



Misguided Balkans policy. Dangerous appeasement

For many years, Western players have been going all out to placate the populist-nationalist players and their destructive ideologies: yet their questionable methods of appeasement and undemocratic interventions have ended up bolstering the very powers that have come to pose a threat to peace. The way for new excesses of violence has been paved. By supporting firebrands, Russia has been able to expand its influence further – this is the Kremlin’s second front for the destabilisation of Europe.

by Marion Kraske

First field of conflict: Kosovo – Serbia

Aleksandar Vucic has a dazzling past behind him. Now President of Serbia, he played a key role in the regime of the former Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic: between 1998 and 2000, Vucic served as Minister for Information; during the Bosnian war, which saw Serbian units commit countless war crimes and the genocide of 8300 Muslims, he deliberately stoked Islamophobia: for every Serb dead, we will kill 100 Muslims, he sneered, just a few days after the violent clashes in Srebrenica.

Vucic has since then done very little to distance himself from these atrocities: as recently as 2018, he paid tribute to Milosevic, who had been brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague on charges of war crimes and genocide, but died while on trial, calling him a “great Serbian leader”. The wishes of other nations have been neglected, Vucic conceded; nevertheless, the Serbs had to pay the very high price of not having grown even greater.

The idea of creating a Greater Serbia was a cornerstone of Slobodan Milosevic’s policy. In 1991, he met the then Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, in Karadjordjevo: the two political powerhouses agreed to divide up Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the aim of creating a Greater Croatia and a Greater Serbia. The result was terrible war crimes on Bosnian soil. Today, 28 years after the end of the war in Bosnia and 24 years after the end of the one in Kosovo, the aim of territorial expansion continues to play a central role in Serbian politics. “Srpski Svet” (Serbian world) is the name of the concept of bringing together all Serbs in a single State – by its very nature, a reimagined version of Milosevic-style imperialism.

The Belgrade leader regards the current borders as entirely temporary. Against this backdrop, he has been playing an expert game of cat and mouse with Western negotiators for years. The key instruments in this are the Serbian minority groups in Kosovo and in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The Bosnian leadership consistently foments conflict in their name. Vucic has steadfastly refused to recognise Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008.

1990s tactics: escalation, de-escalation

As 2023 drew to a close, Serbian nationalists in the Serbian-dominated part of Kosovo were building illegal barricades. Journalists were attacked and even a unit of the rule of law mission EULEX came under fire. Thugs in balaclavas completed the crisis scenario. Belgrade

threatened to march Serbian units in and the army was placed on alert. A dangerous radicalisation catapulting the Balkans back to the 1990s was breaking fresh ground. It is a well-known pattern: provoke, play the ethnic card (the Serbian minority in Kosovo is in a “terrible situation”, the Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabic, claimed), make threats – and then, gradual de-escalation, until we come round to provocation again.

It is slightly problematic that the Western players have got to know the Belgrade escalation pattern over the years. It features the same narrative that the international community needs to make Belgrade an offer. On the basis of the Brussels Agreement of 2013, the USA and the EU recently attempted to reach agreement on creating an Association of Serbian Communities in Kosovo, with the declared objective of both being to “normalise” relations.

Critics in Kosovo, on the other hand, would question the wisdom of creating institutionalised Serbian zones of influence, akin to the Serb-dominated “Republika Srpska” in Bosnia & Herzegovina, which has been setting an ever more radical escalation course with the Bosnian State for years under the Bosnian “Serb leader” Milorad Dodik, with a view to breaking away at some point. Kosovo would rather avoid similar conflict zones on its soil.

Vucic and Thaci: open to redrawing the borders

Instead of defending the immutability of the borders in Europe as a principle that is not up for negotiation, Washington led recent calls for ethnically-based solutions. In particular, the idea of a land swap hit the headlines, with its objective of promoting the creation of ethnically pure areas. The idea was conceived by Serbia’s President Vucic and his counterpart in Kosovo at the time, Hashim Thaci, now currently awaiting trial in The Hague on charges of alleged war crimes during the war in Kosovo.

With the backing of US representatives, the land swap idea finally won the support of the EU in the person of High Representative Federica Mogherini. This failed, not least because of a German veto under Chancellor Angela Merkel and the fact that Thaci had to step down to face charges in The Hague. Yet it remains clear, according to Belgrade-based analyst Izabela Kisic of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, that Vucic has not abandoned all hopes of the “division of Kosovo”. To play for time, Belgrade has returned to a policy of deliberate provocation, while awaiting a “more favourable geopolitical constellation” – such as the return to office of Donald Trump – to be able to assert its claims in Kosovo with greater success, Kisic explains.

USA: Ethno-centric deals and a fall of government

In a bid to iron out existing lines of conflict, Washington has on occasion been given to highly problematic interventions: this goes a long way to explaining the fall of the Kosovo government in March 2020, engineered by the US envoy to the Balkans under former President Trump, Richard Grenell. Observers speculate that the head of government, Albin Kurti, stood in the way of the controversial US ambassador pushing through the land swap between Kosovo and Serbia, having taken a clear position against such a move.

In the following parliamentary elections in February 2021, however, the people of Kosovo made clear what they thought of the seemingly neocolonial style of the US: Kurti’s party, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) made considerable gains compared to its showing in the

2019 elections – a slap in the face for Washington and a rejection of American-driven border adjustment plans.

Since then, Kurti and his second government have been resisting pressure that has only grown under the Biden administration. Representatives of the Kosovo government refer to a judgment of the Kosovar Constitutional Court, which has rejected the possibility of a Serbian community association. President Vjosa Osmani has declared categorically that “we will not permit the creation of community associations with mono-ethnic structures”. The President, a trained lawyer, stressed the need to avoid the kind of problems that have arisen in Bosnia, where a destabilising effect that continues to itself felt today was created by the peace treaty for Bosnia & Herzegovina of 1995, negotiated by the international community, with the creation of the Serb-dominated area of the country. The concern would be that a community association could lay the foundation a second “Republika Srpska”, this time in Kosovo.

Brussels – cleaving to “false US concepts”

As previously with the land swap, its uncritical cleaving to concepts from Washington shows that the European Commission is acting without its own strategy. Brussels has time and again failed to have any presence in the region as a corrective to nationalism and illiberal tendencies. This is a consequence of internal problems and the individual interests of the member states: neither Spain nor Slovakia have recognised Kosovo as a nation state and therefore the fact that it is a Spaniard, Josep Borell, and a Slovakian, Miroslav Lajcak, moderating the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is scarcely credible. It is something of a mission impossible to persuade Serbia to recognise Kosovo’s independence, if the negotiators’ countries are in the non-recognisers corner, political analyst Rahman Pacarizi points out.

With its years of indifference and delaying tactics towards the Balkan states, the EU has very little credibility left to play with. Its authority and transformation powers have been largely used up, Balkans expert Tobias Flessenkämper stated in the annual report on European integration 2022. The fact that EU membership no longer serves as an incentive for political leaders to work on bolstering democracy and discipline was recently demonstrated by the Serbian President with increasing vigour. Vucic has learned that escalation pays – you always get offered something in return.

A very good example of this is that following recent tension in northern Kosovo, US special envoy Derek Chollet went to Belgrade and made some notably friendly statements on their common understanding of “democratic principles”. To appease Vucic, Washington wishes to accommodate Belgrade in the Kosovo question – even in the face of criticism from American foreign policy experts. Serbia should in all events get its community associations and, in return, recognise Kosovo – at least partially. The State Department is calculating that this deal would loosen Serbia’s existing partnership with Russia.

In the opposite corner, political scientist and Balkans expert Daniel Serwer of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies has levelled fierce criticism at this policy of appeasement. He argues that current US Balkans policy is “fundamentally wrong”. Serbia, he explains, has decided in favour of authoritarianism at home and collaboration with Russia and China. Misguided appeasement will have negative consequences for the people in the region for many years to come, warns Serwer.

Germany: Appeasement made by Merkel

In recent years, Germany has also failed to stand up to the nationalistic firebrands in the region. Instead of a coherent strategy for the Balkans, Chancellor Merkel unilaterally homed in on Belgrade's strong man as an anchor for stability during her time in office. She visited Vucic 16 times in nine years – the “disruptive factor” was positively showered with attention – while Bosnia & Herzegovina, the country that suffered the most under the Serbian and Croatian policies of thinking big, received just one visit from the Chancellor.

In her farewell speech, Merkel praised Vucic for having always “kept his promises” – a dangerous minimisation of the increasingly authoritarian and imperialistic Serb. For years, Vucic refused to commit clearly to European policy. When the Russian war on Ukraine broke out, he focused entirely on the special relationship between Serbia and Russia. Belgrade has rejected sanctions against Russia. It is no coincidence that it was announced at the start of 2023 that the notorious Russian Wagner paramilitary opened an office in Belgrade.

Given the growing regional tensions, the German concept of flattering “stabilitocracy” diplomacy can be said to have failed: Berlin has focused for far too long on stability in domestic policy and accountability in foreign policy – in return, the autocrats were forgiven for their shortcomings in the rule of law. Now, with the Ukraine war, the situation in the Balkans is also escalating: with the latest crisis scenario in North Kosovo at the start of the year, Vucic demonstrated that the region is only a stone's throw from a repeat of previous clashes.

2nd field of conflict: Bosnia & Herzegovina – Serbia – Croatia

But Kosovo is not the only place where the Serbian minority is used as a pretext for making trouble. In Bosnia & Herzegovina too, the Belgrade government has shown that Serbian aspirations to become a major power are a threat to peace. The “Republika Srpska” (RS), the Serbian-dominated part of the country, is a product of the ethnic cleansing policy under Slobodan Milosevic. The President in office of the RS, Milorad Dodik, has the support of Belgrade and Russia in his aims to create a breakaway state independent from Bosnia. The RS government is going out of its way to undermine the authority of the host state; it has already created several of its own institutions, such as a medicines agency, to transfer competencies from state to entity level.

On 9 January every year, Dodik celebrates the “anniversary” of the RS, classed as illegitimate by the Bosnian Constitutional Court. The day marks the founding of the Republika Srpska in 1992 and, effectively, the start of crimes against non-Serbs, culminating in the genocide of Srebrenica in summer 1995. During this year's celebrations, Milorad Dodik flaunted his ties with Moscow, awarding the Russian President Vladimir Putin the highest Order of the Republika Srpska. Putin joins war criminals such as Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic among its recipients.

For the first time, paramilitary units assembled in eastern Sarajevo – one of these was the Russian Wolves, a motorcycle club with close ties to the Kremlin. For the inhabitants of Sarajevo, who came under fire from Serbian units and paramilitaries for more than three years between 1992 and 1995, this brought the Greater Serbian flexing of muscles uncomfortably to the fore. The Bosnian film director Jasmila Zbanic spoke out against the international community's support for Dodik and urged the EU and the High Representative

to put a stop to “orgies of fascism”. The former Croatian diplomat and expert on Russia, Bozo Kovacevic, interprets the military posturing of Serbian nationals with pro-Russian undertones as a failure of the West to provide responsible, coordinated engagement.

Croatia is the second pillar: revival of the Tudjman strategy

To understand the complex problematic situation in Bosnia, however, one must also examine the other relevant great power policy at play: that of Croatia. In this context too, Western players have failed to supply the necessary corrective. The EU member state has followed a de facto re-Tudjmanisation course in its foreign policy: Zagreb has systematically instrumentalised the Croatian minority in Bosnia & Herzegovina (about 15%) to build up its own influence in the country. Under Franjo Tudjman, terrible crimes were committed on Bosnian soil in the name of the para-state “Herzeg-Bosna” proclaimed in 1991 (a “joint criminal enterprise”), punished with a total of 111 years’ imprisonment by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia. Notwithstanding, Zagreb has renewed its claims upon Bosnia ever more loudly and radically.

The HDZ BiH, a sister party of the ruling HDZ party in Zagreb, has been calling for years for a strengthening of the Croatian zone of influence in Bosnia: the aim is to create its own third entity. Although critics have claimed that this would exacerbate existing ethnic problems to a dangerous degree, US negotiators Matthew Palmer, and Gabriel Escobar, special envoys for the Western Balkans, and EU representative Angelina Eichhorst, recently gave in to Croatian demands and encouraged Bosnian politicians to reform the electoral law. This aimed to solve the alleged discrimination against Croats (a complaint was made by politician Bozo Ljubic), while the fundamental discrimination against Jews, Roma and women, who do not have full voting rights under the Dayton Agreement, would remain unchanged.

EU negotiators: opaque deals and policies of “Apartheid”

Despite the criticism at home and abroad [1], the USA and EU were determined to implement the demands of the populist-leaning HDZ BiH (and Zagreb): in early 2022, negotiators worked with local representatives behind closed doors in a hotel in the Bosnian seaside resort of Neum – recently the scene of a spectacular failure of the international community. Instead of promoting transparency and bolstering Bosnian institutions, the Western representatives have demonstrated that they prefer shady backroom deals favouring nationalistic powers to democratisation processes and creating opportunities for pluralistic participation.

Civil rights activist Azra Zornic, who rejects categorisation along ethnic lines and brought a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (as a woman, she is not allowed to stand for presidential office), accuses the US and EU of promoting a “policy of apartheid” in Croatia’s favour. The EU, she argues, is failing to “defend its own values in Bosnia”.

In Croatia’s view of things, the undemocratic dominance of the three constituent nationalities (Bosnians, Croats and Serbs) should be cemented in the Bosnian electoral system – going against the verdicts of the Strasbourg court in five separate cases. Croatia’s Foreign Minister Grlic Radman made clear in an interview with local media in summer 2021 that his country would not countenance a civil reorganisation of Bosnia. This pitted an EU member state openly against the fundamental principles of democracy in a neighbouring country– in the presence of Western negotiators.

Croatian agendas: solidarity with the Kremlin

At EU level, Zagreb's aggressive policy of interference has so far largely escaped criticism. Quite the reverse, in fact: Croatian lobbying has had the effect of securing the active support of several important EU officials for the Croatian influence in Bosnia. Here, the US and the EU do not seem fully to appreciate that the Croatian government is, just like Belgrade, standing in solidarity with Russia in the achievement of its old/new objectives.

Following a meeting between Croatian Foreign Minister Radman and his Russian counterpart in January 2022, Sergey Lavrov immediately lent his support to the Croatian position. Moscow, he added, recognised the "discrimination against Croats" in Bosnia. The Kremlin uses a tried-and-tested destabilisation technique: in this case, it centres on the alleged desperate situation of the Croatian population in Bosnia. The Russo-Croatian support axis has an even greater reach: Croatia's President, Zoran Milanovic, has previously spoken openly about a partnership between Croatia and Putin ally Dodik, to resolve the so-called "Croatian question" in Bosnia. Given Russia's preference for populist approaches, any support lent by the EU and the US to Zagreb's intervention agenda starts to look even more questionable.

Just how effective these ethnicised planning games already are for the Balkans was also demonstrated by a non-paper by then Slovenian far-right Prime Minister Janez Jansa, which was doing the rounds in spring 2021: with the support of Hungarian President Viktor Orban, he made the case for a reshuffle of the Balkans along ethnic lines – picking up the threads of the devastating policies of Milosevic and Tudjman and their enforcers, the Bosnian Serb war criminal Radovan Karadzic and the founder of the criminal Croatian State "Herzeg-Bosna", Mate Boban. Both Jansa and Orban are on excellent terms with Moscow. A recent report, furthermore, reveals that EU Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi sympathises with the separatist aspirations of the Bosnian Serb – dangerous scenarios have their backers, even in the EU.

HR Christian Schmidt: an enabler of ethnocentric pseudo-solutions

There is a further relevant influential factor in Bosnia & Herzegovina: the United Nations High Representative. In the person of former German agriculture minister and CSU politician Christian Schmidt, in office since summer 2021, there is a new player in the game who is not only a compliant implementer of Croatian nationalism, but also approves of the pro-ethnic policy US administration.

Schmidt is neither a Balkans expert nor, given his evident close links to the political top brass in Croatia, a neutral figure. In the complex multi-ethnic structure of Bosnia, he – in contrast to his predecessor, Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko – comes across as a foreign body with colonialist tendencies. Schmidt's appointment a few weeks before the change of government in Berlin in autumn 2021 had hazardous consequences for Bosnia & Herzegovina: Merkel was making sure that her kid glove policy towards the region's nationalists could gain more ground.

And as it did in Kosovo, the Biden administration is currently also making efforts in Bosnia to push ethnocentric solutions. Washington is the "architect" of the further ethnicisation of the Bosnian voting system ("gerrymandering") wrought by Schmidt, according to political scientist Jasmin Mujanovic. On election night on 2 October 2022, the High Representative used his special prerogative, the so-called Bonn powers, actively to interfere in the Bosnian

voting system, thereby sidelining the will of the electorate – an action that is almost certainly without precedent in a democratic context.

The tricky issue of “equidistance”

On election night, Schmidt will actively changed both Bosnian election law and the constitution of the Bosnian Croatian region of the country in order to achieve “functionality” – in this case, of the Bosniak-Croat Federation. In fact, his intervention had the particular effect of bolstering the radical Croatian HDZ BiH party, whose chairman, Dragan Covic, previously drew attention to himself with his close ties to war criminals. The very party whose members still glorify Croatian atrocities during the Bosnian war came out on top as a result of the tweaks to electoral law.

What makes this intervention so particularly problematic is the fact that it squanders the professional “equidistance” that is required for the position of High Representative, argues Prof. Jens Woelk of Trento University, constitutional lawyer and expert on Bosnia. While Schmidt’s intercession helped HDZ BiH to a secured position of power, it left the above-mentioned EU case-law on the discrimination against Jews, Roma and citizens untouched.

Undemocratic manoeuvres in favour of populist-nationalistic forces

The episode is akin to an “illiberal attempted putsch”, says political scientist Mujanovic. It also drew massive criticism from the European Parliament: members from France, the Netherlands and Germany described Schmidt’s electoral law changes as “undemocratic”. Vienna- and Belgrade-based political research scientist Daniel Bochsler called the intervention “unacceptable”, particularly as it was retroactive. From the US and the UK, on the other hand, the move won express support. The German government was notably silent on the issue.

Schmidt also had a hand, albeit indirectly, in the results of the presidential elections in the “Republika Srpska”: despite election fraud on a huge scale, which was documented by the candidate standing against Milorad Dodik, Jelena Trivic (PDP), observers report that there was no finalised recount [2] and no final report. Instead, the High Representative declared categorically that the losers must acknowledge the result. The international community effectively legitimised the voting manipulation, according to political scientist Tanja Topic, who said that “election fraud was specifically legitimate”. The actions of the West were a capitulation to the very politician, Dodik, who enjoys robust support from Moscow in his breakaway attempts.

In this context, the German government is also under criticism for bolstering discredited politicians with ill-considered political symbolism. There is now no Green Bosnian policy to speak of, according to the chair of the Centre for the Environment, Tihomir Dakic. The government’s new special envoy for the Western Balkans, Manuel Sarrazin, reportedly met Milorad Dodik at precisely the time the latter was not only threatening the central election commission in discussions around the election fraud, but had recently promised secession for the Serb-dominated part of the country.

Western appeasement: collaboration with populist clan leaders

In summary, it must be said that the manoeuvring of High Representative Christian Schmidt has had dire consequences: the interventions in electoral law, primarily benefiting the SNSD secessionists around Milorad Dodik and bolstering the segregation policies of the HDZ BiH (constituting an axis of blockade policy and targeted disintegration of domestic policy), marked a high point in the Western policy of appeasement towards dangerous extremists and criminal cartel bosses. The CSU politician has caused lasting damage to the role of High Representative just when the institution, carefully deployed by the United Nations to ensure compliance with the Dayton Agreement and to protect the fragile peace itself, appears more important than ever, in view of the attacks on Bosnia's very statehood.

Schmidt's actions and the position of the Biden administration in support of the election law manipulation could hardly be more at odds with the conclusions of the Bosnia resolution of the German parliament of June 2022: "in particular the political actions of populist-nationalistic politicians such as Milorad Dodik, currently a member of the State executive, and Dragan Covic, chairman of the HDZ BiH party, aim to describe Bosnia & Herzegovina as a State and home to a diverse population" (our translation). This policy, the conclusions continue, is a danger to peace in south-eastern Europe and is unacceptable, necessitating "decisive, robust resistance" from the European Union, its member states and the international community.

Germany's tolerance of ethno-national "solutions": human rights activists call for change

Given the illiberal nature of the influence, it is all the more astonishing that the German government has not publicly distanced itself from Schmidt. Even when pressure was subsequently brought to bear on the Bosnian Constitutional Court, this was countered by neither Berlin nor Brussels. The Croatian representative in the State executive, Zeljko Komsic, made a complaint against the High Representative's intervention, but Washington was determined to keep a government formation featuring the newly bolstered HDZ BiH and attempted to block the decision of the Supreme Court judge. The takeaway from this is that by interfering in this way to secure short-term "stabilisation", the international community is making a dangerous contribution to the erosion of institutions and democratic processes in Bosnia.

Against this backdrop, Bosnian citizens are particularly disappointed by Germany's attitude. Many of them had hoped for political change – away from Merkel's policy of appeasement and towards a pro-human rights policy that would rein in the populist nationalism of the HDZ BiH and SNSD. Mostar publicist Stefica Galic, a frequent target for nationalistic attacks, explains that "Bosnia & Herzegovina can only function if it is together, not divided. The aim must be a civic principle rather than creating ethno-national ghettos and conserving their leaders". The interventions of the High Representative should therefore be rejected. Serbia and Croatia continue to practise the policies of Tudjman and Milosevic – this constitutes a fundamental danger to Bosnia, Galic warns, calling upon Germany to oppose these inhumane policies instead of siding with their proponents.

Summary

In view of the processes described, there is an urgent need for a change in course of the German engagement in the Balkans. Appeasing populist ideas leads to strengthening separatists and segregation policies, forming a perilous axis of destabilisation with Russia which, in turn, endangers German and European security interests. The current attacks on the multi-ethnic States of the Western Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro) should be reconsidered in the context of the war Ukraine. Here, there should be clear boundaries regarding secession scenarios and the peace deals powered by Washington and the miscast High Representative currently in office in Bosnia. Germany can only hope for any credibility in the Ukrainian crisis and defend the principle of freedom against the Kremlin's policy of destruction if and when it stops entering into compromises with the perpetrators of the Balkans wars and their successors.

[1] Criticism in this context also came from US senators, among others

[2] According to political analyst Tanja Topic, dozens of sacks of ballot papers were left out of the RS recount, which cannot therefore be described as finalised.