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The Western Balkans remain Europe's Achilles' heel

This weekend in Kosovo showed Belgrade's mastery of 'controlled escalation'. Backed by Russia, the conflict is an 'open flank' for the EU and NATO

Will there be a new war in the Balkans, a further war in Europe? On Sunday evening, Twitter was in a frenzy: There were reports of armed clashes and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was quoted as saying that the situation had never been so tense and that Belgrade would do everything to keep the peace.

What happened? In June, the government of Kosovo had decided that from Monday, 1 August, additional entry regulations for Serbian citizens would come into force. The announced, new regulations provide for Serbian citizens to receive temporary identity documents upon entry into Kosovo. These are the same regulations that apply to citizens of Kosovo when they want to enter Serbia. However, it did not come to that: over the weekend, parts of the Serbian minority set up roadblocks at two border crossings, the government of Kosovo then sent special police, who eventually closed two border crossings temporarily.

It certainly did not help that an MP from the Serbian Progressive Party - Vučić's party - publicly mused that Serbia might be forced to 'denazify' the Balkans - Russian rhetoric sends its regards.

However, international attention was caught on Sunday evening by reports in Serbian media that there had been armed clashes with casualties on both sides - this later turned out to be untrue - and the aforementioned comments by President Vučić. There were also rumours that weapons had been distributed to the local Serb population. It certainly did not help that an MP from the Serbian Progressive Party - Vučić's party - publicly mused that Serbia might be forced to 'denazify' the Balkans - Russian rhetoric sends its regards. Russian news agencies reported tensions live on the ground and further spread rumours from Serbian media.

US backing of Kosovo's reciprocity measures

Despite the media uproar, however, the initial all-clear can be signalled: The Serbian media reports turned out to be untrue, and KFOR released a statement that very night reaffirming its mandate to provide stability and security in Kosovo. The compromise solution proposed by the US embassy, and now implemented by the Kosovo government, provides for postponing the measures for another month (from 1 September) 'to give all parties time to adjust to the new provisions'. This also gives Prime Minister Albin Kurti official backing for the measures from the US.

The unrest did not arise spontaneously, but was triggered by events. The new entry regulations adopted by the Kosovo government in June are so-called reciprocity measures. The background to this is that citizens of Kosovo must both paste over their licence plates and receive temporary identity documents at the border crossing when entering Serbia, as Kosovo identification documents are not recognised by Serbian authorities.

Even after this weekend, it is clear the second part of reciprocity measures will come. This time even with indirect approval by the US.

As early as September 2021, the Kurti government had introduced the first reciprocity measures, specifically the pasting over of sovereignty insignia from Serbian car number plates upon entry. There were tensions then too, special forces from both sides deployed, the Russian ambassador visited troops at the border together with the Serbian defence minister, and Serbian military aircraft flew at the border. However, after the initial turmoil, the arrangements are being quietly implemented.

Even after this weekend, it is clear the second part of reciprocity measures will come. This time even with indirect approval by the US. This is remarkable as the US - with reference to the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue - had so far always spoken out against reciprocity measures.

Belgrade's escalating de-escalation rhetoric

Even if the incidents over the weekend did not escalate beyond the level depicted, they illustrate very well how successful Belgrade can be in raising the temperature in order to maintain the fragile status quo vis-à-vis Pristina. Hardly anyone in Europe masters this continued 'controlled

escalation' as well as the Serbian leadership.

If one follows German reporting, however, one could succumb to the impression that with Vučić a level-headed head of state is calling for moderation. And nobody can be blamed for this view, because Vučić, still Minister of Information under Slobodan Milošević, is a master of escalating de-escalation rhetoric. However, when he talks about doing everything to keep the peace and that Serbs in Kosovo should not let themselves be provoked, one has to ask: 'Who is questioning the peace?' and 'Who is provoking whom here?'.

Following the pattern thus far, there were also increasing signs over the weekend that the roadblocks were not the product of spontaneous gatherings of a few angry citizens, but were at least approved, if not operationally encouraged, by Belgrade. Serbia exercises indirect, operational control over the Serb minority in Kosovo. Thus, the Vučić regime not only reacts to developments in northern Kosovo, but is the protagonist of the development, especially through the Lista Srpska (Serbian minority party in Kosovo) and disinformation through Serbian and Russian media.

Guaranteed Russian support

The parallels between Serbian and Russian foreign and security policy are striking. First, Serbia shares a revanchist agenda with Russia, whereby one could say that Moscow has learned from Belgrade rather than the other way around: a former central power, humiliated in its own perception, stirs up instability in the periphery of its once existing state. This is the mode in which conflicts are most likely to be maintained. Secondly, both states are pursuing the goal of keeping the Kosovo-Serbia conflict in the status quo for as long as possible. The weekend's unrest shows that this requires a small amount of resources. Thirdly, both states are working with comparable instruments, albeit with less intensity in the case of Serbia. Thus, on 31 July, we saw media backing from Moscow for what emanated from Belgrade. Also, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson strongly condemned the Kosovo government and criticised it for unilateral escalation. A classic perpetrator-victim reversal.

However, it would be too short-sighted to see Serbian politics as a mere extension of the Russian Federation. Vučić's policy is characterised by a very successful multi-vector policy - a political approach that tries to maintain good relations with many major powers and to balance them against each other. However, both states pursue the same agenda and goals in the Kosovo issue. The fact that Serbia can always count on Russian support on the Kosovo issue is reflected in the fact that Serbia

does not support the common European sanctions policy against Russia.

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This congruence is found not only in politics, but also in the choice of means. Over the weekend, one could observe the concert of media incitement of a conflict - escalating language coupled with logistical support of 'irregular elements'. Russia, through its news agencies, also took an active role in this, but merely opportunistically reinforced what was emanating from Belgrade.

Thus, due to direct and indirect Russian influence, the region and especially the Kosovo-Serbia conflict remain an 'open flank' for the European Union and NATO in the conflict with Russia. The current incident shows how little it takes (at the end of the day, it is a purely administrative entry regulation) to create tensions and escalate them. This vulnerability will remain until Kosovo and the other Western Balkan states are firmly integrated into the European Union and the transatlantic alliance system.

The weekend's unrest shows how little resources can be used to fuel conflicts that would tie up political - as well as, in case of doubt, military - forces of the EU and/or NATO. Even if no armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo is in sight, the incidents of the weekend underline the importance of the KFOR mandate, and the strategic value of Kosovo - in terms of vulnerability - in the conflict with Russia. The political solution to this 'open flank' is to be sought in the EU's enlargement policy.



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