

Hybrid Threats in the Western Balkans: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper was to identify the nature of hybrid threats posed by Russia in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, subsequently, to identify to what extent the Kremlin is successful in destabilising the political situation in this country. For this purpose, disciplined interpretative case study was employed. This study is primarily based on four expert interviews which were conducted in August 2021, in Sarajevo. The theoretical part of this study introduces the concept of hybrid threats. This concept is then applied to the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on a comprehensive analysis, the authors were able to identify three areas where the Kremlin's hybrid threats are the most significant. These are political and economic influence, information space and proxy organizations. This paper may contribute to the understanding of how Russia constructs its hybrid threats and may also lead to further research on hybrid threats in the Western Balkans.*

Keywords: *Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, Russian Federation, hybrid threats, hybrid war.*

Introduction

In recent years, security analysts and scholars have increasingly discussed the concept of hybridity in international relations. Hybrid threats gained particular attention after Russia had illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, see, for example, Rácz (2015), Hajduk and Stępniewski (2016) or Rusnáková (2017). In the context of Russian hybrid activities, Russian interference in the US elections or the Kremlin's efforts to influence the outcome of the referendum on Brexit could be mentioned as examples of Russian hybrid activities. Finally, Moscow's ties to ultra-nationalist politics in Europe could also be considered a Russian hybrid strategy (Chivvis 2017: 5). Using these hybrid strategies, the Kremlin's political leadership has sought to undermine the unity of the West and citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

Western Balkan states have also recently faced Russian hybrid attacks. They are motivated by the general desire of these countries to be part of the Euro-Atlantic integration structures (EU and NATO). Considering the integration of the Western

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Balkan states into the North Atlantic Alliance, the Kremlin's attempts have not succeeded, as only Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia remained outside NATO. It should be noted that the governments of these two countries have not yet applied to join this organisation.

Russia perceives the pro-Western orientation of the Western Balkan governments as a potential threat, as these countries are located at a critical geopolitical crossroads and play the role of a buffer zone between the West and the alleged Russian sphere of influence. Therefore, Russia seeks to dissuade these countries from their pro-Western orientation through subversions. For that reason, the authors chose the topic of Russian hybrid threats in BiH for their study.

Russia had been involved in the Western Balkans already in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Moscow shared the West's view of the ongoing conflict in the former Yugoslavia. As a result, Russian troops participated in peacekeeping missions until 2003, when Russia's top leadership decided to withdraw its forces from the region, as the purpose of the mission had been, according to them, achieved. After 2014, relations between Moscow and the West have deteriorated significantly following Russia's annexation of Crimea. According to Kuczynski, Russia's increased interest in the region can be observed in the post-2014 period (Kuczyński 2019: 6).

Numerous authors have discussed Russian hybrid activities in the Western Balkans. Authors such as Dimitar Bechev (2019), Grzegorz Kuczyński (2019), Mark Galeotti (2018), and Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018) have discussed Moscow's growing influence in the region in more general terms. All these authors assume that Moscow deploys hybrid strategies to prevent these countries from becoming members of Euro-Atlantic integration structures.

Many case studies also describe the Kremlin's activities in individual Western Balkan states. Kallaba (2017) points to the growing influence of the Kremlin in Kosovo. Gashi and Maqedonci (2017) draw attention to the same phenomenon in their study. In his analysis, for example, Tsalov (2020) refers to Moscow's involvement in North Macedonia. Greene and Asmolov (eds.) (2021) comprehensively analyse the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans region. These authors concluded that Russia uses disinformation campaigns in order to promote anti-Western sentiment in these countries.

The Kremlin's influence in BiH was comprehensively assessed by Brkan and Grdinić (eds.) (2020), who, in addition to Bosnia, also focused on the Russian influence in Montenegro and North Macedonia. In this respect, Stronski and Himes (2019) analysis, chronicling the Kremlin's political and economic impact on BiH and the entire region, represents another valuable contribution to this topic. These authors point out that Serbia is Russia's most vital regional partner. Furthermore, they assume that it stems from the relative cultural proximity of the two nations. However, none of these studies mentioned above focuses comprehensively on BiH. The paper of Brkan and Grdinić (eds.) (2020) addresses only some aspects of Russian influence in BiH without further elaborating them. Even such a brief overview has shown that hybrid threats in the Western Balkans have become an increasingly relevant topic for security analysts and scholars in recent years. This study, thus, aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Russian hybrid threat in BiH and to contribute to the theoretical debate

on this significant topic.

Conceptualising hybrid threats

Although hybrid threats have been discussed primarily in the context of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, many authors described hybrid strategies, which became increasingly evident in international relations long before 2014. The term hybrid warfare was introduced in the Western context by Robert G. Walker in 1998 (Walker, 1998). However, some researchers have associated the use of the term with Thomas Mockaitis. According to Stojar, Mockaitis used the term three years earlier than Walker (Stojar 2017). The concept of hybrid warfare can also be linked to William J. Nemeth, who described the hybrid tactics of Chechen rebels in their fight against the Russian army in his Master's thesis entitled 'Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare' (Nemeth 2002).

The concept of 'hybrid warfare' was first articulated by Frank Hoffman, among other authors. Together with General Mattis, they predicted the nature of future conflicts as early as 2005 and referred to them as hybrid wars in their joint study (Mattis and Hoffman 2005). In his 2007 paper, Hoffman associated the emergence of hybridity in the international environment with September 11th, 2001, when terrorists perpetrated an attack on the United States (US) territory. According to Hoffman, this particular terrorist act can be considered an imaginary breaking point in the concept of warfare. Until then, conflicts had always been resolved by conventional means. However, the aforementioned author uses the example of Hezbollah to point out that such a premise is no longer valid (Hoffman 2007). According to Hoffman, hybrid warfare encompasses 'a whole spectrum of different types of warfare, encompassing conventional means, unconventional tactics and strategies, and terrorist acts, including extreme violence, coercion, and criminal acts. Actors in hybrid warfare include both states and various non-state actors' (Hoffman 2007: 29).

This definition implies that almost anyone can deploy hybrid strategies within the international environment and that hybrid tactics consist of a combination of conventional and unconventional methods of warfare. This understanding of hybrid warfare is opposed by Renz and Smith, pointing out that the concept of hybrid warfare can encompass virtually anything (Renz and Smith 2016: 13). Van Puyvelde (2015) also alludes to the ambiguity of such a concept in his article. It is worth mentioning here that many authors use the terms hybrid warfare, or hybrid threats as synonyms. According to Monaghan, however, it is unacceptable as hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are fundamentally different concepts in terms of their content (Monaghan 2019: 83).

While hybrid warfare is a conflict in the strict sense of the word, involving a confrontation between conventional and unconventional forces using new combat methods, the purpose of a hybrid threat is to exploit the weaknesses of the adversary without declaring war. Monaghan points out that the distinction between hybrid warfare and hybrid threat has been addressed in the past by Hoffman. International organisations (NATO, EU) also discuss the hybrid threat concept. In particular, Russia's recent activities on the international scene have contributed to this. Hence, these organisations seek to answer how to counter hybrid threats. Similarly, hybrid threats

are gaining importance at the national level (Monaghan 2019: 85). NATO defines hybrid threats as 'a combination of military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, the use of irregular armed groups, and the use of regular armed forces' (NATO 2021).

The concept presented by Western analysts is interpreted quite differently in the Russian environment. Russian analysts assume that Russia is a victim of Western hybrid attacks (Clark 2020: 16). In fact, according to Moscow, the idea of hybrid warfare was created by the West. However, hybrid strategies have been used since antiquity (Bartles 2016: 34).

According to Clark, the Kremlin's hybrid operations focus mainly on operations in the information environment (Clark 2020: 15). The concept of Russian hybrid warfare, thus, differs from the Western concept of hybrid warfare. Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, is considered the alleged father of Russian hybrid warfare. In his 2013 article, he predicted the nature of future conflicts. In his opinion, it will be impossible to distinguish a state of peace from a state of war, just as it will be impossible to discern military forces from civilians. Information and its application in combat will play a vital role in the future. According to Gerasimov, these conflicts will not be announced in advance, as they will become persistent (Gerasimov 2013). It is true that many Western scholars now tend to include the tools of information warfare (propaganda, disinformation, etc.) in the concept of hybrid warfare, connecting Western and Russian concepts of hybrid warfare. See, for example, Hadzhiev (2020), Huhtinen and Rantapelkonen (2016) or Arażna (2015). Generally speaking, Russia uses political influence, information operations (cyberattacks, use of clandestine operations), economic impact and proxies in its hybrid attacks (Chivvis 2017: 3-4). Therefore, the authors will focus on identifying the most significant aspects of hybrid threats destabilising BiH.

Information space

Information space, clandestine operations, and cyberattacks are so closely intertwined that they can be summarised in the following lines. The use of information space to exacerbate divisions between different population groups constitutes the most crucial component of hybrid threats. Various instruments in this area include spreading false news, disinformation campaigns or propaganda. These tools aim to weaken the target society and its culture. Cyberspace plays a very similar role in creating hybrid threats. Attackers seek to obtain sensitive data through Internet technologies. Specific tools include cyber espionage or cyber operations. Attacking states may also use the services of intelligence agencies in their hybrid attacks. In doing so, they may, on the one hand, seek to weaken the intelligence services of the state that is forced to defend itself against the hybrid attack. On the other hand, the attacker may use its intelligence services to coordinate further hybrid attacks. This strategy aims to confuse the enemy (Giannopoulos and Smith eds. 2021: 31-32).

Political and economic influence

Russia seeks to gain political influence by courting selected political leaders in other states to exert its influence (Chivvis 2017: 4). Conversely, Moscow strives to weaken actors in these countries opposing the Kremlin's interests. Through its political actions, Russia seeks to deepen the schisms in the invaded societies and weaken the democratic mechanisms of these states (Giannopoulos and Smith eds. 2021: 32). Moscow's energy diplomacy is frequently mentioned when referring to Russia's economic influence in the context of hybrid threats. Excessive energy dependence on Russia can be perceived as a threat when the Kremlin blackmailed its trading partners in Ukraine in 2006 and 2009. Moreover, Russia is building extensive energy networks, which inherently provide opportunities for corrupt behaviour. More generally, Russian investments can distort free markets and weaken democratic mechanisms in the countries receiving these investments (Chivvis 2017: 4). The fact that the energy sector constitutes a frequent target of hybrid attacks is discussed by Dupuy and his colleagues in January 2021, (Dupuy and Nussbaum eds. 2021) referring to recent Russian activities in Europe.

Proxy organizations

The so-called proxy organisations represent the final instrument Russia deploys in creating hybrid threats. They are groups effectively acting as an extended arm of the Kremlin in targeted societies and helping destabilise the political situation in countries where Russia has interests. For example, Chivvis mentions the motorcycle group Night Wolves, linked to the current Russian political leadership. In the same way, Russia also supports anti-Western organisations based in Europe to achieve its goals (Chivvis 2017: 4). When identifying Russian hybrid activities in BiH, the authors have concentrated on the five areas mentioned above.

Research design

This study aims to identify the nature of hybrid threats posed by Russia in BiH and, subsequently, to identify to what extent the Kremlin is successful in destabilising the political situation in the country. The study relies on qualitative research, characterised by being flexible to the researchers' needs regarding the actual selection of the topic and the conduct of this type of research (Hendl 2005: 49-50). In principle, the researcher can change the research questions flexibly, depending on the research direction. For the purpose of this study, the authors selected a disciplined interpretive study method. In this study, the theory only serves as the basis for interpreting the actual conclusions. Essentially, the researcher modifies the approach and then applies it to the case at hand.

Creswell describes five necessary steps to create a relevant case study in his paper. The first two phases involve determining the method and selecting an appropriate case. The remaining three phases include data collection, followed by data analysis, and finally, the researcher draws the conclusions (Creswell 2013: 100-101). In this study, hybrid threat theory is used to modify the concepts of Christopher Chivvis, who identified five areas that the Kremlin focused on when constructing hybrid threats. They are as follows: information operations, cyberspace, clandestine operations, political influence, economic influence, and proxy activities. The authors

here summarise the first three factors under the heading information environment. Furthermore, political and economic influence is also summarised under one aspect. In addition to proxy activities, the authors also discuss the Kremlin's military operations in BiH. The research results are then interpreted and set within the context of Russian hybrid threats in BiH.

The study analyses Russia's hybrid threats in BiH between 2014 and 2021. The fact that hybrid threats were widely discussed following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has led to this timeframe being chosen. Moreover, the scope of the text precludes any more extensive analysis. The authors base their analysis primarily on four expert interviews conducted in Sarajevo, Bosnia, in August 2021. These interviews varied in length, the shortest lasting 35 minutes and the longest approximately 75 minutes. They were conducted as semi-structured interviews, starting with a brief explanation of the topic by the interviewee. After that, the researcher asked questions about the subject. If necessary, the researchers asked the interviewees follow-up questions. The interviews were conducted in English.

Members of the diplomatic staff in Sarajevo were contacted, together with a person actively involved in Bosnian politics. Last but not least, the authors interviewed Prof. Ivo Komšić, who was instrumental in signing the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995). Komšić, a Bosnian Croat member of the presidency of war-time BiH (1993-1996) also served in the recent past (2013-2017) as the Mayor of Sarajevo. The authors could objectively assess the extent of the Russian hybrid threats in BiH based on interviews. Finally, an NGO interviewee provided the authors with electronic responses to their questions. A gatekeeper helped the researchers in selecting the respondents and was able to facilitate three meetings. In general, respondents were selected based on how much information they could provide to the authors. Given the sensitivity of the data collected, some respondents wished to remain anonymous; therefore, the authors chose not to publish their names. In addition, the paper relies on the analysis of primary and secondary data sources. The primary data include official documents of both the Kremlin and the Bosnian governments or official statements of the highest political representatives of both countries. Following a critical evaluation of the data studied, only relevant data sources were applied in this study.

Information environment and Russian hybrid threats in BiH

The Russian government is aware of the need to pursue its interests using means other than political and economic influence. For this reason, it has also shifted its subversive activities to the information environment, using its media to influence public opinion not only in BiH but the entire region. According to recent research, the Kremlin seems to have almost ideal conditions for these activities. Namely, the fact that more than two-thirds of the RS population distrust the domestic media can be considered problematic. The citizens are generally convinced that media deliberately try to lie (Duffy and Green 2020: 11). This opens up space for foreign media, such as Russian media, to offer alternative explanations².

The main goal of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in BiH is to keep the

² On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that a minority of citizens does not trust foreign media because they are afraid of the growing influence of these external actors (Duffy and Green 2020: 11).

political representation in Republika Srpska (RS) critical of the country's Euro-Atlantic course, currently pursued by President Milorad Dodik. Moscow's secondary objective is to portray Russia and Vladimir Putin as a possible alternative to the West. That is why the incumbent President Dodik was clearly supported by Sputnik, which operates in Serbia, before the presidential elections in RS. At the same time, this media largely vilified his opponent, Mladen Ivanić, as a pro-Western politician (Greene and Asmolov eds. 2021: 24). Moreover, Sputnik attempts to stir up disputes between different ethnic groups. In this respect, Salvo and de Leon recall several articles on the website referring to the possibility of two territorial entities, Serbian and Croatian, should BiH finally split up. Another article on the website dealt with the plight of Croats in BiH (Salvo and de Leon 2018).

However, the West is negatively portrayed by both Russian-owned and Serbian media. Before the presidential elections in RS, the local media spread the news that some Western countries would carry out a terrorist attack in the area. Other reports sought to stir hostility towards Muslim Bosnians (Green and Asmolov eds. 2021: 24). The same phenomenon is also pointed out by Turcalo (2021), who discusses the radicalisation of a part of society encouraged by such stories. In a sense, the Kremlin benefits from these reports without making any significant effort. The general attempt to portray the West and its integration structures as weak and incompetent constitutes a prominent theme in Russian disinformation campaigns, see Doncheva's (2020) detailed analysis of the Russian narratives. Doncheva argues that the RS media mainly adopt the pro-Russian narratives, especially the website *Iskra.co* with an unclear ownership structure (Doncheva 2020: 36).

Commenting on these reports, one respondent adds: 'Russia does not need its own media here; it only needs Sputnik, which has a branch in Serbia. It practically spreads disinformation here, improves Russia's image and portrays Vladimir Putin as a strong leader (...). Alternatively, Sputnik publishes some news here and the local media, especially in RS, pick it up' (Interview No. 3 with a Bosnian politician 2021). According to this interviewee, Russian influence in the information space began to increase about five years ago, when the Bosnian media started to cover Russian culture, sports or politics more widely. In his opinion, Russia targets these reports mainly at young people in RS, who have fully adopted Russian narratives (Interview No. 3 with a Bosnian politician, 2021). The remaining question is to what extent these reports affect public opinion in BiH and whether the Kremlin can use these reports to instil distrust in the Euro-Atlantic integration structures. According to one interviewee, the support for the country's accession to the European Union is still very high, around 80%. The country's accession to NATO constitutes a much more challenging topic. In his opinion, the Serbs have constantly blocked the accession negotiations (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo 2021).

This topic has been targeted several times in this article. As this interviewee further elaborates, another Russian narrative in the Bosnian media suggests that BiH is merely an artificial state, and that RS should be annexed to Serbia (Interview No. 3 with a Bosnian politician 2021). This would de facto result in the disappearance of BiH within its current borders. However, according to this respondent, such an option is completely unacceptable. In April 2021, a secret document appeared that reignited the debate on the territorial integrity of BiH. According to Suljagic, this document

was introduced by Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa. This author also assumes that the Kremlin, Croatia, and Serbia were involved in the preparation of this report³. According to this plan, BiH would disappear from the map. Subsequently, it would be replaced by new territorial entities of Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs. As mentioned above, this solution is completely unacceptable.

Intelligence services and their activities form another vital aspect of the Kremlin's hybrid activities. According to a European Values report, whilst there is no immediate danger from Russian intelligence services, recent events in Montenegro, where Russia used subversive methods to thwart the country's accession to NATO, have left security analysts wary. In this respect, the Kremlin's attempt to reinstall Vladislav Filippov⁴, expelled from Albania as a diplomat for alleged espionage activities at the Bosnian embassy in Sarajevo, is rather interesting (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 13). Moreover, Russia made no significant attempts to obtain sensitive data in terms of cybersecurity during the reporting period. However, this does not mean that the threat as such did not exist. In spring 2020, the BiH Ministry of Finance was subject to a hacking attack from Albania (Sarajevo Times 2020). Therefore, BiH should be prepared for this type of subversion in the future. However, as seen from the text by Stojanovic and her colleagues (2021), the Bosnian government does not have a comprehensive cybersecurity approach (Stojanovic and Stojkovski eds. 2021).

Russia's political-economic hybrid threats in BiH

As many examples in recent years have shown, the Kremlin seeks to influence the outcome of the EU elections and target the Western Balkans. There, it tries to prevent individual countries from joining Euro-Atlantic integration structures. A prime example of such an approach is Montenegro, which recently faced Russia's attempt to overthrow the government that sought to integrate the country into NATO. It should be emphasised that this Russian attempt had ultimately failed, and Montenegro actually became a member of the organisation in 2017. On the other hand, the West also failed to respond to this affair adequately, and Russia has continued to conduct subversive actions (Bećirević and Turčalo 2020: 8). Thus, according to the identical scenario, the main goal of subversions in BiH could be to dissuade Bosnia from moving in a pro-Western direction.

Given its complex political system and ethnic heterogeneity, BiH may become an area where foreign powers can more easily exert their influence (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 8). Another reason is that the US has gradually shifted their attention to other regions after the conflict in the 1990s, leaving open space to expand Russia's activities (Bajrović and Kraemer eds. 2018).

In asserting its political influence, the Kremlin predominantly focuses on RS. Within this entity, Milorad Dodik, an ethnic Serb, a member of the three-member Presidency of BiH and current President of the RS, representing the SNSD party⁵, has

³ This document is known as 'the Western Balkans non paper'. See Suljagic (2021).

⁴ Filippov was subsequently appointed military attaché at the Bosnian embassy.

⁵ The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Serbian: *Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata* – SNSD) is a Serb political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Founded in 1996. It is the governing party in Republika Srpska, with its leader, Milorad Dodik, serving as the current member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

been the leading figure for more than 15 years. Dodik has not concealed his sympathies for Russia and the Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin. Ivo Komšić adds on Milorad Dodik: 'Dodik is Putin's most loyal guy. Ironically, he is more pro-Putin than pro-Vucic (Serbian President). He can visit Putin and Lavrov in Moscow whenever he wants' (Interview No. 1 with Prof. Ivo Komšić 2021).

Several examples can illustrate the good relations between Dodik and Putin. Perhaps the most obvious example of good relations was when Putin met with Dodik in September 2018 on the eve of the parliamentary elections in RS. The meeting focused on explaining the good personal relations between both politicians. The Kremlin leader wished his counterpart good luck and expressed his support to Dodik (Putin 2018). Nevertheless, this meeting was by no means the first between the two men. Salvo and de Leon report that Putin met with Dodik eight times between 2015 and 2018 (Salvo and de Leon 2018). Besides other meetings, Dodik also met with Putin shortly before the 2016 referendum on the renewal of the Bosnian Serb day (Salvo and de Leon 2018). Reportedly, Putin promised Dodik a more considerable sum of money at one of those meetings, over € 600 million. It should occur allegedly as early as 2014; however, Dodik said that such a sum had not yet arrived from Moscow. On the other hand, the Western countries imposed sanctions on Dodik in 2016 after he held an illegal referendum; thus, in a way, he depends to a large extent on Moscow's help (Stronski and Himes 2019).

The close relations between the Kremlin and RS stem from supporting the territorial claims of ethnic Serbs in BiH. Indeed, Kremlin uses Serbian nationalism and relative cultural proximity to promote its own interests and establish friendly relations with these actors (Bajrović and Kraemer eds. 2018).

The political support of Milorad Dodik of the RS, a man who does not hide his nationalist tendencies, fits perfectly into the Moscow plan. In 2016, a referendum was organised in RS, despite the Constitutional Court's ban. Almost 100% of the participants voted for the reestablishment of January 9th as the Bosnian Serb Day (Rose 2016). On this day in 1992, the conflict between Bosniaks and Serbs broke out in the former Yugoslavia (Zakem and Rosenau eds. 2017). While the West formally condemned the referendum and imposed sanctions on Dodik, Russian government officials did not denounce such an act and even defended Dodik. These actions have further fuelled speculation that Russia is trying to destabilise the region (Samorukov 2016).

A referendum on the RS independence was expected to be held in 2018. One of our diplomatic sources says of Milorad Dodik's secessionist tendencies, that 'it is more of public discourse than real interest. Dodik himself, in my opinion, does not want the Republic of Srpska to secede because he knows very well what the consequences would be. It could lead to a new conflict' (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo 2021). In principle, the respondent's words suggest that Dodik only responds to the RS political demand, gaining political points. In fact, in the past, the RS President did not support the secession of this territorial entity from the rest of BiH. On the contrary, in the early 1990s, Dodik distinguished himself as a supporter of the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country (Samorukov 2016).

On the other hand, one cannot take this threat, which is fed by the Kremlin's attitude, lightly. A situation from November 2021 clearly illustrates it: at that time,

Dodik expressed the notion that his government would create its own state authorities on the territory of RS, which would, de facto, lead to the secession of RS. The new High Representative for BiH, Christian Schmidt, addressed the affair and warned in his letter to the UN against escalating the situation (Ruge 2021). According to one of the respondents, the matter of secession of the territory is the main obstacle to the country's accession to the Euro-Atlantic integration structures. As long as there are constant demands for secession, Bosnia has a big problem because a state without territorial integrity can hardly join the European Union (...). Ukraine provides clear evidence of how this works (Interview No. 4 with an NGO worker 2021). Fostering these secessionist tendencies allows Russia to ensure that Bosnia does not become a member of the European Union or NATO, which is crucial for the Kremlin.

In addition to Serbian territorial claims, the Kremlin also supports the Croatian ethnic group. In this regard, the vital person for Russia is Dragan Čović, one of the three members of the BiH Presidency, representing the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Čović does not hide that he would establish a Croatian territorial entity within BiH and supports changing the entire electoral law. The Russian Ambassador, Petr Ivantsov, has repeatedly expressed his opinion on BiH, arguing that BiH should not join Euro-Atlantic integration structures. The relationship between Čović and the Kremlin is rather pragmatic. Moscow is aware that it shares many economic interests with Bosnian Croats, especially in the energy sector (Salvo and de Leon 2018).

Apart from secessionist tendencies that directly threaten the political stability of BiH, Milorad Dodik furthermore undermines the functioning of civil society in RS. Following Russia's example, Dodik has proposed to label all foreign-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with the term 'secret agents'. By doing so, the RS government could effectively control the funding of the non-profit sector on its territory (Stronski and Himes 2019). This policy can also be interpreted as an attempt to destabilise the country. Moreover, it is evident that he drew inspiration from Russia in this case.

In addition to these activities, Russia also tries to destabilise BiH on the international scene politically. It does so by supporting RS in international politics. A prime example is the Kremlin's attitude towards replacing the High Representative for BiH. After 12 long years, the current High Representative, Valentin Inzko, was replaced by the German candidate Christian Schmidt in 2021. However, Russia questioned his legitimacy, arguing that Christian Schmidt had not been approved by all members of the UN Security Council (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo). Our respondent commented: 'Christian Schmidt is not, in my opinion, problematic as a person. The problem is the presence of the High Representative in BiH. That is what the politicians in RS, who talk about having their future in their own hands and not needing anyone to control their decisions, object to' (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo 2021). In July, Russia, together with China, tried to close the entire Office of the High Representative. However, this proposal was not supported by the other members of the Security Council UN, and it was rejected (United Nations 2021). It occurred even though Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, had tried to convince the French Foreign Minister in a telephone conversation to support it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021). One of the respondents pointed out to the authors

that 'Bosnian Foreign Minister Bisera Turkovic suddenly appeared at this UN meeting and had this interesting verbal exchange with the Russian ambassador to the Security Council' (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo 2021). This underlines how vital this matter is for the Bosnian government and that Russian influence is seen as a worrying factor in destabilising the domestic situation in BiH.

Russia's support of RS has paid off on the international scene, as reflected in its votes at the UN or on issues of international politics. When Russia annexed the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in 2014, BiH was one of the few countries that did not impose sanctions on Russia (Interview No. 2 with a diplomatic official sent by an EU country to Sarajevo 2021). BiH also did not support a resolution condemning this act. The other countries that did not support it were Serbia, Belarus, and North Macedonia. The issue of Russia's growing political influence in BiH has significantly complicated the entire Euro-integration process. One respondent expressed the view that the EU was concerned about the growing impact of the Kremlin in the Western Balkans, especially in BiH, and the fact that it more-or-less halted the integration process (Interview No. 4 with an NGO worker 2021). In this respect, Ivo Komšić adds that Milorad Dodik is the main reason for slowing down the accession negotiations with the EU. According to him, Dodik tries to sever ties with the West and push for closer cooperation with Russia. In doing so, he has repeatedly used the Russian narratives. Recently, according to Komšić, he declared that today's Germany is a neo-Nazi country (Interview No. 1 with Prof. Ivo Komšić 2021).

In addition to political influence, Moscow primarily focuses on deepening BiH's energy dependence. Namely, on two commodities, oil and gas. The Kremlin concentrates most of its economic activities in RS, mainly in the energy sector⁶. This economic segment is frequently targeted by hybrid attacks, as was pointed out by Rühle and Grubliauskas (2015), using the Ukraine crisis as an example. Russia became more involved in the energy sector in BiH in 2007, when Neftegazinkor bought Rafinerija Nafta Brod under highly unusual circumstances, as the actual price of the company was much higher than what Neftegazinkor subsequently paid (Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD 2018: 9).

However, the dependence on Russian gas supplies is more important in terms of the hybrid threat, as it poses several undesirable complications, given that each of the two entities can pursue its own energy policy. BiH depends solely on Russian gas supplies. RS exercised its right in 2014 when the head of Gazprom met with Milorad Dodik. At this meeting, the company's new supplies of Russian gas were agreed upon. However, the RS President had not communicated his intention to the central government, which led to gas supply shortages in the entire federation because both entities share only one supply centre (Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD 2018: 5-7).

The Kremlin applies a different standard to the central government of Sarajevo. At the end of 2017, BH Gas, whose headquarters are located in the Federation of BiH, had to pay Gazprom a debt that amounted to more than \$ 25 million (Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD 2018: 7). Moscow is aware that all attempts to diversify gas

⁶ More than 40% of the money earned flows back to Russia (Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD 2018: 2).

supplies have failed. Partly because both entities are unwilling to admit other solutions – for example, the completion of the South Stream pipeline – and partly because the Kremlin is reluctant to diversify gas supplies to BiH. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that plans exist to diversify gas supplies within BiH. However, they depend on the political representation of both territorial entities to be willing to reach an agreement; see, for example, the BH Gas plan (BH-Gas 2018).

The reality of the hybrid threat was demonstrated in December 2020, when Russia halved the BiH's natural gas supplies. In January 2021, Gazprom announced that it would again supply gas through the TurkStream pipeline (Čančar 2021). By the way, cutting gas supplies is nothing new for BiH. Already in 2009, BiH lost half of its natural gas supplies due to disagreements between Russia and Ukraine (Center for the Study of Democracy – CSD 2018: 5).

Russian proxies in BiH

In addition to direct political activities, Russia uses proxies to strengthen its influence. These groups often promote radical nationalist opinions, which, generally speaking, are certainly not conducive to the BiH political stability. Cultural proximity plays a crucial role for such organisations. Indeed, the Kremlin stresses the common Slavic roots of Serbs and Russians. In particular, there are two organisations openly favoured by the Kremlin: Serbian Honour – and its offshoot, St. George of Loncari. Both organisations deny war crimes committed by the Serbs during the 1990s war (Turcalo 2021), which is highly controversial.

Nevertheless, not just words but actions confirm the alliance between these radical nationalist organisations and the Kremlin. Moscow funds the Russian Humanitarian Centre operating in Bosnia, which is based in the Serbian city of Niš. This centre provides military training for members of these organisations (Turcalo 2021). Dodik wanted to mobilise members of the Serbian Honour organisation if violence broke out during the 2018 parliamentary elections (Salvo and de Leon 2018) and still maintains excellent personal relations with some members of the Serbian Honour. Allegedly, the group contains approximately 40,000 members (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 12).

In their analysis, Bajrović and his colleagues point to the military aspect of the cooperation between the RS and the Kremlin. According to their study, Russia has armed the RS with thousands of anti-aircraft missiles and firearms since 2014. However, Dodik has long denied any military cooperation with Russia (Bajrović and Kraemer eds. 2018). Professor Komšić's statement that the Kremlin should not arm either side of the conflict as per the Dayton Peace Agreement also indicates Moscow's military influence. Nevertheless, practice shows otherwise. Russia provides weapons to the Serbs in RS. Moreover, it does not demand any payments for them in return (Interview No. 1 with Prof. Ivo Komšić 2021). These Russian actions can be seen as a significant destabilising element in BiH. Should the conflict arise, one can easily assume that Moscow would continue to support this territorial entity, just as it did in the eastern Ukraine war, supporting pro-Russian separatists with its equipment.

In this respect, Konstantin Malofeev, responsible for the largest Orthodox charity in Russia and many projects in Bosnia and the entire Balkan Peninsula, is a

key player in the Russian government⁷. For example, during the Easter holidays in 2015, he organised a pilgrimage carrying the Easter bonfire. The bonfire reached the RS, among others (Stronski and Himes 2019). In organising such an event, one can identify a significant feature of Russian influence in the region. Russia tries to reach out to culturally related peoples using traditional Christian values. Currently, Malofeev is banned from entering the territory of the Federation of BiH (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 13).

In addition to supporting nationalist tendencies, Russia also uses its compatriots to destabilise BiH. It relies mainly on a motorcycle organisation called Night Wolves and the Cossack cultural group. According to Stronski and Himes, these organisations operate independently, but there is financial support from the Russian government behind the scenes. For example, the Kremlin has provided over US\$ 40,000 for the Night Wolves' tour of the Balkans (Stronski and Himes 2019). In 2014, a dance troupe of Russian Cossacks performed before the 2014 parliamentary elections. However, many people were under the impression that the dancers were part of a paramilitary force. There is, in fact, a paramilitary group called the Serbian Veterans, funded by the Dodik government, that cooperates with the Russian veterans' organisation Russian Heirs of Victory (Bajrović and Kraemer eds. 2018). One respondent expressed his view that BiH faces an extreme nationalism problem, and the Bosnian government must deal with it. 'The difficult aspect is that these currents of opinion are promoted by Russia, making the situation even more difficult' (Interview No. 3 with a Bosnian politician 2021). According to this interviewee, the Kremlin's influence in this area is so apparent that it is almost impossible to deal with it.

Night Wolves visited BiH in the relatively recent past, namely, in the spring of 2018, when they visited Banja Luka on their tour of the Balkans to demonstrate the friendship between the Serbs and Russians. Nevertheless, this visit was discussed as an act with strong political undertones, as the central government in Sarajevo was aware of the close ties of these people to the Kremlin (Higgins 2018). The fact that some of its members have been involved in the fighting in eastern Ukraine shows the extent of the Kremlin's ties to this motorcycle group. Among others, the chairman of the Balkan branch of this organisation, Saša Savić, participated in this conflict (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 12). Exactly one year later, in the spring of 2019, researchers from the Balkan Investigative and Research Network published a report accusing Goran Tadić, a high-ranking member of this organisation (the vice-chairman of this association in BiH), of having won a contract for his own company to build a small hydroelectric power plant for almost 1.5 million euros. However, Tadić's company had no experience with such a project. The case has fuelled speculations that his company won the contract due to favouritism (Brezar 2019). What is disturbing about these Moscow-backed groups is their value base. These groups are radically nationalistic, threatening to destabilise the entire country. In fact, Turcalo (2021) highlights this concern in his text. These groups have been active in RS since their establishment in 2014, and they share extreme nationalism, ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church and, last but not least, funding from an external actor (Russia) (Bajrović and Kraemer eds. 2018).

⁷ Konstantin Malofeev is a powerful Russian oligarch, who has close ties to the Kremlin. He is the chairman of the Board of Directors of the media group Tsargrad and he is a zealous Russian Orthodox Christian and mainly a strong advocate of the Russian monarchy before 1917. Malofeev is also called an 'Orthodox oligarch' (Solik and Baar 2019: 30).

In addition to the radical nationalist groups, Russia relies on the support of its Orthodox Church in the region. This aspect is powerful, considering that one-third of the BiH population is Orthodox Christian (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 11). The Kremlin utilises this instrument to strengthen the 'brotherly bond' between Orthodox Serbs and Russians. In the recent past, a series of construction projects have been organised under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2018, a new church and a Russian Cultural Centre were opened in Banja Luka. The opening ceremony in September 2018 was attended by both Dodik and Russian Ambassador Ivantsov (Bechev 2019: 22). Besides this project, the Russian Orthodox Church is also involved in smaller projects focusing on constructing new churches, meeting members of the Orthodox Church, etc. Russia was pushing for a statue of Tsar Nicholas II to be placed in the RS and financially supported a construction of this statue in 2017 (Brkan and Grdinić eds. 2020: 11). The strengthening of relations in the religious sphere further intensified after recognising the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Patriarch of the Church of Constantinople. The Russian Orthodox Church was angered by this act and severed relations with Constantinople. The leading proponent of the Russian position, in this respect, is the Serbian Orthodox Church, which faces similar attempts from the Orthodox Churches in North Macedonia and Montenegro, both of which demand recognition of complete independence from the Serbian Patriarchate.

Conclusions

After the annexation of Crimea, Russia has been repeatedly mentioned in connection with hybrid warfare or hybrid warfare strategy. However, this concept is often mistakenly confused with other related terms, such as hybrid threat and political warfare. The authors focused on hybrid threats in the Western Balkans, particularly in BiH. The research provided a comprehensive analysis of the Russian hybrid threats in BiH; this topic has not been covered by scholars until now. The present study may contribute to the understanding of how Russia constructs its hybrid threats and may also lead to further research on hybrid threats in the Western Balkans. Russia has become increasingly engaged in the region after 2014, and BiH is no exception. By analysing the interviews, primary and secondary sources, the authors were able to identify hybrid threats concentrating in five key areas of increased Russian activities. The most potent hybrid threat is undoubtedly the Kremlin's political influence, as it affects the territorial integrity of the entire state. Russia's political actions support the secessionist tendencies of political leaders of various ethnic groups in BiH. The closest connection exists between Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik of the RS. The two politicians visit each other frequently, and the Kremlin supports Dodik, both financially and politically (through specific political actions), such as Moscow's attempts to abolish the Office of the High Representative for BiH, currently headed by Christian Schmidt, or its support for holding referendums in the RS.

Moreover, the Kremlin supports the secessionist efforts of Dragan Čović, who represents the Croats inside the federation. Moscow's perspective is pragmatic because Russia is linked to the Bosnian Croats by economic interests and may fuel further internal political rifts by supporting their territorial claims. These efforts aid Russia on the international scene, as evidenced in the case of the war in eastern Ukraine, where the Serbian entity has effectively blocked all efforts to adopt a tougher position

towards Moscow. Disagreements between the various ethnic groups also affect the question of the country's accession to the Euro-Atlantic integration structures. It is clear that Russia poses a threat to BiH in terms of economic influence, mainly because of its over-dependence on Russian natural gas supplies. Russia can exploit this fact to further its political objectives. Similarly, Russia often employs proxy organisations to destabilise the state. They usually consist of radical nationalist paramilitary groups, primarily concentrated in the RS entity; the Kremlin helps train the members of these organisations and equips the RS with military material. Nationalism constitutes a significant destabilisation factor in BiH, partly because the Kremlin exploits the information environment for its own purposes. It uses its media, particularly Sputnik Srbija, to spread pro-Russian narratives. These disinformation campaigns primarily seek to influence public opinion to prevent BiH citizens from supporting Euro-Atlantic integration. However, according to one respondent, it appears that the majority of the population wants BiH to join the European Union eventually. Another critical topic addressed by the disinformation websites is the incitement of nationalist tendencies that could significantly affect the territorial integrity of BiH.

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