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BIH-Russia Relations After the Beginning of the Ukrainian War:

What Policy does BIH Lead Toward Russia

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ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly impacted Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), deepening its internal divisions and reinforcing the country's geopolitical paralysis. BiH remains sharply divided along ethnic and political lines; the Federation aligns mostly with Western policies, whereas Republika Srpska (RS) under Milorad Dodik increasingly aligns with Russia, obstructing unified foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic integration. Politically, RS leverages constitutional veto powers to block state-level alignment with Western sanctions against Russia and promote pro-Russian policies. Dodik has openly embraced Kremlin narratives, actively undermining BiH's institutional cohesion and stability. His frequent visits and symbolic gestures toward Moscow underscore RS's strategic pivot to Russia, reinforced by explicit Kremlin support for his anti-Western stance.

Economically, BiH's relationship with Russia primarily revolves around energy dependency, particularly natural gas supplies via TurkStream. Despite this dependence, Russian economic activities in BiH have limited commercial logic, serving instead Moscow's strategic goal of exerting geopolitical leverage. Recent attempts to diversify energy sources, such as connecting to Croatia's LNG terminal, face resistance from pro-Russian political factions in RS and, occasionally, Croat political representatives.

Security-wise, BiH is increasingly aligned with NATO and EU security frameworks, receiving notable military support to bolster resilience against external threats. Nevertheless, RS leadership persistently blocks meaningful NATO integration progress, supported by Russian threats and interference. Notably concerning is RS's incremental militarization of police forces, potentially setting foundations for a parallel security structure independent from state-level oversight, posing severe risks to Bosnia's security and unity.

Public opinion remains deeply polarized along ethnic lines: Bosnian Serbs predominantly favor Russia, while Bosniaks and Croats largely support Western alliances. Despite these stark divisions, governance challenges such as corruption and organized crime unite citizens across ethnic groups as critical threats to national stability. Internationally, although BiH has made formal steps toward EU accession, practical policy alignment is consistently undermined by RS's constitutional obstruction. Moscow exploits these institutional vulnerabilities, maintaining BiH's position as a contested geopolitical space, undermining Euro-Atlantic cohesion

Looking forward, the report argues that without effective EU and US countermeasures to Russia's disruptive influence, Bosnia risks remaining trapped in geopolitical limbo. It calls for a more robust and integrated Western strategy, combining political, economic, and security instruments to counteract Russian destabilization efforts and internal fragmentation, essential for BiH's future stability and successful European integration.

Keywords

Russian Influence, Geopolitical Paralysis, Bosnia's Stability, EU Accession Challenges

Introduction

The foreign policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina is structurally limited by the legacy of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in 1995 but also solidified a system that puts ethno-political bargaining above coherent strategic action (Entina, 2016; Merdzanovic, 2016). Bosnia's divided governance — which involves two autonomous entities, Federation BiH and Republika Srpska, with competing geopolitical orientations — has made it uniquely vulnerable to outside influence, especially during international crises. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2018-2023 Foreign Policy Strategy formally committed to alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, its implementation has been selective and systematically disrupted by Republika Srpska's leadership (Predsjedništvo Bosne i Hercegovine, 2018; Preljević & Ljubović, 2024). Exploiting the country's inherently unstable institutional framework, Republika Srpska has effectively prevented consensus on essential foreign policy decisions. The war in Ukraine has only sharpened these divisions, turning Bosnia into a battleground for conflicting geopolitical ambitions.

Russia's role in Bosnia has a long history, with distinct phases shaping its involvement. In the early 2000s, Russia's interest in the region began to wane, culminating in the withdrawal of its peacekeepers from SFOR in 2003. However, this withdrawal was not a complete abandonment of its interests in the country. By the late 2000s, Moscow's approach had become more assertive, marked by alliances with Serbia and, indirectly, Republika Srpska. Russia's opposition to Kosovo's independence in 2008 was a strategic move, rather than just a symbolic gesture, aimed at solidifying its position as the primary external supporter of Serb nationalist interests in the region (Hadžić, 2024; Dijkstra & Raadschelders, 2022). This shift in Russia's geopolitical stance was reinforced by significant investments, including Gazpromneft's acquisition of Serbia's national oil company, but also oil industry in Republika Srpska which greatly enhanced Russia's control over energy markets in the Balkans (Socor, 2009; Golubović, 2020).

The war in Ukraine has served as a geopolitical accelerant, drawing Bosnia into an even more tenuous balancing act between Western security architectures and Russian influence realms. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, has taken steps toward alignment with EU and NATO positions, while Republika Srpska has deepened its pro-Russian position, obstructing attempts at sanctions and openly endorsing Kremlin narratives. Not only has the conflict deepened existing divides, but it has also fed external efforts to destabilize Bosnia, with Russia's political and economic footprint in RS acting as a direct counterbalance to that of the West.

Political relations

The political connection between Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is fundamentally influenced by the country's internal divisions, a fact increasingly accentuated since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Bosnia's complex and ragmented constitutional architecture, devised by the Dayton Peace Agreement, gives considerable veto powers to representatives of each of the three main ethnic groups, making a unified foreign policy toward Russia nearly impossible. While Bosniak and Bosnian Croat leaders have largely aligned with Western policy on Ukraine, Bosnian Serb leadership has openly supported Russia, deepening the geopolitical divide that Moscow continues to exploit (Bechev, 2024). Notably, the Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), the primary political representative of Bosnian Croats, has also occasionally demonstrated pro-Russian leanings, evident in its obstruction of the adoption of a parliamentary declaration condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine (Ruge, 2023).

The President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has become Russia's most prominent fifth column in the Western Balkans. Dodik's framing of BiH's position was initially as neutral, claiming that the country should not take sides in the conflict. As the war continued, however, he openly adopted Kremlin narratives and moved toward full support for Russia's actions. His meeting with Vladimir Putin on a visit to Moscow in September last year marked a dramatic tightening of his embrace of Russian foreign policy. It was Dodik's seventh meeting with Putin since 2014, cementing his position as a go-between for Russian interests in the region. Echoing Russian justifications for the war, he said publicly, "For many years, the West did not react to the extermination of the Russian population in Ukraine; every day in Donbas, there were murderers and bombers" (TASS, 2022).

Dodik's rhetoric has been matched by symbolic and diplomatic initiatives reinforcing RS's political pivot toward Moscow. On January 9, 2023, he gave Putin the highest medal of Republika Srpska for his "patriotic concern and love for the Republika Srpska" (Deutsche Welle, 2023). The decision drew widespread condemnation by the European Union and the United States but highlighted the

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increasing strength of political ties between RS leadership and the Kremlin. The firm alignment between RS-Russia has continued, with Dodik visiting Moscow again in May 2023 and February 2024, deepening RS's political and economic dependence on Russia (Service, 2024).

In return, Russia has provided such support through both diplomatic support and strategic influence operations. In April 2024, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev personally commended Dodik for his "firm and consistent position on the Ukrainian crisis" and clarified that "your personal relations of trust with Russian President Vladimir Putin play an important role in deepening bilateral cooperation" (TASS, 2024). In addition to these formalities, Russia has also actively destabilized Bosnia's institutions, promoting anti-Dayton policies that undermine the country's sovereignty. Such activities include grunt intelligence operations, disinformation campaigns, and support for radical nationalist groups that undermine the fragile political order in Bosnia (Zweers et al., 2023; Huseinovic, 2025).

At the level of the state, Bosnia has been unable to move closer to aligning with Western sanctions against Russia due to the Republika Srpska veto, despite a constant stream of EU and United States pressure (TASS, 2022; Katic, 2025). Moreover, Russia has been notoriously advocating for the abolishment of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) — a post directly correlating with Dodik's efforts to dismantle international oversight mechanisms limiting his separatist ambitions. Thus, Moscow's opposition to the OHR and the Bonn powers is not only about Bosnia but is also part of a wider strategy of undermining Western influence in the region and encouraging dynamics that keep Bosnia distant from Euro-Atlantic structures (Čančar, 2023).

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Economic relations

Economic relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Russia are largely driven by energy dependency rather than extensive bilateral trade or investment, making Russia's economic footprint in the country more of a strategic lever than a commercial priority. The most critical aspect of this relationship is Bosnia's near-total reliance on Russian natural gas, which it imports exclusively via the TurkStream pipeline through Serbia (Wankiewicz, 2023). This dependence has been identified by the United States as a national security vulnerability, leading to increased Western pressure on BiH to diversify its energy sources and reduce its exposure to Russian geopolitical influence (Čančar, 2021).

In January 2025, Bosnian parliamentarians took a decisive step toward energy diversification by voting to connect the country's gas grid with Croatia. This project, backed by Washington, is designed to "address a pressing national security concern" and curb Bosnia's dependence on Russian gas (France-Presse, 2025). The initiative will link BiH's gas infrastructure to a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal on the Croatian island of Krk, necessitating the construction of approximately 180 kilometers of pipeline at an estimated cost of 100 million euros (Spaic-Kovacic, 2024). While this plan has been in discussion for several years, its implementation has been obstructed by Republika Srpska's leadership and the main Bosnian Croat party, both of which have attempted to steer the project toward their own economic and political interests (Talha Öztürk, 2022; Kurtic, 2024).

Despite frequent political rhetoric in Republika Srpska promoting strong ties with Russia, Russian investments in BiH have yielded limited financial returns and, in some cases, substantial losses. The oil industry in RS—a sector where Russia has maintained a presence—has suffered notable financial setbacks, with Russian investors losing 52 million euros over a two-year period (Lakic, 2019; Vm, 2022). The Brod oil refinery, which was privatized in 2007 when the Russian company Neftegazinkor (a subsidiary of state-owned Zarubezhneft) acquired a majority stake, has accumulated total losses exceeding 300 million euros, including a 7.5-million-euro deficit in 2017 alone (Lakić, 2019). These financial struggles indicate that Russian economic engagement in Bosnia is not primarily driven by commercial interests but by broader geopolitical calculations.

Economic analysts have highlighted this strategic rather than commercial motivation behind Russian investment. As Professor Aleksandar Stojanović observed, "Russia generally has no economic interest in Bosnia, given that the

whole population of Bosnia is barely equal to one-third of the population of its capital—but it has a very strong political interest here and it uses business to achieve its political goals" (Lakić, 2019).

While RS leadership maintains strong pro-Russian narratives, the entity's economic survival is heavily dependent on the European Union, which serves as its primary trade and aid partner (Panagiotou, 2020; Ruge, 2022). Any significant attempt by RS to push for greater alignment with Russia or pursue secessionist policies would jeopardize its access to EU financial assistance, investment, and market access, effectively undermining its own economic viability. This structural contradiction underscores a key limitation of RS's pro-Russian positioning—while Moscow provides political support, its ability to sustain RS economically remains highly constrained, reinforcing the entity's inescapable reliance on Western financial structures (BCSDN, 2025).

Security and Military Aspects

The security dimension of Bosnia and Herzegovina - Russia relations have gained heightened significance following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reinforcing BiH's strategic alignment with Western security structures while deepening Moscow's influence operations in Republika Srpska. As BiH strengthens its military cooperation with NATO and the European Union, Russia has actively worked to obstruct this process, leveraging RS leadership as a geopolitical proxy to counter Euro-Atlantic integration (Čančar, 2024).

Western Security Assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH has received substantial military assistance under the European Peace Facility (EPF), aimed at upgrading its defense capabilities in line with EU security objectives. This support includes the delivery of advanced tactical equipment, such as field furniture, vehicles, engineering tools, IT and communication systems, as well as chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) detection and decontamination technology (WeBalkans, 2022; Georgia Today, 2022). More than half of this equipment has been allocated to the Tactical Support Brigade of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH), enhancing Bosnia's operational capacity and its potential contributions to EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions (BiH N1, 2024).

NATO has also reaffirmed its **strategic partnership** with BiH. During a North Atlantic Council visit to Sarajevo in February 2024, then NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană emphasized that "Bosnia and Herzegovina is a long-standing and close NATO partner" and that the alliance "strongly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Nato, 2024). As part of this broadened security cooperation, NATO has introduced a defense capacity-building package, focusing on crisis management, cyber defense, and counterterrorism, reinforcing BiH's resilience against external security threats (BiH N1, 2024).

Obstacles to NATO Integration and Russian Influence in Republika Srpska

Despite these growing ties with Western security institutions, BiH's path toward NATO membership remains heavily obstructed by Republika Srpska's political leadership, which maintains firm alignment with Russian geopolitical interests. Although BiH has had a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) since 2018, it has struggled to make meaningful progress, largely due to RS-led political resistance. The commitment to accelerating NATO integration was removed from the state-level agenda, reflecting the influence of Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), which remains Moscow's key ally in the region (Čančar, 2024).

Russia has openly opposed BiH's NATO accession, framing it as a threat to regional stability. In March 2022, Russian Ambassador Igor Kalabukhov issued a direct warning, stating that "Ukraine's example shows what we expect. Should there be any threat, we will respond" (Vega, 2023). This thinly veiled threat underscores Russia's coercive approach in deterring Bosnia's deeper integration into NATO, following a pattern of intimidation seen elsewhere in the Western Balkans. Šefik Džaferović, then a member of BiH's tripartite presidency, confirmed these pressures, stating that "there are open threats coming from the Russian side... that Bosnia will face consequences if it continues on its NATO path" (Nato, 2022). Such rhetoric reflects Moscow's broader strategy of hybrid destabilization, combining political pressure, disinformation campaigns, and security sector interference to obstruct Western-aligned reforms in BiH (Karcic, 2022).

Militarization of Republika Srpska's Security Forces

One of the most concerning developments has been the gradual militarization of Republika Srpska's police force, raising fears that RS is laying the groundwork for an independent security structure outside BiH's integrated defense system. Reports indicate that RS authorities have procured weaponry and tactical equipment, allegedly with Russian backing, enhancing the police force's operational capacity beyond its conventional law enforcement mandate (Vera Mironova, 2018). This raises serious concerns that Dodik is incrementally reconstructing an autonomous RS force, potentially challenging BiH's unified military structure and weakening state control over security institutions (Gueudet, 2023).

This trend is deeply intertwined with Dodik's broader threats to withdraw Republika Srpska from key state institutions, including the judiciary, tax authority, and armed forces, which could severely disrupt Bosnia's fragile security architecture, as RS recently did by attempting to effectively erase state police and judiciary competencies within its territory (OHR, 2021; Sofuoglu, 2025). Such moves align with Moscow's strategy of fostering institutional fragmentation, reducing Bosnia and Herzegovina's governability, and eroding Western influence in the region (Bechev, 2024; Karčić, 2025). If left unchecked, the militarization of RS police forces, coupled with Dodik's secessionist rhetoric, could pose an unprecedented security risk, fundamentally undermining the post-Dayton security order in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Public Opinion

Public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding Russia reflects the country's deep-seated ethnic divisions, with starkly contrasting views among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Survey data consistently demonstrates divergent perceptions of Russia, the United States, the European Union, and NATO, underscoring how foreign policy preferences are shaped by internal ethno-political narratives (International Republican Institute [IRI], 2024; Atlantic Initiative, 2024).

The International Republican Institute (IRI) survey (2024) underscores Bosnia and Herzegovina's deeply fragmented public opinion regarding NATO membership and broader foreign policy alignment, reflecting structural vulnerabilities leveraged by Russia. While half (50%) of BiH citizens support NATO

membership, substantial ethnic divisions persist. Bosniaks strongly favor Western alignment, with 76% supporting NATO accession and 59% advocating an exclusively pro-EU and pro-Western policy. Bosnian Croats similarly lean toward NATO (61%) and pro-Western policies (50%), albeit with slightly less intensity (Klix.ba, 2024).

In stark contrast, Bosnian Serbs overwhelmingly reject NATO (61%), preferring either exclusive ties with Russia (25%) or balanced relations between East and West (22%). Only 3% support NATO membership, illustrating the success of pro-Russian narratives in shaping ethnic-based geopolitical preferences (Klix.ba, 2024). These divisions not only inhibit coherent state-level foreign policy but actively reinforce Russian influence, enabling Moscow to exploit internal fractures without significant economic investment. This ethnic polarization, driven by elite narratives, continues to lock BiH in a geopolitical stalemate, complicating Euro-Atlantic integration efforts.

Serb scepticism toward the EU and NATO is partly shaped by political rhetoric and media narratives that frame Western institutions as infringing on Republika Srpska's autonomy. Meanwhile, Bosniak and Croat political leaders, particularly those in the Federation of BiH, tend to view Western alliances as critical safeguards against secessionist pressures and Russian-backed destabilization. This polarization has been further reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has deepened Bosniak and Croat perceptions of Russia as a revisionist actor hostile to Bosnia's sovereignty.

Unlike foreign policy preferences, where attitudes toward NATO, the EU, and Russia vary sharply along ethnic lines, corruption and organized crime are recognized as systemic threats across all communities, reinforcing the idea that governance failures rather than ethnic tensions drive BiH's most pressing security concerns (IRI, 2024; OSCE, 2024). These issues are deeply entrenched in BiH's political and judicial systems, with corruption ranking as one of the most significant challenges to the country's stability and progress toward European integration (BTI Project, 2024).

A majority of respondents across all ethnic groups - Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs - identified corruption, organized crime, and political elites as the most serious security threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, underscoring a rare cross-ethnic consensus on governance-related risks. Survey data indicates that over 50% of respondents across ethnic categories view systemic corruption, entrenched political patronage networks, and the influence of organized crime as the primary threats to BiH's stability (Transparency

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International BiH, 2023; RCC SecuriMeter Report, 2024). This shared concern highlights the pervasive impact of governance failures on BiH's security architecture, transcending ethnic divisions and emphasizing the need for institutional reform to address these challenges.

The ethnic polarization of public opinion on Russia and the West in Bosnia and Herzegovina is both a reflection of and a product of elite-driven narratives. Pro-Russian sentiment among Bosnian Serbs is reinforced by Serbian and RS-based media outlets, which emphasize historical ties, Orthodox Christian solidarity, and Russian support for Serb nationalist goals (IRI, 2024; Bechev, 2024). These narratives portray Russia as a reliable protector of Serb political and cultural identity, while presenting Western actors, particularly the U.S., NATO, and the OHR (Office of the High Representative), as intervening forces that seek to undermine RS's autonomy (IRI, 2024; Turčalot, 2024).

Conversely, Bosniak and Croat political leaders have positioned the West as a necessary counterweight to Russian influence, promoting NATO and EU membership as safeguards against ethno-political fragmentation and external destabilization. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has further solidified these views, strengthening perceptions of the EU and NATO as protectors of Bosnia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Public sentiment in Bosnia mirrors the country's broader political divisions, reinforcing the structural obstacles to a unified foreign policy stance. While Bosniaks and Croats generally align with Western institutions, Serbs maintain a deep-seated orientation toward Russia, a division actively exploited by domestic political elites and external actors. However, shared concerns over security threats and economic instability suggest that, despite the ethnicization of geopolitical narratives, Bosnia's citizens remain primarily concerned with governance failures and economic stagnation. Addressing these fundamental issues, rather than further entrenching ethno-political divisions, remains essential for stabilizing the country and advancing its Euro-Atlantic integration.

International alignment

In December 2022, the European Council officially granted BiH candidate status for EU membership, marking a significant milestone in the country's European trajectory (European Council, 2022). This progress continued in March 2024, when the European Commission recommended opening EU membership talks

with BiH. EU leaders subsequently agreed in principle to begin negotiations, contingent upon BiH fulfilling specific reform conditions (European Commission, 2024). These developments demonstrate the EU's ongoing commitment to the Western Balkans despite the geopolitical challenges posed by the war in Ukraine.

However, BiH's alignment with EU foreign policy remains incomplete due to internal divisions. Most notably, Bosnia has been unable to join EU sanctions against Russia because of the veto power exercised by Republika Srpska representatives in state-level institutions. This discrepancy between formal EU accession progress and practical policy alignment illustrates the constraints imposed by BiH's constitutional structure, which allows ethno-political actors to obstruct collective decision-making.

NATO has also emphasized the importance of preserving BiH's unified institutions, particularly its Armed Forces, which former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg described as "one of the country's strongest multi-ethnic institutions" (NATO, 2024). During a visit to Bosnia, Stoltenberg stressed that these institutions are "absolutely vital for the stability of the country and must be preserved", urging "all sides to stop divisive rhetoric and take concrete steps toward reconciliation" (NATO, 2024). This underscores NATO's strategic interest in ensuring BiH's internal cohesion as a means of stabilizing the region.

Russia has pursued a strategy aimed at keeping Bosnia politically divided and institutionally dysfunctional, preventing it from adopting an independent foreign policy trajectory that might include NATO membership (Zweers et al., 2023). As one analysis puts it, "Russia's main goal is to freeze the status quo and ensure Bosnia remains in limbo" (Bechev, 2024).

To achieve this objective, Moscow leverages multiple channels to amplify BiH's existing divisions, exploiting the country's constitutional arrangements to obstruct meaningful reforms. Russia has consistently backed Milorad Dodik, particularly within the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), where it has supported calls for the abolition of the Office of the High Representative, an institution seen as a safeguard against RS secessionism (SRNA, 2020).

Beyond diplomatic obstruction, Russia has actively stirred tensions through propaganda efforts, political support for radical Serb nationalist groups, and widely publicized gestures backing RS separatism. These efforts serve a dual purpose: to obstruct BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration and to divert Western strategic attention from other geopolitical theaters, particularly Ukraine (Stavridis, 2024).BiH's international alignment remains constrained by structural political divisions that allow external actors, particularly Russia, to exploit institutional

weaknesses. While EU accession negotiations represent formal progress, BiH's inability to fully align with EU foreign policy or advance toward NATO membership highlights the persistent influence of ethno-political obstructionism. Russia's strategic objective—to maintain instability and prevent BiH from solidifying its Western orientation—continues to shape the country's foreign policy landscape. As BiH moves forward, the success of its Euro-Atlantic integration will depend not only on meeting technical requirements for EU accession but also on overcoming internal political fragmentation that external actors continue to exploit.

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Challenges and Future Outlook

Bosnia and Herzegovina's relationship with Russia is shaped by a broader geopolitical struggle, where Moscow continues to exploit Bosnia's structural vulnerabilities to counter Western influence in the Western Balkans. The trajectory of these relations will be determined not only by Bosnia's internal dynamics but also by the geopolitical recalibrations resulting from the war in Ukraine, the European Union's faltering enlargement strategy, and the strategic choices of major regional actors.

Neither the European Union nor the United States has demonstrated a coherent, long-term strategy to counter Russian influence in Bosnia. The EUFOR mission, while symbolically reinforcing security guarantees, has failed to deter Milorad Dodik's continued political brinkmanship. Likewise, the formal opening of EU membership negotiations offers a structured pathway toward integration, yet it remains insufficient to curb Russia's influence, as institutional dysfunction in Bosnia provides Moscow with ample leverage.

The ongoing constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina structurally facilitates Russian influence, enabling Moscow to deepen its political foothold

without substantial economic investments. A recent example illustrating this dynamic is the February 26, 2025, decision by Bosnia's state court to sentence Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska (RS), to imprisonment and impose a six-year ban on his presidency due to his defiance of the High Representative's authority. Dodik immediately rejected the verdict as politically orchestrated and refused to comply. In reaction, RS authorities swiftly passed legislation aimed at undermining the authority of Bosnia's state-level judicial institutions, exacerbating existing internal divisions.

Russia openly supported Dodik, characterizing the court's verdict as politically driven and regionally destabilizing. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov portrayed the decision as an attack on Serbian national interests, warning of significant negative implications for regional stability. This explicit Russian support underscores Moscow's strategic alignment with domestic actors who actively erode Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional coherence and political stability.

Russia has capitalized on deep-seated public cynicism toward the EU and resentment over perceived Western double standards, reinforcing narratives that evoke the unresolved grievances of the 1990s. These narratives resonate most strongly in Republika Srpska, where skepticism of Western intentions remains deeply embedded.

Several geopolitical trajectories could define Bosnia's future engagement with Russia. If the EU advances a region-wide integration strategy—one that includes Serbia alongside Bosnia—it could reduce Russian leverage by embedding both countries more firmly within European security and economic frameworks. However, despite the momentum generated by the war in Ukraine, the EU has struggled to maintain coherence in its enlargement policy, making such a breakthrough uncertain. Conversely, prolonged deadlock in Bosnia's constitutional reform process would further entrench ethnic divisions and cement Russia's role as a spoiler in regional politics, ensuring that BiH remains a geopolitical gray zone between competing spheres of influence.

External actors will play a decisive role in shaping Bosnia's trajectory. While Russia remains the most visible external destabilizing force, it operates within a broader network of revisionist actors, including Hungary, Serbia, and elements within Croatia, all of whom have sought to undermine Bosnia's sovereignty. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has emerged as Dodik's most significant international ally, blocking EU sanctions against him while channeling economic investments that reinforce RS's autonomy. These dynamics reflect a broader regional pushback against EU oversight and a recalibration of regional alliances that threatens to deepen Bosnia's political paralysis.

For Bosnia to navigate these challenges effectively, the European Union must go beyond rhetorical commitments and implement a robust deterrence strategy that combines political, economic, and security instruments. This means expanding the EU's on-the-ground presence, reinforcing Bosnia's institutional resilience against separatist actors, and integrating financial and security levers to counter Russian-backed destabilization. Failure to act decisively would not only weaken Bosnia's stability but would also undermine the EU's credibility as a strategic actor in the Western Balkans.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's policy toward Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine has been defined by internal contradictions and external pressures. While officially committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, BiH remains structurally incapable of aligning with Western policies due to the entrenched obstructionism of Republika Srpska. This dynamic has allowed Moscow to maintain significant influence with minimal economic investment, relying instead on institutional inertia and political fragmentation to sustain its foothold. The future trajectory of this relationship will hinge on whether Bosnia can overcome its internal divisions and, critically, whether the European Union and the United States can adopt more effective countermeasures to curb Russian influence in the Western Balkans. Without such strategic recalibration, BiH risks remaining in geopolitical limbo, a contested space vulnerable to external manipulation and internal decay.

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