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At full throttle – right into the dead end

The latest escalation of violence in Kosovo has made it clear that the EU's approach towards Serbia has failed. A change of strategy is needed

It was already the second violent incident in northern Kosovo in the last six months. On the night of 24 September, as yet unidentified Serbian gunmen staged an ambush at a bridge in the municipality of Zvečan, which was blocked by lorries without number plates. When they arrived at the roadblock, Kosovo police officers were fired upon. One officer died, and three were injured, some seriously. Over the course of the next day, the group barricaded themselves in a nearby Serbian Orthodox monastery in the village of Banjska, which was surrounded by Kosovar police. Four of the attackers were killed in shootings, eight were taken into custody, according to press reports, and two were taken to a hospital in nearby Novi Pazar. The Kosovar police operation was closely coordinated with the Kosovo Force (KFOR) – the multinational military formation led by NATO that was established in 1999 after the end of the Kosovo war – and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Mission).

While this latest crime was quickly condemned in Kosovo, as well as by the Kosovar government, and responsibility was sought in Belgrade, there was initially an unusual silence in the Serbian capital — Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić did not comment until the evening.

Unanswered questions

Even now, more than a week later, it remains unclear whether the perpetrators were heavily armed Serbian militia members from the north of Kosovo or even paramilitaries from Serbia itself. The fact that it is difficult to precisely identify the attackers, even days after the shootings, shows the interplay between irregular elements, non-state and state actors, as well as the instrumentalisation of minorities abroad.

The exact relationship of the group with the deputy chairman of the

northern Kosovar Serbian party *Srpska Lista*, Milan Radojčić, also remains a matter of dispute. Kosovar television showed pictures of him in front of the monastery, while the Serbian foreign minister questioned the authenticity of these pictures. There is also much speculation as to whether the attack shows that President Vučić may have lost control over northern Kosovo and whether the attack may have resulted from an internal conflict within the Serbian government or between Vučić and Radojčić, who is said to be linked to organised crime.

Regardless of all the unanswered questions, the incident shows one thing above all: the EU-led dialogue has hurtled at full speed right into a dead end.

It is already clear that the Serbian leadership is not taking the path of denial, but instead is playing the ethno-nationalist card. Rather than arresting those attackers who were undergoing medical treatment, a day of mourning was held three days after the crime, in honour of the killed perpetrators.

European politicians of all political stripes strongly condemned the attacks. However, for the time being, there will be no deviation from their usual, dialogue-oriented approach. The German Foreign Ministry is calling on the parties to be aware of their responsibility for peace. This, however, does not do justice to the way in which this attack was different. A precise, objective and international investigation into the incident and its background is certainly necessary. Notwithstanding, the fact that the Serbian leadership is organising a day of national mourning for the killed perpetrators should be attracting more criticism. Albanian President Edi Rama and German *Bundestag* member Josip Juratovic, among others, have issued statements in this regard.

A change of strategy is needed

Regardless of all the unanswered questions, the incident shows one thing above all: the EU-led dialogue has hurtled at full speed right into a dead end. With several deaths on both sides by now, it is completely unclear to what extent the parties to the conflict could come together again for constructive negotiations, let alone a ‘dialogue’. The fact that it has come to this was not due to a lack of international engagement, but to the wrong strategy.

In the attempt to pressure Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia and – within the framework of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue – to recognise Kosovo at the same time, diplomatic efforts towards the latter goal have gotten short shrift. The Serbian demand was given more weight, including in setting the agenda for the negotiations.

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The reaction (or rather the lack thereof) to the attack on NATO soldiers back in May was already astonishing. After all, the logic behind the significantly reduced NATO contingents in the region has always been based on deterrence. Such deterrence, however, requires the determination to act. The Western community of states failed to do this both in the autumn of last year – when KFOR, contrary to its mandate, did not clear roadblocks set up by Serbian militias – and this year in the incidents in May. Instead of the Vučić government, the Kosovo government of Albin Kurti was sanctioned, thereby failing to deter Belgrade, if not actually encouraging it in its export of violence.

If you look at the evolution of the last year and a half, you can quite clearly trace the escalating development of the use of irregular elements. It began with demonstrations, politically organised by the party of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, the *Srpska Lista*, and proceeded to roadblocks with the support of locally organised crime groups in November 2022, then to armed agitations in May, which included the shelling of NATO soldiers, and now, in September, continued with the ambush and exchange of fire with Kosovo authorities, carried out by militias and/or paramilitaries with military weapons. The escalation spiral definitely continues.

At the beginning of the year, it still looked as if the EU-led dialogue could actually prove fruitful. The decisive moment was the Orhid summit, which came about on the basis of the so-called Franco-German proposal. The idea of the proposal is to organise relations between Serbia and Kosovo according to the model of divided Germany — a *de facto*, although not *de jure*, recognition. However, this would have required a clear, step-by-step implementation of the agreement, which was laid down in an implementation annex. However, Vučić refused to sign this annex. Instead of insisting on the overall package, the EU negotiators chose the path of less resistance: pressure is put on the democrats, who are supposedly more willing to compromise (in this case Kurti) and less on the autocrats. Current events should provide an impetus to revise this decision. Instead of exerting pressure unilaterally, it would be better to campaign for the implementation of the plan on both sides and in a determined manner.

The current policy of the

Thus, a new approach is necessary at several

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levels. The 'see no evil approach', as CNN recently headlined, is coming into ever more open conflict with German foreign and security policy interests and values. The question is, when will the end of the road be reached for Berlin, Paris, Brussels and Washington? There has been no shortage of diplomatic efforts in this regard. Constant crisis diplomacy, much attention and important visits signal the support of the German government.

The conclusion must therefore be that not only is more political attention needed, but also simply a change in strategy. New approaches and formats should be discussed that could lead to a new and sustainable quality of the peace process, such as the idea of an international conference for a new beginning on the Kosovo-Serbia question. The *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by Olaf Scholz and the geopolitical commission announced by Ursula von der Leyen can be interpreted to mean that the EU and Germany together should also be able to assert interests in an antagonistic international environment. The current policy of the Serbian leadership – that of exporting instability to its neighbouring countries – is in conflict with a European policy focused on peace and security in South-Eastern Europe. The EU's attempt to persuade the Serbian leadership to behave more cooperatively exclusively through incentives has failed for the time being.

As the saying goes, the first step to solving a problem is to recognise that there is a problem. Changing the approach will require a great deal of tact and finesse in order to work towards a flexible response strategy while at the same time balancing the interests in the region that, within the Western community of states, are quite divergent (those of the US, the EU, the individual EU Member States, as well as each of their shifts in priorities in the course of the war in Ukraine). Due to its high reputation in the region and its close economic and social ties, Germany is predestined to take a decisive lead in this process.

Update: The NATO force KFOR has been reinforced with British troops and the Unites States has urged Serbia to withdraw its troops from the border.



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