
BOSNIAN SERB POLICE'S ARMS PURCHASE STOKES EU FEARS

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The purchase of thousands of new guns by the Bosnian Serb police has raised concerns over the intentions of the separatist-led regional government and deepening Russian influence in a divided and economically depressed nation.

A shipment of 2,500 automatic rifles from Serbia is due to arrive in the Serb-run half of Bosnia in March, weeks before the scheduled opening of a new training centre where Russian advisers are expected to play a role.

The weapons are arriving at a time when Bosnia's long-term stability is in doubt. The Dayton peace agreement ended the Bosnian conflict just over 22 years ago, dividing the country into two semi-autonomous parts: the Republika Srpska (RS) and a Muslim-Croat Federation. The deal stopped the killing but created a system that rewarded ethnically based politics. Nationalist parties have a tight grip on power in their separate fiefdoms, corruption is rife, and the country has the highest official rate of youth unemployment in the world.

Bosnia's bitter, flawed peace deal, 20 years on

Earlier this month, the European commission unveiled a new strategy for the region, offering a merit-based path to EU membership, but left it unclear how Bosnia can overcome its deep structural problems.

Serb civil society activists, the central Bosnian government in Sarajevo and western diplomats believe that a new heavily armed police unit will be used by the Bosnian Serb separatist leader, Milorad Dodik, to entrench his position and intimidate opponents ahead of elections in October.

In the longer term they fear that the force could be used to further Dodik's aims of independence, at the risk of a new war in the region.

Russia, which sees Dodik as a bulwark against Bosnian membership of Nato, has shown strong backing for the Serb separatist, who has met Vladimir Putin at least six times since 2014.

On Monday, Dodik confirmed the arms purchase, which was first reported by the Sarajevo-based news site Žurnal, and he said he would take further steps to arm the police for the fight against terrorism. It is an entirely legitimate action and we have nothing to hide, Dodik said. For 20 years we didn't have the right to equip the police, now we have decided to do it.

The international community's high representative in Bosnia, Valentin Inzko, expressed concern

about the shipment. I would like the country to have as few weapons as possible. If one side gets these types of weapons then the other side will want them too, he said.

Diplomats in Sarajevo said that the federal police had also bought a few hundred long-barrelled weapons recently, but the bulk of police in the cantons with the federation wore only sidearms.

Inzko said the police in his native Austria only had 400 long-barrelled guns across the whole country. Normal police do not need them, he said.

The Serb leader was speaking on the day he laid a wreath at a memorial to Russia's late UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, who two years ago vetoed a security council resolution that would have condemned the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide.

Dodik has also cultivated relations with the Night Wolves, a Russian motorcycle club closely tied to Putin, which is under US sanctions for its paramilitary role in the Ukraine conflict.

Russian-trained mercenaries back Bosnia's Serb separatists

At the same time, Russian-trained members of a paramilitary group Serbian Honour appeared on the streets of Banja Luka.

Members of paramilitary group Serbian Honour pose in Banja Luka. Photograph: Handout

It is an organisation of angry muscle-men that the government is using to threaten and intimidate its own people, said Aleksandar Trifunović, a Bosnian Serb journalist. However, this time they go beyond the usual show. This time it feels dangerous.

Serb officials arguing for a heavily armed police counter-terrorist force point to a 2015 attack on a RS police station in Zvornik by a 24-year-old returned Bosnian Muslim refugee. The attacker, Nerdin Ibrić, killed a Serb police officer and wounded two more before being shot dead. But his motives were unclear. Ibrić's father was killed by Serb police in the first days of ethnic cleansing that began the war in 1992. But because he reportedly shouted Allahu Akbar it was deemed to be a terrorist attack.

The incident has since been used to justify a build-up in police strength. A sprawling \$4m (£2.8m) counter-terrorism training centre is due to open in April at the site of a former army barracks at Zalužani outside Banja Luka.

In 2015, the RS interior minister, Dragan Lukač, signed a cooperation agreement with Moscow that envisaged Russian specialists providing counter-terrorist training in RS.

A Serb opposition activist, who did not wish to be named, claimed that Russian advisers had already arrived in the Banja Luka area and that both Zalužani and a planned new cargo terminal at the local airport would eventually be used as a Russian-run humanitarian centre.

A similar centre in Nis in Serbia is suspected by US authorities of providing a hub for Russian intelligence operations, such as an attempted coup in Montenegro in October 2016.

A western diplomat in Bosnia said there was no hard evidence so far that Russians were establishing a similar hub in Bosnia. But were watching closely, the diplomat added.

Kurt Bassuener, a Bosnia expert at the Democratisation Policy Council said that by drawing down a

stabilisation force to just 600 troops and giving up on a post-war initiative to integrate Bosnias divided police forces, the EU had left a vacuum that Russia is likely to fill. As long as the barriers to entry are non-existent, we are leaving the barn door open, Bassuener said. Its a screaming policy failure we havent paid for yet.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/bosnian-serb-police-arms-purchase-stokes-eu-fears>

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