

OPINION

The EU is rushing headlong toward squandering 13 years of heavy investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The unscheduled departure of High Representative Miroslav Lajčák to become Slovak foreign minister has exposed the void in the union's strategy, as it prepares to take the lead in Bosnia with the impending closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

Five EU member states have since announced their intent to withdraw from the European Union Force (EUFOR) peacekeeping force, amplifying already high political polarisation and deepening popular uncertainty. More Bosnians now fear renewed violence than at any time since the end of the 1992-95 war.

EUFOR's threat assessments are complacent. A sober analysis of potential conflict factors and realistic scenarios would reveal that the EU is woefully unprepared.

There is no popular will for renewed conflict. The traumatic war of 1992-95 left at least 100,000 people dead. The 'revenge killings' seen in Kosovo are unheard of in Bosnia. With a lack of social trust and a constitutional system that makes ethnic division politically profitable, fear is readily mobilised and exploited for political gain. A small clash involving minority returnees could ignite conflict.

Police forces, private security companies, veterans' organisations and hunting clubs potentially threaten public security. Representatives of the international community claim to have been told by senior Bosniak leaders that the Federation has more police than the Republika Srpska, alluding to the combatant role that police played during the war. According to diplomatic sources, the Republika Srpska Interior Ministry stocks weapons such as grenade launchers: hardly a policing necessity. Republika Srpska Premier Milorad Dodik is widely seen to be emulating Montenegro's slow exit from the common state with Serbia.

Private security companies, operating in both entities, are not subject to state-level regulation. Their kit is not inventoried, although high-level international sources claim security companies in the Republika Srpska took delivery of several hundred submachine guns (SMGs) and squad automatic weapons in 2008 and that a company in Tuzla received sniper rifles. Although this poses a threat to public security, could violate the Dayton Accords and may well be linked to organised crime, EUFOR has not acted.

The amount of operational military-grade small arms (anti-tank rocket launchers, assault rifles, grenades, light machine guns and SMGs) still in circulation in Bosnia is thought to be high.

EUFOR's strength, following massive cuts in early 2007 that eliminated regional deploy-

EU deterrent evaporates as fears mount in Bosnia

The diminishing EU peacekeeping force is adding to the uncertain political situation in Bosnia, where fears of a return to violence remain, writes Kurt Bassuener



K Bassuener: 1308843

ment, is about 2,100 personnel: one battalion of mobile infantry, plus an international police unit with two mobile companies plus investigative units. Two-person liaison and observation teams scattered throughout the country would require evacuation in a crisis. EUFOR is road-bound in a mountainous country; roadblocks featured prominently in the outbreak of war in 1992.

This leaves EUFOR vulnerable and reactive. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), itself likely to be radically reduced, is set to reinforce EUFOR *in extremis*. Both missions are to be reinforced by 'over-the-horizon' forces. A senior diplomatic source estimated the effective reaction time to a call for over-the-horizon forces to be two weeks.

At a meeting of EU defence ministers in 2008, France and Spain called for the mission to end. The rationale was that the troops are idle, although financial imperatives are moving to the fore. One senior international official noted: "General Villalain [the Spanish former commander of EUFOR] ordered an end to patrols because they were 'provocative'. Maybe that is why they are bored."

Resistance from Germany, the UK and Italy, which now commands the force, delayed closure at least until after the decision to close the OHR is made. Even these countries see EUFOR as a merely psychological deterrent.

On 28 January French Defence Minister Hervé Morin moved to effect a *fait accompli*, stating: "The operation in Bosnia does not make sense any more."

France will withdraw its contingent of about 90 troops by mid-2009, followed by Finland, Ireland and Switzerland, as well as Spain's large contingent. EUFOR's already anaemic operational capacity will be reduced by 500 troops: a whopping 24 per cent.

The EU should field a more robust ground presence in Bosnia with a wider deployment footprint, including strategic points like Brčko. Few EU members have units in combat elsewhere. There is no excuse for such countries not to deploy troops or for them to be bored, as Bosnia also affords training opportunities such as mountain and hot-weather exercises for troops preparing for deployment to Afghanistan.

An increased foreign-troop presence would help to restore Bosnian public confidence. Assuaging popular fear is a prerequisite for achieving the constitutional reform essential for the country's survival and EU success.

EUFOR's mandate to maintain a "safe and secure environment" in Dayton's Annex 1A allows it to assess and address capacities of all potential belligerents. The OHR's closure is pegged to the completion of a set of objectives and conditions: the '5+2 formula'. The second condition requires the Peace Implementation Council to conclude that Bosnia is stable; international inspection mechanisms and a domestic regulatory framework should be read into this.

The EU should grant its new special representative the executive authority to prevent threats to public security. This authority requires a capable force on the ground to deter and respond to challenges to the peace, including removing from office those who threaten it. The potential for violence in Bosnia is real. Should conflict erupt, the EU will have to react, at considerable cost to the already frayed credibility of its Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Kurt Bassuener is a Senior Associate of the Democratization Policy Council: a global initiative for accountability in democracy promotion. He served as strategy analyst with the OHR from 2005-06 and lives in Sarajevo