

Changes to the EU's EUFOR Althea operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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On 2 November 2023, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the EUFOR Althea operation; all 15 members voted in favour of this decision. EUFOR Althea is a European Union military operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Although it is a training and advisory mission, it is also capable of conducting operational activities to maintain security and stability in BiH. Until 2004, such stabilisation tasks had been carried out by NATO (initially as part of IFOR and later under SFOR). At present, the EU operation involves more than 1100 troops from 22 countries, including non-EU states (Albania, Chile, Turkey, Switzerland, North Macedonia). The UN Security Council renews EUFOR Althea's mandate on an annual basis.

Starting from 1 January 2024, Hungarian General László Sticz will take over command of the operation. He will replace General Helmut Habermayer, an Austrian national. Since 2009, all of the commanding generals have been Austrian nationals. The Austrian *Der Standard* daily newspaper reported that Hungary was entrusted with the command of the operation in BiH for several reasons, including the fact that it had committed to make four to five helicopters available to it for at least three years. The decision to appoint a Hungarian national to the post has sparked controversy in BiH and some EU member states.

The political crisis in BiH, which has worsened since 2021, has highlighted the importance of EUFOR Althea there. Due to the unstable international situation, several days after the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the EU decided to almost double the number of its troops on the territory of BiH. In March 2022, more than 500 additional soldiers were deployed there. In September 2023, due to an increase in attacks on Bosniaks living in Republika Srpska (RS, a constituent part of BiH), five Bosnian associations which represent the victims of the 1990s war sent a letter requesting the EU to step up EUFOR Althea's involvement in maintaining security in that country.

Commentary

- The most recent instalment of BiH's escalating political crisis involves doubts regarding the legality of the appointment of Christian Schmidt as High Representative for BiH, and by extension the decisions he has taken. The High Representative's task is to supervise the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement; he also has extensive legislative and executive powers. Schmidt's appointment in 2021 has still not been confirmed by the UNSC. Since the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) is responsible for filling the post, in

theory the approval of UNSC is not necessary. In September 2023, the BiH Prosecutor's Office accused RS's President Milorad Dodik of failing to implement Schmidt's decisions. In line with the amendments to the Criminal Code (which the High Representative introduced in July 2023), the RS leader faces up to five years' imprisonment for this. His prosecution sparked protests by Bosnian Serbs, who set up a blockade of the so-called boundary lines between the constituent entities of BiH (RS and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FBiH). According to the Dayton Peace Agreement, which brought an end to the war in the 1990s, obstructing the free movement of people, goods and services between RS and FBiH is prohibited.

- International talks are underway on the proposal to increase the number of EUFOR Althea's staff in order to better adjust this operation to the worsening security situation. In a resolution passed on 12 July 2023, the European Parliament also called for "the consideration of deploying personnel and additional capacities for EUFOR Althea in regard to the Brčko district" in connection with Dodik's escalating secessionist rhetoric. Due to its strategic location (it divides the territory of RS), the Brčko District has the status of an autonomous unit. Seizing control of this area would be of key importance to the success of RS's potential attempt to secede from BiH. At present, only a Liaison Observation Team (LOT) made up of Austrian soldiers is operating in the district. Its tasks include monitoring the current political-military situation, providing early warnings in the event of security threats, and civilian-military cooperation with the Armed Forces of BiH and the state administration.
- The appointment of a Hungarian national as a commander of the EU operation has sparked concern among a portion of the Bosnian public, due to Budapest's controversial attitude towards BiH in recent years. The Hungarian government has openly supported Dodik's secessionist stance, and is opposed to the plan to include his name on the list of individuals sanctioned by the EU. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and RS's president are both authoritarian leaders and have close links with Moscow, Beijing and Belgrade. Although General Sticz does have the necessary experience to hold this position and is generally accepted, certain objections have been voiced because of the close ties between the government in Budapest and the authorities of RS. These doubts mainly involve the degree to which the new commander will respect the principle of neutrality on issues such as the integrity of the state and the protection of sensitive information, as well as social capital, that is, civilian confidence in the EUFOR Althea operation in BiH. This is particularly important in the context of the recent tensions in BiH, as well as Budapest's open support for RS which has threatened to secede from BiH.