



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory
Report

**Serbia & Kosovo:
Ongoing Tensions in
the Balkans**

Laurence Cant

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In Northern Kosovo on the 24th of September, a Police patrol was ambushed by a group of Serbian Paramilitary fighters. Kosovan authorities then engaged with the gunmen at a monastery near the Serb-Kosovan Border, killing three while the others managed to flee. Kosovo has accused the Serbian Government of orchestrating the attack, claiming that the weapons and vehicles found at the monastery are traceable to the Serbian armed forces. Belgrade has since denied the claims and responsibility for the attack was then claimed by the pro-Serbian political party Serb List.

Background: Decades of Hostility

A fragile peace has been preserved in the region since the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo after a NATO intervention in 1999. When a 78-day bombing campaign forced then President Slobodan Milosevic to retreat. Since then, NATO has maintained a peacekeeping presence in the country, known as KFOR. In the years following the intervention, tensions have flared on multiple occasions. For instance, after Kosovo declared independence in 2008, backed by the US and a number of EU member states, the US embassy in Belgrade was set on fire by Serb demonstrators. Over the years, ethno-nationalist politicians have gained power on both sides by playing up to the rivalry. This has made the chance of successful peace efforts less and less likely. Additionally, hard-line parties have employed extreme measures to destabilise the political landscape. For instance, in 2007, Kosovo Albanian parties repeatedly set off tear gas in parliament in a month-long campaign aimed at foiling attempts to normalise relations.

However, there have been some positive signs over the last decade. In 2013 an EU mediated dialogue between the two sides was set up. Similarly, in March 2023, Belgrade and Pristina were close to signing the so-called OHRID deal, which contained concessions from both sides on key issues such as Kosovo's right to join international organisations and the creation of Serb municipalities in Kosovo. Unfortunately, the deal collapsed when faced with internal political pressures on both sides. Despite these signs of progress, hostilities reached a boiling point earlier this year when ethnic Serbs chose to boycott Kosovo's mayoral elections in June. Despite a 3% turnout at the elections, Kosovan officials chose to honour the results and ethnic Albanian mayors were installed in numerous electorates. This triggered widespread riots by ethnic Serbs in Northern parts of Kosovo, with reported clashes with local police and NATO peacekeepers.

The Aftermath of the Monastery Standoff

The monastery incident has yet again raised the stakes between the two countries. Despite denying all involvement and pledging to carry out an investigation into the incident, Serbian President Alexander Vucic has played up to nationalist sentiment by declaring a day of mourning for the dead assailants. Additionally, he put the international community on high alert by deploying additional units to the Kosovo border, a move that was labelled as 'very stabilising' by Washington. However, the majority of the troops have reportedly been withdrawn at the time of writing. The incident has also led to a bolstering of NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo. In the last two

weeks, both Romania and the UK have announced they will be sending reinforcements to the region. A total of 700 new troops will join the 4,500-strong force already stationed in Kosovo.

Since the attack, Vucic has claimed that Serbia does not want war with Kosovo. Saying that an escalation of the conflict would ruin Serbia's chances of joining the EU. However, he maintains that he will not be silent about injustices against Serbs in the region and will continue to assert Serbia's territorial claims to Kosovo. Kosovan President, Albin Kurti, voiced his disagreements to this in an interview with Al Jazeera. Arguing that the attacks on September 24th were orchestrated to raise tensions that could possibly lead to war. As well as doubling down on the allegations that the Serbian armed forces were involved in supplying weapons for the assailants involved in the Monastery attack.

What Role Can the International Community Play?

At this point, it is likely that the stalemate will continue into the foreseeable future as neither side feels the urgent need to implement an agreement. It may be the case that the US and EU will double down on their commitment to ensuring Kosovan Security. However, this approach has been criticised as it may further empower politicians in Kosovo to employ a more aggressive ethno-nationalist approach to confronting Serbia, which could damage relations further. Former US Ambassador to Serbia Anthony Godfrey instead suggests that it is the EU and Serbia's strongest economic partners that 'hold the keys' to influencing Belgrade. He argues that pressure must be applied from these fronts to get Vucic and Serbia back to the negotiation table.

