

# INTERNET TURKOPHILIA AS A TOOL FOR SPREADING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND GEOPOLITICAL DISORIENTATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This working paper explores how Russian propaganda leverages internet Turkophilia to expand its influence and create geopolitical disorientation in the region. It analyzes the multifaceted propaganda strategies employed by Serbian services and pro-Russia networks, including outlets like Sputnik and Serbian media organizations, to promote an anti-Western narrative. The paper examines the unexpected penetration of this propaganda into the predominantly pro-Western-oriented Bosniak public and attributes this shift to broader geopolitical dynamics, such as Russia-Turkey reconciliation and certain diplomatic missteps by Western diplomats. The study highlights the potential risks and long-term implications of harmful propaganda for regional stability and geopolitical dynamics.*

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, or the United States Institute of Peace.*

# INTRODUCTION

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Propaganda has long been a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy in the Western Balkans, employing the full range of instruments at its disposal. Alongside traditional diplomatic activities and the official representation of the Kremlin, various media outlets such as the Russian news agency *Sputnik* and private Serbian media organizations like *Happy TV* continue to openly propagate a pro-Russian narrative, even in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These channels are skillfully harnessed by Russia to exert influence, while a plethora of other seemingly independent or uncoordinated platforms, including YouTube channels and fake social media profiles, tirelessly disseminate the same narratives to millions of people in the region. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church, its subsidiary organizations, and the media play a significant role in spreading the pro-Russian narrative, contributing to the creation of a potentially harmful geopolitical dichotomy in the region.

However, the propaganda machine has not confined itself to the well-established contours of its usual narrative, which paints the West as an “evil and decadent” force threatening traditional values, with Russia positioned as its defender. It has broken free from these constraints and expanded its reach to audiences previously considered non-receptive to such ideas.

This paper will unequivocally define the activities discussed as Serbian-Russian propaganda while highlighting its unexpected penetration into the predominantly pro-Western-oriented Bosniak public. The strategy to address the new audience would not have been possible without broader geopolitical dynamics. One such crucial shift was the unprecedented rapprochement between Russia and Turkey following the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. Given the two countries’ influential roles in the region, this reconciliation inevitably affected relations between Serbs and Bosniaks. The influence of Serbia and Russia on inter-Bosniak ideological dynamics has been magnified ever since.

Moreover, certain diplomatic missteps by Western diplomats in the region have inadvertently created an opportunity for Russia to wield even greater influence among Bosniaks than ever before. These developments underscore the significance of examining the evolving landscape of Serbian-Russian propaganda and its implications for regional stability and geopolitical dynamics.

## RUSSIA IN THE BALKANS

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### *Russia's Re-emergence*

The 1990s and the end of the authoritarian Socialist regime witnessed a notable manifestation of pro-Russian sentiments among Serbs. Volunteers from Russian nationalist circles ventured to fight alongside Serbian forces, masquerading their involvement as a defense of Orthodoxy against the perceived advance of Islam. This period marked a culmination of the sympathies towards Russia among the Serbian population. During this period, a considerable number of Russian volunteers were deeply influenced by the ideology of Slavic-Orthodox messianism, which portrayed the West as the ultimate adversary in a fervent defense of traditional values.<sup>1</sup> Even Alexander Dugin, who in my view has been erroneously regarded as the primary ideologue of Putin’s Russia, made a visit to the region.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the 2000s and Vladimir Putin’s leadership, Russia was perceived as a relatively inconsequential actor in the region. However, the partial withdrawal of the United States from the region, coupled with the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia,” significantly bolstered Russia’s position.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the 2008 financial crisis, which weakened Western capacities, further facilitated the growing influence of emerging economies such as Russia, China, and Turkey. This influence was particularly pronounced after the European

Union's integration process became stagnant. The independence of Kosovo in 2008 further solidified Serbia's anti-Americanism and alignment with the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Emergence of Populist Politics*

The fall of the Democratic Party in Serbia, combined with the opportunistic strategies of certain populist politicians such as Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) or Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia, provided a space for the open promotion of a pro-Russian narrative. The success of Russian propaganda in the region is heavily contingent on the presence of these politicians and their party infrastructure. This political climate, largely perpetuated by the passivity of the West and the mediocre diplomats who utilized the region solely for career advancement, has inadvertently catered to Serbian nationalist demands, providing cover for Russian interests and enabling the construction of a wide pro-Russian network.

### *Russian Network for Hybrid Warfare*

During the first half of the 2010s, a pervasive pro-Russian social media and internet network gradually took shape. This network prominently featured numerous YouTube channels and social media profiles that disseminated translated news sourced from Russia. These news pieces, often originating from obscure and marginalized Russian outlets, primarily addressed ultra-nationalist Serbian circles. The prevailing themes revolved around the shifting global paradigm, highlighting Russian military and technological superiority as a burgeoning force poised to challenge Western dominance and safeguard the conservative values cherished by Serbian society. This narrative cultivated a cult-like reverence for Putin, portraying him as the primary defender of conservative values on a global scale. Conspiracy theories, largely marginalized in Western public discourse, found fertile ground for discussion within this media landscape. These theories frequently ventured to assert that a hidden, satanic agenda underpinned everything emanating from the West. Moreover, they propagated a pervasive belief in a comprehensive conspiracy against the Serbian people and the Orthodox faith. Notably, the popular YouTube channel *BalkanInfo* gained prominence due to its unique choice of guests who delved into these topics with an unconventional approach.

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## TURKEY IN THE BALKANS

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### *A Neo-Ottomanist Treat*

The perception of Turkey among Serbian nationalistic circles closely paralleled shifts in Turkish foreign policy. This evolution became evident in the second half of the 2000s, under the guidance of Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, when Turkey adopted a more proactive approach to its foreign relations, breaking away from its previous Western-centric stance.

Until the mid-2010s Serbian right-wing circles regarded Turkey as a Western “Trojan horse,” infiltrating the Balkans through its close ties to Muslim communities in an alleged bid to advance greater Albanian aspirations or even establish an Islamic state in BiH.<sup>5</sup> In their view, Turkey, supported by the NATO alliance and the United States, was complicit in an anti-Serbian conspiracy. Foremost the biggest grievance was Turkey's early recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008. This fact contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy among Serbian nationalists, who drew imprecise historical parallels between Russian-

Ottoman relations. They selectively interpreted historical events to fit their conspiracy theory, emphasizing instances where the British and French came to the aid of the Ottomans against Russian encroachment while disregarding the broader context of the European balance of power during that time.

Observing the Turkish shift towards a more dynamic foreign policy in the region, scholars with close ties to the Serbian state—such as Darko Tanasković, who served as the Serbian ambassador to Turkey—began academically exploring the new directions of Turkish foreign policy. It was during this period that the term “neo-Ottomanism” gained popularity, referring to this new, proactive approach to Turkish foreign affairs.<sup>6</sup>

On the political scene, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik emerged as a particularly vocal figure in his anti-Turkish rhetoric, raising alarm within Western diplomatic channels due to his concerns about the growing Turkish influence in BiH. Dodik’s anxieties stemmed from Turkey’s close relations with the most powerful Bosniak party, the SDA (Bosniak Party of Democratic Action), fueling his fears that, with Turkish assistance, BiH could transform into an “Islamic state in the heart of Europe.”<sup>7</sup> Even a Turkish delegation’s visit to Banja Luka resulted in a diplomatic crisis when Republika Srpska representatives refused to display the Bosnian state flag.<sup>8</sup> These were times when anti-Turkish campaigns on the internet and other media platforms gained traction. Although less sophisticated than the present day, these campaigns were sufficient to incite diplomatic scandals.

In 2014, a noteworthy incident unfolded wherein a fabricated Facebook account disseminated fake news that subsequently sparked significant diplomatic tensions throughout the region. This incident coincided with the routine sailing of a Turkish navy ship across the Mediterranean which entered the Gulf of Neum, the sole seaside town in BiH. Given that the town primarily comprises Bosnian Croats, the incident elicited minor discontent among the local population. Shortly thereafter, a message was published on Facebook from an unverified account, which read: “Turkey or the Ottoman Empire handed over their Bosniak brothers to the enemy Austro-Hungary without any protection in the long past! We have never and will not be able to forgive that to ourselves, but then again evil came for the Bosniaks and we failed the test again, we failed to protect them! Now I swear by the great Allah that if anyone were to touch the Bosniaks in any way, he would have a hundred million Turks against him! So don't be surprised when the Turkish warship sails into Neum because that is our sign and support for the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina!”<sup>9</sup>

The Facebook profile created solely for this purpose was swiftly deactivated once the media began to amplify the message. However, the dissemination of this fake news extended beyond social media, as traditional media outlets picked up the story and started propagating it. Regional politicians, without verifying the authenticity of the message through diplomatic channels, reacted as if it had been genuinely uttered by Erdoğan. Milorad Dodik emerged as the most vocal figure, raising alarm among all possible avenues about this message. Dodik even penned a letter to the then Serbian prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, calling for a meeting to devise “appropriate responses for the safeguarding of our state and national interests.”<sup>10</sup>

Without wasting time, Dodik boarded a plane and swiftly traveled to Belgrade for an urgent meeting with the prime minister of Serbia. During their meeting, both leaders issued a joint statement, vehemently condemning the alleged message attributed to Erdoğan. In response, Turkish diplomats promptly refuted the claims, stating that no such statement had ever been made by Erdoğan. Both the Turkish ambassador in BiH and Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party denied the veracity of the message. However, Vučić and Dodik disregarded these denials and persisted in perpetuating the narrative of Turkey’s supposed neo-Ottomanist ambitions. Even in the face of official Turkish rebuttals, the media continued to disseminate this message and invited analysts to discuss the topic extensively. This incident served as a poignant illustration of how social media-based fake news could be exploited for political ends.

## *Turkey in the Pro-Russian Network*

The discourse within certain circles did not shy away from targeting Muslims in the Balkans as agents of a Western conspiracy against Orthodoxy, with Turkey portrayed as the principal sponsor of such machinations. Even within certain scientific circles, assertions were made that Turkish foreign policy exclusively served the “interests of the Anglo-Saxons,” citing the historically cordial relations between Constantinople and London as evidence, albeit within a limited temporal and specific historical context.<sup>11</sup> The alleged U.S. sympathies among Albanians and Bosniaks were often used to substantiate these claims. Occasionally, arguments from internet preachers from Trinidad and Tobago—such as Imran Hossein, who advocated for Muslim collaboration with Orthodox Christians, specifically in Russia as the preeminent Orthodox country, against Judeo-Christian (Western) civilization—were also invoked. Hossein, a frequent guest in Serbia and Republika Srpska, embraced a fervent Russophilia and Serbophilia to such an extent that he even cast doubt on the veracity of the Srebrenica genocide, perceiving it as part of a wider plan against Orthodoxy. Notably, he also staunchly advocated that Turkey functioned as NATO’s Trojan horse, posing a threat to Muslims.<sup>12</sup>

## *A More Positive Turkey after 2016*

The stance of these channels towards Turkey underwent a notable transformation during the latter half of the 2010s. A significant turning point in the perception of Turkey among Serbian nationalist circles came in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 2016. Approximately one month following the failed coup, a Turkish delegation was engaged in negotiations with the Kremlin in Saint Petersburg, seeking to restore ties after Turkey had downed a Russian fighter jet that had entered its airspace without authorization. The failed coup attempt proved to be a catalyst for change, as the Turkish government openly accused the West of orchestrating the coup. Conversely, Moscow’s role during that critical night received praise, with the official theory asserting that Russia alerted Erdoğan to the impending coup. This generated a new-found positive atmosphere between Ankara and Moscow, leading to the deepening of relations and a surge in cooperation. Simultaneously, it exacerbated the already strained ties between Turkey and the West. Within Serbian nationalist circles in the region, these developments were perceived as a positive indication. As Russia and Turkey solidified their restored relations and Ankara increasingly criticized Western policies in the Middle East, it didn’t take long for Serbian nationalist networks to adjust their narrative regarding Turkey. The country was now embraced as a new ally in the fight against Western imperialism.

Such endorsement was not limited to online networks alone; there was a noticeable shift in the attitude of Serbian diplomacy as well. Following the strain in relations caused by former Prime Minister

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Erdoğan’s statement in 2013 that “Turkey is Kosovo, and Kosovo is Turkey,” a significant improvement was observed during Erdoğan’s official visit to Belgrade in November 2017.<sup>13</sup> The shift was so profound that Aleksandar Vučić lauded Turkey as “the strongest Balkan country,” and Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić even serenaded the Turkish delegation with traditional Turkish songs. As a new chapter unfolded in Serbian-Turkish relations, this rapprochement sparked concern among the majority of Balkan Muslims, who, in the wake of the Russian-Turkish normalization of relations, began to fear that they might become collateral damage if this balance were to be reflected in the region.

## INSIDE BOSNIAK PUBLIC SPACE

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After established networks of social media and YouTube accounts started shifting rhetoric towards a more positive one, an interesting approach was observable. Social media was witnessing a flood of pro-Turkish social media accounts and channels that spread the pro-Turkish narrative inside Bosniak public space. The names of these groups are indicative in themselves. Most of the names are full of historical submissiveness towards the Turkish conqueror, such as the Facebook group “Bosnia in 1463,” indicating the fall of this country under Ottoman rule. Other groups include the “Republic of Turkey,” “Hanafi Madhhab,” “Team Ottomans,” “Turkey-Bosnia-Sandzak,” and the like. There are those whose name indicates a new paradigmatic beginning such as “New Bosnia,” which is the most popular one. Although sympathies towards Turkey were present even before, it was often conditioned with pro-Western and pro-NATO Turkey in the eyes of Bosniaks. Being aware that the strengthening of Russia’s position would encourage Serbia, Balkan Muslims were mainly pro-Western.

With the emergence of the new internet network, the narrative within the Bosniak internet space underwent a significant shift compared to the period before the 2016 failed coup attempt. Previously, the allure of Turkey for local Muslims was primarily derived from two dimensions: either the secular, pro-Western image of Turkey or the perception of Erdoğan’s Turkey as an emerging Muslim superpower that successfully maintained the country’s secular and modern character while fostering close ties to the Muslim world. Thus, both secular and conservative Bosniaks found aspects of Turkey to appreciate.

After 2016, a growing number of accounts and channels began glorifying Turkey’s close relationship with Russia, hailing them as a new geopolitical axis and an alternative to the West’s dominance in the region. What garnered praise was not Turkey’s NATO affiliation, but rather the concept of Eurasianism and the formation of a Turkic-Slavic geopolitical bloc in the Eurasian region as a counterforce to the Anglo-Saxon-dominated West, resemblance to the ideas put forth by Neo-Eurasianist writer Alexandar Dugin.<sup>14</sup>

The narrative aimed at the Muslim public included the dissemination of positive news concerning other actors like Pakistan, Qatar, and even Iran. Additionally, attention shifted towards a new geopolitical player, Azerbaijan, which holds both Eurasian and Turkic characteristics and maintains favorable relations with Turkey and Russia. This became particularly prominent during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, where the instrumental role of Turkish drones in securing victory for Baku was highlighted. Like the pro-Russian channels catering to the Serbian audience, Turkey’s technological advancements in the military sphere became recurrent topics of discussion.

Like Putin’s cult of personality on Serbian networks, a similar trend was emerging around Erdoğan. He was depicted as a new leader in the Muslim world, actively fighting for the preservation of conservative values. To reinforce this narrative, short clips from government-sponsored TV shows like *Payitaht Abdulhamid* were widely shared across the internet. These clips would address geopolitical and ideological issues prevalent in the region at the time. The initial aim of this TV series was to draw historical parallels between Sultan Abdulhamid and Erdoğan, subtly conveying political messages to the Turkish public.<sup>15</sup> Now, these messages were being disseminated to the Bosniaks through pro-Turkish and pro-Eurasianist networks on the internet.

Bosniak networks also delved into various subjects that could be classified as conspiracy theories. However, the focus of these theories differed. Instead of portraying the West’s dominance as a “Satanistic plot” as observed among the Serbian public, it was framed as a plot against the Muslim world. According to this narrative, the hidden agenda behind Western dominance involved a “collaboration between Crusaders and Zionists,” aiming to dismantle the world of Islam. In this context, Erdoğan emerged as the sole figure capable of standing against this alleged plot. He and Turkey were depicted as the “last bastion” that should be supported by the wider Muslim world to prevent the realization of this agenda.

To undermine the pro-Western sentiment among Bosniaks, the manipulation of war-related themes was commonly employed, exploiting people's emotions. The portrayal of the West as the primary culprit of the Bosniak genocide, surpassing even the responsibility assigned to Serbia and Croatia themselves, aimed to lay blame on certain elite circles within the West. These circles were depicted as closely intertwined with the globalist elite that utilized regional political actors to further their own objectives. The Srebrenica genocide and the involvement of French and Dutch battalions in surrendering the town to Bosnian Serb troops, along with similar massacres, were frequently exploited as recurring motifs to provoke reactions.

## 2022 RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, efforts to downplay Russia's crimes began to circulate across the networks. The prevailing narrative sought to undermine the perception of who had the morally superior side in the conflict by spreading the notion that Ukrainians had supported the Serbian side during the war in BiH as mere pawns of the West. Additionally, discrediting the Ukrainian side involved highlighting their Orthodox faith, linking them to Serbs and Russians, insinuating that Bosniaks should not concern themselves with their struggle to liberate occupied territories.<sup>16</sup> The narrative had to be tailored to the audience, as openly supporting the Russian side in the conflict was not feasible.

While Russia was demonstrating some success during the early stages of the war, messages began to surface, suggesting how an off-guard West would similarly restrain from action if BiH was under attack, perfidiously drawing parallels to the West's passivity during the 1990s. Some analysts who were featured in mainstream media echoed similar sentiments, characterizing the conflict as a Western agenda to divide Slavic peoples. Anis Bajraktarević, on private *Hayat TV*, blamed the West for the escalation by saying how the "Anglophone West is drawing others to the theater of drama" where Anglophone countries will be the biggest winners of this inter-Slavic war.<sup>17</sup>

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## CONCLUSION: STRENGTHENING THE EURASIANIST NARRATIVE THROUGH HARMFUL POLICIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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Unfolding events within domestic politics show that the Eurasianist narrative that emerged among Bosniaks might not remain seasonal. With the recent changes imposed on the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in BiH, Christian Schmidt provided a fertile ground for the networks to draw their argumentation. These changes disproportionately favored the ultra-nationalistic HDZ BiH (Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina), which actively engaged in separatist warfare against the Bosnian government during the 1990s at the expense of the Bosniak majority. Ironically, the party's leadership does not conceal its ties to the Kremlin. In a bid to secure dominance in the Federation of BiH, they resorted to visiting the Kremlin and leveraging Russian ties to blackmail Western diplomats as part of a tactic to persuade them to push the new election law. After seriously antagonizing the Bosniak majority, the high representative temporarily abolished the constitution for 24 hours. Despite the interventions, the political situation did not unfold in favor of the Croat minority. These maneuvers further marginalized Bosniaks while simultaneously bolstering separatist politicians like Dodik and Čović.

The actions of the OHR, backed and promoted by the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, have generated significant disappointment among Bosniaks and contributed to a growing sense of anti-American sentiment. This trend is substantiated by various opinion polls, which clearly demonstrate the increase in such sentiments. In BiH, there is a 9% decrease in one year, from 40% to 31%, in support of U.S. President Joe Biden's administration. Other regional trends are even worse. The same is observed in Kosovo and North Macedonia.<sup>18</sup> Since this research was conducted before the latest U.S.-supported actions in BiH, the support is expected to continue decreasing.

An increasing number of Bosniak politicians are adopting a similar stance towards U.S. policies in the region. Haris Zahiragić, a member of the influential Bosniak SDA Party, expressed his concerns during a television appearance, stating, "If the international community continues to treat the political will of the Bosniak people in this way, I will personally do my best to ensure that the Bosniak people start looking for new friends." After being asked to whom he was referring, Zahiragic answered, "Both Chinese and Russian."<sup>19</sup>

Numerous analysts in BiH had warned that changes imposed by the OHR and the wider international community would lead to the "radicalization of Bosniaks" and a possible reassessment of their alliance with the United States.<sup>20</sup> It is evident that non-Western actors, particularly Russia and its hybrid warfare network, are poised to benefit from this growing discontent. Ultimately, it appears that the historical trend of having Bosniaks with pro-Russian leanings will persist, thanks to the missteps made by Western diplomats. This is especially true considering that by disenfranchising Bosniaks, they have inadvertently bolstered openly pro-Kremlin politicians like Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović, who now hold stronger positions than ever before.

A similar scenario played out in Montenegro and North Macedonia. The clumsy policies pursued by Western diplomats in the region have weakened these two countries, allowing pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political forces to gain prominence. The West views the new "regional architecture" as a compromise aimed at appeasing Serbia and securing its support against Russia, a country where its 12% of support for the United States is third lowest in the world after Russia and Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> Presently, a similar situation is unfolding in Kosovo, where pressure is mounting on Prime Minister Albin Kurti to concede to Serbia's demands regarding the Association of Serbian Municipalities, which would be a "new Republika Srpska" in northern Kosovo. Recognizing that such a move would permanently undermine Pristina's control over its own territory, Kurti's refusal has strained relations with Washington.

Consequently, like their Bosniak counterparts, they might eventually seek alternative avenues to counteract U.S. and Western influence, with Turkey emerging as a logical first step given its popularity among Muslims in the region. These developments could pave the way for an unprecedented occurrence—the emergence of pro-Russian Albanians. In Bosnia, such sentiments took root due to misguided policies and disenfranchisement. The United States is rapidly losing the loyalty of Bosniaks and Albanians, who were once steadfast partners. Just a few years ago, this outcome was beyond Russia's wildest dreams.

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## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics. This working paper arises from a partnership between the project and the United States Institute of Peace focused on understanding how the geopolitics of religion shapes peace and conflict dynamics in particular regional and country settings.

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