



LINGERING INSTABILITY IN THE BALKANS



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ONE day before Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial mobilisation of his reserve forces – itself a testament to the colossal losses his army is facing in Ukraine – he took time for a rare visit. The person visiting him was none other than Milorad Dodik, the powerful Bosnian Serb politician and outgoing member of the country's tripartite presidency.

As a long time supporter of Putin, Dodik became a rarity among European politicians and was able to break Putin's isolation. Putin wished Dodik success in the elections, saying "[I hope that the results will strengthen the position of the patriotic forces in the country](#)".

There was certainly success. Though Dodik was not a candidate for the rotating state presidency after having spent two mandates in a row, his right-hand person – Željka Cvijanović – took over his position. Dodik went back to

being the powerful president of the semi-autonomous Republika Srpska entity. In a way, it was a Putin-Medvedev switch. To the outside observer, it is worth reiterating that Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of two political entities: the larger Federation (51%) made up of mostly Muslim Bosniaks and Catholic Croats, and an almost equal in size Republika Srpska (49%). According to the latest census, Bosniaks – [at nearly 50%](#) of the population – are dominant. Bakir Izetbegović, the self-proclaimed Bosniak leader and head of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) lost in his race for a seat for the state presidency. Social democrat Denis Bećirević took the place instead, while Željko Komšić, a liberal Croat, renewed his mandate as the Croat member. Despite liberal parties making significant gains in areas inhabited by Bosniak Muslims, ethno-nationalist

parties dominated in Croat and Serb dominated parts of the country. In other words, nothing essentially changes as the presidency is rather powerless since political and economic power is distributed horizontally and vertically, taking into consideration the country's ethnic make-up.

One issue that is sure to remain a challenge is security. Russia's attack on Ukraine has strongly resonated in the region, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The single most important question over the past year, among locals and international observers alike, has been whether a new conflict may erupt. Bosniak Muslims are, by and large, able to identify with Ukrainians and draw a number of striking [parallels](#) between their own experience at the hands of Serbian forces and their Bosnian Serb proxies during the 1992-1995 war. The

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already tense political situation is further exacerbated by Christian Schmidt, the international community's High Representative and his controversial electoral law reforms, which many Bosniaks and international observers have interpreted as discriminatory and further [entrenching](#) ethno-territorial divisions within the system, particularly giving Bosnian Croats a disproportionately larger say in state affairs relative to their numbers. On top of that, corruption and patronage networks involving well-entrenched political figures impede meaningful reform and ultimately fuel democratic backsliding.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

All eyes are on Milorad Dodik and what his next move will be. The powerful Serb leader has gained notoriety for his blatantly [Islamophobic](#) and sabre-rattling rhetoric over the past decade and a half. As a [staunch ally](#) of Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Serbia's right-wing President Aleksandar Vučić, Dodik is in a position to block state institutions and essentially blackmail the state until his demands are met – something the Dayton Peace Agreement enables him to do through its flawed power-sharing mechanism. Dodik has abused the system in the past and prevented Bosnia and Herzegovina from recognising Kosovo's independence, stalling its NATO [accession](#) and refusing permission for the country's military forces to use helicopters in saving trapped mountain climbers or extinguishing fires in summer. Despite no longer being in the presidency, he can still achieve his goals through Željka Cvijanović, his most loyal party cadre. The reasons why he pursues such an irrational policy is to prove that Bosnia and Herzegovina is dysfunctional and thereby make his case for secession. Since coming to power in 2006, hardly a month has passed without

Vladimir Putin met with Milorad Dodik on September 20, 2022
Picture: Kremlin.ru, CC 4.0



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him threatening to declare independence and break the country apart. He has described Bosniak Muslims as a “[servile nation](#)”, “[second-rate people](#)” and “[treacherous converts](#)” who sold their “original (Orthodox Christian) faith for dinner”. Such labels, deemed as severely offensive by the country's majority, have vastly disrupted the fragile post-war inter-ethnic relations, eroded trust among communities and caused significant consternation, particularly among Bosniak Muslims – who faced genocide and ethnic cleansing at the hands of Serb paramilitaries back in the 1990s.

As to why he has not yet declared independence, Dodik says all he is waiting for is ‘[a favourable geopolitical moment](#)’ for him to act. So radical has Dodik become that many Bosniak Muslims view the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), founded by génocidaire Radovan Karadžić, as a moderate opposition party. Dodik's higher objectives of the current crisis are achieving the decades' old goal of breaking Bosnia and Herzegovina apart and adjoining the Republika Srpska with [neighbouring Serbia](#).

To make matters more complex, the leading Bosnian Croat political party – the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – is in cahoots with Dodik and has been cosyng up to Russia. Bosnian Croats are seeking what they failed to achieve during the 1992–1995 war: an independent or at least highly autonomous statelet for themselves, which would eventually adjoin neighbouring Croatia. Croat ethno-nationalists refer to it as ‘the third entity’ and have already achieved considerable success towards their goals, including having their own cantons, administration, TV channel and even an [electric power company](#). All the progress that was made in the immediate post-war years has regressed to war-time levels of animosity. Bosniak Muslims oppose both an independent Serb statelet and a Croat ‘third entity’ as it would confine them, the country's majority, to a landlocked Bantustan with its borders controlled by unfriendly forces. Instead, they favour a unified country with a one-person-one-vote system, instead of the power-sharing currently in place. It is perhaps worthwhile mentioning

that many Bosnian Croats hold passports of neighbouring Croatia, while Bosnian Serbs hold Serbian passports, hence state dysfunction, travel and employment largely affects the country's Muslims.

FOREIGN PLAYERS

Russia, China, Turkey and the Western powers have all vied for influence in the Western Balkans over the past decade or two. Western politicians and policy makers have utilised the vocabulary of geo-strategic competition when debating policy in the Balkans and understandably the West is fretting that it might be losing ground to other major players.

The Balkans is not short of irredentist aspirations. The key regional player is Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia. He has been valued by Western leaders as a pillar of stability, a reputation he has skilfully crafted over the years by playing both the arsonist and fireman – [artificially stoking](#) tensions in the region and then resolving them. Vučić and Dodik meet very frequently and Dodik enjoys Vučić's



Serbia's premier Aleksandar Vučić escorts Vladimir Putin during the Russian president's visit to Belgrade in 2019
Picture: Kremlin.ru, CC 4.0

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[backing](#). After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vučić became one of the few European leaders to oppose sanctions. Another key player is Aleksandar Vulin, Vučić's right-hand man and incumbent Interior Minister. He has been the ideological father of the '[Serbian world](#)' concept, which would encompass all Serbs living inside and outside Serbia, essentially a copy and paste of Vladimir Putin's Russky Mir concept. Just a month before Vučić's re-election in April, his supporters took to the streets in their thousands to endorse Russia's war in Ukraine, donning [T-shirts bearing Putin's face](#) and waving Russian flags. Neighbouring Croatia, on the other hand, is also ruled by a right-wing nationalist, Zoran Milanović, who has referred to Bosnia and Herzegovina as '[not a state, but a big shit](#)' and has even questioned the judicially established truth regarding the genocide of Bosniak Muslims in Srebrenica. Over the past years, his Islamophobic rhetoric and his antagonism towards Bosnia as a

country has brought diplomatic relations to a new low.

Then, there is Russia. Russia's tool kit is rich in symbolism and instruments of subversion. The Kremlin's [track record](#) includes its refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence, its failed coup attempt in Montenegro, and support for separatist leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia's hand is also visible in sabotage and subversive [operations](#) across the region, including the destruction of arms [depots](#) in Bulgaria; a botched surveillance attempt at an Albanian military [facility](#); and it is believed to be behind a series of [cyber attacks](#) in Montenegro. Recently declassified U.S. State Department intelligence alleges that Russia has spent nearly \$300 million since 2014 influencing foreign politicians in the Balkans. The [list](#) of political parties that have benefited include the Democratic Party of Albania, the Democratic Front in Montenegro and Milorad Dodik's SNSD political

party. Russia has also [poured money](#) into training and arming the Republika Srpska's police force and nurturing connections between Serbian and Russian ultra-nationalists. More sinister was a documentary produced by Kremlin-funded broadcaster RT, which called for a '[denazification](#)' of the Balkans. Russia's meddling in the Balkans, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina particularly, boils down to Moscow wanting the country to remain ungovernable. By fomenting political instability it prevents yet another state from joining NATO and it makes sure the West remains preoccupied in the Balkans so that Moscow focuses on its near abroad – Ukraine, Belarus, the Black Sea and the Baltics. Russia has always played a low-cost spoiler role in the Balkans, and it seems unlikely to change its approach despite its economy being under severe pressure.

On top of that, there is [Turkey](#) whose engagement with the Balkans over the past two

decades shows that its foreign policy is guided by pragmatism. Ankara has demonstrated how easily it adapts to changing regional dynamics. Just like in the Caucasus and Middle East, Turkey is careful to calibrate its Balkan policy based on its relations with Serbia, Croatia, the EU, USA and Russia.

LOOMING INSECURITY

Serbia has [accelerated its military spending](#) over the past years for no rational reason except military supremacy. Its current defence budget is almost twice that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo combined. It has strengthened military ties with Moscow by opening an office of the Russian Defense Ministry within the building of Serbia's Ministry of Defense and increasing military exercises between the two states. Serbia heavily relies on Russian and Chinese military hardware – in 2019 it [received](#) donations of fighter jets, tanks and armoured

vehicles from Russia. In 2020, it bought CH92-A drones and FK-3 surface-to-air missiles from China and then purchased the Pantsir S-1 air defence system. It is now the pre-eminent military force in the region.

Kosovo is another country that has unfinished business. Periodic Kosovo-Serbia flare ups reveal the EU's diplomatic limits, but in case actual fighting erupts, both countries are bound by an [agreement](#) in which NATO has the final say. Russia is also involved because of its close relationship with Serbia, leading people to accuse the Kremlin's propaganda of fuelling tensions. Prime Minister Albin Kurti even urged citizens not to "[fall prey to Moscow propaganda](#)".

Bosnia and Herzegovina is effectively disintegrating in slow motion. The Serb-majority Republika Srpska is gradually separating itself from the central government's oversight and there is nothing much state authorities in Sarajevo can do about it. The situation has crossed the Rubicon and reached the point of no return. It is no longer a political crisis, but a rapidly deteriorating security crisis. If Republika Srpska declares independence, an unrecognised pro-Russian Abkhazia-like statelet will be formed on the borders of two NATO member states, Croatia and Montenegro. The central government in Sarajevo would oppose such a move and would take steps to prevent it. The most likely scenario would be localised violence entailing clashes between the police forces of the Federation and Republika Srpska, which are both large and well-armed. In the event of a full-scale war, which is not improbable, the much-touted Bosnian armed forces (the golden child of Western-imposed reforms) would almost certainly break down along ethnic lines, much like the Yugoslav People's Army did in 1991 or the Lebanese army in



Soldiers from C Company, 3 Para took part in an EUFOR-led peace support exercise in various locations across Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018. Picture: Sgt Jonathan Lee van Zyl © Crown copyright

“ONLY AFTER RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE DID EUFOR DOUBLE ITS STRENGTH. THE QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER MOSCOW WILL VETO THE RENEWAL OF EUFOR’S MANDATE – MOST LIKELY IT WILL NOT AS RUSSIA VIEWS EUFOR AS BEING A LESS POTENT FORCE THAN NATO.”

1975, while informal paramilitary groups would be created along ethnic lines, armed with whatever looted military hardware each group was able to carry away. In other words, the Western policy of arming and modernising Bosnia's armed forces will most likely kick back, as it is essentially equal to arming future warring parties. Once Bosnia spirals out of control, it would be a highly pernicious illusion to think that the rest of the region will remain stable. Just like in previous wars, Serbia would step in to arm and support Bosnian Serbs, and Croatia would do the same with Bosnian Croats. Turkey would most likely step in to arm Bosniak Muslims who would not be willing to stop until they have regained every inch of territory lost in 1995.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

In the immediate post-war years, peace was kept by NATO troops which eventually outsourced their work to the EU (EUFOR – Operation Althea) in 2004. Since [2006](#) EUFOR has been haemorrhaging its troop numbers well below brigade strength to an ebb of merely 600.

Only after Russia's invasion of Ukraine did EUFOR double its strength. The question now is whether Moscow will veto the [renewal](#) of EUFOR's mandate at the UN Security Council, which expires on November 2, 2022. Most likely it will not – as NATO would then take EUFOR's place as stipulated by the Dayton Peace Agreement – and Russia views EUFOR as being a less potent force than NATO. However, among NATO member states, there have been no calls for immediate reinforcements and the lowest common denominator seems to be holding the NATO option as a fallback, a fail-safe if the situation deteriorates into serious violence.

So far the response of Brussels to increasing insecurity has been to call for a reinvigorated accession process to the European Union. The EU's approach to the region is rudderless, incoherent and only functional when offering carrots, not sticks. It has had some success at extinguishing fires but lacks a blueprint for any long-term solutions. Its officials do not possess the basic understanding of the region,

let alone the more granular dynamic of inter-ethnic relations. Hence, the EU's resulting policy has been appeasement – giving troublemakers what they want in order to keep the lid on.

The only viable short-term solution would be a robust NATO force on the ground to keep the peace, especially in critical towns such as Brčko, Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo. NATO should seize the opportunity and utilise the momentum the alliance has gained from its unified backing of Ukraine. The next step would be fast-tracking Bosnia's accession to NATO and introducing a rigid vetting system for Bosnia's armed forces. An in-depth vetting process and background investigation will ensure that the military hires service members who are reliable, trustworthy, honest and loyal. Finally, as the country appears to be a battlefield of the NATO-Russia information confrontation, NATO needs to establish a cyber security centre in Sarajevo to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda activities in the Western Balkans.