



Pro-Serbian demonstrators in Strasbourg, France, display a banner reading “Kosovo is Serbia” to protest the independence of Kosovo in February 2008. (Olivier Morin / AFP via Getty Images)

The Kosovo-Serbia Conundrum Reaches a Breaking Point: Kosovo’s North Emerges as Europe’s Most Vulnerable Spot Outside Ukraine

Agon Maliqi

On May 29, 2023, many observers of world affairs seemed surprised by the dramatic [footage](#) coming out of Kosovo. NATO peacekeepers were being [brutally attacked](#) by a mob of violent Serb protesters in the northern Serbian-majority town of Zvečan.

Fulfilling their security mandate as a responder of last resort, the peacekeepers found themselves sandwiched between the violent protesters — many of whom were part of informal security structures tied to the Serbian government — and Kosovo’s Special Police Units, consisting of Albanians, which had surrounded the town hall.

Two days earlier, the Special Police had escorted four newly elected Albanian mayors into their office buildings in Serbian-majority municipalities. The Serbs, who boycotted the elections [under instructions](#) from the Serbian government, contested the legitimacy of mayors who won with a symbolic turnout of 3% but who had been formally recognized as legal by the international community.

Then on June 15, three Kosovo border policemen [ended up in the custody](#) of Serbia’s Special Police unit as they were patrolling smuggling routes. Kosovo’s government claims they were abducted within Kosovo’s territory, which is formally under the



protection of the NATO mission. Serbia says they had crossed into Serbia. NATO [said](#) it could not verify, but the U.S. demanded their immediate release, which eventually happened on June 26. These two major escalation episodes occurred only a few months after Kosovo's government and police were involved in another battle with Kosovo Serbs in the north over the use of Serbian-issued car license plates and identification cards.

The burning question that has emerged from these episodes is: Who controls the north of Kosovo? The answer to this question may hold the key to the resolution of the long-lasting dispute between Kosovo and Serbia – and Balkan security in general.

Kosovo's four northern municipalities are territorially connected to Serbia through hilly terrain that is difficult to control by the central government in Prishtina and is conducive to smuggling, [including that of weapons](#). They have an overwhelming Serbian-majority hostile to Kosovo's independence and its institutions.

In 1999, as the defeated Yugoslav army withdrew from Kosovo along with many fleeing Serbian civilians, NATO set up a roadblock at the bridge separating the northern city of Mitrovica from the other part of Kosovo, creating something of a *cordon sanitaire* for the Serbs in the north.

For almost two decades, even after Kosovo gained independence in 2008 and Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo gradually integrated within its institutional structures, the north remained a world of its own. Kosovo was protected by NATO but operated fully under Serbian state structures. Then, around 2015, a gradual process of [formal integration](#) began though the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

For example, in 2017 Serbia's parallel structures for the judiciary and police were [integrated](#) into Kosovo's system. Northern Kosovo Serbs accepted this grudgingly, pressured by the government in Belgrade, which at the time was pursuing EU accession and was eager to please the West. To implement its will, Belgrade asserted full control over Kosovo Serb politics and created the Serbian List – a party under its control that eliminated any dissenting voices among Kosovo Serbs. One such voice, Oliver Ivanovic, was infamously [assassinated](#) in 2018.

The north has for many years been [described by international organizations as](#) a hotspot of organized crime – a “local fiefdom of a few individuals” with ties to the government in Belgrade. Its leaders last year [were sanctioned](#) by the U.S. and the U.K. For many years, despite occasional tensions, the Serbian List played the role of Belgrade's enforcer of either stability or secessionism.

Things finally went downhill in November 2022. Kosovo Serbs in the north – again under Belgrade's direction, but this time much more willingly – went in the other direction and [abandoned all Kosovo's institutions](#), including the police and courts. This has left Albanian police officers as the only ones responsible for the rule of law. They also resigned from mayoral posts, which created a crisis of mayoral legitimacy.

This reversal of the integration trend is also being associated with the weakening of the power of the Serbian List, whose leaders are not necessarily seen as credible by local Serbs. With tensions still high, some of the protesting crowds were also observed cursing President Aleksandar Vučić and [even physically attacking](#) the leaders of the Serbian List.

The answer to the question of who controls the north so far seems to be: nobody and everybody at the same time. Hence the chaos and the violence, as sides poke the limits and weapons seem to be plentifully available. The north has reached the point where there is a high likelihood of someone getting shot and killed, which risks a dangerous escalation spiral. This is exactly what Russian information warfare is predicting will happen and what Russia would like to see happen, hoping to distract the West from Ukraine.

Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine Opened a Balkan Can of Worms

The main reason tensions have escalated is in fact a major Western [diplomatic effort](#) aiming to make things better. Only a few months ago, Kosovo and Serbia reached agreements in [Brussels](#) and [Ohrid](#) that were supposed to lead to the full normalization of relations. Yet as the recent escalations show, this is now an effort on the brink of failure, like several of its predecessors. And this is the case for the very same



Security forces increase measures after violence escalates in Zvecan, Kosovo on May 30, 2023. At least 30 soldiers of the NATO-led international peacekeeping mission in Kosovo were injured in clashes with Serb protesters trying to prevent the newly elected mayor from taking the oath of office. (Erkin Keci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

reasons, most of which have to do with Western policy toward the region.

Ever since the end of the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia — with Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008 being its last chapter — the West’s approach to pacifying the Balkans was to replicate the path that Western Europe took after World War II.

A key pillar of this approach centers on the countries’ road to joining the EU, which was meant to create codependency, protect ethnic minority rights, and ultimately make state borders like those between Kosovo and Serbia less important. In 2011, the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia started under the premise that the EU had critical leverage on both sides through its policy of conditionality. This effectively meant that Serbia would one day have to recognize Kosovo’s independence in order to join the EU.

The EU dialogue was able to produce two agreements [in 2013](#) and [2015](#) that, among other things, [brought the northern parallel institutions into Kosovo’s fold](#) and were a major step toward full normalization. The agreements also foresaw an additional layer of

autonomy for Kosovo Serbs through the Association of Serbian-Majority Municipalities (ASMM).

It was at about this time that the EU put its enlargement to the Western Balkans indefinitely on hold. The irreversible damage and the toxic dynamics that this historic decision unleashed throughout the region are hard to overstate.

This decision radically changed the incentives of local political elites by removing an external anchor of peace-building and democratic reforms. It fueled authoritarian leaderships, stifled economic growth, and invited capital from authoritarian countries to fill financing needs. Perhaps most importantly, it undermined the West’s leverage and opened the door for external actors like Russia to create headaches for the West.

In response, EU policy toward the region has for most of the past decade been on an autopilot that may only be described as “containment.” The EU and its associated Brussels-bubble commentariat continued to pay lip service to enlargement and fuel illusions while failing to push any of the countries substantially toward joining the EU.

It is within this context of a questionable EU perspective that the question of ethnic borders in the region regained prominence and that security concerns grew, especially for NATO. Successive U.S. administrations were more clear-eyed on the vulnerabilities being created. This explains why NATO membership in the region progressed (e.g., North Macedonia and Montenegro joined NATO) while EU accession stalled.

The U.S. has for a very long time seen the Kosovo-Serbia dispute as [a key regional bottleneck](#). The current state of affairs enables Russia to serve as the protector of Serbia’s interests and to dictate its geopolitical orientation; it prevents both countries’ Euro-Atlantic path; and it creates a security vulnerability to be exploited, as the last weeks showed. These are some of the reasons why Russia [has actively sought](#) to undermine Western-led normalization efforts between Kosovo and Serbia.

In 2018, with support from the Trump administration and some corners of Europe, the leaders of Kosovo



and Serbia even toyed with the idea of a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia as a potential solution. This would see parts of Kosovo north join Serbia in exchange for parts of Albanian-inhabited regions in southern Serbia. The effort failed, largely due to fears of domino effects on the region; to resistance from a few European countries, primarily Germany; and to its unpopularity in Kosovo.

Then, in 2022 came Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's strategic blunder both created an opening and highlighted the urgency of settling the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. And this produced the initiative that led to the Basic Agreement reached in February of that year.

The central premise of the recent deal is not to achieve the final goal of mutual recognition, but an intermediary step that would allow Kosovo to join multilateral institutions without formally recognizing Serbia, similarly to how West Germany and East Germany agreed to coexist in the international arena. In exchange, Kosovo would fulfill its previous commitments on Serbs' rights within its constitutional framework. The escalation in the north showed that what may have seemed a reasonable plan to some in the West failed in its first major encounter with reality.

A Poor Negotiating Framework Meets a Perfectly Complicated Reality

For the Basic Agreement to work, there needed to be a clear and agreed-on sequence of events on who does what and by when. There also needed to be a minimum level of trust between the sides; clear incentives for adherence to the deal; and a mediator with credibility and leverage. None of these preconditions were in place — which explains why the agreement is already falling apart.

A sequenced implementation plan was attempted in April in Ohrid but failed. That sequencing would have settled, for example, the issue of elections in the north, which led to recent escalations. Instead, the implementation plan ended up being anything but a plan. It was [a very vague text](#) — more of a face-saving measure for the mediators, which only delayed proceedings until the next crisis.

The incentives for the sides to adhere to the deal may not be seen by them as incentives. By accepting that

the agreement would be unsigned ([upon Serbia's request](#)) but making it [a binding condition](#) for Serbia's EU accession, the EU continues to operate under the illusion that the EU accession perspective still drives behavior.

This neglects the fact that Serbia has become unacceptable as an EU membership candidate for other reasons, like [deterioration in democracy and the rule of law](#). Vučić — who has actively fueled anti-Western narratives — has signaled he doesn't care about EU membership. Kosovo, on the other hand, cannot move toward joining the EU because Kosovo is not recognized by five EU members. The mediators [can't guarantee](#) that these five will recognize Kosovo, even if the deal with Serbia is implemented.

Even if the sides were to be motivated to pursue an EU accession path, the credibility of the EU that it can deliver on its end is in tatters due to its unanimity rules. North Macedonia went through a painful name change in its historic agreement with Greece and is still stuck facing obstacles due [to a veto](#) by Bulgaria on issues related to history and identity.

The EU's credibility has been particularly shattered in Kosovo. The EU has for many years now adopted an asymmetric approach to the two sides. Although 22 EU members recognize Kosovo, the bloc has effectively allowed the five nonrecognizers to dictate a status-neutral position, which becomes evident in official EU statements.

In earlier days, the EU's status neutrality used to be balanced by Washington's involvement as a staunch Kosovo supporter. But now the U.S. also prioritizes relations with Serbia for transactional reasons, like [the shipment of weapons to Ukraine](#), and its general efforts to drive a wedge between Russia and its allies.

Yet nothing undermines the process like the toxic mistrust between the two leaders. Both seem to [truly think](#) that [the other one wants](#) to start a war and is engaged in a game of chicken, trying to trap the other into a confrontation course with NATO in the north.

Vučić, whose power in Serbia has been waning and who faces weekly protests, has a clear interest in avoiding any decision on Kosovo and seeing the agreement fail — so long as he doesn't get full blame



for it in the West. The recent tensions in the north [suit Vučić well](#). A security crisis is helping to quell the domestic protests and creates an obstacle to the continuation of the dialogue.

Vučić has been able to preserve his maneuvering space between Russia and the West, which is a key source of his power. To achieve this goal, he has found the perfect weapon: Kosovo's almost existential fear of the ASMM — the elephant in the room in this entire drama.

The irony is that no one in Serbia, or among Kosovo Serbs, seems to particularly want this body — especially one without executive powers that would [effectively repackage](#) the existing rights Serbs obtained in 2008. The real goal for Serbia remains either a status-quo or ethnic partition, which is why Serbs abandoned institutions only in the north and not in the south, where most Serbs live.

Yet Vučić has justified his escalations with Kosovo's failure to commit to its side of the bargain and provide a draft of the statute of the ASMM, setting it as a precondition for any of his concessions. He has found support for that line of reasoning even among Kosovo's [staunchest supporters](#) in the West.

Which raises the question of why Kurti is not calling Vučić's bluff and hasn't provided a draft statute of the ASMM, even though he has effectively committed to it, especially after the U.S. [guarantees](#) that it would be to Kosovo's liking.

Instead, while that draft was being expected, Kurti sent the Special Police to escort the mayors to the north against NATO advice, aware of the security risks it would produce and how it would complicate the larger political game in the dialogue.

The Hidden Cost of Trauma

Kurti's strategy of antagonizing Kosovo's friends and allies at a critical moment has left many puzzled. Does he not believe in any of the Western guarantees? Is he prioritizing domestic politics, where the ASMM is highly unpopular and police actions in the north are good for approval ratings? Does he really believe that he can change the reality on the ground in the north through force? Does he have another, longer game in mind?



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (R) meets with President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić (4th L) at Carmelite Monastery in Budapest, Hungary on August 20, 2023. (Mustafa Kamaci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

All the above may be true. In any case, his strategy has set Kosovo on a course of isolation from the West and of sharing the blame with Vučić, which won't bring any good. In fact, it may, [as the U.S. ambassador to Kosovo warned](#), turn it "into a Palestine at worst and a Cyprus at best" — with the north as a NATO protectorate.

It is hard to predict what will happen next. More episodes of controlled violence are likely. What is clear is that the current status-quo in the north, where no one is in full control, can no longer hold.

While Kurti has emerged as another problem to be managed for the West, alongside the "known devil" Vučić, this episode has once again showcased the central impotence of Western policy toward the region, which it is now trying to hide through threats of sanctions. It also shows that in solving complex conflicts involving identity and past trauma, counting on countries to pursue rational courses of action is not a safe bet.



The core premise of replicating how Western Europe achieved its peace will remain extraordinarily unlikely – and not just because the Western Balkans do not have a credible EU membership perspective. It remains elusive because the region is missing another component of Europe’s successful history of peace. World War II ended with a clear winner, which was able to impose at gunpoint a process for dealing with the past, for which its main culprit, Germany, embraced its responsibility.

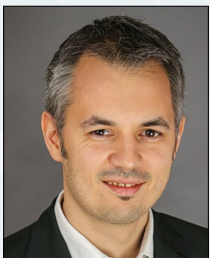
In the most recent Balkan wars, the fighting ended not with the final defeat of Milošević’s hegemonic Serbia but with peace agreements that left frozen conflicts in Kosovo’s north and a fragile peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process of dealing with the past, which focused on punitive measures through the Hague Tribunals, failed to produce societal effects.

There was no Willy Brandt moment that would put Serbia’s neighbors at ease. In fact, [war crime denials](#) and historical revisionism about Serbia’s genocidal past are at an all-time high. The West’s current Serbia-centric policy fails to account for the costs of this fact.

Accommodating Serbia may make some sense from the perspective of realpolitik or momentary transactional needs like arming Ukraine. Since the Balkans do need a Serbia anchored to the West, it may also make sense to engage in some “trauma management” – namely, signaling to the anxious anti-Western Serbian society that, [in the context](#) of Russia’s collapse, Serbs will be protected and safe under the Western framework.

Yet this will be an elusive goal as long as the shapeshifting and unrepentant nationalist Vučić is in power in Serbia. The trauma and irrational behavior will simply be exported to the victims of Serbia’s aggression in the 1990s. The exploitation of this trauma – through the use of [“reflexive control”](#) as a hybrid warfare tool – has in fact become Vučić’s secret weapon in provoking irrational responses and fears in Kosovo, like the one about the ASMM.

The result of the West’s attempt to turn Serbia westward through Vučić has been to, in effect, slowly turn the entire region against the West. It is time to treat the root causes and not the symptoms.



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