

An aerial photograph of a historic town at dusk. A large stone bridge with a prominent arch spans a river. The town's buildings, including a large stone tower, are illuminated by warm lights. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, and mountains are visible in the background.

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South East Europe & Black Sea Region

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Foreword

The West and Russia continue to wrestle over power in the South East Europe and Black Sea Region. On 19. February 2024, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, met Belarussian President Lukashenka in Minsk, Belarus and plans to visit President Putin in Moscow soon. Dodik further enjoys the support of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who once more showcased his pro-Russian attitude when he refused to sign a joint EU declaration, assigning the responsibility for the death of Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny to Russia's President Vladimir Putin. On the other side of the table, the EU continues to tangle the carrot by promising doubled economic output to the Western Balkan Region: European Union Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi recently announced in Tirana, Albania, that the EU developed a 6 billion Euro plan for the next three years, aiming at economic growth and the integration of EU norms. Downplaying what's at stake, he further announced that the EU has "full confidence in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia" and hoped for a fast membership of the bloc to the EU. Obviously, the last words have not been spoken in the matter and with Transdnier Separatists asking Russia for more gas and protection, the EU might as well see its problems reaching further towards the separatist region in Moldova and the Caucasus region.

The Russian war on Ukraine, the upcoming US elections, and the death of Aleksei Navalny keep EU and NATO states on their toes. Welcoming Sweden as the latest member of NATO, Ukraine's endeavors to join the Organisation soon have been diminished, at least for the time the war is raging. Instead, focus has shifted towards security pacts between Ukraine and its Western allies. Zelenskiy encouraged further sanctions against Russia, however, those currently debated are unlikely to target Russia's economic sector, and debates over their effectiveness and 'correct' implementation continue. Overall, the Munich Security Conference displayed the current uncertainty and disagreements. And even without being present Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump were often the center of attention.



Republika Srpska: An Overview of Recent Developments in Light of Democratic Backslide

Carolina Muzzillo

Key Takeaways

- Republika Srpska's (planned) enactment of laws re-criminalizing defamation and restricting media outlets poses a significant threat to freedom of speech and media. This can result in democratic backsliding.
- The enactment of the Foreign Agent Bill threatens the independent work of NGOs that receive foreign funding and can restrict them in their work.
- Milorad Dodik's trial highlights a broader democratic decline in Republika Srpska and BiH, marked by threats to freedom and the rise of ethno-nationalism.

Introduction

The end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 marked the emergence of various complex issues and dynamics in Republika Srpska (RS). The developments bear the danger of making the RS a hotspot for clashes over territorial integrity, peace, and security risks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region. This analysis will address three key recent developments: 1. Package of restrictive laws, 2. Republika Srpska Day in RS, 3. The trial of Milorad Dodik.

Package of Restrictive Laws

Throughout the end of 2023, Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced notable democratic backsliding, particularly within Republika Srpska, driven by concerning legislative measures. Of particular concern was a package of laws proposed in Republika Srpska, which included the re-criminalization of defamation, a draft law establishing an NGO registry reminiscent of

'foreign agents' legislation, and a pending proposal for a new media law. These initiatives raised alarm bells regarding the state of democracy and freedom of expression within the entity and also the whole country.[1]

Foreign Agent Bill

The draft was adopted by the Republika Srpska government in late September and went to the assembly after the closure of the public consultation period in mid-December 2023.[2]

The proposed legislation aims to establish a special register for non-profit organizations receiving funding from foreign entities, with the goal of enhancing transparency in their operations.[3] According to the new law, 'foreign entities' can be defined as governments, foreign political parties, stateless individuals residing abroad, and entities organized under foreign regulations or headquartered in another country. [4] Under the draft law, NGOs who receive funds from foreign entities, would be required to submit semi-annual and annual financial reports disclosing their foreign funding sources. In this case, the absence of a minimum threshold for 'foreign funding' in the regulation means that NGOs must report even the smallest donations they receive, interfering with their daily operations, especially when tracking numerous small contributions like those from crowdfunding campaigns.[5] The draft law requires NGOs to register in a separate dedicated Registry (a registration system that already exists under the national legislation), raising questions about its purpose and creating uncertainty over the required registration information.[6] Additionally, it imposes further inspections on foreign-funded NGOs, creating discriminatory distinctions between them and domestically-

funded NGOs, and including sanctions for non-compliance with registration requirements and failure to provide 'information' on NGO activities. [7]

Additionally, the draft grants the Minister of Justice the authority to prohibit a non-profit organization if it is found to have violated the law. [8] Finally, if the RS government decides to declare them as "agents of foreign influence", these non-profit organizations would be prohibited from engaging in political activities – with the definition of 'political' ranging from any proposal for legislative changes to any kind of human rights activities, research, or comments on political decisions in the RS. [9]

International Organisations and experts have identified the Foreign Agent Bill as a serious threat to civil society organisations and human rights defenders in Republika Srpska, as well as for the respect and protection of fundamental rights in the entity [10]. For instance, In January 2024, the EU delegation to Bosnia-Herzegovina issued a statement expressing grave concern over the recent erosion of fundamental freedoms, such as the criminalization of defamation and the proposed 'Foreign Agents Bill' [11]. They declared these measures to be major backward steps for Bosnia-Herzegovina's path toward EU-Accession. [12] The delegation strongly urged the authorities in Republika Srpska to withdraw the draft legislation pertaining to 'foreign agents', emphasizing the importance of upholding democratic principles and respecting human rights as essential prerequisites for closer integration with the European Union. [13]

Re-Criminalisation of Defamation

The recent re-criminalisation of defamation, enacted by the Republika Srpska National Assembly in July 2023, has made defamation a criminal offense. [14] The amendments define defamation as making malicious or untrue statements about a person, punishable by fines and imprisonment. [15] Despite criticism for potentially restricting freedom of opinion and introducing censorship, the law was enacted. In

response, hundreds of journalists and rights activists protested outside the parliament in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska's capital. Initially proposed in a draft amendment in March, it was allowed for a two-month period for public debates where journalists and civil society organizations have been allowed to provide opinions and recommendations. [16] In the consultations period, the civil society accused the RS entity of attempting to impose control on media, and fines were reduced in the final draft of the law from a maximum of 60,000 euros to a range between 1,000 and 3,000 euros. [17] In this regard, several international organisations expressed their concern regarding the possibility of a democratic backslide. For example, the UN Special Rapporteurs for the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council declared to be "particularly worried that the legal provisions can be used to silence critical voices, including journalists, human rights defenders, and the political opposition". [18]

On the 18th of February, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina rejected to declare the recently enacted criminal law provisions as unconstitutional, even though they aim at criminalizing defamation. Only the prison sentences included in the new law were found unconstitutional. [19]

New Media Law

A report from January 2024 by Media Freedom Rapid Response has raised concerns regarding a recent initiative in Republika Srpska to formulate a new "media law." The report underscores that scant information is available regarding the specific content or objectives of this proposal, which is being developed in a non-transparent manner.

The report says that the working group behind the proposed media law in Republika Srpska is considering restricting media outlets' NGO registration and creating an official list of recognized media and journalists. [20] This could lead to government-controlled journalist certification,

undermining freedom of expression and enabling state control over media, particularly when combined with the Foreign Agent Bill and defamation law changes.[21] According to Media Freedom Rapid Response, the expected content of the bill is problematic and in combination with the lack of transparency during the drafting, the developments are deemed alarming, portraying an inappropriate approach towards media regulation.[22]

Republika Srpska Day

On January 9, 1992, the Bosnian Serb assembly in Bosnia and Herzegovina declared secession from the newly independent country following its separation from Yugoslavia. This declaration aimed to establish Republika Srpska as a separate entity known as the “Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina”[23] and was one of the crucial events that triggered the onset of the war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Republika Srpska Day celebrations on the 9th of January.
Source: Radio Free Europe

Each year, on the 9th of January, RS celebrates Republika Srpska Day with grand parades, often attended by foreign officials. Like in previous years, numerous political representatives from Serbia participated in the celebrations in Republika Srpska. Among them were Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Miloš Vučević, as well as Chief of the Serbian Armed Forces General Staff, General Milan Mojsilović. Also in attendance were President of the National Assembly Vladimir Orlić, ministers from the Serbian government, a delegation from the Ministry of Defense, and representatives from the Armed Forces.[24]

Additionally, President of the RS Milorad Dodik and President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić reached an agreement for synchronized fireworks on January 9th at 8:00 PM in all cities of Republika Srpska, as well as in Belgrade, Serbia. [25]

In 2015, the Constitutional Court of BiH declared the celebrations unconstitutional due to its discriminatory nature against non-Serbs within the entity.[26] Despite this ruling and warnings from the OSCE, the EU, the office of the High Representative, and the US and British embassies, this year’s parade featured 3,400 police officers, paramilitary groups, and civilians in Banja Luka. The EU’s Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Peter Stano, emphasized the necessity of upholding Bosnia and Herzegovina’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, stating that “any actions against these principles will result in serious consequences.” [27] Meanwhile, the US embassy in Sarajevo declared the Republika Srpska Day celebrations to constitute a criminal offense, violating Bosnia and Herzegovina’s constitution and the Dayton Peace Agreement. The US urged the Bosnian legal authorities to investigate any related violations[28] and, on the eve of the celebrations, they deployed F16 fighter jets above in the regions of the eastern town of Tuzla and northern Brcko in a display of support for the country.[29] At the same time, Britain sanctioned the Bosnian Marketing Agency Mania for “activity which threatens peace and stability”, as they “were awarded a lucrative contract to organise illegal celebrations for Republika Srpska Day in direct contravention of the country’s constitution and court rulings”.[30]

In response to the abovementioned accusations from foreign states and stakeholders, Dodik stated, “We need freedom, not colonisers or tutors” while he emphasized looking to Serbia and Russia. During the ceremony, he awarded Hungarian President Viktor Orban (who was invited at the event but did not attend it) as a symbol of gratitude.[31] Last year, he awarded Putin similarly.[32]

The Trial of Milorad Dodik

On February 5th, the trial against Dodik, the President of Republika Srpska, commenced in the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[33] Dodik is charged with defying the rulings of the international peace envoy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[34] In the summer of 2023, at the request of Milorad Dodik, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska passed a law stating that Bosnia's Constitutional Court rulings don't apply to the entity. They termed it temporary until the state parliament established a new law on a state-level Constitutional Court without foreign judges.[35] Dodik was indicted in August for refusing to recognize the authority of the High Representative and has been sanctioned by the US for corruption and threatening the stability and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[36]

According to the Dayton Agreement, any official in Bosnia who fails to implement a decision of the High Representative, or obstructs it in any manner, can face imprisonment ranging from six months to five years. If convicted, Dodik will also receive a ban on public duties.[37]



Milorad Dodik in December 2023
Source: Al Jazeera Balkan

In October, Dodik and Milos Lukic, Republika Srpska's Official Gazette Acting Director, declined to plead in Bosnia's Court, claiming lack of legitimacy.[38] Dodik denounced the trial, vowing to defend Republika Srpska, rejecting the charges of disobeying the High Representative's decisions.[39]

Further his team of lawyers argued that the High Representative's authority is illegitimate, contesting the existence of the alleged criminal act.[40]

A new hearing is scheduled for the 6th of March. [41]

Conclusion

It is evident, as stated by the international community and various organizations that the recent enactment of a restrictive package of laws in Republika Srpska undermines democratic values and fundamental rights not only within RS but also throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Moreover, the latter half of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 witnessed the convergence of this legislative factor with various nationalist and territorial threats emanating from the entity's government and its president, Milorad Dodik.

Regarding the impact on EU accession process, the EU has voiced apprehensions regarding these developments, signalling potential obstacles in Bosnia and Herzegovina's journey toward accession. The erosion of media freedom and autonomy of NGOs, and the dismissal of the international peace envoy, coupled with ongoing separatist threats by Dodik, not only undermine democratic principles but also pose a significant risk to the security and stability of the country.

The deterioration of conditions in Republika Srpska (RS) raises alarms about the overall stability of BiH, while the proximity of RS to Serbia and Russia adds complexity to the geopolitical landscape, with potential implications for regional stability. Therefore, addressing the erosion of media freedom and civil liberties in RS is crucial not only for the advancement of democracy within BiH but also for the broader security interests of the region.

Recommendations

- International observers and organizations should pay close attention to developments in Republika Srpska and Bosnia-Herzegovina, addressing any emerging challenges effectively.
- International support mechanisms need to be implemented in support to Human Rights defenders, Civil Society Organizations and Journalists from Republika Srpska and the whole BiH.
- Hearings, bilateral advocacy meetings and consultations within the international community and in cooperation with international organizations should be held to ensure a complete understanding of the deteriorating democratic situation. Following actions should be taken accordingly.

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The Trial of Milorad Dodik: A Test of Political Power in Republika Srpska

Filip Gavranović

Key Takeaways

- Milorad Dodik recently went on trial for disobeying the decisions of the High Representative Christian Schmidt
- Dodik has a long history of speaking against the OHR, which he considers constitutes illegitimate foreign involvement in the sovereign affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- His actions could also be seen as a further step towards Republika Srpska seceding

Following a series of delays which featured a replacement of judges, a separation of proceedings, and continuous accusations of politicization, the trial of Milorad Dodik opened on February 5, 2024 in the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo[1]. The judicial accusations of defying international authority are the culmination of tensions arising between the current leadership of Republika Srpska (RS) and the current High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt[2]. It can also be seen as a testing ground for ideals of separatism and autonomy among Bosnian Serbs, which have been continuously espoused by the acting RS president Milorad Dodik. This article provides an overview of the trial so far and situates it in a wider geopolitical context.

Context

Ever since the Dayton Peace Accords were signed in 1995, the Bosnian political system has been riddled with inertia – the ‘dysfunctional

state’[3] currently has the highest state fragility rating among European countries[4]. The current federal organization of the state is a product of an international attempt to de-escalate one of the worst conflicts in Europe after WWII. Although the primary objective of the system as a method of conflict resolution has been achieved, the system structurally stops short of providing a sustainable and long-term solution; although the state is built, the society is not [5]. The three former warring ethnic groups have been put in charge of their own federal republics, while having to collaborate within the 3-person presidency on the state level – giving rise to constant tensions between the two levels of government. Even on the level of the state, the decision-making gridlock is apparent – governments take years to form, and the country’s national anthem lacks lyrics not because of choice; but rather because the groups cannot agree on a suitable message that would appeal to all[6].

The current system is not one of local creation but was rather externally imposed through the institution of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) – a position with far-reaching powers that has frequently imposed widely unpopular reforms in the name of preventing the state from disintegrating and has often been nicknamed the ‘viceroy’ of the country[7]. Through the usage of the ‘Bonn Powers’, the OHR can adopt binding decisions in cases of local parties’ inaction, as well as remove public officials that endanger the full civilian implementation of the Dayton Agreement[8]. Although used to maintain stability and prevent disintegration,

their usage frequently draws criticism from local actors - particularly from Serbs in RS, as well as the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić[9].

The discontent against the OHR has become particularly apparent since the appointment of the current High Representative Christian Schmidt, as he was not appointed with the approval of the United Nations Security Council - where China and Russia are attempting to get the institution of OHR disbanded[10]. Rather, he was appointed by the Peace Implementation Council, as were previous High Commissioners. Dodik has stated that without the relevant UNSC authorization, Schmidt would be considered no more than a "tourist"[11]. Neither China and Russia, nor RS currently recognize his authority - the officials of the latter even refuse to grant him official meetings - which is also the root of the current judicial conflict[12]. Dodik's publicly expressed contempt towards the OHR has caused widespread condemnation internationally, caused him to be sanctioned by the USA[13], and spurred retaliatory actions from other Western powers like Germany[14].

The current crisis

On June 1, 2023 the Bosnian Serb's National Assembly adopted new legislation that implied the OHR's decisions could no longer be recognized[15]. In a similar fashion that could be seen as a slide towards secession and more autonomy, the assembly voted on June 27, 2023 to suspend recognition of any decisions made by Bosnian Constitutional Court[16]. This was just one in a series of laws that have been introduced by Dodik's party in 2023 and aimed at delegitimizing Bosnian national institutions in RS. Schmidt used his Bonn powers to annul[17] the laws on July 1, 2023 declaring them detrimental to Bosnian unity and thus in violation of the Dayton accords - citing that the RS entity does not have "the right to derogate from the jurisdiction of key Dayton institutions"[18]. The High Representative also changed the Bosnian

criminal code to introduce charges for officials not respecting the decisions of the OHR, with a projected sentence of 6 months to 5 years, and a ban on public duties[19].



High Representative Christian Schmidt, Source via Wikimedia Commons

Dodik refused to acknowledge Schmidt's decisions, and signed the laws - allowing the Official Gazette of RS to ignore the OHR's decisions, as well as nullifying the decisions made by the Bosnian Constitutional Court in RS[20]. Due to the joint involvement of Miloš Lukić, the acting director of the Official Gazette, the judicial proceedings based on the newly adopted criminal code were initiated against both Dodik and Lukić in a joint prosecution. The trial commenced on December 6, 2023 in Sarajevo - but was soon adjourned to December 20, 2023 as the defense requested it be transferred to Banja Luka, the capital of RS (a request that the judge denied)[21]. Furthermore, Dodik declared the trial as a "political process", chided the US Ambassador Michael Murphy for his colonial behavior, and called the High Representative a "stinker" - clearly expressing his disdain for the "biased" procedure[22]. On December 20, 2023 when the trial was to be carried out after adjournment, the judge Mirsad Strika decided to postpone it to January 17, 2024 - as the defense team requested that four prosecutors be exempted due to alleged biases[23].

However, on the January hearing, Strika only ruled on separating the proceedings on the basis of the second defendant, Milos Lukic, being unable to attend the trial due to a hospitalization – further hearings were thus postponed for the third time[24].

The trial finally began on February 5, 2024 in Sarajevo – led by judge Sena Uzumović, as Strika asked to be replaced before his upcoming retirement later this year[25]. Insults followed after the prosecutor Gordana Bosiljčić read the indictment, prompting the judge to expel the audience from the room. Dodik's defense argued that the proposed criminal offense is invalid, as Christian Schmidt does not have explicit UN Security Council approval, and thus cannot claim the title of High Representative, and the powers associated with it[26]. The next hearing has been scheduled for March 6, 2024, where prosecution will present evidence; with four inspectors of the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) scheduled to testify.



Milorad Dodik shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Source via Wikimedia Commons

Conclusion and recommendations

In a recent interview with Reuters, Dodik claimed[27] that Bosnia has no future while foreigners have such a high degree of control. Despite his constant proclamations of protecting Bosnia and Herzegovina from foreign interference and western colonialism, Milorad Dodik seems to mostly be interested in one

particular part of it – the Serbian majority Republika Srpska. He has already been accused of supporting secessionism by a myriad of international actors, most recently in January 2024 when announcing a new electoral law that would protect elections in RS from rules and regulations of BiH and establish compulsory voting[28]. Furthermore, he recently held celebrations of the self-proclaimed statehood day, which has been deemed discriminatory to non-Serbs in the republic by Bosnia's constitutional court[29].

However, Dodik is not uncontroversial even within his republic – a NDI poll, conducted in 2021, found that roughly half of the RS population disagrees with his intentions to withdraw the republic from BiH state institutions[30]. If he is found guilty, convicted and removed from office, this would be seen as a victory for Bosnia's western allies who hope to keep the country from further fragmentation. Nevertheless, the rise of Dodik should be seen as a symptom of a deeper problem within Bosnia's political system – one that has successfully kept interethnic conflict at bay for the past three decades but made passing legislation and forming governments an impossible task. Although the country acquired candidate status for EU membership in 2022, accession talks have yet to begin, as criteria hasn't yet been met[31]. The crisis of RS secession is not only relevant for the long-term stability of BiH, but can be seen as a proxy diplomatic battlefield between the West and Russia; Dodik has awarded Putin with the highest medal of honor in January 2023, and reaffirmed his close ties with the Russian leader at their meeting in Moscow on February 2024[32].

Although it may seem that this is just one of the many times Dodik is being publicly persecuted, albeit for the first time by a Bosnian Constitutional court, the case is relevant not only due to potentially barring Dodik from appearing in office again, but also because it will showcase the current local and international attitudes

towards Bosnia and Republika Srpska. Consequently, trial observers should pay attention to:

- Explicit support of Dodik through embassy statements from actors like China, Russia and particularly Serbia; Vučić is considered Dodik's closest supporter but has often distanced himself from the RS president in times of political crisis[33].
- Involvement of civil society in RS; Dodik's government has recently pushed a widely condemned law that would create a special register of non-profit organizations with international sources of funding, calling them "foreign agents"[34]. This alludes to a wider atmosphere of distrust among the elite and grassroots organizations, who may play a role in the trial as it evolves.

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The Russia–Ukraine War and Security in the Black Sea: Past, Present, and Future

Jonathan Pugh

Key Takeaways

- The future of security in the Black Sea depends on continued Western support for Ukraine.
- The amount of support given by the West will be the deciding factor in the trajectory of the war in 2024 and beyond.
- European policymakers need to be prepared for the worst-case scenario and to do this without the United States.

Introduction

Two months into 2024, the Russia–Ukraine war appears to most commentators to be at a crossroads, while on the one hand military support for Ukraine may be stalling in parts of the West, on the other, Russia’s military industrial production is peaking. There is much at stake, as former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski famously argued, Russia needs Ukraine to be an empire, but he also noted that a crucial factor for Russia being a great power would be its control over Ukraine’s Black Sea coast.[1] In other words, Russia does not need to control all of Ukraine, its annexation of Ukraine’s Black Sea coast would be enough to ensure its control over most of its natural resources. This would leave behind a rump Ukraine that would be nothing more than a small middling power somewhere between Hungary and Poland. On the other hand, a united pro-Western Ukraine would give the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) naval predominance in the Black Sea and open the route to the resource-rich Caucasus and Central Asia.

This would fatally undermine Russia’s position as a world power and to the optimists amongst Western policymakers; it may even lead to regime change in Russia itself. At present the Russo–Ukraine war is at a crossroads and the future direction of the war is uncertain. Nevertheless, Western policymakers do have the ability to influence (to some extent) how Europe’s largest conflict since the Second World War ends and how this will affect security in the Black Sea region.

Past

The Black Sea was, minus the period of the Russian Civil War and early years of the Great Patriotic War, an undisputed Russian lake for over one hundred years. The Montreux Convention of 1936, which was signed by all the great powers, including Joseph Stalin’s Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), gave Turkey sole rights to control shipping through the Black Sea Straits.[2] The Straits are of vital strategic importance to Russia, as they are its gateway into the Mediterranean Sea. In the aftermath of the Soviet victory in World War II, Stalin put pressure on Turkey to revise the 1936 Convention. Moscow demanded basing rights to be able to defend the Straits, if necessary, as well as territorial concessions in eastern Turkey and a mutual assistance treaty with Turkey.[3] These aggressive actions led to the United States’ intervention on Turkey’s behalf and contributed to the start of the Cold War and the presence of NATO in the Black Sea.

However, the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the independence of Ukraine, as well as the states in

the Caucasus, shifted the regional balance of power.[4] More recently, the Maidan protests in Ukraine, which followed the Russian-inspired breakdown in EU-Ukraine trade negotiations and ended with the overthrow of the pro-Russian regime in Kyiv and its replacement by a pro-Western government, was a shock to the Russian elite.[5] Russia response was quick; to ensure its position in the Black Sea it seized control of the whole of the Crimea peninsula, which was already home to several Russian military installations.[6]



Montro Straits Agreement Signed
Source: RailyNews, 20.07.2021

The seizure of Crimea changed the military balance of power in the Black Sea in Russia's favour. Almost immediately the Black Sea Fleet was designated to get 80 new warships, as well as a new naval base.[7] Crimea, which in the Soviet-era was thought of as a "unsinkable aircraft carrier", also had its military facilities upgraded and reinforced with: modern warplanes, air defence systems, and coastal anti-ship missile batteries.[8] The NATO Supreme Commander General Philip Breedlove warned at the time that "Russia could control the whole Black Sea".[9] The President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, remonstrated that the Black Sea had become a "Russian lake".[10]

Present

Since the start of the Russo-Ukraine war in February 2022 the security situation in the Black Sea has dramatically changed. Some of this is obvious as the Black Sea (the northern half of it at least) is now a warzone. However, some of the immediate outcomes in the war have surprised many commentators.

Initially, it was surmised that the Russian navy had the capability to mound an amphibious landing the one coastline of Ukraine's Odessa Oblast.[11] As events unfolded this turned out to be an exaggeration of Russia's naval power and underestimation of Ukraine's ability to defend against such a landing.[12] Ukraine was also ultimately victorious in the battle over Snake Island.[13] As Peter Chilvers stated in the previous issue, Russia's seemingly inability to stop Ukraine's grain export has been "a blow to Russian prestige".[14]

Russia's Black Sea fleet also appears to have been pushed out of its main headquarters in Sevastopol Naval Base, Crimea because of the threat of Ukrainian drone and missile strikes – seen in December by the damage caused to a Ropucha-class landing ship of the Russian Navy by a missile strike on the eastern Crimea port of Feodosia.[15] An event repeated again in February, when the Ukrainian navy sunk another Russian warship, this time through Unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) or sea drones.[16] Much of the Russian fleet has been moved to the port city of Novorossiysk in southern Russia.[17] In addition, it is believed that Russia is now building a major port facility on the Black Sea coast of Russian-occupied Abkhazia – legally the territory of Georgia.[18] If so, that could turn Abkhazia into being almost as vital for Russian security interests as Crimea is, thus making it even less likely to be willing to relinquish control of it. However, the future direction of security in the Black Sea will be ultimately decided on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine, where the Ukrainian armed forces are currently fighting for their lives amidst a vast material disadvantage. [19]



Destroyed buildings in Avdiivka, Ukraine
Source: CNN,16. Feb. 2024

Future

How the Russo-Ukraine plays out this year remains to be seen, but four potential scenarios are discussed below:

Scenario 1:

Ukrainian limited victory: the nullification of Russian military operations from Crimea

This scenario depends on at least three factors, one, the resumption of military aid deliveries from the United States. Only the U.S. can provide the necessary material to give Ukraine any sort of advantage on the battlefield, although despite the recent spending bill passing the U.S. Senate it remains in doubt it will be eventually able to pass the House of Representatives.[20] Two, the timely delivery this year of F 16s, together with more air defence systems and missiles, to the Ukrainian air force by this summer and in sufficient quantities to contest Russia's air superiority on the front line and reduce the prolific use of so-called glide bombs by the Russian air force.[21] Three, the U.S. needs to supply Ukraine with longer range missiles that can reach all of Crimea and in sufficient numbers.[22] This would enable Ukraine to negate some Russia's military operations that are launched from there and help it to reassert control of its southwestern sea lanes and prevent any future Russian offensive towards Odessa. If this could be done, then Ukraine may in a position to launch a renewed offensive to recapture Crimea and the Sea of Azov coastline in 2025. If Ukraine is eventually to do so, this would change the balance of power in the Black Sea and would limit Russia's potential to project power both inside and outside the region.

Scenario 2:

Frozen conflict: the war ends in a cold truce with the current frontlines.

This scenario may take place even if the United States does send further military aid to Ukraine and even if in sufficient quantities.

It is no secret that Ukraine is now suffering from a manpower crisis and that has many analysts recommend it may be best served by staying strictly on the defensive in 2024 to build up reserves in men and material for a renewed offensive in 2025.[23] However, with the American presidential looming in the Autumn and the re-election of Donald Trump a more than even possibility, Ukraine may find itself pressured into entering some form of negotiations with Russia that freezes the frontlines and defacto leaves Russia in control of Crimea and southeast Ukraine.[24] This is not an idle threat, Trump himself has stated that he would attempt to end the conflict as soon he is re-elected.[25] This scenario may be considered a success by Russia, as it would still leave it in the leading position to project military power in the Black Sea area.

Scenario 3:

Russian victory: Russia establishes complete control of all of Ukraine's Black Sea coastline, including Odessa.

In this scenario, Russia does not conquer all of Ukraine or even Kyiv, but most of eastern Ukraine and all of its Black Sea coast, including Odessa. Six months ago, this would have appeared very unlikely, but presently it is now at least a distinct possibility. It is easy to imagine such a scenario if the U.S. does not resume military delivers to Ukraine or if European countries are not able to up their production rates of military industrial material – something they have failed to do so far.[26] On the other hand, Russia has, in spite of Western sanctions, vastly increased military production and received crucial supplies of artillery shells, drones, and more recently hundreds of ballistic missiles from both Iran and North Korea.[27][28] In addition, while Ukraine has struggled to mobilise more men for it armed forces, Russia is currently mobilising 30,000 extra recruits every month.[29][30] Ukraine, if it does not receive a rapid increase in military aid, may eventually be overwhelmed by Russia's growing advantages in men and material – with one former United

States Defence Secretary already claiming that Russia may be starting to break the stalemate. [31] This would leave Russia in a commanding and almost unassailable position in the Black Sea area and in control of a large percentage of the world's wheat exports.[32]

Scenario 4:

Neither Russia or Ukraine strikes out a victory in 2024, but instead the war remains a slogging match and an attritional battle of wills that continues into 2025.

In this fourth potential scenario, the war does not freeze in 2024 and nor are Russia or Ukraine victorious. Instead, the war carries on pretty much as it did in 2023, that is neither side is able to make sufficient advances to break the deadlock, however, neither Russia nor Ukraine is willing to give up on their war goals. The war in effect becomes a stalemate.[33] Thus, the war continues into 2025, with only villages and the occasional big town, e.g., Bakhmut, changing hands in 2024. Nevertheless, as noted by some analysts, a war of attrition is still a very dangerous scenario for Ukraine. [34]



Armed men, believed to be Russian servicemen, march outside an Ukrainian military base

Source: NBC News/Reuters, 9. March 2014

Conclusion

In all four scenarios discussed above, the crucial element that may decide the outcome is how much aid Ukraine receives from the West. It should not be underestimated that scenario 3

could happen in 2024 if the United States does not resume military aid shipments to Ukraine, it may even be likely. Scenario 1 would take a massive resumption and increase in military but remains a possibility. While Scenario 2 may happen if military aid continues, although not in sufficient quantities to make a telling difference, but enough to prevent a prevent a Ukrainian defeat – the potential of Trump being U.S. President again is another crucial factor. That being said, Russia's military-industrial potential cannot continue to be underestimated – this probably why we are where we are now. There is probably not much that Europe could do to make a military difference this year, other than continue financial assistance – this factor still depends on the policies of the United States. However, scenario 4 may be the most likely and the one that the West and Europe must be prepared for.

For this, Europe should prepare its industries, especially in the areas of artillery shells, drone, and anti-air missile production in order to potentially give Ukraine a decisive edge in 2025, even if Trump is re-elected at the end of this year.[35] The Black Sea region is vital to the future energy and geopolitical security of Europe and the survival of a pro-Western independent Ukraine is crucial for that. It would be a geopolitical mistake to not support Ukraine, a mistake that could also lead to a humanitarian disaster in eastern Europe.

Recommendations

- Europe must prepare for the war going on into 2025 and supporting Ukraine even without continuing U.S. support in the wake of a Trump presidency.
- On the other hand, Europe must also prepare itself for the shock of a Russian victory in 2024 and for substantial rises in defence spending across the continent.
- The above must include contingency planning for a mass exodus of refugees from Ukraine.

- Finally, whatever scenario takes place three factors should be at the top of the list of priorities for all European policymakers whose edicts include security and energy supplies, these are:
 1. Europe must be ready to massively ramp up production of military industrial equipment in all areas, under the auspicious of the various EU organs, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).[36]
 2. The 2023 EU Capability Development Priorities was a good start, but Europe must plan for further defence integration - calls for a European army should not be as easily dismissed as before.[37]
 3. Europe must continue to diversify its energy supplies, including making further advances in renewable energy.[38]

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Navigating Between East and West: Armenia Ratified Rome Statute Despite Russian Objections

Polina Dvornikova

Key Takeaways

- Armenia ratified the Rome Statute, joining the International Criminal Court (ICC) despite Russia's objections
- Key motivations include seeking accountability for alleged Armenian genocide and war crimes against Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
- Ratification signals Armenia's pivot toward Western institutions and defiance of Russia's demands
- Reactions divided along geopolitical lines – Russia harshly critical, while West and rights groups supportive
- Armenia now faces challenges balancing relations with Russia versus the West and leveraging ICC to reduce regional tensions

The Rome Statute established the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1998 as the first permanent international court for prosecuting genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggression. With over 120 state parties, the ICC represents a crucial advancement in international criminal law. On November 1, 2023, Armenia took the monumental step of depositing its instrument of ratification for the Rome Statute, formally joining the ICC.[1] While Armenia originally signed the treaty in 1999, its recent ratification cements a 23-year journey to full membership. The ratification carries intriguing implications as the country hosts a Russian military base and participates in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. With joining the Rome Statute, Yerevan has now bound itself to the ICC's jurisdiction and cooperation requirements, including arrest warrants.

The full motivations behind Armenia's ratification remain complex. Armenia's representative, Yeghishe Kirakosyan, announced that the Statute will enter into force for Armenia on 1 February 2024. As the ICC gains a foothold in Moscow's sphere of influence, Armenia's ratification has provoked varied reactions from Russia, the West, and Armenia's neighbors. Indeed, the step can have multiple implications for international criminal law and geopolitics.



The ICC, Source via AA, March 2023

Armenia's Reasons for Joining the Rome Statute

What are the reasons for Armenia to join the Rome Statute, especially considering its partnership with Russia? On this matter, there are three main factors.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The roots of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict date back to the early 20th century when the territory was disputed between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.[2] After the fall of the Soviet Union, war erupted in the 1990s between Armenia and

Azerbaijan over control of the region, leading to thousands of casualties and displaced civilians. Despite a 1994 ceasefire, violent clashes periodically reignite in Nagorno-Karabakh, including most recently in 2016 and 2020.

The conflict has profoundly impacted Armenia's national security and shaped Yerevan's approach to international law. By joining the ICC, Armenia chose to respond to the large-scale military aggression by Azerbaijan against Armenia's territory through the threat of legal accountability. The recognition of the ICC's jurisdiction is retroactive to May 20, 2021, which covers the latest period of violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.[3] The ICC membership therefore provides Armenia additional judicial recourse to prosecute Azerbaijani forces who allegedly indiscriminately attacked civilians and committed genocide.[4] While the Court cannot impose a political settlement, its role prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity can reshape the incentives and discourse surrounding this volatile regional crisis. Armenia follows the path of Georgia and Ukraine in leveraging ICC jurisdiction to address separatist conflicts exacerbated by Russia.



Armenia's Instrument of Ratification of the ICC Rome Statute Deposited at the UN. Source: Permanent Mission of Armenia to the United Nations

Tensions with Russia

Armenia and Russia have traditionally been allies since the Soviet era, bound together through economic and military ties. As a member of Russian-led institutions like the CSTO, Armenia has long been firmly within Moscow's orbit.

However, cracks in the alliance have emerged in recent years.[5] Armenia was deeply dissatisfied with Russia's failure to provide military assistance against Azerbaijan's aggression. Meanwhile, Armenia has sought to balance relations with both the West and Russia after the Velvet Revolution brought Prime Minister Pashinyan to power.

Joining the ICC exacerbates Armenia's delicate balancing act between East and West. While not directly aimed against Moscow, ratifying the Rome Statute defies Russia's explicit demands and symbolically aligns Armenia with Western rules-based institutions. Cooperation with the ICC's controversial warrant for Putin's arrest also creates friction despite Yerevan's pledges to bypass detaining the Russian leader.[6]

Ultimately, Armenia asserts national interests must take priority even when they clash with the Kremlin's wishes. Russia has clearly expressed its dissatisfaction with Armenia's decision, calling it "wrong".[7] Although ICC membership alone may not sever the long-standing bonds with Russia outright, it demonstrates Armenia's resolve to make sovereign foreign policy decisions regardless of Moscow's displeasure. Armenia's ratification underlines the increasingly complex geopolitical dynamics between these two traditional allies.

Preventing Further Escalation in the Region

Armenian officials and media have portrayed joining the ICC as a move to prevent further violence and stabilize the volatile South Caucasus region.[8] Domestic coverage has focused on the potential for ICC scrutiny to deter potential war crimes by Armenia's rivals. Prime Minister Pashinyan stated the ratification equips Armenia "to prevent atrocities, specifically from neighbor and rival Azerbaijan." In his remarks acceding to the ICC, Foreign Minister Mirzoyan characterized the Court as having "real potential to prevent any further escalation and atrocities" in the area. Officials frame the ratification as upholding international law and norms.

However, some analysts caution the ratification could fuel regional tensions if perceived as explicitly anti-Azerbaijan or anti-Russia. Russia's criticism has been sharp and also Azerbaijan has criticized the move as politicized and divisive. Nonetheless, Armenian authorities contend ICC membership provides vital accountability and incentives to resolve disputes through legal, not military means. While the geopolitical implications are complex, Armenia views the ICC as a forum for reducing violence and promoting stability in the long-term.



Ratification of Armenia Source: via EuroNews, October 2023

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Historical Context: The Armenian Genocide Allegations

Recent violence in Nagorno-Karabakh invoke the historical context of the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire from 1915-1923. Former ICC chief prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo cautioned of Azerbaijan committing "invisible genocide" against ethnic Armenians through starvation tactics that restrict essential supplies.[9]

Specifically, Ocampo's report cites Azerbaijan blocking the Lachin Corridor, the only road connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. This obstructs flow of food, medicine and other critical goods to the 120,000 Armenians in the region. The report argues these deliberate measures to impose life-threatening deprivation enable physical destruction of the group, meeting the UN genocide definition.

Azerbaijan contests the allegations as biased and containing factual inaccuracies. However, with Nagorno-Karabakh under ethnic Armenian control since a 1990s separatist war, Armenians perceive chilling similarities between Ottoman policies of extermination and Azerbaijan's modern blockade. Ocampo urges for a UN Security Council referral to the ICC, but Russia's stance as regional peacekeeper and UN Veto Power, and Azerbaijan's non-signatory status, makes it impossible for the UN to take any action on this matter. By ratifying the Rome Statute, Armenia invoked its genocide history. The dire situation with the Armenian population only underscores the unresolved trauma, as the nation once again faces existential threats to its people.

Reactions to Armenia's Accession to the Rome Statute

The reactions from the international community turned out to be predictable, dividing into two sides: Russia and the rest of the world.

Russia

Armenia's parliament ratified the Rome Statute, straining ties with Russia. The 60-22 vote defied Moscow's warnings of "serious consequences" [10] for joining the court that has indicted Russian President Vladimir Putin over alleged Ukraine war crimes. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested the decision was "wrong"[11] and could impact Putin's future Armenia visits: As ICC member, Armenia would be obligated to attempt arresting Putin if he enters their territory.

The Ratification thus highlights growing divides as Russia failed to support Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh blockade despite a regional peacekeeping presence.

Moscow has criticized Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for reducing reliance on Russia and conducting military exercises with the United States. Disappointment in Russia's muted response to alleged Azerbaijani war crimes and regained control over Nagorno-Karabakh, however, has contributed to Armenia's pivot toward Western institutions like the ICC. A political answer from Russia could meanwhile be already underway: Witnesses reported that at the border between Armenia and Russia, Russian customs service started conducting more extensive detailed checks, delaying the delivery of goods for sale. Whether this is a form of retaliation or routine checks is hard to say.[12]

NGOs and the International Community

The Coalition for the International Criminal Court (CICC) and other civil society actors welcomed Armenia's ratification of the Rome Statute as a significant commitment to human rights and rule of law.[13] They urged integrating the treaty into domestic legislation and ratifying associated agreements. Human rights organizations see the decision as a pivotal move against impunity for atrocities like war crimes, enabling perpetrator accountability and justice for victims. Regional groups also praise Armenia for progress in ensuring access to fair trials and ending injustice. [14] The international community endorses the ratification as upholding liberal rules-based order and driving reform. Armenia's representative at the ICC Assembly of State Parties session stressed Yerevan's dedication to international law and justice through this step.[15]

Conclusion

Armenia's accession to the ICC Rome Statute signifies a pivotal development with complex implications for regional relations.

Moscow harshly protests Yerevan pivoting toward Western-aligned institutions that threaten Russian interests.[16] However, Armenia gains judicial avenues to address security issues like alleged Azerbaijani war crimes and genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ratifying the ICC risks lasting rifts with Russia that could undermine peace negotiations regarding frozen conflicts. Yet growing disillusionment with the Kremlin's security pledges empowers Armenia's push for constrained aggression through legal accountability. Armenian officials wager modest reputational and deterrence benefits outweigh considerable backlash from disrupted geopolitics.

Progress hinges on Armenia leveraging ICC cooperation to tackle disputes and violent tensions. But Russian dominance in the South Caucasus endures, limiting swift realignment.[17] Much relies on advice from the legal community to translate ICC membership into meaningful prevention of potential atrocities.

Ultimately, Armenia signals a historic reevaluation of strategic priorities. Seeking security partners beyond Russia proves increasingly vital with assertive regional rivals and fading confidence in the Kremlin's guarantees. How Armenia navigates the ICC's opportunities and obstacles will determine if enhanced judicial standing pays dividends.

Recommendations

- Armenia should prioritize integrating the Rome Statute into domestic legislation. This involves passing laws and reforms to comply with ICC cooperation requirements. Key areas to address include extradition of suspects, providing evidence, and allowing ICC activities in Armenia. Strong domestic laws will enable Armenia to fully leverage ICC membership.

- Armenia can propose the ICC opens an office in Yerevan. This would facilitate investigations and Court operations related to Nagorno-Karabakh. An ICC presence in the country also reinforces Armenia's commitment to the Court. However, this depends on political will from both Armenia and the ICC.
- Armenia should engage in public outreach and education on the ICC. Many Armenians may not understand the Court's role or how ratification impacts them. Raising awareness empowers citizens to benefit from ICC membership. This can include media campaigns, integrating ICC principles into school curricula, and training legal professionals on cooperating with the Court. An informed public is better equipped to support accountability efforts.

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Election Chaos in Serbia

Maria Eduarda Diniz

Key Takeaways

- Recent protests in Serbia show the discontent with the electoral process and a desire for justice and accountability within the nation.
- The ongoing challenges surrounding the electoral process underscore the pressing need for transparent and fair elections to ensure the legitimacy of Serbia's democratic institutions to its own people
- The EU and Russia are watching from a distance, since the former is losing its influence in the territory, while the latter is growing its presence in Serbia.
- The EU may need to stop believing its demands will be heard by simple promises of EU accession, since Serbia is losing its patience and turning to Russia, instead.

Introduction

In Belgrade, Serbia, demonstrations unfolded as thousands of opposition supporters peacefully converged, echoing a resounding call for the annulment of recent elections held in December 2023 [1], right after the official elections results, and during January 2024. The elections, widely criticized by international observers for their perceived unfairness, were marred by allegations of media bias, undue influence exerted by President Aleksandar Vucic, and a plethora of voting irregularities, including reports of vote-buying tactics[2]. At the heart of this protest lay a palpable sense of discontent with the electoral process and a desire for justice and accountability.

Protestors in Belgrade

Tensions escalated during the Serbian parliament's session on February 6, marked by an adjournment without electing a speaker and deputies. The official results from December's elections reveal a fragmented assembly, with Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) securing 49 seats, and the opposition Serbia Against Violence coalition claiming 43. Other smaller parties, including the NADA coalition and the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), hold varying numbers of seats. Therefore, the protests do not recognize the results.

Amidst the crowd of protesters, voices of opposition leaders, such as Marinika Tepic of the center-right alliance Serbia Against Violence (SPN), rang out with determination.[3] Tepic, a vocal critic of the election outcome, reiterated the opposition's steadfast commitment to contesting the results, citing what she perceived as electoral malpractice[4]. Her address to the crowd underscored the depth of frustration felt by many who viewed the electoral process as fundamentally flawed and in urgent need of rectification.

Central to the protesters' demands was the annulment of not only the national elections but also those held within the city of Belgrade, where allegations of fraud and irregularities loomed large[5]. Belgrade is not only Serbia's capital but also plays an important role in Serbia's political landscape: its population represents a substantial part of the country's electorate and its mayor wields considerable political influence as one of the most prominent officials in the Balkan nation.



Serbia Against Elections Protest, 9 Jan, 2024; Source: via Wikimedia Commons, 9. Jan 2024

Furthermore, against the backdrop of these domestic upheavals, Serbia's aspirations for European Union (EU) membership cast a long shadow. The prospect of EU accession is tied to addressing several issues, ranging from judicial reforms and upholding the rule of law to fostering media freedoms and combating corruption and organized crime. Additionally, the relationship with Kosovo, aligning foreign policies with EU standards, and considering sanctions against Russia further complicates Serbia's path toward EU accession[6].

As protests persist in the streets of Belgrade, with demonstrators voicing concerns about electoral injustices, media bias, and government overreach, Serbia's political future appears uncertain. However, amid calls for change and expressions of discontent, there remains a sense of hope—a shared determination to uphold democratic principles, transparency, and accountability, fostering a fairer and more just society.

The oldest councilor in the City Assembly, Toma Fila, stated at the constitutive session of the Belgrade City Assembly on February 19 that there was no quorum for its holding and that it would be postponed until March 1. Representatives of the opposition coalition "Serbia Against Violence," Dobrica Veselinović and Vladimir Obradović, assessed the postponement of the session as "a significant

victory for the opposition" and evidence that the SNS "does not have a majority" in the Belgrade City Assembly[7].

The West Keeps an Eye on Serbia - and so Does Russia

Amidst Serbia's political evolution, a contrast emerges between past and present Western responses to democratic challenges. During Slobodan Milošević's rule, the West championed democratic reforms, particularly led by the United States.

Recent protests in Belgrade underscored public dissatisfaction with parliamentary and local elections, prompting outgoing Prime Minister Ana Brnabić to attribute the unrest to alleged orchestration by "Western services". Vučić echoed this sentiment during discussions with both Russian and U.S. envoys, suggesting a shared concern for stability over electoral integrity[8].

Despite the contested election results, Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) declared victory, spurring opposition calls for election repeats and peaceful protests. Yet, such dissent encountered police crackdowns, with clashes erupting and arrests made. Western reactions to these developments have been subdued, prompting criticism for overlooking electoral irregularities and violations.

The European Parliament's response to the electoral situation in Serbia provides insight into broader European attitudes towards democratic governance in the region. The European Parliament Rapporteur for Serbia, Vladimir Bilčík, faced criticism for downplaying the significance of electoral irregularities, failing to acknowledge the gravity of the situation[9]. This initial reaction drew sharp rebuke from critics who argued that such irregularities warranted immediate and robust condemnation.

Subsequent to this debate, the European Parliament adopted a resolution with a significant majority, signaling growing concern over the integrity of Serbia's electoral process. The resolution called for an independent international investigation into the reported irregularities, emphasizing the need for thorough scrutiny and accountability. Moreover, it urged the European Commission to spearhead efforts in assessing the election's aftermath and post-election developments [10], underscoring the EU's commitment to upholding democratic norms and electoral integrity in EU candidate countries. However, a continuing tepid engagement reflects broader Western priorities. The EU prioritizes managing regional conflicts and engaging in realpolitik, leading to a transactional approach in its dealings with Vučić. In other words, instead of diving headfirst into Serbia's issues, the EU opts for a more cautious approach, considering its broader priorities of regional stability and managing conflicts. They may engage with Vučić, but their involvement is measured, focusing on specific aspects that align with their strategic interests.

Vučić's geopolitical maneuvering further complicates the situation. While Serbia maintains a delicate balance between Western integration aspirations and longstanding ties with Russia, Vučić's alignment with Moscow, evident in his refusal to impose sanctions on Russia and accusations against the West, raises concerns about Serbia's democratic

trajectory[11]. Serbia's role in the Ukraine conflict further underscores its ambiguous international stance. Despite assurances of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Serbia continues to refuse military aid to Ukraine[12]. Next to that, a substantial number of Ukrainian refugees have made their way to Serbia.

In a complex geopolitical environment, Serbia treads cautiously, torn between Western ambitions and longstanding alliances, with democratic values and electoral integrity at stake. As international scrutiny intensifies, Serbia's democratic resilience faces a critical test, with implications far beyond its borders. The ongoing challenges surrounding the electoral process underscore the pressing need for transparent and fair elections to ensure the legitimacy of Serbia's democratic institutions to its own people: the leaders elected will give a say in important geopolitical matters for Serbia, such as Kosovo, Russia and its access to the European Union.



Vladimir Putin–Aleksandar Vučić in the Kremlin, 02, February, 2024. Source: via Wikimedia Commons, 23. June 2023

Conclusion

The recent events in Serbia have brought to light the challenges to the country's democratic processes, with allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities sparking widespread protests and international concern. As Serbia navigates its geopolitical landscape, balancing aspirations for European integration with historical alliances and geopolitical

considerations, the integrity of its electoral system remains paramount. The outcome of elections not only shapes domestic governance but also influences Serbia's role in critical geopolitical matters such as the ones mentioned before: The role of Serbia and the Western Balkans between Russia and the EU as well as the second year of the Russian war on Ukraine.

Ultimately, Serbia's ability to address these challenges and strengthen its democratic institutions will determine its trajectory towards European integration and its standing on the global stage. The stakes are high, and concerted efforts from both domestic and international actors are necessary to ensure a democratic and prosperous future for Serbia and its people.

Recommendations

- The international community must continue to monitor developments in Serbia closely and actively support efforts to uphold democratic norms and electoral integrity.
- Transparent investigations into electoral irregularities and robust measures to address democratic deficits are essential to safeguarding Serbia's democratic future and fostering stability in the wider region.
- The EU should reaffirm its presence in Serbia by giving more “material” assistance. This may include technical assistance, capacity-building programs, and electoral observation missions to ensure compliance with international standards and best practices.
- As protests over the Serbian political conflicts and flaws have been going on since 2023, it seems the people's demand will continue. Serbia political leaders must put aside their differences and engage in meaningful dialogue to address the systemic issues plaguing Serbia's electoral system.

- Stakeholders should prioritize the interests of the people over partisan politics and work together to enact meaningful reforms.

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Navalny's Death and its Implications

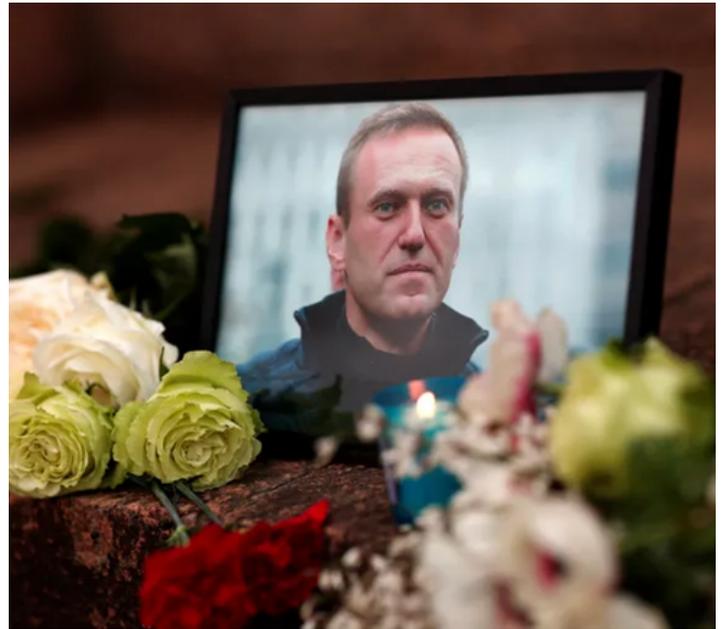
Strahinja Karanovic

Recent Developments

- International Reactions on the death of Navalny vary and follow the same fold line as the approach to the war in Ukraine.
- States seem to either support Russia or have decided to remain aside and not risk worsening their relations with Moscow
- EU and NATO states have stressed that they take all measures to hold Russia accountable

On February the 16th, Russian Federal Penitentiary Service reported that Alexei Navalny suddenly passed away, not sharing too many further details about this incident[1][2]. Alexei Navalny was one of the most prominent Russian opposition leaders, well-known for his anti-corruption and political reform activism, and a very direct critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin[3]. As a reminder, he even ran against Putin in the presidential elections 2018[4]. Consequently, he was a target of multiple assassination attempts and consequently incarcerated based on alleged charges of fraud, extremism and violating probation in 2021[5].

We will briefly analyze how this incident has impacted already strained relations between the Russian Government and “the West” so far, and what implications it might have in the future. Furthermore, it is paramount also to observe how this international strife impacts the situation of various opposition groups located internationally. Key aspects to look after are reactions of political leaders worldwide and how the government in Moscow sees their stance and what consequences has this already led to.



Commemoration to Alexei Navalny, Source: Al Jazeera, 18 February 2024

First Reactions to the news about Navalny's death

Reactions on Alexei Navalny's death vary drastically[6]. Interestingly, the reaction to this event follows the same fold line as the stark division in the approach to the war in Ukraine so far.

We can clearly differentiate between the group of states that either support Russia or have decided to remain aside and not risk worsening their relations with Moscow on one side, and a “Global West” that has already underlined Vladimir Putin and the Russian Government as responsible for Navalny's death[7].

This observation is induced from the political reactions below:

Global West

Heads of States and prominent political figures of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, UK and the US which are mainly NATO and/or EU members have all expressed their shock about Navalny's death, but more importantly, many of them have directly put a blame on the current Russian government, and even more specifically on Vladimir Putin personally[8][9][10].

For example, a president of traditionally more neutral state of Austria, Van der Bellen has expressed that "Vladimir Putin and his murderous regime" are directly responsible for Navalny's death, which directly qualifies the government in Moscow in a very clear negative way[11].

Some of the Western countries have even underlined this tragedy as a further legitimization for their active financial and military support of Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

A notable example of this stance is presented in the most recent statement of Prime Minister of Belgium Alexander De Croo who underlines such incidents as one of the examples why the NATO countries place such importance on the support of Ukraine in its war with Russia[12].

Many of the heads of states also share the stance of international organizations such as NATO and EU states, and the UN are pushing for an independent international investigation with a goal of holding the government in Moscow accountable and are even raising the stakes by demanding the release of other political prisoners[13]. In the words of Ursula von der Layen: "We will spare no efforts to hold the Russian political leadership and authorities to account"[14]

Multiple political bodies have called for an independent investigation. The most recent example being the EUs Joint Motion for a Resolution from the 29th of February where among other suggestions, EU lawmakers urge for an independent investigation that should interestingly enough be mainly initiated and supported by the EU based on the text of this resolution[15][16].

Other Players

In contrast to the condemning reactions of the Global West, countries with closer ties to Moscow, follow a very similar narrative to the one relating to the war in Ukraine.

For example, Chinese stance is to avoid expressing a clear opinion of this matter and publicly labeling it as "Russia's internal affair"[17] The only NATO country that still maintains relatively close relations with Moscow, Turkey has declined to make a statement on this topic, with the government of Hungary following a very similar approach, with none of their prominent politicians (Orban or Sziarto for example) expressing their stance on this topic. Interestingly, protesters commemorating Navalny were even prosecuted by Erdogan's government in multiple locations[18][19].

Furthermore, Serbia is trying to maintain at least, nominal neutral stance on this topic too. While Vucic mentioned Navalny's death as a major incident with potential political consequences, he refrained from blaming the Russian government and remained neutral by stating that the circumstances of Navalny's death remain unclear[20].

The contrast also maps the geopolitical situation even further with the fact that most of the countries of the "Global South" and ex-Soviet Union (with an exception of EU States) decide to take the same approach ignoring the topic of apparent political oppression in Putin's Russia[21].

Moscow

Finally, Moscow did comment on the tragedy of Navalny, unsurprisingly denying any involvement in the issue but have rapidly reacted to the accusations from the NATO/EU block with counter-accusations and further escalating already stained discourse between the two sides[22].

First Political Consequences

Navalny's sudden death did not only spark political statements. There are already very visible policies implemented against the Russian government legitimized as a fight against the oppressive and murderous regime.

Just some days after the news of his death, UK and the US governments have expanded the sanctions to further politicians from Putin's circle with Joseph Borrel and Annalena Baerbock demanding additional sanctions on the EU level and finding ways in making Russia accountable[23].

Finally, on 29th of February, the EU parliament adopted a new resolution holding the Russian Government and Vladimir Putin directly responsible for the death of the most famous political opponent and general political prosecution in this country. The resolution was adopted with a vast majority of votes in favor and is likely to lead to further sanctions and political decisions by the 27 EU states[24][25].

Predictions and Conclusion

- Navalny's death is further emphasizing the global split between the Global West and Global South with countries grouping around NATO directly accusing Russia of repressive and undemocratic practices, with the rest of the countries taking a more neutral approach due to their bilateral relations with Moscow.

- The statements of numerous Western leaders are unlikely to drastically change already negative relations with Putin's Government.
- However, the sanctions and policies aimed against Russia will just serve as a catalyst in further deteriorating relations between the Moscow and countries supporting Ukraine with having minimal effect on holding the Russian Government accountable
- While it is impossible to have a clear picture of what happened exactly to Navalny without an independent investigation, a prompt and hostile approach of some of the world leaders will likely just potentially further motivate Moscow to detach itself from international organization and therefore accountability in front of international law.

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