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Bosnia and Russia: The Implications for European Security and US Interests

Nadina Ronc

Abstract: Twenty-seven years since the end of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) remains a dysfunctional, poverty-stricken ward of the international community and requires greater analytical and policy attention to ensure the situation does not result in an environment conducive to the security threat from Russia. The ever-growing presence of Moscow’s influence in the political system of Bosnia is through the Bosnian Serb dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS). Because of Bosnia’s central location at the crossroads of the Balkans, its weak central government institutions, inadequate military capabilities, and hobbled economy, it is vulnerable to external interference. Not only would Europe and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries be susceptible to such developments, but so would US security, political, and economic interests. This study intends to assess the current nature and extent of the threat, the factors that promote such threat domestically, and the international community’s effect on the situation.

Keywords: Bosnia; Russia; EU; NATO; Republika Srpska.

Introduction

This year marked 30 years since the siege of Sarajevo and the start of the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), in which over 100,000 people lost their lives. Since the Russo-Ukraine war started on February 24, 2022, Bosnia has been on high alert as a possible next country where Russian President Vladimir Putin could push for stronger influence. This time it would erupt by the forceful secession of Bosnia’s Bosnian Serb entity of RS, whose leader is the sanctioned member of the Bosnia presidency, Milorad Dodik. The backing would come from Putin as the main instigator of fresh new conflict in Bosnia, joined by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and the leader of the Bosnian Croats and president of HDZ-BiH, Dragan Covic. The latter has gone on to say that Russia should have a more significant influence in Bosnia, primarily because it benefits him in pushing for the creation of a third entity for Bosnian Croats.

The security in Bosnia is at significant risk of collapse. While the country has been vying for NATO membership since 2006, Dodik constantly objected to it because his views are aligned with Russia and Serbia, the former which opposes NATO enlargement and the latter, NATO membership. In recent months, Dodik has made secession threats that earned him further sanctions from the US and then from the UK. The European Union has yet to act on sanctions but has deployed a small number of European Union Force (EUFOR) troops to Bosnia, including armored vehicles. Further to this, Dodik recently said that he would not agree to any foreign military presence in Bosnia. But he does not have to agree because “under the UN [United Nations] Chapter VII mandate Dayton’s Annex 1A, and the Berlin-plus arrangement, NATO has the authority to deploy” to Bosnia.1 However, this...
issue is not so simple. NATO must assert that this annex means that. Because the current issue is that military presence in Bosnia must be renewed every year, and this UN Security Council vote is coming up in November 2022. There is a high probability that Russia will object to this and will be backed by RS and Belgrade, while China will completely veto it. Therefore, it is important that NATO ground forces are in Bosnia prior to the general elections on October 2, 2022. Unfortunately, this is still being reviewed—all while the US government is focusing upon electoral reform instead of the security issue.²

The thesis will prove that international community has turned a blind eye to the events unfolding in Bosnia and that it is watching as the crises unfold while doing very little to prevent it. For instance, EU and NATO are aware of Russia’s meddling in Bosnia’s security and internal politics. Russia sees Bosnia in terms of its confrontation with the EU and NATO, while for the RS, the interest is local to secede and keep Dodik in power. The RS views the current situation in Ukraine favorably as a means to achieve its goals since NATO and the EU are busy with Ukraine. Putin would like to see the RS create problems so it diverts the attention of the EU and NATO away from Ukraine war, but Putin is aware that due to his war in Ukraine, he just cannot bring assets to help Dodik. Therefore, his influence would be political as it does not have direct access to Bosnia, apart from limited degree through Hungary.³

EU and NATO in Bosnia

The Russo-Ukrainian war has opened new paths to international organizations for countries at risk of Russia’s interference. Bosnia and Kosovo had asked the EU to accelerate the accession process for its EU candidate status to help prevent security instability in the two countries. However, such a move was only made in favour of Ukraine and Moldova, both of which became EU candidate states within a few months of requesting it. Since the end of the Bosnia war, the country has sought membership with the EU and NATO. But the EU has always blamed the Bosnia’s government for the lack of reforms, even when the blame lies with the “global powers, and architects of the Accords.”⁴ And most recently, in March 2022, while the Bosnia parliament tried to vote on Russia’s sanctions over the war in Ukraine, Covic and Dodik voted against sanctioning Russia. However, Johan Sattler, an EU ambassador and special representative, took to Twitter to express his disapproval, blaming the entire Bosnia Parliament, but refusing to name those responsible. For that he was criticised by Bosniak analysts and diplomats.

Bosnia is a country that is highly dependent on external powers administering how the country operates. One of the biggest is through the High Representative whose role is to help implement reforms agreed upon between Bosnia and the EU and help it achieve its road to EU membership. It also has the power to fire elected Bosnian officials and enforce the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). But in recent years, it has been reluctant to use these powers, “fearing a backlash among Bosnian Serb leaders,” until a new High Representative, Christian Schmidt, was appointed.⁵ Schmidt used Bonn Powers, which comes under
the DPA, to scrap the law on immovable property that the National Assembly of the RS introduced giving themselves power to decide how forests and agricultural land is used and who they can sell it to.

However, the most recent disagreements amongst the political parties centred on electoral reforms. Schmidt wanted to introduce a three percent rule favouring Bosnian Croats, a move strongly supported by Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic. The provision would mean the representatives from all three people would have been elected only if more than three percent of them lived in the constituency, not to mention that it would heavily discriminate against minorities such as Jews and Roma people. That would have favoured Covic's HDZ-BiH, who would dominate decision-making in the House of Peoples. It would also help Dodik's party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), meaning Bosniaks would be a minority in their own country. This provision would also pave the way for the eventual creation of a third entity for Bosnian Croats, which would in time see a way to seek secession and join Croatia, as would the RS to Serbia. As the news broke, the US and UK ambassadors to Bosnia said they supported the Office of the High Representive (OHR) in its decision. But due to heavy protests in Sarajevo, Schmidt changed his mind and only introduced technical changes. But according to an expert on the Bosnia Constitution, Joseph Marko, Schmidt does not have the authority to introduce the three percent change because it would oppose Annex 10 of the DPA. While he has the power to control the implementation of the DPA, “he is not authorized to deal with the entities' autonomous legal systems, i.e., their constitutions, if they have not adopted in the application” of the DPA. Therefore, the international community’s support for Schmidt's provision would mean support for the disintegration of Bosnia. So, we can argue that not only is Russia's interference in the internal issues of Bosnia a problem, but also is interference by the international community that seeks to, by force, change rules in Bosnia when the three constitutional people have not agreed on that issue.

Further, recent sanctions imposed on the RS and Dodik by US President Joe Biden's administration came with support from the EU but no intention to do the same. That is primarily due to Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Victor Orban, who has publicly supported the RS. Oliver Varhelyi, the EU's commissioner for enlargement and a close ally of Orban's, allegedly supported secession talks at a private meeting with Dodik, according to the leaked documents. He also blamed the current situation in Bosnia on the former High Representative Valentin Inzko, who issued a ban on genocide denial in the country.

Serbia, along with EU member state Croatia, supports local proxies seeking to fragment Bosnia. Croatia and Hungary use their EU positions to prevent positive policy changes in Bosnia and have voted against sanctioning Dodik. When right-wing Slovenian President Janez Jansa was in power, alongside Serbia and Hungary, a non-paper was authored in which it described the carving of Bosnia. According to this paper, the RS would join Serbia, creating Greater Serbia, and part of Herzegovina would join Croatia, creating Greater Croatia. The small piece of Bosnia would be left to Bosniaks, “a Muslim island with
significant conflict potential” that would never join the EU and NATO. It would be like a Palestine of Europe. The existence of this non-paper was denied by Jansa, but Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama confirmed he was consulted about it. The non-paper was Jansa’s “peaceful” plan, but it would have caused another war in the Western Balkans that would spill into the EU. Despite all these issues that could cause a major security crisis in the region, EU and NATO continue to push for reforms, despite knowing that Dodik and Covic are preventing it. The key deliverables Bosnia must meet for the EU candidate status are constitutional and electoral reforms. While for the NATO candidacy, Bosnia must register the immovable property at the state level. However, Dodik is blocking this request because he believes that immovable property belongs to the RS and not the state. Currently, there are 39 military bases in the Federation of Bosnia, 23 in the RS used by the Armed Forces of Bosnia and one used by the Ministry of Defense.

On December 5, 2018, NATO activated a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Bosnia and invited the country to submit its first annual national program of political, economic, and defense reforms. At the beginning of 2021, Bosnia established the Commission for Cooperation with NATO to facilitate the Reform Program 2021-2022 and other matters to help Bosnia’s accession into the alliance.

In 2014, the minister for foreign affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, was quoted as saying that NATO expansion to Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro would be seen as “provocation.” But, as Bosnia was the only non-NATO member by 2019, Lavrov again said that he does not want Bosnia in NATO, a view shared by Putin, who said Bosnia would never and can never be in the alliance. The Russian Embassy in Sarajevo has threatened to “react” if Bosnia takes steps to join NATO and would perceive any such action as a hostile act. But NATO was quick to shut down the Russian Embassy, stating that no third party can prevent a country from joining an alliance and that it is a sovereign right of Bosnia to choose its path.

“Bosnia’s membership in NATO is a necessity for stability and sustainable peace in the region and beyond, indeed all of Europe. Otherwise, this vacuum that remains as political or strategic temptation in now an ever-heightened atmosphere of continental and global nationalism, and Putin is the greatest risk of seeking to exploit it for some big or small perceived advantage.”

**Putin’s Foreign Policy from 2001 Onwards**

An assessment of the security documents from 2000 describes Russia’s hostility toward the West, particularly NATO’s use of force against the Serbs in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999. Russia claimed NATO’s involvement in the Yugoslav wars was hostile and disregarded “the UN and the standards of international law” and had argued that they were not consulted, acting against the consent of the UN Security Council.
According to Putin, it is a clear example of NATO’s policy that ignores Russia, which claimed a decisive role in Europe and has a disregard for the UN’s standards of international law. Other concerns were the expansion of NATO, which sought to join neighbors in the East into its alliance and go as far as Russia’s front door.¹⁸

Russian foreign policy is to run counter to the US national security interests and values. There are five foreign security policy objectives of the Kremlin:¹⁹

1. Putin, as a president of the Russian Federation, retains the autocratic political system and mafia-style crony economy, which are all equal to Putinism.

2. Reinstate Russia’s status as a great power.

3. Prevent intervention that could harm its citizens by rewriting the international rules and norms.


5. Break up NATO, EU, and transatlantic unity.

After the September 11th attacks, Putin took the West's side for economic reasons. Putin was aware that if he was to exert influence on a global scale, he had to look at it from an economic perspective and not military, at least briefly. He was aware that stronger links to the EU economy would also help boost Russia’s. But he knew that supporting EU’s independent security policy would mean he would help distance it from the US, “which most certainly would be in contrast with American interests.”²⁰ As this unraveled, Russia gained new economic power, especially from its oil and gas sales, using the revenue to strengthen its military. And as its economy continued to improve, Russia stayed with the policy of discrediting NATO, the EU, and the US, and treating these as a security threat, and pushing out the thought that the current world order, especially the European security, is of a significant disadvantage to Russia.²¹

Putin's strategy began with Orange Revolution in Ukraine, a country he was reluctant to leave alone. But the war in Georgia was the turning point for how Russia saw its ties with the West. The bickering between the EU and the US on responding to that crisis slowed progress. Putin took it to mean that in any future conflict Russia may be involved in, no one would stop him, and that Europe would not engage with him in those conflicts because it was too reliant on energy from Russia.²² In 2008, Russia’s military reforms started, and the country used Georgia as its exercise ground to determine how it wanted to carry out their reforms. Only in 2011 did Russia begin to rearm and modernize its defense sector.²³ The Ukraine was a target again, this time the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas, all leading to the current crises.
But Russia’s economic growth was not meant to last, and it took a hard hit as the world economy collapsed in 2007-2008. This changed Russia’s stance toward the West once again as it needed to sustain its economic growth. As part of Putin’s foreign policy, he continued with the use of energy as a weapon by building various pipeline projects—Blue, Nord, and South Stream—“to divert from the Ukraine transit route and to discourage Western alternatives:” the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and Nabucco.

But even energy is not providing returns as it used to. For example, the South Stream gas pipeline that began construction in 2012 and was supposed to go through the Black Sea to Bulgaria through Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia and onwards to Austria was stopped by Russia in 2014 due to non-compliance with the EU laws as well as sanctions it was facing over the Crimea crises. Sanctions have also crippled Russia’s economy and squashed the military budget. As a result, the glory Russia felt during the Georgia war has diminished, as did their attempt to take on the West, the US, and NATO by surprise as they did in Syria and Ukraine.

The most recent Russo-Ukrainian war has damaged Russia’s economic stability. The Western world placed heavy sanctions against the country and its oligarchs and withdrew all the Western companies, leaving Russia on the breadline and crashing its currency. The US has also banned imports of Russian oil, liquefied natural gas and coal, while the UK has said it would reduce its dependency on Russian energy by the end of 2022. However, some of the EU, especially Germany, which is most reliant on the resource, is still reluctant to follow suit as it could shutter their industry, leave millions in the cold, and trigger a “deep recession.” A further setback to Russia is the new EU deal with Israel and Egypt which would see significant exports of Israeli gas to Europe.

What Is Russia’s Main Interest in Bosnia?

The East and West have been at war for many years in the most critical geopolitical area, Bosnia, and in recent years that war has been between the US and Russia. While the US is the backer of the DPA, Putin’s attention is not only devoted to the RS only but also to Bosnia, with the primary aim to keep the country divided along political and ethnic lines. According to former Kremlin advisor under Boris Yeltsin, Aleksandar Nekrasov, “there is a lot of diplomatic maneuvering going on with Russia trying to influence the political process in the Balkans and in and around Serbia,” adding that membership in the EU and NATO is destructive and “creates more destabilization.”

Russia’s players in the Western Balkans are Serbia and the RS, and with that, it is preventing the “consolidation of the region, which is its main interest now.” The only viable game Putin has is Vucic and Dodik, both whom he finds extremely useful to help him carry out his targets in Bosnia.
Bosnia remains the most vulnerable in the region to Putin, due to both a power vacuum and local collaborators such as Dodik. These vulnerabilities are used by the Russia to its advantage, especially since there is no proper rule of law to prevent it. According to the Serbian press close to Vucic, at the meeting in Moscow in 2017, Putin told his ministers not to worry about the Western threats against Russia, that Kremlin had started a project where by 2022, all Serbs will live in one country.\(^{33}\) That is also the long-held desire of Serbs to create Greater Serbia, which was the reason for the 1990s-era war. The memorandum published by the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts (SANU), a document known as the SANU Memorandum created between 1985 and 1986, described that in detail. Even convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj and his Serbian Radical Party used *Velika Srbija* (Greater Serbia) as its official magazine’s title. Serbian nationalists and the Serbian Orthodox Church not only wanted all Serbs in one state but also pushed for control over territories where Serbs were a minority or did not exist, using history as a basis (Kosovo) or pseudo-history (Dubrovnik, Macedonia).\(^{34}\) Even Putin said he would make sure that Bosnian Serbs in the RS have the same independent rights that US president Bill Clinton handed to Albanians in Kosovo and that Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo would join Serbia.\(^{35}\)

**Arming and Training Bosnia Serbs**

In 2014, the financier of the separatist groups in Ukraine, Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, met with Dodik bringing Cossacks that were seen walking nearby polling stations on the day of the 2014 elections.\(^{36}\) Malofeev would also be seen in Bosnia on four different occasions in February, September, and October 2017, but in November 2017, he entered Bosnia illegally. Both the US and the EU sanctioned him, and on May 30, 2018, he was barred entry to Bosnia at the airport in Banja Luka, forcing him to go back to Moscow. He was in Bosnia to meet with Dodik.

In 2015 in Moscow, Russia’s defence ministry signed a joint agreement with the defence minister of the RS for “Implementation of joint training and training in various professional tasks and staff mobility.”\(^{37}\) In other words, Russia would send military consultants and would train police units in the RS in the new police base in Zaluzani, which opened on April 4, 2018. RS police would also purchase military-grade weapons.

In April 2017, the minister for internal affairs of the RS, Dragon Lukac, said that KM8 million (approximately £3.5 million) would be taken out of the budget to arm the law enforcement of the RS. On November 20, 2017, the RS signed arms deal with Serbia’s firearm and artillery manufacturer, Zastava Arms, which will see the entity receive $930,000 (approximately £808,516) worth of weapons.\(^{38}\) By March 2018, Bosnia Serbs spent one million KM (approximately £443,000) purchasing 2,500 assault rifles, of which 1,500 are MO5 EI 7,62mm caliber and 1,000 automatic AKSU47 M92 7,62mm calibers, to arm the police of the RS. Further to this, the RS will invest KM6.5 million (approximately £2.8 million) to reconstruct army infrastructure and build other military installations in the former army base in Zaluzani. This center will serve as a training ground for all members
of law enforcement of the RS, and many different units will be based in that location, and weapons will arrive just before the opening of the center. According to the memorandum signed by Lukac in Moscow in 2015, Russia’s special forces will train Bosnian Serbs in Zaluzani. It also states that there will be a military exchange whereby Bosnian Serb “special forces” will be training with the Russian special forces in Russia.

While the RS was arming itself, the presidency of Bosnia was not aware of any such activity, even though this sort of purchase and training must go through the approval process of the central and not the entity government. Responding to questions regarding arming the RS police, Dodik said this is against the US and political elites in Sarajevo whom he considers to be traitors. At that time, he was running for a chairman of the presidency of Bosnia and awaiting Lavrov’s arrival to the RS. During this same time, various reports showed that Russian elite special forces, Spetsnaz, were also in the RS training police into an army. The presence of the Russian special forces in Bosnia could be taken as an act of aggression against the country. The person who gave authority for this training without consulting the central government was the now-former minister of defense Marina Pendes, who has very close links to Dodik and Covic, of whose party, HDZ-BiH, she is a member.

Bosnian newspapers obtained and published various documents describing the coalition of armed and nationalistic groups led by Dodik, Lukac, Serbia, and Russia. These explained how they would join forces to create a financial body that would work to fund and organize an army or even a National Guard of the RS with Russia’s help. After the RS army would be formed, they would be joined by members of the clero-nationalist and extremist organizations of Serbia and Russia, including organizations that belong to the Chetnik movement and their voluntary formations. Some of them are Serbian Honour (Srbska Čast), a Russian trained Serbian paramilitary unit, and Russia’s motorbike gang Night Wolves, including some influential far-right groups from Serbia who oppose membership in the Western institution.

It has also been identified that Banja Luka International Airport and Zaluzani, a small village within the municipality of Banja Luka, are all the bases of the armed Russian proxies and volunteers. Therefore, if the RS had called for referendum to separate from Bosnia in 2014, Russians would have backed this. Their various well-armed military groups would be ready to defend the RS from the Armed Forces of Bosnia and multiple police units.

At a meeting in Moscow, Dodik offered Putin a chance to build a base on the condition that Russia would help the secession of this entity from Bosnia and would inject millions of euros into its economy. “Spread of Putin’s military into Bosnia via RS is not only negation of NATO but an advance into Europe and NATO’s backyard, unprecedented. Sarajevo has the right to oppose it legally based on the Accords, but Putin is in effect giving new definition where the West failed over two decades ago. Sarajevo government can only succeed with the full support of Euro-Atlantic institutions and not leaving such vacuum to be again exploited.”42
However, NATO is also interested in housing its military in the now disused and damaged underground base Veliki Zep in Han Pijesak, RS. Bosnia’s state court ruled in 2017 that it can be added to the military state property, making way for NATO membership, but the RS has argued it is a property of the entity. The base is 11,474m of land. It was severely disabled during the 1990s war when NATO bombed Serb positions, including Veliki Zep, which is believed to have been used by now-convicted Bosnia-Serb war criminal General Ratko Mladic. But Dodik has warned should NATO have a base in Bosnia, even the one reported to be a US base in Brcko, then Russia should also have a base in the country. However, the RS has no power over Brcko, a self-governed administrative unit, also known as Brcko District, and, as a result, it has the right to invite a foreign military power onto its territory. But because the RS was split in two, and Brcko sits between the two sides, Dodik fears that the arrival of NATO under the banner of the US Army would pose a threat to his intention of secession. Even with the smallest contingent of the US Army in Brcko, Bosnia would be untouchable.

Conclusion

Considering the above analysis, the level of security problems facing Bosnia carries great repercussions for the entire Western Balkans, the EU, and the US. It will be difficult for Western policymakers to ignore security issues gripping the country. That would most certainly spill into neighbouring states in the Western Balkans, many of which are now members of the EU and/or NATO and further afield. It would engulf US and EU interests and its key allies in the region, setting back economies and affecting stability that would be in grave danger. The magnitude of the crises this would produce, and the effects on NATO would be significant. That would not be a war for Bosnia but a war amongst world powers fighting for dominance on the world stage. Bosnia would only be a space that the international community kept unstable with the unworkable Dayton Accord with which it created a problem for itself by testing its own security. They did this by allowing for the creation of the Bosnian Serb entity and have remained silent while Dodik threatens to destabilise Bosnia further, which is “more fragile now than it has been since the war.”

Any new conflict in the Western Balkans will produce a new flow of refugees into an already overwhelmed EU. That means that European, NATO countries, and the US would unknowingly import security threats in the form of the far-right trained and funded by Russia. That would be a far greater threat than it is now and would cause unforeseen problems for the West, which Russia would see favourably.

The EU cannot afford any more conflicts in its neighbourhood. War in Ukraine has already overwhelmed Eastern Europe and set back economic growth. More wars in Bosnia would engulf the EU for years to come. But the EU must also decide will it be on Bosnia’s side or on the side of those who seek to partition it for themselves to achieve what they failed during the 1990s wars.
The solution is not only to send EUFOR troops, whose contingent is currently far too low, nor is it to keep sending weapons because either one of those two will not stop fresh new conflict in Bosnia. But if we argue for more foreign troops in Bosnia, the reasonable size would be around 23,000 for a population of 3.2 million.47

To prevent any future conflict in Bosnia from spreading wide into the region, NATO must accelerate the country’s entry into the alliance, at least as a special case. Only this action would deter Russia from any continued and serious interference in Bosnia. The EU could also do much more for Bosnia by allowing it to have an EU candidate status which is strongly favoured by Slovenia’s President Borut Pahor. Although Bosnia has not fulfilled all the criteria, the candidate status could be conditional—after all Ukraine and Moldova did not fulfil all the criteria when they became member states. However, due to the threat from Russia, which Bosnia and Kosovo are also facing, Ukraine and Moldova became EU candidates. To have economic and security stability, Bosnia too, should have been granted candidate status. With that, NATO and the EU would be the barrier against any further aggression and security instability in the country and the broader region.

Nadina Ronc is a foreign affairs analyst, journalist, and broadcaster specialising in Russian foreign policy, energy security, and the Western Balkans. She is the recipient of a research grant from the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, which funded the 2018 research monograph on Russia’s involvement in Bosnia’s internal issues. Educated at the University of Bonn, and City, University of London with master’s degrees, Nadina is a published writer and broadcaster based in London. She has previously worked for Anadolu Agency, CNBC, and Fox Business Network.

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21. Committee on Armed Services, Understanding and Deterring Russia, 3.

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**REFERENCES:** JPWS uses The Chicago Manual of Style’s notes and bibliography system with endnotes. For further information on references, please consult The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition.

**Books:** Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference.
Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.
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