

# Russia's Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina

By David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon

More than 20 years have passed since the United States brokered the Dayton Peace Accords to end the conflict that ravaged Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The peace agreement ended the war, but the country remains bedeviled by old demons, particularly nationalist political leaders who capitalize on and fuel ethnic tensions between Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs. That ethnic tensions persist may not be all that surprising, but addressing the problem requires the recognition that the Russian government is exploiting and exacerbating them.

The Kremlin's strategic objective in the Western Balkans is to block aspiring nations from joining the EU and NATO. Most well known is Moscow's attempt to organize a coup in Montenegro. Although their efforts ultimately failed to overthrow the pro-NATO government or block the country's eventual accession into the Alliance, the Kremlin sent a message that it is willing to undermine legitimate governments and the rights of the Balkan peoples to choose their own destiny. To stymie BiH's Western integration, Russia is destabilizing the country through a number of means: using local media to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives; training a Bosnian Serb paramilitary unit; acquiring ownership in strategic industries; and supporting politicians and groups loyal to Moscow and hostile to the EU and NATO.

## Russian-Sponsored Media Foment Anti-Western Sentiments

In recent years, the Kremlin has amplified its propagandistic media in the Western Balkans, significantly targeting the ethnic Serb population not only in Serbia, but also in Bosnia and across the region. In 2015, *Russia Today* launched Sputnik Srbija news website and radio with its headquarters in Belgrade, and in January 2018, *Russia Beyond the Headlines* — a news supplement sponsored by the Kremlin — launched a Serbian-language version of its mobile application called RBTH Daily.<sup>1</sup> These Russian outlets play to the historical and cultural ties between Russians and Serbs, primarily promoting shared ethnic Slavic and Orthodox religious identity, while also reinforcing the idea that Russia is their only true ally and that Serbs should not want the countries of the region (Serbia, BiH, Montenegro) to join Western institutions. Their narratives are then picked up and amplified by sympathetic local commentators and media organizations in the region. Prominent Kremlin narratives include stories that memorialize the NATO bombing of Belgrade to keep public opinion stridently against the Alliance;<sup>2</sup> promote conspiracy theories

1 "Russian Sputnik Goes Live in Serbian," In Serbia, (February 3, 2015), <https://insertia.info/today/2015/02/russian-sputnik-goes-live-in-serbian/>; "Да ли желите да добијате електронски билтен Russia Beyond?" *Russia Beyond*, January 17, 2018, <https://rs.rbth.com/zivot/80684-elektronski-bilten-russia-beyond>.

2 "Zaharova Zapadu o bombardovanju SRJ: Zar je moguće da ste toliki idiotic," *SputnikNews*, March 29, 2018, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/201803291115087419-zaharova-zapadu-povodom-godisnjice-nato-agresije-na-srj-/>.



about Western plots to destroy Serb national identity;<sup>3</sup> deify Serb war criminals;<sup>4</sup> glorify Vladimir Putin and the Russian military;<sup>5</sup> and present Russia as the savior of Serbs, including in the ethnic Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia.<sup>6</sup> With the Bosnian elections coming in October 2018, analysts at Jane's 360 have detected a sudden increase in activity by Twitter accounts promoting pro-Russian narratives while also advocating for separatism in Republika Srpska.<sup>7</sup>

## Russian Support for RS Separatism Takes Many Forms

RS President Milorad Dodik has been doing his utmost to undermine BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration, BiH's state-level government, and, potentially, BiH's territorial integrity. For years Dodik has threatened to hold a referendum on the RS' secession from BiH. Although he has yet to follow through, the mere idea of it is destabilizing for the country. Vladimir Putin has consistently supported Dodik. The two leaders met at least eight times in the past three years, most notably in the days leading up to the Bosnian general elections and in September 2016 on the eve of the controversial referendum to reinstate a Republika Srpska national day that was banned

by the BiH Constitutional Court.<sup>8</sup> Dodik uses loyal media in the entity to promote his meetings with Putin, who remains popular with the RS electorate (the local media's portrayal of Putin as a strong leader and protector of Serbs surely does not hurt his popularity).

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The most recent revelation in the Dodik-Kremlin relationship is the existence of a Russia-trained paramilitary force resembling former Serb militias that were active during the Bosnian war.<sup>9</sup> The Bosnian news website Žurnal published a report in January alleging that Dodik personally organized the paramilitary force, which is known as Serbian Honor.<sup>10</sup> The alleged purpose of Serbian Honor is to protect the RS President in the unlikely event of armed opposition during the 2018 elections. The same day of the report, Bosnian Minister of Security Dragan Mektić confirmed to local media that there was indeed a paramilitary force recruiting and operating in Republika Srpska and that Bosnian intelligence and security services had been aware of their presence and activities.<sup>11</sup>

Žurnal also reported that the members of Serbian Honor had undergone training at the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in the Serbian city of Niš, which Russia has insisted is only used for purely humanitarian

3 “Lazanski Upozorava Na OPASNOST: ALBANCI Ponovo UDARAJU Na Sever Kosova, Čekaju Znak VAŠINGTONA,” *SrbijaDanas*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/lazanski-upozorava-na-opasnost-siptari-ponovo-udaraju-na-sever-kosova-cekaju-znak-vasingtona-2018-03-02>.

4 Sputnik, “Руски одбор за Младићеву одбрану: Овакве патриоте су потребне Русији,” *SputnikNews*, November 24, 2017, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/rusija/201711241113560257-mladic-odbrana-dvostruki-standardi/>.

5 D. Kljajić and M. Dobromirović, “SNAŽNA PORUKA RUSKOG LIDERA! Putin rekao Kolindi: KO NAPADNE SRBIJU, RATOVAĆE S RUSIJOM!,” *Informer*, October 20, 2017, <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/353623/snazna-poruka-ruskog-lidera-putin-rekao-kolindi-ko-napadne-srbiju-ratovace-s-rusijom>; “VOJNI ANALITIČAR PUKOVNIK JEVTIČIĆ: Ruska vojna baza u Srbiji, jedina sigurna odbrana od pretnje vojske Kosova!,” *Informer*, March 13, 2017, <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/320593/vojni-analiticar-pukovnik-jevtic-ruska-vojna-baza-u-srbiji-jedina-sigurna-odbrana-od-pretnje-vojske-kosova>.

6 “PUTIN: Republiku Srpsku Ću Da Branim SVIM SILAMA! | Najnovije Vesti - Srbija Danas,” *SrbijaDanas*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/region/putin-srpsku-cu-da-branim-svim-silama-2016-09-05>.

7 Dijedon Imeri, “Recent Twitter Activity Indicates Russian Plan to Destabilise Bosnia Ahead of General Election in October,” *Jane's 360*, January 24, 2018, <http://www.janes.com/article/77311/recent-twitter-activity-indicates-russian-plan-to-destabilise-bosnia-ahead-of-general-election-in-october>.

8 “Putin Praises Bosnian Serb Leader Ahead of Vote,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-russia/26592685.html>; Danijel Kovacevic, “Putin Meets Dodik On Eve of Bosnia Referendum,” *Balkan Insight*, (September 23, 2016), <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-dodik-meet-at-the-eve-of-bosnian-serb-referendum-09-23-2016>.

9 Milos Ćirić, “January Is the Longest Month,” *Balkan Insight*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/january-is-the-longest-month-02-04-2018>.

10 “UZ POMOĆ RUSKIH I SRBIJANSKIH SPECIJALACA: Milorad Dodik Formira Paravojne Jedinice u Republici Srpskoj!,” *Žurnal*, January 12, 2018, <http://www.zurnal.info/novost/20914/milorad-dodik-formira-paravojne-jedinice-u-republici-srpskoj>.

11 “Mektić o Formiranju Paravojne Jedinice u RS: Imamo Odredene Podatke, Sve Će Biti Dostavljeno Tužilaštvu,” *Vijesti*, January 12, 2018, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/389583/mektic-o-formiranju-paravojne-jedinice-u-rs-imamo-odredene-podatke-sve-ce-biti-dostavljeno-tuzilastvu>.

purposes.<sup>12</sup> Some Western intelligence agencies have long suspected the center is used to conduct espionage as well. (Far-right Serbs now seek to open a sister Russian center in Vojvodina in Serbia's northern region that has historically had some autonomy from Belgrade.) The RS paramilitary troops also underwent training at camps in Russia and in battle while fighting alongside separatist units in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Bojan Stojkovic, one of the leaders of Serbian Honor, was trained in Moscow as a Serbian paratrooper. Stojkovic's Instagram profile is filled with praise for Russian President Putin, to whom he referred as "a president worth dying for," and while he denied having been trained in Russia, he freely stated that he was awarded the Russian Federation medal for "running anti-NATO protests in Serbia." Stojkovic calls himself the "bright hope of Orthodoxy" and claims that the group is engaged in "humanitarian work," despite public photos on social media networks showing Serbian Honor members dressed in military gear with black masks and carrying sniper rifles.<sup>14</sup>

Russian foreign investment and energy dominance in the RS is just as significant as its training of paramilitary forces and media influence. Moscow is the largest foreign investor in the RS, and Bosnia as a whole is completely dependent on Russian gas supplies, according to a report by the Center for the Study of Democracy.<sup>15</sup> The same report also explains how Russian state-owned corporations, Gazprom especially, have prevented energy system integration between Bosnia's two entities, the RS and the Bosniak-Croat Federation of BiH. In November 2015, the Alliance for Change opposition bloc accused RS Prime Minister Zeljka Cvijanovic and Finance Minister Zoran Telgetija of accepting a \$300 million loan for the RS entity budget from a Russian source without National Assembly

approval.<sup>16</sup> A Bosnian official told Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) that the Florida-based company, Global Bancorp Commodities & Investment Inc. (GBCI), had only been around for a year and has no other business dealings. The company's manager, a Russian citizen named Alexander Vasiliev, negotiated the loan with Dodik in October 2015 at an international investment forum in Moscow where Vladimir Putin was a keynote speaker. And as Jasmin Mujanovic argued in *Foreign Affairs*, the Kremlin decided to repay a \$125 million debt from the days of Yugoslavia primarily to save the RS budget.<sup>17</sup> Bosnia is the only country to which Russia has repaid a debt in actual money, rather than in goods, a decision Dodik and PM Cvijanovic managed to secure during a trip to Moscow at a time when the RS financial situation was particularly dire.<sup>18</sup>

## Bosnian Croat Nationalism Receives Helping Hand

Moscow is supporting Bosnian Croat nationalism as well. For the last two decades, Bosnian Croats have called for the creation of a separate Croat entity within BiH; barring that, they have at least demanded more political autonomy within the Federation of BiH entity, by successfully pushing for changes to BiH's Election Law. Dragan Covic, the Croat member of the BiH presidency and head of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ BiH), spearheaded these efforts on behalf of the Bosnian Croats.<sup>19</sup> Russia has championed HDZ BiH's position on securing greater power for Croats with Russian Ambassador Petr Ivanov speaking out in favor of Covic's position (the ambassador has also expressed strong opposition to Bosnia's path

12 Milena Djurdjic, "US Sees Russia's 'Humanitarian Center' in Serbia as Spy Outpost," *Voice of America*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-sees-russia-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost/3902402.html>.

13 Aleksandar Vasovic, "Serbian Paramilitaries Join Pro-Russian Forces in Crimea," *Reuters*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-crimea-volunteers/serbian-paramilitaries-join-pro-russian-forces-in-crimea-idUSBREA2D0C20140314>.

14 Photos: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/12/russian-trained-mercenaries-back-bosnias-serb-separatists#img-2>

15 "Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks" (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018), <https://www.dnevnik.bg/file/3121470.pdf>.

16 Srecko Latal, "Bosnian Serb Leaders Under Fire Over Loan," *Balkan Insight*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-loan-for-bosnian-serb-entity-triggers-controversy-10-16-2015>.

17 Jasmin Mujanovic, "Russia's Bosnia Gambit," *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2017-09-06/russias-bosnia-gambit>.

18 Zlatko Hurtic, "Rusija Je Pristala Na Isplatu Klirinškog Duga Da Bi Pomogla RS," *Vijesti*, August 13, 2017, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/371228/rusija-je-pristala-na-isplatu-klirinškog-duga-da-bi-pomogla-rs>.

19 Bodo Weber, "Bosnian Croat Leadership on Course to Throw Bosnia and Herzegovina into Electoral Chaos," *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, December 21, 2017, <https://ba.boell.org/en/2017/12/21/bosnian-croat-leadership-course-throw-bosnia-and-herzegovina-electoral-chaos>.

toward NATO membership and to the strengthening of BiH state institutions at the expense of the entities, particularly the RS).<sup>20</sup>

In addition to helping nationalist politicians achieve their political objectives, Russia also has financial interests at play with Bosnian Croats. According to official security reports reviewed by *Žurnal*, Croatian entrepreneur and former intelligence officer Josip Jurčević was working closely with Russian citizens Igor Krizaev and Mikhail Zazhigin to secure Russia's economic influence in BiH through Covic's political party.<sup>21</sup> In March and April 2017, Jurčević, Krizaev, and Zazhigin reached out to unnamed HDZ BiH officials to discuss the company Aluminij d.d. Mostar. The three entrepreneurs requested that the company switch its aluminum production capacities from electricity to gas imported from Russia using terminals based in the Croatian city of Ploče (Croatia's First Gas Company recently signed a ten-year contract with Russia's Gazprom).<sup>22</sup> Two months later, in a meeting at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, state minister and HDZ BiH party member Vjekoslav Bevanda and Mirko Sarović, supported a proposal by Aluminij d.d. Mostar to abolish customs duties on non-alloyed aluminium, which would be imported from the Russian market.<sup>23</sup> Croatian Ambassador Ivan Del Vecchio, who was also in attendance, said his Russian counterpart Petr Ivantsov had already spoken with Russian officials on the matter. The official document was approved by the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) in July and was officially supported by the Council of Ministers of BiH on December 2017, only a few

hours after Russian Ambassador Ivantsov met with Covic for a holiday celebration.<sup>24</sup> Notably, Ivantsov was the only foreign diplomat in attendance.

Despite their historical and political differences, Covic and Dodik are forming a political alliance in an effort to achieve their respective endgame. Each leader has something to gain from the other: Covic needs backing from Dodik for the creation of a Croat entity, however unlikely that may be, and Dodik, on the other hand, benefits from any political movement that weakens the central state. All the while, Russian propaganda targeting Bosnian Croats and Serbs continues to provoke ethnic conflict; for instance, a Sputnik article was published in October 2017 with the headline, "If Bosnia collapses, not only will the Serbs get a state, but there will be chance for Croats as well."<sup>25</sup> Another article published in Sputnik Srbija pushed the narrative that Croats are being deprived of their rights by Bosniaks and American officials.<sup>26</sup>

## Putin's End Game in BiH

The Kremlin's efforts to undermine stability in BiH and the principles of the Dayton Peace Accords by supporting nationalist politicians demonstrate the Russian government's commitment to keeping BiH from fully integrating into the transatlantic community. With Russian support for separatist policies and even a Russian-trained paramilitary force operating at Dodik's behest, Bosnia remains inhibited by ethnic tensions and political stagnation. Bosnian elections are scheduled for later this fall, and undoubtedly Moscow will continue to support nationalist leaders like Dodik on whom Russia can rely to do its bidding on the issues it cares about most, such as impeding Bosnia's accession to NATO.

20 Petar Ivancov, "Ruski Ambasador: Treba riješiti Hrvatsko Pitanje u FBiH," *Vijesti*, August 24, 2017, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/372361/ruski-ambasador-treba-rijesiti-hrvatsko-pitanje-u-fbih>.

21 "ZAŠTO RUSE BRINE HRVATSKO PITANJE: Ruski Kapital Ulazi u Mostarski Aluminij i Lukavačku Koksaru," *Žurnal*, August 24, 2017, <http://www.zurnal.info/novost/20643/ruski-kapital-ulazi-u-mostarski-aluminij-i-lukavacku-koksaru>.

22 Vedran Pavlic, "Gazprom Signs Ten-Year Gas Delivery Contract with Croatia," *Total Croatia News*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/business/22102-gazprom-signs-ten-year-gas-sale-contract-with-croatia>.

23 "Kako Biznis Spaja Čovića i Ruse," *RTVBN*, September 20, 2017, <http://www.rtvbn.com/3879405/kako-biznis-spaja-covica-i-ruse>.

24 "The Government of FB&H Officially Supported Aluminij's Initiative on Change of the Customs Regime | Aluminij d.d. Mostar," *Aluminij d.d. Mostar*, July 21, 2017, <http://www.aluminij.ba/en/news/1235-government-fbh-officially-supported-aluminijis-initiative-change-customs-regime>; "The New Customs Suspension Is the Beginning of State Concern for Its Strategic Companies | Aluminij d.d. Mostar," *Aluminij d.d. Mostar*, December 29, 2017, <http://www.aluminij.ba/en/news/1258-new-customs-suspension-beginning-state-concern-its-strategic-companies>; Nihad Hebibović, "Zašto Je Ivancov Bio Jedini Strani Ambasador Na Čovićevoj Prijemu?!", *Vijesti*, December 23, 2017, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/387133/zasto-je-ivancov-bio-jedini-strani-ambasador-na-covicovom-prijemu>.

25 Nikola Joksimović, "Ako Bosna kolabira, neće samo Srbi dobiti državu — šansa i za Hrvate," *SputnikNews*, October 29, 2017, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/intervju/20171029113239861-bosna-intervju-tvrtko-milovic/>.

26 Brankica Ristić, "Amerika ne dozvoljava Hrvatima entitet u Bosni i Hercegovini," *SputnikNews*, March 18, 2018, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/regioni/201803181114920605-bosna-hrvati-amerika-srbi-treci-entitet/>.

The Kremlin's multi-pronged strategy to keep Bosnia unstable is a page out of its playbook in countries throughout the transatlantic community in an effort to undermine democratic governments and societies. The Russian government also hopes that by waging influence operations throughout the West, Western governments, the EU, and NATO will be too distracted with their own problems to pay more attention to regions like the Western Balkans. At the end of the day, the most resounding blow to the Kremlin's goals in Bosnia must be dealt by Bosnians themselves when they go to the polls this year. If reformist parties can gain strength, Moscow's hand in Bosnia could be weakened.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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