

Balkan Peace? | 26 years after the Dayton Accords and UK's role now

by Colin A. Munro



On the 20th anniversary of the General Framework Agreement for Peace (formal title of the Dayton accords signed in Paris on 14 December 1995), the Austrian Institute for International Affairs organised a workshop on prospects for the Balkans on November 12th 2015, focussed in particular on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The title of our brief was:

- **Western Balkans as Collateral Damage of European Passivity?**

Wolfgang Petritsch (WP), High Representative (HR) during my year in 2001 as Deputy HR based in Mostar, argued that the limits of external intervention had become clear. Money and elections had not promoted democracy, but the opposite. We should have focussed on functioning institutions, not American notions of “nation building.” The HR’s office should be closed, and the international presence “recalibrated.” Russian revisionism represented an additional problem. Some Western Balkan leaders were “mini Putins.” Earlier that month, in Sarajevo, WP’s predecessor, Lord Ashdown, had argued that “there was a risk of renewed conflict between the three mutually hostile ethnic pockets where it all began in 1992.”

Russia has now refused to approve the appointment of Christian Schmidt (CS, a German politician, CSU) as HR, in succession to Valentin Inzko. CS had reported to the United Nations Security Council that BiH was in danger of breaking up, precipitating renewed conflict. In the Diplomatic Academy on November 12th, 2021, he confirmed that it had not proved possible to establish BiH as a stable state based on national self-determination. Its future was in doubt Dayton was just a “qualified armistice”. The situation was dangerous.

The leader of the “Republika Srpska”, Milorad Dodik (MD) was intent on “dissolving the state with Russian support.” MD had rejected a law, promulgated by his predecessor, confirming the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, and refused to deal with him as HR. He intended to withdraw the RS from state level institutions such as tax administration, the judiciary, and even the BiH army, to (re)create a Serb force.

In an interview with the Guardian on November 29th, 2021, MD insisted that these plans need not lead to the end of BiH. But, “when I go to Putin there are no requests. He just says, what is it I can help with. He never cheats me. It is just the same with XI Jinping.” He, Dodik, “did not give a shit about further sanctions”, threatened by the EU, the US and UK. “All the shit here was made by unelected foreigners and three judges appointed to the constitutional court by the Council of Europe’s (of which BiH is a member) European Court of Human Rights”. These people, and especially Lord Ashdown, acted as a “coordinated criminal enterprise.”

The Guardian describes MD as an erstwhile “darling of the west.” There is some truth in this. Robin Cook and Madeleine Albright thought highly of him. My recollection is of an improvement on the Serb villains directly responsible for the war.

But now, MD is indeed a corrupt (he banks in St. Petersburg!) mini-Putin, hard-line aggressive Serb nationalist, while BiH is another piece on Putin’s chessboard, a protracted conflict which he can unfreeze at any time, albeit only with Dodik’s help, because Russia does not have a border with BiH or Serbia. CS’ description of Dayton as a qualified armistice, fits the bill.

EU/NATO attention is focussed on Ukraine, where Putin may be preparing for an invasion, perhaps by first provoking Zelensky into renewing hostilities to recover lost territory, a tactic that worked during the Beijing Olympics in August 2008 in Georgia. (Saakashvili is now languishing in prison in Georgia after a sojourn in Ukraine). In exchange for renouncing nuclear weapons, Russia (Boris Yeltsin), the UK (John Major) and the USA (Bill Clinton) guaranteed the territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine at the OSCE summit in Budapest in December 1994. Sovereign states have the right to choose their alliances.

The mandate of the OSCE Ukraine observer Mission expires on 31 March 2022. Russia is refusing an extension. This is reminiscent of Russian tactics in Georgia where first, effective border monitoring by the OSCE was stopped (by Russia) in 2004, and the mission finally closed after the war over South Ossetia in August 2008. The Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been under Russian control since 1992.

Consider the following timelines:

- February 21st, 2014: Maidan revolution forces Yanukovich to flee from Kiev to Russia
- February 23rd, 2014: End of winter Olympics in Sochi
- February 27th, 2014: Russia invades Crimea
- March 21st, 2014: OSCE deploys mission in Ukraine
- February 20th, 2022: End of winter Olympics in Beijing
- March 31st, 2022: Closure of OSCE mission in Ukraine.

A Russian invasion seems unlikely before March/April, unless Zelensky lets himself be provoked. Meanwhile NATO, the EU and the Ukrainians should do their Georgian homework. For years before 2008, US advisers in Tbilisi assured Georgians that the US would come to their aid in the event of Russian aggression. Is Biden bluffing? Is deterrence credible?

The UK's appointment of Air Chief Marshall Sir Stuart Peach (NATO Air commander in Kosovo in 2000, former Chief of the defence staff, and chair of the NATO Military committee) as special envoy to the western Balkans, to work closely with the EU, NATO and CS, may signal an end to passivity. His appointment has been welcomed in Kosovo. Boris Johnson has declared that:

- “We have a responsibility to do all we can to preserve the gains achieved through peace and dialogue. We cannot allow any return to the violence and division of the past.”

Foreign secretary Elizabeth Truss has added that Sir Stuart would play a key role in

- “Deterring malign actors.”

The international community failed to deter malign actors such as Milosevic, thirty years ago. Deterring Putin and mini Putins such as Dodik is top priority now.

The Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!

About the author



Colin A. Munro is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and is a UK native. He attended the George Watson's College and the Edinburgh University and joined HM Diplomatic Service in 1969. During his career he held numerous positions in Berlin, Kuala Lumpur, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Zagreb and served as the Private Secretary to the Minister of State responsible for Central and Eastern Europe. His last posting in HM Diplomatic Service was as Ambassador to the OSCE. He chairs the UK Citizens in Austria and in the ABS he is also a member of the Expert Council.

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.