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## BiH: From Dodik's fall to where?

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## ***Abstract***

The election of Sinisa Karan as head of the Bosnian Serb entity on February 8, 2026, demonstrates that the ousted president, Milorad Dodik, who campaigned on behalf of the winner, remains the central figure in the Bosnian Serb political landscape. The political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, was formally removed from his position as president of the Serb entity, by a Sarajevo Court of Appeal, on Wednesday, August 6, following his conviction for violating the peace agreement in the country. These elections, beyond the selection of a new leader—or rather, a charade in Dodik's shadow—constitute a continuation of the power dynamics between nationalists and pro-Europeans, federalists and nationalists, but above all, a prelude to the Bosnian general elections in October 2026 and its integration into the European Union by 2030.

## ***The fall of Milorad Dodik: reality or illusion?***

Since his first election as a member of parliament in 1996, Milorad Dodik has been a major political figure in Republika Srpska and throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the time of his election in 1996, with the support of the international community, particularly the United States, Dodik was perceived as a liberal political figure, in contrast to the former nationalist leaders who emerged from the 1992-1995 war. At that time, Milorad Dodik acknowledged the responsibility of the Army of Republika Srpska in the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in July 1995. During Montenegro's declaration of independence in 2006, a paradigm shift and discourse drastically evolved, with Dodik adopting an increasingly virulent Serbian nationalist rhetoric, "based on questioning the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina"<sup>1</sup>. The appointment of Christian Schmidt as High representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former German Minister of Agriculture under Angela Merkel, in August, 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, accelerated secessionist ambitions and multiplied the initiatives aimed at weakening central institutions and demanding more autonomy, thus undermining the delicate balance established by Dayton.

In April 2024, the RS adopted a law creating an electoral authority specific to this region, undermining the constitution and unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the beginning of 2025, the regional parliament of the RS ordered its Serbian representatives to block the decisions of national institutions, thus paralyzing reforms crucial for European integration. After these various unconstitutional decisions, on February 26, 2025, RS President Milorad Dodik was sentenced by a Sarajevo Court of Appeal to one year in prison and banned from holding office for six years for refusing to heed the decisions of the high international representative overseeing the peace agreement in the Balkan country. The conviction of Milorad Dodik is merely the latest round in the ongoing power struggle with the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ORH). In 2023, the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, imposed legislative amendments to ensure uniformity in judicial decisions across Bosnia and Herzegovina. These measures were categorically refused by the President of Republika Srpska, who even went so far as to have his local parliament pass laws that simply

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lerubicon.org/milorad-dodik-face-a-la-justice-la-bosnie-herzegovine-dans-limpasse/>

nullified them in the territory of the Serb entity – half of the country. The High Representative for Bosnia has been, since the end of the war in 1995, the arbiter of federal decisions, with a power superior to that of the central state thanks to the powers granted by Bonn in 1997 (annul local laws, dismiss officials, impose reforms, etc.). The High Representative represents both the guarantor of the Dayton Accords and, through the excessive scope of his prerogatives, the embodiment of secessionist aspirations within Bosnia and Herzegovina by the international community, effectively placing the country under trusteeship for 31 years.

This sentence is a shock wave and sparked rising tensions in the divided Balkan country. Then subsequently several arrest warrants were issued on March 12, 2025 against several political leaders of Republika Srpska: Milorad Dodik, Radovan Višković (Prime Minister) and Nenad Stevandić (President of the National Assembly) for failing to appear for questioning and undermining constitutional order. This was followed, on March 17, 2025, by the national execution of the warrants by the State Court, obliging all police forces in the country to cooperate in order to arrest them. Milorad Dodik (RS) immediately called on Serbs employed in the central government's police and justice systems to leave these institutions. However, after several Bosnian leaders denounced a coup d'état, the country's Constitutional Court suspended the contested laws on Friday evening. It imposed an interim measure suspending the laws until a final decision is announced.

Despite his repeated statements that he would not submit to the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and his calls to secede from the federation, Dodik finally accepted the court's decision by converting his one-year prison sentence into a fine of 18,000 euros, thus implicitly recognizing the authority of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, Trisic Babic, 58, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Bosnia, was elected by vote to the Republika Srpska Parliament in Banja Luka (north), without any legal basis. She had been an advisor to Milorad Dodik for about fifteen years. On November 23, 2025, the Serbian entity holds a presidential election between Siniša Karan, candidate from the Independent Social Democratic Party (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, SNSD) of former president Milorad Dodik against Branko Blanuša, of the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS). Karan won with 50.8% of the vote against 48.8% for Blanus<sup>3</sup>. However, these elections were marred by irregularities and suspicions of voter identity theft, which may have influenced the result through votes wrongly attributed to Karan. Consequently, the Sarajevo electoral commission decided that approximately 6% of polling stations would be required to hold a new election on February 8<sup>th</sup> 2026. This election in the districts concerned finally validated the victory of Sinisa Karan with 50.5% of the votes against 48% for Branko Blanus<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://theconversation.com/republique-serbe-de-bosnie-les-enseignements-dune-presidentielle-tres-serree-271978>

<sup>3</sup> <https://theconversation.com/republique-serbe-de-bosnie-les-enseignements-dune-presidentielle-tres-serree-271978>

<sup>4</sup> <https://reporteri.net/fr/nouvelles/Rajon/Sinisa-Karan-est-élue-présidente-de-la-Republika-Srpska/>

## *A by-election as a prelude to the general elections of October 2026*

Following the presidential election in RS, what can be expected from the next political decisions, knowing that the next elections will take place on October 4, 2026?

At the federal and national level, the new president Karan seems to be heading towards the same doctrine as Dodik. Karan campaigned to continue Dodik's separatist policies that have blocked political reforms in Bosnia: "This is the night when we start anew to do what we have been doing over the past 23 years but with ever more vigour"<sup>5</sup>. Karan is considered by many to be Dodik's political puppet. The decision to hold new elections, following Dodik's disqualification, seems, on the contrary, to prove his absolute power in the Srpska Republic. This feeling appears to be confirmed by a dual convergence of factors, both local and international.

Yet despite the court's ruling and the fact that he was, until recently, subject to US sanctions, Milorad Dodik once again came out on top: "These elections took place under unfavorable circumstances and with the interventionism of external actors, this is a victory for Republika Srpska and a demonstration of its stability"<sup>6</sup>. This stability rests on the continued accusations by Dodik and his party against forms of foreign interference (USA, EU and United Nations) that oppose any attempt by Republika Srpska to secede from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. President-elect Karan has called moreover for calm, stability and resistance to foreign influence in the lives of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina: "The Serbian people have now given their final answer by saying 'NO' to any foreigner or usurper who seeks to change their will,"<sup>7</sup>.

Another earthquake, since 2017, the American administration has imposed sanctions on Dodik, due to actions considered a threat to the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a violation of the Dayton peace agreement. However, the election of Donald Trump in October 2024 constituted an ideological shift regarding Dodik and his actions against the federation and the Dayton Accords. On October 29, 2025, the United States Department of Finance and Treasury (OFAC) lifted sanctions imposed on the former Bosnian Serb leader, as well as dozens of individuals and companies linked to him, following an "agreement reached with Dodik"<sup>8</sup>. This decision by the American administration follows, according to them, follows the decision by the parliament of the RS to annulled a series of separatist laws passed in recent months after Dodik had been indicted for defying decisions of the international envoy and the Constitutional Court. The lifting of US sanctions against Dodik reveals an increasingly deep rift between the EU and the US, a veritable ideological chasm in the transatlantic relationship via the credibility of Schmidt and the Office of the High Representative, who no longer seem to enjoy the support of the current US administration.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/separatist-wins-rerun-vote-president-bosnian-serb-region-2026-02-08/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/republika-srpska-karans-victory-cements-dodiks-power/a-74874269>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/republika-srpska-karans-victory-cements-dodiks-power/a-74874269>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-pro-russian-bosnian-serb-dodik-sanctions-list/33576314.html>

The general elections, that will take place on October 4, 2026 will surely be the most tense elections since the Dayton Accords, a moment of truth on the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a nation, a federation, and on its European future.

### *The future of BiH inside the EU*

What about the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the European family? The situation is evolving slowly. Bosnia and Herzegovina officially obtained candidate status for the European Union on December 15, 2022. The heads of government of the European Union made this decision at a meeting, after the European Commission's recommendation arrived on Tuesday, December 13, 2022. However, at the meeting of European heads of state, it was emphasized that Bosnia and Herzegovina will still have to fulfill the previously established conditions on the path to EU accession: "The authorities will still be required to implement 14 priorities. These include ensuring the completion of work at all levels of the coordination mechanism and improving the institutional framework, including constitutional reform".<sup>9</sup> As a reminder, candidate countries must align their national legislation with the 35 negotiating chapters of the Union and progressively comply with the standards set by the European institutions.

However, in 2026, Bosnia, compared to the other candidate countries in the Balkans (Albania, Montenegro, Moldova), has fallen far behind: "Bosnia and Herzegovina has fallen behind in terms of freedom of expression and the fight against corruption"<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the European Commission has indeed condemned the country's discriminatory constitution and its failure to respect minority rights on five occasions. The Dayton Accords, which celebrated their 30th anniversary in December 1995, established an ethnocratic and communitarian system, endorsing the results of the war: division, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Today, this ethnocratic logic is even more entrenched than it was ten or twenty years ago. The international trusteeship, still in place, remains the only way to provide Bosnia with the operating budgets of a country. The separatist tendencies of Republika Srpska on the one hand, and the Croat demands on the other, which focus on electoral reform, are likely to exacerbate the ethnic divisions in Bosnia, as well as the creation of what they call a "third entity," Croat. These structural problems, which have accelerated in recent years due to a combination of internal and external factors (the war in Ukraine, the influence of Russia and China in the Balkans, ambiguous relations with Iranian, Afghan, Turkish, and Arab Islamic groups, the migrant route, and the change of administration in the United States), drastically reduce the country's chances of becoming an EU member within this decade.

### *A Perpetual Antechamber?*

Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union is inherent to the Dayton Accords, foreign influences, and the ethno-nationalist system. Without cooperation and transformation of the Bosnian political system, accession to the European Union will be a long chimera. The

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<sup>9</sup> <https://euractiv.fr/news/elargissement-quatre-candidats-a-ladhesion-a-lue-realisent-des-progres-significatifs/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://euractiv.fr/news/elargissement-quatre-candidats-a-ladhesion-a-lue-realisent-des-progres-significatifs/>

nationalist inclinations of the Republic of Srpska, mixed with foreign anti-Europeanist influences, could lead to the spatial partition of the two federations. The country requires in short- and long-term structural transformations to hope to enter the European family according to the European Commission's 2030 agenda. But today, it's hardly feasible or even realistic. The election of Siniša Karan as president of Republika Srpska, despite a very narrow margin of victory over his opponent, primarily signifies the continuity of Dodik and his ideological constellation within the Bosnian tripartite system. Karan's election currently ensures the continuation of a political model centered on clientelism, weak institutions, and the centralized control of public media around the Dodik clan.

The 2026 general elections, without changing the almost immutable character of the Bosnian political system, will draw an essential political picture regarding the continuation of the accession process to the European Union for the next four years. For Bosnia to catch up with Montenegro or Albania, the country's future representatives at various political levels will have to collaborate on the 14 missing chapters out of the 35 of European integration. But even if collaboration were to develop between decision-making levels, which is far from being the case, the problem of finalizing the Dayton Accords remains. The war in Ukraine and the ideological shift in the United States, even if they accelerate the desire of European leaders to integrate the Western Balkans, mean that the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina risks becoming a Turkish case 2.0. Remaining in the EU's waiting room, due to a failure to achieve the structural, normative, and constitutional transformations necessary for European accession, means that rather than aiming for 2030, the country's accession possibilities could extend until 2035 or even 2040.

In light of this situation, the European Union and countries supporting Bosnian accession should implement several actions:

- In the short term, for the October 2026 elections, facilitate the deployment of observers from the electoral observation mission to ensure the regularity of the elections;
- Continue and strengthen the country's European integration through domestic laws concerning justice, the economy, and democracy, compatible with European laws;
- Promote interethnic and inter-federal dialogue to accelerate European integration and open new negotiations under the auspices of the international community to finalize the Dayton Accords, amend the country's constitution, and abolish the High Representative for the EU.

Without attempts at inter-federal negotiations and at a European level, the consequences of this quagmire could only be a decline within the Western Balkans themselves, favoring the secessionist tendencies of the Serb and Croat parts, calling into question the existential foundations of Bosnia as a federation, or even as a country.

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