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Hard approach to soft power: The Balkan–Iranian media battlefield

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Abstract. This paper examines how Iranian state and state-linked media (Press TV, Pars Today, Mehr News, Tehran Times, Lajm, Radio Haracina, Sahar TV) have engaged with the Balkans since 1989–1990 up until 2026, testing whether this engagement reflects Nye's soft power model or a more coercive smart power/soft war logic. Using qualitative comparative case-study analysis of Tehran Times' coverage across eleven Balkan states, the study finds a clear correlation between media sentiment and each country's geopolitical alignment: Kosovo and Albania receive overwhelmingly negative coverage associated with non-recognition and the presence of the MEK, while Bosnia and Serbia receive strongly positive coverage reflecting wartime solidarity and shared anti-NATO sentiment. The remaining countries occupy a critical middle ground. The findings suggest that Iranian media operate transactionally, rewarding and punishing states according to their proximity to the West.

Keywords: soft power, Iranian media, Balkans, media propaganda, Iranian soft power

Since Joseph Nye officially introduced the concept in the 20th century, "soft power" has been widely used by researchers, politicians and even ordinary people to describe, more or less, the state's capacity to shape the preferences – and consequently the policies and actions – of others through attraction rather than coercion. The main set of weapons in its arsenal are therefore immaterial ones: culture and its various branches, ethics, values, and so forth. The role of the military and the economy was not, of course, abandoned, but rather enriched and evolved.

More than 30 years after its debut on the academic and political stage, "soft power" has become a household term, which has been further developed by Nye himself as well as by various other actors. The media, and news outlets in particular, have turned into the main battlefields for waging this soft type of war, incorporating culture, values and even sheer political demagogy disguised as intellectual discourse into large-scale propaganda machines. Albeit not reserved exclusively to authoritarian states, the use of

media as a soft-power tool is most visible and blunt in such regimes, at times even bordering on hard power.

Iran is among the countries whose government actively exerts soft power pressure both internally and externally. Meanwhile, the Balkans have long been a target for disinformation campaigns, mainly by Russia, something that has been extensively researched. However, rarely has the topic of Iranian media influence on the Balkans – and the responses of local governments – been discussed. Some studies on the Western Balkans do exist, but they are not sufficiently detailed.

What is largely missing is a systematic account of the media dimension specifically – how Iranian state and state-linked media, together with associated online activity, have functioned in the Balkan information space over time and how the "hard" episodes have reshaped the media narrative around what began as a "soft", cultural-religious project. This paper addresses that gap.

Thus, the primary research question becomes how the relationship between Iran and the Balkan states has been constructed, contested, and transformed through media – and to what extent does Iran's use of media and information tools in the region represent a coercive departure from the conventional, attraction-based model of soft power. Main objects of the article are the Tehran-linked Press TV, Pars Today, Mehr News, Tehran Times, Lajm, Radio Haracina, and Sahar TV.

The time frame is chosen as extending from the (start of the) end of the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe from late 1989 and 1990 up until the beginning of 2026 (but before the widespread anti-government protests in Iran and the ensuing war with Israel and the United States that began in February). This period also coincides with the election of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Supreme leader of the Islamic Republic in 1989 and ends just before his assassination at the beginning of the 2026 conflict.

As the subject of the study, we examine media strategies, outputs, and narratives – both those of Iranian state and state-linked media and those found in Balkan domestic media coverage of Iran – that constitute the "media battlefield". The theoretical framework of the research is anchored in Nye's soft power theory and its subsequent developments, such as smart-power theory, as well as in the literature on media systems and hybrid threats and disinformation. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design, combining document and media content analysis, case-study comparison, and secondary data analysis.

How hard is soft power?

Nye championed the term "soft power" by challenging the popular understanding of "power". He notes that "power" usually means taking control of the resources of another country, such as population, territory, and goods, by force, mainly through military intervention. However, after the end of the Cold War, he points out that such forms of action were becoming less and less popular, while technology, education, economic

development, and even cultural influence were becoming just as – if not more – important than the classical tools of foreign policy and control (Nye 1990, 154). Furthermore, real power does not come solely from possessing raw resources, but from the ability to actually influence behaviour and event outcomes in other countries. The USA provides an example, maintaining a constant influence over some states while its overall global influence is declining (Nye 1990, 154–155).

A major idea of his theory is that power is being dispersed away from the so-called Great Powers, and more and more smaller players on the world stage are utilizing soft power to their advantage. He then outlines five contributing tendencies: economic interdependence; transnational actors (such as multinational corporations); growing nationalism in weak states, which makes military intervention more costly; the spread of technology (including weapons capabilities) to smaller states; and the growing importance of transnational problems such as drugs, terrorism, and environmental problems that do not pit state against state in the traditional way (Nye 1990, 160–164).

Thus, he manages to distinguish between "hard" and "soft" power, the latter being more "co-optive": to convince them willingly to comply to your desires, goals, etc., rather than force them to submit (Nye 1990, 166). This stems to a large degree from the cultural and ideological benefits of international institutions and cooperation. Again, the example of the US is given, with its popular culture, the values of democracy, and openness to migrants (Nye 1990, 168–170).

In the next decades, other scholars developed this theory and placed greater emphasis on the media as a means of projecting soft power (Almakaty 2025, 132). This includes traditional media, but also social media, streaming platforms, and the digital space, which allow much easier access to global audiences and, indeed, easier control over it (Almakaty 2025, 133). However, the media is a double-edged sword that can just as easily undermine the soft-power strategy of a given government if not used wisely. This can also hapen if another player is doing it better, for example, through more compassionate or more aggressive coverage (Almakaty 2025, 133). This is a well-known issue in Western media, which tend to portray other nations as inferior or malicious more often than not, thereby reinforcing stereotypes (Almakaty 2025, 134).

Such examples – both positive and negative – include the coverage of the Arab Spring, the ensuing European migrant crisis, the disinformation campaigns during the 2020 US presidential race, as well as strategic actions such as the US programme "American Spaces", the Japanese initiative "Cool Japan", and the Canadian campaign "Welcome Refugees". These examples can be used purposefully to shape favourable narratives (Almakaty 2025, 140).

Al-Btoos argues that media has even turned into a diplomatic instrument. He identifies three specific mechanisms: agenda-setting, in which the media bring specific issues to the forefront of international discourse; framing, in which the manner of presentation shapes public interpretation and diplomatic response; and digital diplomacy, in which social media enable direct, real-time communication between governments and foreign publics (Alyakhri, Al-Btoos 2025, 7–9).

The main example for this is the influence of Al Jazeera, which, since its launch in 1996, has reached over 310 million people worldwide. The network

is not immune to scandals concerning editorial independence and impartiality (Alyakhri, Al-Btoos 2025, 16–18). Russia Today's shift from a semi-legitimate world news outlet to a full-fledged propaganda machine for the Kremlin after the Russia–Georgia War in 2008 should also be noted (Alyakhri, Al-Btoos 2025, 17). As a counterpoint, we could take the Voice of America, which has sought to promote democratic values after the Second World War (Alyakhri, Al-Btoos 2025, 18). These examples, however, demonstrate the danger of overplaying one's hand and creating a lasting impression that one's media is a propaganda tool, thereby damaging one's soft power (Alyakhri, Al-Btoos 2025, 19).

In 2017, Nye himself published a new paper which argues that media in all its forms is part of soft power, "ranging from Hollywood to foundations and universities" (Nye 2017, 2). Still, in 1990 he wrote that even back then the US exported approximately seven times as many television shows worldwide (Nye 1990, 169). This influence is not completely dominant; there are countries that are not only unaffected by it but also actively oppose it – such as Iran (Nye 2017, 1).

He emphasizes that soft power is not a normative concept – it is not necessarily better to "twist minds" than to "twist arms", and even actors widely considered to be malevolent, such as Osama bin Laden, are capable of exercising it (Nye 2017, 2). He also makes it clear that soft power is rarely sufficient in itself and is best understood as one component of a state's overall power, which is why he later develops the complementary concept of "smart power" – the successful combination of hard and soft power resources in an effective strategy, a term later adopted by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Nye 2017, 2).

Nye's influential work has not only been further developed by other scholars but also criticized. An empirical study from 2020 notes an ambiguity in Nye's account of the concept: he argues both that states must refrain from editorial interference in state-funded media to preserve journalistic credibility, and that states can build soft power precisely by using international media to cultivate a sense of "shared values" across borders – a description that applies just as easily to China's and Russia's international radio and television broadcasting, usually dismissed in the West as propaganda (Wright, Bunce 2020, 608).

The distinction between propaganda and soft power is visible in the 2020 article by Wright and Bunce, based on 52 interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018 with journalists from Al Jazeera English (AJE), BBC World Service (BBCWS), China Global Television Network (CGTN), Voice of America and Xinhua. Journalists in these organizations – despite representing both democratic and authoritarian funding states – rely on three shared "legitimizing narratives" (Wright, Bunce 2020, 615–616). The first, "exclusionary" narrative, involves journalists defining "propaganda" narrowly as deliberate falsehood, thereby distinguishing their own "truthful" reporting from a shared symbolic Other (in this case Russia Today), which even a CGTN producer dismisses as a "network joke" (Wright, Bunce 2020, 616–617). The second, "obfuscation" narrative, used primarily by senior AJE and BBCWS staff, involves deliberately invoking the ambiguous notion of "soft power" as a way of making journalistic and diplomatic interests compatible without either side giving way (Wright, Bunce 2020, 617–618). The third, "inversion" narrative, argues that reliance on state funding paradoxically increases journalists' operational autonomy, freeing

them from commercial pressures and allowing access to remote or dangerous locations (Wright, Bunce 2020, 619–620).

Regardless, it is now abundantly clear that international media not only disseminate information impartially but actively construct the narratives that shape how nations are perceived abroad, with positive images being able to increase tourism and investment, while negative images lead to stereotypes and strained relations (Almakaty 2025, 132). To this mix, we should also add social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, which often operate like media but are not the focus of this paper.

Western propaganda on Iran

We have seen that the media has always been part of soft power and in recent years it has even been transformed into a leading tool, or rather branch, of the strategy that many countries, including Iran, apply. Meanwhile, the media battlefield between the Islamic Republic and its Western counterparts seems to have taken shape over at least 20 years, as evidenced by a number of research papers. This is especially evident in the case study of the Iran nuclear issue and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as well as its subsequent dismantling by Donald Trump, followed by an escalation of tensions and even a military conflict in June 2025.

In 2013, Jonas Siegel and Saranaz Barforoush published their research on six influential English-language newspapers (which are very much global): the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the Financial Times, the Guardian, and the Independent. More specifically, they examined how these papers covered Tehran's nuclear programme. It is worth mentioning that this and many other studies have noted a resemblance between the way this topic was covered and the media coverage of the Iraq War: before, during, and after the disastrous conflict, the coverage drew a great deal of criticism for its bias, which enabled large public and international support for launching the war (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 3–4). Something which the authors worry might happen again with Iran. Roughly 13 years later, we see that such fears have indeed materialized. But this is a talk for another time.

From the start, it becomes obvious that the media applies a double standard by not questioning the possession of nuclear weapons by India, Pakistan, and Israel, despite their lack of international recognition or official approval, but rather remaining silent on the issue – while Iran is being scrutinized for the mere thought of acquiring one (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 4). Another example is the framing of ballistic missile tests by Israel and Iran. The former is often described as "defensive", while the latter is described as "offensive" (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 34).

A significant finding is that newspaper coverage of the political debate is moving away from the basic facts about Iran's nuclear programme (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 8–9). Instead, official government narratives dominated coverage throughout the period, with the 2009 Geneva talks framed almost entirely around US and European demands for Iranian concessions (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 18).

Political and diplomatic articles make up 40% of all coverage, more than comment and breaking news combined, with this share increasing from 35% in the first period to 49% in the fourth, while the Washington Post and the Guardian devote an unusually large share of their coverage to comment and opinion (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 21–22). There was a heavy reliance on government sources: of the 2,743 sources identified, 67% were affiliated with a national government, with American officials accounting for 36%, Iranian officials for 23%, Israeli officials for 14%, and European officials for 9%. Reliance on American and Israeli officials increased over time, while reliance on Iranian and European officials decreased (Siegel, Barforoush 2013, 24–26).

Dashti and Tari's article takes a similar approach, monitoring 1037 materials, 419 of which were deemed to have ties to the JCPOA: all of them in Newsweek, Time, The New York Times, Der Spiegel, and various US outlets (Dashti, Tari 2020, 250–251).

The authors identify eight major recurring news categories or frames: Iranophobia, Iran containment, advocates versus opponents, US approach to the JCPOA, Iran's nuclear programme, Iran's economy, Israel's role, and JCPOA achievements (Dashti, Tari 2020, 253–254). Iranophobia is the most common frame overall, reflecting anti-Iran sentiment and encompassing subthemes such as cover-up, human rights abuses, Islamic Revolutionary Guard provocations, threats to Israel, terrorism, unreliability and violence, or expansionism (Dashti, Tari 2020, 255–256).

The Iran containment frame includes subframes such as "anti-Iran coalition", arms embargoes, "maximum pressure", sanctions, nuclear inspections, and US surveillance and warnings, as well as deterrence-related military actions justified as responses to Iranian provocations (Dashti, Tari 2020, 257–259). The "advocates versus opponents" frame captures the divide between supporters and critics of the deal. Under the heading "American Approach to the JCPOA", the article contrasts CNN's framing of the deal as the best available option to prevent covert weapons development with Fox News' emphasis, especially since Trump's election, on the agreement as a "bad deal" and an expression of "hostile positions" (Dashti, Tari 2020, 260–263).

The Iran nuclear programme frame includes subtopics such as access to a nuclear bomb, ballistic missiles, uranium enrichment, and nuclear threats (Dashti, Tari 2020, 263–265). The Iran economy frame examines business restrictions, economic relief, financial revenues, and financial problems related to sanctions (Dashti, Tari 2020, 266–267). The frame on Israel's role, shaped significantly by statements by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, presents Israel as threatened by Iran's nuclear ambitions in both media outlets, with subframes covering accusations, concerns, hostility, and provocations (Dashti, Tari 2020, 267–269). Finally, the frame on the achievements of the JCPOA, covering de-escalation, regional cooperation, US–Iran rapprochement, and the promotion of Obama's diplomatic legacy, appears almost exclusively in CNN coverage and is completely absent from Fox News, marking the sharpest divergence between the two media outlets identified in the study (Dashti, Tari 2020, 269–270).

Fayyaz and Shirazi take a broader look of 509 articles between 1998 and 2009 to demonstrate how the images of the "good" and "bad" Iranians are portrayed in

Western media and used to justify policies against Tehran. The dominant media frame presents social progress as unidirectional and determined by Western criteria such as secularism, individual rights, democracy, and free markets, with Iran presented as a nation-state whose system of government is incompatible with these standards, and the 1979 revolution depicted as a religiously motivated departure from the modernizing reforms of the Pahlavi era (Fayyaz, Shirazi 2013, 56).

The authors argue that over time, this Iranophobic framing has partly given way to a "cautiously qualified Iranophilia", particularly visible in coverage of Mohammad Khatami's presidency, which highlights a "rebellious youth subculture", yoga classes, underground fashion, and recreational drug use as signs of Iran's embrace of a modern, American-style culture (Fayyaz, Shirazi 2013, 58). Young Iranians, especially young women, are portrayed as embodying Western modernity through partying, dating, drug use, and fashion choices (Fayyaz, Shirazi 2013, 61–63). At the same time, older, conservative, religious and especially government-related individuals are the embodiment of backwardness and other negative traits.

The ayatollahs strike back

Of course, Iran is not a silent observer in this "cognitive war" (Monemi, Gelareh, Maculan 2026, 1), but an active participant. The government there not only crafts its own disinformation and propaganda strategies but adapts to the Western narratives and turns them in its own advantage – like Khatami's "Dialogues of Civilisations", which is a direct response to Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations", as well as the "Axis of Resistance" as opposed to President George Bush Jr.'s "Axis of Evil" (Sreberny 2013, 801–802).

For Iran, this approach is part of an information war that it is engaged in with the US and the broader West (Price 2012, 2398). Its goal is to wage a psychological warfare and media propaganda aimed at making a target society accept defeat without actual military conflict, encompassing subversion, internet warfare, and the creation of foreign radio and television networks (Price 2012, 2399–2400).

Tehran even creates a specialized Ministry of Defense soft-warfare unit composed primarily of members of the Basij militia, a parliamentary allocation of approximately $100 million (the amount refers to the early 2010s) for a cultural counter-programme, and provincial cultural budgets earmarked for the establishment of so-called soft warfare camps. The establishment of English language international media such as Press TV in 2007 and various other outlets in the following years is also part of its strategy (Price 2012, 2407–2408).

This external arm of the information and cultural warfare is governed by multiple organizations numbering over 80 since the 1979 Revolution (Ghardashkhani, Gölz, Schwartz 2024, 244). 2009 marks a shift in its propaganda narratives after the contested presidential elections. Then the ayatollahs drop the heavy Islamic rhetoric persistent since the revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (albeit it still persists, but many young people have no particular sentiment regarding it) and emphasize popular nationalism, culminating in 2011 with the

creation of the Arts and Media Organization – a semi-governmental branch of the Islamic Propaganda Organization with close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Ghardashkhani, Gölz, Schwartz 2024, 245).

The media strategy of Iran does not differ much from that of the US and the West. Both use discursive strategies such as Van Dijke's dichotomy between positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. For example, Tehran views itself as honest and a victim, with Washington and Tel Aviv being the aggressors who do not wish to see reason and propose balanced solutions, and vice versa (Sivandi Nasab, Dowlatabadi 2016, 101). Similarly, during the JCPOA negotiations, Iranian media consistently choose terms and quotes emphasizing peacefulness and legitimacy (90.3%), while Western media choose terms emphasizing cover-up, suspicion, and threat (70.9%) (Mahdavirad, Ghane 2015, 56–64).

Thus, Iran's strategy for media and information influence abroad is built around the aforementioned concept of "soft war" (jang-e narm), a term that Iranian analysts and officials use as a parallel to the military and diplomatic instruments of the state (Jones, Newlee 2019). This policy is not limited to the classical understanding of soft power as the appeal of culture and values, but also includes active information influence, manipulation, and disinformation, the ideological basis of which stems directly from the Islamic Revolution and the doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini (Jones, Newlee 2019). A central element in this system is the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the national radio and television organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which operates dozens of television and radio channels in over 30 languages and has a significant budget that allows it to reach audiences in different regions of the world (Citrinowicz 2025).

IRIB's international channels – including Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Sahar TV, HispanTV, iFilm, and Qods TV – perform different functions according to their audience: while Al-Alam plays a leading role in shaping regional Iranian narratives in the Arab world, the other channels perform mainly religious-propaganda functions aimed at specific communities (Torfeh 2017). Albeit not the focus of this paper, it should be noted that the media is embedded in the wider strategy of soft power, which includes a network of cultural centres, exhibitions, language courses, publishing, and cultural attachés assigned to Iran's diplomatic missions around the world (Jones, Newlee 2019).

In terms of content, Iranian media follow consistent and well-recognized thematic lines depending on the region they are targeting. In the context of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, media coverage systematically legitimizes Iranian military intervention by claiming that it is being carried out at the invitation of the legitimate governments of both countries and is therefore in full compliance with international law. The close cooperation between Iran, Russia, Syria and Hezbollah is emphasized and presented as evidence of the success of Tehran's regional policy (Torfeh 2017; Kargar 2025).

At the global level, Iranian international channels are compared by analysts to Russian and Chinese state media, as they perform a similar function – opposing dominant Western narratives and offering an alternative geopolitical perspective (Citrinowicz 2025). In support of this thesis, specific accusations by

the British and Italian authorities are cited that Press TV has been involved in influence operations aimed at public opinion in Europe, while HispanTV is particularly active in Latin America, and HausaTV supports the activities of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (Citrinowicz 2025).

Despite the scale of this system, Western analyses also point to significant internal weaknesses in Iran's "soft power". Among them are the limited credibility of official state media, corruption within the system, low levels of public trust in Iran in a number of countries, the growing influence of Western media and culture among young Iranians, as well as domestic discontent with the regime.

The Balkan–Iranian media battlefield

We already established that media not only plays a central role in soft power strategies but often crosses into hybrid situation identified as smart power or cognitive war, both championed by Iran and its global approach to jang-e narm. Where do the Balkans fit in the bigger picture, are they affected or not? The study looks at Iranian media influence over 11 states in the peninsula (excluding Turkey) and their respective national responses. The topic has been partially researched by Liridona Berkolli, Blerjana Bino, Besar Likmeta, and Ahmad Haibat Kannaby but never in an overall comparative way.

The study conducts a review and analysis of the most popular Iranian English-language, government-controlled media. It can be stated with a high degree of confidence that the content published in them reflects the official sentiments of the Islamic Republic: Press TV, Pars Today, Mehr News, Tehran Times, Lajm, Radio Haracina, and Sahar TV.

The Screaming Frog software was used to help extract and categorize data, which led to the division into three categories of Iran-related news: negative, neutral, and positive. News items presenting the Islamic Republic in a good light, whether in political topics favouring Tehran's point of view or cultural events, scientific and sporting achievements, various accomplishments, etc., are considered positive. News items concerning topics such as crime, human rights violations, military conflicts, the detriments of its nuclear programme, etc., are considered negative. Neutral news includes publications in which Iran is mentioned briefly or indirectly, or which provide information about natural disasters, events, and news that are often not directly tied to the government itself.

Tehran Times and Mehr are the two Iranian media outlets that cover Balkan news in the greatest depth, with their online archives reaching back to 1998 and 2003, respectively – up until the beginning of 2026, roughly 22,000 articles were linked to the peninsula. It is not surprising that media coverage corresponds to the general political relations between the respective capitals. The analysis below examines the countries in terms of their propaganda importance, starting with the most negatively portrayed and ending with the most positively portrayed (Fig. 1).

Kosovo is portrayed almost exclusively negatively in Iranian media. This is due to the fact that Tehran does not recognize the country's independence

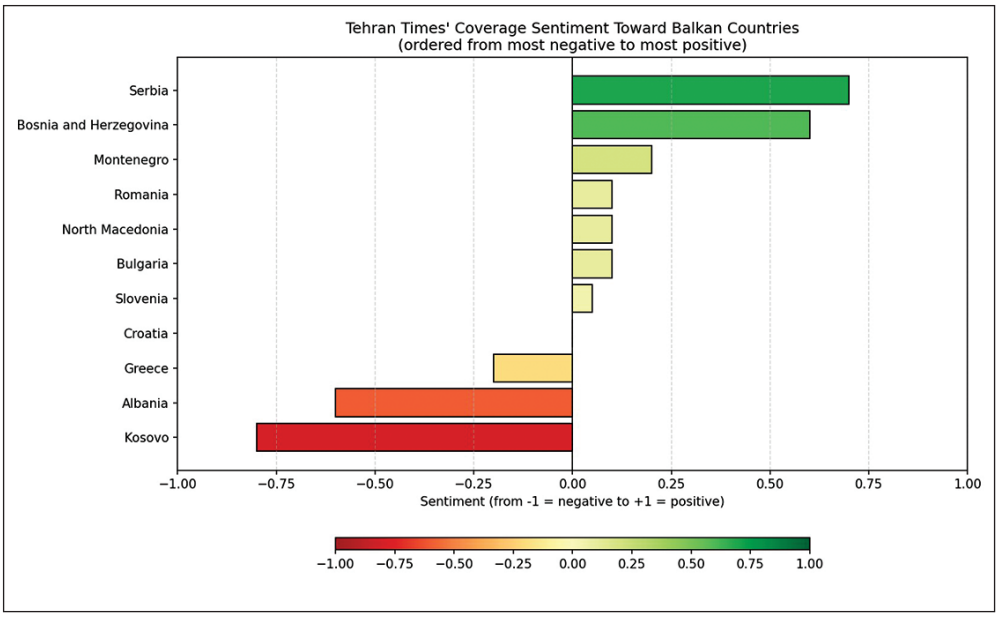


Fig. 1. Positive and negative coverage of the various Balkan countries in the Tehran Times from 1998 to start of 2026, reviewing around 22,000 articles

and often holds it up as an example of American imperialism that promotes secessionist sentiment in order to destabilize various states. Tehran's closeness with Belgrade contributes to this, as it never misses an opportunity to point out that Kosovo is part of Serbia. This also largely coincides with the interests of the Islamic Republic itself, which is concerned about secessionist sentiments in its own provinces of Kurdistan and Balochistan (Sheikh 2018). In these publications, Kosovo is often referred to as a "NATO protectorate", an "illegal project", a "terrorist regime", and a "project engineered by the United States".

Sites and television channels under Tehran's control describe the conflict in Kosovo as part of a broader pattern of US-led intervention in the Balkans, suggesting that Kosovo's sovereignty is illegitimate because it was achieved through NATO's military intervention. This narrative allows Iran to position itself as a defender of national sovereignty against Western imperialism, even though it has little direct influence in Kosovo itself (Samii 1999).

Albania is the other country with predominantly negative coverage. This is not surprising given the presence of the MEK there. This subject occupies Iranian media coverage quite frequently. Similarly to Pristina, Tirana is portrayed as entirely incapable of making independent decisions apart from Washington. The difference is that the country is also presented as a direct threat to Iranian security, owing to its strong relations with NATO, and as a terrorist base for the MEK, whose members plot and launch attacks against Iranian assets abroad or at home (Kannaby, Saadah, Dharmaputra 2017, 464–465). State-sponsored

media in Iran regularly publish reports accusing the MEK of collaborating with foreign intelligence services such as those of the United States and Israel, portraying it as a tool of imperialist forces aimed at destabilizing Iran (Kannaby, Saadah, Dharmaputra 2017, 464).

This narrative fits well within Tehran's broader messaging strategy, which often presents any opposition to the Iranian regime as orchestrated by foreign powers, especially the US and Israel, aimed at undermining the sovereignty and stability of the Islamic state.

This media strategy serves multiple purposes for Tehran. By delegitimizing both the MEK and Tirana's role in supporting the group, it seeks to undermine confidence in the Albanian government both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, by linking Albania's support for the MEK to its close ties with Western powers, Iran is able to present the Balkan country as an extension of US and NATO efforts to undermine the Islamic regime (Berkolli 2021, 4; Bino, Likmeta 2023, 21).

After the severance of diplomatic relations in 2022, Iranian media launched an aggressive propaganda campaign designed simultaneously to deny Tehran's responsibility for the cyberattack against the Albanian government, which led to the diplomatic rift – and to shift the blame onto Albania and its Western allies. The outlets claim that the cyberattacks were fabricated or exaggerated by the Albanian government in order to justify Washington's aggressive stance toward Tehran (Bino, Likmeta 2023, 7, 11).

In addition to the coverage provided by Iranian state media, Tehran is also making significant investments in Albanian-language media platforms to further disseminate its narratives. These investments allow Iran to spread its messages more effectively, even among the population that does not speak foreign languages (Maréchal 2022, 4–6).

This is particularly directed at the country's Bektashi community, which shares certain religious commonalities with Shia Islam. The scale of Iranian efforts in this sphere exceeds its overall media engagement with all other Balkan countries except Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Media outlets such as Lajm (which is now defunct) and Radio Haracina, believed to have received Iranian funding, have become key channels for promoting Iranian narratives to the Albanian public. By providing content in Albanian, these platforms allow Iran to reach a broader segment of the population, particularly in regions where public opinion may be more skeptical of Albania's pro-Western foreign policy.

The Sahar TV channel, which has been broadcasting since 1997 in five languages, including Albanian, also pushes the pro-Iranian point of view, as do its Russian and Serbian partners.

A similar situation applies to the Iranian news agency Pars Today, which publishes hundreds of articles in Albanian every month, covering topics from the global news flow, geopolitics, security, Iranian politics and society, as well as current events in Albania, all of which are presented through the lens of Iranian strategic interests (Bino, Likmeta 2023, 12–17).

Greece is also more criticized than praised in Iranian media, though far less so. Interestingly, the country receives far more media coverage from a

purely quantitative standpoint than the other states in Tehran Times. This is due to their closer economic and political ties over the years. A large portion of the texts are sports-related and mostly neutral. Smaller positive segments appear regarding tourism, cultural exchange, archaeology, and occasionally friendly diplomatic notes. The bulk of negative reports consists of political and geopolitical reporting. The sharpest negativity is linked to the dispute over the seizure of oil tankers in 2022, in which Athens is criticized for acting under pressure from the US and creating unnecessary problems. Additional negative framing appears in articles related to Greece's close relations with the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as in articles related to energy and trade in the Mediterranean, which competes with Tehran.

In addition to energy, Iranian media occasionally covers cultural exchange between Greece and Iran, including joint academic conferences and cultural events focused on their shared historical ties, particularly through ancient civilizations.

Croatia and Slovenia are among the countries with the most balanced coverage in Tehran Times and the other Iranian media. Sports topics dominate, with occasional cultural news adding variety to the news flow, while the traditional criticism of EU, UN, and US sanctions, which Zagreb and Ljubljana comply with, adds a bit more diversity.

Iranian media coverage of Croatia and Slovenia is largely limited to diplomatic contacts and occasional economic discussions. For example, Press TV and Pars Today report on meetings between Croatian and Slovenian officials and Iranian officials, focusing particularly on trade, tourism, and economic cooperation. These reports emphasize Iran's desire to strengthen bilateral relations despite the restrictions imposed by EU sanctions. Iran's media narrative in Croatia and Slovenia attempts to present the country as a potential partner in circumventing the Western sanctions imposed on Iran, particularly through tourism and small-scale trade.

Coverage of Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania and Montenegro is likewise closer to neutral, with most of the news concerning sports and international events. A visible difference appears in cultural and diplomatic coverage, which is rather sympathetic.

In the economic sphere, Sofia is also presented positively as a good trading partner and a "gateway to Europe" for the Islamic Republic. Bulgaria itself is described as favourably disposed toward Iran. Furthermore, trade deals between the two countries are often presented in Iranian media as defiance against the unjust sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States. The long-standing ties between the two countries, shared cultural events, and artist exchanges between the two nations are emphasized.

Following the North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020, Iranian media such as Press TV and Pars Today framed this development as part of a broader Western strategy to expand military and political control over Southeastern Europe. These articles suggest that NATO's expansion into North Macedonia, along with its presence in other Balkan countries, is not about ensuring regional stability but rather about advancing Western geopolitical interests at the expense of national sovereignty. In addition to criticism of NATO, Iranian media also

target Skopje's ongoing efforts to join the EU. Despite years of negotiations and significant political reforms, the country's path to EU membership has been delayed by various regional disputes, including the historical tension with Bulgaria and Greece.

Coverage of Romania is likewise dominated mainly by sports and related events, which are mostly neutral. A positive attitude is noticeable in its portrayal as a good partner for Iran in the fields of trade, diplomacy, energy, and culture. Again, criticism of Bucharest is more indirect, owing to its closeness with NATO and the EU, rather than personal in nature. Montenegro is among the most positively portrayed countries in Tehran Times, but it should be kept in mind that the total number of publications about it is also the lowest.

Coverage of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia is inversely proportional to that of Kosovo and Albania. Tehran Times reports are almost entirely positive and emphasize the great friendship between the two nations, their shared history during the war of the 1990s, joint cultural events such as "Iran–Bosnia Friendship Week", potential investments, educational initiatives, political visits, greetings and discussions, and so on.

The propaganda of the other Iranian outlets toward Bosnia and Herzegovina is aimed at expanding their ideological, religious, and political footprint. The Iranian media narrative focuses on presenting the country as a long-standing, reliable partner of the Muslims in Bosnia, while at the same time criticizing Western, Turkish, and Saudi influence in the region.

Sahar TV, which also broadcasts in Bosnian, has programmes revisiting the history of the Bosnian War, defining Iran's involvement as a selfless act of solidarity with Bosnian Muslims facing extermination. These reports emphasize the humanitarian aspects of Iran's contribution, such as the delivery of food, medical supplies, and other essential aid to war-torn Bosnia. Iranian media often present, in contrast, Tehran's role in the war compared with the actions of Western powers, which are described as indifferent to the suffering of Bosnian Muslims during the conflict.

The publications also emphasize the diplomatic efforts made by Iranian officials during the war to attract international support for Bosnia's independence and to draw attention to the plight of Bosnian Muslims.

Another area to which Iranian media direct their attention is the promotion of Persian culture and literature in Bosnia. Sahar TV, Press TV, and Pars Today frequently report on cultural exchange programmes (Berkolli 2021, 12–13).

Another key element of Iranian media coverage is its focus on important Bosnian political figures considered sympathetic to Tehran's interests. Bakir Izetbegović, son of Alija Izetbegović, Bosnia's wartime leader, is frequently mentioned in Iranian media reports. They highlight Izetbegović's public support for Tehran's positions on issues such as the Palestinian cause and problems with Israel, Western sanctions, and the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East.

Serbia receives the most favourable media coverage from Iranian outlets, particularly Tehran Times. A large share of the publications is similar in subject matter to those about Bosnia and Herzegovina. A difference lies in the reports affirming the country's territorial integrity and the unjust separation of Kosovo

from Serbia. No convenient opportunity is missed to recall the NATO bombing of the country in 1999, nor to give room for comment by Serbian politicians and public figures on the subject. Belgrade is portrayed almost idyllically as a lone opponent of Western pressure and even imperialism – something that is consistent with Iran's narratives about itself.

Iranian media consistently frame Serbia's ties with Iran as a pragmatic decision that runs counter to the interests of Western powers. For instance, the 2018 oil, gas, and agricultural trade agreements between Serbia and Iran received wide coverage, with the narrative highlighting Serbia's desire to maintain strong economic ties with Iran despite Western pressure.

A key narrative in the coverage of Serbian resistance to Western hegemony, particularly with regard to NATO and the United States, emphasizes Serbia's reluctance to join NATO, framing this stance as evidence of Belgrade's commitment to preserving its independence from Western military and political influence. Serbian public opinion, which remains deeply affected by the 1999 NATO bombing during the Kosovo conflict, is often portrayed as sympathetic to anti-NATO sentiment.

Iranian media tap into this sentiment by drawing parallels between Serbia's opposition to NATO and Iran's own geopolitical struggles with Western military alliances, including in Syria and Iraq. NATO, US, and allied military interventions in the Middle East and the Balkans are portrayed as part of a consistent pattern of Western imperialism aimed at suppressing countries that resist attempts at hegemony.

Tehran media also highlight Serbia's close relations with Russia. According to its publications, Belgrade's ties with Moscow are further evidence of its resistance to Western influence. Tasnim, Mehr News, and Press TV frequently report on Serbia's military and energy cooperation with Russia, describing it as part of a broader alliance that includes countries such as Iran, Russia, and China, each positioned as a rival to Western hegemony.

Conclusion

Judging from the available data, it is clear that the border between soft and hard power with regard to Iranian media policy on the Balkans is diluted. Nye's original description of attraction through values and culture still exists but has evolved towards the use of more "sharp" tools to manipulate and influence political, economic, and social discourse. State-controlled English speaking media is "punishing" its enemies with the same media used to attract and "enchant" allied or neutral audiences.

Kosovo and Albania are the hardest hit by the Iranian soft power. On the one hand, Tehran refuses to recognize Pristina for both internal and external reasons. On the other, by accepting the MEK on its territory, Tirana brought upon itself the fury of Iran, which escalated to a full-fledged information and cyber war. Greece and North Macedonia are in a more neutral zone, criticized mainly for their ties to NATO and the EU, but without much personal animosity in tone. The same applies to the rest of the states that are part of either NATO or the EU (or both). Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Montenegro

remain a cautiously positive parties to the conflict. The Iranian news flow linked to them is dominated by sports, commercial, and cultural material, with no pronounced political weight. However, once in a while, the countries are given as examples for future political or economic partnership. Last but not least, Bosnia and Serbia are at the other extreme: there, the Iranian media literally unfolds a narrative of friendship, drawing on the wars in the 1990s and the general dislike of NATO.

It is evident that this is not a classical soft power campaign but rather a transactional media strategy, a smart power – reacting but not attracting. Each country receives as much good (or bad) coverage as its proximity to the West allows, or depending on the plans of Tehran. This proves previous research articles on similar topics that state media (or outlets largely embedded into a certain country and political climate) can hardly be impartial to propaganda.

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