

RUSSIAN SUBVERSIVE INFLUENCE ON ISLAMIC RADICALISM IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Professional paper

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Abstract: After the outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992 – 1995) and of the armed conflicts in Albania, (1997), Kosovo (1998 – 1999) and North Macedonia (2001), the unchecked influx of dozens of extremist Islamist organizations from the Middle East began. Those organizations invested millions of Dollars to propagate a radical ideology and stoke religious hatred in all Western Balkan countries populated by Muslims.

Furthermore, subversive activities of Islamic organizations have been observed since the beginning of the Russian military aggression in

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Ukraine. Those organizations support Putin openly and disseminate negative propaganda against the Western world, in line with certain doctrines pertaining to expanding Russian influence in the Muslim world. Additionally, they foster interreligious hatred in the region.

Keywords: Extremism, Radicalism, Islamism, Western Balkans, Russian Influence

Introduction

Russian authorities are fueling new political and interethnic conflicts through their secret services and the pro-Russian structures they created in the region on a continual basis in order to push back Western influence on the Western Balkans and especially in order to hinder those countries from being integrated into the EU and the NATO, and they are also sabotaging the efforts by the EU and the USA to normalize relationships between Serbia and Kosovo, and they are likewise supporting Serbian separatist endeavors in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were also directly involved in the failed coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016 as well as in the assault on the Parliament of Northern Macedonia in 2017, etc.

Alongside those subversive Russian activities in the Western Balkans, Russian state media and pro-Russian structures within the region launched a systematic propaganda campaign against the USA, the EU, and the NATO, whom they accuse of being no reliable partners for any country in the Balkans, in order to enhance the reputation of Russia there and to impose Russia on the region as a mediator and as a guarantor for peace and security.

The methods of Russian subversive influence on the Muslim population in the countries of the Western Balkans

Knowing that religion may easily be exploited in order to facilitate the implementation of the Russian strategy, the Russian secret services glorify through their agitation in the Southeastern countries of Europe populated by Slavic peoples, such as Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, and the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Slavic ethnicity and the orthodox religion they share, while portraying Putin at all times as a protector of the Slavic interests within the region. The influence of Russian secret services on these states is openly and publicly borne out not just by different political, religious, and cultural cooperations or economic investments, but also by the furtherance of ultra-orthodox and nationalist associations within the region, such as the “Wolves of the Night” (Kovacević, 2018) as well as of pro-Russian associations, espionage centers (Bogdanović, 2023), or military training camps, such as “Serbian Honor” (Borger, 2018), the „E.N.O.T Corps”, etc. (Bryjka, 2019).

In the non-Slavic areas within the Western Balkans, which are mainly populated by ethnic Albanians, such as Kosovo, Albania, and a part of Northern Macedonia, Russia is trying to increase its influence through corruption and Islamic religious organizations. Thus, trustworthy media reported in 2022 that a former chairman of an oppositional party in Albania had also profited from a Russian 400-million-dollar trust fund intended for providing funding to foreign parties and political leaders (Taylor, 2022).

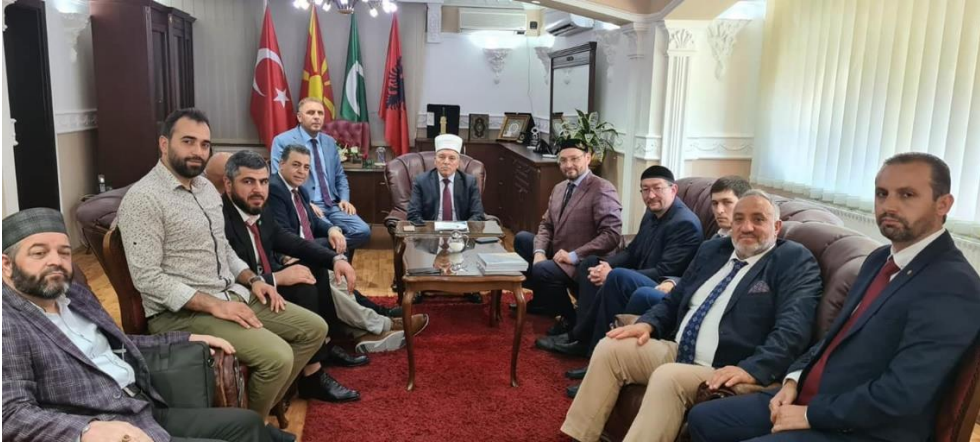


Figure 1. The delegation of the European Muslim Forum led by its president Abdul-Vahed Niyazov visited the Islamic Association in Skopje and Prishtina on July, 2021 (<https://bfi.mk/delegacion-i-forumit-mysliman-evropian-vizituan-reisul-ulemane/>)

Contrary to the mufti of Kosovo and North Macedonia, the mufti of Bosnia-Hercegovina, Husein Kavazović, didn't receive the delegation of the European Muslim Forum led by Abdul-Vahed Niyazov when they visited Bosnia-Hercegovina in July 2021.

In order to increase its influence on the Muslim world, the Kremlin formed different alliances with Islamic countries, such as Iran and Syria, and it is endeavoring to restore relations with Turkey. To that end, Putin declared during a speech he delivered in Malaysia in 2003 that “Russia was closely related to the Islamic world” and that “Orthodox Christianity was much closer to Islam than to Western Catholicism” (Antúnez, 2016). Related to these connections, some pro-Russian Muslim leaders published a “fatwa” (a religious statement and decision mandatory for Muslims), which justified invading Ukraine and underlined that the Muslim combatants who had been killed in action after fighting for Russia were martyrs (National threat assessment, 2023).

Russia is trying to increase its influence on the Western Balkans through the “European Muslim Forum”, which is engaging in a systematic negative propaganda campaign against the USA and other Western powers, while accusing them of “thriving Islamophobia” and of committing war crimes against the Islamic world. This organization was founded in Barcelona in 2018, and its registered office is in Brussels. The Serbian Muftis, Mevlud Dudić and Abdullah Numan, along with Behixhudin Shehapi from North Macedonia and Rifat Fejzić from Montenegro, are those members of the board of the European Muslim Forum who represent the Balkan region. It is mainly directed by Russian religious leaders, who are cooperating in different forms and manners with the Russian government. Abdul-Vahed Niyazov, who is the leader of this organization, is also considered to be working closely together with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Niyazov chaired the Islamic Cultural Center in Moscow, and he represented Putin’s party in the Russian Duma during the second war between Russia and Chechnya (1999-2003). Abdul-Vahed Niyazov is also closely cooperating with Chechen President Ramazan Kadyrov and with some right-wing Russian organizations as well as with some political and religious leaders from Turkey (Röhmel, 2023).

The European Muslim Forum is operating in some countries of the Balkan region, such as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Northern Macedonia, etc. (National threat assessment 2023). So, an agreement with the Islamic Association of Serbia was reached when the delegation of the European Muslim Forum visited Serbia in June 2021, according to which funding was to be provided for a religious Muslim school in Novi Pazar that was supposed to be named after former Chechen

President Ahmad Kadyrov¹. Likewise, they came to an agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina on naming a street in the city of Zavidoviç after Ahmad Kadyrov and on repairing it through an investment amounting to 500.000 Euros (RFE/RL, 2024). In Northern Macedonia, the leader of the European Muslim Forum, Abdul-Vahed Niyasov, signed two agreements. One of those contracts was concluded with the local authority of Tetovo on building a friendship monument named after Ahmad Kadyrov, and the other one was entered into with the authorities of Skopje on naming a park in the city “Ahmad Kadyrov friendship park” (Demokracia, 2021; RFE/RL, 2024).

Thus, the European Muslim Forum is operating as a “fifth column” in Southeastern Europe while promoting Ahmad Kadyrov as a religious figure and portraying his son, Ramazan Kadyrov, who is the current Chechen leader and an ally of Putin, as a protector of the Islamic faith.

Russian secret services endeavor to establish with the European Muslim Forum and the “Ahmad Kadyrov” trust fund a propaganda infrastructure for fueling hatred of and disappointment with the Western powers on the part of the Muslim population of Southeastern Europe and for enhancing the reputation of Russia within the region (Watling, Danylyuk & Reynolds, 2024).

In order to reinforce the disappointment of the Muslim population with the Western states and to enhance the

¹ During the first Chechen war against Russia (1994-1996), Ahmad Kadyrov was appointed leading mufti of the Republic of Chechnya by Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev. At the beginning of the second Chechen war against Russia, Ahmad Kadyrov joined Russian forces and fought against his own people. After Chechnya had been conquered by Russian forces in 2000, he was appointed leader of the Chechen government. He was killed by Chechen Islamists on May 9, 2004 during a military parade in remembrance of “the day of victory.” His son Ramazan Kadyrov, who had led the military formations of his father, was appointed President of the Republic of Chechnya in 2007 by decree. More information under: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/may/10/guardianobituaries.russia>, accessed 01.03.2024.

reputation of Russia in the Western Balkan countries, various propaganda structures, religious associations, corporate enterprises, and even political parties were established, all of which operate in accordance with certain Russian interests and doctrines.

Subversive activities aimed at expanding Russian influence in the Western Balkan countries are being implemented through various means: by spreading fake news, fueling religious hatred, fanaticism, nationalism, and interethnic conflicts, corrupting public figures, financing political parties, undermining the academic world through various methods² and committing other crimes as well.

So, the Russian secret services and the pro-Russian structures created in the region are waging a hybrid war against the region's newly established democratic states by disseminating fake news, strategically fostering corruption, undermining politics, diplomacy, and academia, stoking interreligious hatred as well as interethnic conflicts, and engaging in organized crime as well as in similar activities. Their objective is to prevent the EU and NATO integration of the Western Balkan countries.

Conclusion

During the last two years, a trend toward expanding covert Russian influence in the region's countries with Muslim population has been observed. This is being carried out through subversive activities of pro-Russian structures within the region as well as of humanitarian

² Various pro-Russian circles from Kosovo and North Macedonia have been selling doctoral degrees from Bulgarian and Ukrainian universities, at prices ranging between Euro 10.000 and Euro 15.000, aiming to undermine the academic systems of the region's countries. Those PhD students don't need to attend university in those countries or demonstrate the corresponding language skills in Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Russian, or English.

Islamic organizations and Chechen foundations. They claim that Russia is close to the Muslim world, while stoking interethnic conflicts within the region, and their goal is to prevent the integration of Western Balkan countries into the EU and the NATO.

Aware of the region's religious and ethnic weaknesses, Russia is leaning on the anti-Western, Islamic opposition to achieve its aims. This opposition operates in some Western Balkan countries, rejecting the European integration process as "Western imperialism" and condemning it for imposing foreign, decadent, liberal values on the Islamic world. These ideologues argue that the Islamic world shares more values with Eastern Orthodoxy than with the Western world.

Therefore, Russia seeks to incite political conflicts within the Western Balkan countries with Slavic population by exerting economic and cultural influence, engaging in political cooperation, and especially by fostering nationalism and religious propaganda in the region. This serves the objective of preventing the integration of these countries into the EU and NATO, and of diverting global attention from the Russian war in Ukraine.

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