerabilities in the political, social and technological spheres with carefully tailored content, particularly where Russia seeks to advance its foreign and security policy interests." The bilateral dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia creates vulnerabilities that make both countries susceptible to Russian FIMI.

A turning point in 2008

At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Macedonia's bid to join the alliance was blocked by Greece over the name dispute. While disappointing for North Macedonia, this was a welcome outcome for Moscow.

The intelligence files that were leaked in 2017 and published by "The Guardian" suggest that from that point on, Russian intelligence services systematically targeted Macedonia with influence campaigns aimed at fomenting discord and delaying NATO integration. These files describe Moscow's approach as building "covert political, economic and cultural influence" to prevent NATO expansion in the Balkans.

"The Guardian" reported at the time that "for the past nine years, Macedonia has been the target of a strong subversive propaganda and intelligence activity led by the Russian Embassy, according to a briefing prepared for Vladimir Atanasovski, director of Macedonia's Security and Counterintelligence Directorate (UBK)." The document said: "Using the means and methods of so-called soft power, as part of the Russian Federation's strategy in the Balkans, the aim is to isolate the country [Macedonia] from Western influence."

The leaked files also shed light on how the Kremlin conducts espionage. Three agents from Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR, are said to be based in Skopje and are under the supervision of the SVR's sister station in the Serbian capital, Belgrade. The Russian embassy in Macedonia is also home to four spies from Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, whose activities are coordinated from the GRU base in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Disputes over identity

The name dispute with Greece (resolved in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement) and subsequent disputes with Bulgaria (after 2020) have made North Macedonia vulnerable. Russian disinformation campaigns have consistently emphasized themes of national betrayal, loss of identity, and external imposition. These narratives have deeply penetrated Macedonian society, which was already wary of foreign interference in its sovereignty.

During the negotiations for the Prespa Agreement, actors linked to Russia, namely pro-Russian political parties, media and social media profiles reinforced the messages that the agreement is a Western dictate, designed to erase Macedonian identity and culture.

Speaking of pro-Russian political parties, United Macedonia is the party that stands out, including its president Janko Bachev, who openly advocates for a "union of Macedonia with Russia." Bachev has hosted Alexander Dugin and Leonid Savin in Macedonia on several occasions, two close associates of Russian President Vladimir Putin who are considered ideologists of Russian foreign policy. On the eve of the referendum on the Prespa Agreement in 2018, they participated in a panel discussion at the invitation of United Macedonia on the topic: "Republic of Macedonia in a strategic alliance with Russia and membership in the Eurasian Economic Union." Savin later that year trained members of United Macedonia how to come to power in Macedonia.

NATO accession and the 2018 referendum

The 2018 referendum on the Prespa Agreement was a key flashpoint. The agreement was a prerequisite for joining NATO and the EU, but turnout was deliberately suppressed by disinformation campaigns.

The then US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, directly warned that Russia is funding and spreading false narratives to reduce turnout and encourage boycotts.

"The New York Times" published the research findings that came out of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) according to which at least 300,000 euros were given to opponents of the country's renaming by Ivan Savvidi, a Russian billionaire living in Greece and a former member of the Russian parliament.

Local and international media monitoring groups have documented coordinated activity on Facebook and Twitter, often linked to troll farms or pro-Russian media outlets, spreading claims that NATO membership will bring war or domination by Western corporations.

The Kremlin also used religious networks: elements of the Russian Orthodox Church allegedly pressured the Macedonian Orthodox Church not to accept a compromise with Greece, strengthening nationalist opposition.

Although the turnout in the referendum was below the required threshold, the then government, led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, proceeded with constitutional changes, and North Macedonia officially joined NATO in March 2020. For Russia, this was a strategic defeat, but it strengthened Moscow's determination to prevent the next step: EU membership.

Bulgarian veto and shifting focus to the EU

With NATO accession sealed, Russian interference is recalibrated towards EU enlargement. The main opportunity arose in November 2020, when Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia's accession negotiations over issues of language, identity, and minority recognition.

For Moscow, it was an almost perfect scenario:

It is an EU and NATO member (Bulgaria), not Russia, that has been hindering progress.

Russia-related disinformation quickly reinforced the idea that "the EU will never accept Macedonia," portraying the accession process as humiliating and endless.

Pro-Russian actors in North Macedonia have used the crisis to argue that the country should instead strive for neutrality or closer ties with non-Western partners.

The Bulgarian veto has ignited a propaganda war between Bulgaria and North Macedonia - more precisely between nationalist circles and speakers in both countries. According to the article The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria, and the Russian Style Representations of North Macedonia (Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture, 2023), in this war, the Russian propaganda package is being used by both sides as a weapon to fuel nationalism and the collapse of the EU and NATO, which are the main goals of Russia's hybrid war.

Another publication of the Polish College of Eastern Europe titled "The Russian Trojan horse in the EU: Bulgaria's flawed democracy and Russian kleptocratic interests" points out that Bulgaria can probably be described as the weakest link within the EU, where the corrupt environment and clientelist networks make it easier for pro-Russian actors to gain influence.

Main channels of the Russian FIMI

The Russian FIMI is not limited to a single platform or tool. Instead, it operates as a multi-channel system, designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of a small, polarized society with fragile democratic institutions.

Five basic channels can be identified: media and disinformation, political intermediaries, religious and cultural institutions, corporate/economic power, and intelligence/covert operations.

1. Media and disinformation campaigns

Perhaps the most visible Russian influence is through the media sphere. Moscow has long invested in creating, financing, or strengthening channels that reflect its geopolitical narratives, such as Russia Today (RT), Sputnik, TASS, RIA Novosti. Although RT has been banned in Macedonia, content from this outlet and other Russian media outlets that spread Russian propaganda enter the Macedonian airwaves directly through online portals such as Severnna Makedonija,Kolozheg and others, through social networks or through portals in Serbian language.

They fueled narratives of betrayal and humiliation during the Prespa Agreement (with Greece) and the disputes with Bulgaria. Disinformation presented the compromise as a "sale" of Macedonian identity under pressure from the West.

An example of this is election interference, as documented by Bellingcat ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, where Russia-linked pages and troll networks spread anti-Western messages and attempted to reduce turnout.

These campaigns do not seek majority support, but rather aim to polarize society, weaken trust in institutions, and undermine consensus in the country for Western integration.

2. Political intermediaries and party influence

Another channel of FIMI is the support of political parties. Analysts in the Lansing Institute and other think tanks have suggested that Russia maintains relations with nationalist and Eurosceptic parties in the Western Balkans. Smaller radical groups, including those advocating "neutrality" or closer ties with Russia, are also fueled by disinformation campaigns. The funding channels are unclear, but intelligence leaks suggest that Russian embassies and cultural centers have covertly supported certain political actors.

All these indicators suggest that the goal is not to elect a "pro-Russian government," but to ensure that no government in Skopje has a clear mandate to fully embrace the West.

3. Religious and cultural institutions

Religion is a subtle but powerful channel of the Russian FIMI. The Russian Orthodox Church has historically maintained close relationships with Balkan Orthodox communities, including factions within the Macedonian Orthodox Church. During the debates on the Prespa Agreement, Russian clerical voices echoed nationalist arguments against compromise, warning of "heresy imposed by the West" or "the loss of Slavic identity." Cross-border Orthodox networks, especially with Bulgaria, are sometimes used to present the dispute over Macedonian identity as a "spiritual issue."

Russia uses these networks to spread soft disinformation - cultural and moral messages that delegitimize Western liberalism, EU values, or NATO's role in society.

Such religious influence rarely makes headlines, but it reinforces long-term skepticism toward the West.

4. Corporate and economic power

Economic influence is one of the key tools in Russia's strategy for the Balkans. Between 2006 and 2015, as documented by the research on Russian corporate presence in Macedonia, Russian firms have been buying stakes in energy and mining. Energy dependence is the most enduring power: North Macedonia imports most of its gas and oil through regional networks connected to Russia.

Economic messages are often mixed with disinformation, portraying compliance with EU sanctions as harmful to the Macedonian economy, even though those sanctions reduce dependence on Russia and protect the economic system in the long term.

5. Intelligence and covert operations

Finally, the Russian FIMI has been strengthened by intelligence activity. Authorities in North Macedonia and Bulgaria have repeatedly publicly accused Russian secret services of active interference:

In 2018, just before the name referendum, Government expels Russian diplomats accused of subversive activity.

In 2022, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and the Macedonian president Stevo Pendarovski agreed that Russian secret services worked to inflame bilateral tensions between the two countries and block EU progress.

Leaked intelligence files (Guardian, 2017) revealed a long-term Kremlin strategy to maintain a network of informants, NGOs, and influence agents in Macedonian politics and media.

Taken together, these five channels demonstrate how Russia exerts a multifaceted hybrid influence in North Macedonia, and the situation is similar in Bulgaria. By simultaneously targeting the information space, politics, culture, economy, and security, Moscow ensures that even if one channel is exposed or weakened, others continue to shape public opinion.

The ultimate goal is not direct control, but constant undermining: eroding confidence in Euro-Atlantic integration, fueling disputes with neighbors, and keeping the country unstable enough to serve as an example of failure in EU enlargement.

Bilateral Disputes – a Vulnerability that Creates Space for Russian FIMI

In its third report on FIMI threats, the European External Action Service (EEAS) concludes that "Russian campaigns seek to exploit specific local vulnerabilities in the political, social, and technological spheres with carefully tailored content, particularly where Russia seeks to advance its foreign and security policy interests."

In reality, the bilateral disputes between Bulgaria and North Macedonia create a structural vulnerability that Russia systematically exploits through FIMI. Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's EU integration process, combined with its insistence on historical and linguistic concessions, generates narratives that naturally echo strongly in the country's public debate.

Russian-linked media and actors amplify these narratives across borders. Sometimes Bulgarian domestic actors (politicians, media, intellectuals) produce content that serves as raw material for Moscow's campaigns; at other times, Russian networks spread narratives on their own, fueling nationalist sentiment to boost regional appeal. This interaction is two-way and dynamic, it is not just Moscow pushing messages into the region, but also Bulgarian content being recycled and weaponized by Russian influence networks.

Importantly, Sofia is not an agent of the Kremlin. It is an independent political actor with its own motives, but its actions can still be exploited in foreign influence operations. In fact, the main drivers of the stagnation in reforms and North Macedonia's stalled progress toward the EU are domestic: constitutional limitations in North Macedonia related to the Bulgarian minority, and the EU's own political decision to allow bilateral disputes to shape the accession sequence. These structural and political factors would exist even in the absence of Russian interference.

Russia's role is to take these root causes and magnify their political weight. Through FIMI, Moscow increases the prominence of contentious issues, fuels public distrust, and raises the political cost of compromise in Skopje (and at times in Sofia). What would otherwise be problems manageable through negotiation become politically and socially much more difficult to resolve.

This study demonstrates that Russia operates most effectively at moments of heightened political decision-making, such as referendums, elections, or energy shocks. By fabricating or amplifying disinformation during these critical junctures, Moscow can alter the political calculus, for example by suppressing voter turnout or provoking street protests. The Prespa Referendum (2018) and Bulgaria's veto (from 2020 onward) are illustrative: Russian networks actively tried to shape public perceptions and mobilize mass sentiment at decisive moments.

There is direct evidence of Russian FIMI in these contexts: documented coordinated repetition of narratives and cross-border amplification; proven use of social media networks, troll farms, and content laundering techniques within North Macedonia's information space; as well as the public naming and expulsion of operatives and diplomats by the affected states (North Macedonia and Bulgaria), which indicates the presence of active intelligence operations.

It must be emphasized that Russia is not the fundamental cause of North Macedonia's EU integration deadlock. Treating Moscow as the sole antagonist risks ignoring the domestic compromises required to narrow the space for foreign interference. At the same time, the political disputes with Bulgaria create "ammunition" that Russia can use strategically to prolong and deepen the EU integration stalemate.

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