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Assessing the Security Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Status and Prospects

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The worsening internal problems in Bosnia, especially separatist tendencies in Republika Srpska, are being used by Russia in its hybrid methods to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and impede its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to the resumption of the political debate in BiH about membership in NATO, which is opposed by the Bosnian Serbs, who support military neutrality. In this situation, the importance of the EUFOR Althea mission is growing. Nevertheless, its personnel should be reinforced with specialists in countering hybrid threats.

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The crisis over the political system in BiH, efforts to expand the autonomy of Republika Srpska (RS), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted the EU in February to increase the EUFOR *Althea* mission personnel from 600 to 1,100 troops. Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and others reinforced their contingents. After a 10-year break, soldiers also returned to the mission from Germany (up to 50 in the role of observers, advisors, and liaison officers). It is one element of the increased activity of German diplomacy in the Western Balkans. To signal readiness for rapid-response, EUFOR has increased patrols and French fighter jets have conducted a series of training flights over Bosnia. The UK, in turn, reinforced the staff of the NATO mission in Sarajevo, sending two experts on countering disinformation and defence-sector reform. The British government also donated £750 million to establish a Cyber Security Centre at the University of Sarajevo. However, these measures proved insufficient to strengthen BiH's resilience to hybrid threats ahead of the 2 October general elections. Indeed, in September, the activities of BiH's state institutions were paralysed by a cyberattack.

Security Situation

The main challenge to Bosnia's security and stability is the deepening internal problems, growing nationalist sentiment, and separatist tendencies in Republika Srpska,¹ one of the two constituent parts of the state (entities) alongside the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). In December

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2021, the RS National Assembly passed a package of laws to transfer competences regarding the judiciary, the tax system, security, and defence from the central level to the entity level. The decision runs counter to previous efforts by Western countries to centralise these competences and is seen by them as a step toward RS secession. Of

particular concern are plans to create a Serbian armed force independent of the central government. Its implementation would mark the failure of the defence-sector reform that has been underway since the end of the Yugoslav conflict and widely regarded as the greatest success of building multi-ethnic state institutions in BiH.

Decentralisation and partial re-nationalisation of the Bosnian armed forces would also increase the risk of renewed conflict in BiH (e.g., in the form of Serbian armed irredentism).² However, the likelihood of such a scenario is low due to the military presence of the EUFOR forces and the political context surrounding the RS authorities' decision. They passed laws in response to the introduction of penalties for denying the crime of genocide in Srebrenica by the decision of the High Representative for BiH (HR) in July 2021. It sparked outrage among Bosnian Serbs, who question the legitimacy of the institution established under the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), and they call for its abolition (backed by Russia, Serbia, and China). However, the implementation of the adopted laws was postponed by the RS authorities due to the war in Ukraine. The adoption of the legislative changes was also intended to mobilise the electorate of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the party of Milorad Dodik, who is the main proponent of expanding RS autonomy, ahead of the October elections. In the first half of 2022, he was sanctioned by the U.S. and the UK for corruption

¹ "Sixtieth report of the High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Secretary-General of the United Nations (S/2021/912)," United Nations Security Council, 01 November 2021.

² The civil war in the former Yugoslavia (1992-1995) was primarily an ethnic and territorial dispute. More than 100,000 people (mostly civilians) were killed during the fighting. The hostilities were ended as a result of the intervention of NATO countries, which prompted the parties to the conflict to approve the Dayton Peace Agreement. For more on the origins and course of the conflict, see, e.g.: D.H. Allin, "NATO's Balkan Interventions," *Adelphi Paper 347*, Routledge, London-New York 2010, pp. 13-48.

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and efforts to disintegrate and destabilise BiH. In February, the EU considered similar steps against the Bosnian Serb leader, but the decision was opposed by Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia.

A potential threat to BiH's security is the risk of Russia blocking in the UN Security Council the extension of the EUFOR *Althea* mission's mandate. Russian diplomacy signalled this move in 2021 in

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an effort to force the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) to remove Christian Schmidt from the post of High Representative. At the time, Russia chose not to veto the decision and supported the mission's extension for another 12 months. It did the same during the latest vote, which took place on 2 November this year. Blocking the EU operation would most likely lead to a change in the nature of the NATO

HQ mission in Sarajevo from advisory to stabilisation. Its mandate, given under the Dayton Peace Agreement, is indefinite and allows for the deployment of up to 60,000 peacekeepers. The changes would conflict with the interests of the Bosnian Serbs and Russia.

The Role of the EUFOR *Althea* Mission

Since December 2004, the EU has been responsible for maintaining a stable security environment in BiH. *Operation Althea* replaced the IFOR/SFOR missions conducted by NATO between 1995 and 2004. The transfer of responsibility was based on the "Berlin plus" mechanism allowing the Union to use the Alliance's planning and command resources. The mission's main tasks now include supporting the security and defence-sector reform of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH), monitoring the situation and preventing the resumption of conflict, as well as ensuring the HR's ability to carry out mandated tasks and comply with the Dayton Peace Agreement.

At the strategic level, the mission's goal is to create the conditions for the political integration of BiH into Euro-Atlantic structures. These activities are undertaken within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which is part of the Union's enlargement policy.³ In the case of BiH, however, this process is proceeding most slowly – outside of Kosovo – in the Western Balkans. As of 2016, Bosnia has applied to become an official candidate, but the main obstacles to integration are problems with the rule of law, high levels of corruption, too slow a pace of public administration reform, and a change in the electoral system. In 2019 the European Commission (EC) made 14 recommendations concerning these areas of state functioning.⁴ In June, 12 Bosnian political parties signed an interparty agreement on the European foreign policy course and the extension of the *Althea* mission's mandate. In mid-October, the EC recommended that BiH be granted candidate state status, subject to implementation of the Commission's recommendations and additional reforms.⁵

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³ T. Żornaczuk, "European Commission Recommends Including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in EU Enlargement Policy.", *PISM Bulletin*, no 101 (2018), 22 June 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁴ "Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership of the European Union, COM(2019)," European Commission, 29 May 2019.

⁵ "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report," European Commission Staff Working Document, SWD(2022) 336 final, Brussels, 12 October 2022.

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EUFOR currently numbers 1,100 soldiers (including up to 50 from Poland). At the beginning of the mission, the force was 7,000, but in subsequent years it was reduced to 600 troops. In addition, the countries participating in the mission keep EUFOR reserve forces on standby, which can be quickly

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sent to BiH if necessary. Every year, they participate in *Quick Response* exercises. The EUFOR Multinational Battalion (MNBN), stationed at the Camp Butmir base in Sarajevo, is responsible for crisis-response and interaction with the AFBiH. Until the end of 2018, it trained the AFBiH. Currently, EUFOR advisory teams

(EATs) primarily oversee the AFBiH's implementation of and compliance with NATO standards. The Polish advisors are assigned to the 6th Infantry Brigade with headquarters in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska). There are also 17 Liaison and Observation Teams (LOTs) on Bosnian territory, responsible for monitoring the situation, and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), with a Polish team stationed in Doboj.

In September, BiH joined the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, which aims to strengthen the Union's cooperation with partner countries in civilian crisis management. This will increase Bosnia's capacity to prevent and respond to natural disasters in cooperation with EU members. This area of security is important for BiH, among other things, due to its location in a seismic zone and flood risk. The most recent earthquake (with a magnitude of 5.7) occurred in April this year. In 2014, BiH was hit by the worst flooding in the region since 1982, which caused losses of about €1.3 billion (more than 7.5% of BiH's GDP). More than 1.5 million people (about 39% of BiH's population), mostly in RS, lost their homes or access to electricity, running water, and infrastructure. This was due, among other things, to years of neglect by local authorities in the field of emergency management. The socio-economic consequences of the floods were minimised thanks to, among other things, EU financial support (a total of €65 million for BiH and Serbia), humanitarian assistance from individual Member States, and NATO support in dealing with the flood consequences within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC).

The Prospect of Bosnia's Accession to NATO

BiH's aspirations for NATO membership stem from the Defence Law (2005), the Security and Defence Strategy (2007), and the Foreign Policy Strategy (2018), among others. However, NATO accession is opposed by Bosnian Serbs. In 2017, Republika Srpska parliament adopted a declaration of military neutrality (along the lines of Serbia). Despite the lack of political consensus on membership in the Alliance, the authorities are using cooperation with the EU and NATO to reform the security and defence sector to bring AFBiH up to NATO standards and enable future transatlantic integration. The first step on this path was Bosnia's accession to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 2006. This process was preceded by, among other things, the merger of the independent FiBH (30,000) and RS (10,000-12,000) armies, a reduction of their numbers to 10,000 professional soldiers and 5,000 reservists, the creation of a joint defence ministry, the adoption of a joint military doctrine, the submission of the AFBiH to civilian control, and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The BiH armed forces, established in 2006, are considered an example of the success of building multi-ethnic state institutions. Key positions (e.g., in the general staff, operational commands and support unit commands) are filled on a parity basis, which distinguishes the Bosnian armed forces from police units, which are almost ethnically homogeneous. The core of

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the AFBiH, in turn, is formed of three infantry brigades (each consisting of three battalions, one from each ethnic group) and subordinate mono-ethnic regiments.

In 2008, Bosnia adopted the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), and relations with NATO took the form of an Intensified Dialogue (ID), opening up new opportunities for obtaining assistance and consultations. Through cooperation with NATO, Bosnian military observers participated in UN missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Darfur (Sudan), and Eritrea. BiH also sent an infantry platoon and a team of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) sappers to Iraq. Since 2009, Bosnian soldiers have also participated in missions in Afghanistan (ISAF and RSM) as part of the

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Danish and German contingents. They are currently participating in missions in Mali, the Central African Republic, and the DRC, among others. Thanks to its cooperation with NATO, Bosnia has ceased to be merely a “security recipient” and has become a contributor to peacekeeping efforts.

The commitment to joint activities with the Alliance contributed to the inclusion of BiH in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2010. It greatly facilitates compliance with NATO standards and is considered one of the last procedures before formal invitation to join the Alliance. However, the MAP has not been activated over the years due to Bosnian Serb opposition to the transfer of ownership of post-Yugoslav army military property (e.g., barracks, weapons storage facilities, etc.) from the entity level to the central level. SNSD politicians also blocked the adoption of NATO’s Annual National Program (ANP), clarifying the scope of changes needed for implementation, which effectively activates the MAP. As a result of a political compromise, the BiH authorities finally adopted what was called a “Reform Programme” in December 2019 – the modification of the name was probably due to political calculations and was intended to reduce the image costs to the SNSD (82% of Bosnian Serbs oppose membership in the Alliance).⁶ The coordination and implementation of reforms is the responsibility of the Commission for Cooperation with NATO, established in 2021.

Despite political efforts to sabotage cooperation with the Alliance, the reforms are being effectively put into practice militarily. Since 2014, Bosnia has been participating in the Interoperability Platform (IP), one of the two formats for cooperation under the Partner Interoperability Initiative (PII)⁷, which allows for consultations on political and military issues. Bosnia also participates in the Integrity Building (IB) programme focusing on good governance and transparent use of the armed forces. The AFBiH’s light infantry battalion (800 soldiers) assigned to participate in PfP missions was certified in September. It received the highest ratings and will be able to interact with NATO forces in peacekeeping missions and exercises from 2023. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019-2021 the AFBiH conducted 30 multinational military exercises with NATO countries and three bilateral ones with the U.S.

However, the high ratings of the certified battalion do not reflect the state of the BiH army as a whole. Problems include insufficient funding for infrastructure expansion and repair and modernisation and purchase of military equipment. Since 2016, BiH’s defence budget has been kept below 1% of GDP (in 2021 it was 0.78%), the lowest in the Western Balkans. Due to inter-party disputes, since 2018 the federal budget has been passed with significant delays, which paralyses the administration of the armed forces and prevents their modernisation and development. Nearly all (88%) of defence spending is consumed by personnel

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⁶ “What Matters to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Citizens? Public Opinion Poll,” National Democratic Institute, December 2021, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/bosnia-and-herzegovina-poll>.

⁷ W. Lorenz, “Evolution of NATO Cooperation with Its Partners: Opportunities and Challenges,” *PISM Bulletin*, no 175 (1605), 21 August 2020, www.pism.pl.

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maintenance. Funding for equipment and armaments has not exceeded 4% of the military budget since 2017, which hampers AFBiH's operational capabilities. Although Bosnia receives foreign financial and military support (the main donors are the U.S. and Turkey), use of these funds is sometimes sabotaged by politicians—for example, Bosnian Serbs blocked the possibility of renovating military infrastructure located on FBiH territory. A serious problem for the Bosnian military is the shortage of personnel due in part to the high number of retirements, low interest in serving because of low wages, and economic migration. This mainly concerns Bosnian Croats holding Croatian passports and going to work in the EU. Staffing problems are also compounded by the ethnic quotas, which results in the inability to hire specialists for vacant positions because of ethnicity.

Russia's Destabilising Influence

Although Russia's strategic goal in the Western Balkans is to prevent further NATO enlargement, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has renewed the debate on BiH's membership in the Alliance. For example, Foreign Minister Bisera Turković of the Democratic Action Party (SDA) has called for accelerated integration. In response, the Russian ambassador stated in March that "Russia reserves the right to react to Bosnia's accession to NATO, as it did in the case of Ukraine".⁸ These words were a straightforward threat of Russian military intervention and were primarily intended to put psychological pressure on the Bosnian political elite, discouraging them from strengthening contacts with the Alliance. Of the three non-NATO countries in the region, BiH is closest to integration (despite the lack of political consensus on the issue). Serbia declares a policy of military neutrality, while Kosovo is not recognised by four NATO member states (Greece, Spain, Romania, and Slovakia).

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The likelihood of Russian military intervention in BiH is very low, however, mainly because of Russia's commitment of significant forces and resources to the war in Ukraine, the presence of EUFOR *Althea* troops, geographic distance, and the potentially high costs of intervention. However, Russia has been obstructing Bosnia's integration into NATO via hybrid methods for years. BiH is one of the countries in the region most susceptible to Russian hybrid operations due to, among other things, the pro-Russia sympathies of Bosnian Serbs, low levels of trust in media and state institutions, high levels of corruption and clientelism, the activity of paramilitary groups, and energy dependence on Russia.

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Russia conducts disinformation and propaganda activities targeting the entire Serbian-speaking community in the Western Balkans. It does so directly through, among others, the *Sputnik Srbija* portal, and indirectly through messages conveyed by regime programmes in Russia (and Belarus) duplicated by media in Republika Srpska and Serbia (one of the least free in Europe). The Russian campaigns aim to, among other things, stoke internal and international disputes (including ethnic, religious, and territorial ones), attack the image of NATO and the EU, and falsify coverage of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This perpetuates anti-Western attitudes among the local community and maintains the Bosnian Serbs' positive attitude toward Russia (based mainly on cultural ties). Russian propaganda also creates a positive image of Russia as "Orthodox brothers" and "defenders of the Slavs" against "Western expansionism" in the Balkans.

⁸ "Russia warns it will 'have to react' if Bosnia moves to join NATO," *Reuters*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-russia-nato-idUSKBN2BA2FL>.

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Russia also interferes in BiH's domestic and foreign policy through clientelistic political arrangements. According to publicised information from the U.S. intelligence community,⁹ Dodik has been financed since 2014 by a Russian oligarch responsible for, among other things, financing separatists in Donbas and Russian hybrid operations in Central Europe. Russian funding facilitated the SNSD leader's victory in the 2018 elections to the presidium (the collegial body that serves as the head of state in BiH). Thus, Russia gained indirect influence over Bosnian foreign policy. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Dodik blocked a decision to impose sanctions on Russia, and unsuccessfully tried to pressure the Bosnian ambassador to the UN to vote against a resolution condemning the aggression.

Russia also has subversive potential that it can use to block Bosnia's accession to NATO (as it tried to do against Montenegro in 2016).¹⁰ Members of nationalist paramilitary groups, such as Serbian Honour (*Srbska Čast*), Veterans of Republika Srpska, Balkan Cossack Troops (*Balkanska Kozacka Vojska*, BKV), and the Serbian branch of the Russian

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motorcycle group Night Wolves, are active on RS territory. These environments are mainly used for propaganda purposes (such as rallies in support of Russia in the RS). They also have military skills, and some have combat experience (more than 300 Serbian volunteers have fought on the side

of Russian separatists in Donbas since 2014).¹¹ Their members were trained by, among others, former Russian special services officers at the Serbian-Russian Centre in Niš (Serbia), which has been operating since 2012. The official purpose of this centre is to cooperate in the area of crisis management, but it is most likely a base for Russian intelligence operations in the Balkans. Since 2015, Russia has also been cooperating with police in the RS in the areas of training, information-sharing, fighting terrorism, organised crime, and cyber threats. In 2018, the RS authorities purchased, among other things, 2,500 automatic weapons and Igla V1 anti-aircraft systems, and established a new training centre on the outskirts of Banja Luka (in the former military barracks of Zalužani). Russia could use these assets, for example, to destabilise the internal situation and trigger a "frozen conflict" (along the lines of Transnistria, Abkhazia, or South Ossetia), which would make BiH's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures more difficult in the long term.

Although Russia's economic influence in BiH is limited, it is concentrated in the strategic energy sector and, to a lesser extent, the banking (Sberbank) and metallurgical sectors (through the Gazprom-controlled *Prvo Plinarsko Društvo*). Russia's Gazprom is responsible for 100% of Bosnia's natural gas imports. The Russian government is considering the construction of a branch of the TurkStream pipeline that would pass exclusively through RS territory, providing gas supplies to the EU. During a recent visit to Moscow, Dodik also discussed with Vladimir Putin the plans for Russian companies to build two power plants on RS territory. Since 2007, Russia has also been playing an important role in Bosnia's oil sector through investments by Russian company Zarubezhneft. The acquisition of the debt-ridden refineries in Bosanski Brod and Modriča, as well as the Nestro Petrol fuel distribution network (officially for €120 million; in reality, as much as €250 million), provides Russia with control over about a third of the oil market in BiH.

⁹ "SAD: Rusija tajno finansirala DF u Crnoj Gori i Dodika u BiH," VOA, 13 September 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/rusija-tajno-finansiranje-dodik-bih-crna-gora/6745992.html>.

¹⁰ Malofeev financed Democratic Front politicians to seize power in a Russian-inspired coup in 2016 and prevent Montenegro's integration into NATO. See: R. Bajrović, V. Garčević, R. Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018.

¹¹ See: "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine," *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/>.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Separatist tendencies among Bosnian Serbs can be used by Russia to destabilise BiH through hybrid methods.

The drive to expand the autonomy of Republika Srpska is primarily being exploited by Dodik and his party for internal use. Separatist tendencies among Bosnian Serbs can be used by Russia to destabilise BiH through hybrid methods, such as conducting disinformation campaigns, launching cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, interfering in political processes, using energy blackmail, or carrying out diversionary-sabotage activities through local paramilitary groups. Their goals include impeding the country's Euro-Atlantic integration and undermining EU and NATO crisis-management capabilities¹² in the Balkans. By provoking a crisis in BiH, Russia may be trying to divert the West's attention from the war in Ukraine and force its involvement in stabilising the Western Balkans. It may also treat it as a "bargaining chip" in relations with the West to try to force Ukraine's allies to pressure the Ukrainian authorities to negotiate with Russia.

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If increased Russian hybrid activity is observed in BiH, NATO should consider the possibility of sending counter-hybrid support teams there (NATO Counter-Hybrid Support Teams). Once analogous teams are established within the EU (EU Rapid Hybrid Threat Response Teams¹³), which is expected by the end of 2024, the Union will be able to use them to respond to hybrid-induced crises. In the event that the situation in Republika Srpska escalates and the risk of armed irredentism increases, the EUFOR command could also consider pre-emptively deploying MNB elements in the Brčko District, the autonomous region separating the two components of the RS. Given its strategic importance, seizing this area would be crucial to the success of a (possible) Serbian secession. EUFOR could use military infrastructure historically at the disposal of the NATO mission (Camp McGovern in Brčko District or Eagle Base in Tuzla) for this purpose.

Given the risk of hybrid threats in BiH, NATO may consider including BiH in the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, which aims to prepare partners to defend against terrorism or cyberattacks, among other threats. At a later stage, subject to closer political and military cooperation, Alliance countries may also consider inviting BiH to the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP), the second format for cooperation within the PII offered to countries contributing the most to the Alliance's missions and security. This would expand opportunities for the AFBiH to participate in NATO exercises. To enter the next level of cooperation with the Alliance, however, the Bosnian authorities should develop a long-term plan to increase the defence budget and modernise the armed forces, as well as a new security and defence strategy – the current document has not been updated in 15 years, making it out of step with the current security situation in Europe.

Given the risk of hybrid threats in BiH, NATO may consider including BiH in the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative.

To reduce the impact of Russian disinformation, the EU should increase the resources and personnel of the Western Balkan Task Force responsible for identifying and analysing disinformation in the region.

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¹² F. Bryjka, "New NATO Strategy Reshapes the Future of Crisis Response," *PISM Bulletin*, no 118 (2035), 21 July 2022, www.pism.pl.

¹³ F. Bryjka, "Tracing the Development of EU Capabilities to Counter Hybrid Threats," *PISM Strategic File*, no 9 (117), August 2022, www.pism.pl.

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should increase the resources and personnel of the Western Balkan Task Force responsible for identifying and analysing disinformation in the region. It could also consider supporting the establishment of a news channel broadcasting in Serbo-Croatian and expand its support for strategic communications (e.g., strengthening civil society initiatives and independent journalism). The Union should also financially support projects on the exchange of good practices in countering hybrid threats, media education and critical thinking (at all levels of education).

Despite their small numbers, Polish military personnel in BiH make an important contribution to the functioning of the *Althea* mission, including in the areas of military advisory and providing situational awareness. The positive attitude toward Polish soldiers on the part of all three ethnic groups allows them to act as mediators in conflict situations (including those involving military personnel from other countries participating in the operation). While Polish soldiers are well positioned within the EUFOR structure, Poland has no representative at NATO HQ in Sarajevo. Placing civilian or military specialists in this structure would enhance Poland's experience in the practical dimension of NATO-EU cooperation within the "Berlin plus" mechanism.