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Russia in Review: October 20 – November 9, 2021

Russia Undermines Key Component of 1995 Balkans Peace Deal at the United Nations Security Council

By George Barros and Kateryna Stepanenko

The Kremlin undermined a key guarantor of the Balkan peace settlement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, weakening dampeners on renewed conflict and empowering Russia's Serbian allies. The Kremlin politically weakened the Office of the High Representative (OHR), a key US and EU-backed international institution devoted to maintaining the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the 1992-1995 Bosnian War.¹ Russia removed all mention of the OHR's stabilizing role from an annual United Nations Security Council resolution to renew the EU-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina on November 3.² By doing so, Russia undermined the OHR's political authority and ability work to with peacekeeping forces, impeding its ability to mediate between the component institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Kremlin characterizes the OHR and the Dayton Accords as illegitimate agreements imposed on Bosnia by the Western dominated world order. The Kremlin often seeks to support the Bosnian Republika Srpska and key Russian ally Serbia and undermine EU and NATO efforts to preserve the Dayton Accords.



Russia has long sought to undermine the Office of the High Representative. Russia exploited the first appointment of a new high representative in 12 years in summer 2021 to advance this effort. The steering board of the OHR nominated German politician Christian Schmidt as High Representative in accordance with the Dayton Accords on May 28.³ The Kremlin petitioned the UN Security Council to pass a resolution to permanently close the OHR on July 31, a day before Schmidt's first day in office on August 1.⁴ The Kremlin unsuccessfully argued that Schmidt's appointment was illegitimate since it was made without

consulting the UN Security Council, though the UN has no legal authority over OHR appointments.⁵

A wave of secession threats from Milorad Dodik—the Serbian member of the Bosnian Tripartite Presidency—in July and October of 2021 enabled the Kremlin to target the OHR’s legitimacy. Dodik represents Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority component government of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dodik reiterated Republika Srpska’s desire to succeed from Bosnia-Herzegovina after Schmidt’s predecessor passed a law on July 23 allowing prison terms for denying the Serbian-perpetrated 1995 genocide.⁶ The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) backed Dodik and claimed the OHR’s law undermined Bosnia-Herzegovina’s sovereignty.⁷ Dodik claimed on October 8 that Republika Srpska’s army, tax administration, and judicial system would fully separate from Bosnia-Herzegovina’s central government by the end of November 2021.⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) condemned international criticism of Dodik’s secession statements as “demonization of the Serbian people.”⁹ The Kremlin used Dodik’s response to the ban on genocide denial as a justification to decouple the OHR from peacekeeping operations during the annual UN debate on OHR’s role in the EU peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹⁰ Russia also procedurally blocked Schmidt from presenting a key report to the UN Security Council on the importance of maintaining the EU peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina on November 3.¹¹

The Kremlin’s actions are unlikely to enable a near-term resumption of conflict in the Balkans, but will likely destabilize Bosnia-Herzegovina ahead of a planned October 2022 Bosnian general election. Dodik has repeatedly threatened to secede from Bosnia-Herzegovina in the past and is unlikely to break from Bosnia-Herzegovina despite his rhetoric. Dodik likely seeks (with Russian support) to coerce the EU into further weakening the OHR and reversing the previously announced law against denying

Serbian-perpetrated genocide but likely does not want a renewed physical conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Kremlin seeks to end the EU peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, expel NATO’s headquarters in Sarajevo, and increase Russian influence in the Balkans. The Kremlin’s successful decoupling of the OHR from EU peacekeeping operations undermines OHR’s legitimacy and weakens a key US and EU-backed lever of stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Kremlin is unlikely to seek to restart conflict in Bosnia and seeks to further weaken stabilizing Western structures in the Balkans and grant Republika Srpska greater influence, but retains the option to rhetorically escalate the crisis further.

Russia Around the Globe

1. The Kremlin secured a new gas deal and promises of further economic integration at a Russia-Armenia Interregional Forum on October 19.¹² The Kremlin seeks to integrate Armenia into bilateral and regional organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and economic agreements to cement its influence in the Caucasus. The Kremlin will likely increase its economic leverage over Armenia by increasing Russian infrastructure investment in Armenia over the next several years. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called for increased Armenian-Russian economic integration both bilaterally and through the EAEU during the forum.¹³ Armenia and Russia agreed on an unspecified new price for Russian natural gas supplied to Armenia, though several issues (including powerplant maintenance) remain unresolved in continuing negotiations on Russian energy supplies to Armenia.¹⁴ Russian Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov stated Russian companies are ready to invest \$1 billion in the Armenian economy in coming years.¹⁵

2. Russia and Belarus finalized three military cooperation agreements in Moscow on October 20. These three agreements build on Russian efforts in 2021 to expand Russia’s growing military presence in Belarus and set conditions for a likely

permanent Russian deployment to Belarus.¹⁶ Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin renewed the agreement for Russia's two existing radar bases in Belarus until 2046, agreed on a new Union State military doctrine (later formally approved during a November 4 meeting between Putin and Lukashenko), and approved a bilateral military cooperation plan for 2022. The Union State military doctrine and cooperation plan are not publicly available. The new Union State military doctrine likely formalizes operational concepts for the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces and new joint Russian-Belarusian air patrols. The military cooperation plan for 2022 will likely increase the pace and scale of Russian-Belarusian joint exercises carried out throughout 2020 and 2021. Both the new Union State military doctrine and 2022 cooperation plan will support Russian and Belarusian preparations for the planned "Union Shield" joint exercise in 2023.

3. Russian President Vladimir Putin articulated key aspects of the Kremlin's campaign to expand Russian influence in major international organizations in his annual speech to the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia, on October 22. The Valdai Discussion Club is a Kremlin-sponsored think tank that hosts an annual conference involving Putin and senior Russian thinkers and policymakers.¹⁷ Putin welcomed the rise of multipolarity, individual states' emerging self-interests, and "unprecedented change" in the Western world order as the world transitions away from a unipolar world order. Putin accused the United States of causing the current situation in Afghanistan and abandoning Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states to deal with the fallout of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Putin claimed that Russia desires further international cooperation on COVID-19, climate change, and "evolving crises" and blamed the West for attempting to impose its values on the rest of the world. Putin concluded his speech by praising the United Nations—particularly the UN Security Council—as a necessary organization to

"normalize" the chaotic transition of the current world order. The Kremlin opposes changes that reduce Russian power within the UN and uses its influence in the organization as a key foreign policy tool, such as in its ongoing efforts to limit Western influence in the Balkans and normalize relations with the Taliban.¹⁸

4. The Kremlin successfully leveraged Moldova's energy dependency on Russia to limit the new Western-leaning Moldovan government's European Union (EU) integration agenda and coerced Moldova into signing a new five-year gas supply deal with Russia on October 29. Russia renewed a gas supply contract to Moldova on October 29 that would have expired on October 31.¹⁹ The Kremlin raised gas prices for Moldova in October and threatened to cut off gas supplies by December 1. The Kremlin then offered to reduce gas prices if Moldova amended its free trade agreement with the EU, postponed gas market liberalization reforms that are a requirement for further EU integration, and paid disputed arrears to Russian gas company Gazprom.²⁰ The Kremlin coupled the energy pressure campaign with an information campaign seeking to undermine public trust in pro-Western President Maia Sandu, who took office in December 2020.²¹ Sandu's government had no alternative to Gazprom's pressure and will struggle to break Moldova's entrenched economic dependence on Russia.

5. The Kremlin reshaped its strategy on international responses to Afghanistan in October to increasingly emphasize the need for United Nations aid to Afghanistan, likely as a stepping stone to recognizing the Taliban as the Afghan government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attended a series of meetings in late October to marshal support for UN aid to Afghanistan and neighboring states. Lavrov met Chinese and Pakistani representatives on October 19 to discuss emergency humanitarian and financial aid for Afghanistan.²² Lavrov hosted Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi and representatives from China,

Pakistan, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in Moscow on October 20.²³ All participants called for prompt UN humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan.²⁴ Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan's foreign ministers ratified another joint statement on October 27 calling for the international community to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to Pakistan, Iran, and other neighboring countries hosting Afghan refugees.²⁵ The statement called on countries bordering Afghanistan to prevent the United States and NATO from establishing a military presence in Central Asia. Lavrov stated that Russia plans to send Afghanistan unspecified amounts of humanitarian aid consisting of food, medicine, and basic goods on an unspecified future date.²⁶

The Kremlin is likely reshaping its ongoing effort to coordinate the responses of regional states to Afghanistan by increasingly focusing on UN initiatives—a shift from its approach in July–September that centered on bilateral and regional initiatives, particularly including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This effort fits a pattern of Kremlin attempts to leverage the UN—particularly Russia and China's vetoes in the Security Council—to legitimize its favored policies.²⁷ The Kremlin may additionally be setting conditions to recognize the Taliban through the UN, possibly under the rhetoric of alleviating a humanitarian disaster. The Kremlin reportedly instructed Russian state media personnel to stop referring to the Taliban as a “banned terrorist organization in Russia,” and instead refer to it as an “organization under UN sanctions for terrorist activity,” on November 8.²⁸ The Kremlin will likely remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations and recognize the Taliban by early 2022.

6. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ratified a package of 28 integration roadmaps and a new joint military doctrine on November 4, a

milestone in the Kremlin's campaign to integrate Belarus under the Kremlin-dominated Union State.²⁹ The ratified roadmaps primarily create regulations and measures to unify Russian-Belarusian monetary and fiscal policies under the Union State, a Kremlin-dominated supranational organization between Russia and Belarus.³⁰ Lukashenko and Putin previously approved the content of the roadmaps on September 9 but waited to ratify them.³¹ The new Union State military doctrine likely formalizes operational concepts for the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces and new joint Russian-Belarusian air patrols. Lukashenko's acceptance of the Union State roadmaps is a major concession to the Kremlin. Russia and Belarus negotiated the 28 roadmaps for much 2021, and Lukashenko previously refused to sign any roadmaps until all 28 were finalized as a delaying tactic.³² The Kremlin likely secured Lukashenko's acceptance by intensifying Russian military pressure on Belarus and promising economic support to counteract Western sanctions.³³ The Kremlin will likely intensify pressure against Lukashenko to formalize more integration concessions when Lukashenko holds a planned national referendum on a new Belarusian constitution in February 2022.³⁴

7. CIA director Bill Burns visited Moscow on November 2-3 to warn the Kremlin of US attention to Russian troop movements around Ukraine. Burns traveled to Moscow on November 2 and met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev.³⁵ US sources and Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov later confirmed on November 8 that Burns spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin by phone during his trip to Moscow.³⁶ The Russian military began conducting several anomalous troop movements near the Ukrainian and Belarusian border in late October 2021.³⁷ ISW does not assess from available sources that recent Russian movements are in preparation for an imminent offensive action against Ukraine. However, these movements are part of a wider change in Russian force posture to shift additional forces westward and may support

preparations for offensive operations against Ukraine in spring 2022. ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

8. Belarus attempted to force thousands of Middle Eastern migrants across the Polish border on November 8, a major escalation in its Kremlin-backed effort to pressure the EU with migrant trafficking.

Belarusian security personnel directed roughly 2,000 migrants to cross the Kuźnica-Bruzgi border crossing in Poland on November 8, providing them with directions and tools to destroy fences.³⁸ Belarusian personnel began facilitating the travel of migrants into Poland and the Baltic states in June 2021, but previous single-day crossing numbers remained in the low hundreds.³⁹ Thousands of migrants remain on the border in makeshift camps as of November 10 and several smaller groups have made crossing attempts since November 8.⁴⁰ Polish authorities deployed more than 12,000 soldiers to the border with Belarus and raised the readiness level of its territorial force in response.⁴¹ EU Foreign Ministers will meet on November 15 to discuss responses to the crisis and possible new sanctions against Belarus.⁴²

The Kremlin is enabling, if not directly controlling, Belarus' escalation against Poland to pressure the EU and support misinformation claiming a NATO campaign to destroy Belarus.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov demanded the EU provide financial assistance to Belarus to encourage it to stop migrants entering the EU, claiming the EU should financially support Belarus the way it supported Turkey with Syrian migrants in 2016.⁴³ This is a false equivalency, as Belarus is directly transporting migrants from Iraq to Belarus and across neighboring borders. The Kremlin is additionally exploiting the manufactured crisis to falsely accuse NATO of aggression against Belarus—an ongoing information operation that the Kremlin launched in fall 2020.⁴⁴ Putin and Belarusian President Lukashenko held a phone call on November 9 to discuss Poland and voiced concern about Polish troops gathering at the border.⁴⁵ The Kremlin will likely continue to support Belarusian migrant trafficking to pressure the EU into reducing sanctions on Belarus. The Kremlin is unlikely to use its manufactured crisis as a justification to conduct kinetic operations against Poland but retains the ability to do so in the future.

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⁴⁴ Minsk will likely intensify the migrant trafficking campaign over the next several months. Belarusian authorities reportedly seek to increase the number of flights from Middle Eastern emigration countries to Minsk until March 2022. ["New Flights From Middle East Planned: Lukashenko Continues to Escalate Conflict with EU,"] *News, Latest Headlines and Videos*, November 7, 2021, <https://ru.detv dot us/2021/11/07/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8B-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%8B-%D1%81-%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B6%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B3/>; "Syria, Belarus to boost relations, confront Western Coercive Measures," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, November 3, 2021, <http://sana dot sy/en/?p=253368>; George Barros, "Belarus Warning Update: Putin is Setting Conditions for a Long-Term Continuous Russian Military Presence in Belarus," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-setting-conditions-long-term-continuous-russian-military>.

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