

Serbia Is Playing With Fire In Kosovo

The vehicles of Serbian citizens - who started using Kosovo license plates in accordance with the decision taken by the State of Kosovo last week - were burned by unidentified people. Afterward, the Serbian Belgrade administration and provocative activists became the subject of discussion. Immediately after the event, the Serb List, the largest political party of Kosovo Serbians, announced that they had decided to leave all state institutions of Kosovo. Kosovo Serbians' political and institutional representatives also announced that they had decided to leave all institutions of Kosovo until the decision on the re-registration of license plates in Pristina is revoked and the Union of Serbian Municipalities is established. Goran Rakiq, head of the Serb List, who is Kosovo's Minister of Communities and Returns, also resigned from his post.

These developments showed once again that the Belgrade administration has the potential to fuel the political crisis in the Balkans, according to the course of the Ukrainian front, under the influence and pressure of Moscow. The Western world, which tolerated the separatist Serbian chauvinism, directed Albanians' and Bosnians' national reflexes to a difficult process with the threat of "sanctions."

These recent events clearly show that the European Union (EU)'s umbrella, where the Balkan states go to take shelter, started to take on water. So much so that there are even estimations that the US and the UK may attempt to establish a new order in the region in the coming period.

An article published in *The Guardian* states that anti-Western sentiment in Serbia stems from support for Putin. According to the article, there are a significant number of Russian fans in Serbian society; 50% of Serbians, in general, are committed to Russian interests, except for a fanatical segment that makes up about 31% of the population.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic for a long time displayed a positive approach to regional policies within the framework of the efforts to join the EU and participated in the work for regional (Turkey, Albania, North Macedonia) stability with his open Balkan policies. In this context, three agreements on freedom of movement, travel with identity cards, the equivalence of higher education institutions and the recognition of professional qualifications of doctors, dentists and architects were signed between the six prime ministers, who came together within the framework of the summit organized for Western Balkan countries in Berlin in the past weeks.

However, while the efforts and the agreements made for the establishment of regional peace show some promise, the chaos policy carried out over the Serbian community living in North Kosovo for the last two months clearly indicates Belgrade's unpredictable contradictory approach. After all, Serbia continues to stand out as the biggest culprit for the lack of stability in the Balkans since the 1990s.

It is predicted that in the upcoming period, despite the enlargement policies of NATO and the EU, there may be developments in which Russia's Slavic policies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans - as in the example of Ukraine - will evolve into a hot war argument. It is predicted that Russia, which is stuck in Ukraine, will try to dominate its reckoning with the EU and NATO on the Slavic front and the Balkan countries in every field, especially politics, church and economy. Because Moscow knows very well that the EU, the US and the UK's interest in the Balkans and the importance they attach to the region cannot be compared to that of Ukraine's.

In this regard, it is clear that Serbia is constantly trying to provoke a group of Serbians living in North Kosovo. The international media now talks about how Moscow has a direct influence on the basis of the political tension in Kosovo. In short, this dangerous course carries the risk of evolving into a process similar to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991-1995 for Serbia.

British diplomat Timothy Less from Cambridge University's Geopolitics Center says that the danger from Serbia is bringing Kosovo closer to Albania: "One day Kosovo and Albania will unite. National unity between Kosovo and Albania may one day become reality." He states that citizens of both countries have the will for the realization of national unity. With Kosovo and Albania's future unity in mind, Less added,

“They share a common Albanian identity and most people in both countries want to establish a single Albanian state. There are obvious driving forces of this process, including Kosovo's dependence on Albania for trade with the outside world and the threat from Serbia to Kosovo.”

In the Balkans, political problems in Montenegro and the Sanjak regions after the Bosnia-Kosovo wars are disturbing all parties. In the region, where the pieces never click into place, it seems very likely that not long from now, a climate will enter in which the parties will be forced to make mutual concessions and costs.

It is also seen that Serbian Prime Minister Vucic and Bosnian Serbian leader Milorad Dodik are persistently trying to scratch Bosnia and Kosovo. It is stated that Moscow has a strong finger behind this policy. This process is considered as a harbinger of the Balkans being dragged into a new chaos. For example, Dodik, a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has recently expressed his support once again for the Serbians in Kosovo and said that the Bosnian Serb Republic is ready to do anything possible to help the Kosovo Serbians. Meeting with Serbian President Vucic and Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porfirije, Dodik stated after these meetings, "There should be unity of church and state in the defense of our people in Kosovo, and our people will never be left alone there." In this process, Vucic's choice between Moscow and the EU will stand out as one of the most curious issues.

During this provocation process, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's stance on Kosovo's national priorities and the policies of the Belgrade government was very clear. Kurti said in a statement on the subject:

“Since the implementation of our decision on license plates, not a single incident has been recorded. Despite this, Belgrade encouraged and intimidated Kosovo Serbians to leave our institutions. I ask my citizens not to participate in this boycott and not to leave your institutions. It seems that Vucic is doing what Putin tried in Ukraine. Because when Russia invaded Ukraine, it wanted Russian-origin military and state officials to leave the institutions. But Vucic needs to calculate the outcome of this move well, because he has an example like Putin who implemented this strategy very badly. I am determined to develop good relations based on reciprocity between Kosovo and Serbia. At this point, I would like to emphasize that what you do not wish for yourself, you cannot wish for somebody else. Such ethnic communities also exist in Serbia. For example, there are many Albanians in Preševa Valley, Hungarians in Vojvodina and Bosnians in Sanjak. Now I am asking, are you ready to have a union of municipalities that includes these groups? What you don't want to do in your own home, you cannot do in someone else's home!”

Aleksandar Vucic said that the Kosovo government should stop replacing Serbian license plates, otherwise the Serbs would resist. Jeffrey Hovenier, the US Ambassador to Kosovo, also made a statement on his official Twitter account regarding the recent tension between the two countries. Describing what happened in his message as “cowardly and criminal acts,” Hovenier said that “The US administration condemns any attempt to intimidate those who acquire or want to obtain an RKS plate according to Kosovo law, the burning or destruction of people's property.”

NATO did not remain silent about Serbia's stance in Kosovo, which is increasing tension. In the statement made on the latest developments, Kosovo KFOR, which serves as a multinational peacekeeping force under the leadership of NATO, said “The main thing is to avoid unilateral actions and initiatives that may lead to tension or unnecessary violence,” emphasizing that the duty of the mission, based on the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1244 in 1999, is carried out by closely monitoring the situation on the ground, and that they are ready to intervene in any event that threatens the stability and security of the region.

Thus, considering Russia's potential to manage the political tension in Kosovo, Bosnia and Montenegro through Serbia, the possibility that Serbia's policies in these three countries could ignite a surprise conflict should not be ignored.

In the meantime, the government led by Albanian-born Abazovic, which caused controversy due to the "Basic Agreement" signed with the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porphyry in Montenegro three months ago in order to give the Serbian Church "official status" in the country, fell as a result of the vote in the Montenegrin Parliament. Subsequently, the pro-Serbian parties in the country conveyed the name of Miodrag Lekic to President Djukanovic to form the new government. However, Djukanovic did not give the

task of forming the government to Lekic on the grounds that he did not fulfill the necessary conditions and demanded an early general election in 2023. As a result, a new government has still not been formed in Montenegro yet.

On the other hand, Serbian candidates won the largest number of mayors in the local elections held a month ago, turning the balance in the country in favor of Belgrade. However, it should not be forgotten that Serbia's intervention in Kosovo means that it takes the UN and NATO against itself.

At this point, it would also be useful to convey the following evaluations of Sinan Baykent, an Albanian-born European political analyst:

“Will the Albanian nation show determination and courage to unite? This's the point. The idea of 'national unity' has always been feared and automatically censored internationally. Such that the thesis has become a taboo in the international public sphere over the years. Maybe it would be better if realpolitik on this issue was started...there is a trend towards ethnically homogeneous states in the Western Balkans, and in fact, it seems as if the West agrees with it.”

It is understood from this expression that the West wants ethnically integrated states instead of small Yugoslavia, such as ethnically great Albania, great Serbia, great Bulgaria, great Croatia. In such a case, Bulgaria takes half of North Macedonia, Montenegro is shared between Serbia and Albania, and Bosnia is divided into three ethnically. Because it is now clear that the EU, the US and the UK do not want the turmoil in the region to continue in this direction. However, the realization of this worst-case scenario would inevitably mean the start of a new war in the region. At this point, the reason for the US carrying so many weapons to the Western Balkans and its military concentration efforts is also understood.

In short, when we look at the recent events in Kosovo and the results of the local elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, it is clear that the ethnic political problems of the Balkans are still unresolved. But for today, the most important question is: Is Serbia deliberately playing with fire in Kosovo, or does Russia need a new fire in the Balkans?

Note: Serbian-speaking citizens of Kosovo declared that they oppose the attempts of the Serb List affiliated with the Serbian regime to destabilize.