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EDITORIAL

Written by:
Professor Dr. Sead TURČALO

Time of uncertainty

By the time this text is published, the US election will be over. Some analysts consider this the most important election in US history, and even among more moderate thinkers, many view it as the most important US election in two decades. In their campaigns, the candidates—incumbent President Donald Trump and Democratic candidate former Vice President Joe Biden—are offering starkly different visions of the United States and of international politics.

WHAT AWAITS BIH?

Opinion polls indicate a high probability that the Democratic candidate will win. But previous elections have proved that we should wait for the ballots to be counted. Still, pollsters claim they have learned the lessons of 2016, and that the reliability of public opinion poll results has improved.

In his four-year term, Donald Trump has managed to craft a negative legacy. To undo it, if Trump does not win the election, will take time and commitment.

The gaps in US society that already existed have become an abyss during his term, and new polarizations have developed. As of this writing, just days before the election, a third of US poll respondents believe civil war is a possibility within the next five years.

A YouGov poll also shows that some 56% of US voters think violence will increase in the post-election period. In some states—such as Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Oregon—the risk of violent actions by Trump supporters is especially high. By generating fear among his base, instrumentalizing the US Department of Justice, trying to obstruct mail-in voting, and questioning the legitimacy of any election in which the outcome for him is negative, Trump has created a climate that many analysts claim poses the greatest threat to US democracy since World War II.

A Trump victory would mean the continued decline of US global leadership, a complete collapse of

TERROR OVER EUROPE

As we finish up this issue of the Atlantic Initiative Newsletter, Europe is bleeding again. A series of attacks, qualified by the police as terrorism, have deeply shaken the Old Continent.

In two attacks in France, in late October, three people were killed and several were injured. The attacks shocked the world with their brutality and came at a time when France was still recovering from the beheading of high school teacher Samuel Paty, by an 18-year-old of Chechen descent, for showing his students caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. The world was reminded by these attacks of terrorism in France in 2015 and 2016 that also resulted in numerous casualties.

On the evening of November 3rd, there was more bloodshed, in Vienna. It began near a synagogue in the city center, in the vicinity of Schwedenplatz. Three passersby and one assailant were killed, and at least 15 people had to be transferred to hospitals with injuries, seven in serious condition. Bosnian Belma Musić was among those lightly wounded. At the time of writing, Austrian and French police are still investigating

these latest terrorist attacks. Austrian authorities have confirmed, however, that the perpetrator in Vienna was motivated by the ideology of the so-called Islamic State. As Professor Vlado Azinović has remarked, anyone who believed the physical destruction of the last Islamic State stronghold in March 2019 would eliminate their ideological narrative was clearly naive.

French President Emmanuel Macron has declared that France itself was attacked and “will not give up its values.” Meanwhile, the Islamic world has criticized the French leader, and countries in the Middle East are boycotting French products in response to Macron’s statements from early October that “Islam is a religion in crisis around the world,” as well as his alleged support for the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad.

Professor Azinović has noted that these recent cases of terrorism highlight how a “reactivation” of extremist circles seems to be “driven by the speeches and rhetoric of political leaders, which have dominated public spaces on a global scale recently and serve as a trigger.” This new escalation of terrorism in Europe will be addressed by expert analysts in the next issue of the Atlantic Initiative Newsletter.

decades-long transatlantic alliances and the disintegration of important international institutions. Scholars like Eric Posner have also warned of the real possibility of a US dictatorship, as Trump, freed by the fact that a second term will be his last, can embark without hesitation on the destruction of democratic norms and the rule of law. However, even if Trump doesn’t win, Trumpism has taken root in the US and has supplanted the ideology of the Republican Party to such a degree that the GOP did not bother to present its political platform for the next four years, for the first time since 1854.

This pessimistic scenario can be partially thwarted by the victory of Joe Biden, assuming the results of public opinion polls are in fact accurate. I must emphasize “partially” though, given that the incumbent president has not expressed any intent to allow for a peaceful transition of power, and has called on some groups in the radical right to be ready in the event of the Democratic candidate’s victory.

If he does win, Biden will face the difficult task of returning some stability to social conditions in the

US. At the international level, which interests many of us external observers, Biden is expected to re-establish transatlantic relationships that have eroded in the past four years and to address structural changes. Reconnecting with transatlantic allies and renewing the memberships and international obligations that Trump dismantled or unilaterally withdrew from will help restore structure in the international order.

Biden’s foreign policy approach, judging by his actions over four decades, is based on the classical liberal cooperative approach. However, with Trump’s abandonment of global leadership, circumstances have changed significantly and multipolarity has become more complex. Now, China and Russia are more assertive, global institutions are weaker, and the idea of returning the world of Westphalian sovereignty is more likely. All of these are challenges that a new US administration will have to face squarely.

So, what do these different outcomes of the US election mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina? Do US politics and policy in the country remain constant regardless of who takes the presidential oath on 20 January 2021?

While a distinction can perhaps be made between the practical and symbolic significances of the outcome, it should be borne in mind that symbolism over time can shape practical politics. And in a symbolic sense, if Trump remains in the White House, it will send a message to the world that the trend of US withdrawal from the global arena continues. In four years, this trend has provided significant impetus to other international actors seeking a foothold in the Western Balkans region; and it has strengthened secessionist and irredentist rhetoric in the Republika Srpska, with open support from Russia. An additional four years of a Trump administration, which has become a model for radical right and populist parties and movements across Europe, would offer new momentum to anti-sovereignty and ethnonationalist forces that desire the destruction of the Bosnian state.

NEW POLICY

Symbolically, a Biden victory would empower transformative forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina – a position he also took in the 1990s – to overcome the constitutional constraints of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Practically speaking, however, this symbolism could awaken a sense of desperation in political actors aiming to irreparably damage Bosnia and Herzegovina, and could prompt them to completely obstruct the state; a possibility that has been quietly discussed in recent weeks.

The announcement of a visit to the region by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, which we analyse in this issue, should be seen through this lens. Russia is attempting to proactively prevent any functional reform in Bosnia that might be prompted by the intersection of two symbolic events: the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords and the possible election of a new US president who strongly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as its Euro-Atlantic integration. Indeed, this shows that it really does matter who sits in the White House.

Restoring the structural foundations of transatlantic relations, which Biden would prioritize, would have positive long-term effects for Bosnia and Herzegovina. It would facilitate better synchronization between the EU and US, more effectively deter malignant international influences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and serve as a counterweight to growing ethnonational authoritarianism in both the country and the region. If Biden does win, Bosnia and Herzegovina should meet his new approach with a new assertiveness in international spaces, including through proactive actions of a formal and informal nature, instead of waiting for the international community to reach out. ■

Edward P. Joseph, professor at Johns Hopkins University and foreign policy analyst

“We need a fresh start in the US, in the Balkans, in Europe, and in the world, with new leadership”



JOSEPH: IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, “THE STAGNATION HAS GONE ON SO LONG, IT IS PERILOUS”

(FOTO: OSCE)

Written by: Atlantic Initiative

Almost two months after *Kosovo and Serbia signed their economic normalization agreement*, echoes of the much touted “historic deal” have faded. Almost no one mentions it anymore, and everyday Balkan political life has turned to new topics. So, will the spirit of the agreement be maintained? And what is its importance to dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina? Indeed, what is its weight, if any?

Edward P. Joseph spoke to the Atlantic Initiative on these issues. Joseph teaches at Johns Hopkins University and served for over a dozen years in the Balkans,

including as Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, as well as in wartime Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Additionally, Joseph has experience leading non-profits, as a foreign policy analyst, and as a field practitioner specializing in conflict management. He has been published in virtually all major outlets, including *Foreign Affairs*, from which his article, “The Balkans, Interrupted” was selected as one of “The Best of 2015.”

Previously the Executive Directorate of the Institute of Current World Affairs in Washington, DC (and

the first non-alumnus leader of the Institute in its nearly century of existence), Joseph is currently Executive Director of the National Council on US-Libya Relations. He earned his J.D. at the University of Virginia School of Law, and his B.A. and M.A., respectively, from Johns Hopkins University and its School of Advanced International Studies, where he now teaches. Trained as a helicopter pilot in the US Army Reserve, Joseph is a veteran who was deployed with NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BREAKDOWN IN WASHINGTON

Atlantic Initiative: ["How Donald Trump lost the Balkans"](#) written for Foreign Policy states that the diplomacy conducted under the motto "we do not see evil", conducted by the US administration of Donald Trump in the Western Balkans, has produced a dangerous turn of events in the region. What are the consequences of this kind of geopolitical experiment in the shaky Western Balkans, but also for the long-term strategic interests of the United States? How much is the Trump administration aware of these consequences?

Joseph: In my Foreign Policy article last week, I explained concretely how this Administration's wholesale focus on economic experiments and disdain for political engagement has seen a serious deterioration in/between six countries: Serbia; Kosovo; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Bulgaria; and BiH. The immediate consequences are further deterioration in relations and increased risks of conflict. The Trump Administration is so intent on declaring its Serbia-Kosovo diplomacy at the White House a 'success', that it refuses to call out Serbia on egregious behavior. Relations are worse, not better, between Serbia and Kosovo since the September 'deal.'

Likewise, with the courting of Bulgaria all while Sofia mounts these high-handed pressures on Skopje over identity issues. Like James Baker's infamous statement ('We don't have a dog in that fight'), the Trump Administration is signaling a laissez-faire attitude. Is it any wonder that two days after Bulgaria received more praise for its commitment to the NATO alliance from Washington that the Bulgarian Defense Minister Karakachanov threatened to use military force on another NATO ally, North Macedonia?

This is a serious abdication of responsibility by the Trump Administration. Russia is only too happy

to see dissension among NATO allies, and tensions rise between Serbia and Kosovo -- not to mention a pro-Russian, pro-Serbian, anti-NATO government (by its background) as well as tensions in Bosnia. No, I don't believe the Trump Administration is aware of the consequences -- and no one should be surprised by that. Trump's entire ethos is to proclaim success -- including most seriously in the pandemic -- without a basis for it.

Atlantic Initiative: In September, US President Donald Trump hosted Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti at the White House to sign an economic normalization agreement that will lead to the establishment of air, rail, and motorway links between Belgrade and Pristina. President Trump, who also signed the document during the White House ceremony, called the agreement "historic." From your point of view, what is the importance of this agreement? What does it mean practically for Kosovo and Serbia, and for neighbouring countries?

Joseph: First, let's look at the region. With so many people, including young people, leaving the Balkans, it's critical to develop the economy and create jobs. I also believe that resolving the open political questions -- questions that have been open for more than two decades -- is central to developing the economy.

Kosovo is seriously hampered by the fact that it is not fully recognized. Serbia is also hampered by the unresolved Kosovo issue, unable to truly move on past the legacy of the 1990s. This problem is long-overdue for resolution. I don't believe it's a good idea to keep postponing it or, as the Trump Administration has done, avoiding it.

Second, the theory is that these Washington commitments on the economy would ease the way for political compromise. Just in September, there was all this hype and celebration in both Belgrade and Pristina. And what has actually happened between Belgrade and Pristina? In the wake of the Trump Administration's diplomacy we've seen some of the worst rhetoric since the early post-war period.

I don't need to repeat what was said by the Serbian Defense Minister in the headline of an official Defense Ministry communication. I don't need to

repeat the sinister remark of the Serbian Foreign Minister, precisely on the issue of missing persons, which is the first issue to be discussed in the dialogue. These are disgraceful remarks. And they are not outliers; there is a context here and it is completely contrary to the one painted by the Trump Administration about a “historical breakthrough.” It looks more like a “breakdown” and indeed, the Brussels talks have broken down.

Third, I don’t think it’s right to only criticize what others attempt to do, unless you are prepared to offer a solution. I have done that, right on the eve of the White House talks last month. My article in Foreign Policy sets out a complete proposal for resolving the Kosovo dispute – in a way that protects the core interests of both sides.

It is grounded in reality: the fact that the Russian (and Chinese) veto over Kosovo in the Security Council enables Serbia to avoid a serious, level negotiation with Kosovo. It is based on getting Kosovo into NATO, which would, in turn, liberate Serbia from having to divide Kosovo. Instead, a level playing field would be created for Serbia – assisted by the US and EU – to finally focus on securing the status

of Serbs throughout Kosovo, instead of trying to divide the country. It is a realistic approach because the US, Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, and the rest of the EU share common concerns. The US and EU can address these concerns. And both Kosovo and Serbia – and the rest of the region, including Bosnia, can finally move forward.

WASHINGTON AND BRUSSELS

Atlantic Initiative: After meeting in Washington, Hoti and Vučić held talks in Brussels, where the EU has been mediating between Kosovo and Serbia for over a decade. According to some analysts, the EU is not taking the White House agreement seriously. Could the document help the EU achieve better results? Brussels has insisted on new dynamics and on reaching a final agreement on the normalization of relations within “a few months, not years.” Is that realistic?

Joseph: As for the EU-led talks themselves, they have for the moment broken down over the issue of the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities. In any negotiation, it’s critical to avoid a breakdown – for example, where one side insists



IT'S CRITICAL TO DEVELOP THE ECONOMY AND CREATE JOBS

on speaking about an issue and the other side refuses. That's achieved by having an agreed sequence to discuss the issues. After all, in most negotiations, including this one, not all issues are equally difficult or contentious. Missing persons was a good starting issue because there are Serbs and Albanians who are missing; both sides have an interest in getting this resolved. I don't know what happened here: whether there was an agreed sequence of issues or not.

As for the possibility of the EU achieving mutual recognition (or what it calls, 'normalization'), I'm having difficulty seeing how the current approach leads to that all-important goal. That's why I provided my alternative.

Atlantic Initiative: Some have commented that the Trump Administration's primary goal was public spectacle, rather than a workable agreement that achieves the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. At this point, where does the story of formal recognition of Kosovo stand?

Joseph: Same answer. I have difficulty seeing the path to achieving that. That's why I published my alternative proposal in *Foreign Policy* last month.

Atlantic Initiative: How do you view the cooperation between Washington and Brussels on the issue of Serbia-Kosovo relations?

Joseph: This negotiation over Kosovo is difficult enough without the additional complexity of the Trump Administration in some kind of competition with the EU. It's not a question of a 'document', which is a list of parallel statements or commitments, it's a question of a coherent Trans-Atlantic strategy.

The EU has just released its own 9 billion euro Economic and Investment Plan. How much overlap is there? What elements could have been refined and improved had Washington been collaborating with Brussels instead of in some bizarre competition?

Atlantic Initiative: What about Israel? Does this herald changes and new relations in the Middle East? Washington announced the Serbia-Kosovo normalization agreement only 22 days after it announced the groundbreaking Israel-UAE normalization

agreement, and an Israel-Bahrain normalization agreement was announced shortly after the Serbia-Kosovo news. Belgrade and Pristina have both vowed to establish relationships with Israel. Also, Pristina's will be the first embassy of a Muslim-majority state in Israel.

Joseph: The real question here is not what happens in the Middle East. Neither Serbia nor Kosovo are players in the Middle East, even with the declared placement of their respective embassies in Jerusalem. The question is how does the Israel element advance relations between Serbia and Kosovo? Many people have called for Israel to recognize Kosovo, and now it appears to be happening, and vice-versa. We have to see what any of that means for the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina.

PERILOUS STAGNATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Atlantic Initiative: The agreement appears to provide President Trump with a diplomatic victory ahead of the November presidential election. Can we expect a sense of continuity in US policy towards the Balkans?

Joseph: As I pointed out, the "historical breakthrough" has been followed by a breakdown: the talks between Serbia and Kosovo are blocked; the rhetoric between Belgrade and Pristina is toxic; and the commitments are vague and largely unrealized. Look at what Belgrade has said about the commitment to not use "untrustworthy vendors" for 5G. President Vučić and Prime Minister Brnabić have refused to spurn the Chinese. We have heard denials about what this commitment means. We need a fresh start in the US, in the Balkans, in Europe, and in the world, with new leadership.

Atlantic Initiative: Finally, in November, Bosnia and Herzegovina will mark the anniversary of signing the Dayton Peace Agreement. After 25 years, how much progress have we made?

Joseph: It is not possible to use the word 'progress' and 'Bosnia and Herzegovina' in the same sentence, and still be serious. The stagnation has gone on so long, it is perilous. ■

Professor Dr. Selmo Cikotić is the Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a professor in the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Sarajevo

Managing Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina



MINISTER CIKOTIĆ IS WORKING TO STRENGTHEN BOSNIAN INSTITUTIONS

Written by: Professor Dr. Selmo Cikotić

INTRODUCTION

The Balkan migration and refugee crisis, and mass migration flows via the Western Balkan Route, began in the second half of 2015 and lasted until the Route was closed on 8 March 2016. Yet, with the Route blocked to the organized and controlled passage of migrants, space opened for illegal migration and criminal networks, which have emphasized smuggling and human trafficking. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced mass illegal entries in the 4th quarter of 2017, and this trend only intensified in 2018 and 2019.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a substantial decrease in illegal migration via European routes in the spring, from the second half of March until June. Since June 2020, however, the Western Balkan Route has become active once again.

STRUGGLING TO CONTROL MIGRATION

In order for Bosnia and Herzegovina to fight illegal migration successfully and avoid becoming a “hot spot” for illegal migrants – which could bring serious humanitarian and security problems – the Ministry of Security has prepared a guiding document that defines the priorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the areas of migration and asylum, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 8 February 2018. These



MIGRANTS IN BiH FACE SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES
(PHOTO: MUSTAFA ÖZTÜRK – ANADOLU AGENCY)

priorities correspond to initiatives and measures set out by the European Commission (EC) in its strategy for “a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans,” on 6 February 2018.

One of the six initiatives and special measures that will be undertaken in coming years by the EU to support the transformation of the region relates to greater cooperation in the field of security and migration. The EC strategy stipulates that strategic and operational cooperation in the Western Balkans on the issue of migration and border management is crucially important. This will facilitate access to international protection, the exchange of relevant information (e.g. risk analyses), increased border control, the effective implementation of readmission and return policies, and better capacity to combat illegal migration and the smuggling of migrants. Hence, international and regional cooperation will be strengthened, and border and migration management capacities further consolidated.

In collaboration with competent institutions and agencies, The Ministry of Security of Bosnia and

Herzegovina already undertakes daily activities in accordance with the Emergency Plan of Action and conclusions of the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, and the Migration Coordination Body. Still, the situation on the ground is becoming ever more complex, despite the unremitting work of these institutions and agencies to carry out activities, the implementation of which is monitored by the Operational Headquarters for Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Managing mass illegal migration requires the efficient cooperation and coordination of all relevant state bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Security took a number of steps in the second half of 2020 to establish communication with both state institutions and international partners. First, a visit was made to the Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons to analyse the situation on the ground and launch several activities related to management of the migrant crisis. Meetings were then held – including via an online platform, by telephone, and in person – with European Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, EUFOR Commander Reinhard Trischak, EU Ambassador Johann Sattler, and NATO Commander William



MIGRANTS
(PHOTO: IOM)

Edwards; and also with representatives of the EU, the OSCE, UNHCR, UNDP, the International Organization for Migration(IOM), the Regional Cooperation Council, various ambassadors and deputies (from the US, Austria, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Great Britain, Italy, Norway, Germany, Turkey, Japan, Slovenia, and Sweden), and the ministers of interior of Austria and Sweden.

NATIONAL BORDER PROTECTION

In a meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Commissioner Várhelyi announced that 1.5 million euros would be allocated to the procurement of border protection equipment. Várhelyi was also informed about the measures taken by Bosnia and Herzegovina to improve border control and surveillance and prevent illegal migration, and to provide humanitarian accommodation for illegal migrants. Indeed, the Ministry of Security has made it a top priority to solve the problem of migrant movement and accommodation in Una-Sana Canton.

This has made meetings with the Prime Minister of the Canton and the Mayor of Bihać extremely

important. The Ministry has also taken note of the work of the Task Force for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Organized Illegal Migration, organized by the Chief Prosecutor in the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Several expert groups established by the Minister of Security, which include the directors of administrative units within the Ministry, work on these issues as well.

The team from the Ministry of Security visited the municipality of Zvornik and the Karakaj border crossing point with the Director of the Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina and EUFOR Commander Trischak. The Ministry has launched efforts to link security institutions and agencies in accordance with their competencies related to border protection, the preservation of public order and peace, and the protection of the personal safety of citizens and their property, as well as activities to strengthen vertical and horizontal coordination among all competent structures for the management of illegal migration. This will allow the Ministry to exercise more complete control over the in-country movement and accommodation of foreign nationals who enter Bosnian territory illegally.



ECONOMIC MIGRANTS ARE MOST NUMEROUS
(FOTO: DW)

Cooperation and coordination have also been defined and established with relevant international organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and activities are ongoing to expand and provide adequate accommodation. The aim is to transfer migrants from populated and urban areas to specially built facilities. Another priority is to intensify cooperation with prosecutor's offices and courts, in order to prosecute those responsible for smuggling migrants.

The trend of rising illegal entries by migrants from Serbia and Montenegro to Bosnia and Herzegovina began in the fourth quarter of 2017 and continued in 2018 and 2019. From mid-March to June 2020, illegal entries decreased due to the COVID-19 lockdown. But after the lockdown ended, that number again increased in June 2020.

In 2018, 23,902 illegal migrants were registered at the Service for Foreigner Affairs, of which 22,499 expressed the intention to apply for asylum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Asylum applications were submitted by 1,567 people, or 7% of those who indicated their intention to seek asylum. In 2019, the Service for Foreigner Affairs recorded 29,302 illegal migrants, an increase of 23% from 2018. Of those registered in 2019, 27,769 expressed the intention

to apply for asylum, but just 784 people submitted an application, or 3% of the number who said they would seek asylum in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While the number of migrants expressing the desire to seek asylum grew by 23% from 2018 to 2019, the number who submitted asylum applications dropped by 50%. This trend continued in 2020. A total of 14,203 illegal migrants were recorded by the Service for Foreigner Affairs from January to October 2020, marking a decrease of 35% compared to the same period in 2019 – which resulted from movement restrictions imposed by countries in the region and EU Member States due to the COVID-19 pandemic – but of the 13,360 people who expressed the intention to apply for asylum in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 219 submitted applications, or 2% of those who indicated they would seek asylum.

ECONOMIC MIGRANTS

Though citizenship data is mostly self-reported, collected from the statements of migrants who often enter Bosnian territory without travel or identity documents, the records of the Service for Foreigners Affairs shows that citizens of Pakistan were most represented among migrants in Bosnia and

Herzegovina in 2019. Citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq, Morocco, Syria, Bangladesh, Algeria, Iran, Egypt, and India rounded out the top ten, in that order. It is worth noting that the number of illegal migrants from Egypt, Morocco, Bangladesh, Algeria, and Eritrea increased in 2019, compared to 2018. In the first eight months of 2020, migrants from Afghanistan registered in the highest numbers at the Service for Foreigner Affairs, followed by citizens of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, and Iraq.

Given the representation of Pakistani citizens among migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council of Ministers put forth a Proposal of Readmission Agreement between the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and a Proposal of the Protocol on the implementation of this Agreement between the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. By finalizing this Agreement (and the accompanying Protocol), Bosnia and Herzegovina and Pakistan confirmed their readiness to join international actions to prevent illegal migration, as the Agreement regulates issues related to the admission of citizens, third-country nationals, and stateless persons on the territory of a contracting party contrary to its laws. Intense efforts have also been put into initiating readmission agreements with seven other countries from which the largest number of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina have originated.

It is clear that the majority of migrants entering Bosnian territory illegally are seeking economic opportunity, and that the trend of economic migration is increasing. But problems still exist in the implementation of the shortened procedure under the Agreement between the Council of Ministers and the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the handover and admission of persons whose entry or stay is illegal, and of the Agreement between the Council of Ministers and the Government of Montenegro on the return and admission of persons whose entry and stay is illegal.

MIGRANTS RETURNED TO BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Police officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Croatia have been recorded returning migrants

from Croatian territory to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in violation of their readmission agreement. Meanwhile, a lack of accommodation capacities for migrants illegally staying on Bosnian territory prevents the organization of their deportation from the country. Thus, on 11 March 2019, the Council of Ministers adopted a decision designating the former “Bira” factory and former “Borići” student dormitory in Bihać, the former “Miral” factory in Velika Kladuša, and the former “Sedra” Hotel in Cazin as temporary reception centres for migrants. The same decision stipulated that temporary reception centres at locations established by the IOM be handed over to the Service for Foreigner Affairs for temporary use, and set out the procedure for real property takeover. Such a takeover implies the direct cooperation of the Service for Foreigner Affairs with the IOM to provide human and financial capacities necessary for the use and management of a property; but it has not yet been implemented.

Moreover, in its 145th emergency session held on 11 November 2019, the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted decisions allowing the Ministry of Security to use two barracks to accommodate migrants, free of charge. The former “Ušivak” barracks in the municipality of Hadžići opened in October 2018 and can accommodate 720 persons, with separate areas for families, women, and unaccompanied minors. The Service for Foreigner Affairs manages the centre in cooperation with the IOM. As of 31 December 2019, 1,316 people had stayed there, and so far in 2020, it has accommodated 938. The former “Blažuj” barracks in the municipality of Ilidža can accommodate 2,000. In 2019, 427 people stayed there, and in 2020, the facility had housed 2,350 people as of 20 October.

The IOM coordinates activities and manages the four temporary reception centres in Una-Sana Canton:

- **“Sedra”** in Cazin was opened in July 2018. The centre can accommodate 420 people and is intended for families and unaccompanied minors. As of 31 December 2019, 338 persons had stayed at the centre; and in 2020, 288 people stayed there as of 20 October.
- **“Bira”** in Bihać opened in October 2018 and can accommodate 1,500 migrants. As of 31



(FOTO: BHRT)

December 2019, 2,242 persons had stayed at the centre, which was closed by the decision of the Operational Group for Coordination of Activities and Supervision of the Migrant Crisis in the Una-Sana Canton on 30 September 2020, without the approval of competent state institutions.

- **“Miral”** in Velika Kladuša opened in November 2018 and can accommodate 700 migrants. As of 31 December 2019, 817 persons had stayed there; and in 2020, the centre accommodated 700 people as of 20 October.
- **“Borići”** in Bihać was opened in January 2019. It can accommodate 580 migrants and provides areas for families. In 2019, 295 persons stayed at the centre; and in 2020, 291 had stayed there as of 20 October 2020.

In 2020, new migrant accommodations were also provided in Una-Sana Canton in a tent camp known as “Lipa,” which opened on 21 April 2020 following a meeting in late March of representatives from the Government of Una-Sana Canton, the European Commission, and the IOM. The “Lipa” camp was established in response to needs arising from the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19 crisis, so that migrants could be relocated from abandoned and dilapidated buildings in the

city of Bihać. The camp accommodates up to 1,000 people and is intended for men. As of 20 October 2020, 1,365 persons had been accommodated there. The Ministry of Security plans to further expand its capacities to accommodate illegal migrants, per the recommendation of the EU to establish migrant accommodations in state-owned facilities so that buildings renovated to house migrants can remain at the state's disposal after their departure, and seeks to evenly distribute the burden of the migrant crisis throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina by establishing additional centres outside the Una-Sana Canton.

IMPROVING CONDITIONS

The establishment of new temporary reception centres in solid or prefabricated container-type facilities in Una-Sana Canton has been planned as well, in order to transfer migrants from the “Bira” and “Miral” centres, which will eventually be closed. Activities are also underway to improve conditions and increase capacities (to 2,500 persons) in the temporary “Blažuj” reception centre in Sarajevo Canton, to accommodate foreign nationals who have expressed the intention to apply for asylum or who have already applied, or those staying in the country as illegal migrants. Preparations are being made for the establishment of one or more

temporary reception centres to accommodate up to 1,000 persons outside Una-Sana Canton, in the central parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. These facilities, like “Blažuj” will provide accommodation to foreign nationals seeking to apply for asylum, who have already applied, or those remaining in the country as illegal migrants. Additionally, activities have been initiated to increase the capacities of the Immigration Centre by adding a new floor to the existing building. This will allow the building to accommodate 50 more people, raising capacity from 120 to 170.

The Ministry of Security is working to strengthen Bosnian institutions, to enable the state to take control of both the security and humanitarian aspects of migration, and has focused its efforts on finding ways to increase the human and logistical-technical capacities of the Border Police, agencies and sectors responsible for migration and asylum, and all other security agencies that combat the smuggling of migrants. This will bring greater success, and will reduce security risks in local communities with large number of migrants.

The Ministry of Security is also in charge of coordinating with international partners through IPA projects and the donation of funds, specialist equipment, and devices needed for border surveillance and control in areas exposed to migratory pressures. It oversees the efficient work of police officers at border crossing points as well, and of other administrative organizations within the Ministry.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Managing the movement and accommodation of illegal migrants on Bosnian territory requires establishing better coordination among the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in accordance with their competencies, to effectively link security and humanitarian aspects and achieve more coherence in institutions and agencies. Recent efforts have especially been directed at coordinating the activities of these institutions to facilitate the transfer of illegal migrants from populated and urban areas to specially built centres.

It is necessary to strengthen regional cooperation and regional responses to the migration situation in the Western Balkans and along illegal migration routes, enhance bilateral cooperation among the institutions and agencies dealing with migration and security issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and EU Member States, and increase cooperation with the international and EU agencies tasked with migration and security issues. Key priorities include the better coordination of activities with competent authorities in regional and international efforts against illegal migration, the strengthening of cooperation with donors and international organizations, the establishment of a more efficient system of returns based on existing readmission agreements, and the acceleration of the finalization of readmission agreements with the home countries of migrants illegally entering Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, ultimately, these efforts make sense only if competent institutions and agencies collaborate to prosecute those responsible for the smuggling of migrants, and to prosecute migrants who are reasonably suspected of having committed crimes.

The Ministry of Security has submitted a Plan of Measures and Activities for Effective Management of the Migrant Crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Council of Ministers. The Plan lists seven priorities, 24 measures, and 127 activities for adoption. Following its adoption, the Ministry will proceed with implementing its priority tasks and will continue to implement various other activities aimed at managing the migrant crisis. ■

Sarajevo's Head in a Bear's Mouth



DODIK AND LAVROV: MEETINGS SERVING KREMLIN'S SUPPORT TO ITS PROTÉGÉ
(PHOTO: SPUTNIK)

Written by: Srdan Šušnica

The cancelled working visit of leading Russian diplomat Sergei Lavrov to Bosnia and Herzegovina, scheduled for 28 October, leaves one pondering Russia's policy toward the country and the region (as visits to Greece on 26 October, Croatia on 27 October, and Serbia on 28-29 October were also planned).¹ Had the trip taken place, it would have been Lavrov's second visit to our country in the last two years. It would have been his second visit to Serbia just this year, after having joined Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu earlier in 2020. However, this would have been the first visit by a Russian official on this level to Croatia in 15 years.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian policy has always taken a two-track approach, with one track for the entity of Republika Srpska and a very different track for the state. After visiting Sarajevo in 2018, Lavrov turned toward legitimizing the Republika

Srpska track, repeating the official rhetoric heard from politicians in Banja Luka and attending the dedication of a future Russian Orthodox church and a Serbian-Russian cultural centre. And the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and president of the ruling SNSD, Milorad Dodik, has regular meetings with high-ranking Russian officials, who offer much more than just election season support for their Balkan protégé.²

REHEATING THE FROZEN CONFLICT

The content and timing of Dodik's meetings with Russian leaders frequently coincide with new efforts on his part to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina or with political attacks by his party on the constitutional foundations of the state, its territorial integrity, and its institutions. Threats of referenda or their unconstitutional introduction, campaigns calling to abolish the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina or end the UN presence in the country, and calls

for the secession of the Republika Srpska always grow stronger immediately before or after Dodik meets with Putin or other Russian officials.

Russia's strategic interests and Dodik's personal interests align in a way that produces a central symbiosis shaping Russian policy. In fact, Dodik's politics completely monopolize and define Moscow's attitude toward Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also toward Serbia. Many experts believe that Russia's insistence on adherence to the Dayton Accords and Bosnian territorial integrity is due only to the concern that its open support for the radical aspirations of Serb leaders in the Republika Srpska would draw the region into conflict. But Russia also skilfully exploits and orchestrates Dodik's ardent separatism to intimidate the West and position itself as a global player with "legitimate" spheres of influence.

Preoccupied with taunting NATO, by waving Dodik and his entity (incidentally a Western creation) before the eyes of Euro-Atlantic leaders, Russia sees almost no one else in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is simply no oxygen in Moscow for Bosnian leaders unless they fit snugly in the conductor's seat of the

Serbian-Russian train that is driving destabilization. Here enters Dragan Čović, and the aspiration of Croat ethnonationalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and in Croatia) for a so-called third Bosnian entity.

THE "CROATIAN PROBLEM" – AN INVENTED CRISIS

The third entity "problem" is something Russia aims to elevate in its political agenda in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is the perfect tool by which Russia can re-fuel frozen conflict and block Bosnian integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, without having to get its hands dirty with the question of territorial integrity – an unavoidable challenge to Dodik's calls for secession, even when he refers to it as "peaceful separation." Russia seeks to present itself as a force of stability in the region, and the West and NATO as forces of instability.

Both of Lavrov's visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina have thus struck not only a "Serbian-Russian note," but also a strong "Croatian-Russian note." The cancelled trip meant to take place last month was to focus on Croatian-Russian relations and to further strengthen the pact between Dodik and Čović,



LANDING OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS IN THE BALKANS
(PHOTO: ANTENA M)



**RUSSIAN TIES WITH FABRICATED
"CROATIAN ISSUE"**
(PHOTO: VEČERNJI LIST)

regionalizing it by engaging Zagreb. There is no need to do the same in Belgrade, as Serbia is explicit in its support for a Croatian-Serbian alliance designed to enable a post-Dayton reorganization of Bosnia and Herzegovina with historical borders drawn in previous failed attempts in 1939 and in 1991-1995. For this reason, Lavrov had also planned a meeting with the former apparatchik of the Yugoslav-era League of Communists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although his role as Deputy Chairman of the House of Peoples is far below Lavrov's rank as a foreign minister.

In announcing Lavrov's Balkan tour, the Russian Ministry indicated that, in addition to the always important "Dodik agenda," the visit would be dominated by the entirely invented "Croatian problem" – which is how Moscow describes the alleged vulnerability and inequality of Bosnian Croats in the Dayton structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. One should not lose sight of the fact that Serbian-Croatian-Russian preparations for this visit were made well in advance, in telephone meetings between Lavrov and both Dodik and Čović in the spring, an official visit by Dodik to Zagreb in September, and an official visit by Čović to Belgrade in October. Bosnian state institutions were completely cut out of the loop.

There are also the calls by Dodik and Čović for help from Moscow in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a Russian demonstration of force just 50 km from the NATO border. One specialized Russian military unit landed at the Banja Luka airport, and another attempted to enter Bosnia

and Herzegovina by road from Serbia. If nothing else, this should spark some serious examination of what it really means when Russia claims to respect Bosnian territorial integrity and the implementation of Dayton.

After Lavrov's last visit, domestic commentators, even some diplomats in Sarajevo, rushed to frame his statements on respecting Bosnian territorial integrity as some sort of blow to Dodik's separatist aspirations and to Dodik himself. This is simply naïve, though it may be a noble instinct to want to soothe social unrest and the fears of a new conflict that constantly hover over this country and its citizens. But every time Russian officials support the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or promote the consistent implementation of Dayton and the equality of its constituent peoples, they envision at least a "two-state solution."

BULLDOZER DIPLOMACY

Six months before Lavrov's last visit, Russian politician Valentina Matviyenko visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, employing the rhetoric of bulldozer diplomacy to attack the state's judicial and executive institutions. She aggressively demanded that all power be handed to the entities. This notion of "returning to the original Dayton" is another tool of Russia in attempting to block the functioning of the Bosnian state and therefore its accession to NATO.

Lavrov has also made comparisons between Dayton and other formulas for peace that imply changes to

the Bosnian state, such as at the Valdai International Debate Club in Sochi last year, when he likened the Dayton structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the “special status” of the Republika Srpska to the proposed “two-state solution” for Palestinian-Israeli peace, as well as to the proposed special status of the so-called community of Serb municipalities in Kosovo. According to Lavrov, the concept of decentralization modeled in Dayton was incorporated at Russia's insistence into the 2014 Minsk Agreement to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, because Moscow views the decentralization of Ukraine as a necessity, along with a special status for Donetsk and Lugansk similar to that of the Republika Srpska.

But in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lavrov complained, *“the US and a number of leading [Western] European states are urging the Bosnian and some Croatian parties they control to steer towards creating a unitary state in Bosnia. The aim is simple: they want to drag Bosnia into NATO. All sorts of gimmickry is being used to this end, including attempts to revise the relevant UN Security Council resolution [2144].”* Lavrov criticized the US further, noting that the Brussels Agreement establishing the community of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo *“has been on paper for 4 years”* but *“US-assisted attempts are being made to revise it and create a situation where Kosovo, with its Bondsteel base, the biggest US military base in Europe, could... be dragged into NATO.”*³

There is no need to point out how unambiguously this Russian viewpoint matches that of Greater Serbia nationalists when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It envisions an implied right to self-determination, and proposes that the only issue to resolve is a well-founded case for independence which, by the way, could be tomorrow's *casus belli*. The crucial question then becomes: what limits exist to the destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina as orchestrated by Russian politics?

Moscow has more than clearly demonstrated its determination to maintain a *status quo* that deepens instability, along with a solid cadre of pro-Russian actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The clarity of Russia's intention has actually awakened the dormant West, which is now exerting more intense pressure to resolve these frozen conflicts without delay. Meanwhile, stronger engagement by the US and EU in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and

in Kosovo, the expansion of NATO in the region, and this year's report in the American Senate on aggressive interference by Russia in Bosnian politics have made both Moscow and Dodik nervous.

The insistence of Western actors that Serbia, as the aggressor in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, finalize its agreement on the recognition of Kosovo has certainly contributed to Russia's stronger diplomatic counteroffensive in the region, as have the initiatives already advanced to reform the constitutional structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the uncertainty of Donald Trump's presidency. Lavrov's frequent visits to the region reflect those efforts, which have also resulted in changes to the Russian diplomatic team in countries Moscow deems key to keeping the region within the Russian sphere. Putin's “governor for the Balkans” Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, a former ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina who is now stationed in Serbia, returned to the region in 2019, making it quite clear that a new Russian initiative in the region will be coordinated from Belgrade. New Russian ambassadors were also recently appointed to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Igor Kalabukhov, 2020), Croatia (Andrey Nesterenko, 2020) and Montenegro (Vladislav Malenikov, 2019).

It is easy to imagine that Moscow's new initiative will harness the Dodik-Čović partnership to more forcefully generate momentum for interference by Zagreb and Belgrade in Bosnian affairs, primarily in order to extort concessions from Bosnian political leaders. Indeed, this has already begun. At the time Lavrov's now-cancelled visit was planned, Dodik publicized a “joint Serbo-Croatian statement” outlining a kind of ultimatum in which the Dodik-Čović-Russian model is imposed on the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a loose community of three “states.” At the heart of the statement is the principle that it either be accepted, or “dissociation” will follow. Additional similar ultimatums increasingly extend from the Croat HDZ party, which threatens that the self-proclaimed “state” of Herceg-Bosna will be formed again unless Bosnian election laws are changed in the manner Čović (and his Russian patrons) dictates. One wonders how long Zagreb can remain unresponsive to the fabricated vulnerability of Bosnian Croats.

AN OFFER THAT CAN'T BE REFUSED

Russia could easily blackmail Sarajevo with the invented “Serbian problem” and “Croatian problem,” especially with support from Belgrade (and, though less likely, from Zagreb). It is possible to imagine that the efforts of Dodik and Čović on this front may lead Russia to present Bosnian officials with an offer they can’t refuse. For instance, Moscow could promise Sarajevo everything it provides to the “Serb world” and perhaps even more. The backdrop of current scenes of war in Azerbaijan and Dodik’s incessant cries of secession hang like a sword over the heads of Bosnian leaders, who are constantly reminded of the fragility of peace. Notably, historical and political parallels between Nagorno-Karabakh (and Armenia) and the Republika Srpska (and Serbia) are particularly troubling. Nagorno-Karabakh is like the Republika Srpska on steroids, and its proximity to Russia gives Armenia an advantage that nationalists in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina only dream of – the power to do what they want, and *carte blanche*.

Russian activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moscow’s advocacy for the so-called third “Croatian” entity could end up facing criticism, as the former Russian ambassador to Croatia, Anvar Azimov, did for protecting “*Croatian interests more than Russian ones*.” But at the same time, the form, intensity, and persistence shown by pro-Russian and pro-Serbian opposition in Montenegro since 2015 should be a lesson. Just as he focused on the pro-Chetnik opposition in Montenegro, it is possible that Russia’s new ambassador in Zagreb, Nesterenko, will focus mostly on fostering the Croatian ultra-right and neo-Ustasha movement; and through them, he could influence and radicalize Croats in Herzegovina by playing to their ethnonational frustrations.

It is also not hard to imagine that in a Russian game of “carrot and stick,” Bosnia and Herzegovina could be enticed with a serious offer of Russian gas investment. During Lavrov’s 2018 visit to the country, the prospect that it could be included in the construction of the TurkStream pipeline was raised, with Lavrov praising the contract negotiations on construction of the Russian-Serbian LNG terminal near Zvornik. Perhaps Bosnia and Herzegovina would be offered a terminal in Neum, Stolac, or Tuzla. Russia may also offer weapons or jobs in the defence industry, which could be particularly attractive considering that a quiet regional arms race is currently taking place.

Is it conceivable that Russia’s new initiatives could go so far as to actually guarantee Bosnian territorial integrity and quell of the aspirations of the “Serb world”? In exchange for an end to NATO accession efforts and entity referenda on that issue, the suspension of the Southern Gas Interconnection project, the non-recognition of Kosovo, and a split with the EU on sanctions against Russia, maybe. The Kremlin wants to send a strong message to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region, but also to the West, that they will be very generous in the Western Balkans, but if they have to leave without a handshake, they will leave a worst-case scenario in their wake, especially for Bosnians.

Sir Winston Churchill used to say: you cannot reason with a tiger (or in this case, a Russian bear) when your head is in its mouth. A scenario of endless self-proclamations, secessions, and renewed conflict is certainly worse than granting a few political concessions to Russia, which may otherwise drag Croatia and Serbia into its new “peace plan” and divide Bosnian territory into three independent states. In fact, compared to this prospect, the *status quo* – even with all the obstructionism against the state and aggressive rhetoric within the neighbourhood – seems like a rather pleasant walk in the warm summer rain. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lavrov was forced to cancel the visit after being exposed to COVID-19.
- 2 Dodik has met with Vladimir Putin himself at least ten times: in Belgrade in 2011, during Putin’s visit to Serbia; in St. Petersburg in 2012, on the side-lines of the economic forum; in Moscow in 2014, before general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina; in Belgrade in 2014, during Putin’s visit to Serbia; in Moscow in 2016, before local elections; in St. Petersburg in 2017, on the margins of the economic forum (for the first time since Dodik had been black-listed by the US); in St. Petersburg in 2018, on the margins of the economic forum; in Sochi in 2018, before the general elections and two weeks after Lavrov’s visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, when he visited Banja Luka; in Belgrade in 2019, during Putin’s visit to Serbia; in Moscow in 2020, during the celebration of Victory Day, when meetings were also held with the Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, Alexander Lukashenko, and President of the parastate of South Ossetia Anatoly Bibilov.
- 3 See: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel on Russia’s policy in the Middle East, Sochi, October 2, 2019.” Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3826083 (accessed 25 October 2020).

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Nagorno-Karabakh: Melting down the “frozen conflict”



SECULAR NATIONALISM AND TERRITORIAL PRETENSIONS IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH
(PHOTO: ARMENIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY HANDOUT)

Written by: Harun Karčić, PhD

In September 2020, the longstanding conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan re-escalated over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh province. It is one of the oldest conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and the strategic location of the region and of the Caucasus attracts the interest of many nearby powers, which support different sides in the conflict. But, why are these two Caucasian countries at war?

HISTORY OF A CONFLICT

Nagorno-Karabakh, a province in Azerbaijan, consists of a vast mountainous area in the north and west, and plains in the east and northeast. Until the outbreak of the Russian-Persian war, which lasted from 1804 to 1813, the Caucasus region was under

Persian control; but when the Treaty of Gulistan was signed in 1813, the region was annexed by the Russian Empire. The South Caucasus remained within Russia until the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War (1918–22). Following the Bolshevik victory, and after the dissolution of the fleeting Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic,¹ Nagorno-Karabakh was proclaimed an autonomous area of the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Azerbaijan, despite an ethnic Armenian majority.

The Republic of Armenia never gave up hope of annexing the province, making several unsuccessful attempts in the 1960s and 1970s. And in 1989, Armenians still accounted for 76.9% of the population in Nagorno-Karabakh, with Azerbaijanis accounting for 21.5%.² A year earlier, just before

the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenian delegates in the Karabakh regional government had voted for a union with Armenia, but the government in Baku strongly opposed any division of its territory and tensions quickly turned into war.

The bloody conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan lasted until 1994, and resulted in Armenia's full control over not only the Nagorno-Karabakh province, but surrounding areas as well. Armenian forces and loyal rebels from Nagorno-Karabakh occupied almost 20% of Azerbaijan, nearly 30,000 people were killed, and over one million were displaced to neighbouring countries.³ According to international law, the Nagorno-Karabakh province and seven other areas annexed by Armenia are still considered occupied Azerbaijani territory.

THE ROLES OF TURKEY AND RUSSIA

So, how did countries in the region react? There have been three main stakeholders in the Caucasus, throughout history and to this day – Turkey, Russia, and Iran – and Turkey was the first to recognize Azerbaijan's independence in 1991.⁴ Turkey and Azerbaijan thus have extremely close political, economic, and interpersonal relations, best summed up by the popular saying, "*Bir millet, iki devlet*" ("One people, two countries"), which refers to shared Turkic roots.

In fact, Azerbaijan is so important to Turkey that newly elected Turkish presidents and prime ministers traditionally choose either Azerbaijan or the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus for their first international visit. Moreover, nearly all political parties in Turkey unambiguously support Azerbaijan. This is true not only of the AKP, but also of the ultranationalist MHP and Kemalist CHP, and smaller parties such as İyi Partisi, DEVA, and Gelecek Partisi.⁵

When it comes to military cooperation, Turkish support to Azerbaijan is characterized by coordination, transparency, and efficiency; and for years, Azerbaijani officers have attended military schools in Turkey. Ankara also regularly sends military instructors and special units to engage in joint exercises in Azerbaijan. Turkey is the third largest supplier of weapons and military equipment to Azerbaijan

– including Bayraktar TB2 military drones and missile launchers – after Russia and Israel.⁶

The Russian reaction to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has been somewhat more ambivalent. Though Moscow provides military support to Yerevan and has two bases in Armenia, which house almost 5,000 soldiers, it hasn't offered strong support to either side because it wants to maintain good relations with both countries. As far as Moscow is concerned, Azerbaijan is an ideal neighbour – not only does Baku buy Russian weapons and maintain close diplomatic relations with Moscow, but Azerbaijani officials have rejected every attempt by the US to establish military bases on their territory, and display no ambitions to move closer to the EU or NATO. Azerbaijan takes a multilateral approach to foreign policy, and it never criticizes Moscow.

Needless to say, Russia very much appreciates this. Yet, Armenia is also important to Russia, and Moscow has clearly said it would support Yerevan if the war spills onto its sovereign territory. The current Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, came to power after the so-called Armenian Revolution in 2018, however, when former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan was overthrown. Moscow was never a fan of similar "colour revolutions" and it does not particularly like Pashinyan.⁷ Indeed, Russia will likely allow the advancement of Azerbaijani forces to some extent, as a sign of respect for the country and for the independence of its foreign policy from an over-reliance on the West, and will take the opportunity to make clear to Yerevan the extent of its dependence on Russia and the fact that it should show Moscow more appreciation in the future. To this end, the fact that the EU supported the Armenian Revolution in 2018 but now silently observes as war breaks out with Azerbaijan is a benefit to Russia.

FROM TEHRAN TO WASHINGTON

Tehran supports Armenia in this conflict, due to its complicated relationship with Azerbaijan and its strong economic relations with Yerevan. Armenia is the largest importer of oil, gas, and electricity from Iran. Meanwhile, Iran and Azerbaijan share a border of more than 760 km and have had numerous territorial disputes over parts of the Caspian Sea, abundant with oil and gas.



AZERBAIJAN, ARMENIA, AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH: THE CAUCASIAN CONFLICT THAT BOILS OVER FROM TIME TO TIME
(PHOTO: AL JAZEERA)

The Persian Empire controlled the whole Caucasus region at one point, which included Azerbaijan, but lost the territory in the Russian-Persian war of 1826–1828. In the 1990s, Iran finally tried to expand its influence into Azerbaijan again, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but without much success. While Azerbaijanis are largely Shia Muslims, like most Muslims in Iran, this did not equate to a natural partnership. Northeastern Iran, home to nearly 20 million ethnic Azeris who originated in Azerbaijan, has been an especially large stumbling block.

Many Azeris view northern Iran as a *de facto* southern Azerbaijan, and have expressed territorial claims to the area. In response, Tehran threw support behind Armenia in an attempt to weaken Azerbaijan, applying the logic that my-enemy's-enemy-is-my-friend.⁸ But beyond this, Iran is motivated by Azerbaijan's close links to Israel, as the two countries have cooperated for years in intelligence and military matters.⁹

As for the United States, Washington has participated since 1997, together with France and Russia, in mediation efforts established by the OSCE Minsk Group, between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 2001, US officials took a firm position on peace and

invited the presidents of both parties to the conflict to meet in person in Florida, with American mediators, but the effort resulted in no significant progress. In recent weeks, political actors in the US have given little attention to the renewed conflict, and no longer appear to have direct interests in the South Caucasus. In fact, after the breakout of the current violence, the US was among the last governments to issue a press release.

Similarly, NATO and its Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg clearly communicated to Armenia that the Alliance took no sides and had no direct interest in the conflict.¹⁰ And the EU turned out to be unprepared to assume a stronger role in mediation, and has reduced its actions to official statements.

THE OUTLOOK

The future of the South Caucasus is now in question. While the frozen conflict there has boiled over from time to time and only a tense stalemate was achieved following the last ceasefire in 2016, the price of the current violence is already unbearably high (though neither country will reveal the actual numbers of military victims). Despite the fierce rhetoric of officials in Yerevan about freedom and national



**AZERBAIJAN USES
BAYRAKTAR TB2 DRONES
TO INFLICT SERIOUS LOSSES
ON ARMENIA**

self-determination, Armenia has suffered extensive human loss from the deployment by Azerbaijan of Bayraktar TB2 drones manufactured in Turkey and Harop “kamikaze-drones” made in Israel. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has obviously invested income from the sale of oil and gas in sophisticated defence systems and modernizing its military, and has been unwilling to agree to a ceasefire.

The Azerbaijani Government is clearly frustrated by the fact that two decades of negotiations have yielded no real results, and is determined to regain control over its occupied territory using military force. Still, Armenia insists that the Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh has a right to self-determination. Both countries, along with many Western analysts, frequently use religious arguments to explain the roots of the conflict, but the truth is that it is rooted exclusively in secular nationalism and territorial pretensions.

The new war that is raging over Nagorno-Karabakh is a diplomatic defeat for the West and proof of its indifference regarding conflicts on the margins of Europe. The US has stepped back from its role as a global power, and this vacuum is increasingly filled by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and France. Considering the history of the Caucasus as a region where three great powers have clashed in the past – the Ottoman, Russian, and Safavid Empires – one should not rule out the potential of this conflict to more deeply implicate their modern-day successors. ■

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