

# **THE MUSLIM FACTOR IN RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Guided by geopolitical theory, the Balkans can be seen as a geopolitical node of strategic importance, due to its role as a crossroads between East and West, intertwining cultures and religions. Precisely because of this, the region has always been an area of rivalry between the great powers. This rivalry has accumulated great historical weight in the region, which is being used politically to divide the countries of the Balkans. As a result, today we use the term "Western Balkans" (WB), which should distinguish those countries of the region that are not part of the EU, from those that are full members of the organization. This distinction as well ongoing changes in the global geopolitical balance of power created a vacuum of influence in the region, which the Russian Federation gradually began to fill. Moscow has strengthened its influence in the region and challenged its pro-Western orientation using economic, political, cultural and religious levers.

The WB remained the last part of Europe not yet fully integrated into EU and NATO structures, and Moscow sees the geographical location of the region's countries at the crossroads of a united Europe. Unlike the post-Soviet zone, Russia is currently unable to enter the territory of the countries of the region and distance it from the EU and NATO. That is why Moscow attaches great importance to the situation in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia and Kosovo, seeking to influence events in Belgrade, the Serb-dominated part of Bosnia and Herzegovina - Republika Srpska, Podgorica, Skopje and Pristina. Due to historical and cultural preconditions, these countries are exposed to serious Russian hybrid pressure.

The region is a field of the ongoing "hybrid war" between Russia and the West. Given Moscow's enormous influence over local political, media and business circles, and support from the Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin can inflame ethnic and religious tensions, block reforms, support extreme nationalist and anti-Western groups, and take any necessary actions to prevent regional conflicts from being resolved. All this is the result of the historical past, the political and ethnic disputes and economic rivalry, which were and are caused in no small measure by Russia.

Based on the multi-ethnic and multi-religious demographic composition of the population of the above-mentioned countries and that of Russia, Moscow is looking for new ways to penetrate and exert influence in the region. For this

purpose, the Kremlin uses the Muslim factor, which is characteristic of the countries of the WB, to expand its toolkit of forms, methods and means to achieve its goals. This is possible because Russia has a Muslim republic (Chechnya) within it, whose leader (Ramzan Kadyrov) is highly trusted by Putin.

The connection between the Muslims of Russia and those of the countries of the WB is carried out through Moscow-controlled non-governmental organization - the "European Muslim Forum" (EMF), which work with governmental and non-governmental representatives of the countries of the region.

The article aims to examine the issue qualitatively, and mainly general scientific methods will be used (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction and historical) and some special ones, such as: economic, political and psychological, in accordance with the topic of the article. For this purpose, publicly available materials will be used, based on which research and critical analysis of the problem at hand will be done - various studies and analyses, primary and secondary data, documents and statistics.

In conclusion, an assessment will be made of Russia's actions and their potential to influence the social and political condition of the countries under consideration.

**Keywords:** *Russia, hybrid war, Western Balkans, Muslims, influence*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The new foreign policy doctrine of Russian President Vladimir Putin is based on the idea of a "Russian world". The concept is far from new, but its reformulated form of Russian imperialism. It began to play an important role already in the 19th century. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, it came back into vogue, because at that time an idea was urgently sought on which to build the new identity of Russia. Right-wing nationalist ideologues such as Alexander Dugin subsequently combined pan-Slavic ideas with an anti-Western and neo-imperial Russian nationalism. Their appeal reads: "Let's create the Russian world anew. We must stay together.", and by "we" we mean not only ethnic Russians, but also all "compatriots". It is about all Russian speakers, including those in nearby countries, Christians and Muslims, connected to Russian culture and history, rich enough to provide a basis for Putin's imperial ambitions. All of this has to do with the notion of Russia as an independent civilization, which is fundamental to Putin's claims of reviving the empire. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Moscow adopted Samuel Huntington's thesis on the "clash of civilizations" and transformed it into a guide for political action. It manifested itself for the first time after the NATO high-level meeting in Budapest in 2008, at which an unsuccessful wording was adopted without specific deadlines: that Ukraine and Georgia would join NATO.

Since then, we have witnessed a new stage of the confrontation between the East and the West, and the development of the idea of a "Russian World". As a result, we have witnessed heated conflicts such as the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the conflict in the North Caucasus, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine since this year. In parallel with these armed conflicts and indirect confrontation, processes took place and continue to develop, which in modern security science are defined as "hybrid war". A term that aims to encompass and emphasize all the specifics of contemporary conflicts, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In essence, there is nothing new in this "new" concept of war. Hybridity is a characteristic of every war, as the result of the application of actions, methods and means comprehensive in content, coordinated, with a common design and purpose.

The countries of the WB, which have a strong historical, cultural and religious connection with Russia, became the field of these parallel developing processes.

The main objectives of the Russian hybrid strategy in the WB are to protect, strengthen and expand Moscow's political, economic, cultural, religious and diplomatic influence, as an important part of the process of asserting the aspirations of the Vladimir Putin regime to increase Russian geopolitical prestige and status, opposing the North Atlantic integration of the countries of the region.

## **RUSSIA AND ISLAM**

Around the world religion is on the rise. A variety of trends, including demographic shifts, urbanization, and the global transformation of religion, indicate that religion will help shape the dynamics of existing, new, and emerging great powers. Globalization's transformational effect on religion will also play a key role in the prevalence of global terrorism, religious conflict, and other threats to international security. Globalization also gives greater influence on ethnic and religious diasporas. [9]

The image of Russia in the world is rarely associated with Islam and Islamic identity, in general. While Orthodox Christianity is the country's predominant confession, not many know that Russia is home to as many as 16 million Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. [7] However, there is no recent census to verify this figure (the last one is from year 2010). [4]

Historically, Islam has not been instituted in Russia in a deliberate fashion as a conceptual part of national identity until the breakup of the USSR more than two decades ago. Stark secularism of the former Soviets prevented any religion from evolving either within or without the official political framework. Thus, the role of traditional creeds of the diverse ethnicities and peoples included in the former Soviet Union remained understated for decades. It is only recently that

Islam in Russia has found itself less ‘chained’ by the restrictions that had previously shackled it for centuries, before and during the founding of the former Soviet Union. [4]

The policy of the 2000s along with the government policy to improve Russia’s image in the Muslim world, seems to have yielded encouraging results in terms of Russia’s overall standing. In terms of mass consciousness, Russia is seeking to present itself in the image of a friendly country to Islam and Muslims. That is, it is cultivating the image of an alternative to the belligerence of the US Neoconservative voices (‘Neocons’), who constantly set themselves against the Muslim world with persistent yet fruitless attempts to spread Western political values such as through democracy promotion. Russia does not have a similar policy and does not follow in the footsteps of the former Soviet Union in terms of seeking to spread communism. [4]

This government policy trend has turned out to be really encouraging. Russian leaders and politicians repeatedly stress the significance of Islam as integral to the political fabric of statehood, historically and in the contemporary era. [4]

The “Islamic factor” also remains a part of Moscow’s foreign policy. With the end of the bipolar global system, Islam has fully integrated into international politics, while forces operating under religious slogans have become international political actors. [8]

Outside observers typically consider Russia’s large Muslim population to be a great challenge (or even a threat) for the country and its leadership. Nevertheless, President Vladimir Putin appears to have a different view and may see not only challenges but opportunities, including in Russia’s diplomacy everywhere in the Islamic world. He has increasingly emphasized Russians shared moral values and tries to connect Russia’s “traditional” values to those in the Middle East, Asia and other non-Western societies. [1]

The most important thing for Russia was to find a place for itself in the world and compensate for worsened relations with the West by a more active policy in other regions. After Vladimir Putin came to power, the Muslim vector of Russia’s policy increased. [1]

As one of the poles of a new global order, ‘Orthodox civilization’ corresponds to the main goals of Russian foreign policy. The idea of a civilization with the potential to reconcile western Christianity and Islam could give a new dimension to the international role of Russia.

While clearly identifying Russia as a largely Christian country, President Vladimir Putin is attempting to establish a dividing line between the shared values of believers in many religious traditions and those of the “decadent” secular West,

to make Western values into a liability rather than an asset for Western governments. Russia has developed in recent years a new doctrine, according to which Muslim countries are Russia's natural allies in the confrontation with the West. [2]

This may become Russia's most significant effort to date to develop a soft power strategy to combat Western influence in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and elsewhere in the Islamic world. One event that contributed to the establishment of these special relations was Russia's accession to the Organization of the Islamic Conference as observer nation with a Muslim minority.

As practiced today, Russian hybrid warfare can have at least three objectives: Capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force; creating a pretext for overt, conventional military action; using hybrid measures to influence the politics and policies of countries in the West and elsewhere.[3] This objective is currently the most pressing challenge for Western governments: the Kremlin seeks to ensure that political outcomes in targeted countries serve Russia's national interests. Most vulnerable are countries with weak legal and anticorruption measures or where key domestic groups share Russia's interests or worldview, as is the case in the WB.

## **ISLAM AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL OF RUSSIA TOWARDS SOME OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Russia is trying to negatively influence the security situation in the WB through Islamic religious communities and imams, through Moscow-controlled NGO - European Muslim Forum.

The delegation of the EMF has made visits to Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). In Serbia, the delegation was received by the former Deputy Speaker of the Assembly and leader of the Justice and Reconciliation Party, Muamer Zukorlić (died 06.11.2021). As a result of the talks, a cooperation agreement was reached between the Forum and the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) in Serbia. According to the arrangements, they will work on the construction of a hafiz (religious school for the study of the Quran) in Novi Pazar, which, according to initial plans, will be named after Ahmet Kadyrov, the father of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. In connection with the implementation of the project, the IRC in Serbia had already sent a letter to Ramzan Kadyrov (it is usual practice to seek official approval from senior Russian officials when the host country agrees to its proposed cooperation), and his reply is currently awaited. [10]

During the visit to BiH, meetings were held with the speaker of the Sarajevo City Council, Yasmin Adem, and the leader of the Democratic Action Party, Bakir

Izetbegovic. As a result of the talks, it was agreed that three cities in BiH (Sarajevo, Zavidovici and Gorazde) and Chechnya (Grozny, Gudermes and Shali) would be twinned. [6]

The representatives of the Forum and the local government of Zavidovici reached an agreement in principle, according to which the Forum would provide a donation in the amount of 500,000 euros for the renovation of the infrastructure of the municipality, on the condition that one of the main streets of the city would be named after Ahmet Kadyrov. In order to fulfill this condition, the head of Zavidovici municipality Nashim Mujanovic sent a letter to Ramzan Kadyrov, in response to which he should receive official consent. [5]

*Fig. 1. Abdul-Vahed Niyazov with the mayors of Sarajevo, Gorazde and Zavidovici, and Letter of intent for twinning Chechen and BiH cities.*



It is indicated that the mayors of Sarajevo and Gorazde did not send letters to Kadyrov, but the mayor of the second city, Ernest Imamovic, sent one to the EMF. Behind this rapprochement between the Muslims of BiH and Chechnya was the chairman of the EMF and former president of the Islamic Cultural Center in Moscow, Abdul-Vahed Niyazov, who in the period 1999-2003 was a deputy in the Russian Duma from the list of the "Unity" bloc (today "United Russia") and is listed as close to President Vladimir Putin. The former reis-ul-ulema of the Islamic Religious Community of BiH and former member of the EMF Mustafa Ceric also contributed to the successful development of relations between the two Muslim communities, who repeatedly spoke positively about Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya and Russia (in his opinion, Moscow very successfully inclusive of the country's Muslim population). During its visit to BiH, the delegation of the EMF also held a meeting with representatives of the newly created Bosnian People's Party - Faith, People, State. Its initiator was Sead Sehic (nicknamed Chechen), representative of the EMF for the Balkans. It is known that Sehic lived in Moscow and graduated from the Moscow State University "M. V. Lomonosov" and his brother (Samir) is a member of the Bosnian People's Party – Faith, People, State.

**Fig. 2.** *Abdul-Vahed Niyazov and Sead Sehic with the president of Bosnian People's Party - Faith, People, State, prof. Sanin Musa.*



The delegation of the EMF announced that it had met also with the Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazovic, the Speaker of the Parliament of Northern Macedonia, Talat Xhaferi, and the President of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, Mufti Naim Ternava. There is no information about the results of these meetings, so it can be considered that they were more of a protocol nature and the hosts rather showed hospitality.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given Ramzan Kadyrov's closeness to Vladimir Putin, the nationality of a large part of the members of the forum (citizens of the Russian Federation), the visits to BiH and Serbia and the initiatives taken, it is very likely that Moscow will use the established relations between the EMF, Chechnya and the countries of the WB, as a tool to influence the Muslim communities in the countries of the region, or at least to have their goodwill and friendship.

In addition to the above-mentioned connections and dependencies, a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the mentioned projects and the rapprochement of the Muslim communities of BiH and Serbia on the one hand and Chechnya on the other is the fact that the Muslims from the Balkan Peninsula and those from Chechnya profess Hanafi Islam (variety of Sunni Islam).

For the moment, it cannot be said with certainty that these processes pose a threat to the security or future integration of the countries of the region into the EU and NATO, but they are indicators that must be monitored, analysed and, if it is necessary, preventive actions must be taken.

A possible obstacle to the deepening of the development of cooperation between the Muslim communities of the WB with Chechnya and the EMF may be Turkey's interest in the region, as Ankara invests significant resources (financial, economic, political and others) in Sanjak and BiH, and this may generate indirect conflict of interest between Russia and Turkey.

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