

# BALKANS MONITOR 1/12/2022

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by **Vanessa Tinker**

## Will the Balkans become the next Geopolitical Crisis between Russia and the West?

### Background.

Russia has sought to maintain its influence in the Balkans by sustaining its leverage in ongoing unresolved conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and between Serbia and Kosovo in order to weaken ongoing efforts to integrate Balkans countries in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As with Ukraine, Russia views NATO's expansion eastward as a breach to earlier verbal commitments it argues the alliance made in the 1990s, all of which the U.S. and NATO leaders decline. Russia insists that the alliances efforts to establish closer ties to countries in the Balkans and expand eastward represent part the West's long term effort to encircle and bringdown Russia. The perceived threat of encirclement is not completely unjustified, especially after Montenegro joined NATO in 2017 and Northern Macedonia in 2020.

To counter this trend, Russia has pursued bolstering ties with Serbs and Serb groups throughout the region, in particular with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and newly elected President of Republika Srpska (RS) Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the case of Serbia and Kosovo, Russia has portrayed itself as the defender of Serbian territorial integrity after using its veto power at the UN Security Council in 2008 to block international recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. Since then, the two countries have strengthened economic, political and military ties. Serbia in recent years, for example, has increased its imports of heavy weapons from Russia including 6 MiG-29 fighters, 30T-72 tanks, 30 other armed vehicles, and the PantsirS1air-defense system. Additionally, the two countries have carried out joint military exercises such as those conducted last year – Joint Response 2021 in May and Slavic Shield 2021 in October. All of which have caused alarm amongst the West and its allies. In a 2019 US Department of Defense (DoD) report, it went so far as to caution how serious the situation had become, noting “Serbia provides the most permissive environment for Russian influence in the Balkans.” Although Serbia is not a member of NATO, nor expresses any interest in joining, it

has remained a member of the alliance's Partnerships for Peace. Additionally, Serbia is pursuing EU membership as a candidate. However, the war in Ukraine has now left Serbia stuck between a rock and hard place, forcing it to decide whether the future of the country lies in the east or west. It has become increasingly difficult for Serbia to situate itself between Russia and the West as the rift grows between them. Unlike most EU members, the government and public have displayed high levels of support for Putin and Russia. This is in part because both countries represent NATO for its role in establishing new republics that were previously part of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia – Ukraine and Kosovo respectively. The other, is Serbia's energy dependency on Russia and the conviction that Russia will remain the defender of their interests in Kosovo.

In the case of BiH, Russia has continued to back Bosnian Serb secessionist, provided RS police forces with arms, and had Russian mercenaries train Bosnian Serb paramilitary. In recent years, Russia has intensified its support, backing Bosnian Serb secessionist leader Milorad Dodik, whose secession threats have been longstanding, already dating back to 2016. However, the situation turned from bad to worse in November 2021, when Dodik, who at the time was the Serb representative of BiH's tripartite presidency, vowed to remove Republika Srpska from all state-level institutions including military, intelligence, judicial, and tax institutions. Not only did his threats jeopardize the already precarious peace established by the 1995 Dayton Accord, but they also had the potential to trigger new conflicts and the partition of the county. More worrisome, was the fact that Dodik's political rhetoric was put into action, when in December 2021, RS regional parliament voted in favor of provisions to opt out of national institutions. Shortly after however, plans were placed on hold following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Given BiH's unstable situation, fears mounted that the deterioration of the security situation internationally could spill over into BiH. For this reason, the EU sent 500 reserves to join its peace force in BiH – EUFOR as a precautionary measure.

The question that remains to be seen is whether Russia's war in Ukraine will weaken its position in the Balkans. The ensuing war has raised concerns that Russia might try to further disrupt the region to redirect attention from its flawed campaign in Ukraine. This in turn could spark new waves of unrest in an already fragile region. What is apparent, is the war has underscored the importance of

the West's engagement in in the region politically, economically, and militarily. This includes for example, reinvigorating talks about EU expansion and the accession of Western Balkan candidate states – Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. By failing to engage with the Balkans region now, it leaves the door open for greater Russian involvement.