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Bosnia's Fragile Stability Masks a Downward Spiral

Underlying all the elements of a disturbing security picture is the West's retreat from its role as enforcer of the Dayton order and driver of reform.

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As Bosnia and Herzegovina approaches the first anniversary of [the German-British initiative](#) and the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Accords, the Democratization Policy Council, DPC, and the Atlantic Initiative, AI, are collaborating on [a series of policy notes](#) which examine various aspects of BiH's security situation.

Written by my DPC colleague Bodo Weber, AI's Vlado Azinović, and myself, these papers comprise the DPC and AI's second edition of [our 2011 Security Risk Analysis](#). The first four policy notes – on inflammatory political rhetoric, socio-economic drivers, the Armed Forces of BiH, and EUFOR – have been published; two more – on police and Islamist extremism – are forthcoming.

Little has improved since four years ago, and there has been significant regression on a number of fronts. Underlying all the elements of the multifaceted security picture is a Western retreat from its earlier role as enforcer of the Dayton order and driver of reform expected to navigate BiH out of its systemic dysfunctional arrangement toward a stable democracy based on the rule of law, political accountability, economic prosperity and social justice. The result of that retreat is the existence of a rules-free environment which has propelled BiH into a downward spiral.

The media is largely politically suborned. The pronounced nationalist themes articulated by politicians and their adjuncts, revolving around the future of the state and alleged threats posed to ethnic communities by adversaries both domestic and foreign (and their alleged local allies), have inflamed the public discourse and contributed to fear and homogenization. The topic of “war” has returned to popular discussion.

This phenomenon was evident in media coverage of the 2012 municipal elections, the 2014 general elections, issues and events relating to Srebrenica, acts of Islamist terrorism, and the popular protests of February 2014.

In each instance, political leaders, dubious “experts,” and commentators have all fed into a dynamic that could have dire consequences, generating volatility that could ignite violence by design or accident.

While all those with unfulfilled agendas are pursuing them without restraint to form perceptions and opinions in the media, the most consistent and radical messaging is emanating from the Republika Srpska government and President Milorad Dodik in particular.

While BiH politicians define the agenda, the politically captive media provides the means to radicalize, intimidate, provoke anger, and stoke fear. This information dominance is a vital element of the political elites' life support system.

The socio-economic outlook is also bleak. Despite a shallow recovery beginning in 2011 and implementation of basic initial structural reforms, the structural causes of BiH's socio-economic weakness, and above all the patronage system, remain untouched.

To buy social peace, the ruling elites have become increasingly reliant on the IMF, other IFIs, and on commercial borrowing. The IMF has provided credit arrangements since 2010 (the last infusion being in June), although structural reform commitments were not being honored and despite rising political instability.

The reasons for this generosity lie primarily with the EU's policy at that time: unable to muster the political will to confront domestic political resistance to reforms in BiH, the EU has lowered or dropped altogether its reform conditions. In 2013, the EU provided direct budget support to BiH without serious conditionality. With rapidly rising levels of public indebtedness and social disaffection, this approach proved unsustainable in the long run, as became evident in the violent outburst of social frustration in February 2014.

Those protests – and most specifically the political reaction to them – underscore the nature of the danger. Bosnia's full political spectrum [attempted to instrumentalize the protests](#), with many leaders mischaracterizing them as ethnic in essence. When they are under popular pressure, ethnic fearmongering is the go-to tool of the political elites. Luckily, they got little traction but it wasn't for lack of effort. All the socio-economic and political factors that underlay the 2014 protests remain salient today.

The only partial good news story is to be found in the one institution which emerged from the May 2014 flood emergency with its reputation enhanced: the Armed Forces. Despite limited resources, predicated by its being put on a starvation diet since birth ten years ago, the AFBiH rescued citizens in flood affected areas, protected property, and conducted vital recovery tasks (collecting dead livestock, etc). In so doing, it provided a boost to morale and won the greatest popular appreciation it has enjoyed in a near-decade of existence.

With the exception of some municipalities, the remainder of the government sector was an abject disaster. The experience of the flood response also highlighted various equipment and training deficiencies that can be targeted for improvement. In addition, the forward movement toward registering defense property, still resisted by RS authorities despite court judgments in the state's favor, will – if continued – help pave the way towards activating the NATO Membership Action Plan.

The AFBiH's foreign deployments, most notably to Afghanistan, have improved skills and exposure to other NATO member and partner forces.

However, the AFBiH suffers from all the institutional maladies that infuse (mal)governance in BiH: patronage and clientelism, short-termism, and a lack of accountability. The polarized political environment has taken its toll on the development of the force.

The AFBiH came into existence in 2006, when state-building reforms halted and went into reverse. The RS has regularly targeted the AFBiH budget as part of its policy of demilitarizing BiH, thereby further weakening the state. Ominously, RS President Dodik recently said that [the dissolution of the Bosnian Serb army, the VRS, was among the biggest mistakes of his predecessors](#). He has intimated in the past that the RS should have its own army, most visibly during the floods when he appointed former VRS General Momir Zec to command the civil defense response in Dobož – and punished Mayor Obren Petrović for his “pro-Bosnian” policy.

In addition, much like Dayton BiH itself, the AFBiH is built on compromises that impede its further integration and development. These include the (ceremonial) regimental system, which was intended to contain the traditions of the three wartime armies – the (mainly Bosniak) Armija, the VRS, and (the Bosnian Croat) HVO – among the veterans of those forces. These are now recruiting new inductees. Furthermore, the fact that the AFBiH fields nine ethnic-majority infantry battalions, based in areas of majority affiliation, also poses a barrier to integration and a threat to cohesion.

Interviewees have reported increased displays of political and religious affiliation within the ranks for career advancement. While none of those interviewed for the study believed that the AFBiH would initiate violence or destabilization, all of them believed that it would collapse in the event of serious inter-ethnic conflict.

Finally, the study spotlights the weakened state of EUFOR, which has been cut by more than half since 2011 to a mere 600 troops, less than 10 per cent of its original strength in 2004. The deterrent force is not currently configured for its peace enforcement mandate, as stipulated in Dayton’s Annex 1A and mandated by the UN Security Council; it can neither deter nor react to security threats. Few expert interviewees expressed confidence that it could secure Sarajevo International Airport as an arrival site for reinforcements; several questioned its capability to secure its own base at Butmir. This amounts to a yet-unchallenged deterrence failure for the EU and the West. The just-completed [Brzi Odgovor](#) (rapid response) exercise recently held in Manjača, near Banja Luka, did involve British, Slovak, Bulgarian and Romanian troops, in addition to the Austrian, Hungarian and Turkish forces already comprising EUFOR, along with AFBiH troops.

The exercise involved a civil disturbance scenario with unruly demonstrators. This choice was odd on two levels, however. The AFBiH has no mandate or training to respond to civil disturbances. Secondly, the AFBiH has no mandate to respond to other internal threats to the “safe and secure environment” – EUFOR’s mandate includes both. One military professional interviewed since the exercise derided it as “a show” rather than a test of the EU’s ability to react.

The desire of most EU member states to retreat from the executive role of EUFOR is evident in the latest renewal of its authorization from the [EU Foreign Affairs Council](#): “(EUFOR) retains the capability to contribute to the Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities' deterrence capacity if the situation so requires while focusing on capacity building and training.”

Which BiH authorities are being referred to remains unclear but the implication seems to be the AFBiH, which has no deterrent role except to external threats. The alternative is local law enforcement bodies, for which “deterrence” is an odd choice of word. So the language is practically nonsensical, except as a reflection of the desire of most EU member states to get out of the peace enforcement business in BiH.

They may get their wish in a few weeks’ time, when EUFOR’s Chapter 7 mandate comes up for a vote in the UN Security Council. The [DPC and others feared a veto last year](#), owing to a still unexplained [shift in the RS position on EUFOR from support to opposition](#) and increased tensions with Russia following its seizure of Crimea and initiation of a war in Ukraine. Russia abstained, but only after delivering a vitriolic attack on BiH’s future in the EU and NATO.

Since then, Russia cast its veto over the UK-sponsored Srebrenica commemoration resolution in July 2015. There is no evident political preparation for a Russian veto, despite the potential for one. Recent interlocutors relate that, as drafter of the resolution this year, Russia will redact the Euro-Atlantic integration language it objected to last year and not cast its veto. This remains to be seen. Sources in EUFOR related a sense that in the event of a Russian veto, NATO would re-assume the Annex 1A deterrent role and obtain an open-ended authorization from the BiH Presidency to do so. But no political action has been taken to date to ensure this in advance, to the author’s knowledge. The international default setting, as last year, seems to be to hope for the best without preparing for the worst.

Responding to these challenges is well within the West’s capabilities and mandate. But the will to confront them directly and with unflinching resolve is lacking; maintaining stability in BiH trumps promotion of real progress among EU and other Western capitals leaving them too timid to act. But as our research shows, the status quo is far from stable. Ruling out the use of executive security tools leaves the West with only one effective lever of influence: money. BiH’s political elites know this. Neither do any internal incentives exist to induce political elites to operate differently. Reducing the security risk would enable application of greater pressure on BiH political elites. But it would also entail an embarrassing policy reversal, which is why it remains off the policy menu.

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