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**THE EU AS A SECURITY ACTOR
IN BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA: IMPLICATIONS
OF SECESSIONIST THREATS
FROM REPUBLIKA SRPSKA**

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Introduction

Approximately 100,000 people died in the 1992-1995 three-way war between the Orthodox Serbs, the Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina (The Economist, 2019). The Western-brokered Dayton Accords ultimately ended the fighting by dividing the country into two entities: the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation, where Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats share power (The Economist, 2022). The constitution adopted after the war thus implemented territorial separation along ethnic lines (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2015, p. 1). There is a risk, however, that these ethnic lines become borders. This Info Flash explores the European Union (EU) as a security actor in the region with regard to recent secessionist threats from Republika Srpska.

Dodik's Secessionist Threats

On 14 April, Milorad Dodik, President of the RS, stated that he was considering declaring Republika Srpska independent (Sito-Sucic, 2023a). Previously, Dodik had militarised the territory's police forces and proposed to recreate the RS army (The Economist, 2019; The Economist, 2022). The latest secessionist threat came after a property law dispute (Sito-Sucic, 2023a). According to the constitution, the Bosnian national parliament must approve property legislation that would be valid across the country, which Dodik believes denies Republika Srpska the right to its land, rivers and forests (Sito-Sucic, 2023a). The EU has criticised the threats, called for stability and highlighted its expectation that Bosnia and Herzegovina will align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Sito-Sucic, 2023b).

The Republika Srpska moved closer to secession on 21 June by choosing to cease the publication of decrees and laws of an international peace overseer in the official gazette, implying these will no longer be viewed as official legislation (Sito-Sucic, 2023c). Subsequently, Washington imposed sanctions, having already done so on Dodik, on four top Bosnian Serb officials on 31 July, stating that 'this action threatens the stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the hard-won peace underpinned by the Dayton Peace Agreement' (Sito-Sucic, 2023d). Along these lines, the European External Action Service (EEAS) stated that the 'vote to render [the] Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina's decisions inapplicable in Republika Srpska is [...] without legal basis [and] marks a clear departure from the expectations that accompanied the granting of EU candidate status' (EEAS, 2023a). Against the backdrop of increasing political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, by extension, a heightened risk of security-related tensions, the EU's military capabilities – and its role as the region's primary security actor – will be put to test.

The EU's Role in Bosnia

The EU granted Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status on 15 December 2022 as the first step towards EU membership (EEAS, 2022). However, President Dodik's recent moves towards Republika Srpska's secession can potentially obstruct the country's path into the European Union. France, for instance, underlined its 'deep concern regarding the recent repressive declarations and legislative initiatives in the Republic of Srpska' and stated that 'if they were definitively adopted and implemented, they would represent a backwards step with regard to protecting fundamental rights and bringing the country closer to Europe' (Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations, 2023). Should Republika Srpska resort to military means in its pursuit of secession, the EU would most likely have a military role to play.

The primary purpose of past interventions was to stabilise the country after emerging from war and prevent the recurrence of armed violence (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2015, p. 3). In June 2004, NATO decided to hand over responsibility to the EU, ending the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) mission after operating in the country since 1995 (Juncos, 2013, pp. 147-148). This decision can be attributed to the improved security situation, the US' and NATO's shifted focus on Iraq and Afghanistan and the launch of the EU's CFSP missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and North Macedonia (previously known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). The latter reason convinced Washington that the EU could provide security support in the Balkans (Juncos, 2013, pp. 147-148). The EUFOR Althea Operation was subsequently initiated to bring the Balkan countries closer to EU membership (Pulko *et al.*, 2016, p. 90). The operation's objectives include 'providing capacity-building and training to the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting [its] efforts to maintain the safe and secure environment [in the country], as well as providing deterrence and continued compliance with the responsibility to fulfil the role [...] of the Dayton [...] Agreement' (EEAS, 2023b).

According to Juncos (2013, p. 127), the EU's key takeaway from the Bosnian conflict was the necessity for military instruments that could support its diplomatic efforts. This recognition was vital if the EU intended to position itself as a credible and effective security actor in its neighbourhood. Furthermore, several issues have also been noted concerning the EUFOR's effectiveness. Firstly, domestic laws limit how specific national contingents could contribute to the peacekeeping forces (Juncos, 2013, p. 158). For instance, French troops could not use dogs or bullets, while German troops were prohibited from using tear gas (Juncos, 2013, p. 158). Secondly, there was limited availability of resources in the form of personnel, money and equipment. Thirdly, there was a problem with secure communications between EUFOR's headquarters and Brussels. On a more general note, as the CFSP became more structured, Juncos (2013, p. 166) argues that its increasing complexity hindered coherent action. The complexity of the institutional structure made it challenging for different CFSP bodies to align, potentially impacting effective decision-making and coordination.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the aftermath of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been marked by significant challenges, including the implementation of territorial separation along ethnic lines. President Dodik's recent secessionist threats and termination of publishing international peace overseer's decrees in the official gazette have raised concerns about the country's stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The European Union, having granted Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status, plays a crucial role in its path towards EU membership.

However, these recent developments may impede progress. The EU must carefully consider its military role to maintain stability and safeguard the peace established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Addressing the complexity of the institutional structure and ensuring coherence between different bodies involved will be essential for the EU to establish itself as a credible and effective security actor in the neighbourhood. For now, the path to EU membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina remains uncertain, and the EU's response to the current challenges will play a pivotal role in shaping the country's future trajectory.

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