



Discussion Paper

Bosnia at the Brink: Why Europe Must Act Now

Bosnia and Herzegovina stands at a dangerous crossroads. Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska (RS), the smaller of the country's two entities, has launched a full-scale assault on Bosnia's post-war constitutional order. The situation risks spiralling into violent conflict between RS police forces loyal to Dodik and state-level agencies. Yet, if managed well, this crisis could become a turning point toward strengthening Bosnia's fragile constitutional state. Europe's role—especially that of the Netherlands, with its historic responsibility—is crucial.

What is Happening?

Since the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina has functioned as a decentralized, multiethnic state divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. For years, Dodik has systematically undermined the country's sovereignty and constitutional order. He spreads ethnic hatred, glorifies war criminals, denies the Srebrenica genocide, intimidates opponents, and openly pursues RS secession and unification with neighbouring Serbia.

In July 2023, Dodik escalated his challenge to the authority of the High Representative—currently held by Christian Schmidt, former German minister. He was indicted by Bosnia's state court for refusing to implement Schmidt's decisions. In February 2025, he was sentenced in a first-instance ruling to one year in prison and a six-year ban from public office. A final ruling is expected within three to six months.

In retaliation, Dodik pushed RS authorities to pass laws rejecting the authority of Bosnia's constitutional court, state-level judiciary, and law enforcement. He has begun drafting a new RS constitution aimed at establishing its own army, intelligence agency, and the right to secede and enter a confederation with Serbia. Although Bosnia's constitutional court suspended much of this legislation, Dodik and the RS institutions he controls continue to implement it.

This has led to new investigations against Dodik and his allies for attacking the constitutional order. When they refused to appear for questioning, the court issued



arrest warrants—yet so far no state-level agency has managed to enforce them. RS police, controlled by Dodik, have threatened violence if he is detained.

This de facto coup has brought Bosnia's law enforcement agencies to the brink of violent confrontation—avoided thus far only by the restraint of state-level police forces. Across Bosnia, citizens fear the outbreak of violence. Non-Serbs in RS, particularly war returnees, are especially vulnerable, now left unprotected by national institutions.

Meanwhile, Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Čović has demanded electoral law reforms that would further entrench ethnic divisions. His price for supporting state institutions is a weakening of their multiethnic character—accelerating Bosnia's fragmentation.

Regional Context

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić openly supports Dodik's secessionist agenda, aided by Russia and Hungary. Vučić, facing unrest at home following the November collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad, remains entrenched in power. Elements within Croatia's government also quietly support nationalist Bosnian Croat leaders, undermining Bosnia's sovereignty.

Despite some reintegration gains—through trade, visa-free travel, and the EU accession process—Bosnia's post-war structure remains weak. With the U.S. less engaged under Donald Trump's return, the EU must assume leadership.

The High Representative holds sweeping powers: to amend laws, suspend constitutions, and dismiss officials. Yet without strong U.S. backing and facing a divided EU, Schmidt has hesitated. EUFOR Althea, the EU's peacekeeping force with 1,700 troops (including Dutch soldiers), was recently reinforced by 300 more—but political will remains lacking.

The Danger of Inaction

Failure to confront Dodik risks constitutional collapse, empowerment of ethnic extremists, and violent clashes between law enforcement agencies—paving the way toward renewed conflict.

The Netherlands, with its historic role, showed leadership when it helped block Serbia's EU accession talks in December 2024. It must lead again.



What Must the Netherlands and the EU Do?

1. Garner EU and NATO support for Bosnia's state institutions

- Provide diplomatic backing against Banja Luka, Belgrade, Zagreb, and Budapest.
- Supply intelligence and operational support for any arrest operation targeting Dodik.
- Prepare for enforcement of the second-instance ruling in Dodik's case.
- Make clear that Dodik is no longer a legitimate partner in EU-Bosnia dialogue.

2. Back the High Representative and his mandate

- Guarantee full support for Schmidt's authority.
- Ensure Banja Luka and Belgrade know that as long as Dodik holds power, the EU will support Schmidt's decisive action.

3. Strengthen EUFOR Althea's presence

- Increase visibility across RS to protect non-Serb communities and uphold constitutional order.
- Prepare a credible EU-led or NATO-led alternative should Russia veto EUFOR's UN renewal—one with a strong mandate like KFOR in Kosovo.

4. Pressure Serbia and Croatia

- Threaten to suspend economic cooperation with Serbia unless it ends support for Dodik.
- Publicly support pro-democracy protests in Serbia.
- Demand Croatia fully respect Bosnia's sovereignty and EU principles.

5. Use EU membership negotiations to advance constitutional reform

- Support the immediate opening of EU accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Give the European Commission a mandate to develop roadmaps for democracy, rule of law, and institutional reform.
- Emphasize constitutional reform as a core requirement: building a functional democracy with accountable institutions and a market economy.



Conclusion

Bosnia stands at a tipping point. Despite immense pressure, its institutions still function. The political opposition in RS has resisted Dodik's agenda. Nine weeks into his full-scale assault, peace still holds—but not for long if Europe remains passive. **The EU—and the Netherlands—must act now.**

Netherlands Coalition for the Western Balkans, 3 May 2025