

PROTECTING DAYTON'S SHARED GOVERNANCE BY COUNTERING FAUX NARRATIVES OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37458/nstf.25.1.10>

Original scientific paper

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Abstract: It is well-known that Russia seeks to undermine the Western order in the Balkans, such as supporting Serbs in their rejection of NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). However, some assertions of Russia's influence discussed here show no merit and seem to have been brought to delegitimize the Western installed peace order vital to the stability of the region: the 1-2-3 Dayton

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Peace Agreement (DPA) with one state, two entities, and three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats). The meaningless assertions include disinformation against High Representative Schmidt as a Russia man; the misrepresentation of the U.S. -E.U. led electoral reform as the one benefitting Russia; the frequently repeated falsehoods that NATO and EU member state Croatia is aligned with Putin or that some U.S. officials embrace Russia's values. Such disinformation narratives do not show the ties between the supposed Russian assets and Kremlin, nor do they demonstrate that the alleged pro-Russian actors pursue pro-Kremlin policies. Instead, they tend to be based on the ludicrous claims that the very support for the Dayton categories of ethnic power-sharing reflects the embrace of Russia's values under President Putin. Striking at the core of the Dayton peace bargain, the anti-Dayton unitarists want the DPA to guarantee BiH's external borders, while urging the international community to dismiss the DPA designed two-entity state structure (important to Serbs) or ethnic power-sharing (important to Croats) to impose a centralized, unitary state with a majority rule, or the so-called "civic state." However, besides thwarting (Serb) secessionism and (Croat) separatism, the purpose of Dayton has been to prevent (Bosniak) majoritarianism. The intensity of the debate surrounding the disinformation activities discussed here shows that--though the DPA still remains relevant to the BiH postwar peace and the Western Balkans stability--the consensus on what Dayton is or should be is now collapsing.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dayton Peace Agreement, power-sharing, Croatia, Russia, disinformation, liberal peace, nation-building.

Introduction

In the weeks preceding Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia had no intention of invading Ukraine (BBC, 2022). About 100,000 Russian troops had massed at Russia's border with Ukraine before Russia's Defense Ministry announced it would withdraw some troops in a sign of de-escalation (Rosenberg, 2022).

Meanwhile, there were unmistakable signs of the imminent invasion as Western intelligence sources reported that Russia was building field hospitals near its border with Ukraine (BBC, 2022). On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Since then, Russia's deception and disinformation activities have been discussed at international conferences, such as the 2023 Zagreb Security Forum (Akrap, 2023) and the problems of the hybrid threats and concerns about Russia have gained broad recognition going well beyond the policy and scholarly circles.

However, what still remains to be recognized is that some actors can exploit the well-established facts of Russia's disinformation and Ukraine's victimization to attract support for their own causes that in reality may have little to do with either Russia or Ukraine. It is such cases of misinformation or disinformation that will be reviewed here—the cases seeking to influence the West's policies on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) by presenting extraneous, incomplete, and even fraudulent narratives as part of the legitimate ongoing effort to constrain Russia. More precisely, discussed here is the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA or Dayton), together with various statements made by anti-Dayton unitarists to discredit the DPA-based BiH Constitution by portraying its ethnic governance as the one serving Putin's Russia. While some of these misleading statements are intentional falsehoods, the majority of the faux narratives seem to be constructed around unfounded, partial opinions based on select evidence in disregard for the inconvenient data or counterarguments.

Needless to say, there have been case studies addressing disinformation and hybrid warfare in the countries of South-East Europe (Nehring and Sittig, 2023). The Hybrid Warfare Research Institute of Zagreb also published an analysis of disinformation promoted by the Ljubljana based International Institute for the Middle Eastern and Balkan Studies (Akrap, 2022). In addition, some cases of disinformation originating in the Western Balkans are well-known. Thus, pretending to be a sovereign state—while existing as an integral part of the internationally recognized BiH

state—the Bosnian Serb Republic, or Republika Srpska (RS), regularly submits unsolicited reports to the UN Security Council (Republic of Srpska Government, 2023). However, this article does not deal with such familiar cases of mostly Serb disinformation in South-East Europe and Russia’s support for the Serbs’ secessionist aspirations, both of which put well-recognized pressures on the DPA and the internationally recognized BiH’s borders.

Instead, the hybrid threats analyzed here concern the less discussed cases of disinformation generally propagated by the self-described “pro-BiH actors” who, unlike Serbs, want the West to preserve the BiH state within its internationally recognized borders, while demanding, at the same time, that the West help them dissolve Dayton’s decentralized, shared ethnic governance and force a unitary state with a majority rule. This so-called “civic state” as demanded by the anti-Dayton unitarists—in particular those associated with the SDA-DF political parties—would inevitably empower the Bosniaks as the BiH’s majority constituting slightly above 50% of the total BiH population according to the last (2013) official BiH census (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013a), while disempowering the Serbs (31%) and the Croats (15%).¹

Without denying the benefits of democratic civic governance or the existence of some BiH actors genuinely interested in a non-ethnic, pluralist society, the term “civic state” may be placed within quotation marks to highlight the anti-Dayton activism seeking to upset the Dayton’s shared governance in order to *impose* majoritarian rule, in disregard for the constitutional process and the conditions inappropriate for BiH’s transition to a democratic majority rule at this time. However, the term “anti-Dayton unitarists” will be used here most of the time to denote

¹ According to the last official census (2013), BiH had a total of 3,531,159 people with the following ethnic structure: 50.1% Bosniaks, 30.8% Serbs, 15.4% Croats, and 3.7% Others. See Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013a. In this text, all mentions of Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks refer to the BiH population, not to the population of Croatia or Serbia. The “Others” are either ethnic minorities (e.g., Jews and Roma) or else the non-ethnically defined citizens who do not want to declare their ethnicity and simply feel “Bosnian.” The decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) (mentioned later) concern the rights of the Others.

the supporters of such unconstitutional activities who have also engaged in faux narratives, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Supported primarily by Bosniaks and non-ethnically defined Bosnians,² as well as some left-leaning circles in Europe (Sarajevo Times, 2022c), a civic BiH state objective (in this context not placed within quotation marks) may superficially resemble non-ethnically organized Western liberal democracies, thereby holding some appeal in the eyes of certain actors in the West. However, a civic state contradicts the BiH Constitution and Dayton (the two terms can be used here interchangeably). Based on the DPA postwar settlement, the BiH Constitution was designed to prevent—in the interest of peace--majoritarian rule in the historically divided BiH society, where ethnic relations got aggravated postwar.

Nevertheless, in the recent years, there have been several attempts to disparage the DPA and its supporters, by wrongly tying Dayton's ethnic governance to the values of Putin's Russia, thereby seeking to discredit not only the well-known pro-Kremlin actors like the Serbs, but also the pro-Ukraine, anti-Russia actors, such as some EU and NATO member states, including several high-level officials from both Croatia and the United States (Circle, 2022). These anti-Dayton activists claim that—in contrast to the West's pro-democracy policy on Ukraine--the United States and Europe are betraying BiH by pursuing illiberal, pro-Russia policies such as supporting the allegedly disastrous Dayton-based BiH Constitution (Bassuener et al., 2023; Mujanovic, 2023b). However, BiH's two-entity structure and ethnic power-sharing have been the tradeoff for keeping a single BiH state. This Dayton compromise has been

² Because many Bosniaks and non-ethnically defined Bosnians share the common objective of a civic state with one Bosnian nation, this text normally uses the term "Bosniaks" to refer to both Bosniaks and Bosnians. A "Bosnian" means a non-ethnically defined BiH citizen who does not affiliate with any of the constituent peoples (Interview, 2021). Hence, the narrowly defined term "Bosnians" is not identical with the broader term "BiH citizens." "Bosnians" are counted among "Others" (just 3.7% of the total BiH population as outlined in the previous footnote), while the term "BiH citizens" is a broader, all-encompassing term referring to the entire population of BiH, including its constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats) and Others (ethnic minorities and non-ethnically defined Bosnians).

crucial to ending the BiH war and maintaining peace, thus still enjoying, however imperfect, American and European support.

Before discussing some anti-Dayton faux narratives, this paper will review the importance of the DPA, in particular its 1-2-3 peace bargain, followed by the discussion of the past Western-led nation-building and a current lack of self-sustaining peace in BiH. Next, the paper will discuss some examples of extraneous, incomplete, misinforming, and disinforming narratives used to undermine the DPA, the peace settlement important for the BiH postwar stability that the anti-Dayton unitarists now falsely portray as an agreement that empowers Russia's proxies in BiH.

To clarify, the "old" anti-Dayton activities *not* reviewed here are primarily those of the BiH Serbs, who notoriously rejected the DPA in the immediate postwar years and demanded full independence, thereby rejecting BiH's *external borders*. Under Milorad Dodik, the BiH Serb leader originally helped to power by the United States (Associated Press, 2022) the Serbs' attitudes began to change towards the acceptance of the DPA. However, upset over the forced revisions of Dayton in the direction of greater centralization, as well as the recognition of Kosovo, the BiH Serbs began threatening outright independence again, now with Russia's encouragement. These "old," enduring anti-Dayton activities are well-known and have earned the Serbs sanctions; the United States especially seems committed to curbing the Serb secessionist activities and Russia's influence on the Serbs (Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, 2023).

However, the cases reviewed here concern mostly the "new" anti-Dayton "civic state" advocacy that wants to break the Dayton's 1-2-3 peace bargain by preserving BiH within its internationally recognized external borders while *forcibly changing its internal state structure—entities, constituent peoples, or shared ethnic governance--through unconstitutional or undemocratic means*. Connected primarily to some Bosniak nationalist circles--especially to the SDA-DF supporters--dismantling Dayton's ethnic governance has also been embraced,

most likely for very different reasons, by some Europe's progressives (De Bruijn and Vrbetic, 2022). Hence, discussed here are various statements attributed to a politically wide range of actors who rhetorically denounce Russia's proxies in BiH while in fact aiming at discrediting Dayton's shared governance through cherry-picking evidence to construct misleading arguments.

The Importance of the 1-2-3 Dayton Peace Bargain and the Failure of Liberal Nation-Building

An incomplete agreement, the DPA has been necessary for BiH's transition to peace and its current stability by giving Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats potentially equal stakes in the BiH governance (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina DPA, 1995) The DPA thus reposes on the 1-2-3 peace bargain: one state (1), two entities (2), and three constituent peoples (3) plus others (i.e., minorities). At the 1995 Dayton peace talks, the Croats and the Serbs accepted a single BiH state within its pre-crisis borders; in exchange, the Bosniaks agreed to a decentralized BiH state composed of the mostly Serb entity, or Republika Srpska (RS), and the predominantly Bosniak-Croat entity, or the Federation (FBiH).³ In addition, the Bosniaks had to accept ethnic power-sharing, or the Dayton category of constituent peoples, which has been of crucial importance to the Croats. Not having an entity of their own like the BiH Serbs, the BiH Croats rely on ethnic parity set up in *some* institutions to participate in governance on the potentially equal footing with more numerous Bosniaks and Serbs.

Therefore, in this text, the references to Dayton or the DPA--the peace agreement which formed the basis for the BiH Constitution--assume the *acceptance of the 1-2-3 Dayton peace*

³ As a consequence of the war, the ethnic structure of the FBiH and RS are very different. According to the 2013 official census, the FBiH has 70.4% Bosniaks, 22.4% Croats, 2.5% Serbs, and 4.6% Others (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013b), while RS has 81.5% Serbs, 14% Bosniaks, 2.4% Croats, and 2.1% Others (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013c).

bargain. In other words, the DPA is not merely about stopping the BiH war and affirming BiH's international borders (1), but also assumes the acceptance of the DPA categories of the entities (2) and the constituent peoples (3), without which the DPA would not have been signed and could not have maintained peace postwar.

The DPA left BiH with weak central state authority and tripartite, consent-based ethnic governance, setting the stage for stalemates given the poor state of interethnic relations. Therefore, to strengthen the BiH state and improve its functionality, the international community—chiefly, the United States and its European partners--tried to steer BiH towards a more centralized, non-ethnic governance, particularly during the 2000s (Vrbetic, 2022a). Hence, speaking before the UN Security Council in May 2019, Valentin Inzko, at that time the High Representative (HR) for BiH, remarked that, since late 1997, the successive High Representatives (HRs) had used the Bonn Powers 958 times to impose decisions upon BiH, having created a total of nine ministries, whereas the original DPA had envisaged only three ministries (UN Security Council, 2019, page 24).

Thus, besides imposing hundreds of laws and constitutional amendments over several decades, the HRs fired hundreds of elected officials without due process. They installed, instead, leaders who had little local support but were in line with the international objective of strengthening the central state authority, frequently in violation of the DPA as signed in 1995. The Bosniaks generally greeted and even demanded such interventions, while the Serbs and the Croats—regularly the target of these interventions--resented and resisted the international push for more centralized governance.

However, by the mid-2010s, the international community grew tired of this exhaustive, top-down nation-building that, in some respects, not only contradicted the DPA as accepted in 1995, but also went against the core democratic beliefs of liberal democracies. Namely, the heavy-handed nation-building denied

the local people self-governance many years after BiH had already been pacified, while allowing foreign administrators to bypass the BiH institutional process to impose legislation or dismiss elected leaders *without* any demonstrable security crisis or urgency that would warrant the use of such extraordinary powers. Thus, some accused the international community of running BiH as the “European Raj,” in reference to the British run colonial India (Knaus and Martin, 2003). Eventually, the international community downsized while still remaining engaged to provide some administrators, judges, and troops to protect the BiH state. Support for externally driven nation-building declined, particularly in Europe: as explained by Inzko before the UN Security Council in May 2019 (page 24), the emphasis shifted to the local parties’ ownership of peace.

Underlying this change was also the evident failure of the liberal nation-building to create a viable BiH state, despite the intensive international efforts carried out mostly in the late 1990s and the early to mid-2000s. To be sure, the international community succeeded in forcing through a number of centralized policies and agencies not envisaged in the original DPA in 1995; however, BiH still remained politically disunited, and its institutions--dysfunctional. Moreover, by seeking to strengthen the central state (1) through weakening the entities (2) and the constituent peoples (3), the international community undermined the 1-2-3 Dayton peace bargain (Vrbetic, 2022a). While outraging the RS Serbs, who began insisting on the return to the “original Dayton” or else separation (Srpska Times, 2020), the imposed changes affected mostly the BiH Croats, who share the FBiH with BiH’s largest ethnic community, the Bosniaks.

Unlike the BiH Serbs, the BiH Croats do not have an entity of their own and their effective participation in the tripartite governance on the equal footing with the Serbs and the Bosniaks depends on the Croats’ ability to elect their own representatives into the few power-sharing institutions. However, by virtue of their superior demographic numbers, and by exploiting various loopholes--some created by the international diplomats wishing

to steer BiH away from ethnic governance--the Bosniak electorate could increasingly fill the ethnic quotas assigned for the Croat lawmakers by electing those who would nominally represent the BiH Croats while in fact promoting the priorities of the Bosniak elites, often in disregard for the BiH Croats' needs or interests (Vrbetic, 2022a).

This suppression of the BiH Croat electoral will would not have been a problem if it occurred only in the institutions organized by a non-ethnic, civic majority principle, such as the FBiH's *lower* legislative. Instead, the vexing problem of the Bosniak electorate deciding on who should represent the BiH Croats has concerned the FBiH's *upper* legislative, or the FBiH House of Peoples, which should represent the three constituent peoples--Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats--by ethnic parity, while also reserving some seats for minorities (Others) (House of Peoples of FBiH, 2024).

The Constitutional Equality of the Constituent Peoples and Schmidt's Limited Intervention after BiH's Failure to Implement the Constitutional Court's Ljubic Verdict

As the Constitutional Court of BiH (2016, page 25, para 49) has emphasized on several occasions, the equality of Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats as constituent peoples is an "overarching principle" of the BiH Constitution. Thus, even though the FBiH has three times more Bosniaks than Croats, their equal representation by ethnic parity in the FBiH *upper* legislative, or the FBiH House of Peoples, is consistent with their constitutional position as constituent peoples, irrespective of the actual BiH demographics. There are no majorities or minorities under the BiH Constitution, even though, evidently, there are majorities and minorities in demographic terms.

Besides clearly a part of the Dayton peace architecture, the category of the constituent peoples and their equality in law also reflects BiH's history of its past divisions as well as its

constitutional traditions, most notably when BiH was a part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY, or Yugoslavia). As also confirmed by its key state-formation document dating back to 1943 (Yugoslavia AVNOJ, 1943), post-World War II Yugoslavia was not a civic-based multiethnic state in the image of the United States, but a federal state with several peoples sharing power jointly, an arrangement meant to prevent the domination of any single ethnic group over another and thus avoid the recurrence of ethnic tensions and violent conflict. Likewise, the 1943 decision to create the BiH republic as a federal unit of Yugoslavia (SFRY) includes a specific reference to the “full equality of all Serbs, Muslims [Bosniaks], and Croats” (Yugoslavia BiH, 1943).

Accordingly, while a part of Yugoslavia, BiH observed ethnic balance in the distribution of the official appointments, and its Presidency was a multimember institution. After the first multiparty elections had been held in December 1990, the collective BiH Presidency consisted of 7 members: two Bosniak, two Serb, and two Croat members, in addition to one more member representing the others (Presidency of BiH, 2013). While 15 political parties competed in the first multiparty elections, the three ethnic parties representing the majority of Bosniaks (SDA), Serbs (SDS), and Croats (HDZ), respectively, won 84 percent of the national vote in the parliamentary elections (Malešević, 1991). The key positions were divided between the three ethnic parties: an SDA Bosniak for the President of the BiH Presidency (Alija Izetbegović), an SDS Serb for the Speaker of the BiH Parliament (Momčilo Krajišnik), and an HDZ Croat for the BiH Prime Minister (Jure Pelivan).

In other words, BiH has a long tradition of shared ethnic governance, and its three ethno-political identities have resisted assimilation into one politically defined BiH nation. The concepts of constituent peoples and ethnic power-sharing enshrined in the DPA well predated the BiH war and the peace negotiations at Dayton, having been enshrined in the prior constitutions (Yugoslavia, 1986). Therefore, it should come as

no surprise that the BiH Croats insist on their equality with the Bosniaks and the BiH Serbs as guaranteed by Dayton, as well as on electing their own representatives, the latter point essential for the BiH Croats to maintain their collective rights as one of the three constituent peoples under the BiH Constitution.

However, through various loopholes, Bosniaks have been able to elect a number of deputies on their pro-Bosniak platform to represent BiH Croats as an ethnic group in the *upper* legislative, the FBiH House of Peoples. (The upper legislative appoints the FBiH executive and can exercise control over the lower FBiH legislative, the chamber which Bosniaks control by virtue of their demographic strength.) Such voting anomalies have undermined the constitutional system designed to have two legislative chambers to balance ethnic and civic principles. This balance has been important to the BiH Croats, who rely on their ability to elect their own leaders and ethnic power-sharing, most particularly in the upper legislative, in order to have their voice heard in the FBiH entity, where Bosniaks outnumber Croats by more than 3 to 1. Needless to say, the repeated denials of their right to elect their own political representatives undermine the BiH Croats' support for the FBiH and strengthen their desire for a separate federal or confederal unit within BiH, or the so-called "third entity." (Reuters, 2022a).

In its 2016 Ljubic verdict (U-23/14), the Constitutional Court of BiH (2016, page 30, para. 60) found certain provisions of the election law for the FBiH upper legislative unconstitutional and discriminatory, denying the BiH Croats the right to be represented adequately, in accordance with their constitutional status as a constituent people and the principle of equality of the constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats) under the BiH Constitution). According to the BiH's highest court, "the right to participate in democratic decision-making, which is exercised through legitimate political representation, has to be based on the democratic election of the delegates to the House of Peoples of the Federation by the constituent people represented and whose

interests are represented” (Constitutional Court of BiH, 2016, page 26, para 51).

The 2016 Ljubic verdict has never been implemented, even though the opponents of the verdict, including a former Austrian judge who served on the Court, have claimed otherwise (Woelfl, 2021). The verdict has stirred up quite some controversy, with its opponents arguing that, besides discouraging the implementation of the decisions reached by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the implementation of the Ljubic verdict would strengthen the rule of the HDZ-BiH (Ruge, 2018), the main party of the BiH Croats that would be deciding, allegedly, who are “the real Croats” for the purpose of representation (Woelfl, 2021).

However, the Ljubic verdict demands, as cited above, the legitimate *political* representation, thus leaving open possibilities for the implementation of the ECtHR decisions on integrating minorities into the electoral process, such as the Sejdic-Finci decision (European Court of Human Rights ECtHR, 2009). Those representing the BiH Croats—in the few ethnic power-sharing institutions such as the upper BiH legislative—need *not* be ethnic Croats but should represent *the political will* of the majority of the BiH Croat electorate.

Furthermore, contrary to what the opponents of the Ljubic verdict claim, the implementation of the verdict is more likely to weaken than strengthen the HDZ-BiH, as an analysis of the voting patterns among the BiH Croats shows (Grbavac, 2022). According to Valentino Grbavac (2022), the HDZ-BiH won 58 percent of the Croat vote in the predominantly Croat-inhabited Herzegovina, the region where the majority of the BiH Croats now live; meanwhile, in the central BiH cantons with the Bosniak demographic majorities, the HDZ-BiH got 80 percent of the Croat vote. In other words, the Croat voters rally behind their strongest ethnic party in the districts where Bosniaks, by virtue of their demographic strength, can outvote BiH Croats. In contrast, the situation in the electoral districts with Croat demographic majorities is different—greater competition among

various Croat parties. Accordingly, the HDZ-BiH won just 28 percent of the Croat vote in the Livno canton (Grbavac, 2022), where the Croats constitute 86 percent of the total population (Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013d) and do not fear they might get outvoted by the Bosniaks. Therefore, implementing the Ljubic verdict would most likely strengthen political pluralism among the BiH Croats and erode support for the HDZ-BiH.

The real reason why anti-Dayton unitarists oppose the Ljubic verdict is that the elimination of the cross-ethnic voting would remove the loopholes that have enabled the Bosniak electorate to decide who should represent the BiH Croats politically in some important posts. Therefore, removing the cross-ethnic voting could prevent the Bosniak elites from sometimes controlling the political agendas and outcomes. The most glaring example of this misuse of the electoral system is Zeljko Komsic: nominally the Croat member of the tripartite BiH Presidency, Komsic is in fact a political representative of the Bosniak pro-unitarist constituencies that have elected him four times (Vrbetic, 2022a). Komsic gets elected the Croat President in the BiH Presidency by winning the predominantly Bosniak populated electoral districts, while losing the districts with Croat majorities (Misetić, 2018). Therefore, the predominantly Bosniak electorate elects both Bosniak and Croat members of the BiH Presidency, letting the Bosniak elites control the tripartite Presidency by a two-thirds majority.

In the course of 2021 and 2022, U.S. and E.U. diplomats negotiated electoral reform with limited constitutional changes, seeking in vain to implement the BiH Constitutional Court's Ljubic decision on the Croat electoral rights, as well as the ECtHR Sejdic-Finci decision on the rights for the BiH minorities (3.7% of the total BiH population), while maintaining the 1-2-3 Dayton structure (Trkanjec, 2021). Meanwhile, the relationship between Bosniaks and Croats reached the lowest point since the end of the war, and the FBiH executive operated in a technical mandate for years. Concerns grew over the 2022 elections: Bosniaks said they would eject the Croats' legitimate

representatives from the post-election governance and possibly change the FBiH Constitution unilaterally to end the Dayton power-sharing rule (Gudelj, 2022). This possible break-down of the FBiH's constitutional order—in fact, a likely constitutional coup--caused serious concerns that the BiH Croats could respond to the ejection from governance by declaring self-rule, and that the RS Serbs might exploit the situation to secede from BiH with Russia's support (Vrbetic, 2022b). In 2022 Russia attacked Ukraine, and there existed legitimate concerns that Russia could seek to destabilize the Balkans in order to weaken Europe and the West's support for Ukraine.

Amidst such concerns about BiH and the region, the United States supported the new High Representative, Christian Schmidt, to intervene in the 2022 indirect elections for the FBiH upper legislative to prevent Bosniaks from expelling Croats from governance, while also curtailing the veto powers to prevent the Croat blockades in the FBiH institutions (Office of the High Representative OHR, 2022). Called the “functionality package” reform (OHR, 2022), the Schmidt 2022 intervention was limited, in line with the Dayton BiH Constitution to forestall the worst consequences of the impaired Dayton power-sharing system and to improve the workings of the BiH institutions.

As the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo recalled, HR Schmidt had responsibility to protect the DPA and ensure that “BiH's institutions and their power-sharing mechanisms function” (U.S. Embassy in BiH, 2022). In other words, rather than seeking to impose substantive policy changes, the Schmidt 2022 intervention addressed institutional functionality and political representation, seeking to ensure that all the stakeholders remain part of the decision-making process. Hence, the BiH authorities still have responsibility for passing a comprehensive electoral reform based on the Ljubic and ECtHR verdicts, whose implementation has been demanded by, among others, the European Parliament (2022, para 33).

Much of unintended misinformation and deliberate disinformation concern the above-mentioned electoral problems and reforms, the problems which raised the question of whether BiH would honor ethnic power-sharing under the DPA-based BiH Constitution or else go in the direction of a silent yet destabilizing constitutional coup to bring in a majority rule. As discussed below, there have been deliberate attempts to discredit the DPA, High Representative Schmidt, and the U.S. driven electoral reform as Russia's ploy allegedly intended to benefit Kremlin's allies, with both Croatia's leaders and some high-level officials in the U.S. State Department misrepresented as Putin's sympathizers.

The anti-Dayton civic state proponents have resisted the implementation of the Constitutional Court's Ljubic verdict; these elites want to maintain a situation of a silent constitutional coup as the Bosniak majority gradually takes over the FBiH institutions, and eventually the BiH institutions, despite the Dayton guarantees of tripartite governance. This strategy of expelling Croats from governance to seize the FbiH institutions—before eventually turning against Republika Srpska—was publicly discussed in the Sarajevo media before the 2022 elections, including by an advisor to Zeljko Komsic (Gudelj, 2022). Misrepresented as a liberal “anti-nationalist,” (Bassuener and Selo Sabic, 2021) Komsic and his DF party are actually the allies of the hardline SDA and its leader Bakir Izetbegovic (N1 Sarajevo, 2022c). The main ethnic party of Bosniaks in BiH and beyond (e.g., Sandzak in Serbia), the SDA emphasizes the Bosniak ethnic and religious identity while maintaining strong ties with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, holding election rallies for Erdogan in Sarajevo or campaigning for Erdogan in Turkey (McLaughlin, 2018; Buyuk, 2023).

The Question of Dayton's Ethnic Governance, Power-Sharing, and Western Liberal Democratic Model

Before moving to the next section, here are some clarifications regarding Dayton and democratization.

Because Western democracies are usually *not* constructed around ethnic power-sharing, some Western audiences may feel receptive to the anti-Dayton argument holding that those who want non-ethnic majority rule wish to liberalize BiH and establish democratic governance as prevalent in most liberal democracies. For example, advocating for electoral reform that would “remove ethnicity from governance,” the U.S. Helsinki Commission, normally chaired by a member of the U.S. Congress, criticized HR Schmidt for reinforcing “the divisive force of ethnicity in Bosnian politics as a whole” (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2022).

In the U.S. system of separation of powers, the primary responsibility for U.S. foreign policy lies with the President and the Administration. While not obligatory for President Biden to follow, the U.S. Helsinki Commission’s opinion cited above—which clashes with the DPA based BiH Constitution—is a useful reminder that some in the West, particularly in the United States, fail to appreciate the importance of Dayton’s ethnic governance for the maintenance of peace in postwar BiH. These opinions generally blame Dayton’s ethnic governance for BiH’s partition and dysfunctionality, rather than viewing the problem the other way round. Dayton’s ethnic governance has been a response to the historically divided BiH society, its traditions of power-sharing when BiH was a part of Yugoslavia, and the need to save the fractured postwar state while managing the main parties’ deep differences.

The anti-Dayton unitarists frequently object to the allegedly “unequal value” of one vote to argue that the BiH citizens are “segregated” by ethnicity and that the DPA system is discriminatory and undemocratic because the votes of some apparently count more in the FBiH House of Peoples (N1

Sarajevo, 2021c). However, if Bosniaks outnumber Croats by more than 3 to 1 in the FBiH, then the Croat deputies must come, inevitably, from the parties that capture smaller vote percentages overall in comparison to the Bosniak deputies because the representation in the upper legislative is by ethnic parity irrespective of the demographics. As Matthew Palmer, America's top diplomat for the BiH electoral reform, tried to explain to the Bosniak negotiating team during the electoral reform talks in 2021, it is not unusual that the votes of different constituencies seemingly count differently for the purpose of (better) representation (N1 Sarajevo, 2021c). While the size of population matters for the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate has two senators per state, even though U.S. states vary considerably in size and population.

Furthermore, as regards the process of democratization, the anti-Dayton unitarists and some civic state supporters usually engage in paradoxical arguments. The ECtHR verdicts are important for *correcting* the DPA system and integrating minorities as the equal citizens of BiH; however, some civic state supporters use the ECtHR decisions to argue that the 1-2-3 constitutional order with two entities and three constituent peoples—a product of a peace settlement to end an atrocious war—must be dismissed to reorder ethnic relationships in favor of an allegedly non-ethnic majority rule. They expect that the international community, chiefly the United States, would help them redesign the new constitutional order forcibly; to this end, they point to the ECtHR decisions, including the latest Kovacevic decision, to argue that the ethnic power-sharing under Dayton must be ended (Mujanovic, 2023b; Nurkic, 2023).

However, in Western liberal democracies, constitutional changes are consent-based political processes, undertaken by elected political representatives and/or confirmed in popular referenda, with courts charged with responsibility to guard the laws and constitutions, rather than overturning the existing constitutional orders. Moreover, to have legitimacy and guarantee stability, major constitutional changes in BiH need to emerge out of a

tripartite Bosniak-Serb-Croat agreement and respect the prescribed constitutional procedure for revisions. In short, while allegedly upholding the Western democratic model, anti-Dayton unitarists put forward a view of an undemocratic constitutional change that is not practiced in the West, and that, moreover, cannot guarantee stability in the still divided BiH society (DeBruijn, 2023).

The core issue at stake in BiH is the distribution of power among different segments of the BiH society which once fought each other in a war. Therefore, the postwar BiH state cannot take, as a role model, an established Western liberal democracy without a recent experience of a violent sovereignty dispute or postwar governance in a divided society. Instead, if models for BiH exist in Western democracies, they are to be found in the power-sharing arrangements and ethnic regimes designed to deal with identity and sovereignty disputes. Such examples include Northern Ireland, the Aaland Islands, South Tyrol, or Belgium, with understanding that a universal model applicable to all cases does not exist because solutions to sovereignty disputes need to be tailored to specific circumstances of respective cases.

Discussed below are several cases showing how the Bosniak unitarists and some civic state supporters have exploited the established pro-Ukraine, anti-Russia narratives to build support for challenging ethnic power-sharing under Dayton, including electoral reform, with the understanding that not every case of false or misleading information cited here is deliberate disinformation.

Disinformation: Kremlin's New High Representative for BiH and Russia's Alleged Influence on Croatia

In December 2020, Avdo Avdic, an Istraga's leading journalist, began spinning disinformation about the Germany-Croatia-Russia conspiracy to replace High Representative Valentin Inzko with Christian Schmidt, a German politician allegedly close to

both Russia's President Putin and Croatia's Prime Minister Plenkovic with his HDZ party (Avdic, 2020b). Formally an investigative research outlet, Istraga and Avdic have had close ties with the Bosniak members of the BiH intelligence community, in particular with Osman Mehmedagic, or Osmica, who is widely believed to be the source of this disinformation (Hadzovic, 2021). Osmica is a Bosniak SDA politician who served as the BiH intelligence chief at the time but, mired in corruption and scandals, has been imprisoned in BiH and sanctioned by the United States (Ascic, 2023). Criticized by the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo for corruption (N1 Sarajevo, 2022a) and anti-Western leanings, including its ties with Iran (N1 Sarajevo and N1 Zagreb, 2022), the SDA is the strongest Bosniak ethnic party led by Bakir Izetbegovic allied with Turkey's Erdogan.

Stefan Schwarz, a former member of Germany's Bundestag and Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU party, criticized Avdic and Istraga, having pointed out that Germany was a NATO country, Chancellor Merkel was a friend of the United States, and Schmidt did not like Russia's Vladimir Putin at all (Hadzovic, 2020).

Nevertheless, disinformation that Germany and Russia were pushing for a new High Representative connected to both Russia and Croatia in order to divide BiH between Serbia and Croatia spread through social and traditional media, leading some to draw a parallel to the infamous 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact to divide Poland. Some commentators warned against the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact 2.0" for dividing BiH (Suljagic and Bajrovic, 2021).

"By supporting Schmidt, the U.S. would allow Putin to further encroach into the region," so claimed the Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina (ACBH, 2021), the Bosnian American lobby active on the Capitol Hill, in its February 2021 letter to U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. The Bosniak diaspora lobby (ACBH) apparently saw the appointment of Schmidt in the context of "appeasing" Russian President Putin by denying

BiH's "Euro-Atlantic aspirations" (e.g., NATO membership), voicing such concerns in the letter to Secretary Blinken (Advisory Council ACBH, 2021).

In reality, there was no Germany-Croatia-Russia collusion to install a pro-Kremlin politician as the new High Representative in order to divide BiH or deny its aspirations to join NATO and bring BiH under Russia's influence. Germany has never promoted the division of BiH, while Croatia has insisted on the faithful implementation of the DPA, the agreement that does not allow for secession or the creation of new entities within BiH. Both Germany and Croatia are NATO member states, while Croatia has actively promoted BiH's integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, believing it beneficial for Croatia as well (Republic of Croatia MFEA, 2022).

Moreover, while Christian Schmidt eventually got appointed as the new High Representative for BiH in late May 2021 (N1 Sarajevo, 2021a), his appointment was clearly not planned by Russia. The UN Security Council could never approve Schmidt as the new High Representative due to Russia's strong opposition to Schmidt's appointment (Hina, 2021). HR Schmidt's support lies in the United States and Europe, not in Russia. Meanwhile, the Republika Srpska's officials, who work closely with Russia, consider HR Schmidt illegitimate and continually seek to remove him from office (Republic of Srpska Government, 2023).

While Russia's strong opposition to Schmidt's appointment may have finished the propaganda against HR Schmidt as a Russia man, some other false assertions made by Avdic in the Istraga article got a life of their own. Avdic claimed that, not only was Schmidt a Russia ally, but that he was also close to Croatia's ruling party, the HDZ, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic (Avdic, 2020b). Thus, according to Avdic and Istraga, Schmidt's closeness with Croatia's Plenkovic and his HDZ was the reason why German Chancellor Angela Merkel recommended Schmidt for the post of the new High Representative for BiH, and the proof of the close Schmidt-HDZ ties was the Ante Starcevic

order that Croatia's Plenkovic gave to Schmidt in early 2020 (Avdic, 2020b). In other words, Istraga's Avdic began plotting a story that left Schmidt wide open to future accusations that, as a new High Representative, he would favor BiH Croat leader Covic and his HDZ-BiH, while possibly harming BiH and Western interests in the region.

Initially placed by SDA official and intelligence chief Osmica, the conspiracy seeking to discredit Schmidt, Germany, and Croatia was recycled through the media by various authors and political figures who may have spread this disinformation knowingly or unknowingly (Suljagic and Bajrovic, 2021). Thus, in their letter to U.S. Secretary Blinken, the Bosnian American lobby ACBH also painted Schmidt as a strong supporter of Croatia's allegedly "far-right" HDZ, citing the Ante Starcevic order that Schmidt had received, the order given to Schmidt and accused war criminals, so claimed ACBH (Advisory Council for BiH, 2021).

It is true that Schmidt received the Ante Starcevic honors, but the decision to award Schmidt was not made by the Plenkovic government, as Christian Schmidt publicly clarified in his interview published on the official website of the High Representative (Preradovic, 2023). Instead, it was Croatian President Ivo Josipovic, from the left leaning Social Democrats, who decided to bestow the Starcevic order on Schmidt in 2013, in recognition of Schmidt's contributions to the affirmation of Croatia as an independent, sovereign state. President Josipovic's decision to award Schmidt with the Starcevic order was duly published—in 2013—in *Narodne Novine*, Croatia's official bulletin that publishes state acts and official decisions (Republic of Croatia, 2013).

Thus, without any doubt, the decision to honor Schmidt as a member of the German Government was made in 2013 by President Josipovic, while Prime Minister Plenkovic, also the leader of Croatia's HDZ party, simply handed the honors when Schmidt visited Croatia in early 2020. Schmidt was later

recommended, by the German government, for the post of the High Representative and eventually got appointed by the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in mid-2021 (N1 Sarajevo, 2021a); however, due to Russia's opposition, Schmidt's appointment has not been confirmed by the UN Security Council.

In other words, contrary to what the propagandists like Istraga's Avdic claim, the Starcevic order does not prove special ties between Schmidt and Plenkovic or the HDZ. Furthermore, Croatia's Plenkovic is not a far-right politician, but a moderate, respectable statesman, while his HDZ is a pro-European center-right party which has formed the Croatia government with elected representatives of Croatia's Serbs (Gursoy, 2020).

That Avdic, Osmica, and Istraga were spinning a conspiracy intended to discredit Schmidt was clear at the time, having been exposed by, among others, Bosniak journalist Danijal Hadzovic. An award-winning journalist, Hadzovic writes for Avaz, a Sarajevo daily that can take a stand against the SDA-DF political parties and the politicians such as Bakir Izetbegovic and Zeljko Komsic, especially under the pen of Hadzovic. (On the other hand, Avdic and Istraga have been associated with the SDA-DF, Izetbegovic and Komsic (Avdic, 2021). Danijal Hadzovic of Avaz correctly pointed out that the SDA attempt to block Schmidt's appointment had failed, adding that there was no proof that Schmidt would pursue a pro-HDZ or pro-Croat policy in BiH (Hadzovic, 2021). As also pointed out by Hadzovic, the Starcevic order had been given not only to Schmidt (and some Croat military and political leaders who ended up accused of war crimes) but also to two leaders of Croatia's Islamic community (Hadzovic, 2021). Incidentally, the Ante Starcevic order is not Croatia's highest state honors but a mid-level order, while the second highest state honors were bestowed upon the first President of BiH, Bosniak Alija Izetbegovic, the father of the current SDA leader, Bakir Izetbegovic.

Nevertheless, the Schmidt-HDZ disinformation has reaped some success in discrediting HR Schmidt in certain circles, such as in

the *Foreign Policy* magazine, which has published, quite possibly unintentionally, several misleading articles on Schmidt's 2022 intervention. In a typical *Foreign Policy* take, HR Schmidt has favored Croatia and the HDZ-BiH party, and his detrimental intervention has allegedly led to a “stalemate” in BiH (Kalan, 2023; Mujanovic, 2022b; Mujanovic, 2023b).

While this article cannot get into deeper evaluation of Schmidt's actions--which have sometimes angered Croatia and the BiH Croats--it should be said, nevertheless, that some of HR Schmidt's interventions—including the intervention in the 2022 elections and the subsequent formation of the FBiH government—produced tangible positive results for BiH. Thus, supported by the EU Delegation and the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, Schmidt unblocked the process of government formation in the FBiH (N1 Sarajevo, 2023a; N1 Sarajevo, 2023b) and helped set up the BiH coalition government that passed important pieces of legislation crucial for BiH to get a green light from the European Union.

What the authors published in *Foreign Policy* such as Mujanovic also disregard is that the major opponents of HR Schmidt are the two political parties upset over being left out of the FBiH and BiH governments after Schmidt's interventions: the SDA-DF parties with Izetbegovic and Komsic (N1 Sarajevo, 2022c). These two leaders also did not support the opening of the EU-BiH accession talks at this time, as explained in greater detail later.

As evident from the above discussion, analyzing faux narratives means not only probing falsehoods but also looking at how the vital pieces of information are being withheld while partially true elements are carefully interwoven to create false stories. Of great importance is not only what is said and how it is said but also what is *not* said, and how such incomplete, partial narratives based on carefully selected evidence are constructed in order to mislead the audience. The intention of these misleading narratives has been two-fold. One intention has been to dismiss

Schmidt's interventions as biased by alleging that Schmidt favored the Croats and gave to the HDZ-BiH more than he should have, ignoring that Schmidt had responsibility to protect power-sharing under Dayton, and that not all his interventions have benefitted the BiH Croats (Sarajevo Times, 2022c). The other intent of these faux narratives has been to misrepresent Croatia as pro-Russia, while discrediting attempts at electoral reform based on the implementation of the Ljubic verdict as activities benefitting Kremlin. Ultimately, these faux narratives have sought to undermine the 1-2-3 Dayton peace bargain, by decoupling the commitment to safeguard BiH's external borders from the obligation to maintain a decentralized state structure with two entities and three constituent peoples.

By spinning disinformation regarding Russia's alleged influence on Schmidt and Croatia, Avdic was setting the stage for discrediting then upcoming negotiations on BiH's electoral reform held in the course of 2021 and 2022. As discussed previously, these U.S. and E.U. sponsored talks aimed at implementing the BiH Constitutional Court's Ljubic verdict on the Croat electoral rights, as well as the key ECtHR Sejdic-Finci decision on integrating minorities into the BiH election law. Among the Bosniak elites, there was considerable opposition to the electoral reform based on the Ljubic verdict. To discredit electoral talks, Avdic claimed that Matthew Palmer, the U.S. envoy for electoral reform, served Russia's interests when he tried to strengthen allegedly pro-Russia BiH Croat leader Dragan Covic (Avdic, 2021), thereby linking the BiH Croats, the American diplomat, and the electoral reform with Putin's policy in the Western Balkans.

In reality, no Russian officials participated in the U.S.-E.U. led electoral reform talks (N1 Sarajevo, 2021c). The ideas guiding these negotiations were the aforementioned BiH and European court verdicts, not any plans designed by Kremlin. Furthermore, as previously explained, HR Schmidt intervened in the electoral process in October 2022, but his involvement was supported by the United States. While helping restore some of the Croat

electoral rights—to the chagrin of the anti-Dayton unitarists—HR Schmidt’s limited intervention was in line with his responsibility to protect the power-sharing under the DPA based BiH Constitution and was, therefore, supported by the United States (US Embassy in BiH, 2022).

Nevertheless, some Bosniak leaders, intellectuals, and media carried on with conspiracy about Croatia being a Russia player, and electoral reform, a Russia driven affair benefitting Kremlin. While creating these faux narratives, most of the authors in question have not relied on credible policy analyses to prove Russia’s influence on Croatia but have limited themselves to sporadic evidence or have made false statements. Thus, leading BiH portal Klix falsely alleged that Croatia was “cooperating with Belgrade and Moscow” to “shape European response” to the BiH crisis and “break Sarajevo’s [resistance] to electoral reform” (S.M., 2022).

An author and an activist with an impressive Twitter following, at times published in prestigious policy outlets and university presses, Jasmin Mujanovic has repeatedly misrepresented American-European push for electoral reform to address the lack of the BiH Croats’ legitimate representation as Croatia’s evil meddling in BiH serving Russia. According to Mujanovic, both Croatia and Hungary are “aligning with and aiding the interests of the West’s chief geopolitical adversaries” while interfering in BiH’s politics (Mujanovic, 2023c). The “right-wing” Plenkovic government in Zagreb has a “solitary aim”--win international support for “sectarian” electoral reform in support of the “hardline” HDZ-BiH, so has claimed Mujanovic (2023c).

On his Twitter account, Mujanovic asserted that Russia had already “recruited” BiH Croat leader Covic, while alleging that, since 2017, there had been “growing intertwining” between Moscow and Zagreb regarding their “joint interests in BiH” (Mujanovic, 2022a), the point this author had previously introduced in his 2017 Foreign Affairs article (Mujanovic, 2017). In addition, Reuf Bajrovic, the first Bosnian American who

briefly served, as a member of the DF party, in a past FBiH government (Depo, 2015), has repeatedly alleged that Croatia is pro-Russia, and that Putin is messing with electoral reform in BiH, reasserting these claims in his article for the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Bajrovic, 2022). In her 2021 Foreign Affairs article, Ivana Stradner also claimed that Russia was supporting the BiH Croats in getting their own entity within BiH (Stradner, 2021), reiterating the same claim in her 2023 article for the New Lines Institute (Stradner, 2023).

None of the authors cited in the above paragraph have dealt with the stated or real reasons for electoral reform and the Schmidt's intervention in 2022, nor have they given any reasons why the United States ended up supporting HR Schmidt. As explained previously, the reforms were imposed in October 2022 due to the regional security concerns after the U.S. and E.U. sponsored electoral reform talks had failed. Furthermore, there is no evidence for Mujanovic's views about the supposedly "right-wing nationalist" Plenkovic government and its similarity with Viktor Orban's Hungary, both states allegedly aligning with the West's adversaries, according to Mujanovic (2023c).

A staunch supporter of Ukraine, Plenkovic visited Ukraine twice (Milicic, 2023), while Orban, already in trouble with EU institutions over the rule of law in Hungary, went to Beijing to shake hands with Russia's President Vladimir Putin (Camut et al., 2024). Hungary also tried to block 50 billion euros in aid for Ukraine, facing disapproval from EU leaders, including Croatia's Plenkovic (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2024). Moreover, the above cited scholars who allege the ties between Croatia and Russia do not engage with Croatia's real policies as explained below, nor do they clarify why the Plenkovic government or the BiH Croats—in contrast to Russia or the Serbs—support Ukraine and desire BiH's integration into NATO.

Conspiracies gained on strength in the aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine, when some began to claim, as also reported

by Al-Jazeera, that BiH was vulnerable to aggression from Russia's "proxies" in BiH: Serb leader Dodik, who threatened to secede from BH, and Croat leader Covic, who allegedly wanted to use the U.S.-E.U. led electoral reform to create a Croat republic within BiH (Gadzo, 2022). Such assertions conflate two very different issues, misrepresenting the respective Serb and Croat attitudes towards BiH and Russia as essentially the same, whereas they are very different. These allegations also wrongly assume that some complex, contentious situations are due primarily to Russia's malign influence, rather than reflecting BiH's long-standing contentious politics. BiH is torn by deep internal disagreements over its statehood and state organization; unsurprisingly, Russia seeks to exploit these divisive issues to upset the Western installed order in the Balkans.

As the European Union Institute for Security Studies has pointed out, Russia has relied on the disaffection of the Orthodox Christian communities to undermine the West's policies in the Balkans (Secieru, 2019). However, predominantly a Catholic country that fought against Serbia led by Slobodan Milosevic, Croatia has never fancied the ties of the Orthodox brotherhood that bind some Serbs and Russians. Furthermore, in the eyes of many Croatians, Ukraine is going through a replay of the Croatia war experience (1991-1995), when the Zagreb government temporarily lost control over a third of Croatia's territory.

By 1998, Croatia reintegrated all of its war affected areas, some of them peacefully thanks to the U.S. supported UN mission at the tail end. Therefore, the Kyiv government holds onto this Croatia success story—from the hell of war and partition to NATO and EU membership—appreciating that Croatia's capital Zagreb hosted the 2022 Crimean Platform, the event attended by dozens of foreign dignitaries, including Former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Reuters, 2022b). Thus, some authors have voiced dismay over the misuse of the Ukraine tragedy to spin disinformation that the Croats are Russia's allies (Mikulic, 2022).

Moreover, as a NATO and EU state whose policies have been integrated with the EU polices, the Zagreb Government with Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic adopted the EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus (Council of the European Union, 2023), expelled Moscow's diplomats (Hina, 2022a), and sent military and other aid to Ukraine (Hina, 2023a). Regarding government support to Ukraine, Croatia ranks number 11 (right after Germany) by the donor country GDP, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (Trebesch et al., 2024). In contrast, Serbia has resisted introducing sanctions against Russia, while Serb leader Milorad Dodik regularly consults with Moscow, having received the highest award that Russia confers upon foreign statesmen (Sarajevo Times, 2023c). It is rather comical, therefore, to claim that Croatia is pro-Russia—just like Serbia.

Yet, none of the authors cited for their misrepresentation of Croatia as a Russia ally and a spoiler in the Euro-Atlantic community mention, let alone discuss, Croatia's anti-Russia policies adopted by the Plenkovic Government. They have furthermore disregarded that the Ukraine leaders, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for Croatia's support (President of Ukraine, 2024). They sometimes point to sporadic evidence, such as some controversial statements by Croatian President Milanovic, usually made to spite his political rival, Prime Minister Plenkovic.

There are tensions between Croatia's President Milanovic and Prime Minister Plenkovic (Tesija, 2023). Milanovic has put forward inopportune statements to embarrass Plenkovic; the Prime Minister has responded by seeking to discredit the President as an allegedly pro-Russia politician (Lozancic, 2022). However, the executive power in Croatia lies with Prime Minister Plenkovic, whose statements and policies have been firmly in support of Ukraine, and against Russia. In other words, the authors alleging that Croatia is a Russia proxy out of synch

with the West's policies present opinions based on no evidence, or cherry-picked evidence at the best, to create faux narratives.

Another frequently used propagandist strategy is to present out-of-the-context or outdated information—the information valid in different circumstances or before Russia's aggression against Ukraine--to suggest the existence of the close ties between Croatia and the BiH Croats, on the one hand, and Putin's Russia, on the other hand.

Before Russia's aggression against Ukraine, many states had relations with Putin's Russia. Still today, despite its bad reputation earned due to its actions in Ukraine, Russia cannot be ignored; among others, Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In 2018, Putin's Russia hosted the FIFA World Cup final, played by Croatia and France in Moscow, with the presidents of both Croatia and France in attendance, together with President Putin.

Yet, the 2018 World Cup photo showing President Putin with Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic and BiH Croat leader Covic--a photo taken in the context of a top sports event--has been repeatedly misused on the social and traditional media to suggest Russia's malign influence on Croatia and/or the BiH Croats (Avdic, 2020a). However, as regards policies, BiH Croat leader Dragan Covic is not with Russia, but is aligned with NATO and EU member state Croatia with anti-Russia policies; Covic also wants NATO and EU membership for BiH.

According to a 2023 polling in NATO member states (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023), 82 percent of Croatia's citizens want Croatia to remain in NATO, 67 percent are for providing support to Ukraine, while 48 percent agree Croatia should defend another NATO country if attacked (with 28 percent Croatia's citizens neither agreeing nor disagreeing on the last point). Furthermore, as published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2021)), the 2021 opinion polls show that, as regards NATO membership for BiH, 92 percent of BiH Croats and 90 percent of Bosniaks support it, while 82 percent of

BiH Serbs reject NATO membership. Furthermore, as regards Russia's influence in BiH, only 7 percent of the FBiH population (i.e., Bosniaks and Croats) views Russia's role positively, while 63 percent of the RS population (i.e., Serbs) views Russia in a positive light (National Democratic Institute NDI, 2021).

Clearly, neither Covic nor the BiH Croats are aligned with Putin or Dodik on some important matters of foreign policy because the BiH Croats *support* NATO membership for BiH—just as the Bosniaks do—while the BiH Serbs and Russia *oppose* NATO membership for BiH. Furthermore, the BiH Croats have close ties with EU and NATO country Croatia, now strengthened by the party ties: the HDZ party of Prime Minister Plenkovic is in power in Croatia, while its sister party, the HDZ-BiH with Dragan Covic, is the strongest party among the BiH Croats. Besides hoping for better economic opportunities and security for BiH, one important reason why both Croatia and the BiH Croats support BiH's integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions is the expectation that this integration process would also help resolve the outstanding issues pertaining to the position of the BiH Croats, including the implementation of the Ljubic verdict (Republic of Croatia MFEA, 2022).

Nevertheless, a frequent yet false assertion has been that Covic is a Russia proxy by virtue of his association with Milorad Dodik, the leader of the BiH Serbs with undeniable ties to Putin. Not only does Russia support Republika Srpska and Serbia in the UN Security Council, but Dodik and other Serb leaders frequently travel to Russia to seek support from Putin. Therefore, as an assumption underlying this false argument goes, Covic must be an ally of Russia through his association with Dodik. As typical of various misinformation and disinformation claims analyzed here, those who make such false assumptions or assertions do *not* look at policies, such as the Croat attitudes concerning BiH's integration into NATO, to explain how it is possible that the allegedly pro-Russia Croats in BiH align with the Bosniaks on the policies, rather than with Dodik, Serbs, or Russia. Nor do those misrepresenting Croats as Russia's proxies apply the same

spurious reasoning to the Bosniaks in order to question, for example, why the SDA leadership aligns with Turkish President Erdogan, an autocratic leader of a NATO member state who pursues a mutually beneficial relationship with Putin's Russia amidst of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As argued more in the next section, the real source of contention here is *not* the Croatia-Russia relationship, but Croatia's insistence on the 1-2-3 Dayton, leading the anti-Dayton unitarists to want discredit Croatia as a Kremlin agent allegedly upsetting the West's policy objectives in BiH.

Nevertheless, the claims of the alleged Dodik-Covic-Putin relationship deserve more scrutiny for they reveal that, behind some claims of Russia's influence, sometimes lie BiH's own internal problems and its complex ethnic relationships.

What is probably behind the Covic-Dodik-Russia criticism and disinformation is the wish of the Bosniak elites, as well as possibly some diplomats in Sarajevo, to see Covic aligning himself more strongly with Bosniaks *against* the Republika Srpska leadership. However, while they obviously must work more closely with Bosniak rather than the RS leaders to organize the shared governance in the FBiH, the BiH Croat leaders cannot risk alienating Milorad Dodik and the Republika Srpska leadership for the reasons that the Bosniak leadership and the U.S. Embassy can easily fix—implement the Ljubic verdict.

A big stumbling block in the Bosniak-Croat relations is elections for the tripartite BiH Presidency, which the Bosniak elites control by a two-thirds majority by having the Bosniak electorate elect both the Bosniak and the Croat members of the tripartite Presidency. Since Zeljko Komsic, the nominally Croat member of the BiH Presidency now in his fourth mandate, is accountable to the Bosniak constituencies that elect him, the BiH Croats cannot rely on the Croat member of the BiH Presidency to protect their interests. On the other hand, the BiH Serb leadership has exploited this situation to its advantage, having taken the

positions that, besides protecting Republika Srpska, have sometimes helped the BiH Croats or even Croatia.

Thus in 2019, Komsic opposed the construction of the Croatia Peljesac bridge, and Komsic's SDA ally in the Presidency, serving as the Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency, supported this Komsic' anti-Croatia move (Lakic, 2019). That the Croat member of the BiH Presidency would have wanted to hurt Croatia may seem ironic and confusing until one remembers that Komsic occupies the Croat seat in the BiH Presidency by winning the electoral districts with Bosniak majorities, while losing the electoral districts with Croat majorities (Vrbetic, 2022a).

However, Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the BiH Presidency successfully opposed the anti-Croatia move initiated by Komsic. Arguing that BiH had nothing to gain by getting into a quarrel with Croatia, Dodik vetoed the Komsic instigated Presidency decision and even secured support for his position from the Republika Srpska National Assembly (Lakic, 2019). Built with EU funds, the bridge now bypasses a narrow strip of the BiH territory that cuts into Croatia's mainland at Neum, thereby connecting Croatia's previously disconnected mainland territory.

In other words, a wish that some Bosniak elites and possibly the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo might have about the alliance of Bosniaks and Croats to put an end to Milorad Dodik and Republika Srpska is not only a misguided, illusory idea but is also a non-starter when the Bosniak electorate keeps electing the Croat member of the BiH Presidency. The BiH Croats remain concerned about the autonomy of their decision-making because they struggle to elect their own leaders into the ethnic power-sharing institutions, such as the BiH Presidency and the FBiH upper legislative. Hence, Covic is not in a position to alienate the Republika Srpska leadership due to the complexities of BiH's internal politics and the Croats' threatened position as one of the constituent peoples of BiH. However, Covic is not a Russia ally,

and his foreign policy priorities—seeking EU and NATO membership for BiH--align with those of Croatia and the pro-European BiH parties that represent predominantly the Bosniak electorate (the Troika). Meanwhile, while it wants EU membership for BiH, Republika Srpska aligns with Russia in opposing NATO's enlargement to BiH.

Furthermore, the problems regarding the Southern Gas Interconnection show again that some issues concerning Russia's influence involve primarily BiH's internal problems and interethnic tensions.

Apparently concerned with practicality and timeliness, the United States insists that BiH should use an existing energy company based in Sarajevo to bring gas from Croatia so that BiH can promptly end its dependency on Russian gas brought via Turkey. However, Dragan Covic, the BiH Croat leader, wants to put in place a new public energy company owned by the FBiH and headquartered in Mostar, a city with a slight Croat majority (N1 Sarajevo, 2024).

U.S. Secretary Blinken asked Croatia's Foreign Minister to exert pressure on Covic to agree to the established Sarajevo energy company (N1 Sarajevo and Hina, 2024). However, Croatia, which will be providing a new energy source for BiH, has sided with Covic (Hina, 2024). Together with the Institute for Social and Political Research of Mostar, the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute of Zagreb (2024) has recently published a study on BiH's prospects for energy independence and its strategic partnership with Croatia, showing the complexity of the problem while also offering solutions.

Perhaps some might view the situation concerning BiH's energy independence as the one in which a corrupt local leader keeps prolonging BiH's dependency on Russian energy sources or perhaps seeks to establish a new company for personal profits (N1 Sarajevo and Hina, 2024). However, Covic denies obstructing or seeking personal favors, having proposed a public energy company to be controlled by the FBiH authorities (N1

Sarajevo, 2024). Despite U.S. pressure, the Plenkovic Government stood by the BiH Croats (Hina, 2024). The issue must be very important to the Zagreb government: Croatia normally follows the U.S. lead but here flatly said “No” to the United States. Most likely, the Zagreb government also feels that the United States should take its position into account since it would be Croatia providing a new energy source to help BiH shake off dependence on Russian gas.

Furthermore, the BiH Croats cannot fail but take note of their stakes in the project: the new energy would be coming from Croatia and crossing the Croat inhabited areas of BiH to get to Mostar and eventually to Sarajevo. Since they have learned that their survival as the BiH’s smallest community is connected, not just to the equitable political institutions, but also to a fair share in the BiH economy and the control of resources, the BiH Croat leaders want to establish a new energy company they would control at least partially, rather than use the existing company in Sarajevo under the Bosniak ethnic control.

Therefore, regarding the Southern Gas Interconnection, the real fight is not over ending Russia’s influence sooner or later via using the existing energy company or building a new one—with the new energy coming from Croatia in either case—but over the ethnic control of the energy company bringing gas from Croatia against the backdrop of BiH’s own ethnic tensions.

There is little trust between the Bosniaks and the Croats. Rightly or wrongly, the BiH Croats think they have been duped by Bosniak leaders on several occasions, as the fate of the Mostar agreement shows.

In the city of Mostar, the Bosniak leaders insisted on ethnic power-sharing to constrain the Croat demographic majority in Mostar. Under the pressure of foreign diplomats, the HDZ-BiH (Croats) accepted the Mostar power-sharing agreement in exchange for the SDA (Bosniaks) committing to similar power-sharing arrangements in other FBiH cities and the implementation of the Ljubic verdict (Dervisbegovic, 2020).

However, despite the Western sponsorship of the Mostar agreement and its implementation in the city of Mostar (Hina, 2022b), to this day the Ljubic verdict has not been implemented, nor have similar power-sharing arrangements been extended to other FBiH cities, where the Bosniaks constitute the demographic majority. The Mostar agreement also demonstrates that the issue of ethnic power-sharing is about a minority wanting to be reassured of its participation in governance, the reason why the Bosniak leaders insist on sharing governance with the Croats in Mostar, as opposed to the rest of the FBiH, where the Bosniaks are the demographic majority and oppose, therefore, ethnic power-sharing as an allegedly undemocratic, unethical practice of “ethnic segregation” (N1 Sarajevo, 2021c).

Disinformation: Those Supporting Dayton Serve Russia’s Interests and Harbor Kremlin Values

In April 2022, The Association of Independent Intellectuals Circle 99 (Krug 99) met in Sarajevo to condemn the pro-Dayton statements made by Gabriel Escobar, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for the Western Balkans. While visiting Croatia, Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar remarked that the 1-2-3 Dayton power-sharing framework should be observed until BiH joins the European Union, adding that a civic state concept could be discussed only after BiH becomes an EU member state (Dnevnik.ba, 2022). According to Circle 99 (2022), Escobar did not support European values in BiH but embraced, instead, “Putin’s model of ethno-nationalist expansionism” visible not only in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine but also in the “discriminatory” and “anti-democratic” DPA framework imposed on BiH. The Circle 99 intellectuals believed that the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary rejected not only BiH’s “democratic reformation” but also its European future because a BiH state based on the Dayton framework,

according to Circle 99 (2022), “could never become a member of the European Union.”

The Circle 99 criticism of Escobar came after the months of dissatisfaction among the Bosniak elites and anti-Dayton unitarists, unhappy with the direction of the U.S. led negotiations on electoral reform which the Biden Administration had initiated in 2021 (Zornic, 2021).

When President Joe Biden won the U.S. Presidency, Sarajevo was in a state of euphoria. Having celebrated the incoming Biden Presidency as a new beginning for BiH, the Sarajevo elites expected that the United States would help them revise the Dayton based BiH Constitution by forcing a more centralized state and civic governance (i.e., majority rule) against opposition from Serbs and Croats (Gadzo, 2020; Hamilton, 2020; Mujanovic, 2020).

Instead, the Biden Administration rallied its support behind electoral reform based on the Ljubic and ECtHR Sejdic-Finci verdicts; following the failure of the electoral talks, the Administration eventually supported, in October 2022, HR Schmidt in imposing electoral changes, thereby reaffirming ethnic power-sharing under the 1-2-3 Dayton (Trkanjec, 2021; U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 2022). This U.S. approach caused major disappointments among Bosniaks and their large worldwide diaspora, including among the Bosnian Americans who campaigned for the Biden Presidency. Hence, one could increasingly hear that the Biden Administration has not only “betrayed Bosnia” (Bajrovic, 2021) and has been “dangerously messing in Bosnia’s politics” (Mujanovic, 2022b) but has also lost the plot in the broader Western Balkans, such as Kosovo (Mujanovic, 2023a).

With the outbreak of the Ukraine war, the critics of U.S. foreign policy on BiH began arguing that, while rightfully confronting Russia’s authoritarianism and aggression against Ukraine, in the Western Balkans, America is contradicting its democratic values by appeasing illiberal, pro-Russia actors (Bassuener et al., 2023;

Bajrovic and Delkic, 2023). The United States and its European partners have been “gaslighting democracy in the Western Balkans,” (Bassuener et al., 2023) so have argued Bassuener and other members of the Democratization Policy Council (DPC), a progressive non-governmental organization advocating the civic approach to BiH, in practice translated as the anti-Dayton majority rule without ethnic power-sharing. Hence, the struggle against the 1-2-3 Dayton—one state with two entities and three constituent peoples--has been recast as a fight against authoritarian Russia in tune with Western support for democratic Ukraine.

Accordingly, the Western powers have been called out for their allegedly contradictory, hypocritical behavior of supporting Ukraine on the one hand, while failing to confront Russia’s Western Balkans proxies, on the other hand, upholding instead ethnic power-sharing under the 1-2-3 Dayton, the policy which the critics misrepresent as an equivalent of Russia’s policy towards Ukraine (Bassuener and Vogel, 2022; Bassuener et al., 2023; Bajrovic and Delkic, 2023).

Hence, this new criticism that ties Dayton’s ethnic governance to Russia’s values has not only rebuked the well-known pro-Russia actors like Serbia and the Serbs, but has also targeted some anti-Russia actors such as high-level officials from Croatia and the United States. In this criticism, the pro-Russia accusations do not depend on a proof of ties between Russia and its alleged proxies or a policy analysis showing the alleged pro-Putin actors helping Russia or harming Ukraine, but on the narrowly defined “values” connected to the specific interpretation of Dayton upheld by the anti-Dayton unitarists.

Thus, Kurt Bassuener and Toby Vogel of the Democratization Policy Council deplore, in the prestigious *Foreign Affairs* journal, that the United States has allowed both Croatia and Serbia to pursue a Russia-type Ukraine policy, “interfering in Bosnia on behalf of their co-ethnics there—exactly as Putin is doing with Ukraine” (Bassuener and Vogel, 2022).

Knowing the level of destruction unleashed by Russia in Ukraine, it is difficult to take such views of Croatia's policy towards BiH seriously. During the 1992-1995 war, BiH was surrounded by Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. There was conflict between Bosniaks and Croats, mostly in central BiH during the 1993-1994 period, following the collapse of the Vance-Owen peace proposal. At the same time, Croatia welcomed hundreds of thousand Bosniak refugees and sent weapons to the Bosniaks fighting off Serbs despite the UN imposed arms embargo.

In 1995, Richard Holbrooke and Sarajevo requested military help from the Zagreb government, the help which Holbrooke believed crucial to imposing peace at Dayton, as recounted by Holbrooke himself in his memoir of the Dayton peacemaking (Holbrooke, 1999). Without help from the Croatia Army—serving as a proxy for the American boots on the ground in BiH--it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to reverse some of the Serb territorial gains to make the DPA negotiations successful. Most importantly, the views such as those expressed by Bassuener and Vogel disregard the geopolitics and confuse the respective policies of Croatia and Serbia. They do not differentiate between the BiH Croats' aspirations and Croatia's own interests, ignoring the transformative influence of the Euro-Atlantic integrations on the evolution of some of Croatia's concerns and policies.

Remembering the 1991-1995 war with Serbia, Croatia sees BiH as a buffer against Serbia and hopes, therefore, to preserve BiH as a single state within its internationally recognized borders. Croatia also believes that a vibrant Croat community in BiH is essential to preventing the break-up of BiH and protecting Croatia's own borders. Thus, Croatia wants the friendly Croat community to continue living in BiH, particularly in the BiH areas close to Croatia's winding borders. Moreover, as an EU member state in the Schengen Area, Croatia guards the EU's longest external land border in the area affected by irregular migration and trafficking. Instability in the region, particularly in BiH, let alone the breakup of BiH, would not only raise

normative concerns in Europe but would also affect the security of EU and NATO member Croatia and the protection of its borders, thus eventually creating problems for the European Union and the United States as well.

Croatia is concerned that--with the possible demise of the 1-2-3 Dayton--the BiH Croats would be discouraged from making the FBiH or BiH their home, leaving their country of birth to settle in Croatia and other EU states, while the Bosniak majority would take over the FBiH institutions, setting the stage for confrontation with Republika Srpska. A possible scenario could develop where some Bosniak elites might become more willing to acquiesce in Republika Srpska's separation while hoping to keep the most, if not all, of the FBiH. That scenario could become a nightmare for Croatia: BiH could potentially break into two hostile entities on Croatia's borders, subject to the competing foreign malign influences.

There have been signs warning of this scenario, including during the failed electoral reform talks of 2022, when some Bosniak leaders appeared to have been willing to give up on Republika Srpska in order to take over the FBiH institutions at the expense of the BiH Croats.

As discussed previously, because the BiH Croats do not have an entity of their own, the upper FBiH legislative is crucial for the BiH Croats to maintain political influence in an entity that has several times more Bosniaks than Croats. Without the FBiH House of Peoples based on ethnic parity, there is no ethnic power-sharing protections for the non-Bosniaks, most notably the Croats, in the FBiH. Elections to the FBiH upper legislative, or the House of Peoples, are crucial for the workings of several institutions, including the appointment of the FBiH government and governance at the BiH state level.

While Bosniaks today resent sharing power with Croats and desire a majority rule, the truth is that the FBiH power-sharing institutions have been the choice of the Bosniak leaders. During the Dayton peace talks, the Bosniak negotiating team refused a

separate entity for the BiH Croats, and so the solution was found in Bosniaks and Croats sharing the same entity and its governance. As a result, the FBiH has a complicated system of governance to constrain the Bosniak demographic majority and allow the BiH Croats to influence the decision-making process, chiefly thanks to the FBiH House of Peoples.

On the other hand, the situation in Republika Srpska is rather different. Mostly a Serb entity, Republika Srpska is a unitary entity, with its institutions under the Serb effective control. To be sure, the international community created an institution to keep the Serb majority in check through the RS Council of Peoples, the institution where the Bosniak representatives can, for example, demand a review of the legislation adopted by the RS National Assembly. However, such initiatives have not been fruitful in the past, and the RS Council of Peoples remains too weak to protect the rights of the non-Serbs, chiefly Bosniaks and Croats, living in Republika Srpska (Sarajevo Times, 2023a; Sarajevo Times, 2023b).

For many years, the Bosniak elites wanted to strengthen the RS Council of Peoples by *increasing* its powers, so it becomes similar to the FBiH upper legislative, or the FBiH House of Peoples. These Bosniak aspirations were consistent with their immediate objective of reversing ethnic cleansing and stimulating returns by expanding protections for the non-Serbs in the mostly Serb-run Republika Srpska and their long-term objective of reunifying BiH.

Nevertheless, during the electoral reform talks of 2022, some Bosniak elites gave up on their prior objective of strengthening the position of the non-Serbs in the RS Council of Peoples, insisting instead on *reducing* the powers of the FBiH upper legislative to make the FBiH House of Peoples more similar to the RS Council of Peoples. In practice, turning the FBiH House of Peoples into a version of RS Council of Peoples means taking powers away from the BiH Croats to give full power to the Bosniak demographic majority despite the constitutional

guarantees of equality for the constituent peoples. There were just a few Bosniak leaders who rejected such proposals, most notably Elmedin Konakovic, currently serving as the BiH foreign affairs minister. Konakovic said that he would never accept the transformations of the FBiH into a “Bosniak version of Republika Srpska” (N1 BiH, 2022).

In other words, some Bosniak leaders participating in the electoral reform negotiations wanted the FBiH’s key power-sharing institution redesigned so it becomes comparable to that of Republika Srpska—the entity which the Bosniak leaders usually disparage as the one born out of genocide. In other words, the Bosniak leaders participating at the electoral reform talks wanted a “civic” FBiH with Bosniak majority rule (Cengic, 2022), even if realizing this objective should mean leaving Republika Srpska under the Serb effective control, with Bosniaks and other non-Serbs unable to challenge the RS legislative acts successfully. Ilija Cvitanovic, one of the BiH Croat leaders, accused Bakir Izetbegovic, the leader of the largest Bosniak party, the SDA, of aspiring to turn the FBiH into a “Republika Srpska for the Bosniaks” (N1 BiH, 2022).

It was expected that the Bosniak leaders would seek to balance ethnic institutions with stronger civic institutions during the electoral reform talks (Sarajevo Times, 2022a). However, their insistence on reducing the powers of the FBiH upper legislative to make it more similar to a comparable yet weak institution in what is *de facto* the Serb entity sent a worrisome signal that some elites in Sarajevo, chiefly grouped around the SDA, would welcome the transformation of what so far has been the Bosniak-Croat entity (the FBiH)—into the Bosniak entity in fact.

Not feeling welcome, Croats would most certainly opt to leave, while Republika Srpska—in this hypothetical scenario—would be allowed to secede so that the Bosniak elites can solidify their ethnic control. Therefore, Croatia seems to have justified concerns about BiH splitting into the Bosniak and Serb parts if Croats should disappear as a political factor from BiH.

Hence, to prevent such negative scenarios, Croatia insists on the full respect for the DPA and the political rights of the BiH Croats under Dayton as the best guarantee for their survival as an empowered political community in BiH. Furthermore, as an EU and NATO country, Croatia advocates BiH's integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions because NATO and EU membership would help stabilize the volatile BiH area subject to malign foreign influences, including from Russia, while improving security in Croatia's neighborhood (Republic of Croatia MFEA, 2022).

Naturally, Croatia's insistence on the DPA and the rights of the BiH Croat community upset those seeking to create a unitary civic state without ethnic power-sharing. However, it is absurd to compare Russia's lawless, barbarous acts in Ukraine (Bassuener and Vogel, 2022) to Croatia's policy of advocating NATO and EU membership for BiH while demanding respect for the 1-2-3 Dayton to protect the BiH Croat community. Croatia's actions are also based on the peace treaty (the DPA) of which Croatia is a signatory. Therefore, Croatia is within its rights to insist on respect for the BiH Croat rights under the DPA.

Moreover, contrary to what anti-Dayton unitarists usually assume or openly assert, Croatia's concerns and objectives are not similar to those of Serbia, and the crises in BiH and the Western Balkans look different from the vantage points of Zagreb and Belgrade, respectively. With more compact territory than that of Croatia, freedom from the constraints of NATO and EU membership, and active connections with Putin's Russia, Serbia's geopolitical concerns and aspirations are different from those of Croatia, particularly as regards BiH.

Furthermore, the BiH Serbs and the BiH Croats are not in the same position. The BiH Serbs can freely elect their leadership in the autonomous Republika Srpska. and they want to secede from BiH. Meanwhile, the BiH Croats are wedded to the Bosniak demographic majority in the FBiH and still struggle to elect their own leaders. Furthermore, it is not certain that Croatia's political

elites would welcome a solution that some BiH Croats probably desire but that many Bosniaks fear--the transformation of BiH into a loosely organized state of three autonomous entities with weak central institutions. It is more likely that Croatia would prefer a workable federation covering the entire BiH territory to preserve the BiH state, while insisting on a decentralized federal state with power-sharing to ensure the BiH Croats' inclusion into governance. However, so far, a federal option for BiH—as good as it sounds in a proposal by Grbavac and Pepic (2022)--is not acceptable to either Bosniaks or Serbs.

The propaganda regarding Russia's alleged influence on various Western actors such as NATO and EU member Croatia does not seem to hinge on the evidence of Croatia's cooperation with Russia or specific acts against Ukraine but on the broadly misused political and ideological context, recently also shaped by willful interpretation of the international response to the Ukraine war.

Because this perspective--chiefly associated with the anti-Dayton unitarists-- misrepresents ethnic power-sharing under Dayton as a policy tainted by Russia's values and interests, Croatia gets blamed for pursuing, allegedly, a Russia type policy towards BiH—ironically, just as the Serbs do, who entertain active relations and coordinate policies with Kremlin--while the Biden Administration gets accused of allegedly appeasing Russia in the Western Balkans and thereby contradicting America's liberal democratic values cherished at home and in Ukraine. However, as explained above, Croatia has justifiable security concerns and its policy towards BiH is based on the DPA, a peace treaty, while the U.S. State Department officials, contrary to what Circle 99 (2022) and some other authors affirm, do not like either Putin or ethnic solutions.

From a U.S. perspective, a nation is a political, not an ethnic, community. Hence, U.S. diplomats do not like ethnic partitioning or ethnic parties, as also evident from Ambassador Murphy's statements (N1 Sarajevo and Hina, 2023) or the recent speech by

U.S. Assistant Secretary James O'Brien at the University of Sarajevo (U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina). A supporter of the strong central state authority, O'Brien called out the leaders of the three major ethnic parties, condemned corruption and ethnonationalism, and praised the DPA as the agreement that enabled the strengthening of the central state institutions. The U.S. Assistant Secretary did not discuss that most of the BiH state policies have resulted from the decisions imposed by the international community, with the local ownership of peace still missing. Nor did O'Brien mention that the Dayton category of constituent peoples—important to the BiH Croats but detested by the Bosniaks—is the overarching principle of the BiH Constitution, making BiH quite unlike multiethnic America.

While some may view the O'Brien speech as a message of change in the U.S. policy (Bassuener, 2024) --moving away from the 1-2-3 Dayton and ethnic-centered governance--the truth is that, except for a few notable exceptions, the United States has consistently embraced the policy of anti-Dayton centralization at the expense of the entities and ethnic power-sharing, being the key power driving the top-down liberal nation-building in the 2000s. Thus, the United States has traditionally favored the Bosniak political positions, having naturally raised expectations in Sarajevo and beyond that President Biden--who once strongly criticized the Clinton Administration and its success at Dayton as "appeasement"--would "fix Dayton" in the direction of more civic governance (Mujanovic, 2020; Hamilton, 2020; Mujanovic, 2022b).

Nevertheless, the Biden Administration came to support HR Schmidt to impose the 2022 electoral changes which Bosniaks and civic state activists have harshly condemned (Mujanovic, 2022), while the O'Brien speech has heartened those previously upset with Schmidt's interventions and President Biden, leaving them hopeful that the U.S. policy is now changing the course away from ethnic power-sharing (Bassuener, 2024). Such unexpected changes may look confusing and inconsistent, even

though the U.S. policy towards BiH has been fairly consistent in the last thirty years, viewing Dayton primarily as a tool to end the war and overcome ethnic partitioning by emphasizing the importance of a single, functional BiH state over other considerations.

The question remains why the United States, given its distaste for ethnic divisions, would then even sponsor an agreement like the DPA--which recognized Republika Srpska within BiH and accepted ethnic governance--and why the United States would reaffirm the 1-2-3 Dayton, as it did in 2022.

The U.S. decision to intervene in BiH emerged in the summer of 1995, when the NATO states participating in the UN peace mission in BiH wanted to withdraw their forces. As the leading state of NATO, the United States was expected to help its NATO allies with their withdrawal from BiH. Richard Holbrooke then told President Bill Clinton that, if the United States could not stay out of the conflict, it would have been better to get involved to produce success (i.e., end the war) than to “implement failure” (Holbrooke, 1999).

Helping with the withdrawal would have been tantamount to executing failure, leaving BiH at the mercy of the Serb forces that overran the Srebrenica safe area that summer, resulting in the unlawful killing of over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys and the sentencing of the wartime Republika Srpska leadership for the Srebrenica genocide. The issues of war and peace in BiH did not involve vital U.S. interests but concerned humanitarian issues and the question of U.S. leadership in NATO and Europe.

While the BiH war raged in the 1992-1995 period, the United States criticized the European and international peace proposals for ethnic partitioning; however, after getting involved, the U.S. attitude changed. To end the war, the United States abandoned idealism and embraced pragmatism, accepting ethnic partitioning as consistent with the realities on the ground. Having ended the war, the United States then worked on strengthening the central state institutions before passing the buck to Europe.

Nevertheless, to this day, more than 28 years after the conclusion of the DPA, the BiH society remains divided, and ethnic loyalties remain strong. Hence, the DPA still remains relevant, and, if judging by the past, the United States is likely to stick by the 1-2-3 Dayton whenever security and stability concerns predominate the thinking of its diplomats.

Hence, though there may have been some other calculations, in 2022 the Biden Administration embraced the 1-2-3 Dayton most likely for stability reasons, not wanting to risk aggravating the already explosive situation in BiH amid the worsened relationship with Russia due to the Ukraine war. The United States has traditionally based its BiH policy on the Bosniak-Croat relationship and the strength of the FBiH to keep Republika Srpska in check (Trkanjec, 2021).

However, prior to the 2022 elections, the FBiH institutions were dysfunctional, Croats were threatened with the ejection from the postelection governance, and the RS Serbs were looking for an opportunity to use the FBiH crisis to declare the DPA dead and secede with Russia's support (Sarajevo Times, 2022b; Vrbetic, 2022b). It was under such circumstances that the United States reaffirmed ethnic power-sharing to strengthen the BiH Croats, done most likely with the intent of shoring up the Bosniak-Croat alliance and strengthen the FBiH to contain Republika Srpska.

Regarding the statement made by the Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar that provoked strong reactions in Sarajevo in April 2022, it is important to clarify that Escobar did *not* rule out a non-ethnically organized state in BiH at some point in future. Instead, Escobar said that BiH should not discuss dismissing the DPA power-sharing framework *before* joining the European Union. Escobar probably thought that the fragile BiH state had to be secured with reforms and integration into the EU institutional framework *before* undertaking the contentious, potentially destabilizing internal restructuring.

Herein lies the difference between the U.S. State Department on the one hand, and progressive activists and lawmakers in Europe

on the other hand. In 2022, the progressives blamed the United States for allegedly reinforcing ethnic divisions by supporting HR Schmidt's intervention into the BiH elections (Bassuener and Weber, 2022), and prior to this Schmidt's intervention, the Bundestag passed a resolution calling for the end of the key Dayton categories of entities and constituent peoples (De Bruijn and Vrbetic, 2022). However, if the DPA had unraveled, the calls for intervention would have been placed to President Biden and the U.S. State Department, rather than to Europe's progressives. Aware of such responsibilities, the United States must have felt it important to insist on the respect for the DPA as a guarantee of stability at the time of the heightened regional tensions.

America speaks most loudly when BiH's external borders are challenged, continually reprimanding Serbs, while rarely calling out the Bosniaks who flaunt Dayton by seeking to remake BiH's internal state structure and ditch ethnic power-sharing. The U.S. State Department has diplomats who had the first-hand experience of the war in BiH and still remember the Srebrenica killing fields; some of them participated at the Dayton peace talks where they likely pushed the Bosniak delegation to sign onto Dayton with a promise of helping them reintegrate the country postwar.

Therefore, besides the U.S. distaste for ethnic partitioning, there are several other reasons why the U.S. administrations, Republican and Democrat alike, have been partial to the Bosniaks and their political positions. Nevertheless, for the sake of stability, in 2022 the State Department prevented the internal restructuring of the FBiH by supporting HR Schmidt's intervention into the BiH election law, thereby "betraying" Bosniaks (Bajrovic, 2021) and angering progressives across Europe (Bassuener and Weber, 2022). This U.S. policy seeks to contain and stabilize rather than appease any real or alleged Kremlin aligned actors in the Western Balkans. The U.S. stability policy seems even more important when Russia wants to destabilize the area, looking for an opportunity to rally behind the Serbs and encourage their secession.

While firmly upholding the external borders of BiH and rejecting the “old” challenges to the DPA, the United States has an ambivalent attitude towards the “new” anti-Dayton activities seeking to remake the internal Dayton-based structure, thereby likely undermining its overall objective of regional stability by its shaky commitment to the Dayton 1-2-3 peace bargain. Ethnic solutions, such as ethno-territorial partition, seem alien to the U.S. values even if the DPA remains important for the postwar peace and stability. Thus, the United States sometimes seems committed to the 1-2-3 Dayton rhetorically rather than practically, seeing the DPA primarily as an agreement to prevent secession, even though the U.S. government has reckoned with the realities on the ground and stood behind ethnic power-sharing under the 1-2-3 Dayton when regional security concerns outweigh other considerations.

Nevertheless, the United States is in the process of change, facing enormous challenges both at home and abroad. The United States no longer believes in a “color blind” society, a concept comparable to a non-ethnically organized civic state in the BiH ideological framework. Today, the United States puts emphasis on acknowledging, among others, the role of ethnicity and race in order to redress historic injustices, while the Biden Administration has ordered the immigration agencies to stop using certain words, such as “assimilation,” now to be replaced by “integration.” (Rose, 2021).

While the United States is said to be “the nation of the immigrants,” BiH has the autochthone population with different identities resistant to integration into one politically defined nation, let alone assimilation into one Bosnian nation based on the dominant Bosniak identity as some “civic state” supporters wish. Hence, Dayton’s 1-2-3 peace architecture and ethnic governance will still remain relevant, even though the United States will insist on keeping BiH together as one state and strengthen the central state authority, a challenge for the overstretched superpower facing multiple challenges abroad

besides instability in the Western Balkans (e.g., Kosovo and Montenegro) that could impact BiH as well.

This U.S. policy also testifies how much the world has changed since the 1990s, when the United States was the most powerful state in the world, feeling at liberty to intervene and promote democracy abroad, while the BiH policy was the flagship topic in the U.S. foreign policy community. Today, BiH is rather irrelevant in U.S. foreign policy, as also evident from the way the BiH topics are now discussed, or better not discussed, in leading American think tanks and policy journals, including *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, where few articles on BiH get published, usually by the same clique of authors, without editors offering competing or correcting perspectives.

As regards the various affirmations about the U.S. officials allegedly embracing Putin's ethno-territorial values in BiH, they are clearly disinformation or misinformation.

Nevertheless, such faux narratives have reinforced, among some sections of the BiH society, the negative attitudes towards HR Schmidt, the United States, and the European Union. Significant opposition comes from the SDA, the main Bosniak ethnic party led by Bakir Izetbegovic, the son of the first BiH President. The SDA's junior partner is the DF with Zeljko Komsic, the nominally Croat member of the BiH Presidency; Komsic sharply criticized the U.S. Ambassador in Sarajevo for working on excluding the SDA-DF from the postelection government (N1 Sarajevo, 2022c).

To the furor of the SDA-DF supporters and some apparently independent yet vocal voices, the West supported Schmidt to unblock the SDA-DF obstructed process of the F BiH government formation (Hina, 2023b), thereby helping the Troika and the Croat HDZ-BiH to take power in the F BiH, to the exclusion of the SDA-DF.

The pro-European Troika is an alliance of three moderate parties accountable to the predominantly Bosniak electorate. Though

viciously criticized for the alleged betrayal of their predominantly Bosniak voters (N1 BiH, 2023), the three parties that make up the Troika do not like the 1-2-3 Dayton but observe the Dayton imposed consensus requirements and work with those they disagree with, including Milorad Dodik at the BiH level, in order to strike compromises and pass the EU required reforms (Factor.ba, 2023; Bajramovic, 2024). Meanwhile, the SDA-DF continues to obstruct the reform process and BiH's European path, accusing the Troika of "betrayal" and hoping to bring down the Troika's coalition government with the HDZ-BiH and Dodik (Dnevnik.ba, 2024; Fena, 2024a). A big, though not the only reason, for the SDA-DF's opposition to HR Schmidt and his intervention lies in the exclusion of the SDA-DF from the FBiH and BiH government (N1 Sarajevo, 2022c).

Needless to say, the process of agreeing on the new legislation entailed compromises and has not been easy; however, the BiH coalition government has managed to adopt a number of the important laws prioritized by the European Union. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen recommended the opening of the EU accession talks with BiH (Jones, 2024a), and the European Council agreed, sending a green light to BiH after a long wait (Jones, 2024b). This EU decision is very important for Croatia, too (Republic of Croatia MFEA, 2022). Alongside Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Slovenia, Croatia has lobbied hard for the positive EU's decision on opening BiH's accession talks (Jones, 2024a).

The EU's decision to open the BiH accession talks has, nevertheless, met with criticism, including from the same voices that have engaged in disinformation about allegedly pro-Russia Croatia or U.S. State Department officials. Namely, for the SDA-DF supporters, Komsic, and Circle 99, the opening of the EU accession talks is not good news: they dislike the compromises that the Troika had to make in the process of agreeing to the EU required legislation, and they want to discard Dayton's ethnic governance before BiH joins the European Union (G.L., 2024; Fena, 2024b). As reported by Dnevnik.ba, Komsic was not

pleased because, should the Dayton BiH enter the European Union, then, according to Komsic, “ethnonationalists in BiH would win,” and so would “their sponsors in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Moscow” (Fena, 2024b).

On its Twitter account, the pro-European, progressive Democratization Policy Council (DPC) has expressed similar views, hoping that the European Council would block the decision to open the EU accession talks with BiH because the green light from the European Union would “embolden the corrupt and undemocratic ruling elites” and their “ethnically divisive and secessionist agenda” (Democratization Policy Council, 2024).

While most of the authors cited here for faux narratives—such as Mujanovic and Bassuener—are pro-European voices, they remain deeply hostile to the 1-2-3 Dayton and the Serb and Croat ethnic parties such as the HDZ-BiH, dismissing the efforts of HR Schmidt and the BiH coalition government (Troika, HDZ-BiH, and Dodik’s SNSD) that have, nevertheless, brought some good results for BiH after a long time.

Conclusion

It is well-known that Russia seeks to undermine the Western order in the Balkans, such as supporting Serbs in their rejection of NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). However, some assertions of Russia’s influence discussed here show no merit and seem to have been brought to delegitimize the Western installed peace order vital to the stability of the region: the 1-2-3 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) with one state, two entities, and three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats). The meaningless assertions include disinformation against High Representative Schmidt as a Russia man; the misrepresentation of the U.S.-E.U. led electoral reform as the one benefitting Russia; the frequently repeated falsehoods that

NATO and EU member state Croatia is aligned with Putin or that some U.S. officials embrace Russia's values.

Such disinformation narratives do not show the ties between the supposed Russian assets and Kremlin, nor do they demonstrate that the alleged pro-Russian actors pursue pro-Kremlin policies. Instead, they tend to be based on the ludicrous claims that the very support for the Dayton categories of ethnic power-sharing reflects the embrace of Russia's values under President Putin. Striking at the core of the Dayton peace bargain, the anti-Dayton unitarists want the DPA to guarantee BiH's external borders, while urging the international community to dismiss the DPA designed two-entity state structure (important to Serbs) or ethnic power-sharing (important to Croats) to impose a centralized, unitary state with a majority rule, or the so-called "civic state." However, besides thwarting (Serb) secessionism and (Croat) separatism, the purpose of Dayton has been to prevent (Bosniak) majoritarianism.

The real target of these disinformation activities (hybrid warfare) is the 1-2-3 Dayton, or more specifically ethnic power-sharing with the Dayton categories of entities and constituent peoples. However, given the ethnically divided BiH society, discarding ethnic power-sharing would most likely not produce a non-ethnic majority system, but would lead to Bosniak majoritarianism, already rejected in principle by Serbs and Croats. The available evidence, such as the last official census (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013a), shows that ethnicity remains a salient issue, with more than 96% of the BiH citizens declaring themselves the members of the constituent peoples (50% Bosniaks, 31% Serbs, and 15% Croats), while less than 4% are minorities, including those who do not want to declare their ethnic affiliation and simply feel "Bosnian."

Nevertheless, the criticism of the civic state activism as a window dressing for Bosniak majoritarianism should not mean there are no genuine supporters of the non-ethnic, pluralist governance in BiH. Indeed, there are some sincere supporters of civic

governance, but their nationwide reach is small. For example, one such promising party is Nasa Stranka (Our Party), currently with the Troika coalition government. Important for a political party that calls itself civic and multiethnic, Nasa Stranka does not simply criticize ethnic governance (1-2-3 Dayton) or disparage Serb and Croat nationalism—as most of other “pro-BiH” parties do—but also calls out Bosniak nationalists, such as SDA party officials or Sarajevo’s millennial mayor affiliated with Social Democrats (Begic, 2021).

This statement should not be seen as an endorsement of Nasa Stranka but an acknowledgement that some of its practices are so important for a political party that says it wants a non-ethnic majority rule and establish support across ethnic lines. Nasa Stranka does not forget that the mostly Bosniak composed BiH Army, which Nasa Stranka appreciates (Nasa Stranka, 2024a), committed some war crimes against Serbs and Croats during the BiH war, thus honoring, for example, the memory of the Croat victims at Trusina and the Bosniak victims at Ahmici at the same time (Nasa Stranka, 2024b). This practice is in marked contrast to what is usually seen with other BiH actors that claim to want a multiethnic, integrated society in BiH but appeal mostly to the Bosniak electorate. The Nasa Stranka practice also differs from what we see with some authors cited here, who claim they want a liberal, Western-styled civic governance but remain focused primarily on the Bosniak problems and wounds.

BiH does not have strong multiethnic parties capable of attracting broad societal support across the ethnic lines; it lacks, therefore, the essential prerequisites to transition to a democratic majority rule at this time. Hence, the DPA still remains the essential agreement underpinning BiH’s stability because it provides a framework for the inclusion of the key stakeholders expected to work together and organize governance and adopt new laws.

Nevertheless, as the discussion here shows, the very peace settlement is subject to contention now. Whether they seek to unilaterally change BiH’s external borders or the internal state

structure, such anti-Dayton activities can imperil BiH's future, and thus regional stability, by undermining the compromise that made peace in BiH possible. There is a tendency to view the DPA as merely an agreement that protects the BiH borders while forgetting that this protection is a part of the quid-pro-quo peace formula that links the single BiH statehood with the maintenance of the decentralized internal state structure to block any group from dominating the BiH politics. In other words, there is no Dayton apart from its 1-2-3 peace formula, but the consensus on 1-2-3 Dayton is now collapsing.

Striking at the core of the Dayton peace bargain, the anti-Dayton unitarists want the DPA to guarantee BiH's external borders, while urging the international community to dismiss the DPA designed internal state structure (important to Serbs) or ethnic power-sharing (important to Croats) to impose a centralized, unitary state with a majority rule, or the so-called "civic state." However, the purpose of Dayton has been not only to constrain (Serb) secession and (Croat) separatism but also to prevent (Bosniak) majoritarianism. The intensity of the debate surrounding the disinformation activities discussed here shows that, though the DPA still remains relevant to the BiH postwar peace and regional stability, the consensus on what Dayton is or should be is now disappearing.

The decentralized Dayton-based BiH Constitution empowers the Russia-aligned actors, so has argued Majda Ruge of the European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR) (Ruge, 2022). Ruge is correct in her assessment that the decision-making process under Dayton can empower Dodik to oppose, for example, BiH's integration into NATO and can, therefore, help Russia's interests in BiH.

However, Ruge's statement is also short-sighted and can be misleading. The unitary Republika Srpska with mostly Serb-run institutions does not please the Bosniaks; if there exists any possibility of overturning the hard realities of Republika Srpska, it will lie in the affirmation of the concept of constituent peoples,

not in a civic majority rule. In the situation of the divided BiH society, civic rule becomes a majority's ethnocratic rule—in the case of Republika Srpska, the civic rule means the Serb rule. In other words, by protecting the collective rights of the constituent peoples, Dayton empowers not only Dodik but also the Bosniak leaders and, possibly, even the Croat leaders, to oppose certain decisions they might believe detrimental to their respective communities.

Most importantly, our conclusion cannot be that fighting Russia's influence should require dismantling the key elements of Dayton or that the agreement that has held peace since late 1995 should be dismissed. Given the realities of the divided BiH society, Dayton remains relevant, at least until the peoples of BiH (Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks) can determine otherwise and strike an agreement on the future constitutional arrangements and then change the Dayton-based BiH Constitution in accordance with the prescribed legal procedure.

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