



POLICY PAPER

HUNGARY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: ORBÁN'S DANCE ON THE EDGE

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INTRODUCTION: PUTIN, ORBÁN AND DODIK

Milorad Dodik, president of the Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity Republika Srpska (RS), met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in February 2024. At the meeting, he, among other things, complained about the sanctions imposed against him and his associates by the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom. Dodik promised Putin that he would prevent the membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in NATO. He further boasted of his “excellent relations with ... [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán.”¹

The relationship between the two politicians – Dodik and Orbán – was conceived in the summer of 2019 with the help of a mutual friend, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. The three share similar worldviews, authoritarian tendencies and comparable political paths. Their positions are quite aligned, from Russia and China to the hope of Donald Trump's return to the White House. Cooperation with Orbán, Dodik explained to Putin in February, facilitated his relationship with the EU.

Indeed, Hungary is the most vocal opponent of introducing individual EU sanctions against Dodik. Orbán's man in Brussels, Olivér Várhelyi, has been the EU commissioner since 2019 and has significant influence on the disbursement of EU funds. As if that was not enough, at the beginning of 2024, Hungary took command of the EU mission EUFOR Althea, a 1,600-member peacekeeping force in BiH.

For Orbán, this relationship shows that he is a leader capable of exporting his model of governance. There exists, of course, a certain economic interest too. He also uses Dodik for his own promotion as a sort of mediator between him and a part of the West. But for Dodik, Orbán is his key ally and a disruptor within two transatlantic alliances: the EU and NATO. Orbán is both his

1 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, “Dodik Putinu: Srpska ima ogromnu podršku Vučića i Orbana” [Dodik to Putin: Srpska Enjoys Enormous Support from Vučić and Orbán], 21 February 2024. <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=545388>

protector and promoter, someone who strengthens his position at home and gives his words and deeds a stamp of approval.

The focus of this political analysis is the role of Hungary in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which since 2019 has been personified in the relationship between two political veterans, Orbán and Dodik. The analysis is divided into four chapters:

*Chapter one, **Orbán Aligned with Dodik's Opposition***, tackles the events before Dodik's election as a member of the BiH Presidency in 2018, when the relations between the two politicians took an upward trajectory.

*Chapter two, **Orbán's Pivot towards Dodik***, addresses the period from July 2019 to mid 2020, when Orbán was actively turning towards Dodik.

*Chapter three, **Turning Point***, covers the period from the end of 2021 to mid 2022 and Orbán's positioning during Dodik's attack on the constitutional and institutional architecture of BiH.

*Chapter four, **Orbán and Putin vs. Dayton***, using the example of Dodik's awarding of Orbán in January 2024 and the messages Orbán sent during his inauguration, tackles the question of whether Orbán and Hungary have crossed the line in terms of respecting the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The conclusion of this analysis reflects on the changed regional, European and global context, and the role of Orbán, and the neighbouring Serbia; it also offers a look into the future, taking into account the challenges that come with the elections for the European Parliament and the new European Commission, as well as the US presidential elections – and the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House.

1. ORBÁN ALIGNED WITH DODIK'S OPPOSITION

On the eve of the general elections held in BiH in October 2014, the European People's Party (EPP) was deeply involved in the activities of BiH parties that are either its members or are close to it.² At the initiative of several national and regional actors, and with the personal support and involvement of the then EPP president, Joseph Daul, in April 2014 the five parties signed a joint statement and announced their intention to form a joint government at all levels after the elections.³

With the encouragement of the EPP and favourable election results, above all the victory of the PDP candidate for the Presidency of BiH, Milorad Ivanić, the new Council of Ministers of BiH was formed based on the April Platform. At the level of the Republika Srpska entity, Milorad Dodik renewed the mandate of the entity president, and the entity government was made up of a coalition gathered around his SNSD, without parties close to EPP – PDP and SDS.

Orbán and his party were very clearly and directly informed about the efforts of the EPP president and the need to support sister parties.⁴ Above all, they were expected not to disrupt these efforts, and if they wanted to, they could also support the concept – which Orbán and his party accepted, thus ruling out any cooperation with the rival SNSD and its leader Milorad Dodik. Moreover, at that time the fundamental and most important platform for political cooperation between Budapest and the countries of the Western Balkans was taking place through cooperation with sister parties, ranging from North Macedonia, through Serbia, to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2 Interview with the EPP official in charge of foreign policy and international cooperation conducted by the author in August 2019.

3 The five parties are: Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH), Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ 1990), Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) and Serbian Democratic Party (SDS).

Al Jazeera Balkans, "Narodne stranke u BiH potpisale saradnju" [People's parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a cooperation agreement], 21 November 2016.

<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2014/4/4/narodne-stranke-u-bih-potpisale-saradnju>

4 Interview with the EPP official in charge of foreign policy and international cooperation conducted by the author in August 2019.

When the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, visited Banja Luka in February 2018 at the invitation of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs and member of the PDP (member of the EPP), Igor Crnadak, he did not meet with Milorad Dodik, at that time the president of the Republika Srpska, nor with anyone from his closest circle of associates.

Szijjártó, who was in Banja Luka as Crnadak's special guest at the regional conference on EU integration organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH, supported "the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU and NATO" in a statement to the media.⁵

In the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP), of which Crnadak is a prominent member, at that moment Szijjártó's visit to Banja Luka was seen as the pinnacle of very good and long cooperation with Orbán's party within the EPP.⁶ Among other things, since September 2017, Hungary has placed one of its experienced diplomats at the disposal of Minister Crnadak, to support his team in charge of the European integration process.⁷

At a time when the improving relations between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić were increasingly covered by the media in Serbia and BiH, the visit to Banja Luka in February 2018 was also considered part of the PDP general elections campaign for October 2018.

However, at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, two significant changes ensued, paving the way for the establishment of contacts, followed by a close partnership, between Milorad Dodik and Viktor Orbán.

First, in the BiH general elections in October 2018, Milorad Dodik defeated Mladen Ivanić in the race for a member of the BiH Presidency, and his party, SNSD, established power at all levels, including the state level. Second, under the baton of Joseph Daul, Orbán's party was suspended from EPP membership in March 2019. This opened the way for a change in Orbán's policy in BiH.

5 Dnevni avaz, "Sijarto: Mađarska podržava integraciju BiH ka EU i NATO-u" [Szijjártó: Hungary supports the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina in EU and NATO], 23 February 2024.

<https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/354715/sijarto-madarska-podrzava-integraciju-bih-ka-eu-i-nato-u>

6 Interview with a high-ranking PDP official conducted by the author in September 2019.

7 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Crnadak i Sijarto o nastavku procesa evropskih integracija" [Crnadak and Szijjártó on the continuation of the European integration process], 11 January 2018.
<https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=285166>

2. ORBÁN'S PIVOT TOWARDS DODIK

"I want us to start this cooperation also out of personal needs, because I respect you personally, Mr. Dodik, and you enjoy great respect in Hungary," said Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in June 2019, after the first official meeting with Milorad Dodik, then chairman of the BiH Presidency.

"We respect Bosnia and Herzegovina," added Orbán, who held a press conference for Dodik in Budapest in a room dominated by several large flags of BiH and Hungary. The expectation of Hungarian diplomats was that this visual message would be enough to appease negative reactions from the rest of BiH, as well as negative rumours about Hungary's intentions.⁸ Especially with respect to the scandals caused by Dodik at the beginning of his term in the BiH Presidency, only half a year earlier, caused by the presence of the BiH flag.⁹

Upon initial inquiries by diplomats from key EU and NATO member states, Hungary explained Orbán's pivot towards Dodik as the common goal of maintaining peace and stability in the wider region.¹⁰ In those talks, the Hungarian side insisted that a successful strategy must include talks with all relevant actors, in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement. Apart from a few friendly suggestions, there was no resistance to the Hungarian pivot towards Dodik among the key EU and NATO countries. At that moment, the key members of the EU and the Trump administration in the USA were busy balancing forces around the idea of exchanging territories between Serbia and Kosovo.¹¹ On the contrary, some believed that the rapprochement between Dodik and an EU and NATO member country would benefit Western interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

8 Interview with a Hungarian diplomat familiar with the politics of the Western Balkans, December 2019.

9 Klix, "Džaferović nakon Dodikove provokacije: Povreda zastave je povreda države, na to neću pristati" [Džaferović about Dodik's provocation: Violation of the flag is violation of the state, I will not agree to that], 11 December 2018. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dzaferovic-nakon-dodikove-provokacije-povreda-zastave-je-povreda-drzave-na-to-ne-cu-pristati/181211093>

10 Interview with diplomats from member countries of the so-called Quint, consisting of the US, the UK, Germany, France and Italy, September 2019.

11 European Stability Initiative (ESI), "The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past", 25 April 2019. <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/hypnotist-aleksandar-vucic-john-bolton-and-return-past>

In June 2019, Orbán very openly outlined the content of his pivot towards Dodik and his new policy towards BiH.

The main goal was to establish direct political, economic, cultural and educational ties between Hungary and the BiH entity Republika Srpska. On that occasion, Orbán announced “the adoption of an action plan that will relate to both political and economic issues, as well as cooperation in the field of education and culture with the Republika Srpska.”¹²

The way to achieve this goal, Orbán said very clearly, was his personal relationship with Dodik. “You are a man who is ready to stand up for his community and we respect the identity of the Republika Srpska,” Orbán said, adding that “in the future I see many points of contact between us.” On that occasion, he offered him a sort of political protection, saying that “criticism against you is an acknowledgement, nothing else.”

The concretisation of the new Hungarian policy did not happen quickly, and initially it did not go the way Hungary expected.

The first visible result came only at the start of the pandemic, when in April 2020 Hungary announced that it would send medical aid to the BiH entity Republika Srpska to fight coronavirus.¹³ This decision was changed very quickly, when the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH, Bisera Turković, warned that it was wrong to support “administrative regions, territories or even certain ethnic groups within BiH.”¹⁴ Minister Turković warned Brussels and key EU and NATO member countries about the potential negative consequences of such support. In the end, Hungarian Minister Szijjártó first brought aid to Sarajevo, and then went to Banja Luka. However, the authorities in Sarajevo were forced, at the insistence of Banja Luka and Budapest, to accept the division of aid into equal parts between the two entities. In other cases, the aid was distributed in such a way that two thirds went to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and one third to the Republika Srpska.

Apart from occasional meetings and mutual visits at the political level, Hungary’s new policy towards BiH, including Orbán’s pivot towards Dodik, took full swing only in the second half of 2021.

12 Klix, “Džaferović nakon Dodikove provokacije: Povreda zastave je povreda države, na to neću pristati” [Džaferović about Dodik’s provocation: Violation of the flag is violation of the state, I will not agree to that], 11 December 2018. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dzaferovic-nakon-dodikove-provokacije-povreda-zastave-je-povreda-drzave-na-to-ne-cu-pristati/181211093>

13 Radio Televizija Vojvodina, “Posle intervencije Sarajeva pomoć Mađarske celoj BiH, a ne samo Republici Srpskoj” [After Sarajevo’s intervention, Hungary’s aid goes to the entire BiH, not only to Republika Srpska], 14 April 2020. https://rtv.rs/sk/region/posle-intervencije-sarajeva-pomoc-madjarske-celoj-bih-a-ne-samo-republi-ci-srpskoj_1114021.html

14 Banja Luka portal, “Biseri Turković smeta što Republika Srpska dobija pomoć iz Rusije i Mađarske” [Bisera Turković is bothered by the Republika Srpska receiving help from Russia and Hungary], 14 April 2020. <https://www.bl-portal.com/novosti/biseri-turkovic-smeta-sto-republika-srpska-dobija-pomoc-iz-rusije-i-madjarske/>

3. TURNING POINT

“I come from an extremely fragile political space... from an area that has an undefined community... where we have problems with ideologies imposed on us by liberals from the West,” Milorad Dodik, then a member of the BiH Presidency, said in Budapest in September 2021.¹⁵ In the great hall where Dodik spoke, the Demographic Summit organised by Orbán’s government was taking place, and the prime ministers of three EU and NATO member countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia) sat in the front rows, as well as Trump’s then former US vice president, Mike Pence.

Dodik’s speech and participation at the Summit in Budapest were broadcast live on almost all major television and radio stations in the BiH entity Republika Srpska.¹⁶ They were presented as a sign of international approval of Dodik’s policy in BiH, and as a hint that nothing will come of the international isolation of the entity authorities. Dodik and his coalition partners in the Republika Srpska were at that time under pressure from the members of the Quint (USA, UK, Germany, France and Italy) because they resisted the appointment of Christian Schmidt as the new international community High Representative in BiH, and because from July 2021 they were blocking the adoption of most decisions at the state level. At the same time, Dodik and his coalition partners threatened to take concrete steps towards the collapse of the constitutional and institutional framework of BiH.

In Budapest, Dodik spoke about the migrant crisis, adopting the narrative of the European extreme right and warning that “a four-hour drive from here brings one to the area where migrants from the Middle East arrived. There, because of seven thousand of them, the local population leaves their homes as they cannot endure the torture they suffer every day.” Dodik presented

15 Budapest Demographic Summit IV, “1. Conference Day”, 23 September 2021.
<https://budapestidemografiaicsucs.hu/>

16 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, “Dodik na Samitu u Budimpešti; Razgovarao i sa Orbanom” [Dodik at the Summit in Budapest; He also spoke with Orbán], 23 September 2021.
<https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=446648>

his interpretation of the 1990s Serbs' experience as a warning for Europe, and called for the defence of "Christian Europe":

"You in Europe did not understand us Serbs. You demonised us, and we defended our families, our values. You accepted to stand on one side, I'm talking about the world that did that ... They told me that they must show that they have a good relationship with Muslims and this was a good opportunity. So why are you doing at our expense? Everything that happened to us, without the intention of gloating, is slowly but surely happening in some places that did not expect it to happen. Whether you will understand it now, or whether it will come to your door and get into your house, is up to you. What changes and what is subject to letting go of its values is us – Christians. My experience tells me that Muslims do not abandon their values. I do not call for hatred, conflict, rejection. I'm just calling for you to acknowledge this somehow. To defend Europe, the whole of Europe, not only the EU – for which it is very difficult to believe that it will be defended if it continues with these policies. Because the future of Europe lies not only in economy and energy stability, but also in demographic stability – the birth rate. If that is missing, the peoples who happen to live there will remain, not the European peoples."¹⁷

One month later, on 28 October 2021, Dodik's party, SNSD, adopted a seven-page document in Pale that contained a detailed plan for the unilateral and unconstitutional takeover of state powers, and for the collapse of the constitutional and institutional framework of BiH.¹⁸ The plan was based on the work of five expert groups, tasked with preparing the necessary analytical and legal documents in four areas (fiscal policy, justice, defence, security) and drafting a new Constitution of the Republika Srpska.

The plan envisaged a seven-step implementation, including the adoption of legal solutions for the establishment of parallel institutions at the level of the Republika Srpska, but also the ban on the operation of state institutions on the territory of the Republika Srpska. The plan outlined that the institutions of the Republika Srpska would also apply repressive measures to expel state institutions. One of the points of this plan was the withdrawal from the Armed Forces of BiH, and the establishment of the Army of the Republika Srpska. The seriousness of Dodik's and his partners' intentions this time was seen in the adoption of the law to establish a parallel and unconstitutional Agency for Medicines of BiH, which was to collapse the single market, import and export of medicines.

17 Budapest Demographic Summit IV, "1. Conference Day", 23 September 2021.
<https://budapestidemografiaicsucs.hu/>

18 Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), "Informacija o prenesenim nadležnostima Republike Srpske na nivo BiH i postupak vraćanja nadležnosti" [Information on the transferred competences of the Republika Srpska to the BiH level and the procedure for reclaiming them], 28 October 2021.
<https://twitter.com/adicerimagic/status/1469294289771446282>

Ten days later, on 6 November 2021, Orbán arrived for a two-hour private visit to Dodik.¹⁹ During the visit, there were no statements to the media, and Dodik portrayed it as a sign of “Hungary’s understanding for the Republika Srpska.”

In informal conversations, Hungarian diplomats explained the visit as Orbán’s attempt to understand Dodik’s announcements, reasons and intentions in direct contact.²⁰ Hungary assured its partners that the talks were conducted with the goal of maintaining peace and stability in BiH and the region, and that their adherence to the Dayton Peace Agreement is unquestionable. The visit was also portrayed as an attempt to open a communication channel between the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, and Banja Luka. Namely, Schmidt visited Budapest a few days earlier, where he allegedly delivered certain messages for Dodik.

Part of the Quint, however, seemed not to have been convinced that Orbán’s efforts, even if sincere, would be enough. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, Heiko Maas asked the European External Action Service (EEAS) already on 15 November 2021 to prepare a proposal for individual sanctions, including for Milorad Dodik, and asked other member states to support the initiative.²¹ Hungary opposed the introduction of sanctions, and a few days later, during a visit to BiH, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Peter Szijjártó, called for a conversation with Dodik and issued a public warning that Hungary “will use the veto if the issue of sanctions comes up on the agenda.”²²

Ten days later, on 25 November 2021, High Representative Christian Schmidt, in an interview for The Guardian, stated to the surprise of many that Milorad Dodik “nevertheless suspended the plan to contest the survival of the armed forces of BiH.”²³ Dodik himself confirmed this a little later. Schmidt also stated that this happened “under persuasion by some regional leaders.” There is a consensus in diplomatic circles that Budapest participated in the talks that led to this development, including that part of these efforts was the announcement of Hungary’s intention to allocate funds in the amount of EUR 100 million “for grants to small and medium-sized enterprises, and farmers.”²⁴

19 Radio Free Europe, “Orban u privatnoj posjeti RS-u sa Dodikom u Laktašima” [Orbán on a private visit to the RS with Dodik in Laktaši], 6 November 2021.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-banja-luka-madjarska-viktor-Orbán/31548706.html>

20 Interview with diplomats of the Quint, September and October 2022, and a Hungarian diplomat, July 2022.

21 Dnevni avaz, “Ministar vanjskih poslova Njemačke traži sankcije za Milorada Dodika” [Germany’s Foreign Minister requests sanctions for Milorad Dodik], 15 November 2021.

<https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/696711/ministar-vanjskih-poslova-njemacke-trazi-sankcije-za-milorada-dodika>

22 Radio Free Europe, “Orban: Moramo spriječiti EU da sankcionira Dodika” [Orbán: We must prevent the EU from sanctioning Dodik], 21 December 2021.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/viktor-Orbán-milorad-dodik-sankcije/31619587.html>

23 Al Jazeera Balkans, “Schmidt: Dodik je pod pritiskom odustao” [Schmidt: Dodik gives up under pressure], 25 November 2021.

<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/11/25/schmidt-dodik-je-pod-pritiskom-odustao-od-napada-na-oruzane-snage-bih>

24 Radio Free Europe, “Detalji Orbanovog ekonomskog programa za Republiku Srpsku” [Details of Orbán’s economic programme for the Republika Srpska], 9 December 2021.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/madjarska-republika-srpska-dodik-Orbán-fondovi/31601307.html>

However, there are different interpretations of the reasons for Dodik's willingness to take a small step back. For some, this was Dodik's tactical withdrawal and buying time. Others were convinced that Dodik and Banja Luka still planned to implement a major part of the plan from October 2021. Some diplomats were even then convinced that Dodik's entire plan was coordinated with Moscow, as part of a broader plan to attack the European security and political architecture, with the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation becoming increasingly certain.

In any case, this and similar activities of Orbán and his people regarding Dodik were seen in a part of the EU and NATO as positive and useful for the interests of the EU and NATO. When making the decision to give command of the EUFOR Altea mission to Hungary, for instance, such examples were used in favour of Hungary, with the idea that its greater participation would mean better results with Dodik. But it should be emphasised that this argument was not decisive. A combination of other countries' reluctance to take responsibility, the desire to have a NATO member take command instead of neutral Austria, and perhaps most importantly, thinking that the Hungarian commander will facilitate the agreement of the Russian Federation for the extension of the mission in the United Nations Security Council ruled in Hungary's favour.

With the election of the new Federal Government of Germany, and the arrival of Annalena Baerbock at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, efforts to sanction Milorad Dodik and his associates gained new momentum and energy from mid-December 2021.²⁵ In the weeks that followed, the new German government lobbied for sanctions in various forums and meetings. Hungary continued to oppose the introduction of sanctions both publicly and behind closed doors, calling for dialogue.²⁶

In mid-February 2022, it became clear to Berlin that nothing would come of the introduction of individual sanctions. They focused their efforts on the EU's decision to block funds in the amount of 600 million intended for the Republika Srpska (construction of the Vc highway through BiH).²⁷ To release the funds, the EU led by Germany demanded from Dodik and the ruling coalition in Banja Luka first to return to the decision-making process in state institutions, but also to withdraw and annul all conclusions and laws that were adopted by the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, which were part of SNSD's October plan for the collapse of the institutional and constitutional framework of BiH (including the Law on the Agency for Medicines).

25 Al Jazeera Balkans, "Njemačka se zalaže za sankcije Miloradu Dodiku" [Germany advocates sanctions against Milorad Dodik], 13 December 2021.

<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/12/13/njemacka-se-zalaze-za-sankcije-protiv-milorada-dodika>

26 Dnevni avaz, "Sijarto nakon razgovora sa Šmitom: BiH igra ključnu ulogu u regiji, Mađarska ne vidi smisla u prijetnjama uvođenjem sankcija" [Szijjártó after talks with Schmidt: BiH plays a key role in the region, Hungary sees no point in threats to introduce sanctions], 12 January 2022.

<https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/709708/sijarto-nakon-razgovora-sa-smitom-bih-igra-kljucnu-ulogu-u-regiji-madarska-ne-vidi-smisla-u-prijetnjama-uvodenjem-sankcija>

27 Sarajevo Times, "The EU has stipulated 600 million euros in Aid for the return of RS Officials to BiH institutions", 22 February 2022.

<https://sarajevotimes.com/the-eu-has-stipulated-600-million-euros-in-aid-for-the-return-of-rs-officials-to-bih-institutions/>

At the beginning of June 2022, the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska adopted conclusions stating that “the implementation of the Conclusions regarding the Information on the transfer of competences from the Republika Srpska to the level of BiH, of 10 December 2021, shall be postponed by six months.”²⁸ Dodik and the ruling coalition, however, rejected the request of some EU member states to withdraw and annul all conclusions and laws. Although this was enough for a part of the EU, due to the refusal of the remaining part, including Germany, EUR 600 million were not released.

This, of course, did not prevent Hungary from financially supporting the Republika Srpska in the period that followed. In July 2022, the financial support in the amount of EUR 35 million was launched, through an open invitation to entrepreneurs to nominate project funding in the amount of up to EUR 25 thousand.²⁹

Hungary also supported Banja Luka when the German authorities announced in August 2023 that they were completely withdrawing from four projects in the territory of the Republika Srpska – amounting to EUR 110 million – due to the continuation of “the secessionist policy of that entity and its president Milorad Dodik.”³⁰ Namely, Hungary confirmed its readiness to take over the financing of those projects.³¹

The policy of regular meetings and cooperation between Hungary and representatives of the Republika Srpska had two effects. The first is reflected in raising the international visibility of the Republika Srpska entity, as a partner of an independent and internationally recognised state, a member of the EU and NATO. The second is reflected in the strengthening of the personal relationship between Viktor Orbán and Milorad Dodik, which through these meetings and messages, developed into a relationship of protective and promoting nature.

28 National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, “Zaključci u vezi sa Informacijom o međunarodnoj, političkoj i bezbjednosnoj situaciji – mjesto i uloga Republike Srpske” [Conclusions regarding the Information on the international, political and security situation - the place and role of the Republic of Srpska], 8 June 2022.

<https://www.narodnaskupstinar.net/?q=la/akti/zaključci/zaključci-u-vezi-sa-informacijom-o-međunarodnoj-političkoj-i-bezbjednosnoj-situaciji--mjesto-i-uloga-republike-srpske>

29 Radio Free Europe, “Odobreno 35 miliona eura mađarske pomoći za privrednike Republike Srpske” [EUR 35 million of Hungarian aid for entrepreneurs of the Republika Srpska approved], 1 July 2022.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/szijarto-dodik-sastanak-banja-luka/31924746.html>

30 Radio Free Europe, “Njemačka odustala od projekata u Republici Srpskoj, vrijednih 105 miliona eura” [Germany suspended projects in the Republika Srpska, worth EUR 105 million], 9 August 2023.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/njemacka-projekti-ambasada-rs/32540717.html>

31 Radio Free Europe, “Vlada RS objavila da Mađarska preuzima projekte koje je Njemačka obustavila” [RS government announced that Hungary is taking over projects that Germany suspended], 5 April 2024.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/viskovic-hrgud-madjarska-njemacka/32892756.html>

4. ORBÁN AND PUTIN AGAINST DAYTON

The celebration of this year's unconstitutional Republika Srpska Day, on 9 January, was not much different from the previous ones. In the centre was Milorad Dodik, and next to him stood the Russian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On that day in 1992, a group of Serb MPs left the first democratically elected Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina and decided to declare the Republika Srpska (i.e., the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Their primary goal was to create a monoethnic territory where Serbs would be the dominant majority. Their long-term goal was to unite with neighbouring Serbia. To achieve this, the multi-ethnic fabric of BiH had to be destroyed. What followed was the most brutal conflict in Europe since the end of World War II, which culminated in the genocide in Srebrenica, leaving around 100,000 dead, 2.2 million displaced and tens of thousands raped.

Since 2015, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina has repeatedly declared the celebration of this day unconstitutional. The highest court in the country ruled that it discriminates against non-Serbs living in that BiH entity. While the Republika Srpska constitutionally retained the name Republika Srpska, for the Constitutional Court it was no longer just that.

One of the key goals set in the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, signed by all warring parties, was to restore the multi-ethnic nature of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This required a large-scale return of displaced persons and their property, prosecution of war criminals, as well as ensuring that constitutional and legal provisions guarantee equal rights for all ethnic groups and the others throughout the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With significant international military, financial and diplomatic efforts, much has been achieved since then. Almost a fifth of the population in the Republika Srpska are non-Serbs. Four of the six most important positions in the executive, legislative and judicial authorities in the entity must be held by non-Serbs, as well as half of all entity ministerial functions. Furthermore,

changing the entity constitution is impossible without the support of non-Serbs in the Council of Peoples of the Republika Srpska.

Since Milorad Dodik's first mandate as Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska in 1998, he has proven himself a pragmatist, always adapting his rhetoric and actions to the circumstances. He, therefore, supported the return of displaced persons when it seemed inevitable. He too supported comprehensive constitutional reforms when the US insisted on them in 2006. He was also in favour of BiH's membership in NATO.

However, whenever it seemed politically more profitable to accept nationalist goals, by denying the genocide in Srebrenica and challenging state institutions, he did so.

Since 2015, Dodik has continuously defied the decision of the Constitutional Court on the celebration of 9 January. In 2016, he organised an illegal referendum, asking citizens to support his rejection of the court judgment. It took a coordinated diplomatic effort by the EU and NATO allies to convince the leadership of neighbouring Serbia to publicly state that it "does not support the referendum."³² It was part of the West's firm position at the time to stand behind the Constitutional Court and its decisions, no matter how trivial or bizarre the issue may seem to some foreigners.

The commemoration of 9 January has meanwhile turned into a parade of nationalist celebrations and secessionist rhetoric, fully supported by Russia.

Anatoly Bibilov, then the president of the self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia, supported by Russia, attended the celebration on 9 January 2018. He signed a cooperation agreement with Milorad Dodik and said on that occasion that "our two republics are like twins with an identical strategic partnership with Russia."³³ Since 2019, members of the Night Wolves, Russia's largest motorcycle club and a far-right group that supports the Kremlin, have become a regular feature of the parades. Last year, the flags of the self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic were carried in the parade.

During this year's celebration, Milorad Dodik announced that Viktor Orbán was awarded the highest order of the Republika Srpska. The same one with which the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, was awarded a year earlier. Dodik announced that Orbán gratefully decided to accept it.

When Orbán arrived in Banja Luka in early April 2024 to receive the order, he brought with him a group of about fifty businessmen who participated in the "Economic Forum of the Republika Srpska and Hungary."³⁴

32 Radio Free Europe, "Nikolić i Vučić nisu podržali referendum ali neće uticati na stav RS" [Nikolić and Vučić did not support the referendum, but this will not influence the RS position], 1 September 2016. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/27960326.html>

33 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Bibilov: Došao sam u Republiku Srpsku, a ne u BiH" [Bibilov: I came to the Republika Srpska, not BiH], 10 January 2018. <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=285019>

34 Banja Luka, "Ekonomski forum uspješno završen, Srpska otvorena za mađarske investicije" [Economic Forum concluded successfully, Srpska is open for Hungarian investments], 5 April 2024. <https://banjaluka.net/ekonomski-forum-uspjesno-završen-srpska-otvorena-za-madžarske-investicije/>

In addition to the fact that in the morning hours at the ceremony he accepted the order awarded on the occasion of the unconstitutional Day of the Republika Srpska, one received by Putin a year earlier, Orbán's visit to Banja Luka came at the moment of Dodik's new announcements of leaving the decision-making process at the state level, opposing the decisions of the high representative Christian Schmidt, and of the dissolution and collapse of BiH.

During two speeches in Banja Luka, which lasted a total of 22 minutes, Orbán went a step further in supporting Milorad Dodik and his policy. He said that awarding the order is a "state act."³⁵ He said that his support for Serbs in the Balkans is a response to decades of injustice towards them. He also stated that he "believes in the future of the Republika Srpska, the part of BiH where Serbs live." And he added that "the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina is more complicated." He described BiH as "the most complicated country in the world, unlike the Republika Srpska, which is not." In the Republika Srpska, "things are clear and transparent, everyone knows which are the competent institutions and procedures and things function." At one point he said that "for us, Hungary belongs to Hungarians, for Serbs, the Republika Srpska belongs to Serbs. Foreigners should respect that." Orbán also announced that the priority of Hungary's EU presidency from July 2024 will be directed towards the stabilisation of BiH. Regarding the Office of the High Representative (OHR), Orbán described the imposition of amendments to the electoral law as a "provocation" and a "degradation" of what has been achieved at the beginning of EU accession negotiations with BiH. He called on foreigners to stop interfering in BiH's internal affairs and allow local actors to come to an agreement. With this, Orbán undoubtedly crossed the line in terms of respecting the Dayton Peace Agreement.

However, Orbán and Hungary did not stop there. In mid-May 2024, they completely took over Vučić's and Dodik's rhetoric about the Resolution proposed in the General Assembly of the United Nations on the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.³⁶ After the meeting with Dodik, Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Szijjártó stated that Hungary will vote against the Resolution.³⁷ Claiming that its adoption will destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina and lead to "demoralisation of the Serbian people." During the vote on 23 May 2024, Hungary was the only NATO and EU member state to vote against.³⁸ Along with Serbia, Hungary was the only member state of the Council of Europe that voted against. By doing so, it placed itself alongside Russia and Belarus in Europe.

- 35 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Dodjela odlikovanja Orbanu i konferencija za novinare" [Awarding of decorations to Orbán and press conference]; "Otvaranje Ekonomskog foruma" [Opening of the Economic Forum], 5 April 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX9GR3TjXVw&t=1025s>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEb3FqStnRs&t=1203s>
- 36 N1, "Objavljujemo finalnu verziju rezolucije o genocidu u Srebrenici" [We publish the final version of the Srebrenica genocide resolution], 18 May 2024. <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/objavljujemo-finalnu-verziju-rezolucije-o-genocidu-srebrenici/>
- 37 Federalna, "Sijarto: Mađarska će glasati protiv rezolucije o Srebrenici" [Szijjártó: Hungary will vote against the Srebrenica resolution], 15 May 2024. <https://federalna.ba/sijarto-madarska-ce-glasati-protiv-rezolucije-o-srebrenici-jtjri>
- 38 United Nations, "International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly", 23 May 2024. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4048673?ln=en>

CONCLUSION: DODIK, ORBÁN, PUTIN, TRUMP...

In September 2015, the European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin-based think tank, described Viktor Orbán as the most dangerous man in the European Union (EU). According to ESI, Orbán, using the membership in the EU, NATO, and his party's membership in the largest family of European parties, the European People's Party (EPP), had access to the most important political leaders and through them tried to "inject a far-right virus into the bloodstream of Europe's political centre."³⁹

Namely, in the year of the migrant crisis, during which more than 1.3 million people arrived in the EU, Orbán's rhetoric and actions were more like the extreme right-wing parties' such as the National Rally in France and the Freedom Party of Austria. Orbán openly accused all leaders of centre-left or centre-right, including sister parties, of treason, claiming that "they import hundreds of thousands of people" from "peoples who do not belong to European culture." He also claimed that migrants had turned parts of Berlin and Stockholm into "no-go zones." While he was erecting fences around Hungary, often using violence, he offered a "solution" that in fact consisted only of redirecting the migrant route to Croatia and Slovenia. During that period, he presented himself in speeches as a Hungarian hero, a rebel similar to the revolutionaries of 1848 and 1956, a man who shows individual resistance to the traitorous elites in Brussels and Berlin wanting to destroy Europe. And quite a number of politicians in other EU countries, members of centre-right or centre-left parties, tried to imitate him, both rhetorically and in terms of the offered "solutions."

Viktor Orbán and his party have since been expelled from the EPP, but in the meantime he managed to find a whole range of allies and like-minded people throughout the EU and NATO,

39 European Stability Initiative (ESI), "Refugees as a means to an end – The EU's most dangerous man", 24 September 2015. <https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/newsletter/pdf/ESI%20-%20The%20EU%27s%20most%20dangerous%20man%20-%202024%20September%202015.pdf>
ESI, "The most dangerous Wizard in the EU", 7 October 2016. <https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/newsletter/pdf/ESI%20-%20The%20most%20dangerous%20Wizard%20in%20the%20EU%20-%207%20October%202016.pdf>

and outside of them, from Russia and China to the USA. After the migrant crisis, Orbán tried to utilise every subsequent crisis to further expand or at least confirm his rhetoric and ideas, but also to strengthen his political influence, from the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU to the pandemic caused by COVID and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Hungary and Orbán have also significantly increased their presence in the Western Balkans, primarily with the help of regional political leaders with similar worldviews, policies, ideas, but also relations with Russia and the possibility of Donald Trump's return to the White House. However, Hungary's stronger presence in the region seen, for example, in it taking command of the EU military mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR Altea, was made possible with the agreement of key EU and NATO member states.

This constitutes a dangerous development for the stability and future of the region and Western interests in it, because since February 2022 and Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, the regional, European and global contexts have changed.

Let us take the example of Serbia, which, along with Hungary and Russia, is Dodik's most important partner, and which in 2016 did not support Dodik's unconstitutional referendum on the Day of the Republika Srpska, thanks to the united approach of the EU and NATO in protecting the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Constitutional Court of BiH. Eight years later, to mark this year's unconstitutional Day of the Republika Srpska, Serbia sent a large delegation led by the then Minister of Defence and the leader of Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party, and today the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia. He was accompanied by the Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Army and several ministers. Vučić, who was not in Banja Luka, wrote in the congratulatory message the usual and important assurance that he recognises BiH within its current borders.⁴⁰ However, he also grimly warned that Serbia and the Republika Srpska will soon face difficult times together.

One of Vučić's ministers present in Banja Luka was rewarded with long and warm applause after she said that "Republika Srpska should exist as a state."⁴¹ Aleksandar Vulin, the recently dismissed director of the Serbian intelligence agency, former Vučić's minister of defence and the interior, now the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, made it clear that a few years ago the integrity of the Republika Srpska was set as the number one priority in Serbia's military doctrine.⁴² Vulin also said that "this generation of Serbian politicians should work to ensure that there are no borders" between majority Serb territories.

40 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Svečana akademija povodom Dana Republike" [Solemn Academy to mark the Day of the Republic], 9 January 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJ-R06pZqos>

41 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Odlikovanja zaslužnim građanima i institucijama" [Awards to deserving citizens and institutions], 9 January 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSra1TA9fqM&t=3917s>

42 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Svečani prijem u Vladi Republike Srpske" [Ceremonial reception in the Government of the Republika Srpska], 9 January 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiLldBgcQPw&t=1009s>

There is danger associated with this, because Dodik and his closest collaborators can convince the institutions in the Republika Srpska of a possible secession and collapse of the institutional and constitutional framework of BiH only if they have clearly visible support from the outside. In his recent interviews, Dodik spoke at length about the need for Serbs to use Trump's potential return to the White House to push for the unification of Serbia and Serb-majority territories, from northern Kosovo to the Republika Srpska.⁴³ According to him, the Americans are a "wounded beast." Dodik said that the Americans had left Afghanistan and that they were defeated in Syria; that they united the West against Russia in Ukraine and that they are also breaking them there. He concluded that Serbs must understand that this is a "crucial moment" for the fulfilment of age-old aspirations.

At the same time, Serbian leaders in Belgrade are arming themselves. Since Vučić came to power in 2012, Serbia's military budget has almost tripled, from EUR 500 million in 2013 to EUR 1.4 billion in 2023. This makes it larger than the budgets of all the other five Western Balkan countries combined. In 2023 alone, Serbia spent EUR 600 million on new weapons and equipment, and the export of the military industry amounted to more than EUR 1.5 billion.

Today, Serbian leaders from Banja Luka through Belgrade to Mitrovica and Podgorica are betting on US withdrawal and on a divided EU and NATO. In this, they see Orbán and Hungary as a key partner. They also see that from Ukraine to Nagorno-Karabakh, it is military force, not diplomacy, that changes reality.

On 24 September 2023, in northern Kosovo, we witnessed the return of Serbian paramilitary forces – ready to use force. In Serbia and the Republika Srpska, they were greeted with praise, and were met with loud support of Russia. In the days that followed, the US government warned that it had discovered "an unprecedented staging of advanced Serbian artillery, tanks, and mechanised infantry units, along the border with Kosovo."⁴⁴

Since then, the Serbian armed forces have partially withdrawn. But as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned on 26 January 2024 "stability remains fragile."⁴⁵ This is an increasingly dangerous spiral of escalation, so it is important that the EU and NATO show Budapest red lines.

43 Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, "Intervju: Milorad Dodik" [Interview: Milorad Dodik], 8 January 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5hkgrr0VKU>

44 State Department, "Department Press Briefing", 3 October 2023. <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-3-2023/#post-487618-KOSOVOSERBIA>

45 NATO, "NATO Secretary General with the Prime Minister of Montenegro", 26 January 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i03DMUjlluM>

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