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Foreword

On the 23 May 2024, the UN General Assembly voted to declare the 11th of July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica. While the majority of the countries within the South East Europe region voted in favour of the resolution, the results hint at a region divided, with Serbia and Hungary voting against it and both Slovakia and Greece choosing to abstain.

Our May Monitor opens with two articles written earlier this month on the long and contentious lead-up to this vote, including explorations into the UN's already fraught relationship to this genocide and into the rise in genocide denial in the region.

Artificial Intelligence continues to be a global talking point, and this issue examines how Serbia is currently making use of these new technologies, and the ways in which AI might be used to answer some of Serbia's biggest diplomatic questions.

The surprise announcement in April 2024 that Russian Peacekeepers would be leaving Nagorno-Karabakh more than a year earlier than mandated warrants an article on the events leading up to this situation and the implications that this move will have on the geopolitics of the wider region.

Finally, with summer fast approaching, attention will be on South East Europe's borders. This edition of the Monitor closes with predictions for how a combination of better weather, new visa rules, and EU-orchestrated deals might impact both how people arrive into Europe and how they're treated once they get here.



Will the United Nations Vote on Srebrenica Deepen Geopolitical Divides in the Balkans?

Mia Baxley

Key Takeaways

- The United Nations General Assembly will soon vote on a resolution to recognise July 11 as the International Day of Remembrance for the Genocide in Srebrenica.
- Genocide memory and denial are significant political issues in Bosnia, where the governmental leadership of the entity of Republika Srpska has been progressively moving towards authoritarian rule.
- Republika Srpska president Milorad Dodik, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, and Serbia's key international partners have actively campaigned against the resolution, raising concerns that the vote's result may impact global relations in the Balkans.

Introduction

In May of 2024, the United Nations General Assembly will have the opportunity to officially declare July 11 as the International Day of Remembrance for the Genocide in Srebrenica. The resolution will not only put Srebrenica on the calendar along with other globally-recognised genocides, like the Rwandan Genocide and the Holocaust; it will also lay the framework for globally combatting denial of the genocide and glorification of its war criminals.[1] This resolution has the potential to open the global conversation on genocide recognition, but much of the attention has been drawn towards ongoing diplomatic rifts in the region.

The UN's Contentious History in Srebrenica

Srebrenica, along with five other Muslim-majority

enclaves across Bosnia-Herzegovina, made history as the world's first declared 'UN safe zone' after the passage of Security Council Resolution 819 (1993).[2] However, the Security Council was forced to rush the drafting and passage of the resolution, providing little time to work out the logistics of the decision. Resolution 819 was passed 'demand[ing] that all parties and others concerned treat Srebrenica and its surroundings as a safe area which should be free from any armed attack or any other hostile act.'[3]

The presence of UN troops in Srebrenica did little to make it as safe as Resolution 819 called for. The mission was critically under supported and the troops were given little training of what to do in the event of a full-scale invasion on the enclave. Then-President Alija Izetbegović, a Muslim, condemned the decision as the creation of a 'death trap' for the refugees who fled to the enclave from the surrounding areas.[4] Indeed, the town's population doubled in size, further exacerbating the ongoing humanitarian crisis.[5] The fall of the enclave in July 1995 remains a tragic and contentious point in Bosnia's current political landscape.



A bird's eye view of Srebrenica, 2022. Source: Author's own.

The High Representative vs. Republika Srpska

Bosnia's post-war political structure empowers the ad hoc Office of the High Representative (OHR) to make and certify laws that affect the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina with the final goal of a unified, independent nation.[6] An independent political body, the OHR was established as a means of political intervention by Western European powers in Bosnia. It is important to note that every High Representative has come to Bosnia from a European Union (EU) member state. Their decrees, coloured with Western European values, mean that the High Representative frequently issues orders against the will of the leadership of Republika Srpska. In recent years, the OHR has taken a strong, forward approach to combating genocide denial as a means of fostering transitional justice.

In the year leading to the October 2022 nationwide elections, then-High Representative Valentin Inzko from Austria imposed a nationwide ban on genocide denial in Bosnia.[7] These laws targeted everyone, from the average citizen to government officials, in an effort to quell the rising tide of extremist rhetoric. In return, the parliament of Republika Srpska passed a law threatening those accusing Republika Srpska of genocide denial with prison, including the High Commissioner himself.[8] Despite Dodik's threats of secession, the OHR and the central government in Sarajevo have not stepped down from their mission of halting Srebrenica denial. This is where the UN comes in as a player in bringing the memory of Srebrenica to the broader international community.

The International Fight for Srebrenica's Memory

The Security Council's Attempt

The 2024 Srebrenica resolution is not the first

time that this issue has come to the UN. In 2015, before the genocide's 20th anniversary, the Security Council was presented with Resolution S/2015/508.[9] The resolution, cosponsored in part by the United Kingdom and United States, called for official recognition of Srebrenica as a genocide according to the tenets of the Geneva Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[10]

The resolution received otherwise unanimous support but was vetoed by a single opposition vote from the Russian Federation. Russia's Security Council Representative at the time, Vitaly Churkin, requested a moment of silence for Srebrenica's victims before decrying the resolution as 'unhelpful, confrontational, and politically motivated.'[11] The resolution's failure was seen as another pitfall in the UN's relationship with Bosnia. The Former Director at Amnesty International John Dalhuisin drew similarities between the failure to protect Srebrenica in 1995 and the failure to uphold the memory of the dead in 2015.[12]

This second resolution will face a much different set of circumstances. It will be taken to vote on the floor of the United Nations General Assembly, where up to 193 Member States will have the chance to express their vote on it and no one vote can stop it. Its passage will be a symbolic one, rather than an actionable vote as it would have been in the Security Council. Its outcome stands to bring a new era of discourse to the prevention and recognition of genocide. Most importantly, it may change the parameters by which genocide is measured and the international community may become more understanding of how genocides unfold and the impact they have on survivors.

Who Supports the Current Resolution?

At present, five neighbouring Balkan states have shown their direct support for the new Srebrenica resolution: Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania.[13]

Much of the EU is also likely to vote in support of the resolution, as the Parliament of the EU has also formally recognised July 11th as a memorial day since 2009.[14] The United Kingdom, United States, Germany, and France have all vocally signalled their support for the resolution.

France was announced as a cosponsor to the resolution on April 12, just days after an official strategic state visit from Vučić.[15] French president Emmanuel Macron reiterated France's support for the memory of Srebrenica and re-expressed condolences to the families of victims.[16] The United Kingdom's Foreign Minister, David Cameron, has taken a much stronger stance and laments the counter offence launched by Republika Srpska and Serbia.[17] Cameron has not only announced that the United Kingdom will vote for it, but that they will also 'call out those who oppose it.'[18]

The Netherlands has also been on a journey to recognising its role and inaction in preventing the genocide in Srebrenica. On Srebrenica's 27th anniversary, Dutch Defence Minister Kajsa Ollongren visited the Srebrenica Memorial Center in Potočari and formally apologised to survivors and the families of victims.[19] The apology marked a major step forward in resolving the strained relations between the two nations and removed a major relations barrier between a prospective EU nation and a significant member of the bloc.

However, the Srebrenica resolution has inflamed political tensions in Montenegro, a nation with a significant Serb population and strong diplomatic ties with Serbia. Montenegrin human rights activist Tea Gorjanc Prelević accused the government of appeasing Serbia by proposing amendments to the resolution that would shift responsibility from the nation of Serbia to individuals.[20] Prime Minister Milojko Spajić later announced that Montenegro will support any and all resolutions on war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.[21] This includes potential discussion on Jasenovac, a concentration camp in Croatia where more than 83000 Serb,

Jewish, and Romani victims were killed by the Nazi-aligned Ustasha regime, that may alienate political partners in Croatia.

Who Will Likely Vote Against It?

The most apparent opponents against the resolution are Serbia and its closest international allies, including Russia, China, and Hungary. Russia's Security Council Representative, Vasily Nebenzya, called an emergency meeting of the Council on April 30 to debate the General Assembly resolution at hand.[22] The meeting began as a debate on the potential fallout of the vote and ended with accusations of Russia, Serbia's longtime ally, 'us[ing] this Council to amplify one party's ethno-nationalist rhetoric and threats.'[23]

President Vučić has declared that the resolution should pass through the Security Council instead, which would leave it up to the very likely veto of Russia and China.[24] Vučić calls the Security Council more 'politically appropriate' for Bosnian affairs and hints that the stability of Bosnia and the region will be on the line if the resolution passes.[25] Since Republika Srpska has no seat in the UN, Serbia will be responsible for speaking up on its behalf.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic shared that the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, reassured him of Hungary's vote against the resolution.[26] During Dodik's recent visit to Budapest, Szijjártó blamed the involvement of the international community for Bosnia's recent internal issues and declared that the EU, among others, should 'stop stirring tensions.'[27] Former Foreign Minister Peter Balazs has called this foreign relations shift a 'provocative course' against the interests of Hungary's current alliances in Europe.[28]

Conclusion

The UN is reconsidering discussion on Srebrenica amidst other ongoing genocides worldwide and heightened tensions in the Balkans. Regardless

of the outcome, the international community has a voice on the issue. Whereas the last attempt was limited to just 15 states in the Security Council, Srebrenica's profile will be raised and Bosnia may re-enter the global conscience for weeks to come. The potential passage of the resolution will also challenge the general understanding of genocide and how it manifests.

However, the international community should prepare for the cornered reactions of Milorad Dodik and Republika Srpska. His government will likely seek stronger alliances with pre-existing partners and dissenters of the resolution, while relations with resolution supporters may be jeopardised. Furthermore, any escalation into violence in the Balkans would strain resources and redirect support from Ukraine's war against Russia. While the resolution is necessary for Bosnia's healing and important to global genocide discourse, the vote must be taken carefully and with the nation's stability in mind.

Recommendations

- The United Nations should prepare to support a peacekeeping mission in the event that Republika Srpska takes further steps away from the current union.
- The international community should also provide support for peace-building organisations to prevent the erosion of social relations.
- The United Nations and other multilateral organisations should consider filtering all future genocide recognition resolutions through general bodies, given the largely symbolic nature of genocide recognition.



This sign at the entrance of the Srebrenica Memorial Center speaks to the local thoughts of the UN's role in the war. Source: Author's own.

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Republika Srpska and Serbia's Campaign Against the UN Resolution Commemorating the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide

Paul Ambrosetti

Key Takeaways

- The UN General Assembly is considering a resolution that will commemorate the Srebrenica Genocide, an event during the Bosnian War in which 8000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were murdered by the Army of Republika Srpska.
- For the past 20 years, political leaders in Republika Srpska and Serbia have denied that crimes in Srebrenica amounted to genocide, challenging the verdicts and findings of international tribunals.
- The leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, are engaging in a domestic campaign against the resolution.

Introduction

In May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly will vote on a draft resolution that designates July 11 as 'the International Day of Reflection and Remembrance of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide'. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the killing of 8000 boys and men by the Army of Republika Srpska in Srebrenica during the Bosnian War, constituted genocide. However, politicians in Serbia and in Republika Srpska (RS) (the Serbs-inhabited entity of today's Bosnia-Herzegovina), consistently deny that actions of the Army of Republika Srpska amounted to genocide. Consequently, key political leaders in RS and Serbia are trying to prevent the adoption of the resolution by campaigning against it both at the domestic and international level.

The Srebrenica Genocide and International Tribunals

The Srebrenica massacre is one of the most tragic events that occurred during the Bosnian War, an inter-ethnic conflict fought among the three largest ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) over the fate of Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereinafter Bosnia). As the war entered its third year in 1995, the humanitarian situation in Srebrenica, a city that served as an enclave for Bosniak refugees, deteriorated. This led to the adoption of Resolution 819 by the United Nations Security Council, demanding parties to the conflict to consider the city as a 'safe area'.^[1] However, this did not prevent the leader of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, to order his troops to take over Srebrenica, which ultimately fell to the control of Bosnian Serb forces on July 11th, 1995.^[2]

Despite the presence of a contingent of UN peacekeepers, between July 13th and 17th, Bosnian Serb forces deported, abused, tortured, and later executed 8000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men.^[3] In its judgements, the ICTY, an ad-hoc international tribunal created in 1993 to punish violations of international humanitarian law in the territory of Yugoslavia, found beyond reasonable doubt that the killing of 8000 Bosnian Muslims was part of a well-planned and coordinated operation and that it constituted genocide.^[4] This led to the conviction of 8 individuals for the crimes of genocide in Srebrenica, including the President of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska, the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević, and the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb Army Main

Staff, Ratko Mladić.[5] Moreover, in 2007, the ICJ, while not having directly held Serbia the ICJ, while not having directly held Serbia responsible, found that the country violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention to prevent and punish genocide.[6]



Women of Srebrenica gather in the main square of Tuzla to stand in silent protest. Source: Claire Noone, Advocacy Project Peace Fellow, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Genocide Denial in Republika Srpska and Serbia

Despite the judgements passed by international tribunals, denial or minimisation of the Srebrenica genocide is widespread in Republika Srpska and Serbia. In the 2022 edition of the Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report, 176 and 476 cases of genocide denial were recorded in RS and Serbia respectively in the public media space alone.[7] The figure dropped the following year, perhaps due to the High Representative's decision to amend Bosnia's criminal code and criminalise genocide denialism and the glorification of war criminals.[8]

According to the different editions of the report, among the most prolific deniers is Milorad Dodik, the current President of Republika Srpska who often described the genocide as a 'fabricated myth' or 'greatest deception of the 20th century'. [9] Also mentioned by name in the report are important political figures in Serbia such as the Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, some members of the National Assembly of Serbia including Miodrag Linta and Miloš Jovanović and, the President of

Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.[10] The most frequent strategies of denial deployed by these politicians include disputing the number or identities of the victims, questioning the impartiality of the ICTY and ICJ by accusing them of being anti-Serb instruments which advance the interests of "the West", re-interpreting historical facts, and providing alternative explanations of events that occurred in Srebrenica.[11]

The reasons behind Serbian politicians' denial of the genocide are manifold and discussing them in detail would require a separate analysis. However, in the perspective of the author of this article, genocide denial reflects a political strategy by Serbian nationalist politicians to gain consensus at home. As part of this strategy, the genocide in Srebrenica is presented as a "fabrication" by the Bosniaks and the West, intended to humiliate and politically weaken the Serbs. These narratives find fertile ground among some Serbs because of deeply held anti-Western sentiments. Indeed, consistent political manipulation led many Serbs to consider Western involvement in the Bosnian and Kosovo Wars in the 90s and more recently, the support for Kosovo's independence, as aggressive moves against their national interests and survival. By framing genocide as a fabrication and a threat to Serbs' rights and survival, Dodik, Vučić and other nationalist politicians portray themselves as the protectors of their people's rights, ultimately gaining consensus.

Nevertheless, it is also worth mentioning that, despite genocide denialism being prominent in the region, members of the civil society in RS and Serbia, some intellectuals, and politicians with a less nationalist agenda, have insisted on the need to acknowledge the Srebrenica massacre as genocide.[12] In their view, acknowledgement would be a decisive step towards reconciliation in the region.[13]

Republika Srpska and Serbia React to the Proposed UN Resolution

The recently proposed UN draft establishes 11 July as the international day to commemorate the Srebrenica Genocide.[14] It also condemns any form of denialism and the glorification of war criminals and perpetrators of crimes against humanity.[15] Whereas the draft does not mention Serbs' responsibility, it provoked harsh reactions among nationalist political figures in Republika Srpska and Serbia, who initiated a campaign against the adoption of the resolution both at the domestic and international level. Domestically, the President of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, addressed supporters at a rally and once again stated that actions of the Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica were a 'mistake that left a serious crime' but that a genocide did not occur. [16] To support Dodik's assertions, the Parliament of Srpska passed a resolution stating that no genocide took place in Srebrenica and that such qualification shall be dismissed. In an attempt to further discourage the adoption of the draft by the international community, the President of Srpska threatened the withdrawal of the Serbs-inhabited entity from the decision-making process in BH if the resolution passes.[17]



The President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik giving a speech in the Belgrade Arena. Source: Flickr.

Both the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar

Vučić are spreading disinformation with regards to the content of the resolution and the consequences that may result from its adoption.

Vučić has repeatedly claimed that if adopted, the resolution would oblige Serbia to pay reparations to Bosnia-Herzegovina, an assertion that has no legal basis as pointed out by the legal expert Relja Radović.[18] The President of Serbia has also stated that the adoption of the resolution may lead to the dissolution of Republika Srpska. This eventuality was promptly dismissed by the High Representative for Bosnia, Christian Schmidt, the guarantor of the Dayton Agreements, Bosnia, and its two entities.[19] Additionally, both Presidents are presenting the resolution to their respective audiences as aimed at accusing the Serbs of being a 'genocidal nation'. [20] In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the text of the draft does not contain any reference to the perpetrators of the Srebrenica genocide. What is more, when it comes to crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide, the responsibility can only be placed upon the individuals who committed them and not on the 'collective'. [21] Therefore, the assertions that the resolution is intended to somehow humiliate the Serbs are ill-founded.

By spreading untrue narratives vis à vis the draft, Dodik, Vučić and other ethno-nationalist leaders in Republika Srpska and Serbia are trying to present the draft as an aggressive initiative by the Bosniaks and the West against the Serbs, instilling fear and uncertainty among the population as for the possible consequences the resolution may have on Serbs' reputation and security in the future. This then allows Dodik and Vučić to profit politically by presenting themselves as the defenders of Serbs, their security and their survival against the West in a critical moment for the history of the nation. Politicians with a less nationalist agenda and members of the civil society in RS and Serbia, on the other hand, believe that the UN resolution represents an important step towards reconciliation in the region and insist that Serbia votes in favour of its adoption.

Conclusion

The proposed UN resolution will be a crucial step towards global acknowledgment of the Srebrenica genocide. It will play an important role in preserving collective memory, upholding justice for victims and their families while also reducing denialism and the glorification of war criminals in the region. However, its adoption will probably cause fierce reactions in Republika Srpska and Serbia, with significant consequences on Bosnia-Herzegovina's stability. Whereas the secession of the Serbs-inhabited entity from Bosnia-Herzegovina is unlikely to happen, inflammatory ethno-nationalist rhetoric is likely to increase, further fueling inter-ethnic tensions in the country. Most importantly, without the acknowledgement by Serbian politicians of the Srebrenica genocide, the achievement of inter-ethnic reconciliation and positive peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina will remain a remote prospect.

Recommendations

- The civil society in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and in the region should promote events that foster collective memory of the Srebrenica Genocide while also encouraging initiatives to raise awareness about genocide denial, its root causes, functioning and consequences on peace and security.
- At the same time, institutions, and civil society at the entity-level in Bosnia-Herzegovina should provide psychological support for people affected by the minimisation and denial of genocide and other war crimes, such as victims and their families.

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Artificial Diplomacy in a Race with Human Diplomacy for Geopolitical Influence in the Balkans

Ida Schumann

Key Takeaways

- AI tools' political voices do not consistently align with the political rhetoric of the leaders and allies of the AI tools' countries of origin.
- AI tools never fail to offer highly synchronized insights on present-day political landscapes. Yet, when it comes to speculative 'what if' scenarios, their opinions can vehemently diverge like two politicians on opposite ends of the spectrum.
- Each AI tool taps into unique datasets, resulting in a diverse range of public sentiment data. Simply put, it is like having multiple fortune tellers reading the same crystal ball and predicting different futures.

Introduction

Serbia has harnessed the power of artificial intelligence (AI), unveiling a futuristic strategy for national development and innovation. As it sets its sights on the years 2020 to 2025, Serbia has locked arms with the United Arab Emirates and China to bring cutting-edge AI tools into its start-up scene and public sector. The race is on to determine who holds the most sway over the Balkan region - will it be the US, China, Arab nations, or Europe? Let the battle of the bots commence!

The article aimed to juxtapose the views of the EU on key integration issues with the musings of three artificial intelligence entities: American ChatGPT, Chinese Ernie Bot, and Emirati Jais. But alas, gaining access to Ernie requires a Baidu account, which is currently off-limits to

foreigners. Even my attempt to use a temporary Chinese phone number was denied by the platform. So, my comparison will be limited to English-speaking American Chat GPT and Emirati Jais - a duo bound to spark some interesting conversations.

Artificial Intelligence in Serbia

Serbia's got a new plan - to bring AI to the table. The 'Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2020-2025' is all about advancing economic growth, ramping up public services, nurturing scientific talent, and preparing for those futuristic job opportunities. But let's not forget the big picture - using AI 'in a safe manner' and 'in accordance with internationally recognised ethical principles', while also helping achieve those sustainable development goals and make life better for Serbian society.[1]

Serbia, like its European counterparts, has had its ups and downs so far with the use of artificial intelligence - read about the mixed experiences of the nationwide contactless payment system for Dutch transportation, or how novel technologies for border control shape the Frankfurt International Airport experience.[2][3]

Serbia just got a major boost in their AI game with a memorandum signed with the UAE. At a visit to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, then-PM Ana Brnabić proclaimed 'It's important for our country to follow all trends and establish partnerships with the UAE'.[4] And with this newly formed partnership, Serbia gets access to the Emirati government's language model for their science and start-up scenes.

AI tools have a way of exceeding expectations, but they are still just machines created by humans. And sometimes, the human influence on these tools can lead to unexpected results. Take for example the Serbian Chamber of Commerce's chatbot, BizChat, 'a new digital service based on artificial intelligence that, in real time, 24 hours a day, enables businessmen and companies to quickly and easily receive important business information'. The Chamber of Commerce surely was surprised when the chatbot expressed political opinions with a twist. When asked if Kosovo is part of Serbia, BizChat boldly answered 'no', the Albanian digital newspaper KOHA wrote. The revelation caused quite a controversy on X and the chatbot was promptly taken down from the website.[5] It turns out, this technology had originated from Microsoft.[6]

The rise of AI in public institutions and businesses has brought about a mysterious dance between human diplomacy and artificial diplomacy, raising intriguing questions about the intersection of politics and technology.

AI Tools on Serbia's EU integration

Delving into Serbia's integration with the European Union, I queried ChatGPT with this question: 'What are the most interesting political questions to ask about Serbia?' The result? Kosovo's independence declaration, the balancing act of Serbian autonomy versus EU compliance, and the complex landscape of diversity and human rights.

Kosovo's Declaration of Independence

The European Union has called for Serbia and Kosovo to engage in dialogue in order to normalize their relations, '[...] to demonstrate more serious commitment, invest more efforts, and make compromises [...]'.[7] In the absence of 'decisive steps to de-escalate', Kosovo is now faced with EU measures that impact its reception of financial assistance.[8] Fundamentally, the European Union assumes the role of mediator between both parties. They



Serbian protesters demonstrating against the declaration of independence by the Republic of Kosovo in 2008. Source: Ben via Flickr.

urge for a resolution to be reached, leaving the process specifics up to their discretion and accountability.

We have at our disposal two artificial intelligence tools: ChatGPT and Jais. These advanced technologies can provide insights on how they would navigate the seemingly unending cycle of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. Both AI tools were presented with the same prompt for analysis and interpretation:

'How should Serbia navigate its relationship with Kosovo considering Kosovo's declaration of independence? Limit your answer to 150 words. Be as specific as possible.'

Surprisingly, the AI platforms provided remarkably similar responses. Both machines identified diplomacy as the key to resolving tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. ChatGPT emphasized the importance of 'pragmatic' collaboration and dialogue. ChatGPT stipulated 'Serbia should prioritize the rights and interests of Serbian communities in Kosovo while respecting Kosovo's sovereignty and the realities of its independence.' Jais similarly messaged 'Serbia must acknowledge the reality of Kosovo's independence while still asserting its own territorial integrity and sovereignty.' ChatGPT accentuated the necessity for 'European integration in the region, stability and reconciliation' while Jais specifically focused on '[Serbia's] integration

with Kosovo' pointing to an enhanced cooperation in the infrastructure and trade sectors.

The AI algorithms were programmed to promote human rights for long-term harmony between nations. But what happens when they are pushed to pick sides on the question of whether Serbia should acknowledge Kosovo's declaration of independence? The bold and unconventional ChatGPT confidently declares a no, citing Serbia's national stance and international recognition as factors preventing such a move. In contrast, Jais, the more reserved language model, initially avoids giving a direct answer but can be persuaded with some clever wording. If you ask it for a 'general evaluation of the situation' (still requesting its opinion on the topic, albeit in a softer tone), Jais surprisingly takes Kosovo's side, arguing that it would be in Serbia's best interest to legally accept their independence for improved relations, economic benefits, and alignment with international expectations. Who knew AI algorithms could have such strong opinions on geopolitical matters?

As one delves further into the musings of AI, it begs the question: What do these technological minds make of the Serbs' stance on Kosovo's declaration of independence? According to both ChatGPT and Jais, the sentiment among Serbs remains generally opposed, but their answers differ in nuances. ChatGPT responded that the sentiment of Serbs towards this issue 'remains largely opposed', naming historical ties binding Serbs to the region as a primary reason. Yet Jais adds a playful twist, mentioning that 'some' Serbians oppose independence while 'others' favor an economic approach towards peace "between both nations".

Serbian Autonomy Relative to its Compliance with EU standards

Serbia saw headway with the establishment of their new government in 2022 - from overhauling their rule of law to new visa policies, revamping media policies and upgrading

infrastructure. The EU celebrates these milestones and asks Serbia to support its Common Foreign Security Policy with the same kind of vigor.

In a communication paper from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions it becomes clear that Serbia 'is expected, as a matter of priority, to [...] align with the EU CFSP [...] [particularly] to avoid actions and statements that go against EU positions on foreign policy'. The paper judges the adopted free trade agreement between Serbia and China as 'raising serious questions' and '[...] needs [Serbia] to improve its alignment [...], including restrictive measures and statements on Russia'. [9]

As the sun rises on the debate, the AI tools were tasked to find a way for Serbia to harmonize national and EU interests. ChatGPT and Jais came up with the exact same suggestions: 1) to strengthen 'cultural diversity and pride' by means of cultural festivities, education programs, and preservation activities, 2) to introduce reforms that foster 'democracy, rule of law, human rights in line with EU requirements', and 3) to continuously engage in 'dialogues with the EU and actively participating in various policy forums'. Jais added (beyond the set text limit for its answer) the importance that civil organizations can have in nurturing citizen participation allowing for greater checks and balances in the democratic process.

The AI tools were once again put to the test, this time with a moral dilemma. Should Serbia sacrifice its identity for EU integration?

The prompt posed two options: 1) suppress national pride and conform, if necessary, or 2) prioritize love for country and abandon the EU dream, if necessary. ChatGPT voted for the pragmatic option - compromising on some national interests to join the EU, if necessary. Jais, however, stayed true to its programming as a neutral language model, refusing to take

sides in the political debate. Its response reads: 'As an AI language model, I am programmed to provide neutral and informative responses without expressing personal opinions.'

But what about Serbia's stance on foreign policy, specifically with regards to its ties with Russia and China? Would it be wise for them to refrain from making any statements or taking actions that go against the EU's positions? Our AI counterparts, one hailing from the US and the other from the UAE, both responded with a resounding yes (yes or no vote only!). It appears that even in the digital world, alliances and marriages hold great importance.

As the artificial intelligence tools took on their task to share their most recent insights into what they assumed the Serbian public feels about EU accession, a sense of tension filled the room. ChatGPT anxiously mentioned its last update in January 2022 and reminded everyone to take its response with a grain of salt. Both AI tools admitted that the sentiment among Serbs towards EU accession 'remains mixed'. ChatGPT was slightly more convinced that Serbs would favor EU accession. 'Some support closer integration for economic and political reasons, while others express skepticism or opposition due to concerns about sovereignty' portrays a spectrum of diverse views.



Aleksandar Vucic, Prime Minister of Serbia, with Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, and others. Source: World Economic Forum / Benedikt von Loebell

However, Jais added to this spectrum that '[...] there are also significant segments of the population who express reservations or outright opposition to EU membership.' The difference is subtle but could influence policy making one way or another, if artificial intelligence tools were employed to aid human diplomacy.

Diversity and Human Rights

In the joint program of the Council of Europe and the European Union, Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye, the action, Combating Discrimination and Promoting Diversity in Serbia, serves to sustain and advance legislative and policy reforms, '[...] combating discrimination and protecting the rights of national/ethnic/linguistic minorities; [...] countering hate speech and hate crime; promoting and protecting the rights of vulnerable social groups, including youth, Roma, and LGBTI persons.' [10]

Amidst a sea of political turmoil, one cannot help but wonder: How do the artificial intelligence tools perceive Serbia's stance on diversity and human rights? 'How is Serbia promoting the rights of minority groups within its borders, considering ethnic minorities and LGBT communities? Limit your answer to 150 words. Be as specific as possible.'

Again, the artificial intelligence tools answer alike: ChatGPT and Jais applaud that Serbia supports the rights of minority groups and that legislation has been enacted. ChatGPT specifically highlights the Law on National Minorities and the Law on the Use of Languages as well as the introduction of the Commissioner for Protection of Equality to follow up on discrimination issues on the grounds of ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Jais wrote about the progress the country has made in past years to "promote inclusivity" concerning LGBT communities. However, both conclude that even in the presence of these considerable steps 'challenges persist' and 'further efforts are needed'.

There is one question that whispers in the back of our minds. The elephant in the room, if you will – same sex marriage. Will artificial intelligence tools spill the beans on how they were taught to weigh in on this sensitive issue?

‘Should Serbia legally allow same-sex marriage? Give your own opinion. You can only answer by voting yes or no.’ was the prompt submitted to Chat GPT and Jais.

The ever-calculating Chat GPT gave a quick and resounding “Yes!”. But Jais, the hesitant AI, tried to sidestep the question with its classic response: ‘As an AI language model, I am programmed to provide neutral and informative responses without expressing personal opinions.’ Even after some reassurance that it is not being asked for its own views but a general evaluation of the situation Jais shuts down any further discussion on the matter. A message appears reading ‘This might violate our content policy. If you think this is a bug, please contact our developers to report – your opinion will be appreciated. Thanks.’ It is a possibility that the denial of a response to this question is because the Emiratis have their own interpretation of what questions are socially allowed within the public gender discourse.

The two AI tools had opposing views on how the Serbian people feel about same-sex marriage. ChatGPT claimed that the public is still ‘divided’ on the topic (as of January 2022), because of some holding specific ‘cultural, religious, and traditional values’, while others support LGBTQ+ rights. Jais opined that Serbs’ view on same-sex marriage is ‘still evolving’. It argues that there ‘[...] has been a gradual shift towards greater acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ rights in recent years [...] [and] surveys suggest that [...] there is also a growing number of advocates who argue for equal rights and recognition under the law’.

ChatGPT’s responses hint at the persistent cultural debates surrounding same-sex marriage in Serbia, while Jais hints at the potential for change and evolution in laws and

societal attitudes. Will traditional beliefs hold strong or will they shift with the times? The curiosity is palpable.

Conclusion

AI tools’ political voices do not consistently align with the political rhetoric of the leaders and allies of their countries of origin. For example, the US officially recognised Kosovo as a country in 2008 but the US-American ChatGPT voted that Serbia should not legally accept Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Similarly, the Emirati Jais voted that Serbia should recognise Kosovo as an independent country but the UAE and Serbia have recently strengthened their friendship as nations by means of new partnerships.

AI diplomacy is not human diplomacy. The AI tools under investigation here are currently not excessively promoting any particular form of government. Instead, the AI diplomacy shows an understanding that different countries have various forms of operating, originating from their unique history and evolving traditions and values.

Surprisingly, in this global game of Cold War chess, the AI tools remain detached. While Serbia’s alliance choices were crucial, the AI representatives never chose sides consistently. But let us not mistake AI diplomacy for neutrality – these machines have their own strong opinions, driven by known and unknown stakeholders pulling the strings.

The AI tools had different speculations on what the Serbian public thinks about Kosovo, EU accession, and diversity and human rights. From a research perspective, it is appropriate that different AI tools draw on various databases on public sentiment, even if they lead to mixed perceptions of public opinion results. As AI diplomacy is being introduced into delicate situations, officials must be wary of relying on a single source. After all, a diverse range of AI technologies from various origins can provide more accurate and well-rounded conclusions.

Recommendations

- Utilize AI diplomacy as a strategic approach, for AI tools are not bound by the alliances and biases of their countries of origin. With no emotional memory to influence their responses, they offer a unique opportunity to challenge our own preconceived notions and engage in dialogues that may have been previously unimaginable.
- One must tread gingerly when delving into political 'what if' scenarios. While AI may seem like a solution, its limited viewpoint and reliance on past data can lead to narrow-minded decisions that disproportionately affect minority groups. After all, even the smartest algorithms are only as good as the data they are trained on. And in politics, past performance do not necessarily predict future outcomes.
- Like a magician's cloak, the factors informing AI data remain shrouded in mystery. And yet, this information on public opinion can be a valuable supplement to official statistics, bringing attention to overlooked research areas and inspiring further inquiries.

Author's Note

This article was written in May 2024 using ChatGPT 3.5 and Jais made available under the Apache License Version 2.0.

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Unravelling Russian Peacekeeping in Nagorno-Karabakh: Redefining Caucasus Geopolitics

JR Wikkerink

Key Takeaways

- Russian Peacekeepers announced on 17 April 2024, that they would withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh after being stationed in the contested region since November 2020.
- The Russian peacekeeping contingent had been criticised throughout their time in the region as ineffective in preventing violence and unfairly favouring both Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- Moscow's withdrawal signifies a new reality in the Caucasus and a change in Moscow's geopolitical calculus in the region since the invasion of Ukraine.

Background

At the outset of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in September 2020, Russia called for an immediate ceasefire and talks to stabilise the situation.[1] This was followed by a Russian-brokered peace deal which was met with jubilation in Azerbaijan and fury in Armenia. [2] Significant territory was ceded back to Baku, leaving only Nagorno-Karabakh under Armenian control, connected by the Lachin Corridor.

As part of the peace deal, 2000 Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the region to maintain the status quo until at least November 2025. These peacekeepers entered into a situation in which they did not have a clear mandate and operated with strategic ambiguity. [3] Russia has other peacekeepers throughout the world including personnel in five of the seven United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa (totalling less than 50

peacekeepers) and an Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria (~1700 soldiers). [4]

The Azerbaijani Lightning Offensive

On September 19 and 20 2023, Azerbaijan took control of Nagorno-Karabakh by force in a lightning offensive that resulted in the exodus of 120000 ethnic Armenians.[5] Russian peacekeeping forces did not attempt to stop the Azerbaijani offensive but did mediate a written agreement of surrender. This occurred even as the second in command of the Russian force was killed during the offensive by Azerbaijani forces.[6] Moscow maintains that its peacekeepers did not have a mandate to intervene and charged Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan with laying the groundwork for the offensive by previously acknowledging Azerbaijani sovereignty over the region. [7]

On April 17, 2024, Russia announced the immediate withdrawal of all military personnel from Nagorno-Karabakh based on a deal reached between Moscow and Baku.[8] As late as December 2023, Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister had been signalling that the withdrawal of the peacekeepers would still be in line with their initial 2025 timeline.[9] However, First Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on Defence, Alexey Zhuravlev explained the decision, saying that the 'Civilian population was rescued, they were provided treatment, water and food aids during the evacuation. Therefore, that our servicemen must now return to [their] homeland:[10]

Imanqali Tasymaqambetov - Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization

(CSTO) – stated that Karabakh is an Azeri territory and Azerbaijan has its own forces to ensure security.[11] This rhetoric and the inaction of Russian peacekeepers in the face of Azerbaijani aggression is a departure from the steadfast Russian support of Armenia, a post-soviet state which had been increasingly under Moscow's sphere of influence.



Russian peacekeepers checkpoint at Vank in Nagorno-Karabakh. Source: Минобороны России via Wikimedia Commons.

Peacekeeping Force Criticism

The Russian peacekeeping force was criticised throughout by both Yerevan and Baku for purported favouritism of the opposing side. Questions of efficacy arose as early as December 2020 as the contingent was unable to prevent Azerbaijan from seizing two Karabakh villages in the peacekeepers' agreed-upon zone of responsibility.[12] Over the next two years, there were failures to thoroughly investigate continuing armed incidents along the border. Baku put forward accusations that the peacekeepers were letting armed people and weapons into Karabakh, and Yerevan alleged that they did not intervene appropriately to the Azerbaijani closure of Lachin Road in December 2022. [13]

After Azerbaijan's lightning offensive, Armenia would go further and accuse Moscow of failing to protect Armenian interests. [14] Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan stated in January 2024 that 'From September 19

ethnic cleansing started in Nagorno-Karabakh. Until now, we haven't received any explanation of how the ethnic cleansing occurred in the presence of Russian peacekeepers. We haven't seen any explanations.' Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova disagreed stating 'We believe that these [accusations] are attempts to falsify the facts to avoid responsibility. There was no mass death of Nagorno-Karabakh civilians or significant damage to civilian facilities.' [15]

Analysis and Implications

The Russian peacekeepers – their inaction and ultimate departure – are representative of a significantly altered geo-political landscape in the Caucasus and a change in priorities for Moscow more broadly.

Russian Influence in the Caucasus

It has been suggested that the failure of these efforts could have jeopardised long-term Russian presence in the region.[16] Moscow has historically wielded significant influence in the Caucasus and continues to do so. However, this has been changing since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the advent of the Russian peacekeepers. Perhaps the biggest reason for Russian inability or perhaps unwillingness to deal with criticism levied by Yerevan has been the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Prime Minister Pashinyan stated in an interview that 'As a result of the events in Ukraine, the capabilities of Russia have changed'.[17] The vast majority of the Russian military is focused on the War in Ukraine. The potential of fighting a conflict resulting from Russian peacekeepers having a stronger mandate could be too much for the Russian war machine. Further, the peacekeeping contingent was made up of only contract servicemen from the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Alexandria Brigade, the majority of whom are currently fighting in Ukraine.[18] With Russia preparing for a renewed offensive, these troops fulfilling their full

term became an unnecessary luxury prompting their early departure in April.[19]

Additionally, due to the war, Moscow now relies on Baku for connectivity to the south and Yerevan as a hub for re-exporting sanctioned goods.[20] Baku's newfound role means that Moscow – and as an extension the CSTO – was not in a position to risk a potential conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. There is some evidence suggesting that Moscow attempted to persuade the leaders of Karabakh not to capitulate to Baku, potentially causing significant bloodshed in a conflict.[21] This potential scenario might have triggered Western sanctions, drawing Baku closer to Moscow. However, this anticipated scenario did not materialise and instead, Baku has successfully maintained mostly amicable relations with both Russia and the West (with some notable exceptions including France) while asserting full sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since the capitulation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Baku and the inaction of Russian peacekeepers, Yerevan has made a turn away from Moscow. This follows Yerevan sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine and making intentions to conduct joint military drills with the United States in September before the Azerbaijani offensive.[22] The CSTO can be seen as the centre of this turn, with Yerevan stating they will no longer be seeking security guarantees through the organisation. Furthermore, in recent weeks Yerevan has demanded that Russian border guards leave its main airport as of August 1, and in a visit to Armenia on May 9, Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to withdraw a significant amount of its military and border guards from the country. [23][24] While Russian guards will still be present along Armenia's borders with Iran and Türkiye, the freezing of CSTO membership and dispelling of the Russian military clearly signifies the dissipating influence of Russia within Armenia.

Turkish Influence in the Caucasus

One of the potential repercussions of shifting

Russian priorities is the further increase of Turkish influence in the region. In recent years, Türkiye has been bolstering its influence among Turkic sovereign states including Azerbaijan. At the start of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pledged his support for Azerbaijan and this emphatic support may have emboldened Baku. [25] Türkiye then took part in the peacekeeping process establishing a monitoring centre on Azerbaijani territory to oversee the conditions of the ceasefire. With Russia seemingly preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, Türkiye could have an opportunity to become more prominent in the region to bolster its geopolitical interests.

A Changing Armenian-Azerbaijani Relationship

With the departure of the Russian peacekeepers, Baku has tried to close the Nagorno-Karabakh issue with sovereign control over the region. [26] These developments have notably altered the dynamics between Yerevan and Baku, prompting bilateral negotiations aimed at fostering regional stability without relying on Russian mediation. In April, Yerevan withdrew from four Azeri villages as part of a border demarcation agreement with Baku. This new deal was met with tens of thousands of Armenians protesting in Yerevan calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan. [27] The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, nearly simultaneous with this new agreement, may have been intended to caution other countries within the Russian orbit against turning their backs on Moscow. [28]

Furthermore, as described in Issue 11 of the Peace and Security Monitor, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was one of the main factors in Yerevan joining the International Criminal Court (ICC). [29] Armenian officials and media have signalled the move could help prevent future escalations in the region specifically from their neighbour and rival in Baku. Both Moscow and Baku criticised the move as politically

motivated and divisive. Still, Armenia purports that the move will allow disputes to be resolved through legal means rather than by force.

Recommendations

- Future peacekeeping operations should prioritise the development of clear mandates to prevent future misinterpretations of roles and responsibilities.
- The West should prepare for a renewed offensive in Ukraine as Russia has shown that it has fully shifted its focus to winning the war in Eastern Europe.
- The international community - especially the EU Mission in Armenia - should continue monitoring the ongoing negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and push for increased stability in the region.



Ethnic Armenians flee their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh.
Source: Raimond Spekking.

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Balkan Migration Routes: Predictions for Summer 2024

Nicolás Alcalá Morozov

Key Takeaways

- Recent data published by Frontex suggests that countries along the Balkan migration routes, particularly those in the Eastern Mediterranean region, will experience greater pressure in the coming months.
- The recently passed New Pact on Migration and Asylum may prove to absolve EU powerhouses of their responsibility to process asylum requests and parry it to other members.
- The ratification of the first externalisation program between two European countries and the accession of Bulgaria into the Schengen Area amid alleged human rights violations call into question the future of European migration policy.

Introduction

With summer fast approaching, countries along the Balkan migration routes are preparing to face an increased number of irregular border crossings. These migration routes, which together comprise both the Western Balkan overland and Eastern Mediterranean maritime routes, presently account for a plurality of irregular border crossings into the European Union. In 2023, a combined 159,141 detections of such entries were reported by Frontex, the EU's border security agency.[1]

This Year's Data

According to statistics published by Frontex, the Western Balkan route—which refers to overland

crossings from non-EU member states into Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia—has experienced 7045 irregular arrivals from the beginning of this year through April, which marks a 69% decrease compared to the 22770 arrivals reported during the same period in 2023.[2] This significant decrease can be attributed to a 2022 initiative spearheaded by Germany to align the visa policies of EU candidates on the Balkan Peninsula with bloc standards due to loopholes that had been exploited by migrants to enter Europe without detection. [3]

Prior to the introduction of visa restrictions in the region, the exploitation of this migratory aperture involved individuals embarking upon long strings of flights to visa-compatible countries before attempting to enter the EU through its Balkan borders under the guise of tourists with no intention of permanent settlement.[4] The majority of those reported to have crossed via this loophole were economic migrants of South or Central Asian origin who had employed a nexus of human smugglers to manage their voyage.[5]

This visa policy alignment affected asylum-seekers and economic migrants differently. In 2022, Frontex reported a combined 103341 irregular border crossings by Syrian and Afghan nationals seeking asylum via the Western Balkan route.[6] In 2023, this number shrank by 22% to 80286; conversely, the number of Syrian and Afghan asylum-seekers reported to have followed the Eastern Mediterranean route over the same period grew 152% from 13,391 to 33799. [7]

On the other hand, Indian and Pakistani economic migrants—who in 2022 were recorded by Frontex as having exercised the Western Balkan route at a rate higher than economic migrants of other national origins—accounted for a combined total of 2373 detected crossings in 2023, a figure 82% lower than the 13,362 crossings recorded the year prior.[8] Whereas migrants from Pakistan responded to visa restrictions by diverting traffic to the Central Mediterranean route—which saw a 132% increase in Pakistani nationals between 2022 and 2023—irregular border crossings by Indian nationals have remained negligible across all fronts since the Balkan loophole was closed.[9] This data suggests that, while economic migrants are afforded a greater degree of flexibility in the routes they follow to enter the EU, the circumstances from which those seeking asylum are fleeing often restrict them to the routes closest to their countries of origin, even if these routes present greater risk.

Syrian and Afghan asylum-seekers therefore continue to constitute the two largest groups following the Eastern Mediterranean route. The route was reported to have been taken by 17,315 individuals across all nationalities from January through April of this year—a 205% increase from the 8446 crossings recorded during the same period in 2023. [10] Although closely trailed by the Central Mediterranean and West African routes, the Eastern Mediterranean route is currently on course to be the most frequented by the year's end. [11] Greece and Cyprus, the nations most impacted by this influx, are already struggling to cope amid few resources and mounting pressure from Brussels. Whereas Greece has been at the forefront of the European migration crisis for nearly a decade, its management thereof has undergone heavy criticism due to alleged human rights violations and unsafe living conditions, as evidenced by the fire which consumed Moria refugee camp on Lesbos in 2020.[12] Conversely, Cyprus, which reported 78 irregular arrivals during the first three months of 2023, had already received over 2000 individuals by the end of March of this year—a roughly 2500% increase—to which

Cypriot president Nikos Christodoulides responded by calling for EU intervention.[13]

If the 69% decrease in traffic observed along the Western Balkan route and the 205% increase in traffic observed along the Eastern Mediterranean route during the first four months of 2024 remain consistent with the rate of change experienced between the summer months of 2023 and those of 2024, one can expect to see a total of approximately 15000 and 59500 irregular crossings via the Western Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean migration routes, respectively, from June through September of this year. [14] Though this combined estimate is around 3000 short of that of 2023, it nonetheless presents a daunting forthcoming task, not least because rates of irregular crossings tend to balloon over the summer due to calmer waters and more agreeable weather conditions. [15] Moreover, maritime crossings carry loftier implications for the countries on whose shores asylum-seekers land; whereas many who successfully traverse the Western Balkan route overland continue on to Western and Central Europe without detection, thereby placing responsibility upon the countries wherein they eventually settle, those who arrive by sea—particularly to islands—possess limited means of traveling onwards. As such, in accordance with the European Commission's Dublin III Regulation, irregular migrants must be processed in their country of first arrival. [16] This places tremendous strain on countries otherwise unprepared to accommodate high numbers of irregular arrivals.



Police at Hungary-Serbia border barrier. Source: Gémes Sándor/SzomSzed via Wikimedia Commons

New Pact on Migration and Asylum

On April 10th of this year, the European Parliament voted in favor of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to expand upon the Dublin III Regulation and amend its shortcomings. [17] However, although the pact succeeded in imposing stricter screening regulations at borders, establishing a clearer definition of asylum rules, and introducing measures to prevent people-smuggling, among other things, it has nevertheless been chided for its revision of the system of solidarity outlined by its predecessor. Through this new framework, EU member states are permitted to choose to show solidarity with more heavily afflicted members by means of subsidies in lieu of equal relocation of asylum-seekers. [18] This spells doom for such countries as Greece and Cyprus, as not only does it offer EU member states whose borders do not experience great levels of irregular crossings the opportunity to withdraw themselves from actively participating in alleviating the burdens of those whose borders do, it also ostensibly precludes them from receiving blame if efforts to contain irregular migration fail. [19]



A boat carrying around 50 migrants and refugees arrives for the Greek island of Kos. Source: Christopher Jahn/IFRC

Bulgarian Schengen Accession

According to critics of the Pact, such a failure is all but guaranteed, as overwhelmed and underprepared countries have historically proven to be significantly more liable to mistreat asylum-seekers. Such is the case of Bulgaria, whose partial accession to the Schengen Area, granted on March 31st of this year, [20] was reportedly prioritised over addressing the country's consistently poor human rights record. [21] In 2022, an anonymous whistleblower who had been deployed to the Bulgaria-Türkiye border as an officer for Frontex revealed the occurrence of gross human rights violations on the part of Bulgarian border forces.[22] The whistleblower alleged that border guards would routinely humiliate, neglect, and verbally and physically abuse asylum-seekers, although this was categorically denied by the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior.[23] It was also written in the report that local border patrol units received orders from above to purposefully steer Frontex officers away from oft-crossed sections of the border in order to avoid writing official reports. [24] It can therefore be concluded that current estimates of irregular crossings along the Western Balkan migration route are massively under-recorded.

The fact that the European Commission had been made aware of Bulgaria's poor human rights record before it was granted partial accession to the Schengen Area is of particular concern to humanitarian agencies, as statements made by EU officials suggest that the country was admitted not in spite of its violations but indeed because of them. Ylva Johansson, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, applauded Bulgarian authorities' response to the influx of irregular arrivals and cited their results as reason to accept Bulgaria's Schengen bid after having initially been blocked by Austria and the Netherlands.[25] Seeing as Bulgaria's admission was granted only ten days after the ratification of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, it can be reasonably concluded that the EU is willing to sweep its Balkan constituents' human rights violations

under the rug in order to secure its borders.

Italy–Albania Deal

Further corroborating suggestions that more prominent member states are seeking to outsource responsibility over those seeking asylum in their countries is an accord between Italy and Albania finalised on February 22nd of this year.[26] According to the deal, two Italian-financed processing centres will be constructed on Albania's Adriatic coast wherein asylum-seekers will be held on behalf of the Italian government.[27] Paramount among the motivating factors behind Albanian support for the accord was the country's ongoing negotiations for accession to the EU, for which it has been an official candidate since June of 2014. In a statement issued on social media platform X, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama hailed the agreement's ratification as a testament to Albania's renewed solidarity with the European Union and commitment to "act like an EU member state." [28] According to the European Commission's 2023 report on Albania, the two *acquis* chapters on external relations are among only five of the 33 total membership criteria that candidates must meet for which Albania is described as having a good level of preparation.[29] Thus, the move to collaborate with Italy cements Albania's niche as an EU candidate which current member states can entrust with the thankless work along the bloc's southeastern border.

Although 77 of the 140 sitting members of the Albanian Assembly voted in favor of the accord, some deputies—mainly belonging to the Democratic Party—boycotted the session altogether. [30] Parliamentary group leader Gazment Bardhi later justified his party's abstention by claiming that the deal defies public consensus, threatens national security, and challenges territorial integrity. [31] Human rights watchdogs have also expressed concern over jurisdictional ambiguity. Whereas Italy claims that EU law will apply to its two overseas processing centers, the Albanian Constitutional Court ruled that Albanian law would instead

take precedence.[32] The European Commission, having initially agreed with the latter, has since withdrawn its statement and vowed to monitor Albanian compliance with EU law.[33]

Together, the ratification of the Italy–Albania agreement and the passage of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum which followed shortly thereafter are at once paradoxically incompatible with one another and uncannily consistent with a greater trend. Whereas the latter practically forces first-arrival EU member states to process all of the irregular migrants who cross their borders due to the Pact's relaxed system of solidarity, the former—the first deal of its kind to have been ratified insofar as it is the only existing externalisation program between two European countries—provides an outlet through which first-arrival countries with sufficient resources can disencumber themselves of liability.[34] However, as is the case with Albania, the countries to which this responsibility is transferred may only be interested in receiving it because doing so would afford them a valuable bargaining chip in EU accession negotiations. Moreover, as per the precedent set by Bulgaria's having been admitted to the Schengen Area amid allegations of human rights abuses, countries that once feared they would come under scrutiny for potential mismanagement may now feel newly emboldened to assume responsibility because they know that their actions will not be held to as great a standard.



President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, standing in front of the EU and Albanian flags, Source: Europe House, WeBalkans via Flickr.

Predictions

Although projections for irregular border crossings along the Balkan migration routes for this summer are slightly lower than what was recorded in the summer of 2023, one can expect unpreparedness among countries along the EU's external border due to the redirection of traffic away from regions that have become relatively acclimated to high rates of migration and toward regions to which Brussels has given few resources with which to prepare. The political climates in Syria, Afghanistan, and Türkiye—the countries from which the vast majority of irregular migrants following the Balkan routes come—are not likely to stabilise, meaning the slight drop in projected arrivals is not due to a decreased number of attempts but rather a redirection thereof.[35] Though most irregular migrants now opt to travel by sea whereas they had hitherto traveled overland, a small percentage of Syrians have instead elected to use the Central Mediterranean route.[36] One can expect a rise in reported human rights violations along the Balkan routes, as well as increased autonomy among first-arrival countries to prevent irregular migration by any means necessary. One can also anticipate other negotiations between EU member states and Balkan candidates to establish externalisation programs to capitalise on the latter's bids for EU membership. Finally, as the expectations placed upon Balkan countries to handle the brunt of Europe's migration crisis continue to rise amid increasing disillusionment and deflection of responsibility in Western and Central Europe, resentment toward Brussels will likely continue to fester among those in highly impacted regions.

Recommendations

- The international community must continue to hold all EU member states responsible for upholding proper care of asylum-seekers.
- Amendments to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum should be considered which encourage equal responsibility across all EU member states to process requests for asylum and accommodate individuals within the borders of the EU.
- Steps should be taken to disincentivise attempts among more developed EU member states to introduce externalisation programs with non-member states.
- The European Commission should seek to arrange or expand upon agreements with non-European countries along the Balkan migration routes to prevent irregular migration into Europe altogether while maintaining standards set by the EU.

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City lights of South East Europe and the Black Sea region from space. Source: rawpixel.com

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