DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 05.06.2023 | René Schlee

Serbia’s cunning Kosovo deflection

The key to understanding the violent conflicts in northern Kosovo lies not in the capital Pristina, but in Belgrade

Once again, international attention is focused on violent clashes of the Serbian minority in northern Kosovo. But the key to understanding the current crisis lies not in Kosovo's capital Pristina, but in Belgrade. Faced with domestic political pressure, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić is seeking escalation in the near abroad. This is a recurring pattern that runs counter to Western long-term interests in the region.

Last Monday, at least 30 soldiers were injured, some seriously, in clashes between NATO's KFOR task force and Serbian protesters in Zvecan. In an official press statement, NATO spoke of injuries resulting from homemade explosive devices and firearms. On Tuesday, the alliance then announced that it would send 700 additional soldiers to Kosovo. NATO had to intervene after the mayors of four municipalities in northern Kosovo – where Kosovo Serbs are in the majority – were prevented from accessing the town halls by protesters, and the Kosovo police was forced to use tear gas, among other means, to gain access.

A stricken chord in Serbia’s society

The attack on NATO soldiers is a new low point in the tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia. In Serbia, up to 60,000 people have been protesting repeatedly against President Vučić and his government for about three weeks. These are the largest protests in the country since the fall of former President Slobodan Milosevic. Initially, the protests were triggered by two acts of violence, which resulted in an unusually sudden escalation of the political situation.

In Belgrade, on 3 May, a 13-year-old student at a primary school murdered eight fellow students with a firearm. Several other pupils were injured and two others died from their injuries. The crime was committed with his father's gun. The following night, in the town of Mladenovac, near Belgrade, a 21-year-old man again murdered eight people when he fired from a moving car.
Beyond the parliamentary opposition, the desire for non-violence seems

to strike a chord in Serbian society. Not since 2012, when he took office, has Vučić faced as much domestic political pressure as he does now. Since last week, however, the focus has not been on the protests but on what is happening in Kosovo.

Despite minimal voter turnout of less than five per cent, the Kosovar central government clung to the election results and swore in its winners.

The security situation in northern Kosovo has been fragile for months since the Kosovo Serbs – at Belgrade's behest – withdrew from Kosovo's state institutions (including the judiciary, police and government). They had resigned in protest over the dismissal of the Kosovo Serb police commander by the Kosovo central authorities in November 2022. This was preceded by a dispute over reciprocity measures in the recognition of car registration plates last year.

The current protests and riots are a product of the dysfunctional local elections that were supposed to be used to fill those posts. The elections had been boycotted by the *Srpska Lista*, a Belgrade-controlled party, on the grounds that a Serb municipal association (now a central point of contention in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue) should be established first. Additionally, massive pressure was put on Kosovo Serbs not to vote in the election.

Despite minimal voter turnout of less than five per cent, the Kosovar central government clung to the election results and swore in its winners. This was followed by the protests and violent riots described above. From this constellation, one can see very clearly how the Serbian regime deliberately generates fragile security situations in nearby foreign countries (in addition to Kosovo, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina) to then – if necessary – activate them.

Barking up the wrong tree

However, if one follows the official statements of the US State Department and German representatives, the Kurti government is to blame for the renewed escalation. But this criticism is disproportionate as it ignores the actual agitator of the renewed crisis. The protests are not the actions of angry citizens gathering in spontaneously erupting, legitimate anger at the central government but a product of the instrumentalisation of the Serb minority by the Vučić regime.

As with the boycott of local elections in April, the full extent of Belgrade's social control in northern Kosovo through the *Srpska Lista*

and other structures is evident. The architect of the fragile security situation in North Kosovo sits in Belgrade, not Pristina. One can certainly criticise the Kurti government for a lack of de-escalation. But to neither clearly name the actor of the escalation nor confront him seems strange.

It is also not entirely clear what Pristina could have done differently. The fact is that the local elections were held – after several postponements in favour of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue – with the blessing of the international community. However, the boycott in the run-up to the elections, which was ultimately ordered by Belgrade, was not sufficiently criticised by the representatives of the QUINT states. The elections then resulted in the appointment of four mayors of Kosovar Albanian origin, three of whom were going about their official business in their respective town halls under police protection.

If anything, Pristina can be accused of missing an opportunity to let Serbia's provocation go nowhere, thus not giving Vučić an opportunity to set fire to Kosovo for internal political mobilisation.

Certainly, the Kurti government should have coordinated better with KFOR prior to the police operation last Friday. However, pointing out this possibility is all too cheap against the background of the last tensions at the end of last year and the international crisis management. At that time, KFOR – contrary to its mandate – did not intervene and refrained from clearing the roadblocks over a period of several weeks. Failure to intervene again would mean a declaration of bankruptcy on the part of the Kurti government and its own statehood. This is a classic scenario based on the motto: no matter how you do it, you do it wrong.

If anything, Pristina can be accused of missing an opportunity to let Serbia's provocation go nowhere, thus not giving Vučić an opportunity to set fire to Kosovo for internal political mobilisation. A clever sidestep would have helped Pristina to both sharpen the contrast with and keep the focus on the protests in Belgrade.

Abandoning naive Western objectives

As frustratingly unconstructive as the Kurti government may appear at times, one must not disregard the source of the conflict and the originator of the current tensions, despite all justified criticism of the crisis management. The timing of the riots, in addition to extensive publicly documented operational links between Belgrade and semi-professional thugs involved in the protests and previous militant actions,

should provide sufficient information about the agitator and profiteer of the current situation. The fact that KFOR soldiers have now also been injured in the riots should make people sit up, take notice and call for a change in policy.

The current German and US policy in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict seems to follow the overriding objective of tying Serbia more closely to the Euro-Atlantic camp in view of the conflict with Russia. Given the destabilising role the Vučić regime plays by regularly instrumentalising Serbian minorities throughout the region – against the respective national governments or, in the case of Kosovo, against its statehood – this policy is at the very least short-sighted, if not naïve. The recent increase in the intensity of Belgrade's 'escalate-to-de-escalate' strategy suggests the need for a change of policy that clearly identifies and more decisively confronts the antagonism in Serbian foreign policy.

The scale of the protests in Serbia shows the extent of the Serbs' dissatisfaction with the government and the de-democratisation of the country. The desire for change and for a re-democratisation of a system that has long since slipped into autocracy is all too clear. The international community should therefore not follow the diversionary tactics in Kosovo but turn its attention to the domestic situation in Serbia. In doing so, it should also seek dialogue with the protesters on their demands.



René Schlee
Sarajevo

René Schlee heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office Dialogue Southeast Europe in Sarajevo. Before that, he was responsible for the offices in Northern Macedonia and Kosovo.