

Wide Angle Shot: Kosovo — Putin's ghost hovers over the Balkans

The fear of Kosovar leadership is that giving North Kosovo full autonomy could be possibly associated with the emergence of another “Republika Srpska” or even a new “Donbas” in Kosovo. In other words, Kosovar Albanians perceive it as a potential Trojan horse, mindful of the case of “Republika Srpska” in Bosnia. This would make the state functioning of the youngest country in Europe very difficult as a history of events and frictions in Bosnia indicate.



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The Russian way of “divide et impera” in Europe

After the economic collapse of the nineties, Russia was seeking to regain the geopolitical influence it had before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It used different tactics to achieve its goals, including **cyber attacks, intelligence activities and most importantly European energy dependency**.

However, it's after the 24th of February 2022 that the echo of **the war in Ukraine has also reached the Balkans, the soft underbelly of Europe**. The region has always been a battleground for powers that vie for supremacy since the Roman Empire.

Since the start of the aggression on Ukraine, the **governments in Bulgaria and Montenegro were dismissed in no-confidence votes** and political heat increased in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The downfall of the government in Bulgaria was officially due to the move in protest at the prime minister's plans to drop Bulgaria's veto on the start of EU membership negotiations with North Macedonia. Nevertheless, it seems that the reformist prime minister Kiril Petkov, who expelled a dozen of Russia's 120-plus “diplomats”, **had a Trojan (pro-Russian) horse in his own coalition**. His strong backing of Ukraine — in a country that has historically strong ties to the Russian world — points to behind-the-scenes Russian meddling.

In addition, Russia's virtual **domination of various parts of Bulgaria's energy sector**, including oil, gas, and nuclear was faced with measures by the government to **replace Russian imports** with those from **Azerbaijan and LNG ports in Greece**. In Bosnia, the Republika Srpska leader Dodik proclaimed on 6 June 2022 that Republika Srpska intended to **secede from the federation**. In response, 2 days later, Germany announced that it will deploy troops to Bosnia for the first time in a decade **citing resurgent instability**. In August 2022, Dodik **refused to give his approval** for the **new ambassador of Germany** in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Berlin in turn threatened to retaliate against Bosnia. It is clear in our view that Dodik secessionist movement threatens to break Bosnia and Herzegovina apart and **Putin is using Dodik as a proxy for testing of the Western**

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resoluteness in the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Kosovo are possibly now just a small part of what the Bertelsmann Foundation **described** as a “ring of fire” at the EU outer borders, extending from Belarus to North Africa via Ukraine, Moldova, the Caucasus and the Western Balkans a ring of instability nourished by Russian meddling.

New flare-up in tensions over license plates & ID cards in Kosovo

Starting from the end of July, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia have reached another impasse. The two countries are once again at odds, this time over moves by Kosovo’s government to require Serbians visiting Kosovo to **replace** their **Serbian passports with a temporary ID** while in the country, and to require **Serbian license plates** in the **country to be replaced** with **Kosovar license plates**. The decision was made in a move of reciprocity to similar requirements already issued for Kosovars when they enter Serbia.

Air raid sirens were heard in Mitrovica in northern Kosovo on 31 July, with reports by local media indicating that a large presence of emergency vehicles was seen throughout the area. The sirens were stopped after three hours, according to local reports. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said to the media, that Serbia “has never been in a **more complex and difficult situation** [regarding Kosovo] than it is today”. The **Serbian army has then been stationed in high alert** and several media outlets have also reported minor clashes along the Kosovo-Serbian border.

As the situation escalated, Vucic met with **Serbia’s General Staff to discuss potential military options** in response to “**provocations**” against Kosovar Serbs on July 31. In response to this development, **NATO’s Kosovo Force said it would intervene if Kosovo’s stability is threatened**.

While skirmishes between the two sides have happened also in the past, **something more serious seems** to have undergone behind the scenes considering the **warning** that NATO sent to the Serbian side.

Another standoff in an already uneasy coexistence with Serbia

It seems that the Balkans have **not escaped the reverberations of the war in Ukraine**. Kosovo has supported Ukraine since Russia’s invasion, whereas Russia, a longtime ally of Serbia, does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state, and has echoed Serbia’s president in blaming the government in Pristina for the renewed tensions in northern Kosovo. Kosovo’s allies, including the United States and European Union, called for calm and urged Pristina to delay the implementation of the new rules. The situation calmed after Kosovo Prime Minister **Albin Kurti agreed to postpone the number plates rule until Sept. 1** and **NATO peacekeepers oversaw the removal of roadblocks** set up by Serbs.

Belgrade has long pursued closer **integration with the European Union** — late last year it **opened up several new negotiation chapters** on its path to full accession — while simultaneously maintaining **close economic and political ties** with Russia and China.

While this policy has been **beneficial** in the past, trying to walk a fine line between East & West has put **Vucic into a corner**, as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is likely to make such a policy **unsustainable for much longer**.

The nationalist voices in the Serbian government make Vucic's job even more difficult. During the ruling Serbian Progressive Party congress in July last year, Aleksandar Vulin (Minister of Internal Affairs) stated that “**creating the Serbian World, where the Serbs would live and be united, is the task of this generation of politicians.**”

North Kosovo, the new “Republika Srpska” of the Balkans?

Kosovo's leadership says that ID cards and car plates are just the **implementations of the agreement reached with Serbia in Brussels**. On the other hand, Serbia reiterates that in Brussels another agreement was reached on the **association of Serbian municipalities that the Constitutional Court of Kosovo has declared partly unconstitutional** and Kosovo refuses to apply.

The fear of Kosovar leadership is that giving **full autonomy** to **North Kosovo** would be associated with the **emergence of another “Republika Srpska” or a new “Donbas” in Kosovo**. In other words, Kosovar Albanians perceive it as a potential Trojan horse, mindful of the case of “Republika Srpska” in Bosnia. This would make the state functioning of the youngest country in Europe **very difficult** as events in Bosnia indicate.

Kosovo and Serbia remain at loggerheads over the former's status and prime minister Kurti, who was a **political prisoner under the Slobodan Milošević regime**, is in a stronger position compared to its predecessors who were under continuous threat of indictment for their alleged crimes in the post-war Kosovo.

Recently in an interview with the Italian daily “La Repubblica” Kurti said that the situation has changed since the invasion of Ukraine.

“The first episode, a consequence of the **fascist idea of panslavism** that the Kremlin has, was Ukraine. If we have a second episode, for example in **Transnistria**, then the probabilities that a third war will develop in the Western Balkans, and in **Kosovo in particular, they will be very high**” Kurti added.

By using these strong words in our opinion Kurti tries to bring the **attention of the West closer to the region** in order to reach a final solution for Kosovo. The possibility of EU membership remains an important **motivator** for regional actors not to escalate the tensions, and most importantly the region is today home to many **countries that are members of NATO** and any war at the doorstep of NATO countries that would involve them would be **unthinkable**.



International pressure and attempts to deescalate tensions

The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo failed to resolve differences fueling tension between the estranged Balkan neighbours during talks on 18 August, but they agreed to resume discussions **ahead of a September 1 deadline that could stoke further unrest**.

Moreover, in response to continuous threats and harsh rhetoric used especially by the Serbian leader, **NATO troops have been deployed** on main roads in the north.

However, in a last-minute consensus, Kosovo and Serbia agreed to **waive the issue of entry-exit documents** for citizens of both countries on 27 August 2022, **resolving**

the dispute over the movement of citizens. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Kurti, had previously stated that he was ready to give up the issuance of the entry-exit document for citizens of Serbia, if Belgrade would act in the same way.

Balkans, again the "powder keg" of Europe?

Some would think this is **not a good time for another conflict** in Europe, yet as the adage "divide and conquer" suggests, while Kosovo's allies, the US and EU, have their eyes on Ukraine a new conflict has rekindled in Europe. In our opinion, this is the time for Europe to regroup and **figure out a new way of managing conflicts**.

German foreign minister Baerbock said in March that Berlin "will **not surrender this region in the heart of Europe to Moscow's influence**", but rhetoric must be accompanied by forceful actions.

West should seek to prevent the Balkans and especially **Bosnia and Herzegovina & Kosovo** from becoming Moscow's next **theatre of activity**.

However, much work depends also on the region's countries. **Bad governance, sluggish economies and corruption** have stalled the EU process. In addition, **corruption has been Moscow's best meddling tool** in the Balkans.

With the invasion of Ukraine and considering that we are possibly entering a **new Cold War era** (with the iron curtain shifted to the East), there are fears that Russia will exploit existing tensions in the Western Balkans **to destabilize the region**.

Respect for the rule of law is **wearing** away in some states, and any **drop in living conditions** due to high inflation and the energy crisis might be used by **Russia to foment discontent**. In turn, the Balkan politicians know from the nineties how to **turn nationalism to their advantage to keep their power intact**.

In 2022, in this region, the famous words pronounced by Samuel Johnson in 1775 seem more actual than ever. In the Balkans **"patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel."**

After all, this is still the region of two gunshots, one world war. It all started in Sarajevo.

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