



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# EU must wonder about American reliability amid escalating crisis in Bosnia



A sharply escalating crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen the EU deploy more troops to bolster its small EUFOR stabilisation force in the country.

Despite warnings by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio against Bosnian-Serb separatism, the advent of the Trump administration appears to be one of the factors fanning the current tensions.

Bosnia is essentially a frozen conflict in the very heart of Europe. The European Union is attempting to keep the country together and in the EU's orbit despite mostly Serb and also Croat centrifugal forces. It also has to contend with at least Russian, Chinese, Serbian and even Hungarian interference.

Bosnia's central government in Sarajevo this week **issued** an arrest warrant for Milorad Dodik, president of one of the country's constituent entities, the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska.

Dodik stands accused of defying the central authorities and Bosnia's internationally appointed final arbiter, the High Representative, in adopting a raft of separatist measures.

He is appealing his conviction but has in the meantime stepped up his campaign to curb the power of the central government and the High Representative in Republika Srpska.

## The conflict has been brewing for years

Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country, is constituted of both the Republika Srpska and the Bosniak (mostly Muslim) and Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The conflict between Dodik on the one hand and the central authorities and the High Representative on the other has been brewing for years. It involves not just political power and separatist issues but also a struggle for resources.

## Dodik is under US sanctions for “enriching” himself and his family and also for “undermining regional peace and rule of law”

Dodik is under US **sanctions** for “enriching” himself and his family and also for “undermining regional peace and rule of law”. Significantly, the sanctions were in place and not lifted during Trump's first term. Dodik is widely seen as threatening the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian civil war.

In recent **remarks** to journalists, Rubio was clear about the stakes: “We're hoping we can do anything we can to avoid another conflict in Europe from emerging.” He ruled out breaking up Bosnia and said, “The last thing the world needs is another crisis.”

## A thorn in the EU's side

Yet, Bosnian-Serb political analysts and others who agitate against post-civil-war international tutelage and decades of stalemate take courage from the “changed international circumstances” since the start of the new Trump term.

They see the administration's critical stance on Ukraine and rapprochement to Putin's Russia as a sign that the US will also be more pro-Serb. At the very least, they expect the US to be less supportive of the EU and its role in running Bosnia.

Dodik is outspokenly pro-Trump, has sported MAGA hats, and threw a cocktail party to celebrate his victory. He has also refused to join Western sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine and has met Vladimir Putin since then on several occasions, seen by the EU as a violation of Bosnia's EU-candidate status.

## The presence of Hungarian special police forces in the Republika Srpska was rumoured to have been to protect Dodik in case of an attempt to arrest him

That Dodik and the **increasingly** pro-Russian Republika Srpska are a thorn in the EU's side can also be seen from his very close ties to Hungary's Viktor Orban. The presence of Hungarian special police forces in the Republika Srpska de facto capital of Banja Luka in February, while ostensibly there for training and exercises, was rumoured to have been to protect Dodik in case of an attempt to arrest him.

Their presence was controversial enough for Bosnia's government to subsequently stop a high-level Hungarian defence official on a military plane from landing in the country.

The escalation of the crisis has many people in Banja Luka worried more than at any point since the end of the war about the potential for conflict. But local analysts maintain that Dodik is not looking for violent confrontation.

## The EU's chances of maintaining peace

Republika Srpska does not have its own military since its forces were integrated into the national army some two decades ago. But nobody knows for certain where the loyalties of the Bosnian army's Serb units might lie if conflict does break out.

Dodik can muster his own police and ministry of interior forces, who have on occasion been involved in targeting his domestic opponents and critics. And there are lesser-known Serb-separatist militias of which the capacities are hard to gauge.

The EU's stabilisation, peacekeeping and training **mission**, EUFOR, normally consists of 1000 troops, but Brussels has sent an additional 400 to help forestall unrest during

the current crisis.

This compares to some 60,000 personnel in the NATO-led peacekeeping force immediately after the war. Some in Bosnia don't rate the EU's chances of maintaining peace when push comes to shove highly, if not backed up by the US and NATO.

Yet, for the EU, Bosnia signifies more than just another possible flashpoint on its borders, which is bad enough. A failure to stabilise the country would reflect very badly on the bloc's capacity to act decisively and make a military fist while it's trying to step up for Ukraine and bolster its defences in view of American unreliability or outright animosity.



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While the US appears to be on-side for now in keeping Bosnia together and in opposing Dodik, this cannot be taken for granted in the future.

Not only is the country the arena for political competition between the EU and Russia, Republika Srpska also has significant natural resources, particularly lithium, that could become a target for Trump's transactional way of conducting politics.

Part of the tug of war between Dodik and the central government has to do with who can dispose of state assets and assign things such as mining contracts.

Meaningful exploration of such reserves is held up, among other things, by continuing



legal and political uncertainty as well as by the risk of conflict.

A 2023 EU report on Bosnia's EU candidacy noted that "no progress" was made in the fight against corruption, not just in Republika Srpska but also in the other parts of the country. Republika Srpska does pose some particular challenges, though, as it challenges the authority of the central government and judiciary.

## Dodik's willingness to push escalation

Apart from the separatist measures, Republika Srpska has come in for criticism over two recent laws; one criminalising defamation is seen as aiming to stifle criticism, including from journalists. The other is a Russia-style 'foreign agents' law restricting the activities of NGOs receiving money from abroad.

Neighbouring Serbia is similarly debating an "agents of foreign influence" law, of which the EU has said that it is incompatible with the bloc's values and hence with Serbia's EU candidate status.

Some have linked Dodik's willingness to push escalation, by defying the central government at this time, not only to the new Trump administration but also to the current mass **protests** in Serbia against its nationalist president Aleksandar Vučić.

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Vučić is seen as close to Dodik and even travelled to Banja Luka at the end of February to show support after the Republika Srpska president was convicted by Bosnia's High Court. There has been some speculation that a focus on Bosnia would help Vučić in deflecting attention from his own situation.

The Trump administration's stance towards Serbia is much more friendly than towards Republika Srpska. Earlier this week, Donald Trump Jr. **visited** Vučić in Belgrade.

The Serbian president emphasised "the importance of economic and political relations between Serbia and the U.S. and the importance of strategic cooperation between the two countries and joint projects in the coming years."

The question for the EU now is for how long the exception for Bosnia will hold, considering the new American way of conducting international politics.