

KOSOVO AND SERBIA TENSIONS: TIME TO WORRY?

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia convened in the picturesque lakeside town of Ohrid, North Macedonia, with the intention of signing a potential peace roadmap. This agreement aimed to pave the way for lasting peace through a mutually beneficial arrangement. Under this proposed pact, Belgrade would cease obstructing Kosovo's international institution memberships, and would de-facto recognize the reality of Kosovo being independent, while Prishtina, in return, would grant a degree of self-governance to

predominantly Serb regions in Kosovo. An additional incentive was the prospect of both nations eventually joining the European Union (EEAS Press Team, 2023). Despite the agreement never materializing, the initial atmosphere was positive. For the first time since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, there was a sense that Serbia and its former province might find a way to coexist peacefully. However, fast-forward to the present day, tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina have escalated to their highest point in decades.

THE BANJSKA ATTACK

On September 24, 2023, around 30 Serbian armed paramilitaries in uniforms blockaded a bridge near Banjska, and an ethnically Serbian village in the north of Kosovo. When Kosovar policemen went there to remove the blockades and the trucks, the unknown paramilitaries opened fire, killing one of the Kosovar policemen, and wounding two others. What followed was the sort of battle not seen in the region for decades.

The armed paramilitaries locked themselves in an orthodox monastery, and for hours a siege began between Kosovo special units and the paramilitaries inside the monastery. By the time the violence stopped, three paramilitaries were dead, eight had been captured, two to six were injured, and the rest had fled across the border into Serbia (Aljazeera, 2023). When Kosovo police checked the monastery, they found the paramilitaries had brought enough weapons to supply a small army. The items encompassed rocket launchers, a heavily armored vehicle, 24 automobiles, two 4×4 motorcycles, 150 explosives, three drones, 30 AK-47s, six machine guns, 29 mortars, and over 100 military uniforms (RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2023).

On the 26th of September, Kosovo Police revealed drone video evidence implicating Milan Radoičić, the Vice-President of the Serb List (a Serbian minority party in Kosovo), as a member of the paramilitaries involved in the attack. It is noteworthy that this political party maintains strong affiliations with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2023). Radoičić's firearm permits were discovered at the scene. Subsequently, in an interview, President Vučić characterized Radoičić as a "freedom fighter" and declared that the Kosovo Serbs are tired of "Kurti's terror". Vučić also held talks with the Russian ambassador, declaring that there is an "ethnic cleansing" going on in Kosovo, supported by the West (Chiappa, 2023).

On the 27th of September, the White House announced an "unprecedented" buildup of Serbian troops, along with tanks and heavy artillery, on Kosovo's border. It looked like the attack would be followed by a full-scale military invasion. After claiming that the build-up was a lie being spread by America, Vučić later announced the pullback of the Serbian forces (Kosovo Online, 2023).

On the 29th of September, Radoičić assumed responsibility for the attack,

asserting through legal representation that it was organized without the knowledge or involvement of Serbian authorities or the Serb List, from which he subsequently resigned. On the same day, Kosovar authorities conducted searches on properties owned by Radoičić, including a lakeside villa, a penthouse apartment, and a restaurant (Isufi & Stojanovic, 2023).

Moving forward to the 3rd of October, Milan Radoičić was apprehended by Serbian authorities following a police operation at his

residence and other affiliated premises. This arrest was described by some as a symbolic gesture by Serbia to alleviate Western pressure. It was underscored that Kosovo would not entertain the idea of establishing good neighborly relations with Serbia if Serbia was perceived as a country "sponsoring terrorism." However, on the following day, the Supreme Court in Belgrade denied a request from the public prosecutor's office to detain Radoičić for 30 days, subsequently releasing him from custody (RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2023).

SETTING THE STAGE

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

In present-day Kosovo, the population of approximately 1.9 million is predominantly composed of ethnic Albanians, making up around 92% of the population, while ethnic Serbians constitute about 6%. Instead of integrating into the broader society, the Serbian minority largely resides and works in a few concentrated enclaves, where they form the local majority. Notably, 10 of Kosovo's 38 municipalities are predominantly Serbian, primarily situated in the northern border regions.

Due to stalled negotiations and Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, a significant portion

of Kosovo's Serbian population identifies more with Serbia than with Kosovo. Many continue to use Serbian currency, display Serbian flags, and, until recently, drove cars with Serbian license plates. While there are no physical barriers separating the two communities, Albanians and Serbians live not only in separate geographical spaces but also in distinct mental landscapes. These mental landscapes are marked by contrasting interpretations of the past war, with one side viewing Kosovo as the heart and cradle of Serbia, while the other regards it as an ethnically Albanian nation previously occupied by Serbia. It is these irreconcilable visions of Kosovo that

underlie the recent and escalating tensions in the region (Stojanovic, 2023).

What further fuels these tensions is that both countries are led by individuals whose past strongly influences their beliefs and modus operandi. Vučić, a former ultra-nationalist, served in Milošević's government as Information Minister, where he was involved in spreading dehumanizing propaganda to justify

war crimes against Albanians and Bosnians (Dragojlo, 2023). On the other hand, Kurti, a former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) affiliate and student leader, endured beatings, and imprisonment for his political beliefs under the Milošević regime (Prime Minister's Office Team, 2022). He is widely known in Kosovo politics for his unwavering commitment to his principles and reluctance to compromise.

PREVIOUS ENCOUNTERS

We have had similar encounters in the past. Back in April, local mayoral elections devolved into chaos after Serbians in the north refused to participate in the voting and elections. The boycott led to ethnic Albanians winning in Serb enclaves in paltry turnouts, in some cases as low as 2%. The result led to massive rioting and protests. Around 30 KFOR troops were injured and wounded while trying to keep order (Aljazeera, 2023).

In 2022, Kurti's Government tried to ban the usage of Serbian license on unrelated charges caused North Kosovo to again explode in unrest (Aljazeera, 2022).

plates by Kosovo Serbs, introducing fines for anyone who refused to switch to Kosovo plates. Kosovo Serbs rebelled, setting up roadblocks and burning the cars of any Serb who used Kosovo-issued plates. Although Kurti backed down, it was just a temporary reprieve. In November of 2022, Kurti's government tried again to implement the idea, only for every ethnic Serb policeman in the country to resign. The subsequent arrest of one of those policemen

FAILED NEGOTIATIONS

Now, one might be shocked that mere license plates could lead to so

much trouble, but we must remember that the plates were only

a symbol of deeper issues. Serbian or Kosovo license plates are markers of identity, identities that both sides feel are under threat. It was this feeling of threat that the Ohrid Agreement was meant to solve.

Brought forward by France and Germany, it was marketed as the best chance of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. At its heart lay an EU-brokered plan from 2013 that had never been formalized, known as the "Association of Serbian Municipalities," translated as "the association." It envisioned giving the Serbs of Northern Kosovo huge amounts of autonomy. This would have included the right to set local education, healthcare, and economic development policy, as well as allowing the local police forces to recruit mainly ethnic Serbs. In return for Kosovo accepting this, Serbia would have dropped all objections to Kosovo joining international institutions like the UN and NATO. As a reward, both would have been set on the path to EU

accession with all the economic opportunities that implied (EEAS Press Team, 2023). Yet while both Vučić and Kurti agreed to the deal, Vučić did not sign it, and the agreement was never implemented by either side. Other attempts after these were made for the revival of the negotiations up until October 26, 2023, however, rejection was the ultimate result (EuroNews Albania, 2023).

Kosovo's government's reluctance to implement the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) can be attributed to a genuine concern about inadvertently facilitating the emergence of a potentially destabilizing quasi-state entity that might undermine Kosovo's overall functionality. There has been significant debate and controversy surrounding this issue, with some suggesting that the ASM could potentially evolve into a situation akin to a second Republika Srpska, or perhaps even something more troubling (Taylor & Zimonjic, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS

The current situation raises some concerns. When armed groups from a country challenge the territorial integrity and security of their neighboring country, it doesn't exactly demonstrate a strong desire

for peace and trust-building. Furthermore, the military movements near Kosovo's border, accompanied by reassurances that all is well and there's no threat of war or invasion, have a familiar ring to them.

Some might argue that these events could be a well-orchestrated distraction by Vučić. It's interesting to note that they occurred around the time of a tragic school shooting in Belgrade, followed by several days of widespread anti-government protests (Bechev, 2023). It's possible that this was a desperate attempt to divert attention from these domestic issues. After all, we're dealing with a president who seems determined to hold onto power at any cost.

However, it's important to consider other factors as well. Serbia's progress in the European integration process has been stalled for quite some time, particularly due to the requirement of normalizing relations with Kosovo.

Vučić may have realized that the EU card no longer holds the same benefits it once did. So, why would he risk losing support by reconciling with Kosovo? It's more convenient for him to keep his various factions satisfied and maintain his grip on power.

Furthermore, it's worth noting that this crisis unfolded just five days after Azerbaijan initiated a military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. Interestingly, during the period when concerns were mounting about Azerbaijan's military preparations, their government offered reassurances that there would be no invasion (Reuters, 2023). This parallel could be seen as a subtle signal from Serbia, as history has shown that such assurances were given by Putin before the invasion of Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

In essence, the situation is quite straightforward, and it's crucial not to overlook this reality. It results from longstanding historical issues, a lack of willingness on Serbia's part to build trust and collaborate, and significant mismanagement by the international community. The signs pointing to these problems have always been there, but Western countries have sometimes chosen to ignore them.

History shows that maintaining the status quo is rarely a wise choice. The European Union's reluctance to push

for change and its tendency to appease Serbia, possibly out of concerns about pushing them closer to Russia (even though they have shown alignment with Russia in many ways), is frankly deplorable. The clock of history keeps ticking, and we can't afford to repeat past mistakes. It's essential for the Western nations and the international community to wake up and prevent another diplomatic failure. This is not only for the good of the region but also to avoid any new conflicts that could benefit Russia.

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