THE

PEACE & SECURITY MONITOR

South East Europe

&

Black Sea Region

Issue 13
August 2024

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South East Europe & Black Sea Region

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Foreword

Our August edition of the Peace and Security Monitor delves into many of the most pressing issues facing the Balkan states. At the time of publication the wars on Ukrainian and Palestinian soil are ongoing, highlighting existing tensions across much of the Western Balkans. EU accession pathways may present opportunities to the region, but the pull of the West continues to battle against Russian influence and allegiances.

This year marks 75 years since the formation of NATO, a transatlantic alliance of collective defence. With half the Western Balkan states now members of this treaty, Emma Munnelly explores the factors preventing Bosnia and Herzegovina from following its neighbours.

As Israel's military offensive in Gaza continues and tensions escalate in the Levant, Jovan Knezevic considers the knock-on effect of this crisis in Serbia.

Now in its second year as a eurozone country, Mia Baxley seeks to understand how Croatia's EU accession has impacted its dwindling youth population - and whether the country's current stance on immigration is fit for purpose.

Taking a broader perspective, Maria Eduarda Diniz brings a comprehensive overview of how the Women, Peace and Security agenda has been implemented across the region and whether these action plans are having any tangible impact on women's involvement in the sector.

To close out this issue, JR Wikkerink brings us the latest on the Hungarian Prime Minister's series of controversial diplomatic visits abroad and their potential repercussions on the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: On Path to NATO Membership or Stagnated by Political Resistance?

Emma Munnelly

Key Takeaways

- A revitalised North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has made strides in strengthening its alliance following the accession of Finland and Sweden. With a renewed sense of purpose following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, the Alliance is seeking to bolster its presence, particularly in the Balkans.

- Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) persists with its long-term aim of joining NATO, despite strong opposition from Republika Srpska leaders who pursue anti-NATO sentiment. Republika Srpska also retains strong connections with Serbia, who remain committed to military neutrality.

- The Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to the Bosnian War and set out the Bosnian Constitution. This set out the country's political institutions which are based on ethnic representation through a complex governmental system, making political consensus difficult.

- Over the last decade, Russia has asserted influence in BiH, mainly in Republika Srpska, and has pushed an anti-NATO agenda.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, NATO has played a major security role in the Balkans. It intervened in the Bosnian and Kosovan wars that led to the eventual breakdown of Yugoslavia into separate states. Today, three of the six Western Balkan states are in NATO – Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, while three are not – Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[1] In 2024, NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary at a time when Europe and the Alliance face a host of new threats.[2] Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to many changes in the Euro-Atlantic region. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO has stepped up its support of 'vulnerable partners' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Georgia) to provide tailored support measures.[3] Also, long-term neutral countries Finland and Sweden have joined the Alliance, with both referring to Russian aggression as a driving factor for this decision. Many European countries feel under threat and want better protection, turning to NATO for collective defence guarantees.[4]

For BiH, NATO membership has been one of the country's top strategic objectives. BiH first expressed an interest in joining NATO in 2006 and has made some progress in aligning itself with NATO values. However, strong political opposition in Republika Srpska, external influences such as Russia, and a complicated political system structured around ethnic representation has halted progress. This article

Željko Komšić, former Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, visits NATO. Source: NATO via flickr.com.

will explore the progress and obstacles facing BiH in its pathway to NATO membership.

Historical Context – From Bosnian Civil War to Dayton Peace Agreement

On 1 March 1992, the Bosnian government held a referendum on independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The vote was boycotted by Bosnian Serbs who opposed an independent Bosnian nation. Close to 65% of the country's citizens went to the polls, with 99% voting for BiH's independence.[5][6] In April 1992, Bosnian Serbs rebelled with the backing of the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbia. They proclaimed the land under their control to be a Serb republic in BiH. Soon after, the Bosnian Croats declared their own republic with the support of Croatia.[7] What followed from 1992 to 1995 was a violent civil war. An estimated 100,000 people died in the brutal conflict in BiH. This number included 8,000 Bosniak men and boys killed by Bosnian Serb forces in the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, led by military commander Ratko Mladić. It was the largest massacre in Europe since the Holocaust and is recognised by the United Nations as a genocide. [8][9]

In September 1995, NATO launched an air campaign against the Bosnian Serbs called 'Operation Deliberate Force'. NATO's 12-day bombing was its first military campaign post–Cold War. Less than three weeks later Bosnian Serbs halted the military siege of Sarajevo and agreed to attend peace negotiations. US-brokered peace talks began in Dayton, Ohio, led by US diplomat Richard Holbrooke. The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Peace Agreement) was reached in Dayton on 21 November 1995 and was formally signed in Paris on 15 December 1995. The agreement ended the three-and-a-half-year war in Bosnia.[10][11][12]

The Dayton Agreement confirmed BiH's independence but divided the country into two entities: the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serb Republika Srpska. Also, part of both entities is the multi-ethnic Brčko District, a self-governing administrative unit.[13] The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina derives from the provisions outlined in the Dayton Peace Agreement. The negotiators at Dayton arranged the country's government following a strict interpretation of consociationalism. This means political institutions are structured according to ethnic representation and ethnic quotas across all levels of government. This includes a rotating tripartite presidency, consisting of one representative from each of the constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The Dayton Agreement also established a High Representative of the International Community, who is tasked with the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement.[14]

In the aftermath of the war, NATO played a key role in fulfilling the military and security features of the Dayton Peace Agreement. In December 1995, NATO deployed 60,000 peacekeepers to the region as part of the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR), the Alliance's first major crisis response operation.[15] IFOR was replaced a year later by the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR). SFOR's aim was to maintain a safe and secure environment to aid the country's reconstruction after the war.[16] In December 2004, NATO handed primary responsibility for security over to the European Union (EU), who launched EUFOR Operation Althea in BiH, which has been in operation ever since.[17] NATO provides support to the EU-led mission under the Berlin Plus Agreements.[18] Operation Althea mandate was extended in 2023 by the United Nations Security Council until 2 November 2024.[19] NATO maintains a military headquarters in Sarajevo, which assists the EU mission on areas such as defence and security reform.[20]

BiH's NATO Accession Pathway

Bosnia has long expressed a desire to become a full NATO member. In 2006, BiH joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme to begin the process of bilateral cooperation with NATO.[21] In February 2008, BiH agreed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, which is designed to provide comprehensive advice on defence and security reforms.[22] In September 2008, after the Bucharest Summit, BiH stepped up accession efforts by launching Intensified Dialogue and joining the Adriatic Charter.[23][24] The Adriatic Charter is a framework formed by the US to assist nations in Southeast Europe in obtaining full NATO membership. Four US-Adriatic Charter nations have joined NATO (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia).[25]

In April 2010, NATO invited BiH to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP), a programme of advice and support specifically designed to address the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. Involvement in the MAP does not guarantee future membership, the hopeful country needs to implement democratic and defence reforms in order to be granted full membership.[26] BiH's invitation to the MAP was conditional, and to advance required the registration of immovable defence property to be transferred from local entity-level to the central government.[27]

This created a major problem for BiH's accession hopes, as defence property comes under the control of Bosnia's two entities, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Officials from the Republika Srpska strongly oppose the state gaining control of military property, insisting it should remain the entities' responsibility.[28] In 2017, BiH's Constitutional Court ruled that a military facility in Han Pijesak, in Republika Srpska, must be registered to the state and not the entity. However, political leaders in Republika Srpska do not accept this ruling.[29] Only 33 of 63 military properties previously owned by the former Yugoslav Army have been fully registered.[30]

In December 2018, NATO waived this condition, allowing BiH to proceed with the MAP and to submit an Annual National Programme, which was blocked by Republika Srpska opposition. Instead BiH submitted a Reform Programme outlining intended reforms and providing areas for focused Allied support. Despite this concession by NATO, all defence property is still not transferred to the central government, this remains an essential requirement to advance through the MAP process to gain full NATO membership. The lack of political consensus on the issue remains.[31]

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in 2023, NATO increased support for its partners, including BiH, and created a Defence Capacity Building (DCB) package to help them build capacities and enhance resilience. The package is valued between $48 and $53 million and focuses on strengthening the country's defence and its security.[32] Over the next five years, the DCB package will contribute to the strengthening of NATO standards and practices in BiH while ensuring military interoperability between the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH) and NATO forces in joint exercises and peacekeeping missions.[33]

As outlined, BiH has made some progress in its efforts to join NATO, but the process has become stagnated with strong opposition from Republika Srpska officials making the accession process difficult. BiH finds itself in limbo regarding its NATO future.

Main Barriers to BiH's NATO Accession Plans

Dayton Peace Agreement and Frozen Sectarian Divisions

The Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to Europe's worst conflict and genocide since World War II. The US and its European partners

eventually found a way to stop the conflict with the agreement negotiated at Dayton, which was deemed a great success in that regard. However, nearly 30 years on, the Dayton Agreement is associated more with a dysfunctional governmental system than with peace. In some measure, this is because Dayton was supposed to be a truce rather than a long-term settlement. The complicated governing structure was created to please the warring parties (Republika Srpska and the Federation) and it froze in place ethnic division and rewarded a commitment to ethnically based control of territory.[34] The head US negotiator at Dayton, Richard Holbrooke, admitted that the agreement was created to end the war, but was not expected to be a long-term solution.[35] In the years since, corrupt ethno-nationalists have manipulated Dayton's provisions to remain in power to the detriment of the country's progress and Euro-Atlantic integration.[36]

Joint press statements by NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Elmedin Konaković during the 2024 NATO visit to Sarajevo. Source: NATO on flickr.com.

Republika Srpska – Anti-NATO Sentiment

The President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has stated that Bosnian Serbs are strongly against joining NATO. Dodik is at the forefront of anti-NATO sentiment in Republika Srpska and has used the constitutional power-sharing agreement set out in Dayton as a means to block state-level decisions, preventing NATO integration attempts in BiH.[37][38]

Dodik has said that Republika Srpska's negative attitude towards the military alliance is due to the NATO bombing of Serbs in Republika Srpska that determined the outcome of the Bosnian war. [39] Republika Srpska maintains a strong association with Serbia and insists that as long as Serbia remains militarily neutral Republika Srpska will follow suit.[40]

Dodik has long been a key figure in BiH politics and returned as President of Republika Srpska in 2022. Previously he served in this role from 2010 to 2018, and he was also a member of BiH's tripartite presidency from 2018 to 2022.[41] In recent years, Dodik has made several secession threats. He has warned that the Serb entity will secede from BiH and possibly join neighbouring Serbia.[42] Dodik has worked to undermine Bosnia's state-level institutions that have ensured peace in the region, and as a result been placed under sanctions by the US and UK for his part in putting peace and stability in the country at risk.[43]

Currently, BiH's NATO accession hopes are stalled by the government of Republika Srpska opposing reforms and blocking measures, such as registering military property. Also, BiH's accession hopes are damaged through anti-NATO rhetoric and secession threats.

Growing Russian Influence in BiH

In recent years, Russia has started to assert more influence across Europe, particularly in BiH. Russia has grown into a dominant political force in Republika Srpska thanks to its alignment with Russian ally Serbia.[44] Dodik has developed close ties with Russian President, Vladimir Putin. He supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has visited Putin multiple times since the war started.[45] Dodik has also tried to block BiH attempts to sanction Russia in accordance with the EU.[46] In January 2023, Dodik awarded Putin Republika Srpska's highest medal of honour for his "patriotic concern and love" for Republika Srpska.[47] The close relations have ensured Dodik has emerged as Putin's most loyal ally in this part of Europe.[48]

The West has become increasingly concerned about Russian influence in the Western Balkans following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In comparison to what the West can offer the Balkan countries economically, Russian cannot compete, however, Russia can stir-up instability in the region with very little effort. Russia tries to weaken Western attempts at stabilising the Western Balkans by playing into historical ethnic tensions and religious divides. While at the same time, seeking to undermine the integration process of these countries into the EU and NATO. [49] Russia desperately wants to uphold its position of influence in the Western Balkans and preserve its status as a big global power. Therefore, it is Russia's objective to keep the West out of the region.

Conclusion

BiH's accession to NATO is still on-going, but it is uncertain if or when it will be completed. The Dayton Peace Agreement delivered an end to the war, but its constitutional shortcomings have brought to light an alarming need for reform. The BiH constitution has created a discriminatory and dysfunctional institutional structure that heightens ethnic divisions. BiH political leaders such as Milorad Dodik have manipulated Dayton's provisions to cement power and push self-serving agendas at the expense of the country's progress. This has particularly hampered BiH's NATO accession hopes. Furthermore, with BiH's Euro-Atlantic aspirations effectively on pause due to political instability and lack of progress, external influences such as Russia have been able to assert political dominance. Russia supports an anti-NATO agenda and intensifies hostilities in BiH with strong anti-NATO sentiment in Republika Srpska.

Recommendations

- NATO should continue to support partner States, including BiH, who are in a vulnerable position following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing on strengthening their defence and security.

- The Dayton Peace Agreement should be revisited as it is an obstacle to BiH's EU and NATO membership. It also creates a discriminatory political system based on ethnic representation, leading to political paralysis and corruption.

- NATO should increase supports for BiH and assist the country in meeting the necessary requirements for NATO accession. NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community should increase its presence in BiH, otherwise, it risks allowing external influences such as Russia to drive further ethnic tensions in the region.
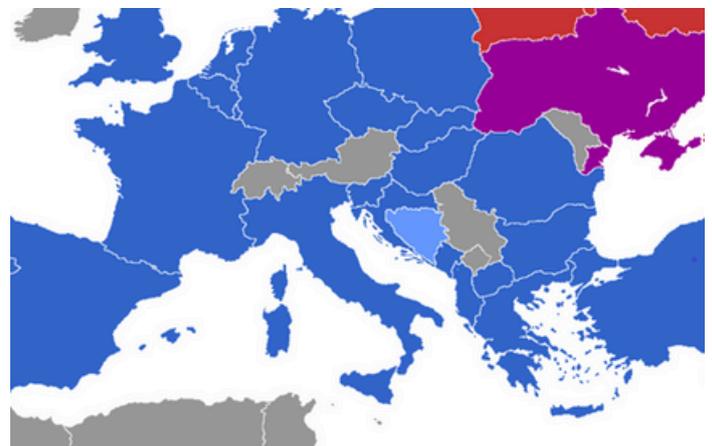
NATO members in Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina represented in the lighter blue. Source: Hasancelikbilek35 via Wikimedia.

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The War in Gaza and the Risk of a New Wave of Islamist Radicalization in Serbia

Jovan Knezevic

Introduction

On June 29 2024, a man attacked a policeman guarding the Israeli Embassy in Belgrade, Serbia using a crossbow. Despite having been wounded in the neck, the policeman eventually managed to kill the assaulter, Salahuddin Zujovic, a man from Central Serbia who converted to Islam after moving to Novi Pazar, a city located in Sanjak, the predominantly Muslim-inhabited province in South-Western Serbia.[1] Commenting on the event, the Serbian Prime Minister, Milos Vucevic, called it a "heinous terrorist attack" while the Israeli Foreign Minister described it as "an attempted terror act on the Embassy of Israel". [2] According to the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia, Salahudin Zujovic and his accomplices belonged to a radical Wahhabi sect, information that was soon confirmed by a video which circulated on social media and showed the attacker swearing allegiance to Abu-Hafs Al-Hashimi, the leader of the Islamic State terrorist group.[3]

The attack, while isolated, led some to believe that the war in Gaza may have triggered a new wave of radicalization in the Sanjak province. While the vast majority of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) living in Sanjak adhere to a moderate and open-minded interpretation of Islam, the province is home to radical Wahhabi groups which spread hard-line interpretations of Islam and were involved in the planning of terrorist attacks in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Moreover, with high unemployment rates, political tensions and a widespread feeling of "intentional neglect" by central authorities, Sanjak is a breeding ground for radicalization. Although Islamist radicalization and extremism are not confined to Sanjak, the purpose of this essay is to briefly discuss the push and pull factors that may encourage certain individuals in the province to adopt radical views and engage in violent acts triggered by the events unfolding in the Middle East.

ISIS fighters in Syria. Source: Dabiq Magazine.

Islamist Extremism in Sanjak and the Western Balkans (WB)

The Islam practised by the majority of the Muslim population in the Western Balkans is considered to be moderate, open-minded and tolerant towards other religions. More "radical" interpretations of Islam such as Salafism and Wahhabism appeared in the Western Balkans in the 90s during the Bosnian War.[4] Indeed, the atrocities committed against Bosniaks encouraged as many as four thousand foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria to travel to the country to fight alongside their Muslim brothers.[5]

Apart from supporting Bosnian Muslims on the

battlefield, some of these foreign fighters spread radical understandings of Islam which eventually resulted in a small percentage of the local Muslim population embracing Salafism or Wahhabism.[6]When the war ended, a significant number of these foreign fighters (many of whom were granted Bosnian citizenship) remained in Bosnia and moved to small, remote villages across the country.[7] Consequently, places like Bocinja, Gornja Maoca or Ovse, soon became so-called "Jihadi hotbeds" from which radical Wahhabi/Salafi leaders directed all their activities.[8] Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in Sanjak and Bosnia were also fueled by foreign actors, most notably countries from the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia. Several reports showed that Islamic humanitarian organisations funded by Gulf countries used their financial resources to spread radical interpretations of Islam across Bosnia and the WB, under the guise of humanitarian or cultural activities.[9] For instance, a report published by SEERECON, showed that of the $800 million of Saudi funds that entered Bosnia since the end of the conflict, $100 million were untraceable and were most likely used to fund charity organisations which, in turn, were possibly used to finance Islamic extremism.[10]

From Bosnia, Salafism and other hard-line ideologies quickly spread to neighbouring countries due to the presence of Muslim populations and minorities in the region. One of these places was the predominantly Muslim-inhabited province of Sanjak, in South-Western Serbia. Here, radical interpretations of Islam found a fertile ground because Bosniaks in Sanjak have traditionally been more conservative, compared to those in Bosnia.[11] While it is believed that Islamist extremism first appeared in Sanjak around 1997, the phenomenon was first spotlighted only in 2006 when 12 Salafis from Novi Pazar, the biggest city in the Sanjak region, were arrested and convicted of planning terrorist attacks on the territory of Serbia against selected individuals, including Mufti Zukorlic, the leader of the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICS).[12]

From 2010 onwards, according to local analysts, Salafis in Sanjak received more funding and became more active and better organised due to, among other things, the split in the ICS.[13]

The issue of Islamist radicalization and extremism in Sanjak became prominent once again when around 50 people from Serbia travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq on the battlefield between 2012 and 2016.[14]

The War in Gaza as a Catalyst for Islamist Radicalization in Sanjak?

After the terrorist attack in front of Israel's Embassy in Belgrade, analysts fear that the war in Gaza could become the driver of a new wave of radicalization in Sanjak. According to Giorgio Cafiero, analyst at the Gulf State Analytics, "the war in Gaza is contributing more to the radicalization of young Muslims than any other conflict worldwide" due to the "strong emotionalization in view of the many deaths every day in Gaza".[15][16] In the case of Sanjak, the emotional response by the local Muslim population to events in Gaza was reflected in the pro-Palestine rallies that were organised since the beginning of Israel's armed response to the October 7 attacks. Commenting on the protests, some local politicians reported that the level of support voiced towards Palestinians was so unprecedented that it was not even seen in the context of the Bosnian War, when thousands of Bosniaks were killed in neighbouring Bosnia.[17] It should be stressed that these public demonstrations of support by Bosniaks in Sanjak and the WB in favour of the Palestinians are a manifestation of civic activism and should not be seen as a "symptom" of a new wave of radicalization. They do, however, show that the war in Gaza has become an emotive issue among local Muslim communities that, along with other factors, could potentially lead to the radicalization of some individuals.

In this respect, the presence of radical Islamist groups in Sanjak acts as an important

"pull factor". Indeed, it is believed that the men behind the attack of June 29 belonged to one of the radical "Wahhabi sects" present in Sanjak. These sects, as already outlined, are funded by Islamist humanitarian organisations with the financial support offered by Gulf countries and spread rigid interpretations of Islam, thereby attracting disillusioned individuals from across the region.[18]

While important, extremist groups are not the only factor that may encourage individuals to embrace more radical views of Islam. Socio-political and economic aspects can act as "push factors" increasing the likelihood of radicalization in Sanjak. Indeed, the economic condition of the province is highly unfavourable, characterised by a lack of job opportunities (especially among young people), poverty and brain drain.[19] In the political sphere, corruption is rampant, while political divisions often result in disputes that are solved using physical force which fuels political as well as religious extremism.[20] For instance, the 2006 local elections ended with a murder and several injured, and more recently a member of the Justice and Reconciliation Party was allegedly killed by a member of the Sanjak Democratic Party due to some political posts published on his Facebook page.[21] Most importantly, as a region in South-Western Serbia predominantly inhabited by Muslims, there is a widespread feeling of intentional neglect by the central government. This feeling of "segregation" is exacerbated by the negative reporting of Sanjak by the mainstream media and the memories of the 1990s when, during the Bosnian War, Bosniaks in Sanjak were intimidated and discriminated against by Serbian authorities.[22] Besides that, more recently, Serbia's ambivalent policy towards the war in Gaza has added another factor. Indeed, while supporting the Palestinian cause at the international level, Serbia delivered 16.3 million euros worth of weapons to Israel.[23] Finally, another factor to consider is the issue of "reciprocal radicalization". In recent years, far-right/ethno-nationalist extremism has been on the rise in Serbia, mostly due to the various central

governments' accommodating attitude towards the issue.[24] Indeed, the messages and activities of far-right/ethno-nationalist groups in Serbia are often in line with the ethno-nationalist agendas of the government and specific political parties.[25] The increase of far-right extremism and, more in general, far right views, may in turn lead to a rise in Islamist radicalization in Sanjak and across the region.

Beyond the push and pull factors, another element that facilitated the rise of radicalization is the absence of a counter-terrorism strategy and its related Action Plan by the Republic of Serbia. The last strategy, which expired in 2021, was not renewed.[26] According to Jarmila Bujak Stanko, expert in radicalization and extremism, a new counter-terrorism strategy was not adopted because it was not among the priorities of the government, an aspect that was also reflected in the lack of assessment of the previous document.[27] In turn, the absence of an updated counter-terrorism strategy left authorities in the country with no updated information on the scope, intricacies and evolution of radicalization/extremism in Serbia and with no guidelines to follow to tackle the phenomenon. Dragan Sormaz, the current President of the Atlantic Council of Serbia, further points out that the adoption of the counter-terrorism strategy should be treated as a priority in this historical moment because the persistence of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza increases the likelihood that some individuals will embrace radical ideas in Serbia.[28]

Conclusion

The attack of June 29 in front of Israel's Embassy in Belgrade suggests that Islamist radicalization and extremism in Sanjak could be on the rise. The continuation and the widening of the conflict in the Middle East, both in scope and intensity, could potentially make this threat even more concrete in the coming weeks and months. An escalation in the Middle East would also pressure Serbia to adopt a clearer stance on the conflict and, if Belgrade eventually opts to side with Israel, this could further increase

dissatisfaction among Muslims in Sanjak, promoting the radicalization of certain individuals.

Apart from increasing the likelihood for extremist acts, the rise – whether real or perceived – in Islamist radicalization in Sanjak could potentially result in a further "stigmatisation" of the province as an "enclave for Islamist extremism" in the eyes of the Serbian population, exacerbating the feeling of "isolation" and "ghettoization" by Bosniaks. In turn, this could lead to a vicious circle whereby more and more individuals become "radicalised" in response to this perception of segregation from the rest of Serbia. Lastly, a rise in Islamist radicalization and extremism may lead to more individuals becoming radicalised in far-right, ethno-nationalist ideas.

Recommendations

- A new counter-terrorism strategy should be adopted by the Parliament, considering and improving upon the deficiencies of the previous one. The new strategy should take into account all forms of radicalization and violent extremism (far-right, far-left, Islamist etc..).

- The government of Serbia should try to tackle the "pull factors" behind radicalization by tracking the activities of radical Wahhabi groups across the Sanjak as well as the organisations that provide them with funds. They should also pay attention to the regional as well as international links of these groups.

- The government of Serbia needs to tackle the "push factors" that lead to the radicalization of individuals in Sanjak by trying to reduce unemployment and fight poverty in the province. The government should also adopt a strategy against corruption while competent authorities should investigate cases of political corruption taking place in the province.

- The government should also refrain from using or promoting the use of anti-Bosniaks discourses while mainstream media should stop presenting and reporting on Sanjak in a negative way.

- The European Union should push for the adoption by Serbia, a EU candidate country, of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy and a related Action Plan.

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Croatia's (Im)migration Crisis in the Schengen Era

Mia Baxley

Key Takeaways

- Croatia became the most recent member state of the European Union (EU) in 2013, the second former Yugoslav republic after Slovenia to do so.

- While much of the Balkan region remains in limbo with regards to EU accession, Croatia's integration marked a new step towards Europe's changing relations with the region.

- Dual youth migration issues and accusations of police brutality against migrants expose a need for immediate policy action to make Croatia's Schengen era successful.

Introduction

In 2013, Croatia became the 28th member of the European Union, marking a new step in the multilateral integration of the former Yugoslavia. By 1 January 2023, the nation was able to enjoy the free movement (Schengen) and economic (eurozone) benefits of its membership.[1] According to the European Commission, the Schengen area "is instrumental to stability, resilience and recovery" in "the current geopolitical and economic context" of Europe.[2] For Croatia, whose War of Independence (1991–1995) devastated the population and economy, EU membership presented an optimistic future and a chance for the nation to modernise.

However, the effects of the 1990s war still linger in the young nation's foundation. While Freedom House has declared Croatia as a free, semi-consolidated democracy, ethnic Serbs and other minorities continue to face harassment and discrimination in much of their daily and professional lives.[3][4] The country's location close to the Mediterranean makes it a common point-of-entry for North African and Middle Eastern asylum seekers, where border guards have been accused of violence and human rights abuses. Compounding the nation's demographic issues, thousands of youth seek new lives elsewhere in Europe and the world as they weigh their future prospects vis-a-vis current socio-political conditions.

The following article takes a comparative approach to the Croatian government's conflicting concerns of emigration and of its handling of immigration at its eastern borders.

Croatia's Inequitable Views on (Im)migration

How Has the Croatian Government Responded to Europe's Migration Crisis?

Across the EU, citizens hold varying views on their satisfaction with the state of the Union's democracy; Croatia's scores fall in the middle, at 60 percent satisfaction compared to 31 percent dissatisfaction.[5] Since Croatia's accession in 2013, migration from the Middle East has taken precedence in European political discourse. Far-right political parties in fledgling democracies like Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland have caused rifts with the rest of the EU over recent migration reforms.[6] In neighbouring candidate states like Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, increased ethnic polarisation and anti-migrant sentiments have been a massive

barrier to building institutions and rule of law necessary for EU acceptance.[7] Although Croatia's expansion reflects positive steps towards the political inclusion of Southeast Europe, the EU's uneven application of its own core values has come under new scrutiny. Human Rights Watch criticised the EU for accepting the country's Schengen application amidst reports of abuses against migrants at the borders with Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.[8] The group claimed that this trend should have disqualified it from joining the Schengen zone until the government could prove it was taking steps towards reducing police abuses.[9] Furthermore, Croatia's Schengen acceptance amidst these concerns has damaged relations with older EU members like Romania and Bulgaria, who have been denied full Schengen integration largely due to migration concerns.[10]

Migration, both in and out of Croatia, has been Prime Minister Andrej Plenković's main talking point since his government came into power in 2016. In a 2020 speech to European partners, Plenković has called the flight of young Croatians an existential issue for Croatia's long-term survival.[11] Population retention was part of the push for full integration, as the government highlighted the positive effects of adopting the euro on the struggling economy.[12] With every step to the Schengen zone, Plenković has been clear on his position regarding the retention of native-born professionals and academics.

However, when confronted with his border forces' treatment of immigrants, Plenković takes a middle-road stance that does little to show progress towards the improvement of human rights. In November 2019, an 18-year-old Afghan man was shot in the abdomen by a Croatian police officer while attempting to cross the border into Slovenia.[13] The police claimed that the shooting was accidental and denied any wrongdoing.[14] Plenković promised to investigate allegations of border violence, which eventually led to criminal charges against the two guards accused in the shooting. [15][16]

Flag ceremony welcoming Croatia to the EU in 2013. Source: European Union 2013 - European Parliament via flickr.com..

There was optimism that the criminal charges, the first of their kind against a border guard accused of violence, would mean an upward trend against instances of migrant abuse. Unfortunately, reports of abuse stayed constant well into the Schengen era, further blemishing the EU's image as a bastion of human rights and democracy.[17]

What Motivates the Current Youth Flight Crisis?

Steps towards national development have faced equally detrimental setbacks, sometimes negating perceptions of progress itself. Despite Croatia's positive post-war democratic trajectory, the social context has been mired by residual ethno-religious tensions and nationalist attitudes towards the war. As such, the overall most common reason for emigration is a generally negative forecast of the country's future. Croatia's under-35 population – those born or raised during the war – has steadily dwindled due to an overwhelming loss of faith in the country's ability to fully democratise.[18]

Croatia's population year-over-year has steadily declined long before the realisation of EU aspirations. The country has yet to recover its pre-war population peak and has lost more than 400,000 people since 2013 to low birth rates, ageing, and immigration.[19] Approximately 3.8 million people currently live in Croatia, while 3.2 million of ethnic Croatian descent have settled abroad.[20]

Croatia's situation reflects a region wide issue of disappointment with political setbacks and economic stagnation.[21] The Croatian economy is vulnerable to global shocks, and since the end of the war, it has endured longer recessions than recovery periods.[22] With few prospects to fall back on, those with the means to study or work abroad often choose to do so permanently.

Prospective emigrants and current expatriates have criticised the government coalition led by the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) for their perceived attitude towards the main drivers of the crisis.[23] In June of 2018, Plenković received public criticism for comparing Croatia's demographic crisis to that of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East in an attempt to shift the narrative, telling a reporter, "You have huge positive demographic trends … where the situation is quite different – there's such poverty they would be crying out to have the kind of standards we have in Croatia."[24] His statement simultaneously punched down on the developing world and, according to diaspora Croatians, overlooked their real driving factors away from their home country.

As thousands of Croatian university students take study and work abroad options for professional self-improvement, many choose to remain where they are or return to their host countries after finishing their schooling. A study conducted in 2005, nearly a decade before EU membership, showed that the country faced a shortage of medical professionals and students electing to stay.[25] Slovenia, at the time a new EU member, was one of the most common destinations for prospective doctors because of higher quality hospitals, better working conditions, and better pay. The country's struggle to permanently retain highly-educated professionals is widely considered a crisis affecting the competitive standing of the economy.[26]

While concerned with the exodus of its citizens, critics have highlighted crucial fault lines in the government's investment in the nation's

infrastructure. The town of Petrinja, south of the capital of Zagreb, was struck by a magnitude-6.2 earthquake in December 2020 which killed 7 people and injured 26 others.[27] In an update one year after the quake, local officials reported a slow rebuilding response from central government officials despite an immediate outpouring of concern.[28] They said that the response to this situation was not an anomaly, as they felt the non-tourist areas have been neglected for years in favour of developing the capital and the coastline. The lack of infrastructure investments highlighted some of the structural reasons for the decline in the population of small towns and villages across the country.

Conclusion

In recent years, conversation on the demographic crisis has shifted from a technical focus to reflections on identity. A 2023 study by Zagreb-based sociologists Marita Grubišić-Čabo and Filip Fila came to a more nuanced conclusion: that many young Croatians want to return home but feel that the national conditions are not ready for their return.[29] This perspective accounts for their complex feelings of national pride and identity in light of the country's sociopolitical issues. A similar survey highlighted that socially active Millennials and Generation Z are less likely to consider emigrating, while young people overwhelmingly believe political involvement in their generation should be higher than the current rate.[30]

Croatia has yet to heal from the 1990s war, and its effects will continue to destabilise future prospects without a full transition. It is not alone in this, as other Balkan nations face the same fears for similar reasons, but the government should take responsibility for the true foundational issues that drive away its most promising young leaders. New discourse shows that economic solutions alone do nothing to fix the deep-seated issues of national identity. Similarly, the government needs to address the brutality against asylum-seekers and how this .

blight on the country's image contributes to the diminished feelings of national pride.

Recommendations

- The Croatian education system should be reformed to encourage civic pride over ethnonationalism, educate youth on the full picture of their nation's progress, and encourage inter-ethnic dialogue to reduce polarisation and violence.

- In his third newly-inaugurated term, Prime Minister Plenković should involve sociologists and youth civic leaders on creating a holistic policy that addresses all concerns about remaining in Croatia.

- The government should work to bridge their own gap with the global diaspora community and further outreach programs with the goal of encouraging returns for those who choose to do so.

Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković addressing MEPs. Source: European Union 2022– European Parliament via flickr.com.

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Women, Peace and Security in the Western Balkans

Maria Eduarda Diniz

Key Takeaways

- UNSCR 1325, adopted in 2000, was a landmark resolution addressing the specific impacts of conflict on women and girls and emphasising their inclusion in peacebuilding. Over two decades, it has been reinforced by nine additional resolutions, forming the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, which guides national and international efforts to protect women in conflict and ensure their participation in peace processes.
- The Western Balkans began implementing the WPS agenda after the wars following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. National Action Plans (NAPs) were adopted by Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010), Serbia (2010), and other Balkan states over the following years. These NAPs have led to increased representation of women in defence systems, although challenges like political tensions and inadequate funding persist.
- While the WPS agenda has led to important advances in gender equality in the Western Balkans, including increased awareness and the development of regional NAPs, the region continues to struggle with gender-based violence, discrimination, and the legacy of conflict. Nevertheless, the progress achieved serves as a foundation for further deconstruction of harmful social norms and the protection of women and girls.

Introduction

In October 2000, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted the landmark Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security. This resolution emerged from a decade or more of lessons learned in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The nature of warfare was evolving, with civilians increasingly becoming targets, and women often bearing the heaviest burden.[1] Additionally, even in transitional and peacebuilding periods, women continued to be marginalised, with their contributions frequently overlooked, excluding them from peace processes.[2]

UNSCR 1325 urged countries to address the specific impacts of conflict on women and girls worldwide and to ensure the systematic inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts, including peace talks, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction.[3] The WPS agenda does not stand alone, but is one fraction of several institutional frameworks dealing with concepts such as women's issues, protection of civilians in conflict, human rights and development. As one of the pillars of the Agenda is "Prevention", National Action Plans started to take place. This endeavour started in a Statement by the President of the Security Council in 2004. The UNSC encouraged national-level implementation of UNSCR 1325, including through National Action Plans to implement the four pillars of the resolution.[4] It also encouraged Member States to collaborate with civil society, particularly with local women's networks and organisations, on the implementation of the resolution.[5]

National Action Plans for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 are national-level strategy documents that outline a government's approach and course of action for localising action on the Women, Peace and Security

Agenda.[6] These documents outline objectives and activities that countries take, both on a domestic and international level, that are believed to secure the human rights of women and girls in conflict settings; prevent armed conflict and violence, including against women and girls; and ensure the meaningful participation of women in peace and security.[7]

Female soldier at Camp Taji in 2019. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The first National Action Plan was developed in 2005. Since then, over 100 countries have developed NAPs for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and associated resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, including UNSCR 1820, considered the other main resolution on the matter.[8]

The WPS Agenda Implementation in the Western Balkans

The adoption of the UNSCR 1325 in 2000 coincided with the end of wars in the Western Balkans, following the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and establishment of new states, and the process of translation of this instrument into national policy agendas of the Western Balkans took more than a decade.[9][10] In July 2010, Bosnia and Herzegovina became the first country in the Balkan region to adopt an Action Plan for implementation of UNSCR 1325, followed by Serbia in December 2010 and Croatia in 2011.[11] By 2024, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North

Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have all implemented National Action Plans related to the WPS Agenda.[12]

As a result of these NAPs, the representation of women in the defence system has improved significantly.[13] For example, women made up 14.98% of the Albanian Armed Forces in 2023. This is followed by Montenegro (10.77%), North Macedonia (10.66%), Serbia (10.59%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (8.2%).[14] This is significant considering the role women had in the many wars in the region – and how it was forgotten. According to some historians, such as Professor Ankica Čakaric, "the historical fact that women were not only active in combat alongside their male comrades, but at the same time organised the whole social reproduction of everyday life, has been ignored."[15] Even though after the creation of the Resolution 1325 some countries, like Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, started implementing laws on Gender Equity, evidence shows that participation of women in the security sector, military and police structures, is not beyond 10% with few exceptions in some countries, and even less in decision-making positions.[16]

Albania adopted its first NAP in 2018 for the period 2018-2020, after an increase in Human Rights and Gender-Based Violence Laws, which, notably, took place after Albania joined NATO in 2009, which has a strong engagement with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.[17][18] The main objectives of the NAP are listed as improving policy documents and raising awareness on UNSCR 1325; increasing the participation of women in the field of security at home and abroad; establishing a regulatory framework and capacities that enable better protection and rehabilitation of women in the field of peace and security; and taking measures for better monitoring and reporting of Resolution 1325. Each objective has corresponding actions and indicators as well as including a detailed budget for implementation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted three NAPs to date, for the period of 2010-2013, 2014-2017, and 2018-2022. Bosnia-Herzegovina's third NAP was developed based on the results of and recommendations from the evaluation of the second action plan.[19] The third plan contextualised the WPS agenda by providing a detailed overview of the country's domestic legal framework and critically examines the legislative and policy developments to advance women's full participation in public and political life.[20] The NAP also offers a detailed gender equality analysis of women's participation in high-level decision-making positions such as in the security forces and peacekeeping missions.[21] Additionally, the action plan includes sections on human trafficking, victims of sexual violence and other wartime atrocities, and reducing landmine threats as well as touching upon natural disasters, migration, violent extremism, and small arms and light weapons.[22] Even without a new NAP, the new Gender Action plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023-2027 includes a chapter on Gender and Security, which states the goals to be achieved in the area by 2027.[23]

Kosovo, has tried to integrate a gender perspective in its legal and institutional framework since the beginning of its post-conflict transformation and modernisation, even before the birth of the entity's first government in January 2008.[24] This can be seen in the first Law on Gender Equality, passed in 2004, and the Kosovo Programme for Gender Equality adopted for the period 2008-2013.[25] Further steps toward gender equity include the adoption of the Working Plan 2013-2015 and a National Action Plan to implement Resolution 1325. The NAP identifies its main objectives as the promotion and protection of women's human rights as well as the recognition of the victims of the Kosovo War. Additionally, the Plan identifies three outcomes: increased participation of women in decision-making, peacekeeping and building processes; integrated gender perspectives in security affairs and increased women's participation in the security structures;

and improved access to protection, justice, rehabilitation, and reintegration for survivors of sexual violence, torture, and other forms of violence associated with conflict/war.[26] It's also worth mentioning the country's commitment to the EU's current WPS Action Plan running until 2024, the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) for the years 2021-2025 and the latest Kosovo Program for Gender Equality covering the period 2020-2024.[27]

Montenegro adopted its first NAP in 2017.[28] The document is mostly oriented towards ensuring women's participation in the security sector at the local (focusing more on police force), national (armed forces) and international (peacekeeping) levels. It also addresses the issue of human trafficking in the country and provides mechanisms to address it regionally and internationally.[29] The NAP also focuses on the protection of women and girls from discrimination and gender-based violence. The priority of the previous and current NAPs have been the implementation of three key areas for achieving the goals of UNSCR 1325: increasing women's participation in decision-making and peace processes; protection of women and girls in conflict zones; integrating a gender perspective and gender education into peacekeeping operations.[30] Currently, the Government adopted the Strategy for the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 – Women, Peace and Security, within accompanying resolutions for the period 2024-2027, with the Action Plan for 2024-2025.[31]

North Macedonia developed a more general National Action Plan than its peers. North Macedonia adopted its first NAP in 2013 for the period 2013-2015. The NAP does not specify the responsible actor for NAP development, identify specific actions, indicators, or a monitoring and evaluation framework and does not have an allocated budget.[32] However, the country is one of the few with an active National Action Plan, covering the period 2020-2025, and is currently the only in the region with a woman as Minister of Defence.[33] The share of women

in command and management positions in the Ministry and the Army is 19%, criticised in media for not fully reflecting the diversity of their society. [34][35]

Croatia, developed two NAPs on WPS. The first was for the period 2011-2014 and was focused on "strengthening the gender perspective", and the second NAP (2017) just expired in 2023.[36] Although the second Plan mimics the first in addressing the normal priorities of WPS Agenda (prevention, protection, participation and post-conflict recovery), it also brought new challenges to the book, including climate change, migration and terrorism.[37]

Like Croatia, Serbia developed two NAPs: one with a mandate from 2010 to 2015, and a second from 2017 to 2020. Both focused on developing mechanisms to protect women, before, during and after conflicts, as well as addressing decision-making as a necessary arena for women's participation.[38] Plans for the development of a new NAP began in late 2022, by the Ministry of Defence, but the process took longer than the implementation of the latest plan, and was acknowledged as a lack of genuine political commitment.[39]

Women soldiers at a military parade in Ukraine. Source: Stanislav Nepochatov via Wikimedia Commons.

Towards the WPS Agenda

Cohn describes UNSCR 1325 as a 'late intervention', suggesting that the WPS Agenda is a limited normative agenda, since the author believes the Agenda is unable to redefine "war". Furthermore, Cohn argues that Resolution 1325 should have attempted to end war by challenging the legitimacy of the system that legitimises war internationally.[40] Instead, the resolution is 'late' because the UN Security Council keeps war going and upholds the dominant paradigm of a world composed of states, which defend state security through military means. The intervention is also 'late' in that it urges actors in war to protect women from violence and involve women in decision-making to end wars, after a war has already begun.[41] Therefore, the idea and implementation of National Action Plans are a little behind what was expected.

According to J. Ann Tickner, the military environment contributes to the construction of a militarised masculinity, based on gender stereotypes, where the soldier is viewed through this lens.[42] This creates a relationship between hegemonic masculinity and the imagery of war, resulting from power dynamics. Peace studies researchers, such as Kara Ellerby, note that hegemonic masculinity influences the culture of violence, as "Western society tolerates male aggression and disapproves of female aggression. Boys are taught to solve their problems through physical violence," with violence being an expression of dominant masculinity.[43]

Cohn concludes that "allowing (some) women to occupy decision-making positions seems like a small price to pay for leaving the war system essentially unchanged".[44] An illustration of this 'late intervention' is the activists in conflict zones who carry printed copies of Resolution 1325 when speaking with military leaders.[45] The concept of 'late intervention' gives the impression that the WPS Agenda may seem like a robust normative framework, but it is a limited agenda that offers little change to perceived

power structures.[46]

Despite the regional progress made in the Western Balkans over the last decade, many scholars and specialists believe that challenges persist. Political tensions and the legacy of conflict continue to impede regional cooperation, and it's argued that overcoming stereotypes (such as hegemonic masculinity) is critical to raising awareness of WPS.[47] Furthermore, it is difficult to monitor challenges and progress due to the lack of comprehensive data on gender-specific issues. Some, as Associate Professor Aleksandar Grizhev of the Military Academy in Skopje, also note that capacity-building initiatives are still limited, largely because of insufficient funding.[48]

Dr. Adelina Hasani from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies discusses the profound impact that the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing conflicts have had on the lives of women and girls in the Balkans today. The war led to extensive human rights abuses, including the use of violence as a weapon and sexual violence against women in conflict. She emphasised that the increase in gender-based violence in the post-war era is a troubling continuation of these wartime dynamics.[49]

Conclusion

What can be concluded is that the National Action Plans across the Western Balkans still face difficulties regarding gender-based harassment and discrimination – just like in many other regions. The progress it has made, however, cannot be completely overshadowed and must be seen as a way for deconstructing social norms and advance protection of women and girls in the region.[50]

In Bosnia and Herzegovina - as explained earlier in this article - the NAP has focused on integrating gender perspectives into security sector reforms and improving women's access to justice. This has led to increased awareness of gender issues within the security forces and judiciary, contributing to a more gender-

sensitive approach to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.[51] Similarly, in Serbia, the NAP has helped to institutionalise women's participation in peace negotiations and decision-making processes.[52] The same can be seen in the increase of protection towards women and girls, as mentioned by the current NAPs, in most countries in the region.

The ongoing efforts to strengthen these plans and address the barriers to their implementation are essential for sustaining the progress made and achieving lasting peace and security in the region.

Recommendations

- Considering that 20 years have passed since the adoption of WPS Agenda, it is time to strategically focus on ensuring equal and meaningful participation of women in decision-making, in governments, formal peace processes as well as in ensuring gender-inclusive peacebuilding.

- It's important to recognise the linkage between gender equality and peacebuilding and democratic governance as mutually constraining and mutually reinforcing processes and, acting systematically to empower women for equal participation in decision-making, governance, peacebuilding, and sustainable development for a better future.

- Ensure equal participation of women at all levels of decision-making in democratic governance, peacemaking, peacebuilding, and sustainable development, in line with the UNSCR 1325, national legal frameworks on gender equality and considering the strategic relevance of women as peace drivers and good governance drivers.

- For all NAPs, specific strategies, definition of actors, and an implementation budget is needed to create a better view of the implementation made and what must be done after the end of each term.

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Viktor Orbán's Peace Mission:
Political Strategy or Substantive Peace?

JR Wikkerink

Key Takeaways

- In July 2024 Viktor Orbán conducted a self-proclaimed 'peace mission' as Hungary assumed the presidency of the European Council visiting Kyiv, Moscow, Beijing, Washington DC and Mar-a-Lago.

- This peace mission has yet to yield any tangible results toward peace in Ukraine while sparking Western and Ukrainian backlash for appeasing Vladimir Putin.

- Orbán likely conducted this peace mission to rally his slumping domestic support and bolster the momentum of the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament.

Background

Viktor Orbán and Russia

Throughout Viktor Orbán's Presidency, the Hungarian leader has struck a different tone in his relationship with Russia and Vladimir Putin than most European leaders. In 2008, as Leader of the Opposition, Orbán spoke out against Russian aggression in Georgia stating that "military aggression is military aggression". [1] This critical stance vanished after the 2010 election when Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP Party Alliance came to power. Orbán shifted his view, believing that aligning Hungary with a single side in a world of declining Western dominance would be strategically unwise. [2] Orbán called for an Eastern opening, with a call to Central Europe to create a new dialogue with Russia. Hungary led the way in this regard, increasing economic cooperation with Moscow in the form of loans, nuclear power construction with

Russian state funding and the signing of a 15-year gas deal.[3] While Hungary signed statements condemning Crimea's annexation in 2014, Orbán clarified Hungary's position as a neutral party and this did not deter further cooperation with Russia.[4]

This strategic ambiguity has continued after Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine that commenced in February 2022. Orbán has refused to allow Western weapons to be transported to Ukraine over the Hungarian-Ukraine border and has opposed EU sanctions on Russia, while simultaneously enjoying NATO security as well as EU funding and market access. [5][6] Orbán has leveraged his stance on the conflict to secure concessions from Brussels, including using his veto power to unfreeze 10 billion euros in EU subsidies. [7] Orbán has attempted to use a 'non-aligned' position to play both sides in the conflict to extract benefits for Hungary and his political fortunes.

'The Peace Mission'

Beginning in July 2024, Hungary assumed the presidency of the European Union's Council of Ministers and on July 2, Orbán began a self-proclaimed 'peace mission'. This mission was nominally meant to accelerate the peace process between Russia and Ukraine. In his first meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Orbán expressed support for the Ukrainian 10-point peace proposal and urged for a cease-fire between the two sides.[8] Privately, Orbán expressed surprise that Ukraine thought they could win back lost territories.[9]

On July 5, Orbán met with Putin in Moscow. Putin

highlighted that the meeting was significant not only because of their long-standing partnership but also because Orbán was representing the European Union.[10] After the meeting, Orbán commented that the EU has a "pro-war policy and privately expressed how Putin told him that time is on Russia's side in the conflict.[11][12] After meeting Putin, Orbán made stops in Azerbaijan and China after which he was very complimentary towards Xi Jinping and the Chinese peace plan for Ukraine before travelling to the US.[13] After meetings held in Washington, Orbán went to Mar-a-Lago on July 11 to meet with former President Donald Trump whom afterwards he called a "man of peace" .[14]

The Hungarian Parliament Building, seat of the National Assembly of Hungary. Source: Author's own.

International Reaction to the Peace Mission

Orbán's peace mission has been met with condemnation from European leaders who have heavily criticized Orbán primarily for meeting with Putin. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, stated that the rotating EU presidency does not have a mandate to engage with Russia as a representative of the EU. [15] President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen referred to the peace mission as an 'appeasement mission'. [16] The mission was also criticized for potentially breaching an article of the EU treaties. Article 24.3 states that EU member states must support the Union's foreign policy actively and unreservedly while refraining from any action

which impairs the Union's effectiveness as a cohesive force internationally.[17] Orbán's actions could be seen as going against the commonly held position of the EU on the War in Ukraine, jeopardizing their response.

Upon completion of the mission, the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borell stripped Hungary of the right to host the next meeting of foreign and defence ministers. [18] Borell stressed that there should be consequences for Hungary's actions even if those consequences are purely symbolic, a move which Hungary lamented as 'childish'.[19] Additionally, the mission was criticized by Zelensky who made pointed remarks without naming Orbán over promises made which were not in the interest of Ukraine or Europe. [20]

Analysis and Implications for the War in Ukraine

Orbán's peace mission and his overall position on the War in Ukraine are consistent with his foreign policy strategy since being elected in 2010. Orbán has demonstrated that he is comfortable playing both sides to extract what he perceives as maximum benefit for Hungary as well as politically for himself. Since the start of the war, Orbán has taken risks such as using his country's non-aligned position to extract funding from the EU for Hungary, and the peace mission is the latest chapter.

One of the reasons that Orbán would have conducted the peace mission was to reverse his own declining domestic poll numbers. In February 2024, two of the leading figures in Orbán's Fidesz Party resigned in a scandal following the pardon of a former deputy director of an orphanage who was convicted of convincing children to withdraw their sexual abuse testimony. [21] This scandal led to one of the biggest anti-government protests in recent history and has caused the Fidesz Party to significantly dip in the polls. Another reason for the peace mission would be to support the success in the recent European Parliament elections of the Patriots for Europe group. Following the elections in June, the group is set

to be the third largest group in Parliament, with 84 MEPs.[22]

Without the presence of a public plan that contains concrete steps to end the War in Ukraine, it appears that Orbán conducted the peace mission with domestic and international political goals at the forefront. The mission has not had any significant effects on the conflict, with Russia continuing to push further into Ukraine and Kyiv opening new frontlines by conducting an operation in the Kursk region which is still ongoing at the time of writing. The peace mission is unlikely to significantly impact future peace talks or contribute to de-escalating the conflict, especially given Zelensky's dismissal of the initiative. Orbán most likely saw an opportunity to play an outsized role in the narrative surrounding the conflict and sought to take advantage for political benefit.

Viktor Orbán and Volodymyr Zelensky attending the working session of the Meeting of the European Political Community. Source: Pool PEUE/ Juanjo Martín via flickr.com.

Recommendations

- The EU should develop a clear approach to peace in Ukraine which cannot be impaired by individual members to further their own interests.

- Ukraine should caveat peace efforts – including the peace mission – by Orbán as potentially motivated by domestic political struggles and political showmanship. Outside actors who seek to end the War in Ukraine should bring both parties together in goodwill negotiations that will not be criticized by allies of either side.

- The broader international community should approach actors in the War in Ukraine with tangible steps to peace rather than use the potential for peace as political strategy.

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