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## **Strategic Patronage and Proxy Politics: Russia in Serbia *vs* Türkiye in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>**

### SUMMARY

This paper investigates the asymmetric geopolitical strategies of Russia and Türkiye in the Western Balkans through a comparative case study of their respective alignments with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Euro-Atlantic institutions face objective challenges in deepening integration across the region, Russia and Türkiye have expanded their influence by cultivating strategic partnerships grounded in historical, cultural, and identity-based ties. This dynamic has resulted in a de facto proxy structure: Serbia emerging as Russia's principal strategic partner in the post-Yugoslav space, and the Bosnian political establishment functioning as Türkiye's core associate within the complex landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which competing external aspirations and the Croatian political element play a considerable role in shaping the domestic landscape. Using a constructivist and neo-imperial theoretical lens, the paper argues that although Russia and Türkiye pursue distinct modalities of influence, both strategically engage with and reinforce historically embedded identity cleavages. In doing so, they shape a regional order, characterised by selective alignments and competing external orientations. The paper concludes by assessing the implications

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for regional stability, EU/NATO enlargement, and the evolving balance of power in the Western Balkans.

*Keywords:* Strategic Patronage, Proxy Politics, Balkans, Türkiye and Russia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

## Strateško pokroviteljstvo i proksi politika: Rusija u Srbiji naspram Turske u Bosni i Hercegovini

### SAŽETAK

Rad analizira asimetrične geopolitičke strategije Rusije i Turske na prostoru Zapadnog Balkana, kroz komparativni okvir njihovih odnosa sa Srbijom i Bosnom i Hercegovinom. Polazeći od pretpostavke o ograničenim dometima i izazovima evroatlantske integracije regiona, istražuje se način na koji ove dve sile projektuju uticaj putem strateških partnerstava zasnovanih na istorijskim, kulturnim i identitetskim vezama. U radu se argumentuje da je ovakva dinamika doprinela formiranju svojevrsne proksi strukture, u kojoj se Srbija pozicionira kao ključni strateški partner Rusije u postjugoslovenskom prostoru, dok politički akteri u Bosni i Hercegovini, u okviru složenog i višeslojnog institucionalnog sistema, predstavljaju centralne partnere Turske. Posebna pažnja posvećena je ulozi konkurentnih spoljnopolitičkih uticaja, uključujući i hrvatski politički faktor, u oblikovanju unutrašnjih političkih odnosa u Bosni i Hercegovini. Teorijski okvir rada zasniva se na kombinaciji konstruktivističkog i neoimperijalnog pristupa, čime se omogućava dublje razumevanje načina na koji spoljnopolitički akteri instrumentalizuju identitetske narative i istorijsko nasleđe. Nalazi ukazuju da, uprkos razlikama u instrumentima i intenzitetu delovanja, i Rusija i Turska doprinose reprodukciji i produblivanju postojećih identitetskih podela, čime utiču na oblikovanje regionalnog poretka zasnovanog na selektivnim savezništvima i konkurentnim spoljnim orijentacijama. U zaključnom delu razmatraju se implikacije ovih procesa na regionalnu stabilnost, perspektive proširenja Evropske unije i NATO-a, kao i na evoluciju odnosa snaga na Zapadnom Balkanu.

*Ključne reči:* strateško pokroviteljstvo, *proxy* politika, Zapadni Balkan, Rusija, Turska, Srbija, Bosna i Hercegovina.

### Introduction

Nowadays, the architecture of the international system is undergoing considerable geopolitical transformations, with state and non-state actors increasingly relying on strategic partnerships, identity-based diplomacy, and regional alliances to secure influence and advance national interests. In the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans, the

traditional dominance of Euro-Atlantic institutions is contested by alternative powers. The following trends can serve as confirmation of this position: EU and NATO expansion in the Western Balkans is stalled, and it is difficult to claim that any of the European powers is becoming a crucial external actor for Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this regard, Russia and Türkiye have emerged as key stakeholders competing for influence in the region, each cultivating deep and asymmetrical partnerships that reflect a mix of strategic ambition, historical legacy, and identity-based diplomacy. Moscow and Ankara are expanding their regional footprints, which meet their national interests: Russia primarily through its strategic alignment with Serbia, and Türkiye through its engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the Bosniak political elite. This growing multipolar dynamic can be rightfully acknowledged as one of the factors complicating the region's path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Understanding that relying on only one vector in foreign policy is risky, political elites in the Western Balkans are increasingly engaging in strategic balancing, leveraging ties with external actors to maximise domestic and geopolitical advantages. The presence of multiple power centres has amplified institutional uncertainty. Moreover, overlapping spheres of influence risk entrenching ethnic and political divisions, making the region more vulnerable to external manipulation and internal instability.

This paper explores how the Russian Federation and Türkiye engage in what can be described as strategic patronage and proxy politics, whereby both states rely on selective local actors to maintain and project influence in the Balkans. In Serbia, Russia has traditionally played the role of a security partner, key energy supplier, and cultural ally, anchoring its presence in Orthodox-Slavic identity. However, following 2022, previously established forms of military-technical and military-to-military cooperation have been significantly constrained, which has altered, but not eliminated, the security dimension of the bilateral relationship. Conversely, Türkiye's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is framed by different motives: shared Islamic identity, Ottoman heritage, and soft power instruments such as religious, cultural, and economic diplomacy.

The central question this study addresses is *how Russia and Türkiye use asymmetrical relationships in Serbia and Bosnia, respectively, to assert geopolitical influence in the Western Balkans*. To answer this, the paper adopts a comparative case study approach and draws on concepts of strategic patronage, proxy politics, and neo-imperialism, with theoretical grounding in constructivist and realist traditions. By analysing the instruments, narratives, and political alignments employed by Moscow and Ankara, the paper seeks to understand not only the bilateral dynamics at play but also their broader implications for regional security, Western integration, and the future of the Balkans.

### *Literature Review*

Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly examined the role of external actors in shaping the regional order in post-Yugoslav space. While the early 2000s saw a strong emphasis on Euro-Atlantic integration as the dominant regional trajectory, recent works highlight the growing influence of non-Western powers such as Russia and Türkiye (Vračić 2016).

The temporary weakening of the credibility of the European Union's enlargement process, exacerbated by internal EU crises, democratic backsliding in candidate states, and public disillusionment, has opened space for alternative geopolitical actors to assert themselves. Both Russia and Türkiye have attracted scholarly attention for their assertive yet ideologically distinct approaches to the region. Both are increasingly portrayed not only as pragmatic actors but as carriers of normative and identity-based strategies that challenge the Western-led liberal model of world order (Makocki and Popescu 2017, 300).

Much of the literature on Russia's role in the Balkans frames its engagement as part of a broader strategy to obstruct NATO and EU expansion, especially in traditionally Slavic and Orthodox states such as Serbia (Stronski and Himes 2017). Russia's approach combines hard and soft power tools: energy leverage through Gazprom, military cooperation with Serbia, and information campaigns via Sputnik and RT. Radeljic argues that Serbia serves as Russia's regional stronghold and a symbolic bastion of "Slavic brotherhood" and anti-Western resistance (Radeljic 2017). Yet, scholars disagree on the nature of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. Harun Karcic and Vuk Vuksanović argue that Moscow's engagement is grounded in shared Orthodox identity, historical narratives, and civilisational affinity, which provide a receptive sociopolitical environment for Russian influence (Karcic 2023; Vuksanović 2023, 110). In contrast, scholars, including Khudoley and Koloskov, emphasise the opportunistic and tactical character of Russia's strategy, highlighting its support for nationalist elites and its use of disinformation, energy leverage, and political patronage to undermine Western-led governance models (Khudoley and Koloskov 2021, 93-95).

Turkish authors Henne and Öztürk view Türkiye's involvement in the Balkans mostly through the lens of soft power implementation (Henne and Öztürk, 2022). Thus, Türkiye has positioned itself as a historical and cultural partner to Bosnia's Bosniak population, invoking shared Islamic identity and Ottoman heritage to build trust and influence. Scholars often frame this within the concept of "Neo-Ottomanism", where Türkiye blends pragmatic foreign policy with symbolic restoration of its imperial past. In this respect, M. Ekşi notes that institutions, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Diyanet (Religious Affairs Directorate), and the Yunus Emre cultural centres, are considered

key channels of influence (Ekşi 2017). Rasidagic and Hesova conducted research on Türkiye's political alliances with Bosniak leaders, particularly through Erdoğan's personal ties with the Izetbegovic family and the Party of Democratic Action – SDA (Rasidagic and Hesova 2020). Comparing the Western Balkans' geopolitics from the perspective of Moscow's and Ankara's engagement, Vračić argues that, unlike Russia, Türkiye's regional image is more cooperative and stabilising. However, critics warn of creeping sectarianism and uneven engagement across ethnic lines in Bosnia (Vračić 2014).

The concepts of strategic patronage and proxy politics are increasingly relevant in understanding Russia-Serbia and Türkiye-Bosnia dynamics, yet they remain underdeveloped in Balkan-specific literature. Most studies examine either Russia or Türkiye in isolation or treat the Balkans as a passive arena of great power competition. Few studies offer a systematic, comparative framework for how these powers cultivate asymmetric alliances with client states or political elites.

This paper contributes to filling that gap by situating both actors within a broader theoretical framework of neo-imperial regionalism and constructivist geopolitics. Neo-imperial mechanisms are understood here not as formal territorial control but as the geostrategic projection of influence via selective elite patronage, energy and economic leverage, security cooperation, and the instrumentalisation of historical and civilisational narratives. Russia's approach mainly relies on security partnerships, energy policies, diplomatic shielding, and a focus on Orthodox-Slavic identity. By contrast, Türkiye employs a softer yet structurally embedded model of influence, utilising religious diplomacy, cultural institutions, development aid, and economic investment networks linked to Ottoman historical memory. Through these differentiated mechanisms, both actors seek to cultivate spheres of influence without direct sovereignty claims. In practical terms, the neo-imperial approach manifests through structured dependency-building rather than formal and total domination. Russia articulates long-term leverage by embedding itself in Serbia's energy infrastructure, sustaining defence-industrial ties, and offering diplomatic backing on sensitive sovereignty issues such as Kosovo, thereby reinforcing political alignment at elite and societal levels. Türkiye advances influence through institutionalised religious networks, educational foundations, development agencies, and targeted infrastructure investments that bind segments of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political and social elites to Ankara. Both actors legitimise preferred political leaders by framing them as guardians of civilisational continuity, thus transforming identity narratives into instruments of geopolitical positioning. These mechanisms collectively produce informal spheres of influence characterised by relational hierarchy rather than overt coercion.

## *Methodology*

This investigation employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to analyse the geopolitical strategies of Russia and Türkiye in the Western Balkans, specifically through their bilateral engagements with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively. The selection of these two cases is naturally guided by their structural asymmetry and symbolic significance: Serbia represents Russia's closest regional partner, rooted in shared Slavic and Orthodox identities, while Bosnia, particularly its Bosniak political elite, has become a key node in Türkiye's strategy of religious and cultural diplomacy. Together, these cases provide a compelling basis for comparison, highlighting how two regional powers project influence through differentiated but ideologically charged forms of strategic patronage and proxy politics.

The research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official government statements, foreign policy speeches, bilateral agreements, and public addresses by political and religious leaders. In particular, some pieces from speeches by Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Aleksandar Vučić, and Bakir Izetbegović are examined for rhetorical patterns and identity framing. Additionally, documents from ministries of foreign affairs, embassy press releases, and transcripts from multilateral summits are used to observe institutional ties.

Secondary sources include academic literature, policy papers, think-tank analyses, and historical studies addressing regional influence, identity politics, and post-Yugoslav geopolitics. The research design is guided by constructivist and neo-imperialist theoretical lenses, focusing on how historical memory, religious identity, and civilisational narratives are instrumentalised by Russia and Türkiye to construct desirable relations with their Balkan partners. Through within-case analysis and cross-case comparison, the study evaluates both the instruments of influence and the discursive strategies used by each power to entrench its position within local political and societal structures.

Ultimately, this methodological framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how geopolitical influence operates not only through material leverage but also through symbolic and ideational alignment, enabling a richer assessment of strategic patronage in the contemporary Balkans.

### *Conceptual Framework: Strategic Patronage and Proxy Politics*

To move beyond descriptive accounts of foreign influence, this study introduces an explicit conceptual framework centred on *strategic patronage* and *proxy politics*. Strategic patronage is defined here as a structured and sustained relationship in which an external power provides political,

economic, security, or symbolic resources to a local state or elite in exchange for long-term geopolitical alignment. Unlike short-term alliances, strategic patronage tolerates a high degree of targeted (client) autonomy while embedding the relationship within narratives of shared identity, historical destiny, or civilisational affinity.

Proxy politics, in turn, is understood not as direct delegation or control, but as an indirect mode of influence whereby local actors advance, obstruct, or reframe regional and international outcomes in ways that align with the strategic interests of an external patron. Building on Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011), this article conceptualises proxy relationships as operating through diplomatic behaviour, narrative convergence, institutional vetoes, and selective policy alignment rather than through military outsourcing alone.

Within the context of the Western Balkans, proxy politics is identified through three observable indicators. First, consistent diplomatic alignment on high-salience international issues, such as Kosovo, NATO enlargement, or sanctions regimes. Second, convergence in official discourse and symbolic practices that reproduce the patron's preferred historical or civilisational narratives. Third, structural dependence or privileged access in key sectors, including energy, security cooperation, religious institutions, or cultural infrastructure. These indicators allow for systematic comparison between Russia's and Türkiye's engagement strategies while avoiding overly deterministic interpretations of external control.

The framework further draws on constructivist insights into identity formation and neo-imperial approaches to regional order, emphasising how historical memory and civilisational narratives are mobilised to legitimise asymmetric power relations. By combining these perspectives, the article treats patronage not merely as material leverage but as a relational process sustained through meaning-making, selective recognition of elites, and symbolic inclusion.

### *Case study I: The Russian Federation in Serbia*

Vuk Vuksanović, in his article, "So similar, and yet so different: Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans – the case of Serbia", argues that claims about identity-based units as essential factors shaping Russian interests in Serbia are overestimated. Vuksanović further says that Russia's engagement with Serbia is grounded in pragmatic geopolitical calculations. Most notably, the use of the Kosovo issue as a lever to constrain Western influence and reinforce Russia's status as an indispensable diplomatic actor in European security affairs. Cultural and religious affinities thus serve to legitimise and facilitate Russian involvement. However, the underlying logic of Moscow's approach

remains firmly anchored in strategic interests, power projection, and the maintenance of geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis the EU and the United States (Vuksanović 2023).

While Vuksanović analytically separates Russia's geopolitical calculations and power-projection strategies from identity-based motives such as Orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism, this study adopts a different perspective, arguing that these pragmatic and strategic interests do not operate in isolation but are instead grounded in and legitimised by intangible identity narratives. Rather than denying the centrality of material and geopolitical considerations, the argument advanced here maintains that in contemporary geopolitics, such calculations are frequently embedded within culturally and historically constructed frameworks of meaning, making it increasingly difficult to disentangle power politics from identity-based drivers.

In turn, Asya Metodieva, in her policy paper titled "Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans", draws attention to the six toolkits of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans: media, security cooperation, cultural organisations/NGOs, energy, church, patriotic/nationalistic groups. Analysing Russian regional policies from this perspective, the author argues that due to well-organised proxy networks in the Western Balkans, the Kremlin, in fact, establishes solid ground for manipulation through media, culture, and other related activities since, in this case, soft power smoothly pushes the need for hard power into the background (Metodieva 2019).

It is sufficient to note that in the collective memory of the Serbs, Russia is associated with the country that provided significant support to Serbia during its 19th-century struggles for autonomy and liberation from Ottoman rule. Those narratives centred on Pan-Slavism, Orthodox Christianity, and shared historical memory. They form a symbolic and emotional infrastructure that Moscow exploits to legitimise its presence and present itself as the guardian of Serbian national interests. Pan-Slavism, an ideological movement that emerged in the 19th century, sought the cultural and political unification of Slavic people, particularly under the protective wing of the Russian Empire (Boldin 2022; Nikolova 2022). The theoretical basis of this concept was perceived from different perspectives in various political and academic circles. Some were cautious considering Pan-Slavism as utopia, while others embraced it as a legitimate ideological framework for resisting Western European domination and preserving Slavic cultural and spiritual autonomy.

Orthodox Christianity functions as a central narrative instrument in Russia's approach towards Serbia, rather than merely a shared religious heritage. While the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches maintain long-standing ties, Moscow mobilises Orthodoxy primarily as a civilisational framework through which bilateral relations are legitimised.

By portraying the Orthodox faith as the moral core of a broader Russo-Serbian community, Russian state and ecclesiastical actors transform religious affinity into a political resource, framing Russia's presence in Serbia not as external influence but as natural solidarity in opposition to Western secularism and moral relativism (Patriarch Porfirije Thanks the Russian Church 2022).

Alongside religion, the selective use of collective memory, particularly World War II, constitutes a second pillar of Russia's narrative strategy. By emphasising shared sacrifice and the Red Army's role in liberating Belgrade, Moscow frames contemporary relations as part of a continuous historical alliance. High-profile commemorations, such as Vladimir Putin's participation in the 2014 Belgrade military parade, serve to transform historical memory into a political message of loyalty and continuity. At the same time, this narrative marginalises more complex episodes of Yugoslav history, producing a simplified and instrumentalised memory framework that supports Russia's present-day role (Borger 2014). The event was designed not only to honour the past but also to convey a message of continued loyalty and shared struggle. Russian media and official statements often emphasise that "Russia stood with Serbia in the darkest times". Moreover, Russia draws upon selective interpretations of Yugoslav history, celebrating pan-Slavic solidarity while marginalising elements that complicate the narrative, such as Tito's break with Stalin or the internal pluralism of the former Yugoslavia. By foregrounding the WWII alliance and downplaying subsequent tensions, Russia simplifies the historical record into a usable memory framework that validates its current role in Serbia (Litvinova 2024).

The Kosovo issue represents the most direct convergence of narrative strategy and geopolitical interest in Russia's policy towards Serbia. Since 2008, Moscow's rejection of Kosovo's independence has aligned Russia with Serbia's territorial claims while simultaneously challenging Western norms of intervention and reinforcing the principle of state sovereignty (Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankic n.d.). By using its veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia has turned Kosovo into a key lever of influence in the Western Balkans. Given Kosovo's central place in Serbian national identity, Russia's unwavering support enhances its soft power and bolsters nationalist and Eurosceptic forces. It complicates Serbia's EU integration by encouraging a continued balancing strategy in Belgrade's foreign policy (Maligi 2023).

More than a legal issue, however, Kosovo represents a key discursive battleground in Russia's ideological challenge to the liberal global order (Ibid.). By supporting Serbia's claim, Russia presents itself as a defender of international norms supposedly violated by the West. Simultaneously, this positioning enables Moscow to strengthen its soft power appeal in Serbia, where Kosovo remains an emotionally charged issue tied to

national identity, historical trauma, and religious symbolism. Russia's unwavering support also serves to leverage influence within Serbian politics, particularly among nationalist and Eurosceptic factions. By reinforcing the idea that only Moscow truly supports Serbia's claim to Kosovo, Russia encourages a balancing strategy in Belgrade's foreign policy, complicating Serbia's EU integration trajectory (McBride 2023).

### *Economic Cooperation between Russia and Serbia*

Economic ties between Russia and Serbia are deep-rooted and multifaceted, with energy, trade, infrastructure, finance, and investment forming the core of this enduring partnership. Despite geopolitical pressures, the two nations maintain robust commercial links built on historical affinity. At the heart of the relationship lies Russia's dominance in Serbia's energy sector. Through pipeline infrastructure such as TurkStream and Balkan Stream, Russia delivers approximately 3 billion m<sup>3</sup> of natural gas annually – meeting some 90% of Serbia's consumption. Moreover, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) – Serbia's national oil and gas giant – is majority owned by Gazprom Neft (45%), Gazprom (11%), and the Serbian state. NIS is currently seeking waivers from U.S. sanctions to maintain Russian crude pipelines, reflecting both geopolitical complexity and economic leverage.

Trade turnover between Serbia and Russia reached nearly \$3 billion in 2023, with Russian exports at \$1.7 billion (mainly energy) and Serbian exports at \$1.2 billion in the primary sectors. Although trade dropped in 2024 to around \$2.34 billion, likely due to sanctions and price fluctuations, it rebounded with Q1 2025 trade up 8%, driven by mineral, chemical, and food goods. The Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union (including Russia) facilitates tariff-free trade, though analysts say Serbia has not fully capitalised on this mechanism beyond energy and raw materials (Trade Turnover 2025). As of mid-2024, over 2,100 Russian-owned companies operate in Serbia (e.g., in IT, energy, and banking).

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Serbia has pursued a balancing act, publicly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity while firmly refusing to impose international sanctions on Moscow. This dual approach reflects Belgrade's attempt to align with international legal norms without jeopardising its strategic relations with Russia. President Aleksandar Vučić has repeatedly affirmed Serbia's respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, asserting that this position aligns with the UN Charter's principles. In March 2022, Serbia voted in favour of two UN resolutions: one condemning Russia's military actions and another suspending Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council. Yet Belgrade has consistently ruled out sanctions, framing them as detrimental to Serbia's

interests, referring to Serbia's historical experience under NATO sanctions in the 1990s and its heavy reliance on Russian energy (Stojanovic 2022).

Vučić typically describes Serbia's position as neutral, neither siding with Ukraine nor standing staunchly with Russia. He emphasises a "Serbian interest" approach, avoiding moralising rhetoric. His participation in the Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit in Odesa in 2025 demonstrated Serbia's readiness to engage regionally, but his refusal to endorse a joint anti-Russian declaration reflected this diplomacy (Zoria 2025). Economic tensions have crystallised around NIS, Serbia's energy giant, majority-owned by Russian Gazprom. In early 2025, NIS was listed under Washington sanctions unless Serbia divested Russian ownership. Vučić appealed for US waivers, warning that sanctions could trigger a national fuel crisis. In March 2025, a US extension diverted an immediate crisis: Vučić thanked American partners while reiterating Serbia's refusal to abandon its Russian ties. Internally, Vučić faces pressure from both nationalist and pro-EU factions. Right-wing parties demand a complete refusal to sanction Russia, in part to safeguard Russia's ongoing support for Serbia regarding Kosovo. Meanwhile, pro-European groups advocate aligning sanctions with EU partners to maintain accession credibility. Serbia's establishment stance is characterised by a dual-track strategy: support for Ukraine's sovereignty within multilateral frameworks, paired with a firm refusal to impose sanctions on Russia.

### *Case study II: Türkiye in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

The foundations of Turkish-Bosnian relations are deeply rooted in a shared historical and religious legacy that dates back to the Ottoman Empire. That is why Turkish rule left an imprint on the cultural, religious, and political landscape of the region. The Ottomans established administrative institutions, religious endowments, mosques, madrasas, and urban infrastructure, laying the groundwork for a lasting cultural bond (Ekşi 2017). This Ottoman legacy has remained a central element in the collective memory of Bosniaks, who often view Turkey as a historical protector. For Turkey, the legacy of Ottoman rule in the Balkans has been instrumental in shaping its post-Cold War engagement with the region. Religious affinity continues to serve as a powerful dimension of Turkish-Bosnian relations. Turkey has supported the reconstruction of Islamic institutions and heritage sites destroyed during the Bosnian War, such as the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka and the Aladža Mosque in Foča. Through institutions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet), Turkey has invested in religious education, interfaith dialogue, and the promotion of Islamic culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This engagement is often welcomed by the Bosniak population, who perceive Turkey not only as a

partner but as part of their extended cultural and religious identity (Öztürk 2016; Sofos 2024).

In recent decades, economic diplomacy has emerged as one of the most dynamic and visible aspects of Turkish-Bosnian relations. Anchored in mutual interests and facilitated by cultural proximity and political goodwill, Turkey has steadily expanded its economic footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina through trade partnerships, infrastructure development, and direct investments. This economic engagement is often portrayed by Ankara as both a strategic and humanitarian mission – supporting the post-war reconstruction of Bosnia while deepening bilateral ties through shared prosperity (Spyros 2024). The Turkish construction company Cengiz İnşaat and others have become familiar names in Bosnia, often receiving large-scale infrastructure contracts backed by political agreements (Turkey’s Cengiz İnşaat, 2012).

Cultural diplomacy constitutes a central instrument through which Turkey translates its historical affinity with Bosnia and Herzegovina into a durable political and societal influence. Rather than operating as a purely cultural exchange mechanism, Turkish cultural engagement functions as a soft-power strategy aimed at embedding Turkey within Bosnia’s social and cognitive space, particularly among the Bosniak population. By promoting language, media, and educational linkages, Ankara seeks to cultivate long-term identification with Turkey that complements its diplomatic and economic presence while avoiding overt political conditionality.

The activities of the Yunus Emre Institute exemplify this strategic logic. Since the establishment of its Sarajevo branch in 2009, the institute has served not merely as a cultural centre but as an institutional hub for shaping cultural preferences and symbolic affiliation. Turkish language courses, cultural events, and academic exchanges create repeated points of contact through which Turkish history, values, and contemporary narratives are normalised within Bosnian public life. The growing popularity of Turkish language learning, reinforced by the wide consumption of Turkish television and media content, illustrates how cultural production operates as an indirect yet effective channel of influence (Yunus 2025). For many Bosnians, especially youth, the institute provides a gateway to Turkish scholarships, educational exchanges, and professional development opportunities. The popularity of Turkish language studies in Bosnia reflects both practical interest and cultural affinity, often tied to Turkish television, music, and historical curiosity. Education is also a key component of Turkey’s cultural engagement strategy. Education represents a particularly consequential dimension of Turkey’s cultural diplomacy. Scholarship programmes such as Türkiye Scholarships and the activities of the Maarif Foundation contribute to the formation of transnational educational networks that extend Turkey’s influence beyond short-term engagement. By educating Bosnian students

in Turkish universities and supporting Turkish-funded schools within Bosnia, Ankara fosters the emergence of socially embedded elites familiar with the Turkish language, institutions, and political culture. These students are trained at Turkish universities across disciplines, and many of them return to Bosnia as cultural ambassadors and influential professionals. These educational links not only cultivate the pro-Turkish elite in Bosnia but also deepen interpersonal networks that sustain long-term cooperation. Taken together, these cultural and educational initiatives allow Turkey to position itself as a benevolent and culturally proximate partner, reinforcing its image as a legitimate stakeholder in Bosnia's post-conflict development. In contrast to more coercive or transactional forms of influence exercised by other external actors, Turkey's cultural diplomacy operates through attraction, familiarity, and historical resonance, generating a form of influence that is subtle, resilient, and difficult to counter through traditional geopolitical means.

### *Narrative Strategy of Ankara: Türkiye as a Traditional Actor in the Balkans*

According to Vuksanović, Turkey seeks to exploit openings created by the EU's weakened presence in the Balkans to expand its diplomatic leverage, economic ties, and security influence, while carefully avoiding actions that could trigger a direct confrontation with Western actors. In this reading, cultural and historical narratives function less as guiding principles and more as instrumental tools, selectively employed to enhance Turkey's soft power and legitimise its regional presence. Overall, Vuksanović portrays Turkey as a pragmatic actor that adapts its Balkan policy to shifting regional power balances, prioritising flexibility, mediation roles, and diplomatic balancing over ideological commitments or revisionist ambitions.

Turkish engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be understood solely through the lenses of diplomacy, trade, or cultural exchange; it is equally shaped by a deliberate and carefully constructed narrative strategy. Since the early 2000s, and particularly under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Ankara has increasingly relied on identity-based narratives to frame its regional role, using history, religion, and moral responsibility as tools to legitimise its presence in the Balkans. In this context, Bosnia occupies a special place, allowing Türkiye to present itself simultaneously as a protector of Muslim communities, a guarantor of regional stability, and a successor state with historical responsibilities rooted in the Ottoman legacy.

Central to this narrative is Türkiye's self-presentation as a guardian of Bosniak Muslims and a moral actor shaped by the memory of the Yugoslav wars. By emphasising its humanitarian assistance, political

support for Bosniak leadership, and rhetorical solidarity during and after the 1990s conflict, Ankara has cultivated an image of fraternal commitment rather than strategic interest (Çıldır 2015). Türkiye's humanitarian aid to Bosnian refugees and vocal support for Bosniak leaders like Alija Izetbegović helped construct an image of Türkiye as a moral and fraternal actor. This perception has been reinforced through political rhetoric. Turkish leaders, including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, frequently refer to the shared destiny and spiritual kinship between Turks and Bosniaks. In public speeches, Erdoğan has positioned Türkiye as the "protector of Sarajevo" and emphasised that "Bosnia is our trust from our ancestors". Such statements are not merely symbolic: they serve to legitimise Türkiye's presence in the region by invoking religious solidarity and post-imperial responsibility (Somun 2021).

At the same time, Ankara strategically complements this identity-based discourse with a narrative of pragmatic moderation. By maintaining relations with Bosniak, Croat, and Serb political actors and promoting trilateral diplomatic formats involving Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Türkiye positions itself as an indispensable mediator in a fragmented political environment. This dual approach, combining selective solidarity with claims of neutrality, enhances Ankara's credibility as a stabilising regional power while limiting accusations of overt partisanship. This strategic moderation enhances Türkiye's credibility as a regional power and reinforces the narrative of its indispensable role in preserving Balkan peace (Talha 2016).

The concept of "historical responsibility" further anchors Türkiye's narrative strategy in Bosnia. Rather than distancing itself from its Ottoman past, the AKP-era leadership actively reinterprets imperial legacy as a source of soft power and legitimacy. Restoration projects led by institutions such as TİKA, including the reconstruction of war-destroyed mosques like Ferhadija and Aladža, serve not only cultural or humanitarian purposes but also symbolic ones. These projects signal continuity, presence, and return, framing Türkiye as a benevolent heir reclaiming its historical role. The notion of historical responsibility manifests in various policy initiatives. Restoration projects of Ottoman-era mosques, bridges, and public buildings carried out by institutions like TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) are more than acts of preservation; they are symbolic acts of return. The reconstruction of the Ferhadija and Aladža mosques, both destroyed during the Bosnian War, serves not only as architectural restorations but also as political claims: Türkiye is back, not as an empire, but as a benevolent actor with deep cultural and historical legitimacy (Talha 2016).

## *Impact on EU and NATO Integration: The Case of Bosnia and Serbia Amid Turkish and Russian Influence in the Balkans*

The Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans remains a strategic objective for the European Union and NATO. Yet, progress has been uneven and increasingly shaped by the geopolitical rivalry involving external actors, particularly Russia and Türkiye. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia represent two contrasting yet interlinked cases where domestic complexities and foreign influence intersect with aspirations for EU and NATO membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina formally aspires to join both the EU and NATO but faces significant internal and external challenges. Internally, the ethnically divided political system, with the Republic of Srpska (RS) often resisting centralisation and Western alignment, impedes coherent foreign policy-making. Externally, Russia openly supports RS and discourages NATO expansion in the region, viewing it as a direct threat to its influence. Moscow maintains close ties with RS President Milorad Dodik, who has repeatedly voiced opposition to NATO accession and promotes greater autonomy for the Serb entity (Cancar 2024).

Türkiye's role in Bosnia, by contrast, largely aligns with the West when it comes to supporting EU and NATO integration, particularly for the Bosniak population. Turkish officials have publicly endorsed Bosnia's path towards NATO, presenting Ankara as a stabilising partner (Türkiye's support 2022). However, Türkiye's increasing cultural and economic influence, framed in terms of religious and historical affinity, introduces a parallel axis of loyalty that may dilute Bosnia's singular orientation towards the EU. In practice, Türkiye's support often complements Western efforts. However, it also cultivates a narrative of Muslim solidarity that some European actors view with scepticism, especially in the context of rising Islamophobia and anti-migration sentiment in the EU (Bosnia-Herzegovina external 2023). In Serbia's case, the picture is more complex. While Serbia remains an EU candidate country, its progress has stalled due to tensions with Kosovo and ambiguous foreign policy alignment. Serbia refuses to join NATO and maintains strong military and energy ties with Russia, despite mounting pressure from Brussels and Washington, especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. President Aleksandar Vučić has skilfully balanced between East and West, accepting EU funds and negotiations while fostering close relations with Moscow and, increasingly, Ankara (Stojanovic 2025).

The overlapping influences of Türkiye and Russia in the Balkans produce a complex, multi-vector geopolitical environment that simultaneously enables and constrains EU and NATO integration efforts. Rather than merely being passive recipients of Western policies, Balkan states such as Bosnia and Serbia navigate competing external pressures,

balancing the incentives of EU and NATO membership against the strategic interests projected by Ankara and Moscow. In this context, Bosnia's institutional fragility makes it particularly susceptible to external manipulation, while Serbia's strategic ambiguity illustrates how states leverage external actors to preserve autonomy and extract concessions. Consequently, the prospects for successful Western enlargement in the region are not determined solely by internal reforms; they are equally contingent on the West's capacity to counteract Russian obstructionism and to strategically engage with Türkiye's increasingly autonomous regional diplomacy, whose actions can either complement or complicate European objectives depending on Ankara's alignment of interests.

### *Geopolitical Fragility in the Western Balkans: Proxy Risks and the Rise of Post-Western Regionalism*

The Western Balkans remains one of Europe's most fragile geopolitical zones, where historical grievances, contested borders, and ethnic divisions intersect with growing external influence. In recent years, the region has evolved into a microcosm of global power rivalries. Against this backdrop, two interrelated developments pose particular concern: the risk of proxy entanglements escalating intra-regional tensions and the emergence of a multipolar, post-Western regional order. While the Western Balkans has not been the site of direct great power confrontation, it is increasingly vulnerable to proxy muddles, where external actors support local political elites, ethnic groups, or nationalist factions to serve broader geopolitical ends. This dynamic creates an unstable equilibrium, raising the risk of internal disputes evolving into fuelled crises.

Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies the complex interplay of external influences in a multi-vector geopolitical space. The Serb-majority entity, the Republic of Srpska (RS), under Milorad Dodik, functions as a conduit for Moscow's strategic objectives, receiving political, diplomatic, and financial support in exchange for obstructing Bosnia's NATO aspirations and challenging the authority of state-level institutions. This relationship illustrates a classic proxy dynamic: Russia leverages Dodik and his network to weaken Western integration, while Dodik exploits Russian backing to consolidate domestic power and resist international constraints (Gurakuç 2024). In parallel, Türkiye has cultivated ties with the Bosniak political leadership, particularly the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), framing its support in terms of historical, religious, and cultural solidarity and providing both rhetorical and developmental assistance. While Ankara formally endorses Bosnia's territorial integrity, this selective engagement with specific ethnic constituencies inadvertently reinforces factional divisions and heightens mutual suspicion across communities.

In the context of Bosnian politics, it should be noted that Croats are one of the three constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily concentrated in the Federation entity. Politically, they maintain their own party structures, most prominently the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which seeks to protect Croat interests within the complex power-sharing system. Croatia, a neighbouring state and EU member since 2013, serves as a model of political and economic integration with Western institutions, and this alignment influences the orientation of Croat political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the context of external influence, Croat leaders have at times acted as a balancing force, negotiating between Western-aligned policies, Turkish initiatives, and Russian engagement in the region. While not aligned with Türkiye as strongly as the Bosniak leadership, the Croats play a critical role in shaping coalition governments and influencing domestic decision-making. Their position often requires careful negotiation and alliance-building, which can affect the overall efficacy of external actors' strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this regard, proxy dynamics are also at play in Kosovo and Serbia. While the US and key EU states recognise Kosovo and back its institutions, Russia supports Serbia's position of non-recognition (Zweers 2023). Türkiye recognised Kosovo in 2008. It enjoys close ties with Pristina but maintains neutral or even warm relations with Belgrade as well. Even limited incidents, such as clashes in North Kosovo or inflammatory political declarations, can be opened for internationalisation, drawing in competing external patrons who treat local conflicts as opportunities to assert strategic influence. The 2022 Ukraine war and rising East-West tensions have made this risk more acute, as Russia seeks to destabilise the Western periphery while Türkiye and other actors push for more autonomous, multi-aligned regional roles.

The Western Balkans today is characterised not by a singular hegemonic project, such as EU or NATO enlargement, but by a fragmented and post-Western regional order. In this context, regional actors navigate a multipolar environment in which external powers – Western institutions, Türkiye, Russia, and China – offer overlapping and sometimes conflicting incentives. States leverage these relationships selectively, based on pragmatic calculations, historical and cultural identities, or economic opportunities, producing foreign policy behaviours that are often fluid and internally inconsistent. Serbia exemplifies this pattern: it sustains strategic partnerships with Russia and China while simultaneously advancing EU accession negotiations and maintaining cooperative ties with Türkiye. This dual or multi-vector approach does not entirely displace the West. It decouples regional dynamics from exclusive Western dominance, complicating the implementation of coherent integration strategies and highlighting the strategic agency of Balkan states in exploiting the interplay of competing external influences.

## Conclusion

The Western Balkans exemplifies the complexities of contemporary multipolar geopolitics, where historical legacies, identity politics, and strategic patronage intersect with aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia illustrate contrasting yet complementary cases in which external actors, particularly Russia and Türkiye, leverage asymmetric relationships with local elites to project influence and embed themselves within domestic political structures. In Bosnia, Türkiye uses historical, religious, and cultural affinities to cultivate ties with the Bosniak political leadership, employing economic, educational, and cultural tools to achieve soft power influence. Ankara's engagement, framed in terms of historical responsibility and moral guardianship, positions Türkiye as both a stabilising actor and a selective partner whose alignment with specific communities can reinforce internal divisions. Conversely, Russia's approach in Serbia combines energy dependence, military cooperation, and diplomatic support with Orthodox Christian and Pan-Slavic narratives to sustain alignment with Russian strategic interests and constrain Western integration.

These cases demonstrate the significance of proxy politics and strategic patronage. Local elites exploit external support to consolidate authority, resist reforms, and negotiate within a multipolar environment, while external powers selectively invest in relational leverage that balances pragmatism with symbolic legitimacy. The Western Balkans today embodies a post-Western regionalism, where the traditional dominance of the EU and NATO is contested by alternative powers capable of exploiting local cleavages. States such as Serbia navigate multi-vector foreign policies, balancing Russia, Türkiye, China, and the EU, while Bosnia experiences parallel influence axes that complement Western engagement but introduce alternative loyalty structures. This overlapping influence increases institutional uncertainty, amplifies polarisation, and constrains Euro-Atlantic strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of integrating constructivist insights, particularly identity, historical memory, and cultural narratives, into analyses of regional power dynamics. Russia and Türkiye show that influence operates not solely through material leverage but through relational legitimacy, narrative construction, and selective empowerment of local proxies. The Western Balkans is thus not a passive arena of external projects but a fluid geopolitical space where local actors exercise strategic agency and external powers pursue asymmetric influence. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing EU and NATO integration prospects, managing regional stability, and navigating the evolving interplay between Western and non-Western actors in Southeast Europe.

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