

Russian Hybrid Warfare in the West Balkans

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Recent years have seen deepening tensions across the Balkans, as Russia and Serbia have sought to destabilize the fragile situations in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro to their advantage.

Kosovo has never been recognized by Serbia, and remains host to a contingent of peacekeepers from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which freed the territory from Serbian rule in 1999 and administered it until independence in 2008. The unsettled status of relations between the two countries has led to repeated threats of war and challenges to Kosovo's sovereignty.

Since 2021 a series of crises involving the validity of Kosovo and Serbian vehicle license plates has resulted in barricaded roads, closed borders, and attacks by Serbian mobs on Kosovo police. Mayoral elections, boycotted by the Serb parties, brought Kosovo Albanian candidates to office and triggered another outburst of violence, including against NATO peacekeepers, 90 of whom were injured in May 2023. In November 2024 the Kosovo government accused Serbia of being behind the destruction of a canal in northern Kosovo, vital to the country's water and energy supplies.

At the same time, Serbia has carried out an unprecedented buildup of troops and weaponry at the border, carrying out aerial exercises close to Kosovo and threatening repeatedly that the crisis could turn into a war. For instance, in 2022 Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said that Kosovo and Serbia were “on the brink of armed conflict.” Russian government officials have taken the same line: according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “a big explosion is brewing in the heart of Europe.”

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the governing structures set up by the 1995 Dayton Accords have come under increasing strain. This agreement, which brought an end to a brutal three-and-a-half-year war which killed more than 100,000 people, established two autonomous entities under a weak central government: The Serb-majority Republika Srpska and the largely Croat and Bosnian Muslim Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has pushed for it to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In February 2025, a court in Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced Milorad Dodik to one year in prison and banned him from politics for six years over his secessionist threats. Russia condemned the court’s decision against Dodik and Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that “this persecution of Dodik is a purely politically motivated move that targets Dodik personally and all patriotic forces of Serbia which is inadmissible.” The Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs immediately announced

that Russia is trying “to neutralize threats to inter-ethnic dialogue, peace and stability” in the Balkans.

Russia’s support for Republika Srpska comes as no surprise. Vladimir Putin and Dodik convened in Kazan in February 2024. During this meeting Dodik stated that he is, “trying to discourage any possibility of [Bosnia and Herzegovina] joining the sanctions against Russia.” At the closing of their meeting, Putin awarded Dodik the Order of Alexander Nevsky for his "contribution to the development of cooperation between the Russian Federation and Bosnia and Herzegovina and for reinforcing the partnership with Republika Srpska." Putin and Dodik met again in early June in St. Petersburg at the International Economic Forum. In his opening remarks, Putin told Dodik that, “We [Russia] are grateful to you for what you do in the spiritual sphere, and in supporting our ties through the foreign ministries.”

Cooperation with Serbia has also been important for Dodik. In 2024, he joined the Serbian cabinet in Belgrade for an “All-Serbian Assembly.” Here he and Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic adopted a “Declaration On the Protection of National and Political Rights and The Common Future of the Serbian People,” which focused on the strong historic, political, and economic ties between Serbia and the Republika Srpska.

Though Montenegro’s current leadership seeks to guide the country closer to Europe, here too there has been a history of Russian and Serbian meddling. In 2016 the President alleged that Russia was behind a failed coup aimed at

ousting him from power and preventing Montenegro's accession to NATO. More recently, pro-Serbian parties in the opposition have tried to change Montenegro's citizenship laws in ways which could complicate its relationship with Serbia and make deeper integration with the European Union more challenging.

All of these cases embody a pattern of Russian influence operations across the Balkans, dedicated to sowing chaos, weakening fragile states, and embarrassing or distracting NATO and the West. Several factors motivate Russia's interest in destabilizing the Balkans. By flexing Russia's ability to cause trouble in the region, Putin suggests that he is the only one who can stop it. If Russia is essential to conflict mediation in the Balkans, and only Russia can effectively rein in rogue actors there, Putin makes himself vital to peace in a sensitive corner of Europe - and presumably will seek to extract concessions from NATO or the EU in exchange for cooperation there.

Increasing the salience of conflicts within the Balkans can also help Russia further stretch the unity of the NATO alliance. Already there is significant division among the alliance over the level of support being given to Ukraine; another conflict, this one even closer to home, would strain NATO's consensus-making still further. A hypothetical war over Kosovo, for example, would complicate NATO's role there, especially given that several member countries do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

Russia therefore benefits from instability in the Balkans regardless of outcome: if chaos continues unabated, with the West powerless to stop it, NATO appears to be a “paper tiger,” unable to stand up for its principles and promises. If brought to the table to help solve the problems there, Putin will seek to use them as leverage to extract concessions. And should a hot war actually break out there, even if NATO intervened successfully against Serbia or its proxies that would mean less attention and material support for Ukraine in its ongoing war against Russian aggression.

Russia has other reasons for supporting Serbia and for sowing instability in the Balkans, reasons which tie into its understanding of information warfare. For Putin, the Western support of Kosovo offers an excuse for his occupation and annexation of internationally-recognized Ukrainian territory. If NATO could intervene to guarantee and defend Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, then Russia is justified in its military actions “protecting” the Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s Republics” and later incorporating them into Russia proper. This diplomatic whataboutism (doubly absurd given that Russia has never recognized Kosovo’s independence) helps Russia muddy the waters of the narrative about the war in Ukraine.

Information warfare plays an important role in Russian security thinking. The Balkans has seen numerous examples of this. North Macedonia has been home to numerous Russian troll farms which spread fake news about the 2016 U.S. elections. Russian influence operations campaigns also

targeted North Macedonians ahead of the 2018 referendum which changed their country's official name and cleared their path into NATO. Russian media have further down discord between religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina and egged on the secession of Republika Srpska.

This type of information warfare can be seen in Russia's support for Serbia. Russia has spread repeated claims, picked up by the Serbian authorities, that Western powers are plotting to carry out a "color revolution" or a "Maidan-style coup" in Serbia. Russia and Serbia have merged together and enhanced their mutual paranoia about Western interference, justifying their hostility towards the West.

At the same time, Serbia has welcomed Russian media onto its airwaves. Not only do Sputnik and RT operate freely in the country, but Serbian media have repeated many of its claims. These include the utterly false contention that Ukraine attacked Russia first, as well as conspiracy theories about US-run "biolabs" in Ukraine and Serbia.

Russia's activities in the Balkans have taken place with the tacit or outright approval of the Serbian government of Aleksandar Vucic. Vucic frequently paints himself as a moderate, and has sought to walk a delicate tightrope between Russia and the West, particularly since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. For instance, Serbia has reportedly sold arms to Ukraine, and voted against Russia at the United Nations General Assembly. However, these have been largely symbolic gestures, and Serbia has aligned with Russia in numerous concrete ways, from refusing to join

international sanctions on Russia to encouraging secession in Republika Srpska.

At the core of the alliance between Vucic and Putin lies the fact that Russia's interests broadly align with those of Vucic and his right-wing Serbian nationalist backers, including the Serbian Orthodox Church. These Serbian nationalists would like to see the return of Serbian control over Kosovo, which they consider an inalienable part of the nation - it was home to numerous Serbian Orthodox monasteries in the medieval era, and is the site of the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, a key moment in the Serbian national legend. Some of them also talk about a "Srpski mir," or "Serbian World," incorporating all of the Serbian-populated territories in what are now Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other states. This echoes the narrative of the "Russkii mir" used to justify the Russian expansion against Ukraine.

Even if these expansive goals are never accomplished, however, Serbian nationalists see a benefit in aligning with Russia for domestic political purposes. Cooperation with Russia in the information space strengthens their claim that Western powers are trying to unseat them, thereby painting opposition forces as foreign agents. Side by side with Russia, they can portray themselves as bravely defending the traditional, Orthodox values of Serbia against modern, Western values coming from Europe.

This alignment between Serbian and Russian interests should be understood by policymakers in the West. Symbolic gestures such as a vote in the UN General

Assembly must be recognized as meaningless window-dressing. Europe, in particular, should understand that threatening Serbia's EU membership prospects provides little leverage as long as the Serbian government is happy to avoid the EU's requirements for legal and political reform. Instead, the US and Europe should threaten concrete, targeted sanctions. There is a legal basis for this, following former US President Joe Biden's signature of an executive order allowing sanctions on those who "threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity" of the region.

NATO responded to the flare-ups in 2023 by sending more troops to Kosovo. However, it needs to do more. Learning from Russia's investment in information warfare, NATO should strike back against the Russian and Serbian propaganda machine. Information warfare teams in the Balkans should seek to remind Serbian nationalists that Putin's promises of support are empty: he is distracted by his war in Ukraine and will not be willing or able to help Serbia should conflict erupt. The comparison should be made between Serbia and Armenia, another Russian ally. Despite being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and making official requests for support from its ally, Armenia received no meaningful help from Russia in its recent wars with Azerbaijan. NATO must not cede the information field to Russia.

The West must pay attention to the Balkans and get tough on troublemakers in the region. Otherwise, simmering tensions could break out into outright conflict, further

destabilizing the region, inflicting human costs, and strengthening Putin's bargaining position against NATO over Ukraine.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Western Balkans are caught in a precarious situation, with Russia strategically using hybrid warfare to destabilize the region and undermine Western influence. Through disinformation campaigns, manipulation of religious institutions, and bolstering nationalist leaders, Moscow aims to keep the Balkans in a perpetual state of crisis, preventing their integration into the European Union and NATO. Figures like Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić play crucial roles in furthering these destabilizing agendas, with Russia providing support and maintaining leverage in the region.

The future of the Balkans hinges on the West's ability to counter these hybrid tactics and offer a clear path toward stability and integration. However, as long as external actors like Russia continue to exploit ethnic divisions and political paralysis, the region will remain vulnerable to further fragmentation. The Western Balkans stand at a crossroads—either they can move towards lasting peace and European integration or remain a battleground for external influences and nationalist ambitions, with peace continuing to hang in the balance. The challenge for both regional actors and the international community is to ensure that the Balkans do not

become a frozen conflict zone, where Russia's influence grows unchecked.