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**NATO, the EU and the Growing  
Instability in Bosnia and  
Herzegovina: Challenges and Risks**

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**Adapt Long Read**

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# **NATO, THE EU AND THE GROWING INSTABILITY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: CHALLENGES AND RISKS**

*Jaroslav Cabuk*

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Ethnic and political tensions within Bosnia and Herzegovina represent potential roots for a more serious conflict in the Western Balkans. The ongoing crisis, if not solved, may erupt into a situation similar to the events in the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the European Union became the institution that de facto takes care of questions of political statehood of the mentioned country, it should look deeper into the roots of the ethnic tensions. The Dayton Agreement, often considered the key agreement dedicated to Bosnian statehood, did not fully solve the conflict from the 1990s.
- The European Union should start discussing the question of the nation and state-building of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Dayton Agreement, which separated the country into two entities (three if we are counting the Brčko district), did not fulfil the needs of the fighting sides. The European Union should discuss the question of potentially changing autonomy for both Serbs (represented by Republika Srpska) and Croats (potentially represented by, for now, an unknown entity).
- The critical thing is to keep the military presence of the European Union in the region. However, because of the relatively poorly built common European defence and its strategic reliance on NATO, it is possible that such a task would require extra help from the Alliance as well (same as before 2008).

## **INTRODUCTION**

More than 26 years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the old divisions among the three ethnicities (or at least among their political leaders) begin to widen again. Even though it seems that the conflict ended in December 1995, such a statement is just a simplification of a much broader and more complicated issue whose roots date back to medieval times. Therefore, we can say that the ongoing political crisis is nothing but just another chapter of already centuries-long tensions within the multinational regions of the Western Balkans. And the Dayton Agreement did not end the conflict - it was more like a ceasefire.

This paper debates the ongoing crises within Bosnia and Herzegovina and how the European Union can handle them and potentially solve them. The roots of the problems stem from the issues concerning the autonomies of ethnicities living in the confederal country. The national tensions were mostly created because of badly drawn state borders. Even though the borders were drawn more than a century ago, the existence within one much larger political unit (Yugoslavia) partially blurred the ethnic tensions. The separatism and rise of nationalism caused the mentioned political unit to split, leaving the separated ethnic groups in danger away from their "original" home country.

The political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina is shaped by the fact that the country's ethnic map is built by three ethnicities. According to the latest census from 2013, the majority (43,5%) is represented by Bosniaks (the older name "Muslims" is often used too), followed by Serbs (31,2%) and Croats (17,4%). (statistika.ba, 2013) While Serbs have their autonomous unit (Republika Srpska), Croats do not. Both ethnicities ask for much more autonomy - Serbs for almost complete independence. In contrast, Croats ask primarily for establishing their political unit (as they share one political unit with Bosniaks). Republika Srpska, established shortly before the war erupted, survived until today - as a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Croat entity Herzeg-Bosna was dissolved as both Croats and Bosniak leaders agreed to form the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina - an

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entity for both ethnicities to cooperate against Bosnian Serbs as a result of the Washington Agreement signed in 1994. Before that, the country was devastated by the war held among all three ethnicities – even between Croats and Bosniaks, now living in one common entity. Since the Dayton Agreement was signed (December 1995), Serbs agreed to integrate their entity (Republika Srpska) into confederation with their Bosniak and Croat neighbours from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – forming today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **REPUBLIKA SRPSKA, DODIK AND INDEPENDENCE**

The main Bosnian problem is centred around its Serbian entity and its political leader. Milorad Dodik has been a Serbian member of the Presidency of the country (represented by all three ethnicities) since 2018. The main problem with the entity is that Serb political leaders, unlike Croats, are not united in their opinion on how their entity’s future should look like. While some moderate politicians do not want any changes to be made, more radical ones ask for more extensive autonomy or even complete independence from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The nation’s right to self-determination is the most common reason they have been stating.

In 2008, after Kosovo unilaterally declared independence, many Bosnian Serbs demanded that Republika Srpska follows in its steps and called for Dodik to organise an independence referendum. However, Dodik stated that he would only do so if the autonomy of Republika Srpska was threatened. The demands of Bosnian Serbs were condemned by the European Union – therefore ignoring potential dialogue with Serbs.

However, Dodik has lately radicalised his rhetoric. In May 2022, he announced that Bosnia and Herzegovina should break up. “The time has come to try once again to activate the mechanism of peaceful dissolution in BiH,” he said. (EURACTIV, 2022) However, Bosnia and Herzegovina was not dissolved peacefully in the past. The dissolution of the country came right after the establishment of the same goals Dodik has set up for the entity these days. Paradoxically, during the war, Dodik represented political opposition to the government of Radovan Karadžić.

Dodik also changed his position towards the European Union. In 2021, during an interview for German-based Spiegel magazine, he stated that the “Western Balkans have never been further from the European Union than they are today.” (klix.ba, 2021). The Bosnian-Serb leader found his allies in Viktor Orbán in Hungary and, until 2022, also in Janez Janeša in Slovenia. The trio, accompanied by the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, represented the so-called “opposition bloc” to the “mainstream political wave”. And with the current statements made by the Croatian nationalist elite (to be discussed later in the paper), we can predict the enlargement of this political community.

The European Union should not ignore Dodik simply because he is “radical” or “sanctioned” (a more comprehensive range of sanctions was imposed f.e. by the United States in January 2022). The understanding that the problem was not created by Dodik himself but had existed since 1992 is needed. Overlooking the issues by the European Union plays into cards of more radical Serbs. The radicals may say that by ignoring the problems the European Union ignores the whole Serbian population, and then the EU looks incompetent or ignorant. In that case, the Bosnian Serb population will never feel positively towards the EU, eventually may block the country’s entry into the Union’s structures. Alternatively, it would strengthen the “opposition” block within the European Union. Such political development would polarise the Union, even more, creating a hard line between the core and the periphery.

### **THE QUESTION OF THE CROATIAN ENTITY**

President of Croatia Zoran Milanović brought to light the issue of Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which the international community has ignored since the Dayton Agreement was signed. His threats to veto the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO were based on claims that the political (and ethnic) question of Croats in Bosnia, and Herzegovina has not been solved yet, and NATO has been ignoring it. Therefore, in his opinion, NATO cannot be enlarged without solving the existing problems first.

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Unlike Serbs in Republika Srpska, Bosnian Croats do not have one “loud” political voice which could speak on their behalf. Therefore, this task naturally fell upon Croatia – now represented by Milanović. The president stated that the resolution of the issue was the only condition for not vetoing Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. However, Milanović as the president, does not have the actual political power to veto the enlargement process.

The European Union (Milanović made a mistake by stating it as a problem of NATO) has ignored the political issues of Bosnian Croats. In 2018, Zeljko Komsic was elected as the Croat member of Bosnia's presidency. However, because the votes of the Bosnian Croats are not counted separately (as the Bosnian Croats are not living in their political entity – even though in some cantons they represent the majority), Komsic won by the simple fact that Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) were voting for him. Paradoxically, Komsic, even though he is Croat, was not elected by Croatians themselves. Komsic defended himself by saying, “... what Croatia is doing to Bosnia, is not good, and such actions undermine mutual trust and goes a long way towards denying the sovereignty of Bosnia.” (BalkanInsight, 2018a). And, as we saw in the relationship between Bosnian Croats and Croats in Croatia, it is not a common opinion shared in one nation divided by borders.

Bakir Izetbegović, a Bosniak member of the federal presidency at that time, said the Bosnian Croats “cannot get a third entity in Bosnia without a war.” (BalkanInsight, 2018b). In summary, the Bosniaks (as said by Izetbegović) fear that such an entity could influence the Bosnian Muslims, too – as the cantons in the Bosnian-Croat federation are more ethnically mixed than those in Republika Srpska. Paradoxically, the fear of war is mentioned mainly by Bosniaks (the majority), not by the other two ethnicities. However, it's logical – unlike Serbs and Croats, Bosnians connect their ethnicity directly to the sovereignty of the whole country. Serbs are associated with Republika Srpska, Croats with a non-existing entity (so far).

At the same time, Bosniaks are associated with the territory of the whole country – even with the regions where they do not represent the majority.

The Union should also be aware of not fully reconnecting Croatia with Bosnian Croats. Croatia can, for now, simply control the Bosnian Croats and, therefore, Bosnia and Herzegovina partially too. This again brings us to the idea that a third political entity representing Bosnian Croats would reduce the foreign influence from Croatia. The same, of course, goes for Bosnian Serbs with their relations with Serbia.

The problem is also evident within the internal social structures. The main issue between the Croats and Bosniaks is that their joint federation is more ethnically mixed – unlike Republika Srpska, which, because it has existed since 1992, managed to get more ethnically balanced (in favour of Serbs) in the last 30 years. Croatian population within Bosnia and Herzegovina is also divided into three main areas – the largest being on the southern borders with Dalmatia. Concentrated Croatian-populated areas are also located in the region of Posavina (the northwest part of the country) and the country's centre. The exact demarcation of the borders would be therefore complicated, as it may also cause harm in the future. The rightly set political, cultural, and social laws, which would “overshadow” the borders of the entities, would be needed.

### **INTERNATIONAL MILITARY PRESENCE AND ITS ROLE IN FUTURE**

President of Croatia Milanović made a mistake by bringing the issue to the NATO agenda. The last NATO mission, SFOR, was replaced by the EUFOR mission (run by the European Union) Althea back in 2004. If Milanović wanted to bring the issue to the attention of the international community, he should have discussed it within the European Union. The most significant step that NATO could take is to redeploy units into Bosnia again – however, only in case the EUFOR cannot do it. And with no existing unified European Union defence program, doubts still exist.

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The international presence in the country is vital. It was first deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina to monitor the actions of the three armies and fulfil the Dayton Agreement. Later, the international presence was reduced as the separated armed forces were disbanded. However, the need to monitor the potential unrest is needed as even the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, stated in 2016 that the possible secession of the Republika Srpska would trigger an international intervention. (Novosti.rs, 2016). And he is right - the unilateral secession of one of the entities would cause the whole country to collapse in turmoil to that in 1992. Therefore, the international community should not repeat the same mistake of getting involved only after the problem already exists. The international military presence should serve preventively, not only as a reaction force.

However, the existence of separated military units within the country (based on Dodik's calls for the establishment of separated Armed Forces of the Republika Srpska) does not have to bring problems if the situation is closely monitored. The Army of Republika Srpska was disbanded (fully incorporated into the federal's army structures) in 2006, which means it existed longer in the post-Dayton peacetime than during the war. Croatian Defence Council (the main armed forces of former Croatian Herzeg-Bosna) was even cooperating with the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina - and those were two different armies fighting for their own future entity. Currently, all three ethnicities have their national brigades, mostly built on a national basis - that means that the separated armed forces do not have to be created, as the national brigades, operating under the central federal command, already exist.

## **CONCLUSION**

The international community - the European Union and NATO, should not overlook the rising problems within Bosnia and Herzegovina, which may soon erupt into a much larger ethnic and political conflict. Ignoring the Serbian and Croatian demands for rebuilding the country may cause that the two entities might ignore the international community and its demands afterwards, thus harming not just Bosnia and Herzegovina but

the relationship with the European Union as well. Furthermore, in the case of BIH's accession to the structures of the EU, the two ethnicities may easily form an

“opposition bloc” against the main “Western wave” within the European Union, joining the already existing conservative bloc represented mainly by Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

The European Union should not overlook the problem. Even though it may look like a simple issue of changing the current electoral system (in the case of Bosnian Croats), the crisis may erupt into a much larger cultural problem between Serbs and Bosniaks and between Croats and Bosniaks. Even though Serbs and Croats are known to have fought each other for centuries, Bosnian Croats found their ally in Bosnian Serbs (with conservative Croatians finding their partners in Serbia too). Milorad Dodik said, “Croats are rightfully dissatisfied in the Federation. It is right to demand what is envisaged in the Constitution: the election of a Serb, Croat, and Bosniak member.” (Bosnian Croat leader: Holding elections in October is a threat to peace, 2022). Such statements are an excellent sign that any future political change within the country should be made with the cooperation of all three ethnicities at once.

What the European Union lacks the most is a potential program for not just the construction of post-war Dayton-like Bosnia and Herzegovina but, more importantly, for the possible reconstruction of the country based on more recent political changes within the country. In short – it looks like the EU's mentality towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is stuck in 1995. A dialogue with all three ethnicities is needed. Such discussion would lead to an equal balance of the political powers of ethnicities. This step is mainly needed for the Croats – as the non-existence of their own political entity seriously harms their political powers (as shown in the recent elections, where their leader won thanks to the votes of Bosniaks, not the Croats themselves).

The radicalisation of all three ethnicities is partially a result of the lack of the European Union's positive and progressive approach toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russian and Chinese influence in the region was caused by the passive policy of the EU, which led to the rise of autocracy (within

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Republika Srpska as an example), thus automatically making the discontented population look for answers to their questions and demands elsewhere.

The international peacekeeping presence within the country should be strengthened. In case the political discussion in the country fails, the international community should be prepared for the worst-case scenarios. That means that the European Union should enlarge its Althea mission. However, as the organisation's common defence capabilities are still far from ideal, the return of NATO is a potential step. However, Serbian distrust towards the Alliance needs to be taken into account; therefore, a prior dialogue is necessary.

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