

## **Balkans at Risk: BiH Dysfunction, Dodik's Brinkmanship, and Global Realignment**

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The Western Balkans have long been a region of instability, plagued by deep-seated divisions and the scars of past conflicts. Nowhere is this fragility more apparent than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where governance failures, secessionist maneuvers, and resistance to international oversight have created a volatile political landscape.

This instability is further intensified by external pressures. Russia's anti-Western information warfare and strategic influence, the rise of an informal alliance among authoritarian leaders—such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán — and a troubling shift in U.S. policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine that risks reducing Western engagement all contribute to a situation that threatens not only BiH but the entire Western Balkans and, ultimately, European security.

### **Chronic Dysfunctionality in BiH and Dodik's Brinkmanship**

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement ([DPA](#)) in 1995, BiH has been marred by an institutional structure designed to maintain ethnic balance at the expense of effective governance. The Dayton framework, while successful in ending the war, also institutionalized ethnic divisions by creating a power-sharing system that often leads to gridlock and fragmentation and that has seen the region [lurching](#) from crisis to crisis.

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This [systemic governance issue](#) is particularly apparent in Republika Srpska (RS), where Milorad Dodik — a highly [polarizing](#) Serb nationalist — has repeatedly used secessionist rhetoric and legislative brinkmanship to destabilize the central state. Dodik's repeated [threats](#) to withdraw RS from key state institutions, including the national army and judiciary, reveal a calculated strategy: by challenging the authority of the central government and the Office of the High Representative (OHR), Dodik seeks to either achieve de facto independence or push for a political union with neighboring Serbia.

Dodik's recent actions underscore this approach. Following his February 26 [conviction](#) for defying constitutional norms and his push through controversial laws aimed at rejecting state-level judiciary authority, Dodik [dismissed the legitimacy](#) of BiH's institutions and vowed non-compliance. His populist rhetoric, which portrays his moves as protecting RS's autonomy rather than outright secession, belies a more dangerous reality. Each defiant step not only deepens the ethnic and institutional divide but also signals to external actors — both those in favor of maintaining a status quo and those seeking to exploit instability — that BiH remains deeply divided.

This long-standing administrative challenge is not merely an internal matter. It creates fertile ground for external meddling, with adversaries keen to exploit BiH's institutional weaknesses to reshape the region's power dynamics. For decades, BiH has been the battleground where external powers — historically the U.S. and later Russia — vie for influence, and Dodik's aggressive posture is a major destabilizing factor in this contest.

### International Reactions: OHR, EUFOR, and U.S. Criticism

Amid these internal tensions, the international community has responded with a mix of urgency and concern. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's rapid decision to [visit](#) BiH on March 10 underscores the international community's alarm at Dodik's provocations. This high-level visit is intended not only to reaffirm the authority of the Dayton framework but also to signal that violations of the peace agreement will not be tolerated.

Similarly, the European Union has taken a proactive step, deciding to [expand](#) the presence of the European Union Force (EUFOR) in Bosnia. The decision to temporarily increase peacekeeping forces under Operation Althea reflects the EU's commitment to maintaining stability in BiH and safeguarding the implementation of the Dayton Agreement. These moves are critical in countering Dodik's attempts to undermine state institutions and prevent a further slide into secessionist chaos.

On the American side, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [sharply criticized](#) Dodik's moves in a post on X, warning that his actions threaten BiH's institutions and regional stability. However, there is a notable divergence in U.S. policy signals: while Rubio and [other U.S. officials](#) have criticized Dodik, recent indications suggest that it is President Donald Trump — rather than traditional U.S. foreign policy “hawks” — who is calling the shots on the broader approach to Russia and the war in Ukraine. Trump appears inclined toward de-escalating tensions with Russia and seeking accommodation on Ukraine, a shift that may result in reduced American engagement in the Western Balkans. This evolving U.S. stance risks leaving a void that could be exploited by authoritarian actors, further complicating the regional security environment.

### **Russia's Malign Influence and Anti-Western Information Warfare**

While internal divisions undermine BiH's stability, Russia has skillfully exploited these weaknesses to advance its strategic interests in the region. Through coordinated hostile messaging and targeted support for secessionist leaders like Dodik, Moscow seeks to legitimize and reinforce divisive tendencies in BiH. Russian media often broadcast narratives that underscore historical grievances — emphasizing the injustices inflicted upon Bosnian Serbs — and portray Western interventions as oppressive and destabilizing. This narrative not only bolsters Dodik's claims for autonomy but also serves to fracture any potential unity among BiH's ethnic groups.

Russia's support is not limited to propaganda. It extends to [practical measures](#), such as providing economic incentives, limited military assistance, and [diplomatic backing](#) to Dodik and other like-minded actors. For over a decade, Moscow has consistently supported Dodik's brinkmanship, including backing his threats of secession and his defiance of the OHR. This support is a key element of Russia's broader strategy to maintain a foothold in the Balkans and to undermine Western influence. By [keeping BiH mired](#) in ineffective governance, Russia can leverage the country as a tool to project power in Eastern Europe and contest the established Euro-Atlantic order.

Most recently, Moscow has made its support for Dodik abundantly clear, with President Vladimir Putin [openly declaring](#) his “solidarity” and Russia [requesting](#) the convening of a UN Security Council meeting on the issue of the Srpska president's conviction and sentencing. One could hardly ignore the possibility that Dodik's provocations are a calculated move within a broader Serbian-Russian effort to exacerbate regional tensions, further complicating the EU's geopolitical challenges.

Despite these efforts, Western attempts to bolster BiH's sovereignty have faced significant obstacles. The country was granted EU candidate status in 2022, but progress on accession talks remains [stymied](#), primarily due to persistent corruption and a lack of meaningful economic reforms. Similarly, efforts to reduce energy dependence on Russia have struggled — plans for a gas pipeline from Croatia have only in the past couple of months made [modest headway](#), after having been in limbo since the 2009 Russian supply cutoff. These stalled initiatives highlight the ongoing difficulty in fortifying BiH against both internal political dysfunction and external Russian influence.

### **Authoritarian Brotherhood: Vučić, Orbán, and the Alignment with Dodik**

Compounding the internal and external pressures on BiH is the emergence of an [informal alliance](#) among authoritarian leaders in the region. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have both expressed strong support for Dodik's policies, aligning themselves against what they view as excessive Western interference.

Vučić's personal support — demonstrated by his [visit](#) to Banja Luka — and Orbán's vocal condemnation of international legal measures against Dodik as a "[political witch hunt](#)" signal a shared regional vision. This "authoritarian brotherhood" champions a model of governance that prioritizes national sovereignty and a rejection of liberal democratic norms.

The backing from Vučić and Orbán not only emboldens Dodik's secessionist posturing but also complicates Western efforts to promote integration and reform in the Balkans. Their alignment with Dodik serves to isolate BiH further from the EU and NATO, creating a network of authoritarian influence that could fundamentally reshape regional geopolitics.

Furthermore, the support of these leaders provides Russia with additional leverage, as it underscores a broader trend of nationalist, anti-Western sentiment across parts of Eastern Europe — a trend that directly challenges the stability and cohesion of the Western Balkans.

### **The Shifting U.S. Approach and Western Policy Fragmentation**

Perhaps the most alarming development is the [rapid evolution in U.S. policy](#) toward Russia and the war in Ukraine, which may result in diminished engagement in the Western Balkans. Historically, the U.S. played a key role in stabilizing the Balkans through robust diplomatic, military, and economic support. However, recent shifts in U.S. strategy — driven by an ambiguous approach to Russia — suggest that Washington might soon reduce its active involvement in regions like BiH.

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This potential disengagement, or even divided support among Western allies, would leave a vacuum in a region that already suffers from chronic dysfunction. Without consistent and unified backing, secessionist impulses in Republika Srpska could be emboldened, while the ability of international institutions to enforce the Dayton framework would be severely undermined. The risk is that a fragmented Western policy could lead to inconsistent support for reforms and a weakening of the institutional checks that have, until now, kept BiH in a precarious balance.

***As Western policymakers grapple with competing priorities, notably the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Balkans could be sidelined. This shift not only threatens the stability of BiH but also has broader implications for European security, as a weakened BiH could spark renewed ethnic conflicts, exacerbate migration pressures, and further erode regional cohesion.***

### Conclusion and Broader Implications

*The Western Balkans face a severe threat from internal weaknesses, aggressive leadership, external interference, and shifting global policies.* In Bosnia and Herzegovina, persistent institutional shortcomings — exemplified by Milorad Dodik’s consistent secessionist tactics and defiance of oversight — have eroded the structures that once supported post-war recovery. His actions, fueled by deep nationalist sentiment and reinforced by Russian support, have deepened internal divisions.

Simultaneously, Russia’s strategic use of anti-Western messaging and its backing for destabilizing measures highlight a broader geopolitical struggle between Moscow and the West. The rise of an informal alliance among authoritarian leaders, including Serbia’s Aleksandar Vučić and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, further isolates BiH from European integration, fueling unchecked nationalist sentiments.

Equally concerning is the rapid shift in U.S. policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine. Recent indications that the Trump administration favors a more conciliatory approach toward Moscow contrast with traditional U.S. policies and risk weakening Western unity, potentially creating a power vacuum.

For policymakers, these converging challenges could destabilize not only BiH but the broader European security order. Without a unified response to domestic governance failures and external pressures, the region may slip into deeper disarray. ***The stakes are exceptionally high: the fragile status quo in BiH — described by OHR Schmidt in October 2021 as facing “its greatest existential threat of the post-war period” — could break down, with potential ripple effects that might undermine stability across the Western Balkans.***