

Reflections on Bosnia and the 'Putin Doctrine'



Prevention and deterrence are far less expensive, and provide far wider positive potential, than reaction post hoc. There may be precious little time left for the EU and NATO to exercise that option

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Timing is everything. Just as the Mueller Report was being furiously downloaded and Western diplomats were leaving for the Easter weekend holiday, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, de facto leader of the entity of Republika Sprska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serb member of the country's presidency, has dramatically escalated tensions and stoked yet more destabilizing uncertainty, as his party (the SNSD), introduced legislation to amend the RS entity law on police, which will establish auxiliary police, allow foreign actors into RS, and prohibit photography of police officers. The other entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has now responded in kind. Politicized, militarized police had a starring role in the worst atrocities of the 1992–1995 war. In such an environment, the threat of miscalculation leading to ethno-national violence is more potent than any time since.

The Power is - Russia

The power which the RS' new law's foreign access provision was designed - and which may well be prodding it on - is Russia. Meanwhile, Europe dithers. The Cold War is often said to have begun in earnest with attempts to destabilize Greece and Turkey, in the late 1940s, just prior to the Tito-Stalin split. The Truman Doctrine, which "established that the United States would provide political, military and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces," can be seen as a

precursor to the foundation of NATO in 1949.

Today's Putin Doctrine[1] is the precise inversion of the Truman Doctrine: Russia (either state forces or their Russian national proxies) will intervene directly whenever a Russia-friendly de facto autocracy faces a bottom-up initiated threat, and will do so with greater certainty if and when that grassroots movement receives material or rhetorical support from the democratic West. The greater the infamy of the challenged regime in Western democratic circles, the greater the imperative to preserve it - if not its leader, at least its posture as a resister of Western policies.

The Putin Doctrine emerged in response to the first "color revolution," in Georgia in 2003. The next iteration came with Putin's considerable investment in ensuring that Viktor Yanukovich would be winner of the 2004 presidential contest in Ukraine - a plan scuppered from below by the Orange Revolution (the benefits of which were squandered by Ukraine's political elites). The Orange Revolution greatly magnified Putin's fear of popular mobilization in Russia (and concerns of Western support for it should it emerge), which further amplified in the 2011 protests following Putin's admission that he and Dmitri Medvedev had planned trading places all along. The 2013 Revolution of Dignity was a failure for the Putin Doctrine, but one for which "hybrid war" countermeasures were quickly employed post factum with

seizure of Crimea and induced war in the Donbass.

The reach and potentially unbound lethality of the Putin Doctrine comes into stark relief with the September 2015 deployment of forces to Syria to prop-up the Assad regime and the still-murky deployment of troops to Caracas in support of the embattled Maduro regime in Venezuela.

At first glance, the Putin Doctrine as defined above is not readily apparent in the former Yugoslav states. But appearances are deceiving. For Moscow has made considerable political investment in developing partners in the region. While the odds against success have been higher in the Western Balkans than in the cases listed above, largely due to the incremental integration of these economies and polities into the greater Euro-Atlantic area, they have improved markedly due to over a decade of increasingly feckless and weak-willed EU and US policy. Furthermore, the costs and risks associated with failure have been negligible to non-existent for Moscow, while the benefits of success - constituting area denial for the West and maintenance of a potentially fruitful field of contestation - are high.

The attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, with the apparent aim of forestalling that country's entry into NATO, doesn't fit the proposed definition exactly, despite being the most dramatic Russian act consistent with Russia's interests in the region. Russia's interest was not threatened by popular street power, but by Djukanovic's policy. But it

was aimed at conservation - at "restoring" Russia's sense of the natural order and the influence it thought it had bought in Montenegro, but only rented. So it is fully consonant with the "forward defense" mentality of the Putin Doctrine. Most recently, Russia undertook considerable efforts in both Greece and (now) North Macedonia (where it had been devoting efforts for some time) to torpedo an agreement that would end the long-running "name dispute" between the countries, thereby facilitating a decade-delayed invitation to join NATO and unblocking the path to eventual EU membership.

But signals of Moscow's growing appetite for risk in the name of disruption to the West had already emerged in early 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, immediately after Russia's forcible seizure of Crimea. Contemporaneous diplomatic accounts, subsequently confirmed by DPC, related Russian encouragement to then-Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik (now RS/Serb member of the BiH Presidency) to push for a secession referendum, citing the Crimea model. Dodik sought the support of Belgrade, but was discouraged by then-Prime Minister, now President, Aleksandar Vucic.

Disintegration the BiH

While stifled, Dodik was thanked for his pro-Russian stance by the Russian Ambassador. His profile with and in Russia also inflated considerably. Since 2014, Dodik has emerged as Moscow's preferred disruptive and anti-Western partner in the Balkans, lacking the ambiguity seen with far larger Serbia. Dodik has also emerged as a national populist archetype perfect for Moscow's propagation to (far)right identitarian audiences in the West and wider world, who project onto him their grievances against (im)migration, Islam, and social liberalism. If Dodik didn't exist, Moscow would need to invent someone like him. Conveniently, they found each other.

Already, Dodik has effectively impeded any further movement toward BiH's NATO membership. Together with his Croat nationalist wingman Dragan Covic, backed by Zagreb, he engages in a constant tag-team effort to fracture and disintegrate the country's Dayton order; perversely, yet fitting for this post-truth era, by claiming to be the sole "protector" of it.

Given Dodik's consistent brinkmanship, Covic and Zagreb have been underestimated as disruptive actors, both in their own right or as Moscow's accomplices. While much attention has rightly focused on Viktor Orbán's utility to Moscow in the EU and NATO, Croatia

has until recently garnered considerably less attention. The intellectually lazy Western presumption was once that Zagreb and Belgrade would impel progress in BiH by way of their own forward movement. But with Croatia in the clubs and Serbia a candidate and "frontrunner" for EU membership, they have become more problematic and destabilizing, not less. The Mostar and Banja Luka tails seem to be wagging the Zagreb and Belgrade dogs. And Moscow is a prime beneficiary - and probably direct instigator - of the disruption Dodik, Covic, and their backers, are sowing.

BiH: Inside the Security Perimeter of the EU and NATO

The Dayton peace agreement, combined with imperfect implementation and the evaporation of Western political will to impel its evolution, has yielded a fundamentally dysfunctional and unaccountable political system in which party leaders and associated rentier circles can maintain power through leveraging fear and patronage. The path forward to European integration is stifled - and will remain so, as long as that system, propped up through spineless EU-led Western policy malpractice masquerading as "stability," continues to make popular acquiescence to the status quo a more rational alternative to popular movements for real change.

So Russia need not escalate to ensure that BiH remains a chronic headache for the EU and NATO, while remaining outside its formal institutions. But the temptation might well prove difficult to resist for Putin, who has demonstrated repeatedly in the past five years his willingness to make bold moves in what he sees as "forward defense" of his preferred rule and governance model. Putting the West on the defensive, particularly in a region in which he apparently sees Moscow having been humiliated in the 1990s, is its own reward. It would be an aggressive, but hardly inconceivable move, for Russia to send forces to the Republika Srpska in support of a bid for independence - and to deter any NATO/EU action to prevent it. The Russian "Humanitarian Center" in Nis, Serbia, provides one model for how this might be done; deployment of forces as seen in Venezuela cannot be excluded. Attaining first mover advantage is a cornerstone of Russian military policy. Dodik's recent moves, as well as countervailing efforts in the Federation, now may force the issue. Even absent actual deployment of forces, there can be little doubt Moscow's backing surely encourages

brinkmanship by Banja Luka and Mostar, as well as Belgrade and Zagreb.

The potential good news is frontloaded: BiH is already inside the security perimeter of the EU and NATO, with EUFOR operating under a mandate permitting a wide range of activities to ensure a "safe and secure environment," under the Dayton Peace Accords and United Nations Security Council Chapter 7, invoked to "maintain international peace and security." The problem is that the existing force is incapable of deterring credibly or reacting in real time to potential challenges, due its insufficient strength and deployment plan. DPC has long called for remediation of this vulnerability for the sake of peace, public safety, and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of BiH.

Russia has already served as a force multiplier for disruptive domestic and regional actors Serbia and Croatia in BiH. The escalatory potential is high, but can yet be impeded if NATO and the EU become the first movers.

This requires as a matter of urgency the reinforcement and recalibration of EUFOR to deter RS secession (and Russian intervention in support of it), as well as other threats to BiH's integrity and human security. As I wrote last week, rapid British participation on the ground through deploying the reserve "over the horizon" battalion would be a key component to fortifying the deterrent. These are allegedly - and nonsensically - on the chopping block due to Brexit. Turkish troops participate in EUFOR - there is no reason British troops, or other non-EU forces such as Canadians or Americans, cannot as well. Chancellor Angela Merkel and French

Credible through Strength

President Emmanuel Macron, who have invited Western Balkan leaders to meet in Berlin, should jump through the closing window of opportunity by seizing the initiative and declaring their will to contribute to restoration of that deterrent - and inviting NATO members and other established democracies to support such an effort.

The point is making the deterrent credible through its strength, mobility, and deployment plan. And this means having a presence in that country's circuit breaker, Brcko. A tripwire force there, integrated into a credible brigade-strength force, impedes any RS play for independence.

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