



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# A thwarted armed rebellion in Kosovo could speed up the end of the decade-long conflict in the Balkans



The 10-year negotiations on the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, mediated by the EU and the US, are currently under the gravest threat because of an armed conflict between the Kosovo police and a group of Serbian rebels, which resulted in the deaths of one policeman and 3 assailants. Even after almost a quarter of a century since the NATO air intervention, the unextinguished hotbed of conflict in the Balkans showed its explosive capacity this week when a large group of heavily armed Serbian paramilitaries attacked the Kosovo police, killing one of its members. A dramatic crisis occurred near an Orthodox monastery not far from the Kosovo border with Serbia, which resulted in the total collapse of the Serbian paramilitary unit. Even though the attackers were quickly identified, some of them were apprehended, and others fled to Serbia - a thorough investigation would have a hard time figuring out the underlying reasons behind the small but potent uprising and locating its leaders.

## The Serbian leader has distanced himself from the rebellion

While Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his government point the finger at official Serbia as the main inspirer of the armed rebellion, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić rejects responsibility, and claims that the conflict was caused by local Serbs in Kosovo, without any involvement of Belgrade. It is difficult for President Vučić to convince his Western partners that his government had nothing to do with the latest crisis in Kosovo after it was disclosed that Milan Radoičić, very close to Vučić and at the same time the leader of his party faction in Kosovo, led the rebellion. Due to illegal and corrupt activities, Mr. Radoičić has been subject to US sanctions since the end of 2021. A year later, the UK placed the same restrictions on him. Even then, the President of Serbia did not renounce him, and took him under protection. This time, though, the conservative Serbian president distanced himself from his principal activist in Kosovo, and vowed to bring charges against

him to the Serbian prosecutor's office.

## Serbia's negotiating capacity has been discredited

President Vučić has many reasons to prove that he is not involved in the paramilitary operation in Kosovo. Even his rejection of Kosovo's accusations that he was behind the armed rebellion seems plausible. The failed action of the heavily armed Serbian formation discredited the negotiating capacity of Aleksandar Vučić, and his credibility as a statesman before European and American diplomatic mediators in the decisive final phase of the negotiations with Kosovo. "What happened is definitely not good for Serbia and could not bring anything good to Serbia", said the Serbian president in one of the numerous interviews he has given in recent days, where he tried to control the damage. As a result of the armed attack of his compatriots in Kosovo, Mr Vučić lost the advantage in the negotiations with Kosovo, which he had gained due to the long-term refusal of his Kosovo competitor, Albin Kurti, to implement the agreed points of the existing agreement, and above all to form autonomy for the local Serbs, who make up less than 10% of the Kosovo population. By ignoring the agreements reached, the Kosovo PM incurred the wrath of Western negotiators towards himself and his country. He has been labelled an agreement breaker, and some diplomatic sanctions have been imposed on Kosovo. However, by suppressing the Serbian armed rebellion, Kurti and his government have turned the negotiating positions in their favour, and entered the final showdown as a factor that has prevented escalation and kept the process alive.

## Speeding up negotiations

Both Vučić and Kurti have a huge problem explaining to their conservative and nationalist voters why they will have to give in to the other side in the negotiations, given the significant decades-long antagonism between

Serbs and Albanians regarding Kosovo. Serbia does not recognise Kosovo as a state. It considers Kosovo part of its territory. This is part of the Constitution of Serbia. On the other hand, Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, and sees Serbia as a historical oppressor and the main obstacle to its full international recognition and membership of the UN. Both leaders have been dealing with the demands of the EU and the US to reach a compromise, so they directly linked reaching an agreement to both countries aspirations for EU membership, which has been their strategic political goal. For years, the EU has mediated these talks with varying success, often not being sufficiently determined to force the 2 sides to an agreement. That is why US diplomacy got directly involved in the process 2 years ago, and managed to speed up the negotiation process and bring it to an end. While there is no firm date for a final deal, it is expected to happen by the end of the year or early 2024. The administration of President Joe Biden set out to extinguish the dangerous Balkan hotspot during his current mandate, and Biden himself mentioned the Western Balkans at the start of his term as one of several main foreign policy priorities of his presidency. Western mediators have the opportunity to use the most serious incident that occurred in the last decade of negotiations regarding Kosovo to speed up the reaching of an agreement. NATO has already decided to send additional troops to its peace-keeping mission in Kosovo (Kfor), which numbers close to 4,000 members. This is already the second reinforcement since the beginning of the year.

## Pushing Russia out of the region

European and American diplomats will now be able to force Serbia and Kosovo to an agreement with much less hesitation and procrastination because time has not been working in favour of the security of this area. They will be particularly motivated by the fact that there are serious indications that Russia was also involved in the latest incident in Kosovo. Russia has been trying to keep the region a zone of frozen conflict. Kosovo's

Interior Minister Xhelal Svecla said that the investigation had found indications of Russian involvement in the attack on his police, as Russian weapons and documents were found at the scene of the conflict. As an ally of Serbia, Russia has a strong security and intelligence presence in the region, particularly in the majority of Serbian areas in the north of Kosovo, where there are many billboards with the image of Russian President Putin and the Russian flag. Western diplomats now have an open way quickly to bring the Serbian-Kosovo negotiations to an end and eliminate deep-rooted Russian destructive influence in the region. Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Russia and does not have room to oppose compromise following the armed event in Kosovo, despite its declared aspiration to join the EU and its condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine. On the other hand, the end of the long-term conflict with Kosovo takes the main political burden off of Serbia and its president. This is making it difficult for Serbia's prospects for EU membership, to which it is economically and technologically tied. Kosovo and Prime Minister Kurti, as the winners of the attempted armed rebellion, could find a way out of the long-term trauma of incomplete international recognition and membership in the UN in a quick agreement. The EU and the US will both regard the Serbia-Kosovo agreement as a significant foreign policy success in one of the least stable regions of Europe, and permanently remove the destructive influence of Russia from it.