



Bosnia: The Next Hotspot Russia Creates Trouble In?

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Last month marked the 26th anniversary of the Dayton Accords, a monumental and controversial peace agreement that ended one of the most violent wars in Southeastern Europe's history. On November 21, 1995, the United States brokered the agreement that ended three years of ethnic violence and genocide in Bosnia & Herzegovina, which had broken out in the wake of Yugoslavia's dissolution. The Dayton Accords, signed by the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, laid out new terms for the people of Bosnia, including a tripartite presidency that would represent each of the three major ethnicities: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The accords resulted in an uneasy, but relatively stable peace.

But today, for the first time in twenty-six years, that peace is being severely threatened. Bosnia is now seeing its worst political crisis since Dayton in the form of secessionist threats by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. In recent weeks, Dodik has threatened to withdraw Bosnian Serbs from all central state institutions, including major ones like the central tax authority, top judicial institutions, and, most significantly, the armed forces. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gabriel Escobar flew to Sarajevo in early November to meet with the Bosnian presidents in an attempt to stabilize the situation. While the meeting itself appeared successful, as one anonymous senior Bosnian official noted, "it remains to be seen whether Dodik will live up to his promise to halt his separatist initiative." "Bosnia and the Balkans," he added, "need more than last-minute diplomatic offensives to achieve long-term stability; the region, long neglected by the West, is increasingly used by Russia, China, and Turkey for their own geopolitical chess games."

While the mention of Russia is brief, it is a reference worth paying attention to.

After all, it's no secret that the Kremlin considers Serbia, and Bosnian Serbs by association, an ally. Shortly after Dodik's inflammatory secession announcement, Russia threatened to veto the annual renewal of the EU's peacekeeping mission at a recent UN Security Council meeting unless references to the High Representative were removed.

Established as part of the Dayton Accords, the Office of the High Representative was intended to represent an "EU peacekeeping force and a civilian executive peace enforcement mechanism" in Bosnia, as well as to uphold the Dayton Accords and protect Bosnia against extreme nationalism and secessionism – the very issues we are seeing today. The UN Security Council agreed to the Kremlin's demands, reflecting the increasingly divisive opinions on Dayton's legacy and its modern effectiveness. By demanding its dissolution, Russia has not only eliminated a significant obstacle for Dodik and other secessionists, but also undermined the implementation of a U.S.-orchestrated peace deal.

Russia's demands – and its success in achieving them – seem minor, yet they represent a dangerous move that threatens Western influence in both Bosnia and the rest of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The lack of attention from the West in recent years, particularly to Bosnia, has given powers like Russia more space to exert their influence. The fracturing of Bosnia is also happening against the backdrop of two other significant crises happening in the region: the migrant surge on the Polish-Belarusian border, and Russia's unexplained military buildup on its common boundary with Ukraine.

While these two events have understandably absorbed the bulk of U.S. attention, Washington should not let its guard down in Bosnia, especially as tensions rise in the region. Russia is not in the same position – economically, militarily, or politically – as it was in the mid-1990s, when the Dayton Accords were first drafted and the U.S. could assert its presence more securely. Even if the U.S. ultimately takes steps to preserve Dayton, Moscow could claim Western and NATO encroachment into its "sphere of influence" as a justification for stepped up support of Bosnian Serbs.

The situation is fragile, and combustible. Bosnia is held together by a peace accord that was never meant to last, and last-minute diplomatic efforts made in emergency instances are unsustainable. If Washington and Europe leave Bosnia unattended, it could result in a catastrophic undoing of Dayton, potentially leading to another major flare-up of ethnic tensions and violence.

It would also leave a window of opportunity for Russia to step in and broker a ceasefire, a scenario reminiscent of the events in Nagorno-Karabakh a year ago where Russia took over the mediation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conclusion of that six-week war demonstrated both Russia's determination to maintain its central role in the conflicts across its "near abroad," as well as its success in presenting itself as the only player capable of bringing an end to the war.

Without checks and balances from the West, there is no doubt that Russia will do the same in Bosnia.

