THE KREMLIN PLAYBOOK 3
Keeping the Faith

PROJECT DIRECTOR
Heather A. Conley

AUTHORS
Heather A. Conley
Donatienne Ruy

CONTRIBUTORS
Marlene Laruelle
Tengiz Pkhaladze
Elizabeth H. Prodromou
Majda Ruge

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**STRATEGIC CONSERVATISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: WORKING THROUGH LOCAL PROXIES**

Majda Ruge

**THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Russia’s historical role in the Balkans resonates to this day. While there were recurrent tensions between Belgrade and Moscow in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russia is perceived as a protector of Orthodox Christians and Serbs. In addition, the reality of Russia’s policies vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) since the late 1990s has placed Russia firmly on the side of the Republika Srpska (RS), the country’s largely homogenous ethnic Serb entity, carved out during the Bosnian War. In many ways, Moscow sided with Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia as well as Bosnian Serb leaders between 1992 and 1995, including by opposing the lifting of the UN arms embargo, which would have allowed the Bosnian army to defend its territory. Per media estimates, around 500 Russian volunteers fought alongside Bosnian Serb paramilitary units in the war.  

In the aftermath of the war, Russia recognized Bosnia’s independence in 1992, sent a delegation to the Dayton Peace Accords conference, and contributed troops to the NATO-led peacekeeping operation. However, since Vladimir Putin’s ascension to the Russian presidency, Moscow has consistently supported Banja Luka (the capital of RS) and Belgrade in policies and discourse that have undermined Bosnia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 2020, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Bosnia and met with Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb member of the country’s tripartite presidency. The meeting took place in East Sarajevo, outside the presidency’s offices of the city’s capital, and without any insignia of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the meeting, Lavrov reiterated Russia’s calls for the closure of the Office of High Representative (OHR), the UN-mandated institution tasked with the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement. He also stressed Moscow’s opposition to constitutional reforms in Bosnia that would eliminate decisionmaking bottlenecks and make the country more functional—one of the conditions for Bosnia’s European integration path.

The meeting symbolized the gist of Russia’s policy on Bosnia, defined largely by opposition to the objective of making Bosnia a functional federal state. While Russia officially recognizes Bosnia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, in practice it works to keep the central government dysfunctional, divided, and incapable of forming any coherent foreign policy that would be undesirable for Moscow. First and foremost, such obstruction includes blocking Bosnia’s NATO accession aspirations and preventing foreign policy alignment with the European Union on...
Russia, whether in regard to the annexation of Crimea or the occupation of Eastern Ukraine. Russia’s foreign policy aims in Bosnia are thus focused on an anti-NATO narrative and preventing accession while fostering a view of Russia as the only true ally for Serbs and Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.

Russia pursues its goals in Bosnia via a two-pronged approach. One is by lending support to the local ethno-nationalist proxies whose goals overlap with those of Russia. Working through local proxies has traditionally entailed lending political support to the political leadership of RS, which has spent the last 15 years obstructing Bosnian state institutions and calling for secession.

The key conduit in this regard is the Bosnian Serb member of the Bosnian presidency, Milorad Dodik, who has been the most vocal opponent of Bosnia’s NATO course and EU-led sanctions against Russia. Russia’s interests are served by the Bosnian Serb leadership’s use of ethnic and entity veto mechanisms provided for by the Dayton constitution to block decisions that are unfavorable to Russia, including the fulfillment of Bosnia’s NATO aspirations. This is exemplified by the repeated failure of the presidency of Bosnia to gather consensus on UN General Assembly resolutions calling on the Russian Federation to withdraw its military forces from Crimea and to end its temporary occupation of Ukrainian territory. Milorad Dodik has also been a staunch opponent of NATO membership, in line with the official position of the Russian government, whose embassy in Bosnia recently explicitly stated that Russia would have to react politically and militarily if any moves were made toward NATO accession.

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The Croat nationalist party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and its leader, Dragan Covic, also act as indirect proxies for Russia. Though the HDZ formally supports Bosnia’s NATO accession path, it opposes the constitutional changes needed to streamline the voting procedures and allow Bosnia to move forward with EU and NATO accession.

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232 “Russia warns it will ‘have to react’ if Bosnia moves to join NATO,” Reuters, March 18, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-russia-nato-idUSKBN2BA2FL.


236 Be., “Kalabuhov.”

The second channel of political influence is the opposition to EU and U.S. policy in multilateral forums such as the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia. The latter oversees the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement and has—in theory—the power to sanction local obstructionists; U.S. and EU policy, implemented through the OHR, aims to render the country’s central government and its decisionmaking mechanisms more functional. However, when such initiatives are put forward, Russia usually opposes them. The latest example of such opposition is the appointment of the German high representative Christian Schmidt. Russia was strongly opposed to this initiative, rejecting the appointment and deeming it illegal and illegitimate because it circumvented the vote on the UNSC; in fact, Russia has sought to close the OHR altogether. Yet the reason Germany decided to circumvent the UNSC is because of the expectation that Russia would have used its veto to block the appointment. On the UNSC, Russia can play a role by exercising its veto on the yearly extension of the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia; it can also use Bosnia as a negotiating token with the European Union and the United States on other issues.

In practice, opportunism dominates the relationship between the political leadership of Russia and RS. Both sides reap political benefits from this relationship: Milorad Dodik shapes Bosnia’s foreign policy according to Russia’s interests, and Russia supports the political goals of RS on the UNSC—pressing for the closure of the OHR, vetoing the UNSC resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, and threatening the non-extension of the EUFOR and NATO missions.

Public opinion in RS reflects these political alignments. The three main Bosnian ethno-religious groups—Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats—differ substantially in their attitudes toward Russia as well as the United States and the European Union. A 2017 opinion poll found that 89 percent of Bosnian Serbs have a positive opinion of Russia’s role in the country, compared to 43 percent among Croats and only 29 percent among Bosniaks, a group that has the highest degree of identification with a multinational sovereign Bosnian state.

In the same opinion poll, 47 percent of Bosnian Serb respondents saw Russia as the number one ally, compared to 0 percent of Bosniak respondents and only 2 percent of Bosnian Croats. The opinions of

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241 At the same time, 64 percent of Bosniaks and 56 percent of Bosnian Croats have a mostly or somewhat positive view of the role of the United States, while only 26 percent of Bosnian Serbs hold this view. Finally, the majority of Bosniaks (65 percent) and Croats (59 percent) strongly support EU accession, contrasted to only 18 percent of Serbs who strongly support the EU integration. See “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence,” Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2017, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_bosnia_poll_february_2017.pdf.
Bosnian Serbs are closely aligned with public opinion in Serbia: 80 percent of respondents in Serbia believe that a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West. In Bosnia, this belief is shared by 55 percent of respondents, higher than the 30 percent share of Orthodox Christians in the total population of Bosnia.

**THE KREMLIN’S EXPLOITATION OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX IDENTITY POLITICS THROUGH THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

As is the case with the Kremlin’s political interests and activities, Russia’s use of conservative Orthodoxy to further its goals in Bosnia and the region relies on the work of local Orthodox entrepreneurs. This is first and foremost the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has its seat in Belgrade. A survey from 2017 suggests a strong association between religion and national identity in Serbia: 78 percent of those surveyed said that being Orthodox Christian is very or somewhat important to their national identity, or more precisely to being “truly” Serbian. This identification has translated into the SOC’s involvement in matters of foreign policy for Belgrade, which claims the role of benefactor of the Serbian Orthodox population living outside of Serbia. Furthermore, the 2011 Strategy of the Serbian Government assigned the SOC a central role in preserving and strengthening ties between Serbia and ethnic Serbs living elsewhere in the Western Balkans. Such interest in the rights of the local Serbian population has often translated into political meddling by Belgrade in these countries’ domestic affairs, as most potently seen in Montenegro’s last elections, but also on matters affecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Kosovo.

In fact, Serbian Orthodox symbolism has accompanied a number of political conflicts in countries in the Western Balkans that host an Orthodox Serb minority. Russia was involved in several recent political incidents, most visibly when the Serbian government sent a Russian-donated train carrying the slogan “Kosovo is Serbia,” painted and decorated with Christian Orthodox symbols, to Kosovo. This generated a standoff at the Kosovo-Serbia border, capturing international headlines. During

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Lavrov’s visit to Bosnia for the Dayton Peace Agreement anniversary, a reportedly stolen, 300-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox icon was gifted to Lavrov by Milorad Dodik.247 This triggered another international scandal and a subsequent Interpol investigation into the path of the stolen icon from the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine to the highest political office in Bosnia.

More generally, the recently deceased head of the SOC, Patriarch Irinej, was said to have had good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).248 Furthermore, there are points of overlap between the interests of the ROC and SOC, as both have dealt with the challenges of breakaway Orthodox churches in the post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet era. While the ROC has grappled with the breakaway Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the SOC is party to jurisdiction disputes with the breakaway churches in Montenegro and, to a lesser degree, North Macedonia.249 It is therefore unsurprising that the SOC aligned itself with the ROC against the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople to grant autocephaly to the OCU.

In the above disputes (and recent tensions between the SOC and other Balkan countries), the policy of governments and churches are closely intertwined, as both the SOC and ROC have an important political role to play in the foreign policy of their respective governments.250 The ROC has often been described as a tool in the hands of the Kremlin, used as a manifestation of Russian soft power in the rest of the Orthodox world. Comparatively speaking, the SOC is said to have retained a higher degree of independence from the government in Belgrade, though it remains an important political actor courted by the government and often acts as its extended arm for the purposes of political legitimization.251 The SOC also vocally opposed Montenegro’s NATO accession and played a highly political role in Montenegro’s last elections, where it swayed the election outcome toward a coalition of pro-Belgrade parties.252

In domestic politics, the close relationship between the SOC and the government in Serbia during Patriarch Irinej’s term was visible in his public support of Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and his policies. The SOC awarded President Vucic its highest decoration, the Order of Saint Sava first grade.


Patriarch Irinej’s overt political role was expressed in his criticism of anti-government protests in Serbia, which were organized in response to growing concentration of power by Vucic’s party and the repression of political and civil opposition, freedom of speech, and the media. For its part, the government tolerated the SOC’s defiance of Covid-19 distancing and lockdown rules, which took place in spite of the SOC issuing a formal decree to respect the government lockdown rules. Patriarch Irinej and Montenegro’s highest-ranking priest within the SOC, Metropolitan Amfilohije—who both died of Covid-19—contributed to the spread of the virus by encouraging large religious gatherings, downplaying the risks, and not wearing masks in public. They reportedly described large religious gatherings as God’s vaccine. The protests in Cetinje in September 2021 around the choice of location for the inauguration of the new metropolitan have demonstrated how political the SOC is perceived to be by the majority of the Montenegrin population.

The relationship between the SOC and the government is similar in RS. The RS government’s tolerance of the SOC’s violation of laws is most strikingly illustrated by its protracted failure to enforce the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and remove a Serbian Orthodox church that was illegally constructed in the private backyard of Fata Orlovic, a Bosniak returnee to RS. (In June 2021, the church was finally dismantled after a 20-year legal battle.) Finally, unlike in Montenegro and North Macedonia, the Orthodox constituency in RS has made no attempt at autocephaly; that constituency is part of the SOC and is fully aligned with the politics of Belgrade.

When it comes to Russia, the new patriarch, Porfirije Peric, was a disciple of Episcope Irinej Bulovic, known for his close relationship to Russia. Episcope Bulovic was reportedly the Russian favorite in the process of selection of the new patriarch of the SOC. Given the overlap of interests between the two churches and between the governments in Moscow and Belgrade in military, political, and economic realms, one could expect the close relationship between the SOC and the governments in Banja Luka, Belgrade, and Moscow to continue.


256 Delauney, “Serbia coronavirus.”


WORKING THROUGH LOCAL PROXIES: THE USE OF STRATEGIC CONSERVATISM

In line with the aforementioned alignment of religion and politics, Moscow’s employment of strategic conservatism in Bosnia is borne out of a triangular connection between the interests of the political leadership in Moscow, Belgrade, and Banja Luka. This involves an overlap between the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests, the political agenda of Bosnian Serb politicians obstructing Bosnia’s institutions and the country’s NATO and EU path, and the political interference by the Serbian government via the SOC in countries that host Serbian Orthodox minorities.

In RS, Russia has thus landed on fertile ground in which political and religious activities overlap. Very little additional investment is needed to exercise influence beyond providing backing for local entrepreneurs and leveraging such entities for the Kremlin’s political goals.

Bosnia’s recent history and contemporary politics are strongly shaped by political claims based on Orthodox religious identity. The political claims and military campaigns pursued by the government in Belgrade and the Bosnian Serb leadership during the war (1992–95), which sought to carve out an ethnically “clean” territory and incorporate it into greater Serbia, were legitimimized by these actors as the political right of Bosnia’s Christian Orthodox population to remain in a single state. The SOC played an important political role during the war, most strongly illustrated by the so-called Patriarch’s Paper, the document forming and authorizing a joint Yugoslav-RS negotiation delegation at peace talks in Dayton, Ohio. The document was signed jointly by the patriarch of the SOC, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, and two indicted (and later convicted) war criminals—Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. In his memoir To End the War, Richard Holbrooke recalls the signature of Patriarch Pavle at the bottom of the document and the Eastern Orthodox cross as a crowning stamp approving the delegation; the two members who were convicted for war crimes, Karadzic and Mladic, were later excluded on the insistence of the U.S. government.

In the post-conflict period, Serb-Orthodox identity has regularly been used by the Bosnian Serb political leadership to legitimize their contemporary autonomist or secessionist goals. For instance, in Bosnia, the SOC supports and legitimizes those political actors who promote the idea of pan-Serbian unity, obstruct Bosnia’s sovereignty, and make threats of dissolution. A case in point is the attendance of Patriarch Irinej at the “National Day” of RS, which had been pronounced unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015. Despite the decision of the highest court in Bosnia, Milorad Dodik, then president of the RS, held a referendum for instituting a “state” holiday for RS in 2016, and has since threatened to hold a separate referendum for RS to secede from Bosnia. As a result of these actions, the U.S. government placed Milorad Dodik on its sanctions list. In the context of war-time crimes and secessionist goals, Patriarch Irinej’s statements about RS being a “nation-state of Serbs” and God’s creation to ensure the unity and survival of Serbs have provided legitimization to the continued secessionist agenda of

261 Ibid.
the RS leadership.263

**THE KREMLIN’S INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PAN-SLAVIC ORTHODOX TIES TO BACK UP ITS ANTI-NATO AGENDA**

While the politicization of conservative Orthodoxy in Bosnia’s Serb-dominated entity is primarily homemade, the use of conservative Orthodox identity in Russian-owned media further legitimizes the overlapping political goals of Moscow and its local proxies.

Russian media outlets in Serbian language, such as Sputnik, were launched following the Russian occupation of Crimea. They amplify the mantra of shared Orthodox ties to promote pro-Kremlin narratives and the image of Russia as a true ally of Balkan Orthodox Christians against the NATO threat.264 Numerous news agencies in RS and Serbia borrow Sputnik’s articles and their anti-Western narratives and carry them as original reporting.265 The messages promoted by Sputnik in Serbian-language sites and subsequently Serbian news sources reinforce the political agenda of the RS leadership. This includes, for example, denial of the Srebrenica genocide and relativization of war crimes committed by convicted political and military leaders from the RS; antagonistic reporting on NATO’s actions, the United States, and the OHR; and depictions of Russia as an Orthodox protector of the otherwise endangered Serbian nation. A case in point is Sputnik’s reporting on Banja Luka’s gratitude to Russian czar Nikolai II for the survival of the Serbian nation during World War I as a motivation for the construction of a new Russian Orthodox church in the center of Banja Luka.266

The construction of this church in Banja Luka illustrates the eagerness of local political elites in RS to cozy up to Russia, and the minimal investment needed by Russia to establish its political and religious presence in this part of Bosnia. The church, dedicated to the Romanov dynasty, along with a Russian cultural center, is set to be built on a surface of 6,500 square meters (about 70,000 square feet) in the center of the city. Both the church and the cultural center are reportedly fully funded by the budget of RS, including from funds donated by Serbia, but with no financial investment from...


Furthermore, according to local media, the church construction plans were in violation of urban regulations in Banja Luka due to its oversized proportions. Reportedly, the government dealt with this problem by changing the existing urban planning regulations, demonstrating a willingness to go the extra mile to accommodate Moscow. A smaller Russian monastery, St. Matrona of Moscow, was built in the village of Ritešići in RS 10 years ago at the initiative of local NGO Serbian-Russian Friendship and Unity of Orthodox Peoples.

Besides being instrumentalized by media, this shared Orthodox identity serves as a legitimizing basis for existing political ties and foreign policy interests and unfolds as a parallel process. The engagement of ROC and SOC dignitaries on the margins of the political process is one instrument of such legitimization. Meetings between Russian officials and Serb political figures often have a religious dimension and are followed by meetings with Orthodox church leaders. For instance, Patriarch Kirill’s second official visit to Serbia followed Russian president Vladimir Putin’s visit to Serbia for celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the Red Army’s liberation of Belgrade.

During his visit to Belgrade in 2011, Putin was awarded the SOC’s highest distinction for, in the words of the SOC itself, “his active love towards the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people, particularly shown in a brave and persistent protection of the faithful people, churches, monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as the preservation of the integrity of the Republic of Serbia.” Putin also visited the Orthodox cathedral Sveti Sava in Belgrade in January 2019 to inaugurate the new mosaics funded by Rosotrudnichestvo, Russia’s international development agency. Russia’s contribution reportedly amounted to €10 million (around $11.6 million).

INFORMAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH PAN-SLAVIC NGOS AND RUSSIAN-SERB PARAMILITARY GROUPS

In Bosnia, a wider overlap between Orthodox symbolism, politics, and a clandestine sector was


269 Ibid.


271 “Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin awarded the Serbian Orthodox Church’s highest distinction,” Serbian Orthodox Church, March 24, 2011, http://spc.rs/eng/russian_prime_minister_vladimir_putin_awarded_serbian_orthodox_church%E2%80%99s_highest_distinction.

brought to the fore when Milorad Dodik gifted Sergei Lavrov a stolen Ukrainian icon during Lavrov’s visit to Bosnia in December 2020. The Ukrainian government later claimed the icon was a part of its cultural heritage from Luhansk, an area held by Russian-backed separatists. In what emerged as a major international scandal, an Interpol investigation was launched into the origins of the icon’s presence in Bosnia and the icon was returned to Bosnia’s embassy in Moscow. The absence of a reaction by the SOC regarding the stolen icon is notable and indicative of a transactional relationship between the church and the RS government; had it been a stolen SOC icon, the church would likely have been outraged.

The case also highlighted the role of the fringe militant groups that commute between RS and Russia under the guise of Orthodox cultural associations. This network includes Serbian and Russian volunteers in Donbas and Night Wolves—a Russian motorcycle club—who travel mostly undisturbed between Banja Luka and Donbas, either as combatants in Russian operations in Ukraine or for the purpose of participating in yearly Orthodox pilgrimages in RS.

Beyond this case, informal channels of Russian influence in RS are often exercised via nongovernmental entrepreneurs connected to the Kremlin. The deployment of over 100 uniformed Cossacks for intimidation purposes in Banja Luka on election day in October 2014 was widely seen as the Kremlin’s political support for Milorad Dodik, whose electoral win was anything but certain. The group was accompanied by Konstantin Malofeev, sanctioned by the European Union and known as a Kremlin operative who allegedly initiated and funded Russia’s operations in Ukraine. After winning the RS elections, Milorad Dodik awarded Malofeev and two other men close to the Kremlin the so-called Orders of Njegos, First Degree, for contribution to the “formation of the Republika Srpska.”

Various other nongovernmental groups have been deployed to boost Slavic Orthodox ties and glorify paramilitary cooperation in Bosnia in the 1990s and present-day Ukraine while deepening local cleavages and vulnerabilities to destabilize Bosnia. For instance, regular pilgrimages of Russian and local paramilitary groups take place to honor fallen Russian combatants who participated in the Bosnian War. Per media estimates, around 500 Russian foreign fighters participated in the war on the side of the RS army, some actively taking part in ethnic cleansing campaigns against the non-Serb, mostly Bosniak population.

The societal and political consequences of such pilgrimages are predictably destabilizing, as the

273 The Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA published a photo of the icon and a seal confirming its authenticity, which clearly shows that its origin was in Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian media, it was used as the seal of the Ukrainian Committee for Culture in 1920.


276 Ibid.

277 Ibid.

gatherings are perceived as a provocation and legitimization of ethnic cleansing and rape campaigns by the surviving victims or family members of those who lost their lives.

Visegrad, a city described by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as the location of “one of the most comprehensive and ruthless campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the Bosnian conflict,” is a site of such yearly Orthodox pilgrimages organized to honor fallen Russian combatants. Two monuments to Russian volunteers were built in Visegrad, and every year Russian volunteers as well as combatants currently fighting in Donbas gather to pay tribute to the fallen. Representatives of the SOC also attend this pilgrimage, along with RS government representatives and representatives of various local and Russian Orthodox NGOs. Around 3,000 Bosniaks, including many women and children, were killed by Serb forces in and around Visegrad.

Igor Girkin, who played a leading role in the separatist movement in the initial stages of the so-called Russian Spring in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, was reportedly one of the Visegrad volunteers. His case points to the entanglement between the Russian and Serb paramilitary groups, evidence of the pan-Slavic brotherhood ties which draw on shared Orthodox identity. The so-called Russian Orthodox NGOs that regularly appear in RS, such as the Union of Volunteers of Donbas, therefore, seem to serve the Kremlin’s goals of having a presence on the ground, which can in turn serve as a tool of recruitment of Orthodox foreign fighters for Russia’s military efforts in Ukraine.

For their part, combatants from RS and Serbia have traveled eastward to join Russian fighters in Eastern Ukraine. Their travel reportedly takes place without restrictions on regular flights from Banja Luka, via Belgrade and Moscow, to the occupied areas in Ukraine. And while the Bosnian prosecutors’ office has processed a number of cases of foreign fighters departing to fight with the Islamic State in Syria, not a single verdict was issued for 11 combatants whom local authorities have said fought in Ukraine. Only one case was brought to court, and it was quickly abandoned due to lack of evidence.

Notably, while the Islamic Community in Bosnia cooperates with the authorities in criminal


281 “IGOR GIRKIN aka STRELKOV was Russian fighter in eastern Bosnia,” YouTube video, posted by Esad Hecimovic, May 12, 2014, 3:29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC6-ajX9qfI.


284 Ibid.
procedures and deradicalization programs, the SOC plays no such role in regard to the foreign fighters returning from Ukraine, who seem to enjoy complete impunity in the RS. As a result, not a single sentence has been brought against foreign fighters who have returned to RS from Eastern Ukraine. The SOC has not officially condemned or discouraged such departures.

CONCLUSION
In essence, the use of “strategic conservatism” for the Kremlin’s pursuit of political goals in Bosnia builds on the considerable overlap between the Kremlin’s interests and those of its proxies in Banja Luka and Belgrade. Both Banja Luka and Moscow openly define their agenda in Bosnia in opposition to the policy objectives of “Western powers” on the Peace Implementation Council, specifically regarding the mandate of the OHR as well as the EU and NATO military presence. Here, Russia’s goal seems to be to undermine the Western “state-building” agenda and retain its political influence in Bosnia rather than commit any significant investments in the cultural, social, religious, or economic realms. Local demand for Russia’s political and rhetorical support is significant, while only minimal investment from the Kremlin is required.

The pursuit of strategic conservatism in Bosnia is defined less in opposition to Western liberal values (whether social norms or lifestyle choices such as sexual orientation). Instead, it builds on the existing narrative of alleged Serb Orthodox historic victimhood in the region and elevates Russia’s role as their protector. Finally, while the Kremlin’s political support to the Bosnian Serb leadership remains crucial, the SOC is a powerful actor in its own right when it comes to shaping discourse and influencing public opinion. The Kremlin’s use of Orthodoxy and religious connections is therefore an added—almost “bonus”—element rather than the main driving force of strategic conservatism in Bosnia.