



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The race against time regarding Kosovo - Is a new war possible in Europe?



Both Kosovo and Serbia have raised their stakes in anticipation of the long-term negotiations finale regarding the normalisation of mutual relations, amid strong tensions on the ground that threaten to turn into an open interethnic conflict. Both governments made major foreign policy moves in just 24 hours, not believing in the likelihood of success, but trying to take the best possible positions in anticipation of the final phase of the negotiations, which have lasted for more than ten years.

First, Kosovo submitted to the EU Czech Presidency an official application for membership in the Union, despite the fact that five out of the 27 EU members do not recognise Kosovo, and despite the recommendation that arrived from many international addresses that the government of Kosovo should not rush with the official application.

Less than a day later, the government of Serbia asked the NATO-led mission in Kosovo, KFOR, to return up to a thousand members of the Serbian army and police, referring to the peace resolution of the UN Security Council from 1999, which ended the three-month campaign of NATO bombing of Serbia. This is also a move that both the US and the EU have warned Belgrade not to make, because such a request would certainly not be fulfilled.

At a time when the hostile governments in Belgrade and Pristina are working full steam through high diplomatic channels, aware that they will not have much success, in the north of Kosovo, where majority Serbs live, violence is escalating, to the threat of an open wider armed conflict.

The Serbian army and police left, and were replaced by the international missions KFOR and EULEX 23 years ago, but Kosovo is still not at peace. Even the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 did not bring stabilisation, but even greater tensions, due to Serbia's refusal to recognise the statehood of Kosovo, and the encouragement of its minority, which constitutes about 10% of the population, not to recognise the state

authority of the government in Pristina.

Since last summer, tensions have increased and resulted in the exit of Serbian representatives from all state structures, including the police, judiciary and parliament. The arrest of a high-ranking police officer in the Kosovo police, on charges of terrorism, was the trigger for Serbs in the north of Kosovo to block local roads with trucks, which they have often done in the past as a form of protest.

Who are the masters of chaos in Kosovo?

Circumstances in the north of Kosovo are controlled by criminal groups under the leadership of several Serbs, who also represent the transmission of the influence of the government in Belgrade on the Serbian population in Kosovo. Two of them, Milan Radoičić and Zvonko Veselinović, were added on December 9 to the list of persons against whom the UK has imposed sanctions for serious corruption, theft and harmful impact on society and undermining democracy, as well as spending state resources for their own benefit.

The two have been on a similar US "blacklist" for the same reasons for a year. Although the authorities in Belgrade consider them heroes of the Serbian resistance, and do not hide their closeness to the Kosovo authorities, the authorities in Pristina consider them dangerous criminals banned from entering the country.

Tensions between local Serbs and the Kosovo authorities have the potential to have turned into open armed conflict because institutions that can guarantee security are not strong enough and the capacities of international missions are not sufficient to ensure the full rule of law. The KFOR mission has around 3,600 members from more than 20 countries, but its mandate does not include police work, which is in the hands of the Kosovo authorities and only partly the European EULEX mission.

When you add the high level of criminalisation in the predominantly Serbian north and the porousness of the border with Serbia, the conditions for conflict become even more realistic. On the other hand, the government in Pristina is also taking nationalist-motivated steps towards the Serbian community. It persistently fails to meet their main request for the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities as a form of autonomy, which it committed to nine years ago in the agreement with Serbia, and under EU guarantees.

Russian interest in starting a new war

Russia has traditionally shown great ambition for the outbreak of conflict, particularly since the beginning of its aggression against Ukraine. Russian influence on events in Kosovo goes mainly through aggressive Serbian right-wing criminal groups, but also through a massive campaign of disinformation, managed from Russia, through a large number of local Serbian information platforms, controlled by Russian propaganda centres. The Kremlin desperately wants to relax its difficult position in Ukraine and divert the West's energy to another area, and Serbia and Kosovo provide ideal conditions for that.

It was precisely this reason that stimulated the much greater engagement of Western diplomats to bring Serbia and Kosovo closer to an agreement, with US pressure on both sides particularly visible in recent months. The frequent crises on the ground are successfully extinguished for now by the two main mediators for Kosovo - Gabriel Escobar, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and Miroslav Lajcak, the EU envoy for the Kosovo process. They are well on their way to solving the current crisis with roadblocks in the north of Kosovo, and they are trying to make it not just another fire extinguishing exercise, but a turning point towards a comprehensive agreement.

“I do see some elements of optimism here. We're looking for more than just a resolution

of crisis. We're looking for more sustainable solutions in the context of regional opportunities. We want to turn this crisis into an opportunity not for just Serbia and Kosovo but for the region as a whole”, Escobar told local media.

The West is in a hurry to close the door to dangerous Russian influence in the Balkans with a comprehensive agreement on the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which will certainly not subside as long as its aggression against Ukraine continues. To that end, all actors are intensively discussing the plan, which is unofficially called the Franco-German initiative. According to this plan both Serbia and Kosovo would make mutual concessions and end their long-standing conflict with a compromise. The strongest pressure to reach an agreement comes from the USA, and the EU will be in charge of ensuring the benefits of this agreement, primarily through faster accession of both countries to the Union.

“The early spring of 2023 could be the deadline for reaching an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia,” said EU special envoy Lajcak recently in Pristina, confirming that the Western mediators will not delay reaching an agreement, as they have done so far.

However, in the course of this real race against time, in which the stakes are high, not only in the Balkans, but also in Ukraine, Kosovo will remain an area where there is a real risk of conflict breaking out. Simply, the approach of the long-awaited agreement between the two states is also visible to its opponents. An end to one of the most dangerous crisis hotspots in Europe does not benefit their criminal activities, nor destructive state influence.