

Bosnia-Herzegovina: The (In)security Between the NATO-land and NATO-less Country

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The Russian Naval Facility in the Syrian port of Tartus lies 150 kilometers south of the starting point of the NATO-coast. From the Turkish-Syrian border, all European Mediterranean coast is within the NATO-member states, except [21.2 kilometers of the Bosnian coastline](#). The rest of the coast to the Atlantic is all controlled by NATO. Furthermore, continuing a journey along the European Atlantic and later the Baltic coast will not leave NATO-land before the Russian Kaliningrad exclave. When the Black Sea is included in the consideration, it is noticeable that from the Turkish- Syrian border, there are only a few coastal countries that are not in NATO: Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sweden and Finland. While the Scandinavian former militarily neutral duo has made significant progress towards membership since 2022, the only outsiders or leftovers from the previous geopolitical positioning are Georgia, Ukraine, Russia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Both Georgia, since 2008, and Ukraine, since 2014, do not control their own territory due to Russia's geopolitical interests and military engagements. The question is, how does the political elite in Bosnia-Herzegovina feel upon observing the situation and learning all the facts?

NATO Makes History in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The current situation certainly provides plenty of concerns at three levels: within Bosnia-Herzegovina, its immediate neighborhood and globally. The country's existence as a modern state is intertwined with NATO. The UN peacekeeping force, albeit with a mandate in

neighboring Croatia, had been present in the country at the time of its independence in 1992 and was soon given the mandate for Bosnia-Herzegovina. The blue helmets heavily relied on NATO, which, after 45 years of its existence, had the [historical first combat action of NATO](#) troops in 1994 when they shot down four Bosnian Serbs fighter-bombers. The war was ended by a [NATO-led intervention in 1995](#), followed by the implementation force securing the [Dayton Peace Agreement](#). The original huge contingent force was gradually scaled down, with EUFOR eventually replacing NATO as the core of the mission that is effectively averting any actors, both internally and externally, with the ambition to destabilize the country and the region.

The situation in the post-war country is often described as [a fragile peace](#), but not a single incident of revenge killing has occurred since 1995. Nevertheless, every globally significant development is reflected in Bosnian society, starting with the [NATO intervention against Serbia](#) (and Montenegro) over Kosovo in 1999 until current Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The consociational model of governance provided for the prevention of the renewal of hostilities, alongside the international presence in the form of [UN, NATO or the EU](#), but made the country perpetually weak and the society divided along ethnic lines. Thus Serbs show rhetorical animosity towards NATO and the Western world, like in the neighboring Serbia, and effectively block further moves by Bosnia-Herzegovina to join the military alliance. Meanwhile, Croats show a willingness to join other NATO members that include Croatia, and Bosniaks see the membership as the warranty of the country's preservation and as a protection against interference from both Serbia and Croatia.

The presence of international organizations always provided the legitimacy of external involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Still, the reality is that the United States' decision-making, engagement and interest led to [the end of the war in 1995](#) and the post-war state-building and institution-building processes. The state structure formally left continuing coexistence of two armies that fought each other until the NATO intervention. In practice, each of the three ethnic groups controlled a military force with little confidence in the other two's peaceful intentions. The American-led initiative unified the armies and created the Ministry of Defense at the state level in 2004, thus finally defining Bosnia-Herzegovina as a state according to the famous [Weber's definition of the legitimate use of violence](#).

“Malign Influences”

The overall image of perpetual instability in Bosnia-Herzegovina is purely political, developed by the country's political elites and adopted by the masses. Security was always carefully overseen by international organizations, primarily NATO, involving the Bosnian military in their own training and operations. Thus a contrast was created between the EU formally granting a candidate status to Bosnia-Herzegovina and yet stating almost simultaneously in the [EU commission's own country report](#) disappointing results of political reforms and Bosnian unsuccessful political attempts to guide the country towards policy progress in political and

economic integrations. Conversely, NATO practically put the Bosnian military under control, engaged them in partnership programs and only lacked a [formal recognition of the next stage towards the integration into the military alliance](#) primarily due to the lack of political unity and will in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Membership Action Plan to which NATO invited Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2010 was not activated by the Bosnian submission of the Annual National Program. Instead, the country submitted a delayed "Reform Program", resulting from the eventually achieved compromise. The content is there, but not the form; all leaders interpret it differently. Thus a simple question – [Has Bosnia-Herzegovina joined MAP?](#) – has different answers. Serbs objected to further military integration into the Western alliance and made practical steps to block them. However, the reliance on financial, economic and military aid forces creativity in accepting the content in return for support for the survival of the regimes established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Nevertheless, the country cannot progress further, and a global crisis initiated by the war in Ukraine cements the internal divisions.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has no foreign policy. Bosnian Serb leader [Milorad Dodik visited Vladimir Putin](#) twice in 2022 and repeatedly stated that the country did not introduce economic sanctions on Russia. The Foreign Minister from the nationalist Bosniak party said the opposite, as did Bosnian Serb political opposition to Dodik. [The disunity of the country](#) was underlined, further destabilizing the state. However, Russia was not a major economic partner, and its presence was more felt in the political field. The whole concept of [the Russian World](#) (Russkiy Mir) stops geographically far from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Still, close political ties with Serbs and their own ambition of uniting all Serbs in one state under the idea of the [Serbian World \(Srpski svet\)](#) creates a theater in Bosnia-Herzegovina where politics and culture collide and require additional efforts from the West while Russia seeks to [leverage the instability in the Balkans](#).

Meanwhile, the Bosniak Nationalist party [SDA hosted the Iranian Foreign Minister](#) in December 2022, who met the party leader and Bosnian [Foreign Minister from the same political party](#). Bosnia-Herzegovina [abstained at the UN vote to condemn the Iranian regime's](#) use of violence against protesters. Bosnian diplomats had the same attitude in 2021 when they abstained from supporting condemnation of [Iran's human rights violations](#) and abstained in a vote to condemn [human rights violations in the occupied Crimea](#).

At the official level, the state in Bosnia-Herzegovina is weak, society is disunited, and this leaves only a minor individual engagement as volunteers on either of the sides in Ukraine. Like the volunteers for ISIS in the past, these individuals do not present a broader danger to the country. However, they are an unpleasant side-effect of the conflict. It is the political elites that hold the country down and out of the Euro-Atlantic integrations—even those who declare the will to integrate do very little towards achieving the aims.

Conclusion

The West provided support to the state in dealing with the [returnees from the Middle East](#). Bosnia-Herzegovina needs assistance now to deal with the Ukrainian crisis and effectively a deeply divided community at home. Otherwise, geopolitical strategists in [Moscow will enthusiastically support](#) any dramatic measures by Serbian or Bosnian Serb political leaders that would potentially create an additional conflict zone.

Russia uses the Balkans primarily as destruction for the West. The post-Global Financial Crisis decade was a period of western sleepiness when Russia entered the Balkans through its propaganda machine that woke up pre-existing historical sympathies. Economic investment failed to justify impressions in the Balkan public, primarily among the Serbs, that Russia is a strategic financial partner. However, [Russia is only ninth](#) on the list of biggest direct foreign investors to Bosnia-Herzegovina, with 3.98% of the overall investments. The [media presence through Sputnik](#) and [RT](#) developed their [Balkans or Serbian services](#) and spread ideas that Russia rival western influences. In the end, this returns steady voters for the autocratic leaders expressing support for Russia that are avoiding the checks and balances of liberal democracies.

[The exodus of the working-age population](#) from the Western Balkans has been continuous over the last decade and in only one direction – to the West. This means that regimes might remain authoritarian in the Balkans and never transition towards a liberal form of democracy. The security concerns are addressed despite the democratic backsliding with the NATO enlargement leaving only Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo outside the member states. Yet, the US set up [the largest and the most expensive military base](#) built by the US in Europe since the Vietnam War in [Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo](#). NATO leads and influences [security reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#), and [Serbia carried out more common military exercises with NATO than with Russia](#) despite the rhetoric by political leaders. The future might not be bright, but seemingly Russia is squeezed out of the Western Balkans in any serious form.

Nevertheless, the media in Serbia, largely read in Bosnia-Herzegovina by Bosnian Serbs, enthusiastically expressed [support for Russia](#) during the invasion of Ukraine, which was seen as a [response to NATO threats](#). Thus [large right-wing demonstrations](#) in the Serbian capital in support of Putin and Russia show potential for anti-Western policies. In parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina dominated by Bosnian Serbs, [large murals celebrating war criminals received added “Z”](#) like on Russian tanks. The leader of the largest Bosnian Serbs' political party frequently visits Moscow and has been elected President of the Bosnian Serbs-dominated entity at the elections in October 2022. This leaves Bosnia-Herzegovina in limbo. The state is neither here nor there. Political elites are incompetent to break the deadlock, citizens' political participation almost non-existent, and the only possibility to move on is by some external political intervention that would impose reforms in the country.

