

EU to Russia: Keep Balkans Out of East-West Confrontation

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Supporters of Serbian nationalist leader Vojislav Seselj wait for him at Belgrade airport on Nov. 12, 2014.

SARAJEVO — The European Union urged Russia on Friday not to drag the Western Balkans into its deepening rift with the West over Ukraine, reflecting concern that the region risks becoming another point of East-West tension.

The countries of the Western Balkans have their sights set on membership of the EU, but diplomats say Russia is exploiting economic hard times and pro-Russian sentiment among some Orthodox Christian Slavs to build influence in the region.

Noting "tensions" between the EU and Russia, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, on a visit to Bosnia, said it was in the interest of both "to find and develop ways of cooperation, and not of confrontation."

"For sure, it would be a good idea to keep the Western Balkans out of these dynamics and

thinking, and I would expect everybody in the Russian leadership to consider this in the same way," she told a news conference.

Germany, in particular, has made clear its concern over Russia's role in the Balkans, which remains politically and economically fragile two decades after the bloody breakup of socialist Yugoslavia.

While Slovenia and Croatia have both joined the EU, expansion to the likes of Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo has been slowed by foot-dragging on reform and deep unease within the EU itself over the wisdom of further enlargement.

Mogherini's visit to Bosnia came as the EU tries to inject momentum into a stalled reform process that has exposed the dysfunctionality of the country's postwar framework, a highly decentralized and unwieldy system of ethnic power-sharing that ended the 1992-95 conflict but has since stifled development.

Britain and Germany have proposed unlocking EU cash to encourage change, putting economic development ahead of political reform. Bosnia is in the process of forming governments at the national and regional levels after an October election.

"From all political leaders we had a positive response on the political will to commit seriously on a new phase that now we have to make concrete and substantial," Mogherini told reporters after meeting government and party officials.

Mogherini, the EU's top diplomat, said she would brief EU foreign ministers on her findings on Dec. 15.

Russia raised eyebrows among Western diplomats in November when, for the first time in 14 years, it declined to support the extension of a Western peacekeeping force in Bosnia, first led by NATO but now by the EU. Russia abstained in the UN Security Council vote.

Russia has offered political support for Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who frequently advocates the dissolution of the Bosnian state.

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