



# SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Balkan Affairs Brief

## **Russia's Balkan Client: Republika Srpska and the Legacy of Srebrenica**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republika Srpska emerged from the Bosnian War as a political entity for the ethnic Serbs within the country's borders. During the war, they attempted to create a Serb-only state through the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, culminating with the Srebrenica Genocide of 1995, where 9,000 Bosniaks were systematically murdered in July of that year. Russia, for its part, has maintained close ties to the Bosnian Serbs, directly and also through their close ties with Serbia's government in Belgrade. Russian volunteers served alongside Serbs in the Bosnian War, the Kremlin provides political cover for Milorad Dodik's government, and they block attempts to create international consensus around the crimes committed in Bosnia. While this genocide and the crimes of Ratko Mladić are an issue of Bosnian and Serbian importance, we must critique Russia's position of providing cover for war crimes and exploiting the unresolved legacy of Srebrenica.

### Brief History- Bosnian War and Creation of Republika Srpska

The Bosnian War lasted from 1992 to 1995, following the fracturing of the Yugoslavian government. Bosniak Muslims, Croats, and Serbs all fought for territorial control, with the backing of outside states, such as Croatia and Serbia. As the Bosnian Serbs attempted to create an ethnically Serb



territory, violence fell on the Bosniaks of eastern Bosnia. Srebrenica became a haven for Bosniak Muslims fleeing the violence in the area, as it was under the protection of the Bosnian Army, and later in 1993 the UN declared it to be a safe area. In March 1995, following orders from the President of Republika Srpska (RS), Ratko Mladić captured Srebrenica and over 8,000 boys and men, forcing 30,000 women and children to leave the area. They systematically killed these

8,000 Bosniaks, burying them in mass graves. Both the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia have ruled this to be a genocide. The Dayton Agreement formally ended the Bosnian War and created oversight committees to enforce peace. Today, the Republika Srpska still exists as a semi-independent region within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### Russia's Volunteers in the War

Russia's involvement with Republika Srpska and in Bosnia predates Putin, beginning at the time of the Bosnian War. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, and his government attempted measures to cooperate with Western powers. They were a witness, but not a signatory of the Dayton Agreement. They sent soldiers on the peacekeeping mission and held a seat on the

Peace Implementation Council. Despite this, Russia has always maintained close ties with Republika Srpska.

The government provided support for Serbs and Bosnian Serbs as well. Russian volunteers fought alongside Bosnian Serbs in the Army of the Republika Srpska, with the European Council on Foreign Relations estimating around 500 volunteers in all. A key individual within this volunteer outfit is Igor Girkin, who, following his time in Bosnia, has been a key figure in the 2014 Russian annexation of Ukraine, the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, and has fought in Chechnya and Transnistria. Since the Bosnian War, Russia has played into both sides of this conflict. They have paid lip service to the West, sending peacekeepers and sitting on the panels, while providing political cover and sending ideological volunteers to the army responsible for the genocide at Srebrenica.

### **Russia Today- Vetoes and Support**

The relationship between the Bosnian Serbs of Republika Srpska and the Russian Federation in the postwar period, especially under Putin. Russia provides little material support to Republika Srpska (RP); most comes from other countries like Hungary and Serbia. In fact, Russia puts relatively few resources into their relationship. However, because of its strategic position and savvy media networks, Russia has established itself as the political backer of the RP. As Russia's relationship deteriorated with the West, it began a campaign to undermine EU and NATO influence in the Balkans, importantly by allying itself with Serbia and Serbian Extremist groups in former Yugoslavian states. They exploit the Serbs' mistrust of the West due to grievances stemming from the breakup of Yugoslavia and position themselves as an ideological ally who shares a similar culture and religion, Eastern Orthodoxy. The main way Russia provides political support is by using its international position to provide cover for the regime and the past genocide. In 2015, Russia blocked a UN Security Council Resolution that marked the 20th anniversary of the Genocide, calling it "politically motivated". This helps advance RS political goals, as do Russian efforts to oppose a stronger Sarajevo-based central government for Bosnia and Herzegovina and OHR oversight in Republika Srpska. Moscow has opposed declarations that Republika Srpska has no right to secede, questioned the legitimacy of judgments from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and resisted statements supporting Bosnia's Constitutional Court. Russia has also threatened to veto extensions of EUFOR Althea, the international peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, using the issue as leverage in disputes over the Office of the High Representative and broader Western involvement. All of this shows Moscow's role in Bosnia's internal politics. They are willing to undermine the West at any turn, and they do so through very little political cost.

Apart from international opposition to Western efforts in Bosnia, Russia also provides training for RS police forces, who are taking worrying steps to form armed forces independent of the Bosnian Army. At the 2023 Republika Srpska Day, Wagner troops appeared alongside Bosnian Serbs. Through Russian investments, they have incorporated Srbijagas and Gas-Res, a Serbian natural gas

company. They are attempting to expand operations into the SR, which can show real material support from the Kremlin. Compared with the European Union, Moscow provides relatively little financial support to Republika Srpska. Instead, its influence comes through political backing, diplomatic protection, ideological affinity, and strategic support. This allows Russia to reinforce Republika Srpska's position and challenge Western efforts in Bosnia without needing to dominate the entity economically.

### **Dodik and The Russia Sphere**

The key figure bridging the Republika Srpska to Russia is Milorad Dodik. A former president of RS, leader of the political party SNSD, and a vocal opponent of Bosnia's Nato partnership and the sanctions against Russia. He is a longtime demagogue for Bosnian Serb secession from the central government in Sarajevo, and has spent his political career challenging Bosnia's central institutions. Russia provides political cover for this grandstanding, and throughout the 2000s until very recently, a pattern emerged between Russian support and Dodik. Dodik would do something that would challenge the West, such as removing Bosnian Serb support for a certain institution or organization, then deal with blowback from the OHR and other Western institutions. Russia then backs Dodik, provides political cover, and Dodik backs away from the confrontation while continuing to publicly grandstand. This relationship was personal too: Dodik met with Putin several times over the years, and Putin even received the highest medal the Republika Srpska government gave out. So, this relationship was central to the two countries' relationship: Putin provides Dodik with international legitimacy, which he then turns into political capital at home, where he presents himself as a savvy statesman with international standing.



This system works for Russia because it doesn't require many resources to maintain the relationship. Russia's influence overlaps with interests from local politicians who already have constitutional power within Bosnia and are looking for international backing against a Western-supported Sarajevo government. So Russia acts as a spoiler, backing one side of the power struggle without committing much. The goal is to keep Bosnia divided and in need of Western attention. Without cohesion, it cannot threaten Russian interests, and its dysfunction jams up NATO and the EU.

**The Legacy of Srebrenica - Why does this matter?**

Srebrenica was one of the worst crimes to happen to the European continent since the holocaust. It was not an isolated event and was directly caused by the actions of the Bosnian Serbs and their efforts to create a homogeneous state in a country with many different ethnicities. There has not been true justice for this. Serbia and Republika Srpska deny the genocide, distort reality, and weaponize it to maintain their position. Russia's position, where they block UN resolutions to commemorate the genocide and block accountability for it, puts them squarely against international consensus.

The Bosnian War was not a long time ago, and its divisions and wounds are still fresh in many people's minds. Russia continues to exploit grievances and hate as part of its broader effort to prevent Bosnia from consolidating Western-oriented institutions and foreign policy. In the political game for influence over Eastern Europe, this is only one part. However, with the recent death of war criminal Ratko Mladić, it is important to understand Russia's foreign policy in cases like this. They side with genocidaires, with war criminals, and provide cover for them. They refuse to let wounds heal for their own personal gain. That is why Srebrenica matters.

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