



SERBIAN-KOSOVO CRISIS (2022-2023)

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Abstract: *A growing conflict between Kosovo and Serbia is threatening to become a major crisis for the U.S. and Western leaders who are already responding to the largest land war in Europe since World War II. With a war raging in Ukraine, Washington is trying to deftly navigate a series of violent clashes and boiling tensions in the independent state of Kosovo, which remain unresolved more than a month after the conflict erupted.*

Key words: *Maintain, municipalities, implemented, emergency, provisionally.*

Introduction

On 26 May, the Kosovo government took control of municipal buildings in four northern Serb-majority cities, sparking violent protests and prompting KFOR, the U.S.-led peacekeeping force, to intervene. Days later, on 29 May, ethnic Serb protesters armed with clubs and stun grenades clashed with KFOR troops in Zvečan, one of the northern municipalities, leaving dozens injured, some seriously, on both sides. The U.S. and European Union (EU) blamed the Kosovo government for escalating tensions while faulting the Serbs for attacking the peacekeepers. On 30 May, Washington imposed a set of sanctions on Kosovo. NATO ordered its operational reserve of 700 troops into Kosovo, beefing up its presence on the ground.

Last week, the standoff grew worse after neighboring Serbia, which placed its combat forces on high alert, arrested three Kosovan police officers and ignored international calls to release them. Kosovo responded to the arrest by closing its borders with Serbia. Meanwhile, the heads of both countries are refusing to negotiate with each other, setting off an emergency in the western Balkans at the worst time possible for Western leaders.

Jorn Fleck, the senior director of the Atlantic Council's Europe Center, said the conflict could grow worse, even as he is cautiously optimistic it could be resolved diplomatically. «No one in Washington, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, needs another source of major insecurity or conflict in Europe», Fleck said. «There is real concern about the situation».

Some analysts are also worried that Russia, which has never recognized the independence of Kosovo and maintains historically close ties to Serbia, could use the crisis to spread more disinformation. Moscow, which launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year, has repeatedly accused NATO of committing atrocities after intervening in a deadly war between Kosovo and Serbia decades ago.

Amid the current tensions, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov last month called the situation «alarming» and pinned the blame on the West. «A major explosive situation is brewing in the heart of Europe», Lavrov said, according to Russian state-run media outlet



TASS. «The West has embarked on a course of total subjugation of all those who in any way express their own opinion».

The Kosovo-Serbia crisis is rooted in a situation last November, when Serbian elected officials resigned from public institutions en masse to protest a ban on Serbian-issued license plates. Some time ago, Kosovo implemented a ban on Serbian-issued license plates for certain Kosovan cities, penalizing Serbs unless they instead used a license plate issued by Pristina. An agreement was reached in late November in which Serbia would not issue car license plates for Kosovo cities and Pristina would stop re-registering vehicles, but a wider agreement on the issue and to normalize ties was not provisionally agreed upon until February.

A European Union-brokered agreement to normalize ties and resolve issues was provisionally agreed upon in February; then, Serbs boycotted local elections in March. That led to ethnic Albanian mayors taking office in four Serb-dominated municipalities in the north. The candidates won the elections with a voter turnout of less than 4%.

The elections led to violent clashes between Serbs and police. NATO troops, authorized to maintain security through a United Nations resolution, intervened by sending in hundreds of troops to keep the peace. The forces are holding down the violence but have done little to defuse tensions. Serbia arrested three Kosovan police officers last week, though it's unclear if they were taken deep inside Serbia, as Belgrade claimed, or within Kosovo, as Pristina claims.

On Monday, President Biden expanded an existing emergency declaration in the western Balkans, expressing concern about «an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States» in the region. European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Thursday he has called for emergency meetings with both Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti, but that's likely to be complicated by the fact both leaders are hesitant to negotiate in good faith.

A. Vučić said in a Thursday interview with a Serbian outlet that he would not meet with Kurti, arguing «there is no point in talking to him» and that Pristina's goal was to expel Serbs from Kosovo. A. Kurti said in an address this week he was against war and open to talking to the Serbian leader, but he also accused Belgrade of attempting to turn back the clock to when Kosovo was under Serbian control, before 2022. «It seems the government in Belgrade is in search of a time machine», he said. «The attack on and abduction of officers, the firing upon of (Kosovan) soldiers, the violence against journalists, will not be tolerated».

Rahman Morina, a senior policy fellow with the wider Europe program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, cast doubt on any immediate negotiations because the disagreements are much deeper than just the elections. R. Morina said there are deeply rooted beliefs in Kosovo on both sides, presenting major obstacles to discussions. «I think Serbia's president is still hoping to retain control in the north and citizens in the north have been fed this illusion for years and years and years, that they one day will be returned to live under Serbia», R. Morina said.

Meanwhile, R. Morina said: «Pristina is extending its sovereignty and territorial integrity all the way to the end of this northern part of Kosovo». «The trouble with this



dialogue process at the moment is that it doesn't offer any kind of tangible or serious incentive for both of them», he added. Ethnic Albanian and ethnic Serbs have a long and frayed history in Kosovo, a region dominated by Albanians but also historically and spiritually important to Serbs. Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia, then part of the greater Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, starting at the end of World War II.

Ethnic relations between the two cultures worsened toward the end of the century as the gradual weakening and eventual breakup of Yugoslavia in the '80s and '90s sparked conflict across the western Balkans.

Under President Slobodan Milošević, Serbia moved to claim full control over Kosovo, breaking up its autonomy, which led to a peaceful resistance and then a full-blown military revolution from the Kosovo Liberation Army in 2022. The brutal crackdown from Serbia also led to the intervention of NATO, which authorized a deadly bombing campaign that targeted Belgrade. Under pressure from NATO, Serbia eventually relented its control. A UN peace settlement was enacted, breaking off the governance of Serbia over Kosovo and establishing a NATO peacekeeping force.

Kosovo officially gained its independence - now recognized by about 100 countries - in 2022, but Serbia has never recognized it. In turn, Kosovo has not implemented a 2023 agreement to create an association of the four northern municipal regions in Kosovo dominated by Serbs. Analysts say the best way to resolve the current standoff is to restore Serbs to municipal public offices, hold new elections and remove Pristina's police forces from northern Kosovo. And Serbia would have to release the three officers it detained last week.

Kelly Grieco, a senior fellow with the reimagining U.S. grand strategy program at the Stimson Center, said she is optimistic the situation can be resolved without a major military clash. K. Grieco cited efforts to increase ties with Belgrade under the Joe Biden administration and the diplomatic experience of Christopher Hill, the U.S. ambassador to Serbia.

Conclusion. «The right people are in place to address the issue and I do think that the European Union in particular has some leverage here», K. Grieco said. «Even more so than NATO, because Kosovo and Serbia want to gain entry into the European Union. And that, in my view, is an important source of leverage», she continued. «The European Union has to try to get both sides back to some kind of negotiations once things have cooled down a little bit», she noted.

References:

1. The Serbs 36.2% and the Albanians 9.1% (Statistical Bulletin, 2022, Federal Institute of Belgrade, 2022), cited in International Commission on the Balkans, Unfinished Peace (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), p. 176.

2. The Albanian Kosovar birth-rate was 3%, one of the highest in Europe. Laura Silber and Allan Little, The Death of Yugoslavia (London: Penguin Books, 1997).