

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

## Bosnian Serb lawmakers vote to separate key institutions

Hardline Serb Republic leader advances cause for separate army, judiciary and tax authority from Bosnia



Milorad Dodik: 'This is the moment of conquering the freedom for Republika Srpska' © REUTERS

**Marton Dunai** in Budapest DECEMBER 11 2021

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Bosnian Serb lawmakers voted to separate key institutions of the Serb Republic, one of two entities that make up Bosnia, advancing hardline leader Milorad Dodik's agenda for secession from Sarajevo.

The vote on Friday night alarmed Bosnia's western allies, who fear a break-up could lead to ethnic violence, crime and corruption and destabilise the wider region, preventing its integration into a European economic and military alliance.

As the region's upper house did not support the resolution, it is not binding.

US, UK, France, Germany, Italy and EU embassies said in a joint statement that the move was "a further escalatory step".

"Continuing this dead end path . . . is damaging the economic prospects of the [Serb Republic] entity, threatening the stability of the country and the entire region and jeopardising Bosnia's future with the EU," the countries said.

The west and Russia have increasingly sought to exert influence in the region and Moscow has long supported Dodik's politics as it tried to keep Bosnia from joining the western alliances, especially Nato.

Russia and China have also opposed sustaining the Office of the High Representative, the international community's main conduit of helping to preserve stability in the

the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, a complex deal that ended Europe's worst armed conflict since the second world war, but locked in ethnic boundaries.

The lawmakers of the Serb entity, which along with the Bosniak-Croat Federation make up the state of Bosnia, on Friday weighed separating the tax authority, the judiciary and the armed forces, and decided late at night to call on the Serb Republic's government to go ahead with the plans and draft relevant new laws.

"This is the moment of conquering the freedom for Republika Srpska," Dodik told the parliament of the Serbian Republic before the vote. "Bosnia is an experiment . . . I don't believe it can survive because it does not have an internal capacity to survive."

Domestic opposition politicians said Dodik's latest secessionist move is a decoy to dominate debate ahead of an election due in October 2022, when he is expected to face a tough fight to hold on to power after recent steady opposition gains in key cities including the federal capital Sarajevo and the Serb Republic's capital Banja Luka.

"Dodik is a good bluffer," Branislav Borenovic, chair of the Serb Republic's centre-right opposition Party of Democratic Progress, told the Financial Times. "He is trying to keep a crisis on the agenda. That is the only way for him to stay in power. He has no real answers to the economy challenges, the pandemic, corruption . . . So he likes to have a crisis."

Aside from political destabilisation, the economy of the country could suffer greatly if the Serb Republic were to withdraw from the joint Independent Tax Authority, one of the most successful post-Dayton institutions of the country, the IMF's mission chief told the Financial Times.

"Should the Republika Srpska go ahead and withdraw from ITA, it could threaten the ongoing recovery and the long-term prospects of the country, reversing years of progress at a time when the economy is not moving ahead very fast," the IMF's Alina Iancu said.

