

THE KOSOVO “TRAIN CRISIS” AND THE RADICAL ISLAMIC THREAT

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The political solutions crafted by US and EU to the Kosovo crisis of the 1990s, were only temporary fixes that stopped the bloodshed but didn't solve the fundamental roots of the conflict. After 20 years the old hostilities and tensions are threatening again the stability of the region.

In Kosovo, tensions are on the rise thanks to Belgrade's mounting provocations. In January 2017, Serbia has opened a new rail line to the Serb part of the Kosovo city of Mitrovica. On January 14, 2017, Belgrade sent a train towards Kosovo painted in the colors of the Serbian flag, covered in the statement "Kosovo is Serbia" in multiple languages and decorated inside with Serbian Orthodox imagery. Kosovo's special police units blocked the rail line with armored vehicles, bringing Serbs and Albanians to the "brink of conflict." Kosovo said it was a provocation and Serbia claimed that the train was stopped from crossing the border to Kosovo, over fears it would be attacked, and then returned to Belgrade a few hours later.

Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic held an urgent meeting with Kosovo Serbs attended by Serbia's defense minister, on the Serbian side of the border with Kosovo. Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic said on January 15, 2017, after meeting of his council for national security: "We don't want war, but if it is necessary to protect Serbs from being killed, we will send an army to Kosovo. We will send soldiers; we'll all go. I'll go, and it won't be the first time that I go [to defend Serbs]. Serbia will act in line with the Serbian Constitution." ¹

Before the "train crisis", two additional events have contributed to the current tension between Kosovo and Serbia:

- The arrest in France in early January 2017 of former Kosovo prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, under an international warrant issued by Serbia. Belgrade

wants to try him for alleged war crimes committed against civilians during the 1990s conflict. The Hague war-crimes tribunal has twice cleared the former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) officer of charges, but Belgrade insists he should be extradited and has protested a French appellate court's release of Haradinaj pending a review.

- The «Mitrovica wall"- Mitrovica is an ethnically divided city in predominantly Serb northern Kosovo. Relations have deteriorated in the town of Mitrovica, where Serb authorities have started erecting a two-meter tall concrete wall on the banks of the Ibar River. The wall's construction, by a bridge that divides the town's Serb-dominated north and largely ethnic Albanian south, has angered Pristina, which says it is cementing the town's divisions and must be knocked down.

The negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo

Kosovo's and Serbia's leaders agreed to ease tensions that have risen and pursue intensive high-level talks following EU-brokered efforts in Brussels to normalize their relations.²

Serbia blamed Kosovo on February 3, 2017, for the collapse of European Union-mediated talks as tensions escalated in the Balkans amid reports of troop movements and war rhetoric. Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic claimed the Kosovo leaders' "only goal is to storm" into northern Kosovo, an area populated by Serbs. He rejected calls by unidentified Western ambassadors to pull back Serb police forces from the border with its former province.³

But in February 2017, local Serbs in Kosovo demolished the wall they built in the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica, following weeks of tension over the issue between Kosovo and Serbia. The deal to destroy the wall was reached following EU-mediated talks between the government in Pristina and Serb representatives. Kosovo Prime Minister Isa Mustafa had threatened local Serbs that if they did not take down the wall, his government would do it.⁴

Kosovo's president Hashim Thaci's called on the European Union and NATO to warn Serbia against inciting a new conflict in Kosovo and the Balkans. Thaci accused Belgrade of inciting inter-ethnic hatred in northern Kosovo.⁵ Kosovo also blamed Serbia of potentially using the example of Russia in Crimea to annex the northern part of Kosovo.⁶

On his visit to Kosovo on February 3, 2017, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg urged Kosovo and Serbia to normalize their relations. "We are committed to continue to stay here with a significant force," Stoltenberg said. "This is a very clear signal of our commitment to make sure that Kosovo is a safe and secure place."⁷

Federica Mogherini said progress toward normalizing ties is essential if the two sides want to pursue closer relations with the European Union.

Historical background

Kosovo is the smallest country in the western Balkans region with two million people. Kosovo Albanian Muslim-majority population make up more than 90 percent of Kosovo's population. Northern Kosovo, including Mitrovica and territory north of the Ibar River, (twenty percent of Kosovo) are under the control of Serb minority of around 40,000 to 50,000 people.

With the collapse of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's ethnic Albanian rebels fought Serbian forces in 1998-1999 and President Bill Clinton launched air strikes to drive out Serbian forces and prevent ethnic cleansing in 1999. The war resulted in the death of more than 10,000 Kosovar Albanians and the displacement of nearly a million. About 4,600 NATO troops are deployed to Kosovo against renewed violence.⁸

Kosovo, backed by the U.S. and major western European states, declared independence from Serbia in 2008. Today, 113 countries recognize Kosovo's sovereignty and statehood. But Serbia denies Kosovo's sovereignty and considers it part of its territory and supports the Serb minority.⁹

The threat of radical Islam

The Balkans, and specifically the western portion of them, has become a major recruitment base for ISIS due to their high rates of unemployment and the growing size of marginalized sectors of society. This helps to explain why the number of ISIS recruitments from the Balkans and the Western Balkans in particular rose from 675 in 2015 to more than 1,700 in 2016. The number of fighters joining extremist groups in the Middle East from Kosovo was the highest per capita in Europe and across the Western Balkans region.¹⁰

More than 700 women from Europe have joined the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq. More than 40 of whom were from Kosovo, the second only to the total in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has seen 60 women join conflicts in Syria and Iraq.¹¹

There are jihadist networks and Salafist groups that sympathize with ISIS in some countries of the Balkans, such as Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia. In addition to recruitment, these groups offer logistics services for recruits from other parts of the world on their way to Syria via the Balkans and Greece and Turkey.

The Balkans is strategically important for the Islamic State (ISIS) as they serve as a major transit zone for foreign recruits to ISIS from various parts of the world. The Balkans are also important for ISIS for movements in the opposite direction, which is

to say as a transit point for operatives into Western Europe and a staging point for terrorist operations.¹²

In November 2016, Kosovo's counter-terrorism police arrested 19 people allegedly preparing to attack a soccer match between Israel and Albania. In addition, the cell was plotting other attacks in Albania, Kosovo, and across the Balkans.

Kosovo's justice ministry is taking a hardline on Kosovars returning from the Islamic State, instituting a mandatory sentence of six months and up to 15 years for ex-combatants. Beyond law enforcement, Kosovo has also developed a soft power response, emphasizing education, economic development, and moderate messaging by imams.

The Western Balkans and the immigration crisis

In the last decades the Balkans was a significant source of migration to Western Europe countries. The populations of most of the region are declining, consequence first of very heavy emigration then of below-replacement fertility rates.

The Balkan countries became the gate of Europe for the influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants who started flooding Europe in 2015.¹³ The new wave of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East can change dramatically the demographic balance in the region. Most of the immigrants are considering the Balkans as a transit area on their way from Middle East to West Europe, but if a part of them (ten thousands and more) will remain in the region they can undermine the fragile stability of the region.

Interior and defense ministers from 15 European countries have agreed to come up with a plan by April 2017 for the so-called West Balkans route, to ensure that the overland route from Greece remains shut for migrants.¹⁴

The arms race in the Balkans

Serbia

Russia, has staunchly sided with Serbia in the dispute over Kosovar independence and Serbia and its Russian allies have never recognized Kosovo's independence.

Russia has gifted Serbia 60 armored vehicles (half of them T-72 tanks) plus six MiG-29 jet fighters. Russia also is providing experts to upgrade the aircrafts acquired from Russian Army reserves. Serbia has announced that it will receive a squadron of second-hand MiG-29 fighters and Buk air defense systems as a gift from Belarus.

Serbian Defense Minister Zoran Djordjevic said his country is not acquiring offensive, but "exclusively defensive weapons". The minister told Serbia's neighbors had "no reason to panic" and stressed it was the country's duty to care about security of its citizens, "but also about European security". According to Djordjevic, Serbia is

now thinking about providing its army with the “weapons and tools” necessary to do its job, while the current procurement of arms comes as part of a “three-year plan.”¹⁵

The arrival of the arms from Russia expected this year and the new arms will significantly improve and modernize Serbia’s armed forces.

Croatia

NATO member Croatia, with which Serbia fought a war in the 1990s, has a dozen old MiG-21s, which are generations older than the MiG-29, and thanks to years of neglect no more than a handful of them can get airborne.¹⁶ Croatia announced that it too would procure second-hand jets, probably F-16s, and Blackhawk helicopters from the United States.¹⁷

Both Serbia and Croatia also talked about reviving military conscription, abolished in the postwar reduction of military assets. Compulsory military service existed in the former Yugoslavia, and Croatia continued the practice until 2008.

Croatia is reportedly planning to bring back a "light" form of the military draft in 2019. According to Croatian Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic, the scheme under consideration would amount to three or four weeks of mandatory basic training for draftees.¹⁸

Serbia has also reviewed the option of bringing back compulsory military service. The proposal, which came from the Serbian Defense Ministry, has been shelved for the time being by Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic as too expensive.¹⁹

Summary

The US, is still the dominant foreign power influencing the Balkans. The outgoing U.S. administration supported Kosovo’s independence, which was recognized in Washington and many other Western capitals within days of its enactment in February 2008. In recent months the Serbian government has implemented some steps considered by Kosovo as provocations. The goal appears to be to fire up the government’s hardline supporters and test the new U.S. administration’s willingness to change Kosovo policy.

An ongoing tension and any new Balkan conflict would draw in a wider cast of players. The combination of waves of Muslim refugees from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, Islamic radicalization of Muslim communities in Balkans and the return of Jihadists from the theaters of jihad in the Middle East, can give start to jihad on the European continent.

The plight of Muslim Albanians would draw in foreign jihadists, as happened in the wars of the 1990s – only in much greater numbers, given the upsurge in Islamism in Europe and the Middle East. A conflict in Kosovo can spill over to Bosnia – Herzegovina and Macedonia and turn to be a regional conflict.

Unlike in the 1990's, the Jihadists will not fight only the Serbs but they will turn their guns against the secular pro-western regimes in Kosovo, Bosnia – Herzegovina and Macedonia.

Putin sees independent Kosovo as an affront to Russia and the Slavic world generally and Russia would not sit by and let others determine the outcome of events and will try to reconfigure arrangements in the region in favor of the Russian geostrategic interests.²⁰

The EU and the US should re-engage in a serious way to defuse the tension between Kosovo and Serbia and to prevent further escalation that may open a strategic window for the radical Islamic groups to destabilize the Balkan region.

Notes

¹ Serb, Kosovo leaders agree to ease tensions, pursue talks, World Bulletin, January 25, 2017.

² Serb, Kosovo leaders agree to ease tensions, pursue talks, World Bulletin, January 25, 2017.

³ Serbia blames Kosovo for failed negotiations amid war talk, press form, February 3, 2017.

⁴ Serb bulldozers demolish wall in Kosovo's divided city, Reuters, February 5, 2017.

⁵ Kosovo Wants EU, NATO to Warn Serbia Against Escalation, abc News, February 3, 2017.

⁶ Kosovo Wants EU, NATO to Warn Serbia Against Escalation, abc News, February 3, 2017.

⁷ Serbia blames Kosovo for failed negotiations amid war talk, press form, February 3, 2017.

⁸ Impact of “America First” on US-Kosovo Relations, The Huffington Post, February 2, 2017.

⁹ Serb bulldozers demolish wall in Kosovo's divided city, Reuters, February 5, 2017.

¹⁰ Tarek Dahroug, Foreign fighters with IS, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1327, 12 January, 2017.

¹¹ A report released by the Pristina-based Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS).

¹² Leonat Shehu, Husbands, Social Factors, Drive Kosovar Women to Join IS Militants, voanews.com, January 28, 2017.

¹³ The Latest: EU Nations to Keep Balkan Migrant Route Shut, A.P, February 8, 2017.

¹⁴ The meeting included representatives from the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Greece.

¹⁵ Snezana Bjelotomic, Djordjevic on weapons: We are only interested in defense, b92.net, January 30, 2017.

¹⁶ John R. Schindler, President Trump's First Foreign Policy Crisis: Balkan War Drums Beat Again, Observer, January 25, 2017.

¹⁷ Snezana Bjelotomic, Djordjevic on weapons: We are only interested in defense, b92.net, January 30, 2017.

¹⁸ Gordana Knezevic, Fresh Talk In Balkans Of Reinstating Military Draft, Radio Free Europe, February 9, 2017.

¹⁹ Gordana Knezevic, Fresh Talk In Balkans Of Reinstating Military Draft, Radio Free Europe, February 9, 2017.

²⁰ Snezana Bjelotomic, Chaos in the Balkans: Putin's revenge plan, Serbian Monitor. Com, January 27, 2017.