



By: *The Editorial Board*

The conflict in Kosovo - Russia's desperate chance to extend the Ukrainian crisis to the rest of Europe



Serbian tennis superstar Novak Djokovic got into trouble because of his politicism and activism when he was supposed to confirm his title as the greatest player of all time at the Roland-Garros tournament in Paris.

"Kosovo is the heart of Serbia. Stop the violence", wrote Djokovic on a camera lens after his first victory and a good start at the Paris Grand Slam.

Djokovic will continue to fight his opponents and sports authorities on the courts in Paris because of his political messages. French Minister of Sports Amélie Oudéa-Castera said that his message was "not appropriate".

But his compatriots will remain in trouble over Kosovo with the local majority Albanians with whom they have been unable to agree on a peaceful coexistence for decades, long after Roland Garros.

About 25 members of the NATO-led Kosovo mission (KFOR) were injured over the weekend by extreme Serbs during riots in which Serbs wanted to prevent local Albanians from taking over municipal administrations in several cities where the Serb population is in the majority.

The escalation was the result of a series of mutually radical moves by Serbs controlled by the authorities in Belgrade and the government of Kosovo.

The latter concerns the recent elections for local authorities in Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo. The Serbs boycotted the elections. This allowed the Albanian candidates to win, even though voter turnout was almost insignificant. It was just over 1%.

Despite the warning of the 5 most influential

Western governments to recognise the lack of legitimacy of the newly elected authorities, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti decided to install them anyway, using strong police forces.

"We very clearly notified the Kosovar authorities that it was a mistake to proceed with these elections," said French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday.

Kosovo government is stunned by the US reaction

In an otherwise tense atmosphere, this represented a spark that initiated street conflicts. There was fighting, tear gas, stone throwing, and shots were heard.

After a long time, NATO's KFOR mission was exposed to attacks by Serb extremists while trying to position itself as a buffer between the two conflicting parties.

The government of Kosovo and its nationalist Prime Minister Kurti are stunned for no reason because they were slapped in the face by their biggest ally, the US.

An extensive military exercise by several NATO members that was supposed to start in Kosovo on June 2 was cancelled overnight. It was just one of the "punishments" because Kosovo caused an escalation in the turbulent north of the country.

"We strongly condemn the actions by the Government of Kosovo that are escalating tensions in the north and increasing instability. We call on Prime Minister Kurti to halt these violent measures immediately and refocus on the EU-facilitated dialogue", said US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

French President Macron also condemned the Kosovar authorities and said they had to "bear responsibility for the current situation." "There is non-compliance with an agreement that was nevertheless important, and which was secured just a couple of weeks ago," said Macron.

In the belief that the alliance with the US is unconditional, the Kosovo government tragically overlooked the wider international framework where normalisation of relations with Serbia is only one part of the mosaic.

The absolute priority of the US administration is to reach a final agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, under the auspices of the EU, by the end of the year and thus end the long-term conflict, where NATO also intervened in the bombing campaign in 1999.

Ignoring the bigger picture

Pristina also overlooked the enormous danger of the internal conflict serving Russia's interests and directly supported its aggression against Ukraine.

Moscow has been persistently and for a long time trying to start an armed conflict in Kosovo as the most favourable place for opening a new front in Europe, where NATO would be directly involved and thus divert the focus from supporting Ukraine.

Russia controls extremists and part of the criminal underworld in Serbia. They have repeatedly demonstrated that they could quickly and easily cause violent incidents in the north of Kosovo.

It was these groups that attacked members of the KFOR mission last weekend. They wanted

to provoke a direct conflict between NATO and the Serbian population, which is also a desirable goal expected and inspired by Moscow.

Regardless of the focus on the conquest of Ukraine, the highest Kremlin officials gave enormous publicity to the conflicts in Kosovo, confirming that they are interested in its escalation.

"The current escalation in Kosovo is alarming, and a major explosive situation could erupt in the heart of Europe", Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters in Nairobi on Monday.

Faced with poor prospects for the success of its operation in Ukraine, Moscow has been frantically searching for a region where it is possible to ignite a spark of a new conflict and drag NATO into it.

Moscow is also aware that it has less and less time for such a plan because the feuding leaders of Kosovo and Serbia are close to reaching a definitive agreement on mutual relations after decade-long negotiations.

The combination of hard and soft Western power

Western countries are leading in this race against time, showing determination not to hinder a quick compromise.

Part of that determination is the unusually harsh US criticism of the Kosovo government, followed by NATO's decision to strengthen its KFOR mission by adding 700 new members, a fifth of its total composition.

This determination not to allow a Russian-supported escalation in Kosovo was accompanied by the simultaneous publication of the EU's new growth plan for the Western Balkans, which includes Kosovo and Serbia.

The plan was announced by the President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, on Wednesday. It foresees strong economic incentives through pre-accession funds, much faster inclusion of this region in the EU single market, and stimulation of its internal economic integration.

"This is a new approach for the EU. We do not only ask our partners to take new steps towards us. We also take a big step towards them. Our shared goal is to speed up their journey towards the EU", said the president of the EC at a security forum in Bratislava.

Russia cannot match this combination of hard and soft influence that the US and the EU exert in the Balkans, directly opposing Moscow's effort to thaw a conflict that killed hundreds of thousands of people a quarter of a century ago.

But, without a doubt, Russia will continue its attempts to destabilise the region where it still has a lot of influence, particularly in Serbia.

Russia was left with no other alternatives, so the Balkans might be the last chance to spill over the Ukrainian conflict into other parts of Europe.