



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# The head of the CIA in the Balkans—closing the door to the penetration of Russian influence



While primarily preoccupied with finding solutions to the crisis in the Middle East and frequently traveling to the region, CIA chief and ambassador William Burns paid a surprise and unannounced visit to several Balkan capitals and spoke with their leaders.

The visit took place this week without public announcements, but with many indirect reactions from local actors. This particularly regards Burns' first stop on his mini-Balkan tour, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a particularly complex political and security issue in the region still burdened with post-conflict divisions from the 1990s wars.

In Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the CIA chief met with the three-member presidency, which collectively serves as head of state, and finds it very difficult to reach consensus on decision-making due to the mutual deadlock between the leaders of the three constituent nations: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats.

It appears, however, that Burns' target, and one of the more important reasons for the visit, was outside the three-member presidency—the long-standing political leader of the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik.

## A pro-Russian politician's shift

His nationalist policy, which occasionally includes secession threats, has long sought to undermine Bosnia and Herzegovina's joint institutions.

The last time he threatened a referendum on the secession of Republika Srpska, one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's two state entities, was in June. Shortly afterwards, he announced that he had prepared a document on peaceful separation, which he would propose to the other two ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"We are convinced that there is already enough historical and civilisational maturity and that this is necessary and will happen,"

said Mr Dodik regarding the latest of many announcements that he will initiate proceedings to secede the Serbian entity from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Although he did not attend the talks with William Burns in Sarajevo, Mr Dodik released a comment on the same day that appears to be a shift in his long-standing policy of destabilising Bosnia and Herzegovina: "We have never questioned the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and secession has never been our policy."

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Mr Dodik has been under US **sanctions** for years for corruption as well as for policies that are destroying Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order, which is based on the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the civil war.

In addition, Dodik has been a strongly **pro-Russian** politician for years, which became particularly evident after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the last two and a half years since the start of the war, Dodik has met with Vladimir Putin no fewer than five times, most recently in June during an economic forum in St. Petersburg.

Dodik, the only Balkan political leader to maintain such close relations with the Russian president, poses a constant threat to institutionally fragile Bosnia and Herzegovina, potentially opening up a new crisis hot spot or even a potential conflict.

In addition, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs has long been a brake on Bosnia and Herzegovina's rapprochement to NATO membership, which the two other ethnic communities—Bosniaks and Croats—are striving for. Due to Dodik's resistance, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not imposed sanctions against Russia, despite

having committed to EU membership.

## Serbia-Bosnia-Kosovo triangle

During his visit to Sarajevo, there is every possibility that the CIA chief exerted pressure on the political leadership of the Serbian entity to abandon their secessionist rhetoric and plans, as this is how they have long kept the door open for destructive Russian influence in the post-conflict Balkans.

At the same time, Milorad Dodik became one of the most isolated politicians in Europe due to US and later UK sanctions. These sanctions particularly affected his corrupt business, which he controlled through a number of companies also under sanctions.



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The relationship with the authorities in neighbouring Serbia will be particularly important for the future behaviour of the Serbian leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with whose president, Aleksandar Vučić, Mr Burns also spoke after his visit to Sarajevo.

Although he never supported the Serbs' secessionist policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina but insisted on preserving the country's sovereignty, Serbian President Vučić still has a decisive influence on Milorad Dodik.

In this respect, he will likely serve as a kind of guarantor to the USA, ensuring that developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina progress towards de-radicalisation. The

Serbian head of state places significant importance on the partnership with the USA because of another pressing issue, Kosovo, where EU-sponsored negotiations have been stagnant for an extended period of time.

However, in order to maintain the partnership with the US, President Vučić is obliged to solve the almost-year-old case when heavily armed Serbian paramilitaries in Kosovo, led by his protégé Milan Radoičić, attacked the Kosovo police. One policeman was killed, another was wounded, and also three attackers were killed during the confrontation.

This crisis threatened to lead Kosovo into a new armed conflict and even drag the NATO-led KFOR mission into the conflict, opening up a new hot spot in Europe.

Despite the US and EU's insistence on prosecuting and punishing the attackers, their leader remains at large, enjoying the protection of Serbia.

## Resolving crises

This unresolved post-conflict crisis has long been a space for the penetration of Russia's destabilising influence, which would like to see a new conflict in the Balkans to divert the West's attention from the Ukraine crisis.

With this in mind, after his talks with Serbian President Vučić, Mr Burns travelled from Belgrade to Pristina for **talks** with Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani and Prime Minister Albin Kurti.

Both Washington and its EU partners have long been dissatisfied with Kosovo's attitude towards dialogue with Serbia and in particular the local Serbian community, which is why the EU introduced limited sanctions last year that are already having a significant impact on the weak local economy.

## The CIA chief's Balkan trip was a strong push for regional leaders to quickly turn their attention to resolving crises that have their roots in the 1990s civil wars

The CIA chief's Balkan trip was a strong push for regional leaders to quickly turn their attention to resolving crises that have their roots in the 1990s civil wars, judging by the initial impact.

The crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as those related to Kosovo, are not only hindering regional progress, particularly the region's accession to the EU and NATO, but they continue to provide an open path for Russian destructive influence to penetrate the region, a development that directly contradicts US's interests in integrating the entire region into the EU and NATO.