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Sophie Gueudet

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Three's Company? Fragmenting Hierarchies, Multiple Patrons and Secessionist Escalation in Republika Srpska

Sophie Gueudet [a,b]

[a]DIRPOLIS, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy; [b]PeaceRep Ukraine, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the patron-client dynamics between Republika Srpska (RS), Serbia, and Russia, highlighting the shift from a 'master-patron' to a 'multiple patrons' setting. RS, leveraging the resources provided by Serbia, has gradually increased its agency and outgrown the relationship, appealing to a more powerful patron, Russia, to advance its secessionist agenda. Navigating eroding regional and global hierarchies and reinforcing its centrifugal role in Bosnia–Herzegovina, RS's engagement in a 'multiple-patrons system' encapsulates broader patterns of global fragmentation where global, regional, national, and sub-national dynamics of conflict enmesh and where transboundary (geo)political interests and constellations reshape new (dis)orders from below.

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The illegal celebration of *Dan Republike* (Day of the Republic), held each 9 January, has long provided the President of Republika Srpska (RS), Milorad Dodik, with a platform for self-promotion and plebiscitary mobilisation. The 2023 edition featured another guest of honour: Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose 'patriotic care and love' for the Bosnian Serb-controlled entity was rewarded with the highest decoration, the Order of the Republic necklace (Glas Srpske 2023a). The award constitutes a symbolic repayment for Russia's increased support for the systematic attacks on Bosnian statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity pursued by the Bosnian Serb leader as he consolidated his political grip over Republika Srpska and installed an ethnocratic regime (Gueudet 2022). It also symbolically inserts Russia into a three-decade-long legacy of international patronage sustaining both the original and renewed claims for secession and statehood in the entity.

Indeed, RS has been engaged in a durable patron client relationship with Serbia that predates the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and has provided the critical material, political, diplomatic and symbolic resources (Berg and Vits 2018; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012) necessary for the entity's creation and later consolidation as a centrifugal force within the Dayton framework (Caspersen 2008; Zahar 2004), corresponding to what Biermann defines as a master patron setting involving a dominant state patron with potentially

CONTACT Sophie Gueudet sophieclairepaulinegueudet@gmail.com
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conflict deciding resources (Biermann 2025a). Yet, since 2006, under the authoritarian leadership of Milorad Dodik and his political formation, the Party of Social Democrats (SNSD), authoritarianism and secessionism, have become paramount concepts in the entity's politics, calling and working for the transformation of BiH into 'a union of states' (Toal 2013) that would dismantle the Dayton peace architecture and damage the sovereignty and statehood of BiH. The organisation of an unlawful referendum on the validity of a decision about the unlawful character of Dan Republike by the Constitutional Court of BiH on Republika Srpska's territory in 2016 marked the peak of the regime's confrontational stance toward the central institutions and the international actors of the peace process (Gueudet 2024). In that regard, Serbian patronage has remained structurally bounded. Since Belgrade has repeatedly refused to endorse outright Dayton revisionism or formal secession, seeking instead to preserve its international positioning defined by Tadić's 'Four Pillars Foreign Policy' of 2009 (Vučković 2023).

It is in this critical juncture for the master-patron setting that Russia entered the equation, for the RS leadership began to court a more assertive and less risk-averse patron to make up for the original patron having either reached the limits of its capacity or drawn firm political red lines (Caspersen and Gueudet 2024; Kowalski and Rekść 2023). This shift was facilitated by a convergence of interests with Russia, which since 2014 has pursued a deliberate strategy of disrupting and reconfiguring the Balkans regional equilibria through coercion, co-optation, and subversion (Bechev 2019). The establishment of new patron – client relations, drawing on well-tested practices from Russia's 'de facto state playbook' intended to formalise status quo allowing for a galaxy of client secessionist entities to survive non-recongition and contested sovereignty (Malyarenko and Wolff 2022; Gueudet 2024), rests on the creation of asymmetric yet mutually beneficial ties between actors sharing strategic, geopolitical, and ideological objectives, making Dodik a perfectly sensible partner.

Therefore, the emergence of Russia as a new patron for RS secessionist leadership Russia in RS politics signals a shift that cannot be explained solely by entity, national or regional levels dynamics. The editors of this special issue foreground that contemporary international politics is increasingly characterised by global fragmentation: the erosion of previously dominant geopolitical hierarchies, the diffusion of authority across multiple levels, and the multiplication of actors capable of intervening in, reshaping, or obstructing conflict-management mechanisms. Power and authority in this context are not merely redistributed; they are duplicated, contested, and exercised simultaneously across global, regional, national, and in our case, subnational arenas (Benson et al. 2026).

Secessionist conflicts and contested sovereignties are particularly sensitive to these dynamics, insofar as they remain extremely permeable to external impulses from wider geopolitical dynamics and therefore extremely volatile. A such, secessionist conflicts become sites where global fragmentation materialises in concrete and destabilising ways. Within this setting, patron – client relations (PCRs) remain a structurally decisive feature of conflict dynamics (Biermann 2025b), but the conditions under which patronage is exercised have changed fundamentally. As fragmentation expands the pool of potential patrons and weakens centralised authority over conflict resolution, long-standing master – patron relationships may be recalibrated, complemented, or transformed into multiple-patron settings (Biermann 2025a). For clients, this means opportunities for diversification and strategic leverage; for original patrons, it raises the costs of restraint and

disengagement as well as the bar of what is expected to be delivered. Yet these transformations remain insufficiently explored in the literature on secessionist conflicts, which has largely focused on dyadic patron – client relationships (Hicken 2011; Kaufmann 1974; Scott 1972).

This article addresses this gap through an in-depth analysis of Republika Srpska's shift from a master – patron to a multiple-patron setting. How and why, under conditions of global fragmentation, after decades of extensive and rather comprehensive Serbian patronage, did RS increasingly turn to Russia to support a renewed and escalatory secessionist strategy? What does this turn reveal about client empowerment? And how does the emergence of a second patron reshape the original patron – client relationship, rather than simply replacing it? To do so, the article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the conceptual framework. The empirical analysis then examines the consolidation and limits of the Serbia – RS master – patron dyad, before analysing Russia's emergence as a complementary patron. The final empirical section focuses on the escalation of RS's secessionist strategy between 2021 and 2025 as a case of empowerment and escalation of conflict under multiple patronage. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this case for the study of secessionist conflicts in an increasingly fragmented global order.

Patron-client relationships in secessionist conflict and the new global fragmentation

Instead of a 'return to great powers politics' or 'New Cold War', a term that would in any case be misleading and inaccurate, insofar as the confrontational logics of the Cold War were never truly bipolar but rather global (Westad 2005; Romero 2014), we witness a new global fragmentation, denoting the erosion of previously dominant geopolitical hierarchies and normative orders and leading to constellations in which power is shared, duplicated or contested across multiple levels (Benson et al. 2026). Though Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine marked an axial event, the current phase of global fragmentation builds on earlier layers of fragmentation and produces configurations in which existing conflict lines are reactivated through the involvement of new players with converging geopolitical agendas, intensified contestation of the norm-based international order, and circulating ideological frameworks that lend renewed resonance to longstanding grievances. As Peter (2024) highlights, in this setting, contemporary conflicts are therefore marked by the multiplication of actors involved and by the entanglement of global, regional, national and local dynamics.

As such, heightened geopolitical instability and uncertainty increasingly affect longstanding and unresolved conflicts over contested sovereignty such as secessionist conflicts and de facto states, particularly because the status quo on which these entities have endured, defined by the absence of formal conflict resolution or peace agreements, is highly vulnerable to systemic geopolitical shocks, including the war against Ukraine. Older conflict dynamics become entangled with new forms of global fragmentation and local drivers of conflict becomes entangled with the regional and global processes (see Tartu De Facto States Unit, 2022, 2023, 2024). In these configurations, one of the most enduring and structurally decisive features of secessionnist conflicts, the presence

of patron – client relations (PCRs), is likely to know profund alterations as geopolitical hierarchies erode and the number of external actors involved in conflicts multiplies.

The conditions under which patronage is exercised might change as the supply of potential patrons expands, the stakes grow higher, and formerly stable patron – client relations may crumble or transform with increasing rapidity, which is consistent with the research agenda Biermann advocates for and entailing greater scientific focus on 'medium, small and non-state patronage, multiple patron scenarios, and patron as well as client networks' (Biermann 2025a). The article therefore proposes to investigate the impact of this new global fragmentation on patron – client relations in secessionist conflicts, which constitute a particularly revealing object of study insofar as they concentrate, across multiple scales, layered dynamics of contention: at the local level, grievances and mobilisations that propel secessionist leaders to break away; at the national level, the progressive fragmentation of the central state from which they seek to exit or have exited; at the regional level, triangular contention between the secessionist entity, the host state and the possibly neighbouring patron state; and at the global and transboundary level, the involvement or direct intervention of state and non-state actors that play the role of patrons and the circulation of discursive, ideological or material resources, which often prove decisive in activating, sustaining, or reconfiguring the trajectory of those conflicts.

Patron – client relationships (PCRs) have been described as 'instrumental' (Scott 1972) or as 'lopsided' friendships (Wolf 1977), in which contractual bases and expected outcomes are not always clearly stated. A more powerful patron provides military, economic, and/or political resources in exchange for the client's alignment with its interests, including ideological convergence, international solidarity, and strategic advantage (Carney 1989, 49; Shoemaker and Spanier 1984, 18–19). However, the relationship is neither strictly vertical nor entirely one-sided, and the client is not a passive recipient. This earlier scholarship identified reciprocity, asymmetry, compliance, and affectivity as defining components of PCRs (Carney 1989; Kaufman, 1974; Veenendaal 2017). Nonetheless, underlining the 'complex, bidirectional and fluid' nature of PCRs (Relitz and Biermann 2017) recent reconceptualisations foreground four constitutive features: cooperative resource exchange, asymmetric power dependence, diffuse obligation, and durability (Biermann 2025a).

A cooperative resource exchange implies that the patron cannot expect the client's passive obedience and blind compliance, nor can it afford to impose them through coercion (Ladwig 2017). It must instead accommodate the client's demonstrations of agency, as it is not a mere pawn in the hands of an omnipotent patron (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012). At the same time, the patron is also expected to deliver the security, military, economic, political, diplomatic, and ideological resources that enable the client's survival under precarious conditions of existence (Caspersen 2015; Berg and Vits 2018), and it is precisely the provision of these resources that sustains the asymmetric power dependence at the core of the relationship. Because patron – client relations remain distinct from one-sided dependency (Veenendaal 2017), the patron must continuously deliver on its side of the exchange, and when it proves unwilling or incapable of doing so, the relationship becomes subject to renegotiation, recalibration, or, more rarely, breakdown (Caspersen and Gueudet 2024).

Diffuse obligation allows to account for the informal character of PCR, and though in some cases, formalised agreements and treaties and other memoranda of cooperation might underpin contractual relations, both parties still benefit from a great deal of leeway in how much they want to give into the resource exchange. The structural asymmetry of the relationship makes that leeway more obvious on the patron's end, but the client remains capable of exercising agency in a variety of ways: by openly defying the directives of the patron (Caspersen 2008; Caspersen and Gueudet 2024); by seeking the intervention of an alternative, more influential or more malleable patron (Caspersen and Gueudet 2024); by mitigating the negative consequences of its patron's shortcomings (Kosienkowski 2019); or by attempting to reduce the weight of power dependence itself (Kolstø 2020). Moreover, once the client's objectives for engaging in the relationship are met, the commitment to the patron might decrease, as evidenced by Kowalski and Rekść (2023) in their study of Serbia's engagement with China during the pandemic, which offers an edifying example of how the client can influence the terms of the PCR.

The possibility for the client to recalibrate its position, seek alternatives, or even reduce its dependence on the patron does not imply that patron – client relations are easily reversible or short-lived. On the contrary, these relationships are structured by durability, precisely because they are sustained through iterative exchanges of resources over time (Hicken 2011; Hilgers 2011, 573). It is this repetitive and cumulative character of resource exchange that stabilises PCRs despite fluctuations in interests, episodes of contestation, or short-term dissatisfaction. The notion of durability thus distinguishes PCRs from ephemeral cooperation or transient alliances of convenience, which are prone to dissolution once the predetermined objectives of either party have been accomplished. In addition, affectivity may operate as an additional yet non-constitutive stabilising force within certain patron – client relations, for it can add ideational and symbolic layers to resource exchanges. This is particularly the case when the patron is a kin-state with a shared ethnicity and an explicit desire to protect co-ethnics across borders for symbolic and ideational motives, though such ties may also be shaped by strategic or domestic political considerations (Waterbury 2020). In such contexts, affectivity can mitigate short-term divergences of interest and fluctuations in commitment.

Conventionally, patron – client relations have been conceptualised as dyadic configurations (Kaufman 1974). However, Biermann's recent contributions underscore the existence of alternative patronage configurations beyond the traditional master – patron setting, which involves the engagement of one dominant state-patron with potentially conflict-deciding resources. In particular, the multiple-patron setting refers to a configuration in which a client is simultaneously supported by several state and, in some cases, non-state actors. Biermann's (2025a) call to explore such configurations in secessionist conflicts is particularly timely in a phase of global (geo)political fragmentation marked by 'complementarity, overlap, and competition' (Peter 2024) across global, regional, and local hierarchies of power. More specifically, the transformation from a master – patron setting toward a multiple-patron setting can be directly linked to the reorganisation of these hierarchies, as well as to the increasingly transboundary character of conflict dynamics and their actors. This transformation also has direct structural consequences for some defining features of PCRs, most notably asymmetric power dependence and diffuse obligation: the greater the number of potential patrons, the greater the

client's leverage, as it becomes possible to play them off against one another (Bercovitch 1991; Veenendaal 2017).

It is within these (re)configurations of patron – client relations under conditions of global fragmentation that the article situates its analysis of the triadic relationship between Republika Srpska, Serbia, and Russia, and of the shift from a master – patron setting to an emergent multiple-patron configuration. Even before the beginning of the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina, RS has been embedded in a durable master – patron relationship with Serbia, structured by asymmetric power dependence, diffuse obligation, and reinforced by affective kin-state ties. This relationship has been sufficiently effective to consolidate RS's institutional position within the Dayton framework and to preserve the political status quo on which secessionist entrepreneurs, particularly under Dodik's leadership, have been able to relaunch a long-term project of statehood. Yet, while Serbian patronage has enabled this consolidation, it remains structurally constrained in its capacity to deliver the ultimate objective of formal secession, and we will argue that in that regards, the referendum of 2016 that marked the first step toward an attempt at de facto secession represents a critical juncture underlying the need of a more powerful and more daring patron, It is precisely this tension between client ambitions and patron's capacity or willingness to deliver that renders the turn toward an additional patron pallatable for the former.

From the RS perspective, the turn toward Russia reflects both an attempt to overcome the limits of Serbian patronage and a direct outcome of its prior empowerment through that very patronage. Once core objectives within a given patron – client relationship are secured, in this case, the preservation of the Dayton status quo and the assurance that RS's substantial autonomy as an entity within BiH will be maintained, the client's commitment may decrease (Kowalski and Rekść 2023), while its leverage increases through recalibration and patron-shopping. In this sense, Russia's entry does not replace Serbian patronage but reconfigures it. Russia's own objective of disordering and re-ordering the Western Balkans converges with this shift: in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Moscow has exploited the contested sovereignty, structural weaknesses, and institutional divisions embedded in the 1995 Dayton Agreement and has implemented a multidimensional strategy to expand and consolidate its influence and interfere in domestic politics and conflicts (Bechev 2019). This convergence of interests between Dodik's secessionist project and Putin's broader geopolitical agenda propelled the transformation of a committed dyadic master – patron relationship into an incipient multiple-patron setting. The analysis of this process allows for a better understanding of a phenomenon that despite trailblazing contributions such as Palani's on Kurdistan and its search for diversification of patronage and international support to navigate an uncertain and fragmented global environment (2023) still remains marginally scrutinised in the literature on de facto states and other (aspiring) secessionist entities.

Methodology

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach that captures the *longue durée* dynamics of the PCR from wartime Republika Srpska through the post-Dayton period to the present phase of global fragmentation, in order to identify critical junctures in the triangulation between the client (RS), the original master-patron (Serbia), and the later entrant into

the triad (Russia). Archival research conducted at the National Archives of Republika Srpska between 2016 and 2018 covers the wartime and immediate post-war period and documents the genesis of the master – patron setting, showing how it was embedded in both the secessionist project of RS and the irredentist aspirations of its patron. This work draws on the collections of the Presidency of Republika Srpska, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RS, and the Bureau of Representation of RS in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for the period 1992–2000. Secondly, political ethnography carried out in Banja Luka and Belgrade between 2016 and 2018, and again in 2022, provides insight into the moment when the 2016 referendum confronted Serbia with sustaining the status quo on which its client had consolidated itself, while withholding formal support for a renewed secessionist bid. This component is based on more than twenty interviews with foreign-affairs officials from Serbia and RS involved in wartime diplomacy, post-war transborder cooperation, the Special Parallel Relations Agreement, or diplomatic representation. Qualitative analysis of grey literature and official documentation produced by RS and Serbian agencies, accessed through open sources, materials provided by interviewees, and press archives consulted at the National Library of RS and the National Library of Serbia for 1992 to the late 2000s, and online for more recent years, supplements the archival and ethnographic findings, alongside a thorough analysis of reports and statements by international institutions involved in the peace architecture, the first of which being the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Finally, although access to Russian official sources remains limited, what is published on the RS end, being either official bilateral agreements or media coverage, mitigate this constraint by providing documentary insight into the institutionalisation and framing of RS – Russia relations.

Serbia and Republika Srpska: consolidation and limits of the master-patron dyad and empowerment of the client

The long-standing patron – client relationship between Serbia and Republika Srpska has been instrumental in ensuring RS's quasi state-like status within Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war and, more recently, in enabling Dodik's construction of an ethnically-grounded authoritarian regime at the entity level, or 'ethnocracy', combined with highly disruptive policies at state level. Among PCRs in secessionist conflicts, the Serbia – RS dyad is distinctive in terms of its comprehensiveness, duration, and kin-state dimension. Tracing how this dyad has evolved from wartime irredentism to post-Dayton institutionalised patronage illuminates both the empowerment of the client as a direct outcome of the master-patron setting as well as the structural limits imposed by the patron that will make a second patron attractive.

Joint war goals and patron-backed peace terms

The 'Greater Serb' irredentist project that paved the way for the proclamation of Republika Srpska was not merely ideological; it rested on cross-border political engineering and a convergence of war goals between patron and client. It presupposed the active mobilising role of the Serb nationalist parties outside Serbia, whose formation and campaign for the elections of 1990 was closely monitored and supported by the ideologists of Milošević,'s regimes. The Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) was therefore the direct result of the

patron's irredentism and served as a co-instigator of the secessionist project. After the SDS victory in the elections, it was set in motion through the creation of Serb Autonomous Regions, the 10 November 1991 referendum on remaining in a Yugoslav state, the establishment of parallel local government structures, and especially the military preparation of the targeted territories. All of those escalatory steps were all embedded in close coordination between the SDS, the Yugoslav Popular Army (JNA) and Milošević's government (Zahar 2004).

This architecture of patronage, initially visible in institutional and political arrangements, also translated into a discursive framework on the defence of the 'Serb national interest'. The proclamation of Republika Srpska on 9 January 1992, presented as the sovereign expression of the 'Serb people' of Bosnia–Herzegovina, sealed their joint escalation towards war (RS National Assembly, 1992a). The six 'strategic objectives' announced by Radovan Karadžić on 12 May 1992 (the drawing of borders, territorial corridors, the partition of Sarajevo and access to the sea) make explicit this convergence of war aims between Pale and Belgrade (RS National Assembly 1992b). The progressive withdrawal of the JNA from Bosnia, leaving behind officers, heavy weaponry and logistical networks that were integrated into the VRS, completed the initial patronal transfer: RS entered the war with a fully fledged politico-military apparatus made possible by the patron's support (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia 1999).

In this early phase Milošević fulfilled the role of patron unconditionally, accepting international sanctions and diplomatic isolation rather than abandoning the Bosnian Serb leadership and the irredentist project (Interview 1). Yet despite mounting pressure, Milošević reaffirmed his support for Pale. As Karadžić reported to RS deputies, the Serbian president assured him that, 'whatever the sanctions and threats, we will stand by the Serbs of Bosnia' (RS National Assembly 1993a). From 1993 onwards, however, asymmetric power dependence and diffuse obligation began to work in less favourable ways for Pale. Under growing international pressure putting substantial strains on Yugoslav economy and society, Milošević progressively repositioned himself from war entrepreneur to 'reasonable' negotiator. The Vance – Owen and Contact Group plans made particularly clear the emerging divergence between the war aims of the RS leadership and Belgrade's interest in sanctions relief and international reintegration. While the RS Assembly rejected these peace plans, Milošević increasingly used the asymmetry of power and resources to impose his line (RS National Assembly 1993b), ultimately closing the border, imposing a quasi-embargo on RS and taking over de facto diplomatic representation of Bosnian Serbs during peace negotiations formalised by the 'Patriach Paper', an agreement that grant Milosevic the leadership of the 'joint' Serb delegation during peace negotiations (Interview 1, RS Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

Dayton is the culmination of this evolution: Milošević negotiates on behalf of RS, accepts the reaffirmation of Bosnia and Herzegovina within its international borders, and sacrifices several of the initial war goals in order to secure an internationally acceptable settlement (Interview 1). From the perspective of Pale, Dayton is a defeat of the original irredentist project. Yet it also institutionalises RS as an entity with extensive competences and substantial autonomy within a weak federal state, and, crucially, embeds in Annex 4 (the Constitution) the right of entities to establish 'special parallel relations' with neighbouring states (General Framework Agreement for Peace, 1995).

This outcome encapsulates the paradox of the Serbia – RS PCR: the patron abandons the client's maximalist war goals and curtails its diplomatic agency, yet remains structurally indispensable to RS's security, economic viability and institutional recognition. This is the basis on which the durability and iteration of the master – patron relationship are built in the post-Dayton period.

Formalised patron-client relations and the guarantee of the Dayton status quo

The formalisation of Serbia – RS patronage rested on the very clause that RS elites had identified as compensatory at Dayton, the right of entities to enter into Special Parallel Relations with neighbouring states, subject to respect for Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity (GFAP, Annex 4, Art. III.2). The Special Parallel Relations Agreements (SPRA) became the main framework through which Yugoslavia, and later Serbia, maintained and reconfigured its patron role.

A first agreement was signed in 1997 between FRY President Zoran Lilić and the Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency, but remained largely unimplemented because of institutional crisis within RS, intra-Serb struggles and FRY's isolation over Kosovo (Interview 2). After the fall of Milošević, the Agreement on Special Parallel Relations of 5 March 2001, and its 2006 successor after the dissolution of Serbia and Montenegro, gave substance to a broad range of sectoral cooperation (Glas Srpske 2001, 2006). The agreements cover economic cooperation and use of natural resources, legal approximation, privatisation, science and technology, education, culture and sport, social and health policy, tourism and environmental protection, information, protection of citizens' freedoms and rights, the fight against crime and, in the 2001 version, defence (Official Gazette of Republika Srpska, 2001). Read through the lens of PCR, SPRA are not technical add-ons but a formalised form of cooperative resource exchange and diffuse obligation (Biermann 2025a). They provide an iterative framework through which Serbia delivers economic, financial, institutional and symbolic resources, and RS aligns politically and reproduces a Serb-centred regional order.

Economic cooperation illustrates this dynamic clearly. SPRA facilitated the entry of Serbian capital into key RS sectors. The 2006 acquisition of Telekom Srpske by Telekom Srbije for 646 million euros, more than RS's provisional 2007 budget, was the largest Serbian investment abroad and brought RS a vital injection of revenue (Politika 2006). Preferential treatment for Serbian firms and virtually duty-free trade gave RS a valuable outlet for heavy-industrial and energy-related goods. Trade data from a 2015 memorandum of the RS Representation in Belgrade show that Serbia accounted for about 13 per cent of RS exports and 17.5 per cent of its imports, with a total bilateral trade volume of roughly 1.1 billion KM (Representation of Republika Srpska in Belgrade, 2016).

Under Vučić, the SPRA framework also became a conduit for more strategic forms of patronage, particularly in the energy and defence sectors. Agreements on gas supply via Srbijagas, joint hydropower projects on the Drina, and memoranda aimed at integrating RS's defence-industrial capacities and infrastructure into Serbia's defence system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Ministry of Defence of Serbia 2017; Government of Republika Srpska 2018) all point to a deepening material interdependence in highly strategic domains. These developments weaken Bosnia and Herzegovina's attempts to establish a unified defence policy, an initiative that has struggled since the 2005 unification of the armed forces, and overall they function as a centrifugal force

against efforts to strengthen the central state, contributing to the fragmentation of its sovereignty and statehood and the consolidation and empowerment of its client.

Kin-state policies and nested integration across the Drina

Beyond material resources, Serbia has also exercised patronage through kin-state policies that deepen affective and symbolic ties and enhance the identity component of the relationship (Caspersen 2008; Waterbury 2020). Tadić's 'Serbs of the Region' policy epitomised the institutionalisation of such policies and reinforced Serbia's role as kin-state to Serbs across the former Yugoslavia. The RS was probably one of the main beneficiaries as the framework of the 'Serbs of the region' complemented the SPRA and as such cooperation in culture, sport, education, and the economy expanded dynamically (RTRS 2018). One of the best example is to be found in the long-term Podrinje project (Glas Srpske 2013). Launched at a joint government meeting, Podrinje comprised around one hundred smaller projects such as transborder energy facilities, water management, agriculture, and bridges, designed to densify connections between populations on both banks of the Drina (Glas Srpske 2015). Such initiatives anchored Serb – Serb cooperation at the local level and fostered a form of nested integration that reconfigured the function and perception of the border (Knott 2015).

Under both the SPRA and the 'Serbs of the Region' framework, the construction of educative infrastructures, cultural venues and places of worship managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church on RS territory contribute to the long-term diffusion of a transboundary Serb identity conceptualised by its entrepreneurs as a 'common spiritual space' across the Drina, with the further aim of enhancing interaction and integration with the kin-state 'over and above' the sovereign borders (Knott 2015). The 'common spiritual space' concept has been formulated and promoted by key state and non-state actors, including the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), its Banja Luka counterpart (SANURS) (Kuzmanović and Mirjanić 2005) and provided the foundation for the broader notion of 'Srpski svet' (Serb World). This discourse has been pivotal in framing Bosnian Serbs as a threatened minority requiring protection from Belgrade. In July 2017, Dodik and Vučić jointly announced the drafting of a 'Declaration on the Survival of the Serb People', portraying Serbs as culturally and linguistically weakened throughout the post-Yugoslav space and even facing 'identity genocide' (Glas Srpske 2018).

This narrative became a powerful tool on both sides of the Drina, particularly in RS, where Dodik's ethnocratic regime use it to justify the whole set of measures aiming at destabilising the sovereignty and statehood of BiH and pushing forward renewed claims for RS statehood (Gueudet 2018).

A master-patron with reservations

Since 2006, under the leadership of Milorad Dodik and his party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), authoritarianism and secessionism have moved to the centre of entity politics. Calls for a referendum on self-determination, demands to transform Bosnia and Herzegovina into 'a union of states', and the systematic undermining of the legitimacy and sovereignty of central institutions (Toal 2013) became key instruments in the construction of an ethnocratic regime. The unlawful referendum organised in RS in 2016 on the validity of the Constitutional Court decision declaring 'Dan Republike'

unconstitutional marked a decisive turning point in this confrontational stance toward state institutions and the international actors of the peace process, including Western states, the EU, NATO and the UN (Gueudet 2024). It also illustrates the extent to which secessionist entrepreneurs could act on the basis of the empowerment generated by Serbia's longstanding patronage, whose centrifugal effects strengthened RS's capacity to challenge the Bosnian state.

Serbia nevertheless displayed marked reluctance to endorse Dodik's separatist agenda. In 2016, Vučić publicly criticised the organisation of the referendum and repeatedly urged Dodik to abandon the initiative. A senior official from the Serbian Consulate in Banja Luka, interviewed in July and October 2016, shortly before and after the vote, expressed scepticism toward the RS government's endeavour and affirmed that Serbia had not and would not encourage Dodik to take further steps toward secession, which he characterised as illusory. At the same time, he acknowledged that neither the consulate, the embassy nor the Serbian MFA adopted a proactive posture aimed at deterring Dodik from proceeding (Interview 3). This hands-off approach, which enables Belgrade to maintain its image as a responsible mediator without entering into open conflict with RS authorities, has become a recurrent feature of the patron – client relationship under Dodik and Vučić. The dynamic became even clearer from December 2021, when Dodik launched a series of political, legal and institutional mechanisms intended to withdraw RS from state-level competences, including the armed forces, judiciary and tax administration. These steps toward de facto institutional secession were met without enthusiasm by the patron, and Vučić sought to persuade Dodik to re-engage with central institutions (B92 2022; Euractiv 2022) and moderate his stance to preserve Serbia's ambiguous position as a signatory of the Dayton Peace Agreement and a guarantor of stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region.

For RS, this configuration is inherently double-edged. Decades of Serbian patronage supplied the institutional, economic and symbolic foundations needed to sustain ethnocratic governance and nourish long-term statehood claims, yet when these claims materialised into concrete secessionist steps the master patron signalled that certain thresholds would not be crossed. The gap between RS's renewed secessionist agenda and the structural constraints of Serbian patronage thus made the search for an additional, more assertive patron conceivable. In a context of global fragmentation and an expanded pool of potential patrons, Russia's entry does not supplant Serbian patronage but reconfigures it, transforming a historically dyadic master – patron relationship into an emerging multiple-patron setting and underpinning the client's growth of agency and power in the PCR.

What Russia delivers: a complementary master-patron?

Russia's appeal as a complementary patron

Serbia has done most of the heavy lifting in establishing, over the last three decades, a comprehensive patron – client framework. Unlike Serbia, the Kremlin mainly supplies the political, symbolic and diplomatic resources needed to push secession forward. From a PCR perspective, Russia offers precisely the resources the master patron withholds, which makes it attractive for a client seeking to escape the structural constraints of the master-patron setting.

Following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Russia recalibrated its Western Balkans policy and began using the leverage afforded by the region's dependence on Russian energy to pursue a more assertive geopolitical agenda. This shift introduced a framework defined by coercion, co-optation and subversion (Bechev 2019) across political organisations, the security sector, religious and cultural institutions and the media, with the explicit objective of disrupting existing regional order and challenging Western influence. Within this broader strategic turn, PCRs emerged as a key mechanism of co-optation: Russia seeks asymmetric yet mutually advantageous ties with actors whose agendas align with its geopolitical and ideological objectives. This includes activating elements of what Malyarenko and Wolff (2022) and Gueudet (2024) describe as the 'de facto state playbook', a repertoire used to keep conflicts over disputed territories and contested sovereignties in what Russia considers its 'near abroad' under management and to leverage them against the 'collective West' (Toal 2013). Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its contested sovereignty and fragmented institutional architecture offered favourable conditions for deploying this playbook, and RS proved particularly willing to play along. Its leadership has long framed secession in anti-Western terms and treated Russia as a political and ideological counterweight to peace-implementation structures (Karcic 2022). This convergence of interests made RS an expedient vehicle for Russian ambitions to disorder the post-Dayton settlement and install durable presence in a territory where Euro-Atlantic integration is highly contested.

Regime consolidation and autocracy import

The consolidation of the regime and the rise of autocracy can be seen as a key aspect of Russia's patron politics in Republika Srpska, delivering political legitimacy and credibility to the ethnocratic regime through three complementary channels: interpersonal relations between Dodik and Putin, interparty cooperation, autocracy export.

During his three mandates as RS President, Dodik has established an authoritarian system of governance, characterised by blatant violations of the rule of law, state capture and crony capitalism. Russia's patronage has proven invaluable in consolidating the regime through the strategic use of personal diplomacy by both parties. The relationship between Dodik and Putin has become increasingly personal over time, as evidenced by Dodik's frequent visits to Moscow, which have served to reinforce their shared agenda of destabilising Bosnia and the broader region. During the 2018 and 2022 general election campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Putin openly endorsed Dodik as 'his' candidate, portraying him as a statesman dedicated to protecting Republika Srpska's interests (Glas Srpske 2022a). Thanks to the Russian President's skyrocketing popularity in RS Dodik can cultivate his as a Putin-like strongman up to confrontation and conflict to defend the entity. The 2023 edition of Dan Republike (Glas srpske 2023a), in which Putin was awarded the necklace, intended to publicly establish parallels between the two figures and utilise the figure of Putin as an electoral and political asset for the regime, particularly given that the honour has been reciprocated when Putin decorated Dodik with the Order of Alexander Nevski (Glas srpske 2023b). Furthermore, Dodik's SNSD and Russia United have cultivated close inter-party relations, evidenced by the signing of a cooperation agreement that advocates for the establishment of a militarily neutral territory in the Balkans. The agreement is founded on the recognition of shared cultural values and a congruence of political and strategic agendas. SNSD Secretary

General has characterised the agreement as 'an important component of the integrity of the countries of Southeast Europe, and that it contributes to peace in the region' (Glas Srpske 2016).

The aforementioned connections translate into Dodik's exercise of power and emulation of the Russian political model, which is characterised by the personification of power, an autocratic system, and ideological foundations. The RS government has increasingly adopted Russian legal practices to suppress political opposition, with recent legislation, including the law on foreign agents, echoing similar laws passed in Russia to curtail civil society and political dissent (Radio Free Europe 2023). Furthermore, a proposed law on defamation in RS is designed to severely restrict press freedom, echoing similar trends seen in Russia under Putin's rule (Radio Free Europe 2023). Taken together, these practices amount to a transfer of political and symbolic resources that deepen RS's asymmetric dependence on Russia while generating diffuse obligation through interpersonal and ideological alignment, which strengthens Russia's position as a patron precisely in domains where Serbia's support is yet present, but less impactful for building internal legitimacy of the regime.

Ideological diffusion

The export of autocracy is supplemented by the export of ideology, with Dodik drawing from the concept of 'Russkiy mir' to take the 'common spiritual space' to the next level, relinking with Milosevic's Greater Serbia. The concept of 'Srpski Svet' is not only a result of kin-state policies underscores the significance of unity among Serbs across diverse regions and alludes to a world of 'values related to our religion and identity' that are unified around the Serbian homeland (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019). Dodik is a prominent proponent of this concept, characterising it as a 'remarkable idea' that should not face any opposition (Pobjeda 2024), and utilising it as a political and ideological framework for secession. The rally 'Srpska te zove', held on 18 April 2024, serves as a prime example of how Srpski Svet functions as the regime's primary justification for seizing any opportunity to 'declare independence and unite with Serbia' (Glas Srpske 2024a). Furthermore, the portrayal of Russia as an alternative centre of power and a 'useful and impartial' ally, in opposition to a 'collective West' hostile to RS vital interests for ideological motives, contributes to driving the regime further towards Russia (B92 2014). Following a meeting with the Russian President in May 2023, Dodik emphasised that RS can rely on Russia and Putin to support Republika Srpska the 'decadent behaviour of the West towards those who were not legally elected to the post of High Representative' (Glas sprske 2023b).

A range of non-state actors, organised in transnational networks, are involved in this ideological export. Significantly, the Russian Orthodox Church has expanded its presence in the entity since 2018, relying on its Serbian counterpart to amplify its nationalist discourse. This strategy is evident in several joint initiatives, including the inauguration of a Church and Cultural Centre in central Banja Luka, which officials from both sides hailed as a testament to the 'spiritual and cultural intimacy of the Russian and Serb peoples' (Balkan Insights 2018). The Association for Serbian-Russian Friendship and Unity of Orthodox Peoples has constructed a monastery in Ritešić, conceptualised as 'a Serbian-Russian spiritual centre' (Žurnal 2020a).

By validating ethnonationalist and anti-Western worldviews, Russia provides the normative scaffolding that Serbia cannot openly endorse, thus reinforcing a complementary

division of labour between patrons and expanding the repertoire of resources available to RS.

Militarisation of the RS's security apparatus

One of the most striking aspects of Russia's patronage of RS is its role in strengthening the entity's security apparatus. The militarisation of RS has been a central component of Dodik's vision for a more autonomous RS, and Russia has provided both direct and indirect support for this goal (Katana 2016), crossing a line that Serbia would not.

In 2015, the Ministry of Interior of the RS signed a memorandum of understanding with Russian law enforcement agencies, which facilitated joint training programmes in fields such as counterterrorism and the suppression of social movements (RTRS 2024). Furthermore, Russia has provided support for the development of military training facilities in RS, including the police training centre in Zalužani, which was modelled after the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, Serbia (Balkans Insight 2017). US intelligence reports have expressed concerns regarding the arming and training of armed groups, citing the establishment of a clandestine camp in the vicinity of Rogatica in eastern Bosnia and the Maglic mountain area, which is reportedly protected by the RS Ministry of Interior (BNE 2023). The Ministry of Interior has denied this, but the significant increase in the quantity and quality of the entity police's equipment over the past decade suggests a possible correlation with Russian interference (Interview 4). Furthermore, there have been reports of Russia's alleged involvement in the training of RS paramilitary groups loyal to Dodik, with the aim of strengthening his autocratic governance system (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2016). It is crucial to acknowledge the connections between ultranationalist and potentially militarised Serb organisations, such as veteran associations, and their Russian counterparts. While these connections have primarily facilitated the spectacle of political might, exemplified by the Dan Republike event where the local chapter of the Noćni vukovi marched alongside Veterans of Republika Srpska, a veteran association closely affiliated with the SNSD, it remains challenging to ascertain the extent of their infiltration within the entity's security apparatus (Interview 4).

These developments suggest that Russia is laying the groundwork for a more robust security presence in RS, which could potentially play a critical role in any future moves toward secession. The growing militarisation of RS's police forces is part of a broader strategy to create a parallel security infrastructure that operates outside of the BiH framework and is more aligned with Russian interests.

By supplying coercive and security-related resources that Serbia either cannot or will not deliver at a comparable scale, despite existing defence agreements, Russia deepens asymmetric dependence in the security domain and enables RS to develop parallel structures beyond the authority of Bosnia's central state, thereby clarifying the client's strategic rationale for diversifying patronage.

Economic statecraft and patronage rents

Unlike Serbia, Russia's economic assistance to Republika Srpska remains limited, yet it is strategically targeted at sectors that directly challenge Bosnian sovereignty. Through bilateral arrangements that highlight RS's paradiplomatic capacity, Russian involvement

enhances the entity's state like profile in strategic sectors that directly challenge Bosnian sovereignty, most notably energy. Investments in former Yugoslav energy infrastructure have given Russia significant influence in the entity's energy sector, creating leverage for both parties over the central government in Sarajevo (Žurnal 2020b). The acquisition of the Brod and Modriča oil refineries by the state controlled company Zarubezhneft in 2007, which placed most of Bosnia and Herzegovina's oil refining capacity under Russian control, illustrates this pattern. Despite accumulated losses exceeding 1.3 billion euros, Russian engagement has persisted, indicating that political considerations outweigh economic rationality. This logic is further reflected in long term gas supply agreements with Republika Srpska, including the 2015 Gazprom Export contract renewed in 2023 until 2050, and in plans for joint gas fired power plants announced in 2022 (BNE Intellinews 2022; TASS 2024).

Compared to Serbia's comprehensive patron-state intervention in its client's economy Russia relies on targeted patronage rents rather than comprehensive economic intervention (Interview 3). In this sense, these targeted economic interventions contribute to the consolidation of the patron – client relationship at relatively low financial cost while sustaining the illusion of economic sovereignty that underpins claims to statehood.

Delivering revisionism and secession

Russia plays a pivotal role in supporting Republika Srpska's (RS) ambitions for revisionism and secession, particularly through its diplomatic assistance. In contrast to Serbia, Russia holds significant international leverage, particularly within multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. This enables Russia to influence the decision-making processes concerning the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). RS has found in Russia an influential ally capable of challenging the regional paradigm for conflict resolution and security, leveraging its position in the UN Security Council and its involvement in the DPA implementation mechanisms – advantages that Serbia lacks. Russia exercises its influence in the UN Security Council, using its veto power on several occasions to defend RS's interests. A notable instance was in 2015, when Russia vetoed a resolution recognising the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, arguing it was 'not constructive, confrontational, and politically motivated' (Balkans Insight 2015). This is part of a broader strategy of undermining international initiatives that are viewed as detrimental to RS's objectives.

Since Milorad Dodik pursued a separatist agenda, he has systematically targeted the institutions and mechanisms responsible for overseeing the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Dodik has called for the termination of these institutions and an end to international intervention, openly criticising the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and accusing it of undermining the Dayton Peace Agreement and the BiH Constitution by enacting reforms that 'grant additional powers to Bosnia and Herzegovina'. Initially, the Russian representatives adopted a relatively moderate stance, raising concerns about the use of the OHR's 'Bonn powers' to push through state-level reforms and remove elected officials obstructing the peace process (UNSC 2007, 2008). However, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia shifted to a more assertive and direct political and diplomatic stance in support of Bosnian Serb revisionism (UNSC 2016). In that same year, Russia made it clear that it would not be voting to extend the EUFOR mandate, arguing that doing so would facilitate Bosnia and Herzegovina's

integration into the European Union and NATO (UNSC 2014a, 2014b). In the ensuing years, Russian officials opted to distance themselves from the mechanisms for implementing peace, including the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), while concurrently expressing overt support for the actions of the RS, including its 2016 referendum. During Security Council deliberations, Russia staunchly defended the Dodik regime, contending that the referendum within the constitutional framework of RS did not pose a threat. They accused the High Representative's report of bias and anti-Serb sentiment (UNSC 2016).

In 2021, Russia escalated its support by blocking the appointment of a new High Representative, Christian Schmidt. Russia insisted that the position was vacant and that any appointment should be subject to a vote by the Security Council, a move which aligned with Dodik's long-standing desire to eliminate the OHR. With the backing of China, Russia's veto power threatened the OHR's very survival, thereby jeopardising the enforcement of the Dayton Peace Accords (Peter and Houghton 2024). Russia's policy continued to evolve in 2021, with the country formally withdrawing from PIC meetings as long as the High Representative remained in charge. In November 2022, Russia, in collaboration with China, made its vote for the extension of the EUFOR mandate contingent on the exclusion of any reference to the OHR, thereby effectively denying its legitimacy (UNSC 2022). This policy shift was a key factor in the deepening institutional crisis in BiH, which reached a head when the RS National Assembly voted to withdraw from the Bosnian armed forces, judiciary, health, and tax systems, opting to create its own institutions (OHR 2022a). In a letter dated 17 February 2022, just one week before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia also announced it would cease funding the OHR (2022a). This move signalled a notable alignment with Dodik's revisionist agenda, thereby further eroding the capacity to enforce the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords. This shift in policy positioned Russia as a pivotal patron within the Bosnian Serb secessionist movement. Subsequent to this development, Russia's endorsement of Bosnian Serb separatism and claims for statehood became increasingly evident. In Spring 2022, the Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, announced the opening of a Russian diplomatic office in Banja Luka, which would hold the same status as the embassy in Sarajevo (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2022). This symbolic gesture underscored the growing alignment between Russia and RS, highlighting the convergence of interests between Russian geopolitical strategies and Dodik's separatist objectives. The establishment of a Russian diplomatic presence in Banja Luka reinforced the perception of RS as a state within a state and signalled Russia's broader support for undermining BiH's sovereignty.

The support provided by Russia to RS's revisionist and secessionist agenda is consistent with its broader geopolitical agenda, particularly in the context of its actions in Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine and the use of force to alter territorial boundaries are analogous to the support provided to separatist movements in BiH. On the RS end, the cooperative resource exchange manifests primarily in the diplomatic yielding that Dodik and RS extend to Russia, enabled by the constitutionally conferred veto power that the RS member of the Presidency has repeatedly used to block central-level decisions deemed harmful to Russian interests, and by extension recast as harmful to RS interests. Dodik's role in countering European and U.S. influence in the region is significant, particularly in the context of blocking BiH's EU and NATO aspirations. He has used his constitutional veto power in Bosnian institutions to block reforms that would bring BiH closer to EU and NATO membership, in alignment with Russia's threats of 'consequences'

should BiH pursue these objectives. RS representatives have also used their veto power to prevent BiH from adopting at the UN resolutions condemning Russia's annexation in Crimea or sanctions against Russia following the full-scale invasion (Glas Srpske 2022b, 2022c).

While Russia's engagement with RS predates 2021, it is only after Dodik shifted from rhetorical secessionism to concrete institutional steps that the Kremlin markedly intensified its diplomatic and political support. Compared to the long-standing Serbia – RS dyad, the RS – Russia relationship is younger and less institutionalised, yet repeated interactions in political, security, economic and diplomatic affairs already display emerging patterns of cooperative resource exchange, asymmetric dependence and diffuse obligation. What the relationship has yet to acquire is full durability. Yet this temporal asymmetry is itself analytically meaningful: Russia operates as a complementary patron, providing exactly those revisionist, anti-Western and conflict-escalating resources that Serbia cannot or will not offer, thereby enabling RS to widen its strategic autonomy within an emerging multiple-patron setting. This complementarity aligns with theoretical expectations in multiple-patron settings, where clients diversify patronage specifically to obtain resources that the original patron withholds.

Republika Srpska unhinged: empowerment of the client within a 'multiple patrons setting'

At the point where accumulated client capacity confronts the limits of patronal restraint, the shift toward a multiple-patron setting becomes both intelligible and strategic, with the original patron underpinning consolidation and the new patron facilitating escalation. With the new impetus given my the emerging multi-patron setting and the influx of political, ideological and diplomatic resources stemming from Russia's commitment to Dayton revisionim, patronage logics created the conditions under which Milorad Dodik could use the complementarity of both patronages to empower the entity and gradually revive a secessionist project. By 2021, this process of empowerment had reached a critical threshold. The regime possessed sufficient institutional capacity, internal control, and symbolic legitimacy to initiate a strategy of stepwise institutional disengagement from the Bosnian state. The escalation of Republika Srpska's secessionist strategy from 2021 onward unfolded in parallel with a visible intensification of Russian political and diplomatic backing, which altered both the perceived costs and the feasible scope of confrontation with Bosnia and Herzegovina's central institutions.

The immediate catalyst was the July 2021 imposition of amendments criminalising genocide denial by High Representative Valentin Inzko (OHR 2021). RS authorities rejected the amendments outright, suspended their application on entity territory, and initiated a boycott of state-level institutions. In December 2021, the RS National Assembly adopted conclusions mandating the withdrawal of RS from state competences in defence, taxation, and the judiciary, and tasked the entity government with drafting legislation to recreate parallel institutions (Glas Srpske 2021). These steps marked the first explicit move toward de facto institutional secession. While Serbia urged caution and de-escalation, Russia escalated its diplomatic shielding, openly contesting the authority of the High Representative and signalling that any attempt to enforce central decisions against RS would be politically opposed at the international level.

In January 2022, following consultations with President Vučić, RS representatives temporarily returned to state institutions (B92 2022). This tactical pause did not amount to a reversal of the secessionist trajectory. Legislative preparations for competence transfers continued, despite a brief slowdown officially associated by the RS authorities with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (OHR 2022b). Yet, escalation resumed with greater intensity following Dodik's return to the RS presidency after his mandate in the tripartite Presidency. In December 2022, the RS National Assembly adopted the Law on Immovable Property, asserting exclusive entity ownership over land and natural resources (RS National Assembly 2022). Although the law was suspended by the High Representative and annulled by the Constitutional Court, Russia publicly questioned both interventions and framed the dispute as evidence of Bosnia and Herzegovina's 'failed sovereignty'. In June 2023, the RS National Assembly adopted legislation suspending the implementation of Constitutional Court rulings and halting the publication of the High Representative's decisions in the Official Gazette (RS National Assembly 2023). In September 2023, it announced plans to draft a decree authorising the arrest and deportation of the High Representative. In addition to resuming public promises for independence by Dodik (RTRS 2023), these steps reflected a growing sense of impunity that was closely linked to the diplomatic protection afforded by Russia, including its continued obstruction of peace implementation mechanisms (Glas Srpske 2023c).

Taken together, the 2021–2023 period marks a transition from confrontational rhetoric to it's protracted escalation. RS authorities advanced incremental institutional disengagement while relying on Russia to contest, delay, or neutralise international responses that Serbia was unwilling or unable to block. Escalation thus cannot be explained solely by internal empowerment or by Serbian patronage. It became viable once Russian involvement altered the structures of conflict management in BiH. From the perspective of patron – client relations, Russian patronage did not replace Serbian support but complemented it by supplying precisely those conflict-escalatory resources that Serbia withheld: diplomatic shielding, normative contestation of peace-implementation mechanisms, and obstruction of enforcement at the international level. In Biermann's terms, the emergence of a multiple-patron setting reduced RS's asymmetric dependence on its original patron and expanded its room for manoeuvre. Empowerment here is not simply the accumulation of internal capacities, but additionally the client's ability to activate escalation with the margin of safety provided by Russian patronage.

Importantly, this diversification of patronage also impacted the Serbia – RS relationship in the sense that it forced the original patron to raise the bar of the resources it delivers. Faced with the prospect of losing influence over its client, Serbia recalibrated its position toward Dodik and the secessionist bids. While continuing to resist formal secession, Belgrade raised the ceiling of symbolic and political alignment with RS, including through renewed pan-Serb rhetoric and high-level political presence at mobilisation events. The mass rally 'Srpska te zove', organised by Dodik to display public support for separatism, was attended by prominent RS nationalistic figures and officials from Serbia, including former Prime Minister and current President of the National Assembly Ana Brnabić (Glas srpske 2024a). The presence of members of the Serbian government was particularly significant in light of the rally's objective, which culminated in the RS National Assembly

passing an amendment to the 2010 Law on Referendum (Glas Srpske 2024b). This amendment sought to remove the institutional and organisational impediments to the conduct of a new referendum, this time on the entity's secession. Although the Serbian government did not overtly endorse secession, it did revive old pan-Serb nationalistic rhetorics, predicated on calls for unity. On 8th June, an event known as the All-Serb Assembly was organised in Belgrade, adopting the slogan 'One People, One Assembly – Serbia and Srpska' and issuing a document entitled the 'Declaration On The Protection Of National And Political Rights And The Common Future Of The Serbian People' (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2024). Serbia thereby adjusted to its client's expectations by delivering heightened symbolic, political, and ideological resources that aligned more closely with the trajectory of RS's secessionist bid, which took it as an opportunity to escalate even further: on 4 July 2024, the RS National Assembly further adopted a draft law amending the legislation on the use of the flag, coat of arms, and anthem. The amendment sought to operationalise elements of the pan-Serb declaration adopted the previous month by establishing a legal basis for the use of Serbia's anthem, flag, coat of arms, and other all-Serb symbols by public authorities in Republika Srpska (RS National Assembly 2024). Enabled by diplomatic shielding from Russia and heightened symbolic alignment from Serbia, the empowered and emboldened RS leadership advanced in his strategy of escalation, testing even further the outer limits of the Dayton framework.

Conclusions

This article set out to explain how and why Republika Srpska's long-standing master – patron relationship with Serbia has, under conditions of new global fragmentation, shifted toward an emergent multiple-patron configuration with Russia, and what this structural change entails for each actor in the triad. The analysis shows that the relevance of patron – client relations in secessionist conflicts is not diminished by fragmentation; rather, fragmentation multiplies the opportunity of patronage. As geopolitical hierarchies erode and conflict-management authority becomes more contested across all levels, the supply of potential patrons expands and the potential for the client's obstruction, contestation, and non-compliance increases for there are likely to be backed by more than one patron.

The article draws three core conclusions. Read through Biermann's constitutive features, the Serbia – RS relationship displays durable cooperative resource exchange and diffuse obligation that, over time, generated a stable pattern of asymmetric power dependence. This long-term patronage empowered the client not by eliminating asymmetry, but by increasing RS's leverage within the Dayton architecture, enabling the consolidation of an ethnocratic regime at entity level and the subsequent reviving of secessionism. It is precisely because of what delivered as a master-patron that the client acquired the leverage necessary to seek additional patrons capable of supplying resources that the original patron withheld.

Second, it demonstrates that global fragmentation altered the status quo on which the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina was settled and raised the bar of what the patron should deliver to satisfy the client's ambitions and expectations. In that, Russian patronage did not substitute Serbian support; it complemented it by providing resources that enabled the client's escalation of the conflict while reducing the diplomatic and political

costs. In the 2021–2024 escalation sequence, Russian patronage supplied conflict-escalatory resources such as diplomatic shielding, normative contestation of peace-implementation mechanisms, and obstruction of enforcement in multilateral arenas, while benefiting from a cooperative resource exchange based on the client's institutional and political capabilities to weigh in and effectively veto attempts at the national level to align with Western sanction regimes against Russia and to block the Euro-Atlantic integration of BiH, consistent with Russia's objectives of disordering and reordering the region according to its strategic objectives (Bechev 2017).

Third, the article shows that patron diversification fed back into the Serbia – RS relationship itself. Faced with the risk of marginalisation and with a client increasingly embedded in Russian whimp, Serbia partially recalibrated its own symbolic and political investment in the PCR, raising the ceiling of alignment with RS even while continuing to avoid formal endorsement of secession. The triad thus evolved less through open patronal rivalry than through a functional division of labour: Serbia continued to sustain the material and institutional foundations of RS's autonomy, while Russia supplied the diplomatic and ideological resources that enabled escalation beyond the limits of the Dayton status quo. Ultimately, empowerment, in this setting, is therefore not equivalent to 'equalisation' of power between patron and client, but to an expanded capacity for patron-shopping and calibrated escalation that becomes feasible when authority is fragmented and enforcement is contestable.

Two analytical qualifications should be noted before concluding. First, Republika Srpska's legal embedment in the Dayton framework and its high degree of institutional autonomy shape the extent of its dependence on any single external patron and distinguish it from other cases of secessionist conflict involving de facto states or independence-seeking entities. In this setting, patronage is better conceptualised as enabling escalation and regime consolidation rather than as a condition of ontological survival. This does not render the case exceptional, but it does affect how the multiple-patrons framework operates. Research on Kurdistan, for example, shows how an independence-seeking entity with substantial resources and autonomy arrangements in its host state can leverage patron diversification to expand its room for manoeuvre as regional hierarchies erode and external alignments become more fluid (Palani 2023). This suggests that the multiple-patrons framework travels across contexts, but that its effects vary with baseline autonomy, the institutional architecture of conflict management, and patrons' relative tolerance for revisionism.

Second, the durability of the RS – Russia relationship remains an open empirical question. While the analysis demonstrates cooperative resource exchange, diffuse obligation, and emerging asymmetric dependence, this relationship has not yet reached the level of iteration and institutionalisation characteristic of the Serbia – RS dyad at the time of writing. Whether this triad, shaped by global fragmentation, will endure remains uncertain, notwithstanding Moscow's unconditional support for Dodik in 2025 during his trial, sentencing, and removal from office (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2025), and the longer-term consequences this may have for the original patron – client relationship. Future research should therefore examine how durable multiple-patron configurations become over time under fragmented authority structures, and how shifts in patrons' broader geopolitical priorities reverberate through secessionist conflict trajectories.

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Notes on contributor

Sophie Gueudet is a historian and International Relations scholar specialising in contested sovereignty, de facto states, and war and conflict in Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. She is a Research Fellow at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna within the Horizon Europe RE-ENGAGE project and a Research Associate with the PeaceRep Ukraine programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research focuses on secessionist conflicts and political violence, with particular attention to patron client relations, politico military elites, and the international practices of de facto statehood. Her work has been published in, or is forthcoming in, leading peer reviewed journals including *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Globalizations*, and the *European Journal of International Relations*. Committed to research-led teaching, she also teaches global history, international relations and conflict studies in several European Universities.

ORCID

Sophie Gueudet http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8542-8708

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